

The village of Oving and its place in history

Oving is built on a hill that dominates the surrounding countryside. It has been occupied by Romans, Saxons the Normans and into modern times. It probably had settlements of pre-Roman Celtic Britons. At least 1800 years of history, probably more.

Springs and wells provided the village with drinking water until quite recently. The water permeates through the Portland and Purbeck limestone and gathers in impermeable rock. The hill's springs provide the source of streams, which run south to the river Thame and north to the holy well in North Marston, this was famed for its curative properties in mediaeval times.

The springs rarely freeze or fail and are noted for their purity and clarity. Old water pumps can still be seen on church lane and also in the grounds that belong to Oving house.

The local Kimmeridge clay topsoil gives the area a reputation for good fertility. The clay and limestone have been used for bricks and building stone for many centuries. The remains of clay quarries, dating back to the 15th century can be seen to the west of Pitchcott.

There is a Roman camp on top of the Oving's hill, dating from about 200AD. A minor Roman road runs 1 mile west of Pitchcott towards Granborough. The Roman road called Akeman Street is 3 miles to the west of Oving and there's a Roman burial site near North Marston.

The Roman Empire adopted Christianity in 380AD. In Britain some tribes became Christian, others retained their Celtic religions and cultures for several centuries. In many cases Christianity and earlier religions co-existed and blended.

The Romans left Britain in 407AD, after over 360 years of occupation. They left many fiercely independent tribes, with no sense of national identity. The Catuvellauni inhabited the area around Oving; they were part Romanised and part Celtic.

When the Romans left; the Angles, Saxons and Jutes invaded East Anglia and the South East from Germany and the Low Countries. They were more united and warlike than the Britons, who resisted them as individual tribes and were easily defeated. The invaders stamped out the old British cultures and Christianity. Some Celts fled to Wales, the southwest (*Kernow*) and Brittany (*Armorica*).

These times are called the dark ages. Legendary characters, such as King Arthur, resisted the Saxons with transitory success. Eventually, most of the Britons were enslaved by the invaders, who became known as the English (*or Angles*).

In 550 the Saxons took Buckingham fortress and in 571 the Saxon, Earl Harold, sacked Aylesbury (*Aeglesburge*).

Oving (*Olvinge*) became part of the Saxon kingdom of Mercia. King Frewald's daughters, called Eadburgh and Eaditha, they were born at Quarrendon village in about 600. The name Eaditha is redolent of the ancient roots of our language.

By the 8th century King Offa was holding court at his palace in Winslow (*Winseslai, Winneslaive, Wynselowe*), he also had a palace at Brill. Offa ruled the kingdom of Mercia, which stretched from the east coast to the Welsh borders where he built his famous Offa's Dyke.

A Bronze enamelled disk was found in Oving, this dates to early Saxon times, though it contains Celtic decorations. It is now in the Aylesbury museum.

The Norsemen followed in the footsteps of the Saxons by rampaging across north Buckinghamshire, destroying the Saxon palace at Brill in 914 and Winslow in 921. For a while Norse kings, such as Canute, held sway in Britain.

Oving became part of the Ashendon Hundred, an administrative area, named after Ashendon village on its lofty hill. This name is used for electoral register purposes to this day.

The manor of Oving belonged to Thane Edwin shortly before the Norman Conquest.

When William the Conqueror defeated King Harold II at Hastings in 1066, he put his favourite Norman knights in control of the former Saxon lands.

Geoffrey, Bishop of Constance, took control of Oving, though Walter Gifford; Earl of Buckingham had overall control.

The Doomsday Book was prepared in the 1080's and 90's at the behest of William I, mainly as a basis for tax collection. Oving manor is listed as:

Part of the Ashendon Hundred, with 1270 acres, 10 hides, land for 9 ploughs, 4 in demesne. 18 villeins had 3 ploughs and there were woods for 200 hogs

Demesne land belonged to the manor; a hide was 60 to 120 acres of land. Villeins were partly free men, who were required to work for the manor for about half of their time, the peasants were slaves and treated little better than livestock.

The "woods for 200 hogs" indicate extensive woodlands, which no longer exist. This illustrates how the land usage has changed since Norman times.

Looking from Oving's hill, towards North Marston, there are good examples of mediaeval plough and furrow cultivation patterns.

During Norman times Oving's ownership often changed hands. The spelling of the village name was variable as spelling was imprecise in those times. English was still a fledgling language of the peasants, who were almost entirely illiterate. The Normans and the later Plantagenots, spoke feudal French or Latin, often wrote in Latin and usually needed a translator to talk to their minions.

In 1093 the Paganel owned the village as part of the Barony of Dudley. In 1165 Mainfelin de Ovunges took over. By 1254, Robert de Ovinge was in control. In 1285 Roger de Someri had rights to Ovyng and Merston (*North Marston*), he could punish offenders at his main estate in Newport Pagnell with tumbrel, pillory and gallows.

The Earl of Cornwall owned Pitchcott village in 1230, just 15 years after the Magna Carta was signed. Pitchcott (*pyhcote/Pitchcote*), means 'main dwelling on the hill' in Saxon.

Part of Oving "being meadows and a windmill" belonged to Oseney Abbey in 1291. Windmills have long been a feature of Oving. The last one, sited near to windmill cottages on Bowling Alley, was destroyed by fire in the 19th century.

By 1361 most of Oving and North Marston belonged to Thomas and Jane Tochevyk. The land then passed on to Master John Wro and Roger de Clerk of Oving.

The Black Death killed about half of Britain's population in the 30 years from about 1348. Some "plague" villages were abandoned, it seems that Oving survived. This period marked the last decline of feudal society, partly because an abundant, and submissive labour force no longer existed.

When Henry VIII destroyed the monasteries in the 1530's Oving was bestowed on the Dean and chapter of Oxford. Sir John Arundell owned part of Oving.

From 1470 the Lee family became a major landowner in the area, owning Quarrendon and Pitchcott. By the mid 1500's Sir Henry Lee owned Oving as well. Sir Henry was a courtier to Henry VIII, from the age of 14 and was knighted in 1553.

Later, Sir Henry was a favourite and the champion knight of Elizabeth I. The queen visited the manor house at Quarrendon in 1592 and the Tudor knights held jousting contests each year in celebration of the Queen's accession to the throne.

Quarrendon had a manor house with gardens, the chapel of St. Peter and a village. Now only a few stones remain of the chapel, where Sir Henry was buried.

Even in those times the land was subject to frequent flooding, and large banks were built to protect

the manor house and the church.

Quarrendon still had 64 residents in 1851, but there are no signs of the village now. It had a history of at least 1200 years.

During the English Civil War, Aylesbury was a parliamentary stronghold, with batteries sited at Quarrendon. In 1642 the battle of Aylesbury was fought north of Aylesbury near Watermede. 247 casualties were found in a mass grave close the main road to Whitchurch; they were re-buried at St. Mary's church in Hardwick.

Brill was a Royalist stronghold and Oxford was a major Royalist centre. So there were probably many skirmishes in the area. Bolbec castle in Whitchurch was held by the Royalists and was destroyed by roundhead troops, though it was already partially ruined and never a significant military position. There are two positions near to the castle, which may have been gun emplacements looking across the vale towards Aylesbury.

Local tradition has it that Oliver Cromwell watered his horse at the spring called Horsel pond behind, what would then have been, the recently built Black Boy public house. Presumably Oving would have seen both Royalists and Roundheads passing through.

In the early 1700's Henry Lovebond owned Oving and his nephew Henry Lovebond Collins owned the village until 1735, Charles Pilsworth, an Aylesbury MP, took ownership in 1744.

Oving's earliest building is the All Saints Church, dating partly from the 13th century. An earlier wooden church probably stood on the same site. The nave, chancel, lancets and the north and south aisles are 13th century. The east chapel is 14th century and the tower was completed in 1674. All built with the local limestone.

Adam was the first recorded rector, he first preached in 1222.

GE Street was responsible for the church's restoration in 1828, along with many other churches in the area. The repairs are now regarded as vandalism of ecclesiastical architecture. As a result some of the original features have been lost.

There is a crescent shaped earthwork to the east of the church on the brow of the hill and looking out towards Bicester. Its purpose and origin is unknown, it may be Celtic or Saxon.

The photogenic old part of Oving, around the village green, contains several wooden framed 17th century houses, some with thatched roofs. Many of these buildings use locally produced bricks. It's probable that some of the present buildings lie on the sites of older dwellings.

The original part of the Black Boy public house was brick built with a timber frame in about 1600. It has two additions, the last in "mock Tesco" style. So much for listed building status.

The Horsel Pond, behind the Black Boy, would have provided pure water for the villagers throughout the year, as the water is reputed to never fail or freeze. This spring, combined with several other springs on the hill, is the source of North Marston's holy well.

In the 19th century Oving was the scene of two murders.

In 1828 Joseph Walker was a farm worker and the parish clerk. Joseph had an affair with Hannah Bagot, who became pregnant. Joseph's wife Anne had arguments with him about his infidelity. She fell ill after drinking some tea in their house and died, their son also became ill after drinking the tea. Joseph was arrested and held in the Black Boy overnight. A post mortem showed that Ann had died of arsenic poisoning.

Walker was charged with murder and tried at the assizes in Aylesbury. It was proved that he had walked to Winslow and bought arsenic a few days before the murder. He was found guilty of murder and executed.

A second murder happened in 1873. Annie and Henry Evans married in 1864. Annie did well in a haberdashery business in Aylesbury, but Henry had problems with his cattle dealing business and took to drink. They often argued and eventually Henry stabbed her and beat her

to death. He tried to make out that she had gone to visit relatives but panicked and made a getaway. Neighbours made the grisly discovery of her body and an arrest warrant was put out for Evans. He was caught, found guilty of murder and hung at Aylesbury prison.

Oving had 150 inhabitants in 1712, 357 in 1801 and 391 in 1841.

During this period north Buckinghamshire was very poor, with most people working on the land or in cottage industries such as lace making. Later on there was silk weaving in Whitchurch (*London road*) and Aylesbury during part of the industrial revolution. At that time the cost of labour in north Buckinghamshire was less than in the industrial north

Oving House was built in the 1800's and is set in its own grounds on the escarpment, which overlooks Aylesbury. It was sold at auction, by its owner Lord Boston for £20,324 in 1861. It was extensively modified in the 1900's in the Italian Paladian style of architecture.

The Rothchilds bought 206 acres of land in the village for £13,120 and built some substantial houses on Marston Hill and Bowling Alley. Mr. Parrot also bought land for £3,220.

In 1861 an elementary school was built near the church, with a capacity for 90 children.

In 1901 Oving had 318 inhabitants and the average school attendance was 68.

Mrs. Emma Bayliss kept a shop; William Bradshaw also had a shop. Frederick Clarke ran the Black Boy and was also a butcher. John Clarke ran the Butcher's Arms pub. James Henry Clarke was a beer retailer. Frederick Elmer was a dairyman. Mrs. Charlotte Evans was the sub postmistress. Noah Fincher was a boot maker. Miss Sarah and Miss Priscilla Holden were dressmakers. Ralf Lloyd was a butcher. John Showier was an insurance agent and his wife was the schoolteacher. Frederick Smith was a carpenter and Isaac Smith was a greengrocer. William White was a carrier and George White was a gardener at Oving House.

From early times Oving has been at the confluence of droving tracks, they meet at five lane ends at the junction of Marston Hill and Bowling Alley, close to where the Roman camp is located.

The droving tracks can be identified by what appear to be very wide hedges and borders alongside today's roads. These roads are ancient, possibly dating to pre Roman times; they were part of a latticework of roads across the nation. They were used for driving cattle from their pastures to market. In some cases they were driven for very long distances, such as from the Welsh mountains.

The track ways radiate out, indicating Oving's ancient links with the surrounding villages.

South along Oving Lane to Whitchurch

Whitchurch (*Whicherche*) was owned by Walter Gifford, Earl of Buckingham in the 1070's, he was the son of Osbern de Bolebec who fought alongside William the Conqueror in 1066.

Hugh de Bolebec ran Whitchurch, as a subfeudatory of the earl. He constructed Bolebec Castle. The castle mound probably pre-dates the castle. It may have been a hill fort, a "moot" or "hundred mound" for ceremonials and the dispensation of law in Saxon, or earlier, times.

Contrary to local belief, it is unlikely that there was ever a stone castle; only the most important Norman castles were built in stone. Buckinghamshire has only one recorded Norman stone castle, the Boarstall Tower. It is unlikely that a second stone castle would have remained unrecorded. The castle was probably built of wood with a tiled roof. The local badgers often bring up fragments of fired roof tiles on the castle hill.

The local limestone has been used in many of Whitchurch's old buildings and local clay was used for bricks and roof tiles. Some newer buildings stand on the sites of older ones, for instance the White Horse pub appears to be Victorian, but at ground level the remains of a much older limestone building can be seen.

Some buildings, such as the village shop, contain at least three different architectural styles that are very apparent in the roofline, as they have been added to over the centuries.

To the east of the village the remains of extensive ridge and furrow cultivation can still be seen, along with pits where clay and limestone were excavated.

The St. John Evangelist church dates from the 1200's and part of the Priory Hotel (*old Court House*) dates back to the 1600's.

Close to the path of the current main road through the village there was the "butts" here medieval yeoman archers were required to practice with their longbows or face punishment.

It was this same tradition of longbow men that allowed the 6,000 strong army of Henry V to defeat 25,000 Frenchmen at Agincourt in 1415. (*It gives us the two fingered gesture of contempt still used today. The French cut off the two forefingers of captured archers to stop him drawing a bowstring and the longbow men were taunting the French to show that they still had their fingers*)

Whitchurch was granted permission to hold a weekly market in 1245. It still holds an annual spring fair. As with other festivals, the timing probably dates back to early pre Christian festivals, based on the passing of the seasons.

For instance, in 354 Pope Gregory moved Christmas from its original June timing to fit in with the ancient winter solstice Yule feasting time. Certainly the traditional dancing of the maypole is a Celtic ritual, possibly dating back to Bronze Age times, unlike the "modern" druids who were re-invented in Victorian times.

Before the 18th century Whitchurch may not have been on the main route between Buckingham and Aylesbury. The early tracks probably left Aylesbury along the ancient roads via Quarrendon and the minor Roman road to the west of North Marston, Granborough and northwards to Buckingham.

A turnpike road was built from Buckingham to Aylesbury in the 18th century. This passed through Whitchurch. Tolls were collected from road users and each local community had to maintain their section of the road. There was a tollgate south west of Hardwick at the ford that is still visible next to the new bridge; the nearby house was the tollgate keeper's cottage.

Some houses in Whitchurch were demolished to make way for the road and the stones were used to construct the plague house on the road to Oving, it is now a cattery.

East along Meadway to Creslow

Creslow (*Cresselai in the Doomsday Book*) was owned by Edward Sarisberi in 1070. It has ruins of the oldest building in the area; a chapel built in 1120 and was owned by the Knights Templar. They were warrior monks who protected pilgrims and took part in the crusades in the Middle East. The chapel was last used in 1554 at the dissolution of the monasteries.

The echoes of the Knights Templar still live on with the Masonic Lodges of today.

The old manor house is reputed to have a dungeon cut into the underlying limestone bedrock.

From 1086 to 1322 the manor, with its surrounding farmland, belonged to the Earls of Salisbury, thereafter it belonged to the Plantagenot and Tudor monarchs.

Creslow's fertile pastures supplied the royal courts with prime meat. They were famed for producing excellent livestock.

When the canals were built, live cattle were driven to the canal and the living cattle were taken to London by barge, before this they were slaughtered locally and the meat was often tainted before reaching London.

North along Pulpit Lane or Marston Hill and the Portway to North Marston

North Marston's name is probably based on the Saxon name for marsh. It is called Merston in the Domesday Book, when it was owned by William Fitz-Ansculf and later by the Paganells.

Pilgrims visited the village because the holy well, to the west of the church, was thought to have miraculous curative properties.

The church became a pilgrimage centre, partly because it contained a shrine to the church's prelate, Sir John Schorne (1290-1314).

Sir John was said to have imprisoned the devil in a boot. The artefact of the "devil in the boot" was kept in an alcove in the church and was thought to have great religious significance.

The church became very wealthy, by the standards of the time, with pilgrims contributing about £500 per year.

The boot was moved to Windsor in 1478, in return the church was given substantial funds to improve and maintain the church. Royal contributions continued into Queen Victoria's time. This accounts for the current church, which is ornate for a small village.

Much of the old village was destroyed by fire and many of the current buildings date from much later times.

Written by David Proctor 2001