

Wem Rural: state of play and way forwards

Background and achievements to date

When VCH Shropshire was founded in 2015, we decided that we would begin our work with a project which was deliverable in the short term and so we chose Wem. Our history of Wem (a 'VCH Short') appeared at the end of 2019 and was well received. We decided whilst this volume was underway that we should next turn to the townships of Wem Rural civil parish. There were several reasons for this, but what was prominent in our thinking was that our researcher, Dr Judith Everard, was accumulating a great deal of knowledge about Wem Rural. The sources were the same: many of the historical personalities spanned the town and its surrounding countryside. It therefore seemed a waste to squander that knowledge by moving onto one of the other areas on which we wished to restart work (Shrewsbury and Newport).

Whilst we have never received any direct funding for our work on Wem Rural, the *draft* accounts of eight townships and a general introduction were largely complete at the end of 2019/beginning of 2020. We had also commissioned Wendy Horton to write the text on the buildings of the townships and this was done in the winter of 2019. With the arrival of COVID, work largely came to a halt and it was the summer of 2021 before the texts could be finalised. These texts are now all posted on our website ([www.
http://www.vchshropshire.org./WemRural.html](http://www.vchshropshire.org./WemRural.html)).

By the beginning of 2020 we also recognised that we had pretty well run out of money to spend on Wem Rural and we needed to switch our attention to Shrewsbury. We therefore decided to suspend our work on Wem Rural until a new infusion of funds could be found.

What we have achieved so far is quite considerable. Of the eight townships, only one had a previous history. The others have all been written out of extensive research in Shropshire Archives and elsewhere.

It is intended that the drafts will be reinforced with additional twentieth-century material, including that drawn from the Valuation Office survey from immediately before the First World War and the National Farm Survey of 1941.

Future work: the townships

Two townships within the parish of Wem and the manor of Wem remain to be done (Edstaston and Coton), and two which are in the parish but not the manor (Lacon and Soulton).

Edstaston

This is a large and complicated township. Much of the material for Edstaston is collected, and some of the text drafted (about 3,000 words out of an expected final length of 15,000 words, being 12,000 for history and 3,000 for Edstaston church and other buildings). There is more material than we appreciated – an archive for the Edstaston Hall estate has recently been discovered. Especial attention needs to be paid to the church which is early and surprisingly big for a chapelry of Wem: it has to be suggested that it is actually the mother church of the parish. We held a site inspection with Dr Paul Barnwell of Oxford University in the Summer: he recommends that the immediate way forwards is by making a measured survey of the church.

Coton

Not begun. This appears to be another complicated township, but with overlaps with Edstaston: ideally the two would be worked on together. Projected length, 5,000-8,500 words.

Lacon

Probably a fairly simply township, but not in the manor of Wem so the manorial history will have to be explored. The archive is largely at Raby Castle, co. Durham, so allowance needs to be made for a visit there. Projected length 2,500-3,000 words.

Soulton

A bit of an unknown. Outside the manor of Wem so the manorial history will have to be worked out. We know that there is quite a lot of post-medieval archive. A nationally important house and medieval archaeological site adjacent. Projected length 6,000 words. (I suspect that once some exploratory work has been done, Soulton will turn out to be under costed in the table which follows.)

Other future costs

We have not provided either illustrations or maps for the draft texts. This will be a future cost, but we would like to factor maps in particular into the costs for this final stage of the project.

We would envisage at least two maps for each township: a redrawing of the 1636 Wem map, a redrawing of the tithe map and perhaps a modern map. The maps will need a great deal of preparatory work before they can be professionally drawn, but we envisage and have allowed costs for engaging a professional cartographer of £2,500.

A statement of likely costs follows. It would of course be possible to shave some costs off this at the margin and defer others. The element for the planning of Edstaston church is a mere guess. If funding were available, the whole could be delivered by the end of 2022.

The ideal sequence would be to undertake Edstaston and Coton together (cost say £9, £10,000), then Lacon and finally Soulton.

The total cost of completing Wem Rural is estimated at £20,100. A more detailed breakdown of these costs can be provided.

The immediate outcome will be draft text on the VCH Shropshire website. For a rural area of dispersed settlement, it seems unlikely that we could make a VCH Short work financially (or not without a sizeable subvention).

RWH
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