

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - January 2019

Twyford and Ruscombe as a Crossroads

At Wargrave Local History Society's January meeting, local historian and author Audrey Curtis recounted the history of Twyford and Ruscombe as a Crossroads. She commented that although Twyford and Wargrave are close, their history is quite different.

Evidence, such as flint tools, showed the Twyford area had been settled from 6,000BC, whilst the Romans had also inhabited the area. Even before the Romans arrived, the local people had learnt how to drain the land, had set up areas for agriculture, fished, and made baskets. The Anglo Saxon Chronicle recorded that, in 871, the Vikings battled against the forces of Alfred, King of Wessex here. The Saxons, having 'local knowledge', were able to get to safety by making use of the ford across the Loddon at Twyford - it is thought that this is the first document to mention Twyford.

In Anglo Saxon times, the more important settlements were considered to be those with a church. Both Ruscombe (St James) and Hurst (St Nicholas) had one, but Twyford did not, it coming within the parish of Hurst at the time. Twyford had to wait until 1847 for St Mary's to be built (and later extended), whilst it did not become a separate ecclesiastical parish until 1876.

Twyford was to develop in importance, eventually out-growing both Ruscombe and Hurst, as it was where the Anglo Saxon tracks south from Wargrave and west from Windsor crossed. It was also where the River Broadwater joined the River Loddon, and so a mill was established by at least 1163, when one Wimund is documented as the miller at Twyford. Twyford, however, is not mentioned in the 1086 Domesday Survey, it being part of the Manor of Hinton at the time. The rites of the manor were held by the Earl of Salisbury. It was inconvenient for people to have to go to Amesbury for court hearings, so the Earl asked the King to make the area part of Wiltshire. It remained like this for 700 years until, in 1844, it was integrated with the surrounding Berkshire.

In the meantime, the crossroads of trade route tracks gained importance. A postal service had begun in 1579, with letters carried by post boys on horse-back. The first service was from London to Reading via Maidenhead - and Twyford. As well as this, Newbury had become a very important centre for the wool trade, and much was exported by being carried through Twyford to London, in the early days by pack horse along muddy tracks. Inns and taverns were set up to provide refreshment for the travellers, whilst farriers - and later wheelwrights and cartwrights - would help to maintain their means of transport. Twyford being at a crossroads on this route, it became a place where many people stopped for refreshment. By the mid 18th century there were 23 inns or alehouses in Twyford - helping to make the people relatively rich compared to other hamlets. The Wagon and Horses dates from at least the 17th century, and probably many years earlier, and still trades as a pub, whilst the Rose and Crown, which was a pub until 1824 but now Chiswick House, is thought to be the oldest surviving building in Twyford. It is said that Edward Polehampton was given shelter as a 'poor waif' there in the 17th century. He later was apprenticed as a coach painter, and when he died gave his fortune to the village of Twyford. The charity still exists, and his name is recalled in the name of village schools.

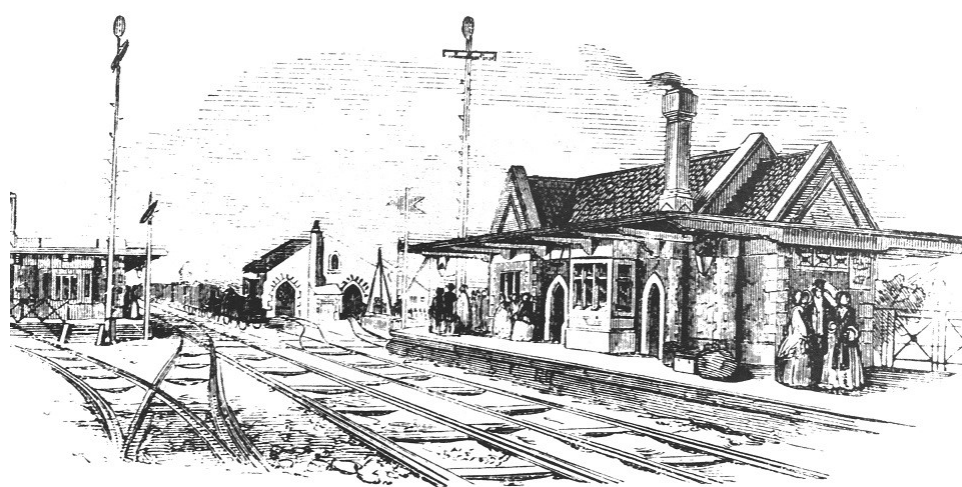
By the end of the 16th century, there was a growth in industry, and hence population, and to provide additional housing a brickworks was established at Ruscombe. There were only relatively few large houses, as the majority of the population were agricultural workers and craftsmen - a lot making baskets

(growing osiers alongside the roads to Waltham and Hare Hatch being popular).

Twyford, Audrey said, was also a "cross roads" in the Civil War. The Parliamentary troops - the roundheads - had a base at Windsor, and the Royalists - the cavaliers - at Reading. The people of East Berkshire were caught between the two. As either army passed one way or the other they would pillage and steal whatever they wanted from the local inhabitants, whilst for a while 700 roundheads were encamped at Twyford and Ruscombe. The cavaliers raided the village in March 1643 - roundheads came to defend the village from Henley - the crossroads coming to the aid of the village. By October that year, the Royalists had set up camp close by as a way to help defend Reading. The venture failed, but in their retreat they burned both the mill and the bridge, and a large proportion of the houses. Fortunately, trade on the Bath Road was soon to return after the execution of Charles I in 1649, and so the village was able to recover fairly quickly.

There was another conflict in the time of James II. The troops of William of Orange had invaded, and were marching towards London. King James sent his troops to block their advance, and the Dutch were pursued back to Twyford. History repeated itself, as many of the Dutch - lacking 'local knowledge' - suffered as they fell into the ford.

Traffic through Twyford had continued to increase, to the benefit of Twyford and Ruscombe. The Highways Act of 1555 required all men to give 4 (and later 6) days a year to improve the roads, putting stones into the surface (although the rich paid others to do their share). This was really adequate as road usage increased, and so each section of a road was put in the hands of a Turnpike Trusts. The tolls charged paid for the upkeep of the road. It took 50 years to complete the road to Bath in this way at the end of the 18th century.



TWYFORD STATION

Alternatives to the roads were sought as a means of transport, and in 1770 plans were made for a canal to make a short-cut from the River Thames from Reading and Sonning to near Dorney and Windsor, passing through Twyford. However, a proposal from Bristol men for a railway to London in 1824 would bring a line through Twyford. That was built, despite objections by the Palmer family of Sonning and the Provost of Eton College, and opened as far as Twyford in 1839. It could not progress

further west until the Sonning cutting had been dug - work done by 800 Irish navvies, who 'spent their spare time drowning their sorrows'. They outnumbered the population of Twyford at the time - the effect can be imagined.

The opening of the railway had a big impact on Twyford. A Station Hotel was opened, houses were built, and industry increased, including a gas works and an iron foundry (both remaining active into the 20th century). It also meant that local farmers could improve their business by transporting milk quickly into London.

After World War 1, the Government realised there was a great need for housing, and so an estate was created at Northfields - built using bricks from the works at Ruscombe. An even bigger expansion of population numbers came after World War 2, growing from 1687 in 1951 to 6216 in 2001. The railway, of course, enabled many of the new residents to commute to London.

Those wanting to know more may be interested in the book "Twyford and Ruscombe through the Ages", written by Audrey, and published by the [Twyford and Ruscombe Local History Society](#).

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, February 12th, when Graham Horn will tell us about The History and Restoration of the Kennet and Avon Canal, and then on Tuesday, March 12th the Society will hold its Annual General Meeting, when the past year will be reviewed and the programme for the coming year revealed.