

## A SHORT HISTORY OF FLITWICK

From "History of Bedfordshire 1066-1888" by Joyce Godber (1969)

**Summarised by Jeremy Godwin, MA (2008)**

Flitwick began as a dairy farm on good land by the River Flit; Flitton next door was merely a general farm village on the river. Unlike Flitton in the Hundred of Flitt, Flitwick is in the Hundred of Redbornstoke. Its name is from the old English words Fleot, "a river", and wic, "a dairy farm", given by its Saxon settlers, c450AD onwards, who came from Germany up the river valleys to here. In mid 9<sup>th</sup>-early 10<sup>th</sup> century, Flitwick was in Mercia and controlled by the Danes until they submitted to the King of England (after losing the Battle of Luton the year before) in 914. The English split the shire up into large groups of parishes known as Hundreds. Every four weeks the Hundred's Court met outside.

William I marched north through Bedfordshire via Flitwick seizing its crops and livestock and those of Amptill, Steppingley, Millbrook reducing them to famine, 1066; it was early winter.

Churchwise, the parishes of Bedfordshire were by c 1150AD grouped into six rural Deaneries. Flitwick was in the Deanery of Fleet (ie Flit). Nearest market towns were Amptill (from 1219) and Westoning (from 1304 but never grew much as a market).

Nearest Fair (big annual chance for all number of things you couldn't get locally): Amptill, 30 November from 1330AD.

Houses were of wood and plaster with shutters (no glass); beds were rolled-up straw pallets. Toddlers and old folk fell down wells or into ditches. Bridges (wooden) were unsafe and ferries (decrepit) sank. Carts stuck. Famine in wet summers. Staple foods were bread (and bacon if any) and ale. Bedfordshire's main crimes have always been theft and assault; if going out at night take helmet, lance and wear a padded jacket (13<sup>th</sup> century advice). At dusk, beware of muggers. Riots now and then too, eg at Limbury Sports 1247. Life was hard for most; few possessions. The climate was cold and wet early in 14<sup>th</sup> century and the Black Death slew hundreds, March-Aug 1349.

Villagers had up to five sheep each (a sheep was a good present to receive as gift or legacy). Crop yields were very low (4-fold was high) grown on individual strips on the open fields, grazed in winter (in summer, animals put to the common).

Medieval Bedfordshire was a place of small estates and small monasteries, to which the gentry often gave the right to choose their parish's next vicar and to have 1/10 of its produce. Flitwick's was given to Dunstable Priory who in 1263 made one of its members Vicar of Flitwick. Some outlying places got a chapel to save a long walk to church; in Flitwick parish, Ruxox by c.1150 (when Dunstable Priory was given it). Dunstable's bankrupt Prior was retired to Ruxox in 1280 with a servant to look after him.

You could frame your own rules if you founded a chantry in your local church, with your own priest to pray for you. In 1355 Edmund Bulstrode of Flitwick founded his and his rules required his priest to give six months' notice. Chantries were abolished in the 1530's when Henry VIII set up the Church of England.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, powerful men settled in Ampthill and Wrest nearby. Ampthill's importance grew as local centre for centuries after.

Many churches were enlarged or improved pre 16<sup>th</sup> century but by 1518 quite a few were decrepit including Flitwick (and in 1530). Bedfordshire folk were fond of their clergy and monks and set-up, so Henry VIII's changes were a sudden shock. Churches were made stark and bare. They continued decrepit. Prosperity for some, poverty for others, locally; more possessions now (16<sup>th</sup> Century) but thefts and muggings at dusk and violent quarrels. Stolen goods were sold off at fairs and markets.

In 17<sup>th</sup> Century various villages had a specialist too. Flitwick had a bodice-maker. In 1671 Flitwick had 62 householders, 17 of whom had two hearths or more in their homes (hearth were taxed); 10 of them were too poor to be taxed. 8 houses had no hearths (ie no heating) at all; some of these were widows. Each parish paid for upkeep of its poor people then; in 1766 Flitwick's were Goody Fountain, Goody Woodard, Goody Fipp, Widow Prackett, Widow Sirrket and Ben Crouch (ill). (Goody = old woman).

In 1671 over half the houses in Bedfordshire had only one hearth, including John Bunyan's. Village houses were of one or two storeys, some with no ceilings. Most cottages had earth floors. Kindling was dried bracken (from the common). Fuel was wood, peat or coal. In 1634 a Flitwick farmer left his wife 2 loads of fern (bracken) and 3000 turves (peat, from the Moor probably). Kindling was by flint-sparks. Clothes were made to last. More people were wearing gloves. Transport was by horse (if affluent), foot or the carrier's cart. The gentry got their vehicles, clothes and some of their supplies and servants from London. As the local JPs they set minimum wages every so often based on the local food prices. Most Bedfordshire clergy were low-paid. In the Civil War (1642-1650) desertions were common and supplies (commandeered locally by both sides) erratic. Farmers had orchards near their houses; cottagers grew vegetables in their gardens.

Plague died out in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century but smallpox arrived instead. Flitton had a smallpox outbreak in 1685. Many people had ague/malaria, kidney or bladder stones and gout (from too much liquor). The County Gaol, below ground, in Bedford had gaol fever (typhus) now and then. It stood on the corner of the High Street and Silver Street. Bedfordshire exported four eminent doctors in mid 17<sup>th</sup>C to London including Sir Charles Scarborough from Flitton (Charles II's doctor). Most people, however, relied on their wife's recipe book for local cures for self and farm stock if any.

Life was still a struggle but less so than before. Cash was replacing livestock as gifts or legacies. Amusements included music (all kinds), books, football, stoolball (early sort of rounders), hawking, hunting, rabbiting, poaching, maypoles, cockfighting (eg Ampthill on Boxing Day), reading Godly books (17<sup>th</sup> Century; less godly 18<sup>th</sup> Century), card-playing, embroidering (ladies), pipe-smoking. People had more furniture now. Under the bed in strong box was their cash; banks did not yet exist.

Thefts from rich and poor alike abounded. Highwaymen worked the roads. In 1678 one gang worked the south Beds part of Watling Street (the A5 via Dunstable) north to Watford Gap and used the Swan at Flitwick as hideout, a lonely pub on the Dunstable Road, half a mile from the prying eyes of the village. (The present Swan is later, rebuilt c1900 by look of it). Two of the gang were Flitwick men, prosperous yet greedy; one was Richard Rolph, yeoman (ie farmer who owned his land); the other, George Sole, tanner (part of the leather-making trade). When the rest of the group was caught and gaoled at Newgate (London), these two refused to help them. George Sole promptly

turned to deer poaching in the Earl's park at Woburn (the Earl was not a Duke yet). In 1679, he and friends who had a greyhound stole a horse each and rode across one evening leaving the horses while they climbed into the park. At midnight, some of the Earl's workforce came by, saw the horses, put them in the stables and waited for George and co to return. Three hours later they were still waiting and caught them.

In 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the estates of gentry grew; many villages' open fields and commons were enclosed ie divided up among the farmers and hedged off. Roads were full of ruts (wheels needed broad wheels and up to 10 horses). Tramps everywhere and gypsies too (from 1720's). Settlers, if hard-up, were expelled back to their native places by JP's order. Roads' upkeep in Flitwick was by the parish officers (local farmers and their men), free (the parish gave them beer, on the rates). No main road came nearer than the present A6. Flitwick people, if hard-up, went to their parish officers in the hope of handout; if rejected, they went to the nearest JP whose order could (in theory) overrule the parish's. Some got by, some didn't, it depended on what you were like.

A few low-paid vicars worked more than one parish eg Flitwick and Sundon had the same man. Services were long (sermons were often read from books) without much music; hymns and choirs came gradually in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Beds. No pipe-organ except in St Paul's, Bedford.

Most yeomen sold out to the big estates, becoming their tenants. Luton grew wheat; south Beds had dairy farms/cows milked by men; Ampthill grew woad (for dyeing); the greensand ridge and Sandy had market gardens selling to London. Flitton's were nearest, and Maulden's, growing peas, beans, root crops. Woburn Fair was the place to buy a horse; Bedford Fair for cattle; Elstow and Potton Fair for sheep. Rinderpest (cattle plague) broke out in 1745 at 60 farms around Flitton. Government ordered all infected cattle to be killed and buried four feet deep, their hides slashed to prevent reuse; half value was refunded on production of JP's certificate (the Vicar of Flitton was an active JP).

Enclosure came to Flitwick in 1752, when its doctor, Humphrey Dell, had his eye on Church Mead and got the 74 commoners to agree to forego their rights on it for £5 a year from him. Thus Church Mead became private land.

The 1760's summers were cold and wet and bread prices rocketed. Main foods were bread and cheese and bacon, if any, and ale. Recipes included Hasty Pudding (flour and hot water); in 1730 one woman put arsenic in hers, then ran off before her husband ate it (not in Flitwick). Children were treated as little adults; many died young. Few went to schools, unless parents were well off. Lidlington's schoolmaster these 7 years was hit over the head by the local rowdy woman, 1727, who defied the JP's warrant for her arrest.

Part of Flitwick owned by the Egertons was sold to the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke of Bedford in 1787. In 1798, General Egerton reviewed the local cavalry in Wrest Park, mustered to repel any invasion by Napoleon. This did not come but a slump did, after Waterloo in 1815 and arson, crime and unrest. Most had no job, or only starvation-wage farm work.

Little groups of farmhands began, here and there, to demand higher pay at Marston (1819), Keysoe (1822), Roxton (late 1820's), Flitwick (1831) going round to browbeat the farmers. Riots broke out at Millbrook in 1829 where 100 men broke windows and locked up the constable for an hour. Riots at

Meppershall 1834, 100 rioters, and 10 other places. Corn-ricks were set on fire, animals maimed. The locals backed the rioters. Most parishes now had a workhouse, usually a filthy decrepit cottage or house to dump their destitute in. In 1834, the government closed all of these and grouped parishes into districts called Unions, each with its workhouse run by Guardians; Flitwick was in Ampthill Union. Lidlington and Millbrook were suspicious of this change; 200 from that district besieged the JPs' meeting in the King's Arms, Ampthill, 14<sup>th</sup> May 1835 in riot. The JPs' sent for the Metropolitan Police, who came and made arrests. (No Bedfordshire Police until 1849).

Thieves were often transported to Australia and Tasmania (Van Diemen's Island) eg Richard Dillingham of Flitwick in 1832 for stealing from a house in Steppingley. By 1836 he was working in a large market-garden in Tasmania, he was articulate, unlike many, and drove the produce into Hobart every week.

It was best to be in an estate house or cottage; the Duke or Squire looked after the buildings. Otherwise, expect cramped rooms and still low wages. TB was now the scourge of the people, and foot and mouth and swine-fever those of their animals. Farming plunged into decades of slump, 1870's; many were abandoned to weeds etc. Lunch, for those in work, was the Bedfordshire Clanger of suet, bacon at one end, jam at the other, taken cold to the fields with beer.

In 1846, over half the schools in Beds were Sunday Schools only. Not even a Sunday school then in Flitwick but the vicar wanted to start a weekday school.

Railways came to Leighton Buzzard in 1838. Its company agreed to run a Bedford line if Bedfordshire people got it built; agreed in 1845, built in 1846 via Millbrook and Woburn to Bletchley. The Midland Railway's line to Leicester via Bedford opened in 1857 but was soon congested so a relief line via Flitwick was opened in 1867 (goods), 1868 (passengers). Ampthill Tunnel was cut for it in 1867. The trains rocked violently (Dickens got out at Bedford 1867 before his stop because of this). Goods users included the big brickworks (latter 19<sup>th</sup> Century) and local market-gardeners.

Village feasts continued on or near the church's patron saint's day (Steppingley's was on 30<sup>th</sup> August). By 1889, Flitwick had a cricket club. Its gentry included the Brooks family who in 1880 toured France. One of them, Major J H Brooks, Indian Army since 1843, was in the Battle of Indore (Indian Mutiny), July 1857 fighting off the rebels for an hour in the heat. That night they foiled their sepoys, who fled to Delhi. At home, he was devout. Later he became one of Bedfordshire's first County Councillors (1889), as did one of Flitwick's farmers, George Cook. Major J H Brooks was also active in the South Bedfordshire Croquet Club for local gentry.

Besides having one of the four rural Beds doctors, 1750's, in Dr Dell, Flitwick became a spa briefly till 1806 when Dr Rodomonte Dominicetti came from London (his wife was from Ampthill) and rented East End House on a long lease, developing his special vapourous and dry baths there for ladies and gentlemen who were his paying guests in the house. These were artificial baths medicated by his special apparatus brought with him from London. He had published its details but had gone bankrupt there. Alas he had few takers and left in 1806. The next medical episode was when Mr HK Stevens, farmer at Folly Farm, sold his iron-well's water at 2d. a bottle in the 1870's. Marketed as chalybeate water (Greek for iron), its sales took off for several years after the two national medical journals reported on it, in 1880 and 1891. His well was a spring. Iron is often found in greensand.

Ridgmont, originally Rougemont, was named from it as was Redborn of Redbornstoke, that runs north of Flitwick and named the Hundred.

By the 1870's Flitwick had a National School (ie Church of England) run by subscription; it was in the red and the parish transferred the school and teacher's house to a School Board providing they could still use the classroom on Sundays. The Privy Council in London agreed, but told them to pay off the debt first so in the end they had to sell the school books and furniture at valuation after transfer to the Board. The Board then advertised for a teacher (female) for £50 a year and her coal; no takers. They had to settle for a man (dearer at £85 a year); he objected to being expected to teach evening school too for no extra pay. All changed in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Flitwick.

Addenda (overlooked on 1<sup>st</sup> reading)

Flitwick's knight Sir David de Flitwick attended the 1295 Parliament (one of the earliest) but was not an MP as such. He also jousted in the Dunstable Tournament in 1308, still vigorous but getting old. His surname, that of the village, suggests that he was of the family that built the castle-mound west of the church, soon after the Norman Conquest (11<sup>th</sup> Century). The village street would then have been between the church at one end and the castle at the other.

In 1701 four Bedfordshire men, well ahead of their time, issued proposals for life-insurance. Samuel Rhodes of Flitwick, Michael Arnold of Ampthill, William Barnwell of Millbrook and Charles Dymoke of Cranfield. Nothing seems to have come of this; but London took up the idea later in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

So to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century and social change, a station on the London line, and the desire of townfolk to live in the country but work in London transformed Flitwick into rural suburbia tacked onto an ancient centre.

John Bunyan, of Elstow thence Bedford, wrote of Pilgrim's Progress through the Slough of Despond (Bog of Depression, in modern terms) to the Delectable Mountains on the skyline, visible south of Bedford. Flitwick is in these!

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7<sup>th</sup> November 2008, at Penrith, Cumbria

(Retired archivist, Cumbria Record Office)