TONY BOSTOCK'S LOCAL HISTORY NOTES: SWANLOW

SWANLOW

The township of Swanlow is the name given to the southern part of the parish of Over in Winsford. It stretches from the banks of the river Weaver at Stock Stairs below Ways Green, across to Moors Lane and the boundary with Darnhall. Through the centre of the area runs Swanlow Lane which follows the top of the sandy ridge that projects south from the ancient borough of Over. The ridge has probably been a transport link for many hundreds of years if not millennia. For the great majority of its time the area on either side of the lane was agricultural with only a few houses standing along it. Only in comparatively recent times has a significant part of it become a populated area.

The Lane, the B5074, was such a significant route that the whole area was sometimes referred to as Swanlow Lane. Starting at Over Square the lane continues through the southern part of Over, passes the ancient parish church of St. Chad's and the Old Star public house before entering the township itself. Just past the junction with Moors Lane the road forms a boundary with Darnhall on the west, and then just past Evan's farm it forms the division between the townships of Darnhall and Weaver, on the east, before descending the bank, once known as Chivey Hill, to meet the Ashbrook. From here the road changes its name as it continues on towards Church Minshull and Nantwich.

Whilst the name of the township occurs at an early period, Swanlow Lane is not mentioned until 1699. It is clearly marked on Burdett's map of 1777 with a few cottages straddling the southern end of the lane. The next maps to show Swanlow Lane are the tithe map of Over made in 1843 and the Darnhall estate map of 1860 which details the stretch that formed the manorial boundary. After this there are a succession of Ordnance Survey maps which clearly show the development of properties along the lane.

Origin of the name

The name of the lane clearly refers to the road that leads from whichever direction towards and through the township of Swanlow.

The place name 'Swanlow' first occurs in documentary evidence in the 1330s. Its name is certainly earlier than that. It derives from two elements s*w*ā*n* and *hl*ā*w*. The first is normally considered to mean 'swine', and thus a place where swine were kept or pastured or even a place where the herdsman lived. However, a more likely meaning is *Swein*, a Danish personal name, for example, Swein Forkbeard, a Danish king (d. 1014) who played a significant part in invading England and was the father of the famous King Cnut. This first element is coupled with *hl*ā*w*, an Old English word meaning a small hill or mound, perhaps a burial mound – a tumulus, the site of a pre-Christian burial. A particularly interesting thought when one considers that St Chad's churchyard, which lies a few hundred yards off the lane, has possible links with the pagan period. So it quite possible that the name refers to a burial mound of a man named Swein, or, at the least, an area of land containing such a mound once owned by that person.

This last suggestion of place-name origin is also supported by the fact that many 'low' place-names are coupled with a personal name. Mounds of earth and stone were placed over a burial or cremation of a particular individual and may have been used by successive generations, taking the name of the last deceased. Often these funereal deposits were located on the boundaries of tribal estates and it is also a fact that many tumuli are located on high ground or in prominent positions to allow them to be seen from a distance. At Moulton, on the other side of the river Weaver, there was a Bronze Age bowl barrow about 150 yards north-east of

Moulton Bank Farm which has now disappeared. Ormerod describes it as being on 'the highest point of the ridge' and 'a tumulus of considerable elevation and an extraordinary large diameter', but, unfortunately, as is so often the case due to centuries of farming – ploughing and the trampling of livestock - nothing remains of it today.[1] The tumuli at Swanlow, if indeed there was one, would have fitted the usual model of being in a prominent position and close to a boundary.

Swanlow Lane, looking north,
with old cottages and the Post Office

Swanlow Lane, looking south,
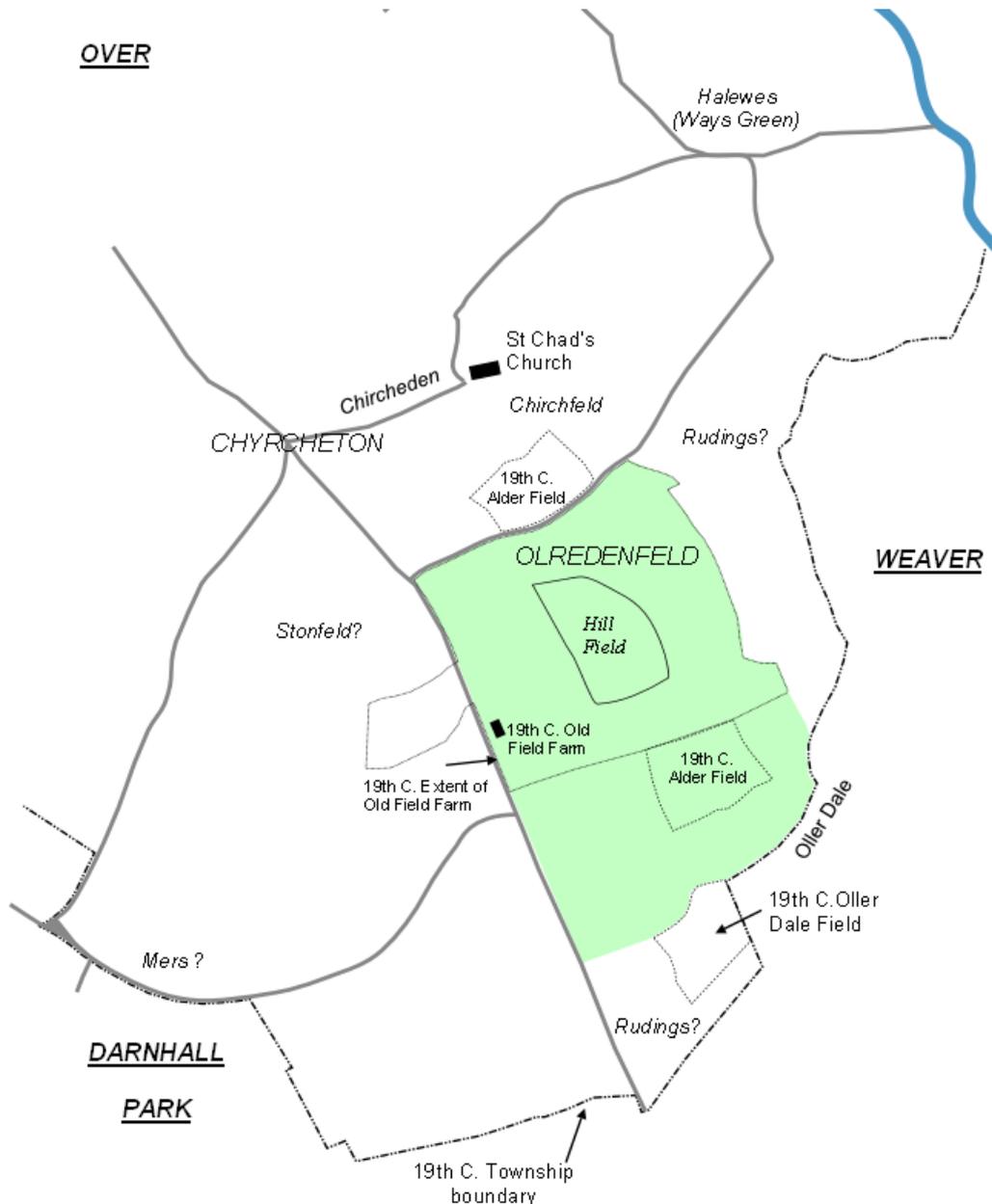*with Old Field Farm in the distance*

Where exactly is or was Swanlow?

Clearly people of the time knew of a place called Swanlow, so where was it? Today it is recognised as being the area around the Swanlow Post Office and the junction of Welsh Lane and Swanlow Lane. Where the original Swanlow from which the township takes its name was we have no way of knowing, but allow me to speculate. In the centre of the Old Field Farm estate there is a field with a curving boundary along which runs a footpath: a path that deviates to follow the curve from its otherwise straight course from Weaver towards St Chad's – was the path skirting a feature in the landscape? Early plans and aerial photographs show this field to be almost oval in shape with a north-south orientation. In the 1840s this was known as 'Hill Field': a strange name for a relatively flat piece of land. *(See sketch map below)* Was there at one time a small hill here which has over the years been ploughed out – a mound? If so was this the 'low'? Its location in the very heart of the Swanlow district would make sense.

Hill Field, off Swanlow Lane.
The site of the original 'swānhlāw'?

Swanlow in 1334

There is in fact little reference in the historical annals to the township itself, however Swanlow's early history is inextricably linked to that of the two medieval manors of Over and Darnhall which were administered as a single unit. Swanlow was probably a township within the manor of Darnhall which originally included the church of St Chad's. During the late 13th century the two manors were granted by Prince Edward (later Edward I) to the abbey he had founded at Darnhall, which later transferred to Vale Royal.

In the mid-fourteenth century the Swanlow area was more populated then than it was in the middle decades of the last century. The significant fact was that along Swanlow Lane, in the vicinity of the cross roads with Darnhall Lane and the driveway to St. Chad's church, there were numerous cottages that comprised the hamlet of *Chyrcheton* (Churchtown). This settlement may have continued along Swanlow Lane, on both sides, towards the modern day Post Office. In addition there were a few dwellings in *Mers* (the 'boundary') which lay

somewhere along Moors Lane, with a few at *Holden*, (the 'hollow valley') in the vicinity of todays Knobbs Farm; several more in *Halewes* (Ways Green); and in an unnamed settlement area which in all probability is Swanlow where there were several properties.

Our knowledge of the settlements, how many people lived in these parts and their names comes to us from a rental in the *Vale Royal Ledger Book*. The original account of the history and administration of the Cistercian Abbey has been lost for hundreds of years but was transcribed in 1662 by Randle Holme and is now preserved in the British Library. From this the Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire published a printed version in 1914.

The arrangement of the rental, dated to 1334, is such that each hamlet or vill within the manors of Over and Darnhall has its own heading under which are listed the names of the tenants living there and details of their property. Land holdings are described as being 'oxgangs' (a customary family tenement holding of eight acres), 'bovates' (a similar unit of eight acres), 'acres', 'selions' (strips of land in the open field later known as 'loonts'), 'tofts', 'plots', 'crofts' and 'assarts'. This last term refers to land taken from the waste lands and woodlands that bordered the manor or township and were then newly cultivated. Homes are described as being 'messuages' (a house and land), houses or cottages. Property rents were based on an annual charge of one shilling an acre. Within the medieval large open fields the 'selion', roughly a sixth of an acre of gently curving ridge and furrow, was the basic unit of land tenancy, with each family working a collection of them scattered across the open fields of their township. From this rental it is possible to build a picture of who lived in a particular neighbourhood and where they farmed their land.

The townships listed in the rental are *Little Ouvere* (Little Over or Littler), *Halewes* (perhaps the Ways Green area), *Muchel Ouvere* (Greater Over), *Mers* ('the boundary', in the area of Moors Lane), *Chyrcheton* ('Churchtown', the church settlement), *Blakeden* (Blackden) *Heth* ('the heath', possibly on the Darnhall boundary), *Stochall* (a part of Darnhall on the Wettenhall boundary) and Wro (somewhere near Woodford). Between *Mers* and *Chyrcheton* there is a significant section for which the title is missing. In all probability this is Swanlow.

In the section believed to be Swanlow there were fifteen tenants, one of which was a woman, and mention of fifteen houses. The tenants were: Randolph son of Gilbert; Randolph son of Richard de Holden; John Durant; Henry le Dunne; Adam son of Henry le Dunne; Ralph del Mers; David the Cowherd; John the Miller; Richard son of William; John, brother of the same Richard;, William del Hull, a fisherman; Valentine; John Valetyn; Robert son of John Valetyn; Avice widow of Richard son of William; and Roger Poyntel. In addition two residents of *Chyrcheton* rented property in Swanlow: Emma daughter of John le Parker of *Chyrcheton*, had a messuage for which she paid a rent of 1d, along with a plot of newly improved ground there at the same rent. Randolph Pye had a messuage and curtilage here at a 6d rent. The total of seventeen homes suggests a population of around ninety.

In the main the tenants occupied strips of land in Swanlow itself with additions in fields in the neighbourhood such as *Berchedenche, Berndewode, Bradenhale, le Bruch, Chirchden* ('the Church valley'), *Ellwallfeld, Merslone*, *Rudings, Stonfeld*. The total income from rents here came to £3 13s. Of this total John Valentyn paid the most with a rent of 14s and Henry le Dunne paid 12s 6d, the rest paid varying amounts the least being 1s paid by the widow Avice..

Under the heading of *Chyrcheton* are the names of fifty-one men and four women who held various amounts of property. Of these only twenty-nine are specifically stated to have held a messuage but in other instances, where there is no such mention, there are references to a house or a cottage so it is reasonable to infer that the majority of the fifty-five people had some form of dwelling here suggesting a population of around two hundred.

The tenants of Churchtown provided nearly £10 in annual rents to the abbey's coffers for their homes and plots in the large open fields: in all they worked nearly 160 Cheshire acres (336 statute acres).[2] Of them John Avard paid the most – fourteen shillings; Roger son of Pymme and Richard son of John le Parker each paid a little over twelve shillings; and Gilbert de Porta and Robert de Holden paid ten shillings. The tenants farmed plots in fifteen different locations within the manors of Over and Darnhall. Much of the land was in Churchtown itself with a significant proportion being in *Olredenfeld*, *le Heye, Stonefeld, Longacres*, and *Littlemor*.

Prior to the entry for *Chyrcheton* is that for *Mers* listing four male tenants. The tenants here produced only 11s 11d in rents for their few holdings which were predominately in *Mers* and *Merslone*, as well as in *Rudings,* and *Stonfeld*. *Mers* and *Merslone* are today indicated by the presence of Moors Lane. Here there were only about twelve acres (twenty-five statute acres) of land probably located towards the western end of the lane, in the vicinity of Moors Lane Farm.

All together it seems that there was a population of perhaps just over three hundred living in the Swanlow area of Darnhall manor.

The field names are interesting and tell us something of the medieval landscape and need to be considered in a little more detail.

There were forty-four acres (about ninety-two statute acres) in *Chyrcheton* with several more acres in *Chirchden* (church valley), *Churchdenfel'* (church valley field), *Chirchestoc* (the church place) and *Chirchfeld*: in all about fifty acres (105 statute acres). These will have been located one the slopes and the higher ground in the immediate vicinity of the church and in what was the village itself at the cross-roads. In all about 120 statute acres.

Olredenfeld literally means 'the alder valley' – a valley with alder trees. According to the nineteenth century tithe map there were two 'Alder Fields' which are perhaps remnants of the earlier open field. There is also a field called 'Oller Dale', which seems to be a corruption of 'alder', that lies alongside a stream which forms the boundary with the township of Weaver and drops into the modern Firwood Brook. A further clue as to the location of this large field is found in the rental. Richard son of William had in this field 'all the land that lay between the land of Richard le Parker on the north and the land of Gilbert de Porta on the south and extends from the highway to the land of the aforesaid Richard.' In all probability the highway referred to is the modern Swanlow Lane. Set between the two 'Alder Fields' of the 19th century, is Old Field Farm (once known as Old Farm) which may take its name from the ancient name of the field and locality. The modern acreage of the whole area from 'Oller Dale' to Welsh Lane is about 100 acres of which about seventy-five acres is in a compact block which seems to accord with the total acreage of thirty-five Cheshire acres (seventy-four statute) given for *Olredenfeld* in the 1334 rental.

*Berchedench*e suggests a stream through birch trees; *Berndewode* suggests an area cleared for cultivation by burning trees or scrub; *le Bruch* also suggests an area of waste land broken up and cleared for agriculture; and *Ruding'* means land cleared of trees and scrub. These names would suggest that a significant part of the district had been recently improved for agricultural purposes and it a reasonably accepted fact that waste lands tended to be on the borders or margins of a township. According to the rental there were nearly thirty acres of land (63 statute acres) in these parts of the manor. One particular piece is named as *Prestruding*, the priest's clearing', which lay somewhere near or in *Olredenfeld*, and is perhaps the earlier name of the later 'Vicar's Field' which lay between the church and Welsh Lane.

At *Stonfeld* (the stony field), which totalled twenty-one acres (forty-five statute acres) of land, the majority of which were farmed by the people of *Chyrcheton* and *Mers*. Today in the area

bounded by Swanlow Lane, Moors Lane and Darrnhall School Lane there are about 100 statute acres and it seems that part of this was medieval *Stonfeld*.

Lastly there is *Halewes*. The meaning of this locality is difficult. Whilst the second element is likely to be *weg* (a 'way' or 'road'), the first part causes concern. It could be *halh* ('nooks'), or *hall* (a hall) or *halgh* (water meadows) or even refer to an ancient place of worship. Here nine men and a woman had nine messuages and held about twenty acres of land (forty-two statute acres) in various locations including *Halewes* itself and *le wewes* (perhaps from *waesse,* 'swampy' way). Predominantly, however, the holdings were in *Bradstrete* ('the broad street') suggesting a major route-way in this area, perhaps leading down to the ancient ford across the river Weaver below Stocks Stairs.

In some instances we have a glimpse into the way in which parcels of land could be exchanged between the tenants or how tenants might be compensated by the lord of the manor for loss of their original holding. Randolph son of Richard de Holden had an 'assart' (newly improved land) in *Rudings* which his father had from the lord in exchange for his lands in the field of Holden. Richard son of William had lands in *Olredenfeld* which his father was given in exchange for his lands in *Holdensfeld* – a field near the hollow valley somewhere on the modern Darnhall and Over border. Another Richard son of William was to have the lands of the widow of Nicholas Druery in compensation for the land taken from his father when Abbot John created his grange at Darnhall. Randolph son of Adam son of Hugh bought lands in 'Olredensfeld' from John son of John Kingesson. Elis David bought lands in *Heppedenfeld* (the field at Hepden near Woodford Hall) from his father and his father gave him an acre of land in *Olredenfeld*. Richard son of John le Parker had 6¾ acres in the same field which his father was given in exchange for land on the Heath, an area north of Darnhall School Lane.

What does the *Ledger Book* tell us of the people who lived here? Surnames were relatively new a born out of a need to identify individuals in legal and fiscal documents and these early names are of interest because they can tell us something about the people who bore them. They tell for instance where a person came from, usually with the suffix 'de' – Croxton, Shipton, Hull, Holden, Heath, Mers and Welshman (did he give his name to Welsh Lane?). They tell of a man's occupation – Clerk, Cowherd, Fulator (for one who fulls cloth), Miller, Parker, Porta (for a gate-keeper), Vicar, Waite (for a watchman) and Fabyn (for a smith). Two of these names are interesting given that at Darnhall there was a substantial deer park and that there was a fulling mill at Darnhall. Some names can tell us who a person's father or mother was or whom he or his ancestors had served as in David, Jonet, King and Kingsson, and Pymmeson. In many cases the old naming system still applied: John, son of Adam son of John, brother of Richard, son of William. Some names were perhaps a nickname – Druery (love, friend), Dunne (meaning brown or swarthy) Mous (mouselike), along with Stew, Floure, Stikere, Snell whose meanings are obscure.

An early mention of a Swanlow resident is that of Henry Pym, leader of those who rebelled against the rule of the abbot of Vale Royal was punished in a number of ways – first he had to offer a wax candle to the Blessed Virgin on the feast of the Assumption in the monastery of Vale Royal, at the high mass, in the face of the convent for the rest of his life, because he had made so shameless a disturbance. Lands he had farmed out he was to have no further claim to and his lands in Swanlow were to be held henceforth, by him and his descendants, in villeinage and service to the abbot.

In 1330, a few years before the date of the rental, the Ledger Book gives a list of people who presented Abbot Peter with New Year gifts. Henry son of Richard Pymme of Swanlow offered a sheep worth one shilling; Robert de Herteford of Swanlowe gave three geese and four pullets together worth one shilling; David the Cowkeeper gave a calf; and Adam, son of Richard the Clerk, who lived near the church, also gave a sheep. The name of Robert de

Herteford is interesting as the Cistercian monks and their servants who first settled at Darnhall in the 1260s came from Abbey Dore near Hereford.

---

[1] (CCC, SMR no. 791; Ormerod (1882), iii, 264; Watkin, Roman Cheshire (1886) p. 314; VCH (1987) Longley 1/87)

[2] The Cheshire acre is based on a perch of 8 yards rather than the statute measure of 5½ yards. Each Cheshire acre measured twenty perches by eight perches so that a multiplier of 2.1 is required to covert to statute acres.