

# Stoak and Stanney

Under this heading are records and recollections of eight townships in or near the Parish of Stoak and from which are drawn the members of the Stoak and Stanney Women's Institute.

Ormerod gives the first recorded date for Stoak as 1316, it being then a part of the Soterlegh estate, but it is thought to have been part of the land given to Hugh Lupus by William the Conqueror, It passed to the Thornton family and in 1550, by marriage with the family of De Duttons, to the Bunburys, who held it until 1750. Stoak includes Little Stanney, Croughton and Wervin, and until 1922, parts of Whitby and Ellesmere Port.

The **Church of St. Lawrence** dates from Norman times, although it is thought that a church stood there in Saxon days. In 1349, it was "a sumptuous building of stone and wood with four bells" (Ormerod). It has the not-uncommon legend of the stones prepared for building being repeatedly removed by supernatural hands from the selected site to the present position. A fragment of a drawing of the twelfth century building here has been discovered in the British Museum. The Church was almost entirely rebuilt in 1827; the North wall and roof of the nave and the shell of the chancel are all that remain of the earlier Church. The three bells in the tower are the oldest in Wirral (1615-42) and the bells carry the mark of the Clibury branch foundry at Holt. A fourth and older (1598) sanctus bell hung in the Old Village School until the steeple became dangerous and it was removed. Also in the Church Tower is a one-handed clock.

The Church's most precious possession is an Elizabethan communion chalice of 1576 with the "mutton-mark" seal of the Chester silversmith who made it. The communion table and altar rails are the oldest in Wirral; and the Church registers are amongst the oldest (1538) and best kept in the county. The earliest recorded name still borne by a local family is Venables (1694), the families of Bunbury and Grace of Whitby having died out. There are many records of "twopences" being distributed to "passengers" to leave the parish - no doubt poor tramps, who might become a charge on the parish.

In 1816, Ormerod describes Stoak as a collection of filthy hovels scattered round the Church; now, however, it is a pleasant and well-cared-for village with a small, new Council house estate.

In the Domesday Book, **Little Stanney** (Stoney Place) was part of the desmesne of Hugh Lupus. The Bunbury family of Stanney Old Hall were Lords of the Manor from the eleventh to the eighteenth century and lived in Wirral's finest mediaeval house, in which an unusual feature was the Court Room - with four oak trees standing one at each corner, the branches forming the vaulting of the roof. In 1820, while the owner was abroad, an over-zealous agent had the Hall pulled down, hoping to see a "fine modern house" in its place. The oak was sold for firewood, and the local smith found a hoard of gold coins, probably hidden during the Civil War, in one fine beam.

Beneath Shop Farm, which was once the village inn, where beer was brewed in the cellar, are remains of the Roman road to Stoak. Few old buildings remain in the village. The Post Office is a cottage altered beyond recognition, and its two neighbours await demolition; all were charity cottages for widows. The old water mill, which worked within living memory, is a mere skeleton within the boundary of the Shell Refinery. Eighteenth century Rake Hall still stands, but the trunk road to North Wales has cut through the rural charm of Little Stanney. Great Stanney has been absorbed into the Borough of Ellesmere Port, and part of Stanney Hall is an office.

**Wervin** (Wivrevine) was closely associated with Chester, and the Abbey of St. Werburgh held half of it at Domesday. Later, it belonged to the Dean and Chapter, and in 1390, it was in the parish of St. Olave, Chester, but was taken over by Stoak parish in 1922. There is evidence of a Saxon church and, until the dissolution, a small monastery. Of this, the old chapel has been desecrated and is now "a common farm shed with a picturesque exterior" and a beautiful quatrefoil-headed window.

**Croughton** is a very small and purely agricultural village, which was also associated with the Abbey of St. Werburgh, until it was seized, at the dissolution, by Sir Richard Cotton. It is thought that the valley called "The Dungeons", which separated the Wirral and Broxton Hundreds, and along which the Shropshire Union Canal now flows, was once the course of a branch of the Mersey that flowed into the Dee. Another small village, Chorlton, is now in the parish of St. Oswald, Backford, and is noted as the one time home of Ormerod, the Cheshire historian.

**Stanlow** (Stanlaw) – "On this very bleak and uninviting spot, John, Sixth Baron of Halton and Constable of Chester, founded in the year 1100 A.D. a monastery of the Cistercian Order". The monks regarded the position with natural aversion. Ormerod says, "It is difficult to select a scene of more comfortless desolation than this cheerless marsh... approached by one miserable trackway of mud". The monastery flourished for a while, but then had a series of disasters by storm and fire until it was moved to Whalley in Lancashire, leaving only a cell for four monks. The last traces, an archway and door on Stanlow Point, disappeared a few years ago, and the whole area is now covered by the Shell Refinery.

**Whitby**, although not mentioned in Domesday, was included in a grant to the Abbey of St. Werburgh in 1093. Until the construction of the Ship Canal, it was a completely agricultural community in one of the prettiest of the Wirral villages. Suburban houses have replaced old cottages and farm houses and modern roads run in place of leafy lanes lined with periwinkles, rest harrow and a rare species of wild orchis (orchid).

**Ellesmere Port** was known as Whitby Locks until the completion of the Shropshire Union Canal; the "port" is now far larger than the little Shropshire town from which it took its name. Whitby Locks was at first a small pleasure resort with one hotel and salt baths, which people from Chester visited by boat or road. The local inhabitants went to Stoak Church in a barge drawn by a donkey.

In 1843, the first dock and warehouse were built, and Whitby Locks became Ellesmere Port. The Shropshire Union Canal Company's tugs, known locally as "the packet", drew flats of grain from Liverpool to Ellesmere Port. When the Manchester Ship Canal was completed in 1891, the township was completely severed from the river and it grew rapidly, having increased its population tenfold since 1901. Although oil refineries and other industries, together with new housing estates, cover the former farmlands and marshes, and Ellesmere Port being granted a Borough Charter in 1956, the Mayor of the new borough in 1960 was a descendant of the Venables of Stoak.

The Stanney duck provides a well-known ghost story. The bird haunted the lanes, and so upset and frightened the natives that a band of men went out together, laid in wait for the duck, and having caught it, they cut off its head and buried its body at the top of Stoak Lane. So nowadays, it hurries by without its head.