

the Cotswold scarp some five miles south-west of Wormleighton. As one would expect, the Spencers sided with the Royalists, and the manor-house at Wormleighton, with its stout embattled walls and gatehouse, formed an important local stronghold controlling the gap through the Cotswold scarp. Indeed, when at a later date the Royalists had to retreat south before the Parliamentary forces it was felt that the manor-house should not be left to fall into enemy hands. A brief entry in the diary of Sir William Dugdale, the famous Warwickshire antiquary, records its fate on 7 January 1646: 'Wormleighton house, in Warwickshire, burnt by his Ma^{ties} forces of Banbury, to prevent the Rebels making it a Garrison.'¹ The destruction was certainly severe, and the present house, which is only a remnant of the original, incorporates mainly the north wing of the old Tudor building and the two-storied gatehouse (bearing a date 1613) with many associated repairs and alterations, often crudely effected (Plate 8 and Fig. 5). After 1646 the house degenerated into a large rambling farmstead, and still serves as such today, for there was no compelling need for the Spencers with their fine house at Althorp to rebuild it. The population had certainly remained fairly static at Wormleighton between 1634 and 1734 if one considers the pattern of buildings on both maps, a conclusion borne out by Dr. William Thomas who recorded 12 houses and 15 families there in 1730,² figures not far removed from those of two centuries ago.

The Spencer fortunes seem to have revived through the renting of land, and as there was as yet no necessity to contemplate actual sales of land in Wormleighton or Stoneton the estate here continued intact. A sharp contrast in the rural landscape was still discernible between Wormleighton with its enclosed fields, and such adjacent parishes as Priors Hardwick, Priors Marston, and Fenny Compton, which had never experienced drastic depopulation and still retained much open field. But this was to change in 1758, when some 770 acres in Priors Hardwick were enclosed by private Act and no less than 3,800 acres in Priors Marston.³ This was a period of feverish activity in such recently enclosed parishes, as a new pattern of fields and farms was established. Improvements in long-distance transport were also being discussed, and in April 1769 an Act was passed to build a canal from Coventry to Banbury and Oxford.⁴ It was understandable that this should use the Fenny Compton gap, that had for so long carried a road through the Cotswold scarp, and that part of its course should run through the parish of Wormleighton. The course of the canal, which was opened between Coventry and Banbury by March 1778 and to Oxford by January 1790, is shown on Fig. 7. Local tradition stoutly maintains that the sinuous course was determined by Earl Spencer who would only consent to the canal crossing his land on condition that it passed through the land of each of his tenant farms! Although there would clearly be advantages in bringing in lime and other commodities, it appears more probable that the course of the canal merely conformed to the dictates of physical geography by closely following the 400 ft. contour! From canal maps⁵ dated 1777 and from a plan⁶ of the manor of Wormleighton by John

¹ W. Hamper, *The Life, Diary and Correspondence of Sir William Dugdale*, (1827), p. 83.

² W. Dugdale, *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, 2nd edition (1730), i. 517.

³ W. E. Tate, 'Enclosure Acts and Awards relating

to Warwickshire', *Transactions Birmingham Archaeological Society*, lxx (1943-4), 79.

⁴ C. Hadfield, *British Canals* (1952), p. 75.

⁵ Spencer Muniments.

⁶ *Ibid.*