



Crowell

The parish of Crowell is long and narrow, its boundaries being the Lower Icknield Way to the north, right up to Crowell Wood on the top of the Chiltern ridge near Spriggs Alley to the south. The village of Crowell is now tiny and is situated on the Chinnor to Kingston Blount road. Crowell, spelt Crawelle by 1163, means crows spring or stream and it grew up around the only stream in the parish, the Pleck. There is no evidence of occupation before Anglo Saxon times but by the Norman Conquest it was held by Alwin, Lord of Emmington. In the Domesday Book it says the King received £7 for Crowell. In 1665 twelve people had thirty eight hearths indicating that there were some substantial houses. Crowell Hill was enclosed by the 17th century but Crowell village was a late enclosure, in 1882.

On the Davis map of 1797 the Upper and Lower Icknield Ways were shown as principal

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Domesday Book entry for Crowell (1086)

roads in the parish, but by 1839 they were grass tracks. By enclosure in 1882 they had become bridleways. In 1797 there was also a road running from the village up the hill to the farms on Crowell Hill and on to Radnage, again this was just a track by the early 1800s.

The population of Crowell in the early 1800s was one hundred and fifty. In 1831 the parish was 1160 acres and had twenty nine inhabited houses with thirty seven families living there. Some of the houses, which were half-timbered, were destroyed in a large fire, which occurred in the village in 1859. The houses were rebuilt and by 1871 the population was two hundred and three, probably the most it has ever been. However, the agricultural depression took hold and by 1891 it was reduced to half of this. In 1989 there were thirty five households but the population was only ninety three.

The Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a small building, comprising nave, chancel, porch, vestry and stone bell-cot. The first known documentary evidence for the church is 1231. The present church has few early features except for the rounded arch to the door on the north side of the nave, which is Norman, showing it was in existence by the mid 12th century. In the 13th century the chancel arch was enlarged, a south porch added and a new font installed. The chancel was rebuilt in the 14th century. Today a few medieval tiles remain under the altar. There is also a brass preserving the memory of Sir John Payne, rector until 1469. A gravestone under the altar is a monument to John Stopes who died in 1668. He was the rector during the civil war and his daughter Rebecca is remembered for her gift of church plate in 1637. The chancel was repaired in



St Mary the Virgin in 1822



After repairs in 1830s

1745, 1768 and again in 1802, when the repairs cost £46 7s 4d. Repairs to the church in the 1830s cost £120. For this amount the roof was re-tiled, the bell-cot re-roofed with zinc, the weather boarding on the tower renewed, two new gothic windows and a door installed and other sundry items repaired. About the same time the churchyard was lowered which was several days work for five men.

In 1878 a major restoration was carried out when the church was practically rebuilt using much of the original material. It was made of flint with polished chalk inside. The south porch, vestry and the bell-cot, now of stone, date from this time. In 1879 the lych gate to the churchyard was built and the seating in the church was altered. Reverend Adams presented a new churchyard gate to the parish in 1895. The church now only has one bell but once had two, as both were re-hung in 1739. In 1971 the organ was given to Crowell Church by the Methodist Church at Beacon's Bottom, which had closed down. Presumably, before that, they managed with the harmonium, which was often referred to at the vestry meetings. In 1895 Miss Rogers was the organist and she was paid £5 annually. In 1903 thanks were offered to Mrs Davis, the rector's wife as she had played for two years without a fee. In 1914 the church was insured for £1050 at a cost of 15s 9d, the chancel for £800 at 12s and the Rectory for £1200 at 19s.

In 1811 the parishioners insisted that the two Sunday services should be reduced to one. So when the religious census of 31 March 1851 was taken, there was only a morning service held. There were thirty six free sittings and one hundred and six others, a similar number of seats to the one hundred and forty noted in 1818. The day the census was taken there were fifty three in the general congregation and twenty six Sunday scholars. It is believed that quite a number of the people came from Kingston. There must have been a specific area where the poor people sat in the church, as in 1874 Randall Cooper was paid 10s 10d for 'mending the floor where the poor men sit'. By 1920 there were only fifteen communicants, eleven of whom were over twenty one years of age. In 1948 the Crowell church joined with Aston Rowant.

The earliest mention of a Rectory is in the 1665 hearth tax returns. The Rectory was known to have been partly rebuilt between 1722 and 1730 by the rector Edward Hind. Soon after this date the rector probably became non-resident for some time. There was a resident curate in the 1770s but by 1800 the curate of Chinnor officiated. It is likely the Rectory was not lived in for some while and finally it was declared uninhabitable. It was rebuilt in 1822 at a cost of £760. The Regency building is of whitewashed brick; two storied with a slate roof and was designed by J.B.Rebecca of Leicester Square. In 1879 the rector of Crowell, Rev John Churchill, died suddenly and an auction was held at the Rectory of all of his household furniture and effects. An article in the press at the time gives us an idea of the stipend of a vicar. The Crowell living had 9 acres of glebe land and £243 of tithe rent giving a gross income of £249 and a house to live in.

There is little evidence of non-conformity in the village after the celebrated character Thomas Ellwood, the Quaker, left the parish. Four non-conformists were mentioned in the census of 1676. Nothing more is known until 1828 when a house in the Spriggs Alley part of Crowell was licensed for worship. There were two Calvinists in Crowell in 1834, who probably worshiped at Kingston or Chinnor, but that year a house was licensed. There was nowhere licensed for worship in the 1850s so their meeting house must have closed but there were nine dissenters reported. In 1866 sixteen non-conformists went to Chinnor to worship.

Like Aston we are very fortunate to have the churchwardens accounts for Crowell. Although most of the time the accounts are similar for the two parishes there are some interesting differences. With regards to vermin, Crowell too seems to have been troubled by sparrows and polecats but they were also paying 1s for badgers, 4d for sparrow hawks and 1s for a fox. The accounts showed many payments for prayers particularly with regard to royalty. In 1760 the churchwardens paid 5s for beer at the Coronation of George the Second, this may have been for the bell ringers. In 1763, 1s 6d is paid for a paper (prayer) of thanksgiving for peace with France and Spain. In 1780, a prayer is bought for the birth of a prince, presumably Prince Alfred. He was however their fourteenth child and only lived two years. There was no mention in Crowell of purchasing prayers for earlier children. Nine years later they obtained a prayer, which cost 3s 6d, for the recovery of the King. This was at the time that George the Third was in a deranged state and there was serious concern for his health. He recovered somewhat but needed a further prayer said in 1800, after he was shot at in the theatre in Drury lane. Presumably the prayers were for the fact that he was unhurt in the incident. Princess Charlotte's birth, the daughter of George the Fourth, in 1796 warranted another prayer. Much later in 1860 a prayer was said for cattle plague. It is uncertain whether the prayer is for the cattle to recover or thanksgiving that the cattle of the parish did not succumb to the disease.

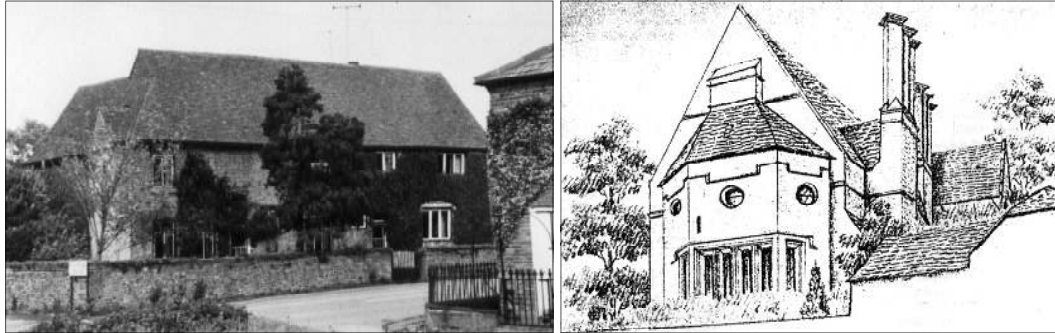
Some very early overseers of the poor accounts survive for the parish but they give little detail. In the late 1660s, three people a year seem to be receiving payments and regularly the East family crops up. In 1677 widow East's son is receiving £6 15s a year and widow East £4 1s. However, in 1678, £8 is paid to remove Thomas East from the liberty of Crowell. He must have had settlement elsewhere. The rest of the family stayed, as in 1676 Edward East received £2 5s 6d and in 1710, widow East £2 2s for seven months.

In 1865 Randall Cooper, the blacksmith was an overseer but in 1850 he fell foul of the Poor Law Guardians as they reported he had an open drain and privy which was causing a nuisance. In the same year the Besley family, the mother Mary Ann, a widow and her six children ranging in age from twenty five to thirteen applied to the Poor Law Union to emigrate. The sum to be provided was not to exceed £10 each. The family needed £70, which was less than half of the annual poor law rate assessed for the parish so it was agreed for them to go.

The vestry meeting also dealt with the distribution of charity money. In the minutes of 1865 the Poores Close charity was discussed. This refers to three acres of land believed to be beyond Crowell Hill Wood, which was let and the proceeds given to the poor of the parish. Thomas Kimber paid £2 7s 6d annually, which was said to be a low rent but this was because the land was in a poor situation. The land was probably that left by the rector John Stopes, in his will of 1668. The proceeds were distributed to the poor in sums varying from 6d to 4s depending on the size of the families.

One of the oldest and most notable buildings in Crowell is Ellwood House. It stands on the opposite side of the road to the church. The building dates from the 16th century and the front is of chequer brick that might conceal a timber frame. The rear is gabled with timber framing and brick and flint in-fill. There are two large chimneystacks each with three diamond stacks. The hipped roof and three oriel windows probably date from the

17th century when the house was likely to have been extended. In the 1660s tax was paid on ten hearths suggesting a larger house than exists today. There are also some ancient outbuildings adjacent to the house.



Front and side views of Ellwood House

The house was named after the noted Quaker, Thomas Ellwood, who was born there in 1639. His father Walter was a parliamentarian J.P. His mother had inherited the house from Walter Grey, a rector and patron of Crowell. Thomas's parents were both 'well descended' but were said to be from 'declining' families. His education from the age of seven was at Thame Grammar school. Before that, from 1642 to 1646, the family lived in London to avoid Royalist molestation during the civil war. In London Thomas met a young girl with whom he struck up a friendship and when he returned to Crowell to live, the young girl went to live with her mother and stepfather, Isaac Pennington, both now Quakers in Chalfont. Thomas's father took him to Chalfont, to renew their acquaintance and it was here that he fell under the influence of the Quakers. His father disapproved. In 1660 Thomas invited a Quaker, Thomas Loose, from Oxford to attend a meeting at Crowell. The letter fell into the hands of Lord Falkland, Lord Lieutenant and a party was sent from Oxford to arrest him. He had sympathisers in the area and his father managed to procure his release and tried to keep him from future meetings. In 1666 his father and his two sisters left Ellwood House to live in London. Thomas's father directed him to sell all of the cattle and dismiss the servants. He lived alone for a while before selling the house from which he gained a little money. Thomas's Quaker friends later obtained for him the post of reader in Latin to John Milton. John Milton became a good friend and gave him help and encouragement. Ellwood married Mary Ellis in 1669, died in 1713 and was buried at Jordans.

Dr Richard Fellows, Professor of Physic at Oxford University, later occupied Ellwood House. He apparently practised from the house. Dr Fellows was buried in a field high in Crowell Hills, as it is understood he had asked not to be buried in the churchyard. In the 19th century Ellwood House was divided up into labourers cottages. However, in 1876, Joseph Hill of Kingston Blount bought it and restored it to a farmhouse again. The house The Shepherd's Crook is the public house which stands near to the church, known until a few years ago as the 'The Catherine Wheel'. The origin of the original name is unknown but it may have been because of Crowell's connection with the Stafford family who used a burning cartwheel for their badge. Henry Stafford, Second Duke of Buckingham, displayed the badge prominently at the Coronation of Richard the Third. An alehouse was known to have stood on this site during the Cromwellian era. A century later it was licensed as an inn. Drovers on the Icknield Way would use the inn as an overnight stop; they slept in a lean-to shed, which is now the main bar. In 1753 the landlady was Martha Floyd. She was a member of one of the village's leading families and her family were churchwardens for many years. She was buried in the village in 1762. Francis White as landlord succeeded her, he was there until 1809 when a succes-

is still in the same family today.



Snowy scene of the Catherine Wheel (now the Shepherd's Crook) in 1991

sion of landlords followed. Thomas Coote was landlord by 1854 but he was also described as a tailor. Jesse Stevens, landlord by 1859, stayed for some years but by 1876 Frederick Bowler was in residence. He was described as a beer retailer and shopkeeper. There is no mention of a separate shop in Crowell but James Harding was described as a shopkeeper in 1854. Frederick Bowler stayed at the inn for about fifteen years and was replaced by John Sulston who had retired from farming. He died in 1887, aged eighty three and after that there were frequent changes of ownership until Joshua Church came in 1928 and was still there in 1939. Vestry meetings were held at the inn until 1879, after that they moved to the Sunday school room.

There was a major fire in Crowell at the end of July 1859. Some children, who made a bonfire in Mr Hill's rickyard, close to the barn adjoining the public house, started the fire. It was a very dry summer and the flames spread very rapidly destroying the public house and barns. The church was lucky to escape the flames because the wind took a slight turn. However the fire went on to destroy the cottages of James Harding and two belonging to Mr Beauchamp, the vicar. A thatched building at the back of the Rectory was hastily covered with wet blankets; this prompt action almost certainly saved the vicar's home. As the flames spread Randall Cooper's home, blacksmith's workshops and his two other cottages were nearly all consumed. The fire could not be contained and it spread to a farmyard belonging to Mr Hill and three adjoining cottages. A stable and two hayricks, which belonged to Mr Heybourn, were also lost. The Earl of Macclesfield sent a fire engine and another from Thame attended the scene. Several police officers and the villagers themselves fought to fight the flames. The villagers used cloths, blankets, sheets and copious amounts of water to throw on the fire. Despite this effort eight families were left homeless with all their belongings destroyed. Jesse Stevens, the landlord of the public house was away at the time but some of his furniture was removed and saved. His wife and family were kindly sheltered at the Rectory for the night. In January 1860 at the Watlington Petty Sessions, a licence was granted to Jesse



*Joseph
Humphreys
with his
cart.
The
Catherine
Wheel
Is in the
background*



*Further
up
the
lane
With
Ellwood
House
In
the
background*

Stevens, of The Wheel at Crowell. The public house was obviously rebuilt very quickly, possibly by Jesse himself, as he was also a builder.

Another very sad incident with fire had occurred in Crowell just two years earlier. A young girl, Sarah Seymour of Chinnor, who was just eight years old, went to visit Mrs King, her aunt at Crowell. Whilst she was there she went to Mrs Lerner's house to play with her eleven year old daughter and they were left alone to play. For amusement the children set fire to the kindling in the grate. Poor Sarah was sitting on a stool by the fire and her dress ignited. The child's screams brought her aunt running to the scene but it was too late, the child died of her injuries. An inquest was held at the Royal Oak in Chinnor.

Over the centuries the life of Crowell has centred on farming. In 1728, it is known from a report for the lord of the manor that the land was mainly arable with a good part of it



Farmer Joseph Hill outside Mrs Holdsworth's cottage, along the lane up to Crowell Hill

described as 'good clay'. A small part under the hills was poor and chalky, whilst on the hills it was strong loam. There was also a considerable amount of woodland. The common land was used for sheep. This land was described as poor quality as sixty sheep were allowed per yardland. Obviously the laws had changed as in 1657, the court rolls declared that a tenant might keep twenty sheep and one cow per yardland and the cows were to come into every field five days before the sheep. One year later it was declared that no man should keep sheep in the cowleaze and meades between Lammas (1st August) and 18th November or put them in the wheat or pea fields until they had been completely harvested. Walter Ellwood obviously fell foul of these laws and also of making encroachments on the land, he removed a hedge, turned a watercourse and enclosed some land. It is said that the 'Homage' met on St Luke's day at the elm in the street at 8 o'clock in the morning to mark the boundaries. Walter



A late harvest of barley during the war.



Farmer Hill inspects the tractor furrows. He owned four tractor ploughs.

Ellwood is said to have heard the orders and consented to them.

In 1771 there were six farmers and twelve labourers. At the end of the 18th century Francis Kimber was the biggest farmer in Crowell. He was noted for his advanced practices in agriculture. He changed the cropping rotation, sowing wheat after clover and then putting his sheep on the field after the wheat crop to prevent slug. He also hoed his beans two or three times to give him a clean, weed free crop. He used London rags at £8 10s per ton as manure on his clover which proved better than other manures. All of the early part of the 19th century saw six or seven farmers in Crowell some of them in Crowell Hills and Spriggs Alley. In 1842 three quarters of the parish was arable and the remainder was woodland.

The agricultural depression created problems for the farmers and Joseph Hill, whose family farmed at Kingston, took over most of the farms in the village. By 1891 the directory shows only two farm bailiffs, one for Joseph Hill and the other for George Sheen. Future generations of the Hill family continued farming in the village. During the war Joseph Hill of Ellwood House was also a part time sergeant in the Special Constabulary. He was also a Billeting Officer. This meant he had to find billets for evacuees and check up on them from time to time.

The other main occupations in Crowell were lace making for the women, and chair making for the men. In 1851 there were sixteen lace makers and three chair makers and a chair bottomer. In 1871 there were a similar number of lace makers and there were five chair turners, three were members of the Bennett family from Crowell Hill and two lived in the village. By 1881 there were still a number of lace makers but chair turning seems to have died out. There was a blacksmith in Crowell in 1814 and the Cooper family were wheelwrights/ blacksmiths up to the early 1900s. The smithy is believed to have been next to the Catherine Wheel.

There were carriers mentioned in Crowell, John Bass in 1833 and Thomas Colsell in 1841. It is possible that they were taking straw to London for stabling and returning with rags for the land. Joseph Hill was a successful straw dealer later in the century. Over the years a few other professions were mentioned. There were shoemakers, Henry Bird



Mrs Green and her mother by their cottage



Farmer Hill on Police duty

in 1825, and George Messon in 1851, also two waggoners John Ayres in 1879 and George Howard in 1881. Bricklayers occurred throughout the 19th century. In 1835 and 1852, there was a tailor, a grocer in 1834 and a butcher in 1839 but it is unlikely they had shops in Crowell, they may have worked in Chinnor or Kingston. By 1928 Robert Surman had a motor engineering business, and today this family runs an undertaking business in Crowell.

A case, which came up before Watlington Petty Sessions in 1860, illustrates the severity of criminal punishment then, as compared with present day. Henry Coleshill of Crowell was charged with stealing two pounds of bacon from the shop of Mr King of Stokenchurch. The prisoner had gone into the shop to buy some powder and shot and shortly afterwards the grocer noticed the bacon was missing. Police Sergeant Bowers apprehended the prisoner and found two pieces of bacon on him, one of which Mr King identified as his property. The prisoner was committed for two months hard labour. Mr Besley of Crowell was also involved in a case at the Petty Sessions in 1858. He had two bushels of chaff stolen from him and Edwin North was accused of the theft. Even though it seems quite a minor offence he was sent for trial at the Oxford Assizes. The case was heard at the Lent assizes when the prisoner was found not guilty because the chaff

found on the prisoner's premises could not be identified as the same as that which was stolen. A minor case like this today would probably never make it to court. A very common crime in the 19th century was poaching. This is illustrated by a case in 1879 when John King and Moses Sewell of Crowell were summonsed for trespass in search of game at Crowell. The case was proved and they were fined 1s and 8s 3d costs each. To take game a licence was required.

We know a little about events which have taken place in Crowell. At the first Jubilee of Queen Victoria, in 1887, the rector, Rev Coker Beck entertained everyone in the parish to dinner and tea. There was a short thanksgiving service in the church at lunchtime followed by a cricket match, singles v marrieds. The married men lost by an innings. The Chinnor brass band played during the day and in the evening there were games and sports. For the Diamond Jubilee, in 1897, a service was held in the church at lunchtime followed by a dinner. In the evening there was a bonfire on Crowell Hill. A bonfire also burnt on the hill on peace day in 1919. This was after Mr and Mrs Hill had entertained sixty Crowell people in the afternoon. On Sunday 3 August 1919 a memorial tablet was dedicated in the church to the two soldiers of the parish who had lost their lives.

Today Crowell is a small village with some of the old cottages still standing. Some new houses have been built interspersed with the old. The church is still open and used regularly for services and the public house is a very popular hostelry.