Cerne Historical Society

MAGAZINE

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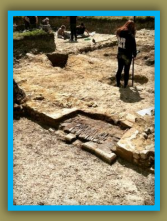






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Cerne Historical Society

Den Denness - Chair

Welcome to the Winter 2025/26 edition of the Cerne Historical Society's magazine.

It's been a while since our last publication so, as a reward for your patience, we've treated you to a bumper edition this time round. It includes a combination of pieces from our regular writers plus, I'm pleased to say, three articles that we've received from guest contributors.

In the first of these, our vicar Jonathan tells the story of a fifteenth century product of Cerne Abbey, John Morton. Now largely forgotten, Morton was one of the most important power brokers of his time, rising to become Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VII before being elevated to the status of Cardinal. Elsewhere, Sheila Hughes writes about the long-demolished manor house at Middlemarsh, which, again, has historic links with our abbey. The third of our guests is Anne Brown, the driving force behind our sister society in the Sydling valley. In her article Anne documents the development of the watercress industry in the valley and how it has managed to survive locally while production elsewhere has declined.

(If any readers have ideas for their own contributions for future editions of this magazine, please contact the editorial team to discuss your thoughts).

Covered elsewhere in these pages are pieces examining life in Bushes Bottom during the early twentieth century, a look at self-help societies in Victorian Cerne Abbas, the story of the restoration of St Mary's Church in the 1960s, and the third and final part of George Mortimer's chronicle of our village hall. I hope that you get a lot of pleasure from reading these.

Finally, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the contribution made to the Cerne Historical Society by Gordon Bishop, who recently stood down after a six-year stint as the Society's Chair. Among the many achievements made during his time at the helm were the establishment of this magazine – to which he was a regular contributor – and the successful efforts that he oversaw to finally locate Cerne Abbey and to start the first formal archaeological excavation of the site. In addition, as a member of the Society's Committee I can personally testify to Gordon's effectiveness as its Chair, a role he conducted with a clear-sighted efficiency, civility and good humour. His contribution will be greatly missed by the Society.

Ian (Den) Denness – Chair of the Cerne Historical Society

Den may easily be contacted by using the form on the website cerneabbashistory.org/contact-us

Jonathan Still

JOHN MORTON CARDINAL, ARCHBISHOP of CANTERBURY and PRIMATE of ALL ENGLAND

How close can we get to Cerne Abbey as it was, a C15th powerhouse? Well, this skull is pretty close. It is in Clitheroe, Lancashire, at Stonyhurst Jesuit College, a Catholic public school. But it was born in Dorset, to middling county gentry, around 1420.

It spent its early years in Moreton near Bere Regis. It must have been very bright, because at around 7 years it was brought to Cerne Abbey by its parents for its early education. That mouth learned to sing the Latin plainsong and polyphony within the great abbey church. I wonder if it was a clear and pure soprano? Did the eyes look up at the soaring vaults, the gilded and carved foliate scrolling? See through the sunbeams piercing the incensed air? Did the ears listen, enthralled, to a thundering organ? Those teeth gobbled up the carp and eel and oysters served in the refectory. He grew well and fast. Above all, the brain and mind were developing. Perhaps the young skull was bent over games of chess, perhaps handling the very chess-piece found in the Cerne Abbey excavations in 2025, checking on the rules in the earliest known representation of chess in the common-place book of the monk-tutor, now in Trinity College Cambridge library. What did they call him? John? Jack? Johnny Morton?

At 14 he was ready for his next step- Balliol College Oxford. Interestingly, he read Civil Law. Law then was pretty equally divided between civil and church. Church or Ecclesiastical law covered personal, moral and relational law, whereas civil law dealt with statute and property and commercial contracts. John graduated as Bachelor of Civil Law, but kept studying. In 1451 he became Bachelor of Civil and Canon Law, in 1452 a Doctorate in Civil Law. He was destined for the Church Civil Service, and was appointed Lawyer to the Court of the Arches, the Appeal Court for the Church Province of Canterbury under Archbishop Bourchier and then to his first Royal Court appointment on 26th September 1456. Morton at this time sought Holy Orders and was ordained priest on 10th March 1458. From now on, he would combine his civil and church law and become an omnicompetent courtier.

These were the times of the Wars of the Roses. England was riven between two factions, the House of York and the House of Lancaster. This was the original “Game of Thrones”.

Morton sided with Lancaster and served Henry VI. When Henry was defeated at the Battle of Towton Moor, on 29th March 1461 Morton was arrested with other, secular Lords. It was the bloodiest battle, in atrocious weather. Modern estimates are that 28-30,000 died. The victor, Edward IV, had secular opposition Lords executed on the spot. Morton was too useful, and protected by his ecclesiastical status. He was committed to the Tower of London, but this was no wimpy vicar, and he escaped, fleeing to Flanders in exile. There he joined Henry VI's widow, Margaret of Anjou, and sheltered her son, the 7-year-old Prince Edward.

Morton set to work and built support for Margaret before leading her back to England through Dorset, where he had grown up, and where his local family connections would support them, landing at Weymouth, and staying overnight at his alma mater, Cerne Abbey. This was not a social call, and we must imagine hectic preparations as troops and militia, horses and supplies gathered to the Lancastrian colours in preparation for the march north. What would the older monks have made of this international man of affairs who they knew so well as a boy, now in his pomp and prime, aged 51 and directing the events of history?

On 4th May 1471 it didn't go well at Tewkesbury, where the Lancastrian army which had gathered to Margaret's banner was crushed by the Yorkists. The 17 year old Prince Edward was killed in the field of battle. John Morton was arrested and sent back to the Tower for a second time. But again, Morton was too useful. He was pardoned by Edward IV, and made Master of Chancery and Master of the Rolls. These were huge royal appointments. In a time of national chaos at the level of the throne, Morton was the essential continuity agent.

From 1474 Morton was entrusted with international diplomatic missions to Europe. Archbishop Bourchier had not forgotten Morton either, and appointed him Bishop of Ely on 31st January 1479, then a huge and wealthy Diocese.

Morton's star was in the ascendant, but three years later Edward IV was dead. Morton rushed to crown the 13-year-old Edward V, who was King from only 9th April to 25th June 1483. In a coup, Edward's uncle Richard, Duke of Gloucester, seized power as Richard III and had Morton arrested and he was again sent to the Tower, along with the two Princes Edward V and his younger brother, Richard.

The two Princes were 'disappeared', but Morton was placed under house arrest in the custody of the Duke of Buckingham at Brecon. Morton, ever the supreme diplomat, was able to 'turn' his gaoler and sprung a plot to unseat Richard. The plot failed, and Morton fled again to Flanders, once more with the House of Lancaster in exile, and their great future hope, Henry Tudor.

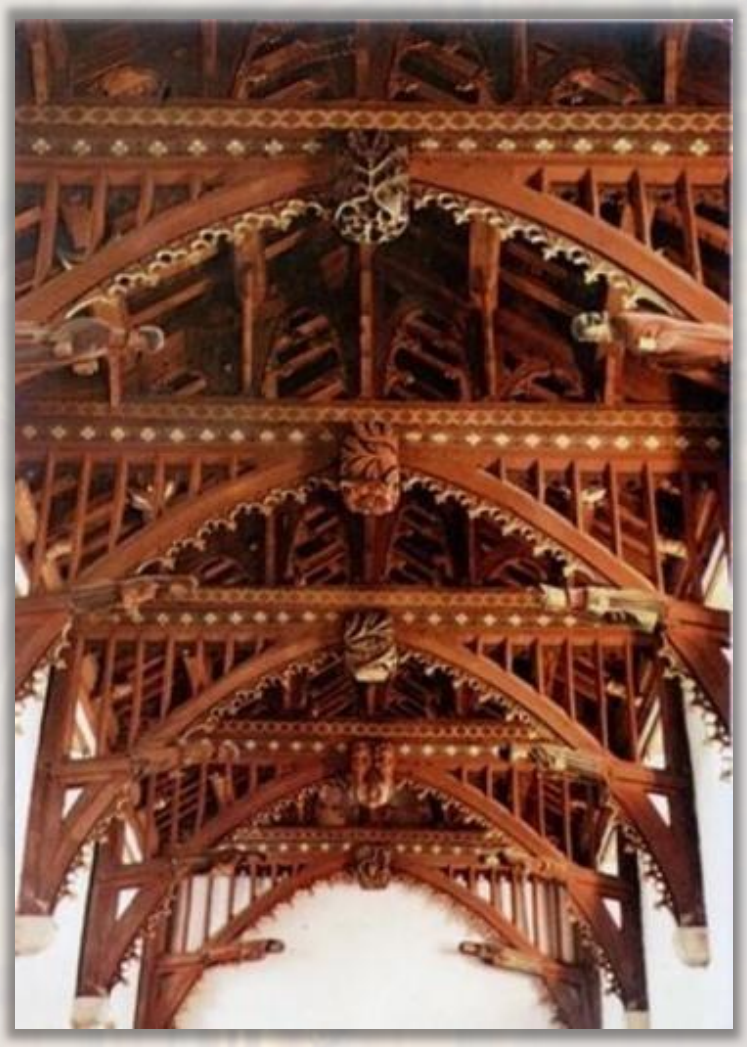
Richard III sought legal extradition from the Spanish Flanders for Henry Tudor, but Morton's intelligence networks gave him warning. A young priest, Christopher Urswick, an agent for Margaret Beaufort, rode at speed and led Henry Tudor to safety across the French border.

At Bosworth Field on 30th October 1485 Henry Tudor defeated and killed Richard III and became King Henry VII. Morton, of course, was handsomely rewarded for his service. Henry appointed him Lord Chancellor, and, from then on, Morton was rarely if ever absent from the King's Council. Archbishop Bourchier, Morton's old patron, died on 30th March 1486 and Henry appointed Morton to succeed him. On 31st January 1487 he was placed in Augustine's throne in Canterbury Cathedral, chief subject after the King and chief Prelate in England. Even this was capped when the King lobbied Pope Alexander VII and Morton was appointed Cardinal 20th September 1493 and given a lovely big red sombrero hat.

Can you imagine the excitement in the refectory at Cerne! One of their own! Little Johnny Morton Cardinal and Archbishop! It meant that this little corner of Dorset was well-connected. The Prior of the tiny obscure house of Austin Canons at Hermitage found himself summoned to become personal Chaplain to the King.

Morton loved his home and never forgot it. He re-built the nave at St John Baptist church Bere Regis with a magnificent carved and painted roof featuring statues of the twelve apostles, a portrait of himself and the symbols of the marriage of Henry VII to Elizabeth of York.

In around 1490 a John More placed his 12-year-old son Thomas as a page in the household of Archbishop Morton. The young boy astonished and amused the archiepiscopal household with his precocious talent, and his acting in the Christmas revels. William Roper, Thomas More's son-in law recorded how Archbishop Morton had remarked "This child, here waiting at table, whosoever shall live to see it, will prove a marvellous man".



Had Morton remembered Abbot John Winteborne, Abbot of Cerne, making such remarks about his own precocious young self, back in Dorset in the 1430s? Thomas grew up to hold himself the great Offices of State John Morton had held before him. However, he had the misfortune to do so under that Tudor 'Trump' Henry VIII and the now Saint Thomas More paid for it with his life.

Anything was possible, until 1500 in Knole Palace in Kent. This was one of the string of overnight stop Palaces of the Archbishops of Canterbury on their regular route from Westminster to Canterbury and it was here that John Morton died on 12th September. At 80 he was a fine age.

He had been renowned for his magnanimity in life and personal modesty. This was reflected in his Will. Morton asked to be buried in a simple grave near to the statue of Our Lady in the Undercroft at Canterbury Cathedral, under a simple slab of Dorset Purbeck Marble. The monks erected a memorial cenotaph (an empty tomb) in the same chapel, which, much eroded, survives with an effigy of Morton in his glory.

Morton's remains rested there in peace until the Civil Wars of the 1640s when Roundhead soldiers tore up his brass nameplate for scrap and in doing so broke the stone slab. All could see the shrouded body inside and visitors would scrabble for possible rings or pectoral crosses and several bones went missing.

After the Restoration in 1660, the new Archbishop's nephew, Ralph Sheldon, suggested that the tomb should be tidied up and Morton's skull was placed in a lead box and kept at the family home. This part of the family were recusant Catholics and sent their sons for education at the English Jesuit College at St Omer in the Spanish Netherlands. That is where Morton's head ended up, but after the French Revolution, the Jesuits fled Napoleon to Stonyhurst, Clitheroe, Lancashire. Morton's skull came with them and has remained there ever since. He always did find travel energising! We have a brief character reference for the living Morton from a contemporary, John Harrington, the Proctor for the English Cistercians, who had their own House at Bindon Abbey, close to Morton's family home.

'In my opinion, he is a man of great learning and profound wisdom, devoted to the service of God, concerned for the public welfare rather than for his own advantage, immersing himself profitably in both religious and secular affairs, and not shrinking from the heat and burden of the day.'

All that, and a touch of James Bond 007 too!

I am grateful to the websites of Isolde Martyn, 'A Tudor Family Guide', the book by Richard Marius about Thomas More and 'The Parish Book of Cerne Abbas' by Patricia and Vivian Vale.

Revd Canon Jonathan Still

In the summer of 2025, the University of Sheffield returned to Cerne Abbey for its third season of archaeological excavation, uncovering new evidence for the abbey's development and earlier activity on the site. We were ably assisted by a team of students from the UK and around the world, as well as many local volunteers.

The main focus of our excavations was the reopening of Trench D from 2024, which lay to the northeast of the main cloister complex. The purpose of this was to finish excavating the building range here and to extend the trench slightly to take in an additional area where we thought the northern end of the east cloister range was located. This season, we were able to excavate more comprehensively the range of buildings we had seen in 2024 and tentatively identified as an earlier abbot's lodging or similar high-status residential building. While we could not confirm this for certain, this remains our interpretation, even though the building was more complex than we had first imagined. There were at least 4-5 successive phases of rebuilding, and the last of these was an extension to the west, which continued beyond the limit of our trench. We also successfully located the northeast corner of the east cloister range. As with almost all the main monastic buildings, this range survived only at the foundation level, but the surfaces inside were better preserved. These included a patch on in situ 13th-century tiles, which were very heavily worn and cracked from heavy use. However, the fact that they were never replaced suggests this portion of the range was considered a more utilitarian area.

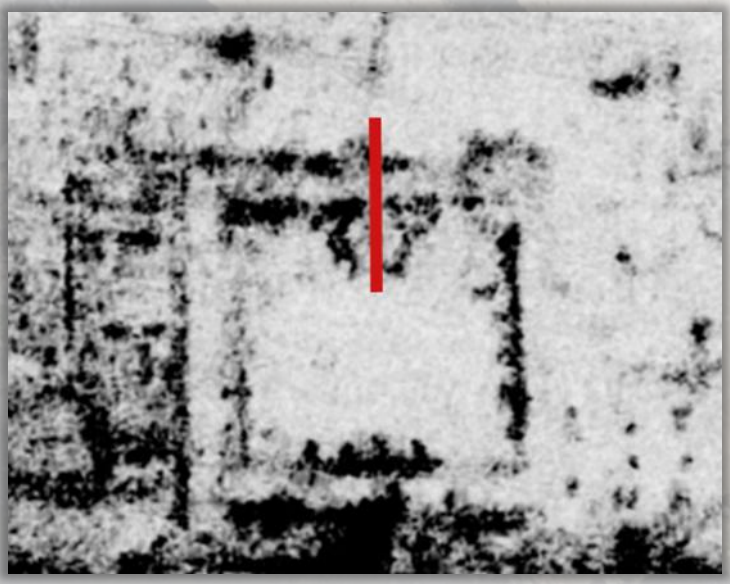
In the area south of the domestic range and east of the cloister, we continued excavating in what was a yard in the later medieval period. This area contained further dumps of later medieval domestic waste as well as earlier features cut into the natural chalk below. The largest of these was a huge circular pit over 2m in diameter and almost as deep. Although we only emptied a portion of this pit, its function remains uncertain. It was filled almost entirely with redeposited chalk and contained very few artefacts or general waste. This means it was either a feature regularly cleaned out, or it was filled in very shortly after being dug, before rubbish could accumulate. Given the lack of material from within it, it is hard to date precisely, but it predated the 13th-century yard surfaces. Other earlier gullies and post holes were found in this area and extend under the later building ranges. Because Trench D was relatively small, these features did not form a coherent plan and are likely to represent different phases of activity. A number contained quite large quantities of ceramics of 11th-early 12th century date. This pottery is currently undergoing analysis, and once the results are available, they will help us interpret these features more effectively.

A range of interesting finds again came from this area of the site, offering a hint of the area's status and activities. Perhaps the most eye-catching is a medieval book clasp, made of gilded copper and decorated with two small flowers. This would have been attached to the end of a leather strap used to hold a large book firmly shut, as the vellum of the pages was thick and much bulkier than modern paper. These clasps are common finds and would have been attached to all sorts of everyday books. However, this example is particularly finely crafted, and it would have been attached to a more important prayerbook or even a bible.

Another artefact of interest is a small oval lead object, found at the north end of the east cloister range. At first glance, this looks like a ‘vesica seal’, an oval stamp pressed into hot wax to authenticate important documents. However, these are normally made in bronze and have the image cut in reverse, so that the wax seal was imprinted with a prominent image. The Cerne object is made of lead and not in reverse, so it would not have made the correct type of impression. Instead, this object appears to be a devotional item, carried by its owner for spiritual reasons. The lead has weathered significantly in the soil, but it depicts a seated saint-like figure, or even an angel, holding a sword or other item in the hands. Further research may identify its purpose more firmly.

Not all artefacts found in the trench originally came from this exact location, as Dissolution destruction and robbing had scattered items across the whole field. A good example of this was a small corner of thick brass sheet, decorated with heavily incised lines, found in the topsoil layers of Trench D. This is a portion of a 15th-century memorial brass, and the surviving piece depicts the hem of the dress or clerical vestment worn by a now lost figure. This brass would have been fixed to a tomb, almost certainly located in the monastic church. However, after the abbey's closure, as it represented valuable scrap, it would have been among the first fittings removed. The reason our corner has survived is that the brass was riveted to the grave slab, and the hole for one of these fixings is visible along the line of the break. Most probably, the brass snapped at this point as it was being levered off, and this small section was lost or scattered along with a wide range of other building remains.

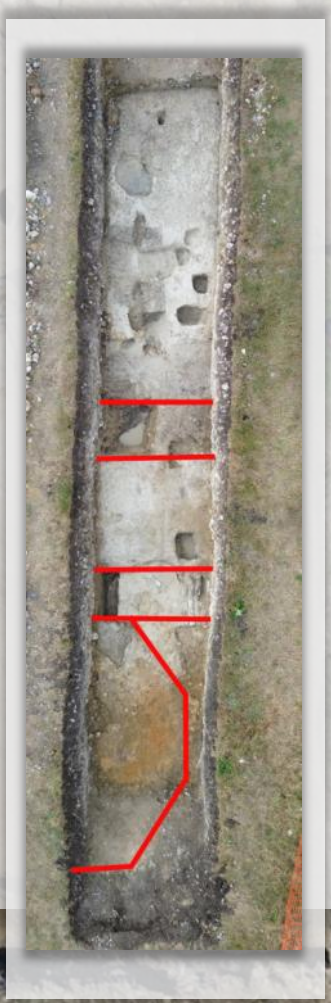
The excavation produced hints of earlier activity, some of which will become clearer once the pottery analysis is completed and we undertake some further radiocarbon dating. Perhaps the most striking, and certainly one of the smallest, of these finds was a tiny fragment of drinking glass. Identifying such small pieces of glass can be very challenging. Still, its distinctive blue colour and thick, looped opaque white trailing are distinctive. This fragment is from a cone-shaped beaker, and while it needs to be confirmed by scientific analysis, it appears to be a type typically found in Western Britain during the late 6th and 7th centuries AD. This coincides with the radiocarbon date we obtained for a pit excavated in the cloister in 2023, and suggests not only that there was early occupation on the site before the traditional founding of the Anglo-Saxon abbey in AD 987, but also that this activity was of a status that had access to high-quality glassware.



In 2025, we also opened a second small area, Trench E. This was located over a very clear hexagonal feature on the geophysics at the north end of the cloister, abutting the refectory range there. We assumed this to be a conduit house, the place where water was piped into the cloister and distributed around it, and also it would have served as a place where the monks would wash before entering the refectory. One thing that had been striking about the geophysics was its resemblance to the surviving conduit house from Sherborne Abbey.

The most important find from the trench was a stone ceiling boss from a 'lierne vault', a decorative form of late medieval stone vaulting. This boss formed part of the internal ribbing from the conduit house and was finely carved in Hamstone. In style, it is identical to the vaulting of the conduit house at Sherborne, which was constructed under the early rule of Abbot John Mere c. AD 1505-20. Interestingly, this date coincides with the rebuilding of the abbot's lodging at Cerne by Thomas Sam in 1508/09. Therefore, they were likely constructed at a similar time by the same group of masons, who would have used the identical patterns to create the mouldings. The Cerne boss is still incredibly sharp in detail, due to the conduit house standing and being exposed to the elements for around 30 years. It takes the form of a stylised double rose, usually assumed to be a symbol of the House of Tudor. However, this example is unusual as the overlapping petals have a surround of toothed sepals forming a sunburst edge, a feature not usually seen on depictions of the Tudor Rose.

Although the conduit house was completely dismantled at the Dissolution, the trench revealed its foundations. Further, it demonstrated its similarity to the surviving conduit house at Sherborne. Projecting into the cloister were foundation packing from four of the original walls of the octagonal building (the remainder being beyond the edge of the trench). To the north, this was directly joined to the wall of the cloister walkway, and the construction of the new conduit in the 16th century necessitated the rebuilding of the walkway's outer wall at this junction. This was evidenced by the presence of Purbeck marble column fragments, which had been removed from the original wall at this point and used as foundation packing for the new construction. Within the new conduit house was a circular stone foundation pad. This feature was not central to the octagonal foundations and lay slightly closer to the cloister walkway. Such a pad would not have served an obvious function in the later conduit, and is interpreted as the remains of the earlier conduit head that must have stood in this location before its replacement in the 16th century.



As with any excavation, many questions remain unanswered from last year's work. Some we hope will become clearer as study and analysis continue. But there are other areas of the site we still want to investigate, and we are planning to return in late July and early August this year. As always, we are very grateful for all the help and support we have received so far and we very much hope that you'll continue to follow and support our work in the coming year.

CERNE ABBAS' VICTORIAN FRIENDLY SOCIETIES

The lives of working people in nineteenth century Britain were precarious.

With no sickness pay or support available from the Welfare State, the apparent security gained from permanent employment was at risk from an unexpected accident, illness or injury. Worse still, with most households dependent on the earnings from a principal breadwinner, a sudden death could lead a whole family into destitution. Prospects were made even more grim in the 1830s when the longstanding practice of financial support being provided by the Parish in times of need was replaced by the threat of incarceration in one of the newly established Union Workhouses.

In response to this uncertainty, many of those at risk turned to what came to be regarded as a shining example of Victorian 'self-help' – by forming a 'Friendly Society'. The basic principle behind the friendly societies was that members would regularly contribute a set amount of their earnings to a central fund administered by its trustees. The money would be invested and accrue interest. However, should a member fall ill or die, contributions from the fund were made to him (and, initially, it was always a man) or his family to help navigate his period of incapacity, to cover funeral expenses, and to support the bereaved family.

There were many friendly societies operating in Britain during the Victorian period. The largest and most famous of these were the **Independent Order of Oddfellows** and the **Ancient Order of Foresters**, both of which, despite being locally administered, were overseen by a national governing body. Both had roots dating back to the eighteenth century. There were others, but these smaller societies, having lesser reserves, tended to have higher subscription fees and handed out lower value dividends.

Cerne Abbas first benefitted from the establishment of a friendly society when the Ancient Order of Foresters opened a local branch based at the Elephant and Castle pub in 1860. Adopting the title 'Court St Austin' (Foresters used the title 'Court' for their local branches, unlike the Oddfellows and Freemasons which favoured 'Lodge'), the Cerne Abbas branch was numbered 3482, indicating the extent to which Forestry had taken hold in Britain.

The Court St Austin began with sixteen members, but its popularity soon spread. Within a year that number had risen to 51, and by 1866 it had 90 members on its books and had accrued £170 in reserves.

Friendly societies were favourably viewed by most Victorians. The wealthy were happy to support any venture that helped people avoid the workhouse and thereby ease their contributions to the parish rates. Society members also benefitted from a sense of enhanced social status – not everyone had sufficient surplus cash to afford to enrol to a friendly society, so a division was created between those that were part of a society and those that weren't. As the head of the Cerne Foresters said in the year the Court was founded:

> ***"I believe that friendly societies made better husbands, better fathers, and better citizens than others of the same class who do not belong to such institutions"***

The enhanced social standing granted by membership was visibly displayed through the adoption of regalia, including sashes, badges and medallions. In the case of the Foresters, members referred to each other as 'brother', and the head of the local branch as 'Chief Ranger'.

The function of the friendly societies extended beyond planning for financial security. Members enjoyed regular celebratory dinners in which a feast was followed by speeches and communal singing. These helped develop a sense of fraternal community. But in Cerne Abbas, as in many other parts of the country, the Foresters came to greatest prominence through their annual holding of a 'demonstration' in the village, followed by a public fete open to all.

The first Foresters demonstration was held in August 1861 and its format set a template that would be followed for the next sixty years. On the day before the event, the villagers decorated their houses with foliage, flags and other paraphernalia, while the streets were adorned by a series of temporary archways, covered in greenery, and proudly displaying uplifting slogans, such as 'God Save the Queen', 'Forestry Forever', and the Foresters' own motto 'Unity Benevolence and Concord'. The intention was to transform Cerne Abbas into a vision of Sherwood Forest.

On the day of the demonstration, the Foresters would assemble, wearing full regalia, at its 'Court House' at the Elephant and Castle. From there, they would parade around the village before arriving at St Marys Church, where they attended divine service and were given an appropriate sermon by the vicar. Afterwards, the procession was re-formed and headed off to a grand dinner held in a marquee erected in one of the fields that surrounded the village. After numerous speeches, the fete began.

The size of, and attractions at, the fete grew over time. Initially, it included several traditional pastimes, such as a maypole, coconut shies, an Aunt Sally, and dancing late into the evening. One early highlight was the annual display of swordsmanship performed by the village's own Sergeant Dominy. At the 1870 fete, he successfully sliced a gooseberry, a potato, an apple, and an egg in two with four rapid slashes of his weapon – the four items having been placed respectively on the forehead, mouth and hands of a small boy!

Later, the fete became the venue for the annual Cerne Abbas pony races. This popular event grew in magnitude until the First World War, and it was these races that we so enthusiastically revived after the hostilities in 1920 (see *Cerne Historical Society Magazine, Autumn 2022).*

The Forester's Fete became an important date in Cerne Abbas' social calendar. Local schoolteacher Catherine Granville noted in her diary, on the eve of the 1908 fete, that there was 'an air of excitement over the town especially among the boys' in anticipation of the festival. On the day itself, she recorded:

"At 11.45 there was a service in the church before which, headed by a brass band, the Foresters had paraded the principal streets. Then after the service… the men adjourned to the marquee erected for the purpose in a field next to the Workhouse and had dinner...

… After dinner we joined the merry makers (everyone comes from miles around and makes holiday). There were the merry-go-round braying out popular tunes in a most doleful manner, swing-boats, cocoa-nut shies, try-your strength machines, Aunt Sally, a shooting range and various other stalls and booths. In the afternoon there were pony races, bicycle races, flat races etc. Towards the evening the band played dance music and dancing was the thing."

For many years the Foresters Fete was the largest and most-looked-forward-to celebration in Cerne Abbas.

ANCIENT ORDER OF FORESTERS.

THE Members of Court "ST. AUSTIN," No. 3,482, intend holding a DEMONSTATION and FETE, at CERNE ABBAS, on JULY 9th, 1874.

A PROCESSION will be formed at the Court House at 12 o'clock, headed by the Weymouth Rifle Volunteer Band, especially engaged for the occasion; and, after passing through the principal streets, will proceed to a FIELD adjoining the town, kindly lent by Mr. HELLYAR, where a PUBLIC DINNER will be provided by Mr. T. Fox, at 2s. 6d. each.

Various AMUSEMENTS will be provided.

For further particulars see Bills.

From The Weymouth Telegram 12 June 1874 p12

The local success of the Foresters was followed in the 1890s by the establishment of two additional friendly societies in the village. First, in 1892, the Oddfellows established a new lodge – the 'Self Help Lodge' – at the Royal Oak. Its financial function, and its emphasis on sociability and conviviality, mirrored that of the Foresters. The second new society, the Red Lion Slate Club, was different. Established in 1895, the Slate Club collected subscriptions throughout the year and offered support to members as needed. But, at the end of each year, the Club's reserves were evenly distributed among subscribers, acting in effect like a 'Christmas Club', before wiping the 'slate' clean and starting again in the new year.

The decline of the friendly societies in the UK is directly linked to the emergence in the twentieth century of the welfare state. The passing of the Old Age Pensions Act (1908) and the National Insurance Act (1911) first legislated for the provision of pensions, sick pay and an early form of unemployment benefit for working people. As further legislative changes were introduced, culminating in the post-Second World War reforms of the Attlee Government, the role previously adopted by the friendly societies was absorbed by the state. Membership of the Foresters, Oddfellows and others declined, Courts and Lodges were closed, and their social activities ceased.

Despite the fall in membership, many of the friendly societies still exist in a modified form. The Foresters Financial is a mutual financial services provider which offers a variety of savings, ISAs and other investment packages to its members. The Oddfellows still boast a third of a million UK members and continues to provide financial support, fundraising and social activities. Other former friendly societies have evolved into building societies and others into fully-fledged banks. But none of them can match the profile and energy of their nineteenth century predecessors, which had formerly provided the sole safety net against penury and disgrace for many working people.

(Epsom Foresters in full regalia)

There are only 38 watercress farms in the whole of England.
They have become rare, and are quite special.
We are privileged to have one in the Sydling Valley.

Watercress has always grown wild in the chalk streams of England. The first commercial watercress farm in England was established in 1808, in Gravesend, to supply the London market. More cress farms developed to cope with demand. They were almost all on the chalk streams of Dorset, Wiltshire and Hampshire, and the cress was taken by train to markets around the country.

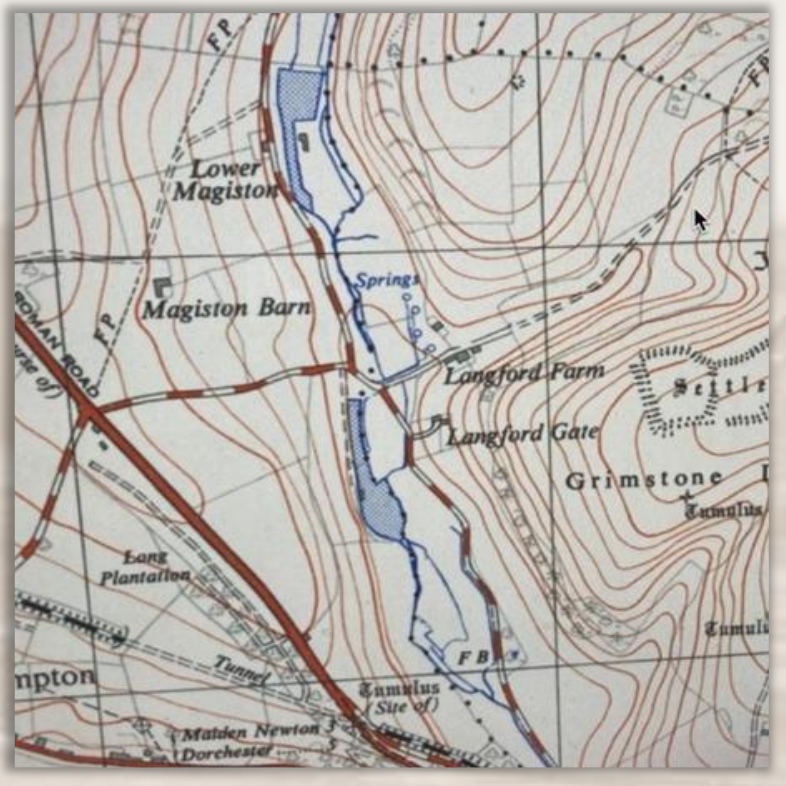
Watercress is hugely nutritious, and was a winter staple, sold in greengrocers' shops and widely consumed, until the advent of the supermarkets when cheap imported vegetables became available all year round. In 1940 there were over 1,000 acres of watercress under cultivation in England, but in the 1970s, many cress farms went out of business. By the year 2000 only 150 acres of cress beds remained in the whole country. 3 of these acres are in the Sydling Valley.

Cress beds are fed by groundwater springs and bore holes which provide a constant flow of relatively warm, pure, chalk-filtered spring water. On a winter's day steam can be seen rising from the beds, as the warmer spring water meets the cold air. On these days, watercress characteristically ducks its head close to the water to keep warm.

The cress farmer also likes to have his hands under the water on a cold winter morning! His day starts before first light, when he is out cutting cress.

In the days when there was a railway station by the Grimstone Viaduct, the cress from the Sydling Valley would be bunched, packed and taken down to Grimstone Station to be taken by train the same morning to the markets in Dorchester and beyond.

Grimstone Station



There used to be four cress beds in the Sydling Valley: at Up Sydling, Huish, Magiston, and Langford.

Langford cress beds were in the water meadows south of Langford Gate The bunching shed is now a holiday let called the Fishing Lodge.

Magiston

The Magiston cress beds were established in 1908. They belonged to Magiston Farm, then were sold to the Golledges who lived near Bath. The manager lived on site in a corrugated tin shed, which was said to have been used previously as a chapel in Frampton. In the 1950s the bungalow was built, and the shed became the rest room and kitchen for the workers.

At its height 20 people worked at Magiston, cutting, bunching and packing, doing long hours of back breaking labour. Once bunched, the cress would be put into "chips", wooden baskets holding 36 bunches. These would then be put into a spring fed pool in the next shed, where water flowed over them all day, keeping them fresh until they were put in a cart and taken down for the late train to Bristol ready for sale in the early morning wholesale fruit and veg markets.

The cress beds were cleaned every few months. A horse and cart were walked down into the bed, and men either side forked the contents into the cart to clear the bed, then washed it down and brushed it out.

During WW2 the beds were rebuilt by German and Italian prisoners of war. An earth bank was built down the middle, and the two sides were known as the German side and the Italian side. There was a great demand for cress, and the ministry bought most of it for recuperating soldiers. Bunching and packing were still done at Magiston until the 1970s, as witnessed by the graffiti in the bunching shed, "I love the Monkees"! There used to be a railway for pushing trolleys of cress around between the beds. The turntable of the railway still hangs on a shed wall.

Railway Turntable

Ernie Crawley's wheelbarrow

Huish and Up Sydling

These cress beds were both run by the Crawleys. First Ben Crawley, then from the 1930s his son Ernie. Ernie lived at Huish Cottages, which back directly on to the beds.

John Morris remembers buying cress from the Crawleys for 6d a bunch.

The bunching and packing shed for Huish is now the garage for the cottage. The bunchers would be on piece work, paid per bunch. The bunches were packed into boxes ready to take down to the station. The blackboard in the shed still lists the names of the old wholesale customers, waiting for the numbers of boxes for delivery to each to be chalked in.

Ernie died in 1970, and a couple of years later the Huish cress beds became a trout farm, raising small fry for Trafalgar fisheries on the Longford Estate south of Salisbury. They are now a tranquil home for nature and for David Buckland's Cape Farewell.

Up Sydling cress beds fell into disuse, and are now overgrown but a haven for wildlife.

The blackboard in the Crawley's shed

Watercress in Sydling today

Luckily, in 1976, John Hurd took over Magiston Cress beds, keeping cress growing alive in Sydling when so many other cress farms were closing

John Hurd's Organic Watercress is a family business based near Warminster, with beds in the Deverill Valley and here at Magiston. The Magiston beds are managed by Jerry Chinchen.

These days cress is grown here all year round, although summer is now the main season. The cress cutting begins at 5am. Until 2019 it was still cut by hand, but for the past 5 years, it has been cut by machine, making life a great deal easier.

The cress from Magiston is driven to Warminster each morning, where it is bunched, packed and sold to smaller shops and to the markets at Evesham and Covent Garden, and at least half is collected by Waitrose and taken to Bracknell for distribution to their stores around the country.

Nowadays just two people run the beds. As well as the daily care and harvesting of the cress, Jerry raises seedlings of cress for both Magiston and Deverill in the repurposed trout rearing sheds, powered by solar panels on the roof and lit by LED lights. There are two sowings per year, a winter variety and a summer variety.

The cress beds are still cleaned out every 6-8 months, (using tractors these days), washed down and the silt washed out. The dirty water is pumped into settlement tanks, and once it is running clear the water is diverted back into the river. The silt that settles to the bottom is drawn off once a year for use as organic fertiliser.

And so modern methods keep the chalk stream pure, and the Sydling Valley still produces its traditional watercress.

Magiston is the only remaining productive cress farm in the Sydling valley

With thanks to John Hurd and Jerry Chinchen for their information and advice, and for access to Magiston Cress Farm.

Anne Brown Feb 2025

Middlemarsh Grange

...the Lost Mansion

On Kennels Lane, Glanvilles Wootton, is a site called 'The Moat'. The moat itself, now just a field ditch, is all that remains of Middlemarsh Grange, a grand mansion demolished in 1774. The land originally belonged to Cerne Abbey, who built a grange there as an abbots' retiring place and possibly a farm to supply the Abbey. In 1544, following the Dissolution of the Monasteries, it was one of several properties granted to Philip van Wilder, a Dutchman who became the equivalent of Master of the King's Music to Henry VIII.

In 1597 the property was acquired by Sir Robert Napier, or Napper, of Puncknowle. He was descended from a Scottish family who became the Barons of Merchiston, Edinburgh. He also acquired Crichel House near Wimborne, and in 1615 established the almshouses in the building in Dorchester now known as "Napper's Mite". He died that year, his will requesting that he be buried in "the new aisle I have of late proposed to build there", meaning at Minterne Magna church, the parish church for Middlemarsh. A chapel was accordingly attached to Minterne church, now housing many impressive memorials to the Napier family, including a huge marble monument covering the east wall. In the 17th century the Napiers' main seat transferred to Crichel House, but they continued to be buried at Minterne where, unusually, their crypt is above ground, a stone building attached to the chapel's east wall, accessed through the chapel floor.

Middlemarsh Grange

Sir Robert and his descendants were Dorset MPs who were nevertheless Royalists, which led to Middlemarsh Grange being sequestered during the Civil War, to be returned to the family at the Restoration. Sir Nathaniel Napier, great-grandson of Sir Robert, rebuilt a good part of the Grange in 1708. The drawing below, from the estate map in the Dorset History Centre, shows a Georgian-style building, built around a quadrangle.

On the east side of the building was a chapel, over its altar a painting of The Resurrection by Sir James Thornhill. When the Grange was demolished, the painting was given to the Rector of Folke. It was subsequently hung in Folke church, but from June 2025 has been on permanent loan to The Sherborne where is has been on public display since 17th January 2026.

The Napier baronetcy became extinct in 1765 with the death of Sir Gerard Napier. His aunt Diana Napier was the wife of Humphry Sturt of Horton, MP for Dorset 1754-84, who built the famous folly, Horton Tower. He bought the Grange in 1765, and their son Charles was the owner at the time of its demolition. The stone was reported to have been used to repair local farm buildings, but some ruins were still visible in 1836 according to (subsequently aborted) plans for a railway between Bath and Weymouth which would have passed them. Now, apart from the remains of the moat, there is only evidence of a cobbled yard beneath the fields and fragments of brick, pottery and glass occasionally turned up by moles!

George Mortimer Series: History of Cerne Village Hall part 3

This third article covers the demise of the first Hall on Wills Lane and the planning, design and the building of the present Hall to its formal opening in 2006. It also includes later enhancements.

By 1995 the Hall Committee had agreed that a new Hall had to be built. Possible sites were explored and narrowed down to three options: on the current Hall site in Wills Lane; in Mill Mead; or in Simsay Field. The Wills Lane site was too small for the envisaged new Hall and Dorset Highways would not support it because of poor traffic and emergency vehicle access. More to the point, the sale of the site was necessary to generate funding for a new Hall. Mill Mead may have been associated with the Cerne Abbas Mill at one time, but was now a neglected piece of land. **Figure 1**. A 'free' site on Simsay Field was offered by the Digby Estate, but as part of a larger house building scheme to which there would be much local opposition.

Fig 1

The Committee produced a Voting Slip which was delivered to every house in the Cerne Valley in June 1997 to determine opinion on these options. The response reflected 75% of residents, a very high return by any normal electoral standards. The results were:

Wills Lane 138 25.9%
Mill Mead 232 43.5%
Simsay 163 30.6%

Mill Mead was the clear Cerne Abbas community decision.

The outstanding issue of the ownership of the car park adjacent to the old Hall in Wills Lane was resolved in 1998. Major Colville, who had bought the site as a gift for £25 in 1936, had died in 1947. A surviving relative was eventually found who was happy to sell it at £250 plus the Solicitor's fees; exactly the arrangement the 1949 Committee had previously rejected. The way was now open for the sale of the whole Wills Lane site.

Planning for the new Hall was coordinated by its Management Committee, chaired by Alan Morrell, with Janet Bartlet as Secretary and Jim Smith as Treasurer. They co-opted a series of Project Managers from the community. The first was John Hitt who was responsible for much of the design, to be succeeded by Geoff Hunt. John Hartley also joined as Technical Advisor. This team was to face any number of hurdles and had moments when they must have thought they would never succeed. However, they did succeed and the community owes them a lasting debt of gratitude.

Nor should the support of Lois Rose, the village hall representative for Dorset Community Action be forgotten. Grants from Dorset County Council and West Dorset District Council (WDDC), totalling £55,000, were arranged through her efforts. The Cerne Valley Parish Council (CVPC) also donated £10,000. Bids for a grant from the Lottery Fund were unsuccessful, basically because village halls were increasingly no longer a priority for that Fund.

The Architect who had designed the impressive Village Hall at Thornford was appointed in 1998. The design of the Hall was to go through any number of changes and positioning on site, with differences in design concepts between the Hall's and WDDC's architects having to be resolved. The latter had ideas of a 'rustic barn' and even proposed the main windows face north into Kettle Bridge Lane! Thankfully, these and other curious ideas came to nothing. Early designs had envisaged the Hall with a basement entrance from Mill Mead. **Figure 2.** However, cost considerations determined this as unaffordable. In any case, the problems of access to the Hall from Duck Street and the sheer impracticality of crossing a boggy Mill Mead, especially in the dark and in all weathers, were decisive.

Fig 2. Watercolour drawn and rendered by Geoff Hunt

Obtaining Planning Permission from West Dorset District Council for the Mill Mead site was managed through the CVPC. Apart from WDDC, any number of other 'authorities' also felt they had some 'statutory' interest in the new Hall on Mill Mead and 'had' to be consulted. Surveys galore for them were commissioned by the Management Committee. These surveys included Archaeological, Hydrological, Environmental, Ecological, Contour, and Topographical. Mill Mead must have been the most surveyed piece of land in West Dorset! Whether all or any of these surveys ultimately served any useful purpose is for debate. After much negotiation and many vicissitudes, Planning Permission for the new Hall on Mill Mead was eventually granted by WDDC on 15 March 2001. This permission included the redevelopment of the Kettle Bridge picnic site to provide increased car parking spaces.

Achieving Planning Permission had taken nearly four years since the 1997 democratic vote and had already cost nearly £60,000 in fees and costs. With this permission in place the committee felt confident enough to purchase the Mill Mead site in June 2003. However, the new Hall still had to be designed in detail, built and commissioned. It was to take a further four years plus from Planning Permission being granted before the first pile was driven into the ground. Meanwhile, the old Hall continued to deteriorate, to be a constant drain on the available financial resources while it remained open.

Fig 3

It was always recognised that the sale of the village hall site in Wills Lane with planning permission for three houses would provide the major source of funding for building the new Hall. There were prolonged border disputes in the early 2000s with the Barton Lodge site which was also being planned for housing development. Resolution was eventually achieved in 2004 with the original plans for the village hall site intact. The developers of Barton Lodge site subsequently bought the village hall site on 4 April 2005 for £400,000. Major Colville's original £25 gift for the old Hall in 1936, therefore, made the new Hall possible. The plaque put up by him in the old Hall is now in the new Hall as a permanent reminder of his original gift and what it made possible decades later. **Figure 3**. The closure of the old Hall was marked by a final party with a 1930s theme on 1 April 2005. The subsequent demolition was swift, with no visible trace left to record its previous 68 years of immeasurable service to the community. **Figures 4 and 5** show the then and now. The way was now clear to seek a contractor for building the new Hall, but there would be a period of over a year without the community having any village hall. During this interregnum, St Mary's Church was used for many club and society meetings with the kind permission of the Vicar.

Fig 4 & 5

The final design for the new Hall was displayed as a splendid model by Gordon Bartlet. **Figure 6.** The minutes for 11 January 2005 record that PL Hammond of Sturminster Newton had been chosen to build it with a final contract price of £475K. The funds available at that time barely covered the costs of building and commissioning, but at this late stage a very generous bequest arrived. This, plus community grants arising from the Barton Lodge and Abbots Meadow developments, ensured that the new Hall would be commissioned with a comfortable credit balance in the bank.

Fig 6 ***Gordon Bartlet's Model for early version of Village Hall - front and rear***

Work started on 1 August 2005 with the driving of steel piles into the underlying greensand and the new Hall quickly took shape. **Figures 7 to 12.** A separate Working Party was set up at the same time to plan for equipping and managing the new Hall. By January 2006 all major decisions had been made, including decoration, furnishing, setting provisional hire charges, arranging licences and much more. Landscaping the new Hall grounds was undertaken by Nick Williams-Ellis, a noted landscape gardener who lived in River Cottage. This was paid for by the donations from Open Gardens who had chosen the Hall as its 'local charity' for most of the years up to its opening.

8. Hall taking shape

9. Roof steels in place

7. First piles being driven

11. External walls

10. Store room inner walls

12. Nearing completion

The Management Committee had earlier enlisted the support of the MP for West Dorset, Oliver Letwin, for the new Hall and in January 2003 he agreed to be its 'Patron'. He was to prove invaluable in 'walking the corridors of power' in its interests. The Hall was formally opened by him on 27 May 2006. **Figure 13.** It had taken about nine years from the decision to build on Mill Mead to the opening of the new Hall. By comparison, the old Hall in Wills Lane had taken 12 months from concept to opening, the only outside body involved then being Dorchester Rural District Council whose single concern was the siting of the cesspit! This comparison is made with no further comments on the post-war 'planning system'; perhaps it speaks for itself.


Western Gazette

www.westgaz.co.uk

Village hall is 'best in west of county'

Fig 13

On 27 July 2006, an Extraordinary General Meeting elected a completely new Management Committee for the new Hall. The previous Committee could now look forward to a well-earned rest and the gratitude of the community in bringing the new Hall project to fruition.


Fig 14

To bring this history right up to date, in 2012 the original Meeting Room was doubled in size, made possible by an unexpected generous bequest. Larger events in this room were now possible and took much pressure off the use of the Main Hall. That year being the 60th anniversary of the late Queen Elizabeth's accession to the throne, the new room was named the Jubilee Meeting Room and opened by Lord 'Eddie' Digby on 15th September 2012. In **(Figure 14)** Lord Digby is seen with David Evans, the late and much-missed Chairman from 2006 until his death in 2019.

Another generous bequest in November 2018 was used, with a grant from '**Low Carbon Dorset'**, to fit solar panels on the south-facing roofs **(Figure 15)** and replace all the original fluorescent lighting with LED fittings. These changes have made a significant impact on electricity bills, always a major expense for the Hall. The decision late in the original Hall design, that the heating system would be a radiant heating system rather than the alternatives of oil or gas, was therefore particularly prescient, given the present preoccupations with 'Net Zero' and fossil fuels. With the upgrading of the audio-visual systems and the fitting of superfast broadband, the Cerne Abbas Village Hall can now confidently claim to be by far the best and most advanced venue of its kind in West Dorset. Local community societies and clubs have flourished. It is also used regularly by many external organisations and for events such as wedding receptions, providing vital income. If the members of the Committee who met to plan the first Hall in October 1936 are looking down, they could only be amazed and yet proud at what they initiated as its replacement approaches its 20th anniversary.


Fig 15

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Janet Bartlet and John Hartley in the writing of this article.

Bushes Bottom, Godmanstone

A young boy aged 9 or 10, playing in a barn hayloft, accidentally falls through the trap door on to a heap of metal ploughshares on the floor below, an extremely unfortunate landing. His injuries are serious enough for his father to quickly catch his white cob pony, saddle it up and ride with all speed to fetch the local doctor from the village some 4 miles away, who returns with him immediately. The boy's injuries turn out to be a slight fracture of the skull, and some nasty cuts and bruises from which, with youth on his side, he eventually makes a full recovery.

This incident is not an extract from a Thomas Hardy story, nor did it take place in the 18th century, or even the 19th, but is related in Raymond Forcey's wonderful book, Wessex Memories, published in 1992, about his boyhood living at Bushes Bottom between 1909 and 1914, a remote farmstead in a valley a mile and a half west of Godmanstone. Forcey's detailed memoir relates with almost cinematic clarity the simple bucolic life he and his family enjoyed at this isolated settlement. Simple it may have been, but also extremely tough, with few of the conveniences of life available even in those days to working people, so that, as the above story illustrates, help in an emergency could only be summoned in much the same way as a century or so before. The doctor in the story was the much-admired Doctor Dalton, from Cerne Abbas. At the rectory in Godmanstone lived the Rev. Pope, a kindly man, who would walk the 3-mile round trip to Bushes to see how young Raymond was recovering.

Many residents of the Cerne Valley will have enjoyed the walk to Bushes Bottom, either over the hill from Godmanstone to its east, or from Sydling to the north west, also a hilly walk. Maybe they will have been lucky enough to listen to one of local farmer Will Best's knowledgeable and entertaining talks on the subject. Either way, this article will hopefully encourage those, who haven't already, to don walking boots and make the rewarding trek; perhaps they will also enjoy reading this personal appreciation of the place from one who has been captivated by it for over 60 years.

Between 1959 and 1964 Bushes Bottom, and approximately 170 acres of land to the north of it, belonged to my family, as part of Watcombe Farm. For my father, having moved from a smallish heavy clay farm in Worcestershire in 1959, farming this remote land, which was more suited, as he often ruefully said, to the production of gorse and rabbits, was daunting. The surrounding fields are steep, with thin chalky soils, in many places stony beyond belief. Crops are expensive to establish, don't yield much, and grazing, although dry underfoot, supports relatively few livestock. Now to the north of the boundary of Watcombe Farm, Bushes has been owned and farmed by the Morris family, at Huish Farm, Sydling St Nicholas, since 1964, the land today sensibly managed to maximise wildlife rather than production.

The farmstead, once home and workplace to 3 families, can be found on the earliest OS maps. Surveyed in 1805, the Old Series 1 inch map published in 1811 shows Bushes Barn. (Earlier maps have not come to light.) Originally part of the Godmanstone Estate, the reason for its establishment would have perhaps been to enable the inaccessible valley to be managed, with a small number of farm workers, living with their families and working near the animals and land they looked after. Godmanstone is 1.5 miles away, Sydling possibly 2, a slow and arduous journey either way, so that even with vehicular transport in the 1960's when my family farmed it, time spent bumping all the way to Bushes on the track from the farm at Forston made carrying out any sort of work there hardly worthwhile. Bushes was abandoned finally in 1934, but the Forcey family's departure in 1914 coincided with the outbreak of world war which must have had an unsettling effect for the family living in those circumstances.

After the war came rural recession, which led to the sale in 1919 of the Pitt-Rivers estate of Cerne Abbas. Henry Duke, owner of the Godmanstone Estate, died in 1913; most of his estate was also sold in 1919. The sleeve notes in Wessex Memories describe the years before the Great War as a golden age for rural life. It's easy to evoke the gentler pace, the beauty, the almost unimaginable abundance of wildlife which Forcey describes surrounding the valley where he lived as rural perfection. The reality was undoubtedly less idyllic. Work on farms was almost entirely manual and physically demanding. Working with horses, and in the early 20thC with steam engines ploughing and threshing, it was also frequently dangerous; life expectancy for farm workers was often brief.

At Bushes, the remains of the pair of cottages in which Raymond's family of seven, and the young couple next door lived, is tiny, measuring approximately 40ft by 15ft internally. Today, it's almost impossible to visualise each half of the first floor being divided into 3 bedrooms, and 2 kitchen/living rooms being formed on the ground floor. Water was drawn from a well for washing, but surprisingly, piped water was available, which also supplemented drinking water for the cattle. A curious "cow-operated" Lister pump today still brings clean water to its small trough from below ground. There were outside privies, and vegetables grown on the small areas of good soil near the buildings, but staples like flour and salt involved a day-long trip to Dorchester.

Chickens were kept for their eggs, a house cow provided milk, and a good deal of their meat came from rabbits - which probably also ate a high proportion of any crops grown in the fields. Raymond and his siblings had to run the gauntlet of the wild Red Devon cattle grazing the hills they had to negotiate daily on their walk to school in Godmanstone, which he attended from the age of 5. Sometimes there was snow, and in wet weather they'd return home soaked to the skin. The valley abounded with snakes, including adders which occasionally could be found curled up in the hayloft. Despite all these challenges, Raymond describes his boyhood at Bushes as a happy one which seems to have given him a contentment in later life, and a natural easy-going wisdom which is often detectable in his writing. Entertainment for young Raymond, who taught himself to play a harmonica, and his siblings, came from a wind-up gramophone. As Godmanstone church was too far to walk on Sundays, Raymond's father would conduct a simple service, accompanying the hymns on an old bellows organ.

Today, all that remains of the pair of cottages in which the Forcey family and their neighbours lived are the four walls, the upstairs floor having been removed and the roof replaced with agricultural sheeting. The fireplaces in each end wall remain, with one retaining the original metal bread oven. The other was stolen in recent years.

A rusty pair of sheep shears once could be found tucked into the fork of an ash tree near the cottages, forgotten by the shearer many years ago. Small patches of the yellowish distemper paint on the walls remain, and graffiti scratched into the plaster and chalked on the doors in recent years invite curiosity – who is Nina, and is she still happy with Bruce? The brick barn which once stored hay for the cattle and horses always was, as Sam who worked on Huish Farm told me decades ago, “very dicky”, but it still stands, although you enter it at your peril today.

Drawn by Raymond Forcey

Of the larger house which Forcey describes, which accommodated a family of 10, and a steel Dutch barn probably erected in the 1950's, today there is no trace. Amongst the dilapidation of the buildings, the echoes of past lives are tangible and ubiquitous in the atmosphere of the place. Some of those lives, apart from Raymond Forcey's, have surfaced in the memories of families whose past generations actually lived at Bushes Bottom. And although I never lived there, my long-standing familiarity with the place seems to form part my own life history.

The steep-sided valley where the farmstead is situated contains no river, but was gouged out by water millennia ago, the result of meltwater from the last ice age. Archaeological finds from a settlement on the summit of Shearplace Hill, a mile to the north, excavated in 2013, included Bronze Age pottery and a fine bone weaving comb. A mile or so to the south of Bushes is Grimstone Down, a 100-acre complex of Celtic field systems, including eight bowl barrows.

Small pieces of worked flint occasionally turned up when I was cultivating the surrounding fields. And pits, pock-marking the fields around Bushes, have variously been explained as chalk pits, flint pits, dewponds, or bomb craters courtesy of the Luftwaffe jettisoning their payloads having been seen off by the RAF whilst trying to flatten Portland; a rusty incendiary was once dug up at Bushes. The hill over which one must climb to return to Godmanstone is called Crete Hill. Any association with the Greek island seems unlikely; more likely the French word *crête* meaning ridge or crest implies Norman origin. From the geology of the valley to evidence of the first farmers, to glimpses of the lives of the last occupants in what's left of the buildings, the story of the valley's past is everywhere to be seen.

Last year, on a fine April afternoon some 6 years since my last visit, I walked to Bushes from Godmanstone. My route took me past a large steep field on the side of the valley to the south, reverted to downland some 25 years ago. It's now a carpet of cowslips, native grasses and herbs. More herb-rich grass fields lie to the north, facing the steep ancient downland across the valley. Skylarks sing from on high, and the barely discernible hum from the A37 to the west fades to nothing as I descend to the farmstead. Bleating sheep is, and was for my entire memory of the place, the ever-present background sound. The gorse in flower is a complete riot of yellow, and looking north up the sweep of the valley, there are bursts of snow-white blackthorn amongst it. As I gingerly peer into the cottage, as has often happened on previous visits, a barn owl flies out; from the brick barn a little owl retreats to perch on a nearby branch and stare at me, looking affronted. A small flock of corn buntings, nowadays a rarity on farmland, takes flight from bramble bushes. A few years ago, the whole valley was designated a Site of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI).

When Raymond Forcey returned to Bushes some 70 years after leaving, he was saddened by the changes he saw. Hedgerows gone, arable production on ploughed up former downland. This was the 1980's; but it coincided with the introduction of agricultural schemes supporting the creation of habitat to try and mitigate the loss of farmland wildlife. This included establishing wildflower margins round fields, replanting hedgerows and the reversion of arable land to species-rich downland. Thanks to those schemes, and much of the nearby land being farmed organically, some of the lost wildlife is returning, which I hope would have gladdened Raymond's heart. This effort is celebrated by a belltower near where once the cart shed stood, erected in 2014, the centenary of his family's departure. The tower's connection to the surrounding landscape escapes me, but the gorse, the flints, and the echoes of bleating sheep from the hills and ruined buildings are all the reminders I need.

Copies of "Memories of Wessex" can occasionally be found at online out-of-print booksellers.

George Mortimer

A Church Renewed

THE 1960s MAJOR RESTORATION OF ST MARY'S CHURCH

Fig 1

In the Cerne Historical Society archives was found a box containing miscellaneous material about the major restoration of St Mary's Church which commenced in 1960.

The box included incomplete reports, photographs, press cuttings and much else. The PCC minutes from that time, now in the Dorset History Centre, also helped to illuminate a story of triumph over the ravages of time and the long neglect of the fabric of the church. The story in particular highlights the key role played by the Revd Cyril Taylor who was the Vicar from 1958 to 1968.

In January 1959, Robert Potter of Messrs Potter and Hare of De Vaux House, Salisbury undertook the Quinquennial Inspection of St Mary's Church.

Even before his report was fully written he had to call for immediate action to eradicate dry rot from the east end of the north aisle roof and from the south side of the chancel. Further exploration showed that total renewal of the chancel and nave roofs was also required. That August a consultant civil engineer, Mr. Gifford, went further and pronounced that the nave roof should be shored up immediately. A photograph **(Fig 1)** taken at the time shows the state of the nave roof and that previous attempts appear to have been made to prevent its collapse. It is anyone's guess as to how old the roofs of the nave and chancel were, but it was quite likely they included the original medieval timbers from about 1530 when the nave roof was raised by Thomas Corton, the last abbot of Cerne Abbey, for the clerestory. **(Fig2)**

Fig 2

Fig 3

Dry rot was also found to have attacked the wooden floor and pews when the floor collapsed under the weight of the shoring of the nave roof and scaffolding. **(Fig 3)**. As a result, the floor and pews had to be removed and burnt. These pews dated from 1819, to replace earlier pews to enlarge the seating capacity in the church. The decision was taken to lay a completely new concrete base over the nave and both aisles, with wood blocks covering the seating area and stone pavors elsewhere. The pews were replaced by the 150 chairs used today, providentially provided free of charge by the parish of Tanworth-in-Arden, Warwickshire.

The specification for the renovations was drawn up by a Mr Kenneth Wiltshire, from the firm who carried out the original survey. He was to remain the supervising architect throughout and St Mary's owes him a vote of gratitude for his professionalism. St Mary's was also fortunate in having Webb & Ford of Maiden Newton, a well-respected firm of 'traditional' builders, as the main contractors.

The cost of replacing the two roofs was initially estimated at £7,500 at the time, but with inflation factored in this would now equate to about £216,000 at today's prices. As ever, the cost of the renovations increased, to finally reach nearer £17,000 (or nearly £500,000 today). The financial demands on the parish in the early 1960s, with only about 400 adult parishioners, were daunting.

At this critical moment in the history of St Mary's, it was fortunate to have as its incumbent the Revd Cyril Taylor. Born in 1907, he was a chorister at Magdalen College School, Oxford and studied at Christ Church, Oxford and Westcott House, Cambridge. Ordained into the Church of England in 1932, he served as both pastor and musician. In the latter role he was a producer in the religious broadcasting department of the BBC from 1939 to 1953 and Chaplain of the Royal School of Music from 1953 to 1969. His hymns are still sung today, his most well-known tune being 'Abbot's Leigh'. Cyril Taylor threw himself into finding the necessary funds for the renovations by launching an appeal. An early fund-raising event, perhaps using his earlier connections with the BBC, was being nominated for the 'Weeks Good Cause' on 4 October 1959.

He was flown by helicopter to Bristol for the broadcast immediately after the 4pm Harvest Festival service, accompanied by his wife and his two churchwardens. **(Fig 4)** The helicopter, a Bristol Sycamore, was provided by Bristol Aircraft Ltd, the cost met by a parishioner as his gift to the appeal. A newspaper from that time records that their procession to the helicopter in a nearby 'recreational field' (Simsay?) was accompanied by the whole congregation and led by the pipes and drums of the 15th Training Battalion RASC from Blandford. Cyril Taylor's flair and drive in raising funds was to be demonstrated time and again.


Fig 6


Fig 5

Fig 4

The arrival of a giant crane in Cerne on 2 May 1960 to hoist reinforced concrete beams for the new roofs into position was a spectacular occasion. **Fig 5** shows the crane arriving in Long Street and **Fig 6** hoisting the first beam into position for the nave. The crane which had come from Bath (not without some difficulty as it passed through Sherborne) required the approach road to the church to be reinforced and local overhead power lines to be temporarily dismantled. Cyril Taylor sat all day in a specially constructed and decorated booth in the garage of No 1 Abbey Street to receive gifts towards the appeal. This realised a little over £600, bringing the appeal to date to nearly £4,700.


Fig 7

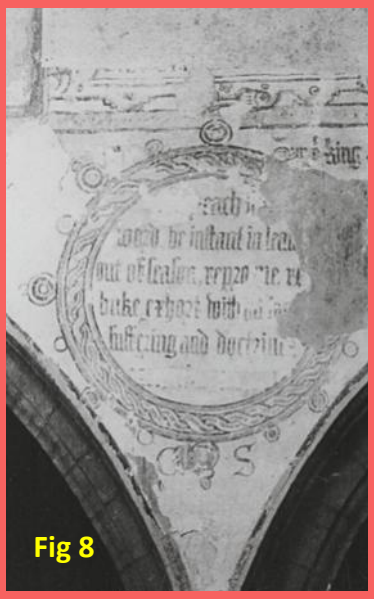


Fig 8

The installation of the beams, later encased in oak and still visible today, marked the start of the renovation work. As soon as the new roofs were protecting the nave and chancel from the weather, work could begin inside the church. As suspected, lying hidden beneath limewash in the nave and side aisles were 17th century wall paintings. **(Figs 7, 8 and 9.)** The removal of the eastern-most truss of the old nave roof also revealed the surviving upper edges of the paintings which had at one time decorated the chancel screen prior to its removal in 1870. A pre-1870 photograph **(Fig 10)** showed that the screen had formerly displayed the Ten Commandments and the Royal Coat of Arms of Charles II, the latter having been reinstated in 1679 after the Commonwealth period.


Fig 9


Fig 10


Fig 11

The opening of the lancet window on the north wall of the chancel in 1926 had revealed 14th Century paintings showing scenes from the life of St John the Baptist **(Fig 11)**. There were signs that the re-opening of a similar window in the south wall might reveal more paintings. A faculty was obtained to move to the west end of the north aisle two Victorian memorials which blocked this window and to open it up. This was done in the spring of 1961, to reveal a 14th Century depiction of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary **(Fig 12)**.
The paintings in the chancel and nave were restored in 1962 and one was added to commemorate the restoration of the church. **(Fig 13)**. Paintings with Biblical texts in the north aisle and over the south door were also restored **(Figs 14 and 15)**. Their texts were from the Geneva Bible, in use from 1560 until the publication of the Authorised Version in 1611, and therefore pre-date those in the nave which used later Biblical texts.


Fig 12

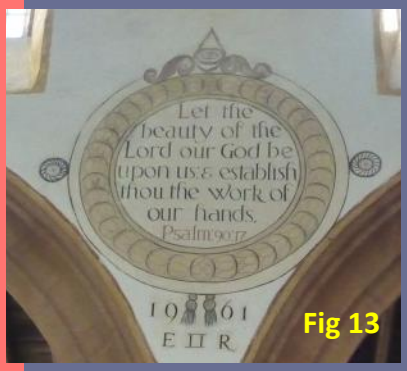


Fig 13


Fig 14


Fig 15

The upheaval of 1960/1 provided a unique opportunity to install modern heating and electrical systems. The organ was moved from the head of the south aisle to its present position. The 15th Century font was also moved, from the western end of the south aisle to where it is today.


Fig 16

The space left vacant was enclosed and is now the Vestry **(Fig 16)**.

It was at this time that the decorative top to the font was fitted, donated by a former parishioner living in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe.

A Purbeck marble coffin and coffin lid, **(Fig 17 and 18)** which had also resided at the western end of the south aisle were moved to their present resting places outside to the south of the church. These had reportedly been dug out of the Cerne Abbas burial ground in times past.


Fig 18


Fig 17


Fig 19

Recent closer examination of the coffin lid has revealed a cross design **(Fig 19)**. The lid may date from the 13th century and was almost certainly associated with someone of high status. More detailed research of the coffin and lid is taking place and will be the subject of a further article.

St Mary's had to be temporarily closed in March 1960. However, parishioners were able to use the adjacent Congregational Church in Abbey Street, then still active, for worship **(Fig 20)**. At a special ***'Service of Thanksgiving after Restoration'*** on Whitsunday 21st May 1961, St Mary's was re-opened for worship by the Lord Bishop of Salisbury, the Right Reverend William Anderson. The reopening was celebrated by the placing of a plaque in the South Porch. **(Fig 21)**.


Fig 20

In the autumn of 1962 the south porch and the north aisle roof underwent extensive repair and reroofing where dry rot had also been found earlier. The nave's west window was also in a poor state of repair and needed considerable restoration. A new inscription window was inserted to mark this restoration.


Fig 21

By the time the next Quinquennial Survey came round in June 1964, any outstanding remedial work required was relatively minor. During the next two years the windows in the north and south aisles were largely re-glazed.

(In 2024 the northern trench in the Cerne Abbey excavations in Beauvoir Field revealed evidence of lead and glass, suggesting that this was a glazier's workplace. If so, it is tempting to speculate that this was the site for making the windows for the clerestory about 1530)

Then was undertaken what was to be the single most expensive task of restoration, apart from the replacement of the nave and chancel roofs: the restoration of the east window. This window was reported as having been salvaged from Cerne Abbey, the upper half of a window in a chantry chapel dedicated to St John the Baptist in 1482. It is understood that it was not incorporated into St Mary's for some time after the Dissolution and the date 1639 **(Fig 23)** below the window may be a clue. However, there is no record of it in the Churchwardens accounts from that time. It is also not known when the east window was last re-glazed, but the insertion of some of the heraldic fragments had been fitted upside down and inside out!

Happily, Mr George Squibb, Norfolk Herald Extraordinary, who lived in No 1 Abbey Street, was uniquely able to give expert advice on its restoration. **(Fig 24)**. It was this same George Squibb who gave the plot of land immediately to the north of St Mary's to the church. With its impressive entrance gate, the garden is named after him.

By the end of 1967 the restoration of St Mary's was complete and, God willing, our church may last for yet another 500 years from when it was bequeathed by the Abbey to the parishioners of Cerne Abbas.

Fig 23

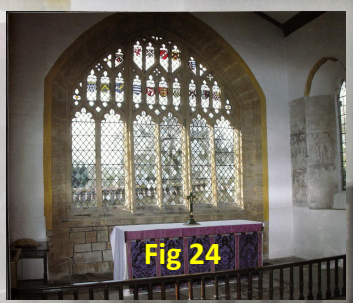


Fig 24

Photo A K Popkin

Letters

Edited by George Mortimer

From the outgoing Chair:

I have received the following praise of the Magazine which I said I would pass on:

"Thank you. The Magazine is utterly fascinating and beautifully presented". ***(Nicholas Jones)***

"What a splendid read - the Society and its 'doings' go from strength to strength. Many thanks to all concerned and my best wishes". ***(Fiona Hyden)***

"What a great edition of the magazine. Congratulations to all the contributors". ***(Bridget Hodges)***

Gordon Bishop

By the Editor:

We are always pleased to receive such feedback, a tribute to all who have a hand in producing the Society Magazine.

George Mortimer writes:

The impressive article by Harriet Still in the Winter 2023-4 edition of the Cerne Historical Society Magazine discusses 'jetty houses' and 'jointed crucks' in the context of medieval Abbey Street. When living at 29 Long Street (near the church, back of the Royal Oak), the architect drew up plans of the house for planning purposes. One can imagine the surprise (and interest piqued) when an E/W cross-section of the house (Figure 1) roughly 30 feet north back from the road, appeared to show that the east side of the building was of 'jetty house' construction. The original jointed crucks were also discernible. This suggested that there was originally a thoroughfare to the east of the house. To support this thesis, there is a shallow cupboard in the dining room of No 29 on that side of the house about 20 feet back from the road. It may be reasonably conjectured that this was originally a window looking out onto this thoroughfare. (Figure 2). (The road was called East Street until about 1978)

In the 1798 map of the village (Figure 3) No 29 Long Street is identified as 140 and No 31 Long Street as 145. Therefore, any thoroughfare to the east of No 29 had been infilled by then and become part of 145 or No 31 Long Street.

Continued...

Letters

In 1798 both properties were owned by Thomas Coombs, a 'Maltster, Brewer and Linen Draper'. A recent photograph at Figure 4 shows the present appearance of the houses from Long Street and what appears to be an infill between the two original buildings is very apparent.

There arises any number of interesting speculations: if of jetty construction, how old might this section of No 29 be? Might an early thoroughfare to its east pre-date Abbey Street as a path from the Abbey to Piddle Lane and beyond? Was that thoroughfare thus sufficiently significant to warrant the jetty construction of that side of No 29? Or was the thoroughfare to provide access from the backs of the later houses on that side of Abbey Street, although this would seem an unnecessary construction for such a relatively mundane purpose. It is unlikely that there will be any definitive answers to these speculations, although some judicious dendrochronology might clarify matters.

Could Harriet throw any light on this house history (or mystery)?

George Mortimer

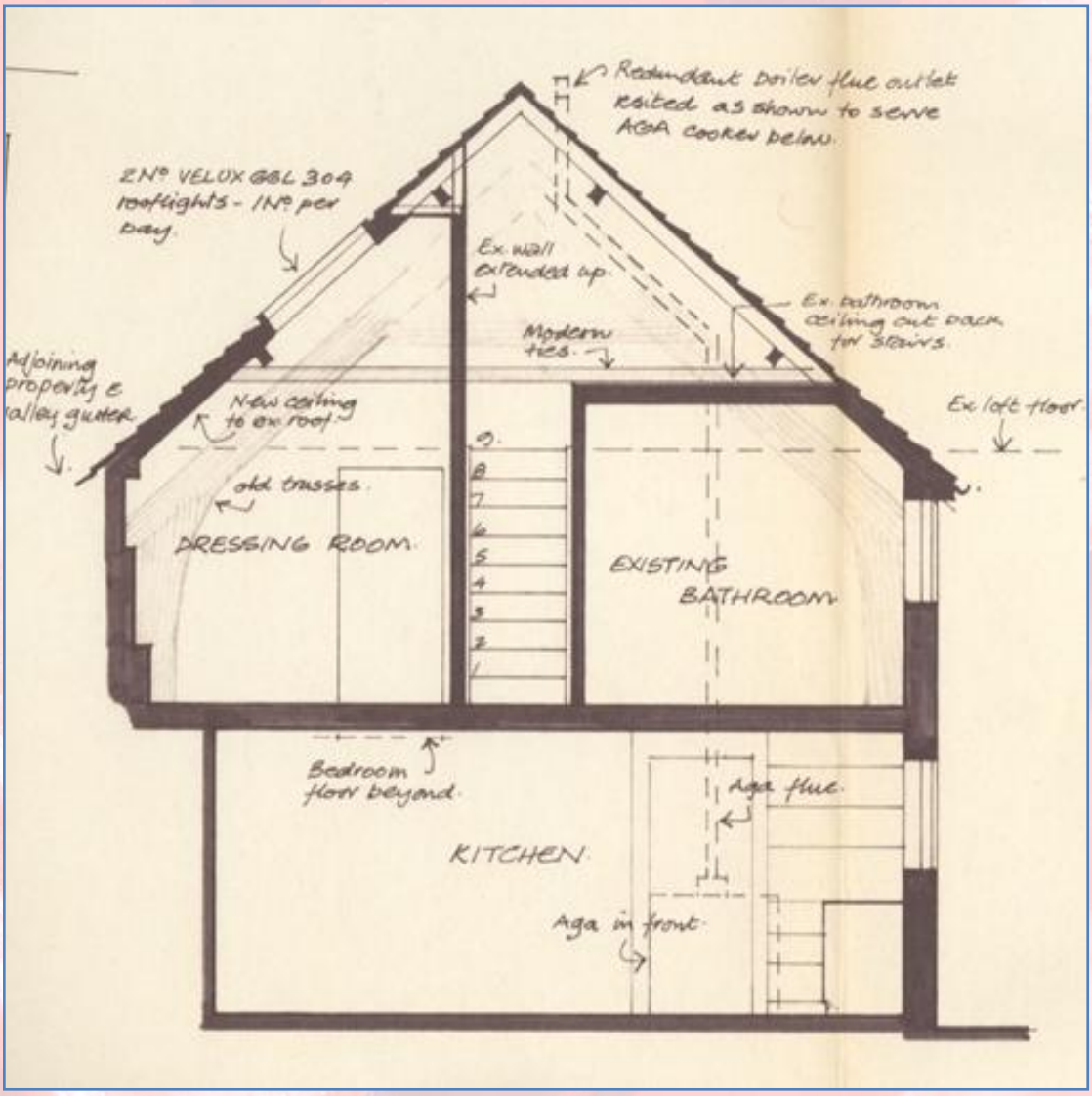
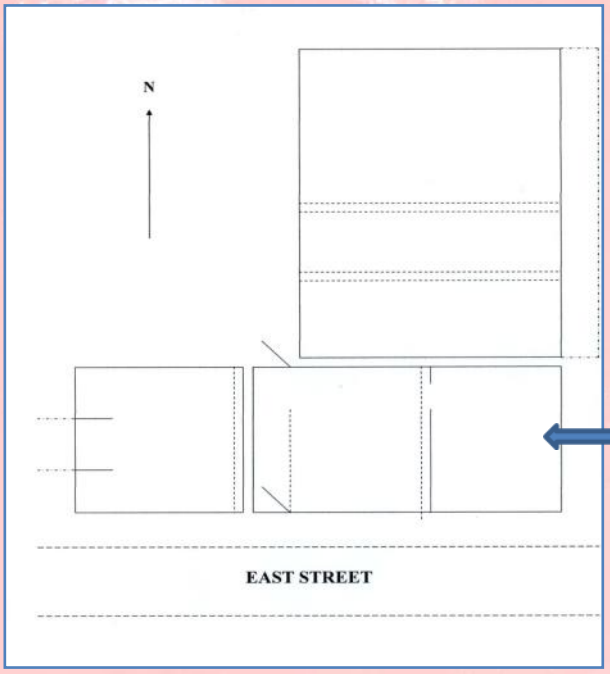


Figure 1

Continued...

Figure 2



Approximate site of E-W cross-section of No 29 Long St

Cupboard

Figure 4

Figure 3.
1798 Map of Cerne Abbas

No 29 Long Street is 140
No 31 Long Street is 145

Letters

By the Editor, on the above...

There is obviously still much to find out about the histories of the old houses in Cerne Abbas which must predate by centuries their present appearance and internal layout.

About 20 years ago the Cerne Historical Society initiated a 'House Histories' Project. Certain houses were selected for more detailed research and the results can be viewed on its website at:

https://cerneabbashistory.org/house-history/.

At the same time David Kirkpatrick, a US citizen and a member of the Society, initiated an Anecdotal History of many of the older houses in the village and these can also be read on the website. Is your house included on the website? Perhaps it should be and the Society would welcome its inclusion. If you wish to research the history of your house, the Society may be able to help. Just contact the Society and we will help if we can. Anonymity is assured if you so wish.

The Letters Page Editor will be pleased to hear from you on any subject that will increase a mutual understanding of our shared history.

gcmortimer@btinternet.com or put a note through the door at 3 Abbey Court, if you prefer.

We reserve the right to publish if no objection is expressed in your email or letter.

This magazine may be viewed online at cerneabbashistory.org

Cerne Historical Society

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