

Old Hawkhill

Part 1 - Ownership of Hawkhill

Much of the north of England has been shaped by years and years of strife and warfare. From Anglo-Saxon and Viking times it had always been difficult for rulers in the south of England to maintain law and order in the north. The north-east was particularly difficult to control and there were many uprisings against the king's authority. In 1067, after paying homage to William the Conqueror, Copsig was made Earl of Northumbria but after ruling for a mere five weeks was captured and burnt to death by his enemies. Only after many punishment raids and laying waste to much of the north was order finally restored.

Although these raids ensured that the north-east of England became loyal to the king, it was not the end of violence and danger in the region. This time, however, the armies came from the north. The border between England and Scotland was a matter of dispute and many raids and skirmishes took place throughout the medieval period; the borders remained a difficult and violent place to live. The Norman kings gave important Barons and their families estates across Northumberland and Durham and many castles were built to provide protection against both hostile locals and raids from Scotland. Norham Castle, on the River Tweed, had been built in 1121; other examples included Wark, Alnwick and Morpeth.

Despite the frequent warfare, for most people life was dominated by living and working on the land. The landowners kept some of their land for their own farms, but most was given to followers to farm in return for their help in times of war and contributions of money and food. Most people's houses would have been simple, wooden structures. These small buildings were easy to build, which was important as they were often destroyed during Scottish raids.

During the 14th century life in the north-east had been badly affected by the Black Death; in 1379 almost the entire population of Newton, in the Tyne Valley, died of the plague¹. This came after a series of famines between 1315 and 1317, as well as many epidemics among animals in the 1320s. There were also changes in the climate. The weather became rainier and colder making farming in many areas much harder. As a consequence, many settlements shrank in size while others were completely deserted.

The now abandoned settlement of Hawkhill sat on the north bank of the river Aln about 3 miles downstream from Alnwick. From the early 14th century its history had been closely tied with the Grey family who owned various estates in Northumberland. Sir Thomas Grey is recorded as being heavily involved in the Scottish Wars of Independence and suffered

¹ Other places affected include Alnwick (1543 & 1590), Denwick (1665), Lesbury (1665), Berwick-on-Tweed (1568 & 1597)

significantly in the defeat of the English at Bannockburn where he was captured. For his services he had been knighted in 1301, granted 108 acres of lands at 'Howyk'², and made Constable of Norham Castle from 1319 to 1331. He died in 1344.

His son, Thomas Grey had also fought against the Scots and, in consideration of his good service, was made warden of the manor of Middleton in Coquetdale. In 1345 he was appointed Constable of Norham Castle and acquired a great deal of additional land; it is said that he 'he left his estate much better than he found it' and was most likely the builder of Heaton Castle. He died in 1369.

His son, the third generation of Thomas's, born in 1359 at Heaton Castle, Norham, was a collector of taxes for the government and when he died in 1400 records show that his estate³ included '*Hawkhill, the manor, of the same barony by knight service, annual value 10 marks.*'

In 1848, Samuel Lewis wrote⁴ '*Hawkhill, a township in the parish of Lesbury, S. division of Bambrough ward, N. division of Northumberland, 3 miles (E. by S.) from Alnwick; containing 75 inhabitants. It comprises 693 acres of land mostly in tillage, exclusively of about 20 acres of plantations and roads; and, with the exception of a few acres, is bounded on the south and west sides by the river Aln. The township is intersected from east to west by the Alnmouth and Hexham road, which divides it into two parts, the southern being of a dry soil, and the northern in nearly equal portions dry and wet; the surface of both divisions is undulated. The corn tithes have been commuted for £114 and the small tithes for £56.*'

Yet only seven years later Whellan⁵ writes that '*Hawkhill . . . consists of one farm in the occupancy of Mr Thomas Crisp*' and the Ordnance Survey records the farm at Hawkhill as, since 1888, being in the Civil Parish of Lesbury.

Records reveal that mixed farming was the general rule on the greater Howick Estate, grain crops and turnips being grown, and cattle and sheep reared. Much attention was paid to cattle feeding and fattening on the farms near Howick, and the grazing on Howick grass parks was let by auction every year. Most of the farms were leased for 21 years or a lesser term, sometimes from year to year, but a good tenant might remain much longer than was specified in his original lease. Little mercy was shown to those who fell seriously into arrears of rent: their crops, stock and implements were put up for sale. There is little doubt that the Earls Grey themselves always took a close interest in estate business. But that was not their only interest.

² As recorded in the Patent Rolls 1232–1509: these are Royal Letters Patent granting lands, titles, offices or emoluments to a subject.

³ See entry 433 in Inquisitions Post Mortem, Henry IV, Entries 400-446 - <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/inquisitions-post-mortem/vol18/pp125-144>

⁴ Extract from: A Topographical Dictionary of England comprising the several counties, cities, boroughs, corporate and market towns, parishes, and townships..... 7th Edition, by Samuel Lewis, London, 1848.

⁵ William Whellan & Co., History of Northumberland, 1855

For many years, the Howick Estate had been closely associated with the Grey family. In 1667, John Grey of Acton⁶ had inherited the estate from his elder brother. The estate then passed down through his son, John Grey, to his grandson, Henry Grey (1691-1749); both John and Henry had been born at Howick. As members of the aristocracy and sitting in the House of Lords, the family had long been involved in governance and matters of state. As statesmen, diplomats and legislators, they had long sought parliamentary reform in order to reduce the power of the Monarchy which, at this time, held near absolute executive powers. In 1745, four years before his death, Henry had been created 1st Baronet Grey of Howick.

Henry's son, Charles (1729-1807), having three older brothers, did not expect to inherit his father's titles so, with financial assistance from his father, purchased a commission and had a distinguished military career. He served in the Seven Years War, the American Wars of Independence and the French Revolutionary wars. He returned to England in 1794, was raised to the peerage as Baron Grey of Howick in 1801 and five years later was created Earl Grey.

Standing atop his monument in Newcastle city centre, Henry's grandson, Charles (1764-1845), is probably the best-known member of the family. He was a leading Whig politician becoming an MP at the age of 22 later serving as First Lord of the Admiralty and Foreign Secretary before becoming Prime Minister in 1830. He had long been a supporter of reform and steered through parliament many notable measures. These included: the Great Reform Bill of 1832, the first major step towards modern parliamentary democracy; the Factory Act of 1833 which gave more protection to children at work; the reform of the Poor Law; and the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. Scholars rank him highly among British prime ministers, averting much civil strife and enabling Victorian progress.

Earl Grey tea, created to suit the water from the well at Howick, was served by Lady Grey in London when entertaining as a political hostess. It proved so popular that she was asked if it could be sold to others. Sadly the Greys, being unbusinesslike, failed to register the trade mark. As a result they have never received a penny in royalties.

Henry, 3rd Earl Grey (1802-1894), was another active and reforming Whig politician and for a time was Secretary of State for the Colonies in the 1840s. He was the first minister to proclaim that the colonies were to be governed for their own benefit, not for the mother country, and to accord them self-government so far as was possible.

Albert, 4th Earl Grey, was Queen Victoria's first Private Secretary and a great believer in the British Empire. As an MP he was a tireless advocate of cooperation between consumers and producers, industrial profit sharing, proportional representation, church reform and temperance, establishing the Public House Trust, a network of public houses that sold non-alcoholic beverages. In 1904 he became the governor general of Canada. Although unwise investments in South Africa had left Grey little money or wealth, his

⁶ Acton near Felton, Northumberland, is another deserted village.

appointment was made possible by the generosity of his wife's aunt. However, a seasoned diplomat⁷ at that time commented ' . . . *I doubt Albert's level-headedness . . . an enormous amount of harm may be done here by his impetuous action & want of judgement'*

Despite their considerable landed property the Greys were never rich. Their lands were heavily encumbered with thousands of pounds of debts and interest payments incurred by their predecessors' political activities. These had been an annual drain on the estate which did not make huge profits. In 1870, faced with a mortgage of £200,000 and other encumbrances, the 3rd Earl Grey sold several properties for £82,000 which enabled him to discharge several debts other than the "terrible" mortgage. Although this mortgage was subsequently reduced, other debts were still being incurred and in 1906 the total of mortgages and loans stood at £283,586. By 1916 the 4th Earl Grey was in daily terror of the interest rate rising by half a percent and soon after his death in 1917 parts of the estate were sold, and subsequent sales considerably reduced the size of the once extensive estate. The 4th Earl Grey had owned 17,600 acres; the 5th Earl who died in 1963 owned about 3,000 acres.

In 1872, possibly in connection with these dire financial affairs, letters between Earl Grey and William Woodman, a solicitor from Morpeth, record the exchange of Hawkhill Farm (owned by Earl Grey) for Low Stead Farm in the neighbouring parish of Longhoughton and owned by the Duke of Northumberland, thus consolidating the Percy's holdings in Northumberland.

Part 2 - Developments at Hawkhill

Maps of 1749 and 1864 show that the original Hawkhill settlement by the river (click [here](#) to see map) had been superseded by a new and larger settlement established on the road from Alnwick to Alnmouth. Why?

During the Victorian period (1837-1901) the domestic political agenda was increasingly becoming more liberal, with moves towards gradual political reform, social reform, and the widening of the franchise. There were also unprecedented demographic changes: the population of England and Wales almost doubled from 16.8 million in 1851 to 30.5 million in 1901.

Up till 1800 Britain had been a largely rural economy marked by poverty especially where there were no industries to keep wages competitive. A system of Poor Law relief known as the Speenhamland System meant farmers could pay their workers less than a living wage, and the parish would make up the rest. The tied cottage system developed to house labourers on short annual contracts, so that there was no longer permanence in either employment or housing for the rural worker. Instead of secure employment, many labourers now became migrants in their quest for work, often in the rapidly growing larger towns and cities.

There was increasing concern, especially amongst those politicians with interests in social

⁷ The previous governor general of Canada, his brother-in-law the Earl of Minto.

reform, about the living conditions of those living in poverty and the prevalence of diseases such as cholera. In 1842, Sir Edwin Chadwick, a leading social reformer, had published a report,⁸ probably the most important 19th Century publication on social reform, that proved poor living conditions were directly linked to disease and low life expectancy. In 1843 a Royal Commission was established to inquire into *'the state of large towns and populous districts in England and Wales with reference to the causes of disease among the inhabitants, and into the best means of promoting and securing public health'*.

An 1845 report by Professor David Reid (a member of the Commission) on the state of Newcastle-on-Tyne⁹ following the cholera epidemic of 1831-32 stated *'The streets most densely populated by the humbler classes are a mass of filth where the direct rays of the sun never reach. In some of the courts I noticed heaps of filth, amounting to 20 - 50 tons which, when it rains, penetrate into of the cellar dwellings. . . . Piggeries were also pointed out to me which added their offence to the causes already mentioned. . . . and no such activity horrified me more than the attempts to keep the refuse of privies for the purposes of selling it to neighbouring farmers. The landlords and farmers encourage the practice and the authorities are reluctant to stop it for fear the poor will loose this small source of income. They forget the much larger expense of disease and death which results from the cause.'*

In 1849, writing in the London Medical Gazette¹⁰, John Snow M.D. suggested that cholera was being spread in those places where there was a *'mixture of the cholera evacuations with the water used for drinking and culinary purposes, either by permeating the ground and getting into wells, or by running along channels and sewers in to the rivers'* and that the disease spreads *'by being swallowed'*.

This growing body of research had immediate effect and led to the Public Health Act of 1848. This act was the first in a series that would improve the living and working conditions of the poorest people for the rest of the nineteenth century. Following this, local Boards of Health were set up to appoint a medical officer, with authority to build sewers, inspect homes and make provision for the supply of clean water for domestic use. Imposed on these authorities was a further duty to inspect for nuisances for which they were given the power to serve abatement notices. The Act defined a 'nuisance' as anything that would be 'a nuisance or injurious to health', for example, growing deposits of refuse and overcrowding in homes.

The cholera epidemic of 1831-32 was followed by a second in 1848-49, this time affecting Alnwick where 136 people died. In October 1849 about one-tenth of the Alnwick rate payers wrote to the General Board of Health requesting that a Superintending Inspector *'visit the said townships, and to make inquiry and examination with respect thereto, with a view to the application of the said Public Health Act 1848 to the township of Alnwick, or to*

⁸ Enquiry into the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain, published 1842

⁹ Report on the state of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and other towns. HMSO, London, 1845

¹⁰ On the pathology and mode of communication of cholera. London Med. Gazette, vol. 44, Nov. 2, 1849

the whole union of Alnwick'. The 'Alnwick Poor Law Union' had been formed in 1836 and included 62 townships in Northumberland from Embleton in the north to Amble in the south. The final report covered the whole of this area and included the parishes of Lesbury, Alnmouth, Shilbottle, Longhoughton and the township of Hawkhill.

In his report¹¹, Robert Rawlinson, the Superintending Inspector, stated that most deaths occurred where living conditions were poor in the extreme with '*. . . dung-heaps directly before windows . . . great deficiencies of water . . . and open surface drains bringing the foul water from many families'*. He made a significant number of recommendations for improvements in Alnwick including the construction of a reservoir, the re-siting of slaughterhouses, and how drains should be constructed.

He also wrote that many of the outlying villages would benefit from a well-directed system of sewerage, a supply of water, and by the supervision of a local Board of Health. Of Alnmouth he said, '*the houses are in general very filthy, large accumulations of filth are kept in the back lanes . . . but that only six cases (of nuisance) required to be dealt with under the Act'*.

Of Newton-by-the-Sea he said, '*filth and other refuse have accumulated in the square, till it is several feet above the level of the foundations of the houses so that in wet weather the cottages in the south-west corner are rendered almost uninhabitable'*.

Of Boulmer he said, '*In August last year the cholera broke out and 8 or 9 deaths occurred which I attribute, in a great measure, to the unwholesome condition of the dwellings from a want of proper ventilation'*.

Of Embleton he reported, '*Twenty-four cottages have been built in the village within the last three years, and yet there is not a single privy or ashpit'*. Of a lodging house he reported that '*one room had no window and the door had to be left constantly open to prevent suffocation from the smoke of the fire'*.

Of Lesbury he said, '*It is inhabited by farmers and their labourers. Several of the cottages have lately been rebuilt, and it does not appear from the reports of the officers that many cases of nuisances were found.*

There are no references to Hawkhill in Rawlinson's report yet fourteen years later maps show (click [here](#)) that a substantial settlement exists on the Alnwick to Alnmouth road. Had Henry, 3rd Earl Grey, mindful of the requirements of the 1848 Public Health Act, re-housed his labourers and tenant farmers and provided them with clean, piped drinking water and a sewage and waste disposal system.

¹¹ Preliminary Inquiry into the Sewerage, Drainage, Supply of Water and Sanitary Condition of Alnwick & Canongate. HMSO London, 1850

Rawlinson ends his report by writing extensively about the use of earthenware 'drain-tiles' to conduct '*all liquid, solid, and semisolid refuse to some common outlet or reservoir*' and concludes by stating '*Drain-tiles have of late been extensively made and used in the district by the Duke of Northumberland, by Earl Grey, and also by others of the local landed proprietors.*' Is this where the origins of the current Hawkhill are to be found?

Eighteen years after Rawlinson's report was published there were still many issues surrounding sanitation and sewerage. Reporting to the Alnwick Union Workhouse Committee in December 1868,¹² Mr George Hawkes, Police Superintendent, stated that the cottages at Hawkhill had been '*. . . . inspected twice during the last ten days. The drains had been opened and the ash-pits and privies thoroughly cleaned out . . . and the occupiers requested to use plenty of quick lime.*' Perhaps these developments were not as immediately successful as originally hoped.

Further research needed

¹² Alnwick Mercury, Saturday 16 January, 1869

References

Part 1 - Ownership

These notes have been produced with reference to British History Online, which maintains many indexes about the Greys, and indexes to the estate's archives which are held by Durham University Library, Archives and Special Collections.

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Part 2 - Developments at Hawkhill

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