

Chapter 12

Whitwell: A ‘pretty little village’

Sue Howlett

Described in the *Victoria County History of Rutland* (II, 165) as a ‘pretty little village’ of 84 inhabitants, Whitwell is one of the smallest settlements in Rutland. Today, however, it is one of the busiest locations on the shores of Rutland Water. Hundreds of visitors regularly throng its two extensive car parks, taking advantage of Cycle Hire, ‘Rock Blok’ climbing, cruises on the *Rutland Belle*, sailing, windsurfing and canoeing. On a summer weekend, cars queue to turn off the A606 road, following the re-routed Bull Brigg Lane which once linked Whitwell with the villages of Normanton and Edith Weston, via Bull Bridge.



*St Michael's
Church,
Whitwell (SH)*



*Bull Bridge in
1971 (Jim
Eaton)*

Before Rutland Water, Bull Brigg Lane linked Whitwell with Normanton and Edith Weston, via Bull Bridge (SH)



Human activity at Whitwell goes back at least two thousand years. In 1976-77 evidence of a small community living near to the present sailors' car park was discovered when archaeologists uncovered Iron Age post-holes, pits and ditches dating from the first and second centuries BC. Although this settlement was then abandoned, the area was re-occupied by a Romano-British farming community in the centuries following the Roman conquest of 43AD (*see* Chapter 18 – Brooches, Bathhouses and Bones – Archaeology in the Gwash Valley).

The Whitwell Coin Hoard

In 1991, a dramatic discovery was made at Whitwell. Four metal detectorists, searching with the landowner's permission, found a gold finger-ring, two gold coins [*solidi*] and 784 silver coins [*siliquae*], scattered across a fifteen-acre ploughed field. The discovery was reported to the police and analysed by experts at the British Museum, who identified the objects as Roman, dating mainly from the late fourth century AD. The find-spot was not far from the site of an Iron Age and Romano-British settlement at Whitwell, which had been excavated in advance of the construction of Rutland Water (*see* Chapter 18 – Brooches, Bathhouses and Bones – Archaeology in the Gwash Valley).

An inquest was held at Oakham Castle in May 1992 at which, according to legislation then in force, the find was declared to be Treasure Trove. This meant that when the ring and some coins were acquired by Leicestershire Museums and the British Museum, the finders received a reward equivalent to their full market value. Later that year, more silver coins were found, bringing the total number of these to 870.

Most of the coins were minted in Italy and Germany, and dating evidence indicated that the hoard must have been buried after 400 AD. Three-quarters of the *siliquae* had been clipped and 42 were forgeries, suggesting that they may have been used after the breakdown of Roman authority, as the legions were returning to Rome.

The most vivid and valuable item of the collection was the gold finger-ring, decorated with male and female busts facing each other. It was probably given to celebrate a betrothal, and is now in the collections of the Rutland County Museum (Bland & Johns 1994, 151-7).

The gold Roman betrothal ring found at Whitwell (RCM)



After the Roman legions departed from Britain, Whitwell eventually became an Anglo-Saxon village. In 1066 the estate was owned by 'Besí' and was worth the modest sum of twenty shillings. It had its own church on the steep knoll close to the crossroads. In common with many churches on high ground, this was dedicated to St Michael and All Angels.

The village took its name from the 'White Well', a spring rising in the hill-side behind the church. Its water supplied a well in a nearby farmyard and emerged in the Rectory garden. In 1858 a parish conduit was built into a wall in the Rectory grounds, allowing villagers to obtain water from a tap in a round-arched recess. One local archaeologist has suggested that holy water was formerly supplied from Whitwell to other churches in the area (Adams 1980, 45). At the beginning of the twentieth century, when heavy rain fell, the waters of the spring could be heard beneath the church and on rare occasions rose through a floor drain close to the chancel arch (Harvey & Crowther-Beynon 1912, 218).



The floor drain in Whitwell Church (SH)



Whitwell parish conduit (SH)

When William of Normandy conquered England in 1066, Anglo-Saxon estates were redistributed to his relatives and followers. Whitwell was granted to his niece, Countess Judith, widow of the Saxon Earl Waltheof. Twenty years later it was visited by surveyors who were riding the length and breadth of England to compile the Domesday Book of 1086. They noted that, under her tenant Herbert, the estate's value had now doubled to 40 shillings. Ten villagers and smallholders tilled the land with three ox-drawn ploughs. By 1329 there were eighteen householders, including one woman, 'Isabel ad Fontem', who probably lived by the spring. There were two priests, Ralph and Henry, and another Ralph, the chaplain. Other occupations included Elias the carpenter and William the smith (www.le.ac.uk/english/pot/ruthome).

Early in the thirteenth century, Whitwell had passed to the Priory of St John of Jerusalem (the Knights Hospitaller). It was probably under their ownership that the church was extended, with the addition of a south aisle and double bellcote. According to Nikolaus Pevsner in *The Buildings of England*, this is probably the earliest example of the traditional Rutland double bellcote. Further alterations were made in the fourteenth century, with a window inserted in the south aisle. A stone slab, once used as the medieval altar, was reused in the seventeenth century as a gravestone for the Rev Daniel Nailer, one of Whitwell's Rectors.

In 1345 Richard de Whitwell, the prebendary of Empingham in the church of St Mary, Lincoln, founded a chantry, and the rent of lands in Hambleton and Whitwell was used to pay a chaplain to sing daily masses in the Lady Chapel at Whitwell for the souls of Richard, his parents and ‘all faithful dead’ (National Archives, *Chancery Inquisitions*, c 143/273/11). A few decades later the chantry chaplain was William of Whitwell.

The last of a succession of chantry priests was Robert Suckling, made redundant by Henry VIII’s Chantry Act of 1547. The visiting commissioners described him as aged 46 years, ‘of honest conversation and hath always heretofore been exercised in the Education of Youth in learning yet unable to serve a Cure [parish] by reason he is purblind [totally blind]’ (Wright 1684, 137). His daily duties are remembered in the name of ‘Chantry Cottage’, one of Whitwell’s most picturesque cottages. According to tradition, stones from the original Chantry House may have been used in rebuilding the manor house (later known as Old Hall).



Chantry Cottage, Whitwell (SH)

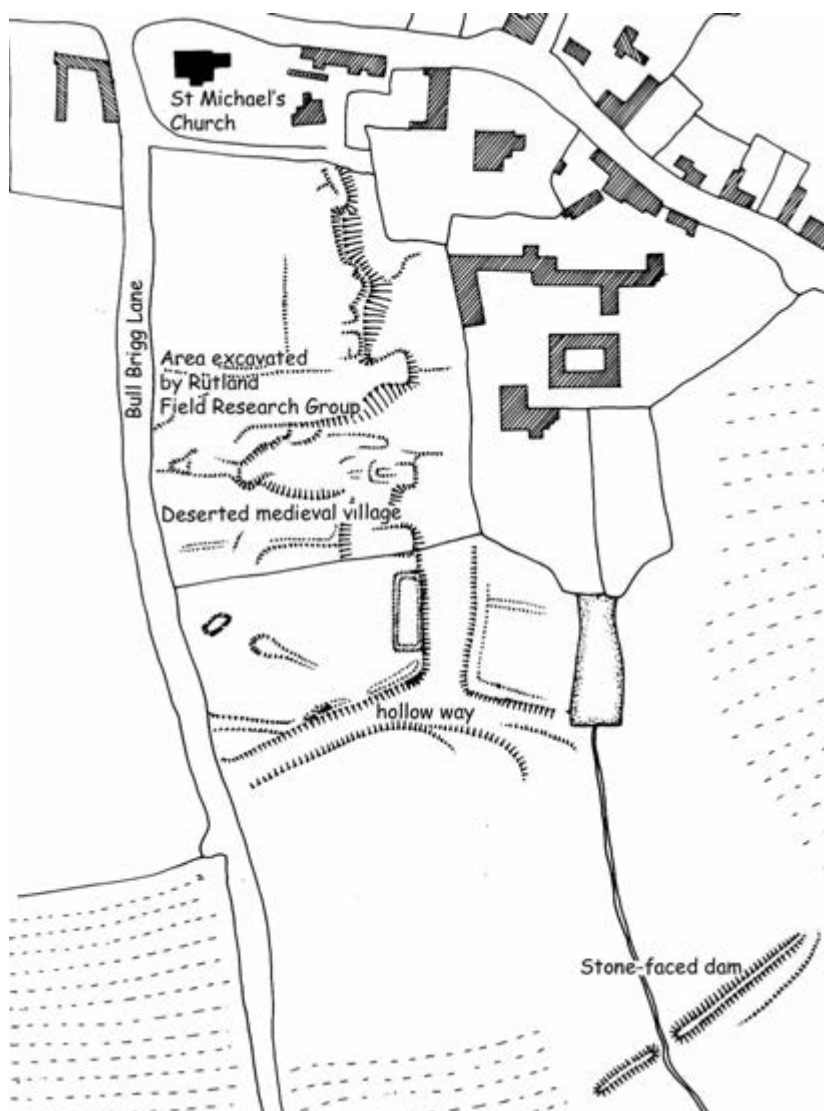


This window and some of the stonework at the former Old Hall, Whitwell, are thought to be from the medieval chantry (SH)

Today the village of Whitwell straddles the busy Stamford to Oakham road. In the Middle Ages, however, it also extended along Bull Brigg Lane to the south. There are traces of earthworks to the east of this road although the stone-faced mill dam was obliterated by Rutland Water. When this particular land was acquired for the construction of the reservoir, an excavation was carried out by the Rutland Field Research Group for Archaeology and History. Among the building foundations of this shrunken medieval village, they found sherds of pottery dating from the eleventh to the seventeenth century, and other finds including a thirteenth century halfpenny (*see* Chapter 20 – Medieval Settlements at Nether Hambleton and Whitwell).

The Prior of St John of Jerusalem continued to hold Whitwell until the 1540s, when ecclesiastical properties were confiscated as part of Henry VIII’s Dissolution of the Monasteries. Before this date the manor of Whitwell was leased out by the Prior of St John for a rent of six shillings and a pound of pepper. In the fifteenth century it was held by members of the powerful Flower (Flore) family, whose properties included the surviving Flore’s House in Oakham.

Sketch plan of the village and medieval earth-works of Whitwell (after Hartley 1983, 48)



In 1523 Richard Flower died 'seised of lands and a watermill in Whitwell', but after his death his widow was quick to sue her stepson, the heir Roger Flower, for the watermill, land and 'a capital message' (house with land and outbuildings) (*VCH* II, 165).

The value of Richard Flower's property in Whitwell, an impressive £80 per year, is confirmed by the Military Survey of 1522. This assessment of every community's wealth, and ability to defend the kingdom, provides a snapshot of Whitwell on the eve of the Reformation. The Prior of St John of Jerusalem was represented by a steward, Henry Wykley, whose personal land was worth six shillings and eight pence but whose goods were exempt from assessment. The chantry priest, John Reynolds, continued to sing daily masses for the souls of the dead, receiving an annual stipend of six marks, one more than that of the parson, Henry Hasley. The landlord with the

largest landholding, Richard Flower, was listed as having ‘horse & harnesses for vij [6] men’, ready to ride to the defence of the kingdom. Far smaller landholdings were held by Thomas Sherrard, receiving £4 13s 4d per year in rent, and John and William Haryngton (Harington), receiving six shillings and twenty shillings respectively. The remaining nine adult males living in Whitwell were either tenants of one of the landowners or labourers, ‘yong men & pore’, owning no land or rents but with wages of 20s (£1) per year (Cornwall 1980, 24-5, 114).



A damaged gravestone of about 1545 in the chancel of Whitwell Church. It is inscribed ‘Filius [son of] Roger Flore’ (SH)

The Flower and Harington families were connected by marriage when Richard Flower married Alice Harington of Exton. Richard’s early death in 1540 left their five-year-old son, John, to inherit the manor of Whitwell. The last of the Flower family to hold Whitwell was another John, born in 1571, and his wife Jane, who were described in 1621 as recusants (Roman Catholics).

In 1620 the manor of Whitwell was sold to Sir Baptist Hicks, 1st Viscount Campden, who also bought Exton and other Rutland estates. His heirs, the Noel family of Exton, continued to hold Whitwell as Lords of the Manor until the twentieth century. They appointed Rectors to the parish church and provided them with a substantial Rectory, dating back to the sixteenth century, though subsequently much rebuilt and extended.

‘Resurgam’ [I will rise again] on the gravestone of Maria, wife of Thomas Frere, Rector of Whitwell (SH)

Whitwell’s Rector from 1627 was Thomas Frere. When divisions between Puritans and high-church Anglicans led to the bitter tensions and civil war in the 1640s, the ministers of Rutland were equally divided. The two schools of Uppingham and Oakham spread puritanism across the county, although some parish priests such as Uppingham’s Rector, Jeremy Taylor, remained loyal to the king with his Anglo-Catholic ‘innovations’. Thomas Frere, appointed as Rector of Whitwell by the Royalist Noels was ‘ejected’ by the dominant Parliamentarians in 1650. In his later appeal to King Charles II, he stated that he had been ‘imprisoned & plundered for loyalty’, having seven children unprovided for (Walker 1948, 301). Thomas Frere died, re-instated as Rector of Whitwell, in 1667. His tomb lies beneath the chancel floor with those of his two wives, Prudence, who died in 1635, and Maria (Mary) who died in 1658.



Although the lords of the manor of Whitwell were members of the Noel family, the family's main seat was nearby Exton Hall. The eldest Noel sons, succeeding to the titles of Viscount Campden and later Earl of Gainsborough, took up residence at Exton where the family still lives today. Meanwhile the rebuilt manor house of Whitwell (Old Hall) became home to Alexander Noel, youngest brother of the 2nd Viscount Campden, with his new wife, Mary Palmer. She was sister to Sir Geoffrey Palmer, 1st Baronet, later to be appointed Attorney-General by King Charles II (www.thepeerage.com). This influential connection would in later years confirm Alexander Noel as a leading figure on the Rutland county scene.



Left: The area around Whitwell village showing ridge and furrow, evidence of the medieval strip farming system, surviving into the twentieth century, as well as the Barnsdale deer park (Hartley 1983, 58)

Below: The new manor house (later known as Old Hall, then Old Hall Farm) at Whitwell (SH)

During the 1630s, the new lord of the manor of Whitwell turned his mind to increasing the efficiency and output of the three great open fields, which were cultivated in strips according to the medieval system. Parts of Whitwell's West and North Fields were enclosed into smaller units of land, although, in the process, poorer villagers inevitably lost out. Further enclosures followed later in the century, when the South Field was enclosed and the remaining parts of the West and North Fields reorganised into three new fields, Nether, Middle and Clay (Ryder 2006, 8). The name of Clay Field was to prove highly significant three centuries later, when the geology of the area was an important factor in the decision to build Rutland Water.



The tranquil cycles of rural life were brutally disrupted in the 1640s by the outbreak of civil war with the gentry of Rutland equally divided in their choice of allegiance. The Noels were staunch Royalists. Baptist Noel, 3rd Viscount Campden, led his cavalry troop of 'Camdeners' in daring raids across Rutland and beyond, even confronting Oliver Cromwell at the siege of Burghley House, outside Stamford, Lincolnshire. Although Lord Campden was heavily fined and briefly imprisoned during the years of conflict, his uncle, Alexander Noel, seems to have led a quieter life at Whitwell, maintaining cordial relations with his Parliamentarian neighbours. Indeed, he was pragmatic enough to negotiate the marriage of his daughter, Mary, to Abel Barker of Hambleton, an active member of the County Committee which governed Rutland in the name of Parliament. As with most such alliances, money played an important role: Alexander Noel agreed to provide £1,500 to obtain a suitable husband for his daughter.

Restored to his kingdom in 1660 amid popular rejoicing, King Charles II found himself beset by debt and financial problems. New taxes were introduced, including the famous Hearth Tax, which became law in 1662. County receivers worked with local constables to count the hearths in every home, each to be taxed at two shillings per annum, one shilling to be paid on Lady Day and one shilling to be paid at Michaelmas. The officer appointed to administer the Hearth Tax in Rutland was Andrew Noel, son of Alexander Noel of Whitwell. In Whitwell, Alexander Noel's manor house was the largest building, with eight hearths, although his nephew, the 3rd Viscount Campden, had an impressive 32 hearths at Exton. Whitwell Rectory, where Thomas Frere was enjoying his reinstatement after the upheavals of the Commonwealth period, had six hearths, while each of the remaining 19 properties had no more than one taxable hearth. The parish constable, Clement Gregory, had a one-hearth home of his own but also owned a second cottage which was temporarily empty (Bourne & Goode 1991, 32).

The inefficiency of the Hearth Tax led to further experimental taxes. In the decades which followed, a variety of new taxes included the Window Tax which remained on the statute books from 1696 to 1851, leading to the many

*Whitwell
Rectory in the
early twentieth
century (Hart)*



blocked-up windows still seen today. However, the most successful, before the introduction of Income Tax, was the Land Tax introduced in 1692. The assessments for this tax allow researchers to compare the list of taxpayers in Whitwell and other parishes with those of earlier generations. Alexander Noel had died in 1667 and his son, Andrew, left no male heirs. Without a resident lord of the manor, Old Hall became a farmhouse and the manor of Whitwell became part of the Exton estate. When a Land Tax assessment was made for Whitwell in 1712, the Earl of Gainsborough was charged £10 5s 4d for land in the parish, and the Hon Lady Noel, probably his mother, was charged £9 13s 3d. However, the Rectory was worth more, with Mr John Chapman assessed at £13 9s 0d (*The 1712 Land Tax Assessments* 2005, 57).

A few years later, Whitwell had a new Rector, John Isaac. In 1719 Isaac married Mary White, who would become the aunt of the famous naturalist, Gilbert White of Selborne, Hampshire. A memorial in the church records the death of Mary Isaac, daughter of the Rector and his wife, ‘taken to the angels in heaven’, aged 10. In contrast, another daughter, Katherine Susanna Isaac, died at the age of 83 in 1803.

Whitwell Rectory provided hospitality for the fifteen-year-old Gilbert White, when he travelled from Selborne, Hampshire, to visit his aunt and uncle in 1736. Here he made the acquaintance of Thomas Barker of Lyndon, who was already beginning to keep his detailed weather journals. Six years later, Gilbert White stayed at Whitwell for three months. His younger sister, Anne White, born in 1731, also visited her aunt and uncle at Whitwell, meeting Thomas Barker whom she married in 1751. It is possibly due to his friendship with Thomas Barker that Gilbert White began his own more famous natural history journals (Kington 1988, 8-10).

Whitwell remained a tiny village and sleepy rural backwater for the following two centuries. In 1801 the population was only 80 and, although it increased to 139 in 1841, had declined again to 104 by 1861, possibly due to improved farming methods requiring fewer labourers. By the end of the century the population had continued to decline: the census of 1901 records 20 households and a total of 81 residents. The heads of four families were described as farmers, tenants of the Earl of Gainsborough, while Thomas Hall, possibly occupying Old Hall Farm (formerly known as Old Hall), was described as ‘Grazier’.

Three homes in 1901 were occupied by different branches of the Springthorpe family. In one cottage lived William Springthorpe, still described as ‘Labourer’ although aged 74. Close by, were households headed by two distant cousins, both aged 43. One was Elijah Needham Springthorpe, ‘Boot and Shoe Maker’, who also served as Churchwarden, with his wife, two children and a boarder from Nottingham. Elijah



The Old Rectory, which is now part of Whitwell Hotel and Conference Centre (SH)

Springthorpe's earlier life was recalled by Lizzie Pinder, who grew up at Old Hall Farm in the 1870s and 1880s: 'rather lame; he used to spend Sunday evenings in our lower kitchen, sitting on the dresser between the sink and the steamer, accompanied by the cook [Hannah Andrew of Ketton], whom he afterwards married.' In the neighbouring cottage was Thomas William Springthorpe, a 'Road Labourer', whose two teenage sons were each described as 'Farm Labourer (Horseman)'. The younger, Herbert Cecil, was one of six men of Whitwell killed in the First World War.



Left: Whitwell Main Street about 1908. Note the postman, who walked to Whitwell from Oakham via Egleton and Hambleton. He returned to Oakham with the collected mail by the same route in the evening (Hart)

Right: Elijah and Hannah Springthorpe outside their cottage in Whitwell (Liz Branson)



Lance-Corporal Herbert Cecil Springthorpe, 1887-1915

'Lance-Corporal Herbert Cecil Springthorpe, 2nd Battalion the Lincolnshire Regiment, was the son of Mr and Mrs Thomas William Springthorpe of Whitwell and was born there on 30th May 1887. He was married. Private Springthorpe enlisted in the Regulars in 1903. Two years later his regiment was ordered to India where he completed his three years service. On his return to England he obtained a position as porter at Skipton station and after about five years he went to Canada. On the outbreak of war he returned from Vancouver, being still on the Reserve, and rejoined his old regiment in September 1914. They were drafted to France in November and on 12th March 1915 he was killed in action in Neuve Chappelle [sic]. Prior to leaving Vancouver in 1914 a memento with an address, signed by a number of his neighbours, was presented to Mr Springthorpe in which the following sentiments were expressed: "We appreciate the fact that you are to be our representative in the defence of our country, flag and honour. As a neighbour we shall miss your cheerful outlook on life, but when duty calls, manhood must respond"' (Phillips 1920, 90).



The Pinder Family of Whitwell

In 1951 John W Pinder recalled:

'Robert Pinder's name appears for the first time in 1866, when he signed his name on the Churchwardens' Accounts. He was a wealthy farmer and lived at Old Hall Farm. He must have been a comparative newcomer to the village because he did not appear on the 1851 Census. By 1870 he was appointed churchwarden and continued to serve until 1896. Although the Rector had proposed him as Churchwarden in April 1870, Robert did not hesitate to suggest that the Rector should pay the same parish rate as the rest of the parish. In that year it was three pence in the pound. Robert Pinder died in 1898 at the age of 61 and was buried with other family members at Whitwell. A brass memorial plate near the chancel arch records his and his wife's death. The remaining family then left Whitwell.

'Mr and Mrs Pinder's son, Robert, was accidentally shot and killed by his native manservant at Navua in the Fiji Islands. He was a sugar planter and died in 1908 at the age of thirty.'

During the late 1860s and 1870s Whitwell had as its Rector Charles Spencer Ellicott. His son was Charles John Ellicott (1819-1905), who became Bishop of Gloucester in 1863. Bishop Ellicott was a respected author and theologian, appointed in 1870 as chairman of the committee translating the New Testament for the Revised Version of the Bible. One of his unusual privileges was that of free travel on the Great Eastern Railway, awarded for his role in a railway accident, where despite severe injuries he exerted himself heroically to administer spiritual consolation to the dying victims of the disaster. Bishop Ellicott visited Whitwell for the funerals of his parents. Lizzie Pinder, looking back in 1950 on her childhood, remembered the Sunday evening after one of the funerals, 'four or five robed figures sitting in one of the pews. Our governess told us that people always came to Church the Sunday after they had buried someone they loved'.

Above:
Herbert Cecil
Springthorpe
(Phillips 1920,
plate viii)

Charles Ellicott, Bishop of Gloucester, was often to be seen on his tricycle (Liz Branson)



In 1881 Whitwell Church underwent restoration, at a cost of £1,600, paid for by a former Curate, the Rev R V C Kinleside. Lizzie Pinder, born in 1871, described how before this date she had been taken into her family's box pew, which was very comfortable, with 'thick cushions, very high hassocks, a thick carpet, and in the winter foot warmers'. She could hear voices but not see anyone until allowed to stand on the seat for the psalms. As the family grew in size, with thirteen children plus relations and servants, Lizzie and her siblings sat with their governess in the ordinary pew behind the box pew. While the restoration of the church was carried out, services were held in a stone barn owned by her family. 'That barn made a really good little church, it was much wider than the church itself, for I remember how very small the little Holy Table looked, which had been brought from the church – the harmonium too was brought.' The harmonium was played by Mrs Beecham, the wife of the new Rector, with Teddy Springthorpe, 'a weedy little boy with very poor eyes', blowing it.

Charles John Ellicott, Bishop of Gloucester, son of the Rector of Whitwell (Vanity Fair 18th July 1885)

The Pinder household at Old Hall made up the majority of the congregation, in addition to the 'Beecham boys', the Rector's sons, and the Sexton, Elijah Springthorpe. One regular churchgoer, remembered by Lizzie, was 'old John (or Tom) Allen with a withered hand and an iron hook fixed up his sleeve. I heard often that he was found dead by his bed on his knees'. The congregation was greatly increased for Evensong on Good Friday, when Robert Pinder would give his farm workers 'a full day's wages, and a free day to spend in their own fashion, mostly on their allotments, provided they came back to church; the service was in the evening for their convenience'. The labourers earned about twelve shillings (60p) a week, and Lizzie describes them wearing 'coarse dark brown corduroy trousers tied below the knee', or in some cases, such as the shepherd, wearing smocks.

The Village Feast, celebrating the patron saint, was held at Michaelmas (29th September). ‘There used to be gypsy stalls set up near the village inn, and a good deal of fun of sorts kept up for about a week I believe, but of course we [the Pinder children] took no part in it; our maids were allowed out those days.’ By the mid-twentieth century, however, the autumn Feast Week was no longer celebrated and villagers would travel to Empingham to share in theirs.

Christmas was the time when everyone could celebrate. The church would be heavily decorated with evergreens until it ‘turned into a big shrubbery’. Late on Christmas Eve, about fourteen men and boys gathered in the top kitchen of Old Hall, around a table covered in a thick brown cloth. They brought out fourteen shiny hand-bells and proceeded to play ‘jingly’ tunes such as ‘Pop goes the Weasel’. If the children had already gone to bed they were allowed back down again, being sent back upstairs while the men enjoyed their beer and cake! Another highlight was the visit of the Mummers, ‘five or six big lads who performed in the lower kitchen, with corked faces, sticks and bludgeons, giving Beelzebub the worst of it!’ (*see* Chapter 5 – Edith Weston: A Queen’s Dowry).

While Lizzie Pinder and her sisters had lessons with their governess at home in Old Hall, and their two brothers went away to school, local children had lessons in the village school. Unlike most neighbouring villages, Whitwell had no purpose-built school, but lessons were held in Chantry Cottage from the 1860s to about 1890. After the school was closed children had to walk or later travel by bus to Exton or Empingham. The village was also too small to have its own butcher or blacksmith, with tradesmen calling from Empingham or elsewhere. Until about 1900, the blacksmith from Greetham came once a week, using premises at High Moor Farm, which also had a bakehouse which was used by many villagers for baking bread and roasting their Sunday joints.



Lizzie Pinder, also known as ‘Betty’ Pinder, grew up to become an Anglican nun, taking the new name ‘Sister Lisette’. She always felt that she had been blessed in her mother’s womb when her parents attended the Roman Catholic funeral of the Earl of Gainsborough. In 1909 she joined the Community of St Mary the Virgin at Wantage, Oxfordshire, an active monastic order caring for the poor in the slums of East London. She revisited Whitwell only once, in 1947, to see once more the graves of her parents. Writing to her nephew, Robert, in July 1950, Sister Lisette recalled with love and gratitude the ‘heaven-light’ bestowed on her by the happy childhood days at Whitwell.

Elijah Springthorpe, bootmaker and churchwarden, lived to the age of 79. In their cottage at the west end of the village, he and Hannah brought up two children, John Hugh and Elizabeth Anne. Elizabeth’s son, John Branson, who grew up in Empingham, has vivid memories of visiting his grandparents at Whitwell in the 1930s.

Interior of St Michael's Church, Whitwell (Liz Branson)

Elijah Springthorpe and Life at Whitwell in the 1930s

'My grandfather was Elijah Needham Springthorpe who lived in the house at the top of the hill on the right hand side of the Oakham road. He was a boot and shoemaker by profession, but also ran the village post office from his home. Like most other rural post offices he stocked a small selection of general goods, sweets, whips and tops and marbles. The room given over to the postal and sundry sales was to the front of the house, but service was through an opening onto the corridor that led from the main door on the western wall of the house. One wall of the room was totally occupied by a large glass-fronted cabinet containing dozens of pairs of wooden lasts on which the boots or shoes were made. Each customer had a last that was an exact replica of their feet, thus ensuring a snug fit when the footwear was completed. Each boot or shoe was made from leather and the smell of leather pervaded the house, but not unpleasantly. He was patronised by the aristocracy of that time. I remember the fine finish that he made even for a farm labourer. Taking pride in what you did was normal in those days.

'In 1936 Whitwell had no electricity. Every day, water had to be fetched from the tap in the middle of the village. For the men folk, beer was the everyday, drink. Elijah had his beer delivered in a barrel by dray from Oakham.

'Lavatory arrangements were primitive. There were no water closets, just a wooden framework concealing a steel pan into which the body waste products fell. The frame was often two stepped, providing seating at different heights to suit the stature of the user. The pan was exchanged for an empty one every week, usually very early in the morning, and the contents were taken and spread over fields as manure. Toilet paper as we know it today was rare in 1936 and use was made of cut-up newspaper. Deep sewerage and indoor lavatories were introduced long after the war.

'The nearest doctor was at Empingham, but only available to those that could pay. There was a "Sick and Dividend Club" at Empingham which would have been open to Whitwell residents. Families paid two pence per week per family member into this fund, which then gave them access to the doctor whose bill the fund paid. However some villagers were so poor that they were unable to join the club.

'The horse and cart era, the mainstay of rural transportation, only came to an end at the end of the war. Public transport was by United Counties omnibuses, but for people going to work, cycling was the only way since the first bus arrived, far too late, at 8.30am. Whitwell

was served by a variety of local tradesmen selling from the backs of vans. The visit was usually once per week and was well patronised by the villagers. Paraffin was a popular fuel for cooking and lighting, brought by the Harrison and Dunn hardware van [from Stamford] or by Ellis and Everard [from Oakham]. Another vendor had fish and chips for two pence and found many takers at around 7pm on his day, as did the wet fish man on Friday morning. Butchers and bakers also made the rounds. Milk was totally local to Whitwell and delivered by jug. The coalman delivered coal from a horse and cart. Each bag contained one hundredweight (50kg) and cost 1s 9d. Everyone had open fires, burning wood and coal. The fire was lit first thing in the morning and burned all day. Often the fire was flanked by a hot water boiler on one side and an oven on the other. Elijah's fireplace was like this and it had a spit above it which was a rotating mechanism used in roasting meat' (John Branson, 2006).

*Elijah Needham
Springthorpe*
(Liz Branson)



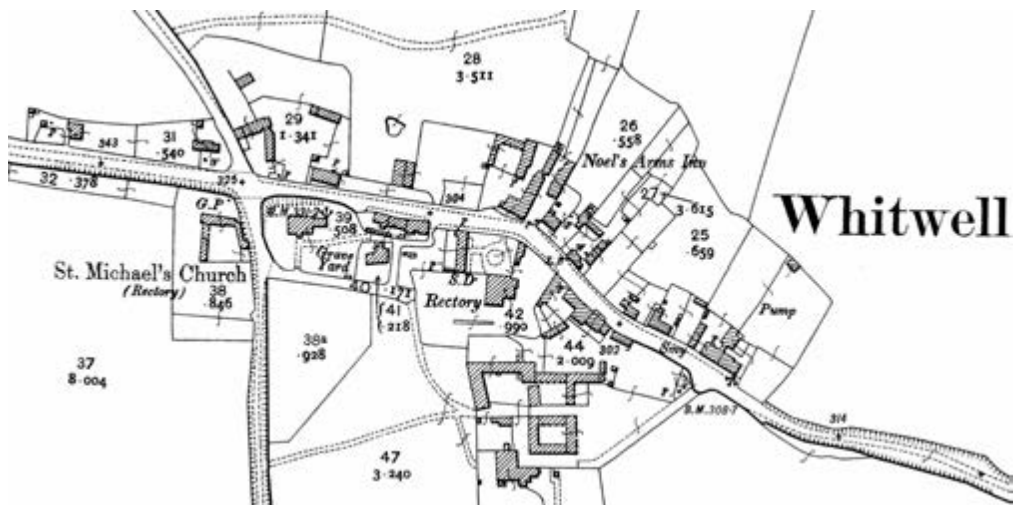


Whitwell Main Street in the 1930s (Hart)

The villagers of Whitwell, as elsewhere in Britain, would have heard by wireless the news of the declaration of war in 1939. When local men went off to fight, much of the agricultural work in the valley was carried out by prisoners of war and the Women's Land Army. These anxious times were relieved by dances and whist drives at the Village Hall, a surplus Great War army hut, erected in 1921 and opened by Lady Gainsborough. The last function held there was probably the wedding reception of Harold Land and Violet Springthorpe in 1954. The hall gradually fell into disrepair and was finally demolished around 1970.

One young woman growing up in the village was Dorothy Hackett (*née* Brudenell), born in 1917 at Home Farm. On the outbreak of war she left Whitwell to join the Auxiliary Territorial Service (women's army service). She met a 'dashing' Cornishman and married him in Whitwell Church in 1943, before leaving for her new life in Cornwall, only returning to Whitwell much later in life. She remembers her mother's annoyance that, even during the wedding service, the church was made gloomy by blackout curtains.

The village of Whitwell from the OS 2nd ed 25" map 1904



For a couple of decades after the war, Whitwell remained an estate village, with most residents, including farmers, paying rent to the Gainsborough Estate. There were four substantial farms, employing workers who lived in the surrounding cottages. High Moor Farm was the childhood home of Jane Thomas (*née* Bottomley), a typical mixed farm at the eastern end of the High Street. Jane remembers being expected to work hard on the farm from an early age. Even as a child she would drive tractors that pulled trailers, allowing her to feed the animals. Although local children came to play, there was little spare time, but ‘no one knew any different’.

When news came that a reservoir was to be built in the Gwash valley, Jane’s father, along with most other farmers, was devastated. He and others paid as much as they could into a fighting fund to try to prevent it, but all in vain: ‘To start with we thought, no, it could never happen, then it started to get a bit more serious and the next thing we knew, yes, it was going to happen.’ Tragically, her father died in a farm accident in the early 1970s, and later, the loss of land to the reservoir meant that there was not enough left for the farm to be viable. Jane remembered walks from Whitwell to Edith Weston, and sitting on one of the bridges, fishing in the stream in that beautiful valley. ‘Many farms ended and families moved out. Nothing was ever the same again’ (Jane Thomas, 2005).

*High Moor
Farm in 2006*
(SH)



The largest farm in Whitwell was Old Hall Farm, formerly Old Hall, which included much land now submerged by Rutland Water. In the 1950s and 1960s it was owned by Brigadier Cavenagh, who employed Bert and Bet Jardine to manage the farm. The Brigadier’s colourful career had included riding in the Grand National, for which he regularly had to lose weight in the sauna, and declining to accept a medal at Buckingham Palace, for which he received an official rebuke (information from Lisa Cavenagh). According to his daughter, the late Mrs Bridget Senior, the first he heard of the coming of the reservoir was when he looked out of his window and saw two men

apparently surveying his field. He went out to question them. They said, ‘Oh, didn’t you know? All this’ – with an expansive gesture of the arm – ‘is going to be part of a new reservoir. Bought by compulsory purchase. You’ll get compensation.’ He said, ‘Money can never compensate me for my own land’. His daughter reported that he never recovered from this loss and died before the reservoir was completed. No longer viable as a farmhouse, the Old Hall Farm was sold to Anglian Water and has more recently become part of the Whitwell Hotel and Conference Centre.

Following completion of the reservoir, a lighter episode in the history of Old Hall Farm is struck by a story recounted by Robin Church of Whitwell. About eighteen months after the waters of the reservoir started to rise, it began to be stocked with trout, and, by then, the new Whitwell Creek had been created on the former land of the Old Hall:

‘The stream that runs through the gardens of the Rectory ran straight into the creek and in spring, fish spawning go up running water. Well, the stream in the [Old Hall] garden is probably only four or five feet wide and 18 inches deep, and the trout got up there. Jam-packed full of trout, and we used to go down there in the morning . . . and we used to hoick these out with our bare hands. No tickling, we didn’t need to. We had buckets, everybody’s freezer was full. People used to come with baskets . . . great big linen baskets. Unfortunately, Anglian Water got wise to this because, if you look now, there’s a big storm drain door over it with a big metal door that’s mounted vertically and swings so that the water can get out and the fish can’t get up.’



Brigadier Cavenagh, the owner of Old Hall Farm at Whitwell (Tina Cavenagh)



The stream in the grounds of Whitwell Rectory in 2006 (SH)

Woodlands Farm, opposite the church, was farmed for 30 years after the war by Mr and Mrs Ractliffe, and when her husband died, Mrs Ractliffe lived there alone until 1994. She had apparently been a keen cricketer and wicket keeper, and in later life would watch every Test Match on television. Mr Ractliffe's father had been the railway crossing keeper at Ashwell, working on the railways for many years. In the First World War he worked at Melton Mowbray (Leicestershire) station where there were truckloads of boots sent back by the troops fighting on the front lines. He used to collect some of these off the train and take them home where he would repair them during the evening. On retirement, he moved with his son and daughter-in-law to Whitwell. Later, the tools of his trade were donated to Rutland County Museum by Mrs Ractliffe.

When Whitwell's Postmaster, Elijah Springthorpe, died in 1936, the Post Office moved elsewhere. At first it was in an old cottage, now demolished, close to the church, where Jane Thomas remembers going with her mother, down four or five steps into a small general store. Then in 1961, a wooden extension was built to the north side of a pair of semi-detached council houses on the road to Edith Weston, now Bull Brigg Lane. This was operated by Hilda Bell, as recounted by her daughter, Mary:

'From the days of selling a few cigarettes along with her Post Office duties, Mum grew the business to sell groceries, confectionery, soft drinks and souvenirs of Rutland Water. Once the reservoir opened the shop became seven days a week, catering for the early morning fishermen who were looking to buy their bacon and eggs to cook Sunday morning breakfast after a few hours out on the water. It was not unusual for me to receive a call at work to pick up something in town for someone who had forgotten to bring it with them and Mum did not sell it. By the 1980s it became harder and harder to compete with the supermarkets, with the relaxing of the Sunday trading laws, and the opening up of the car parks for more businesses. The Post Office and shop was finally closed in 1994, three years after the death of Mum, Hilda.'

The tranquil village life of Whitwell was never the same after the building of Rutland Water, coming at the same time as other changes which totally altered the countryside. As churches were less well attended, parishes were amalgamated and lost their resident priests. Whitwell had been united with the benefice of Exton with Horn as far back as 1926, but in 1986 this group was united with Empingham, and Whitwell Rectory was no longer required. The building was sold and, in 1991, 'The Old Rectory' was offered for sale, 'completely renovated to provide two very large spacious properties on large plots close to Rutland Water'. Soon afterwards it became offices for Anglian Water and is now part of the Whitwell Hotel and Conference Centre. The conversion of the Rectory and of several former farm buildings was an indicator of new money, and new people, coming into Rutland. Although land to the north of Whitwell is still farmed, the farmhouses along the village High Street no longer hum with agricultural activity or the sound of animals in the yards.

Rutland Water also had a great impact on the prosperity of Whitwell's public house, The Noel, formerly the Noel Arms. Built as a farmhouse in the

seventeenth century, it became one of two village inns, the other being the Three Steps Inn, on the corner where the telephone box now stands. This inn was demolished soon after the war.

When Jane grew up, she worked at the Noel Arms during the early days of Rutland Water, and remembers the atmosphere of the first season as being ‘quite manic’.

The new owners of the Noel Arms, who bought it at auction in 1979, were Sam and Julie Healey. The inn buzzed with new energy and, while catering for the influx of fishermen and tourists to the new reservoir, it became the centre of a lively village community. The most audacious enterprise which took place at this time was to ‘twin’ the village with somewhere abroad, but this would not be just a tiny foreign hamlet. Two villagers wrote to the Mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac, announcing that they intended to link Whitwell with Paris and inviting him to the ceremony. The letter was a masterpiece of tongue-in-cheek, school-boy French:

‘As you know, these days it is very chic, even *de rigueur* to twin towns having a common interest. Doubtless you know Whitwell-on-the-water, chief fishing port of the Midlands. When we have visited Paris we have noticed that there are many fish in the Seine. It is for that reason that we have thought to twin Whitwell-on-the-water with Paris. We hope you can participate . . . (*entente cordiale, mains à travers la mer et tout cela*). We would have wished to offer to pay your expenses, but thanks to Mrs Thatcher we are unfortunately too poor . . .’

The date set for the twinning ceremony scarcely allowed time for any reply. Nevertheless, on the day before, 13th June 1980, a response was received from the Mayor’s office: ‘Monsieur Jacques Chirac, who is appreciative of your attention, has asked me to let you know that it was unfortunately impossible to give a favourable answer to your request.’ The polite reason given was that Paris was officially twinned with Rome, thus excluding any other twinning arrangements. The ceremonies went ahead regardless. A procession started at Exton with an open car containing the French master from Oakham School as a substitute for the Paris Mayor. As one resident remembers:

‘Needless to say, there were plenty of onion sellers and ladies in French dress and split skirts and all that. You see, it was a good do. There were various ceremonies and the “Mayor of Paris” officially opened the booze and that sort of thing. Television people turned up and in the end they were supposed to go on to a couple of other things but they never left, they just stayed on all evening . . . It must have been Friday night, and on the Monday it was all on Central Television News. They interviewed Nick “the Thatcher”, as they do, and it was in the Sunday papers . . . So that’s why we have “Twinned with Paris” signs and, occasionally, I have had letters from people, mostly children, wanting to know what it’s all about’ (Robin Church).



The Noel, Whitwell, formerly the Noel Arms (SH)



Today, life in the village of *The late Geoff Whitwell* may have settled into a calmer routine, but a few hundred metres to the south, the newly created Whitwell Creek resounds with the happy sounds of children learning to sail. There, windsurfers improve their skills, yachtsmen launch their craft and families canoe or queue to cruise on the *Rutland Belle*. On the other side of Bull Brigg Lane, near the old Edith Weston road which now leads down into the waters of the

reservoir, further energetic activities are on offer. Children may no longer roam the fields of Whitwell Parish, seeking their own amusements, or play in the near-deserted main street of the village, but people of all ages from much further afield can run, play, cycle or climb, and explore the beauties of this man-made landscape, or simply enjoy their leisure, with as much delight and enthusiasm as the carefree, rural children of centuries past.

Whitwell village and Whitwell Creek from the air in 2006 (John Nowell, Zodiac Publishing)

