

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Downton Abbey On Your Doorstep - 100 Years On.



picture by Claudia Wild

Not many people living in Norley will know that on Saturday July 18th 1914 at 2.30pm at the Grosvenor Hotel Chester was offered for sale The Norley Estate: - 1,181 Acres comprising some 14 farms, 16 cottages, various building plots and Norley Hall - a mansion built in 1500 for the Hall Family, enlarged in 1697 for John Hall, rebuilt in 1782 for William Hall and enlarged again in 1845 for Samuel Woodhouse - how it looks today.

My Family came to Norley in March 1968 when my father took the tenancy of Low Farm. This farm along with Smithy Bank Farm, Fingerpost Farm, Sandy Croft Farm and Town Farm 2 had been purchased by Cheshire County Council to be offered at cheap rents for home coming soldiers from World War 1.

Low Farm was farmed as a dairy farm and my father milked cows up until his untimely death in 1995. The County Council offered us the opportunity to buy and we did, in 1997.

My mother - a district nurse and midwife for 40 years - told a patient about buying the farm and he produced an original sale catalogue from 1914 - his own father had been at the auction. We kept a copy, and that's where my fascination with Norley Hall, Norley Village and life in Norley at the time, began.

Life in Norley Hall pre first world war must have been very good. The 1911 census for Norley Hall shows Charles Bell, his wife, son, daughter and a nephew living there with a butler, three housemaids and a cook. That was just the indoor staff - there was also a coachman living in the beautiful coach house just off Town Farm Lane, and gardeners living in a gardeners' cottage - to the left as you come out of the rear entrance to the hall.

Norley at that time was a self contained village, revolving around Norley Hall. The farming model at that time was that the squire retained the Home Farm, which was managed by a bailiff working under his instructions. The Home Farm provided a template for tenant farmers to follow - including best breeds of cattle for milking, which crops to grow, how to rotate these and other good farming practice.

If you were born in Norley around this time you would have gone to the village school built by Samuel Woodhouse. This was originally a Sunday school but as school attendance on a daily basis became law, children attended daily. As you left school you would either be employed by the Hall as a servant, or work on one of the tenants' farms. There were many shops in the village then. One supplied clothes - or livery as it was called - to the two large houses in Norley. A boy was employed to fetch beer for the gentry, while they were fitted out!

Agriculture was the mainstay of the village. Cow Lane was so named because of the number of milking cows that were kept there. Every farm would have made cheese, and cheese rolling competitions took place down Cheese Hill. The competitions were banned in due course - after too many broken bones due to pre-race visits to the Tigers Head?

Samuel Woodhouse was a great benefactor of Norley. He led the Parish Council for many years, building the school and generally fulfilling his duties as the squire of the village very well. His business was as a wine merchant, importing Madeira wine into England. He sold Norley Hall to Charles Bell in 1900 and appears on the 1911 census at Heatherston Park, Taunton, Somerset. He doesn't appear to have fallen on hard times - the census shows he still kept eight indoor servants including a journeyman/baker.

When he took over the Hall in 1900, Charles Bell appeared in the census as a brewer, maltster, and wine and spirit merchant in Wavertree, Lancashire. The next property listed in the census is Brewery Yard, with the head of household listing Charles Bell as his employer.

No one seems to know what happened to Charles Bell. He went from having what seemed to be a thriving business at the turn of the century when he bought the Hall, to having to sell everything in 1914. One theory is that he was involved in underwriting the insurance for the Titanic, which went down in 1913. Another theory suggests he lost a legal battle with chemical business Brunner Mond. Whatever did happen, he seems to have had to raise a monumental amount of cash in a very short time.

The answer seems to have been the auction at 2.30 on Saturday 18th of July 1914, which changed lives for ever!

On starting to write this article there seemed only one logical place to start, Norley Hall. As we walked down the drive you can imagine the photographer setting up his camera, a big box on a tripod, black cloth over his head taking the first exposure. In fact we could retrace his steps exactly, one from the drive at Norley Hall, one more central from the front lawn, the next from the back drive looking left of Gardeners Cottage, then, then rotate right to catch the Paddocks.

The service entrance to the Hall is very impressive - all converted to houses now but you can see the coach house with its massive arched opening where the coaches would have driven through after dropping their guests at the Hall.

The guests would have danced in the ballroom above the service building with its sprung floor specially for dancing. Presumably the drivers would have been entertained and fed in the coachman's lodge or vast kitchens that would have serviced the hall.

A lot of thought went in to planning and building Norley Estate. Norley Hall was lit by methane gas from a plant recycling the animal dung from the farm. There are no two farms or buildings built the same, ingenious features such as underground water tanks storing rain water from the roofs.

Norley Estate was not unique in fact it was quite the norm but I think it's nice to have your very own Downton Abbey right here on your doorstep - all you've got to do is find it!

David Gadd, Low Farm (Norley Estates)