

Transcription of a talk given by Walter Brown
in Peasemore Church in June 1996 on

SOME EARLY HISTORY OF PEASEMORE

Ladies and Gentlemen

Peasemore has an ancient history. We have some old archaeological sites around us here which go back for some four thousand years. Very little has been recorded about them and so I will tell you what we do know. But four thousand years is quite a long time and you must allow a bit of mythology to creep in here and there.

While I was considering Peasemore and the district around us, it struck me what tremendous changes we have seen in our village here during this present century. In the early part of the century Peasemore and the way of life here had changed comparatively little since the Middle Ages. Today in this last decade it has changed out of all recognition. I thought therefore that it might be of interest if I mixed in a bit of modern history with the old.

There are still a few of us around here, somewhat ancient members of the parish, who have lived here long enough to have witnessed all these changes. In particular I would mention Stephen and Donald Lindsay and Geoff Jacobs. We have all delved into the history of Peasemore and tonight, with the help of several others, we have arranged this little exhibition of old photographs and old maps of the parish. We sometimes have a bit of a gossip about the old days and so we remember when Peasemore had no mains water here. Households got their water out of a bucket drawn up from the well. We had about fifteen wells here in the village and, as we are pretty high up here, all our wells were at least a hundred and sixty foot deep; and so it was quite a tedious business drawing up the family water supply day after day. But at least the water when it came up was cold, clear, sparkling, beautiful water to drink compared with this chlorinated stuff we get out of a tap today. But there were exceptions. I am glad to say they were pretty rare, but once in a while the springs would fall very low and then it was a different matter. In those days nearly everybody who lived in the village worked in the parish; and during those drought years there would be a rush home at the end of the day's work in order to draw the first bucket from the well. Because the first bucket came up reasonably clear, succeeding buckets came up cloudy and chalky, what we used to call studley - a word you don't hear any longer today. In those dry summers we even had to send water carts, - horse drawn of course - all the way to Boxford in order to get additional water from the stream there. Back in those days there was no electricity here. Houses were lit by oil lamps and candles. There were no electric cookers, which everyone relies on so much today, and of course

no television. There were no telephones in the village and there was no main drainage. There wasn't a house through the middle of the village here which had an indoor loo. About ninety per cent of our cottages, barns, and sheds were all thatched and nearly every family kept a pig and some chickens at the bottom of their garden; and instead of all this modern agricultural machinery we had over thirty fine shire horses stabled here in the village. So it was a completely different world; and although we may regret the passing of some of the old traditions, most of these changes have of course been very much for the better. While the village today looks completely different, as you can see from these old photographs, I think most of us agree that it has developed very well and it remains a good place to live in. Looking back to those times, most of the older generation still spoke with a broad Berkshire accent and used a lot of the old dialect - words like studley which I mentioned for the water. Today nearly all those old words have disappeared from our vocabulary, which is rather a shame, because many of them went straight back to Saxon times.

Not long ago Stephen and I were out somewhere when he used one of the old vernacular words, which was dumbledore. The friends with us said what on earth is a dumbledore, so he had to explain that it was an old country word here for a bumble bee. Afterwards I told him that his use of the word dumbledore which I had not heard for some time, reminded me of a story of at least seventy years ago concerning our Peasmore church choir. In those days our choir was all male and at that particular time it consisted of three rather famous old Peasmore characters. This little story amused the two of us because we remembered these three old warriors and their singing so very well. We thought perhaps I might pass it on to you, because, although perhaps slightly crude, it 's a good example of their down to earth expressive speech. I will mention their names because I can see a few people here who may well remember them. One of them was Tom Simpson. Old Tom occupied a couple of places in our choir stalls because he was that wide and his bass singing voice was notorious for being something between a buzz and a hum. Next to him was another old Peasmore character called Hewkins who lived across the way in a thatched cottage, which has since been demolished; and there was a bit of rivalry between those two. The third one many will remember, because he was slightly younger than the other two and lived to a fine old age; and that was Frank Hatt. Frank was a great chap. It was he who told me this little story. He was Jenny Maskell's grandfather and he was our parish clerk, verger and sexton here for many many years and was actually a member of our choir here for eighty years, which took us back into the last century. We have a plaque to his memory in the vestry. Well according to Frank, when our three choiristers had returned to the vestry after matins one Sunday morning, old Tom Simpson - he who had the deep voice - accused Hewkins of singing out of tune, which was probably true. However Hewkins was extremely indignant at this accusation and he rounded on Tom and said "well you baint much better; you makes a noise like an old dumbledore in a pisspot!"

I must move on to some even more ancient history. I will mention our parish boundaries, but our parish boundaries do not go back four thousand years. They go back a mere one thousand years; but I will start on our eastern boundary, The Green Lane or Old Street its proper name. Old Street is a Roman Road. It is part of an old Roman military highway which went from Wantage to Silchester. It goes along the whole of our eastern boundary and I don't think it has moved a yard since the Romans put down their trace the best part of two thousand years ago. Where our road from Peasemore to Stanmore crosses Old Street, just beyond Hailey, the lane to the right going south we call the Green Lane and the lane to the left going up to the Ridgeway is known as Red Lane. If you go up Red Lane for a couple of hundred yards from that road junction and then look out to your right into the field one hundred yards away, you will see an old round barrow or bronze age burial mound. It is the type of barrow called a Bell Barrow which dates it back to about two thousand B.C. and so the old mound has been there for some four thousand years. There are one or two local stories about it. One is that it is the haunt of the 'little people', and another is that if it gets disturbed by people digging into it, it will provoke a great thunderstorm. I don't know how far back that story goes but a long long way I think. But I do know of two recorded instances when the mound has been dug into in comparatively recent times. The first was in 1785, when there was a rumour going around here that the mound contained treasure and so some chaps thought they would have a dig and see what they could find. They started digging through the top. When they got down about six feet there was a flash of lightening and a great rumble of thunder followed by one hell of a hail storm. That was quite enough for them. They promptly filled in the hole and shot off home. Some years later in 1815 Mr Charles Long who lived at Langley Hall decided to excavate the mound. Langley Hall, by the way, was opposite the Langley Hall pub. If you look across the road from the Inn you can see the lodge which stood by the gates of the drive which went down to the Hall. The Hall itself was burnt down many years ago. In 1815 Mr Long lived there; and it was the beginning of a period when many of these old barrows in this part of the world were being excavated, sometimes by knowledgeable people, often by enthusiastic amateurs. Mr Long and his party of diggers made a thorough job of their excavation and took several days over it. When they got down about ten feet, on the south side of the barrow, which consisted mainly of reddish clay, they found a cinerary urn containing some burnt bones. The urn was made of pottery and it had an incised decoration around it, pretty typical of that bronze age period. They went on digging until they came to the chalk, where they found seven post holes in a circle. But even at the end of that excavation there was yet again a tremendous thunder storm. The diggers were apparently very shaken and one man was said to have been so terrified that he went off his head and finished up in a lunatic asylum! So in Stanmore and Peasemore we reckon that the old Stanmore barrow should be left in peace.

There was also another bronze age grave found alongside the Green Lane about that time. This was a type called a cyst, a comparatively shallow grave surrounded

by stones and it was discovered when they were digging turf there. A bronze spearhead was found in that grave.

The only other round barrow in our vicinity is the Rowbury mound which you see when you go along the Wantage road to Newbury. When you turn left at Chapel Arch the Rowbury mound is on the slope of the hill on your right. At the time of the Domesday survey, Peasemore was in the Hundred of Rowbury and so our representatives from Peasemore would have attended the Hundred Court there. Many of these old Hundreds were called after their meeting places or Moots as they used to be called. These were usually well known locations such as a road junction, a mound on top of a hill or an isolated tree in a prominent position. The two farms up on top there are still today called Rowbury Farm and Court Oak Farm; and the name Court Oak undoubtedly takes us back, perhaps a thousand years, to when the Hundred Court was held at a prominent oak tree up there.

Returning to the Green Lane, those of my vintage remember in our youth when Old Street was a nice wide short cropped lane. You could take a waggon and horses up it with ease in those days. This was thanks to the many flocks of sheep which were using it continually, most of them coming and going to Ilsley; because for over three centuries the sheep fairs at East Ilsley had been amongst the largest in the whole country. These fairs were held on alternate Wednesdays from April through to September and they used to auction as many as fifty five thousand sheep in the day. They also had wool fairs there in July and August and there was a time when they tried to introduce a spinning enterprise into East Ilsley, but without success. Some of us remember going to these sheep fairs back in the 1920's and it was a wonderful sight. Every pen and paddock in and around the village was full of sheep. Every other house was a pub doing a roaring trade. East Ilsley was always famous for its sporting activities - race horses, training stables, coursing and so on. It was also very unusual in that it had two doctors living in the village, because doctors then were very few and far between in the countryside. There were no doctors, no surgery at Chieveley; in fact the whole of the Chieveley practice was run by one doctor who lived at Brightwalton. But East Ilsley had a couple and I remember that there used to be a little rhyme which rather aptly summed up the East Ilsley of that time - you may know it, it went something like this:-

“East Ilsley, remote amidst the Berkshire Downs, is well renowned o'er its sister towns for sheep and wool; though not for spinners. For Doctors, Sportsmen, Publicans and Sinners”.

Back again to the Green Lane. Where our other road from Peasemore crosses Old Street, going up to Beedon Common, there used to be an ale house at that road junction. I'm not sure which side of the road it was on because there used to be a cottage on the left hand side which has since disappeared. When that rather chalky field is ploughed and cultivated, you can still see some good black earth in that corner where the cottage and its well dunged garden stood. There used to be a certain number of these quite small ale

houses dotted about. They were often just cottages with a few barrels of beer, sufficient to look after wayfarers. At that time, in addition to the shepherds coming through, we used to get a certain number of herds of cattle and their drovers coming by; because for centuries cattle were driven along the Ridgeway, coming from Wales. They were mostly going to Smithfield but a certain number came off on these green ways going to other markets. Except for the shepherds and the drovers, people didn't travel very far at that time - and I'm talking about seventy or eighty years ago. Very few people in Peasemore ever went further than Newbury, and to go to Newbury most people walked or got a lift in the carriers cart. We had two carriers out of Peasemore, both run by Geoff Jacob's family. Our roads were very different then. We had no tarmac on any of our roads round here. Every road junction had a large bit of green turf in the middle and when the very occasional car or cart went by on a dry summer's day, there was a cloud of white dust behind it. When I was talking about the history of the old Church last year, I mentioned that when the nave of our old norman church was demolished in 1842, it was thrown out as rubble to make up the village street. The street at that time was just a muddy lane with ruts in it. To go back even further, that bit of our Chieveley road which goes along Gidley Bottom and up to Beedon Common - that is called Wildway; and that takes us back to when Wildway was just a rough track going from Peasemore to Chieveley.

If you come along Wildway heading back towards Peasemore and instead of turning right at the handing post, you go straight on, you go up Mud Lane and eventually you find yourself at Hill Green. Until the middle of the last century, there were still two circles of large sarsen stones on Hill Green. Unfortunately, during the latter part of the century, these stones were moved and put into rows; and so later reports state that the stones were then in recently placed straight lines. Because of this, the National Monuments Record Centre at Swindon is slightly sceptical about Hill Green as to whether it is in fact a genuine site of ancient stone circles. However, folk memory in Leckhampstead and Peasemore says quite definitely that the circles were there and this is confirmed by an article in the Journal of the Archeaological Association of 1861 by a Doctor Silas Palmer. Doctor Palmer was a reputable authority and he examined Hill Green in 1861 and he said very definitely that there were two circles of sarsen stones on the Green at that time; but that already some of the stones were being moved and, according to his report, they were being taken by somebody who was placing them along his hedge as a barrier to keep waggons and cattle from encroaching onto his property.

Many of us remember these stones lying on Hill Green before this last War. During the War, when every yard of agricultural land had to be made use of, they were moved yet again and dumped in a pit and buried. Although sarsen stones are ploughed out of neighbouring fields, when they are usually thrown into the nearest hedgerow, these large sarsens on the Green - and they were very big - were thought to have been formed in and brought from the stream bed which flowed alongside the Wantage road. Today that little winterbourne rises in the gravel pits down by Chapel Copse, but before the gravel pits were dug, it used to rise up by Chapel Arch and flow in the ditch on the east side of the Wantage road. In fact in living memory, when the springs were very high, it has risen much higher up than that - between the Egypt crossroads and Eastleigh. Quite recently,

when they were putting in a pipeline down by Chapel Arch, they again dug out some extremely large sarsen stones from the bed there. These were taken up to Chapel Farm to make a rockery and it took some heavy machinery to move them there.

These ancient stone circles are to be found throughout the British Isles from the Orkneys in the north down to Cornwall in the south; and in fact there are some over the Channel in Brittany. They date back to about 2000 BC. Some of them are even older. There is still a good deal of discussion as to their true purpose, whether it was civil, religious, astronomical or a combination of these. There is even a rather far fetched theory that they were laid out on ley lines in accordance with the earth's forces. But whatever you like to believe, they were undoubtedly of great importance to the population of the time and had some ceremonial use.

Some of these circles, including the most famous of all at Avebury and Stonehenge have avenues of stones leading into them. We were very interested here when soon after this last War, an aerial survey was flying over here from Hunting Clan Airways and they reported seeing and photographing the marks in the ground of what appeared to have been an avenue of stones going across the field we call 'The Downs' - that's the field the south side of Mud Lane - going across that field from east to west heading into Hill Green. For years plough teams had ploughed out extremely large sarsen stones from that field, going in a straight line across to Hill Green. These were dragged off the field and put on the left hand side of the lane which goes down to Chapel Copse and Worndown. About 200 yards down that lane from the signpost, there is a steep bank on your left going from the lane down into the field. Some little oak trees grow there and these large stones had been deposited on the bank there. Incidentally, that bank is called 'The Butts' and it was used as the butts for archery practice by the people of Peasemore back in the Middle Ages. Most of those stones have now been moved for other purposes, You will see a fine large one at the bottom of Gidley Hill when you go along Wildway. I took a medium sized one to act as a marker at the corner of the lane going down to the chalk pit when those implement sheds were put up there - I suppose that was about 30 years ago. I remember soon afterwards that Mrs. Buffy Macdonald, who liked taking her dogs for a walk down there, asked me one day if I had noticed the hound's footmark imprinted on that stone. I said "No, I hadn't" at that time and she reminded me of the story of King Arthur's hound - we're back to mythology again. Arthur had a famous hound called Bercelet and Bercelet was said to have left his paw mark on a sarsen stone.

To return from mythology back to authentic history: amongst our exhibits in the chancel you will see a part of an ancient stone axe head. This caused considerable interest in the Newbury museum when it was examined by Mr. Tony Higgott, the Curator there. It is neolithic and approximately 5000 years old and it was found in the orchard at Prince's. On our eastern boundary, we have the sites of these two ancient bronze age graves, both going back some 4000 years, the same period as the ancient stone circles on Hill Green and the site of the avenue of stones going through the middle of our parish across the Downs field into Hill Green. Nearly 2000 years ago, there would have been considerable Roman traffic coming and going along Old Street. Over 1000 years ago, Christianity

came to Peasmore. Almost exactly 900 years ago, our old norman church was built on the site of this church, very possibly taking the place of an earlier saxon chapel and dedicated, according to very old but extremely strong Peasmore tradition, dedicated to St. Peada. I spoke about our St. Peada last year. He lived in the 7th Century. So Ladies and Gentlemen, Peasmore does have an ancient history.