

# NORLEY HALL & THE WOODHOUSE FAMILY

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The Editors' note to an article in the Frodsham & District History Society Journal 2016, page 17, outlined the presence of three generations of the Woodhouse family in Norley during the nineteenth century. Those initial findings led to more research and fieldwork which supported a popular walk around the village lanes pointing out the estate buildings of its two manors: Norley Hall and Norley Bank (Frodsham Festival of Walks 2017). The distinguished life of Peter Edgerton Warburton, born at Norley Bank, featured in the Journal last year. In this issue I present a more detailed study of the history of Norley Hall and its occupants, and in particular, the legacy of the Woodhouse family in the village today.

## Early history of Norley

At the time of Domesday Norley was part of the Kingsley estate and held from Earl Hugh Lupus. In medieval times Norley's existence was intrinsically bound to that of the Forest of Mara and Mondrem which reached its maximum extent in the thirteenth century and was only finally disafforested (1) in 1812. The heart of the Forest of Mara survives as Delamere Forest today. The first record of a 'Norley Hall' dates from the fifteenth century. It was in the ownership of the Hall family and initially on the site of the nearby property now called 'The Paddock'. Archaeological finds in the garden of 'The Paddock' were reported in the Cheshire Archaeological Bulletin no. 5, 1977 (2). About 1500 a new 'Norley Hall' was built by Thomas Hall on the present site. John Hall enlarged the house in 1697 and in 1782 John's grandson, William Hall (1733-1795), rebuilt the Hall on the same site. On William's death the Norley Hall Estate was inherited by his nephew, George Whitley of Alvanley (1758-1819) – see the article by Sue Lorimer: *The Whitley Window, St John's Church, Alvanley* in this Journal. After George died his son, the Rev William Whitley (1795-1876), sold the estate by public auction at the Red Lion Hotel in Warrington, to Samuel Woodhouse from West Derby, Liverpool. At the time of the sale in 1825 it was described as a valuable freehold estate comprising a *modern mansion, called Norley Hall, with extensive offices, stables, pleasure grounds, plantations and gardens...* There were also 8 dairy farms covering 1011 acres and the estate occupied about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of Norley Township (Chester Chronicle 29 April 1825). Samuel was able to purchase the estate because he had earned wealth from the Woodhouse family business.

## The Woodhouse Family Business



Samuel Woodhouse (1771-1834) was the second son of John Woodhouse senior (1731-1812), a Liverpool merchant residing at West Derby, Liverpool, who was trading in soda ash (3), the chief export of Sicily at the time. In 1773 he was sailing along the west coast of Sicily to the port of Mazara del Vallo when a storm forced them to take shelter in the small port of Marsala. Whilst in one of Marsala's taverns John was surprised to taste the high quality local wine, *vino perpetuo* (4)

This wine tasted similar to Spanish & Portuguese fortified wines that were very popular in England at the time. John decided to ship 50 'pipes' of *vino perpetuo* back to Liverpool, i.e. 50 'pipes' = 50 barrels each with a capacity of c.100 gallons. He was concerned the wine would lose its fine qualities on the long sea voyage so he fortified it with brandy. This was how Marsala wine was created.

In England the market for Marsala wine grew and vine production needed to increase to meet demand. John's eldest son, **John junior (1770-1826)** went out to Sicily in 1787. The Woodhouses provided loans to farmers to establish more vineyards. They repaired the main street in Marsala & built a mole (breakwater) to improve the harbour. When youngest son, **William (1775-1835)** joined them they bought a fishing shed and converted it into a secure winery or *baglio* (5) on a seven acre site near to the harbour. The site also contained a *charming country house in semi-Palladian style*. There were *gardens, poultry-runs, kennels, vines, plots of wheat and even a cemetery*. The first grave was that of John junior's friend, John Christian, a cooper from the Isle of Man who died in Marsala in 1793. (Raleigh Trevelyan 1972)

The family traded as Messrs. Woodhouse and Brothers. Marsala wine was held in such high repute, and at a time when rum was increasingly difficult to obtain, that in 1800 the British Government gave orders that the Mediterranean Fleet under the Right Honourable Rear Admiral Horatio Lord Nelson K.B., Duke of Bronte in Sicily, should be supplied with it. The agreement with John junior & William Woodhouse for the delivery of 500 'pipes' within the space of five weeks to his Majesty's Ships off Malta, was personally signed by "Bronte Nelson" at Palermo on 19 March 1800 (6). The following day Nelson informed his Commander-in-chief of the deal (7). In the early nineteenth century the Woodhouse family amassed a fortune from the business. Sources tell us they operated the wine production and exporting side of the business and encouraged vine growing to their specification in other parts of Sicily, e.g. on Nelson's Bronte Estate on the slopes of Mount Etna in the east and also in Malta.

John senior, who fortuitously discovered *vino perpetuo*, created Marsala wine and introduced it to England, died in Liverpool in 1812. John junior died of gout, without issue, in Marsala in 1826 and William died in 1835 also in Marsala. Second son Samuel died at Norley Hall in 1834. The eldest sons of William and Samuel respectively, John (1819-1840) and Samuel Woodhouse II (1821-1892) were both minors when their fathers died. John died at Brazenose College, Oxford, after a short illness, but was survived by younger brother William Henry (1824-1858).

From the 1830s control of the Woodhouse family business was assumed by a relative, Rev. Humphrey Archer Hervey, who never lived in Marsala but appointed managers to take charge of Baglio Woodhouse. Two of his sons, Humphrey Archer junior and Robert, eventually joined the business, also William Henry, William's second son. After Humphrey Archer junior's wife died in 1861 he lost interest in the business and the situation was only saved by Samuel Woodhouse II's second son, **Frederick William (1849-1934)**, *who went out to Marsala for 5 years in 1867 immediately after leaving Eton*. The business prospered again under Frederick's direction and eventually two of his younger brothers joined him. The business lasted until the start of WW1 (Raleigh Trevelyan 1972).

## Samuel Woodhouse senior (1771-1834)

Returning to John senior's second son, Samuel, his role seems to have been at the Liverpool end of the family business. Four years after his father's death, Samuel, at the age of 44, married Martha Frances Gordon, aged 20, in Neston, Cheshire. They produced all of their five children before purchasing the Norley Estate in 1825. After moving to Norley Hall, Samuel retained his commitment to the family business in Liverpool whilst investing both time and money in the Norley community. The legacy of his activities is still to be observed in the village. For instance:

- in 1832 Samuel gave land for the building of an Anglican church. This is now demolished but the date stone survives in the grounds of the present church ([photo 1](#))
- in 1833 he founded a Sunday school which became a day school in 1844. It remained the church primary school until 1989 when a new village school opened. The former building is now private accommodation ([photo 2](#))
- in 1833-4 Samuel had extensive outbuildings constructed at Wob Farm, now called 'The Home Farm'. Samuel & Martha's dated monogram still adorns the property ([photo 3](#))
- in 1834 Samuel had Town Farm 2 built or rebuilt and adorned with their dated monogram. This residential property is now called 'The Meadows' ([photo 4](#))

After nine years at Norley, Samuel Woodhouse senior died aged 63. An engraved stone plaque that may have come from the old church has recently been discovered behind the Woodhouse Monument in the graveyard:



ADJOINING  
THIS IS THE REMAINS OF  
SAMUEL WOODHOUSE ESQ  
OF BRONTE NEAR LIVERPOOL  
AND NORLEY HALL IN THIS TOWNSHIP  
AND  
MARTHA HIS BELOVED WIFE  
THE FORMER OF WHOM DEPARTED THIS LIFE  
ON THE 23<sup>RD</sup> DAY OF FEBRUARY 1834  
IN HIS 63<sup>RD</sup> YEAR  
THE LATTER ON THE 10<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF MAY 1840  
AGED 45 YEARS.

TO A BEREAVED FAMILY THEIR LOSS IS IRRELIEVABLE  
AND THE MANY ENDEARING QUALITIES OF EACH  
WILL LONG BE REMEMBERED BY ALL WHO KNEW THEM  
HE WAS DISTINGUISHED NO LESS BY HIS BENEVOLENT DISPOSITION  
THAN HIS UPRIGHT AND HONOURABLE CHARACTER...  
TO BOTH THIS CHURCH IS LARGELY INDEBTED  
HE CONTRIBUTED SIGNIFICANTLY TO ITS ERECTION...

The Woodhouse Monument is listed Grade II. Three of its four vertical panels commemorate William d.1835, John, his son aged 22 d.1840 and Mary Hannah Isabel (his infant daughter) b.1833. The fourth panel is blank. The leaning plaque contains the above inscription.

Samuel senior's eldest son and third child, **Samuel Woodhouse II**, was only 12 years old when his father died.

## Samuel Woodhouse II (1821-1892)

We know little of Samuel's early life until 1844 when, at the age 23, he married Eliza Mostyn from Glasgow. She was aged 19 and the daughter of Henry Thornton Mostyn, an Army Surgeon in Malta from 1825-1848. The marriage took place in St Paul's Cathedral, Valetta, Malta before they returned to Norley for the rest of their lives.

In 1845 the young couple had Norley Hall remodelled in Tudor style by renowned Liverpool architect, Alfred Bower Clayton, ([photos 5&6](#)). Nine years later Samuel commissioned Edward Kemp to redesign the garden. This directly followed Kemp's work at Park Place, now Castle Park, Frodsham.

The 1851 census tells us that Samuel and Eliza had three children under 5 and eight servants.

By 1861 the household included six children, a young niece, butler, cook, nurse and six servants.

Samuel and Eliza produced twelve children between 1846 and 1867: three of them died before reaching the age of 1 but three of them lived to be more than 80 years old.

Samuel's wife, Eliza, died in 1889 aged 64 and Samuel three years later aged 70. Samuel and Eliza, their eldest daughter, Eliza Frances who died aged 19 years, and four of their eight sons are buried in the graveyard at Norley close to the Woodhouse Monument which was erected c.1840. *Did Samuel commission the Monument after his Uncle William, two of William's offspring and Martha, his mother, died between 1833 and 1840?*

The good deeds of Samuel and Eliza in Norley are numerous. He is especially remembered for:

- Renewing many of the buildings on the estate, in particular, Norley Hall and its gardens. Both are now privately owned although part of the exterior of Kemp's kitchen garden wall is visible from Town Farm Lane.
- Reducing the rent of his tenants by 10% in the bad farming years of 1846 & 1886
- Giving over a site for the vicarage at the time the present church was built in 1878 ([photos 7&8](#))
- Samuel was also a respected Justice of the Peace and member of the Eddisbury Bench, Deputy Lieutenant of Cheshire, Sheriff of Chester in 1869, a River Weaver Trustee, a patron of the Parish Church, a supporter of the local school, and latterly, the Kingsley Home for Boys which was established at Kingsley Hall in 1886.

The report of his passing (Cheshire Observer 25 June 1892) described Samuel as *a most kind and considerate landlord* whose work was done in *a quiet and unostentatious manner*. Samuel's second child and first son, Samuel Henry, inherited Norley Hall on the death of his father.

### **Col. Samuel Henry 'Harry' Woodhouse III (1848-1932)**

Samuel Henry attended Eton College and University College, Oxford, before qualifying as a Barrister at Lincoln's Inn Field, London in 1875. He married Florence Ada Wilkinson in Rathdown, Ireland in 1876 and was engaged in military service from 1881. After his father's death Norley Hall continued to be occupied by members of the Woodhouse family until it was sold. Norley had become a parish in 1836 but it was not until 1894 that provision was made to elect Parish Councils. The poll took place at the school in Norley and eight members were elected including Samuel Henry who became their first Chairman. His resignation when Norley Hall was sold at the end of the century was received with great sadness.

For much of the early twentieth century Samuel and Florence resided at Heatherton Park, Taunton, Somerset until Samuel died, aged 84, in 1932.



## Recent history of the Norley Hall Estate

In 1899 the estate was sold to **Charles Bell JP**, a former partner in Messrs Barton and Bell, brewers in Wavertree, Liverpool. Charles was a breeder of shorthorn cattle and shire horses. They won him many prizes at agricultural shows and he exported stock to Argentina and elsewhere. On his death in 1914, his pedigree stock and the furniture contents of Norley Hall were sold. The estate was broken up for sale in forty lots (Cheshire Observer 7 March 1914).

**James Dronsfield**, an inventor and manufacturing engineer, bought Norley Hall and 35 acres in 1914. When he died after a long illness in 1942 his only daughter, Selina Dronsfield, continued to live there. From 1958 the Hall itself was divided into two residences and its outbuildings sold and converted into individual dwellings. One of the two residences, Norley Hall Farm, listed Grade II, is for sale by Savills: guide price £895,000 (2018).

## Conclusion

In this study, I have provided key details of the significant growth and development of both the Woodhouse family business and the Norley Hall Estate. Four generations of Woodhouses played an important role in the management of their family wine business in Marsala and Liverpool and adopted a benevolent role as landed gentry in the lives of Norley villagers during the nineteenth century. In contrast, the twentieth century and especially the onset of WW1, saw the business fold as young members were recalled for war duty. Similarly, the changing socio-economic conditions witnessed the slow demise of the once grand estate. But many of Norley's Woodhouse legacies are still there to be discovered by the astute observer.

## Notes that enhance the text

**Disafforestation (1)** = freedom from Forest Law. The southern part of the Forest of Mara was classed as a hunting forest until 1812 when an Enclosure Act was passed to return the remnant forest to ordinary land. The Act transferred ownership of half the area to the Crown (Delamere Forest) & half to surrounding major landowners. The Forestry Commission, established in 1919, took over the management of Delamere Forest and now works with Cheshire West and Chester to promote recreational use of the forest.

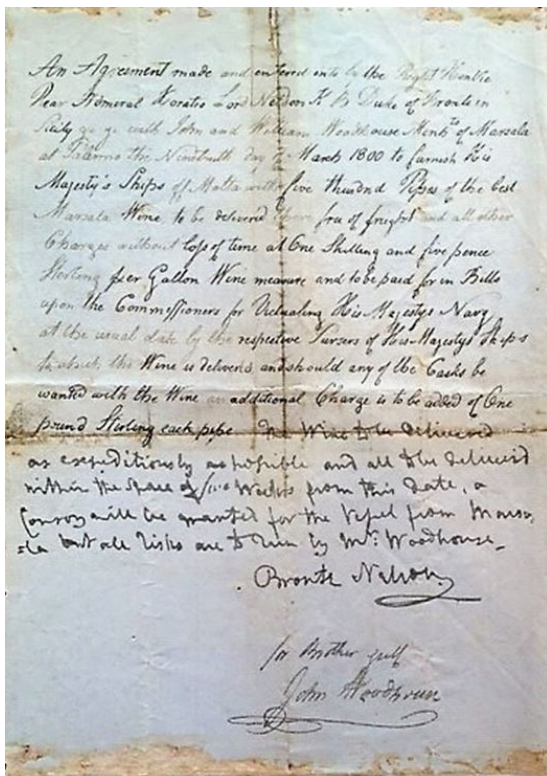
**CAB no.5 1977 (2)** page 41 – Norley The Paddocks, Town Farm Lane, reports that a party of four from the Northwich Archaeology & Local Studies Group examined sandstone structures exposed by the owners in the garden of the property. The finds were thought to indicate occupation of the site in the 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> century. A copy of the report may be accessed online via the Cheshire Historic Environment Record.

**Soda ash (3)** in John Woodhouse senior's time was obtained from the ashes of the succulent plant *Salsolea soda*, common name saltwort, which grows in coastal regions throughout the Mediterranean basin. Soda ash is a crucial ingredient in the glass-making & soap-making industries.

**Vino perpetuo (4)** or *perpetuum* was the wine of Sicilian peasant families made by a special aging technique in large casks for celebratory occasions. *Vino perpetuo* was not fortified but the process of producing it gave it special qualities and an alcohol content of 17%-19% volume. Ancient vine varieties that were well adapted to Sicilian climate & soils produced the grapes.

The vinification process using macerated skins and strong presses produced a 'must' and a wine rich in polyphenols. When wine was drawn off for celebrations an equal quantity of young wine was added to the vintage in the aging cask: a kind of perpetual topping up.

**Baglio (5)** is a term that was widely used in Sicily for a fortified country estate initially to protect from marauders when producing wheat and then vines. Baglio Woodhouse became the model for later wineries that set up in Marsala, e.g. Baglio Ingham, established by a Yorkshire competitor in 1812 and Baglio Florio, established by an Italian industrialist in 1833. The latter still exists and has modern premises in Marsala producing high quality wine and can be visited. Some traditional baglios in other parts of Sicily have been transformed into contemporary wineries and farmhouse inns that provide tourist accommodation.



**The Agreement with Nelson (6)** dated 19 March 1800 & signed 'Bronte Nelson' was exhibited at a society meeting by Joseph Mayer FSA, a founder member of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire and contributor to the public museum that is now the World Museum, Liverpool. The exhibit was made possible by kind permission of its possessor, **John George Woodhouse (1823-1889)**, second son of Samuel Woodhouse senior (Liverpool Mercury 6 April 1852). Some 90 years later another local newspaper reported that 'the Agreement' was displayed above a mantelpiece in a Liverpool hotel smokers' room (Liverpool Daily Post 15 July 1943). Then in 1948 'the Agreement' was given to the Stewartry Museum in Kirkcudbright by Col. George Hamilton of London, where it still resides! (Enquiry by Sue Lorimer and subsequent email correspondence).

Grateful thanks to the Stewartry Museum for permission to show document No.4069

**Nelson's letter (7)** to his Commander-in-chief dated 20 March 1800 says *I have agreed with Mr Woodhouse, at Marsala, for 500 pipes of wine, to be delivered to our Ships at Malta, at 1s 5d per gallon; and as Mr Woodhouse runs all the risks, pays all the freight etc, I don't think it is a bad bargain. The wine is so good that any gentleman's table might receive it, and it will be of real use to our seamen.* Nelson suggested to John that his preferred brand of Marsala should be known as 'Bronte Madeira'.

## Sources

Gladys Archer 2012 Norley a village alive

Tom Wright & RM Bevan 2009 Past times – Kingsley, Acton Bridge, Crowton & Norley

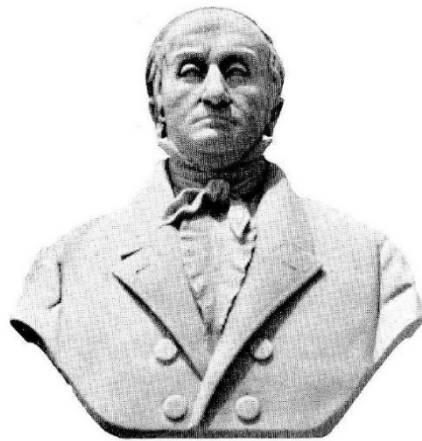
Raleigh Trevelyan 1972 Princes under the Volcano

Henry Jeffreys in History Today Feb. 2017 *Bittersweet Taste of British Sicily*

Wikipedia, Ancestry and other internet sites, e.g. *Baglio Woodhouse Marsala* on Youtube

**A time line / family tree for Woodhouse family members mentioned in the text**

	John Woodhouse senior (1731-1812) Traded in Sicily & created Marsala wine		
John junior (1770-1826) Died in Marsala Established Baglio Woodhouse	Samuel senior (1771-1834) Bought Norley Hall in 1825 & improved estate farms & village facilities		William (1775-1835) Died in Marsala Worked with John junior
Baglio Woodhouse managed by a relative, Rev Humphrey Archer Hervey from c.1835 until his death in 1843			
	Samuel II (1821-1892) Developed Norley Hall & gardens, also estate farms & village facilities	John George (1823-1889) Possessor of the Agreement with Nelson	William Henry (1824-1858) In partnership Humphrey Hervey junior
Baglio Woodhouse managed by Humphrey Hervey junior until Humphrey's demise in the 1860s			
	Samuel III 1848-1932 First Chairman of Norley Parish Council Sold Norley Hall in 1899	Frederick 1849-1934 Rescued & turned around the Woodhouse business in Marsala which survived until 1914	



The bust of John Woodhouse junior who signed the Agreement with Nelson on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1800 (From the website of the winery and tourist attraction Baglio Florio)





1 Date stone of the first Anglican church was placed in the ground of the present church in 2002



2 Residential accommodation in the former Sunday School & Church Primary School founded by Samuel Woodhouse senior in 1833



3 Outbuildings of The Home Farm, formerly Wob Farm, supporting Samuel & Martha's dated monogram, top right

4 The Meadows, formerly Town Farm 2, supporting Samuel & Martha's dated monogram, bottom left



5 Norley Hall rebuilt in 1782 by William Hall. Remodelled in Tudor Revival style 1845 for Samuel Woodhouse II



6 Norley Hall in its Parkland setting as seen from Norley Road, to the south southwest,



7 Church of St John Evangelist, listed Grade II\* 1878-79 by J L Pearson. Samuel Woodhouse II was a patron of the Parish Church



8 Vicarage, built on the site of the Red Lion Inn, donated by Samuel Woodhouse II, next to the Church on Norley Road

**Photographs of Norley's Woodhouse legacies – KG**