

Tony Ivins on Whitwell – Part 1

Tony Ivins was a founder member, and remains the President, of the Reepham Society for his lifetime. This article is based on a recorded talk on the history of the parish of Whitwell, where he lived for many years. Unfortunately, the beginning of the transcript had some damage but I think we have recovered most of it. The talk began by acknowledging a debt to two well-known local historians, Chris Barringer and David Yaxley, both of whom have, in the past, carried out a great deal of research in the area. At least two tapes of the original presentation are held in the Reepham Society Archives. Anyone who wishes to listen to or copy the tape should contact the Chairman or Secretary of the Society.

A good place to begin the history of this parish is to consider its name. Whitwell is said to mean “clear spring”. There are a number of live springs in Whitwell. In particular, there is a good clear spring near the southern boundary of the park of Whitwell Hall. This was embanked in 1842 to provide the water supply for the hall itself. It has never failed and, coming from deep underground, it maintains a constant temperature for its population of frogs, toads and small fishes.

The earliest history of the parish can be traced back to Roman times with the presence of the Roman Road which runs from Billingford and Bawdeswell, through Booton and on to Caister-by-Yarmouth. The actual route of the road is not clear across Whitwell but in Whitwell Hall grounds it can be seen as a sort of small, curved embankment. It goes on through Jordan Green to Bawdeswell along Common Lane.¹

Possibly that old Roman Road, after the Romans went home, was an access route for various Saxon groups who came looking for land to settle in. That really brings us to the earliest Whitwell village records. In the north-eastern corner of Whitwell Hall there are the remains of an old village. We knew through oral tradition that there was a village there but it was not until the early 1970s that an archaeologist came along called Helen Supermeister. Sadly, she is no longer with us but she spent a summer, with a group of friends, excavating there. They found the footings of medieval brick walls, quite a number of them. Underneath those she found staining in the soil that could indicate a possible Saxon settlement. The last mention of that village that we know of is on Fayden’s 1797 map of Norfolk and on the site of this village he has marked “Whitwell demolished”. And we think that the last few, possibly empty, cottages were pulled down so that the owner of Whitwell at that time could enlarge his park.

¹ One indication of the site of a Roman road is the use of the term “street” in a village name. We should remember this when considering the route of the road through Whitwell even though the OS map marks it differently and the word “street” is common in Norfolk villages with no evidence of Roman presence.

At the southern end of the hall grounds, getting towards the south-eastern corner, there is a site which we think may have been the first Whitwell Hall, probably an old timber-built Saxon hall. There is a little clearing, still clear, strangely enough, surrounded by what our man called "bottomless ditches", in other words very soft, muddy ditches. An archaeologist friend who came to look at the site some years ago thought these ditches indicated a moat, possibly a drainage moat around the old hall. Of course, it would have had the advantage of being quite close to the springs I mentioned earlier on, so it would have had a good water supply .

Getting away from Whitwell Hall and back to the parish, there is a 17th century map, of which I have a copy, which shows the Whitwell Field with its cultivated strips. That field lay between the present Whitwell Street and what is now called Whitwell Road, with Mill Road in the middle. That made quite a big, cultivated field, one of the common fields of the Whitwell village. This map seems to be a copy of an earlier map, copied later to show which of the strips paid tithes to which of the three churches in Reepham because the various strips are marked "W", "R" or "H".

The other piece of common ground in the village is still there. Whitwell Low Common, some 40 acres of rather wet common has no ownership as far as the Commons Commissioners know. Their feeling is that it was a piece of manorial waste but, among the early enclosure awards, is an early 19th century one that says that this bit of ground should be set aside for the poor of Whitwell to gather fuel and, possibly, to dig peat as well. Such rights are known as the rights of "turbary".

One little bit of medieval history that is quite interesting is that there has been a long tradition of a chapel of St Nicholas in Whitwell. We think this may have been sited on the Whitwell Hall grounds, just south of what we call the New Wood because there is an acre of ground there which, until 1880, belonged to the Dean and Chapter of Norwich Cathedral. This might possibly indicate that this was the site of the chapel of St Nicholas. However, there have been no excavations there but we should note the site as a possible site of interest for the future.

There was also, near the village, an old water mill that worked from the little stream that rises near Themelthorpe and runs through the Hall Farm grounds and then through Whitwell Hall grounds, eventually running into the Blackwater River and, thence, to the Wensum. This mill possibly ground the corn for the old Whitwell village. After the village became derelict, the mill itself was probably abandoned but was rebuilt in the 1830s to break up the tan bark for the Whitwell tannery, of which I will say a bit more later, and it did that sort of work until the 1870s when it was replaced by a steam engine.

Coming right along now to the 19th century, the principal landowners then were the Leamons of Whitwell Hall. They came to Whitwell in the early 19th century and left

by the end of that century, three generations of them. They had a tannery. The Leeds of Whitwell Green Tannery were tannery owners and farmers, too, while the Collyers of Hackford Hall also owned quite a lot of land in Whitwell.²

There is a map of 1824 that shows interesting road changes in the parish. It shows how the first Robert Leamon, like many another landowner of the time, pushed the road away from the hall because he felt it ran too near his house so he had it moved about 50 yards farther to the north.

Several other little tracks were cleared out and a riding alley was opened – that is the little lane and a bit of footpath that runs between Whitwell Street and Mill Lane, crossing Mill Road and through to the Whitwell Road. It is still called Riding Alley. Fiddlers Alley runs from the top road above the hall down to the bottom road through Whitwell. Bar Lane is an interesting road that runs out from Back Street in Reepham as a little footpath but until 1816 it was a cart road. A good many years ago now, I was given a bit of a noticeboard that had been used as a shelf in a cottage when one of the corners was cut off. It was a white painted board and on it in black lettering were words to the effect that this road had been shut up “By Order” at a certain session. The date was 1816. As it was found in a cottage on the corner of Bar Lane, we are pretty sure it referred to the shutting up of Bar Lane. Another interesting little fact that one of my local friends told me is that when Bar Lane was open as a cart road it was called Gracious Street. I cannot tell you any more about how it should get that name but that is how it was.

Nineteenth century people

Some years ago I was able to get a copy of the census returns for Norfolk and I thought it might be interesting to look at what Whitwell parish looked like, the people who lived and worked there, what sort of work they did and how many of them there were. And it goes rather like this.

The biggest group of people was those whom the census called “agricultural labourers”. Whitwell parish comprises just over 1,500 acres so it is about the area of a reasonably sized modern farm. In this parish the Whitwell farmers employed 69 men, 30 boys and four women on 1,500 acres. Now, those of you who farm or have connections with farming will contrast that with what happens today – perhaps at the most half-a-dozen chaps. There were 10 farmers. Interestingly, eight men and two women were farming then. Most of the farms were fairly small. I will go through them because quite a lot of the names keep going over the years and are still known now.

² Most villages used to tan the hides of their own beasts in the past so it is possible that these tanneries are on much older sites.

Mark Eglington farmed 270 acres and employed nine men and five boys.

John Billham – now that’s interesting because a number of people will know that at the end of Whitwell Street is an area known as Billham’s Hill and that is where he farmed. He only farmed 22 acres, but to do that he had three men and a boy.³

Peter Wilkin, his acreage is not recorded.

Sarah Barrett farmed 40 acres and she employed one man to help her.

Stephen Leeds, I mentioned earlier on; he was one of the principal landowners in Whitwell, farmed 880 acres and employed 30 men and 16 boys. He also had his tan yard, those buildings near Whitwell Common, just beyond the White House. That was Leeds Tannery which, incidentally, finished work about 1903. As a tanner he also employed 10 men, three boys, three carpenters and a blacksmith.

Thomas Dunger farmed 332 acres up by Jordan Green and he had seven men and three boys to do the work of that.

Elizabeth Neil farmed 50 acres with “one man and two sons”, whether they were hers or the man’s it doesn’t say.

Marianne Secker we would really call a smallholder now. She farmed an acre and a quarter.

Robert Leamon of Whitwell Hall farmed 340 acres on which he employed 21 men and 10 boys. As I said earlier, he was also a tanner employing 17 men and five boys.

John Bacon farmed 22 acres. I don’t know where he farmed.

If you have added up all those acreages, you will find that it comes to a lot more than the 1,500 acres in Whitwell parish. The answer to that is that Stephen Leeds, who farmed that 880 acres, had a lot of land in other parishes.

In total there were 89 farm workers, men and women. I will not list all those, although, here again, you find names that have persisted through to the present. There were three pages of farm workers, then we come to the blacksmiths – there were two blacksmiths in the parish:

John Smith, who was a qualified tradesman, aged 46, and **John Rudd**. Rudd must have just come out of his apprenticeship because he was aged 16, born in Reepham as a journeyman blacksmith. The name of Rudd goes on in Reepham today.

There was one brewer – **Mark Brett**, a man who combined the job of being a bricklayer and an innkeeper. That happened quite often, I found, especially with the

³ He is also named as a “machine owner” in one census so he probably had a horse-drawn threshing machine which would be hired out to others. [Ed.]

little beer houses. Very often the man followed a trade and his wife looked after the beer house.

William Springell kept the pub called the Cock Inn which was in Whitwell Street and is now the house called The Old Star.

There was another innkeeper at the Foldgate on Whitwell Common – **Samuel Vile**.

A high proportion of these villagers were born in Whitwell, Reepham or the surrounding parishes. Hardly anyone comes from very far away. Well, one chap came from Cawston – that's a long journey. He was one of the three bricklayers. In a lot of Norfolk villages there was a brickmaker and bricks were made. I don't think bricks were ever made in Whitwell, but I suspect he worked at the Reepham brickyard which is just up where the road turns sharp right by Reepham Station.

Now carpenters – there were lot of those. It is interesting to reflect for a minute that in these early records one never finds the term “builder” – they're all of a named trade. If you wanted a job done you didn't send for a building firm, you sent for the tradesman you wanted to do the job – carpenter, bricklayer, mason if it was stone work, and so on.

As a result, you never find “builder” listed. As for carpenters, I see there were a lot, about 10 of them living in Whitwell, not necessarily all working there. One of them, **Thomas Sawyer** – good name for a carpenter – was also a wheelwright.

Now, cattle dealers and shopkeepers – four of those. Three of them seem to be related – they are all named **Neil**; and then dealers in fish – two of them – **William Guymer** and **Peter Wilkin**, both born at Whitwell. This again shows the big variety in trades and tradesmen.

There were seven dressmakers, so it seems quite obvious that no one went and got something ready to wear – you called in someone to make it for you. The seven dressmakers were **Jane Ware, Franklins, Galimer, Roland, Vile, Vone** and **Secker**. There was one washerwoman, **Elizabeth Hunt**, and one charwoman, **Deborah Wilson**.

In the parish there were two grooms. They would probably have worked either at the White House on the common or at the hall.

Shoemakers – again you see no buying of the ready-made things. Three shoemakers working here – **Guymers** again and a **Rudd**.

Also a turf maker and fowl dealer. Quite how he made his turf I don't know but I imagine he would be drying the turf for burning, possibly turf gathered on Whitwell Common.

Finally, there was one wheelwright and then the house servants – nine of them. That is not very many compared with the other parishes. Admittedly, Hackford parish is a lot bigger than Whitwell and Reepham is about the same size. Though there were not many houses in the parish at that time who would keep servants, or keep many of them, there were nine of them living in the parish at the time.

The directory shows another interesting fact about what happened when people got too old to carry on with their job. The only pensioners you find are men who've been in the armed services, and here we had two Chelsea pensioners, **Henry Rudd** and **John Right**. Henry Rudd was aged 73, born at Whitwell and at the time of the census he was blind. John Right was aged only 45, also born at Whitwell, and he was a pensioner of the 77th Regiment of Foot.

Then we turn to the tanners, of course, **Robert Leamon** and **Steven Leeds**, plus the number of men working for the tanneries. The two tanneries employed between them 27 men and eight boys. There's one woman listed working in the tannery and she was called the "bark cleaner" – **Lydia Wilson**, aged 36, and she was born in Reepham.

The other group of people listed are the paupers and, in all the cases I've looked at in the census returns, those paupers lived with their grown-up children – their families. I didn't find one in Whitwell who was living alone. They were all in their seventies. One man was 84. The census gives the professions of some of them. **Rebecca Whur** was formerly a stay maker, **Thomas Barker** a carpenter; the others were all agricultural labourers.

In the parish at that time there were 106 dwellings occupied and three empty. That includes the two listed as big houses, Whitwell Hall and the White House, but they were mostly cottages or very small farm houses. Listed in the census was a total of 477 people including children, 224 males and 253 females. Of that total, 173 were in jobs, leaving 304 not working.

That is what the parish looked like in the middle of the 19th century. I think that there is one really significant thing. That is how occupations and jobs were very local because they are pretty well all working in the parish or in the neighbouring parishes of Hackford, Reepham and Kerdiston. As I mentioned earlier, their ancestry, too, was local. Most of them were born in Whitwell and I think practically none, in this particular census, were born outside Norfolk.

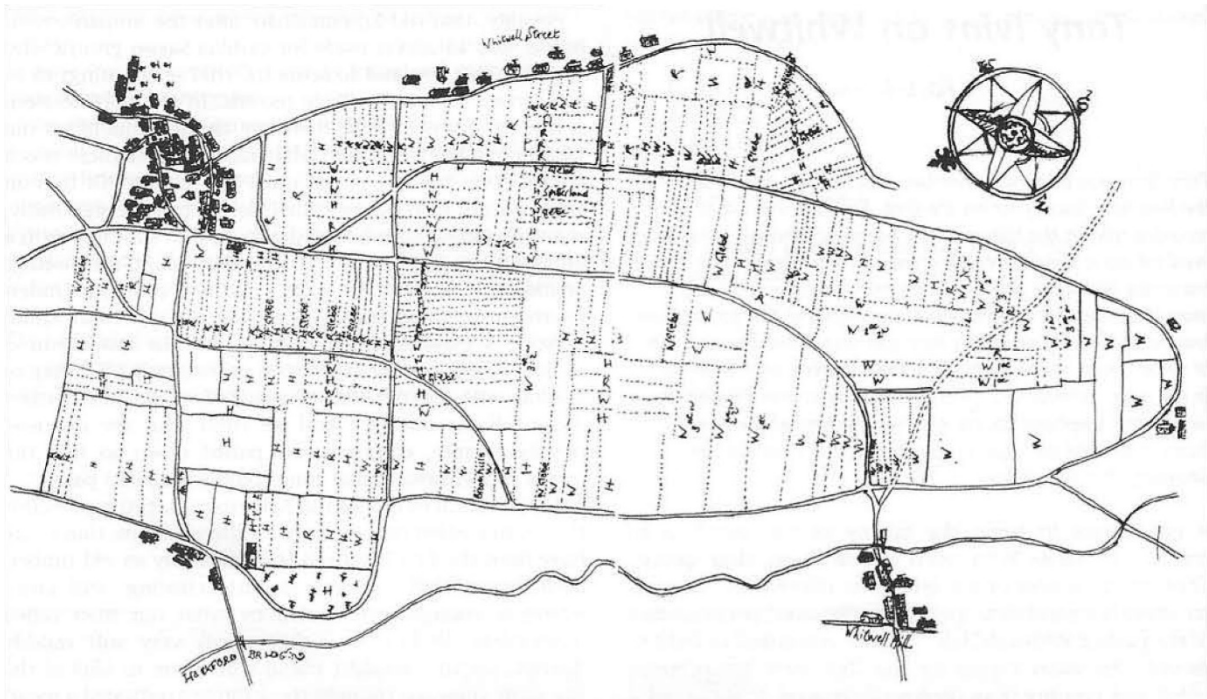
The other place I have mentioned is Whitwell Common. We thought that it would be a sensible thing to make it into a local nature reserve because of local interest at the time. This then happened: with a management group made up of a number from the parish council plus me, as a trustee under the old Parish Commissioners who managed the common from the beginning of this century, and representatives from

Nature Conservancy and from the County. Two other people, John Barkham, environmental scientist, who advised us on the management of the common and Lyn Garland, who lives in Whitwell and was very enthusiastic about enrolling groups of volunteers to do necessary clearing work on the common, made up the numbers.

This article comprises about half of the content of Tony Ivins' presentation to a meeting of the Reepham Society. The second half, which considers some different aspects of Whitwell parish, will be printed in a further Reepham Society Magazine, which we hope to publish later in the year.



Whitwell Hall when it was opened before the last war as the Forest School.



This map of "Whitwell Field" was probably used in the 18th century to establish to which church tithes should be paid. It is almost certainly copied from an earlier map as it still shows all three churches. The railway line now cuts across the west end of the field.



The buildings of Leeds Farm are dilapidated today but they occupy the site of the Leeds Tannery. In the field behind here it is possible to see the remains of at least one of the tannery pits.



Whitwell Low Common is the only piece of registered common left in the modern parish of Reepham. It is no longer used as grazing land but is an important area for wildlife.

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