

WORMLEIGHTON:

The changing fortunes of a Warwickshire parish. Part One

The late Harry Thorpe, F.S.A.

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EVERY settlement is unique, not simply in terms of its location on the earth's surface but more particularly because it represents the end product, as we see it today, of the intensive occupation by successive generations of a relatively small tract of land for varying periods of time. In its general adaptation to the broad physical, social, and economic patterns of the local region a settlement may have much in common with its neighbours, but within its own territorial unit appraisals of micro-physical conditions on the one hand and the influences of individual men, women, and their institutions on the other have often conspired to produce a distinctive personality, etched deeply on the landscape, for each town, village, hamlet, parish, or township. Whereas the lowly peasant had often little choice but to conform with local custom and practice, a lord of the manor had scope to influence the activities of a whole community and so might change the very look of the landscape itself. Wealthy, wise, and powerful lords with a long-established interest in, and sense of obligation towards, their lands and folk could encourage good farming and soften the blows of famine and disease. Dissolute lords, and particularly those whose manors changed hands frequently, might neglect or abuse their peasantry to the point where the hardy fled to growing towns while the weak were hard pressed to scrape even a bare living from the soil. In this article the growth and prosperity of an English village, Wormleighton in Warwickshire, is traced from Anglo-Saxon times to the Norman Conquest and beyond, until suddenly at the end of the fifteenth century the settlement was destroyed in order that its arable lands could be used as pastures for sheep and cattle. The depopulated manor was then purchased in 1506 by an energetic and ambitious Warwickshire sheep-farmer, called John Spencer, who not only re-established the village but quickly amassed great wealth in livestock and land in the surrounding area. After John Spencer was knighted soon after 1518, the family became one of the leading titled families in England. The manor of Wormleighton has remained in the possession of the Spencers until the present day, and I am greatly indebted to the 7th Earl Spencer of Althorp for kindly allowing me to consult the fine collection of maps and documents relating to Wormleighton in the muniment room at Althorp. With the aid of these documents it has been possible to study in some detail the historical geography of Wormleighton from the late fifteenth century onward. The influence of the great family is still strongly discernible in the village today, though several of their farms have been sold since 1924 to cover death duties.

REGIONAL SETTING

The parish of Wormleighton, with an area of 2,451 acres and a present population around 150 of whom about 110 live in the nucleated village itself, lies on the borders