

SHARNBROOK

The parish of Sharnbrook lies 9 miles North-West of Bedford in the Hundred of Willey, and in the County district of North Bedfordshire. Covering an area of 2,467 acres it is bounded by the Parishes of Knotting and Souldrop to the North, Riseley on the North-East, Bletsoe to the East, Felmersham South and Odell on the West.

Geology and Topography

No large-scale geological map was available for consultation, nor any detailed printed study, so the only source has been the county-wide drift map held in the Conservation Department. The sketch map (Fig. 1) is a tracing from this map.

The River Ouse, flowing along the Southern boundary of the Parish from West to East, has laid down deposits of gravel and alluvium in the South, while carving its way through the Great Oolitic limestone which forms the central part of Sharnbrook. North of the limestone a strip of cornbrash lies exposed, while the most Northerly part is composed of boulder clay.

The soils are of a heavy clay consistency.

The land slopes from North to South, draining into the Ouse (see the contour Overlay). The highest point near Temple Spinney, is 303 ft. above Ordnance Datum, and the lowest by the banks of the Ouse, 143 ft. above Ordnance Datum.

The higher, Northern part of Sharnbrook is well wooded, many of the larger woods being on the boulder clay. The main woods are Frankcroft Wood, Halsey Wood, Temple Wood and Pippin Wood, all probably in existence at least from Medieval times. The woods of the Colworth Estate, further West, are of post-enclosure origin.

Topographically one may see the Parish dividing itself in two along the 200 ft contour line. South of this are the low-lying areas of Church Field and the Meadows in the West, and Stoke Mill Field to the East, with the village dividing the two, this area slopes gently down towards the Ouse. North of the 200 ft contour line are the higher areas with Colworth in the West and the wooded areas of the Temple Estate and Frankcrofts farther East. Looping its way down the centre from North-West to South is the Sharn Brook, alongside which, and acting as a central point for all these areas, lies the village of Sharnbrook, its High Street running parallel with the stream from which it takes its name.

The village lies South of the 200 ft contour, a linear settlement aligned North-South, sloping down towards the Ouse. To the East are the Midland Railway and the A6, both running North-West/South-East.

Gathered round the village are three manor houses, the substantial early 18th Century Colworth House, now the centre of a Unilever Research Establishment. The Toft, at the Northern end of the village, the oldest surviving part of the house dating from 1613; and Ouse Manor to the South, and by the River.

Most of the outlying farms are in the North or North-Eastern parts of the Parish, the areas furthest from the village.

Much of the Parish is now under plough, with a lot of the old pasture now turned over to arable. Recent years, and probably the Second World War especially, have seen a reversal of the situation recorded in the Victoria County History in 1912, when only 853 acres out of 2,158 acres of farmland were arable, the rest being permanent grassland.

PREHISTORIC AND ROMAN SHARNBROOK

No sites of either period have ever been excavated in Sharnbrook. The main evidence therefore comes from field-walking, aerial survey and chance finds. David Hall has covered much of the parish in his field survey, and further information on what appears below is available from the Sites and Monuments Record kept in the Conservation Department at County Hall.

The MESOLITHIC period is represented by a single find, a stone axe found at a marginal grid-reference. SMR9849.

The NEOLITHIC period likewise is represented only by the chance find of a stone axe. SMR10446.

Evidence for BRONZE AGE activity consists of two Ring-Ditches, SMR 732 and 1839.

IRON AGE remains exist in a larger quantity. Two areas show concentrations of Iron Age or Belgic material, both discovered during field-walking. Finds are mainly pottery, with some clay. SMR 67 and 2696. The latter area, South of Temple Wood, shows as a cropmark on the R.A.F. aerial photograph series.

The ROMAN period also figures more strongly. Field walking has revealed three areas where pottery has been found, SMR 85, 1989, and 2684.

A roman Road supposedly runs through the Parish from Bleksoe in the South-East, going in a North-Westerly direction to meet another Road in Knotting and Souldrop. Its true course has not been ascertained, and its existence is doubtful. (SMR 728)

MEDIEVAL SHARNBROOK

No SAXON sites or finds have been discovered in the Parish.

The Place-Name:

The name Sharnbrook may be of Saxon origin, coming from the English 'Scearn' and 'broc', meaning 'during' and 'brook' respectively. Presumably the name came from the effect created by watering cattle at the stream.

It appears in Domesday Book as both Sernebroc and Serneburg, subsequent versions include: Shernebroc (1163), Scarnebroc (1167, 1220), Sharnebroc (1167), Sarnebroc (1189, 1199, 1202), S(c)harnebrok(e) (1247), Scharneburg (1276), S(c)hernebrok (1278, 1302, 1494, 1502, 1617) and Sharbroke (1406).

The Domesday Survey:

The following holdings are mentioned in the Domesday Survey, 1086:

Albert of Lorraine held two hides and a quarter virgate with a mill worth fifty shillings with four villeins, four bordars and four serfs.

The Bishop of Coutances held four-and-a-half hides worth eight shillings with seven socmen, one villein, six bordars and three others.

Count Eustace of Boulogne held two hides worth forty shillings with four villeins, three bordars and four serfs.

Hugh de Beauchamp held one-and-a-half virgates worth two shillings with three sokemen.

Hugh the Fleming held half a hide and a quarter virgate worth ten shillings with one bordar and one serf.

Osbern the fisherman held half a hide with a mill and fish-stew worth twenty-six shillings with one villein and two bordars.

Countess Judith held three virgates worth ten shillings with one villein and one bordar.

The Burgesses of Bedford held half a virgate worth two shillings.

The Manors:

The lands held by Albert of Lorraine in 1086 were attached to the Barony of Bedford by 1185. In 1406 the estate was a messuage of 100 acres. The first references to the Bedford overlordship appeared in 1419. The estate was held of the Barony of Bedford from 1185 to 1386 by the descendants of Albert, the Loring family, and subsequently kept the name, being known as LORINGS MANOR. In 1644 the current owner, William Boteler was killed at the battle of Cropredy Bridge. In 1765 the estate passed to the influential Cornish family through Vice-Admiral Sir Samuel Cornish. The estate was finally dispersed in 1876, by which time it also included the manors of Tofte and Temple Hills.

The holdings of the Bishop of Coutances were granted to the Knights Templar in the 12th Century by their current owner, Alice of Clermont. In 1199 the Templars were granted the rights of assart of 200 acres in Sharnbrook, and this area, in the North of the Parish became the Temples Estate or TEMPLES HILL MANOR. The name Temple survives today in Temple Wood and Temple Hill and many other examples can be found in the field-name index (Appendix 1). In 1331 the manor passed to the Knights Hospitaller who held in until 1543. In 1545 it was alienated into the Lorings Estate, following the same descent until 1876.

Out of the lands of Count Eustace of Boulogne evolved the TOFTE MANOR. The Triket family were tenants of Count Eustace and were great benefactors of Newnham Priory. In 1278-9 it was recorded that the Priory held a capital messuage of 180 acres of land attached to the houses of Boulogne and Bedford. In 1331 the manor was in lease to William Tofte who gave his name to the estate, which passed to the Crown after the Dissolution, thence to George Boteler, owner of Lorings Manor, remaining part of that estate until 1876.

The Beauchamp family obviously expanded on the one-and-a-half virgates which they held in 1086, for part of the Tofte Manor came from their lands, the Beauchamps being the Barons of Bedford. The one-and-a-half virgates mentioned in the Domesday Book developed separately into LANGTONS MANOR though. In 1086 this land was held of Hugh de Beauchamp by Osbern de Broilg, whose family remained tenants until 1200. The next reference to the holding appeared in 1324 when it was alienated from Robert de Utteford to John de Langton, when it consisted of a messuage of 80 acres. Known thereafter as LANGTONS MANOR it passed through various hands, including the two powerful Sharnbrook families of Cobbe and Gibbard. Descendants of the latter holding the estate into the present Century.

Also attached to the Barony of Bedford was PARENTINES MANOR. This overlordship was acknowledged in 1278, 1302, 1346 and 1428. The Parentine family first appear in the early 13th Century as benefactors of Newnham Priory. In 1278 Ellen de Parentine held one hide in Sharnbrook, and she reappears in 1302 and 1316 but by 1346 the manor was affiliated with Langtons, thereafter following the same descent.

OUSE MANOR also originated from lands granted to Newnham Priory, in this case from grants made by the Child family. In 1278 the Prior of Newnham held free fishery from the "mill of Pinch to the mill of Stoke" and from "Sculterleye to the head of the pond of Pinch". From then on it followed the same descent as the Tofte until it was differentiated in 1614 when it consisted of 5 messuages, 246 acres of land and a piece of water called "le Oves in Sharnbrook". It subsequently passed through the ownership of several families, including, briefly, the Cobbes.

SHARNBROOK MANOR probably originated from the land owned by Higham Ferrers College. The College was founded in 1422, and owned land in Sharnbrook worth four pounds at the dissolution. In 1542 this land, called SHARNBROOK MANOR, was granted to Robert Daires who alienated it to George Boteler in 1543, thus it became part of Lorings Manor.

COLWORTH MANOR again was held by the Barony of Beauchamp of Bedford. In 1304 John Daniel obtained recognition of right to the manor from William Warren and it passed through a number owners, including in 1484 the Crown. In around 1700 it was bought by Mark Anthonie who built the earliest part of Colworth House. In 1771 William Lee-Anthonie extended and altered it considerably.

Throughout this period Colworth was extra-parochial, only becoming part of Sharnbrook in 1895. The whole estate covers parts of the Parishes of Odell and Knotting and Souldrop also. Consequently Colworth must have been somewhat isolated from Sharnbrook. There are, near the house, the remains of a Medieval Village, SMR 722, evidence for a separate community existing on the Estate. The area within the estate boundary remained unchanged by the Enclosure Award of 1810, having been enclosed previously.

Another part of Sharnbrook which was extra-parochial was the Stoke Mill, in the South-East of the Parish on the North bank of the Ouse. A "mill of Stoke" is mentioned in 1278 in connection with the Prior of Newnham (see Ouse Manor above) and it seems likely that it was in existence at the time of the Domesday Survey. The Stoke Mill was in fact a small enclave of the Parish of Bletsoe.

Archaeological Evidence:

Existing Medieval Earthworks include the moat or motte in Castle Close, SMR 994, which survives to a substantial height, being a large mound surrounded by a wide ditch.

There exist on the Ouse Manor Estate some interesting earthworks associated with ridge and furrow, SMR 10697.

A deserted village site with a possible moat exists near Arnoe Farm in the very North of the Parish, SMR 2699, this area is now being cultivated, but before ploughing, when it was still under pasture, the village stood out quite plainly as a series of earthworks.

Ploughing has devastated the Medieval earthwork remains in the Parish, these being mainly Ridge and Farrow. Many of the areas which show as pasture on the R.A.F. aerial cover have now been turned to arable, with the consequent destruction of the Medieval remains. For further information see SMR 1642.

Medieval Buildings:

St Peters Church, SMR 1112, is basically a 13th Century building with 14th, 15th and 17th Century additions. The styles of architecture represented include the Early English the Decorated, and the Perpendicular. The first reference to a foundation here comes from a deed of Newnham Priory in the 1180's, and the first known Rector was one Richard, who dates from c.1155.

No other certainly Medieval buildings apparently exist in Sharnbrook. The fine stone-built, thatched cottages of the High Street are of indeterminate age, but do not seem to be Medieval, although the plan of the village may not

have changed too much. According to CRT 130 SHA 25 the Tofte Manor house dates back to 1613 and parts of Sharnbrook Grange are also of a Seventeenth Century date. SMR 1116 and 1114 respectively.

THE POST-MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Enclosure:

Enclosure by Act of Parliament, in answer to the dissatisfaction expressed at the open-field system, took place in 1810.

The Pre-Enclosure map showing this system is based on an 1809 map (M.A.35 CRO 1809a in the field name Index, Appendix 1) which had the enclosure system superimposed. The basic picture shows two main areas of open field among estates enclosed earlier, (coloured orange). The three main open fields seem to have been Church Field, Woodend Field and Stoke Mill Field, which are referred to in early sources as South Field, West Field and East Field respectively, or occasionally South, West or East Season (C.R.O. B.S.1192,1719). Other named fields include Utters Field, Temple Field and Deadland Field, all north of the village. The meadows, alongside the banks of the Ouse in the South were also important, and were separated into doles before the enclosure, the names of which survive from a 1617 survey (A.D.997 CRO).

The largest estates at this time were in the North; Colworth, which was still extra-parochial and included land outside Sharnbrook; the Toft Estate, which held land round Frankcroft Wood; and the Temple Estate, evolved from the land assailed by the Templars in 1199. Ouse Manor, at the South end of the village held a smaller estate. The dates of enclosure for these estates is not known, but it was certainly before the 1617 survey which is the earliest comprehensive list of field names for Sharnbrook.

The Post-Enclosure Map is based on two 1809 maps, M.A.35 and M.A.35/2, the latter being accompanied by the Award Book (Book K, C.R.O.). Further information is taken from an 1855 Railing Map (M.A.35/3). The change from the open-field system to one of private closes and separate fields was quite drastic. The early Nineteenth Century origin of many of these closes can be seen from the Field Name Index where many of the names are not attested before 1810.

The Field-Names:

The origins of these names is various. Some are obviously based on personal names, as some of the Manors are, Langtons Pightle is an example of one based on the name of the Manor whose name comes from the Langton family. Jeffrey's Piece is an example of a personal name surviving in the form of a field-name. Gilbert's Mead is an interesting one, this name is attested in 1855, and probably originated from the "Meadow of Illebert" which appears in 1219, and had become Gilbertusmede by 1506. The name was applied to Gilbert's Close also.

Some names originated from the names of topographic features, Kennell Hill Field for example, or Temple Spinney Close. Brookfield is probably the oldest example, the name Le Brok'feld appears in 1320, and returns as Brookfield in 1617, also as Brookfield Close.

Other names may relate to the crops which were grown, for example Rye Furlong, which survives after the enclosure as Rye Close. Names such as Saw Pit Close or Limekiln Close also indicate one use of the area.

Some names such as Little Field, Great Meadow, Fourteen Acres or Long Piece have obvious origins, but others such as Long Aldens, Cawfle End and Inge Peece are more obscure.

In many cases pre-enclosure names survive after 1810. Thus the Short Pexwell of the 1617 survey becomes Short Pexwell Close in 1819.

The Community:

The Enclosure does not seem to have had a detrimental effect on Sharnbrook village, though it cannot be said what effect it had on the agricultural community.

Sharnbrook continued to develop throughout the Nineteenth Century, no doubt aided largely by the construction of the Midland Railway in the late 1840's. With the line came a Station, and a number of coal merchants, and money. The village was chosen later in the Nineteenth Century as the best place for the local constabulary and police court, and this was built in 1872. Before that in 1836 the school which had been founded some years before became a National School; the building is still in use today.

The long list of 39 different trades which were represented in Sharnbrook between 1853 and 1898 include a Cooper, Brickmaker, Tilemaker, Draper, Dressmaker, Limeburner, Mason, Plumber, Paper-Hanger, Carpenter and Wheelwright, with perhaps a touch of distinction with the opening of a Hairdresser in 1853 and a Coffee-shop in 1894.

Sharnbrook also attracted two Christian denominations who opened chapels in the village. The Baptists and the Calvinistic Baptists had both arrived by 1851.

Industry:

The agricultural industry of grinding corn is the oldest sort in Sharnbrook. Two mills are mentioned in Domesday Book, and two mills remain today. Sharnbrook Windmill is a fine stone-built mill erected c.1880, while Stoke Mill was a water mill on the Ouse. The "mill of Pinch" mentioned in 1278 does not survive today though its site is known to be on the Ouse also, near Ouse Manor.

The cottage industry of lace-making is the only industrial activity Sharnbrook has seen. This activity dates from the Sixteenth Century. The Burials section of the Parish Registers from 1740-1763 mention twenty-seven women who were lace-makers, and the trades directories of the Nineteenth Century state that pillow-lace was made in Sharnbrook.

SHARNBROOK TODAY

Sharnbrook Village is now a conservation area, and the High Street has been able to retain some of its charm. Many of the cottages are still thatched, and the road is unspoilt by heavy traffic, which concentrates on the A6, further East. New housing estates have been built behind the church, between Lodge Road and the High Street.

The outlying area is still agricultural, though many of the old field boundaries have been removed to make larger fields.

The Colworth Estate has become a Unilever Research Establishment, and Colworth House has been swallowed up in this, its interior completely changed.

The major threats to archaeological remains in Sharnbrook would appear to be heavy ploughing and gravel extraction. The threat that ploughing poses should not be underestimated. Gravel extraction will occur only along the banks of the Ouse, but this area may prove to be of importance.

Large-scale development does not appear to be a great threat, at least in the foreseeable future.

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BEDFORDSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARISH SURVEY PROGRAMME

This essay was produced as part of the archaeological parish survey programme, carried out by the Conservation Section of the County Planning Department. A major source of evidence was material in the County Record Office. Copyright over this essay is retained by Bedfordshire County Council.

Further information on specific items may be available in the Bedfordshire Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) which can be consulted by appointment in the Planning Department.