

Shillington in the Georgian Era

Top of the crops

The benefits of rotating crops was already well understood as a means of minimising the risk of plant disease, controlling weeds and improving soil fertility. In 1724, the large estate of the Delme- Radcliff family of Hitchin Priory grew wheat, barley, oats, rye, peas and hops as well as bullimons, a combination of vetches and oats used for animal fodder. At Pegsdon Common Farm, hops continue to grow in a hedgerow and are a relic of cultivation there.

Shillington's farmers grew a similar range of crops and this 1920s photograph shows a group of pea pickers about to start work.



Also grown for winter cattle feed were mangolds whose large roots stored energy in the form of sugars that built-up as they grew through the previous summer.

The photo from the early 1900s shows men loading them into a clamp- a heap that was covered with straw and thatched to keep out frost and rain. Cattle spent the winter in yards at farms and their diet included chopped mangolds, rolled oats and hay. They also ate some of the straw used for bedding.

Workhouse

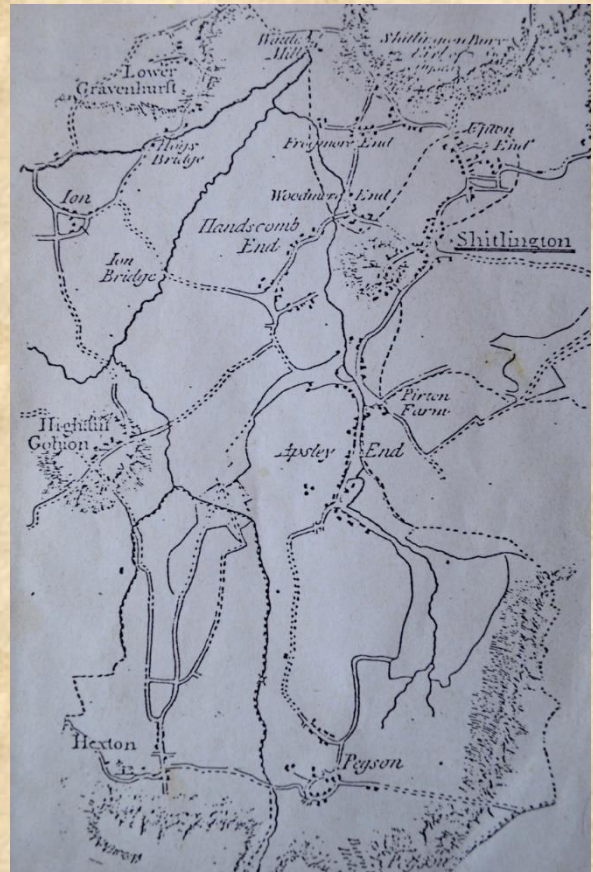
By 1723, there was a workhouse in Shillington and those who didn't have a job were ordered to live there. To earn their accommodation and food, they had to do menial tasks including removing stones from the fields. Conditions were desperate- there were only 12 beds for 40 inmates- and the overseers were censured in 1787 after 12 residents died in a few months. James Webster, Justice of the Peace visited in 1804 and found that the Master was "extremely negligent in his duty, that not residing in the House, and being wholly occupied in other pursuits (running a pub), he hath no time to attend to the State and Condition of the Houses or the poor therein. That the poor being under no authority are disobedient, idle and disorderly." The JP was particularly concerned about the unmarried mothers and the lack of cradles for the three babies. The Quarter Sessions ordered repairs to the tiles and windows and whitewashing the walls. In 1835, a new large workhouse in Ampthill replaced those in Shillington and 18 other villages. Showing no sign of its notorious past, Shillington's former workhouse is now three homes at 4, 6 and 8 Church St.

A hard life

The plague reappeared in 1728 and an outbreak of cattle plague (also known as murrain or rinderpest) killed many livestock in 1743. A massive volcanic eruption in Iceland on 8 June 1783 pushed smoke containing harmful fluorine gas high into the atmosphere. Winds blew it towards Europe and a plume descended over Bedfordshire. Outdoor workers breathed in the toxic fumes and damaged their lungs. Some died and many survivors suffered poor health.

The map makers

The first maps showing the whole of Shitlington parish (as it was spelt at this time) appear in 1765. Jeffrey's map appears in the photograph and is quite accurate except that the labels for Woodmer End and Frogmore End (later called Hillfoot End) are transposed. Pegsdon is spelt Pegson and the water mill off the Gravenhurst Rd is shown as Wattle Mill. The map shows a more complex road layout at Upton End than exists today and the route to Chibley, a small hamlet at the time, and on to Stondon was very different. The road between Hanscombe End and Apsley End crossed Sandy Heath, an unenclosed area of land. The Shillington to Pegsdon road took a more circuitous route than today and the oval road system in Pegsdon west of Shillington Road picks out the site of the village in medieval times. Some of these old roads are now public footpaths. The map shows land along the tributaries of the brook from Hexton and Pegsdon that flooded regularly in winter and was grazed by cattle in summer. Joseph Musgrave commissioned a map of his estate in 1777 which shows a much larger Apsleybury Wood extending on its western side to the brook from Hexton.



Jeffrey's map of 1765

Enclose the fields

Bigger farmers hankered to take advantage of the high corn prices that war with Napoleon had caused. They wanted to get rid of the small, scattered strips in the open fields and make large blocks of land for their exclusive use. They also wanted more flexibility to implement new ideas that were incompatible with the rigid rules governing the open field system and invest in bigger machinery.

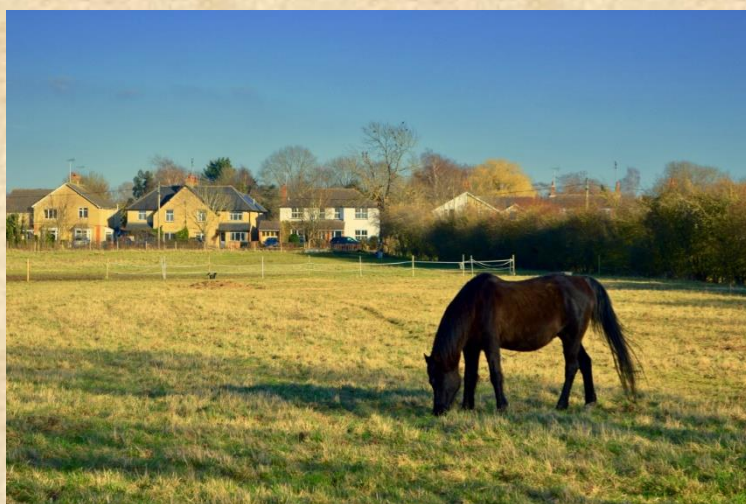
Parliament granted their wishes in 1802 when Shillington's Enclosure Act was passed. Surveyors soon drew up maps showing new rectangular fields replacing the large open arable fields and the grazing commons. To work land further from the villages more effectively, Trinity College established new farms at Rosehill, Kettledean and Pegsdon Common.



This post-enclosure map featured more straight lines. The winding route to Lower Stondon via Chibley was replaced with a direct route. Implementation of the changes took time to achieve and it wasn't until 1834 that reconstruction of the Shillington to Higham Gobion road began.

The 'closes', small fields with a single owner that had been enclosed much earlier and many winding parts of the long-established road system were unaffected by the changes, including the northern part of Hanscombe End Rd.

The length of the brook between Apsley Arch and the watermill used to flood regularly but Enclosure changed this too. The new channel constructed along the eastern side of the floodplain (and in front of the Bury Rd houses in the picture) had a shallow gradient which provided up to 3 metres extra head of water to power the watermill. The new mill pond stored enough water for it to continue working when low flow would have previously closed it down. Land no longer flooded became meadow or pasture.



Winners and losers

Unsurprisingly, the largest farmers emerged with the best land. Small farmers endured disruption and ended up with odd-shaped, small, scattered areas that were expensive to fence and harder to farm than what they had previously. They also lost access to grazing areas, hay meadows and places where they could gather firewood, nuts and berries.

In theory, they could object to the proposals but according to historian, Christopher Hill, writing in 1967, anyone affected by Enclosure had the right to petition parliament to stop it provided they "learnt to read, hired an expensive lawyer, spent a few weeks in London and were prepared to face the wrath of the powerful men in his village". Some small farmers decided to sell the small area allocated to them and work for others or get out of farming altogether.

A thorny problem

The newly-created field boundaries were planted only with fast-growing hawthorn bushes, also known as quickthorn. These soon grew into thick hedgerows that could be laid to confine cattle without supervision and temporary grass leys were planted for them to graze.

Over two centuries later, single-species enclosure hedges are easy to pick out. Older hedgerows usually contain field maple, hazel and hawthorn as shrubs or trees as well as mature trees of ash and oak. In some, dogwood, spindle or wayfaring trees grow too.



Hedgelaying

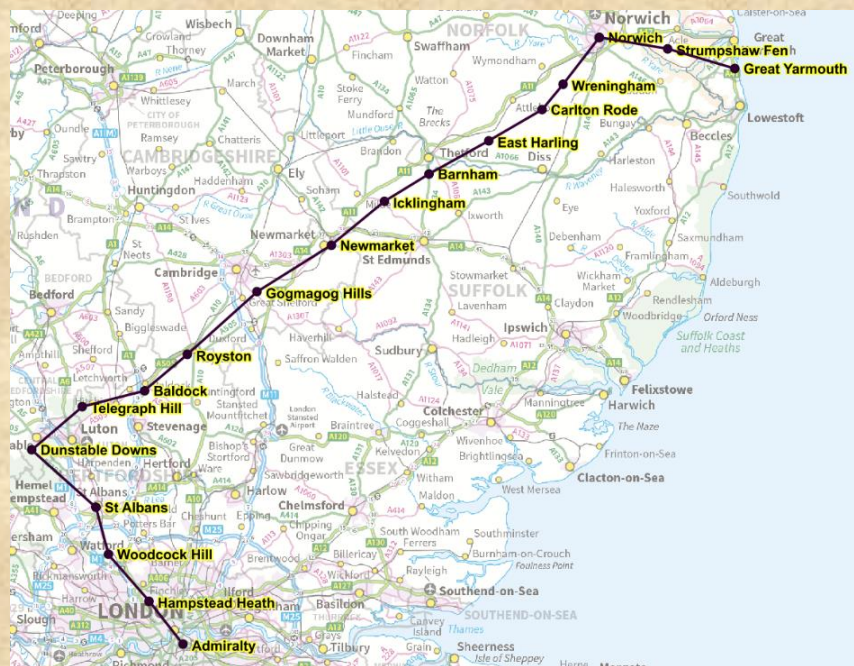
Keep in touch

To address the risk of Napoleon's troops invading at the end of the 1700s, the Admiralty set about improving communications between its London building and the Channel ports where the navy was based. The system used relay stations where the operators opened and closed large shutters to pass on a coded message. It was read at the next station 8 to 10 miles away and passed on again quickly.

A second row of relay stations to another naval base at Great Yarmouth opened in 1808. Messages from London were sent to Dunstable Downs and on to a station built at the highest point on Lilley Hoo.

The operators there passed it on to Weston Hills near Baldock for onward transmission towards Yarmouth.

Hostilities ended in 1815 and no trace remains of the local relay station other than the name it gave the site- Telegraph Hill.



Robin Hood

Folklore claims that a man known as the "Robin Hood of Hexton" led a group of poachers through local woodlands in 1811. The Bow Street Runners- a privately funded predecessor of the modern police- was on their trail and tracked them to the pub in Pegsdon. Although surrounded, the poachers refused to leave but their pursuers set fire to some straw and directed the smoke into the bar. Eventually, choking for air, the men staggered out and were arrested. The landlord pleaded for leniency using the term "Live and Let Live" and this became the pub's name.

At the end of their tethers

In 1824, tensions associated with poverty and inequality that had been simmering for some time erupted in Shillington when the parish wheelbarrows (used by workhouse inmates to clear stones from the fields) were damaged. Four men received fines of 10 shillings plus a shilling for “riot and tumult”. In the December, a group of angry men confronted the parish overseer, William King, who claimed that they “assembled in front of my farmhouse in a most riotous and noisy manner, and with many oaths and threatening gestures demanded money..... Their conduct was so violent and disorderly as to cause much fear and alarm to me and my family for the safety of our persons.... These young men have no grounds for disorderly conduct. I am ready to find them work, but they refuse to work and demand money from me, to spend in public houses.”

Subsequently, the five leaders were bound over to keep the peace in the sum of £20 each. An uneasy peace followed but poverty did not go away. The churchwarden accounts in 1830 record the names of several paupers receiving a weekly allowance.

Constable country

On 6 Dec 1830 following widespread riots, unrest broke out in Stotfold where labourers demanded a guaranteed wage of 2 shillings a week and the dismissal of an unpopular Poor Law overseer. Shillington was asked to send men to help restore order and the vicar, Rev John Hull, hurriedly swore in 212 special constables (40% of the men in the village). Of these, 109 (74 labourers, 3 shoemakers, 13 farmers, 4 gentry, 3 butchers, 2 pensioners, a coachman, a footman, a blacksmith, a carpenter, a wheelwright, a bricklayer, a glazier and a miller) were sent to Stotfold. Some carried staves bearing the crest of King William IV that were kept in a chest in the church. Dissent rumbled on in many places until conditions eased after 1843.

In his 1967 book about the Hanscombe family, “Common Blood”, C.E. Hanscombe summed up the early part of 19th century thus: ‘Rents and tithes had risen with the price of corn... The harsh game laws, involved transportation for offenders, were of the utmost danger to the working classes and coupled with the Corn Laws, showed the influence of landowners on the government. It was illegal to kill game. Spring guns and mantraps were legal until 1827. Until the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, farmers and their workers suffered from constantly fluctuating prices. Food was dear, bread, cheese and potatoes, with an occasional bit of fat pork, were the farm labourers’s chief foods. Serious labour troubles were frequent in town and country alike.’

Farmers and their workers wore leggings with knee-length linen smocks that fitted snugly around the chest but allowed plenty of leg movement. Moleskin and corduroy trousers replaced them at the end of the 19th century.

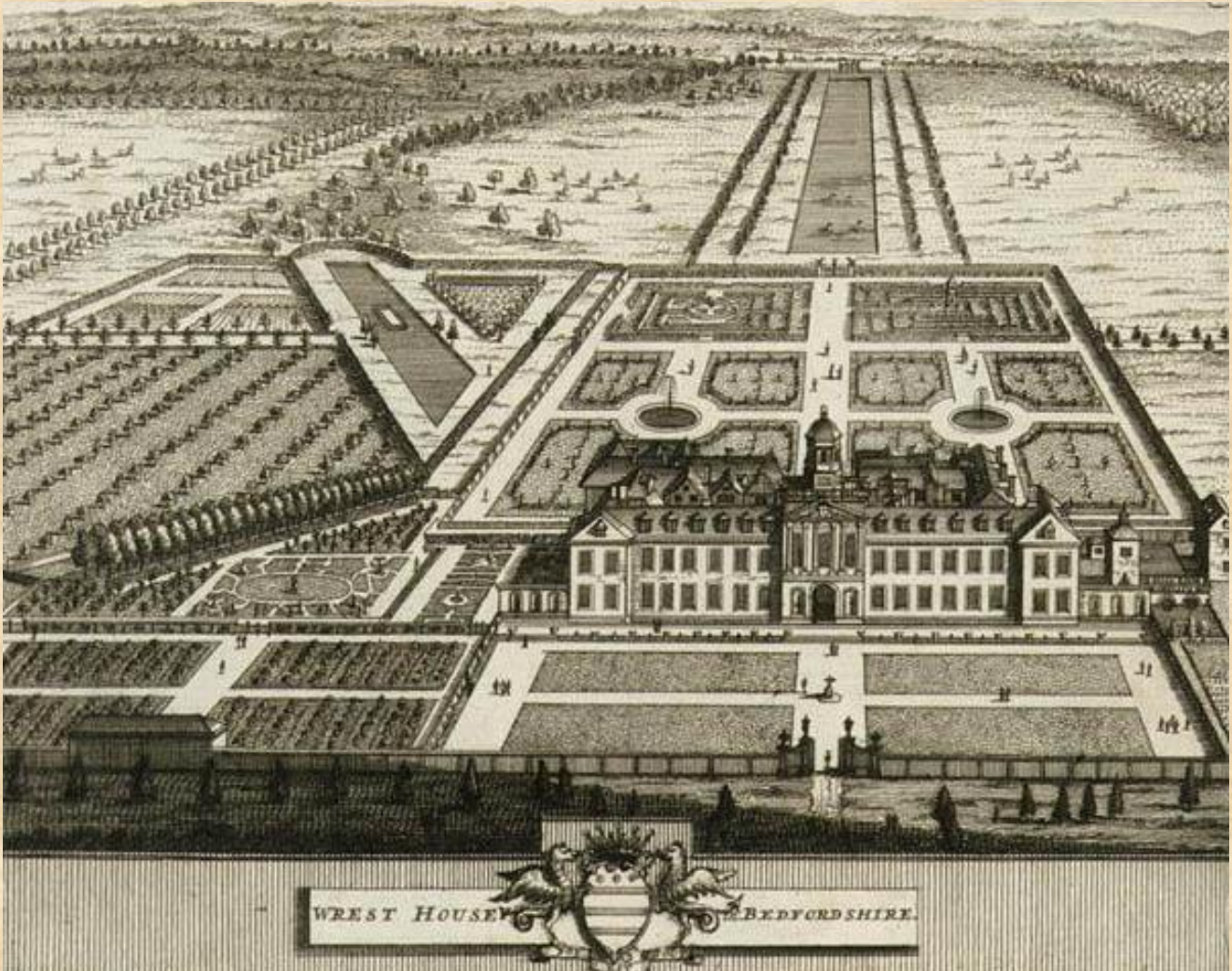
This image of farm labourers taking a break from stooking sheaves of wheat is almost timeless but was taken in the 1950s at Pirton Grange Farm.



Race you there

Oblivious to the problems endured by the poor, the landed gentry pursued their own interests including hunting and horse racing which had taken place on Lilley Hoo in the late 1700s and early 1800s in front of large crowds. In 1830, a challenge between wealthy landowners led to a horse race across country from Harlington church, round the obelisk in Wrest Park in Silsoe and back to the start. The participants jumped hedges and streams and aimed for the steeple on the return journey.

After this, races where horses jump obstacles became known as 'steeplechases' and the best known, the Grand National, was first run ten years later.



Wrest House c.1708.

This building was replaced in the 1830s, but the formal parterre elements of the garden remain from this time.

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