

History of Wistow Village

Pre-History

Wistow, an idyllic rural village in North Yorkshire situated where the Humberhead Levels meets the Vale of York, a large flat expanse shaped by glacial movement, 22,000 years ago it would have been covered by the British Irish Ice Sheet, later when the Humber gap was closed off with glacial slip, would have been completely submerged under the vast Proglacial Lake Humber.

The north of the Humberhead Levels have been inhabited by modern humans for several thousand years. The light sandy soils were easily drained by the hand tools used by the Neolithic people, this allowed people to settle for the first time, leaving behind the hunter-gatherer lifestyles of the Mesolithic period.

A recent archaeological dig on Wistow and Cawood commons led by Margaret Brearley and John Kenny found evidence of Iron Age and Roman dwellings.

The people who have lived in the area that is now the Parish of Wistow have lived through at least five Kingdoms, those being Elmet, Deira, Northumberland, the Danelaw, and finally the Kingdom and Republic of England, and two Empires, the Roman and British.

The Vikings in The Village:

The calm rivers of the Humberhead Levels were perfect for the Danish invaders to navigate inland, sailing up the Ouse to their British capital Jorvik. Despite the Vikings being portrayed as blood-thirsty invaders, they are known to have assimilated well with the cultures they met on their journeys, settling down with the Saxons they found along the way. How much of a community was in Wistow before the Vikings we do not know, but after their arrival they founded the first church in Wistow, a chapel named St Hilda's.

There are not many records of the chapel, other than it being left in ruin by the Norman period.

While writing about the Vikings, it would be wrong to not mention the Nesses, The Nesses is an area that gets its name from an old English word, Nesses - a headland that juts out into water.

But which water is it referring to? The only water in sight is an often dry dyke, well, this dyke was once actually the River Ouse! The river used to snake its way much closer to the village, before cutting its way through the soft soil of the oxbow and creating a new route much further away. Following the old route of the Ouse it's clear to see the Nesses used to actually be on the banks of Riccall.

Along the spine of The Nesses lies a popular footpath that runs through a little woodland at its highest peak and culminates at the banks of the river, a path that has been a much-loved by generations of ramblers and hikers, and children who've built dens along its length.

It's well documented that in 1066 the viking army moored in Riccall the day before they were finally vanquished by King Harold at the Battle of Stamford Bridge. Amazing to think that the Viking warriors may have been walking down our well loved footpath the day before the skirmish that would bring an end to the Danelaw and three hundred years of Viking rule.

A historic map showing the original route of the river Ouse in detail:

<https://maps.nls.uk/view/102344923>

The Liberty of Cawood, Wistow and Otley

The previous link denotes a map of "The Liberty of Cawood, Wistow and Otley"

In Saxon times these townships were gifted to the See of York by King Athelstan, creating a massive manorial estate of which The Archbishop of York became Lord of the manor,

Liberties such as these made them semi autonomous regions, the possible reason Wistow is not recorded in the Domesday book is because the area was not in full control of the new Norman King, William the Conqueror, who was crowned by Ealdred, Archbishop of York on Christmas day 1066, as one of the few Englishmen and the only Northerner trusted by King William, this may have helped the archbishop maintain his holdings and perhaps spared them the worst at the Harrying of the North.

The archbishop received tax from his tenants, he also ran the courts, and hired constables, ale finers, collectors, beadles, pinders - whose job it was to round up animals that were not being properly supervised on common land and hold them in the Pinfold until the owners paid a fine for the release of the stock, and byelawmen - the byelawmen's job was to fine the owners of un-rung swine, survey the sewers, fences, ditches, bridges, styles and grips in the common land and the banks of the ouse, and when they had done their surveyance they set days for common work to be done.

There were large amounts of "waste land" down the Marshes that could be farmed by any one, but usually were farmed by unlanded peasants, the common was farmed in large open field systems and there were four hags, two of which were open and two closed, these would switch in seven yearly cycles, "open" meant tenants of the lord could source wood or use them for pannage (the release of pigs into woodland to eat acorns and chestnuts) freely.

The Manor Courts were held as follows:— Michaelmas Court the Wednesday after Michaelmas(29th september); the Twenty-day Court the Wednesday after the 20th day after Christmas; Easter Court the Wednesday in Easter week; Lammas Court, called "the fearing court," the Wednesday after Lammas day(1st August); & the three-week Courts to begin the same day three weeks after Michaelmas court & so to continue every 3 weeks until Lammas Court and no longer.

The courts seemed to be ran this way until at least the early 18th Century, whether things began to change after the enclosure of the land or otherwise, by the middle of the 19th century it had become clear that the liberty was no longer functioning, with massive

inefficiencies in government, not helped by the fact Wistow and Cawood were over 30 miles away from the other towns of the liberty which surrounded Otley.

For a long time no business arising from either Wistow or Cawood village was heard in any court sessions, there was no Gaol (jail) that could be used, and the Liberty was so small it couldn't justify summoning jurors in separate sessions from the West Riding.

Taking this into consideration the West Riding deemed the peculiar privileges of the Liberty should come to an end, and petitioned the crown to unite the Liberty with the county, which occurred on 21st March 1864.

From this point on, Wistow started to do its Petty Session business in the wapentake of Barkston Ash.

<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/26a74388-425f-4fd3-9130-d25b36efe328>

<https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/22828/page/1326>

Rebuilding of the Church

The Chapel of Saint Hilda lay in ruins by the end of the 12th century, in 1216 the archbishop created a prebend at Wistow, with a share of the cathedrals monies being paid to a cleric, paying for the building of the new Norman church dedicated to All Saints, some old stones and monuments were saved from the old chapel and incorporated into the new church, the church had many upgrades over the next three hundred years, with the bell tower being the last edition, completed in 15th century.

The English Civil War

Unfortunately not much is known about Wistow in the civil war except that there was damage to some banking. This is despite the fact that the surrounding area was held by both Royalists and Parliamentarians, in fact Cawood and Selby were longtime strongholds for Lord Fairfax, Commander-in-Chief of the Parliamentary forces and de facto ruler of England, before he was eventually overshadowed by his subordinate Oliver Cromwell.

Although there are not many accounts of what happened in Wistow during the war, we can see the results of Oliver Cromwell's strict Puritanical ideologie on the village. The Church before the war had painted murals along the walls, but after the founding of the Commonwealth during the interregnum, images and icons were no longer allowed in churches. All the murals were removed, leaving only one small plastered and painted section which was missed in the destruction, the only clue to what could have been before. Who knows what other relics were lost, in Cawood four stone statues from their church were buried in a garden to avoid destruction.

<https://www.forgottenbooks.com/en/readbook/>

ALifeoftheGreatLordFairfaxCommanderinChiefoftheArmyoftheParliamentofEngland_10143705#84

The remarks of William Storr of Scalm Park

Scalm Park is a historical manor on the edge of the parish of Wistow, maps show it was originally built in the 15th century, and rebuilt by one of its most interesting inhabitants, a yeoman called William Storr. William Storr's father came to Scalm Park in 1678, and farmed it until his passing in 1695, after which William took over eventually buying the lease in 1717.

William authored a book entitled The Remarks Of William Storr, of which a copy is now kept at the University of York, but unfortunately there is only a brief extract available on the internet which I shall include a link to below, it's an interesting document, and includes chapters on harvesting, planting trees and orchards, the rebuilding of scalm park, recording of a solar Eclipse, and I'm sure most interestingly to the ramblers of the village, battling to keep old paths and rights of way open which were being obstructed.

He had amazing knowledge of the Common Land and its customs, and it's thanks to his book we know how the manor functioned in the 18th century, most details on the court system I have written about came from a chapter in his book called "A Breef Collection of dues Rents and services Accustamed to be paid and performed to the Lord Arch Bishopp of yorke his Grace by the tennants and Coppiholders within the manner of wistow Anno 1711.", if you have time I suggest reading the whole wonderful extract.

https://www.cantab.net/users/michael.behrend/repubs/storr_remarks/pages/main.html

William also left a collection of the place names from the village, some of which are still in use, Dawker Hill, Garman carr, Black Fen, and the Buscroft, some of which we can only guess at, the Jenny lands, which probably ran along the Jennygoit Dyke on Wistow common, and a myriad of other place names lost to time.

Inclosure of Wistow

Enclosure of the commons were numerous acts of parliament from 1604 until 1904, the acts removed the rights from peasants who had lived and farmed "common" or "waste" land for generations.

Common land was usually land that was under the control of the lord of a manor, in this case The Lord Archbishop of York, and manorial tenants had the right to use land for livestock pasture & pannage, or the land was split up into narrow strips and divided up between tenants to cultivate in what was known as an Open-Field System.

Waste land was land that had no value as a farm strip, it was not officially used by anyone, and as such was usually farmed by landless peasants.

The Enclosure of Wistow began in 1776, starting with the open fields and marsh land totalling over a thousand acres, then enclosures were awarded again in 1780, with just shy of another two thousand acres enclosed from the people.

The main beneficiary of the Enclosure at the time seems to be the Church and Vicar of Wistow, who took ownership of the land in exchange the right to tithe, an archaic tax that was awarded to the Church from the profits from the land, this still has knock on effects today, with the church continuing to own mineral rights on large swathes of land in Wistow.

The inclosure acts were a massive driver of the industrial revolution, as people who had previously lived by farming land that had been held in common suddenly found their right to subsistence had vanished and with no recourse for their loss, and so had little choice but to move to towns to find work in factories and mills.

Unfortunately we will never know if the enclosure of wistow drove down the population of the village, as the common land was enclosed 25 years before the first modern census took place in Britain.

<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/a8773f97-4ad5-4b99-ab57-211047a56263>

The Methodist Chapel

There has been a Methodist Chapel in Wistow since 1803, the original chapel was used until 1873, when the local people raised a sum of £683 7s 7d to build the New Wesleyan Chapel which is still used to this day as a place of worship and a village hub, with coffee mornings, shrovetide pancake celebrations, Parish Council meetings and numerous other events all taking place in the chapel.

John Wesley himself made journeys to preach in the village at Wesley's Field.

ALL ABOARD!

The first mention of a railway coming to Wistow was in 1879, with the Church Fenton, Cawood and Wistow Railway bill, which would have provided five miles, four furlongs and 6.60 chains length of track from Wistow to a field adjoining the Church Fenton Station of the North Eastern Railway Company. The bill came before Lord Redesdale, who after some trepidation over the placements of a level crossing at Church Fenton agreed to pass the bill, unfortunately, the capital could not be raised so the line was never built.

It wasn't until April 1896 the next bill came to parliament in the form of The Cawood, Wistow, Selby Light Railway Bill, which passed with no opposition, in fact it received praise from many, including Lord Londesborough, although, this could be due in part to the proposed line running across a good portion of the Lords land in Wistow, and so it was the *Cawood, Wistow and Selby Light Railway Company* (CW&SLR) was formed. In just three months, on Saturday 11th July 1896 the first sod was cut by the company chairman's wife Mrs Henry Liversage at Cawood, with the line opening on 16th February 1898.

The scheme was to be shorter and cheaper than the original plan, at a cost of £25,000, and providing four and a half miles of track from Cawood and culminating at Leeds side of Selby Junction, near what are now called Brayton Gates. The reason the line culminated here was due to the North Eastern Railway company not allowing the new company to use their metals, the CW&SLR had to build a new platform a mile away from Selby Train Station, which was fine for people who were visiting town, but a massive inconvenience to through passengers.

In 1899 the company's [Board](#) decided to pursue building an extension from Cawood to [Church Fenton](#). This unnerved the NER, who saw a potential threat should the Wistow line revive a venture along the lines of the 1879 scheme, which would allow the [Hull and Barnsley Railway Company](#) to penetrate the NER's fiefdoms of York and Harrogate.

This led to NER buying CW&SLR company in 1900 for £32,000 and the planned extension to Church Fenton was subsequently scrapped. CW&SLR company was formally wound up on 27 February 1900, Thereafter the NER operated the line as a branch, as did its successors, the [LNER](#) then finally the [North Eastern Region of British Railways](#). A benefit from the takeover occurred on 1 July 1904 when branch trains were diverted to run through to the main [Selby](#) station. The Brayton Gates terminus thereby became redundant. It was closed and soon demolished.

When the line opened it had a schedule of five trains a day, Monday through Saturday, and a journey time of 17 minutes, the regularity was soon increased with extra trains on market day, and even ran special offers of cheap tickets to encourage people to the Wistow Sports and Show days.

By 1914 the schedule had reduced to two trains a day, barring market days which still ran a full schedule, and on 1 January 1930 the passenger service was withdrawn completely except for special events, train rides to Leeds pantomime for example, which carried on sporadically until 1946. The goods service continued though, mainly transporting farm produce, by the mid 50's this was only an "as required" service, unfortunately for the railway this sporadic service could not compete with the growing competition of road haulage and the railway closed in 1960.

In April 1960, the rail line allowed passengers on board for two farewell tours, and the line closed permanently on 2nd May 1960.

On 23rd May a diesel shunter was sent out to collect the equipment from Cawood station, a Mr John Woodall, who had travelled on the first train in 1898, asked [British Railways](#) if he could ride the train one last time, they agreed and he was allowed to ride in the guard's van of this final trip.

The Station House of Wistow is now a private residence and less than half the track remains as field boundaries.

For a more comprehensive look at the railway there is a book titled: THE CAWOOD, WISTOW & SELBY LIGHT RAILWAY by [Kenneth E. Hartley](#)

The Great Wistow Show

Shows and Sports Days were a common fixture in the village's history, having a fully fledged show day for over 40 years.

The first sports day began in 1878, becoming an annual event in subsequent years, the day included the 100 yard, 120 yard handicapped, 440 yard, pole jump and three legged race.

Wistow's first full annual show was The Horticultural and Stock show held on Tuesday, 9th August 1887. At the inaugural show there were over 320 entries over 57 classes, including Horses and Stock, Vegetables, Flowers, Fruit, and Farm Produce - the prizes for the event were worth over a whopping £35!

The most notable award of the day was a special prize awarded to Robert Simpson by Colonel Gunter MP for a tray of vegetables, with the title of the class "Most useful to a labouring man's family! (four varieties)"

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000499/18870813/130/0015>

From this point on the show went from strength to strength, by the nineteenth show it was being reported by the Skyrack Courier the show could rival the Great Yorkshire Show, if not in size then definitely in quality. It was around this time 1905-06, the show became a resounding voice for the class of light horses - a class that was in drastic decline, with many people giving speeches in need of quick breeding regime, one of whom Dr George D Todd while toasting the shows success, noted the pleas by the people for a simple and pure life, but he had to make a plea for the horses - if the light horse was eradicated, he claimed, it would lead the British Army to be legless! The country was in great need so all events requiring light horses should be expanded, and forget barbed wire fencing to keep at bay the foxes, let the hunt do its work! This was met with resounding cheers, how times have changed!

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0003890/19050812/033/0003>

The 38th and final show was held on Tuesday August 6th 1929, it had 13 agricultural classes, and 68 classes of Horticulture and Farm Produce, with the prizes worth £200! A magnificent military display was performed by the 5th Inniskilling Dragoon Guards, the band of which went on to provide musical entertainment. A special prize was awarded by Col. George R Lane Fox, the MP for Barkston Ash, in a category that must have been favoured by MPs, and mirroring the first event: "A Tray of Vegetables most useful in a Working Man's Home." Won by Wistows own B Hemmingbrough.

The following year, the world was gripped by the great depression, the 1930 event had to be cancelled because of the downturn in the economy and the show never recovered. The show society carried on for some time after though, holding annual fancy dress parties, in 1932 the Hull Daily Mail reported that the society had managed to raise £11 12s which was to be split between Selby War Memorial Hospital and Leeds Infirmary.

Industry in the village

Wistow over the last few hundred years had become a very self sufficient village, even being referred to as a small town by some, as ever farming was the main industry of the village, but there were also four shops, a blacksmiths, joiners' workshops, a garage, two builders' yards, a fish shop, a haulage firm, a potato packing plant and warehouse and a hairdressers and two public houses.

The Old Dog originally combined a pub, a small mixed farm rearing pigs and poultry and was a registered slaughterhouse. Later becoming The Goblin Tree an Italian Restaurant finally becoming a residential property after its closing in the early 2000s,

The Black Swan was a pub and also a small arable and milk farm, delivering milk daily to most households in the village, sadly its days as a dairy farm are long past.

Of all the public immunities the village once boasted only the Black Swan remains to this day.

Boundary change

In 1972 the Ted Heath government passed the Local Authority Act, a mass shake up of local government creating the two tier council system which is still used in some parts of the country to this day.

To accommodate the new council system there had to be boundary changes across the country, the result was the reduction in size of Yorkshire, firstly by the creation of a number of new counties including Cumbria, Cleveland, and Humberside, and some towns and villages were moved in to other counties including Durham and Lancashire.

The boundary changes came into effect on the 1st April 1974, moving Wistow from the West Riding into North Yorkshire.

Wistow Mine

In 1974 the government announced its ambitious 'plan for coal,' maximising profits from indigenous coal at a time it was cheaper than imported gas due to the 1973 oil crisis.

Exploratory digging had taken place in the Selby area in the 1960s and found a northern extension to the Barnsley Seam, with an estimate of about 600 million tonnes in the seam, and this was to be clean coal, some people misunderstand the meaning of clean coal, it doesn't mean it was any environmentally better which I have heard some people claim, it's actual meaning comes from the amount of soil brought up in extraction. In some of the old pits that were becoming exhausted, 30% of everything that came up was waste soil, the seam at selby was so wide they could go down the seam without taking any soil, this is the reason why in and around the selby mines there are no slag heaps.

Planning permission was sought in 1974 and granted in '76. Cementation Mining Ltd began sinking the first of two 24 foot diameter shafts on October 29th 1976. This was a really impressive display, because the water table is incredibly high in Wistow, so the area surrounding the shafts had to be frozen - for a full year - before the sinking of the shafts could commence! They wouldn't realise it yet, but from this point on water would be a massive impediment to the mine, when the Mine opened in 1983, water began pouring in almost as quickly as coal could be taken out!

Wistow was the first mine of Selby Coalfield to start production, and employed up to 700 workers at its peak, setting several new output records; in September 1995 it set a European record by producing 200,000 tonnes in one week.

Wistow mine, once called the mine of the future, was consigned to the past, closing on 13th May 2004.

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-selby-the-saving-face-for-coal-1984-online>

Wistow Charities

Archbishop Mountayn's, or The Apprentice Charity - Archbishop Mountayn who had been born in Wistow, founded a charity in 1655 to pay for apprenticeships for boys, the apprenticeships costed around £5 per boy, the money was raised by letting land called the Far Newlands, which raised £25 per year.

Harfords Dole - Mr Harford gave 20 shillings a year out of his lands which was to be distributed at Christmas and Easter by the Church wardens.

Shaw's Charity - in Robert Shaws will, dated 29th December 1719, he stated that all his land should be sold after his death, and from the monies he left a rent of £5 annually which would pay and maintain a school master that would teach ten poor boys in English and writing.

The Poor's Land - the founding of the Poor's Land charity is very interesting, a collection of land parcels of which the rental fees are distributed to poor widows at Christmas by the churchwardens, some of the land was gifted to the charity by the commissioners for the inclosure of the lands of Wistow, "in right of the poor's original property in the fields and ings of Wistow." In part accepting the theft of the Common Land from the people. It also included a parcel of land called littlestead gifted in the will of Mrs. Dorothy Wright and two acres gifted by a Mr Shaw. All these lands were copyhold within the archbishops manor.

These charities are listed in the book The History of the Parishes of Sherburn and Cawood with incidental accounts of the village and prebendal church of Wistow by W Wheeler

Folklore, Myth and Legend

The scenery where people live has a great effect in moulding them. Here, living among the hags and marsh land that became identified with their everyday existence, the people of Wistow were no different. Seated by the fire on a winter's night, the wind moaning and shrieking mysteriously, with old stories and superstitions passed on through the generations. Wistow became a village mired in folklore, mythical creatures and peculiar goings on, there was no escape in any direction.

On the northern boundary of Wistow, there stood the Goblin Tree, a huge lightning blasted oak, a massive specimen that was hundreds of years old while alive, and stood hundreds of years after it's demise, with gaunt looking branches extending out like arms, a great bleached skeleton, with a hole so big in the trunk children brave enough could climb right in. In the late nineteenth century Edmund Bogg wrote in his book The Old Kingdom of Elmet "stout of heart were they who at nightfall passed it formerly without fear and trembling." unfortunately, after weathering the storms of centuries and terrorising countless generations, The Goblin Tree was felled in the early two thousands, they say it was because the tree had become too dangerous, but I can't help but think it might have had something to do with the farmer and his staff, having to work the fields on late autumn evenings, sensing the prickle of

their hair standing up on the back of their neck, with a feeling almost as if someone was watching them from the branches of the Goblin Tree.

At the end of Selby Road, if you venture on the footpath west, you might come across a very peculiarly named place as you enter Spark Hagg, the Elf Hole Farm, from whence the elves come tripping lightly in the moonlight, the fount of light and gladness.

If you miss the footpath, and by accident head south to Selby, you'll have to pass over Boggart Bridge, in old English folklore the Boggart is a malevolent *Genius loki*, that is, a geographically-defined spirit that inhabits marshes. There once could have been dozens of boggarts roaming in all the marsh around Wistow. According to Edmund Boggs book, Boggart Bridge is the home of the gruesome tale of Peg Fife who skinned a man alive, he doesn't go into any more detail, and maybe that's for the best.

Finally to the east, the Black Fen, the fountain and origin of that bad fiend the Will-o'-the-wisp, and all that is evil.

If these morbid curiosities have left you petrified and seeking sanctuary, you would do better than to believe that consecrated ground can save you from the superstitions of old, because if you venture in to All Saints Church you will find an old tombstone dedicated to a centuries past vicar of the church, inscribed on the stone you can see clearly two coiled serpents, an ancient pagan symbol denoting wisdom, this is not the only curiosity in Wistow Church, on the North Wall is a tablet with an hourglass in relief surmounted by a skull, this addition to the Church in the 18th century was to block up the north door, also known as the Devil's Door.

Superstition and Old Wives Tales run through the fabric of this village.

Here is a digital version of "The Old Kingdom of Elmet" by Edmund Bogg

<https://archive.org/details/oldkingdomofelme00boggiala/page/232/mode/2up?ref=ol&view=theater>

Notable Persons:

William Thomson (Viticulturist) 26 November 1816 - 19 October 1897

Agricultural worker and Gardener born in Wistow, emigrated to the USA where he introduced and popularised the Sultana grape in California, the Thompson Seedless variety now accounts for 95% of all raisins produced in California.

Archaic Spellings:

- Wicstow, Wystow, Wykestow, Wyxstowe

<http://epns.nottingham.ac.uk/browse/West+Riding+of+Yorkshire/Wistow/5328827cb47fc40c810062b1-Wistow>

Etymology

- **wīc-stōw** 'a dwelling place, a camp'