



Farming

The parish has been a farming community for centuries because the soil, which is a mix of chalk and clay, is very productive. The local springs supplied water and in ancient times the beech woods on the slopes of the Chilterns would have provided food for pigs.

In the 16th and 17th century the main crops were wheat, barley and oats but hemp, flax, hops, peas, vetch and beans were also grown. The area was quite enterprising, as in 1610 the Manor Farm had decreed that all straw and dung was to be used for manuring. Rag manure was used in Aston as well as Crowell by the early 1700s. In the 18th century, farming in Aston and Kingston was still on the open field system, so tenants only had small strips of land to sow. In 1700, Robert Hester owned and farmed ninety nine strips in Aston and four major landowners owned most of the rest with John Clerke holding a third of the strips. There was also quite a lot of common land to graze animals. In 1647 an owner of five acres in Kingston Blount was entitled to common land for eight sheep and a cottager, who had rights as a tenant, was allowed pasture for a cow and ten sheep.

In Aston in the 17th century the Cornish family were farmers. They were affluent and owned two houses in Aston and a mill house in Adwell. In the 1620s the will of Richard Cornish, who described himself as a husbandman, demonstrated his wealth. He had thirteen horses and harnesses worth £41; three bullocks, nine cows and four weaning calves, worth £41; nine hogs and six pigs, £7; one hundred and eighty-eight sheep, £70; poultry, 10s; bees, 10s; substantial amounts of grain, wheat, barley and peas worth £200 and hay worth £20. He also leased the mill and land at Crowell. The Quartermaine family also farmed locally in the 17th and 18th centuries. They were described as yeoman farmers but were probably much smaller landholders than the Cornish family. Roger Quartermaine's will in 1707 showed sixteen acres of wheat and barley worth £30; corn worth £4; fifteen acres of grass worth £15; two horses, £8; livestock, £19 and poultry 15s.

Many of the farmhouses date from the 18th century. In 1769 Aston Rowant estate consisted of four farms, two in the village, 175 acres and 287 acres, one on the hill, 77 acres, called Upper Hill Farm and another lower down, 112 acres, called Lower Hill Farm, later The Drum and Plough and finally Warren Farm. The 287 acre farm incorporated a smaller one of 77 acres, which may later have become Middle Farm. There was a substantial farmhouse at this time, on the left of the road leading from Aston to Kingston. General Caillaud rebuilt Home Farm, which faces The Green in Aston village. It is of chequer brick and there is a stone inscribed 1794 by Siarey, the builder. It was once called Aston Lower Farm and later Aston Green Farm. The farm buildings included a 16th century barn, which may have been built at the same time as the earlier farmhouse. By



Home Farm facing The Green, Aston Rowant, 1928



Woodway Farm, 1988

1828 another farmhouse had been built on the Kingston Road, probably Woodway Farm. It was a four bedroomed house made of brick and flint, with a thatched cattle shed and stabling for twelve horses. In 1850 there were still four farms on the estate. Lower Field Farm (Home Farm) and Woodway Farm, a total of 560 acres, were let to George Abbott, and Upper and Lower Hill Farms let to William Beamsley. Beamsley paid £200 rent for the two farms, which totalled 184 acres, this was said to be a moderate rent. Home Farm had two farmyards with stabling for thirteen horses. It also had piggeries and a brick and thatch cow house. In December 1858 there was a fire at Mr Abbot's farm. Two barns, twenty acres of threshed wheat, some sheds, a carpenter's shop and timber were destroyed. This was thought to be the work of an arsonist. In the later part of the 19th century Joseph Willet was farming at Warren Farm. He obviously kept sheep as in 1880 he was fined for letting his sheep stray onto the highway. He had to pay costs of 5s.

The main crops in 1850 were beans, wheat, barley, oats and roots. In the sale catalogue for Aston House in 1859 the land was described as 'fine corn growing land with a large proportion exceedingly kind to turnips and barley'. Every year there was a root show in Thame and in 1860 Mr Guy of Kingston said he would present a silver cup for the grower of fifty turnips and swedes. Mr Guy would provide the seed and the winner would be the one with the greatest weight. Another event which the local farmers probably took part in was the ploughing match at Watlington. A pair or a team of horses pulled the plough and it was a skill in which great pride was taken. A good furrow had to be as straight as a die. The match was run by the Watlington Farmers Association and was followed by the cottagers' horticultural show. There was a display of farming implements and entertainment provided by a brass band.

By 1912 the estate had sold off some of its land but still retained Home Farm, which had outbuildings described as 'model farm buildings'. There was a forge with a blacksmith's shop and also a carpenter's shop. These barns and farm buildings have now been converted to modern residences. The estate also held Middle Farm, which was facing the church, probably on land now owned by the stud. In 1914 most of the land grew wheat, but the water meadows at Aston were good and watercress was grown. The grass was said to be poor probably because of the chalk.

Before enclosure, there were about twenty-three farmers in Kingston but by 1850 only a few small farmers had survived and the farms belonged to the lords of the manors. Town Farm in Kingston was once owned by the Belsons and known as Belson's Farm. The house was situated on the corner of Brook Street and the Stert Road. A new Town Farm house was built nearer to the Green before 1850 and William Watkins lived there. In that



Sheep on the Green in Kingston



Town Farm, Stert Road, 1989



Hay making on the Meeks Farm 1920s



Lower Farmhouse, Brook Street, 1992

year there were six farms in Kingston, two of them only small. The Brown family owned most of the land. The largest farm was The Grove, which was 255 acres. William Fletcher farmed Town Farm until the 1890s, he lived to be ninety six and had three wives. It was taken over by the Clark family, who now farm at Lower Farm. The Hattons ran Lower Farm for most of the 19th century. Their land was mainly to the right of the Stert Road and Town Farm land to the left. By 1939 most of the land was farmed by Lower Farm and The Grove with a couple of smallholders. One of these was Mr Meeks of The Red Lion Inn. Cheese schools were held at The Red Lion, where local ladies were taught the art of cheese making.

The outlying hamlets were predominantly farming communities. Chalford Green Farm dates back to the 17th century and was probably occupied by Richard Cossen. Several generations of the White family farmed Chalford Green Farm in the 1800s and after the turn of the century it was taken over by the Brownings. The other farm in Chalford, Manor Farm, was built in the early 1600s for the Hester family, who farmed there. At enclosure in 1858, two hundred and fifty two acres went to the landlord William Lowndes Stone. At some time in the second half of the 19th century it was incorporated into Thame Park Estate. The Deverell family farmed there as tenants for a hundred years until Thomas Deverell retired in 1918. Wykeham Musgrave owned the land in Copcourt and Chalford until it was split up in 1917, when the estate was sold. At this time Copcourt Farm had 255 acres with a substantial farmhouse. The outbuildings, which were of brick and timber, tiled and thatched, consisted of two stables, large cattle sheds, granary, hen houses and piggeries. The rent was £204 with a further £12 15s for the shooting rights. In Kingston Stert, Thomas Munday was described in 1696 as a substantial yeoman



Cheese making school at The Red Lion c. 1920. Back row; Mrs Clerke-Brown, third from left, Mrs Ballard, third from right, Mrs Meeks standing on the right, Kathleen Clark seated second from left.



Haycart pulled by Colonel the horse. Mr Clark is on the haycart. Possibly John Dover and George White on the rick 1920s.

farmer. For much of the 19th and early 20th centuries the Delafields were farmers there, followed by the Churches and the Wallingtons. Mr Good of Kingston Stert is known to have had one of the country's first threshing machines. In the 1930s there were two poultry farms and a pig farm.



Kingston Stert Farm, 1990s



Sheep shearing at Kingston Stert 1920s

Before the 20th century much of the work available locally was related to agriculture. In 1851 about forty five percent of people working were employed in this way. Life was hard and hours long. Labourers usually worked from 6 am to 6 pm in the summer and until dusk in the winter. Shepherds had no regular hours and Mrs Ludlow remembered her husband, in the 1920s, walking up to Crowell Hills four or five times a day in lambing time. He had a chicken house on wheels as shelter. At harvest time wages were better but you had to work from dawn to dusk and often the whole family was called in to help. Before 1850 corn was cut with a scythe but when the horse drawn reapers came in, work became a bit lighter. However many hands were still needed for raking and making the stooks.

Farming had reached its peak by the 1850s, the average wage for a farm worker was 9s 6d. By 1914 it was not a great deal more at 15s. If you were lucky a cottage would be available and some farm produce would be given to you. By the 1870s the agricultural depression had taken hold. Much more imported food was available and the years of 1875 to 1880 were very wet which ruined the crops and made animals sick. Landlords usually tried to help by reducing rents. A newspaper report in 1879, which had particularly severe weather, says that at the rent audit of Thomas Taylor, which was held at the Lambert Arms, twenty percent was returned to the tenants.

By 1881 there had been a small decline in the numbers employed in agriculture but it was still about forty percent. Boys now stayed at school longer and this was sometimes blamed for them losing interest in entering farming. A case which came up at the Watlington Petty Sessions in 1880 shows that boys were still employed on the land. Henry Fleet, a small boy of Aston Rowant was employed bird scaring and he was charged with having a gun without a licence. The 'gun' consisted of a small barrel attached to a piece of wood without a hammer and trigger. He discharged it by putting powder in the touchhole and igniting it with a fuse. He was found guilty and fined 6d with 9s 6d costs. A sum of money it seems unlikely he could afford to pay. If not in regular employment children would take time off school at harvest time and at potato picking to help in the fields.

Telephone No. 4.

THAME MARKET SALE.

May 5th 1914

SOLD FOR *MR. E. J. Clarke*

By MESSRS. BOND & BURROWS.

Number of Animals.	Description of Animals.	At per Head.	£	s.	d.
32.	<i>Hicks.</i>		14	2	6
33	/		15	10	
	<i>Hoop.</i>		3	3	
	/		2	18	
	/		2	12	
Commission....			4	1	6
By Cheque.....			40	11	6

With Compliments and Best Thanks.



1914 bill of sale

Comparing prices at Thame Market



A reluctant horse at the jump! 1940s



Thame Market 1940s

Some of the bigger farms in the parish are still working, but mechanisation has reduced the need for large numbers of agricultural labourers. The majority of the people in the area now work outside the villages.

The woodland in the parish has always been a valuable asset. In 1769 Aston Warren woods were valued at £1,381 and the timber in the grounds of Aston House at £651. When the estate was sold in 1859 there were 130 acres of profitable beech woodlands and plantations. The brochure said they were well managed and interspersed with larch plantations. There were also woods above Kingston. Growing timber was also included in the sale when the Copcourt and Chalford Farms were sold.

There are now two stud farms in the village. Aston House Stud is in the old stables of Aston Rowant House. Clarence Hailey started the other, Aston Park Stud Farm, in 1928. This stud was famous for its stallion, Trigo. In the 1930s there were thirty to forty mares kept in their own stable boxes. Since then the stud has changed hands a number of times.