

The History of Wroxton

For a relatively small village, Wroxton is rich in history. Mentioned in the Domesday Book, the village probably takes its name from "Wroces Stan" meaning buzzards' stone. In ancient times the village was crossed by various trackways, including the Saltway, the route from the Worcester salt works to London. Slight traces of a Roman settlement have also been discovered. By 1086 records refer to 24 tenants (2 serfs, 12 villani, and 10 boarders).

It was in the Middle Ages and the establishment of Wroxton Abbey, however, that the village began to flourish. Michael Belet founded an Augustinian priory in honour of St. Mary in 1217 (hence the village has been referred to as Wroxton-St. Mary). He was granted a charter by King John for the foundation in 1209 and this was ratified by Henry III in 1251. He thus became prior and vicar and endowed the priory with his Wroxton manor house, demesne, and additional properties. The original Chantry housed 12 canons. Over the next 300 years the priory buildings and grounds were modified and enlarged. Eventually the priory held virtually all the lands in the parish of Wroxton and nearby Balscote. The Priory of Canons Regular of St. Augustine continued until the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII in 1536.

In 1537 the lease was obtained by Sir Thomas Pope who held various positions at the court of Henry VIII including that of Guardian to the Princess Elizabeth. Sir Thomas, who founded Trinity College Oxford, bestowed the estates to Trinity, although he reserved the rights for the Pope family and their descendants to remain tenants of the estate. During the reign of James I, the original Priory was razed by fire. In 1618 Sir William Pope, Earl of Downe, built the main part of the present "Abbey" In 1668 upon the death of the Fourth Earl the estate was inherited by his sister, Lady Frances, who married Sir Francis North (later Lord Keeper of the Great Seal). Sir Francis purchased the outstanding shares of the leases and was subsequently created the 1st Baron Guilford in 1683. The Abbey remained the residence of the Norths for the next 270 years. Perhaps the most famous Lord North was the 6th Earl of Guilford who was Prime Minister during the loss of the American Colonies. Due to finances, the family surrendered the lease to Trinity College in 1932. In 1963 Trinity College sold the Abbey and grounds to Fairleigh Dickinson University of New Jersey, USA for its English Literature program. Trinity retained the village proper and the surrounding farms. Although the college has sold most of the houses, it still retains several properties, and much of the local farmland, which it leases.

The Village Today

The beauty of the village rests in the fact that much of the village has remained untouched over the years. The largest recorded population was 819 in 1841; it has remained near 500 for the past 75 years. The Abbey and grounds have been restored by Fairleigh Dickinson and English Heritage to its original splendour. This includes William Pope's house of c.1611; the south wing of 1858; Sanderson Miller's Gothic chapel window (1747), and rotunda (1750); Tilleman Bobart's pleasure gardens comprising artificial lake, cascade, serpentine, Chinese bridge, and an obelisk erected on the visit of Frederick Prince of Wales, in 1739.

Although the Abbey is not open to visitors the grounds may be viewed from dawn to dusk. There is a public foot path which crosses through the grounds and onward to Drayton Arch.

Most of the houses in Wroxton date from the early 17th and 18th centuries. Houses closest to the Abbey Gates and in Church and Silver Streets are somewhat older.

Although The North Arms is an older building, the oldest public house is the White Horse which dates from the 1750's when the Stratford Road was built as a turnpike to relieve traffic in the village. Woodcote, opposite the Abbey Gates, once housed the Black Horse public house. The Old Laundry, Old Bakery, and the Post Office were all some of the original and older buildings.

Although there is documented evidence of Wroxton church from 1217, the present ALL SAINTS appears to be chiefly 14th and 15th century. There are, however, traces of a medieval wall painting above the chancel screen. The tower was designed by Sanderson Miller and begun in 1748. The church contains some notable and striking monuments. The grand canopied tomb of Sir William Pope (d. 1631) and his wife Anne (d. 1625) stands in the chancel. There is an exquisite monument, carved by John Flaxman, to Lord North, the Prime Minister, (d. 1792); a unique memorial shared by all three wives of Francis, Lord Guilford, carved by Joseph Wilton in 1783, as well as prominent grave stones and brasses of Sir Thomas Pope (d. 1668); Francis, Lord Keeper (d. 1685); and Margaret Bustard mother of Sir Thomas Pope, founder of Trinity College (d. 1557).

ST THOMAS OF CANTERBURY in Silver Street was built in 1887 by Colonel North who was Catholic. This is one of only eight thatched churches in England. Colonel North was born J.S. Doyle who changed his name to North after marrying Baroness Susan North in 1841. Catholic services were first held in the Abbey Chapel and then moved to a mission chapel housed in the "North Arms". The mission finally moved to St. Thomas when built. Today St. Thomas is part of St. Joseph's in Banbury and is registered for marriages. As early as 1676 Wroxton has been the home to various Protestant nonconformists. Quakers, Anabaptists, Baptists, and Presbyterian families have been listed in various censuses. The first mention of a Methodist community is 1778. In 1822 a Mr. William Gardner's house was registered as a meeting place. The current Methodist Chapel in the High Street is the most recent chapel. The current school with its excellent reputation attracts students throughout the Banbury area. The Duck Pond and its spring had been the source of the village's water supply for hundreds of years. Even the Old Bake House used water from the spring. Today the resident ducks are tended to by villagers who serve on a rota. The thatched hut was built to protect the ducks at night from local fox. The "Slow Down Ducks Crossing" sign on "Woodcote" is a reminder from the time the ducks were housed in the cottage garden and the ducks would cross Mills Lane to reach their hut.

Other points of interest include the 17th century signpost on the North Newington Road; the dovecote in Wroxton Park; the icehouse on the Abbey grounds; Wroxton House Hotel, a former manor home; and Wroxton House flats on Church Lane which was originally the Pilkington (of Pilkington Glass) family home. There are many less famous, but nonetheless, lovely Horton ironstone and thatch cottages in the village.

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The Parish Clerk holds some reports on the village and its houses produced when conservation status was applied for. This material is available for examination by arrangement with the Clerk.