

Wem & Myddle, then and again

Review Number: 2411

Publish date: Friday, 4 September, 2020

Editor: Judith Everard

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ISBN: 9781912702084

Date of Publication: 2019

Price: £16.00

Pages: 178pp.

Publisher: University of London Press

Publisher url: <https://www.sas.ac.uk/publications/victoria-history-shropshire-wem>

Place of Publication: London

Author: David Hey

ISBN: 0718511158

Date of Publication: 1974

Price: £0.00

Pages: 260pp.

Publisher: Leicester University Press

Publisher url: https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/An_English_rural_community_Myddle_under.html?id=SjOA

Place of Publication: Leicester

Reviewer: Peter Edwards

In 1974, David Hey published his book on Myddle in Shropshire, a study based upon his doctoral research at Leicester University. One might wonder how a proud South Yorkshireman had even heard of an insignificant North Shropshire parish, let alone decided to carry out research on it. Fortunately, his supervisor, Professor W. G. Hoskins, the doyen of English local historians, had discovered it via a unique source, *Antiquities & Memoirs of the Parish of Myddle, County of Salop, written by Richard Gough, A.D. 1700*. Published in 1875, Salop County Council had recently printed a limited edition of 500 copies, one of which I possess. It was Gough (and Hoskins) who drew Hey to Myddle and his book reveals how important a source Gough's *Antiquities and Memoirs* was to him. Similarly, when the committee of the recently established Victoria County History Shropshire chose Wem as the subject of its first 'VCH Short', the existence of an antiquarian history of the town and its extramural parish (known as its 'foreign') must have influenced their decision. As the authors declare, 'We are grateful to have it'. Reverend Samuel Garbet served as the curate at St Mary's chapel of ease in the rural township of Edstaston, dying in 1756, long before the publication of his book in 1818. If it appears strange to review books published 45 years apart, taken together they complement each other. Given the proximity of Myddle and Wem to one another (the parishes adjoin), they illuminate the relationship between a market town and its rural hinterland, as well as providing insights into the intersection between the locality and the wider world. While a direct comparison of the books can only be made for the overlapping years (Hey's date-range is 1524–1701), the VCH Short also traces later developments at Wem. Moreover, when the VCH researchers complete the Wem Rural

volume, currently being written, readers will be able to examine the symbiosis between a town and its foreign.

Naturally, both Hey and the VCH team deploy the full range of sources available to them, but the evidence of eye-witness accounts written by intelligent observers involved in public affairs add an extra dimension to their narratives. Gough based his memoirs on the seating arrangement in St Peter's parish church, starting with the pews of the local elite at the east end. As a sixty-six-year-old in 1700, he could not only recall events over the previous fifty years and the lives of three generations of fellow-parishioners, but also the stories of two older generations. He also consulted existing documentation, had read Camden's *Britannia* – which perhaps inspired his own work – and he checked his sources to clarify such matters as family genealogies. As an able antiquarian, Garbet similarly enhanced his personal knowledge of people and events by other sources of information.

The two books cover the core elements of communal interaction – the evolving landscape and communications systems, economic activity, social life and administrative organisation – but the style and presentation differ enormously. If the rigours of modern academic writing drive Hey's account of Myddle, the influence of Gough's memoirs shines through and endows it with an unparalleled richness of detail about local society. Although glimpses of Garbet's personal experience appear in the history of Wem, as in his account of the great fire of 1677 and the protracted dispute between Mr Daniel Wycherley and the copyholders, such vignettes are over-shadowed by the extended time-span and the weight of the VCH checklist of sources to be consulted and topics to be covered. This is no bad thing in a work of record but it makes the task of researching and writing a VCH volume a heroic one and a précising nightmare. Nonetheless, the VCH team have given us a comprehensive and readable account of the town.

Early modern Myddle was a large rural parish comprising eleven contiguous townships covering 4,691 acres, if the detached chapelry of Hadnall is discounted. Scattered settlement was typical of north Shropshire parishes, as reflected in the name of the nearby parish of Ruyton-XI-Towns. Based on the Hearth Tax entries of 1672, Hey calculates that the population of Myddle was about 630. The parish and manor of Wem contained thirteen townships, the urban centre originating as a planted Norman castle-town with burgage plots lining the high street. A detailed estate map of the town and the surrounding fields in 1631 depicts the urban layout at the time. The town lay about six miles to the northeast of Myddle village and was therefore the nearest market centre, although Shrewsbury, the county town, was situated only a couple of miles further away to the south. The parish of Wem covered 13,900 acres, of which the urban township comprised 1,203 acres. The Hearth Tax return listed 110 taxpayers in the township out of a parish total of 292, which the authors suggest (with allowance for the exempt) means a parish population of about 1,800 in 1672.

Wem never achieved borough status, so like Myddle, it was governed by the steward and his officers, operating through the manor court, their actions regulated by customary rights and procedures. The town had its own officers: two bailiffs chosen annually, one by the steward and the other by the town jury. In the foreign, serjeants of the peace were being appointed by the second half of the 12th century. By the late 16th century, constables had replaced them, two for Wem township and one each for the rural ones. Like their predecessors, the constables presented misdemeanours to the court. The town possessed a Court or Market House by 1512, although the lord had replaced it on the site of the present 'old town hall' by 1561. The parish was divided into four quarters, one of which comprised Wem township. At the annual meeting of the vestry, the rector (or curate), 'gentlemen parishioners' and parish officers set the lewns, elected officers and audited their accounts. The system remained intact until the late 19th century and the creation of the Wem Urban District in 1900. It sanctioned the building of yet another market and town hall in 1904. Manorial and parochial officers similarly governed early modern Myddle, the posts, as at Wem, being filled by those who occupied the front rows of pews.

While the town of Wem possessed markets and fairs and a wider range of occupations than those at Myddle, agriculture directly or indirectly employed most of the early modern workforce in the town and parish. Thus, the authors point to the predominance of pastoral farming, although noting that crops flourished on the more

friable soils. During the 17th century, dairy farming spread from the northeastern corner of the county across the entire North Shropshire Plain. Garbet noted this development. In Myddle, the rearing of cattle gradually gave way to dairy farming. Wem provided local farmers with an outlet for their products: by 1292, there was a weekly market on Sundays and a three-day fair around the Feast of St Peter and St Paul, the patronal saints. According to Garbet, the Martinmas Fair, established before 1589, was remarkable for the sale of 'vast numbers of the best hogs' (presumably fed on whey) that were sold and sent to London for victualling the navy. The town acquired a third fair in 1636: held on St Mark's Day, it specialised in the sale of linen cloth, although in 1788 it was trading in cattle, horses, sheep, linen and flax seed. By the mid-19th century, the town possessed eight fairs, reduced to seven after the coming of the railway. A livestock market was held on the first Monday of each month. Wem played an important role in the distribution of local farmhouse cheese around the country. Cheese producers were living in the town from the early 18th century and a century later the Dobell family, resident in the rural township of Lowe and Ditches, established a cheese factorage that by 1876 was pioneering the factory production of cheese.

Apart from the manufacture of farmhouse cheese, agricultural-based industries at Wem included milling; the production of hemp and flax; tanning and the manufacture of leather goods; dealing in timber; and brewing and malting. Occupations recorded in the parish registers for the period 1599–1624 reflect Wem's status as a small market town with a strong agricultural base but also offering such 'urban' services as those provided by barbers, butchers, chandlers, chapmen, drapers, dyers, mercers and painters. The town grew in size and complexity through the 17th century and beyond. In about 1700, for instance, many of the properties held by the inhabitants of the town were small, consisting of no more than their dwelling or workshop. Later, the *Universal British Directory* of 1795 named four tailors, six shoemakers, two hairdressers, two bakers, four butchers, two grocers, four drapers, two millers (corn dealers), two stay-makers, a hatter, a milliner and mantua-maker, a breeches-maker, a clock-maker, an ironmonger, a liquor merchant and a Staffordshireware dealer. The output of brewing and malting enterprises, in particular, increased in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the Shrewsbury and Wem Brewery Co. only ceased to malt in Wem in 1968. Leather production similarly expanded well into the 19th century but thereafter declined on account of stricter standards of public health. At Myddle, a number of the inhabitants followed the crafts of blacksmithing, carpentry, shoemaking, weaving, tanning or tailoring. One in nine of the entries in the mid-16th century parish registers refer to craftsmen, rising to one in seven a century later. Unlike their counterparts at Wem, most of them possessed a smallholding, dual occupation being a feature of pastoral areas like the North Shropshire Plain.

Both books pinpoint the early modern period as a time of considerable change in the landscape, developments charted in manor court rolls and in extant estate maps and surveys of the time. By the end of the middle ages, no woodland remained in Wem township, although large tracts existed in other parts of the parish. Lord Dacre began the felling of timber in Northwood in Henry VIII's reign, a task which the Dowager Countess of Arundel had virtually completed by the turn of the century. She also completed the drainage of Wem Pool, one of the many glacial mosses and meres scattered around the Plain. In Myddle, felling began in the late 15th century with the clearing of Divlin Wood and ended with the cutting down of Myddlewood by the end of the 16th century. Harmer Moss was drained in the 17th century. As a result, Hey calculates that the process added over one thousand new acres of farmland in the two centuries. Arable land was also improved. As was typical of wood-pasture areas, the townships of Myddle and Wem had their discrete open fields. In 1561, Wem township possessed three open fields and farmers in other townships had strips in open fields too. Also typically, the acreage declined as a result of piecemeal enclosure. Hey charts the demise of the open fields in Myddle's townships: indeed, he notes that Gough was involved in the measuring and exchange of strips and the subsequent enclosure of Balderton township field, probably in the 1680s.

During the so-called Great Rebuilding (c. 1570–c. 1700), some of the larger north Shropshire houses were built of free stone quarried at nearby Grinshill, but in an area once heavily wooded, many of the houses were timber-framed. At Myddle, a number of timber-framed houses survive, although, as Hey points out, later extension and alteration often obscures the original layout. Slight probate inventory evidence suggests that

early modern homes there originally consisted of either an open hall and a boarded-over parlour, or of a hall and parlour with chambers above. At Wem, the planned Norman town expanded during the middle ages with the creation of new streets lined with regular tenement plots. The townscape suffered enormous damage in the great fire of 1677, which Garbet calculated destroyed about 140 dwelling houses, as well as the timber market house and the almshouses in Mill Street, and badly damaged the church. Some timber-framed buildings did survive, and others were constructed anew but are often hidden behind brick façades. Rebuilding and changing architectural styles have given the town its predominantly Georgian and Victorian appearance today.

Garbet's 'antiquarian' history provides evidence for that mainstay of VCH publications, the descent of the manor or manors in each parish, and in passing highlights an issue that bedevilled relations between lords and their tenants across the country. Mr Daniel Wycherley bought the manor in 1665, intent on maximising the return on his investment at the expense of the copyholders. Once in charge, he sought to dominate the manor court by personal attendance, packing juries and using his servants to assess fines for wrongdoing. He rode roughshod over the manorial customs in general, claimed heriots and denied that the fines on copyholds of inheritance, although arbitrary, were limited to a maximum of one year's rent on entry or alienation. The tenants appealed to the Court of Exchequer, gaining several judgements in their favour between 1673 and 1683, winning their case concerning six of the customs and eventually (and unjustly) losing out on the issue of fixed or arbitrary fines because they had either lost their evidences in the fire of 1677 or had settled with Wycherley. As Gough observed, 'Many...made their land free, butt some inconsiderate selfe-conceited persons refused, and conceived that a copyhold estate was better than a freehold, but they found the contrary, to the great damage of their families, and the ruine of some'. It was small comfort because the dispute had drained Wycherley of money, forcing him to sell the manor to the notorious Sir George Jeffreys, 1st Baron of Wem and the judge of Monmouth's rebels. At Myddle, freeholders paid the lord a fixed chief rent and a heriot on the death of the head of the family. Although Hey does not clearly demarcate between leaseholders and customary tenants, he indicates that both groups generally held their property for twenty-one years or for ninety-nine years determinable on three lives, which was reputed to be only a slightly better form of tenure. Even so, Gough gleefully quotes his own example to show that they could last far longer.

Hey opens the chapter *The Community* with the words, 'Only with Richard Gough does one have any real insight into the mind of a member of this woodland community...a conservative in religion and politics...his whole structure of thought, his mental outlook, and his everyday actions and attitudes were dominated by his religious beliefs'. Hey cites Gough's opinion of Richard Clarke, a labourer, who had joined the 'phanaticall, selfe-conceited sort of people called Quakers'. Clarke, Gough recalled, 'merely out of designe, had a minde to join with these persons...He came home the next day a perfect Quaker in appearance, and had got their canting way of discourse as readily as if hee had beene seven years apprentice'. Offering a basic education, petty schools appeared from time to time, surviving until the master responsible retired or died. Longer lasting was the school that Gough had attended before moving on to a small private establishment at Broughton. As Hey argues, however, even those without such an education had personal knowledge of the wider world. They had friends and relatives in surrounding villages and other contacts in market towns. A number of parishioners migrated to London. Hey points out that Gough displayed a detailed knowledge of the Civil Wars and was aware of some national and foreign events. As was typical of wood-pasture areas, poverty was not a real problem, at least before the late 17th century. Gough singles out blind John Matthews as the only regular pauper, observing that he was allowed to go round the parish doing odd jobs and begging.

In the middle ages, Wem's spiritual needs were served by the parish church and by St Mary's chapel of ease at Edstaston. After the Restoration, a second chapel of ease was constructed at Newtown. Dedicated to King Charles the Martyr, it seems to confirm the authors' view that the inhabitants of the town had not necessarily supported the cause of the Parliamentary garrison. The installation of a 'zealous reformer', Andrew Pearson, in 1646 must have exacerbated the situation. Imprisoned briefly at Shrewsbury in 1660, he returned the following year only to be removed by the churchwardens for refusing to wear a surplice and read from the Book of Common Prayer. As is the VCH practice, the authors provide a full description of the architecture of the parish church, which, apart from the tower, had to be rebuilt after the great fire. Reconstruction work

continued into the 19th century. Over time, non-conformists acquired places of worship too. In 1851, the Religious Census records morning and evening attendance figures of 266 and 207 for the Congregationalists, 95 and 80 for the Primitive Methodists and 22 and 45 for the Baptists. Salvation Army members met at the barracks in Noble Street between 1888 and 1929 when they moved to a new hall built at the west end of the High Street.

Sir Thomas Adams, a native of Wem, who became lord mayor of London, founded a grammar school in the town in 1645. Garbet taught there. The first schoolhouse survived the fire but was partly rebuilt in brick before being reconstructed in 1776. Numbers were low and standards generally poor, that is, except for the years 1724–48 when John Appleton served as headmaster. In 1703, a charity established by Richard Corbet paid for a writing master to teach four poor boys reading and writing. Other schemes included the establishment of a Sunday School by 1802, and Anglican National and Nonconformist British Schools in the late 1830s. Various private schools operated, including one run by William Hazlitt, the minister of the Noble Street chapel, whose son, William, the essayist, studied there to the age of fifteen. The Hadow Report of 1926 led to the building of a separate Senior School in Shrubbery Gardens. Renamed Wem Modern School in 1945, it merged with Adams Grammar School in 1976 to form a comprehensive school. Social welfare was financed by money collected by the overseers of the poor rates and augmented by charity bequests. An almshouse existed in 1561 and there was a workhouse in the town by 1739. It moved to Bank House in about 1801. In 1836, Wem became the centre of a new poor law union and to house the inmates a new workhouse was built at Love Lane, north of the town. Even so, because of the cost of inmates, about four times as many paupers continued to receive outdoor relief. Over the centuries, doctors, lawyers, firemen and a police force delivered social and public services, while provision was also made for sanitation and lighting. No doubt, Myddle inhabitants were among those who had recourse to at least some of these facilities.

Hey's study of Myddle, enriched and made possible by Gough's history, is a classic work of local history. The ambition of the VCH is necessarily more limited: to illuminate the history of a place. The VCH Short for Wem does this extremely well. VCH often seems allergic to just the sort of anecdote about human frailty in which Gough excels. A VCH account of Myddle would perhaps draw little from Gough: it would be wonderful if in the future we could have the VCH history of Myddle to compare with Gough and Hey.

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