

History Of Benwick

The History of Benwick is one of my main interests and I have spent a great deal of time researching our village from every resource I can get my hands on. Benwick has changed dramatically over the past hundred years, seeing many buildings come and go; roads change name, and of course a healthy supply of new blood to the village.

Benwick was formally a hamlet of Doddington, which was the main village of the area, but became it's own Parish in 1868. Over the past century Benwick has grown quite substantially, more roads and houses have been built, and more are still to be built, but interestingly the number of people in residence has stayed similar.

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General Benwick History

The exact date that Benwick was established is unknown, while some sources say that it was first recorded in 1221, however I believe this to be untrue. It is mentioned that Benwick was one of the only Fen villages to be mentioned in the Domesday Book. The Domesday book was commissioned in December 1085 by William I, better known as William the Conqueror who defeated king Harold II at Hastings in 1066, it was completed in 1086, William wanted to know everything from who owned what, how much it was worth and what was owed to him, essentially he wanted to know his royal rights and revenues, so he could make the most of them.

Another fact that shows Benwick was around before 1221 relates to the times of King Stephen the last Norman King (*reigned 1135-1154*), during his reign, he tried to capture the Isle of Ely, which was under the command of Bishop Nigellus of Ely. He managed to overthrow Nigellus who fled the area, King Stephen then sent the early of Essex, Geoffery de Mandellieve to seize the remainder of the Bishop's men who stilled carried arms. In this time Bishop Nigellus returned to the Isle, and recaptured Aldreth Castle. Geoffery soon had a change of heart and forsook the King; the islanders then feared action from the King and committed the castles of Aldreth and Ely into the hands of de Mandellieve, he then built garrisons in Benwick and Fordham in 1143.

There have been many spellings of Benwick, from "Benick", "Beymwich", "Benewich", "Benewik", "Benewyk", "Beynwyk", "Beynewyk" and "Bennick". I am currently unsure when "Benwick" became the official name for our village.

A government act of 1847 meant that Doddington would be split into smaller parishes, of which Benwick was to be one, this would happen upon the death of the current Rector, Algerton Peyton. He died in 1868.

At the coronation of King George V, an oak was planted at the top of the High Street; however this was burnt down during the VD celebrations. In the 80's a replacement tree was planted in dedication to Charles Burbridge; who instead of flowers requested money to plant trees in Benwick. The other two trees are in The Pound and behind the Bus Shelter. Benwick did not receive electricity until May 1939 and piped water came in 1953. Before water was piped in, people used to buy it for a penny a bucket.

The following post-war memories are by Jade Wells from Bretton on behalf of her Granddad

"After the war a large wooden hut was built next to chapel farm and a village army cadet force was set up run by Wilf Sutton (Dusty) most lads in the village belonged part army training followed by games table tennis etc. finishing with refreshments. Later on a mobile film show used the hut once a week showing a short film, news, halftime and then a longer film, they sold small tubs of ice cream with a little wooden spoon in the interval, its hard to believe what a treat that was after no such things through the war years."

"Another great annual event was the village sports day this was organised by ex home guard men who did all the work on the day and also provided a free meal halfway through the day for all the village children. I don't know how the money was raised but in the races first; second and third were all cash prizes so we could compete to get money for the three day village feast (fair) always held about 17th; 18th and 19th July, this was a big event with most villagers going and lots of people from outline districts coming it was always crowded, it used to go from the old bridge halfway down the street also filling the White hart yard which is now a housing estate, the village pubs all seven of them used to be bursting at their seams during those three nights. There were lots of events going on in the village like whist drives; jumble sales; auctions to mention a few. "

Religion

Religion in Benwick has always been purely Christianity. Originally there was an chapel of St. James which was on the site which is now Chapel Farm, the earliest reference of this I can find is 1518. It is also noted that Benwick had a Chapel on a map of the Fens from 1604 surveyed by William Hayward. This map is courtesy of Norris Museum St. Ives. I do not know when this chapel went, but have read of reference to it in 1830's.

An unconsecrated Chapel was built in 1637/8, it was on this site that the only ever Church of Benwick was built. St. Mary's Church was completed in 1854, sharing the same dedication as that of Doddington Church. It cost £2500 which was raised under "Giberts Act". The first rector of Benwick was Revd W A Woods 1868-1915, since 1920 it was with the Bishop of Ely. The church served the people of Benwick until it was demolished in 1985 due to subsidence.

Benwick also had two Chapels both built in the 19th Century, the first was a Strict Baptist Chapel which was built in 1818, little information on this Chapel exists, it was demolished in May 1963. The Baptist Chapel Garden were sold in 1954-56, as the name suggests Chapel Gardens was built on the Chapel's Garden.

The Second Chapel is now the only religious building still in existence in Benwick, the Methodist Chapel was built in 1833 and was used until 2006 when it became unsafe to use

Benwick County Primary School

There was no schooling in Benwick until Benwick School was built. In 1871 a school board was created, and Her Majesty's Inspector said a school for 90 boys and girls and 60 infants would do for Benwick, the board however claimed that 200 places were needed, the final school accommodated 216 pupils, 154 mixed and 62 infants and was opened on September 29th 1873. It cost £1,590 this sum included a Teacher's House. The first master of the school was David Garrod. There were 127 pupils in attendance ranging from aged below three to 12/13.

In the Victorian times, attendance at the school depended greatly on the land, the children were often needed to work, especially during the harvest times, and this often meant that the school was closed, and even when it was re-opened there was low attendance because the children were gleaning (*collecting left over crops after harvest*). The school was also closed for periods of time owing to outbreaks of various infections, Measles, Whooping Cough and Mumps being three of the most common. The school was also closed when few people turned up or when there were village activities such as the Benwick Feast, or Plough Monday, a day when local Ploughmen dragged their ploughs through the village threatening to plough up the land in front of peoples houses who didn't give them money. The attendance could range from 176 one month to just 40 the next. In 1939 the school was changed into a junior school for 128 pupils.

The school has changed a great deal over time, the layout has changed, and much of the original school has been covered up, such as the fire places and the ceiling beams. The school has also lost its bell, and the windows have been lowered.

Pubs, Shops and Amenities in Benwick

Benwick once hosted a large amount of Pubs and shops and other amenities. Firstly there were 8 pubs, mostly located along the High Street. First from the top end (near the river) was The Boot and Slipper It was in this pub that the Doctor held his surgery twice a week, and behind the pub was a bowls green, where a group of men once played a 24 hour Bowls Marathon for the Guinness World Records. The Bell Inn followed just a few metres away.

Next up was the White Hart and then the George the next pub was the Five Alls, the only surviving pub to this day. The next pub; just passed the Lilyholt Road junction was The Pack Horse and next to the school was The Nags Head. The seven main pubs of Benwick even had their own Darts league - no need to travel out the village! Outside the village was The Plough Inn, down Floods Ferry.

In terms of Shops; Benwick lost its last one in August 2007; it was the last surviving shop from a variety. The original post office was next to the George there were other shops in the village, Broughton's Newsagents was located down Cambs Row, there was also a wool shop and a small sweet shop. A bakery was ran by Tom Smith, as you can see in the picture. Another Grocers ran by another Smith, and There was also a small petrol station; the pumps of which still remain in the village near the War Memorial. What is more there was also a Butchers, ran by the Clapham's.

Next door to the original Post Office was a Barclays Bank which opened one day a week. The bank, though closed for many years, was demolished only a few years ago in around 2000-2001. Stevenson's Garage was located down Doddington Road, near the High Street end, and Richards had a Lorry Yard, down the High Street. Boons Blacksmith was located behind the Bell pub, and was closed when they moved to their current location down Lilyholt Road.

The Village Hall

Benwick has had 3 different Village Halls in the past 100 years. The first was built in 1920 and was demolished in 1938, it was located at the top of Whittlesey Road, on Doddington Road. It is this hall which is pictured in the picture to the left; which was supplied by Brian Shaw. The second village hall was located behind the Pack Horse Pub, down the High Street. It was built in 1957 and demolished in 1986.

The current Village Hall was built in 1987 and officially opened by Michael Bond on December 3rd 1988. It is built on land next to the school; where the Nags Head pub was previously located. The hall is ran by a committee of 18; which has now been filled. The Chairwoman is Pat Tickner