

- 1. Introduction -

A Domesday Village

The village of Wyburnbury stands on the site of one of the earliest settlements in Cheshire. It is said to be named after Wibba, a Mercian ruler in 593-606 AD. Alternatively the name may be derived from 'Wigbeorn' (early Anglo-Saxon). In a dictionary of names 'Wyburn' is given as an Old English ancestral name meaning 'war hero'. Topographically 'bur' refers to a hill or raised ground. A name with 'bury' often denotes a site on a ridge of land. From the ninth century 'burh' means residence, normally fortified.

This was the West Saxon province of Mercia. Wyburnbury is mentioned in the Domesday book of 1086 so we know there was a settlement here at the time of the Norman invasion in 1066. It records a priest, two villeins and two borders. The entry refers to William, the sub-tenant, who was probably William Malbedeng, the Norman baron of Nantwich. Translated from the Latin the entry states:

The same Bishop held in King Edward's time and now holds Wimeberie. William now holds it of him.

A Large Parish

At some time the church was dedicated to St. Chad who was Bishop of Mercians in 669 AD and fixed his See at Lichfield. Fragments of a 12th century arch stone of Norman design, with typical zig-zag motif, were unearthed during excavations near the tower in 1893. The advowson of the church had passed at some time to William Praer of Barthomley who gave the manors and churches of both Wyburnbury and Barthomley to the Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield in 1326. By this time the parish of Wyburnbury was very extensive. John Delves in his will of 1420 bequeathed 20/- to the fabric of Wyburnbury church together with a silver chalice and a vestment of tunics worth £10. A chapel-of-ease at Coppenhall was endowed in 1373 by Robert Stretton Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield (Ormerod); the chapel would be to accommodate those living a distance from the parish church. From the 17th until the early 19th century the parish included eighteen townships, extending to the borders of Nantwich and Audlem. It included Doddington and Weston and most of what is now Crewe. Even today it ranks as one of the largest parishes in England.

The Oldest Building

The tower is the oldest building in the village. It was part of a church built in the late 15th century, on the site of an



Wyburnbury Church 1892 - 1977

earlier one. Many members of the wealthy Delves family of nearby Doddington were buried at Wyburnbury; in the 14th century the Delves had purchased Doddington, which had no church. There are no records relating to the tower's construction but permission would have been needed from the king. The land was owned by the church. The tower was built during the last phase of English medieval architecture in Cheshire, when at least 40 steeples were built between 1470 to 1530.

The Leaning Tower

There have been many churches on this elevated site but only the tower remains. Its tendency to lean has earned it the title the 'Leaning Tower of South Cheshire' or in earlier days the 'Hanging Steeple of Wimberie'. However, it has survived for over five hundred years. During this time, due to unstable ground beneath it, five churches have become unsafe and have been rebuilt. The last church was closed after the services for Christmas 1972 and was demolished in 1977. The tower itself was also declared dangerous and unsafe, due to its increasing lean, and was closed to the public.

The Tower Preservation Trust Founded

In 1982 the church authorities proposed to remove the six bells in the belfry prior to the demolition of the tower. The news was greeted with much dismay by local people. In response, a small team of volunteers got together and

approached the Bishop of Chester who agreed to allow them time to get together a counter proposal. In 1983 the Wyburnbury Tower Preservation Trust was formed and the group launched a massive campaign to save the tower.

The Tower Straightened

The main task facing the trust was to straighten the tower which by 1983 was leaning badly to the north east nearly 4ft from the vertical. After six years of intensive fundraising and surveys, a remarkable feat of engineering took place. The foundations were reinforced with concrete rafts. Eighty five hydraulic jacks were put in place and used to lift and straighten the tower, estimated at weighing two thousand tonnes. At the request of the Trust the tower was left with a 'lean' approx. 18" (45cm) off plumb. The 'big lift' took place on 16th March 1989 with computers monitoring and guiding the operation. Engineers crawled about beneath the tower, between the jacks, making final adjustments. At 11.22 am a bell was rung to mark the successful lifting of the tower. The event was watched by many people and made headline news in the local and national press.

A Registered Charity

Wyburnbury Tower now belongs to the people of Wyburnbury. It is a grade A listed building, now safe for public use, and its future seems secure. But as a registered charity, the Trust will continue to need funds to maintain this historic building.