

Victoria County History of Cumbria Project: Work in Progress

Interim Draft

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

Parish/township: **KIRKBY LONSDALE** (township)

Author: **Emmeline Garnett**

Date of draft: August 2013

INTRODUCTION

The ancient parish of Kirkby Lonsdale covered 35,945 acres (14,547 ha) of south-east Westmorland and comprised the market town and parish centre of Kirkby Lonsdale and eight other townships: to the east, beyond the Lune, Casterton (4,324 acres/1,750 ha), Barbon (4,261 acres/1,724 ha) and Middleton (7,276 acres/2,945 ha); to the south and west Hutton Roof (2,715 acres/1,099 ha), Lupton (6,059 acres/2,452 ha) and Mansergh (2,668 acres/1080 ha); to the north, Killington (4,875 acres/1973 ha) and Firbank (2,985 acres/1,208 ha). This article treats the township of Kirkby Lonsdale and the history of the parish church.

Kirkby Lonsdale, in size and in many of its features no more than a large village, is nevertheless an ancient market town serving a wide area, 'whither the neighbouring inhabitants resort to church and market'.¹ The township to which it gives its name lies at the south-east corner of Westmorland, bordering on Lancashire and within a mile or two of the Yorkshire border, the whole township covering an area of 3,253 acres (1,316 ha.) Its roughly triangular shape is bounded on the east side by the Lune for about two miles, and for another two miles by a Lune tributary flowing from Terrybank Tarn which lies at the most northerly point of the township. Beyond the tarn the boundary crosses the watershed, and meets the Blea Beck, later the Lupton Beck, which forms the township's western boundary as far as Spital. The southern boundary follows no particular natural features, crossing open country in a series of straight lines delineated by hedges and walls, until it reaches the Lune a short distance below the Devil's Bridge. The

¹ Camden, *Brit.* (1722 edn), 987.

boundaries, so much of which are formed by watercourses, are probably of considerable antiquity, although the earliest record is from the Enclosure map, surveyed in 1808.²

The land is undulating, but nowhere to any great height, from about 50m. at the Devil's Bridge to about 150m. at Terrybank Tarn. The underlying geology is Silurian mudstones in the northern part of the township and carboniferous limestone in the south, with basal conglomerates of carboniferous series outcropping around the town itself. Much of the township exhibits the 'basket of eggs' topography characteristic of glacial drumlins overlying the bedrock, with alluvial deposits along the River Lune and between the drumlins.³ Deep, loamy soils predominate in the east of the township, with heavier, wetter soils on the higher ground to the north and west.⁴ Seventeenth century inventories show that the lower land near the river was in the past associated with ploughland and cattle rearing, the higher ground with sheep,⁵ but in later times with the improvement in grassland, crop raising has been almost abandoned, cattle and sheep both grazing at all levels.⁶

Although in the seventeenth century Machell commented that the Lune all along was beautified with great plenty of wood,⁷ relatively little old woodland now lies within the township. The one considerable stretch is Green Wood, along the river surrounding and to the north of Underley Hall, the name of which indicates that it was built below a wood or clearing.⁸ In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries country villas, some with considerable areas of land, were established by landowners attracted by the 'beautiful and fertile vale',⁹ such as Nowell at Underley, Tomlinson at Biggins, Carus at Lunefield. Woodlands were then planted for amenity and shelter, in the case of Underley largely for pheasant

² CAS (Kendal), WD/PP/Box 1.

³ British Geological Survey 'Geology of Britain viewer' at <http://www.bgs.ac.uk/discoveringGeology/geologyOfBritain/viewer.html>

⁴ Soils of England and Wales Sheet 1, Northern England (Soil Survey of England and Wales, Harpenden 1983)

⁵ Based on probate inventories: Lancashire Archives (Preston), WRW/L.

⁶ See 'Economic History'.

⁷ *Antiquary on Horseback* ed. J. M. Ewbank (CWAAS. Kendal 1963), 25.

⁸ PNW, I, 43-4.

⁹ J. Housman, *A Descriptive Tour and Guide to the Lakes, Caves, Mountains and other natural curiosities in Cumberland, Westmorland, Lancashire* (Carlisle, 1802), 56.

shooting, a sport which continues though far less extensively than in the nineteenth century, when royalty visited and bags were expected of a size that would disgust present-day sportsmen.¹⁰

Settlement

The name 'Kirkby Lonsdale', borne by both the ancient parish and the market town and signifying 'the church settlement in Lonsdale', indicates that the township was the site of an early church, almost certainly of pre-Viking origin.¹¹ The surrounding hamlets of High and Low Biggins ('buildings'), Tearnside (a name of uncertain origin, perhaps referring to osiers used in basket-making) and Underley were recorded in the thirteenth century. Another hamlet, Kearnstwick (earlier 'Kestw(h)ayte': 'valley clearing') was almost certainly of medieval origin, though not recorded until the sixteenth century.¹²

A ford across the river Lune, and the imposing bluff above it, no doubt dictated the siting of the church, and the settlement. The original area of the town was defined by four roads which met near the church. Mitchelgate (originally 'Bichelgate')¹³ came in from Kendal and the west. Fairbanks came from the north, ultimately from Scotland.¹⁴ The steep hill now called Mill Brow led east to the ford across the river and all that part of Kirkby Lonsdale parish on the east bank, as well as towards Settle in Yorkshire. The present Main Street was the road south to Lancaster, along the west bank of the Lune. From medieval times, this also led to the river crossing at the Devil's Bridge.

It is not clear whether market tolls were payable on the entries to the town. The toll shown on a map of 1770¹⁵ at the junction of the road to the bridge with the road coming in from Lancaster may have been a turnpike toll. A house

¹⁰ Inf. Clementine Pease.

¹¹ Gillian Fellows-Jensen, *Scandinavian Settlement Names in the North-West* (Copenhagen, 1985), 34.

¹² *PNW*, I, .43-

¹³ CAS (Kendal), WDY/8/1 In a survey of Kirkby Lonsdale of 1627 the road is Bichellgate (with 'Bichelcroft' beyond it.) It is so called in James Newton's will of 1661, and Peter Lawcock's of 1707. Lancashire Archives (Preston) WRW/L. No explanation of the name has been found. Parson and White, *Dir. C. & W.* (1829) uses 'Mitchellgate' and it has so remained, some authors assuming that it was the original 'great road' into the town.

¹⁴ Beyond Old Town, three miles out of Kirkby Lonsdale, this is still called 'the Old Scotch Road'.

¹⁵ Thomas Jeffery, *Map of Westmorland* (1770)

above Mitchelgate, fifty yards beyond Abbot Hall, is called Tollhouse Cottage, but there is no available evidence to show that this was an ancient name.¹⁶

Within the town all the roads converge on a short and narrow stretch alongside the churchyard, now called Market Street. Behind the houses on the church side of this street lies a second row against the churchyard wall, some of which are still separate and attainable through St. Mary's Court. Market Street was called 'Shambles', meaning 'a bench where meat was sold' and probably where animals were slaughtered,¹⁷ for which purpose it is much too narrow as it stands, so it would seem that the front row of houses was built later, and that Market Street was originally a market square. The medieval market cross stood at the junction of Market Street, Mill Lane and Main Street until 1819,¹⁸ when to ease the traffic congestion it was moved to a small square on Mill Lane later called the Coalmarket,¹⁹ now the Swinemarket. Soon afterwards a new market square was opened at the north end of Main Street. The Thursday market, which continues to the present day, was granted to John de Kirkeby in 1227.²⁰

Much of Main Street near the church was rebuilt after a disastrous fire in 1776²¹ although behind some of the facades remnants of much earlier buildings can be discovered. The modern commercial buildings are on the whole confined to the original house widths on the street side, although with redesigned frontages and in some cases considerable extensions backwards. Back walls away from the street frequently show remnants of older features, built-up doorways and the frames of disused mullioned windows.²² A shop in Market Street bears a small datestone of 1661, but this appears to have been reset from elsewhere. One house (54-6 Main Street, in 2013 an ironmonger and garden shop), escaped the fires and also subsequent modernisation; its very large hearth and other features from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are still in place.²³

¹⁶ It is believed to have been in earlier times, an alehouse called the 'Dancing Boys'. There are no house deeds. Inf. N. Johnson

¹⁷ O.S. 1:2,500 sheet, Westmorland XLVII-8 (surveyed 1858).

¹⁸ RCHME, *Westmorland*, 138.

¹⁹ O.S.1:2,500(sheet Westmorland XLVII-8 (surveyed 1858).

²⁰ *Rec. Kend.* II, 307.

²¹ A. Pearson, *Annals of Kirkeby Lonsdale* (Kendal 1930), 48.

²² Particularly behind nos. 44 and 52 Main Street, and in Chapel Close.

²³ RCHME, *Westmorland*, 138-9.

A substantial house, converted, on the evidence of its elegantly decorated front, at the end of the seventeenth century from a much older building, parts of which remain, stands halfway down Mill Brow, and is known as 'The Old Manor House'.²⁴ It was so used while the manor was in the hands of the Lowthers,²⁵ but the Kings Arms, in Market Street opposite the entry to the churchyard, was the original manor house for the Carus family in the sixteenth century.²⁶ Its eighteenth century facade has been added to a much older building whose great fireplace and other features remain.²⁷ Beyond it, at the bottom of Mitchelgate, stand two other large houses, Fountain House and No 4 Beckhead, evidently designed for prosperous owners.

No 4 Beckhead was rebuilt on the site of an inn,²⁸ for Henry Bickersteth, surgeon in the town from 1775 until his death in 1821.²⁹ Fountain House is on the site of the old Fountain inn, a large coaching establishment. It was largely demolished and rebuilt in 1830 by William Wilson Carus Wilson, founder of the Clergy Daughters' School at Casterton.³⁰

The town, particularly as seen from the hills on the opposite side of the valley, is still tightly compact, but has none the less grown considerably since the end of the eighteenth century. The first extensions were all to the south, along the main street towards the Devils Bridge. A house here carries on its downspouts initials of the Gathorne family and the date 1777. When first built it was considered quite a country residence, though less than 300 yards from the market cross: on the opposite side of the road the Lunefield estate of Roger Carus was built in 1815 and then said to combine 'the conveniences of the town with the elegance of the country'.³¹

At the end of Market Street, on the west side, stood a considerable inn, the Rose and Crown.³² In 1820 it burnt down, as related on an obelisk in the

²⁴ See 'Landownership'

²⁵ See 'Landownership'

²⁶ *Rec. Kend.* II, 313-14.

²⁷ W. H. Chippendall, 'The Hall in Kirkby Lonsdale', *CW2*, xxx (1930), 125-7.

²⁸ Pearson, *Annals*, 61

²⁹ M.I Kirkby Lonsdale Church

³⁰ Inf. from house deeds in the owners' possession. (For further information on Carus Wilson, see Casterton).

³¹ *Lonsdale Magazine* 1821, 161. Roger Carus was a remote descendant of Sir Thomas Carus who acquired the manor of Kirkby Lonsdale in 1565 (see 'Landownership')

³² Renamed the 'Royal Hotel', after a visit in 1847 by Queen Adelaide. (See Casterton)

churchyard raised by public subscription to the memory of five servant girls trapped in the attic and burnt to death.

The next few years saw a number of alterations to the town. The large house next to the Rose and Crown, Jackson Hall,³³ was taken over as the new inn of the same name, while its gardens on the opposite side of the road were in 1822 converted to a new market place by permission of Lord Lonsdale, lord of the manor, who subscribed a third of the £370 public subscription.³⁴

At about the same time New Road was laid out southwards from the site of the old Rose and Crown, a modernisation which led to bitter local arguments in the *Westmoreland Gazette* and *Kendal Chronicle*, between two local worthies who indulged in more of a slanging match than any logical argument about the value of a new road against the widening of Mitchelgate.³⁵ On the south side of the new Market Place a row of houses later converted to shops was built, and on the opposite side from the Rose and Crown the Savings Bank was built in 1847, designed by Thompson and Webster,³⁶ converted to dwellings in 2011.

The nineteenth century also saw the expansion of estates outside the town, and with it the rebuilding not only of the large houses such as Underley and Biggins, but also of many of the farmhouses belonging to them. These are not dated, but their architectural features consistently show improvements made in the mid- to later nineteenth-century. Particularly typical of the period are the Kearswick cottages with ornamental bargeboards and leaded windows.

In 1848 the Queen Elizabeth School moved from the churchyard to the west of the town,³⁷ and over the years spread to a large complex of buildings. In 1895, as a datestone shows, Bective Road was built by the Underley Estate, joining the top end of New Road to Mitchelgate. The twentieth century before the Second World War saw a small extension of houses at Robraine, on the old road to Lancaster on the west side of the river, and a council estate of twelve

³³ CAS (Kendal), W/PR 19 (Kirkby Lonsdale parish registers). Named from the Jackson family, of which the last relevant member appears to have been Mrs. Ellen Jackson, died 1785.

³⁴ F. W. Garnett, *Westmorland Agriculture* (Kendal 1912), 127

³⁵ One wrote under the pseudonym of 'J.P.' which the other interpreted as 'Jack Pudding' (*Westmorland Gazette* 14 April 1822), a fair indication of the level of argument. 'Wretch', 'blockhead', 'scribbling slave' were some of the terms used.

³⁶ A. Taylor, *The Websters of Kendal* (Kendal 2004), 156.

³⁷ See 'Social History'

houses on the Kendal road.³⁸ In the 1950s³⁹ the first houses of Harling Bank⁴⁰ were built, a row since extended, at the top of the hill near the Queen Elizabeth School, where the new primary school was also built in 1985.⁴¹ In 1960 Lunefield was demolished⁴² and its extensive gardens became a housing estate. Later the town extended quite densely to the west, filling the angle formed by the two roads leading northwards, one continuing from Mitchelgate and the other from Fairbank. New estates called Abbotsgate and Lower Abbotsgate were built behind the restored farmhouse of Abbot Hall⁴³ which in the past marked the western edge of the town. An estate of 35 houses named Defoe Drive after a notable headmaster of the Queen Elizabeth School, was begun in 2011.⁴⁴ All these were private developments and residential only; they included no shops, businesses or other institutions except for new doctor's surgeries; these migrated to a new building beside Booth's Supermarket in 2004⁴⁵ mainly to ease the parking problem, which caused the town trouble for many years, constantly recurring in the parish council minutes since the 1930s,⁴⁶ though the introduction in the early 1990s of a one-way system round Mitchelgate, Market Street and Main Street went some way to alleviating the problem. In 2013 a development of 36 retirement apartments was begun on the opposite side of the road from the supermarket, on one of the few remaining green spaces within the town boundary.

From the later twentieth century there was some commercial development on the A65, the Kendal road, about half a mile to the west of the town. On the south side of the road a large garage and filling station was built in 1970⁴⁷ and between it and the town a small business park was laid out in 2007.⁴⁸ This developed slowly, only four of the eight units being occupied in 2012. On the

³⁸ Datestone: 'Kirkby Lonsdale Urban District Council 1932'.

³⁹ Inf. from an owner.

⁴⁰ Built on Harling Bank Meadow, so named on the Tithe Map. Harling was a considerable family name in the Kirkby Lonsdale area from the 16th century, largely dying out by 1812 (cf. parish register).

⁴¹ See 'Social History'

⁴² A. Pearson, D. Kyle, A. Phillips and M. Gresson, *Annals of Kirkby Lonsdale and Lunesdale Today* (Parthenon, 1996), 431.

⁴³ This house, though one of the oldest in the town, has no religious connections. A family called Abbott owned it in 1848: CAS (Kendal) WDRC/8/231.

⁴⁴ Lawrence Defoe, headmaster 1936-1966.

⁴⁵ Local inf.

⁴⁶ CAS (Kendal), WPC/13/1/1/4-7 (Kirkby Lonsdale Parish Council minutes).

⁴⁷ Local inf.

⁴⁸ Local inf.

opposite side of the road the town's veterinary practice moved out to a converted barn in 1989.⁴⁹

Beyond the town, the estates of Underley and Biggins were largely rebuilt and extended in the nineteenth century.⁵⁰ Now an outlying hamlet to the south of the town, Biggins once had its own importance as the centre of the Curwen estate, as shown by the 1640 inquest on George Preston, who had acquired the Curwen property.⁵¹ Deansbiggin, to the north, now a farmhouse, has internal features such as a chimney which show that the 1623 datestones marked modernisation of an older building.⁵² Tearnside Hall, in the hamlet of that name, bypassed since 1953 by the Kendal road, was built in 1686 by John and Ann Baylife. It is a handsome house of its period, with a decorated two-storeyed porch facing the old Kendal road. No evidence has been found that this was the centre of an estate of any size, but it may well have been an inn. The stylised leaves surrounding the initials on the datestone and repeated on the porch lintel are of a type that has been found on several houses in north Lancashire which may have been inns.⁵³ These features, the large barn and stabling block attached, and another very large agricultural building nearby with the same date and initials, make it a strong possibility.

The early history of Spittal farm, on the Kendal road at the boundary of the township with Lupton, is discussed under 'Religion'.

Communications

As has been said, the seventeenth century saw a considerable development in industrial and commercial activity. The development of Kirkby Lonsdale had been considerably influenced by its position with respect to other centres of population, the nearest being Kendal (16 m./26 km.), Lancaster (20 m./32 km.), and Settle (17 m./27k.) Four main roads, from these three centres and from Penrith, converged at Kirkby Lonsdale to cross the river Lune, originally by a ford at the bottom of Mill Brow. The precise position of the ford is not known, as the river has changed its course and a large island has developed in midstream. The

⁴⁹ Local inf.

⁵⁰ see 'Manors and Estates'.

⁵¹ *Rec. Kend.* II p.321-2

⁵² see 'Manors and Estates'.

⁵³ E. Garnett, *The Dated Buildings of South Lonsdale* (Lancaster 1994), 205-6.

Lune rises very rapidly after rain in the surrounding hills, and this ford must frequently have become impassable. The problem was addressed by the building of the Devil's Bridge, the oldest structure in the township apart from the church. It shares its name and legend with several in Europe, always buildings of great antiquity and with features, either of height or unusual width of arch, or both, which gave credence to the myth that there must have been a superhuman builder. There is still doubt as to the origin of the current structure, estimates ranging from about 1200⁵⁴ to about 1500.⁵⁵ The earlier date is suggested as the time when the church was being built by masons of St Mary's York with skills which were not available locally.⁵⁶ Nicolson and Burn state that there was a grant of pontage for the repair of the bridge in 1275, which would fit with this suggestion.⁵⁷ The later date is based on the style of the arches, which may indicate a rebuild of an earlier structure.⁵⁸ In 1365 Richard de Wisbeche, vicar of Kirkby Lonsdale, and Thomas Banes were granted in aid of the repair of the bridge pontage for six years on things for sale passing by or under it between the priory of Hornby and Gratrehals.⁵⁹ If the word 'under' had any real meaning it could not have applied to the bridge as it currently stands, built directly on to rocky formations extending into the waterway. There has therefore been speculation that there was originally a bridge higher upstream,⁶⁰ somewhere near the ford. This is unlikely and no evidence has been found; 'by or under' was more probably a lawyer's phrase to cover all eventualities.

The 'repair' authorised in 1365 may date the bridge as it stands, the stonework appearing to be mainly of that period. A reason for its survival more or less in its original form is that the outcrops of rock above it throw the water straight through the central arch without wearing the supporting piers. At the crown of the bridge the roadway is only eleven feet (3.4 m.) wide, and the heavier traffic of the twentieth century, particularly the coming of motor transport, made a replacement essential. In 1931 the Stanley Bridge was built 150 yards

⁵⁴ Hyde & Pevsner, *Cumbria*, 463.

⁵⁵ RCHME, *Westmorland*, 136.

⁵⁶ Hyde & Pevsner, *Cumbria*, 463

⁵⁷ N & B, I, 244. Their source for this statement has not been found.

⁵⁸ RCHME, *Westmorland*, 136.

⁵⁹ *Rec. Kend.* II, 311. The place name 'Gratrehals' has not been identified.

⁶⁰ Pearson, *Annals*, 120-1.

downstream,⁶¹ designed by Charles Hines, Westmorland County surveyor and bridgemaister,⁶² who had the foresight to make it wide enough for twenty-first century traffic. In spite of the withdrawal of wheeled traffic, in 2010 the old bridge was on the English Heritage ‘at risk’ register, and it was reported that a full restoration would cost £300,000.⁶³

In 1861 a proposed railway line from Clapham to Lowgill was opposed by 68 signatories to a petition, largely from local landowners.⁶⁴ Possibly this was the reason that the Kirkby Lonsdale station was built a mile and a half outside the town, near Cowan Bridge in Lancashire. The tradesmen and other inhabitants of the town did not share the objection of their betters. More than 50 of them signed another letter to the railway company, asking that the station should not be at Casterton, as the toll bar then still in operation would cause expense and annoyance to prospective passengers.⁶⁵ In 1899 plans were mooted for a branch from this line to Kendal, passing through Kirkby Lonsdale. One of the main reasons put forward was the advantage to the town’s economy of the expected boost to tourism, an early mention of the modern town’s chief industry, which developed after the Second World War with the proliferation of motor transport. Some correspondence has survived, but stops abruptly. The plan was evidently abandoned.⁶⁶

Population and Social Character

Kirkby Lonsdale was ranked by Daniel Fleming as the ‘greatest towne save Kendale, in this county’⁶⁷ although the 1662 Hearth Tax lists no more than 101 dwellings.⁶⁸ By the traditional multiplier of five persons per household the total population, including the hamlets of Biggins, Kearstwick, Tearnside, and the outlying farms, was 510, a small town even by the standards of the time. In 1773 171 properties paid Land Tax, indicating a population of perhaps 850.⁶⁹ The

⁶¹ Datestone on the upstream parapet.

⁶² Pearson *et al*, *Annals Today*, 330.

⁶³ Kirkby Lonsdale Town Council Minutes, 14 July 2010. (With the Council Secretary)

⁶⁴ CAS (Kendal), WSUD/KL/33.

⁶⁵ CAS (Kendal), WDY/139.

⁶⁶ CAS (Kendal), WSUD/KL/33.

⁶⁷ *Fleming-Senhouse Papers*, ed. E. Hughes (Carlisle, 1961), 5.

⁶⁸ C. Phillips *et al* (ed.), *Westmorland Hearth Tax*, 160-1.

⁶⁹ CAS (Kendal), WQ/R/LT (Lonsdale) 1773

growth of industry in the later eighteenth century⁷⁰ accounts for the expansion to 1,283 in 1801, rising to 1,643 in 1821 and remaining fairly stable until the end of the century. The population rose to 1,800 at the end of the nineteenth century.⁷¹ Thereafter it declined: the town lost 42 men in the First World War,⁷² industry was no longer appropriate to an isolated small country town, and tourism awaited the widespread private ownership of motor-cars. The lowest point in the census record was 1,240 in 1951, but then tourism, and the necessary services to tourists, began to develop. In 1971 the population was 1,300, the next forty years saw considerable new housing, and by 2001 the population had almost reached 2,000. This growth was partly due to the greater ease of commuting to work in larger neighbouring towns, and by the presence of large primary and secondary schools.⁷³ These ensured that the age range of the population was more balanced than it might otherwise have been, as the town's compact size, good shops, three active churches, varied sporting and social activities and beautiful countryside made it very attractive to retired people.⁷⁴

In the twenty-first century Kirkby Lonsdale was an unmissable part of tourist itineraries through the Lune Valley and as an appendage to the Lake District. The crowds were the economic lifeblood of the place, and therefore tolerated, but the town continued to have a busy social life of its own, acting as the service area for the south-east corner of Cumbria and adjacent parts of Lancashire and North Yorkshire.

⁷⁰ See 'Economic History'.

⁷¹ Census returns 1891.

⁷² War Memorial in the churchyard.

⁷³ See 'Social History'.

⁷⁴ In 1951 20% of the population, and in 1981 33% were of retirement age (Pearson *et al*, *Annals Today*, 270). The national figures for over-60s were 16% for 1951, 20% for 1981: Vision of Britain website URL:http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10001043/cube/AGESEX_100UP