

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

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Parish/township: SKELSMERGH

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Date of Draft: 08.02.2013 [Updated 23.01.15]

SKELSMERGH¹

Skelsmergh was a small, rural, township of 2,093 acres (847 ha) two miles north-east of Kendal, nestled between the river Kent and two of its tributaries, the Sprint and Mint. In 1935 land north of Mint Bridge was annexed to Kendal and later developed for industry and housing, reducing the size of the parish to 1,939 acres (784 ha) and introducing an urban element to a section of the former township. The rivers mark the southern, western and much of the eastern boundaries of the township but the north-eastern boundaries with Patton and with Whitwell and Selside are not as clearly related to topographical features. That section was described in detail c.1230-40 but the only name still identifiable in the perambulation is Goodham Scales ("Skaillere-goodwine").² The modern boundary, usually following small watercourses or field walls, is probably that described then.

In 1777 Skelsmergh and Patton were described as 'one constablewick, but... separate divisions for a long time.'³ The link with Patton, particularly for taxation purposes, was common but not invariable between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.⁴ The name Skelsmergh, first

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 *Rec. Kend.* I, 251, 391-2; *PNW, Part 1*, (Cambridge, 1967), 149.

³ N&B, 123.

⁴ Below - Local Government.

recorded in the late twelfth century,⁵ has been interpreted as combining two Old Norse elements: the personal name Skjaldmar and *erg*, ('dairy farm' or 'summer pasture'), probably indicating Scandinavian settlement.⁶

Landscape

The flat flood plain beside the confluence of the rivers at the southern tip of the township quickly gives way to an undulating topography of drumlins, mostly elongated in the southward direction of glacial flow. These hills are unnamed with the exception of Helme Bank, Harry Bank and Heights.⁷ In less than five kilometres, the altitude rises from 49m in the south to 214m on Skelsmergh Fell, from whence the aspect is of a markedly more upland character. The boundary rivers reflect this variety, sometimes meandering through meadows but characterised elsewhere by rocky stretches or steep sided valleys, where fast moving water has cut deeply into the drumlins. Although the landscape was once tree-covered, by the medieval period there were probably only scattered woods in the demesne park and on steeper banks. The higher ground to the north-east was unenclosed common land in contrast to the settled and enclosed farmland of the lower parts of the township.⁸

The eighteenth-century vista of rolling fields and rounded hills demarcated with hedges and dry stone walls was noted by Arthur Young in 1771, who described the view southward from Skelsmergh Fell as, 'one of the finest landscapes in the world.'⁹ Thomas West incorporated Young's detailed description into his guidebook, identifying Stone Crag¹⁰ as the appropriate viewing 'station'.¹¹ The modern landscape is more built up, has fewer fields¹² and, with the decline of arable farming, a more homogenous appearance, but Young's description of three foreground hills and a patchwork of enclosures can still be recognised.

The drumlins are mainly composed of moulded glacial till – a jumble of clay, silt, sand, gravel and rounded boulders that have been deposited by the retreating ice. These include the distinctive pink Shap granite erratics that are often incorporated into local dry stone walls. The

⁵ Skelesmeresergh: *Rec. Kend.* I, 265.

⁶ *PNW*, I, 146-9.

⁷ Others are named on estate and corn rent maps but have no contemporary currency.

⁸ Below, Economic History, Agriculture.

⁹ Arthur Young, *A Six Months Tour Through the North of England Vol III*, (London, 2nd ed., 1771), 131-2.

¹⁰ On Skelsmergh Fell, precise site unknown.

¹¹ Thomas West, *A Guide to the Lakes*, (London, 1778 ed.), 182-4.

¹² 1836 CAS (K), WQ/R/C/19, Skelsmergh Corn Rent map compared with author's estimate of 2000. A reduction from about 450 to 300, approximately one third.

bedrock differs from the adjacent townships because overlying the Bannisdale Slates in more than half of the township is an outlier of conglomerate, sandstone and limestone to which the Skelsmergh Fault forms an arcing north-eastern boundary.¹³ The limestone is responsible for a number of swallow holes where water drains into the ground in the east of the township. It is also the reason for the unusual nature of the Skelsmergh Tarn SSSI: although the surrounding willow carr and fen is more typical of acid areas, the high proportion of calcium carbonate in the water makes it a marl tarn with a distinctive range of invertebrates.¹⁴

Soils are mostly brown, stony and well drained but some of the flatter riverine areas have coarse loamy and sandy soils over gravel. These and other relatively low-lying areas are often wet, as is suggested by the number of field names with the appendage 'mire' or 'moss'.¹⁵

Settlement

Limited evidence from core samples¹⁶ and early finds¹⁷ suggests several periods of settlement and retreat after 3000BC. The thirteenth-century boundary perambulation describes a landscape of established settlement but it is only from the sixteenth century that a picture of the local community can be reconstructed. At this time, the pattern was of dispersed settlement on farms usually situated in sheltered folds in the landscape. Most were located close to the boundary between enclosed and unenclosed common land¹⁸ or adjacent to watercourses.¹⁹ The only cluster of dwellings was at the hamlet of Garth Row, first recorded in 1604,²⁰ which was also the site of the tithe barn.²¹

Although many of the farm sites are likely to have been established in the medieval period, most farmhouses appear to have been rebuilt after the late seventeenth century. Two exceptions are

¹³ B.G.S., *Geology of the Kendal District* (NERC 2010), Sheet 39: Kendal Bedrock (2007) & Bedrock and Superficial Deposits (2008).

¹⁴ English Nature File ref. SD 59/3 at http://www.english-nature.org.uk/citation/citation_photo/1002010.pdf (Accessed 15 July 2012).

¹⁵ 17 are listed on Corn Rent map. There are also 15 'holmes'.

¹⁶ D. Walker, 'Studies in the Post-Glacial History of British Vegetation XIV Skelsmergh Tarn and Kentmere, Westmorland,' *New Phytologist* 54 (2) (1955), 222-54.

¹⁷ Skelsmergh Hall stone hammer, HER 4113; Holme House stone axe hammer, HER 4112; Carus Green flint knife, CW3 i (2001), 192.

¹⁸ Thornyslack, Hollin Root, Otter Bank, Edge Bank, Garnett Folds and all Garth Row properties.

¹⁹ Old Earth, Beck Mills, Scarfoot, Redman Tenement, Nether House, Stocks Mill, Burton House, Low Groves, Gilthwaiterigg.

²⁰ LRO (Preston), WRW/R446B/9, Will of James Jackson.

²¹ Trinity College, Cambridge, 40 Kendal 67.

Gilthwaiterigg, a much modified fifteenth-century hall-house with cross wings²² and Coppice How²³ which has a date panel for 1702 but incorporates cruck frames and is likely to be of partly pre-seventeenth century construction.²⁴ Summerhow²⁵, Burton House, Garnett Folds²⁶ and Low Groves²⁷ are probably late seventeenth-century houses. Houses with later date panels include Must Hill (1746) Mint House (1783) and Mint Cottage (1821).

There was a gradual accretion of new buildings adjacent to the 'North Road' after it was turnpiked.²⁸ During the nineteenth century, short terraces of houses were developed at Oakbank and Scarfoot for mill workers.²⁹ A few substantial residences were built in the late Victorian and Edwardian period, often in more elevated locations such as Redhills, the Vicarage, Thorny Bank and Meadowbank.³⁰ All the pre-twentieth century buildings were constructed predominantly from local Bannisdale Slate.

Two farm sites (Redman Tenement and Littlemire) were abandoned after 1945 but most farmhouses were converted to private residences in the second half of the twentieth century. The only council housing was developed at Dodding Holme in 1949.³¹ The Kiln Croft hamlet evolved in two stages with the erection of three dwellings beside the Skelsmergh Hall access road followed by the adaption of the farm outbuildings into eleven units in 2001. Laverock Hill was developed as a series of detached houses along a short access road after 1973.³² By 2009 Holme House Farm had developed into a small community with seventeen residential caravans and several industrial storage compounds and containers. This site was developed without planning permission and in 2012 its future was uncertain.³³

By 2010 the rural part of Skelsmergh remained a sparsely-populated parish composed of scattered buildings and hamlets but the area transferred to Kendal in 1935 had become a suburb of the town. Industrial estates were developed here, north of Mint House and Mint Cottage and

²² RCHME, *Westmorland*, (HMSO, 1936), 213.

²³ Formerly Coppack How.

²⁴ Blake Tyson, 'Twenty Cruck Buildings at Skelsmergh, Kendal, c.1600', *CW*2, c (2000), 192-194.

²⁵ Hyde & Pevsner, *Cumbria*, 625.

²⁶ Interior panel with date of 1609.

²⁷ RCHME, *Westmorland*, 213.

²⁸ Mint House, Wilson House, Strawberry Bank, Hylands, Garnett Plain, Summerhill etc.

²⁹ Below, Economic History.

³⁰ Demolished 2012.

³¹ CAS (K), WPC/2 Minute Book: 6 Sept 1948, name proposed to District Council.

³² Area originally known as High Scar Foot.

³³ Planning Inspectorate Appeal Decision 29 Sept 2010. Appeal Ref: APP/MO933/C/09/2108315.

private housing was built along Gilthwaiterigg Lane.³⁴ In 2003 the Hunter's Croft development of eleven houses north of Mint House completed this infilling process.

Communications

The Roman road linking the forts at Watercrock and Low Borrow Bridge is believed to have followed a route over Patton Bridge and Laverock Bridge through Skelsmergh.³⁵ The 'Old Road' from Otter Bank to Watchgate over Skelsmergh Fell was probably a longstanding packhorse route and seems to have been the road to Shap that formed part of the London to Carlisle road depicted on Ogilvy's map of 1675. This was a difficult route for wheeled traffic, as the retreating infantry of the 1745 Jacobite army discovered.³⁶ It became part of the Heron Syke to Eamont Bridge turnpike road after 1753.³⁷ In 1822 McAdam abandoned the direct route over Skelsmergh Fell and constructed a loop with a gentler gradient that contoured above Garth Row. After 1926 the 'North Road' became the A6 and, in response to increasing motorised traffic, there were a number of minor changes to the alignment. The road lost much of its traffic and its significance as the main west coast route after the M6 motorway was completed in 1970.

Skelsmergh's geographical position has made it a corridor for north-south communications. Bintley's rejected option for the west coast rail route³⁸ would have gone through the township, as did one of the two alternative alignments for the M6.³⁹ The huge Thirlmere (1894)⁴⁰ and Haweswater (1948-55) aqueducts and a gas pipeline pass underneath, as does a fibre optic cable.⁴¹ The Thirlmere aqueduct emerges above ground at three multi-pipe siphon bridges, and the valve house near Low Groves also reveals its presence. The underground progress of the aqueducts across the landscape is marked by groups of valves but more obviously by the chains of iron field gates and occasional stiles.

The boundary rivers are not wide but they are fast flowing and highly responsive to rainfall so travel into and through the township has relied on a series of bridges. Mint Bridge was referred

³⁴ Below, Economic History.

³⁵ I. D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain*, (London, 1973, 3rd ed.), 387.

³⁶ Otter Bank has been claimed as the place where Lord George Murray and the Highland Artillery passed the night. *CW1*, xv, (1899), 109.

³⁷ Turnpike Act, 26 Geo. II, 1753.

³⁸ D. Joy, *A Regional History of the Railways of Great Britain Vol. 14: The Lake Counties* (Newton Abbot, 1983), 20.

³⁹ H. L. Yeadon, *The Motorway Achievement - Building the Network: The North West of England* (Stroud, 2005), 141-2.

⁴⁰ J. J. Harwood, *History and Description of the Thirlmere Water Scheme* (Manchester, 1895).

⁴¹ Norweb-Telecom cable laid 2000.

to in 1542.⁴² Sprint Bridge is mentioned in 1537,⁴³ was in need of repairs in 1667⁴⁴ and was rebuilt in 1716⁴⁵ and again in 1860.⁴⁶ Gurnal Bridge was described as a wooden bridge for horses when it fell down in 1724 and was then replaced by a stone construction.⁴⁷ Laverock Bridge was mentioned in 1534.⁴⁸ The narrow packhorse bridge here was widened early in the nineteenth century by bolting on a parallel structure and adding parapets. There was a ford and later a bridge south of Ladyford, close to the modern bridge built to link the two parts of the Carus Green golf course.⁴⁹ The bridges to Mealbank,⁵⁰ Sprint Mill⁵¹ and the two aqueduct bridges were all built in the nineteenth century.

Population and Social Character

Estimation based on the Hearth Tax return would suggest a township population of just over 200 in 1674,⁵² a figure comparable to that recorded in the early nineteenth century (247 in 1801; 220 in 1811). It climbed rapidly to 367 by 1881 but then declined to 309 in 1931. Between 1951 and 2001 the reduced parish had a population that fluctuated between 250 and 297. In 2010 there were more than 30 households in the section transferred to Kendal. The sharp nineteenth-century increase and subsequent decline mirrored the rise and fall of local industry and declining agricultural employment. The relative stability of population for much of the twentieth century and rise towards its end reflected a steady expansion of the housing stock, initially counterbalanced by shrinking family size.⁵³

In 1851 two residents were born in Scotland but the remainder were born in Westmorland or the three adjacent counties. The number born outside the region crept up to seventeen by 1911 and became much higher during the twentieth century.⁵⁴ Even in the nineteenth century, within the

⁴² LRO (Preston), W/R463D/52; Edward Pykerynge will.

⁴³ HER 17573.

⁴⁴ *Rec. Kend.*, III, 61.

⁴⁵ *Rec. Kend.*, III, 144.

⁴⁶ *Rec. Kend.*, III, 149.

⁴⁷ *Rec. Kend.*, III, 136-7.

⁴⁸ *Rec. Kend.*, I, 66.

⁴⁹ *Westmorland Advertiser*, Sep 16 1820, describes collapse of wooden bridge here during Kendal Races.

⁵⁰ Absent from 1836 Corn Rent map but on 1858 OS 1st Ed.

⁵¹ On Corn Rent map but not enclosure road maps: CAS, (K) WDBIG/PLANS/EXTRA/1237-9.

⁵² 45 households with multiplier of 4.75.

⁵³ 1821: 41 families in 42 houses of which 2 unoccupied; 2001:108 households (in reduced parish).

⁵⁴ Estimate based on personal knowledge of the community.

parameter of regional stability, there was significant population turnover. Most young farm workers and servants were short-term residents. Between 1851 and 1911 the proportion of those recorded in the census as born in the township was always less than a third and only one farm was continuously tenanted by a family of the same name over this period.