

‘Honeygreave’ and the Rock House ferry*

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I

In the published Bebington parish registers for the years 1558 to 1701 there occurs, 44 times between 1585 and 1692, the place-name ‘Honeygreave’, 30 in relation to christenings and 14 to burials (see appendix).¹ The name, which does not recur after 1701 in the unpublished registers, was one of only three – apart from those of familiar villages or hamlets – used to denote the dwellings of individual parishioners. Its meaning is ‘Honey Grove’ or ‘Honey Wood’, and the allusion is apparently to honeysuckle, as in the Landican fieldname ‘Honey Field’.² This pleasingly bucolic toponym is unremarkable in all respects but one: it is not found anywhere else. No trace of Honeygreave features in the recent and exhaustive survey *The place-names of Cheshire*,³ even in the sizeable appendix of rare, unidentified or failed names. But although the record of its existence is confined to the Bebington registers, its occurrence there was nevertheless frequent enough, and its demise recent enough, to call for explanation. What and where was it, and why did it fail? The enigmatic ‘Honeysuckle Wood’ deserves attention; certainly more than it was given in the published registers, where no editorial explanation or comment is offered and where it is not even included in the index – hence its absence from *Place-names*.

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¹ F. Saunders and W. F. Irvine, eds, *The Bebington parish registers, 1558-1701* (Liverpool, 1896), *passim*.

² J. McNeil Dodgson, *The place-names of Cheshire* (5 vols, Chester, 1970-97), IV, 267.

³ *Ibid.*, IV, 245-61.

The total of 44 references must at least signify that Honeygreave was to be found in one or other of the five constituent townships of the parish – Lower and Higher (or Over) Bebington, Poulton Lancelyn, Storeton and Tranmere – and the presumption is fortified by the much smaller numbers of references to such sizeable places outside the parish as Bromborough (26) and Liverpool (twelve). As for its nature, the range of choices is limited. Its late disappearance means that it can hardly have been more than a hamlet, if as much. It scarcely compares with the other known hamlets or minor settlements in the parish, only three of which are acknowledged by the registers: Hinderton in Lower Tranmere, Holt Hill in Upper Tranmere, and Watts or Watch Heath on the boundary of Tranmere and Prenton townships. Each of these was plainly more populous than Honeygreave, for in the same period up to 1701 there are 155 references to Holt Hill, 125 to Hinderton and 82 to Watts Heath. Moreover, Hinderton and Watts Heath are mentioned only from 1622 and 1636 respectively, whereas Honeygreave (like Holt Hill) appears as early as the mid 1580s, the date at which the registers first began to note places more specific than townships. To have claimed only half the number of references achieved by the insignificant squatter settlement at Watts Heath⁴ in over twice the length of time, Honeygreave hardly qualifies for admission even to that modest company.

If not a hamlet, Honeygreave must have been more like a single residence, which would at least help to explain the sudden disappearance of its name. Houses as a rule fare significantly worse than hamlets in the Bebington registers, where not even the manorial halls of individual townships, at the top of the social tree, are identified as such. In all the five townships of the parish, there were (and continued to be for much of the eighteenth century) only two named houses: Derby House and Rock House. These lay within a few hundred yards of each other, close to the Mersey and to the Tranmere and Higher Bebington boundary, and they offer the only remaining parallels to Honeygreave. Derby House (established, as will be seen, in the early 1560s) is

⁴ For Watts Heath, see J. E. Allison, *Sidelights on Tranmere* (Birkenhead History Society, 1976), pp. 28-29.

mentioned in the published registers 13 times from 1612, and Rock House eleven times from 1653. It is not at all clear why these two in particular should feature so prominently in the registers, although Derby House, according to both William Webb *c.*1620⁵ and Randle Holme *c.*1668,⁶ was the most considerable place in Higher Bebington township, the only one they found worthy of mention. It was essentially a private residence, though this is less clear in the case of Rock House, which first appears under that name in the Wirral sequestrators' accounts for 1645-46.⁷ In the 1680s, and no doubt much earlier, Rock House combined the roles of farmhouse and ferry house, in which latter function it was the ancestor of the Royal Rock Hotel of the 1820s and 1830s. In the 1663 hearth tax returns it was rated at four hearths, one more than Derby House, and was evidently a sizeable establishment, by this yardstick surpassed in the parish only by Mr Hockenhull's house in Tranmere (five hearths) and matched only by Lower Bebington and Tranmere Halls – establishments recognisable only from the names of their occupants – and the unnamed houses of Messrs Kent and Cowes in Tranmere.⁸

A closer look at the parishioners located at Honeygreave in the registers helps to define the problem a little more sharply. They and their dates of inclusive periods of residence can be summarised thus (further details with individual occurrences will be found in the appendix):

Peter Gill	May 1585-Feb. 1593
William Hodleston	June 1603
Richard Rideing	May 1620
Ellen Younge	Sept. 1631
Thomas Smith	Sept. 1631-May 1635
Richard Sharp	July 1642-Nov. 1643

⁵ 'Description of the hundred of Wirral', in W. W. Mortimer, *The history of the hundred of Wirral* (London, 1847), appendix, p. 12.

⁶ Randle Holme's account of Wirral *c.*1668, in *ibid.*, appendix, p. 16. See also *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd ser. 47 (1952), no. 9,659.

⁷ British Library, Harleian manuscript 2,018, f. 21; *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd ser. 50 (1955), no. 10,019.

⁸ 1663 hearth tax, *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd ser. 8 (1910), no. 1,572 (Overbebington) and no. 1,580 (Tranmere).

Daniel Robinson	Jan. 1644-Mar. 1655
John Smith	Feb. 1644
William Hodgson	Sept. 1647
Martin Brough	Sept. 1648-Apr. 1654
George Smith	Apr. 1658-Feb. 1680
Christopher Orme	July 1668-Mar. 1672
Thomas Eccles	Sept. 1669-Feb. 1673
Dorothy Kay	Apr. 1672
Mary Smith	June 1674
William Williams	Nov. 1675-Jan. 1680
Henry Newbold	Feb. 1679
Robert Bushell	Sept. 1682-Apr. 1687
Mary James	Dec. 1687
Thomas Smith	Aug. 1689
John Davyes	May 1690
[] Bell	Nov. 1692

It can be seen from this that before 1642 and after 1682, only one family at a time was recorded at Honeygreave. At both periods one such family was the Smiths, who are first noted in 1631 and last noted in 1689; since they also occur several times between these dates, it is reasonable to suppose that they were in continuous residence throughout the whole period, despite a lengthy spell in 1645-58 during which they must simply have had no christenings or deaths to register. From 1642, however, they were joined by others, including the Sharps (1642-43), the Robinsons (1644-55), the Broughs (1648-54), the Ormes (1668-72), the Eccleses (1669-73) and the Williamses (1675-80). In fact, from 1648 there were occasionally two families in addition to the Smiths, Honeygreave being shared with Robinson and Brough for most of 1648-54, with Orme and Eccles in 1669-72 and with Newbold and Williams in 1679. No doubt, at least some of these families resided at Honeygreave for longer periods than allowed for by the accidents of baptism and death, and it is equally possible that there were other, shorter-term, residents who escaped mention in the registers altogether.

The important point, however, is that the number of families present at any one time during the period of multiple occupancy *c.*1640-*c.*1680 (dates of no obvious significance in

themselves) was never higher than three. This further rules out Honeygreave as a hamlet, for even in that most modest of settlements the families of servants and farm workers have to be taken into account as well as those of the principal householders. The recorded population of Honeygreave is, in fact, more compatible with that of a mansion capable of accommodating several families. The number of christenings there was more than twice as great as for burials (30 to 14 or 2.14:1), a ratio roughly comparable with the eight christenings to three burials at Rock House (2.6:1) and the eight christenings to five burials at Derby House (1.6:1), and rather less so with the ratio of 1.3:1 for Higher Bebington township overall. To that extent, the parallel with large houses holds good, but there is also a marked dissimilarity. Honeygreave appears in the parish registers far more often than either Rock House or Derby House. Even during the period 1645 to 1692 when all three names were current, it features 34 times against nine times for the former and five for the latter. Less than a hamlet and busier than a sizeable private house, Honeygreave defies ready classification.

The only way of advancing the enquiry is by taking a wider view of the persons recorded in the registers as living there. It is possible, even likely, that successive keepers of the registers were less than consistent in the way in which they detailed individual parishioners' whereabouts. In fact, there is ample evidence that this was so. Thus there are 34 references to parishioners at Holt Hill in the 1580s and 1590s, but only two in the 1600s and 1610s when the same persons began to be accredited instead to Tranmere, the parent township. It is therefore conceivable that a person might be assigned to Honeygreave on one occasion but to its township (whichever it was) on another. If alternative attributions of Honeygreave residents are to be taken into account, some obvious hazards have to be guarded against. One of these is the risk of confusing different people with the same surname. Even if the name was common, however, the risk is probably low, for it must have been primarily to avoid confusion of this kind that the registers gave details of location in the first place. Another is the possibility that a family may have changed address within the parish, perhaps within the same township, though in a sparsely populated district

that contingency, too, seems unlikely. In the event, the tracking of Honeygreave residents within the parish turns out to be a more illuminating exercise than could have been expected, very few of them not being found elsewhere:

Recorded at Honeygreave	Recorded elsewhere in the parish
Peter Gill 1585, 1593	Higher Bebington 1588, 1608, 1612; Tranmere 1616 and (probably his son, Peter junior) 1643; Upton 1644, 1653
William Hodleston 1603	'Woodd' 1590, 1591; Higher Bebington 1590, 1595 and 1599
Richard Rideing 1620	'Bebington' 1613, 1614
Ellen Younge 1631	Tranmere 1602
Thomas Smith 1631, 1632, 1635	Higher Bebington 1658
Richard Sharpe 1642, 1643	No other local reference
Daniel Robinson 1644, 1649, 1650, 1655	Tranmere 1641, 1646; Birkenhead 1648; Rock House 1653; Tranmere 1659; 1653, Storeton 1659; Hinderton 1670, 1681
John Smith 1644	Tranmere 1640; 'de Ferry-house' 1649
William Hodgson 1647	'Bebington' 1628, 1633, 1636, 1637, 1640, 1644, 1648; Lower Bebington 1659, 1677
Martin Brough 1648, 1654	Tranmere 1656

George Smith 1658, 1661, 1667, 1675, 1678, 1680	Rock House 1663; Tranmere 1669, 1683
Christopher Orme 1668, 1672	Higher Bebington 1665; Rock House 1670
Thomas Eccles 1669, 1673	Tranmere 1629, 1631; Birket Wood 1657; Tranmere 1666; Rock House 1670; Tranmere 1672
Dorothy Kay 1672	No other reference, but an Edward Key is recorded at Derby House 1639, 1641
Mary Smith 1674	No other local reference
William Williams 1675, 1680	Tranmere 1668; Lower Bebington 1668
Henry Newbold 1679	Higher Bebington 1634, 1635, 1649; Tranmere 1673; Storeton 1674, 1676
Robert Bushell 1682, 1687	Hinderton 1652; Tranmere 1668, 1672; Rock House 1685
Mary James 1687	No other local reference
Thomas Smith 1689	Rock House 1690
John Davyes 1690	Hinderton 1658; Tranmere 1693, 1698; Holt Hill 1698
[] Bell, 1692	No other local reference

It emerges that of these 65 additional references to the 22 recorded residents of Honeygreave, 27 concern the township of Tranmere, or specific parts of it such as Hinderton or Holt Hill. Not very far behind are 18 references to Higher Bebington township, including seven to Rock House and Derby House.

There are also three to Lower Bebington and nine to 'Bebington', which could refer to either Higher or Lower but should probably be taken to denote the latter as the mother township of the parish. A location in Tranmere would therefore seem to be indicated, and perhaps one towards the southern fringe of the township in view of the high number of references to Higher Bebington and particularly to Rock and Derby Houses. In addition, several of the other places named, Birket (one mention), Hinderton (four) and 'Ferry House' (one), were riverside locations and, like Rock House, seem to hint that Honeygreave might be found at the Mersey end of the Tranmere/Higher Bebington boundary. This is as far as evidence of this kind can safely take us.

Among the parish register entries, however, are some that fix the location of Honeygreave beyond any doubt:

	Honeygreave	Rock House
Daniel Robinson	1644-55	1653
George Smith	1658-80	1663
Christopher Orme	1668-72	1670
Thomas Eccles	1669-73	1670
Robert Bushell	1682-87	1685
Thomas Smith	1689	1690

As shown, six of the persons recorded as resident at Honeygreave between 1644 and 1689 are also registered at matching dates as occupants of Rock House. This cannot be coincidence. The names Orme, Eccles and Bushell are uncommon enough to rule out confusion of identity, not least when all six names follow each other in the same fixed succession at either place. Small wonder at the comparability of Honeygreave and Rock House already noted; the only possible conclusion is that they were the same place. The identification also resolves the disparity in the frequency and incidence of references to each of them in the parish registers. It suggests that Honeygreave was the earlier name, and that Rock House, first occurring in 1653 in the registers (and in 1645 elsewhere), was an alternative designation and one that from the 1690s was to supplant the old name entirely.

Thus Honeygreave was Rock House, and several of its residents are associated with a ferry. In the first of these cases, the

John Smith who occurs in 'Tranmere' in 1640 and at Honeygreave in 1645 is described as 'de Ferry-house' in 1649.⁹ Saunders and Irvine, the editors of the published Bebington registers, identified the 'Ferry-house' as Woodside, but the registers have little difficulty in specifying Woodside when Woodside was what was meant,¹⁰ and an unspecific ferry house is more likely to have been situated within the parish than outside it – a conclusion fortified by the record of a widow Smith holding Rock House and a ferryboat in March 1645.¹¹ A second resident was Thomas Smith, probably John's brother and the son of John Smith, 'waterman of Birkett Wood',¹² who was a defendant in a legal case of September 1628 concerning Woodside ferry rights.¹³ Thomas did not claim to have worked at Tranmere ferry, but his brother Peter, though not himself a recorded resident of Honeygreave, testified that he had operated the Birkett, Tranmere and Eastham boats at various times.¹⁴ Fourthly and finally, Peter's brother-in-law, Richard Rydinge, ferryman of Liverpool, recorded by the parish registers as in 'Bebington' in 1613-14 and at Honeygreave in 1620, testified at the same hearing that he had operated the Tranmere ferry for seven years between spells at Woodside and Eastham.¹⁵

The identification of Honeygreave with Rock House clearly calls for a closer look at the early 'Tranmere' or 'Rock' ferry, beginning with the matter of its nomenclature. The ultimate precedent for the usage 'Tranmere ferry', adhered to in legal documents and proceedings as late as 1830, would seem to be its earliest recorded appearance in 1357 as the *passagium et batillagium de Tranemoll*.¹⁶ By the seventeenth century, this legalistic affiliation of the ferry to Tranmere was at odds with popular usage as

⁹ Saunders and Irvine, *Bebington parish registers*, p. 79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 115, 116, 180, 210 (over the period 1652-99).

¹¹ British Library, Harleian manuscript 2,018, f. 21; *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd ser. 50 (1955), no. 10,019.

¹² F. Saunders and W. F. Irvine, eds, *The baptismal, marriage and burial registers of the parish of Bidston in the county of Chester, 1581-1700* (Birkenhead, 1893), pp. 54, xviii.

¹³ R. Stewart-Brown, *Birkenhead priory and the Mersey ferry* (Liverpool, 1925), p. 154.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Dodgson, *Place-names of Cheshire*, IV, 258.

preserved by contemporary maps and diaries, which invariably call it the Rock House ferry or, from the mid eighteenth century, Rock Ferry.¹⁷ The duality is not too difficult to account for. Rock House and its ferry, though in Higher Bebington, immediately adjoined the boundary with Tranmere, much the more populous and considerable township of the two, and so the likelier to have lent its name. Moreover, much of the land on either side of the boundary remained in the same hands from at least the early fourteenth century until the late eighteenth, tending to uncertainty or indifference about its exact line. Hence, no doubt, such imprecise descriptions of its location as ‘in Tranmere or Bebington’, recorded in a deed of 1716.¹⁸ The formal, Tranmere, appellation persisted until the outset of the nineteenth century, when it was taken over by an entirely new enterprise operating from Tranmere Pool, at the far, northern, end of Tranmere township.¹⁹ With that, the ancient ferry was finally left free to assume its everyday name of Rock (House) Ferry unopposed.

In addition to serving as a ferry house, Rock House also functioned as a farm. Deeds from the 1680s until as late as 1830 consistently describe it as such or call it simply ‘Rock Farm’. An indenture of 16 June 1685, for example, refers to ‘all that messuage farm and tenement now or late in the occupation or possession of George Smith commonly called the Rockhouse... and all those two boats commonly called the Rock boats with

¹⁷ Diaries referring to Rock House ferry in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries include those of Thomas Bellingham, for 13 Aug. 1689 (*Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd ser. 35 (1940), no. 7,832); George Comberbach, recorder of Chester, for 21 Jan. 1692 (*Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd ser. 34 (1939), no. 7,532); Henry Prescott, for 1 July 1704, 15 May 1705 and 11 June 1706 (J. Addy, ed., *The diary of Henry Prescott*, Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, 127 (1987), pp. 14, 48, 103); and Joseph Taylor, for 16 Sept. 1705, in his *A journey to Edenborough in Scotland* (printed in *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd ser. 10 (1913), no. 2,243).

¹⁸ G. Ormerod, *The history of the county palatine and city of Chester*, revised and enlarged edition, J. Helsby, ed., (3 vols, London, 1882), II. 453.

¹⁹ Parish registers of St Andrew’s, Bebington, 1805, Chester and Cheshire Record Office, P 62 (microfilm 84). See also T. B. Maund, *Mersey ferries, volume 1: Woodside to Eastham* (Glossop, 1994), pp. 47-49.

their perquisites and profits'.²⁰ As in later deeds, the ferry is treated as a matter of secondary interest to the farm with which it was invariably coupled, and in so far as it amounted to 661 acres in 1830²¹ the farm was no mere adjunct to the ferry. Although direct evidence of any agricultural role is lacking before the 1680s, account has to be taken of the multiple occupancy discernible from the 1640s, as well the exceptionally high frequency of parish register references overall, compared with those for Derby House, Rock House's more exclusive neighbour. These anomalies are not easily explained in terms of a ferry house alone, even if the ferrymen had spent much of their time farming, and the large acreage might suggest that Rock House was primarily a farm. The farm might even have predated the ferry, in which event a name such as the early 'Honeygreave' would not have been inappropriate. The following two sections pursue each of these roles in turn, beginning with the ferry, before charting the local interests of the Minshull family, lords of the manor of Higher Bebington, in whose changing fortunes the two aspects of Rock House combine.

II

More than three centuries after the earliest appearance of the 'passage of Tranmere' in 1357, there occurs an augmentation office authorisation, on 3 December 1586, of a three-life lease of the *passagium de Tranmoll alius Tranmore* to John Poole of Sutton and his sons John and George, taking effect from the previous Michaelmas. This marks the official beginnings of the post-medieval ferry at Rock House, at around the time of the earliest references to Honeygreave and four decades before the references to Tranmere ferry during the Woodside ferry hearings of 1628. In issuing the lease, the augmentation office, successor to the court which had been set up to administer and dispose of former

²⁰ Between Thomas Cholmondeley of Vale Royal, and Elizabeth Felton spinster of Playford, Suffolk, Chester and Cheshire Record Office, DBC 1621, box 17. See also a similar deed of 13 Mar. 1707, DBC 1621, box 12. Material in this sequence of 20 boxes is unsorted and uncalendared.

²¹ An undated indenture between Joseph Bateman and Henry Kelsall, both of Chester, Joseph White of Little Sutton papers, Chester and Cheshire Record Office, DBD 27.

monastic property, seems to have been acting on behalf of the principality of Wales and the earldom of Chester, offices vacant since the accession of the last Prince of Wales as Henry VIII in 1509. Rights in most of the Mersey ferries had for long been retained by the principality as appertinences of the earldom, and *The Black Prince's Register* includes several references to the prince's interests in them.²² Two exceptions were Woodside and Eastham ferries, which belonged respectively to Birkenhead priory and the abbey of St Werburgh at Chester, and the priory's title did not go unchallenged.²³

The preamble to the granting of the Tranmere ferry lease, no doubt transmitting the substance of an earlier petition from Poole, places it firmly in the context of the decline of Seacombe ferry. There, 'the ground where the said passage and ferry boat has been used is grown in nature of an island as people can not have such recourse to the same as in times past they have been accustomed'.²⁴ Consequently,

since the decay of the said passage at Seacombe there has been a passage used and a boat set up at Tranmoll within two miles of Seacombe, and the suitor humbly prays that he may have a lease of Her Majesty's interest of the said boat and passage at Tranmoll.

In consideration of such a lease, Poole had offered to revive the annual rent of 9s 8d in respect of the defunct ferry at Seacombe, in addition to a new payment of 12d for the passage of Tranmere, for which no rent was known to have been paid previously. The essential implication of this concession, indeed of the whole transaction, is that the Tranmere passage had not existed before the decay of Seacombe ferry, but came into being solely to replace it. There is some slight and indirect evidence that the Tranmere ferry was no longer operating in 1552-53, having somehow been discontinued since the 1350s. But there is also a certain vagueness

²² *Register of Edward, the Black Prince* (4 vols, London, 1930-33), III, 83; see also *ibid.*, 101, 262.

²³ *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁴ National Archives, augmentation office leases, E 310/9/14, item 12, spelling modernised.

about exactly how long it had been in operation before the grant of the 1586 lease, an issue hardly clarified by the statement that no rent was known to have been previously paid for it. Very possibly, the unspoken purpose of the lease was to regularise a hitherto illicit operation.

The transaction seems still less transparent with regard to Seacombe ferry. Where the lease portrays this ferry as all but defunct by 1586, the complainant in an action in chancery as recent as 1552-53 alleged that it had only 'of late' been established. This was Ralph Worsley, purchaser of the site of the recently dissolved Birkenhead priory and of much of its local possessions, who, among other grievances, made out that John Minshull of Church Minshull had set up Seacombe ferry in competition with his own at Woodside, in breach of his rights as successor to the priors.²⁵ More to the point, as Worsley was scarcely a disinterested party, several of the deponents at the Woodside ferry proceedings of 1628 testified that they had worked at 'Wallasey' (that is, Seacombe) ferry in the recent past, which hardly squares with what the augmentation office had been 'credibly informed' on the matter. The continued payment of the 9s 8d rent, plainly offered by way of inducement for recognition of the ferry at Tranmere, could certainly imply that operations had ceased at Seacombe, but hardly proves that they actually had. Nor does the office seem to have been given any notion of the true value of the ferries, given the ludicrously token character of the shilling rent accepted by the office for the new Tranmere passage. This sum, still being paid as late as 1787 by the Cholmondeley family to the county palatine for the 'passage of water in Tranmere',²⁶ was only a tenth of the Seacombe rent, and a mere eightieth of the £4 rent exacted by John Egerton of Egerton, to whom Poole had transferred the ferry lease in the meantime, when himself letting it to Augustine Turner in December 1587.²⁷ But despite the impression that Poole's petition for the ferry had been misleading and economical with the truth, there is no reason to doubt that the facilities at

²⁵ National Archives, early chancery proceedings, C 1/1319/73-75; Stewart-Brown, *Birkenhead priory*, pp. 146-47.

²⁶ National Archives, county palatine of Chester, 'rent roll' 1739, LR 2/264, item 144.

²⁷ National Archives, ancient deeds, C 146/7076.

Tranmere ferry were quite recent and were now placed on a sounder and more regular footing.

There is, however, one particularly puzzling aspect of the two leases of 1586-87 – the absence of any mention of the family who had not only held Seacombe ferry at the time of its alleged decay but were also lords of the manor of Higher Bebington, within which the newly authorised Rock House ferry lay, the Minshulls of Church Minshull. John Minshull, lord of the manor from c.1540 to 1574,²⁸ was the last recorded operator of the decaying passage at Seacombe, which he held on a 21-year lease, first granted by the crown in right of the earldom of Chester to William Bromley on 10 July 1546²⁹ and transferred to Minshull by 1552-53; John was duly succeeded by his son Richard. In the circumstances, their lack of obvious involvement in the arrangements of 1586 is surprising in the extreme. They would have been all too well aware of the potential of ferries as a source of income, and at this period competition for the rights to them was strong. Apart from the Poole family, Sir George Calveley, George Cotton, Hugh Cholmondeley and several others sought, and on 19 December 1579 received, a royal grant of ‘Le Ferrie house’ and ‘le Ferrie boate’ as prominent components of the manors of Eastham and Sutton.³⁰ The acrimonious dispute between Minshull and his neighbour, Ralph Worsley, over ferry rights in Seacombe has already been noted, while from the 1570s the Liverpool burgesses were greatly concerned both to control illegal ferry operations on their side of the Mersey and to protect the profits to which the town was entitled on ferry journeys setting out from there – the issue underlying the Woodside ferry proceedings of 1626-28.³¹ Faced with the failure of the Seacombe passage, on which their lease had anyway been due to expire 19 years before, the Minshulls might well have been at pains, in 1586, to re-establish ferry facilities on their property in Bebington parish, and have made it their business to secure the lease

²⁸ Ormerod, *History*, III, 338.

²⁹ *Letters and papers, foreign and domestic, of Henry VIII* (21 vols, London, 1862-1910), 21, part 1, 1383, no. 38.

³⁰ *Calendar of the patent rolls preserved in the Public Record Office, Elizabeth I, volume 8, 1578-80* (London, 1986), no. 1678.

³¹ Stewart-Brown, *Birkenhead priory*, pp. 148-58.

themselves. So far from doing so, they cannot be shown to have been definitely in possession of the ferry before the 1640s, when they held it and Rock House as part of their ancient 'Park' estate in Higher Bebington and Tranmere.³²

III

This apparent neglect is all the more inexplicable in that the Minshull family had another good reason, in addition to the loss of Seacombe, for wishing to revive the ferry passage at Rock House, one that would have borne directly upon the early character of Honeygreave. This was John Minshull's concern, from the early 1560s, to bring into cultivation the hitherto unimproved district of Higher Bebington behind the ferry and Mersey shore. Recorded in a series of leases preserved among the 'ancient deeds' series at the National Archives,³³ this process marked a departure from the usual neglect by the Minshulls and their successors, the Cholmondeleys of Vale Royal, of their outlying properties in Wirral. These were normally mortgaged in order to subsidise the family's principal estates in central Cheshire, and the special attention now given to them is best understood in the context of the advent of the ferry at Rock House, or the prospect of it, which would have enhanced the potential value of the development by making it directly accessible from Liverpool. The process of clearing the heavily wooded hinterland of the ferry for agricultural use seems to have begun with John Minshull's grant in perpetual fee farm of an acre of land in 'Bebington Wood' in the township of Over Bebington on 28 October 1561.³⁴ The grantee was one Dermot, Dormice or 'Derby' Ulster, an Irishman of mysterious origins and controversial character who, in addition to being Minshull's physician, was active in Liverpool town politics, serving there on at least one occasion, in March 1565, as

³² National Archives, state papers domestic, interregnum: committee for compounding, SP 23/246, no. 37. See also the Wirral sequestrators' accounts, British Library, Harleian manuscript 2,018, ff. 100, 102.

³³ National Archives, ancient deeds C 146 and C 147; the deeds were presumably submitted to chancery for copying on the dorse of the close rolls, though this does not appear to have happened.

³⁴ National Archives, ancient deed C 146/7011.

agent of the earl of Derby.³⁵ His marriage to Jane Williamson on 5 May 1560 is recorded in the Bebington registers,³⁶ 17 months before this initial acquisition in Bebington Wood. The Ulster family first appears in the registers in 1566,³⁷ and recurs regularly thereafter up to December 1591, following Derby Ulster's death the previous month. It was evidently to the third earl, Edward (1521-72), that Ulster owed his sobriquet, one which he freely made use of himself, even in legal documents, while the house which he built on the acre of land acquired from John Minshull in 1561 was known by 1612 as Derby House³⁸ and remained so until its demolition c.1936.

Once built, the house served as the focus of subsequent clearance and cultivation of adjoining land in Bebington Wood. To this end, Minshull made two further leases to Ulster in May 1565 and March 1569,³⁹ and after his death in 1574,⁴⁰ his son Richard continued his father's policy. One of his grants to Ulster, dated April 1576, related to land adjoining Ulster's house and described as 'lately' reclaimed from Tranmere Common,⁴¹ evidently an extension of the same process beyond the township boundary but one for which corresponding records do not survive. Most of the Bebington deeds contain clauses entitling Ulster to 'marl, hedge, ditch, plough, sow, dig and rid therein',⁴² or 'to sow, mow, rid, and stock up by the roots trees, shrubs and bushes growing upon the premises, to make marl pit or pits'.⁴³ A sidelight on the Minshulls' transformation of a silvan backwater into a gentry estate is the use in their deeds of the term 'Woodd', which also briefly occurs in the parish registers nine times in the six years between 1585 and 1591. Saunders and Irvine entered these 'Woodd' references under Birkenhead in their index,

³⁵ J. A. Twemlow, ed., *The Liverpool town books, volume 1* (Liverpool and London, 1918), pp. 254-55.

³⁶ Saunders and Irvine, *Bebington parish registers*, p. 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 8.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 152-53.

³⁹ National Archives, C 146/8571, 8758.

⁴⁰ Ormerod, *History*, III, 340-41.

⁴¹ National Archives, C 146/7137.

⁴² National Archives, C 146/8571 (29 May 1565), C 147/227 (10 Feb. 1593).

⁴³ National Archives, C 146/7137 (4 Apr. 1576), C 147/226, 228 (2 Apr. 1580).

mistaking them for Woodside and Birkett Wood, but they clearly correspond to the 'Bebington Wood' mentioned in the deeds. Indeed, four of the nine 'Woodd' references involve the family of William Hodleston,⁴⁴ the second earliest occupant of Honeygreave to be recorded in the same registers, in 1603,⁴⁵ and two others relate to Derby Ulster and his daughter-in-law, Judith.⁴⁶

Bebington Wood and Honeygreave, first recorded in the registers in 1585 (the earliest date at which any individual place is specified there),⁴⁷ would seem to have been closely related, the 'honeysuckle wood' presumably forming an arm or outlier of a more extensive Bebington Wood. If it did not already exist as a remnant of the fourteenth-century *passagium et batillagium de Tranemoll*, Honeygreave/Rock House must have originated as a farm in these years, when the ground clearances would have been followed by the creation of the local field pattern partly recorded in Jonathan Bennison's map of the Mersey and its coastal fringes of c.1835.⁴⁸ Within that pattern, the Rock House lands would have taken shape, or been incorporated if they already existed. These, as already noted, amounted to 661 acres in June 1830,⁴⁹ when they are defined by a plan accompanying another deed relating to the sale of Rock House by Joseph White junior of Little Sutton to Thomas Morecroft of Liverpool.⁵⁰ This shows a plot of land of a highly irregular 'T' shape, the cross stroke of which lay along the Mersey shore roughly between the present-day St Paul's Road to the north and the southern end of the Rock Park estate to the south, the ferry occupying the midway position. At its farthest point, the downstroke extended inland as far as the Old Chester Road in the vicinity of its later junction with Bedford Road. Highly irregular as this plot was, it notably conforms at every point to the established field boundaries as depicted by Bennison.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 32, 141 (three entries).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 140, 142.

⁴⁷ See appendix.

⁴⁸ In the Wirral Central Library, Birkenhead.

⁴⁹ Chester and Cheshire Record Office, DBD 27.

⁵⁰ 'Assurance of the Manor of Higher Bebington to Thomas Morecroft', 17 June 1830, White of Little Sutton Papers, Chester and Cheshire Record Office, DDX 112/10b.

To the south, it adjoined the lands of Derby House, also reaching as far inland as the Old Chester Road, in this case at Dacre Hill. The two estates, formerly Minshull property, in effect shared the entire eastern arm of Higher Bebington and the adjoining part of Tranmere, together comprising the present-day Rock Ferry, the division between them most probably dating from the formation of the Derby House estate in the period 1561-80.

None of the Minshull deeds of the late sixteenth century mentions the ferry as such, though one of them, dating from August 1587, eight months after the augmentation office lease, is witnessed by one 'Richard Fferihowse'.⁵¹ At this point, however, the only physical connection between Derby Ulster at Derby House and the ferry based on Honeygreave/Rock House would have been the road or track (later Rock Lane) that must have linked the two houses with Higher Bebington village and the rest of Wirral, and given access to the ferry. It may be significant that the lane is not mentioned in either of the two deeds of 1576 and 1580 concerning the Long Spang, along whose south side it later ran, the field being described as lying between the dwelling house of Derby Ulster (at its south-eastern corner) and Tranmere Common to the north.⁵² This could mean that the lane was not yet well enough established to serve as a property boundary, and imply (consistently with the preamble to the 1586 lease) that the ferry was not functioning much before the building of the Derby House in the early 1560s.

IV

For all the Minshulls' demonstrable interests and ambitions in the area, the fact remains that the ferry lease was acquired from the augmentation office not by them but by the Poole family. John Minshull's son Richard, who had succeeded his father in 1574 and made further leases to Derby Ulster, himself died on 1 December 1586, leaving his four-year-old son, John, as his heir.⁵³ The date of Richard's death is of special interest, falling only two days before

⁵¹ National Archives, ancient deeds, C 146/7016.

⁵² National Archives, C 146/7137, C 147/226, 228.

⁵³ National Archives, Cheshire *inquisitions post mortem*, CHES 3/83, no. 20; Ormerod, *History*, III, 338.

the augmentation office's authorisation of the lease on 3 December, a startling coincidence. What can have been happening here? It can hardly have been simple opportunism on the part of the Pooles, as if they were callously taking advantage of Richard's incapacity by snatching the ferry from his and his family's grasp at the last moment. That seems too neat to be plausible and, besides, the initial petition for the lease must have been presented some time before. It is altogether more likely that they were acting with Richard's knowledge and consent to ensure that the opportunity to re-establish the ferry on a sound basis was not lost. That some concerted and prearranged plan was being followed seems more plausible, not least in view of the promptness with which the Pooles transferred the ferry to John Egerton of Egerton at some point before 10 December 1587, enabling Egerton on that date to convey responsibility for its running to Augustine Turner for 21 years, if the three Pooles should live that long, and requiring them to maintain 'one sufficient and lawful ferryboat for the said passage of Tranmor'.⁵⁴

Egerton's personal connections with the Minshulls were much closer than Poole's, or were rapidly becoming so, and his interests were not confined to the ferry. Succeeding his father in his Oulton and other estates in 1590-91,⁵⁵ he purchased Derby House and Derby Ulster's other Minshull leases from Derby's eldest son and executor, Peter, on 10 February 1593.⁵⁶ His reason for doing so is not immediately obvious, since the Egerton estates, like the Minshulls', lay in central Cheshire, but is revealed by Richard Minshull's revised *inquisition post mortem* of 1593-94. This shows that since Richard's death eight years before, Egerton had been taking the rents and profits of the Minshull estates and had acquired the custody of Richard's son from John Savage and Sir Hugh Cholmondeley.⁵⁷ Savage and Cholmondeley's precise standing in the matter is not specified, but they were apparently acting as executors, while Egerton was in effect acting as guardian of the young John Minshull, who in due course was to marry his

⁵⁴ National Archives, ancient deeds C 146, C 147.

⁵⁵ Ormerod, *History*, II, 217.

⁵⁶ National Archives, ancient deeds, C 146/8574, C 147/227, 229, 331.

⁵⁷ National Archives, Cheshire *inquisitions post mortem*, CHES 3/83, no. 20; Ormerod, *History*, III, 338.

daughter Frances.⁵⁸ In this capacity, Egerton would, or should, have maintained, repossessed and preserved the Minshull inheritance, including Derby House and the adjoining lands previously leased to Derby Ulster, until the young man reached his majority around, if not before, 1603. A mortgage of September 1613 shows John in possession of properties in (Higher) Bebington, 'Churchbebington' (Lower Bebington) and 'Tranmoll', as elsewhere in Cheshire 'now or late or at any time heretofore in the several or other tenures or occupation of Sir John Egerton of Egerton'.⁵⁹

If Egerton had succeeded in vesting the ferry rights in the Minshull estate, no mention is made of them at this date, and the family was not certainly in possession of them before the mid 1640s.⁶⁰ It could, however, be significant that one of the items preserved among the Minshull papers is a copy of the augmentation office lease of 1586 endorsed with a note of the interests of 'ye prince' in Seacombe ferry as parcel of the earldom of Chester.⁶¹ Such an annotation is only likely to have been made after 1610, when, after a long hiatus, the offices of Prince of Wales and earl of Chester were successively filled by Princes Henry and Charles, and before Charles's accession to the throne in 1625. The acquisition and retention of this copy would seem to suggest that the Minshulls' interest in ferries was still active in the 1610s and early 1620s, and may even signify that they had finally obtained the rights. The date at which they did so would have depended on whether the augmentation office's original three-life lease to the Pooles ran its full course, or was surrendered by them before its expiry. In the apparent absence of any record of a subsequent grant of the ferry, there is no means of telling whether Minshull only acquired the ferry on the death of the younger John Poole in 1641 – not long before his possession of it is recorded in the Wirral sequestrators' accounts for 1645-46 – or whether the

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 340-41.

⁵⁹ National Archives, Cheshire administrative enrolments, CHES 2/279, m. 6d.

⁶⁰ British Library, Harleian manuscript 2,018, f 21; *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd ser. 50 (1955), no. 10,019.

⁶¹ Birch Cullimore deeds, Minshull/Cholmondeley/Delamere papers, Chester and Cheshire Record Office, DBC 1621, box 12.

Pooles surrendered their interest in it earlier in the century, enabling it to be transferred to the Minshulls. The presence of the annotated 1586 lease copy would seem to favour the latter conclusion.

V

It therefore looks as if the Pooles were acting principally as local agents of Egerton in acquiring the ferry lease as a first step in the process of securing it for the Minshall estate during the minority of Richard's young son. It is quite possible, however, that there was a further influence in play on both the Pooles and Egerton, exercised a little more remotely but far more potent than either of them. This was the earls of Derby, the most powerful family in Lancashire and Cheshire and lords lieutenant of both counties for most of this period. As has been seen, Derby Ulster, the builder of Derby House in the early 1560s and cultivator of the ferry hinterland, was an associate of earl Edward, acting on his behalf in Liverpool politics and accepting the name Derby as a sobriquet. That alone could account for the name Derby House, though there could have been a more direct and tangible association between house and earls. Earl Edward (1522-72) and his successors earls Henry (1572-93) and Ferdinando (1593-94) would have needed constant and ready communication between their seat at Knowsley and Wirral, both for visiting their deer parks at Bidston and Neston, and still more for their journeyings to and from Chester in pursuance of their duties as lords lieutenant, an office they held between 1585 and 1594.⁶²

Since the earls owned Toxteth Park, adjoining the Mersey immediately opposite Rock Ferry (and including the site of the terminal authorised at Harrington in 1805⁶³), they would have been involved as a matter of course with the Lancashire end of any ferry operating from Rock House, whether or not they envisaged making any personal use of it. They may, however, have seen in it considerable advantages to themselves. A direct crossing of the river between the two places would have offered a shorter

⁶² B Coward, *The Stanleys, lords Stanley and earls of Derby 1385-1672*, Chetham Society, 3rd ser. 30 (1983), p. 153.

⁶³ Local act, 45 George III, cap. 62.

route than the Liverpool-Woodside passage downstream, especially when travelling to Chester and back, and would have avoided both Liverpool town and the steep gradient of the road over Tranmere Hill. This shorter route may well have been the one taken on 2 September 1589 when the earl's 'household books' record that he and his retinue 'went to Toxteth Parke and so forthe to Wirrall',⁶⁴ not a choice of words suggestive of a crossing from Liverpool to Woodside. The likelihood that earl Edward saw a potential personal benefit in the Rock House ferry is increased by independent evidence of direct contact between him and the ferry lessees at a significant moment. Two years earlier, on 1 November 1587, Edward received an overnight visit at Knowsley from Mr John Poole 'and one other of the Poles',⁶⁵ the only visit of the kind recorded. The nature of their business is not stated, but fewer than six weeks later, on 10 December, John Egerton, having now acquired the lease from the Pooles, transferred it to the local operator, Augustine Turner. It is difficult to believe that the running of the new ferry so as to meet the earl's convenience and the choice of operator were not touched upon at some point during that evening at Knowsley.

The Pooles would thus seem to have been consulting the interests of lord Derby as well as those of John Egerton and the Minshull family. At the same time, Derby Ulster, too, may have seen an opportunity to oblige the earl. In view of the unpredictable and often dangerous character of the crossing reported by later travellers, it is possible that Ulster hoped to play host to the earl at Derby House, or otherwise to make it available to him, when a return crossing to Toxteth was delayed by an unfavourable tide or inclement weather. Derby House was, after all, at least as much a gentleman's seat as a working farmhouse, in 1594 featuring dovescotes and liquorice beds and protected by a circuit wall of which a 50-foot length had recently been pulled

⁶⁴ F. R. Raines, ed., *The Derby household books...of Edward and Henry, the third and fourth earls...together with a diary containing the names of the guests who visited the latter earl at his houses in Lancashire*, by William ffarington, esq, Chetham Society, 31 (1853), p. 65.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

down.⁶⁶ Such walls are not standard features of farmhouses, and Webb's *Description of the hundred of Wirral* of c.1620 rates Derby House (under Tranmere) as 'a fine seat of that worthy...John Minshal, of Minshal, esquire', where (he notes under Over Bebington) he 'hath great store of fair possessions'.⁶⁷ Ample signs of gentrification are evident in the frequent allusions in the sequestrators' accounts of the 1640s to Minshall's Derby House estate in Over Bebington and Tranmere as 'The Park'.⁶⁸ This park had no legal status, and the name was perhaps tongue in cheek, inspired, much like 'Derby' Ulster and 'Derby' House, by the Stanleys, themselves unrelenting huntsmen.

How often the earls of Derby actually availed themselves of these facilities is unclear, but not very often, on the evidence of the diary of their steward, William Ffarington. Beginning in 1572 and covering only periods when the earl or lord Strange was in residence at Knowsley, this journal records only six occasions during the period July 1586 to August 1590 when they crossed into Wirral, on three of them making for Bidston, and on a fourth travelling to Chester and back.⁶⁹ In any case, a personal arrangement of this kind at Derby House would probably have lapsed after the death of Derby Ulster late in 1591, and been affected by the termination of the earls' lieutenancy of Cheshire on Ferdinando's death in 1594. It would certainly have been discontinued altogether upon the sale of the Stanleys' Toxteth estate to Sir Richard Molyneux of Sefton in 1605.⁷⁰

Honeygreave, then, appears initially as a farm that originated with, if it did not precede, the clearance and cultivation of Bebington Wood in the 1560s and 1570s. Centred on Derby House nearby, this activity anticipated the establishment of 'Tranmere' ferry in 1586 and was promoted by the Minshall family, lords of the manor of Higher Bebington, as an estate

⁶⁶ National Archives, Chester administrative enrolments (formerly known as recognisance rolls), CHES 2/259, m. 1d.

⁶⁷ Printed in Mortimer, *The history of the hundred of Wirral*, appendix, p. 12.

⁶⁸ National Archives, ancient deed C 146/7011.

⁶⁹ Raines, *Derby household books*, pp. 52, 68, 76 (Bidston), p. 54 (Chester), pp. 36, 65 ('Wirral').

⁷⁰ W. Farrer and J. Brownbill, eds, *Victoria history of the county of Lancaster, volume III* (London, 1907), p. 42 nn. 13-15.

development of potential appeal to the more prominent burgesses of Liverpool, especially when readily accessible by means of a ferry. That the ferry house itself was located at Honeygreave is shown by the residence there from around 1600 of several of the ferrymen associated with it. By the 1640s, it had also become known as the Rock House ferry, and until as late as 1830 Rock House was invariably described as a farm held in conjunction with the ferry. A final, graphic, insight into the replacement by the names 'Rock House, 'Rock Ferry', 'Rock Farm' and 'Rock Lane' of the original 'Honeygreave' is offered by the plan accompanying the White-Morecroft transaction of June 1830.⁷¹ This shows, just above low-water mark and a little to the north-east of the Royal Rock Hotel, a great swathe of rock extending some 1,200 feet from north to south and some 530 feet wide from east to west. The same formation is depicted, rather differently but equally impressively, on Bennison's map of the Mersey shore, which reveals it to be matched (indeed surpassed) only at Woodside.⁷² It was plainly to this rocky shelf that the ferry owed its existence, in providing the original, low-tide, mooring place for boats. It is not difficult to see how the growing use of the ferry would have emphasised the importance of the rocky shelf, and how the term 'Rock' should soon have come to the fore, better characterising the site than the essentially rural 'Honeygreave'.

⁷¹ 'Assurance of the Manor of Higher Bebington to Thomas Morecroft', 17 June 1830, White of Little Sutton Papers, Chester and Cheshire Record Office, DDX 112/10b.

⁷² In the Wirral Central Library, Birkenhead.

Appendix

Honeygreave as recorded in the Bebington parish registers
(F. Saunders and W. F. Irvine, eds, *The Bebington parish registers, 1558-1701* (Liverpool, 1896)).

C = christening; B = burial; s = son; d = daughter; cc = children

1585 9 May	C Robert s of Peter Gill de Honeygreave
1593 22 Feb.	C Peter s of Peter Gill de Honygreave
1603 9 June	C Henry s of William Hodleston de Honigrave
1620 8 May	C Francisca d of Richard Rideing de Honny Greave
1631 5 Sept.	B Widow Ellen Younge de Honny Greave
1631 4 Sept.	C George & Ann cc of Thomas Smith de Honnygeare
1632 8 Dec.	B Ann d of Thomas Smith de Honey Greave
1635 22 May	B John s of Thomas Smith de Honny Greave
1642 24 July	C Mary d of Richard Sharp de Honey Greave
1642 29 Dec.	B Mary d of Richard Sharp de Honey Greave
1643 17 Nov.	C Mary d of Richard Sharp Honny Greave
1644 1 Jan.	C Elizabeth d of Daniel Robinson de Honny-Greave
1644 4 Feb.	C Elizabeth d of John Smith de Hunny-Greave
1647 23 Sept.	B Ann d of William Hodgson de Honigrave
1648 17 Sept.	C Thomas s of Martin Brough de Honey Greave
1649 1 Nov.	B Maria d of Daniel Robinson de Honey Greave
1650 8 Dec.	C Christopher s of Daniel Robinson de Honey Greave
1653 4 Dec.	C Anthony & Mary cc of Daniel Robinson de Honigreav
1654 9 Apr.	C Robert s of Martin Brough de Hony-greave
1655 16 Mar.	C Jane d of Daniel Robinson de Hony-greave
1658 18 Apr.	C Mary d of George Smith de Hony-greave
1661 14 Feb.	C Thomas s of George Smith de Hony-greave
1667 9 Apr.	C George s of George Smith de Hony-greave
1668 7 July	C Miriam d of Christopher Orme de Honey Greave
1669 10 Sept.	C Catherine d of Thomas Eccles de Honygreave

- 1669 23 Oct. B Catherine d of Thomas Eccles de Hony Greave
- 1672 25 Mar. B John s of Christopher Orme de Honygreave
- 1672 9 Apr. B Dorothy Kay de Hony Greave
- 1673 27 Feb. C Thomas s of Thomas Eccles de Hony-Greave
- 1674 10 June B Mary Smith widow de Honygreave
- 1675 13 Nov. C Alice d of George Smith de Honey Greave
- 1675 22 Nov. C Benjamin s of William Williams de Honey Greave
- 1678 1 Apr. C Elizabeth d of George Smith de Honey Greave
- 1679 23 Feb. C Samuel s of Henry Newbold de Hony-Greave
- 1680 10 Jan. C Sarah d of William Williams de Hony Greave
- 1680 21 Jan. B Sarah d of William Williams de Honey Greave
- 1680 22 Jan. B Elizabeth wife of William Williams de Honey Greave
- 1680 7 Feb. B Alice d of George Smith de Honey Greave
- 1682 14 Sept. C Elizabeth d of Robert Bushell de Honey-greave
- 1687 16 Apr. C Rachel d of Robert Bushell de Hony Greave
- 1687 22 Dec. B Mary James de Honey Greave
- 1689 15 Aug. C George s of Thomas Smith de Honygreave
- 1690 20 May C John s of John Davyes de Honey greave
- 1692 22 Nov. C Elizabeth d [] Bell de Honey Greave