

Chapter 3 *The Village Scene*

*This chapter, with its prospects old and new,
Features some ways in which the Village grew
And changed over the years. The Cross still stands.
Both pubs sell copious beer, of different brands;
The Village hums with busy life, and all
Dream of an extension to the Village Hall.*

The Inheritance

“Time like an ever rolling stream bears all its sons away” and some of Stevington too. Until 1946, when boundary changes reduced the size of the Parish by 135 acres, the Village included the high ground to the south-west known as Picts Hill. Close by the Bedford to Northampton railway line (removed after the Beeching Report of 1962) stands Moat Farm [102], built in the 17th Century and remodelled in the early 19th Century and still a thriving working farm; however, it no longer falls within the Parish of Stevington. The old road to Picts Hill and Moat Farm started at the bottom of Wheaton Hill just beyond Duck End Farm. It is now just a track but was the main route to Turvey before the railway and the new road to the A428 were built.

In addition to territory, we have also lost some important buildings, notably the great tithe barn in Church Road, pulled down between 1872 and 1876, as well as the Hospice and Manor House nearby which were demolished at about the same time. Fortunately, much of interest has survived the ravages of time and man.

The Village is laid out in the characteristic cruciform of an Anglo-Saxon village. Descending into the Village from Wheaton Hill in the south the first building of consequence, situated on the right, is Duck End House, formerly Duck End Farm. It was a working farm until the early 1970s when the owner, David Smith, sold it. In its grounds there used to stand a charming 18th Century dovecote, all the more picturesque for its decaying fabric [107] if not for its tin roof. The dovecote had somehow escaped listing and it was demolished overnight in the early 1980s.

The next complex of buildings is the present Duck End Farm. Once there were two farms of the same name but neither owner would change

the name of his. However, there the two Duck End farms stood, next to each other, albeit with a smallholding in between, and no doubt there was confusion at times. It is all the stranger as the remaining Duck End Farm was once called "Olyffes" occupied by a family of the name of Olyffe and no one knows why the name was changed. **Plate 106** shows the garden of the present Duck End Farm as it was shortly before the Great War with the then owners, the Turney family, in the garden. Note the beehives which were a feature of many curtilages in the Village.

A striking indication of the way things change is **Plate 109**. This is the rear of the *Royal George* pub in Silver Street. The stairs seen here in the courtyard are now enclosed within the main structure and the well is filled in.

Plate 134 is a photograph of Silver Street showing a child, apparently abandoned in a pram, with a horse, probably attached to a cart, looking on. If “every picture tells a story” this should certainly give us a glimpse into the past. What exactly is the story here?

In the next picture [135], one of the oldest street views we have, a child stands outside the *Royal George*. To the right, more or less opposite the *Royal George*, there used to be a bakery (Keeper's Bakery) which along with its shop on the Silver Street frontage closed in 1973. Behind it there is now a small close of five houses called, appropriately enough, *The Bakery*. Also in the picture is a splendid sight of the striated topiary of the yew in the garden of what used to be the Village shop with the Cross in front, taken shortly after the Great War or even earlier. The yew is no longer barbered as it used to be.

Opposite the shop is a 19th Century red brick building which used to be the old Institute or Reading Room [143], built on land provided by the Tuckers of Pavenham, after whom *Tuckers*

Islands in the river are named (see map in the *Village History*). The Institute was designed keep the men out of the pubs and it had a reading room to encourage sobriety. The young were given a shilling to sign the pledge which they promptly spent on beer. The Institute was closed when, to the horror of its benefactors and the Baptist Meeting which managed it, it was discovered that it had become a front for drinking and smoking.

Looking north down Church Road, directly opposite the *Red Lion* is the old off-licence advertising the availability of *Wells' Bedford Ales and Spirits* [137]. The off-licence ceased to trade around 1970 and was sold as a private house in the following year. The last licensee was Mercy Swain. The writing on the photograph indicates where Dick Ruffhead, the Village blacksmith, had his shop. Compare this with a recent photograph [138] of the same view. Further still down Church Road, looking back to the Cross, two tots pose for a picture [136] next to a cottage on the right, *Twin Cottages*, with a splendid overhanging thatch. The *Old House* on the left was formerly a dairy and a shop.

Facing back down Church Road, on the left, after the Church Rooms is the 'new' *Manor Farm House*, built by the Duke of Bedford in the early 1880s, after he demolished the old Manor House and Hospice. The *Old Vicarage*, further down on the left, dates back to the 15th Century. It was sold in 1977, a year after the last incumbent occupied it [110]. Compare this with **Plate 111**, a sketch by Bernard West drawn in 1943.

At the end of Church Road, the *Holy Well* is seen at the bottom of **Plate 114** with St Mary's church in the background. In the photograph the butterbur is discernable but not yet rampant as it is in high summer. On the right is an area that used to flood frequently and where horses were watered, though this is not very clear from the photograph. Contrast this with a watercolour wash executed by Bernard West in 1943 at the age of 16 [115] and a modern photograph [116]. Another old photograph [112] of the Church itself, surmounting the *Holy Well*, conceals the fact that the roof of the south aisle (15th Century) is ruined. The remaining shell, open to the sky, is now used for mowers and other equipment for the maintenance of the church-

yard [113].

Returning to Park Road, the easterly arm of the Village, one sign of change is the view of the former Village shop, now a private house [141]. Another sign of change is reflected in a view of the road outside the *Almshouses* [125] showing Park Road circa 1900 lined with an avenue of elms and sycamores. At least seven people stand there. **Plate 127** is the same view today.

The Almshouses were founded by William Barringer. He was born in Stevington and, having made a fortune as a printer, in London left in his will of 1631 a sum of about £1600, which enabled five almshouses to be built and also funded the purchase of about 25 acres of land on the boundary between Pavenham and Felmersham to provide income for the Trust (Barringer Trust). Today that parcel of land is leased and forms part of the new Pavenham Golf Course. **Plate 129** shows the Almshouses today with four occupants standing in their doorways, from left to right: Mavis Crowe; Chris Molloy; Mary Woods; and Freda Jeffs.

Almost next door is the *Primitive Methodist Chapel* [117] which closed to worship in 1957 and was then used as a potato store. Fortunately it is now the workshop of Robert Shaftoe, organ builder, reminding us that "all art and much religion aspires to the condition of music".

To the south of Park Road lies the *Windmill*, a post mill constructed in about 1770. In 1921 Percy Keech, an undertaker, carpenter and wheelwright by trade, saw that the mill needed repair and undertook with the help of six men to do the job, which in fact he completed in a mere twelve weeks. The Mill remained in working order until 1939. In 1951 it was purchased by Bedfordshire County Council as an historic monument and was one of five contributions made by Bedfordshire to the Festival of Britain. It is now a listed building. **Plate 154** shows it as it was after Percy had restored it; **Plate 155** shows it forlorn and awaiting repair after the sails were damaged in a storm; **Plate 156** shows the repair work in progress involving much interior renewal, the restoration of the outside boarding and the replacement of the steps and tailpole. The new sails were put in place from 22 to 24 September 2004 after an absence of six

years [157]. **Plates 149-53** show the work in progress.

Beyond the Windmill lies *Skylark Cottage*, a derelict reminder of the railway era in the Parish [122]. It was last occupied by Dudley Orman and his family in the 1980s. **Plate 123** shows the old railway line at Picts Hill with its splendid bridge and **Plate 124** has signs of a narrow gauge railway.

On the western arm of the Village one enters Court Lane from the Cross and at the end is a terrace of stone cottages [108]. Almost opposite, at Amen Corner, and set back from the present road is *Home Close* [128] (now called "Willow House") where the old road left the line of the modern road, continued towards the Church and then wound round to near *Meeting Farm* at West End [103]. Part of Meeting Farm dates back to the 15th Century. The former farm buildings opposite once formed part of *West End Farm* and are now converted into a private house [104]. The old farmhouse was demolished in the late 19th Century. Nearby is the *Baptist Meeting* [118] founded in 1655 and built in 1721. The last house on the left in West End is *Hart Farm* [105].)

"Change and decay in all around I see."

In the 1920s the Village was in decay, but the next decade saw a radical improvement. This leaning standpipe in Park Road [159], rusty though it be and crying out for attention, is a reminder of the days when pure drinking water was so necessary to counter disease that in 1935 the Bedford Rural District Council introduced a "*Comprehensive Scheme of Water Supply*" to all villages in the County. Altogether there are ten of these standpipes, in Park Road, Church Road, Silver Street and West End, putting an end to the use of the wells which previously were the only source of drinking water and probably polluted (see *Village History* Chapter 32 page 230).

The improvement in Stevington's living conditions was accelerated by the availability of modern transport (including the bicycle) which enabled people to work away from home and get back in reasonable time to take part in village life. Other factors, besides good water,

included mains sewerage, electricity and, much later, gas. Houses which in the 1920s and 1930s were in a poor state of repair became desirable properties offering, along with all mod cons, countryside peace and the unquantifiable benefits of Village life.

Apart from the development of the closes of Farley Way, Burridge's Close and Foxbrook, there has been much infilling, extension and adaptation. The original Village School building [119] was divided into two dwellings and the old School House, occupied by the head teacher has been extended [120]. "The Barns" off Church Road, formerly part of Manor Farm, have been transformed into prestige examples of conversion [131]. Other examples in Park Road include No 58 [132]; the Old Mill House [133], much extended in recent years; and the even more recent extension of Wilf Mackness's old cottage [126], the original cottage being clearly visible to the left of the photograph. Much the same transformation was effected much earlier to the twin house opposite.

Also in Park Road at Mill Farm stands an imposing 18th Century barn [158]. This was sold by the Duke of Bedford to the County Council as part of the Smallholdings scheme. In the early years of the 1900s it was used on a communal basis by the small-holders who hoped to survive on "three acres and a cow". The depression of the 1920s and 1930s ended those hopes. The Barn is to be converted to an alternative use in the near future, and four houses will soon be built nearby where the old pig-sties once stood.

Plate 162 should be a winning entry in some future Turner Prize Competition, featuring a crazed panel from the old farm shop [160], now sadly gone. Fortunately, a new farm shop has risen from the ashes [161].

At Park End there is another example of decay in the form of the old summerhouse by the river in the wood next to the Lawn. It was built by one of the nearby landowners and has a small harbour for a punt. Little now remains but fortunately we have a photograph from the early 1970s [121].

Pubs



144 Thatching next to the *George*



145 The *Royal George* Yesterday:
Oliver Cox at the Door



146 The *Royal George*
Looking Towards
the Cross



147 The *Red Lion* in Floral Glory



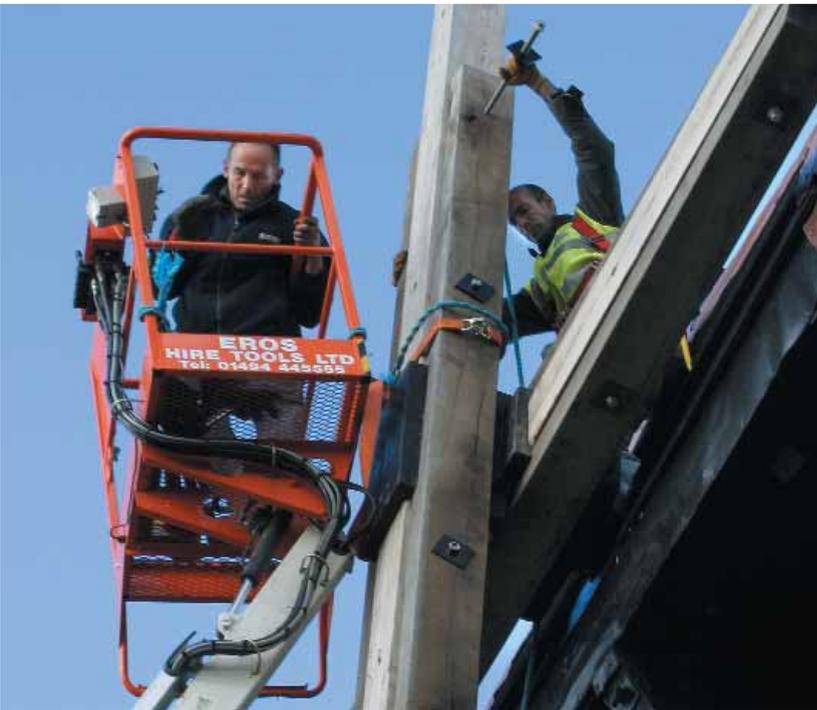
148 The *Red Lion* at Christmas



149 Rearing the Windmill: The First Cross Arm Arrives



150 The Cross Arm is Lifted into Place



151 The Bolts Go In



152 Anticipation and Expectation



153 The Second Sail Goes On



154 The Windmill in Working Order 1921



155 Dismasted and Sails Removed 1996



156 Work in Progress 2003



157 The Windmill Resailed: 24 September 2004



158 The Great Barn at Mill Farm



159 Sad Standpipe



160 The Old Farm Shop



161 The New Mill Farm Shop



162 Modern Art? The Old Mill Farm Shop