

KENTMERE HALL AND THE GILPINS

1373 -1672

By Joe Scott

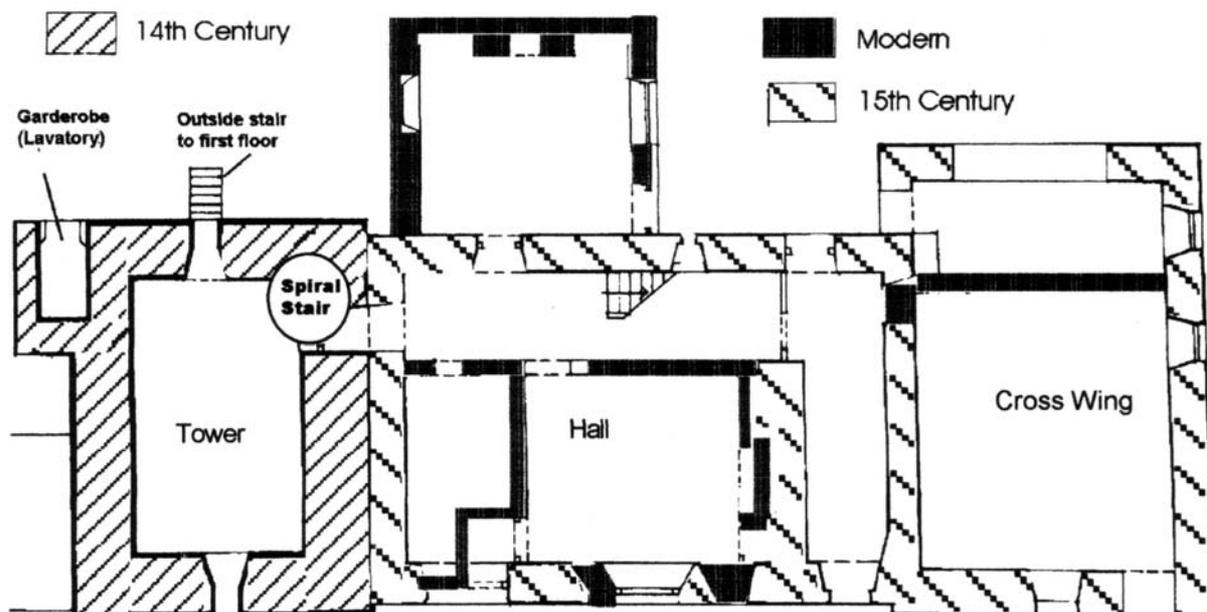
based on a talk given at a Society meeting Feb 9th 1999



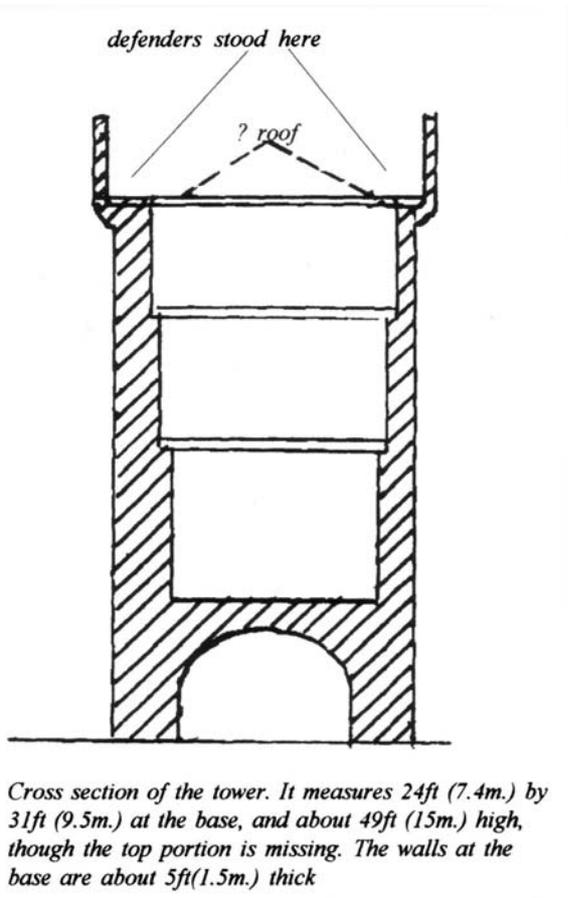
Kentmere Hall. Drawing published in Ambleside, 1814

Kentmere Hall is the most picturesque of the late mediaeval fortified houses of the Kendal area. Some like Burneside are far more dilapidated; others like Sizergh have been transformed into stately homes. But Kentmere has not changed very much in the last 300 years.

As the plan below shows the pele tower on the left is the oldest part. A spiral stair in its north-east corner led up to the upper floors. The stonework of the central part, the hall, and the cross wing on the right shows that they were built up to a hundred years after the tower. Before this there may have been an earlier Hall, probably a single storey building with a thatched roof on a timber frame.



Plan of the Hall based on Royal Commission on Historical Monuments Report 1936

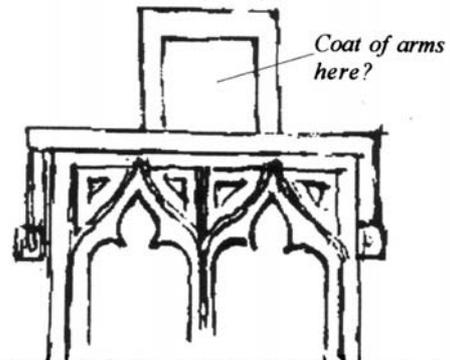


The main room of the first floor had an elegant window facing south, a fireplace and a door into the upper part of the hall, as well as doors to the spiral stair and to the wardrobe. On the north is another doorway to an outside stairway, but this is probably not original. In this room the lord and his lady could enjoy comparative comfort. Above on the roof the battlemented parapet was supported outside the line of the walls on corbels so that defenders could shoot down the wall-face at attackers at the bottom. At each corner was a small turret only one of which remains, but in the 1690's (see sketch below) three can be seen. Machell missed out the cross wing altogether, but he does seem to show us that in his day the hall roof was slated not thatched.



Sketch from Thomas Machell's notes 1690's¹

The tower, with its complex battlements and turrets and its elegant window was built in an age when stone buildings were rare, and when the sandstone for the window surrounds had to be brought from miles away on packhorses.



The tracery of the head of the first floor window is of a design typical of the late 14th century.

Another striking feature of the Hall is its position. There is no sign of an outer defensive wall, and the site is overlooked from high ground within easy bowshot on three sides. Despite the impressive machicolation, defenders on the roof parapet would have been an easy target. The Hall may have provided some security against a gang of unruly neighbours in the disorderly years of the later Middle Ages, we may suspect from its position as well as its elegance that its builder was thinking more of prestige and status than of real tactical defence.

The Gilpins

It seems likely that the man who built it was William Gilpin. According to local tradition the founder of the Gilpin family was a huntsman who was rewarded with a gift of land for killing a wild boar at Gilpin Bridge in Crook. Perhaps this was the Richard Gilpin to whom the Baron of Kendal granted the "Manor of Ulthwaite" in 1272 - the annual rent of "twelve barbed rows and two shillings and sixpence" seems appropriate for a huntsman.² But this Richard and his immediate descendants did not as far as we can tell, live in Ulthwaite or in Kentmere. In that same year 1272 the manor of Kentmere was inherited by the Baron's sister,³ Laderina and her husband, and from them descended to the Yorkshire family of Stapleton. The Gilpins were never the Lords of Kentmere manor.

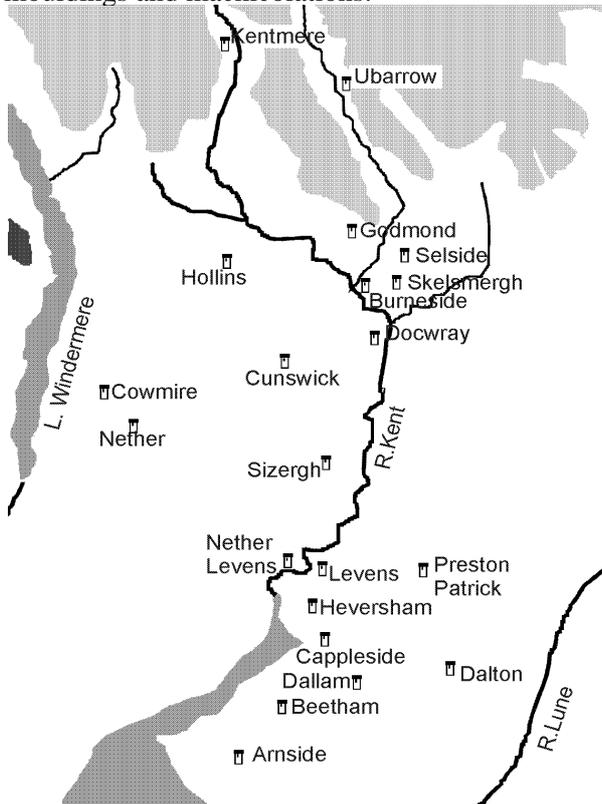
Our next piece of documentary evidence comes from 1373.⁴ A William Gilpin was one of the jurors at the enquiry into the Kentmere possessions of a deceased Stapleton Lord of the Manor. It is possible that this William had moved

into Ulthwaite or Kentmere, and since it was about this time that Kentmere Hall was built perhaps it was William who built it.

What were pele towers for?

The fourteenth century was a time of border wars, bad weather and the Black Death, and Westmorland was one of the poorest counties in England. Despite this Kentmere Hall is one of 20 pele towers all roughly similar in design and built in the years 1350-1400.(see map below) A simple explanation is that the border counties were a key defence against Scots invasions. But the worst of the Scots invasions, and the only one that can be shown to have caused damage in the Kendal area, was 40 or 50 years before the pele towers were built, in 1324-5 - in 1324 the Baron of Kendale's legal rights in Kendal "ought to be worth 26/8, but now nothing by reason of the destruction of the Scots."⁵ Even then there is no similar evidence of damage in Kentmere or Staveley. There were later Scots invasions, like the one that laid Appleby waste in 1389, but there is no evidence that Scots armies came near the Kent valley on that occasion.

So the pele towers of Kentdale were not built as a serious defence against the Scots, as indeed the design of Kentmere Hall shows, and we have still to explain why William Gilpin (if it was he) spent so much on those elegant window mouldings and machicolations.



Halls in South Westmorland which have (or once had)

pele towers.

In the 14th century, Kings of England placed defence against the Scots in the hands of the "Wardens of the Scottish Marches", Cumberland and Westmorland forming the "Western March". The men of these counties were required to turn out with their weapons when called for, perhaps to meet an attack, perhaps to garrison Carlisle, Appleby or Brough, perhaps to march into Scotland.

To organise this the King paid to the Wardens of the Marches enough money out of taxation to guarantee regular wages to the soldiers. The rate was 2d a day for a foot soldier, and 6d for a mounted archer, with higher amounts for the various ranks of leaders. It was good money but in addition there was the opportunity for profit from looting, a normal activity of fourteenth century armies in enemy territory. Most lucrative of all for the leaders was the chance of ransom. When prisoners of rank were captured there was a carefully regulated system of extorting ransom money. The most notable example is that of John de Coupland, who in 1350 had the luck to capture King David of Scotland in person.⁶ The actual ransom went to King Edward III of England, but he rewarded John with lands worth £500 a year, including half the Barony of Kendale. War could be a profitable business. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the English fought wars in France and Ireland as well as Scotland, and for good measure in 1455-1485 they fought amongst themselves the Wars of the Roses. Great lords built up private armies of "retainers", men under contract to serve under their banner for a stated annual fee.

By 1350, as this system developed, Kentdale had become a useful reservoir of experienced soldiers. So local leaders were needed to call out the men of Kentdale, leaders whom a team of local lads would trust who could earn their respect who might bring them back victorious and with full pockets and whole skins. And a resident leader in Kentmere needed a rallying point where his team could come together, where arms might be stored or money kept secure till pay-day.

So the leader of the Kentmere men built himself a Hall well designed to emphasise his martial and social status. If it was William Gilpin who did this, it was convenient to his own lordship of Ulthwaite. Until the seventeenth century there were humbler houses near the hall, where followers might live and it was a reasonable

centre for men from any part of Kentmere, Hugill or Staveley. Gilpin probably paid a trifling rent for the Hall and its farm land to the Stapleton Lord of the Manor far away in East Yorkshire, and he may indeed have acted as steward of the Manor and leader of the local people in peaceful matters as in war.

The Gilpins 1485-1600

1485 was a year of change for Kentmere and for England. William Gilpin of Kentmere Hall was killed at Bosworth, the final battle of the Wars of the Roses, and so no doubt were a number of Kentmere men who had followed him to the wars. In the larger picture, the victory of Henry Tudor and the firm grip that he and his family took on the country brought to an end the internal wars, made illegal the private armies of retainers and ushered in a century of internal peace and prosperity.

There were still foreign wars, and Westmorland men were still mustered to fight against the Scots, for instance in 1542.⁷ But now the arts of peace paid better dividends. The local cloth industry was flourishing, so there was money in sheep and there were opportunities in trade. Education was opening new doors for the sons of gentry and yeomen - a grammar school was opened at Kendal in 1525.

We can see how the Gilpins made use of these opportunities by following the careers of three of the sons of Edwin Gilpin, brother of the William who had been killed at Bosworth.⁸ The third son, Bernard, went to the new Kendal school and from there to Oxford, where he became a Fellow of Queen's College, and a priest. Helped and advised by his mother's uncle who was Bishop of Durham, he became Archdeacon of Durham, was famed in later life as "The Apostle of the North", and was offered the Bishopric of Carlisle though he turned it down⁹ The second son, George, became a lawyer and a merchant and was for some years Queen Elizabeth's ambassador at the Hague¹⁰. The eldest, William, inherited his father's lands, and when he died in 1578 he owned land and mills in Langdale, Grasmere, Underbarrow, Strickland Roger, Staveley, Fairbank, Stockbridge, Martindale, Pooley and Ulthwaite.

William was still a Stapleton tenant in Kentmere and the Hall and whatever lands he held as tenant there are not included in this list of freeholds. It

may have been he who had the roof of the Hall slated, since the story of how the local giant John Hird lifted a 30ft beam into position single handed is placed in the reign of Edward VI when William was head of the family.

It was William's son George who, at some date before 1595, bought the Hall and 300 acres of land from the Stapletons, and established "my feeding land called le Parke"¹¹. George also owned several of the small farms south west of the Hall "houses and buildings at Park Yeate and closes adjoining". It looks as if he had managed to buy out enough of his humbler neighbours to make what had been "Wrea Quarter pasture"¹² into his personal pasture land. The Gilpins of the Hall no longer needed a team of sturdy neighbours to follow them to the wars, and soon there were no other houses in what became known as "Hall Quarter". It is recorded in an 18th century document that a man born in 1683 "hath heard an ancient woman say that her mother was born in one" of these houses.¹³ When the site of one of them was excavated in 1991, the only dating evidence that came to light was, significantly, a sixpenny piece of Elizabeth I (1558-1603).¹⁴

The Gilpins had clearly adapted with great success to the new opportunities of Tudor England, and George Gilpin Esq. of Kentmere Hall was a powerful figure locally. He was enormously wealthy by local standards, owning land all over the county as well as the largest farm in the area. Unfortunately we have no inventory of his property,²¹ but his son George²², under whom the fortunes of the family had, as we shall see, declined greatly, left goods and chattels worth £630.15.0, including 17 horses, 462 sheep and 27 head of cattle. Of 87 other local inventories from the years 1634-1725 none had farm stock worth even half as much as George's. His "apparel, trunk and desk" were worth £40, and he had books, £7.00, and a silver bowl and 8 silver spoons, £4.00. We can imagine George, sitting at his desk in that elegant room on the first floor of the tower giving a lead in local affairs. When Kentmere sent up a petition in 1588 supporting Staveley's request for the right to bury in Staveley Chapelyard, the first two signatures were those of George and his son William's. We find him acting as the supervisor of the wills of other Kentmere folk. He did not lead his neighbours out to war as his forebears had done, but he led them in many other ways.

The 17th Century - things go wrong for the Gilpins

Things began to go wrong for George Gilpin in 1597. In 1595 he had pulled off a prestigious marriage of his only son William to Dorothy Sandford of Howgill Castle. Dorothy brought with her a dowry of £400, but George had to agree to a settlement conveying all his lands to the first-born son of this marriage so that he himself now became merely a life tenant of his own estates¹⁶.

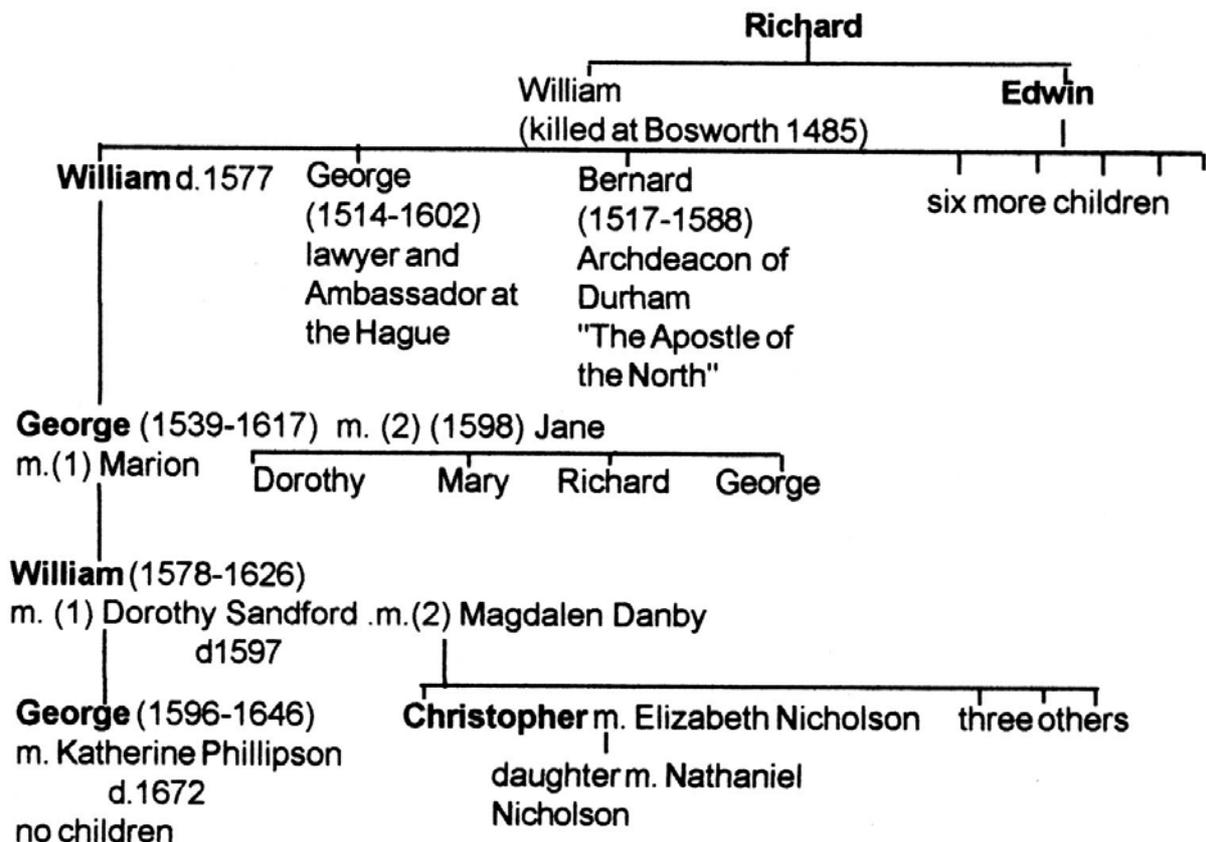
A year later the expected son was born and duly christened George, but in 1597 Dorothy died. In the following year old George, now 59, married again and his new wife bore four children, two girls and two boys, the last of whom, born when his father was 71, was also christened George.¹⁷ Was William's son George perhaps defective in some way, so that his grandfather wanted to replace him with a more worthy chip off the old block? Meanwhile William had also re-married and produced another family of children. Relations at the Hall must have been very strained, with two Mrs Gilpins and three sets of half-siblings! Old George had control over the management of the estate, but could not sell land

— it all had to go in the end to William's son George. In 1612 old George made a generous lease of much of his lands to trustees for Richard and baby George¹⁸, the sons of his old age, and they were able to hold on to this land even after old George died in 1617. But in 1627, when William in turn died, his George was finally able to assert his rights under the 1595 marriage settlement and recover all the lands, though we may suspect that they were in a depleted condition due to old George's efforts on behalf of his other family.

The bad luck was not yet over. Although this George was now fully master of the Hall estate and was now aged 31, he was unmarried, a very unusual circumstance for an heir of his importance and one that may confirm the suggestion that he was in some way defective. It was 1635, and he was 38 before he married (to Katherine Phillipson from Hollin Hall), but they had no children. In 1646 he died, a rich man by local standards as his inventory quoted above shows. The land and property now went to his half-brother Christopher, the eldest son of William's second marriage. But Christopher was not to enjoy it for long, if at all. He was an active Royalist leader in the Civil Wars 1642-51, and

The Gilpins 1485-1672

(Heads of the family in bold)



after the defeat and execution of the King he was declared a delinquent and the estate was confiscated by the government¹⁹.

The widowed Katherine probably stayed on at the Hall and was able to claim an income of £40 a year out of the estate which was, not surprisingly, "much impaired for want of direction". Meanwhile Christopher Gilpin fled abroad, where he died. After the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 it was claimed by Katherine's Phillipson relations and by Christopher's son-in-law Nathaniel Nicholson of Hawkshead that Christopher had sold the Kentmere estate to one or other of them before he fled. In 1669 Katherine Gilpin, widow, was living at the Hall and was taxed on one hearth. So was Nathaniel Nicholson taxed on two. The unfortunate Katherine died in 1672 ending the 300 year connections of Gilpins with the hall. There were complex legal baffles for the next 20 years, but in the end the Phillipsons seem to have bought out the Nicholson interest and later they sold the Hall and the estate to Daniel Fleming of Rydal.²⁰ It has been owned by absentee landlords and let to tenant farmers ever since.

References

1. Machell, Rev. T. in J M Ewbank "The Antiquary on Horseback" 1963
2. Farrer Records of Kendale Ip.317
3. Farrer Ip.308
4. Farrer Ip. 310
5. Farrer Ip.17
6. Farrer Ip.22
7. Letters & Papers Hy VIII, in Farrer Ip.84
8. Gilpin family tree KRO WDY/262 and Nicholson & Burn Hist & Antiq. of Cumb & West. Ip.136
9. Scott J "A Lakeland Valley Through Time" p77
10. DNB
11. George's 1PM of 1617 which quotes the 1595 marriage settlement in which George includes the Hall etc. Farrer I p.313
12. Atkin C&WAAS Transactions 1991 p.7
13. Farrer Ip.313 and III p.153-4
14. "Search" excavation leaflet 1991
15. Corporation of Kendal MSS Folder 10 KRO
16. 1PM Farrer Ip.313
17. Kendal Parish Registers
18. Farrer Ip.312
19. Calendar of the Cttee on Compounding quoted in Farrer Ip.128
20. Fleming Sir D "Description of the County of Westmorland". 1671 ed Duckett 1882 p. 16, Nicholson & Burn 1237-8, Fahy in C&WAAS Transactions 1964 p.162 & C&WAAS Transactions 1973 p.236, Huddleston in C&WAAS Transactions 1985 p.368.
21. Advice received subsequent to the publication of this paper is that **Nicholson and Burn** recorded the possessions of George Gilpin 1542-1616, in their work of 1777, "The History And Antiquities of the Counties of Westmorland and Cumberland.":-
 "Kentmere Hall with three hundred acres, plus one fifth of common land at Dalehead, 2 houses with curtilages called les Bankhowses, 3 closes on the east of said houses called les Banckhowse closes and severally called le Brery Close, le Myddestmest close and le Nethermost Close, le Great Springs, le Easeinge, le Ewesbancke, le Lowe Borwance, le High Borwance, and those buildings at Parke Yeate. and 3 closes adjoining said houses called les Parke Yeate Closes.
- One fourth of the Manor of Staveley. Four messuages (houses) and tenements in Strickland Kettle. several tenements in Strickland Roger. Three cottages in Kendal. Three messuages in Penrith. Eight messuages in Ullthwaite, plus thirty acres there, plus a Grain Mill and a Fulling Mill, plus fishing rights. Nine tenements and messuages in Riston and Newgate."
22. It is now felt that the George referred to here was not the son of George (1539-1617) but the son of William (1578-1626), ie George's grandson (1596-1646). In this case, the list of assets cannot be seen as referring in any way to the decline of the fortunes of Kentmere Hall, but simply as a measure of the young George's personal assets. (Letters from A.J. Gilpin Esq. to the Society November 2005)