

Brief History of Willington

The name Willington is derived from Wynflaeda's farm. This female name is of Anglo-Saxon origin and she must have been an important person for her name to be enshrined in the name of Willington. In the Domesday Enquiry, the settlement is noted as "1 hide paying tax, Land for 2 ploughs, 2 villagers have 1 plough; woodland half a league long and 1 acre wide, wasted, value before 1066 8 shillings now 10 shillings." Wynflaeda chose a good spot to settle, the area was secluded and sheltered by the ridge to the north, the soil fertile and with a good supply of spring water. In particular water was obtained from a spring below Rough Low known as Pearl Hole. For many years this was the main water supply for the village.

Later, during Norman times, the land was given to the Abbot of Stanlow Abbey on the banks of the River Mersey. The Abbot had to pay 10 shillings rent annually in Chester. Eventually the monks abandoned Stanlow due to flooding and were granted a site at Whalley in the Ribble Valley where they built an Abbey. The ruins of the Abbey are still there. After the dissolution of the Religious Houses in 1542 the land was annexed by the Leghs of Booth. In 1593 it came into the ownership of the Master Forester, Sir John Done. The property remained with the Done family until 1828 when it was bought by Major William Tomkinson, for £24,000, who transformed the farms and woods into a family estate. William Tomkinson built Willington Hall in 1829. The architect was George Latham of Nantwich whose design was neo-Elizabethan, a style in fashion at the time. The total cost was £5,000. It is now a Grade 2 listed building housing a Hotel and Restaurant.

The other large property of note is Tirley Garth built at the instruction of Bruno Mond in 1906. Building stopped abruptly due to financial problems and was leased to a Mr R.A.Prestwich, a Manchester textile business man, (who later became the chairman of Burberry's). He completed the house in 1912. The property is also of neo-Elizabethan design and the architect was C.E. Mallows. The lease was inherited by his daughter, Miss Irene Prestwich, who, in 1949, bought the house from ICI. She established it as a base for Moral Re-Armament. It is now owned by a film company. The very beautiful gardens are open to the public for certain days and the village of Utkinton holds its annual village fete at the property.

In the past Willington had far more facilities than it has today. William Tomkinson founded Willington School for the local children in 1848; it was free and non-denominational. At one time there were more than 70 children on the roll. The school closed in 1934 when Kelsall School was opened. Although Willington has never had a Church there were 2 Chapels. The Methodist Chapel on Chapel Lane, previously known as Rough Low, was built in 1823. The Presbyterian (Calvinistic) Chapel on Willington Road was built in 1817. Both Chapels are now private residences. The village shop and Post Office was located in various cottages, finally finishing up at Corner House before its closure in the 1990s. A Reading Room was built near Willington Corner by James Tomkinson in 1897 to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. The ground floor was used for games and reading. It contained a small library and billiards room. The upper floor was occupied by the District Nurse. It was converted into 2 dwellings around 1950. There was a bowling green in the grounds which later became a children's playground.

Also of note are the Memorial Cottages on Chapel Lane. These were built in 1912 in memory of James Tomkinson who was killed in the House of Commons Point to Point in 1910. These cottages were made available to widows or deserving elderly couples in Willington. They were severely damaged by fire in the 1990s and remained empty for several years. In 1996, Family Housing, Manchester became the trustees of the Charity and the land in front of the cottages was given planning permission and four cottages, Brunswick Cottages, were built, these are available, at affordable rents, to people who have a connection with Willington. The original Memorial Cottages were restored and made into two properties, they were sold to fund the development of Brunswick Cottages. The plaque to James Tomkinson can still be seen on the gable end of the end property.

In 1946 it is believed that the County Council steam roller engine toppled overboard taking a section of the road and bank into the dell below Rough Low. Due to the War labour was very short at this time so German prisoners of war were recruited to repair the damage and build a wall. The wall is still there with an inscription relating to the prisoners of war who made an excellent job of repair.

To build a substantial edifice you really need a broad foundation. So bear with me as I carve my way through ancient history as Willington becomes established. It is all relevant to what our village will become, against the odds, and why.

The Mysterious Wynflæd

The first mention of Willington is in the Domesday Book, the land register ordered by William the Conqueror which established who was responsible for paying taxes in 1086, twenty years after the Norman Conquest.

The four lines devoted to it in the Domesday Book describe it as “1 hide paying tax, land for 2 ploughs, 2 villagers having one plough, woodland half a league long and 1 acre wide, wasted. Value before 1066, 8 shillings, now 10 shillings” We will go into what that means at a later date.

The name given is Winfleton which is said to be derived from “Wynflæd’s farm”. This would imply that the farm’s main tenant was a woman, probably a widow, Only 10 per cent of the tenant farmers registered at the time were female. It also says, however, that “Erniet held it, and was a free man.” It seems likely that Wynflæd and her family farm predated the Domesday book, and probably even the 1066 Norman Conquest. Willington may be much older than we think.

The name Wynflæd was quite popular in Anglo-Saxon times. It derives from the Anglo-Saxon for ‘joy’ and ‘beauty’. It also belonged to noblewomen such as the Wynflæd who died around 960. She was a major landowner, a widow, in the south of England and is known to us because she left a complex will, a single piece of parchment which was miraculously preserved and is now in the British Library.

[Search bekybookshistory.uk for Dr. Becky Lawton’s highly readable look inside that will] There was also a Wynflæd who was the mother-in-law of King Edmund 1. He was assassinated in 946. Much as I’d like to, I haven’t a shred of evidence to give our Wynflæd any royal or noble connections at all, though naming your children after members of the nobility has deep roots.

But I get ahead of myself. I promised you Æthelflæd, for good reason. Known as the Lady of the Mercians, she was the daughter of King Alfred and was his eldest child. (The name means ‘noble beauty’ and was also popular). She was born around 870

at the height of the Viking invasions. By the time she was around 8 most of the country was under Viking rule, with Mercia – which includes us - cut off from Alfred and the kingdoms of the south. Æthelred, Lord of the Mercians, fought back, regained territory and aligned with Alfred. To cement that alliance, Alfred betrothed his teenage daughter to the much older Mercian lord.

Against the odds, they became the power couple of the age until he died in 911, leaving her to officially succeed him as the Lady of Mercia, the only recorded female ruler of a Kingdom in Anglo-Saxon England. She fought alongside her brother Edmund who had inherited the English throne after Arthur's death in 899. She played a very active role, the chroniclers record, in fortifying the dividing line between the Scandinavian-ruled 'Danelaw' territories in the East and the rest of England. For the Willington area, the most significant of her moves was to strengthen Chester's defences and to fortify the burhs, or burghs, at the ancient sites of Beeston, Eddisbury and Runcorn. She is believed to have personally supervised the fortification of Eddisbury and to have spent time there. Her final act in 917 was to send an army to successfully capture Derby, the first of the five Danelaw boroughs to fall to the English. Edmund completed the conquest just months after her death in 918.

The following century saw a relatively united England prosper despite the ongoing power struggles between church and state. Cheshire was a law unto itself, a barrier to the Welsh and the Vikings from Ireland who had settled on the Wirral. It was much larger than it is now, eventually encompassing Flintshire and southern Lancashire. The fortification of the border must have seen much more traffic between Beeston and Eddisbury, probably along the old Sandstone Trail, with Willington a convenient watering hole before the ox-carts tackled the steep climb onto the ridge.

To establish a settlement certain basic conditions are required. It needed accessible building materials, suitable land, food resources and a reliable supply of water. The building materials were provided by the nearby sandstone escarpment. Sand and clay strata, and livestock in the fields, provided wattle and daub, and later bricks. Wood was plentiful. Food could be hunted or foraged from the woods and forests and fished from the pools.

But what gave Willington the edge was a reliable supply of clean, ever-flowing spring water from the Pearl Hole spring at the top of the gorge between Willington Wood and Rough Low. That spring was Willington's main water supply until the 1970s.

There are other underground springs all around Willington. A bore hole still supplies the grounds at Willington Hall. Early Ordnance Survey maps show wells marked at regular intervals

down Chapel Lane and around Willington Corner. Some still remain as garden ornaments. The reason for switching to mains water was often that the spring water was very hard and 'furred up' the pipes. But let's go back a thousand years again. With pigs rooting in the forest and cattle on the cleared ground the time came for agriculture and animal husbandry to start developing. Farming families cooperated in groups of ten, called tithings. Ten tithings were consolidated into a "hundred". Willington was located in what became Eddisbury hundred (the Anglo-Saxon Riseton and Roelau hundreds).

Without wars to take the men and boys away from the land there was more labour available to guide the ox-drawn plough. Relative prosperity increased. It was far from all sweetness and light. The peasants of the time were in effect slaves, tied to the land and landlord. Manumission – buying your freedom – was out of reach for most and dependent on the whim of the local Lord or Abbot. It would take 300 years for

that to change. Life expectancy was 35 years but this figure was distorted by the very high child mortality. Survive to five as a peasant and you had a chance of making 50 or even older. Being a widow, as Wynflæd may have been, had huge advantages. If she swore to remain celibate she could not be married off against her will.

Did they go to Church? There was no accessible church to go to. Anglo-Saxon history is rife with centuries of towering conflicts between warrior monks and Kings, all about influence and power rather than immortal souls. The nearest church and hallowed ground for burials would have emerged in Tarvin but travel across the marshy plane was treacherous. There were no roads, only causeways. Up the Sandstone Trail or over Little Switzerland to access the old Roman Road to Tarvin was feasible.

Itinerant priests may have met the needs of outlying settlement populations, but the evidence is that in general country folk, while perhaps playing lip service to the church, remained loyal to the gods, spirits and festivals they knew of old. However hard the Church tried to appropriate the equinox festivities and the celebration of the seasons, they persisted. They echo down the ages today.

Little did Willington know that the church was to play a decisive role in its history. The reason we are an independent Parish today after being extra-parochial for centuries is because a Norman Lord gifted Willington to the church in the hope his sins would be forgiven. But first Willington will need to weather the horrors of the Norman Conquest which descended on them just as they were beginning to see the genuine fruit of all their labours.

The Art of Survival

What is the classic answer of a governing power to a wrecked economy and disgruntled population? Build infrastructure. That was the Norman answer to reviving the English economy that it had devastated in the immediate aftermath of the 1066 invasion. In this case it built not roads but fortress castles. Between 500 and 600 castles were built during the century that followed. They were followed by a massive ecclesiastical building boom – of which more later.

The purpose of castles was to consolidate Norman power and discourage the ambitions of other kingdoms in Northern Europe from any attempt to oust them, while at the same time providing the Norman rulers and their entourages with safe havens in the case of local uprisings.

Most of these were in the south and east, where the threat of invasion was more immediate, with another line marking the Norman encroachment into Wales.

Cheshire, other than the Welsh border, was not a top priority. We know that Chester (1070), Beeston and Halton (Runcorn) were refortified at this time.

Wales itself was under constant threat of coastal Viking raids from Ireland. The Viking raiders plundered and took anyone they could round up as slaves. The Welsh themselves mainly remained on their side of Offah's Dike although there were marauders in the Dee valley and more organised raids around Chester itself. This would lead to Norman penetration along the coast of North Wales, fortified gradually with some very large and powerful status symbol castles.

Though traditional stone castles were to rise up in quick succession over the next 150 years the initial castles were nearly all of the "motte and bailey" construction which was quicker and cheaper to build. In the case of Beeston the hilltop location meant there was no need to build a big artificial mound on which to construct the

wooden fort which could be defended. It also provided the area for a moat and high wooden palisade which surrounded the fort at a distance. Beeston's stone castle, the rise of which would have been visible from Willington, was built in the 1220s by Ranulf, the 6th Earl of Chester. In 1237, when Ranulf died without an heir, King Henry III appropriated it to use as a launching point for his campaigns in Wales. It remained on the skyline until it was demolished during the Civil War in the 17th century.

There appears to be no evidence that Kelsborrow castle above Little Switzerland was rebuilt at this time although it is possible that the moat and defensive palisades could have been restored. It was certainly not rebuilt in stone later and neither were any of the other hillforts along the Sandstone Trail, with the exception of Beeston. The "harrowing of the North" by the invading Norman army has gone down in history as an atrocity. Immediately following the invasion any resistance from the native population was met with the most brutal punitive measures, which included the destruction of towns and villages, including their livestock and food resources, and in some cases the eradication of the whole rural population. The history books mostly record this in relation to Yorkshire, but wide areas of Cheshire were affected as well. Many of the villages surrounding us were recorded as depopulated and "laid waste" in the Domesday book. Willington and Tarvin and the only places locally with any recorded population at all. Why? Maybe the boggy ground between the river Gowy and us literally saved our bacon.

To digress briefly, there are so many different arguments about what the word "waste" really means in this context. Some interpret it as meaning "laid waste" while others believe it just meant that that piece of land wasn't being cultivated at that moment.

Building any sort of castle requires manpower, especially when artificial mounds and trenches are involved. It was in the Normans' best interest that, having subjugated the population, they then encouraged them back to farming and the cultivation of the land. Manual labour on the fortresses is unlikely to have been voluntary, but there was a very good reason to make sure that the work force was well fed and possibly even paid in some form.

As the more primitive defences were replaced by the typical stone edifices we think of as Norman castles, even more skills and materials were required. The Normans had to import some of those skills from the continent, including initially most of the stonemasons and the architects involved. Very quickly, however, these skills would have been passed on to a new generation of locally trained craftsmen. The Guilds started to evolve in order to manage apprenticeships and determine who could call himself a Master Craftsman.

People on the land and in the villages would start to travel – with permission from the local lord who would probably tax them for the privilege. The beleaguered King would regularly demand contingents of fighting men from his regional Lords. It was their duty to provide them. Thus fit young local men would be rounded up, trained in the use of weapons, and sent wherever the King required. If they survived they would return home with tales of a world beyond the villages.

Whilst they were away the women would plough, sow, harvest, spin, weave, brew "small beer", raise children and perform the myriad of tasks dictated by the seasons. They kept the home fires burning. It was a hard life and often a short one. Average life expectancy for those who worked the land was 25 – though this is slightly skewed by the high child mortality rate. A third died before reaching the age of five. One woman in ten died in childbirth. 45 was really, really old. If you were a privileged landowner you might hope for a 33 average.

The Romans had left a solid road from Chester to Northwich, still visible today as it passes close to the A56 and the bypass near Kelsall, near Kelsall Hall and below Eddisbury Hill. Stone quarried from the Sandstone Ridge, bricks from Tarvin Sands, pottery from Gowy valley clay and salt from Northwich would have moved along that route. The preferred method for long distance transport was by ship, with Chester still a very active port. From there goods would be shipped around the coast to the southern ports and beyond. Thus even the smallest rural communities began to be involved in life beyond their immediate borders.

Though goods from beyond the immediate area began to become available, the increased traffic also brought with it less welcome guests – the infections and pandemics which swept through the whole country at depressingly regular intervals. The bubonic plague had already decimated the population back in 660. I plan a special chapter on these epidemics in people and livestock at a later date because they were of special significance to villages like Willington in general, and to us in particular.

Our proximity to the mighty forest, as it still was then and would remain for many centuries, was also a mixed blessing. The local peasant could generally allow pigs to forage acorns in autumn and winter, gather fallen wood and harvest wild fruits and berries, but hunting was strictly forbidden and penalties for poaching were draconian. The forest also harboured the outlaws on the run who might be partial to a local chicken, goose, sheep or pig.

Throughout this period Willington's farming folk would have been too preoccupied with eking out a basic existence to be concerned with the niceties of national or local politics. The tenuous hold on life meant that for the people of that time the state of their immortal souls, and the prospect of a heaven which would have sounded like a genuine paradise compared to their daily grind, was far more immediate. How the Church gained control of Willington and what that meant for our long-term history will be our next story.

“A damnable and sinister regime”

In 1246 a very remote ancestor of mine appeared in court at Lancaster and was fined the not inconsiderable sum of 20 shillings for “receiving Adam, Richard, William and Roger, sons of Roger, parson of Blackeburn after the burning of the Grange of the Abbot of Stanlegh at Stainings, who were all outlawed.” What has my delinquent ancestor got to do with Willington, you might ask? The connection took me by surprise too!

Following the Norman Conquest, which had the full backing of Pope Alexander II in Rome, the Church swept through the country founding monasteries everywhere they saw an opportunity. Abbey-building and estate management were seen as the next phase of economic recovery following the castle-building fever. Make no mistake – the Church was certainly looking to minister to the sick, poor and needy, harvest souls and consolidate political power, but the Abbeys and their estates were a fund-raising operation of vast scale. They were there to pay for the building, running and maintenance of the Abbey, its monks, its lay employees and the charitable services it provided, and to send a healthy contribution back to Rome itself.

In 1178 – just over a century after the invasion – John fitz Richard, Baron of Halton and hereditary Constable of Chester, gifted lands including Willington for the founding of the Cistercian Abbey of St. Mary at Stanlaw (Stanlow), on the banks of River Mersey (near where the oil refinery is today). Such a foundation was seen as a

kind of insurance policy for the future of the immortal soul of the benefactor. He then followed King Richard 1st's call for a third Crusade and died in the Holy Land in 1190 at the Battle of Acre.

The monks constructed their Abbey but gradually discovered that the Mersey estuary is no respecter of human structures and is prone to huge tidal fluctuations. Their remote location may have been conducive to prayer and contemplation but it was extremely vulnerable. Just when they should have been celebrating their centenary, in 1279, there was another major flood. Eight years later a storm took down the tower and a fire ravaged the rest of the buildings. The monks appealed to the King and the Pope to allow them to move to safer premises and, nine years later, packed their bags and merged with Whalley Abbey near Blackburn in Lancashire. Stanlow became a Grange, a subsidiary, with a few monks and lay brothers in charge.

This is an interesting move, because the "mother house" of Stanlow was not Whalley but Cheshire's main Cistercian foundation, Combermere Abbey, located between Nantwich and Whitchurch. It was founded in the 1130s, originally by the Savigniac monks from Normandy. In 1148 they were forced by Papal edict to switch to following the slightly less strict and more politically acceptable rules of the more successful Cistercian monasteries. It is perhaps because of this that an unworldly Combermere struggled over centuries with problems of financial mismanagement. Abbot after abbot was removed and the Abbey forced into periods of what we would term administration.

Maybe that is why Combermere took one look at Stanlow and its holdings and decided it was more of a liability than an asset. The productivity of Willington and similar areas was not going to make anybody rich. Whalley was welcome to it. Or maybe Rome considered Combermere and its floundering finances unfit to take on further responsibilities. Why, you might ask, were they not amalgamated with far more high profile Vale Royal Abbey close by? That would have made sense geographically and financially. This was simply because the foundation stone of Vale Royal had only been laid by King Edward and Queen Eleanor of Castile eleven years earlier and it would be decades before it was fully functioning.

Willington was thus now part of the Whalley estates. Unfortunately the Whalley records appear to have been lost at the time of the dissolution, when Henry VIII's quarrel with the Pope regarding divorce culminated in his systematic destruction of the monasteries throughout the land and confiscation of their entire assets. However, Vale Royal's records are better preserved, as are some of those from Combermere. Whalley Abbey would have appointed local lay officials, possibly based at Stanlow Grange, to collect the feudal dues in cash and kind. This could be a very dangerous job. A Grange was supposed to be no more than a day's walk from the land it supervised. Could you walk from Stanlow to Willington in a day? The only passable route was probably via Chester and out past the Stanford Bridge ford and Tarvin. Those working on the land were little better than slaves and it took centuries for the church to be persuaded to give them their general freedom. They could buy their relief from serfdom – but where were they to get the money?

To quote the Vale Royal edition of The Local History Group series edited by Frank A. Latham, in the early days of Vale Royal abbey "The local peasantry had many grievances against the abbot as their lord. For example, no woman could marry outside the manor without obtaining permission and paying a fee. When she became pregnant a further payment had to be made. None could work for another without the lord's consent, and none could dispose of their property by means of a will, as their goods belonged to the lord."

In 1311 the abbot and several monks were arrested and accused of harbouring a gang of bandits. They hid out in the abbey, petitioning the King, and received exemption from criminal process. In 1320 one of the abbot's servants was ambushed and killed, "his head being used as a football." In 1336 a number of Vale Royal tenants went to court in Chester to plead that they were "freemen made to endure villein services illegally." They were thrown into jail in chains. Shortly after, their friends and relatives ambushed Abbot Peter whose groom was killed and who barely escaped with his life. His revenge was to humiliate the imprisoned men further and confiscate their properties. In 1340 Abbot Peter was murdered by local people who burnt his houses and crops and stole "a great quantity of his possessions." Disputes and incidents pepper the records of subsequent abbots, culminating in the assassination in 1437 of Abbot Henry. The sword that slit his throat was wielded by the vicar of Over, who was himself murdered in 1442. The Abbey was taken into royal protection and £1000 was required to put the estate back on its feet. Peace did not descend. In 1454 monks were up in court for driving the abbot off the premises and plundering his private quarters. They stole "three pairs of sheets, five tunics, eight yards of cloth, a bow, 24 arrows and two books." An ensuing tour of inspection ordered by Rome concluded that Vale Royal was "a damnable and sinister" regime. Undoubtedly, below the top layers of church autocracy and politics, there were good monks and laymen trying to lead a religious life and carry out their Christian duties. While many monks had a genuine calling, an Abbot was frequently a political appointee. He was often a "spare", the second son of a prominent local land-owning household. While monks took vows of poverty and obedience, records show abbots throughout the system had considerable personal property and possessions. A fish starts to rot at the head, as the monks, whose diet often depended on the local fish-pools which they tended, would appreciate. In many monasteries the corruption filtered down.

The Abbey staff would have included an infirmarian, to care for the sick, an almoner, responsible for the distribution of alms to the poor, and the guest-master who provided the traditional hospitality to travellers. Combermere Abbey, however, found these obligations onerous. In 1351 they complained bitterly to Edward, the Black Prince, about the cost of providing hospitality to guests and their servants, horses and hunting hounds. Local historian Frank Latham speculates that the proximity of the Abbey to the Chester-Shrewsbury Road proved to be an intolerable drain on its resources.

Combermere had a similar record to Vale Royal, with much feuding, resulting in one abbot being excommunicated for refusing to let the Archbishop of Canterbury enter (1309). The local aristocracy ejected an abbot, another abbot tried to occupy the Whalley abbey and oust the abbot there, and 1446 Abbot Richard Alderwas was shot dead with a bow and arrow by an angry local. There was theft, forgery, rape and a reputation of "having an evil name for using of misrule."

But to return to Willington, the move to Whalley supervision and limited resources of the Grange at Stanlow would have meant that even these most basic health care facilities were beyond the reach of Willington. Such villagers would rely on age-old herbal medicines and traditional cures, as they had always done. As far as I know we have no evidence of a graveyard from this era or for centuries beyond, though maybe we haven't looked hard enough. If they wanted to be married in church or buried in consecrated ground they would have had to travel to Tarvin, the only substantial settlement in the area with a church. If you look across the landscape from Gooseberry Lane when the mist has settled in the Dee valley, you can see

clearly that Tarvin and Oscroft are built on higher ground. However, in-between there were and are still some swampy areas – consider the historic problems of drainage at the Priors Hayes golf course. (The name Priors Hayes means an enclosure for the (Tarvin) Prior's animals). It would have been a hard journey over causeways, with "proper roads" not being established until the 1800s.

And where does this leave my reprobate ancestor? The Grange at Stainings which the parson's sons burnt down was also a grange attached to Whalley Abbey. It was located just outside today's Blackpool. So relations between the abbots of Whalley and their parishioners appear to have been just as troubled as those in Cheshire. Did Willington care? We will never know but we can guess that tax collectors and administrators were not keen to try to impose their will on a village of few means on the edge of a forest full of outlaws similar to the four sons who had burnt down another Whalley grange.

In 1348 the Black Death arrived in England. It killed an estimated third to a half of the population. It was by no means the first or the last pandemic to sweep the country, but the consequences changed the course of history. It meant that for the first time those who farmed the land had power. Next time we'll take a closer look at pandemics generally and what consequences the Black Death had for villages like Willington.

The Black Death – how Willington survived.

The bubonic plague epidemic, The Black Death, crept up across England from the south coast in 1348 and 1349. By the time it faded, six years later, it had swept between and third and a half of the population into the grave.

We do not know precisely how the Black Death affected Willington, but its relative isolation may have protected it from the worst. What we do know is that a host of other Cheshire villages mentioned in the Domesday Book disappeared at about this time, never to return. It raged from 1348 to 1349 but it continued to resurface in the succeeding decade, mutating in a way with which we are familiar today. It killed up to half the population, reducing it from an estimated pre-pandemic 6 million to 3 million. The next major outbreak was in 1665, when both knowledge and recording were far more advanced. Records from that time help piece together what the earlier plague was like.

On the eve of the pandemic the country had been under Norman rule for three centuries. This was the equivalent then of ten to fifteen generations. Pre-Norman England was now the stuff of myths and legends. Nostalgia for the days of the imagined chivalry of the Knights of the Round Table and the possibly fictional King Arthur was growing among the ruling classes.

On the land little had changed. Smallholdings such as Willington had little or no incentive to produce more than was necessary for their own subsistence because any surplus would be taxed and probably confiscated by fair means or foul. Local Lords and Abbots alike understood economics as squeezing your tenants until the pips squeaked. The villagers might be free men and women instead of virtual slaves but they were still tied to the land. They had the freedom to starve. Their homes might now have floors of stone which fell off the wagon on the way from the sandstone quarry to the castle-building site in Beeston but the roofs were thatch, the walls wattle and daub banked up with sods, and people and livestock lived under one roof.

Indoor life was pungent, especially in winter. Bathing was unknown unless there was a convenient lake. Clothes were only washed in case of absolute necessity because it wore them out. A hole in the ground and a plank provided the sanitary facilities. Having a pot to piss in was more than a turn of phrase – it was a life-saver. No-one went out at night unnecessarily - there were wolves in the nearby forest, though these were well on their way to extinction after Edward 1, (Edward Longshanks), who reigned from 1272 to 1307, had put a bounty on their heads. After dark a family would huddle for warmth in their one bed, on straw or bracken, hearing the remaining wolves howl and the eerie, baby-like cry of the female fox on heat, the wild boar snorting and rooting, the deer rutting, and whatever else supernatural the imagination conjured up by the flickering light of a fire or a tallow candle. There might be a dog tethered outside to guard the homestead and sound the alarm if a marauder from the forest, human or animal, came too close. By day the dog's job was to keep the rats down.

On a farm there were always rats and mice. There still are. But whereas the mice usually remained close to their territory, rats are opportunists and they roamed where the pickings were the richest. Lice and fleas are also opportunists. It was probably a rat, with its lice and fleas, which clambered up a mooring hawser onto a trading ship on the continent and down another when it docked in Portsmouth, carrying with it the fleas and lice we now know were infected with the bubonic plague. The people killed the rats and the fleas and lice decamped onto the warm, sweating bodies of the first available human host. The Black Death struck. When the human host died there would be another sweaty, juicy human or animal host nearby.

No-one knew what caused it. The medical care was that provided by the monasteries and their apothecaries and the home remedies based on the herbal knowledge every family would possess, handed on from generation to generation, were the only remedies available. Such plagues were seen as a punishment from God for the all-pervasive sinfulness of man, resulting in pilgrimages which in turn served to spread epidemics further. It must have been a hopeless, bewildering time. The rich packed up their belongings, fleas and all, and headed out of town to the country residences either they or their families possessed. Chester was probably left for the poor to scavenge what they could and plunder the deserted mansions in the hope of hidden treasure.

The plague was, of course, not the only epidemic around. From influenza to a range of epidemics affecting livestock, not to mention the fluctuations of the weather, death from hunger was a constant threat, especially now there was only half the labour to work the land and tend the animals. But it was that shortage of labour that provided a glimmer of light for the rural community. It did not take long for young, fit labourers to realise that they could make demands, charge more for their labour and go where the demand for their services was greatest. Wages rose and, for the first time, landowners were not having it all their own way.

In 1351, at the behest of the landowners, including the monasteries such as Willington's landlord, the government ordered that wages return to pre-pandemic levels. The landlords tried to clamp down with imposing the rules of serfdom which tied the labourer to the land. They soon discovered that a rebellious workforce was not at all productive, so that each landlord put his own interests first, poached labour from other landowners and paid them the going wage, possibly with a "productivity bonus" attached. The seeds of the Peasants' Revolt were sown.

In the south of the country a radical preacher, John Ball, attacked the class system. The soul of a peasant was as valuable to God as that of a Lord, he said. The

established Church, whose abbots were mostly the spare sons of the major aristocratic families, did not like this at all. It earned John Ball excommunication in 1366. But by now the seeds of revolution had been sown on fertile soil and would continue to germinate over the coming decade.

In 1377 the government introduced a poll tax, to be applied to men and women alike, to pay for ongoing wars with France. The fuse was lit and exploded in 1381 when the inhabitants of an Essex village ran the tax collector who came to collect the poll tax out of town. Peasants from Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk marched on London, led by John Ball and Wat Tyler. The young King, Richard II, and his advisors took shelter in the Tower of London.

The Peasants' Revolt is well documented. It failed as such. Tyler, Ball and many more were executed. But in subsequent decades many of the peasants' demands were met, including an end to serfdom and to the poll tax. No English government dared introduce a poll tax again until 1390. And we all know how that ended.

Willington must have emerged from this dark period smaller but stronger. Its population was probably a couple of dozen at best on one or two farmsteads, most probably located around where Home Farm and Willington Hall are now. Only Tarvin had a population in the dozens but its transport links on the salt road from Northwich to Chester would have made it vulnerable. Kelsall as such did not exist yet and would remain three separate hamlets for centuries to come. Chester had a pre-pandemic population of around 3,000, which was reduced to the Domesday book level of 1,500.

If the land itself would not sustain the small Willington population then there was always the forest to fall back on and the plague would have decimated the number of people available to assert law and order there. Villagers would have exercised their rights to allow their pigs to forage and to take dead wood for their fires. Rabbits were probably plentiful and the occasional deer would venture "beyond the pale", the enclosure meant to contain them.

Next time I'll try to take a closer look at how farming round here developed over the centuries. What was growing and grazing in the fields around us? From flax to wheat, from sheep to cattle, how much has it changed?