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978-0-521-09016-2 - Coal and Tobacco: The Lowthers and the Economic Development of West Cumberland, 1660-1760

J. V. Beckett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Cumbria today consists of the historic counties of Cumberland and Westmorland, together with the north Lancashire districts of Furness and Cartmel, an area of some one and a half million acres in all. It is a natural region, although this has only been recognized for administrative purposes since the 1974 local government reorganization. At its heart is the central mass of the Lakeland hills, while its limits are defined by the Scottish border to the north, the western slopes of the Pennines to the east, Morecambe Bay to the south and the Irish sea to the west. The Eden valley, running south-east from Carlisle, and the Solway and west Cumberland plains are the most fertile areas, while the lowland part of the Furness peninsula is suitable for stock-rearing. Various minerals have been found in the region: lead and copper in the Pennine hills, copper around Keswick and the Langdales, iron in the south-west of the region, and coal along the west coast.

Before the hills and lakes of Cumbria became a tourist attraction at the end of the eighteenth century, the region had always been isolated from the rest of the country. Traditionally Scottish travellers took the eastern route through England, to avoid both the terrain and the people. Celia Fiennes shuddered in 1698 at 'those inaccessible high rocky barren hills which hangs [sic] over ones head in some places and appear very terrible'. Defoe considered Westmorland 'eminent only for being the wildest, most barren and frightful of any that I have passed over in England, or even in Wales itself'. The 1695 edition of *Camden's Britannia* described the eastern part of the region as 'a lean, hungry, desolate sort of country'.¹ It was wild countryside; the sheriff of Northumberland armed Lord Keeper Guilford and his entourage with 'a dagger, knife, pen-knife and fork' when they set out from Newcastle for Carlisle in the later seventeenth century.² Border raiding and conflict with the Scots only came to an end in

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

COAL AND TOBACCO

1745. Overall, Sir Edward Seymour was probably reflecting the views of many of his contemporaries when he told local landowner James Grahme in 1700 that 'a worsor country for people and travellers I never met withal'.³

When Seymour passed through Cumbria it was sparsely populated; something like 95,000 people lived in Cumberland and Westmorland, or, to put it another way, some 2 per cent of the national population occupied 5 per cent of the country's total acreage. Apart from the growing west Cumberland port of Whitehaven, only three towns were of any note: Carlisle, the county town of Cumberland, with between 2000 and 3000 inhabitants; Kendal with around 2000; and Penrith, 1350. A century later, at the first census of 1801, the two counties had a combined population of 158,000, an overall increase of 66 per cent. As with other areas, the rate of growth was approximately twice as fast in the second half of the century as in the first. Cumberland's overall increase had been the more rapid: roughly 80 per cent by contrast with Westmorland's 36 per cent.* The rates reflected differences in the occupational structures of the two counties. Westmorland in 1801 was still predominantly agricultural, with only four towns of over 1000 inhabitants. In Cumberland, by contrast, extensive mining, new industries and trading connexions, had brought urban growth. Six towns had more than 3000 inhabitants.⁴

Industrial and commercial change was undoubtedly the most striking feature of Cumbrian development in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the most significant features being coal mining along the west coast (with a related trade to Ireland), iron mining in Furness, and the establishment of trading links with America and the Baltic. Iron and coal had been worked in Cumbria as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Systematic mineral workings only began, however, in the mid-sixteenth century when the Mines Royal Company worked copper in Newlands, Borrowdale, Caldbeck and Grasmere. Today's Lakeland tourists would be hard pressed to imagine Keswick as an industrial centre, and the beautiful Newlands valley scarred with copper workings, but this activity brought a certain amount of prosperity to the region. In 1574, for

* These figures make the data presented in P. Deane and W. A. Cole, *British Economic Growth, 1688-1959*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1967), p. 103, seem intrinsically unlikely. Their suggestion of a 10 per cent decline in the two counties between 1701 and 1751 was obtained by using a base figure of 135,000 for 1701. Local evidence indicates that this is too high.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

example, wages were paid, and other payments made to 360 local people. Even though the Keswick enterprise did not outlast Elizabeth's reign, its success acted as a stimulant to other industrial concerns. Iron had been produced in Furness during the first half of the sixteenth century, but bloomsmithies were outlawed in 1564, presumably in an attempt to ensure that charcoal would be available for the Mines Royal. After the Mines Royal Company departed, iron forges were established, at Cunsey by 1623, and at Ulpha a couple of years later.⁵ Systematic coal mining began in the sixteenth century around Parton and Workington on the west coast. Both the coal and iron industries grew rapidly in the course of the seventeenth century.

Before taking a detailed look at these developments in the century or so after 1660, a cautionary note needs to be sounded. The regional economy as a whole was not transformed. Even if some of the less than flattering descriptions of contemporaries and historians can be ignored, many aspects of the Cumbrian economy remained unchanged. Agricultural improvement, for example, came late, and new techniques were only slowly adopted.

The pattern of landownership in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was characterized by a drift of property towards the region's more prosperous owners. A solid core of gentry families fashioned and directed society. They acted as the effective organs of local government, although only two or three of them would have ranked with the greater gentry elsewhere in England. Generally they were substantial neither in numbers nor wealth. Cumbria, as one traveller noted in 1710, was a region 'depopulated of gentry'. As late as 1754 one of the wealthiest could comment that 'the gentlemen in general have very inconsiderable [estates]'.⁶ Eight, or possibly nine, gentry families spent in excess of £10,000 on property in the period 1680-1750, of whom five had a significant interest from non-landed sources. These included an East India nabob and a family of Appleby lawyers. Perhaps the most significant feature of the land market was the role of the Lowthers. The four branches of the family in the region (including the viscounts Lonsdale) spent £142,000 on property during the same period. When the accidents of birth and inheritance brought the estates into the hands of one man, Sir James Lowther of Lowther (created Earl of Lonsdale 1783) in 1756, he was reputed to be one of the wealthiest men in England.

Cambridge University Press

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J. V. Beckett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

COAL AND TOBACCO

The few peers who owned estates in Cumbria were generally absentee, limiting their local interests to rent collection and borough politics. As a group they sold land to the value of some £85,000 between 1680 and 1750, whilst purchasing only about £70,000 worth. Of this latter sum, £46,000 was spent by the Lonsdales, the region's one indigenous peerage family.⁷

As for the smaller landowners, known locally as yeomen, their position was rather different from that of their contemporaries elsewhere in England. The decline of the lesser owners, so much a feature of the century after 1688 in southern and midland counties, occurred largely post-1815 in the north-west.⁸ Travellers and commentators have left a rather one-sided view of this group. Wordsworth was particularly guilty. He painted a romanticized picture of Cumbria, describing a static society characterized by its hardy statesmen who lived close to poverty on land which had 'for more than five hundred years been possessed by men of their name and blood'. Not too much store should be set by this picture, which was uncritically accepted by Macaulay in the nineteenth century and Trevelyan in the twentieth.⁹ It ignores what amounted to considerable mobility among the lesser owners. On the Earl of Carlisle's estate in north-east Cumberland, for example, of the 745 fines assessed at the twenty-five manor courts for which records survive between 1727 and 1750, 293 (40 per cent) were purchase fines, an average of nearly twelve at each court.¹⁰ Furthermore, the yeomen were not quite as poor as Wordsworth and others implied. In national terms Cumberland and Westmorland had long been regarded as impoverished; for the purposes of taxation they had been given special rating in 1389, and generations of vigilant MPs had maintained this situation. Evidence for the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, indicates an increase in prosperity. Inventory evidence from Kendal deanery (admittedly one of the wealthiest areas of the region) suggests a rise in yeoman prosperity between the later seventeenth century and the second quarter of the eighteenth.¹¹ This may explain why so many new schools were opened in the region between 1660 and 1800; 44 in Cumberland and 28 in Westmorland. As a result, the region had a relatively high literacy rate.¹² Quite why the position of the Cumbrian yeomanry should have been different from that of their southern contemporaries is not clear, but it may have been related to the structure of agriculture and the availability of industrial by-employment.

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J. V. Beckett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the eighteenth century most Cumbrians maintained themselves by subsistence agriculture, thereby ensuring that mixed husbandry prevailed in the region. Arable crops were mostly oats and bigg (an inferior variety of barley), which were cultivated for animal and domestic consumption. Wheat and rye are only occasionally found in inventory lists. Cattle were the lynchpin of the economy, with greater and lesser owners alike involved in breeding and rearing. The value of cattle recorded in yeoman inventories was consistently greater than that of sheep. Many local landowners benefited from the Scottish droving trade. Cattle were driven into Cumbria between June and December, sold to local farmers for winter fattening, and then re-sold to graziers further south in the spring. Fairs were held throughout the region, both in small villages such as Orton and Shap, and larger centres including Carlisle, Penrith and Kendal. By the later eighteenth century 10,000 Scottish cattle were sold annually at the September fair held in the village of Brough, a few miles west of Carlisle. The prosperity of the trade may have been linked to the long fall in grain prices between the mid-seventeenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries. This trend, which was reflected in rising per capita real incomes, almost certainly brought about an increase in the consumption of meat and dairy products.¹³

By contrast, the eighteenth century was not a period of great prosperity for sheep rearing since wool prices followed a generally downward trend. This may be one reason for the distinctly secondary place of sheep in the Cumbrian economy. Inventory evidence shows that yeoman flocks rarely exceeded 200, with a later seventeenth-century average of around 50 for both highland and lowland farmers. The larger flocks seem to have been concentrated in southern Lakeland, particularly around Kendal, the main woollen town of the region.

The prosperity of the cattle trade, the continuing hold of customary tenure which ensured that farms remained small, and the inhospitable landscape and climate – inimical to both investment and experiment – combined to delay the introduction of improved husbandry. Nonetheless changes did come; indeed, the potato was introduced in the mid-seventeenth century, rather earlier than elsewhere. Many of the new agricultural practices were pioneered in the region during the 1730s and 1740s by John Nowell, steward of the Earl of Carlisle's rather bleak territory between Carlisle and the

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J. V. Beckett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

COAL AND TOBACCO

Northumberland border. Nowell introduced progressive leases on the estate, increased the size of farms, and cultivated new root crops on the earl's home farm. Despite Nowell's success, only isolated examples can be found of improvements taking place elsewhere in the region. Little consistent effort was made to enclose or to use lease covenants to improve farming, and the almost universal condemnation of local practices by commentators at the end of the eighteenth century suggests that progress had not been rapid; indeed, it is clear that turnips and artificial grasses, which have often been taken as a sign of progress, were cultivated in only a few of the west Cumberland parishes by the 1790s.¹⁴

The yeomanry not only benefited from the cattle trade, they were also well situated to capitalize upon the opportunities for by-employment. Cumbria, with its many customaryhold tenants in a pastoral economy, had the type of background favourable to the development of countryside industries.¹⁵ Cloth was woven in all the valleys radiating from Kendal, while in 1686 it was reported from west Cumberland that 'the country is already in the practice of making linen, sacking, coarse woollens, stockings and hats'.¹⁶ 'Yeomen' doubled as blacksmiths, carpenters and tanners; they developed interests in salt panning and shipping, and some in west Cumberland even combined working at the coal-face with farming.¹⁷

Whatever the relative importance of the cattle trade and by-employments in ensuring continued prosperity, especially among the lesser landowners of the region, it was heavy industry which was the driving force behind economic change. Wordsworth's view of Cumbria, outdated in 1700, was totally misleading by the later eighteenth century. By then, far from being untouched by the gathering momentum of industrial development, parts of the region had been in the van of progress. The introduction of blast furnaces in 1711 gave the Furness iron industry a massive boost, and the area remained one of the principal English charcoal-iron producing centres thereafter. This industry has been described elsewhere, however,¹⁸ and attention here must, perforce, be focussed on the rapid economic development of the west coast region.

Coal mining, linked to a ready-made and expanding market in Ireland, provided the base from which flowed all the other developments in west Cumberland. Exports of coal to Ireland began early in the seventeenth century, and the relationship which developed

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J. V. Beckett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

between Dublin and west Cumberland was remarkably similar, on a smaller scale, to that between London and Tyneside. Demand for coal in London stimulated the north-eastern coal industry in terms of a multiplier effect of secondary and tertiary employment.¹⁹ The pull of the Dublin market performed a similar function in west Cumberland. Opportunities arose from promoting industries which used coal as their fuel (i.e. coal-fuel), such as salt panning, glass making and ore smelting. Whitehaven's geographical position facilitated the development of new trading links. Enterprising ships' masters recognized the profits to be made from trading across the Atlantic rather than simply pursuing the not very profitable coal trade. Some of them turned merchants, and played a vital role in promoting Whitehaven as a tobacco entrepôt. By the 1740s the link with America was threatening to undermine the coal trade. On a less substantial scale, trading connexions were established with the West Indies and the Baltic. Vessels outward bound for the colonies required an export cargo. Sir John Lowther, owner of Whitehaven, made efforts to establish textile manufactures in his new town to meet this demand, while the expansion of the Cumbrian cloth centres in the eighteenth century can perhaps be explained, in part, by such needs. Kendal's population had reached 8000 by 1801, Penrith's 3800 and Carlisle's 10,000.²⁰ However, much of the cargo was acquired outside the region. Certainly the coastal towns benefited from the industrial and commercial activity. Whitehaven's population increased seven-fold in the seventy-eight years after 1685, while Workington also showed a considerable increase. Furthermore, the tobacco trade had secondary effects. Newly rich merchants turned their wealth into industrial developments and landownership. They became leading figures during the 1740s in ironworks, glassworks, ropewalks, shipbuilding and other activities. Their search for small estates pushed up the price of land in west Cumberland at a time when coal-bearing property near to the west coast was in considerable demand. The resulting price inflation amazed Sir James Lowther. He suggested in 1753 that 'people are mad to give such prices for small parcels of land as they do in Cumberland, they don't give such prices near London, where those that are in the funds want to lay out millions they have there in landed estates'.²¹ Once they owned land, the merchants sought a voice in local affairs, some becoming JPs and land tax commissioners, as well as serving in the office of sheriff.

Cambridge University Press

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J. V. Beckett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

COAL AND TOBACCO

Yet the prosperity generated by the 1740s was short-lived; the second half of the eighteenth century saw the west Cumberland economy grow at a slower pace, with the momentum built up before 1750 tailing off. Many of the developments proved to be superficial. Perhaps most importantly much of the tobacco trade was lost to Glasgow during the 1750s and was never regained. As a result, the merchants' capital resources ran dry; they could not sustain the level of enterprise upon which they had embarked in the heady years of the 1740s, when Whitehaven stood second only to London in the quantity of its tobacco imports. When, for example, Peter How, one of the town's leading merchants, failed in 1763, the casualties of his bankruptcy included a snuffery and an iron forge. Two other merchants had helped him promote the latter.

The superficiality of the developments was also clear from the failure to attract labour to the area. A steady trickle rather than a stream of migrants found their way to west Cumberland. Notably lacking amongst them, however, were the vigorous and entrepreneurially-minded skilled workers who were often crucial for long term development. Whereas, for example, Sheffield's ironmasters usually emerged from the ranks of the secondary metalworkers, and in the west Midlands the greater ironmasters evolved from lesser status, this was not the case in west Cumberland.²² The craftsmen and middle-rank merchants who became the rising entrepreneurs elsewhere were deterred both by the region's physical isolation and the lack of investment capital. The local gentry simply did not have the resources to invest, and the merchants were only able to do so for a few years.

All of this took place under the watchful eye of the Lowthers, the dominant entrepreneurial family. The economic and social history of west Cumberland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is inextricably interwoven with the history of the Lowthers; to write about the one without the other would be misleading, since they played a part, either major or minor, in more or less every development. They were model eighteenth-century landowning-entrepreneurs, typical of a *genre* which made such an important contribution to early economic growth through their prominence in mining, townbuilding and transport improvement. Sir John Lowther kept every possible iron in the fire, even to the extent of burning his fingers on occasion. His own son was critical of his diffusion of interests; 'his great mistake', according to Sir James writing in 1746,

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J. V. Beckett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

'was that he would join in any expense to encourage anything but collieries'.²³ For his own part, he was determined to keep his interests to coal mining, although he found himself drawn into new industrial ventures including salt panning, glass manufacture, and, indirectly, the Baltic and colonial trades. As a colliery entrepreneur he was a considerable success, and he also proved to be adept in other roles. When a shipping crisis during the 1730s threatened his hard work in cultivating the Irish market, he helped to plug the gap by acquiring shares in vessels. He used his influence in London to promote his own business affairs, and to aid those of the merchants. His seat in Parliament provided the means of promoting legislation designed to help the north-west, such as harbour and turnpike improvement bills, and of opposing measures likely to be damaging to west Cumberland's interests.

Lowther's active life brought him the personal satisfaction of great wealth and considerable political influence in his native county. Friends and enemies alike were prepared to admit that Lowther, and his father before him, were west Cumberland's most important entrepreneurs. Walter Lutwidge, a local merchant, and a hostile witness by the time he wrote in the 1740s, accepted that in west Cumberland Sir James Lowther was 'without flattery . . . the centre of motion'. In other letters Lutwidge referred to Lowther as 'our great man', thereby consciously imitating the popular epithet for Sir Robert Walpole to describe the relationship between Lowther and the area. In 1751, William Brown, the Tyneside colliery viewer, told Carlisle Spedding, Lowther's Whitehaven colliery steward, that he found 'a secret satisfaction in hearing of the welfare of Sir James who without dispute has been the great instrument of the present flourishing condition of Whitehaven and places adjacent'.²⁴

A study of the Lowthers is, in effect, an investigation of their interaction with the local economy. Rapid expansion of the coal industry during the second half of the seventeenth century can be dated from Sir John Lowther's coming of age in 1663; a further acceleration of the pace was linked with Sir James Lowther's decision to widen his horizons in west Cumberland from the early 1720s. An understanding of the interaction is vital for an appreciation of the expansion during the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and the retardation which followed. Thus, whilst the present book is primarily a study of the entrepreneurial role pioneered by Sir John Lowther and brought to fruition by his son, and whilst each

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J. V. Beckett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

COAL AND TOBACCO

chapter is basically concerned with the Lowthers' role in developments, the economy of the region is studied to provide a firm framework within which to examine the role of its most important entrepreneurial family. In so doing, the crucial importance of coal, and the rather less vital role of tobacco, except for a few years in the 1740s, will become apparent.

This approach helps to overcome some of the drawbacks posed by having to take most of the material from the Lowther papers. Membership of Parliament (father and son sat in the House of Commons for most of the period 1664–1755), and London residence, were not only important for the roles that the Lowthers could play in advancing west Cumberland's development, but also for the correspondence generated by their absence. Events in Cumbria can be pieced together from papers surviving in the family archive, which has been relatively inaccessible until recent times. However, the fullness of these papers raises certain methodological problems, because no substantial body of material has survived for any of the other entrepreneurs or merchants involved in the region's transformation. After all, the Lowthers were not alone, even if they towered above their fellows in the scale of enterprise and the size of profits. Among the coal-owning landowners the Curwen, Christian and Senhouse families were closely connected with the developments of these years, while tobacco merchants such as Walter Lutwidge, Peter How and William Hicks, became significant figures in various aspects of the region's economic development. Only a few papers survive for these families, most notably a couple of letter books of Walter Lutwidge. Even with the customs records these hardly add up to an effective counterweight to the great bulk of material provided by the major source. Some chapters of this book have had to be written almost entirely from the Lowther papers; indeed, the chronological structure is partially determined by the quality of the records during the lifetimes of Sir John and Sir James Lowther. Obviously this raises the danger of exaggeration and distortion. No one would question the Lowthers' prominence in west Cumberland's development, but it is easy to overemphasize their already central position because more is known about them than anyone else.* In addition, the nature of the evidence drawn from their papers may

* Similar problems are found in other regions. See, for example, Barrie Trinder's remarks on the hazards of a comparative study of the Shropshire entrepreneurs in *The Industrial Revolution in Shropshire* (Chichester, 1973), pp. 196–7.