

VCH Leicestershire draft text

LEIRE**Economic History**

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VICTORIA
COUNTY
HISTORY

Leicestershire

The major economic activity in the parish of Leire has been mixed agriculture. The open fields of pasture and arable crops were partially enclosed by private agreement in the 17th century with the remainder by Parliamentary Act in 1780.¹ In addition, a number of large-scale poultry enterprises flourished in the twentieth century.² Manufacturing in the parish has been largely limited to grain milling at the two water-mills, with some framework-knitting. The lack of employment in the 1830s led the overseers to offer payment to those willing to emigrate.

FARMING**The physical framework**

In Domesday Book there was no mention of woodland or waste, but 48 acres of meadow are recorded, more than for the neighbouring parishes, which had 16 acres or fewer.³ A total of 27 fields with names containing 'meadow', documented from the 18th century onwards, lie mainly along the stream that runs northwards and then westwards in the east half of the parish, as the valley opens out.⁴ A furlong in Browne's Mill Field (Leire Mill) was named as Stubbway suggesting assarting or coppicing had occurred in an earlier period.⁵ Field names in the north-west of the parish suggest land less suited to arable, such as Wildmoor and Brier Hill.⁶

The Middle Ages

Three major landholders held a total of eight carucates of land in 1086, but there was little demesne, and their prime economic interest in their manors appears to have been the collection of rents. Robert Despenser held five of these and his holding included 48 acres of meadow, presumably along the broad valley of the stream. There were 1½ ploughs in the demesne and four villans, a priest and two bordars had 1½ ploughs.⁷ Robert de Bucy held two carucates, but no demesne is mentioned. Eight villans and one border had two ploughs on this land.⁸ The final carucate was held by the Bishop of Lincoln, occupied by two sokemen and a bordar who had half a plough.⁹

Mention of a furlong named Flaxlondes in 1212 suggests flax was grown.¹⁰ However, there are no inquisitions detailing demesne farming, and no medieval accounts to show crops or livestock. A

¹ ROLLR, ID32/332 (1653), 9D43/206/15 (1698), DE2/24/1-2 (1699), EN/A198/1 (1780)

² *Kelly's Dir. Leics* (1916), 546; (1932), 685, TNA, MAF 189/595

³ A. Williams and G.H. Martin (eds.), *Domesday Book: A Complete Translation* (London, 2002), 629, 639, 641.

⁴ C.A. Cambers, M.A. project, Centre for English Local History, 2006

⁵ Indenture and terrier between William Almey and Baron Smith, 1714, private papers

⁶ ROLLR, DE 1221/23, Colquitt Deeds, 1778

⁷ Williams and Martin (eds.), *Domesday*, 641.

⁸ Williams and Martin (eds.), *Domesday*, 639.

⁹ Williams and Martin (eds.), *Domesday*, 629.

¹⁰ Summary of fine in G.F. Farnham, *Leicestershire Medieval Village Notes* (Leicester, c. 1928), III, 178

holding of 190 a. in 1337 included 100 a. of arable, 40 a. of meadow, 20 a. of pasture, 20 a. of wood and 10 a. of moorland, suggesting that at a time when the medieval population may have been at its peak there was still land which was not intensively farmed.¹¹ Leire was not a wealthy parish. The number of people assessed for the 1327 lay subsidy was similar to that in the four neighbouring parishes, but the amounts were generally lower in Leire, with the highest assessment just 2s. 6¼d.¹²

Enclosure

The period from the 1560s to the 1670s saw the population double, unlike other local villages.¹³ A private agreement to enclose and to exchange rights was made in 1653 between nine landholders.¹⁴ In return for granting the right to gather furze and thorn and to graze stock on the aftermath, Thomas Grey was entitled to sole use of various meadows near Stemborough Mill. The other landholders agreed to give up the rights to pasture in seven named areas. In the same deed Cow Close, formerly known as Leareholme was to be used solely by Thomas Grey, and those holding land in Cow Close were compensated by the use of land elsewhere in the open fields.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, there were generally three open fields.¹⁵ In the earliest surviving records these were Over Field, extending over the southern part of the parish, Lower or Nether Field, and Moorhill or Middle Field.¹⁶ The Lower field ceased to be mentioned as an open field following an enclosure agreement of 1699 whereby approximately 580 acres were enclosed.¹⁷ A fourth field, Beyond the Brooke, was mentioned only in a glebe terrier of 1625, and lay to the east of the stream that flows north from Leire Mill towards Stemborough Mill. In the agreement of 1699, part of the Beyond the Brooke field, parts of the Moorhill field and neighbouring common land were also enclosed. Over field was then divided into Upper and Mill fields, maintaining the three field system. Mill field covered land west of Leire Mill and Upper field continued to the boundary with Frolesworth.

In 1780, three parliamentary commissioners oversaw the enclosure of the final 376 a. of open fields, which lay south of Dunton and Frolesworth Roads and within the land west of Broughton Lane.¹⁸ The rector received one seventh of this land in lieu of further tithes and annual payments equal to two nineteenthths of the value of gardens, orchards and earlier enclosures.

The ridges and furrows of the fields enclosed in 1780 survived well into the twentieth century but have now been considerably reduced in area by deep ploughing to create fields for arable crops.¹⁹ Where it was mapped in the 20th century, the streamside land can be seen to be ridged downhill to encourage drainage. The remaining hundred acres of ridge and furrow are mostly in the

¹¹ Summary of De Banco roll in G.F. Farnham, *Leicestershire Medieval Village Notes* (Leicester, c. 1928), III, 180.

¹² W. G. D. Fletcher, ed. "The earliest Leicestershire lay subsidy roll, 1327." *AAS Reports* 19(1888-9) pp.130-178, 209-312

¹³ See above 'Introduction'

¹⁴ ROLLR, 1D32/332, Agreement to give up common rights, 1653

¹⁵ Lincs. RO, Dioc/Ter Bundle/Leics/Leire

¹⁶ Lincs. RO, Dioc/Ter/5/419, 1601 terrier

¹⁷ ROLLR, DE 2/24/1-2, Agreement to Enclose, 1699

¹⁸ ROLLR, EN/A/198/1

¹⁹ Leicestershire and Rutland HER, Medieval ridge and furrow survey

south of the parish to the east of the railway cutting. Lines where the orientation of the ridges changed have been preserved in modern field boundaries.



Figure 4: Ridge and furrow in the field west of the road to Ashby Parva

Crop production and animal husbandry

During the 16th century the yeomen and husbandmen engaged in mixed farming, with a slightly greater emphasis on crop production.²⁰ Wheat, barley, rye and peas were all grown. Thomas Bodicoat was a typical farmer and in 1583 had five acres of wheat, 'corn' and peas, three horses and their harness and agricultural tools worth £11.²¹ He kept five heifers, five sheep, two sows and some hens worth a total of £7 15s. He also owed £4 15s. to six men in amounts varying between 40s. and 8d. A bequest shows he held at least one acre of meadow.²² Cattle herds were small, generally less than ten adult animals, and sheep flocks numbered around 30 or 40 animals. Wool production played an important role for some, wool and sheep accounting for 30 per cent of John Brian's estate of over £67 in 1548.²³ Ten years later eight stones of wool worth 40s. and 60 sheep worth £6 were part of a husbandman's inventory.²⁴ Similarly, in 1597 Clement Stretton, a prosperous yeoman, had

²⁰ ROLLR, CD 97, Leics Wills and Inventories

²¹ ROLLR, Wills and Inventories file, 1583/31B

²² ROLLR, Will 1585/53

²³ ROLLR, W & I file 1548/6

²⁴ ROLLR, W & I file 1558/69

£10 worth of wool and a flock of 60 sheep worth £15.²⁵ He also owned 21 cattle of various ages and 10 horses and, in addition, his field crops were assessed at £35. The mention of a small field of two leys called Flaxlondes in a will shows that flax was being grown on land that had formerly been used for grass.²⁶

Deeds of 1603 set out the restrictions on grazing of cattle, horses and sheep and on the management of water by the miller, Thomas Browne.²⁷ Pigs were to be ringed between Michaelmas and Lady Day, and it was forbidden to permit outsiders to use the fields for retting hemp or flax. Peas could only be gathered outside their own land if agreement had been made and a limit of thirty five sheep per yardland was set.

The enclosure agreements enabled farmers to buy and sell the newly enclosed plots. Following the first agreement of 1653, Robert Lord took the opportunity to consolidate his meadow land by buying five leys from William Beale.²⁸ At his death he was described as a freeholder and in a position to be owed £107, mainly by a fellow farmer and the rector.²⁹ Crops continued to include corn, hay and peas as a single item for the smaller farmers, and oats began to appear in the 1680s.³⁰ The inventory of a wealthier yeoman taken in March 1677, listed maslin, wheat, peas, hay and barley as well as six acres of wheat and rye and three acres of peas and beans.³¹ There was no clear emphasis on either livestock or arable activities in the parish, reflecting the mixed nature of the soils. An increasing number of inventories showed that money lending and the taking out of bonds was common.³² Cattle herds remained small, rarely more than ten of all ages and Nicholas Higginson's flock of 103 sheep in 1698 was much larger than any other recorded.³³ Pigs were a minor constant presence and bee hives were mentioned but hens ceased to be counted.³⁴ No horses are mentioned between 1640 and 1660, and it is possible that they had been requisitioned for the army.

After the second enclosure agreement in 1699, John Stretton acquired a field for his own use in place of grazing rights that had previously been attached to his cottage.³⁵ The enclosure of the last open fields in 1780 converted 370 a., about one third of the parish, allowing the cultivation of new crops as well as improved livestock practices. A total of 98.5 a. of wheat, barley and oats in roughly equal quantities were recorded in 1793. Two years later it had risen to 122 a.³⁶ Six a. of beans were also grown. Comparison of the yields per acre for each crop shows varying success, those with the largest holdings producing higher yields. In 1801, a time of population growth nationally, rye, potatoes, turnips and peas were also being grown, the increase in total arable acreage to 147¼ a. being mainly due to the additional 21 acres of turnips. The modest increase in arable acres suggests that most of the newly enclosed land in 1780 was converted to pasture.

²⁵ ROLLR, W & I file 1597/38

²⁶ ROLLR, Will 1589/60 Nicholas Higginson, yeoman

²⁷ Beds. RO, L26/1040 Draft court Rolls, Lucas Archive

²⁸ ROLLR, Will 1660 no 162, PR/I/52/217

²⁹ ROLLR, DE 1425/1

³⁰ ROLLR, PR/1/78/154 (Crisp, 1676), PR/1/81/106 (Beltdain, 1679), PR/1/87/187 (Garret, 1685)

³¹ ROLLR, PR/I/79, 41 Inventory of James Freeman, yeoman, 1677

³² ROLLR, PR/I/87/187 (Garret, 1685)

³³ ROLLR, PR/I/103/86

³⁴ ROLLR, PR/I/51/66

³⁵ ROLLR, EN/198/2, Will 1707/2

³⁶ ROLLR, QS28/161 Crop returns 1795

In 1831, eight farming families were employing at least one labourer and seven were relying on the labour of their own families. A total of 29 male labourers aged over 20 years were employed.³⁷ The sizes of the 11 farms recorded in the 1861 census varied between 15 and 228 acres. Four men had farms of more than 100 acres, employing 22 workers in addition to family members. The remaining seven farms employed a further 11 labourers.³⁸ In 1901 eight householders were solely reliant on farming, of which four were described as employers and five other households combined work as a farmer or grazier with other occupations.



Fig 5: One of the substantial brick farmhouses within the village

Arable farmland increased during the 19th century to a peak of 322 a. in 1877, after which it declined steadily to a low of 45 a. in 1937.³⁹ Directories from the 1840s described the mixed soil as well-suited to the growth of barley.⁴⁰ The acreages of wheat and barley were roughly equal until the 1920s when barley ceased to be grown in Leire.⁴¹ Barley reappeared after the Second World War and increased gradually, almost to the exclusion of wheat and oat production.⁴²

At the start of the 20th century, 25 of 31 farms were of less than 50 a., and only one was more than 150 a.⁴³ By 1941, the number of holdings had fallen to 22 due to a reduction in holdings of less than

³⁷ ROLLR, DE 1425/110, 1831 census return, Leire

³⁸ TNA, RG 9/2246

³⁹ TNA, MAF 68/39, 533, 1103, 1673, 2243, 2813, 3356, 3836, 4205, 4575, 5037

⁴⁰ *White's Dir. Leics* (1846), 399

⁴¹ TNA, MAF 68/3356

⁴² TNA, MAF 68/4205, 68/5037

⁴³ TNA, MAF 68/2813, Agricultural returns for 1917

five acres.⁴⁴ There was an increase in the area under permanent pasture and clover and the number of cattle rose. As the 20th century progressed large-scale poultry farms occupied some of the new pasture. In 1940 and 1941 197 a. of grass were ploughed up and replaced by arable crops, three quarters of which were oats. After the war the arable acreage dwindled again from 276 a. in 1947 to 166 a. in 1967.

In 2015, winter-sown oilseed rape and wheat are the most commonly grown crops in the arable fields, which lie mostly west of the railway cutting,⁴⁵ and the pasture land is grazed by cattle and sheep, as well as horses, kept at small-scale livery establishments. In places, strips of land around field edges are sown with cover crops or left uncultivated for pheasants reared for commercial shoots. Small-scale fishing lakes were developed after 1960 along Stemborough Lane and west of Back Lane. These have either closed or become member-only enterprises.⁴⁶ A small estate of light industrial units, located on Eaglesfield Farm during the late 20th century, has been replaced by private housing.⁴⁷

Poultry farming

There were two poultry farmers in 1911.⁴⁸ By 1922 three separate poultry enterprises were operating in Leire and by 1932 there were four.⁴⁹ Between 1927 and 1967, poultry totals varied between 5,000 and 23,000, the highest being in 1937.⁵⁰ One specialist breeder at Eaglesfield Farm devoted 24 of his 200 a. to poultry in the 1920s.⁵¹ Avenues of breeding pens, designed by the owner, William Golden, held 5,000 birds on heavy, damp land between the village and Stemborough Mill. The farm sold eggs for hatching, chicks and adult birds. Golden's incubation and rearing appliances were also available for sale. The breeds kept were Rhode Island Reds, White Wyandottes, White Leghorns and Light Sussex. His birds won a series of medals and prizes in national competitions. He promoted egg production as a profitable enterprise due to the low prices commanded by corn, the wholesale price of a dozen eggs being at that time at least 2s. 6d. The opening of the railway halt at Leire in 1925 for passenger and later goods traffic allowed Golden to supply eggs, day old chicks and adult breeding birds to customers in the United Kingdom and Ireland.⁵² In 1945 turkeys and other chicken breeds were being reared but by 1965 the business had ceased to trade.⁵³

Francis Porter ran a poultry business at Leire Mill, known as The Willows in the 1920s and 1930s but by 1941, due to falling income from his poultry enterprise, he converted his holding to market gardening.⁵⁴ James Redfern of The Gables kept poultry on a commercial scale after the second world war. He was a member of the Poultry Stock Improvement Plan operated by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, entitling him to free veterinary advice and also compensation in

⁴⁴ TNA, MAF 32/388/180

⁴⁵ Pers comm., 24 Nov 2013.

⁴⁶ Personal knowledge

⁴⁷ OS Map 1:2500 SP 5290 (1990)

⁴⁸ TNA, RG 14/18913

⁴⁹ *Kelly's Directory* (1922), 552, *Kelly's Directory* (1932), 685

⁵⁰ TNA, MAF 68/3836

⁵¹ Advertising brochure for Eaglesfield Poultry Farm, 1926, Private papers

⁵² *Guardian and South Leicestershire Advertiser*, 6 Mar. 1925. Advertising brochure for Eaglesfield Poultry Farm, 1926, Private papers

⁵³ *Tamworth Herald*, 26 May 1945, 2. Private papers, author.

⁵⁴ TNA, MAF 32/388/180

1964, when that advice proved to be erroneous.⁵⁵ In 1967 over 13,000 poultry were kept in Leire.⁵⁶ Today, there are no longer any poultry farmers in Leire, but there is no single reason for these businesses to have ceased.

Mills

Two mills have existed in Leire for most of its documented history. A 13th century grant made by Thomas, lord of Leyra to his son William, parson of Leyra, included the mill of Steinesberne.⁵⁷ In 1279 Nicholas de Burbache and Richard de Eshby held two water mills in Leire.⁵⁸ In 1327, William de Cotes held a watermill and plot of meadow in Leire of Robert de Wolaston, by service of one-tenth of a knight's fee.⁵⁹ In the glebe terrier of 1601, 'Browns mill' was mentioned and can be identified as the present Leire Mill.⁶⁰ Thomas Browne risked a penalty of 40s. at the manorial court if he failed to keep sufficient water behind his dam or if his water escaped from its course.⁶¹ In the glebe terrier of 1703, the miller (now of 'Smith's Mill') was paying 3s. per annum to the Rector. The land tax assessment made in 1774 required a sum of 6s. 11d. from John Beale 'for the mill'.⁶² By 1780 Leire Mill was owned by the Fawkes family and remained so until the death of John Fawkes in 1863.⁶³ The mill continued in use until it became the site of the Willows poultry farm in the 1920s.⁶⁴

In 1661 Heneage Finch, later the Earl of Aylesford, purchased land near Starbroe Mill from John Foster and then, at some point, the mill itself.⁶⁵ In the glebe terrier of 1703, the miller of 'Foster's Mill' was paying 4s. per annum to the rector. William Bosse's mill paid the same sum in the terrier of 1724.⁶⁶ William Sewell and then his son, also William, were the tenants between 1774 and 1810, initially paying 9s. 8½d. per annum 'for Lord Aylesford's mill'.⁶⁷ Sarah Sewell married William Berridge and the Berridge family were the millers until the middle of the 19th century.⁶⁸ The Fletcher family were tenant millers for the next 50 years.⁶⁹

The mill remained in the ownership of successive earls until it was sold in 1913.⁷⁰ Between 1913 and 1944, owner occupiers operated the mill and towards the end of this period a diesel motor was installed, replacing water power. After 1944 the mill and its land became a pig farm, owned by William Golden and in 1964 the mill was sold again and converted to a private residence. Considerable rebuilding took place and from 1981 the mill pools were developed to form the basis of a trout fishery business.

⁵⁵ TNA, MAF 189/595, Letter from MAFF to the Treasury advising financial settlement, 30 Apr 1964

⁵⁶ TNA, MAF 68/5037

⁵⁷ TNA, E 326/2275 Grant by Thomas, lord of Leyra

⁵⁸ Nichols, *History*, IV, 240

⁵⁹ *Cal. Inq. p.m.* VII, 213.

⁶⁰ Lincs. RO, DIOC/TER/5/419

⁶¹ Beds. RO, L 26/1040 Draft court roll, 1603

⁶² ROLLR, QS 62/182-191, Land Tax Returns

⁶³ ROLLR, DE 1425/7 Register of Burials, Leire, 1813 - 1932

⁶⁴ TNA, MAF 32/388/180

⁶⁵ Nichols, *History*, IV, 242

⁶⁶ Lincs. RO, Dioc/TerBundle/Leics/Leire

⁶⁷ ROLLR, QS 62/182-191, Land Tax Returns for 1980

⁶⁸ *Drake's Dir. Leics* (1861), 277, *Wright's Dir. Leics* (1863), 752

⁶⁹ TNA, RG 9/2246, 10/3222, 11/3117, 12/2489, 13/2950

⁷⁰ *Leire News Issue* 8, Mar. 1979, 5

In the 1601 terrier there was also reference to 'winmill leas' on the west side of the parish towards Frolesworth.⁷¹ Although there is no evidence of a windmill in Leire, there is mention in 1582 of a windmill in neighbouring Frolesworth.⁷²

Manufacturing

Nineteenth-century censuses show that roughly equal numbers were engaged in agriculture, hosiery production and trade.⁷³ Numbers engaged in hosiery between 1831 and 1891 rose sharply to a peak in 1851 of 54 framework knitters, two thirds being female. The youngest worker was 11 years old and the majority were under 40 years. Forty frames were recorded in Leire in 1844, one of the smaller totals for the district, Dunton Basset having 120 and Cosby 250.⁷⁴ In the 1841 census 21 households contained 35 workers described as stocking makers. The 1830s and 1840s were a difficult period for the industry, and in Leire the overseers offered payment to those willing to emigrate in the 1830s,⁷⁵ and land in a parish charity was divided into allotments in a scheme administered by the rector.⁷⁶ The numbers in hosiery production fell in the next four decades, so that by 1891 only one hosiery worker was recorded. In 1901, eight hosiery machinists were listed, possibly employed in the factory in neighbouring Broughton Astley.

Professionals and those in trade numbered around 50 in each census with only slight variation. Many of the men's occupations were associated with agriculture such as blacksmith, wheelwright, carpenter and miller and the women's with dressmaking or domestic service.

Construction of the railway line through Leire in 1840 brought employment for 12 railway labourers, eight houses in 1851 being described as 'railway cottages'.⁷⁷ Later, the line continued to be a source of employment, requiring porters and signalmen, as well as labourers for maintenance in 1901.⁷⁸

Services

In 1835 five shopkeepers and dealers in groceries and other goods were trading.⁷⁹ Four of the five men were also listed with other occupations. Dealers in agricultural goods such as butchers and horse dealers were also recorded. The number of shopkeepers remained around three, gradually diminishing in the 20th century until it seemed in 1977 that the last shop in Leire had closed.⁸⁰ In 1978, following the retirement of sub-post-mistress, Margaret Hewitt, a combined post office and shop opened. This continued in the same premises under various proprietors until its eventual closure in 2009.⁸¹

⁷¹ Lincs. RO, DIOC/TER/5/419

⁷² Curia regis, roll 58, Trinity 15 John m. 3

⁷³ TNA, HO107/598/13, 107/2078, RG 9/2246, 10/3222, 11/3117, 12/2489, 13/2950, 14/18913

⁷⁴ VCH Leics III, 21

⁷⁵ See below, Local Government

⁷⁶ *Report to enquire into the condition of the framework knitters* (Parl. Papers 1845 (609) p.126).

⁷⁷ TNA, HO107/2078, 1851 census

⁷⁸ TNA, RG13/2950, 1901 census

⁷⁹ *Pigot's Directory of Leicestershire*, (1835), 147-149

⁸⁰ *Leire News*, Issue 4, March 1978,

⁸¹ Personal knowledge

Licensed premises

Three or four alehouses and inns were recorded from 1753 at the Quarter Sessions.⁸² The White Horse and the Bull's Head were both identified by name in 1824.⁸³ The first mention of the public house near the church as the Queen's Arms was in a directory of 1840.⁸⁴ An advertisement in 1912 for the Queen's Arms Inn offered 'good stabling and cyclist accommodation'.⁸⁵ In 1916 the Bull's Head ceased to operate as licensed premises under the Licensing (Consolidation) Act 1910.⁸⁶ The White Horse Inn advertised in 1926 that it had public rooms capable of holding 150 people.⁸⁷ In 2015, the White Horse and the Queen's Arms continue to trade. Both have been extended to include restaurant rooms.

Local economic history since 1945

The number of working farms has fallen to three or four, which are owner-occupied, the village farmhouses having been converted to non-agricultural use. Land attached to those farmhouses has been purchased by farmers resident elsewhere. The landscape has been altered by the removal of hedges to allow the use of large scale agricultural machinery.

Small light industrial units existed for several years at Hall Farm and Eaglesfield Farm, the latter being replaced by housing in the late 20th century. A horse-box construction company operates from a site within the village and a computer consultancy occupies the Hatchery that belonged to the Redfern poultry enterprise. The increase in livery establishments has provided some work opportunities as do the public houses.

⁸² ROLLR, QS 36/2/1

⁸³ ROLLR, QS 36/2/10

⁸⁴ *Pigot & Co.'s Directory Of Yorkshire, Leics etc* (1841), 40

⁸⁵ *Abbott's Illustrated Almanac*, 1912 (Lutterworth, 1912)

⁸⁶ ROLLR, DE 5503, Title deeds

⁸⁷ *Guardian and South Leicestershire Advertiser*, 22 Oct 1926