

ASTON TIRROLD AND UPTHORPE

HISTORY, TRADITIONS AND NEIGHBOURHOOD

BY

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WOOD ENGRAVING BY NEVILLE ADAMS

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St. Michael's Church, Aston Tirrold.

Printed from a paper read to the Aston Women's Institute on January 13th, 1921,

by Miss L. Fuller.

Miss Fuller, who died on November 10th, 1935, was the last of the Fuller family to live in Aston. She was the daughter of Mr John Fuller of Copse Stile.

Fifty copies of this book have been printed. Nos. 1 and 2 have been specially bound.

This edition has been reprinted by the Astons History Group in 2004 as part of the celebrations to mark the 40th. anniversary of the present Astons Village Hall, and the 60th. anniversary of the Village Meeting that voted in favour of the Astons Women's Institute resolution of 1942 to provide a Village Hall for the villages.

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ASTON TIRROLD AND UPTHORPE



As we older folk pursue our quiet way about the winding roads of Aston, we often recall the changes that have taken place during our lifetime, and sometimes our thoughts go much further back, and we try to picture to ourselves what Aston was like in the days of old. It is in the hope of gathering together a little of what is known of our village and neighbourhood, that this paper is written.

The earliest authentic mention of Aston is in the famous Domesday Book compiled in the reign of William the Conqueror, and finished in the year 1086. In this Survey every town and village in England was set down, with the number of its population, the amount of land in each estate, and the produce grown thereon, all these details, being collected at a vast expenditure of labour and money, that the Norman King might be able to find out exactly how much taxation his unhappy new subjects could be made to bear. Aston is there called *Æstoune* – Eastown, a Saxon name which shows that there was a village here long before the coming of the Normans, though nothing has been recorded of its previous history. After the Norman Conquest Aston was given to a Norman named Ferrold, or Thorold, or Tyrrold – it is spelt in at least five different ways. In accordance with Norman custom Tyrrold did not attempt to alter the Saxon name of his new possession, but he added his own to it, and so it became Aston Tirrold, meaning Aston belonging to Tirrold. Aston Upthorpe is wholly Saxon, and means a hamlet or homestead adjoining Aston. Though there is not much to relate about Aston itself in those far-off days, there are places around us that carry us back many hundreds of years.

We all know that fifty-five years before the birth of Our Lord, the great Roman General, Julius Caesar, having conquered Gaul, as France was then called, crossed the Channel and landed on the coast of what is now Kent. The natives of our islands, who were called Britons, fiercely opposed the Romans, but they could not withstand those mighty armies of well-disciplined and well-armed soldiers, and very soon they were obliged to own the Romans as their masters. For 400 years many of these Roman conquerors and their descendants made their home in Britain. A few of the British chiefs became their friends and were allowed some small share in the government of their country, but the rest of the conquered people who had escaped death became their slaves, and sadly they mourned the loss of their freedom. Yet it proved not altogether bad for them, for the Romans, though at times very cruel, were on the whole just and wise rulers, and our British forefathers learnt much from them.

The Romans built towns and villages, and made themselves fine stone houses furnished with many luxuries. They had a great military camp on Lowborough, in the parish of Aston Upthorpe, and a smaller one on Blewbarton, our famous hill that is partly in Aston

and partly in Blewbury. In both places numbers of relics have been dug up, and in the museum at Reading you may see various weapons such as spears and spearheads, battle-axes and arrow-heads, an enormous quantity of pottery bowls, dishes, saucers, jars of many sizes and shapes; glass was less common, but a few glass bottles, jugs, flasks and bowls have been found; also the head of a cock modelled in white clay. In addition to these are knives, some of them so skilfully clasped they would appeal to the modern schoolboy, needles (rather like our packing-needles) and pins, brooches, bracelets, rings (of all sizes) and other ornaments for men, women and children; tweezers, nail-cleaners, ear-picks, hair-pins and many other small articles used by the smart society of the day. In 1860 Mr Valpy, the then owner of Thorpe Farm, carried out extensive digging on Lowborough, and no less than 750 coins were found, some of them dating from the time when St Paul was a prisoner in Rome. Thousands of oyster shells have been found, and may still be dug up, for the Romans were epicures, and oysters brought from the beds at Colchester were one of their favourite delicacies.

Later on Lowborough was a beacon hill, and when the monster Armada of Spain threatened our Devon coast, no doubt Lowborough flashed forth its fiery signal of Gog and Magog, the next beacons in the chain, for as Macaulay tells us –

‘Such night in England ne’er had been nor e’er again shall be’,
when
‘From Eddystone to Berwick bounds, from Lynn to Milford Bay,
‘That time of slumber was as bright and busy as the day;
‘For swift to East and swift to West the ghastly war-flame spread,
‘High on St Michael’s Mount it shone; it shone on Beachy Head,
‘Far on the deep the Spaniard saw along each southern shire,
‘Cape beyond cape in endless range those twinkling points of fire’,

but the Spaniard little thought that he would never be allowed to land, and would meet only with disaster and destruction.

When the Romans came to our neighbourhood they found the Thames Valley covered with dense forests, with undergrowth so thick that it was in many parts impenetrable to men, and the most numerous inhabitants were wolves, wild-boars, big savage wild-cats and creatures of that ilk, and there also deer of various kinds. The only roads the Britons had been able to make were mere tracks trodden by the footsteps of the hunters. But even in those days there may have been a village here, or a cluster of huts. If there were, we can picture it something like this: the huts, some round, some square, would be built of mud or logs of wood, with one low doorway but no window. The roof, made of interlaced branches, would have a hole in the middle, to let in some light, and to let out smoke from the fire underneath it smouldering in the middle of the floor of dry mud; there might be some heaps of rushes to serve as beds or seats. Round these huts there would probably be some small clearing, on which a few sheep and cattle would graze, and oats or possibly a little wheat from Gaul could be grown, to make their hard cakes of bread. At that time the women had learnt to spin their wool and make coarse cloth to clothe their families, but if we travel in imagination a little further back still, we should find our forefathers living in holes in the ground, their only clothes the skins of the wild beasts they killed and lived upon, except perhaps when the bright sunshine made fashionable young beauties of both sexes prefer their own skins for summer garments, dyed with the bright blue juice they

were expert in extracting from the woad. But that was several hundred years earlier, and civilization had made some progress even before the arrival of the Romans.

Now these Romans were grand road-makers, and they soon altered the face of the country. All of us living here have the privilege of walking on one of their four most famous military roads. It ran from East to West of England and was called Icknield Way, or Ickledon Street. The barbarous Saxons, who came later, allowed parts of the splendid road to fall into decay, and there is now great difference of opinion as to its direct route just in our neighbourhood. Many antiquarians have said that it ran along our 'Fair Mile' past the foot of Lowborough, but now it is more generally thought that it is identical with our main road from Reading to Wantage, and that the Fair Mile is part of another Roman road called the Ridgeway. It is quite certain that the Icknield Way formed one of the boundaries of Blewbury, for it is so mentioned in a document dated 596, less than 200 years after the departure of the Romans. It is said that, after the Romans left, no roads to equal theirs were made until the coming of the railways and the broken-stone roads which were constructed by Macadam about the same time. Not only did the Romans make solid roads, but they cleared the forest for a long distance on each side, which made that part of the country much safer to live in.

The Romans ruled Britain for rather more than 400 years; during that time the Gospel of Christ was brought to them from Rome, and they, as well as many of the Britons, became Christians, and began to build churches to worship in. But the time came when the great city of Rome was itself in danger from hordes of barbarians, and a hasty summons was sent to Britain, commanding the return of all the Roman legionaries for the defence of the Mother-country. And so once more the Britons were left in full possession of their own land, but alas! without Roman help they were not strong enough to hold it. It was a fair and fertile country, and the fame of it had reached the peoples living on the other side of the North Sea, Jutes, Angles, and Saxons, and all these tribes came sailing across in their long strongly-built boats, in every increasing numbers. Landing on our eastern coast they burnt the houses, stole the cattle, and, killing all who opposed them, they drove the Britons ever farther and farther west, until Wales and Cornwall were the only parts of the island where they could live and defend themselves. Some of the Saxons settled in Essex – East Sax, others in Sussex – South Sax, and many more came into the division we now call Berkshire, and made it part of their kingdom of Wessex – West Sax. But the Angles were even more numerous; they overran nearly the whole of the country and called it Angle-Land – England.

The Romans came and went, the Angles and Saxons came and stayed, and their blood runs in our veins. At first they were terrible savages; they burnt the beautiful stone houses the Romans had left and all the villages and churches, and set up their heathen temples, for they believed in many gods. When we speak of Tuesday we are naming Tiu their god of war, Wednesday is the day of Wodin, the beautiful sky-god, and Thursday was the day when they offered sacrifice to Thor, their awful god of thunder. They soon began to build their own villages, some of which later became famous towns – Wantage, Wallingford, Abingdon – and it is probably that during this period, somewhere about 1,400 years ago, Aston or Æstoune, as they called it, came into being.

Let me describe a Saxon village, for as they were all built on much the same plan, it will enable us to picture something of the Aston of those days. Each Saxon chief who conquered part of our country called himself King of the land he had made his own. He

took as much of it as he wanted for his own estate, and the rest he divided among his chief followers, in payment for their services. These followers were called Thanes or Lords, and they again, having satisfied their own needs, would give smaller divisions of land to their men, who were bound in return to fight for their Lord, just as he had to fight for the King, and also to bring a certain number of men in his train. The few Britons who had not fled or been killed were made slaves, and they were forced to wear round their necks metal collars bearing the name of their master. The Thane would make his slaves build him a big wooden house, with a large hall and several rooms round it. Outside would be sheds for his cattle and horses, and barns for his corn and hay, and the whole would be surrounded by a deep ditch, and a very thick wall built of mud and stone to protect it from robbers and wild beasts.

Close by were smaller houses built by the Thane's men, and beyond these were the thatched huts of the slaves. All these houses made up the village, and in many cases there was a bit of common ground, which still remains as the village green, but it does not appear that Aston was ever favoured in this way by its Lord. The hills and country round that had been cleared, were divided into fields of which each freeman owned a strip, and in payment on certain days he had to spare his ox to pull the big village plough. Everybody in the village obeyed the Thane, and the Thane was answerable to his King. There were, however, many villages or townships without a Thane. In these the headman was elected annually by the freemen and was called the Reeve.

After many years had passed, St Augustine was sent by the Pope of Rome to preach to the Angles and Saxons – or, as they had come to be called, the English – and many of them, including the King, gave up their heathen gods and became Christians.

The greatest and best of all the Saxon Kings was Alfred the Great, and we are proud of the fact that he is distinctly connected with Aston. He was born in the royal palace at Wantage and was most carefully brought up by his mother, who encouraged him to learn to read, a rare accomplishment in those days for anyone who was not a monk. She also taught him to love the songs of his native land. During the reigns of his father and elder brother other fierce enemies had invaded England – the Danes and Vikings from Northern Europe. They were bold, fearless seamen and in their big ships they dashed across the Northern Seas, and raided our shores. At first they only carried off cattle, burnt houses and stole everything that they could lay their hands upon, and were gone again as quickly as they came; but each year they grew bolder and came in greater numbers, bringing their women and children with them, and though the English fought them stubbornly, they were unable to turn them out.

At last these invaders reached Reading and then ensued a series of fierce fights all along our Berkshire Downs. Alfred's elder brother Ethelred was then King, but the young prince Alfred was at the head of one wing of the army, the King being in command of the rest. Tradition tells us, that whilst King Ethelred was long at his prayers in the Church of All Saints at Aston Upthorpe, Alfred attacked the Danes from Blewburton Hill and after terrific fighting gained a complete victory at Æscendune, or Ashdown. The exact site of the famous battle is however not quite clear. Probably Æscendune was the name of a long range of hills, of which the most western still bears the name of Ashdown, but Blewburton, Lowborough and Compton may all have had part in the great fight; the story that at one time King Ethelred took up his station on the hill we call King's Standing, and watched his young brother's fierce onslaughts from that high ground, may well have preserved for us the exact truth. One thing is certain, Alfred won a great victory at

Æscendune, Wessex and Aston were saved from the Danes; Alfred was proved to be not only a great soldier, but a great leader of men.

Ethelred died in the same year, 871, and Alfred became King. The Danes still gave trouble; they were never driven out of England entirely, but Alfred succeeded in making terms with them, and there was peace. Eventually those who remained mixed with the English, and we gained another strain from the strong Danish stock.

Alfred reigned thirty years – years filled with great deeds, one of the most important of which was the raising of a strong navy. He died at Faringdon on the 28th of October, 901. A fine statue to his memory stands in the market place at Wantage. It was unveiled by King Edward VII, then Prince of Wales, in 1877. The inscription is worthy of the hero it commemorates. It runs as follows:

Alfred the Great
The West Saxon King,
Born at Wantage, A.D. 849.
Alfred found learning dead, and he restored it,
Education neglected and he revived it,
The laws powerless and he gave them force,
The Church debased and he raised it,
The Land ravaged by a fearful enemy,
From which he delivered it.

It may be interesting to consider a few of the ancient places by which we are surrounded. About 200 years before the time of King Alfred, one of the Saxon chiefs, Cissa, built a great Abbey at Abingdon, of which his nephew, Heane, became the first Friar; and his niece built and dedicated a Nunnery to St Helen. The Manor of Aston was soon after given to Lulla the Saxon, whose name is preserved in Lollingdon, and who presented both Lollingdon and Aston to the Abbey of Abingdon. The monks of Abingdon used their house at Lollingdon as a sanatorium for the sick. King Ethelred, known as the Unready, founded a small Nunnery at Cholsey, but its life was short, only 20 years, for on Christmas Day in the year 1006, it, and the whole village, were burnt by the Danes. The inhabitants however had timely warnings, for the Danes first passed them by, that they might hurry on to the richer town of Wallingford. It was not till they had plundered and burnt the larger place, that they returned to Cholsey to find it deserted, all its people, including the 25 nuns, having fled to the forest, in spite of the deep snow which made the wolves daring. But the wooden houses, church and nunnery were soon reduced to ashes, and lay waste for more than 100 years. Then King Henry I presented Cholsey to his newly built Abbey at Reading, whose monks rebuilt the church as it now stands, a rare and remarkable specimen of a small Norman Minster, cruciform in shape. At the restoration of the church a few years ago some burnt stones of the earlier Saxon church were found embedded in its walls. They name Cholsey – Ceolseye or Island of Ceol – recalls the marshy state of the land in Saxon times.

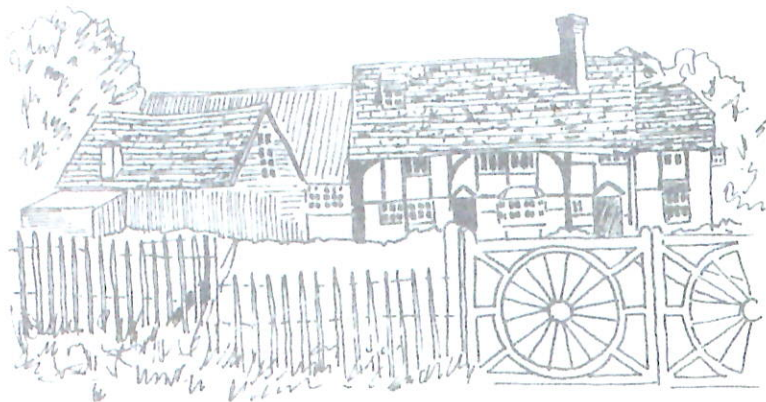
The town of Wallingford dates from the days of the early Britons, who called it Gwallenford, 'the old fort by the Ford', changed by the Saxons to Wallengasford and so to its present name. The Britons defended their ford by earthworks some of which still remain. At its most prosperous time Wallingford was a place of great importance, large enough to have 14 churches. Wallingford fought bravely, and suffered much from the

Saxons and the Danes, but played an ignoble part when William the Norman appeared at its gates. The Lord of Wallingford was then Wigod the Saxon. He had married his daughter to a Norman Baron, Robert D'Oyley, Lord of Oxford, who persuaded, or bribed, Wigod to allow William to cross the Thames at Wallingford. That enabled the Norman Duke to make his way to London which he quickly seized, and so became William the Conqueror, King of England. One of the privileges granted to Wallingford in return for this most unpatriotic service, was that of ringing their curfew bell at 9 in the evening instead of the usual hour of 8, and although no fires or lights are put out nowadays, the bell is still rung at 9 o'clock. William's son, Henry I, left his crown to his only child Mathilda, who had been married to the Emperor of Germany. Her claim was disputed by her cousin Stephen, and civil war wasted the country. At one time, when Mathilda had taken up her quarters at Oxford, Stephen's forces suddenly besieged the city, and she had to make a hurried flight to escape capture. Snow lay deep on the ground and the Thames was frozen, but the Empress with a small escort, dressed in white, contrived to make their way all unperceived through the enemy's lines, crossed the river on foot, and so arrived safely at Wallingford, where she was met by some of her own men under the Earl of Gloucester. Several times Stephen besieged Wallingford, but was never able to take it.

Wallingford played an important part in the Civil War between King and Parliament, which ended so disastrously for Charles I, but after the War its famous Castle, that had given Cromwell much trouble, was completely dismantled, and now only a few ruins are left. No doubt Aston and all the villages round sent many good men and true to fight on both sides, but their names are not preserved to us. The Fullers of those days had not yet come to Aston, but lived in an old house at Blewbury, a great part of which is still standing, and the story runs that one Sunday morning Mr John Fuller and his six sons returned from church and were sitting down to dinner, when the tramp of cavalry was heard, and a foraging party of Royalists from Oxford, where the King then was, came trooping in, no doubt attracted by the savoury smell. The dinner quickly disappeared and the cavaliers rode off gaily. Then the Fullers produced other provisions, probably from a hidden store, for many things had to be hidden in those days, and set about cooking another meal, to which when it was ready, they once more sat down, no doubt with whetted appetite. But again the tramp of soldiers was heard, and the stern faces of some of Cromwell's Ironsides broke in upon them. The second dinner was promptly commandeered, and history fails to relate whether the lawful owners were able to produce a third meal, or had to bear their hunger as best they might.

That same John Fuller was nominated in 1667 as Sheriff of the County of Berks. But, as a contemporary letter tells us, 'Although he was a good neighbour, and would lend a man a pair of harrows or a Dung-cart, and could pray well, he was rather too covetous' and I am sorry to say, he determined to walk to London to get himself excused from serving. Accompanied by his man, Corderoy (this gives us mention of another old Blewbury family which has migrated to Aston), he accomplished the long journey, and declined the offer that had been made to him. Towards the end of his life he was known as 'poor Mr Fuller', because having six estates he bestowed one on each of his six sons, and had none left for himself. His grandson Richard, of Fitzharris, Abingdon, was High Sheriff in 1754. Two Fullers fought at Waterloo, General Sir Joseph Fuller returned in safety, but his younger brother, Lieut-Col William Fuller, was killed in a charge of the first Dragoon Guards. Another old family is that of the Slades, of which our friend Mr Harold Slade is now the sole representative left at Aston. The Slades bought Thorpe Farm in 1521 as

shown by the Deed they still possess, but in 1782 John and Deborah Slade were married, and being blessed with 21 Children, they found it difficult to provide for so large a family, and therefore sold their land, though they continued to occupy it until Mr Leonard Slade removed to Kinton in 1912. But Mr L Slade has bought, and still owns, Lowborough.



The Smithy Thorpe Street c.1969

Thorpe Farm House, judging by the architecture and chimneys, may in part date from Tudor times, and if it could give us its history it would be an interesting record of the ways of farming during the last 400 years. To go back about 70 years when Mr Benjamin Slade was beginning farming, his sons can tell us of the long stone-flagged hall in which breakfast was given every morning to the labourers. The horses having already been fed by the carters, all the men assembled at six o'clock and enjoyed a substantial meal of home-cured bacon, home-made bread, and home-brewed small beer, before they went to work. Of course the women also started early to prepare a meal for so many, or perhaps to see to brewing or breadmaking. Once a month washing-day came round. All washing was done at home, two washer-women coming over-night, that they might start at two or three in the morning, and get the clothes hanging out betimes.

Corn was then threshed by flail, the operation going on continuously throughout the winter, until hand-worked threshing machines were invented, they in turn being superseded early in the last century by steam driven machines. And now the sound of the flail on the barn floor is hardly ever heard. More labour was needed in those days when steam-ploughs and reaping-machines were undreamed of; but wages were so low – 9/- to 12/- a week with extra for harvest – that we can only wonder how families could live on them in as much comfort as we know they did. They more ambitious young men were attracted by the higher wages they could earn on the railways, or as policemen; and among the girls the best hands at cooking or housework were tempted into the towns where mistresses offered more money than they could get at home. From these and other causes the population of the two Astons has dwindled a little :

In 1861 Aston Tirrold numbered 395 and Aston Upthorpe 169

In 1881 “ “ “ 310 “ “ “ 168

In 1911 “ “ “ 320 “ “ “ 120

Ethelred and Alfred are not the only Kings who have stood on King's Standing Hill. George III used to come there from Windsor for stag-hunting, and took up his station there to watch the unfortunate stag, which, having been sent the day before to spend a night in a small shed near the Manor Granary, was turned out on the Ridgeway ten minutes before the hounds were loosed. Let us hope the stage usually survived the hunt and was returned to his home in Windsor Forest.

In September 1914, King George V came to the Aston Downs to review many thousands of troops under training in the five camps and Churn, Moulsoford, and other places in this neighbourhood. He was accompanied by Lord – then Sir John – French, Sir Ian Hamilton and other famous generals, and great was the praise they bestowed on these volunteers for 'Kitchener's Army', then in their first enthusiasm to fight the great enemy that had defied the biggest part of Europe.

Unknown to most of the inhabitants, but by arrangement with the Rector, the Rev Lumley Green-Wilkinson, the Prince of Wales came to Aston in June 1914, just before the war began. He was one of 20 members of the Magdalen Detachment of the Oxford University Corps, and they bivouacked at the Rectory on a route march from Oxford to Churn Camp. Houses being taboo for the hardy cadets, they all slept in the Parish Room under a tarpaulin, and used the Rectory coach-house as their mess-room, the Prince serving as mess orderly.

As we have seen, Blewbury was already a village as far back as the year 596, and is called in Domesday Book Bleitberig. It has a fine church and two almshouses. In the church two ancient books are preserved that date from the reign of Edward VI. They are partly bound in iron, and have chains attached, but whether they were originally chained to a lectern is uncertain; they may very possibly be the two large books mentioned by Ashmole, as being chained to the monument of Sir John and Dame Alice Daunce, the remains of which monument are now in the south aisle.

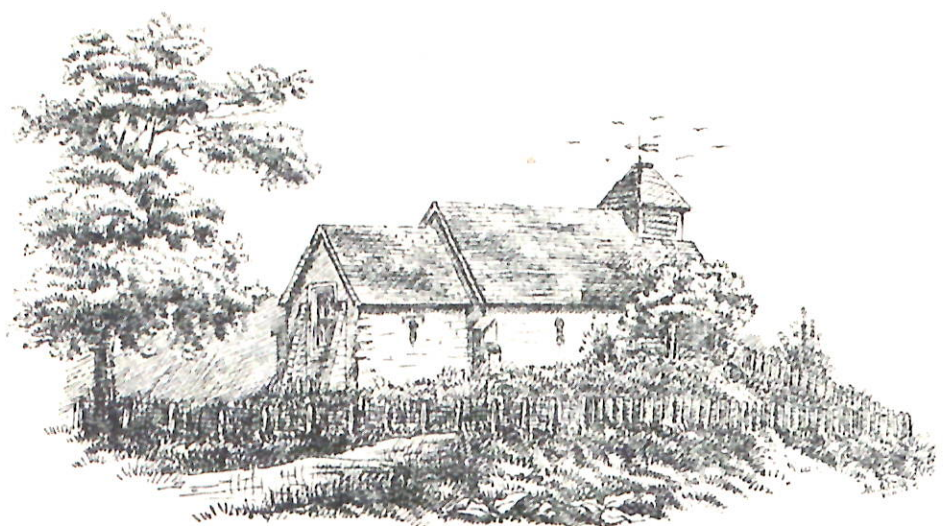
The oldest building in Aston Tirrold is undoubtedly the parish church, * dedicated to St Michael. It is a building of flint with stone dressings, has a tower and peal of five bells, and the architecture is early English. The clock is very old; originally it had no face, but its time was fairly trustworthy, although the weights were somewhat unusual, one being a cannon-ball and the other a big piece of rubble.

The Rev Sir John Hoskyns, Bt., who was Rector from 1845 till 1911, and whose name is held in affectionate remembrance, had the clock modernized and a face added to commemorate his golden wedding, April 22nd, 1886, and the jubilee of his ministry in 1895. Many friends also built the organ chamber in memory of the late Mrs Gurdon. Sir John Hoskyns died in 1911 and Lady Hoskyns in 1914; the chancel was restored in their memory by the Hoskyns family, friends and relations adding a vestry.

The Rev Lumley Green-Wilkinson, after acting as Chaplain to the Forces during the Great War, restored the Lady Chapel as a thank-offering for his safe return.

* We now know this is not so; an English Heritage study in 1992 revealed The Cottage in Aston Street to date from the 13th. century. (ed.)

The church of All Saints, Aston Upthorpe, is of great antiquity, and was originally a Norman structure, probably built on the site of a still earlier Saxon church, the one known to Ethelred and Alfred. A Norman door and window remain on the south side, and the massive font is also early Norman. The ancient timbers of the roof and porch are still sound and of great strength. It was formerly a chapelry of the parish of Blewbury, but in 1862 it was united with Upton as a separate parish.



Aston Upthorpe Church in 1860

The Presbyterian Church dates from the passing of the Act of Uniformity in 1662. Many clergymen, unable conscientiously to comply with the demands of the Act, were ejected from their livings, and two of these, the Rev Thomas Cheesman of East Garston and the Rev Richard Comyns of Cholsey, notwithstanding great risk of imprisonment, continued to preach in the neighbourhood of their old churches. At the invitation of Mr John Fuller, the Lord of the Manor, they came to Aston and were instrumental in forming a Presbyterian Church. In 1670 a barn was fitted up for these services, and in 1726 the present church, or Meeting-house as it was then called, was built by two brothers, Joseph and Richard Fuller, who, in addition to ground for the graveyard, gave also a house for a manse which has ever since been the home of the successive Ministers.

In 1827 a day-school was established in a cottage that had once been a farmhouse, and the Presbyterian School house was built in the same year. This was the first school in Aston, and for twenty years it was the only school, until about 1847, when the National School was started by the Rector.

Before the days of organs each church had its gallery for musicians, and a great variety of musical instruments were in vogue. As there was afternoon service in the Parish Church

and evening service at 'Meeting' there was opportunity for a kindly strengthening of choirs. At the Parish Church Charles Jervis with his violin and Thomas Curtis with his bass-viol were among the chief musicians. Jervis was rather lame, wherefore he was generally called 'Steppy', and he and his fiddle were in great request whenever there was a chance of a dance. At the Meeting-house Sophie Pope with a beautiful soprano voice led the singing, her brother David Pope, the blacksmith, played a clarionette or flute, and George Pope, better known as Sailor Pope, was a most imposing figure with his ophicleide or sometimes a bassoon.

Some of us are still apt to call the Reading road 'the Turnpike' but perhaps the newcomers would hardly know what we mean. Yet I can well remember the tiny turnpike house upon the top of Chalk Hill, just at the entrance to the village, and the white gate across the road, that only opened on payment of 4*d.* for a two-wheeled and 6*d.* for a four-wheeled vehicle to pass. The old woman who kept the gate for many years after her husband's death was named Mary Parsons, and was a worthy and notable person in her day.

There used to be a brewery in Thorpe Street called the old Malt House and in the garden of the Chestnuts was once a cider manufactory, some of the sheds of which are still standing. A grist-mill stood on the moat-stream at the Manor. It vanished many years ago, but the stream is still called Mill Pond and the road by it is Mill Lane. Some of the four-horse stage-coaches, that made such a gallant show before the railways, passed along the Turnpike on their way from Reading to Bath, but the London coaches took the road through Wallingford.

Many new houses have been built, but the old ones pulled down outnumbered them. No doubt the new cottages are far more healthy and convenient, but now and then an old one disappears that calls forth a regretful sigh. Such a one was on the right-hand side of 'Lower-end-town'. It had green outside shutters, and on them was painted in white letters 'Waterloo Cottage'. The man who lived there was James Pope, a Waterloo veteran, and he it was who built, in great part with his own hands, this 'home for a hero'. His wife Elizabeth accompanied him to the wars, and they both returned in safety; and now they lie in the churchyard, under a mossy stone that records their adventurous life. The Popes are a very numerous Aston family, and several are still with us – notably our friend Jonathan Pope, nephew of the Waterloo man, who, after long and useful service in the London Police Force, for many years being on guard in front of the Bank of England, has retired to his native village. Another of the old cottages which I hope will yet remain for many a year, is the one in Baker Street, occupied by Mr Tubb the gamekeeper, for it bears the date 1676 on its chimney.

Aston, like most old villages, used to have Stocks and a Pound – they stood on the triangle opposite the Chequers Inn. The Pound was used occasionally for a stray cow or donkey till about 30 or 35 years ago, after which it fell to pieces and gradually disappeared. The stocks, which happily have not been used within living memory, were removed about the same time. Before the time of District Councils the mud scraped from the roads – there was even more of it then than there is now – was collected on the same triangle and was sold once in every three years. The auctioneer made use of an egg-glass; three times the sand was allowed to fall and the last bid before the upper glass was empty for the third time secured the heap of mud.

During the Great War we had a woman postman, but it was no novelty, for before the time of the penny post, which began in 1840, a woman used to bring letters from Wallingford to Aston and Upton once a week, and each letter was charged 6*d.* on delivery.

For many years Aston had its own fire engine and brigade. They practised in what was then the Manor water-meadow, but now is a kitchen garden, and drew water from the mill-pond rather to the terror of the passers-by, for the hose had a curiously awkward way of sending water in the wrong direction! Fires were of rare occurrence, but once when there was a big fire at Harwell and nearly a whole street was burned down, the Aston engine worked with several others that were rushed up from various places round. Unfortunately when the time for payment came, disputes arose that ended in something like a free fight. The hose of our engine was cut and the engine itself was so badly damaged, that it was not thought worth while to have it repaired, and it was never used again.

During the Great War there was a big sale at Wallingford in aid of the funds of the Red Cross. Farmers from all the neighbourhood contributed sheep, pigs, poultry, corn, etc., and other people gave generously of their stores. Aston sent her old fire engine, which fetched the handsome sum of £12, and was bought by Mr H. Snow, who preserves it as a relic of old times.

Blotting-paper was first made, owing to a mistake, at Hagbourne Paper Mill early in the last century. The proprietor, Mr Slade (no relation of the Slades of Thorpe Farm), lived in Aston at what is now known as Croft House. His paper was all handmade, and one day some of his workmen forgot to put the size into a quantity that was in process of making, so it was all thrown aside as waste. But somebody, probably Mr Slade himself, happening to want a piece of paper to write a note, took a bit of the spoilt paper and found that his writing ran and blotted, because the unsized paper absorbed the ink. Up till that time sand was used to dry wet ink, and the idea struck him that absorbent paper might be used much more easily and quickly. He very soon put blotting-paper on the market, and it proved so popular that it was in great demand. The making of writing-paper was discontinued, but even then Hagbourne Mill was much too small for the increasing business and Mr Ford, who had married Mr Slade's niece, bought the Snakesley Mills, Hants, which, though they no longer have a monopoly, still claims the largest output of blotting-paper in the world.

For some years the Aston Benefit Society flourished but, owing to a sad lack of foresight in the management, it came to an untimely end. The annual festival was held on Whit Monday, when the members headed by a gorgeous blue silk banner, emblazoned with the words 'Aston Benefit Society' in gold lettering, and the Aston Band, with carpenter Finch almost invisible behind the big drum, but exceedingly audible, assembled at the Presbyterian Church where a service was held. (Almost the first sermon Mr Curry preached in Aston was the club sermon in June, 1873.) After the service the members had a good dinner in the clubroom at the Chequers, and the afternoon and evening were spent with a crowd of followers, parading the village discoursing sweet music as they went, and sometimes the lassies and lads danced on the lawns of the bigger houses. At first all who joined were young and healthy, and there was plenty of money, so some of it was divided between the members at intervals; but the time came when the members began to grow old, and much more had to be paid out for sickness and burial fees. The reserve fund got low, and then new members would not join. At last the funds were exhausted, and so the

Benefit Society had to give place to bigger Friendly Societies established on a more substantial foundation.

To commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 it was decided to provide a recreation ground for Aston. Sir John Hoskyns headed the list of subscriptions with £100, and the sum of £261 was quickly raised. Five acres of the land in front of 'The Filberts' were purchased from Mr A.C. Arding for £150, and the rest of the money was used in preparing the ground, fencing it, planting trees, etc. In 1903 the recreation ground was made over to the Parish Council who have since been responsible for its upkeep. Every footballer and cricketer will agree that no better way of commemorating a long and glorious reign could have been found.

The good old customs have become things of the past. Mumming and May-day garlanding. Christmas would hardly have been Christmas, at any rate of us children, without the mummers who helped to make merry at that season. In wonderful paper fringed coats of many colours, that rustled and hissed as the wooden swords clashed, King George and Slasher dealt each other many deadly blows; but the slain were quickly brought to life again by Dr Jack Fimmy, who could cure a magpie with the toothache; and all ended happily with a friendly dance. One or two sticks with a few flowers on them are still to be seen occasionally on May-day, but they would have been laughed to scorn in the old days when every family had a many-hooped garland, that formed a bower for a gaily dressed doll-queen. There is no record that Aston ever had a May-pole, but the garlands were a pretty harbinger of summer that we are sorry to lose.

In the beautiful old farm-house at Lollingdon, John Masefield lived for several years, and wrote there his poems 'On Lollington Downs'. After he left, the house was occupied by a party of German prisoners, who, in conspicuous garb of navy-blue and crimson, worked in the fields under military escort. They worked well, always firmly cherishing the belief that England was conquered, and that what they sowed would be reaped by the Fatherland.

Aston like most old places has its share of tales that Berkshire folk call 'unkid', but they are not of a very blood-curdling nature. Unaccountable lights may occasionally be seen round the village. They appear most frequently in autumn – sometimes as a long flashing trail between Lids and Blewburton, or against the trees round the meadows, and at other times they are small and steady. Many years ago some people returning late from Blewbury said that an old thorn-tree on Balden was blazing when they passed it, but next morning it showed, no signs of fire. Much more recently the Rev Henry Forshaw and Mr Ernest Griffiths saw a wonderful flashing light when they were taking a stroll after church; they describe it as very brilliant, lighting up the trees of Lollingdon. It moved rapidly, and was seen for about three seconds. As the Hon Mrs F.J.K. Cross was driving from the station one night she and her coachman both saw a pale light in Winterwell which appeared to come from a window, for it looked as though framed in, though there is no building of any kind anywhere near. When Mrs Cross investigated the place next morning, nothing could be found to account for it. Many other people have seen strange lights: they have never been known to do any harm and probably science will one day explain the mystery.

An old man named Daniel Parsons used to live in Aston Street, who by dint of hard work and frugal living had scraped together considerable savings. His neighbours often told

him he would be robbed, and advised him to put his money in the Bank. Commercial Banks were then a recent institution unknown to old Daniel, to whom 'the bank' meant that one covered with grass on the other side of the way. The idea of secrecy pleased him, so one dark night when he thought everybody but himself was asleep, he crept across the road with his spade, dug a hold under the turf, and dropped in his precious hoard. But when he could no longer see or handle the beautiful golden coins he became uneasy about them, and determined to get them back, so the next night he went again to the hiding-place. Alas! it was empty, he had indeed been robbed and the robber was never discovered. It is said that sometimes on dark nights the shade of old Daniel returns to hunt for his lost treasure.

Other treasure is supposed to be hidden in Winterwell. A man, whose name is now forgotten, murdered another, and hid the money he took from his victim in a deep hole between the two poplars that standing at the entrance to Winterwell. He was transported for the crime, but before he died he wrote to a relative minutely describing the hiding-place. There was much digging, but the treasure, if ever there were treasure, was never found. A phantom coach is said to pass along the Turnpike road; the galloping horses may be heard by the imaginative, but nothing is every seen.

Aston, like Blewbury, Hagbourne, and Harwell, is noted for cherry orchards. 'May-dukes' and 'Amberhearts' are the finest of their kind, and are known far and wide.

Among our many wild flowers are a few uncommon ones. The Bee-Orchis (sic) (*Ophrys apifera*) grows on the terraced bank of Blewburton, and specially fine specimens may be found in the meadow beyond Thorpe Common. The Fly Orchis (*Ophrys muscifera*) grows in Windmill Copse. An Eastertide visitor to the dew pond on Thorpe Downs is sure to see around him bright patches of purple and gold Pasque-flower (*Anemone pulsatilla*), but rarest of all in the South of England is the Grass of Parnassia (*Parnassia palustris*) which inhabits Aston Mead. Despite its name it is not a grass, but with heart-shaped leaves and delicate creamy blossoms belongs to the tribe of St John's Wort.

The Manor of Aston has changed hand many times. The present owner, our kind friend Mr F.J.K. Cross, in whose play barn we are meeting today, has an exceedingly interesting ancient deed, by which Queen Mary and her husband, King Philip of Spain, in 1551, granted the Manor of Aston and the advowson of the church to two Berkshire gentlemen, Thomas Everard and Richard Yates, in return for a payment of £766 18s. 10d., a much larger sum in those days than it would represent now. A valuation of the goods of Thomas Fuller of Sheppy, made some thirty years earlier than this deed, in 1522, has been preserved, and a few items may be of interest as showing prices in those days :

656 ewes at 18d each
555 lambs at 14d each
2 geese and a gander 12d
3 couple of swans 20 shillings
A little nag with one ear 6 shillings



Among household goods in the hall we find a table, a form, a long settle, and an oak cupboard, a painted cloth for the high dais and a forest billhook all valued together at 6s. 8d. We should indeed be glad to furnish our houses and larders at these rates now!

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But other days, other ways. Though we may give a sigh for pleasant things that are gone, let us be grateful for the very real improvements that have come – better houses, better wages, better schools, and a far higher standard of living, are among the first that rush into the mind. And now we have also our Women's Institute founded and affiliated with the National Association of Women's Institute 11th November, 1920.

Let us remember that it is the lives of the people of Aston that make Aston, and we women must each do our bit to bring to pass a future that shall be worthy of the past.