

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

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Parish/township: SKELSMERGH

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### SKELSMERGH<sup>1</sup>

#### RELIGIOUS HISTORY

Skelsmergh lay within the parish of Kendal. A chapel of ease was recorded in the 1578 visitation, which noted, in relation to 'relics of popery', that 'the altar is defaced but not wholly pulled down'.<sup>2</sup> The chapel must have been in disrepair by 1599, when Adam Pykeringe left a legacy, 'to the mending of Skelsmer chappell'.<sup>3</sup> It was still in use as a manor court and for rent-paying until 1673<sup>4</sup> but by 1692 it was in ruins; Machell noting 'the walls only remaining, but some now living remember it covered and seats standing in it...' He also stated that the chapel was dedicated to St John the Baptist and that Sir Uter Gilpin<sup>5</sup> had been chaplain here before the Reformation, adding that there had been neither chapel yard nor chaplain's house but that there had been a salary of an unknown amount apportioned by house. Machell sketched a rectangular building 12 yards by 7½ built adjacent to a spring called St John's well, with the water running under a wooden floor. There are no obvious remains and later local tradition assumed that the chapel site was at Skelsmergh Hall.<sup>6</sup> Machell's description and evidence for the location of St John's well,

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Bridget Machell, Geoff Brambles, the Kendal Local Studies librarians, Michael Dolan at the Talbot Library and all the staff at the Kendal Archives for their assistance in the preparation of this article.

<sup>2</sup> Borthwick Institute (York) V.1578-9/CB.2 Chester.

<sup>3</sup> LRO (Preston), W/RW/R463D/49.

<sup>4</sup> Below, Local Government.

<sup>5</sup> CAS (C) D&C, Machell MSS, ii: '*as appears by a will drawn by his hand*'. Will not located.

<sup>6</sup> Excursions and Proceedings, *CW1*, vi (1883), 202-3.

indicate a site west of Otter Bank.<sup>7</sup> Thereafter the township had no place of worship of the established church until 1871.<sup>8</sup>

## **Roman Catholicism**

The decay and loss of the chapel was probably related to the strength of local Catholicism. In 1583 the Catholic owner of Skelsmergh Hall, James Leyburne, was executed at Lancaster for denying the Queen's supremacy. The strong Catholic identification of this family remained influential until 1715 and was supported by the presence of other Catholic gentry families in adjacent townships.<sup>9</sup> The existence of a Catholic enclave north of Kendal seems to have attracted other recusant families to Skelsmergh. Leyburne's personal example was also important and Catholic historians have linked six Catholic martyrs, who were executed within a hundred years of his death, to the township by birth, family or residence:<sup>10</sup> the layman John Ma(w)son (1591),<sup>11</sup> the priest Thomas Sprott (Lincoln 1600),<sup>12</sup> the bookseller James Duckett (Tyburn 1602),<sup>13</sup> the priest Thomas Somers (Tyburn 1610),<sup>14</sup> the priest John Duckett (Tyburn 1644)<sup>15</sup> and the Benedictine lay-brother, Thomas Pickering (Tyburn 1679).<sup>16</sup>

Seven years after Leyburne's death a commission reported that Christopher Pow and his neighbours had hired an unauthorised Reader at Skelsmergh chapel.<sup>17</sup> Names such as Pickering, Wharton, Gilpin, Mowson, Garnett, Machell, Platt and Stephenson appear frequently on

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<sup>7</sup> Blake Tyson, 'St John's Well and Chapel, Skelsmergh: their location and present condition', *CW2*, xcvi (1998), 155-167.

<sup>8</sup> Below, Church of England.

<sup>9</sup> The Thornburghs of Selside, Ducketts of Grayrigg and Braithwaites of Burneside were often identified as Catholic.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Tunstall was also listed as a 'Skelsmergh martyr' by Sister Agnes, *The Story of Skelsmergh* (Kendal, 1949), 44.

<sup>11</sup> Date and name uncertain. R. Challenor, *Extracts from Memoirs of Missionary Priests*, (London, 1742) included both John Mason 1591 and John Mawson 1612. See also Joseph Mawson, 'John Mawson, Layman Martyr, 1612, And Some Catholic Mawsons'. CRS vi (1921) and D. Longmire, *The Seven Martyrs of Kendal*, Kendal 2008 who concludes he may have come from Skelsmergh.

<sup>12</sup> Born 1571 Skelsmergh: G. Anstruther, *Seminary Priests*, Vol 1 (St Edmund's College, Ware, 1968).

<sup>13</sup> *ODNB*: Duckett, James: born Gilthwaiterigg and godson of James Leyburne. Also known as John, see Anstruther, *Seminary Priests* Vol ii p 89.

<sup>14</sup> Born Skelsmergh. Longmire, *Seven Martyrs*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> *ODNB*: Duckett, John: descended from Skelsmergh family.

<sup>16</sup> From Gilthwaiterigg according to pencilled note on an earlier will: Edward Pickering 1542.

<sup>17</sup> TNA, E178/2379.

recusant lists between 1606 and 1767.<sup>18</sup> A list of convicted recusants in the Kendal and Lonsdale wards in 1625-41 includes sixty-five names for Skelsmergh and Patton,<sup>19</sup> more than for any of the other twenty-five townships.<sup>20</sup>

### **Dodding Green**

Dodding Green is named after the Kendal wool merchant who is believed to have built the house at the end of the fourteenth century.<sup>21</sup> By 1665 the tenancy was held by a prosperous Catholic yeoman, Robert Stephenson.<sup>22</sup> It was clearly already a mass centre when Bishop John Leyburn, the vicar apostolic of England – and a member of the family who still owned Skelsmergh Hall - carried out confirmations at Sizergh, Witherslack and Dodding Green in 1687.<sup>23</sup> Thomas Roydon, a riding priest, was working in the area from 1699 and seems to have used it as a base for his Westmorland circuit but may not have taken up residence until around 1718.<sup>24</sup> Bow Bank, Millbeck, Garnett Folds and Skelsmergh Hall appear as sites for baptisms and marriages in his registers of 1699–1722.<sup>25</sup>

Through a complex series of transactions between 1698 and 1721, designed to circumvent the penal laws, Robert Stephenson bequeathed all his lands and properties for the support of a Catholic priest at Dodding Green and other charitable purposes.<sup>26</sup> Dodding Green is the oldest Catholic mission in Westmorland but after the establishment of premises in Kendal it eventually became a separate Roman Catholic parish that extended from Stramongate Bridge in Kendal to Tebay.<sup>27</sup> The church is dedicated to SS Robert and Alice – saints chosen in honour of Robert Stephenson and his wife.

Stephenson's support was timely in sustaining local Catholicism because it came when the Leyburne funds that had supported the Westmorland circuit were failing. Although Dodding

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<sup>18</sup> There are lists for 1623, 1626, 1628, 1629, 1632, 1640, 1641, 1650, 1657, 1674, 1675, 1678, 1679, 1691, 1696, 1699, 1715, 1717, 1722 and 1767.

<sup>19</sup> The small neighbouring township of Patton was often included with Skelsmergh for taxation purposes.

<sup>20</sup> Lance Thwaytes, 'Catholics of the Seventeenth Century in the Barony of Kendal', in Marie B. Rowlands, *Catholics of Parish and Town 1558-78* (CRS 1999), pp. 194-205.

<sup>21</sup> Sister Agnes, *Skelsmergh*, 38.

<sup>22</sup> LRO (Preston), W/RW/K/R474C/10; Will Anthony Stephenson, 1665.

<sup>23</sup> J. A. Hilton et al, *Bishop Leyburn's Confirmation Register of 1687*, North West Catholic History Society (Wigan 1997).

<sup>24</sup> His register as a travelling priest ends in this year.

<sup>25</sup> LRO (Preston), RCLA acc.6361 Register.

<sup>26</sup> Above, Charities.

<sup>27</sup> 1919 Map in Stephenson Trust boxes at Lancaster Diocese.

Green came to be used mainly for elderly Catholic priests of some intellectual reputation in partial retirement, it also played an important role in the development of Westmorland Catholicism. When, at the opening of the Kirkby Lonsdale church in 1948, the bishop declared ‘once more from Dodding Green, Catholicism reaches out deep into the country’ he was referring to the role of priests at Dodding Green in contributing to the establishment of the Kendal, Ambleside,<sup>28</sup> Kirkby Lonsdale and Windermere<sup>29</sup> churches.

Even in its early days, this was an unusual mission: in a rural area, relatively well-endowed - in 1840 John Lingard described Dodding Green as ‘the best living in the north’<sup>30</sup> - but with a small chapel and a smaller and declining number of Catholic parishioners. The first known priest at Dodding, Thomas Roydon, had a wider role, serving a number of house chapels and becoming vicar-general in the Northern District and a member of the English Chapter.<sup>31</sup> In 1741, he was succeeded by his nephew, also called Thomas Roydon. Robert Johnson (1764-1799) had been headmaster of the Douai preparatory school and built the new chapel at Dodding<sup>32</sup> as well as premises at Kendal. Robert Banister (1803-12) had briefly been vice-president at Douai and was regarded as influential in Catholic ecclesiastical circles. He was succeeded in 1834 by his nephew and protégé, Henry Rutter, the author of a number of religious books.<sup>33</sup>

In the early nineteenth century there were periods without a resident incumbent when Thomas Wilkinson, the Kendal priest, also served Dodding. A long-running dispute over the right of presentation and use of the trust funds, between the hereditary trustees, the Riddells of Cheeseburn Grange<sup>34</sup> and successive vicars apostolic became the subject of wider controversy and lawsuits.<sup>35</sup> Charles Brigham was placed in Dodding by Edward Riddell in 1839 but he was refused faculties by the bishop of the Northern District because of the dispute and his unsuitability as a priest<sup>36</sup> although he was not ejected until 1858. He was followed by Robert

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<sup>28</sup> 1879 Canon Curry of Dodding Green rented a room in Church St. Ambleside for holding mass: Lancaster Directory 1939 (diocesan), Historical Sketches, 125

<sup>29</sup> Bernard Kelly, *English Catholic Missions* (London, 1907), 438.

<sup>30</sup> Ushaw, Lingard correspondence, Lingard to Husenbeth, 145.

<sup>31</sup> Lancaster Directory 1939 (diocesan), Historical Sketches, 122.

<sup>32</sup> Chapel licensed 1791; *Rec. Kend.* III, 139.

<sup>33</sup> Their letters were published in: L. Gooch, *The Revival of English Catholicism: The Banister-Rutter Correspondence 1777-1807*, North West Catholic History Society (Wigan, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> By descent from the Thornburghs, who had been appointed Receivers by Stephenson.

<sup>35</sup> *A Letter to the Right Rev. Francis Mostyn on the Rights of Nomination in the Incumbency of Dodding Green*, (London, 1842) and *A Statement of the Dodding Green Dispute*, (London, 1846). Both pamphlets published anonymously by the Catholic priest Francis Trappes.

<sup>36</sup> Talbot Library, DG Letterbook 2.

Hogarth,<sup>37</sup> brother to William Hogarth the first bishop of Newcastle - both born at Dodding, where their father had been the tenant farmer on the estate. Ralph Platt, the incumbent from 1868 to 1874 had been prefect of studies at Ushaw and Vicar General.<sup>38</sup> Canon Joseph Bamber, priest at Dodding from 1947-83 wrote, 'at one stage we were down to one family attending and even today there are more martyrs from the past in the parish than parishioners'.<sup>39</sup> This historical significance ensured that Dodding Green retained interest as a 'martyr shrine and place of pilgrimage'<sup>40</sup> containing, in Bamber's time, a penal times museum and martyrs' relics collected by him. The last resident priest was Canon William Jackson (1984-90) who also celebrated mass at Sedbergh and Sizergh Castle and was diocesan treasurer.<sup>41</sup> On his retirement it ceased to be a separate parish and from 2004, the house, chapel and gardens were occupied and renovated by residents from the Cenacolo Community, the English branch of a charity for rehabilitating addicts, founded in Italy in 1983. In 2012 the Community contained around twenty people living a semi-monastic lifestyle of work and prayer. The community was supported by legacies, donations and standing orders from a group of supporters.<sup>42</sup>

Dodding Green is a seventeenth-century building and an example of a Catholic chapel built as part of a private house and retaining some features from penal times including several places of concealment. It was arranged on an H-shaped plan and on the north end there is rainwater head and pipe with the inscription RSA 1682 (Robert and Alice Stephenson). The original chapel was an attic room and the surviving one, built on the end and with an external stairway, probably dates from 1791. The 1840 Brigham extensions and alterations included a Jacobean-style ceiling and decorative external woodwork by Websters of Kendal but most of these features were lost in the 1940<sup>43</sup> and 1968 renovations together with the wall sundial and the statue on the front of the house.<sup>44</sup>

## Church of England

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<sup>37</sup> Assembler and copier of the Dodding Green Letterbooks.

<sup>38</sup> Northern Catholic Calendar 1874/5, 41-3.

<sup>39</sup> *The Universe*, Dec 12 1969, In the heart of Westmorland-a unique martyr's shrine by Fr Joseph Bamber.

<sup>40</sup> *Universe*, Dec 12 1969, Bamber.

<sup>41</sup> *Skelsmergh, Selside & Longsleddale Church News*, 'A Long Life in Ministry,' by Joanna Wates, Sep 1989.

<sup>42</sup> Cenacolo Newsletter - late Summer 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Wallplate inscribed: 'Haec domus renovate est, MCMXL RJGK' (incumbent priest Richard Kershaw).

<sup>44</sup> Hyde & Pevsner, *Cumbria*, 624.

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, members of the established church worshipped at Kendal, Burneside or Selside.<sup>45</sup> Only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was an Anglican presence re-established. In 1869 Archdeacon Cooper of Kendal proposed forming the three townships of Skelsmergh, Scalthwaiterigg and Patton into a new ecclesiastical district with a new church. It was constructed in an elevated position on Helme Bank, to the design of Joseph Bintley and consecrated in 1871.<sup>46</sup> Like its early modern predecessor, it was dedicated to St John the Baptist. Many local people subscribed to the building fund but much of the £1,378 required came from outside.<sup>47</sup> Trinity College Cambridge gave £250 towards the endowment. Another £1,000, as well as the site for the vicarage, came from the estate of Hannah Braithwaite.<sup>48</sup> The living was worth £190 in 1895 and £343 in 1925 and was in the gift of the vicar of Kendal.<sup>49</sup>

The building was constructed with a bell turret on the west end above the doorway. An organ chamber was added in 1884 and in the same year stained glass was inserted in the big three-light east window as a memorial to the Morton family. In 1888 the chancel was extended by twelve feet and stone finial crosses added to the roofs. The lych gate was constructed as a war memorial and originally included a wooden cross that is now inside the church.<sup>50</sup> The centenary of the church in 1971 was marked by the addition of an illuminated neon cross to the tower. In 1974 a new door was constructed on the south side and the exposed west opening blocked. The original church had 207 settings but this was expanded to 232 by later alterations.<sup>51</sup>

The adjacent vicarage was completed in 1875 by the same architect. The first incumbent was G.E.P. Reade (1872 to 1895), who was commemorated in the name of the additional graveyard that was created on land donated by one of his daughters in 1950 - the Canon Reade Memorial Churchyard.<sup>52</sup> The new Anglican church and parish with a resident vicar sparked off a more active religious life in the area in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Reade and his

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<sup>45</sup> Entries relating to inhabitants of Skelsmergh occur frequently in the registers of Selside (120 events, 1753-1812); Burneside (100 baptisms 1717-60) and Kendal (numerous entries, 1558-1825): CAS (K), WPR 30/1; WPR 54/1/1; WPR 38/1.

<sup>46</sup> *Westmorland Gazette*, Nov 4 1871.

<sup>47</sup> Below - Social History.

<sup>48</sup> This was a contested will and the case attracted much interest see J. S. Campbell, *The Braithwaite Will Cause and History of the Black Drop* (Kendal, 1872).

<sup>49</sup> Kelly, *Dir. Westmd.* 1934.

<sup>50</sup> The cross is referred to in 1921 and was removed from the gate in the 1950s.

<sup>51</sup> Kelly, *Dir. Westmd.* 1897.

<sup>52</sup> CRO (K) WPR 87/1/4/22 & 23.

parishioners created a church choir, Sunday school, branch of the Church of England Temperance Society, Girls' Friendly Society and Parochial Library.<sup>53</sup>

His successor, Samuel Livesey, was the incumbent for forty-three years. The last burst of Victorian religious energy in the township was the building of the parish room opposite the church in 1897.<sup>54</sup> Twentieth-century retrenchment saw amalgamation with Selside to form a united benefice in 1954.<sup>55</sup> In 1960 the ecclesiastical parish boundaries were redrawn so that Skelsmergh no longer included part of what had become north-east Kendal.<sup>56</sup> In 1973 the united benefice of Skelsmergh, Selside and Longsleddale was created.<sup>57</sup> After 1940 there were eight vicars who served for relatively short periods. Of these, Lawrence (Lawrie) Peat (1979-86) made a particularly strong impact as a parish priest motivated by an inclusive idea of community and founded the Church News for the three parishes. Most of the vicarage was sold in 1988 and a new smaller building constructed alongside it. The last resident (and part-time) vicar for the parish, Robert (Bob) Dew left in 2006 and was the longest serving of the post-war vicars.<sup>58</sup> Skelsmergh parish then became part of the Beacon Group of six local churches.<sup>59</sup>

## **Nonconformity**

Although there were a few Quakers and later Unitarians in the township<sup>60</sup> the most significant nonconformist presence was provided by the Christian Brethren. By 1882 were using a small mission room in Garth Row.<sup>61</sup> This was a daughter church of the Sand Area meeting in Kendal. It was supported by families from Garth Row and some of the surrounding farms. In 1940 both Sunday School and gospel services had an average attendance of forty.<sup>62</sup> However, the mission closed in 1955 when numbers became too small.<sup>63</sup> It was then converted into a small house. In 2006 the Kendal congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses built a new Kingdom Hall in Giltwhaiterigg Lane in the part of Skelsmergh transferred to Kendal.

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<sup>53</sup> G Reade, 'Church Work in Skelsmergh', *Skelsmergh Church Magazine*, July 1895.

<sup>54</sup> Below, Local Government

<sup>55</sup> London Gazette 40215, 25 June 1954.

<sup>56</sup> CRO (K), WPR 87/1/4/26.

<sup>57</sup> London Gazette 45928, 13 March 1973

<sup>58</sup> 1991-2006.

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.thebeacongroup.org.uk/> © 2005-6 The Beacon Group of Parishes & Tullnet Internet Services.

<sup>60</sup> Rowland Scales and his son Daniel left legacies to the Unitarians - F Nicholson & E Axon, *The Older Nonconformity in Kendal* (Kendal 1915), 303.

<sup>61</sup> Although the building is shown on Ordnance Survey 6-inch map, 1st ed, surveyed 1858.

<sup>62</sup> CAS (K), WDFCPB.

<sup>63</sup> Informant: A. Hayes, retired farmer of Red Bank and a former preacher at this mission.