

Pagans and Puritans

Most people who live near Oxford will have heard of the revels that occur on May morning, especially around Magdalen College tower. Very few of us know the story of why this extraordinary ceremony occurs and the history behind it. In May we were delighted to welcome back Tim Healey to educate us on the subject.

As usual, his talk was entertaining, amusing, educational and so full of facts that anybody given the task of summarising his talk has either got to be good at shorthand or have an exceptional memory! I don't have either, but I do have access to the internet where you will find that Tim has created several webpages dedicated to May Morning in Oxford, some of which is summarised here. But I suggest you look at his site as it contains far more information than I can give you!

Listening to the choir singing a hymn in Latin at 6am from the top of Magdalen College tower is just one of many Maytime revels and traditions that occur in the city, some of which go back to the 13th Century. They were controversial then and in 1250 the Chancellor of Oxford forbade 'alike in churches, all dancing in masks or with disorderly noises, and all processions of men wearing wreaths and garlands made of leaves of trees or flowers or what not.'

The celebrations were not well documented until the late 1600s. Initially May Day was greeted with secular part songs dedicated to Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers (the margarine hadn't been invented then!). To 17th-century Puritans, reviving the deity was deeply worrying. They saw Flora as a living reality, a profane heathen goddess come to life in the May Queen. The country was reverting to paganism!

Thomas Hall, in his ferocious rant *Funebria florum, the downfall of May-games* (1660), rails against Flora as a whore 'of the city of Rome, in the county of Babylon'. Her worship brought in a pack of 'ignorants, atheists, papists, drunkards, swearers, swash-bucklers,



maid-marions, morris dancers, maskers, mummers, may-pole stealers, health-drinkers, gamblers, lewd men and light women'. A bit like Oxford now I suppose – nothing changes!

By the 16th century May games and morris dancing are closely associated. In Oxford in 1599, we are told:

'The inhabitants assembled on the two Sundays before Ascension Day, and on that day, with drum and shot and other weapons, and men attired in women's apparel, brought into the town a woman bedecked with garlands and flowers named by them the Queen of the May. They also had morris dancers and other disordered and unseemly sports, and intended the Sunday to continue the same abuses.'

The report also alludes to 'men attired in women's apparel'. Cross-dressing was a ribald feature of morris celebrations, which particularly scandalised opponents. The Puritan Christopher Fetherston fulminated against the practice in his *Dialogue Against Light, Lewd and Lascivious Dancing* (1582). 'For the abuses which are committed in your May games are infinite. The first whereof is this, that you do use to attire men in women's apparel, whom you do most commonly call May Marrions, whereby you infringe that straight commandment which is given in Deuteronomy 22.5. That men must not put on women's apparel for fear of enormities.!

Tim went on to describe how the Maypole became an idolic feature of the celebrations, and would be covered in flowers and herbs, bound with strings and ribbons from the top to the bottom, and sometimes painted with variable colours with two or three hundred men,

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women and children following it with great devotion.

So began a cheery complicity - deep-rooted in many towns and villages - between the parish church and the disorderly revellers. Some parishes even kept their own sets of morris costumes in church to be brought out for their annual Whitsun Ale celebrations.

But as mentioned before, the Puritans were horrified by all May customs and their attack on the celebrations in Oxfordshire was led from Banbury, famous as a hotbed of Puritan zealotry. Vicar Thomas Bracebridge fronted the effort to destroy the Banbury Maypoles and all other heathen practices. In May 1589 the constable of Banbury issued an edict to 'take down all Maypoles within his district and to repress and put down all Whitsun ales, May games and morris dances and utterly to forbid any wakes or fairs to be kept.'

Under Cromwell's Protectorate the Puritans had their way and the May revels were shut down everywhere.

The May games returned with the Restoration of 1660 to widespread rejoicing. Anthony Wood reports, 'This Holy Thursday (31st May) the people of Oxon were so violent for Maypoles in opposition to the Puritans that there was numbered 12 Maypoles besides 3 or 4 morrises.'

However, although the Puritans were out of power, resistance to the May-Day activities still continued. But gradually during the 18th century the character of the May revels seems to have changed. We hear less of maypoles in Oxford and more of boys

blowing horns. It is reported that boys in Oxford used to blow cows' horns or hollow canes early on May morning. In 1724, Thomas Hearne writes that the horns were used in Maytime as drinking vessels as well as for making music: 'The custom of blowing them prevails, at that season, even to this day, at Oxford, to remind people of the pleasantness of that part of the Year, which ought to create Mirth and Gayety.'

The Morris seem to have been active on May Morning in Oxford during the 19th century. It may be that the morris who appeared on the streets of Victorian Oxford came in from Headington and other surrounding villages. What is certain is that May Morning in Oxford changed in the latter half of the Victorian age as Magdalen Tower came increasingly into the picture - and Headington spurred a nationwide morris revival.

The long battle between Pagans and Puritans was over. Dancing around Maypoles, morris displays and the election of May Queens - human replicas of the once-abhorred Flora - were all subsumed into the Victorian myth of Merrie England.

Three eminent Victorians helped legitimise May Day: Alfred Tennyson with his long poem *The May Queen*; Holman Hunt with his iconic painting *May Morning on Magdalen Tower*; and John Ruskin who ritualised May celebrations at Whitelands College in Chelsea, a training college for women teachers who carried customs into the school curriculum.

An excellent talk by Tim - and for more information follow this link: <http://www.maymorning.co.uk/426023492>

- Bob Hessian

Meg Latham



In memory of a dear friend and former committee member of BLHS, Meg Latham, who sadly passed away in March this year. A Service of Celebration was held on 20th April at Thame Barn Centre to which Family and friends were invited, and which I attended.

I first met Meg when we both joined the Reading Group at Bicester Library several years ago when she still lived in Bicester. We also met up at history society meetings and many of you will remember the diminutive figure of auburn-haired Meg who must have livened up committee meetings with her ideas and forthright views.

She went on to assist with the Bicester Museum & Heritage Trust venture until she moved to Thame where she became, not surprisingly, fully involved with Thame Museum until a decline in her health forced her to resign.

We learned at the Service of Celebration, from members of her family and friends, that Meg had always been a feisty character and I am sure she would agree with that description. I know she was a great supporter of Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour movement in

general. Her children Duncan and Holly related stories of cannabis growing and always having all their friends round to their house as mum loved the company of younger people. We learned that she had been a teacher, but one of her abiding passions was archaeology and digging in particular.

I recall the dig at the Priory in Bicester and her enthusiasm was catching!

Last summer the Reading Group members went to London on the train: Meg got on at Haddenham and Thame Parkway en route to visit the Bankside area specifically to locate an old house we had read about in the previous month's book. We had a great day out, although her health was deteriorating then. The photograph was taken on that day and you can see how happy she looked.

We all last saw her at our monthly meeting in January.

- Margaret Graham

2nd June 1882

WHIT-WEEK - On Whit Monday, although a Bank Holiday, I did not rush off by train to enjoy sea-breezes, or to be carried any long distance for purposes of recreation. I had an opinion that there were plenty of pleasant strolls nearer Bicester, or at any rate in the county, and that for a "day's outing" the common-place but useful "marrow-bone" stage was quite sufficient to carry me as far as I need go for the combined objects of health and recreation.

Whit Monday, as all know, was lovely, but rather too warm for anything but a quiet saunter, and outdoor life exceedingly pleasant. I wandered about for some hours in many an agreeable pasture and found myself in the afternoon on the foot-way between Weston-on-the-Green and Kirtlington.

The scent of the clover rendered the aid of Mr Rimmell quite unnecessary on Monday, for it pervaded the air everywhere; but when I entered Sir Henry Dashwood's park at Kirtlington, through which the said foot-path runs, I was abundantly rewarded for any little fatigue I may have undergone during the day. There, amid the rich pasture and sweet clover blossom, the aged oaks, and the general beauty of the scene, I revelled in luxury; and to add to the pleasure the sound of the rich tones of Kirtlington bells were wafted by the refreshing breezes with sweetness which no words can describe.

Those who wish to see the beauties of England must see them on foot, and any enterprising map-engraver who would get up a series of handy pocket maps, showing every foot-path, would do great service to pedestrians, as well as in enriching his own pocket.

The weather during the week has been all in favour of pleasure seekers. The opportunity offered on Monday of a cheap trip to London from Bicester was embraced by good number of people; though, perhaps, the largest number found their way to Oxford, where one of the principal attractions was a fête and gala in the Crescent Gardens.

Mr Tubb's match was the only event of note which came off in Bicester. The annual Whit Monday match was played on the Bicester Cricket Ground. Large numbers of the lovers of cricket flocked down to the field, which looked quite gay with the number of tents and the display of bunting. Praise is due to Massey for having prepared so good a wicket for the occasion.

At 11:30 proceedings commenced by Mr E.H. Paxton choosing the eleven, or rather twelve.

Mr H. Tubb undertook to captain the twenty-two, and as the number increased to thirty-four, his post was no sinecure in placing in the field such an extraordinary number. The twelve took the field, and the big number was represented by Long and Webb, against the bowling of C. Shillingford and Hobbs. It is needless to give a detailed account of the innings, suffice it to say that none of the side were able to stand long against such bowling and good fielding.

When the bell rang for luncheon there were 21 wickets lowered for 54 runs. All adjourned to the large marquee and partook of a good lunch, kindly given by G. Tubb Esq., and placed on the table in Phillips' usual good style.

On the conclusion of the repast Mr E.H. Paxton rose and, in felicitous terms, proposed the health of Mr George Tubb, Mrs Tubb, and Mr and Mrs Henry Tubb, which was cordially drunk, with three times three and musical honours. Mr H. Tubb briefly responded.

On resuming the game, the wickets fell even more rapidly than before, Paxton bowling in Shillingford's place, in his "high, home, and easy" style, inducing the unwary to hit out, only to be caught, or if they missed, to be bowled or stumped. Lindsey's bowling at the other end was equally disastrous, and the innings closed for 78 runs.

For the side of the dozen, Lindsey and S. Coleman were the first at the wickets. Wakenell commenced the trundling at the bottom end, and Clarke donned the gloves. The second ball produced a single at mid on by the first named batsmen, and another was placed to the leg, whilst another was fuddled by Blake, and one over had been sent down. Greenfield (slow round) took the leather at the top end. In the third over Lindsey hit Wakenell prettily to the leg for 2, and shortly after Blake retrieved his laurels by catching Coleman in the mid. The telegraph denoted 7-1-1.

Hill followed, and after his partner had scored a single, hit to the leg for a couple, the fielding being anything but faultless. Shortly after the townsman drove for two, and the following ball found his wickets spreadeagled by Wakenell. Paxton appeared, and cut the second ball for unit and drove another over the bowler's head for a brace, and also to the off for the same number. A run was stolen which might have cost a wicket but the ball was slippery. Greenfield, who had been bowling round and under, sent another down which Paxton failed to land properly, and was caught by the captain for score of nine. 24-3-9.

Hobbs filled the vacancy, and shortly after skied one, giving a chance to Goble, but the sun was powerful, and he failed to see it. Singles were made, and the left-hand man, in trying to shoot one through the many fieldsmen, was secured by Handy at leg. Cort was the next batsman, and the sparring became tame. In a short time, however, Hill was caught and bowled by Greenfield. The catch was a smart one - high up and one hand. 37-5-8.

Grimsley came and hit hard to the off for three, and Cort, in putting one to square leg, was well caught by Egerton, after running for it. C. Shillingford filled the opening, and his partner was badly missed by George, and almost directly after was bowled by Wakenell. 47-7-5.

Up to this time the wickets had been equally divided between the two bowlers. The brothers Shillingford now became partners, and the fresh batsman drove to the off for one. The game became most lively, both players were running up the score, and it was palpable they were the salvation of the side.

C. Shillingford played a good cricket innings of 28 (not out), whilst his brother put together 17 in fine form, amongst which was one to the tent for four. After both had settled down to their work, and at 80 up, W. Shillingford was splendidly caught at the square leg by Egerton. Palmer, in beginning to bat, hit one up in the

mids, but Sloan was to “eager for the fray” and dropped it, but the sticks soon fell to Wakenell.

The innings finished at 93, leaving the twelve winners on the first innings by 15 runs. The wickets were drawn at seven, but the second innings of the thirty-four had hardly any reference to the game.

5th June 1908

GAS EXHIBITION AT BICESTER - The Gas Light and Coke Company Ltd. have been holding various exhibitions and cooking lectures during the past week at the Corn Exchange, Bicester.

The hall was suitably decorated, and for the evening exhibition was brilliantly illuminated, giving splendid ideas of what can be produced by modern gas appliances.

On one side of the room was shown a large number of various sized standard cookers supplied by the well-known firm of Messrs. Willey and Co., Exeter. The other side of the room was chiefly devoted to slot stoves, meters and fittings. A model room was created, showing a complete prepayment installation which the new Company is introducing to the town, thus enabling the smallest cottage to be supplied on the prepayment system with no expense to the consumer for stove and fittings.

The exhibition was opened on Monday afternoon by the Rev. Walter O'Reilly, who in a brief speech said he was very pleased to be there for this occasion, as he thought Bicester people were looking forward to cheaper and better gas than that to which they had been accustomed.

He mentioned that he did not understand the art of cooking, but he thought it a good idea for the children to have an opportunity to compete in the cooking competitions which the Company were holding. He wished the new Company every success, and then asked Mrs Hayward to proceed with the children's cookery competition, in which he hoped the boys would turn out successful.

In the evening the exhibition was opened by Mr E.C. Saphin, the Company's secretary, who said they wished to extend the business by introducing the prepayment system. They were going to put in slot meters and cookers giving all the advantage of cooking by gas, and it was acknowledged on all hands that whatever light used for illuminating, gas stood unequalled for cooking purposes.

Many people complained that gas stoves were not economical, but that was entirely the fault of the users, not of the stoves; many people wanted to do with a great deal of gas what a little gas would do. When using a gas cooker it needed watching, in order to see that there was no undue consumption of gas. The Company wished to introduce into the houses something with which the people could cook a dinner with as little trouble and expense as possible. He hoped the people would take advantage of what the Company were now offering to them. He then asked Mrs Hayward to commence with her evening lecture, which was fairly well attended.

3rd June 1932

BICESTER M.C.C. TREASURE HUNT (by Backfire) - The Bicester Motor-cycle Club held their first, brand-new, motor treasure hunt last Sunday, and I was in it. No, after prolonged reflection, perhaps it would be as well to say that I was out of it, so to speak. It was like this. Somebody

said “You ought to go in for that treasure hunt.” I said “Why?” He said “Because you look as though you would find it.” This was complimentary. I rather flatter myself on my Scotland Yard CID appearance - hawk nose, searching eyes, and purposeful look, you know, in the style of Sherlock Holmes with an uplift.

We assembled on the Market Square at 2:30, a brave little company of fifteen. That number would doubtless have been larger, but showers had fallen at frequent intervals, and the psychological time for a treasure hunt is a sunny day. However, there was the important official ready to send us hunters away like “greyhounds straining at the leash”, and he thought it might be possible to dodge the raindrops, which again began to fall. The important official wore a mysterious demeanour as who should say “You can't get anything out of me.” I did not try, but he extracted something from me - a shilling - as the entry fee, which considering the treasure was practically mine already, was cheap.

The official served out sealed envelopes and instructed us not to open them until the whistle blew. Well, it blew in due course, then I ripped open the flap of the envelope and found a clue card.

The card remarked: Route 1. Section 1.

4 4 4 4
4 4 4 4
4 4 4 4
4 4 4 4

Add up this sum and show correct total to official. That was perfectly easy, and the official said “all right”, rather unwillingly, I thought, as if he begrudged me the honour of good arithmetic.

The next instruction on the card was: “You are facing Curtis. Behind you is south. Go north at 4mph, for three minutes. Note number on door on left of boot shop and write it down.”

Easy again. Number 44. Still crawling steadily I trickled around St John's corner past “three shops with two yellow advertisement plates” and - however, the story has not to exceed a certain length. Dodging round past the waterworks and over the Middleton Road the cruise came to an end.

At Bignell stood a point man, who kindly bestowed on me a second card: “Route 1. Section 2”, and told me I needn't stop to pass the time of day with him unless I liked, but carry on and do deeds of derring-do.

Here, there, and practically everywhere that clue card led me like a shepherd tending a stray sheep. “Find the cross on the stone wall and pass it to the Red Cow.” Which red cow, and why hand a stone cross to it? Oh, I see. This is Chesterton; all right. Four straight miles; absolutely easy; no Chinese puzzle at all, at all.

“Round by stone wall and find this: (card still speaking)

My first is in coffee, but not in tea.

My second in holly, not in tree.

My third in undress, not in clothes.

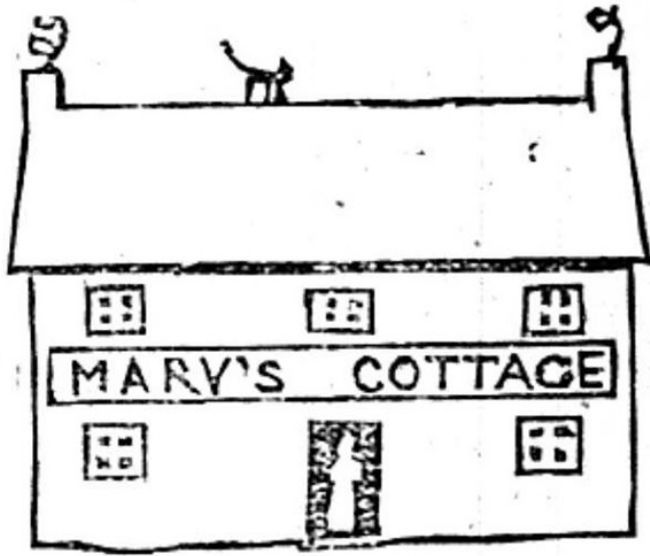
My fourth in rambler, also in rose.

My fifth in cotton, but not in thread.

My sixth in Herbert, not in Ted.

My whole - a large building in stone.”

This was a snag - rambling roses, Herberts and Teds, having coffee in a tree. Was that the idea? No sense in that. What building is usually in stone?... Oh, I see; very subtle.



Mary receives visitors and her little lamb is on roof.

So, on through Kirtlington; finding crossroads and bends, T roads and turns, feeling very like an ordinance survey map myself. So for the open air, and the sting of the rain on the nose! Here is the waterfall at Glympton, and a Village pub. Everything, let me repeat, perfectly simple, and, but for the rain, simply perfect.

Four straight miles again. "Find the Big Stones by asking in village and write number of them down."

Wearily up the hill from Enstone comes the oldest inhabitant, deaf as a dumb-waiter, a stick in each hand; blue-bottle on his chin.

"Tell me, I prithee, where are the Big Stones?" said I.

"Eh?" said he.

"Big Stones." I repeated.

"Yiss, but can't last for ever, and it'll do the crops good."

"No, no, not weather. Stones."

"Oh, the stuns. Hoar stuns, us calls um. Up beyont ter the spinner on th' Charlbury rud, you'll see: yon up ter corner of the ruds, yiss, you'll find um."

On I went. A voice sounded behind me: "You ain't the fust as asked today neither. Whoopee!"

Finding large stones, well, I ask you; when they're stowed away in a thick spinney. However...

Thus the card: "Large stone in wall and village cross, count steps of cross and write number down." Nothing but crosses and stones. At Taston, this, and watch me counting them; village crowd goggling and thinking of

sending for the police.

Tally-ho, and away through Charlbury, over two bridges, past house with round windows. "Find Mary's cottage and write down its name here."

...Mary was at home to visitors, but she could not understand why one motorist wanted her name. (Some even aver that her little lamb was on the roof).

To Shipton-under-Wychwood (finding main road going south). "Large copse on the left." Good. There it is. "Saw, hammer and pincers." (Oh, yeah, the Carpenter's Arms at Fulbrook).

Over the river at 20mph, says the clue card, and up the hill at 10mph (oh, no, don't imagine I did all this, but others tell of it.)

Well, the "treasure" was a news placard on a board thus: "News Chronicle. £1000 Derby Prize." (In small letters, exchange this for the treasure).

Mr Cyril Hanks won it, at Barford, with others close up behind. Quite a good run, but no rain next time, please.

14th June 1957

OYEZ, OYEZ, OYEZ - "Be it known to all that the Black Knight of Burcester, alias Bissiter, alias Bicester, doth now issue a challenge to ye Youth of Burcester aforesaid, and especially to the fair damsels which do reside within youth clubs at Burcester aforesaid. That they do severally choose them gallant Knights and Esquires of their company to be their champions at ye lists at ye Bicester House on ye 29th day of June in the year of grace 1957, chiefly at 'Tylting at ye Bucket', 'Climbing ye Greasy Pole' and 'Bowling for ye Porker'.

Divers good prizes will be presented to ye winning Knights and Esquires by their fair ladies.

Accoutrement tents will be at hand at ye side where ye Knights and their Esquires may don suitable apparel. God save ye Queen!"

Ye olde towne was agog last Friday and Saturday. The gentleman responsible for any amount of pointing fingers, curious stares, admiring glances and awestruck children was Mr John Hollis. A fine figure of a man in the colourful costume of an 18th century town crier. With his booming voice and merry laugh, he gave wonderful publicity to the Parish Church fete on June 29th.

His journey round the town was in order to promote the event and sell entry forms for the "Spot the Stranger" competition in connection with the fete.

Various shop windows in the town contain "stranger" articles, and first prize is a £5 voucher. Twelve other prizes are to be awarded, with special prizes for children.

The closing date is next Monday.

Summer Walks and Outings

The first of our walks this summer is on Sunday 8th July, when Liz Woolley guides us around the history of **Folly Bridge & Grandpont, South Oxford**.

The walk is open to members only, at a charge of £6 per person. But this cost does not include refreshments.

Then, on Sunday 22nd July, we are planning a trip to the **Chiltern Open Air Museum**, near Chalfont St Giles.

Further details and application forms for both of these events were sent out with the last newsletter, but the closing date for applications is the 18th June.

We then have two countryside walks in August, and two village walks in September. All of which are based in and around Aynho and Chesterton.

Roll of Honour

The following are the local men who died in the Great War, 100 years ago this month.

Sergeant John Howard Grimsley, of King's End, Bicester.

Died: 15th June 1918 Aged: 23 Served in: Ox & Bucks Light Infantry

Private William Robert Robbins, of Souldern.

Died: 15th June 1918 Aged: 19 Served in: Ox & Bucks Light Infantry

Private Thomas Franklin, of Oddington.

Died: 16th June 1918 Aged: 25 Served in: Royal Fusiliers

Sergeant Lionel Allan Pratt, of Kirtlington.

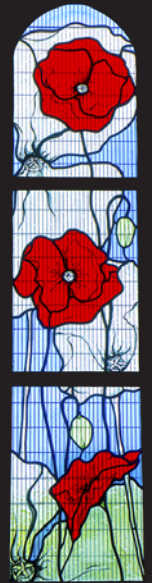
Died: 23rd June 1918 Aged: 28 Served in: Royal Army Medical Corps

Private H. H. Davis, of Kirtlington.

Died: 26th June 1918 Aged: 32 Served in: Army Service Corps

Private John Wyatt, of Bucknell.

Died: 29th June 1918 Aged: 31 Served in: Sherwood Forresters



Marj's Memories Traffic in the Fifties

In the forties and fifties there weren't many cars on the roads. The milkman, coalman and oilman changed their transport from horse and cart to vehicles with engines. Children had the freedom of the road to cycle wherever they liked, unaccompanied by adults, but nearly always in groups.

Lords Lane and Bucknell Road were favourite places to play. Lords Lane had a hill going down, then a humpback bridge where the brook goes under, and then a hill up. You could get such speed before hitting the hump and still a bit of motion to help you up the next hill. Just before reaching the main Banbury Road there was a traffic sign "HALT Major Road Ahead" and it was a STOP sign. Most junctions into main roads had STOP signs.

Sheep Street wasn't a precinct and it was always easy

to park on the side of the road with no restrictions. It wasn't even necessary to lock your car. It felt safe. There were no seat belts. Our first car was an Austin Seven. A little boxy car, black at the bottom and cream at the top. It had hide upholstery; little pop out indicators; a handle that went into the front to start it up; and double de-clutching was necessary to change gear.

People who had driven during the war had a licence to drive if they had renewed it from that time. So it was handy for learners to have an elderly person to escort them when learning.

In the fifties, during the Suez crisis, learner drivers were allowed to drive without being accompanied. Our little Austin Seven went to so many places during that time, including London, on a provisional licence. Imagine that!

- Marjorie Dean MBE



Market Square - 1949

Village History Weston-on-the-Green

The village of Weston-on-the-Green lies about 4 miles south-west of Bicester.

At the time of the Norman Conquest the manor was held by Wigod of Wallingford. But Wigod died shortly after the conquest leaving his estates, including Weston, to his son-in-law, Robert D'Oyly. Weston descended via Robert's younger brother, Nigel, to his nephew, also Robert, who, in 1129, founded the Augustinian Osney Abbey and included Weston parish church as part of its endowments. Parts of the manor lands were later granted to Osney Abbey, including six virgates given by Robert's wife, Edith, and son, Henry.

Henry's son, also Henry, sold most of the remainder of the manor to Osney Abbey in 1227, retaining only the house, watermill and demesne lands. He gave the final parts of the manor to the abbey shortly afterwards and the abbey then retained the manor until it surrendered all its lands to the Crown at the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539.

Weston Manor House is a 15th or early 16th century building, built for Osney Abbey's bailiff. It was built within a 13th century moat, two sides of which survived until they were filled in. The house was re-fronted in the 16th century and the entrance hall has a Tudor fireplace from about this period. In 1665 it was assessed at 20 hearths for the hearth tax. The panelling of the drawing room dates from the reign of William and Mary, just before the end of the 17th century.

In about 1780 the 16th-century great hall was renovated with a timber roof frame and linenfold panelling transferred from Notley Abbey in Buckinghamshire. The 16th century front was replaced in about 1820 and the Hon. Rev. F.A. Bertie then had the house altered and renovated in 1851. It is now a hotel.

The earliest surviving parts of the parish church of the Blessed Virgin Mary are the Norman font and the ground stage of the west tower, which was built around 1200. By 1741 the mediaeval building was in ruins, and in 1744 all but the 13th century bell tower was rebuilt.

The replacement Georgian church had originally plain round-arched windows on the north and south sides and an ornate plaster ceiling, but this collapsed in 1810.



Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The surviving ornate Georgian surroundings of the south door are of a very high quality.

There is no east window. Instead the blank east wall is dominated by an altarpiece of the Ten Commandments thought to have been painted by the Italian master Pompeo Batoni (1708-87).

The architect R. Phenè Spiers restored the building in the 1870s, repairing the tower and adding the south porch and new seating. But a plan to rebuild the east end with an apse "to make the building more church-like" was not executed. In 1885 Spiers added a heavy tracery to the Georgian windows and the organ was installed.

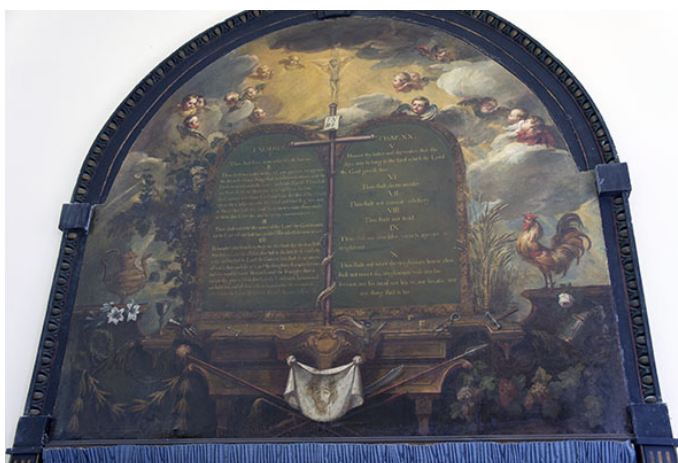
The tower used to have three bells, one each cast in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. They were replaced in 1870 with the present ring of five, all of which were cast by Mears and Stainbank of the Whitechapel Bell Foundry. There is also a Sanctus bell cast in 1834 by W & J Taylor, of Oxford.

A school was opened in the village in 1855. Oxfordshire County Council took it over in 1920 and reorganised it as a junior school in 1937. The village had no electricity until 1931, but the school didn't have any until 1947. It was closed in 1984 and is now a private home.

RAF Weston-on-the-Green is about 1 mile north of the village. German prisoners of war and Canadian military personnel built it in 1915 for the Royal Flying Corps. It was redeveloped after the Great War when a number of the original buildings were demolished. The former RFC Officers and Sergeant's messes are located on the opposite side of the B430 road, and are now in commercial use.

In 1967 the airfield was used for the launch of the first modern hot air balloon in the UK, called the Bristol Belle. It was created from an idea developed by members of the Bristol Gliding Club and Wing Commander Gerry Turnbull, then based at RAF Weston-on-the-Green, was brought in as an experienced gas-balloon pilot, to teach the team how to fly it.

The airfield is now a parachute training station, under the control of RAF Brize Norton, and is one of the few remaining active RAF bases with some original pre-RAF buildings.



Batoni altarpiece inside the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary

- Matthew Hathaway

Talks Update

Over the next few months we have a varied itinerary of talks that we hope will prove very interesting.

Monday 18th June

Liz Woolley returns to tell us about **The Coming of the Railway to Oxford**.

Monday 16th July

John Beaumont comes to talk us through some **Wireless War Secrets**.

Monday 17th September

Our AGM is followed by a talk by St Edburg's Heritage Group on **The Extraordinary Women of Bicester**.

A Dark Night in 1940

We had been living in Murcott at Ivy Farm for about five years. My father was the Air Raid Warden for the village, which meant that he had to check that everyone had "blacked out" their windows.

This was the time when the German bombers were regularly raiding Coventry, and this was yet another one. For whatever reason one plane was shedding bombs across the countryside doing no damage except for just one which hit the house right next door to ours. Inside the house were the owners, Mr and Mrs W. Crawford, as well as two evacuees from London, Mrs Keith and her daughter, Pauline. The bomb destroyed half of the house and killed Mrs Keith.

Very soon the local police were there to help with the rescue and then the Bicester Fire Engine arrived and floodlit the scene. My father was concerned that the lights would attract more planes and bombs, so we moved out of our house complete with coats and blankets to spend a cold frosty night under a haystack in the fields. Meanwhile, Roy Hoskins had bravely climbed into the damaged house and rescued little Pauline. She was then looked after by the Argent family who were also evacuees living in Murcott.

Printed in the Oxford Times, 31st January 1941:

COMMENDED FOR BRAVERY - Mr Roy Bourne

Hoskins, a farm worker, of Jubilee Cottage, Murcott, has been commended for bravery in connection with the bombing of the village of Murcott last autumn. Mr Hoskins, who lives with Mr Jack Edwards, showed great gallantry in rescuing a child, the daughter of Mrs Keith, a London woman who had been evacuated to the village and who was lodging with Mr William Crawford.

The whole family were seated round the fire when Mrs Keith went to a bedroom in which her child was, in order to comfort her. A bomb then dropped and partially demolished the house. Mrs Keith was killed, and her child injured, and Mr Hoskins, at great personal risk, entered and rescued her at a time when German planes were still bombing the village. Mr Hoskins, it is stated, showed no regard for his own safety.

PS Kirk, assisted by PC Whippe, were directing a search for occupants of the cottage when a child's whimpering was heard. PS Kirk made a hole through the thatch which had collapsed but was unable to get through. Mr Hoskins consented to be lowered head downwards into the cavity and was able to push the child along to the sergeant.

His gallant act was instrumental in saving the life of the little girl who has now fully recovered from her injuries.

- Peter Crook

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