

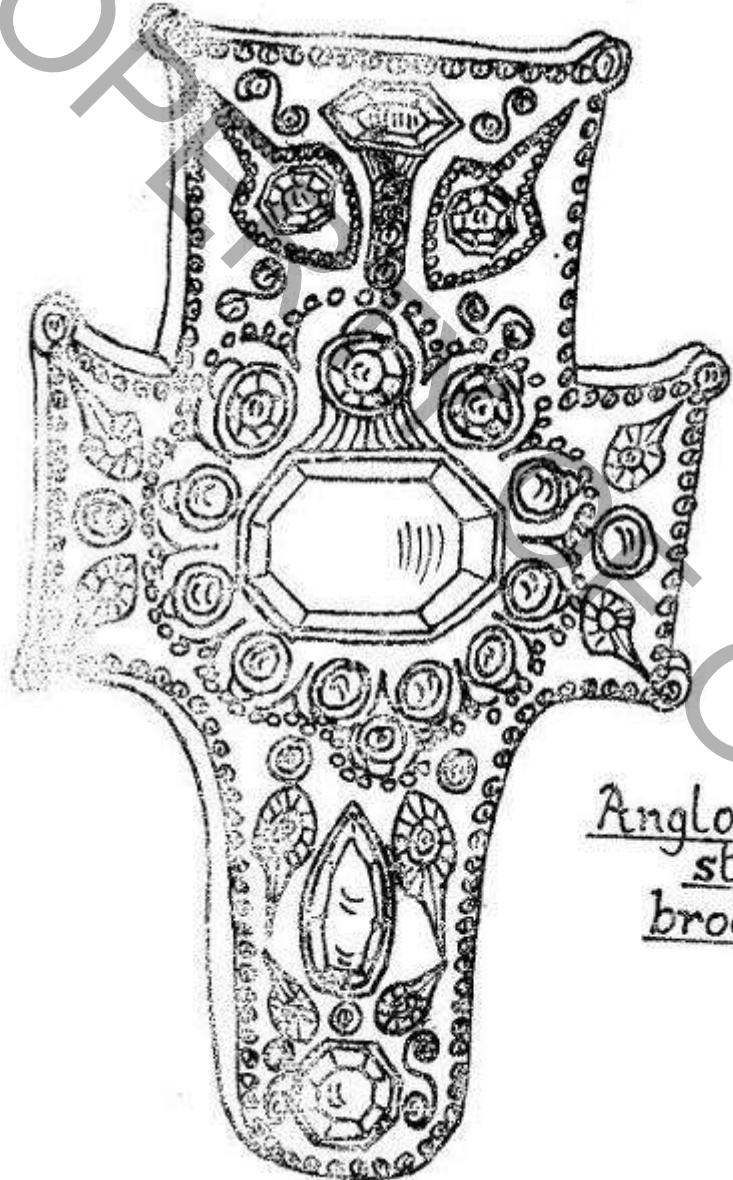


Greater Wigston Historical Society

White Gate Farm, Newton Lane, Wigston Magna Leicestershire

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BULLITIN 13 OCT '85



Anglo-Saxon  
style  
brooch.

# **PROGRAMME**

**Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> October 7.30pm**

“The Age of the Horse”

An illustrated talk by Ian Varey

**Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> November 7.30pm**

“The Name Game”

A look at the study of Place-names, with particular reference to our part of Leicestershire

**Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> December 7.30pm**

Christmas Meeting

Members Evening

**Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> January 7.30pm**

To Be Arranged

**Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> February 7.30pm**

A.G.M.

All of these meetings will be held in the small committee room at Wigston Liberal Club, Kelmarsh Avenue, Wigston at 7.30pm  
Friends and new members are always made most welcome.

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## **Subscriptions.**

Subscriptions are £2.00 per year or £1.00 for O.A.P.s and members under 18 years of age. As well as membership to the society, the subscription entitles one free admission to the Wigston Museum and to receive the Society's Bulletin which is published three times per year. Subscriptions can be paid at the meetings or sent to the Hon. Treasurer ... Mr B Bilson, 23 Thirlmere Road, Wigston, Leicestershire.

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Editor. Ian R Varey 150 Welford Road Wigston Leicester

## **September '85 Meeting**

At 7.00pm on Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> Sept. some 40 members met at Wistow. The owner of Wistow Hall, Mr Timothy Brooks, distantly related by marriage to the Halford family, had kindly agreed to show us around the Church and Hall.

While there was still daylight, we started our visit by looking at the church. The church is dedicated to St. Wistan, a Mercian prince who was murdered on that very spot in 849 A.D. Mr Brooks then gave us a resume of the history of the Church and the Halford family, owners of the Hall and estate for many years. Members then explored the Church.

It is a simple building, much restored and enlarged in the Georgian period. The light airy interior has box pews, a side pulpit, plain chancel and a small North transept in which is the most notable of the Halford tombs. Richard Halford Bart was a fervent Royalist and his marble tomb shows him in his armour. Among the other Halford monuments that of Sir Henry Halford is important, for in the early nineteenth century, he was Royal Physician to King George III. Before leaving the church yard our attention was drawn to a blocked in Norman archway on the exterior wall, probably the original doorway to the original church and indicative of the great antiquity of at least part of this simple but delightful church.

We then walked across the road and up the drive to Wistow Hall. Many of us were quite surprised by its great size. The Hall like the church was much altered and enlarged in the Georgian period. Originally the building was an 'H' shaped Hall house in the early Jacobean style. The Georgian façade masks all trace of this earlier house. Mr Brooks showed us around the two principal downstairs rooms, the Hall and the Staircase Hall.

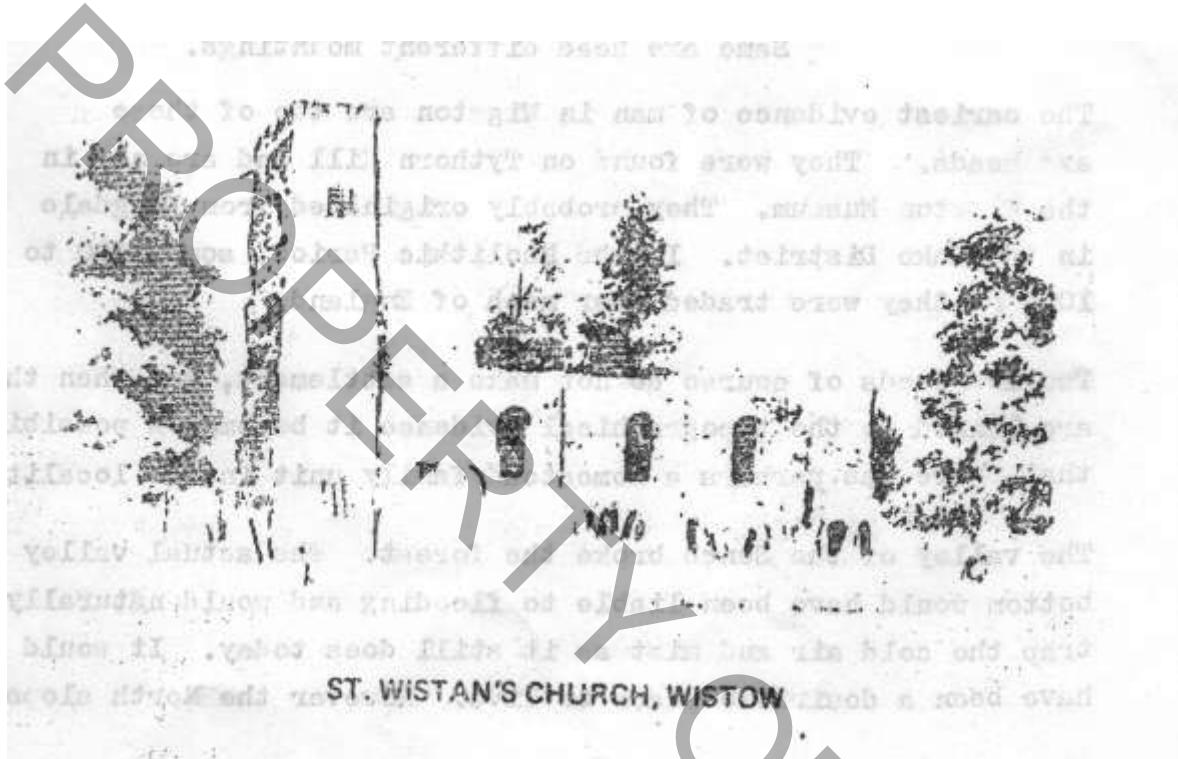
Both rooms have excellent Georgian interiors. In the Hall there is a fine plaster ceiling and wood paned walls. Above the China cabinet there is a painting of an eighteenth century hunting scene.

The Staircase Hall featured, a wonderful Georgian staircase, decorated with elegant ornamental ironwork, there were more pictures adorning the wall from the time of Sir Henry the Physician and Lord Cottesloe.

At one end of the room was a cabinet which held many of our gazes, for in it were displayed, perhaps the most prized possessions of Wistow Hall. The saddles and trappings from the horses left by King Charles and Prince Rupert in their flight from the Battle of Naseby. In such a hurry was the King they stopped long enough to jump onto fresh horses and were away, The Royal saddles have been revered as heirlooms ever since. In the same cabinet there was displayed various seventeenth century weapons including a pair of light pistols reputed to have belonged to Prince Rupert.

At the other end of the room, a delicate sculpture in plaster, of a greyhound, was lying on a wooden chest. This animal the badge of the Halfords seemed to be keeping a watchful but friendly eye over the assembled crowd.

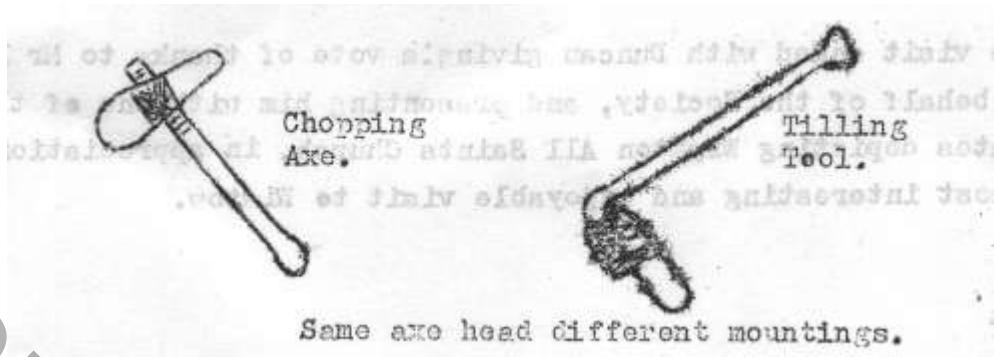
The visit ended with Duncan giving a vote of thanks to Mr Brooks on behalf of the Society, and presenting him with one of the plates depicting Wigston All Saints Church, in appreciation of a most interesting and enjoyable visit to Wistow.



#### AN UPDATE ON THE HISTORY OF WIGSTON UPTO1066.

A dense green deciduous forest clothed the land, after the melting of the glacial ice. In this huge forest was the land we now call Leicestershire. Present day Wigston was represented by a small break in the trees, the silty flood terraces of the little River Sence. Possibly our hunter-gather ancestors passed this way? But no evidence of their passing remains or more correctly no evidence has been found.

Over the centuries, the life style of the hunter-gathers changed and some agriculture and husbandry became a part of their way of life. This necessitated a more settled form of habitation and the clearing of woodland for cultivation. The areas of light forest on easily worked soils were natural sites for these early homesteads. The improvement in hand tools after 2000 BC, in particular the shafted stone axe made forest clearance a possibility. With a different handle the same stone axe could be used to till the soil.



The earliest evidence of man in Wigston are two of these axe heads. They were found on Tythorn Hill and are now in the Wigston Museum. They probably originated from Langdale in the Lake District. In the Neolithic Period, some 2000 to 1000 years they were traded over much of England.

Two axe heads of course, do not make a settlement, but when they are linked to topographical evidence it becomes a possibility that there was perhaps a homestead / family unit in the locality.

The valley of the Sence broke the forest. The actual valley bottom would have been liable to flooding and would naturally trap the cold air and mist as it still does today. It would not have been a desirable place to live. However the North slope of the valley forms a definite, ridge some 50 to 60 feet above the river. This ridge would warm up quickly and enjoy long hours of sunshine. Many little south flowing streams and springs cut across this ridge on their way to join the Sence. On the stream banks and in the little valleys there is in addition to some light alluvial soil some exposed like clay which is lighter and more easily worked than the predominant boulder clay. This North ridge, then, above the river offers the most important conditions that early man sort when choosing a site for his home... a South facing slope; good water supply; light easily worked soil and good communications, i.e. along the river' valley to the main corridor of communication in Leicestershire, 'the Soar Valley'.

Tythorn Hill itself has water on three sides and possibly was considered the easiest, site to clear and settle first. How the site was inhabited, or by whom, is not known.

For the next piece of evidence of early dwellers in the Wigston area we must jump perhaps a 1000 years to the Bronze Age.

A new piece of the jigsaw, of Wigston's early history, was found just last year, 1984, on the new Wigston Harcourt Estate. A digger cut through the top soil to reveal a Bronze Age Urn. The top part was missing, probably lost through ploughing in the Middle Ages, but sufficient remained to make a positive identification.

The little stream, the Blackwell, close to where the Urn Was found, flows round Wellspring Hill where it is joined by a second spring flowing down what is now Cooks Lane. The stream then crosses over the Welford Road just before the Railway bridge, The topography is again significant, for like Tythorn Hill, Wellspring Hill has water on three sides and would be relatively easy to clear. In fact the Bronze Age site may represent an extension of the already cleared land from an earlier settlement.

This gradual movement-West is continued for finds of Roman pottery, masonry, and 'trenches filled with waste materials have been found in the field, on the other, side of Welford Road. To say that this was a villa site is somewhat premature, but certainly habitation is indicated. The railway embankment and the railway bridge rather spoil a minds eye view..... but imagine a Roman Villa sited on the South Leicester Rugby playing field,

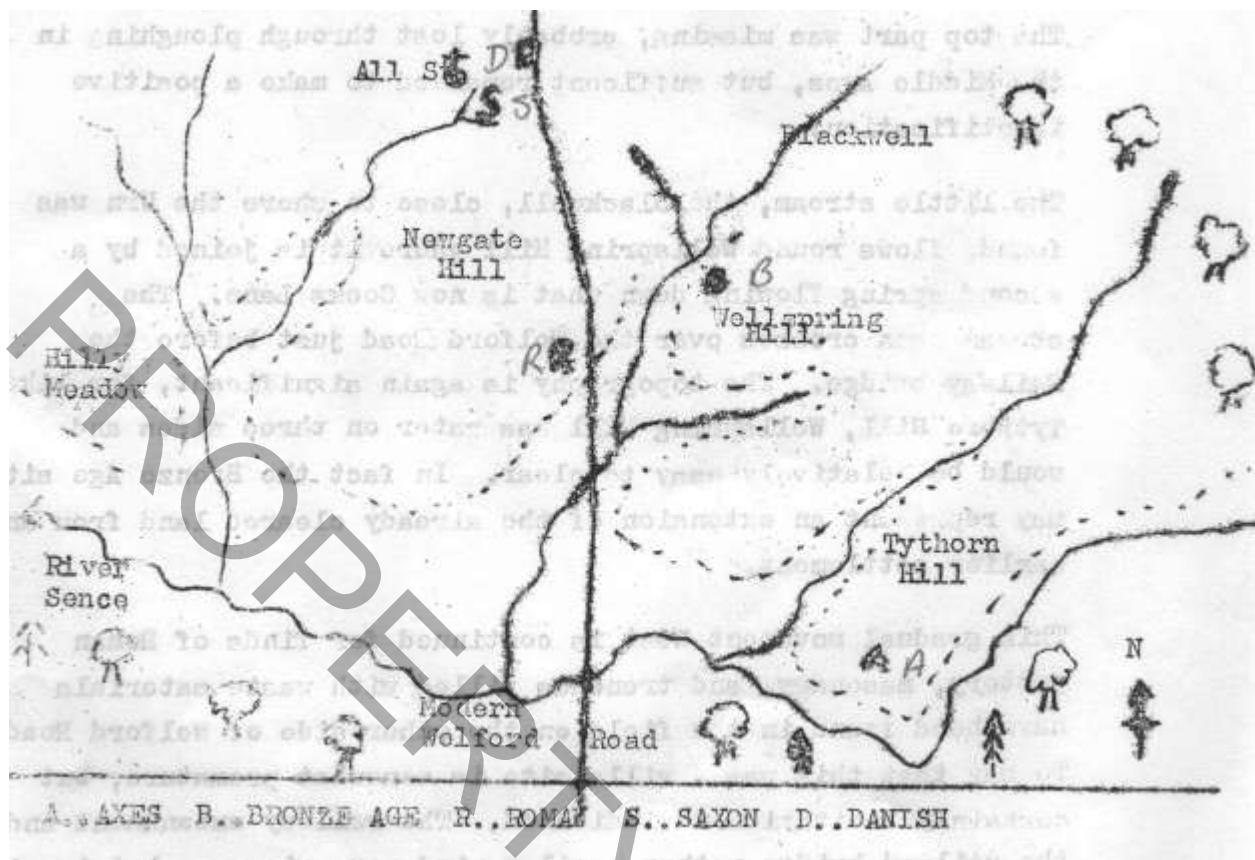
A South facing slope stretching down to the River Sence, with weed and beyond. To the East cultivated land (where the Bronze Age find was made), and to the West and North land being cleared, on the sand and gravels, reaching back towards the present All Saints Church.

There is a growing belief, largely from photographic evidence made on aerial surveys, that many Roman sites are in fact situated on earlier Bronze Age Estates, rather, than cut from the virgin forest. This may have been the case in Wigston, though at present it is only circumstantial evidence.

With the next known occupants the historian is on safer ground. The gradual move West now alters to North West with the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in the sixth century.

Consider, is this movement West due to a particular Human trait, that of wishing to take advantage of someone else's work, clearing the land, but not wishing to live on their old homestead site with its 'ghosts' and cess pits. The natural thing to do is to build your new site close but not too close.

## MOVEMENT WEST



The arrival of the Angle-Saxons in Wigston is significant, because for the first time there appears to have been a village. The accepted view is that from the fifth century bands of invaders moved up the river valleys from the East Coast. The Welland was such a valley. From the place name evidence ' Rockingham In N'hants and Petling in Leics. were among the first settlements.

A second means of access, sometimes overlooked, were the old but still serviceable Roman Roads. The Via Devana, Gartree Way was like an arrow pointing from the Welland Valley near Medbourne, straight to Leicester. It was by this route that bands of Angles and Saxons settled in the new villages of Stretton and Evington. It was probably this same route that a band of Angles came by, to occupy Wigston in the sixth century. The name Wigston is a hybrid name. the first element, being Scandinavian and the second element is Saxon, a 'ton' meaning a village. The original Saxon name for Wigston is unknown.

The main evidence of Saxon/ Angle occupation falls into two parts. First is the existence of a large A/S cemetery. Finds of brooches and other jewellery together with bits of horse harness ware made in 1795 during construction of the Northampton Turnpike Road. ...near Wigston's present cemetery. Other smaller periodic finds have been made, since. This site is well south of the village site but close to the site where

Roman finds have been made. Where the settlers opposed? Or was it appropriate, that the burial site should be near an older occupation, or is it just coincidence?

The second part of the evidence relates to the patron Saint of our second church, St. Wistan, Wistan, prince of the Royal House of Mercia, was murdered in the Royal Hunting Forest on the spot where now stands Wistow Parish Church. This occurred in 849 AD at a meeting between Wlstan and the "Uncle, on the banks of the Glen( another name for the Sence) The body was carried to the nearest settlement, Wigston just three miles away, and laid to rest in the church, before starting its journey to Repton the main residence of the Kings of Mercia.,

The present St. Wistan's Church is built on the site where the body rested, and presumably the site of the small Saxon church which served Saxon' Wigston.

The place name experts assure us that the origin of the name Wigston is Viking's ~ ton. However, I can't help but notice how similar the names Wistan and \wigston are?

That a sizeable settlement was in existence by 849 seems certain. Growing numbers of people must have led to large scale clearance of land around the village centre and; gradually spreading out. A large settled, farming community must have been the first impression of the next wave of settlers, the Scandinavians.

After intermittent warring and some settling by Danes, Swedes and Norwegians especially in the North Country, the Danelaw was established in 875 AD. By 877 AD Leicester was .one of the five Danish Boroughs, Indeed the name Leicestershire is Scandinavian for the lands, around. Leicester,

Of the five boroughs Leicester was the most southern. We were in frontier country, Watling Street, the present A5, was the boundary between Danelaw and Saxon England.

Now put yourself in the position of a Danish Jarl in Leicester, he is in charge of a buffer zone between a potential enemy and the heart of Danish held land who's capital was York.

His priority I believe must be a protective network especially south of Leicester. It was therefore essential that Saxon Wigston was occupied. The village was on a main route south, commanded a ridge above a river valley and by determined men was less than an hours march from Leicester. Perhaps reasons such as these account for the occupation by a large number of 'Northmen' and there families of Wigston. Naturally they would not wish to be too close to the conquered Saxons.

This may well account for the Domesday entry for Wigston indicating a twin village site, with two manors and two churches. It may also account for Wigston's name,.... not

named after one scandinavian as we find in Arnesby and Shearsby, but named after the group of invaders, Vikings – tun.

1066 and all that had little impact on Wigston, one feudal lord was changed for another, there seems to have been no Norman settlement. It is however, a convenient place to stop.

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