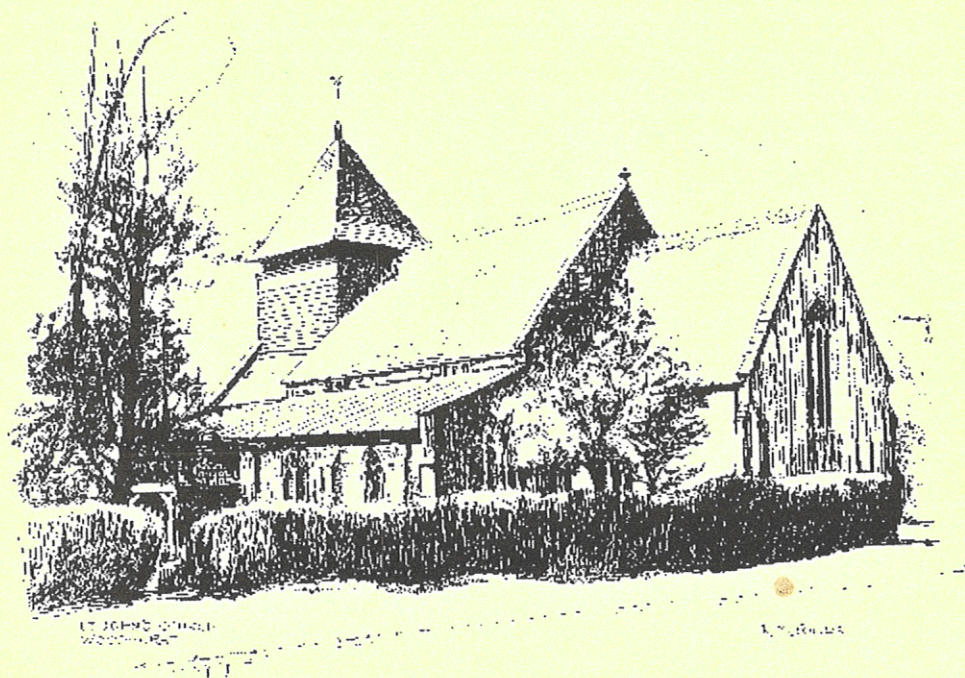


A brief history of Woodhurst



Woodhurst is an example of an Anglo Saxon ring village, but there is evidence that the area was inhabited before that time.

It is difficult to know when the village of Woodhurst began its life. Its position, on raised ground above the river valley to the south and the fens to the north was an ideal place for a community to be created. There would have been an abundance of trees (hence the name Woodhurst which means wooded hill) and also a plentiful supply of water.

In recent years there have been two archaeological digs in the village. In 1998 when a new water pipe was laid between the village and Woodhurst crossroads and in 2001 before the houses were built at Harradine Close. In 1998 a scattering of Roman pots were found at the eastern end of the site and at the western end near the village Mr Brown from Abbots Close using his metal detector, found some Roman coins and a small silver square which was part of a Roman ring dating from the late 4th century.

Cambridge University Field Unit carried out the initial search in 2001 and found a skeleton, which was buried in a north/south direction, with the head removed and placed at the feet. This indicates a non-Christian burial. The excavations were taken over by the Birmingham University Archaeological Field Unit. In their preliminary report they concluded that this small site was of interest. This was a lower order Roman settlement of particular importance as it gave them a better understanding of the fen-edge landscape. They concluded that there probably was continuous occupation of that site until the present day.

Roman coins have also been found at The Grange and Manor Farm

**Roman coin of 330-335 AD commemorating Constantinople becoming twin capital of the Roman Empire with Rome.
Found at The Grange.**



A further find of some significance occurred when Moot Way was being built in 1949. Seven skeletons were found lying east/west and they appeared to have been buried through a scattering of Anglo-Saxon and Medieval pottery, floors of burnt clay and wattle structures. The distance of the burials from the church seemed to indicate that they were possibly plague burials.

The Church

Woodhurst is not mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086, but neither is St Ives. At that time St Ives was known as Slepe; and Woodhurst and Old Hurst (the Hursts) were

covered by the name Slepe. The Domesday Book entry for Slepe mentions that it was on Land of St Benedict of Ramsey and had two churches. It is presumed that one of the churches is the church at Woodhurst. It would not be the present building as the earliest part is the north wall built in the late 12c.

By the time of the Domesday Book the county of Huntingdonshire had been divided into four hundreds. These hundreds had several functions including an administrative one. Each hundred had a meeting place often marked by a stone. Woodhurst was in the Hurstingstone hundred, and a large stone found where Woodhurst, Old Hurst and Houghton meet is supposed to have been such a stone. (It is now in the Norris Museum St Ives)

At this time Ramsey Abbey was all powerful. The Priory at St Ives belonged to Ramsey Abbey. A Papal Bull written by the Pope in 1229 to the Prior and monks of St Ives confirms that the churches of Slepe(St Ives) Wodehurst(Woodhurst) and Woldhurst(Old Hurst) belongs to St Ives Priory and through them to Ramsey Abbey.

In 1251 an inquisition from Ramsey confirms that the church at St Ives was dedicated to All Saints, that the chapels at Wodehyrst and Waldehyrst belong to St Ives. It complains that the dead of Wodehyrst and Waldehyrst are being buried in Waldehyrst in a cemetery that is not dedicated. This is prejudice to St Ives Priory as they were paid for every burial. Every house that had a hearth had to pay the vicar a halfpenny at Easter to light the church. If a woman died, her husband being alive, he could keep the best beast, but second best was to be given to the vicar.

St Ives Fair

There are extensive records of this fair which was given a charter in 1110 by Henry I. These records are in Latin, luckily an account has been written, in English.¹ This fair lasted for several weeks in the spring and belonged to Ramsey Abbey and the king. People came from Europe to buy and sell at the fair.

The area of Slepe consisted of St Ives,² the Green, Woodhurst and Old Hurst. Records of meetings of this area show that from 1291-1302 Woodhurst had at least 55 families, which probably meant that the population was about 250 people. Woodhurst were obligated to the great fair for two services. To help construct the market stalls and night watch during the fair. As an example in the mid 13c they had to provide 2 constables and 4 watchmen. Failure to carry out these duties resulted in a fine.

In May 1300 Edward Newman, Nicholas Osebern, Roger Edward and John West, all of Wodehirst, were ordered to watch in le Twertweye near the canvas booth on the night of the Thursday before the Feast of St Duncan, they withdrew their watch and did a

¹ The Fairs of Medieval England by E W Moore

² The part referred to as St Ives at this time was usually Bridge Street

poor job, so robbers broke into the booth and the greater part of the canvas and other goods were stolen. They were fined 3 shillings.

The people who carried out these constabulary duties also had positions of some importance in the village. The four mentioned in the last paragraph were all jurors as was Agnes Abovetown and Henry Wodereve who, in addition to being a constable was also a sheep owner.

The Manor

The Manorial system was well established in Woodhurst at this time. Manors differed in size and complexity, but it seems that Woodhurst Manor was similar in size to the parish of Woodhurst parish.. It was an economic unit containing the demesne³ which the lord of the manor retained for his own use and the remainder of the land was tenanted or common and waste land. The tenants were villeins who occupied land in return for services to the lord of the manor, such as working on his land or giving him some of their produce; or freemen who paid a rent for their land.

In 1279 all holders of franchises had to prove their titles, these were recorded on a Hundred Roll. The one for this area shows that in Woodhurst there were 24 virgates⁴ of arable land cultivated by the villeins. Typical of the conditions under which a villein held land is that they performed 3 works a week from September on the lord's land and gave foddercorn at Christmas and 20 eggs at Easter.

The lord of the manor held a court for his tenants. It stated the customs and rules of the manor, relating to land, payment of dues and services owed by the tenants to the lord. It had jurisdiction over disputes and could order tenants to farm in a proper manner. They also appointed local officials such as a constable, ale-taster, hayward⁵, pinder⁶ and field reeve.⁷ The court met on a regular basis from one to six times a year. The court was presided over by the lord's steward. All villeins were supposed to attend, A jury of up to twelve men were elected. These would be the most prominent people in the manor. The proceedings of the court were conducted in English, but up to 1733 they were recorded in Latin.

Manor Records

Records of land during 13c and 14c mention names of people living in the village. An example from the 1279 hundred rolls states:-

³ Land belonging to Lord of the manor, often near ManorHouse

⁴ The area of a virgate varied but in the Woodhurst area a virgate equalled 16 acres.

⁵ A Hayward was in charge of fences & enclosures and cattle grazing on common land

⁶ A pinder was in charge of impounding stray animals

⁷ A reeve was a minor local official.

There are 3 cottagers in Wodehirst who hold 1 messuage⁸ each with a curtilage⁹ of half a rod¹⁰. For example John Albert holds one like this for 3s a year. Others of these include Richard Molendum (of the mill) who holds in Wodehirst 1 small messuage with a curtilage for 20d per year

The Liber Gersumarum of Ramsey Abbey covers the period from 1398-1458. It contains transcripts of land, transfers, marriage licences and exodus fines.

An extract from this states;- Woodhurst August 1444 John Whyght one messuage built up with one bake house and a half virgate of land recently held by John Vikorye and once held by Thomas Porter from Michaelmas for life, rendering annually 6s 8d at the customary times which property previously rendered 8s. Further he will repay and maintain the bake house at his own expense with timber and three cart loads of thorns supplied by the lord this first time.

This illustrates the fact that the lord of the manor (Ramsey Abbey) ensured that the inhabitants of the village continued to maintain their land as well as they could. The Manor Court met on a regular basis to ensure this was done. There are in existence five years of the reports of this court from 1561-1565.¹¹ These are written in Medieval Latin and difficult to decipher. An example of the rules are:-

That no man shall kepe any foles lye in the fields after they be one month old upon payne of 3s 4d

That no man shall fell any bushes of the heth or any other common bushes upon the lyke payne.

These were two of the rules made in the court held on 23 September 1563. Also at that court they appointed William Colvyle as Constable; William Clement and William Webb as aletasters and William Cristemas as Hayward.

In addition to the Manor Court the Church played an important part in people's lives. Ramsey Abbey one of the most important Benedictine Monasteries in the country was a place of pilgrimage for many. The reputed bones of St Ivo were there and pilgrims would travel many miles to see this relic. Perhaps the ampulla found at The Grange was dropped by one of these pilgrims

⁸ Dwelling house with surrounding property

⁹ Small piece of ground attached to a house

¹⁰ Rod is 5 and a half yards

¹¹ The court met once a year at this time

A 15c ampulla.
An ampulla was a vessel for holding
consecrated oil.
Found at The Grange



16th Century

This was a century of great change in the village and records that are available from this time such as wills, tax lists and Ramsey Abbey Records help to give us an insight into the lives of Woodhurst villagers. When Henry VIII broke from the Church of Rome and became head of the Church of England the dissolution of religious houses in England began. In 1539 Ramsey Abbey was dissolved and all their estates handed to the crown. In 1561 the lord of the manor of Woodhurst is shown to be Queen Elizabeth. John Pakye who was treasurer at Ramsey Abbey was given a pension of £6-13s-4d and became the curate at Woodhurst.

The dramatic change due to Henry VIII's actions in founding the church of England is reflected in the wills. At the beginning of the century people bequeathed their souls to Almighty God and all the Saints and our Blessed Lady Saint Mary, by 1560 there was no mention of 'our Blessed lady'. The Guild of St John which was open to both men and women is not mentioned after the establishment of the Church of England. At this time the church was either called 'All Saints' or 'All Hallows' and there is reference to a St John's Cross which was situated at one end of the village.

People were obviously very worried about sins they might have committed or tithes they might have neglected to pay. Wills show them asking for forgiveness for these and leaving money to the church, the mother church of Lincoln¹² and the lights that were in the church, including the sepulchre light.¹³ People were worried about the possibility of them not getting into heaven and often left money for a trentall¹⁴ of masses to be said for their soul.

Money was also left for repair of the church and for the bells. The present day tower was built in the 17c, it replaced an earlier tower. The roads, such as they were must have been in a bad state as money was left for the repair of the high ways. It was usually a few pence or shillings, Thomas Okye left 12d to repair the highway leading

¹² Woodhurst was in the Lincoln Diocese until 1837

¹³ The light which was burning continually on the north side of the chancel

¹⁴ 30 masses said on 30 consecutive days for the soul of the departed.

from his house to the church with stone. William Harrow in 1520 left £5 for the road about Woodhurst, the road must have been in a very poor state.

In many wills money was left for the poor of the village. John Christmas left 10 shillings to be invested by the churchwardens and the interest given yearly to the poor for ever at the discretion of the church wardens. He also gave 12d to *everyman who owneth not a plough*.

There were three large fields, called Stockin¹⁵. Gosling Bush and East; and several smaller fields and furlongs. The large fields were divided into narrow divisions called strips. There was no definitive size for these strips, though typical ones might be 8 yards by 220 yards. They had a reverse-S shape to allow the plough to turn as it approached the headland. This resulted in what is now known as ridge and furrow¹⁶. People could have strips in each of the large fields¹⁷. The crops grown in these fields were wheat, barley, rye, oats, pease, beans, fodder and malt. They kept sheep, cows, bullocks, horses, bees and chickens. The Manor Roll shows that there were strict rules as to where and when they could keep them in the fields. Items of homeware and clothing were expensive and valued and were often willed as separate items to friends and relatives.

The Lay Subsidy Tax taxed people mainly on their goods, only resident landowners were taxed on their land. In 1523 there were 31 men in Woodhurst who paid tax. 14 were labourers who paid 4d tax each. The goods of the remainder were valued from 40d-£10 and their tax was from 12d to 5s.

This was a century of discovery and wars. The war against Spain culminating in the Spanish Armada meant that England had to be prepared for a Spanish invasion. Each village had to have people ready with their weapons to go to defend the country. Weapons used were muskets(M); pike(P); sword (S); halberd (H)¹⁸; Qualiver(Q)¹⁹ and arquebus (A)²⁰

They had to be ready to muster at an hours warning. A list of those in readiness in Woodhurst in July 1588 including their weapons:-

John Plume P. A	William Pell Q. A.	Robert Robinson P. S.
Francis Morys Q. S.	Henry Plume Q. S.	John Christmas M. S.

¹⁵ Stocking means land cleared of tree stumps

¹⁶ Ridge and furrow can be seen in fields to north of Church Street

¹⁷ William Harrow left his daughter strips the 3 fields of Woodhurst

¹⁸ A long handle ending in a combined spearhead and battle axe

¹⁹ Type of gun

²⁰ Portable firearm supported on a forked rest

Today there is little evidence of the 16th century in buildings. Manor Farm has some 16c parts and the house by the pond now known as Swan Weir was built at the end of this century. It was known as Rose Cottage in 1930s, and in the 19th and early part of 20th century was a blacksmiths. This is the oldest house in the village.

17th Century

Another century of change for the country which would have an effect on the life of the village as well. Huntingdonshire was the birthplace of Oliver Cromwell who was to play a major part in the Civil War that gripped England from 1642. The county was divided as Huntingdon was for the King and St Ives for Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans. There is no indication in written evidence what the people of Woodhurst thought. However Wheathill Audley who lived at Wigger, an isolated large house at the south of the parish was fined £225 because he followed with the crowd to see the king's plate carried off towards Cambridge.

Unfortunately there are no church records for the period of the Civil War; in fact though registration of baptisms, marriages and burials on parchment began in 1558 the records that survive for Woodhurst begin in 1682. From 1597 a copy had to be sent to the bishop and a few of these survive from the early 1600s. In 1650 Oliver Cromwell sent a Triers Visitation around the country to report on all the churches. The Woodhurst report states

Woodhurst is a vicaridge worth fourteen pounds per annum having a Chappell belonging to St Ives. Mr Halstead the present Incumbent, a preaching minister, supplies the said cure²¹ and receives the aforesaid profits to his own use. The report also suggested that Woodhurst and Old Hurst unite and share a curate.

There are other records for the village such as the Protestation return. By an act of Parliament in 1642 all males over the age of 18 had to sign a Protestation to defend the Church of England against all Popery. The list contains 81 names including that of John Halsted who was curate at Woodhurst and Oldhurst. One historian has calculated that the number who signed is on average 26.2% of the population. That would make Woodhurst's population 309.

New taxes continued to be levied and from 1662 until 1689 there was a Hearth Tax. The parish constable compiled lists of householders and the number of hearths and gave these to the Justices of the Peace at the Quarter Sessions. The tax was collected twice a year at Michaelmas²² and Lady Day²³. Those in receipt of Poor Relief or in houses worth less than 20 shillings per annum not paying Parish Rates were exempt. In

²¹ Parish

²² September 29th the feast of St Michael and all Angels

²³ March 25th

1666 there were 46 households , seven of these had not paid. 29 of the households had one hearth. In 1674 there were 45 households and in addition 9 households where they were receiving constant alms and therefore exempt from paying.

Another census was the Compton Census of 1676 which was called for by the Archbishop of Canterbury. It recorded the number of conformists, papists and nonconformists in each parish. Woodhurst had 132 conformists, no papists and 3 non-conformists. One of the latter would have been Job Halstead who applied for a licence for his house to be used as a place for Presbyterian worship. This was granted in 1672.

Money continued to be left to the poor in wills, the most generous was William Berdon who in 1678 gave three acres of arable land. His land to be let and the money obtained to be distributed to the poor on Easter Monday in every year. This could be the beginnings of the Town Lands Charity which exists today. He mentions several fields in his will, some are still in existence today. East Field; Bacon Land; Blackhills; Rye Furlong; Wards Close; Furlong Field; Church Field; Goslingbush Field.

Another source of information as to how people lived in the 17c are Inventories.. When someone died two appraisers would make a list and value the deceased persons possessions. Often the inventory states in which room each article is found. Job Halstead had a kitchen, a hall, a dairy, a parlour, a Kitchen chamber and a cellar. He had a yard, barns and fields with animals and crops. The total value was £161-17-5

Knowing what was mentioned in these inventories helps to build up a picture of life in Woodhurst in 17c. Among items used in the house were feather beds, straw mattresses, bolsters, pillows, curtains and cushions. Blankets, sheets, pillowcases, board cloths for the board tables, napkins (some made of damask) and towels. Chairs, stools, tables, sideboard, forms, coffers and boxes. Kettles, spits ,dripon pan, iron and brass pots, pewter dishes, kinnell²⁴, and cheese press. Silver spoons, looking glass, clock and books in an inventory are indicative of the wealthier members of the parish. In contrast some had very little to leave. A spinster called Joan Cooper had:- an old pair of bedsteds; a pillow; a coverlet and her coats, her linen and hats, a coffer and £4 which was owed to her.

About 1668 there is a list of rents payable to the Duke of Manchester. This names everyone who rents land and houses in the village, and where it is. They also name the previous owner of the land, sometimes who owned it before that. *Mary Beardon widow owned one close late William Bearden and formerly Halstead.* A terrier of the lands of Mr Thomas Ashby dated 13 November 1685 shows that he had 225 strips in the fields of Woodhurst. This names which field each strip was in and who had the strip next to him. Today this seems a very complicated way of farming.

²⁴ Wooden tub

It was around the turn of this century that Horseshoe Cottage was built. For many years it was the Three Horseshoes public house, in 1840 it was stated that it was an old public house. Sometimes the Manor Courts were held there. It became a private house in 1922.

18th Century

This is a section from a map of Huntingdonshire drawn by Thomas Jeffries in 1768 for the Duke of Manchester

Wood Hurft



Life in the village in this century had its ups and downs. The burial register shows that there were several years when there must have been diseases rife in the village. Perhaps cholera, typhoid, diphtheria or even a plague. There are no records to tell us what, but 58 people died between 1727-1728 and 46 people died between 1780-1781 sixteen of these 46 were infants. In total in this century 634 people died and were buried in the churchyard.

Early in the century John Fuller (later changed to Fullard) came to the village. His family played a prominent part in village life for over 100 years, and gave his name to Fullards Farm in South Street. He came to a village that was an area of mixed farming. A particular of land in Woodhurst taken in 1706 recorded that there were 949 acres of arable land, 316 acres of pasture and 70 acres of meadow land. 700 acres of the arable were farmed by 5 people. Wiggin Farm in the south of the county had 218 acres the majority of which was pasture for sheep.

The records for the Manor Court that have survived, other than the few in the 16c begin in 1727.. They were in Latin until 1732 when they were written in English. They give a comprehensive account of the dealings in land and the efforts to regulate and unify the way people farmed. People were fined for not maintaining their fences, not scouring their ditches, and not keeping their cottages/houses in good repair. Some orders from 1791 which illustrate this:-

1. We order that no Hog or Hogs shall be kept in the Fields of Woodhurst until the Fields be clear'd under pain of forfeiting 2s. That no Hog or Hogs shall be turned into the said Fields without a ring in their nose under pain of forfeiting one shilling per Head to the Lord of the Manor

2. Ordered that no Cows be turned on the Commons of this Parish without they are knob'd with Wood under pain of forfeiting one shilling per head to the Lord of the Manor. .Ordered that no Cow be turned on the Commons of this Parish that do not give Milk under pain of Forfeiting to the Lord of this Manor one shilling per head.

3 Ordered that no Person or Persons shall cut down any Bushes on the Commons of this Parish under pain of forfeiting five shillings for every bush so cut, to the Lord of this Manor.

4 Ordered that no sheep be turned into the Cow Pasture Common and the Ridges until Martinmas in each Year, nor continue there after Lady Day Old Stile the said Common then to be laid down for a Crop, for the Cows to enter on 21st May.

5 Ordered that no person or persons within this Manor shall let any Foals go with Mares into the Fields of Woodhurst during the time corn is growing in the said Fields or in time of Harvest.

One interesting entry in the Manor Court for 1754 is a request from Dr Peter Layard to grant him a piece of ground to develop a Spa. This land on Bathe Hill is on the Eastern side of the B1040 and belonged to Woodhurst until the late 19c when it was given to Bluntisham. The spring or Chalybeate Waters commonly known as Somersham Spa became a well known place for people to come to take the waters. Dr Layard paid an annual rent of 2s 6d. He called Woodhurst a pleasant village and that poor people from surrounding villages could go to the Spa without payment from 5 in the morning until 7am.

The growth of Dissenters was one of the biggest factors throughout this century and Woodhurst was no exception. Job Halstead had started it with his request to use his house as a place for dissenting worship in 1672 and Thomas Hoby and Thomas Marriot travelled to Kimbolton and Needingworth to attend Dissenter services, at the end of the 17c.

A survey carried out by Robert Baker the curate of Woodhurst in 1717 illustrates the presence of Dissenters in the village. He wrote that *there are 75 families in the village. A half a dozen are Dissenters, Independents and Antinomians. He resides in the parish, but there is no vicarage. He does not know any who attend church unbaptised, and has baptised no adults. Public Service is performed every Sunday. He catechises every Lent and the Sacrament is administered three times a year, Easter, Christmas and Whitsuntide. Last Easter there were a dozen Communicants.*

The Dissenters were multiplying as 3 years later the number of Dissenter families had increased to ten.

The Church of England punished those who broke their rules by bringing them before the Archdeaconry Court or making them stand up in church and confess their sins and then recite the Lord's Prayer. Churches were inspected and reports made on any problems. Woodhurst Church in 1748, when Samuel Cooper was the vicar, was in a bit of a state. An inspection report states:-

Walls and ceiling to be plastered and whitewashed, floor of the porch to be level. Cup and cover to be mended, plate and napkin, new Bible; Basin for the font; Font to be kept clean; Pavement to be raised and level; Rubbish to be removed; West End to be clean and paved; pews to be mended and the floor; Buttress on the North side to be secured; Elder in the churchyard to be ground up, and the yard to be kept decent. The chancel walls to be scraped clean and whitewashed, and outside to be plastered; walls and foundation to be secured, windows to be cleaned and mended

The number of Dissenters in the parish increased during this century and people were beginning to join the Baptist Church in Bluntisham which was led by Mr Coxe Feary. Mr Feary used to come with his friends to Woodhurst to hold services in people's houses. R W Dixon wrote *'In winter the road between Woodhurst and Bluntisham was execrable – no gravel - deep ruts – soft deep mire and puddles of water rendered it almost impassable'*²⁵

The number of converts to the Baptist faith grew so rapidly that a chapel was built in Woodhurst. R W Dixon writes *'The friends at Woodhurst built this Meeting House themselves, and they paid for it themselves (clay bricks and thatched) and it was to be for the use of a congregation of protestant dissenters from the Church of England to resort to for the worship of God'. The Land twenty-two feet by fifteen, was given by John Bletsoe for the above purpose. The building itself was but twelve feet by ten, the rest of the bit of land serving for ingress and egress..'*

Chapel built in 1798 in South Street by Woodhurst people who attended Baptist Chapel in Bluntisham. The house next to it is The Willows

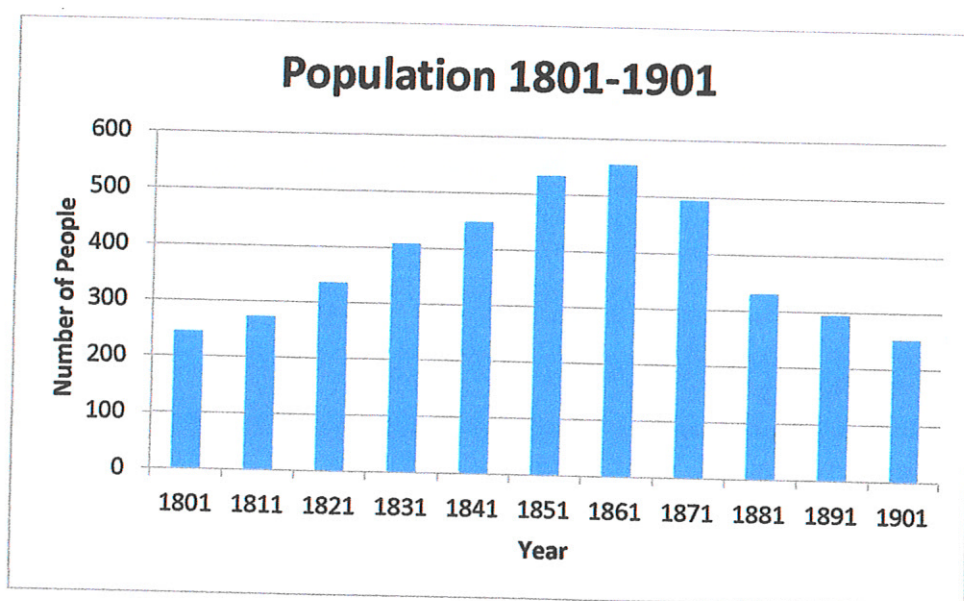


²⁵ R W Dixon; A century of Village Nonconformity 1887

In December 1796 an Act of Parliament which was going to cause the biggest upheaval in farming in the village was passed. It was the Enclosure Act of 1796, for Somersham Heath, which included Woodhurst. In a process that took several years to complete the commissioners appointed conducted a thorough survey of all the land in the parish and allotted land to people so that they had the same acreage but not in the strips that they were farming at the time, but in fields. Before final decisions were made people could put in a claim for what they considered they were due. An example of this was the statement from John Borrett. He wrote :- *I John Borrett claim to be entitled to One Commonable Messuage and Toft, also 116 Acres 1 Rood 10 Perches of Arable Land and 12 Acres of Pasture or Meadow Land in Woodhurst in the occupation of John Bletsoe, Copyhold of the Manor of Woodhurst. Also one other Commonable Messuage in occupation of the Town for a Workhouse. Copyhold of the Manor of Woodhurst.* The Commissioners were also responsible for setting out roads, footpaths, drains, and gravel, sand and clay pits etc. The road from the east end of the village by the pond to Woodhurst crossroads was constructed just before the Enclosure Act.

It took several years for the Enclosure Award to be made, and people were able to exchange pieces of land to make their holdings more viable. The results were published in a book and also in map form. Unfortunately the map for Woodhurst is missing. The fields created, are on the whole, the ones that are in existence today.

19th Century



From 1801 the population of the country was counted every 10 years, and from 1841, details of every person was recorded. A look at the graph of population shows the rise and decline in this century. At the beginning of the century the number of people living

in Woodhurst had hardly changed for 400 years. It was a similar number in 1901, but in between the population more than doubled.

Woodhurst was a typical farming village with everyone working on the land or in a trade that supported the population such as butchers, bakers, carpenters etc. It was a self sufficient, self contained village. The main roads from Huntingdon to Warboys and St Ives to Somersham were a mile away from the village and there was little through traffic.

Samuel Jackson Pratt, an author who knew Woodhurst well²⁶ describing the village in 1801 states:- *I have invited your retrograde step to a scene which affords neither a landscape to the children of fancy, nor a comfortable inn to the sons of luxury; nor anything like a house – than the most lowly dwellings of clay which seem to have made no progress towards the general effect of civilisation since the time of the Roman invader, if we except the abodes of one or two overwhelming farmers, and the habitation of the better supplied body of the pastor whose job it is to take care of the souls of these aboriginal looking Britons.*

Needless to say this author had a flowery style and a tendency to exaggerate.

A survey of 1811 records that there were 800 acres of arable land, 50 acres of meadow and 50 of pasture. There were 6 Farm houses, 30 dwelling houses and 18 cottages. Cows, carthorses, sheep and hogs were raised and wheat, barley and beans grown. The Lord of the Manor was Mr John Carstairs and Mr Bull also owned an estate. Some properties were freehold but the majority still copyhold²⁷ to the Lord of the Manor.

The population continued to grow, but the housing available did not always grow at the same pace. In 1811 there were 57 families living in 57 houses. By 1831 there were 92 families but they had to share 52 houses. At the height of the population growth in 1861 there were 554 people in the village. This included 5 farmers, with farms over 170 acres; and 6 farmers with smaller farms under 70 acres; Blacksmiths, Carpenters, Bakers, Grocers, Butchers, Shoemakers, Postmaster, Bricklayer, Gardeners, Three public houses, the church and two Baptist chapels and two schools. The British school joined on to the Baptist Church in Church Street and the National School run by the Church of England in what is now the house called The Limes.

The prosperity did not last long as due to a few years of wet weather accompanied by new legislation which meant that wheat from abroad was cheaper than that grown at home, there was a decline in all aspects of village life. And by 1901 the population had dropped to 253. The decline in population for Huntingdonshire from 1861 to 1891 was 10% , for Old Hurst and Pidley just over 30% but for Woodhurst it was 47%, illustrating

²⁶ He was a witness at John Hills and Mary Fullards wedding and signed their marriage bond

²⁷ A tenant held a copy of the entry in the rolls of the manor which recorded his or her possession of a holding on agreed terms

that Woodhurst was more badly affected than most. In the May 1897 the Church magazine states:- *At the rate we are losing our friends from one cause or another, the village seems to be rapidly fulfilling the prophecy of a former inhabitant, that it is one day to consist of a signpost to say where it stood and nothing more*

People who left the village went to many different places and occupations. Several families went to work in a brewery in London, some to industry in the north of England. Some men joined the army, young girls often went to work in hotels and shops in nearby towns, or as far as London. The adventurous ones emigrated; favourite countries were Australia, Canada and America.

At the beginning of this century in England there was a shortage of farm labourers during the haymaking and harvest times. Irish labourers came over to work in the fields. In Woodhurst in 1837 there was a fight between some local labourers and four Irishmen. Two Irishmen were wounded and six Woodhurst labourers were charged. Four were given jail sentences from 3-6 months hard labour. Two were sentenced to death, this was reduced to transportation, and even that sentence was not carried out. They went to prison for a short time. Three years later some Irish labourers had their revenge and attacked John and Thomas Furness outside the Three Horseshoes public house, they were eventually caught and were sent to jail.

Another great change nationwide was the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Until then the parish was responsible for looking after the poor. Like other villages Woodhurst had a workhouse and at least one overseer of the poor. This new Act was based on unions of parishes run by a committee of Guardians. Woodhurst was in the St Ives Union. People in dire need were sent to the Union Workhouse, others were given 'outdoor relief'. In 1870 fifty three men, women and children in the village were receiving this.

It was about the time of this Act in 1834 that the first of several disastrous fires occurred in the village. The first fire started in a barn on John Fyson's farm. The newspaper reported that eleven thatched cottages and two farms were destroyed. People came from all over the county to help. Some of the villagers were seen to be intoxicated and enjoying a 'pugilistic combat' and doing little to help. There were four more major fires this century. In August 1874 just a few days after he was acquitted of assaulting his servant girl Frederick Fyson of Holdich Farm lost his hayricks in a fire and in 1877 and '78 there were 3 more fires to property belonging to Walter and John Fyson, one fire also damaged the Half Moon and Stars. These were definitely thought to be the work of an incendiary. The final occasion was in 1898 to the barns and outbuildings belonging to Mr Meek. Luckily they saved the house, which is now known as Cherry Tree House.

There were no schools in Woodhurst for the first 45 years of the nineteenth century. Children whose parents could afford it were educated by either having a governess or being sent to a local fee paying school in St Ives or Huntingdon.. Illiteracy was the norm and evidence of this can be seen in the church registers where people made a mark instead of signing their names. In 1843 Sir John Pelly the Lord of the Manor gave some land to *build a school for the education of the labouring, manufacturing and other poorer classes in the parishes of Woodhurst and Old Hurst and also for a residence for the Schoolmaster or Schoolmistress. The school always to promote the principals of the Established Church.*²⁸ Church Schools were known as National Schools.

A few years later John Longland Ekins who built the Baptist Church in Church Street added two rooms on the eastern side of the chapel to establish a Non-conformist School. These were known as British Schools.

In 1871 after an Education Act was passed providing free education for those unable to pay and after acrimonious meetings between the two Woodhurst Schools they combined to form a Board School in the building adjoining the chapel. It opened on 1st April 1872 with Mr Hoskin as schoolmaster.

There was a strong non-conformist element in the village from the beginning of the century with several people obtaining permission to use their house/barn for worship. So when John Longland Ekins built the Chapel there was a ready congregation. The little thatched chapel in South Street was also being used. The bad feelings between the Church of England and Non-conformists continued throughout this century. The church accused the Lord of the Manor of renting his farms to non-conformists. The Religious survey of 1851 illustrated the difference between the two congregations. For the church the average number of attendants including Sunday School was 54 in the morning and 64 in the afternoon. For the Baptist Chapel it was Sunday School in the morning and 99 adults and 50 children in the afternoon.

One event that was planned but thankfully did not happen was the building of a railway line through Woodhurst. The railway was to go from Ramsey to St Ives and would have cut the village in two sections. It was planned to go through between what is now Abbots Close and Moot Way, and buildings either side would have been removed which would have included up to Cherry Tree House. An Act was passed through Parliament but not acted upon.

Despite the falling population Woodhurst was an active community. At various times during the latter half of the century there were clubs organised for the village. These included, a Benefit Club; Mothers Meeting; a Coal Club, a Provident Club and an active Cricket Club. Chapel Anniversaries were momentous occasions and the concerts held in the Baptist Chapel. The Church Choir and Sunday School had annual excursions to

²⁸ This building is now the house called The Limes.

places of interest. A Reading Room and library were established which also held evening classes. The community opened their homes to poor children from London to give them a holiday in the country. They came from June to August, some of them were here for the major event of the year, the celebration of the Feast of St John the Baptist on June 24th. This had been a special day for years. In the 18c people would wait till June 24th to have their children baptised and to get married. It was a day when the whole village was given an opportunity to enjoy themselves. The day began with a church service and in the afternoon there was a village tea, sports, sometimes a roundabout and swings, and a cricket match against a neighbouring village. A parade around the village, and the day ended with a dance in a farmer's barn.

At the end of the century the village could also have provided their own band. The Woodhurst and Old Hurst String Church Band was founded in 1897. A note in the Church Magazine says;- *The practices are found very enjoyable by the performers which is a very good thing for all concerned on the premises and off, because people listening outside might not unnaturally think that there were a lot of persons in great pain in the parsonage.*

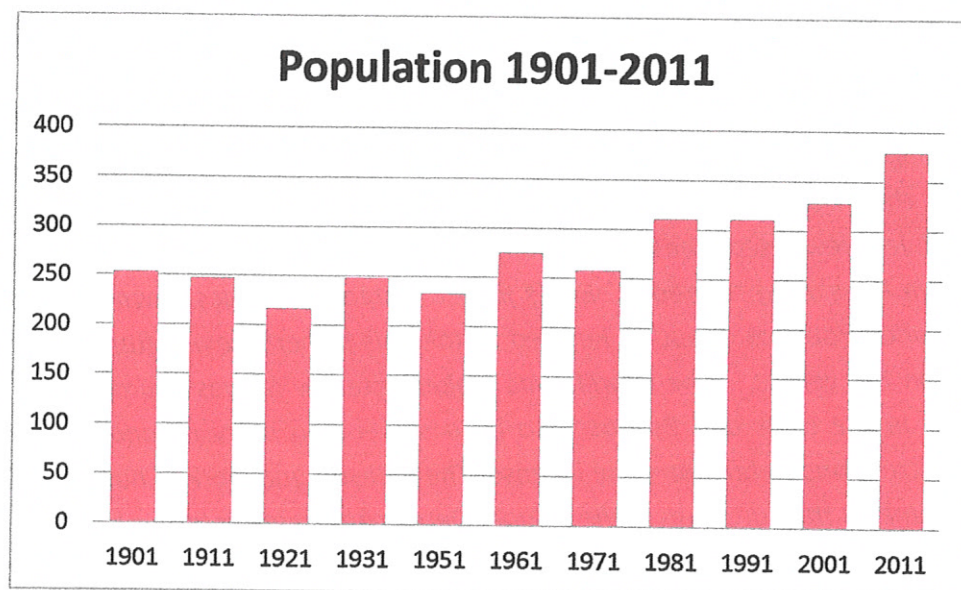


Woodhurst and Old Hurst String Church Band, Walter Cooper the Parish Clerk is on the left and his brother Charles Cooper on the right. The man in the middle with the cello is William West. The minster at the back is Rev. Kilburn, the curate for Woodhurst and Old Hurst. The photograph was taken in front of the parsonage. Now the house called The Limes,

At the end of 1894 the graveyard at the front of the church was closed. People had been buried there for hundreds of years. The land behind the church was glebe land belonging to the vicar of St Ives and he transferred a portion of that land to the church

for future burials. This graveyard was consecrated by the Bishop of Ely on June 20th 1896; the first person buried in it was Elizabeth Selby on August 28th. The four people who died in the village during the time there was no graveyard at the church were interred in Old Hurst churchyard.

20th Century and beyond



This graph illustrates the fact that until the 1970s the population of Woodhurst stayed hovering around the 250 mark. Many of the farms and properties were still copyhold to the Manor. Sir John Pelly had died and his two daughters had inherited his estate. They had begun the process of enfranchising²⁹ some of the properties, and continued to do this until copyhold was abolished in 1922. Although small and very rural, there were many activities in the village, and the church, the chapel, and the school were the centres of village life.

As in centuries before men, when called, went to serve their country, with sometimes tragic outcomes. Benjamin Feary was killed in the Boer War and Frederick Furness, Frederick Ding, Ernest Kidman and John Murden in the First World War.

To describe life in the village between the wars I have amalgamated descriptions by Bob Cade³⁰ and Derek Cannon³¹.

In Woodhurst in the 1920s and 30s everything needed was in the village. All local children were connected with farms or farm workers, and were expected to help on the farms. Derek was taught to milk a cow when he was seven. The whole village was

²⁹ Convert the property from copyhold to freehold.

³⁰ Bob (1919-2010) lived in Woodhurst all his life. He was a blacksmith.

³¹ Derek lived in Woodhurst all his life.

supplied with milk butter and cheese. The children used to go to a farmer before school and collect the milk with their jugs and cans. It wasn't pasteurised it came straight from the cow. Many people had chickens and some people kept a pig as well. There was a shop kept by Sansom and Watson that made bread and people selling meat used to come to the village. There was no electricity so houses were lit with oil lamps. There was no running water till the late 1930s, so we used either to pump the water from the village pump, or fetch it from the wells. The children went to the village school, Miss Knowles was the head teacher. There were only two classes for all the children aged between 5 and 14. The summer holiday started when the farmers told the head teacher that it was time to harvest the corn. All the older children would help with the harvest. Three or four horses pulled the binder that made the sheaves. Children used to climb trees, go looking for bird's nests (didn't hurt birds or eggs) or play with hoops or tops. Sometimes they would cycle to Huntingdon on their bikes, there were not many cars about, and very few telephones in the village. The Parish Council rented out the grass verges down the side of the roads. Bob's father rented the verges down the Old Hurst Road and when Bob was about 12 he used to take his father's cows after school to eat the grass on the verges. The church was looked after by St Ives church. There were robed boys in the choir and Bob used to be a server and carry a candle. Reg Gurry carried the cross and Peter Gurry the incense. They played and worked hard and had an enjoyable time as they grew up in the village. Derek considered that the best thing that happened was the formation of a Scout Troup, started by a Scoutmaster from London that moved to the village. They used to camp locally go by train to Hunstanton and even in 1935 a visit to Bruges. Feast Day was the big event of the year when the church and the chapel got together. There was a parade from the church in the morning, cricket match free teas for the children, sideshows and in the evening a dance in the schoolroom.



**Woodhurst Scout Troup in
Bruges in 1935**

The period of the second world war was an exciting one for the village, being next to RAF Wyton a very busy airfield which was used by the Pathfinder aircraft. It must have been a worrying but interesting time. The one remaining public house in the Village, the Travellers Arms changed from a little village quiet pub to a busy one full of RAF personnel from the airfield.

Other strangers coming to the village were the evacuees from London. They came, not from one school but many different schools, a few with parents, but mainly on their own. If Woodhurst was a shock to them after life in London, they, with their worldly wise ways, were certainly a shock to the village children. The head teacher from 1942 to 1950 said: *they weren't very popular with the children because they knew it all, or said they did. They were frightened of the countryside. A boy said to me 'Ain't there a lot of sky, They had never been in open spaces and never knew what it was. They were different'* Many stayed only a short while, a few a little longer and one or two long enough to make friends and to return to the village after the war for a visit.

In September 1957 the St Ivo secondary school opened and children from Woodhurst who did not pass the examination for Ramsey Grammar school went to the Ivo School. This greatly reduced the number of pupils in the school, by January 1963 the number had reduced to 26 and in July 1963 the school closed. This was a blow to the village as a school is such a large part of village life. A few years later the Chapel closed and it was hoped that the village could buy the building to use for village activities, but unfortunately that was not possible. In 1983 the Trustees of the Chapel, who owned the whole building, gave permission for it to be sold to be converted into a house.

**The Baptist Chapel and school
waiting for a buyer**



In 1971 the population was 258, similar to the number calculated in the 13th century and less than at the time of the Protestation Return in the 17^c. Since then the population has gradually increased to the 2011 census total of 379. New houses have been built, some barn conversions and small developments in farmyards, but Woodhurst still keeps the original ring village shape.

In the past 40 years life has changed in the village. Organisations and clubs have come and gone. Women's Institute, Gardening Club, Youth Club, Toddlers Group, and Ladies Group have all lasted for a while and then gone. . People are going outside the village for their entertainment and relaxation and to get there a car is essential. The one bus a morning to St Ives not adequate for these purposes. Feast Week, once a week long celebration with various tournaments, sports, Barn Dance and the 'Round the Village' race, has now changed in character. There are fewer events, but the advent of a scarecrow festival and Cream Teas has encouraged more visitors to visit the village.

The village entered the 'Anglia In Bloom' competition and in 1997 and 1998 won a gold award, in 1999 they were 'Calor Gas Village of the Year' for Huntingdonshire. When the RHS took over this competition they also won awards in 2002, 2006 & 2008. Now Natural Woodhurst has taken over the task of improving the environment.

Where people work has changed dramatically. The farms are now worked by one or two with extra help at harvest, some work from home, some travel a distance to work by car or train, so in that sense Woodhurst is becoming a dormitory village. The children go to many different schools, In a survey carried out in 2006 they attended 5 nursery schools, 13 different primary schools and 8 different secondary schools. This hampers the nurturing of a community spirit amongst the children.

It is still a great place to live and when there is a problem the village rallies to help. In 1982 with the village already fundraising to provide for a village hall, it was announced that the church was in a state of disrepair and there were four alternatives to be considered.

1. The church to remain open for parish use but extensive renovations had to be done urgently.
2. Hand the church over to the Redundant Churches Fund who would decide whether to preserve it or not. If preserved it could be used for up to 3 services a year and special services
- 3 Church to be sold for alternative use
4. Church to be demolished, which would be a problem as it is a listed building

The village was given a month to decide what they wanted to do and they chose the first option. This entailed a lot of organisation and work from many people to restore the church. including the children who worked very hard. At this time the church had moved from being a chapelry of St Ives (in 1968) and were now with Broughton and Old Hurst. This status changed again in 1991 when for the first time in its history Woodhurst was created a parish in its own right and joined Bluntisham, and Colne in a new Benefice. Seventeen years later they left this Benefice and joined Somersham,

Pidley and Old Hurst in the Somersham Benefice, thus renewing their close ties with Old Hurst which went back to the 12c.

In 2012, disaster, part of the east wall of the chancel collapsed. Once more villagers past and present and friends of the church rallied round and donated the large amount of money needed for the repair. One donor, now living in Australia, whose ancestor first came to the village in early 18c immediately paid for protective scaffolding so that the elements would not cause further damage before repairs could start. So much money was raised that further work internally was able to be carried out.

Today the village maintains the same footprint of a ring village, although there are roads going into the ring. There is no road through the centre, or ribbon development along the roads leaving the village. The character has changed; it is no longer a self contained unit, where all you need for living is close by. A car or adequate public transport (which we do not have) is essential to live here. However the statement in the 1897 Church Magazine *that one day it will consist of a signpost to say where it stood and nothing more* has thankfully not come to pass

Many thanks to those who have given me photographs, maps, plans and documents over the years. These have helped me put together this short history of the village of Woodhurst.

Special thanks to the Cambridgeshire Archives at Huntingdon Record Office for permission to reproduce some of their archives.

