

Parish/township: MOSSER

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MOSSER

Mosser was a small rural township of 1489.6 acres on the north-western edge of the Lake District, four miles south of Cockermouth. Since 1934 it has formed part of the civil parish of Blindbotheil. The bulk of the township consisted of a north-west facing slope rising from the ill-drained valley facing Pardshaw (the ‘moss’ from which the township takes its name) to the summit of Fellbarrow (416m.) but the township boundary straddled the watershed with the Loweswater valley to include the south-facing slopes of Bramley Seat. The settlement pattern was one of dispersed farmsteads and small hamlets scattered across the western half of the township; Mosser Fell, the rising eastern part of the township, and a smaller area of moorland adjoining Sosgill, remained as unenclosed common land until 1867. For the most part, the township boundaries followed topographical features: the former mossland on the north west; Cat Gill on the north east; the watershed along the crests of Fellbarrow and Loftbarrow on the east; and Whittern Gill and Dub Beck on the south.¹ The boundaries of the township were those of the estate granted to Adam de Mosser c.1203.² However, Adam’s grant also included pasture rights over land in Loweswater parish, between Whittern Gill and Crabtree Beck, an area subsequently known as ‘Waterend Wood’, which was the subject of periodic disputes between Mosser and Loweswater, which were finally settled only in 1828.³

Mosser lay on the margins of the seigniorial forest of Copeland, close to the boundary between the barony of Copeland (or Egremont) and the honour of Cockermouth. Its subinfeudation to Adam de Mosser by Richard de Lucy, baron of Egremont, presumably initiated a period of colonisation and clearance. The name Mosser (from Old Norse *mosi*, ‘peat bog’ and Gaelic-Norse *aergi/erg*, ‘summer pasture’) suggests that the north-western fringes of the fells had been seasonal grazing grounds in the Viking Age.⁴ Permanent settlement is implied by 1220, when the tithes of Mosser were disputed between the parishes of St Bees and Brigham. In the ensuing agreement, Mosser was deemed to lie within the parish of St Bees, reflecting its feudal allegiance to the barony of Egremont, but the rector of Brigham would thenceforth take the tithes of Mosser, paying a pound of incense to St Bees.⁵ Thereafter, the link with St Bees was forgotten and Mosser was recognised as a township within Brigham parish.⁶

The dispersed settlement pattern was probably established as a result of colonisation in the thirteenth century, though the names of individual farms and hamlets are not recorded before

¹ Ordnance Survey 1st edition 6” map, Cumberland, Sheet 62; Mosser enclosure award: CRO, QRE/1/127.

² Below: Manors and Estates.

³ CRO, D/Law/1/242/19; D/WM/11/405. The disputes will be discussed at greater length in the article for Loweswater.

⁴ Diana Whaley, *Dictionary of Lake District Place-Names*, (Nottingham, 2006), 243-4.

⁵ *Reg. St Bees*, no. 105 and p. 142n.

⁶ Below, Religious History

the sixteenth century.⁷ The most substantial clusters of dwellings in the eighteenth century were the hamlets of Mosser Mains, where there were four holdings and a mill, and Mossergate or High Mosser, where there were five holdings. There were two holdings each at Bramley and Underwood; most of the remaining settlement sites were single farmsteads by that date.⁸ No major routeways passed through the township; external links were provided by lanes through farmland to adjacent townships and by fell roads across the open commons to Whinfell, Loweswater and Sosgill.

Population was never large. There were around 20 holdings in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth century.⁹ The number of households in the township appears to have remained remarkably stable across the early-modern period, reflecting stability in the number of holdings in a farming community with few cottagers. There were 23 households in 1662 and 22 families in 1801 when the population stood at 101.¹⁰ The number of inhabitants declined across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, remaining at around 100 until 1841, settling at around 75 in the late nineteenth century but falling to 56 in 1931, the last census year for which separate statistics are available for the township. The number of families had dropped to 12 by 1901.¹¹ The fall in population was accompanied by amalgamation of farms and a reduction in the number of steadings: several farmstead sites had been deserted by the mid-twentieth century,¹² while former dwellings adjacent to surviving farms were converted into farm buildings.¹³

Among the yeoman farmers of eighteenth-century Mosser was Isaac Fletcher (1714-1781) of Underwood, whose diary provides vivid insights into life in the township in the mid- and later eighteenth century.¹⁴

⁷ Most of the individual habitation names are recorded before 1620: Bramley, 1545 (CRO, D/Law/1/239); Graythwaite, 1563 (*PNC*, p. 423); Aikbank, 1575 (CRO, D/WM/11/405); Beech Hill, 1592 (CRO, YDX/208/3); Fellside, 1614 (PRO, C2/JAS 1/B31/62); Mosser Mains, 1606 (CRO, D/WM/11/405); Mossergate, 1611 (*ibid*).

⁸ Fletcher, *Diary*, 464-9.

⁹ Conclusion derived from analysis of changes of ownership recorded in Egremont Lordship court leet, 1677-1845: CRO, D/Lec, box 247.

¹⁰ PRO, E179/90/77, rot. 48; Census 1801.

¹¹ Census, 1801-1931.

¹² Settlements recorded in the nineteenth century at Milldam, Gillbrow, High Houses and Whinnah had been abandoned by 1950: CRO, DRC/8/134; OS 6" Map, sheets NY12NW and NY12SW (1957 edn).

¹³ Cottages at Mossergate Farm were converted into loose boxes in 1967 (local inf.).

¹⁴ *The Diary of Isaac Fletcher of Underwood, Cumberland, 1756-1781*, ed. Angus J. L. Winchester (CWAAS Extra Series XXVII, Kendal 1994).