

The History of Upper Heyford

Upper Heyford, historically, a rural agricultural parish lies in North Oxfordshire, about 12 miles north of Oxford, and roughly the same distance south of Banbury. It is bounded by Somerton to the North, Ardley and Middleton Stoney to the East, Lower Heyford to the South with Steeple Aston and Middle Aston to the West. The Cherwell River flows through the valley, forming the western boundary,. It is widely believed that this parish got its name from a ford over this river from which it rises steeply to the East.

Doomsday records this parish as 'Hegford'. Later, towards the end of the 12th century, it became one of the estates of New College, Oxford, who still own much land in the parish. In the early 20th century the Royal Air Force established an airfield here, which was active during both World Wars. The United States Air Force took over this site from the 1950s until 1994. The medieval parish consisted of approximately 1,600 acres, but the airbase was to reduce the size of the parish to just under half of its original size.

The Upper Heyford Historical Society was formed in January 2004, and is concerned with all aspects of history of this place and the local area, at present focusing on the previous two centuries. This is a small informal group that meets in each other's homes to discuss ongoing work and future research. There is no fee to join the group; just enthusiasm and curiosity. Society members occasionally attend other local history events and workshops. At present, and for the foreseeable future, the society's main priority is to archive material already gathered. To date this society has produced three booklets; two containing some of the history of the parish, and the first of two which focus on the village Flower Show. Information on these can be accessed through the website address on www.upperheyfordvillage.co.uk

PLACES OF WORSHIP

The Society has discovered the following: The present Anglican Church, rebuilt and renovated over the centuries; lastly in 1867, stands where other ancient structures of worship stood, overlooking the Cherwell River. The three story tower is all that remains of a medieval structure with its battlemented parapet, protruding staircase and two – belfry windows. On the buttresses at the north-west and south-west angles of this tower are carved the arms of New College, Oxford. Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, 1897, is commemorated by a clock on the east face of the church tower. In the same year a Wesleyan Chapel opened in the village, and is now a private home.

Many of the Rectors of this parish in times past were New College men. The last Rector to serve this place as a single parish was the Reverend E.P. Baker, who left in 1954. Later Upper Heyford became one of several parishes within the Cherwell Valley Benefice in the Diocese of Oxford.

The Present Rectory was built in 1864, the architect being William Wilkinson, who also left his mark on several homes in North Oxford, and designed the Randolph Hotel in Oxford. Its 19th century significance in the community can be judged by its size consisting as it did of upwards of 20 rooms. Today it has been developed into several privately owned apartments.

It would appear that the original parsonage was located near the Manor and possibly attached to the church. The church and manor are probably the oldest buildings in the village. Manor farm is one of two remaining working farms in this parish today. On this site also is a magnificent medieval barn probably dating from the early 15th century as well as a 17th century Granary, recently restored.

ENCLOSURE

Upper Heyford residents experienced a change in lifestyle with the arrival of James Brinley's canal, which occupies 8 acres of parish land, and opened in 1790. The engineers used the course of the river near the manor for their silent highway, thus destroying the site of the original ford.

Enclosure took place here in 1842, this parish being one of the last to be enclosed in Oxfordshire. The Reverend Innes Baker was the Rector who supervised the transformation of the parish from an open field and wasteland, system of farming to field division by quick set hedges, which this movement brought about. Farms approximately 9 in number, at that time, were located in the village prior to enclosure. Following this movement 3 other farmsteads were established on the eastern end of the parish, in the vicinity of today's Leys Caravan Park. Additionally, the parish moved from dairy to sheep farming and the cultivation of barley and turnips, all of which it was noted for, in those times.

Allotments - Part of the enclosure of Upper Heyford involved the provision of roughly 20 acres of land for use as allotments FOR THE POOR in compensation for the loss of the right to cut furze on the waste for fuel. The number of residents who hold allotments has reduced over time. There is an active and dedicated population who produce their own food on this land today. In the same year, 1891, as the village received a Reading Room from Lord Victor Albert George Jersey, he had a barn built on the allotment site for the use of allotment holders. Happily, allotment holders today enjoy the benefit of piped water to this place, in addition to collected rainwater for their use in cultivation.

Recreation Field - In addition to allotment land, parishioners received over 3 acres of Recreation Ground for their use. On this site, but no longer with us, the parish stocks were located, The Allotments and Recreation Ground have been in use since 1875. During the 1950s a Village Hall and Sports Pavilion was added to the Recreation Ground, partly funded by the USAF, for the benefit of the parish and the wider community.

Railway - Great Western Railway Company laid its tracks through 10 acres of this parish, and opened for traffic 2nd September, 1850. The first person to purchase a ticket at Lower Heyford station was David Kirby, sawyer, Upper Heyford.

School - The National school, today a private home, was opened here in 1861 on land given by New College and Richard Greaves, farmer, Two Trees Farmhouse. William Weatherell was the then Rector. The building cost £422. Originally this building included a teachers house, which is believed to have been located in the part which displays the arms of New College. This gable looks directly into the Tchure

The Green, where the Reading Room is located, was home to upward of twenty families during parts of the 19th Century. Today, approximately six or so homes surround the area.

The Mill - Noah Austin, a butcher, murdered James Allen, the miller, here in this parish in 1863 Both men were natives of the village. Austin was subsequently hanged in Oxford for this foul deed - his was the last public execution in Oxfordshire. Today James Allen's tombstone stands alone in the church yard, and although his family carried on the milling business the Mill was demolished in 1910, possibly due to decay. It straddled the river Cherwell, to the west of Allen's lock, where today the mill race can still be heard.

Pubs - The village used to have two public houses. The Barley Mow and The Three Horseshoes. The latter is mentioned in 18th century literature, and although the former may also be as old, both establishments are most often mentioned in 19th century documentation. The Barley Mow is the only remaining public house in the village today; the Three Horseshoes now being two private homes,

Post Office - Although in times past many village houses served as Post Offices the village today, has a visiting post office from Fritwell, calling for a half hour once a week.

War - In the years leading up to and during WW1 many young men, from different parts of the Commonwealth, lost their lives in aircraft accidents, in the local area. A visit to the cemetery here reminds one of the heroic sacrifices of these people who gave their lives for the freedoms we enjoy. The War Graves are maintained to a very high standard and it is not unusual to hear of family members travelling from far away places to visit the final resting place of their loved one.

The airfield was to grow to include a population of approximately 5,000 U.S military personnel and about 1,000 civilian employees and was home to the F111s involved in the Libyan airstrikes in the late 1980's. (The population figures do not include family

members). In recent times the Ministry of Defence sold the base to the North Oxford Consortium, who plan to develop a community of 1,000 homes with facilities. It is partially used as a business park; some of the site is to be preserved as a historical testimony to the cold war, and English Heritage has found some rare and otherwise endangered flora and fauna here. More information is available through their website www.raf-upper-heyford.org

Like many other small communities, the village has lost some local services including shops, chapel, post office, school and one of its two pubs. However, Upper Heyford continues to evolve, and today, with close links to the M40 many inhabitants commute to the larger towns and cities for work. Yet it is still a vibrant community with a range of active groups and clubs and several sporting and social events held throughout the year. At present, there are plans to refurbish the Reading Room for community use. As mentioned earlier, this building was a late 19th century gift from Lord Jersey to the parish. As its name implies it was where one could go to read the newspapers and literature of the day. Over time it has served as an infant school and a nursery school and will now serve future generations, as a meeting place for community activities, in a truly delightful setting.

The Historical Society- Jan