

ART. IX.—*The old port of Sandsfield.* By W. T. McINTIRE, F.S.A.

THE upper expanse of the great estuary of the Solway, with its river mouths, its violent tides, its ever shifting shoals and sandbanks and its changing channels, provides a subject of never failing interest to the student of its hydrographical history. Perhaps no part of that history is more remarkable than that which relates the story of the perpetual struggle for the mastery between the creative forces leading to the growth of new land upon the coastline and the destructive assaults of the sea waves. Throughout the course of recorded history victory, in this eastern portion of the Solway, seems to have declared itself upon the side of the land. The silt brought down by the Eden, the Esk and the Leven has continually added new acres to the Solway shore and carried the contour line of the coast ever westwards at the expense of the sea. A comparison of old maps of the Solway* with that of the latest Ordnance Survey, even after allowances have been made for possible inaccuracies of the old geographers, seems to show that since the sixteenth century there has been an eastward extension of the land averaging more than two miles. Leland's statement that in Roman times the Esk may have been navigable as far as Netherby and that "men alyue have sene rynges and staples yn the

* Among the maps to which reference is made above are the remarkably accurate "platt" prepared for the commissioners who settled the Border Line between England and Scotland in 1552; Aglionby's "platt" of 1590; Morden's map in Camden's *Brittania*; Timothy Pont's map of Annandale (1608); Speed's map of 1611; Bleau's map; Crawford's map of 1832, etc. The earliest map in which Sandsfield is named appears to be that illustrating Hutchinson's *History of Cumberland* (1794).

walles as yt had bene stays or holdes for shyppes," may have been an exaggeration, but there is abundance of other evidence of changes which have taken place in the conformation of the coast. Thus, the Leven or Line, which at one time mouthed into the Solway a short distance from the mouth of the Esk, now joins its waters with those of that river two miles from the coast; Rockcliffe marsh has become a promontory stretching out a long distance into the Solway; the minister of Gretna, who compiled the description of that parish in the new *Statistical Account* of 1834, wrote: "a large tract of marsh land of a lively green has been formed and is daily increasing."* Coupled with these evidences of the continuous advance of the coast line is Hutchinson's statement, to which further reference will be made later, that in his day (1794) ships of eighty tons could navigate the Eden as far as Rockcliffe.

As a consequence of this change in the contour of the shore line, many places formerly upon the coast or near it found themselves, if not actually transformed into inland villages, at all events deprived of their access to the sea owing to the silting up of their channels of communication with the Solway. Such a place was Sandsfield, now a small hamlet near the bank of the Eden opposite Rockcliffe, but formerly the thriving port of the city of Carlisle.

The name of Sandsfield appears to be one of comparatively modern growth, but situated near the spot where the Powborough beck, after passing through the parish of Burgh, falls into the Eden, the place and its immediate neighbourhood are referred to in medieval documents as Polleburc or Polleburgh. The first place-name element of this word is the O.E. *pol*, "a pool or sluggish stream," a word which in its later form of "pow" is applied to many small becks mouthed into the Solway,

* See Neilson, *Annals of the Solway*, in *Transactions of the Glasgow Arch. Soc.*, New Series, iii, Part 11, 256.

both on the Cumberland and Scottish sides of that estuary. The second element "burgh" or "borough" is apparently derived from the name of the parish of Burgh-by-Sands in which the stream has its birth.

The earliest mentions of this district of the Powborough refer to its value rather as a fishery than as a port and are concerned with the taking of salmon in the Eden. Between the years 1167 and 1203, Hugh de Morevill lord of the barony of Burgh, of which the district was then considered a member, granted the Monks of Holm Cultram abbey "one net at Polleburc and other places on the Eden, in common with the tenantry of Burgh, and one booth and a place for drying nets with all easements for the fishery" (*Reg. Holm Cultram*, p. 7). This grant was supplemented, about 1234, by Simon de Sabulonibus (Sandys), who gave Holm Cultram a plot of land 50 feet long and 30 feet broad "at Polleburgh on the banks of the Poll which falls into the marsh at Burgh and into the Eden at a place near the Polle on the west, where the monks may build a house. Also at the northern end of the building towards Burgh, on land nearer the Polle, a plot of four feet broad and of the same length, for spreading out a net to dry" (*ibid.*, p. 8).

Meanwhile, there had been a controversy with regard to the tithes of the fishery between the abbey and Sir Gilbert de Feritate, rector of the church of Bowness and a member of the powerful Le Brun or de Feritate family, now for the time lords of Beaumont in succession to the barons of Burgh until about 1380, when Beaumont was re-united with Burgh after purchase by the Dacres. In the matter of the dispute concerning the fisheries, it was finally agreed, on the authority of the bishop in the chapter of Carlisle, with regard to the tithes payable for the fishery of one standing net (*rete stativum*), that Sir Gilbert should allow the abbey to receive all tithes of fishing both of this (net) and wherever the parishioners of Burgh fished on the

shore of the Eden, and Sir Gilbert should receive all tithes of fishery from his own parishioners of Bowness and Drumburgh, whenever they fished, except at Polleburgh (*ibid.*, p. 9).

It was not merely the richness of its salmon fishery, however, that contributed to the significance of this strip of the Solway coast at the foot of the Powborough; it also occupied an important position as guarding the English end of the great Solway ford known as the Sandwath or Dornock wath. In times of peace there must have been frequent passings to and fro over the Solway of travellers between England and Scotland. We know that Scotsmen coming into England in the 14th century were compelled to pay a toll, for on November 18th, 1341, King Edward III appointed Richard de Denton to enquire into the complaint of William de Bohun, earl of Northampton, constable of England, that his men of Annandale coming as of old by the Solway to sell their goods at the fairs and markets of Carlisle, were hindered and unduly taxed by the deputy keeper of the Solway (*Transactions*, N.S., xxxix, 168). There is also a petition, dated 1307, to Edward II by a man who wishes to farm the toll between Soulwadz (the Sulewath or Solway ford) and Arthuret (Bain's *Cal.*, iii, 31).

It seems obvious that some place on or near the future site of Sandsfield must have been a station where this toll was exacted from travellers who came from Scotland into Cumberland by the Sandwath.

The place must also have been of considerable military importance in wartime for the protection of the English shore from the raids of Scottish invaders. It is recorded that many of the Scottish armies which made incursions into England did so in three divisions, each making use of a separate ford over the Solway—the Sulewath, the Sandwath and the Annan or Stonywath. This, for instance, was the course adopted by the Scots who

forestalling Edward I's invasion of Scotland by the eastern march, crossed the Solway in 1296 and made a determined but abortive attack upon Carlisle. It was moreover by the Sandwath, as the Lanercost chronicle informs us, that the English force which invaded Scotland in 1333 returned after fighting a successful minor engagement at Dornock (*Transactions*, N.S., xxxix, 162-3).

It is also to be remembered that King Edward I's death in 1307 took place while he was marshalling his army on Burgh marsh, preparatory to invading Scotland by the adjacent Solway fords, and that the monument which marks the site where he is supposed to have pitched his tent is within easy reach of the Powborough or Sandsfield. An interesting reminder of the important part played in the Edwardian wars by this place at the mouth of the Powborough was the discovery at Sandsfield in 1845 of a hoard of silver coins, some of them of Edward I and Edward III (see the late Chancellor Ferguson in *Transactions*, O.S. viii, 380). These coins now in the Museum at Tullie House, Carlisle, taken in conjunction with the great Beaumont hoard, deposited about 1370 and discovered in 1884 (*ibid.*, 377), afford striking evidence of the importance of Sandsfield and the neighbouring Beaumont, on the direct route to Carlisle, in Edwardian times. It does not seem unreasonable to suppose that the site of the future Sandsfield, accessible as it was for small ships at high tides may have developed into a port for the supply of munitions for the armies which from time to time throughout the 14th century assembled in the neighbourhood of the Sandwath.

There is no mention, however, of Sandsfield by name in the interesting report upon Cumberland ports and shipping made by the commissioners, appointed by Royal Warrant in 1565, to investigate the condition of the Cumberland harbours (see P. H. Fox in *Transactions*, N.S. xxi, 74-80). The suggestion that the "Powsfoote," mentioned by the

commissioners is Powborough on the Eden is confuted by the fact that the ports of Cumberland are taken in order from the north to the south and that "Powsfoote" comes last on the list after Whitehaven. It is stated moreover to be "of the Inheritance of Anthony Huddlston, Esq." The Powsfoot to which reference is made in the report must therefore be a long way south from the Powborough. There is a stream, the Pow, which falls into the sea near Whitehaven, giving its name to Pow Street in that town, but the mention of the name of Hudleston in connection with Powsfoot would imply that the port was in the Millom neighbourhood. It is possible that Polleburgh was one of the ports thus mentioned collectively in the report:—

"Item, There is dyvers and sundrye fishermen inhabiting in severall other towns and villages more distante from the Sea, which hath small Boates of the burden of one Tunne or thereabouts, occupied by iiii or vi men onely in fishing of herrings and killinge (cod). And doth haunte the said Crekes or having But doth load at severall other places at their libertie alongst the Sea Coaste."

An event which probably laid the foundation of the prosperity of Sandsfield as a port took place in 1721, when Thomas Pattinson, John Hicks and Henry Orme, of the city of Carlisle, procured an act of parliament to deepen, cleanse, clear and more perfectly make navigable the river Eden from Ellenfoot to Bank End, and to keep the same clean, and at their own proper costs and charges, and for the great expense attending such an undertaking, they were allowed for thirty-one years a certain duty upon coals, lime, etc. (Hutchinson, *History of Cumberland*, II, 522).

Sandsfield became the port of Carlisle, and until the construction of the ship canal and the usurpation of its title by Fisher's Cross, was known as "Port Carlisle." In 1794 Hutchinson was able to write:—"The river Eden

is navigable at spring tides for vessels of 80 tons far as Rockliff. The district or extent of the port of Carlisle, which is the mother port (under which is Rockliff, Sandsfield, Sarkfoot, Bowness, etc.), is from Bankend near Maryport to Bankend at the extremity of the parish (Rockcliffe) on the south-east, as the river cannot be navigated further up but by boats or small sloops" (*ibid.*, p. 526). To his description of Beaumont he adds a note by Houseman:—"Sandsfield is a small port, at which are imported considerable quantities of fir timber, iron, flax, tar, rice and merchant goods. The export is small, a little wheat, butter, alabaster, etc." (*Transactions*, N.S. xxxix, 162). Elsewhere Hutchinson refers to the fact that among the few good roads leading out of Carlisle was that connecting the city with Sandsfield. To his account of Carlisle he appends a few statistics with regard to the annual imports to and exports from Sandsfield. Though incomplete, his figures are of interest:—

Years.	Quantity of tons imported.	Quantity of tons exported.
1733	—	27
1734	154	—
1735	250	—
1736	290	—
1737	120	—
1738	144	—
1739	110	—
1765	210	25
1766	440	56
1767	189	—
1768	250	30
1769	590	67
1770	660	44
1780	180	72
1781	187	30
1782	154	80

Years.	Quantity of tons imported.	Quantity of tons exported.
1791	1367	144
1792	2683	116
1793	906	159
1794	486	50

These details, Hutchinson explains, were extracted from the custom house books, where blanks occurred these books were not forthcoming. It will be noticed that both exports and imports were subject to marked fluctuation. The smallness of the amount of trade in the earlier years covered by the statistics is the reflection of the depressed state of Carlisle at the beginning of the period. The mention of flax among the imports is of interest as a reminder of the spinning of linen yarn which was a prominent home industry in the Burgh and Beaumont district (see Lonsdale, *Cumberland Worthies*, vi, 182).

In 1794, Hutchinson tells us, the importations "principally consisted of deals, tar, staves, rum, etc., and the exportations of grain, potatoes, oak bark, oatmeal, flour, timber, lead, freestone, alabaster, British barrel staves, etc." (*History of Cumberland*, II, 681).

The prosperity of the port of Sandsfield received a rude set-back—one from which perhaps it never really recovered—as a consequence of the terrible storm which devastated the coasts of the Solway on January 24th, 1796. On this occasion all the Solway ports suffered serious damage, and according to the *Cumberland Pacquet*, 'At Sandsfield, a family had much difficulty to get out of their house and a great part of their furniture was lost. At Rockcliffe, several houses in the lower part of the village were swept away and their families rendered destitute. At Skinburness, the hotel so much resorted to in the sea bathing season was swept away: but it is now repaired.' Other damage done was the destruction of stores and livestock at Beaumont, Burgh and Bowness.

Despite this disaster and a dwindling amount of commerce, Sandside was still for many years employed as a port. Like other Solway ports it acquired an evil reputation as a resort of smugglers. Robert Anderson, "the Cumberland Bard," who had a wide circle of acquaintances in the district gives us a lively picture of the motley crowd to be seen in the Sandsfield hostelry in his poem "Bruff Reaces," written upon the occasion of the holding of that meeting upon the death of the lord of the barony of Burgh in 1804:—

Leyke pez in a pot neist to Sandsfield they capert,

* * * * *

There were smugglers, excisemen, horse cowpers an'
parsons

Sat higglety-pigglety—aw far'd aleyke—

Then mowdy-warp Jemmy—Aw man it was funny

He meyde them aw laugh, when he stuck in a creyke.

There was lasses frae Wigton an Worton an Banton:

Some of them gat sweethearts, while others gat neane;

An bairns yet unbworn 'll oft hear o' Bruff Reaces

For ne'er mun we see sec a meetin' ageane.

We have early mentions of the relations between Sandsfield and the Solway smugglers, for, in 1724, the port conjointly with Dumfries, Whitehaven and Workington sent representatives to a meeting held at Wigton to consider improved measures for the suppression of the contraband trade. It was resolved that two well-armed, well-manned sloops should be provided, fitted both for sailing and rowing, to be stationed respectively at Silloth and Annan Waterfoot to command the open channel of the Solway, whilst smaller boats in the service should be employed along the shore. The cost of the maintenance of these sloops was estimated at £180 for the first and £130 in succeeding years (see J. Maxwell Wood, *Smuggling in the Solway*, p. 115). Of the possible identification of Sandsfield with the "Father Cracken-thorp's inn" of Sir Walter Scott's *Redgauntlet* and its

association with smuggling adventurers, mention is made in *Transactions*, N.S. xxxix, 162.

Even after the construction of the ship canal from Fisher's Cross to Carlisle in 1819, Sandsfield still found employment as a port and is thus described in Parson and White's *Directory for Cumberland* in 1829:—"The port of Carlisle extends along the coast from the river Sark (which divides Cumberland from Scotland) along the south side of the Solway Firth to Bank End, near Maryport. It enjoys but very little foreign business, for it has no bonding warehouses and large vessels cannot discharge their cargoes nearer to Carlisle than Fisher's Cross, a distance of 12 miles W. of the city, but vessels of less than 100 tons can navigate the canal, and the Eden is navigable for vessels of 60 tons as far as Sandsfield under Rockcliffe, eight miles N.W. of Carlisle. Though it was anciently the chief port of Carlisle, the public revenue does not now derive any benefit from it, for its expenditure exceeds the amount of its receipts—the foreign commerce of the County being now nearly all confined to the port of Whitehaven where there are spacious landing warehouses. The importations consist principally of timber, iron, slates, salt, etc., and the exportations of grain, potatoes, oak bark, meal, flour, herrings, alabaster, freestone, lead, staves, etc. The cotton wool manufactured here is brought chiefly from Liverpool where a great part of it is returned in a manufactured state for exportation. The custom house is a small building situated near Scotch Street."

Such a place was Sandsfield in the declining years of its commercial activity. Stress of circumstances compelled the little port to yield supremacy to Port Carlisle even as in turn Port Carlisle was superseded by Silloth about 1858. Perhaps, had the methods of clearing and deepening the Solway channels urged in 1838 by that remarkable self-taught scientist and economist John Rooke of Akehead, found acceptance with the public, Sandsfield might have

enjoyed a new lease of life as a port (see Lonsdale, *Cumberland Worthies*, III, 260-264).

As it was, for many years afterwards cargoes were occasionally landed there, and old inhabitants of the district still relate how their grandfathers used to obtain through Sandsfield their salt for curing bacon and for other domestic purposes. Now the sole reminder of the former commercial activities of the port is an old wharf upon the banks of the Eden, but though the little hamlet of Sandsfield may have sunk into a state of somnolence, its sleep may well be haunted by memories of an active and serviceable even if not a distinguished past.