An introduction to Woodbury

The Parish of Woodbury is steeped in history and people have lived here for centuries. Artefacts have been found here that were used in the Bronze Age, 3,000 years ago. It is a large and ancient parish that can be traced back to the 11th century.

The Domesday Book shows that the Manor of Wodburgh was a Royal manor, owned by Baldwin, the Sheriff of Exeter, having formerly been one of the estates of Gytha, the mother of King Harold, which also included a church with its land.

When gradually parishes were formed the old Manor of Woodbury was the main one in the Parish, together with the ancient manor of Nutwell, the manor of Grindel & Salterton, and the Rectory Manor belonging to the Vicars Choral of the Cathedral.

The Parish stretched from Nutwell Court, Gulliford, and Exton as far as (and including Ebford); eastwards to Grindel (Greendale), Hogsbrook, Woodbury Castle and parts of the Common; and westwards to Woodmanton and Venmore. The villages of Woodbury and Woodbury Salterton were in the middle area of the parish. The manor of Woodbury still exists with its Lord of the Manor being Lord Clinton, but the other three manors have now vanished.

Fortunately, a large number of documents have survived which can be found in the Devon Heritage Centre at Sowton and in the Cathedral Archives in Exeter. The parish church of St Swithun and Nutwell Court are the two most important buildings in the parish and together with many of the ancient farms and families are well documented.

In the 1560's Nutwell Court was occupied by John Prideaux who bought the Manor of Woodbury from the Crown after its Lord, Henry Grey, Duke of Suffolk, who was a direct descendant of the 13th centre Albermarle family of Woodbury, and the father of Lady Jane Grey, was beheaded in 1554 as a traitor, two weeks after his daughter suffered the same fate. Three generations of the Prideaux family lived in Nutwell Court.

At the end of the 17th century Sir Henry Pollexfen, who had also lived there, died and was buried in St Swithun's – he was the chief prosecutor in the 'Bloody Assizes' after the Monmouth Rebellion and Lord Chief Justice.

It is quite easy for us to think that we are the only people who have ever lived here, and that things have always been as they are at present. It is of course quite the opposite.

One hundred years ago, the pony and trap were the main form of transport, the roads were unsurfaced, there was no electricity, mains water supply or sewage disposal system.

Most local men were employed in agriculture or associated industries, and the ladies developed a living from their homes, mainly in the lace making industry. Shops of various types were more in evidence even until around forty years ago, but these once essential services have now dwindled to an absolute minimum due to the current ease of travel and communication.

My own family has been resident in the village since 1535, when records began, almost 500 years ago. What changes have taken place through that period, and I wonder what they would think if they came back now!

I am of the age group that can remember back to the early 1940's, when there was at one point, only one car in Woodbury, which was owned by the local doctor. Now look at it!

In 2015, I set about constructing a website for the History Society, where as much local history as possible could be stored online. This would enable people all over the world, including Woodbury expats, of which there were, and still are many, to be able to look back at their heritage from afar.

Many of the photographs, which form the major content of this website, were generously supplied to me, for inclusion in a book I was producing at the time, by the current members of long-standing Parish families. Many are personal family photographs, but they reflect the style and character of bygone days.

These families are by general nature those that have been associated with the land, as they are the people who have been in residence more on a permanent basis, and therefore been able to retain records of events that took place. They have not in their entirety gone off to find their "fortunes" in foreign lands, and most have a thread of continuity running through many generations/centuries. It is therefore not unusual that they held the key to the main stockpile of Woodbury history.

If you have an interest in Woodbury history, take a look through our website, which I am sure you will find interesting. Then perhaps you might consider joining the Woodbury History Society, to find out even more. We look forward to seeing you on board!

Roger Stokes 2023.

Contact and meeting details can be found on the website.