

# WINSFORD

*A History*

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# WINSFORD

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*Tony Bostock*



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## INTRODUCTION

Originally Winsford, in the very heart of Cheshire, was the name given to a very small area of land where the river Weaver could be crossed. In historical terms it is a new town having been formed in 1894 by combining the two ancient townships of Over and Wharton, both of which are mentioned in the pages of the Domesday Book. Over lies on the west bank of the river Weaver and was originally divided between the parishes of Over and Whitegate, whereas Wharton on the other side of the river once lay solely in the parish of Davenham until its own parish was established in 1843.

Over takes its name from a narrow sandy ridge which rises some forty-five feet above and parallel to the Weaver. The steep bank was once segmented by a series of streams running down narrow valleys or 'denes'. The western side of the ridge slopes away gradually towards Little Budworth. The soils of Over are particularly light and sandy. On the other side of the river the land rises up steeply to level out about twenty-five feet above the river level and then remains fairly flat throughout the township with heavier clay soils.

The development of these two townships could not have been more different. Over was not only a township and parish but also a mediaeval borough with the right to hold a weekly market and have an annual fair – a market town, a place of commerce. Wharton had no such privileges and was for much of its history simply a rural manor held in private hands. So, the story of Winsford is predominantly about the communities of Over and Wharton and it is not until later chapters of this book that Winsford comes into its own as a town.

The Winsford Urban District Council formed as a result of the 1894 Local Government Act replaced the ancient Borough of Over and the Winsford Board of Health which had been in existence since 1848. It continued in being until the Local Government Act 1972 created the Vale Royal Borough Council which covered much of mid-Cheshire. Local affairs were looked after by the Winsford Town Council which had a mayor as successor to the ancient borough mayor and that of the Urban District Council. Vale Royal then disappeared with further boundary changes in 2009 and the formation of the Chester and West Cheshire District Council.

Though originally in an area of predominantly pastoral farming, the district around Winsford owed its prosperity to the extraction of salt from the rock salt beds that lie beneath much of mid-Cheshire, which were formed during the Triassic period hundreds of millions of years ago. Ground water that had percolated into the rock formed brine which was pumped up through boreholes and then evaporated to produce salt. A process which started in the Winsford area in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. From

1844 salt was also obtained by mining. The salt industry was stimulated by the opening of the River Weaver Navigation in 1721 and later railway links. Subsequently other businesses were attracted to the area so that during the 19th century boat building, sail making, engineering, cotton milling, tanning, button making, and general commerce all played a part in Winsford's prosperity. Whilst some of these industries declined, including the salt industry, Winsford continued to develop with modern industries being encouraged into the town. During the mid-1960s parts of Winsford became overspill for Manchester and then Liverpool. Today it is very much a commuter town housing about 32,000 people, with light industrial complexes and excellent road links to the world beyond.

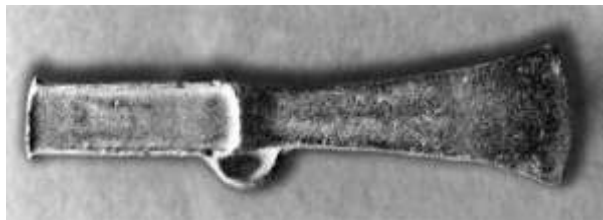


## CHAPTER ONE

### The Dark and Distant Past

**I**t is likely that pre-historic man roamed the land around Winsford and may have even settled here. In the Mesolithic period (c. 8000 – 4000 BC) the well-drained lightly wooded area along the sandstone ridge, overlooking the Weaver valley, would have been an ideal location for a temporary camp of the nomadic hunters and gathers of the time; preferable to the lower lying heavily wooded areas that were characteristic of the Cheshire plain. It is perhaps no coincidence therefore that a flint arrowhead and a scraping blade from period were found on the ridge in Over and along the northern part of Swanlow Lane. An ancient route may well have followed the line of the Over ridge and it is also likely that Neolithic traders (c. 4000 – 2500 BC) used the river Weaver to carry axe heads south from Cumbria into the region and farther south. The Neolithic period was a time in which man became more settled and saw the introduction of arable and pastoral farming in areas cleared from the dense woodlands. Though nothing has been found locally, on nearby Eddisbury Hill funerary urns of the late Neolithic period have been unearthed. The Early Bronze Age (c. 2500 – 1500 BC) is often evidenced by the discovery of burial mounds and the ‘-low’ element in the name Swanlow (swine’s low) in the southern part of Winsford may refer to such a mound. Only a few miles west is the site of Seven Lows, a series of burial mounds from the period, and others have been located in the neighbouring townships of Rushton, Hartford and Moulton.

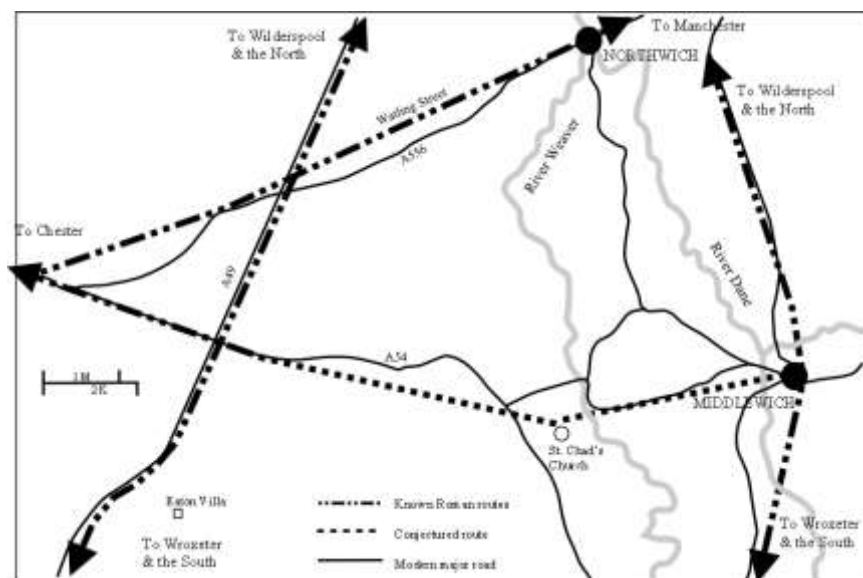
The Bronze Age saw the introduction of metal working from which period a looped palstave was discovered at Whitegate and a socketed axe head and a barbed arrow head were found in Winsford. The later Bronze Age and the Iron Age were times of further settlement, woodland clearance and the building of hill forts on the Cheshire sandstone ridge at Kelsbarrow, Eddisbury and Helsby. The people of the Winsford area probably looked towards these for their defence. The occupants of the forts may have included people of high status the leaders, organisers and administrators of the district. It is also likely that trade was organised from these same centres. By around 500 BC very coarse pottery used in the manufacture and transport of salt and made from clay found in mid-Cheshire has been



*Fig: 1 Bronze Age Palstave, similar to the one found in the Winsford area*

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discovered as far south as the lower Severn Valley and South Wales. Society during this period of history was based on tribal organisations. The Winsford area, and much of Cheshire, lay in the territory of the *Cornovii*, whose influence stretched from southern Shropshire to the river Mersey and west into north-eastern parts of Wales.



**Fig: 2** The Roman road from Chester to Middlewich. The conjectured line passes close by St Chad's church before crossing the river Weaver below Stocks Stairs

### *Roman Routes*

The Roman invasion of Britain began in 43 AD, though their arrival in these parts was probably several years later. The period of Roman occupation has been evidenced by means of Roman pot sherds and coins in the Swanlow area but it is not known whether or not there was a settlement in the Winsford area though there is evidence of Roman activity near by. A few miles west of Winsford, at Eaton by Tarporley, archaeologists uncovered a small villa site. To the east, on the other side of the Weaver is Middlewich (*Salinae*) where the Romans established a military fort on Harbutt's Field and began to exploit the salt deposits and form an industrial settlement working with iron, bronze, lead, glass, leather and cloth. Several miles north at Northwich (*Condate*) the Romans had their fort overlooking the confluence of the rivers Dane and Weaver and the already well established salt workings. The focus of Roman life was Chester (*Deva*) with its great legionary fortress. From here there were major road links with Wroxeter to the south via Whitchurch (*Mediolanum*); to the north via Wilderspool near Warrington; to the north-east and York via Northwich

## THE DARK AND DISTANT PAST

along Watling Street; and to the east via Middlewich. These were traversed by a major route from the Midlands heading towards northern Britain which passed through Middlewich, by-passed Northwich, and crossed the River Mersey at Wilderspool. Another major route linked Whitchurch and Wilderspool and passed through Little Budworth a few miles west of Winsford.

Whilst the actual routes of many of the Roman roads in Cheshire have been established, that which linked Chester and Middlewich is only known of in part. In Nettleford Wood, Kelsall there is a junction of two Roman roads. From Chester the Watling Street forks in the general directions of Northwich and Middlewich. Traces of the road towards Middlewich, which follows a similar line to present A54, have been discovered at a number of locations until about a mile past the crossing with another Roman Road, now the A49. No certain evidence of the route further eastwards has been found and whilst there has been much debate about such a route it is highly likely that it would have continued on to pass through the Winsford area. If the line of the road from the four known points is projected the line of the road is not on a direct heading for Middlewich but straight to the very centre of the churchyard at Over. Is this a mere coincidence or was there a Roman settlement in the near vicinity of the church? Of course Roman roads did not always run straight, but certainly they were straighter than the ancient tracks. Obstacles such as marshes and steep river banks would cause them to deviate which no doubt occurred leading towards the crossing of the Weaver and on the other side. The location of medieval *Bradestrete* in Over, a name which may be a clue to a Roman Road, perhaps lies along the route. The route may have crossed the river below the church at Ways Green where it is known there was an ancient crossing place. Even with a slight change of direction, perhaps along the ridge above the church, the conjectured straight line of the Roman road would reach the Weaver at this point. Here, or nearby, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century several Roman coins were found by men digging to find a brine-pit. From the crossing of the river the route would have then continued along the southern boundary of Wharton, through Stanthorne, which means 'the stony way', towards Harbutt's Field, the site of the Roman military settlement in Middlewich.

Following the departure of the Roman administrators in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century Britain lay open to invasion and migration of the Germanic races. By about 600AD the local Romano-British population came under the influence of the new comers and eventually became subsumed under the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia and so begins the period known as 'the Dark Ages'. Cheshire was the most northerly part of Mercia and is first mentioned in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle under the year 980.



*Fig: 3 St. Chad's church down among the fields.*

### *The Hidden Place of Worship*

The language of the new settlers in these parts of Cheshire gave rise to the place-names of the area today. 'Winsford' may be a Saxon name suggesting a Celtic personal name *Wyn* along with *ford* (a crossing on a stream), however a medieval form meaning a ford for *wains*, wagons) cannot be ruled out. 'Over' (*Ovre* or *Ufra*) as a place name is Saxon and purely topographical, and meaning a settlement on high ground. 'Woodford' is Saxon for a *ford* in a *wudu* (a wooded area). 'Swanlow' is probably a *low* (mound) where swine were pastured. 'Marton' or 'Merton' was a *ton* (a settlement of farm) on a *mere* (boundary). Wharton was probably a corruption of 'Weaverton' - a farm by the river Weaver. 'Whitegate' is a later, medieval, name formation for the location of the entrance to the precincts of Vale Royal Abbey, an area previously known as 'Conersley' which may be interpreted as a *leah* (a woodland clearing) frequented by *conies* (rabbits). 'Darnhall' could simply mean a settlement in a *halh* (narrow valley or hollow) which was *derne* (hidden) though there is another possible, and more intriguing, meaning which I shall return to. Some other minor names are 'Hepden' - the 'hip-thorn valley'; Blakeden - the 'dark valley', Bradford the 'broad fording place' and *Mers* - 'boundary place', the name of a small hamlet on the border of the parishes of Over and Middlewich.

The site of St Chad's church would have been the focus of a parish perhaps based on an earlier land unit or estate. Given that it lies in a hollow

## THE DARK AND DISTANT PAST

it seems that the name of Over, first recorded by the Normans for the whole district, is inappropriate for the location of the church and that its earlier name and that of the parish was different. Darnhall seems the more likely given that from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards the whole district is known as the manor of Over and Darnhall, or visa-versa, and on at least one occasion Over is referred to as 'a member of Darnhall'.

The Old English words *ealh* or *alh*, and *heargh* or *hearh*, can mean a 'temple' or 'heathen shrine' and *dern* means hidden or secluded and therefore a possible meaning for Darnhall is 'the hidden place of worship'. The circular churchyard at St Chad's with the site of the medieval altar at the very centre is a likely indication of a pre-Christian place of worship. Its proximity to springs and wells may also indicate an early religious site: in fact there are wells within the perimeter and the northern edge of the churchyard is formed by a stream which flows into swampy ground to the east. One of the most popular and widespread cults in the pre-Christian era was the worship of the goddess of water so that springs, wells and rivers became the sites of cult practises and rituals, with precious goods being cast into the water as offerings. The site of St Chad's church would be most appropriate for such worshippers as there are several wells and springs in the immediate vicinity of the church along with a well within the churchyard. Many Celtic religious sites were situated in woodland groves and at this time the area around the church was probably well wooded. St. Chad's church may in fact be sited in a Celtic *nemeton* - a sacred grove.



**Fig: 4** *The circular churchyard of St Chad's church.*

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Early churches were often established on pre-Christian religious sites. The early Christian missionaries under Abbot Mellitus in A.D.602 were exhorted by Pope Gregory to utilise pagan sites to found new churches. 'The temples of the idols among that people (the English) should on no account be destroyed. The idols are to be destroyed, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, alters set up in them and relics deposited there'. This was so the local people could continue to use those places they were accustomed to frequent for religious purposes. Therefore this rather secluded location may represent continuity of a sacred place stretching back at least one millenium and perhaps, as much as two thousand years.

Although there is no architectural evidence in the fabric of the present church of St Chad earlier than the 14th century, there are the remains of a Saxon cross of the Mercian style, c.750-900 AD. The Saxon church was probably no more than crude timber or stone 'shed', or even simply an uncovered standing cross within an enclosure. Here the local priest would have preached, celebrated mass and performed other church rites, and buried the dead in grounds around. The dedication to St. Chad is one that is often associated with Anglo-Saxon churches reflecting early traditions of missionary work in the area and may indicate a long-standing episcopal link. Chad, or Caed, was a seventh century missionary who was educated at Lindisfarne and sent by St. Columba to preach Christianity to the peoples west of the Pennines. In 667 AD he became bishop of the Mercian people and died in 673 AD in which year he was made a saint. Other churches in Cheshire which have the same dedication are: Chadkirk, Farndon, Tushingham, and Wybunbury. In the early tenth century, Farndon was a royal estate and the church at Wybunbury may have associations with the Mercian royal house as it belonged to the diocese based on Lichfield, Chad's episcopal seat, close to the royal residence at Tamworth. It may be that St Chad's church was originally within a royal estate or one of the bishop's holdings.

St. Chad's church may have been a minster church. Such churches were founded by kings, queens, bishops or members of the Saxon aristocracy, and sited close to the caput of the manor with the territory of the lord's estate determining the extent of the parish. At these *monasterium*, a priest or a collection of clergy, part of the bishop's *familia*, would



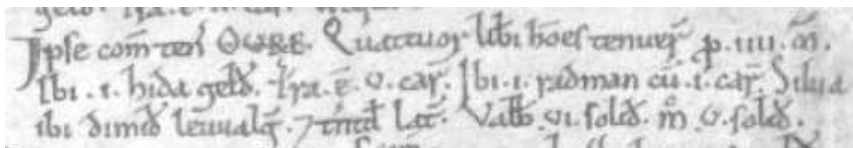
**Fig: 5** The fragment of a Saxon Cross in St Chad's church.

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share a communal life and be responsible for the cure of souls within the lord's estate and associated parish. Although in the post-Conquest era, with the exception of Wettenhall and Oulton, the whole parish of St Chad's was in the hands of the Norman earl of Chester, as the antecessor of the Earls of Mercia. However, so far as is known, there was no royal or noble ownership in the area prior to the Conquest which could be an argument against this being a minster church and parish. The Earls of Mercia certainly had interests in this part of Cheshire: they held the important salt towns of Middlewich and Northwich: they held the neighbouring manor of Alraham in the ancient multi-township parish of Bunbury, and they held the important manor of Weaverham immediately to the north. It is feasible for the parish to have been a comital estate before being split into four manors in the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century as recorded by the Domesday Book.

### *Domesday Book and the Norman Earls*

The church is not mentioned in the Domesday Survey of 1086, however it may be presumed it was contained under the heading of the estate named 'Ovre', which had consisted of four small, unnamed Saxon manors. It is from this time onwards that the parish associated with St Chad's became known as Over. In the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, what was known as the manor of Over and Darnhall contained a number of dispersed settlements – Merton, Swanlow, *Mers*, Woodford, Hepden, Blakeden and Bradford, any of these may represent other early manors. Also within the parish bounds lay the manors of Wettenhall and Budworth which are specifically mentioned in the Survey, as is *Conersley*, then a member of the manor of Weaverham, on the northern border.



**Fig: 6** *The Domesday entry for Over. Translated and expanded it reads: 'The same earl holds OVRE. Four freemen held it as 4 manors. There 1 hide pays tax. Land is 5 carucates. There 1 radman with 1 plough. Woodland half a league long and as wide. Value was 6 shillings, now 5 shillings.'*

The actual Domesday entry for Over tells us very little. Before the Conquest the four unnamed manors had been held from the Earl of Mercia by four anonymous freemen. There was enough arable land for five plough-teams (about 600 statute acres) though only enough for one plough was being worked by an individual described as a *radman* – that is a person who performed services on horse back for his lord. It seems that between 1066 and 1086 the Saxon population of the four manors had moved away

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for some reason leaving the one individual, who presumably had a family and servants, to make what he could of the available land. Much of Over was wooded and we are told that there was a wood half a league (about 1200 yards) long and the same wide. In reality the woodland would not have been rectangular and the measurements would have been a general approximation. The lack of resources and population is reflected in the value of the manor. Originally the four small manors had been worth six shillings but by 1086 the value of the estate was worth five shillings.

The new lord of the manor was the powerful earl of Chester, Hugh d'Avranches, commonly known as Hugh Lupus (the Wolf) or Hugh the Fat. This powerful lord, a cousin to William the Conqueror, was granted the whole of the county of Cheshire together with a substantial portion of North Wales as an important frontier fiefdom. Much of the county was divided up by him into large 'baronies' and awarded to his retainers, but some manors, such as Over, were retained in his own hands - his demesne lands. Here the unnamed radman and his family would have farmed the land from a house near the church, perhaps occupying the manor house, which was probably where Church Hill Farm is today.

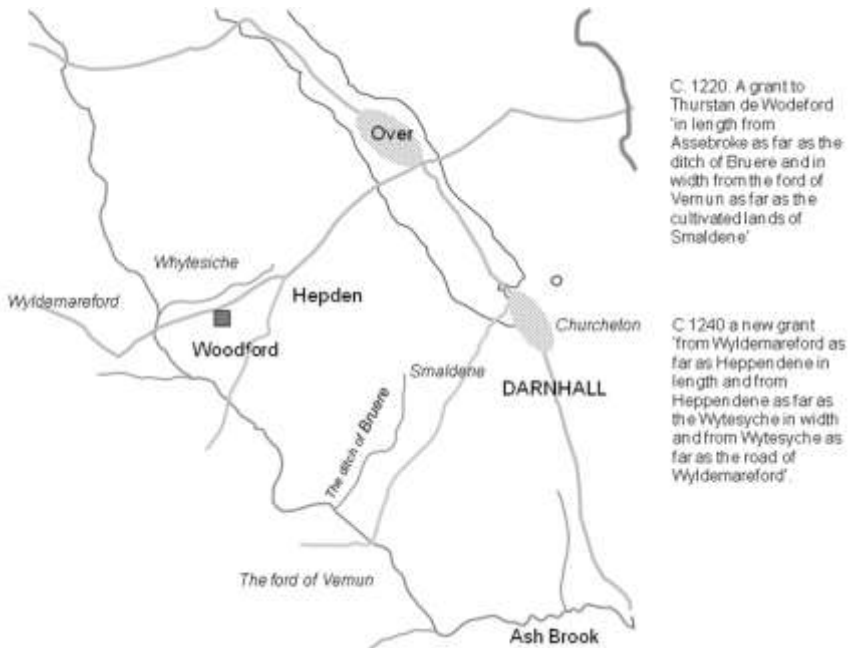
During the time of successive Norman Earls their manor house was transferred to a location more remote from the village that had developed to the present-day Darnhall, to create a hunting lodge with the lands around it being emparked to provide for hunting pursuits.

The area chosen was originally a croft known as Woodford. Earl Ranulph III, c.1220, or perhaps a little earlier, granted to Robert son of Thurstan a croft situated along the banks of the Ash Brook called Woodford which his father had previously held. The family who were settled here for at least three generations adopted the name Woodford. A second charter, dated perhaps a decade later, compensated Robert de Woodford for the loss of these lands, which had been used to create the lord's *vivarium*, a word which a park or hunting preserve. The boundaries of the new grant where the family then settled are somewhat difficult to trace but they clearly indicate somewhere in the region of Hepden Green, where the present Woodford Hall farm stands.

At the newly emparked part of Darnhall the lord had his house with servants including hunters, a parker, and gardener: he also had a private chapel here. It is said that this was a favourite place of residence for the Earls of Chester and that the founder, Earl Ranulph, stayed here on many occasions. John le Scot, the last of the Norman Earls of Chester, died here in 1232-7. It was as a result of his death that the earldom became annexed to the Crown by King Henry III and then became vested in his eldest son, the Lord Edward, Prince of Wales. In September 1241, King Henry was in residence at Darnhall and his son visited the manor in the summer of 1256, and on a number of other occasions when in Cheshire.



**Fig: 8** The 'ford of Vernun' from which the Woodford family took its name. The road leads on to Wettenhall.



**Fig: 7** The location of 13th C. Woodford. The area bounded by the Ash Brook and the ditch that was once Woodford became the parklands of the manor of Darnhall. The Woodford family being moved further north near Hepden where they established their house known as Woodford Hall.

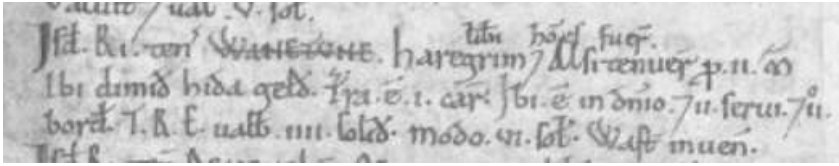
## WINSFORD: A HISTORY

As a result of the establishment of this hunting lodge in Darnhall, the focus of the manor shifted from the area around the church to this new high status location. The remainder of the manor, where the majority of the peasants would have lived, comprised of the village close by the church known appropriately as *Chircheton* and the hamlets of Swanlow and *Mers* (now represented by Moors Lane). Beyond the village were small hamlets on the Over ridge - Blakeden, Little Over, Michel Over, Merton, and *Helewes* where the peasants worked the large open fields each with their own arable strips known hereabouts as 'loonts'. This greater area continued to be known by the Domesday name of Over so that when Earl Ranulf confirmed his father's grant of St Chad's church to the nuns of Chester it was referred to as *ecclesiam de Huure*.

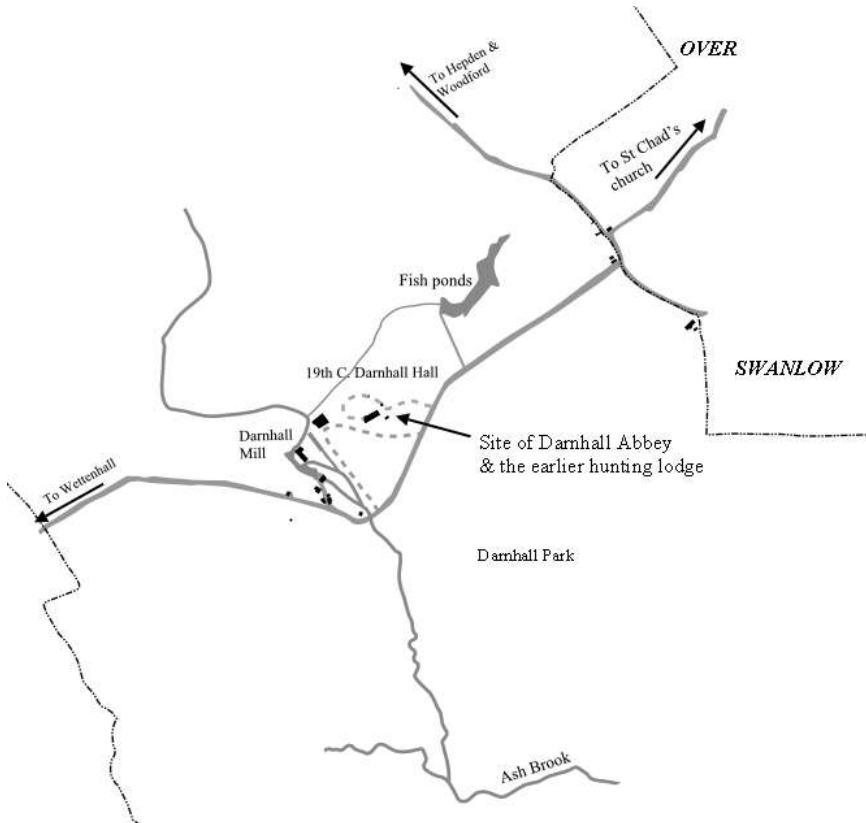
### *Domesday Wharton*

What then of Wharton? This township is mentioned in the Domesday Book with somewhat more certainty and we even know the names of the Saxon lords - Haregrim and Alfsi. In the pre-Conquest era Wharton was divided into two separate manors before being combined into one which was granted by the Hugh earl of Chester to one of his Norman vassals Richard Vernon. Vernon was the grantee of several manors throughout the county, though concentrated on Davenham parish and his castle at Shipbrook which all formed his 'barony of Shipbrook. In all there was enough land at Wharton for two ploughs (about 250 statute acres) which were being worked to full capacity by two serfs and two smallholders for the benefit of the lord, as a result of which the dual manor's value had increased from four to six shillings.

Following the evidence of Domesday there is little mention of Wharton in historical documents. During the Norman period a member of the Vernon family granted lands here to the convent of St. Mary, Chester, and thence, throughout the medieval period, the identities of the two Saxon manors were retained and referred to as *Waverton juxta Bostok* and *Waverton juxta Medium Wicum*. The Bostock family who were lords of the neighbouring manors of Bostock and Moulton, held the first part from the barony of Shipbrook, now Wharton Green, the area around the railway bridge. The nuns held the other part, though it seems that their estate was further divided into *Waverton juxta Medium Wicum*, the area now known as the Nun House estate, and *Waverton juxta Overe*, the area nearer to the river.



**Fig. 9** The Domesday entry for Wharton. Translated and expanded it reads:



**Fig. 10** Map of Darnhall showing the site of the original Cistercian Abbey

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Rule of the Lord Abbot

Over's medieval history is dominated by the Cistercian abbey and convent of Vale Royal founded in the late 13th century. Affairs on the other side of the river are less well documented and there is very little so far known about Medieval Wharton.

#### *The Founding of the Abbey at Darnhall*

On 2 August 1270, the future Edward I issued a charter to the abbot and monks of the monastery of St Mary at Darnhall that was in fulfilment of a vow he had made following his miraculous escape from a ship-wreck in the winter of 1263/4. Civil war between King Henry and Simon de Montfort delayed fulfilment of the promise. During the war Edward was imprisoned at Hereford Castle and Cistercian monks, in their white habits, from nearby Abbey Dore attended to the needs of the royal prisoner. Reminded of his vow, and in gratitude to them, Edward granted his manor of Darnhall to the monks. Consequently, in 1266, the General Chapter of the Cistercian Order authorised the inspection of the site at Darnhall



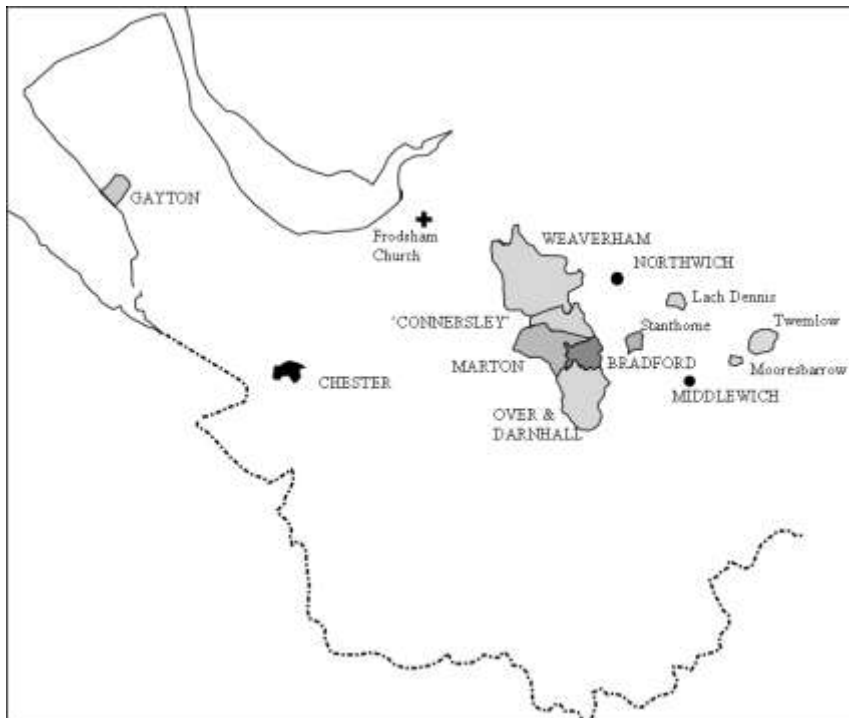
*Fig: 11 Edward's Vow, as depicted in an old stained glass window once at Vale Royal*

and a few monks were dispatched from the mother house to take formal possession of the lands; monks from Dore were probably resident from as early as 1268. The charter issued two years later granted and confirmed to the abbot and monks the place where 'the abbey is situate', a location along the banks of the Ash Brook, a tributary of the River Weaver, in the very heart of Cheshire. It also included 'all enclosed lands, whether in woods or fields, all men and animals and anything else that pertained to it', and was given just as freely as he had held it. The spiritual endowments made at the time were the rights to appoint incumbents to the churches and chapels of

## THE RULE OF THE LORD ABBOT

Frodsham and Weaverham, with two in Derbyshire.

It was soon realised that the original grant was insufficient. During the next few decades a number of grants were made by King Edward and local lords which spread the abbot's influence further afield. In 1275, the manor of Weaverham, which included several dependant townships, was seized by the king from its former holder and granted to the new abbey. Similarly, the following year, the manor of *Conersley* (now Whitegate), held by Walter de Vernon as a sub-ordinate manor to Weaverham, was granted to the abbey. It was this latter grant that precipitated the community's move to a site known as Vale Royal where, in August 1277, the foundation stones of what was intended to be a great abbey church were laid. In 1280, perhaps in order to provide sufficient funds for the community at a time of great expense, the manor of Gayton, on the Wirral, was seized from its previous owner. Lack of funds is also indicated by Edward's grant, that same year, of the advowson of Kirkham church, Lancashire. There then followed, during 1285, a series of grants of lands at the expense and removal of the previous occupiers in Little Over, part of Merton (or Marton), Bradford and Sutton, which all lay between the manors of Darnhall and *Conersley*. Six years later, lands in Stanthorne, Lach Dennis, Moorsbarrow and Twemlow were



*Fig: 12 Lands in Cheshire held by the Abbey*

## WINSFORD: A HISTORY

granted by members of the minor gentry families. In 1312, more for the sake of convenience than finance, the remainder of the manor of Merton was added to the endowment, its owners, who bore that name, being given in exchange the more distant manor of Gayton.

Urban property was also granted to the monastery. As a result of their possession of the manor of Weaverham the Cistercian monks gained houses in Bridge Street, Chester, and a number of salt-pits in Northwich and then from 1277 until the early years of the 14<sup>th</sup> century the abbot received the profits of that town. Two salt-pits in Middlewich were bestowed in, or shortly before, November 1275. In the suburbs of London the Abbot of Darnhall obtained houses and rents too.

The series of grants made between 1270 and 1285, with that of Merton (Marton) in 1312, were such as to create a large, single block of territory along the Weaver Valley, some nine miles by four. In this whole area the abbot's will held sway as feudal lord.

### *The Move to Vale Royal*

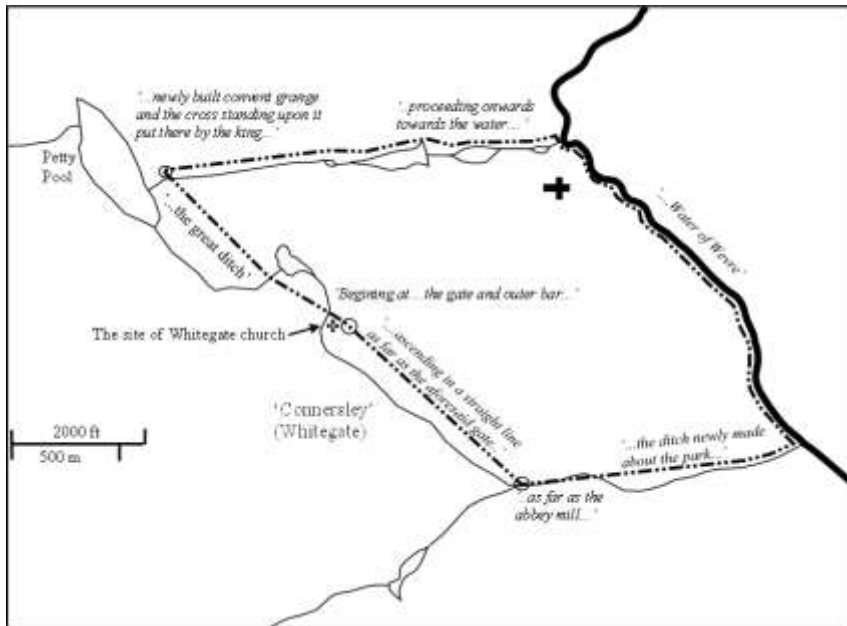
Despite its having been chosen and inspected with apparent care, the site at Darnhall evidently proved to be unsuitable and Edward allowed the monks to transfer to a new site. It was by no means unusual for changes of site to be made. Thirty or more communities in England and Wales changed site at least once and some minor localised changes may never have been recorded. Just why Darnhall was unsuitable we are not informed. It may be that the actual extent of the demesne lands at Darnhall may have been too small to contemplate the building of a fine abbey church and that the intended precincts of the monastery were too close to the lands of the tenantry clustered around St Chad's church. Not that Cistercians

were normally too bothered by that as they had a reputation for up-rooting whole communities. It may be that moves to do so in the Darnhall area were a cause of the friction, disorder and hatred that occurred. The nature of the soils cannot have been a particular factor, for if anything the



*Fig: 13 The Consecration Ceremony, as depicted in an old stained glass window once at Vale Royal*

soils at Darnhall were better suited to agriculture than the sandy soils at Vale Royal.



**Fig: 14** The precincts of Vale Royal Abbey

The proximity to water may be the key factor behind the move. The site at Darnhall was on the east-bank of a brook which flowed into the larger Ash Brook. The flow of water may not have been powerful enough for the needs of the monks as it was only fed by a few minor drainage channels. Certainly there had been problems with the water works at Darnhall earlier in the century. The site at Vale Royal lay on the banks of the more powerful river Weaver and between two of its major feeders, either of which could be led off to flush the drainage channels of the monastery or to service a mill leet. Of course, it may simply be that Darnhall was only ever intended as a temporary location and that the possibility of a more suitable venue had always been considered.

Whatever the reasons the monks happened to select a site on the banks of the river Weaver within their newly acquired manor of *Conersley*, about four miles away from Darnhall. These lands were then renamed Vale Royal 'to show that no monastery should be more royal in liberties, wealth and honour'. From the autumn of 1277 the new name of Vale Royal seems to have been used, though the title Abbot of Darnhall continued for a while later.

The boundaries of the site were set out and whilst it is difficult to be precise about them now they do seem to coincide with identifiable features

## WINSFORD: A HISTORY

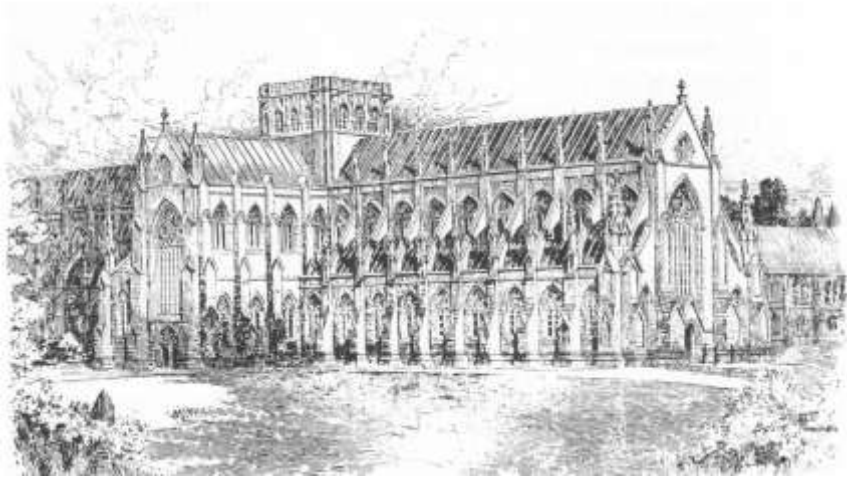
in the modern landscape. Starting at the southern tip of Petty Pool, or else in the vicinity of Monkey Lodge, the boundary followed down the valley, past Earnslow, the site of a medieval grange on the borders of Weaverham and Hartford, and then on down through what were the abbey's fish ponds, that included Rookery Pool, to the river Weaver. The river was then followed south to the junction with Petty Pool Brook at Bradford, where the boundary turned west to follow the ditch to the mill and thence straight back to the start. In all an area of about 200 acres.

### *A Grandiose Building Scheme*

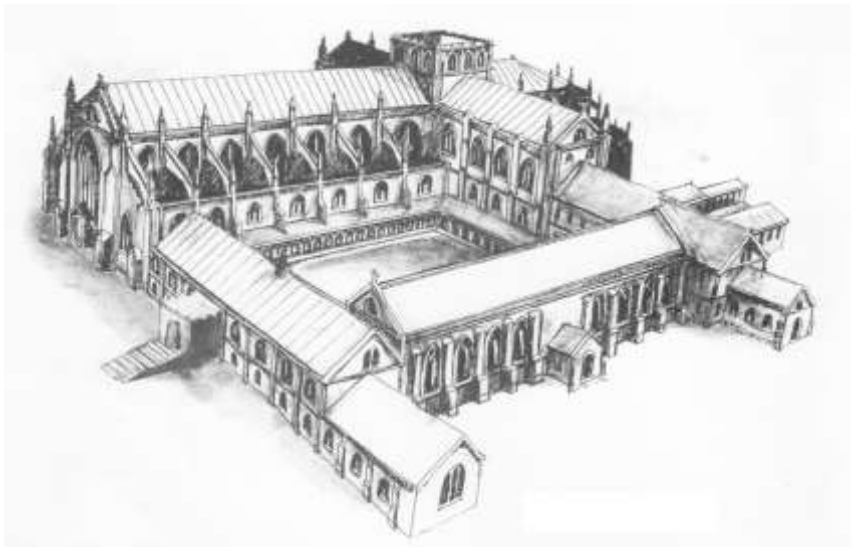
Just before Edward was crowned king he fought in the Holy Land in what is known as the Ninth Crusade (1271-2) and played a major part in the defence of the remaining territories against the Turkish Baibars and Mamluks. He brought back to England a portion of the Holy Cross which he gave to the abbey at its foundation to enhance the holiness of the house dedicated to St. Mary and St. Nicholas. The chronicler of Vale Royal also recorded how Edward sought everywhere for approved relics of the saints to bestow on the abbey and how he endowed the abbey with hallowed vessels, vestments and precious books.

Foundation stones of the great altar at Vale Royal were laid by the King, and his queen, Eleanor of Castile, on 13 August 1277. The occasion, at the time of Edward's preparations for an invasion of Wales, must have been one of great pomp and ceremony. Stones were also laid by the earls of Gloucester, Cornwall, Surrey and Warwick, and by other members of the nobility. It is said that it was then traditional to place coins under foundation stones and this may in fact be so for, during 19<sup>th</sup> century alterations to the buildings last century, two silver coins of the 13<sup>th</sup> century were found under the bases of two old stone pillars.

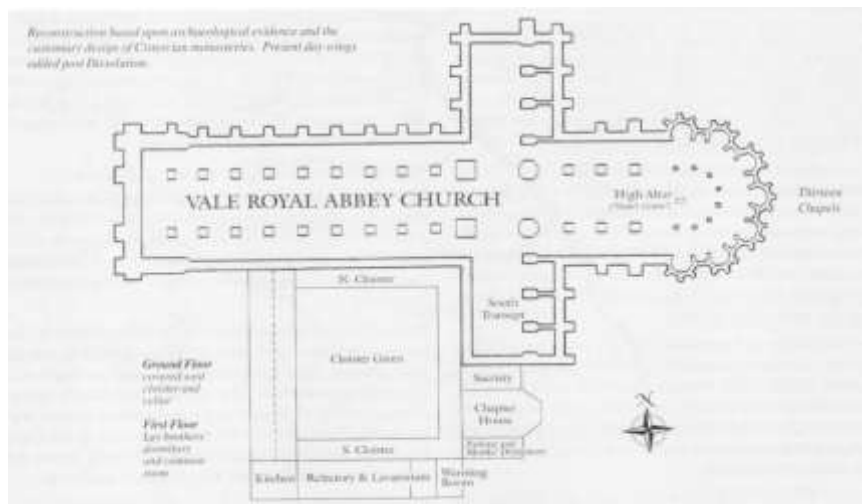
The building began in earnest with funds being provided out of the royal revenues from the county of Chester and an initial payment of 1000 marks (£666.66). Leonius, a royal clerk, was appointed as custodian of the works and during his term of office an average of £500 was spent on materials and wages annually. The actual construction was supervised by Walter de Hereford, a master mason who designed castles in North Wales, for which he received two shillings a day. The names of some of the masons who worked with Walter indicate that they may have travelled from far and wide and have been engaged on other monastic sites: Dore, Furness, Roche and Salisbury.



*Fig: 16 Basil Pendleton's drawing of Vale Royal Abbey, viewed from the north-west*



*Fig: 15 Basil Pendleton's drawing of Vale Royal, viewed from the south-west.*



*Fig: 17 Basil Pendleton's foundation plan. In size the abbey church was virtually the same size as Westminster Abbey.*

The main building material was stone quarried in nearby Eddisbury. Local people, most of them tenants of the Abbot, were employed in carting the stone blocks for which they were paid about 2½d for each return journey. In the year 1278 over 14,500 return journeys were made by over 200 different people; sometimes sixty, seventy or even eighty loads arrived every day. Timber, used to make planks for the building of dwelling houses, workshops and huts, was supplied from Delamere Forest and men were paid 2d for a return journey. In 1278, 12,300 boards and 79,000 nails were provided. Other commodities included iron from Newcastle, lime from Chester, wax, lime, pitch and straw. Wages varied from the meagre 8d a week for a labourer to 2s 6d for a skilled craftsman. Marble columns, capitals and bases were ordered to be shipped to either Chester or Frodsham from the south coast.

Three years after the foundation ceremony the community of monks moved from Darnhall to temporary quarters in the new Vale Royal Abbey precincts. It is thought by some that the monks erected a small chapel in which to perform their services whilst the abbey church was being constructed: this was the predecessor of the present Whitegate Church. By 1283, building work had progressed to a state when consecration of the building could take place. Anthony de Bec, bishop of Durham performed the ceremony in the presence of the king and his court. Twice within seven years the majority of England's ruling elite had gathered in the Winsford area.

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Five years later, work began on the cloisters and all seems to have been going well until the latter years of the 13th century when financial problems again set in. It is possible that the funds were being misappropriated but whatever the reason, Edward seems to have lost interest in his ambitious project and made only meagre grants. Income had to be sought by the abbey from other sources.

The community was left to manage a construction programme that was far beyond its means and, not surprisingly, the house never achieved the size or grandeur that Edward had intended. The abbey only had a community of twenty-one monks in 1336 and eighteen in 1381.

It was not until 15 August 1330 that the abbot and the community of monks moved from their temporary wooden lodgings, then 'unsightly and ruinous' into the cloisters of the new monastic buildings. Much work still needed to be done: the vaults, roof, cloisters, chapter-house, dormitory, refectory and other offices, needed to be completed.

In 1342, Robert de Cheyneston, the new abbot recorded that the abbey had debts amounting to £20 and that the granges of Knights, Bradford and Hefferston had been damaged by fire, along with the corn that they contained. Repairs to the weirs and granges at Darnhall and the lead roofing to the choir and north end of the abbey building cost £100.

A new phase of patronage began in 1353 when Edward, the Black Prince, decided to complete the work his great grandfather had started. He granted 500 marks (£333.33) then and a further similar sum five years later. Masons were commissioned to work on the structure which was to include a 'chevet' of thirteen chapels at the east end. The plan was on a style then novel in England and similar to the present day cathedral of Toledo, Spain. In 1359, the Black Prince granted the abbey the church of Llanbadarnfawr, Cardiganshire, in order to provide funds for costly repairs to the abbey church. In that year, a contract was made with William de Hepleston to complete the masonry work commenced by the abbot. The work was expected to take six years to complete, but, in 1368, Hepleston was still at



*Fig: 18* Floor tiles remnants from Vale Royal

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work for he received a commission from the Prince of Wales to recruit masons and workmen to work at Vale Royal.

### *Vale Royal - the largest abbey in Britain*

What did the Abbey look like? Excavations on the site earlier this century reveal that the planned length was 421 feet (128.3m), with a nave of 92 feet, and a total width, across the transepts, of 232 feet (70.7m). Clearly these foundations suggest that the largest Cistercian church in Britain was being built: larger than Fountains Abbey, and close in size to the largest in Europe, Vaucelles, and also to Westminster Abbey.

The buildings were arranged around an open quadrangle - the cloistral precincts - and naturally the main building was the abbey church. This was intended to be a magnificent structure based on a cruciform ground plan. The east end was formed into an elaborate chevet of seven polygonal chapels alternating with six quadrilateral ones that were commissioned by the Black Prince and were probably used for the housing of shrines and holy relics. As to the overall height one can only surmise that its dimensions were suitably grand and in proportion to the plan. A small bell tower, to sound the daily offices, was positioned over the intersection of nave, transepts and choir, and it has been suggested that there may have been two small towers at the west-end of the side aisles of the nave.



**Fig: 19** A Cistercian monk in his white habit

To the south of the church, and adjoining it, stood the cloisters. These formed a quadrangle about 140 ft (42.7 m) square. The central area would have been either grassed or else used as a herb garden and around it there would have been a walk-way. Within the eastern range was situated the Chapter House, a place second in importance to the church itself, where the business of the abbey was conducted and the sessions of the manor court held. Within the cloisters there will have been the sacristy, parlour, dormitories, kitchen, refectory and rooms to store the monastery's provisions.

Around the cloistral precincts there would have been other buildings to do with the domestic and agricultural business of the abbey. It is likely too that

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other buildings would have included the abbot's lodgings and accommodation for guests and pensioners of the abbey.

The whole complex was probably surrounded in some way by either a ditch, an earthen bank, or perhaps a wall, with gateways at various locations. One of these gates would have been near to the site of the present gate in Whitegate.

Despite all this it is unlikely that the intended abbey was ever completed. Severe gales in October 1360 blew down the nave 'from the wall at the west end to the bell-tower before the gates of the choir' - a substantial part of the main building. The Black Prince immediately arranged for funds to help with the repair work. However, with mounting debts and the costs of hospitality provided by the abbey, the funds were insufficient. During the reign of Richard II permission was sought from the



*Fig: 20 The coat of arms of Vale Royal Abbey. They are based on the Royal arms of England with three gold coloured leopards against a red background, surmounted by a silver abbot's crozier.*

king to reduce the height and width of the nave as an economy measure. Little further work was then done on the main building which, if it ever was completed, cannot have achieved the same grandiose size that had been originally intended.

During the following century repairs and maintenance was carried out to the fabric and, in 1422, an aisle was added to the main building. Regular grants of timber from the forest of Mara were made throughout the fifteenth century and into the next. However during the fifteenth century the house remained in financial difficulties: legal disputes, local disorder and poor management all contributed to the wasting of the abbey.

### *Monastic Strife - unholy rows*

From the time of Edward's foundation at Darnhall the peasants and tenantry of the manor did not welcome the change of landlord and tried to withdraw their labour, rents and other customary services. Disputes between the local population and the abbey continued throughout its history for, in an effort to extract every detail of his lordship and to make as much profit as possible, the abbot sought to interfere with the customary arrangements of the manor and to the villeins' way of life. The Cistercian practise of consolidating their manors and of enclosing large areas for the pasture of sheep and cattle meant the abandonment of ancient manorial rights enjoyed by the peasantry.

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As early as 1307, there were struggles against the conditions under which the local villeins had to live. It may be that with the granting of the manors to the abbey the inhabitants suffered social degradation: certainly the rule of Cistercians was strict. Some of the conditions imposed on the peasants were as follows. No woman was able to marry outside the manor or outside her condition of bondage without permission and a charge; when a woman became pregnant she had to make a payment to the lord; men and women could be punished for sins committed or else make a suitable payment; none could work for another without the lord's consent but were required to work for him at his will; the holding and working of land outside the manor was restricted; a man was not permitted to advance his son in holy orders without special permission; trespasses against the lord could lead to imprisonment or an unlimited fine; horses owned by the peasantry could not be sold without permission and peasants were not allowed to dispose of their property by means of a will or by gift as all their goods belonged to the lord. Objections to the conditions of bondage, refusal to grind their corn in the lord's mill and objections to restrictions on the leasing of their lands led perhaps many to suffer heavy financial penalties and imprisonment and created much ill will.

It seems that monastic life itself had a sinister aspect at this time. About 1311, a warrant was issued to the sergeants of the peace to arrest Abbot John and several monks who had been accused of harbouring a gang of notorious robbers which included one of the monks. Such activities would certainly not have endeared them to the local community.

In 1320, dissension led to murder when one of the abbot's servants, John de Budworth, was attacked and killed in Darnhall; his head being used as a football by his attackers who were members of the Oldyngton (Oulton) family. A similar fate might have befallen Brother John Lewis, the abbot's cellarer, had he not been so speedy. On his way home from Chester he was ambushed and attacked in Tarvin by Robert de Winnington and his brothers.

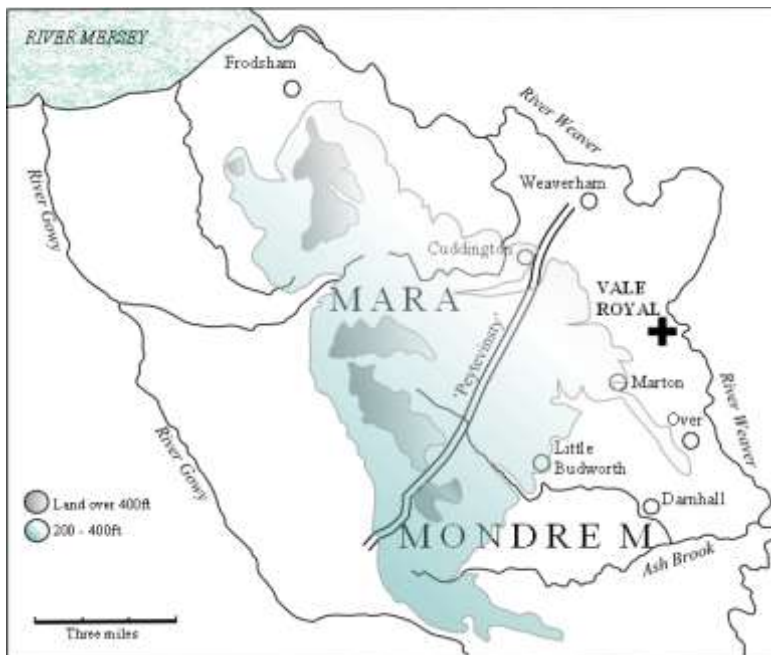
General hatred of the abbot and his rule over the area of the Weaver valley erupted into open rebellion. *The Ledger Book of Vale Royal Abbey* records a case against a large number of the tenantry of whom ten were singled out for special mention. Each were aggrieved at Abbot Peter's rights of lordship over them. These people and others banded together to declare their opposition but it seems that their conspiracy was reported for they appeared before the manor court held at Marton on 6 May 1329. At the hearing held before the abbot's steward, the abbot gave evidence in person of the trespasses he had suffered. The ten defendants were so aggrieved that they began an armed revolt before being subdued and taken in chains to Weaverham prison. On the following Friday, 13 May, all the accused were assembled together in the court held at Darnhall and were required to surrender their goods as pledges of future good conduct and to make an offer of £10 as a penalty. Out of leniency Abbot Peter accepted £4 to be

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paid in two instalments.

The most notable instance of rebellion against the abbot occurred in 1336. The persistence of the tenantry to seek justice led to both legal and illegal actions and adventures outside the County. A number of men from the manor of Darnhall, went to Chester to plead before the justiciar of Chester that they were freemen who were being made to endure villein services illegally by the abbot. They returned to face the abbot whereupon they were shackled in Over prison until they acknowledged their servile status. With the excuse that they were embarking on a pilgrimage to Hereford some tenants set off to seek out the king. At Westminster they presented a petition setting out their grievances. In response the king wrote to the justiciar of Chester and ordered him to enquire into the matter. He found in favour of the abbot and instructed him to punish his bondsmen. They appealed again and lost again but this time the justiciar suggested that the appellants be punished in an exemplary manner so that they would not "clamour the king again". But they did just that. The king was again sought, this time in Windsor, and complaints were laid against both the abbot and the justiciar. The king instructed his son, Edward, Prince of Wales and Earl of Chester, to assist.

Encouraged the villagers returned home and a little while later about thirty of them attended the County Court to present their case. Once again judgement was given against them. Next, some of them sought Queen Phillipa who instructed the abbot to leave them in peace. Abbot Peter then



**Fig: 21** The site of Vale Royal in relation to the forests of Mara and Mondrem which covered the land between the rivers Gowy and Weaver

## WINSFORD: A HISTORY

decided to seek an audience of both the king and queen. At King's Cliffe, Northamptonshire, the abbot was able to present all his charters to prove his rights over the men of Darnhall and won his case convincingly. Hearing the news the defeated villeins, with members of the Venables family, who had their own private scores to settle with the abbot, came upon the abbot and his retinue on the journey back to Cheshire. At Exton, Rutland, on 24 June, a fight ensued in which the abbot's groom was killed and the abbot himself was nearly slain. All involved in the affray were arrested and taken to Stamford where, on the following day, after local enquiry, the Abbot and his party were allowed to go, leaving the bondsmen in chains.

Those who attacked the abbot were ordered to surrender all their lands, goods and chattels and had to make a most abject submission to the abbot: for many Sundays thereafter they were required to stand in the choir of the Abbey, before the assembled monks, with bare heads and feet, and offer wax candles in token of their subjection. So ended a particular episode of civil disorder in Over and Darnhall, but more was to come.

In 1340, the Abbot Peter came, not unsurprisingly, to a violent end; he was murdered by local people including a member of the Venables family and in the same year a number of men burnt the abbot's houses in Chester, destroyed crops and stole a great quantity of goods and animals.

Life in and around the abbey was far from tranquil for both the monks and the local population. The abbey lay within the Forests of Mara (part of Delamere) and Mondrem and as that would impose severe restrictions upon the monks' freedom to exploit their lands immunity from the Forest Law was granted within the manors of Over, *Conersley* and Weaverham. But the abbot's natural desire to exercise his rights in or near to forest land led to disputes with those whose duty it was to administer the laws - the hereditary foresters and under-foresters. In 1328, the abbot had to personally petition the king in Parliament because forest officials were denying him his rights. He succeeded and charters declaring the rights of the abbey were read out in the County Court.

The monks had the right to clear their woodland for cultivation, to take timber and fallen branches for building and fuel, to have a beekeeper, to quarry stone and to take what was needed for the manufacture of glass. A particular problem was one of taking timber and it does seem that here the abbey exceeded its rights. In 1357, the Black Prince felt obliged to reduce those rights to the taking of timber for maintenance only and the use of the branches of those trees so taken for firewood. Pasture was limited to their own townships and not to the lands in the Forest generally.

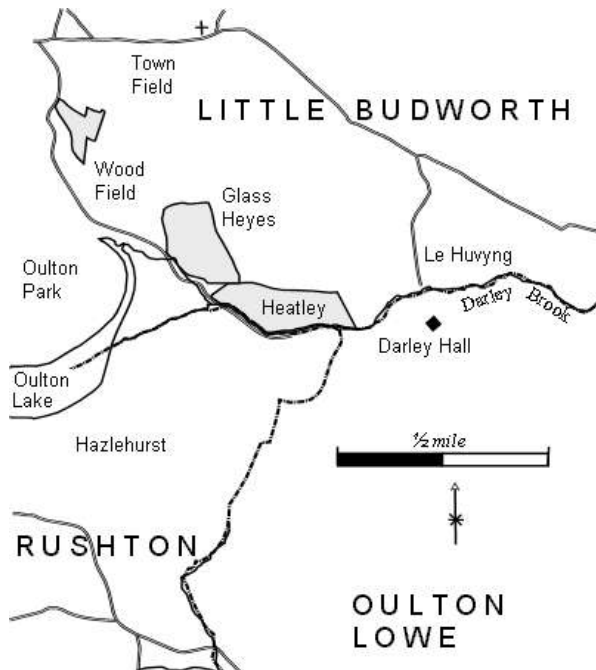
It was not always people of lower standing who had problems with the abbot. Disputes with neighbouring landowners seem to be commonplace. In 1375, there were incidents of fighting between the abbot and the Bulkeley family who held lands at Eaton across the river Weaver. In 1394, Abbot Stephen was accused of giving refuge to the murderer of a member of the Bostock family and in the following year Adam de Bostock in his feud with

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Abbot of Vale Royal was twice bound in sum of £200 to keep the peace: the abbot likewise. On one of these two occasions the incident involved the Bostocks in attacking the abbot's mill at Darnhall. The other involved a mob, led by the Bostock family halting a visitation to Vale Royal by the abbots of Oxford, Croxton and Dieulacres. Two of the gang were in fact monks, one of whom was later accused of rape and the other of theft from the abbey.

In 1395/6, an Inquisition was held into the mis-handling of the abbey's affairs at which evidence was given on oath by jurors headed by the Bostock family. It was alleged that over a nine year period following the accession of King Richard II, the abbot had leased, sold, granted or otherwise destroyed much of the abbey's property. Specific mention is made of the granges of Darnhall, Knights, Bradford and Hefferston, and the felling and selling of huge quantities of oak trees. It would seem, therefore, that the abbey's affairs were in a desperate state and that its abbot, Stephen, was incapable of proper management. In addition, during his period of office, the abbot was accused of harbouring members of his household who had been accused of criminal offences, of allowing a prisoner to escape and of taking bribes.

Matters did not improve in the next century and the character of the abbots remained consistent. In 1424, one of the abbey's servants was accused of an armed attack on the prior and five years later arrests were



*Fig: 22 The location of Vale Royal Abbey's glass work in Little Budworth.*

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ordered of those who had sought to violently interfere with the election of Abbot Henry Arrowsmith. This particular abbot seems to have been of particularly bad repute. In 1436 a visitation was ordered to examine the affairs of the abbey and the conduct of the abbot who had been accused of an offence of rape at Over three years earlier and of harbouring an outlaw in Merton in 1435. The visitors feared for their safety and sought protection from the sheriff. In 1437 Abbot Henry suffered a violent death at the hands of an armed band of men from Lancashire, Derbyshire, Staffordshire and Cheshire. They were led by George Weaver of Weaver and included the vicar of Over, then Richard Astull, who drove a sword through the abbot's throat several times.

The abbey was taken into Royal protection and management of affairs was handed to Humphrey, earl of Stafford; it was said that £1000 was needed to repair the waste caused to the estate. But local feuds and disorder continued despite Royal protection. In 1446, Onston Mill and other possessions were seized by gangs of local men and orders were issued to have the offenders imprisoned. In 1448 Hugh Venables was imprisoned for destroying one of the abbey's mills, taking cattle and threatening the abbot's life.

There was also internal disorder too. There is a case of theft by monks from the abbot and of the abbot being driven from the precincts due to the conspiracies of laymen and monks. In 1455 the General Chapter of the Order instructed two abbots to investigate the affairs of the abbey which was described as being a 'damnable and sinister regime'. They may have changed matters for the better as thereafter there is little evidence of disorder either outside or inside the abbey. Though later, in the two decades before the Dissolution there were power struggles over the election of abbots and involvement in local family feuds by those abbots which involved bribery and corruption.

In fairness, Vale Royal was not an exception in experiencing such happenings: social discontent was widespread at this time and other monasteries suffered similarly. However Vale Royal is perhaps different in that the disruption and unholy rows with neighbours continued for so long during the mediaeval period.

### *Agriculture and Industrial Enterprises*

Despite all the social unrest the abbey of Vale Royal managed to provide itself with sources of income from agriculture, industry and trade.

Several granges, or outlying farms were established at Darnhall, Marton, Knights, Bradford and Hefferston, near Weaverham. From here the abbey's servants worked the fields and managed the animals. Cereal crops, peas and other legumes were grown. In the orchards they had apples for there is mention of cider being sold just prior to the monks arrival at Darnhall. Also barley will have been grown and brewed to create ale.

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The monks had herds of cattle. In 1283 the abbot's agents were purchasing cattle from as far away as Essex, and in 1303 the abbot was fined for allowing 220 cattle to stray into the forest. In 1330 gifts to the abbey included six oxen (presumably for ploughing purposes), six calves and four dozen sheep.



*Fig: 23 A lease of the Knights Grange estate granted by Abbot John to John Smythe, a Yeoman of the Guard, dated 28 August 1537. Field names mentioned remained in use until the early 20th century.*

Sheep farming was a particularly important activity for the white monks of Vale Royal. Wools was used to make their habits and blankets and the milk could be used to produce cheese. Surplus wool was used as a cash crop and the Cistercian earned an international reputation as sheep farmers and traders of fleeces. In 1275 Abbot John of Darnhall had a contract with a dealer from Caudray in Belgium to supply twelve sacks of 'good wool of the better crop of Hereford' and as good as that from Dore for a price of nine marks a sack. The wool had to be sent to Hereford to be dressed prior to shipping via London. In 1297 a Florentine wool merchant recorded that Vale Royal produced six sacks of wool a year which suggests that the flock numbered about 1500.

A corollary of sheep farming was fulling. The earliest reference to a fulling mill is in 1341 though it's likely to have existed long before that. The mill was located in what is now Whitegate village. Similarly one may deduce that cattle rearing meant the presence of tanning and tan yards a process carried out at Bark House Farm by a family who were known by the name Barker. Leather and leather goods such as shoes were probably sold through the abbey's shops in Chester which were located in a part of the city known for that trade.



*Fig: 24 Knights Grange. Today it is a public house.*

### *The Tenants and their Fields*

The people of Over and Darnhall were dispersed among several hamlets during much of the medieval period. From their homes they laboured in the fields producing cereal crops and legumes for their subsistence and for the abbot's profit. Medieval farming practises involved three or four large open fields in a township which were divided into arable strips, each being held by the tenants. Tenants might have a number of strips in one field or scattered among a number of fields.

Between the modern High Street and the border with Weaver township to the south there were four small valleys running down to the river Weaver, each with a small stream emanating from a spring on the side of the sandy ridge. These were *Denelden*, *Schotwallden*, *Chyrchden* and *Olreden*: it was in the third of these that the church stood. On the ridge itself, on the spurs between the valleys and between the lanes, lay the open fields divided into strips held in severalty by the tenantry.

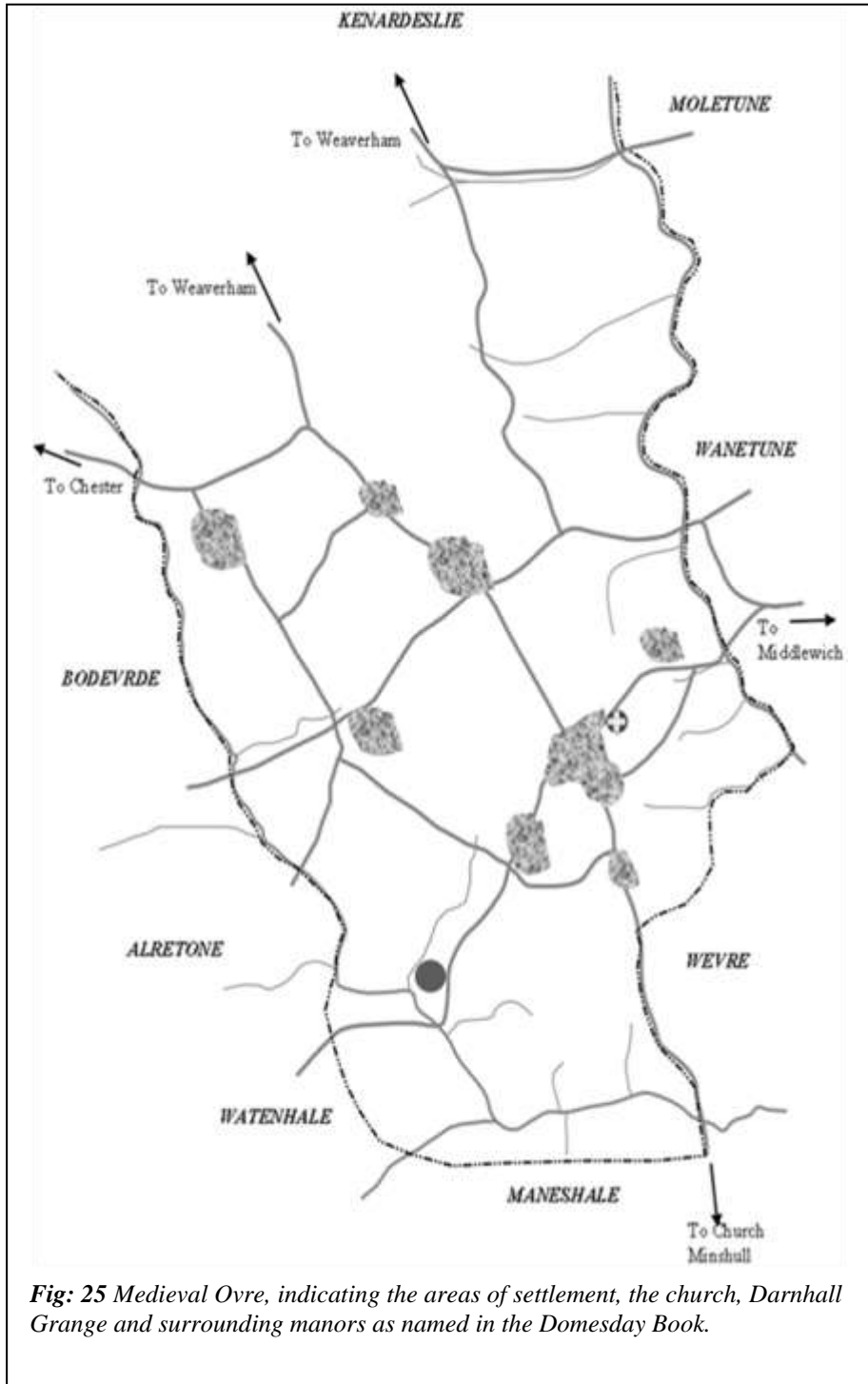
The road layout was probably much as we know it today with a main highway running along the line of the modern Swanlow Lane. Joining this was a lane coming in from Wettenhall and known in the middle ages as *Dernelenes*. A lane from Middlewich ascended the ridge from a crossing point below Stocks Hill passed north of the church. In part this probably known as *Bradestrete*, the 'broad street'. The modern lane which provides access to the church will probably have then been a swampy area in the vicinity of a spring from which the stream ran down past the church. The lane from Middlewich forked on Stocks Hill, crossed the stream and then ascended the ridge near to the *Olreden* and along what is now Welsh Lane. Another route may have gone from Stocks Hill towards the *Denelden* and then on towards the borough of Over.

In the area of the present public house called 'The Old Star' was the hamlet of *Churchton* the largest area of settlement in the parish. In the mid fourteenth century there were thirty-three known messuages and fifty-two

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tenants of either messuages or plots of land in the vicinity. The concentration of people will undoubtedly have been along Swanlow Lane between the public house and Welsh Lane. Beyond this large hamlet or village, south towards the boundary with Weaver was the hamlet of *Mers* (meaning 'boundary' from which modern Moors Lane takes its name). Here there were thirteen messuages. In all the number of dwelling properties suggests a population of over 200 people in the area around the church and down Swanlow Lane. There were other areas of settlement, with some names still surviving: *Michel Over*, Little Over, Hebden, Blakeden and *Halewes*, perhaps doubling the population numbers.

The church, as now, was certainly surrounded by fields. Strips and plots were held by the local people in *Chyrchefeld*, *Chyrcheden*, next the *Chyrchestoc* (the church place) and the field of *Chyrcheton* itself. In the valley with its steep sides and boggy terrain there was only a little over a quarter of a Cheshire acre (which equates to about half a modern statute acre) of useful land and that was held by Robert the Cowherd, possibly for pasture purposes. Close by the church there was a field of about seven Cheshire acres, (about 14 ½ statute acres) which in all probability was somewhere just south of the church, and alongside the vicarage was another small field. In *Chyrchefeld* there were about four Cheshire acres of land.



*Fig: 25 Medieval Ovre, indicating the areas of settlement, the church, Darnhall Grange and surrounding manors as named in the Domesday Book.*

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The town fields of *Chyrchton* consisted of about forty-four Cheshire acres. Beyond these fields there were also arable lands at *Halewes*, about twenty acres; *Mers* about ten acres with a further acre and half in *Merslone* and seven acres in *Littlemor*; *Wewes* about seven acres; and *Olredenfeld*, which lay along Swanlow Lane, thirty-three acres. In this area of Cheshire the arable strips were known as 'loonts', a word which persisted through to the nineteenth century. The tithe map of 1846 clearly shows these strips along each side of Swanlow Lane, and the term used still survives today in the residential area known as 'The Loont'.

Further out from the church there were fields adjoining the hamlets of Hebden (*Heppedenefeld* with about twenty acres) and Blakeden (*Blakedenfeld* with about twenty-four acres). Four other large fields were *Burifeld* (the 'borough field') with about sixteen acres, *Stonfeld* (the 'stony field') with twenty-one acres. *Longacres* with about fourteen acres, and *Asfeld* (known until recent times as 'Ashfield') with about sixteen acres.

Further away to the north-west were the common pasture lands which merged with the territory of the Forest of Mara (Delamere). Within the bounds of the forest special laws pertained imposing on the inhabitants and those who ventured there, measures and obligations designed for the protection and management of deer.

### *The Borough of Over*

On 24 November 1280, King Edward granted the abbot and convent of Vale Royal the right to hold a weekly market in their manor of Over and to have an annual fair: the market was held every Wednesday for the selling of produce and the fair was held each year over a three day period in mid September. Vale Royal now had the distinction of having its own urban centre and market and for the abbot this was most welcome for he and his convent could now receive revenues from the sale of goods at the market and of livestock at the fair. A few years later Abbot Walter ordained that there should be a free borough in his manor of Over and his charter, written in Latin, is preserved in the British Museum among the Harleian Manuscripts. This meant that the people of Over now had certain rights removing them from the normal restrictions of the feudal and manorial world. The borough was laid out land on either side of what is now Delamere Street in a series of matching burgage plots, each being suitable for building a house, forming a garden and with space to keep a pig or cow. The plan of the 13<sup>th</sup> century borough is still visible in the modern garden plots. Residents could hold their burgage plot for a fixed annual rent of 12d., and with each burgage they had the right to dig turves on Blackden Moss; they were permitted to have an assembly, or council, and to appoint their own bailiffs, including the election of a mayor, subject to the abbot's approval; to have their own prison, cuckstool and pillory; to arrest offenders; and to have the right to bail and sureties if they were accused of

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offences. The proviso was that the people of Over had to buy and sell their wares and produce, including ale, in the market and at the fair of Over in preference to anywhere else.

The borough was established in the ancient hamlet of Muchel Ovre and centred along what is now Delamere Street. As the centre of trade and local administration the borough became the natural hub of the whole area and thus enhanced the name of Over against that of Darnhall. It also led to a shift in population and the demise of the settlement around the church, known during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries as 'Chycheton'.

### *Dissolution*

Although the original intention was for a house for thirty monks there seems to have been never more than eighteen. In 1509, when a visitation was made by the abbot of Dore, there were fifteen monks. An inventory of the goods of the house lists the contents of the abbot's chamber, the hospice, the pantry, the kitchen and the brewery. In the church there were thirty copes, two silver crosses, six chalices, a gold collar, a silver pastoral staff and other valuable possessions. The monastery possessed many oxen and other cattle and worked the granges of Darnhall, Hefferston, Knight's and Bradford.

The history of Vale Royal Abbey comes to an end with Henry VIII's policy of seizing church property. At the time of the Dissolution the abbey had a net annual income of £518 and a community of fifteen. The document of surrender was dated 24 August 1538 and two weeks later the abbot, prior and thirteen monks handed their property over to the king's commissioner, Thomas Holcroft.

The abbey church was 'plucked down', its stone being used to repair bridges and churches and even to form foundations for houses locally. The south and west ranges of the cloisters became a country house for three generations of the Holcroft family who also enjoyed the lordship of much of the abbey's estates in the Over, Whitegate and Weaverham areas. A little later the Holcrofts sold some of their property: the manor of Darnhall was sold for £682 in 1541 to Sir Rowland Hill, a merchant and alderman of the City of London but subsequently passed to the Lee family; the manor and borough of Over was purchased by Edmund Pershall; Marton Grange became the property of the Mainwarings of Over Peover, and Knights Grange was sold to the Starkie family of Oulton Lowe.



**Fig: 27** Vale Royal House as depicted in 1616 when the home of Lady Mary Cholmondeley. Much of the house is as it is today, though the main entrance is now on the ground floor and the gate house does not exist.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Borough Courts and Civil War

**D**uring the 17<sup>th</sup> century Over was recognised as being a town of some significance. In King's Vale Royal, published in 1656, there is a description of the county of Cheshire that had been written by William Webb, some thirty-five years earlier. Under the heading of Eddisbury Hundred, Over and its environs are described. At Darnhall there was a “...*fine seat with a sweet house of brick lately erected*” then the residence of Henry Lee, esquire.

*“...Along the park side of Darnhall lies Swanlow, and therein many good farms that have been of the abbey lands..... And so we come first to Overchurch, situate somewhat remote from many of her parishoners, and half a mile well from the town itself, which being one of the main goodly possessions which the abbot and convent of Vale Royal enjoyed, obtained by them, or by their means at least, to be a mayor town, which government they hold to this day, as also a fee and liberty of a good precinct, wherein strangers and all are liable to their arrests; near unto which is a fine gentlemanly seat, called Knights Grange, now the lands of Lady Mary Cholmondeley formerly mentioned; and not far from this a very pleasant house, now the possession of Thomas Mainwaring of Marton, gentleman. And so a little further we pass by Whitegate, which though it show you but a chapel, yet challengeth, by a statute in the year Henry VIII to be an entire parish of itself. The vicarage there is in the gift of the said Mr Mainwaring's and so we come to that famous Vale Royal.. ”*

In the same work there is an account of Over by William Smith under his descriptions of 'Market Towns of Cheshire':

*“Ouver standeth on the east end of Delamere forest, not far from the river of Weever, and it is but a small thing; yet I put it in here because of the great perogative that it hath. For it hath a maior .....*’

These descriptions have a common theme – the town's status. Over had been a borough since the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and had a mayor, aldermen and a number of officials who were responsible for good order and presenting offenders before the manorial court. So what sort of a town was Over? Smith says “it was but a small thing” – how big was it? Who lived there and how did they live?

### *Demography*

The size of population of the manor and borough of Over in the 17<sup>th</sup> century is not easy to estimate. The best method of assessing population is to use the parish registers. The district was divided between two parishes: Over, which included Wettenhall and Oulton Lowe, and Whitegate, which included Marton and Darnhall. The registers for Over commence in 1558, though there are significant gaps between 1561 and 1590, 1666 and 1674, and 1691 and 1696; those for Whitegate begin in 1563. Using the registers of baptism the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century population of Over parish seems to have been around 550, which then rose by the turn of the century to about 760. By 1625 the population appears to have reached about 1000. In the 1640 and 50s there was a decline in population before it rose again over the next decade to about 900. Figures for Whitegate are smaller but show a steady rise for the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century from around 300 to 600.

The total population for the area, including Darnhall but excluding Wettenhall and Oulton Lowe, seems to vary between 1000 and 1400 during the Stuart period. This is a significant size. By the end of the century, Chester had a population of 9000. Most of England's provincial towns contained around 1000 and some market towns were as low as 700. The population of our town and its immediate environs in the mid-century was on a par with Newcastle-under-Lyme (1200 in the 1660s), Stafford (1350 in 1666) and Uttoxeter (2000). No "small thing" then!

The Hearth Tax returns of 1664 allow a check to be made on figures gleaned from the parish registers. The Hearth Tax was a tax levied on every fireplace in a house and for each parish a list was made that indicated the number of hearths and who was exempt on the grounds of poverty. Using a multiplier of 4.75 for each household the figures give a total population of around 1000, which accords with the estimate gained from the parish registers.

From 1661, a series of court rolls survive for the manor of Over. These record a list of those who were required to attend court in April and October each year. The manorial court's jurisdiction did not include Darnhall, but did include Whitegate. The average number of named persons throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century is 155. Whilst some would have been non-resident property owners, the majority of these would have been the head of a resident household and would give population figures of about 800. When figures are added for Darnhall (say another 100) and for those not subject of the manor courts (about 50) the figures again suggest a total population for the whole area of close to 1000.

It is almost impossible to work out the population of the township of Wharton from the parish registers of Davenham due to the fact that the residence of those recorded are rarely given at this time. However, in the registers we find the following family names which are likely to be from

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Wharton: Acton, Adamson, Adderton, Barlow, Bostock, Bradhurst, Buckley, Burrows, Hampson, Hoole, Hayes, Hulse, Maddock, Robinson, Tomlinson, Torkinton, Weever. Names which persist to the present time.

As with Over, useful indicators are the taxation returns. Thirty-six property units are referred to in the Poll Tax returns of 1660 of whom five relate to estates of non-residents, including two men who lived in Over. Within what seem to be the resident households there are ninety people actually named as paying the tax. In addition there will be a number of children who were exempt from the tax and a number of poor people who were also exempt. The Hearth Tax of four years later lists thirty-five houses, including those of the poor. Both sources suggest a population of about 165 in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. Small when compared to the numbers living on the other side of the river.

### *Standards of Living*

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Cheshire homes were described in the following way.

*"In building and furniture of their houses, till of late years, they used the old manner of the Saxons; For they had their fire in the midst of the house, against a hob of clay, and their oxen also under the same roof," but within these forty years it is altogether altered, so they have builded chimnies, and furnished other parts of their houses accordingly.*

According to the Hearth Tax in Over, Darnhall and Whitegate there were 208 dwellings. The largest of all the properties was Vale Royal with twenty-nine hearths. A single fire-place was present in 163 homes which would have been situated in the centre of a primitive, single-storey cottage. However, some single-hearthed buildings were more than just a cottage. Raphe Holbrook of Over was assessed as having a single hearth, yet, according to his will, his home was split into two parts - the lower end or 'loome house' and the 'higher end of the house which hath the fire place', and in addition there were outbuildings – a bake house, barn and cow-house. Clearly this was a significant property despite the tax assessment. It is perhaps safe to assume that houses with three or more hearths were substantial buildings.

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*Fig: 30 17<sup>th</sup> century cottage in Whitegate*



*Fig: 29 'Falcon Cottage, Marton*



*Fig: 28 17<sup>th</sup> century cottages which once stood along Delamere Street, Over*

Surviving probate records, especially the inventories which sometimes accompanied wills, can give details of the insides of 17<sup>th</sup> century houses listing the contents of each room. In most dwellings the main living room was called the 'house'. Here the family amused themselves, entertained their guests, prepared and ate their food and kept most of their furniture, along with their brass and pewter-ware,. The 'parlour' and 'chamber' tend to imply bedrooms; the first often denoting the bedroom of the head of the household. Some houses had butteries, where barrels of beer and other drink were stored; kitchens, brew houses, stables, barns and other outbuildings also appear in some of the inventories.

Furniture in 17<sup>th</sup> century homes was very basic and utilitarian. It is likely that much of the furniture was home-made, though there are examples of 'joined' items, referring to furniture made by skilled joiners. Occasionally one finds mention of tables, but in most cases boards and trestles were common place. Such items of furniture were most suitable in cramped accommodation as they could easily be taken down and stored at the side of a room. For seating stools and benches are far more common than chairs. Beds were an important feature of any house and often a valuable piece of furniture to be bequeathed to sons and daughters. The main bed might have had corner posts and a canopy. The simplest form of bed was a pair of bedsteads that were overlaid by boards on which was placed a coarse mattress. Two particularly interesting items sometimes noticed are the truckle bed - a low bed on castors which could be stored away under the main bed, and the press - a bed that could be folded up into a cupboard. Pillows, cushions, sheets and blankets are often recorded separately or else simply listed as bedding. Curtains and napkins too are to be noted. Storage in 17<sup>th</sup> century houses was mainly provided by chests and coffers, though occasionally there is mention of cupboards and sideboards. Rarely do we find any mention of mirrors, clocks, books or other luxury items. Wooden and pewter plates are often mentioned along with the shelves on which they were stored.

Some inventories mention livestock. Hugh Starkie of Knights Grange seems to have had the largest herd of cows - 21 valued at £44; the norm was around half a dozen. Heifers and calves also appear though in smaller numbers. Bulls and bullocks are rarely found and when they are it is normally as single items, two exceptions are: John Boden of Over (1611) had four bullocks and Richard Darlington of Brookhouses (1667) had three bulls. The numbers of beasts of burden, oxen and horses, indicate that it was the ox which was still favoured on the heavier clay soils. John Boden had two, Ralph Whittingham of Swanlow (1660) had a 'yoke' and Richard Darlington had four oxen. Horses and mares figure in ten inventories — Ralph Maddock of Over (1637) had three horses. Seven men had sheep, the largest flock, 140, belonged to Richard Darlington. Pigs, poultry and geese also feature in many of the inventories.



*Fig: 31* 17<sup>th</sup> century 'Littler Grange', Over

### *Social Structure*

The social structure of Over was of a kind that pertained generally in rural townships at the time. At the top of the pyramid stood the lord of the manor along with a small number of gentry families, below these a small body of yeoman farmers, followed by a larger group of husbandman. The bulk of the population consisted of cottagers, day labourers, servants and peasants. Into this agrarian community fitted at various levels, rural craftsmen — carpenters, wheelwrights, smiths, websters, tailors, tanners and local tradesmen such as butchers and bakers.

The vast majority of the inhabitants in the 17<sup>th</sup> century derived their living from farming and its allied occupations. Farming was chiefly for subsistence, though a few of the larger farmers and estate owners probably produced a surplus for local sale and for other nearby markets. Mixed farming, a combination of pastoral and arable, was the rule; the local topography and the nature of the soil favoured cattle rather than crops, and the arable farmer needed cattle for manure as there were no fertilisers other than marl. The few tradesmen and craftsmen who gained most of their income from their specialist skills also had cattle and land as a supplement, and as a 'fall-back' when trade was depressed.

In the medieval period the ancient communally regulated cultivation of individually occupied strips in the large open-field system had been the norm. However, at some early date strips in these ancient fields became consolidated, sub-dividing the fields into larger units and single ownership. Some of the strips in the Town Field remained intact until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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In Over it seems that trades concerned with weaving were as important as farming. There are a websters living in the area and in some farming households there is specific mention of looms. At Knights Grange there were six spinning wheels and four looms 'furnyshed to weave Pole Davie' (a course canvas cloth used for sacks or sails) with stock to keep the looms going and the websters in work. Many other inventories mention yarn, hemp and towe again indicating weaving businesses.

In Wharton during the 17<sup>th</sup> century there were three estates or farms: these were Nun House, Duttons Farm, Tomlinsons Farm, Billows Heath House and Nun House Farm, the basis of the original parcel held by the nuns of Chester. They were not substantial properties and the houses were modest in size having only two or three hearths. The majority of the population were cottagers who lived in single-hearthed dwellings. Here agriculture was the normal way of life.

### *Lords of the Manor*

For the majority of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the lordship of the manor of Over was in the hands of the Pershall family. Edmund Pershall, a grocer and general merchant of London, was descended from a Staffordshire family and he bought the manor from the Holcroft family who had held it since the Dissolution of Vale Royal in 1538. In 1637, he was described as gaining a living 'by buying and selling of wools as a Merchant of the Staple', but as a business man he seems to have been unsuccessful as fell into serious debt.

In 1624, financial pressures were such that Edmund feared the loss of his estate and consequently conveyed some of his manors, lands and tenements to three business friends to hold in trust. That same year, his eldest son and heir, Robert, along with a London merchant, purchased a tenement and 100 acres of land from the estate causing creditors to complain that they being defrauded. Failing to come to terms with his creditors he was arrested for debt on 7 January 1626 and thrown into the Fleet prison. Subsequently, the High Court of Chancery directed that Edmund be tried for bankruptcy and at the Court of Common Pleas held at Westminster he was formally judged a bankrupt. On 22 December 1627, commissioners were appointed who found that he held the manor of Over, the rectory of Whitegate, its tithes, profits and patronage of the vicarage, and that these had been conveyed in trust to Sir John and Sir William Pershall. On 5 March 1628/9, the commissioners ordered new trustees to sell the manor to satisfy the creditors. During all this time Edmund languished in the Fleet prison, London, and died there on 26 March 1629. Efforts to resolve the bankruptcy case were not straightforward and it was not for another eight years before £1500 was raised from Edmund's lands to satisfy various creditors. On 12 December 1637, the rectory of Whitegate, various farms, messuages, tenements and cottages in Over and Whitegate were sold for £2228 6s. 8d. to Thomas Cholmondeley of Vale Royal.

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On 6 April 1637, Edmund Pershall's inquisition post mortem was held at Northwich. The jurors declared that he had held the manor of Over from the King and that it contained eighty messuages, twenty cottages, four water-mills, one horse-mill, and 4,650 acres of various land types, eight burgages, rents from various tenants and the profits of the courts of Over. The son and heir was then Edmund (presumably Robert had died earlier) who was aged twenty-two years when his father died. Between Edmund's death, 1629, and the date of the inquisition, 1637, the profits of Edmund's estate were drawn by his son Edmund, Thomas Cholmondeley of Vale Royal, Henry Lee of Darnhall and Ralph Bostock of Moulton.

Edmund Pershall, the son and next lord of the manor, sold the manor of Over for £2,400 to Thomas Cholmondeley. At this time Edmund and his brother Thomas had moved from their former home at Church Hill House, near the church, to occupy Handley Hill and Rutter's tenement in Over. Edmund was buried at Over on 2 June 1676 where a John Pershall, probably another brother was buried on 17 February 1675.

The other estates once owned by the ancient abbey of Vale Royal that had been sold off by the Holcroft family remained as seats of gentry families during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Darnhall was home to the Lee family. Marton was still the residence of the Mainwarings who had previously been abbey tenants there. In 1615, Vale Royal house and the surrounding lands were sold by Holcroft to Lady Mary Cholmondeley for £900. Knights Grange which had been sold within a few years of the Dissolution to the Starkie family was by the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century in the hands of the Cholmondeleys. There were one or two other smaller estates too, such as Woodford Hall, at one time held by the Maisterson family, Ways Green, Littler, Hepden, Handley Hill and Oak House.

### *Law and Order*

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century the people of Over, Whitegate, Marton, Swanlow, Blackden and Woodford were subject to the manorial court of Over. The court was technically known as a 'Court Leet with View of Frankpledge and a Court Baron'. The court sat twice a year in April or May and October. To each session the manorial tenants were summoned on pain of a fine. From those who attended the jury would be elected and at the October session the officials for the following year would be appointed. Firstly, the mayor, the most senior member of the community whose election needed the approval of the lord of the manor. The mayor was held in much respect and following his term of office continued to be respected by being bestowed the title of 'Alderman'. Once appointed, he presided over the court in the presence of the lord's steward who was a full time, legally trained official responsible for running the manor. Next, two constables were appointed, then two ale tasters, two burlymen (who enforced court orders), the town sergeant, mayor's sergeant, sealer of leather (who

John Widdington De/brode	
Thomas Widdington	2
John Widdington	spon y' h'nd'p'
George Widdington	s
John Widdington	spon'at
Rough man' de'ns	s
Richard Widdington	s
Randole Widdington	s
John Widdington De/brode	s
Rough Thun	s
Richard Widdington	s
John Widdington	spon y' h'nd'p'
Thomas Widdington De/brode	spon y' h'nd'p'
George Widdington	s
John Widdington	s
Maad Widdington	s
Rough Widdington	s
Thomas Widdington	spon y' h'nd'p'
Thomas Widdington	spon y' h'nd'p'
Thomas Widdington	s
John Widdington	spon y' h'nd'p'
Richard Widdington	s
Richard Widdington	s
Thomas Widdington	s
Richard Widdington	s
George Widdington	s
Thomas Widdington	s
John Widdington	s
Richard Widdington	s
John Widdington	spon'at
Richard Widdington	s
Richard Widdington	spon y' h'nd'p'
John Widdington	spon y' h'nd'p'

Fig: 32 17th century manor court roll showing part of the list of householders subject to its jurisdiction.

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checked on the quality of leather goods), heyward (who supervised hedges and fences) and four affeerors (who fixed the penalties for offences). These were all officials of the Borough of Over. Finally, the jury, known as the Grand Jury, numbering thirteen, were sworn in. For the surrounding country areas known as the Marton and Swanlow quarters, a second inquest was held with a further jury of thirteen, along with two constables, two ale tasters and two burleymen; a heyward of the Town Field was also appointed.

At these courts minor matters affecting the running of the manor and its customs were reported, judgement given, orders made and fines imposed. On 7 October 1662, Ralph Boden of Oak was ordered to rebuild his barn that had been blown down and to repair his kiln or pay 6s 8d. Similarly, John Dikes had to repair his house and ensure it was in a tenatable state. In April 1665, Widow Fletcher was ordered to scour Blakeden Moss Brooke along her ground and Ralph Holbrook of the Town was required to scour the brook up to Hebden Green. Other matters include householders being ordered to repair bad roads with shovels on pain of a fine of 10 shillings; setting stiles and gates; altering water courses; clearing rubbish and so on. Orders were made prohibiting the keeping of cattle in the Town Field, or of keeping sheep in lanes belonging to the Borough. Rights of way were sometimes in dispute and these would be enquired into by the courts and decisions made, often by perambulating the route.

Inn keepers and ale house keepers regularly infringed the Assize of Bread and Ale by which costs and measures were set and occasionally we learn of people fined for using false weights and measures, such as Elizabeth Entwistle in April 1665.

The courts heard complaints of misdemeanors such as poaching. At the April 1664 court, John Eaton, John Snelson, John Bosier, Edward Harington of the Heath, John Darlington, the miller, Robert Entersley of Close Gates and John Cluloe were ordered not to enter on the common with dogs. In October that year, Edward Robinson was fined 10s for taking partridges in a net. There were cases of assault also. The standard fine for affray or assault was 3s 4d., but if blood flowed the fine was doubled. On 27 October 1664, Richard Darlington of the Wood was fined for assaulting Richard Ellands, but when his son John attacked a Nantwich man and drew blood the fine was 6s. 8d.

During this period the church exercised control over both the clergy and the laity through its courts. The archdeacon, through the Consistory Court, strove to maintain ecclesiastical control over every-day life by disciplining the clergy, proving wills, awarding grants of administration, issuing licences and faculties along with other administrative matters, but, arguably, more importantly so far as the parishioners were concerned, by enquiring into complaints of immorality and matrimonial affairs. The court jurisdiction was wide - adjudicating in tithe disputes, wills and marriage contracts; punishing those proved to have committed libel or slander;

## BOROUGH COURTS AND CIVIL WAR

enquiring into cases of scandalous behaviour, seduction and bastardy. Even failure to attend church could land a person before the courts. The numerous extant case papers and files of evidence that testify to a community racked by niggling, back-stabbing, prying, gossiping and general meddling in other people's business. Whilst some might see the court as meddlesome, others might easily use the law to get one over on a troublesome neighbour or settling an old score. No doubt lies, perjury, prejudice and bribery played their part.

William and Dorothy Darlington were parties in an incest case of 1669. The couple resided with Dorothy's father in Darnhall after they were married for about six months. One day William caught his wife copulating with her father and left their home to live in Coddington. After eighteen months of separation Dorothy became pregnant by her father and arranged



*Fig: 33 St Chad's church and 'Widow Cooke's alehouse'.*

for John Evans, the local carrier, to move her to Liverpool to have the birth. Evidence was given that she had been promiscuous with many men including a Thomas Kelsall and at the time of the case was living with Hugh Robinson.

A particularly interesting case involved the local parson. One night in 1676, Joseph Darlington and his friend went to widow Cooke's alehouse by the church at Over. There they saw Abraham Smith the curate who was "full of ale". About midnight they were in an upper room when they heard quarrelling below; going downstairs they found James Kettle and Jonathon

Robinson were fighting and Smith being held back from the fight. After they had been quietened Smith started on Robinson by giving Robinson a thump on the ears. It seems that the quarrel was over a drinking challenge. In evidence Robinson stated that Smith was a man of civil and sober life, diligent in visiting the sick and other pastoral duties. However, it appears that he and the vicar, Littler Sheene, were not getting on very well. Sheene had apparently criticised the bishop of Chester as being sympathetic to Presbyterians and Smith with others had disturbed and hindered him in performing his duty on account of this. On one occasion Smith had

## WINSFORD: A HISTORY

locked the church door against the incumbent and placed a lock on the pulpit door. John Twemlow a witness for the vicar stated that Smith performed an act of marriage in Alice Barker's alehouse in Whitegate between Thomas Burroughs and Mary Dodd. Constable Darlington had attempted to serve Smith with a writ, but he snatched it, tore it up and declared he "cared not a fart for it". For the other side, Robinson gave evidence that Sheene had fathered two bastards on sisters Marjory and Mary Maddock. Interesting times!

John Bostock was accused by Peter and Ann Barker of slander in that as he passed Barker's house, on 2 February 1637, he shouted out to Peter "Cuckoe, where is Cuckold Barker". He repeated such things when Peter entered his shop suggesting he was a man who was ignoring his wife's infidelity.

Here is a sample of the many other cases that are recorded in the Consistory Court Books:

- 1595 Mary, wife of John Dutton cites Thomas Starkie of accusing her of adultery and bastardy
- 1616 Hamon Percivall, vicar, cites Elizabeth Entwistle for non-payment of tithes and Easter dues.
- 1621 Edward Billington cites Ann Billington for adultery.
- 1634 Robert Comberbach and Catherine Millington cited for adultery committed at Marton Hall.
- 1635 Robert Mainwaring cites Abraham Darlington for non-payment of tithes of grain.
- 1638 Peter and Ann Barker cite Ralph Bostock for slander.
- 1641 Thomas Baker versus Ralph and Alice Whittingham for causing his wife Dorothy to desert him
- 1663 Richard Garrett versus John Gandy for cozening (cheating).

### *The Civil War*

In November 1644, the city of Chester came under siege from Parliamentary forces under the command of Sir William Brereton. The state of affairs imposed by the leaguer (to use the contemporary term) was to last for a long fifteen months. The conditions endured by the residents of the city need not concern us here, other than to say that they suffered great hardship. Times were also hard for the inhabitants of the surrounding villages upon whom the besieging troops imposed themselves. Further out, the villages and townships of Malpas, Tarvin and Christleton suffered the inconvenience of permanent garrisons; but the effects of the tumultuous events of 1644-45 were felt even further afield.

During this time it is known that a detachment of Parliamentary soldiers was based at Darley Hall, Oulton, but was is not generally known is



*Fig: 34 Sir William Brereton,  
Parliamentarian Commander in  
Cheshire*

that Over was a garrison town too and suffered economically as a result.

The majority of cases of Over people suffering losses at the hands of Roundhead soldiers was during 1644/45, though the earliest occurrence of troops being quartered was in the first few months of 1643, 'a little before the first battle of Middlewich' (13 March). Raffe Houlbrooke of Over recorded a charge of 13s. 4d. for lodging ten men and ten horses under Brereton's command. In the spring of 1645, Yorkshire cavalry arrived in Cheshire and took a part in the sieges of Beeston and Chester. When Prince Rupert relieved Beeston, the

Yorkshiremen, under the command of a German mercenary, Major Hans George, withdrew to Over.

Claims for repayment of debts incurred by Parliament in Proposition money, free quarter and plunder seized by its forces and the sufferings of each of the freeholders and tenants of Over were separately recorded by the constables and their accounts still survive. The losses that the local people endured fall into three broad categories: livestock of all kinds; food and drink, that included barley, oats, peas, bacon, bread and, in particular, cheese. Other items included bedding, cloth, beds, clothes pewter ware, yarn, horse gear weaponry and even a ladies petticoat!

Thomas Harrison suffered the loss of two horses that were taken to 'ye leaguer at Beeston Castle' and a horse taken to the garrison at Darley with one nag, all valued at £5 11s. Richard Darlington had two horses, twelve sheep, two oxen, a calf and other cattle valued at £14 8s 4d taken by Parliamentary soldiers. Worse still was Robert Whittingham's situation, he lost thirteen cows, three heiffers, a calf, all his cattle, a nag, a three-years old filly, a colt and an old mare, all valued in excess of £40. In addition to his livestock, the following was seized: nine hundredweight of cheese, half hundredweight of 'new' cheese, malt, bacon, pewter, bedding, a new pair of boots, a new winnowing sheet, two pairs of horse gear and rope, all worth a further £10.

John Bosier's musket, several daggers, a boarding piece, a mare, a horse, two colts, six measures of oats, 28 shillings in cash were taken along with his son Thomas' sword, scabbard and belt and son Ralph's sword, scabbard, belt and fowling piece, all worth in excess of £14. Thomas Maisterson also had weapons taken: a fowling piece, three swords, two

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Quil Duffe 20 shillings of Quil his arrears for quartringe of the Parliament  
 soldiers during the time of war and which lesse he hath payed by Parliament  
 and Commandes as followeth

Item 2 foot soldiers of the rout this tresp. Undermain George and	6	0	0
2 horses 3 night 3 shill.			
Item 2 foot soldiers of Watlinges tresp. 1 day 1 night	1	0	0
Item 2 foot soldiers men 2 horses 7 day 7 night	0	3	0
Item 2 foot men of Capt. Colton soldiers 1 week	0	0	0
Item 2 foot men of Capt. Duffe soldiers 3 night	0	3	0
Item 2 men 2 horses of Yorkshire soldiers 1 night	0	2	0
Item 1 man 1 horse of Capt. Duffe soldiers 1 week	0	0	0
Item Capt. Duffe all the retent for a tresp. the the kept a best guard at night the horse of the said tresp. Duffe, & did not a shillings with their horse in a down a hay, & burned my few wood when wind depart & later Duffe Duffe the night after 2. p. the same retent soldiers under main George Command about one tresp. & a horse kept a guard in no horse 1 night & did not with their horse in a down a hay and their themselves in mouth a shillings to the value of	0	0	0
Item 2 men 2 horses of Staffordshire soldiers 1 week	0	14	0
Item 2 men 2 horses of Capt. Duffe soldiers 1 week	0	14	0
Staffordshire men one week			
Item 5 men 9 horses of Ludlowshire men 1 week	2	2	0
Item 2 foot men of Capt. Colton soldiers 2 day 2 night	2	0	0
Item 2 men 2 horses of Capt. Duffe soldiers 1 week	0	14	0
Item 2 men 2 horses of the Informant Duffe Belmore	0	4	0
Greenish 2 day 2 night			
Item 2 men 2 horses of Salwe Wood 1 week	0	9	0
Item 2 men 2 horses of Staffordshire soldiers 1 week	0	14	0
Item 2 men 2 horses of Capt. Duffe soldiers 1 night	0	2	0
Item 2 men 2 horses of Staffordshire soldiers 2 horse 2 night	0	4	0
Item 2 men of Capt. Duffe soldiers 4 night & horse	0	4	0
Item 2 men 2 horses of main Duffe soldiers 1 night	0	2	0
Sum	10	17	0
Lesse in Duffe 1 shillings & other necessary	0	6	0
Item Duffe for tents at the said Duffe Duffe did have in the said Duffe at a later to the appointment of a tresp. 10	0	0	0
Item Duffe for tents for the same 10 shillings	0	10	0
Item Duffe for the same 10 shillings for tent for the same 10 shillings	0	10	0
Item Duffe for the same 10 shillings for tent for the same 10 shillings	0	10	0
Sum	10	27	0

Fig: 35 Extract from the Over constable's account of losses incurred by Raffé Bostocke of Over during the Civil War

## BOROUGH COURTS AND CIVIL WAR

muskets and a bandelier, three stand-bows, one leading staff, two holbards, three black bills and two further sets of bandeliers. But that's not all - plate, worth £40, a flaggon, a pair of sheets, a carpet, two saddles, three hundredweight of cheese and a horse.

The people of the town of Over and the surrounding hamlets were considered as Royalist on the grounds that the local gentry were so regarded. The lord of the manor, Edmund Pershall, supported the Royalist cause during the Civil War. He saw active service and became a prisoner at the battle of Worcester on 20 July 1646. Both Edmund and his brother Thomas had been declared delinquents in May that year for having 'deserted their homes and adhered to the forces raised against Parliament'. Thomas was fined  $\frac{1}{6}$  of his income and Edmund  $\frac{1}{2}$ , a total of £300. Likewise, Thomas Cholmondeley of Vale Royal, was compounded as a delinquent for having taken a commission of array for the crown and being active in Chester during the siege there. He petitioned against the decision on the grounds that as he had been at the siege of Oxford and at its surrender he was subject to the benefits of the articles of surrender, nevertheless he was subjected to a fine of  $\frac{1}{10}$ , £1200. On appeal this sum was reduced to £450 upon condition that he settle the rectory of Over for the use of the minister along with an annual income of £50 from the tithes of the parish and £40 a year to the incumbent at Wettenhall.

Minor gentry too suffered for supporting the king. Thomas Maisteron of Woodford was compounded for being in Chester during the siege. However, his wife, Mary, petitioned that he only went to the city to see a doctor and then, due to the siege, was unable to return home. Nevertheless he was fined  $\frac{1}{4}$  - £630. Mary made a further appeal to reduce the fine to a  $\frac{1}{10}$  on the basis that Thomas was infirm and they had eight children to support. The appeal was dismissed. Poor John Cleaford was fined £18 for following his master, Thomas Cholmondeley, to Chester despite being much in debt and having six small children. John Minshull of Vale Royal was even worse off. Apparently, he went to Chester whilst it was being held for the king, and, though he never bore arms against Parliament, was elderly and living with his daughter and seven grand-children, he was fined £1000. This penalty was later reduced by £300 on the understanding he was to pay for a preacher at Minshull at a cost of £30 a year for ever. Other 'delinquents' who compounded included: Hugh Cholmondeley of Vale Royal, Elisiah Mainwaring of Marton, John Boden of Over, Arthur Barker of Whitegate, Robert Jackson of Vale Royal, Richard Whittingham of Over (who was dead by April 1648), Anne Nickson of Salterswall, Charles Whittingham of Over, Richard Barker of Over, Randle Burton, John Kettle and his son Ralph of Over, and Robert Boden of Whitegate. The estates of these major freeholders who had supported the king were placed under sequestration in addition the estates of Robert Maddock junior, and John Cooke.

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Coins of the period were discovered along Nixon Drive. A black cup contained a dozens of silver coins the latest of which bore the date 1643, a year before the time when Parliamentary troops were occupying the borough. It highly likely that they were hidden to prevent them falling into the wrong hands. A coronor's inquest declared them to be treasure trove and they are now in the Grosvenor Museum at Chester. Another hoard of silver half-crowns from the Restoration period was found a mile or son to the north and Gale Green and these are now at the British Museum. There being no banks, uncertain times forced people to secrete their hard-earned cash.



*Fig: 36 Hoard of 17th century coins found off Nixon drive, Over.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Winsford's Salt Industry and the Weaver Navigation

When exactly salt production started at Winsford is uncertain. An old source refers to a salt spring flowing into the river Weaver just north of Winsford Bridge and that by 1671 there were two small salt works here on the Over side of the river: one north of the bridge was worked by the Cholmondeley family of Vale Royal, the other, south of the bridge was occupied by Richard Vernon, attorney of Middlewich and one of the gentlemen appointed as 'undertakers' by the virtue of the Weaver Navigation Act, 1721. A map of the river Weaver surveyed and drawn in 1721 indicates the two salt works either side of the approach to the bridge: a note on the map says: "*Mr Vernons land and salt works up to Winsford Bridge*".



*Fig: 37 Winsford Bridge: the start of the Weaver Navigation, 1721*

Vernon's salt works was described as consisting of "a wych house, storehouse, stables, outhouses, a smithy, utensils, and a field, part of Wayes Green Farm, called Clovers Croft". The mention of the parcel of land helps position the works to the south of the bridge. Cholmondeley's salt works would have been described similarly.

An indenture dated July 1705 made by Richard Vernon, refers to

his salt house in Over, which he stated produced 40000 bushels of salt a year. Following his death in 1726 Vernon's property including the salt works in Over passed to John Crewe of Crewe Hall and another trustee with instructions that they sell the same "with all convenient speed" to pay of his debts.

In 1730 the trustees sold Vernon's works to Thomas Patten of Warrington and his partners, who then leased the same to Thomas Eyre & Company who had six pans at work in 1733. Eyre had originally been involved in the linen and silk trade in East Cheshire but had gradually increased his business activities to include the production of salt from brine

## WINSFORD: A HISTORY

along with the operation of wharfs, warehouses and barges in Winsford. He and Patten had advanced the scheme for building the Weaver Navigation. Following Eyre's death in 1735 Patten succeeded in the running of the salt works, warehouses and barges.

On 25 March 1724 an agreement was drawn up between Charles Cholmondeley of Vale Royal, William Toft, apothecary of Middlewich, and George Wilkinson, 'late of Middlewich and now of Winsford', yeoman for a lease of the Winsford Salt Works and a brine pit for £80 a year. It was declared that Cholmondeley would provide the bricks for supporting the pans, that he would pay any taxes or other dues laid on the premises, except for salt duty which was the responsibility of the lessees, and would pay for the maintenance and upkeep of the works, unless damage was caused by the negligence of workers. The grant makes it clear that there were four pans in operation at this site and that the tenants were to do all they could to encourage trade during their tenure. It seems that George Wilkinson continued to operate the site until at least 1733. In 1741 Charles Cholmondeley himself is shown as a shipper of salt suggesting that the tenancy previously held by Wilkinson was in abeyance at that time.

### *Isaac Wood*

In 1744 Isaac Wood, a local merchant took on an eight-years lease on Patten's works for £200 a year. He also had the use of the brine pit and a number of flats (barges for conveying salt) from Patten and became the leading salt producer in the area, having a virtual monopoly on the trade until his death in 1782 when he was succeeded by his widow Jane. He also traded in pig iron, pottery, pipe clay, stone, and other commodities.

During his lifetime Wood was shipping about three-quarters of the total tonnage of salt down the Weaver. He also traded in pipe clay, flint, earthenware, pig metal, slate and calamine and had about 85% of river trade in his hands. His flats, of which he had between six and eight, and his wharfs and warehouses were realising a profit of over £1000 a year.

By November 1757 Wood, then the chief river trader, was wealthy enough to purchase the works from Patten with the salt houses, brine springs, dwellings, buildings and lands for £3,700. He also bought land on the other side of the river in Wharton called Done's Meadow and Joynson's Meadow which lay just south of the bridge. This land had been previously purchased by Patten from the Joynson family and occupied by Wood for 'graving' or repairing boats. His land on this bank of the river, directly opposite his salt works, were to become the heart of Winsford. In September 1769, he extended his interests in Wharton by purchasing lands known as "the Banking and Croft upon the Hill" for £1050 from the representatives of the late Thomas Tomlinson in Wharton.

Isaac Wood, whose home had been Oak House in Over, situated high up on the ridge overlooking the river, died in 1781 and his widow Jane

continued the business. The importance of salt making is perhaps emphasised in Wood's will in which he specifically exempts his "*fflats, vessels, Boats and Tackling and the Pans, Grates and other Instruments and Implements for making salt*" from being sold to cover any debts and expenses.

Jane Wood continued to work the salt here in Winsford and was eventually joined in the business by John Roylance of Middlewich: she was succeeded by her son Isaac and his wife Annabella. The family continued to produce salt until the end of the century.

### *Salt Production*

Brine was generally found at about 100 feet below the ground though in some cases it could be found as near as about twelve yards down.

The traditional method for making salt was to boil brine using large iron pans of about twenty-five feet width and of varying lengths and containing about 800 gallons of brine. In a lease of a salt works dated 1808 the standard size of pan was stipulated as being '780 superficial feet', which gives a pan of either 30ft. by 26, or 39ft. by 20. The rent paid for brine extracted on the land was £25 per annum but this rent could be increased or decreased according to any subsequent alteration in the size of the pan and therefore the amount of brine used. The pans were supported on brick pillars inside sheds. The heat from a coal-fired furnace at one end of the pan was drawn under the pan in order to boil the brine. As the brine boiled salt crystals were formed and raked off to the side of the pan where they were collected and placed into wooden tubs. Once the excess moisture had drained off the salt set into blocks which were then removed from the tubs and dried in an adjoining hot house.

A salt works would typically include the pan house with its tall chimney from which smoke bellowed forth; a smith's shop; a cottage for the owner or occupying manager; the pit from which the brine was drawn; a cistern for storing the brine prior to boiling; a storage shed; a wharf where the flats would load the salt. At this time it was likely that the brine was drawn up by means of a pump necessitating a tall structure with wheels and pulleys over the pit.

Tax had to be paid on salt production. Salt was placed in bonded warehouses for storage and then as it was shipped out, or sold, the tax became due. As early as 1704 there is reference to a Humphrey Ogle the 'salt officer at Winsford'. For much of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the tax was 3s 4d per bushel of 56 pounds, or about £6 a ton. The tax later rose to 15 shillings a bushel or £30 a ton at the turn of the century but was then lowered to 2s a bushel or £4 per ton in 1823, and then abandoned altogether in 1825. Added to the tax there were charges for using the Weaver Navigation, which meant that salt was an expensive commodity.

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Although in relation to Northwich and Middlewich the output of salt was still small, we do not know exactly how small because the shipments from Winsford included salt from Middlewich. In the 1750s between 1,000 and 2,500 tons of white salt were shipped from Winsford and then during the 1760s, 70s and 80s between 3,000 and 4,000 tons. In the year 1786-7 the tonnage was recorded as being 8,758. The reasons for the increase in trade are not clear though new markets on the Continent may have opened up. Certainly the year saw the arrival on the Winsford scene of the German Henry Wilkens in partnership with Jane Wood and John Roylance. A Liverpool business man he already had a salt mine at Marston and was the first of a series of German, Dutch and Danish entrepreneurs who began to produce and transport salt. The following year it was up again to nearly 11,000 tons and by the end of the century had reached over 38,000 tons.

Following on from the success of both Cholmondeley's and Wood's salt works on the Over side of the river many enterprising gentlemen sought permission from the Cholmondeley family, who owned most of the land in Over, to create their own salt works on the flat stretches beside the river between Winsford and the lands below Knights Grange. Thomas Cholmondeley agreed to let out plots on fifty-year leases. These had a clause that if no salt was found on the land then the lease could be surrendered without penalty.

The entrepreneurs who obtained leases were not always local men, nor were they men who had previous experience in producing salt. Seemingly for those with sufficient excess capital the salt industry was something worth becoming involved in. In August 1802 Messrs John O'Kell & Co. leased fields on the Knights Grange estate with a thirty yards river frontage for fifty years. The parties forming the company were Joseph Goulden, a merchant of Anderton, William and George Holland timber merchants of Northwich and John O'Kell, a gentleman of Sandiway. The lease acquired by these men included a salt works along with 'all brine pits, salt rock pits, reservoirs, canals, sluices, windmills, engine houses and storehouse'. The annual rent was £100 for first thirty years and then £142 for remaining period. A provision in the lease was that a storehouse measuring fifty yards in length by thirty wide and four high was to be erected with four pan houses. In addition they had to sink a brine pit and erect engines to pump the brine which was to be refined on this or other lands owned by Cholmondeley and not sold away. The lease stipulated that if no brine was found then the lease holders could sink one or more pits on neighbouring Knights Grange land that had not already been leased for salt, and if, after sinking these pits to at least fifty-five yards no brine was found the lease could be terminated. In 1803 the same parties, under the name of Joseph Goulden & Co., acquired some six acres of land adjacent to Knights Grange with the object of getting rock salt, but they do not appear to have persisted in their purpose. This lease was to be inoperative if good rock salt

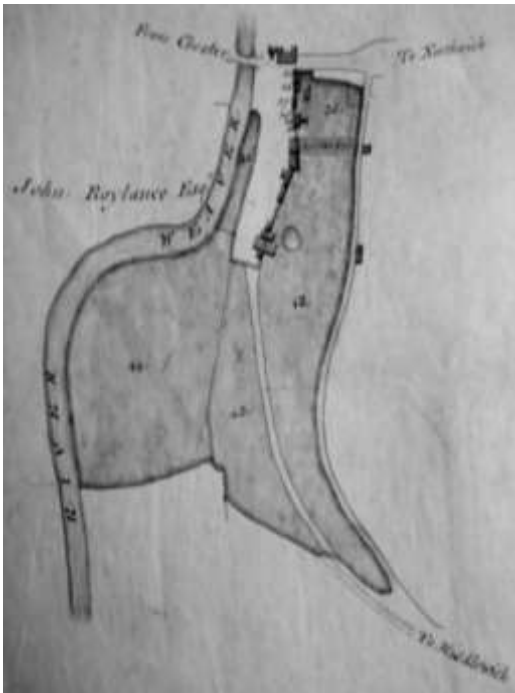
## WINSFORD'S SALT INDUSTRY

was not obtained or if rock salt becomes worked out or the mine destroyed by water or other unavoidable accident.

Throughout the decade several more leases were taken out for plots of land along the western bank of the Weaver. With some the option to obtain rock-salt was included in the terms at an extra cost. Marshal & Co., Davenport, Done & Co., Dudley & Co., Rankin Okel & Co., Taylor, Done & Co, are a sample of company names involved in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of these the name of Dudley grew to prominence especially on the Wharton side of the river.

As a result of the establishment of these several works a succession of different people are found to be shipping salt, often for just a few years at a time, men such as Lowe, Stringer, Seaman, Chesworth and Marshall.

### *Wharton's Salt Works*



*Fig: 38 Winsford in the 1750s, showing the beginnings of what was to become the Market Place. The Red Lion and the Royal Oak public houses are indicated.*

The Wood family established a small salt works in Winsford with their purchase of land here in the late 1750s, but the real growth of Winsford began after 1796, following John Dudley's prospecting for brine. Spurred on by the success he saw on the other side of the river Dudley began prospecting on his own land. Tradition states that for a time he was unsuccessful and was about to abandon his search, when one of his men said he would have another 'dig'. The supply of brine then found which gushed out with such force that the men had difficulty in getting out of the shaft. A salt works was

immediately constructed around the site and became the first in Wharton and the beginning of what was to become one of the largest of the works on this side of the river. From 1797 the Dudley name became, either alone or

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in partnership, one of the most prominent amongst salt producers during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### *The Weaver Navigation*

Whilst salt was the catalyst that created Winsford the navigation of the River Weaver downstream from here certainly facilitated it and the eventual abandonment of salt taxes in 1825 provided an added incentive.

One of the most important and controversial issues of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century was the improvement of the River Weaver to make it a navigable waterway from Frodsham Bridge upstream as far as Winsford. Inland white salt making in the 18<sup>th</sup> century grew with rising home demand and the expanding export market stimulated by Liverpool's involvement with the slave trade. A major event of the century, supported by the Liverpool merchants, was the passing of the Weaver Navigation Act. For those who supported the idea this would support the rock-salt mining industry by making it more viable, whereas those in opposition saw the move as being counter to the interests of the brine boiling industry and the reciprocal trade in coal to the salt boilers. The initiative had been proposed as early as 1663 following which there were some unsuccessful attempts in 1670, 1710 and 1715 to obtain an Act of Parliament. Finally a Bill was introduced in January 1720 which successfully passed through both Commons and Lords to receive Royal Assent in March 1721, having had a majority of twenty votes in the Commons. The preamble to the Bill says it all: "Whereas the making of the river Weaver alias Weever, alias Wever, navigable for boats, lighters, and other vessels, from Frodsham Bridge, in the county of Chester, to Winsford Bridge in the same county, will not only be very beneficial and convenient as well for the carriage of salt and cheese (the great manufactures and produce of the said county) as of other foods and merchandises to and from the town and parts adjacent, but will employ the poor, and be a means to preserve the highways in the said county and will very much tend to the employing and increase of watermen and seamen and be for the good of the people....". Supplements to the Navigation Act confirmed the course of the waterway as far as Winsford Bridge. Two other extensions, one along the Weaver as far as Nantwich, and another to improve the River Dane as far as Middlewich never materialised.

The Weaver Navigation Act appointed three Cheshire gentlemen to be 'undertakers' of the project: John Egerton of Oulton, Leftwich Oldfield of Leftwich and John Amson of Lees. Associated with these men was the Middlewich attorney named Richard Vernon. The initial estimate for the cost of the work was £9000 raised by subscription from local gentlemen including Egerton who gave £1000, Amson £500, and Vernon a further £1000. For about eight years almost little was done to further the scheme and in frustration business men with local interests - Thomas Patten, his

brother Jonathan Patten of Manchester, Thomas Eyre of Wharton and John Dickenson of Manchester - offered to take over as 'undertakers' and proceeded to build the canal. Once work began in 1730 it took only two years and about £20,000 before flats (sailing barges) began to operate up and down the river.

Unfortunately for the Winsford salt proprietors and other businessmen a collapse of the lock at Northwich in 1757 as a result of subsidence meant that the Navigation beyond Northwich's Town Bridge became un-useable. For nearly two years goods had to be transported by road adding time and cost. Isaac Wood attempted to gain some compensation from the Weaver Navigation authorities without success. Plans were laid for a canal to be built through Clive to Middlewich to give additional transport options but these were blocked by the Navigation Trustees.

There were also bills for the road between Middlewich and Winsford to be improved by repairing and widening between 1753 and 1779 and the Navigation Trustees commissioned improvements of the road by laying down gravel in November 1784. It is likely that during this time the road became a more direct route unlike the old road that wound its way through Clive and along Rilshaw Lane to approach Winsford from the south.

Control over the running of the Navigation was, according to the Act in the hands of Commissioners, though in practise it was down to the undertakers. The Commissioners did however appoint and oversee the work of the administration staff of clerks and inspectors of tonnage and pay their salaries out of the tonnage dues. Isaac Wood was a clerk of the Navigation based at Winsford at a salary of £40 p.a., but his activities in trade on the river required him to resign from his post in 1735.

Tonnage shipped along the Weaver from Winsford and Northwich north towards Frodsham increased steadily. In the first year 7,954 tons of rock salt, 6,988 tons of white salt, 2,635 tons of coal, 534 tons of paving stone, 226 tons of oak and timber, 220 tons of limestone, 167 tons of merchants goods, 127 tons flint stone, and 79 tons of pipe clay. The 'merchants goods' included imports such as brandy, port, wine, tobacco, sugar, molasses, prunes, raisins, anchovies and train oil. Boat accessories, such as blocks, rope, ocham, anchors, and mast poles came upstream. Exports included 'crateware' (pottery goods) and cheese. But the transport of salt and coal dominated. Winsford's trade was about a third of Northwich's and included goods to and from Middlewich.

In succeeding years, despite the increasingly high rates of transportation, the volume of goods up and down the Weaver Navigation continued to increase. In 1742/3 nearly 31,500 tons of goods, including iron ore, were shipped and that same year twenty-nine boats were recorded as taking goods to Winsford with a total of 236 cargoes. For example the *Hope* loaded twenty-one cargoes at Winsford. In 1752/3, 43,126 tons were carried, again including iron ore. Imports at this time included cotton and hides. In 1762/3 the total tonnage for the river was 76,952 tons of which

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Winsford's portion was 8,805 tons. Ten years later, in the 1770s, tonnage was up three-quarters on the 1760s with a grand total of 118,905 tons. Of this Winsford was responsible for 14,899 tons.

Completion of Trent and Mersey canal in 1778 had an adverse effect on Winsford with about half of the Potteries and Middlewich trade going by the new canal. So that in 1782/3 the total river trade was down against what had previously been a rising trend and of this Winsford contributed less than half what it had been doing previously and shipped only 1,885 tons of salt – the lowest ever recorded. This decreasing volume resulted in the post of inspector of tonnage at Winsford being abolished in 1784. In the last decade of the century there was some improvement to a total of 159,527 tons along the Weaver from Northwich, of which Winsford then provided about 25,200 tons.

One of the commodities being shipped along the Weaver was iron ore. This product, a high grade hematite ore from west Cumberland was smelted locally using charcoal to produce the iron sheets required to make the large salt pans but little is known about the operation. On the banks of the river Weaver, somewhere near to the Vale Royal mansion, a blast furnace had been established for some time. In 1696-97 the cost of purchasing and transporting 605 tons of hematite ore from Cumberland to Vale Royal was just over £984. The iron making site was acquired by Abraham Darby of Coalbrookdale, Shropshire, and his brother-in-law Thomas Baylies around 1716. However it was not until after Darby's death in 1717 that the partnership actually took possession and then lacking sufficient capital Baylies, who then resided at nearby Marton, entered into a partnership with Charles Cholmondeley of Vale Royal and two other gentlemen. However despite Cholmondeley's backing the enterprise was short lived and caused substantial losses to those involved.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Urbanisation of Winsford

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century both Over and Wharton were very much agricultural areas and the Borough of Over provided what any market town would for the local community. For much of the century agriculture had remained the main form of employment, but the character of the area was changing with the advent of the salt trade and the transport opportunities provided by the Weaver Navigation. At the end of that century Over and Wharton were fast becoming a single industrial area with an ever expanding population. In 1810 the population of Over, including the Darnhall area stood at 1,971, and the population of Wharton was 888.

George Ormerod, in his great work on Cheshire, first published in 1819, says of Over:

*It consists of a street nearly a mile long on the road from Middlewich to Chester..... The township is terminated at Winsford Bridge by the Weaver, at a distance of about one mile east from the town; but the intervening space, from the great increase in population in consequence of the salt-works, forms nearly an uninterrupted street. On the south at about twice this distance, the other hamlet of Over Swanlow is terminated by the Ash Brook; this part represents the appearance of an irregular village of farm houses scattered on the sides of sandy lanes. The greatest part of the whole is the property of Thomas Cholmondeley, esq., under whom are farmed the long succession of salt works, extending along the Weaver from Winsford towards Vale Royal. Where this line commences, every natural beauty of course gives way before the smoke, the machinery, and the various nuisances inseperable from the manufacturing population. The face of the country is otherwise pleasing, and after leaving the bank of the Weaver, the views towards Beeston, the Broxton hills, and the fertile and well wooded district intervening, are particularly interesting. ”*

This account suggests that in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century there were three distinct areas. The Borough of Over laid out along what is now Delamere Street; the street leading down to Winsford Bridge, along which a significant part of the population lived; and the scattered farms and sandy lanes of Swanlow. Much of the natural scenery of the Weaver valley seems to have been obliterated by the numerous salt works and the consequent plumes of smoke.

The number of companies producing salt continued to grow in the first few decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially with a series of reduction in the

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salt tax and its eventual abolition in 1825. A consequence of this was the migration of hundreds of people from the countryside into Over and Wharton, attracted by the prospect of employment. By the mid 1820s there were salt works on both sides of the river Weaver: on the Over side there were fourteen works running north from Winsford Bridge, and on the Wharton side a further three. According to Bryant's map of Cheshire dated 1831 there were only four salt works on the Over side: moving north from Winsford Bridge towards Meadow Bank these were Court's, Dudley's, Long's, and Wood's. On the other side of the river there were five salt works: Done's which stood just north of the bridge, then Leigh's, Dudley's, Perrin's, and lastly New Works near to the Moulton boundary.

Originally the salt industry in Over and Wharton had been small but then in 1785-6 there was an almost doubling of salt production from 4,436 tons to 8,758 tons an increase in trade that would continue. In 1815 the tonnage of salt from Winsford topped 100,000 and then rose to nearly 330,000 forty years later. By 1840 Winsford had eclipsed Northwich in the production of white salt, although Northwich continued to dominate the rock-salt trade. In 1860 there were 416 pans and over 1,000 workers in Winsford and by 1884 a total of 813,100 tons were produced: a hundredfold increase in a century.

During the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries there had been nearly 300 individual salt manufacturers and shippers. Names such as Wood, Lowe, Stringer, Chesworth, Barrow, Ball, Marshall, Docksey, Mort, Easthope, Smith, Seaman, Leah, Roylance and Court frequently appear as salt traders in the 1760s, 70s and 80s. This was a time for entrepreneurs, the vast majority of whom operated for only a few years. But a few operators lasted a long time, men such as William Court who traded salt along the Weaver for forty-four years.

Whilst the salt trade was important and created many job opportunities and ensured that there was a hub of activity around Winsford Bridge there were other industries established during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Over and Wharton.

### *Over Cotton Mill*

A cotton spinning and doubling mill stood just off what was then known as Winsford Lane, later the High Street, in Over. It was built in 1869/70 by Messrs Abraham Haigh and Son, on land they acquired where water was available from a spring located on what is now Spring Bank and from wells in the vicinity of Well Street. The Haighs were a wealthy family from Ashbourne, Derbyshire, and had purchased Darnhall Hall in 1861. They built Over Hall as the family home after selling Darnhall in 1871.



*Fig: 39 Haigh's cotton factory in Over*

Haigh's steam driven factory was equipped with the most up-to-date machinery. The company also built terraced cottages nearby for the mill workers. A new community grew among the newly formed streets around the factory with shops, a Methodist chapel and public houses. The building consisted of six floors which were occupied by over 300 hands, both men and women. Many of the workers were newcomers to the area having been recruited from areas with a tradition of cotton spinning such as Macclesfield and Congleton in Cheshire, Lancashire and Derbyshire. In an effort to persuade people to come to Over, Haigh offered loans of between £6 and £8 for travel costs; these had to be repaid at the rate of one shilling a week.

Spinning was very much a family concern. Complete families would work in the mills, including children. It was not until the Factory Act, 1874, that an age limit of nine years was imposed. Hours of work were long: from 1847 the day for women and young people was eleven hours a day to a maximum of sixty-three hours a week. Generally the working day started at 5.30am and could continue until 8.30pm, though for women and young people it tended to be from 6am to 6pm. Men could work any hours including night shifts.

The mill was destroyed by a fire in 1874 with the loss of eight lives. Those who perished were buried in the grounds of the new St. Johns church on Delamere Street where a memorial was erected to their memory. As a result of the fire Mr Haigh was forced to raise a mortgage on Over Hall and his lands, but within two years he was filing for bankruptcy. The family name remains in streets named after them – Lower Haigh and Upper Haigh Streets, where some of the houses were built from bricks taken from the old factory and from its chimney which was finally pulled down in 1904. This was not the end of cotton milling in the township for a new fustian mill,

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known as Over Mill, was opened a few yards away from the site of Haigh's mill in John Street in 1886.

In Wharton there were two fustian mills: one in Dierden Street and the other along Station Road.

### *Other Industries*

Near to the bridge on the Wharton side of the river the Bradbury family of Wharton Villa had a factory where bones were ground to make fertilizers and bone-meal for use in the production of bone china. Near to this there was a meat processing factory which together with the bone factory produced an incredible stench that prompted Fletcher Moss to remark: "Up the long hill from Winsford to Over...amidst perfumes indescribable..."

A consequence of the Weaver Navigation and the salt trade was the formation of a boat building industry. William Cross who had timber yards alongside the river in Wharton, established a 'flat and boat building' business. In 1841 he employed thirteen shipwrights, a ship's carpenter and a sail maker along with a further thirteen skilled men and a number of labourers. Subsequently other ship yards were established so that by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were six well equipped dock yards.



**Fig: 40** *Darnhall Hall, c.1900*

*The Countryside*

The traditional, rural ways of life continued and there were many opportunities for employment on the numerous farms and gentry estates. And whilst the landscape of the area around Winsford Bridge had turned brown, black and grey there was still a good deal of greenness.

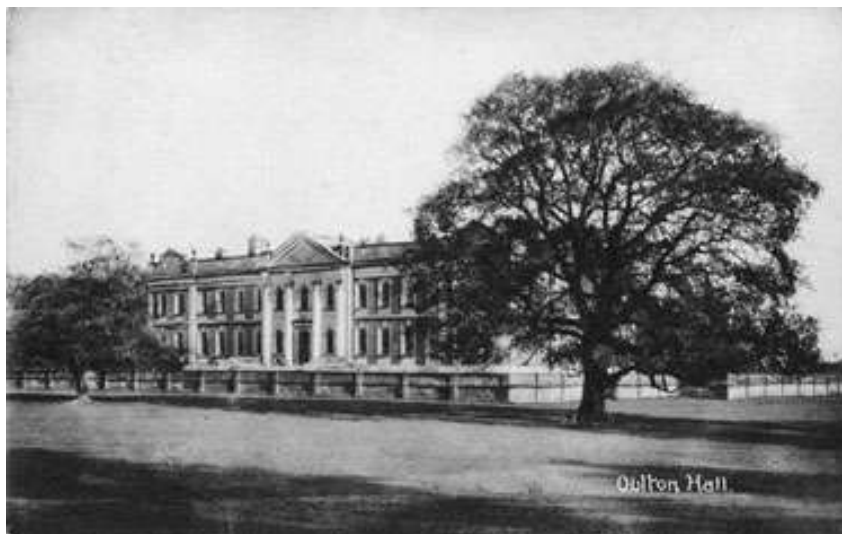
Darnhall Hall was the home of the Corbet family until they left in 1846. They were a highly respected family and the last of their name was known, took off his overcoat and gave it to a poor old man who was shivering at the gates of St Chad's church. Every Christmas he had a bullock killed to provide meat for the poor of Darnhall township. When the Corbets left the hall became the home of the Verdin family. Their lands covered much of the southwest corner of today's Winsford, in the area of Swanlow and Darnhall, providing employment opportunities and housing for many.

Here cattle and sheep were reared, a variety of crops were grown and the woodland and willow beds were managed. The estate even had its own public house – the Raven Inn – which until recently was still serving alcohol but is today empty and neglected.



**Fig: 41** The 'Raven Inn', part of the Darnhall estate. Today it lies derelict.

The Cholmondeleys dominated affairs in these parts of mid-Cheshire from their pile at Vale Royal. Thomas Cholmondeley was elevated to the peerage as Lord Delamere in 1821 and he commissioned many improvements to the old house some of which were designed by John Douglas, the renowned Cheshire architect. As with the Verdins, their extensive estates, which included most of Whitegate and Over, provided



*Fig: 42 Oulton Hall as it was before the tragic fire of 1926*

much employment and accommodation for local people, especially since Lord Delamere was lord of the manor of Over.

Oulton Hall with its extensive park in Little Budworth was home to the Egerton family. The hall no longer stands as it was destroyed by fire in 1926 claiming six lives. That hall, designed by Vanburgh and improved by Lewis Wyatt, had replaced an earlier 15<sup>th</sup> century house that had also been engulfed in flames. The gardens and parklands had been laid out by the celebrated landscape gardener William Eames and William Webb.

Bostock Hall built by Samuel Wyatt for the Tomkinson family was purchased by the France family in 1792 and subsequently became the home of the France-Hayhurst family. By making various purchases of land and through inheritance the family amassed a large domain stretching across Cheshire. The family were particularly interested in farming and introduced many new farming practises on the estate. As benevolent landlords they provided estate housing for their employees and established the village at Bostock Green. Not only did the family own the whole of Bostock they also owned a substantial part of Wharton along with a few salt works.

In Wharton there were a number of large houses and whilst the owners of these houses were predominantly industrialists they also owned agricultural lands around and about their homes. Wharton Hall was a Georgian House and home to the Armstrong family. Opposite stood Wharton Lodge, home of the Dudley family who were so prominent in the production of salt. Oaklands another substantial house and gentleman's residence stood on the other side of the railway line and was the home of the Perrin family and then the Armstrongs.

*The Borough of Over*

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the traditional forms of commerce through shops, markets and annual fairs along with the administration of the Borough of Over continued much as it had always done. The heart of the borough was Delamere Street.



*Fig: 43 Delamere Street, Over, the heart of the Borough of Over, c.1890s*

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the manorial court was presided over by the mayor of Over and held in May and October. The upper room of the George and Dragon public house was used for the purpose. At the October session of the court, the mayor would be appointed from a list of names submitted to Lord Delamere. Once appointed the mayor took the position of Justice of the Peace for the borough along with Swanlow and Marton. As a JP he had the right to sit on the bench at Quarter Sessions alongside the richer land-owning members of the gentry.

Normal business of the court involved two juries – the ‘Grand Jury’ for the borough and ‘Second Jury’ for Swanlow and Marton areas or ‘quarters’. They decided on petty criminal and civil matters and also issued trading licenses, especially those for public houses.

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*Fig: 45 'The George & Dragon' public house in which the old manorial and borough courts were held.*



*Fig: 46 Ancient cottages that once stood along Delamere Street, Over, c. 1890s*



*Fig: 44 The regalia of the Borough of Over*

## CHAPTER SIX

**Victorian New Town**

**I**n the night of Sunday, 6 June 1841 the first detailed census of people living in England and Wales was undertaken – previously, there had only been a basic count of population every ten years. This shows that the population of Over in 1841 was 2,816 and that of Wharton 1,400. Of the total of 4,216, 173 actually lived in what was then Winsford, the area below Winsford Hill and around the market. The population that had more than doubled since the beginning of the century and was to continue to rise so that by the end of Queen Victoria's reign the population of the Winsford Urban District was about 10,500 with approximately two-thirds living on the Over side of the river. Population growth was of great significance in the development of the townships of Over and Wharton and what was to become the new town of Winsford.

In 1857 a substantial iron bridge was constructed to join the two districts. This replaced an earlier single arch stone bridge. As a consequence of subsidence the new bridge had to be raised on three occasions in 1871, 1876 and 1882. It was finally rebuilt in 1929 at a cost of £5000 by the Cheshire County Council.

*Winsford Town*

The Winsford Local Board was formed on 27 July 1875. Its first clerk was the solicitor John Henry Cooke, who became an energetic reformer of social conditions in Winsford. Up until then neither Over nor Wharton had any public water supplies, sewage systems, lighting or proper footpaths. Water was obtained by Over residents from a pump at the end of Well Street and both townships were strewn with privies and cess-pits. Standards of hygiene were so poor that deaths from cholera were a constant problem so it became the responsibility of the Board to overcome these problems. Some parts of Over had been lit by gas from the works established in 1858 at the bottom of Weaver Street and this was extended throughout the town. Water was piped from a water tower at Oakmere and then treated and pressurised again by the Local Board at their works in Over. Sewage was processed in filter beds alongside the flashes using basses or clinker from the residue of the coals burned in the salt works: the process worked so well it attracted the attention of many other towns.

In addition to its industrial back-drop, the growth of the new town attracted commerce of all sorts. Both Wharton and Over had market halls. The Market Hall situated in Winsford was built of brick in 1859 by a group of gentlemen who formed the Winsford Town and Market Hall Company in

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*Fig: 48 The 'Red Lion', Market Place, Winsford, c.1900*



*Fig: 47 Three taverns in a row: 'Ship' 'Flatmans' and 'Coach and Horses', Market Place, Winsford, c.1900*



*Fig: 49 Shop premises in Market Place, Winsford, c. 1900*



*Fig: 50 Winsford Town Hall, c.1900*



**Fig: 51** Winsford Bridge looking down from Wharton Hill, c. 1900

order to regulate the timings of the market and make it more beneficial for traders. The unstable ground meant it had to be re-built in 1876 when the upper part was finished in timber. The market was held every Saturday afternoon until eleven o'clock. Here butchers, greengrocers and cheese merchants plied their ware alongside local farmers' wives with their own eggs, butter and fruit. In Over there had been a market hall along Delamere Street since 1840 when a company was formed to build it. This brick built building was home to a Wednesday market that had been established in 1280 but had fallen into disuse during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lord Delamere then purchased all the shares in the market in 1858 and as it became obsolete due to the Winsford Market it was converted into a school. Wharton had its fairs in May and November and Over on Wednesdays in mid May and at Michaelmas.

The success of the market enabled the proprietors to buy the market rights from the lord of the manor of Wharton, William Hosken Harper of Davenham, and to erect, in 1872, a town hall on land between the market and the bridge and backing on to the river. The Winsford Town Hall was made from wood and plaster work due to the problems of subsidence which was somewhat fortuitous as seven years later it had to be raised up by eight feet and have new foundations laid. The ground floor was occupied by lock-up shops and the floor above provided a large open room for seating about 100 people as a venue for meetings and local gatherings. Eventually this became Winsford's first cinema, then a billiards hall and then, lastly a night club.

In Over commercial premises were concentrated along the bottom half of the High Street and along Delamere Street on top of the ridge, the home of the ancient borough. In 1850 they consisted of eight beerhouses, four

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blacksmiths, seven boot and shoe makers, seven butchers, three chemists and druggists, five grocers, five linen and woollen drapers, six provision dealers, nineteen salt works, one boat builder, eleven shopkeepers, six tailors, two tinnerns and braziers, two watch and clock makers and four wheelwrights. However, farming was still an important aspect of the local rural economy as there were twenty-seven farmers. Professional people lived here too: doctors, lawyers, insurance agents, members of the clergy and veterinary surgeons. Likewise in Wharton there were ten beer houses, three boot and shoe makers, twelve shopkeepers, four tailors, nine farmers and sixteen proprietors of salt works. A bone and button manufactory and boat building yards. Two distinct self-contained and self-sufficient communities linked by the manufacture of salt and the river.

In 1860 James Leigh, a cobbler, and William Denson formed the Winsford Co-operative Society. Capital was raised to buy land at the



*Fig: 52 The 'Old Star', Swanlow Lane. A popular public house today.*

bottom of the High Street in Over, near to the Town Bridge, on which to build a shop and a loan was obtained to purchase stock. Despite some early problems with its running, the organisation became very successful and by the end of the century had extended up the High Street with a pharmacy, cake shop, grocery, butchers, clothing shops, a restaurant, a coal yard and its own bakery.

Given the very thirsty nature of salt making there were numerous inns, taverns and beer houses in both communities. On Delamere Street there were the 'Black Bear', 'Bricklayer's Arms', 'Crown', 'Gate', 'George and Dragon', 'Red Lion', 'Wheatsheaf', and 'White Lion'. On the High Street

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houses such as the 'Albert', 'Bull's Head', 'Butcher's Arms', 'Forester's Arms', 'Fox and Hounds', 'Golden Lion', 'Pig and Whistle', 'Queen's Arms', 'Rechabites' Rest', 'Travellers' Rest', 'Weaver Arms', 'White Swan', and a further eleven public houses elsewhere including the 'Rifleman' on Weaver Street and the 'Star' on Swanlow Lane. There were also numerous licensed beer house keepers in unnamed properties. In the Winsford Market Place stood the 'Red Lion', 'Ark', 'Royal Oak' 'Swan', 'Flatmens Tavern', 'Ship', and 'Coach and Horses'. Elsewhere in Wharton there were a further nine public houses including the 'Brighton Belle' by the railway station, the 'North western Hotel' (now the 'Top House') and the 'Sailor's Tavern' on Hill Street, along with numerous unnamed beer houses.

In Over a purpose built police station was built along the High Street and opened in 1884: it had cells, court room upstairs and accommodation for a sergeant and two constables. It still stands but has now been converted into apartments. Wharton also had its police station and a house for the resident sergeant and it too still stands as a barber's shop.



*Fig: 53 Over police station, High Street, Over, c.1900*



*Fig: 54 The old Wharton police station.*

### *Housing and Social Amenities*

The increases in industry and the workforce changed the character of Over and Wharton for ever: no longer typical Cheshire agricultural townships based on a small village centre. Now, what had been a small industrial enclave around Winsford Bridge had expanded into the neighbouring fields and lanes. Hastily built terraced cottages were constructed along the main thoroughfares to house the growing population joined by narrow side streets lined by similar properties with their yards and back-allies. The same observer quoted earlier in the last chapter continued his description of the district by saying: “the light of the sun is darkened by smoke, the stench is horrible; what should be fields are tracts of blackened slime where the skeletons of trees stand gaunt and withered”.

The various salt works established cottages near to for their workers. In 1841, in Wharton the four salt works of Patent, Dudley, Leigh and Done had twenty-four houses housing 125 people. Thirty years later the ten salt works had between them thirty-four houses or cottages for 141 people. Often it was the case that the works foreman or agent occupied one of the properties.

A particular form of housing was created by Herman Falk, the owner of the Meadow Bank salt works and the Rock Salt Mine. He built for his workers a series of houses at Meadow Bank for his employees using a material known as ‘basse clinker’. This was the waste product from the cheap coal used in the salt furnaces which was then used to build the walls of the cottages. These single storey cottages (though there were a few with an upstairs) had ordinary brick quoins to the doors and windows. Despite

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this apparent benevolence Falk was not concerned with how his workers lived as many existed in overcrowded and insanitary conditions, a situation which attracted the attention of the medical authorities and the national press. Falk also built the Meadow Bank School in 1872 from the same base material and paid for the staff who supervised 200 children. Five years later the running of the school was taken over by the Over School Board, but the Falk family continued to occupy themselves with the school by examining the children and providing equipment and prizes. The base houses were demolished during the 1940s and a new school was built in 1912.

In 1857 the Winsford Gas Works was opened providing the first form of lighting. The works were situated at the bottom of the High Street and its junction with Weaver Street, where today the new college building stands.

The occasion of Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887 was an opportunity

### *Education*

The massive increases in population seen during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century necessitated the provision of a number of schools. Despite the various origins of the schools they eventually were all controlled by the local School Board formed in 1876.

Originally education was provided in Over by a privately endowed school which was established in 1689 for children from Over, Whitegate and Weaver: the site of the original school in Darnhall is now a farm house. In 1894 the school was moved to the site it now occupies.

Along Weaver Street there was a school associated with Christ Church endowed by the Trustees of the Weaver Navigation in 1840 to provide education for over three hundred children. Eighteen years later the Over Market Hall in the heart of the town of Over was converted into a National School, known as St John's, for 430 children. Then in 1876 another school was established along the High Street for 581 children. This latter school was subsequently enlarged in 1879, 1880 and 1906 in order to accommodate 900 pupils. In Wharton a privately endowed school had existed since 1805 but in 1846 it became the Wharton National School for 400 children, with a boys school for 300 being added in 1880.

Religious schools were established too. The Church of England school in Gladstone Street was built in 1909 for 300 children. The Wesleyan Methodists had a school in Over Lane (High Street). Wharton National School was opened in; there had been an earlier school on this site since 1805.

William Henry Verdin considered technical education as necessary for the advancement of industry and he proposed to turn Darnhall School into a technical institution but this was rejected in 1893. So two years later the Verdin Trust was formed from which the Verdin Technical School was established. Subsequently this became the Secondary School for Higher

Education and then the Winsford Verdin Grammar School and then the Verdin Comprehensive.

### *Churches*

The care of people's spiritual needs were recognised by the building of new churches in both Over and Wharton. In Over, on land overlooking Winsford Bridge, Christ Church was built and opened in 1844 by the trustees of the Weaver Navigation, mainly for the use of watermen and their families. Originally built of stone and timber with a square tower surmounted by a spire, it became unsafe due to subsidence and was re-built in timber and plaster in 1881.



*Fig: 55 St John's church, Over.*

Wharton lay in the parish of Davenham and as this was somewhat inconvenient for residents to attend a chapel of ease

was erected in 1835 at the expense of by James France France of Bostock Hall. The building soon became too small for the growing population and also it had to be demolished a few years later as it stood on the route of the new railway line. So in 1843 a new chapel began to be built. The building of Christ Church cost £1,400 raised by private subscription and was completed in the autumn of 1849.

By Order in Council dated 9 January 1863 the new parish of St. John's, Over, was established and an entry was published in the *London Gazette* on 13 January. The new parish was created partly from that of Whitegate, but mainly from St. Chad's and the published entry gave details of the boundary between the two parishes. The church, designed by John Douglas, was consecrated on 18 June 1864. It was dedicated to the memory of Sarah, the wife of Lord Delamere who had died some years earlier. He gave the site and erected the church mainly at his own cost: money for the minister's stipend was raised from his lands in Moulton. The creation of St John's parish had the effect of halving the number of parishioners from Over

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within St. Chad's parish to a little under 1600. Not only that, St Chad's parish lost the commercial areas along Delamere Street, High Street and the River Weaver. St. John's became the parish church of the industrial and

commercial parts of Over whilst St. Chad's remained as the agricultural parish.

A large and diverse population meant that the non-conformist churches continued to thrive. On the top of the Over ridge, to replace an earlier Independent Chapel built in 1814, a new Congregational Chapel was erected in 1868 to designs made by John Douglas. A Wesleyan Methodist Church was erected along Swanlow Lane in 1861 and the Primitive Methodists opened their chapel along Over Lane (now High Street) in 1842. Also in Over Lane there was a Methodist



**Fig: 56** Map of St John's parish created from St Chad's in 1863

Association Chapel built in 1836 and rebuilt in 1877. The Roman Catholics had a place of worship in Chapel Street taking over an earlier Primitive Methodist meeting place in 1872.

The first Methodist chapel in the Wharton area was built on the north side of Wharton Road alongside a lane which became known as Chapel Row. It was established during the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and may have replaced an earlier building, though it is known that Wesleyan Methodists met in Wharton Cottage in the 1790s. In 1891 it too was demolished and a new chapel was built on the opposite side of Wharton Road which was also demolished in 1979. A Free Methodist Chapel and a Primitive Methodist church were established on Station Road in 1860 and 1864. The latter, which replaced a smaller chapel that had stood in Crook Lane, had to be demolished because of subsidence in 1892 to be replaced by the present Trinity Church opened in 1894. A Wesleyan Methodist Church was established on Winsford Hill in 1884.



*Fig: 58 United Reform church, Over, with the cottage known as 'Whitehall' in front.*



*Fig: 57 Christ Church, Over: the waterman's church*

*Victorian Philanthropy*

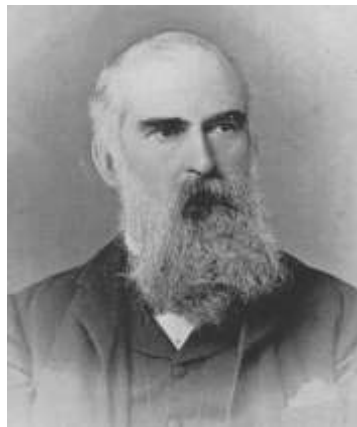
During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a number of services and amenities were provided for the people Over and Wharton by private benevolence and public subscription. Wealthy industrialists, of whom there were than a few with interests in the area, believed it was their moral duty to provide a better life for those less fortunate by donating money to worthwhile projects to improve social conditions. Herman Falk mentioned above was one such person, but there were several others.



*Fig: 59 William Henry Verdin*

One of the first items of any significance was the erection of an elaborate gas light standard at the road junction outside the Red Lion in Winsford given by John Cross of Wharton Lodge, a salt proprietor. This had at its base a few drinking fountains to provide clean water for those attending the Market Place in preference to ale.

The Verdin family were perhaps the most prominent of the benefactors to the town. Originally the family were of modest means living in Castle, Northwich, and working on the river Weaver as flatmen, but the entrepreneurial skills of brothers Joseph and Richard Verdin led to much wealth from the salt industry and a firm which claimed to be the largest salt producer in the world. Richard's son Joseph resided at Brockhurst, Leftwich, and became a prominent figure in local affairs, as a Justice of the Peace and Deputy Lieutenant for the County of Cheshire. He was elevated to the Baronetage on 24 July 1896 and knighted the following year, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Although Joseph and his brother William Henry were appointed to the board, the formation of the Salt Union in 1888 brought the end to the family business. Sir Joseph continued to live in Cheshire until he moved to Herefordshire in 1900. His brother William Henry Verdin was Conservative candidate in the election of 1885 where he competed with Liberal candidate John Brunner for the newly-



*Fig: 60 John Brunner*

## VICTORIAN NEW TOWN

created Northwich Division of Cheshire parliamentary seat. Brunner won the seat but his triumph was short-lived as Gladstones Liberal government were defeated on the issue of Home Rule for Ireland. William Henry was a Justice of the Peace and Deputy Lieutenant for the County of Cheshire, and High Sheriff in 1897. He was also a life trustee of the Weaver Navigation Trust. He lived with his family at Highfield House, near the railway station in Wharton, and later moved to Darnhall Hall.

Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee provided an impetus for the building of various amenities and suggestions included a swimming baths, a recreation ground, a library and even a new abattoir. At a public meeting held in the Winsford Town Hall in January 1887 William Henry Verdin believed "they could show their love and esteem for the Queen by establishing local institutions for the benefit or the population or the district". Before the meeting of the Committee subsequently appointed to deal with the celebrations, it was learned that both a public bath and



*Fig: 61 The Brunner Guildhall, High Street, Over, c.1900*

recreation grounds had already been given to the town by local benefactors which then left the issue of establishing a library.

Joseph Verdin and William Henry Verdin established the swimming baths in Winsford near to the Market Place using a part of Cross's Dock Yard. This large timber framed building with an elaborate brick frontage, was opened by Viscount Cross, an event that was followed by a torchlight procession to William Verdin's home, Highfield House. At a time when few houses had baths the Winsford Swimming Baths with its private swimming facilities and medicinal brine water became hugely popular. John Knight Armstrong of Wharton Hall gave five acres of land in Wharton for the provision of a playing area and Lord Delamere did likewise on the other side of the river in Over by presenting the town with 3½ acres of land along the High Street in 1887. In celebration on Jubilee Day 1897, over 1500 schoolchildren were assembled on the Wharton playing field and



**Fig: 63** *The Verdin Baths in Market Place, c. 1898*

presented with a commemorative medal. They then marched through Winsford across the bridge and up to the Over playing field where they were given tea.

The origins of the Winsford Free Library arose out of the same public meeting when Rev. Youard said that, "they would be doing their duty nobly if they sought to have as their local memorial a free library". It was then resolved to raise subscriptions to erect a library along the High Street in Over. The total subscriptions amounted to £1431, with over 400 people subscribing. The cost of the site was £146, the cost of the building £1020, which left enough to purchase books and fulfil the promise of establishing a library without any cost on the rates. The building, constructed in 1888 of red brick with terra cotta ornamentation, was opened by Mrs W.H.Verdin on 14 December. During the opening ceremony Charles Dickens, son of the



**Fig: 62** *The Winsford Free Library*

famous author read passages from works by his father and other authors. The occasion was marked with free teas in the Methodist Church that stood opposite the library and also in the Town Hall.

When William Henry Verdin moved from Highfield House to Darnhall Hall in 1898 he donated his former home to the new town for the purpose of establishing a hospital in honour of the queen's diamond jubilee – the Albert Infirmary. Demolished in 1976 the site is now an old people's home.

It is appropriate to mention two other worthies associated with Winsford. The first is John Swanick Bradbury who was born in Crook Lane, Wharton, in 1872 and lived in the town until the age of 15. He was educated at Manchester Grammar School and Brasenose College Oxford. He joined the Civil Service in 1896 and his career took him to the position of Secretary of the Treasury which he held when the very first issue of the old ten shilling and one pound notes was made. Both bore his signature, and consequently became nicknamed 'Bradburies'. During the First World War he was the government's chief economic adviser. John Bradbury never forgot the town of his birth as on elevation to the peerage in 1925 he chose the name 'Lord Bradbury of Winsford'. He died in 1950.



*Fig: 64 John Swanick Bradbury, one-time Permanent Secretary to the Treasury.*

The other notable person to be associated with Winsford is the celebrated author Charles Dickens. It is generally believed that for a time he resided along Swanlow Lane, Over. He is believed to have used events that happened in nearby Stanthorne as an inspiration when writing his novel *Great Expectations*. Sometime in the 1840s he heard of a marriage that had been cancelled at the last minute and where on the orders of the bride, the wedding breakfast remained laid out and untouched on the dining table for a considerable length of time. The house was Stanthorne Lodge, opposite Stanthorne Hall, which had been the home of Ellen Chatterton and her unmarried daughter Elizabeth who had been born in 1803. Elizabeth remained alone and unmarried in the same house between 1851 and 1871. Dickens is thought to have taken the name Miss Haversham from the Scottish slang term 'havering' - a chattering person - as a play on the Chatterton family name. When the library was opened in 1888 Charles Dickens' son Charles was present..

## WINSFORD: A HISTORY

### *Transport*



*Fig: 65 Over and Winsford railway station, c.1900.*

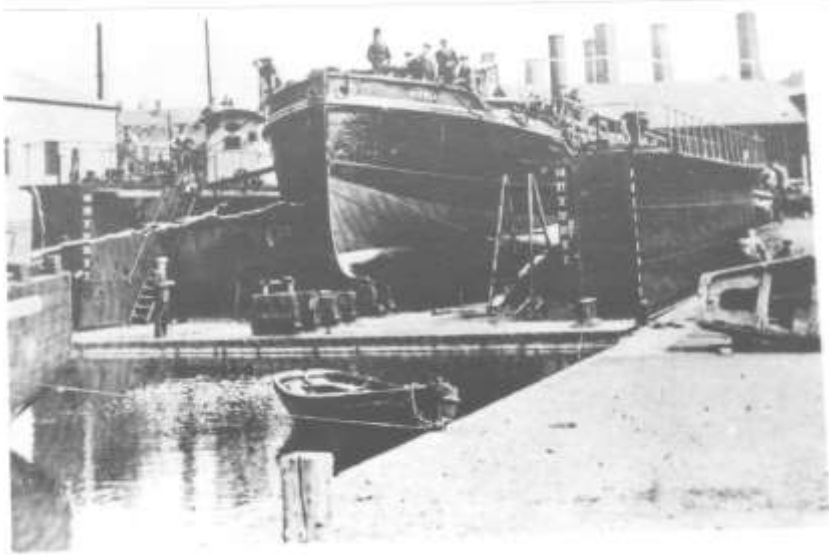
The River Weaver was made navigable to Northwich and Winsford by 1732. The Weaver Navigation Trustees resisted proposals for the Trent and Mersey Canal to pass through Winsford because they did not want to jeopardise their monopoly of trade on the river. Instead the Weaver was improved with the channel deepened and locks modernised.

Road links were improved in 1857 when the old single arched stone bridge was replaced by a substantial iron structure to join the two districts. As a consequence of subsidence the new bridge had to be raised on three occasions in 1871, 1876 and 1882. It was finally rebuilt in 1929 at a cost of £5000 by the Cheshire County Council.

Soon after the first ever passenger railway was opened in 1830 to link Manchester and Liverpool another was created linking it to Birmingham which passed through mid-Cheshire, especially Copenhall where, as a result, the new town of Crewe was developed. Proposals to run the Grand Junction railway close by the salt works were rejected for similar reasons to the objection to the Trent and Mersey canal. The line was opened in 1837 with a station positioned in Wharton, mid-way between Winsford and Middlewich. About 1840 the 'Railway Inn' was built alongside the railway bridge and station to serve travellers: this was later re-named, and remains today, as 'The Brighton Belle'.

The Winsford and Over station, the terminus of the Cuddington branch of the Cheshire Lines Committee Railway (West Cheshire Railway), was built on the west bank of the river and opened in 1870 with spurs off to the various salt works: it was closed in 1930. Eventually the Over and Wharton branch line of the main London and North Western Railway was constructed in 1882 with a terminus at the top of Wharton Hill, opposite what was then called the North Western Hotel, now known as the 'Top House'. The station buildings were demolished in 1979. Whilst this line's original purpose was the carriage of goods it did cater for occasional passenger links to Hartford railway station until after the Second World

War. Other small branch lines linked the various salt works with the main line.



*Fig: 66 One of the may boat building yards.*

### *Salt Industry*

A picture of the industry can be had from looking at any of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century O.S maps. Solid black blocks line both sides of the river Weaver to indicate the presence of the pan houses and warehouses of the salt works all of which owned since 1888 by the Salt Union. Moving north from the bridge on the Wharton side the first factory was that once owned by the Evans family which was started in 1856 and known as Island Works. On the opposite bank was the Bridge Works. Next on the Wharton side came the Birkenhead Works and the Uploont Works with Runcorn Works on the Over side of the river. Meadow Works were on an island formed by a channel across a loop of the river. Next, the Over Works with the Dudley Works opposite in Wharton. Higher up on the Wharton bank, overlooking a bend in the river, stood the Cheshire Amalgamated Works formed in 1866 and the works owned by the Kay family. Alongside were the Wharton Works, where in 1915 there was a rock-salt mine, and the Railway and River Works formed in 1872. Down at river level were the works acquired in the 1860 and 70s by the Stubbs family and known as the National Works and Little Meadow Works. Opposite were the Knights Grange Works. High up on the Wharton bank stood the Bostock Works, owned by the Deakin family since 1846, and the Moulton Hall Works founded in 1858, which

## WINSFORD: A HISTORY

together, in 1908, were described as containing sixty-two pans, timber built pan houses, three brine shafts and a brine cistern. Back on the Over, or more correctly the Whitegate side of the river stood the Meadow Bank Works and mine. Lastly, and on the boundary between Wharton and Moulton, there was the Newbridge Works founded in 1850 and acquired later by the Verdin family.

The produce from these works were exported across the globe: to America, Canada, the West Indies, South America, Asia, Europe, Scandinavia, Iceland, West Africa, and Australasia.

Rock salt in Winsford was discovered below Meadow Bank and two four foot square shafts were sunk down 200 feet and lined with timber and clay. Miners were lowered down in buckets. Mining was a slow process in those early days and a system of mining in 'rooms' was adopted leaving large pillars of rock to hold up the roof. The same method is still used to day and large caverns extend for many miles below the Cheshire plain. Between 1844 and 1892, when the mine was shut down due to competition from the Northwich mines, one million tonnes of rock salt had been extracted. However the Winsford mine got a second chance when the last of the Northwich mines flooded in 1928. The Meadow Bank Mine re-opened soon after and continues to this day.

### *Herman Eugene Falk*

One of the main salt proprietors of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was Herman Eugene Falk who became known as 'the father of the salt trade'. The family, who originated in Prussia, are first recorded in 1841 as R. Falk Senr. & Co. and continued to trade under that name until 1850. Robert Falk had been in business in Liverpool before investing in the salt works at Winsford where his brother Herman became manager. The Falk brothers were forced out of business by the Salt Trader's Association in 1850 only to return to Meadow Bank a few years later with Herman in charge and Robert acting as the London

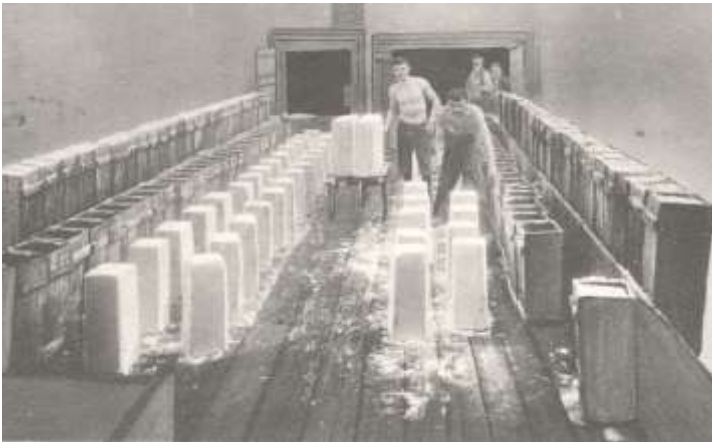


**Fig: 68** *H.E.Falk*

agent. From this time H.E. Falk appears and was a very large shipper of both white and rock salt until 1888. Falk united the major salt proprietors of Cheshire in a Salt Chamber of Commerce in 1858 to regulate production



*Fig: 69* Extracting salt from the boiling pan.



*Fig: 70* Drying salt blocks



*Fig: 71* Loading salt into flats

## WINSFORD: A HISTORY

and prices. In order to destroy the business of independent hauliers and the Flatman's Friendly Society, a form of trade union, he established in his own shipyard and from 1863 the River Weaver's first iron steamboats to tow strings of dumb barges. A strike in 1868 forced many proprietors to increase wages and reduce working hours but Falk would have none of it and imported labour from firstly Germany and then from Holland and Poland. Falk died at his home, Catsclough Farm, in January 1898.

During the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the salt market had reached over capacity and become chaotic. In 1888 a syndicate, including Falk, purchased the majority of the small salt works in the area and established itself as a limited company known as the Salt Union with the intended aim of overcoming pricing and labour problems and bring order to the market.



*Fig: 72 Constables and soldiers parading to quell industrial unrest*

### *Industrial Unrest*

Working conditions in the salt industry were far from ideal and led at various times to industrial unrest.

As a consequence of new regulations and working conditions imposed by the Salt Union of both watermen and salt workers The Winsford and District Salt Makers Association was formed.

In September 1892 the Weaver flatmen went on strike and the ring leaders were immediately taken before the magistrates at Middlewich where the case against them was dismissed due to legal technicalities despite the magistrates being Salt Union shareholders. In order to avert the consequences of the strike the Salt Union hired extra staff – ‘blacklegs’.

Enraged salt workers also joined in the dispute. Vessels travelling down the river were pelted with missiles and the crews subject to verbal

## VICTORIAN NEW TOWN

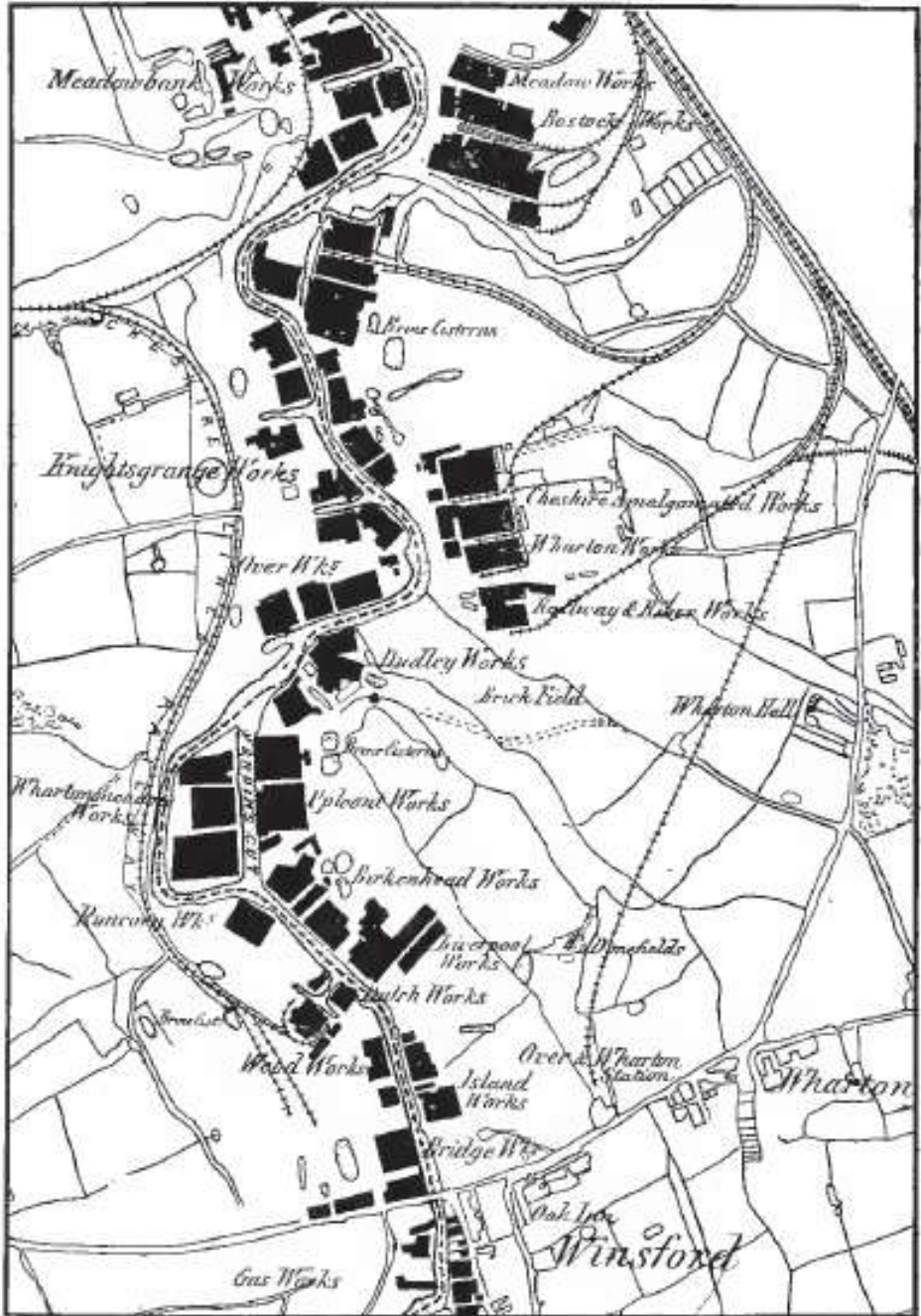
abuse. Police officers were required to escort the boats and under pressure additional officers had to be drafted in from other parts of Cheshire. When new workers arrived at Newbridge Works by train they were met with an extremely hostile reception and needed police protection: even the constables were showered with bricks and other missiles. On one occasion strikers stormed the offices of the Salt Union but were forced by policemen with drawn truncheons. An appeal to the Home Secretary in London resulted in a detachment of Hussars being sent from barracks in Manchester to settle matters. The Mayor of Over, magistrate Edmund Leigh, threatened to read the Riot Act, but peace was restored without its being actioned. The police officers returned to their stations whilst for a few days the Hussars remained billeted at Winsford Town Hall. Matters were finally resolved between the employers and the workers with the mediation of the Dr Jayne, then Bishop of Chester.



*Fig: 74 Winsford's smoking chimneys*



*Fig: 73 The Winsford waterfront. The picture shows the rear of the Town Hall and the Market Hall. The town bridge can be seen to the left of the picture.*



*Fig: 75 The numerous salt works along the river Weaver*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Twentieth Century Developments

The beginnings of the century saw an end to the interests of wealthy families and their philanthropic ideals. The Verdins sold their interests in the salt trade to the Salt Union but remained living at Darnhall Hall. The suicide in 1926 of Roscoe Brunner at Whitehall, Little Budworth, ended that family's business interests here also. Lord Delamere left Vale Royal to live permanently in Kenya and the family's possessions in Over, Marton and Whitegate were sold off between 1912 and 1920. Perhaps the last donor of any significance was Reginald Barton of Over Hall, a salt proprietor. He gave of a piece of land at the top of Winsford Hill to be used as a football ground – the Barton Stadium. Later, at the end of World War II he gave his home to the Winsford Urban District Council with the intention that it became a maternity hospital. However, due to the burning down of the council's offices in Russell Street there was a quick change of policy and Over Hall then became the council offices and remained so until 1974.



*Fig: 76 The bottom of High Street, Winsford. The Co-operative store is on the right of the picture on the junction with Weaver Street.*

### *An Urban District*

Under the provisions of the Local Government Act 1894 the Winsford Urban District Council was formed and the name of Winsford was firmly planted on the map. Despite this local people continued to designate themselves as being from either Over or Wharton for many generations.

The first chairman of the new authority was Lord Delamere of Vale Royal who allowed the Council the use of the 17<sup>th</sup> century silver mace of that had belonged to the old Borough of Over. Sir William Verdin presented the chain of office and supplied the red, fur-lined robes and black hat to be worn by the chairman. Not to be out done by this, Sir John Brunner presented the chairman's chair and desk which were installed in the new council chamber.

### *John Henry Cooke*

The solicitor John Henry Cooke, who had been clerk to the Local Board from its inception, became Town Clerk of the new authority. He had already served the town for nineteen years and had proved himself to be one of its leading citizens

and had earned the nickname 'the father of Winsford' and even 'the uncrowned king of Winsford'. Under his guidance almost all of Winsford's residents had running water and sewerage provision to their homes; the town had its own water works to purify and pressurise the system; lighting provision and street paving. He was also clerk of the Over School Board and was involved in educational development in the town. Born in 1849 to John Cooke, a solicitor, and his



*Fig: 77 John Henry Cooke, 'the father of Winsford'.*

wife Ann, at Bank House, Over Lane (now High Street), Over, he married and had two sons who were both killed in the Great War. His family lived firstly at a house called 'Airedale' on Swanlow Lane before moving to Crossfield House just off Swanlow Lane. He died in 1928. Interestingly John Henry's elder brother, Frederick, also a solicitor, became the first town clerk of Crewe.

*Declining Industry*

At the peak of the salt industry's fortunes in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century there were 650 open pans evaporating brine in the traditional manner to produce salt alongside the river Weaver. During the 1890s the industry was contracting and the many individual producers were becoming amalgamated into one single firm operated by the Salt Union. Slowly the old open-pan works began to disappear - some destroyed by the subsidence for which they had been responsible. By 1912 there were half the number of pans operating as compared with the heydays of the early 1880s.

A new process for extracting salt from brine was developed by Brunner Mond, later ICI, using a steam and vacuum evaporation process. This became the norm and led to the final demise of the labour intensive open-pan system. As output from the traditional boiling method shrank so Winsford' position as a salt producer weakened in favour of the ICI sites at Northwich, Runcorn and Sandbach. Having employed over 2500 workers in the 1880s by the 1950s half of that number were employed in producing salt and by 1964 there were only 100.

The last link with salt remained with the Meadow Bank rock-salt mine which still exists. The Meadow Bank Mine began in 1844 with the sinking of two shafts and continued to operate until 1892 when mines in Northwich were more profitable. However due to the flooding of the Adelaide mine, the last Northwich mine, Meadow Bank was reopened in 1928. From its huge caverns that stretch for many miles under the Cheshire countryside salt was extracted by huge machines and vehicles to be stockpiled alongside the river ready for winter use in keeping the countries roads free from snow and ice.

In 1992 reorganisation of ICI saw the sale of the salt making business to a new company which took the old name of the Salt Union. It is they who today produce the stock piles of salt and grit to be seen along New Road which is spread on the nation's roads during winter.



*Fig: 78 The War memorial and Soldier's Grave in St Chad's churchyard*

## WINSFORD: A HISTORY

### *Winsford at War*

The twentieth century began with wars fought in distant places and continued in that fashion for much of the century. Winsford men formed a contingent of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Company (Cheshire) Imperial Yeomanry and saw service in the Boer War in South Africa in 1900 and 1901: a statue in the modern town centre commemorates those who died. The regular soldiers were joined by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Volunteer Brigade of the Cheshire Regiment. During their absence the Drill Hall on Dingle Lane (now a Bingo Club) was opened for the military training of local men.

In the First World War, the Great War, 247 men from Winsford were killed and nearly 1500 were absent from home serving their country. A memorial to those who died was erected outside the school on the High Street. Made of Portland stone and standing seventeen feet high it bore the names of the officers and men who had fallen. It was unveiled in a ceremony on 18 September 1920. This memorial now stands in the centre of the shopping centre. Another memorial was in the form of an extension to St Chad's church. Work began in February 1924 and took two years to complete. Within the church yard a Soldiers' Memorial and Grave were constructed with a complete list of names of those who had died.

During the Second World War, Over Hall, the home of Reginald Barton, a salt works owner, was commandeered for use by the army. The stables were converted into a barracks for the men whilst the officers used the main building. The site of the old hall is now a small private housing estate.



**Fig: 79** War memorials in the shopping precinct. In the background is the memorial to those who fell in the Boer War, the other being a memorial to both World Wars.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS

American troops were garrisoned at nearby Oulton Park. Between 1939 and 1945 the park was requisitioned by the Government in order to house thousands of American soldiers prior to the invasion of Normandy. It became the Headquarters of the U.S. General Patton and the site of intensive D-Day training. Little Budworth Common was used for military training exercises. Being the nearest town to Oulton, there can be little doubt that Winsford will have experienced the GIs.

### *Overspill Town*

Immediately after the Second World War the Dene Drive housing estate was built to re-house both local people, as the old terraced properties which were once the homes to salt workers were demolished, and incoming workers for the new and existing industries.

At this time Winsford had old established iron foundries, a factory engaged in grinding and pulverising industrial materials, a mechanical engineering works, a boot and shoe factory, a tin smith's works, and motor engineering establishments. Bradbury's clothing factory had been established in 1919 and rebuilt just before World War II. Breeze Forge, established in 1908 was producing metalwork for railway locomotives and the aircraft industry. In addition, immediately after World War II, Henry Smith Ltd., of Salford, had opened a large constructional steel works on a six-acre site in Wharton and further expanded twice during the 1950s; an electro-plating works was also established near Winsford Bridge.

One of the best known industrial premises was the Winsford Bacon Factory. Built at Wharton Green in 1937, it was a joint enterprise between the local authority and the Co-operative Wholesale Society and specialised in curing pork and bacon using locally produced salt.

Despite the old and new industries, by the 1950s the town's economy had reached crisis point due to the continual decline of the salt industry which forced many of Winsford's inhabitants to find work in neighbouring towns. Over 50% of the adult male population then worked elsewhere and there was a steady drift of families away from Winsford, so that the population remained at around 12,700 throughout the 1950s.

The Town Development Act, 1952, provided a procedure by which the surplus population of large conurbations might be eased and small moribund towns, whose industries had declined, could be revived. Government assistance for new industries was dependent upon increasing population, so the Winsford Urban District Council began negotiations with the Liverpool City Council to take a total of 15,000 during the 1960s. The negotiations came to nothing so an agreement was signed in December 1959, with the Manchester Corporation by which Winsford Urban District Council agreed to build 4,300 new homes for 15,000 new residents, thus doubling its population over a ten-year period, to build extra shops and amenities, and to attract a total of 8000 jobs. For Manchester an existing

## WINSFORD: A HISTORY

centre like Winsford with land on which to build overspill housing estates was the solution to their expanding population and poor housing.

The Grange estate, so called because of its proximity to Knights Grange farm and the fact that it was built of that farm's land, was the first overspill estate and people began to take residence in 1962; by 1964 it had accommodated over 400 families. A consequence of the loss of fields was that the farm house became a public house – and still is. The same effect was felt elsewhere as compulsory purchase orders took effect and farms disappeared with tenants being evicted. For old Winsfordians it seemed that the newcomers were given every facility whilst local people were left to fend for themselves. The whole policy of overspill was hotly debated during the local council elections of the early 1960s.

The Urban District Council provided greater opportunities for work with the establishment of an industrial estate at Wharton in 1961. Easy access to what was the new Cheshire section of the M6, opened in 1963, and the newly electrified railway links to Liverpool, Manchester and London encouraged companies to obtain sites in Winsford. New factory building had commenced in 1961, though overall progress in obtaining new industries was at first slow. By 1964 sixteen new firms had established themselves in the town in part due to the fact that there were renewed efforts to attract Liverpool people with the backing Government's Board of Trade who offered generous financial incentives.

When the agreement was drawn up with Liverpool the then Board of Trade insisted that Winsford should raise its target population from 32,000

people by 1971 to 70,000 by 1986. A plan prepared by consultants, approved by the then Ministry of Housing and by the Cheshire County Council, provided for an even larger final population, possibly 100,000 by the year 2000. None of these figures were ever achieved, in fact by 1971 the population figure stood at just less than 25,000 – a doubling over ten years. Later the estates known as Mount Pleasant (after a house of that name), Glebe Green (an area of land purchased from St Chad's church) and St John's (behind the church of that name on Delamere Street) were built. So on to the old



**Fig: 80** The coat of arms adopted by the Winsford Town Council. The quarters represent Vale Royal Abbey, Cheshire, the salt industry and the Verdin family.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS

village of Winsford were grafted rapidly new housing estates, to accommodate workers from Liverpool and, to a lesser extent, Manchester. Modern Winsford had been born.

The Mount Pleasant estate of 750 houses, conceived in 1967, had about 1,300 homes, housing a population of about 4,000 people, mainly nominated by Liverpool Corporation. Its construction was completed at a cost of about £3 million. Soon after the estate was finished it became apparent that the type of flat roofing used on the houses was inadequate due to a large number of leaks, letting in rain to upper rooms. Hence, it was decided to re-roof all 750 houses, at a cost of over £350,000. On the Glebe Green estate, in 1968, a new school was established as additional capacity for Darnhall Lane School. In Wharton the lands of Nun House Farm were bought by the local authority to make way for another new housing estate.

Each new estate was to have its own community centre to provide social facilities for young and old. For the town's social life the Civic Hall was under construction by 1967.



*Fig: 81 Verdin High School, now the Winsford Academy*

### *Schools*

The majority of the incoming families comprised of young married couples with children. This led to an initial shortage of school places as over half of the overspill population were under sixteen years of age and half of them under five which meant a future schooling problem. In 1950 there were three council schools, three church schools and a grammar school. Initially extra pupils were accommodated at Meadow Bank school which only taught thirty children but had the capacity for over a hundred more. Special buses were laid on to bring the children from the housing estates to the school which was some way out of town. For senior pupils the Verdin

## WINSFORD: A HISTORY

Grammar School became too cramped and rooms in the Guildhall had to be utilised.

The provision of schools was not a matter for the Winsford Urban District Council as it was the responsibility of the Department for Education and the County Council and this caused some initial problems. Eventually money was made available and new schools, both junior and secondary, were built of which the Grange estate school was the first.

### *Social and Leisure Opportunities*

Between the World Wars the three small lakes formed as a result of brine subsidence became popular venues for summer outings. Known as the 'Flashes' they were visited by people from Manchester, the Potteries and other conurbations as a place to visit to picnic, swim, or take a boat trip on the 'Cheshire Broads. Even today the flashes are recognised as a centre for recreation, yachting and caravanning. Near to 'Bottom Flash' stood the Verdin Open Air Brine Baths another popular attraction.

Winsford could also boast two cinemas – 'The Magnet' on Weaver Street and the 'The Palace' situated in the old Drill Hall building. Whilst the former has now disappeared the latter still stands as a Bingo Hall. Winsford also had a roller skating rink.

### *The New Town Centre*

Onto the 19<sup>th</sup> century town framework a plan was developed to fill in the gaps left by abandoned salt works and the old industries and to clear the old terraces of salt workers cottages. This involved re-forming the road system which concentrated on the narrow Winsford Bridge – a major bottleneck. During the following years the south side of High Street, the old 'shopping centre with its varied shops, was demolished to make way for a new dual carriageway for through traffic. The lower end of the north side was retained as something of a side street with its existing shops. At the bottom of High Street the old town centre was demolished and a new bridge across the river was built to improve traffic flow with a one-way system – in effect a large roundabout. All that remains of the original town of Winsford are the 'Red Lion' and a few other public houses.

The new town centre was developed as a pedestrian shopping centre half way up the High Street and opposite the old Brunner Guildhall. It consisted on a market, library, post office, health centre, old people's centre, leisure centre, civic hall and car parking.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS

Today there are plans to redevelop the shopping centre which involves demolishing the Civic Hall, the health centre and some of the shopping ranges. A new building known as 'The Lifestyle Centre' has already opened and taken the place of the Civic Hall with the additional features of swimming pools, gymnasia and meeting rooms.

Like the Civic Hall, the original health centre has now closed as a new purpose built clinic has been opened on Dene Drive, housing two doctors' practices, a dentist, a physiotherapy unit and pharmacy.



*Fig: 82 Winsford's shopping precinct*



*Fig: 83 Wyvern House, formerly the headquarters of the Vale Royal Borough Council, now offices of the new Chester and West Cheshire Council*

### *Local Government Changes*

With the reorganisation of Local Government in 1974, the Urban District Council was merged with other councils, such as Northwich and Frodsham, into the large Vale Royal Borough District. Winsford was left with a town council with limited powers similar to those of a parish council, under the chairmanship of its Town Mayor.

In 1991, the Vale Royal Borough Council moved its main office from Northwich to a purpose-built headquarters in Winsford, known as Wyvern House which also housed the Winsford Town Council. Today it is one of the sites of the new Cheshire West and Chester Council. Both the Cheshire Constabulary, in 2003, and the Cheshire Fire Service, in 1997, moved their respective headquarters buildings from Chester to Winsford.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS



*Fig: 85 Winsford's modern 'Lifestyle Centre'.*



*Fig: 84 'Clemmonds Hey', Cheshire Constabulary's headquarters building*

*Moving On Towards the Future*

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