

## The Browns of Hill Farm

The early years of the nineteenth century were prosperous ones for farming. Investment in agriculture was worthwhile and a good deal of building work and enclosure was carried out on the Bedford estates to take full advantage of the opportunities. Among the new farms was Hill Farm in Willington, built in 1804 using a design by Robert Salmon, the Duke of Bedford's surveyor and later his steward. The design used the octagon plan also seen at Octagon Farm in Cople. Census records from the nineteenth century refer to the farm as Conduit Farm or Grove Farm; however, the Bedford estate accounts prefer the original name of Hill Farm. The first tenant of Hill Farm was Robert Brown. As a tenant farmer, Robert was a man of some standing in the village and in 1810 was duly appointed as overseer together with Thomas Twitchell. The Duke of Bedford continued to support the development of Hill Farm. The accounts show that in 1811, 20,000 quicksets were planted there and at Croote's Farm, a sign that enclosure work was taking place. Shortly afterwards, in 1814 and 1816, money was spent on drainage, perhaps necessitated by the fairly heavy clay soil on the farm.



Figure 1: Hill Farm

The period after the end of the Napoleonic Wars was a more difficult period for farming. There is some evidence that matters became more difficult in Willington and in 1832 Robert Brown received £100, "His Grace's free gift in consideration of his loss by death of farm horses." Of course, at that time, the horse was absolutely central to farming.

Robert Brown died in April 1841, aged 81, and Thomas Brown, born in Great Straughton, Huntingdonshire in 1801, took over the tenancy<sup>1</sup>. He took over at a good time for farming. The next decades were the time of "High Farming". New tools, improved drainage, chemical fertilisers, better feeds and a general willingness to try new ideas all came into play. The estate accounts show that in the 1840s and 1850s money was spent at Hill Farm on improving the drainage and on new buildings as well as improving the farmhouse itself. By the time of the 1851 census, Thomas, now listed as married to Mary<sup>2</sup>, was employing 10 men and 6 boys and farming 311 acres. In 1861, he was farming 294 acres and had lost some land when the school was built. He then employed 11 men and 4 boys. He and Mary were living with two daughters, a niece, three nephews and a servant. Thomas was a man of standing in the village and had the vote. He died in August 1870. In the 1871 census, Mary is listed as the head of the household, farming 320 acres and employing 10 men and 6 boys. She was living with one of her daughters, and with Thomas Brown, her nephew, who was born in Woburn, and 2 servants.

By the time of the 1881 census, the nephew, Thomas Brown held the tenancy for Hill Farm. He was farming 320 acres and employing 7 men and 4 boys. He was married to Anne, his cousin and the household also included his mother, Mary, referred to as an annuitant. The next years were to prove

<sup>1</sup> It is not clear if Thomas was Robert Brown's son although this seems likely.

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that Thomas had married before the 1841 census but the census contains no record of a wife.

difficult ones for the family. Thomas Brown's wife, Anne died in September 1885 and his mother, Mary died in January 1888. By then, the agricultural depression was taking effect. Rents had to be remitted and the value of land fell. In the 1891 census, Thomas is still listed as tenant and is shown as a widower with a young family of two daughters and three sons. However, by 1894, faced with the impact of the depression, he had given up the farm and it is listed in the accounts as "in hand". Following failed attempts to sell some of the land at Hill Farm, a new tenant, Thomas Greig came in.

Thomas Brown carried on working in Willington and in the 1901 census is recorded as working as a dairyman and cow keeper, something of a comedown from his earlier position as a leading tenant farmer. By 1911, he had retired and was living in Wootton with his cousin, one of his daughters and two sons, Thomas Frederick, who was a house painter and George Herbert, who was a dairyman, working "at home." It may well be that the sale of Willington by the Duke of Bedford as well as advancing years had prompted the move to Wootton.

As for Hill Farm itself, it was listed in one of the sale catalogues prepared for the Keeble brothers, who had bought Willington and Cople from the Duke of Bedford in 1902 as a speculative venture. Details were as follows:

**A COMPACT FARM**  
known as  
**"WILLINGTON HILL FARM"**

Bounded on the East by property of R. Mercer, esq., now in the occupation of Mr, Thomas Greig, comprising a **Brick and slated HOUSE**, containing Dining, Drawing and Breakfast rooms, 6 Bedrooms, Kitchen, 2 Cellars, Pantry, Brewhouse, &c.

**The BUILDINGS** are boarded and slated on Brick foundations and include – 2 stall Nag Stable and Coach House, Cart Horse Stable, Loose Box, Barn, Large Cow House with Scotch Feeding Stalls and Piggeries, Cart Shed with Granary over, Root House, 3 Yards with Shelters, Fowl House, Cart Shed, &c.

Together with a Thriving and well kept

**SPORTING WOOD 20 acres in extent**  
KNOWN AS  
**"CONDUIT GROVE"**

Having a capital Growth of YOUNG TIMBER TREES  
AND  
**Eight Arable of Pasture Fields**

The whole containing 139 acres, 0 roods, 8 poles.

The farm was eventually sold to Colonel Frank Shuttleworth, a major beneficiary of the sale of Willington by the Keeble brothers.

As with some of the other farms in Willington, the tenancy of Hill Farm had remained in the same family for much of the period of Russell control. Doubtless this gave a sense of continuity and

stability to the village. The end of the family's link with the farm was a sign of the difficulties facing farming at the end of the nineteenth century and a portent for the sale of the village by the Duke of Bedford. The struggle of Thomas Brown to keep up with the rent can be seen in the estate accounts. The measures taken by the Bedford estate to help him and others through the difficult times are also apparent. Thomas Brown's ultimate failure as a tenant to ride out the storm did not come long before the Duke himself decided that land ownership was no longer worthwhile.

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