

The Village of Woodhurst

By

Sydney Jarman

HUNTS COUNTY SKETCHES

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Wood Hurst is a typical Huntingdonshire village, and though but of small extent possesses more than one feature of interest. From a directory point of view, it is situated about four miles north of St Ives, and four south west from Somersham station, is in the Hundred of Hurstingstone, Union of St Ives, County Court District and Postal district of Huntingdon, Rural Deanery of St Ives, Archdeaconry of Huntingdon, and Diocese of Ely. The area of the parish is 2,130 acres, with a rateable value of £1,970. Although not mentioned in Domesday Book, Wood Hurst is an ancient village. Its etymology has been the cause of much contention; it is admitted that "hurst" is Saxon for "wood" but why the prefix which is today seen as "Wood" --but which was formerly "Wode"--is not known. The name is variously given as one or two words; the Church registers give both. We have recently heard a very reasonable suggestion with regard to the etymology. It is well known that in ancient days

large quantities of woad were grown in this neighbourhood and disposed of as a marketable commodity; and it is thought that perhaps the name "Wood Hurst" originally indicated the hyst in which the woad grew. It is the only place of the name in England, although there are over eighty with the prefix "Wood" Professor Pryme in describing the county says:- "It is well-wooded, indeed there was a vast forest of many miles in extent, traces of which still remain in various woods, and in the names of villages--Woodwalton, Upwood, Wood Hurst, Old Hurst, Warbois"

There is scarcely any indication of the ancient character of the village. An old work on the topography of the county states that a castle formerly existed here, and what was alleged to be a portion of the foundations was pointed out. Nothing is now known with regard to it. Wigan Farm (the residence of Mr A Barton) also deserves mention. Its name used to be spelt "Weken" and is believed to be derived from the Saxon, meaning a sacred place. It is supposed to mark the spot of an ancient tumulus, or burial ground. The Census returns show that the parish and village have experienced the vicissitudes common to agricultural communities. The population in 1801 was 245; in 1831 it had risen to 408; in 1841, 449; in 1851, 503; whereas at the last Census (1881) the number of inhabitants had dwindled down to 331. It is said that there are now more Wood Hurst people living in London than in the village itself. In 1815 the village (consisting of two streets, Church-street and South-street) contained forty houses of fairly good construction. Today the houses number about seventy five and their appearance are such as to give the village a neat appearance.

Agriculture is the staple pursuit; the soil is of a cold clayey nature; the subsoil, yellow and blue clay. The chief crops are wheat, barley, oats, beans, peas and clover. The land is almost universally in a state of excellent and creditable state of cultivation. Mr S Fyson, of Warboys, is the largest occupier, having three farms on hand.

Wood Hurst is a very healthy place, judging from the large number of aged inhabitants. It was

remarked some time since that there were more person over eighty years of age in the village than of any other of the size in the county.

In 1796 the Enclosure Act, as it affected this neighbourhood, came into force and the tract of land known as Somersham Heath was divided amongst the surrounding parishes. it contained 2531a 0r 18p; and the Award of the Commissioners (which is still extant) mentions at length the awards grant^{3d} to Somersham, Wood Hurst, Pidley with Fenton, Oldhurst, Colne, st Ives, Bluntisham with Earith and Holywell with Needingworth. The parish of Wood Hurst then consisted of 1401a, 1r, 14p, of which 346a, 1r, 14p, were ancient enclosures, 1054a, 3r, 34p, were open fields and commonable land. Four allotments were awarded to Wood Hurst making in all 271a, 1r, 6p, and this was sub-divided amongst the land owners in the village. Sir Robert B Burton who was lord of the manor and also impropriate rector was awarded 200 acres in lieu of the whole of the tithes, both great and small. This property was charged with a corn rent of £58, to the Vicar of St Ives with the Chapelries of Old Hurst and Wood Hurst; and afterwards descended to the Pelly family, in whose hands it still remains. At the time of the Award there were twenty two owners of land in the parish; today there are about half a dozen. Only one name on the Award is represented amongst the land owners of the parish today. Hempstead (one acre) Five and a half acres of land were awarded to the poor, which still remain theirs, being let at the Easter vestry every year. A rate was made to defray the cost of the Act and the Award (the framing of the latter extending over eight years) under which Sir Robert Burton paid £471 7s 3d (the largest item) and the Duke of York £10 1s 9d. The share of Wood Hurst to the expenses was over £2,500.

In the award we find the following names for different parts of the parish viz; Stocking Field, Mill Furlong, Gorsling Bush Field, Gannock Field, Duddock's Meadow, Church Field, Ridge Meadows, Cow Pastures and East Field. All these names have gone out of use, with the exception of "Stockings" and "Duddock's" is known by the slightly altered name of "Durrick's". "Duddock's" Meadow was entirely separated from the rest of Wood Hurst parish by 131 acres of heath allotted at the time to Old Hurst parish, but which has recently been transferred to Wood Hurst. The Pelly family now own the lands which then belonged to Sir R Burton, John Cole, John Barrett and John Fullard.

On Monday August 11th 1828, John Bletsoe, who had previously been in a deranged state of mind, hanged himself at his house in the village.

In 1837 a "Church census" was taken in this village, and it was found that of a population of 408, only 71 attended a place of worship.

Wood Hurst was visited by a most disastrous fire in 1834. About six o'clock on the morning of November 6th, in that year, flames were discovered in a barn on the farm premises of Mr John Byson, and soon the whole property was in a blaze and burnt to the ground. The valuable farm produce that lay around was also ignited and in consequence of a high wind sparks and burning debris were carried to other houses in the village, and the thatched roofs taking fire there was soon a general conflagration. The inhabitants were so busily engaged in endeavouring to save their furniture and goods that they troubled little to stop the progress of the flames, but the neighbouring villages soon sent numerous willing helpers, who worked vigorously in overcoming the fire, and thanks to their exertions about half the village was saved. When all danger was over some of the county magistrates held an enquiry, and it was stated before them that when the flames first

broke out numbers of the labourers became intoxicated, and showed a heartless disregard of the consequences, some of them even quarrelling and fighting whilst their neighbour's homesteads were being rapidly consumed under their very eyes. The losses to the cottagers and labourers were very severe, their goods being uninsured.

In March 1845, much alarm was caused in this neighbourhood by an earthquake shock. It was, however, but transitory, and fortunately had no ill effects.

The church is situated in the centre of the front of Church Street. There is some little doubt as to the dedication, some of the earlier authorities giving it as All Saints; but it is generally considered as dedicated to St John the Baptist, and the Parish Feast is now observed on his festival June 24th. The Church consists of chancel, nave with south aisle, and low clerestory, a south porch and a wooden bell turret on the west gable. The piers to the nave are round with good moulded capitals. There is a plain octagon font, with modern stem. Of the fabric the chancel is of the most recent construction; it was rebuilt by the late Sir J H Pelly bart, impropiater and lord of the manor. The rest of the church was restored in 1871, at a cost of about £500. The old benches and pews were replaced with new ones, with the exception of four, which have carved backs, and on one being the date "1631." The ends of these four benches are apparently older. In 1879 a painted reredos, representing the Crucifixion, with figures of St Mary and St John, was added, and greatly improved the appearance of the chancel, which is exceedingly neat and well appointed; new choir seats and return seats for the clergy had been previously added, at the restoration referred to. In the south wall is an aumbry—a place formerly used for locking up relics and other valuables. The tower, or rather bell cote, contains one bell, bearing the following inscription:- "He that will meri, let him be meri in the Lord, 1624" There were formerly three bells, and the machinery and woodwork still remain, although in a very somewhat insecure condition. Two of the bells were cracked, and for this reason they were taken down when the church was restored in 1871, and until recently they occupied a place on the floor of the vestry. The first was inscribed "W.Govve, I Christmas, Church wardens, 1621" and the second; "Iohn Christmus, Wililam Bull. C Newman made mee 1695" The inscriptions were of crude workmanship, as may be guessed by the mistakes in the names "William" and "Christmas" It has been proposed to do away with these two useless bells, in order to carry out some much needed repairs to the fabria of the Church.

The Church-yard presents no unusual feature of interest, if we except the fact that the epitaphs are singularly numerous. Two large stones are erected to George and Ann Ekins (1824 and 1828); on one is inscribed:-

*Here in the last, the lonely bed of earth
Lies the dear form of one who gave us birth,
Close by whose side the silent mould'ring clay
Of her loved partner wastes itself away.
O'death, did we not see they sting removed
How would our hearts lament for those we love
We do lament their absence from us now.
But to the will of heaven we humbly bow.*

Another stone to William Royston, 1765, almost defaced, contains the following quaint verse:-

*My dearest dear, do not regret
That in my youth I'm snatched away,
I hope in heav'n for to meet
You at the resurrection day.*

We will content ourselves with one other elegy, to John Auston, which may be taken as a fair sample of several in the Church-yard:-

*My life declines, my strength is gone,
Disease and pain prevail,
Death threatens to arrest me soon,
My heart and flesh doth fail.*

There are numerous stones which bear the character of antiquity, but the finger of Time has obliterated the inscriptions of any earlier than the eighteenth century.

The living of Wood Hurst is a chapelry annexed (together with Old Hurst) to the living of St Ives in the patronage of the Ansley family. Though in other respects an independent parish, ecclesiastically Wood Hurst is therefore part of the Parish and Vicarage of St Ives. From time to time there seem to have been curates in charge of Old Hurst and Wood Hurst, while at other times these places have received their ministrations from St Ives.

Some former curates were connected with the village for long numbers of years. Robert Baker was curate from 1691 to 1721., thirty one years, and his remains lie in the Church-yard. The following entry appears in the register:- "Robert Baker, clerk, curate of this parish, was buried October ye 1st 1721" The name of "Thomas Ashton, curate ", appears 1725-1737 a period of 12 years, but nothing except his name and date is known of him. Samuel Cooper's connection with the Church extended over thirty-one years, 1747 to 1778. he was married at St Ives to a Wistow lady named Pyke in 1767. John Walker was curate fourteen years from 1803 to 1816. His entries in the registers are written in a remarkably good handwriting. J W S Rugeley was for thirty years curate of the parish from 1841 to 1871, when he removed to Cambridge and died there in 1886. he came of a well known St Ives family, members of which still possess land in the neighbourhood. the present curate is the Rev.L. A. Pollock, who during the time he has been connected with the Church has won general respect. He has recently taken up his abode in the village, the old disused school cottage having been repaired to provide a permanent residence for a curate, which has been a long felt want. The old Church school room is utilised for Sunday school, night school, etc There are at present about thirty children attending the Church Sunday school.

The Church registers date from 1682-1690, and some of the early entries, are of names that are common in the village today. Revel, Selby, Saint, Hall, Dring, Goody, Hart, Beck, Shelton, Key, West, Sekens(Seekings), etc: The second entry of burial is of the curious name of Christian Christmas. Some of the entries are in quaint language, the majority are very brief, and very rarely is any occupation or description given. Under 1714 there is a notice of the burial of "Elizabeth, daughter of Elias Godfrey and Catherine his wife, being stragglers" In another case there is a simple entry "A stranger, a poore man buried"

In the latter part of 1780 and in the following year there was apparently an epidemic raging in the village, as forty burials are recorded in less than a year. A family of three received the last rites of the Church in one day, and in another case a man and his wife were buried together. The neighbouring parish of Old Hurst did not suffer from the epidemic.

The burials at the time averaged three or four a year, though occasionally it happened that the year passed by without any taking place.

In one of the burial registers appears the following entry signed by Samuel Cooper, Curate:-

"August 20th 1765, was found dead in Wigan farm, lying in the Parish of Wood Hurst, near the corner of ye Oakley, opposite the Stone Chair in the road from St Ives to Ramsey, ye corps of a Man unknown (supposed to parish for want of assistance;) almost destroyed by vermin; and was buried near ye Place where found, by reason of the great Offence"

Later on we find that on March 26th 1781, "a shepherd named Knighton was killed by the fall of a hay rick.

The marriage registers date from 1680, when John Bond of Cotnam, in ye county of Cambridge, widdower, and Elizabeth Hinson, Wood Hurst, virgin, were married March 11.' It was no uncommon occurrence for people to come from neighbouring parishes in order to be married at Wood Hurst; thus we find couples journeying from Earith, Colne, Bluntisham, Fendrayton, Warboys, Haddenham, etc; Whittlesey and Hemingford Abbots, Cambridge and St Ives, Upworth and Willingham. On April 25th 1741, the Rev John Bannister, was married to Amy Lankaster, both of St Ives.

The baptisms date from 1682, the first being "Mary Hollyday's daughter." March 11th. two singular entries read;_

"John Baker was bornd on Son luke day 1710

"Robert, the son of Robert Baker and Ann 1701"

These entries are quite out of place, in what seems like children's handwriting, and it is likely that they were made by the children of Robert Baker, who was curate of Old Hurst and Wood Hurst at the time, and was buried (as we have seen) in Wood hurst Church-yard in 1721. His children would doubtless have had plenty of opportunities of meddling with the registers.

Orthography was much neglected, as usual in those days. "Jannavary" appears in the registers instead of January, and February is spelt "Feberary" Catherine is frequently rendered as "Caterne" Names of some neighbouring villages appear thus:- Warbois, Hadnam, Fenne Draughton, Hemmenford, Lola(Lolworth) Erith. The registers contain nothing but what are absolutely Church matters, and rarely anything but entries of births, marriages and deaths; but it may be interesting to note that that in May, 1690, the "summe of nine shillings and three pence was collected for the reliefe of the distressed Protestants in Ireland" There were two other collections the same year, and 3s 3d and 4s respectively were sent to New Alresford (Hampshire) and Bungay (Suffolk) to sufferers from fires.

There are two Nonconformist places of worship in Wood Hurst, the most ancient being a quaint old-fashioned Chapel situated in the Back street, now in connection with the Baptists, and which has experienced various vicissitudes. But little of it's early history are now be gathered, as the oldest inhabitant of the village does not remember it being built. Mr Key, who is now 77 years of age, informs us that a Mr

Bletsoe, also of Wood Hurst, gave the piece of land on which the building now stands, to Mr Coxe Feary, the then Baptist minister of Bluntisham, who had the Chapel built, in somewhat the same style as it is now, with the exception of "stud and clay" walls roughly thrown up, economy evidently having a strong voice in the matter. The Chapel thus in it's early days would look little more than a rude hut, or small barn, and even the recent additions of brick walls to three sides of the building make it, with it's small leaden window panes and it's thatched roof look like a rural cottage of half a century ago, and but little like a place of worship. The interior, though somewhat rude and bare, presents a comfortable appearance. The floor is plainly bricked, and the walls whitewashed, whilst the primitive, straight-backed, white deal benches are arranged facing the pulpit at the end of the room; oil lamps being used for lighting purposes. The pulpit is, in comparison with the rest of the furniture, of recent make, and was presented the Chapel by Mrs John Fyson, now of London. But little is known of the services under Mr Feary, the founder of the Chapel, except that they were successively conducted by a Mr Green of Bluntisham, and a Mr Thornton of Ramsey. About 70 years ago there was some disagreement between the brethren, and the old Chapel was deserted, another meeting place being opened a little further down the street. About the same time a Sunday school was started by the late Mr Barton of Wigan farm, to which a few of the oldest inhabitants can remember going to when they were children. After a time a reconciliation took place, and the services were continued in the old meeting house, as before, being conducted by a Mr Fisher, who came over weekly from Potton, and afterwards by various other preachers. At the present time there is no regular minister, but prayer meetings are held every Sunday, conducted by Mr George Cooper, and Mr Meeks, while occasionally friends from St Ives and Warboys conduct services. There is seating accommodation for 150, but the congregation rarely exceeds twenty or thirty worshippers. The building is owned by a person at Godmanchester.

In MR R W Dixon's "Century of Village Nonconformity" there appears some interesting references to Wood Hurst, as extracted from Mr Coxe Feary's "Memorials" That gentleman was in the habit of travelling from Bluntisham to preach at Wood Hurst, holding meetings regularly in a cottage, and we learn they were much valued by people. After the cottage meeting was over, the "little band of earnest bluntisham folk would travel back to Bluntisham together; in the fine weather, as they went they would sing a hymn, then kneel down by the wayside, while one of their number lifted their voice in prayer; then rising from their knees they journey on 'singing as they go' a truly processional hymn, with the roads for their aisles, the stars for their lights, and the open country for their great cathedral." In the winter the roads were so bad that at frequent places the men had to carry the women pick-a-back! Ultimately a small chapel was built for the use of the worshippers, the land (twenty-two feet by fifteen) being given by Mr John Bletsoe. They were called "Culemites" as a term of reproach, after a man named Culem who lived at Needingworth. There was no Nonconformist Sunday school in Wood Hurst, and many parents sent their children regularly to Bluntisham. Towards the east of Church street stands what is now known as the "Union Chapel" the sect worshipping there formerly belonging to the Baptist and Congregational bodies. It was built in 1841 by the late Mr John Longland Ekins (who was previous to that a churchwarden) In 1883 it was thoroughly restored, it's interior has a very neat bright appearance, the benches are of polished pitch pine, and it will seat about 350 persons. There is a large platform for speaking, but no rostrum. The singing is lead by an American organ, played by Miss Fanny Ekins. There are three tablets to members of the Ekins family. and a brass plate inscribed as follows:-

"This meeting house was re-opened on Thursday August 2nd 1883, after having been closed for alterations and improvements, undertaken in affectionate remembrance of the late John Longland Ekins Esq. who first collected a congregation of worshippers in a smaller building, and afterwards caused this house to be raised for the worship of God. By jealous and unfailing services he maintained the cause in a state of great efficiency during a period of forty years.

"He being dead yet speaketh"

There is a Sunday school in connection with this chapel with about forty scholars. it originated with the Baptist cause as early as 1820.

A local paper of January 1846 states that "William Brown an itinerant bookseller was stopped by two foot pads near Pell's Turnpike at Wood Hurst, who knocked him down and robbed him of £5. After the Enclosure, one of the persons mentioned in the Award committed suicide, it was believed through dis-satisfaction. We have not been able to discover name or particulars.

The geology of the neighbourhood is interesting on account of the singular way in which the upper greensand is mixed with the Oxford clay and drift gravel. In the reports of the British Association for the Advancement of Science will be found an account of this formation drawn up by the late Mr John King Watts. In consequence of his having shown to Professor Owen and Sir R I Murchison some vertebrae and a paddle of a species of Plesiosaurus found not far from St Ives, the entire neighbourhood attracted attention in scientific circles, and Mr Watts was invited to examine and report upon the geology and paleontology of the neighbourhood from Over (Cambs) through Holywell and Needingworth, right on to Wood Hurst on the one side and Hilton and Elsworth on the other. this was done, and a paper on the subject was read by Mr Watts at the Belfast meeting in 1852. we quote from an abstract of his paper in the Association's Reports, published in 1853.

"The principal formations in the neighbourhood are the upper greensand, the gault, and the Oxford clay, with great quantities of drift gravel and sand in certain localities. The upper greensand is however but ill defined, being only occasionally met with as near Wood Hurst, and at needingworth, and then but to a small extent. The gault formation is well defined, and is in some places of great thickness. All the elevations and hills near the town are composed of it. The lower greensand is seen out-cropping in patches a few miles distant as between Elsworth and Hilton, and also between Over and Willingham. There is a beautiful outcrop and elevation of this formation at Haddenham, some miles off the road to Ely, being a further continuance of the line. The Oxford clay extends to a considerable distance southward, and a great part of the district towards Fenstanton, Hilton and Connington is of this formation. The drift gravels and sand are found in many places immediately under the top soil; in some places very coarse, and at others as fine as quicksand. In some of those drifts occurred good specimens of Echinus, many Belemnites and Ostreae, much water-worn. the above mentioned range of gault hills is well-defined and interesting. At the westward end of the range near the town of St Ives, the gault passes downward apparently to a great depth; and at this place many Ammonites, Gryphaeoe, Belemnites, Hamites, and Terebratuloe are found. The ammonites occur of various sizes, some very small and others weighing many pounds. belemnites have been found in st Ives district upwards of a foot in length. This ridge trends eastwards Somersham, and about two miles from st Ives towards that place, is a district of rich land, called St Ives Heath, which was formerly part of the royal forests, but disafforested in the reigns of Henry II and III....."

Following the range of hill which now turns eastward, we arrive at the cutting on the Wisbech and St Ives Railway, in the parish of Bluntisham. In this cutting iron pyrites were found in great abundance, a great quantity of solenite, and specimens of Ostrea and Belemnites. the elevation proceeds on to Holywell, and there breaks off, the river running below. On the opposite side of the river in the parish of Over(Cambridgeshire) is a continuance of this ridge or low hills, and the Cambridge and St Ives Railway cuts through the southern side thereof. In this cutting a great variety of fossils was found, many smooth nodules crystallized within, and large boulders of hard sandstone.

There was no school in Wood Hurst previous to the year 1843 when with the aid of the "National society for the Education of the poor" a school and cottage attached were built by the Rev. Yate Fosbrooke on a plot of ground given by the late Sir Henry Pelly, situate a little to the west of the Church. The first mistress was Miss Jane Smith, afterwards the wife of Mr John Brown, builder of Warboys. The schoolroom was enlarged by the addition of a new wing by the late Rev. C D Goldie. Soon after it's formation a second school was built by Mr J Longland Ekins. Previous to these foundations, a few of the now well-to-do children went to Pidley, St Ives etc; for an education, the majority of the population receiving no schooling at all.

In 1870 a School Board for Wood Hurst and district was formed. Mr J L Ekins being elected the first chairman. he held the post till his death, being succeeded in it by his son-in-law, Mr Bateman Brown. This Board School now serves for all the children of Wood Hurst, Old Hurst and neighbourhood. The National School has been closed since the formation of a School Board in Wood Hurst, the schoolroom being still utilised for Sunday school, night school etc:

John Carstairs Esq; of Wood Hurst, is mentioned as High Sheriff of Hunts and Cambs in 1812. Mr Carstairs lived at the White House, which previously belonged to Sir Robert Burton. the property afterwards went to the Pelly family, through marriage with Miss Carstairs.

On 1818 there were but two public houses in the village, the "Half Moon and Stars" and the "Three Horseshoes" This number increased to six, but there are now four--the two above mentioned and the "Farmer's Boy" and the "Travellers' Arms"

In 1855 a serious fire occurred at Wigan farm, occupied by Mr Robert Barton. it happened on May Day, when the work people had gone to Wood Hurst. When the flames broke out, the man in charge, instead of releasing the cattle from the farm buildings, rushed off to St Ives for the fire engine, and 40 cattle (including some fat beasts) and two horses, were burnt to death. the farm buildings were burnt down, and a number of implements destroyed.

About Michaelmas 1877, a fire broke out on what is now known as the New Farm, then called Old Farm. It commenced between nine and ten o'clock, and being on St Ives Fair night there was scarcely any help obtainable to put out the flames. The public house adjoining the "Half Moon and Stars" was also set on fire, and both that and the farm were burnt to the ground. it was supposed to be the work of an incendiary.

The district is very interesting from a naturalists point of view. At Burleigh Hill there is a large fir wood, in which magpies are unusually numerous. These birds are now as a rule becoming rather scarce, but in this wood as many as 21 eggs have been found at a time. Comparitively recent the nest of an English partridge (*Perdix cineria*) was discovered there containing 21 eggs. Chaffinches are also very numerous, building in the hedge there. The golden crested titmouse, a rare bird, which builds in fir trees, is also to be found there. Missel thrushes and wood pigeons likewise frequent the locality.

We are indebted to Mr H E Norris for some of the above information.

