

# AN UPDATED HISTORY OF LITTLE MILTON TO APRIL 2021

## INTRODUCTION

This is not a minutely detailed history of Little Milton, for such a narrative would depend on the documentary sources being available, which sadly they are not. The aim therefore has been to try to pick out the key events in the life of the village from the sources that are available and, in particular, to document the more recent history of the village which has not previously been recorded.

A village comprises its buildings, its surrounding fields, hills, woods and streams, its businesses and organisations, its people and its community. In Little Milton, much of the historical village that was built from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards is still standing today. However the village has changed significantly, particularly since the 1950s, and expanded. Most importantly, the village has progressed from being a largely farming community, tending its fields season by season, to the village we see today.

### Resources

Many documents which contain references to Little Milton are held and catalogued either at the National Archives <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/> or Oxfordshire History Centre <https://apps2.oxfordshire.gov.uk/srvheritage/basicSearch>

A comprehensive collection of photographs of the village is available online at <https://pictureoxon.com/index.php>

A selection of some historic photographs is on the village's own website at <https://www.hugofox.com/community/little-milton-village-community-7833/archive-photographs/>

A very detailed history of Great Milton parish, including Little Milton, is available at British History Online (BHO) (previously the Victorian County History) <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol7/pp117-146>. The current edition covers up to the mid-1950s and was published in 1962.

*Little Milton - The Rebuilding of an Oxfordshire Village* by D. Portman, B.A. <https://oxoniensia.org/volumes/1960/portman.pdf> was published in 1960 and documents the results of detailed research into the village's historic buildings

*St Mary's and Great Milton* by Andrew Meynell was published as a booklet in 2021 and covers from the Saxon period to 2020. The church history is also the history of Little Milton's church until 1844.

## BACKGROUND

For much of its history, which covers at least a thousand years, Little Milton has been a farming community. Agriculture has been the prime purpose of the settlement since Anglo-Saxon times up until relatively recently. It is only since the Second World War that the village has changed in character to a commuter village.

The choice of location of the original settlement was almost certainly determined by:

1. The high quality of the land
2. Its elevated location on a ridge above the flood plain of the River Thames
3. Well-draining soil
4. The presence of springs providing good quality water and, for houses located slightly above the spring line, the accessibility of water from wells

A sale catalogue of 1810 wrote of the village's 'salubrity of air and fine springs of water'.

The village developed as a so-called nucleated settlement, with farm buildings clustered compactly around a central core. The four village farms were Wells Farm, Fletcher's Farm, Belchers Farm and Manor Farm. There was also one separate farm in the parish for a period (~18<sup>th</sup> century) at Blagrove, near the River Thames. To this day, the village is still surrounded by high quality agricultural land which continues to be extensively farmed.

## EARLY HISTORY

There is evidence of a Roman villa to the east of the village near Ditchend Farm and possibly the ruins of a Saxon mill by the watercourse, also to the east of the village. The pond (once known as Barker's Pond) which lies just upstream of Blenheim Cottages may well have been the mill pond, although this is unproven.

The main entry in Domesday (1086) is for the whole manor of [Great] Milton, which included Little Milton:

The same Bishop [of Lincoln] holds Milton. There are 40 hides of land. Of these he has his own farm 31 hides, and his soldiers have the rest. The land is 26 carucates. There are now in 5 carucates; and 24 villans, with 31 bordars and a priest, have 19 caracutes. There is a mill of 15 shillings value and a meadow of 10 shillings. In the time of King Edward and afterwards it was worth 18 pounds, now is worth 30 pounds.

*Hide* - approx 30 acres

*Carucate* - the area of land an oxen team could plough in a year

*Demesne* - a piece of land attached to a manor and retained by the owner for their own use

*Villan* - an unfree peasant who owed his lord labour services (two or three days per week) but who also farmed land for himself. Villans were the wealthiest and most numerous of unfree peasants. Also called villains or villeins

*Bordar* - unfree peasant with less land than a villan

Little Milton is first documented by name in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. However it almost certainly was a 'township' (a sub-division of Great Milton parish) – at the time of Domesday (1086). Little Milton was a separate manor by the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a manor then being an estate in land, with a lord of the manor who had jurisdiction over those who lived within the lands of the manor.

For a period, the Abbot of Dorchester was a free tenant in Little Milton: the abbey had held 20 acres and a meadow since 1146 and in 1279 also held 1 virgate (about 30 acres) by scutage (money paid by a vassal to his lord in lieu of military service). Free tenants were characterised by the low rents which they paid to their manorial lord and they were also subject to fewer laws and ties than villeins.

The current Manor House itself is reported to include some relics from a 13<sup>th</sup> Century monastery in the cellar and, as such, contains the oldest known part of any building in the village.

The National Archives hold a petition to the King and Council by Laurence de Louches concerning land in Little Milton dated 1301.

The British History Online <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol7/pp117-146> gives a detailed history of the ownership of Little Milton manor from the 1300s up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and also covers Economic and Social History, Parish Government and the Church history.

### FROM 1500 TO 1800

Although we do know quite a lot about the buildings of this period, the historical record is otherwise rather sparse.

Before 1600 building in the village were mainly timber framed and two houses remain which give an indication of the nature of the timber framed construction. These are Hill View and Well Cottage (now called Spring and Well Cottage).



Well Cottage

From the 1540s onwards there was considerable rebuilding in villages across England, funded by high profits being generated from farming. In Little Milton and the surrounding villages, this rebuilding occurred somewhat later - from around 1600 onwards. Stone construction was adopted rather than timber framing, due firstly to the presence on the ridge where Little Milton stands of the upper Portland beds containing a stratum of sandy freestone with a maximum thickness of six feet. This stone was quarried locally from sites to the north and east of the village. Secondly, the use of stone was due a shortage of timber locally as much of the local woodland had already been felled. Rebuilding in stone was unique to this cluster of villages (Miltons and Haseleys); nearby Chalgrove and Chiselhampton, for example, are primarily timber-framed villages.

The village was transformed by this energetic phase of new building between 1600 and the start of the Civil War (1642). Old houses were improved but many freestone farmhouses were built in this period by prospering yeoman and husbandmen, so that within a generation Little Milton was almost completely changed in appearance.

Good examples of stone-built houses from this period include Abbot's Close, Fletchers Farm House, Wells Farm Cottage, Frogmore Cottage and The Greystone Stores (now called the Old Stores). Almost without exception, the houses and cottages which lie in the historic core of the village and which were built from 1600 onwards are built of stone.

The Civil War (1642-1651) had a massive impact on the whole country. Locally, the Battle of Chalgrove Field (1643) took place over the course of a single day just two miles from Little Milton on land to the east of Chalgrove. Royalist forces withdrew to Chiselhampton after the battle, and it is unlikely the battle as such had any direct impact on Little Milton.

Some research indicates that Fletcher's Farmhouse (1638) may have been the last house to be built before the Civil War and Wells Farm Cottage (1691) the first built after the Restoration (1660). Once building restarted after the Civil War and the Restoration, it is thought that up to 30 additional dwellings may have been added to the housing stock by the end of the 1700s.

The main road through the village has always been an important trade route. The road was part of the Aylesbury to Shillingford Turnpike route which opened in 1770, with toll booths in Thame and Stadhampton. It provided a major route from the Midlands via Aylesbury to the Thames at Shillingford. Here it joined the turnpike from Oxford heading south and east through Benson, leading on towards Reading and London. (Plans for the site of the new village school in 1861 refer to the adjacent main road as the 'Turnpike Road'. Turnpikes were taken over by county councils in 1888. So traffic in the village may well have been an issue since 1770!)

The road from Watlington entered the village along the Haseley Road then followed the main turnpike road past the Lamb Inn for 100 metres before turning off westward to ultimately cross the River Thames at Chippinghurst ford. Where this road crossed the main road in the village was known as The Cross, the site of which was marked by a medieval cross until some time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when it was removed. This route was important in the 18<sup>th</sup> century but declined in use in later years, probably due to the construction of the bridge over the River Thames at Chiselhampton.

There were at one time at least four mills in the local area. The windmill at Great Haseley still stands and has been restored in recent years. Within Little Milton parish, there was a windmill on Windmill Lane (now colloquially known as the Wheatley Road), located at what is now Orchard House. There was a windmill near Great Milton on the Cuddesdon road and also a watermill where the same road crosses the River Thames, the building for which still stands.

### **1800s**

This century brought great changes to Little Milton. Some of these were as a direct result of the Enclosure was the legal process of consolidating small landholdings into larger farms, which had been occurring since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Once enclosed, use of the land became restricted and available only to the owner, so it ceased to be common land for communal use. The years between 1760 and 1820 were the prime years of wholesale enclosure of agricultural land, a process by which, step by step, common rights were lost. Enclosure generally came late to the parish of Little Milton but, for example in 1839, 902 acres of land in the parish were enclosed out of a total acreage of about 1300. 575 of the enclosed acres went to Walter Long, the lord of the manor.

Other key reasons for significant changes in this period were greater mechanisation and the subsequent move of workers from villages to factory work in towns and cities. The introduction of farm machinery in the parish led to violent opposition. In 1830 rioters from the neighbouring villages of Drayton, Chislehampton, and Stadhampton assaulted James Wells of Little Milton and broke his threshing machines. Six people were indicted and sentenced to 7 years' transportation. The parish itself appears not to have been in sympathy with the attack and 136 Milton parishioners were sworn in as special constables.

Poverty amongst villagers waxed and waned throughout the 1800s. In the early years of the century, the cost of the Napoleonic Wars had a major adverse effect on the economy. Prior to 1834, the local Poor Law Commissioner had complained that the parish was seriously misgoverned. Groups of men stood idle in the centre of the village every day and respectable inhabitants were afraid to leave their houses after dark. Members of the Vestry Council (forerunner of the parish council and responsible for administering the Poor Law payments) were reported to be in danger of having their windows broken or property damaged.

The Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 changed both the scale of contributions to the Poor Law and the level of benefit payments. It also introduced Poor Law Unions (and workhouses) and Little Milton became part of the Thame Union. A workhouse was built in Thame in 1836 (later the site of Rycote College). As a result of these changes, less burden was placed on the better off to contribute so they could afford to employ more men, thus reducing the number who were forced to claim benefits. By 1836 all able-bodied men in the parish had found employment.

In 1987 evidence of the Poor Law in action was found under the floorboards of the Old Stores. Amongst other papers were a receipt for the Poor's Rates (contribution) dated 1840 and several 1838 Medical Attendant's Orders for the shop to supply a parish pauper with 2lbs of mutton.



The Poor Law in action. Thame Union Order date 29 June 1838 to supply a pauper of Little Milton with 2lbs of mutton

The 1860s and 1870s were a period of a country-wide agricultural depression. Between 1873 and 1879 British agriculture suffered from wet summers which damaged grain crops. Cattle farmers were hit by foot-and-mouth disease, and sheep suffered from liver rot. The poor harvests masked a greater threat to British agriculture, namely growing imports of foodstuffs from abroad. There was so much unemployment and poverty in the parish of Little Milton during this period that, in addition to provisions under the Poor Law, special steps were taken by the better-off inhabitants to alleviate distress amongst the poor. In particular there was a scheme which subsidised emigration to Canada, the scheme paying for passage and rail fare. Low wages continued even into the 1890s.

During this difficult period, the population of the parish declined from a peak of about 480 in 1840 to about 300 by 1900. In 1851, 97 village men were employed locally as agricultural labourers. This represented about 70% of the male workforce. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this number had reduced to just 32 men or 30% of the male workforce although other men still worked in trades supporting farming such as blacksmiths, shop keepers, publicans, thatchers, saddlers, carters and livestock dealers.

Building in the village during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was very limited, although some important developments did take place. Firstly, the manor lodges (known as the 'pepper pots') were built in 1820. The church was built in 1844, when Little Milton also became an ecclesiastical parish in its own right, followed by the building of the vicarage shortly thereafter (both paid for by Mr Walter Long, the lord of the manor).

The bowl of a medieval piscina from the medieval chapel of St James was re-used in the chancel of the new church. The location of that ancient chapel is not known precisely, although a pre-enclosure map indicates that it was close to the site of the present church. The chapel was reported to be in ruins at the time the new church replaced it in 1844. Various documents describe it as a 'chapel of ease' - a church building other than the parish church, built within the bounds of a parish for the attendance of those who could not reach the parish church conveniently.

The church tower was added 1861. For the non-conformists of the parish, a Wesleyan Chapel was built in 1890.

The one other very important building dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the school. So-called day schools had been run in the village prior to 1861. In 1854 there were three day schools, one for infants and two for scholars (school age children) plus evening classes for adults. From 1861 onwards, the village had its own dedicated school, which survives to this day. It is a Church of England school and was built and run under rules set out by the Church and the Oxford Diocese. An additional classroom was added in 1893, by which time an average of 63 pupils were attending the school.

Otherwise, apart from some agricultural buildings, there was virtually no other building in the village in the 1800s. The map overleaf shows the village as it was in 1871 and it would hardly change for another 90 years.

In 1894, under local government reform, the civil parish of Little Milton was established and a parish council was formed. The civil parish originally included the hamlet of Ascott until in 1932, as part of a re-alignment of parish boundaries, Ascott was absorbed into Stadhampton parish, leaving the civil parish of Little Milton as it is today.

One other important development in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the coming of the railway in 1864. That year the line from Thame to Kennington Junction, just south of Oxford, opened. The nearest station to Little Milton at Tiddington (5.5 miles) opened in 1866, giving access to rail travel to Oxford, London and further afield. Goods to and from the parish could now go via Tiddington station.

A walking route which crossed the fields to the River Thame at Chippinghurst and then went on to Oxford became disused in the 1890s when the footbridge over the river fell into disrepair and no-one would take responsibility for its repair. The site of the bridge is marked as 'stepping stones' on modern maps, although whether there ever were true stepping stones at this location or what now remains are just the foundations of an old bridge or weir is unknown. One of the earliest actions of the newly-formed parish council in 1894 was to fight for this bridge to be restored. (The issue had still not been resolved 125 years later!)



1871 map of Little Milton

## The 1900s

By 1911 the main landowners in the parish were Edmund Sawyer, who owned the Manor house, Ernest Matthew Boulton of Great Tew (who had given the land for the village school in 1861) and Milton Harris of Little Haseley.

No Victorian or Edwardian houses were built in the village apart from the Old Vicarage and the Wesleyan Chapel (since converted for residential use). However the third storey of the Manor House was added in 1910. It was in the 1920s that the first modern brick additions to the housing stock, namely the six Cremar Cottages, were built for the local council. Otherwise, the village was virtually unchanged from the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the development which occurred after the Second World War.

During the Second World War, Chalgrove Airfield was built in 1943 and used by US forces, mainly for photo reconnaissance, until 1945. The prime impact at the time for Little Milton, apart from aircraft noise and activity, was that the road past Rofford Manor to Chalgrove was blocked, necessitating a detour via Stadhampton. The route was not re-instated until 1964 when a new road bypassing Rofford was built. The old road past Rofford Manor remains blocked to this day.

Chalgrove Airfield was decommissioned from military use soon after the end of the war, but remains in use as an airfield as it is the location of Martin Baker, the ejector seat manufacturers. Now somewhat ancient Meteor jet aircraft can occasionally be seen operating in the area in support of ejector seat development for the Martin Baker company.

The airfield at RAF Benson, six miles away across the fields, has also had an impact on Little Milton. First opened in 1937, it was the centre of photo reconnaissance operations in the Second World War. Since 1945 RAF Benson has undertaken various roles and during periods when jet or heavy aircraft were using the airfield, the final approach path passed just to the east of Little Milton. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century so far, RAF Benson has mainly been a base for helicopter operations and the sight and background sounds of helicopters are commonplace around Little Milton.

There is anecdotal evidence that the site of the Little Milton sewage farm was the location of a searchlight battery during the Second World War but no documentary evidence has been found to support this.

There is no known evidence of any bomb damage to the village during the war.

Soon after the Second World War a national programme was initiated to build social housing, then known as council houses, in all communities. Little Milton was no exception and in the early 1950s the District Council of the day (Bullingdon) built houses on open fields at the north end of the village along the Thame Road as well as in Old Field. These included old people's bungalows in Old Field, along with a warden's house. These houses were built either in brick or in pre-cast concrete (so-called Airey houses).

The sale by auction of the Manor Estate on 21 June 1956 was a very significant event in the village's history. Following the death in 1955 of Mr Milton Harris, the then owner of the Manor House, in the following year his executors put the whole Manor Estate up for sale. This comprised:

- The Manor House, Lodges and Grounds
- Manor Farm farmyard
- Ditchend Piggery (which had been built extensively in asbestos!)
- Various fields around the village
- Village Shop and Post Office
- 25 cottages, then comprising about one-third of the housing stock of the village
- Allotments

Milton Harris had originally purchased land in the parish sometime before 1911. He purchased the manor house and moved to the village either during or just after the First World War, having previously farmed in Little Haseley (and having been born in Great Milton where his mother farmed). He had bought nearly all of the above properties comprising the Manor House Estate by 1920. As a land and property owner, Mr Harris had a major influence on the village's affairs for the first half of the 20th century. He was a Church Warden and later a Justice of the Peace. When he and his wife travelled to South Africa in 1936-37 to visit relatives, the news was published in the village newsletter. He sat on the War Agriculture Committee during the war and his wife Beatrice was Evacuation Billeting Officer. She continued to be active in village affairs after her husband's death in 1955.

Many of the estate's cottages were let out to those who worked on Manor Farm. The sale of these cottages ultimately forced some agricultural workers to leave the village but also allowed new people to move in. Newly-bought properties were renovated, refurbished, converted and extended to become the dwellings we see today. A number of semi-detached cottages were converted into single dwellings, for example Spring and Well Cottage. Two new houses were built, namely Milton House in the grounds of the Manor House and Willowbrook Cottage in the grounds of Brookside.

In the early 1960s, and as a direct result of the above sale, the farmyard at the Manor Farm in the heart of the village was redeveloped with 20 houses replacing most of the old farm buildings in what became Milton Manor Drive.



Centre of Little Milton in about 1960 when the Manor farmyard buildings had been demolished

Also in the 1960s, after the Manor Estate sale but not connected with it, six houses were built on what is now called the Haseley Road (previously known as Gore Street). This also involved a small stream running across the frontages of these houses being covered over for part of its length. Three bungalows were also added along Blenheim Lane, and four other single dwellings were added elsewhere in the village.

Ditch End was originally just a barn but had been developed as the piggery of the Manor Farm Estate from the 1950s, with further additions to the farm buildings plus 4 cottages and one house being built in the 1960s.

During this same period, much of the land to the west of the village down to the River Thames was owned by the Belchers Farm Estate. Many of the houses on the western side of High Street and Church Hill, plus Penn House and Frogmore, formed part of that estate. Like the Manor Estate dwellings, these houses were also improved and refurbished, mainly in the 1970s and 80s, and sold. Additional farm buildings and a light industrial estate were developed at Warren Barn on the Belchers Farm Estate in the 1970s and 80s.

Over time, the four main village farms (Manor Farm, Belchers Farm, Fletcher's Farm, and Wells Farm) ceased being working farmhouses and barns and became residences, with some of the barns also converted to residential use. By the beginning of the 20th century,

the number of working farms located in the village had already dropped to three, Fletcher's Farm no longer operating as a separate farm. Note, however, that Views Farm, the buildings of which are located just within Great Milton parish, has long owned and farmed land in the north-east of the parish. The three remaining village farms then comprised 257, 300, and 412 acres.

By the mid 1950s a resident of the time has recorded that the Manor farm yard was largely disused.<http://www.littlemilton.org.uk/community/little-milton-village-community-7833/reminiscences/>

The impact of these farms on the village we know today should not be underestimated. For many centuries the livelihoods of the village residents were almost entirely dependent on the fortunes of the village farms and their owners. Not only did those farms provide direct employment or support for local trades but, until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, also provided many of the houses and cottages in which the farm workers and supporting tradesmen and women, artisans, labourers and their families lived.

Mains services came relatively late to the village, The sewage farm was not constructed until 1963, with mains drainage throughout the village following thereafter, although some properties were not connected until as late as the early 1970s. (It is noted that a significant proportion of the council houses and sheltered accommodation along Thame Road and in Old Field were actually built before mains sewerage was available in the village.)

At the time of the Manor Estate sale in 1956, some estate cottages had piped water but some were still getting water from communal pumps or wells. In 1956 most but not all houses had electricity. Few cottages then had telephones; the Manor House's telephone number was Great Milton 8.

Even now, there is no mains gas in the village and it is unlikely to be supplied in the future. Thus as central heating became the norm, oil-fired boilers were installed in village houses with oil tanks in the gardens.

In 1974, the first phase of the building of the M40 provided a motorway route between London and Oxford. The impact of the opening of the M40 on Little Milton was two-fold. Firstly it made it possible for village residents to commute more easily to jobs in the west London area. Secondly, it increased the volume and weight of traffic through the village, particularly as the main road (the old turnpike road) was then upgraded from a B road (B4013) to an A road (A329).

In 1974 people were already saying that an immediate solution to the traffic problem in the village must be found and a bypass should be built. In 1991 the M40 was extended all the way to the M42 at Birmingham, which opened up further commuting options from the village.

Two other important developments affecting planning and development occurred in this period. Firstly, the Oxford Green Belt had first been proposed in 1958, but was only formalised and approved by central government in 1975. The effect in Little Milton was to protect all land west of the main A329 from most forms of development. Secondly, 1984 saw the establishment of the Little Milton Conservation Area which provided an additional layer of protection for the historic centre of the village.

The village had long supported its own shops, post office and bakery in the centre of the village. However, the opening of a supermarket (now Asda) 3 miles away at Wheatley in 1980 had a major impact on the two village shops still operating at that time - the Village Stores, now called the Old Stores (but has variously been Greystones or Jennings Stores in the past) and the Post Office. Before planning permission was granted, a petition in Little Milton opposed the supermarket development.



The land which now forms Chiltern View was first put forward for development in 1971 following the death of the land owner. The proposal to build Chiltern View was highly contentious at the time and planning approval was only subsequently granted on appeal. Building commenced in the early 1980s and the 43 houses when completed added 30% to the housing stock of the village at a stroke.

At the time, it had been feared that the houses would largely be bought as second homes. In reality, many young families moved into Chiltern View and immediately boosted the number of children at the village school, saving the school from threatened closure, a real possibility in 1986. Many of the adults in Chiltern View did work away from the village and added to the number of commuter households. But those new residents also went on to rejuvenate many village organisations and over time have contributed considerably to the village as it is today.

When Chiltern View is added to the earlier 20th century buildings, the housing stock of the village more than doubled in the period 1920-2000. In 1960, there had been 80 households and a population of just over 250. By the early 2000s, there were 195 households in the parish and a population of 485.

When the owner of Wells Farm died in 1990, the majority of the farmland to the north-east of the village then comprising Wells Farm was let to the Berk, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) on a very long lease. This resulted in a large nature reserve being established immediately adjacent to the village, with a network of footpaths providing ready access and a wonderful amenity for the village.

At one time, the village had three pubs - The Lamb, The Plough and The Three Horseshoes – and, for a while, also an off licence selling beer (Mrs Bett's Farmhouse). The Three Horseshoes closed in the early to mid-1980s. With the closure of The Plough in 1996, only one pub now remains – The Lamb in the High Street.



The Lamb

In the late 1990s, a small project group examined the possibility of applying for Millennium Funds to replace the ageing village hall. The old village hall, located on the recreation ground, was a simple wooden hut built in the 1950s which by the late 1990s had deteriorated and had become uninsurable. The replacement project did not go ahead, primarily because at the time the recreation ground was leased to the parish council by a local farmer. Millennium Funding required a higher degree of security of tenure.

The national census in 1901 had shown a very self-contained community, with most residents being born and raised in the village. In adult life, they worked in the parish and used local shops and tradesmen. However they also looked to both Thame, the local market town, and Oxford as sources of supply. Thame in particular offered all the services needed of a market town – banks, solicitors, weekly market, etc. Carters provided regular services to Oxford, Thame, Wallingford and Abingdon. Also the railway was within 6 miles, offering some opportunities to travel further afield. Later in the century, bus services were established which ran several times a day to Oxford and weekly to Thame on market day. For a period, Abbot's Close was the village garage and White's coach firm was based there.

The sale of the Manor Estate in 1956 perhaps marks the point at which the village started to change in many subtle ways from a very self-contained community to one that looked outwards well beyond the parish boundaries. The increasing ownership of cars was a major factor. Over the years, the scope of car travel from the village has increased significantly, not only in volume but in range. Journeys to work in the London area became commonplace; commuters journeyed to Banbury, Bicester, Aylesbury, High Wycombe, Reading, Didcot, Abingdon and, most importantly, to Oxford. The development of the Oxford City park and ride system aided the latter.

Travel by car east, west, north or south became relatively easy (traffic allowing). In addition, access to foreign travel also became easy. Heathrow airport is only 40 minutes away (on a good day) and Gatwick 1hr 15mins. Also Eurotunnel is just 2hrs 10 mins away.

The use of train services by villagers has waxed, waned and waxed again. The station at Tiddington, which was open from 1866 to 1963, closed as a result of the Beeching cuts. The main Great Western east-west line at Didcot remained open. However the option for villagers of using trains again for regular journeys only really started to become viable when the Chiltern Line, itself a victim of Beeching cuts and reduced in the 1960s to single track, was restored to double line working with two platforms being installed at Haddenham (now Haddenham and Thame Parkway) station in 1998. A further upgrade of the line in 2006 and improved rolling stock, plus the provision of a larger car park, resulted in a service which now made a day trip to London easy and the prospect of commuting by train to work in London a feasible option. The alternative, which also became very popular, is the very frequent coach services which run from the Thornhill Park & Ride via the M40 to London Victoria.

## **21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY**

In 2000 the last remaining commercially-run village shop, which also contained the post office, was sold to an estate agency. The Post Office then withdrew the operating licence and also closed the village sorting office. Following the closure of the shop and post office, there was a great deal of discontent and anxiety in the village about the loss of the amenity. In the same year (2000) a project was initiated to try and at least re-instate the village post office. Ultimately this initiative was successful. Within the year, a very small community shop and post office re-opened in part of one of the cottages adjacent to the old post office in the centre of the village. (About 8 years later, this facility was replaced by the community shop and post office constructed on parish council land at the recreation ground, as detailed below.)

Although the original Millennium application for funding to replace the village hall was unsuccessful, in the early 2000s the parish council was able to purchase the recreation ground for the village and thus achieve security of tenure. This important step allowed a revived new village hall project to be restarted. After securing grants, the new hall (named the Pine Lodge) was successfully funded and built and was opened in 2005. A further project to build and run a village community shop, cafe and post office adjacent to the Pine Lodge also came to fruition and in 2008 replaced the small post office which had opened as a temporary solution in the centre of the village back in 2000.

In effect, the recreation ground was the centre of new development in the village over this period, resulting in:

- New village hall (Pine Lodge)
- Pre-school (The Orchard)
- Community shop, post office and cafe
- Children's play area
- Multi-Use Games Area
- Parking area

The three buildings on the site were all built of timber in a log cabin style, the first of these having been the Orchard Pre-School building, followed by the village hall and then the shop & post office. This style of building is unique in the village.



The Pine Lodge

At a time when funding was available in the early 2000s, a number of road safety improvements were introduced in the village, funded by the county council as a result of bids made by the parish council. These included trying to slow traffic by placing build-outs on the A329 at both entrances to the village. Two pedestrian crossings were also installed, one near the school and one at the entrance to the recreation ground.

Villagers have always been content to manage without street lighting in the village. When the senior citizen's bungalows were built in Old Field, one street light was installed. A single light was added at each of two pedestrian crossings. Otherwise the village remains unlit by street lighting.

With car travel convenient and easy, the village now looks outward for such services as the GP surgery in Wheatley (there had been a resident doctor in the village in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – hence the so-called Doctor's House on the High Street). The major hospitals are in Oxford. There are theatres in Oxford, Aylesbury, High Wycombe; a multi-screen cinema is 15 minutes way on the edge of Oxford, and DIY stores too. Garden centres are similarly 15 minutes away. Village children may attend the village primary school but then go on to Wheatley, Thame or Abingdon for secondary school, travelling either by car or school bus. There are golf courses and gyms, all within a 20 minute drive. Good pubs and restaurants abound. There is a petrol station 2 miles down the road at Stadhampton.

The final bus services between Oxford and Little Milton ceased in 2016, having been heavily subsidised for many years. At that point, the village did become totally dependent on the car. However, the rapid growth of online delivery services has meant that many people can now shop quite happily from home and do not necessarily need to leave the village to do their shopping. Some things have gone full circle.

## **COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Note that virtually nothing is known of the impact of previous pandemics (Black Death, Spanish Flu, etc) on the population of Little Milton, although it is reported that the vicar of the Milton parish died in the Black Death.

### **2020 Impact**

In early 2020, the world was hit by the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic, which appeared to originate in China and which spread rapidly across the globe. This respiratory disease affected the elderly and those with compromised immune systems particularly hard. Many of those who were admitted to hospital needed intensive care. Cases in the UK rose rapidly, deaths were increasing and the National Health Service seemed in danger of being overwhelmed. In line with many other countries, on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020 the country went into so-called lockdown. The whole population was confined to the house except:

1. To go to work if unable to work from home and if the workplace had stayed open
2. Once per day for exercise
3. For essential shopping
4. For medical treatment

All social gatherings were banned and 'social distancing' of 2m introduced.

In Little Milton, the church, school, pre-school, Pine Lodge (village hall) and the Lamb pub all closed as a result of lockdown restrictions. The community shop and post office remained open throughout but the cafe was closed. The Lamb offered takeaway evening meals.

Many people did work from home and commuter traffic to and from the village dropped significantly, although some people – doctors, some teachers, key workers, etc – still had to travel to work. The volume of through traffic dropped dramatically. The resulting silence was wonderful. Supermarket and other delivery vans were a welcome sight around the village as people shopped online. Organisations such as the parish council or village hall management committee met remotely using online meeting software such as Zoom.

The bridleways and footpaths surrounding the village were used extensively by people getting out for their daily exercise as allowed by the lockdown rules. Neighbours were now more likely to be met out on a walk than in the street. Socialising took place when meeting along the pathways, all at 2m social distancing. There was a new etiquette as to who would step aside on a narrow path to let others through.

The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VE (Victory Europe) Day on 6 May 2020 was due to be celebrated as a major event in villages and towns across the country. Little Milton's celebration was planned by the village hall management committee as a major event at the Pine Lodge and recreation ground but this had to be cancelled. Nevertheless on the day, which was hot and sunny, street parties did gather with everyone well spaced out and with no sharing, apart from conversation and good humour.

The members of the community looked after each other. Help with shopping or picking up prescriptions were the main needs and people were largely able to make their own arrangements with friends or neighbours. Supermarket delivery slots became more valuable than gold dust and were readily shared. Gardening was very popular and there was a trade in seeds and plants. Much work was done on houses, gardens and, for some, allotments. Clearing out cupboards, lofts and garages became a national pastime. Weekly waste collection services continued although recycling centres were closed.

There were virtually no Covid cases in the village in the first half of 2020. Lockdown, both locally and nationally, had the desired effect and, coupled with the virus retreating in the face of warmer weather, case numbers dropped in the late spring. As restrictions were eased across the summer of 2020, some village facilities re-opened and, by the end of the summer, some normality had returned to life. Nevertheless, many activities in the village which bring people together, such as the Fete held annually in June, had to be cancelled. Much of the glue that holds the village together was missing that spring and summer.

The summer of 2020 proved to be just a lull in the virus's attack on the human race. In the autumn, particularly as the weather cooled, the number of cases started to increase again. On 5 November 2020, a second period of lockdown was imposed by the government, which again restricted people's movements, closed the pub, etc but, unlike the first lockdown, schools and universities remained open. Whilst the routine of lockdown was all too familiar, the second lockdown missed the good weather of the first and was not so conducive to outdoor activity, gardening, etc.

On 10 November 2020 it was announced that the key stages in testing one of the many Covid-19 vaccines then under development appeared to be successful. This news raised hopes of a mass vaccination programme starting in 2021.

Meanwhile on 2 December 2020 the second lockdown ended but it was replaced by a tiered system which continued to impose many of the same restrictions on daily activity across much of England. By this stage, people needed something to cheer them up and it was noticeable that Christmas decorations, trees and lights appeared much earlier around the village than they might have done in past years. Christmas shopping for presents was done largely online.

The December village Christmas Fair has been an annual event to raise funds for the church, village hall and Orchard pre-school. Due to lockdown restrictions, in 2020 the fair instead was organised as a walking Christmas fair, with stalls set out on stall-holders' drives or in garages around the village. This arrangement turned out to be highly successful, helped by it being a cool but dry and sunny day, with many people walking around the village and catching up with friends and neighbours.

So in Little Milton and across the globe 2020 was a year like no other in most people's memory. Only those old enough to have lived through the Second World War Two had experienced an event of greater impact nationally.

## **2021 Impact**

On 5 January 2021 the country entered its third total lockdown. This third lockdown once again closed all non-essential shops and services and, like the first lockdown, this included schools and colleges. The village shop again stayed open. Again The Lamb could not function as a pub but instead offered pre-prepared meals to consume at a home and a range of foods including vegetables, deli items, cakes, etc designed to complement the range stocked by the village shop and thus reduce villagers' reliance on supermarkets.

Coming as it did in the middle of winter, this third lockdown was less easy to endure than the first. Although people now knew the routine, the weather precluded work in gardens and allotments. Also going out for exercise meant wrapping up warm and, on many days, dodging the heavy rain. Many local footpaths became very muddy and people resorted instead to walking or running the local roads, particularly the route to Little Haseley

January 2021 also saw some more cases of Covid-19 in the village. In the second half of January and into February, the national vaccine programme got under way and increased in volume very rapidly with the GP surgery in Wheatley providing an excellent vaccination service to villagers.

In mid-February, with the national vaccination programme exceeding expectations, the government announced a series of measured steps to take the country out of lockdown and return to some form of normality by mid June.

Easter 2021 (4 April) was celebrated within the limitations of the restrictions still in place. The Spring Village Fair held on Easter Saturday was again a 'walking fair' with stalls spread around the village. It was a distinctly cool, blustery but dry day. However many

people were out and about around the village and there was hope in the air that most Covid restrictions would be gone by mid-June.

## THE OUTCOME TO 2021

As suggested at the beginning of this history, a village comprises the following:

- **Buildings:** which in 2021 are still based on an historic core built 300-400 years ago, but with modern additions, mainly on the north side of the village, which have doubled the housing stock over the last century
- **Surrounding fields, hills, woods and streams:** Affected by enclosures in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but otherwise not much changed. Now more intensively farmed with a labour force much reduced due to mechanisation.
- **Businesses:** which originally, and for many centuries, were the farms and supporting trades and which are now long gone. Some small businesses eg. art gallery, recruitment agencies, consultancies, etc. are run from people's homes in the village but most people now look for employment outside the village. However Working From Home, which developed exponentially during the 2020-21 pandemic, and is likely to continue into the future, will mean more people's place of work will again be within the village in the future. Such developments are very dependent on the internet and broadband services, another vital development which has come to the village in recent years.
- **Organisations:** many of which are needed to keep the village going as a vibrant community, ranging from the parish council to church cleaners, from the village hall management committee to the Milton Manor Drive Residents Association, from litter pickers to Friends of BBOWT, from the Church to Neighbourhood Watch, and many others. These have changed and expanded over the centuries.
- **People and community:** the village is far more affluent today than it was a hundred years ago and people are better-educated and healthier. But, most importantly, a strong sense of community remains. This has been demonstrated to the full during the lockdown periods of the 2020-21 coronavirus pandemic.

## THE PEOPLE OF LITTLE MILTON

This history identifies few villagers by name. That is intentional. Many of the names are, in any event, lost in the mists of time. Over the centuries, many people have, in their own ways, had a significant influence on the village and its affairs. Clearly the lords of the manor of Little Milton were highly influential in their time, as subsequently were the major local landowners and farmers. Their impact on the village can be seen all the way through to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Many others have influenced village affairs but to name just a few would be unfair to the many omitted from such a roll call. Some individuals, just by the nature of their roles in the village, will have played a significant part in their time. These include the vicar or rector, school head teacher, parish councillors, village doctor, shopkeepers, publicans, etc.

However, and particularly since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of the more recent successes in the village have been team efforts. The 'team' might be a formally constituted body such as the parish council, school governors or village hall management committee. Such constituted bodies have achieved much over the years. Conversely, the team might be a less formal grouping of like-minded people who come together for a particular purpose, such as the village fete committee, volunteers who work on the BBOWT nature reserve, church cleaners, annual litter pickers and many others.

Everyone in the village, past and present, has played their part in its history

## **THE FUTURE**

It is not usual for a 'history' to look ahead, but it will be interesting in 50 years time to see the outcome of certain potential future developments!

Prior to the pandemic, the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw an almost unprecedented pressure across the country to keep building more houses and infrastructure, resulting in ever-longer and more complex national, county, district and local plans being written as to how that might be achieved. In response to this trend, in 2018 the Parish Council published its own Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) for Little Milton.

It is developments outside the village which may have the greatest impact in the years to come. Traffic issues became a concern way back in the 1970s when the M40 first opened and are likely to be the biggest future concern. Further increases in traffic volumes, noise and pollution may come as a result of, firstly, any large scale housing developments within about 5 miles or so of the village. The opening of new routes which change traffic routes and flows, such as a new bridge over the River Thames at Culham and a Clifton Hampden bypass, may also have an impact.

On 10 December 2020, South Oxfordshire District Council approved the adoption of a new Local Development Plan designed to meet the district's housing needs to 2035. The Plan does not impose any new housing on Little Milton. However, the Plan does include provision for a large (3000 homes) development at Chalgrove Airfield. Whether or not this development will actually take place is, at the time of writing, a matter of conjecture. If it does eventually happen, it could result in a new 'market town' with amenities such as schools, supermarkets and other shops and facilities, which could eventually usurp Thame's role as the village's local market town.

As a possible solution to all traffic problems, a road bypass for the village has been a possibility on the village's agenda for at least 45 years. There has never been quite enough traffic to tip the balance and bring the project close to the top of the list of the many conflicting bids for the county council's infrastructure funding. Historically, the village has been evenly split on the subject of a bypass. There has been concern that a town or village bypass tends over time to become the new development boundary, leading to unwanted expansion. A bypass also takes traffic away from local amenities which depend on passing trade, such as the community shop and village pub.

## **SUMMARY**

Little Milton has existed for at least a thousand years. Over those years, the changes to the village and the way of life of villagers have been significant, most particularly since the end of the Second World War. The village has survived difficult times in the past and coped with change before. It will do so again.

Barry Coward

Chairman of the Parish Council 2011-2019

Chairman Neighbourhood Development Plan Steering Group 2016-2018

Little Milton

April 2021