

# VCH SHROPSHIRE

## Wem Rural

### Lowe and Ditches

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This is a draft text prepared by Dr Judith Everard and Wendy Horton for VCH Shropshire

Following on the completion of the Wem short (2019), we took the decision to work on the townships of Wem Rural especially those which fell within the manor of Wem. Now, in July 2021, we are publishing as drafts the text prepared by Dr Everard and Ms Horton.

This text will be further amended in a number of respects. It will be expanded to include more material on landholding. Subsequent versions will include maps and other illustrations. At a later stage there will also be a section on agriculture.

We welcome suggestions, corrections and additional references.

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July 2021

## LOWE AND DITCHES

### LANDSCAPE, SETTLEMENT, AND BUILDINGS

#### Boundaries and Township Origins

Lowe and Ditches was irregular in shape, being elongated north–south, extending almost 3 km from Northwood south to the Roden. The long eastern and western sides were all field boundaries. The south east boundary, adjoining Wem township, was Wem Brook and, further south, ‘the bridge between the houses at the Ditches’.<sup>1</sup> The township’s morphology may be regarded as three blocks. The central block, roughly square, encompassed Lowe Hill. It bordered Wem township to south and east, the south east corner projecting between two of Wem’s open fields. On the west it adjoined Horton and at the north west it met the Northwood Hall estate in Newtown. The southern block provided the ‘Ditches’ element, encompassing Ditches Hill. It was roughly triangular, with the broad base at the south, where the ground slopes down to the river and the western end of Wem Pool; the apex, where this block joined Lowe Hill, was the short section of the Wem–Ellesmere road passing over Ditches Hill. It was bordered by Horton to the west and Wem to the south and east. The third, most northerly, block extended from Lowe Hall up to Northwood, lying between Northwood Hall to the west and Edstaston to the east.

There was an adjustment to the township boundary, between the mid 17th century and 1805, at ‘Golborne’s Cross’ where about 30 a. of pasture closes in Horton was allocated to Lowe and Ditches. In the tithe apportionment for Lowe and Ditches they are named Goulburn fields, Drakey field and Shop field. This portion of Horton was the copyhold tenement of Thomas Barnes by 1561,<sup>2</sup> and hence part of the Lowe Hall estate. Adding it to Lowe and Ditches would have been for administrative convenience, as well as the logic of using Drake Lane and the road junction as the township boundary. The township area was almost 668 a. in 1841.

For the purposes of Wem parochial government, Lowe and Ditches was within Horton quarter, with the townships of Horton, Wolverley, Newtown and Northwood.

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<sup>1</sup> Garbet, 14. Neither landmark is identifiable today.

<sup>2</sup> *Survey, 1561*, 82–3; Garbet, 305. ‘Gobrand’s’ fields still shown as part of Horton on the 1631 Arundel map. See ‘Horton’.

Neither Lowe nor Ditches is named in Domesday Book; the territory may have been included in Wem and/or Horton at that time. The two were initially regarded as separate entities. In 1256 the township of ‘la Dich’ was fined over a body found outside Wem township, along with the adjacent townships of Wem, Tilley and Horton, while the township of ‘la Lawe’, with the townships of Edstaston, Coton and Tilley, was fined for failing to arrest the Welshmen accused of a murder in Edstaston.<sup>3</sup> They were joined as a single township by the end of the thirteenth century; ‘Dichlowe’ was a member of the manor of Wem c.1285.<sup>4</sup> In 1290 it was the township (*villata*) of ‘Dyche Lowe’ (or possibly the two *villate* of ‘Dyche’ and ‘Lowe’), and named as ‘Lowe [e]t Dyche’ in 1327.<sup>5</sup>

Ditches is from Old English *dīc* (ditch); it was known as ‘Ditch’, singular, at least into the mid 16th century.<sup>6</sup> Lowe is from Old English *hlāw* (tumulus).<sup>7</sup> There are no records of earthworks such as a ditch or tumulus, respectively, that could have inspired these names. A lane crossing Ditches Hill was called Drake or Drakey Lane: ‘According to legend the Devil was supposed to sit in a high tree on the Ditches bank at the turning into Drakey lane.’<sup>8</sup> This additional place-name evidence gives support to the past existence of earthworks as landscape features, given the mythical association of dragons or malevolent spirits with burial mounds.<sup>9</sup> More pragmatic explanations are also possible, however: perhaps a ditch in the marshland of Wem Pool at the foot of Ditches Hill, and an alternative definition of ‘lowe’ as a small, rounded hill. Samuel Garbet, usually willing to relate local stories, knew of ‘no certain tradition’ of ditches, and was firm on the latter derivation for Lowe, dismissing ‘Lowe Hill’ as a tautology.<sup>10</sup>

## Landscape

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<sup>3</sup> *Shropshire Eyre Roll 1256*, nos. 683, 689, 960, 961.

<sup>4</sup> SA, 6000/2651, but as to the spelling and form of the place-name, note that this is a 16th-century copy of the c.1284 tenure roll.

<sup>5</sup> TNA, E 149/1, *Cal. Inq. p.m.*, ii, p. 470 no. 774; *Shropshire Lay Subsidy 1327*, 144.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. ‘the Diche hill’, ‘le dyche Hill’ in 1561: *Survey 1561*, 60–1; and see above.

<sup>7</sup> Gelling, *PN Salop V*, xiii–xiv, 247–8.

<sup>8</sup> *Survey 1561*, 58–9; Garbet, 293–4; quote, without source, from Woodward, 8.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Maxims II’, in *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, ed. and trans. T.A. Shippey (Cambridge, 1976), lines 26b–27a: ‘Draca sceal on hlāwe, / frod, frætsum wlanc’ [A dragon must live in a barrow, old and proud of his treasures]. H.R.E. Davidson, ‘The hill of the dragon: Anglo-Saxon burial mounds in literature and archaeology’, *Folk-Lore* 61 (1950), 169–85 at 179–82.

<sup>10</sup> Garbet, 292.

Lowe Hill, or the Lowe, and Ditches Hill rise to 105 m. ASL about 1 km north west of Wem town. The northern side of Lowe Hill is a short, steep downwards slope. From the bottom, the ground rises to the road junction at Lowe Hall and thence rises gently but steadily north all the way to Northwood (100–105 m ASL).

Garbet's description of the township's soil in terms of 18th-century agriculture reflects its varied topography: 'The soil is generally a reddish clay, or marl, with a small mixture of earth, and in some places of sand. It is about a foot deep, and equally fit for tillage or pasture ... There is plenty of marl, and with this manure the land will bear excellent barley, peas and oats.'<sup>11</sup> Numerous large ponds in the northern part of the township may be former marl or clay pits, but also serve to drain otherwise waterlogged ground for pasture.

## Communications

One south–north route formed the spine of the township. In the south, Lowe Hill Road begins at the western end of Wem town, near the site of the medieval St John's chapel and well. Crossing Lowe Hill it terminates at Lowe Hall, at the junction with the east–west route described below. The northern continuation begins a few metres to the west; it was recorded in 1561 as a lane (*venella*) and as 'the way (*via*) leading to the church of Wem'.<sup>12</sup> As depicted on the 1631 map, the lane goes to Northwood, where it peters out in the woodland. It was described by Garbet as 'the road from Lowe to Whixall' and today as Ossage Lane it continues north into Whixall.<sup>13</sup> The east–west route was the king's highway (*regia via*) in 1561,<sup>14</sup> despite the fact that it only appears to connect Creamore with Horton. On a larger scale, however, it served to link the Wem–Whitchurch road with the Wem–Ellesmere road, bypassing Wem town. Lowe Hall sits at the crossroads of these east–west and south–north routes.

The Wem–Ellesmere road crosses Ditches Hill. It is the westwards continuation of an ancient routeway that forms the high street of Wem. Locally, this is the route to Horton and the north west of Wem parish and to Loppington. It was turnpiked in 1771 and is today the B5063.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Garbet, 292–3.

<sup>12</sup> *Survey, 1561*, 48–9, 62–3.

<sup>13</sup> Garbet, 300.

<sup>14</sup> *Survey, 1561*, 48–9.

<sup>15</sup> See 'Horton'.

Drake or Drakey Lane, starting at Ditches Hill, connects the Wem–Ellesmere road to the east–west ‘king’s highway’ at ‘Golborns Cross’,<sup>16</sup> which latterly marked the township boundary (see above).

## Population

In 1327, five heads of household were assessed for the lay subsidy as having goods valued over 10s., a figure comparable with the other townships of Wem manor.<sup>17</sup> It may be, however, that the population of Lowe and Ditches was smaller but on average better off than the other townships, since the population assessed for the poll tax in 1381 was just four married couples and one single man, the lowest number of any of the Wem townships assessed.<sup>18</sup> A survey of the manor in 1561 reported eight dwellings (seven ‘messuages’ and one cottage) in Lowe and Ditches, but the crown survey of 1589 reported eleven dwellings (nine ‘messuages’ and two cottages).<sup>19</sup> In most townships, the 1589 survey reported considerably fewer dwellings than the 1561 survey, hence the difference here may reflect a real increase in population. For the 1672 hearth tax, 15 households were liable; more than in the neighbouring townships of Horton and Wolverley (nine each).<sup>20</sup> Additionally, around 32 per cent of households may have been exempt from paying hearth tax due to poverty; hence the total number of households in Lowe and Ditches can be estimated at 22.<sup>21</sup>

A census taken by the curate of Wem in 1800 recorded a population of 87 in Lowe and Ditches township.<sup>22</sup> According to the national census, the population was 90 in 1821 and 98 in 1841. After that, the population seems to have declined. As the census later counted the townships of Lowe and Ditches, Horton and Wolverley together, and varied as to whether the thriving cheese factory at Belle Vue was counted in Lowe and Ditches or in Wem township, it is difficult to be certain. The population was 66 in 1851, 75 in 1861, 63 in 1881 and 48 in 1891 (including Belle Vue). Thereafter, Lowe and Ditches was subsumed into Wem Rural Parish. It is unlikely that the population of the former township today exceeds its 19th-

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<sup>16</sup> *Survey 1561*, 82–3; Garbet, 308.

<sup>17</sup> *Shropshire Lay Subsidy 1327*, 144.

<sup>18</sup> *Poll Taxes ... 1381. Part 2*, 374–5, 378–9. The townships of Sleaf, Newtown and Northwood do not appear in the poll tax returns, however.

<sup>19</sup> *Survey 1561*, 58–67; TNA, LR 2/225.

<sup>20</sup> *Shropshire Hearth Tax Roll of 1672*, 47–52

<sup>21</sup> Based on the average for parishes in North Bradford hundred: *Shropshire Hearth Tax Exemptions*, Table 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Wem Parish Registers*, 778–9.

century level. The same farmsteads continue to be occupied but with fewer residents, and little new housing has been built since c.1900.

## **Settlement**

The township name, from both ‘the lowe’ and ‘the ditch[es]’, as discussed above, is suggestive of prehistoric or at least pre-1066 activity, but no earthworks or artefacts have been found. Neither Lowe nor Ditches is named in Domesday Book. The township must have been formed after 1086, out of the territory between Wem and Horton, and along the western side of Edstaston. There are perhaps clues to a foundation from Wem in the way the south east corner of Lowe intrudes between Wem’s Middle and Chapel fields. It is also notable that Lowe forms a corridor linking the lord’s valuable demesne resources of Wem Pools to the south and the North Wood to the north, with large areas of demesne land throughout. The Ditches estate is probably of medieval origin and its attachment to the Lowe appears artificial. The early modern parish registers show that parishioners lived at ‘the Lowe’ or at ‘the Ditches’, not ‘in Lowe and Ditches’.

A nucleated medieval settlement existed at the top of Lowe Hill. The 1631 map depicts three dwellings in adjacent crofts on the west side of the road, clustered around the entrance to a short lane leading into the fields, and a fourth on the east side of the road. Open fields were laid out close to the crofts. The hamlet remains discernible today, with Pym’s Farm and its estate cottages on the west and Lowe Hill farm on the east.

The north of the township was formed by colonisation of the lord’s woodland and waste. North of Lowe Hall, both the northern portion of Lowe township and the large Northwood Hall estate, adjacent to the west, have the appearance of late medieval colonisation of the North Wood, which must once extended much further south towards Wem. The lane north of Lowe Hall is lined with three farms, two in existence by 1561, and the 1631 map depicts a scatter of cottages at the northern limits of the township (along with others nearby in Edstaston) which suggest opportunistic enclosure and habitation at the edges of the woodland.

There are no public buildings or commercial buildings other than the large structures associated with modern farming methods.

## **The Built Character**

Lowe and Ditches takes its name from a low elongated hill on a south west to north east orientation. The two most significant houses lie at each end of the township, The Ditches on the slope at the south west end, and Lowe Hall on higher ground to the north east.

*Lowe Hall* is a symmetrical three-window house in early 19th-century style, but said to conceal an earlier timber-frame. Located in the north east quadrant of the crossroads in Lowe and facing south west towards the lane, the house is of red brick under a tiled roof with external brick end stacks, raised stone copings on moulded kneelers, and a brick and stone eaves cornice. Most of the windows are four-pane sashes under segmental brick heads, those to the upper storey set low beneath the eaves, allowing space for the attic storey which is lit from the north gable. The central entrance is under a gabled timber hood supported on brackets, the modern door retaining an over-light with diamond glazing. High up on the wall above the entrance is a tablet bearing a date of 1666 accompanied by an armorial shield and crest. A postcard of the 1930s shows the house much as now, but with small-pane sashes and a panelled door. Continuous with the south gable end is a large rear wing of 19th-century date, with detail as front, and a large clustered chimney stack set back behind the ridge. It adjoins an earlier rear range.

Little is known of the plan-form of the earlier timber-framed house, though it includes the central rear range, which is slightly lower and longer than the 19th-century wing, and is said to retain the original projecting roof purlins. There is also a staircase projection to the rear, its exact position unclear, with timber-framing to its gable apex. Inside the projection is a fine Jacobean well-staircase rising from the ground floor to the attic, with flat open-work decorative balusters and newel posts with large finials. Panels with ornamental plasterwork were also recorded beneath the landings.<sup>23</sup>

Lowe Hall has a long history, the estate was held by the Barnes (previously known as Baron) family from at least 1489. Thomas Baron was admitted to a messuage with barns, stables and other buildings in a curtilage of half an acre in Lowe and Ditches in 1512.<sup>24</sup> The 1631 map depicts a large, two-storey house in the same location and orientation as the present house. Nevertheless, according to Garbet, Thomas Barnes (b. 1614) built that part of the house

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<sup>23</sup> Historic England, List Entry No. 1264453; N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England. Shropshire* (1958), 310; SA, PH/W/8/10/4-6 (staircase, 1964); SA, PH/W/8/10/8 (exterior, 1930s).

<sup>24</sup> *Survey 1561*, 60–1.

which contained the hall and the kitchen in 1635, and the other half, including the parlour, in 1654, so it is not clear why the house bears a date of 1666 rather than 1654. A staircase projection would be expected on the back of the hall rather than the parlour, providing a slightly earlier and more appropriate date for a Jacobean staircase.<sup>25</sup> Lowe Hall was then one of the three largest houses in the manor; in 1672 it was assessed as having nine hearths – only the rectory house in Wem and Aston Hall had as many.<sup>26</sup>

At the front entrance to Lowe Hall is a pair of gate piers, of red brick with large moulded capstones bearing pineapple finials. The finials are probably contemporary with the mid-17th-century rebuilding and are an early depiction of pineapples, which were first grown in Britain around this time. They were re-set on the red brick piers which are of 19th-century date. In a postcard of the 1930s, a wooden bar gate is shown between the piers with a cobbled surface beneath, and adjoining brick boundary walls. Pleasure gardens were laid out by John Barnes in the 18th century, according to Garbet, well executed with water features and green walks. There are gardens north of the house, but the Tithe map of 1844 also marks a garden with ponds on the south west side of the cross-roads.<sup>27</sup>

Lowe Hall came to be known locally as ‘Judge Jeffreys’ House’ and as Judge Jeffreys’s country seat. George Jeffreys, created Baron Jeffreys of Wem in 1685, was lord of the manor for just five years (1684–1689) and there is no record that he ever visited. However, his son and heir, John, Lord Jeffreys (d. 1702), did visit Wem, and stayed at Lowe Hall as the guest of Thomas Barnes (1642–1709).<sup>28</sup>

Opposite Lowe Hall to the west is a group of single-storey buildings. In the 19th century the buildings were set back from the road, the longer central range facing south, possibly the coach house and stables to the hall.<sup>29</sup> The site has since been redeveloped for residential and agricultural uses, with just part of the east range preserved.

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<sup>25</sup> Garbet, 297–300.

<sup>26</sup> *Shropshire Hearth Tax 1672*, 47, 48, 50.

<sup>27</sup> Historic England, List Entry No. 1236760; SA, PH/W/8/10/3; Garbet, 297; Wem Tithe Map, 1844 (Lowe & Ditches). With emphasis on the water gardens: G. Williams, *The Country Houses of Shropshire* (Woodbridge, 2021), 397–8.

<sup>28</sup> G.H.F. Vane, ‘Judge Jeffreys’s house at Wem’, *TSAHS*, 3rd ser, 2 (1902), 291; Garbet, 97–8; Woodward, 34. For the persistence of the Jeffreys connection, see British Listed Buildings, no. 1264453; sales particulars, 2017: <https://search.savills.com/property-detail/gbwmrstes090041>

<sup>29</sup> Tithe apportionment, lot 3815; OS 25”, Shropshire sheet XIV.15 (1881).

On the lane running south from the crossroads towards Wem, on the east side of the road, is *Lowe Hill*, a two-storey rendered house built in two adjoining parts at a shallow angle to each other. That to the right is a tall four-window building under a shallow, hipped slate roof with brick stack to left, the south east garden front overlooking Wem. The upper storey windows are tall casements with small-pane glazing, whilst below is a shallow pentice supported on narrow columns, under which is a garden door. The left-hand building is three-window and much altered, but its lower roof-line suggests an earlier date. A messuage here had belonged to the Pay family since at least 1561, and was sold to the Taylors in the late 17th century following a law-suit. It belonged to the Taylors at least until the mid-18th century. The building marked on the Tithe map of 1844 with a garden is probably the current house. L-shaped farm ranges are located away from the house to the east, the arrangement shown on the Ordnance Survey of 1881, but they now appear converted for domestic use.<sup>30</sup>

Opposite Lowe Hill is *Pyms Farm*. As depicted on the 1631 map, the original farm house was near the road and close to the other houses in the Lowe Hill hamlet.<sup>31</sup> In 1648 it was described as a house of one bay with a barn and garden.<sup>32</sup> Later in the 17th century, the then owner, Thomas Jebb of Wem, replaced it with ‘a good brick house’ which was set back in the fields;<sup>33</sup> this seems to have been the site of the farm house ever since. The house was rebuilt prior to 1818, when it was advertised as a ‘Mansion ... recently built... stand[ing] on a gentle eminence with a Southern aspect’.<sup>34</sup> The farmhouse is shown on the 1881 Ordnance Survey, forming the south east side of a farmyard with courtyard-style plan. By 1901, there was a new driveway and separate access to new farm buildings to the north of those previously existing.<sup>35</sup>

A photograph from the 1920s or 1930s shows a substantial and symmetrical three-window house of three full storeys.<sup>36</sup> It was of brick under a slate roof with classical style detail and exaggerated sandstone dressings, some of which may be a later embellishment. The detail included rusticated sandstone to the ground floor, a portico with decorative parapets, bay windows to the first floor and a heavy eaves cornice topped by a small triangular pediment. A

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<sup>30</sup> OS 25”, Shropshire sheet XIV.15 (1881); Wem Tithe Map, 1844 (Lowe & Ditches); Garbet, 297.

<sup>31</sup> Arundel map; the house ‘faced the road, very near the Donn’s’: Garbet, 296.

<sup>32</sup> ACA, MS 508, f. 32v.

<sup>33</sup> Garbet, 296; Thomas Jebb as owner: SA, P295/B/3/11, Horton Quarter, 1684.

<sup>34</sup> *Chester Chron.*, 15 May 1818, 1.

<sup>35</sup> OS 25”, Shropshire sheet XIV.15, first edn 1881, second edn 1901.

<sup>36</sup> In possession of Mary Gildea (pers. corr. May 2021).

lower wing to the left was in a similar style, whilst a wing to the right was of faux timber-framing, possibly of c.1900 date.<sup>37</sup> On the north side of the current entrance is a pair of semi-detached estate cottages, Pym's Cottages, constructed of polychrome brickwork with dentilled brick bands under a hipped slate roof, shared brick stack and end-entrance bays set back.

These cottages are first shown on the 1901 map.<sup>38</sup>

North of Lowe Hall is *Lowe Farm*. A building is marked on the 1631 Survey of Wem, gable end facing the road, in a field named St John's Furlong, which formerly belonged to St John's chapel at the west end of Wem. The property was held of the lord's demesne by Roger Whitfield in 1561, when there was not yet a house built on it. The current farmhouse is of two storeys with an attic, consisting of a front range and long rear wing. It is possible that the rear wing encases an earlier house, the front range added later. An advertisement for the sale of Lowe Farm in 1867 described it as, 'comprising a very large and good house, suitable for a gentleman's residence, having a south frontage of 50 feet overlooking a garden laid out in front ... and containing six rooms on the ground floor, eight bedrooms and two good cellars'.<sup>39</sup> The house has been much modernised and is rendered, with replaced roof coverings, though the front retains some early 19th-century detail including raised stone copings on shaped kneelers and wedge lintels over the windows. The entrances are currently in the north and south sides of the rear wing, facing the farmyard and garden, respectively, but the Ordnance Survey of 1881 there was a west porch facing the road along with the south-facing garden entrance. The farmhouse forms the south side of a rectangular farmyard, the farm ranges of red brick under slate roofs. In the 1867 advertisement, these were described as, 'a range of new outbuildings for 8 cows, barn, bay and cart house'.<sup>40</sup> These ranges are relatively low compared with some in the area, suggesting that this farm may not have undergone the large-scale agricultural improvements of the early-mid 19th century.<sup>41</sup>

*The Ditches*: With an inscribed date of 1612 on the door latch, The Ditches is without doubt one of the most perfect and eye-catching examples of its type in Shropshire. Of two storeys

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<sup>37</sup> HER no. 26622, citing C. Baxter, *Historic Farmstead Characterisation Dataset* (2010); SA, DA27/710/1/33.

<sup>38</sup> OS 25", Shropshire Sheet XIV.15, 1st edition, 1881 & 2nd edition 1901; Wem Tithe Map, 1844 (Lowe & Ditches); Garbet, 296-7.

<sup>39</sup> *Shrewsbury Chron.*, 22 Mar. 1867, 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Shrewsbury Chron.*, 22 Mar. 1867, 4.

<sup>41</sup> SA, 972/7/1/49; Garbet, 293-4, 301; OS 25", Shropshire sheet XIV.11 (1881); Google Street View, April 2009.

and an attic, the house is timber-framed on a sandstone plinth under a machine-tile roof with a clustered brick stack. The close-studded framing has plaster infill and there were jetties on all four sides (that on the south gable end now lost). Both the close-studding and jetties were symbols of high status, the former requiring a lot more timber than box-panelling. Like many early 17th-century houses, The Ditches has a lobby-entrance. These developed from the medieval open-hall, where the hearth was at the entrance end of the hall, later enclosed by a hood and then a chimney. The chimney was then behind the front entrance, with a small lobby between the two, from which doorways led off to left and right. A more up-to-date 17th-century feature is the symmetrical front with central entrance, which in this case consists of a two-storey porch with fleur-de-lys decoration to the gable. Inside are side benches and unglazed mullioned windows. The nail-studded front door has strap hinges in fleur-de-lys form, as well as the inscribed date on the door handle. Overall, the impression is of uniformity, with the jetty going around the house including the porch, the only divergence being the herring-bone decoration to the north (attic) gable. The house is also unusual for the preservation of its original timber windows to the ground floor, which have ovolo-moulded mullions and transoms, and dropped sills. Those to the upper storey were replaced in the 19th century but retain the original sills.<sup>42</sup>

Inside, the ground floor has two equal-sized heated rooms on each side of the chimney stack. There is evidence that the original staircase was in the south west corner of the northern room, not behind the chimney as would be expected in a lobby-entrance house, but this arrangement would have allowed access into a single-storey rear room. The staircase is now located in one of several rear ranges added in the early 20th century, when the original rear room was also raised. The ceiling has ovolo-moulded spine beams and chamfered joists at right-angles resulting in a chequered pattern, whilst dragon beams are found in all four corners, confirming that the jetty went all round the house. Each room has a large fireplace of Grinshill stone. That to the southern room has ovolo-mouldings to the jambs, a moulded arch and overmantel with classical-style decoration. A heraldic shield was formerly attached to it, bearing the coats of arms of important families, mainly from the north of England and Wales. The fireplace in the northern room is slightly plainer but has chamfered jambs with decorative stops incorporating lozenges and trellis work. It has fittings which suggest it was once in a kitchen, but has an early 20th-century brick fireplace inserted. There is wood

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<sup>42</sup> Newman and Pevsner, 38, 40, 677; Historic England, List Entry No. 1264550; Moran, *Whitchurch*, 219–24.

panelling throughout the house, the upper floor with chamfered ceiling beams and stone fireplaces. The five-bay roof structure is typical of its date with tie-beam trusses, straight wind-braces and two tiers of purlins. A plaster inscription on the chimney records its repair in 1822. A brick structure containing a gas plant was added against the south west side of the house c.1909 to provide domestic heating.<sup>43</sup>

There was an earlier house on the site of which no trace remains, perhaps built on the copyhold close named Hall Meadow, adjacent to the west, where a small house was depicted in 1631 next to the new, much larger house. The property was then owned by the Twyfordes, but the last member of that family died in 1603, a few years before the new house was built. The founder was probably George Kilvert who was living there in 1622. After the death of his son Richard in 1644, the house was sold to John Barnes of Lowe Hall, who leased it out. The Ditches also has connections with the Nonconformist movement in north Shropshire, including a brief period when it was occupied by Mr Richardson, the Puritan rector of Myddle, who was forced out at the time of the Restoration.<sup>44</sup>

In the front garden is a sandstone *sundial*, probably mid-18th century and in classical-style. It has a vase-shaped base on a moulded plinth, the capping decorated with foliage and a festooned garland. The brass and lead plate on top is probably later, and bears an inscription ‘1LET NOT6/THE SUN GO/DOWN UPON THY/1WRATH4’. A photograph of 1964 shows the house little altered and a shaped ha-ha in the east-facing garden. It is interesting that the sundial cannot be seen, so it may have been moved from elsewhere.<sup>45</sup>

The Ditches is set down below the road, its driveway continuing as a track leading to *Lower Pool Farm*. By the early 21st century, the farmhouse there had gone but an L-shaped red brick farm building was extant. A historic appraisal was undertaken of this before it was converted into residential units.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Moran, *Whitchurch*, 219–22; Historic England, List Entry No. 1264550; Newman and Pevsner, 677; SA, PH/W/8/10/7, photograph 1964; SA, SC/1/65: sales catalogue 1889.

<sup>44</sup> Moran, *Whitchurch*, 222–4; Garbet, 294–5. For Richardson: Richard Gough, *Antiquities and Memoirs of Myddle*, 19: Richardson lived at the Ditches for a short time between the Act of Uniformity (1662) and the Five Mile Act (1665).

<sup>45</sup> Historic England, List Entry No. 1236569; SA, PH/W/8/10/7.

<sup>46</sup> Shropshire HER ESA 6324 ([Detailed record to be seen](#)).

Nearly opposite the entrance to The Ditches on the B5063 is *Belle Vue*, a villa residence with 6½ a., built on the outskirts of Wem by 1826.<sup>47</sup> The land – then a house, outbuildings, garden and orchard with the adjacent close named ‘Clemley Park’<sup>48</sup> – was sold from the lord’s demesne, c.1809, to George Walford of Wem, and it was probably in Walford family ownership that the site was redeveloped as a gentleman’s residence.<sup>49</sup> Richard Wycherley Smith was already residing at Belle Vue in 1826, when he married Catherine Dickin, a niece of George Walford.<sup>50</sup> The house, though altered, has a shallow hipped roof and sash windows.<sup>51</sup> By 1841 a Cheshire farmer and cheese factor, John Dobell, was residing there. After a few years the Dobell family moved to Northwood, but in 1855 the cheese factoring business was re-established at Belle Vue as Platt & Dobell. Thereafter, as well as being the family home of successive generations of the Dobell, Platt and Swain proprietors, the property was developed as a cheese factory, producing cheese from locally produced milk by the late 1870s. Most of the industrial buildings have been demolished, except for the brick loading-bay near the roadside, leaving Belle Vue once more as a farm house.<sup>52</sup>

The *lodge* to Belle Vue is probably of early 19th-century date. The small, square characterful lodge is two-storey and constructed of red brick under a pyramidal tiled roof with central brick chimney and wide boarded eaves. The original entrance faced south east towards the driveway and has a rectangular wooden doorcase, but the entrance is now elsewhere as the driveway is no longer in use. The windows are mainly two- or three-light casements, but the entrance front has an oculus to the upper left with unusual flowing tracery. A similar oculus is found in the upper left of the south west elevation, with a blocked window below with painted gothic tracery. To the rear (north west) is a later single-storey extension.

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<sup>47</sup> *Chester Chron.*, 8 Sept. 1826, 2; SA, 1186/124, 30 Sept. 1828, Richard Wycherley Smith of Belle Vue, Wem, esq. Comparable, in its genteel suburban relation to town and turnpike road, with the Aston Park estate of Stephen Hassall (see Aston).

<sup>48</sup> Field names ‘Clemley’ and ‘Clem Park’, common in Shropshire, indicate poor soil: H.D.G. Foxall, *Shropshire Field-Names* (Shrewsbury 1980), 25.

<sup>49</sup> 1805 Survey, 118–19; SA, 6000/12498; Tithe apportionment, lots 447–50; SA, 1848 box 101, ‘Wrench’; 1864 indenture and schedule of deeds: SA, 1848 box 157.

<sup>50</sup> *Chester Chron.*, 8 Sept. 1826, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Historic England, List Entry No. 1264545; Google Street View, April 2009. Note that both Belle Vue house and the lodge are technically in Wem township.

<sup>52</sup> See below, Economic History.

## LANDOWNERSHIP

Lowe and Ditches was entirely within the manor of Wem, a status that has remained unchanged from presumably soon after 1066 to the present day. There was one freehold estate, The Ditches, and the remainder of the township was held in the lord's demesne or as copyhold. In 1436, customary tenants held three messuages and 16 nooks of arable land, for which the total rents were 6s. and 32s. per annum, respectively.<sup>53</sup> Copyhold tenements were enfranchised at different times from the mid 17th century onwards.

### Demesne

In 1561 the lord's demesne consisted of several closes and crofts totalling 67 a. which were leased at will to John Allenson (54 a.) and John Thurleigh (13 a.). Of Allenson's holding, 24 a. was a close of pasture with a ruined house ('mesuagium ruinosum') called Wall field. By 1648 this portion of the demesne, now let to William Allenson, had increased to 64 a. and was known as Pim's Farm.<sup>54</sup> Thurleigh's holding comprised the lord's windmill, on the Wem side of Ditches Hill, and adjacent closes to the north and west.<sup>55</sup> A bakehouse was provided by the lord of the manor at 'town croft' (later 'Tom croft'), but by 1561 it had been converted to a cottage.<sup>56</sup>

A cottage at the northern limit of the township, with 13 a. of enclosed pastures (Whordes field), was probably recent enclosure at the edge of Northwood – in 1648 it still contained 60 (saleable) trees and 2 a. of rough pasture. The 1631 map, additionally, labels as 'terra domini' two crofts, each with a cottage, which appear to be encroachments on the road as it entered Northwood. By that time, the 'Whordes field' demesne was let to Thomas Barnes, who held it in 1648, with 5 a. at 'Cadinges lake', on the opposite side of the lane.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> TNA, C 139/76/34; *Cal. Inq. PM*, xxiv, 348, no. 495. A nook, in Wem manor, usually consisted of 9 a., being 3 a. in each of three open fields. In Lowe, however, at least by the time of enclosure of the open fields, a nook was just 3 a.: *Survey 1561*, 34–5, 64–5.

<sup>54</sup> *Survey 1561*, 48–9; ACA, MS 508, f. 32v; Garbet, 296; see below.

<sup>55</sup> *Survey 1561*, 52–3.

<sup>56</sup> *Survey 1561*, 66–7; Arundel map: at the crossroads, opposite Lowe Hall.

<sup>57</sup> *Survey 1561*, 48–9; ACA, MS 508, f. 31r; the Arundel map shows 'Cadinges lake' as 'Kerings lake'.

Additionally, St John's Furlong, a croft of '15 butts' which had been part of the endowment of St John's chapel, Wem, was taken into the lord's hand on the suppression of the chapel in 1548.<sup>58</sup>

A large part of the lord's demesne in Lowe and Ditches, at least 30 a., was sold to Thomas Barnes of Lowe Hall in 1652 (see below). Pym's Farm too was sold (see below). In 1805, several parcels of land totalling 47 a. still pertained to the lord of the manor, suggesting that additions had been made to the demesne since the sales of the mid 17th century. In a subsequent sale in 1809, two parcels of demesne with houses were sold to Thomas Elkes (55 a.) and George Walford (26 a. 3 r.), respectively.<sup>59</sup>

## Principal Estates

### *Lowe Hall*

The Lowe estate of the Barnes family was the predominant estate in the township over several centuries. William Baron of the Lowe owed suit of court at Wem in 1489.<sup>60</sup> In 1512 Thomas Baron was admitted to a copyhold estate comprising 95½ a.<sup>61</sup> Thomas Barnes, yeoman, of the Lowe (d. 1658) astutely formed alliances with the neighbouring families, marrying first Elizabeth Adams (d. 1616) and second Dorythy Moody of Pool Head (d. 1667), and marrying his son, Thomas (1614–68), to Elizabeth Higginson (d. 1703). Thomas Barnes the younger was so called because his father assigned Lowe Hall to him and retired to another residence, probably around the time of Thomas the younger's majority (1635).<sup>62</sup> Father and son were both founder 'feoffees' of Thomas Adams's school in 1650.<sup>63</sup> Thomas Barnes the younger in particular consolidated and increased the estate. He enfranchised all the copyhold tenements c.1650 and in 1652 purchased all the demesne lands and rights then in his possession, throughout the manor, for £613. Another deed of 1652 recites numerous properties purchased by Barnes in Lowe and other townships.<sup>64</sup> Engaged in the later stages of

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<sup>58</sup> *Survey 1561*, 66–7; 1631 map; Garbet, 246, 294.

<sup>59</sup> 1805 Survey, 000; SA, 6000/12498.

<sup>60</sup> Garbet, 298. Garbet refers here and elsewhere to a manor court roll of 1489.

<sup>61</sup> *Survey 1561*, 60–1; TNA, LR 2/225 (1589).

<sup>62</sup> *Wem Parish Registers*, vol. 1; TNA, C 2/Eliz/B18/54; Garbet, 298–9, although the dates at p. 298 are incorrect. Elizabeth née Higginson was the grandmother of Garbet's wife, Anne (née Edwards) of Great Ness, where apparently she died in 1703: Garbet, 299.

<sup>63</sup> Garbet, 185.

<sup>64</sup> ACA, MS 59, pp. 32–3, 59, 73–4.

draining Wem Pool, he purchased at least 20 a. of the Pool Lands and established Pool Farm.<sup>65</sup> Around the same time, Barnes purchased the Ditches estate, but disposed of it as the marriage portion of his daughter (see below).

The Lowe Hall estate then descended from father to son until John Barnes, who died in 1761, was succeeded by an only daughter,<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth (d. 1762), who married John Watson (possibly of Terrick Hall, Whitchurch), and the estate passed to their descendants. In 1793 the estate was declared to include: eight messuages, one (blacksmith's) shop, 20 gardens, 350 a. of arable land and 450 a. of pasture in the townships of Wem, Lowe and Ditches, Edstaston, Horton, Newtown, Northwood and Wolverley.<sup>67</sup>

John Barnes Watson of Lowe Hall had his son John Barnes Watson baptised at Edstaston chapel in 1784,<sup>68</sup> but by 1808 he had moved to Terrick Hall. By 1805 Lowe Hall Farm was occupied by Thomas Elkes.<sup>69</sup> Edward, the son and heir of John Barnes Watson, died without issue in 1847 when the co-heiresses to the estate in equal shares were the two daughters of William Henry Watson (d. 1839): Charlotte Barnes and Harriet. Charlotte Barnes married in 1849 Thomas Mainwaring Penson, later the county architect of Cheshire; Harriet married George Morrison Marsh of Bangor Iscoed in 1851.<sup>70</sup> The estate began to be broken up in 1874 when the executors of the co-heiresses advertised for sale: Lowe Hall Farm, Lowe Cottage Farm, Northwood Farm and Pool Farm, totalling over 485 a., and equipped for dairy farming, as well as a newly erected dwelling house and blacksmith's workshop.<sup>71</sup> Northwood Farm was purchased (ultimately) by the Maddocks estate of Wolverley, and the subsequent ownership of Lowe Cottage Farm is outlined below, but that of Lowe Hall Farm is uncertain.

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<sup>65</sup> Garbet, 252; ACA, MS 59, p.73.

<sup>66</sup> For the descent of the estate to this point, Garbet, 298–300.

<sup>67</sup> NLW, Smallwood Collection of Deeds and Papers, no. 468.

<sup>68</sup> W.G.D. Fletcher (ed.), *Shropshire Parish Registers 2. The Register of Edstaston* (1907), baptisms, 14 Feb. 1784.

<sup>69</sup> 1805 Survey, 99; *Shrewsbury Chron.*, 3 Jan. 1834, 2; Elkes tenancy: *Eddowes's Jnl*, 7 Apr. 1847, 3.

<sup>70</sup> SA, 3994 box 4, Lowe Cottage Farm; two notebooks recording 1847 sales of furniture etc. at Lowe Hall: SA, 1848 box 151.

<sup>71</sup> SA, SC/6/59; *Eddowes's Jnl*, 19 Aug. 1874, 1. Eight lots comprising: Northwood Farm (c.133 a.); Lowe Hall Farm (five-bedroomed house, buildings, yard, garden etc., c.133 a.); Lowe Cottage tenement (four-bedroomed house, buildings, garden etc., c.94 a.); the Near Croft (house, blacksmith's shop, yard etc., c.1 a.); Little Drake Hill Field (land c.2 a.) and Pools Farm (four-bedroomed house, buildings, stack yard etc., in c.97 a.). The blacksmith's shop was in Horton (see Horton, 'Economic History').

### *The Ditches*

‘The Ditch’ was a settlement between Wem and Horton by the mid 13th century. A William Dyches was living in Lowe and Ditches township in 1381, and Thomas Dychus in Horton.<sup>72</sup> The copyhold estate existed by 1502 when Thomas Twyford was admitted to the tenement.<sup>73</sup> The freehold part of the estate is first recorded in 1561, when it was the only freehold in the township of Lowe and Ditches. The freehold estate was based upon a compact block of south-facing hillside bounded by Wem Field to the east, Wem Pool to the south, and the road from Wem to the north. Two detached closes to the north – one beside Drake Lane (‘Churings Britch’), and another in Newtown on the edge of the North Wood – probably originated as assarts. The copyhold estate lay adjacent to the west, consisting of a rather larger area.<sup>74</sup> The estate in 1589 thus comprised a total of 70 a., encompassing most of Ditches Hill.<sup>75</sup> Richard Twyford died in 1603 and the estate passed to George Kilvert (d. 1630). The death of George’s son and heir, Richard Kilvert, in 1644 may have been the occasion for Thomas Barnes the younger of Lowe Hall to acquire the estate.<sup>76</sup> In 1652, Barnes enfranchised the copyhold lands of the Ditches, totalling 37 a. Robert Hill, tanner of Wem, also acquired from the deceased estate of Kilvert, and enfranchised, a close of 8 a. named the Brickhill.<sup>77</sup>

Thomas Barnes did not long retain the Ditches, disposing of it as the marriage portion of his daughter Dorythy to John Edwards of Great Ness in 1658.<sup>78</sup> Edwards in turn sold the estate in 1677 to William Basnet of Ruyton, whose descendant, the Revd. Joseph Longford (*alias* Langford), was the proprietor in 1805, holding 90 a.<sup>79</sup> Langford’s heiress was his only daughter, Elizabeth, who married her first cousin, the Revd. Thomas Henshaw Jones, in 1826

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<sup>72</sup> *Poll Taxes ... 1381*, 394.

<sup>73</sup> *Survey 1561*, 60–1.

<sup>74</sup> *Survey 1561*, 58–9: the acreage of the estate is unfortunately omitted from the 1561 survey; TNA, LR 2/225 (1589); Arundel map (closes labelled ‘Richard Kilvert’).

<sup>75</sup> TNA, LR 2/225.

<sup>76</sup> *Wem Parish Registers*, 49, 52, 55, 58, 61, 65, 66, 70, 74, 78, 103, 124, 143, 149, 157, 158, 165; TNA, PROB 11/157/196: will of George Kilvert, proved 12 Feb. 1630; TNA, C 7/200/34: *Andrew Kilvert and Roger Kilvert v Thomas Barnes and others*, 1649; Garbet, 294–5.

<sup>77</sup> ACA, MS 59, pp. 29, 32.

<sup>78</sup> Garbet, 295. See B.M. Jones, *The Goode Mr Garbet of Wem: The Life of the Revd. Samuel Garbet, M.A. of Wem, Shropshire 1685–1756* (Wrexham, 2001), 26–32.

<sup>79</sup> SA, 239/1; Garbet, 295; 1805 Survey, 100.

but died in 1827/8, along with their infant son.<sup>80</sup> The Revd. Thomas Henshaw Jones was the proprietor in 1840, when the tenant was Edward Elkes, holding 102 a. Jones died in 1860, possibly bequeathing the property to one of the daughters of his elder half-brother, David Francis Atcherley.<sup>81</sup> By 1874 the farm was owned by the estate of the late John Lee.<sup>82</sup> The Ditches farm was advertised for sale in 1889, ‘with a handsome black and white dwelling house’ and nearly 85 a. Also for sale as separate lots were 10 a. of pasture ‘near the Pools’, 10½ a. of arable ‘situate at the back of Belle Vue Cheese Factory’, 14 a. called Primrose Crofts with frontage to the Wem–Ellesmere road, arable land called the Big Hop Yard (9 a.), and a further 24½ a. of meadow land ‘near the Pools’, all in the occupation of Samuel Elkes.<sup>83</sup> The property remained in the Lee family, however, as the executors of Henry Lea, sold the property in 1905.<sup>84</sup>

### *Pyms Farm*

Pyms Farm originated from a parcel of the lord’s demesne which was held by John Allenson in 1561, extending south west from Lowe Hill Road. A William Pym resided in the township in 1381.<sup>85</sup> In the early 18th century it was said to be named after the tenant, named Pym, who was murdered and his body concealed on the farm during the Civil War.<sup>86</sup> In 1648 ‘Pims Farme’ was held of the lord’s demesne by William Allenson, when it comprised 64 a. 2 r. and included the Wall fields (22 a.) to the south east.<sup>87</sup> Soon afterwards, Allenson purchased the freehold from the earl of Arundel’s trustees. Pyms Farm then changed hands several times before 1700. In 1700 it was owned by Job Orton of Shrewsbury, grocer.<sup>88</sup> By 1715 the estate belonged to John Swanwick.<sup>89</sup> John Swanwick (1736–1810) inherited Pyms Farm, holding

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<sup>80</sup> *Chester Chron.*, 9 June 1826, 2; ‘The forgotten brother of David Francis Atcherley’, 27 Feb. 2014: <http://www.atcherley.org.uk/wp/the-forgotten-brother-of-david-francis-atcherley/>

<sup>81</sup> Tithe apportionment, Lowe and Ditches, 162–3; *Wolverhampton Chron.*, 3 Oct. 1860, 5.

<sup>82</sup> As shown on a plan included in sales particulars for the Lowe Hall estate, 1874: SA 1848 box box 157.

<sup>83</sup> *Oswestry Advertiser*, 26 Jun. 1889, 1.

<sup>84</sup> *Shrewsbury Chron.*, 29 Sept. 1905, 1.

<sup>85</sup> Fenwick (ed.), *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381*, 394.

<sup>86</sup> Garbet, 298.

<sup>87</sup> ACA, MS 508, f. 32v.

<sup>88</sup> Garbet, 296–7. The sale is not recorded in ACA, MS MD 59. Job Orton (‘Overton’): SA, P295/B/3/11, Horton Quarter, 1700.

<sup>89</sup> SA, P295/B/3/11, Horton Quarter, 1715.

82½ a. in 1805.<sup>90</sup> A visitor in 1803 praised Pyms Farm as a ‘neat, comfortable house ... delightfully situated on a gentle eminence. The house is surrounded by the estate of its owner, which he keeps in his own hands, and cultivates with science and success.’<sup>91</sup> In 1808 John Swanwick retired, letting the property to Henry West Betty, the father of the celebrated child actor, William Henry West Betty.<sup>92</sup> At the expiration of the tenancy, in 1818, Pyms Farm was advertised for sale, with a ‘recently built ... mansion’ and over 100 a. of arable, meadow and pasture land.<sup>93</sup> By 1840 Pyms Farm (97 a.) and Lowe Hill Farm (32 a.) were both owned by Revd. James Craig, and let to Charles Woollam and Samuel Woollam respectively. ‘The Pyms House Estate’ was advertised for sale in 1848, as a freehold ‘mansion house’ and gardens, with contiguous farmland totalling 111½ a.<sup>94</sup> The tenant, possibly owner, c.1852–1872 was James Powell.<sup>95</sup>

Samuel Hudson purchased Pyms Farm between 1891 and 1895, and resided there until his death in 1907. As well as agricultural improvement, Hudson took a leading role in local government, as chairman of the Wem Union board of governors and Wem Rural District Council, and from 1889 to 1906 as an alderman of SCC.<sup>96</sup> Hudson left Pyms Farm to his nephew, William Hudson of Hulme Hall, Cheadle Hulme, who died in 1916, leaving his land and farms in Shropshire to his nephew, Thomas William Hudson.<sup>97</sup> T.W. Hudson sold off part of this inheritance (Newton-on-the Hill in Myddle), retaining Pyms Farm and residing there at least until 1941.<sup>98</sup>

### *Lowe Hill*

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<sup>90</sup> SA, 167/47, p. 104; Redmonde, ‘The Swanwicks of Cheshire and Shropshire’, *Wrexham Advertiser*, 20 Sep. 1890, 2; S.L. Swanwick and J.E. Jones, *The Descendants of Rev. Philip Henry, M.A. ... The Swanwick Branch to 1899* (Toronto, 1899), 13–14; TNA, IR 26/310/22, will of John Swanwick, gent, of Pym’s Farm proved at Chester, 25 Jan. 1811.

<sup>91</sup> E. Butcher, *An Excursion from Sidmouth to Chester, in the Summer of 1803 ...* (London, 1805), 169–71.

<sup>92</sup> P. Ranger, ‘Betty, William Henry West (1791–1874)’, *ODNB*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/2315> (accessed 28 August 2018); *Worcester Jnl*, 20 Jun. 1811, 3; *Eddowes’s Jnl*, 30 Sep. 1874, 2.

<sup>93</sup> *Chester Chron.*, 15 May 1818, 1.

<sup>94</sup> *Eddowes’s Jnl*, 6 Sep. 1848, 3.

<sup>95</sup> Solicitor’s papers on the Powell estate in Aston: SA, 1848 box 151.

<sup>96</sup> Obituary in *Shrewsbury Chron.*, 22 Mar. 1907, 8.

<sup>97</sup> *Wellington Jnl*, 25 May 1907, 7; *Chester Chron.*, 7 Oct. 1916, 8; 14 Oct. 1916, 8.

<sup>98</sup> *London Gazette* refs; *Kelly’s Dir. 1941*, 290.

Opposite Pym's Farm, on the east side of Lowe Hill road, is Lowe Hill Farm. In 1549 John Pay and Maud his wife were admitted to the copyhold estate which comprised a dwelling house, two crofts (9 a.), and two nooks (18 a.) recently enclosed as two pastures.<sup>99</sup> The 1631 map depicts a house some distance from the road in approximately the same position as the present Lowe Hill farm house, in the tenure of Richard Pay. His successor, John Pay, apparently fell into financial difficulties and it was the notorious Samuel Smith of Wem who enfranchised 'Lowe Hill croft' which had been the inheritance of Richard Pay.<sup>100</sup> From before 1684 to after 1714, the small estate was held by John Taylor and continued in the Taylor family into the mid 18th century. In 1805, now 24 a., the owner was Mrs Elizabeth Porthouse and the tenant Benjamin Groome. By 1840 Lowe Hill farm (32 a.) was owned by the Revd. James Craig. 'The Lowe Hill Estate' was advertised for sale in 1848, as two recently erected dwelling houses, with gardens, barn stables and coach house, and nearly 33 a. of farmland in several parcels. One of the houses was the farm house, occupied by Charles and Samuel Woollam, and the adjoining house was occupied by John Dobell.<sup>101</sup>

North of Lowe Hall, three farms line the lane north into Northwood, from south to north: Lowe Villa Farm, Lowe Farm and Lowe Cottage Farm.

#### *Lowe Villa Farm*

The Cadman family were tenants, before 1521, of a copyhold tenement north of Lowe Hall called 'Cadomos Landes', of about 50 a. in closes extending from around Cadman's Lake (the lord's demesne, probably because it was 'waste' prior to being drained)<sup>102</sup> up to the North Wood.<sup>103</sup> They also held four burgages in New Street, Wem, and one nook (9 a.) in the open fields of Wem township, by copy formerly granted to William Cadman, son of Thomas Cadman.<sup>104</sup> Roger Whitfield was admitted as tenant of this estate in 1521 and his son Robert in 1551.<sup>105</sup> An adjacent copyhold tenement of 16 a. with a messuage, in existence by 1518

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<sup>99</sup> *Survey 1561*, 64–5; TNA, LR 2/225.

<sup>100</sup> ACA, MS MD 59, p. 29; Garbet, 297, 357–8.

<sup>101</sup> *Eddowes's Jnl*, 6 Sep. 1848, 3.

<sup>102</sup> 'Cadinges Lake' (1561); ACA, MS 508, f. 31r, 'Cadinges lake' in the lord's demesne (1648); 'Kerings Lake' and, across the road, 'Kerings Field' (1631), 'Caddins Lake' (1652), '?Cammins Lake' (1805 survey) and 'Common Lake' (Tithe apportionment).

<sup>103</sup> *Survey 1561*, 62–3.

<sup>104</sup> *Survey 1561*, 22–3. The Cadman family had not disappeared; William Cadman married Ellen Whitfield at Wem in 1586: *Wem Parish Registers*, 92.

<sup>105</sup> *Survey 1561*, 62–3.

and held by William Webb in 1561, was added to the Whitfield estate by 1631.<sup>106</sup> The land more to the north was sold, before 1631, to form Lowe Farm (see below).

The 1631 map depicts a house beside the lane just north of Lowe Hall, in a croft held by Thomas Whitfield, named Higher Yard. By the mid 17th century the land nearer to Lowe Hall had been acquired by the Lowe Hall estate and was enfranchised, along with the rest of his copyhold estate, by Thomas Barnes.<sup>107</sup> The Whitfields seem to have sold their remaining Lowe estate soon afterwards, although descendants of Roger Whitfield were settled in Wem, Tilley and later Aston (The Weir farm).<sup>108</sup> According to Garbet, Rowland Whitfield sold this estate, c.1651, to Richard Jebb, steward of the manor, who enfranchised it. The estate passed to the steward's grandson, Richard Jebb, curate of Whixall, who sold it to Richard Lawrence of Wem, the occupier in 1752.<sup>109</sup> The owner in 1810 was Thomas Elkes (d.1824); in 1826 Elkes's executors sold the property to James Lea.<sup>110</sup> In 1840 the core of the former Whitfield property still existed as nearly 43 a., owned by James Lea and divided into two compact tenements. The smaller, of 12½ a., included a cottage and garden on the same site as the 17th-century house, but set back from the road.<sup>111</sup> From before 1851 probably to 1868 the occupant was James Lea (b. 1827), son of Samuel Lea, tenant farmer of The Ditches – perhaps a nephew of the 1840 owner. Lea (the elder or younger) replaced the cottage with a smart new house (the current house) and in 1868 advertised 'Lowe Villa' for sale, with 10 a.

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<sup>106</sup> *Survey 1561*, 64–5, cf. Garbet, 301: Garbet's account of the three tenements in the north of Lowe is unreliable compared with the 17th-century Arundel map and records of the sales and enfranchisements by the Earl of Arundel's trustees for sale, which Garbet did not know of.

<sup>107</sup> ACA, MS MD 59, p. 32; cf. Garbet, 301. Roger Whitfield married Elizabeth Barnes, possibly the daughter of John Barnes of Lowe Hall, in 1612: *Wem Parish Registers*, 2, 101.

<sup>108</sup> Transactions involving Richard Whitfield of Wem, merchant, and his son Thomas Whitfield, scrivener, in London in the 1660s may be related: SA, 103/1/1/42–4. See also correspondence of George Whitfield, surgeon, in London, about the family's interests in Wem: SA, 587, e.g. 587/52, 56, 67, descendants in Wem, Marchamley (Shrops.) and London, 1766–93.

<sup>109</sup> Garbet, 301.

<sup>110</sup> Supplementary Abstract of title of James Lea to messuage and lands in Lowe: SA, 1848 box 157

<sup>111</sup> Tithe apportionment, lots 3791–4.

of ‘old pasture land’.<sup>112</sup> The property was advertised for sale again in 1889, when occupied by John Brassey, and in 1974 on the instructions of W.H. Phillips.<sup>113</sup>

### *Lowe Farm*

The origins of Lowe Farm appear to be in St John’s Furlong (see Demesne, above). By 1561, the parcel of ‘15 butts’ that lay within Roger Whitfield’s copyhold close of Woodbrich (2 a.) was let by the lord of the manor to Richard Whitfield for 18*d.* per annum.<sup>114</sup> By 1623, a copyhold tenement had been formed, then held by William Felton, with a house built on St John’s Furlong and several adjacent copyhold crofts acquired from the Whitfield estate to the south; in 1631 it was in the tenure of Richard Felton.<sup>115</sup> After Felton’s death, the tenement of 30 a. was enfranchised by Richard Jebb, steward of the manor *c.*1650.<sup>116</sup> It apparently reverted to William Felton, an attorney and one of the plaintiffs in the ruinous litigation between Wem copyholders and Daniel Wycherley as lord of the manor which began in 1673. Felton acted as the plaintiffs’ representative until 1679, but after apparently attempting to negotiate a settlement with Wycherley, he was condemned as a traitor to their cause and disgraced.<sup>117</sup> Felton sold his estate to Sir George Jeffreys, *c.*1685,<sup>118</sup> when the latter was acquiring estates in Wem to augment his status as lord of the manor.

By 1805 the 55 a. farm was owned and occupied by Richard Richards, and in 1840 by Thomas Richards.<sup>119</sup> Joseph Andrew Bracegirdle of Stockport purchased the farm in 1862, with Richards remaining as tenant, but financial, and neighbourly, difficulties obliged him to sell it in 1867, as a farm of 37 a.<sup>120</sup> The purchaser *c.*1872 was George Powell, whose

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<sup>112</sup> *Eddowes’s Jnl*, 22 Apr. 1868, 1. James Lea (the younger) had left Lowe by 1871 and gone into business as a poultry and game dealer: Census, Lowe and Ditches, 1841, 1851, 1861; Willenhall (Wolverhampton), 1871; Shrewsbury, St Mary, 1881.

<sup>113</sup> *Oswestry Advertiser*, 24 Apr. 1889, 1; *Birmingham Daily Post*, 30 Mar. 1974, 23. W.H. Phillips also owned Lowe Cottage Farm (below).

<sup>114</sup> *Survey 1561*, 66–7.

<sup>115</sup> Arundel map; Garbet, 300.

<sup>116</sup> ACA, MS MD 59, p. 28.

<sup>117</sup> Garbet, 69, 79–82.

<sup>118</sup> Garbet, 95, 300.

<sup>119</sup> 1805 Survey, 102–3; Schedule of deeds, 1808–1900 (carbon copy of typescript): SA, 1848 box 157; Tithe apportionment, lot 3776; Bagshaw, 336. cf. advertisement for sale of farm in Lowe: *Eddowes’s Jnl*, 25 Oct. 1843, 1.

<sup>120</sup> *Shrewsbury Chron.*, 15 July 1864, 6–7; 23 Sept. 1864, 9; 8 Sept. 1865, 7; 6 Dec. 1867, 8; *Oswestry Advertiser*, 24 Jan. 1866, 8; *Shrewsbury Chron.*, 22 Mar. 1867, 4; *London Gaz.*, 22 Oct. 1867.

descendant sold Lowe Farm to George Fenn the younger in 1900.<sup>121</sup> In 1903, with Lowe Cottage Farm, Lowe Farm was owned by George William Fenn. Both were advertised for sale in 1908, Lowe Farm as a freehold dairy farm of 38 a.<sup>122</sup>

### *Lowe Cottage Farm*

This large farm was situated in the northernmost part of Lowe, where it was bounded by Edstaston and Northwood, an area still in the process of colonisation at the time of the 1561 survey. In 1631 there was a house on the site of the present Lowe Cottage farmhouse, in a large croft held by Thomas Barnes. Four more dwellings were scattered west of the lane, near Northwood, all of which had disappeared by the 19th century. By 1631 Thomas Barnes held almost all the land to the west, between the lane and Northwood Hall, some as copyhold and some leased from the lord's demesne. By 1652 he had added the large close to the north of the Lowe Cottage croft, labelled 'Chadoc' on the 1631 map, and enfranchised it along with his other copyhold lands.<sup>123</sup>

Lowe Cottage Farm remained in the Lowe Hall estate. In 1805, the house was let to Richard Heatley, while the farmland of 84½ a. was farmed by Richard Richards, who owned and resided at the adjacent Lowe Farm.<sup>124</sup> 'Richard's Farm', with messuage, outbuildings and land, was settled on Edward Barnes Watson on his marriage in 1808,<sup>125</sup> but remained in the Lowe Hall estate as he later inherited the whole estate. William Henry Watson resided at (and perhaps built) Lowe Cottage (9 a.), while 'Richard's Land' (78 a.) was farmed by a tenant. Edward Barnes Watson died without issue in 1847 and the Lowe Hall estate was inherited by the two daughters of William Henry Watson (d. 1839), Charlotte Barnes and Harriet, in equal shares. The Lowe Cottage tenement was advertised for sale, with the rest of the Lowe Hall estate, in 1874.<sup>126</sup> In 1878 the executors of Charlotte Barnes and Harriet *née* Watson sold Lowe Cottage Farm (94 a. 3 r. 34 p.) and the blacksmith's shop in Horton to George William Fenn. In 1909 Fenn's son sold it to Frederick William Morris of Wrexham, for £4,600. By

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<sup>121</sup> Schedule of deeds, 1808–1900 (carbon copy of typescript): SA, 1848 box 157.

<sup>122</sup> SA, 1848 box 157; *Wellington Jnl*, 29 Feb. 1908, 1.

<sup>123</sup> Messuage and tenement in the tenure of James Craddock: ACA, MS MD 59, p. 59.

<sup>124</sup> 1805 Survey, 100–3.

<sup>125</sup> SA, 3994 box 4: Lowe Cottage Farm, 1878–1960; SA, SC/6/44, sales catalogue for Lowe Cottage Farm, Wem, 1877.

<sup>126</sup> SA, SC/6/59.

1922 it was owned by John Williams of Lees Farm, Wolverley.<sup>127</sup> In 1923 the trustees in bankruptcy of John Williams conveyed the property to Henry Wallace Phillips.<sup>128</sup>

The early 19th-century ‘cottage’ remains, albeit extended and altered: it was first built as a square, symmetrical house with two windows to the ground floor and to the first floor, flanking a central main door that faces west towards the lane, with a central chimney and another on the southern gable end. The L-shaped range of farm buildings, situated north of the house in the late 19th century as shown on the first edition Ordnance Survey, has been replaced with modern agricultural and light industrial structures. Lowe Cottage Farm is presently the depot of a haulage and skip-hire business.

## ECONOMIC HISTORY

### Farming

There were at least two common fields in Lowe: one named Wall field, another perhaps Lowe Hill field.<sup>129</sup> Lidar imaging reveals a distinct area of ridge-and-furrow immediately north of Lowe Hill farmstead, and fainter traces extending south west from Pym's Farm farmyard, an area that included closes with field-names including Wall (later Well).<sup>130</sup> ‘Nooks’ of land – reckoned in Wem manor as 9 a., being 3 a. in each of three open fields – in Lowe were just ‘single nooks’ of 3 a., perhaps indicative of the relatively limited extent of the open field system.<sup>131</sup> The fields were apparently enclosed in the 1550s, as several of the tenements had been converted from acreage (‘nooks’) in the open fields to enclosed parcels since the admission of the current copyholder – including John Paye, admitted in 1549 – by the time of the 1561 survey.<sup>132</sup>

### Industry and services

#### *Windmill*

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<sup>127</sup> SA, D3651/B/151/10/1–3.

<sup>128</sup> SA, 3994 box 4: Lowe Cottage Farm, 1878–1960.

<sup>129</sup> John Higginson, John Paye: *Survey 1561*, 64–5, also 48–9.

<sup>130</sup> E.g., 1805 Survey, 104.

<sup>131</sup> *Survey 1561*, 34–5, 64–5.

<sup>132</sup> *Survey 1561*, 62–5, tenements of Anna Millward, John Higginson, John Paye.

There was a windmill in the manor of Wem by 1290, its location not recorded.<sup>133</sup> A windmill provided by the lord of the manor existed, in 1561, at the highest point of Ditches Hill and within a parcel of demesne totalling 13 a., then let to John Thurleigh. There is no later record of this windmill. The survey of Wem in 1589 does not mention it, but does record a windmill on the castle mound in Wem having been erected about 20 years previously. The latter windmill is depicted on the 1631 map, whereas no windmill is shown on ‘Windie mill’ close in Lowe and it is not mentioned in the 1648 survey of the manorial demesne.<sup>134</sup> Possibly the Lowe windmill was taken down and re-erected (or some of its parts reused) on the castle mound in the late 1560s. The 13 a. parcel including ‘Windmill Hill’ was sold in 1652 by the earl of Arundel’s trustees to Richard Wynne of Lincoln’s Inn.<sup>135</sup>

### *Cheese factory*

The Belle Vue cheese factory had its origins c.1840 when Joseph Dobell, a Cheshire cheese factor, took the lease of the villa residence on the border of Wem and Lowe townships. Commercial cheese production had commenced by 1876, meaning that Belle Vue was one of the earliest such operations in Shropshire. The owner and manager was John Platt, from Manchester, who had married Joseph Dobell’s widow, Sylvia, and his stepson, John Dobell. Substantial buildings for the production and curing of cheese were constructed north west of the house. The factory became a considerable employer of local, especially female, workers, and purchaser of locally produced milk. After John Dobell died without issue in 1894, Platt recruited Percival Swain, a young Leicestershire cheesemaker, to secure the future of the business, which traded as Platt & Swain until the factory closed in the 1970s.<sup>136</sup>

## **SOCIAL HISTORY**

Lowe and Ditches lacks municipal or civil amenities, being close enough to Wem to have access to all amenities there, leaving the area exclusively residential/agricultural.

With the elongated and artificial composition of Lowe and Ditches, its social character is best considered in terms of several different communities.

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<sup>133</sup> TNA, E149/1. *Cal. Inq. Misc.*, ii, 470, no. 774.

<sup>134</sup> *Survey 1561*, 52–3; TNA, LR 2/225; Arundel map; ACA, MS 508.

<sup>135</sup> ACA, MS MD 59, Sale of demesnes, no. 61.

<sup>136</sup> *VCH Wem*, 57–9.

The Ditches in the 16th to early 17th centuries stood apart as a high-status house with freehold lands and resident owner. From the mid 17th century, however, it was let to tenants and lacked investment. In 1672, the house occupied by Mrs Richardson (presumably The Ditches) was assessed for tax on four hearths, which was the second largest number in the township but far behind Lowe Hall.<sup>137</sup> The Ditches has remained in isolation since, although the area became busier with the development of the Belle Vue cheese factory in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

The next community, going north, was the hamlet on Lowe Hill. There were four ‘messuages’ here in 1561 and in 1631. In 1672 Lowe and Ditches township contained 12 houses with just one hearth, of which several must have been here. The only house with three hearths, then occupied by James Bickley, may have been ‘the good brick house’ built by Thomas Jebb at Pyms Farm.<sup>138</sup> Eventually Pyms Farm became predominant, the only farm on the west side of Lowe Hill road, as Lowe Hill Farm was on the east side. The social character of the hamlet has been preserved, however, with the Pyms Farm estate cottages.

The isolated situation of Lowe Hall suggests a different origin from the Lowe Hill tenements. Lowe Hall estate, in contrast to The Ditches, benefitted from having the same resident family from the 15th century to c.1800, accruing lands and developing the ‘capital message’. In 1672, Lowe Hall had nine hearths, the largest number of any house in the manor (the rectory in Wem also had nine).<sup>139</sup> It also had fashionable formal gardens, and the prestige of hosting the lord of the manor on a rare visit c.1700.<sup>140</sup> The Barnes family ceased to be resident from the early 19th century, however, and Lowe Hall was demoted to tenant farmhouse.

The fourth component community of Lowe and Ditches is the area north of Lowe Hill. In 1561 there were seven houses/cottages in Lowe and Ditches, but 15 are depicted on the 1631 map and there were at least 15 in 1672.<sup>141</sup> This increase likely occurred in this northern area. Whereas only the Whitfield copyhold tenement is recorded in 1561, the 1631 map depicts six houses further north, and several more just beyond the Lowe township boundary at Foxholes and on the edge of Northwood. This was a community of squatters on the lord’s waste and houses built speculatively on assarts. By the 18th century, however, the situation had been regularised and consolidated into just the three existing farms, which were often owner-

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<sup>137</sup> *Shropshire Hearth Tax Roll*, 50.

<sup>138</sup> *Shropshire Hearth Tax Roll*, 49–50; Garbet, 296.

<sup>139</sup> *Shropshire Hearth Tax Roll*, 47, 50.

<sup>140</sup> Garbet, 97, 297.

<sup>141</sup> Survey 1561, 60–7; Arundel map; *Shropshire Hearth Tax Roll*, 49–50.

occupied or had long-term tenants. For this community, Northwood Hall was the nearest neighbour, and Edstaston chapel the chapel of ease.<sup>142</sup>

## RELIGIOUS HISTORY

Lowe and Ditches was and is within the parish of Wem. The parish church of St Peter and St Paul is located in Wem town.<sup>143</sup> In 1561 the lane north of Lowe Hall was described as ‘the way leading to the church of Wem’.<sup>144</sup> Residents of Lowe and Ditches also attended Edstaston chapel, as a chapel of ease to the parish church.<sup>145</sup>

There has never been a dedicated chapel in Lowe and Ditches, but Lowe Hill hamlet was a focus for Nonconformists by the late 17th century. Samuel Dunn (b. 1657), according to Garbet, ‘was at first a wild libertine, but at length taking up, became a rigid Presbyterian’;<sup>146</sup> in 1692 Dunn was licensed to hold dissenters’ meetings at ‘Lowhill’.<sup>147</sup> By 1700 the adjacent Pym’s Farm was owned by Job Orton of Shrewsbury,<sup>148</sup> whose eldest son was Job Orton (1717–83), dissenting minister and theologian.<sup>149</sup> From this time the property became a focus for the Presbyterian network of the descendants of the Revd Philip Henry.<sup>150</sup> In 1743 ‘the house of John Swanwick called Pims farm’ was licensed for meetings of dissenters ‘called Presbyterians’.<sup>151</sup> John’s son Joseph married Elizabeth Lawrence of the Moat House (Aston, Wem), the great-granddaughter of Philip Henry. Joseph Swanwick (d. 1769) and John Swanwick (1736–1810), among other members of the Swanwick and Lawrence families,

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<sup>142</sup> *The Register of Edstaston*, 10, 52, 59, 66, 72.

<sup>143</sup> For the history of Wem parish, see *VCH Wem*.

<sup>144</sup> *Survey 1561*, 62–3.

<sup>145</sup> E.g., *Wem Parish Registers*, 169: extract from Edstaston register, baptism of daughter of Timothy Whitfield of Lowe, 1646; *The Register of Edstaston*, 10, 52, 59, 66, 72.

<sup>146</sup> Garbet, 295–6. *Wem Parish Registers*, 178. For the Dunn tenement, enfranchised c.1650, see *Survey 1561*, 66–7; Arundel map, ‘Simon Donn’; ACA, MS MD 59, p. 33.

<sup>147</sup> *Shropshire Quarter Sessions Orders, 1638–1889*, I, 139.

<sup>148</sup> Garbet, 296–7; Job Orton (‘Overton’): SA, P295/B/3/11, Horton Quarter, 1700.

<sup>149</sup> D.L. Bates, ‘Orton, Job (1717–1783)’, *ODNB*: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/20856> (accessed 28 Aug. 2018).

<sup>150</sup> R.L. Greaves, ‘Henry, Philip (1631–1696)’, *ODNB*: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/12976> (accessed 28 Aug. 2018). See *The Register of Wem Presbyterian Chapel, 1755–1814* (Shropshire Family History Society, .

<sup>151</sup> *Quarter Sessions Orders*, ii, 111 (SA, QS/1/3, f. 33v).

attended the Presbyterian chapel in Noble Street, Wem.<sup>152</sup> In 1803 Katherine *née* Lawrence, niece of Elizabeth, visited her relatives at Pym's Farm with her husband, the Revd. Edmund Butcher, a Nonconformist minister.<sup>153</sup> The connection only seems to have ended when John Swanwick retired from farming in 1808 and let the farm to tenants.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> *Register of Wem Presbyterian Chapel*, 78–80.

<sup>153</sup> E. Butcher, *An Excursion from Sidmouth to Chester, in the Summer of 1803 ...* (London, 1805), 82, 128, 158, 169–71.

<sup>154</sup> SA, 167/47, p. 104; Redmonde, 'The Swanwicks of Cheshire and Shropshire', *Wrexham Advertiser*, 20 Sept. 1890, 2; S.L. Swanwick and J.E. Jones, *The Descendants of Rev. Philip Henry, M.A. ... The Swanwick Branch to 1899* (Toronto, 1899), 13–14; TNA, IR 26/310/22, will of John Swanwick, gent, of Pym's Farm, 25 Jan. 1811.