

# The Lakes in 1905

Linda Phillips



*Windermere and Langdale Pikes, from Lonwood [sic], painted by A Heaton-Cooper*

WHAT were the lakes like in Ransome's formative years?

One of the many books available online at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org) is a guide to the lakes, published 1905, entitled *The English Lakes* by William T Palmer. It can be downloaded for free.

In 1905, Arthur Ransome would have been 21, having just become an adult by the laws of the day. We know he was influenced in his childhood by his love of the lakes. 1905 was the heyday of the Edwardian era, Edward VIII having been born when AR was 10.

This book throws some interesting light on the lakes as AR would have experienced them in the years up to 1905, and some extracts are shared herein.

By 1905, the old order, of rustic lifestyles, horse and carts, manual labour, was already fading, with motor transport and technology from the industrial age reaching as far as the lakes.

With the intrusion of the railways, visitors were rife already. I can't resist reproducing comments by Palmer:

We have two classes of tourists: "The Strenuous Life" and "The Lotos [sic] Eaters," I divide them by their tastes. Others call them "Visitors," "Tourists" and "Trippers." The first they adore—they take a "cottage furnished" perhaps, and anyway are profitable in a staid, comfortable manner; the second they tolerate—he is a man of hotels and boarding houses, here to-day, and to-morrow "away ower t'fell," but, by reason of his plenty, worthy attention; the third they despise; many seem to think that the day-visitor ought to be put down—by violence preferably.

Already come the complaints of the old roads being full of tourists in the season, with motor cars and motor buses spoiling any chance of peace and quiet.

Seeing Windermere by steamer (boat) is the done thing. Palmer extols the views:

From the deck of the steamer as it lies berthed at Lakeside there is a glorious view. The steep side of Gummer's Howe, green in summer with bracken, golden with the young tendrils in spring, and in autumn russet with fading glory, rises opposite. Like a wide river the lake winds further and still further as your eyes turn toward the mountains. Yes, there they are, blue with distance - sharp peaks limning strongly against the sunlit sky. At present the lake is still as a mirror; drippings from the oars of passing boats make little glittering ripples.

Old 'farmsteadings' are deemed attractive. 'Old and weathered, built of blue-grey stone, they harmonise well with their surroundings.'

But the invasion of modern houses is not just a modern-day concern. Even then, new houses were spoiling the view. Palmer complains:

We almost hate the sight of a modern-built villa, trim without, healthy and comfortable within. I make no pretension to the artistic temperament: subordinate the villa to its surroundings, and I am content; but stick a horror of brick and red tiles in all its nakedness on a commanding hillside, or right on the edge of a beautiful mere, and the wanderer is above human whose temper is not tried at the sight.

The car ferry ('cable boat') over Windermere has already been in existence for some time.

At the landing-stage our steamer has to wait till the tank-like cable-boat has completed its journey. Down the hill opposite comes the road from Kendal to Hawkshead, and about this point, from time immemorial, the lake has been crossed. Various sorts of craft have been used: in the time of the Lake poets the conveyance was a large and almost flat-bottomed boat, pulled along by sweeps. [Sweeps = oars bow and stern, usually]

Palmer makes reference to the lakes freezing over, perhaps in reference to the Great Freeze of 1894/95 when a young Arthur went skating on the lake.



*Near the Ferry, Windermere, Skating by Moonlight, painted by A Heaton-Cooper*

Of that winter, Palmer writes:

... a skin of ice is forming. There is a loud crack and a rattling echo passes along the frozen surface. Eerie it is so to hear the ice “stretching”: the frostier the night the louder and more frequent the reports. (In 1895 I was on Windermere after dark—it was a moonless night—and the loud and long continued roars which spread about the ice were almost alarming.)

Palmer is most informative with his descriptions of Coniston. According to him, on Peel Island, Norsemen, Vikings of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, ‘erected a house, the foundations of which have recently been determined by an antiquarian’.

Peel Island, alluded to before, is the place when in the time of the Sagas a Norseman dwelt, and a daring man he was to live on so low a rib of rock. In a wild gale the water, lashing its rocky sides, will throw spray right over it. In relief the islet is mitred; two rock ledges face the lake, leaving between a grassy depression some feet in depth. Our old Norseman built walls across this gap, then with poles and twigs from the shore-woods made a roof, and thereby obtained a home sufficient in its humble way to provide shelter in the wildest weather. In spring the glen of the islet is a mass of blue—with wild hyacinths.

Can we still find blue hyacinths on Wild Cat Island?

Anyone who has visited Peel Island, properly known to us as Wild Cat Island, can readily picture the scene. The island is indeed mitred. From the secret harbour, on the lake side, a steep rock ledge prevents access to the island, while the other ridge encloses the camping ground. These days, the camping ground is obstructed by many new-growth trees, but remove these and it’s easy to picture the hollow, ideal for camping, and with poles and twigs forming a roof over it, a house of sorts can be pictured.

Charcoal burners are a common sight back then, though apparently not in summer. He writes:

Much charcoal burning is done in the winter, and a pleasant scene it is to find on a snow-clad day lines of smoke rising from the barrenness where once was woodland, men moving round the conical patches from which internal heat has melted the white covering, the rough huts, the incipient flicker which has to be immediately quenched else the whole oven of charcoal be spoiled, the thinning smoke which threatens a dead fire there, to which the woodmen hasten to encourage the hidden blaze.

But Palmer is less impressed by the copper miners, something that didn’t seem to upset AR. Apparently, copper mining was a major activity in the 1840s and had resumed at the turn of the century.

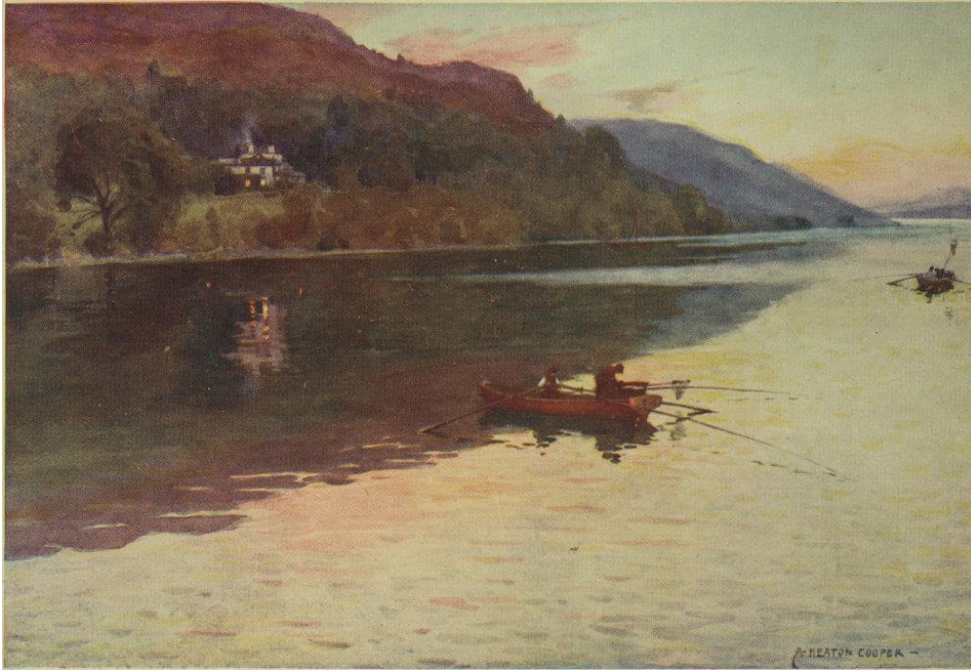
He writes:

The hillside you traverse to reach Levers Water is almost honeycombed with the shafts of old copper mines. “Mines Valley” indeed was once the busiest haunt of men in the Lake Country. Its copper is now being exploited afresh, and the prosperity of sixty years ago may be repeated.

All this while Coniston Water had been in unsullied purity. But a century ago copper was found among the fells and mines opened. Refuse ran down in muddy streams, tainting the lake from head to foot. Many fish died, for the shingles on which they had previously spawned were fouled, and, though ripe with ova, they could not perpetuate their kind. The damage was not completed in a season, but in thirty years, just as English law began to protect the finny denizens, the lake had been robbed of a great proportion of its fish. Twenty years more the mines continued to send down poisonous offal. Then the copper veins gave out, pollution ceased, and the fishery gradually improved.

AR was, of course, a keen fisherman. Much of the book is devoted to describing the pleasures of fishing on the lakes.

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*Brantwood, Coniston Lake, Char-fishing, painted by A Heaton-Cooper*

Palmer can sum up this insight into the lakes in 1905 for us:

‘To know Coniston Water well is to be convinced that one’s pen cannot describe it.’

*Editor’s Note: Original punctuation retained in quotations.*