

Wilmslow Historical Society: The Victorian Charm of Dean Row:

The following is a transcript of a talk given sixty years ago on October 23rd 1963 to the Senior Class of Dean Row Primary School by Hilda Briggs. Many of the illustrations are taken from the papers and records kept by Hilda, passed on to her family and transcribed by her grandson, David Briggs in February 2023. The words in italics are those of Hilda.



Hilda as a young girl from around the time her childhood memories are drawn.

Hilda Hankinson was born in Dean Row in 1882. She was the last but one of 11 siblings born to John and Margaret Hankinson. All were born in the hamlet and all survived to full adulthood. Hilda lived at Dean Row until she was about 10 years old when the family moved to Bromsgrove to take up general farming. Her mother and father returned on their retirement to Wilmslow in the 1920's where Hilda joined them with her son, Philip, after the loss of her husband in 1922 and lived here until she died in 1971.

Whilst some minor points of historical detail in the text may have changed in the 60 years since the talk was given, the memories of rural Wilmslow life of the late 19th Century make for an interesting read.

“Boys and Girls, I want to talk to you this afternoon about the Dean Row of a good many years ago – most of you, in fact I feel sure, all of you, only know about it as you see it today when you come to school, or go for walks or when you are being driven in the car, but Dean Row has a very long history.

When William the Conqueror came to England in 1066 and got possession of the country, he gave a lot of the land to families from France who had helped him win, and amongst them was a family called Venables – mighty hunter – who came into possession of Dean Row which derives its name from Dene – a wooded valley and Rowe – rough ground.

In return for the land, they had to give service to the King by keeping the district in order and in case of war, provide an army and a bodyguard for the King, complete with bows and arrows. In those days, Counties did not exist.

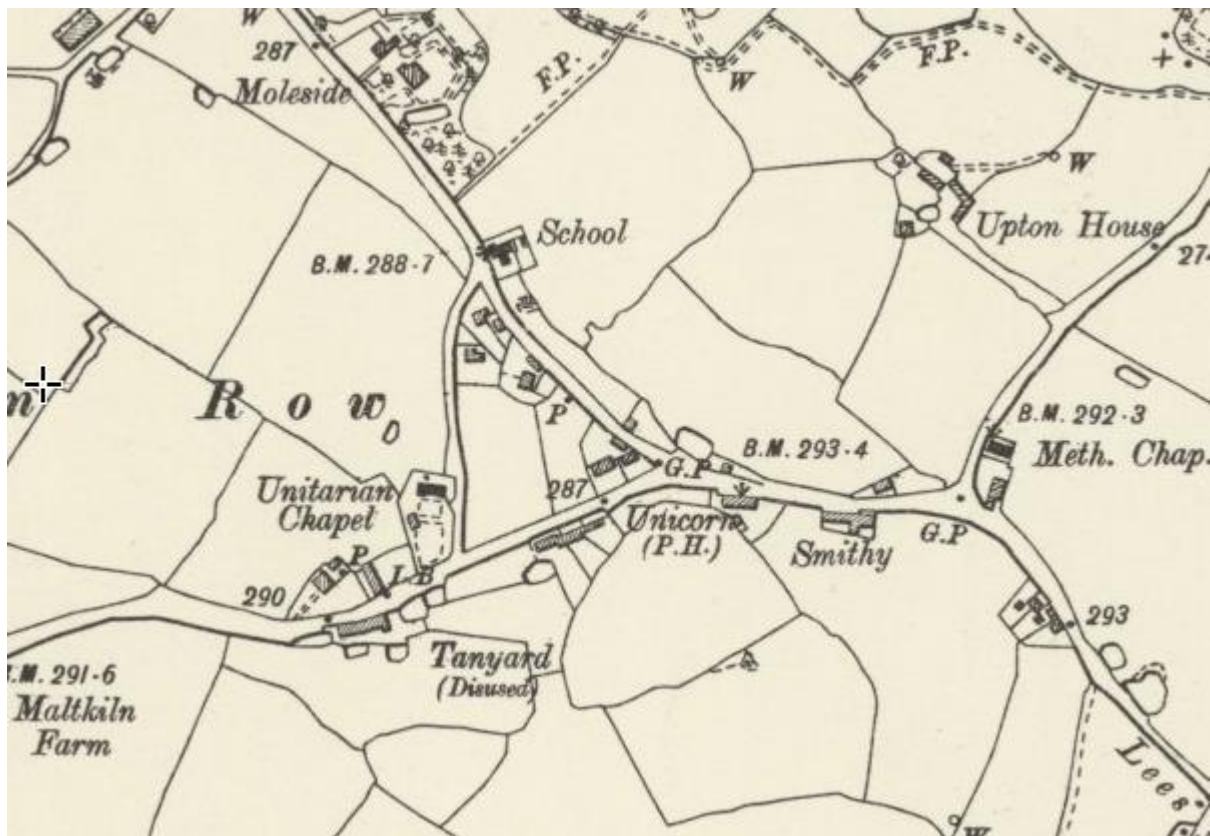
Eventually, and through marriage, Dean Row and Hough hamlet collection of small farms and cottages came into the possession of Lord Stamford ¹ (1421 brass in Wilmslow Parish Church) forming Bollin Fee. Originally, land had to stay in the family – it was not until much later that Laws were passed that permitted land and farms to be sold, (other large land owners in the area were the Napiers and Prescotts) These Laws allowed Trustees to take over places like the Unitarian chapel, for which the Dean Row hamlet was famous, the Chapel having been built nearly 275 ² years ago in 1689, when people who did not belong to the Church of England were at last allowed to build places of worship of their own. I will say more about the Chapel later.

¹ The 1841 Cheshire Tithe Maps show John Hankinson (Senior) as a tenant of Lord Stamford – Plots 1730 and 1738

² Now 335 years ago.

Dean Row was one of six hamlets which formed the Parish of Wilmslow – the names of the others you will know – Hough, Styal, Morley, Fulshaw and Chorley (which later became Alderley Edge), but we must not stay to speak of them, as I want to tell you about Dean Row as it was about 100³ or more years ago, when my father was a young man living there and it had nine greens.

The centre of the life of the hamlet was where it is now, with the Unicorn Inn, where, since there was not any daily papers, what news there was in the weekly paper was read out loud in the bar by Mr Barber, whose nearby village blacksmiths (now Agricultural Engineering works), was where the horses were shod before we had motor cars, (of course Mr Brandon's garage is a later addition) and there was a tiny shop opposite, now a very useful stores.⁴



From the 1898 Ordnance Survey.⁵

There was a little Methodist Chapel just around the corner going to Woodford, and down by the Deanwater there was a Print Works, then if we come back we find the old village school – now of course – replaced by your beautiful new School where we are today – and we should realise that the Village Hall in Brown's Lane was not built until many years later (1920's).



The Methodist Chapel.

³ Now 160 years ago.

⁴ The Smithy site and the Wesleyan Chapel are now repurposed to offices, but the building of the "very useful store" on the other side of the road which shows as a Post Office (GP) on the 1898 OS Map no longer exists.

⁵ By the time of this OS map John Hankinson Jnr had recently given up tanning and moved with all his family to Bromsgrove to take up general farming.

The row of small cottages near the Unitarian Chapel was occupied by people who had hand loom weaving machines, and there the women wove beautiful pieces of silk, which they used to take to Macclesfield – walking there and back – to sell when finished, and to bring back with them loose silk they needed to make into further pieces.

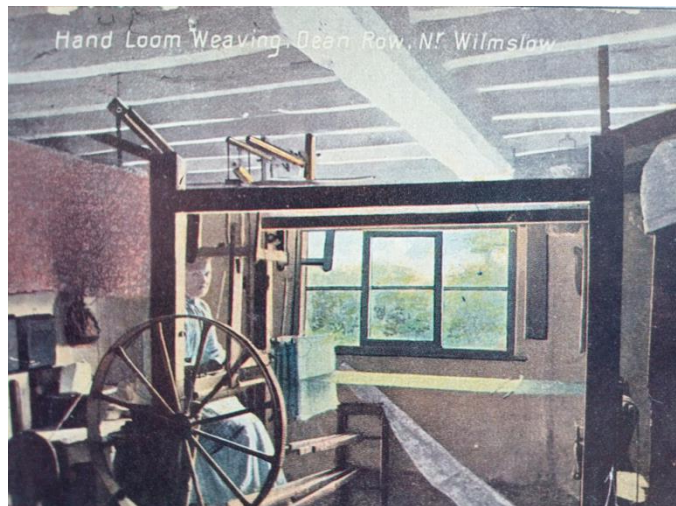


Cottages at Dean Row



Picture titled: Hand Loom Weaving, Dean Row Nr Wilmslow.

“Mary Williamson pictured in an old hand-tinted postcard weaving on a loom in one of the cottages at Dean Row”.⁶



Now what you have not seen, nor have your Fathers and Mothers, as it was pulled down over 60 years ago now, was a building called the Tannery which was opposite to Dean Bank House and the Chapel wall and where the old walnut tree is. This is where the hides of animals were tanned – that is to say made into leather – for boots and shoes and other things, by the process of being put in to pits in the ground which contained water and broken up pieces of bark which had been obtained for this special work during the Autumn Bark Harvest by being stripped from oak trees which had been felled on the big estates all around the County in the Spring. My father and my Grandfather and Great – Grandfather⁷ worked the Tannery for three generations with the help of the workers who lived in the adjacent cottages, but new factory methods for tanning hides came along and the Tannery became obsolete. A reminder of its existence is the old finishing stone, which is in the driveway of Dean House near the Unicorn.

⁶ Copied from an article in Cheshire Life June 1982.

⁷ William Hankinson 1767-1833, John Hankinson Snr 1790 -1864, John Hankinson Jnr 1844-1923

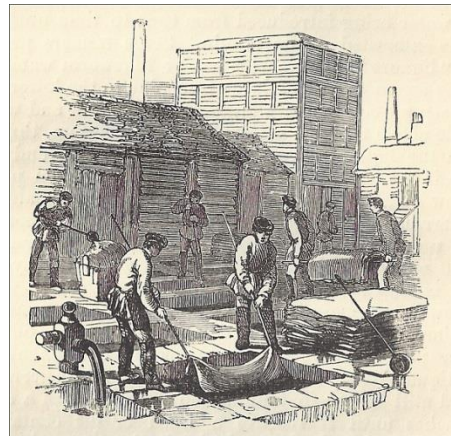
Opposite the Tannery there was previously a long, low thatched house, called Tanyard House, where I was born before my Father built Dean Bank, but this has long gone.



Tanyard House: The first Hankinson family home in Dean Row. Drawn by Hilda's eldest sister Mary Hankinson 1868-1952



Hand fleshing hides



Tanning pits



John Hankinson Sr. 1790-1864: Tanner at Dean Row. Hilda's grandfather.



John Hankinson Jr. 1840-1924: Hilda's Father: Tanner at Dean Row

Other activities included a Brick Works where Mr Cook's farm now is (Brickyard Farm) and remains of the old tanning pits can be observed in some of his fields, (particularly in wet weather, when pools of water often form there) and hats were made in some of the cottages, of which there were many others, as well as the ones we have spoken of near the Chapel, scattered about the lanes (these lanes had no lamp-lights then of course!) and the men living in them – as well as working on the farms – carried out other work such as peat-digging, rat-catching, mole catching, charcoal burning, cattle driving, thatching cottages and hay-ricks and so on. There was a widow who lived in Brown's Lane known as "Pig-Nellie" because she used to take pigs to market in a kind of milk float, and it is said that she was so strong that she could lift a pig onto the float by herself! A stranger occupation was that of a man who lived in Cross Lane who used to collect buttons and stitch them all onto his coat! The local people called his cottage "Button Hall".



A Victorian horse drawn milk float.

So what did the people of Dean Row do for entertainment? There were no busses or motor cars to take them into Wilmslow, no gas or electric lights and, as I have said, no lamps in the lanes. Well, the new (as it was then) school had been built, and in it for many years each month in the Winter, on a Friday, concerts and recitations were given, arranged and performed by various groups of friends. These were called the Penny Readings, the charges to go in being one penny and three pennies. They were very popular – and the lighting of the school and the platform was done by candles and oil lamps. Much help for these performances was given by the Minister of the Chapel and the Schoolmaster.

At Christmas time, all the people who lived about, rich and poor, used to meet for a Christmas party at the school, where there was a very big Christmas tree on which everybody's presents were hung which they were going to give to each other. I still have one which was given to my Mother – a box-based pin cushion.⁸



Margaret Hankinson (nee Lowe), Hilda's mother 1844-1923 – and the box based pin cushion.



⁸ Box based pin cushion now owned by Susan Briggs

Mothering Sunday, when families were united (apprentices were allowed home for this day) and the Annual Sermons were given and the Harvest Homes were each great slices of village life, and when the Corn Harvest was finished, the farmer would give a supper to all his men and their wives and children, often in the big barn - illuminated by hanging oil lamps.

It is here worth mentioning another farming custom of the time, this was Boon Day, when a new farmer was helped by having men lent to him for a full day's work.

For gaiety on May-Day, the horses would be decorated and visits made to Knutsford where the May-Queen was crowned, and on the Fifth of November, everybody met on the Village Green at the corner of Brown's Lane for the big bonfire, the treacle toffee and the parkin made in the different homes for all to share.

What is now known as Dean Row Road, leading from the Bluebell Inn, was previously called Bluebell Lane, but in earlier days still it was known as Pillion Lane, when people used to ride on horseback with the man astride and the lady riding side saddle in front of him.



The old Bluebell Inn (somewhat later than these stories)

I said earlier that I would tell you more about the old Unitarian Chapel, which is a most beautiful building, both inside and outside. It is most unusual, for in the whole of England there are only two more like it, designed and built by the same architect, and they are at Knutsford and Macclesfield. When you look at it from the outside, there are stone steps at each end, one leading to the organ gallery and the other is for people attending for worship to reach the other gallery.



You may wonder why this chapel was built in such an out of the way place in those early days, but when you learn from your history books about the reign of William III, you will see that although clergymen who had left or been removed from the Church of England were allowed to build their own Chapels, they were not allowed to preach or teach anywhere within five miles of any big town, and at the time that would have been Macclesfield, because Stockport had not yet grown so big.

Just about 120⁹ years ago, there was a day school in the Chapel. It was held in the vestry and the gallery which had plenty of room for the big desks, (some of which are still there) because at the time there was no organ in the gallery – the choir used to sing accompanied by music played by violin, flute and a bassoon which is still there.

The day school went on for nearly twenty years, the scholars being taught by a cousin of my Grandfather – my Father was one of those scholars but then as numbers increased, there was not room enough and the idea arose that a new school should be built – but I'll tell you more about that later – for now I want to tell you that when they started the school in the Chapel, they also built stables in the Chapel yard for six horses to be put in, as some people used to drive or ride long distances to come to Chapel and it was desirable to take the horses out of the carriage shafts while their owners went into the service. There was a 3 horse carriage which used to come from Alderley Edge, picking up people on the way. It was not unusual for some people to bring their dinner with them and have it in the vestry!

You may have noticed that there is a big sundial in the Chapel yard, and this was built in memory of the people who first founded the Chapel, using the money that was left over from what had been collected for building the wall around the Chapel grounds. Another thing to note is a big boulder stone on one of the graves. It was dug up from a considerable depth and is presumed to have been brought down long years ago when the ice sheets came down from the Lake District. On the Chapel outside wall there are two plaques to the memory of members who died in the two World Wars.

Now, as promised, a bit more about the school which was built in 1861 – just over a hundred years ago. It was called the British School. It was a wonderful idea since as I told you, the Chapel could no longer hold 40 pupils. A small committee was formed and an appeal for money was sent out – people from all over the County subscribed to it and all the local Wilmslow Chapels and Churches and also the Government gave a little help and a piece of land was very generously given by two gentlemen, Mr Cunliffe and Mr Symons, who owned the Calico Printing works down by the river at Handforth.¹⁰



Dean Row School and Schoolmaster house alongside.¹¹

⁹ Now 180 years ago

¹⁰ The 1982 Cheshire Life article by Priscilla Hodgson states that the Wesleyan chapel was partially constructed from material taken from the Calico Print works when it was demolished.

¹¹ School house illustration by Jonathan Tollitt – taken from Cheshire Life article: June 1982.

When it was built, the school was managed by Trustees¹² and was kept going by voluntary subscriptions and Government grants (which depended on the number of pupils attending and how well they did in their exams) and the children paid so much a week, either a penny, tuppence or threepence according to their age. There was no such thing as a Canteen and the children used to bring their dinners with them and have them heated up in the oven in the schoolmaster's house.

Later, the Local Government Education Committee took over the school and its teachers and the older children were transferred to other schools in Wilmslow, leaving the school as just a Primary School until Miss Prowes and Mrs Malbon came with all of you here to your new school buildings. The old school and the schoolmaster house were sold and my long active interest in it was brought to an end.

Goodbye!

David Briggs

for Wilmslow Historical Society February 2023

¹² An original board listing the founding Trustees – including John Hankinson Jnr. now hangs in the modern Chapel Hall adjacent to the Unitarian Chapel.