

TONY BOSTOCK'S LOCAL HISTORY NOTES: WOODFORD HALL, OVER



Within the township of Over, on its western boundary, stands Woodford Hall, once the focus of a small estate. It is today a farmhouse and a Grade II listed building.¹ Woodford Hall takes its name from the family who resided on the site in the mid 13th century; the Woodford location from which that family took its name was situated further south.

Woodford was a part of the manor of Darnhall which, along with the manor of Over, were owned by the powerful Norman earls of Cheter. Lands at Woodford feature in two of Earl Ranulph III's (1181-1232) charters. The first dated c. 1220, or perhaps earlier, records the grant of lands called Woodford to Robert de Woodford, which his father Thurstan had held. The bounds are given as:

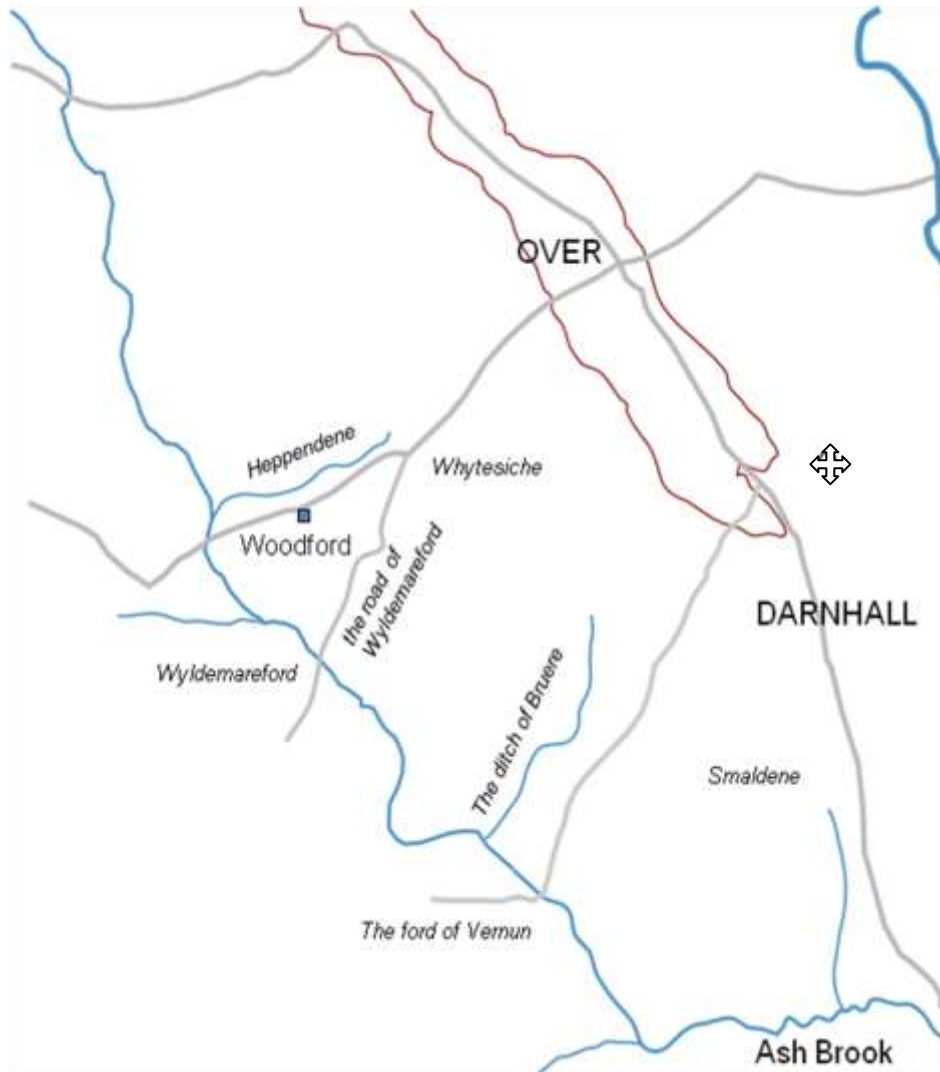
*'in length from Assebroke as far as the ditch of Bruere and in width from the ford of Vernun as far as the cultivated lands of Smaldene'*²

Generally medieval charter boundaries work by giving the length from south to north followed by the width from west to east. If this is so then the croft has the Ash Brook to the south, a ditch or stream to the north, a water course with a crossing point to the west and arable land to the east. This can only refer to what was in recent times known as Darnhall Park – an area surrounded on two sides by the Ash Brook, by a stream to the north which flowed through a series of medieval fish ponds. The ford from which the locality takes its name is now represented by the bridge at Darnhall. The fields of 'Smaldene' were probably part of the larger arable area of the manor in the vicinity of Knobbs Farm, an area once known as 'Holdene', or else it refers to the stream that descends into the Ash Brook from behind the Raven Inn.

The second charter issued by the earl, dated about a decade later than the first, granted lands to Robert in compensation for the loss of his lands which the earl had decided to use to create a *vivarium* (a deer park) and a hunting lodge, with the meadow being flooded to become a mill pool. The bounds of the new grant of land are:

'from Wyldemareford as far as Heppedene in length and from Heppedene as far as the wytesyche in width, and from wytesyche as far as the road of Wyldemareford'.³

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With reasonable certainty we can locate this parcel of land around the present Woodford Hall and the area generally known as Hepden, 'the valley of rose hips'. The 'Wylemareford' is the crossing point on the Ash Brook, now with a bridge, at Woodford along the lane to Pool Head Farm. Interestingly the fields on the other side anciently had names alluding to horses. From here the boundary followed the brook north to 'the valley of rose hips', then went across to reach a small stream, 'whytesiche' which was then followed south to the lane leading to the ford.

In considering these the two charters it seems that in the area we now call Darnhall, Earl Ranulf III created a deer park for himself and those who would follow him as Earls of Chester. This area had once been known as Woodford and the previous occupants of the lands were relocated a little further north in the region of the present-day Woodford Hall. The earl then moved his local residence from the manor house, at its traditional place near to the parish church, the original 'Darnhall' to this more remote and suitable place where he had his hunting lodge, his place of sport and entertainment. Thus the focus of the manor shifted from the area of the church to the 'new' Darnhall - a place of high status, from where the manor of Darnhall and Over would have been administered for him by his officials. It is perhaps worth mentioning at this point that there is no reference to Darnhall in the Domesday Book of 1086, though Over is recorded. The entry refers to Over as being a name given by the Normans to a group of four unnamed Saxon manors, of which Darnhall is very likely to have been one and Over, 'the settlement on the ridge', another. Was Woodford one of the other two? We don't

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know – perhaps, along with ‘Stochall’, the area on the other side of the Ash Brook where the modern village of Darnhall is situated where a family of that name lived.

Woodford was a regular source of income for the earl as the lease of the lands here generated an annual income of five shillings and a ‘reasonable’ pig: the money was paid annually in equal instalments at Christmas and on 24 June, and the pig was given on 11 November. It is interesting to note that there are references in contemporary documents known as ‘the Pipe Rolls’ to the Earl of Chester renting, for his own use, two salt houses in Middlewich which were owned by Robert de Woodford suggesting that the family were a not an insignificant one. Robert Woodford was certainly paying his five shillings *ferm* or rent in 1237-8, but by 1240 this was being paid by his heirs, so had presumably died about 1239.⁴ In 1303 there was a William Woodford, a tenant of the powerful abbot of Vale Royal, who was fined for allowing his animals to escape into Delamere Forest.

The last earl of Chester, John le Scot, died at his hunting lodge at Darnhall in 1237 without any children and so, consequently Darnhall and Over were seized by the Crown. King Henry III’s son Edward, Prince of Wales, became Earl of Chester and therefore lord of Darnhall and Over. He is known to have visited the area on a number of occasions and then in the mid 1260s he gave the dual manors to the Cistercian monastic order for them to establish a monastery in the heart of Cheshire. Initially they took over the hunting lodge for their abbey but some year later they transferred to ‘Conersley’ (Whitegate) where they built Vale Royal. It is about the time of the change of lordship from the Crown to the monks that the Woodford family seems to die out or else the family were dispossessed for some reason by the abbot and moved away from the area.

On the Feast of St. Martin, 11 November, 1329, Philip Egerton did homage to the abbot of Vale Royal in the court house at Over to acknowledge that he held his lands from the abbot for the annual service of rendering five shillings and a hog. During the mid 14th century Philip’s descendant, William Egerton of Bulkeley, was recorded as having held twenty acres of arable land and an acre of meadow from the abbot of Vale Royal for five shillings a year and that the estate was worth twenty shillings. Following his death in 1429, he was succeeded by John Warde who did homage to the abbot in 1438-9 for the estate.

With the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the seizure of Vale Royal by crown officials Woodford became the property of Thomas Holcroft who resided at Vale Royal and he farmed Knights Grange and Woodford out to John Starkey of Oulton but by this time the rent for Woodford was twelve shillings and its value twenty-three shillings. When his son Hugh married Dorothy Brooke Knights Grange and Woodford were settled on the couple for their lives according to a settlement dated January 1596. It remained with the Starkey family for a few generations until 1611 when Hugh Starkey died leaving two daughters Dorothy aged eight years and Margaret six years. According to his Inq. P.m. (1611) It seems that the Starkey family sub-let Woodford – Hugh is known to have resided at Darley in Oulton and at Knights Grange. From August 1609 Hugh leased Knights Grange and lands in Woodford to Thomas Wright and Randall Vernon at a peppercorn rent. Hugh died in June 1610. Likely early tenants are the Blackamore family. At some time during the Tudor period a Roger Blackamore resided at Woodford: his grandson Raffe and great-grandson George were during their life times mayors of the Borough of Over. Raffe occurs as an archer in a muster of 1544 and may well have served in Henry VIII’s or Edward IV’s campaigns against the Scots. George Blackamore is recorded as tenant to Edmund Pershall the Lord of the Manor of Over and paid 13s 8d a year rent for his estate at Woodford and an extra shilling for a parcel of land on Blakeden Moss.

In 1591 Randle Stanley, gentleman, was tenant to Starkey for Woodford and paid £4 6s a year rent, and George Blackamore was at Fennywood in Little Budworth.

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The property was sold by the descendants or trustees of the Starkey family to Thomas Maisterson of Nantwich. Thomas Maisterson resided here during the time of the Civil Wars and suffered for his support of the King. His home was looted by Parliamentary soldiers billeted in the town, of whom some actually lodged at the hall. In items of plate, presumably silver, he lost £40 worth to soldiers serving under a Captain Whalley along with various weapons, equipment, saddles, horses, cheese, oats, peas, and a carpet: in all he claimed losses amounting to just over £71.⁵ In providing accommodation and food to soldiers and their horses he claimed Parliament had cost him a total of nearly £31. On one occasion a lieutenant and a man serving with a Captain Buckley spent two weeks living at the hall during which time they were fed along with their three horses. Another time five men and five horses stayed here for ten nights. He also stated that in addition to £20 paid to the cause at Nantwich he paid a further £50 which should have been returned but never was, and then he paid a total of £120 to county officials. Despite all this, and in addition he was formerly accused of providing the King's army with a man and a horse and for being in Chester during the siege of the city and was declared a 'delinquent' and had his estates sequestrated. In defence evidence to the Parliamentary authorities Thomas stated that he had lost his home in Nantwich it having been commandeered by the State for a gunpowder store and neighbouring houses pulled down to create defences for the town; he had also lost 140 of his trees and had land near his salt works spoiled. Despite his mitigation he was fined $\frac{1}{6}$ th of the worth of his estate which amounted to £630. His wife Mary travelled to London in July 1646 to make an appeal to reduce the fine to a $\frac{1}{10}$ th on the basis that Thomas was infirm and they had eight children to support and that he had given at least £20 to the Parliamentary cause. She said he had remained at home until April 1645 and then only went to the city to see a doctor with whom he remained all the time. She also produced a certificate signed by the minister at Little Budworth that her husband had taken the National Covenant in defence of the Presbyterian religion (essentially an oath of allegiance to Parliament) before the congregation in the church on 22 March 1646. The appeal was dismissed.⁶



A Cheshire Officer believed to be Sir John Booth of Woodford Hall, (1602 – 1678), Parliamentary Colonel and Governor of Warrington. Knighted in 1660.

According to Randle Holmes' Survey of Cheshire, 1671, Sir John Booth (son of Sir George Booth of Dunham Massey) purchased the Woodford estate from Maisterson, in fact by 1664 the house and lands were owned by him and he paid hearth tax on five fireplaces in the house. Sir John was born in 1602 and as Colonel John Booth he served with distinction on the Parliamentary side. He was knighted at the time of the restoration of King Charles II and in 1661 was granted the offices of 'prothonotary and clerk of the crown of Cheshire and Flintshire' for life.⁷ John died in 1678, having married firstly Dorothy, daughter of Sir Anthony StJohn, brother of the Earl of Bolingbroke (by whom he had children George, Sir John Booth of Chester, Thomas and others) and secondly in 1659 to Anne the widow of Thomas Legh of Adlington. Whilst occupying the hall Sir John was charged by the court of the Borough of Over in 1664 with neglecting to have work done to repair Chester Lane along a stretch for which he was responsible.

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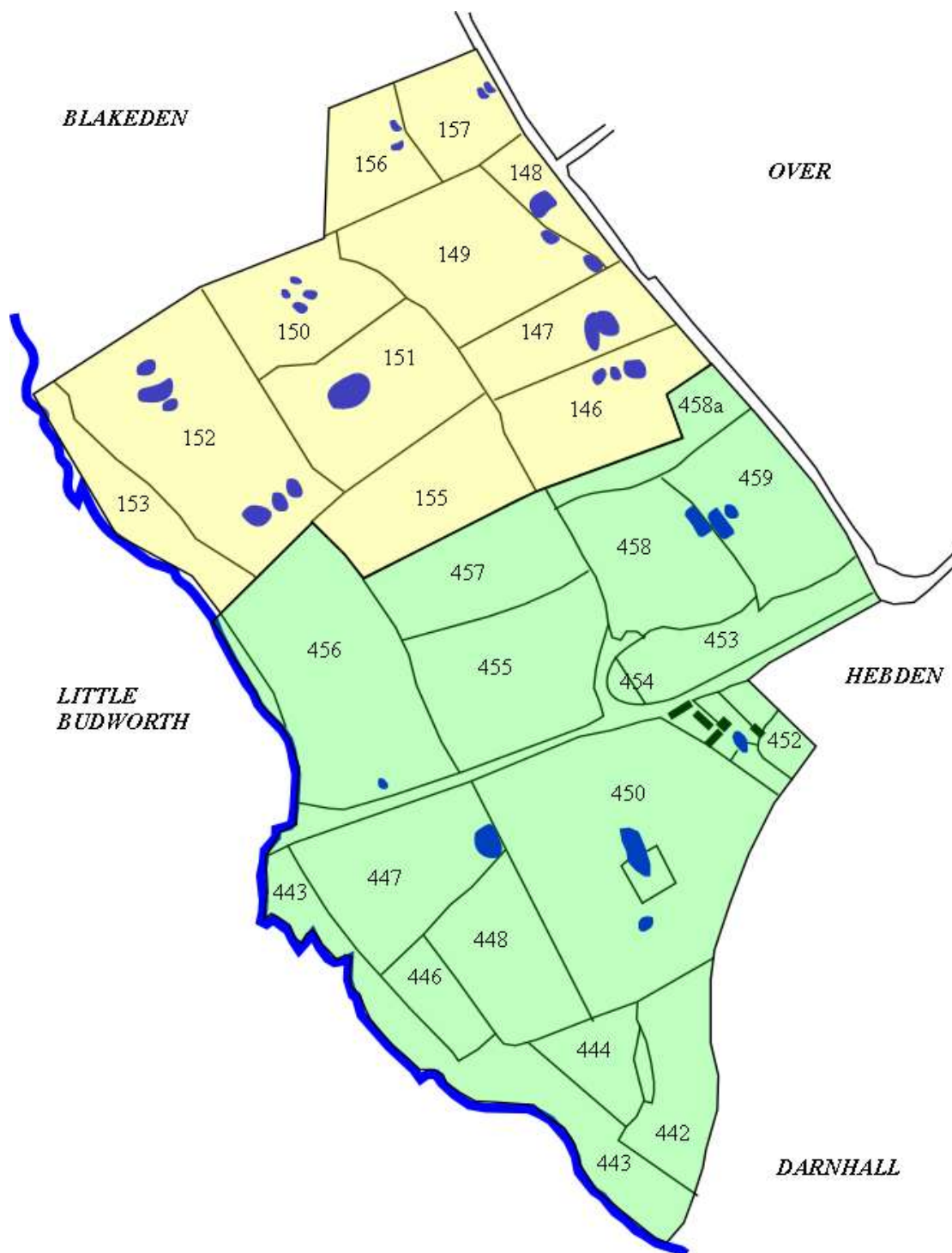
George Booth of Woodford died in 1719 aged 84 years. During his lifetime he was 'prothonotary' of Chester, translated the works of the ancient Greek historian *Diodores Siculus* and was the author of a treatise on 'the nature and practice of real actions'. His brother Thomas was executed for murder in 1687 as a result of the political differences between King James and John's cousin Lord Delamere. By his will dated January 1706 and proved in October 1719 he charged his estate at Woodford and property in Chester with £500 to be paid to his daughters and their children. George left three daughters: Elizabeth Tyndale of Bathford, Somerset; Elizabeth wife of Thomas Tyndall; and Catherine, wife of James Howard of Boughton, Chester, a relation of the Earls of Berkshire.

Following George Booth's death the Woodford estate was then sold to Sir George Prescott, baronet, under whom Philip Acton was tenant here in the 1790s. Thomas Prescott was the next owner with Thomas Ravenscroft as tenant in the first decade of the 19th century. The Prescotts sold to a Mr Broadhurst, whose relation, Richard Dutton of Waverton, managed the estate and is recorded as the proprietor during the mid 19th century. It was then again sold to James Cookson of Utkinton.

The tithe map of about 1845 shows the Woodford Farm as containing about 266 acres; 115 of which lay in Whitegate parish. At the time the owner, or proprietor is given as Richard Dutton and the occupant farmer as Joseph Slater, born about 1806, who had eight servants living with him. In 1851 he employed nine labourers, many of whom lived on the premises along with Elizabeth Adderley, the housekeeper. Ten years later she was still there and that year Joseph was mayor of the Borough of Over. Then Slater employed six men and three boys as well as his housekeeper and a housemaid who all lived in along with Slater's niece and four visitors on the night of the census, Sunday 7 April 1861. Slater was still there in 1881, now said to be 73 years old and living with a lady called Annie who was styled as his wife. He was again appointed mayor of the borough in 1881 and 1882. Joseph passed away in July 1889 and was buried at St Chad's aged 83 years. By 1891, 75 years old, retired land agent, George Slater lived here with his nephew Cyrus Dunkirk Slater, the farm bailiff, and niece Laura Reynolds along with seven servants. By 1911 George was succeeded as householder by Cyrus, then 48 years old, who lived here with his wife, Annie, and two female servants. The 1911 census informs us that there were twelve habitable rooms at the hall with four others used for storing cheese and other uses.



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The Woodford Hall Estate, c.1840

Areas shaded in yellow are Whitegate parish and those in green Over parish

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Parish	Plot	Plot Name	Land Use	Acres	Roods	Perches
Whitegate	146	Near Rough Field	Pasture	11	1	20
Whitegate	147	Further Rough Field	Arable	9	3	14
Whitegate	148	Near Tanners Meadow	Mowing	6	2	12
Whitegate	149	Middle Field	Mowing	11	3	8
Whitegate	150	Far Vetch Field	Arable	8	3	23
Whitegate	151	Near Vetch Field	Arable	10	2	31
Whitegate	152	Thistly Field	Pasture	21	0	24
Whitegate	153	Butters Meadow	Mowing	6	2	3
Whitegate	154	Part of Glade Field	Pasture	7	2	0
Whitegate	155	Part of Birch Field	Arable	9	1	0
Whitegate	156	Far Tanners Meadow	Mowing	5	2	26
Whitegate	157	Tanners Croft	Mowing	5	1	30
Over	442	Big Thorney Croft	Mowing	7	3	20
Over	443	Long Meadow	Arable	12	2	20
Over	444	Little Thorney Croft	Mowing	3	2	16
Over	445	Plantation in Big Thorney Croft	Pasture	0	1	3
Over	446	Little Sand Field	Arable	3	3	12
Over	447	Big Sand Field	Pasture	11	2	0
Over	448	Middle Sand Field	Arable	8	0	13
Over	449	Plantation in Big Sand Field	Pasture	0	0	20
Over	450	Barn Field	Pasture	27	3	25
Over	451	Plantation in Barn Field	Plantation	0	2	9
Over	452	House Building & Garden	Building and Garden	4	3	6
Over	453	Poolstead	Mowing	6	1	0
Over	454	Barn Croft	Mowing	0	2	19
Over	455	Banky Field	Pasture	14	0	22
Over	456	Glade Field	Arable	18	3	22
Over	457	Birch Field	Arable	9	1	0
Over	458	Near Blackden Field	Pasture	10	0	27
Over	458a	Part of Near Bough Field	Pasture	1	1	20
Over	459	Further Blackden Field	Pasture	9	1	11
Over	460	Poolstead Croft	Mowing	0	1	12

Schedule of fields c. 1840

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¹ English Heritage Building ID: 57417. Description: Farmhouse. Late C18/Early C19. Red Flemish bond brick with ashlar dressings and slate roof. Three storeys. Entrance front: three bays symmetrically disposed. Stone plinth. Central doorway with flat porch supported by two Tuscan columns. Tripartite windows to either side having stone sills and flat arched heads with keystones. These have sash lights to centre of 2 x 3 panes with lateral lights of 1 x 3 panes. Similar windows to left and right of first floor with central window of 3 x 3 panes. Similar windows to second floor though of reduced height, the lateral windows having central lights of 2 x 2 panes and the central window being of 3 x 2 panes. Left hand return: 2-light leaded casement window to left of gable. Rear: Wing to right.

² *Cal. Inq. Misc., I, 1219-1307*, p.330

³ Barraclough, G., *The Charters of the Norman Earls of Chester*, p. 420-3

⁴ Pipe Rolls, p. 38, 46, 51, 56, 65, 78.

⁵ British Museum, Harleian MSs. 2126,ff 3-39.

⁶ *Calender of State Papers (Domestic) 1645-7*, p.456. *Calender of the Committee for Compounding with Delinquents*, ii, p.1272. *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd series, vol. x, (Aug 1913), p 68.

⁷ *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd series, vol. xxxiv, (January 1949), p 4