

MITCHELGATE AND BICHIL CROSS, KIRBY LONSDALE

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During the last ten years or so I have worked on the old Kirkby Lonsdale parish, which encompassed the townships of Kirkby Lonsdale, Casterton, Barbon, Middleton, Killington, Fairbank, Mansergh, Lupton and Hutton Roof. Minor place-names can help in identifying where, in this extensive upland parish, individuals recorded in early documents might have lived or owned property. Study of such names involves, of course, close attention to changes which have occurred in the name-forms since about 1500. Mitchelgate, in Kirkby Lonsdale town, appears not to have been mentioned in early documents, but an earlier and rather similar street-name, *Bichelgate/Bichellgate/Bitchelgate*, does occur. Smith, in *The Place-Names of Westmorland*, suggests that Mitchelgate derives from Old English *micel* and Old Norse *gata* and means ‘the great street’ (Smith 1967, I, 43). This, in itself, is somewhat odd since the street does not seem significant enough to warrant the appellation ‘great’ nor is it so insignificant that irony might be employed.

A small packet of deeds in Kendal Archives provides evidence to suggest that Mitchelgate had become an alternative name for *Bichelgate* at some point before 1820.¹ It contains documents relating to properties on Mitchelgate. One of these documents details the Earl of Lonsdale’s enfranchisement, in 1807, of Edward Gorrill in relation to rents paid on a property on Mitchelgate,² and a further one, dating to 1820, refers to

1. Cumbria Archives Service (Kendal) WD BIG 1/9.

2. The lands held by the Earl of Lonsdale were referred to as the ‘Lordship’; these were the lands formerly owned by the Abbey of St Mary, York which were sold to Thomas Carus and Katherine his wife in 1558. One peculiarity of the Lordship arose from the fact that the Abbey’s holdings were the results of gifts so that all imaginable tenures are present. The Lordship continued to play a dominant role in some aspects of Kirkby Lonsdale in succeeding centuries for, of the two churchwardens, one was appointed from amongst the Lordship’s tenants. The Robert Atkinson discussed here was just such an appointee in 1768 (Smail *et al.* 2008, 90).

property ‘on the north side of a street called Bitchellgate in Kirkby Lonsdale otherwise Mitchellgate...all built by William Dealtry of Nottingham, silk merchant, on the site of ancient buildings purchased from Rev. Edward Gorrill’.³

Rights to the property in Mitchelgate were bequeathed to Edward Gorrill by his uncle, Robert Atkinson of Kirkby Lonsdale. The will, made in 1794, stated

To my nephew Edward Gorrill all my messuage and tenement and title in and to the Meeting House in Bitchellgate in Kirkby Lonsdale and the dwellings under the same...I devise to George Gregg of Lupton gentleman all my copyhold and customary lands...situate in Bitchellgate.⁴

The reference to customary and copyhold estates confirms the antiquity of the route for the Lordship of Kirkby Lonsdale, which held lands within the township that had been given to St Mary’s Abbey, York.⁵ In 1558, subsequent to the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the Lordship was sold to Sir Thomas Carus of the Middle Temple and his wife Katherine for £428 7s.⁶ The property was inherited by their granddaughter, Elizabeth, who married Sir Nicholas Curwen of Workington. Subsequent to Elizabeth Curwen’s death in April 1611, it fell to their daughters. It was then sold to the Preston family of Holker and by 1671 had come into the hands of the Lowthers of Lowther, later Earls of Lonsdale (Farrer 1924, II, 305–06). Using the extensive Lowther archive held in Carlisle, it was possible to track the name *Bichelgate* back as far

3. It is perhaps worth noting that, since the bulk of the references derive from legal documents they necessarily incorporate all possible ways of referring to the property and should not be taken as evidence that both names were concurrently in everyday use.

4. No other reference to a Quaker Meeting House in Kirkby Lonsdale has been found although there was a widespread Quaker presence in the area. The probated will may be found at Lancashire Archives, WRW/L/1799 Will of Robert Atkinson of Kirkby Lonsdale stonemason.

5. This is not to say that there were buildings on the route during the Abbey’s ownership. As discussed below, the first building is recorded in 1627. However, the original tenure by which the land was held would automatically apply to buildings erected upon it.

6. The purchase price represented twenty-five years’ purchase on the rental of £17 2s. 8d. Carus was a member of a locally prominent family and his wife was the daughter of Sir Thomas Preston of Furness Abbey. The Lordship of Kirkby Lonsdale passed to their second son, Christopher, the father of the Elizabeth named here. The Inquisition Post Mortem of Thomas Carus (died 1571) is quoted at length by Farrer 1924, II, 313–15.

as the 1605 Survey undertaken for Elizabeth Curwen during her widowhood.⁷ Various surveys and rentals allowed identification of those who had owned property on *Bichelgate* and so their wills could be accessed.⁸

<i>Name-form</i>	<i>Preservation Context</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Source</i> ⁹
house in Bichelgate otherwise Mitchel Gate	admittance	1914	CAS (C), DGRL 7/26/24
house in Bitchelgate otherwise Mitchelgate	surrender to lord	1878	CAS (C), DGRL 7/26/6
Mitchelgate	lease	1833	CAS (K), WD PP Acc 5331 Box 5
a street called Bitchellgate otherwise Mitchellgate	sale documents	1820	CAS (K), WD BIG 1/9, sale of property by William Dealtry
in Bitchelgate	enfranchisement	1807	CAS (K), WD BIG 1/9.
Bitchelgate	enfranchisement	1807	CAS (K), WD PP Acc 5331 Box 5
Bitchell Gate	owner's will	1794	LA, WRW/L/1799 will of Robert Atkinson of Kirkby Lonsdale, stonemason
Bitchel Gate	admittance	1787	CAS (K), WD PP Acc 5331 Box 5
Bitchelgate	owner's will	1785	CAS (K), WD PP Acc 5331 Box 5, John Gibson of Kirkby Lonsdale, house carpenter
Bitchelgate	admittance	1774	CAS (K), WD PP Acc 5331 Box 5
cottage formerly a barnstedd...in Bitchel Gate	admittance	1757	CAS (K), WD PP Acc 5331 Box 5
dwelling house situate in Bitchel Gate	admittance	1744	CAS (K), WD PP Acc 5331 Box 5
barn in Bitchellgate	recognisance	1715	CAS (K), WD PP Acc 5331 Box 5
nigh Bitchillgatehead	survey	1712	CAS (C) DLONS L/5/2/12/22 ¹⁰

7. In many respects the Lowther archives are untapped resources, although some work has been done to extend the cataloguing. They may be found in Cumbria Archives (Carlisle) under the general reference of DLONS.

8. These are held at Lancashire Archives under general reference WRW/L.

9. LA (Lancashire Archives); CAS (Cumbria Archive Service), (C) Carlisle, (K) Kendal.

in Bitchelgate	survey	1712	CAS (C) DLONS L/5/2/12/22
all my messuage...and garden lying in Bitchellyate	owner's will	1707	LA, WRW/L/1707 will of Peter Lawcock of Kirkby Lonsdale, linen webster
all that barn...in Bitchellgate	owner's will	1690	LA, WRW/L/1690 will of Mary Newton of Kirkby Lonsdale, widow [fn]
lying in Bitchallgate	survey	1671	CAS (C) DLONS L/5/2/12/20 (Joseph Laycock)
Barne in Bitchellgate	survey	1671	CAS (C) DLONS L/5/2/12/20 (Mary Newton)
one Barne in Bitchallgate or a part thereof	survey	1671	CAS (C) DLONS L/5/2/12/20 (damaged)
my barn in Bichelgate	owner's will	1656	LA, WRW/L/1661 will of James Newton of Kirkby Lonsdale blacksmith
one other dale lying at the Bitchill Cross ¹¹	owner's will	1639	LA, WRW/L/1639 will of John Ewan of Pellsyeat, Kirkby Lonsdale
one barn in Bichellgate	survey	1627	CAS (C) DLONS L/5/2/12/19
ground lying above bichell crosse	survey	1627	CAS (C) DLONS L/5/2/12/19
lying in the Kilne rowe & nere bichell crosse	survey	1627	CAS (C) DLONS L/5/2/12/19
lying above Bitchell crosse called Walker Dike	survey	1605	CAS (C) DLONS L/5/2/12/19
lying in the kiln rowe and neare Bichellcrosse	survey	1605	CAS (C) DLONS L/5/2/12/19

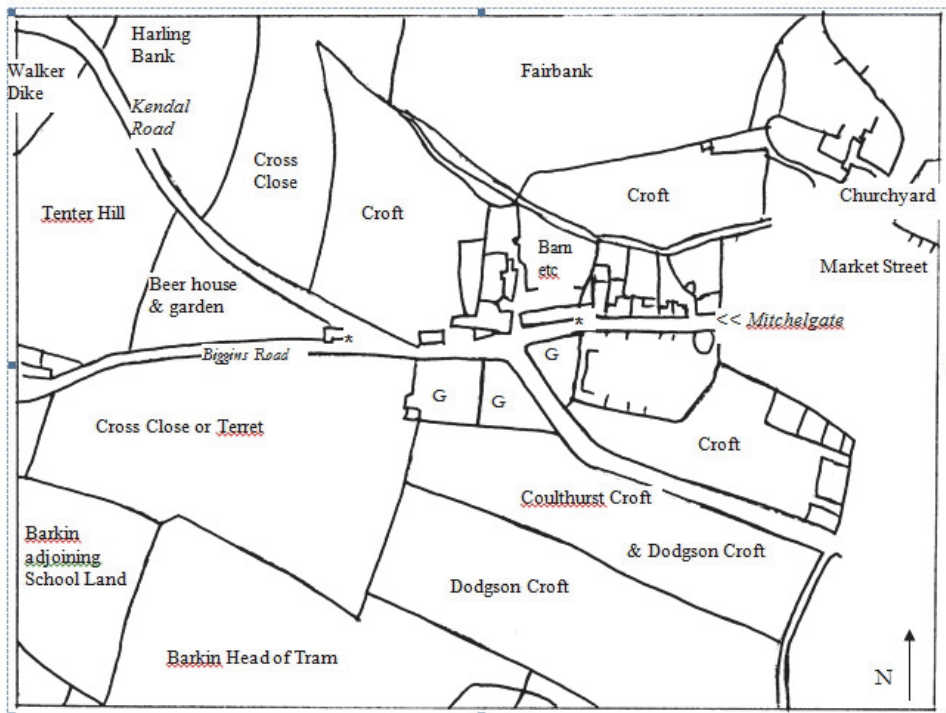
The table above contains extracts, including name-forms, which throw light on the origins of Mitchelgate. They demonstrate the existence of a *Bichell Crosse* and the development of the steep slope leading from Kirkby Lonsdale market place to the cross. This route was already called *Bichellgate* in 1627 when the first building is recorded. An *ad hoc*

10. I should like to thank Jim Lowther for permission to quote from the archive of the Lowther Estate Trust.

11. The phrasing indicates a dale or dole of land within an open field.

process of development continued through the second half of the seventeenth century. It becomes noticeably more active in the eighteenth century with buildings converted and reconverted, as barns and stables became housing which, in turn, became manufactories and a meeting house.¹² At some point, a building was erected on the land adjacent to the supposed site of the cross; by the 1840s (at the latest) this was a ‘beer house and garden’.¹³ When the cross itself vanished is not known; no reference to it has been found later than 1627 but its significance as a landmark may have lessened as buildings were erected along *Bichelgate*. The available evidence does not allow us to suggest a precise date for when the cross was erected, although it is likely that this was some time during the ownership of St Mary’s Abbey, York.

This leaves us with two connected questions: where was the cross located and what was its purpose?



Map of Mitchelgate and area, taken from the Tithe Commutation Map (1848) (CAS (C) WDRC 8/231).

Key: G - garden; * - Suggested locations for Bichel Cross.
The names in italics are not given on the Tithe Map/Schedule.

12. The deeds relating to properties in *Bichelgate* bought by the Earl of Bective in the late nineteenth century show this process with great clarity. CAS (C) D RGL 7/26.

13. Kirkby Lonsdale Tithe Map (CAS) K, WDRC 8/231.

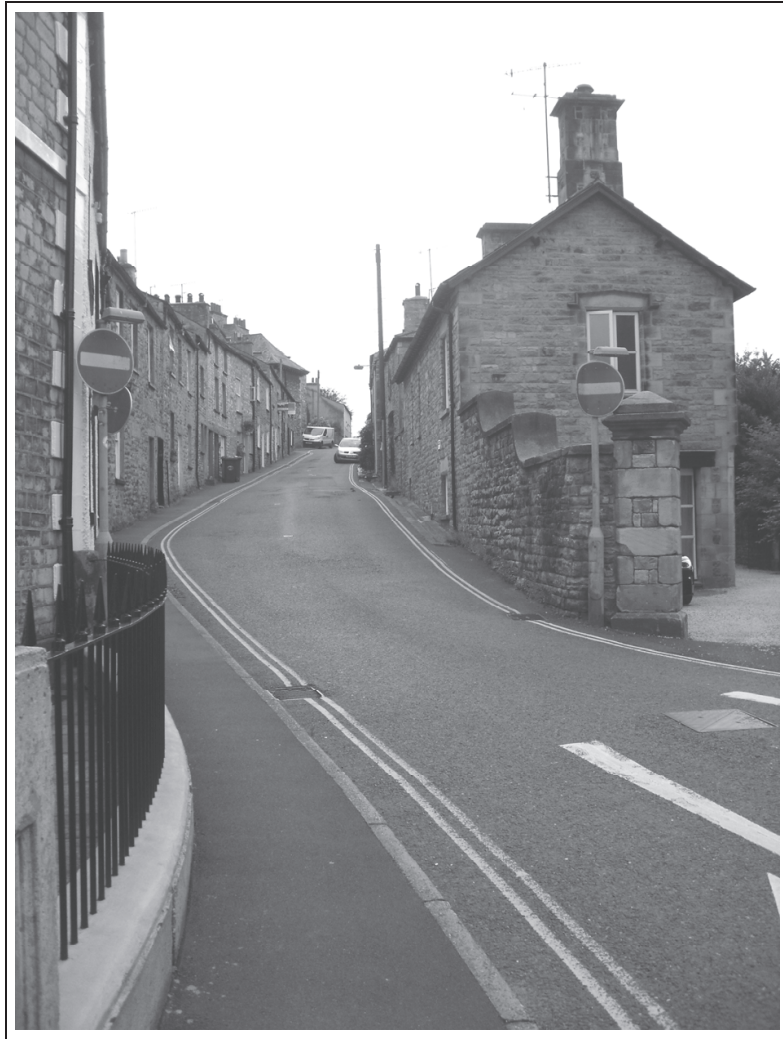
The map above is based on the 1848 tithe map for Kirby Lonsdale. It shows the location of *Bichelgate*/Mitchelgate, running westwards from the Market Place to the fork; the right fork is Kendal Road whilst the left hand is Biggins Road (which leads southwards into Lancashire, forming part of the route along the west bank of the R. Lune from Kirby Lonsdale to Lancaster). The town centre is not shown in detail on the map, nor are the properties there listed on the Tithe Commutation Schedule. This lack of representation of buildings within the town centre is unusual and, in this instance, indicates that part was not titheable; the implications of this division are discussed below.¹⁴

The cross apparently lay beyond the built-up area as it existed in 1607 but that still leaves two possibilities, both of which are marked on the map. The westernmost site at the fork of two important roads must be a strong possibility and one that is, to a degree, supported by the presence of fields named 'Cross Close' adjacent to both roads.¹⁵ The second possibility is that it sat at the limit of the Abbey's lands; that is, those which it owned and from which it collected rents. Certainly, the Tithe Map makes it clear that the area to the east lay within the non-titheable zone but that the lands to which names are attached on the map were titheable. The tithes were the property of Trinity College, Cambridge, so there seems to be no question of the tithes being merged with the rents as might be the case if one person (or entity) owned both land and tithes. On balance, the probability is that the western site is more likely for the cross since, at a time when roads were generally unmarked and buildings had not yet begun to line the route, a cross would help travellers find their way into town. It would also serve to identify the point at which market tolls might be levied.¹⁶ The toll keeper would, generally, have a hut to keep him dry; it was frequently the case that this evolved into an alehouse and, as noted above, the Tithe Map shows a 'beer house' at the road junction.

14. The National Archives catalogue entry for Kirkby Lonsdale Tithe Map notes 'Titheable parts only'. In contrast, for Clitheroe, Lancs., there are two maps at different scales, one of which covers the whole parish but omits any detail for the town itself, while the other shows every house within the town. The schedule includes the entries for both maps (TNA IR/30/37/45; Clitheroe Tithe Map/Schedule, Lancashire Archives, DRB 1/52).

15. It is possible that the 'Croft' lying immediately north of the junction was originally part of Cross Close.

16. If the experience of Kirkby Lonsdale matched that of Hornby (to the south on the east bank of the Lune) then livestock being taken through the town on their way to market elsewhere were also tolled as they crossed the town boundary (Holt forthcoming).



View westward along Mitchelgate

The above picture was taken from the bottom of Mitchelgate looking westward to the top. This is a steep and narrow street; a road to the right of the photographer crosses Fairbank (from which it takes its name) and becomes a significant route northwards through Mansergh Old Town where it forks west towards Kendal. (Judging by the house numbers, the first building on the right of the picture is deemed not to be on Mitchelgate; it appears to occupy an ancient site that pre-dates other buildings on this route.) The two possible locations for where Bichil Cross could have stood are either at the very top of the view shown in the photograph above, or lower down where a car is parked on the right.

The questions which remain are linguistic: what prompted the change from *Bichelgate* to Mitchelgate, and what are the origins of the forms in *Bichil*? It is possible that the change to Mitchelgate may have been the result of a perceived link with the word ‘bitch’ (OE *bicce*), and its

possible indelicate connotations. There are many instances of such euphemistic changes: in Devon, for example, *Shitestorr* became Sheepstor for reasons of delicacy (Fox 2012, 129). In fact there is documented evidence of changes to place-names in OE *bicce* which mask their origins: Beachendon (Farm) in Buckinghamshire and Beechingstoke in Wiltshire are examples in which the vowel has been lengthened, presumably ‘from motives of delicacy’ (see EPNE, I, s.v. *bicce*). The replacement of *Bichel-* with *Mitchell-* in the early nineteenth century coincided with what Muriel Jaeger correctly identified as a changing society out of which would emerge Victoria and her culture (Jaeger 1956), but such changes were not confined to this period. The change would no doubt have been facilitated by the fact that the [b] and [m] are both bilabials, and thus phonetically similar.

What of the origins of *Bichil-*? The likelihood of earlier forms coming to light which would help answer this question is vanishingly small, but there are instances of similar names. Diana Whaley discusses *Bitchell* and *Bitch Hill*, both in Longsleddale, and *Bitch Hill* in Crossthwaite, and proposes that they derive from (later reflexes of) OE *bēce* ‘beech’ + *hyll* ‘hill’ (Whaley 2006, 22). There are also examples in York (Bickhill (lost); Smith 1937, 282) and the West Riding of Yorkshire (Bitch Hill, Wakefield; Smith 1961–63, II, 166). Smith suggests that both of these Yorkshire examples mean ‘bitch hill’, referring to ‘a hill frequented by bitches or where hounds were bred’ (Smith 1961–63, II, 166), and VEPN notes that OE *bicce* ‘bitch’ ‘seems to appear in a number of names in **haugr** and **hyll**’ (VEPN, s.v.).

Phonologically, either of these explanations could account for the form *Bichil-*. Outside the southernmost parts of England and the settings of country houses, beech trees seem to have been a relatively rare sight (see, for example, White 1977 [1788]).¹⁷ Rackham’s work indicates that beech, although it is tolerant of poor soils, does not readily spread (Rackham 1990, 34–35). This would suggest that beech trees would be unusual and, particularly if growing on an elevated site, would tend to be very noticeable. Such conspicuousness would account for the use of the beech-element in *Bichil-*, but the alternative cannot be ruled out.¹⁸

17. In their study of hedgerows, Barnes and Williamson found that beech occurred in less than 10% of Norfolk hedges (Barnes and Williamson 2006, 63).

18. The author is very grateful for the support and practical help given by the editors in connection with the onomastic aspects of this paper.

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