

Grand Victorian Houses in Cross Town and Over Knutsford

1: Introduction : A national trend played out in Knutsford

We should not be surprised if a man, having made a fortune in business, should want a grand house for himself and family in spacious grounds away from the *hoi polloi*. In a series of six articles published on www.mathstudio.co.uk I will illustrate how this has been the case with several Victorian gentlemen who built mansions in Cross Town and Over Knutsford. We will also see what became of them and their estates over the decades.

There is a common theme: that fine places were built with great wealth by 'new money', that after the Great War of 1914-18 there were not enough servants to run them, and the families could not afford the maintenance costs and the death duties. So between the wars these mansions became white elephants and eventually were sold, either for other uses, or demolished and the land used for post-war housing. This was the pattern all over England.

Many readers will know that in centuries past Cross Town (along the Mobberley Road) together with Over Knutsford (along the Chelford Road) together formed a village distinct from the main town of Knutsford 'across the Moor', and was only incorporated into Knutsford in 1894. This was the Pennington-Legh's Norbury Booths estate, and most people here worked on the estate, were tenant farmers, or made a living in small trades -- weaver, blacksmith, tanner, reed cutter, laundress, dairy maid.

In Victorian times there was a smelly tannery in Cross Town on what is now Woodlands Drive. Two Knutsford brothers, John and Henry Long, owned this and other tanneries, and had made themselves wealthy. Henry Long bought land near his Cross Town tannery from Pennington-Legh – just far enough away not to smell it -- and built Woodside House there in about 1850. It was the first new-money mansion in Cross Town.

The railway came to Knutsford in 1862, allowing wealthy Manchester businessmen to commute from the noise, smoke and industrial grime to their pleasant country seat. Charles Galloway made a fortune from his iron foundry and boiler works and built Thorneyholme near the site of the tannery, by then disused. By 1890 - 1900 several other fine houses had been erected – Sharston, Rockford, Aylesby, Hallside. The map shows their locations.

Today only Hallside continues as a private residence. Thorneyholme, Rockford and Aylesby were demolished in the 1960s and modern houses built on their grounds. Woodside first became a private boarding school before being knocked down and replaced by houses and St Vincent's school. Sharston House survives as a nursing home.

To get into the mind-set of the Cross Town community of past times, we have to understand i) how small and closely knit it was, ii) just how strongly hierarchical society was, and iii) how central church-going was, whatever your denomination. The population of the town centre in 1857 was about 3,100, but only 208 people lived in Cross Town. Peter Pennington-Legh was the lord of the manor, magistrate and deputy lieutenant of Cheshire. Most Cross Town residents were near the bottom of the social ladder.

The history of Cross Town up to the 1950s is closely linked with the Norbury Booths estate and with St Helena's and St Cross churches. Before St John's church was built in Knutsford centre, most of the working folk regularly worshipped at St Helena's chapel near Longridge. When St John's opened in 1744, the authorities there declared that St Helena's was redundant, and removed all its regalia and records to St John's. This so annoyed the Cross Town locals that they refused to attend St John's, and an 'us and them' feeling took root. Eventually, in the 1850s, Peter Pennington-Legh drew up plans for a church for the people of Cross Town in Cross Town. He provided the bricks and wood, but it was built by the locals themselves. The photograph shows this first St Cross church in about 1860.

Sadly this church had not been well designed and soon alarming cracks appeared in its walls. The only solution was to demolish it, and have a new one built by professionals. Much of the money for the present St Cross church came from the wealthy commuting business people of Cross Town. Charles Galloway for one gave generously. The magnificent west window, designed by Edward Burne-Jones, commemorates his son Percy who died in India aged only 27.

The congregation of St Cross raised the money to build and later extend the first day school in Cross Town. In 1922 they raised the war memorial at the corner of Thorneyholme Drive. The parish rooms next to the church were in constant use for the full variety of community events and get-togethers, with the local dignitaries opening the garden fetes. This Cross Town social closeness lasted into the 1950s, even 1960s. After that many more people moved into the parish from further afield, living in new houses in Thorneyholme Drive, Beech Drive, Sandiway, Mansion Drive, Woodside, Manor Park South, Rockford Lodge, Sharston Crescent and Aylesby Close where the gentlemen's mansions had once stood. Fortunately many of the smaller houses and cottages of the common people survived and, together with St Cross church, are now part of the Cross Town and Over Knutsford conservation area.

A point to bear in mind while reading the articles in this series is that facts about times long past are hard to come by. Only personages at the top of society had their biographies written. For most people we might find when they were born, married and died, and where they lived on a few dates, but beyond that almost nothing can be found. Once their friends and acquaintances also passed away, almost no record remains of what these people were like as characters or how they lived.

Acknowledgments

In researching material for this series I have as far as possible verified statements with original sources. These come from directories, census returns, birth and electoral registers, etc. on-line at Findmypast.co.uk. Newspaper articles are from the on-line British Newspaper Archive, and maps from the National Library of Scotland's collection.



The original St Cross church, built by workers in Cross Town.



Simplified version of the Ordnance Survey maps from 1880 to 1906 showing the grand houses, based on maps at the National Library of Scotland.