



History of Thornton Hough and The Red Fox

Standing on the outskirts of the picturesque village of Thornton Hough in the heart of rural Wirral, Brunning & Price's Red Fox has a fascinating history stretching back some 150 years.

Thornton Hough as it appears today is principally due to the efforts of two philanthropic landlords: Joseph Hirst, a textile manufacturer from Huddersfield, and William Hesketh Lever, later Lord Leverhulme, founder of Lever Brothers at Port Sunlight.

Described as Torintone at the time of the Domesday Book, the village's present name was established when the only daughter of Roger de Thorntone, the local landowner, married Richard de Hoghe during the reign of Edward II. By the beginning of the 19th Century, Thornton Hough with a population of just 165, formed part of the great Parkgate Estate owned by Baron Mostyn of Mostyn in Flint.



Edward Pryce Baron Mostyn

Broken up into separate lots, Baron Mostyn sold the village and surrounding land at auction in June 1849. An area of land on the east side of the village came into the ownership of Joseph Hirst who had already rebuilt much of his own village at Wilshaw in West Yorkshire.

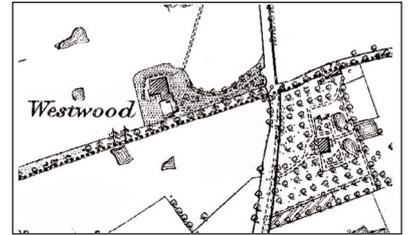
Between 1866 and 1870, Hirst was responsible for the building of All Saints Church, the adjoining vicarage, the first village school, and the row of cottages behind the church known as Wilshaw Terrace. He lived in the original Thornton House and died at Wilshaw in 1875.

In 1888 William Lever, who later became the first Lord Leverhulme (pictured right), moved into nearby Thornton Manor to be close to his new factory at Port Sunlight. Over the next few years Lever purchased much of the village and surrounding land and soon set about transforming the village. Many of the old 'insanitary' cottages were demolished and replaced with the half-timbered cottages you see today. William was also responsible for the building of the smithy, a second school, the Village Club, St. George's Church, and two houses for members of his family.



Originally called 'Westwood', then 'Westwood Grange', and more recently 'The Grange', the Red Fox was built on an area of land to the south of the village known as 'Mill Hey' long before Mr Lever came to the area. It was just one of the many Mostyn Estate lots sold in Thornton Hough and purchased by businessmen and merchants from Liverpool and Chester who built large 'villas', either for their own occupation, or for rental.

Who actually first bought the land and the surrounding fields, now occupied by Westwood Farm, is not known, and the exact date of the construction of Westwood is unclear. There is a report of an 1863 date stone on one of the buildings, but there is no record of the house, cottages, or lodge, until they appear on the ordnance survey map of about 1875.



The first recorded occupant of the house is James Sawers, (pronounced Seers) in the 1870's. Described as a "worthy and honourable gentleman", he was a wealthy local merchant. Proprietor of James Sawers & Co., a trading company which had premises in Liverpool, London, and South America, he was a prominent member of the local community.

Unfortunately his business went bankrupt in March 1879 and "the calamity and unforeseen event which befell him caused this splendid estate to be pushed onto the open market". Westwood Estate, including the house and its valuable contents, were offered for sale. The house was described by the auctioneer as a "substantially built residence of Gothic character designed by a most accomplished architect for the original owner...who placed no limit on the cost".

The entire contents, livestock, and even the plants in the greenhouse, were sold in a five-day auction in October 1879. Omnibuses were laid on to convey the bidders each day from Woodside Ferry at Birkenhead. The 7.5 acre estate including the house, gardens, and conservatories was sold at a separate auction in Liverpool, and after some competitive bidding it was finally sold to Mr Nathaniel Birtles Fogg for £12,200. Equivalent in today's money to over a million pounds.

Nathaniel Fogg was 41 when he bought the Westwood Estate. He was a 'railway contractor', from Southport where he lived with his wife Mary and their four children. Sadly she died in Autumn 1879 just two months before he bought Westwood, and Fogg only owned the property for four years before, after remarrying, he went back to live in Southport.

Ownership then passed to the Johnson-Houghton family who occupied the property for some fifty years. Originally from Crosby in Liverpool, John Johnson-Houghton trained as a farmer, and was previously living in nearby Leighton Hall with his wife and their three children. They moved to Westwood in early 1883 and three more children were born there.

John Johnson-Houghton died in March 1910 aged 60, but his widow, Margaret, continued to live at Westwood for the next twenty six years until she passed away in October 1936 aged 86. Six months later the land and farm were sold by the trustees to a Mr. and Mrs. George Anderson. The house, lodge, and grounds remained in the ownership of the Johnson-Houghton family, but the occupation of the house over the next few years is unclear.

During the 2nd World War the house is rumoured to have been requisitioned by the army, but there is no evidence for this and it's not clear what it would have been used for. By the end of the war it had been bought by William Leonard Horbury, a former cottonbroker, toy manufacturer... and a mobile chipshop operator!

Contrary to some reports, Westwood had never been owned by the Lever family. The house was built in the 1860's when William Lever was still a young man training to be a grocer in Bolton. He only came to Wirral in 1888 to begin building the factory and village at Port Sunlight. Over the next twenty years his business went from strength to strength. In 1906 he was elected MP for Wirral, and in 1911 he was made a baronet. His wife, Lady Lever died suddenly at Thornton Manor in 1913, and in 1917 William was raised to the peerage. He took the title 'Leverhulme', combining his name with his wife's maiden name in her memory. Lord Leverhulme died in 1925 and the title then passed to his son William Hulme Lever.



William Hulme Lever,
the 2nd Lord Leverhulme

The dowager Viscountess, 'Freda' Leverhulme (pictured right), William Hulme Lever's second wife, was then faced with finding a new home, and she purchased Westwood Grange from William Leonard Horbury for the sum of £8,000. She took possession of the property in April 1950, at which time it was described as "dark, dreary and full of mid-Victorian touches".



Hampered by post-war material shortages, extensive work was carried on the house over the next few months but by September 1950 Freda was living at Westwood Grange. By the time she moved in, the house was described as presenting a "light, airy, and tasteful atmosphere without any way detracting from its real character". At this time the property comprised the house, gardens, paddock and entrance lodge which stood alongside the original driveway.



Westwood Grange in the 1960s

Freda, Viscountess Leverhulme, died in February 1966. The property was divided into two lots and sold by auction at The Blossoms Hotel Chester in July that year:

Lot 1, comprising the house, gardens, and paddock, was bought by Elizabeth Joan Evans who ran the Wirral 100 Club in Heswall which she then transferred to Westwood Grange. Lot 2 was the old entrance lodge and was sold separately

Liz Evans had the new entrance and driveway constructed, and a swimming pool dug behind the house, which was apparently very popular with the local community. In 1975 she sold part of the land for what is now known as Westwood Stables, but kept the house and paddock. In April 1973 Westwood Grange and the remaining land was sold to three North Sea divers. One of them, Derek Lilley, later the co-founder of the Est Est Est restaurant group, ran it as a night club.

In 1987 the Barnes family, who formerly owned the Devon Doorway in nearby Heswall, bought the property and turned it into a restaurant, building the Westwood function suite in 1991, the 'Skybar' extension in 2000 and adding the front porch in 2005. 'The Grange' was well known locally, and was a very popular wedding venue, though it's fair to say the basement nightclub had a bit of a reputation for its sticky carpets and general shenanigans!

In 2014, Brunning and Price added the property to their growing portfolio, renamed it The Red Fox, and over the next six months carried out extensive alterations to create this attractive addition to their restaurant chain. Internal walls were removed, the entrance remodelled, and the old nightclub converted into brand new state-of-the-art kitchens.

