



Parish History

Worton & Marston

Worton Concise History

With its close neighbour Marston, Worton formed the south-western portion of the estate and ancient parish of Potterne. It became a parish in its own right in 1866, although it had been regarded as a separate entity for administrative and fiscal purposes since 1316 at least. But its owners were always the owners of Potterne – the bishops of Salisbury – and it was to Potterne church that its inhabitants resorted on Sundays, using the raised causeway alongside the present lane. In Potterne church Worton and Marston residents each had a portion reserved for them, where they worshipped and for which they were responsible. Only in 1843, five years before the Wesleyan chapel, was a parish church built in Worton for the two communities, and then it was sited several hundred metres west of the village so that it could be convenient for Marston people also. The chapel closed, but has reopened as an independent church dedicated to St. Brithwold.

Worton is a linear village, strung along a busy (although officially a minor) road, which acts as a by-pass around Devizes for motorists from the south and west. Unlike many such villages, however, its *raison d'être* seems not to have been the road, which as a route linking Market Lavington with Melksham probably dates only from turnpiking in 1769; the road is not marked on a map of 1675, and before the turnpike it was described as 'miry and foundrous.' It was the brainchild of the troublesome Westbury trust, and its turnpiking was resisted by Worton people (fearing the tolls no doubt) who claimed that a good horse causeway already existed. Speeding heavy traffic along it in recent decades has become the

bugbear of life in Worton.

The choice of site was probably dictated by the terrain. The parish consists largely of poorly drained, heavy Kimmeridge clay, and the village is perched on a slight eminence, surrounded

by an almost fenland landscape. The houses south of the road (from Park Farm westwards) have a back lane running along behind them, and so regular are many of the property boundaries on a map of 1656 that this area of the village must have been planned and laid out as a single operation, presumably in the medieval period. Its form is reminiscent of the planted villages laid out on their estates by great monastic landowners such as Glastonbury, and suggests that here, as on their large property of Bishops Cannings, the bishops of Salisbury were founding villages on new sites.

The village is first mentioned by name in a document of 1173. The name means 'farmstead with a herb-garden or kitchen garden,' and so perhaps the original nucleus was a community with this specialised function within the episcopal manor of Potterne. By 1334 Worton was assessed for tax at about two-thirds the total for the rest of Potterne (excluding Marston) and in 1377 another tax roll suggests a total population of 120-150. The map of 1656 marks about forty houses in the village, and so accommodating perhaps 150-200 people. Between 1801 and 1971 the population rarely fell outside the 300-400 range, although a 1970s housing development was built south of the road over a field belonging to John Gaisford on a map of 1735, and was accordingly named Gaisford Chase. This and subsequent new housing, Mill Head and Cedar Close, have boosted the total, which exceeded 600 in 1991.

Exploiting the waterlogged clays must always have presented problems. Traces of medieval ridge and furrow cultivation, and of hedgerows formed when they were consolidated, may be seen on either side of the road west of the village. Some show the slightly curved 'aratra'

profile characteristic of former open-field furlongs, and they run back on the north side to a long regular boundary which would have separated the field from the meadows beyond. By 1656 most of this area had been taken out of the open fields and enclosed; although Furlong Field (north of the village) and South Brook Field (south of the village) remained open, along with Worton Common on higher ground to the south-east. By the nineteenth century

enclosure was complete, and in 1841 over 85% of the agricultural land was described as meadow (i.e. pasture). Dairy farming continued to be the principal land use until recently, but now the milking herds which used to stroll along the main road have become a memory. Park Farm, a large timber-framed house, is the most impressive of the farmhouses, and Marsh Farm, near the Poulshot turning, presents a modest but ornate front to the road. Worton Mill, new in 1855 as a corn mill, but on the site of an earlier fulling mill, is an imposing landmark west of the village; it continued working until about 1970. No trace remains of the tollhouse which stood in 1812 by the Poulshot turning, but Turnpike Cottage survives at the east end of the village by the Potterne turn (known as Cuckolds Green). A village hall was built in 1911, and was originally known as the Library Hall, because it was partly funded by Andrew Carnegie, the American philanthropist who was responsible for promoting many of England's public libraries (including Calne in Wiltshire).

Although not the most picturesque village on the claylands Worton has a very strong and friendly community spirit, with an annual newcomers party, a vibrant local pub (Rose and Crown), and a modern primary school. Its inhabitants boast a wide range of attainments and interesting occupations, working for the most part away from the village. The principal business still operating, from its garage in the High Street is Bodmans Coaches, begun in 1922 by the grandfather of the present proprietor; Bodman's vehicles are a familiar sight throughout Wiltshire. Worton shares with Marston its church and school, but the two are also fostering other links through a kind of twinning organization which restored the footpath between them as a millennium project.

Perhaps the most remarkable Worton resident was the affable Frederick Kempster (1889-1918). Dubbed the English giant, he stood 2.56m (8ft 4½in) tall and weighed 171.5 kilos (27 stone). He lived intermittently at Grange Lodge with his sister and brother-in-law between 1911-16, entering the house on hands and knees, lighting cigarettes from streetlamps, shaking hands with people at upstairs windows, and playing darts in the pub while kneeling.

NOTES (location: ST9857; area: 396ha; population (2001): 586)

General: VCH 7, 207-17 passim; Worton and Marston Domesday Book 2000, 2001.

Church: Maggs, F H C, History of Christ Church, Worton and Marston (1841-1991), 1991;

1656 map: WSRO Ch Comm Maps 42; Kempster: Alexander-Jones, C, An introduction to

Frederick the English giant, [c.1999].