

Victoria County History of Cumbria Project: Work in Progress

Interim Draft

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Parish/township: **CASTERTON**

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INTRODUCTION

Casterton is a rural township with two centres now joined into one straggling village. It lies on the east side of the Lune, which forms its western boundary. In shape long and thin, lying east and west, it covers an area of 4,324 acres (1,750 ha), rising from the river to the largely uninhabited fells. Its northern boundary is with Barbon township, the western end following a small tributary of the Lune, except between Howerigg and Whelprigg, where for about 500 yards the township boundary leaves the beck side and makes an unexplained loop to the north. The southern boundary, which forms the county boundary between Westmorland and the Lancashire townships of Burrow-with-Burrow and Leck, runs along the Ease Gill Beck, another tributary of the Lune. At the furthest point east stands the County Stone, where the boundaries of Yorkshire, Lancashire and Westmorland meet.

In the second half of the eighteenth century a dispute arose with Barbon regarding the boundary between the two townships across the common land to the east, which ought to run, the petitioners said, ‘in a direct or strait line from Little Agle to Great Agle [Aygill] ... not by a curved one.’¹ Ten years previously Thomas Huck had grazed cattle and cut rushes unimpeded, but now it was unsafe, as Barbon people chased the Casterton cattle with dogs. The dispute appears to have been resolved in favour of the Casterton tenants, since the modern boundary follows Little Aygill straight down to the junction with Great Aygill.

Landscape

¹ CAS (Carlisle), DLONS/L5/4/15/7: petition re Casterton Common, undated. Can be assigned to later 18th century by reference to Thomas Huck, who farmed Gale Garth at least from 1764-1800 (Kirkby Lonsdale Parish Register).

The land rises eastwards from the Lune. The village and most of the farms lie on undulating ground (typical ‘basket of eggs’ drumlin topography) at c.100-130m. A steep scarp up the edge of the fell levels off to a series of summits in the Brownthwaite area at around 420-430m. The land then falls towards the Bullpot and Gale Beck valleys, beyond which Casterton Fell rises steadily from c.300m. to the crest of Crag Hill (682m.) and Great Coum (687m.). The underlying bedrock is almost entirely of the Basal Conglomerates and Carboniferous Limestone Series, capped by Millstone Grit on Crag Hill and Great Coum. A series of sink holes (recorded in the names Bullpot and Cow Pot) lies along the junction between the limestone and the Basal Conglomerates. The western part of the township has well drained loamy soils on glacial drift, with small areas of river alluvium, providing good meadow and grazing land. Soils become thinner and sourer as the land rises, with impeded drainage and acidic peaty soils on the lower fells at Brownthwaite and blanket peat on the higher fells.²

Settlement

The mainly inhabited part of the township, that lying between the Fellfoot Road and the river, covers only a third of the total area. An outlying island of settlement in the Bullpot valley, on higher ground, formerly surrounded by unenclosed fell, contained four settlements, at Smithy House,³ Gale Garth, Hellotscales, and Bullpot, none of which was still farmed in 2013: Hellotscales was a ruin, Bull Pot a centre for potholers, Smithy House a holiday cottage, and Gale Garth a private dwelling.

The name Casterton indicates ‘farmstead near a fortification’, the Old English *ceaster* (‘city, walled town, fortification’) usually denoting a Roman settlement but no trace of a fort or marching camp have been found.⁴ It has been suggested, however, that a stone circle and mound east of the Roman road it may have been the remains to which place-name referred.⁵ There are traces of Scandinavian occupation in minor place-names,⁶ and in a silver brooch of the Viking age found in a field near Casterton Hall in the nineteenth century.⁷ There must already have been

² *Soils of England and Wales, Sheet 1 Northern England* (Soil Survey of England and Wales, 1983).

³ So named from a local family, not because there was ever a smithy there. William Smithys occurs in a list of tenants of 1772. CAS (Carlisle), DLONS/L5/4/15/3

⁴ PNW, I, 27; D. N. Parsons and T. Styles, *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names (BRACE-CAESTER)* (Nottingham, 2000), 158-62.

⁵ RCHME, *Westmorland*, 66-7.

⁶ E.g. Hellotscales, indicating a summer shieling, and the frequent use of ‘fell’, ‘gill’ and ‘beck’ in field and settlement names.

⁷ B. J. N. Edwards *Vikings in North West England* (Lancaster 1998) p. 32. The brooch is now in the Tullie House Museum, Carlisle.

considerable settlement in medieval times: on 2 October 1292, Edward I's army rested there on its way to Appleby, Carlisle, and ultimately Berwick.⁸ The soldiery may have bivouacked, but the army leaders would have demanded proper housing. A tenant list of 1574 suggests heavier settlement than any other Kirkby Lonsdale township except the town itself. Six free and 53 customary tenants are listed, 29 of the latter on holdings of two acres or less.⁹ The 1674 Hearth Tax return listed 56 houses: six in Casterton; nineteen in (Low) Casterton; fourteen in Chapel Houses (which included High Casterton), seven at Longthwaite, on the back road to Barbon, six at Fellgate on the Bullpot road, two at Elm Tree, now a single farm between Low and High Casterton, and two at Gowrey, where the farmhouse is now just over the Lancashire border.¹⁰

The township's easy access to the town Kirkby Lonsdale by means of the Devils Bridge¹¹ must have had an influence on the development of this pattern of settlement, and at a later date on the building of larger houses in the western half of the township. Kirfit Hall, now partly ruinous, was originally a handsome L-shaped seventeenth century house, partly rebuilt in the eighteenth century.¹² Within a short distance of each other there are three houses which can claim to be called Casterton Hall. The first, in High Casterton, was 'an old ruinous building' in 1692,¹³ but was mainly rebuilt in the nineteenth century. The second, in Low Casterton, more properly called Beckside, dates to the second half of the sixteenth century.¹⁴ The third, a neat neo-classical house dated 1811, probably designed by John Webb,¹⁵ was built above the river by the Carus Wilson family, who at that time also owned Beckside.¹⁶ Both Kirfit Hall and the third Casterton Hall were set in parkland, landscaped and wooded, and making the most of their proximity to a picturesque stretch of the river Lune. The nineteenth-century growth of Low Casterton was shaped by the establishment of the schools, which expanded further until they constituted more than half of the village, but the proximity of Kirkby Lonsdale also introduced a suburban

⁸ B. P. Hindle 'Medieval Roads in the Diocese of Carlisle' *CW2*, 77 (1977), 83-95.

⁹ Estreat of the court baron, 1574: *Rec. Kend.* II, 334.

¹⁰ C. Phillips, C. Ferguson, A. Wareham, *Westmorland Hearth Tax* (London and Kendal 2008), 181-2.

¹¹ See Kirkby Lonsdale article for a description of the bridge. The Casterton end of the bridge has a peculiar feature: in a shallow recess in the wall stands a short pillar bearing the badly worn inscription 'Fear God, Honer the King, 1673', and a reference to the constable of Lonsdale Ward at the time of its erection. In 1692 it was said by Machell to have been 'lately set up with a dial upon it' (Jane Ewbank (ed.), *Antiquary on Horseback* (CWAAS Extra Series XIX, Kendal, 1963), 24) but in its present position in the lee of the wall it cannot have worked as a sundial.

¹² RCHME, *Westmorland*, 66.

¹³ Ewbank, *Antiquary*, 27

¹⁴ RCHME, *Westmorland*, 66.

¹⁵ J. M. Robinson *Architecture of Northern England* (London) 1986

¹⁶ Claire Wildsmith 'Casterton Hall', *Kirkby Lonsdale & District Newsletter* (Autumn 2010). It is now divided into five dwellings.

flavour. The sale in 1899 of the Lunefield estate in Kirkby Lonsdale included fourteen sites for houses in Casterton,¹⁷ which were subsequently all built and others added. Early twentieth-century housing expansion included the breaking up of Casterton Hall into five dwellings, and other small housing developments. Casterton School, absorbing two other schools,¹⁸ had expanded its buildings during the twentieth century, and by 2013 constituted more than half of Low Casterton. The result is a village without any obvious centre, although to the inhabitants there is more community feeling than might be assumed from outside appearance, and from the dominating presence of the school.

Communications

Two roads and a green track run roughly parallel north and south through the township. Furthest east is the Fellfoot Road, a track which marks the edge of cultivated or good grazing land made up of fairly small fields outlined by stone walls. Since 1996 this minor track has been rendered noteworthy by an installation by the artist Andy Goldsworthy consisting of sixteen sheepfolds behind the walls of the track, each with a large boulder in it. The middle road is partly on the line of the Roman road from Chester to Carlisle, believed to have been constructed under Agricola about AD 79.¹⁹ The Roman road passes only two dwellings, and its use has long been superseded by the third road, the Settle to Sedbergh turnpike, now the A683, nearest the Lune and passing through Low Casterton.²⁰ Several transverse lanes link the three roads and lead to outlying farms, the Fell Road, climbing the fell to Gale Garth and Bull Pot, continuing as a green track northwards into Barbondale and onwards to the Dent valley in Yorkshire.

Casterton's main line of communication is, and has been since at least the late eighteenth century, the most westerly north-south road (A683). It was turnpiked in 1762 under the Sedbergh Turnpike Trust; a tollhouse cottage stands halfway between the Devil's Bridge and Low Casterton village.²¹ The modern road may replace an earlier road towards Sedbergh, following the track leading to Kirfit Hall, now little more than a field path, which continues past

¹⁷ Sale catalogue, 1899. Development was not immediate. The 1914 OS map shows seven developed plots.

¹⁸ See 'Social History'

¹⁹ J. M. Ewbank 'A Cross-section of the Roman road in Casterton', *CW*2, 60 (1960), 28-31.

²⁰ Low Casterton is now always referred to simply as 'Casterton' but for clarity the old name has been retained throughout this article. 'Casterton' has been used to refer to the whole township.

²¹ Precise date of building unknown. The Sedbergh Turnpike Trust began building roads in 1762. The tollhouse remained active until at least 1871 (Census returns).

the house, along the river and into Low Casterton by the old mill site and the seventeenth-century Becksid Hall.

The North Western Company's railway line between Clapham in Yorkshire and Tebay, opened in 1861 and closed in 1954, ran through Casterton. On the original plan it passed through the middle of the village, just to the east of the church, but this was altered, although the new plan necessitated a cutting. 'The friends of the School will be glad to hear that the apprehended annoyance of a Railroad through the School premises is removed by the adoption of another line, behind the School, in all respects preferable.'²² No station was built within the township: the people of Kirkby Lonsdale petitioned against the proposal, as prospective passengers would have had the inconvenience and expense of passing through the tollgates, then still operative.²³ Casterton continued to be poorly served by public transport: in 2013 one bus a week, on Thursday, Kirkby Lonsdale's market day, passed through on its route from Sedbergh and returned two hours later.

Population and social character

In terms of prosperity reckoned by numbers of hearths recorded in the seventeenth century, Casterton was a very average country township:²⁴ Out of fifty dwellings listed in 1674, five had three hearths, two had four and two five, these latter being identifiable as the manor house in High Casterton and Edward Wilson's new house at Becksid Hall. The population at that date may be reckoned as c.200. Daniel Fleming's listing of the inhabitants in 1695²⁵ shows a population of 161, excluding younger children, distinguishing between sixteen yeoman families and fourteen farming families. There were also 48 'poor persons', but no indication as to how many families this represents or how many of them might have held land, and eight bachelors above the age of 25, some of whom may have had their own households.

In 1773 there were 46 properties, suggesting a similar level of population.²⁶ Population had risen to 266 by 1801 with a further very sharp rise to 623 in 1841 being explained by the establishment of two boarding schools.²⁷ Numbers remained at about this level for the rest of the nineteenth

²² CAS (Kendal), WDS/38.

²³ CAS (Kendal), WDY/139. The opinion of Casterton residents is not recorded.

²⁴ *Westmorland Hearth Tax*, 181-2.

²⁵ In response to the Tax Act of 1694.

²⁶ Land Tax return, 1773: CAS (Kendal), WQ/R/LT 1773 (Lonsdale Ward).

²⁷ See 'Social History'.

century. The twentieth century saw a decline, the lowest figure of 175 being in 1971, probably during a school holiday. In 1991 the figure was 250.