

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

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Parish/township: SKELSMERGH

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SKELSMERGH¹

SOCIAL HISTORY

Social Structure and Character

Little can be surmised about the medieval social history of Skelsmergh beyond the pre-eminence of the Leyburnes who held Skelsmergh from the mid-thirteenth century but became non-resident lords by the end of the fourteenth. The family ascendancy ended with James Leyburne's sales² although their influence lingered until 1715 through their retention of the Hall and demesne farm and their status as local leaders of Roman Catholicism. By the early seventeenth century social authority was shared between the Bellinghams, who kept a manor court and owned more than a dozen customary tenements in Skelsmergh, and the lessee of Skelsmergh Hall, who held a similar number,³ and tempered by a significant number of freeholders (of whom there were eighteen in Skelsmergh and Patton in 1640). The presence of families with businesses and properties in Kendal and elsewhere further diversified the social structure.

Of the 45 households in the township in 1674, 24 had one hearth, 7 had two, 13 had between three and five and the Hall had nine.⁴ The comparatively high proportion of multi-hearth houses

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 Above, Landownership.

³ Above, Landownership.

⁴ *Westmorland Hearth Tax*, ed. C Phillips, C. Ferguson, A. Wareham, (London: British Record Society, 2008) 223.

for Westmorland might indicate that around a third of families were relatively prosperous. There may have been a similar proportion who were poor; in 1671⁵ there were four exemptions from the tax even though this list omitted more than a third of the houses listed in the return of three years later.

Enfranchisement in the eighteenth century further weakened gentry influence, as the township came to be dominated by a fluctuating group of 30-40⁶ freehold and tenant farmers of some independence but small wealth. By 1796 the three largest farms were rented from non-resident minor gentry - Daniel Wilson (Dallam Tower), John Gale (Whitehaven) and William Rawlinson (Graythwaite).

The records of the Skelsmergh Select Vestry for the Poor in 1820-32 open a temporary window onto a layer of local society that was not previously visible. At least ten township families needed relief because of low pay or intermittent work. Four families were struggling with old age and infirmity, and a widow, two orphans and four apprentices were supported.⁷

In 1836 there were still 31 farmers in the township but there were just three owner-occupiers and only 7 of the 28 landowners were resident in the township. By 1871 the social structure was more stratified and the yeoman element had thinned out. The number of farming and landowning families had declined to twenty and as well as more than forty people employed as agricultural labourers and servants, there was a single manufacturer and nearly fifty industrial workers employed in the bobbin and woollen mills.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century was notable for the burst of energetic paternalism which built and endowed a new church, vicarage, school and parish hall in the township. Although there was strong local support, only one of the major contributors of finance and land to these projects was a resident - Dr Longmire of Thorny Bank. Most were aristocratic landowners⁸ with an interest in the township or local manufacturers.⁹

The closure of the mills and declining agricultural employment in the twentieth century was accompanied by increasing residential development. By the beginning of the twenty-first century

⁵ TNA, E179/259/14 rot 1d (not included in *Westmorland Hearth Tax*).

⁶ All the assessments for Land Tax, Window Tax, Church Repairs and the Poor in this century were for such numbers

⁷ CAS (K), WPC2/V1&V2.

⁸ Hon. Mrs Howard, Earl Bective, G. E Wilson of Dallam Tower, Earl of Lonsdale.

⁹ W. H Wakefield, Isaac Braithwaite, H. W. Schneider, J. Cropper.

Skelsmergh had acquired a markedly more middle class population with diverse origins and employment histories.

Community Activities

Nineteenth-century Skelsmergh was favoured intermittently as a site for country sporting activities. In 1820 the revived Kendal Horse Races were in a field at Ladyford¹⁰ and in the same year the annual Kendal Hunt met at Mint House.¹¹ In 1824 the Kendal Harriers met at Skelsmergh Stocks.¹² In 1887 the Kendal Otter Hounds met in the parish and in the same year there was a Hound Dog Trail over a four-mile course.¹³ In 1900 and 1907 the Oxenholme Staghounds met at Skelsmergh Hall.¹⁴ These events probably drew their support from the whole district. There are few records of township-based sporting or other social activities before the late nineteenth century.

The Victorian vicarage (1874) included a 'Parish Room' in the basement but a more spacious site for meetings and activities was desired and in 1895 a Parish Room Building Committee was set up.¹⁵ The premises were built opposite the church in 1897,¹⁶ on land provided by the Dallam Tower Estate for a nominal payment. It was conveyed as a possible school or teacher's residence or to meet 'the spiritual, intellectual, moral or social wants of the neighbouring population' as the vicar thought proper.¹⁷ By the 1930s it had become a village hall used for parish meetings, church and social activities that included the lad's club, Girls Friendly Society,¹⁸ badminton club, dances and whist drives.¹⁹ The building was extended in 1936²⁰ and in 1978 a strip of adjacent land was enclosed to create a car park to mark the Jubilee. A new entrance hall was built in 1982 and the kitchen area extended. Declining usage and the need to raise money for repairs and improvements led to a reappraisal in 2000 and, after several public meetings, the PCC agreed to

¹⁰ *Westmorland Advertiser*, Sep 16, 1820.

¹¹ *Westmorland Advertiser*, Nov 11, 1820.

¹² *Westmorland Advertiser*, Jan 31, 1824.

¹³ *Westmorland Gazette*, July 2 1887.

¹⁴ *Kendal Times*, Dec 15, 1900 and Jan 12, 1907.

¹⁵ CAS (K), WPR 87/1, School Building Committee .

¹⁶ External inscription: 'Built in the Diamond Jubilee Year 1897'.

¹⁷ CAS (K), WPR/87/4/11. Typed copy headed: Extract from Conveyance dated 5th October 1895.

¹⁸ Founded 'a little later' than 1877: '*Church Work in Skelsmergh*' by G Reade, reprinted from Skelsmergh Church Magazine, July 1895.

¹⁹ J. Richardson in 'The Great Book of Skelsmergh 2004' - community book kept by Mrs D Bevis, Skelsmergh.

²⁰ CAS (K), PCC Minutes 1932-1941

set up a trust to lease the hall and manage it. This became the Skelsmergh Community Hall registered charity in 2002.²¹ A section of the adjacent field was leased soon afterwards, a balcony added in 2006 and in 2008 the hall was extended and refurbished with the aid of a £187,000 lottery grant.²² In the first decade of the twenty-first century, it was in regular use by a children's playgroup and for indoor sports, parties, weddings, funerals, meetings, coffee mornings, farmer's markets etc.

The Garth Row and Skelsmergh Women's Institute²³ was formed in 1920 and met at the Garth Row Mission Room until 1956 and then at the Parish Hall until the branch disbanded in 1992 and most of the remaining members transferred to Selside. This was a lively branch with attendance at meetings of between 30-40 until the 1980s and like the Skelsmergh Mother's Union (pre-1911 to 2008)²⁴ provided an important forum for local women.

The Skelsmergh Sports were founded in 1947²⁵ on the initiative of the Rev. C. W. Gibbons as an annual sports day for adults and children with an evening dance. The Sports Committee held December whist drives and dances to finance the Sports until 1980. This event was still thriving in 2012 and moved in 2004 from a farmer's field next to the Vicarage to the new Community Hall field. In the early years activities such as dog races, tossing the sheaf, pillow fights, wrestling, and the tug of war featured. Latterly, it evolved into an event mainly for younger children with races, a traditional tea and sometimes other entertainment.

Education

The earliest reference to education in Skelsmergh is a record of two boys admitted to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge in 1582 and 1587 who had been taught by Mr Garnett in Skelsmergh.²⁶ One was later a well-known recusant²⁷ and Garnett's school may have been an early example of the Catholic education that must have existed in the area.²⁸ Clues to the presence of some local provision include 'Garnett Fold' field called Schoolhouse Close²⁹ and a

²¹ Charity Commission No. 1098387.

²² http://news.biglotteryfund.org.uk/pr_030608_nw_cb_skelsmergh?regioncode=-l&status=theProg&title=Lotto%20cash%20makes%20community%20hall%20fit%20for%20future (Accessed, October 17 2012).

²³ CAS (K), WDSO 158.

²⁴ Records in possession of Mrs R. Turner.

²⁵ CAS (K), WPR 87 (Misc.), Skelsmergh Sports Committee Minute & Account Book.

²⁶ Probably the Skelsmergh deponent 'John Garnet Mr of Art', see TNA, E178/2379.

²⁷ John Preston MP for Lancaster 1593, History of Parliament online.

²⁸ Below, Religion.

²⁹ CAS (K), WDTW/1585/4/2.

house at Scar Foot known as School House.³⁰ In 1715 Thomas Clerk, a cordwainer from Garth Row, left part of the interest and profits of his tenement and land for the maintenance of a schoolmaster, provided that the inhabitants of Skelsmergh erected a school.³¹ This does not seem to have happened. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Richard James of Hole House kept a school for older children at Garth Row.³² Meagre local provision probably inspired Joseph Harling of Tarn Bank in 1802 to leave £100 to Selside School and £100 to Burneside school to admit four poor boys to each school from Skelsmergh.³³ This charity became the Kitching and Harling Charity later known as the Selside Educational Foundation.³⁴

When the Education Department identified a need for additional provision in 1872³⁵ the vicar and vestry committee quickly decided to build a school near Garth Row. The Poor Allotment was proposed as the location but there were difficulties with the Local Government Board. An alternative site was donated by Mr Longmire of Thorny Bank and a National School was built in 1874 at the cost of £291.³⁶ Because of its northerly position, the school drew its pupils mainly from the Garth Row, Garnett Bridge and Watchgate area and some children in other parts of the township attended schools in Burneside, Meal Bank and Kendal.

The school was always small and usually had only one teacher, sometimes with an assistant or monitor. Sarah Stoddart was headmistress for more than thirty-five years but had to retire in 1920 following an accident when riding home during a November snowfall. Between 1900 and 1915 the number on roll fluctuated between 27 and 49 but it declined to 22 in 1923 when there was a succession of temporary teachers.³⁷ Under Dorothy Mountford, from 1923-28, the number rose to 28 but by 1933 there were only 10. From 1934 until 1949 Mary Greenbank (later Hawes) was headteacher. The numbers recovered to 19 by 1939 and the war years were busy with evacuees and teachers arriving from Newcastle and South Shields and later from Barrow. There were also private evacuees from London and Liverpool. The school was well-regarded by the

³⁰ LRO (Preston), WRW/R516/37, will of George Marshall of 'School house near Scar Foot in Skelsmergh'.

³¹ LRO (Preston), WRW/K/R421C/51.

³² *Westmorland Gazette*, 23rd December 1911: A Nonagenarian's Record.

³³ LRO (Preston), WRW/R511/58, Joseph Harling will.

³⁴ Charity Commission - Removed Charity 526951.

³⁵ *Kendal Mercury*, 21 Dec 1872: Education Dept notice.

³⁶ CERC, NS/7/1/11436.

³⁷ CAS (K), WPR87/1/5/2. Log Book 1903-30.

Westmorland Director of Education and in April 1941³⁸ the President of the Board of Education was brought to visit.

An exposed hillside site and limited budgets for maintenance and heating often caused problems and there were snow closures most winters. By 1947 there were only nine on roll and, in spite of protest and numbers subsequently rising to seventeen, the school was closed in December 1949 and the teacher and most of the children transferred to Selside school in January 1950.³⁹ Some Skelsmergh children still attended that school in 2012 but others went to Kendal or Burneside schools and most secondary students were enrolled at Kendal schools.

Charities and Poor Relief

In 1616 Alice Duckett left instructions in her will to pay £3 a year from her tenement called Nether House - £1 to Kendal, £1 to Strickland and £1 to Skelsmergh. After the tenant's death it was to be sold and the full rental of £9 given for the use of the poor by the trustees. This gift proved problematic and was the cause of legal disputes that came before the Lords Commissioners in 1659⁴⁰ and Chancery in 1753.⁴¹ The Commissioners For Inquiry Concerning Charities noted that 'the history of this charity is involved in great obscurity' and that most of the money was going to the Kendal corporation account.⁴² However, money from this source was still being distributed as a dole to the Skelsmergh poor in the nineteenth century.⁴³

The most significant local charities have been Catholic. They were necessarily clandestine in origin and this secrecy generated uncertainty over their origins, purposes and history both inside and outside the Catholic church. Stephenson's Trust originated when Robert Stephenson, having outlived his wife and children, bequeathed his estate for charitable purposes by a series of deeds between 1698 and 1721.⁴⁴ He received the lordship rents to twelve Skelsmergh properties and held the customary tenancies of Dodding Green, Holme House and the Beck Tenement and also had property in Kendal,⁴⁵ Selside and Whinfell.⁴⁶ His primary purposes seems to have been

³⁸ CAS (K), WDS93/1. School Log Book 1930-50.

³⁹ CAS (K), WPR87/1/5/3.

⁴⁰ TNA, C 93/20/32, Westmorland, Skelsmergh, Charities.

⁴¹ Chester, DCB/1595/3/5 - Lickbarrow estates in Skelsmergh.

⁴² Further Report of the Commissioners for Inquiring Concerning Charities, House of Commons, 1815-35, 490.

⁴³ Below - Local Government.

⁴⁴ Over ninety, according to B. C. Foley, 'Robert Stephenson (1650-1723) Dodding Green' in *Some People of the Penal Times* (Lancaster 1991), 39.

⁴⁵ Kilner House, The Black Bull and Horse and Rainbow.

⁴⁶ Evett Sike, Moser, Borans & Breamrigg.

to ensure the provision of a local Catholic priest and to assist poor Catholics but he specified a wide range of educational and welfare concerns that included poor housekeepers, apprenticeships, discharge of debts, disability by age and lack of clothes, tools and medical help. He was specific in not excluding Protestants and his trustees included local Quakers. Stephenson's dole at the door of Dodding was abolished in 1801 but distributions to the poor in the neighbourhood continued into the twentieth century.

The Moyston Trust, another Catholic charity, was established in 1695 when Peter Mowson and his brother, the London goldsmith and banker John Mowson,⁴⁷ gave Mill Beck tenement and £140 mortgaged on Garnett Folds for poor Catholics, the support of Catholic apprentices and for Catholic education in the Barony of Kendal.⁴⁸ Mill Beck was farmed with the neighbouring Burton House which was itself left to the Rev. Thomas Wilkinson of Kendal in 1843 by the Mount family. These two properties were used to support the Kendal mission and to provide distributions to the poor in the town and in 2012 were still owned by this trust.

Robert Johnson, one of the incumbents of Dodding Green, left three additional fields to the Stephenson Trust besides other significant charitable endowments.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Mowson chaired the governing body of the Goldsmith's Company and was a conduit of Catholic funds. See Wright, 'The Layburnes and their World', PhD thesis, St Andrews, 2002, 138.

⁴⁸ Ushaw, UCM III/242, March 16 1784: letter from Robert Johnson to Bishop Matthew Gibson.

⁴⁹ Below, Religion - Dodding Green incumbents.