

Victorian Shillington

Church and chapel

In 1825, the Rev C. Stoper, a non-conformist from Hitchin hired a small building where he preached to an enthusiastic audience.

His successor, the Rev John Wayne, built the congregation up yet further.

The building survives (pictured) in the garden of 91, Church Street.



The popularity of Stoper's message led to the building of a Wesleyan Methodist chapel in 1840 at 31 Church St. Soon, it was packed and needed replacing in 1874 with a much larger building in High Rd.



The Congregational Church also opened in 1840 a few doors away at 47 Church St and remains open to this day.

Pegsdon gained a Wesleyan Methodist chapel in 1841 and a Primitive Methodist Chapel (pictured) opened at 101, Bury Rd in 1887. The High Rd chapel continued in use until 1996 and went on to be refurbished as a home.

An education for all

The churches ran Sunday Schools which helped some children gain literacy skills but concentrated mainly on religious instruction.

In 1856, the National School (seen in this much later photograph) at the end of Church St opened and enabled all children to receive a full-time education.

Attendance was patchy as many were expected to boost the family income by plaiting straw.



In the churchyard

A newspaper in 1847 reported that sheep grazed All Saints churchyard and church records confirm this when they stated that 'The clerk be required to dig out all the nettles and to remove the sheep



from the churchyard on a Saturday afternoon, and to clear away the droppings; and that no sheep be sent to graze on the sabbath'.

A wooden fence surrounded the churchyard but iron railings replaced it in 1856. On the Church St side, the surface of the road was lowered at some point to reduce the gradient and a stone wall revetment was built to retain the soil. The 'Ten Steps' facilitated access and a large lantern above illuminates them on dark evenings.

Railway mania

In the 1840s, the railway network was expanding rapidly. In 1845, there were plans for a route between Oxford and Cambridge via Hitchin and Luton. A direct route between them would have required an expensive tunnel under Offley Hill. An alternative one was considered, passing between Shillington and Pegsdon, but the scheme failed. The line linking Sandy, Biggleswade and Hitchin with King's Cross opened in 1850 and enabled fresh vegetables and salad from the area to reach London's markets in under 2 hours. Picking Brussels sprouts provided plenty of work for gangs of casual labourers through the winter months and some local people joined them. The work was most unpleasant on cold, wet days but offered the best pickers the chance to earn plenty of money. In 1857, another line opened between Hitchin and Bedford with Henlow station being the nearest to Shillington.

As well as benefitting passengers, railways facilitated the transport of heavy items over long distances. Coal came to this area and most stations had sidings where merchants loaded it into sacks for distribution by horse and cart. Also brought to this area were gravestones made of a brown sandstone which separated the coal seams.

There are several in Shillington churchyard.



Dinosaur dung?

In 1862, William Wilshere invited a scientist, Robert Lawes, to inspect a field of his at Chibley Farm. A layer up to 70cm deep contained rounded stones called coprolites which some thought were dinosaur droppings.

Lawes found that they were rich in phosphate and could be made into a valuable fertiliser. He assembled a team of navvies to dig them out starting at the foot of the slope below the Meppershall road. As they worked their way across the field towards the Stondon Road, the bed of coprolites

became deeper in the ground. A steam-powered mill washed the coprolites and horse-drawn carts took them to Henlow station from where they went by train to Barking for processing.

By 1870, digging had also begun at Trinity College's Rosehill Farm. Washmills, steam engines, sheds for equipment, stables for horses and a temporary tramway were erected in a field at Marquis Hill. The coprolite bed went round much of Shillington and they were also extracted at Pump Farm and behind the Musgrave Arms in Apsley End. The diggings continued across from there towards Higham Gobion.

Job vacancies

Extracting the coprolite bed needed many labourers and single, young men flocked to the village. The population of Shillington increased from 1,598 in the census of 1851 to 2,226 in 1881.

The demand for accommodation led to a building boom. Several terraces of small cottages were built and many of them were used as dosshouses.

Most of them can still be seen today:

39 to 53 High Rd

9 to 27 Hillfoot Rd

29 to 43 Hillfoot Rd, known as Barrack Row, built edgewise to the highway

75 to 107 Hillfoot Rd

35 to 51 Bury Rd

67 to 77 Bury Rd. No 79 was the Edward VII beerhouse

10 to 24 Hanscombe End Rd known as Walking Stick Row where Jane Farrow is pictured, probably in the 1920s.

1 to 3 Higham Cottages (built in 1877)

1 to 6 Long Row, Pegsdon.



Marshall's Row (pictured) stood where Marshall's Avenue is now.

New homes were also constructed in Church St but many of these are larger.

Senior staff and others who profited from the extra wealth that coprolites brought to the village lived in these.



Fancy a pint...?

Labourers worked up a tremendous thirst and beer houses and pubs did a roaring trade. Some of those listed below had already operated for years. The period when they were open is shown in brackets and other details include the name of the brewery that supplied them during the coprolite era.

The Marquis of Granby, 15, Marquis Hill (c 1740-1959), Simpsons of Baldock

The White Horse, 52, Church St (pre 1813-1914), Simpsons of Baldock

The Red Signpost, Upton End Rd (pre 1822-1959), W & S Lucas from Hitchin

The Five Bells, 18, Church St (pre 1822-1975), pictured in the early 1900s when W & S Lucas had sold it to J.W. Green, Luton

The Bedford Arms, located where Bedford Close now stands (1829-1992), W & S Lucas of Hitchin and after 1873, Newlands of Bedford

The Swan, 7, Hanscombe End Rd (between 1822 and 1847- 1959), John Holden, Henlow

The Musgrave Arms, 16, Apsley End Rd (between 1822 and 1847), Simpsons, Baldock and the only one of these surviving

The Commander-in-Chief, 77, Church St (1869-1908). Oliver Steed's Hertfordshire (Baldock) brewery. Its customers were the better paid manual workers such as the foremen.

Three new, purpose-built beer houses were constructed.



The Five Bells: Named for the peal of five bells at All Saints' Church.



The Crown, 104 High Rd (1869) W & S Lucas, Hitchin and still open today

The Noah's Ark, 16, Hillfoot Rd (1876- 2016) Oliver Steed's Hertfordshire (Baldock) brewery, which became Baldock Brewery and in 1903, Wells and Winch, Biggleswade

The Engine (pictured), 1, Church St (1876-1912) Oliver Steed's Hertfordshire (Baldock) brewery, which became Baldock Brewery and in 1903, Wells and Winch, Biggleswade. Its entrance was in High Rd, and officials in the coprolite business were its customers.

These two beer houses opened among the new houses:

The Dial was the largest of the three Higham Cottages and operated for a short while as a beerhouse

The Edward VII, 79, Bury Rd (1869-1913)
E K and H Fordham, Ashwell, pictured with Joseph Stevens, the landlord from 1904 - 1912, in the doorway.



Boom and bust

Coprolite diggers could earn more than farm labourers and this created some tension as illustrated in this extract from 'The Coprolite Diggers' Song': -

*"Come listen you farmers to what I do say,
We Coprolite diggers now can have fair play.
With our spade and our pickaxe we've no work to seek.
We won't work for farmers for ten bob a week."*¹

By 1876, large quantities of American rock phosphate were shipped here in bulk, undercutting the cost of that produced from coprolites. The industry plunged into a rapid decline and after a brief revival in the early 1880s, the navvies left Shillington. If it hadn't been for the new housing it spawned, the industry would have disappeared without trace.

In 1885, poverty was becoming apparent and the vicar, Rev James Bonser, reported to the bishop that "Low wages and scarcity of work have caused not a little distress among our population this winter. With a view to alleviating this distress, it was suggested to me that the wealthier inhabitants of our parish should be invited to contribute to a fund for supplying coal to poor families. This has been done and £18 17s. 6d has been collected."

Liberal Shillington

Doubting that successive Tory governments had their interests at heart, many people supported the Liberal party. It gained power in 1868 and in 1872, the obsolete Wesleyan chapel at 31 Church St reopened as the Liberal Club. As well as hosting party meetings, it was rented out for other activities. One user was the Oddfellows Club, a social club and friendly society funded by regular but modest subscriptions that created a fund to support members and their families if they suffered illness, injury or death. Those falling on hard times had previously relied on charity and this early form of personal insurance enabled people to retain their self-esteem if disaster struck, several decades before the welfare state would provide universal support.

After its formation in 1915, the local branch of the Women's Institute met in the Liberal Hall. Concerts, dances and family celebrations also took place. A brass band from Gravenhurst was entertaining locally in 1898 and may have played here.

The Hall's outdated facilities led to its use fizzling out in the 1990s. It became a dwelling in 2007.

¹ [coprolite | Cracked Voices \(cracked-voices.co.uk\)](http://coprolite|CrackedVoices(cracked-voices.co.uk))
www.shillington-history.org.uk

Fire!

The risk of fire was always present when there were lots of thatched buildings and stacks of straw (such as the one being built in the photograph) around.

On 30 September 1899, the 'Great Fire of Meppershall' as the Bedfordshire Express called it, broke out in a barn at Bury Farm. With a strong wind fanning the flames, it destroyed the farmhouse, 6 cottages and 23 stacks of cereal crops. A horse and other livestock died. The damage was valued at over £3,000. Over 30 people lost their homes. Local people put them up until other accommodation became available and set up a relief fund. Only 8 weeks earlier, Shefford Fire Brigade had been called to extinguish another fire at the farm. In 1911, fire totally destroyed the mid 17th century Shillington Manor soon after Captain Lucas of the Hitchin brewing family had purchased it from the Musgraves. It was rebuilt in 1917 (and has been rebuilt again since then). In 1922, the thatched schoolhouse which stood next to the Twitchell in Shillington also burnt down.



Strange goings on at Pegsdon Hills

A strange thing happened in 1905 when W.M.Stafford, an American professor, arrived in Pegsdon. He recruited a team of labourers to dig a trench into the hillside east of Noon Hill, paying them well for their services. He told them that he looking for fossils. Later however, he explained to a journalist over a tot of whisky that his mission was to locate buried stones. They were reputed to have writing confirming that Sir Francis Bacon was the real author of some of Shakespeare's plays.

Unsurprisingly, the diggers found nothing. Hawthorn bushes obscured the Pegsdon site for many years but after the Wildlife Trust acquired the area in 1992, volunteers cleared some of them. With a little exploration, Safford's trench can still be found near the public footpath that skirts the western side of Barn Hole.

Living longer



Life expectancy had averaged only 40 for boys and 43 for girls born in 1841. Many died when they were young but those who reached five years old had a good chance of living into their 70s. Average life expectancy increased to 56 years for boys and 59 years for girls born in 1921.

Life remained tough though for most, including this group of pea pickers about to start a long day's work in around 1928.

Let's settle on Shillington

Shillington replaced Shitlington as the preferred spelling during the reign of Victoria. The first Parish Magazine appeared in 1898 or 1899 and a few years later, Doctor Kilham Roberts arrived in Shillington. The churchyard was filling up fast and part of the field to the west was purchased for an extension in 1912. Around this time, Woburn Abbey acquired a few muntjac from China but some soon escaped. They remain common in this area to this day.

In 1911, William Hanscombe who had been the final Lord of Shillington Manor donated land for a village hall. After his death, it was renamed the Hanscombe Memorial Hall.

It was a fairly simple building and originally had a massive hood over the front door as shown in this photograph.

