

Hoskins and Higham



I wonder how many readers have visited Higham, which, according to famous architectural historian and writer, Nikolas Pevsner, is a “rarity in the county”, a “Georgian proportioned mansion in the Gothic style”. Some might know it as Higham Hall from past decades when it was a girls’ school, a youth hostel, a local authority education college, and now an independent residential adult education college.

This is the story of Thomas Alison Hoskins (1800-1886) and Higham, the

lakeside family seat he built near Setmurthy, overlooking Bassenthwaite Lake, Ullock Pike and Skiddaw. The Hoskins family originally settled in Cumberland in 1748 from Herefordshire, when Hoskins’ grandfather, Alexander, moved into the village of Great Broughton. Hoskins’ father, George, was also born in Cumberland.

Thomas Hoskins was born on 29 March 1800 at 30 St Ann Street, Liverpool, then a leafy and affluent suburb comprising large houses and gardens.

His father was a successful merchant working in the city's flourishing mercantile and shipping business. His childhood and early adult years were spent in Liverpool. As eldest son, the house in St Anne Street passed to him after his father's death and he is recorded still living there with his younger brother, George Alexander, in an 1825 tax register document, and working as an attorney and notary at Whitley & Hoskins in Liverpool's Exchange Buildings.

In 1826 he moved to Cumberland, most probably to work in the businesses founded by his late grandfather. As a successful and 'upwardly mobile' young man, he needed a suitable residence and chose an excellent site for his country retreat – on a slope, looking east towards Bassenthwaite Lake, with Ullock Pike and the majestic Skiddaw range behind.

From 1827-28 he built Higham, a substantial property in a light Gothic style, designed to be solid and durable for a young country gentleman with a growing family. The main facade and gables were constructed of locally sourced carboniferous limestone, a light grey stone which allowed fine decoration, laid in ashlar blocks with a fine mortar bed. The north and south wings were built in

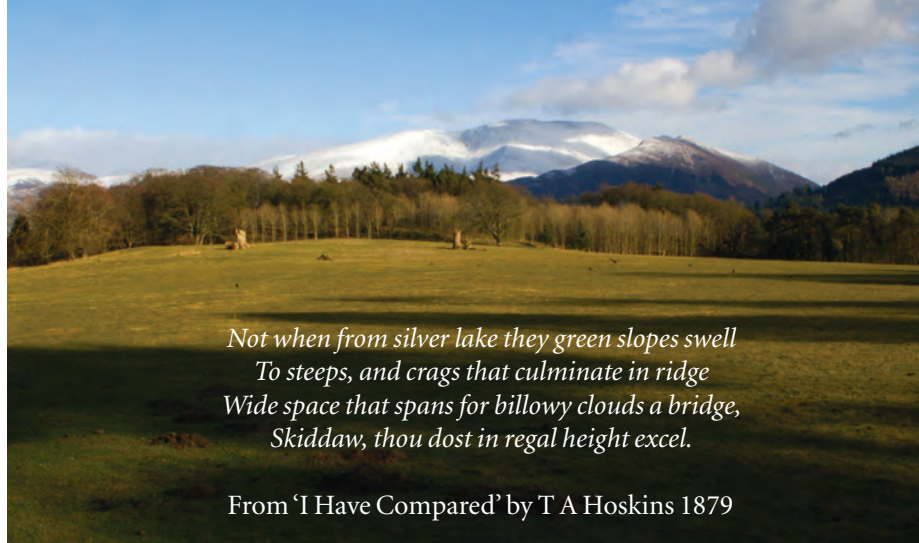
Skiddaw slate cobbles, with dressed sandstone to quoins, lintels and window surrounds – a technique often referred to as a 'Queen Anne front and Mary-Anne back'. The north, south and west elevations were shielded from the weather by dense trees, high stone walls and the slope of Elva Hill behind the house.

Hoskins spent much of his time developing and managing the 385 acre (155ha) estate. Like his grandfather before him, he also served as a magistrate and chairman of the Cockermouth Bench. Over the years he became a man of significant power and influence, as a county councillor, High Sheriff of Cumberland in 1854 and finally Deputy Lieutenant.

The railway boom of the 1840s-'50s was not universally welcomed in the



Left, Higham's east facing main facade; right, Hoskins and wife Sarah in the 1870s; overleaf, views of Skiddaw, looking east from Higham



*Not when from silver lake they green slopes swell
To steeps, and crags that culminate in ridge
Wide space that spans for billowy clouds a bridge,
Skiddaw, thou dost in regal height excel.*

From 'I Have Compared' by T A Hoskins 1879

Lakes. It is well documented how Wordsworth and Ruskin objected to the proposed Kendal and Windermere railway, thereby revealing their arrogance and snobbishness towards the working class whom they feared would descend on the area, destroying the beauty, peace and purity of their idyllic Lakes for themselves and 'rural folk'. Wordsworth wrote that the train will "place the beauties of the Lake district within easier reach of those who cannot afford to pay for ordinary conveyances, transferring uneducated persons in large bodies to particular spots".

Hoskins had no such doubts or misgivings about the development of the railway in Cumberland. In fact, he invested substantially in railway shares, and was a prime mover in bringing the railway further into Cumberland. A prospectus for the proposed Cocker-mouth, Keswick & Penrith Railway Co Ltd published in 1860, said, "the line will complete the communication between the iron ore districts and blast

furnaces of Cumberland and the iron and coke districts of Middlesboro' and South Durham, materially lessening the railway transit to and from these places".

Hoskins was appointed as chairman of the CK&P Railway Co Ltd, and on 21 May 1862, he cut the first sod in the construction of the new railway, at Crosthwaite, the midway point of the proposed line. With characteristic pomposity, he said a 'few words'... "I cannot doubt as has been expressed in the solemn invocation to our Heavenly Father that increased facility of interchange will stimulate your industrial productions, develop more fully all your natural advantages, and the very mountains will yield more profits and mineral treasure when sustained by a railway".

Ruskin opposed later railway expansion including the CK&P line, as a further step towards the destruction of the Lake District, stating, "The stupid herds of modern tourists let themselves be emptied, like coals from a sack, at Windermere and Keswick".

The line opened for goods and passengers in 1865, and Hoskins continued as chairman for a further three years, overseeing the building of Keswick Hotel, which was directly accessed from the railway platform. He made substantial income from the railway business, but for all his wealth, he was abstemious in his private life. He was also deeply religious, a passionate protestant but most forceful in his religious and moral views, and fiercely anti-papist.

He began writing poetry in the 1820s and the first collection of his work was published in 1851. His poetry, late-nineteenth century in style, uses ornate language, grandiloquent expressions and highly embellished prose. But now and again he captures the spirit and essence of Higham's surroundings, the weather and light over the mountains and fells. His favourite subjects, after religion, were Skiddaw and Bassenthwaite. *Sacred Lays of an Old Life's Borderland*, a collection of his religious narrative poems published

in 1879, is available in reprint in the US.

Hoskins died in February 1886 and was buried in the family grave at St Barnabas Church, Setmurthy, beside his wife and two sons. For all his investment in, and public service to the county, his obituary in the *West Cumberland Times*, was terse, "The deceased was a man of great ability and considerable force of character".

Today, there is a campaign to re-open eighteen miles (29 km) of his original railway route from Keswick to Penrith. Perhaps we can now better appreciate the contributions he made to his adopted county. ■

This is an abridged version of a talk, Hoskins and Higham, which Brian Anderson will give at Higham Hall on Sunday 31 August (2pm). For tickets contact Higham on 01768 776276 or visit www.highamhall.com

Brian is a photographer and college tutor. View his work at www.andersonimages.co.uk

Outdoor classics

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Tour dates: Sunday 29 June – *Sense and Sensibility*, Lowther Castle and Gardens; Saturday 9 August – *Wuthering Heights*, Muncaster Castle; Sunday 10 August – *The Jungle Book*, Muncaster Castle; Wednesday 13 August – *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Lowther Castle.

For all tour details, tickets etc visit www.chapterhouse.org