

---

**A new market centre for the Upper Eden Valley**

---

The grant of a market charter to Kirkby Stephen in 1353, was a significant step in the development of the small agricultural hamlet into a market centre of traders and craftsmen as well as farmers. This grant was made during a period of severe economic upheaval when death, devastation and disease disrupted life in the area. Yet despite all these hazards, and despite a rival market less than five miles away, Kirkby's market survived, unlike some others in North Western England. To understand these changes it is necessary to look at the village in its Cumbrian context during the fourteenth century. The problem, however, is to find contemporary sources, for unlike parts of southern and central England, there are very few surviving documents, nor is there much pictorial evidence in the form of manuscripts or carvings. Many local documents were destroyed or lost through fire, pillage or flood during the Scottish incursions, when the main administrative centres, such as the castles of Carlisle, Appleby, Brough and Hartley, together with Carlisle cathedral and many churches were devastated or neglected.

The problem is exacerbated if one wants to find details of the lives of the ordinary villager at a period when few people were literate: few church decorations or murals survive. A source like the splendid cartoons of the Lanercost Cartulary, which illustrate both the peasant and cleric of Cumbria in the late medieval period would be ideal, but unfortunately the drawings cannot be dated and are unlikely to be earlier than the 15th century.<sup>1</sup> The choir of Carlisle cathedral, rebuilt in the 14th century under Bishop Welton, is another potential source with its richly carved misericords and pillar capitals. However, although the pillars depict the agricultural year, the suspicion that they were not illustrating local conditions is aroused when that for September is found to show the harvesting of grapes: a highly unlikely task in the 14th century given the recorded number of harvest failures of rye and oats,

---

**A new market centre for the Upper Eden Valley**

---

accompanied by famine and high corn prices. The misericords are also a disappointment as a view of village life: there are a few people depicted in 14th century dress suffering unpleasant torments, but the bulk of the carvings are of the green man, a reminder perhaps that the disasters of the century brought the old magical beliefs to the fore.<sup>2</sup>

Documentary records, therefore, form the basis of this description of Cumbria despite the fact that they are sparse, sporadic and incomplete. So far it has proved impossible to find the original grant of Kirkby Stephen church to St Mary's Priory, York, and so even the dedication of the church remains unknown.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately the bishops' registers for the period [translated by Professor RL.Storey]. give a picture of the bishops as both ecclesiastical and political leaders. for as the king's representatives in the north. they attended parliament, led their men into battle, and supervised the border defences. They collected taxes for both the crown and the papacy, and organised their clergy and the church courts.

The other documents of the period are the state papers: these have survived because they were lodged in London. They include the Charter Rolls [CR] in which Kirkby's first market charter is recorded; [the original has disappeared], the Inquisitions Post Mortem [IPM] with the Clifford properties in Kirkby Stephen listed in 1315, and 1327, and the Inquisitions Miscellaneous [IM].<sup>4</sup> Tax lists for the lay subsidies and the Poll taxes have also been used.<sup>5</sup>

By using a combination of sources, it has been possible to detect, through the haze of the past 650 years, an odd glimpse or two of the life in 14th century Kirkby Stephen. Three aspects will be discussed: first the church and its vicar, secondly the villagers as revealed by the tax lists, and thirdly the manor and its farmlands. Separately they beg more questions than they answer, but together, they give some insight into the type of settlement found in the Upper Eden in 1353. The study will begin with a brief

---

**A new market centre for the Upper Eden Valley**

---

summary of the general problems found in 14th century Cumbria, for, remote though it was, Kirkby could not escape from the general lawlessness, disease and disasters of the period.

**Background.**

Three major problems disrupted life in fourteenth century Cumbria: first political unrest in the border counties of Scotland and England continued for most of the century, secondly there were several periods of harvest failure, which, coupled with the endemic cattle and sheep disease, led to malnutrition and famine. Thirdly in 1349 the Black Death reached the north, the first of several outbreaks of plague which occurred over the next forty years.

**Lawlessness**

Edward's I's confrontational policy towards the Scots inflamed the border regions from the last decade of the 13th century, with the result that in the following century, there was little peace even in the official periods of truce. Devastation by the Scottish armies and bands of raiders caused terror and havoc for most of the 14th century. Frequent petitions to the king mention the burning, looting and the driving away of beasts [500 were taken from Brough in 1315] by the Scottish invaders. Between 1315 and 1324. Tebay was destroyed, parts of Appleby, Dufton and Kirkby Stephen were burnt, Winton mill was destroyed and Hartley castle damaged.<sup>6</sup> An inventory of Brough in 1315 lists 24 tofts [small holdings] and ten vaccaries [large cattle farms] all burnt. Andrew de Harcla, the owner of Hartley castle and the king's commander of the north, who attempted to calm the situation by coming to an agreement with the Scots, was executed for treason in 1323, although the king himself negotiated a truce the following year.

In 1330 the northerners were still petitioning the crown, complaining of poverty after thirty-four years of continuous war. Surprisingly, the king was sympathetic and in