

Victoria County History of Cumbria Project. Draft parish/township histories

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Parish/township: SKELSMERGH

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SKELSMERGH¹

ECONOMIC HISTORY

The local economy was based on agriculture until the twentieth century. Up to the 1950s mixed farming was general, although permanent pasture seems always to have predominated. Farm consolidation and an increasing emphasis on pastoralism were long-established trends and this process accelerated in the second half of the twentieth century. There is a concurrent history of small local industries exploiting the abundant water-power; some of the mills becoming more substantial employers in the nineteenth century. All the water-powered enterprises closed during the twentieth century and agricultural employment contracted. Work became more varied and predominantly based in Kendal and farther afield. The expansion of the town over Mint Bridge and creation of the Shap Road industrial estates in the last quarter of the century introduced an extensive range of manufacturing and service industries to an area that was previously part of the township.

Agriculture

Core samples taken at Skelsmergh Tarn suggest two episodes of forest clearance before 500 BC.² The *aergi/erg* element in the place-name, often interpreted as 'summer pasture', may indicate

¹ The author would like to thank Bridget Machell, Geoff Brambles, the Kendal Local Studies librarians, Michael Dolan at the Talbot Library and all the staff at the Kendal Archives for their assistance in the preparation of this article.

² Walker, 'Studies in the Post-Glacial History of British Vegetation XIV Skelsmergh Tarn,' *New Phytologist* 54 (2) (1955), 222-54.

seasonal settlement but the relatively gentle topography accords better with the alternative interpretation, 'dairy farm'. The area around Skelsmergh Hall has been suggested as a site for a medieval cattle vaccary.³ There is evidence that it was once emparked: it is shown as a park on Saxton's 1576 map and field-names such as Far Park and Patch Park occur only in the area around the Hall. In 1588 there was 'within the said parke five score twelve acres of ground or neare there about ...whereof twentie three acres are besett with underwooddes twentie sext acres are meadowe and three score three acres are pasture or arable landes ...'⁴ As late as 1692 Machell claimed to detect oaks notched with holes to hold racks for feeding deer.⁵ Predominantly pastoral land use was recorded in 1777 when a tithe valuation of the township, excluding the Hall, claimed there were 314 acres of upland meadow, 350 acres of pasture, 80 acres of mire meadow, 3 acres of potatoes, 6 acres of coppice and 96 acres of corn and grain.⁶

The two hundred acres of Skelsmergh Fell, above Garth Row, were enclosed in 1823⁷ but regular field shapes and field names⁸ suggest that all the higher ground on the north-eastern edge of the township had previously been unenclosed pasture. A six-acre field to the west of Skelsmergh Tarn was enclosed and divided between three adjacent farms in 1816.⁹ The road on the southern side of the tarn is still unfenced and the 1816 enclosure may have eliminated the last remnant of a common that once encircled the tarn.

James Leyburne had 28 tenants in 1577.¹⁰ This list excluded the demesne and a few properties in the south of the township. Leyburne sold the manor soon after this date which opened the way for progressive enfranchisement. In 1649 Fleming listed eighteen freeholders in Skelsmergh and Patton.¹¹ A 1731 manorial list of customary and freehold tenants included eighteen freeholders for Skelsmergh alone.¹² There were twenty-four customary tenants of whom six possessed only fields within the township and two had cottages with a small amount of land. Some

³ M. A. Atkin, 'Medieval Land Use in the Ancient Parish of Kirkby Kendale', *CW* 3, xiii (2013), 132-3

⁴ TNA, E178/2379 Westmorland: Skelsmergh, Cunswick Park Surveys of the possessions of James Laburne, attainted.

⁵ CAS (C), D&C, Machell MSS, ii, 106.

⁶ Trinity College, Cambridge, 40 Kendal 56. Charles Barnard's valuation.

⁷ Act For Inclosing Lands Within...Whitwell and Selside, Skelsmergh and Crook...23 May 1823.

⁸ Corn Rent map, e.g. Oat Rake (sic), Intack (x4), Waste, New Close. Also plant references: Whins, Brackenny Heath, Broom Close (x4).

⁹ CAS (K), WD/U/48/1. Award and Plan of 29 April 1816 by John Williamson.

¹⁰ Chester, DCB/5. Papers relating to Lickbarrow Estates in Skelmergh (sic), printed copy of deed of 1577 published for meeting at Skelsmergh Stocks May 1 1801.

¹¹ CAS (K), WD/RV/HMC 101-200.

¹² Levens Hall MSS, Box 16/33.

consolidation can be identified and tenement names such as Redbankfoot, Harry Bank, Gibbon Housestead, Nether House and Spout Tenement disappeared, as they were absorbed into neighbouring farms.

The semi-subsistence nature of much local farming emerges from inventories.¹³ Nearly all farms grew a few acres of oats and barley. There are frequent references to meal and malt in small quantities for home consumption. Three-quarters list sheep but only five had flocks of more than a 100 and most had less than 50. The value of sheep was not high but they provided the raw material for cottage industry – around half of the inventories contain references to items such as spinning wheels, cards, studdles, tenters and yarn or small stocks of wool. The largest investment was in various kinds of cattle but only three had more than 50 and over half had fewer than ten beasts; there are a few references to oxen. Most inventories listed a couple of horses and around half mentioned small numbers of pigs, poultry and bees.

The demesne farm at Skelsmergh Hall was the largest property. When Rowland Thornburgh, the tenant, died in 1708, his inventory listed 230 sheep and over 50 cattle. When it was forfeited in 1715 it had 95 customary (c.130 statute) acres¹⁴ with additional common rights¹⁵ but it increased in size in 1724 with the purchase of Harry Bank and Garnett Folds¹⁶ and was then 132 customary (c.185 statute) acres. In 1836, with the addition of enclosed common land, it was a 386-acre farm.

On the lower land nearer to Kendal, in the south of the township, there were some intermediate sized farms such as Gilthwaiterigg, Ladyford, Summerhow and Low Groves. These more capitalised properties were often occupied or owned by minor gentry or merchant families. Gilthwaiterigg consisted in 1761 of 90 customary (c.125 statute) acres and was valued at £3,231 11s¹⁷ It was 121 acres in 1836.¹⁸ Summerhow was a smaller property owned by the Kendal chapman Christopher Sprott in 1610¹⁹ and later Oliver Platt the tallow chandler.²⁰ Low Groves, a 135-acre farm in 1836, was probably created by the drover Rowland Scales who merged adjacent

¹³ Database of 70 from 1542-1779, probably under-representing poorer farmers.

¹⁴ Customary land measurement in Kendal barony was based on a 19.5-foot perch, giving a customary acre containing 6760 square yards, or approximately 1.4 (1.396) statute acres.

¹⁵ TNA, FEC1/757.

¹⁶ CAS (K), WDTW/1585/4/2.

¹⁷ CAS (B), BDHJ/91. Grey's valuation.

¹⁸ Corn Rent map.

¹⁹ LRO (Preston), W/RW/K/R472C/49. Christopher Sprott.

²⁰ CAS (K), WDX/510. Deeds. Lowgroves.

properties.²¹ Ladyford extended to 68 customary (c.84 statute) acres when it was sold in 1604; ²² in 1836 it was part of a 232-acre estate combining Ladyford, Must Hill and Redman Tenement, although let as two farms.²³

In 1836 pasture covered 47% of the township, meadow 20%, arable fields 28%, 'seeds' nearly 2% and woods 2%. There were then 31 farmers occupying more than 10 acres, only 5 of whom were not living on their holdings. Nearly all were tenants - there were only three owner-occupiers. Only 7 of the 28 landowners were resident in the township. Agricultural returns from the later nineteenth century combine Skelsmergh with Patton but show that the amount of barley sown was by then small although significant amounts of oats and root crops for fodder were still grown. In 1851, 59% of the inhabitants lived in households whose head was a farmer or agricultural labourer; by 1911 this had declined to 44%.²⁴ There was increasing variety in employment and a marked reduction in the number of living-in farm labourers and servants.

Skelsmergh Hall remained the largest farm. The Morton family who were tenants from 1811 until 1918 became well-known shorthorn breeders, exporting pedigree stock to Canada, the United States, Argentina, New Zealand and Australia. Three brothers of this family took out Skelsmergh cattle and set up a stud farm near Melbourne, Victoria, selling 37 head for £27,000 in one famous sale²⁵ before selling up and returning to Kendal. This was a capitalised and innovative farm that in December 1911 included a water-powered turbine fed from a small reservoir, providing power for machinery such as a milk separator. By this time the farm was slightly smaller in size but was described as having over 100 cattle, mostly pedigree, 4 horses, a small flock of Wensleydale sheep, 130 half-breeds and 25 blackfaces and following a rotation of oats, roots, oats with seeds and five or six years of pasture.²⁶

The Hall continued to combine dairy farming and cattle breeding under later tenants and then owner-occupiers after the Second World War. In 1990 there were 350 friesians here but by the end of the century it had ceased to be a farm and the outbuildings were adapted to form the basis of the 2001 Kiln Croft housing development.

²¹ Deeds. Lowgroves.

²² *Rec. Kend.* I, 259.

²³ Corn Rent map.

²⁴ TNA, HO 107/2441; RG 78/1820.

²⁵ *Westmorland Gazette*, 18 Oct 1890, An Australian Shorthorn Breeder, 8.

²⁶ *Westmorland Gazette*, 23 Dec 1911.

By 1941 there were 16 other farms.²⁷ Only two had electricity. Forty-nine horses were kept for agricultural purposes and there were no tractors. All farms had dairy cattle, sheep and poultry and nearly half kept pigs. Wartime requirements trebled the quantity of oats, potatoes and root crops grown for stock.

Post-war change was rapid. Eighteen Skelsmergh farms had a more or less continuous existence from the seventeenth to the twentieth century²⁸ but by 2012 there were only four farms with a resident farming family and much of the land was rented out and managed from a distance. Most land was now owned by residents or farmers in adjacent townships apart from that held by the Stephenson Trust.²⁹ Arable cultivation continued into the mid-twentieth century (in 1964 there were 25 acres of oats, 4 acres of potatoes, 15 acres of roots and 25 acres of clover)³⁰ Specialisation had eradicated dairy farming and the switch to livestock rearing was almost complete apart from a few fields used for keeping horses for leisure.. Two or three fields were used for maize in the early years of the new century but by 2012 nearly all agricultural land was permanent pasture and grass grown for silage or haylage.

Woodlands

There were 23 acres of underwood in the medieval park in 1588 but this is the only indication that the township was once well-wooded. The fringe of trees alongside the Mint and Sprint rivers forms a more or less continuous narrow strip of woodland that was exploited for centuries - in 1222 Kendal was granted the right to take dead wood from both sides of the Mint here.³¹ Other woodland was mainly coppice wood in small parcels on steep riverside or hill slopes, described in 1777 as: 'Copse Wood consisting of small Oak, Ash, Birch and Alder with Hasles and other underwood usually cut clear with the Ground every 16 or 18 Years and chiefly burnt into Char Coal and the rest corded and sold to Bakers'.³² In 1836 29 woods were listed in Skelsmergh, all small - the largest, Chester Hagg, was of less than six acres. Two-thirds of the farms had such woods attached that were actively managed for the production of coppice wood

²⁷ TNA, MAF 32/202/66.

²⁸ Beck Mills, Bowbank, Burton House, Coppack How, Edge Bank, Garnett Folds, Gilthwaiterigg, High Thorn, Hollin Root, Ladyford, Low Groves, Must Hill, Otter Bank, Pond Side, Red Bank, Skelsmergh Hall, Tarn Bank, Thornyslack.

²⁹ Skelsmergh and Scalthwaiterigg Parish Environment Group Survey 2011.

³⁰ TNA, MAF68/71.

³¹ *The Boke of Recorde of Kirkebie Kendall*, R. S Ferguson, CWAAS reprint, 2001, 127.

³² Trinity College, Cambridge, 40 Kendal 56.

and timber until the twentieth century.³³ Crow Wood and High Wood³⁴ were grubbed up in the nineteenth century and Scar Wood became a reduced woodland pasture but most of the rest survive as neglected woods. In the late twentieth century, the development of the golf course and Watchgate waterworks was accompanied by tree planting and the Skelsmergh tree warden promoted the planting of several small areas for amenity.³⁵

Manufacturing

In 1537 the leper hospital of St Leonard or Spital held a walk mill and half of a corn mill, which had been 'in decay for thirty-four years'.³⁶ The Spital mills were close to the hospital at Beck Mills on the Skelsmergh side of the Mint. In 1580 they were described as a 'water grain mill' and two fulling mills.³⁷ Successive corn mills continued to use the site until the Second World War.³⁸ In 1723, a new fulling mill was erected by Gabriel Shaw and Jonathan Dodgson of Kendal.³⁹ In 1804 it was a fulling and flax mill and when advertised for sale in 1816 contained 8 flax spinning frames of 24 spindles each, 4 tow spinning frames of 24 spindles and 3 carding engines.⁴⁰ It was a worsted spinning mill between 1829 and 1865⁴¹ and was later used for snuff⁴² and tobacco grinding, horn comb manufacturing⁴³ and furniture making.⁴⁴ In 1948 it was converted to flats.⁴⁵

Higher up the Mint, below Meal Bank, at Scarfoot, there was also a series of mills. In 1743 it was the site of a logwood mill and a sickle mill.⁴⁶ The logwood mill was probably built by George Braithwaite who was recorded as a dyer and drysalter in Kendal early in that century.⁴⁷ The

³³ Advertisements for sale of woods at ten Skelsmergh locations: *Westmorland Gazette*: 3 Dec 1853, Apr 29 1854, 27 Jan 1855, 20 Oct 1860, 10 Aug 1861, 26 Oct 1861.

³⁴ Corn Rent map.

³⁵ Parish Allotment, Cold Harbour Quarry & Gurnal Bridge .

³⁶ *Rec. Kend.* I, 72.

³⁷ *Rec. Kend.* I, 158.

³⁸ 1580, 1701, 1723, 1732, 1743, 1751, 1765, 1796, 1816 & later Directories.

³⁹ Between 1765 and 1791 it was part-owned by William Pennington, one of the inventors of the carding machine.

⁴⁰ *Westmorland Advertiser*, 6 July 1816.

⁴¹ *Westmorland Gazette*, 3 June 1848.

⁴² *Kendal Mercury*, 18 March 1865, Snuff Mills recently opened by Messrs. Graham & Dodgson.

⁴³ Bulmer, *Dir. Westmd.* 1885: Henry Brown Comb Manufacturer, Kelly *Dir. Westmd.*, 1894, Joseph Troughton & Sons Comb manufacturers.

⁴⁴ Kelly, *Dir. Westmd.*, 1929 W. French Gibbs.

⁴⁵ CAS (K), WSMB/K11/S533, planning application.

⁴⁶ Pastoral Centre, Diocese of Lancaster. Stephenson's Charities: Statement and Appendix of Documents 1862, 68.

⁴⁷ CAS (K), WDB12/6/15 & 16.

Braithwaites also had a woollen mill there in the early nineteenth century.⁴⁸ Successive logwood mills functioned at the site until 1920 when the weir was dismantled.⁴⁹ Raw materials such as fustic, cochineal and logwood were chipped, rasped or ground to produce a wide range of textile dyes and colourings during around two centuries of operation but in the last years it also produced laundry products for Braithwaite and Co Ltd.⁵⁰

Mills on the Sprint in Skelsmergh are recorded from 1557 when there were two fulling mills near Sprint Bridge on land which had belonged to St Mary's Abbey, York⁵¹ and there is a 1588 reference to a walk mill on the Sprint.⁵² In 1616 Alice Duckett left two mills at Nether House in her will⁵³ but in 1718 a later tenant of this property alleged that houses, mill and mill dam had been pulled down⁵⁴.

There were no buildings on the site in 1847 when Robert Seed purchased Oakbank from the Gandys⁵⁵ and over the next few years erected a purpose-built bobbin mill, drying sheds and large house for his family and workers. In 1851 this enterprise employed 45 bobbin turners, 2 sawyers and 5 labourers.⁵⁶ The Seed family ran the mill until 1905 when it was taken over by William Shepherd who retained bobbin manufacture but also added tool shafts. The site was then used by Tubbs Hiscocks and Co. Ltd and Leonard Henshaw.⁵⁷ James Cropper & Co. Ltd. purchased the Oakbank Woodturning Company in 1964 and used the premises to make plugs for the cores of paper rolls and pallets.⁵⁸ Croppers ceased production in 1973 and leased the property to a paper waste company which closed in 1981. The premises were later used as a saw mill but the race was blocked and the dam demolished around this time.

The small but reliable spring of St John's Well, when supplemented with mill ponds, provided power for two further mills. Giltwhaiterigg corn mill is first mentioned in 1640⁵⁹ and continued

⁴⁸ *Kendal Mercury*, 28 Dec 1844, 3.

⁴⁹ CAS (B), BDHJ/16/3. 1922 Report on Obstructions on Rivers Kent, Mint and Sprint.

⁵⁰ CAS (K), WDB 12/1/5.

⁵¹ British Library, Harley 607.

⁵² TNA, E178/2379 Westmorland: Skelsmergh, Cunswick Park Surveys of the possessions of James Laburne, attainted.

⁵³ TNA, C93/20/32 Westmorland: Skelsmergh Subject: Charity. (Nether House was near Oakbank).

⁵⁴ Chester, DCB/5. Papers relating to Lickbarrow Estates.

⁵⁵ CAS (K), WDTW/77 Oak Bank estate.

⁵⁶ 1851 Census.

⁵⁷ *Westmorland Gazette*, 'Bobbin boy who bought the mill,' 29 Oct 1993.

⁵⁸ Information from Sir James Cropper.

⁵⁹ LRO (Preston), W/RW/K/ R425D/38 Probate, James Duckett.

in operation until 1920.⁶⁰ Higher up this stream, Stocks Mill was a corn mill in 1710⁶¹ but there must have been much earlier mills at this site or below near Burton House, as the adjacent tenement was already known as Millbeck in 1620.⁶² It was a tannery with a bark mill when purchased by Thomas Ashburner in 1743.⁶³ In 1820 William Walker's bobbin mill and house burnt down here⁶⁴ and it remained in use for bobbin manufacture until 1841.⁶⁵ After 1842 the site was put to a variety of light industrial uses as a saw mill, blacksmith and joiner's yard⁶⁶ and in the twentieth century for building⁶⁷ and haulage contractors⁶⁸ and as a garage.⁶⁹

Quarrying

Nine small quarries, mostly small borrow pits for wall construction and roadbuilding, are marked on nineteenth-century maps. Three, alongside the A6 on Skelsmergh Fell, were larger. Lying on the 1822 realignment of the turnpike road, the two at Cold Harbour and above Garth Row were probably created to build this section. They were reserved for the township in the enclosure award.⁷⁰ They also provided some local building stone. Thornyslack quarry, opposite the Longsleddale turn, was of twentieth-century origin.

Other Businesses and Service Industries

Red Tree and the adjacent tenement of Spout House in Garth Row was the site of successive tanneries. It was Robert Nicholson's in 1682 but had previously been held by Rowland Stewardson (d. 1662), whose probate inventory included tanning tools; it was owned by the tanner Humphrey Cleator in 1726.⁷¹ In the nineteenth century Garth Row became a small-scale artisan centre with joiners and wheelwright yards and blacksmiths, shoemakers and tailors

⁶⁰ J. Somervell, *Water-Power Mills of South Westmorland on the Kent, Bela and Gilpin and their tributaries*, (Kendal, 1930), 36.

⁶¹ LRO (Preston), W/RW/K/R459B/65 Probate, Humphrey Morland.

⁶² LRO (Preston), W/RW/K/R456B/44 Probate Peter Mowson.

⁶³ Printer and publisher of the Kendal Mercury.

⁶⁴ *Westmorland Advertiser*, Jan 15 1820.

⁶⁵ Parson & White, *Dir. C. & W.* 1829, Postlethwaite & Taylor; *Westmorland Gazette*, Dec 11 1841, Huddleston and Sons, Stocks Mill Bobbin Turners, Final Dividend.

⁶⁶ *Kendal Mercury*, Oct 12 1872, Stocks mill auction of timber, blacksmith and joiners shop, saw and bone mill and two cottages by executors of late Mr John Machell.

⁶⁷ Kelly, *Dir. Westmd.*, 1921 Nelson Bros., builders & contractors.

⁶⁸ Kelly, *Dir. Westmd.*, 1938 Barnes & Phizacklea haulage contractors.

⁶⁹ *BT Phone Book*, Lancaster & South Cumbria Business listings: 2012 Stocks Mill Garage.

⁷⁰ CAS (K), WQ/RI/24.

⁷¹ LRO (Preston), W/RW/K/R474C/20 Rowland Stewardson; W/RW/K/R461C/13 Probate, Robert Nicholson, Tanner; Levens Hall MSS, Box 16/33. Admittance to Spout House of Humphrey Cleator tanner 24 Nov 1726

recorded here. Stocks is marked on eighteenth-century maps⁷² and may have already been an inn on the turnpike road at this time. It was called the Duke of York in 1809⁷³ and later the Duke of Wellington but was pulled down in the 1860s following 'a representation made by some of the householders'.⁷⁴ Increasing traffic on the A6 by the 1930s, before the M6 was built, also created opportunities for businesses such as the Strawberry Bank Refreshment room,⁷⁵ Cold Harbour Café,⁷⁶ and Wilson House Garage.⁷⁷ Other retail premises have been largely absent from the township - a reflection of dispersed settlement and good communications with the adjacent market town.

Economic History Since 1945

In 1972 the Watchgate Water Treatment Works was constructed to treat water from Haweswater, Windermere and Ullswater and direct it down the aqueducts to Manchester. The highly automated site, refurbished at a cost of more than £30 million in 2003, employs few people.⁷⁸

In 2000 there was a caravan site and other holiday and bed and breakfast accommodation and part of the Carus Green golf course lay within the parish but tourism and leisure was only a small employer.

The first industrial development in the part of Skelsmergh transferred to Kendal in 1935 was the Lakeland Dairy in 1953 which later became Dale Farm Lakeland producing dairy products.⁷⁹ In the 1980s industrial estates were created along the Shap road. By 2011 there were nearly fifty businesses here distributed between areas zoned as the Westmorland Business Park, Fell View Trading Park and Meadowbank Business Park. Other manufacturing concerns included English Lakes Ice Cream, Mardix Specialist Switchgear and NJO Technology lighting design. The largest site was the Lakeland distribution centre which supplied home and kitchen products to its 57 stores.⁸⁰ Grosvenor House Papers Ltd had both headquarters and warehouse here.⁸¹ There were ten concerns in the vehicle sales, servicing and hire sector and nine in construction or related

⁷² John Cary, *Cary's New and Correct English Atlas*, Westmoreland (London, 1787).

⁷³ CAS (K), WD/U/48/3, 1809 Indenture.

⁷⁴ G.E.P. Reade, 'Church Work at Skelsmergh,' *Skelsmergh Church Magazine*, July 1895.

⁷⁵ Kelly *Dir. Westmd.* 1934.

⁷⁶ Kelly *Dir. Westmd.* 1938.

⁷⁷ 'A Tale of Two Contrasts,' *Church News, Skelsmergh, Selside, Longsleddale*, June 1983.

⁷⁸ Watchgate WTW, *UK Water Projects Ltd*, (2002), 187-8.

⁷⁹ <http://www.dalefarm.co.uk/pages/lakeland/Our+Story> (Accessed 4 March 2012)

⁸⁰ <http://www.lakeland.co.uk/info/OurHistory> (Accessed 4 March 2012).

⁸¹ <http://www.ghpkendal.co.uk/aboutus.asp> (Accessed 4 March 2012)

trades. There were also agricultural engineering and various specialist design, servicing and consultancy services. The Cumbria Rural Enterprise Agency, NFU Mutual and Lakes Training also had premises. At least twenty of these businesses were either mainly retail outlets, with attached shops or functioned as both trade and retail outlets.