

Victoria County History of Cumbria Project: Work in Progress

Interim Draft

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

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Lowther family bought the manor of Kirkby Lonsdale about 1672,¹ and the court books have been preserved from that date.² At that time the court appointed annually 30 officials, including assessors who set the fines, overseer of the poor, byelawmen or constables, common viewers or moorlookers, aletasters, scalers of weights and measures, swinelookers, becklookers, cornlookers, supervisors of the highways, fish and fleshlookers, overseer for Kearnstwick Mooryeat, and searchers and sealers of leather.³ From this list it can be seen that the court was responsible for the good order both of the town, and for that part of the wider parish belonging to the Lonsdale estate, commonly known as Kirkby Lordship, for trading standards, as well as for agrarian matters such as overstocking on the township's common land. Four 'lookers' were appointed to seek out beasts on the common which did not belong to the lordship, and bring them into the pinfold until their owners paid to remove them. At a later date land tax and window tax collection were also the business of the court. The office of constable involved most access to money and in 1704 it was stipulated that the constable then appointed should not hand out money to wayfarers unless he was checked by a second person.⁴

The burden which this considerable list of duties laid on the male population of a town which was no more than a large village is striking, and

¹ Ewbank, *Antiquary*, 18.

² CAS (Carlisle), D/Lons/LS/2/12 (In five books, 1672-1925)

³ CAS (Carlisle), D/Lons/LS/2/12/1 (1672-96).

⁴ CAS (Carlisle), D/Lons/LS/2/12/2 (1697-1746).

perhaps had some influence on the fact that throughout the eighteenth century most of them gradually vanish from the records. By 1771 the appointments comprised overseer of the poor, two becklookers, two swinelookers, two byelawmen for the town and two for the lordship, and two surveyors of the highways, one for the town and one for the lordship. The town surveyor was particularly important owing to the watercourse which ran through and in some places under the market place and down Mill Brow. In 1740 property owners were assessed at three pence in the town for flagging and repairing the town beck, but it continued to present problems. In 1772 the surveyor was ordered by the court to 'flag and cover up...a watering place in the road leading to the church near the Sun Inn, which we think dangerous to his Majesty's subjects'.⁵

No information is given as to the reason or method of changing the pattern of the courts, but from 1777 two courts were held on the same day, the first being the court leet, which had no business beyond swearing in a constable, followed by the court baron and customary court of dimissions which dealt with the transfer of property. The first of these dwindled in importance, being held at wider and wider intervals until it vanished in 1797. There was then a five-year gap before the courts baron restarted.⁶

The court continued in an attenuated form into the nineteenth century, sitting at widening intervals of years.⁷ There were no more juries after 1822, their place being taken by direct submissions to the earl of Lonsdale, and the courts baron moved to the Lonsdale estate steward's office in Penrith. Between 1844 and 1906 only six courts were held. As a final gesture the last one of all was convened again in Kirkby Lonsdale in 1925 on the abolition of copyhold tenure, with a jury of six men chaired by William Little, steward of the manor, by that time in his nineties. It dealt with five transfers of property, the sums involved amounting in all to 1s. 8¹/₂ d.⁸ The manorial rights in the market were transferred to the Urban District Council in 1928.⁹

⁵ CAS (Carlisle), D/Lons/LS/2/12/3 (1746-1776).

⁶ CAS (Carlisle), D/Lons/LS/2/12/4 (1777-1905).

⁷ Parson and White *Dir. C & W* (1829) states that a court leet continued to be held every October to appoint, among other officers, five inspectors and regulators of fairs, and this responsibility was not finally extinguished until 1928. However the existing court books make no reference to markets or fairs.

⁸ CAS (Carlisle), D/Lons/LS/2/12/5 (1906-1925)

⁹ CAS (Kendal), Urban District Council Minutes WSUD/KL/11

In 1680 the court had ordered an assessment to be made of the poor of the whole of Kirkby Lordship and had allowed twelve pounds annually for their relief, which was raised by an assessment of property owners at five pence in the pound.¹⁰ The number of poor persons in the town varied from year to year, sometimes as many as thirty. They were given help either weekly, monthly, or quarterly, presumably according to their ability to manage their financial affairs. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the lordship met an annual bill of £550, of which £345 was in weekly pensions to the poor and £164 in casual relief. The overseer received an annual salary of fifteen guineas.¹¹ In the twentieth century there was still an annual ‘assembly of the electorate’ at which the Trustees of Amalgamated Charities reported the grants they had made, typically, in 1969, 32 grants of £1 at Easter and 37 grants of £3 at Christmas.¹²

As early as 1735 the court recorded the establishment of a ‘new erected workhouse on a certaine piece of waste ground called Millbrow’.¹³ No other information has been found until the years 1782-6, during which the parish register recorded 31 deaths as occurring ‘in the poorhouse’, with an age range of ‘infant to 88’. At what stage the vestry became responsible is not clear.¹⁴ Vestry minutes for 1812 show a list of furnishings bought, and expenses for ‘building’ the workhouse, but the latter are clearly for extension of an existing building, made necessary by the establishment in 1811 of a Poor Law Union embracing the townships of Kirkby Lonsdale itself, Barbon, Casterton, Middleton, Firbank, Hutton Roof, as well as Old Hutton in Westmorland, Whittington, Arkholme, Melling, Cantsfield, Tunstall, Burrow and Leck in Lancashire, and Burton and Thornton-in-Lonsdale in Yorkshire.¹⁵ In 1816 contributions were received from other parishes: Whittington £93, Old Hutton £71, Leck £27, Burrow £32, Arkholme £27, Firbank £49 and Killington £21.¹⁶ The organisation was short-lived and came to an end not long after the passing of the Poor Law Act of

¹⁰ CAS (Carlisle), D/Lons/LS/2/12/1.

¹¹ CAS (Carlisle), D/Lons/LS/2/12/4.

¹² Parish Council Minutes 16 March 1970.

¹³ The General Workhouse Act, 1723, empowered parishes, or unions of several parishes, to establish workhouses.

¹⁴ The vestry minutes are available only from 1801.

¹⁵ Parson & White, *Dir. C & W* (1829), 688. Presumably Lupton and Mansergh were included as extensions of Kirkby Lonsdale.

¹⁶ Vestry minutes.

1834.¹⁷ Later the building housed, at least in part, the first National School,¹⁸ and a vagrant ward,¹⁹ which seems to have continued into the twentieth century, providing lodging for tramps who paid for their stay by stone-breaking.²⁰

The first Local Board was set up in Kirkby Lonsdale in 1869, the need for it arising out of complaints to the Kendal Board of Guardians under the Sanitary Act of 1866 that the sewage arrangements of the town were extremely ineffective. After considerable delays, the first water and sewerage scheme was carried out in 1876.²¹ In 1892 offices for the Board were established on the first floor of an altered old house at Beckhead, which housed the butter market on the ground floor.²²

In 1895 Kirkby Lonsdale was created an Urban District Council, which in the following year took over the powers of the parish council and the vestry.²³ The manorial rights in the market were transferred to the Urban District Council in 1928.²⁴ In 1932, under the Local Government Act of 1929, it was downgraded to a parish council, in spite of vigorous opposition from the town, and a narrow majority (twelve to nine) in the county council, which acknowledged that the town's affairs had been run both competently and cheaply.²⁵ Owing to the size of the population, the new council was allowed nine members and a clerk, and it was allotted three seats on the South Westmorland Rural District Council.

Increasingly over the next forty years²⁶ the council's chief preoccupation was the problem of traffic. As early as 1920 the need for ladies' conveniences had been discussed 'in view of the large number of visitors arriving by motor'.²⁷ The first attempt at one-way traffic was made in 1928, with a suggestion (still under discussion in 1930) that arrows should indicate circulation round the market square. In the same year the council sought a byelaw to curtail the proliferation of

¹⁷ Vestry minutes 1839, reference to building 'formerly used as a workhouse'.

¹⁸ See 'Social History'.

¹⁹ CAS (Kendal), WSUD/KL/11 Urban District Council minutes 23 Sep. 1891.

²⁰ M. Gresson, *A Stroll through Kirkby Lonsdale* (Kirkby Lonsdale 1996), 19.

²¹ *Kirkby Lonsdale Local Board*, 7.

²² CAS (Kendal), WSUD/KL/7.

²³ CAS (Kendal), WPC/7/33RO.

²⁴ CAS (Kendal), WSUD/KL/11.

²⁵ Under a country-wide downgrading of small Urban District Councils, among which Kirkby Lonsdale, with a population of 1300, was one of the smallest. The salaries involved amounted to £396 p.a.

²⁶ The council minutes have been preserved until 1972. Unfortunately, from this date to 2000 they have been lost or destroyed.

²⁷ CAS (Kendal), WSUD/KL/10.

filling stations in the town.²⁸ In the years 1962-72 the subject of motor traffic, congestion or parking was raised at every meeting.²⁹ Small towns move slowly, and the desirability of a one-way system, which seems an obvious solution and was ultimately implemented, was resoundingly rejected by a public meeting in October 1966.³⁰ Another meeting on the same subject in 1971 attracted 200 people.³¹ Some time later a one-way system was introduced in Mitchelgate, Market Street and Main Street, and the situation was further relieved by the provision in 1985 of car parks at Booth's store at the western edge of the town followed by others round the new doctors' surgeries in 2004.³²

Under local government rules, a parish council of this size may, if it wishes, designate itself a town council, and in 2002, Kirkby Lonsdale, finding that the change would bring certain advantages,³³ and cause its concerns to be taken more seriously at district level, opted for the change and became Kirkby Lonsdale Town Council. Later, perhaps anxious to raise its profile still further, the council considered adopting a town crest and motto, but nothing came of this.³⁴

²⁸ CAS (Kendal), WSUD/KL/11 and 12

²⁹ CAS (Kendal), WPC 7/125 Parish Council Minutes 1962-1972

³⁰ CAS (Kendal), WPC 7/125.

³¹ CAS (Kendal), WPC 7/125.

³² Local inf.

³³ Local information says that the tipping point was the status of the town's two public lavatories.

³⁴ Council Minutes September 2009.