

Shillington since 1945- part 2

Gone missing

Tractors had replaced all the working horses like those pictured with Percy Aldridge by the early 1960s. With them went Shillington's blacksmiths. Farmers did not replace many of the farm workers who retired or left for other jobs and there are no longer any in this area. Home milk deliveries no longer occur. In the 1980s, Bedfordshire County Council sold off its smallholdings to the sitting tenants.

Most farmers kept some livestock after the war. Spillages from feeding troughs provided food for birds, mice and rats which were prey for owls.

Animal manure, ponds and meadows with wildflowers attracted insects and they provided food for swallows and other birds. After harvest, huge flocks of lapwings followed the plough feeding on unsuspecting worms.

Much of this wildlife has disappeared as small farmers have retired and farming practices have changed.



No longer seen are herds or flocks of farm animals being driven along roads and tracks on their way to fresh pasture like the longhorn cattle pictured passing the Old Swan with Tony Emms and his dog.

It may have been in the 1980s when there was last a herd of milking cows in Shillington and fattening cattle for beef is barely profitable in the 2020s.

Many of the fields they used are home to pet horses and poorly designed 'shanty towns' of stables, barns and manure heaps disfigure some. Wildlife-rich hay meadows and pastures have become degraded. The control of 'weeds' has reduced habitat for butterflies and other insects.

The earthworm population declined and the lapwings that followed the plough to eat them disappeared. The ponds where livestock drank have silted up and bushes have grown out to cover many of them, including the ancient manorial fish ponds at Parsonage Farm. Arable farming has simplified to just handful of crops.

Potent herbicides have obliterated poppies and other arable weeds and pesticides have reduced insect numbers. Many hedgerows and areas of scrub such as existed on parts of Pegsdon Hills were grubbed up to make larger fields in the 1950s, removing habitat used by nightingales.

Many old barns have vanished too including those at Green End Farm and Elmhurst Farm in the 1980s. At the latter, some of them and the former Coffee House had been designated 'listed buildings' but this did not prevent their demolition. Homes in Wheelwright Close, Preslent Close and Elmhurst Gardens occupy their site.

This photograph below shows barns on the left side of High Road where houses in Wheelwright Close and Preslent Close now stand. The village hall is on the right.



Some bird species nested under the eaves of these old wooden-framed, weatherboarded buildings and bats roosted in the roofs. With their steep roofs, they were the same shape as houses, often differed little in size and fitted in well with the village scene. Modern farm buildings are inaccessible to birds and vermin that ate stored grain and reduced the farmers' profit. Their steel or concrete frames and large roof spans increase capacity and enable farm loaders to manoeuvre easily. Some sit uneasily in the landscape.

However, some of the old ones survive and have been put to different uses. In Pegsdon, barns and cattle sheds at Bury Farm were converted into dwellings. A farm shop used two ranges at Lordship Farm in Shillington until concerns about highway safety closed it down. Apart from its steel frame, a dutch barn at Hanscombe End Farm, seen in the bottom right-hand corner in around 1960 with a shiny new section of roof, was rebuilt as a home in 2020.



At Manor Farm in Higham Gobion where Parrish brothers had the most farm workers in the area in the 1980s, barns of various ages have housed a very different business since 1998. Veterinary specialists, Davies who perform procedures on animals that are beyond the scope of ordinary vets use them now. Like their agricultural predecessors, they have the greatest number of employees in Shillington parish.

Leylandii in- elms out

Photographs of Shillington taken prior to 1970 show scenes that differ remarkably from today's fast-growing evergreens like Leylandii and bushes of exotic species have obscured once open views of homes.

Some of the gardens that helped feed the village during the wars have become vast expanses of lawn with not a vegetable or flower in sight. Hedgerows have lost all the elm trees, such as these shown at



Apsley Arch. Dutch Elm Disease killed them off in the 1970s and most were felled within a few years. Elms regenerate from their roots but die by the time they reach a height of 6m when the bark becomes suitable for the beetle that spreads the disease. Ash became the dominant tree but is itself threatened by chalara (ash dieback).

Not the same anymore

Arguably, children have suffered most from all the changes that have occurred since 1945. Free range children once explored the fields, climbed trees, made dens in the hedgerows and played in roads with little traffic. The freedoms they enjoyed have gone as anxious parents monitor their movements and ferry them from one planned event to another.

Romany gypsies had once visited regularly, helping farmers where required, sharpening knives and scissors and selling clothes pegs they'd made with wood from the hedgerows. Odd, unused pockets of land and verges where they parked their wagons and grazed their ponies are no longer available, fenced off to keep out less desirable travellers who came later and often left a terrible mess behind them when they moved on.

'Efficiencies' caused the loss of Shillington's full-time police officer and the police house at 55 High Rd was sold off.

People used to stay in the same job for longer. Here's a presentation to Mrs R Pearce who retired in around 1969 having delivered the post by bike for 29 years.



The loss of farming families and the changing countryside have made redundant words that everyone would have understood into the 1950s, including:

Beaver- mid morning snack

Bruck- broken

Clarring- rushing about

Forest (forehorse)- the leading horse in a team pulling a heavy waggon or plough

Goo- go

Hullock- hard chalk

Old boy- son

Young old boy- youngest son

Old gel- wife

Starm- a short, fat tree trunk

Theck- thatch

Not all bad news

People living here in the distant past were constantly striving to ensure their day-to-day survival which meant food production dominated most lives. While crop growing is still the principal land use, it requires few people and little physical effort. The repetitive, heavy and dirty work that farm workers used to do no longer affects health or shortens lives.

Sheep have become the dominant farm animal and grazing continues as it has for thousands of years on the steep chalk hills of Pegsdon's nature reserves, keeping long grass and scrub at bay. This has maintained populations of rare plants at Knocking Hoe including the Pasque flower, moon carrot, spotted cat's ear, field fleawort and burnt orchid.



Pasque flowers at Knocking Hoe

What do you do?

People living in Shillington, Pegsdon and Higham Gobion today have many different backgrounds and occupations. Around 30% of adults are retired and the remainder have a wide range of jobs. Many 'white collar' workers operate from home for at least part of the time. Those who work outside of the local area commute to many different locations.

Shillington has retained facilities that some villages now lack including two churches. Shillington Lower School successfully attracts pupils from the village and elsewhere although some youngsters are educated at fee-paying schools. The village still has two pubs- the Crown and the Musgrave Arms. Cars are serviced at Dawes and Bowles Garages and the latter also sells fuel.

The Live and Let Live in Pegsdon had been threatened with closure but the introduction of chalets for overnight stays has broadened its income.

Apparent indifference from some previous owners about the pub's unique location was rectified when the garden was given a new lease of life in 2021 and it reopened as the View.



The photograph was taken from Deacon Hill with the View in the centre. Like the other survivors, the sale of meals helps keep it going now.

Houses everywhere

The large families of Victorian times, often crammed into the smallest of homes, have been replaced with families with one or two children and in some cases, none at all. However, the construction of new homes has maintained the population. Aragon Housing Association built those that replaced Scyttels Court, at the rear of Marshalls Avenue and in Jepps Close on land formerly owned by the local authority. They include rented accommodation and shared-equity homes that help some local youngsters remain in Shillington. Since 1960, the majority of developments have been speculative with most houses for sale. Usually bought by incomers, the most recent are in Chapel Close, Wilson Close and Sandy Heath Close. With odd plots around Shillington largely used up, developers are eyeing up farmland in between its many Ends and in the wider countryside. One new industry that has appeared in recent years but employs nobody is power generation. In 2022, about 50 homes and farm buildings carried solar photovoltaic or water heating panels on their roofs.

In your hands

Shillington, Pegsdon and Higham Gobion acquire more history as every day passes. It is possible to live in a village and keep yourself to yourself as everyone had to during the worst of the Covid outbreaks. If everybody did that, it would lead to facilities and communal activities being lost. For the parish to thrive in the future, the local population must use its shops and pubs and other businesses. They must support its school, village hall, churches and social club. They must talk to their neighbours and passers-by. They must join its women's institute, men's club and other organisations and take part in quizzes, concerts and fetes. Only if local residents take an interest in their surroundings and engage with others will the community thrive. The future is in their hands.