

# THE DRAGON OF WANTLEY

Dragons were a regular feature in medieval ballads and prophecies. The Welsh were told of their own red dragon, which would eventually defeat its white English opponent. The English appropriated St George and his famous adversary in the reign of Edward III (1327-77), who created the Order of the Garter as part of a conscious plan to rally the nation in support of his war in France. The ballad of the Dragon of Wantley dates from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, but is probably based on an older legend, or legends. The lyric is not very specific when it comes to time and place; but local patriotism has made up the deficit.

## The Legend

*The Dragon of Wantley* concerns a beast which lived near Wharncliffe Crag near Wortley in South Yorkshire. It first appeared in print in 1685, and was later included in Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*, published in 1767. It enjoyed widespread popularity in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It tells how a knight, More of More Hall (which lies in the Don Valley beneath the Crag), obtains a special suit of Sheffield armour and kills the dragon by delivering an almighty kick up his "arse-gut". The lyric contains an accurate description of the area around Wharncliffe Chase, though the legend has spread far and wide. The name 'Wantley' is thought to derive from either Wortley or Wharncliffe.

For those unfamiliar with the area, I should explain that Wortley is a village, as well as the name of a local family, whose head became the Earl of Wharncliffe.<sup>1</sup> Wharncliffe Crag, Wharncliffe Woods and Wharncliffe Chase form a large area of woodland and heath above the River Don, around five miles to the North of Sheffield, and they are virtually uninhabited now, though the Woods are popular with mountain bikers. You would be unwise to try the trails there on a road bike.

I first came across the place 40 years ago when I moved to South Yorkshire and, not long afterwards, I came across the legend attached to it – at least I assumed that there was a connection between the legend and the place. After all, perhaps the most famous lines in the ballad are:

And More of More Hall, with nothing at all,  
He slew the dragon of Wantley.

Now, there is more than one version of the ballad (and, for the sake of completeness, there is also an opera and a novel about the affair), but all versions

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<sup>1</sup> The present Wortley Hall is an 18<sup>th</sup> century building, owned since the Second World War by a consortium of trade unions. Wortley Park is now entirely given over to agriculture.

refer to More, More Hall and Wantley/Wortley, while the description of the topography does remind one of the geographical features associated with the name Wharncliffe, especially the Craggs. More's battle with the dragon is also remembered in local tradition;<sup>2</sup> and, for what it is worth, there is a wood on the western (or More Hall) side of the Don, called Wantley Dragon Wood. This has a notice board displaying a map, which shows a Dragon's Den and a Dragon's Well on Wharncliffe Chase, on the heights opposite. Some years ago, the Woodland Trust built a drystone wall in the shape of a dragon at the top of the Wood, with a carved wooden head.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, long ago, Horace Walpole, son of Prime Minister Robert Walpole, and a prolific writer, thought that Sir Richard Wortley (who died in 1603) was the prototype for the allegorical dragon:

Old Wortley Montagu [d.1761] lives on the very spot where the dragon of Wantley did, only I believe the latter was much better lodged: you never saw such a wretched hovel: lean, unpainted, and half its nakedness barely shaded with hareteen,<sup>4</sup> stretched till it cracks. Here the miser hoards health and money, his only two objects; but the savageness of the scene would charm your Alpine taste: it is tumbled with fragments of mountain, that look ready for building the world. One scrambles over a huge terrace, on which mountain ashes and various trees spring out of the big rocks; and at the brow is the den, but not spacious enough for an inmate. However, I am persuaded it furnished Pope with this line, so exactly it answers to the picture:

'On rifted rocks, the dragon's late abode.'<sup>5</sup>

In all view of all this evidence, is there any reason to doubt the connection between the ballad and the Wortleys of Wharncliffe?

## Sheffield

The current *Wikipedia* article relies, partly, on an article posted on the internet by Steve Moxon ([www.stevemoxon.co.uk/dragon-of-wantley.php](http://www.stevemoxon.co.uk/dragon-of-wantley.php)), who traces the

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<sup>2</sup> See for example *The History of Morehall* by Brenda Duffield, at [www.stocksbridge.co.uk](http://www.stocksbridge.co.uk). The writer points out that in 1862 More Hall was sold to Lord Wharncliffe, so that 'the Dragon might have triumphed in the end'!

<sup>3</sup> I say 'for what it is worth' because the Trust only acquired the wood in 2000, and it was only then that the relevant part of the adjacent woodland was given its present name.

<sup>4</sup> Or harrateen, an English fabric of linen or wool, used in the 18<sup>th</sup> century for curtains and bed hangings.

<sup>5</sup> *Wortley & the Wortleys*, lecture delivered before the Sheffield Literary and Philosophical Society and the Rotherham Literary and Scientific Society, Rev. Alfred Gatty, D.D. (Thomas Rogers, Sheffield, 1877).

origin of the legend to 1573, and a lawsuit arising, not in Wortley or Wharnccliffe Chase, but in Sheffield:

A lawsuit was taken out in 1573 by one George More of Sheffield on behalf of the Sheffield Burgery (the 'free men' of Sheffield) against the Lord of the manor of Sheffield, George Talbot, the sixth Earl of Shrewsbury, in respect of his appropriation of the proceeds of Sheffield 'waste' land, which hitherto had paid for Sheffield's poor, civic works and the parish church.

So, in a single sentence, the writer jettisons the traditional origin of the ballad, which was related by the doyen of 'local history', David Hey, as recently as 2002, in his *Historic Hallamshire*. Moxon summarises the conventional view as follows:

Historians have long maintained a consensus that the once hugely famous legend (in the form of a bawdy anonymous ballad, and later an opera) of the fight between a dragon of Wharnccliffe Craggs and 'More of More Hall' is entirely an early-modern fancy: of Sir Francis Wortley personified as a dragon, with someone cast as the knightly adversary, who, though, can't be a More of More Hall because the family had died out by Sir Francis' time, necessitating the awkward twist that it has to be a later owner of More Hall, George Blount, as being one of those who took legal actions against the Wortleys circa 1600. The Dragon of Wantley ballad, it is insisted, is nothing more than the flippant appropriation of the standard 'George & the Dragon' tale to allegorise the contest, with a literary treatment to satirise medieval romance.<sup>6</sup>

Before turning to Moxon's theory, it is worth remembering that the original ballad was quite specific as to location:

In Yorkshire, near fair Rotherham,  
The place I know it well,  
Some two or three miles, or thereabouts,  
I vow I cannot tell;  
But there is a hedge, just on the hill edge,  
And Matthew's house hard by it;  
O there and then was this dragon's den,  
You could not chuse but spy it.

Now, it has to be admitted that it is about 8 miles (not 'two or three') from the centre of Rotherham to Wharnccliffe Craggs; but the lines quoted make it clear that the author was deliberately vague about the exact distance. However, we are told that

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<sup>6</sup> Moxon, op. cit., who pays tribute to David Hey, while opining that he was wrong.

the 'big fight' took place near Rotherham, not Sheffield. If the origin of the story was in a Sheffield law suit, it seems most unlikely that the ballad would not have made this clear. As it is, the poet does refer to Sheffield, but only when he tells us that his hero went there when he was in need of a new suit of armour, of high quality:

But first he went, new armour to  
Bespeak at Sheffield town,  
With spikes all about, not within but without,  
Of steel so sharp and strong,

We should also recall that the poet also refers to a 'hill-edge' and to 'Matthews's house' close by. This does sound like the solitary house perched on the Craggs high above the Don Valley that one sees even now from the Manchester Road; and, if this identification is correct, one can see why the poet said 'you could not chuse but spy it'. The house in question is indeed a remarkable sight from the West, and in particular from More Hall Reservoir. It is now called Wharncliffe Lodge.

But why did the writer of the ballad call the Lodge 'Matthew's House'? The name is probably medieval, as is much of the language used in the poem, but Matthew's house is described in the Bible, in *Matthew* 9:10-12. The New Life Version tells us that:

Jesus ate in Matthew's house. Many men who gathered taxes and many who were sinners came to Matthew's house and sat down with Jesus and His followers. The proud religious law-keepers saw this. They said to the followers of Jesus, "Why does your Teacher eat with men who gather taxes and with sinners?" Jesus heard them and said, "People who are well do not need a doctor."

So, Matthew's House was a kind of haven or refuge, which would be an appropriate name for Wharncliffe Lodge in former times (despite Horace Walpole's criticisms). This was certainly what Lady Mary Wortley Montague thought, when she visited the place in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. She wrote that 'it was a sequestered rural spot, [although] quite of a rude nature.' A ride in a horse-drawn coach, along the track from the Woodhead Road and across the Chase, to the Lodge, must certainly have been a bruising experience; but the Lodge would still have been a welcome sight.

But Mr Moxon will have none of this. For him, the identification of the dragon with a lord of Wortley (as opposed to a lord of Sheffield) is simply false, indeed it is no more than 'an 18th century conjecture by Godfrey Bosville, likely serving to aggrandize one of his ancestors and to denigrate this ancestor's antagonist, Sir Francis Wortley'. He criticises all previous historians (including Bosville, Bishop Percy, Joseph Hunter and David Hey) for missing the point, which only he has discovered – which is the existence of a lawsuit in 1573 between George

More and the Earl of Shrewsbury. According to Moxon, this is the true origin of the legend, which he also thinks is a commentary on the social tensions generated by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation.

These new theories are open to serious objection:

1 The ballad does not mention the Earl of Shrewsbury, or the subject matter of the Sheffield lawsuit, and cannot be tied to Sheffield in terms of topography. Admittedly it does mention a More of More Hall; but not a George More, which is the particular name Moxon focusses on .

2 Moxon establishes no connection between the facts of the 1573 litigation, involving George More and the Earl of Shrewsbury and those which appear in the ballad; and the 1573 litigation does not relate to Wantley or Wortley or Wharncliffe or More Hall. Yet Moxon asserts that it is 'self-evident' that the lawsuit of 1573 is the one 'indistinctly recalled by Bosville', in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Why?

3 Moxon thinks that what lay behind the case in 1573 was the re-distribution of land which took place as a result of the dissolution of the monasteries and chantries some decades previously; but there is no mention of religion, or of the two great dissolutions, in the ballad. Admittedly, the English Reformation did lead to many disputes about the title to land; but again, there is not a hint of this in the ballad, though it accuses the dragon figure of many injustices. In addition, Moxon seems to think that the 1573 dispute was a rare event; but disputes like this were very common. Likewise, there is no reason to regard the 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Shrewsbury, or his wife Bess of Hardwick, as unusually rapacious. The Elizabethan aristocracy was notorious for its extravagant spending, indebtedness, litigiousness and ruthlessness.<sup>7</sup>

4 Moxon claims that George More of Sheffield was probably related to the More of More Hall. Why? More or Moore is a common name, for obvious reasons, in the North of England. Further, there is nothing in the idea that 'More' was commonly mis-spelt. There could be no mis-spelling in an age before orthography was standardised.

5 There are several passages in Moxon's article where he draws conclusions from Celtic or Gaelic place-names. One would have more confidence in these if he could spell English correctly. Thus he has 'villein of the peace', where he means 'villain of the piece', and 'principle' where he means 'principal.' Yet he castigates 'the stubborn failure of academics to consider Gaelic roots, through false outdated notions about prehistory.'

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<sup>7</sup> See Lawrence Stone's *Crisis of the Aristocracy* (1967), David Cannadine's *Aspects of Aristocracy* (1994) and Chris Bryant's *Critical History of the British Aristocracy* (2017).

6 Moxon draws the wrong conclusion about the poet's use of 'Matthew's House' as the name for what is generally considered to be Wharncliffe Lodge. He says Matthew's House was the name of the house of Jesus's first disciple, which is true, but then says 'the Wortley Lord can hardly have been considered in the ballad both as 'Matthew' and the 'monster'. Why not? Why should we assume that Wharncliffe Lodge was occupied by the lord of Wortley at the relevant time? It might have been occupied by a tenant or employee. In any case, on my reading of the poem, the allegorical dragon might have had his den 'on the hill edge' (which I take to be Wharncliffe Crag), rather than in Matthew's House itself, though this was undoubtedly close by. Finally, Moxon reads the poem too literally at this point. Why should we assume that 'Matthew's House' was a holy place, when this might simply have been the poet's way of referring to a haven, especially in winter-time?

7 Moxon proposes that Sir Richard Fanshawe, a Cavalier who spent some years in internal exile at the now ruinous Tankersley Old Hall, may have been the author of the ballad; but provides no evidence to support this conjecture. We do know that Fanshawe translated Luis de Camoens's epic poem *The Lusians*, from Portuguese into English in the mid-1650s. His wife tells us so.<sup>8</sup> Why didn't she mention *The Dragon of Wantley*, if Fanshawe wrote it?

## Wharncliffe Chase

Let us turn from the critic to the criticised. David Hey's view of the origins of 'the Dragon of Wantley' was that the ballad probably had its origins in the 1590s, in litigation between local people and their landlord Sir Richard Wortley. The Wortleys were 'accepted in the Earl of Shrewsbury's circle', centred on Sheffield Manor Lodge; but there was 'no reason to link the Earl with these disputes'. The litigation concerned tithes and enclosures – common enough sources of conflict in Elizabethan times. It is the second of these disputes which featured Sir Richard Wortley as the villain of the piece.

In 1594 Sir Richard Wortley lodged a complaint in the Court of Chancery, alleging that George Blount of More Hall and others had repeatedly broken into, and vandalised, both the Old Park at Wortley and the New Park on Wharncliffe Chase. The offenders were mostly yeomen or members of the minor gentry, some of whom were servants of the Earl of Shrewsbury. These Parks had only recently been enclosed: Sir Richard had enlarged the former and created the latter while extending Wharncliffe Chase in 1589, which almost certainly involved the eviction of some of his tenants. In real life, therefore, it was deer, rather than dragons, which 'ate up men'. (We should also note that Sir Richard's ancestor Sir Thomas Wortley had 'form', when it came to the enclosure of parts of Wharncliffe Chase).

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<sup>8</sup> *Chapelton Researches*, M.H.Habershon, (London & Sheffield, 1893).

David Hey's is the better view. To start with (and to employ an admittedly *ad hominem* argument) he knew more about the history of South Yorkshire than anyone else. He spent his life, and built a career, on it, acquiring several degrees, and was latterly Emeritus Professor of Local and Family History at the University of Sheffield. He read all the sources, and published learned articles about many subjects relevant to the argument, long before he published *Historic Hallamshire*. Moreover, he was a scholar and took a cautious approach to evidence. While he clearly thought that the the ballad originated in the events of 1593, rather than 1573, he did not assert this dogmatically. He suggested that it was the most likely explanation, which is probably the most we can hope for.

But what matters more is the evidence; and here there are again several points we can make:

1 Hey's theory is soundly based on a study of the text of the ballad which appeared in Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* of 1765; and in particular on the place names and topography used by the author of that text. Thus the action is shown to have taken place on Wharnccliffe by the poet's use of the place names 'Wantley' (which appears as 'Wantcliffe' in an inscription cut in the rocks at Wharnccliffe Crag in Henry VIII's time); and there are features of Wharnccliffe Crag which find an echo in the poetry ('the stones he could not crack' could well be the gritstone boulders which lie in profusion up there). Hey even reproduced a black and white photograph of a hole in the rocks (not far from the Lodge) known as the Dragon's Den. Meanwhile, More Hall still lies where it always was, on the minor road leading to More Hall reservoir, West of the Don.

2 Though he cannot prove it, Hey explains a possible origin for 'Matthew's House', pointing out that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Godfrey Bosville identified one Matthew Northall as the keeper of Wharnccliffe Lodge. My earlier point that Matthew's House has a Biblical connotation is not inconsistent with this. The ballad after all is a work of fiction; and there could be a *double entendre* here, though Hey's explanation is the more obvious one.

3 Crucially, Hey shows that Sir Richard Wortley's activities in the Wharnccliffe area in the late 1580s and '90s are the most likely explanation for the complaints made in the poem about the 'eating' of trees, houses and churches; and that he is the most likely villain to be cast as the Dragon, rather than the Earl of Shrewsbury (though it should certainly not be assumed that the latter was a stranger to litigation). He does this by a close study of the archives as a whole, rather than by concentrating on a single document.

4 Hey thinks that the ballad was probably written by a minstrel attached to the court of the Earl of Shrewsbury, shortly after the death of Richard Wortley in 1603. He

thereby sets the ballad in context, in terms of authorship and audience, as well as geography.

5 Admittedly, the argument that the ballad can be traced to identifiable people in the 1590s would seem to breakdown when we come to More of More Hall, because (as Hey also points out) the last owner or tenant there called More moved out of the area in 1547. Moreover, the tenant of More Hall in the 1590s, who (uniquely as far as we know) was involved in both the tithe and hunting disputes with Sir Richard Wortley, was called George Blount. However, Hey did not argue that the ballad was a precise allegory, but simply that the Wortley family's activities in the Wharnccliffe area in the 1590s were its most likely source. The two disputes are presented in the form of a consciously antique ballad, with archaic language and touches of medieval romance, and featuring elements of the story about St George and the Dragon; and there is nothing unusual in giving a story a hero who lived in the past, rather than the present. More of More Hall may well have been such a man.

6 At the end of the ballad, the Dragon is slain, with a kick up the backside, rather than a club or a sword. This explains why we are told in the first verse that More did what he did 'with nothing at all' – which is to say that no weapon was used. Can we draw a connection between this and the version of the facts on which the legend was based, as related by David Hey or Steve Moxon? In the first case the connection is slim, but in the second case it is non-existent. If the Dragon of Wantley represents Sir Richard Wortley, then we know that he died at the age of 42 in 1603, not long after the court proceedings involving George Blount;<sup>9</sup> but, if it represents the 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Shrewsbury, he died in 1590, some 17 years after the court case involving George More of Sheffield.

In conclusion, the ballad was meant to be enjoyed, rather than picked apart (although that is what I have spent most of this chapter doing). It was immensely popular in its day, giving rise to a comic opera in 1734 and a novel by the American novelist Owen Whistler in 1892; but, above all, it was entertaining, being included in all the great collections of this kind of verse, in 1685, 1699, 1725 and 1765. It was also referred to often in 19<sup>th</sup> literature, and the reference to it in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* in particular helped to create a minor tourist industry in South Yorkshire. It can be read for pleasure even today, without knowing who all the 'characters' were meant to represent.

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<sup>9</sup> The coincidence did not escape Hey, who thought it accounted for the probable date on which the ballad was composed: *Historic Hallamshire*, p. 153.



## APPENDIX: THE BALLAD<sup>10</sup>

Old stories tell how Hercules  
A dragon slew at Lerna,  
With seven heads, and fourteen eyes,  
To see and well discern-a:  
But he had a club, this dragon to drub,  
Or he had ne'er done it, I warrant ye:  
But More of More-Hall, with nothing at all,  
He slew the dragon of Wantley.

This dragon he had two furious wings,  
Each one upon each shoulder;  
With a sting of his tayl, as long as a flayl,  
Which made him bolder and bolder.  
He had long claws, and in his jaws  
Four and forty teeth of iron;  
With a hide as tough as any buff,  
Which did him round environ.

Have you not heard how the Trojan horse  
Held seventy men in his belly?  
This dragon was not quite so big,  
But very near I'll tell ye.  
Devoured he poor children three,  
That could not with him grapple;  
And at one sup he eat them up,  
As one would eat an apple.

All sorts of cattle this dragon did eat;  
Some say he ate up trees,  
And that the forests sure he would  
Devour up by degrees;  
For houses and churches were to him geese and turkies;  
He ate all, and left none behind,  
But some stones, dear Jack, that he could not crack,  
Which on the hills you will find.

In Yorkshire, near fair Rotherham,  
The place I know it well,

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<sup>10</sup> [www.allpoetry.com/The-Dragon-of-Wantley](http://www.allpoetry.com/The-Dragon-of-Wantley), see also Percy, op.cit.

Some two or three miles, or thereabouts,  
I vow I cannot tell;  
But there is a hedge, just on the hill edge,  
And Matthew's house hard by it;  
O there and then was this dragon's den,  
You could not chuse but spy it.

Some say, this dragon was a witch;  
Some say he was a devil;  
For from his nose a smoke arose,  
And with it burning snivel;  
Which he cast off, when he did cough,  
In a well that he did stand by,  
Which made it look just like a brook  
Running with burning brandy.

Hard by a furious knight there dwelt,  
Of whom all towns did ring,  
For he could wrestle, play at quarter-staff, kick, cuff and huff,  
Call son of a whore, do any king of thing,  
By the tail and the main, with his hands twain,  
He swung a horse till he was dead;  
And that which is stranger, he for very anger  
Eat him all up but his head.

These children, as I told, being eat,  
Men, women, girls, and boys,  
Sighing and sobbing, came to his lodging,  
And made a hideous noise;  
"O save us all, More of More-hall,  
Thou peerless knight of these woods;  
Do but slay this dragon, who won't leave us a rag on,  
We'll give thee all our goods."

"Tut, tut," quoth he, "no goods I want:  
But I want, I want, in sooth,  
A fair maid of sixteen, that's brisk and keen,  
With smiles about the mouth,  
Hair black as sloe, skin white as snow,  
With blushes her cheeks adorning,  
To anynt me o'er night, ere I go to fight,  
And to dress me in the morning."

This being done, he did engage  
To hew the dragon down;  
But first he went, new armour to  
Bespeak at Sheffield town,  
With spikes all about, not within but without,  
Of steel so sharp and strong,  
Both behind and before, arms, legs, and all o'er,  
Some five or six inches long.

Had you but seen him in this dress,  
How fierce he look'd and how big,  
You would have thought him for to be  
Some Egyptian porcupig.  
He frighted all, cats, dogs, and all,  
Each cow, each horse, and each hog:  
For fear they did flee, for they took him to be  
Some strange outlandish hedgehog.

To see this fight, all people then  
Got up on trees and houses;  
On churches some, and chimneys too;  
But these put on their trowses,  
Not to spoil their hose. As soon as he rose,  
To make him strong and mighty,  
He drank by the tale six pots of ale,  
And a quart of aqua-vitae.

It is not strength that always wins,  
For wit doth strength excell;  
Which made our cunning champion  
Creep down into a well,  
Where he did think, this dragon would drink,  
And so he did in truth;  
And as he stoop'd low, he rose up and cry'd, "Boh!"  
And hit him in the mouth.

"Oh," quoth the dragon, "pox take thee, come out!  
Thou disturb'st me in my drink:"  
And then he turn'd, and s[hat?] at him;  
Good lack how he did stink!  
"Beshrew thy soul, thy body's foul,  
Thy dung smells not like balsam;  
Thou son of a whore, thou stink'st so sore,

Sure thy diet is unwholesome."

Our politick knight, on the other side,  
Crept out upon the brink,  
And gave the dragon such a douse,  
He knew not what to think:  
"By cock," quoth he, "say you so, do you see?"  
And then at him he let fly  
With hand and with foot, and so they went to't;  
And the word it was, Hey boys, hey!

"Your words," quoth the dragon, "I don't understand:"  
Then to it they fell at all,  
Like two wild boars so fierce, if I may  
Compare great things with small.  
Two days and a night, with this dragon did fight  
Our champion on the ground;  
Tho' their strength it was great, their skill it was neat,  
They never had one wound.

At length the hard earth began to quake,  
The dragon gave him a knock,  
Which made him to reel, and straitway he thought,  
To lift him as high as a rock,  
And thence let him fall. But More of More-hall,  
Like a valiant son of Mars,  
As he came like a lout, so he turn'd him about,  
And hit him a kick on the a[rse?]

"Oh," quoth the dragon, with a deep sigh,  
And turn'd six times together,  
Sobbing and tearing, cursing and swearing  
Out of his throat of leather;  
"More of More-hall; O thou rascal!  
Would I had seen thee never;  
With the thing at thy foot, thou hast prick'd my a[rse-gut?],  
And I'm quite undone for-ever.

"Murder, murder," the dragon cry'd,  
"Alack, alack, for grief;  
Had you but mist that place, you could  
Have done me no mischief."  
Then his head he shook, trembled and quaked,

And down he laid and cry'd;  
First on one knee, then on back tumbled he,  
So groan'd, kickt, s[hat?], and dy'd.

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**Wortley Park**





**Wharncliffe Lodge**



**Wharncliffe Lodge from the Don Valley**





**More Hall**





**The Dragon in Wantley Dragon Wood**