

# A GLIMPSE - THE HISTORY OF BEECH HILL

## Introduction

Beech Hill Housing estate is less than 100 years old and therefore historical accounts of the area are at a premium. This article concentrates on the period from the late 18th century to present day with particular emphasis on one of Wigan's premier families, the Thicknesse family of Beech Hill.

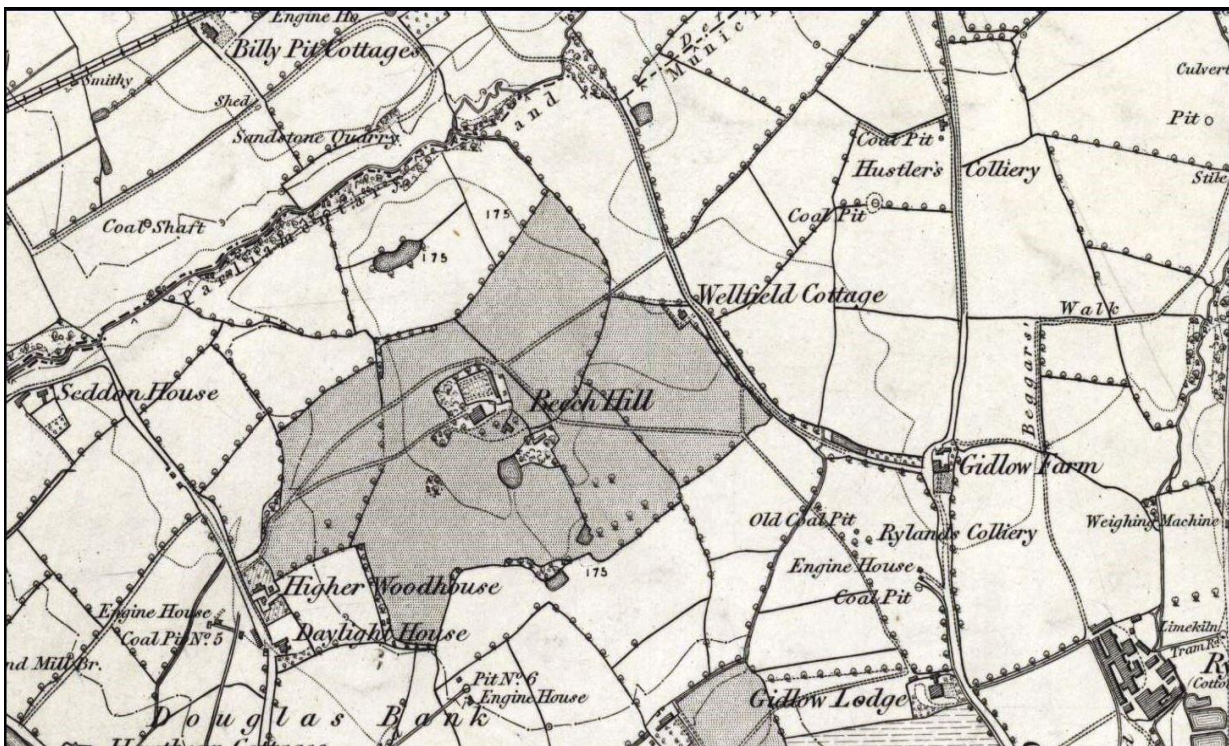
Victorian Wigan in the mid 1800's had a population of around 32,000 which was concentrated mainly to the east and south of the town in Scholes and Wallgate and to the west along Ormskirk Road to Orrell.

Although housing was creeping up Gidlow Lane and along Woodhouse Lane towards Martland Mill the west and north of Wigan consisted mainly of agricultural land and was sparsely populated.

Over the next 50 years the population of the town was to double with Irish immigrants and workers from all parts of the country coming to the area seeking employment in the coal, cotton, engineering and railway industries.

## Beech Hill of Old

The 1845/46 Ordnance Survey (OS) map of Wigan shows a snapshot of Beech Hill as it was 175 years ago. It was dominated by a large wooded area, presumably of Beech trees, stretching from Beech Hill Lane to modern day Wellfield Road and from Beech Hill Avenue to modern day Acacia Crescent.



In the centre was a large house dating from the late 1600's, called appropriately Beech Hill Hall. The hall was in its own grounds with a formal garden, parkland and large ponds. By overlaying a modern map over the 1845 version the location of Beech Hill Hall can be pinpointed as being off Ascroft Avenue in the Cherry Grove cul-de-sac. (Stephen Scully who lives in Cherry Grove has since confirmed that whilst digging over his back garden he came across the foundations from the hall).

A puzzling feature of the modern-day layout of Beech Hill is the large roundabout, referred to by locals as the 'Bullring', at the junction of Thickenesse Avenue and Rose Avenue. The reason is that it is the site of a pond that once stood on the old Beech Hill Estate. When developing the area, the builders just filled the pond in and built the road system round it.

The main entrance to the Hall was from Beech Hill Lane. The original stone gate posts are still in place today and can be seen outside No.118, a few properties up from Beech Hill Farm, a Grade2 listed building that was built about the same time as Beech Hill Hall. Beech Hill Lane is unique in that it is the only road in Great Britain with that name.

On the eastern edge of the estate stood Wellfield Cottage, on the route of the ancient pathway from Wigan to Standish via Giants Hall Farm on Standish Wood Lane. Despite its name, on the map it looks quite a substantial property with cottages close by.

Immediately to the north is the Wigan/Standish Urban District Boundary following the line of the feature known by locals as the 'Valley'. The stream in the Valley is officially called Billy Pit Brook after William Colliery (nicknamed Billy Pit) which was located at Giants Hall long before Giants Hall Colliery was opened in 1875.

All around the boundaries of the estate were working farms. On the west Beech Hill Farm and Seddon House Farm, to the north across the Valley and officially in Standish was Giants Hall Farm, on the eastern side stood Gidlow Farm and Brimelow Farm.

The 1907 OS map shows the Wigan/Standish boundary line as going through the middle of Brimelow Farm but with the farmhouse being on the Standish side. The property was included in the 1921 auction of Standish Hall but today its modern postcode confirms it is now part of Beech Hill.

## **The Thickenesse Dynasty**

At the time of the 1845 map's publication the Beech Hill Estate belonged to Ralph Anthony Thickenesse. His family bears an ancient name that was brought to England by the wave of emigration that was started by the Norman Conquest of 1066. It comes from the ancient Norman French name, Xhignesse. The Thickenesses were granted lands by William the Conqueror and by the 13th century had settled in Balterley near Newcastle-under-Lyme in Staffordshire.

Their lineage can be traced directly back to Radulphus de Thyknes who in the reign of Henry III was Bailiff of Newcastle-under-Lyme. His direct line of ascent leads to Ralph Thickenesse born in 1640.

His son, Ralph, born in Balterley around 1663 was a Non juror, one of 400 members of the Anglican Church who refused to swear the oaths of allegiance to William III and Mary II, after King James II was deposed in the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89. Ralph married heiress Elizabeth Stockton of The Oaks in Cheshire.

His son, successor and namesake, Ralph was born in 1693, he married Aletha, daughter of Richard Bostock, a physician from Shrewsbury. Ralph apparently squandered his wealth forcing him to sell the Thicknesse family seat, Balterley Hall, midway between Newcastle-Under-Lyme and Crewe in 1747. He then moved over the border to live in Cheshire.

His eldest son Ralph, born in 1718 was educated at Brasenose College in Oxford, as several Thicknesses were. He qualified as a physician and then settled and practiced in Wigan. He died in 1790 aged 71 and was buried in Windleshaw Chancery in St. Helens cemetery.

At the time his only son, born in 1768 and again named Ralph following the family tradition was living at Beech Hill Hall. He married Sarah Woodcock at All Saints parish church in 1798. Sarah came from a prominent wealthy family who were influential members of Wigan society. Their home was Bank House in Wigan Lane.

Ralph became a successful businessman and banker, founding the Wigan Old Bank in partnership with Thomas Woodcock, his brother-in-law, who had served as Mayor of Wigan on five separate occasions between 1802 and 1817.

Ralph then moved from banking into the coal industry and became the successful co-proprietor of Kirkless Colliery and later Birkett Bank Colliery. In 1830 he became the first Chairman of the Wigan Branch Railway and the following year he was elected as Member of Parliament for Wigan, representing the town for three years from 1831 to 1834. He died in 1842 and was buried in Wigan parish church.

His only son, Ralph Anthony was born in Beech Hill in 1800. On 5 Aug 1828 Ralph Anthony married his first cousin Mary Ann Woodcock in Wigan Parish Church, they went on to have four children, three girls, Anne, Sarah and Eleanor and a boy, again named Ralph after his forebears.



**Ralph Anthony Thicknesse (1800-1854)**

Ralph Anthony followed his father into politics and in 1847 as a member of the Whig Party he became MP for Wigan taking over the seat from Charles Strickland Standish of Standish Hall, who had stood down from politics and did not seek re-election.



**Mary Ann Thicknesse**

The 1851 census shows Ralph residing at his London home at No.1 Cumberland Terrace in St. Pancras with daughters Anne and Eleanor. They were attended by six servants, four of whom were born in Wigan, Mary Johnson 23, Rachael Peters 28, Edmund Jackson 39 and James Leyland 29.

His wife Mary Ann was found on the same census visiting the famous Rugby Private Boarding School in Warwickshire where their 18-year-old son Ralph was studying.

### **A Tragic Tale**

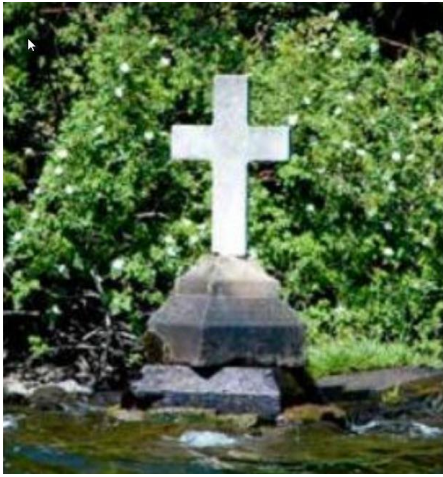
Sadly, Ralph Anthony was to out-live three of his four children. Sarah, his first born, had died in 1838 aged just three, All Saints burial records simply record her cause of death as 'weakness'. Eleanor died in 1853 aged 17 and was buried alongside her sister on 5 April of that year.

A few months after Eleanor's death tragedy was to strike the family once again when Ralph Anthony's only son and heir, 20-year-old Ralph Jnr, tragically drowned along with his cousin 19 year old Thomas Woodcock in a boating accident in White Cross Bay on Lake Windermere. The pair, who couldn't swim, were attempting a return canoeing trip between Waterhead and Bowness.

At the Coroner's Inquest at Low Wood Inn where their bodies were taken after being recovered an eyewitness by the name of John Taylor gave evidence that he had seen their two-man rowing skiff strike rocks and capsize. The Coroner was told that both their watches had stopped at 3.30 pm, a grim reminder of the time of the tragedy.

At the time of their deaths Ralph was studying at Trinity College, Cambridge. Thomas the eldest son of John Woodcock, a successful Wigan banker was a Lieutenant in the 3rd (Duke of Lancaster's Own) Royal Lancashire Militia.

The cousins were brought back to Wigan by train for burial. Crowds lined Wallgate in silence to watch as Ralph was taken back to Beech Hill for the last time and Thomas was taken to his home at The Elms on Wigan Lane. (The building still stands today in the grounds of Wigan Infirmary). The pair were buried in their family vaults at All Saints parish on Monday 19 September 1853.



Shortly after a memorial inscription to the cousins was put in place on the rear wall of the parish church. The following year a memorial cross was also erected on the shore of Lake Windermere below Ecclerigg Crag near to the site of the tragedy. It records their names along with a part quotation from the parable by Matthew 25.13. The verse simply says:

*'Watch Therefore for Ye Know Neither the Day nor The Hour When the Son of Man Cometh'.*

In the year following his son's death Ralph took his wife Mary Ann and daughter Ann on holiday to Harrogate, staying at the Dragon Hotel. On Sunday 20 Aug he was taken ill, his condition deteriorated and at 11pm on Tues 22 Aug 1854 Wigan lost its MP when Ralph Anthony Thicknesse died of a heart condition, he was aged 54. The next day Ralph's body was brought back to his home in Beech Hill and a week later he was buried alongside his three children in All Saints parish church.

After over 600 years of the Thicknesse name being passed from father to son and six successive generations of Ralph Thicknesse the male line had finally been broken and on his death Ralph's estate passed to his only surviving child, his daughter Anne.

### **The Heiress**

Anne had fallen in love with a clergyman by the name of Francis Henry Coldwell, the son of the Rector of Stafford. Francis was ordained in 1853 and his first post was as assistant Curate at All Saints church in Barrowby, Lincolnshire before becoming Curate to the Rector of Wigan, the Rev Sir Henry Gunning.



**Anne Thicknesse**



**Francis Henry Coldwell**

He officiated at his first ceremony in Wigan on 29 January 1854 when he conducted five burials on the same day including a two-day old baby girl from Chapel Lane by the name of Mary Jones.

Francis was destined for great things in the priesthood and his first appointment was Vicar of St. Mary the Virgin parish church in the village of Deane, on the outskirts of Bolton.

His name appears in St Mary's Parish records for the first time on Sunday 15 April 1855 when he performed four ceremonies, two marriages, a baptism and a funeral all on the same day.

Three months later on 13 July 1855, Anne Thicknesse and Francis Coldwell married at St. Michael's parish church in the village of Whitewell in the Trough of Bowland a few miles to the west of Clitheroe. Their union was to produce eight children, five boys and three girls but Isabel Mary, their fifth born child and second daughter died in infancy in 1866 aged just four months,

Two years into his incumbency Francis was appointed Honorary Canon and Rural Dean of Bolton-le-Moors and later Honorary Canon of Manchester

In 1859 Francis, at the request of his wife, changed his surname by Royal License from Coldwell to Thicknesse in order for the family name, if not the bloodline to live on. He now inherited the Family Crest, the Thicknesse Estate in Wigan, several collieries and the family fortune.

Mary Ann stayed on in Beech Hill Hall on her own for a period but with her daughter now following the career path of her new husband and the rest of her family now deceased, she left Beech Hill and moved in with Anne and her son in law. The hall was then rented out to tenants.

The 1861 census finds her living with them in the Vicarage in Junction Road, Deane. Francis and Anne had by this time had three children, Ralph, Francis and Philip. The eldest two were baptised with the surname Coldwell but after the name change Philip was the first to be given the surname of Thicknesse ensuring that the family name, if not the blood line would carry on for another generation.

In a time before the Welfare State and benefit payments the Lancashire Cotton Famine of 1861 was a disaster for the region which had 2,650 cotton mills. This led to mill closures, mass unemployment, hardship and poverty to hundreds of thousands of textile workers. It was brought about by over production and contracting markets which coincided with interruptions in the import of raw cotton from the southern states of America caused by the American Civil War.

Although Wigan had a much smaller cotton industry than some of its neighbours in East Lancashire such as Blackburn, Oldham, and Rochdale etc the town still suffered as a consequence. In Wigan coal was King, but as well as for domestic use the mines were geared for producing fuel for the cotton mills. With these mills now redundant miners were put on a four-day week causing more hardship.

The Cotton Famine lasted for four years and during this time Francis was a prominent member of the Relief Committee, organising help for the poor and needy with the opening of soup kitchens and the distribution of food, coal, clogs and clothing.

## **Pastures New**

After 14 years in Lancashire, Francis left St. Mary's and moved to Northamptonshire on his appointment as Rector of St. Peter's church in Brackley. Whilst in this post he also served as Chaplain to the Bishop of Peterborough for three years. It was here while living in the Vicarage that

Mary Ann Thicknesse died on 27 August 1871 aged 66. Her body was brought back to Wigan for burial and six days later she was laid to rest in the family vault in Wigan parish church.

Francis was later made Archdeacon of Northampton and the 1881 census found him and Anne, their daughters Frances and Katherine and no less than eight servants living in the village of Little Houghton just outside Northampton.

Anne Thicknesse died aged 55, in 1886 whilst visiting Christchurch, a few miles to the east of Bournemouth. She was the last of the Thicknesse family that had been born in Beech Hill. Her body was brought back to St. Peter's in Brackley for burial.

In 1888 two years after Anne's death Francis was promoted to the post of Suffragan Bishop of Leicester, a title he held for 14 years to 1912. His residence was at Archdeaconry House adjacent to Peterborough Cathedral. He turned the dilapidated building into a mansion and in line with the Victorian Parsons hobby of renovating churches he spent some of the Thicknesse fortune in helping to rebuild more than a dozen churches. That same year he married for a second time to Agnes Beatrice Jane Argles, 28 years his junior, at Stamford in Lincolnshire. His last post before retirement in 1914 was as Rector of St. Helen's church in Oxendon, near Market Harborough.

Francis Henry Coldwell Thicknesse died on 2nd November 1921 at his retirement home, South Luffenham Hall in Rutland at the age of 92. On his death he was the oldest and wealthiest Anglican Bishop in the country. Today a memorial to him can be seen in Wigan Parish Church.

His daughter Frances recorded her memories in a journal known as the 'Blue Book' and wrote about her early years in Deane and the life and achievements of her father. After their move to Northamptonshire, she recalls him telling her that after living in Wigan and Bolton he missed the Lancashire humour and the expressions used in everyday conversation.

One of the many stories he told was of an elderly gentleman with a bad leg. His physician advised him that the leg would have to be amputated, advice which he adamantly refused. However, one of his friends told him, "*It says in the bible that if thy foot offends thee, cut it off, so I think thee'd better have it done*". The man agreed but on a special condition that the leg be buried in the churchyard, where used to go and sit by its grave.

Intriguingly in the memoir by Francis's granddaughter Grace, '*Memories of a Grandfather*', it mentions the name change from Coldwell to Thicknesse. It seems that all was not well with her family in regards to Anne's betrothal to Francis. She wrote:

*'against the express wishes of her parents, Anne recently and privately married to a former curate of the parish church of All Saints Wigan, near which her father's estate of Beech hill lay, got her husband to assume in 1860, by a Private Act of Parliament, her maiden name of Thicknesse. She had become sole heir, as well as, on her parent's death, to a fairly considerable fortune in Wigan Properties'*

Does this intriguing paragraph explain why Anne and Francis married 35 miles away in the tiny hamlet of Whitewell, near Clitheroe instead of All Saints parish church in Wigan?

The year following Francis's death his grandson Rev Cuthbert Carroll Thicknesse reinforced the Thicknesse ties with Wigan when he was appointed Rector of Wigan in 1922. Cuthbert who had been born in London had served as a Chaplain attached to the Royal Artillery during the First World War, but was invalided out following wounds received in Flanders in 1917. He also became Honorary Chaplain to King George V

On Saturday 17 October 1925, the Cenotaph was unveiled in All Saints Parish Church gardens in remembrance of all those who had given their lives in the Great war. It was officially unveiled by Gen Sir Herbert Lawrence and dedicated by Bishop David of Liverpool. Cuthbert, as Anglian Chaplain of Wigan was prominent in the ceremony.

Cuthbert's residence was the Rectory in Frog Lane, the building, which dated back to 1693, had largely been rebuilt in 1875 at a cost of £10,000, a huge sum in those days, by the then Rector, Hon George Thomas Orlando Bridgeman.

The building boasted 17 bedrooms, a dining room for 30, a reception room for 300 guests, an Oratory for private worship, numerous kitchens and servants' quarters, stables and spacious gardens.

In a time of high unemployment in the 1930's Cuthbert felt uncomfortable living in luxury in such a huge house while workers in the town suffered. He hoped to downsize and make changes to the Rectory but was unable to do so by an Private Act of Parliament taken out in 1875 by Rector Bridgeman that forbade any future Rectors of Wigan making any changes to the property.

However, Cuthbert was to break the Act, raising £40,000 by public subscription to fund the building of the new All Saints secondary school in the grounds of the Rectory. The foundation stone was laid by Lord Crawford in May 1931 and the school opened the following year.

Like his grandfather before him he was to spend 14 years in Lancashire before moving to pastures new. On 6 March 1936 it was announced that Cuthbert, by now a Canon, had been appointed Dean of St. Albans Cathedral in Hertfordshire.

## **Beech Hill Hall**

After Mary Ann left Wigan to live with her daughter Ann, the 1861 census shows the new occupants of Beech Hill Hall as Edward Scott, a 64 year old Attorney at Law from Workington in Cumberland. Also listed are his 28 year old wife Laura who hailed from Edgbaston near Birmingham and their two young children, two year old Arthur and four month old Bertha.

Ten years later the 1871 census finds the occupants of Beech Hill Hall as being 46 year old Edmund Peacock, born in Newmarket, Suffolk and his wife Elizabeth who came from Oswestry in Shropshire along with their two daughters Edith and Elizabeth. At the time of the census on 2nd April of that year it looks like the tenants were absent and Edmund and Elizabeth were running the property on their behalf. The occupation of Edmund is shown as gardener and Elizabeth's as being 'In charge of the house'. Lodging with them at the time was Rev Alfred A. K. Legge, the Vicar of St. Andrews church, Springfield.





**Beech Hill Hall c1880**

The 1881 census shows the occupants of Beech Hill Hall as 25 year old Mary M. Ashworth, a school teacher & governess from Manchester, Lavinia Finlay, a nurse from Bootle, Marion Blackrock the cook, was born in Kirkcudbright in Scotland and the housemaid, an 18 year old local girl from Crooke Village by the name of Clara Stonehouse. Also listed are three young sisters who were born in Wigan, Edith, Constance and Lillian Oliver, aged nine, seven and one respectively and four year old Lilly M. Higginson from West Derby.

On Friday 2 May 1902 Beech Hill Estate was put up for sale by auction in the Clarence Hotel on Wallgate, Wigan. By this time the hall had been partitioned off into four separate dwellings, known as 'Cottages' bringing in a total rent of £52 per annum. The whole of Beech Hill Estate of 47 acres, including the hall, Wellfield Cottage, and a large farmhouse and six cottages in Woodhouse Lane were offered as one lot. Bidding started at £2,000 and reached £5,250 but as no further advance was made the lot was withdrawn.

The Estate was then offered as separate lots. The bidding for Wellfield Cottage with 2,500 sq. yards of land started at £200 and was sold for £425. The hall along with 10,000 sq. yards of land made up another lot but didn't reach the reserve price and was withdrawn at £560. The remainder of the lots consisted of properties and land in the Platt Lane area of Scholes.

By 1911 the area was expanding, Beech Hill Avenue had been surfaced and connected Beech Hill Lane to Gidlow Lane. On the census of that year the last records of people residing at Beech Hill Hall Cottages along with their families were shown as seventy year old retired miner Levi Bibby who lived at No 2. At No 3 was Henry Crane aged 41, a collier and at No 4 was James Cleaton, a 40 year old furnace worker at a rolling mill.

Housing stretched from along Beech Hill Lane, from Woodhouse Lane to the junction of Beech Hill Ave where Henry Gill, farmer, lived at Beech Hill Farm. There were just four houses in the northern section of Beech Hill Lane beyond the farm, No's 112 to 118, all occupied by miners.

Seddon House Farm where Beech Hill Lane met the 'Valley' was occupied by 65 year old Samuel Green, an engineer at a puddling (steel) works, and his wife Alice. Living with them were 23 year old Alice Victoria Gibson, Alice's daughter from a previous marriage. Her husband Granville Napier Gibson, a Baptist Missionary in India and their daughter Edith aged six. Adjacent to the farm was Seddon House Cottage occupied by a miner, James Morris and his wife and daughter.

Over on the other side of the estate the occupants of Wellfield Cottage were 54 year old widow John Glassbrook whose occupation was cooper (barrel maker) for a brewery. Also living there were his sister Mary Ellen along with her husband Edmund Hatton, an insurance agent and their daughter Ethel.

Beech Hill Avenue now consisted of 14 homes, Ascroft Avenue had four, Netherby Road 13 and Thicknesse Avenue 38. There were 13 inhabited houses in Netherby Road, off Beech Hill Avenue. It was here in Netherby Road two years later, on 5 November 1913 that a foundation stone for the new Beech Hill school was laid by the Mayoress Mrs Sarah Dickinson.

On 14 March 1914 the Wigan Observer printed an article under the Headline Banner:

#### *BEECH HILL ESTATE ATTRACTIVE DEVELOPMENT SCHEME*

*It is probable that in the near future a notable development will take place on the Beech Hill Estate. This part of the Borough has long been regarded as a very highly desired residential district, and with suitable houses erected thereon, many persons will seize the opportunity of securing a dwelling place at this delightful situation.*

*From what we hear, the trustees propose to lay out the estate by the erection of better class residencies, and design for houses with occasional black and white treatment in the old Lancashire style have already been considered. These will be laid out in attractive streets. The plans show a site for a bowling green and one can easily imagine the present hall being converted to an admirable clubhouse. The locality is beautiful and healthy and many will welcome the carrying out of this interesting scheme.*

Little did the author of the newspaper article know that in three months' time events were to happen that would change the world forever. On 28 June 1914 Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the Heir Apparent to the Austro- Hungarian Empire and his wife Sophia were assassinated in Sarajevo by a Serb Nationalist by the name of Gavrilo Princip, a member of the notorious Black Hand Gang.

The murders sparked a chain of events that led to the outbreak of the Great War. On 4 August of that year Great Britain declared war on the Central Powers of Austria-Hungary and Germany. The grand plans for the development of Beech Hill Estate were subsequently shelved and quietly forgotten about.

Beech Hill school opened its doors for pupils for the first time at 9am on Monday 1 February 1915, seven months after the start of World War 1. It consisted of two mixed departments. The headmaster of the seniors which had 200 pupils was Mr. Davis T.S. Robertson. The juniors with 150

pupils were run by Miss Mary A. Hall. Plans were already in place for further expansion of the school which had cost £5,302 to build.

## **Beech Hill Council Estate**

With Beech Hill Hall no more Beech Hill and Gidlow were developed over the next 25 years by Wigan Corporation, the Council estate being built in the 1920's and 30's. Appropriately the theme of the street names was to be trees and flowers with Acacia Crescent, Honeysuckle Avenue, Willow Road, and Fir Grove etc.

The release of the 1921 census into the public domain in January 2022 may possibly shed light on the fate of Beech Hill Hall and the sale of the estate to Wigan Corporation.

In 1927 the parade of shops in Gidlow Lane was built on the site of the old Gidlow Farm and shops were also built in Wellfield Road and in Beech Hill Avenue on the corner of Shaftesbury Street.

Another major development was the opening of the new Royal Ordnance Factory (ROF) in Gidlow Lane in 1939. As war clouds loomed it was tasked with producing artillery shells which would then be sent by rail from the nearby Rylands sidings to a filling factory such as ROF Chorley at Euxton to be filled with explosives.

The close proximity to Beech Hill of the ROF along with Rylands Mill, Giants Hall Pit and John Pit helped the area to recover by providing jobs after the mass unemployment and hardships endured during the Great Depression of the 1930's.

On 29 September 1939 with the Second World War barely a month old a National Register was taken of all the households in England and Wales. Its aim was threefold, to provide an up to date list for the issue of I.D cards and ration books and also to administer conscription into the armed forces. In 1948 the information was used to form the basis of the NHS Central Register

Data from the 1939 Register shows that in the area bounded by Beech Hill Lane, Beech Hill Ave and Gidlow Lane, roughly the same size as the old Beech Hill Estate owned by the Thicknesse family, there were 27 streets, 1,129 households and 4024 residents.

Beech Hill was part of St. Andrews Ecclesiastical Parish and in 1940 a wooden Mission church was built on the corner of Beech Hill Avenue and Netherby Road. It was the daughter church of St. Andrew's for religious services. Rev. John Lawton, the Curate of St. Andrews at the time was appointed Priest in Charge.

In 1947 St. Anne's Parish was formed and Rev. Lawton became the first Vicar. Five years later the foundation stone of a new modern church was laid in Beech Hill Avenue and St. Anne's parish church was officially opened the following year in 1953. The original Mission church became the church hall and today is a Community Centre used for various activities. It was about this time that the Thicknesse family sold their last remaining properties in Wigan, three cottages, 150 years after Ralph Thicknesse had moved into Beech Hill Hall.

Today things have gone full circle and mother and daughter Church have been reunited. St. Anne's Church is now ministered once again by a Priest in Charge, the Vicar of St. Andrews, Rev Tina Nicholson. In today's falling congregation numbers St. Annes is part of a hub along with four

other churches, St Andrews, St Catharine's, and the two Lower Ince churches, St Mary's and Christ Church.

On 14 Feb 1956 the Wellfield Hotel was opened in Wellfield Road on the site of the old Wellfield Cottage. Built by Greenall Whitley, it was said to be the first new pub built in Wigan for 50 years. It provided a much-needed focal point for social activities for the residents of the estate.

The first Landlord was the popular Jack Bowen from Llanelli in South Wales. Jack, who played loose forward, had signed for Wigan Rugby League Club in 1938 on a ten-year contract, making 147 appearances. However, during the Second World War he lost four years of his playing career whilst serving in the Welsh Guards on active service. Jack retired in 1974 after running the Wellfield Hotel for 18 years, he died in 2009 aged 93.

The final pieces in the jigsaw for the estate came in the early 1960's with new council housing being built. The area at the bottom of Bluebell Ave and land accessed from Beech Grove was developed and saw six new streets added to the estate, Tulip Drive, Redwood Ave, Forest Ave, Spruce Road, Dell Ave and Sandalwood Drive (now demolished). This was followed by the development of new private housing on the Seddon House Drive estate to the west of Beech Hill Lane and a new pub fittingly named the Beech Tree.

In the 1970's a road bridge was built over the West Coast railway line at Whitley connecting Spencer Road West with Spencer Road providing access to Wigan Lane at the Cherry Gardens.

Later a new bridge was built over the Leeds Liverpool Canal and River Douglas connecting Beech Hill Avenue with Marsh Green. This created a northern ring road around Wigan enabling traffic and HGVs in particular to avoid Wigan Town centre. It also made Beech Hill a much busier place, as before it was only accessible from Gidlow Lane, Springfield Road and Beech Hill Lane from the south.

Finally, in the 1990's private houses were built at the top of Gidlow Lane close to Brimelow Farm, accessed from Overbeck Close. Housing in the Beech Hill area is split approximately 60/40 between pre-war and post-war council housing and a mix of old and new private housing. Some council houses are now privately owned of course after the Conservative Government's right to buy legislation of 1985.

Now there is not much room for further expansion in Beech Hill owing to the boundaries set by the Leeds Liverpool Canal to the west, the main West Coast railway line to the east and the Wigan/Standish boundary along the line of the Valley feature to the north.

This has ensured that Beech Hill has retained its character and remains a close-knit community at the very northern edge of Wigan.

**Graham Taylor Feb 2021**

### **Principal Sources**

*1845/46 Ordnance Survey map (6" to 1 mile) Wigan*

*Ancestry Census 1851-1911*

*House of Names*

*Lancashire Online Parish Clerks*

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*Special thanks to Andy Lomax and  
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information on the Thicknesse  
family, Beech Hall and Beech Hill  
school.*

*Photos*

*Ancestry Lea Family Public Tree  
Hilary Mayne*