

A walk around the history of Swanbourne

The village of Swanbourne can trace its roots back to Anglo-Saxon times. The first mention of 'Suanaburna' comes in a document of 792 relating to the granting by King Offa of the parishes of Winslow, Granborough and Little Horwood for the establishment of St. Alban's Abbey. The name probably means 'peasant's brook', and so originally referred to the stream which flows along the western border of the parish, rather than the village itself.

At the time of the Domesday Book in 1086, the parish was divided between 5 landholders, although one of these was extremely small. One of the major landholders was King William (The Bastard or Conqueror) who took over land belonging to King Harold. William's half-brother the Count of Mortain also held land, and the other two major landholders were Walter Giffard and William, son of Ansculf.

The church itself was founded in 1230, probably on the site of an earlier wooden Saxon structure. In 1201, land in Swanbourne had been granted to the Abbot of Woburn by Hugh and Margaret Mallet. In 1212, the Abbott of Woburn appointed Robertus Pasellewe as vicar, and a list of the succeeding vicars is posted near the organ. The last resident vicar up to 1968 was Rev James Mathers. Since then, the post of vicar has been combined with that of the Rector of Mursley and other responsibilities.

This walk starts from The Betsey Wynne public house which was opened in July 2006. The pub takes its name from Betsey Fremantle (nee Wynne), wife of Thomas Fremantle, who was a captain in the Royal Navy and a close friend of Admiral Nelson. Thomas and Betsey, together with their new-born son, also called Thomas, moved to Swanbourne in 1798. At this time, Thomas Fremantle was recovering from an injury to his right arm acquired in the same action in which Nelson had lost his. Betsey was a diarist, starting her journal in August 1789 at the age of ten, when she was travelling with her parents and sisters across Europe. Thomas Fremantle himself went on to fight alongside Nelson at the sea battles of Copenhagen and Trafalgar, and eventually become an Admiral, in charge of the Mediterranean fleet. However, he died an unexpected early death in 1819. Betsey kept writing a diary until her death in 1857, and larger parts of it have now been published. They throw a very interesting light on her life and times. Thomas and Betsey's eldest son became an M.P. and took high office in government. He was eventually made the first Lord Cottesloe, partly in honour of his own achievements and partly in recognition of his father's activities. Descendants of the Fremantle family have remained in the village ever since, and now much of the village, including The Betsey Wynne itself, belongs to the Fremantle Estate.

- (1) From The Betsey Wynne, turn right along Mursley Road. A few houses along on the right, is what used to be the Swan pub, now a private house. This was the last of the 5 pubs that existed in the village in the 19th Century to cease

business. There was a 15-year gap between its closure and the opening of The Betsey Wynne.

- (2) Opposite is Wychwood House, which used to be a Baptist chapel. An original chapel was built on this site in 1809, but the present building dates to 1863. The chapel eventually closed in 1969 and was converted into a private dwelling soon after.
- (3) A few doors further along the road on the right-hand side is a new house called Willow House. This is the home of the former England fast bowler, Darren Gough. Opposite is a footpath leading to the lower part of the village called Nearton End. The footpath is called The New Walk, as it was created in the middle of the 19th century, to replace the original path which was closed when the Sir Thomas Fremantle (later 1st Lord Cottesloe) created the park around his home.
- (4) The next house on the right, a Georgian building known as the Cottage, was once the Dower House of the Fremantles. During the Second World War, it was the home of the Spitfire fighter ace, Tony Bartley, who married the film star Deborah Kerr ('The King and I' and many others).
- (5) Opposite The Cottage is the Old House, Elizabethan in origin. This was the home into which the Fremantle family moved in 1798. It has been much enlarged since then, but remains the Fremantle family home, currently occupied by Betsey Duncan Smith (direct descendant of Thomas and Betsey Fremantle) and her husband, Iain, the former Conservative party leader.

In 1800, Charles Fremantle, the second son of Thomas and Betsey, was born in the Old House. Like his father, he also became an Admiral, but before this, in 1829, he had been given the task of claiming Western Australia for the Crown. He landed at the mouth of the Swan River, close to where the port of Fremantle, named in his honour, now stands. The nearby town of Perth has areas known as Swanbourne and Cottesloe, also from this family connection. In 1998/9, Tom Fremantle, son of the 5th Lord Cottesloe, and then aged 29 years, cycled the 12,000 miles from Swanbourne to Swanbourne in memory of his family ancestor's historic voyage, made at the same age. It took Tom 16 months to complete the journey, which he wrote about in his book entitled 'Johnny Ginger's Last Ride'.

- (6) The next building on the right is the former Infants School, and now the Village Hall. It was built in 1871 to accommodate the many younger children now attending school after education became compulsory for all children. It served as the Infants School until 1913. The next house was, for many years, the home of the village schoolmaster, George White and his wife, who together ran the two village schools. The building itself may well have been built just after the Civil War to replace one burnt down during that war.
- (7) The Village Stores and Post Office, which is set well back from the main road,

and was originally a Cooperative Store. The Swanbourne Co-operative Society had been formed in 1868 to help the poor of the village avoid falling into huge debt. It was originally situated in a thatched house (no longer standing) on the Winslow Road. The present shop was transferred to private hands in 1969, and has managed to survive against the odds, thanks to the hard work of the shopkeepers, and the estate which owns the building.

- (8) Further along is the stone building of Deverals Farm which bears the date of 1630. The Deverals were clearly wealthy at one time and held a share in the Swanbourne manor. The house came into possession of the Fremantle family in 1802.
- (9) Opposite is a beautifully-timbered house, now two dwellings, dating to the 17th century – perhaps also built after the Civil War. For a time at the end of the 19th Century, it served as a lodge house for Swanbourne House. Many of the trees which lined the drive are still standing, The drive continues across the road, and leads up to Swanbourne House. (See below for more information on the house).
- (10) In the churchyard on the right (opposite the lodge house), nestling under the first yew tree you can see the gravestone of Jeremiah England, stonemason. He, along with another workman, was killed on 18th June 1866 in a fall during the construction of Swanbourne House. His fellow workmen erected the stone in his memory.

Before going into the church, look at the large memorial tomb to the right of the church porch. This is in memory of two brothers, William and Nicholas Godwin, who died in 1706 and 1714 respectively, each leaving money for the establishment of a free school for 12 boys from Swanbourne and Mursley. This was an early date for such a school. The school was originally located on a site down Station Road, until it was eventually replaced by the current Church of England School, situated in Winslow Road.

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The south wall of the Church bears the date 1632, and suggests a renovation carried out by the churchwarden, John Deveral after the building of Deverals Farm. The church had a subsequent major refurbishment in 1863 with support from Sir Thomas Fremantle (1st Lord Cottesloe).

Inside the church, are a number of interesting features. There are the remains of a doom wall painting visible behind the organ. Fragments of red paint can be found on some of the pillars and walls, suggesting that the nave was highly decorated at

one time. The nave also has a number of memorials to various wealthy landowners in the village, but the chancel is mainly given over to memorials to different members of the Fremantle family, including Admiral Thomas Fremantle. Near the communion rail, there is a brass to Thomas Adams who was murdered by highwaymen in 1626.

- (11) On the opposite side of the road to the church is the war memorial, unveiled in 1920, and recording the names of the 13 young men from the village who died in the First World War. Two further names from the Second World War have since been added. An unusual feature of the memorial is that in addition to recording those who lost their lives in these two wars, it also lists all those who took part in the first war, noting those who were taken prisoner or were wounded. Unfortunately, the stone has worn badly
- (12) Across the road from the church stands an Elizabethan stone manor house, built around 1600 for Sir John Fortescue, Chancellor of the Exchequer of England under Queen Elizabeth I, from 1589 until 1603. Sir John had a very large house built at Salden (the other side of Mursley) and it is thought likely that he had this second home built for his family, so that they were kept away from all the business activity around Salden Manor. There is a very fine tomb in his memory in Mursley Church. The Manor House, which has served many functions over the years, including that of an Old People's Home, is now used as an annex to Swanbourne House School. To the left of the Manor House is the main part of the tree-lined drive which leads to Swanbourne House.

Swanbourne House was built around 1865 for Sir Thomas Fremantle, (the eldest child of Thomas and Betsey Fremantle and later the 1st Lord Cottesloe). It was used by the Fremantle family until the death of the 2nd Lord Cottesloe in 1918. The 3rd Lord Cottesloe chose to live back in the Old House, a much more modest dwelling. In 1920, Swanbourne House was let out to a private school, and Swanbourne House School has become a well patronised fee-paying school, providing much employment to the village.

- (13) Turning right towards Winslow, on the right hand side is the former vicarage, built in Victorian times to replace an earlier building. It is now a private home.
- (14) Opposite is a beautiful example of Tudor architecture, with herring-bone brick work. This building was the first location for Swanbourne Post Office and tradition has it that the square orifice over the front door was used as the posting hole for the mounted postman, thus avoiding the need to dismount. (The Post Office has been located in many other places since then, and is now part of Swanbourne Stores).

Continuing on along the same side of the road as the Old Post Office, after a row of three old brick cottages, there is a footpath. If you have time, it is worth walking along here for a few hundred yards. You pass at the back of another house likely to have been rebuilt after the Civil War, and now the Home Farm. At the time of the Civil War, it was the home of Major Thomas Deveral, who served the parliamentary

cause in Buckinghamshire. Further along, looking to the left, is a good view of Swanbourne House, tucked in amongst the trees. To the right of the house is a clear example of the ancient ridge and furrow. This dates back to the farming strips that pre-dated the enclosure of the land into fields - which happened in Swanbourne at the fairly early date of 1762. An Act of Parliament had to be passed for each community that was enclosed, and 5 commissioners were appointed to allot the land between the various land-owners of the time. The large map that they compiled for this purpose, and a copy of the Act are to be found in the County Archives.

- (15) Returning to the Winslow Road, the modern bungalow on the left is called Godwyn, the name reflecting the fact that the land on which it was built was once the School Garden, dating back to the original Godwin School. Opposite is the Swanbourne Church of England School (now run in partnership with the infant schools in Mursley and Drayton Parslow). This was opened in 1832, taking over and expanding on the role of the Godwin School, as schooling became open to all. It once had separate entrances for girls and boys, and there was a high wall separating the two playgrounds.

Turn right down Station Road. This road eventually leads, after one and a half miles, to Swanbourne Station – which was situated on the Oxford to Bletchley railway line. The Station opened in 1850, and was, for many years, a main route for both passengers and goods traffic. In 1955, there were plans to build a large marshalling yard here to serve the whole of the South of England, and a huge concrete flyover was built at Bletchley to facilitate this. However, these plans were cancelled before any work actually started on the yard itself. The line eventually closed to passengers at the end of 1967, following the Beeching review, though it remained open to goods trains and the occasional special excursion for many years after this. The station master at the time remained living in the redundant buildings and his sons still live there. The platforms remain as a reminder of this past age – and there are now long-delayed plans to reopen the line to passengers, though this does not include reopening the station.

- (16) After about 100 yards, turn left into Smithfield End. The houses on the left are a good example of homes built in the 19th Century, probably by a local builder, Thomas Bowler.
- (17) Further along on the right is Ivy Farm, which dates to the 17th Century. Turning the corner, little is known of the history of the thatched cottage on the left.
- (18) The next house on the left was once a pub called The Boot (one of many such pubs in this area which get their name from the cult of John Schorne, the vicar of North Marston who caught 'the devil in his boot' and led to the church of North Marston becoming a centre of pilgrimage in medieval times). This pub closed for business around 1935. Its outhouses once served as a Friendly Society Clubhouse – an important source of mutual support for working families.
- (19) Opposite The Boot is a lane which originally joined up with the road to

Winslow, but which was closed off at the time of the enclosures of 1762. The first house on the right was The Laundry during the 19th and early 20th century. To the left of this lane is the row of thatched cottages known as Barrack Row. This is thought to have garrison during the Civil War. In 1643, there was an attack on the village by a foraging party on the side of the King. When the people of Swanbourne refused to give them what they wanted, reports of the time say that 7 places within the village were set on fire. After this attack, permission was granted by Parliament for the rebuilding of these houses, using wood from Whittlebury Forest.

- (20) Opposite Barrack Row – No. 2 Smithfield End, was once the home of the village blacksmith. The small building beyond it, which now serves as a garage, was once the village smithy. The two new houses behind the old smithy were built on land sold to raise money for the establishment of The Betsey Wynne.
- (21) As we come back to the Winslow Road, the Victorian house on the opposite side of the road was for nearly 100 years the home of the Brooks family, who were carpenters and undertakers.
- (22) Turning to the left, back towards the church, on the left is Swanbourne Tea Rooms, which also has many old photographs and memorabilia of the village. The older buildings go back to Civil War days, and reputedly were used as stables by the Parliamentary forces. The newer buildings on the left were added on to form a bakery, which operated successfully until the 1970's. The ovens can still be seen in the Tea Rooms. (The Post Office was also once located here).
- (23) On the opposite side of the road is Home Farm – the hub of the Fremantle Estate, which has ownership of the majority of the village lands and many of its properties. This house itself dates back to the mid-17th Century and was the home of Major Thomas Deveral (see above).
- (24) Carrying on along the road, on the left hand side are Victorian cottages. In the front garden of number 20 is a small building which was once the cobbler's workshop. Corrie Barn is a recent modernisation of a barn linked to the Charlton Hill Farmhouse next to it. The Farmhouse itself has served as a residence for several centuries.

Returning back to the church corner, you have three choices. You can go straight back to the Betsey Wynne, missing out the Nearton End part of the village. However, if you want to see Nearton End, you can continue on down the hill (once called Petticoat Lane, now known as Cemetery Hill since it leads to the village cemetery which was opened in 1892) or you can return back towards the Betsey Wynne and then turn down the New Walk opposite Willow House, marked as part of the Cross Bucks Way.

- (25) If you chose to go down Cemetery Hill, there is no path down much of this road (despite a request, recorded in the Parish Council minutes of 1896, for

such a path to be added!). However, if you wish to risk this route, cross over to the path on the right hand side, and walk down past Swanbourne House School, noting the tree-lined drive up to the school, and the modern buildings which mask the 1860's house built for Sir Thomas Fremantle. When this path comes to an end, choose a suitable point to cross over to the left and go down as far as the cemetery on the left and walk through it and out the other side into Nearton End.

- (26) Turn left, past Moat Farm on your right, Garden Cottage on your left, and then the fine Tudor herring-bone brick house on your right.

If you take the safer route down The New Walk, you are following a path that replaced an original footpath linking Nearton End to Swanbourne proper, when Sir Thomas Fremantle wanted to extend the lands around the Old House (where he was living before the building of Swanbourne House). So, despite its name, The New Walk is over 150 years old. At the bottom, turn left to join the alternative 'Cemetery Hill' route.

- (27) On the right at number 25 are what was once a butchers shop and slaughterhouse, but which ceased this activity in the 1950's. There is a water pump beside it, once a major source of water to this part of Swanbourne.

- (28) On the left is the Methodist Chapel. The current chapel was built in 1907, replacing an earlier one built in 1858. Its founders were mainly poor agricultural workers for whom the chapel was a major source of support and education. The plaque on the front of the chapel records it as a Primitive Methodist chapel, meaning it was part of the movement which started in Staffordshire, which attempted to return to Methodism's primitive roots of outdoor preaching, Bible study and prayer. ('A History of Methodism in Swanbourne' is available from Ken Harris tel: 01296 720454)

- (29) Almost opposite the chapel is Brook Farmhouse, a rare example of cruck-style building, and almost certainly dating back to medieval times. There is a date of 1619 on one of the bricks which would have been included at a later time. It seems that what is now an external wall on the western (right-hand) end of the house was originally an internal wall.

- (30) There is another fine thatched house further along on the right – Nearton Cottage. This is reputed to have been the only house in the village to have suffered damage during World War II, when it was strafed by a passing plane and lost its chimney pot!

Tattams Lane on the left leads back to The Betsey Wynne, but you might want to continue along Nearton End for a hundred yards or so.

- (31) Hart House on the left (once The White Hart pub until its closure around 1880) and Nearton Farmhouse on the right. This road leads to Stewkley Lane, a green lane which has never been developed as a road, but which leads to Stewkley and was used as a drovers road in earlier days. Either return to

Tattams Lane (see next paragraph) or you can follow the path through the gate on the left which takes you through the Millennium Wood (which was planted in 2000 to mark the start of the new millennium with all of the hopes we had at the time for a more caring world!) and then alongside the Recreation Field.

(32) At the top, on the opposite side of the road are two interesting 1930s houses, built to a design by the wife of the 3rd Lord Cottesloe to serve as grace and favour residences for former Fremantle staff.

(33) Turn left, past Ridgeway Cottages. This cul-de-sac of post-war housing was built by the local Council to house village people soon after the Second World War. Most of the houses are now in private hands. After this, you reach the top of Tattams Lane.

(34) Tattams Lane is named after Thomas Tattam who originally lived at what is now 17 Tattams Lane (or after his son Joseph Tattam, who was a Union organiser). It only gained this name in the 1970's when the character of the lane changed with the building of bungalows and houses along its eastern side. It incorporates two older houses – number 17, which was built on a road closed at the time of enclosure, and number 15, a timbered house which once had an orchard stretching from the house up to the Mursley Road.

You are now back at The Betsey Wynne. I hope you have enjoyed the walk.

Ken Harris.