



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

Rambling about Stony Ford

by Dr Clive Spinage

Stanford in the Vale takes its name from the ancient crossing of the river Ock or "Salmon" River, the word "ock" deriving from the pre-Saxon word *ehoc*, meaning salmon; although in the 18th century it was known for its pike. The ford was probably where the bridge now spans it before Stanford Mill. In Saxon times the crossing was known as "stony ford", and it was here in September 1289 that the carts of the Bishop of Hereford, Richard de Swinfield, became stuck when he was travelling to Wantage on his way to visit the King at London. Mid-way between Faringdon and Wantage, it was to the important sheep-market town of Abingdon that the village was linked until modern times; Wantage only coming into prominence after the opening of the Wilts & Berks Canal. Seen since post-war days as little more than a dormitory for Wantage, Stanford has suffered more than most Vale villages at the developer's hand.

A sunny summer's day in June 1930, and a three-horse team ploughs a Stanford field on Hunter's Farm, while sheep contentedly chew the cud. But such bucolic scenes covered a harsher reality. In December 1924 the new guaranteed weekly agricultural wage was fixed at 29 shillings and 2 pence, or 7 pence an hour for a 50 hour week. But low wages were not the only disadvantage for the Berkshire labourer. Security of tenure was non-existent and the pre-war depression bit deep into the countryside. One casualty was Henry Spinage, shepherd for 29 years on the same farm. He was paid off on Saturday evening at the end of his week's work with the brief comment from the farmer, "I won't need you on Monday. I've sold the farm." Not a penny over the weekly wage was paid in recognition of 29 years of service. The agricultural labourer of those days would not have seen eye to eye with Virgil and his:

"Thrice happy ye, who in your homes rejoice,
And know the blessing of your peaceful choice!"

Most born a century or more ago would probably have agreed that the change which has come has been for the better, except perhaps that is concerning the disappearance of public houses. "Ye Stanford Bear" was burnt down in the 18th century, and its successor "The Bear" has gone. The "Crown Prince", later renamed "The Prince", became a private house, as did in the sixties "The Cottage of Content". Most recent to disappear was "The Marlborough Arms", demolished to make way for new houses some ten years ago.

Stanford's ancient houses have fared somewhat better, although built onto and up to until almost unrecognisable. Latest to fall victim to the harsh wind of Stanford's change is Penston's, which having lost its garden to become a new residential development has also lost its name. William Penstone, who was registered for the hearth tax on three hearths, was probably living there in 1662; and perhaps his son, Hugh Penstone, in the adjoining Chinam House with two hearths. The average number of hearths of the 69 registered dwellings was 2.7, in the range 1 to 12; so Penstone's house was only of average size. The most interesting feature concerning it is that local tradition calls it not Penstone, but "Cromwell's House" (which is the name it now goes under). Legend has it that Oliver Cromwell used it as his headquarters while fighting in the area in 1645, probably planning

the siege of Faringdon, one of the last Royalist strongholds to hold out against him. If Cromwell's alleged use of the house could be verified, it would make it one of Stanford's most historic houses. Perhaps it was simply a coincidence that this ancient former farmhouse came onto the market on the 350th anniversary of the Civil War.

In 1695 the ground floor western room was fully panelled in oak with an ornate plaster frieze and the cross beam was covered with original plaster in similar grapevine design. An original painted stone fireplace was uncovered in the bedroom above about this time.⁽¹⁾ But all this historic early interior has now gone and the rooms have been "modernised", except for the ancient oak floor boards in the western bedroom which sag massively in the centre of the room. Not mentioned in previous accounts of the house, halfway up the staircase exists a priest's hole. A narrow cavity between the wall of the western part of the house and the later eastern addition, offering just room enough for a man to stand up in; concealed behind tall, narrow, hinged panels. If it were indeed a priest's hole then this would date the eastern addition to the house as 16th century, making the western part originally 15th. But perhaps it was constructed in case of need by Cromwell to hide should Royalist forces overpower the property. In 1862 a number of Charles I coins was discovered hidden in the thatch of an old building connected with the house. Many Royalists hid their valuables to prevent seizure by Cromwell's men, so perhaps William Penstone had not been a willing host.

The vicar of the period seems to have bent with the times, for Giles Bingley was vicar from 1641 until his death in 1669, not being ejected for refusing to espouse Presbyterianism. In 1652 we read that 10 shillings and 6 pence were paid by the church for "blotting out the Kings Armes and for setting up the States Armes." Then in 1660, the year Charles II was restored, 1 pound 16 shillings and 8 pence were paid for "setting up the King's Armes."

Unfortunately this historic house has now suffered the developer's blight by having the rear garden severed by a brick wall and a housing estate built fronting the lounge. The house certainly seems worthy of closer examination by an historical architect.

Reference

- (1) V.M.House, n.d., Stanford in the Vale Parish Record, Part V, Privately Printed.



Stanford Mill 1930 (V-STA004)



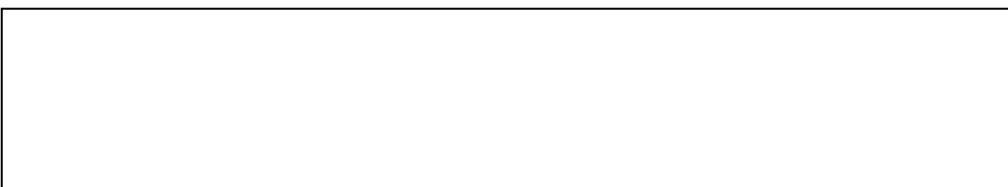
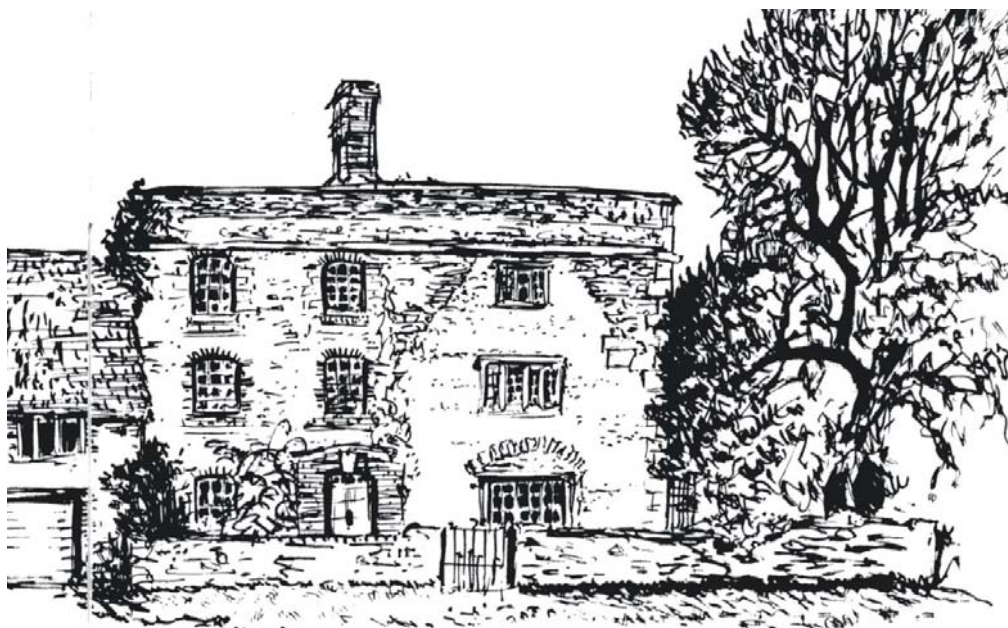
Three-horse ploughing.
Stanford, June 1930



“and sheep do gently graze”.
Stanford, June 1930



The Marlborough Arms, Stanford, circa 1900



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