

## Whitwell Hall

According to the 18th century Norfolk historian, the Rev. Blomefield, the history of the manors of Gambon and Whitwell Symonds (which today includes the areas of Whitwell Hall and Hackford Hall) can be traced back to Anglo Saxon times. The land is listed in the Domesday Book (1086) as being owned by Rolf de Bellofago who was given the land after the Norman Conquest.

In 1659 Augustine Messenger held the manors of both Whitwell and Hackford and in 1680 these were inherited by Robert Monsey who became rector of Bawdeswell in 1683. In 1689 he was obliged to take an oath of allegiance and supremacy to the new King William but he declined to do this and was subsequently deprived of the living at Bawdeswell. He was more fortunate than many other members of the clergy in that he owned a small, yet comfortable estate so he retired to Whitwell to live. He was able to indulge in his passion for growing plants, particularly oaks, and some of the oak trees that he planted at Whitwell during these later years still survive in good order today. It was here that his son Messenger was born in 1693.

It is said that the 18th century was rich in “interesting physicians” and one of the most remarkable (and certainly the oddest) was Doctor Messenger Monsey. He is recorded as being uncouth, unwashed, able to deliver the most outrageous remarks and generally to behave in the most unseemly manner, was generally unpopular yet always tolerated on account of his wit and malice. He is mentioned in most of the contemporary records of the time.



Messenger spent his formative years at Whitwell being educated by his father until 1711 when he entered Pembroke College, Cambridge. He graduated B.A. in 1715 and returned to Norwich to study medicine. He finally settled down to practice at Bury St Edmunds and might have remained there for the rest of his days had it not been for a fortunate accident which occurred when the second Earl of Godolphin was taken ill at Bury, on his way to his house at Newmarket.

Monsey was summoned to attend and the patient made a swift recovery although history does not record whether the recovery was fully or partly due to the professional ability of Messenger.

Godolphin was a nobleman who was fond of a good talk and a quiet life and so delighted was he with the doctor's conversation that he invited him to go and live with him. He also introduced him to all his friends and in due course obtained for him the post of non-resident physician at the Chelsea Hospital. Monsey was able to live at the Earl's house at St James's in London.

In London, this extraordinary doctor from Norfolk, with his appalling manners and scathing tongue, was a novelty and became an instant success in the broad social circle of friends of the Earl of Godolphin. He became a great friend of Sir Robert Walpole (who was the first person to hold the office of Prime Minister) and it is reputed that Messenger was the only man who dared to contradict him and to beat him at billiards.

The Doctor had a prodigious output of general verse and literature but his celebrity owed little to the pen but everything to his conversation and his habits. He never did anything in a common manner; when one of his teeth ached, he would tie it by a length of catgut to a perforated bullet and fire the bullet from a pistol: he claimed this method of dentistry to be painless and urged all his friends to remove their painful teeth in the same manner.

He never said anything unless it was unexpected or outrageous, his talk was vigorous and incessant, anecdotal, highly flavoured and crowded (like his letters) with classical quotations and deplorable puns. He was also renowned as a teller of scurrilous after-dinner stories once the ladies had retired and left the gentlemen to their port.

Lord Godolphin died in 1766 and none of Messenger's other patrons could quite endure the possibility of having him as a permanent resident in their houses. He had married when he lived at Bury but his wife was dead and his only child, Charlotte, was married to a linen draper in London and was preoccupied with her large family. The idea of retiring and moving back to Whitwell was the very last thing he wanted to do, so he had to leave St James's and retire to apartments in Chelsea Hospital.

He continued to maintain his contacts and his remarks were as much quoted as ever, but he grew old and soured and intensely disagreeable, and his dress and general deportment became even more eccentric. He was much disliked at Chelsea, particularly by the junior doctors who were eager for his post and salary. Messenger would aggravate them by refusing to give up the position and by saying that they would all die before him anyway: a statement which he did his best to fulfil by living to the age of ninety-five.

He became increasingly lonely as the years wore on, for he had by now outlived all his friends, and his scathing wit and unpredictable conversation was too strong to be accepted or appreciated by this later era of London society. His daughter spent as much time as she could with him but this was limited as she had eleven children and a husband who was in business.

During these later years he maintained a regular correspondence with William Wiggett Bulwer of Heydon Hall. William lived only a few miles from the Whitwell estate and generally kept an eye on the place for Messenger. It is known that Messenger and Charlotte would occasionally visit Norfolk but it seems that while they would visit Whitwell, they would always stay at Heydon; in any case the hall would have a tenant living there. Travelling from London to Norfolk in the 18th century would have had its limitations and in these later years the old age and failing health of Messenger coupled with the family ties of Charlotte would have made journeys impossible. In 1767 he began these letters to William and they continued with the last one being written only a month before his death in December 1788.

While outwardly he appeared the same disagreeable and awkward person he had always been, these letters displayed him in a mellower and less savage mood. Amid the wit and general buffoonery there runs a pleasant current of affection and kindness, particularly for his daughter and especially for Mr and Mrs Bulwer and their daughters Molly and Sally.

He wrote of Heydon as the place "where I have always met with so much cordiality, pleasure and hospitality – for I do assure you I have passed no moments of my life with more satisfaction than at Heydon".

He died at Chelsea at the age of ninety-five on 26 December 1788. His will was worthy of him. It was nineteen pages long and was extremely detailed and complicated. He insisted, with elaborate and ghastly directions, that his body should be dissected and the remains thrown into the Thames. The recipients of his clothes were detailed down to his "old shoe buckles". Many people received sums of money ranging from five pounds to six hundred and fifty pounds, but all his property and lands "in the parishes of Whitwell and Hackford in the County of Norfolk" went to his daughter Charlotte. A complicated entail that the Whitwell estate should pass to her

female children and to their issue only was included and it seems that Messenger's intention was to exclude the male line of the family from any long-term inheritance.

Like her father, Charlotte did not appear to have lived at Whitwell Hall during the rest of her lifetime. She had eleven children and a husband who was in trade in London as a linen draper. Their home and business was firmly rooted in the capital and there seemed little sense in moving up to a rural estate in Norfolk and so for a few years longer Whitwell Hall and its farms continued to be let to tenants. Faden's 1790 map of Norfolk marks the hall as being occupied by a Thomas Cooke.

Charlotte only lived for a few more years and she died in 1798. Her eldest daughter Caroline inherited the Whitwell and Hackford estates and on 18 March 1800 she married John Bedingfield Collyer. John was the second son of Daniel Collyer of Wroxham Hall and he and Charlotte moved into Hackford Hall. The Collyer family and their subsequent generations were to live at Hackford until Brigadier-General John Collyer left during the 1930s.

The exact date cannot be established but at this time the Whitwell Hall estate was sold by Caroline either just before or just after her marriage. In the Land Tax Return of 1801 for the parish of Whitwell the proprietor is shown as Edward John Ellis. The same Edward Ellis is listed in the Morningthorpe Return for 1800 so it is probable that he purchased the estate between April 1800 and March 1801. The Land Tax Return for Whitwell continues to record Edward Ellis as living at Whitwell until his death in February 1821.

His subsequent will shows him to have been a somewhat wealthy man; he left a number of specific cash bequests totalling nearly £3,000 with several bequests payable per week or per year for the rest of the life of the recipient.

The whole of the estate was left to his nephew, James Ellis of Hackford, with the provision for him to "be kind to his father Arthur Ellis, if not the estate was to pay him an allowance of 20/- for the rest of his life". Unfortunately, history does not record the actual outcome.

Also included in the will was £100 to Robert Leamon the Younger of Fakenham who was also appointed as sole executor and was to be paid expenses and a reasonable allowance for carrying out the necessary executive duties.

James Ellis was a harness and collar maker (also the trade of Robert Leamon) who lived with his wife Alice and their eight children in a house on the corner of Reepham Market Place, on the site which was later occupied for so many years by Barclays Bank. James, however, declined to move into Whitwell and it was left to Robert Leamon as executor to find a tenant for the hall and its surrounding arable and pasture land. The letting was advertised in the *Norfolk Chronicle* in early June 1821



and the hall was initially occupied on an annual tenancy by Matthew Breese Copeman. However, it was only eight months later that, in the same newspaper, the following notice appeared on five consecutive Saturdays in February and March 1822:

*To be sold by Auction by Mr Burt at The Angel Inn, Market Place, Norwich, this day 2nd March between the hours of 3 and 5 in the afternoon (unless sooner disposed of by Private Contract).*

*All that very desirable Estate called Whitwell Hall, in Whitwell, in the County of Norfolk, late the residence of Edward John Ellis, Gentleman deceased and now in the occupation of Mr Matthew Breese Copeman, as tenant from year to year; comprising a capital Mansion House with attached and detached offices of every description, fit for the residence of a Genteel Family and 130 acres, three roods and 17 perches by survey, of excellent arable and pasture land, with barns, stables and every other requisite farm buildings, for the occupation of the same. Also a Messuage, now used as Cottages and a convenient and well planned Tan Yard, containing 14 handlers, 17 vats, six taps with necessary limes and grainers, convenient drying shed, mill house, leather house, bark barns, stables and other outbuildings, requisite for carrying on the Tanning Trade.*

*The Mansion House contains an entrance hall, with keeping room, dining and drawing rooms, six bedrooms, three attics, kitchen, store room, good cellars and other domestic offices; it is situated on an eminence with a lawn in front surrounded by growing plantations, which inclose a trout stream, a greenhouse and large gardens, well planted with choice fruit trees, a capital orchard, etc. The Estate may be viewed upon application to the tenant. Printed particulars and conditions of sale are ready for delivery and may be had of the Auctioneer and at the place of Sale and for price by Private Contract apply personally or by letter post paid to Mr James Ellis at Reephams or Mr Robert Leamon junior at Fakenham.*

The auction sale did not, however, produce a buyer and Robert Leamon obviously felt the time had come to move up from the status of harness maker to that of country gentleman and so he purchased and duly moved into Whitwell Hall during the summer of 1822. This move was confirmed when the following notice appeared in the *Norfolk Chronicle* in November 1822.

*Fakenham – To be sold by Auction on Wednesday 13th November. The remaining parts of the valuable stock in trade of Messrs Leamon and Son, Saddlers, Collar and Harness Makers. To be sold without reserve.*

Robert purchased not just the hall and its surrounding farmland but also one of the two Whitwell tanneries. The tannery had been an essential part of the estate

business since the 18th century and it was to remain so throughout the next 50 or more years. Robert's ownership introduced a period of considerable change at Whitwell. He enlarged and modernised the tannery during the 1840s. He made sure the estate was properly farmed and also built up a thriving timber business. Robert was obviously a man of some wealth and in 1840 he pulled down most of the old red brick hall and built in its place the white brick and slate-roofed Regency style house that remains to this day. In 1842 he moved the road some 100 yards to the north and built a new carriage drive which ran to the front of the House.

On the southern boundary of the present park are some springs, the presence of which no doubt gave the origination of the name "Whitwell". The springs flow up from the chalk and if the surface chalk is disturbed the water runs a muddy white. In old English "Whitwell" means white spring. At the time of the enlargement of Whitwell Hall embankments were constructed to contain the flowing water and so, some four hundred yards east of the hall, Robert constructed a reservoir (or spring pond) to supply the hall with a supply of fresh water. Research has shown that at the eastern end and a few yards below the reservoir a brick-lined pit was built to contain a hydraulic ram which was installed in 1842. This machine used a flow of water from the reservoir to pump a smaller quantity along 300 yards of lead piping up to a tank in the hall. The water was (and still is) very hard and this quickly coated the inside of the pipe which in turn minimised the danger of lead poisoning. The rise from the ram to the tank was about 80 feet and it took ten gallons of flow to pump one gallon of water into the tank at the rate of one gallon each minute.

The original installation pumped the water into a large slate tank mounted on brick piers in the boiler room. Water was then piped to the kitchen and from here it was collected by the maids and carried by them to the parts of the hall that required it. In later years tanks were installed in the attics and these were primarily used to supply the bathrooms and the flush lavatories.

The waste flow of water which drove the ram was channelled along the southern boundary of the park and a dipping place was made with brick steps leading down to the water so that the families living in the Orwell Cottages could come with their pails to get the water they required for their domestic purposes; this was in everyday use until 1939.

The reservoir filled from the chalk springs; it has always run constantly to overflow and has never been known to freeze over. It maintains a constant temperature of 10°C throughout all times of the year.

The ram supply was used for the hall until 1970 when the increasing use of agricultural sprays in the arable field next to the reservoir was judged likely to pollute it.

Robert's change of status in life to that of country gentleman was achieved by hard work and a shrewd ability to turn all aspects of the estate into a profitable business. He died on 7 March 1853 and was succeeded by his eldest son, also named Robert.

In his lifetime Robert (2nd) was to greatly enhance his inheritance and also to enjoy a reputation as a considerable personage. He owned an estate of nearly 800 acres and his business interests thrived. He was involved in politics and was the sponsor for Clare Sewell Read, a well known Norfolk MP of the time. He was also secretary to the group of country gentlemen who in 1850 erected by means of public subscription the large Corinthian column erected as a monument to the memory of Thomas Coke at Holkham Hall. He is also known to have had a financially lucrative contract to supply timber to the government, probably for the navy and he bought large amounts of oak from other Norfolk estates such as Felbrigg. He must have had considerable capital available to be involved in and to sustain such a venture.

Robert had obviously inherited some of his father's business acumen and he continued to take the Leamon family through a period of financial prosperity, a period that was to eventually decline and end so unhappily a few years after his unfortunate death in 1878.

While there were a number of reasons for the decline in the family fortunes, they can be initially traced to a disastrous fire which occurred in 1874. The fire which burned for three days destroyed the many stacks of tan bark which stood in a yard near to the tannery; some of the tannery buildings were also burnt down. The tan bark was not insured and to replace this and also to update the tannery Robert had to borrow capital.

Skins for tanning had to be obtained from slaughterhouses and these mainly came from Norwich where most of the completed leathers were transported back with much of the trade going directly to the shoe manufacturers. The untreated skins were delivered to Whitwell in relatively small loads by carriers' carts and this slow and limited form of transport was unable to compete with the new railways. The extension of the Victorian railway system enabled hides to be transported quickly and in bulk. Small country tanneries began therefore to suffer from serious competition at this time from the large urban tanneries, notably in Bermondsey. Much of the work in the larger tanneries was helped by machinery while the local tanneries' output was achieved almost wholly by labour-intensive means. Robert realised that his tannery was becoming uncompetitive and with the additional burden of the 1874 fire he decided not to just rebuild and replace his loss but to modernise the overall tannery enterprise. Money for the venture had to be raised and it appears that Robert borrowed from a local group of businessmen known as the Springfield Group of trustees.

In retrospect it is ironic that the coming of the railways was the death knell of the country tanneries yet Robert sold some of the estate land to the Midland and Great Northern Railway to enable Whitwell Station to be built in 1883. When it was sold Robert insisted on the condition that the M&GN plant trees along the new line of the road to screen the sight of the new station from the hall. The trees subsequently planted were Scots pines; they grew quickly and fulfilled the screening condition. Most of them remain standing today.

He greatly extended the tannery by making additions of other tan pits, drying sheds and by building in 1876–77 an engine house fitted with a steam engine. This was used to grind the bark which was essential to make the tan liquor in which the hides were steeped. The outflow from the skin washing and particularly when the tan pits were cleansed gave off a dreadful odour, so Robert moved the course of the beck further to the east of the hall by having a new course dug out. This is still referred to locally as the “new cut”.

Despite all the investment, business did not upturn and the local community, and his family, were all greatly shocked at the severe loss when Robert committed suicide in August 1878. He hanged himself in one of the Whitwell Hall bedrooms. He was succeeded by his son, Phillip.

Phillip was unable to stop the decline and the Leamon fortunes went from bad to worse with the whole enterprise eventually being declared bankrupt in 1883. Phillip went to India to try and recoup the fortune but he didn't succeed; while he was away his wife remained at the hall until 1887 when the Springfield Trustees foreclosed and she and her family were forced to leave. Her six small children were placed in the care of various relatives and she went to live in Norwich. Sadly, the considerable strain these years placed upon her affected her mental condition and she finished her life in an asylum.

The three generations of the Leamon family who lived at Whitwell all had large families and today their descendants are widely scattered throughout the world. In recent years Tony Ivins has enjoyed a correspondence with branches of the family living in Canada, Tasmania and in many parts of this country.

The Springfield Trust retained the ownership of the estate for the next 40 years and the hall was let to various tenants. In December 1921 Mr C. Banan bought the estate but by 1925 he had sold the 320-acre Hall Farm to Arthur Stimpson and also sold to Capt. E.H. Barclay the hall and 40 acres of parkland. Capt. Barclay lived at Whitwell with his wife and three daughters until 1937 when he inherited Colney Hall and subsequently moved there.

The property was then sold to Forest School Ltd (1928) Ltd (a private company registered as an educational charity) which has owned the hall to this day. Forest

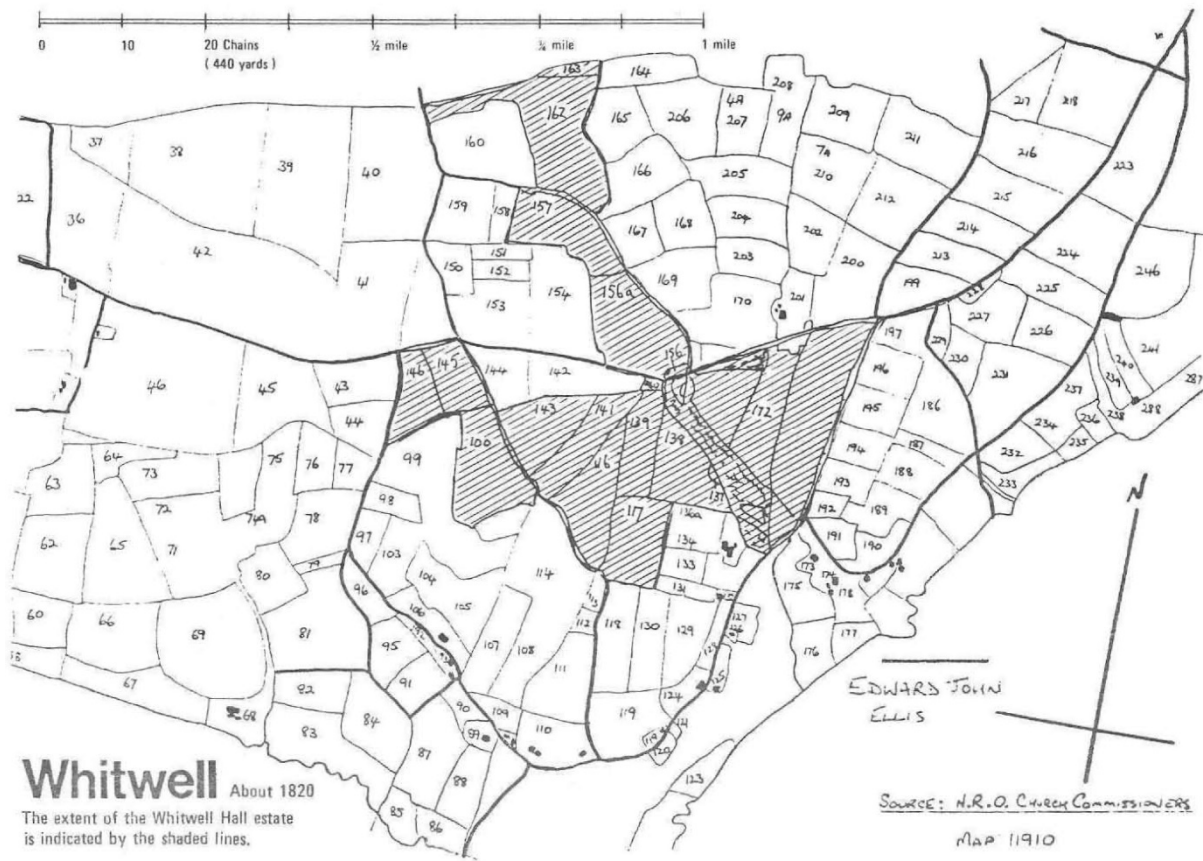
School had outgrown its original premises in the New Forest and moved to Norfolk in the spring of 1938. The school remained here until early 1940 when the threat of invasion along the North Norfolk coast caused the children and teaching staff to be evacuated to south Devon. The army requisitioned the hall shortly afterwards and remained there until late 1945.

The school did not return but a Forest School Camp was held during the summer of 1947 and during the next 20 years the hall was increasingly used for Easter and summer holiday camps and for staff training courses. In 1965 tented camps and house accommodation was offered to schools during term time and this pattern of term-time activity and holiday camps continues today as the Whitwell Hall Country Centre.

Tony Ivins joined the staff of Forest School when it moved to Whitwell in 1938 and, apart from war service with the RAF from 1940–46, he has been actively engaged with the school to this present day. Suzanne Dommen joined the school staff in the summer of 1939 and Suzanne and Tony were married in 1946 and made Whitwell their home.

Brian and Sue Evans, assisted by Paul Mortimer, are now responsible for the management of camps and house parties and also for the estate. Tony still maintains an active interest as he is chairman of the company directors.

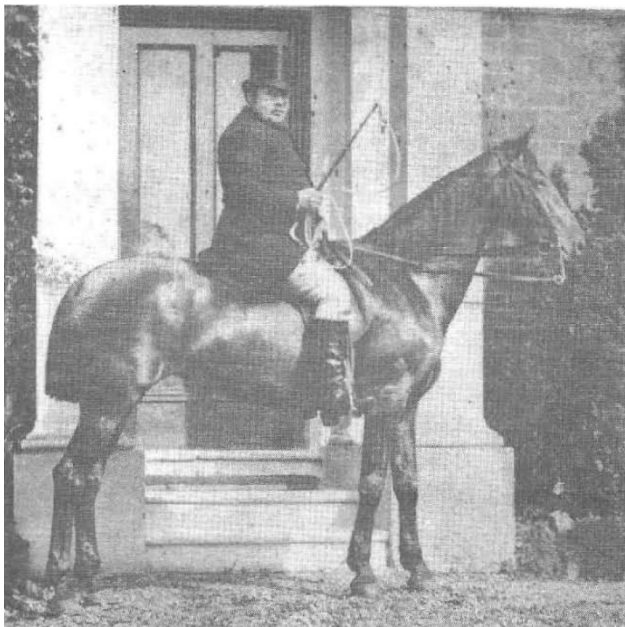
*From an article published in the Reepham Society Magazine 1994*



Robert Leamon, who bought the Whitwell Estate in 1822.



The reservoir which originally supplied the hall with all its water – very little of the original ram can be seen today, what is left is situated at a lower level and in the trees at the far left of the picture.

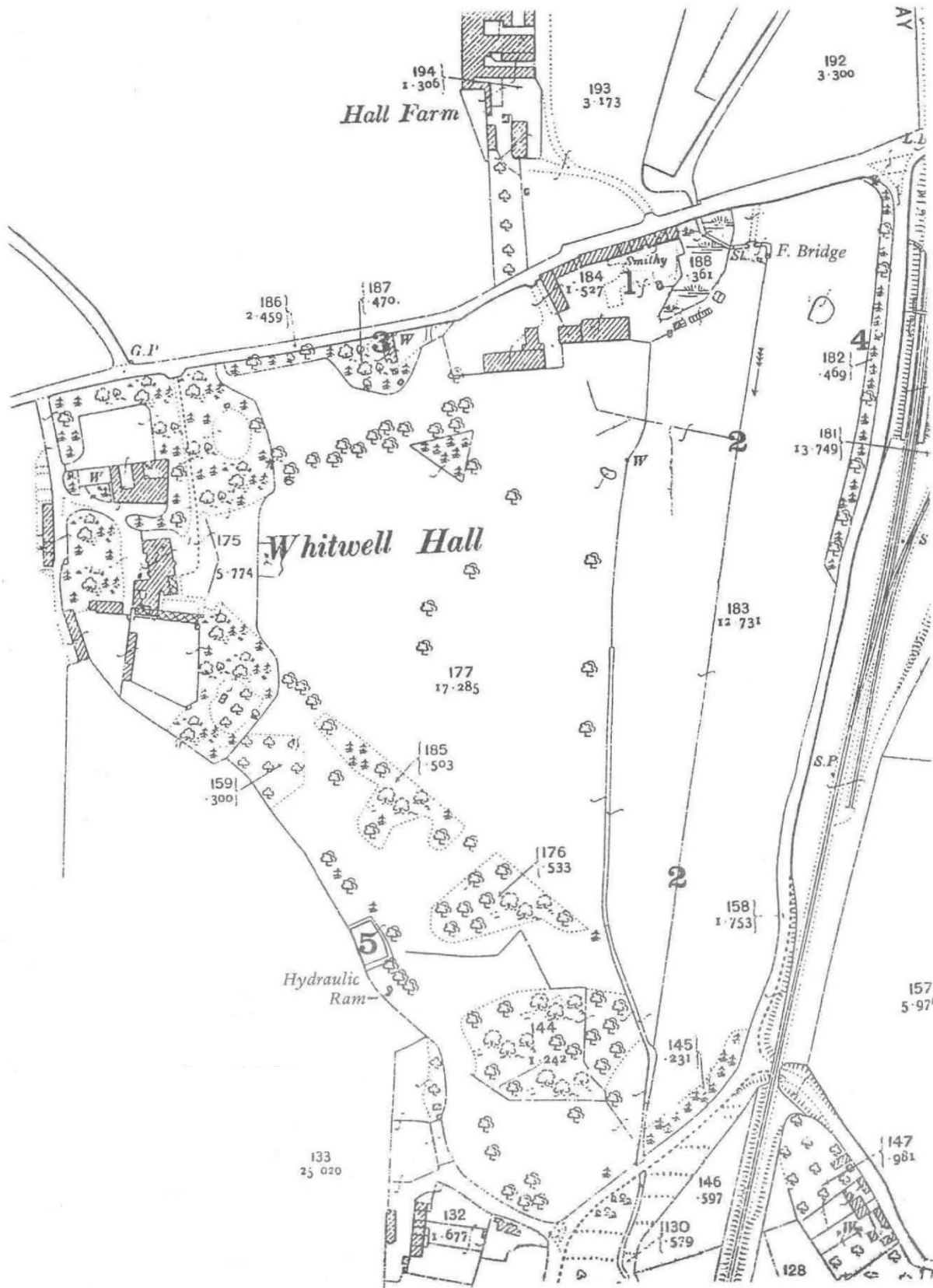


Robert Leamon (2nd).



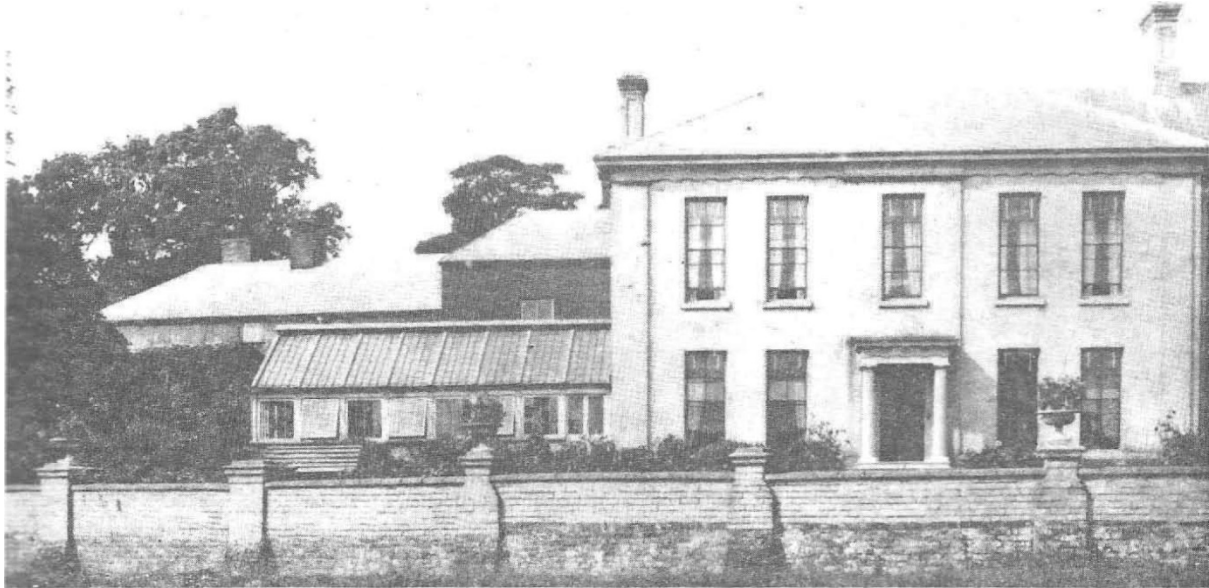
Mary Gill, wife of Robert Leamon (2nd)





Whitwell Hall in the 1880s showing some of the notable changes and additions made by the Leamon family: 1. The site of the tannery. 2. The new course of the beck (the “new cut”) which supplied the tannery with water. 3. The two cottages (now

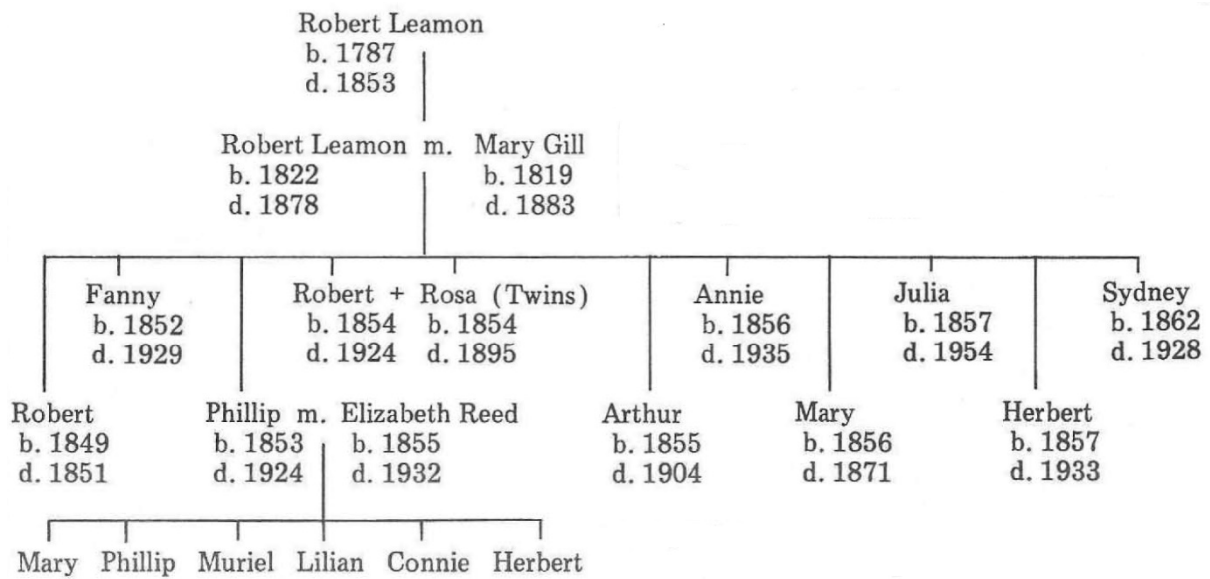
“Hillside”) let to the Midland and Great Northern Railway Company as homes for the stationmaster and signaller. Bought by the company in 1919 and turned into one house for the stationmaster. 4. The line of trees built to screen the new station from the front view of the hall. 5. The reservoir and hydraulic ram installed in 1842 to pump water up to the hall.



The front of Whitwell Hall in the 1880s, looking towards the east; Robert Leamon (1st) built the hall in the 1840s and also constructed a new carriage drive which led to the front of the building. This was closed up in the 1920s and since then all traffic has used the rear driveway only.



Phillip Leamon, taken in 1879, a year after he inherited the estate from his father.



**THE LEAMON FAMILY**  
at Whitwell Hall 1822 - 1887

Robert Leamon (2nd) had married Mary Gill in 1847 and, like most other Victorian families of this period, they had a large family; their first child, a son, was born in 1849 and 10 more children followed during the next 12 years. The first son was called Robert (as had been the first son of the previous three generations). Sadly, he died at the age of two and the estate was in time inherited by the next eldest son, Phillip, who was born in 1853. Another son was born into the family in 1854 and he was subsequently christened Robert.

In the Whitwell Road cemetery there is a large memorial to Robert and his wife Mary and also to their 11 children. On the other side of the cemetery, and almost parallel to this memorial, is the family grave of the Collyer family. It is perhaps ironic that the two families who lived and worked as neighbours should end with their final resting places so close together.



Mrs Phillip Leamon with her six children; Mary, the eldest, looks about eight years old and so the picture was taken about 1889, some two years after the family had left Whitwell Hall.



The three eldest children with their mother, nurse and Mr Preston the coachman. Taken in 1884 it also includes a lady, at the back of the trap, whose name is unknown, although it is probably one of Mrs Phillip Leamon's sisters-in-law.



Members of the Whitwell Hall staff in the late 1870s.



The large memorial to Robert, Mary and their 11 children in the foreground. The family grave of the Collyer family may also be seen almost directly in the background.



Whitwell Hall, 1993. The outline of the conservatory from the 1880s picture can be seen on the side wall of the main building.