

DIGBETH FARM: the rural pasture revisited

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Most people, hearing the name 'Digbeth Farm' in conversation, are likely to associate the name with the Deritend area of Birmingham. Those from further afield might be aware of a Digbeth in Walsall, or perhaps the one in Coventry, but few are likely to think of Northfield. Yet, on the southernmost border of that parish was once an area of this name, of which all mention has now vanished into the realms of history. It no longer appears on any modern map, neither is it recalled in any street names, although some of these commemorate the names of previous landowners. For much of its history Digbeth Farm consisted of about twenty-four acres of dairy farm, until the farmhouse and lands were purchased by the City of Birmingham. Today it forms part of a housing estate consisting of Willetts Road, Harpers Road, Cressage Close, Centenary Way, Purslow Grove and part of Adstone Grove; all of which are considered to be part of Tutves Green.

The name 'Digbeth' has uncertain origins, but is thought to be an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'dike-path' or a ditch. The farm is thought to have a long history, and appears in parish documents going back approximately to 1750, although there is an indication that the land was known as Baker's Place in the fifteenth century, during the reign of Henry VI.

In 1790 Digbeth was a medium to small farm of little over twenty-three acres. Its boundaries followed the present-day line of Mill Lane from a point near the Kalamazoo works, to the railway bridge at the bottom of Quarry Lane, along Coleys Lane, up to Turves Green, along to the row of shops by The Oak Walk and from there in almost a straight line back to Mill Lane.



A sketch of the farmhouse in 1945 by C L W Pannell

THE EARLY YEARS

The earliest known recorded owner of the lands can be traced back in the rolls of the court of frankpledge for the parish of Northfield, which chronicles the legal dealings of the parish. The earliest landowner registered in

this way was a lady named Agnes Baker, who was granted the land by the lord of the manor in 1424. The grant was much larger than twenty-four acres, and extended a little further out into the lands of Hawkeslow (Hawkesley), and up along the present Bristol Road towards the border with Frankley.

The grant is recorded in the following extract from the transcript of a document dated May 1428:

‘Homage there represents that Agnes Baker who held freely from the lady a messuage and half a virgate of land with appurtenances in Northfield called Baker’s Place by service of 9s 6d rent per annum died after the last court where upon there fell to the lady as heriot a cow ‘valewe reed’, value 4s of which a moiety remains to the parson of the church by name of principal according to the custom of the manor because she has no more animals but the lady shall have the better part for four pence according to the custom And they say that John Baker is the son and next heir of the same Agnes of the age to the said lands and tenements who being present in court comes and claims the said lands and tenements and gives to the lady for relief 9s6d And did fealty and was admitted tenant.’

The same rolls of court indicate that the Baker family were brewers and beer retailers, with the same three names recurring over the five years that are covered by them. It is also apparent that they were selling beer from unlicensed premises, as each year the court rolls listed the number of brewhouses that they operated, and each year they were found to be contravening the laws of assize. In 1427 the lord of the manor issued a warning to all brewers in the parish: ‘And order is given to all the brewers that they sell one gallon of beer above 1 1/2d under a penalty, each of them, of 6s 8d each’.

The lands passed on to John Baker in 1444-5. Baker’s Place (Digbeth) left the Baker family’s possession in 1544-5, when it became the property of William Showles. In 1615 it became the property of the Middlemore family; a name that survives today in Middlemore Road, just off West Heath Road by Northfield Station. In 1751 the lands were taken on by Richard Palmer, and three years later by his son Joseph Palmer, who paid a yearly rent of 8s. Ann Palmer, Joseph’s widow, took over ‘the land known as Digbeth Sholes or Baker’s Place Sholes or Tin Hill and Hawkeslow’ on her husband’s death in 1762. She also received other lands nearby, which were known by the names of Shorton Heath or Shortnells. When Ann Palmer died in 1766, her widowed daughter Ann Cromwell, took on the ownership of the land.

THE MID-LIFE YEARS: 1790-1890

Few documents survive from earlier than 1790, but after this date records from St Laurence’s, the parish church of Northfield make it easier to identify both the owners and occupiers of the lands of Digbeth Farm.

By 1791, ‘the property known as Digboth, in the Hay yield of the parish of Northfield’ was owned by Thomas Willetts. The Willetts family were quite wealthy, and owned or leased a number of properties in and around the parish. Of these the most notable was the New House Farm, better known today as Manor Farm (the house in Manor Park), which they leased in 1804 for the term of twenty-five years. The occupier of ‘Digboth’ Farm in 1791 was William Walker, then a 59-year-old man, with a wife and nine children. He was a respected member of the community, who had held a number of official posts in the parish, including that of constable for the years of 1767, 1783 and 1784, which was not a desirable responsibility. He was appointed overseer of the poor for the area of Lightwood Row in 1779, and again in 1790 for the Hay yield; he also served as a sworn juror for the court of frankpledge on many occasions.

It is amusing to find that Walker was himself up before the court on no less than two occasions, for erecting a gate upon the lords waste, at a place near to Turves Green, and for taking in a piece of land (part of the lane leading to West Heath). For this he was fined 1s with the threat of a much larger fine if he did not retreat from the land before the next court. On the occasion of his first misdemeanour, he was a member of the jury: did he find himself guilty or not guilty?

Walker died in July 1794 and was buried in St Laurence’s churchyard. The entry in the parish register describes him as a miller; presumably he had been operating Digbeth Mill. After his death, his widow, Ann, remained at the farm and took over all of the financial responsibilities. She now had to pay all the regular bills, such as the annual chief rent to the lord of the manor and the poor relief rate to the parish church, to name but two of them. The poor rate assessment for Digboth Farm indicates that a sum of £2 13s 4d was paid every three months, but the farm was not the only property for which she was liable, as £2 had to be paid for the mill and almost a further £1 for three other nearby properties. By 1807 Ann Walker was paying poor rates for no less than twelve houses, one farm and a mill; the rates, to be paid monthly, totalling £3 7s. She died in 1812, but by then it appears that she was no longer in possession of Digbeth Farm. According to the roll of frankpledge, she was

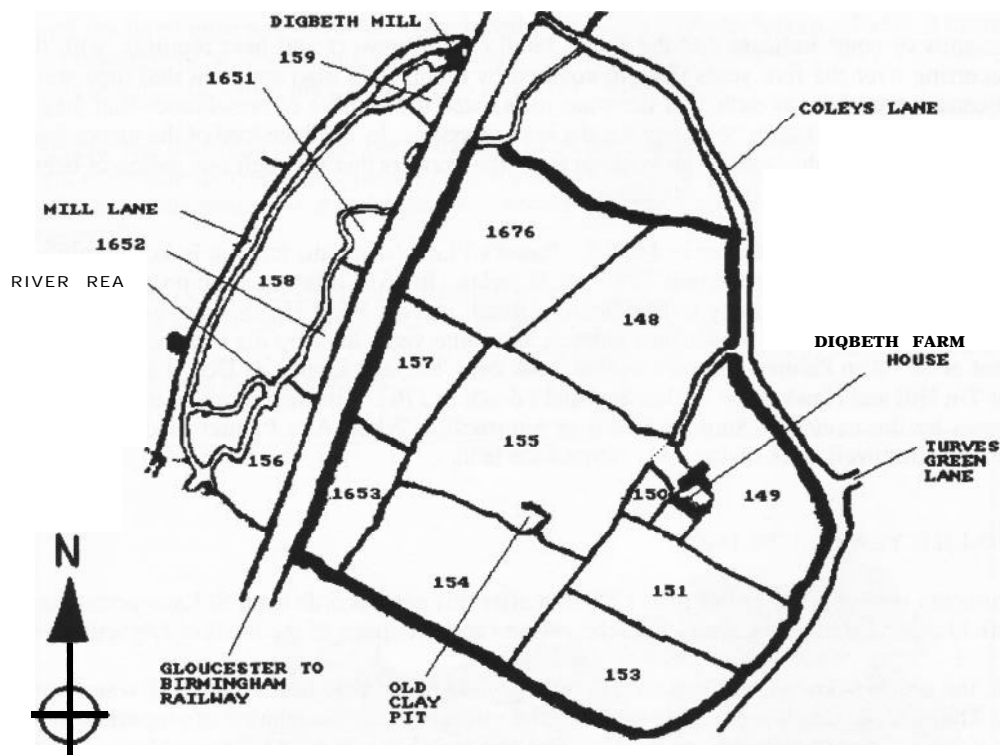
Digbeth Farm - continued

living on a two-acre plot of land called 'Ducyes' or 'Ducies': her eldest son, Nicholas Walker, was to gain possession of this land.

In 1816 Digbeth Farm was sold to another member of the Willetts family, with John Willetts paying £1,600 for the freehold. In the will of one of the previous owners, Richard Palmer (father of Ann Cromwell), parts of the farm had been left to various friends and relatives. Consequently, a five-page deed was required to determine who owned which parts of the lands of the Digbeth estate, so that John Willetts was made aware of everyone who could have any claim to parts of his land.

There is a gap in our knowledge of the farm's ownership and occupancy between 1816 and 1838, as parish documents from 1807 to this date have not survived, and no other evidence has come to light as yet.

THE 1839 TITHE APPORTIONMENT



Digbeth Farm (based on the tithe apportionment map)

In 1839 a complete record of landowners, occupiers and properties was compiled for the parish of Northfield, to identify how much each person should pay to the parish church, and a map showing the layout of all farms, land and buildings was produced to accompany this. The following table shows the apportionment entry for Digbeth Farm, then owned by John Willetts and occupied by Thomas Parker:

Plot No	Plot Name	Land Usage	Acres	Rods	Perches
148	Top Meadow	Meadow	3	1	18
149	The Bar Leasow	Pasture	2	2	23
150	House, Outbuildings and Garden	Homestead		2	21
151	Garden Field	Pasture	2	1	9
153	Boundary Field	Pasture	2	3	7
154	Well Leasow	Pasture	2	3	27
155	Harper Piece	Pasture	3	2	14
157	Pt of Brook Meadow	Meadow	1	1	23
1653	Pt of Brook Field	Meadow			34
1676	Pt of Lower Meadow	Meadow	1		15
TOTAL AREA			23	0	31

THE BIRMINGHAM & GLOUCESTER RAILWAY

The line was surveyed in 1835, and construction work began to shatter the peace of this rural area. It was built in the opposite direction from that inferred by its name, as it was constructed from Gloucester to Birmingham. The first section of the line to be opened was the thirty-one mile section between Cheltenham and Bromsgrove on 24 June 1840, followed on 17 September by an extension north to a temporary station at Cofton Farm via stations at Blackwell and Bamt Green. Finally, on 17 December, the railway age came to Northfield with the opening of the line, and the first train from Birmingham must have terrified the cattle in the fields of Digbeth Farm, running on the newly-opened section with stations at Longbridge, Lifford, Moseley and Camp Hill. Northfield had to wait until 1870 for a station of its own.

THE CENSUS RETURNS

Yet another variation of the farm's spelling appears in the 1841 census, which lists it as 'Digbath'. The farm was now occupied by Mary Parker and her husband John. Also living there was a young lad named James Olderson, aged 11; he may have been a hired hand or possibly an apprentice. The Worcestershire (East Division) parliamentary registers for 1847-9 show a George Page as the occupant of Digbeth Farm.

In 1851 John Summerfield, aged 33, occupied Digbeth Farm as a farmer of twenty-three acres. Also resident was his wife Ann, both of them natives of the adjacent parish of Harborne in the county of Staffordshire, together with John's brother Joseph, aged 25, who probably helped out with the heavy work. Strange as it may seem, ticks were placed by the census enumerator in the 'Deaf, Blind or Dumb' column against the names of all three members of the household. The name of John Summerfield also appears in the Worcestershire parliamentary registers between 1847 and 1861, with his qualification to vote arising from the ownership of a house and land plus the freehold of a property in Shendley Field on the other side of the parish. It is not possible to say whether this is the same man, possibly owning the Shendley land while making his residence at Digbeth Farm, or whether there were two John Summerfield resident in the parish at the time.

By 1861 the occupants of Digbeth Farm had changed once again. The head of the household was now John Crockett Brown, aged 34, who described himself as a farmer and cattle dealer. Originally from Handsworth in Staffordshire, he may have been attracted to Northfield by his future wife, 22-year-old Mary Brown, who was born there. They had two children: Emily (aged 2) and Howard Brown (aged seven months). Also on the premises on census night were two servants, both aged 16: Edward Partridge from Northfield (who was John's nephew) and Eliza Payton, who had come from Chipping Camden in Gloucestershire. Two years later, when the lordship of the manor was sold, the description of the property had changed a little. In addition to the house, there was now a barn, cowhouse, stableloft and yard, garden; the property still contained the twenty-three acres and thirty-one perches assessed in 1839, but the gross annual rental by this time was £80 and the rateable value calculated as £74. The Brown family were the tenants of William Willetts (son of the previous owner John Willetts), who was now co-owner with a man named John Mole.

On 31 October 1861 a number of the surrounding farms, estates and buildings were put up for sale. John Brown bought lot 10, this being five cottages on Quarry Lane, very close to the railway bridge, approximately where the Hillside Garage now stands. The starting bid was £100; it was followed by another at £210, but then Brown secured the property with a bid of £215, and he was now the proud owner of five cottages with good gardens and nail shops attached, comprising an area of 2 roods and 20 perches. The occupants were named Witheford, Holyoake, Wilkes, Crauford and Hemming, who paid rents totalling £20 16s per annum. On the same day, Digbeth Mill (then described as Northfield Mill) was sold to a Mr Bamitt for £1,080.

The perambulation of the boundaries of Northfield of 1863, describes the topography of Digbeth Farm and Turves Green as follows:

... and now onto Turves Green, - (153 on plan, meadow called Boundary Field of Digbeth Farm), (Note: Morris is the owner of Turves Green House.). (Note: Encroachment, by John Burman, on the land lying between the hedgerow, and the cart road, and which was formerly known as The Turves Green, whence the name of the village sprung - this has been enclosed five or six years.) Now cross the road, to about seventy yards into the pasture - where was formerly a ditch [Is this Harper's Piece? And could the name of Digbeth be derived from it?] leaving George Withers's cottage on the right, then up the field, keeping the hedgerow on the right to the railway; thence across the same - taking to the hedge again, and crossing Bowling Alley Brook [Is this the River Rea?], and the road [Mill Lane?].'

Digbeth Farm - continued

The two-day perambulation started at Pebble Mill, went through Stirchley, through Fordrough to Wythall reservoir up to the West Heath Road to Turves Green and around Digbeth towards Quarry Farm.

The Brown family were still at Digbeth Farm in 1871, but by then John Crockett Brown was described as a farmer of seventy-two acres: where these additional lands were located is unknown. He and Mary now had three more children: Emily and Howard had been joined by Amy (aged 6), Alice May (aged 4) and William (aged 1). Still living with the Browns was John's nephew, Edward Partridge, unmarried and described as a hay, straw and cattle dealer. There was one servant: a 16-year-old Banbury girl named Ellen Harding. Mrs Mary Crockett Brown was to live on to the grand old age of 82, and was buried in the churchyard of St Laurence on 23 November 1921. Her last address was 5 Mill Bank (i.e. Mill Lane), which was only a short distance from Digbeth Farm.

Although the name of Stephen Barker appears in Birmingham directories from 1880 to 1888, for Digbeth Farm and Matthias Barker in 1890, they were the owners, not the occupants. According to the 1881 census Thomas Ancoln was then the head of the household. He was a 55-year-old farm bailiff, originally from Haselor in Warwickshire; his wife, Phoebe Ancoln, was many years his senior, being described as aged 76 from Bingeworth [spelling unclear] also in Warwickshire. Their servant was Jane Bond, an 18-year-old Northfield girl. In addition to Digbeth Farm, Stephen Barker, who lived until his death in 1889 in Frederick Road, Edgbaston, owned the Bowling Alley Farm on the opposite side of Coley's Lane, which he bought at auction on 31 October 1861.

Once more the occupancy of Digbeth Farm had changed when the 1891 census was taken. Samuel Hissey, a 53-year-old farmer from Trentham in Staffordshire, was in residence together with his wife Emily aged 28 and a daughter named Mary Alice. As Mary Alice's age was given as 27, it appears that she was the child of a previous marriage of Samuel's.

THE LAST YEARS: 1891-1950

The evidence for the declining years of Digbeth Farm is drawn from trade directories and electoral registers. Some care is needed in interpreting the information that directories provide: as commercial publications, the majority of entries were only printed upon payment of a fee, and there are consequently large gaps in the entries for certain properties. The following list shows the entries that can be found for Digbeth Farm:

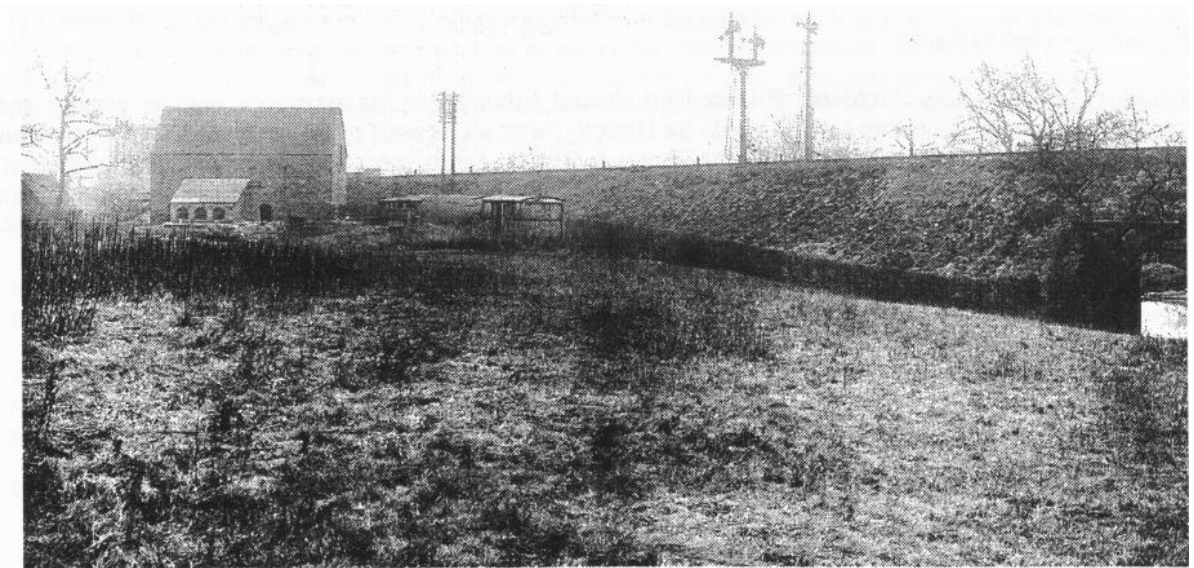
1892	Joseph Edmunds Digbeth Farm. Northfield
1894-8	Joseph Edmunds, Dygbeth Farm. Northfield
1902-13	William John Kember, Dygbeth Farm, Northfield
1913-20	Edwin Williams, Dygbeth Farm, Turves Green, Northfield (listed in electoral registers as being in Quarry Lane)
1921-4	Mrs Kathleen Theresa Elliott, Dygbeth Farm, Turves Green, Northfield; also her husband William James Elliott, and Charles Harris
1925	Entry as previous, plus Frank White on the site in a caravan.
1926-7	Henry Hodgetts, farmer, and his wife, Betsy; Dygbeth Farm, Turves Green; plus Frank White in the caravan.

Henry and Betsy Hodgetts lived at Dygbeth Farm until c. 1934, then in 1935 they appear in the directory at Turves Green Farm, a short distance away. The electoral register for 15 October 1935 - 14 October 1936 lists them at 135 Turves Green; this being where part of Turves Green School now stands, just off Turves Green Road. As this electoral register contains no entry for Digbeth Farm, it can be assumed that at this time the buildings were standing vacant.

Birmingham City Council purchased the site of Digbeth Farm on 2 April 1947, together with other land nearby, including Abbeydale Road, Coleys Lane, Turves Green and West Heath Road. The purchase totalled 39.735 acres. The farm was demolished c. 1950, and a new estate built. Residents of Willetts Road and Harpers Road first appeared in the electoral registers for the qualifying date of 20 November 1951, and by that time all but a few of the houses were occupied. Some parts of the present estate were not built until a few years later, appearing in the electoral registers of 1956. 1958 saw the last directory entry for Henry and Betsy Hodgetts, the last occupants of Digbeth Farm. Willetts Road did not appear in a directory until 1961, nearly ten years after it was built, and Harpers Road appeared at the same time; although as a council estate, the entry does not list their residents. The school and tower blocks that now stand on the lands that for so long were part of Digbeth Farm first appeared in a directory in 1962.

A NOTE ON DIGBETH MILL

Before the arrival of the railways in 1840 it would appear that Digbeth Farm also included the nearby mill on the River Rea within its boundaries. Over the years the mill was variously known as Digbeth Mill, Cotterill's Mill, and towards the end of its working life as Northfield Mill. Left in ruins for a number of years, from 1934 it was used for a time as a storage site by the Borough Surveyor. There were plans to have the mill preserved as a site of historical interest, but that, alas, was not to be. It was demolished, and the site used for dumping rubble for a while, then left to grow wild. All that remains to remind us today of the working mill are a few brick walls standing in the undergrowth just inside the gate to a small wooded park known to the local people as Daffodil Park.



Digbeth Mill (photographed in 1929)

REFERENCES

Documents consulted to date:

1. BRL 478815 DV 732 Court rolls of the manor of (Northfield and) Weoley for courts held Friday after the feast of St Michael 1 Henry IV (3 October 1399) to Monday next before the feast of the Conversion of St Paul the Apostle 36 Henry VI (23 January 1457/8) Transcript, c. 1910
2. BRL 478835 ZZ 65B Court book of the manor of Northfield and Weoley recording view of frankpledge with courts baron held 12 October 1733 to 24 October 1838
3. BRL 478818 DV 733 Court rolls of manor of Northfield and Weoley for courts held from 12 October 1742 to 17 October 1759
4. BRL 478866 DV 734 Chief rents and cottage rents due to Jervoise Clarke Jervoise (Lord of the Manor of Northfield and Weoley) 1786
5. BRL 478867 DV 734 Chief rents and cottage rents (as above) 1791
6. BRL 478868 DV 734 Chief rents and cottage rents (as above) 1801
7. BRL 478869 DV 734 Copy of quit rents and cottage rents in Northfield, 1802. with notes giving occupiers for 1786, 1813 and 1824: copy made c 1840. With draft copy of view of frankpledge with court baron of the manor of Northfield and Weoley held 1859. 1802- 59
8. BRL 478870 DV 734 Chief rents and cottage rents due to Jervoise Clarke Jervoise (lord of the manor of Northfield and Weoley) 1809-1813

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9. **BRL 478889 ZZ 63B Commonplace book of the lord of the manor. Plans 1840**
10. **BRL 478838 ZZ 65B Court book of the manor of Northfield and Weoley recording view of frankpledge with court baron held 17 November 1846. with copies of indentures dated July 1887 to 15 August 1902, releasing property in the said manor from quit rents in respect of the said property. Plans. fol 1846**
11. **BRL 478873 DV 734 Draft copy of the view of frankpledge with court baron of the manor of Northfield and Weoley held 17 November 1846**
12. **BRL 478874 DV 734 (as above) Court baron held 1859**
13. **BRL 478879 DV 734 Draft copy of terrier of quit rents due from tenants of the manor of Northfield c. 1900**

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