HISTORY OF THE DESERTED VILLAGE OF WHITTINGTON, RATBY

Michael Ball and Doug Harwood

The timing and causes of the desertion of Whittington are still unknown, as is its precise location within the historic parish of Ratby. This paper considers the roles played in its apparent abandonment by fourteenth-century plagues and monastic land acquisition. It concludes that there may have been a small monastic grange in Whittington, owned by Ulverscroft Priory, from its association with the Priory at Charley. The final desertion probably occurred in the late sixteenth century as a result of the privatisation of its fields and the loss of manorial tenancy rights. The balance of evidence suggests that Whittington was a small hamlet probably located around the present site of Whittington Grange Farm.

INTRODUCTION

Whittington was first identified as one of Leicestershire’s deserted villages by Hoskins in his 1945 paper (1).1 In 1963–64 the Deserted Village Research Group concluded that the site of the village had not yet been precisely located, and that the period and causes of its desertion were still unknown (2). Since then, no research has been published concerning the history and abandonment of Whittington. Documentary evidence about medieval Whittington is scarce because of the way its administration fluctuated between Whitwick manor, Groby manor and the Crown (3). Nevertheless, this paper will attempt to address the following questions:

i) When was Whittington established? ii) When and why did it become deserted? iii) How far were the fourteenth-century plagues or the expansion of monastic lands responsible for its abandonment? iv) Was it a nucleated or a dispersed settlement? v) Where did the original settlement lie?

The placenames associated with the lost village of Whittington are found in the north-west corner of the parish of Ratby, between Markfield Lane, Thornton Lane and Slate Brook (Fig. 2). They include the detached farming settlements of Whittington Grange and Whittington Edge, and the woodland known as Whittington Rough. Although there is no recorded evidence of the medieval boundaries of the settlement, the southern limit probably followed the north-west to south-east line of the present Ratby parish boundary along Slate Brook. The name ‘Whittington Edge’ suggests that the eastern boundary may have been Markfield Lane, which is also the current parish boundary. The 1825 Map (Fig. 3)

1 Figures appearing in parentheses refer to the Notes appearing at the end of this article.
indicates that part of the Whittington Grange Estate was located on the Markfield side of Thornton Lane. The land comprising Whittington was of relatively small extent, stretching c. one mile from its northern boundary, north of Thornton Lane (height 158m) to the south-eastern edge of Whittington Rough (height 125m). Its territory probably measured c. 800m from west to east at its widest point. In the mid-1960s Whittington was bisected by the M1 motorway.

THE QUESTION OF WHITTINGTON’S ORIGINS

The place-name Whittington is O.E., meaning ‘the settlement associated with a man called Hwita’ (4). The name may have close links with Whitwick, although the latter might derive from the O.E. hwit, ‘white’ (4). The ing-tūn place-name elements are considered to be of eighth- to ninth-century date, suggesting a pre-Conquest origin for Whittington (5a). It belongs to a group of similar estates with ing-tūn endings in north-west Leicestershire (Hemington, Lockington, Packington, Swannington and Worthington), all of which were probably established prior to the Scandinavian invasions of the late ninth century (5b).
Whittington, however, was not listed in the Domesday Book (1086). The first reference is as Withinton in 1209 (6). However, absence from the Domesday Book does not mean that the settlement did not exist in 1086 (7), as small sites were often included under the returns of larger neighbours. Therefore, place-name evidence indicates that a small, late eighth- to ninth-century estate called Whittington may have originated as an assart in the boundary area between the larger neighbouring settlements of Ratby and Markfield. Whittington may have been overlooked in the Domesday Survey or, more likely, given that the Survey was essentially a fiscal document, included in the returns for Ratby.

Its absence from the Domesday Survey may indicate that it was not until after the Conquest that the settlement expanded to achieve hamlet status. There is no record that Whittington ever had its own church. It has always been dependent
upon Ratby or Markfield for ecclesiastical authority and services, suggesting a later growth in population. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries experienced a period of rapid population expansion in England. This must have created pressure for the further clearance of waste land in the south-east boundary area of the manor of Whitwick where Whittington lay. After 1204 this area was under the control of the de Quincy family who owned Whitwick, Groby and Shepshed manors in Charnwood Forest (8). The small neighbouring assarts of Old Hays and Bondman Hays in Ratby parish were also established during this period. The following document refers to this period of ‘waste’ and suggests that Garendon Abbey may have had some role in the thirteenth-century clearances.

‘John Comyn, earl of Boghan, was summoned to answer Eustace, the abbot of Gerondon, in a plea that he permit the abbot to have common of pasture in Whitewyk, Wytington, Roteby, Groby and Merkenfeld, of which the said John

![Image of the earliest map of Whittington Grange, 1825.](source: Sale notice for Whittington Grange, dated 30 July 1825. Derbyshire Record Office – D5336/a/25/84/2.)

Fig. 3. The earliest map of Whittington Grange, 1825.
unjustly and without judgement disseised Roger, formerly abbot of Gerondon, and of which he says his predecessor was seised of common in 120 acres of waste in Whitewyk, 200 acres of waste in Whytington, 10 acres of waste in Roteby, 100 acres of waste in Groby, and 40 acres of waste in Markenfeld as the right of his church’ (9a).

In a further report of this case, Eustace suggested that the lands had originally been seised ‘by a gift of Roger de Quincy’, who had taken over the estate in 1235. In reply, John Comyn claimed that ‘he (held) in Whytington 200 acres of waste....Let a jury come and try the case’ (9a).

Eustace was Abbot of Garendon in the period c. 1290–94 and Roger between c. 1275 and 1281. The accession of Eustace therefore took place between 1281 and 1290 (9b). The list of lands owned by Garendon Abbey (10) contains no reference to Whittington, which suggests that Abbot Eustace’s bid to regain land in Whittington was unsuccessful.

**Whittington in the late thirteenth to early fourteenth centuries**

By this time, many of the references to Whittington relate to land-ownership issues. When Roger de Quincy died in 1264, his lands were divided between his three daughters. His second daughter, Elizabeth de Quincy, who had married Alexander Comyn, earl of Buchan, received Whitwick Manor and part of Shepshed. The Manor of Groby passed to his youngest daughter, Margaret, wife of William Ferrers, earl of Derby (11).

In many of the contemporary documents describing rentals, taxes etc., Whittington is accorded similar status to the neighbouring settlements of Ratby, Groby and Markfield. Moreover, the *itinerary of 1280* contains the first reference to Whittington Grange when it states that ‘Ratby, Groby, Markfield and Whittington Grange answered collectively as one vill’ (12). This may have been an unsuccessful attempt by Lord Ferrers to claim Markfield and Whittington as part of his Groby Manor, which Alexander Comyn, of Whitwick Manor, was able to resist. At his death in 1290, the manor of Whitwick passed to Alexander’s son, John. He died in 1308 and in 1309 his brother William illegally seized the lands, although the rightful heirs were Alice and Margaret, the daughters of John’s younger brother, Alexander Comyn. A document dated 12 December 1312 cites:

> ‘William Comyn, brother of John Comyn, the Lord of the Manor of Whitwick, was (illegally) enfeoffed of two parts of Shepshed, Markfield, Whitenton (i.e. Whittington), Bochardeston (i.e. Botchorton), Neuton (i.e. Newtown Unthank), a moiety of the town of Ratby, the township of Whitwick and part of Bardon Park’ (13). However, ‘in 1323, Master William Comyn of Boghan, having obtained of John Comyn, the late earl of Boghan, his brother, deceased, the township of Whittington without the King’s licence, had the King’s pardon for the same’ (14). After 1312, the land was partitioned and Alice, who had married Henry Beaumont in 1310, was awarded Whitwick manor.
In 1327, four Wythyngton villagers paid the Lay Subsidy Roll (15a), collected to pay for Edward III’s Scottish War (see Table 1). In the 1334 Lay Subsidy, Whittington was assessed at 10s. (15b).

Henry de Beaumont still held Wydington as part of his Whitwick Manor at the time of his death in 1340 (16). The first evidence comparing the size of Whittington with neighbouring villages appeared in his Inquisition Post Mortem, 1339/40. Whittington was then contributing the rents of 10 villeins worth 60 shillings (£3) to the manor (see Table 2). Even allowing for the fact that official statistics may not always describe the real status of settlements due to false accounting and tax avoidance, it would appear that Whittington was only slightly smaller than Markfield in 1339/40. The uncertainty about Ratby’s contribution probably arose because only a small proportion of its land still belonged to Whitwick Manor following the subdivision of Roger de Quincy’s estate between his daughters after his death in 1264 (see above).

**Fourteenth-century Plagues and Whittington’s desertion**

Between 1348 and 1400 there were five outbreaks of the plague in Leicestershire. It has been estimated that between 30 per cent and 50 per cent of the population of England died as a result of these visitations (17). It is a popular local myth that Whittington became deserted as a result of the plagues. This has been reinforced by the naming of the high ground between Ratby and Whittington as ‘Sick Hill’. Hoskins suggested that villages with small populations might have been so depleted of people that the necessary subsistence tasks of cultivating the open fields, mowing the meadows and so on would have been impossible to maintain. The only solution would have been the abandonment of the village. As an example of this he cited Ambion, for which there are no records of any surviving population after 1346 (18).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wythyngton Lay Subsidy Roll 1327</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rog’o de Normanto</td>
<td>iij</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walt’o Bole</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rog’o Aboueyewe</td>
<td>xij</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Will’mo de Stanton</td>
<td>xvii</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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Table 1. Wythyngton Lay Subsidy Roll 1327.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of Villeins</th>
<th>Rent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Botcheston</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markfield</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newton Unthank</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratby</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whittington</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Rentals paid by villages in Whitwick Manor in 1339–40 (19).
Whittington may have belonged to this category of village. It is located on high ground between 400 and 480ft above sea level. The soils are heavy clays derived from Mercian Mudstone series, overlain mainly by glacial boulder clays (20). It has been recorded that the climate in England in the early fourteenth century was very cold and wet, leading to a major famine in 1316 (21a, 21b and 21c). Located in a relatively high, exposed area and with a small population, Whittington would have been very vulnerable to the physical disasters of the time.

Nevertheless, the evidence indicates that the plagues were not a major cause of Whittington’s depopulation. In 1362 the village was still very much in existence when ‘the King granted license to Sir Henry Beaumont, knt. to give 20 messuages and 20 virgates of land in Merkefeld and Whytinton to sir Thomas Beaumont, knt.’ (22).

Thirty years after the first outbreak of plague, the Poll Tax returns for 1377 (25) list 21 receipts, totalling 7s. 0d., collected from Whittington. The 1379 Poll Tax lists 19 persons, of whom 12 paid the tax = 4s. 0d. (see Table 3). Seven families were paying tax and another seven individuals did not contribute. These figures suggest that the population of Whittington had changed very little since 1312 when 10 rentals were listed (Table 2). Despite their severity, the plagues do not seem to have caused the abandonment of Whittington. This further confirms Dyer’s conclusion that ‘the survival of villages recorded in the 1377–9 Poll Taxes disproves the simple connection between desertion and the Black Death of 1348–9’ (23).

Whittington continued to be in the possession of the Beaumonts during the early fifteenth century. There was a succession of very severe winters between 1407 and 1413 (21a, 21b and 21c). The Inquisition Post Mortem of Henry de Beaumont in 1413 describes how ‘Henry de Beaumont was seised of four messuages in Whitynton’ (24). A rental statement in the same document indicates further that these ‘four messuages (were) in decay and in Henry’s hands for want of repairs and tenants and they return nothing now and used to render £5-6s-8d’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whittington Poll tax 1379</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Names of the 12 who paid tax</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>de Willelme Steyne ux</td>
<td>4d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henrico Steyne filio</td>
<td>4d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johanne de Barton</td>
<td>4d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johanne de Barton filius</td>
<td>4d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger de Stanton</td>
<td>4d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia, matre eis</td>
<td>4d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willemo, filio Jacoby</td>
<td>4d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johanne, servient eisden</td>
<td>4d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoma Smyth ux</td>
<td>4d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margeria Webster</td>
<td>4d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam Tong ux</td>
<td>4d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henrico Dimelyn ux</td>
<td>4d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probate Summa</td>
<td>4s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summa</td>
<td>4s.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Whittington Poll Tax for 1379 (25).
Farnham (1927–28) has argued that ‘absentee lords of Whitwick had been neglecting their properties for some time’ (26). However, it may be that the combination of harsh climatic conditions and the preceding plagues had taken its toll upon Whittington and caused a reduction in its population, but not yet complete abandonment.

The majority of winters in the 1430s contained several weeks of widespread severe weather, not matched until the beginning of the Little Ice Age in the 1690s (21a). In particular, 1438 experienced the most serious famine since 1315–16. The cause of the calamity was heavy and continuous rain in summer, with an almost total absence of the normal solar heat (21c). Despite this, Whittington continued to survive: ‘In a book of fifteenths and tenths granted by the laity in 1416, Whittington (was) rated at 10s and in the subsidy of 1445 at the same sum, but an abatement was then made of 2s (20 per cent)’ (27). This subsidy was close to the Leicestershire average of 15.7 per cent and much lower than Barleston’s 58 per cent, Kirby Muxloe’s 38 per cent and the same as Ratby and Groby’s 20 per cent (28). Thus, 30 years after the apparent crisis of 1413, Whittington was still being assessed at the same rateable value and receiving only average abatement. The village seems to have survived the combined ravages of plague and a poor climate.

The Wars of the Roses brought dramatic changes to the Lordship of Whitwick. Following the fall of Henry VI and the crowning of Edward IV in 1461, the previous allegiance of the Beaumonts to the House of Lancaster resulted in them becoming a victim of the former’s demise. The new Yorkist Dynasty quickly passed bills of attainder against William, Viscount Beaumont, heir to the Beaumont dynasty. The manor of Whitwick, which included the heavily wooded parishes of Botcheston, Whittington and Newtown Unthank, was one of the manors forfeited to the Crown before being granted to Edward IV’s favourite, William Lord Hastings on 26 October 1464 (29). This gave Lord Hastings access to the stone quarries in the north of the manor and to local supplies of timber required for his new castle at neighbouring Kirby Muxloe c. 1481–83. Evidence from the building accounts show that between 1480 and 1483, two men from Whittington, John Hine(d) (slater?) and Robert Skevington (stone carrier), were named as workmen in the construction of Kirby Muxloe castle (30).

Within a few short years, the Hastings tenure of the manor of Whitwick was ended, following his execution by Richard III in 1483. At this point the manor of Whitwick again came into the possession of the Crown, and two years later, after the battle of Bosworth (1485), it passed from the House of York to the Lancastrian, Henry VII.

Whittington in the sixteenth century

Whittington was still listed as a free-standing member of the manor of Whitwick in 1507, according to a report of a Whitwick Court hearing, as follows: ‘Whytyngton – William Heyn, frankpledge there, gives for a common fine there at this day’ (31). However, on 4 March 1512, the third year of Henry VIII’s reign, the Crown released its tenure and passed the manor of Whitwick to Thomas Grey,
Marquis of Dorset and also Lord of the Manor of Groby: ‘The king to Thomas, Marquis of Dorset: (i) Manors of Bankers (Bankerdes) and Shroffeld (in Lee) and in Lee the advowson of the church there: Kent. (ii) Manor of Whitwick (Whytewke), Swannington [in Whitwick], Whytynmgton [in Ratby], Donington’ (32). By 1531, the inheritance of Whittington had passed to Henry Grey, 3rd Marquis of Dorset and Duke of Suffolk, and the village was still in his possession when he died in the first year of Mary Tudor’s reign – 1554 (33).

It has been noted that throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Whittington had retained its separate identity in the official records, mainly for taxation purposes. After 1512 there is no record that Whittington ever paid taxes again as an individual settlement. It is omitted from the Lay Subsidy of 1524–25 (34) and from the Diocesan Population Returns of 1563 (34). Similarly, in 1610, Whittington was again omitted from the Lay Subsidy Rolls (34). Thus, following Henry VIII’s reorganisation of local manorial holdings in 1512, Whittington disappeared from the official record, to be thereafter designated as part of the parish of Ratby in the manor of Groby.

Was Whittington Grange a monastic holding and was the Church responsible for the abandonment of Whittington?

During the twelfth century, new priories and abbeys were established in Leicestershire. These were supported by donations of land to create ‘monastic granges’, which were either farmed directly by the religious orders or rented out to tenant farmers under the supervision of the abbeys. The expansion of these granges to form large sheep farms in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has been put forward as a major cause of the desertion of some villages. Examples are the abandonment of Dishley and Ringolthorpe as a result of the founding of Garendon Abbey in 1133, and the loss of Ingarsby following the final purchase and enclosure of its land by Leicester Abbey in 1469 (35).

The name ‘Whittington Grange’ suggests that there might have been some involvement of a local abbey in the desertion of Whittington. The place-name ‘grange’ derives from the Middle English for an ‘outlying farm’. These were usually but not always the property of an abbey or priory. However, the summary of the lands belonging to Garendon Abbey (36) and Ulverscroft Priory (37) by Nichols (1804) makes no mention of Whittington. Jack (1965–6), despite using a full list of sources in her study of the administration of monastic lands on the eve of dissolution, fails to find any reference to Whittington or Whittington Grange (38). In his study of monastic granges, Courtney (1980–81) states that only four of Leicestershire’s deserted villages (Alton, Dishley, Ringolthorpe and Weston) resulted from grange formation. There is no mention of Whittington Grange in his list of the monastic granges of Leicestershire (39). However, he concedes that ‘the mediaeval usage of the term grange may have been “loose”, so that it might mean merely a barn or describe a more elaborate set-up incorporating a permanent residence’. Moreover, he concludes that ‘many Leicestershire granges are poorly documented’, leading to a ‘lack of information on the workings of most granges’.
They may have been ‘compact demesne, farmed by lay brothers’ or ‘dispersed in the open fields and worked by hired and customary labour’. By the late fifteenth century the leasing out of grange land had become a common phenomenon: ‘Augustinian demesnes (such as Ulverscroft Priory) were based on church glebe land and often consisted of unconsolidated units lying scattered among the strips in the open fields.’ In the case of Horsepool Grange, which was near to Whittington, ‘its arable was scattered in the common fields of Stanton-under-Bardon and the sheep flock grazed on the waste of Charnwood’ (40).

A tentative case can be made for the involvement of a monastic grange in the farming economy of Whittington. Courtney has observed a correlation between the distribution of granges and the recording of waste in the Domesday Survey (41). Evidence already cited above has indicated an early involvement of Garendon Abbey in the assarting of ‘200 acres of waste’ in Whytington before 1294. However, there is no further evidence of links between Garendon and Whittington. The possible links between Charley/Ulverscroft Priory (see Fig. 1) and Whittington Grange before and after the dissolution of the monasteries will now be discussed.

In 1540, only one year after the dissolution of Ulverscroft Priory (see Table 4), the earliest known description of Whittington Grange was recorded in the Bailiff’s Account, 31 Henry VIII 1540, drawn up on behalf of the Marquis of Dorset by his bailiff, William Chesilden (42), as follows:

Whittington Grange Farm terra there Thirty shillings four pence the farm.....called Bentleys Hill....Twenty acres in tenure and Henrie Hayne, lately Roberto Sike hoc anno.....Eleven shillings the farm land called Nether Field cont Twenty acres......Thomas Skeffington lately in the tenure of Roberto Sike hoc anno.....Eleven acres called Dole Meadow containing six acres infirm....in the tenure Roger Glaster and John Brice lately Roberto Sik.....L (?) three shilling.....four pence farmland called En field and Midell field John Warn ?and his wif Win fridd alope lately in.....Roberto Sike.......Eleven Shillings farm called Whityington Grange land adjacent called Nether hute containin Eight acres and a half (?) and seven acres of pasture ad (j)acent (?) containing four acres and (?).....Edward Browne lately in the tenure of Roberto Sike.

It could be inferred from this description that mediaeval Whittington had its own three-field system comprising a ‘Nether Field’, presumably in the lower eastern part of the township, a ‘Midell Field’ in the centre, and an ‘En(d) Field’ at its higher western part (43). Importantly, the above passage indicates that the land of Whittington Grange Farm in 1540 totalled only c. 70 acres, compared to its 337½ acres recorded only 70 years later in 1610 (see below and Note 57). The ‘grange’ therefore occupied only a small part of the original township of Whittington. The description also shows that Whittington Grange was already in existence before the dissolution of the monasteries, under the tenancy of one person, Roberto Sike. The grange land seems to have been ‘scattered in the common fields’ in a pattern similar to Horsepool Grange, as described above by Courtney (40). The references to ‘Dole Meadow’ and ‘pasture’ may indicate that some enclosure had taken place before dissolution. It was common for glebe or demesne land to be partitioned before other parts of the open fields, so that it could be more easily rented out by
the abbeys and/or the Lord of the Manor.

There is tentative evidence that this small ‘grange’ farm at Whittington may have had some involvement with Ulverscroft Priory. It has been noted by Courtney that ‘Augustinian demesnes were (often) based upon church glebe land’ (40). In the absence of a church at Whittington, the nearest churches able to manage the glebe land would have been either Markfield or Ratby. There is no evidence of a link between the vicars of Ratby and Ulverscroft Priory. The nomination of Ratby clergy was the responsibility of Nuneaton Priory. However, in 1272, Alan de Zouch, Lord of Ashby, had granted the advowson of the church of Markfield to the Prior of Charley (44). In 1465, Charley became united with Ulverscroft Priory (44), which presumably then assumed responsibility for nominating the vicar of Markfield church. The above Baillif’s Account of 1540 (42) provides further evidence of a close relationship between Markfield and Ulverscroft in that ‘certain lands and tenements at Markfield belonged to the priory of Ulverscroft, as did also a horse-mill and close to the same adjoining’ (45). It is recorded that the de Quincys, lords of the manor of Whitwick, had been ‘great benefactors to Ulverscroft’ (46). It is therefore highly likely that, before 1540, Roberto Sike had been renting a small ‘grange farm’ on the glebe land of Whittington, administered by the vicar of Markfield church under the auspices of Ulverscroft Priory. As late as 1588, a Henry Sykes was living in Whittington Grange, according to his will of 20 July. His father, Rev. Henry Sykes, had been vicar of Markfield from 1564 to 1574 (47). Immediately after the Dissolution of Ulverscroft Priory in 1539, responsibility for the administration of Whittington Grange was given to Henry Grey, 3rd Marqui of Dorset and lord of the manors of Whitwick and Groby. It is significant that the land was then split between six people: Henry Hayne, Thomas Skeffington, Roger Glaster, John Brice, John Warr and Edward Brown. Was this an attempt to make clear to local people that the dissolution of the monasteries meant a complete break with the past?

Evidence from the inheritance of Ulverscroft Priory

Further evidence of the possible involvement of Ulverscroft in the management of a medieval grange at Whittington can be inferred from the way in which the Priory’s land was re-allocated after dissolution in 1538–39 (see Table 4). At first, the former Priory was given to Thomas, Earl of Rutland, who sold it to Sir Andrew Judd in 1543. It was then sold to Sir Henry Grey in 1550. The Protestant Greys lost favour when Mary Tudor succeeded to the throne in 1553, and in 1554, Frideswide Strelley, a widow and ‘one of the gentlewomen of Queen Mary’s most honorable pryvy chamber’ (48), was awarded several sites previously belonging to Ulverscroft Priory by Queen Mary and Philip of Spain:

Philippus and Maria, in the 3rd and fourth year of their reign, grant unto your said oratrix and hyr heirs the several sytes of the late priory of Olverscroft with all the other lands being within the town fields, parishes and hamlets of Charly, Ratby, Newtown, Markfield and in the waste of the Forest of Charnwood (48).
There is no direct mention of Whittington in the above passage. However, since 1512, Whittington had been part of the township of Ratby (above). It is in the later inheritance of the properties that a possible connection between Ulverscroft and Whittington Grange becomes clearer. A document of 1578 indicates that Frideswide Strelley left her estate, including her Ulverscroft properties, to her natural kinsmen:

In 1565, Edward Gryffin, Robert Reynes and Robert Connyngham were enfeoffed as trustees to certain specified uses, in consideration of the love which she (Frideswide Strelley) bore to her nephew, John Wylyn, Bennett Wylyn, William Wylyn, Francis Wylyn and Peter Newark of the city of York, her natural kinsmen and for their advancement to hold the properties to the use of the said Frideswide Strelley for her life and her issue (49).

The Ulverscroft lands were formally inherited by her nephew, John Wilson, in 1565. Although John left the property to his son, Ambrose, in reality it was 'ultimately invested' in the boy's uncle, Bennett Wilson (50). In 1578, Bennett Wilson, gent., was cited to show by what title he possessed the site of the priory of Ulverscroft (51). Ten years later, in a document of 18 December 1588, Bennett Wilson of Ulverscroft is named in the sale of Whittington Grange with W. Raven of Horsepool Grange (52). The reason why Bennett Wilson, the main inheritor of Frideswide Strelley's Ulverscroft estate, should be involved in the sale of Whittington Grange will be discussed below.

A significant case which again featured a connection between Whittington and Ulverscroft Priory was heard at Whitwick Court in 1616:

'between (the above) Robert Peshall, plaintiff and Lisle Cave, Judith his wife, John Gobert esq. and Lucy, his wife, defendants of 10 messuages, six cottages, a windmill, two dove houses, 12 gardens, 12 orchards, 300 acres of land, 150 acres of meadow, 400 acres of pasture, 20 acres of wood, 40 of furze and heath, 10s. 0d. of rent and common of pasture in Staunton-under-Bardon, Horspoole, Bagworth, Thornton, Markfield, Whittington and the Forest of Charnwood and all tythes of Stanton, Bagworth, Thornton and Markfield'. It was concluded that the 'premises are declared to be the right of Robert Peshall and his heirs and he gave the defendants £360' (54).

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15 September 1539 – Ulverscroft Priory owned by the King
1539 – Awarded by the King to Thomas, Earl of Rutland
1543 – Sold to Sir Andrew Judd
1550 – Sold to Sir Henry Grey, Marquis of Dorset
1554 – Awarded to Frideswide Strelley by Queen Mary (Note 48)
1565 – Inherited by John Wilson, nephew of Frideswell Strelley
1578 – Inherited by Ambrose Wilson, son of John Wilson.
   Administered by his uncle, Bennett Wilson
1609 – Sold to Robert Peshall

Table 4. Changing ownership of Ulverscroft Priory after
Dissolution in 1539 (53).
It may be mere coincidence that Robert Peshall, the new owner of the former estates of Ulverscroft Priory, should be in dispute over landholdings in Whittington. However, taken together, the combined evidence of the place-name ‘grange’, the small size and scattered location of Whittington Grange Farm before 1540, the link between Markfield church and Charley/Ulverscroft Priory, and between the later owners of Ulverscroft Priory and Whittington, all suggest that Whittington Grange Farm may have had a monastic foundation, possibly linked first to Charley and later to Ulverscroft.

Why then has Whittington Grange consistently been omitted from the lists of monastic granges in Leicestershire, as compiled by Nichols (1804), Jack (1965–66) and Courtney (1980–81)? A clue may be in the statement by Nichols (1811) that ‘the tenure (of Whittington Grange) is in free socage, of the manor of East Greenwich, purchased from the Crown 19 Elizabeth 1576’ (55). East Greenwich was a fictitious manor set up by the Crown shortly after Dissolution, to deal with monastic properties which had been previously concealed from the authorities, possibly to evade appropriation (56). This linkage between Whittington Grange and the manor of East Greenwich is perhaps the most convincing evidence that the farm had monastic connections which had previously been concealed. It would explain why the grange was not listed in the monastic records of both Charley and Ulverscroft Priories before 1539, and why its possible links with the church are only now being discovered. The previously concealed nature of the connection between Whittington Grange and Ulverscroft Priory might also explain the interest of Bennett Wilson in the sale of 18 December 1588 (cited above). Soon after the dissolution of Ulverscroft Priory in 1539, the hidden status of Whittington Grange must have been revealed and it became the property of the Crown. It was then sold into private hands (William Raven?) in 1576 (55). The above-mentioned 1588 sale may have given Bennett Wilson his first opportunity to reclaim Whittington Grange for his own Ulverscroft estate. Despite its probable links with Whittington Grange, there is nothing to suggest that Ulverscroft Priory was involved in the village’s eventual desertion. Before the dissolution of the monasteries, Whittington Grange occupied only a small part of the village’s land. There is no evidence that Ulverscroft Priory expanded its landholding in Whittington to the extent that people were forced out of their homes. The abandonment of Whittington as a small hamlet community seems instead to have been a consequence of post-Dissolution policies and events.

The role of the privatisation of Whittington’s land in its desertion

A description of Whittington Grange in a sale notice of 1610 paints a clear picture of how much the village had changed since 1540.

Being all pasture ground, inclosed in divers several closes, great and small, containing 337 and a half acres and 15 perches. There are two husbandmen’s houses therein, with barns, stables, neat-houses, orchards, gardens and backsides to them; will keep Ewes 400, Milch-kine 30, Feed beasts 20, Yield in hay 100 loads, Rear calves 20. Besides keeping sheep, geldings, oxen for draughte, foals,
arable 32 acres, and commons in the Forest of Charnewode, without number, for all manner of cattle. Land was being rented out to Mr. Duport at £9 13s. 4d. a year for three years to come from Ladye-day next, 1610. Also the lorde hathe all the woods...valued to be worth £500 (57).

From the above it can be seen that between 1540 and 1610 almost all the land of the former village had been consolidated to form an enlarged Whittington Grange Farm comprising c. 337 acres (cf. c. 70 acres in 1540). By 1610, the Grange occupied almost all of the former open fields of the village. These fields had now been enclosed with 90 per cent under pasture and sheep as the main livestock. The fields were being rented out to local farmers, but by 1610 there was only accommodation for two families in the ‘two husbandmen’s houses’, compared to possibly six families named in relation to only c. 70 acres in 1540. Details of the enclosure and consolidation of Whittington Grange can be tentatively reconstructed from evidence of cases brought before Whitwick Manor court, often to contest the loss of local tenancy rights. As early as Michaelmas in 1579, Francis Whetstone and his wife, Katherine, were defendants in a case involving properties in Islay Walton, Ratby, Groby, Newton, Bochестon and Whittington Grange (58). On 20 December 1609, in an Inquisition taken at Whitwick, tenants claimed to have rights of common of pasture in ‘divers parcels of land’ which included ‘Whittington Green’ (59). In October 1621 a case was brought between Luke Jackson, plaintiff, and Lisle Cave, Judith his wife, John Gobert esq. and Lucy, his wife, Sampson (Choyce?) and Jane, his wife, defendants in a case concerning ‘10s-0d rent and the loss of rights to common of pasture’ in a number of locations including Whittington (60).

In 1630, in an Exchequer Deposition by Commission, Henry, Earl of Huntingdon, the plaintiff, brought a case against George and Luke Jackson, defendants concerning rights to use closes in Whittington Heys (61). This was probably in part an attempt by a descendant of the Hastings family to reclaim the lordship of Whitwick from the Greys. However, it is important to our understanding of the changes in landownership in Whittington because a number of witnesses were called to clarify this issue. They were asked:

Do you know of any closes belonging to the manor of Whitwick e.g. Whittington Heys? How long have you known them and were they not or some of them copyhold land, parcel of the manor of Whitwick, granted or grantable by copy of court roll of the manor of Whitwick, according to the custom of the said manor and to whom were they or any of them granted?

Charles Alsop, aged 68 years said he

has known the closes for 50 years’ (i.e. since 1580) ‘and all or most of them were holden by copy of court roll of the manor of Whitwick, according to the custom of the said manor....that Thomas Pywell of Markfield held Great Ferney hurst and Whittington Heys by copy of court roll....he also said Mr. Lysley Cave sent for divers of the tenants...and told them that they had forfeited their copy, but yet notwithstanding, if they would surrender up their copies to him, he would make them several leases for three lives in the Interrogatory mentioned by the said Mr. Cave about 40 years last past (i.e. 1590) (61).
Several other witnesses made similar statements to the effect that Lysley Cave had purchased ‘Whittington Grange and other closes whose tenants became to the said Mr. Cave’ (61). Lysley Cave of Horspool Grange was a key figure in the history of Whittington Grange during this period. He was the fifth son of Francis Cave of Baggrave Hall, and married Judith, his second wife, daughter of William Porter of Estcourt in Warwickshire (62). He died on 10 February 1622–23. Significantly perhaps, his father, Francis Cave, had been a Commissioner of the Crown with responsibility for disposing of monastic lands following their dissolution in 1538–39. Old Hays, Ratby was one of the neighbouring properties which Francis Cave had acquired at the time. It follows that his fifth son, Lysley Cave, would have been well acquainted with the locations of former monastic lands and the value of their purchase. This is yet another coincidental link between Whittington Grange and the monasteries. A key testimony describing the land purchases made by Lysley Cave in Whittington was provided by Simon Jackson of Stanton-under-Bardon, aged 69 years. He remembered that in the year 35 Elizabeth (1592–93):

Whittington Grange became severed from the manor of Whitwick within a short time after that Mr. Cave had purchased the said Whittington Grange of Mr. Raven (and that) there was a letter sent from William, lord Burley, then lord Treasurer, unto Sir Henry Grey, knight, then steward of the manor of Whitwick under queen Elizabeth, to take order that the tenants of Whittington should surrender their estates, whereupon he has heard one Thomas Pywell, being tenant by copy of two closes called Fearnhurst and Whittington Hey, surrendered his estate therein at the court of Whitwick...and that one Emma Baldwin, being tenant by copy of Stocke Hey, surrendered her estate therein, and that Mr. Cave made them new estates by lease of the said closes (61).

These accounts suggest that before c. 1580, land in Whittington had already been enclosed to form ‘divers parcels of land’ (e.g. to form ‘Whittington Heys’). It is also clear that, at the same time, tenancy and ‘rights to common’ in Whittington were still being administered according to traditional manorial custom through copy of court roll. In passing, it is again interesting that, according to Jack (1965–66), ‘much of Ulverscroft’s income came from copyhold rents at £1 per virgate’ (63).

The court evidence indicates that, by the late sixteenth century, land previously administered within this manorial system by copyhold was becoming available for individual purchase. Thus Lysley Cave was able to buy ‘Whittington Grange and other closes’. The new owner was then able to replace copyhold rights with a new system of tenancy, with support at the highest level from Lord Burley. This scenario is consistent with the conclusions drawn by other historians that the later middle ages ‘saw the expropriation of the peasantry by a capitalist-minded gentry’, and that this led to some village desertions (64).

Upton (2009) has argued that there may have been good economic reasons for this late sixteenth-century policy. In the case of the desertion of Nether Itchington, she argues that Thomas Fisher, the new landowner, ‘did not deliberately depopulate’ the village, but rather that he was finding it too difficult to get tenants
and that ‘the ultimate viability of Netheritchington may yet have rested in the hands of the tenants themselves’ (65). Could the same be argued for Whittington? Its soils are derived from the heavy clays of Mercian Mudstone, capped by glacial boulder clay, and are still very stony in places. The altitude is quite high (125 to 158 m) and exposed to strong winds. Despite the abundant evidence of ridge and furrow (see Fig. 4), the area may not have been particularly conducive to arable farming. It may have become increasingly difficult to find tenants for the small scattered land units inherited from the old open field system. The enlargement of Whittington Grange during the late sixteenth century would have enabled land holdings to be consolidated into more economically viable units under pasture and rented to fewer people, thus leading to the final abandonment of Whittington as a village settlement. However, the bailiff’s account of 1540 (see above), which describes how six families were renting c. 70 acres at Whittington Grange Farm (42), does not suggest that it was difficult to find tenants. We are left therefore with the conclusion that the depopulation of Whittington was mainly the result of government policy to privatise both church and manorial lands following the dissolution of the monasteries in 1538–39. This process possibly began first with the purchase of the church (i.e. grange) lands; hence the eventual adoption of Whittington Grange as the principal name of the area.

The court case of 1630 also cleared up the issue of the relationship of Whittington to Ratby and Markfield. Henry Sikes of Ashby de la Zouch, tanner, aged 70 years, confirmed that Whittington Grange was in the manor/parish of Ratby (66). He also remembered that ‘all tythes and other duties due for the vicar (had been) paid to the vicar of Ratby by the owners and occupiers all the time of his remembrance’ (i.e. going back to c. 1570). William Purfery of Markfield, clerk, aged 36 years, said that ‘Whittington Grange is the greatest part in Ratby parish and the rest in Markfield’, and that ‘the parson of Markfield received a Rate Tythe of 3s-8d out of two grounds in Whittington Grange, viz., Goose Grene and Bealey Hill’. Almost certainly, this ecclesiastical relationship between Ratby and Whittington had a long history. Ratby Church had been the mother church for the area and had collected tythes from surrounding churches, including Markfield, possibly from pre-Norman times (67, 68).

**Why and when was Whittington deserted?**

It can be concluded that Whittington suffered some depopulation as a result of the late fourteenth-century plagues. Nevertheless, it survived with a small population throughout the fifteenth and into the mid/late sixteenth century. Within its territory was Whittington Grange, a small farm with probable monastic connections to Charley and Ulverscroft Priories. However, expansion of these monastic interests had no role in the eventual desertion of the hamlet. Instead, following the dissolution of the monasteries in the late 1530s, the church and manorial lands were gradually sold off to private individuals with the full support of Lord Burley, the Queen’s first minister. This quickly led to the complete enclosure of the open fields, an increased emphasis upon less labour-intensive
pastoral farming, and the loss of the manorial entitlements and rights to common previously enjoyed by tenants. By 1610 the settlement had been reduced to ‘shrunken’ status, with just two houses.

The desertion of Whittington is consistent with the general pattern of other village abandonments described in the literature. It involved a small settlement in a marginal environment whose name was recorded late, probably because of its delayed expansion to hamlet status from a single family estate. This meant that it was dependent upon neighbouring villages for important social and ecclesiastical facilities such as a church, fairs, markets and legal processes (69). Finally, its desertion was more the result of a series of gradual, ‘piecemeal processes’, than ‘a (single) cataclysmic event’. In broader political terms, it can be seen as ‘part of the grand narrative of the transition from feudalism to capitalism’ and from ‘community’ to ‘individualism’ (70).

Where did Whittington lie, was it a nucleated or a dispersed settlement?

There is still uncertainty about the precise location of Whittington or whether it was a dispersed or nucleated settlement (2). Immediately to the south of Whittington is Bondman Hays which was first mentioned in 1343, when Elizabeth de Ferrers held ‘the third part of the assart of Roteby (Ratby) which the bondmen hold’ (71). This late colonisation consisted of a series of small dispersed farmsteads which are still present in the landscape. Did Whittington take a similar form? Squires (1986) has suggested that ‘the woodland of Whittington Rough... with the fields beyond, occupies the site of the former dispersed settlement of Whittington’ (72). However, analysis by Fred Hartley of aerial photographs taken in 1968 shows that, apart from the area near to Whittington Grange Farm and Whittington Rough, ridge and furrow occupied all of the remaining fields which might have supported the former settlement area (Note 73 and Fig. 4). This indicates that Whittington was almost certainly a nucleated hamlet, served by its own small open field system. Unlike Bondman Hays, no archaeological evidence of former dispersed farmsteads has been identified by field observation. The number of Whittington families paying rent to the manor of Whitwick in 1339–40 (Table 2) and the Poll Tax in 1379 (Table 3) also supports the idea of a nucleated settlement of comparable size to Botcheston, Markfield and Newtown Unthank, rather than a landscape of small dispersed farmsteads. In contrast, the settlement of Bondman Hays was not included separately in either of the above population lists, probably because its dispersed population was already included in the returns for Ratby.

It is usually safe to assume that medieval village homesteads were located separately from the arable strips (ridge and furrow) which were so essential to the community’s agricultural subsistence. On the 1968 aerial photograph (see Fig. 4) only two locations in Whittington are devoid of ridge and furrow. These are Whittington Rough and the area around Whittington Grange Farm.
Whittington Rough

In the past, the woodland of Whittington Rough has been assumed to be the site of the former settlement, on the grounds that the land would have been unsuitable for a return to agriculture after the abandonment of the village and was therefore left as scrub or woodland. Recent field observation has refuted this argument (see Fig. 5). A substantial area of ridge and furrow, transected by later field boundaries and ditches, has been found inside the wood, suggesting that it was probably part of the medieval arable system and subsequently enclosed. No evidence of the foundations of former buildings has been discovered inside the wood.

The site of Whittington Grange Farm

The absence of ridge and furrow around the site of Whittington Grange Farm supports the idea that this may have been the location of the village. It had the advantage of being at the crossroads where Thornton Lane, the main road between Markfield and Botcheston, would have met the former trackway of
Roman origin which connected Ratby to the north-west (74). It would also have made economic sense, in terms of the availability of building materials and other amenities, for the present Whittington Grange Farm to have been located on the same site as the abandoned village, perhaps initially occupying the best of any remaining dwellings. The description of Whittington Grange in 1610 indicates that the remains of two husbandman’s houses from the former village, with their ‘barns, stables, neat-houses, orchards, gardens and backsides to them’ (75), were still present on the site. A picture of one of these houses is provided by the 1636 inventory of the ‘goods, Cattell and Chattels of John North, late of Whittington’. It was a hall house with one main room (the ‘hall’), and a kitchen and buttery on the ground floor. A long list of the goods etc. in the hall confirm that this was the main living space in the house. Upstairs there was a ‘chamber over the hall’ (containing) ‘Chese crach and ...chesse shelves, one Lome, one frame, one strike and other implements’. In the other chamber there were ‘two bedsteads, one mattrice, one blanket, one Covering two wheels with other implements’ (77).

It is difficult to find archaeological evidence of former house plots because modern farm buildings now occupy a large part of the area and spoil from the construction of the M1 lies close to the site. However, analysis of the 1825 map of Whittington Grange (Fig. 6 and Note 76) shows the location of two farmhouses and of a series of narrow fields orientated at 90 degrees to the main track, which runs north-west to south-east through the centre of the map. The latter could have been survivors of the above ‘orchards, gardens and backsides’ (75) which may originally have been burgage plots behind medieval farmsteads, situated alongside the main trackway. Note also the right-angled bend in the road near to the surviving farmhouses, which may have formed part of a former village

Fig. 5. Whittington Rough in 2009, showing ridge and furrow and enclosure hedges (surveyed by D. Beckerton and D. Harwood).
square. Also the 1835 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 7) shows that Whittington Grange was at the centre of the local road system and included a nucleated group of buildings.

In 1959–60 the only surviving farmhouse was a detached two-storey building which could have been a refurbished and extended seventeenth-century house, perhaps John North’s house (77) and probably one of the ‘two husbandmen’s houses’ there in 1610 (see Fig. 8). The 1968 aerial photograph shows evidence of a possible abandoned building to the south of the main track. There is anecdotal evidence from the present owners, who found the remains of stone foundations on the site of their new house when it was being built alongside the main trackway in the early 1960s. It is therefore concluded that the most likely location of the medieval hamlet of Whittington was around the site of the present Whittington Grange Farm.

Notes to Fig. 8 (p. 209)

This small two-storey house was the only dwelling at Whittington Grange Farm in 1960. It was demolished in the mid-1960s and replaced by farm buildings. The owners remember that the original house was built without foundations and was very damp. It could have been a simple hall house until the roof was raised to
create an upper storey and an extension added on the right, to provide the new front entrance and staircase. The chimney would therefore have been in the centre of the original hall house and the old central front door could have been converted to the present ground-floor window. This old house may have been John North’s
home in 1636 and is further evidence that the area around the present Whittington Grange Farm was the site of the medieval hamlet of Whittington.

NOTES
5b. Cox, B. (2005), A Dictionary of Leicestershire and Rutland Place-Names, Nottingham Place-Name Society, p. xiv.
8. After the death of the 4th Earl of Leicester, Robert Fitzparnell in 1204, the Lordship of the manors of Whitwick, Groby and Shepshed passed to his sister, Margaret, the wife of Saer de Quincy. In 1207, Saer de Quincy was made the Earl of Winchester (the Honour of Winton). After his death on a crusade in 1216, the Lordship eventually passed to their son, Roger de Quincy, on the death of his mother in 1235 (3).


28. See records for individual villages in Nichols, J. (1811), *op. cit.*


42. By letters patent under the Privy Seal, 25 Nov 2 Eliz [1559], that Queen Mary, by warrant under her Privy Seal 20 Feb 1 Mary [1554], in consideration of a promise made by Edward VI to Sir John Parrot, kt. It relates to land from ‘dissolved monasteries which were passed to him as concealed lands, but in fact were not concealed’. Parrot’s petition was that he should grant the same to the queen in exchange for other lands. It was decided that he should be granted ‘as much other concealed lands, etc., to full accomplishment of warrant, to be held of the manor of Estegreenweich [East Greenwich], Kent’.


45. Farnham, G. (1928), *op. cit.*, p. 254. The names Goose Green and Be(nt)ley Hill were still being used on the Whittington Grange Sale Map of 1924.
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