



CONSERVATION AREA HISTORIES:

# WOODHOUSES

DISTRICT OF SOUTH DERBYSHIRE



*This brick-built terrace of cottages at Woodhouses was built around 1780. The dam of the Staunton Harold Reservoir (built 1959-64) can be seen in the background. Photographed in 1986. Courtesy of Philip Heath.*

Woodhouses is a small hamlet in the parish of Melbourne. The core of the conservation area contains just eight old houses, two recent barn conversions and a new, three storey house built in 2004 on the site of an old thrashing barn, amounting to eleven dwellings in all. In addition, the conservation area also includes six fields and Pool Farm (19), which stands detached to the north-east of the hamlet.

Woodhouses stands on the edge of the former Melbourne Common, formerly a wooded pastureland of some 740 acres at the southern end of the parish. Before the trees were felled around 1600, the Common was known as “Melbourne Wood”. It adjoined other wooded common pastures in neighbouring places including Stanton, Calke, Derby Hills and Staunton Harold, making Melbourne Common just one part of an extensive, continuous tract of uncultivated ground.

By the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, three areas of clustered settlement had formed on the fringes of Melbourne Wood, created on small plots unofficially encroached from the common pasture. One of them was on part of the Common called Barnstimber adjoining Melbourne village; the second was at Calke Mill at the southern end of the parish; the third was Woodhouses. Of the three, only Woodhouses has preserved a distinct identity of its own. Barnstimber, ranged along the present Ashby Road and Penn Lane, has been subsumed into Melbourne. The hamlet of Calke Mill was destroyed by Sir Harry Harpur (d1789) and Sir Henry Crewe (d1819), the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Baronets of Calke, in order to improve Calke Park. The mill itself, with the mill house and one remaining cottage nearby, was demolished when the Staunton Harold Reservoir was constructed between 1959 and 1964.

“The Woodhouses”, as they were often called, were houses built in Melbourne Wood as the name suggests, and the name was obviously coined while the trees still stood. This is borne out by the documentary evidence, which shows that the oldest houses were built in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A manorial inquiry of 1597 shows that the three oldest house sites at Woodhouses had been settled between 1557 and 1589. In 1597, they were occupied by George Hood, William Sharratt and Henry Knight.

All three of these houses began life as unauthorised encroachments on the woodland pasture, which was supposed to remain unimpeded for communal use by the villagers as pasturage for their animals and as a source for timber, stone, gorse etc. for their own household use. Often, however, encroachments were tolerated by the Lord of the Manor and accepted by the villagers. In 1584 the three encroachments at Woodhouses were formally adopted as legitimate properties in the Manor of Melbourne by being officially converted into “copyhold” property. “Copyhold” property, an archaic form of tenure which was finally abolished in 1922, could be bought and sold, subject to a small annual rent to the Lord of the Manor plus a “fine” payable to the Lord of the Manor each time the property changed hands. The owners of copyhold property proved their ownership by possessing copies of entries in the manorial court rolls, documenting that they had taken possession of a specific piece of copyhold property. These copies are the origin of the term “copyhold”.

The homestead of the Knight family, enclosed out of the wood before 1584, is marked today by a terrace of three cottages (now two) built around 1780 by Richard Webster of Calke **(11)**. The terrace predates the road by a few years, explaining the awkward non-parallel alignment. The northwestern cottage, adjoining the lorry yard, was once the home of Samuel Matthews, gamekeeper, and his wife Sarah, who raised their children there. In 1859, all five children died tragically of fever within the space of a few days. The youngest was eight months old and the eldest nine years old. The house was improved later that year by two extra rooms, one on each floor, added at the end. A stable belonging to Woodhouse Farm on the other side of the road had previously stood there, and was thought partly responsible for creating the environment that had led to the infection. A new stone-built replacement stable was built in the farm yard **(13)**, which still survives amid the later buildings.



*Woodhouse Farm, c1888, showing the new buildings of 1884 on the right, incorporating the older, stone-built stable. Courtesy of Philip Heath.*

Woodhouse Farm **(13)** marks the site of William Sharratt's homestead. His descendants the Smiths and the Holdsworths owned it afterwards. In 1789 the Melbourne Estate acquired the property, then divided into three cottages, and turned it into the nucleus of a small new farm. The farm was rented to the Gregorys, who stayed there until 1882. Their tenancy seems to have been uneventful until the end, when



*The new house at Woodhouse Farm, with its odd chimney, built in 1884. This photograph of c1900 illustrates the once-common practice of training fruit trees up the walls of houses. Courtesy of Philip Heath.*

Charles Gregory fell into unspecified "evil ways" and deserted the farm. He had sold off what he could, and neglected to cultivate it after Harvest 1881. In 1882, his stock and household contents were sold at auction under a distraint for rent and his tenancy was terminated. We do not know what became of him or his family. A happy ending seems doubtful!

After Gregory's departure, the house and outbuildings were rebuilt in 1884 for the new tenant Thomas Jackson, market gardener, who lived there with his wife and their eleven children. The new farmhouse was modest but imposing, sited a little distance to the south-west of the old house, of which only a little lean-to survives. The stone-built stable and loft of 1859, already mentioned, was incorporated in the new buildings. The bricks for the rebuilding, supplied by the Whitwick Colliery Company, contrast markedly with the earlier bricks produced at Woodhouses. The house may have been designed by Messrs. Evans and Jolley of Nottingham, architects who were retained by the Melbourne Estate at the time. It is similar in style to other known works by them on the Estate. It bears a datestone on the gable fronting the road, with the date 1884 and the initial "C" under a coronet, for Earl Cowper, owner of the Estate.

The third original house at Woodhouses, that of George Hood, was almost certainly Woodhouse Farm Cottage **(12)**, which had no connection with Woodhouse Farm until the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is now separate again. It is probably the house that was occupied by John Bottfyshe in 1584, as part of the estate of the Bewleys of "Bewley Hall", where the Dower House in Melbourne now stands. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Woodhouse Farm Cottage had become part of the freehold estate of the Earl of Huntingdon as Lord of the Manor, which may be explained by a previous Earl's acquisition of the Bewley estate, including Bewley Hall. Oddly, the half-acre croft to the east of the house was an enfranchised copyhold of the Hollingworth family, who rented the house from the Earl of Huntingdon. It is not clear how the house and croft came to have separate statuses.

By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Woodhouse Farm Cottage was divided into two dwellings. It was substantially rebuilt, piecemeal, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and particularly in 1891, when the thatched roof was stripped and replaced with tiles and the house was turned back into one dwelling.

After the Manor of Melbourne was sold to the Hastings family of Donington Park in 1604 or '05, further encroachments at Woodhouses

and elsewhere were neither prohibited nor converted into new “copyholds”. Instead, the Lord of the Manor treated new encroachments as his own freehold and extracted small rents from the occupants.

Although the early histories of some of the houses are quite well documented, the reasons why a settlement was established at Woodhouses in the first place are more difficult to discover. The most likely reason is that the first house or houses were built to farm a large enclosure of pastureland known as “Wood Close” (approximately **18, 18, 18, 18, 18**), which extended eastwards up the hill from Woodhouses. Wood Close is recorded in title deeds as far back as 1535 and was probably an “assart”, i.e. an enclosure formed by woodland clearance. As such, it would never have been part of Melbourne’s open field system and could therefore be farmed independently.

By 1735, when a map was made of the Earl of Huntingdon’s estate at Melbourne, more properties had appeared at Woodhouses. One of them was the house known in recent decades as Tutholme (**14**), which contains fragments of a reasonably substantial timber frame and may date from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. It also has an 18<sup>th</sup> century kitchen wing built over a small, barrel-vaulted cellar. Through most of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries this was the home of the Warren family, Melbourne’s foremost brickmakers, who had a brick kiln on Melbourne Common



*An early stereoscopic slide of “Tutholme”, prior to alterations made around 1880. The people are probably Henry Warren (1796-1888) and his wife Elizabeth. Courtesy of Margaret Jackson.*

as early as 1707. Their early source of clay seems to have been at the west end of Melbourne Pool, where flooded clay workings called Brick Kiln Pits (**4**) still survive within a 19<sup>th</sup> century plantation. Besides making bricks, the Warrens were also maltsters and farmers. The family were still making bricks in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, but by this time their brickyard was alongside the road across Melbourne Common from Melbourne to Ticknall.

Another of the additions at Woodhouses shown on the 1735 plan was the smaller house north east of Tutholme, which is Woodhouses’ only listed building. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, this house (**15**) was rented with Tutholme as part of the same holding. It has some good quality stonework on the front and contained a fragment of decayed timber framing (part of a tie beam, attached to a wallpost and windbrace) before its repair and extension in the early 1990s. Again, it is probably 17<sup>th</sup> century in origin, of two bays with a central offset chimneystack. The Warrens’ 18<sup>th</sup> century malthouse was formerly attached to the east end of it, hence the cottage’s recently given name “The Malthouse”. Most of the malthouse was pulled down in the 1950s, but vestigial traces remained until recently.

The third and last new building shown on the 1735 map is a small building which appears to survive in part in a row of stone-built, pantiled, single storey pigsties (**16**). They were formerly used as workshops for making



*The small building in the background is a remnant of the scythe stone workshops. The building in the foreground is a rebuilding of 1887. Photographed in 1991 and since converted to a dwelling. SDDC collection.*

“scythe stones” and were possibly built for that purpose. The adjacent building, with a plain tiled roof (**17**), is a rebuilding of 1887, but looks far older than its years. Just as the Warrens’ house was sited to exploit the reserves of brick clay on Melbourne Common, scythe stone making and building stone production at Woodhouses developed to exploit the Common’s valuable supplies of gritstone.

The gritstone quarries, of which there were a ring all around Woodhouses (e.g. **1, 2, 3, 7, 22**) were worked by the Chambers family from 1761 or earlier until 1848, and were afterwards worked by their former employees the Seal family. The Seals lived in the semi-detached cottages (formerly one house) at the south-east end of the hamlet (**20**), apparently built sometime between the plan made in 1735 and the parish plan of 1787 attached to the Melbourne Enclosure Award. A “stone yard” developed at the back of the cottages, with a further cottage (long demolished) and further workshops. The two surviving outbuildings (**16** and **17**) have now been joined together by a new piece of building and converted to a dwelling known as “Plumtree Cottage”.

The quality of the stonemasonry produced at Woodhouses varied according to the pocket of the customer and the nature of the building concerned, ranging from rough, random rubble, through roughly squared blocks, to fine, smoothly-dressed ashlar work. But the Chambers were perhaps better known for the scythe stone branch of their business. Unfinished or broken examples of these long, thin stones for sharpening scythes can still be picked up at Woodhouses today. The Chambers had a warehouse of stone and thatch by the navigable River Trent and a stone sawing mill on the river at Shardlow, suggesting that their business was not confined to the immediate locality.

Another hint that the Chambers’ business was widespread is found in the will of Mary Chambers dated 10<sup>th</sup> November 1810:

**“I do hereby humbly and earnestly request that the Most Noble William Duke of Devonshire, the Right honourable the Earl of Chesterfield the Right honourable Lord Viscount Melbourne, Sir Henry Crewe Baronet, Sir Hugh Bateman Baronet and Doctor Johnson will upon my death be pleased**

**to admit my said Son William Chambers Tenant of all and singular the Messuages or Tenements Farms Lands Stone quarries and all other the Premises which I now hold or rent of them respectively”.**

Mary Chambers herself did not live at Woodhouses. She lived in the handsome house at 15, Potter Street in Melbourne built by her late husband around 1789 on Melbourne Estate land. As one would expect of a stone mason, it has a handsome frontage of well-squared stone blocks. The house is now known as “Exchange House”, recalling its later use as Melbourne’s telephone exchange.

So, as the foregoing text shows, Woodhouses enjoyed a significant role in the economy of Melbourne in the Georgian era. It proved to be a convenient centre from which the deposits of clay and gritstone on Melbourne Common could be worked, providing the bricks and stonemasonry for many of the buildings still to be seen in Melbourne today.

The Warren and Chambers families had both been tenants of the successive Earls of Huntingdon of Donington Hall, who had purchased the Manor of Melbourne in the early 17th century and owned the rights to extract clay and stone from the common. But in 1789, during the “Enclosure” of Melbourne by Act of Parliament, all the Woodhouses properties were transferred to the estate of the Lamb family at Melbourne Hall. Part of the hamlet was acquired through exchange between the Donington and Melbourne estates, and the remainder by negotiation with the other owners.

Through-roads and footpaths often guide or dictate the pattern of buildings in a settlement, but that is not the case at Woodhouses, where the road post-dates the majority of the buildings. As a result, the appearance of the buildings as viewed from the road frontage is of secondary importance to the appearance of the hamlet as a whole when viewed from the surrounding hills and fields, which reveals its “layered” appearance on a series of shallow terraces cut into the hillside.



*One of the cottages that belonged to the scythe stone workshops. Photographed in 1991. SDDC collection.*

Until 1789, the road to Woodhouses was an insignificant track leaving the old Melbourne to Ashby road **(23)** at Melbourne Common Farm **(24)**, and ending at the brook. It was superseded in 1789 by the present Melbourne to Ashby road **(21)**, laid out to replace the earlier route which passed in front of Melbourne Hall. The old route went from the county boundary at Melbourne Coppice direct to Melbourne Pool, via what is now Melbourne Common Farm. It was direct and sensible, with no hills to worry the horses.

But the old route was disliked by Lord Melbourne at the Hall, because all the through traffic passed through his park and in front of his windows. So, during the Parliamentary Enclosure of Melbourne (1787-91), the route was changed. The new route used existing lanes at the west end of the

village, now Derby Road and High Street, and a new length of road was laid out past Lamberts Quarry and on through Woodhouses.

The new road was far less convenient than the old one. A new bridge **(9)** had to be built across the brook at Woodhouses, and the steep Woodhouses Hill **(21)** was a strain for horse-drawn vehicles. A few decades later, during the Crimean War, the Melbourne factories were closed and a fund of £300 was raised to provide employment for the mechanics thrown out of work. It was decided that they should be employed in altering Woodhouses Hill to make the gradient more gentle, and about thirty of them were employed in the task under the direction of John Earl in 1854-55. A cutting was made through the top of the hill, and an embankment or causeway was made across the valley bottom **(8)**, making the hill much easier to negotiate. The bridge over the brook was widened at the same time.

John Earl was resident in the parish and sold the Melbourne Arms to the Melbourne Estate in 1864. He was a railway sub-contractor who had made his money building railways in France, so he would have had no difficulty overseeing the Woodhouses project. The cyclists among us can still feel gratitude for this work today!

One of the Melbourne estate's most ambitious projects was the remodelling of Melbourne Pool between 1841 and 1846. This work included the straightening of the brook between Woodhouses bridge and the pool and the formation of three elaborate irrigated meadows **(5, 5, 5)**, drained by a new culvert under Melbourne Pool, constructed in 1842-4 (entrance at **6**). The irrigation system has long been abandoned, but vestiges remain including the inlets to the water carriers from the brook, showing as curved brick walls **(10)** alongside the road bridge.

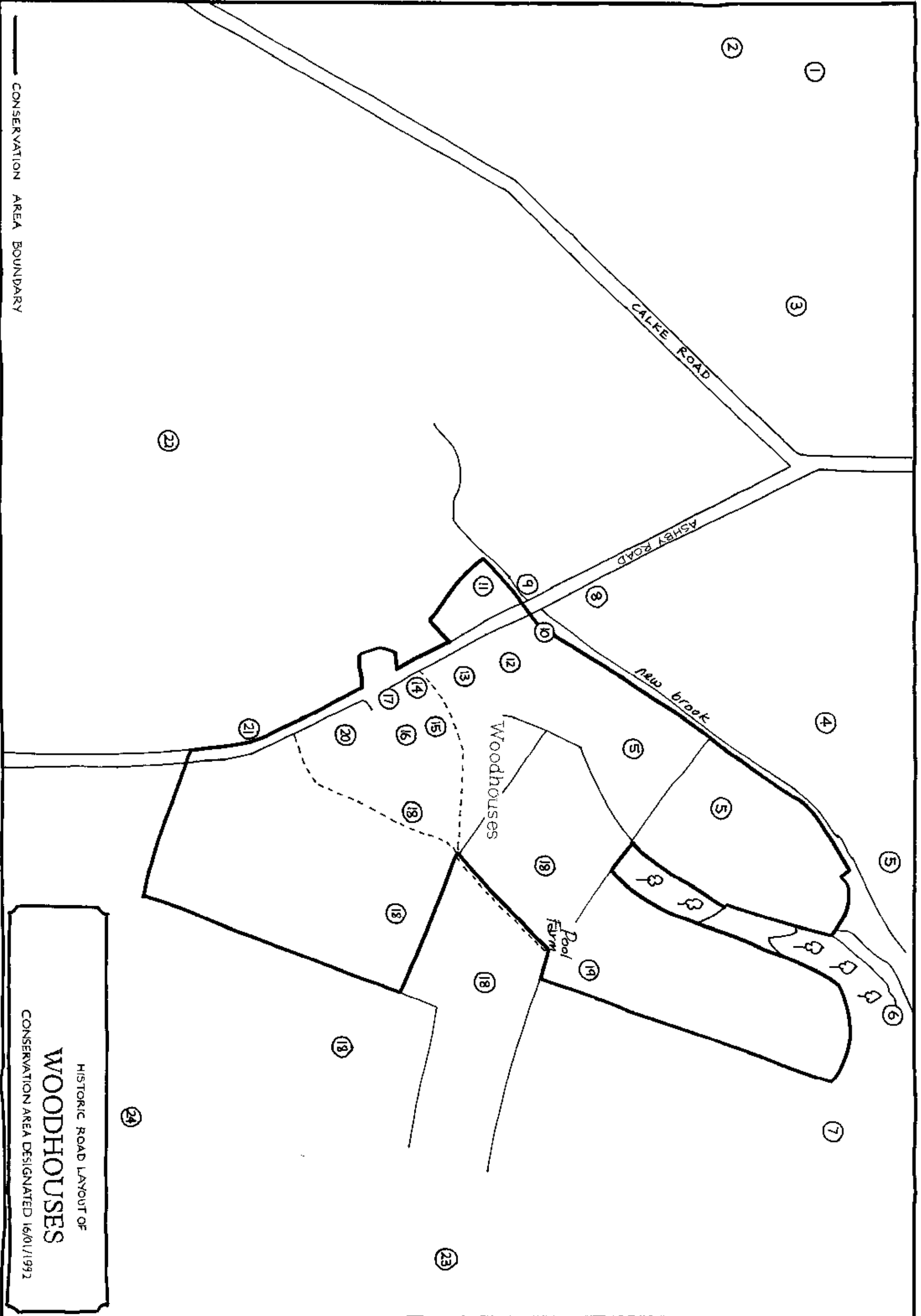
During the second half of the 19th century the brick and stone industries of Woodhouses waned, perhaps due in part to the coming of the railway to Melbourne in 1868. However, it was during this period that the buildings became much as we see them today. During the 1870s, '80s and '90s the interiors were modernised, thatched roofs were replaced with tile, external joinery was renewed and chimneystacks were rebuilt to a standard, heavily-corbelled pattern. The work is recorded in detail in Earl Cowper's Melbourne Estate Accounts.

Pool Farm **(19)**, isolated from the main cluster of dwellings, was originally a smallholding known as the Sharratt, and buildings existed on the site in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this farm was let with Melbourne Pool and the mill. The old, small farmhouse has been abandoned ever since a new bungalow was built adjacent to it in the 1920s.

### **Philip Heath.**

Designed and published by South Derbyshire District Council. March 2005. Series editor: Philip Heath. The views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) concerned and do not necessarily reflect the views of the District Council.

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CONSERVATION AREA BOUNDARY

HISTORIC ROAD LAYOUT OF  
**WOODHOUSES**  
 CONSERVATION AREA DESIGNATED 16/01/1992