

A HISTORY OF KIRKBY FLEETHAM

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KIRKBY FLEETHAM

Despite its proximity to the busy A1, a mile to its west, Kirkby Fleetham, four miles north-east of Bedale, is one of the most tranquil villages in North Yorkshire. The shingle-edged River Swale flows past to its east.

The present settlement, with its older houses located around three sides of the ancient green, was originally two separate villages – Fleetham, or Fletham, a Saxon settlement and Kirkby, or Cherchebi, of Danish origin. Both were well established before the Norman Conquest of 1066 and were referred to as two separate places in the Domesday Book of 1086 and as recently as the reign of George IV in the 1820's. Such a juxtaposition of a Viking and a Saxon settlement less than a mile apart was common in this part of the country.

Kirkby translates as '*settlement by the church*' and Fleetham as '*settlement by the pool or stream*'. Although no church is mentioned at Kirkby in the Domesday Book, both a church and a priest are recorded at Fleetham. It is probable that the church in question was one erected at Kirkby by Christian Danes. If there ever was a church in Fleetham village it is not mentioned as such after the Domesday Book reference, although there is an early 14th century record of the church at Kirkby Fleetham, probably again meaning the one in Kirkby. There had been Christians in the area around Catterick, and almost certainly in Fleetham, since the missionary Paulinus had baptised thousands of people along the River Swale during the early 7th century.

Whatever church existed in Kirkby before 1066 was rebuilt by the Normans, evidence of which can be seen today at the north and south doors of St Mary's church. Further rebuilding, including the tower, font, south side of the nave and the effigy of a knight dressed in mail armour and carrying both sword and shield, took place during the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries. This knight, one of the Stapletons, was a Knight Templar, a member of an organisation which was part-military, part-religious which played a significant role in protecting pilgrims during the Crusades. St Mary's Church was restored and the chancel completely rebuilt between 1871 and 1872 at a cost of £2,000. An organ built by Coacher and Co of Huddersfield and costing £250 was installed in 1880.

A little-known and lengthy 19th century poem mentioning this church and an animal, which must have wished it had never ventured near it, has the grand title, '*An address to a dead cat which had fallen from the ivy tree that runs up*

the tower of Kirkby Fleetham church, Yorkshire, up which it is supposed it had climbed after birds’.

It begins:

‘Wert thou by mad ambition fired, Or wert by sensual hopes inspired? But by whatever thou on wert led It matters not, life’s spark is fled.

I ween the fluttering tribe above In airy tumult won thy love, And branch by branch their height to gain Thou climbdst, unconsciously and vain’

Needless to say, the luckless cat scared the birds away and found itself marooned high up the tower. Then the wind intervened!

‘A blast most rude the branches tossed, Thy hold exhausted nature lost, And down to earth impetuous sent, In cries and groans thy life was spent’.

Both before and after William 1’s conquest of England, a Saxon called Eldred held the manor of Kirkby. His granddaughter, Godareda, was subsequently mistress of Kirkby for a time. The next known tenant, in 1283, was William Giffard. For a long period until 1514, the tenure of Kirkby was in the hands of the Stapleton family who also had land in Fleetham. Then the owner of the estate, Sir Thomas Metham, leased Kirkby for 41 years to William and Elizabeth Conyers but soon afterward he granted another lease for the same land to William Belforth who, at some point, moved into the manor house. There is no mention of where the Conyers went but in 1529 Belforth was complaining that Elizabeth Conyers and 12 of her friends had ‘*assembled unlawfully*’ at his home in Kirkby and driven him from it. Having thus evicted Belforth, Mistress Conyers moved back into the house. The explanation for this strange state of affairs appears to be that after William Conyers died, Belforth persuaded Sir Thomas Metham to lease Kirkby to him so that Elizabeth would, he believed, marry him. Whatever the eventual outcome of the feud, Metham’s son, another Thomas, sold the manor of Kirkby in 1600.

The purchaser was Leonard Smelt, whose family was to own Kirkby for the next 140 years. His son Mathew inherited the estate in 1627 and left it in turn to his own son, another Leonard, who died in 1690. Richard Smelt bought part of the manor of Fleetham from William and George Darcy in 1670 when the estates were joined for the first time as the manor of Kirkby Fleetham. The next owner, another Leonard, described as being of ‘Kirkby Fleetham’, became Member of Parliament for Northallerton in 1713. He became a wealthy Clerk of the Ordnance in the 1720’s and 30s with a London residence at the prestigious, newly-built 21 Upper Grosvenor Street. When he died in

1740, the Northallerton seat in Parliament was next occupied until 1745 by his brother, William, from Bedale. It is his son, Leonard, baptised at Kirkby Fleetham on 2 May 1725, who made his mark on the wider world.

In 1739, as a 13 year old, he was found a post as a cadet gunner in the Tower of London. In the drawing office there, he was taught by some of the best military engineers and draughtsmen of the day. In 1741, he spent a short time in Portsmouth before returning to the Tower later the same year as a practitioner engineer and assistant clerk to Britain's chief engineer, John Armstrong. Although Leonard had been given a helping hand onto the ladder of success and some useful introductions by his Uncle Leonard, there is no doubt that he grasped every opportunity that came his way and impressed his employers with his skills and ambition.

By 1743, and still only 18 years old but earning a tidy £80 a year, he was sent to Flanders, an area covering parts of modern France, Belgium and the Netherlands. As well as receiving a further salary increase, during his two years on the European mainland he fought at the battles of Dettingen and Fontenoy. In 1748, he assisted for two years on the survey of the military road, now the B6318 between Carlisle and Newcastle, and in 1750 took charge of its reconstruction. The need for such roadworks had been realised during Bonnie Prince Charlie's rebellion of 1745 when the road was so bad that King George II's General Wade found it impossible to move his army quickly from east to west to intercept the Jacobites as they moved south from Scotland. In 1750, Smelt took over control of the entire project from Douglas Campbell, whose sister Jane he had earlier married.

By that time, one of Britain's most important overseas bases, because of the enormous fish stocks in the water around it, was Newfoundland, off the east coast of North America. Smelt was sent there, to the settlement of Placentia, to write a full report on its defences. It would be an understatement to record that he did not think much of them. He wrote that they suffered from '*every defect of design*'.

Smelt was one member of the Corps of Engineers who were not at all happy with their conditions of service and urged the Duke of Cumberland to have them improved. Greatest among their grievances was the fact that, despite working with the military, they were not given army ranks, a situation which was remedied in 1757 when Smelt became a captain. He resigned from the corps a year later while serving as chief engineer in Plymouth. He had inherited property from his father in 1755.

It is not clear whether he spent much or any time in the north but, in 1770, he had a meeting which was to change his life when his neighbour, Robert D'Arcy, 4th Earl of Holderness, introduced him to King George III. The

monarch took an instant liking to Smelt, whose conversation he enjoyed immensely, and within the year he had appointed him sub-governor, deputy tutor in modern terminology, to his two oldest sons, George, Prince of Wales, aged 12, and Frederick, Duke of York, 11. Smelt later claimed that he neither enjoyed nor was up to his sub-governor's duties. In 1771, he offered his resignation, which King George refused to accept, so he continued in post until 1776. From 1774, he was in daily charge of the young men, working with them in the Dutch House, their own establishment, from 7am until 8pm, at which time they were allowed to join their parents for two hours. He impressed the princes with his artistic skills, his knowledge of literature and art and must have recounted exciting tales of his experiences as an engineer. Both young men were fascinated by everything military. Frederick grew up to become the 'Grand Old Duke of York' of nursery rhyme fame. Smelt was so close to Prince George that for a long time afterwards he had dinner with him three times every week.

Declining a pension, Smelt was instead granted an allowance from the king who, in 1787, also gave him a house in Kew and visited him there on several occasions. The two men continued to enjoy each other's company to the extent that Smelt was described as 'perhaps the man in the world most to the king's taste of any person outside his own family'.

Following the death of his wife in 1790, Leonard Smelt retired to his home in Langton, in North Yorkshire, where he died on September 2, 1800.

Smelt's Charity is still administered in Kirkby Fleetham, money to help the poor of the village having originally been raised from the rent of 19 acres of land, £17 15 shillings in 1903, left for the purpose by the first Leonard Smelt.

After the long tenure of the Smelts, Kirkby was next owned by John Aislabie, who left the estate to his daughter, Mrs William Lawrence, and her husband. The estate stayed in the family until 1845 when a Miss Lawrence died and left it to a relative, Mr H E Waller, from whom it was bought in 1889 by Edward Courage. By 1914, it was in the possession of Mr E H Courage whose memorial is the 1948 furnishing of St Mary's south chapel.

The original village of Kirkby was either deserted or destroyed centuries ago and almost nothing of it remains today. Also unknown are the dates of the building of the first Kirkby Hall and of its successors. In recent times, the hall has been a hotel and a place of retreat but has now become, once again, a family home.

After the Norman Conquest, the tenure of Fleetham, which was eventually two manors, was taken from the Saxon tenants Uchtred and Gamul and given to the Norman Count Odo of Penthièvre, Chamberlain to the Earl of

Richmond. By 1301, Henry le Scrope owned part of Fleetham and was responsible for building what used to be called the Old Hall, the remains of which are now scheduled. In 1914, it was described as:

'The dwelling place which Henry le Scrope obtained licence to crenellate in 1314. These remains consist of a flat raised platform, roughly circular and about 140 feet in diameter. On the north a moat separates this portion from an outwork which would have formed the approach to the village. On the west also the moat is well defined and separates the central portion from a piece of raised ground lying immediately to the west. On the south and east sides there are no traces of moat or outworks, the low-lying ground probably forming a natural swamp in that direction. On the north side of the central mound remain about 45ft of masonry, ten to 15ft in height, which formed part of the external wall of the inner fortifications. This is built of moderate-sized rubble, the facing of which has been entirely removed. To the east of this, on the opposite side of the moat, is a low portion of similar walling about 65ft in length. The remains are too fragmentary as to give an idea as to the date or plan of the building'.

A more recent description suggests that the site was originally a motte and bailey castle and that the moat was very steep. One of the depressions could be the remains of a fish pond.

Fleetham had its own mill, mentioned in the 17th Century and operated by water from Mill Beck. It is now a private house. Other land in and around the village was in the possession of Marrick Priory.

The village shop and post office was formerly the Three Tuns Inn and in 1914 there was a brewery at the Lane Ends, the junction of Low Street and a lane running west from the village.

A local directory of 1859 explains that, in 1732, there stood near Kirkby Fleetham church a farmhouse which had once been an inn – the last remaining vestige of the ancient lost village of Kirkby. The directory then goes on to mention some of the best known properties in Kirkby Fleetham:

'Kirkby Fleetham Hall is a neat mansion, pleasantly situated close to the church and consists of a centre and two wings, the latter being much more recent than the former. In front of the house some fish ponds are formed by a clear stream and there are some fine trees in the grounds. This hall and the principal estate in the parish belonged to the late Mrs Lawrence of Studley, near Ripon, but were purchased a few years ago by H E Waller esq. The mansion is now the seat of Thomas Bolland Esq.

Fleetham Lodge, situated one mile west of the village, is the seat of John Conyers Hudson Esq. It is a good residence and has been improved by its present owner. In a room in this house was deposited for a few days the headless body of Lord Derwentwater, who was executed for treason on Tower Hill in 1716, aged 27, and was permitted to be buried at Dilston, in Northumberland. There is an ancient fish pond in the grounds as well as a mound or hill, of which it is uncertain whether it was thrown up by the Romans or during the time of Cromwell.

Green Gate House, a neat building erected about fifty years ago, is the property and residence of Mr John Fryer senior.

Friars's Garth, now in the occupation of Mr Christopher Pybus, is supposed to be the site of a religious house, of which nothing is known. Foundations of buildings have been found about the house and the ground is very uneven. The farm may have belonged to some monastery and the monks probably had a cell or grange. Hook House Farm is now occupied by Mr Pybus, West Low Field House by Mr Joseph Ingledew, North Low Field House by Mr Robert Whitton and South Low Field House by Mr William Poole'.

Until comparatively recently, in historical terms, most villages were largely self-contained. Today, Kirkby Fleetham has a post office/village shop and a primary school. In 1872, along with all its farmers, tradesmen in the village included two joiners, a cattle jobber, a miller, a grocer and gardener, two tailors, a veterinary surgeon, market gardener, two shoemakers, a brewer, two blacksmiths and two publicans.

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