



Stevington: The Village Scene

Stevington is situated at latitude 52.10N and longitude 0.37W about six miles north of Bedford. It is a small parish of 1676 acres nestling in the valley of the River Great Ouse. Geologically the land is Oxford clay overlying Oolitic limestone.

The origins of the settlement are obscure. There is a little evidence of iron-age activity on the east side of Church Road and some evidence of Romano-British occupation at six unexcavated sites in the south east of the Parish. The name Stevington, "Styfa's Farm", is old English and first occurs in Domesday Book (1086). The earliest dateable artifact is the tower of the church, which is Anglo-Saxon and was probably built in the 980s. Precisely when the Church of St Mary the Virgin was established is not known. However, it is reasonable to suppose that the area of the ecclesiastical parish had been well-defined by the early 10th Century. At the base of the outcrop on which the Church is built is the Holy Well. Like many such wells it was reputed to cure blindness and the spring is said to never to have failed.



In early times Stevington was situated on the frontier of the Danelaw; Bedford was not retaken until 915. The Parish included the area known as Picts Hill (136 acres) which was lost to Turvey in 1946 as a result of a local government boundary change. The Anglo-Saxon settlement developed in the area around what is now the Cross and in a series of outlying "ends" (small hamlets each with its green): Park End to the east, Duck End to the south and West End. Picts Hill was another "end" and was the site of a major Village green. The mediaeval manor did not simply include the ecclesiastical parish of Stevington but held land in adjoining Pavenham, Turvey and Bromham (Salem Thrift).

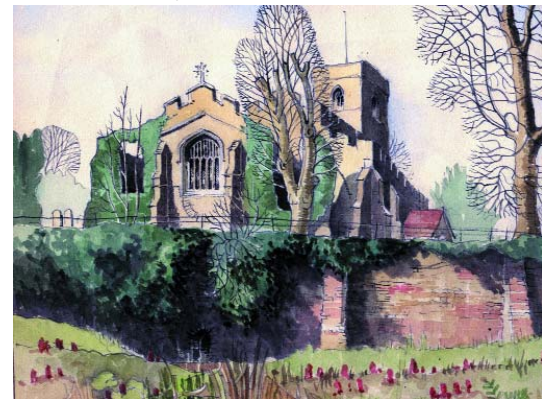
It is difficult to trace the early effect of man on the physical appearance of the parish. Clearances of woodland typically began as far back as the Neolithic period. However, we do know from the Domesday Book that the Village was substantially cleared of forest by 1086 as there was only sufficient woodland for 20 pigs to "rootle". The mediaeval agricultural system whereby villagers held strips (fur-

longs) in the great open fields was Anglo-Saxon in origin. In Stevington the principal fields were at the south eastern end of stretching from the Stevington-Oakley Road. These fields were called the Little Field and the Great Field. There were also Lower Field, Backside Field, Pixhill Field,

Haslewood Field, Mobbs Bush Field, Red Land Field, Barnsey Field and Park Field and Drinking Bush Field. The last was the final and inebriated resort of those who annually "beat the Bounds". One of the last known examples of ridge and furrow in Stevington was Farley Field, ploughed out in the 1960s.

To the north, between the Bromham Road and the River was The Park. The Anglo-Saxon thane, Arnulf, was succeeded by Count Eustace II of Boulogne at the Conquest and the Park may owe its origin to the latter. It was a hunting area divided into the Great and Little Park and was probably surrounded by a dyke, or bund, to confine the deer.

The aspect of the Village until the 19th Century was very different from what we see today. It was much more open. The present field system with its profusion of trees and hedges dates from the Enclosure Award of 1806. There had been some earlier enclosure to create the Lord's demesne but the open field system had continued in some form or another until the Award was implemented. The effect was to rationalise land-owning in the Village to the benefit of the larger landowners. It also led to the creation of some new roads such as the present road at Wheaton Hill leading to the Northampton Road (in place of the old Turvey Road), the straight road from Court Lane to West End and the northern part of Church Road. It also created the road to Bromham in place of the southern route which passed Skylark cottage and is now a bridleway.



The built environment of the Village is easier to trace. St Mary's is undoubtedly the earliest building in the Village followed by the Old Vicarage, part of which dates from the 15th Century. On the present site of the Barns on the west side of Church Road was a hospice which was an offshoot of Harold Priory. The old Manor House was built onto the Hospice, probably in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. Both were demolished by the Duke of Bedford in the 1870s along with the Great Tithe Barn, which straddled what is now Church Road approximately at the entrance to The Barns.



The Cross at the centre of the Village, situated almost in the middle of the road, (an early example of traffic calming?) was probably erected by Hugh II, Bishop of Lincoln, between 1207 and 1227. It may originally have stood at the Hospice. Some consider that it is the cross mentioned in Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress".

Parts of Duck End Farm and Meeting Farm probably date from the late Middle Ages. The houses of Stevington in that period were built of wood and have largely vanished. With increased prosperity based upon the grain trade and wool production in the early 17th Century saw the rebuilding of the Village in stone. Typical is Cross Close (1637) probably built on the site of a former wooden framed dwelling. It is reputed to have had some connection with the old Manor House and a tunnel leading to the old Hospice. The Almshouses were constructed a few years



later by the trustees of the late William Barringer, a wealthy printer. He was a Stevington man who had made his fortune in London.

Most of the existing stone buildings, including the important Baptist Meeting at



West End, had probably been built by 1721 with the exception of the long row in Silver Street which dates from the 18th Century. Some of the notable stone buildings which have not been mentioned already are Hart Farm and West End Farm at West End and the Old House, Pear Tree Cottage and Twin Cottage in Church Road. Many other stone built cottages especially in Silver Street lend great character to the Village.



The windmill, dating from 1783, and an outstanding example of a post mill, was restored first by Percy Keech in the 1920s and again by the County Council in 1951 and 2004. It attracts many visitors.

The Duke of Bedford's rationalisation of the farms in Stevington involved the demolition of Broomhall Farm in the Park at the sharp bend in Park Road, a farmhouse opposite the almshouses, and the farmhouse of West End Farm.

On the positive side was the construction of the Manor Farmhouse with its associated barns, and Tythe Farm in 1872. The show-piece gardens at the Manor House are regularly open to the

public and have been created from scratch by Simon and Kathy Brown over the last fifteen years or so.



The 19th Century saw the beginning of building in brick, much of it local, as at Tythe Farm at the top of Wheaton Hill, the Institute, the Church Room, the Red Lion public house and the primitive Methodist Chapel. Slate also became available with the construction of the canals. The School and Schoolmaster's House, being built in stone, were an exception. The twentieth century witnessed some expansion of the Village first in Court Lane, then in Farley Way and Burrigge's Close, and latterly at Foxbrook.



All the photographs used in this article were taken from the recent publication "Stevington In Pictures" which is available for £17.50 from The Stevington Historical Trust. Call Peter Hart on 01234 823586, or order online from: www.rogerdayphotography.com/publication.htm

