

Out and about in Norwell

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It is at Newark that the River Trent turns northwards. Running parallel to the river are the Great North Road (now the A1) and the East Coast Mainline railway. The easily missed village of Norwell lies seven miles north of Newark and one and a half miles west of the A1. In 1853 it was described by White in his *Directory* as 'a large village upon a declivity'. Fortunately for Norwell's inhabitants, both past and present, the ground on which the village stands is sufficiently high to raise it above the surrounding water-meadows which can still flood.

The parish of Norwell consists of the village of Norwell, the hamlet of Norwell Woodhouse and the now deserted hamlet of Willoughby. The population now is about 450, much as it was

in 1250 and 1700. It reached a peak of about 800 in the middle of the nineteenth century when it was a flourishing, almost self-sufficient community, supported by its farms and trades.

Norwell is separated from the major north-south lines of communication by the Beck, a small tributary of the Trent which was not bridged between Cromwell and Norwell until Parliamentary Enclosure in 1832. This isolation is one of the factors which slowed down the pace of change and favoured the retention of a way of life which was changing more rapidly elsewhere.

Two miles north east is Carlton on Trent which is on the Great North Road and has a wharf on the Trent; it also had its own railway station. Until 1873 this village was part of the parish of Norwell and was its gateway to the wider world, even though it had to be reached along a road on heavy clay. Carlton's history and heritage are very different from those of Norwell. A visit there makes an interesting comparison.

The approach to Norwell from the east is dominated by the large and imposing church of St Laurence. The position and the size of the church encapsulate the history of the village. It was a 'church village' from at least the eleventh century until the 1950s. This ownership by the church of land and buildings is the other major factor which slowed down the pace of change. Tenant farmers and penny-pinching landlords were unlikely to be innovative.

The 'mother' church is Southwell Minster, seven miles to the south west; its links with Norwell (*Nortwelle* in *Domesday*) have been close. In the eleventh century the Minster needed to finance its increasing number of prebendaries (canons). Unlike any other parish in Nottinghamshire the rents from the land in Norwell were used to support first two, and then three, prebendaries – Norwell Overhall, Norwell Palishall and Norwell Tertia Pars. The named seats of these prebendaries

Norwell village from the south



Church Farm in the main street



St Laurence church dominating the approach to Norwell from the A1





The Charity School, built around 1727 and restored in 2007



Scott's Cottage showing some external evidence of a timber frame building



The Plough, a public house since about 1800

can be seen in the Chapter House and Choir of Southwell Minster. As well as a manor house in Norwell each prebendary also had a house in Southwell.

Many of Norwell's prebendaries were men of national importance. Several became Archbishops of York; many were bishops of other dioceses. Robert de Wodehouse (died 1346), who was born in Norwell Woodhouse, became treasurer of England. Some resided in Norwell and took an interest in the church; John Clarel (Overhall, 1255-1295), for example, left money in his will for the east window, the tracery of which, although restored, can still be seen. The magnificent clerestory was almost certainly funded by a prebendary in the fifteenth century. An additional link with Southwell Minster was made in the middle of the nineteenth century when the church was restored. The restoration was in the hands of the well-known church architect, Ewan Christian, who gave his attention to Norwell in between working on the restoration of the Minster. His sympathetic restoration retained most of the medieval features of the church although some new ones were added such as the reredos, pulpit and font.

Evidence of the heritage of the parish can be seen in the landscape. The prebendaries left traces with their moated manors. South of the churchyard is the large rectangular moat which is all that remains of the manor of Overhall which may have been constructed in the twelfth century. It was besieged by the Parliamentarians in the Civil War and then abandoned at the end of the seventeenth century. The sites of the two other prebendal manors can be seen elsewhere in the village. A moated farmhouse in Norwell Woodhouse can also be linked to the prebendaries. There is yet another moated site in the deserted village of Willoughby: this was the one building of status which was not in the hands of the church. Willoughby functioned as a very distinct community with a complicated pattern of inheritance and land ownership.

The landscape has been shaped by centuries of farming. Evidence of the medieval three field system can be seen in the ridge and furrow which is still visible in North Field and South Field, but has been ploughed out in Middle Field. The farmhouses, barns and crewyards associated with these fields are clustered in the main street. Church, Black Horse, Box Tree, Hill, School House and Willoughby farmhouses are all still there but none now is a working farm. This can be compared with the nearby village of Laxton which still operates an open field system and retains working farms in the centre of the village.

Over time the open fields of Norwell have been enclosed. The curving hedges following the line once taken by the plough are evidence of Tudor enclosure for sheep farming. This has preserved the ridge and furrow. The small fields with regular straight hedges are the result of Parliamentary Enclosure in 1832. This saw the final disappearance of the open fields although their names were retained in the newly created Southfield Farm and Northfield Farm. Another charming relic of the open field system is the circular brick pinfold, almost opposite the Plough public house.

Every building contributes something to the story of a village; Norwell is no exception. Three vicarages stand in sight of each other. Norwell Grange opposite the church was the eighteenth century vicarage. This was replaced by the Victorian vicarage set back on top of the hill; it was thought to be a healthier position after one vicar's three daughters became ill and died. The modern vicarage was built in 1974. Three school buildings stand within 50m of each other in School Lane. Earliest is the Charity School first endowed in 1727 when land was left to provide an

Prebendal stalls of Norwell Overhall and Norwell Palishall in the Chapter House of Southwell Minster



The tower windmill



The pelican in its piety on the Victorian reredos



income to support poor scholars. Rents from the same land are still used for the benefit of children in the parish. The Charity School has an Artisan Mannerist doorway. The Victorian School, typical red-brick Gothic, was built in 1872 and this in turn was replaced by the current school in 1965. The three buildings provide remarkable evidence for the history of education.

Most of the buildings along the main street are built in red brick and roofed with the pantiles characteristic of the area. Many of the rougher bricks

were produced locally as Norwell had its own brickyard in the middle of the nineteenth century. In some cases brick walls completely encase timber frame buildings; the earliest, Southview Cottage, dates back to 1306. Some external timbers are still visible in Old House, Auld Cottage and Scott's Cottage. This encasing of an earlier building, rather than demolition and replacement, took place from the seventeenth century onwards and was typical in an impoverished community where landlords were unwilling to invest in new buildings.

The names of some of the houses give an indication of a formerly self-sufficient community – the Old Post Office, the Old Stores, the Old Saddlers, the Old Forge, Blacksmith's Cottage, Brickyard Cottages, the Mill House. The tower mill still stands, but without its sails. In the nineteenth century wheelwrights, shoemakers, butchers and bakers plied their trades. In the previous century, Norwell had the distinction of having its own clock maker.

In many respects all modern villages are alike. They usually have a church and a pub, possibly a school and a village hall. If they are fortunate they may

continue to have their own shop and post office. Norwell has all of these. Villages are made different by their building materials and their layout. Above all they are made different by the landscape and their location within it, and by their owners. In the case of Norwell ownership by the church has made it the distinctive and interesting village that it is.

The Norwell Parish Heritage Group, with support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, has produced five Norwell Heritage Booklets – *Norwell Buildings*, *Norwell Trades*, *Norwell Mills*, *Norwell Schools* and *Norwell Farms*. Each is well-illustrated and extremely informative, available for the price of £4 each plus postage and package. For further information email: emjones.norwell@btinternet.com or call: 01636 636365.

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