

THE FLAX MERCHANTS OF KIRKHAM

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During the eighteenth century the Fylde was an expanding agricultural district sometimes called the granary of Lancashire. By producing large quantities of grain it helped to feed the growing industrial population of a county which in 1795, according to John Holt, could support itself for only a few weeks in the year.¹ Progressive landlords like the Cliftons of Lytham found corn growing profitable and increased its production by reclaiming large areas of moss and marsh. The landscape became dotted with windmills whose produce, mainly oatmeal, the staple food of the poorer classes, found its way to the markets at Preston and elsewhere. The Napoleonic Wars gave further impetus to these developments and in 1817 Vicar Webber of Kirkham, after noting the great improvement in agriculture throughout the Fylde in the last fifty years described it as 'a very fine corn country.'² But while agriculture took pride of place and the Fylde as a whole escaped industrialisation, there was nevertheless a measure of mercantile activity and domestic industry especially in and around the urban centres of Poulton and Kirkham.

When Hutton visited Blackpool in 1788 the coastal development which we know today had hardly begun.³ Blackpool was then a mere handful of boarding houses approached by a maze of winding lanes. The chief town on the Fylde plain was Kirkham, followed by Poulton on the navigable Wyre, and during the eighteenth century groups of merchants in these towns became interested in the plantation and Baltic trades. Their activities resulted in the growth of Poulton as a small port and of Kirkham as a manufacturing centre of some importance so that in 1824 Baines could write: 'There are here [Kirkham] considerable manufactures of sailcloth and cordage and also of fine and coarse linens; and the Baltic produce, of which there is a considerable quantity consumed in this town and neighbourhood, is brought up the Wyre and landed at Wardleys on the north east side of that river where the principal manufacturers of Kirkham have large

and commodious warehouses for the reception of goods.⁴ (See Figure 1 and Plate 1).

The production of coarse linens and ropes from flax and hemp had been a domestic industry in the Fylde and Lancashire plain since the Middle Ages.⁵ Small quantities were grown locally and tithe flax and hemp were granted to the Kirkham vicars. In many of the seventeenth-century wills there are items of flax which was evidently retted (soaked) in ponds and ditches for at the Kirkham Court Leet of 1611 it was agreed that 'None shall lay no hemp nor flax in no pit or ditch without leave on payne of 3/4d'.⁶ At what date flax began to be imported is uncertain. According to Porter⁷ there was trade with Russia from the Wyre as early as 1590 but it was not until the eighteenth century that the trade expanded. After 1660, as a result of the navigation acts and the increased number of British- and colonial-built ships, there was a growing demand for sailcloth at a time when the effects of the wars with the Dutch and French had decreased supplies from abroad.⁸ To encourage home manufacture (colonial manufacture

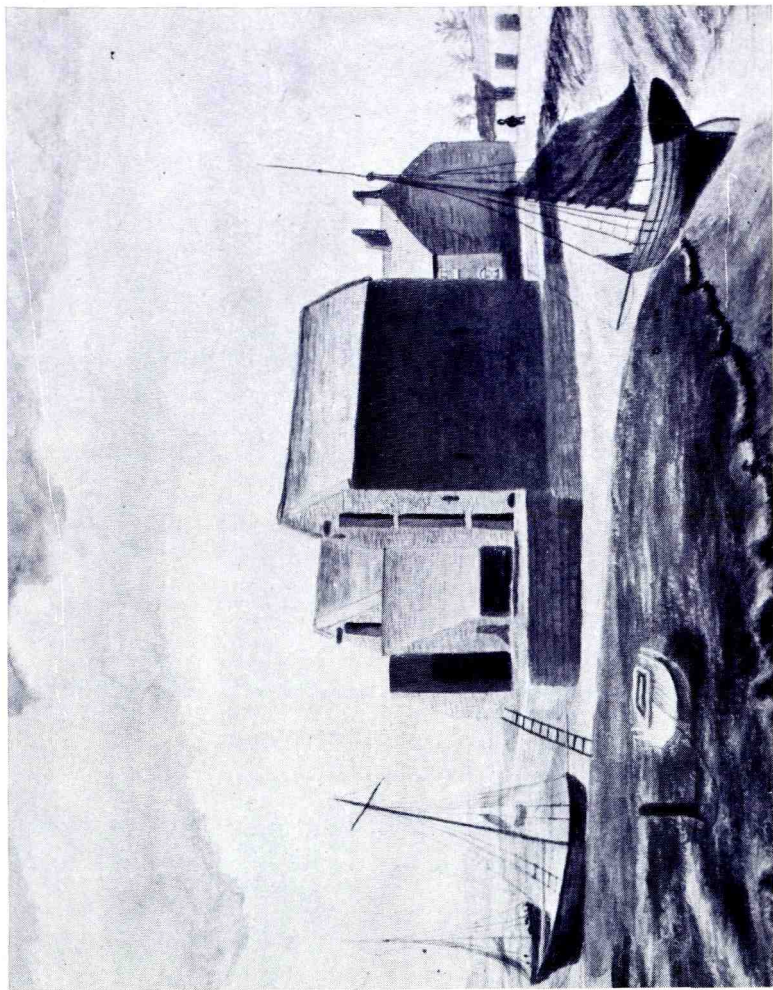


PLATE I WAREHOUSE AND QUAY AT WARDLEYS (from an oil painting)
*A photograph of the other warehouse appears in Queen Ashmore Industrial Archaeology of Lancashire,
p. 143. Both warehouses are now demolished.*

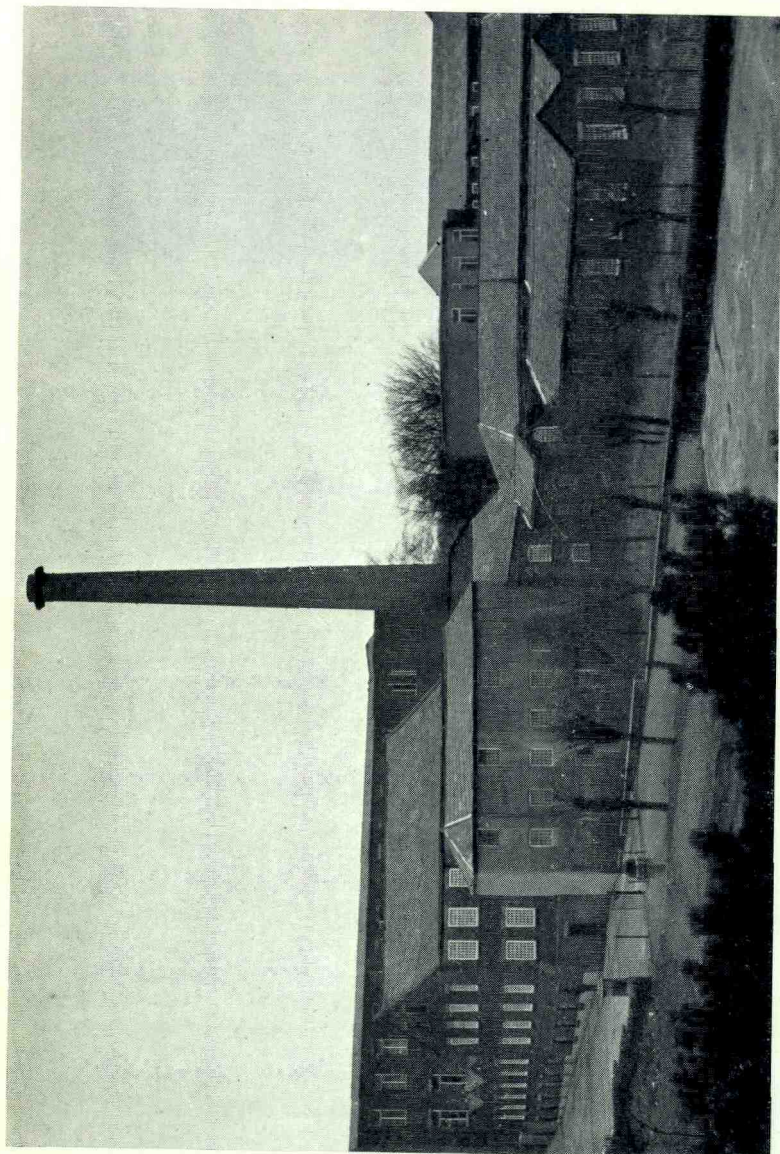


PLATE 2 KIRKHAM FLAX MILL

Eighteenth-century wing (rendered) in centre; John Birley's extensions c. 1804, right; new wing and chimney for fine spinning c. 1860, back left.

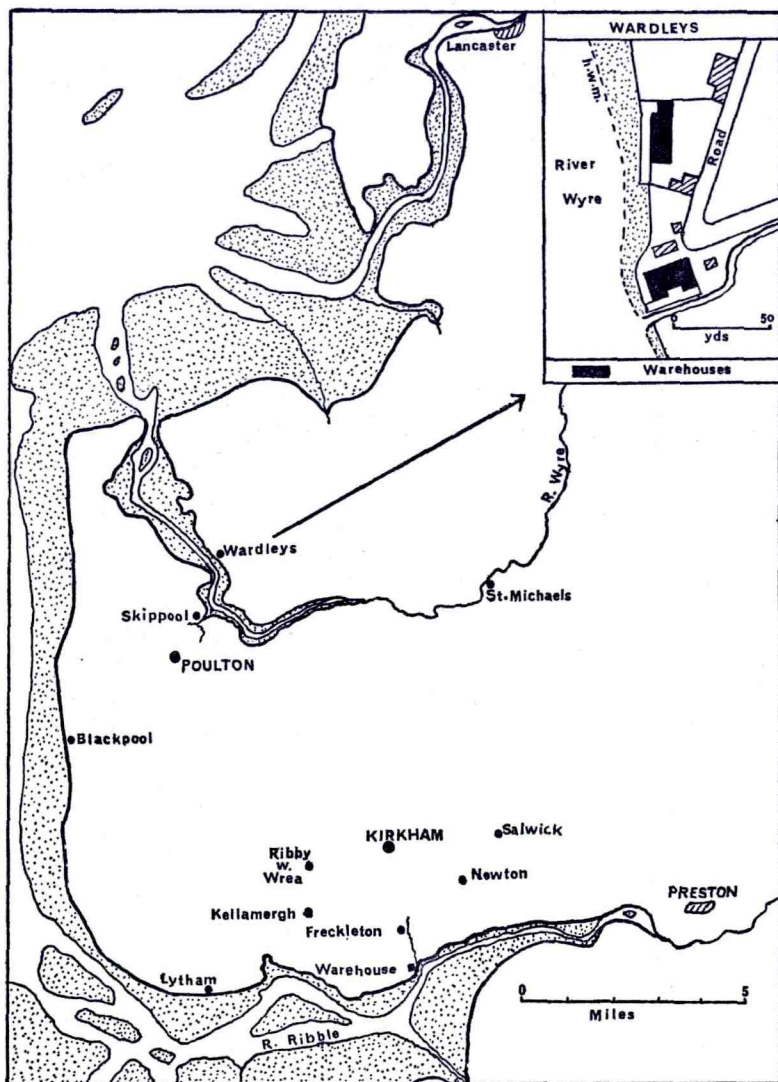


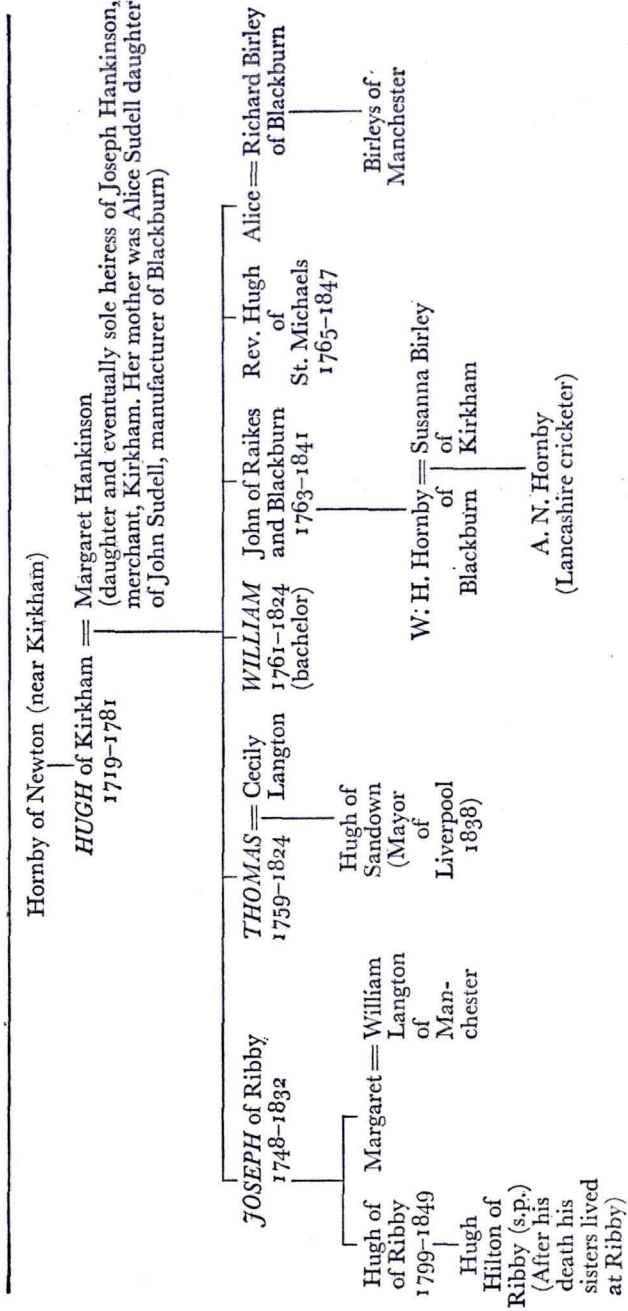
Figure 1 THE FYLDE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY
 Based on Maps of Fearon & Eyes 1736 and Yates 1796

elder son Robert and later (1735) to his younger son Joseph who by then had developed other interests. Joseph is described as a merchant or chapman and he evidently dealt in flax for in 1736 Richard Hall was apprenticed to 'Joseph Hankinson, flax-dresser.'¹¹ About this time he was also providing altar wine for the vestry of thirty men and it is quite possible that he obtained it from Poulton, for he was certainly in contact with the merchants there some of whom traded with the wine countries. Shortly before his death he joined with other Kirkham and Poulton merchants in a company 'to carry on trade with Barbados' and they bought a parcel of ground called Ramlesfield at Skippool Creek near Poulton where they had a warehouse built.¹²

Joseph Hankinson was dead when the warehouse was completed (1744) but by his will dated 14 September, 1738, he left his mercantile interests to his son Thomas who continued to trade from the Wyre along with his brother-in-law Hugh Hornby¹³ (see Table 1, the Hornby family). They bought additional shares in the Ramlesfield warehouse and evidently traded both to the plantations and the Baltic for in 1752 they were part-owners of a ship the *Hankinson* which made voyages to St Kitts, Riga and St Petersburg.¹⁴ That they continued in the flax business is shown by an indenture of 1757 whereby 'Thomas Fleetwood of Kirkham was apprenticed to Hugh Hornby and Mr Thomas Hankinson of Kirkham, flaxdressers.'¹⁵ By 1770 Hankinson, Hornby and the other part-owners had sold the Ramlesfield warehouse; by this time they were using the warehouses at Wardleys on the other side of the river where there was deeper water and a hard beach.

Thomas Hankinson died intestate about 1775 and his property went to his sister Margaret, wife of Hugh Hornby, who with his sons carried on the business. In William Tunnicliffe's *Topographical Survey*, 1787, they are described as 'Hornby, Hugh and Sons, Merchants and Sail Cloth Manufacturers' but Hugh Hornby had died in 1781 and was succeeded by his eldest son Joseph who formed a co-partnership with his brothers Thomas and William under the trade name of J. T. & W. Hornby. This was done in 1793 by a series of conveyances which show that by this time the family had become owners of a considerable amount of property in Kirkham.¹⁶ Their premises in Freckleton Street included two spinning sheds, a weaving shop, a bowhouse or bleach house and two rows of workers' cottages known respectively as Old Row and New Row, to which were later added further cottages and weaving shops in a close called Hornby Square. In Orders Lane they bought several fields on which they built another factory and bowhouse and in Moor Lane they

TABLE 1: *The Hornby Family* (abbreviated pedigree)



The Hornbys connected with the Kirkham flax industry are in italics. For full pedigree see Joseph Foster, *Pedigrees of the county families of England* (1873), Vol. 1, Lancashire.

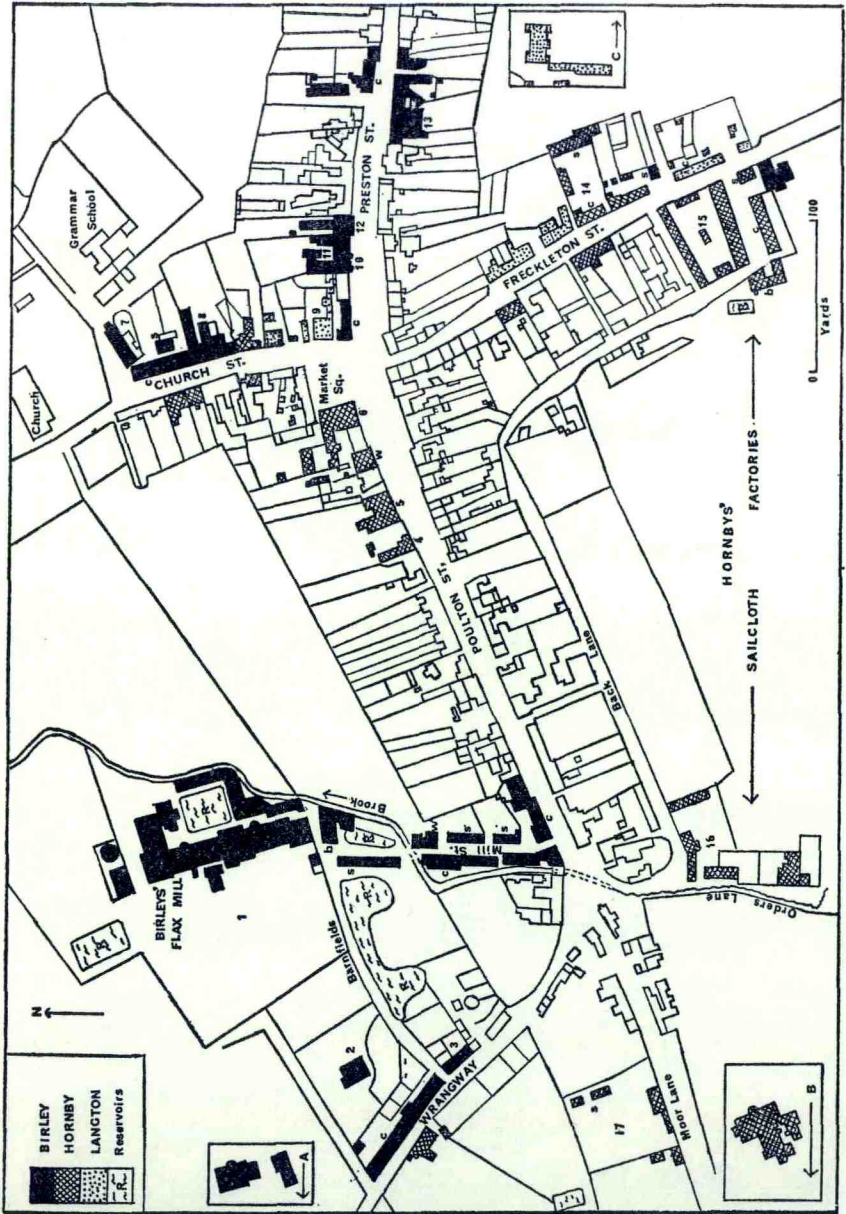


FIGURE 2 KIRKHAM IN THE EARLY-NINETEENTH CENTURY
 Based on *Tithe Award Map (1837)* with details from documents quoted in text

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|---|--|----|--|----|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| 1 | Flax Mill and Bleaching Ground. | 8 | Residence of Wm. Birley (Sen.). | 14 | Hornby Square. | B | Ribby Hall (1799) residence of Joseph Hornby. |
| 2 | Apprentice House. | 9 | Ash Tree House, residence of Langton family. | 15 | Freckleton St. Sailcloth Factory. | C | Carr Hill (1780) residence of William Langton and afterwards of T. L. Birley. |
| 3 | Starch House and Weaving Shop. | 10 | Residence of Shepherd family. | 16 | Orders Lane Sailcloth Factory. | | |
| 4 | Counting House. | 11 | Counting House and Sailcloth Factory. | 17 | Moor Lane Weaving Shops. | | |
| 5 | Residence of Thomas Hornby. | 12 | Residence of John Birley. | | | | |
| 6 | Residence of William Hornby (formerly of Hugh Hornby). | 13 | Hillside (1811) residence of William Birley. | | | | |
| 7 | Heckling Shop. | | | | | | |

ABBREVIATIONS

b = bowhouse.

w = warehouse.

c = cottages.

s = weaving shops.

INSETS

A Milbanke (1809) residence of Thomas Birley.

had weaving shops and other buildings (see Figure 2). Their residences and counting houses were in Poulton Street near the old Moot Hall on the Market Square which they used as a heckling shop until its demolition in 1795. But it was not only in Kirkham that their sailcloth business expanded. About 1785 they were partners in a flax spinning mill near Whitehaven, they owned another mill at Bentham in the West Riding and by 1824 they had a factory in Redcross Street, Liverpool. To supply these establishments they were part-owners of many ships which brought flax and hemp from the Baltic ports to Liverpool, Lancaster and Wardleys on Wyre.¹⁷

The moving spirit in all these enterprises was undoubtedly Joseph Hornby who was described as 'a shrewd, long-headed, clever man who raised himself and was the great means of improving the condition of his brothers who died in affluent circumstances.'¹⁸ Towards the end of his life Joseph Hornby lived as a country gentleman. He owned lands and farms in several parts of the Fylde and in 1799 he built as his residence Ribby Hall just outside the Kirkham boundary where his descendants resided until the late-nineteenth century.¹⁹

Thomas and William Hornby both died in 1824 and with the death of Joseph in 1832 the Kirkham mercantile interests of the Hornbys appear to have ceased. They are not mentioned as Kirkham merchants in Pigot's *Directory* of 1836 but they continued to own property in the town long after that date and their Bentham and Liverpool factories were carried on by their relatives and descendants.

THE LANGTON, SHEPHERD AND BIRLEY FAMILIES

Langton Shepherd & Co.

The first of the Langton family to reside in Kirkham was Cornelius (see Table 2, the Langton family). He was descended from the Langtons of Broughton Tower, north of Preston, and he came to Kirkham about the time of his marriage in 1689 to a daughter of the headmaster of Kirkham Grammar School. In 1690 he paid 30 shillings for his freedom which enabled him to continue his trade as a woollen draper and it is recorded that he supplied the vestry of thirty men with cushions and tablecloths. After his death in 1712 his eldest son John carried on his business and became associated with William Shepherd whose family had for some time lived in Ribby-with-Wrea or Wrea Green (see Table 3, the Shepherd family). William Shepherd seems to have started business in Kirkham about 1738 when he was admitted a 'free burgager' on payment of 10s. 6d. and in the same year he

TABLE 2: *The Langton Family* (abbreviated pedigree)

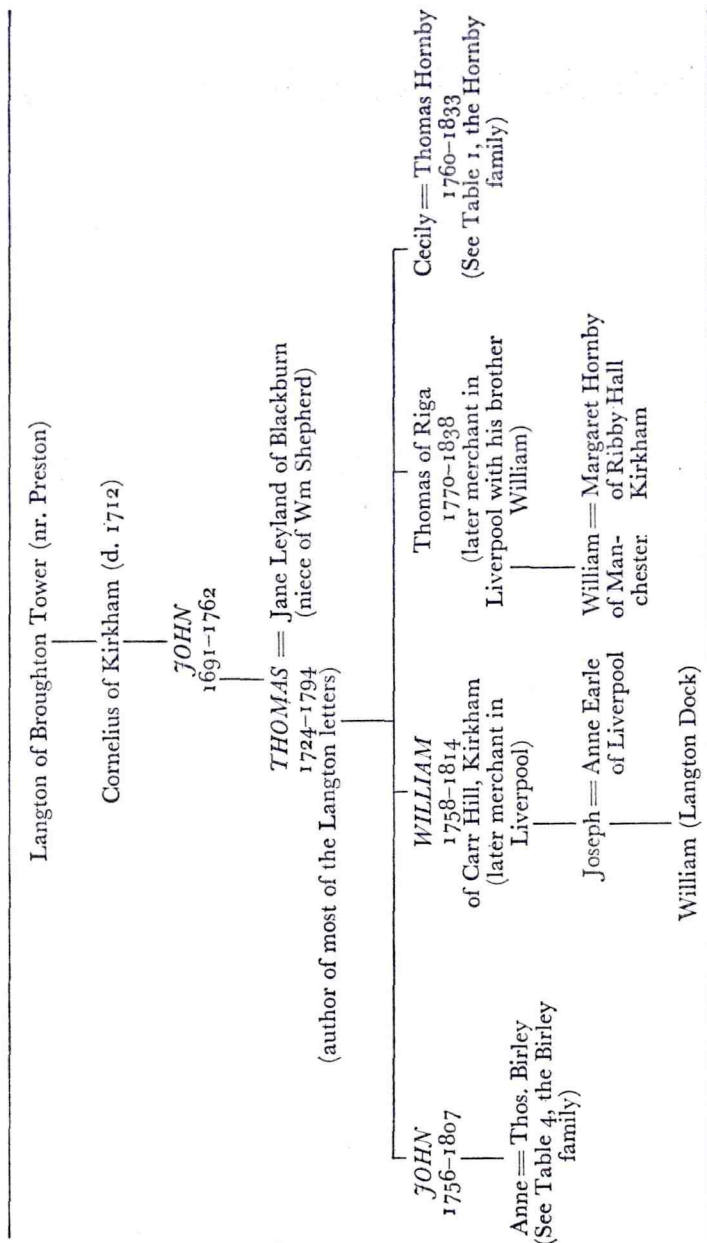
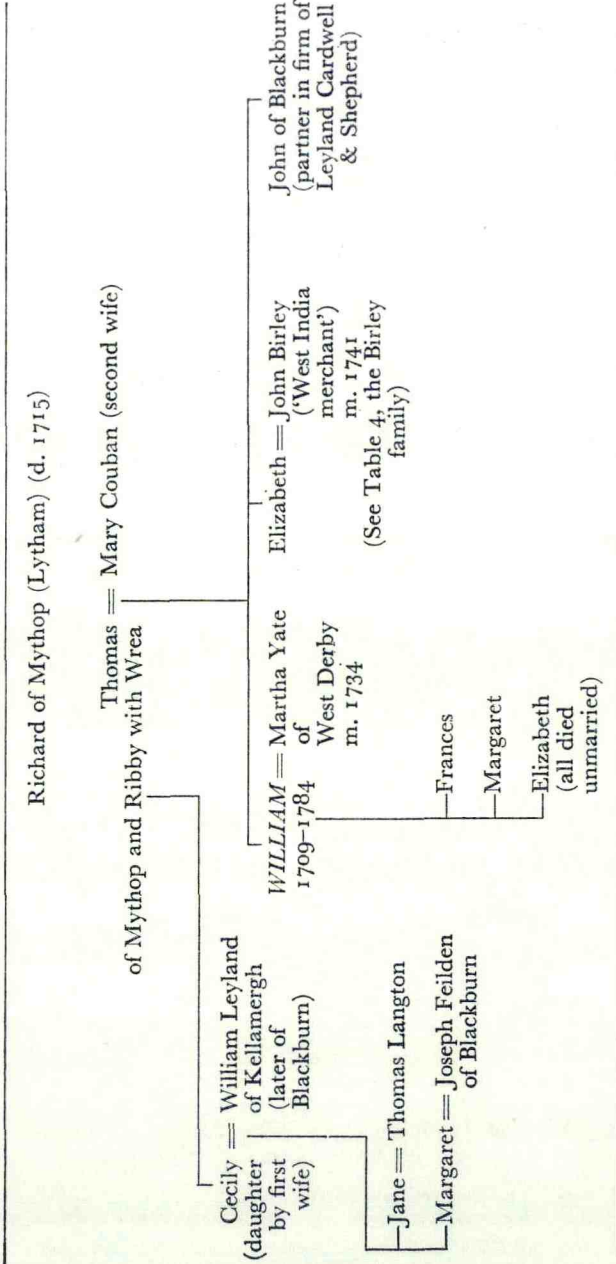


TABLE 3: *The Shepherd Family*

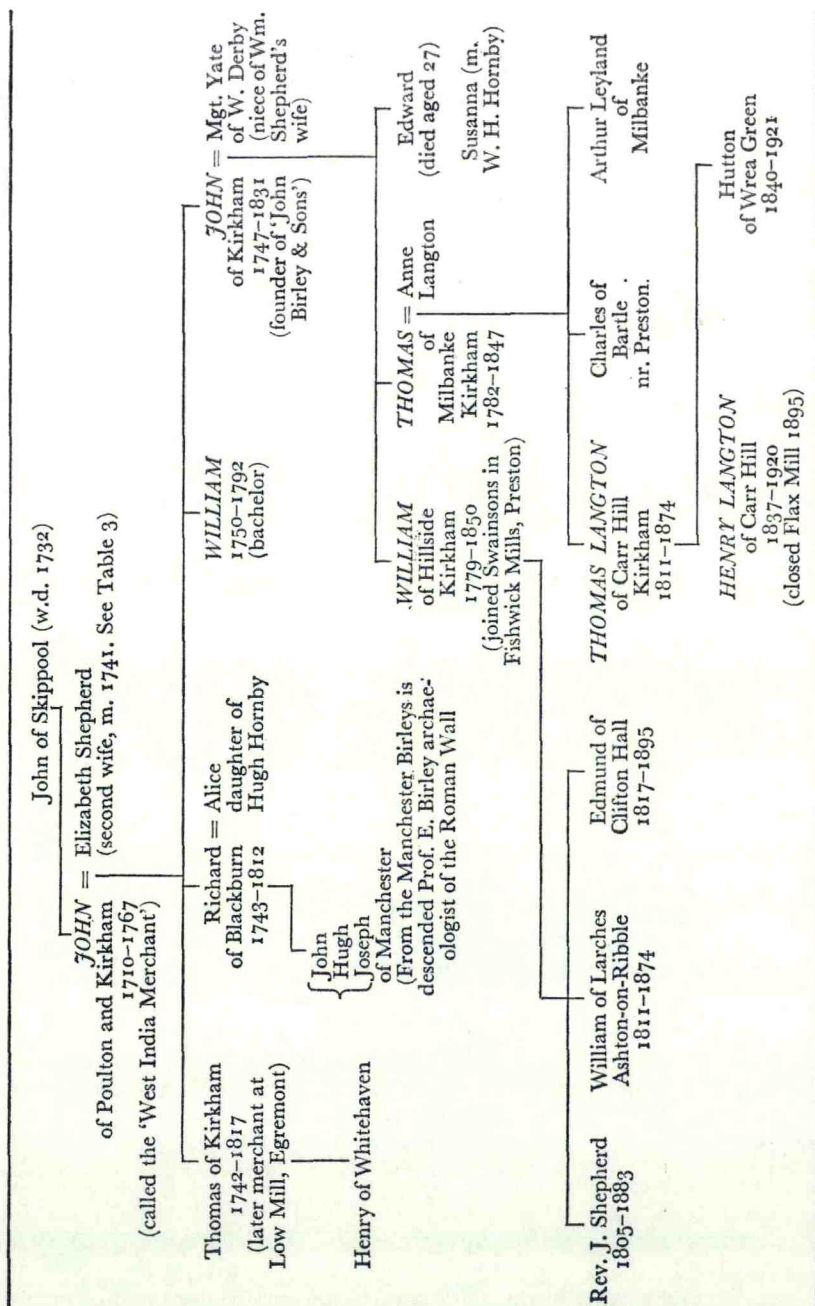
Compiled from Shepherd Birleys Notebook (LRO/DDD) and from documents quoted in text.

served on the jury of the court leet with John Langton.²⁰ Precisely when they joined forces as merchants is uncertain but by 1746 they were together as Langton Shepherd & Co. part-owners of the snow *Betty and Martha* which was engaged in the colonial trade,²¹ and in one of John Langton's wills (1748) there is reference to 'the partnership now carried on between me and Mr William Shepherd.'²² They were also part-owners of some new warehouses built at Wardleys on the Wyre on the opposite side to Skippool and nearer the estuary. Dr Pocock, bishop of Meath, saw these warehouses in 1754 when he wrote: 'We came to the River Wyre, on the N.E. side of which are warehouses for the landing of goods for the merchants of Poulton and Kirkham, it being a very good harbour.'²³ They were very likely built following the appointment by the court of exchequer in 1745 of new legal landing places at Hambleton Scar (Wardleys) and at Bucksbank near Skippool, the Wyre merchants having petitioned that the existing legal quays were useless for 'ships from the Baltic whence they have considerable importations.'²⁴

About the time these warehouses were built Langton Shepherd & Co. began to acquire land and property in Kirkham in order to extend their sailcloth business and documents in the offices of Dickson, Child & Green, solicitors, Kirkham, throw much light on these early developments.²⁵ In 1754 William Shepherd, John Langton, his son Thomas Langton, and William Rawlinson bought from two Dublin merchants, Edward Noy and Richard Cave,²⁶ closes of land on the east side of the Wrangway known as the 'Barnfields or Wildings'. Here by the end of the century they had erected a bowhouse, a weaving factory, a starch-house, spinning sheds and other buildings. In 1758 the same four who 'carried on trade together in co-partnership' bought from William Grimbaldston of Kirkham land formerly known as the Brick Croft on the east side of the Wrangway where two sailcloth factories were built (see Figure 2).²⁷

Shepherd, Langton and Birley

After the death of John Langton in 1762, his son Thomas Langton and his partner William Shepherd took in John Birley, the brother-in-law of William Shepherd (see Table 4, the Birley family), and from that date the partnership is recorded as Shepherd, Langton and Birley. The business continued to expand and more premises were acquired. In 1766 William Shepherd rented a warehouse, counting house and shops in Preston Street, two-thirds of which property he made over to his partners and in 1769 Mary Rawlinson, widow of William Rawlinson the former partner, conveyed to William Shepherd, Thomas Langton and

TABLE 4: *The Birley Family* (abbreviated pedigree)

John Birley, a warehouse, stables and heckling shop in School Lane (see Figure 2).²⁸

John Birley came to Kirkham from Poulton where, like his father, he was a Wyre merchant but he was no stranger to the Kirkham district. As early as 1730 we find him elected thirtyman for the township of Westby-with-Ballam, the home of his first wife, and in 1738 he appears on the Kirkham court leet along with John Langton and William Shepherd. In 1741 he married his second wife, Shepherd's sister Elizabeth, and thereafter for a time he disappears from the Kirkham records having apparently settled in Poulton where he is mentioned in connection with renovations to Poulton Church.²⁹ He traded from the Wyre and he was a part-owner along with Langton Shepherd & Co. in several ships with Poulton registrations.³⁰ His letter book which unfortunately seems to be lost was seen by his great-grandson Rev. J. Shepherd Birley who states that Langton and Shepherd of Kirkham and their relatives, Leyland, Cardwell and Shepherd of Blackburn, are frequently mentioned in it and that there are references to other firms including Hankinson and Hornby of Kirkham and Inman & Co. of Jamaica.³¹ With the latter firm John Birley seems to have had close trade relations being known to his descendants as the 'West India merchant', but by the 1760s the West India trade with the Wyre was declining and this may have induced him to join Langton and Shepherd in Kirkham where he resided until his death in 1767. His elder sons made their mark elsewhere and it was his younger sons, John and William, who succeeded their father as partners in the Kirkham firm.

Langton Birley & Co.

William Shepherd died in 1784 at the age of 75 leaving three unmarried daughters. He was described as 'a tall man of most conciliatory manners and great intelligence' who was influential in settling disputes and much looked up to by the whole county.³² For some years before his death he had ceased to take an active part in the partnership which by 1780 had become known as Langton Birley & Co. and consisted of Thomas Langton with his two sons, John and William, and the brothers, John and William Birley. The oldest and most experienced of these was Thomas Langton. His letters among the Langton Papers reveal him as a shrewd, hard-headed and single-minded business man who guided the firm through the difficult period of the American War and countered the losses in ships and trade by gaining a foothold in the London market and winning contracts for sailcloth with the Royal Navy.³³ His death in 1794 (two years after that of William

Birley) left his two sons, together with John Birley, as the surviving members of the partnership which without his direction and leadership began gradually to break up.

Soon after the death of Thomas Langton, John Birley, the third of that name, began to act on his own account and was well equipped to do so. In his youth he had endured a hard training in Jamaica under the former Lancaster merchant Charles Inman³⁴ and now, at the age of 47 and with over twenty years experience as a partner in the Kirkham firm, he was both mature and responsible. His resources were strengthened by the legacies of his unmarried brother William³⁵ and he had the financial backing of his relatives in Blackburn. In 1796 he purchased a field called the Cloyce Meadow from Margaret Grimbaldeston of Kirkham and in 1804 he acquired land and property including a barn, shippon, barkmill and tanyard on the north side of Poulton Street adjoining the present Mill Street. Both these sites were adjacent to the Barnfield premises and were later used in the expansion of the flax business. He then proceeded to buy out the Langtons and what remained of the Shepherd interest by a series of conveyances dated 14 June 1804. These show that he bought the Wrangway sailcloth factories for £167 and the large Barnfield premises, containing a bowhouse, weaving factory, spinning shades, spinning factory and 12 cottages, for £1,648 15s. He also acquired the lease of the warehouses in Preston Street, where he was 'already engaged in the sailcloth business', for £250 and he later bought them outright along with the adjoining residence of the Shepherds for £2,015. The Church Street and School Lane property, including a warehouse, heckling shop and cottages, were conveyed to him for £481 15s. and shortly afterwards he bought some land and a cottage in Freckleton Street which he converted into a weaving shop (see Figure 2). In Freckleton village where sailcloth manufacture was also carried on he had previously (1803) purchased from the Langtons cottages and weaving shops in Strike Lane. In nearly all these transactions his trustee was his nephew John Birley of Blackburn.³⁶

John Birley and Sons

Having bought out the Langtons John Birley carried on the business as 'John Birley and Sons' (under which name it remained until its liquidation in 1895) and proceeded to reorganise and extend it. He developed the Barnfields site with its nucleus of spinning shades and weaving shops into a large flax mill powered from 1807 by a '32 horse engine with duplicate boiler' purchased from Boulton and Watt for the sum of £1,816,³⁷ and near the mill he built an apprentice house for lodging poor

apprentices from London and elsewhere. Improvements and additions continued as shown by an indenture of 1841 when the premises were described as: 'All that flax spinning mill or factory with counting houses, gas works, power loom weaving and heckling shops, smiths' shops, boiler houses and porter's lodge, yards and lodge or reservoir for water thereto belonging and adjoining' (see Plate 2).³⁸ During the first half of the century much of the weaving was done in shops owned by Birleys in Mill Street, Wrangway, Barnfields, Church Street, Preston Street, Freckleton Street and Strike Lane Freckleton. After 1840 poor Irish immigrants, mainly from the Belfast area, were employed in the mill and housed nearby in low thatched cottages which were often insanitary and overcrowded.

The Decline of the Kirkham Flax Industry

Since the boom years of the Napoleonic Wars there had been a gradual decrease in the demand for sailcloth. The emergence of the U.S.A. as a producer of linen and the obsolescence of the navigation laws had ruined the old colonial markets while the British navy, an important purchaser of canvas during the French wars, needed less in times of peace. The Lancashire cotton industry, on the other hand, was growing apace in new and efficient buildings and drawing workers from the old domestic and handloom establishments on which the weaving of sailcloth and sackling had hitherto depended. The Kirkham merchants were not slow to sense the change. Already in the eighteenth century Richard Birley, his wife Alice Hornby and her brother John had gone to Blackburn where early in the nineteenth century they established cotton spinning mills, while in Kirkham, after the deaths of the three Hornby brothers (1824-1832) their Freckleton Street sailcloth factory was sold and later converted into a cotton mill.³⁹ Even John Birley and Sons were obliged to follow the trend. In 1820 they joined Charles Swainson in setting up the Fishwick cotton mills in Preston, among the most modern of the day, and in order to render the Kirkham Flax Mill a viable concern they were forced in the 1830s to change from coarse spinning, on which sailcloth manufacture was based, to spinning finer counts for export which made much of their machinery obsolete and eventually necessitated the building of a new wing.

When John Birley died in 1831 he left the flax business in Kirkham to his sons William and Thomas but differences soon arose between them caused partly by the decline of the flax industry and the growth of the cotton industry. About 1838 William Birley and his son Edmund proposed to withdraw from

the Kirkham flax business and take over the shares of Thomas and his sons in the Fishwick cotton mills in Preston which they regarded as a better prospect. The suggestion was strongly opposed by Thomas Birley and his family and there followed a long and acrimonious dispute. Among the Birley papers in the Lancashire Record Office is a memorandum which throws much light on this quarrel.⁴⁰ It is unsigned and undated but was probably written by one of Thomas's sons about 1838. The Kirkham concern, he says, had so many disadvantages that 'we should have been glad to have retired ourselves'. He refers to the additional expense of running and supervising a country mill with high carriage costs, scattered buildings, 'built at 13 different times', with wooden floors injured by the steam used in flax spinning, and requiring three steam engines. He states that 'in consequence of the great change we have found it necessary to make from coarse to fine spinning' many of the warehouses and weaving shops in different parts of the town had become of little or no value and the bleach works, 'of considerable value had we employment for them', were almost useless. The capital involved in cottage and other property belonging to the concern was a great disadvantage as in a large town this outlay would not have been necessary. Finally he estimates that the future prospects of the flax trade were far from encouraging, 'principally in consequence of the French, with whom we have an extensive trade, being about to impose an additional duty.'⁴¹ In spite of all this the writer admits that the profits of the Kirkham concern for the last seven years had been an average of £7,965 per annum but he thinks that not enough had been deducted for wear and tear. Eventually, with the help of arbitrators, an agreement was reached. In 1841 Thomas Birley took over William's share in the Kirkham mills for £7,485 and that of William's son Edmund for £900.⁴²

From 1841 Thomas Birley carried on the flax business with his sons Thomas Langton Birley, Charles and Leyland.⁴³ Although linen and sailcloth were still produced they seem to have concentrated on fine spinning for which, as already stated, extensions were made to the old flax mill. About the middle of the century being the largest property owners and employing about 800 workers they tended to dominate Kirkham, and in 1872 Thomas Langton Birley, having bought the demesne lands and manorial rights from Christ Church Oxford, was able to style himself lord of the manor. The flax mill descended to his eldest son Henry Langton Birley but towards the end of the century high costs and the competition of cotton made it uneconomic and it was finally closed in 1895. It remained unused until 1918 after which it

served as a cotton waste mill until 1972 when it was finally demolished.

THE TRADING ACTIVITIES OF THE KIRKHAM MERCHANTS

The letter books, business papers and account books of the Kirkham merchants appear to have been lost but it is possible to build up a general picture of their trading activities from their shipping interests, their connections with Liverpool and other ports, and especially from a few letters, both business and private, which have survived. In the Lancashire Record Office is a box of Langton Papers⁴⁴ containing letters from Thomas Langton to his sons John and William. They cover the period 1771 to 1778 when Thomas and (later) his sons were part-owners in the firm of Shepherd Langton and Birley and when their friends and rivals in Kirkham were Hugh Hornby and Sons. These letters offer many interesting sidelights on the trading activities of the Kirkham merchants and they have been freely drawn upon in the account which follows.

Imports of Flax and Hemp: the Baltic Trade

Imports from the Baltic, already 'considerable' in 1744,⁴⁵ are frequently referred to in the Langton letters. They consisted mainly of various grades of flax and hemp, the raw materials for the production of sailcloth and cordage.⁴⁶ On the evidence of the letters the principal ports of origin were St Petersburg (with its outport Krondstadt) and Riga but there are also references to Narva, Libau, Pillau and Konigsburg while from Danzig there were imports of ashes used in the bleaching process. There were English firms or agents at most of these places so that it was seldom necessary to write in any other language.

The voyage from the Baltic ports to Lancashire took about four weeks⁴⁷ or even longer depending on the port of origin, the weather, and whether calls were made at other ports. The normal route was 'north about' round Scotland and traffic was confined to the summer months, May to October. Winter passages were avoided because the Baltic gulfs were frozen and rough weather resulted in damage to cargoes and ships. In a letter of July 1787 Thomas Langton is very concerned about the delayed departure of a Baltic ship from Liverpool 'as the season is so far advanced'. The round trip would take over two months and he was anxious at all costs 'to avoid a winter's passage.'⁴⁸ But after the winter recess he was equally anxious to get early deliveries of flax so that when the *Norfolk*, a ship he had engaged to bring 60 tons of flax from Petersburg was stranded at Hull in April 1788 on her outward

voyage he was very disappointed. 'She was to have been an early ship' he says, 'and to have brought us an early supply.'⁴⁹

The chief warehouses of the Kirkham merchants were at Wardleys on the Wyre and the arrival and discharge of Baltic ships there was a matter of some concern for them. They had to ensure that the vessels were conveniently berthed, that the cargo was in good condition and that the unloading was properly carried out. They had also to watch the state of the tides as the Wyre, although more navigable than the Ribble, sometimes presented difficulties. When, for instance, Mr Birley and J. Parr went to Wyre on 10 October 1780 in hopes of seeing Captain Davis come up the river, Thomas Langton feared they would be disappointed 'as there will scarce be water sufficient', but he thought that Captain Holland who had arrived at Whitehaven on the 6th would stand a good chance of getting in if he met with a good pilot. Davis had sailed from Riga in the *William* and Holland from Petersburg in the *Providence*. Both had encountered rough weather and both cargoes were damaged. In fact Holland had already drawn up a protest (probably at Whitehaven) to certify the underwriters of his coming north about and it was hoped to recover the loss from £300 insured on the profits. But apart from the damage Thomas Langton had great complaints against the quality of the whole cargo bought by the *Providence* and he thought that 'little attention was paid to our interest by the house at St Petersburg'.⁵⁰

The unloading at Wardleys evidently took several days for, when Captain Storey arrived at the warehouses on Tuesday 16 September 1777, Thomas Langton observed: 'We shall begin to discharge in the morning. I hope we shall finish on Saturday. The weather is fine and suitable for the purpose which will greatly forward us. Mr Hornby will finish to-day.'⁵¹ Not all the flax, however, was delivered at the Wyre warehouses; consignments were often discharged at Liverpool whence parcels were sometimes sent by canal boat or coaster to Freckleton on the Ribble. For example in August 1782 when William Langton was with John Owen Parr & Co. at the sailcloth warehouse, Dry Dock, Liverpool, his father advised him: 'If you find the remains of the Petersburg 12 heads please you as to colour and quality would have you ship it by the first coast boat to Freckleton as we fear we may be short for the long shades.'⁵² From about 1760 there was a legal quay with a warehouse at Naze Point, Freckleton, opposite the confluence of the Douglas and Ribble.⁵³ It was difficult of access for larger Baltic ships but it could accommodate Irish and coastal craft and was handily placed for the Douglas canal boats. Being only three miles from Kirkham it was much

more convenient for the Kirkham merchants than Wardleys which was about twelve miles away with a difficult approach by land and what little evidence there is suggests that they frequently used Freckleton for coastal and canal traffic.⁵⁴

After 1778 when the French had joined the Americans against Britain there was danger from French privateers. In fact in 1780 the *Industry* from Danzig, carrying in her cargo four casks of ashes for Langton Birleys, was taken by a French privateer of 14 guns about 60 leagues from land.⁵⁵ To combat this danger Baltic ships often sailed in convoy from the Sound to Hull whence the Lancashire consignments were sent via the Aire navigation and the completed portion of the Leeds-Liverpool canal. Thus on 25 September 1780, when a Baltic convoy had arrived at Hull, Thomas Langton commented: 'This flax will be immediately forwarded by canal'; and again (19 August 1782): 'We shall incline to look on a while as to the hemp in hopes our Riga pass may arrive at Hull. The conveyance from thence by Kildwick will be very speedy.'⁵⁶ But breaking bulk and canal dues no doubt added to the expense and even in war time the sea route was regularly used.

Besides being manufacturers the Kirkham men were merchants and the nature of their trading activities involved them in a variety of mercantile dealings. Not all the imported flax was used in manufacture and the surplus was often sold to chapmen. On 12 July 1775, for instance, when a consignment of dry flax arrived at Liverpool Thomas Langton hoped that it would 'please the chaps... and meet with a ready sale'. But in addition to flax and hemp which were light cargoes other Baltic products were imported, often of necessity to ballast certain types of ships. Timber, for instance, came in regularly. In June 1775 Hugh Hornby had information that 'the Riga vessels are all arrived there... and that those that are to lade timber will be detained as no balks are yet come down'. Evidently the Langton ships were among those detained for Thomas observed regretfully that Hornbys have a ship 'which lades all flax and... they will have new flax on the market a long before us'. Other commodities mentioned by Thomas Langton and imported in Baltic ships are wheat, iron and tallow.⁵⁷

The Langton letters end in 1788 but there is ample proof that the Baltic trade went on well into the nineteenth century except for a few years during the Napoleonic wars when the Baltic ports were closed. The Kirkham merchants were part-owners of ships with Liverpool, Preston (Poulton) and Lancaster registrations until after 1800,⁵⁸ some of which ships were engaged in the Baltic trade; and in the *Preston Chronicle* which begins in 1812 there

are many entries for imports into Wyre and Liverpool, for both Birleys and Hornbys, and into Lancaster for Hornbys, presumably for their factories at Bentham.⁵⁹ Birleys continued to use the Wyre until about the middle of the nineteenth century. In September 1832 the *Preston Chronicle* records two ships at Wyre from Narva and one from Archangel with flax for J. Birley and Sons but after about 1840 Baltic ships began to use the new port of Fleetwood and the Wardleys warehouses were leased to Messrs Lewtas who imported timber from the Baltic and Canada.⁶⁰

While the bulk of their imports were undoubtedly from the Baltic the Kirkham merchants occasionally imported from elsewhere. In the Langton Papers there are several references to Italian or Ancona hemp.⁶¹ Langton Birley & Co. exported to Italy and although there is no record of Italian imports into Wyre there was probably a trade connection through Liverpool. Another source of raw flax was Ireland. During the winter months when the Baltic ports were closed small quantities of flax and tow are recorded from Drogheda and Newry. These came in smaller ships along with various other cargoes for the Preston merchants and would probably be discharged at Freckleton. More rarely ships from Ireland, carrying flax only, discharged at Wyre. On 10 February 1821, for instance, the *Peggy and John* arrived at Wyre from Newry with 26 tons of undressed flax for J. Birley and Sons.⁶² As in the case of Italy the Kirkham merchants had connections with Ireland and it is probable that flax was imported from there during the Napoleonic Wars when the Baltic was closed and sailcloth was in large demand.

Exports and Sales: the Colonial Trade

The disposal of the sailcloth and other manufactures of the Kirkham merchants is not always easy to trace as much of it was sold through agents and mercantile houses in Liverpool, London and elsewhere. It is known, however, that during the second half of the eighteenth century they exported sailcloth and twine to the colonies. This is not surprising when we remember that the second John Birley was known to his descendants as the 'West India merchant' and that his son, the third John Birley, spent three hard years in Jamaica under the redoubtable Charles Inman. In the 1740s and 1750s there was direct trade between the Wyre and the plantations and although this seems to have petered out the Kirkham merchants continued to trade with the colonies in association with firms in Liverpool and other ports.

Some interesting references to this trade have emerged from South Carolina where four letters written by the house of Austin Laurens & Co. to Langton Shepherd & Co. have been preserved.

The first two, written on 19 August and 12 October 1756, make no mention at all of sailcloth but refer to such matters as indigo, rice, rum and slaves in which the Kirkham partners were interested. The next (20 December 1763) written by Mr Laurens says, 'I have likewise received your 7 bales of sailcloth... in fairly good order save two or three pieces daubed in the vessel's hold with tar but not of much consequence. The cloth seems to be good but rather too narrow which will be a detriment to the sale.' In a subsequent letter of 9 May 1764 he has sold upwards of 90 pieces of this sailcloth but he is not very enthusiastic about future prospects and thinks the Kirkham merchants would do better to find outlets at home rather than 'plague yourselves with this distant and precarious market'.⁶³

In spite of this the trade seems to have gone on. In the Langton Papers, although there is no direct reference to the export of sailcloth to the colonies, there are several strong implications. For instance in June 1775, when Thomas Langton was at Hotwells, Bristol, for his health, he became quite anxious about the situation in North America and about payments owing to him, presumably for exports. 'I hope', he writes to William, 'that you have received some letters from thence since I left home with remittances, or I fear it will be long, very long, before we get anything from that quarter.' But if the trade with the mainland was being temporarily interrupted that with the West Indies seems to have continued. The Hartleys of Whitehaven, for instance, were extensive West India traders and in October 1780 Langton Birley & Co. sent them 136 bolts of canvas for exportation. Again on 19 August 1782 the Kirkham firm was advised by Messrs Thompson and Rowlandson of Barbados that they had decided to risk sending £150 currency by the *Devonshire* for Lancaster. Langton Birley & Co. were also dealing about this time in such colonial products as tobacco and sago powder which may have been taken in payment for goods exported.⁶⁴ When the American war was over we find them exporting to Virginia through orders given them by Sparling and Bolden of Liverpool. Between 1788 and 1793 this firm shipped to Virginia more than £178 worth of sailcloth and £187 worth of Seine twine.⁶⁵ About the same time there were enquiries from Canada by a Mr Frazer of Quebec who required an assortment of sailcloth which Langton Birley & Co. could not supply immediately.⁶⁶

Trade with Europe

In many countries of Europe such as Holland, France and Germany the production of sailcloth and linen was old-established and protected industry so that even in peace time there were few

openings for British manufacturers. As mentioned above, however, Langton Birley & Co. imported Italian hemp and this seems to have led to reciprocal trade. In 1780, for instance, a Mr Stefanelli of Leghorn ordered 60 bolts of canvas to be shipped by a vessel from Liverpool. There was apparently a regular trade connection with Leghorn but Stefanelli was a new customer and after making enquiries as to his character and stability Thomas Langton decided to have no further correspondence with him 'as it may disgust our Leghorn friends'. There were also exports to Irish ports from which Langton Birley & Co. sometimes obtained raw flax. The evidence is scanty but in August 1782 we are told that the bales for Newry must be shipped by the first vessel going there⁶⁷ and among the exports to Ireland in the early nineteenth century was sacking; an entry in the *Preston Chronicle*, 27 April 1816 shows that 100 bundles of sacks were sent to Waterford by Birleys of Kirkham.

In the Langton Papers there are no references to exports of sailcloth to other European countries but Thomas Langton was always on the look out for new markets and when in April 1788 William took a holiday in France with his friends his father wrote to him deploring the fact that there was little prospect of the tour turning to any advantage in trade and requesting him to enquire at the ports 'how they are supplied with canvas and on what terms'. 'If', he says, 'you could open up a new market your journey might not prove useless.'⁶⁸ Whether anything came of these exhortations it is impossible to say. By the 1830s, as already noted, Birleys were trading with France but by this time they had gone over to fine spinning and their exports were mainly of linen yarn.⁶⁹

The Home Market

About 1780 Langton Birley & Co. were apparently in some financial difficulty and the letters of Thomas Langton frequently reveal a note of anxiety. He fears that the firm's resources will be insufficient to meet their liabilities; he talks about 'our necessitous situation' and about 'having recourse to our London friends'. The cause of this financial stringency is not stated but as already noted the American War had seriously affected the colonial market; payments had been withheld, ships lost and cargoes damaged; and the firm had evidently insufficient capital to ride these losses easily. It was therefore urgently necessary to speed up sales and find new outlets at home to pay for Baltic imports and to satisfy pressing creditors.⁷⁰

In the home market the chief customer was the Royal Navy for whose use, according to John Aiken, 'considerable quantities'

of sailcloth were provided by the Kirkham merchants.⁷¹ This is confirmed by entries in the Navy Board Contracts which show that from about 1780 both Langton Birley & Co. and J. T. & W. Hornby were receiving orders for sailcloth.⁷² There are references to this in the Langton Papers where the best sailcloth is often referred to as 'Navy' or 'Government' canvas. Some of the deliveries may well have been to the naval depot at Deptford for in October 1780 50 bolts of canvas, 'same as last proportion', were sent there. Another letter refers to a Navy contract, for when in April 1788 the *Rose* was loading at Lancaster Langton Birley & Co. decided to send by her all the Navy canvas they could muster so as to ship 'one half the contract'. At the same time they must have been shipping naval canvas from Freckleton for we are told that the *Rose* was likely to be 'so soon after the *Concord* from Ribble who is not yet sailed that we shall scarcely think of taking out a Navy Bill before the *Rose* arrives and her cargo is delivered'. Some of these Navy bills were for considerable sums like one which in October 1780 Langton Birley & Co. were recommended to sell at $11\frac{1}{4}$ per cent discount—nett amount £990 19s od.⁷³ Small wonder that Thomas Langton was often worried about accounts from the Navy Office when payments were delayed as they often were. Although supplied in various grades the quality of the Kirkham sailcloth seems generally to have been high and efforts were made to improve it by paying greater attention to the weavers. In 1763 the Laurens letter from South Carolina had described the cloth as good but rather narrow and this is confirmed by Thomas Langton's letter to William in France in 1788. 'I suppose', he says, 'they are chiefly supplied with Russia canvas which is broader than ours—say about 27in.—and will probably come lower in price in proportion but I apprehend ours would be preferred as to its fabrick.' Deliveries to London were usually by sea but occasionally they went by canal as in August 1782 when 13 bales sent from Kirkham to Liverpool were directed to be 'sent on board the Duke's Flatts to take the first conveyance by the canal boats'.⁷⁴

On reaching London it is clear that much of the so-called 'Navy' canvas was handled by agents though how much actually went through them to the Royal Navy is difficult to determine. These agents were a constant source of worry to Thomas Langton especially about 1780 when Langton Birley & Co. were in financial difficulty. Quick sales on the shortest credit were essential and when William was in London his father repeatedly urged him to impress this upon the agents. Thus on 24 October 1780: 'We find that you have drawn on Birkbeck Blake for £150 at 10% . . . Pray press them to extend their sales as much

as possible to get quit of the canvas on hand . . . If the Navy cloth with Anderson and Davidson should all be sold we can speedily replace it. I wish Mr Gale may put off the 200 bolts with an allowance of 10% discount. Pray press him to extend himself in the sale of it.' In another letter William is asked to press Messrs Dickinson and Lloyd to make speedy sales and indeed about this time pressure on the agents is Thomas Langton's constant plea. But sales were not always easy for competition was keen especially from the Warrington sailcloth makers who evidently used some of the same agents as Langton Birley & Co. Thus, on 27 October 1780: 'We are much surprised to find so many of the Warrington people are up [i.e. in London] and running down the prices of canvas so much. We must do the same as others and we wonder Messrs Anderson and Davidson should make any arrangements for Messrs Gaskells [of Warrington] at a reduced price without acquainting you of it.'⁷⁵ There was also competition from the Scottish manufacturers whose canvas, we are told, 'prejudices the sale of ours', and from Hornbys, the rival Kirkham firm who had a relative, Mr Loxham, as one of their London agents.⁷⁶

Most of the agents charged $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 4 per cent commission which Thomas Langton (and evidently Joseph Hornby) tried to avoid by selling privately whenever possible. On 10 October 1780 he wrote to William: 'J. Hornby tells me this morning that he thinks there will be a demand for canvas in London this winter for private sale. The demand comes in November and generally holds till March or April. It would be very eligible if you could agree with any person for the delivery of a quantity of canvas without going through our agents hands and subjecting us to their high charges and commissions.' In another letter he advises William to see some of the chapmen himself with the help of a Mr Hatton Turner but warns him to be on his guard as he is agent for most of the Warrington makers.⁷⁷

Payment for the Baltic products seems to have been done through Messrs Muilmans of London on the surety of Langton's friends Turner and Threlfall. Thus in September 1777: 'Messrs Muilmans have drawn on us for £1,600 and I this day remit Messrs Turner & Co. £1,000 in lieu thereof.' But in the following year at the request of Muilmans, 'to account with them direct for the produce of the cargo', about £1,200 was remitted to them direct.⁷⁸ What Langton Birley & Co. really needed was a London agent of their own and it is not surprising to find that Thomas Langton, after educating his son Zachary at an academy in Hampstead, set him up as a wholesale linen draper in London.⁷⁹ By 1788 he was evidently handling their London affairs: 'Messrs Birch's drafts for R.8000 [8,000 roubles] have already appeared

and no orders were given to Zach. for their acceptance. We, however, wrote him immediately back to accept their drafts to the amount of £3,000'.⁸⁰ Similarly it was desirable to have a representative in the Baltic where problems arose with regard to orders, sales and prices especially when, as sometimes happened, Langton Birley & Co. sold certain varieties of their flax before it left Baltic ports. In 1788, for instance, they instructed Thorleys of Riga to resell their Draw Cut and Risten 3 Band and to ship the Six Heads and Lithuanian Pass to Liverpool unless it could be put off at 26 roubles per shott. They also decided to buy no more Riga hemp as the price was too high and advised Thorleys to transmit the money in hand to Petersburg instead of transferring it back to Amsterdam.⁸¹ It was no doubt to cope with situations such as this that in 1788 Thomas Langton sent his son Thomas (junior) to join the firm of Thorley Morrison in Riga. At this date he was only 17 but he later became a partner in the firm and one of the principal mercants there.⁸²

THE BUSINESS AND FAMILY CONNECTIONS OF THE KIRKHAM MERCHANTS

The Kirkham mercantile families were closely associated, not only in their business dealings but also in their civic and social activities, which resulted in frequent intermarriages and gave rise to such names as Langton Birley, Shepherd Birley, Hornby Birley and many others. In Kirkham itself they formed a wealthy clique which for over 100 years dominated the life of the town, transforming it from an ancient market and ecclesiastical centre into a small manufacturing community. Their names are prominent in the select vestry of thirty men which helped to govern the large ecclesiastical parish of which Kirkham was the centre; they served regularly as jurors and bailiffs on the court leet which governed the town for its manorial lords, and they were prominent in the education of the children, wresting the sole control of the ancient grammar school from the London Drapers' Company and founding in 1761 a Charity School for Girls which was the model for a similar one at Blackburn. As merchants and manufacturers they employed hundreds of workpeople and many domestics were required for the large houses (some of them still standing) which they built in the Kirkham area.⁸³ But it was not only in Kirkham that these families left their mark; some of their members saw opportunities for sailcloth manufacture in and around Whitehaven, Lancaster (Bentham) and Liverpool while others, sensing the growing importance of cotton, moved to Blackburn, Manchester and Preston. In all these towns they be-

came prominent in commercial, manufacturing and civic life, making thereby a notable contribution to the industrial development of Lancashire and adjacent areas of the North West.

Whitehaven

Towards the end of the eighteenth century the Hornby and Birley families extended their manufacturing activities to the Whitehaven area of Cumberland, the centre of an old domestic linen region. At this time Whitehaven, with its member ports of Workington and Maryport, had an extensive coal trade with Ireland and mercantile connections with the West Indies and Baltic. About 1786, to meet the demand for sailcloth, Joseph Bell of Whitehaven formed a partnership with the Hornby brothers and Thomas Birley of Kirkham in a company known as Hornby, Bell and Birley.⁸⁴ By 1794 they had extensive buildings in Whitehaven itself while at Low Mill, a hamlet near Egremont, they converted the ruins of an ironworks into a large sailcloth manufactory using water power from the river Eden. When John Marshall of Leeds visited Cumberland in 1800 this factory of Hornby, Bell and Birley at Low Mill Egremont was the largest seen by him on his tours. It had 1,500 spindles and used eight tons of flax each week. 'They are building another', he says, 'which will do as much more.'⁸⁵ This second mill was at Cleator but soon after Marshall's visit the partnership must have dissolved. There is no further mention of the Hornbys and the directories show that by 1811 Bells had their own factory in Whitehaven while the Low Mill and Cleator factories were in the hands of Birleys under the style of Henry Birley & Co.,⁸⁶ described in White's Directory of 1829 as 'Flax and tow spinners, thread, twine, and sailcloth manufacturers'.

Henry Birley was the son of Thomas Birley of Kirkham who early in the nineteenth century had moved to Cumberland with his family.⁸⁷ Two other sons, John and James, probably had interests in the business but the driving force was undoubtedly Henry Birley. He rebuilt Low Mill after it had been destroyed by fire in 1827 and provided cottages for the operatives as he did at Cleator where he lived for a time in a residence called 'The Flosch' later used as offices by Ennerdale R.D.C. He also had a sailcloth manufactory at Corkickle in Whitehaven as well as weaving shops in Duke Street and Catherine Street. In Duke Street there was a Birley Court with 16 cottages for workpeople and Henry Birley himself had a fine Georgian house in this street in which he died in January 1830. Henry Birley employed nearly 400 men and women in his various factories and they are said to have regarded him more as a friend than a master. He was an extensive

landowner with farms near Whitehaven and shooting rights round Ennerdale Lake (then Broadwater) which he owned. He was a bachelor and after his death the flax business already in decline, was sold with most of the other Birley properties.⁸⁸

Bentham

About 1795 when Lancaster was a thriving port the Hornby brothers established themselves in the village of Bentham thirteen miles away where water power was available from the river Wenning and where flax was already being spun in the High Mill owned by Charles Parker of the Society of Friends. The Hornbys at first operated from another mill, the Low Mill, which dates from 1785 and was probably built by them.⁸⁹ They imported Baltic flax into their warehouse on St George's quay Lancaster and transported it by four horse wagons to Bentham.⁹⁰

In his *History of Bentham* James Bibby records that Hornby & Co. at first spun yarn at Bentham for their sailcloth factories at Kirkham and that they afterwards built premises for weavers, some of whom came from Kirkham. In fact one row of 16 houses with four looms in the cellar of each was christened 'New Kirkham' by the occupiers in memory of the place they had left.⁹¹ No date is given for the transference of these weavers but it was probably about the time when Hornby Roughsedge moved from Kirkham to Bentham.

Hornby Roughsedge was the son of the Rev. Thomas Hankinson Roughsedge, Rector of Liverpool. He was a relative of the Hornbys through his grandmother Elizabeth (née Hankinson). Early in the nineteenth century he lived in Kirkham where, according to Shepherd Birley, he was 'in business with the Hornbys' and he seems to have managed their Kirkham factories.⁹² About 1814 he moved to Bentham and although he continued to trade under the name of Hornby & Co. he took over and extended the Hornby interests there.⁹³ In 1814 he bought High Mill and the residence known as Bentham House from Charles Parker. He also acquired the manorial rights of Ingleton and became the leading gentleman of the district. He was a great benefactor of St Margaret's Church, Bentham which he built and which contains several memorials to him including a prayer book inscribed 'Hornby Roughsedge, Kirkham 1802'.

In the 1830s the sailcloth industry began to decline in Bentham as it did elsewhere and the mills went over to the production of finer yarns by wet spinning. In 1850 Hornby Roughsedge sold the mills and Bentham House to Waithman & Co. and retired to Foxghyll near Ambleside. He died in September 1859 and is buried at Grasmere. With him the connection of the Hornbys

with Bentham seems to have ended although yarns and linens were produced there until 1883.

Liverpool

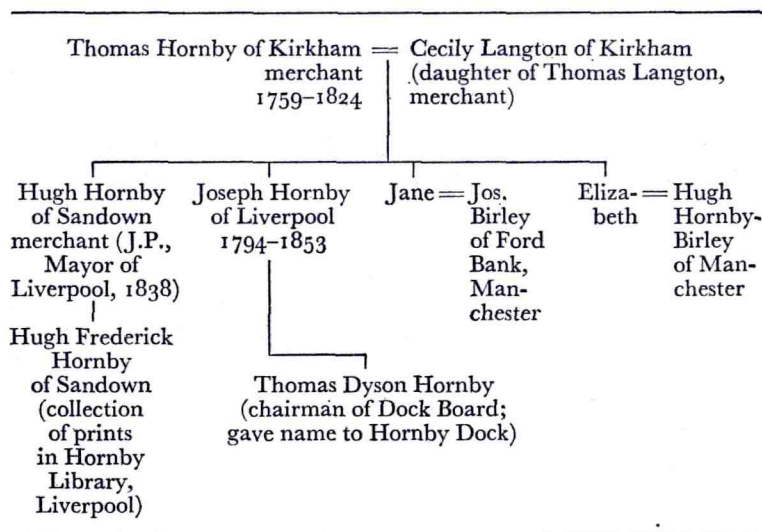
The rapid growth of Liverpool in the eighteenth century attracted merchants from a wide hinterland and all the Kirkham flax families had connections there. From about 1740 they used the Mersey as well as the Wyre not only for their Baltic imports but also for the West Indies trade and general merchandise for, as Thomas Langton observed, 'We are near enough to Liverpool to attend to the sale of any article'.⁹⁴ They were part-owners with Liverpool merchants of many ships which used the Mersey⁹⁵—indeed John Langton is listed among the Liverpool slave traders—and their connections with Sparling and Bolden have already been noted.

In 1733 William Shepherd married Martha Yate, sister of John Yate a Liverpool merchant, and thus began a long and close connection between Langton, Shepherd and Birley and the Yate family.⁹⁶ John Yate was a great friend of Thomas Langton. He looked after the Langton boys when they were at school in Woolton and he is often mentioned in the Langton Papers. Indeed he seems to have formed a partnership with the Kirkham firm for in both Gore's and Williamson's *Liverpool Advertiser*, 1777-8, there are several entries for Langton Yate & Co. which may explain why William Langton was so often in Liverpool about this time. John Birley was also linked with the Yate family for he married John Yate's daughter Margaret and was a friend of her twin brother William who lived for a time in the West Indies.

After they had sold out their Kirkham interests to John Birley in 1804 the Langtons became a Liverpool firm. William and his brother Thomas (ex Riga) are entered in Gore's *Liverpool Directory*, 1821, as 'Langton, W. T. & Co., merchants, Counting House, 5 King St. Lane', and records show that they were large importers of Baltic produce.⁹⁷ William's son Joseph married Ann Earle of a Liverpool mercantile family and from this marriage came the William Langton who was chairman of the Dock Board from 1870 to 1876 and gave his name to the Langton Dock.⁹⁸

The Hankinson and Hornby families were also closely associated with Liverpool. Joseph Hankinson's niece Elizabeth married Edward Roughsedge, an ironmonger and merchant of Liverpool,⁹⁹ and their grandson was Hornby Roughsedge mentioned above as being in business with the Hornby brothers in Kirkham and Bentham. In the early-nineteenth century J. T. & W. Hornby imported much Baltic produce into Liverpool where they had a

counting house and linen manufactory.¹⁰⁰ Thomas Hornby's two elder sons, Hugh and Joseph, settled in Liverpool and founded the firm of H. & J. Hornby & Co. Russia merchants of Brunswick Street. Hugh of Sandown, Wavertree, was Mayor of Liverpool in 1838 and his son Hugh Frederick left to Liverpool a fine collection of bindings, prints and books now in the Hornby Library. The other partner Joseph had a son, Thomas D. Hornby, who followed William Langton as chairman of the Dock Board and gave his name to the Hornby Dock.¹⁰¹

TABLE 5: *The Hornbys of Liverpool* (and Manchester)

Blackburn

While some branches of Kirkham mercantile families established themselves near north-west ports where they continued to trade with the Baltic and to manufacture sailcloth, others, perhaps sensing the growing importance of cotton, moved inland to centres of domestic industry such as Blackburn. In the 1730s John Shepherd and his brother-in-law William Leyland joined Richard Cardwell of Blackburn in the putting out of cotton and linen yarn for the production of Blackburn checks. Leyland, Cardwell and Shepherd are mentioned in the letter book of John Birley, the West India merchant, and they were part-owners with him and Langton Shepherd of Kirkham in the snow *Brockholes* which traded from the Wyre.¹⁰² They imported both West Indies cotton and Baltic flax into Liverpool or Wyre and to obviate the difficulties of land transport they joined with other Blackburn

merchants in an unsuccessful petition to parliament (1756) requesting the removal of the fishing stakes from the Ribble to make it navigable to the turnpike between Walton and Blackburn, 'where is carried on a great manufacture of cotton and linen cloth and cotton checks'.¹⁰³

William Leyland had two daughters;¹⁰⁴ Margaret who married Joseph Feilden founder of a Blackburn cotton spinning firm, and Jane who married Thomas Langton of Kirkham, author of the Langton Papers in which the Feildens are often mentioned. The two families visited each other frequently and when Thomas Langton junior went to Riga his 'uncle Feilden' was at Hull to see him off.¹⁰⁵

The Birleys and Hornbys were also closely connected with Blackburn. Richard Birley of Kirkham settled there with his wife Cecily Hornby in the latter half of the eighteenth century. He was at first associated with the Cardwells in the firm of Cardwell and Birley¹⁰⁶ but he later went into partnership with his wife's younger brother John Hornby who in 1779 left Kirkham for Blackburn to learn the business of a merchant and who in 1884 inherited over £2,000 from the will of his father Hugh Hornby. Birley and Hornby became a leading cotton firm in Blackburn. At first they operated from a putting out warehouse in Clayton Street but in 1809 they built a size house at Brookhouse, followed in 1828 by the Brookhouse mills. They extended their interests to Manchester where the sons of Richard Birley eventually settled and took control while John Hornby became head of the Blackburn firm. He lived in a Georgian house in King Street, Blackburn and later at Raikes Hall, Blackpool, now the Raikes Hotel and near to the present Hornby Road. His son W. H. Hornby who married Susanna Birley of Kirkham was the first Mayor of Blackburn on its incorporation in 1851 and in 1857 he became M.P. for the town.¹⁰⁷

Manchester

Early in the nineteenth century the Blackburn firm of Birley and Hornby extended their cotton spinning business to Manchester. In the *Commercial Directory* of 1814-15 they are entered as of 16 Back George Street but by 1824 Baines records them as of Chorlton Mills. The Manchester business was run by the three sons of Richard Birley all of whom had close connections with Kirkham. John, the eldest, of Platt Hall, Rusholme was trustee of his uncle and namesake in Kirkham when he bought out the Langtons, while his brothers Hugh Hornby Birley of Broome House, Didsbury and Joseph of Ford Bank, Didsbury both married their cousins, daughters of Thomas Hornby of Kirk-

ham.¹⁰⁸ In 1819 as a captain in the Manchester Yeomanry Hugh Hornby Birley played a prominent part in the suppression of the Peterloo Assembly¹⁰⁹ and in 1824, along with his brother Joseph, he formed a partnership with Charles Mackintosh the inventor of a new waterproofing process for the development of which premises were built next to the Chorlton Mills.¹¹⁰

The Langtons were also connected with Manchester through William Langton (son of Thomas the Riga and Liverpool merchant) who married Margaret Hornby of Ribby Hall, Kirkham and in 1834 became managing director of the Manchester and Salford Bank. He was active in public life being concerned in the promotion of the Manchester Athenaeum and Mechanics Institute and when Owens College was established a Langton Fellowship was subscribed in his honour. As treasurer of the Chetham Society he edited the *Miscellanies* 1851-62 and other publications.¹¹¹

With Manchester also is associated the name of Albert Neilson Hornby who although born in Blackburn achieved fame as a cricketer at Old Trafford. He was in every sense a descendant of the Kirkham merchants, his father W. H. Hornby being a grandson of Hugh Hornby and his mother a granddaughter of John Birley. According to A. W. Ledbrooke he had the magic touch of a born leader and he used it combined with his magnificent physical strength to build for himself a position which has never been equalled at Old Trafford.¹¹²

Preston

Although linked with names such as Richard Arkwright and John Horrocks, Preston was late in its industrialisation. In 1795 John Aiken described it as 'a town which has always taken a lead in point of gentility' and remarked on 'its freedom from the bustle of traffic and manufacture'. Preston, it is true, had an ancient market, some domestic industry and a small community of merchants who endeavoured to carry on trade *via* the tortuous channels of the Ribble, but during the eighteenth century it had little attraction for the Kirkham merchants and only the Langtons who had relatives and friends there had any close associations with it.¹¹³

In the early-nineteenth century, however, Preston developed rapidly as an industrial town and with the sailcloth industry in decline John Birley and Sons saw opportunities in cotton. As already stated about 1820 they joined Charles Swainson of Preston in the building of Fishwick Mills, one of the largest enterprises of its day, and when William Birley (who had married Mary Swainson) ousted his brother Thomas from this under-

taking, Thomas's sons, under the style of Birley Bros., erected cotton mills in Hanover Street, Preston.

The three sons of William Birley, all born in Kirkham, were prominent in the civic life of Preston. The eldest, Rev. J. Shepherd Birley, whose notes on the Birley family have already been quoted, was an active public servant. For many years he was chairman of the Preston quarter sessions and his portrait hangs in the sessions house. The second son William, D.L., J.P., of the Larches, Ashton on Ribble, was Mayor of Preston in 1858 and his younger brother, Edmund of Clifton Hall, was Guild Mayor in 1882. Edmund who by this time controlled Fishwick Mills was a leading citizen of Preston and Birley Street in the centre of the town is named after him.¹¹⁴

The descendants of the flax merchants are still to be found in many parts of the world but they have disappeared from the Kirkham district where they first rose to prominence from comparatively humble origins. The flax mill has recently been demolished and now only a few street names, workers cottages and several large houses in which the merchants resided remain as memorials of a bygone age in which they dominated the life of Kirkham. No doubt their prosperity was based partly on the long hours and low wages of their employees but they were shrewd and enterprising business men as well as responsible and public spirited leaders of the communities which they served. In their day they did much in industrial, commercial, educational and civic affairs, not only for Kirkham but for Lancashire and adjacent regions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Mr M. M. Schofield, not only for the valuable material he has placed at my disposal, but also for the help and encouragement he has given me in preparing this paper.

NOTES

- 1 *General view of the agriculture of the county of Lancaster* (1795), p. 206.
- 2 See R. C. Shaw, *Kirkham in Amounderness* (1949), pp. 278-85.
- 3 William Hutton, *A description of Blackpool* (1788, reprinted as vol. II of *Transactions of the Fylde Historical Society* in 1944), p. 10.
- 4 E. Baines, *History, gazetteer and directory of Lancashire* (1824) I. p. 656.
- 5 A. P. Wadsworth and J. de L. Mann, *The cotton trade of industrial Lancashire* (1931), p. 25 and map.

- 6 R. C. Shaw, *op. cit.* p. 339.
- 7 J. Porter, *History of the Fylde* (1876), p. 141.
- 8 See *Autobiography of William Stout of Lancaster* (Chetham Society, 3rd series XIV), p. 94.
- 9 For exports of sailcloth from Liverpool to the West Indies and America in 1770 see Enfield, *History of Liverpool* (1774), p. 80.
- 10 According to an old vestry book at Kirkham C. E. Vicarage the population grew from 405 in 1694 to 1449 in 1790.
- 11 L[ancashire] R[ecord] O[ffice] Kirkham apprentice indentures no. 9.
- 12 LRO DDX 2451/8. The Ramlesfield warehouse is still standing but now converted into two residences.
- 13 LRO Amounderness wills. Hugh Hornby who came from the nearby village of Newton had been apprenticed to Joseph Hankinson and eventually married his daughter Margaret.
- 14 Information of Mr R. Craig from *Lloyd's lists*.
- 15 LRO Kirkham apprentice indenture no. 65.
- 16 LRO DDD/308, 9, 9B. In these conveyances Joseph Hornby made over one third of his Kirkham property to his brother William for £1,400 and one third to his brother Thomas for a similar amount.
- 17 See below p. 98 *sqq.*
- 18 From notebook of Rev Shepherd Birley in Birley Papers LRO DDD. (hereafter Shepherd Birley Notebook).
- 19 Still standing but unoccupied.
- 20 R. C. Shaw, *Records of the thirty men of the parish of Kirkham* (1930), p. 74; and *Kirkham in Amounderness*, pp. 316, 363.
- 21 Information of M. M. Schofield from colonial naval officers returns PRO CO/33/16 pt. II. The ship was probably named after Betty Langton and Martha Shepherd, the wives of the merchants.
- 22 Langton Papers LRO DDX/190.
- 23 J. J. Cartright ed. *The travels through England of Dr Richard Pococke* (1754) Camden Society n.s. 44 (1889) p. 6. The will of William Shepherd (1782) shows that he owned two-fifths of 'certain warehouses, wharfs and quays situate at Wardleys... which I hold jointly with Mr Thomas Langton who is owner of the three other fifth parts'. (DO/HLB/2. See note 25).
- 24 PRO T11/22. See also *Customs letter books of the port of Liverpool*, ed. R. C. Jarvis (Chetham Society 1954), no. 174.
- 25 Especially useful are two boxes of documents belonging to Henry Langton Birley (hereafter DO/HLB) and other Birley documents in an old leather-bound box (hereafter DO/OB). Since this paper was written some of these Birley documents have been transferred to the Lancashire Record Office.
- 26 The Caves were acquainted with the Langtons for when Thomas Langton toured Ireland in 1749 he dined with them in Dublin: Diary in Langton Papers *op. cit.*
- 27 DO/HLB/1.
- 28 *Ibid.* William Rawlinson died about 1763. Little is known about him but a William Rawlinson was apprenticed to John Langton & Co. of Kirkham in 1746: Index of apprentices, Society of Genealogists, London, vol. 1.
- 29 H. Fishwick, *History of Poulton-le-Fylde* (Chetham Society, n.s. 8, 1885), p. 46.
- 30 Information of M. M. Schofield from colonial naval officers returns: PRO CO/33/16, pt. II.
- 31 Shepherd Birley Notebook, p. 1. From 1740 to 1750 John Birley was

- in partnership with Thomas Alker whose will (Amounderness Wills LRO) is witnessed by John Birley but contains no mercantile information.
- 32 Shepherd Birley Notebook, p. 6.
- 33 See below p. 95.
- 34 For full account see Shepherd Birley Notebook.
- 35 The will of William Birley (DO/HLB/1) included a bequest to John Birley of a half part of a warehouse at Wardleys.
- 36 DO/HLB/1.
- 37 Birmingham Reference Library, Boulton and Watt Collection, letters to J. Birley and Sons 1806-7, and diagrams, portfolio 393.
- 38 DO/OB.
- 39 Cotton eventually superceded flax in the Kirkham district. Between 1850 and 1914 two cotton spinning mills and four weaving sheds were built but the flax families were not involved.
- 40 LRO Birley Papers DDD.
- 41 In the 1840s the French virtually closed the market to foreign yarns: see W. G. Rimmer, *The Marshalls of Leeds* (1960), p. 199.
- 42 Conveyance from William to Thomas Birley DO/OB.
- 43 These sons continued their interest in cotton by establishing themselves as cotton spinners and manufacturers in Hanover Street Mills, Preston (1846) under the trade name of Birley Bros. LRO, Birley Papers DDD.
- 44 Langton Papers LRO DDX/190 (hereafter LP).
- 45 See above p. 83.
- 46 In the LP there is reference to Petersburg 12 heads and 9 heads, Riga Pass, and 3 Band, Risten 3 Band, Draw Cut, and Livonia. For these technical grades see Horner, *Linen Trade of Europe*, p. 482, and the table on p. 490 which lists codilla hemp as being imported into Wyre.
- 47 *E.g. the Young Peter* which left Libau on 29 June 1778 was expected at Liverpool towards the end of July: LP 56.
- 48 LP 56.
- 49 LP 67.
- 50 LP 62, 63, 63.
- 51 LP 54. There is a small stone quay at Wardleys graduated to a depth of 12 feet at which Baltic ships (of say 100 tons and 10ft draught) could presumably tie up on a good tide but it is likely that many of the ships were grounded on the hard beach or 'scar' and unloaded into carts.
- 52 LP 65.
- 53 J. Barron, *A history of the Ribble Navigation* (1938), p. 452.
- 54 See below pp. 92, 95. There were sailcloth weaving shops in Freckleton including one belonging to Langton Birleys: E. Baines, *Directory of Lancashire*, II, p. 627.
- 55 LP 62.
- 56 LP 61, 65. Kildwick is on the canal near Skipton.
- 57 LP 48, 47, 59, 67.
- 58 M. M. Schofield, 'Statutory registers of British merchant ships', *T.H.S.L.C.* 110, p. 122.
- 59 In 1814, according to entries in the *Preston Chronicle*, 17 ships brought Baltic cargoes mainly of flax, hemp, timber, tallow and iron for the Kirkham merchants.
- 60 See J. Porter, *History of the Fylde*, pp. 254-7.
- 61 LP 47, 60.

- 62 *Preston Chronicle*, 12 Sept 1812 and issues for winter months in subsequent years.
- 63 I am indebted to Mr M. M. Schofield for copies of these letters sent to him by Professor Rogers of South Carolina. The first two letters have now been published in *Papers of Henry Laurens* (University of S. Carolina Press 1970) II, pp. 290, 336. The later letters (unpublished) are addressed to Langton Shepherd and Birley, John Birley being a partner after 1762.
- 64 LP 47, 62, 65, 56.
- 65 M. M. Schofield, 'The Virginia Trade of Sparling and Bolden' *T.H.S.L.C.* 116, p. 36.
- 66 LP 67.
- 67 LP 62, 59, 65.
- 68 LP 67.
- 69 See above p. 88.
- 70 LP 59, 62.
- 71 J. Aikin, *A description of the country from 30 to 40 miles around Manchester* (1795) p. 288.
- 72 PRO ADM 106/3622 f. 51 sqq. I am indebted to Mr N. B. Harte of the L.S.E. for this information.
- 73 LP 63, 67, 62. A navy bill was a negotiable asset: see P. A. Baugh, *British naval administration in the age of Walpole* (Princeton 1965), p. 47¹.
- 74 LP 63, 67, 65.
- 75 LP 59, 62, 60.
- 76 LP 62, 60.
- 77 LP 60, 62, 60. These London agents may be identified in Bailey's *Northern Directory*, 1781. Among them was Mr Threlfall, of Turner and Threlfall, Fleet Street, a relative of Rev. Threlfall, headmaster of Kirkham Grammar School and brother-in-law of Thomas Langton. Mr Gale was of a Whitehaven mercantile family and Mr Loxham (Hornby's agent) was of a Kirkham and Poulton family related to Hugh Hornby's wife Margaret Hankinson.
- 78 LP 54, 56.
- 79 LP 103. In a release in Dickson's Office (DO/HLB/2) Zachary is described as a merchant of Bread Street, London. He later became a member of the Skinners' Company.
- 80 LP 67.
- 81 LP 67. Thorley Morrison & Co. were a leading firm in Riga: see Bernard Pool, *Navy Board Contracts 1660-1832*, p. 124.
- 82 LP 68, 103. Thomas (junior) sailed from Hull in June 1787.
- 83 R. C. Shaw *Kirkham in Amounderness*, pp. 692-9.
- 84 Wm Hutchinson, *History of the county of Cumberland* (1794), II, p. 84. Insurance valuations for Hornby, Bell and Birley are given in transcripts of Sun Insurance Records by Dr S. D. Chapman.
- 85 Quoted by W. G. Rimmer in *Marshalls of Leeds*, p. 57.
- 86 According to C. Caine, *Cleator and Cleator Moor past and present* (Kendal 1916), p. 369, the Cleator mill was built by Henry Birley and the only power used was a water wheel. It was a large mill and was still spinning yarn and thread in 1916.
- 87 Birley Papers LRO DDD.
- 88 The sale of the Birley property was advertised in the *Cumberland Packet* of July 1830 and June 1831. I am grateful to Mr D. Hay, Librarian of Whitehaven, and to Mr R. N. Roberts of Beckermett for much information about Henry Birley.

- 89 There are Sun Insurance valuations for J. T. & W. Hornby at Bentham Yorkshire for 1795 (information of N. B. Harte).
- 90 M. M. Schofield, *Economic History of Lancaster* (1951), II, p. 24.
- 91 James Bibby, *A History of Bentham* (printed by the *Craven Herald*, Skipton about 1930).
- 92 Hornby Roughsedge was a Bailiff in Kirkham six times between 1805 and 1813: R. C. Shaw, *Kirkham in Amounderness* p. 401.
- 93 In his *History, directory and gazetteer for the county of York* (1822) E. Baines lists under High Bentham: Hornby Roughsedge Esq. Bentham House, and Hornby & Co. flax spinners, bleachers and linen manufacturers, Bentham Mills. There is no mention of Hornbys under Low Bentham.
- 94 LP 67.
- 95 Information of M. M. Schofield.
- 96 LP 29, 32, 33, 58, 62, 65. See also Shepherd Birley Notebook and William Shepherd's will (DO/HLB/1 & 2).
- 97 *Preston Chronicle* 1812 and subsequent years.
- 98 B. Guinness Orchard, *Liverpools legion of honour* (1893), p. 444.
- 99 The will of Edward Roughsedge is in LRO, Chester wills.
- 100 E. Baines, *Directory of Lancashire* I, p. 391.
- 101 B. Guinness Orchard *op. cit.* pp. 401, 402.
- 102 Information of M. M. Schofield from Plantation Register, Liverpool.
- 103 W. A. Abram, *History of Blackburn* (1877), p. 771.
- 104 In his will (DO/HLB/2) William Leyland made bequests to his daughters and left £200 in trust to Richard Cardwell, John Shepherd and Joseph Feilden, 'to establish in Blackburn a Charity School after the pattern of that at Kirkham'.
- 105 LP 21, 31, 35, 36, 38, 40 and 68.
- 106 Richard Birley's daughter Elizabeth married John, third son of Richard Cardwell, and the eldest son of this marriage was Rt Hon. Edward Cardwell, secretary of state for war 1868-74.
- 107 G. C. Miller, *Blackburn, the evolution of a cotton town* (1951), pp. 371-7.
- 108 I. R. Million, *History of Didsbury* (Didsbury Civic Society, Manchester 1969), p. 122.
- 109 R. Walmsley, *Peterloo, the case reopened* (Manchester U.P. 1969), *passim*.
- 110 *Victoria County History, Lancashire*, II, p. 402.
- 111 W. E. A. Axon (ed.) *Annals of Manchester*, p. 383.
- 112 A. E. Ledbrooke, *Lancashire county cricket 1864-1953*, p. 59.
- 113 Thomas Langton's sister Susanna who married John Hankinson, a Preston solicitor, and Edward Bolton, a wealthy descendant of a Preston merchant family, are both frequently mentioned in the Langton Papers (See 37, 39, 40).
- 114 *Preston Guardian*, 30 March 1895.