

Portrait of a Village

Ashton Keynes

by N. W. Keiffer



The first cross in the churchyard

Mention Wiltshire to most people and they think of the vast plains, the rolling downs of the open country around Salisbury, Devizes and Swindon. But Wiltshire pushes fingers up into the Cotswolds, there are secret little villages in hidden by-ways and coombes that belong to Wiltshire, yet the casual visitor thinks they are in Gloucestershire.

Such a place is Ashton Keynes, only a few miles from Cirencester, but having strong ties with, and a good bus service to Swindon. It lies close to the hub where Fosseway crosses Ermine Street, and are joined by the Icknield Way, roads which were green trackways of importance before the Romans came to Britain.

The indefatigable William Cobbett riding his horse through Wiltshire and Gloucestershire in 1826 has this to say about Ashton Keynes: "I had to go through a village called Ashton Keynes, with which place I was very much stricken. It is now a straggling village, but to a certainly, it has been a large market town. There is a market cross still standing in an open place in it, and there are such numerous lanes, crossing each other, and cutting the land up into such little bits, that it must at one time, have been a large town. It is a very curious place, and I should have stopped in it for some time, but I was now within a few miles of the famous Sharncut . . ."

Certainly Ashton Keynes has two claims to fame, one of which might have a bearing on its previous size.

The Thames A Stripling

Thousands of people have stood beside the Thames in London wondering at the size of this great river; watching, as one can from Greenwich, large ocean liners sailing up to the Pool of London. How few have seen this same river as a stripling, a brook clear as crystal and narrow enough to jump across as it is in Ashton Keynes. Here are the first houses built on its banks; here is the first of many villages through which it passes. Here, before it reaches the great seats of learning, the palaces and parliament of a nation, it has reflected in it some charming Cotswold cottages.

It gushes out from a culvert beside a picturesque group of cottages and flows a little distance before making a sharp right-angle bend into the main street. And now we come to the other claim to fame, a claim it is believed no other village in England can make, and that is the possession of four stone crosses which are not boundary marks.

Oldham claims to, have seven crosses, but some of these are of wood, and their origin was to mark the boundary of the Horsedge Estate which was exempt from tithes and taxes, as it belonged to the Knights Hospitallers of St. John, They never owned property in Ashton Keynes.

The four crosses of Ashton Keynes are obviously of ancient origin. The one in the churchyard once stood near the entrance door to the church, for many years in ruins, people helping themselves to some of the larger stones which doubtless surrounded it.

During the 1914-18 War the parish authorities decided it should become a war memorial, so it was removed and reconstructed to the east of the church.

Gumstool Cross

A footpath leads across a field to the cul-de-sac where the Thames emerges, and where the river turns at right angles there is another cross, as though marking this important event. The circular stone in which the shaft is set was hollowed out to take it, and the base consist of a single deep step, not very worn, set on a larger slab almost flush with the ground.



The second cross, the river runs between the wall and the cross

This is known as Gumstool Cross, named from the little bridge over the river. It is supposed to mean the place where they ducked shrew and witches. There must have been a dam of sorts, or perhaps the river has silted up, as it is very shallow at this point.

The river now runs to the south, past some delightful houses, every one of which has its own little bridge across the Thames. The third cross stands in the centre of the village, at a cross roads, and is a very large affair for such a small village. It takes its name from the Inn on the corner, and is known as White Hart

Cross.

The third cross in the centre of Ashton Keynes

The base was being most cruelly treated by passing wagons and lorries, so a few years ago it was moved a little way from the centre of the road and rededicated by the Bishop Malmesbury. As with two others, the shaft is broken at the top, the carving which must once have adorned it removed by the Puritans in their zealous war against idolatry.

The street to the east of this cross curves round in a semi-circle, and at the end of it stands the fourth cross. Set quite differently from the others on a high mound, the base is level with the average person's head. Much overgrown with weeds and nettles, it is not possible to say how many steps lead up to it, but four are visible. It appears to have been a preaching cross, or perhaps it was here that the priest summoned the villagers, who would then walk in procession to the church.





The fourth cross on a raised mound

Ancient Ritual

Could it have been the continuation of some ancient ritual lost in antiquity ? The name of the village in the Domesday Survey was Essitone. Was it once Isis Stone, Isis, the goddess of Fecundity, after whom the Romans named this part of the Thames.

Perhaps here, set aside from the bustle of busy Corinium, or Cirencester as we know it now, there was a temple to Isis in the forest. The barque of Isis was a boat or small ship annually offered to this goddess, and as late as the 12th century the custom of mounting the replica of a ship on wheels, which the people followed, dancing and singing, was held in some parts of Germany.

The early Christian adapted many of the pagan rituals through necessity. Whatever was the origin, Ashton Keynes is a place of great charm, and for me, a place with much more atmosphere than the more popular Lacock and Castle Coombe. One of the hidden gems of Wiltshire.

From Wiltshire Life Magazine June 1967