

## Thomas Twitchell – farmer and Methodist



During the time that Willington formed part of the Bedford estates, a small number of tenant farmers played a leading role in village life. Among them was Thomas Twitchell, who rented Croot's Farm in the middle part of the nineteenth century. The farm, named after a previous tenant, John Croot, had previously been held by his father, also called Thomas Twitchell.

Thomas Twitchell, the younger, was born in 1821. His parents were Thomas and Mercy Twitchell and he had a younger brother and sister, John and Sarah Mercy. Both his parents died at a young age, his mother in 1825 and his father in 1833. His father's administrators took charge of his tenancy until Thomas himself came of age. Thomas subsequently married Elizabeth Ginger Procter in Berkhamstead in 1847 but had no children. He became a wealthy man and remained at Croot's Farm until his death from apoplexy at the age of 49 in 1870. By then, he had made his mark as a successful farmer and promoter of the Methodist cause.

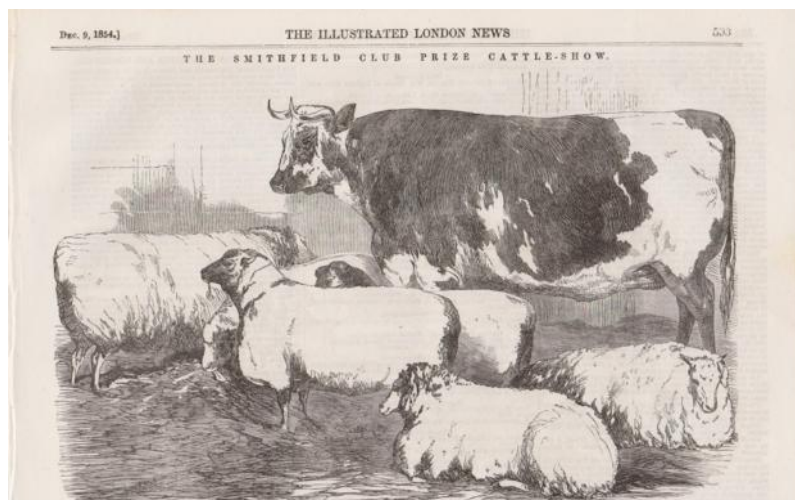
The Russell accounts show that Thomas Twitchell took on a sixteen year lease for Croot's Farm in 1843. He also took over his father's lease for Moxhill Farm, Cople in the same year. The 1851 census reveals Thomas Twitchell was then farming 450 acres and employing 24 labourers. When these leases came up for renewal in 1859, Thomas signed a new sixteen year lease for Croot's Farm and also took over White Hart Farm, Willington. Moxhill Farm now passed to George Barnard of Cople. The 1861 census indicates Thomas Twitchell was then farming 308 acres and employing 15 men and 7 boys.

The period of Thomas Twitchell's tenancy coincided with the era of 'High Farming'. This was a movement that gathered momentum following the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 and saw the extension of drainage, the use of artificial fertilisers, the improvement of farm implements and tools and a general acceptance of new ideas and inventions. The then Duke of Bedford, Francis was a great exponent of 'High Farming' and he found a willing supporter in Thomas Twitchell. The Russell accounts show a drive to improve drainage and that many farms were rebuilt and improved. In the case of Croot's Farm, they show that drainage work was carried out there in the 1840s, with Thomas Twitchell paying interest on money expended in 1842 and 1843 on drainage. The Russell records also reveal building work at the farm in 1848, when barns, stables, a feeding house, a shelter house, a cow house and a coach house were built partly through reusing old materials. The total cost of the

rebuilding work was £844/7/5d. A further example of the impact of 'High Farming' at Croot's Farm took place from 1856, when Thomas Twitchell began to pay interest on money spent on new machinery. Croot's Farm appears to have had a mixture of arable and pasture land and had an orchard, but it was for his livestock, especially his sheep, that Thomas Twitchell became best known.

The fact that Thomas was seen as a progressive farmer came across in his obituary in the Bedford Mercury (May 17<sup>th</sup> 1870), which commented that

“The deceased was well known, not only in the agriculture of this and the neighbouring counties, but throughout the Kingdom, having taken an active part in many of the great agricultural enterprises of the day. He was a pupil of the late Mr Samuel Bennett of Bickering's Park<sup>1</sup>, and was for many years a most successful exhibitor of Leicester sheep at the Smithfield Club shows.”



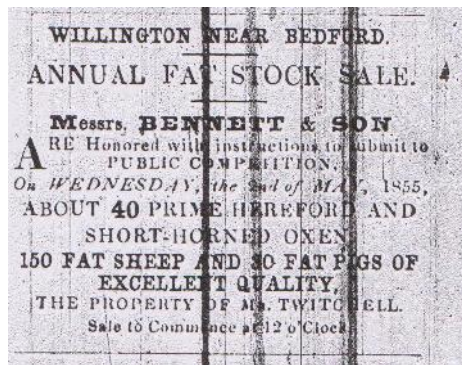
From the *Illustrated London News* – prize stock at the Smithfield Club Show - 1849

Thomas Twitchell's obituary in the Bedfordshire Times on the same date appears to have been syndicated from a national newspaper and provides further details, indicating he was a member of the Council of the Smithfield Club and had often acted as a judge at shows. It also mentions that he had been appointed vice-president of the Bedfordshire Agricultural Society, a year before he died. The obituary stated:

“he acquired (from Samuel Bennett) a taste for well-bred stock, particularly Leicester sheep, of which breed he was for many years the most successful exhibitor at the Smithfield Club shows. Mr Twitchell was regarded by his brother farmers on the Duke of Bedford's estate as one of the very best farmers in that highly cultivated county; in the management of sheep he has for 25 years been looked upon as an authority.”

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<sup>1</sup> Bickering's Park (sometimes named Beckerings Park) is in Ridgmont near Woburn. Samuel Bennett was a local Wesleyan Methodist lay preacher and also a distinguished and successful farmer and exhibitor of sheep. He died in 1853, aged 63.



Advertisement in the *Bedfordshire Times* – 28<sup>th</sup> April 1855

We get an interesting insight into village and farm life through the records of two court cases, Thomas Twitchell was involved in. These were the cases of Thomas Brown in 1844 and George Childs in 1850. Thomas Brown was found guilty of stealing a sheep skin from Thomas Twitchell and sentenced to 7 years transportation. The skin belonged to one of Thomas Twitchell's show sheep and was said to be worth 7/-. Others became suspicious when Thomas Brown tried to sell it for 2/-. Thomas Brown had previous convictions for violently assaulting a young girl in 1839 and for breaking into a neighbour's house and stealing money from a child's money box in 1843. He had lived in Willington but at the time he stole the sheep skin was in the Bedford Union workhouse. In the other case, George Childs, a servant of Thomas Twitchell, was sentenced to six months hard labour for stealing one and a half bushels of wheat worth 6/6d from his master. George Childs had evidently taken one sack containing five bushels of wheat that he had bought but, on hearing that his master was out, had helped himself to a second sack containing a further one and a half bushels.

As with his mentor, Samuel Bennett, Thomas Twitchell combined success as a farmer with a strong commitment to the Methodist cause and he is perhaps best remembered for his support of Methodism both in Willington and across the county. His obituary in the *Bedford Mercury* stated:

“In the Wesleyan religious world he was a star of considerable magnitude, and throughout the Bedford and Amphill Circuit his loss will be much felt, as he assiduously discharged the duties of circuit steward and local preacher. He was a liberal contributor to all the institutions peculiar to Methodism, and having no family, his hand was always ready to give of his abundant substance.”

Thomas Twitchell became a lay preacher at the age of 20 in 1841. This was typical of a system where “a promising young man would be sent out with local recognised preachers, and after being heard at least four times might be promoted to this office” (Godber, *History of Bedfordshire*, p 502.)

Speaking at a meeting in 1864 to secure the building of St Mary's Methodist chapel in Bedford, he himself indicated his commitment to the Methodist cause, speaking of:

“the advantages that Wesleyan Methodism had conferred upon himself, and of its blessings to his native village, where he had hitherto been unable to obtain a site for a Chapel. He was, however, thankful to see the cause progressing in Bedford, and it was his determination to do all in his power to help forward the present movement.” (*Bedfordshire Times*: 26th January 1864)



St Mary's, Cauldwell Street, Bedford

He made a subscription of £200 towards building costs and subsequently became a trustee of St Mary's chapel itself. This serves as just one example of his support. He became a trustee of St Paul's Wesleyan Chapel in Bedford and a trustee of the Ampthill Methodist Circuit. A number of contemporary newspaper reports bear testimony to his support. We know that Thomas Twitchell was a staunch supporter of the Wesleyan Missionary Society and hosted an annual meeting on his farm for the society, attracting more than fifty vehicles on the occasion of the society's jubilee and raising a good deal of money (*Bedford Mercury*: 14<sup>th</sup> May 1870.) Newspaper reports on the individual meetings indicate that he and his wife were generous hosts and that people were able to walk round his gardens and fields after attending a meeting, taking part in a service and enjoying the refreshments paid for by the Twitchells.

The meetings for the Wesleyan Missionary Society in Willington took place in a barn and under canvas on Thomas Twitchell's farm. Regular services also took place in Thomas Twitchell's barn and in the return he made for the Ecclesiastical Census of 1851, he indicated that forty people had attended the service on census day, which was the norm, and that there was space for fifty. Interestingly, another tenant farmer, William Brimley of Road Farm, describing himself as "Lay Preacher", made a return for the Independents in Willington, indicating a congregation of 60, the same number as attended the Church. In effect, two of the leading tenant farmers in the village were taking a lead in the moral and spiritual welfare of its inhabitants.

Towards the end of Thomas Twitchell's life, he was able to arrange for a wooden chapel to be built on his farm. On 24<sup>th</sup> June 1868, he informed the quarterly meeting of Methodist preachers that: "the Duke of Bedford would not sell a piece of ground for a Chapel at Willington, but would allow a wood or an iron Chapel to be erected, which had been commenced." The *Bedford Mercury* of 8<sup>th</sup> September 1868 duly reported that

"on Thursday a neat wooden chapel with stained windows, situate upon the property of Mr T Twitchell was opened for Divine worship... It is a source of congratulation that Mr Twitchell had been enabled to build a chapel here, although he was unable to obtain land for a freehold. The building was erected by Mr C Day of Bedford at a cost of £400."

The "Around the County" feature on Willington in the *Bedfordshire Times* of 4<sup>th</sup> August 1899 tells how, after his death, the new tenant of Croot's Farm was a member of the Church of England. The Duke of Bedford was, therefore, approached with a view to enlisting his support to make other arrangements for Methodist worship. As a result, "the wooden building was placed upon rollers and removed to its present site. It was there cased with its early English covering of grey brick and stone,



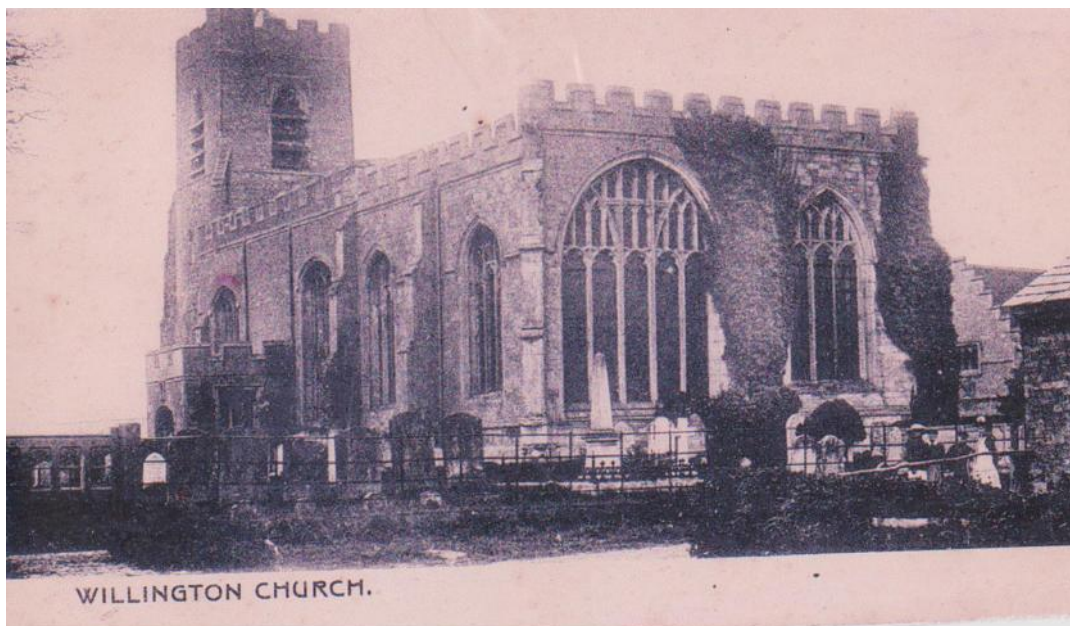
with tiled roof.” To enable this to happen, the Bedford estate report for 1876 indicates the Duke of Bedford had granted a lease of 21 years for 20 poles of land to the trustees of the chapel at a yearly rent of 4/-. The Duke of Bedford also agreed to meet the costs of the building work. The building, thus moved to its present location, then included a chapel and schoolroom as well as a “coach house and stable for the use of the preachers who come with horse and trap from a distance.”

Thomas Twitchell was, therefore, a successful and well known farmer and a public spirited man of substance. In terms of his politics, the Bedford Mercury obituary stated that

“he possessed no powers to comprehend high political principles ... and that as a politician his mind was excessively narrow. In the dark days of protection he took his stand amongst the blind leaders of the blind and consequently when Free Trade became the national sentiment, he was left in the rear; and this position he ever maintained. Apart from politics, however, he was an estimable man.”

No doubt these comments reflect upon the writer of the obituary as much as upon Thomas Twitchell and serve as a reminder of the passions generated by the Free Trade debates of the time. Indeed, the Bedfordshire Times obituary makes no mention of these debates and sees him as “a public spirited, wealthy, and liberal man ... held in high respect, [whose] premature death will be universally regretted.” That said, the word “liberal” here probably refers to his generosity rather than to his political beliefs. That he took an interest in politics is seen in the Bedfordshire Times of 7<sup>th</sup> March 1868, which reports that he took the chair at a public meeting in Leighton Buzzard Corn Exchange called to express opposition to the malt tax.

Thomas Twitchell died a wealthy man. Probate records show his estate was worth just short of £9000. His passing was honoured in the village by a well-attended funeral. Fittingly, the ceremony started with a service in the chapel on his farm before a procession to the Church for the burial itself. He is commemorated with a fine obelisk near the east end of the parish church.



Old photo of Willington Church showing Thomas Twitchell’s memorial – an obelisk in rails (now gone) - with the inscription (now eroded) “THOMAS TWICHELL died 6 May, 1870, aged 49”.

Source: *Weight Matthews - 1914*

Rob Bollington, November 2012