

VCH Leicestershire draft text

LEIRE**Introduction**

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VICTORIA
COUNTY
HISTORY

Leicestershire

The parish of Leire lies 6.5km (4 miles) north-west of Lutterworth, and a similar distance east of the junction of Watling Street with the Fosse. The place-name is thought to have originated as *Legra*, the pre-English period name of the stream on which the village stands. The name Leicester has the same origin, and possibly takes its name the name of the people who lived in this area.¹ A few miles to the south-east are the villages of Walcote and Walton, their initial elements from *walh*, 'a Briton'.² It is therefore possible that this part of the county was once an enclave of British survival.

Minor roads lead in all directions from the nucleated village, which is of linear form, extending along both sides of the main street. The surrounding fields are edged with mixed hedges and trees, with few outlying farm buildings. The economy has always been heavily dependent on agriculture, although there was some framework-knitting in the 19th century. Like many places in Leicestershire, the village has expanded since the 1950s, and in 2001 contained approximately 600 residents.

Parish boundaries and extent

The shape of the parish is a rough square measuring one kilometre along each side. The present parish boundary has remained unchanged since the mapping by the Ordnance Survey in 1891,³ following existing or former field boundaries. At two points, where the parish boundary meets a road and there is no field boundary immediately opposite, road and boundary coincide for a short distance until a convenient field boundary is reached. In the parliamentary enclosure award of 1780, four yardlands in the common fields in the south and west of the parish were described as 'reputed to be in the parish of Kimcoate', equivalent to about 50 a.⁴ In the plans prepared in 1835 for the building of the Midland Counties railway line through Leire, it was noted that certain fields were 'in Kimcote'.⁵ In 1877 a detached part of Kimcote was annexed to Leire by Local Government Board Order, at the same time as a detached part of Leire was annexed to Ashby Parva.⁶ In 1901 the area of the parish was 1107 a. (448 ha).⁷ No connection between Leire, Kimcote and Ashby Parva is apparent in records such as the *Taxatio* or *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, which can sometimes hint at early relationships.⁸

¹ B. Cox, *Place-Names of Leicestershire* (Nottingham, 2011), V, 129

² Ibid., 149, 113.

³ OS Map 6", Leics. XLIII (1891 edition)

⁴ Record Office of Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland, DE 144:EN/A/198/1, *Leire Enclosure Award*

⁵ ROLLR, QS 73/13, *Midland Railway Book of Reference and Plans*, DE 1425/73 Lawyers' Accounts, Rates dispute between Leire, Kimcote, Ashby Parva and Ashby Magna

⁶ TNA, HLG 66/14

⁷ TNA, RG 13/2950, 1901 Census

⁸ *Taxatio ecclesiastica Angliae et Walliae Auctoritate Papae Nicholas IV circa 1291* (1802), 63; *Valor ecclesiasticus*, IV, 146, 152, 183-185

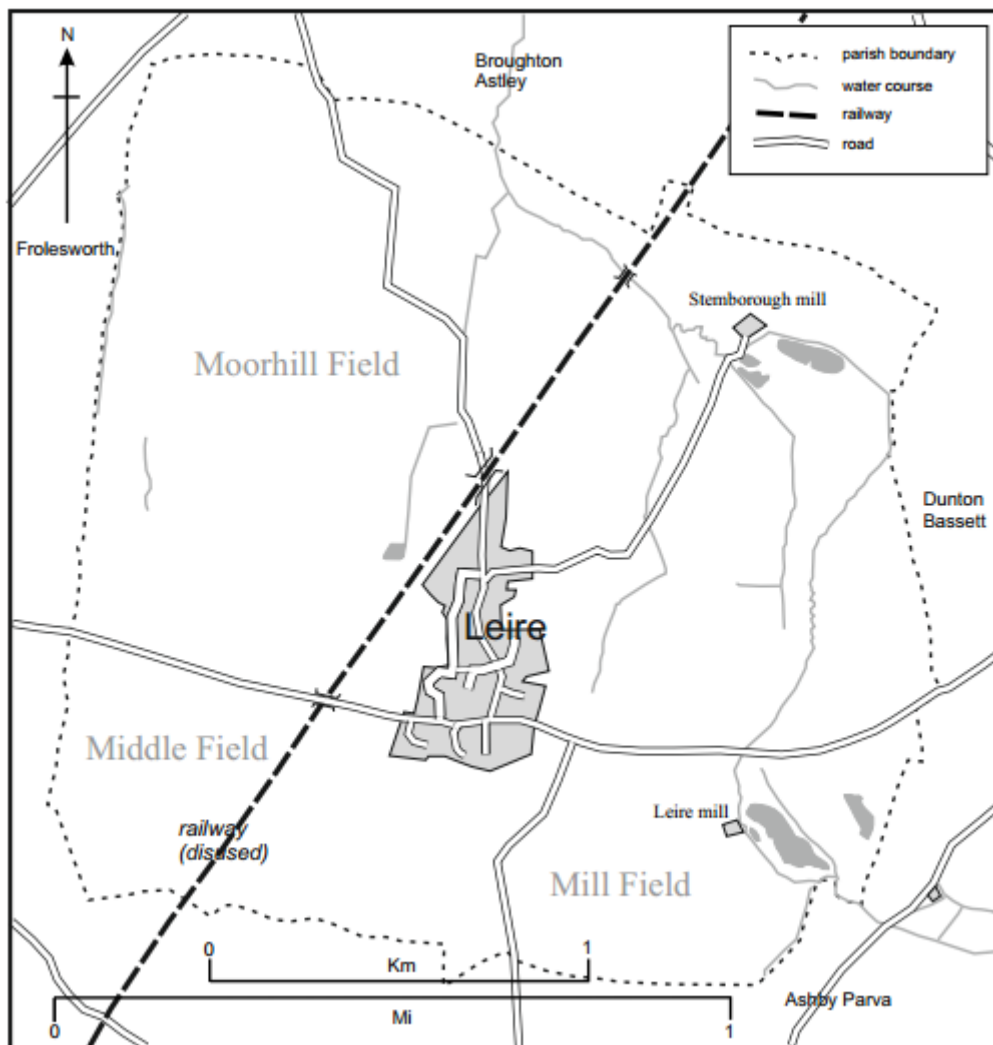


Figure 1: The parish of Leire

Physical features

The highest land, rising to 125 m. above sea-level, is in the south west of the parish, sloping down to 90 m. in the north. The soils are a mixture of sand and gravel or clay and silt,⁹ across which small streams flow northwards. The main stream powered two mills and its course was diverted between the two, so that it flows almost parallel to the contours before entering the mill leat of the second mill. Its valley marks a division between the higher land to the south which rises up to Watling Street and lower land to the north which becomes the Soar valley. The land outside the village is divided into pasture and arable fields. The fields to the west are predominantly arable and those to the east are mostly pasture, with an increasing acreage being used for the grazing of horses.

Communication

Leire is 20 km. (12 miles) south west of Leicester, lying close to the south west boundary of the county formed by Watling Street. The nearby town of Lutterworth has a weekly market, provides a range of goods and services and is also the nearest access point to the M1. The A5 and M69 beyond

⁹ British Geological Survey 1:10000 SP58NW 2, SP59SW 2, (1992, 1991)

Claybrooke Magna give access to the west of the country. The former Midland Counties railway line cuts across the parish from the south west to the north east forming a northerly border to the village itself.¹⁰ It opened in 1840 linking Rugby to Derby and Nottingham.¹¹ Until 1925 trains passed through the parish without stopping, but in that year Leire Halt opened for passengers and later for goods.¹² It was closed to all traffic in 1962 and the southern part of the line, which lay in a cutting, became an 800 m. nature walk in 1989.¹³ Elsewhere, the line has been filled in for grazing or left as a wooded bank.



Figure 2: The disused railway bridge over Broughton Lane marks the limit to housing development on the north side of the village.

Carriers between Leire and Leicester, Lutterworth and Hinckley increased in number during the 19th century. In 1815 a carrier service to Leire from Leicester operated every Saturday afternoon from the White Swan.¹⁴ By 1846 there were two carriers driving to Leicester on Wednesdays and Saturdays.¹⁵ In 1863 Thomas Harrison was travelling to Hinckley on Mondays, but this service appeared to have been short-lived.¹⁶ Three carriers were also travelling to Lutterworth on Thursdays to take advantage of the market day there. In 1916 the only link mentioned was to Leicester on Wednesdays and Saturdays, returning from the Town Arms at 5 pm.¹⁷

In 2015, the village still retains an hourly bus service from early morning until early evening providing transport to Rugby or Leicester via Lutterworth or to the retail park at Fosse Park.

¹⁰ ROLLR, QS73/13, *Midland Railway Book of Reference and Plans*

¹¹ *Leicester Journal*, 3 July 1840

¹² *Guardian and South Leicestershire Advertiser*, 6 March 1925

¹³ *Leicester Mercury*, 1 October 1989

¹⁴ *The Leicester Directory*, (Leicester 1815), 78

¹⁵ *White's Dir. Leics.* (1846), 400

¹⁶ *White's Dir. Leics.* (1863), 752

¹⁷ *Kelly's Dir. Leics.* (1916), 546

The first directory mention of a postal service is in 1846, when a daily delivery from Lutterworth was recorded.¹⁸ In 1849 the post office keeper was James Pettifor, who was also a wheelwright and grocer.¹⁹ By 1925 Mrs Sarah Robinson was the sub-postmistress, receiving two deliveries from Lutterworth and dispatching post to Lutterworth twice every weekday.²⁰ Thomas Dove, who also ran an agricultural machinery business, was later sub-postmaster, and by 1936, Rugby had replaced Lutterworth as the postal town.²¹ From 1957 until 1977 a house on the east side of Main Street became the post office and continued as such until its closure in 2009, where the post box remains in use.²²

A recent campaign has resulted in Leire being one of the areas expected to receive improved broadband services by 2015.²³

Population

Nineteen people, including a priest, were recorded in 1086,²⁴ suggesting a population of about 80, slightly smaller than average compared with other settlements in Guthlaxton hundred. In the Lay Subsidy Roll of 1327 there are 14 names.²⁵ The Poll Tax of 1377 listed 65 names, perhaps 120 people in total, placing Leire again among the smaller settlements.²⁶

The ecclesiastical census of 1563 Leire gives 23 families, suggesting a total of between 120 and 130 people.²⁷ The 70 communicants above 14 years enumerated in 1603 is one of the smallest totals locally, showing little growth in the village since 1563.²⁸ The Compton census in 1676 however showed a doubling to 144 communicants,²⁹ and the Hearth Tax return of 1670 records 51 households, more than twice the figure for 1563.³⁰ This differs from the trend seen in other villages in this part of the county, which in general terms witnessed substantial population growth between 1563 and 1603, followed by a decline in population between 1603 and the 1670s.

Population returns from national censuses show a gradual rise from 347 people in 1801 to a peak of 455 in 1831, after which it fell to 239 in 1901.³¹ In 1871 the enumerator commented on a steeper decline which he attributed to the demolition of houses, 17 being empty in 1861 but only three a decade later. He also noted a decrease of 80 people from the total which he thought was due to the migration of young people into the town. Numbers rose again slowly to 303 in 1951.³² Since that date

¹⁸ *White's History* (1846), 400

¹⁹ J. Soer, *The Royal Mail in Leics and Rutland* (Upton-on-Severn, 1997), 170 and TNA, HO107/2078

²⁰ Kelly's, *Directory* (1925), 594

²¹ Kelly's, *Directory* (1936), 857

²² Personal knowledge

²³ <http://www.superfast-openreach.co.uk/rural-broadband/> accessed 12 Jan 2014

²⁴ A. Williams and G.H. Martin (eds.), *Domesday Book: A Complete Translation* (London, 2002), 629, 639, 641

²⁵ W.G.D. Fletcher, 'The Earliest Leicestershire Lay Subsidy Roll, 1327', *Reports and Papers of the Assoc. Architectural Societies*, XIX (1887-8), 300

²⁶ C.C. Fenwick (ed.), *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381*, British Academy Records of Social and Economic History, (Oxford, 1998), I, 491

²⁷ A. Dyer and D. M. Palliser (eds.), *The Diocesan Population Returns for 1563 and 1603* (Oxford, 2005)

²⁸ *VCH Leics* III, 169

²⁹ A. Whiteman, *The Compton Census of 1676: A Critical Edition* (London, 1986), 328-340

³⁰ *VCH Leics* III, 172. See 'Economic History' for context in Leire.

³¹ *VCH Leics*, III, 192

³² *VCH Leics*, III, 192

the total has risen sharply to approximately 600 people, part of this increase being commuters using the convenient motorway connections.³³

Settlement

Fieldwalking has produced scatters of worked flints of Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age date to the west of the village.³⁴ A cluster of Roman greyware sherds and mortarium fragments has been found on the hilltop, more than 500m. west of the village, suggesting a low-status Romano-British site,³⁵ and also showing discontinuity with the present village site.

The mill buildings are remote, the present village being sited some distance from the stream. With that exception, the village has been the focus of settlement in the parish from the medieval period. Numerous sherds of Potters Marston ware have been found at a site near Elms Farm close to the church, the volume and unspoiled condition suggesting an occupation site of the 12th or 13th century.³⁶ The church tower is also of this date.³⁷ North east of the church are the remains of earthworks described as medieval fishponds and building platforms,³⁸ which may relate to one of the manors. This area is likely to have formed the core of the medieval settlement.³⁹

The church is at the southern end of the village and the linear settlement falls gently northwards, with 19th and 20th century houses lining the main street, between the medieval core and the lane to Stemborough Mill. The built character is that of a former agricultural village with houses constructed mainly of brick, roofed with slate or tiles. Early photographs show that roofs were thatched in the 19th century but in 2015, only two properties are thatched.⁴⁰ The variation in design of houses along the main street suggests that the present houses were built over an extended period, as individual dwellings were replaced. Numerous patches of undeveloped land along the main street were used as allotments and smallholdings until the mid-20th century, when they were developed for housing. This was followed by small-scale developments in the second half of the 20th century, northwards as far as the railway bridge and along Main Street. These single houses and small groups have resulted in a more densely developed village. A second road runs from east to west past the church with modern housing on both sides. A back lane runs parallel to the main street, forming the garden boundary of the houses on the west side of Main Street, possibly indicating a planned element. Measurement of the frontages of the plots along Main Street suggests that small groups of houses were built with a similar plot width, such as 18 ft., 19 ft. or 22 ft. The older houses of the village are a mix of detached and terraced dwellings, fronting directly onto the street. As the agricultural emphasis has diminished, some smaller cottages have been combined to form large houses, similar to those built at The Green and on the opposite corner south of the village hall, where a petrol station stood in the mid-20th century.

³³ Neighbourhood Statistics, 2001 Census, Office for National Statistics

³⁴ Leicestershire and Rutland Historic Environment Record, Leire, MLE18651 (OS: SP520904)

³⁵ Leics and Rutland HER, Leire, LE9177 (OS: SP519904)

³⁶ Leics. and Rutland HER, Leire, LE9179 (OS: SP 524899)

³⁷ Sherd dated by Dr Richard Pollard, Leics. County Archaeologist, 21 Feb 2012

³⁸ Leics. and Rutland HER, Leire, LE1852, 1854 (OS: SP 527902)

³⁹ Leics. and Rutland HER, Leire, LE9183 (OS: SP 525901)

⁴⁰ ROLLR, DE 5905/3 CD ROM containing photographs of village houses (2000)

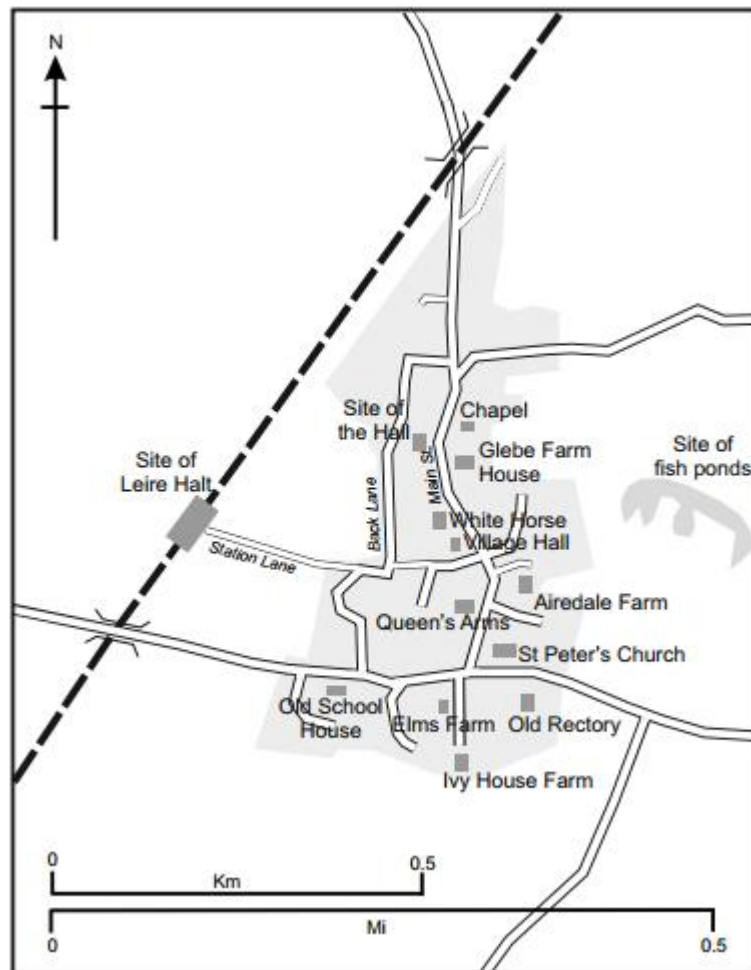


Figure 3: The village of Leire

The village is largely residential, and in 2015 is still able to support two public houses. Four substantial former farmhouses remain as evidence of the village's agricultural past. Most of the housing is privately owned including about half of the 26 council-built houses which have been purchased by tenants. A conservation area, approved in 1975 and revised in 2006, is largely congruent with the area of the village shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1891.⁴¹ Within it are a number of grade II listed buildings of mainly 18th and 19th century date, some with an earlier core.⁴² Infilling by building on garden land is the main source of new houses.

A late 20th century light industrial estate has been replaced by housing,⁴³ and the main non-residential activity is equestrian, both private and commercial. The fields contain a mixture of arable crops, pasture for cattle, sheep and horses and stables.

⁴¹ Leire Conservation Area, Planning Department, Harborough District Council (1975, revised 2006)

⁴² Leics. and Rutland HER, Leire (OS: SP 5290)

⁴³ OS Map 1:2500, SP 5290 (1961,1989,1990)