

Trading Stories, Working Lives

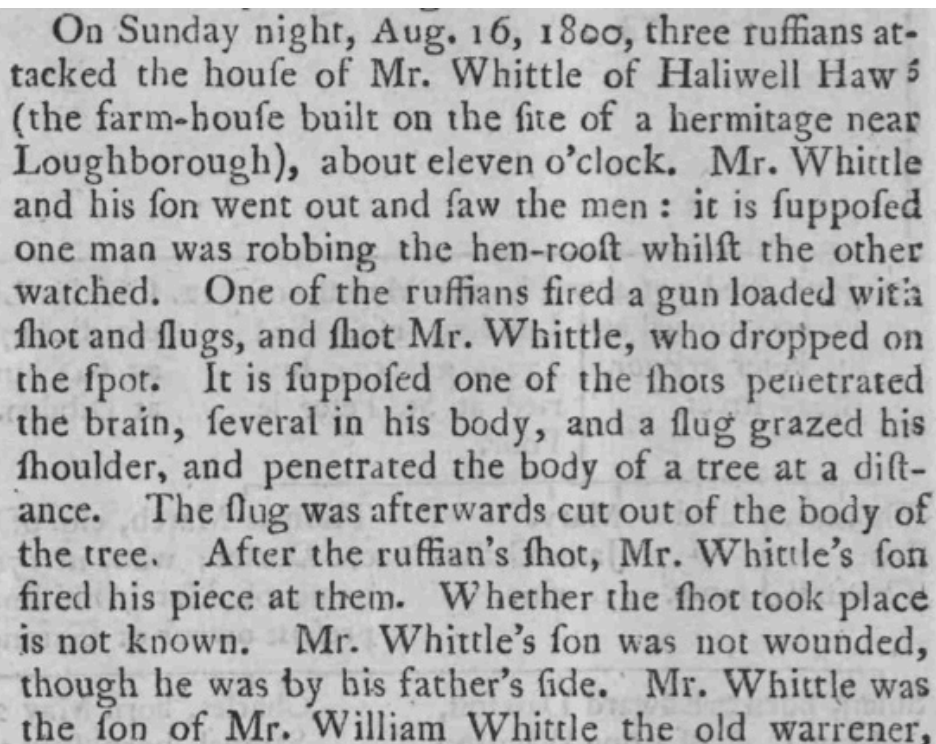
Graham Barker discovers yeoman farmers and rabbit warreners amongst his ancestors, the Whittles of Charnwood



It's a Sunday night in August 1800. The residents of Holywell Hall have been in bed for nigh on two hours, having turned in early after a hearty dinner. All is quiet, save for the gentle tick of the hallway clock. Suddenly, outside in the farmyard, the hens and ducks become agitated. Two intruders have opened the coop door and are attempting to bundle the birds into sacks. The noise of the flustered animals wakes Ellen Whittle. She nudges her slumbering husband – “Sam, quick, there's someone in the yard,” she whispers. Realising something's amiss, Samuel grabs his boots. “Check on the girls, keep them in their bedroom,” he urges Ellen, keen to ensure that their three teenage daughters are safe. Clad only in his nightgown and boots, he heads down to investigate. His 21-year old son William follows close behind, having grabbed a gun from the cupboard. As Samuel and his son rush into the dark, hunting out the trespassers, gunshots fill the air.

On Sunday night last, about 11 o'clock, a most desperate attack was made at Holywell-Hall, Leicestershire, the dwelling-house of Sam. Whittle, and some Ducks stolen by some person or persons armed with fire arms, and by whom the said Samuel Whittle was wounded, and his life is depaired of.

Hit in several places, Samuel falls to the ground. John Nichols, writing in *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, takes up the story in dramatic detail: “one of the shots penetrated the brain, several in his body, and a slug grazed his shoulder.” The *Derby Mercury* reports that, “his life is despaired of”. Yet remarkably, Samuel survived the incident, and lived to the considerable age of 82.



On Sunday night, Aug. 16, 1800, three ruffians attacked the house of Mr. Whittle of Haliwell Haw^s (the farm-house built on the site of a hermitage near Loughborough), about eleven o'clock. Mr. Whittle and his son went out and saw the men: it is supposed one man was robbing the hen-roost whilst the other watched. One of the ruffians fired a gun loaded with shot and slugs, and shot Mr. Whittle, who dropped on the spot. It is supposed one of the shots penetrated the brain, several in his body, and a slug grazed his shoulder, and penetrated the body of a tree at a distance. The slug was afterwards cut out of the body of the tree. After the ruffian's shot, Mr. Whittle's son fired his piece at them. Whether the shot took place is not known. Mr. Whittle's son was not wounded, though he was by his father's side. Mr. Whittle was the son of Mr. William Whittle the old warrener,

I'd first chanced upon my connection to Samuel Whittle when he pops up as executor in a 1791 family will: “My brother in law Samuel Whittle of Holywell Hall in the Liberty of Garendon, farmer”. Leicestershire wills – along with an extensive collection of parish registers and poll books – have recently been uploaded at Find My Past (www.findmypast.co.uk). Who could resist a relative living in a Hall? Samuel clearly merited a closer look.

Despite initial impressions, Holywell Hall isn't an especially grand residence. Rather, it's a farmhouse in the style of a grange, standing a few miles south west of Loughborough, close to Nanpantan. “The name is in fact a corruption of Holy Well Haw – “an enclosure around the holy well” – and takes its name from a spring close to the farm buildings noted for its abundant supply of water: the moats are still visible and the well is an uncommonly fine one, very large; perhaps five yards long and three broad: it is a soft water, never freezes in winter, and at the spring-head throws out as much water as would turn a mill-wheel; the same quantity in summer as in winter.” (Nichols) In medieval times, the well water was believed to have healing properties; a poem tells of a lady from Groby Castle – apparently dying, after becoming lost in Charnwood Forest – who is resuscitated by a hermit at the holy well:

“Ten steps had he gone from the green grassy mound
Still hemming the Holy Well Haw,

When, stretched on the grass – by the path he must pass –
A statue-like form he saw!
He sprinkled the lymph on the Maiden's face,
And he knelt and he prayed at her side –
Not a minute's space had he gazed on her face
Ere signs of life he spied..."

But enough of romantic legend, let's return to present-day reality. A bit of sleuthing on Google Maps reveals that Holywell Hall still stands, now on the fringes of Loughborough University's Science and Enterprise Park. There's a notable similarity to the lithograph included at the opening of this article, drawn for TR Potter's History and Antiquities of Charnwood Forest (1842). What a rare treat for a family historian.



Now, let's put Samuel Whittle in context. Baptised in 1747 at Woodhouse, he was the son of William and Sarah Whittle. The baptism record includes an intriguing detail: in a different-coloured ink, a 'y' has later been added at the end of the surname. For decades, the surname of father and son seems to bounce between Whittle and Whittley, without rhyme or reason, though Samuel himself appears to have eventually settled on Whittley, at least for his own will and headstone.

Samuel and his wife Ellen (nee Alt) lived at Holywell Hall for over thirty years, renting it from Charles March Phillips of Garendon Hall. As a yeoman farmer, Samuel would have raised sheep and poultry, some pigs and cattle perhaps, and maybe grown wheat, barley, and turnips. The Whittle(y)s prospered, and accumulated properties – "land in the disafforested Forest of Charnwood" as well as Shepshed tenements in Dag Lane, Danvers Lane, and the curiously-named Stile-Twitchel – together with property inherited from Ellen's father. By

1820 they had retired to enjoy their final years in Shepshed. Alas, in July 1827, the Leicester Chronicle reports “Mrs Whittle, at an advanced age [has died]; she was taken suddenly, as she sat in her chair, with a fit of coughing, which was so violent as to make her fall out of her chair: when lifted from the ground she was dead.” Samuel lived a while longer, looked after by two spinster daughters until his death in 1830.

Hot on the trail, I decide to look a generation further back. Once again, I’m blessed with good fortune, as parish registers, wills and local history books come together to create a colourful scene. Nichols, especially, comes up trumps: “Mr [Samuel] Whittle was the son of Mr William Whittle the old warrener [of Beaumanor]” and “In this warren-house William Whittle (who died in 1796) resided nearly 80 years, and his ancestors before him on the same spot for two centuries.”

Nichols then concerns himself with a landslide that occurred near the Whittle warrens in 1748/9 – variously attributed to floods, strong winds and an earthquake – but it’s his footnote that proves especially valuable to me. He references the Court Rolls: “John Whittle holdeth, by lease dated April 10, 1652, of the grant of William Herrick, Esq, one close or piece of ground, in the [Charnwood] Forest, lying on the South side of the Hill called Thick Hill, called by the name of Goathouse, with two tenements standing on the same, and one free-warren of coneys [rabbits] thereunto adjoining, for the term of 21 years, there being 4 years expired, and 17 years yet to come; with common in the Forest; and payeth yearly rent, with suit of court, £9 and common fine to Beaumanor 1d.”

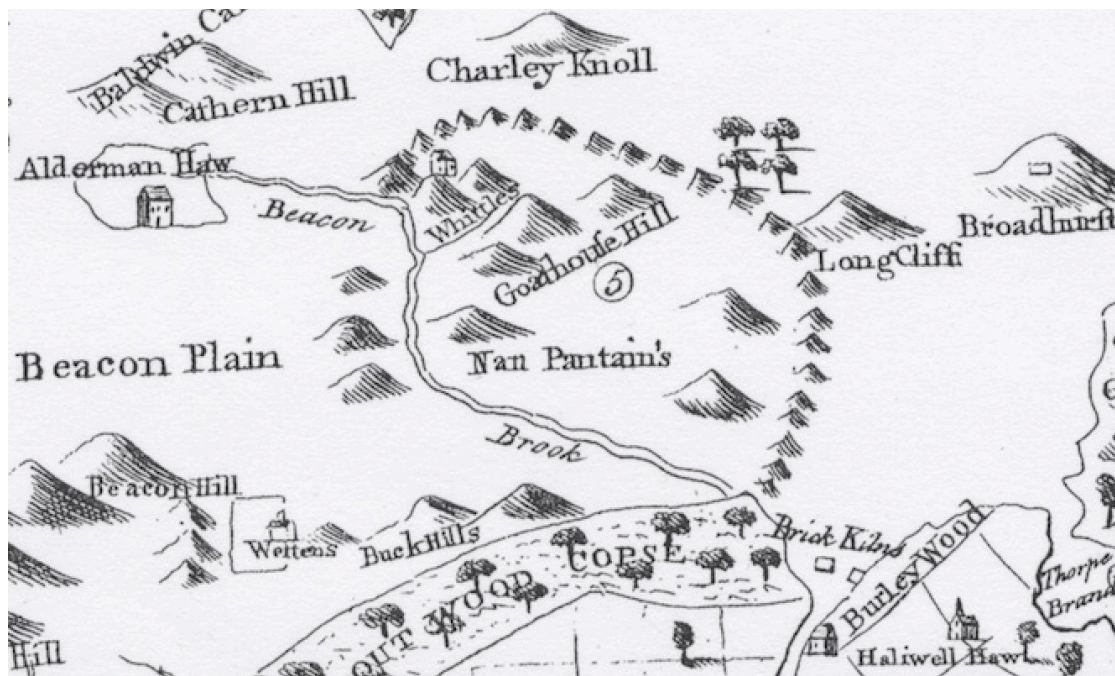
Nichols is not infallible, for sure, but it seems very likely that Whittles worked as rabbit warreners at Goathouse Hill for over 200 years. Despite the name of the hill – the first reference to ‘Gothous’ appears in 1307 – there’s no contemporary evidence to suggest that the Whittles kept goats as well as rabbits. Nichols continues, “After the Forest had been completely cleared of most of its wood [one great clearance took place in 1673], it abounded for a considerable time with rabbits, there being not less than five well-stock warrens... and three smaller ones.”

But trouble appears on the horizon. “In 1749 there were riots in the Forest,” writes Mrs GK Long in *The Leicestershire Historian* (1978), “when the Freeholders tore down squatters’ buildings and forcibly protested against the rabbit warrens, since they held that the rabbits spoiled the herbage on which they pastured their animals.” Nichols takes up the story once again:

“William Whittle, a warrener, and about four or five of his assistants, were attacked by the rabble on the Warren Hill. They defended themselves, a scuffle ensued, with pitch-forks, spades, pick-axes, &c. The warrener was the only person who had a gun. In this affray, William Stevenson, one of the rioters, received a wound in his forehead, on which he lingered a few hours, and died. It was the opinion of Mr Hunt, the surgeon who dressed the wound, that the man was not shot (though such a rumour gained ground amongst the multitude), it was

believed to be occasioned by a fork-grain penetrating his head. A gun was fired off in the air, which occasioned the report of his being shot; but it was never properly known who the person was that killed him. Whittle and five or six other persons were indicted at the Lent assizes at Leicester 1749 for the murder; but, no positive evidence appearing to convict any of them, and Mr Herrick's grant of free-warren being produced in court, they were of course acquitted."

It's said that no rabbits were left after the disturbances, which might explain why Samuel broke the family tradition of working as a warrener and instead took up the farmhouse lease at Holywell Hall. To help make sense of the landscape, I dig out various maps. Amongst them is a 1754 map, depicting 'Haliwell Haw' near Garendon Park, Goathouse Hill near 'Nan Pantain's' and – wait for it – an adjacent peak labelled as 'Whittles'.



Could this area – still known today as Whittle Hill – be named after the family? I find conflicting evidence. What is clear is that Whittle Hill was a prime source for whetstones. Frederick T Mott writes in *Charnwood Forest* (1868): "At Whittle Hill is a small quarry in the hard flinty slate, where hones or whittles of excellent quality are obtained, and sent to all parts of the world. They are much prized by the colonists in Australia."

Antiquarian, TR Potter asserts "The pieces are shaped and polished and converted into hones, or whittles, as they are called locally. Hence the name of the hill." But a critical review of Potter's book in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1843) notes: "Now, it is not true that these stones are locally called whittles; but they are called whetstones, as elsewhere. A whittle, as is well known, was a knife, not the stone on which it was sharpened. But the Whittle Hills were so named from the tenants who long worked them. John Whittle rented the Goat-house of William Herrick, Esq as early as 1652..." And Barrie Cox in his

doctoral thesis *The Place-Names of Leicestershire and Rutland*, also credits the name connection to John Whittle the warrener. We shall probably never know for sure how the name came about, but either way, when I'm next rambling through Charnwood I'll be sure to take the footpaths around Whittle Hill, Goathouse Hill and Holywell Hall, to follow in the footsteps of my ancestors.

Auntie Mabel: inspiring family histories

To read Graham's previous 'Trading Stories, Working Lives' articles – and for ideas on writing your own family history – visit www.auntiemabel.org or follow him on Twitter [@auntiemabel.org](https://twitter.com/auntiemabel)