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West Cumberland, 1660-1760

J. V. Beckett

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## Coal and tobacco

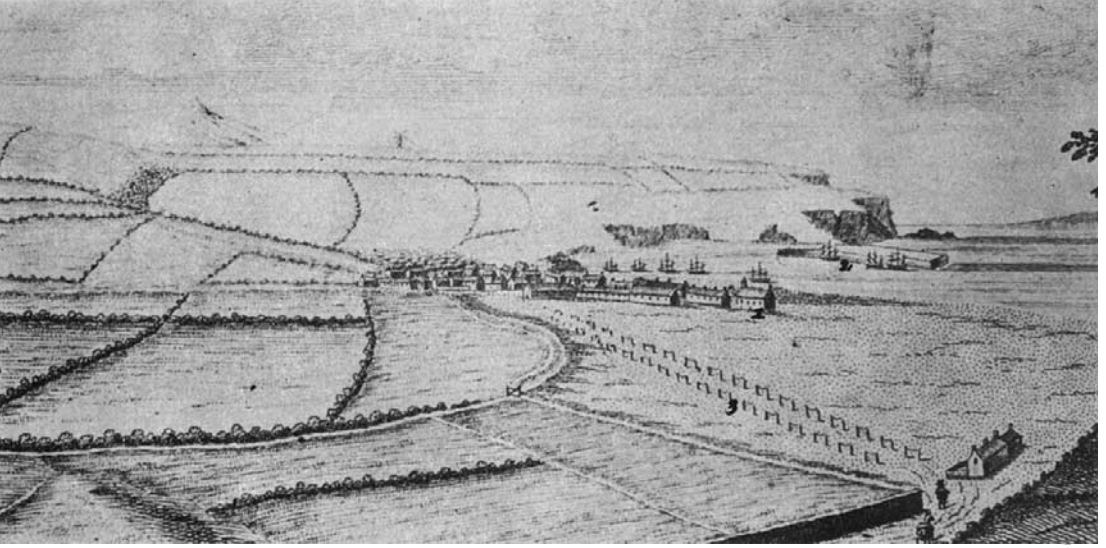
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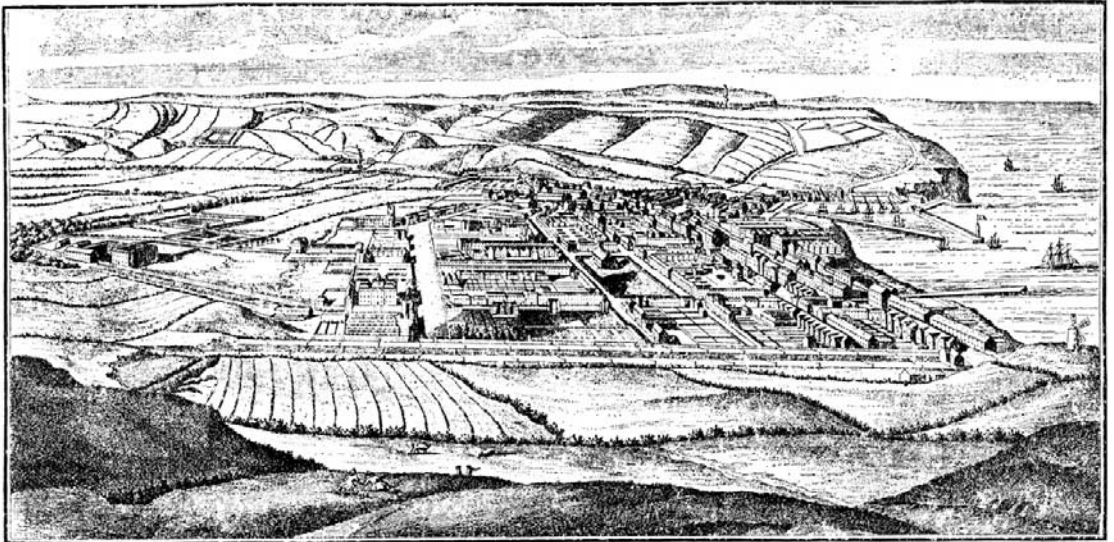
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Whitehaven in 1642 (above) and in 1738 (below)

‘The South East Prospect of Whitehaven in the Year 1642’ (detail) is reproduced by courtesy of Carlisle Library. ‘The East Prospect of the Town and Harbour of Whitehaven’, taken from an engraving by Richard Parr, based on Matthias Read’s ‘Bird’s Eye View of Whitehaven, 1738’, is reproduced by courtesy of Whitehaven Museum.



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# COAL AND TOBACCO

The Lowthers and the Economic Development  
of West Cumberland, 1660-1760

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J. V. BECKETT

*Lecturer in History, University of Nottingham*

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TO MY  
MOTHER AND FATHER

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## Note on Dates

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All dates prior to 2 Sept 1752 are in the Old (Julian) Style, except that the new year is taken to start on 1 January. From 14 September 1752 dates are in the New (Gregorian) Style.



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## Preface

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West Cumberland today is primarily renowned for its nuclear plant at Windscale. Once, however, the ports of Whitehaven and Workington were centres of trade and commerce on a par with Liverpool, Bristol and Glasgow. Coal, the eighteenth-century equivalent of twentieth-century oil, was mined at various points along the Cumberland coastline. Much of it was sent to Ireland, and the prosperity engendered by the trade enabled west Cumberland to thrive. Whitehaven enjoyed a short-lived but lucrative tobacco trade, and the confidence that this inspired led to the planning of new industries and trade routes. But as this book will attempt to show, the region remained overdependent upon its coal industry; too many of the plans never got off the drawing board, and the local economy failed to change sufficiently to accommodate rapid development. Consequently the period covered by this book was one of considerable, but unsustainable prosperity for the region.

If coal made economic development possible, one family was supremely responsible for turning potential into reality: the Lowthers. Indeed, this book is largely a study of two men, Sir John Lowther (1642–1706), and his son Sir James (1673–1755), and the area that they did so much to develop in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their papers are voluminous, yet their careers have never been studied in any detail. I shall hope to repair this omission, but not within the conventional biographical mould. Jointly their active lives spanned the period during which Cumbria, and particularly the west coast area, underwent a rapid rise in economic importance. During the later years of his life, Sir James Lowther came to dominate west Cumberland as few men dominated a comparable area of England under the first two Hanoverians.

Less central to the book, but significant in itself, is the suggestion of an alternative interpretation of Whitehaven's economic history to

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that provided forty years ago by Percy Ford. In an article entitled 'Tobacco and Coal: A Note on the Economic History of Whitehaven', *Economica*, ix (1929), Ford argued that 'the early development of its coal mining industry and trade had been financed in part from the profits of the import and export of tobacco' (p. 192). This book will attempt to show that such a view is untenable. The two trades were almost entirely separate, and merchant capital was only ploughed back into industry – and new industries at that, rather than coal – from the later 1740s. The present book also builds upon, and in places corrects, J. E. Williams' article, 'Whitehaven in the Eighteenth Century', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, viii (1956). Williams only partly amended Ford's argument. Here the suggestion will be advanced that coal was the staple from which most other developments grew. Tobacco may have been a lucrative adjunct for a number of years, but coal provided the economic foundation upon which the region was built.

This book has been several years in the writing. It began during the two years that I spent as Lord Adams Research Fellow in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne (1974–76), and I should like to thank the trustees of that post whose generous sponsorship enabled me to undertake the majority of the research. It has been completed alongside teaching posts at Wroxton College (the British campus of Fairleigh Dickinson University, New Jersey, U.S.A.) and the Universities of Hull and Nottingham. I should like to thank the Earl of Lonsdale, Lord Crawford of Balcarres, R. F. Dickinson Esq. and Mr and Mrs O. R. Bagot, who made the book possible by allowing me to consult their family papers, the University of Michigan Press for permission to print the table on p. 107, and the Mary Fair fund for a generous grant towards the expenses of publication.

In preparing *Coal and Tobacco* I have sustained many debts to friends and colleagues, and I should like to take this opportunity of thanking them for giving of their time to advise and help me. Although it is invidious to single out individuals, it would be less than grateful were I not to mention several people who have been particularly helpful. Amongst the many archivists and librarians from whose knowledge I have benefited are Mrs Anna Rossiter and Mr Jeremy Godwin of Carlisle Record Office, Mr R. E. Wilkinson and Miss M. Brander of Carlisle Library, and Dr Nicholas Cox of the Public Record Office. Individuals that I should like to thank

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*Beeston*

*Nottingham*

*December 1979*