

Briefing Note No. 8

Introduction

These notes are intended to complement the VCH Guidance Notes on the introductory section of a parish history and should be read in conjunction with them. You'll find the Guidance Notes at: <http://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/local-history/introduction>

The Guidance Notes for the introductory section are very full and are particularly helpful in listing the key sources to be consulted – this Briefing Note is a gloss to the national guidelines.

In many ways the introduction is a synthesis of the more detailed accounts in the other sections of the article: it is thus preferable that it should be drafted *after* the rest of the article. Your account should cover the prescribed topics; in many rural townships/parishes they can probably be grouped together as follows. Note that we suggest that you incorporate the 'Buildings' section into the discussion of Settlement and that 'Events' and 'Worthies' should only be included sparingly! The Introduction should thus be structured as follows:

- Description and location; Area; Boundaries and extent
- Landscape
- Settlement (including domestic buildings)
- Communications
- Population and Social character
- (Events and worthies – if appropriate)

Glosses on the VCH Guidance Note

1. Description and location; Area; Boundaries and extent

There is some overlap and repetition in these sections of the national Guidance Note; hence the suggestion that they might be grouped into one section of the Introduction. The key elements, and the order in which they might be treated, are as follows:

- An introductory description, which may be no more than ‘a small rural township in the ancient parish of X’, and its location (e.g. ‘on the edge of the Lake District, five miles west of Penrith’)
- Where appropriate, a thumbnail sketch of the place could be included in this opening paragraph, mentioning prominent natural or manmade features (e.g. ‘embracing extensive mosslands on the Solway lowlands’; ‘contains the three villages of X, Y and Z’); aspects of the local economy (‘a former coal-mining village’); and perhaps major historical sites (‘the prominent earthworks of the Roman fort of DERVENTIO’).
- The place-name, its meaning and the significance of the name could be discussed here, as the name is often a key piece of early evidence about the ‘origin of the parish’. Something along the lines of: ‘The name Askham probably derives from Old Norse *askum* (‘at the ash trees’), suggesting that ash woodland was a distinguishing feature of the landscape in the Scandinavian period’. For interpretation of the place-name use the standard modern works of reference, namely:
 - A.M. Armstrong, A. Mawer, F.M. Stenton and Bruce Dickens, *The Place-Names of Cumberland*, English Place-Name Society Vols XX-XXII (Cambridge, 1950-52) [cite as *PNC*]
 - A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of Westmorland*, English Place-Name Society Vols XLII-XLIII (Cambridge, 1967) [cite as *PNW*]
 - D. Whaley, *Dictionary of Lake District Place-Names*, English Place-Name Society Regional Series 1 (Nottingham, 2006) [cite as *Dict. LDPN*]
 - **Do not use older place-name studies, nor popular works!**
- Acreage of the township/parish and emergence or establishment of its boundaries. Use the Ordnance Survey 1st edition Six-Inch map to obtain the acreage. Shape of the area within the boundaries. The historic boundaries: what did they follow (streams; watersheds; roads; field boundaries)?
- Administrative sub-divisions: where you are writing the history of the whole of an ancient parish which included several townships, mention these components and give their locations and, if possible, acreages. Some Cumbrian townships were subdivided for certain purposes, e.g. highway maintenance. These will be discussed in detail in the Local Government section but should be mentioned here.
- Changes in area as a result of the redrawing of civil parish boundaries.

2. Landscape

The suggestions in the Guidance Note should be followed, though reference to the place-name and its meaning will probably have been dealt with earlier. A mention of the extent of common waste before enclosure (or where it survives today) could be included – along the lines of the information in the ‘Jubilee Digests’.

For soils, use the Soil Survey of England & Wales 1:250,000 map, sheet 1 (Northern England) and the accompanying volume, R. A. Jarvis et al, *Soils and their Use in Northern England* (Harpenden: Soil Survey of England & Wales Bulletin No. 10, 1984). For places in Cumberland, some of the topographical descriptions in Thomas Denton's *Perambulation of Cumberland 1687-8* provide a vivid glimpse of soil and farming types.

3. Settlement (including domestic buildings).

This section should aim to provide an account of the development of the settlement pattern from the earliest record to the time of writing. Again, this is a section which it will make sense to write only after you have established the demographic and economic history of the parish/township – periods of economic expansion and population growth will have generated new settlements, whether these are new farmsteads in the 13th century; rows of industrial workers' cottages in the 19th or dormitory housing in the 20th. At least the following four topics should be included in this section:

- For the **medieval and early modern settlement pattern** use place-name evidence (the earliest reference to the name of a farm or hamlet provides a *terminus ante quem*, at least), rentals, surveys, parish registers, probate indexes etc.
- The section is probably the appropriate place to include material on **domestic buildings**, particularly vernacular building styles. Describe the local building materials and any survivals of early forms (e.g. 'clay dabbins'). Datestones may allow you to say something about phases of rebuilding.
- For **settlement change in the century 1750-1850** you will have to rely on estate records and title deeds, though remember that the Land Tax schedules can be useful to identify and date the building of villas and other private residences in rural areas.
- **Settlement change from mid-19th century to early-mid-20th** can be traced in outline from successive editions of Six Inch (1:10,560) and, more particularly, Twenty-Five Inch (1:2,500) maps. For the details, other sources, such as title deeds and the 1910 Valuation records (particularly the 'Field Books' in TNA, IR58) should be consulted.
- **Council housing and private housing estates:** these should be dated and described briefly. Local government minutes and planning applications are the key sources (recent planning applications are available online – remember that the Lake District National Park Authority – not the District Council – is the planning authority for places within the national park boundary). Barn conversions (and conversions of other buildings) are a feature of many modern rural communities: there is no need to give a blow-by-blow account, but a statement giving some idea of the scale and chronology of the phenomenon should be included. (Conversions of places of worship and schools etc will be mentioned elsewhere in the article when discussing those institutions.)

4. Communications

The Guidance Note provides full and helpful advice, which should be followed.

5. Population and social character

Population: for estimates of population in the later 17th century, remember that Thomas Denton included figures for each ancient parish/chapelry in Cumberland, based on rough estimates of the number of households, in his *Perambulation of Cumberland*.

Social character: most of the topics mentioned in the national Guidance Note will be treated in the Social History section. In the Introduction it would be appropriate to provide a thumbnail sketch of the kind of community the township/parish was. A brief sentence or two should suffice, along the lines of: 'The lords of the manor were non-resident after c.1450. From the 16th to the 19th century, the township was dominated by independent yeomen holding by customary tenantright.' OR 'The scattered community of small farmers and cottagers was replaced between 1920 and 1990 by a largely wealthy retired population, as ribbon development of housing took place along the main road and farmhouses were sold.'

6. Events and worthies

Only to be included in exceptional circumstances:

- events: only include events of national or international importance (e.g. the submission of the northern kings to Athelstan at Dacre in 927)
- 'worthies': only include if (a) the individual is nationally significant and (b) the association represents a major part of the individual's life and the place's history (Wordsworth at Grasmere, for example).

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