



*Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series*

## **Grove Village – No Longer Overshadowed by Wantage Town**

**by Reg Wilkinson**

Until recent times the village of Grove was overshadowed by its neighbour, the town of Wantage. However, during the past three decades scores of houses have been built in and around Grove and nowadays the population of the village nearly equals that of the town. In 1961, the population of Wantage was 5,949 and of Grove 1,845, but in 1981 the population of Wantage was 8,741 and of Grove 7,387.

As there are few places of employment in the immediate vicinity of Grove, many of its inhabitants travel to work each day at scientific institutions like the Atomic Energy Research Establishment and the Rutherford and Appleton Laboratories at Harwell, Esso House near Steventon and the Culham and Jet Laboratories near Culham. Many more commute to Swindon, Abingdon and Oxford or to London by way of the railway station at Didcot.

Grove had its own access to the main London-Bristol railway through the station at Wantage Road until it was closed by Dr Beeching in 1965. The station was approximately a mile from Grove and 2½ miles from Wantage. It opened in 1846 and during the first three decades passengers, depending on their means, made their way to Wantage Road in carriages, on foot or by the horse-drawn omnibus run by Mr Nunney.

In 1875 the situation changed considerably when a tramway was constructed between Wantage Road and the terminus in Mill Street, Wantage. The line skirted the eastern boundary of Grove as it passed along the side of the Oxford Road on its way to the station. Passengers from Grove were picked up, or let down, at Grove Bridge and Oxford Lane.

The tramway company was in business for 70 years, carrying both goods and passengers until 1925 and then goods only until the line's closure in 1945. The main reason for closure of the passenger service was the introduction of an omnibus service by the GWR in 1924. This took in Wantage and the surrounding villages and included the route between Wantage and Wantage Road Station, via Grove. Later, this route was taken over by the Oxford Bus Company and the service was continued until the station closed.

Some time before the introduction of railways or buses another means of transportation had an influence on Grove and provided employment for some of the residents. This was the Wilts & Berks Canal which on its way through the Vale of White Horse passed along the eastern and southern boundaries of Grove. When the tramway was constructed 65 years later part of it ran parallel to the canal along the Oxford Road.

The W & B was officially abandoned in 1914, but its remains are still in evidence around Grove. Short sections of the canal bed can be seen and three locks named Limekiln, Grove Common and Small Marsh are recognisable. In addition a row of substantial cottages, which once housed canal employees, stands close to Grove Bridge and is now named Ormond Terrace.

Although the village has existed for hundreds of years and probably took its name from Thomas Grove who owned a watermill and land in the parish during the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, most of Grove's development has taken place during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Without doubt the biggest upheaval the village has ever seen took place during the last war when an airfield was constructed on agricultural land to the west of Grove. At first the airfield was used by the Royal Air Force as a training school for night flying. Then it was taken over by about 2,000 men of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> US Army Air Force who enlarged the airfield to accommodate the huge bombers which flew countless missions to Germany during the last three years of the war.

The Americans went home when hostilities ceased and the villagers had just recovered from the effects of having so many airmen in their midst when hundreds of contractors' men arrived to fill the huts which had so recently been left vacant. The new arrivals were the men who had been engaged to convert another airfield, some seven miles away at Harwell, into the Atomic Energy Research Establishment.

Work at Harwell went on for a number of years and at times there were as many as 1,500 men in the accommodation at Grove. In addition the larger buildings on the airfield were taken over by the RAF and became No.3 Maintenance Unit.

The influx of so many strangers during the 1940s and early 1950s put a great strain on the social amenities of Grove and the surrounding district. Also the vibrations caused by heavy bombers flying overhead and heavy lorries roaring through the streets put a great strain on the buildings of the village.

In 1949 the vicar was obliged to close the parish church because it was in danger of collapse. The building, which was completed in 1900, had been unsatisfactory almost from the start and it was badly in need of repair for some time before the war. So the Americans were not entirely responsible for its end. In 1965 a brand new church was opened and dedicated to St John the Baptist.

Now there is very little evidence to suggest that aeroplanes ever flew from Grove, although a few of the airfield buildings remain and one of the biggest is now used by a youth club. Metal Box and British NonFerrous Metals have moved into Grove and built their research laboratories on part of the old airfield. Many of the new houses occupied by Grove's expanding population have been built where runways once existed. Grove is now a quieter place than during and just after the last war.

The following photographs are just a small selection from those held in the Photographic Archives of The Vale and Downland Museum.



Grove? - King George VI visiting RAF base in 1942? - King, Equerry, ranked



Grove? - King George VI visiting RAF base in 1942? - King, Equerry, ranked men.(mil024.jpg)



Grove - 1970s? - Oxford Road, 'No 4 Ormond Terrace', Canal Co



Grove - c1900 - Denchworth Lane - The Green, bridge and old Post Office - looking east.(v-gro031.jpg)

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