

Fairford Flyer

Extra No 47

December 2022

FAIRFORD HISTORY



SOCIETY

Thank you to all who renewed their £5 membership this year. FHS now has 131 members. Thank you also to all the Flyer contributors: Edwin Cuss, Syd Flatman, Chris Hobson and Eric Jones and for the favourable comments from members.

FHS Meetings 2023

All meetings are at 7.30 pm in the Farmor Room, Fairford Community Centre except for the February meeting which is at 10 am during half term

There is no meeting in December but on January 19 the long-awaited talk on the Renovation of Big Ben will be given by Fairford's own Keith Scobie-Youngs, 7.30 pm at The Community Centre

February 23: a 4th Thursday daytime meeting on Sport by Edwin Cuss; March 16: Kathy Haslam on Kelmscott Manor; April 20: Royal Progression 1535 by Alan Pilbeam; May 18 Bill King on a topic to be decided; June 15 AGM to be arranged

Cotswold Sheep - November meeting

Steve Parkes gave a very interesting and entertaining talk on the history and current status of the Cotswold rare breed of sheep. Steve is one of Britain's leading breeders of the Cotswold sheep and is a former Chairman of the Cotswold Sheep Society. He keeps a small flock of Cotswold sheep near Stow on the Wold; they are very dear to his heart.

Steve started the talk by outlining the history of the Cotswold Sheep and how they came to this country. Before the Roman invasion of Britain the Cotswold Hills were very bare, with just a few cattle and small primitive sheep roaming on the hills. The sheep that the Romans brought possibly originated in the River Nile area of Egypt. They flourished on the limestone hills with rich pasture and became big boned with tasty meat. Their huge coats made of long-staple fine curling wool make them very distinctive. The Cotswold sheep spread north along the limestone hills through Leicestershire, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire each developing their own characteristics over the centuries.



After the end of the Roman era in Britain the monasteries and abbeys built up huge flocks of sheep which became their main source of income and a major economic resource for which England (and the Cotswolds in particular) became famous. The quality of the Cotswolds wool was in part due to the washing process in sheep

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dips before the animals were shorn; this made the wool lighter in colour and less greasy. There are remains of sheep washes all over the county. Steve still uses a renovated sheep wash near Chipping Norton.

Cotswold wool was renowned for its excellent quality and became much sought after during the medieval period, not just in England but also throughout much of Europe. Wool merchants collected wool from the Cotswolds and exported it to the Continental markets and became very rich. This thriving export business resulted in the growth of 'wool towns' such as Cirencester, Chipping Campden and Northleach (and incidentally enabled the building of magnificent churches including St Mary's at Fairford). The Crown imposed taxes on the export of fleeces which became a major source of Royal revenue.

Steve concluded his talk by showing some slides of Cotswold Sheep and their shepherds. A member of the Garne family whose ancestors had farmed Cotswold sheep flocks since the 1800s was in the audience and Robert Garne was the first president of the Cotswold Sheep Society which was founded in 1891. It had become evident that the sheep's pedigree had to be proved and Flock Books were issued to make a permanent record of the sheep's ancestry. Cotswold sheep were exported to the United States in the 19th Century and today there are more Cotswold Sheep there than in the UK. Steve also showed pictures of our local wool churches including Fairford and the Northleach brasses which show the merchant's feet on wooolsacks and the recognisable forelock of the Cotswold sheep. Especially nice was the picture of June Lewis and Ralph Jones, on their wedding day in 1998 outside Fairford Church when June wore a wedding dress made of Cotswold wool. They were accompanied by a Cotswold sheep as June was a great fan of the breed. Another picture was of her sheep Yin and Yang with Fairford Church in the distance during a snowy winter in the 1980s.

Fairford's Rural Heyday by Eric Jones

The Cotswolds have a sheep-and-wool image. Because Fairford lies on the lowest slopes, it is reasonable to assume that life here was based on sheep-farming for centuries. Land in a great arc to the north of the town is easy to imagine as grassy wolds full of sheep of the long-woolled Cotswold breed. A Tudor wool store on Park Street and another on Milton Street reinforce the impression. But for a least a couple of hundred years this may have been a misreading. To understand why, we have to recognise that historically there were great fluctuations in agricultural prosperity and types of farming.

The Cotswolds in general were converted to the sheepfold from the mid-seventeenth century. They were mostly walled about 1800. Instead of the ancient concentration on wool, this new system meant feeding sheep on roots and clover to obtain their manure for fertilising cereal crops. The Fairford tithe map of 1841 shows the area to have been mainly ploughland arranged in large fields. Outlying farms tended to have their beginnings in barns or feed-stalls, where plough teams could be housed overnight because to bring them to and fro from farms along the streets would have used up more energy than they produced. Details are lacking; the set-up simply fits the general Cotswold building sequence and the occupation of the chalk downs to our south. On land belonging to the squires of Fairford, the Raymond Barkers, the sequence may often have halted at the barn stage.

Occasional scraps of information flesh out the story and bring Fairford into line with the overall history of sheep husbandry. Thomas Rudge's 'General View of the Agriculture of the County of Gloucester', written in 1805, states that the New Leicester breed, developed by the famous Robert Bakewell, was dominant at Fairford. John Raymond Barker thought his flock was much improved by Leicester blood, which suggests he may have been crossing Leicester rams on his existing ewes (they may have been Cotswolds). Then the Raymond Barkers jumped ship, so to speak: in 1834 John Raymond Barker's son bought Southdown sheep and rams from John Ellman, who pioneered that breed at Glynde, Sussex. Moreover the son was so interested he emerged as a judge of Southdowns in 1840.

The next generation, in the shape of George Raymond Barker, was honorary secretary of the Cirencester Agricultural Society from its founding in 1830. Another son of the family, Thomas, was serving in 1840 on the committee of management of what was called at first the English Agricultural Society (Royal Agricultural Society of England). He and his father had subscribed to the society from its beginning in 1838 and Thomas (by then farming in Buckinghamshire) was later to chair its finance committee.

As far as one can tell, the first half of the nineteenth century was the heyday of Raymond Barker agricultural activity. They built big estate farms such as Park Farm and Milton Farm in the 1860s, barely a decade before the slump. Prosperity petered out in the arable depression of the late nineteenth century, when parishes north of Fairford were often grassed down and thought to be of little use except for fox-hunting. An early twentieth century map shows drinking ponds in the hedges or walls near Fairford, as if the district had gone back to livestock farming. A sheep dip was in use until the 1970s. Sheep certainly continued to be kept but I expect the initiative had passed to the bigger tenant farmers. The air photograph of the town in 1928 shows a few sheep standing in the 'floated water meadow' (Lower Green) where water was streamed across, two days on and two days off, in order to obtain an early growth of spring grass. No-one now remembers the field in operation, although the ridge-and-furrow is still visible.

The Raymond Barkers may have lost heart as well as money. The family sold the more urban parts of its estate in 1923, the year after the repeal of the Corn Production Act removed government protection from cereal growing. They had in any case not been looking after their non-farm tenants. Five houses still relied on well water and the sale catalogue warned of drainage problems. Seven householders had the option of paying part of their rent in chickens; one was noted as owing two couple of fat hens! The author of 'Highways and Byways in Oxford and the Cotswolds' (1905) shied away from saying Fairford was in decline but does say it was a slow place and drew pointed attention to the downward spiral of comparable local towns. This was a generation or two after the Raymond Barkers' moments on the agricultural stage. There had been a time when Fairford held its head high at the national level.

The Fairford Retreat Asylum

This year marks 200 years since the founding of the Fairford Retreat, a privately-owned lunatic asylum. The asylum was the brainchild of Alexander Iles (1792-1856) and he and subsequent members of his family ran the Retreat until it was sold to Dr. Arthur Charles King-Turner (1871-1959). Between 1822 and 1944 when the Retreat was closed about 1,500 patients had been treated in the extensive buildings which subsequently became Coln House School. At its peak in 1851 a total of 192 patients were in residence, some for only a few weeks or even just a few days, other were very long-term residents. For many years in the 1840s/early 1850s the Retreat was the largest privately-owned asylum in the country outside of London but numbers declined from the late 1850s when many new county asylums were built. The Retreat gained a very good reputation for its policy of non-restraint and the high standard of care of its patients in contrast to less-enlightened treatment and poor conditions in many other public and private asylums. This was largely due to good management and the guidance and support of several resident physicians including doctors Charles and James Cornwall and John Hitchman.

During the Festive season many of the patients were able to take part in various entertainments and the Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard of 2 and 9 January 1858 has reports of the Christmas Ball and supper at which almost all the patients attended and greatly enjoyed.

Christmas Clippings

Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard 23 December 1871

Christmas Meat Show

It seems almost presumption to speak of anything like a meat show in connection with Fairford, but we think it would be doing Mr Painter a great injustice to ignore his exertions altogether. His show this season did him very great credit, and was admitted by all who saw it to be the finest they had ever witnessed in this town, and we certainly think it would bear comparison with any show in the neighbourhood. It consisted of one very fine steer fed by Mr Henly; two fat heifers, bred and fed by H N Goddard, Esq; one prime fat heifer, bred and fed by W Slatter, Esq. Stratton; five superior wethers, bred and fed by W J Edmonds, Esq; five splendid 4-tooth wethers, bred and fed by Mr Harris, Melbourne; five very fat shearhogs, bred and fed by Mr E Howes, South Hill; two fat porkers, bred and fed by Mr Rickards, Fursey Hill; and three fat rabbits. The carcasses were beautifully dressed, and arranged to have a very good effect.

Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard 23 December 1871

Christmas Liberality

It is gratifying to find that although Lord Dynevor is not with us, he has not forgotten the wants of the more needy of his parishioners, but has liberally bestowed a piece of beef to all widows and widowers, in number about 40, 4 lbs each and also 6 lbs each to 16 old married couples. We doubt not but this will be most thankfully received by all.

Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard 30 December 1871

Christmas Holidays

The very un-Christmas like weather which prevailed this season rendered it somewhat a dull one, at least in Fairford. The indoor comforts were undoubtedly the same as usual, and to a certain extent perhaps more appreciated, but everyone will admit that for the thorough enjoyment of Christmas in country places, skating, or at least some sort of outdoor amusement is requisite. Still, taking all things into consideration, the Fairford folks made the best use of it, and by means of many social meetings and the like, whiled away the holiday time. As we doubt not but they are still willing to bear testimony that after all Christmas is essentially the time for family gatherings and merry-makings. A word of compliment is certainly due to our ringers who did all that could be expected of them to enhance the public weal. We must congratulate them on the improvement noticeable in their performances. On Boxing Day the town was enlivened by the merry strains of a fife and drum band from one of the neighbouring villages, and the same evening the Kempsford brass band favoured us with a nice selection of music in the market-place, playing as usual in their first rate style.

Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard 6 January 1872

Ringers' Supper - On Friday, 29th ult, the ringers and a few friends, about 20 in number, met at the George Inn, for the purpose of holding their annual supper. After enjoying an excellent repast provided by the worthy host and hostess, the handbells were introduced, and tended very much to enhance the harmony of the meeting. The company did not separate till a very late, or rather early, hour.

Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard 6 January 1872

Christmas Tree

Through the kindness of Lord and Lady Dynevor the members of the choir and the children of the Church Sunday Schools, with their teachers, were entertained in a most interesting manner at the Crofts Hall, on Wednesday last. Through the exertions of the Lady Superintendent of the girls' school, assisted by several friends, a large Christmas tree was procured, and well laden with a variety of useful and ornamental articles, toys etc. The children met at the hall soon after 4 o'clock, about 130 in number, when the tree was beautifully lighted, and the articles distributed amongst both teachers, their friends, and the children, for so complete and efficient were the arrangements that not one was forgotten, some suitable article being appropriated to each. The school children were shortly afterwards dismissed, each one receiving at the door a large bun and an orange, with which they went off highly delighted. Afterwards the teachers and their friends, with the members of the choir, sat down to an excellent tea, and a most enjoyable evening was spent. Before separating the company testified their appreciation of the kindness which had been shown them by heartily cheering both Lord and Lady Dynevor and all who by their exertions had conduced [sic] to entertainment. We must not forget to mention the very tasteful manner in which the room was decorated with evergreens, etc, and some nicely executed mottoes in water colours, bearing the inscriptions, "God save the Queen", "God bless the Prince of Wales", " A Happy New Year, " Success to our Sunday Schools, " etc. etc.

North Wilts Herald 6 January 1873

School Treat - The children of the Church Sunday Schools had their usual Christmas treat in the Crofts Hall on Wednesday. Christmas trees loaded with bon-bons, toys, gloves and small articles of wearing apparel, which were distributed to the children, formed an important part of the ceremony.

