

A Local History of Broxton, Duckington & Harthill



Bolesworth Estate workers 1934

Written and researched by
Wendy Bawn
Rebecca Dakin
Carol Shadbolt
Edited by Helen Bate

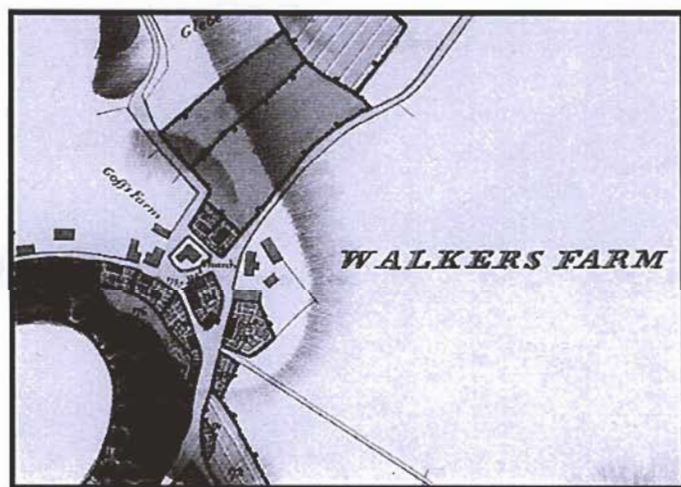


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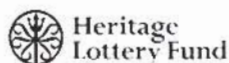
Edited by
Helen Bate
July 2004



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Local Heritage *initiative*



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Our thanks particularly to those local people who have contributed including Anthony and Diana Barbour, Renee Brereton, Dorothy Brookfield, John and Joan Burnett, Margaret Cox, John and Marjorie Dakin, Constance Davies, Roger Done, Nancy Hewitt, Eddie and Ruth Hughes, Muriel Lebeter, Gertrude McGuffie, E.Morgan, Edna Morgan, Nancy Newall, Tom Price, Joan Sackett, Dennis and Muriel Sheen, Doris Sheen, John and Joan Siddorn, Judith Siddorn, Fred Stant, David and Cynthia Stant, H. Stevenson, Annie Stockton, John and Anne Vernon, Joan Whitby and Maureen Williams.

Special thanks must go to Margaret Cox, Secretary of Broxton and Bickerton W.I., David Hayns, local historian, Jonathan Pepler, County Archivist and the staff of the County Record Office.

INTRODUCTION

This book was produced as part of a local heritage project which drew together people from the Peckforton and Bickerton Hills area to produce exhibitions, books and a web site about the local and natural history of their area. This project was instigated and managed by Helen Bate of Peckforton. As part of a wider project to develop Peckforton and Beeston Village Hall, Helen successfully raised sufficient grant funding to create a digital image bank of local photographs, two professional exhibitions depicting the local and natural history of the area, a web site and two local interest publications.

Wendy Bawn had been carrying out research for the last few years at Cheshire Record Office into the history of Broxton where her ancestors lived and farmed.

Rebecca Dakin was asked to help with producing maps of the area and carrying out interviews with people from Duckington.

Carol Shadbolt interviewed many local people from the Broxton area and compiled all the research material into a book which would depict the fascinating social history of Broxton, Duckington and Harthill.

Wendy and Helen carried out the final editing of the book ready for publication.

The Countryside Agency Local Heritage Initiative grant funding has allowed this book to be published and made available for local people to enjoy.

As amateur historians we had a lot to learn, loads of enthusiasm and many people who were keen to share their memories and photographs with us. Our thanks go to all these people, without whom this book could not have been produced.

The content of the final book has been determined by the material made available to the authors. It would be impossible to cover every aspect of village life in detail in the time and with the resources available, but it is hoped that all readers will find something of interest to them.

We have tried as far as possible to ensure the accuracy of the information given. Personal accounts and memories however, are subjective, and so some discrepancies may occur.

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A BACKGROUND TO THE BROXTON AREA

Rising above the Cheshire Plain, the sandstone hills dominate this part of Cheshire. This area has a long and fascinating history. In the 19th century George Ormerod described it in his History of Cheshire:

"The county of Chester has few districts more likely to arrest the attention of the traveller, from mere natural beauties, than the township of Broxton. The immediate foreground is rich in timber, and luxuriant in verdure and as the road ascends the pass of Barnhill, the magnificent vale of Chester, with the estuaries and the Welsh mountains, opens with a grandeur which the views from the neighbouring hills rarely attain. The scenery then changes to a style of landscape not often met with in this county. The road winds between rocks and antient(sic) oaks, which cast their branches over the road and occasionally give a glimpse of the rich valley before mentioned, and at other times a near view of precipitous elevations of the Bickerton Hills, whose bare and abrupt crags, crowned with the earth-works of a British fortress, close the immediate foreground. To the left the eye commands the long line of the broken terminations of this mountainous range, with minor well-wooded elevations scattered below, over which the prospect extends to the distant forest hills rising from the great vale, which intervenes between the districts of Broxton and Eddisbury."



LANDSCAPE AND LANDMARKS

19th century disused quarries and small natural and man-made caves exist all around the Broxton area. They form a fascinating tapestry showing man's impact on the landscape.

Caves

Many caves have their own legends and stories that are associated with them.

On the side of Bickerton Hill facing Harthill is a partially collapsed cave, known as **Mad Allen's Hole**. There are at least two stories told concerning 'Mad Allen'. He could have been a man hired by a local landlord to impersonate a hermit in an artificial cave. But it is more likely that it was John Harris of Handley, born in 1710, who was thought to be Mad Allen. A star-crossed lover, prevented from marrying the woman he loved, he took to living a stone-age life in several caves for over seventy years

In the Cheshire Archaeological Society Volume 2 1864, there is an article on 'Cheshire Waifs and Strays'. In the introduction the author states that *"it is intended to publish any curious articles relating to Cheshire...we here give a verbatim copy of a strange broadside printed at Chester early in the present century... bordering somewhat on the marvellous...which now may assist us in ascertaining whether any truth lies hidden beneath this seeming fiction."*

These extracts are from

"A Full Account of Mr John Harris the English Hermit - now residing in a cave in a Rock, known by the Name of Allen comb's Cave, near to the Town of Harthill, in the Parish of Tattenhall, in the County of Chester. Mr. Harris is 99 Years old, born July 24th 1710, in the Parish of Handley, in the County of Chester.

We often hear of some Men, from Various motives, preferring a life of solitude in some gloomy Cavern or Cave in the Earth, wholly secluded from human society...

Mr. John Harris, the Hermit, is a man about 5 feet 10 inches high, of a ruddy complexion. strong built, a strong voice, and walks very straight and remarkably quick; he was a man possessed of a very great fortune, he had several estates in the parishes of Handley, Broxton, and Tattenhall, which he sold after his parents decease, and took his abode in Dens and Caves in the Mountains, in which he has resided ever since, which is about the space of 66 years; occasioned by his parents refusing him marriage with one Miss Ann Egerton, in the parish of Handley, whereof he made a solemn vow never to marry as long as he lived, and have as little conversation with mankind as possible.

The first place he made his abode in was a Cave belonging to W. Leech, Esq., of Carden, in the County of Chester, in which place he resided for the space of 20 years and upwards; he not liking this situation removed from thence to a Cavity in a Rock,

belonging to J. Tarlton, Esq., of Bolesworth-Hall... in which he resided for the space of 66 years. He was discovered on the 5th November last, by four young men, who were getting what they could plunder to burn the image of Guy Fawkes; they were so affrighted at the sight of the hermit, that they ran in to the town of Harthill, and declared that they had seen a wild hairy man, and that he had gone into the Rock's mouth, that is in Allenscombs, and that he was the frightfulest figure they ever saw.

Four gentlemen took lanthorns to investigate. They discovered a clean well dressed gentleman by a coke fire, "to prevent being discovered by smoke" reading the bible, with a Brook of clear spring water near by, "but as to his hair and Fingernails, they have not been cut since he took to a life of a Hermit, and his Toe Nails they are grown like unto Asses hoofs, neither has he shaved since he took to his life of an Hermit which makes him appear very frightful.

Mr. John Harris keeps a servant Man whose name is John Barlow, aged 69 years, he was born at Barnhill and has lived with Mr. Harris near 50 years, ...he is often visited by the neighbouring Gentlemen in Cheshire, likewise by J. Tarlton, Esq., Bolesworth-Hall, the owner of the Rock wherein is Mr. Harris's residence, and who has given him liberty to reside in the apartment where he now is until the Lord is pleased to call him from hence. This Cave is 10 Miles from the City of Chester, and 2 from Barnhill."

A later article stated that the so called Hermit of Allenscomb was "one of the simplest and most unromantic of day labourers" and "the tale had no foundation in fact."



Mrs. Muriel Lebetter nee Whitehurst was born and brought up in Brown Knowl. She said that as a child in the 1940's they never went to play near this cave (above) because of the stories about the man from Handley living there.

Another local cave at Rawhead, was known as **Bloody Bones Cave**. In 1834 Isabella Bishop, the daughter of the Rector of Tattenhall, wrote in her diary of the "dreadful brigands of Bloody Bones Cave" on Rawhead, who terrorised the neighbourhood, plundering graves and stealing cheeses from local farms. She mentions that one of the bandits gave her a black silk dress as 'hush money' but

she reported him nevertheless, and seven bandits were captured and executed. Isabella also wrote of how the bandit 'ladies' used to sell sand in the village for cleaning purposes.

[Extract from Tattenhall the History of a Cheshire Village, Frank Latham (1977)]

The cave on Broxton Hill known as **King James' Parlour** (below) could have been visited by King James in the 17th century when he visited the area. This may have given rise to the local name, although on many maps it is labelled the Stone Caves.

The cave lies below Broxton Old Hall. There are two chambers, one has a tiled floor, a carved door and a glazed window. The smaller cave is small, dark and was once fitted with a door. Locals say the cave was once used for bear baiting. There are scratches on the wall that may have been made by an imprisoned bear. It makes an interesting folly. Possibly the cave was naturally formed in the sandstone hill and was excavated by the early owners of Broxton Old Hall, as a retreat or summer house.



Eddie Hughes of Brown Knowl, who lived in Hall Lane as a child, remembers sheltering in the stone parlour on the night of November 14th 1940, when the bombing seemed particularly threatening, probably the night when Bunbury Church and Barrowmore Hospital were hit, and bombs fell over a wide area of countryside. His father took the family in the sidecar of his motorbike up to Broxton Old Hall yard, through the gates and the wood to the King's Parlour for shelter. About 4 a.m. things quietened down and they went home. They later discovered that a mobile anti-aircraft gun had been set up on the Old Coach Road near the Hall and had been responsible for a lot of the noise.

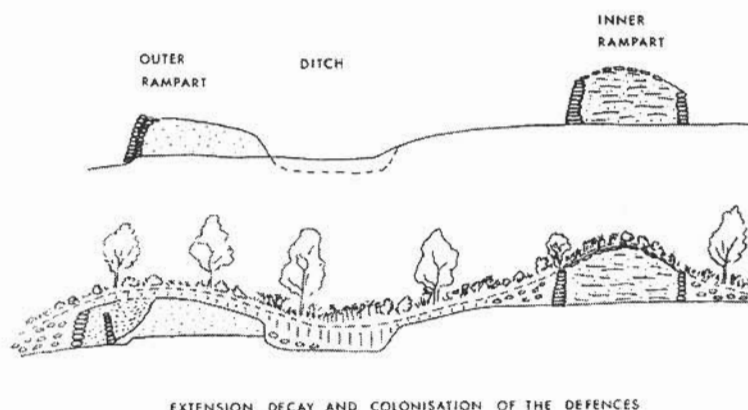
Maiden Castle – An Iron Age Fort

On a vantage point on the crest of Bickerton Hill overlooking Brown Knowl and Fullers Moor is this Iron Age hill fort. The word 'Maiden' means 'untaken' or 'unused'. It was a relatively strong fort.

In 1934-5 W. Varley an archaeologist excavated the area. All that remains of the Iron Age hill fort are two overgrown banks, which were the inner and outer ramparts in an arc against the steep scarp, which formed part of the defences. The ramparts were made with sand and a dry stone front. The inner rampart has an earth and timber core, 20ft. high and 10 ft. wide. Inside circa 200 BC would have been erected a freestanding palisade. Small depressions in the ramparts are remains of quarrying for stone before the area was enclosed in 1742. Archaeological recording was carried out in 1996 as part of the battle clearance operation by the army. Approximately 138 pieces of mortar were recovered and a small iron rock splitting wedge associated with 17th century quarrying.



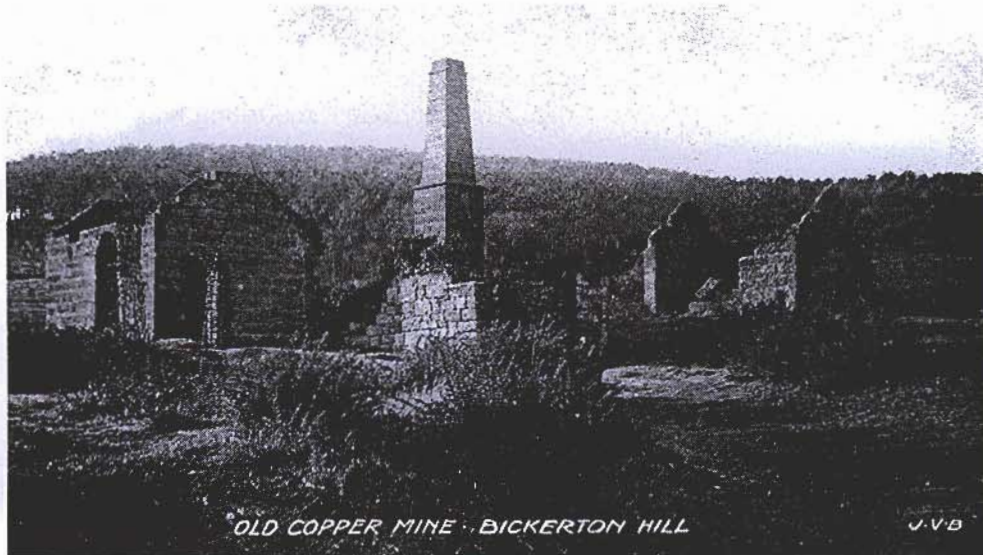
This photograph of the excavations in 1934-5 shows the two broad stone ramparts. Today the vegetation has covered the area. This photograph and the following sketch are taken from the *Sandstone Trail Teacher's Pack* compiled by Diana Raggett for Cheshire County Council.



Mines and Quarries

Amongst the hills around Broxton can be found a number of disused and abandoned sandstone quarries. Some of these were used to obtain sandstone for building, or sand for scouring and cleaning purposes.

In nearby Bickerton, the remains of the old copper mining industry are clearly visible. The photograph below shows the remains of the Copper Mine chimney as it was around 1920.



Copper mining in Bickerton was first recorded in 1696 but there may have been earlier activity. The distinctive chimney is the flue of the pumping engine installed during the 19th century. Six shafts were sunk, one being deepened to 156ft in 1807. The copper ore was last assayed in 1906 and was considered very rich. The Royal Oak at Broxton, was renamed The Coppermine in the 1980s and contains artefacts and pictures relating to mining.

Between 1696 and 1698, eight people were employed. Miners worked in candlelight and were compelled to stay underground for up to 10 hours a day in cramped, damp conditions. Traditionally the skilled miners were German. Johannes Brandshagen features prominently in the mine records. In September 1697 he wrote to his employer Sir Philip Egerton, asking for a pay rise,

"I have now my things for examination of ye oare (ore), which I will doe, as soon as possibly I can come to it, in this desolate place, where nothing in ye world is to be had for any commodities, whatsoever it may be, and whilst we are strangers here, and must buy all things for ready, it is impossible to live of (live on) what your Worship has allowed us..."