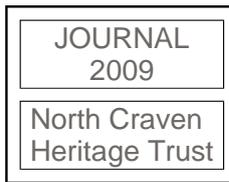


A Millennium of Farming at Lower Winskill

Thomas C. Lord



Ongoing research into the history of Lower Winskill suggests that the farm originated as part of an upland holding developed by Sawley (Salley) Abbey in the medieval period. Sawley Abbey was a Cistercian monastery on the banks of the Ribble, near Clitheroe. It received large grants of land in Upper Ribblesdale. Winskill appears to be part of a gift to Sawley Abbey by a local lord, Elias of Giggleswick, in about 1240 of the whole of the manor of Langcliffe, including Winskill, and the neighbouring village of Stainforth. Winskill is first recorded as a placename in 1404, when it is spelt Wyndscale.

The place name Winskill incorporates the old Scandinavian word skali meaning a shieling or area of upland grazing. The meaning of Win may be wind, or possibly whin or gorse from the old Scandinavian word hvine. Being used for grazing, Winskill was most probably an area of scrub and grassland before the enclosure of about 65 acres of the best land between low limestone cliffs on the east, and the high cliff overlooking Ribblesdale on the west. A large enclosed core area may be typical of some monastic upland farms. Two neighbouring farms belonging to Sawley Abbey, Stockdale and Cowside, had enclosed core areas of about 80 acres and 50 acres respectively. Whereas the core areas of Stockdale and Cowside were apparently enclosed by banks and ditches, Winskill seems to have been enclosed on the east side by a massive dry stone wall. Parts of it are still standing.

Initially the enclosed area at Winskill may have contained only a few fields. The oldest walled fields are situated on areas of deeper soil which could be ploughed and used for growing crops. The characteristic ridges of old ploughing still survive, while stones dug up after being repeatedly scratched by iron plough blades can be found built into the dry stone walls. The main arable crop was possibly oats. The livestock consisted of cattle, sheep and horses. In the summer months most of the livestock probably grazed on open pastures east of the enclosed area. Some stock, especially cattle, would return to the arable fields after the harvest to graze the stubble. Sheep could have stayed at Winskill all year round, but most of the cattle and horses may have wintered on lowland holdings belonging to Sawley Abbey.

By the early sixteenth century, Winskill was probably managed by tenants paying an annual rent to Sawley Abbey. The 1522 Loan Book (a record of a national tax imposition) lists Ellys, James, Roger and William Foster among others and it might be presumed that they were all at Winskill which was then the largest farm in Langcliffe. Members of the Foster family lived at Winskill throughout the sixteenth century according to Parish Register information. At some stage they divided the enclosed area into individual holdings for themselves, possibly by about 1540 just after the Dissolution of the Monasteries. At an inquest into the suicide of one Robert Foster of Winskill in 1545, his livestock was recorded as 44 sheep, 24 lambs, 5 young cattle, and two horses. This is too few stock for the whole of Winskill. It is likely that Robert Foster farmed only a part of it, and the extended family had already divided up the holding in some way. In 1591 there were four farms, two at Lower Winskill, and two at Upper and Higher Winskill.

In 1537 the crown abolished Sawley Abbey, and its property was granted to Sir Arthur Darcy. After his death, the former Sawley Abbey property in Stainforth passed to his third son, Sir Edward Darcy, who lived in Kent, and the whole of Langcliffe went to his fifth son, Nicholas Darcy of Northampton. For the first time in some three hundred years Langcliffe and most of Stainforth had separate landlords. This made the township boundary between Stainforth and Langcliffe into a property boundary. It takes a marked detour around Winskill, so that the whole of Winskill is in Langcliffe township. Nicholas Darcy was apparently keen to raise capital from his Langcliffe property, and in 1585 he mortgaged it with Henry Billingsley, a merchant in London. In 1591 Darcy and Billingsley jointly sold Winskill to the four sitting tenants: Giles Foster at Higher Winskill; Thomas Foster the younger at Upper Winskill; Thomas Foster the elder with his son Richard and also Richard Foster younger at Lower Winskill. (Apart from Giles, the location of the others is not definite). To raise their share of the purchase price, the tenants sold their holdings to a third party in return for a secure tenancy at a fixed annual rent. Crucially for the history of Winskill, it appears that each tenant sold their portion to a different third party. This split Winskill into four separate ownerships, each occupied by tenants with security of tenure. The effect upon the landscape was basically to preserve the boundaries and fields at Winskill as they were in 1591. The basic field pattern at Winskill today, and indeed many of the dry stone walls, are more than four hundred years old.

Each farm at Winskill in 1591 consisted of walled fields in the original ring garth together with rights to graze a stipulated number of sheep or cattle on large communal pastures nearby. The rights to graze were called gaits, and the allocation of different numbers of gaits for each farm at Winskill in 1591 suggests that a formula was used, possibly based on the area of meadow, or formerly of arable, that each farm possessed. The communal pastures were strictly managed so that the numbers of grazing animals and the time of year when grazing could take place were strictly controlled. Pastures managed in this way were called stinted, and they were crucial to the farming system.

Fortunately, at Winskill the gaits were recorded both by the numbers of animals eligible to graze, and by an area deemed equivalent, measured in customary acres. Therefore it is possible to calculate the area of enclosed fields and the area of communal grazing represented by the gaits for each farm at Winskill in 1591. The gaits, or rights to graze, on the stinted pastures greatly increase the overall size of each farm.

Stocking rates for cattle and sheep on the stinted pastures can be calculated too. The stocking rates are one adult cow to three and three quarter statute (modern) acres, and one adult sheep to three quarters of a statute acre. Five adult sheep were considered equal to one adult cow. The current rates issued by MAFF (now Defra) for hill farms consider ten hill sheep equal to one adult cow.

The pattern of seasonal management of the stinted pastures in the Yorkshire Dales is very important. Surviving accounts indicate that generally adult cattle and sheep went onto the stinted pasture at the normal stocking rate in early May (old style calendar, around the middle of May by our calendar) and remained until early October (around the middle of October by our calendar). Then all adult cattle had to be removed. When arable crops were grown, the cattle probably went onto the stubble for at least some of the winter. Sheep could stay on the stinted pasture, but usually only at half the normal stocking rate. All stock, however, had to come off at the end of January, so that the pasture was rested throughout February, March, April and early May when the cycle began again. In spring there was a period for up to a month when the early grasses and other plants could grow without being grazed. This meant that when sheep with lambs at foot and newly calved cows were turned onto the pastures in May there was forage for them to produce milk.

It is not known when arable crops ceased to be grown at Winskill. From the field pattern in place by 1591, it appears that livestock farming was then the main farming activity. Wool was valuable at this time, and sheep were kept primarily to sell their fleeces. In the seventeenth century some dry stone walls were rebuilt to prevent sheep jumping over them, evidence perhaps of an increase in sheep numbers. However, making butter and cheese from cow's milk was probably more important. There are records of barns with provision to house cows in winter, shippens, by the early 1600s. Meadows were certainly in use by this time, providing hay to feed the cattle indoors. Because of the lack of streams and reliable springs, the barns for housing the cattle were built near to farm houses to share the same water supply, a deep well in the case of Lower Winskill. The clustering together of farmhouse and field barn is unusual in the Yorkshire Dales; it is another distinctive aspect of the Winskill landscape. Perhaps the first wells were made by Sawley Abbey, for the sinking of deep wells into the limestone bedrock would have been a considerable expense.

The present farmhouse at Lower Winskill was extensively rebuilt around 1860. It retains features from an earlier house on the same site built by Nicholas Bullough in 1675. His initials NB and the date 1675 are carved on the decorative stone lintel above the back door. Nicholas Bullough's principal occupation was as a carpenter. He had purchased the freehold of the larger farm at Lower Winskill in July 1662. It seems that -the leasehold had been given up after the death of Thomas Foster, Richard Foster's son, in about 1650. Unlike the Fosters who were tenants, Bullough owned Lower Winskill, which probably encouraged him to build a new house. Being also a carpenter, it is probable that he built some of it himself. Bullough had moved from the hamlet of Tosside about 8 miles away, possibly because of a local demand for carpenters due to the extensive re-building of houses then underway in Upper Ribblesdale. Having a trade as a carpenter, Bullough was not a full time farmer, nor was he solely dependent on the farm for his income. Dual occupations may have been commonplace on upland farms at this time.

In 1651 the smaller farm at Lower Winskill, formerly tenanted by Thomas Foster the elder and his son Richard, was purchased by Alice Clapham, a widow. In 1656 Alice married one Thomas Armistead, a farmer, and they lived at Lower Winskill. Enough of their house survives to reconstruct its layout. There is even part of the stone oven where Alice must have baked bread. It lay in a great open hearth, possibly the width of the main downstairs room which was only partly boarded over so that most of the room was open to the roof. This layout was soon to go out of fashion. The downstairs rooms in Nicholas Bullough's house opposite, built in 1675, were probably entirely boarded over, and the main fireplace was smaller. His house was also more showy. It had carved stone door jambs with a decorative stone lintel recording his initials, and more ornate windows. Bullough's farm was somewhat larger - it is likely that having a dual occupation enabled him to build the more prestigious house.



The farms at Lower Winskill were not in owner occupation for long. In the early 1700s, both farms were sold to purchasers who rented them out to tenants. Eventually, in 1739, the farms were amalgamated to form a larger holding. John and Bernard Preston, John Stackhouse and William Foster were consecutively tenants and owners up to 1860. In 1789 there was an Act of Parliament to enclose and divide the stinted pastures in Langcliffe. There must have been changes in the livestock management when privately owned fields replaced the stinted pasture system. Stock numbers would have increased, which would have led to a need for more winter fodder and more barns with shippens to house cattle over winter. The stone barn at the east end of the range of buildings at Lower Winskill was probably built about 1800. Even so, it seems unlikely from

Lower Winskill farm in winter

the numbers of cattle stalls, booses, in the shippens that more than about 12 cows could have been kept indoors at this time. The numbers of cattle kept over winter was of course limited by the amount of hay that could be made. In the early 1800s there could have been as much as about 15 acres of meadow cut for hay. It appears that on average over an acre of meadow was needed to keep one cow over winter.

After the bankruptcy of the landlord William Foster of Bowerley in Langcliffe, Lower Winskill was sold in July 1860. It then consisted of about 30 acres of meadow and pasture at Winskill, a small detached pasture of about 3 acres, and a large pasture of about 50 acres, one of the fields enclosed from stinted pastures in 1789. At the sale, the large pasture was sold separately and was purchased by a different buyer. The remainder of the land, including the farmhouse and buildings, was bought by Anthony Stackhouse who already owned land at Winskill.

Since about 1700 Anthony Stackhouse's family had owned the farm at Higher Winskill originally tenanted by Giles Foster in 1591. Anthony Stackhouse amalgamated this farm with Lower Winskill. Thus more than 250 years after the division of Winskill in 1591, three of the four farms were back together. Anthony Stackhouse undertook a programme of modernisation. The farmhouse at Higher Winskill was abandoned, and a new farmhouse was built at Lower Winskill on the site of Nicholas Bullough's old house. The new house retained the gable walls of Bullough's house, but the front wall was largely taken down and rebuilt, while the rear wall was taken down entirely, and a new wall was built further out so that the new house was two rooms deep, with two downstairs rooms at the front and two at the back. Features from Bullough's house were re-used in the back wall, noticeably the decorative stone lintel over the door, and some of the splayed window surrounds and mullions. The square stone surrounds and mullions on the stair window were new, although the design was then rather old-fashioned. Inside the house one of the back rooms was laid out as a dairy to make butter.

Some of the outbuildings were re-roofed. Alice Clapham's old house could have been made into a shippen at this time. Some of the stone standings on the shippen floor were re-used pieces of a stone fireplace which may have been taken out of the Bullough's house when it was re-built. A special shippen to milk cows was added in a lean-to building which had a high roof with rooflights. The water supply for stock was improved by fixing cast iron gutters on the barns to collect rain water off the roofs. It was stored in a large slate tank. From the slate tank, water was piped to a trough in the yard for cattle to drink in winter. An improved system of manure storage was installed. Glazed ceramic pipes were laid from the shippens and the middens to collect the liquid manure, soar, in an underground slate tank. The nitrogen-rich soar was then pumped into a spreader mounted on a horse-drawn cart and applied sparingly to the meadows.

Stackhouse's intention was probably to let Lower Winskill as an up-to-date dairy farm producing butter from cow's milk. Unfortunately, cheap foreign dairy products became available from the 1870s, and the returns on farm-produced butter fell. The steep descent into Ribblesdale made horse-drawn transport of liquid milk to the nearest railway station impractical until the arrival of tarmac roads and reliable motor transport in the 1930s. As a tenanted farm, however, Lower Winskill was a useful 'starter farm' where a farmer could begin his career and build up some capital with a relatively modest outlay. A 20 acre pasture was subsequently added to the farm, probably to increase the summer grazing so that more sheep could be kept.

The Stackhouse family retained Lower Winskill until the 1960s. Their tenant from about 1930, until he retired in 1957, was James Lowther who was still making butter on the farm in the 1950s. He also kept hens to sell eggs. 'Egg money' was a useful cash income. The stone-built hen house used by Lowther survives in a ruined state. Hen houses typify alternative approaches to farming in the Yorkshire Dales, and it must be regretted that their historic significance continues to be overlooked by conservation agencies.

In 1962 Lower Winskill was sold to my grandfather, Ernest Forster, who eventually added part of it to his farm in Stainforth. However, from about 1970, most of Lower Winskill was let on annual grass rents. During this period, the farm deteriorated as the meadows and pastures were run together and grazed as one field. In 1992 I took on part of the farm and then extended it to its current size. About 25 acres of unimproved hay meadow have been restored, preserving the intricate pattern of ancient, small walled fields. A modern steel-framed livestock shed has been added to the range of traditional farm buildings to provide winter housing for a suckler beef herd. Stocking rates on the farm are relatively low and it is intended eventually to enter the farm into the Organic Conversion Scheme.

Much of the historical information comes from a series of indentures relating to Lower Winskill dating from 1591 up to 1893 held by the author and public documents and maps concerning Winskill to be found at The National Archives, the North Yorkshire Record Office in Northallerton, the West Yorkshire Archives at Wakefield and Sheepscar and the Yorkshire Archaeological Society. Wills from the Borthwick Institute at the University of York have also been used. All these have been transcribed and form the basis of an article on the history of ownership of all the Winskill farms expected to be published in due course in this

Journal.



Lower Winskill farm in winter