

St Michael's Church

Woolverstone



A Brief History

A Short History of Woolverstone

The Beginnings – Fact or Fiction?

The earliest evidence of human habitation is of a bronze age settlement situated on the road leading down to Cat House (by the Marina). Here, flint tools, broken pottery and bones of the period have been found.

Legend has it that Woolverstone gets its name from a Danish or Norse chieftain called *Wulf*. It has been said that where the Church now stands there once stood a large glacial stone. This spot had supposedly been held sacred, and on this stone, Wulf the Rover was said to have sacrificed a poor native in honour of his god, and hence – *Wulf's Stone*.



The Lords & the People

In the Domesday Book we read that there were two manors in the area held by Tostin and Aluric. These comprised of 3 ploughing teams, 3 acres of meadow, 3 villeins and 5 bordars, a Church and 10 acres of land, 5 horses, 8 beasts, 20 hogs, 60 sheep and woodland and pasturing for 15 hogs.

Most court rolls that describe the management of the manor in these early days were almost certainly destroyed during the 1381 Peasant's Revolt. Those that do remain show how the original feudal manor gradually became free of feudal ties. The early tenants gained independence and were free to buy and sell land.

The 15th Century inhabitants grazed their stock on commons and in wood pastures, but had to pay rent for this to Lords of the manor. They also grew arable crops in small enclosed fields.

From the mid 1550's there were no more servile peasants. Freeholders were becoming yeoman farmers. Others worked for wages or as independent craftsmen. The manor was reduced to recording changes in tenancy and collecting rents.

The Wolverston Family

From the mid 1300's for over 200 years the *Wolverston* family were Lords of the manor.

Roger de Wolverston of Wolverston Hall was a rich and powerful man. He was the King's Escator for Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk in charge of land changes affecting the crown. His son, also named Roger, married Elizabeth, the grand-daughter of Sir John de Holbroke. They had no sons, only three daughters, the eldest of whom married William Latymer of Freston.

Thomas, brother of Roger, died in 1443 and in his will left his best armour and helmet, bearing the family coat of arms – three wolves heads in silver, to his eldest son. He may well have fought at Agincourt.

Roger, son of Robert, provided much of the material for the building of the porch of the Church, which was built at the end of the 15th century.

Philip, the last of the line, was described as a 'gentleman pirate' and spent some of his life in the Tower. His daughter Mary, Dame Mary Killigrew, followed in her father's footsteps and narrowly escaped the death sentence after an incident of piracy in Falmouth Harbour in 1582.



The Rise of the Squires

No single family was dominant in Woolverstone after Philip Wolverstons death. A succession of squires owned the manor until John Tyssen who, in 1720 fell heavily into debt, and mortgaged it to John Ward. There followed 50 years of legal wrangling during which time William Berners of London arrived as tenant at the old manor house. In 1774 he became owner of the Estate, comprising of 220 acres for the sum of £14,000. During the 160 years of ownership by the Berners family, the estate and village received the shape they have today.

Many of the cottages amenities and ancillary buildings (most now renovated and modernised for residential purposes) were part of the Estate which grew up under successive squires.

In 1937 Geoffrey Berners, the last squire, sold the estate to Oxford University Nuffield Trust. There followed the gradual break up of the estate, the Hall being acquired by London County Council, later the I.L.E.A., as a boarding school for boys, and now The Girls Day School Trust.

Woolverstone Church

The church is dedicated to St Michael the Archangel and was undoubtedly in existence well before the Domesday Book record. Nothing of that early building exists though it was probably built of wood with a thatched roof. It has experienced many re-buildings and renovations during its history and we pick up a record of these in wills of the 15th century. These include bequests for images to be made for the candelbeme (rood beam); for repair of a 'certain vault' for a pane of St Jerome; for a 'new stepyll' (tower) and for the making of a new porch.

Also dating from this period is the Font. Much of the decoration done at this time was destroyed by the Iconoclasts, during the reign of Edward VI, in an attempt to rid the church of idolatry and superstition. Cromwell and his men completed the job removing the angels who held up the Font.



Above – Rear view of St Michaels

Church & Estate

A close association between the Church and the estate can be traced back to the time of the manor. In 1546 Philip Wolverston sold two of the three Church bells together with two sets of vestments. When brought before the Royal Commissioners, his defence was that they were not worth very much and that anyway, he had supposed that “ye sayd church to be heys oune chapel” – he was fined £20!

In the 19th century, Woolverstone Church showed a strong inclination in worship to Anglo-Catholic spirituality. This was encouraged in no small part by the Berners family. In the considerable re-building that was undertaken, it is clear that the Berners family were both motivators and providers. In 1832, a transept, vestry and chancel aisle were added to the north side. In 1866, the chancel was rebuilt with the addition of a sedilla and priscina and a new east window.

In 1888, the last major re-building work took place to create the building we have today. An entire new nave was built with chancel and vestry removing previous re-building.

This new nave and chancel became the main worship area and was furnished along the thoughts and patterns of the Oxford movement. The original nave was relegated to a south aisle. The cost of this work was £5765.16s.3d and was paid for by the squire, Captain Hugh Berners. This enlargement of the Church shows the concern that the squire and his family had for the spiritual needs of their workers. It shows concern that was both religious and practical.



Parsons in Passing

If the 19th century showed a strong Anglo-Catholic influence at work, go back a couple of centuries to the 17th century and we see something quite different. At that time the ministry at Woolverstone, like many churches in the Ipswich area, had been touched by the rapid growth of Puritanism in East Anglia. This developed with the arrival of the ‘honest Netherlanders’ who settled here.

These foreign artisans and their families were weavers and associated tradesmen. Eventually their non-conformity produced a reaction from the hierarchy in Norwich and London. As the orders to conform became more stringent, so many resolved to flee to New England. This ‘flitting’ of the weavers led to considerable economic problems and attempts were made to prevent their leaving.

The rector of Woolverstone, one Timothy Dalton, had a brother who fled in 1635, in the face of ecclesiastical persecution. It appears that Timothy was deeply involved in arranging transport for these refugees, for his activities were complained of by the Royal Commissary in Ipswich. In 1636, he was suspended from his duties by Bp Wren of Norwich, for disobedience to Episcopal edicts.

Many other ministers in Ipswich and surrounding areas were similarly suspended for various offences such as refusing to read publicly the King’s (Charles) declaration in favour of Sunday sports. After his suspension, Timothy Dalton built himself a small house (the position of which is one of those fascinating mysteries of history still to be resolved). He has been living at Woolverstone since 1615 and during this time had acquired land. He was undoubtedly acquainted with William Andrews, a master mariner with two ships – ‘Elizabeth’ and ‘Francis’ which were used in taking immigrants to the New World and who owned land in Woolverstone. Maybe it is on one of these ships that Timothy Dalton himself went in 1637, for we next hear of him being made a freeman of Dedham, USA.

Clergy Under Censure

His successor was Jonathan Skynner, who was very different in both theological outlook and temperament. Within a year, he was already so unpopular with parishioners that the new bishop was complained to, but without redress. Skynner was accused among other things, of a serious assault on Mr Dalton's maid as she retrieved a stray cow from parsonage glebe. Two years later a petition to Parliament for the removal of Mr Skynner was made by 22 parishioners – we do not know the outcome of this however!

Other rectors that we know anything about are Thomas Orger, who came to the church in 1349 - the year of the Black Death, survived it and is mentioned in the manor court roll for 1352. Another is Thomas Runtyng, rector in 1399 who has a small brass memorial in the step up into the original chancel.

The Runtyngs were a local family. In his will of 1489, the rector John Englysshe desired to be buried in the chancel before the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary beside the high altar – although we do not know if he actually was. Other possible vaults include that of Robert Wolverston under the original chancel, and the Berners family under the new aisle.

The Estate & Hall

Under the Berners, the extent of the estate increased considerably until by the time of the First World War, it covered the whole of Woolverstone parish and extended throughout the Shotley peninsular. The village was a 'closed' village owned by the estate and all the residents had some connection with the life of the estate.

The Hall was the focus of life with the present Hall replacing the old manor house shortly after William Berners purchased the estate. The site of the old Hall is now occupied by the water tower and stable block.



By all accounts the successive squires treated their workers and families with considerable thoughtfulness. A school was provided in the village, as were a working men's hall (the Berners Hall) and Widow's homes. Leisure was not neglected either, the squires having keen sporting interests. Perhaps they would not have disapproved too much of the Marina!

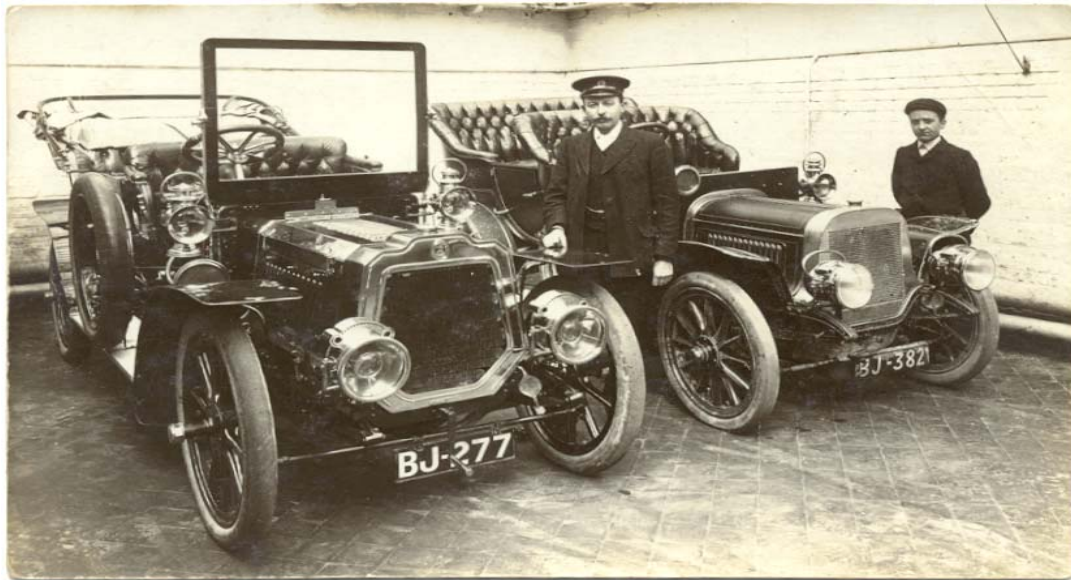
In late Victorian times, the Woolverstone Hall Harvest Home was a gigantic party in which the whole estate participated. A typical programme included Midday lunch for 800 people, an afternoon of games and sports, swings and roundabouts for the children, a military band to provide music, tea at 4pm and the day finished with a magnificent display of fireworks.

The Berners Family

The family tree shows an impressive pedigree with a line that can be traced back to William Berners of London, a silkman, and his wife Katherine in the late 16th century.

Approaching the estate from the Ipswich direction, the entrance was marked by a gate lodge. This lodge has for some time been known as 'Monkey Lodge'. The monkey was the family emblem and was to be found all over the estate in the form of stone monkeys and monkey crests.

There is a story that one of the Berners family returning from abroad, brought back a pet monkey which he kept in the back yard of the house, since called 'Monkey Yard'. One night, a fire broke out and the monkey made so much noise that it woke the household and thus saved their lives. Perhaps symbolically, all the monkeys were removed by the family when the estate was sold. There are however, two remaining monkeys which can be seen at either end of the roof on the Widows homes in the village.



The Hall After the Berners

Since the sale of the estate, the Hall has seen different uses first as an army base and then in 1942 as a naval establishment. It was also used as a preparation centre for the 'D' Day landings.



It was during this time that an Obelisk, built by Charles in memory of his father William Berners, was accidentally burned down by naval ratings one night after visiting a local hostelry.

Since the war the Hall has been a boarding school for boys, naval, grammar and comprehensive run by L.C.C. (ILEA), and is now the Ipswich High School owned by the Girls Day School Trust.



The latest alteration to the church took place in 2008 with the installation of fully accessible toilet facilities and a kitchenette. In addition, a bell ringing gallery and staircase were created.

The photographs on this page show the before and after views.

This major work was made possible by generous bequests, donations and fund raising activities.

