

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

[Note: This is a provisional draft and should not be cited without first consulting the VCH Cumbria project team: for contact details, see <http://www.cumbriacountyhistory.org.uk/>]

Parish/township: HELSINGTON

Author: Sarah Rose

Date of Draft: 10/01/14

HELSINGTON

Helsington was a rural township of 3,327 acres (1,346 ha), lying two miles south-east of Kendal, between the Lyth Valley and the River Kent. The latter marked the eastern boundary of the township, except for approximately one mile between Robin Hood Island and the southern edge of Low Park Wood, near the footbridge. Between these points, the boundary ran east of the river to encompass the Larkrigg estate, reaching as far east as the road connecting Sedgwick and Kendal. The southern edge followed field boundaries between Sizergh Castle and the slopes of Sizergh Fell, just north of Sizergh Cottages and the Strickland Arms. The boundary continued west, around the edge of Park Moss, where it headed north along Park End Lane into Brigsteer. Here it divided the hamlet in two, before continuing west along field boundaries to Helsington Pool. Much of the north western boundary ran along Underbarrow Scar, a limestone escarpment also known as 'Scout Scar'. The northern boundary, from the Scar to Kendal, is less well-defined by topographical features.

In 1935, 126 acres (51 ha) in the north east of the township was transferred to Kendal borough.¹ This area, which included the manor house at Helsington Laithes and the Howard Orphan Home, was developed as a suburb of Kendal.² The civil parish boundaries were further altered

¹ Westmorland Review Order 1934.

² CRO (Kendal), WSMBK/11/3/12/M196; WSMBK/11/3/8/H637.

in 1970, this time to incorporate the entire hamlet of Brigsteer and an area to the south west, between Helsington Pool and the Brigsteer Causeway.³ Some territory to the west of Brigsteer Park was simultaneously lost to Levens. Helsington lies outside but close to the edge of the Lake District National Park, but was recommended for inclusion within the Park in a 2013 report.⁴

The name Helsington, which was recorded in 1086 as *Helsingetune*, has obscure origins; it may derive from the OE *helsingas*, meaning ‘a farmstead of those dwelling on the *hals*’, with *hals* denoting a ‘neck of land’ or ‘pass’.⁵ This could refer to the ridge of Underbarrow Scar.

Alternatively, the name could derive from the *Haelsingas*, a tribe referred to in Old English heroic poetry, or a form of Old English *haesling* meaning ‘hazel copse’.⁶

Landscape

Helsington’s landscape is one of contrasts. Extensive woodland lay along the banks of the River Kent in the east and in the south, where Sizergh Castle sat ‘in the midst of fertile grounds, beautifully sprinkled with wood’.⁷ Moving north and west, the landscape gives way to hill pasture and limestone scars. Here Helsington’s bedrock of carboniferous limestone breaks the surface, as is reflected in the name ‘Stainbank’ (Stonebank) Green.⁸ Rising 235 meters above sea level, Scout Scar lies on a north-south alignment, its dip slope falling to the east; its scarp slope facing west over the Lyth valley flats.⁹ Brigsteer village, meanwhile, clings to the cliffs below Burnbarrow Scar. The local limestone was once much exploited, being used for lime production and worked as ‘marble’ for decorative architectural features.

³ Westmorland (Parishes of Helsington and Levens) Order 1969. The County Council had been approached about changing the civil parish boundaries to incorporate the whole of Brigsteer village as early as 1946: CRO (Kendal), WPC/34/1.

⁴ http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/images/lake%20district%20extension%20report_tcm6-10041.pdf

⁵ *PNW*, I, 108.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁷ Parson & White, *Dir. C. & W.*, 649.

⁸ *PNW*, I, 121.

⁹ Jan Wiltshire, *About Scout Scar* (Lancaster, 2008).

In the north west of the township lies Helsington Barrows, a walled parkland habitat of former common waste, now owned by the National Trust.¹⁰ Another area of former common was Helsington Moss. Lying in the south west of the township, the mosses were improved by the Drainage Act of 1838 (award 1843)¹¹ and enclosure award of 1855.¹² This brought to an end a long tradition of peat cutting. Around Brigsteer and Sizergh the soil is still peaty, but across much of the township it is free draining and slightly acidic, with a loamy texture.¹³ In 1938 it was described as ‘clayey’.¹⁴

Settlement

Evidence of ancient settlement includes a Neolithic perforated stone axe-hammer and Bronze Age dagger found on Helsington Moss in the late nineteenth century.¹⁵ Roman and medieval finds have also been made more recently at Scroggs Wood,¹⁶ while an area near Briggs House Farm has been identified as a possible medieval village.¹⁷ The site is a scheduled ancient monument (no. 35019). From the thirteenth century, however, the main settlement in the township was at Brigsteer. Situated on the southern boundary of the township, on the edge of the Lyth valley, the hamlet was first recorded in 1227-37.¹⁸ Its name derives from *brycg* ‘bridge’ and probably the Old English *steor*, meaning steer or young bullock.¹⁹ The bridge in question may once have crossed Underbarrow Pool to Helsington Moss. Elsewhere in Helsington, settlement has consisted of scattered farms and houses.²⁰ Many of these farm sites date from the medieval

¹⁰ Jan Wiltshire, *About Scout Scar* (Lancaster, 2008).

¹¹ CRO (Kendal), WDY/25; WDX/600; WPR/8/14/1/6.

¹² CRO (Kendal), WPR/8/14/1/6.

¹³ <https://www.landis.org.uk/soilscapes/>

¹⁴ Kelly, *Dir. Cumb. & West.* (1938), 53.

¹⁵ Oxford Archaeology North, *Sizergh Estate Lands: Historic Landscape Survey* (2011), 14-15.

¹⁶ ‘Archaeological Projects in Cumbria’, *CW3*, XI (2011), 266.

¹⁷ CRO (Kendal), WDSO/374/5.

¹⁸ *PNW*, I, 109.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ In 1778, the vicar reported twelve farm houses in the Helsington besides the residents of Brigsteer: Cheshire Record Office, EDV/7/mff 44/4.

period, though the farmhouses themselves appear to have been largely rebuilt in the seventeenth century.²¹ The surviving manor house at Helsington Laithes dates from c.1500, but by far the oldest and largest dwelling in the township is Sizergh Castle. Begun sometime between 1292 and 1310, the castle lies between Brigsteer and the River Kent.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, several substantial residences were built in the township by wealthy industrialists and professionals. They included a villa at Stonecross, and the mansion at Prizet. Growth in local industry resulted in the construction of homes for workers at Helsington mills, known as Marble Mills Cottages.²² Several bungalows have been built in the township since the 1940s, particularly at Brigsteer. A number of sites were considered for the construction of council housing during the 1950s, but plans did not come to fruition.²³ Instead, a small estate was built by private developers on a field in Brigsteer in the early 1960s.²⁴ Housing development has since been limited to the conversion of farm buildings. By the 1950s, several properties were described as holiday residences.²⁵ Helsington Community Land Trust was established in 2011 to address the issue of social housing.²⁶ In 2013, much of the population was still concentrated in Brigsteer, while the rural part of Helsington remained sparsely populated.

Communications

The major route through the township, running north to south, is the road from Kendal to Milnthorpe. This ancient route, which passes through the Sizergh demesne close to the castle, was widened in 1733²⁷ and subject to the Turnpike Act of 1759.²⁸ After the construction of the M6 motorway it formed part of the new dual carriageway trunk road, re-numbered A591, leading

²¹ RCHME, *Westmorland*, 108.

²² Cited in Census from 1841.

²³ CRO (Kendal), WPC/34/2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ CRO (Kendal), WDSO/209/1.

²⁶ <http://www.hclt.org.uk/>

²⁷ *Rec. Kend.*, III, 110.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 13

from the motorway to the Lake District. During the 1960s, the stretch from Sizergh to Kendal was developed into a dual carriageway, opening in 1971.

To the west of the main road, another north-south route passed through the township, following the edge of the rising land from Kendal to the north of Brigsteer, along the edge of the former common on Helsington Barrows. The township was also traversed on an east-west axis by Whetstone Lane to the west and eastwards by Hawes Lane, leading to Hawes Bridge, the only point in the township where the River Kent can be crossed by vehicles. Dating from the eighteenth century, this two-arched structure carries a single carriageway road leading to Natland.²⁹ The New Sedgwick Gunpowder Company constructed a footbridge across the River Kent to facilitate access for workers.³⁰ A new suspension bridge was built after the original structure was destroyed in a flood in 1874.³¹ The bridge was restored in the late 1980s and remains open to the public. The Lancaster Canal, which closed in 1955, once passed through the far eastern part of the township, through the Larkrigg estate.

By the mid-twentieth century, a three weekday bus service ran through the township. The then parish council attempted to procure a Saturday bus service to enable local residents to take produce to market in Kendal, but they were unsuccessful.³² The Brigsteer community came together in 1970 to build its own bus shelter, only for bus services to the village to end soon afterwards.³³ Helsington was without public transport for many years; but by 2013 Lecks Travel operated services between Kendal and Brigsteer, from Tuesdays to Saturdays.³⁴

²⁹ <http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/en-75280-hawes-bridge-over-the-river-kent-helsingt>

³⁰ CAS (Kendal) WQ/O/15; footpath diversion order January 1860.

³¹ *Westmorland Gazette*, 10 Oct. 1874.

³² CRO (Kendal), WPC/34/1; WPC/34/2.

³³ CRO (Kendal), WPC/34/2.

³⁴ <http://jplanner.travelinenortheast.info/planner>

Population and Social Character

Helsington was a rural community, with a limited gentry presence. In the absence of a resident lord, the Stricklands at Sizergh were the most socially prominent family in the township. The Hearth Tax return of 1674 suggests an estimated population of 162,³⁵ many of whom were resident in Brigsteer. By 1801, the community had grown to 230 persons. This increased further during the course of the nineteenth century, which coincided with Helsington's industrial episode. A peak of 360 was reached in 1891, including twenty-nine residents at the Howard Orphan Home (opened 1865). However, the first decade of the twentieth century witnessed a sharp population decline, with figures of 308 in 1901 and 279 in 1911. This rise and fall may reflect a downturn in agricultural employment. Of those whose occupations were listed in 1851, around sixty per-cent were engaged in agricultural activities, the vast majority of whom were described as agricultural labourers or farm servants. By 1901, around half of the workforce was still engaged in farming. But the number of labourer's had markedly declined. Some roles had become more specialized (e.g. 'cattleman'), but farmer's children were often listed as farm workers, and few labourers had their own household. By the nineteenth century, an increasing number of farms were tenanted, and the turnover was high. Consequently, few families had long-established roots in the township. In 1851, a third of the population had been born in Helsington, including only seven heads of households.³⁶ However, relatively few newcomers came from very far afield, with half of the population being born elsewhere in Westmorland. These patterns continued into the early twentieth century.³⁷

The population recovered slightly after the First World War, rising to 297 in 1921 and to 319 in 1931. The recorded population fell to just 225 in 1951 but this may reflect the loss of land through boundary changes in 1935. Conversely, the increased figure of 299 recorded in 1971

³⁵ 34 households with a multiplier of 4.75

³⁶ Census 1851.

³⁷ Census 1901.

probably reflects the incorporation of Brigsteer village into the township in 1970, which affected some twenty dwellings,³⁸ the number of households rising from seventy-four in 1961 to 105 in 1971. The total population figures of 343 and 334 recorded in 1981 and 1991, respectively, may well have included holiday makers at Low Park Wood Caravan Park. The numbers of permanent residents were recorded as 276 in 1981, 283 in 1991 and 288 in 2001. Housing and family size has perhaps helped to stabilize the population in recent years. Age may also play a part in determining the size of households: in 1991, thirty-one per-cent of Helsington's population were of pensionable age – above the national average.

³⁸ CRO (Kendal), WPC 34/2.