

## **A HISTORY OF THIS PARISH OF WOOLSTON**

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Although the Warrington area as a whole can boast of a historical background which includes the Bronze Age and the Roman Conquest, Woolston's History can only be traced back to the times of the Danish Invasions. On the west of England, the Danes used the River Mersey as an easy means of communication and it was when they established a base at Thelwall that two settlements were started north of the river – one being Eric's Town (Rixton) and the other being Wulfige's Town (Woolston).

There had previously been plenty of activity in the area by Britons who axes have been found in Risley and Rixton; by the Romans whose road network passed close by; and by the Saxons who built a fort at Warburton.

Woolston's spelling has changed several times having been Wulston, Wulstone, Wolston and even Ousten (by map maker John Ogilby, who entered place-names according to local pronunciations, when he made Lancashire's first road map, in 1675). It is interesting to note that the map showed a mill pond near Dam Lane and a windmill near Spittle Brook. Ogilby also showed two villages within the bounds of the present Woolston. One was Mascrat (the local pronunciation for Martinscroft), and the other Fistleton Green, in which were two rows of houses, near to the site of the present, Weir Lane, where lived the Mersey fishermen.

It seems hard to realise that it was written that 'in the Mersey, the fish are in such abundance that the husbandmen cannot sell them at all and manure their fields with them'. Even as far back in history as 1367 there were reports of fishermen brought before the courts for obstructing the flow of the river with fish weirs; and that so many salmon were caught that all the countryside and markets for twenty miles around were supplied. A later account says that the Mersey had sturgeons, mullet, seals and eels, lobsters, shrimps, prawns and 'the best and largest cockles in all England'.

Much of Woolston's more recent history has centred around the activities at Woolston Hall, which was demolished to make room for Woolston Country Primary School and neighbouring housing developments – hence the name 'Hall Road'. The Hawarden family occupied the Hall in the sixteenth century and when a daughter married a member of the Standish family, Woolston Hall became a Standish stronghold.

Part of Woolston Hall was a Catholic Church and the Standish family were frequently persecuted for proving a refuge for missionary priest.

The Standishes were also involved in the Civil War, in which they were prominent Royalists – and had their land confiscated by Cromwell. (Battery Lane dates back to Cromwell days!): and in the Jacobite rebellion in which Ralph was captured, and only the intervention of his father –in-law, the Duke of Norfolk, prevents his execution.

Toll-gates: post boys on horse back carrying the mail (including one murdered in 1791 after which the murderer was hanged at the scene of his crime); stage coaches to Manchester on deplorably bad roads, two packet boats per day to Manchester on the River Mersey, with fares ranging from 2s 6d for a cabin to 1s 0d. for steerage – are all items of interest.

It is noteworthy however, that Woolston's population actually declined in the nineteenth century from 596 in 1821 to 451 in 1921. Although during this century four notable buildings were erected – St Peter's R C Church in 1829; Martinscroft Methodist Chapel in 1827; St Peter's R C School in 1840 (now demolished) and Woolston C E School in 1885 (now the Church Hall).

It is in the past quarter century, however, that Woolston has seen most progress, with the building of four new schools, two new Churches, a library, a clinic and health centre, three shopping precincts (including the important facilities of a bank, a post office and a chemist's shop), a leisure centre, two swimming pools, four squash courts, a playbarn, playing fields with floodlit all-weather pitch (plus two private bowling greens and sports ground), a riverside park, new housing for a population of around 7,000 and new, clean, landscaped employment areas – to ensure that the village of Woolston, now part of Warrington Borough in Cheshire (after eighty years, until 1974, as a Parish in Warrington Rural District, in Lancashire) so conveniently situated near to the intersection of several motorways, will be one of the best equipped communities in the North West of England.