

Snap, An Abandoned Hamlet

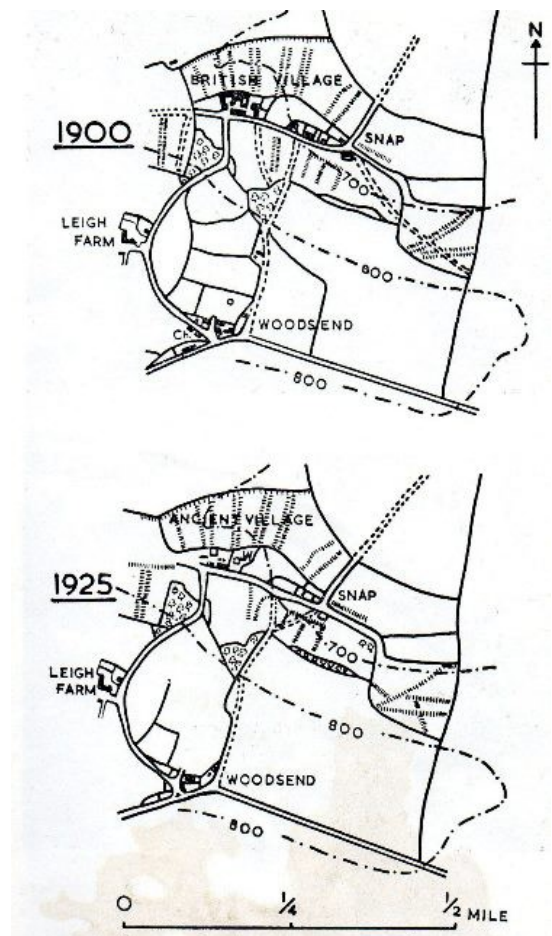
The strange story of the decline, fall and eventual annihilation of the hamlet called snap as told by R. S. Turner in 1967

At a time when the building trade presents an unprecedented threat to the countryside, it is fascinating and rather exiting to see a complete natural landscape where, only fifty years ago lay a thriving hamlet. Snap between Aldbourne and Ogbourne St. George, has become better known now that it no longer exists than it ever was during its long history as a farming community, and its posthumous fame rests on its value to historians as an archetype for the kind of rural depopulation which took place during the agricultural depression, as well as on the various rumours which grew up around the ruins.

The name of Snap comes from the same source as Snape in Suffolk which has also gained fame recently in an unusual way by the opening of The Maltings as a concert hall. "Snaep" in Old English means "boggy place" and the village is described in the book of Wiltshire place names as lying in a bottom of the chalk down where the ground is full of water. In fact it lies near the head of the valley, but the bottom of the gentle slope away from the village shows the characteristic coarse grasses of wet land. Despite this it was apparently a healthy place, for a Mrs. Swatton of Wooton Rivers, one of the old inhabitants of Snap is recorded as having said so, and that some of her ancestors had lived well into their nineties, one of them topping the century.

The first record of the name is in 1268 as "Snape", but aerial photographs have clearly established that it is surrounded by the remains of a large Celtic village, and Hoare in his book "Ancient Wiltshire" claims that Samian ware was found there, The size of the village does not seem to have changed much since 19 pool-tax payers were registered there in 1377, for in 1773 Andrews and Drury published their map of Wiltshire showing 10 dwellings at Snap and five or six cottages at Woodsend the nearby hamlet which has now returned to that size after it "boom" in the nineteenth century. The maps show the later sizes of Snap and Woodsend.

The history of Snap, Leigh Farm and Woodsend between 1850 and the present day illustrates how economic, social and personal factors have altered our landscape. By eighteen fifty, the *medieval predominance* of sheep on the downs had given way to mixed farming, and the two big farms at Leigh and Snap employed an estimated 20 people. Because Woodsend was on the road it received the attention of a public subscription, by which means a National School was built there in 1855. There was one school-room and two rooms for a teacher. Its uses for



services, on Sundays and after its closure as a school, led to the belief that there was a “church at Snap”.

On 26th January, 1934, the “Wilts., Berks. And Hants County Paper” ran a highly inaccurate article about Snap, beginning with a quotation from Goldsmith and aptly titled “The Deserted Village”. It starts off with a rather journalistic picture of the place as it then was. There were telegraph poles down the “High Street” and the farmhouse stood ruined. Behind the first cottage was a fine orchard, “the bent boughs speaking desolation”. The apple trees still survive now though huge and twisted. The only other surviving domestic plants are three great box trees in a line which once formed a hedge. The article describes several wells which have since been filled in, though the outline of one can still be seen. This may have been the donkey well which local rumour places at Snap. There are tears from a returned exile, and several confusing though fascinating interviews with ex-inhabitants. The best is with Mr. Osbourn, the owner of the farm from 1896 to 1901. He calls it a pleasant though isolated place with nine cottages in the hollow and eight up on the hill. He and the other people interviewed, make no clear distinction between the hollow - Snap - and the hill - Woodsend - so the poor reporter confuses them and builds a picture of a thriving village with church and school.



However, many obviously knew the difference because the next week the paper published another article called “True Facts About Snap” which is a substantially accurate account of the decay of the village.

In 1875 the two farms and the two hamlets numbered together about 22 houses, plus the church-cum-school. Corn prices had varied over the past decade from 40 to 75 shillings a quarter; then came several bad harvests and, for the first time, substantial imports of cheap American corn.



The first crops from the rapidly developing prairies demanded no more than a scratch of the plough and some seed. On the continent, where peasant farmers have always been more highly valued than here, tariffs were raised against it, but in England, Free Trade fever had gripped both parties and the corn was allowed to come flowing in at very favourable prices. The fate of the countryside was of little interest to the urban population who were grateful for the cheap bread, and the country left to fend for itself in the true spirit of “self-help”. Snap apparently survived the first wave of agriculture depression when, all over England cornfields reverted to grass or went to waste and the worker drifted away to the towns or to the new countries overseas. A second wave of ruin came in the nineties when frozen meat began to come from Australia, New Zealand and South America.

Mr. Osbourn was caught at the height of it and when he left in 1901 the farms of Snap and Leigh were put up for auction. No one bid and they were later sold privately to Mr. Henry Wilson, who has taken

much of the blame for what subsequently happened. Mr. Wilson was a butcher from Ramsbury who adopted a policy of buying up large amounts of land - which was then very cheap - and converting it into large sheep runs, which was the only way the land could be made to pay at all then. The "County Newspaper", in their second article, feel obliged to say that Mr. Wilson was a fine man "of striking personality, kindly disposed, public spirited just and fair in his dealings, who held not only the respect, but the affections of the people of Ramsbury and a wide district round about". With the grassing over of the arable land, and the amount of work available quickly diminished and the farm workers gradually drifted away to Ogbourn, Aldbourn and Swindon. In fact the demise of the village would probably have been more painful if Mr. Wilson had not bought the land as the example of the Glebe

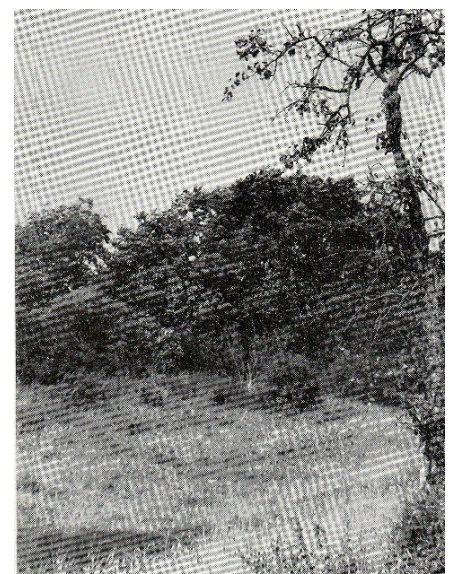


land at Woodsend shows. The vicar of Aldbourn was quite unable to let his land for several years and it lay derelict until Mr. Wilson bought it. Although a very pretty and apparently healthy place, the cottages cannot have been very pleasant to live in. The "County Newspaper" describes them as "miserable", and the outlines of one of them which survives today show two rooms of about fifteen feet square.

Human memory is notoriously short, and within a very short space of time the rumours began to grow. One theory was that the water supply ran out. Mr. Wilson

was apparently vilified in parliament, and the Daily Mirror ran a highly inaccurate article in 1913. Snap was as usual confused with Woodsend, and again under the influence of Goldsmith's "Deserted Village", a picture was built up of the complete village, church, school, chapel, entirely occupied by hawkers. One of these, Mrs. Betsy Black, was discovered by the reporter having tea on the village green behind the church: "We live very comfortably in the chapel" she said. "We get our living by hawking or selling vegetables in the country round about" "It is very quiet now", put in the woman's husband, "Nobody ever troubles us and the policeman only comes round these parts twice a week". There must have been considerable confusion between Snap and Woodsend here!

Woodsend perhaps survived because it was on the road, but one cannot help rather envying Snap when the two places are compared today. Woodsend numbers six houses, several of them modern and without charm. A good deal of farm building is going on at Leigh, but when you pass through the leafy tunnel to the street corner at Snap where the farmhouse was, you pass into the true peace of the downs. What was the farmyard is covered in rich downland grass, (see image above) full of little flowers and clover. Three tall and stately larch trees mark the beginning of the village proper, and this is completely wooded. Under the trees patches of nettles show that this ground has only been taken over by nature fairly recently. Several of the cottages can still be made out. What was once the high street is no longer even used as a track beyond the farm site, and now bushes on either side are spreading into the deep trackway and the nettles are filling it up. Such is the fascination which travel has on us, that a road which used to lead somewhere and now no longer even leads tends to excite the imagination more than the deserted cottages. At the end of the village the road branches and I stood for some time contemplating those two tracks, waist high in vegetation, fenced off by barbed wire, leading nowhere for no reason.





The leafy tunnel forming where the High Street once passed through