

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

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Parish/township: HELSINGTON

Author: Sarah Rose

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HELSINGTON

ECONOMIC HISTORY

Helsington's economy was largely based on agriculture, with pastoral farming coming to predominate in the twentieth century. Orchards were common from an early date, and residents also once derived an income from exploiting the peat moss on Helsington Common. In the nineteenth century, the power of the River Kent was harnessed to fuel various manufacturing industries, including a gunpowder works. However, gunpowder manufacture ended in the early twentieth century, at a time when agricultural employment also began to decline. From the 1950s, employment was increasingly found in Kendal and further afield, while leisure and tourism became a significant aspect of Helsington's economy by the twenty-first century.

Agriculture

Field names, such as 'ewe close', 'bigcroft' ('bygg' meaning barley), and 'oxen close',¹ reflect the mixed nature of farming in the township. By the sixteenth century, ploughs and oxen were present on several farmsteads, with barley and oats as the main crops.² In his memoirs, Stephen Brunskill, who leased Berryholme farm in the 1790s, referred to the failure of his barley crop 'on

¹ *PNW*, 112; CAS (K), WPR/27/7/2/6.

² Based on an analysis of sixteen probate inventories, 1578-1744.

which we greatly depended.³ There is evidence that the long-ley system was used in the township by c.1800.⁴ Orchards were also a feature on many farms from the medieval period right through to the twentieth century.⁵ Mild winters and free-draining limestone soil supported grass growth for grazing. At his death in 1577, Allan Bellingham, lord of the manor, possessed a flock numbering 138 sheep and 37 lambs.⁶ Sheepfolds were concentrated in the northern half of the township where the land was more suitable for rough grazing.

Prior to the enclosure award of 1855, there were two areas of common waste, totalling about 1,000 acres: Helsington Moss in the south west of the township, and Helsington Barrows in the north. Following a dispute between the Stricklands and Bellinghams in 1592, the right of Sizergh tenants to pasture cattle on Helsington Barrows, which they had done for forty years, was endorsed.⁷ The same legal case also made reference to the piecemeal improvement of the commons over the previous thirty years.⁸ Rentals from the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also identify rents owed for newly improved land.⁹

The absence of a resident lord resulted in the demesne farm being tenanted from an early date. In 1320, William de Thweng leased the Helsington demesne to Roger de Kernetebey, vicar of Kirkby Kendal, for thirteen years, with de Kernetebey agreeing to build a new oxhouse and repair the old grange.¹⁰ However, two years later, the manor was in a poor state having been burnt by the Scots.¹¹ There seems to have been no improvement by the time of William de Thweng's

³ *The Life of Stephen Brunskill of Orton* (London, 1837), 47.

⁴ CAS (K), WDX/140/10 (Lease of Holeslack Farm, 1801).

⁵ CAS (K), WPR/27/7/2/6; WTDV/2/40l; *Sizergh Estate Lands*, 84; Kelly, *Dir. C.&W.* (1938), 53. Examples survive at Nether Wells, Holeslack, Park End and Lane End Farms.

⁶ Lancashire Archives, W/RW/K/R405B/23.

⁷ *Rec Kend.*, I, 161.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Levens Hall, Bagot MSS, Box 2/3.

¹⁰ *Rec. Kend.*, I, 141.

¹¹ *Lancs. Inq.*, pt ii, 147. There were then 86 acres in demesne, worth 3d per acre and 5 acres of meadow worth 6d per acre.

death in 1340, when the chief messuage was described as ‘waste and ... worth nothing’.¹² Nevertheless, the demesne at Helsington Laithes, including the water corn mill, were leased thereafter. In 1722, rent for the demesne mill and mill house amounted to £160: far greater than the £17 collected from the rents of free and customary tenants.¹³ Heriots had been commuted by 1680¹⁴ while the earliest evidence of enfranchisement by the lords of Helsington dates from 1700.¹⁵ By 1758, just five customary tenants remained.¹⁶ Enfranchisement began much earlier for Sizergh’s tenants: Sir Thomas Strickland is said to have enfranchised 82 tenants across his estates, including those at Sizergh, in 1490/91.¹⁷

Among the oldest recorded farms in Helsington was Hawes, which was granted by the Stricklands to John de Camera (Chambers) in 1288.¹⁸ On the death of Walter Chambers in 1581, Hawes consisted of 38 acres of arable land, 12 acres of meadow, 20 acres of pasture, and 10 acres of wood, with an orchard and a water mill.¹⁹ Most of Helsington’s other farms can be traced from the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries,²⁰ including Bridge House (a corruption of Briggs’ House), which once belonged to the first recorder of Kendal, Robert Briggs.²¹ Bridge House farm contained 55 ½ customary (c.76 statute) acres in 1798, by which time it and many other farms in Helsington had been acquired by wealthy landowners (including the Wilsons of Rigmaiden) and let to tenants. By 1845, only one farm, High House, was owner-occupied.²²

¹² *Rec. Kend.*, I, 143.

¹³ Levens Hall, Bagot MSS, Box 2/3. By the late seventeenth century, it was common for tenant farmers to pay the bills of their lord, in lieu of rents: Bagot and Munby, ‘*All thing is well here*’, 177.

¹⁴ Levens Hall, Bagot MSS, Box 18M/2.

¹⁵ CAS (K), WDX/405, T2; WDRIG/Box 12 (Netherwells Deeds), no.1; WDRIG/Box 12 (Berryholme Deeds), no.19.

¹⁶ Levens Hall, Bagot MSS, Box 2/3.

¹⁷ N&B, I, 98.

¹⁸ *Rec Kend.*, I, 136; CAS (K), WDCH/T3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 159-160.

²⁰ Several farms have structures dating from the seventeenth century or earlier: RCHME, *Westmorland*, 108.

²¹ Briggs was appointed by the Kendal Charter in 1575.

²² CAS (K), WPR/27/7/2/6.

By the mid-nineteenth century some of Helsington's farms had also undergone a significant expansion, with five containing over 170 acres.²³ The largest single farm, at 347 acres [140 ha], was at Sizergh Hall, the former demesne farm run by William Ellison.²⁴ Hawes stood at 177 acres [40 ha] by 1845,²⁵ rising to 198 acres [76 ha] at the time of its sale in 1896.²⁶ Between 1700 and 1845, Berryholme had grown from 40 acres [16 ha] to 83 acres [34 ha];²⁷ in 1910 it measured 149 acres [60 ha], plus 26 acres [11 ha] of wood.²⁸ In 1910 there were six farms of more than 150 acres, the largest being on the Strickland's estates at High Sizergh (282 ac; 114 ha) and Low Sizergh (166 ac; 67 ha). By 1860, all farms still practiced a mixture of arable and pastoral farming, although the emphasis varied.²⁹ Thus at Hawes, around two thirds of land was arable, while at Sizergh Hall the majority was pasture. Around half of farms also then possessed at least one orchard. Farming was still a key feature of Helsington's economy in the early twentieth century, but it had begun to decline as a source of employment.

By 1941, there were a dozen farmsteads sited within Helsington.³⁰ Just four were owner-occupied, while three had electricity. Most had over 100 acres devoted to a mix of permanent grazing and cultivation, with oats as the chief crop. All but Prizet farm had both sheep and cattle, with the largest herd being 121 head of cattle at Hawes Farm. Four farms possessed flocks of 200 sheep or more. There was also a significant number of poultry on most farms; flock sizes ranged from sixty-six at Prizet, to 411 at Bridge House. A few pigs were kept by most, although Grate Farm had 304 - in addition to large numbers of other livestock. There were sixty seven horses across these farms in total, with most being used for agricultural purposes.

²³ Namely, Hawes, Larkrigg, Low Sizergh, Sizergh Hall Farm, and Helsington Laithes.

²⁴ CAS (K), WPR/27/7/2/6. Census 1841 and 1851.

²⁵ CAS (K), WPR/27/7/2/6.

²⁶ CAS (K), WDB/22/2/1/8 (sold as two lots: one 188 acres, the other a field of 10 acres).

²⁷ CAS (K), WDRIG/Box 12 (Berryholme Deeds), no.19; WPR/27/7/2/6.

²⁸ CAS (K), WTDV/2/40.

²⁹ CAS (K), WPR 27/7/2/6.

³⁰ TNA, MAF 32/197/45.

Peat Cutting

Peat was not only used locally to fuel domestic hearths and limekilns, but was also sold to the residents of Kendal.³¹ Properties in the township often had ‘peat cotes’ (buildings for storing peat) attached to their estate.³² However, the tradition of peat cutting was irrevocably changed by the Underbarrow, Helsington and Levens Drainage Act of 1838.³³ The installation of a drainage system, using catchwater dykes, enabled areas where peat had once been cut to be brought into agriculture. Whereas twenty-six carts of peat a day were once transported to Kendal, by 1907 it had become an occasional occurrence.³⁴ By that date, only the Parsonage, Berryholme and High House possessed mosses. Surviving peat enclosures became wooded in the twentieth century.³⁵

Woodland

In 1421, the lord of Helsington had 100 acres of wood in demesne, considerably more than the forty-one acres on his estate in 1910.³⁶ In contrast, by the early twentieth century, the Sizergh demesne boasted 277 acres [112 ha] of woodland,³⁷ much of which originated from deer parks established in the fourteenth century. In 1332, William de Thweng granted to Walter de Strickland waste and wood in Helsington, with the right to enclose his land (except that at Brigsteer), with estovers for him and his tenants.³⁸ In 1336, Sir Walter Strickland was given licence to empark his wood and demesne at Sizergh.³⁹ This resulted in a park straddling both sides of the River Kent: that on the west bank became Sizergh Park (later Low Park Wood), while that on the east became Larkrigg Park. In 1361, Thomas Strickland, was given licence to empark a further 300 acres in Helsington, Levens and Hackthorpe, as a reward for his good

³¹ CAS (K), WDSO/209/1.

³² See, for example, the particulars for Holeslack Farm in 1780: CAS (K), WDNT/15.

³³ CAS (K), WPR/8/14/1/6.

³⁴ Whiteside, ‘Notes on the Chapelry of Helsington’, 122.

³⁵ OAN, *Sizergh Estate*, 86.

³⁶ *Rec. Kend.*, I, 147-148; CAS (K), WTDV/2/40. Wood and stone from Helsington was used at Levens Hall for improvements: Bagot and Munby, *‘All thing is well here’*, 3.

³⁷ CAS (K), WTDV/2/40.

³⁸ *Rec. Kend.*, I, 143.

³⁹ *Cal. Pat.*, 1336, p.196.

service in France.⁴⁰ This led to the formation of a second deer park at Brigsteer, the western pale of which followed the parish boundary between Helsington and Levens.⁴¹

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Sizergh estate was disparked to become managed woodland.⁴² In 1713, Brigsteer Park was reduced in size, becoming restricted to the east of Park End Lane by a large park wall.⁴³ Afterwards, the western half of the park was disparked to become Low Brigsteer Park Wood, while the eastern half, or High Brigsteer Park, was re-enclosed to keep the deer in. The distribution of woodland on the Sizergh estate remained fairly static during the nineteenth century, although some post-enclosure planting took place at Helsington Barrows and Brigsteer Brow.⁴⁴

Woodland on the Sizergh estate was actively managed. In 1841, ‘several hundreds of feet of timber’ were put up for auction, while late nineteenth-century plans show where coppicing had occurred and the areas to be cut.⁴⁵ Coppicing was particularly prominent at Low Brigsteer and Low Park Woods.⁴⁶ In 1733/4, the Backbarrow Iron Co. was granted permission to fell trees in ‘Sizergh Park’ for charcoal, though there is no indication that any was produced on-site⁴⁷. There is some evidence of bark peeling and potash production at Brigsteer Park Wood.⁴⁸ A Jubilee plantation was created for shooting purposes in 1935, and other woods, including Low Park Wood, also had open spaces for shooting.⁴⁹ On taking over the estate in 1950, the National Trust produced a woodland management plan, which recorded 5,000 acres of woodland across the estate. Much of this lay within Helsington township, including Helsington Barrows,

⁴⁰ *Cal. Pat.*, 1361, p.551.

⁴¹ OAN, *Sizergh Estate*, 4, 77.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Rec. Kend.*, III, 109-10.

⁴⁴ OAN, *Sizergh Estate Lands*, 81.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 82-83. Coppice was widely used in the local bobbin-turning industry.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

Holeslack, and Low Park Wood. By 1969, Brigsteer Wood (79 acres; 32 ha) was derelict due to a lack of coppicing, with no saleable timber left.⁵⁰

Manufacturing

The power of the River Kent was harnessed at an early date, with a corn mill at Helsington Laithes by 1297.⁵¹ In about 1800, the mill site was developed as a marble works by Kendal Architect Francis Webster, who leased the premises from the lord of the manor.⁵² Webster constructed two water-powered mills on the site, and built a weir further upstream to improve the water supply to the mill race. The marble mills were not large employers in Helsington, with just three local residents (all living at Marble Mills Cottages) working there between 1841 and 1861.⁵³

The larger of the two mills polished locally mined limestone for ornamental use.⁵⁴ The building was acquired in 1895 by J. Chaplow and Sons, who used the buildings as engineering workshops for the maintenance of their traction engines and other machinery.⁵⁵ In 1905 the firm was described as 'haulage contractors, threshing machine proprietors and furniture removers'.⁵⁶ The water wheel was used to generate electricity until the 1940s, but has since been dismantled.⁵⁷ In 2013, the company still operated their tarmacking business from these premises.⁵⁸ The second, smaller mill was a saw mill. This was taken over by Gawith, Hoggarth & Co. in the 1880s and converted its use for snuff manufacture.⁵⁹ Snuff continued to be produced on site by water-driven machinery for more than a century after. The only change to this method of manufacture

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Cal. Pat.*, 1297, p.304.

⁵² J.W. Dunderdale, *Kendal Brown: The History of Kendal's Tobacco and Snuff Industry* (Helm Press, Natland, 2003), 131.

⁵³ Census 1841, 1851, 1861.

⁵⁴ Parson & White, *Dir. C. & W.*, 639.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 431.

⁵⁶ Bulmer, *Dir. West.* (1905), 385.

⁵⁷ Dunderdale, *Kendal Brown*, 131.

⁵⁸ <http://www.jchaplow.co.uk/> [accessed 23.8.13].

⁵⁹ 1882 according to P.N. Wilson quoted in 'Proceedings', CW2, LXV (1965), 432.

was the addition of a small electrically-driven 'hammer mill' which was installed in 1980 to help increase production.⁶⁰ The snuff mill closed in 1991 and the Grade II listed building was sold and converted into a dwelling.⁶¹

Gunpowder manufacture was the most significant industrialised process in Helsington in the nineteenth century. The New Sedgwick works covered an area of 27 acres [11 ha] on the Sizergh estate in Low Park Wood, on the east bank of the River Kent.⁶² The company, established by Walter Charles Strickland in 1857,⁶³ failed in 1864, and the works were taken over by a Manchester syndicate who traded as the New Sedgwick Gunpower Company Ltd.⁶⁴ Following the Explosives Act of 1875, which introduced regulations for the gunpowder industry, the New Sedgwick works was granted a licence to continue manufacturing in 1876.⁶⁵ In 1886, Henry Swinglehurst became director of the company, now known as the Sedgwick Gunpowder Company.⁶⁶ On his death in 1896, Henry was replaced by his son, Addison, and the business became a private limited company. It remained with the Swinglehursts until late in 1917, when it was acquired by Explosive Trades Ltd.⁶⁷ They, in turn, became part of Nobel Industries Ltd in 1920, which was incorporated into ICI in 1926.

Most of the workforce at New Sedgwick came from neighbouring townships, rather than Helsington itself.⁶⁸ According to the 1861, census, only the foreman of the works lived in Helsington itself.⁶⁹ To facilitate access, by 1860⁷⁰ the company had built a footbridge across the

⁶⁰ Dunderdale, *Kendal Brown*, 154.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁶² English Heritage, *New Sedgwick Gunpowder Works, Cumbria: and Archaeological and Architectural Survey* (2003), 3.

⁶³ *Rec. Kend.* III, 111.

⁶⁴ EH, *New Sedgwick*, 20; *Westmorland Gazette and Kendal Advertiser*, 25 June 1864.

⁶⁵ EH, *New Sedgwick*, 20.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*. The year 1918 is given by R. Vickers, *South Lakeland Gunpowder Manufacturing Industry, 1746-1936* (2003), Appendix II.

⁶⁸ EH, *New Sedgwick*, 6.

⁶⁹ Census 1861.

River Kent, close to the works entrance. The bridge had to be replaced when the original structure was washed away in a flood of 1874.⁷¹ There were numerous explosions at the site, some fatal. On 30 June 1875 an explosion killed five men and destroyed the corning and power press houses.⁷² Two men were killed and four injured on 30 March 1903, in an explosion which caused £4000 worth of damage.⁷³

The site closed in May 1935 and around fifty employees were transferred to other works or made redundant.⁷⁴ A number of buildings were subsequently demolished on safety grounds. The site was requisitioned during the Second World War, the main block serving as a munitions store.⁷⁵ The works were acquired by the National Trust in 1950 as part of the Sizergh Castle estate. Further alterations were made in 1977 to make way for Low Wood Caravan Park.⁷⁶ The site contains a number of surviving structures, including the mill race, turbine pit, the saltpetre house, refining sheds, office and stores, together with the leat that brought water from a weir on the Kent. The works has been designated a Scheduled Ancient Monument and several of the remaining buildings are Grade II listed.⁷⁷

Mining and Quarrying

There are remains of numerous limestone quarry workings in Helsington.⁷⁸ Initially, limestone was used locally, but the improvement of transport networks in the eighteenth century allowed it to be exploited commercially. Several limekilns were constructed in the township, and an almost intact example survives at Holeslack Farm.⁷⁹ Lime was in high demand to improve the soil

⁷⁰ CAS (K), WQ/A/11/15.

⁷¹ *Westmorland Gazette*, 10 Oct. 1874.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 7 Aug. 1875.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 4 April 1903.

⁷⁴ EH, *New Sedgwick*, 20; *Westmorland Gazette*, 8 June 1935.

⁷⁵ EH, *New Sedgwick*, 23.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷⁸ Sizergh quarry (now Duke Plantation quarry) is marked 'old quarry' on the 1860 OS map.

⁷⁹ OAN, *Sizergh Estate*, 85.

following the drainage and enclosure of the Lyth Valley. Some limestone contained colourful veins, which led to its use as ‘marble’ in decorative architectural work, particularly in Kendal.⁸⁰

Ancillary Trades and Service Industries

Despite the establishment of several industries and an increasing population in the nineteenth century, Helsington had few tradesmen. A grocer was recorded in Brigsteer in 1851, followed by a joiner and stonemason by 1861.⁸¹ A joinery business was recorded in the township in 1934⁸² and in the 1960s.⁸³ No mention is made of a resident blacksmith until 1891.⁸⁴ The smithy, located next to the Wheatsheaf Inn, was still operational in the early 1920s,⁸⁵ but was later converted into a dwelling. The inn itself dates from the seventeenth century and remained in use in 2013.⁸⁶ In the early twentieth century, more amenities appeared in Brigsteer village, including a shop and post office, which were established by 1906 and 1910 respectively.⁸⁷ A filling station and garage was built at Prizet on the A591 in the 1920s.⁸⁸

Economy since 1945

Many of Helsington’s historic farms survived into the twenty-first century, with most coming to specialize in livestock, particularly dairy farming.⁸⁹ In 2013, the 341 acre [138 ha] farm at Low Sizergh (owned by the National Trust since 1950) had a dairy herd of 150 cattle, cross-bred from Holsteins, Swedish Red and Montbeliards, as well as a flock of 200 Swaledale and Mule sheep.⁹⁰ Low Sizergh is also an example of diversification, producing strawberries, free-range

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 85; Parson & White, *Dir. C.&W.*, 639.

⁸¹ Census 1851 and 1861.

⁸² Kelly, *Dir. C.&W.* (1934), 55.

⁸³ CAS(K), WPC 34/2.

⁸⁴ Census 1891.

⁸⁵ Kelly, *Dir. C.&W.* (1921), 55.

⁸⁶ RCHME, *Westmorland*, 109.

⁸⁷ Kelly, *Dir. C.&W.* (1906), 56; Kelly, *Dir. West.* (1910), 60.

⁸⁸ Kelly, *Dir. West.* (1929), 53.

⁸⁹ The National Trust have introduced Galloway Cattle from the Isle of Mull on their tenants’ farms on Helsington Barrows.

⁹⁰ http://www.lowsizerghbarn.co.uk/dept/working-farm_d014.htm [accessed 6.11.13]

eggs, and opening a tea room and farm shop.⁹¹ The 150 acre [62 ha] Larkrigg Farm has been in the Wilson family since 1957. They kept sheep and cattle (beef and dairy) until the early 1980s when they focused on rearing sheep for meat.⁹² One of Helsington's few ancient farms to be lost was Holeslack. Absorbed into the Sizergh estate in 1935,⁹³ it ceased to function as a working farm after 1950. The Grade II listed, seventeenth-century farm house was subsequently converted into a holiday let.⁹⁴

In 1967 the post office closed and its services were transferred to the village shop.⁹⁵ This too closed some years later and was converted into a dwelling in the 1980s. However, the later twentieth century has also seen the growth of several local businesses associated with leisure and tourism. The Shenstone Country Hotel operated in the 1950s through to the 1970s.⁹⁶ Since 2002 the former hotel has been a Financial Management Bureau. By 2013, there were three bed-and-breakfast businesses in the township, with caravan sites at Grate Farm and Low Park Wood. The latter site was established by the National Trust in 1977 and subsequently leased to the Caravan Club.⁹⁷ Sizergh Castle and gardens have been open to the public since the 1950s, and a new visitor facilities building was constructed in 2005-6.⁹⁸ There is a riding school at Larkrigg (separate from the farm).⁹⁹ The opening of the A591 dual carriageway in 1971 brought more business to Prizet service station, which was run by BP in 2013. A Travelodge hotel opened on the northbound side of the site in 2006,¹⁰⁰ replacing a Little Chef restaurant which closed in

⁹¹ http://www.northernfarmer.co.uk/diversification/10142303.Up_close_with_the_animals_at_cafe/ [accessed 22.10.13].

⁹² Information supplied by Graham Wilson of Larkrigg Farm.

⁹³ CAS (C), D/Lons/L5/2/11/156 (enfranchisement 15 Oct. 1935).

⁹⁴ <http://www.nationaltrustcottages.co.uk/cottage/holeslack-farmhouse-009017/> [accessed 22.10.13].

⁹⁵ CAS (K), WPC 34/2.

⁹⁶ *London Gazette*, 4 Apr. 1952, 1910; *Kendal and District Dir.* (1953), 93; *Kendal and District Dir.* (1975), 144.

⁹⁷ *Westmorland Gazette*, 27 May 1977.

⁹⁸ OAN, *Sizergh Estate*, 5.

⁹⁹ <http://www.larkriggridingschool.co.uk> [accessed 1.11.13]

¹⁰⁰ *Westmorland Gazette*, 3 Nov. 2006.

2005.¹⁰¹ Next to the filling station is the ‘Energy Centre’, a firm specializing in eco-friendly products.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 18 Mar. 2005.