



*Above: Monkey gargoyle*

*Right: The base of the Saxon Tower at All Saints' Church*

**I**N A LINE running south-east of Lincoln lie a group of villages which owe their prosperity to three Lincolnshire characteristics. The first of these is undulating moor and heathland on which animals used to graze, the second is the local stone from which to construct houses and farm buildings and below the villages lie the fens adjoining the River Witham which kept people supplied with fish, wildfowl and reeds for thatch. Add on to this meadows, land for growing crops, and woodland which provided both fuel and building materials and it is easy to see why these little communities developed.

Of these villages, Branston, lying just four miles south-east of Lincoln, was one of the most prosperous in the past and is one of the most developed today.



The south-eastern boundary of this long, but narrow parish stretches to Mere, close to Waddington. At its western end is Branston Booths, now a hamlet close to the Car Dyke. Beyond here lies Branston Fen which borders the Witham, close to Bardney. Monks from Bardney Abbey once paid rent for fisheries on Branston's land.

There is no doubt that people have lived here for a long time. The very name Branston, originally Branztune, would suggest a Celtic hill settlement or enclosure. It is known the Romans settled at Branston, following the dis-



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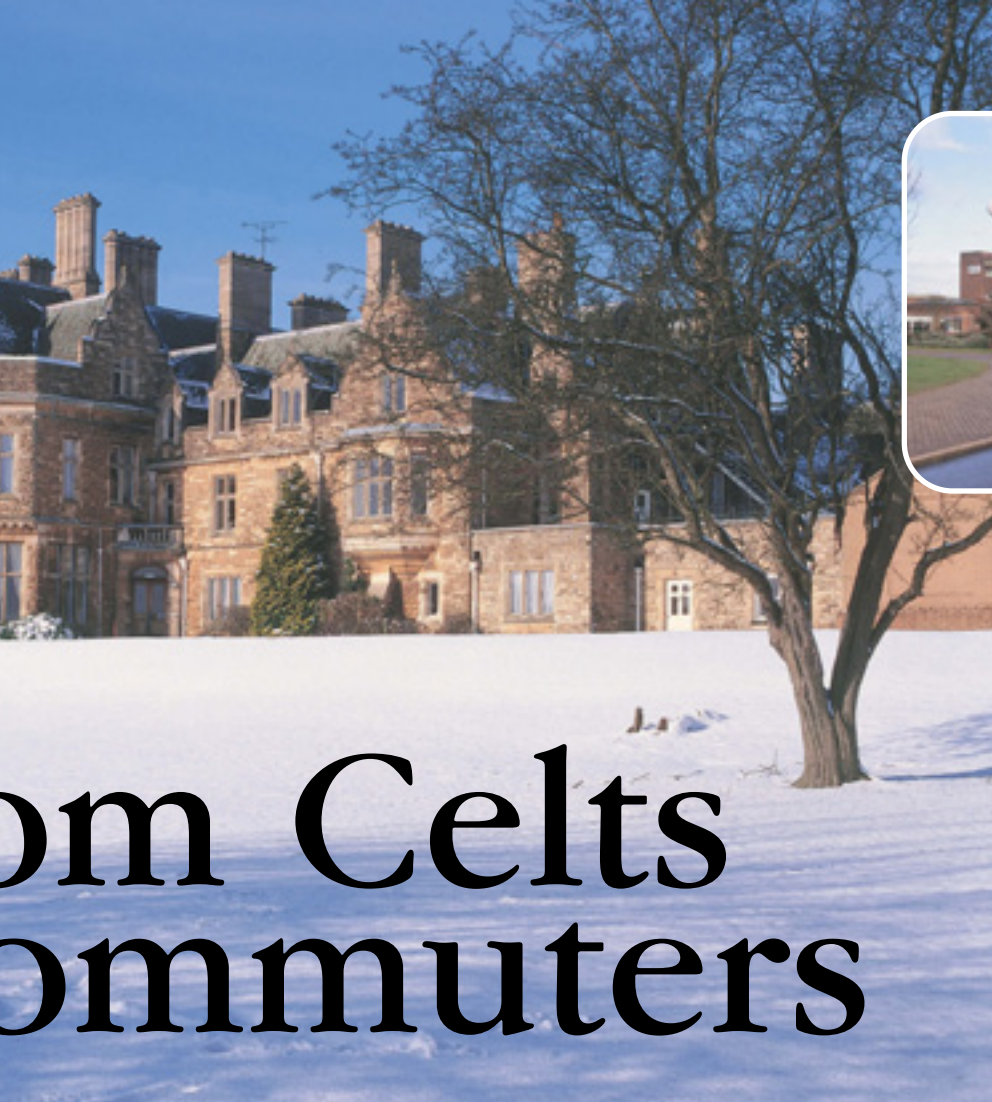
*The stone-b  
ringed by modern*

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covery of a young girl's inscribed gravestone in Folly Lane which may have led to a Roman villa on the west side of the village.

At the time of the Conquest, the land was owned by a Saxon named Hemine but post-Conquest, it was taken over by Walter De Aincourt, cousin of Bishop Remigius who built the first Lincoln Cathedral. By the time the Domesday Book was compiled in 1086, the village had a population of around 365 people, a very large number compared with the more usual sixty to 100 residents. But growth was slow and in 1801 there were still only 446 people living there, mostly earning a living from the land, fen and river.

Although the railway did not come close to the village – Branston and Heighington station was one-and-a-half miles to the north – its proximity to Lincoln would have attracted the wealthy families who built fine houses there. They in turn created employment for local people and improved their lives through charitable acts and donations to the village. Two of these families, the Leslie-Melvilles and the Abel Smiths, were prominent in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Abel Smiths had founded the Smith Ellison Bank in Lincoln in 1775, and in



*Above: Branston Community College*

*Left: A wintry scene at Branston Hall Hotel once the home of the Leslie-Melville family*

# From Celts to Commuters

*... built settlement at Branston may now be  
... estates but its roots go back to pre-Roman times*

by Theobald PHOTOGRAPHS: John Smith and John Whitaker

In 1830, the Hon Alexander Leslie Melville, youngest son of the seventh Earl of Leven and Melville, became a partner in the bank and came to live in Branston. He took up residence in Branston Hall, originally built for the Bertie family in 1735, and took upon himself the wider aristocratic responsibilities to society.

Alexander, and later his son, Alexander Samuel, were joined by female



## *Down Your Way*

members of the family in performing civic and charitable duties. They built the village forge, now a private house, the cottage for the district nurse who was the principal source of healthcare in the village, and the Parkside Infants' School. The ladies in the family provided baby clothes for every pregnant

woman in the village who could not afford to buy them, arranged treats and sports days for the village children and during the First World War organised food and clothing parcels for the armed forces. Each Branston man who left to fight was given a present from the Melvilles. Family celebrations, such as Alexander Samuel and his wife Albina's Golden Wedding Anniversary, were shared with the village with the school being closed for two days and a thanksgiving service in the church.

The Leslie-Melvilles were a very wealthy family and had a new hall built in 1886. With its thirty-eight bedrooms, it was described as a 'gentleman's moderate-sized country house'. The original hall of 1735 was burned down in a terrible fire which broke out during a goose supper for local tradesmen in 1903. It was said that after the fire brigade had fought the flames, they sat down to the remnants of the supper.

The Melvilles left Branston Hall and in 1924 it became a sanatorium, later a hospital, which was finally closed down in the 1960s – after much protest from the local population. In the subsequent years it was used as a residential home for the elderly and is now Branston Hall Hotel, known to many in the county as one of the premises licenced

for civil weddings.

Although wealthy, the Abel Smiths were somewhat in the shadow of the Leslie Melvilles. They lived at Longhills Hall, about half-a-mile out of the village on the Sleaford Road and it was they who gave the land to be used for a cemetery. They disappeared from Branston life in the Second World War when Longhills was requisitioned for use by the army.

Longhills had been built in the early nineteenth century for £40,000 in the Italian style, by Peregrine Curtois. He was a member of a long line of rectors from one family who served All Saints' Church for 211 unbroken years from 1680 until 1891. The first of these was John Curtois, born in 1652 in Lincoln where his father Rowland was at various times Chamberlain, Mayor and Sheriff. He was followed by his son, also John, who, after forty-eight years was succeeded in 1767 by Peregrine. After another forty-seven years Peregrine was followed by his son, also Peregrine, who built Longhills. Peregrine served the parish for forty-seven years. The fifth Curtois rector was Atwill who restored the church and carved the fine choir screen. His daughter, Ella Rose, carved the eight panels which were inserted into the screen. Atwill was succeeded by another Peregrine, his brother, who died in 1891 and brought the long line of succession to an end.

Like many before them, the Curtois family left their mark on the church through the work of their hands. However, much of this was destroyed inadvertently in the twentieth century.

On Christmas Day, 1962, All Saints' Church was ravaged by fire. There had been two services in the church that morning, but no Evensong. It was a cold night and people kept to their homes but shortly after 8pm, a Mr Jack Taylor looked out of his window and noticed the church was on fire. He quickly called the fire brigade and then informed the Rector, the Revd Raymond Lucas.

Mr Lucas and some of the parishioners rushed over to the church and, despite the danger from the molten lead which was dropping from the ceiling, managed to save the church's vestments, silver and some of the hymn and prayer books.

By the time the fire brigade arrived the fire was well alight. It was thought to have been caused by an electrical fault in the organ and had been burning quietly but steadily for some hours. When the heat shattered the clerestory windows, air rushed into the church and fed the flames. The Father Willis organ, choir stalls and choir roof were completely destroyed and the organ chamber and sanctuary damaged beyond repair. The chancel arch had cracked when the firemen's cold water had played on the almost red-hot stone and the flames had licked down the nave, burning through the bell ropes at the west end. Some of the carved panels from the screen were rescued and, although charred on the back, were able to be incorporated into the new organ case.

After the fire, Branston Methodists immediately offered their chapel for services and during the period of repairs it was used for funerals. Other services took place in the church hall. Temporary services started again in the church the following Easter but the full restoration was not completed until 1966.

Where parts of the building had been damaged beyond repair, it was decided the replacement should definitely be of the twentieth century. This is much evidenced by the East Window, designed by Keith New who designed and made some of the nave windows in Coventry Cathedral. A largely abstract piece, its title is 'The Glory Behind the Cross'. The other impressive piece of restoration is the new organ, now situated in the west end of the church.

During the Second World War, Branston maintained its role as an agricultural village with many Land Army girls and evacuees coming to live or work in the area. However, Branston Mere was to play a crucial role in the war effort as it was the location of a telegraphy station responsible for twenty-four hour monitoring of German radio traffic. The coded signals and their sources were relayed to Bletchley Park where code breakers worked to decipher them. It is doubtful if Branston residents knew what was happening in their midst. The workers in the underground building were never allowed to talk to anyone about what they did and it is only recently that they have been able to write and talk about what they did during the war.

Motorists driving southwards through Branston notice a sharp left-hand bend



*Top: Old stone cottages in Rectory Lane; Middle: All Saints' Church; Bottom: The former Bertie Arms is now a private house*

in the road, right in the middle of the village at what is known as Old Plough Corner. Until the early 1980s, there were buildings right up the road on both sides and the 'corner' was extremely dangerous. In order to straighten the road a little, the Plough public house and a small row of houses were demolished in 1983 to create the

wide green verge we see today and which makes an ideal playing area for the village Christmas tree each year. However, the Plough wasn't entirely lost; its stones were taken and used for repair work on Lincoln Castle. The Wagon and Horses pub, on the opposite side of the road, was demolished and rebuilt in a safer position.

One of Branston's more unusual buildings, Gargoyle House, is believed to have been built around 140 years ago by Thomas Lovely, a builder. Mr Lovely is thought to have restored many churches in the county, including St Swithin's in Lincoln and the gargoyles which he used to adorn his house came from these buildings.

The monkeys on the gate were said to have been put there as a joke. A young man in the village was taunting Mr Lovely, saying he would have a 'monkey' meaning a mortgage, on his property. Mr Lovely agreed with the young man that indeed he would and then put up the monkey figures.

During the second half of the twentieth century Branston experienced unprecedented expansion with the construction of several new estates on the east side of the village and building work is still going on. The Methodist Chapel is no more and has been converted for private dwelling but All Saints' Church and its attractive modern hall are still the focal points of the village, both visually and for community life.

To cope with the rise in population – now standing at more than 4,500 – the village has a small supermarket, doctors' surgery and church hall. It has primary schools and a Community College which takes pupils from all over the area. It lives up to its title by providing facilities such as the public library and further education, which are available for all to use. There are also many thriving clubs and organisations making this a popular commuter village for people working in Lincoln and beyond. □