

A Potted History of Sawtry

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It is only since the 16th Century – during the time of Queen Elizabeth I – that the village has been called Sawtry. Prior to the 10th century there were many variations of the name. During the reign of Henry I in the 12th Century, the village was called “SALTREIA” or “SALTREAIM” which meant a landing place or stream.



Salt had been transported through Sawtry since before the Roman invasion. The evaporated sea water left salt in the fens which was collected and carried away by pack horse/mule from a landing place near where the Royal Oak pub once stood [now directly opposite Fen Lane under the south bound motorway lane], near where a dyke from the fens called Black Horse drain stretches Eastward into the then flooded fen land and out to Ramsey Mere.

Sawtry lies on the edge of a ‘bay’ in the centre of a half moon-from Alconbury Hill on the South Side to Norman Cross and Yaxley on the other. In the 12th Century the village of Winwick levied a tax on the Salt Mule Train that passed through it en route to Northampton and the Midlands.

The Romans

The Roman occupation AD 43-c.400 was mostly confined to the English Lowlands including East Anglia. It is thanks to the Roman road builders that Sawtry has convenient access to both North and South of the country by way of the Old North Road (A1), also known as Ermine Street. One reason their roads lasted so well was due to efficient drainage. A ditch was

dug a few feet from each side of the road, and the excavated earth was used to form a bank called the 'agger', which was built on foundations made from broken stone, bricks, and pottery, cemented with lime. Large polygonal blocks of hard stone were then carefully fitted together to form the road's surface. The Roman word for this surface was pavementum – hence our 'pavement'.

Long before, and during, the Roman occupation, the Fens were rich pasture and farm land with majestic oak forests. Fine wines were produced from grapes, whose vines flourished without greenhouses, so the average temperature and climatic conditions must have been a lot warmer in those days.

Boadicea, who died about AD61, was Queen of the Iceni tribe. When her husband, Prasutagus, died in AD60, he left his property to be divided among his daughters and the Roman emperor, but the Romans seized his whole Kingdom, (our present-day Norfolk). This provoked Boadicea to raise a rebellion. During this uprising, a company of Romans from the 9th Legion were marched South, from Lincoln and Longthorpe Fort on the River Nene. Word may have been carried to Boudicca of the Romans approach, for the Queen staged an ambush near Colchester and won the day. The Roman infantry was slaughtered.

The Anglo-Saxons came after the Romans, and colonised most of the English Lowland around the 5th Century but they, like the Romans before them, failed to quell the Celtic North and West. When the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, coming from areas in and around what is now Denmark, invaded Britain in the second half of the 5th Century, there was a great series of incursions by mostly Germanic peoples into the steadily weakening Roman Empire and, by AD 600, they were well established in Britain. By the end of the 7th Century these tall, blond, blue-eyed pagans had been converted to Christianity by Saint Augustine of Canterbury and other missionaries from the Continent.

Vikings and onwards

In 870 the dreaded Vikings (Danes and other Scandinavian races) invaded throughout East Anglia. The Danes were an independent race and, being good organisers, made laws and settled well in East Anglia. Thus the Saxons came under the Dane Law and, until their adoption of Christianity in the late 10th and early 11th Centuries, the Scandinavian peoples practised their traditional religion. The Dane Law is the name given to the areas under Danish Viking occupation in 878AD – much of Eastern and Northern England (including Sawtry) and the districts of Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham, and Stamford.

In the mid-900's King Edgar and Saint Dunstan introduced and implemented a national programme of religious reform, and during 975, King Edgar sent Monks to two of the old Monasteries at Peterborough and Gt Paxton from where missionary monks went out to convert the local people back to Christianity.

A census of the English Kingdom commissioned by William I in 1085, the Domesday Book, was completed in 1086. It is without equal as a public record in mediaeval Europe and is a fairly complete record of conditions among the ruling class in late Anglo-Saxon and Early Norman times.

Doomsday Book

In the Domesday Book, Sawtry had three Churches, All Saints, St Andrews and St Mary's. In the 11th Century Sawtry was named "Saltrede", meaning Salt, referring to the salt marshes in the Fens.

Judith, niece to William the Conqueror, was married in France, to the Saxon Earl Waltheof of Huntingdon and Northampton. Waltheof had previously fought against William, but had been pardoned. During her life in Sawtry, Countess Judith was popular and loved by the local people because she cared for the sick and poor, some even called her 'Saint Judith', which is how the names of St Judith's Lane and St Judith's Field originated, and although she owned land throughout the country, she chose to live in Sawtry.

In 1147 Simon de Senlis founded the Cistercian Sawtry Abbey. It took 98 years to complete and was always very poor. William of Sawtry was a rogue monk who began preaching his own religion. So displeased were the elders that he was put to death in London in 1359! By 1540, in the Reformation, the Monastery had been destroyed. In 1850 a farmer employed some out of work Irish navvies to dig up old abbey stones. It is commonly believed that they were used to build the present Greystones public house on the Green! Others can be seen inside and outside All Saints Church.

The Tudors

Henry VIII married Catherine of Aragon in 1509. By 1527 things were not going well. Henry was worried because Catherine had borne no male heir. Henry convinced himself that God was displeased and with the marriage and that this was the reason. He ordered his chief minister, Cardinal Wolsey, to ask the Pope for an annulment. Complications arose with Rome and it was not until 1533 that England broke with the Church of Rome and the Archbishop of Canterbury granted the divorce.

The then divorced Queen Catherine was imprisoned in Kimbolton Castle, a few miles West of Sawtry. When she died in 1536, her coffin was carried in a procession and rested overnight in Sawtry Abbey, where the Monks kept an all night vigil for her. In the morning Catherine's body continued on its way to the Cathedral at Peterborough Abbey where her tomb can still be seen today. [In 1986 a commemoration of that procession was held with a large celebration at the College, in period costume, of the events.]

Oliver Cromwell



Oliver Cromwell was one of the most important figures in British history, a great general, and Lord protector of the Commonwealth, or republic, of England, Scotland, and Ireland for five years. He was born at Huntingdon on 25th April 1599. He was elected the Member for Huntingdon in 1628 and during the next 12 years he was prominent in local affairs in Eastern England. He was instrumental in the Civil War and in the execution of King Charles 1.

To the north east of All Saints Church, on Tort Hill, near to the Al(M) is the position of a Cromwellian Gun Platform. Tort Hill is on “high” ground, (fifty feet or so above sea level counts as high), and was sited to control the approach of Royalist forces coming from the North during the Civil War. The most likely type of cannon used there would have been a ‘Culvenne’ with a calibre of five inches [126mm], the cannon ball weighing 15lbs [6.8kg], and a charge of 15lbs of black gunpowder would have fired the ball to a distance of just under a mile.

Sawtry Churches

St Andrew Church stood on the East side of the old Great North Road. The old church, and the original All Saints Church were both demolished in 1879 and the present All Saints Church was constructed from the best material from the original buildings.

Sawtry Parish Council

The very first Parish Council meeting was held on January 7th 1885 in the Board of Education School Hall, Church Street [later to become the All Saints Church Hall, now offices for Makers Ltd.]. The council was made up from the Manors of All Saints and St Andrews to form one Parish Council. At this first meeting a Parish Rate was set and they voted to exclude the Public! St Judith's Parish did not join the combined Parish Council until 1935. Before this they had their own Parish meetings.

Drinking Water

In 1899 a project was begun to get a supply of fresh drinking water sited permanently in Sawtry. The Squire of Conington sold a half acre of land to Sawtry Parish Council for £50 5s 9d [£50 28p] and a penny rate was set to help pay for building a reservoir. It was finished in 1905, having taken six years to complete. Supply has long since outstripped demand and it ceased use many years ago.

The Green



The Green was always the centre of village activity. Fairs were held there on feast days. [Our Sawtry Feast celebrations are held in the first week of June.] During 1899 charges were fixed for public hire of the green: 1s 5d (7p) for 24 hours, with the proviso that there was to be no selling of goods or entertainment after 11pm.

A Police Constable's house faced the Green with a lock-up for miscreants. It is sited on the east side of the green. The lock-up key was formally handed over to the Parish Council in 1901 by the Superintendent of Police. There were two cells in it,

one on each side of a passage. The cell doors were iron clad, well secured with iron bolts and had a small barred window. It was well used at the weekends, mostly by locals, who were enthusiastic drinkers, often ending their sessions by spending the night in a cell to sober up and cool off enough to be let out in the morning! A few locals can still remember its use well into the 20th century.

The fire engine shed faced the Green. The engine was horsedrawn and worked by hand and always seemed to be in need of repair. There was a charge for calling out the fire brigade, which was £4 for up to 10 hours, and over 10 hours the cost was 5s [25p] per hour. The Boy Scouts were assigned to look after the fire engine and so well did they do it, that by 1925, it was in such good condition that the Parish Council treated the Scouts to a new fire hose!

Village Facilities

Sawtry had a smock mill on Gidding Road, part of which is still visible. It ground corn into flour for bread for the local farmers and those villagers who collected the gleanings (the loose corn left in the fields after the harvest had been gathered). The local baker lit his ovens on a Sunday so that the locals could, for a fee, have their Sunday dinner cooked and their bread baked!

The village was well served and mainly self-supporting. It had a good supply of public houses, Churches, the miller, baker, two blacksmiths and an engineering works for the steam engines which worked the land. Adding to the growing list of small businesses were a cobbler, carpenter, saddler, and ‘carrier’ who went to the local markets at Huntingdon, Peterborough, Oundle, or Thrapston on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

It is likely some people only ever went as far from Sawtry as the local carrier could take them, and maybe some who never went that far. It seems that Sawtry has always been a lively, industrious, enterprising and friendly place to be so why go elsewhere?

A Gentleman Called

A visitor from Sawtry’s past has recently been here. His name is Mr R. Paddison and it has been approximately 75 years since he was last here. He is 94 years old with an amazing memory of old Sawtry.

He remembers the W.I. Hall as a tin hut, the Post Office was on the Green and the Baker’s was where Mr Lakhani’s Chemists shop is now. I remember the ovens in the back when I worked for Lockhead Electronics in 1969 on the same site. There was a man known as “Squinty” who repaired watches near the Bakers shop. Vine House was a farm house with farm

buildings at the back where Mellors Court is now. Along the High street going towards Church Street were four small dwellings (shown on the O.S. map in 1920 was a row of houses with a small shop at the end). [I can remember it as a sweet shop.]

There was a tin shed there where cycles were repaired on the corner of High Street and Church Street. He remembers the A1 B&B when it was a shop. From the corner of Tinker's Lane to the Church was all fields and manor farm. He can also remember a fair on the village green.

Ben Irish, then lived in Mr Huntings house near the Green, and it was Mr Paddison's father who advised Mr Irish to buy the horse Papyrus which won the Derby at 100 to 1. Mr Paddison said he left home at the age of 18 as he did not intend to work all his life as a farm labourer.

Reginald Paddison, Mr Paddison's father, (Master of the Hunt), lived in the 'Whitehouse' Coppinford and his grandfather lived in the Manor House in the High Street near the Surgery. Mr Paddison was a hound walker, his job was to walk and train the little hounds until they were large enough to join the Hunt. Mr Paddison used to visit the Manor House often. He is interested in everything scientific and even remembers the mill up Gidding Road working. It had no sails but the mill stones in the building near the mill were working, driven by an engine which drove three sets of stones.

He used to take horses down Green End Road to Allan's Engineers to be shod and visit the pub (The Black Bull, or Durham Ox) at the corner of St Judith's Lane to wait. Allan's Engineers was opposite St Judith's Lane and, early in the morning, he would cycle to Holme train station to collect the daily papers.

The day after he told me all this, I walked with my dog to the A1 B&B with a promise to call and see if Mr Healy, current owner of the Manor House was at home. We found the gate open and Mr Healy at home. He was very interested in what Mr Paddison could tell him about the 'old house'. In one place a building had been removed. It turned out to have been a lean-to at the right-hand side of the Manor which had been a coal house, log shed & a WC. Also Mr Paddison was able to tell Mr Healy where he could find a sweet-water well.

Mr Paddison informed me that he had done a little digging where the moat complex was in Archer's Wood. This is where the Sawtry Archaeological Society did a dig in 1979/80. He found a Great Grasshopper and a rare plant called Adder Tongue which grew in the moats.

Mr Henry Russell Paddison was impressed by the kindness Sawtry people had shown him. He had to leave for Devon the next day and I have promised to send him a copy of this Sawtry Eye. While he was here recently, Mr Paddison walked to Connington and back. Not bad for a 94 year old. He has travelled all over the world he tells me, and lives in New Zealand in the winter. Thank you Mr Paddison for paying us a visit.

Harry Milford