

PORTRAIT OF A MASTER FORESTER

William Bowland



The tomb of Sir Walter Urswyk, Master Forester of Bowland

Sir Walter Urswyk was Master Forester of the Forest of Bowland in the second half of the fourteenth century. A retainer of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, he also held the great Lancashire Forests of Amounderness and Quernmore.

Walter Urswyk fought in the Hundred Years' War serving John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, in Castille. According to Froissart, Urswyk won distinction at the Battle of Navarretta in 1367 and was knighted on the field of battle. For his valour, Sir Walter also had

bestowed upon him a lifetime annuity of £40 – a great sum for the period - and was granted two manors at Catterick and Forcett in Richmondshire (now part of North Yorkshire).

As Earl of Richmond, John of Gaunt promoted Urswyk to the office of High Constable of Richmond Castle in 1371. In 1372, Urswyk became Master Forester of Bowland. This appointment may have been something of a family tradition – a forebear, Adam de Urswyk, having been Master Forester between 1331-53.

During his tenure as Master Forester, Sir Walter Urswyk appears to have made one enduring contribution to the history of the Forest: the re-location of the Lord of Bowland's Forest courts to Whitewell.

The maintenance of forest law was an important feature of the early Lordship with enforcement taking place through two courts – *swainmote* and *woodmote*.

It is thought that Bowland's original Forest courts may have been held at Hall Hill from as early as the twelfth century.

Most people today would struggle to identify Hall Hill. Indeed, it is all but invisible to the naked eye buried in a dense clump of trees but stands north-north-east of modern-day Whitewell, close to Seed Hill, on a steep rise with a commanding view across the Hodder.

Bowland historian Mary Higham argued for Hall Hill being a medieval motte, perhaps linked in some way to

the Domesday *vill* and deer enclosure (laund) at Radholme. The Hill's natural limestone mound certainly shows signs of being adapted for occupation and indeed, may have accommodated some form of modest fortified



Hall Hill, masked by trees, towering over the Inn at Whitewell

dwelling. Academics, such as Professor Richard Hoyle of the University of Reading, have speculated that Hall Hill may date from the period of the Anarchy during the reign of King Stephen (1135-1154). Nineteenth-century writers had thought that the Hill might have housed some form of small Roman encampment.

It is unclear when, how or why Hall Hill fell into disuse. Certainly, at some point in the 1370s, forest administration appears to have shifted from Hall Hill to a newly-built hunting lodge at Whitewell. Re-modelled in

1836 by the Towneley Lords of Bowland, that lodge, much extended and changed, is today known as the *Inn at Whitewell*.



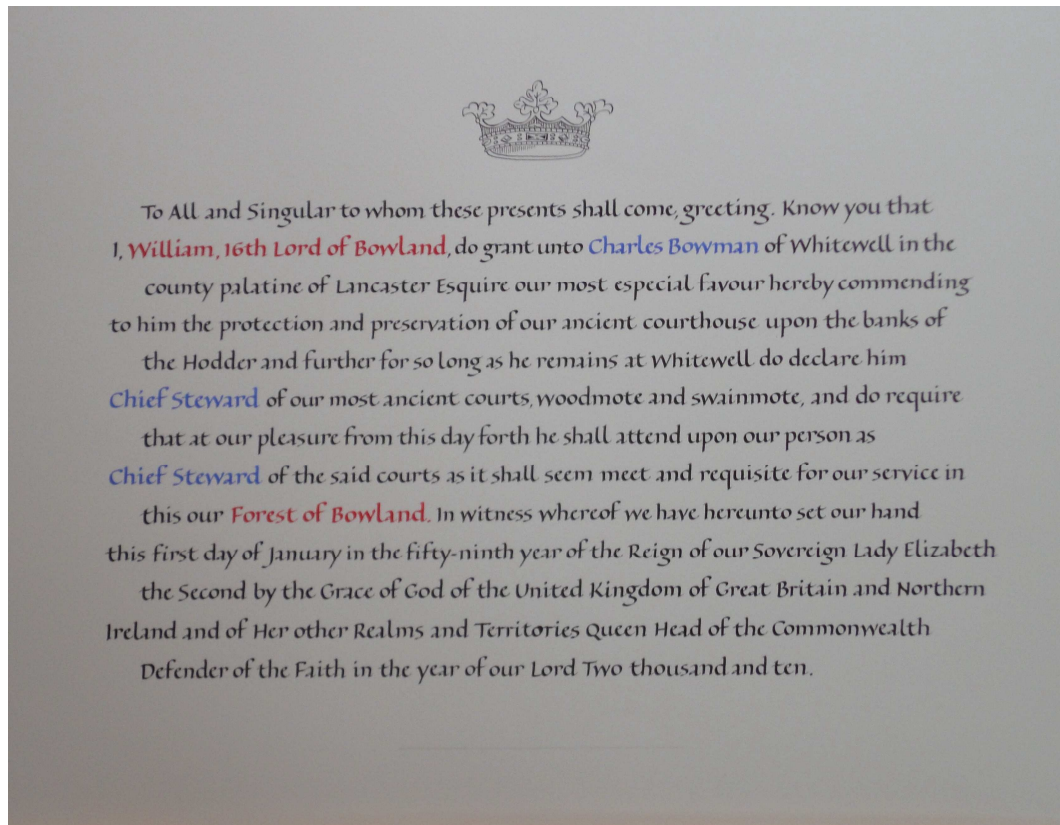
The Inn at Whitewell

It may be significant that this transition took place in the wake of the Black Death (1348-50). Certainly, Urswyk seems to have re-modelled the entire hamlet, placing a new hunting lodge and a chapel at its heart. Yet, Whitewell was already ancient by Urswyk's time. The discovery in the 1980s of a Middle Bronze Age mortar – the so-called “Whitewell Stone” – suggests the hamlet has prehistoric origins.

Uncovering this history led me as Bowland's present-day Lord to offer the Chief Stewardship of Bowland – the modern equivalent of the office of Master Forester – to

the proprietor of the Inn, Charles Bowman, in early 2010. I felt it important to mark and revive an ancient tradition.

For those interested, the Bowman grant is now preserved at the Slaidburn Village Archive where it can be viewed by the general public on Wednesdays and Fridays.



Grant of the office of Chief Steward of the Forest of Bowland

The date of Sir Walter Urswyk's death is uncertain. Two dates have been proposed: 1377 and 1403. Urswyk is not buried in Bowland but in St Anne's Church, Catterick.

The proximity of his tomb to tombs belonging to the Scrope family has led some to suggest Urswyk may have married into the powerful Scrope dynasty. Sir Richard le Scrope, later Lord Scrope of Bolton, was Richard II's

Lord Chancellor who built the imposing Bolton Castle in North Yorkshire in the 1480s.

However, as monuments go, perhaps Whitewell is Urswyk's most memorable and enduring. An ancient settlement by the Hodder re-modelled in the late fourteenth century, a place that has been for more than five hundred years at the heart of the Forest of Bowland.