

Long Wittenham: A 'Walkabout' Guide



Second Edition 1997

The Long Wittenham Local History Group

Acknowledgements

Old friends will notice a considerable difference in this - the ninth edition of 'The Chronicle'.

Janet Haylett is to be much congratulated on writing such an interesting and informative booklet to accompany what, we are sure, will prove an equally rewarding 'walkabout' for visitors coming to our village. We very much hope to find many outlets for our guide outside our own Long Wittenham History Group. It is still, though, being printed under 'The Chronicle' banner.

Once again I have to thank Linda Francis whose sterling work pasting-up, year after year, produces such a quality magazine. It requires a great deal of expertise and Linda never fails us.

Nandi Ablett, a local artist, has kindly allowed us to use her charming illustration of the Cross for the front cover. Thankyou, Nandi.

Clare Owen, who has produced the clean, typed copy from the much edited muddle that she was originally confronted with, is also to be congratulated. It is not an easy task and without her input there would be no 'Chronicle' this year.

Elizabeth McDougall

Editor

September, 1996

Welcome to Long Wittenham

We do hope you will enjoy your stroll around our peaceful Thames-side village. Many have walked along the High Street before you - Saxons, Romans, Vikings, Normans - they have all contributed to Long Wittenham's rich history. It is this story we have pleasure in sharing with you now.

If you have time you may like to read the Introduction first. This will give you some information about the village before you start. A booklet - 'A BRIEF HISTORY OF LONG WITTENHAM 1800 - 1920' is available from our village shop. It tells the story of life in a rural community during that period.



Introduction

As long as there have been people living in England this area has been inhabited. A Stone Age axe, found in the River Thames not far away, is proof of this early occupation.

In those days there would have been wild animals to hunt, a plentiful supply of wood and fertile land for growing crops. By the Bronze Age there were communities in the vicinity, and later a large Iron Age hill-fort at Castle Hill - on the Wittenham Clumps – which probably lasted for several centuries. It had to be well defended as the Thames marked the boundary between several warring tribes.

It can be cold and windy up on the Hill, and when things were a bit more settled the opportunity was taken to move down to a more sheltered position. Although most of the time it was safe to farm over a large area, a defensive enclave was still considered necessary. The rivers Thames and Thame provided a natural, protective barrier on two sides. Dyke Hills, an impressive earth wall, was built to complete these natural defences. Parts of these works still survive and can be seen from the footpaths between Day's Lock (Little Wittenham) and Dorchester.

The Romans met with little resistance when they marched into this part of the Thames Valley. They based their settlement at Dorchester. The defensive camps, now no longer needed, were replaced by small farmsteads spread over the surrounding countryside.

Over the next few centuries other peoples arrived. In the 5th century it was the Saxons, including Witta. 'Ham' can mean a river meadow, and so this area became known as Witta's Ham. Invasions by Mercians from the Midlands in the 7th and 8th centuries, and by

Vikings in the 9th, were absorbed by the local people who remained as a Saxon community. The excavations of the Saxon burial grounds at Saxon's Heath (on the road to Didcot) in the mid 19th century indicated a community of some size operating from the 5th to the 7th century.

During this time, and indeed up to the 10th century, Witta's Ham would not have been the village you see today but merely a collection of 'hamlets' containing perhaps four or five farm units. Each unit would have comprised one large dwelling house, plus several smaller buildings which could be used for the storage of animals or as workshops for weaving, etc. These buildings were not permanent. They tended to last for a generation or so before the timbers sank into the ground and started to rot. A replacement structure would then have had to be built close by with construction commencing before the final destruction of the old building. In this way sound timbers could be re-used, the settlement moving around every generation or so within the same plot. It is clear that there were several sites of habitation around the present village.

This progression is difficult to follow using crop mark evidence. Aerial photographs do seem to indicate that the village street may at one time have been at right angles to its present orientation.

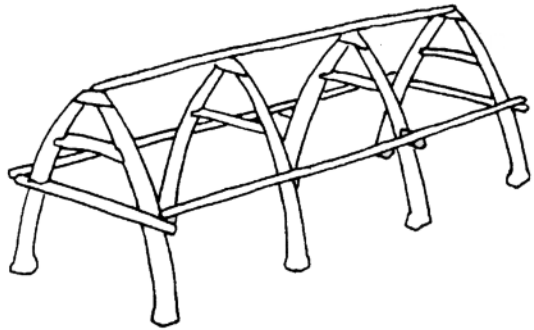
In the eleventh century the Saxons gave way to the Normans. After his victory at the Battle of Hastings, William the Conqueror marched to Wallingford, crossing the Thames there before continuing towards London. This must, no doubt, have caused concern to our village population.

The Domesday survey of 1086 shows that Queen Edith, wife of Edward the Confessor, was Lady of the Manor in Long Wittenham until she died in 1075 (see 'The Chronicle' No.2 for more details of

Queen Edith). After her death William gave the Manor to his cousin Walter Gifford, who had come over with him from France.

During the next two centuries the village probably began to take the shape we know today. The old Saxon church was replaced with a Norman structure on the same site begun in about 1120 and built of stone brought from Caen. A new technique of joining wood together with mortice and tenon joints allowed houses to be built with timbers above the ground ensuring that they kept dry and did not rot as had happened previously. At last there could be permanent housing.

In those early days cruck-framed houses were easiest to construct, their resilience confirmed by the continuing existence of seven cruck-framed buildings in the village which may be 600 or more years old.



There is evidence that there was a major reorganisation of the land following the Norman Conquest, resulting in the open field system that so often surrounds medieval villages. Long Wittenham had two main open fields, the North Field and the West Field, dating probably from about that time until Enclosure in the early nineteenth century.

The open fields required a sizeable and well-organised community to work them co-operatively. There had to be agreement by everyone about which crops to grow and which fields should be grazed. These decisions would be made each year at the Manorial Court attended by the Lord of the Manor, his representatives, and all the local landholders - gentlemen farmers, yeomen and husbandmen.

After Walter Gifford, the manorial rights of our village passed to several Earls, thus allowing it to be known as Earls' Wittenham. One famous Lord of the Manor, Gilbert, Earl of Hereford and Gloucester, was called Gilbert the Red. He lived from 1254 until 1295, and was both a friend and an enemy of Henry III and his son, Edward I. (You can read more about Gilbert in 'The Chronicle' No. 6.)

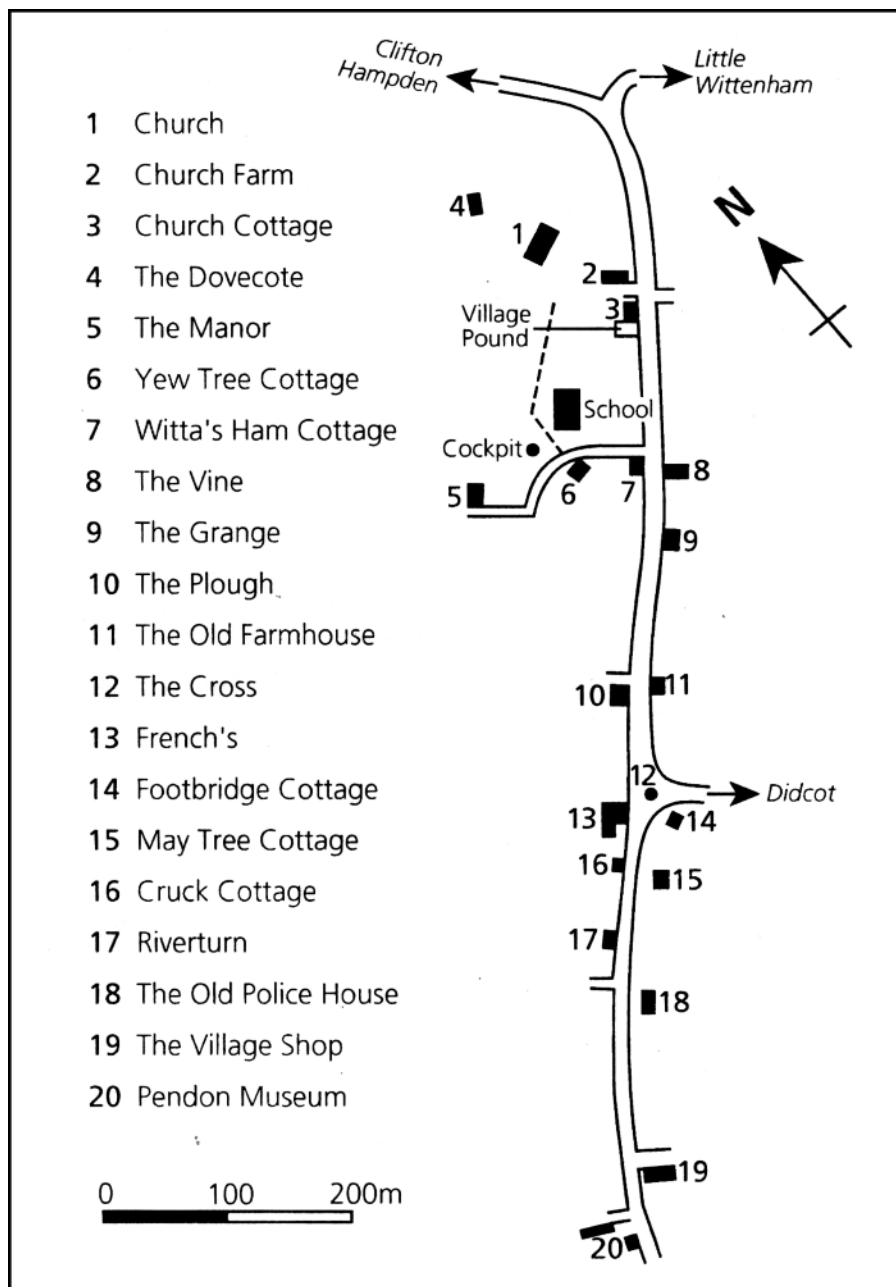
Life continued uneventfully for many centuries, with the way of life governed by seasons, weather and harvests. Long Wittenham was a good size, probably about 250 inhabitants, although this would fluctuate as the plague and other pestilences took their toll.

There were some events of national importance which stirred the village from its quiet existence. One such was when William of Orange marched up from the South in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. William camped at East Hendred, passing through Long Wittenham on his way to Wallingford, and then to London. That must have given the villagers quite a fright and much to talk about during the following weeks.

A big change came with the enclosure of the open fields into smaller pieces of land bounded by hedges or ditches. This new arrangement allowed more progressive farming methods to be used but, as ever, it was the poorer people who came off worst, losing their land and rights of common grazing to the bigger farmers. In Long Wittenham Enclosure took place mainly between 1809 and 1812, much later than in many other places.

As you walk around the village you will see a variety of building materials and styles reflecting the slow but inevitable changes that have made Long Wittenham the place it is today.





We will begin with the Church. If you are starting at the other end of the village simply follow the walk in reverse.

1. The Church



1990

Standing on the same site as its Saxon predecessor, St. Mary's was begun around 1120. The stone was brought from Caen, a reminder of the Norman influence of the time. Originally there was only a nave and chancel. The side aisles were added in later centuries in diverse styles, which can be seen in the different shaped pillars inside.

The chapel, now used as the vestry, was built in 1295. Tradition has it that this chapel was built as a memorial to Gilbert the Red, who was one time Lord of the Manor and who, it was believed, was a Crusader. In fact, although Gilbert 'took the Cross' - that is he said he would join the Crusade of the Lord Edward (son of Henry III), he did not actually go to the Holy Land. You can read more about this 'Wannabe' Crusader in 'The Chronicle' No. 6.

The three main features of interest in the Church are the lead font, the piscina in the North aisle pillar near the pulpit and the small stone effigy in the vestry.

Around the middle section of the lead font can be seen thirty bishops as well as some fine pattern detail. It is one of a handful of fonts that survived the ravages of the Roundheads in the Civil War, who melted them down for recasting as ammunition. Fortunately, the churchwardens of the time had the foresight to protect the font by encasing it in wood. It was only rediscovered, safe and sound, in the mid-1800s.

The monument in the vestry, which may or may not have been a memorial to Gilbert the Red (the ‘Wannabe’ Crusader), is the smallest sculptured monument in the country.

The tower dates from the 15th century. There are six bells, which were re-cast in 1765. Recently the sundial on the tower has been restored. You can read more about the church in the guidebook, available in the church.

Leaving the church, walk back down Church Lane so that you can look at both Church Farm and Church Cottage.

2. Church Farm

The oldest part of this building is the low brick central section, dating from the mid-15th century. The Tudor addition is jettied on both sides and may have been used as a meeting house or possibly had some semi-official use. For many years it was home to the Prowse family. William Prowse was vicar from 1617 until 1644. His descendants became local gentry and landholders until about 1890.



Church Farm

3. Church Cottage

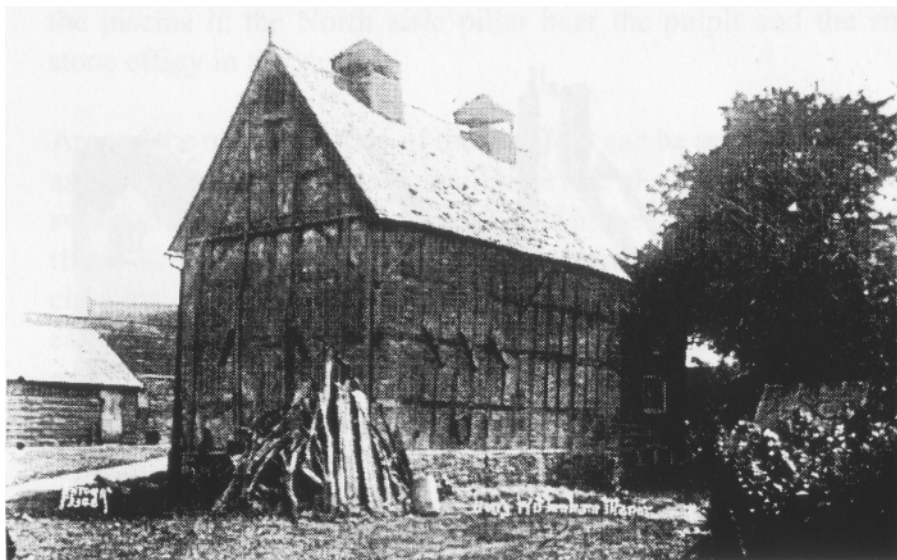
The cruck frame is very clear on the east end of this thatched cottage. Originally it was one large, open hall house but in more recent times it was divided into three cottages.

Next to Church Cottage is the village Pound where stray animals could be put until claimed by their owners. The memorial plaque is to 'Curly' Didcock, who served on the parish council for many years.

Just beyond Pound you will see Church Farm Cottage. It was an early house of Box Frame construction, later divided into three cottages. Probably a house of some importance in its time, it is unusual in being at 90° to the High Street.

Return to the church, but this time go beyond it so that you can look over the wall on the right and admire the Dovecote.

4. The Dovecote



1950s

This was probably one of the largest dovecotes in the area. Dating from Tudor times it would have housed hundreds of doves or pigeons.

In the days before freezers and canning, obtaining fresh meat in the winter was always a problem. There was not enough fodder to overwinter all the animals, so many were slaughtered and the meat salted or smoked for later use. Pigeons were a welcome change from a diet of salted or smoked meat, and they also provided fresh eggs. The droppings were another source of manure for the fields.

Now make your way down through the churchyard where generations of our villagers are buried. The oldest gravestone (now in the vestry) is in memory of Elizabeth Sadler who died in 1682. However, many people before her were buried in this quiet place. Enjoy its peace. Down by the wall Robert Gibbings, well-known author and engraver, is buried. The

cottage he owned, Footbridge Cottage, is described further on.

As you leave the churchyard through the Kissing Gate, you come to the old village Cockpit, a dip in what used to be the Village Green. Cockfighting has been illegal in England for nearly 150 years, but one of the very old villagers (who died in 1987 aged 99) could remember his father talking about cockfighting in the Cockpit.

On your right is The Manor.

5. The Manor

Long Wittenham is rather confusing in that there have been two houses both claiming to be The Manor House. Until it burned down in 1965 the old Manor Farm was called the Manor House. Very often two brothers of the leading Long Wittenham family would live in these two large houses.

The house you see on your right is old in origin, although most of what you can see dates from an 18th century rebuilding. Formerly called Willingtons, this old house was indeed a manor house, where the leading family



*Old part of the Manor
formerly Willingtons*

lived and where the annual Manorial Court took place. All the parish business was transacted during these meetings. Officers, such as the Constable and the Overseers of the Poor, were appointed and a programme of crops and grazing drawn up. The Lot Meadows and some fishing rights were allocated by drawing lots, and disputes were settled.

Keeping the school on your left return to the High Street along School Lane. past The Old Stable and Yew Tree Cottage.

6. Yew Tree Cottage



This interesting house was originally of cruck frame construction, although subsequent alterations have changed its external appearance considerably. In the 1830s it was shown as two houses joined together. By the 1880s it had become one house. For many years this was the home and premises of one of the local bakers, the

large oven being in the front of the house. The Easons, who lived here at that time, were local, having come from Clifton Hampden.

The best known of the ‘baking’ Easons was Tom, who was born in the village in 1866 and married Edith Smith the schoolmistress. Living so close to the school it was convenient to graze their horse on the school playground! It was stabled in what is now ‘The Old Stable’, which had a loft for hay where the flour could also be kept. The delivery cart was housed here.

In the days before cottages had their own cooking ranges the baker would cook joints of meat for special occasions. They would also bake already mixed cakes for one penny.

Tom and Edith’s son Richard became Sub-Warden of Radley College in 1952, no doubt benefitting from his parents’ scholarly interests. Tom was a governor of Long Wittenham School until his death in 1950. Another branch of the Eason family were blacksmiths and ran a blacksmith’s shop behind the family home at 37, High Street, for nearly a century.

Back onto the High Street, you will see Witta’s Ham Cottage and The Vine.

7. Witta’s Ham Cottage

This used to consist of three separate cottages and lay closer to the High Street. In the 1960s it was taken down and rebuilt further back from the road.



C 1954



1983, after rebuilding

The middle cottage was the home of the original Wittenham Co-operative Industrial and Provident Society, which was run for many years by Robert Holmes and his wife Sophia. Later the 'Co-op' moved a few doors up the road (towards Clifton Hampden) on the far side of the school playground. Sophia and her daughter continued to run a shop selling sweets as well as draperies until the 1920s. The 'Co-op', by then part of the Oxford Co-operative Society, also flourished and these premises remained as a shop until its closure in 1975. You can read more about the shops and trades of the village in 'The Chronicle' No. 3.

8. The Vine

The oldest part of The Vine is the thatched wing at the back. In the 1840s James Kingham ran a butcher's shop here. He is remembered in the name of the lane which runs along the side of the pub - Kingdom Lane. A few years later Thomas Tame, wheelright and carpenter, started a beer shop at Vine Cottage. The Tame family continued this business as well as running the beer shop. As the beer trade became more important, the newer brick building was added,



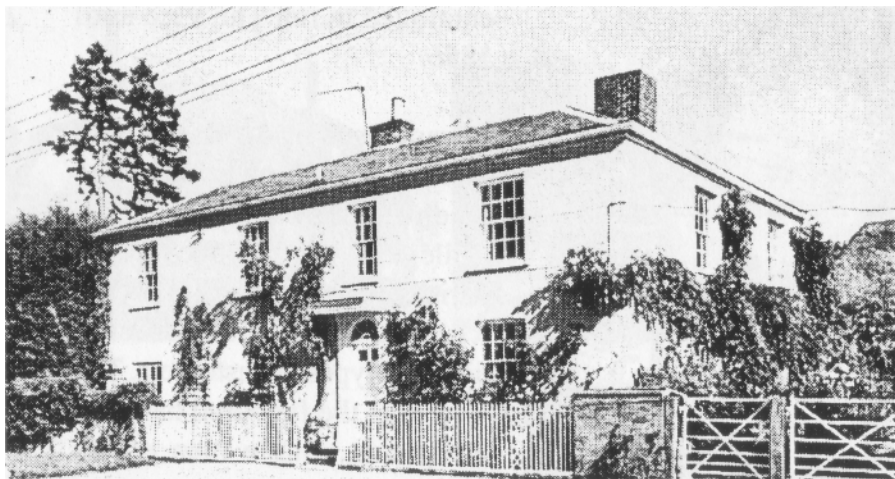
probably around 1850 to 1860. The Tame family continued to run The Vine until 1956.

It was leased by Morlands until 1970 when they bought the freehold from St. John's College. With five pubs in the parish to choose from, each had its own style and attracted different types of customers. The Vine was the favoured haunt of the young, single men of the village.

Walking towards the Cross (located on the bend in the road going towards Didcot) notice 'The Grange' on your left.

9. The Grange

The Hewett family lived in the village in the last century and into the early part of this. The two sides of the family, the one wheelwrights and carpenters, the other gentlemen farmers, both played a big part in village life. The Grange was built in 1820 for the richer, farming Hewetts. In 1861 Henry Hewett, a farmer owning 200 acres and employing seven labourers and three boys, lived here. One of his sons, Stephen Pithouse Hewett, continued to live here with two of his sisters, who were unmarried, until his death in 1939, after which that branch of the family died out. Little Laura Hewett, who died when only twelve years old, is said to haunt The Grange.



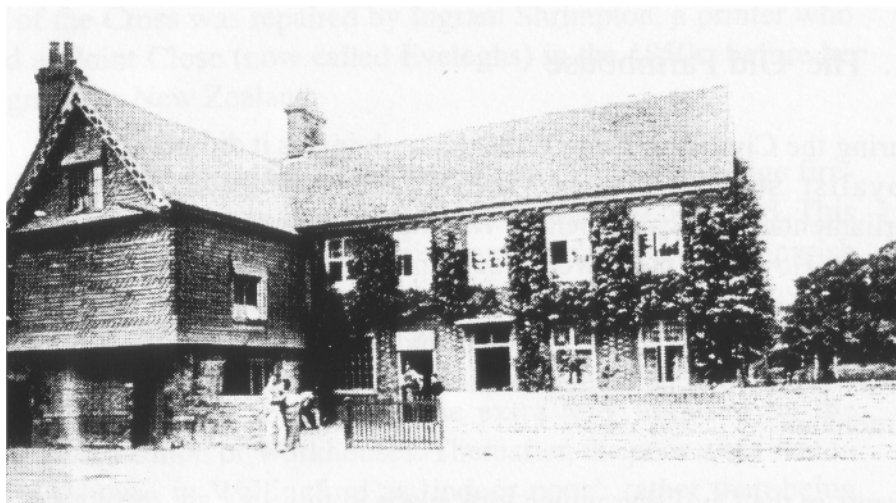
Two later occupants - the Misses Roxborough - came to the village in 1950. They both died in 1973. You can read more about these good ladies in 'The Chronicle' No. 7.

Just before The Cross, on the right hand side, you will see another of the village pubs, The Plough.

10. The Plough

A butchery with an attendant slaughter house was the original trade carried on at these premises. The animals were tethered to a ring in one of the trees in the back courtyard to await their fate.

But alongside the butcher's shop an alehouse grew up, although the dating of this is not clear. The fine front of The Plough probably dates from the end of the 17th century. By 1875 it was in need of major repairs. The schedule for these repairs shows that as well as the butcher's shop and slaughterhouse there was also an apple room and dairy.



Early 1900s

The jettied part of the building, abutting onto the High Street, is a later addition. A blocked-up door leading to the shop can be seen at the front of this. The Plough Inn was popular with business people as, until the 1950s, it was the only pub in the village to hold a spirit as well as a beer licence. The Plough was also the haunt of farmers; this was where they conducted their business.

For many years it was run by the Chambers family. Annie Chambers was famous for her rook suppers and tripe dinners. The Vicar entertained the senior members of the choir to meat teas there. In the 1920s The Plough was a favourite haunt of fishing parties, and attracted a well-heeled clientele who used to be collected from Didcot railway station to spend two weeks of summer pleasure by the Thames. Today The Plough has pleasant gardens reaching down to the river. The slaughterhouse is now the dining room.

Another house worth looking at - The Old Farmhouse - is on the opposite side of the High Street from The Plough.

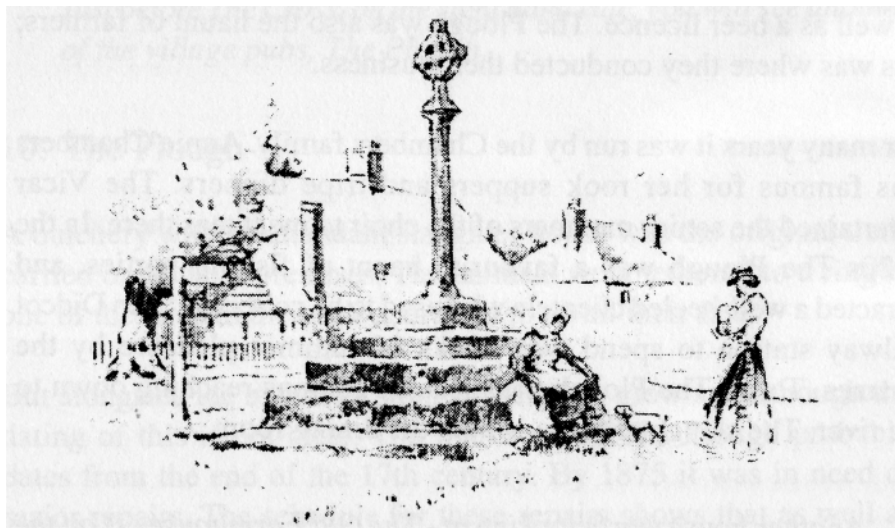
11. The Old Farmhouse

During the Civil War, Long Wittenham - lying as it did between the Royalist strongholds of Oxford and Abingdon, and the Parliamentary encampment at Wallingford - probably tried to stay neutral. However, there would certainly have been troops passing through the village and a good deal of unwelcome activity. Legend has it that Oliver Cromwell rested under the mulberry tree in the garden here while he waited to attend his niece's wedding at Little Wittenham.

Events in the Civil War which took place in this area are recounted in 'The Chronicle' No. 8.

From The Plough it is only a short distance to The Cross.

12. The Cross



The base of the village Cross dates from the 7th century. St. Birinus, who brought Christianity to this region, preached here. The upper

part of the Cross was repaired by Ingram Shrimpton, a printer who lived at Point Close (now called Eveleghs) in the 1850s, before he emigrated to New Zealand.

The small shed behind the Cross was used to house the village fire-engine. The cost of building this - in 1850 - was just over £18. This was paid by the Vestry, an organisation which served as a parish council does today until these organisations were established by law in 1894. The Vestry had owned a number of houses in the parish in which the very poorest lived. Between 1848 and 1850 these were sold in order to be able to pay the extra levy imposed by the Wallingford Union of Workhouses. Thereafter, the poor were sent to the workhouse in Wallingford as 'indoor poor', rather than being supported by the village. As well as paying the levy, the money paid for the fire-engine house and also helped some villagers to emigrate.

Just down the High Street from the Cross, on the right, you will come to French's, a large thatched property.

13. French's

The French family lived in Long and Little Wittenham from the early 16th to the early 18th century. They were an important farming family but are best remembered for John French who was martyred in 1530 because he 'believed not the body of Christ, flesh, blood and bone, to be in the sacrament' and that 'he has not confessed to any Priest of long time'.

By the early years of this century the surviving property was a rather derelict farmhouse and several barns. These were converted into a large, comfortable house in 1906 by Mr. Hayes from London, who initially came down only at weekends. Later it was the main residence



of his family. They stayed there until 1943. In 1966 the house was divided into two; French's and French's Riverside.

On the far side of the Cross Triangle, across the stream, is Footbridge Cottage, already referred to.

14. Footbridge Cottage

Tucked away behind the Cross is this small cottage, home to Robert Gibbings from 1955 until his death in 1958. Robert Gibbings was an artist, author and engraver of considerable talent. From 1924 until 1933 he was owner of the Golden Cockerel Press, which became well known for its fine typography and illustrations - 'The Four Gospels' being a famous example.

One of the authors published by the Press was A. E. Coppard who lived next door, at May Tree Cottage, from about 1927 until 1931. After he had sold The Golden Cockerel Press, Robert Gibbings was

a lecturer in typography and book production at Reading University for many years. His books, which include 'Sweet Thames Run Softly' and 'Till I End My Song' are full of stories about Long Wittenham and the villagers he knew.

Robert Gibbings is buried in the churchyard, his headstone appropriately carved with his own simple device - a crossed quill pen and engraving tool. It was cut, at his own request, by the Oxford sculptor Michael Black.

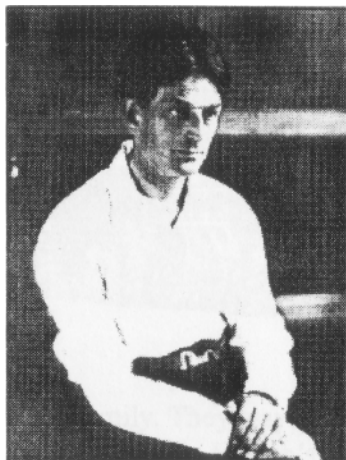
Next to Footbridge Cottage, following down the High Street, stands Maytree Cottage.

15. May Tree Cottage



1950s

Originally of cruck construction, this old cottage was modernised in the 17th century to a box frame, which gave more headroom on the upper floor. A charming building in its own right, May Tree Cottage achieved fame as the home of the author A. E. Coppard from 1927 until about 1931. Coppard wrote initially for the Golden Cockerel Press. His stories are very atmospheric and he achieved considerable success as a writer. His 'Selected Tales', written in 1946, was the chosen Book of the Month for the American Book Club.



More or less opposite May Tree Cottage you can see Cruck Cottage.

16. Cruck Cottage



This is believed to be the oldest house in South Oxfordshire, possibly 800 years old. The cruck frame is lasting well, following careful restoration work by the present owner in 1974.

Originally this was a single storey, open hall house, without a chimney, which was added during the reign of Elizabeth 1.

Thatch is a common roofing material in this area. Until the coming of the railways, which made transport of Welsh slate much easier, all the village houses would have been thatched.

Continuing down the street you come to Riverturn, a Victorian house. Very few were built during this period in Long Wittenham.

17. Riverturn



1900s

This was a general store and also, later, a bakery from the 1890s until the 1950s. Mr. Charles Bidmead was the first proprietor. He was a cycle agent and repairer and many of the village children learned to ride a bike by hiring one for a few pence an hour.

On the left hand side, as you walk towards the present Village Shop, you will see The Old Police House.

18. The Old Police House

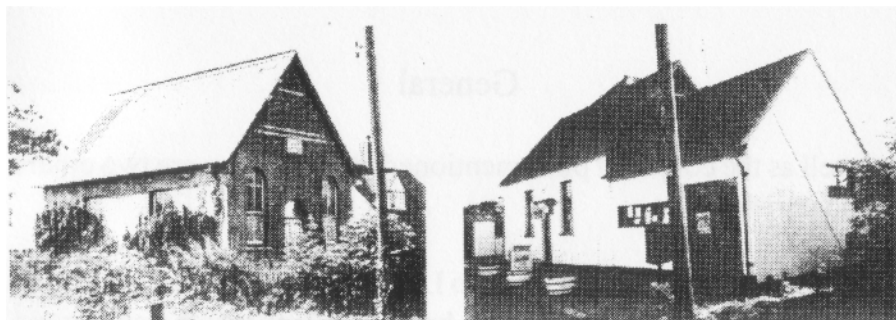
The office of Village Constable is an ancient one. He would have been appointed at the Manorial Court and his duties would have included keeping the peace and looking after the village bull.

In 1856 the appointment of proper policemen in villages was required by law. The local officer's duties would normally have included minor infringements of the law - such as the arrest of lads who had drunk too much and were making a nuisance of themselves. The local 'Bobby' was, however, also a member of the village community and would occasionally join in the drinking and poaching that were part of country life! The Police House was purpose built in 1907 and remained the Police Station and Police House until 1947.

You are now nearly at the Village Shop and Post Office.

19. The Village Shop

This used to be the local Methodist Chapel, where the less conformist members of the village would meet on Sundays and sing loudly. Although the Vicar did his best to keep the villagers strictly 'Church People', there was a good congregation at the Chapel until the early 1950s when dwindling numbers forced it to close down. It opened as the Village Shop and Post Office in 1960.



The Methodist Chapel in the 1950s (left), later the Village Shop (right)

Continuing past the shop you will find Pendon Museum. You are almost at the end of the village - the west end.

20. Pendon Museum

The original building (which had to be pulled down and re-erected as a family dwelling a few years ago) was built as a working men's pub in about 1850. It was known as 'The Three Poplars' and was run for many years by Christopher Winkfield. He was also a corn dealer and carrier. In 1954 it closed as a pub and became a youth hostel with Roye England as warden.

Roye's hobby of making scale models of buildings began to take up more and more time and space and in 1964 the youth hostel closed and Pendon Museum opened. Today it houses a superb collection of model buildings, trains and landscapes, and is well worth a visit.

Perhaps you will now understand why our village is called 'Long Wittenham'; you have walked nearly half a mile from where you started - the Church. We do hope you have enjoyed strolling through our past.



General

As well as the couple of pubs mentioned already, there are two others in the parish:

‘The Machine Man’ (off the road to Little Wittenham) and the ‘Barley Mow’ (by the Clifton Hampden bridge), all of which serve good food; ‘The Machine Man’, ‘Plough’ and ‘Barley Mow’ also offer accommodation.

Bed and breakfast accommodation is also available at three other locations:

‘Witta’s Ham Cottage’ (mentioned earlier) - Mrs Jill Mellor can be contacted on 01865-407686.

‘Appletree’ (located just beyond the Pendon Museum) offers single room, B & B, non-smoking accommodation - ring Mrs Elizabeth McDougall on 01865-407416.

‘Rook’s Orchard’, a charming old house in Little Wittenham. Ring Mrs Deborah Welfare on 01865-407765.