

ART. XIV – *The Decline of the Cumbrian yeoman Ravenstonedale: a case study*¹

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THERE has been a recrudescence of interest in the Cumbrian yeoman in recent years.² This appears to have arisen from the fact that the yeomen in Cumbria were more numerous and survived for much longer than in the rest of the country. Bailey and Culley, reporting on the state of agriculture in Cumberland in 1794, said “there are probably few counties where the property is divided into such small parcels, the greatest part is held under customary tenure . . . we cannot pretend to be accurate, but believe that two thirds of the county are held by this kind of tenure”.³ Pringle, in a similar report on Westmorland, stated “a large proportion of the county is possessed by a yeomanry, who occupy small estates of their own, from £10 to £50 a year . . . generally held under the lord of the manor by customary tenure”.⁴

Some customary tenures along the Scottish border were different from the rest of the country. Some tenants owed a duty to the Crown, known as Border tenant right, to appear horsed and armed to defend the country against the Scots. They also owed the usual duties to the lord of the manor of paying an annual rent and in some cases a heriot and boons, though in most cases these had been commuted, and a fine on the death of the lord or a change of tenant. Fines were expressed as so many times the annual rent and could be fixed by custom of the manor, or were arbitrary, at the will of the lord. Searle analysed the tenures of 325 manors where details were given in Nicolson and Burn’s history. He found that 71% of the tenants in Cumberland were customary and 70% in Westmorland. With regard to fines, he found that 48% were arbitrary and 22% fixed in Cumberland, while in Westmorland the percentages were 18% and 60%.⁵ This bears out Bailey and Culley’s estimate of two thirds. Customary estates were also estates of inheritance with the estate normally descending to the eldest son, or if there were no sons, to such daughter as the father should appoint.

It was the Henrician inflation which upset the apple cart. Prices are estimated to have quadrupled in the sixteenth century. This benefited the customary tenant whose rent was fixed but who could sell his surplus at ever increasing prices. The landlord, on the other hand, was hard hit with a stationary rent roll and increasing cost. He naturally took steps to improve his income in line with the rise in prices. He found it was easier to raise fines rather than rents, and developed a tendency to declare fines arbitrary which the tenants held to be fixed. The tenants showed a remarkable propensity to combine and take legal action and the courts were usually favourable to them. In the 1580s the courts ruled that an arbitrary fine must be reasonable, i.e. not more than one or two times the improved annual value.

The main attack came in 1620, when the impecunious James I issued a proclamation stating that the union of the crowns had rendered tenant right obsolete and that in future crown lands in Cumbria were to be let by indenture only, and he encouraged all landlords to exchange customary tenure for leaseholds for life. The tenants met, ostensibly to view a bridge at Staveley, where they decided to unite and

take the matter to court. The case came before the Star Chamber where the tenants argued that they held their land by a double tenure, border tenant right and the custom of the manor, and that the abolition of border tenant right in no way affected their holding of the land by the custom of the manor. It was five years later, and after the death of James, before the court delivered its verdict. It held that the estates were indeed estates of inheritance, but failed to arrive at any conclusion as to whether fines were arbitrary or fixed. This ruling did not bring to an end disputes between landlords and tenants and in some cases tenants paid heavy fines to have the rights confirmed. But it did give tenants a security of tenure which was never afterwards challenged.

Of the four recent studies of the Cumbrian yeoman previously quoted, three dealt with Cumbria as a whole, but one, that by Gregson, is a case study of what happened in the Gilsland estate from 1603 to 1828. She found, over that period, that the number of customary tenants fell by 125, from 433 to 308, but that this was made good by the increase in the number of freeholders. Thus the number of yeomen remained constant. At the same time, from 1650 to 1750, leaseholders gradually became more important, increasing from 4% to 19% of all holdings; while from 1750 to 1828, they more than doubled, rising to 50% of all holdings. 71% of these leaseholds were the creation of new farms from the commons and 13% from leasing the demesne; only 10% came from the purchasing of customary estates and converting them into leaseholds. Gilsland, situated in the extreme north of the county next to the Scottish border, cannot be held to be typical of Cumbria. Very few areas would have so much common land capable of improvement or so much demesne land to rent. Nevertheless it would appear that it is only by more case studies of individual parishes or estates that a real picture of what actually happened can be obtained. Therefore the present paper is an attempt to elucidate what happened in Ravenstonedale.

Ravenstonedale is a small parish of 16,406 acres (6,642 Ha.), 14 miles north-east of Kendal, and south-west of Kirkby Stephen. It is enclosed by the Orton fells to the north, Wildboar Fell to the east and the Howgill fells to the south. About half the parish is over 1,000 feet above sea level. The river Lune rises in the Howgill fells and flows eastwards to Tebay. The road from Kirkby Stephen comes over Ash Fell and follows the Lune to Tebay. A branch road comes off it and goes south to Sedbergh. The old pack-horse route from Kendal comes over the Howgill fells into Ravenstonedale and then on through Kirkby Stephen and over Stainmore to the north-east.

Little is known of the type of agriculture practised in Ravenstonedale. But in 1801–5, ten articles appeared in the *Monthly Magazine* describing Ravenstonedale, Asby, Crosby Ravensworth, Orton and Kirkby Stephen; all places near Ravenstonedale.⁶ In four of the five parishes the tale is much of the same. Prices were rising, land was being enclosed, pared and burnt and crops sown. Farms had been consolidated. New crops had been introduced, wheat, potatoes, clover and rye grass. Although most of the land was still pasture or meadow, a considerable amount was arable. Oats were the main crop, but potatoes, wheat, turnips, rape, barley, rye and peas and beans were also grown.

When the author describes conditions in Ravenstonedale the picture is quite different. Farms are “very small, few being over £60 a year and varying from that to

£10 and under . . . the mode of cultivation is probably not much different from that which was practised nearly a century ago . . . very little of the land in the parish is in tillage . . . it seems astonishing that the coldness and the moisture of the climate should be considered by the inhabitants as unsurmountable difficulties attending the cultivation of corn . . . the potatoes that are consumed here are brought from Appleby". But then he gives the game away. Ravenstonedale, he says, "is most remarkable for its excellent meadow and pasture ground . . . they generally reckon that to pasture a cow for five or six months will make her very good beef sufficiently fat for market . . . twenty yards of well got hay are also deemed fully competent for a like purpose during the winter season . . . the great price which fat cattle have fetched of late has made the business of grazier very lucrative . . . sheep are denominated from the great length of their wool, the long Scottish sheep, in contradistinction to the Cheviot breed . . . excellent butter and cheese is produced, much of the butter is carried into the counties of Yorkshire and Lancashire and some into Northumberland . . . for some time past on account of the high price of provisions, the profit of the dairy has been likewise very great and the value of land has therefore much advanced".⁷

The inventories from 1670 to 1854 bear out the above picture. Ploughs are seldom mentioned but every farm has a well equipped dairy.⁸

To sum up, Ravenstonedale was an area of small farms engaged in dairying and stock raising, whereas the other parishes with part of their land in the more fertile Eden valley and with a lower rainfall were more suitable to arable farming.

The records of the manorial court, known as the Customary Court Baron and Court of Demissions, are extant from 1587–9, 1680–93 and 1716–1871.⁹ In 1808 a private Act of Parliament was passed by which customary estates under Lord Lonsdale could be enfranchised.¹⁰ There was no rush to take advantage of this act; the last land holding in Ravenstonedale was not enfranchised until 1871. Whenever a holding was enfranchised no further record about it appears in the court records. However in the Metcalfe-Gibson papers there is a call book for 1826.¹¹ This is divided into two parts; the first headed "freeholders by enfranchisement" and the second headed "customary tenants". The book has been kept up to date by transferring names from the latter list to the former and by crossing out names and substituting new ones as the property changed hands. This is not entirely satisfactory as one cannot be sure that all the transfers have been recorded. In some cases the date has been omitted. It appears to have been a private record kept by the steward. Nevertheless by using these sources it has been possible to construct a register of land holdings, showing the customary tenant of each holding, year by year, from 1716 to 1851, when it can be compared with the census enumerator's returns for that year. The gap in the records from 1693 to 1716 proved too wide to be bridged. All land holdings had to be registered in the name of one person.

The question arises as to whether the register is correct. One argument for its accuracy is its logical consistency. With over 1,500 entries spread over 135 years the whole fits together like a well made jig saw puzzle. There were occasional errors. In a few cases the rent was misquoted but this was usually corrected in the next entry. There were one or two cases of a man transferring property to one person and then transferring the same land to another person some time later. Here it would appear that something had prevented the finalisation of the first transfer and that the second

transfer was the correct one. The mistakes were rare and the accuracy of the entries is convincing.

The register can also be checked by various lists of tenants. These include a list of tenants liable for fine at the death of the lord in 1716, 1778, and 1803.¹² In 1734, when the manor passed to Robert Lowther, the land-holders purchased the tithes, thereby extinguishing them. There is a valuation of the holdings for this purpose. Their valuation comes out at roughly 18 times the customary rent.¹³ There are three land tax assessments for 1773, 1790 and 1803.¹⁴ All these lists are difficult to interpret; one cannot just count the number of names. The unit of assessment appears to be the land and not the tenant. One man who held two pieces of land will appear twice and where a man and his wife both hold land they will appear separately. Neither is it any use eliminating names that appear twice as there were often two or more men with the same name holding land at the same time. In the 1734 list there were five John Fawcetts all holding land. This necessitated a family reconstruction of all the people of the same surname at the same time. In this 1734 list there were 179 names. By eliminating the names of the people who owned two or more pieces of land and husbands and wives listed separately, the number was reduced to 168 names and this agreed with the register. The other lists were treated in the same way and they all agreed with the register. In 1851 the register was compared with the census enumerator's returns.¹⁵

Table 1 shows the distribution of land-holdings on the dates when the register could be checked with the lists plus lists for 1753 and 1826 to fill the gaps.

TABLE 1
Distribution of land-holdings according to rents

	Number of holdings	Lower Quartile s. d.	Median s. d.	Upper Quartile s. d.
1716	178	3. 6	9. 4	16. 8
1734	167	4. 9	10. 11	18. 3
1753	151	5. 6	11. 4	21. 4
1778	133	5. 11	10. 7	21. 8
1790	129	4. 8	11. 10	23. 8
1803	117	4. 9	14. 3	26. 0
1826	113	5. 8	14. 3	26. 9
1851	90	4. 11	14. 3	29. 3

The number of holdings fell steadily to almost a half in the 135 years to 1851. The size of the smaller holdings, as shown by the lower quartile, remained relatively constant, rising slightly in 1778 and then falling. The median remained relatively constant to 1790, then increased by just over a quarter but then showed no further increase. On the other hand, the large sized holdings showed a rising trend, increasing by three quarters over the period.

Two further points are worthy of notice. The first is the proportion of land held by women. Manorial custom in Ravenstonedale allowed a daughter appointed by the father to inherit land if there were no sons. This right continued after marriage, and was carefully safeguarded. As elsewhere, widows held in trust if the male heir was under age and in any case were entitled to their "thirds" during their lifetime.

TABLE 2
Women land-holders

	Number	Total Rent			Percentage of all rents
		£.	s.	d.	
1716	33	11.	16.	9	11
1734	23	10.	10.	8	10
1753	24	14.	10.	3	13
1778	21	10.	13.	2	10
1790	27	11.	4.	6	10
1803	22	12.	1.	8	11
1826	31	24.	8.	10	27
1851	17	29.	15.	6	27

There was no significant change in either the number of holders or the amount of land held by women until after 1803, when the proportion more than doubled, although the number of women land-holders fell in 1851. As might be expected, elderly spinsters and widowers were prominent among the cottagers. But 97 women appear as holding land with a rent of over 3s.4d. All acquired their property by inheritance. Practically all of them married and nearly all of them married yeomen, only thirteen remained spinsters. Apart from seven who married men from outside the parish and left, and of whom nothing more is known, only eleven married men who did not own land. Of these eleven, one married an apothecary, one an independent minister, one a schoolmaster and two the younger sons of yeomen, all of whom may be said to be of equal social status. Four married men from outside the parish moved in to farm their wife's land and their social status is unknown. This leaves only two, of whom it may be said that they married beneath themselves; one married a farmer and the other a blacksmith. Thus it would appear that at least from 1716 onwards, the yeomen and their families formed a distinct social group who married among themselves. The inter-marriage was one of the factors which led to an increased concentration of holdings. When widows appear as land-holders it is usually because they held land in their own right and have outlived their husbands. Only four cases have been found of a man leaving land to his widow and in all four cases the children were under age.

The other factor worthy of interest is the amount of land held by non-residents.

TABLE 3
Non-resident land-holders

	Number	Total Rent			Percentage of all rents	Percentage held by women
		£.	s.	d.		
1716	10	4.	6.	5	4	11
1734	10	4.	5.	5	4	11
1753	17	5.	16.	9	5	10
1778	10	3.	3.	10	3	0
1790	17	14.	5.	8	13	0
1803	16	14.	0.	6	13	5
1826	29	33.	8.	3	30	31
1851	32	50.	10.	2	45	53

Up to 1790 non-resident land-holders are of little importance but after this date their holdings increase, so that by 1851 nearly half of the land is held by outsiders and over half of these outsiders are women.

When we come to consider the yeoman, the immediate problem is one of definition. The definition, that a yeoman was a man having a freehold land worth at least forty shillings a year, is of no use as there was no freehold land in Ravenstonedale. Latimer's well known remark, that his father was a yeoman though he had no land of his own, has led some to argue that it was mainly a question of social status; but what Latimer said was, "my father was a yeoman, and he had no land of his own, only he had a farm of three or four pounds a year at the uttermost, and thereon he tilled as much as kept half a dozen men. He had a walk for a hundred sheep, and my mother milked 50 kine".¹⁶ This is a good definition of a yeoman in Cumbria which must include customary tenants. The trouble with this definition is the cut off point at the lower end. Obviously a cottager was not a yeoman and neither was a smallholder or husbandman. The problem is, at what point did the land-holding become sufficiently large for the holder to be regarded as a yeoman?

The parish registers give occupations from 1771 to 1779 and from 1787 onwards. In all 68 men are described as yeomen. Comparing their names with our land register of land-holders, the minimum holding is one with a rent of 3s.4d. One exception is Anthony Metcalf and his son who never held any land but are described as yeomen. Anthony is also described as game-keeper to the Earl of Lonsdale and his son became the steward of the manor. So as the most important men in the parish, they probably felt equal in status to the yeomen and were recognised as such. In the 1851 census returns Anthony describes himself as a farmer, i.e. tenant-farmer. Possibly he felt status symbols had no place in government returns. Other exceptions were two cases of men who had transferred their holdings to their sons a few years before their deaths, but were still described as yeomen; and two cases of men who were described as yeomen although they did not inherit any land until the death of their fathers a few years later. These cases are understandable. In the former case, the man was really a retired yeoman and in the latter case, the father may have retired from farming on the marriage of his son. Of more interest is that there are three cases of men being called yeomen, when, in fact, the land was held by their wives. Craftsmen were not yeomen even if they owned sufficient land. But there was nothing to prevent a yeoman from adopting another occupation; descriptions such as yeoman and carrier or yeoman and butcher were common.

Another source of information is the wills. Here, as in the registers, the occupation is not always given, but the description occurs in 105 cases. Again the smallest land-holding is one with a rent of 3s.4d. and again there are three cases of men who had ceased to hold land at the time of their death. There are also seven cases of yeomen, according to our definition, who described themselves as husbandmen. These all occur in the early years of the eighteenth century. Could it be that the term yeoman only became a status symbol late in that century?

In the light of the above, a yeoman in Ravenstonedale may be defined as a customary tenant, either male or female, with a holding of at least 3s.4d. customary rent, who farms his own land. In the case of a married couple, it is immaterial whether the man or his wife holds the land.

If, therefore, we take the number of land-holders and deduct the small-holders and the non-resident holders, we are left with the number of yeomen.

Table 4 shows that the decline of the yeomen was slow to 1778, slower than the decline of all land-holders. After 1778, there was a large fall in the number of yeomen to 1790 and another large fall after 1803, when the number of yeomen declined faster than the total number of land-holders. This latter fall is associated with the increase of non-resident land-holders.

TABLE 4
Yeomen

	Total land- holders	Under 3s.4d. Rent	Non- Resident	Yeomen	Yeomen as % of Total
1716	178	39	10	129	72
1734	167	22	10	129	77
1753	151	16	17	118	78
1778	133	14	7	112	84
1790	129	21	19	89	69
1803	117	19	16	82	70
1826	113	16	29	68	60
1851	90	15	32	45	50

The yeomen were not a homogeneous group. The size of their holdings varied to a considerable extent.

TABLE 5
Distribution of customary rent paid by yeomen

	Lower Quartile s. d.	Median s. d.	Upper Quartile s. d.
1716	7. 10	13. 1	20. 1
1734	7. 11	13. 1	19. 3
1753	8. 2	13. 7	23. 1
1778	8. 0	13. 4	23. 0
1790	8. 0	14. 9	26. 5
1803	9. 1	18. 10	28. 9
1826	10. 4	17. 11	34. 10
1851	8. 6	17. 11	37. 5

As one would expect, as the number of yeomen declined, the size of the land-holding increased. The lower quartile showed little change, except for a rise in 1826. The median showed little change to 1790, when it rose and it rose again in 1803, but then it remained stable. The upper quartile showed a different pattern. It rose in 1753 and again in 1790 and 1826. The result was a much greater inequality in the distribution of land-holdings. In 1716, one quarter of the land-holders paid rents of under 8s.0d., and one quarter paid rents of over £1, or nearly two and a half times as much. In 1851 the difference was nearly four and a half times as much.

The main changes took place in 1790 and 1826 and these were also the dates when the non-resident land-holders increased.

TABLE 6
Percentage distribution of customary rents paid by yeomen

	3s.4d. -5s.	5s.1d. -15s.	15s.1d. -25s.	25s.1d. -35s.	35s.1d. -45s.	45s.1d. -55s.	55s.1d. -65s.	65s. +
1716	10	52	19	10	4	3	2	-
1734	12	46	22	8	5	3	-	2
1753	11	46	20	16	3	2	1	2
1778	10	45	24	11	3	3	4	2
1790	14	37	22	14	4	2	2	4
1803	10	33	22	17	6	2	2	5
1826	7	37	20	10	13	9	2	2
1851	13	29	20	10	10	6	2	8

Although the number of small-holdings, represented by a rent of 3s.4d.-5s., fell by a half, the decline was similar to that of all yeomen and they remained at about ten per cent of all holdings during the period. The largest relative decline was in the next group, with rents of 5s.1d.-15s., which fell from about one half to under one third, the fall being mainly from 1778 onwards. The next two groups show relatively little change from about 30%. The larger holdings, with rents of 35s.1d. and over, rose from about one tenth to one quarter, the rise being particularly marked after 1803. Wordsworth's reputed statement that "between 1770 and 1820 the number of freehold statesmen was halved and the size of their farms doubled; the little farms being amalgamated" is not correct with regard to Ravenstonedale.¹⁷ What was happening was that the larger yeomen were acquiring the medium sized farms. Presumably the small farms were not worth bothering about.

It is well known that some of the yeomen rose to the rank of gentry, the Braithwaites of Ambleside and the Bindlosses of Borwick are examples.¹⁸ The same process occurred in Ravenstonedale. In the 1829 directory, one yeoman was designated as esquire. In 1849, there was one gentleman and one esquire. In the 1851 census returns, three yeomen described themselves as landed proprietors, which, as they had given up farming and were presumably living off the rents of their properties, was a correct description, as by giving up farming they had ceased to be yeomen.¹⁹ It follows from this that there was no such thing as a typical yeoman. Yet a stereotype seems to have grown up of the yeoman as a small farmer, slaving from dawn to dusk, clad in home spun. James Losh, attending a property sale in Carlisle in 1820, said "the lots being small, the bidders were mostly what are called statesmen (yeomen possessed of a small estate) and I was much amused with their uncouth appearance and the odd mixture of cunning and simplicity in their conduct and manners".²⁰ Bouch and Jones remark, "most accounts of statesmen picture him as using the labour of his own family".²¹ These comments may well be true of the smaller yeoman, but they completely ignore the larger numbers of more prosperous yeomen. For instance when John Milner, yeoman of Ashfield, died in 1813, he left household goods valued at £109.1s.6d. including silver plate and watches £13, clocks £9, looking glasses £5.5s.0d. and tea urn, coffee pot and pictures £4.3s.0d,

books £1.10s.0d. This indicates a life style far removed from the uncouth yokels portrayed by Losh.

Neither were yeomen a static group. The picture of a yeoman cultivating his ancestral plot and handing it down to his eldest son more or less *ad infinitum*, is not true. There was an active market in land. Some yeomen prospered and increased their holdings. Some did not, sold out and disappeared. New people from outside the parish bought holdings, some of whom settled in the parish whilst some moved on again after a short time. The picture is one of continual change. This can be illustrated by tracing the families of yeomen over the years.

TABLE 7
Families of yeomen

	1716	1734	1753	1778	1790	1803	1826	1851
1716	129	103	76	60	45	41	31	19
1734		26	16	8	6	4	3	1
1753			26	19	14	14	8	5
1778				24	13	8	5	3
1790					11	6	4	-
1803						9	7	3
1826							10	3
1851								11
	129	129	118	111	89	82	68	45

Thus, of the 129 yeomen in 1716, 26 had left by 1734, but 26 new ones had moved in, and so on until by 1851 only 19 yeomen were descendants of the yeomen of 1716. In fact the decline from 1716 to 1851 was greater than appears from the table. Some families had prospered, acquired more land which, on death, had been split between sons, thus creating more yeomen in the family. One of the yeomen in the 1716 list is represented by five in 1851, two by three and one by two. Of the 129 names in 1716, only ten are represented in 1851 and of these, seven have increased their holdings, one is holding less land, only two are holding the same land in 1851 as in 1716.

Further evidence that the yeomen were not content to cultivate their ancestral plot comes from the Land Tax return of 1790. This return, for the first time, gives the names of "owners" and "occupiers". Of the 89 yeomen at this date, only 40 were owner occupiers, 41 were occupying part of their land and letting the rest, five were renting extra land and three were letting some land and also renting some. The pattern seems to be that when a man held land in different parts of the parish, he farmed one and let the other. If he held adjacent farms, he might or might not farm them both. There were 84 sub-tenants, almost as many as the yeomen, giving a total of 173 farmers. This is more than the number of yeomen in 1716, so there must have been tenant farmers at that date. It follows that the number of customary tenants is no guide to farming practice. Neither is it any guide to the total population. The rural population depends on the number of customary tenants, tenant farmers, and the number of servants, agricultural labourers and craftsmen and the size of their families.

The census returns for 1851 throw similar and additional light on the position. Three of the people we have classed as yeomen had ceased farming and describe themselves as landed proprietors and one was a craftsman, so our figure of 45 overstates the position by four. There were 84 sub-tenants, making a total of 125 farmers, compared with 173 in 1790, a fall of over one quarter.

As the local directories have been used to calculate the decline of the yeomen, it may be useful to compare our figure for 1851 with Mannex's directory of 1849.²² Mannex records 43 of our 45 yeomen, but only classes 23 as yeomen plus one gentleman and one esquire. Similarly we can compare our list of 1826 with Parson and White's directory of 1829. According to our register there were 68 yeomen, Parson and White have 42 yeomen, one esquire, one Miss and one spirit merchant. Thus both Mannex and Parson and White only record two thirds of the yeomen.

To sum up our findings so far: the number of yeomen declined after 1734 and from 1790 fell more rapidly than the total number of land-holders. This fall was accompanied by a growth in the size of the larger holdings. The medium sized holdings increased in number in 1790 and 1803, but not thereafter. Between 1778 and 1790 a change took place, the fall in the number of yeomen increased and there was a significant increase in the proportion of the land held by non-residents. By 1851 some of the larger yeomen were calling themselves gentlemen, esquire or landed proprietors.

Pringle writing in 1794 stated that "the yeomanry is daily decreasing. The turnpike roads have brought the manners of the capital to this extremity of the kingdom. The simplicity of ancient times is gone. Finer clothes, better dwellings, and more expensive viands are now sought by all. This change in manners, combined with other circumstances, which have taken place during the last forty years has compelled many a statesman to sell his property, and reduced him to the necessity of working as a labourer on those fields, which, perhaps he and his ancestors had for many generations cultivated as their own".²³

Adam Sedgwick, who witnessed the near extinction of the yeoman in Dentdale, wrote "many of them, not having learnt to adapt their habits to the gradual change of time, were ruined, and sank into comparative poverty. Some migrated in search of a better market for their talents. A few old families stood the test. . . . The French Revolution seemed to shake the whole foundation of society; and the shock was felt even in the retired valleys of the north of England. . . . The war that followed brought new taxes and increased poor rates. . . . I well remember the two years of terrible suffering, when many farmers and land owners – before that time hardly able to hold up their heads – had to pay poor rates that were literally more than ten times the amount of what they had been in former times".²⁴

Wordsworth attributed the decline to "the invention of the spinning jenny which concentrated spinning in the factories and so took away profitable work from the peasants' wife and children".²⁵ Hutchinson, commenting on the decline of the population of Skelton from 1786 to 1792, attributed it to the "enclosure of the common land, which occasioned many cottagers to quit the community . . . and the uncommon progress of manufactories which induced multitudes to engage their children therein".²⁶ Bouch and Jones quoted the report of the Select Committee on Agriculture which stated, "a main cause of the decline of the yeomanry of Cumberland and Westmorland, it has been suggested, was the burdening of their

land with portions for big families, which with the falling prices (after 1821), it could not carry".²⁷

Of the five suggested explanations, two can be ruled out straight away with regard to Ravenstonedale. There were no enclosures in the parish since the improvement of 1579. Neither did the invention of the spinning jenny destroy the local domestic industry. This was the knitting of stockings for the Kendal market and the introduction of machine spun yarn merely freed more hands for knitting. As late as 1801, Ravenstonedale was supplying the Kendal market with 1,000 pairs of stockings a week, nearly half the total supply.²⁸ But this industry had come to an end by 1851 and if its decline coincided with the post-war depression, it could have caused difficulties. The provision of portions for the younger children in some cases bore heavily on the smaller yeomen. Examination of the wills and inventories shows that portions often exceeded the net personality of the deceased, so the inheritor of the farm must have started his career encumbered with debt. But this had been going on for a much longer period than the committee suggested, although the fall in prices would aggravate the position. The decline of the domestic industry, the provision of portions, coupled with the fall in prices after the war, could have caused difficulties for the smaller yeomen, but this does not explain the decline of the richer yeoman.

Pringle seems to be nearer the mark when he says the simplicity of ancient times had gone. What had happened was that Ravenstonedale in 1716 had been a relatively isolated parish, with its inhabitants living a more or less self contained life. By 1851, with the improvement in communications, turnpike roads, coaches, postal system and the growth of industry and urbanisation elsewhere, Ravenstonedale had become more integrated in the national economy. The railway arrived in 1861. From 1660 to 1780 grain prices fell, benefiting rural economies specializing in stock rearing. The "great rebuilding" in Westmorland took place from the 1660s to 1697:²⁹ Ravenstonedale church was rebuilt in 1744. Inventory studies show that wealth had begun to grow in the 1720s.³⁰ John Handley, in 1699, had led a spartan existence, but by 1790, houses were well furnished, tea and coffee were being drunk and silver plate was common among the well to do families. This increase in wealth was accompanied by an increased inequality in the distribution of wealth. Table 5 shows that from the 1750s the large land-holders grew much faster than the smaller ones. What was happening during this period was that a yeoman with a fair sized holding was able to purchase one or more other farms and, on his death, to leave one to each of his sons or all to one son.

Younger sons, at the beginning of the period, had left the parish as the family farm was only sufficient to support one family. This continued throughout the period, but, by 1790, these younger sons were inheriting land and retaining it and thus increasing the number of non-resident land-holders.

By 1790, a number of old established families were dying out. For instance, the Fothergills of Street, one of the oldest families in Ravenstonedale, came to an end with two sons neither of whom married. William died in 1771 and George in 1791. Richard Bovill, again one of the largest land-holders in the parish, died in 1784 and left his land to his two daughters, both of whom married men with large land holdings. George Scarbrough, died in 1824 and left his land to his two daughters who then moved to Kirkby Stephen. Similarly, Margaret Hodgson, when she

inherited her father's estate, moved to Kendal. Heiresses were no longer content with village life.

In these ways, the concentration of holdings and the growth of non-resident landholders increased. Both these points are well illustrated in the case of the Elliotson family. The Elliotsons first appeared in Ravenstonedale in 1633. The son, William, appeared in the 1716 list holding three farms of small to average size. On his death he left one farm to each of his three sons. Each of these three sons married late and each purchased three extra farms. When John died in 1758 he left his farms to his son who died, aged seven, and who, in turn, left his farms to his uncle Thomas. The other brother, Richard, also died in 1758, and left his farms to his son William. Thomas died in 1772 and left his farms to William. Thus William inherited twelve farms and purchased seven more. When he died he left them to his three daughters, who all married outsiders and left the parish. William's total customary rent amounted to £6.3s.2d. This places him in an entirely different category from his fellow yeomen, Richard Alderson, paying a rent of 4s.8d.

Walton in a recent study of the decline of the yeomen, came to the conclusion that it was an optical illusion. The owner-occupier carried on but the use of the term "yeoman" declined.³¹ This may well be true of the nineteenth century, but what happened in Ravenstonedale during the period under review was that the whole economic and social structure changed. In 1716 there were 129 yeomen and the difference in wealth was not great. They formed the jury of the manorial court, held the offices of churchwardens, overseers of the poor, surveyor of the highway and village constables, and governed the parish through the "four and twenty". They were the guardians of manorial customs and were energetic in enforcing them. When Robert Lowther purchased the manor in 1731, he levied a general fine. The yeomen responded by signing an agreement, binding themselves to the sum of £40 each, instructing counsel and filed a suit in Chancery on the grounds that the fine was contrary to custom. A general fine, they held, was only due on the death of the lord and not on the alienation of the manor.³²

By 1851 the number of yeomen had fallen to 45 and the richer ones were calling themselves landed proprietors. The economy had become market orientated, depending on the export of dairy produce and cattle. The manorial court was coming to an end. The "four and twenty" had withered away. Times had changed.

Notes and References

¹ This is a shortened version of a dissertation submitted in part fulfilment for a Diploma in Local History at the University of Liverpool.

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- ⁶ *Monthly Magazine*, August and September 1801, December 1801, March 1802, June and July 1802, March and June 1803, September 1804 and April 1805.
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