

AN OUTLINE HISTORY OF OTFORD

THE Otford district was not a place of primary settlement for **PRE-HISTORIC** man, who favoured the drier sandstone ridge southward. Indications of his existence here, however, are provided by at least two palaeolithic artefacts, one from Frog Farm, another from Otford Mount. The earliest evidence of settlement is a broken neolithic sickle-blade, also found at Frog Farm. It is thus possible that the origins of Otford are to be sought in that area, where, as F. R. J. Pateman pointed out, an ancient bed of the river Darent provided a good soil for habitation. The bronze age is represented by a hand-axe from Dunton Green and a bronze razor from the fields north of Otford village. Signs of iron-age settlement, likely in itself, are at present undiscovered.

Evidence of **ROMANO-BRITISH** occupation, however, is plentiful and increasing. A well furnished Roman villa (at Progress, Pilgrims Way East) flourished in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D., until its destruction by fire about 200. It boasted some gay plastered walls in yellow, red, vandyke-brown, deep puce and green, painted figures and a Virgilian inscription. A pottery-kiln was associated with this establishment. Another early settlement was the farmstead at Frog Farm, evidenced at present by several hearths and first-century pottery (c.60—100), with a few other finds. The recent excavations at Frog Farm Roman cemetery (c.110—160), by the Otford and District Historical Society's Archaeological Group, directed by A. C. Young, have already produced over fifty urn-burials and some unusual finds, including a bead-necklace and a small mirror, as well as Patch-Grove, Samian, and Castor pottery. It may imply the existence of a second-century community at Otford of unexpected size, or, it has been suggested, a cult centre related to one of the nearby springs. An excavation at the Charne (1954), conducted by G. W. Meates, revealed the presence of a rude farm-building in use c.160—180, and indicated the pursuit of general farming, including intensive corn-growing and large-scale stock-raising. The Progress site was used in the 3rd and 4th centuries as a cattle-enclosure. Thus the pattern in Britain of prosperity followed by decay after 200 is roughly reflected in Otford's Roman sites, but no evidence has been discovered of fourth-century revival. Much more excavation, however, remains to be carried out.

Close to the site of the Romano-British shed at the Charne an isolated early **SAXON** urn-burial (c.550—600) was discovered, the earliest evidence of Saxon occupation. The name Otthanford (=Otta's ford) originated in Saxon times, the eponymous Otta being presumably a local chieftain. The 7th century is the date assigned on the evidence of location and grave-goods to the Polhill cemetery (excavated under the direction of B. J. Philp), which has yielded over 100 graves, many more having been destroyed in the 19th century and mistakenly identified as battlefield-burials. Its excavation may suggest a semi-pagan community: it produced grave-goods, but not plentifully (knives, spears, beads and one disc-brooch), while pottery was almost totally lacking; the bodies were aligned west-east in the Christian fashion, but this sometimes characterized pagan burials.

The two battles of Otford (c.776, 1016) are part of national rather than local history. Tradition locates both west of the Darent, where the place-names Battle Field, Danes Bottom and Danes Trench are found. The latter has been adjudged, however, a boundary bank and not a military work on intrinsic archaeological grounds; as a defensive earthwork it cannot be reconciled to the historical evidence of the 1016 battle.

There was a church at Otford in Saxon times, and H. M. Taylor considers that parts of the existing building, notably the north wall with its interesting quoins, are very likely Saxon work of c.1050—1080.

Some time after the first battle, lands in the neighbourhood were granted, traditionally by Offa, king of Mercia, to the archbishops of Canterbury. Thus began the long connection of the manor of Otford with the archbishops, whose lordship is recorded in Domesday Book and continued throughout the **MIDDLE AGES**, when the manor included Shoreham, Sevenoaks, Chevening and parts of the Weald. It was in virtue of the overlordship of the primate (often he was also chancellor or treasurer of England) that Otford reached its heyday in the middle ages, for he maintained, when resident, a busy court. Medieval kings of England often stayed here, particularly during vacancies in the see of Canterbury. Thus in 1294 Edward I came to Otford from Wrotham, perhaps by the Pilgrims Way. (Orthodox historians dismiss the popular idea of the Pilgrims Way as a great medieval pilgrim-route, although generally accepting its prehistoric origins.)

Archbishop Lanfranc is reputed to have built the first manor-house here. The presence of Thomas Becket, however, is attested only by the legends narrated as protestant propaganda by Lambard, four hundred years later; viz. that he miraculously caused the Becket's Well spring to flow, and cursed a disturbing nightingale and an inefficient smith.

The surviving ministers' (i.e. officials') accounts begin for this manor in 1289. They provide information about demesne-farming and details of manor-house maintenance. Thus the accounts of Archbishop Reynolds (1313—27) record work on the hall, the "lord's chamber and turrets", the kitchen (dresser and porch), the lord's mill, the "mill of the town" and many other buildings. A thatcher and his mate took ten days to thatch the almshouse of the manor-house at a joint wage of 5d. a day. Extensive repairs, including the making of a new hall, buttressed and battlemented, by Archbishop Courtenay in 1382-3, suggest that the house may well have suffered considerably during the Peasants' Revolt (1381), for the insurgents not only murdered the unpopular treasurer, Archbishop Sudbury, but damaged his property, though this is not recorded of Otford. In 1440-1 two masons were paid 3s. for three days' work repairing "the stone wall of the fountain of Blessed Thomas, broken for the pipe of the water conduit there", the earliest reference to Becket's Well, which was a water reservoir for the manor-house. When the Well was excavated in the 1950's possible traces of this work were revealed; and archaeological evidence suggested that the oldest surviving masonry was of the 14th century. It may have replaced an earlier structure.

Late-Norman development of the church took place when the existing tower was added c.1160-80. Early in the 14th century the chancel was entirely rebuilt and there was some re-fenestration in the nave; three Decorated windows on the north side—one with whimsical dripstone heads—bear witness to this work.

A custumal of c.1284 provides much detail of the largely free peasants who cultivated their own and the archbishop's lands (the demesne) here in the middle ages. Services to the archbishop were owed by two types of tenant: gavelmen, holding yoke land (one yoke=roughly 150 acres, but with wide differences), and cottars, holding cotaries, each of 8 acres. The gavelmen performed no strictly servile services, but had ploughing, harvesting, firewood-carrying and fencing to do for the lord. More servile works were due from the cottars, including carting manure, guarding prisoners and giving the lord Christmas presents—typical of bondsmen's services elsewhere; but there was little or no week-work, most burdensome of all. Except in general terms we do not know how the peasants worked their own lands.

There were 13 yokes in Otford itself (Shoreham also had 13), divided between 69 gavelmen, and 11 cotaries with 11 cottars. Tenants of inlands (lands taken ~~in~~ from the waste), landless labourers, servants and officials are not named in the custumal; the first paid money dues and the others worked for wages. The figures suggest a medieval population of at least 400 people in Otford (including Dunton Green) before the Black Death of 1348-9.

A later rental proves there were fewer tenants in the 15th century than in 1284, and while small farms continued some tenants were apparently building up larger farms of over 100 acres, some in scattered parcels. This rental shows John Payn holding 50 acres, and Thomas Payn's heirs 23½ acres in the yoke of Landrishelle. These men gave their name to Paine's Farm, north of Otford Mount. R. H. Du Boulay has demonstrated the continuance of demesne-farming at Otford, long after this practice had been generally abandoned elsewhere, but labour services came to an end on Otford manor in 1444 with the final leasing of the demesne.

TUDOR times brought great changes to Otford. Archbishop Warham in about 1515 rebuilt the manor-house in palatial style, pulling down all the existing buildings (except the chapel and Courtenay's hall) and extending the site to embrace a great new courtyard with a fine north front. The surviving structure (popularly and erroneously known as Otford Castle) consists only of the shell of the north-west tower, connected by the ground storey of a gallery (now cottages) to one side of the gatehouse. Ragstone walling in Bubblestone Road probably represents the southern limit of the palace, a new superstructure having been erected on the foundations of the earlier manor-house wall there.

Warham's successor, Thomas Cranmer, did not long enjoy residence at Otford, for Henry VIII compelled him to exchange it for less attractive property. There is no evidence that it was at Otford that Cranmer wrote the Book of Common Prayer, which was first drafted some years after 1537, when he surrendered the palace. The story that Henry planned to stay at Knole (also given up by Cranmer) while his household lodged at rheumatically Otford rests on good authority, however. Henry VIII did not neglect the palace, as has been said. Between 1541 and 1546 he spent hundreds of pounds on repairs at Otford, Knole and Panthurst, the bulk on Otford. An account of 1546 notes the payment: "Allowance for the King's Majesty's garden of Otford . . . for four weeders, 23 days at 3d.—23s." Henry, far from neglecting Otford Palace, even left the garden tidy!

Decay in fact began in the reign of Edward VI. An estimate for repairs made in 1548 amounted to over £106, but in Elizabeth I's reign dilapidation was far advanced, and a similar estimate totalled £1,629 9s. 10d., (1573). The crown was too impoverished at this period to put the work in hand, although the queen retained possession and lordship.

The Sidneys of Penshurst had special interests in Otford, holding the lord keepership of palace and parks. Sir Robert Sidney in particular made strenuous efforts to gain possession of the property for reasons of prestige, as other emulative courtiers were making suit to the queen for it, and also because his wife had "such a liking to yt". In 1594 Sir Robert wrote to Lady Sidney: "Touching Otford . . . if you could like to ly there this winter, it would be very fitt for many respects. The company is much better about yt; you are within 16 miles of London and no foule ways to speake of."

Though the queen refused to alienate the manor she gave the advowson of the church (then a chapel of the vicarage of Shoreham) to the dean and chapter of Westminster in 1560. With this patronage the Old Parsonage came into their hands, but it has apparently never been occupied by clergy since medieval times. In 1608 it was described as "the Rectory with barn, orchard &c. in tenure of Cornely Berisford gent". Tudor fireplaces in this house and in the Bull Inn possibly came from the palace. Two carved roundels in the wall-panelling at the Bull were once considered to be portraits of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn (or Katherine of Aragon). This identification has been rejected by the Victoria and Albert Museum, who class these carvings as "Romayne heads", typical of early Tudor work showing Italian influence. They may have been portraits (c.1535), but their subjects remain unidentified.

A survey of this period (c.1540, gives the following picture of the village: "The Town standethe northe west side of the . . . (palace) in one strete partly buylded on both sides with some fayre houses which containeth in length VIII hundred fete. Also the Ryver is current through the said Towne whereuppon standeth a water mill and in the said Ryver be dyvers kynds of Fyshe as Troutte . . . Also there be personable men within the said Towne of Otford to doo the Kinge service 40." Thus Otford probably had a smaller population at this time than two hundred years previously. Certainly the absence of a great household in later Tudor times lessened its importance.

The people of Otford submitted to the bewilderments of the Reformation, involving a revolution in religious thought and frequent liturgical changes, without tumult. When Cranmer was preaching the new doctrines of royal supremacy and anti-popery he recorded that the people about Otford (unlike those of Canterbury where trouble had occurred) were sufficiently instructed in the new teaching. In the church the addition of the south aisle and the vestry (c.1520-30) marks the last main stage in the completion of the fabric. To this period also belongs the fine Easter sepulchre (which A. D. Stoyel has described as one of the best examples in the county), with its Tudor roses and pomegranate symbol of Katherine of Aragon. Within ten years or so, however, the abolition of all church furnishings associated with catholic worship had begun with the removal of the venerated image of St. Bartholomew (patron of the church), and by Elizabeth's reign this purgation—or authorized sacrilege—was complete.

This century also saw the rise of the Polhill family from yeoman status. David Polhill of Ightham acquired Broughton Manor ("Manor" is a courtesy title) in Mary's reign, his son, John, graduated to the gentry, and his grandson, David, became sheriff of Kent. The Polhills thus emerged as the leading Otford family in **STUART** times.

This development is reflected in a survey of the manor in 1608 commissioned by James I. It shows John Polhill, gent, paying dues to the crown for a "messuage called Broughtons, viz: mansion house, barn, stable etc.", for four other houses including that called "house at the Mill", and approximately 820 acres of land. Only three of the king's other tenants held more than 100 acres and there were only five others with farms of between 20 and 100 acres. Of these John Christian occupied a "tenement called Bulls, three barns with land $2\frac{1}{2}$ acres", and sublet one "tenement called Crowne." In addition he farmed 77 acres of land including 9 acres called "Combe". Although the survey possibly omitted some tenancies it suggests that the peasantry had diminished since the 15th century.

Archaeological confirmation of an interesting historical record of the administration of local government by the justices of peace in quarter sessions at this period may be found today at Longford Bridge at Dunton Green (part of Otford until the late 19th century) where the three parishes of Otford, Sevenoaks and Chevening met. Following a quarter-sessions order the surveyors of highways for these parishes repaired the bridge, setting a recording stone bearing the date 1637 in it. In the same year the church acquired its west porch after the fire that had severely damaged the fabric about this time.

The national quarrel between king and parliament inevitably had repercussions in Otford. In 1641 the people of Otford and Shoreham took the opportunity provided by the sitting of the Long Parliament to send three repetitive petitions about their religious grievances. They complained that although the dean and chapter of Westminster derived an income of £160 per annum from Shoreham and 200 marks from Otford, the then incumbent, Mr. Emerson, received only £20 and his dwelling, for serving both parishes, so that the parishioners had had to hire a curate to assist him. Mr. Emerson preached in one church or the other every "Sabbath Day sounde and orthodoxe doctrine and further gained our love by his honest and peaceable life and conversation." Mr. Browne, his assistant, had been resident for four years, "and hath painfully (i.e. painstakingly) preached the word of God." They asked for adequate maintenance for them both. The petitions record that there were 60 families in Otford and 80 in Shoreham, a reflection of a rise in population that was national in scale in the 17th century. Of the 19 distinguishable Otford signatories of one petition, 11 made their marks, being illiterate.

Before any reform could be effected the ecclesiastical anarchy of the Civil War and Interregnum had commenced. Kent was moderately royalist in politics and a royalist rising, one of the centres of which was Sevenoaks, took place in 1643. Nearly all the gentry of the Darent valley, including Polhills and Gilbournes, were involved. When the rising failed David Polhill (previously sheriff) was sent up to answer to parliament for inciting and encouraging the insurrection. He and Sir Edward Gilbourne survived these troubles after imprisonment and fines.

Both their names appear in the earliest surviving Otford parish records (registers apart), dated 1649-51, which show that the usual poor rate assessments were being methodically recorded and audited during these troubled years of Charles I's execution and the inauguration of the brief English republic. The overseers of the poor in Otford levied a twopenny rate in April—May, at the beginning of the year (old style) and a threeha'penny rate at the end, December—March. David Polhill Esq. paid £1 5s. 2d., but Edward Kester and others only 2d. Besides Otford inhabitants "outdwellers" having land in the parish but living elsewhere paid their quota. Gilbourne was one of the two magistrates who passed the accounts and appointed overseers of the poor and churchwardens for the next year.

Returns made for the hearth tax in 1664 provide rather more information about the people of Otford after the Restoration of Charles II. All householders worth more than 20s. a year had to pay this levy on fireplaces, which shows Otford, with its 53 householders (37 chargeable, 16 not) occupying a humble place among nearby villages, to judge by population. Sevenoaks Town (186), Seal (134), Sundridge (114), Chevening (99), Shoreham (90), Sevenoaks Weald (85) and Riverhead (57) all returned larger numbers, though in every case they had a higher percentage figure of poorer, unchargeable inhabitants than Otford with its 30%. Paupers, however, were not included in the returns.

In Otford, David Polhill paid for 6 hearths (Broughton), and Mr. Robert Petty (Colets Well) for 10. But the highest Otford assessment was of "Mr. John Collinvill att home, ye lodge and old Ruins" for 16 hearths, which may signify that part of the palace was still habitable by a gentleman of means.

An insight into the everyday life of the times is given by 20 surviving Otford probate inventories of 1666-98. Nine of the testators were farmers, living in yeoman-type houses, having hall, kitchen and parlour, with rooms above. Thomas Smithers, a tanner, who bequeathed the comfortable estate of £347 10s. 10d., had a ten-roomed house, while Hester Hartnup, widow, occupied a two-roomed cottage, and left £6 10s. 8d. Even the larger houses were sparsely furnished, though clocks and silver occur in 5 and looking-glasses in 2 cases. Table-linen is mentioned surprisingly often, books very rarely, window-curtains once and jewels, crockery, pictures and ornaments not at all.

In general, ordinary Otford people did not have many possessions at home, and what wealth they had resided chiefly in their farming-stock. Thus Samuel Bostock had only £30 in cash, but crops worth £363, animals £179 and implements £30. The inventory of George Smalle (1690), a relatively poor yeoman (his predecessor paid for 2 hearths in 1664), shows that he had 33 acres sown with crops when he died: 16 acres barley and the rest peas, oats and wheat. His stock comprised 6 horses, 1 cow, 5 calves, 7 sheep, 5 lambs, 1 sow and 16 other pigs. His seed in store included sainfoin, evidence that small men were growing the new grass crops in this area at a very early period.

Studies on Georgian and Victorian Otford have hitherto been comparatively neglected, but it is possible to indicate some salient points in its development during the last 250 years.

An epitome of Otford's **GEORGIAN** history is to be found in the ecclesiastical report on this insignificant village in 1758, which stated it "contains 64 houses, no families of note therein. No Papists, Presbyterians, Independents (=Congregationalists), Anabaptists, Methodists, Moravians and Quakers, or those who profess to disregard religion." The number of houses suggests that the population had remained static since 1641, and the fact that Otford was a dead-end at this date seems inescapable.

The Polhills had moved to Chipstead in 1711, but they continued to be buried at Otford, where Charles Polhill's monument (1755)—the work of Sir Henry Cheere—still dominates the church, dwarfing that of his more famous brother, David the Petitioner (1754), a leader in the whig movement of 1701 to petition parliament to give William III better support in his anti-French policy.

F. R. J. Pateman, in his analysis of the parish records of 1800-1850, demonstrated that a select vestry, composed of the leading farmers, conscientiously administered local affairs, notably the onerous poor law, in the early part of the 19th century. The following minute of their proceedings is in period, but not, it is fair to say, typical: "Tis the Opinion of the Present Vestery, that the men at Worken on the Road, between the Warrey House and Kemsan Barn Aught to Receive the Paresh Pay—the same as the Other men as Worke on the Road. A mochan maid by Mr. Bradly and seckend by Mr. Parrish that the Drain a Cross the Road by the Front of Mr. Edward Coleyers Hows makes the Road so bad as to Render it impssbell." (1826).

Otford's poor-house was rented to the vestry by James Martyr, subsequently the builder of the existing house at Colets Well. It was superseded by the union workhouse in Sevenoaks after 1834. Martyr also built (1800) the first chapel (now the Roman Catholic chapel) for a group of Methodists who had established themselves in Otford after 1758.

The post-Tudor history of the palace and its old demesnes is as follows: the Sidneys disposed of their interests to Sir Thomas Smith, a great merchant-landowner, who never lived here. Smith's heirs, familiar today from Smythe's Charity, in 1705 secured the whole estate, continuing as absentee landlords into the next century. The crown sold the lordship of the manor in 1806, and in 1844 the property, including "the ruins of the ancient Castle and Palace of Otford", was acquired by Earl Amherst.

The census of 1801 gives the population of Otford (with Dunton Green) as 497 and in conformity with the national increase it continued to grow until country districts suffered the rural exodus consequent upon the agricultural depression of the second half of the **VICTORIAN** period. The construction of the Sevenoaks Railway to Bat and Ball, completed by the pioneer engineer and contractor, T. R. Crampton, in 1862, greatly facilitated the migration of population in the area, and in the last years of Victoria it again increased.

A document of 1871 gives the population as 1127 (again with Dunton Green), but of 129 heads of Otford households about one third only were Otford-born. Half the rest were Kentishmen and the remainder from other counties. The brickmakers housed in the "Brickfield huts opposite Mr.

Crampton's yard" were almost all from the west and midlands. The railway workers too were "foreigners", but chiefly from Kent. Agriculture, however, still provided a living for most people. Among the 500-odd inhabitants of Otford itself there were 5 farmers, including Richard Russell, who built the fox-hunting tower on Otford Mount, farming the 300 acres of Castle Farm, 88 agricultural labourers and 16 other rural workers, such as cowmen and woodcutters. Besides these, publicans (5) were the most numerous category of tradespeople, among whom it is surprising to find a "cordwainer" as well as a shoemaker. Roughly half the children are described as "scholars", mostly no doubt at the National School (founded 1833), and there were 19 domestic servants, including grooms and factotums. The village was closely linked by marriage to Shoreham and Sevenoaks, but the almost complete absence of Kemsing connections of any kind is very remarkable and calls for explanation.

At Twitton lived Robert Richards, "medical practitioner", known in legend today as "Doctor Bob". Dunton Green claimed a photographer, William Ladds, whose wife had the splendid name of Marrinea, and a local Methodist preacher, Edmund King, a wheelwright by trade.

Changes in the church came with the sweeping restoration of the fabric by the eminent gothic architect, G. E. Street (1863), and the separation of the living from Shoreham with the appointment as vicar of an energetic Scot, Dr. John Hunt, in 1878.

As H. W. Hart has pointed out, Hunt was a theologian of repute, who had taken part in the informal discussions of a quasi-oecumenical nature that occurred in Germany after Vatican One. These indeed probably explain his preferment to Otford, as he had fraternized abroad with the patron of the living. He was a versifier and hymn-writer, a strong opponent of "ritualism", a liberal-free trader, a great admirer of Germany and a trenchant critic of France. He denounced the non-attendance at church of many of his flock and moreover was a strict sabbatarian. For his good works, in which his pony (Romeo) and trap sometimes played a part, he was designated "the poor man's friend."

Dr. Hunt's long incumbency from 1878 to 1907 probably had far-reaching effects on Otford's social life, because, with his liberal opinions, he filled to a large extent the place occupied in most villages by more conservatively minded gentry.

With the beginning of a new world in 1914 even greater change was to come to Otford, to the history of which the diaries and memoirs of its present inhabitants are, it is hoped, in process of making their contribution.

The writer records his thanks to fellow members of the Otford and District Historical Society for suggestions in compiling this paper.

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Otford, Kent.