

David Pannett's History of Bicton Part 64

Woodcote Farms

Many people in Bicton, north of the Welshpool road, may not realise that the parish also extends south beyond the Montgomery Road to include the farming settlement of Woodcote. The township of 'Woodcote and Horton', like Rossall and Onslow, was once another outlying portion of St Chad's parish, which was added to the new ^{civil} parish of Bicton in 1883.

The farmland here occupies an area of undulating glacial landscape in the headwaters of the Rad Brook between the main Severn and Rea Brook valleys. Boulder clay ridges and damp hollows made it unsuitable for large-scale arable farming and therefore its early history was dominated by woodland and heath as part of the former 'Han Wood', hence the name. In this area it was one of a group of small mediaeval settlements straddling the borders of Pontesbury and Meole parishes: Onslow, Dinthill, Sascott and Edgebold. Onslow and Horton were in fact partially in Pontesbury parish.

Names with 'cott' or 'cote' imply small hamlets and indeed Domesday Book of 1086 record no more than one or two plough teams in each. Nevertheless, the communities still worked 'open field' systems with intermixed strips and shared pastures. Aerial photographs show traces of typical mediaeval plough ridges preserved under pasture at Onslow and Dinthill, while 'furlong' field names persisted in Woodcote at least.

In many ways all these were typical of many parts of western Shropshire, where a history of original Welsh settlement and difficult glacial landforms produced a pattern of small hamlets rather than the larger villages found in the English Midlands. As a result, some may now only consist of the single modern farm.

The history of Woodcote actually illustrates very well the stages by which this original system of cooperative smallholders evolved into the modern farming landscape, a process often summed up as being the transition from 'feudalism to capitalism'.

During the 12th and 13th centuries, the population of England expanded during a favourable warm spell. New land was often taken into cultivation by clearing woodland, called 'assarting'. The irregular outline of Woodcote Coppice certainly suggests such activity, while, all around, 'Han Wood' has all

but disappeared. Land deals within the township used the term 'virgate', which denotes a peasant holding in an 'open field' system. Builwas Abbey even acquired one or two, perhaps to gain more grazing rights over the waste.

In the 1327, eight inhabitants were taxed in Woodcote, but, soon after, poorer weather heralded the trend towards the 'Little Ice Age', before a further disaster arrived in 1348, namely the 'Black Death', which reduced the national population by at least a third. In farming communities this left fewer people to work the land in the old ways. On the other hand, more land was available to individuals who survived, offering more commercial opportunities. In particular, there was a shift to more stock farming and in the following centuries some landlords in the Midlands even evicted remaining tenants in order to run commercial sheep and cattle 'ranches' on the former village land.

Here in Woodcote, we have a record of how related changes took place: in 1483 the three landowners agreed to redivide their property between them in a simpler way, replacing an intermixed and muddled pattern inherent in three 'open fields'.

Thomas Horton, who also claimed to be 'Lord of the Manor', took the field towards Horton, John Baylis took the second field and meadow towards Onslow and the heath, while Nicholas Wearing took the third field towards Hanwood and Edgebold and also a 'moss' on the other side of the Montgomery Road. Significantly, each of these portions included not only the new owners own farmsteads or 'messuages', but also others of former tenants or owners, all of which added up to that same 1327 figure of eight. Thomas Horton actually lived in one, suggesting the other two were 'absentee' landlords.

This agreement certainly allowed a new kind of farm unit within its own ring fence, complete with more hedges to confine stock. Farmsteads could also be built out in these new fields, as at the Oak and Woodcote Barns, leaving only two in the original hamlet. Judging by what can be seen today, these were obviously modernised. Lower farm is of particular interest as it includes one part whose features point to the end of the 16th century, rather like Owen's mansion in Shrewsbury High Street. The Shrewsbury Chronicler reported that in 1575 the dwelling house of Mr. John Hosyar was burnt down here in Woodcote. Could this be a rebuild? The role of new

landowners and the merchant classes of Shrewsbury needs further investigation!

The hearth tax of 1672 implies four main farmhouses at the Woodcote end of the township, including one occupied by a Waring, most likely at Upper Farm, while Lower Farm, with its 6 hearths, still clearly visible today, was occupied by Richard Langford. Local farm workers obviously occupied seven cottages spread between Woodcote and Horton.

In the 18th century, Lower Farm was owned by Charles Jones, whose descendants sold it to John Wingfield of Onslow in 1825. Upper Farm was likewise added to the Onslow estate in 1826 after the Waring family, like the Jones', had simplified the complex family interests in order to facilitate the sales. Now, all within one estate, farm boundaries could be modified and most recently these two farms have actually been amalgamated.

Since, through much of this time the land was actually worked by tenants, landlords had little incentive to modernise their dwellings, so that they remain as monuments to these formative years in the creation of our modern farming landscape.

Lower Farm
Woodcote

