

Dorset History Forum at Cerne Abbas

26th September 2009



The Village Hall in the beautiful and historic town of **Cerne Abbas** was the location for this Dorset History Forum event. **George Mortimer of Cerne Abbas Historical Society** gave a captivating talk on the Time Line of the village:

Cernal was a Celtic word meaning a pile of stones. In the Domesday book the village is referred to as Cerne, and a document of 1288 calls it Cerne Abbas. Skipping the first 600,000,000 years, George started with the ice age when the area was Arctic permafrost and tundra valley. There is an Iron Age ditch, a Romano-British corn dryer, and evidence of later Celtic field systems continuing into medieval times, most disappearing only in the last 50 years.

Established in 987AD, the Benedictine Abbey became very rich with an annual income of £575 in 1535 (about £½m today); the town flourished with it, the main industries being sheep farming and wool textiles. At the Abbey's dissolution in 1539 the Abbot was granted an annual pension of £100 (about £70,000 today). By 1575 the Abbey, with the exception of its porch and guesthouse, had been razed to the ground and the town, having lost its reason for existence, fell into poverty.

The "New Inn" was originally a 2-bay hall c.1200 which, by the Dissolution, had been extended to the building we see today, probably by a wealthy wool merchant. Abbey Street was built around 1400.

The 1617 survey makes no reference to the giant. Indeed the first written evidence is the expenditure in 1694 of three shillings to repair it.

Between 1705 and 1919 the town was owned by the Pitt-Rivers family. In 1747 there were 17 breweries and taverns, but by the 19thC brewing had faded away. A Poor Law Union Workhouse was built in 1837 and a new County Police HQ, including a Court House and cells, was built in Long Street in the 1850's. It was closed in 1960.

By 1906 the town was almost deserted. In 1919, as a result of Death Duties and WW1, the Pitt-Rivers family had to sell the properties in their possession, ie most of the town, raising £67,000, Abbey Street selling for £331 – one house there recently sold for £600,000.

The 20thC saw the village increasing in prosperity: local farming and greater mobility provided by the car enabling its recovery.

[More information on the village together with photographs can be found on Cerne Abbas Historical Society's web site: www.cerneabbashistory.org.]

John Davey of Dorset Historic Towns Project (being undertaken by Dorset CC in partnership with English Heritage) spoke on the **landscape of the Cerne valley**: By studying detailed maps they had detected the Saxon rectilinear field systems running perpendicular to the river valley (providing a variety of agricultural conditions as the land rose up the hillside) and probable lanes with later settlements and roads. In common with others, eg Sherborne and Abbotsbury, the Late Monastic settlement in Cerne Abbas lay directly outside the abbey precincts – secular settlements probably on both sides of Long Street and Abbey Street with the market outside the town area.

The survey will cover 23 towns in Dorset. Draft reports have been completed for 11 of these and appear on the project's website: www.dorsetforyou.com/historictowns or www.dorsetforyou.com, then Search on "historic towns survey".



The final speaker of the morning was **Ann Smith, Archivist, Sherborne Castle**. Her subject was **George Wingfield Digby (GWD), A Victorian Landowner**:

In 1856, aged 60, George Wingfield inherited Sherborne Castle and estate from his uncle, 2nd Earl Digby, and, by royal licence, added "Digby" to his name. In the next 27 years he was to make huge changes to the estate.

He spent £13,000 (about £1m today) on improvements, modernised the castle and bought 20,000 acres of land. Contracts with workmen included penalties for poor or late work, and rules of conduct of workers on site. Leases specified requirements of tenant farmers, eg four field system manured annually, and cattle to be sheltered in winter. Drainage, mills and buildings were improved; "Digby brown" paint was used on woodwork. In 1863 he opened a brick field and kiln, the bricks being stamped with "D". Field drainage was a priority: he spent £2-4,000 annually for the next 20 years and estate workers were paid compensation whilst work was done.

He moved the Estate Office into town where it was more convenient for tenants to pay rent, etc., and housed workers decently. Tenants were provided with large gardens so they could be self-sufficient. He built a private water supply which was only demolished after WW2 when a public water supply superseded it. He created allotments in villages with strict rules, but there were prizes for the best fruit and vegetables and an annual supper. He paid for the church restoration and rebuilding of the school, built bungalows for widows and old people and provided the town with a fire engine, supported cricket clubs, football clubs and a cycling club. The list goes on and on.

From 1857 families wishing to go to Australia were assisted by the Estate until improved economic conditions stopped the exodus. In the 1880's the Agricultural Depression saw tenants requesting reductions in rents and, as rent arrears accumulated, tenants had to be asked to quit. In 1881 Estate land sales started.

When he died in 1883, the Estate's loan from the Land Improvements Company stood at £159,000 (about £13.5m today). The crippling loan repayments plus death duties (introduced in 1894) meant his grandson had to institute major sales in 1904. After WW1 all new land acquired by GWD was sold. The Estate is now the same size as it was when GWD inherited it. His ethos of philanthropy but the estate must be profitable to survive is still practised by the family today.

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The afternoon events comprised the AGM, an open forum and a guided walk around Cerne Abbas, but other commitments meant I was unable to attend these. I must, however, congratulate the committee of Dorset History Forum and the members of Cerne Abbas Historical Society for a fascinating and well-run day.

Joanna Booth

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*For more information about the Dorset History Forum or to find out about their events go to [www.dorsethistoryforum.org](http://www.dorsethistoryforum.org).*