

VILLAGES THREE

A short history of the Parish of St John the Baptist, Colsterworth

The ancient Jurassic Way ran along the western edge of the limestone escarpment, which stretches north to south through this part of Lincolnshire. Along its length small settlements grew up at points where springs of pure water issued and the village of Colsterworth was doubtless one of these settlements, with the River Witham naming close below where the western edge drops down. One of the Colsterworth springs ran - and still does - at the bottom of School Lane near to where there was a ford over the river. How much this track to the spring has been used over the centuries is evident in the sunken nature of the Lane. For the early settlers in this area, the iron ore deposits were convenient in the making of tools and weapons. Ermine Street was built by the Romans from London to Lincoln and then northwards to York.

Most surrounding village names have evolved from the Danes but the name of Colsterworth has Anglo-Saxon origins, and means the settlement of the charcoal burners. The Parish Church has a section of Saxon work in its building. Twyford, a small hamlet to the south of the village, has an even earlier Saxon name- In the Domesday Book of 1087 it was recorded as being bigger than Colsterworth but the positions were reversed as time went by and now Twyford is accepted as being part of Colsterworth.

Woolsthorpe - officially Woolsthorpe-by-Colsterworth - is a hamlet in the Parish of Colsterworth. The name of Woolsthorpe is taken from, 'Ulestanestorp, meaning 'outlying farmstead or hamlet belonging to a man named Wulfstan, Wulf or Ulf . The name is a mixture of an old English personal name plus the old Scandinavian 'thorpe' meaning settlement.

The Domesday Book also reveals that the three villages - Twyford, Colsterworth and Woolsthorpe - although in the same parish, were held by three different landlords. Twyford was outlying property (soke) of the Lady Judith, the Archbishop of York held Woolsthorpe and also part of Twyford and a Thane of the Queen had Colsterworth.

Woolsthorpe was treated as a separate manor by the 13th century. One of the oldest buildings in the hamlet is Chapel House - now a private dwelling at 22 Newton Way. In the 13th century it was recorded as being the Chapel of Ease to William Mortimer's Manor, where locals who could not get to church could worship. Also travellers could stay overnight, rather like the old monasteries. The chapel was surrounded by a graveyard which was cleared and lowered to make a garden, the road and a stack-yard by cartloads of bones being taken away, around 1800 when the chapel was converted into a dwelling. Although recently extended, the original chancel arch is still visible in the east end of the building. The Manor passed through many hands until Robert Underwood sold it to Robert Newton, the grandfather of Sir Isaac. The great scientist was born and spent his childhood here.

The Priory of Saint Barbara was built in Colsterworth on the west bank of the River Witham giving some security to the inhabitants during the turbulent Middle Ages. Henry V gave Colsterworth to his son, the Duke of York, who was killed at Agincourt. After the Priory was suppressed its revenues went towards the building of the great church at Fotheringay, Northamptonshire, and later, after Elizabeth I gave the village to William Cecil, doubtless the revenues went to help develop Burghley House, near Stamford.

The division of the parish into three separate identities caused problems over the years as to whether Colsterworth and Woolsthorpe were in the Soke of Grantham for legal jurisdiction. Sir Isaac complained that he had to pay Constable's rate for North Witham but Poor rate for Colsterworth. When Colsterworth was enclosed in 1805-8 it was accepted that Colsterworth and Woolsthorpe were in the Soke of Grantham but Twyford was not. The Soke of Grantham had the peculiarity of consisting of several distinct patches surrounded by parts of Lincoln County. This proved very inconvenient for the administration of justice. Many magistrates of the County lived within the Soke but not being magistrates for the Soke could not commit any person in their own immediate neighbourhood. Passing vagrants often went from county to

soke and soke to county within a few miles easily evading the vagrancy laws. However, all was solved eventually by the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 when Colsterworth and Woolsthorpe became administered by Justices of the Peace as had Twyford since Tudor times.

By the years of Victoria, big landlords had bought up more and more property and lands changed hands by marriage or sale. Colsterworth Manor passed into the hands of the Storeys and Woolsthorpe to the Turnors of Stoke Rochford Hall. The Cholmeleys of Easton also owned property in Colsterworth and the Manners family held Twyford. Under the Enclosure Act of 1808, all these landowners increased their holdings and about 30 villagers were allotted some acres but the expense of fencing their properties, made obligatory by the Act, forced many to sell up. The Rector received 398 acres and 11 acres of glebe land on the understanding that tythes would cease. The larger fields produced by the enclosures enabled the use of the new agricultural machinery and the old four-course system was replaced.

When the Great North Road, then known as the Great York Road, was completed as a turnpike road in 1752 Colsterworth was appointed a post town and began to grow. Servicing the passing coach and cart traffic became big business and shops began to proliferate along the High Street offering their wares to the local people, to those from the many nearby villages and to the coach trade. By 1854 there were 7 inns and six beerhouses, 5 schools, 11 grocers, 5 butchers, a regular post service, a carrier and a horse bus to Grantham on Saturdays, as well as many other establishments. It has been suggested that 1856 marks the high point of Colsterworth's prosperity.

During this period, Church attendance was high both for the Parish Church and for the chapels of which there were three (in 1851). It was in 1885 that the great Victorian restoration of the Parish Church took place, led by the Rector, John Mirehouse. The old chancel was pulled down and the present one erected using some of the stones from the original chancel (which had been pulled down in 1775) in the formation of the beautiful east window. A new bowl was affixed to the old carved stem of the font, new stained-glass windows were inserted and new seating installed. The whole of the stonework was cleaned and, according to the report in the Grantham Journal of the time, 'great labour has especially been bestowed on the roofs of the nave and aisle'. It is at this time that the name of the church changed from that of Saint Peter and Saint Paul to its present name of Saint John the Baptist.

The churchyard was closed except for the use of graves in situ and the present one opened in Harvest Field on land given by the rector, the Reverend Mirehouse. By the end of the 19th century services were held regularly in the Church of Saint John the Baptist but the days of three services every Sunday, a Sunday School and a choir not to mention the choir outings - were long gone. In spite of protests from the villagers, the rectory was sold for private housing. The rectory is now at Skillington and the present incumbent, now referred to as the priest-in-charge, serves four villages - Skillington, Colsterworth, Great Ponton and Little Ponton. The year 2006 saw the appointment of the first female parish priest.

The Colsterworth branch of the Society of Methodists started in a barn lent by Mr Wood of Gunby. The services were led by Mr John Treadgold who was from a family of Methodists in Little Brington, Northamptonshire, moving here around 1795. In 1814/15 the Society moved to another barn, one fully set out as a chapel this time and in Colsterworth itself but the exact location is unknown. In 1835, a piece of land on Back Lane was rented from Sir Montague Cholmeley at a lease of a hundred years at a nominal rent of half-a-crown a year. The old barn chapel was sold for a hundred guineas leaving a debt on the new building of £168 (including £50 carried over from the old chapel). The scheme was ambitious in that it was the first time that the Methodists had designed and constructed a place of worship. Attendance varied during the following years but for the summer of 1850 there are records showing an average of 200 adults and 80 children at Afternoon Worship and 170 adults in the evening. Unfortunately a schism at this time caused another chapel to be opened at Dunkirk, an area over the river at the bottom of what is now School Lane - previously known as Workhouse Lane. Here the services were held at the industrial premises of Edward Ingle (of Middlefield House). This Wesleyan Reform Chapel was particularly associated with the Temperance Movement and soon moved onto the High Street and later into the building especially built in 1858 and sold for

housing in 1950. There was also at one time a Primitive Methodist Chapel which held its meetings in Woolsthorpe at a private house. Only the original chapel on Back Lane is still in use.

During the early 1920s, the ironstone workings were expanded. The ironfields stretched over a huge area in Lincolnshire and Leicestershire. No. 1 pit was opened up (1926) to the west of the village followed by Pit No.2 (1927). In 1932 No.2 Extension Pit was opened up and followed the line of the Water Lane valley westwards. Quite a few houses and rights of way were lost to this development one being the footpath called Merrycock Hill which led up from Water Lane to a group of houses and two windmills. There is some evidence that the south of Grantham was used as a settlement area for retired legionnaires in Roman times and during the mining period a smelter, some coins and other Roman remains were unearthed. In 1941 a new quarry to the north of Woolsthorpe was opened - the North Pit Great tracks of land were excavated with the top-soil removed and piled up in such heaps as to call the area the name of 'The Alps'. A railway track was joined to the mainline to the east and a bridge built over the B6403 (removed in 1984). Spurs were attached to this branch line leading to Buckminster and Stainby with many truck tracks to the various sites of working. Offices and workshops were built at Dunkirk and much village housing was built or bought up to house the managerial staff. A hostel was opened for female office staff.

The ironstone brought work to men and women from this and many other nearby villagers and towns, some cycling ten or twelve miles to and from work every day. As the labour force was diminished on the land, the ironstone workings brought welcome relief to many who would otherwise have had to move away from the parish to search for other work. It is said that working on the ironstone was like working in a big family. Everyone knew everyone else and all gave support to each other, not only at work but in the many out-of-hours entertainment activities and sports attached to this huge concern. It came as a blow when the ironstone closed in the 1970s due to the influx of cheaper and richer ore from abroad. The top soil was replaced in accordance to the original agreement with the landowners and the fields restored to agriculture. Looking at this area now, no-one could imagine the uproar and industry of those years. Men who worked there hold fond memories of their time 'on the ironstone' and will describe their achievements with little persuasion.

Although bringing prosperity, the Great North Road caused much heavy coach and cart traffic to pass through the narrow and winding Colsterworth High Street until eventually the A1 bypass was opened in 1935 and a comparative peace was restored. The development of the motor car and a local bus service led to a change in shopping habits as people travelled to Grantham or Stamford or even Peterborough instead one by one the local High Street shops closed and were turned into dwellings until in this year of 2005 there is but one store left, the popular and busy local branch of the Cooperative Society. On the Bourne Road near the crossroads stands the Post Office, a popular and much used amenity but whose future is in doubt and where the passing and parking of so many cars and lorries cause difficulties to those attempting to cross the road. It is to be hoped that the imminent road improvements on the A1 roundabout - a noted black spot for accidents - will go some way to alleviate this problem.

A visitor from but fifty years ago would find the village much changed. The seven pubs are reduced to one, (the White Lion), and some of the old cottages which held small businesses such as those of the joiner and undertaker, and the baker were removed and blocks of utilitarian flats built in their place. The forge is now a private house as is the saddle-maker's, the butcher's and the grocer's. The school, built in 1973, replaced the old 1823 and 1895 buildings which are now two houses. Even the old village hall on School Lane, which was an old Army hut from World War One and in which were held dances in WW2, boxing matches, sales of work, concerts and dramatic performances, is also of the past. There are no farms where there used to be at least 5 and all the old crafts such as the blacksmith, the saddle-maker and the waggoner have gone.

Twyford is now merged into Colsterworth whereas the separation of Woolsthorpe is maintained by the ban on building on land between the two villages. The exception is the new Village Hall opened in 1984 erected on land donated by British Steel when the works closed. The area

includes a social club and a sports field. This development is the hinge that holds the two villages together. The older part of Woolsthorpe with its old cottages of mellow limestone and red pantile roofs, set in small groups along narrow winding lanes and interspersed with dry stone walls, still exists but most of the green spaces have been filled in with new buildings of red brick or stone. The population of Woolsthorpe seems to have been fairly constant. Two ancient family names recorded in 1665 - Atter and Senescal - are still to be found in the village today.

Colsterworth is now a quiet place where most of the working population travel out of the village even commuting to London by rail from Grantham. A considerable number of small enterprises responding to local needs have developed. These include building renovation and gardening, computer services, soft furnishings and upholstery, car maintenance and financial services. A doctor's surgery serves a wide area and children are bussed in from neighbouring villages to school. For relaxation and hobbies a variety of activities are on offer such as bowling, football and cricket, a social club, two women's organisations, a Music and Drama Society, a Gardening Club and a Village Archive Group. Nurseries for the toddlers and Beavers, Cubs, Brownies and Guide Packs are available for the youngsters, but sadly no Scouts until a new leader comes forward. From the nucleus of the old settlement along the High Street, Colsterworth has expanded, with the building of two large estates reaching east almost to the A1. House prices have risen considerably. One house on School Lane was sold for £4,000 in 1975, for £30,00 in 1984 and has recently been valued at £285,000. The convenience of this parish of three villages with its situation in the Midlands and on the A1 giving easy access to all parts of the country, has made this a convenient and popular place to live.

Sources:

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