

A Brief History of Wheatley

The average 21st Century person could be forgiven for thinking Wheatley is nothing more than a post-Industrial Revolution urban suburb of a once thriving industrial town. However, appearances can be, and are, deceptive.

Early Days

Wheatley's history dates back to at least the 8th Century when the earliest known record of the Manor of Sandall and Wheatley was written. "Wheatley" means *wet fields*, which describes the general condition of the region in the times before the River Don was rerouted and extra drainage channels dug, and lies on the old floodplain of the Don, which peaked at today's Thorne Road. "Sandall" means *a sandy nook of land*, which still exists down river from the present-day hamlet. Although the two original townships (something between a village and a town) were separated by over a mile of open countryside, they appear to have been administered as a single unit from pre-Conquest days, the Victorian historian Hunter remarking in his study of Yorkshire, "the townships (of Wheatley and Sandall), if indeed they were ever separate...". Immediately before the Conquest, the manor was owned by the Lord of the Manor of Hexthorpe, none other than Tostig, the Earl of Northumbria, one of the three most powerful men in the kingdom after the king himself. The Conquest of 1066 was more than just a change of monarch. The new Norman regime confiscated almost all lands owned by the native English and parcelled them out to King William's faithful retainers. Sandall-and-Wheatley was granted to Nigel de Fozzard, whose name suggests he was Breton, and after his death passed through several other families, including the de Mauley's.

Wheatley Hall

The Lords of the Manor resided in Sandall until 1683, by which time the powerful Cooke family had inherited the manor and a magnificent family seat was built midway between the two townships by Sir Henry Cooke. Named Wheatley Hall, the stone-built building boasted a proliferation of windows and had four storeys, one of which was underground. Unfortunately, due to the proximity of the River Don which frequently burst its banks, the basement suffered a great deal of flooding, as did the surrounding 103 acres of grounds. The contemporary view held that the site was by no means the best that could have been chosen, which leads to the obvious conclusion that Sir Henry chose it merely for its geographical location. The building remained the seat of the Cooke family until around 1914 when the latest lord, Sir William Cooke, moved out to be nearer the colliery he owned in neighbouring Bentley. The Hall was leased to Wheatley Golf Club, which used the ground floor as a club house and sub-let the upper two storeys as flats. By 1933, upkeep of the deteriorating building had become too much for the golfers, who moved to their current home on Armthorpe Road. The estate, much of which had been converted into a golf course, was purchased by Doncaster Corporation for housing, whilst the crumbling Jacobean Hall itself was demolished in 1938. Today, the site of the Hall is occupied by McCormick International Tractors' factory complex, whilst the estate has long vanished beneath the Wheatley Park housing estate.

Long Sandall and Clay Lane

Although sharing a Lord of the Manor, the twin townships enjoyed separate existences. Whilst Wheatley was mainly an overflow from Doncaster, Sandall developed in splendid isolation, at least until the early 20th Century. Its church, due to the vagaries of siting holy buildings, was built about a mile away from the main settlement and quickly became the nucleus of a new village, Kirk Sandall. Sandall, henceforth, become known as Long Sandall, the *Long* referring to its linear nature along what are now Little Lane and Clay Lane West. Its proximity to the river meant it was a popular point for unloading cargo, and it enjoyed several centuries of relative prosperity, boasting two inns as late as the 1860s. However, whilst the spread of industrialisation caused Doncaster and its immediate neighbours to grow rapidly in the 19th Century, the same force eventually caused Long Sandall to decline as a major settlement. The abundance of local sand encouraged the establishment of two major glass factories in the vicinity. Homes for the workers were built in the daughter village of Kirk Sandall and on the site of an old clay pit across Barnby Dun Road from Long Sandall. This latter became Clay Lane estate and grew rapidly to overshadow the older settlement. By the 1970s, the

number of households in Long Sandall had shrunk to less than twenty. Now there are just six, hidden from the outside world behind the huge Rockware Glass factory.

Population Explosion

The early settlement between Doncaster's market place and Milethorn Lane consisted of around twenty houses, one of which was Nether Hall, the imposing home of the Copley family, Lords of the Manor of Sprotborough. By Queen Victoria's accession, Wheatley had spread as far as Morley Road/Avenue Road but remained a largely rural area until the railway plant opened in Doncaster in the mid-19th Century. As late as 1871, the population of Wheatley was a mere 183. Twenty-five years later, this had exploded to around 2,600. What had once been an area of fields criss-crossed by unpaved tracks suddenly became a densely populated collection of back-to-back terraces for the railway workers and their families. Amidst this scene of rapid industrial housing growth was Nether Hall, now stripped of its grounds and passed from one owner to another in quick succession. Along Thorne Road, huge town houses were built, not just by the more affluent citizens of Doncaster but by several wealthy families from out-of-town who wanted somewhere to stay during the St.Leger Raceweek.

Churches

Paralleling this growth was the springing up of several churches in the Wheatley area. Although Doncaster's parish church, St.George's, was just the other side of the market place, the well-heeled newcomers of Thorne Road desired their own church in which to worship, free from the urban riff-raff. Thus Christ Church was built on a triangle of land on Thorne Road in 1828. With the working class population of Wheatley growing annually, the local Anglican Diocese created the new parish of St.Mary's and a church to serve it in 1884. Not to be outdone, the Methodists built no less than three chapels in the area, one on Highfield Road, another on the corner of Nether Hall Road and Broxholme Lane, and a third, St.Andrew's, at what was then the terminus of Beckett Road. Sadly, the first was demolished in the early 1990s whilst the structure of the second still exists but is no longer used as a place of worship. St.Andrew's, however, is still thriving.

Twentieth Century Development

The main growth in Wheatley area came after World War One. The 1920s saw houses built as far as Wentworth Road. During the 1930s, Wheatley Hall Road was finally opened up for public use following the closure of Wheatley Hall. Previously unused marshy land to the west of the old grounds was partially drained, allowing houses to be built from Woodhouse Road to Harrowden Road, whilst the first stage of the Wheatley Park estate, between Liverpool Avenue and Worcester Avenue, was built on the old Hall's front lawn. The 1930s also saw the first houses built in what would become Wheatley Hills. Originally known as the Hills Lane Estate, it centred on The Grove with the eastern edge being marked, appropriately, by Boundary Road.

Solving the post-war housing shortage resulted in Wheatley doubling in size during the second half of the 1940s, with over 2,000 houses being built on what used to be open land between Canterbury Road and Clay Lane. Wheatley Hills reached its present size during the 1950s with the development of the Ennerdale Estate to the south of the original Hills Lane Estate, and the Greenleafe Estate east of Boundary Avenue. The main development of the 1960s and 1970s was the creation of a ringroad to divert the ever-increasing volume of traffic away from Doncaster town centre. Houses on the south side of Wheatley Lane were demolished as the road became a dual-carriageway known eventually as Church Way, with a new stretch being laid between Holmes Market and St.George's Church. The eastern end of Wheatley Hall Road was diverted south to meet Thorne Road, severing the ancient road link with Long Sandall and effectively cutting the Clay Lane Estate off from the rest of the area. Hills Lane, which linked Thorne Road and Armthorpe Road, became part of a dual-carriageway called Leger Way, and was extended to run along the southern perimeter of Wheatley Hills and neighbouring Intake as far as the Racecourse. The 1980s and 1990s saw Wheatley Hall Road become a dual-carriageway and new houses built on small plots scattered across Wheatley Park and Wheatley Hills.

Administration

For approximately a thousand years, Wheatley and Long Sandall were, to all intents and purposes, the personal possessions of the Lords of the Manor of Sandal and Wheatley. The few residents were all tenants and what local administration existed was totally vested in the

Lords of the Manor. Not until the 19th Century did local government as we know it come about, and that was mainly in the towns whose populations were rapidly inflating due to the Industrial Revolution. The town of Doncaster, which had previously been a Borough, became a Corporation in 1835 with three wards, one of which, East Ward, included the Netherhall area as far as Broxholme Lane and the north side of Wheatley Lane as far as Milethorn Lane. The rest of Wheatley existed outside Doncaster's control, becoming an Urban District within the West Riding of Yorkshire when that became an administrative county in 1888. In 1914, Doncaster's boundaries were extended by the acquisition of Wheatley along with Balby and Hexthorpe. Wheatley Ward officially came into existence on 2nd November of that year and is now the second oldest ward in the borough after Central. In 1939, Doncaster's wards were reorganised, some disappearing, others being created. Part of Wheatley was hived off to form part of a new ward covering the region around Town Field, one possible explanation for a move that left neighbours who used the same local shops being represented by different councillors being that the ward had recently acquired new electors in the Hills Lane estate (which should by rights have been included in the new Intake Ward.). The outbreak of war prevented the new boundaries coming into effect until 1945, by which time the electorate was growing rapidly, but the situation remained unchanged for another 59 years. In 2004, not only was the stretch of Wheatley between Norborough Road and Broxholme Lane reunited with the rest of Wheatley, but a huge chunk of the town centre and the rest of the Netherhall area were incorporated. Thus, whilst Wheatley has been made whole again, the three people who represent Wheatley in the Council Chamber are also responsible for areas that have never been part of Wheatley. But that's politics!

Industrialisation

The 1960s redevelopment of Wheatley Lane and Wheatley Hall Road opened up vast areas of previously unused land for industrial use. One of the first businesses to be established in the area was Fordsons, the British farm machinery arm of the American motor giant, Ford, who established a factory on the site of the old Wheatley Hall. After World War 2, Ford, as it had become, became part of the International Harvesters empire, which in turn became J.I. Case at the end of the 1980s. It is now McCormick Tractors International and still occupies a large factory complex on the original site. The tractor factory has been joined by many other industrial concerns over the years, including ICI who had a factory nearby. This became DuPont when ICI was taken over but has since been demolished. Other major employers included Crompton Parkinsons and Burtons tailoring. One of Wheatley Hall Road's most distinguishing features today is the large number of car dealers which have set up shop alongside it. Almost every make of car from Europe, America and Japan has been represented at some time or another, and the list is still growing. The 1980s saw two of Doncaster's major employers go into sudden decline. Although Wheatley itself did not have a coal mine or a railway works, many Wheatley residents worked in one or the other, and suddenly found themselves unemployed. One result of this sudden glut of available workers has been the mushrooming of dozens of small, light-industrial concerns on new industrial estates all over Wheatley, with everything from website design to dinghy repair being represented.

Wiping Away the Past

Another consequence of the sudden decline of Doncaster's mining industry was the winding-up of the Mines Rescue Service, which operated from an imposing building at the junction of Wheatley Hall Road and Wentworth Road. With very few working pits left, there was no need for a specialist rescue service anymore and the building was vacated. After several years of neglect, it was eventually demolished and replaced with two characterless industrial units. Unfortunately, this trend is all too indicative of Doncaster Council's policy regarding old buildings. Despite several centuries of documented history, most of the oldest buildings in the Wheatley area are only about a century old. Nether Hall is probably the oldest surviving original structure in the whole of Doncaster, dating from around 1690, yet was rumoured to be facing demolition in the 1990s. The Cheshire Cheese pub on Church Way dates from 1821, but was intended to be demolished in the early 1990s to make way for a widened Church Way. The house next door on Don Street also predates the Victorian Age, but has been threatened with demolition on a number of occasions so the Cheshire Cheese could be expanded. The Horse & Groom pub on East Laith Gate was recorded as long ago as 1780 but the building itself dates from a rebuild in 1933. Another public house, the Stag on Dockin

Hill Road, was recorded in 1837 but the present structure dates from 1935. Christ Church, as mentioned earlier, dates from 1828 and only narrowly escaped demolition when the local Diocese was able to sell it in the 1990s. Other buildings which would have been of enormous historical value have not been so fortunate, such as Wheatley Hall, Sandall Grange - which stood where the Wheatley Hotel is now - and Broxholme, the site of which is now covered by St.Vincent Road and St.Vincent Avenue. Equally sad is the fact that even relatively young buildings which became well known landmarks have also disappeared. The Mines Rescue building has already been mentioned, as has the distinctive white ICI building. Directly across Wheatley Hall Road from the Mines Rescue building was the King George Hotel, built on the site of a former police station in 1932. This was closed and demolished with almost indecent haste early in 2003. The car showroom that was supposed to replace it failed to materialise and the site is now an open-air second-hand car lot.