

VCH SHROPSHIRE

Wem Rural

General Introduction

by Judith Everard

This is a draft text prepared by Dr Judith Everard for VCH Shropshire

Following on the completion of the Wem short (2019), we took the decision to work on the townships of Wem Rural especially those which fell within the manor of Wem. Now, in July 2021, we are publishing as drafts the text prepared by Dr Everard and Ms Horton.

This text will be further amended in a number of respects. It will be expanded to include more material on landholding. Subsequent versions will include maps and other illustrations. At a later stage there will also be a section on agriculture.

We welcome suggestions, corrections and additional references.

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July 2021

WEM RURAL TOWNSHIPS

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The aim of this project is a history of each rural township comprising the medieval parish of Wem, based on the template for VCH rural parish histories. This treatment is intended to reveal the distinct topography and history of settlement and landownership of each township. Most existed as settlements before the medieval manor of Wem (Aston, Coton, Edstaston, Horton, Lacon, Sleap, Soulton, Wem, Wolverley), while some were formed later, in the process of the manor's development (Lowe and Ditches, Newtown, Northwood, Tilley). With topography from alluvial plains to heavy clay soils that were wooded into the early modern era, the townships were diverse in character. For most of their history since 1066, however, the townships were all components of Wem parish. Most also belonged to Wem manor, and to the same local government body (since 1900, Wem Rural Parish), meaning that they shared a common institutional history. The rural townships individually – before the mid-19th century, at least – lacked the features and institutions typical of the parish as an entity: parish church, parochial government institutions and schools. These were situated in Wem as the urban centre. Manorial institutions such as the castle/manor house, court sittings and weekly market were also located in Wem town. In parochial and manorial organisation, and in local government, the rural townships were articulated as constituent parts of the whole. Therefore the purpose of this chapter is to address these common topics and to offer an overview of the manor/parish and how the townships were combined within it. Some of this material has been treated in *VCH Wem*.¹ *VCH Wem* is the history of the market town of Wem, but the parochial and manorial institutions and the town's relationship with its rural hinterland are naturally addressed in detail there. The reader is referred to *VCH Wem* for the comprehensive accounts, arranged thematically. The aim here is to give an overview of the parish and to draw together and summarise the commonalities of the rural townships.

The townships of the medieval parish of Wem were: Aston, Coton, Edstaston, Horton, Lacon, Lowe and Ditches, Newtown, Northwood, Sleap, Soulton, Tilley, Wem and Wolverley. These were also members of the medieval manor of Wem, except Lacon and Soulton. The

¹ J. Everard, J.P. Bowen and W. Horton, *The Victoria History of Shropshire. Wem* (London, 2019).

township histories completed in this project are: Aston, Horton, Lowe and Ditches, Newtown, Northwood, Sleaf, Tilley and Wolverley. The history of Wem township is the subject of *VCH Wem*; the remaining townships will be covered as and when the resources are available.

LANDSCAPE AND SETTLEMENT

Boundaries and Origins

Wem Rural Parish is located in the north west of Shropshire, extending approximately 6 miles (10 km) east–west and 5 miles (8 km) north–south. Its boundaries are essentially coterminous with the medieval parish of Wem, a compact bloc of territory which had an area of 13,900 a. (5,265 ha.). The creation of Wem Urban District in 1900 removed the central part of the territory, comprising the market town of Wem. Wem Rural Parish thus has a ‘doughnut’ shape, with an area of 12,620 a. (5,107 ha.).²

The manor may have Anglo-Saxon origins, given that Aston (Old English ‘east-*tūn*’) is apparently named in relation to Wem, which may have been a Mercian secular estate centre.³ Soulton, Lacon, Wem, Horton and Wolverley, lying along the same ridge above the Roden, were all pre-1066 estates, as were Edstaston and Coton to the north. Their relationships with Wem prior to the Norman Conquest are unknown, but after the Norman lords chose Wem for the site of a new castle-town the adjacent estates became subject to it. In a survey of Bradford hundred in c.1284, the members of the manor of Wem were listed as the adjacent territories of Aston, Tilley, Lowe and Ditches, Horton, Wolverley, Edstaston and Coton, but also Steel (Prees parish), Harcourt (Stanton-upon-Hine-Heath), Beslow (Wroxeter) and Dodington, Alkington and Edgeley (Whitchurch).⁴ Another member, Sleaf (*Slepe magna*), was listed in Pimhill hundred; Sleaf does, however, adjoin Tilley.⁵ The tenure of these various members differed; in general, the core territory of the manor adjacent to Wem town was treated differently from the more distant parts. Harcourt, Steel,⁶ Beslow and Sleaf were held in fee of

² ‘Parish Profiles: Wem Rural Parish’; www.shropshire.gov.uk/media/12075/wemrural.pdf. The boundaries of Wem manor are described in *VCH Wem*.

³ *VCH Wem*, 14; J. Blair, *Building Anglo-Saxon England* (Princeton, 2018), 145, 147.

⁴ SA, 6000/2651; Manchester, John Rylands Library, MS GB 133 PHC/3; *Collectanea Topographica et Genealogica*, I (London, 1834), no. XVI, pp. 111–21, at 114–15.

⁵ *Ibid.*; *Collectanea Topographica et Genealogica*, I, 121.

⁶ Harcourt: SA, 322/2/117. Steel: *Survey 1561*, 162–3; Eyton, *Antiquities*, ix, 197.

the lord of Wem for military service at the time of the *c.*1284 survey and later.⁷ Dodington, Alkington and Edgeley made a detached portion convenient for marriage settlements and dower; allocated to the dowry of Angharad, daughter of William II le Botiler, in 1327, the estate finally passed to Angharad's descendants, the Lestranges of Blakemere.⁸ The estates surrounding Wem town, however, were kept under the close control of the lord of the manor. These – the subject of this study – were rarely alienated for family settlements, or granted in fee, or used to endow religious houses. They were bound to suit of court at Wem, and large areas were held in demesne or as customary tenancies (copyhold).

The townships of Newtown and Northwood were later creations, of the 14th and 16th centuries, respectively. The northern boundary of the manor of Wem, with the episcopal manor of Prees, was confirmed by royal order in 1228,⁹ although it would be centuries before settlement extended that far north of Wem town. Hence the creation of Newtown and Northwood, and likely the northwards extension of Lowe and Ditches, was internal colonisation of the manor's own territory.

Landscape

The area of Wem parish is almost entirely covered with superficial deposits of sand, gravel, boulder clay and alluvium formed over the last two million years by glaciation, latterly the Devensian glaciation which ended about 12,000 years ago. The bedrocks are clay, marl, mudstone and siltstone of the Lias group, the lower division of the Jurassic era. Bedrock is generally not exposed in the area, hence the topography is dictated by the glacial deposits. In particular, a curving moraine of outwash sand and gravel deposited by seasonal and post-glacial meltwaters forms a low ridge that was favourable for both travel and settlement. The early settlements of Soultton, Lacon, Wem, Horton and Wolverley were strung from east to west along an ancient route atop the moraine, now the B5065 and B5063 roads. North of this moraine the legacy of glaciation is a clay till soil, with raised peat bogs in the north west.¹⁰

⁷ Beslow: Eyton, *Antiquities*, viii, 40–1; *Survey, 1561*, 146–7, and see township history of Tilley. Sleaf is treated as a township of Wem manor.

⁸ Eyton, *Antiquities*, ix, 173, 175, 194–6; Garbet, 37–8.

⁹ *Calendar of Close Rolls, Henry III, Vol. 1. 1227–1231*, ed. H.C. Maxwell Lyte (London, 1902), 65.

¹⁰ British Geological Survey, sheet 138.

The Wem fault, the south eastern limit of the Cheshire basin, runs north east–south west through Aston and Tilley, the residual north-facing scarp represented by Brockhurst, Palms ill and Trench Hill.¹¹

The manor/parish is bounded in the north west and south east, and crossed, by the river Roden, which rises in Wem Moss at the north west limits of the manor/parish. The river's southwards course from its source marks the north west boundary. It turns east to flow through the middle of the territory, and then again forms the south east manor/parish boundary. For the whole of this course the river flows through a broad plain of alluvium and marshes, only reaching higher ground at Aston Brockhurst. Here the Roden enters a gap in the Wem fault scarp, turning south to form the parish boundary with Lee Brockhurst. Numerous streams flow through the manor/parish as tributaries of the Roden, notably Redfellis Brook, Wem Brook and Soulton Brook from the north, and Sleaf Brook from the south.

Communications

Wem town is the hub of road traffic in the manor/parish. The main east–west and north–south routes radiating from the town were turnpiked in the 18th century. Still the main roads in and around Wem, these are now classed as 'B' roads. Otherwise a network of lanes serves the rural areas. The Prees branch of the Shropshire Union canal, opened in 1805, crossed the north of the parish, with a wharf at Edstaston and its terminus at Quina Brook beside the Wem–Whitchurch turnpike. The Shrewsbury–Crewe railway, opened in 1858, runs south–north through the east of the parish, with a station at Wem and formerly a halt at Tilley.¹²

Population

The township (*villa, villata*) was the administrative unit on which population counts for Wem were based until 1900, when superseded by Wem Urban District and Wem Rural Parish. Population size, density and structure varied across the townships and in different eras. Township population figures are included in each separate account. For convenience, and for purposes of comparison, these figures are illustrated in this general introduction.

¹¹ British Geological Survey, sheet 138.

¹² See *VCH Wem*, 5–11.

Rural versus Urban

In terms of the whole manor/parish, the proportions of the population residing in the town and the rural hinterland have changed dramatically. The population of the rural townships, taken together, apparently always exceeded the population of Wem township until c.1880, since when the urban population has exceeded the rural.

By 1086 Wem was already the most populous settlement, with 14 peasant households. The other places around Wem named in Domesday Book (Aston, Coton, Edstaston, Horton, Lacon, Sleaf, Souldon and Wolverley) had from one to five peasant households each. Cumulatively, however, these settlements recorded 21 such households,¹³ and there were probably more, in the future Tilley, that were counted under Wem. Assessments for the poll tax of 1381 – with 52 named adults for Wem compared with 146 in Aston, Coton, Edstaston, Horton, Lowe and Ditches, Tilley and Wolverley – indicate a ratio of almost three people in the rural townships to one in Wem.¹⁴ In the hearth tax assessment of 1672, 110 households were liable to hearth tax in Wem, compared with a total of 177 in the same rural townships.

The Compton census of 1676, based on a count of the adult population at the parish level, recorded a total of 1,419 adults in Wem parish.¹⁵ Township-level population-count figures become available for the first time in 1800, when the curate of Wem made a survey of the whole population of the parish, when the total was 3,096. The population of Wem township was 1,417, with 1,582 in Aston, Coton, Edstaston, Horton, Lowe and Ditches, Newtown, Northwood, Tilley and Wolverley.¹⁶ The ratio of urban to rural appears to have been narrowing from the 14th to the 19th centuries, although in the medieval and early modern sources the definition of ‘household’ for taxation purposes could have reflected different domestic arrangements in urban and rural areas.

The township was the basic administrative unit for national census returns from 1801, so reliable figures are available for individual townships for most of the 19th century. A caveat regarding the use of such census figures is that, for some of the rural townships, for example, Sleaf or Wolverley, the population was so small that it is misleading to analyse them

¹³ *VCH Wem*, Table 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; *Poll Taxes ... 1381*, 392–4; Newtown and Northwood had not yet been constituted as townships, but probably had few residents at the time.

¹⁵ Stafford, William Salt Library, MS 33, ‘An Account of the Province of Canterbury, 1676’; W.G. Dimock Fletcher, ‘Religious census of Shropshire in 1676’, *TSAS* 12 (2nd ser., I) (1889), 75–92.

¹⁶ *Wem Parish Registers*, 778–9.

statistically. Small changes in absolute numbers, representing perhaps a family moving in or out of the township, or properties near township boundaries being counted in different townships from one census to another, represent large percentage changes. Hence there is more value in looking at trends in the aggregated population of the rural townships.

With local government reforms in the last decades of the 19th century, the significance of township boundaries faded. By the 1901 census, Wem Rural Parish had been created and the census returns thereafter were divided topographically within the parish, rather than by township. The census reports available for censuses from 1921 give figures at (civil) parish level.

Census data from 1801 to 2011 show that for most of the 19th century the population of the rural townships still slightly exceeded that of Wem township. In 1881, the town overtook the rural area for the first time. By the late 19th century, the urban population had grown, with suburban development east of the town centre drawn towards the railway station. Wem Urban District, created in 1900, also took in the suburban part of Tilley township, from Wem Mill south to the railway viaduct. The urban and rural populations nevertheless remained almost equal until the mid 20th century. In 1934 Wem Urban District almost doubled in size, but this did not in itself have much effect on the urban/rural population balance, as the territory newly incorporated in Wem Urban included few residential properties. The difference instead came from post-World War Two municipal house building, notably the Grove and Cordwell estates (1950s–60s).¹⁷ At the same time as post-war house building increased the urban population, the rural population was in decline; by 1971 it had reached a level below that of 1801 and by 1981 it was less than one-third that of Wem Urban. Since 1991, however, the rural population trend has reversed. The population of Wem Rural Parish grew from 1,175 in 1991 to 1,659 in 2011, an increase of almost 40 per cent, exceeding the growth rate of Wem Urban (around 11 per cent). With the opportunities presented by the Internet for commerce and employment in locations outside towns and cities, it is likely that this trend will be sustained.

¹⁷ Woodward, 114.

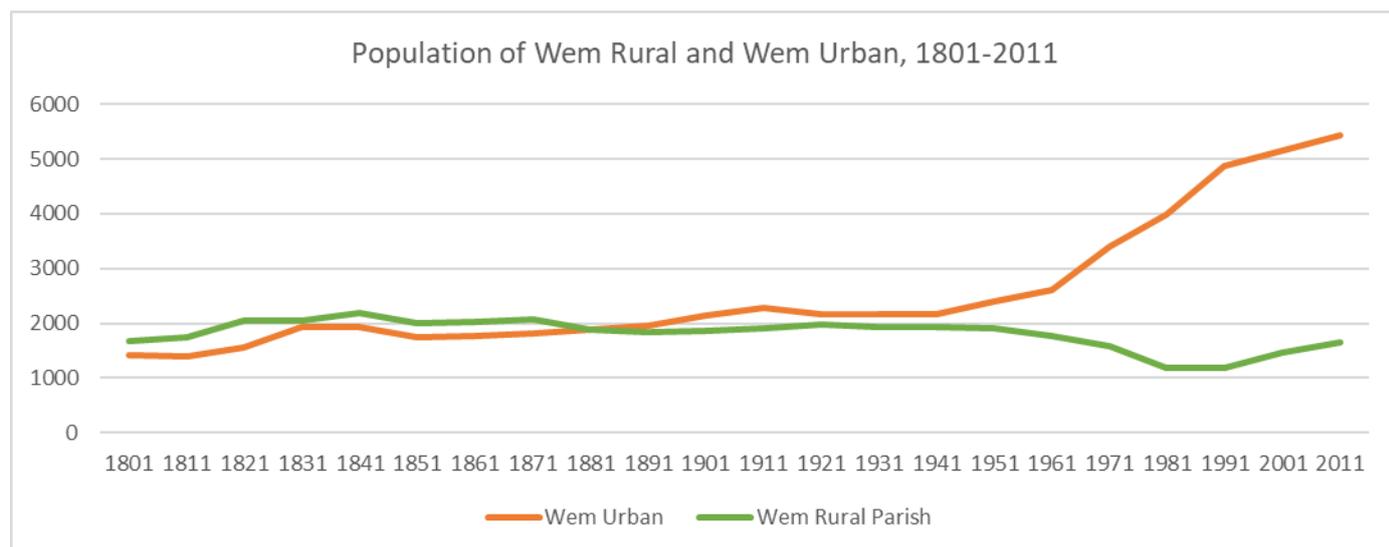


Figure 1. Population of Wem Rural and Wem Urban, 1801–2011.

Township Populations

Prior to 1800, township population figures can only be estimated. First, the medieval and early modern sources only count township household heads or dwelling houses (generally described as ‘message’ (farmhouse) or cottage). No attempt has been made here to apply a multiplier to these figures to derive full population counts prior to the 1672 hearth tax. Second, all the available sources originate in the valuation of households for tax or rental purposes. Assuming evasion and understatement of liability, as well as the omission of the less well off, the figures discussed even on the household level are incomplete and should be treated with caution. They may nevertheless be used to compare townships and to give some indication of trends over time.

The tables below group the townships by quarter, as used for parish administrative purposes: Aston and Tilley in the south; Edstaston and Coton in the northeast; Horton and the others in the north west. This in itself shows patterns related to different regions of the manor/parish and the townships’ histories, for example, the rapid colonisation of Northwood between *c.*1550 and *c.*1650, as well as population growth in Edstaston and Tilley in the same period.

Figure 2a. Households assessed for lay subsidy, 1327. Figure 2b. Persons assessed for poll tax, 1381.

Figure 3: Numbers of dwelling houses counted in early modern surveys.

1561: Survey of the lordship of Wem for William, Lord Dacre: *Survey 1561*, 60–158, 164–7.

1589: Valuation of the manor of Wem when escheated to the crown: TNA, LR 2/225.

1672: Hearth tax assessments: *Shropshire Hearth Tax Roll*, 48–52.

Note: The count for Wolverley in 1561 is particularly understated as some tenants relied on medieval charters to prove their freehold titles, so the contemporary number of houses on their tenements was not recorded. The 1672 figures represent only the numbers of houses assessed for hearth tax, those exempt on grounds of poverty are not included.

The hearth tax assessment of 1672 offers almost the only evidence for township populations prior to 1800.¹⁸ In addition to households assessed for hearth tax, many more were exempt on grounds of poverty – an estimated average of 32 per cent of households in the parishes of North Bradford hundred.¹⁹ In estimating the population in 1672, it is necessary to add this proportion to attain the number of households, and then to apply a multiplier to estimate the number of people. Analysis of the Shropshire hearth tax records 1662–1674 found that a

¹⁸ *Shropshire Hearth Tax Exemptions; Shropshire Hearth Tax Roll*, 47–52.

¹⁹ *Shropshire Hearth Tax Exemptions*, Table 3. This seems even favourable, compared with figures from 1815, when Wem parish had 1,313 ‘poor’ in a population of 3,121: *Select Committee on Education of the Poor: Digest of Parochial Returns* (1818), 770.

multiplier of 4.5 brought the parish population totals, including for Wem, the closest to those of the ‘Compton census’ of 1676, so that multiplier is used here.²⁰ It is not possible to determine the proportions of hearth-tax payers and the exempt poor in Wem town compared with the rural townships. Poverty was not restricted to the town, however, as exemption records do occasionally identify rural townships. In particular, certificates of exemption for Wem parish from one year, c.1662, included 14 specifically from Tilley and two from Horton.²¹

Figure 4: Township populations.

1672: Estimated from hearth tax assessments: *Shropshire Hearth Tax Roll*, 48–52, plus 32%, rounded to full numbers.

1800: Survey of the parish population by the curate of Wem: *Wem Parish Registers*, pp. 778–9.

1821: UK national census (the first census report for which all the townships are individually represented).

Figure 5. Township areas (acres).

The townships had widely varying population sizes, but these were largely consistent with the different township areas; there was less variation in population density. In 1821, for example, township populations ranged from 67 (in Wolverley) to 458 (in Coton), a factor of nearly

²⁰ *Shropshire Hearth Tax Exemptions*, 12–13.

²¹ *Shropshire Hearth Tax Exemptions*, 51–2.

seven. When township area is taken into account, however, the difference reduces to a factor of three: in 1821, population density (persons per acre) ranged from around 0.09 (Wolverley) to 0.27 (Coton).

Figure 6. Population density (persons per acre).

1561: Survey of the lordship of Wem for William, Lord Dacre: *Survey 1561*, 60–158, 164–7. Dwelling houses (households) multiplied by 4.5 for estimated population number.

1672 and 1821: population numbers as per Figure 4 above.

Settlement

Prehistoric

At the top of Grinshill, south of the Wem parish boundary, substantial quantities of flint artefacts show flint-working activity in the late Mesolithic and early Neolithic eras (*c.* 6500–2900 BCE). This assemblage is exceptional for Shropshire, where flint does not occur naturally, and therefore the flint must have been found locally in glacial or riverine deposits, or imported from a distance.²²

A polished axe head of probable later Neolithic date (2900–2100 BCE) found in the Wem area is made of volcanic tuff, probably from Langdale in the Lake District.²³

In the north west, a cropmark tentatively identified as a ring ditch has been observed between Northwood Farm and Wem Moss.²⁴ Human remains ('bog bodies') and a Middle Bronze Age

²² I am grateful to Peter Reavill, Shropshire PAS, for his assistance with this section. Shropshire HER (PRN) 04726 and ESA3462; PAS, (e.g.) HESH-3E6327, HESH-3E5AD3.

²³ PAS, HESH-17B4B1.

²⁴ Shropshire HER 34326. The site is visible, but indistinct, in Lidar imagery.

bronze palstave were uncovered in Whixall Moss during commercial peat extraction.²⁵ Cast bronze (copper alloy) objects such as palstaves and an axe-hammer, dating from c.2000 to c.600 BCE, have been found in Northwood and Wolverley in plough soil on low-lying ground near Redfellis Brook and the Roden.²⁶ The findspots and the nature of the objects suggest they were deposited in water or a wetland environment for ritual purposes,²⁷ and the settlements of their owners would have been elsewhere.

The place-name and elevated situation of 'The Ditches' (Lowe and Ditches township), suggests earthworks possibly connected with a hillfort, but none have been observed there. At Preston Springs, about 100 m. south of the Wem parish boundary, there is a ditched enclosure almost 100 m. in length, from 60 m. tapering to 30 m. in width, probably Iron Age, situated at the edge of a steep slope down to the Roden.²⁸

Roman

The Roman road from Wroxeter to Chester passed close to the parish boundary, at the closest point about 250 m. east of Thistleford bridge.²⁹ There is no reliable evidence of Roman settlement within Wem Rural Parish, but some Roman presence is likely due to the proximity of the major road. The Wem antiquary, the Revd Samuel Garbet, c.1730 made a detailed study of the Roman 'stations' along the road, and concluded that Wem town itself had 'no Roman remains'.³⁰ Nevertheless, Garbet was willing to consider that masonry found at The Hill farm (Aston) might have been Roman: 'To the west of the house, about thirty years ago, were dug up a great many large stones, supposed to be the remains of a Roman way, or perhaps of some ancient building or fort.'³¹ Another candidate for a Roman site is Trench Hall Banks, a rectilinear enclosure near Trench Hall. Garbet described it as 'the visible

²⁵ A.Q. Berry et al., *Fenn's and Whixall Mosses* (Mold, 1996), 30–1, 41–6, 179. Wem Moss was not subject to commercial peat extraction, so there has been less opportunity for such finds there.

²⁶ Shropshire HER, 03422, 02660, 02920; PAS, CPAT-79CD04, HESH-9F2990, HESH-C348E5, WMID-CC3A18; L.F. Chitty, 'A bronze looped palstave from New House Farm, Wolverley, near Wem, Shropshire', *TSAS*, 58 (1966), 101–6; D.A. Higgins, 'Three unlooped palstaves from Shropshire', *West Midlands Archaeology* 26 (1983), 1–7.

²⁷ E.g., PAS, CPAT-79CD04.

²⁸ Shropshire HER (PRN) 02673; <http://shropshirehistory.com/military/hillforts.htm> (accessed 12 Jan. 2021).

²⁹ Margary route 6a: I.D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain*, 3rd edn (London, 1973), 296–7, plate 12.

³⁰ BL, Additional MS 30315, letters from Garbet to William Mytton, 27 Oct. and 14 Dec. 1733; Garbet, 15.

³¹ Garbet, 359.

remains of a Roman camp’, and also believed that the fortified site had been reused as the manor house of a Saxon lord. The archaeological evidence, however, suggests that it was the site of a post-medieval house.³²

Isolated finds of Roman coins and brooches have been made on cultivated land in or near Wem Rural parish. One of the coins, in poor condition, is probably of the emperor Hadrian (117–138 CE);³³ the others date from after 160 to *c.*285 CE.³⁴ The brooches, all incomplete, cannot be dated with such precision, but their styles represent a similar era.³⁵ There is a fragment of a copper alloy finger ring, the bezel inlaid with concentric circles of blue and green enamel, again with an estimated date of the second–third century CE.³⁶ Additionally, a ‘developed crossbow’ type brooch, dating to *c.*320–400, is a type rarely found in the West Midlands.³⁷ These finds are not all associated with the Roman road; several of both the coins and the brooches were found further west, in Wolverley and Loppington, particularly in the vicinity of Spenford bridge.³⁸

The most important archaeological find near Wem has been the hoard of late Roman-period silver unearthed in 2018, comprising 336 small pieces of hack silver, including 80 coins. The latest dateable coins are of 402 CE:³⁹ ‘the Wem coins were not just clipped; many had been halved, quartered and mutilated after being clipped – a unique phenomenon for late Roman-period coins. They appear here as being treated as bullion, with the power of the emperor’s image ignored ... it seems more likely that the hoard date lies after the end of any official control over the coinage and its circulation within Britain’, perhaps 410–470 CE.⁴⁰

Anglo-Saxon

³² Shropshire HER 01136; Garbet, 338–9. See ‘The Built Character’ in Tilley.

³³ PAS, LVPL-C15788.

³⁴ PAS, HESH-6EBBD6, LVPL-C481E2; NMGW-0F08EE, NMGW-0ED27E, NMGW-36EEB6.

³⁵ PAS, HESH-B0DF90, WMID-C3A6C5, WREX-8881F7, WREX-F1478D.

³⁶ PAS, HESH-8333C5.

³⁷ PAS, WMID-DDA2BD.

³⁸ Coins: PAS, HESH-6EBBD6, NMGW-0F08EE, NMGW-0ED27E; brooches: HESH-B0DF90, WMID-C3A6C5, WMID-DDA2BD.

³⁹ PAS, LVPL-9CF012; R.H. White, ‘A 5th-century hacksilver hoard from Wem, Shropshire’, *Medieval Archaeology* 64.2 (2020), 365–9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 369.

Place-name evidence indicates Anglo-Saxon origins for Aston, Coton, Edstaston, Horton, Lacon, Sleaf, Soulton, Wem and Wolverley, all of which appear in Domesday Book, as well as other place-names in Wem parish such as Blackhurstford, Brockhurst, Creamore, Ditches, Lowe and Tilley. That Wem was the centre of an estate is indicated by the fact that Aston appears to be named as the ‘east *tūn*’ in relation to it.⁴¹

A silver coin of the Carolingian ruler Louis the Pious (814–40) was unearthed as a stray find in Wem Rural.⁴² Such coins are rare, especially in the West Midlands. Their presence is associated with Viking travellers; in north Shropshire, perhaps, individuals who had crossed from Ireland to the north west of England.⁴³

Medieval settlement

Earlier medieval settlement may have been limited to the ridge on which Soulton, Lacon, Wem, The Ditches, Horton and Wolverley were situated, perhaps extending south to the ford in Aston. The territory north of Lowe Hill and west of Edstaston was probably wooded and lacked permanent settlement. Likewise, south of the river, the greater part of the future townships of Aston and Tilley lay within a broad band of wooded countryside stretching from Shawbury to Myddle.⁴⁴

The medieval settlements at Aston ford, Horton green, Lowe Hill and Wolverley were to some extent nucleated, the dwelling houses clustered around an open space, with crofts extending behind them to open fields and common grazing land. These hamlets lack the regularity of planned settlements. Such at least is the inference from early modern sources, but the antiquity of these arrangements is unknown. Wolverley, uniquely, had a ‘hall’ (possibly with chapel), in its own grounds on the edge of the hamlet, and a watermill (attested c.1220). Faint remains of probable moated sites at Horton and Wolverley, in both cases closer

⁴¹ *VCH Wem*, 14–15; Gelling, *PN Salop*. I, 23, 121–2, 160, 169–70, 273–4, 275, 303, 320; Gelling, *PN Salop*. V, xiii (‘*tūn*’ names concentrated near rivers, including the Roden), 238–61, and see individual township accounts for discussion of place-names.

⁴² PAS, LVPL1786.

⁴³ PAS, YORYM-81FB8D: discussion at:

<https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/965456>; E.N. Hookway, ‘An Archaeological Analysis of Anglo-Saxon Shropshire A.D. 600–1066: With a catalogue of artefacts’, MRes thesis, University of Birmingham, 2015, 71; R.H.M. Dolley and K.F. Morrison, ‘Finds of Carolingian coins from Great Britain and Ireland’, *British Numismatic Jnl* 32.4 (1963), 75–87. The Wem coin is the only Carolingian coin listed in Hookway, *ibid.*, 63–4.

⁴⁴ Based mainly on place-name evidence, info. Angus Winchester.

to the river and further from the main road than the extant hamlets, hint at a change of the settlement morphology, but their chronology too is unknown.

The woodlands south of the Roden were formally protected as the lord's demesne after the Norman Conquest, with Aston Brockhurst and Tilley Park enclosed and 'the Trench' seemingly being all the wooded area in Tilley that was not enclosed in the park. Another park was enclosed in the north-west of Edstaston in the 13th century. The whole area north of Lowe Hill was the lord's North Wood – its limit perhaps being marked by the road that linked Creamore and Horton green.

Colonisation of the woodlands is apparent from the 14th century. An assart of unknown date near Blackhurst ford in the North Wood was long an exclave of Wolverley township. The foundation of Northwood Hall as an assart granted to the lord's steward is relatively well documented (see Newtown). Lowe Hall arguably originated in similar circumstances – granted to a tenant whose mission was to reclaim the block of territory extending north from the road just mentioned and lying between Edstaston to the east and Northwood Hall to the west, which later formed the northern portion of Lowe and Ditches township.

Moated sites, of which Northwood Hall is an unusually elaborate example, are characteristic of late medieval colonisation. Examples in Wem Rural include Moat House farm on the parish boundary (Aston), at Creamore (Edstaston/Wem), and Moat farm (Newtown).

Newtown was created as a planned settlement apparently around the mid 14th century (admittedly an unusual time for expansion of settlement). Along the lane running west from Northwood Hall to a ford on Redfellis Brook, a series of large crofts were laid out, extending north to a new border of the North Wood. A few more such crofts may have been created on the south side of the lane, with scant evidence for open fields, which may have abutted the existing open fields of Wolverley.

Tilley and Aston both had dispersed medieval settlement, with open fields on what arable ground could be found nearer the river. Tilley 'village' appears to be a medieval planned settlement. In a programme of dendrochronology, the earliest timbers in village buildings were found to date from the mid 15th century.⁴⁵ Here the crofts were smaller, fitted in between open fields and the northern boundary of Tilley Park.

⁴⁵ A. Reid and G. Nash, *The Tilley Timber Project* (Logaston, 2019), 54–6, 69, 79

Early modern settlement

In the north, planned settlement of the North Wood began in the 16th century, with the township of Northwood newly created by mid century. Enclosure was barely complete 100 years later. In the south, in the same era, the woodlands of Tilley Park, Trench and Aston Brockhurst, and the vast wetland of Wem Pool, were sold off, cleared and cultivated. These, however, generally became large farms, without the same implications for population and settlement as the colonisation of Northwood. Nevertheless, the opening up of large new areas for farming brought prosperity to the area, reflected in the grand timber-framed buildings in Tilley village as well as Aston Hall and Aston House.

Population growth in the early modern period is reflected in the development of wayside settlements at Barker's Green (Aston), Tilley Green and Northwood Green from the 17th to 19th centuries, largely at first by encroachment on the lord's waste.

Settlement from the 18th to 21st centuries

Enclosure of the open fields took place early in Wem parish, by general agreement, in the late 16th century. It had little effect on the pattern of farming settlements, however, with relatively few new farms established on the former open fields. (Enclosure had no effect in Northwood and Newtown, whose settlement patterns were not based around open field cultivation.) Wolverley Lodge Farm (Wolverley) and Fields Farm (Horton) are perhaps 19th-century examples.

Villa residences in park-like grounds were built in choice locations around Wem Rural in the first half of the 19th century: Aston Park, Bellevue (Wem/Lowe and Ditches), The Lawns (Northwood), The Woodlands (Wolverley). Later additions were Trench Hall (1870s) and Palms Hill (1880s). Farmhouses were also improved and updated throughout the 19th century, and the large estates built terraced cottages for farm-workers, as for example at Pym's Farm (Lowe and Ditches) and Trench Farm (Tilley).

Suburban Wem, in the 20th century, stretched towards Tilley, with ribbon development along Tilley Road, and towards Lowe, with the Lowe Hill housing estate. Such development has, however, remained within the bounds of Wem Urban District.

In the 20th century social housing was provided by Wem Rural District Council as pairs of semi-detached houses grouped on the edge of the hamlet, at Aston, Newtown and Northwood. In the late 20th and early 21st century, small estates of private residences have 'infilled' within the hamlets of Newtown and Northwood, in Horton as barn conversions.

Wem Rural in the 21st century remains lightly populated and overwhelmingly rural in character.

LANDOWNERSHIP

The parts of Wem that are recorded in Domesday Book were held by various individual free men and women before the Norman Conquest. Some individuals (if the same personal name means the same person) held in more than one place: ‘Wighe’ held parts of Coton, Wem and Wolverley; ‘Elmer’ held parts of Aston and Wolverley; two women named ‘Alveva’ held parts of Wem and an ‘Alveva’ also held part of Edstaston.

By 1086 these estates were all under the same lord, Roger de Montgomery, and his tenant, William Pantulf. Around 1101 William Pantulf became tenant-in-chief and held Wem and its members as a barony. The whole manor of Wem thereafter passed as a single manor in succession to the present day. Hence, in respect of all landholding in the various townships, the ‘chief lord of the fee’ was the holder of the lordship of Wem. This superior level of lordship is therefore not discussed in the township accounts.⁴⁶ The pattern of landholding for each township is analysed in terms of the freehold and copyhold estates, while the lord’s demesne in each is identified. The varying ratios of demesne, copyhold and freehold provide much of the distinctive character of the various townships’ histories.

ECONOMIC HISTORY

Farming

000

Forestry

See *VCH Wem*, 68–9.

Industry and Services

The rural townships functioned as the agricultural hinterland of Wem, the market town at the centre of the manor/parish. The characteristic features of a village or town, notably economic

⁴⁶ For descent of the manor, see *VCH Wem*, 44–8.

specialisation and commercial activities not directly based on agriculture, were to be found within Wem town. Hence the economies of the rural townships were entirely agricultural, with specialist trades being limited to those supplying the needs of agriculture, such as blacksmith or wheelwright. Some individuals supplemented their household income by providing services such as shoemaking or tailoring, or collecting turnpike tolls. Several of the rural townships had more or less ephemeral public houses and grocery shops.

In the 19th century, clay deposits in Aston were developed into industrial brickworks at Barker's Green. A hamlet of industrial labourers grew up there, with some later diversification including employment on the railway. Canal wharves at Edstaston and Quina Brook, from 1805, gave rise to novel economic activities such as lime kilns and warehousing, and services for the canal workers and boatmen such as public houses and a post office. Both brickworks and canal wharves ceased operating in the 20th century, but the legacy of commercial/industrial land use continues to the present, with a builder's merchant at Barker's Green and a bus depot at Edstaston wharf, isolated in the rural landscape.

Northwood Green is the rural location with the most varied and enduring commercial activity. The Horse and Jockey public house has been an inn since at least 1750. At various times from the 18th to the 20th century the hamlet also had a turnpike toll house, smithy, post office, grocery shop, seed merchant, wheelwright/coffin maker, livestock feed mill and electrical engineer. This local service activity can be partly explained by the remoteness of Northwood from Wem town or other urban centre. In contrast, the modern development of light industries in Lowe and Ditches (the Bellevue cheese factory, 1870s–1970s) and Aston (commercial dairy, 1920s–70s, now an industrial estate) was likely due to proximity to Wem – both these facilities lying just outside the boundaries of Wem Urban District – and its railway station.

SOCIAL HISTORY

Social Character

The future Wem townships appearing in Domesday Book were marked by the different types of peasant households recorded: Wem had four *villani*, eight *bordarii* and two *servi*. Aston and Horton, later composed of copyhold tenements, had *bordarii* and *servi*. Coton and

Wolverley, with part or all freehold tenements, had one or two ‘riding men’ (*radman*) and *villani*.⁴⁷

In the medieval and early modern periods, there were relatively more large, well-to-do households in the rural townships than in Wem. For the 1327 lay subsidy, Wem township had seven assessed households, while four to six were located in each of Aston, Coton, Edstaston, Horton, Lowe and Ditches, Tilley and Wolverley.⁴⁸ If the total population was smaller in the rural townships, nevertheless, each had almost as many well-off households as there were in Wem. In contrast, for the poll tax assessment of 1381, in theory a head count of adults irrespective of wealth, Wem had 52 taxpayers, compared with an average of 21 for the seven townships listed above.⁴⁹ The same pattern can be seen in the Tudor lay subsidy assessments of 1525 and 1543. When the threshold for tax liability in 1525 of goods valued at 40s. was reduced to 20s. in 1543, the number of taxpayers assessed in Wem increased from four to 34, but on average only doubled in the rural townships.⁵⁰

In the hearth tax assessment of 1672, of the 10 houses with six or more hearths in the manor, four were in Wem and six in the rural townships. All the townships had large proportions, mostly the great majority, of single-hearth households, but in Wem town there were proportionately fewer single-hearth households and more with two or three hearths.⁵¹ Northwood was exceptional in having 22 single-hearth households out of 24 assessed, explained by its origins in smallholdings and squatter cottages encroaching piecemeal in the manorial woodland. As noted in ‘Population’, above, an estimated 32 per cent of households were not assessed for hearth tax at all, being exempt due to poverty. It is not possible to distinguish between urban and rural in this regard, as exemptions were not usually recorded at the township level, but a chance record of certificates of exemption for Tilley *c.* 1662, compared with the hearth tax assessments for 1672, results in the same figure of 32.5 per cent.⁵²

Society in Wem from the late Middle Ages was characterised by the permanent absence of the lord of the manor. The next tier of the social elite: the rector, the lord’s steward, and the wealthiest landholders, also often resided elsewhere. As successful landholders accumulated

⁴⁷ *VCH Wem*, Table 5.

⁴⁸ *VCH Wem*, Table 1.

⁴⁹ *VCH Wem*, Table 1.

⁵⁰ Faraday, *Shropshire Taxes*, Table II, nos. 449–57, 939, 957–65, 986–8.

⁵¹ *Shropshire Hearth Tax Roll*; *VCH Wem*, Table 7.

⁵² *Shropshire Hearth Tax Exemptions*, 51. See Tilley.

more wealth, combined with dominance in the legal profession or commerce, they too tended to move away to country estates. The Dickin and Walford families are notable examples, discussed in the accounts of Wolverley and Aston, respectively. In the 19th century (and earlier), the social elite in each township was therefore quite diffuse, made up of the resident clergy and the residents with the largest landholdings. The most wealthy and local, notably the Dickin family in Aston, Wem and later in Wolverley, and the Maddocks family of Wolverley, played the role of resident gentry.

The open character of the parish, in religious terms, encouraged large-scale Nonconformism, up to half the population in the mid 19th century. Primitive Methodism held a virtual monopoly in Wem Rural in terms of chapel building, while followers of other denominations could join the various Nonconformist congregations in Wem town.

A survey of residents of Wem Rural parish was conducted in 2013, with 259 respondents. The respondents were predominantly middle-aged and were long-term residents: 74.5 per cent were aged 40 to 69; 64 per cent had lived in the area for more than 10 years, and 39 per cent for over 20 years. The majority of respondents were employed or self-employed (57 per cent) or retired/semi-retired (36 per cent), with 5 per cent either ‘looking after a household’ or studying.⁵³

Education

Thomas Adams’s grammar school was founded in 1650. The school was established in Wem town, but it was an undertaking of the whole parish. The statutes specify that the school should offer places to the ‘children’ (sons) of all parishioners. The list of principal benefactors at the foundation includes the better-off tenants from all the townships.⁵⁴ The endowment was invested in properties in Northwood and Coton,⁵⁵ as well as the school’s premises in Wem. The hours of attendance set in the 1650 statutes made provision for pupils who lived ‘in the several villages remote from the town’.⁵⁶ By the late 18th century, there were also private schools in Wem town, extending formal education to girls. Charity

⁵³ E. Craney, J. Horsley, J. Murgatroyd, L. Vernon, M. Whyte, S. Whyte and T. Wilton-Morgan (Wem Rural Community Plan Steering Group), *Wem Rural Community Plan* (2013), 9.

⁵⁴ Garbet, 177, 180, 188.

⁵⁵ E.g. 1805 Survey, Northwood, 92–3, and 146–7.

⁵⁶ Garbet, 190.

subscription schools in Wem, from c.1800, offered formal education to boys and girls of the whole parish.⁵⁷ In 1833 it was reported that, in addition to the grammar school, which had about 30 pupils, Wem parish had an infant school with 100 places, six day schools attended by 66 boys and 84 girls in total, and two girls' boarding schools, all of which were fee-paying. The National School, supported by charitable subscriptions, was attended by 186 boys and girls daily and an additional 120 children on Sundays. There were four more Sunday Schools, supported by voluntary contributions.⁵⁸ From among the latter, a Nonconformist day school for boys and girls, the British Schools, opened in 1839–40.⁵⁹ These schools were all in Wem town. Evidence for schools situated in the rural townships is fragmentary: a dame school at Foxholes,⁶⁰ and a teacher dwelling in Northwood hamlet, both c.1850.

Access to formal education in the townships north of Wem improved when new charity subscription schools were opened in Newtown and Edstaston c.1860. Their histories are treated within the respective township accounts of Newtown and Edstaston. In 1869 it was reported that all but a few children in the parish were regularly attending school up to the age of 11–12 years.⁶¹ Extension of the school-leaving age in the 20th century further concentrated schooling in Wem town. In 1931 SCC provided for secondary education in Wem Rural District with the County Senior School at Shrubbery Gardens in Wem, and later a secondary modern school on Lowe Hill Road, now Thomas Adams School. Most children from the age of 11 travelled into town for their secondary education.

Social Welfare

As the old poor law was based on the parish, Wem parish church was the centre of poor relief administration. There were apparently almshouses in the 16th century, on Mill Street opposite the church. Randle Mainwaring of Soulton in his will of 1547 gave 1s. each for 'the poor folks of the almshouse'.⁶² Later there were 'poor houses' in Wem, and a parish poorhouse

⁵⁷ *VCH Wem*, 93–4, 97–8.

⁵⁸ *Abstract of Answers and Returns on the State of Education in England and Wales*, vol. II (1833), 785.

⁵⁹ *VCH Wem*, 94.

⁶⁰ TNA, ED 103/56/5, 91.

⁶¹ *Employment of Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture (1867)*, Commission. Evidence (House of Commons Parliamentary Papers), 78.

⁶² Will of Randle *Maneryng*, 11 Jul. 1547: 'Wem Wills', ed. Watts.

was established at the western edge of the town in 1801.⁶³ Most of the charities established for poor relief in Wem were available to all parishioners.⁶⁴ Some were established to benefit residents of particular townships, or groups of townships, such as the Newtown and Edstaston chapelries, and these are discussed in the relevant township accounts.

The parish also appointed overseers of the poor. For instance, in 1653 Quarter Sessions heard a complaint against the overseers of the parish of Wem.⁶⁵ Their financial organisation and how it operated in relation to the churchwardens is obscure, however, due to lack of surviving overseers' accounts. The churchwardens disbursed some of the rates they collected on local poor relief. In the rural quarters, presumably this related to the relief of need occurring within those quarters, whether of residents or passing travellers. For example, in 1684, the churchwarden of Horton quarter paid 18s. 10d. to 'severall poore in the absence of the Overseer'.⁶⁶

In 1835 all of the rural townships were included in Wem Poor Law Union. The new union workhouse was established in 1838 on the northern edge of Wem township, on the road to Edstaston.⁶⁷

RELIGIOUS HISTORY

The townships were integral parts of Wem parish for parochial administration and ecclesiastical affairs, hence the religious history of the parish is not dealt with in the township accounts. The parish church of SS Peter and Paul is situated in Wem town.⁶⁸

Middle Ages to Reformation

The chapel of St Mary, Edstaston, may pre-date the parish church. Its origins and role within the parish remain obscure. There is evidence for a church or chapel in Aston, north of Aston bridge and west of Church Lane, which had disappeared before the Reformation.⁶⁹

⁶³ *VCH Wem*, 100–3.

⁶⁴ *VCH Wem*, 99–100.

⁶⁵ *Quarter Sessions Orders*, I, 5: 19 Apr. 1653.

⁶⁶ SA, P295/B/3/1/1.

⁶⁷ *VCH Wem*, 103–4, 139.

⁶⁸ See *VCH Wem*, 'Religious History'.

⁶⁹ See 'Aston'.

There was a holy well and wayside chapel of St John near the western limits of Wem township, whose endowments included ‘St John’s Furlong’ in the north of Lowe.⁷⁰

The remains of a ‘domestic chapel’ could still be seen at Wolverley Hall in the 18th century, but nothing is known of its history.⁷¹

Reformation to 21st century

The chapels of St John near Wem, and St Mary’s, Edstaston, were suppressed in 1548 and stripped of their endowments. St John’s was soon demolished. Edstaston chapel was closed, but re-opened as a chapel of ease, with a curate funded by the rector of Wem.⁷² Soon afterwards, encouraged by the Puritan rector of Wem, the residents of Newtown, Northwood and Wolverley combined to establish a new chapel of ease at Newtown, whose first minister was in post in 1655.⁷³

In the mid 19th century the chapelries of Edstaston and Newtown were formed into new ecclesiastical parishes. The ecclesiastical history of the townships closest to Wem thus continued uninterrupted, with Wem, Aston, Tilley, Sleaf, Horton and Lowe and Ditches, as well as Lacon and Soulton, remaining as Wem parish. For Edstaston and Coton, henceforth their religious history was that of Edstaston parish. For Newtown, Northwood and Wolverley, it was Newtown parish. The history of Edstaston chapelry and parish is treated in the township history of Edstaston, and that of Newtown chapelry and parish in the township history of Newtown.

Nonconformists were a significant minority of the parish population; however, the extent of Nonconformity in the rural townships is largely unknown as the available figures do not distinguish between the rural and urban areas.⁷⁴ In 1800, of a parish population of 3,096, about 10 per cent professed Nonconformity: 294 Methodists and 57 Presbyterians. This proportion increased to approximately half by 1851, when the parish’s Anglican and Nonconformist places of worship offered almost the same number of sittings – around 1,500 each, of which around one-third (528 Anglican and 423 Nonconformist sittings) were in the rural townships.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ *VCH Wem*, 113; see ‘Lowe and Ditches’.

⁷¹ Garbet, 327.

⁷² *VCH Wem*, 113; *Survey 1561*, 36–7, 110–11; Garbet, 273–9.

⁷³ See ‘Newtown’.

⁷⁴ *VCH Wem*, 125–30.

⁷⁵ *Church and Chapel*, ed. Field, 105–7.

Nonconformist meetings and chapels were initially located in Wem town, but the congregations were not limited to townspeople. During the 18th century, at least two farming families were actively involved in the Presbyterian congregation of the Noble Street chapel: the Swanwicks of Pym's Farm (Lowe and Ditches) and the Lawrences of the Moat House (Aston). The chapel's register also records the rural township of residence of congregation members. By c.1800, those who attended the Chapel Street Congregational chapel, at least for baptisms, included families from Coton, Edstaston, Loppington, Tilley and Whixall, and from varied ranks of society.⁷⁶ Licences for Nonconformist meetings were issued for John Swanwick at Pym's Farm in 1743, for the Weir House (Aston) in 1810, and the house of Aaron Huxley (at Foxholes, Northwood) in 1814.⁷⁷ A Congregationalist chapel was built at Quina Brook during the heyday of the canal wharf, between 1805 and 1834.⁷⁸

In the 1820s a mission from Prees Green successfully established Primitive Methodism in both urban and rural parts of Wem. A chapel at Pool Head (Northwood/Edstaston) opened in 1841. In 1851, private houses were in use as Primitive Methodist meeting houses at Barker's Green (Aston), Coton Wood, Northwood (The Lawn), Northwood Green, Tilley and Wolverley. Within the next decade or so Primitive Methodist chapels were constructed at Barker's Green and Northwood Green.⁷⁹ The Coton Wood congregation apparently took over the Quina Brook Congregational chapel after it was sold in 1868.⁸⁰ Of the rural chapels, only the (now) Methodist chapel at Northwood Green remains in use for worship at the time of writing.⁸¹

The parish churches of King Charles the Martyr, Newtown and St Mary the Virgin, Edstaston, continue in use for worship at the time of writing. Newtown parish is within the combined ministry of Myddle and Broughton, Loppington and Newtown. Edstaston parish is within that of Prees, Edstaston and Whixall.

⁷⁶ 'Wem, Chapel St. Independent Chapel, 1785–1836', in *Shropshire Parish Registers. Nonconformist and Roman Catholic Registers, Pt 2* (Shropshire Parish Register Society, 1922), p. 286.

⁷⁷ SA, QS/1/3, fol. 33; QS/1/9, fols. 88r, 202r; *Quarter Sessions Orders*, II, 111, III, 167.

⁷⁸ *Church and Chapel*, 109.

⁷⁹ *Church and Chapel*, 107–8. For the chapels, see the respective township histories of Aston, Northwood and Tilley.

⁸⁰ J. Cox, '[former] Quina Brook Congregational Chapel' and '[former] Quina Brook Primitive Methodist Chapel', *Shropshire's Nonconformist Chapels*: <http://www.users.waitrose.com/~coxfamily/>

⁸¹ Personal observation; *VCH Wem*, 129.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT⁸²

While subsumed within the manor of Wem, the rural townships maintained a legal identity as administrative units. The township or vill (*villata*) was an administrative unit both within the manor, and for the purposes of county and even central government. At the Shrewsbury assizes in 1256, the townships were represented by their individual juries. Likewise, exercises of central government were made by township as the component units of the parish, for taxation such as medieval lay subsidies, the 1381 poll tax, and the hearth tax in 1672. The earliest national censuses and the 1841 tithe apportionment were also arranged by township.

Manorial government

The township (*villata*) was a unit of manorial government, notably for policing and justice. View of frankpledge was taken at the court leet for the manor of Wem – held twice a year around Easter and Michaelmas – with presentments of all wrongdoings from each township that owed suit of court at Wem.⁸³ The court leet dealt with breaches of the peace such as affray and all criminal matters except murder and death by misadventure (which were reserved to the crown), as well as breaches of the many and varied manorial regulations ('pains') such as selling ale without licence, encroachment on the lord's waste, and digging marlpits without permission.⁸⁴

By the late 16th century there was a constable of the peace for each township. Constables were appointed at the Michaelmas court leet.⁸⁵ Their duties included keeping the peace, apprehending wrongdoers and arranging for cases to be brought to the manor court.⁸⁶ Wrongdoings came to court initially via the constables. It was their duty to bring to each court leet a group of men from the township who, after prior discussion and agreement, would submit matters to the court under oath. In the 17th century, these juries consisted of five men from each township, including two or three from each of the hamlets.⁸⁷ By the early 19th century, the parish clerk visited each of the townships in early September to make out

⁸² See *VCH Wem*, Local Government, for a comprehensive account of local government, justice and poor relief for the manor and parish.

⁸³ The procedure is described by Garbet, 120–1, 137–8.

⁸⁴ SA, 167/3, e.g., 17 Oct. 1588, 1 Oct. 1590, 8 Apr. 1591; 167/5A, e.g., 19 Oct. 1612, 15 Oct. 1616

⁸⁵ John Rylands Library, MS PHC3; e.g. SA, 167/3, 17 Oct. 1588.

⁸⁶ See below in this chapter.

⁸⁷ Garbet, 137.

the ‘jury lists’ ready for the Michaelmas court leet.⁸⁸ At the court there were two juries, one for the town of Wem and one for the rest of the manor. The latter, the ‘homage without the bar’, made the formal presentments for the rural townships. The court leet continued to be held annually in Wem into the 20th century although by 1892 ‘its business had been negligible for some time’.⁸⁹

Transactions involving copyhold land and disputes between tenants of the manor were dealt with by the manor court – the *curia parva* or court baron – held in Wem customarily every three weeks.⁹⁰

Parish government

For the purposes of parochial government, the various townships of Wem parish were grouped into four quarters. The origins of the arrangement are unknown, but the fact that the north west quarter was named for Horton, rather than Newtown, which would have been more central, suggests that the arrangement was medieval, pre-dating the colonisation of Newtown and Northwood. The quarters were comprised as follows:

Quarter	Townships
Aston	Aston, Lacon, Sleaf, Soulton, Tilley and Trench
Edstaston	Coton, Edstaston
Horton	Horton, Lowe and Ditches, Newtown, Northwood, Wolverley
Wem	Wem

In each quarter, a nominated churchwarden elected annually by the parish vestry was responsible for collecting the church rates and making appropriate disbursements.

Churchwardens’ annual accounts for the collection and disbursement of church rates survive, continuously, from 1684. Disbursements mainly contributed to the conduct of parish business

⁸⁸ In early September the parish clerk visited each of the townships of the parish to make out the jury lists: SA, 7577/36/8.

⁸⁹ Woodward, 97. See also *Oswestry Advertiser*, 2 Nov. 1892: report of court leet and court baron held 26 Oct. 1892 at the (old) town hall.

⁹⁰ Garbet, 118, 119–20, 126, 139, 141; SA, 167/1–.

and the maintenance of the parish church. In the case of Horton and Edstaston quarters, this included maintenance of the chapels at Newtown and Edstaston, respectively. Maintenance of Newtown chapel out of the parish rates did not go unchallenged, however, by ratepayers keen to minimise their rate contributions, as the chapel's 1666 consecration deed specified that it was the financial responsibility of the townships of Newtown, Northwood and Wolverley.⁹¹

Wem Poor Law Union

When constituted in 1836, Wem Poor Law Union comprised all of the rural townships of Wem manor and parish, as well as the adjacent parishes. Administration of poor relief became centralised in Wem town, exemplified by the establishment of the union workhouse on the edge of the town.

Wem Rural District

In 1872 the guardians of Wem Poor Law Union were constituted as the Rural Sanitary Authority of the Wem Union.⁹² Under the Local Government Act 1894, the Rural Sanitary Authority was replaced in 1895 by Wem Rural District.⁹³ Wem Rural District comprised 14 parishes, being all the parishes of Wem Union. Within Wem Rural District, the civil parish of Wem was created, with three wards: Edstaston, Newtown and Wem.⁹⁴ The individual townships then ceased to have legal or administrative significance. In 1900 Wem Urban District was formed by excising the urban area of Wem from Wem Civil Parish, and hence from Wem Rural District, whose acreage was then 51,999 a.⁹⁵ Wem Urban District covered the urban area of Wem: as a result it only had a small acreage (452 a. including 4 a. of water). The remaining Wem Rural Civil Parish took on the doughnut-ring shape of a large rural area encircling Wem town. Together, Wem UDC and Wem RDC covered the area of the Wem Poor Law Union (52,451 a.).

Wem Rural Civil Parish

After the removal of Wem Urban District, the three wards of Wem Rural Civil Parish were:

⁹¹ See 'Newtown'.

⁹² SA, DA27/994/1/1.

⁹³ SA, DA27/994/1/3; D27/100/1.

⁹⁴ SA, CP325; *Wellington Jnl*, 10 Nov. 1900, 8.

⁹⁵ The following is based on successive editions of *Kelly's Dir.* (eg. 1913, p. 287; 1917, p. 273; 1941, pp. 286, 300). For the reorganisation of 1934, see *Salop Review Order 1934* (Ministry of Health order no. 77933): the sealed copies of the definitive maps are TNA, HLG 23/1800. I am grateful to Richard Hoyle for contributing this section of the Introduction.

Wem Rural Civil Parish after 1900	Former townships
Edstaston ward	Coton, Edstaston
Newtown ward	Horton, Lowe and Ditches, Newtown, Northwood, Wolverley
Wem ward	Aston, Lacon, Soulton, Tilley and Trench, plus the rural parts of the former Wem township

By the local government reorganisation of 1934, the area of Wem Urban District was enlarged to 903 a., taking in around 450 a. of the adjacent rural area, notably the milk factory in Aston and Creamore Mill (Edstaston). But Wem Rural District was in turn assigned part of Whitchurch Rural District and thus extended to [by?] 12,995 a. There came to be a high level of cooperation between the Urban and Rural districts – they shared offices in Barber House in Wem – and in 1967 they were merged into the North Shropshire Rural District, which, from 1974, was known as North Shropshire District. Its offices were in Wem where it built new accommodation in 1971, extended and reopened as the Edinburgh Building in 1989. In 2009, the district council in common with the other district councils was merged into the county council to form Shropshire Council. With the 2009 reform, Wem Rural Civil Parish was joined with Wem Town Council and Whixall Civil Parish to form the Wem Ward, represented on Shropshire Council by two councillors.⁹⁶

The distinction between Wem Urban District and Wem Rural Civil Parish is perpetuated in the town and parish councils which remain as the first level of local administration. The ‘Wem ward’ of Wem Rural Parish has been renamed Roden ward, and the three wards defined in a way that finally erases the former township identities.⁹⁷

Wem Rural Civil Parish	Description
Edstaston ward	to the north and north east of Wem town, contains the hamlets of Coton, Cotonwood, Creamore Bank, Edstaston, Paddolgreen, Quina Brook and Ryebank

⁹⁶ Woodward, 155.

⁹⁷ Extract from Wem Rural Community Plan: <https://www.wemrural-pc.gov.uk/parish-overview/>

Newtown ward	to the north and north west of Wem town, contains the hamlets of Newtown, Northwood, Poolhead and Wolverley
Roden ward	to the west, south and east of Wem town, contains the hamlets of Aston, Barkers Green, Horton, Lacon, Lowe, Palms Hill, Tilley and Trench



Figure 8. Wem Urban District with 1934 additions in red (TNA, HLG 23/1800).