

Murton Parish

Neighbourhood



APPENDIX B **A Brief History of the Township** **of Murton**

Adopted Version

2025

Plan

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To the north of the glacial moraine upon which Dunnington and other villages stand is an area of low lying and often very wet land drained by the Osbaldwick and Piker Thorn becks and a network of drains, which ultimately flow into the River Foss at York. The height of that land above mean sea level is only about 50 feet. The village of Murton was established on land a few feet higher, thus lifting it above potential flooding. Archaeological evidence suggests human settlement in the York area since the Neolithic period (c.4000 to c.2000 BC). Bronze Age flint tools, such as axe heads, and bronze and pottery vessels have been discovered on the higher ground, notably at the nearby Heslington East university site which partly lies on the glacial moraine. It is unlikely that there was such early settlement on the wet lowlands to the north.

The first evidence of a settlement is found in the Domesday Book of 1086. The “Great Survey” ordered by William I (William the Conqueror) to assess the ownership and value of land for taxation purposes records all the local villages including Mortun (Murton), whose land was assessed at four carucates and was held by the canons of York Cathedral. It recorded that two ploughs could be on the land but that it was waste, implying perhaps that it was not being tilled. The Domesday entry for Murton is included with Osboldewic (Osbaldwick). Together five households are recorded. At some stage after 1086 it would seem that some of the land in Murton came into the possession of St. Mary’s Abbey. A Patric of Cahors gave three carucates of land in Murton to the Abbey. That may be how the two fields High and Low Smary Close and the adjacent Smary Lane became so named.

The historic derivation of the name Murton is simply town or place on the moor. Over the centuries its spelling varies in written documents: Mortun,

Mortune, Moreton, Morton and Murton. As late as the early 19th century Morton was still the occasional spelling.

From the late 13th century the Register of Freemen of the City of York records people from Murton being admitted to the Freedom of the City, which was required to carry out trade in the City. For example in c.1272 Hugo de Moreton, zonarius (girdle maker) was admitted. A few years later Radolphus de Moreton, pistor (miller) was also admitted. Over the next centuries people from Murton are quite regularly listed in the Registers.

The boundary of the Township of Murton had probably been determined by early medieval times. As was normal, it was delineated by thoroughfares, water courses and field boundaries. There has been only one minor change since. The Civil Parish of Murton covers the same area as the historic Township: approximately 844 acres.

In 1660 “The Content of the Land at Murton” was measured in preparation for the enclosure of some of the common land and open fields and for the allocation of that land. Sixteen land owners are recorded for about 200 acres of land. Almost half the land was in the hands of the Straker family. Evidence of open field strip farming still survives in fields close to village, where ridge and furrow may still be seen in the land.

Soon after the Restoration, various taxes, including a Hearth Tax, were introduced to provide income for Charles II. For the Hearth Tax, which was soon repealed, occupiers of houses were required to pay two shillings per annum per hearth. The tax was, of course, unpopular with much evasion. The record of the Hearth Tax receipts for Murton survives for c.1673. It gives the first detailed information of the inhabitants of the village and the houses. There were 21 households. Three were receiving alms and were not liable for the tax. Of the other 18, the majority had two or more hearths, suggesting that Murton houses may have been of some substance. Twelve family names are recorded. The Strakers had four houses; the Butrys and the Bovills two each.

The Parish Registers for baptisms, marriages and burials partly survive from 1581 and provide an insight to the local families. It is not always possible, in the registers, to distinguish Murton families from those of Osbaldwick and

elsewhere. However in years in the 17th and 18th centuries when it is possible, Murton entries often significantly outnumber those of Osbaldwick, suggesting that Murton had as many, if not more people, than Osbaldwick. As we shall see below, even in the 19th century there were periods when Murton Township had more people.

In 1796 a very detailed survey of land and property ownership and occupation in Murton was carried out. Land was measured and a large scale map produced. A schedule of property was produced. For the first time we have very comprehensive information about Murton. Fields were named, with area, ownership and occupant. The survey lists 46 different owners of land and 39 different occupiers. Nineteen houses, all in the village, are mapped and listed. There were only four other properties outside the village: the two toll houses and two on Bad Bargain Lane on the northern edge of the Township. So there had been no significant growth over the previous century. The owners mostly held their land copyhold from the Manor of Strensall. Few of them actually occupied the land they owned. Some were well-to-do York trades people and dignatories. Some lived a long way away. The 1796 plan of the village shows a very wide Town Street, as it was called. The street went up to the frontages of the property on both sides. In the early 19th century, the street was narrowed by the enclosure of land in front of properties on the west side to the boundaries that exist today. This may have happened as those properties were given over to race horse breeding and training (see below).

Murton was never an estate village. It never had a manor house or a great family. It was part of the Manor of Strensall, but does not appear to have figured large in the activities of the Manor. Its church dates back to at least the medieval period, but was always a Chapel of Ease for the parish church at Osbaldwick. After a dispute about responsibility for repair Murton church became dilapidated in the early 19th century and became a ruin. It took until 1914 for it to be restored to use.

Much more information is available for the history of Murton in the 19th century from diverse sources. A Rate return of 1824 lists some 30 land and/or property occupiers. The poorer households would not have had to pay rates. The decennial censuses of population from 1801 record the number of people

in the Township. The numbers can be compared with the neighbouring townships.

At the very beginning of the 19th century the Township experienced some development. Some new houses were built in the village. The Township erected four Poor Houses (known as the Town Houses) in Moor Lane. Two large houses and several cottages were built along the north side of the Turnpike Road at Grimston, and thus within Murton Township. Two farms, farm cottages, and a brick yard with cottages were built along Bad Bargain Lane. However, the population figures above suggest that from the 1830s the Township only grew slowly and spasmodically. The number of houses in the Township hardly changed over 60 years from 1841.

The Nineteenth Century Populations of Murton, Grimston, Osbaldwick and Holtby.

	1801	1811	1821	1831	1841	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
Murton	110	128	134	156	161	167	154	168	176	198	189
Osbaldwick	123	135	176	163	200	205	188	198	164	181	209
Holtby	117	163	170	157	146	169	165	141	136	127	152
Grimston	51	63	72	70	80	71	64	50	58	64	81

Number of Houses in Murton

	1841	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
Occupied	36	37	34	39	41	42	43
Unoccupied	7	3	8	2	4	3	3
Total	43	40	42	41	45	45	46

Murton in the 19th century was overwhelmingly an agricultural village and Township. Almost all its occupants were engaged in farming or market gardening. It supplied the people of York with food. Farming was mixed. Grain and vegetables were grown. There were cow and pig keepers. Milk was produced and sold. Through the middle of the century the cultivation of chicory for the adulteration of coffee was a significant cash crop. In the early

20th century, the village had a reputation for growing strawberries. Through the 19th century there were very few other trades in the village: a blacksmith and a wheelwright for some of the period, a cart and carriage maker late in the century, and several dressmakers. Occasionally a resident from the village had an occupation in York, but that was not common, except for those living at Grimston. Throughout the 19th century there was no development on the western edge of the Township closest to York.

However, a major addition to farming activity from the 1820s to about the 1850s was the breeding and racing of horses. Robert Ridsdale, a notorious, dishonest race horse owner and gambler bought some 300 acres of land in Murton and Holtby around 1830 and established stables in Murton. At his peak he is said to have had 200 horses. Much of the property at the north end of Murton village, on both sides of the village street, was developed as stabling. Ridsdale came from humble origins. One account suggests he was a boot boy at a hotel in Doncaster; another that he was a lowly groom. He amassed a lot of money through gambling and set himself up as a breeder and trainer in Murton, living in the Hall. He spent a lot of money buying land. For a while in the early 1830s his luck held out. He won the Epsom Derby in 1832 with St. Giles. On that race he was said to have received from the Marquis of Exeter the largest sum ever paid out up to that time on a single bet upon one race. Various sources suggest he won between £30,000 and £47,000 on the Derby. The win was probably fraudulent as St. Giles was almost certainly a four year old horse, not a three year old as required for a Derby entry. St. Giles did win other races. Ridsdale had previously been involved in another racing scandal. The horse Jerry, after which the Murton inn was named in the 1830s, won the St. Leger in 1824. Ridsdale laid heavily against Jerry winning, bribing its jockey to hold back. The plot was discovered, the jockey changed and Ridsdale lost heavily. Ridsdale's time in Murton was short-lived. He was declared bankrupt in 1836 and his land sold. The sale advertisements variously suggest 250 acres and 320 acres were up for sale. Amongst the purchasers of the land was John Wriglesworth, whose descendants continue to farm in Murton to this day. Race horse breeding and training continued on a smaller scale in Murton for about another two decades.

So at the end of the 19th century Murton was little changed from a hundred years earlier. It had been little affected by the growth of the city of York. Its economic activity had changed little. It was still overwhelmingly an agricultural community. It was not a wealthy place, but neither was it particularly poor. Three-quarters of its houses had five rooms or more in 1891. There were some substantial properties: Murton Hall, Murton Villa, Murton Grange, Grimston Lodge and Grimston Villa (now demolished). Several of the farm houses: Gells Farm, Blue Coat Farm and Pear Tree Farm were quite large.

In 1911 the population of Murton was still only 188, but thereafter significant increases occurred. By 1921 the population had risen to 243; by 1931 to 265. The Derwent Valley Light Railway arrived in 1912 connecting the village to York and the population along the Derwent Valley. Passenger services operated until 1926, when buses took over. Goods traffic continued to 1981. The railway encouraged building in the village and gave access to employment in York. The First World War had little impact on Murton. Three of its sons lost their lives. Murton probably benefitted from the demand for food.

The major inter-war development for Murton occurred in the west of the Township. The construction of the White Cross Estate at Tranby Avenue, Cavendish Grove and residential property on the Hull Road, along with commercial property including a garage, various workshops, a plant nursery and a café along the Hull Road, much of it where B & Q is now, doubled the number of properties in Murton Parish. A number of new houses were built in or near the village, including Red and Buff Cottages and bungalows and semi-detached houses along the south of the village street. There was new property along Bad Bargain Lane, but other property had long disappeared including Fisher Farm and its cottages and Willow Grove brick works and its cottages.

The 1930s was a decade of change for Murton. A Russian petrol company ROP set up a depot at Murton Lane station yard. Land ownership and occupation was gradually consolidated into larger and more viable holdings. A piped water supply was brought to the village in 1934. As early as 1936 Murton started to prepare for war. An Air Raid Precautions Committee was set up. Preparations were made for potential attack and damage. Wardens were appointed. In due course shelters were built. Murton village was very busy for

much of the war. The station yard and fields to the north, High and Low Smary Close, were used as a large petrol and ammunition dump. The railway became busier. An additional siding was built at Murton station in 1943. It could accommodate 40 wagons and half a million gallons of petrol in four gallon drums were being stored at one time. Prior to D-Day about 100 wagons were loaded with petrol in one day for transport south. Soldiers were billeted in many houses in the village. Murton Lane was closed. Villagers could apply for a pass. Italian prisoners of war were billeted in Nissen huts and at Grimston Lodge. They worked on the railway and helped on local farms. Property in Murton avoided damage, but bombs fell on farm land up Smary Lane and incendiary flares fell in a field near the corner of Murton Lane and the Stamford Bridge Road. A British aircraft crashed on Murton Moor; another went down between Nova Scotia Pond and Holtby Manor, after taking off from Elvington. Murton accommodated evacuee children from Sunderland and Middlesbrough.

Since the Second World War, Murton has seen many changes. In 1956 St. James's Church acquired land for a churchyard, allowing burials in Murton for the first time. The four primitive Poor Houses, condemned in 1936, but still occupied until the 1950s were finally demolished in 1959.

In the 1960s, the village population was greatly increased by the development of Murton Garth and houses on Murton Way and Moor Lane. The cattle market moved from York to Murton and the new abattoir was planned. The village gas lights were converted to electricity. The large National Grid electricity sub-station opened between Murton Way and Hull road.

In the 1970s the York By-Pass divided the Parish in two. A speed limit was introduced in the village. A proposal for a very large housing development at the north end of the village was turned down. New houses were built in Smary Lane. The Farming Museum was proposed. The Methodist Chapel which had served the village for over 100 years was put up for sale.

In the 1980s the Farming Museum acquired some of the DVL track to run trains after commercial traffic ended. Clanceys metal recycling business moved from York to Murton. A large retail warehouse opened on the Hull Road.

MFI/Texas in due course became B & Q. A proposal was put forward for a 480 acre new village between Murton and Osbaldwick.

In the 1990s there was a proposal for a new East Coast Motorway with a route between Murton and Holtby. There was further development of the Murton industrial estate. At the turn of the century, the number of dwellings in the Parish almost doubled with the development on the southern periphery, bounded by the Hull Road and the Osbaldwick Link Road (Redbarn Drive, Meam Close and Moins Court) and a small development in the village, Blue Coat, for which the historic Blue Coat Farm House was demolished. St James's Church had its first serious development since 1930 (when electricity was installed), when the village raised a substantial sum (ca £80,000) to install a kitchen inside the church and build an extension containing a welcome lobby, for village-run community activities.