

TONY BOSTOCK'S LOCAL HISTORY NOTES: DARNHALL

NINETEENTH CENTURY DARNHALL

Darnhall is one of those rare places that has changed little over the centuries. The whole of the township comprised a single estate in possession of the occupant of Darnhall Grange.

Following the dissolution of the monasteries Sir Rowland Hill, citizen and alderman of London, appears as the owner: he was Lord Mayor of London in 1549. This Rowland's sister Johanna married a John Gratewood and had a daughter named Alice, who became their heir; she married Sir Reginald Corbett, a justice of Common Pleas. From this time on the Darnhall estate was the property of the Corbett family. A descendant, Peter Corbet, sold the property a Thomas Bamfield who re-sold it to Thomas Lee (died 1642), son of Henry Lee of Lee Hall, during the reign of King Charles I. Later John Lee of Wincham and Darnhall transferred the estate back to the Corbett family by sale at the beginning of the 18th century. It was John Lee's son Charles who became the famous American general. By 1816 William Thompson Corbett was in residence and by 1850 Thompson George Corbett, but by the 1870s Thomas Knowles, M.P. for Wigan was the proprietor until his death on 3 December 1883.¹ William Henry Verdin moved here some ten years later from Highfield House, Wharton and lived here until his death in 1929: he was a Justice of the Peace and Deputy Lieutenant for the County of Cheshire, and High Sheriff in 1897.

In 1860 Edwin Corbett died and the estate was put up for auction at the Crewe Arms Hotel on 30 October. The basic description of the property was 'a freehold estate of upwards of 1700 acres' and 'comprehending a fine old baronial mansion'. It also included several dairy farms, tenements and cottages, a water corn-mill, streams and ponds, parkland, woodland plantations and 'a highly respectable tenantry'. Whether Edwin ever lived here for any length of time is doubtful: he was living in Rostherne in 1841 and ten years later he was living at Tilstone Fearnall.



Darnhall Hall, circa 1900

¹ Ormerod, vol II, pp. 180/1

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was here in 1841. He was married to Ann who was sixteen years younger, a Cholmondeston girl. Catherine Hesketh his wife's unmarried sister lived with them. This must have been a fairly large house as it was home to seven others on the night of the census in 1861: two journeyman millers, a waggoner, a cowman's groom called John Major who may have been related to the occupant of Bridge Cottage, a pig feeder and two hired female servants. The mill was described as having the advantage of a never failing supply of water with two large 'overshot' water wheels which worked seven pairs of stones, a dressing machine and other plant. The house in which he lived was an 'excellent brick and slated dwelling with out-offices and a range of agricultural buildings that included a 'Gig-house', a hay-shed and piggeries. Stones was man of property as he leased about fifty acres around the mill and along the banks of the Ash Brook on the other side of the lane from the owner of Darnhall Hall, and was the owner of the Chapel Cottage in Swanlow and a house with about three acres along Woodford Lane, Over.

Associated with the demesne lands of the hall was a farm along Moors Lane, known as Moors Lane Farm. The house was divided into three dwellings occupied by the families of J. Woodcock, J. Bate and R. Tickle who for some reason do not occur in the 1861 Census. The 1851 census is more informative. Here lived John Bate, a labourer, and his wife; Samuel Nevitt, a pig breeder, and his family; and Richard Tickle, another labourer, with his family. J Woodcock was probably the brother of George Woodcock who lived further along Moors lane as they were of a similar age and both born in Minshull.

In the area known as 'School Green' Mr Darlington 'or his undertenants' had a dwelling house with outbuildings and a garden known as 'Old Schoolhouse' (Lot 2). This was the site of the school founded in 1699 by Thomas Lee of Darnhall, which was then known as 'Jackson's Croft adjoining Holding Cross'. Here James Hopley, a farmer, lived with his wife and daughter who were both named Elizabeth. This had previously been the home and workshop of George Nevitt, a wheelwright.

Also at School Green, but within the township of Over, was Lot 3 a large cottage with a shippoon, a garden and a croft in the occupation of William Astles. Lot 4, further down School Lane was the cottage and garden, leased by B Wilkinson, which was next-door to the new Darnhall School established in 1818. On the other side of the school site was a sand-pit which was also part of the old Corbett estate (Lot 5)

Back at School Green the next tenement was that of John Roberts, a forty years old man from Tarporley who farmed twenty-eight acres either side of the lane that led to Hepden. He was married and had a nine years old son named Jospeh.

The next farm was that of Randle Cooke. Although not named in the sales catalogue it was known as Beech House Farm and was the centre of 168 acres of land described as being 'a remarkably fine farm'. The house was 'commodious' with yards and buildings for forty cows and four horses. Randle and his wife Ann were originally from Cholmondeston and had five children. Living with them in the house were a housemaid, a kitchen maid, a carter, a cowman and a stable boy. In 1851 it was listed as 'Breach House'. Opposite the farm there stood what was described as being a cottage but known as 'Surrey's Houses'. Here in 1861 lived James Hulse, a salt boiler, his wife and their two children. Ten years earlier it had been home to sixty-seven years old Martha Hulse, a pauper, grand-daughter Emma, daughter Maria Dodd and her husband Thomas.

We now come to Hepden Farm (Lot 8). Here there was a farm-house, yard, gardens, piggeries and a range of agricultural buildings with tying for twenty cows and three horses. In 1860 W Williamson held this farm consisting of 116 acres. According to the 1851 census this was the farm worked by seventy-five years old Jane Williamson (born in Tilston): she was the widow

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of William Williamson who held the farm before her. In that year she lived with her unmarried daughter and two unmarried sons and a nephew.

Across on the other side of the Ash Brook stood Pool Head Farm (part of Lot 9) of about ninety acre occupied by Richard Hewitt. In 1851 this farm was occupied by John Cooke and his family with three servants: before that William Trelfa had the farm. This farm, which had new buildings, was listed as part of Stocker (or Stoker) Lane Farm which was held by Samuel Lewis and described as being a 'very fine estate, entirely in a ring fence embracing two farms'; in all the two farms totalled nearly 300 acres. This farm-house had an excellent brick and slate dwelling and two ranges of buildings with tying for sixty-six cows and four horses; there was a piggery, a garden and an orchard. According to the 1861 census this was Sheen Lane Farm. Lewis was said to be seventy-five years old and born in Bunbury and had been here since the mid-1840s. He lived with his wife, her son and daughter, a dairy maid, three house maids, two labourers, a carter and a cowman.

Across the fields from Stocker Lane Farm, on the bank of the Wetenhall Brook, stood Bankside Farm (Lot 11). This was described in 1860 as having been recently very much improved and the home of Richard Boffey. There were 153 acres of land and at the farm yard there was accommodation for forty cows as well as stabling and piggeries. According to the census he was an Over man aged thirty-six and he lived with his wife, four daughters and six servants on a farm of 176 acres. Thomas Toft had been here since at least 1841 and by 1851 Thomas was in his eighties and the property may have changed shortly after the date of that census.

Across the Wetenhall Brook lay the fields of a 'compact estate' divided into two dairy farms (Lot 12). In 1860 Samuel Williamson was the tenant farmer of what is now Fields Farm and Mrs Cookson was the occupier of the other farm which no longer exists but was in the vicinity of the radio dish. According to the 1861 census Samuel Williamson had seventy-three acres and lived here with his wife and their four children. This may have been what was in 1851 Darnhall Farm tenanted by John Whitby. Anne Cookson, aged seventy-six, had the other farm with her unmarried daughter and three grandchildren, and farmed 100 acres. This had been called 'Darnhale Farm in the fields' back in 1851 when William Cookson was the farmer: he and Ann had seven children living with them then and had probably lived there since about 1825.

The next farm was Hill Farm, or Hill Top Farm, which was had an access road from Swanlow Lane: this had 171 acres and was worked by Joseph Buckley (Lot 13). According to the census Buckley was a young man, perhaps newly married to Elizabeth, and they had two girls aged two and one years old. Elizabeth's parents, John and Mary Merrill from Wybunbury were living with them along with five servants. In 1851 Richard Oakes and his wife Ellen lived here with their eight children.

Swanlow Lane provides the boundary between the townships of Darnhall on the west and Weaver on the east. Set in the fields at the top of Chimney Hill was a cottage (Lot 19) occupied by William Sumner, a fifty-five years old agricultural labourer, who farmed the fields around it: he had been here since at least 1851. The next cottage (Lot 17) along the lane was held by John Baker, a sixty years old labourer. He lived here with his wife, married daughter Alice Potts, son Frank and grandson Ralph Potts.

The Raven Inn (Lot 16) was described as being 'an old established public house' with out-offices and a wheelwright's shop and three acres of land. John Phillips was the licensee who followed the trade of wheelwright. He lived here with his son and daughter and an apprentice. Ten years earlier John Baker, then seventy-three, lived here with his wife and their three grown-up children. He may have been the father of the John Baker who lived in the cottage next-door, as both families seem to have arrived in Darnhall about 1825.

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Part of the Darnhall Estate plan showing Lot 16 'The Raven'

The last of the farms was a 'very excellent dairy farm on a capital turnpike road' (Lot 14). This was the home of George Lewis. Here there was a farm house with a yard, gardens, orchard and an extensive range of 'substantially erected farm buildings' which included provision for tying thirty-six cows, stabling for three horses, a loose box, a gig house, etc. In all he farmed a 100 acres of land behind the house. He and his wife Martha had eleven children whose ages ranged from a son of nineteen years to twins aged five months. He had been here since 1847 having moved from Rushton. Alongside the road stood a cottage, a part of this farm, which was occupied by Thomas Space. The census of 1861 shows Thomas Pace a sixty years old labourer and his wife. Ten years earlier they had four children living here.

Next to the farm was the tenement of sixteen acres belonging to William Williams, butcher. Besides the house there was a cow shed and a slaughter house. William had been born in Darnhall about 1780 and he and his wife Ann had a twenty-four years old daughter also named Ann. In 1851 he was described as being a farmer of ten acres and in 1841 as an agricultural labourer.

The census mentions two cottages in Moors lane known as 'Moor's Lane Cottages' which were occupied by George Woodcock, a labourer, his wife and their six children, but property is not mentioned in the sales literature. George Woodcock was here in 1851.