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MASHAMSHIRE COLLIERIES

by

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CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction	6
Acknowledgements	6
General Background	7
Geology	7
Historical Background	8
Jervaulx Abbey at Colsterdale	9
The Danby Family	11
End of the Scropes of Masham and Upsall	12
Second Sir Christopher Danby	13
The First Sir Thomas Danby	14
Christopher Danby	16
The first dispute at Gollinglith	17
The second Sir Thomas Danby	19
Thomas Danby - Murder and Mayhem	22
Margaret Danby	23
Sir Abstrupus Danby	24
Farnley Estate	28
A rather chaotic entrance	28
Second Gollinglith dispute	30
Outline of the banksman's job	33
Christopher Dawson as banksman	34
Swinton Hall	43
Aldborough Elections	45
Decline of Christopher Dawson	46
John Robinson	47
Return to the High Gill	56
The Third Dispute at Gollinglith	78
Abstrupus Danby Junior	83
Speedwell Gin Shaft	85
William Danby Senior	89
Caldbergh Lead Mines	90
Arthur Young's Visit	98
Colsterdale Lime Kiln	99
An amicable settlement at Gollinglith	101
William Danby Junior	104
Brown Beck Low Shaft	107
Brown Beck High Shaft	110
Arnagill Trial	113
High Gill: The Final Episode	113
Colsterdale Lime Kiln	115
Anne Holwell Danby and Admiral Harcourt	116
Technology Arrives – The Last Stand	116
George Danby: End of the line	130
Not so grand finale	131
Conclusions	132
Appendices	133
References	152
Index of personal names	156

APPENDICES

1	Articles against Richard Ascough	133
2	John Robinson's reply on behalf of Ascough	136
3	Richard Ascough's reply to the charges against him	137
4	My charges against ye workmen of my colliery of Colsterdale	139
5	Colsterdale Census returns listing coal miners	141
6	Colsterdale School	143
7	Production figures	144

ILLUSTRATIONS

1	'Cup & Ring' stone	8
2	Thomas Jeffrey's Map of Yorkshire (1771)	10
3	The Danby Coat of Arms, with quarterings to show related families	12
4	Sir Thomas Danby (1610-1660)	19
5	Demand for payment from the Sequestration Commissioners, 1645	21
6	Sir Abstrupus Danby - style of Garret	25
7	Sir Abstrupus Danby's monument	27
8	Thorny Grane Colliery	35
9	Allen Grove - level mouth and smithy, with binksteads and powder house	40
10	The Old Hall at Swinton in 1723	44
11	Sketch of the colliery workes at the Engine Pit, on Thorney Grane	57
12	Long Level, begun in 1706	58
13	Plan & Section of Beldin Gill Lead Shaft and underground pumping shaft	62
14	View of Steam Engine Pit with the lead dressing floor	64
15	Lead Veins at High Gill	65
16	Inlet for watercourse to the underground waterwheel at High Engine Pit	66
17	Dame Judeth Danby's tomb in Masham church	83
18	The lead workings on Caldbergh Pasture and Ings	90
19	A double shaft on Caldbergh Ings	92
20	Boundary stone between Masham and East Witton	102
21	Boundary stone between Masham and East Witton	102
22	William Danby Jnr (1752-1833)	105
23	Quarry Gill Bridge, built by Benjamin Akers	105
24	Arnagill Tower, built by Benjamin Akers	106
25	Birks Gill Colliery	108
26	Brown Beck Colliery	111
27	Sketch of the colliery workings in Arnagill in 1815 and 1826	114
28	The flagstone quarry in Beldin Gill	116
29	Steam Engine Pit with Beldin Lead Shaft	118
30	The 'Egg-Ended' boiler at the Steam Engine Pit	120
31	The 'Egg-Ended' boiler, made from rivetted plates	120
32	The 'Egg-Ended' boiler at the Steam Engine Pit	122
33	The hemi-spherical end of the boiler	122
34	The Steam Engine Pit with the boiler	123
35	Ilton limekiln, built 1830	125
36	High or Engine Pit Colliery, Colsterdale	127
37	Sketch of the opening of New House Level	129
38	A young George Affleck (Danby)	130
39	George Danby (Affleck) as an old man	130
40	Colsterdale School, built 1882	143
41	Fire Coals raised between 1690 and 1842	147
42	Lime Coals raised between 1690 and 1807	149

THE MASHAMSHIRE COLLIERIES

INTRODUCTION

Unlike other parts of the Yorkshire Dales, Masham and Mashamshire have been relatively little noted. John Fisher's *History & Antiquities of Masham & Mashamshire* (1865) remains the main source for the area, but it was written with the usual Victorian slant on history and religion. Susan Cunliffe-Lister's *Days of Yore* (1989) gives an excellent overview of Mashamshire, presenting a more modern approach in detailing the development of the area.

This book complements them by presenting the results of a meticulous study of mining in the, so far, little recognised Colsterdale coalfield. This worked from the 14th century until the late 19th century, giving it one of the longest and best documented periods of working of any upland coalfield in Britain. For the first time, scattered documentary references to the Danbys, as well as transcripts from the family archive, have been used to present an insight into the underlying relationships between the landowners, their mining agents and the colliers. It is also intended that this more comprehensive history will provide the basis for a detailed history of the Danby family and their various estates.

The main source of primary information for coal mining at Colsterdale, and the rest of Mashamshire, comes from the Cunliffe-Lister (Swinton) Archive, reference ZS. This archive was first donated to Bradford City Library and then transferred to the North Yorkshire County Records Office, Northallerton, by the Cunliffe-Lister family in 1972. A small part of the papers have been microfilmed, but the rest of this huge collection consisting of over 350 boxes is, at the time of writing, incompletely catalogued, making comprehensive referencing impossible. Unless stated otherwise, therefore, all information is from the Swinton Archive.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly I would like to thank Jean & Maurice Bell who, by renting me my little Yorkshire home, not only made it possible to get to the Record Office at Northallerton regularly, but also, and more importantly, put my spiritual home, the Yorkshire Dales within easy reach. I will always be indebted to them for their kindness and friendship. Secondly I would like to thank Mike Gill and Hazel Martell for their usual expertise in bringing this book to its final stages and preparing it for publication. Mike also prepared the maps and assembled production figures for publication. I would also like to thank the Archivist at the North Yorkshire County Records Office for permission to quote from the Swinton Archive, and all the Staff there for making my visits so enjoyable. Very special thanks are due to Linda Turnbull of the Search Room for her extraordinary efforts on my behalf to make this archive accessible. Without her unstinting co-operation this book would be lacking in many details. My thanks are also due to the staff at the Reference section of Northallerton Library for dealing with my requests for obscure books. Last, but by no means least, I would like to say a big thank you to Johnny Cunliffe-Lister for his company during our very pleasant excursions exploring the outer reaches of Mashamshire, and to Susan Cunliffe-Lister for permission to reproduce the pictures of Sir Abstrupus and of Swinton Hall. Ian

Spensley, Dave Johnson and Geoff Blacker have also been very helpful by answering queries and sharing information on their various areas of interest.

GENERAL BACKGROUND

Colsterdale [in Middle English, colster means one who has to do with coals] is situated at the headwaters of the River Burn, to the west of Masham, in what is now part of the Nidderdale AONB. The high moorland, drained by the Burn and its tributaries, reaches as far as Nidderdale to the west and Coverdale to the north. The coal was worked at two main locations. The first is around Birks Gill [wrongly identified as Kirk Gill in the VCH]¹ and Brown Beck below the Slip Stones Crag, and the second is at the head of the dale at Thorney Grain, or the High Gill. An area of ground at Gollinglith [pronounced Gawnley] was also worked at several periods.

The seam worked in Colsterdale tended to produce two qualities of coal. At Birks the coal was of an inferior quality and was sold mainly to the local lime-burning trade for use at banks of kilns at nearby Nosterfield, Gebdikes & Well. The coal from Thorney Grain and the High Dale was of a better quality and was used mainly for house fires. Both types of coal were transported by packhorse from the more remote sites and by waggon from pits nearer the bottom of the dale. The coal seam was seldom more than 16 to 20 inches thick and was often split into two by a sandstone parting. The coal was not of a gassy nature and there are no records of explosions in the pits. The main enemies of the colliers were water and the vagaries of the weather.

At the head of the dale, the seam was also crossed by three, lead-bearing faults, but, unfortunately, the lead ore was contaminated with high concentrations of sulphur [probably pyrites], making it very difficult to smelt.

GEOLOGY

The Colsterdale area forms part of the eastern edge of the Millstone Grit outcrop of the Askrigg Block as it slopes down into the valley of the River Ure. The top beds, which consist of the Lower Follifoot Grit, form several notable outcrops at the Slipstones, Gollinglith and Agra Crag. These beds overlie successively the Scar House Beds and the Colsterdale Marine Beds. The coal seam itself is found in the lowest beds, the Red Scar Grits, and has been identified by Wilson as the Woogill Coal, so named from its outcrop at the head of Nidderdale. This seam is also found in Coverdale, where it was worked at Sowden Beck, Braithwaite Moor and at the more substantial Scafton and Fleensop collieries.^{1,2}

Like all Millstone Grit coals, the seam at Colsterdale was deposited in dynamic, estuarine conditions. This meant that land and water levels were constantly changing, as were water courses. As a result, the seam was variable in quality and thickness, and it was sometimes 'washed out' by former river channels. Moreover, whilst coal was worked at the same geological horizon elsewhere, the seam was often absent over large areas.

After deposition and lithification, the area was subjected to faulting and other tectonic pressures during the upward folding process which formed the Pennines. This gave

the Colsterdale seam a shallow dip eastwards at Brown Gill and northwards at Thorney Grain. The faults, which affected the local rate of dip, also tended to bring water, either from the surface or from aquifers, into the workings. Another local, tectonic feature encountered in the workings was a swelly [or swilly], where the seam was contorted so that it dipped more steeply for a short distance before rising back to its original position. This formed a valley-like hollow in which water often collected.

The other persistent seam in the dales, the Tan Hill Coal, is associated with the Howgate Grit. It is lower in the geological succession, however, and therefore does not outcrop at Colsterdale.

During the last ice age, the Ure glacier forced the water from the Burn and Pott Beck to back up and form lakes, which later deposited layers of laminated clays and moraines as the glaciers retreated. These moraines contain deposits of Crinoidal Limestones, Cherts and other rocks from further up the Dales, but unfortunately they have never been the subject of an in depth study.³⁻⁵

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Colsterdale is one of a number of small manors in a grand, or major, manorial holding known as Mashamshire. This was established after the Conquest, from earlier Anglo-Saxon settlements listed in the Domesday Book, and is centred on the town of Masham. Evidence of early human activity comes from cup and ring stones and other early rock carvings, from an Iron Age barrow on Roomer Common and from a Romano-British settlement, which is currently being examined by the Agill Study Group.¹

Mashamshire itself was part of the extensive estate belonging to the Earls of Richmond and was held by the de Mowbray family under Knight tenure.² In the early part of the 12th century they granted large tracts of land to the surrounding religious establishments. Waste lands on the south of the River Burn at Moorheads passed to monks of Fountains Abbey and were incorporated into the holdings they had in Nidderdale. The Hospital of St Mary Magdalen at Ripon was granted most of the village of Ilton. Moor and waste land on the northern side, including Colsterdale, was granted to the Cistercian House at Jervaulx. Mashamshire then

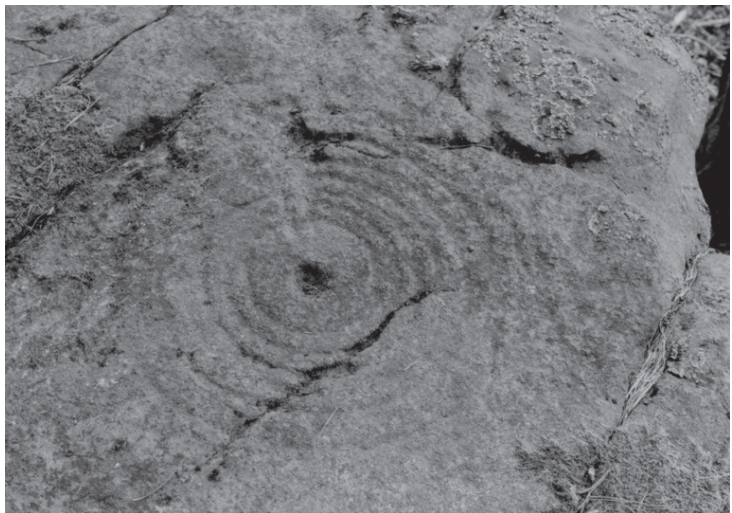


Figure 1. A prehistoric 'Cup & Ring' Stone.

passed to the de Wauton family, which held it until 1328 when Joan, the last of the de Wautons, sold it to Sir Geoffrey le Scrope. He was a member of a younger branch of the powerful Scropes of Castle Bolton in Wensleydale.^{3,4} This line of the family, which became known as the Scropes of Masham and Upsall, amassed large land holdings in the North and East Ridings of Yorkshire, as well as in the counties of Northampton, Lincoln, Essex, Kent and Northumberland.^{5,6}

JERVAULX ABBEY AT COLSTERDALE

The first reference to Colsterdale occurs in 1156 when Roger de Mowbray wrote to the Archbishop of York, confirming his grant of grazing there to the monks who were building an abbey at Jervaulx.¹ Nevertheless, the first documented reference to mining in Colsterdale does not occur until 1254, when an agreement was made between John de Wauton and the Abbot of Jervaulx that *'he [John] would build no Forge in Colsterdale and if he raised one in any other place would take no wood from Colsterdale to maintain it [because the Abbott & Convent had common of Estovers (the Right to cut wood for fuel or repairing buildings) there] and from thenceforth he would neither give nor sell any Iron Stone gotten there to the men of Colsterdale'*. It is unlikely that the monks were actually getting ironstone there, because no deposits have been found subsequently and a similar covenant is found in a charter which granted the monks all rights to lead ore and ironstone in the Forest of Wensleydale, but only allowed them to build temporary shelters and no permanent smelting site for iron. It suggests that the monks were hoping for ironstone to be found and exploited, as at Fountains Abbey where deposits were a great source of income, but it is the only early reference to ironstone and subsequent charters only mention coal.^{1,2,3}

An Inquisition Post Mortem, taken at Masham in 1304, on the lands and tenements of John de Wauton which were held as part of a Knights Fee for the wardship of John, son and heir of Sir Roger de Mowbray deceased, refers to *'a place called Coalsterdale two parts of a mine of sea coles [minere carbonum marinarium] some years worth 53s 4d and other years not so much, the monks of Jervaulx having the other third part. On Masham Moor is a quarry of Millstones [molorum]'*.⁴

On 10 April 1333/4, six years after the Scropes obtained Colsterdale, a dispute arose between them and Jervaulx over possession of the mines. Two agreements were made concerning these rights. The first deals with the mines and states:

'Whereas there has been a dispute betwixt them concerning the mine of coals in Colsterdale it is agreed that Sir Geoffrey le Scrope and his heirs grant the Abbot and his heirs the right to dig for coals within Colsterdale wheresoever they like, as well without their enclosed ground as within and make their profit of them at their pleasure without the hindrance of the said Sir Geoffrey or his heirs for ever. The Abbot and his successors are herewith bound to pay 8 Marks per year to Sir Geoffrey and his heirs so long as any coals are to be found therein albeit that the Abbot get not the coals so that through the negligence of the Abbot & Convent or through default of their working the payment of rent shall cease'.

The second agreement deals with access and states that Sir Geoffrey le Scrope:

'...grants to the Abbott and Convent of Jervaulx a free way through the whole of Mashamshire towards Colsterdale so that no one henceforth coming towards Colsterdale unto the mine of the said Abbot to seek coals or other necessities or thence returning shall be assailed, hindered or disturbed, so that all men may peaceably come to or return from the said mine of Colsterdale for ever'.

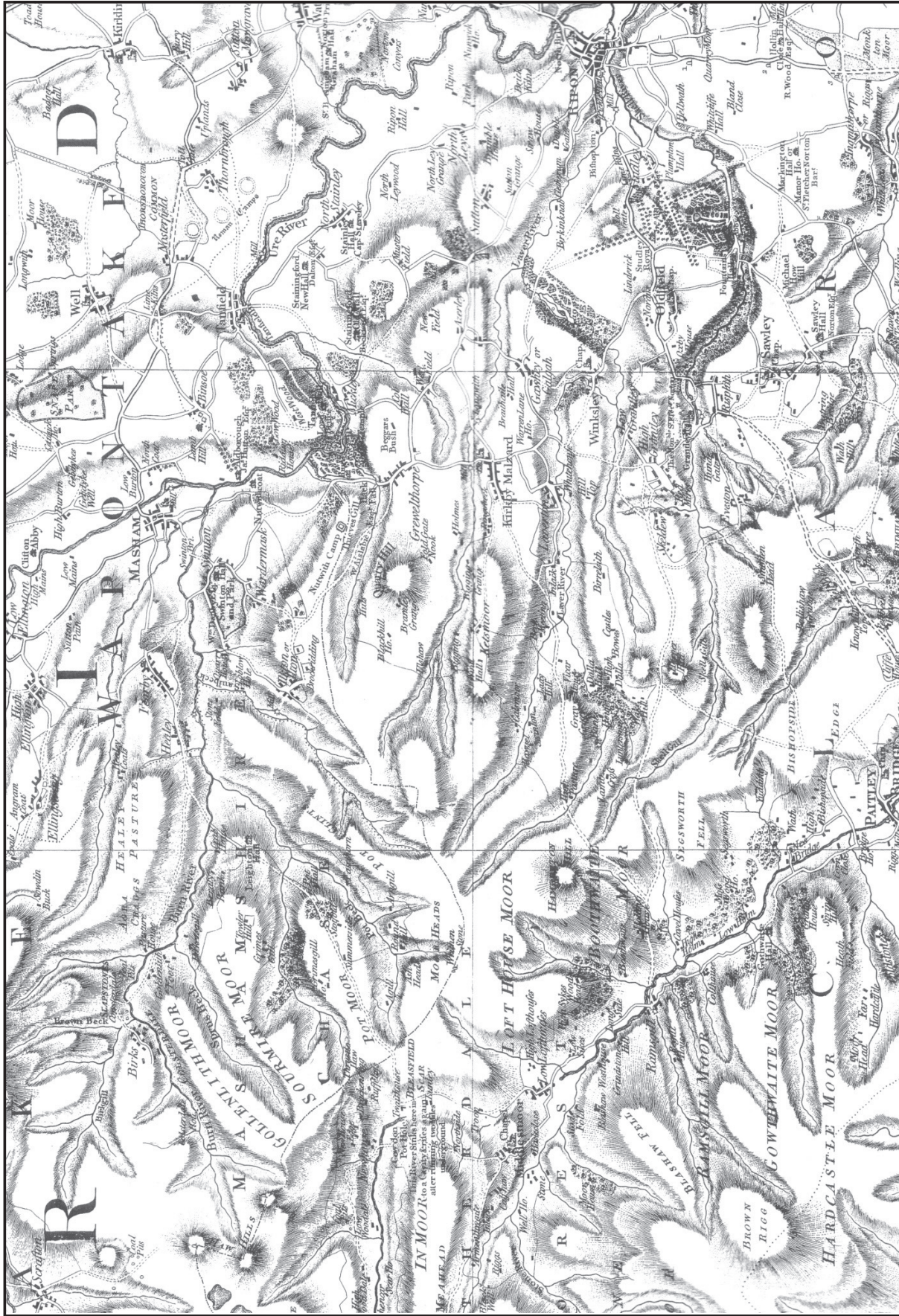


Figure 2. Jeffreys's map (1771) showing Colsterdale, upper Nidderdale and Wensleydale.

For this grant, the Scropes were:

‘forever entitled to twenty quarters of coal for Estovers in perpetuity, or for as long as the mine lasts, saving to the Abbot and Convent sufficient coals for their own use’.

An Inquisition Post Mortem, taken at Bedale after the death of Henry le Scrope in July 1392, refers to *‘a certain mine of coal worth by the year beyond reprises 40s payable at the Feast of St Michael and Easter’*.⁵

During the agrarian crisis of the mid 15th century, the Scropes rationalised their holdings in Mashamshire. They reclaimed the coal mines in January 1449/50 and an Award was made that the Abbott and Convent of Jervaulx should *‘release all their freedoms in Colsterdale and other places in Mashamshire to John le Scrope and his heirs in woods or in any other Thing except as is therein excepted. Which exception or Reservation found to have been right of Commonage therein’*. On February 6th that year a Release was duly signed. This award only entitled the monks to grazing rights for their sheep and cattle and ended any claim to working the coal in Colsterdale.

THE DANBY FAMILY

Of the early origins of the Danby family, T.D. Whitaker tells us that Robert Stringent, who came over with the Conqueror and was granted lands to the north of Northallerton, married locally and changed his name to Danby in order to assimilate with the local population. Whitaker claims that he was based at Yafforth, near Northallerton, and gradually built up land holdings in the Hambleton area.^{1,2}

Robert Danby, ancestor of the Danbys of Swinton, is the first known member of the family. He was a lawyer who rose through the justice system, particularly at Court, until in 1461 he was appointed Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas and was also knighted. Marriage to his second wife, Elizabeth Aslabay, in 1445 brought him lands in Durham, Darlington and Gateshead. As befitted his new status, he bought the manor of Thorpe Perrow, which became the family seat, in 1456. He retained his position as Chief Justice through the First War of the Roses [1459-1471], but on the re-accession of Edward IV in 1471 he was removed. He stayed active in the law when he was retained by Richard, Duke of Gloucester, as a J.P. in Northamptonshire, Warwickshire & Kent and died in 1474 after which his widow took the veil.³

Sir Robert’s son, James, married Agnes, the daughter and sole heiress of Sir John Langton, in 1466 and thereby acquired the Farnley estate, near Leeds. Like his father, he was a loyal supporter of Richard, Duke of Gloucester. He was rewarded by being made a Knight Banneret after the Battle of Hutton Field near Berwick in 1482 and was in attendance at Richard’s coronation the following year. He survived the second war of 1483 to 1487 and died in 1496.^{4,5,6}

Sir James Danby was succeeded by his son Christopher who was born in 1468 and was destined to bring the Mashamshire estates into the Danby family when he married Dame Margery (or Margaret) Scrope in 1493.⁷

END OF THE SCROPE OF MASHAM AND UPSALL

Before following the Danbys further, we need to understand the series of complicated manoeuvres which established the final ownership of Colsterdale. These started when Geoffrey, the last of the Scropes of Masham, died without issue in 1517. The Scrope estates were then divided between the husbands of his three surviving sisters and co-heirs: Alice, Margery and Elizabeth, and the Scrope of Masham title became extinct. Sir James Strangways of West Harlsey, the husband of Dame Alice, got the Manor of Colsterdale amongst other lands. Dame Margery was married to Sir Christopher Danby of Thorpe Perrow who got the Manor and Free Chace of Masham, together with other lands in Kent, Suffolk, Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire. The third sister, Dame Elizabeth, was married to Sir John Fitz Randolph of Spennithorne who got lands at Clifton and Constable Burton, amongst others.

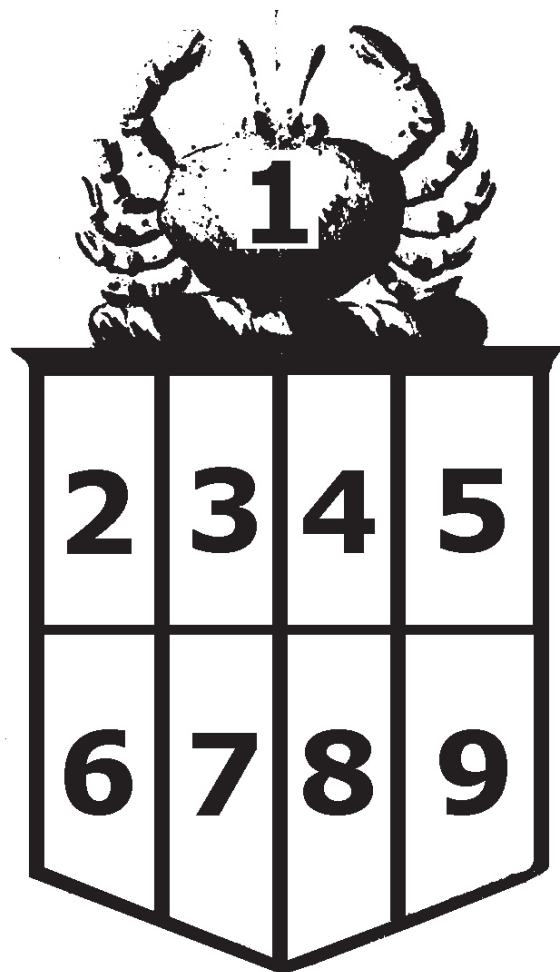
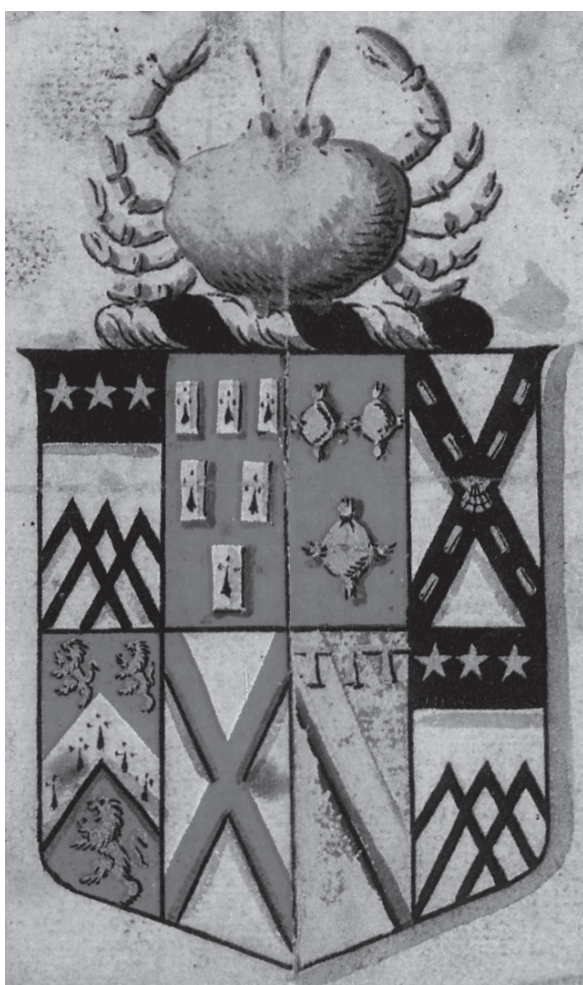


Figure 3. The Danby Coat of Arms, with quarterings showing related families:

- | | | |
|-------------------------|----------|-------------|
| 1.Scrope | 2.Danby | 3.Bretville |
| 4.Aislalie | 5. Elvet | 6.Langton |
| 7.Neville (of Gargrave) | 8.Scrope | 9.Danby |

After a protracted legal suit between the heirs of the grandson of Sir James Strangways, who died in 1541, the king (Henry VIII) was brought in to arbitrate and, in the settlement reached in 1544, the manors of Colsterdale, Notton and Woolley were granted to his cousin, Robert Roos of Ingmanthorpe.^{1,2} Unfortunately, Roos was