

Harrington: Cumberland's Lost Town

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MODERN day Cumbria is one of the best areas in England for studying the development of new towns in the 17th to 19th centuries. Elsewhere in the North West, new towns like Burnley and Nelson usually developed out of existing rural settlements in an initially unplanned manner in response to local industrial growth. Cumbria's new towns in contrast were planned developments. They were generally created to encourage trade and in the earlier examples had industries planted by the town's founders. The earliest of these towns was Whitehaven, founded in the 17th century, but the tradition of planned town foundation continued on into the 19th century with the most recent examples being Askam-in-Furness, Millom and Barrow.¹ Most were located on the coast – Longtown is an exception – and intended to function as ports. Apart from Askam and Barrow, all the port towns occurred in the historic county of Cumberland. As well as those towns already mentioned these planned towns include Maryport, Silloth, the failed town of Port Carlisle and the now lost town of Harrington. Though developed over more than two centuries all these towns shared common features; contemporary state-of-the-art harbour facilities, and classically inspired planning with urban squares and streets laid out on a gridiron plan. Of all these towns, Harrington, a mere 3 km to the south of Workington, is the least well known and indeed no longer exists as a planned town.

The township of Harrington is of pre-Norman origin but is not documented until the 12th century.² By the early 18th century its principal settlement was situated at the top of a valley, and later became known as High Harrington to distinguish it from Harrington Harbour. The economy was based on farming, and there is no evidence to suggest any maritime activity there before the 18th century. In the 1560s Harrington was omitted from all lists of Cumberland's ports and does not seem to have been regarded as one.³ Whilst it is possible that it was operating as a port by the later 17th century, the only ships registered to ports in 1675-9 were for Whitehaven, Workington, Ellenfoot (later Maryport) and Flimby.⁴ There seems to have been some trade there by the early 18th century when the haven was known as Harrington Beckfoot⁵ but there is no record of port facilities until the 1750s. By the 18th century nearly the whole township belonged to the manorial lords, the Curwen family, so they were free to exploit and develop it how they pleased.⁶ The Curwens were based at Workington Hall and also controlled the port of Workington.

It is generally considered that the harbour was first established around 1760.⁷ A ledger details the financial transactions related to the Curwen family's business during the period 1757-64, especially to activities at Harrington Harbour and production at Harrington Colliery. It reveals that the name Harrington Harbour was already current by 1757. Between 1758 and 1763, it also details payments to labourers and contractors at Harrington Harbour and for possible construction-related materials to be used there.⁸ Another feature of the ledger is the enumeration of cargoes of coal exported



FIG. 1. Harrington's harbour today reflects the development achieved by the late 19th century.

from Harrington Harbour annually. In 1757 these totalled 24 but by 1761 they had increased by 254% and remained at the higher level for the following years covered by the ledger.⁹ This indicates that something significant had happened in the intervening years to cause such a dramatic increase in trade. That the increase followed closely upon the payments for harbour works, suggests they were related. It is likely that the works for which payments were detailed between 1758 and 1763 were associated with the erection of the quay attributed to Henry Curwen in later sources.¹⁰ It also seems highly likely, on the basis of its recorded later trade that, as earlier at Whitehaven and Parton, the improvement to port facilities at Harrington was undertaken to increase the coal trade of the port owner's local coal mine, Harrington Colliery.¹¹ Within the later 18th century records of the Curwen family, the financial concerns of the harbour and Harrington Colliery are often dealt with as one enterprise.¹² Had Harrington Colliery lain closer to the Curwen's other port at Workington it is possible that they would not have invested in port development at Harrington, but instead Harrington Colliery was situated to the south of Harrington, closer to Parton than Workington. The Curwen's coal-owning rivals, the Fletchers and Lowthers, who controlled Parton and nearby Whitehaven would have discouraged the use of their ports for exporting coal from Harrington Colliery, so the development of Harrington Harbour seems to have been the solution.

The Curwen's initiative at Harrington was broadly contemporary with the similar developments undertaken by the Senhouses at Maryport.¹³ As at Maryport in the 1750s, Harrington was seemingly developed by the local landowners to facilitate the development of their coal interests. Again like Maryport the port facilities were initially improved in a relatively basic manner with more sophisticated enclosed

harbour facilities, and even docks at Maryport, being developed later. At Maryport the development of the port was immediately followed by the laying out of the planned town,¹⁴ but this does not seem to have been the case at Harrington. Although Harrington Harbour was sufficiently significant by 1774 to be included on Donald's county map of Cumberland, there was no indication of an associated settlement to the port. In 1774 the small port was recorded as Bella port, a name frequently used for Harrington Harbour into the earlier 19th century.¹⁵ Though the port development was begun by Henry Curwen, it was his son-in-law, John Christian Curwen, who appears to have ordered the building of the first enclosed harbour.¹⁶ Construction work was being carried out under his instruction in 1788.¹⁷ As early as 1772 Harrington had 12 ships registered to it, placing it behind Whitehaven, Workington and Maryport for registration but ahead of Parton.¹⁸ By 1794 the harbour had around 60 ships registered to it,¹⁹ and in 1810 it had the fourth largest vessel tonnage (4,960 tons) of all ports in Cumberland.²⁰ Both in terms of tonnage and ship registration, Harrington remained Cumberland's fourth most significant port throughout the early 19th century.²¹

It is unclear when the grid planned town was laid out, but it seems likely that it began to develop around the time of Henry Curwen's death in 1778, or shortly thereafter. Peter Taylor was one of two trustees of the estate of Henry Curwen and executor of his will and had the power to grant estate land for building purposes following the inheritance of the estate by Henry's daughter Isabella.²² Under the powers granted to him by these appointments to sell land from the estate in Workington and Harrington for domestic building purposes, he was in 1782 involved in the sale of land to the south of Harrington Harbour.²³ The details of the sale were as follows:

all that plot or parcel of ground for the purpose of building houses upon, situate, lying and being at Harrington Harbour on the south side thereof in a certain street there leading from the wagon way westwards towards the sea adjoining on the east to the buildings and grounds belonging to Sarah Watson and being a corner house, fronts a street on the west thereof containing 13 yds in length of front and extending backwards towards the south 20yds in length as the same is now set out and measured off and built upon.²⁴

This sale indicates that building activity was ongoing in the early 1780s but that by then part at least of the street pattern had been laid out and some buildings had been erected. By 1794 many, though by no means all, of the 200 houses enumerated by Hutchinson in Harrington township would have been situated at Harrington Harbour.²⁵

As with the harbour, the development of the town owed more to John Christian Curwen than to Henry Curwen. The entire Curwen family estate holding was taken forward by John Christian Curwen very much in the style of the 18th century, Enlightenment-influenced, improving landlord. As John Christian of Ewanrigg Hall he married his cousin, Isabella, daughter of Henry Curwen, and was conveyed the estate by Isabella in 1783 and controlled the estate until 1828, assuming the Curwen surname and coat of arms in 1790.²⁶ This united the coal interests of the Curwen and Christian families. As with members of the Lowther family or the Revd Robert Graham at Longtown, he was interested in a range of improvement activities, including agricultural modernisation. He established a model farm at Schoose and bought land between Windermere and

Hawkshead, where he encouraged forestry.²⁷ John Christian Curwen's development of the settlement of Harrington Harbour shows that he shared an interest in the foundation of planned new towns with other contemporary 18th century Cumberland landowners, such as the Revd Graham and Humphrey Senhouse.

In 1802 the settlement associated with the harbour was described as 'a populous and improving village'.²⁸ By 1811 Harrington was said to be a small port and town of about 1,000 inhabitants. It was considered to be a flourishing place in which a number of buildings were in the process of being erected, including a new schoolhouse.²⁹ The school lay outside the gridiron settlement as it was demolished for the railway in 1845.³⁰ Further evidence of population growth and settlement development is provided by the erection of an Anglican Church and Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist chapels in 1828.³¹ The latter lay to the south of the gridiron development but on a continuation of one of its streets, Christian Street, suggesting that the layout of the gridiron settlement had been completed at the time of the chapel's erection. Even so, Harrington did not appear as a separate entry in trade directories in the early 19th century but was included under Workington.

In Pigot's *Directory* of 1828-9 Bella port is referred to as Harrington Harbour and described as a small seaport three-quarters of a mile away from the old village of Harrington.³² Just five years later the port was sufficiently important that the entry for Workington had been changed to 'Workington and Harrington Harbour'.³³ In 1831 the settlement was described as a town that 'now consists of several streets, though seventy years ago not a single house had been erected'.³⁴ Three years later it was stated that 'most of the houses are well built, and of modern erection, and are occupied by retired shipmasters and other persons of respectability'.³⁵ The conclusion is that the planned town of Harrington was begun probably in the later 1770s and was largely completed by 1811 but with continuing developments into the later 1820s. The fully developed gridiron planned town is first shown in plan on the tithe map of 1842.³⁶ (Fig. 2) It was based on a cross, with its main thoroughfare, Christian Street, being the spine road. Towards the southern end of the town on the east side was a square known as Stanley Square. As at Maryport the streets were named after members of the landowner's family. The layout was both formal and classically inspired and very reminiscent of both Maryport and Whitehaven. The town's size and the extension of its grid plan were constrained by the wagon way to the east, the harbour to the north and a large shipbuilding yard to the south-west. Consequently, the limited development of the town later in the 19th century did not respect the gridiron plan and largely consisted of ribbon development along the main road north to Workington following the valley of the River Wyre.³⁷

Harrington's trade appears to have been largely confined to the Irish Sea and to have consisted primarily of the export of raw materials sourced locally in West Cumberland. The wagon way in existence by 1780 was used to bring coal to the harbour from Harrington Colliery, mimicking a similar arrangement at Maryport.³⁸ In 1794 the port was recorded as trading in lime and coal, mainly with Ireland and Scotland, and in 1860 it was noted that the coal went to Ireland and the lime to southern Scotland,³⁹ presumably for agricultural improvement. Ironstone and fire clay were also exported



FIG. 2. Extract from the Tithe Map of 1842, showing the fully developed planned town. Cumbria Record Office (Whitehaven) YPR16/135.

according to an account of 1802,⁴⁰ with the ironstone primarily going to Ulverston,⁴¹ though in 1831 both products are referred to as having been formerly exported to Scotland.⁴² Harrington's success in the Irish Sea trade may in part have been aided by the removal of its closest rival Parton in 1795, when the quay there was destroyed by a storm and not rebuilt.⁴³ Equally, the growth of Harrington may have acted as a deterrent to the rebuilding of the harbour at Parton when for the second time in a century its quay was severely storm damaged. This occurred at a time when it had already been replaced by Harrington as Cumberland's fourth most significant port.

Unlike Maryport or Whitehaven, Harrington has no evidence to suggest a significant trans-Atlantic trade in the 18th or early 19th centuries and certainly there is no evidence to suggest a link with the slave trade. The registration at Harrington Harbour of a Harrington-built vessel known as the *Quebec Packet* in 1840⁴⁴ suggests a possible trade link with Canada, a country with which West Cumberland had maritime contacts in the later 19th century. By 1860, however, the port's trade had diminished, the harbour was silting, and the town seems to have been in decline.⁴⁵ This is likely to have in part been associated with decline in coal output which had been a growing problem at Harrington Colliery as early as the 1820s in the last years of John Christian Curwen's life.⁴⁶ The port revived somewhat in the later 19th century and around 1890 the harbour was improved.⁴⁷ Yet despite this the declining significance of the port in West Cumberland is indicated by the fall in the number of vessels registered as belonging to it. Between 1794 and 1858 there were always between 30 and 60 vessels registered for Harrington but by the end of the 19th century there were none.⁴⁸

The fortunes of the town were dependent on the success of local industries as well as the port's trade. The establishment of industries was seen as a necessity in the development of both Whitehaven and Maryport and so it was at Harrington, the landowner/developer encouraging the foundation of industries. At Harrington the earliest industries related directly to the port. A ropery was encouraged by Henry Curwen, who loaned the Harrington Ropery Company £800 in 1777.⁴⁹ The first shipyard was established by 1783.⁵⁰ Photographs of some of the late 18th century buildings indicate that sail making may have been undertaken in some of them.⁵¹ By 1811 two ship building yards were in operation.⁵² Further industrial expansion was facilitated by the opening of the Whitehaven, Cleator and Egremont Railway, built between 1843-1845. This enabled the development of Harrington Ironworks in 1857.⁵³ At their height, the Harrington Ironworks produced around 60,000 tons of pig iron annually, the export of which helped revive the port. The ironworks did end the lime trade with Scotland as they consumed the local lime supplies.⁵⁴ By the 1860s Harrington was a small industrial town that, along with the ironworks, had a shipyard, ropery, tannery, chemical works, corn mill, a brewery and, about 1.5km south of the town, a brickworks.⁵⁵ From the 1860s the port's role in the local economy greatly reduced in significance, notably in relation to manufacturing industry. By the end of the 19th century the town's prosperity, once founded on the coal industry and trade, had become largely dependent on iron manufacture with the local coal resources facing exhaustion.⁵⁶ By the 1930s the port had ceased to operate and the Curwens had ceased to have an interest in the town, leaving Workington Hall shortly afterwards.⁵⁷



FIG. 3. Harrington in 1948 with the magnesite works dominating the surrounding area.
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Harrington's slow decline was only delayed by the opening of the ironworks, and this is reflected in the town's lack of growth at the end of the 19th century and in the early 20th century. Harrington's shipbuilding industry relocated to Workington in the 1880s. Following the closure of the chemical works and then the ironworks in the 1930s, a magnesite factory was established on their sites in 1940 to provide materials for the war effort.⁵⁸ This led to the blocking of the harbour so that it could be used as a saltwater reservoir. After the final closure of the magnesite factory in 1953,⁵⁹ the town was left without a viable economic base, so was targeted by Workington Borough Council for 'slum' clearance, which was completed in the early 1960s. As in many other instances the word 'slum' was a political rather than technical term and used to ensure political ends, in this case the removal of surplus housing, and by extension a community considered to be surplus to requirements.

Throughout the later 19th and for much of the 20th centuries inner urban areas were condemned as slums in order to justify redevelopment. Often there was little wrong with the buildings. Those destroyed at Harrington were part of a planned town developed along classical lines of urban planning. In the earlier 19th century many were occupied by merchants. The town also included examples of early industrial workers' housing such as top-and-bottom houses, always unusual in Cumbria and now nationally rare. As Harrington was transformed from a port to a predominately single industry town so its population of merchants, seaman and maritime-related craftsmen

changed into a community of industrial workers. Eventually industrial decline led to this community being viewed as redundant. The trajectory of industrial and social transformation at Harrington is mirrored to an extent at Maryport. The town's ultimate fate in response to economic changes presaged the challenges that faced the remainder of West Cumberland in the later 20th century, as deindustrialisation gripped the area. The consequences are still vexing policy makers and are physically represented by efforts to regenerate coastal urban communities. It remains to be seen whether these efforts will be more beneficial to the existing communities, and more respectful of the area's industrial past, than the Harrington clearances. Today the site of the former planned town is marked by the occasional wall footing and parts of some of the roads, otherwise it is a municipally maintained open grass area, suffering in places from ground contamination. It is also an important archaeological resource for the study of early industrialised urban development.

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Notes and References

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