

Out and about in Silloth

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Situated north west of the Lake District, Silloth is a seaside resort, looking across the Solway Firth to Dumfries and Galloway.

The origins of this settlement lie in medieval times because the monks of nearby Holme Cultram Abbey had established storage facilities there to receive and store the grain from the farmers cultivating the more promising coastal landscape. The 'barns' or 'lathes' gave the place name of 'sea lathes' which has evolved into Silloth.

In the mid nineteenth century, Silloth was transformed into a Victorian seaside resort. What happened owed very much to the determination of one Carlisle businessman, John Dodgson Carr, who gave his name to such products as 'Carr's Water Biscuits'. A previous attempt to bring imported flour to his factory at Carlisle via a canal from Port Carlisle had not proved as promising as expected because the canal did not have sufficient capacity. It was replaced by what proved to be an unprofitable railway link – because there was limited scope for diversification – and this situation was exacerbated by the silting up of the channel to Port Carlisle which meant that larger vessels were

unable to dock. The outcome was that Carr and others decided to create a new port at Silloth, which would then permit deep sea access for trans-Atlantic vessels.

The first stage was the formation of the Carlisle and Silloth Bay Dock and Railway Company in 1852. After much opposition, work began on the railway line in 1855 and it was fully open in 1856. The dock was not completed until 1859. However, John Dodgson Carr had other ambitions for Silloth. He had already demonstrated that he was an enlightened employer by such acts as the introduction of factory excursions – by train via Cockermouth – to the Lake District. He had decided that Silloth should become a holiday resort for the working people of Carlisle. He believed that they deserved such an opportunity away from the grime and dust of the city. Directly the railway was in place, he was at the forefront of the development of a small town at Silloth. It was already recognised as having an extraordinary outlook and aspect because its view had been strikingly recorded by J. M. W. Turner.

The basic grid-iron pattern that was devised can still be seen today. Amongst its cobbled streets there were four hotels

and thirty-eight lodging houses. One plot facing the sea was left vacant and this was finally occupied in 1870 by the sandstone magnificence of Christ Church, subsequently crowned in 1878 by a spire. Between the planned town and the sea was the 36 acres of what is known as The Green. It provided, and still provides, a substantial playground for the resident and visiting community, whilst also being a substantial 'buffer' between the housing and the bracing effects of the Solway Firth. An early pier was provided in 1857 – comparatively long at 1000 feet – from which daily steamboats departed for Liverpool, along with less frequent links to the Isle of Man and Dublin. The earliest structure was the bath house, with water supplied with the help of a steam engine, which subsequently became very elegant and popular tea rooms and in more recent times has served as an amusement arcade. St Paul's Parochial School dated from 1857, being in origin a late example of an elementary school provided by the National Society only thirteen years



The Golf Hotel



The pier 1923



The bathing huts c. 1900

before the introduction of universal elementary education under the 1870 Education Act.

Unlike some other speculative developments at seaside locations this venture was highly successful. It captured the enthusiasm of the people of Carlisle and was very popular. Anyone wanting to gain a sense of what it was like can do so through the medium of two of Margaret Forster's books on her family's life – *Hidden Lives* [1995] and *Precious Lives* [1998] – where she reveals her father's lifelong love of Silloth as a destination. This atmosphere of excitement and delight, if anything, grew with the introduction of workers' holidays and continued after the Second World War, only to be disrupted quite dramatically by the railway closure in 1964 as a result of the 'Dr Beeching's Axe'. Professor Jack Simmons once told me that Silloth was a perfect example of a settlement which depended wholly on its railway link for its existence and vitality: it had grown basically from nothing as result of the railway and railway closure removed the very vitality created by the holiday-maker link with Carlisle and its region.

The dock at Silloth has had a chequered history. The original dock opened in 1859 but its entrance collapsed in 1879, trapping twenty vessels inside, and a tidal dock opened in 1885. When Margaret Forster describes her girlhood experience at the harbour in *Precious Lives* in the 1940s, it was still a public facility but it is now a private and largely inaccessible port facility.

A modern-day visitor to Silloth will still see The Green, with all of its open expanse, fronted by a clear glimpse of the grid-iron layout of the core of the town. One very noticeable hotel – the Golf Hotel – stands out amongst the Victorian architecture but the Victorian ambience is still very noticeable, especially with the survival of some cobbled streets. At the front it is still possible to visualise the setting of its very extensive pier – incidentally never mentioned in a set-piece gazetteer of nineteenth century piers; and the large flour mill structure erected by Carr's of Carlisle still dominates and defines one side of the harbour area. The parish church still offers a welcome to visitors. The bath-house structure can still be admired and St Paul's Parochial School was rescued from demolition in 1998, becoming the Solway Coast Discovery Centre, which offers a window into the geological, archaeological and environmental development of this coastal area.

Trying to drive to Silloth, a motorist will understand the thrust of what Jack Simmons was saying about the resort.



Criffel Street buildings, and Christ Church
(below) Looking across Silloth docks to Silloth, and beyond to Skinburness



It was constructed after the turnpike age and the route is, therefore, in some places a series of sharp turns as the modern road merely follows a medieval route pattern, around landholdings and through small villages, whereas if there had been a turnpike the post-railway motorist could have resorted to the smooth gradients of a turnpike route.

Even in summer Silloth will strike a visitor as being rather bracing in its climate but it is possible to see very clearly the fossilised layout and design of the Victorian holiday resort and to see why the people of Carlisle so treasured what it had to offer.

Further Reading

Margaret Forster, *Hidden Lives: a family memoir*, 1995

Margaret Forster, *Precious Lives*, 1998

Margaret Forster, *Rich Desserts and Captain's Thin: a family and their times, 1831-1931*, 1997

This 'Out and About' has been composed from notes prepared by Trevor James for a field visit which he led as part of the Historical Association Conference organised by Professor Bill Speck at Carlisle.