Bartons History Group

Notes for guided tour of Steeple Barton on July 2010 - Christine Edbury

The Parish Church of St. Mary-the-Virgin, Steeple Barton

> *"By opening the window[1] and leaning out, the parish church comes into view across the lane, a lonely building now, empty and cold and bare except for one hour each week. It was rebuilt about the year 1300, when the village was large and flourishing; this was the high farming period of the Middle Ages. The font is twelfth century and deep in the churchyard to the east of the chancel is a buried wall which is perhaps the east wall of a Saxon church."*
> (From **"The Making of the English Landscape, 1955" by W.G. Hoskins** who lived for a time in the Vicarage at Steeple Barton.)

What you see now is a large, late medieval building, extended when the population was much higher in the middle ages. It was once the mother church of a royal Saxon estate, rebuilt about 1300, when the village was large, but there has been a church on this site since about 800. The Victorian did a splendid job of modernising the old church, but in doing so, took away all earlier features. A church was given to Osney Abbey in the 12th century by Roger St. John of the manor of Sesswells Barton, which explains why people associate Barton Abbey with being ecclesiastical, but there never was an abbey here.

If you visit the church, please take time to read the explanation panels at the west end of the church.

The church has the most interesting capitals – carvings of faces and animals. One explanation could be that Henry 1st has a zoo at his palace at Woodstock – '*he begged exotic animals from all his foreign contacts'* (Oxfordshire Parks, F. Woodward). Did local masons see these animals and carve the beautiful figures we see today?

A 14th century tomb top[2] was mentioned in the Vestry minutes of 1836-51 when new foundations were being dug. It later became hidden but it was rediscovered in the early 1980s when the grass was mown particularly severely. It may have been the tomb of one of the De Bertons/St. John's who lived in the earlier manor.

There is also a stone 'sarcophagus type coffin' tomb, said to have been used as a drinking fountain on a nearby farm.

A Roman coin was found under the tower during renovations in 1855. I think it was William Wing of Steeple Aston who noted, in the *Annals of Steeple Barton and Westcot Barton,* that the gravedigger mentioned old walls, possibly even Roman walls, when new graves were dug in the east part of the churchyard. The quote mentions herringbone style stonework. A small piece of Roman pottery was found when the gravestones were lifted and recorded in the 1980s (but that is not enough dating evidence for anything significant).

Plague victims were reputed to be buried on the north side so it is said that there have been no further burials in that area.

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[1] at the Vicarage

[2] Audrey Martin, Mick Sterling, Madge Byford and Chris Edbury 'excavated' it and took photographs. Barbara Clark made a drawing (for details see file in archives).

The oldest readable gravestones are for the Eaglestone family, mid 1600s. Some of these are laid against the north wall, near the tower.

The church organ was built by William Hill in 1875 and restored in 1993 by Robin Rance. Tom Hazell (late of Whistlow) had to remove bees regularly from the roof of the organ chamber. (Information taken by Chris Edbury from the Vestry minutes).

The deserted village 'wiped out by the Black Death'

> *"Then finally, out of sight but only fifty or sixty yards from this room, in the field next the garden, there lies buried the main street of the old village that was wiped out by the Black Death. One walks between the banks that show where the houses stood, marking how blocks of squared masonry thrust in one place out of the turf and how the tree roots twist among the rubble footings of the peasant dwellings; and one picks up pieces of twelfth and thirteenth century pottery – mere shards, bits of rim, sides, bases, but all datable; nothing later than the Black Death, when the great silence descended."*
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> Prof. Hoskins' comments from his study in "The Making of the English Landscape"
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> (I have traced these pieces of pottery to the Ashmolean Museum, and intend at some time, to take photographs of them.

The stone for the gateway at the bottom of the old garden at Woodman's Cottage[3] may have come from the medieval tithe barn when it was demolished. The young oak tree in the field beyond was planted by Major Philip Fleming[4] on the site of one of the corners of the barn.

Barton Abbey

The "Abbey" part of the name is a Victorian invention, the house or estate was never part of an abbey, the only connection being Roger St. John giving the church to Oseney Abbey. Barton Abbey belongs to one manor, and very possibly Church Farm is on the site of another medieval manor house, there were two manors close by each other, Steeple Barton and Sesswells Barton. It was thought that the remains of cottages in the field above the fish ponds towards Whistlow may have been the site of the old manor, but the County Archaeology Department thought it more likely to be underneath Church Farm. Unfortunately no dating evidence has come to light yet.

Prof. Hoskins' comments:

> *"One of the last parks to be made as late as the 1870s. The house is older, and is merely a stone casing around a house originally built by a successful merchant of the Staple, whose inscription is still over the door : Thinke and Thanke Anno 1570. Three hundred years later his house was remodelled by another successful bourgeois – this time a wealthy Oxford brewer. But this was an old, long-cultivated estate when John Dormer acquired it, with a history stretching back to pre-Conquest days, when it was one of the demesne farms of the Anglo-Saxon kings."*

The estate produced food to feed the household at Woodstock Palace when the Anglo-Saxons kings hunted there.

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[3] Previously two cottages – Mr and Mrs Denton lived in one and Mrs Ruby Pratley in the other. The two cottages were converted to one dwelling in 2000 (?).

[4] Confirmed by Mr. Robin Fleming 31/08/08

"One can walk along the broad green lane that was first made to connect the estate with the hunting park."

"And there is the lane, dropping down to the stone bridge that was rebuilt in 1948, but unquestionably on the site of the stone bridge which is mentioned as a landmark in an even earlier charter." (W.G. Hoskins)

Post box located in the wall of cottage, opposite the Old Rectory[5]

This is a Victorian wall box of 1861. It is not quite the earliest version of a wall post box, but it is one of the second standard wall boxes. Roadside letterboxes first appeared in the British Isles (in the Channel Islands) as early as 1852 and the author, Anthony Trollope, was instrumental in introducing them to mainland Britain. Rosemary has discovered an organisation called "The Letterbox Study Group" which aims to catalogue and preserve all post-boxes in Britain. Very interesting – look at their web-site (www.lbsg.org) for more information.

Middle Barton has a postbox from every reign except Edward VIII. In the area around Middle Barton there are an exceptionally large number of Victorian wall boxes: Ledwell, Rousham, Caulcott, Steeple Aston, Middle Aston, Nether Worton, Over Worton, Radford, Heythrop (all more recent than the Steeple Barton box). One interpretation is that all these surviving wall boxes are located near 'big houses'.

The Vicarage

Prof. Hoskins' comments from his study at the Vicarage (Chapter 10: The Landscape Today in "The Making of the English Landscape, 1955").

"The view from this room[6] where I write these last pages is small, but it will serve as an epitome of the gentle unravished English landscape. Circumscribed as it is, with tall trees closing it in barely half a mile away, it contains in its detail something of every age from the Saxon to the nineteenth century. A house has stood on this site since the year 1216, when the bishop of Lincoln ordained a vicarage here, but it has been rebuilt over and over again, and last of all in 1856. Down the garden, sloping to

[5] information from Rosemary Wharton
[6] understood to be his downstairs study

the river, the aged and useless apple trees are the successors of those that grew here in the time of Charles I, when the glebe terrier[7] of 1634 speaks of 'one orchard, one backside, and two little gardens'.

Beyond the apple trees and within a few feet of the river is a raised platform, visible in winter before its annual submergence in weeds, part of a vanished building, and there are clear lines of stone walls adjoining it. Almost certainly this is the site of one of the three water-mills recorded on the estate in the Domesday Book. Below it flows the Dorn, known to the Saxons as the Milk, from the cloudiness of its water after rain; and one still sees it as the Saxons saw it a thousand years ago, as I saw it a few minutes ago in the thin rain drifting down from the Cotswolds."

The original Vicarage was said to have been built in the 13th century but, by 1783, the current building was in a bad state and demolished. A new one was built in 1855, designed by S.S. Teulon. There is a rare octagonal-shaped hall. The arms of the Duke of Marlborough are set on an outside wall (The Dukes of Marlborough are patrons). A stone head of a medieval queen was seen by Hoskins in the grounds, probably from the church when it was modernised in the Victorian era. The vicarage was sold in 1963 to the Kettlewell family, Dr. Kettlewell was a zoologist. The vicarage was recorded by William Wing *(in the Annals of Steeple Barton and Wescot Barton)* as being *"a posh house with no stable or piggery!"*

The Fishponds

"Across the stream, tumbling fast on its way to Glyme and Evenlode, one sees a wide sedgy hollow planted with willow saplings, from which flocks of goldfinches rise with a flash of wings on sunny mornings. This hollow, enclosed by a massive earthen bank, was the fishpond begun by the lord of the manor before his death in 1175, and completed by his son:

'Odo de Berton grants to Roger de St. John the land between the garden of Roger and the road to the bridge together with the manor where Thomas de St. John began to make his fishpond, rendering yearly a pair of spurs of twopence.'

This was about 1200, the charter is undated, but the fishpond is still there today." (W.G.Hoskins)

Fish was an important part of the medieval diet. Cattle were raised and slaughtered before the winter, when there would be little food for them. Fish was salted and dried to supplement the diet. Religion also played an important part. The church was very strict on fasting, and meat was not eaten on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays during Lent and other feast days, but fish could be eaten. The fish bred for this purpose were pike which were a delicacy, bream, perch and roach (carp came much later). Fish ponds (and dovecotes) were restricted to those of higher status. The fishponds are marked on the ordnance survey maps.

Late Neolithic or early Bronze Age flints have been found fieldwalking in the field above the fish ponds (Great Park) looking towards Whistlow. Whistlow is a corruption of 'whleu' = stone; an aerial photograph in the Oxfordshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record at Westgate, shows a large circle in the top of the field, possible the site of a barrow. The remains of houses with stone foundations and a distinctive track can be seen in the field Great Park. (Susan Digby-Firth, secretary to Laws and Fiennes, was a keen amateur archaeologist; she lived for a time in one of the estate cottages and collected these flints in the 1970s. They are now in the County Museum collection at Standlake.

[7] a document recording boundaries, land inventories, list of tenants of a lordship etc.

the group, standing above the fishbonds, near the remains of the houses and lanes of the deserted village

Notes onTithe Barns:
The tithe, or payment in kind, was 10% of the annual produce of a manor/village and was paid to the church. Only the wealthy had the 10% in money, so the rest of the population paid in kind – produce in the form of crops, livestock, from orchards and gardens. This was an ancient custom in the Christian church, going back to the 7th century. By the 10th century tithe payments were compulsory, tithe barns began to be constructed. By the end of the 18th century tithes were paid in a different form, sometimes giving the rector/vicar, an agreed piece of land or an amount of money in lieu of produce. This system finished in the 1960s.

If you get a chance, visit the National Trust barn at Great Coxwell, just off the A420. Open all year, but closed at dusk, as there is no lighting inside. £1.50 entrance fee. Also Swalcliffe barn, built for New College around 1400, situated in the village of Swalcliffe (north of Banbury), looked after by Oxfordshire County Council Museum Service, and housing some of their carts and old fire pumps etc. Free entry. Open on Sundays and Bank Holidays.

Bibliography:
Hoskins, W.G., The Making of the English Landscape, Penguin History (1955).
{Hoskins (1908-1992) was Reader in Economic History at Oxford University}
Woodward, F., Oxfordshire Parks (1982)
Article in Oxford Mail, October 1955 - Hoskins gives S.P.B. Mais from the Oxford Mail a guided tour of Steeple Barton and its history.

A review on Making of the English Landscape (Paperback)
This book has been updated on a number of occasions so make sure you get the latest version, Amazon sent me an earlier version that was no use at all. Since then I have acquired the corrected version that updates Hoskins to more recent finds and it really proves what a pioneer he was, how astute some of his work was and how much the science of landscape studies has advanced. This book is a must for all students and brings forward that nothing within the landscape stands in isolation and there is virtually nothing in the English landscape that has not been put there by man. Read this book first then you will become a better landscape historian and archaeologist.