

Cummersdale History Researched and Written by Alan James

Cummersdale first inhabitants

The terrace above the Caldw valley on which the present High Cummersdale village is situated was formed about 15,000 years ago during the last ice age. Over the following seven or eight thousand years, as the ice cap receded and temperatures began to rise, the growth of vegetation was encouraged and hunters ventured along the coast and up the river valleys in search of food. The evidence that these nomadic tribes left, however, is very sparse and unfortunately there is no concrete evidence of them at Cummersdale.

We are more fortunate with later tribes. Neolithic man left more evidence of where he had been, and at Cummersdale quite a few worked flints have been recovered. In addition to worked flints being recovered, two stone axes have also been found in the Cummersdale area, one in 1946 and another in 1951. From the present evidence we know that the first settlers here at Cummersdale were late neolithic people, although the actual settlement or living area has not yet been located.

There is some Bronze Age evidence from both Brow Nelson and High Cummersdale, Brow Nelson also produced Iron age/Romano British evidence, which includes a crop mark site. Roman activity is evident to the East of High Cummersdale village with two known sites, a possible Roman fort of the early 2nd century, and in the adjacent field a 4th century farmstead.



From when the Romans were here until about the 12th century little is known of settlers in the area, pottery shards give some indication of the few inhabitants. Because of the unsettled situation in the borders, landowners were reluctant to live outside the protective walls of Carlisle. They employed tenant farmers to work their lands outside the fortifications of the city. The de Carlisle's, Robert of Whitrigg, Walter of Kirkbampton, William de Monte Acuto, Alan de Pennington are just a few of the landowners at Cummersdale in the 13th and 14th centuries. In addition to these, the church also owned lands and properties at Cummersdale. The Bishops register for 1318 records him being the owner of a fulling mill and the corn mill Cummersdale.

For many years, the areas outside the walled city of Carlisle suffered at the hands of the Scots, and later, the border Rievers. Some very serious incursions took place with properties ransacked and burned, livestock stolen and in some cases the inhabitants killed. The Cummersdale district as with other areas around Carlisle were sparsely populated during these centuries.

More trouble came during the siege of Carlisle in 1644 / 45 when many of the skirmishes took place in and around Cummersdale, these are graphically described in Issac Tullies published account of the siege. He also records that one of the last acts of the starving garrison in Carlisle castle was to send out a party of horsemen to Cummersdale mill for corn to feed the starving occupants.

Many Cumbrian's thought that with the coming together of the Crowns and then the settlement in 1706 they could at last look forward to a more peaceful life, however, in 1745 Charles Edward Stuart (Bonnie prince Charlie) caused quite a panic in and around Carlisle on his way South to lay claim to the Throne. He and his highlanders crossed over Cummersdale Moor and through the village on his way to set-up his headquarters at Blackwell



Mill with the bridge to the Racecourse.

The earliest mention of the corn mill at Cummersdale is in 1268, in a quit claim by Nicholas, the son of William de Charpent, of his rights in Little Cummersdale and the mill to Robert, Bishop of Carlisle.

In 1282 the mill is still held by the church, for in an inquisition taken at the death of Ralph de Irton in that year, among the sources of revenue mentioned is the rent of the mill of

Cummersdale, and later in the in the Bishops register of 1318 the mill was to let three years in a row, paying 100 shillings rent. Much later in a document dated the 8th June 1612 the Howards of Corby are recorded as owners of the corn mill and the fulling mill including lands and estate at Great Cummersdale. In 1637-38 the mills were let again to Thomas and Christopher Blenehasset.

Later documentary evidence of the mill comes from Isaac Tulies account of the siege of Carlisle in 1644 -45. Whether the Mill referred to by Tullie occupied the same site as the earlier mentioned thirteenth century mill is not known. Tullie records that a party of horsemen rode out to Cummersdale mill for corn to feed the starving garrison within the Castle at Carlisle. In 1656 Sir Francis Howard and his son , Francis, let the mill. By 1689 Henry Brougham, of Broughton Hall, Westmoreland, owned the mill. In an agreement of that date, Henry paid George Topping of Cummersdale five pounds of current English money for the lease of Cummersdale mill. By 1701, another local man, John Forster, had decided to buy the mill. He paid £549 to Henry Brougham.

The deal was carried out through Henrys agent, John Stockdale of Penrith. By 1775 the corn mill was advertised to let in the local papers. The advert gives a description of the mills contents and workings. It was fitted with blue and grey mill stones, and also included in the tenancy was a barley mill and drying kiln. There was also other buildings and five acres of land with the mill.

The mill was re-built in 1782, the new mill was three storeys high and was fitted with three and was fitted with three pairs of stones; Blue, Grey and French.

The millstones were situated on the top floor of the building. The second floor contained a dresser for cleaning the grain, and also a bolting mill, - a large cylinder, which with little labour sorts and sacks the flour down to the ground floor of the building.

Also built alongside the new mill was a drying kiln with the capacity to dry forty bushels at a time. Mr John Forster of Carlisle was the owner of the new mill. In 1808 Mr John Dalton rented the mill. He was assisted by his father, Thomas, who had previously been the keeper of the poorhouse in Carlisle.

Ten years later tragedy struck the Dalton family when Thomas, delivering some flour to Blackwell in his horse and cart, had crossed the river Caldew at the Bay Head. During the time that elapsed while making the delivery the river had swollen in consequence of heavy rain in the hills. On his return journey the elderly Thomas attempted to cross the river in his cart, but the horse was unable to stand the violent current and was carried downstream, and both Thomas and the horse were drowned.

The letting of corn mills seems to happen every ten or twelve years, going by the adverts in the local papers. At one time two corn mills were advertised at Cummersdale, the site of one was at the bottom of the hill road on the right near the lagoon, and the other, according to an old map was sited on the bend of the river where the present mill stream out-let from the print works is today. In

Victorian times bakers were always looking for a white bread, this could never be achieved with stone ground flour. By late Victorian times the milling industry was beginning to feel the effects of modernisation. Before selling the corn mill in 1886, the Dalton family renovated the mill and its machinery, adding the new Hungarian roller system for crushing grain.

Also fitted at the same time were wind and sieve purifiers, which were designed to eliminate the brown fluff that was so objectionable in the old process of flour making. The new machinery was capable of grinding four sacks of wheat and hour, which was a considerable increase on the old system. It also had the added bonus of grinding up the shorts and seconds into fine flour.

These had previously been sold at a lower price. The newly renovated mill also now had a dual source of power, water and steam, giving a combined fifty horse power. Twenty years later (1905) the mill buildings were sold to Stead McAlpin print-works. A survey by Mr Pattinson Dalton's legal council carried out a survey. the properties to be sold were the corn mill, the two cotton mills and 39 workers cottages, Daltons council asked for £12,000 for the properties, but Mr Stead finally paid £10,000.

Also included in the sale were parcels of land and the mill stream water rights. The corn mill buildings were let to the Abbotsford Tweed mill company until 1914, they then were used by Stead McAlpin as a store for their large collection of wooden printing blocks. The buildings were finally demolished in the 1970's. It was around the corn mill that Cummersdale mills village evolved.



Cummersdale Schools

The old school house at Newby West was the earliest school in the parish, I have seen references to it being there in 1833. In Whellens history of Cumberland, 1860 he mentions that a school was at Newby for both sexes. Sadly not much exists about this early school, but in the 1870's the school was recorded as having 50 pupils. The school building was 20feet by 30feet and it was estimated that 100 pupils could be accommodated!

At one time Holme Head was part of Cummersdale parish and the British school at Holme Head accommodated a few children from Cummersdale parish. The school was owned by Fergusons who of course owned the factory at Holme Head. Because the school was privately owned none of the school logs seem to have survived. This school closed in 1884 when Morley Street school was built. school also existed at the print works from about 1846, but this was the children that worked in the factory. The children had to be at least 8 years old to work in the factory, they worked 9 hours a day and 2 hours at school. Miss Mary Ann Nichol was the schoolmistress who received 6 shillings a week salary which was paid by the printers.

The cotton mill school was started in the early 1860's and continued until 1914. This school still continued even after the new Board school opened in 1884 in High Cummersdale.

Mr Morrison was the Headmaster in 1861, but sadly he drowned in the river Caldew in 1866.

The school was mainly part timers, some worked in the mill and some were from agricultural families and when needed on the land school became second choice. Even after the school opened in High Cummersdale in 1884, and the cotton mill ceased production and closed, the school continued until about 1914. The school building was used as a Joiners shop for Stead McAlpin for many years before it was demolished in 1993.

In 1881 the school board were looking for a site for the proposed new school at High Cummersdale village. The land they favoured belonged to Colonel Sowerby Esquire, of Putteridge Park, Hertfordshire, however this didn't find favour and Colonel Sowerby's Agent wrote back to the Board suggesting they use the piece of waste land at the entrance to the village, (the common).

This suggestion was put forward to the villagers at meeting, and one objector at the meeting said if the school was built on the common he would exert his common right to dig clay from below the foundations! Whether this effected the Boards decision is not known.

The first Headmaster of the proposed new school was Mr Tomas Ridley, he was appointed in 1882 but because the new school wasn't built the cotton mill school was used as a Board School. In 1924 Mr Tom Ridley retired after 42 years' service at the school and he was succeeded by Mr Tom Amos. In his 25 years service he was to experience the 1930's depression. a diphtheria epidemic, the influx of children from the Land Settlement and the evacuee children from the North East.

The Bacon Curing factory.

A Bacon Curing Factory once existed at High Cummersdale. In the Dean and Chapter archives in Carlisle record office situated in Carlisle Castle, are the Court Baron / Court Leet books for the ancient Manor of John de Chapple, which covers some areas within Cummersdale and Caldewgate. The books tell us of previous owners of the site and properties. An entry on 13th February 1747 records a property on the site consisting of a Messuage,(a house or cottage), a barn, byre and garden. This is the area where the present church, village hall and Cummersdale House stand today. Further entries record changes of ownership in 1767, and 1822. Also by 1827 Mr John Watson had become the owner of the properties and land. When John died in 1836, he left his property at Cummersdale to his only son, Richard. John had put a proviso in his will which allowed accommodation for his wife Sibyl:

"Subject to my said wife having the use and accommodation of two dwelling rooms(provided she lives in them herself, but not otherwise) called the Bakehouse rooms."

The reference to the Bakehouse rooms suggests there could have been a Bakery at Cummersdale in the 1830's.

It wasn't until April 1859 that ownership of the properties once again changed hands. This time the new owner was Joseph Smith, the son of Joseph and Ann Smith previously of Wigton. Born in 1821, his mother was one of the McAlpins, sister of Thomas and Duncan McAlpin, two of the founders of the Stead McAlpin company.

Joseph had moved from Wigton with his mother and sister shortly after 1835 and the 1841 census records them living at the print works. Joseph mother, Ann ran the grocer's shop in the village and in the 1841 census she is recorded as a grocer and later in 1848 she is still recorded as the grocery shop owner at High Cummersdale. By 1851 Ann had given up her grocery shop to her son, Joseph, but he was still carrying out work for the printworks as well.

In the 1876/77 directory Joseph is recorded as a grocer but two years later the 1879 Slater's directory records him as a bacon curer at Cummersdale. This is the first reference to the bacon curing at Cummersdale.

The present church building and the village hall were part of the bacon curing factory and the buildings stretched back to the roadside.

1939 - 1945 In The Parish.

Leading up to the Second War, the people of the Parish and the villages together with the Parish Council were making preparations to protect themselves and their property in the event of air raids occurring in the Parish.

In September of 1938 at a Parish Council meeting air raid precautions were discussed, and a Chief Air Raid Warden for the Parish was appointed, He was Mr Bernard Overton, By 1939, many other areas in the country were at greater risk and danger than Cummersdale, and evacuation of the children from those areas became a priority and took place toward the end of 1939.

In Britain as a whole about one and a half million evacuees, which included escorts, some teachers and parents arrived at their reception areas at various locations throughout the country carried by 4,000 special trains from 75 different stations. At Carlisle Station a total of 5,848 evacuees arrived over a couple of days in September 1939. The evacuees which were mainly children were distributed to Carlisle and the surrounding parishes. Dalston had 280, at Cummersdale 36 children from Newcastle, 14 from South Shields and 18 mothers and 5 helpers accompanying them came to the village.

The children, all with labels attached and carrying their possessions in all manner of brown paper parcels, carrier bags and suitcases. They were all lined up on the

village common, and from there they were allocated to the various volunteer family homes. The ones with mothers and helpers were billeted in three empty houses, one being Cummersdale House, beside the church.

People of the parish donated furniture and other essentials to help the evacuees settle in. One of the families that arrived from the North East and was billeted in Cummerdale House recalls being there. He remembered that three family groups were in the house, and that his mother converted the lean-to greenhouse at the back of the house into a kitchen area. This particular family never returned to the North East after the war, they eventually moved to a house in the bottom village.



For more of the fascinating history of the Parish go to the link below.

www.cummersdalehistory.co.uk