A Brief History of Great Barton

The origins of the village now known as Great Barton date back at least to Saxon times, when the settlement was known as Bertune, a name thought by some to relate to the production of barley. The settlement lay on the ancient trackway - still identifiable with the present Green Lane passing the Church - that brought travellers from beyond Ixworth to Bury St. Edmunds, and passed near to the lake now known as Barton Mere, where there was evidence of early settlement. The Saxons held a local parliament (Hundred Moot) at Cattishall, which continued after the Norman invasion as a court of the King's Justices.

Early documents record that around 950 AD much of the land was acquired by the Monastery of Bury St. Edmunds, an association that would continue until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539. The Domesday Book of 1086, compiled after the Norman conquest, describes the village of Bertuna, at the time of Edward the Confessor and after the conquest, as a manor of 5 carucates of land (about 600 acres). At that time some 50 acres were held by the church.

In the 1200s a stone church dedicated to the Holy Innocents was built by monks of the Abbey, on the site of an earlier wooden structure. At that time it would have been the centre of the community. The earliest part was the chancel of the present church, the font of which still exists. However, much of the church as we see it today was not built until the 14th and 15th centuries. Manyfeatures of the church are worthy of investigation, for example the impressive windows (although most of the glass dates to the early 1800s), some medieval pews with fine bench ends and the single hammer beam roof with its richly carved flying angels - all but one headless due to desecration by parliamentarians around 1640. The fine tower contains Tudor bricks in addition to flint and stone, and the weather vane may be that known to have been repaired in 1793. The sundial over the South porch warns us: *periunt et imputantur* – they perish and are reckoned.

The site of the church, being far from the present centre of the village, is difficult to explain; perhaps an early settlement adjacent to it relocated, though there is no evidence that this was a consequence of the Black Death, as is sometimes supposed. More likely is that when the Abbey disposed of land to the north of the church the focus of development naturally shifted. The present road to the church was not built until the 1800s, on what was previously only a footpath.

From this time up to the dissolution, villagers would have served the Abbot as Lord of the Manor, with each tending his own strips of land for growing cereals, legumes and roots crops, and rearing pigs and cattle. Barton Mere would have supplied fish for the monastery.

At the dissolution, the Manor of Great Barton passed from the Abbey to the Crown. We know that in 1554 it was held by Thomas Audley, a nephew of the Chancellor of England. Barton Hall was built by Robert Audley in 1572. The manor, rectory and lands in the parish remained in the Audley family until 1704, when they were acquired by Thomas Folkes, on whose death they passed to Sir Thomas Hanmer through marriage

to his daughter Elizabeth Folkes. When Sir Thomas died in 1746 they passed to his nephew Sir William Bunbury, who died in 1764. The Bunbury family also held the manor of Mildenhall and the two estates continued to be held by the family into the 20[th]century.

Several Bunburys rose to prominence. Henry William Bunbury (1750-1811) was a famous caricaturist, some of whose paintings, until recently, could be found in the Manor House Museum in Bury St Edmunds. His son, Sir Henry Edward Bunbury (1778-1860), latterly Lt General, was responsible for much of the building on the estate, including cottages in The Street, the almshouses and the public house; to him fell the task of informing Napoleon of his exile to St Helena following his defeat at the battle of Waterloo. Sir Thomas Charles Bunbury, Henry Edward's uncle, owned the racehorse Diomed, the winner of the first Derby; however he had had to concede the name of the race to Lord Derby, by losing the toss of a coin for the honour. There are several monuments to members of the Bunbury family within Holy Innocents Church and in the graveyard; the last was that of Sir Henry Bunbury, who died in Mildenhall in 1930

In the 14th century a second ancient manor – that of Necton – was sold by the Abbey to the Cotton family of Cambridge. Later it was acquired by the Conyers, who gave their name to the present Conyers Green. Necton Hall was situated west of the present Livermere Road and its enclosing moat has been revealed in aerial photographs. The last building on the site was demolished in 1941.

In more recent times two events contributed to the transformation of the appearance of the village in a way would have made it unrecognisable to anyone living in the eighteenth century. The first was the redevelopment of the road system that began in 1821, the second the destruction of Barton Hall by fire in 1914.

The turnpiking of the Bury to Norwich road in 1769 resulted in the rerouting of traffic away from Green Lane (running past Holy Innocents Church) to what is now The Avenue; this road then passed just south of Barton Hall and took two sharp turns through the village before continuing eastwards towards Ixworth. In order to 'empark' his property and give him privacy, Sir Henry Edward

had the road structure altered by private Acts of Parliament at his own expense. The extensive road development programme altered the alignments of Mill Road, Livermere Road, Fornham Road and, particularly, the Bury to Norwich turnpike; the last change created a new road (now the A143) from the present junction with The Avenue directly to and through the centre of the village and beyond to join the original road to Ixworth. The realignment explains, for example, why the cottages behind the post office and the old forge now appear isolated. The track now known as The Park was the means of access from the Hall to the farm and laundry for exclusive use of the Bunbury family.

Barton Hall, by 1914, was an impressive three-storey building containing extensive oak panelling, many valuable paintings and items of furniture, and a fine library. The fire began in an upper floor around midnight on Saturday 17 January 1914, following a party; however the precise cause is unknown. By the time the fire

engine arrived from Bury the fire had been raging for over an hour, and the well that supplied the Hall proved too deep to extract water. After the fire only parts of the walls remained standing; today fragments of the masonry can still be seen. The event would mark the end of the Bunburys' influence in Great Barton.

A consequence of the fire was the sale of the Barton Estate in July 1915. The sale catalogue included 100 lots and contained photographs of some of the estate buildings, many of which had been built in the time of Sir Henry Edward Bunbury. Included was the old windmill that stood near the present Mill Road but has since been demolished. In the course of time the parkland – later Hall Park – became available for development. This and further developments at

Conyers Green have resulted in a large sprawling village, many of whose inhabitants commute to Bury and, increasingly, Cambridge, Ipswich and elsewhere. Having in its history experienced fluctuating prosperity, Great Barton is once again a thriving and desirable village, although there are threats that it may succumb to the ever expanding Bury and Moreton Hall developments. The increasing volume of traffic thundering through the village on the A143 will only be resolved by major road developments in the future.

The Great Barton History Society maintains an extensive archive of documents relating to the village (from which the above notes have been drawn), and promotes an interest in local history by holding regular meetings addressed by prominent local speakers.

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