

CARNFORTH, 1840-1900: THE RISE OF A NORTH LANCASHIRE TOWN

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IT is well known that the growth of industry, trade and communications during the nineteenth century led to the rise of new towns and the transformation of a number of old ones. In this paper an attempt is made to trace the development of a new town at Carnforth, in north Lancashire, and to indicate some of the problems to which its growth gave rise.

During the second half of the nineteenth century an urban and industrial community, most of whose members derived a livelihood, directly or indirectly, from work on the railways and at the local ironworks, grew up by the side of, and soon surpassed in both size and importance, the old village of Carnforth. The old and the new are still clearly visible and are readily distinguished on the ground. Old Carnforth is represented by several ancient farmsteads and houses along the former village street (North Road) and in the outlying parts of the parish. Most of these buildings are constructed of carboniferous limestone and their counterparts exist in many of the villages nearby. Victorian Carnforth, by contrast, is represented by streets of terraced cottages and more elaborate dwellings of the "villa" variety; by the main shopping centre (Market Street); and by a number of public buildings (local government offices, railway station, parish church, chapels, school). Some use has been made of limestone in this part of the town, but Victorian Carnforth is built principally of Millstone Grit which, like the limestone, was quarried locally. A third and very different element has been added since the 1920s, in the form of a large housing estate on the eastern side of the town. But neither the very old nor the very new is sufficiently prominent to conceal the nineteenth-century core and it is from this that most travellers along the A6 road derive their impression of the town. The growth of this upstart is discussed below.

I THE RAILWAYS AND THE IRONWORKS, 1840-1867

In the 1840s Carnforth was a rural township of some 300 inhabitants lying within the large ecclesiastical parish of

Warton.⁽¹⁾ Its population had risen by about ninety since 1801, but most of this increase occurred early in the century and there had been little net change during the past twenty years. Warton was much the larger village and contained in 1841 twice as many inhabitants as the small settlement on the other side of the Keer valley. Most of those who lived in Carnforth occupied houses by the side of the old Lancaster and Kendal road, but there were isolated farmsteads elsewhere (Fig. 14). Although there had been some new building in the intervening years, the lay-out of the village would not greatly have surprised John Lucas who had known it a hundred years earlier. In his time Carnforth village lay "upon high Ground . . . each House, with its Outhousing standing at a Considerable Distance from another".⁽²⁾ The tithe map of 1846 and the first edition of the Ordnance Survey six-inch map (1848) show that much the same plan existed in the 1840s.

The system of communications evolved during the nineteenth century was to prove of great importance to the township, and the tithe map was made at an interesting time, when part of the new system had already been completed and work was in progress on another part. The least important of these works in relation to the future development of the town was the Lancaster canal. The section of the canal between Tewitfield, about two miles to the north of Carnforth, and Preston was completed in the autumn of 1797, but there was no link between this length and the canal south of Preston until 1803.⁽³⁾ Only when the canal was completed between Tewitfield and Kendal in 1819 was a connection by inland waterway between the Wigan coal-field and Kendal at last established. No canal settlement as such ever developed at Carnforth, but the waterway appears to have stimulated the working of the extensive deposits of glacial sands and gravels in the township. Three gravel pits, the largest of which was owned by the canal company, had been opened alongside the waterway by 1845. More recently completed than the canal was the turnpike road which had been opened in 1820.⁽⁴⁾ This left the old Lancaster road near the south-western end of the village and ran straight across the low-lying alluvial flats of the lower Keer valley to the north. In the 1840s this road (the present A6) had no houses along it except near the

⁽¹⁾ Unless otherwise stated, all population statistics are from the decennial census volumes.

⁽²⁾ *History of Warton* (1931), ed. J. R. Ford and J. A. Fuller-Maitland, p. 119.

⁽³⁾ J. F. Curwen, "The Lancaster Canal", in *Trans. of the Cumb. & West. Antiq. & Arch. Soc.*, Vol. XVII, N.S. (1917), pp. 36, 38.

⁽⁴⁾ J. L. Hobbs, "The Turnpike roads of North Lonsdale", *ibid.*, Vol. LVI, N.S. (1956), pp. 272, 276.

junction with what is now Market Street, where there was an inn (Fig. 14). The old village was thus by-passed, and it was principally along the new road and between it and the Lancaster and Carlisle Railway that the Victorian town was eventually built.

When the title map was surveyed the Lancaster and Carlisle line was still under construction. The railway was authorised in June 1844; it was opened for passenger traffic as far as Oxenholme on 22 September 1846 and throughout on 17 December 1846. The line approached Carnforth from the south-west and was carried between the continuation of the high ground where the village lay and Hunting Hill to the west. Thereafter it ran on an embankment over the Keer meadows towards a gap in the hills to the north. At the point where a station was built, the line was about a quarter of a mile distant from the village.⁽⁵⁾ The main lines of communication through the township were thus shifted westward and away from the old settlement.

A further stage in the evolution of the railway system was reached in 1857, when a line was opened from Ulverston to a junction with the Lancaster and Carlisle Railway at Carnforth. At its western end the new line was connected with an extension of the original Furness Railway and was in this way linked with the iron-mining districts of Low Furness. As part of the works carried out along the route a new and "most commodious station" was built at the junction with the Lancaster and Carlisle line to handle the anticipated increase in traffic.⁽⁶⁾ In spite of these events the character of the township did not alter greatly during the 1850s and early 1860s. Rather these were years of slow change. The station, the sidings and engine sheds came to form an increasingly distinct group of features, the more prominent for being still surrounded by fields. Gravel-working continued to grow in importance and large quantities were sent away by water and rail.⁽⁷⁾ The population increased from 294 in 1851 to 393 ten years later. After 1864, however, the tempo of change quickened enormously and within a year or two a new town was being fashioned.

The most important single factor in bringing about this change was a decision made by a group of Manchester men to promote a company to smelt Furness haematite at Carnforth.

⁽⁵⁾ A station was probably ready for use by passengers in the autumn of 1846 or shortly afterwards (*Directors' Minutes, Lanc. & Carlisle R.*, 23 July 1845; 31 July 1846; 1 February 1847).

⁽⁶⁾ *Lancaster Guardian*, 29 August 1857; *Dir. Mins. (L. & C.)*, 27 April 1857.

⁽⁷⁾ *Dir. Mins. (L. & C.)*, 25 June 1850; Mannex, *Topography and Directory of North and South Lonsdale* (1866), p. 565.

The ore was readily accessible by way of the Furness lines, and the completion in 1861 of the South Durham and Lancashire Union Railway to a junction with the Lancaster and Carlisle line at Tebay allowed coke to be obtained direct from the Durham coalfield. Furthermore, when the company was promoted the construction of a new railway from Wennington, on the Skipton and Lancaster line, to Carnforth had been authorised, and a direct link with the iron and steel centres of the West Riding was thus likely to become available. It is possible that the decision to build the works at Carnforth was also influenced by the fact that the carboniferous limestones, which had already yielded ample proof in Furness of their richness in haematite, underlie much of the township and outcrop extensively in the district.⁽⁸⁾ If the prospect of a local supply of ore was a consideration, however, it was a relatively minor one compared with the facilities for assembly and despatch of raw materials and products offered by the various railway lines.

The leading promoter of the new company was Herbert John Walduck, an iron and copper merchant of Manchester.⁽⁹⁾ Associated with him were John Hall, silversmith; Thomas Ledward, merchant; James Pickles, iron merchant; William Rumney, calico printer; William Slater, solicitor; and Edward Lord, machine maker. With the exception of Lord, who came from Todmorden, all the promoters were Manchester men. The company was registered in August 1864 as the Carnforth Haematite Iron Company Ltd., with a capital of £100,000 divided into 200 shares of £500. Walduck was to finance the purchase of the necessary land in Carnforth and was to act as the sole agent for the company's pig-iron for a period of five years after the furnaces were blown-in. The share list for 1865 shows that no local interests were represented in the company at this time.⁽¹⁰⁾ Of the 155 shares taken up by September 1865, 91 were held by men with addresses in Manchester, 10 by shareholders who lived on the north-east coast, 14 by persons in Birmingham and the Black Country and the rest by persons who came mostly from the West Riding, west Cumberland and London.⁽¹¹⁾

⁽⁸⁾ The limestone was used in the blast furnaces as a flux and quarries were opened to work it.

⁽⁹⁾ Company records, P.R.O.

⁽¹⁰⁾ An apparent exception was Edward Barton, engineer, of Warton. Barton was an employee of the company, however, and at this date must recently have arrived in Warton. He lived at Warton Hall until 1873, when he moved to his new house, Warton Grange.

⁽¹¹⁾ Henry Bessemer and his brother-in-law Robert Longsdon were two of the original shareholders.

The site chosen for the ironworks lay in the angle formed by the Warton road and the line of the L.N.W.R. not far from the river Keer, from which supplies of water for industrial purposes were shortly to be taken⁽¹²⁾ (Figs. 14 and 15). When the line from Wennington was completed in 1867, the site lay within a triangular island formed by the road and the railways (Fig. 15). Under the supervision of Edward Barton, who, though only in his thirties, had already accumulated considerable experience of iron-making techniques on Tees-side and in west Cumberland, blast furnaces and ancillary plant were erected and connected with the L.N.W.R. by a short spur line. Local contractors appear to have been employed for the masonry work—including the 220ft. high chimney that was to dominate Carnforth's skyline until 1931—but much of the equipment came from south Lancashire. The first pig-iron was made in the summer of 1866.

It was estimated that the works would employ between 200 and 500 men, and the directors decided at an early date that it would be necessary to build a workers' settlement close to the plant. In 1864 a row of twenty cottages (then or shortly afterwards known as Bessemer Terrace) was built along the Warton road on the company's land. It was probably soon after this time that a start was made on the construction of the rows of stone and brick cottages which stand at Millhead (Dudley) in Warton (Fig. 15). All this could not fail to arouse interest locally. The *Lancaster Gazette* reported with some pride, in October 1864, that the new ironworks would "vie with any kindred works in the black country, or the noted Barrow itself"; and a contemporary farther north observed that "from a small, if not insignificant village, Carnforth is now fast rising into importance".⁽¹³⁾

The new ironworks were not alone in contributing to this growth. The completion of the Furness and Midland Joint Company's line from Wennington further enhanced the importance of Carnforth junction, and it is from about this time (1867-9) that the postal services organised from here began to assume considerable regional significance. To work the enlarged junction effectively more men were required, but accommodation was difficult to find and the railway companies therefore began to secure houses for the use of their own employees. Six railway cottages had been built at the side of the Lancaster canal by the spring of 1866.

⁽¹²⁾ The Lancaster and Carlisle line was leased to the L.N.W.R. in 1859.

⁽¹³⁾ *Westmorland Gazette*, 28 July 1866. The files of the *Westmorland Gazette*, *Lancaster Gazette*, *Lancaster Guardian* and *Lancaster Observer* have been used extensively in the preparation of this paper. To avoid a multiplicity of footnotes, the reference is given hereafter only when a direct quotation is made.

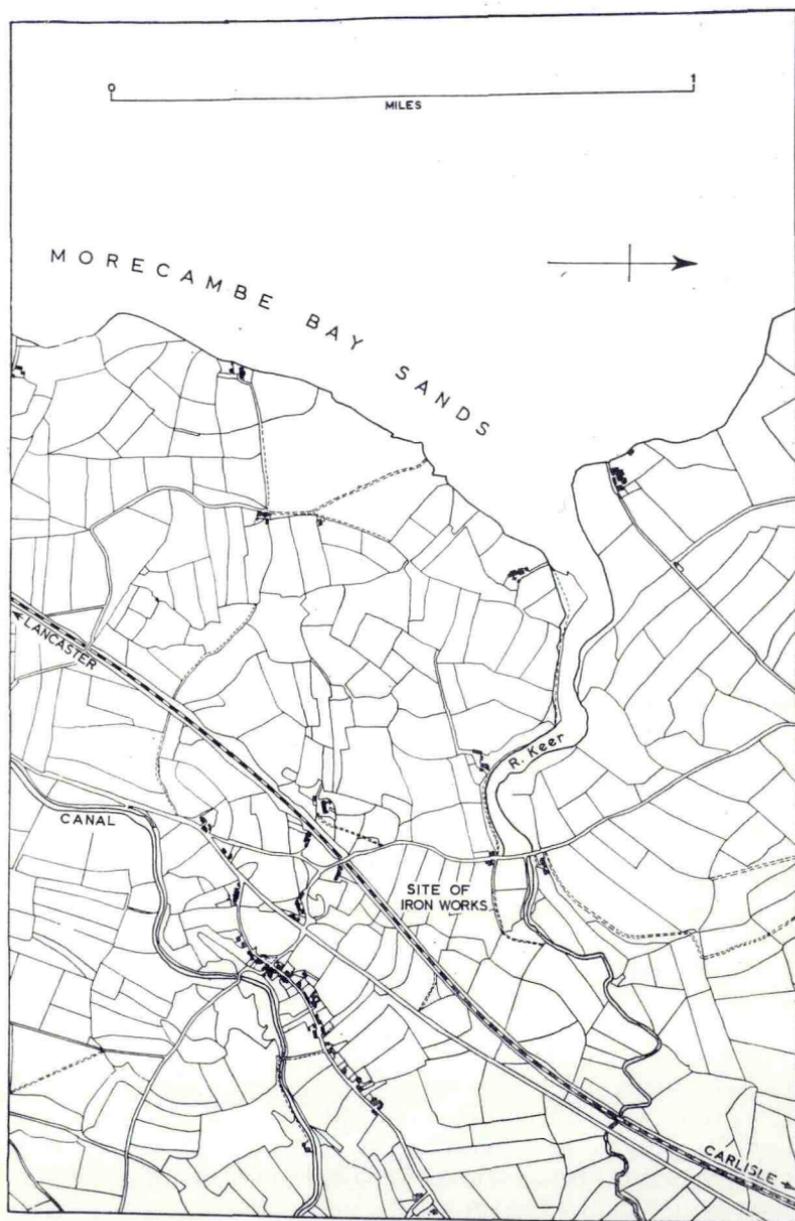


Figure 14. CARNFORTH IN 1846

The map (re-drawn from the tithe map) shows the old village surrounded by fields. Detail north of the River Keer has been added from the Ordnance Survey 6" map of 1848. North lies to the right.

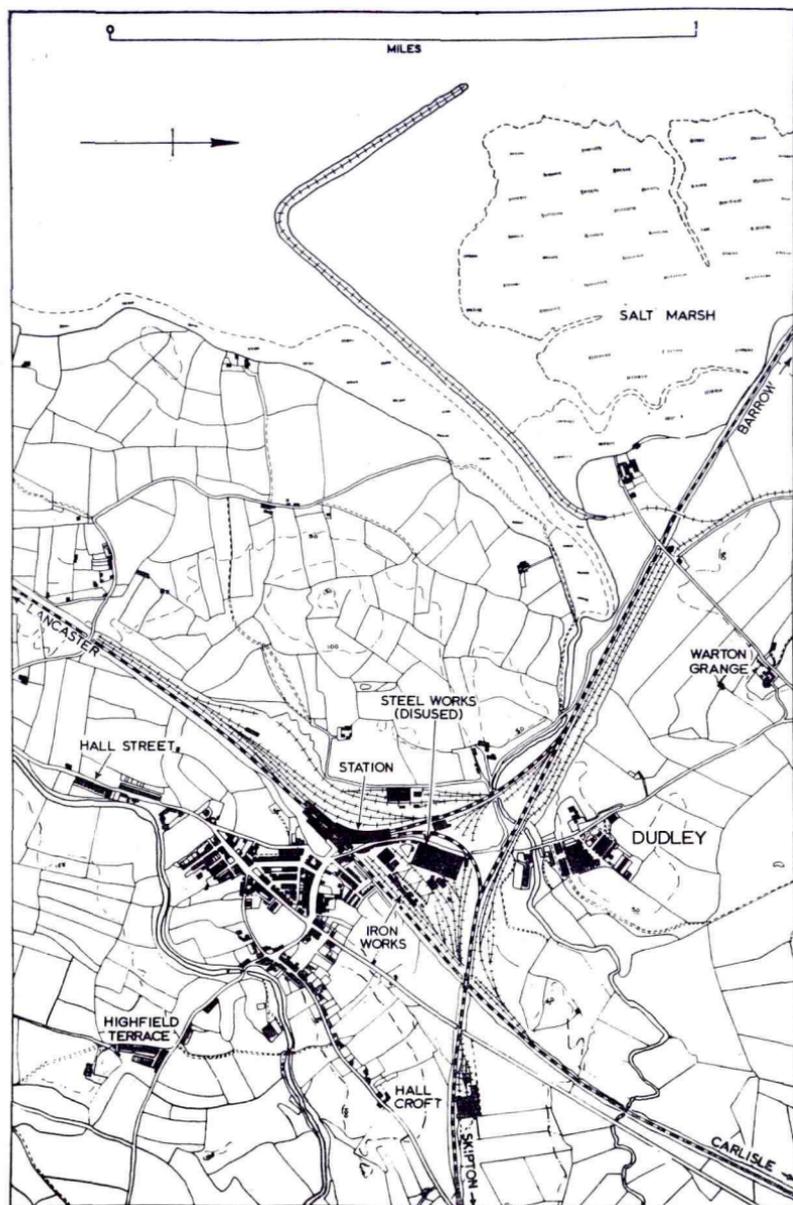


Figure 15. CARNFORTH IN 1890

The village has become a small town. The map is based (by permission) on the Ordnance Survey 6" map published in 1893 (revised to 1890).

Within three years, then, a considerable change had been brought about in both the landscape and the economy of the township. But not only Carnforth was affected. Employees of the railway companies lived at Warton also and that place was influenced in growing measure by events across the river Keer. The community at Dudley⁽¹⁴⁾ was socially and economically part of the developing town and came to share some of its problems in an acute form. The demand for accommodation, too, stimulated the building trade as far afield as Lancaster. As one newspaper justly observed, "a new life seemed to have been infused into the locality".⁽¹⁵⁾

II A NEW TOWN, 1868-1900

Between 1861 and 1871 Carnforth's population increased from 393 to 1,091 and Warton's from 581 to 1,035. Ten years later Carnforth had 1,879 inhabitants and Warton 1,471. From being villages with little to distinguish them in point of size from many of their neighbours, they became the largest centres of population in the district. Developments here seem to have had the effect of first checking and then reversing a flow of people from the area, and during the period 1871-1880, when a natural increase of population of 928 was recorded for the Warton Registration Sub-District, the total population rose by 1,416.⁽¹⁶⁾ A considerable amount of immigration is suggested by these figures. Unfortunately it is not possible at present to determine where these persons came from.⁽¹⁷⁾

In the absence of a detailed map for the 1870s and (before 1878) of records showing where buildings were to be erected, it is not always possible to be precise about the localities where building activity was most concentrated. Certain points emerge fairly clearly, however, and the general picture can be drawn with some confidence. For the first years of its existence the Carnforth Ironworks were equipped only to produce haematite (Bessemer) pig-iron. By 1870, however, the directors had decided to enter the steel-making end of the business, and in that year the capital of the company was increased by £30,000 for this

⁽¹⁴⁾ The name is said locally to have arisen from the presence there of immigrants from the Black Country town of the same name. The story is not unlikely, but no documentary proof has been found to support it.

⁽¹⁵⁾ *Westmorland Gazette*, 28 July 1866.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Based on the figures for natural increase of population given in the Annual Reports of the Registrar-General for the years 1851-1880.

⁽¹⁷⁾ The census schedules after 1851 are not open to inspection and the published census volumes for 1871 and 1881 are not helpful for immigration into places of this size. The Warton parish registers and obituaries in Lancaster papers confirm that immigrants were drawn from many parts of the country.

purpose. Shortly afterwards there were added to the four blast furnaces then in existence a fifth furnace, two Bessemer converters and plate and rail mills.⁽¹⁸⁾ This activity, but still more the general prosperity of the company in the early 1870s, was reflected in the continued growth of Warton and Carnforth. By 1872 about 100 houses had been completed in Dudley and others were under construction.

On the Carnforth side of the river Keer expansion was also taking place. As early as 1866 it was reported that "the village has been gradually expanding" and that "preparations had been made in the immediate vicinity for a new town".⁽¹⁹⁾ The phase of construction before 1878 affected principally the eastern side of the Lancaster road, Market Street, the Kellet road (across the canal: the first rows of cottages were built here in 1878) and the village itself, where some of the gaps between the old houses began to be filled. The steel works contributed to the development of the Lancaster road properties in rather an unusual way. During the erection of the works it was found necessary to demolish Bessemer Terrace, but the cottages were rebuilt on the Lancaster road and are now known as Hall Street. For the most part, however, although company-inspired, the building activity on the Carnforth side of the Keer was not, as in Dudley, company-sponsored.

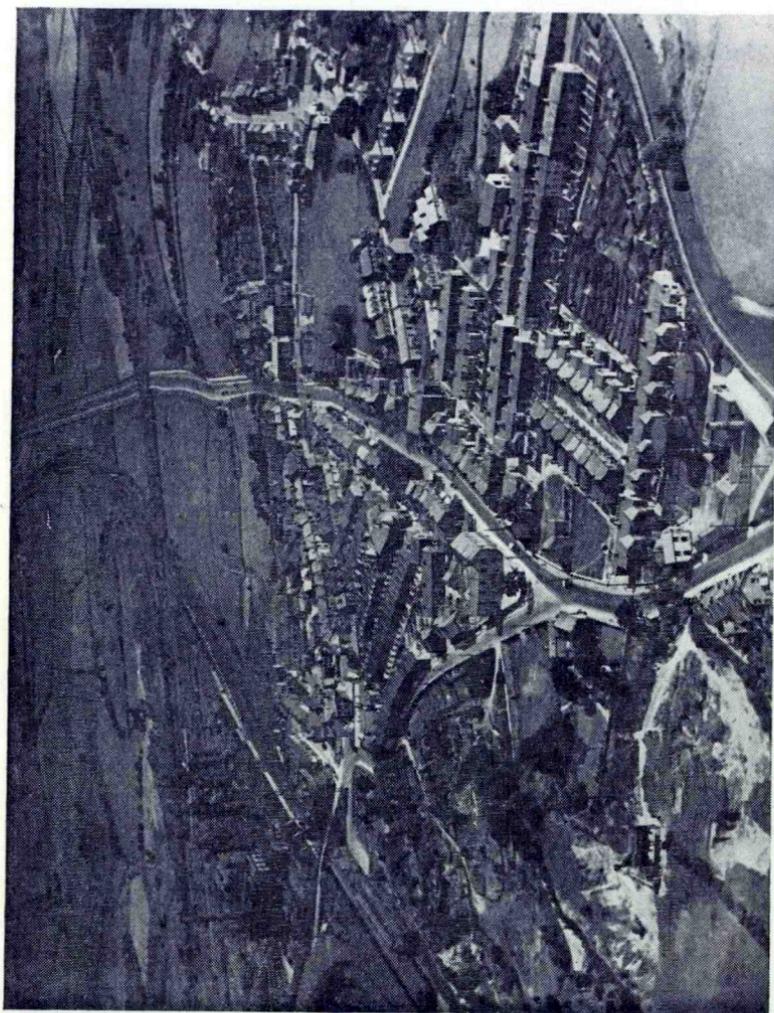
Provision was made at this time for the educational and spiritual needs of the growing population. The Dean of Worcester and the Rev. Gilbert Ainslie had given land for a school and house in 1849,⁽²⁰⁾ but by 1872 the school accommodation was inadequate and enlargements were made. In the following year the present parish church (Christ Church) was consecrated and Carnforth's Church of England congregation had from this time a resident minister. The Nonconformists, too, received strength from the immigrant population and in 1870 the Wesleyan Methodists opened a new chapel. Three years later the Primitive Methodists laid the foundation stone of a chapel. The Congregationalists grew rapidly in numbers after 1878 and by 1882 they had both a chapel and a resident minister. It was not long before they opened a day school.

In the 1880s further building took place along the western side of the Lancaster road; in the triangle formed by Market Street, Lancaster road and New Street; near the station; and along the Kellet road. The built-up area in 1890, when Carn-

⁽¹⁸⁾ *Mineral Statistics; Journ. Iron and Steel Inst.*, 1871, p. 140; *Iron*, 22 February 1873.

⁽¹⁹⁾ *Westmorland Gazette*, 28 July 1866.

⁽²⁰⁾ *Churchwardens' Book of Warton*, no. 1, August 1849.



Photograph by Aerofilms Ltd.

Plate 12. CARNFORTH IN 1933

An aerial view looking north. The old village appears at right centre; the turnpike road of 1820 runs through the centre of the view; and the partly demolished ironworks lie by the L.N.W.R. on the left.

forth's population was about 2,600, is shown on Fig. 15. New houses continued to appear during the last decade of the century but by 1890 the phase of rapid growth was over. Between 1878 and 1890 plans for approximately 225 new buildings in Carnforth and the Dudley portion of Warton were approved by the Rural Sanitary Authority; between 1891 and 1903 the number was about 144, of which 102 were approved in the four years 1896, 1901, 1902 and 1903.⁽²¹⁾ Confirmation that the rate of growth slowed down considerably towards the end of the century comes from the Census returns. In the decade 1891-1901 Carnforth's population showed a net increase of 360, but this was a smaller number than at any comparable period since 1861.

The local newspapers provide some indication—unfortunately not always of a quantitative kind—of the extent to which the growth and prosperity of the town during these formative years were bound up with railway communications and the state of the trade in haematite pig-iron. The expansion of the ironworks and the growing importance of the railway junction were accompanied by an extension of the hotel accommodation, which had been very limited hitherto. The facilities afforded by the railways were primarily responsible for the establishment of a Spring Fair for cattle in 1870 and a fortnightly auction mart for cattle and sheep six years later. Fluctuations in the iron trade, as reflected in the number of furnaces in blast, form a prominent item of local news throughout the period, although it is rare to find a statement of the number of men affected by such changes. The closing of the steel works, however, was said in 1889 to have led to the unemployment of 300 men, many of whom subsequently left the town.⁽²²⁾

The presence of the ironworks was felt in other ways as well. The "Ironworks Interest", as it was called in the 1890s, was led by Edward Barton, who in the course of his long association with the company rose to be its chairman and managing director. Barton did a great deal for the town and in at least two of his important contributions to its affairs—the promotion

⁽²¹⁾ The R.S.A. Minute Books are in the Lancs. Record Office. The plans in 1896 concerned chiefly houses to be built for the L.N.W.R., and at the later dates an estate at Crag Bank. The L.N.W.R. houses (in prominent red brick) were completed in 1898. Further details of the railway and Crag Bank houses occur in Carnforth U.D.C. Sanitary and Highways Committee Minute Books.

⁽²²⁾ The steelworks had a curious history. Walduck (who was in a position to know) said in 1881 that up to that time they had never worked. The *Mineral Statistics* suggest sporadic operation. In 1884 they were reorganized, apparently to produce steel wire, and were working during 1885 and 1886. In 1890 they were "disused" and in 1898 were dismantled and sold by auction.

of the Carnforth Gas Company in 1871-72 and the Carnforth and District Waterworks Company in 1877—he was supported by the resources of the ironworks.

III SOME PROBLEMS, 1864-1894

It was inevitable that problems should be created by the rapid expansion of population in a place such as Carnforth was in 1864, for neither the administrative machinery nor the experience necessary to deal adequately with the circumstances of rapid change existed locally. Two of the most pressing problems in the 1860s and 1870s were concerned with sewerage and a supply of pure water, but there were also complaints about the neglect of streets and the character of some of the new houses.

Complaints about the sanitary condition of the town were soon forthcoming both from those who lived in it and from others. It was claimed that there was “not a proper drain or sewer in all Carnforth”, that the streets were not kept in repair, that houses were being “built up anyhow”, and that sewerage percolated through the walls of some houses and entered the living rooms, “which was far from being a desirable thing”!⁽²³⁾ The chairman of the Rural Sanitary Authority reported to his colleagues in Lancaster, after a visit to Carnforth in 1873, that the “sewerage was . . . in a very objectionable condition”. The most severe criticisms, however, were reserved for Dudley where, after an outbreak of fever, conditions were described in the editorial columns of the *Lancaster Guardian*.⁽²⁴⁾ In Dudley, it was said in 1872, “the houses . . . are crowded together, most improperly; the privies and ashpits in some cases actually adjoin the houses, and in others face the back doors at the distance of a few feet. There has not been the slightest provision made for surface drainage, and the impurities thrown from the houses are allowed to decompose in the streets. The only water to which the inhabitants have access is obtained from a spring connected with a dyke in a neighbouring field”. “Need we wonder”, it was asked, that “fever should be generated here and that the infant mortality should be high?” The writer went on to blame “one of the most wealthy and prosperous companies in the North of England” for the creation “of this nursery of fever”. Conditions were undoubtedly bad, but in fairness to the company it should be mentioned that when the sanitary state of Dudley came up for discussion at meetings of

⁽²³⁾ *Lanc. Guard.* 16 March 1872; 1 April 1874; 8 April 1876.

⁽²⁴⁾ 14 December 1872.

the Rural Sanitary Authority in later years, criticism of the buildings was not infrequently combined with criticism of the way in which some of the facilities, admittedly meagre, were being used. In 1888, for example, the Medical Officer of Health for the Authority reported that "only in one or two instances" were the outbuildings in proper use, many of them housing fowls, ducks and rabbits.

A system of sewers and an increased supply of water were in fact urgently required in both Carnforth and Warton, and to a large extent the provision of one entailed the provision of the other. Sewers needed flushing and an increase in the use of water would inevitably be followed by further problems of disposal. It is not, therefore, surprising to find that the first system of sewers to be laid in the two places was soon followed by a scheme to provide a supply of water in abundance. Not long after its formation in 1872 the Lancaster Rural Sanitary Authority began to discuss plans to lay sewers in Carnforth and Dudley. Contracts for the work were signed in 1874 and 1875, and were carried out in 1876. The river Keer near its outfall proved to be a useful outlet for the main sewer, and the water required for flushing purposes was at this time obtained from the canal.

The provision of a water supply was a more difficult and costly undertaking. That it was urgently needed there can be no doubt. Warton and Carnforth obtained their supplies from wells and springs. These were inadequate to meet the demand and in any case were too easily subject to pollution to be used with safety in a crowded community. Tests made on behalf of the Rural Sanitary Authority showed that springs and the river Keer (which was already being used by the ironworks) could provide an additional supply, but of such hardness that it was not likely to prove acceptable. A suitable source was eventually found, about two miles away, in Over Kellet township, in the form of a tributary stream of the Keer. Since the gathering ground was largely underlain by Millstone Grit, the water was much softer than that obtained from sources in the limestones. The Waterworks Company, which had taken over from the Rural Sanitary Authority the task of providing a supply, constructed a reservoir (Pedder Pots) in 1879 and conveyed water by gravity flow to parts of Carnforth and Warton.⁽²⁵⁾

Both the sewage and water supply schemes subsequently required further attention, but by 1879 a good start had been

⁽²⁵⁾ The company had spent £13,000 by the end of 1879. Carnforth's water still comes from Pedder Pots, although the responsibility for its provision has rested with the Lancaster Water Undertaking since 1953.

made in the provision of these essential public works. That these developments were timely is suggested by the figures for mortality and disease in the annual and quarterly reports of the Medical Officer of the Rural Sanitary Authority. There were places within his survey where the record of deaths and disease in the 1880s was considerably worse than in Carnforth and Warton,⁽²⁶⁾ and it is hard to believe that the schemes completed here in the preceding years did not contribute to the relatively favourable health record.

One other problem should be mentioned. As Carnforth grew, so did the demand for an administrative machine in keeping with its urban function. In particular the desirability of the control of sanitary matters by an authority in Lancaster whose area of supervision (in 1872) included twenty-two townships and parishes, was frequently questioned at meetings of the ratepayers. The Authority obtained urban powers in respect of Carnforth in 1874 and of Warton in 1877, but this move did not satisfy those who wished to see local affairs more firmly in local hands. Two attempts to secure greater control of sanitary matters failed (in 1876 and 1886), but a third and more far-reaching attempt was successful, and in 1894 the township became an Urban District. It is fitting that this account should end with the official recognition of Carnforth as an urban community.

POSTSCRIPT

The town's problems during the past half-century have been very different from those of the earlier period. The population has grown very slowly indeed (from 3,040 in 1901 to 3,388 in 1951) and in fact it declined during the decade 1921-1931. The railways, limestone quarries and gravel workings remain, but the ironworks have gone. After a period of irregular working in the 1920s they were finally closed in 1929 and the plant and site offered for sale. They were bought by Thomas W. Ward, Ltd., of Sheffield, who subsequently dismantled the works. A link with the origins of the town some seventy years earlier was thus broken.⁽²⁷⁾

⁽²⁶⁾ There were healthier places, too, but the annual death-rates in the 1880s never approached the figure recorded for Galgate for the five years ending 31 December 1887 (an average of 26 per 1000). The movement of railwaymen and the turnover of workers at the ironworks presented special problems in Carnforth, especially during epidemics.

⁽²⁷⁾ The site is now occupied by an ordnance depot and the warehouses of a wool company. The rail facilities of Carnforth still make this island site a useful one.

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