

VCH SHROPSHIRE

Newport

The Mansion

This text has been prepared for VCH Shropshire by Professor Richard Hoyle. The suggestions of Dr Judith Everard are warmly acknowledged. The maps are by Catherine Glover.

It is made available to readers in advance of its full publication. We welcome suggestions for improvement, additional references and, of course, we invite readers to point out errors.

At the moment it is only possible to trace the history of the mansion to about 1686. We hope that a further revision of this text will offer at least some suggestions for the earlier history of this intriguing property.

September 2026

The Mansion.

The Mansion is the name given to a house set back from the High Street in Newport. There is no contemporary usage of this term, but the house has been called the Mansion by a number of modern historians and we follow them here. But there is no real justification for the name although it does serve to stress how there was something exceptional about this house in Newport terms.

‘The Mansion’ is particularly obvious on the Hill map. Apart from this house and the grammar school (which also stands some distance back from the High St), the High St was fronted by a continuous row of houses on both sides. The mansion sat behind a gap in the High St frontage. The house, its curtilages and the open ground behind it was purchased by the Newport Market Company in 1859: the site was cleared shortly after. It has probably been built on a second time. There is therefore no physical evidence for the house and no drawings of it have been discovered. It appears on the tithe map of c. 1840: it was long gone by the time the Ordnance Survey came to Newport.

The house has long been a puzzle for Newport Historians and a number of erroneous accounts have appeared over the years.¹ The present account is based on the title deeds to the house surviving, as one might expect, in the records of the Newport Market Company.²

There is some sense with starting with the house and associated properties as shown on the tithe map and as purchased by the Market Company as part of the site for its cattle market. There was a map of the land which needed to be acquired by the Company but it is not known to survive. The schedule of the land acquired contained in the Company’s purchase deed may however be related to the descriptions on the tithe map.

The schedule of land to be acquired by the Market Company is more granular than the tithe apportionment and map. The latter reduced the property down to three parcels, where the schedule itemised either 12 or 14 parcels. The 1846 conveyance also includes a full

¹ *Newport, The Mansion* (Newport and District History Soc., March 2003); Harvey, *Aspects of Newport in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*, pp. 43-7.

² The main source are the deeds held by the Market Company who kindly have me access to them in August 2022. They include original deeds 1701-1858 (bundle 7), a schedule of the deeds, 1701-1846, an abstract of the same deeds, 1701-1846, various loose deeds and papers including mortgages made by Thomas Thompson (bundle 8). There is an abstract of this archive at SA by the late Malcolm Miles which includes deeds I did not see in 2022: K 63.2 v.f. A small cache of papers in Liddle and Heane (associated with the mortgage of the premises by Thompson to William Picken, 1837) includes a schedule of deeds to 1837, an abstract of the purchase deed of 1826 (‘Addenda to abstract’), draft mortgage 1837 and a sketch plan of the southern part of the property: ‘Ground plan of Mr Thompson’s outbuildings, roads etc situated in Newport’. 1101/8/1/3 {208_09: IMG_691-735}. Copies of wills and settlements of the Dickinson family (some of the originals of which are amongst the Market Company deeds) can be found in NTM 6/4. This is not a part of the archive relating to the mansion but relates to other lands belonging to the descendants of Samuel Dickinson. There is therefore a great deal of duplication between these three archives.

description of the property. There are earlier descriptions contained in a settlement of 1804 and a conveyance of 1826. There is also a full and helpful description of the property when it was offered for auction in 1842. There is a sketch plan of a part of the premises. Taken together, these sources taken together allow us to unpick the property's history from the end of the seventeenth century onwards.

It is not possible to work out the exact boundaries of the property from the tithe map. There may have been some confusion at the time about boundaries: the sketch plan of part of the property labels one area as the 'plaintiff's garden' which implies at least a dispute over ownership.

Broadly, the property extended from St Mary's St down to Watery Lane. The frontage against Watery Lane had been sold for cottages (tithe 139, 139a) and The Tannery (tithe 137). The property extended behind the corner properties on St Mary's St to what was then called Bakehouse Lane but is now Stafford St. There was an entrance from Bakehouse Lane. Most of the buildings on Bakehouse Lane were in different hands. The entrance into the property had also been narrowed since Hill's map by the building of new houses (tithe 325, 326, 327). (Figure 1.)

The main components of the property can be itemised and to a degree described.

- (i) The carriage drive from the High St down to the house. This appears to have been gated: the auction description speaks of there being an iron 'pallisade' about 30 feet wide. There were shrubberies on both sides of the carriage way. In 1846 this was described as a 'piece or parcel of waste ground as the same was formerly but which for many years has been laid out as a courtyard and shrubbery and is leading to and lying between the messuage [the Mansion] and the Market House in Newport'.
- (ii) To the left as one went towards the house were two buildings which had been used ('memorially') as attorney's offices. The 1826 conveyance says that they had been built by Samuel Dickenson. In 1859 they were being used as a schoolroom.
- (iii) The house itself was a substantial property. After an entrance hall, it had a very large dining room (21' 7" in by 12' ft 4"), a drawing room (18' by 15"), sitting room (no dimensions are given), kitchen and pantry on the ground floor, six bedrooms on the first floor and three attic rooms. There were also cellars. In a variety of ways, this was a large and prestigious property within the town. None of the sources though give us any idea of the age or condition of the property or name its builder.

(iv) The carriage drive went past the house on its right (south) side and proceeded slightly beyond the house to two buildings separated by a passage way. The first, to the left as you faced it, appears to have been domestic: it acted as a dairy and brewhouse. The second, larger property, was built as a cockpit. The 1826 conveyance describes it as ‘a piece of building called the Cockpit and made use of for the fighting of cocks’. It had been converted into a coach house and stable. There was access to this at its south end into Bakehouse Lane (vii below). It is not quite certain who the land in front of the coach house belonged to: the appearance from the tithe map is that it was part of the property 321 on the tithe map.

(v) behind the house was a garden or walk - some element of ornamental gardens is indicated - which ran down to the Tan House.

(vi) behind the coach house was a field called Keelings yard or Cockpit yard whose extent was estimated at one acre. In 1826 it was said to run to the brook running from the Marsh. By the time of the tithe map there were cottages at the far end of the field fronting Watery Lane (tithe 139, 139a).

(vii) the carriage way giving an exit into Bakehouse Lane has already been mentioned. In the 1826 conveyance (but not subsequently) this was described as ‘a road or driftway over and through the lower part of the garden belonging to the White Horse Inn’ (tithe 320).

It can be seen that this was a substantial property with large tracts of garden or field between the property and Watery Lane. The frontages of this property - on the High St, against Backhouse Lane and Watery Lane - had progressively become developed with cottages and, at the east end, a tan house. The property had also captured the larger part of the rear of the burgages of the two properties which pay between the entrance to the Mansion House and the corner of Bakehouse Lane, The Fox and Grapes (tithe 321) and the White Horse (tithe 320). (Figure 2.) The conveyancing history of the property explains this.

Having reviewed what can be discovered about the Mansion in the years before its demolition, its history in the thirty or so years before its acquisition by the Market Company can be quickly told. In 1826 it was sold by the heirs of Thomas Dickenson of Newport to Thomas Thompson of Newport. Thompson was probably already the tenant of the property. Thompson mortgaged it in 1837, increased his borrowing in 1841 (twice apparently). Later he appears to placed his affairs in the hands of his son-in-law, R. S. Skey of Notting Hill who

sold the property to G. H. Duncalfe in 1846 after it was offered for auction in 1842.³
Duncalfe sold to the Market Company on 12 July 1858.

The deeds in the Market Company's possession take the descent back to the end of the seventeenth century. In 1701 Elizabeth Wilkes of Newport wid. mortgaged the core property to one John Orme of Edgmond. The property comprised

- (i) the messuage, burgage or tenement where Elizabeth DuGard was dwelling
- (ii) the piece or parcel of waste ground lying between the messuage and the market house in Newport and
- (iii) the yard on the backside of the messuage.

In 1703 Wilkes mortgaged the property afresh, together with parcels of land in Norbroom, to one Henry Fox of Walton Grange in Staffs., yeoman. In 1714 she, with her son, Dr Thomas Wilkes of Trinity College Oxford, and Henry Fox as mortgagee, sold the premises to Thomas Smith of Newport, tanner. The property conveyed was described as

- (i) a messuage, burgage or tenement in which William Holbrook clerk had formerly lived and where Ralph Leeke now inhabited
- (ii) a parcel of waste lying between the messuage and the market house in Newport
- (iii) a yard lying on the backside of the messuage, burgage or tenement

There were two additions to the schedule of property:

- (iv) a tan house lying between the yard and nigh unto a certain place called The Hoyles, together with a tan house and a kiln for drying bark which was then or had been in the possession of Francis Sambrook tanner
- (v) A barn in the Hoyles standing nigh unto the tan house with a small garden.

The lower part of the field behind the mansion had been developed as a tannery over the previous ten or so years, drawing on water from the brook running from the Marsh to the Strine. As Smith was described as a tanner, this may explain his interest in owing the property.

In 1730, when Smith sold the house and its grounds, and the tannery. At this time he was living at Cotwell in the parish of High Ercall and called himself a yeoman. He sold to Samuel Dickenson the younger of Newport gent. and Thomas Betenson of Edgmond, gent.

³ Miles identifies Skey as a canal engineer who met and married the daughter of Thomas Thompson whilst working on the Newport Canal. Miles, *Newport Market Company*, p. 20. Skey and Mary Ann Thompson married at Newport on 14 Sept. 1836.

Betenson's role is not clear but he may have been acting on behalf of Dickinson's wife, Katherine. Again, the elements of the property can be itemised:

- (i) a messuage in Newport where Ralph Leeke formerly dwelt and which was now inhabited by Thomas Mills
- (ii) a piece or parcel of waste ground lying between the said messuage and the market house in Newport
- (iii) a yard or garden and the walk or lane lying on the backside of the messuage extending down to the fence dividing the same from the tan yard and a little garden thereto belonging
- (iv) a pew in Newport church.

But Smith reserved from the sale to Dickinson and Beckenson the tan house, the tan yard, the bark kiln and all the outbuildings, and he also reserved a footway with the right to lead horses or geldings from the tan yard to the street. This separated the far end of the field below the mansion from the remainder of the premises.

Samuel Dickinson died in September 1782.⁴ His eldest son and heir was Thomas Dickinson (d. c. 1807). In 1780, Thomas Dickinson bought out of the wreck of the Pigott estate the land lying to the south of the Mansion between his father's land and Bakehouse Lane. This was in two elements:

- (i) the building called the Cockpit 'heretofore made use of for the fighting of cocks' situate in the upper part of a yard or garden or close of land called Keelings yard or the Cockpit yard.
- (ii) the said yard in two parts divided called Keelings yard or Cockpit yard between the lands of Mr Samuel Dickinson on the one part [to the north] and the house and lane called Bakehouse Lane on the other [south] side, also adjoining to the garden or land lately belonging to Robert Pigott but now of George Baddeley watchmaker and the garden also belonging to Pigott, late in the possession of John Kirby but now of John Jackson joiner (the west end) and down to the brook from the Marsh to the pool dam.

This purchase captured for the Dickinsons all the property behind the High St frontages extending to Bakehouse Lane. Given that the buildings immediately adjacent to the entrance into the Mansion's courtyard have been identified as the premises of the Swan Inn which closed in or about 1764, the Cockpit stood in the grounds of the Swan and must have been a facility offered by the Inn for the entertainment of its clientele.⁵

⁴ Will made 15 July 1779, proved 7 Feb. 1783. PROB 11/1100, fos 157r-158r.

⁵ I owe this point to a draft text on the history of the Swan by Dr Everard.

The descent was then, as we saw, through the Dickinson family until they sold to Thomas Thompson in 1826.

There is little doubt that Samuel Dickinson was an attorney and it seems most likely that the attorney's offices which stood to the left as one entered the courtyard of the Mansion were his work. This is further implied by a deed of 1734 in which Dickinson acquired a part of a 'mixen place' or pigsty: the 1826 conveyance is plain that the officers were built (in part at least) on this sliver of land. We are also expressly told that Dickinson built a summer house in the court yard in a deed of 1804: this is not mentioned in the conveyance of 1826 so had presumably been removed by then. It is also likely that he was responsible for improving the waste ground between the house and the High St. into a court yard and ornamental shrubberies. It has to be a matter of speculation as to whether he also rebuilt the house but this is surely plausible.

The question that has to be whether we can extend the history of the Mansion House back beyond the mortgage of 1701. made by the widow, Elizabeth Wilkes. She appears in the earliest surviving churchwardens' rate for Newport of 1694-5 paying one of the largest individual rates in the town. She does not appear in the following rate and what may be the house was in the hands of a Mr Davenport. The signs are that Elizabeth Wilkes did not live in The Mansion for most of the time between the extant rates commencing and her sale of the house in 1714.

Her husband can be identified as John Wilkes of Newport apothecary, who died in London in early 1686.⁶ We have an account of the circumstances in which his will was made; Wilkes appears to have taken ill and made a peremptory will. Its purpose was to strengthen the hand of his widow in her widowhood. It leaves everything to her: there are no legacies, no mention of any children (although Elizabeth Wilkes took out a tuition bond for their children). It contains the odd proposal that his brother in law Thomas Lee should continue the apothecary's business as a salaried employee of his wife at £15 per annum 'for so long as he lives with my wife'. His wife was executrix. This may have been the will - made urgently - of a man who wished to give his widow total discretion. It may also be read as saying that the property was his wife's and he wished to make no claim over what she had brought to their marriage.

⁶ The following is based on the will and probate file in the Lichfield Wills, see on Findmypast.com.

It is his inventory which is chiefly of interest. The first room to be inventoried was the ‘balcony room’ which contained a bedstead but also 16 chairs amongst other furniture. What was the balcony: a gallery? And why all the chairs? It is hard to guess at the function of this room. The second room the appraisers visited was the ‘room over the kitchen’ which also contained a bed, other furniture and seven chairs. There was a little room between the two. then two rooms ‘over the balcony’ and a room ‘over the kitchen’: does over mean on a floor above or in rooms behind the balcony? Most confusingly there was ‘a parlour next the street’. There was also a shop stocked with apothecary’s goods, a still house and a brewhouse.

Given the distance between the mansion and the street, a ‘parlour next the street’ may indicate that the building being inventoried was not the mansion. Or the parlour might have been in a different building on the High St, perhaps with the shop: a shop in the mansion would be poorly located. The inventory does not say and it is impossible to decide. The house was plainly a substantial one and it seems likely that it is the one portrayed on Hill’s map. If the balcony was a gallery, then the number of chairs suggests that the gallery was being used for some sort of performance, and a gallery suggests some sort of sub-medieval property on a large scale.

At the moment we do not know who either John Wilkes or Elizabeth Wilkes were, or how the mansion came to be in their possession. It has been suggested that the mansion must be the house with 13 hearths held by John Taylor in the Hearth Tax of 1672.⁷ On the other hand, a substantial (and unimproved) late medieval house might well have had relatively few hearths. For the moment this is all speculation: we hope to offer more concrete suggestions for the house’s earlier history in the future.

⁷ A suggestion made by Dr Everard.

Appendix

The description of Thompson's property in 1842.⁸

To be sold by auction by J. Holland at the Victoria Hotel, Newport aforesaid, on Saturday the 16th day of April 1842, at 5 o'clock to the evening in the following or such other lots as may be determined upon at the sale and subject to such conditions as will be produced.

Lot 1

A singularly detached and desirable residence, calculated in every respect for a man of fortune and admirably situated for a professional gentleman, situate in the very heart of the Town of Newport Shropshire.

The entrance to this property is through an iron palisaded 30 foot frontage by a carriage road out of St Mary's Street within a few yards of the Town Hall. The drive is continued about 100 yards by shrubberies on each side to the pleasure ground at the front of the residence, and also to the outbuildings. the house comprises a spacious entrance hall, dining room 21 ft 7in by 12 ft 4 in with closets and entrance into the garden, drawing room 18ft by 15 ft, sitting room, kitchen and pantries on the ground floor. six commodious and pleasant bedrooms and closets on the first floor, three attics and extensive cellaring, court yard, brew house and dairy. the outbuildings comprise a four-stall stable, two coach houses, cart house, cowhouse, coalhouse and piggeries, with a spacious yard, the garden, which is very extensive and enclosed by a brick wall, is beautifully situated at the back of the residence and neatly laid out and planted with a great variety of fruit trees in full perfection and attached to the outbuildings and garden is a valuable piece of turf land enclosed by walls and buildings, very convenient for the depasturage of horses or cattle. On the left side of the drive to the residence there are two excellent brick and tile offices which have been occupied by attorneys immemorially and there is extensive church accommodation appurtenant to the property.

The site of the residence with the pleasure grounds, garden and land contain by a recent admeasurement 1a 1p 31p or thereabouts.

Immediate possession may be had.

⁸ *Shrewsbury Chronicle* 15 Apr. 1842; *Staffordshire Adv.* 16 Apr. 1842. There is a poster advertising the sale in SA, 1101/8/1/2.



Figure One. Extent of Thomas Thompson's property on the tithe map. The Mansion House is in red. The extent of the sketch plan is shown by the stippled black line.



Figure Two. Conjectural burgage boundaries from the tithe map. The Mansion House is in red.