

## Introduction



Figure 1: Coston village, looking east

The small village of Coston in north-east Leicestershire lies on the B676 road between the market town of Melton Mowbray, seven miles to the WSW, and the A1 junction at Colsterworth (Lincs.), a similar distance to the east (Figure 1). Following several periods of shrinkage, most notably in the 14th century and the late 19th century, the village in 2021 comprised just 16 houses and a medieval church. Land to the south of the church contains the earthworks of former house platforms. Since 1834 all the land in the parish has been part of the Buckminster Estate, owned by the Tollemache family. Buckminster parish lies immediately east of Coston, and they share a parish boundary.

Coston was an ancient parish in its own right, but since 1936 it has formed part of the civil parish of Garthorpe;<sup>1</sup> the village of Garthorpe is 1½ miles south-west of Coston. The connections between these villages stretch back further: in the early 19th century both villages had common rights to c.100 a. of heathland in the north of the parishes,<sup>2</sup> which was shown by the Ordnance Survey in 1885 as 'Lands Rated to the Parishes of Coston & Garthorpe'.<sup>3</sup> This may be the same land mentioned in a court roll of 1541, which records that some ten years previously the parishes could not agree which of them had responsibility for burying a stranger who had been found dead 'where the contention is now between Coston & Garthorpe'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Youngs, *Admin. Units*, II, 224, 226.

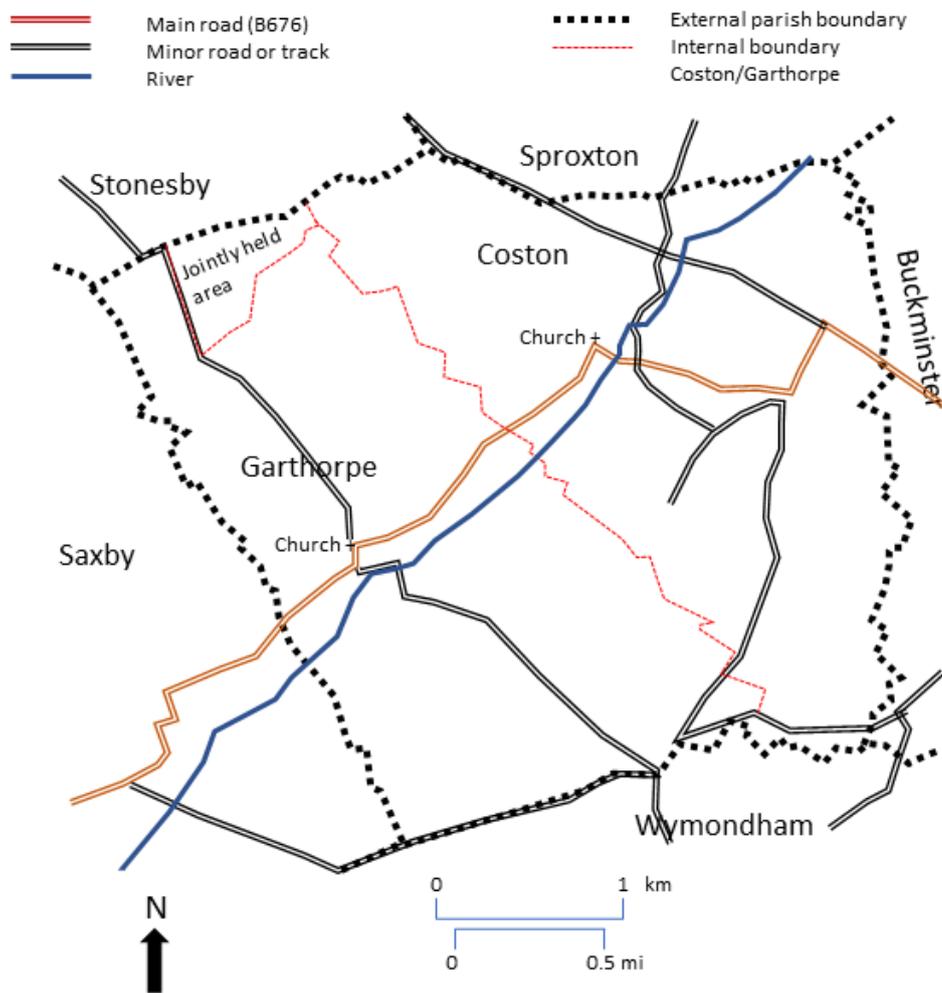
<sup>2</sup> ROLLR, DE 1844/1.

<sup>3</sup> OS Map, 25", Leics. XIII.16 (1885 edn); TNA, OS 27/2917.

<sup>4</sup> ROLLR, DE 1322/1.

## Boundaries and parish origins

Although Coston and Garthorpe were separate ancient parishes, each with its own medieval church, their parish boundaries suggest they originally formed a single administrative unit (Map 1). Together they are shaped like a rhombus, bisected by the B676 road and the almost parallel river Eye, which both cross the parish from north east to south west. The external boundary is so straight it may have originally been drawn over virgin land, with the internal boundary between the Coston and Garthorpe forming a series of steps at right angles to the river, presumably marking the ends of the open-field furlongs of the two villages (Map 1).



Map 1: Parish boundaries

## Landscape and soils

The river Eye rises c.2 miles north of the parish boundary, in Sproxton, and flows south west towards Melton Mowbray. Its name changes to the Wreake just beyond the town of Melton as it continues its journey south to join the river Soar at Syston, near Leicester. The ground in Coston is gently undulating, from c.100 m above Ordnance Datum along the river, rising to c.135 m above OD at its highest points. Both the main road and a minor road to Sproxton cross the river. Both were fords

until 1909, when a bridge was constructed on the main road.<sup>5</sup> The crossing on the minor road remains a ford.

With the exception of the alluvial deposits alongside the river, the underlying geology of the parish is Charmouth Mudstone Formation, overlain by Diamicton. It is bounded on the north-east by the ironstone ridge which underlays Buckminster and Sproxton, and to the north by Lower Lincolnshire Limestone at Stonesby. These two stone types were both used for the parish church, and present an attractive visual contrast. The topsoil is classified as a medium-heavy, slightly acid, loamy clay, which is seasonally wet and drains to the river.<sup>6</sup> The farmland in 2021 is partly arable and partly pasture, with the latter grazed by sheep.

## Communications

Richard Dobney offered a weekly carrier service to Melton in 1846,<sup>7</sup> and there was still a weekly service to that town in 1895.<sup>8</sup>

Centrebus provided a daily service in 2022 between Melton Mowbray and Grantham (Lincs., 13 miles to the north east of Coston), stopping in the village, although with only a single bus daily to Melton and two from that town (three on Saturdays), all morning services.<sup>9</sup>

The nearest railway stations were Saxby (in Freeby parish) on the Syston to Peterborough branch line of the Midland Railway, which opened in 1848,<sup>10</sup> and closed in 1961, and Wymondham and Edmondthorpe, on a branch line from Saxby to Bourne, which opened to passengers in 1894 and closed in 1959.<sup>11</sup>

Thomas Watkins was appointed receiver of post in 1851, but within two months the position had been transferred to James Cawthorne, and remained with the Cawthorne family until the 1910s. The office closed between 1951 and 1955.<sup>12</sup>

## Population

The 23 households enumerated in 1086 suggests a population of about 105.<sup>13</sup> There are no records to provide an estimate of the extent of population growth before the Black Death, but 82 people were assessed for the poll tax of 1377, suggesting a population of 120.<sup>14</sup> Pottery sequences in the fields suggest there had been substantial depopulation by the late 14th century.<sup>15</sup> There may have been some recovery by 1563, when 26 households were enumerated,<sup>16</sup> although the house platforms to the south of the church remained vacant.

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<sup>5</sup> ROLLR, DE 427/6; *Leic. Chronicle*, 29 May 1909; *Grantham Jnl*, 21 Aug. 1909.

<sup>6</sup> <http://mapapps2.bgs.ac.uk/ukso/home.html> (accessed 30 Sept. 2021).

<sup>7</sup> W. White, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland* (Sheffield, 1846), 231.

<sup>8</sup> *Kelly's Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland* (1895), 59.

<sup>9</sup> <https://bustimes.org/localities/coston> (accessed 5 Apr. 2022).

<sup>10</sup> *VCH Leics.* III, 118.

<sup>11</sup> *VCH Leics.* III, 124.

<sup>12</sup> Soar, 76.

<sup>13</sup> *Domesday*, 636.

<sup>14</sup> C.C. Fenwick (ed.), *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381* (Oxford, 1998), I, 484–5.

<sup>15</sup> N. Dransfield, S. Bell and R. O'Neill, 'Anglo-Saxon settlement at Coston Hall, Leicestershire', *Trans. LAHS.* 89 (2015), 113–44.

<sup>16</sup> A. Dyer and D.M. Palliser, *The Diocesan Population Returns for 1563 and 1603* (Oxford, 2005), 215.

The later 16th century appears to have been a period of rapid growth, with 95 communicants in the village in 1603, indicating a population of about 142.<sup>17</sup> By then, the open fields were starting to be enclosed for pasture.<sup>18</sup> One-third of the population appears to have moved away by 1676, when only 66 communicants were recorded, with two Roman Catholics.<sup>19</sup> The villagers testified in 1607 that Coston's lord, Maurice Berkeley, had enclosed land and depopulated the village in the year before his death in 1601.<sup>20</sup> It is difficult to reconcile this with the Heath Tax of 1670, which recorded 22 houses which were taxed and nine houses exempt from the tax, and perhaps the exemptions were empty properties rather than poor residents.<sup>21</sup> There was perhaps a slight increase in population by 1709, when 31 families were recorded, c.126 people.<sup>22</sup>

The population continued to increase over the first half of the 19th century, from 150 in 1801 to a peak of 185 in 1851. There was then a steady decline over each decade to 78 in 1911, following which the number stabilised, with 74 in 1931. Later figures are only available for the civil parish of Garthorpe (including Coston). There were 81 houses in Coston in 1861 and just 16 in 2021.

## Settlement

There has been little archaeological fieldwork in the parish, but limited investigations in 2010–11 ahead of building activity found some worked flints and small quantities of Romano-British pottery of the 3rd and 4th centuries. There is no evidence of continuity from the Roman to the Anglo-Saxon period. The earliest clear indications for settlement date from the early–mid Saxon period (5th to mid 9th centuries) on land to the east of the river, immediately south-east of the former Coston Hall mansion (see map 2). Pottery sherds, mostly of early Stamford or Lincoln shelly ware (dating from c.850–1000), also included a few sherds of Ipswich ware, which are very unusual for Leicestershire.<sup>23</sup>

The first element of the place name is a Scandinavian name, *Katr*, while the second element is an Anglo-Saxon word for a settlement or farmstead. This combination, also found locally in Sproxtton and Croxtton (*Kerrial*) has been held to belong to the initial phase of Danish settlement, c.870.<sup>24</sup>

The lack of Saxo-Norman or later pottery scatters to the east of the river, or other archaeological material in that area other than the post-medieval Coston Hall, is striking. The earlier finds may be from a dispersed settlement that had been partially abandoned by the mid 11th century, perhaps through nucleation on slightly higher ground to the west of the river.<sup>25</sup> The church, also to the west of the river, is known to have been built by c.1080.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>17</sup> A. Dyer and D.M. Palliser, *The Diocesan Population Returns for 1563 and 1603* (Oxford, 2005), 337.

<sup>18</sup> Above, Economic History.

<sup>19</sup> A. Whiteman (ed.), *The Compton Census of 1676: a Critical Edition* (Oxford, 1986), 339.

<sup>20</sup> TNA, STAC 8/16/13; L.A. Parker, 'The depopulation returns for Leics. in 1607', *Trans. LAHS* 23 (1947), 243–5; L.A. Parker, 'Enclosure in Leics., 1485–1607' (PhD, London, 1948), 106–7, 120–1.

<sup>21</sup> VCH Leics., III, 170.

<sup>22</sup> J. Broad, *Bishop Wake's Summary of Visitation Returns from the Diocese of Lincoln, 1706–1715* (Oxford, 2012), II, 758.

<sup>23</sup> N. Dransfield, S. Bell and R. O'Neill, 'Anglo-Saxon settlement at Coston Hall, Leicestershire', *Trans. LAHS* 89 (2015), 113–44.

<sup>24</sup> B. Cox, *The Place-Names of Leicestershire II* (Nottingham, 2002), 151, 245–6, 102.

<sup>25</sup> N. Dransfield, S. Bell and R. O'Neill, 'Anglo-Saxon settlement at Coston Hall, Leicestershire', *Trans. LAHS* 89 (2015), 113–44.

<sup>26</sup> Below, Religious History.

Earthworks to the west of the river and south of the church include apparent medieval house platforms, enclosures, trackways and remnants of ridge and furrow cultivation.<sup>27</sup> Archaeology on this side of the river reveals evidence for late Saxon, Saxo-Norman and medieval occupation up to around the end of the 14th century, with the relative quantities of pottery suggesting the settlement to the west of the river was larger than that to the east. None of the pottery found dates to beyond the end of the 14th century, which may reflect extensive desertion of the village at that time, perhaps resulting from a combination of adverse economic conditions and the Black Death.<sup>28</sup>

Two large depressions to the north of the church appear to have been fishponds (figure 2). They may have been connected to an early manor house to the north of the church, but there is no indication that the property which stood 75 m. south of the fishponds in 1845 was either large or unusual, although the larger property on that site in 1885 was labelled 'Manor House' by the Ordnance Survey.



Figure 2: One of the fishponds, north of the church. The buildings are part of Church Farm (formerly Manor Farm)

Other earthworks to the south of Grange Lane and to the east of Grange Farm (marked as no. 80 on Map 2) outline early closes and two large building platforms, which probably relate to Croxton Abbey's grange, which stood on this land before 1536.

<sup>27</sup> R.F. Hartley, *The Medieval Earthworks of North-East Leicestershire* (Leicester, 1987), 25.

<sup>28</sup> Dransfield, Bell and O'Neill, 'Anglo-Saxon settlement', 113–44.



Map 2: Coston in 1845 (Tithe map); north at top

The farmhouse attached to Mill Farm is built from local ironstone, with limestone dressings (Figure 3). Its outbuildings are limestone. The other farmhouses are brick, although several have limestone outbuildings.



Figure 3: Mill Farm (west elevation facing the road)

The large property to the east of the river in 1846, with probable outbuildings to its north-west, was described as a ‘mansion’ in the tithe award. This was probably the house built c.1790 by James Phelp (lord of the manor) for his own occupation. This was known as Coston Hall, and was surrounded by an orchard and gardens. The property was occupied by Michael Marriott in 1845, a tenant who farmed 106 a.<sup>29</sup> It was ‘now in ruins’ in 1863,<sup>30</sup> and had been demolished by 1885.<sup>31</sup>

The rectory stood apart from the village, on the road to Buckminster. It was demolished c.1960. Houses stood in 1846 on either side of Grange Lane, which led to a farmhouse (Grange Farm) to the south east. Mill Farm, to the north, is near the site of a former watermill and mill pond.

By 1884 the farmhouses and outbuildings at the three main farms, Mill Farm, Manor Farm and Grange Farm, were all larger than they had been in 1845, and two pairs of semi-detached houses had been erected opposite the church, one pair in 1881 and the other in 1884 (Figure 4).<sup>32</sup> A small house had also been built on the lane which leads north west from the village. The other farms in the village were very small, and probably ceased to be viable as a result of the agricultural depression of the late 19th century. The census reveals that tenant farmers and farm labourers moved away and, some properties were demolished: the rector recorded in 1905 that the Earl of Dysart (landowner) had ‘pulled down some 20 cottages here and built four’.<sup>33</sup> The properties on both sides of Grange Lane were taken down between 1884 and 1902, although Highfield Farm was

<sup>29</sup> ROLLR, Ti/80/1; White (Sheffield, 1846), 230.

<sup>30</sup> White (Sheffield, 1863), 346.

<sup>31</sup> OS Map,, 25”, Leics. XXI.1 (1885 edn).

<sup>32</sup> Date tablets extant and seen by author, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Northants. Archives, Box X 924.

built in this period.<sup>34</sup> The post office closed between 1951 and 1955,<sup>35</sup> and the building had been demolished by 1975.<sup>36</sup>



Figure 4: Pair of farmworkers cottages, built in 1884 with later extensions (north elevation)

<sup>34</sup> OS Map 25", Leics. XXI.1 (1885) and (1904).

<sup>35</sup> Soar, 76.

<sup>36</sup> OS Map, 1:2500, SK 8422 (1975).