

**A STUDY OF THE PARISH**

**OF**

**PIRTON**

**By**

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**1964-1967**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Pirton – This place is full of folk-lore; possibly its moats, earthworks and ancient houses are responsible for much of this. There is a tumulus in the parish called 'knocking knoll' and at certain periods, it is averted, three loud and distant knocks are heard, apparently issuing from the interior of the mound. There is a tradition that a warrior attired in his armour is buried there, his treasure chest beside him.

A local distich runs:-

“In Pirton pond there lies, untold  
Sacks of treasure, pots of gold”

Pirton pond is the moat which encircles the Toot Hill, and the site of the sunken treasure is a dark and deep spot where the ancient drawbridge stood. The horses pulling Archbishop Stigand's spoils of war shied at the drawbridge pulling the coach into the moat.

Tradition has it, too, that the church was once built upon the same Toot Hill, but that every night the devil pulled down that which had been built the previous day and rebuilt it at the foot of the hill where the church now stands. This may point to a pagan temple existing on Toot Hill, the materials of which were utilised for the building of the church.

The fine old mansion known as High Down has legends intertwined in its history. Over the porch is the haunted room, a small roof chamber that was discovered in 1878 by a bricklayer falling through the tiles. To his relief he found a floor beneath him, although in an advanced state of decay. In one of the corners of the room the remains of a turret stair were to be seen and a small window over the front door which had been bricked up.

A cavalier named Goring, being wounded in the Civil War, sought and obtained shelter in the house, and was hidden in this room. When, however, the Roundheads began to search for him he took refuge in the hollow of a large wych elm outside the doorway. He was soon discovered by the soldiers, dragged down and murdered at the foot of the tree, whence he rides headless on a white palfrey on the night of every June 15<sup>th</sup> to the grounds of Hitchin Priory.

Tradition and folk-lore abound, where history and writing is sparse, in this parish of isolation.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **PHYSICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PIRTON REGION**

#### **General Situation**

The parish of Pirton is situated forty miles to the north-north-west of London, in the north of the county of Hertfordshire and adjoining the county of Bedfordshire. The latitude of the village is 51degrees 58 minutes north, the longitude 0 degrees 20 minutes west, and can be found on the Ordnance grid at TL1431.

The parish is situated in the rural district of Hitchin, with the Hertfordshire parish of Holwell bordering it to the north-east, Ickleford to the east and Hitchin to the south and south-east. Shillington in Bedfordshire adjoins Pirton to the west and north. The parish boundary is found along the Icknield Way and the R. Oughton on the south and south-east, the ridge of Pegsdon Downs and a stream to Apsley End on the west, with an arbitrary line to the north and east. The county boundary follows an S-pattern with the parish of Shillington interlocking with and between Pirton and Hexton. This has provided each parish with a fair apportionment of high ground, chalk slopes and chalk-marl plain, with grazing land for sheep on the hills, some woodland, and some pasture to the north-west. The size of the parish of Pirton has ranged since 1801 between 2561 acres in 1871 to 2783 acres since 1921.

Population in 1801 was 481, more than doubling by 1861 to 1023 and reaching a maximum in 1881 of 1125. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the population has fluctuated from 900 in 1901 to below 800 in 1921 and to the present figure of just over 900. Once the new Cromwell Estate is populated the figure will be just under 1000.

No place can be studied properly in isolation, and so the first two chapters will describe Pirton in association with its general surroundings. Chapter I is concerned with the physical setting of the region and Chapter II takes a look at the human setting.

#### **Relief**

The main structure affecting the relief of the area is the range of chalk hills known as the Chilterns. They lie in a south-west to north-east direction extending a hundred miles from the White Horse Hills of Wiltshire and Berkshire through Pirton to the Gog Magog Hills of Suffolk. An impressive scarp-slope faces the north-west in contrast to the south-east which dips gently under the River Thames and London Basin.

Pirton and Hitchin are situated at an area of change in the Chilterns. To the south-west they stand impressive, the hills just to the south-west of Pirton having been called the Alps of England, with the famous Dunstable Downs only eight miles further to the south-west. Within five miles of the scarp slope of the Chilterns between Goring and Hitchin are a line of towns, Wallingford, Thame, Aylesbury and Leighton Buzzard, at a height of about 250`, while in no fewer than seven areas the hills rise above 750`. They have however, presented no real barrier to communication because between

Goring and Hitchin are five gaps and routeways below 500` just south of Royston, and quite rapidly merge into the lowlands of East Anglia.

**Fig 1**[unavailable] which shows an area of 150 square miles round Pirton, indicates that roughly half of the area is below 250 feet and half above 250 feet, the lower ground being to the north and north-east, and the high ground to the south and south-west. The same pattern exists within the parish of Pirton as shown in **fig 3**. A third of the parish is over 250 feet high, rising in Tingley Wood to over 400 feet to a maximum behind High Down of 437 feet. Much of the actual village is cited on a spur of chalk pointing north-east at a height of 250 feet. A larger spur extending north-west and north-east between 200 and 250 feet contains another third of the parish, the remaining part to the north and east below 200 feet and reaching a minimum of 168 feet in the north-east corner. From the point of view of relief the parish is divided into two sections – the undulating and hilly south-west, and the flat and gently sloping area of the north and east. Between the two is a slope which has a maximum gradient of 1 in 18 from Rectory Farm (213 feet) to Hill Farm (266 feet).

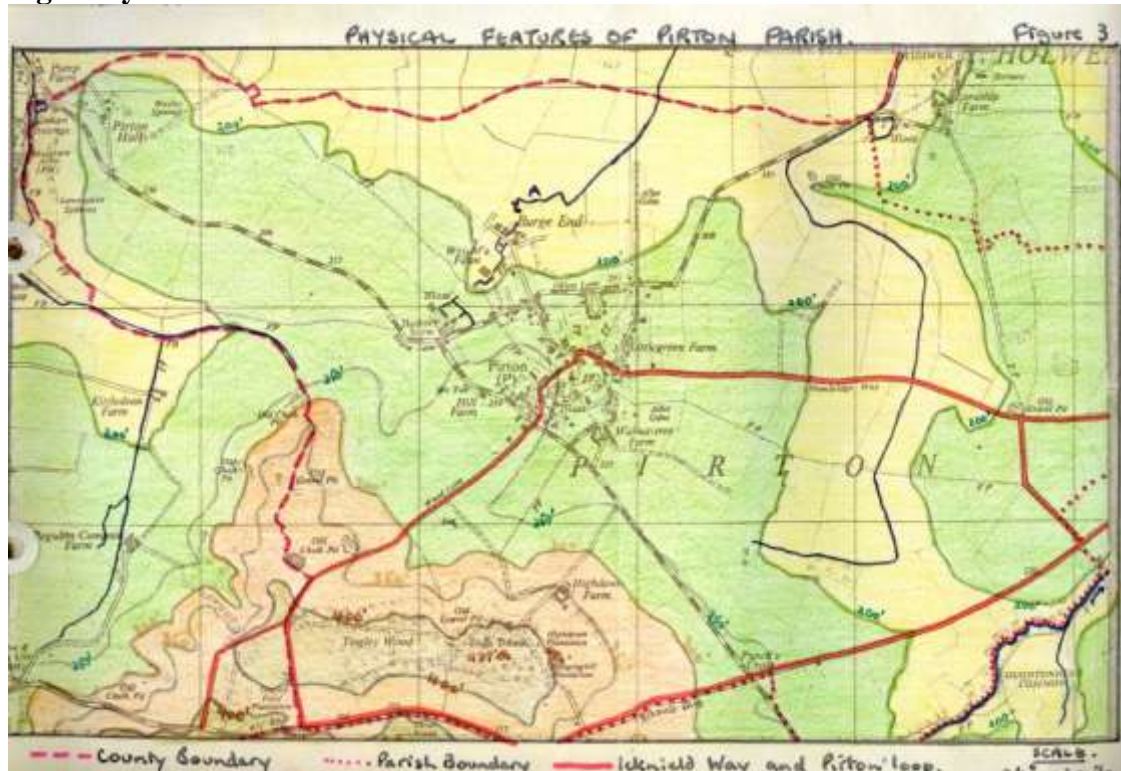
### **Drainage**

The area is affected by two great river systems, the watershed consisting of the Chilterns. The rivers to the south of the Chilterns rising on the dip slope, except for the River Lea which has worn through the ridge to rise to the north of Luton, all flow south as tributaries of the River Thames. The River Gade and the River Ver are tributaries of the River Colne, joining it at Rickmansworth and above Watford respectively and flowing into the River Thames at Staines. The River Lea flows in an easterly direction for the first half of its course until three miles east of Hertford where it turns due south to enter the River Thames at West Ham. The River Mimram, River Beane and River Rib are all tributaries of the River Lea. The characteristic feature of these south flowing rivers is of dry upper valleys, retreating and interrupted rivers. Because of the south-dipping slope of the chalk under the London clay the drainage is still to the south but much of it is underground. Interrupted rivers are shown on **fig 1** by the upper reaches of the River Lea at Luton and the Old Bourne north of Hertford and dry valleys in the 500 foot contour of the upper River Ver.

To the north of the Chilterns, rivers flow from **fig 1** to the east, to the west and to the north. All of these rivers flow eventually into the River Ouse, which after flowing east across **fig 1**, turns north at Ely to run into the Wash at King's Lynn. The River Cam meets the River Ouse below Ely and Clipstone Brook and the River Ouzel at Newport Pagnell. **Fig 2**[unavailable] shows a dendritic pattern of obsequent drainage in the area almost surrounding Pirton, though many of the feeder streams shown are little more than ditches.

The River Oughton, which makes the south-east border of the parish, has an average width of 15 feet from its source of prolific springs on the 200 foot contour. A much smaller stream makes up a portion of the western boundary and runs north into the River Ivel at Shefford. The remaining two streams in Pirton, shown on **figs 2 and 3** are little more than ditches until they have left the parish, although both originate from small springs.

**Fig 3 Physical Features of Pirton Parish**



There has been a recession in the drainage pattern to the north of the Chilterns as there has been to the south, but the cause is rather more obscure. Two good examples are found close to Pirton, the dry valleys at Pegsdon, three minor ones shown at the south west of **fig 3**, the others just off the map to the south-west. The second example is that Domesday says of Pirton that 'there are four mills worth 73s.4d.' Cussans History of Hertfordshire adds that they were "probably at or near Oughton Head." As to the correctness of the assertion of Cussans there are no proofs except in the case of Westmill which undoubtedly was one of them. The Grange Farm at the north-west corner of the parish, is a probable site for the second. Quite a sizeable streambed or ditch has been followed back from stream A on **fig 3** through a moat round Burge End Farm, across Wright's Farm to the moat around Rectory Farm. Although there are no traces of the mill, Wright's Farm seems to be a small replica of Westmill Farm in layout and direction of the house, mill and bridge, and this seems to have been the third site. The fourth is more speculative but Burge End Farm is a possibility, this assertion being reinforced by the two fields named Millers Close on the Enclosure Award Map, at the back of the house and at the north-west end of Burge End Lane.

The Hertfordshire chalk was laid down 80-100 million years ago and originally extended to the Irish Sea. The drainage later ran south and south-east to the Thames basin across the Hertfordshire Chilterns from the north and north-west, through for example the Hitchin gap. The advance and retreat of the Ice Ages gradually removed the chalk, with the help of weathering and river erosion, to the north of the present line of the Chilterns, cutting off the upper parts of the northern tributaries of the River Thames. In the valleys containing the larger tributaries such as at Hitchin, and to the east where the chalk was lower, the Ice Sheets advanced further south plugging the valleys with glacial drift, and creating the barrier to alter the drainage direction. When the chalk was worn away to the north of the higher areas, for example at

Pegsdon, a scarp slope was formed to cut the south flowing rivers at the crest and allow a new drainage pattern to emerge to the north. Lord Avebury in 'Scenery in England' (P.367) suggests this as the reason for the dry valleys on the scarp slope and the dry upper reaches of the dip slope streams. The Hexton Parish Survey puts forward two other likely suggestions for their formation. One suggests that the dry valleys were cut by the water from the melting ice (when the chalk was still frozen) in the last Ice Age and deepened by the period of torrential rain which followed. A combination of the two ideas seems most plausible, that they were cut by streams before the last Ice Age, which subsequently enlarged them. The problem which arises is that there are similar valleys in the south and south-west of England beyond the limits of the Ice Sheets. This helps to give credence to the second of the Hexton suggestions that they were caused by subsidence of the land following the solution of the underlying strata by underground streams. Ever increasing use of water and the digging of wells in more recent times has been responsible for lowering the water table level to cause further retreat of the streams.

### **Geology**

The general geology of the southern part of the region has already been inferred, the area consisting of chalk uplands roughly above the 250 foot contour. To the north of the chalk Chilterns is an area of chalk marl, sometimes overlain with boulder clay, succeeded by a large expanse of gault clay, and followed further north successively by lower Greensand and Oxford Clay.

A generalised vertical section is shown below of the solid geology of the Chilterns in the Pirton area.

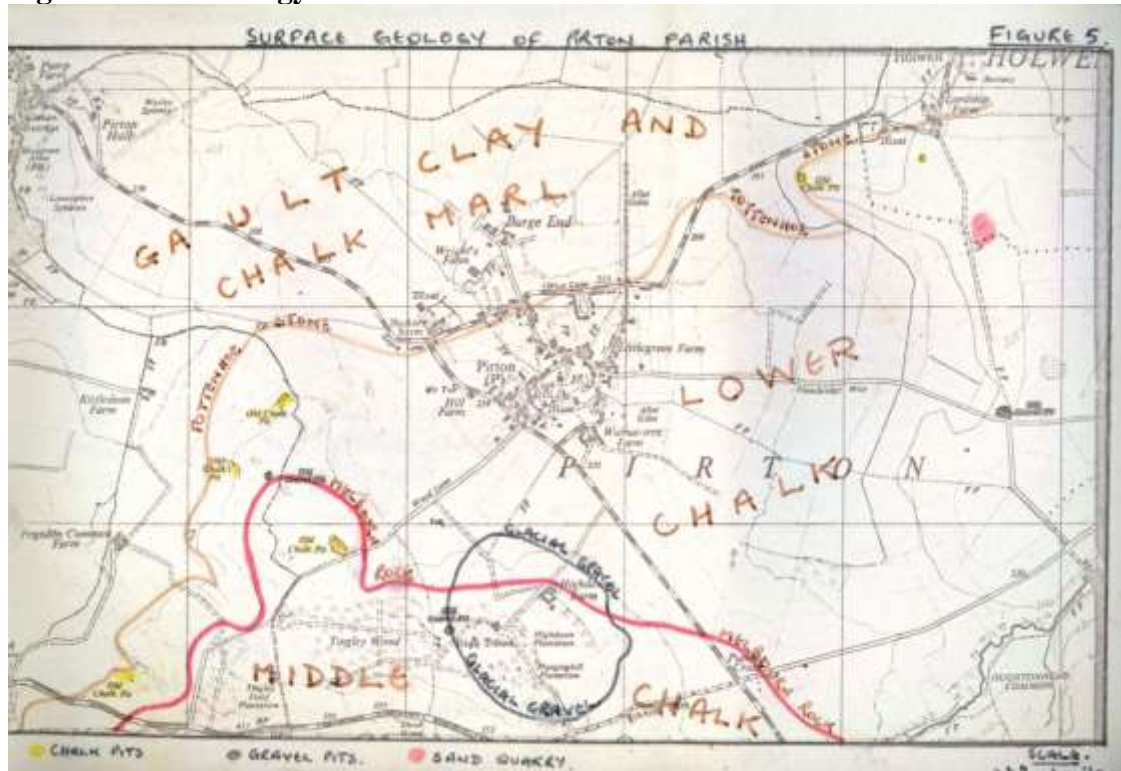
#### **Fig 4 Solid Geology Table in Pirton Area**

1.	UPPER CHALK	-	with flints, occurs in the higher west
2.	HARD CHALK ROCK	-	9'-10', a form of hard limestone.
3.	MIDDLE CHALK	-	usually 200'-220' thick.
4.	MELBOURN ROCK	-	9'-10', hard rock.
5.	LOWER CHALK	-	without flints – usually 160'-180'.
6.	TOTTERNHOE STONE	-	3' thick
7.	GAULT CLAY	-	140'-195'
8.	LOWER GREENSAND	-	25'-100'

The O.S. Geology map 221 of the 1"- 1 mile series has been completely unavailable, but a simplified surface geology map of the parish occurs in **fig 5**. The village stands on an outcrop of Totternhoe Stone and though has been classed on **fig 1a** [unavailable] as a settlement relating to the Icknield Way is geographically a spring-line settlement. It occurs in a straight line of spring-line settlements in a north-east direction from Hexton to Pegsdon, Pirton, Holwell, Radwell, Ashwell, Steeple Morden and Litlington.



**Fig 5 Surface Geology of Pirton Parish**



A third of the parish to the north of the Totterhoe Outcrop consists mostly of chalk marl mixed with some heavy gault clay. This is separated from the Lower Chalk by the slope of the Totterhoe Stone. Above the lower chalk a band of rock follows the 350 foot contour from the west as far as High Down Farm whence it tilts downwards across the contours to Oughton Head where springs issue forth from it at the 200 foot level. The Melbourn Rock marks the lower limit of the Middle Chalk which covers the highest parts of Pirton. The hard chalk rock and the upper chalk have long since disappeared, though an area of glacial gravel drift is shown at High Down on **fig 5**.

**Figure 5** also shows the pits and small quarries in and immediately surrounding the parish that have been used in the past. In general the chalk pits have been used for hard core for tracks, for lower surfaces of metalled roads, and for drainage ditches. The gravel pits are of glacial origin consisting mainly of chalk pebbles and flints together with a variety of Midland rocks and fossils, and have been used for road mending. The chalk pit to the north-east of the parish is of Totterhoe limestone clinch and used for building material. This pit provided much of the stone for the rebuilding of the church tower in 1883. The most important quarry in recent times was the excavation of the sand pit immediately to the east of the parish, within the 225 foot contour, for the building of the M1 motorway in 1959 and 1960. The sand is of high quality and though it is no longer used commercially much of the sand deposit remains.

Fig 6 Section of the Pirton Well-bore

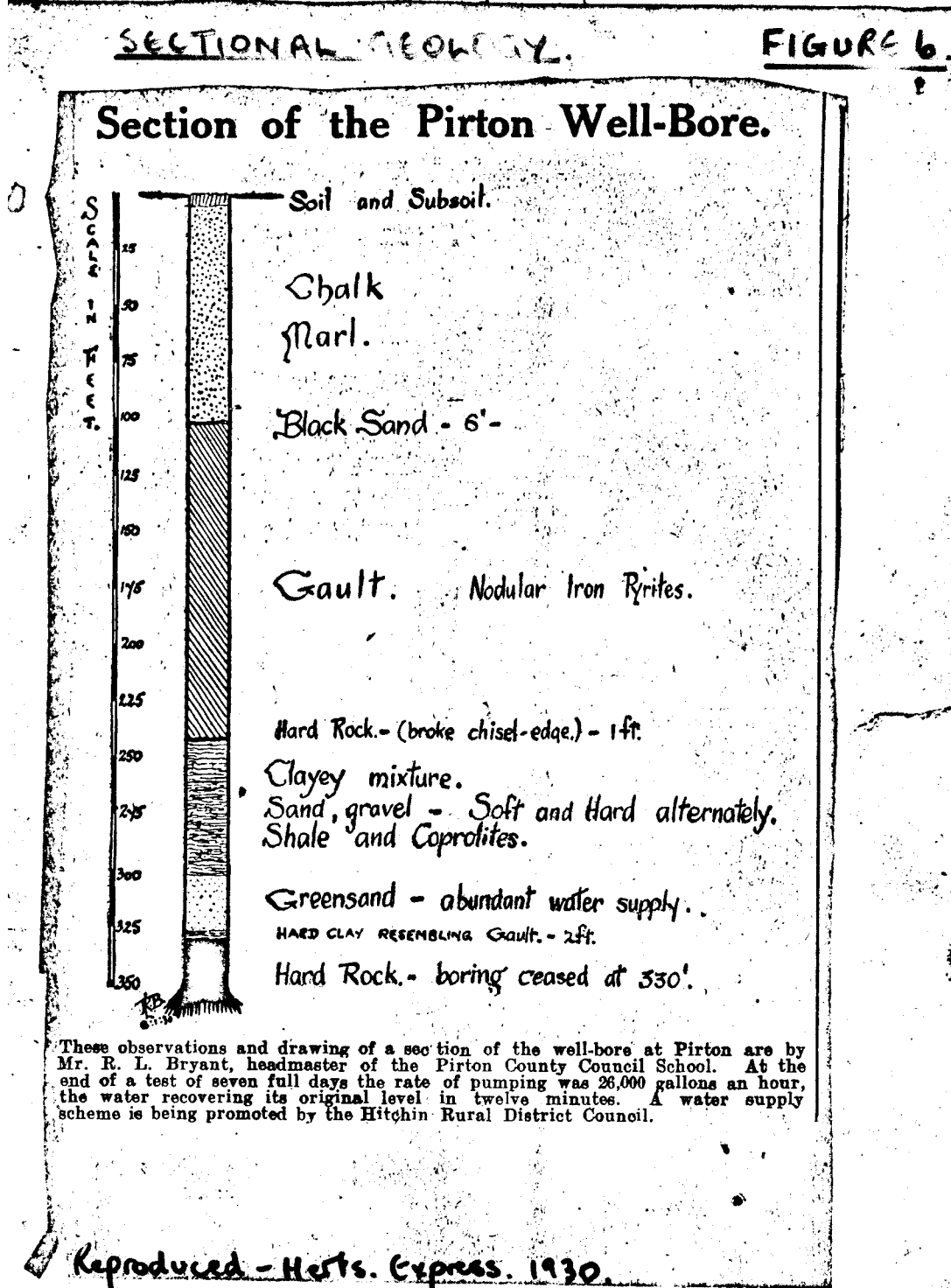


Figure 6 shows a section of the geology beneath the lower part of Pirton. The well-bore was drilled immediately to the north of the Totternhoe slope on the west side of the junction of Priors Hill and Shillington Road (Grove Lane). The height of the land at the point of the bore is 215 feet, allowing only a 100 feet of chalk marl and most of the Gault Clay to be above sea level. An abundant supply of clear, fresh water was reached at 300 feet, the equivalent of 85 feet below sea level, with the bedrock a further 30 feet deeper at 115 feet below mean sea level.

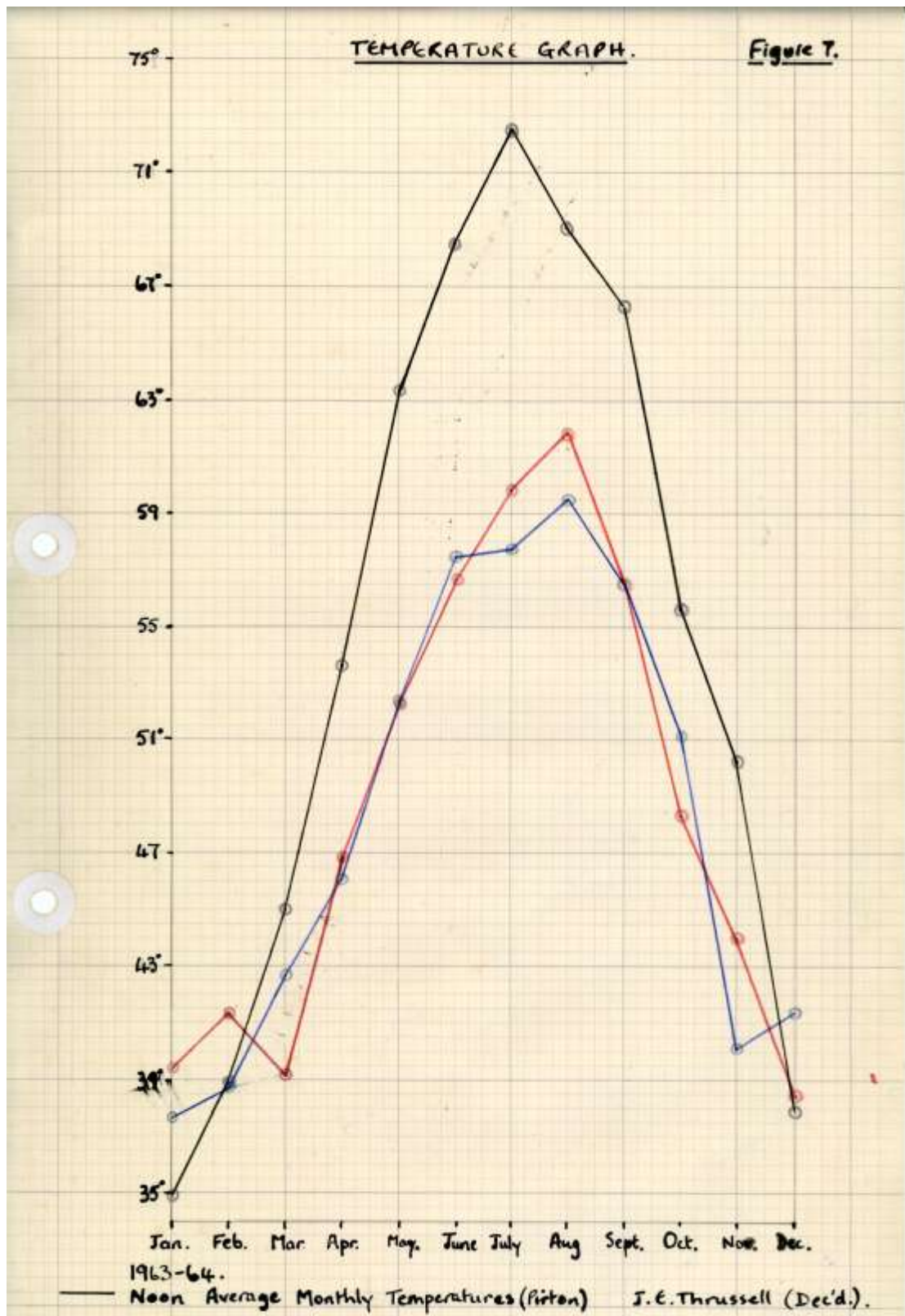
## Climate

“The area on the Chilterns surrounding Hexton (2 ½ miles west-south-west of Pirton) has the greatest range between average summer and average winter temperatures of any part of Great Britain. As if in some way to compensate for this, it is in that region of South-east England which receives the least rainfall – in normal years about 25 inches,” states the Hexton Survey on **page 14**. This is quite a sweeping generalisation which nevertheless contains much truth.

**Figure 7** gives a few isolated temperature figures trying to compare Hertfordshire monthly averages with those of Pirton. The only figures available for Pirton were 1963 and 1964 while those for Hertfordshire have been taken from random figures found in the Herts Natural History Transactions. Direct comparison especially for the summer months gives a false impression because the Pirton figures were taken at noon and so are about 10 degrees above the normal averages. An odd point in the summer figures which does appear is that the maximum is reached in July in 1963-64 instead of in August as shown by the earlier figures. Much of this discrepancy is accounted for in the figures – while the 1963 and 1964 July were both 72 degrees F, 1963 had a month of June 5 degrees F warmer than 1964 and August and September 6 degrees F and 5 degrees F cooler respectively. Even in 1964 July is still more than 1 degree warmer than August. The lower winter figures of Pirton which would be ever lower had the temperature not been of midday e.g. in 1963 the January and February averages at 8a.m were 7 degrees lower than the midday ones used, are accounted for by the fact that Pirton is exposed to the east and north-east. Being sheltered from the south-west winds in the summer, and being exposed to the polar continental weather from Europe, accounts for the larger than average extremes of Pirton.

A feature of the rainfall is the number of torrential downpours which fall with startling suddenness, especially during the summer months. Quite a large proportion of the rain falls in this manner” – again from the Hexton survey. No reason however, is given except that “it would seem that the neighbouring hills do increase the rainfall to a noticeable extent.”

Fig 7 Temperature Graph



“

Fig 8 Mean Monthly rainfall Figures 1921-1928

MEAN MONTHLY RAINFALL FIGURES.  
1921-1928.

FIGURE 8.

	PIRTON 422'	HITCHIN 300'	LETCHWORTH 290'
JAN.	2.29	2.41	2.26
FEB.	2.22	2.28	1.95
MAR.	1.45	1.39	1.19
APR.	2.01	2.10	2.00
MAY	2.03	1.91	1.64
JUNE	1.47	1.51	1.42
JULY	2.91	2.91	2.68
AUG.	2.31	2.28	1.94
SEPT.	2.47	2.48	2.19
OCT.	2.63	2.56	2.29
NOV.	2.33	2.36	1.74
DEC.	2.09	2.12	1.72
TOTAL	26.21	26.31	23.02
DAYS OF RAIN.	209	197	170

Report on Weather

Transactions of Herts. Natural History Society.

Vols. 18, 19.



**Figure 8** shows that rainfall is spread very evenly throughout the year, and that height and closeness to the hills do affect the total rainfall. The Pirton figures were taken at 422 feet on the hills, those of Hitchin at 300 feet and three miles south-east of Pirton, and those of Letchworth at 290 feet and four miles east of Pirton. 53%, 52% and 55% of the annual rain of these three places respectively falls in the six months from May to October, accounted for by the westerlies and the Chilterns. The westerlies approach up the dip slope of the hills, gradually dropping moisture as they rise. When these winds are not very moist they reach as far as Pirton to give small amounts of moisture but not to Hitchin and Letchworth – Pirton averages 209 wet days per year compared with 22 less for Hitchin and 39 less for Letchworth. On warm summer days however, the scarp slope produces very high warm up-currents of air, as at Dunstable Downs, which cause the westerlies to rise suddenly to give the sudden heavy showers in the summer.

## CHAPTER III

### HUMAN BACKGROUND OF THE PIRTON REGION

#### Roman Communications

A close network of Roman communications existed over the area surrounding Pirton, no place on **fig 1a** [unavailable] being more than three miles from a road. Almost all of the major roads crossing this area radiated from London, the three main ones being Watling Street, road number 220 on **fig 1a**, and Ermine Street. The other major road, following the course of the scarp slope of the Chilterns was the Icknield Way, from Streatley and Goring in the south-west to Great Chesterford and possibly Bury St. Edmunds in the north east. This road was the closest in the Roman road network to Pirton, which is situated on a loopway from it. In the opening words of the chapter on the Icknield Way in the book by the Viatores – “no other road appears to have been the subject of so many assertions, arguments and speculations as to its origin and purpose as the Icknield Way.” The chapter goes on to suggest that the Icknield Way is older than Roman times, but that it was used extensively by them. “A few finds (e.g. in the area of **fig 1a** the long barrow near Therfield) suggest that the ‘Icknield Way’ may be as old as the Neolithic Age” (c.2300 – 1800 B.C.). Because of 4000 years of usage several tracks, for summer and winter use are evidenced, an example being Ashwell Street (number 230).

One other centre of Roman activity from which roads affecting this area radiated was Verulamium (St Albans), two miles from the south-centre of **fig 1a**. There were other centres of importance on the Roman map which grew up at cross roads in the Roman system. Dunstable (Durocobriuae) was at the meeting of Icknield Way with Watling Street; Little Brickhill (Magiorinium), three miles from centre-west of **fig 1a**, was situated where 176 and 173 crossed Watling Street; and Bedford, a fording place for several roads across the R. Ouse. On the eastern half of **fig 1a** Sandy and its suburb Girtford, Langford, Shefford and Ickleford were the fording areas of the R. Ivel. Three other settlements were of importance as crossroads – Royston (half mile from the upper east border of **fig 1a**) where the Ermine Street met Icknield Way, Baldock, a crossing place of the Icknield Way, 22 and 221, and Braughing (Curcinate), three miles from the lower east border of **fig 1a**, where 21, 21 and 32 crossed Ermine Street.

Over half of the other settlements in this area of **fig 1a** have been affected by the Roman communication system in their growth. 90% of these settlements are situated between one and two miles from an original Roman road, and were connected with the roads by means of a loopway, probably the best example of which is Pirton from the Icknield Way. The villages were situated off the major roads at convenient points where springs occurred or where there were natural defences. **Fig 3** shows part of the Icknield Way, at the south of the parish, with Pirton, a spring-line settlement, 1 ½ miles to the north.

Half of the Pirton loopway is shown by a two mile track south-west from the village, at present called Wood Lane but formerly called Icknield Street, to meet the Icknield Way on the modern Hitchin-Hexton road. The track of Wood Lane has four natural sections – the first third runs south-west from the village along a 25 foot wide track

rising only slightly in comparison to the middle section which rises over 100 feet at a gradient of 1 in 25. The third section splits into two arms, one turning south to join the Icknield Way and the other continuing roughly in a south-west direction and forming one of the parallel track ways of the Icknield Way and a direct link from Pirton to Pegsdon and Hexton. This western loop enters the village through Great Green circling the northern edge of the original encampment on Toot Hill and leaving the village eastwards at Little Green. The eastern loop travels directly east for one mile until it crosses a stream and turns south-east. Half a mile from the bridge the road splits, like the western half, one section to the south in a dog-leg to join the Icknield Way at Westmill. The other section runs parallel to the Icknield Way on a causeway to the next village of Ickleford.

### **Present Communication and Settlement**

The same principle appears in the modern communication system as was apparent in the roman network. A radial pattern emerges from London, reinforced by subsequent interconnections where necessary and enhanced by a dendritic pattern of minor roads.

The main trunk routes from London passing across the area of **fig 1** are the A5 to North Wales and Holyhead, the M1 to Birmingham and the north, the A6 to Manchester and the Great North Road (A1). A fifth trunk route passing within the district branches from the London to King's Lynn A10 at Royston to join the A1 north of Huntingdon. Other major roads aiding north-south communications are the A5120/418 from Bedford to Dunstable, the A600 from Welwyn through Hitchin to Bedford and its offshoot, the A6001 to Biggleswade, and the A602 from Hertford to Hitchin.

In contrast there are only three winding major east-west links, the most southerly and nearest to Pirton being the A505 from Dunstable to Royston. To the north of Pirton are the A418/507 from Leighton Buzzard to Bishop's Stortford, and the A603 from Bedford to Cambridge, fed from the west by the A428 from Northampton and the A422 from Newport Pagnell.

Pirton is enclosed in the square of roads cornered by Barton, Clophill, Shefford and Hitchin, shown on **fig 2**. The village consists of a south-pointing triangle of roads with a feeder road issuing from each apex. Though Pirton is situated well into the countryside and seems reasonably isolated, these three roads provide reasonably direct access to all the major routeways hitherto mentioned, in all directions. The southern road leads to Hitchin in less than four miles, giving access to major roads to the north, south, east and west. Eight miles from Pirton to the south-east is the A1 leading to London in less than one hour. The road east from Pirton takes 1 ½ miles to reach the A600 leading to Bedford or on to the A1 to the north at Biggleswade. To the west the Bedford to Luton road is five miles distant and the M1 another five miles further on.

**Fig 1** also shows that the area was well served by a network of railways. The past tense has been used because many of the lines are closed, or in the process of being closed, completely or at least to passenger traffic. In general the east-west passenger services such as the Hitchin to Bedford line and the Luton, Welwyn Garden City, Hertford line have been or are being closed. Hitchin however, provides hourly



services to London, Cambridge and to the north-east by the main L.N.E.R. Nine miles to the west, Luton provides hourly communication to Liverpool and Manchester to the north-west and London to the south on the L.M.R.

Though Pirton has been well supported since Roman times by a good road system, and surrounded by a network of railways for the last hundred years, it has never really been influenced by water transport. The R. Ivel was made navigable as far upstream as Shefford, eight miles away to the north, which did for a short time bring coal into the area of Pirton via the North Sea and the R.Ouse from Newcastle and Durham. Grain has also been shipped away from the region by this means, but neither venture was successful because of the northward flow of the river system, and the southward attraction of trade with London.

## CHAPTER III

### A HISTORY OF PIRTON

#### Origin of Name

The name of Pirton seems to have changed as often as it was written thus Pirton, Peirton, Piriton, Piritone, Periten, Peritone, Pirten, Purton, Purten, Pyrton and Pyrten. From this mixture of spellings several derivations and meanings have hence been put to it. They may be summed up as follows:-

1. Peri-ton: A Saxon possessor of that name, though there is no recorded evidence of this.
2. Pera-ton: Pear-tree town, though latterly the village has been noted for its plums than it pears.
3. Pyr-ton: That which shoots out in a point or cone after the manner of a flame of fire. This would be associated with the conical mound of Toot-Hill, or associated with the Beacon Hill situated immediately above the parish to the west.
4. Pyriton: From the same root as No.3, but in connection with pyrites – small pockets of iron having been found in the area.
5. Other possibilities are that it was named from a tumulus burial ground of an
6. early British chieftain or Saxon settler.

#### Pre – Norman Pirton

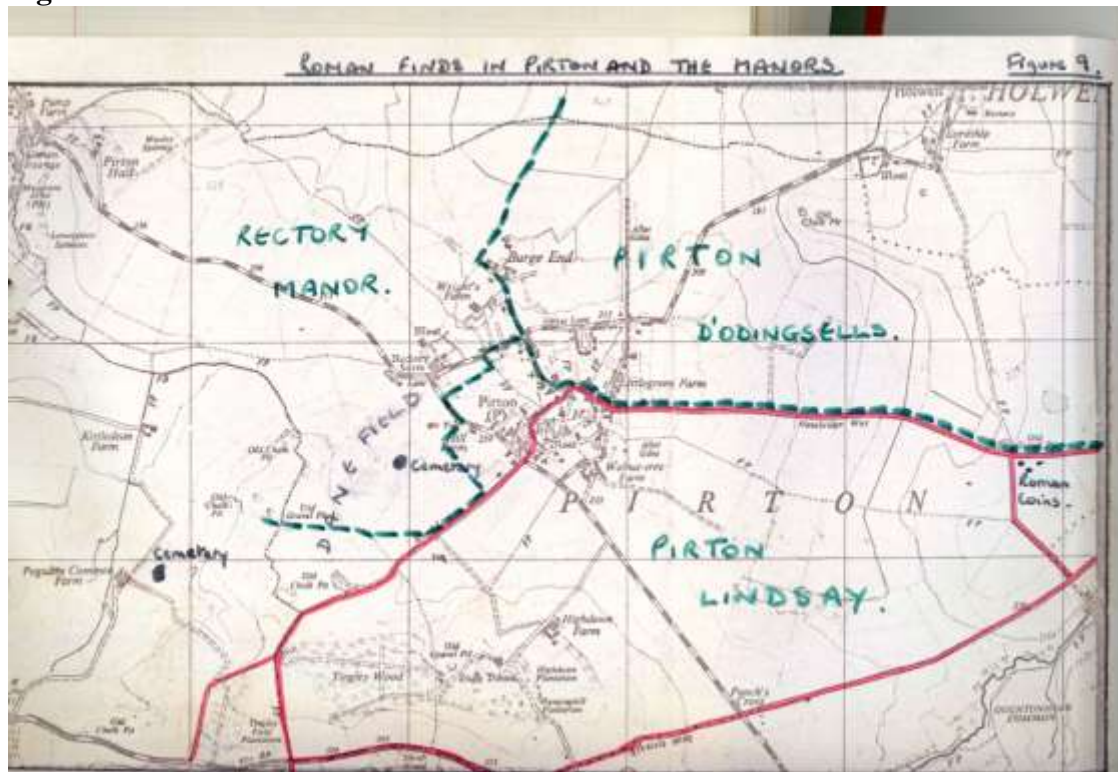
It has been shown in Chapter II that the siting of Pirton was almost certainly established in Roman times on a loop from the Icknield Way. Remains have been found in the vicinity to substantiate this. A large number of burials were found in 1835 close to the surface in Dane Shot, part of Dane Field (see **fig 9**) on Pirton Hill, half a mile from Icknield Street (now call Wood Lane). Some thirty skeletons lay in two rows, one of which was carefully arranged, the skeletons lying four and half feet apart with the heads pointing north-east, the other was carelessly arranged, three or four skeletons being thrown into one grave. With them were many 'dull black urns' of a moderate size, containing bones and also a 'curiously ornamented' brass armlet, some buckles and twisted pins.

Mr Ransom adds that forty five years previously (to his article in 1886 – hence in 1841) a large number of skeletons, also those of horses, with several fragments of iron and bronze, which he concludes were post Roman burials. If however, he refers to the same find, the contemporary accounts do not mention horses, and the skeletons as described in them 'might just as well be Roman as Saxon.' Mr Ransom also records an amphora, three feet high, dug out at a short distance away and that 'a variety of other vessels have since been found here.'

It may also be included here another cemetery in the adjoining parish of Pegsdon. It lay at the foot of the chalk hills on Pegsdon common (see **fig 9**) half a mile from Icknield Street (Wood Lane) and about four miles from Hitchin. It was opened in 1879, again by Mr Ransom and found to contain a 'considerable number of broken urns of brown pottery' with cremated human bones in some of them, and several

pieces of Samian. Beneath them an earlier cemetery was revealed containing ruder, hand-made urns, 3/8 inch thick, with human ashes mixed with charcoal.

**Fig 9 Roman Finds in Pirton and The Manors**



To the east end of the Pirton loop, Roman coins have frequently been found.

The parish gradually increased in importance in Saxon times because at the time of the Norman invasion Pirton boasted a population of over two hundred, and contained four mills (described in Chapter I). During the latter part of the Saxon period the manor was held under Archbishop Stigand.

**Formation of the Manors of Pirton and the Manor Houses**

**Fig10 Formation of the Manors of Pirton**

	Saxon -	Archbishop Stigand
Norman-	Ralph de Limesi	1068 founder of Hertford Priory to which he gave part of Pirton = <u>Manor of the Rectory</u>
		Alan de Limesi
		Gerard de Limesi
		John de Limesi

1189 – 1199

Basilia = Hugh d’Odingsells

Eleanor = David Lindsey

Manor of Pirton  
D’Odingsells

Manor of Pirton  
Lindsey

Burge End Farm and  
Hammond’s Farm

The Old Hall and High Down

In the gabled farm, Walnut Tree Farm, (see **Fig 11**), there is a painting on the panel above the fire place in the lounge, said to be a picture of the Castle of Ralph de Limesi. The painting is in brown and is a view from the room across the Bury, depicting a hill, castle, trees and a moat. It is a painting of the time of Queen Anne – the dating given to the panels. The local name for the hill is Toot Hill, derived from the Anglo-Saxon ‘totian’ to lift, elevate.

The castle mound is a large oval shape, covering over an acre, 25 feet high and nearly surrounded by a broad, deep moat. On the west face is still just visible, about half way up, an early rim or platform, the purpose of which is made clear in the Bayeux Tapestry, which shows Norman soldiers defending a castle from a fighting platform.

**Figure 11** gives an adequate description of the plan of the earthworks, except for one anomaly. If all the encircling moats were constructed at one time or period only one inlet and outlet would normally be present. The outlet to these moats is through Walnut Tree Farm near the bend in the road. The ditch marked **A** on the plan is apparently an unnecessary connection between the wet moat and the rampart. It may be that this outlet is earlier than the outer rampart and dating from the Saxon period being the original outlet from the inner ditch. This leads to the assumption that the mound was originally pre-Norman and that the de Limesi’s enlarged the keep mound and constructed the outer defence works.

The present church, within the castle enclosure, is sited on an original built by de Limesi. As previously noted in **fig 10** he founded the Priory at Hertford, which was a cell to the Abbey at St Albans, and endowed with two and half hides out of the manor of Pirton – thus forming the

### **Manor of the Rectory**

The Rectory Manor remained in the possession of Hertford Priory till the dissolution of the monasteries in 1534, when it was granted to Sir Anthony Denny, whose son sold it to John Dye in 1578. Sir John Dye sold it to a Poultney, and he conveyed it to Thomas White, whose executors sold the manor in 1686 to an architect, Sir Anthony Deane. From the Deanes it was bought in 1736 by Robert, second Lord Raymond, from whom it passed to the Filmers, baronets of East Sutton, Kent. In 1870 Mr Daniel Davis of Hexton paid £17,500 for the farm and 415 acres. After the death of his son in about 1947 the farm passed into the Weedon family, who currently farm the land.

Fig 11 The Toot Hill Pirton



**Rectory Farm (see fig 12)**

It is illustrative of an old English farmstead, facing south in an area of four acres and enclosed by a moat. Within the moat to the west are the farm buildings, to the rear an orchard, to the east the vegetable garden, and at the front a small enclosed garden opening into a large entrance yard.

Fig 12 Rectory Farm

FIGURE 12.



RECTORY FARMHOUSE.



INSIDE THE TITHE BARN.

The present house dates from about 1600 and replaces the former medieval house on the same site. The walls of the E-shaped house are of local clunch or hard chalk and are between 2' 3" and 2' 6" thick with dressed stone angles, still shown by a small unplastered piece on the east wing. This local stone is rather soft when quarried but hardens on exposure, it is however, fairly porous and freely absorbs moisture, making battening of the walls inside and plastering outside a necessity. There is "a flattened pointed arch to the porch executed in two rings of chamfered brickwork, and this is about the only piece of Gothic tradition." The roof is constructed of massive rough hewn and split timbers; the tie beams are left in the natural curve of the bough, each one split down the middle to form two tie beams.

### **The Tithe Barn (see fig 12)**

The term 'Tithe Barn' is applied rather loosely to this large, aisled circa 1600 building. Buildings for the use of rectors of parishes who were independent of religious houses are more properly called Tithe Barns. In this case although it was used for the receipt of tithes of the village, the barn was necessary to accommodate the produce of the 415 acre estate belonging to the Hertford monks, the rectors of the parish. Its construction is all timber except for brick noggin along the west side, next to the moat and was originally thatched. Its form is medieval probably descending from the early Friesian or Saxon form of combined house and farmstead under one roof. The main construction is of massive one foot square oak posts, and is 135 feet long, 37 feet wide and 33 feet high at the ridge of its self-supporting roof.

### **The Manor of Pirton D'Odingsells**

The Manor of Pirton D'Odingsells, including Burge End Farm and Hammonds Farm, remained in the family of D'Odingsells in direct male line till 1513, when Edward d'Odingsells conveyed it to Richard Dycons. Two years later he conveyed the whole manor in trust to the Provost of Eton College, whose successors retained it till 1800. Lady Penelope, wife of Sir Charles Radcliffe, bought the manor from Eton College and in whose family it remained till 1964.

### **Burge End Farm and Hammond's Farm**

These two farmsteads are taken together because the whole shows clear traces of a surrounding moat. The name Burge End or Burgh End indicates that here were some outlying fortifications of the ancient burgh. From the remains of these earthworks it is suggested that they are a line of early defences' coeval with the burgh of Toot Hill. The reason, apart from defence, of its existence is the, now small, stream running between the two farms and rising at Rectory Farm. This would have been the closest fresh-water stream to the village.

The most important family to be tenants here to the College of Eton were the Hammonds, which in the late 1700's became the Handscombes through the female line. The wealth of this family was shown in 1625 when John was called upon to contribute £15 to a loan for the King, whereas most of the Hertfordshire gentry contributed only £10. In his will, dated 1641, he gave two cottages for the use of the poor of the village forever, and £100 for investment in land, the interest to be applied



to apprenticing the poor children of the parish. The cottages, rebuilt in 1877, are still in use and part of a field at Punch Cross is still held in trust by the Hammond charity.

The house of Hammond's Farm is of late Elizabethan date, half timbered with some brick noggin. Burge End Farmhouse is slightly later, still early 1700, probably erected by John Hammond.

### **Figure 12a Hammonds Farm**

*Figure 12a*



ELIZABETHAN HAMMONDS  
FARM.

### **The Manor of Pirton Lindsey –** alias Pirton Pinkney or Pirton Clinton.

The Manor of Pirton Lindsey, which included the Old Hall and High Down passed by marriage from the Lindseys to the Pinkneys. It passed, again by marriage, to the Clinton family who held the Manor till the 1450's. The next hundred years in its history is rather obscure till it came into the possession of Thomas Docwra, who died in 1602. His great grandson, Thomas Docwra, left an only daughter, Martha, wife of Sir Peter Warburton, whose son, Sir George Warburton sold the Manor in 1727 to Ralph Radcliffe of Hitchin, in whose family it remained like the Manor of Pirton D'Odingsells until recently.

### **The Old Hall and High Down**

There is much confusion about this Manor. Thomas Docwra, who in 1602 inherited the Manor from his father, also Thomas, built the Old Hall in 1609, shown by a still



existent tablet on the wall. On the walls of High Down house are three similar carved stone panels with the arms of Docwra and the dates 1504, 1599 and 1613 on them. The earliest one is obviously reset from the dating of the house, and the logical explanation of the other two is that it was built in 1599 and extended in 1613. If the Old Hall was so named in distinction to High Down – the new hall – High Down should have been built after 1609. The logical explanation seems to be that the Old Hall was rebuilt on the site of the former Manor house by virtue of its closeness to the Ickniel loop and to the Church and Toot Hill. There is no present evidence of a moat or defences but from the map of Toot Hill (**fig 11**) it is highly possible that the present roads, below field level, surrounding the house could have been used as a moat.

The Old Hall was built at the same period as the Rectory Farmhouse and was very similar in form and shape. It was also built of local clunch reinforced with small red brick cornering, with the same window mouldings, except for the late Gothic hood moulding above the windows. The career of this old house has been rather chequered, although it remained an important house of the manor till 1800 when 16 of its rooms were pulled down. Only the west wing remained, which has subsequently ranged in usage from a vicarage to a public house, until its recent reinstatement as a country house.

High Down is an interesting and unusual house of plastered flint and clunch with clunch dressings, forming one side of a courtyard with stables and outbuildings on the others. The little altered, L-shaped house has many original features still in evidence, such as the oak-studded door, back staircase, panelling, two large chimneys and two stone fireplaces in the upper storey.

## CHAPTER IV

### PIRTON PARISH – LAND UTILISATION

Pirton is situated in what might be called 'the Prairies of England'. East Anglia is the traditional corn growing area of England, which extends south-west across Bedfordshire and north Hertfordshire. Summers are warm, the harvest period relatively dry, and a low annual rainfall of about 25 inches. In the parish the terrain is mostly flat, but the soil, clay and chalk marl, is heavy, although it always soaks up excess rain and prevents flooding and marshy ground.

It is noted in **Chapter I** that there were four mills in Pirton parish at the time of the Domesday survey, suggesting that the tradition of corn growing is a long one. A second extract from the Domesday survey, that "there was pannage for only 500 swine," hints that Pirton was rather deficient in woodland and hence had a greater percentage of pasture and cropland. The character of the farmhouses e.g. Hammond's Farm and Rectory Farm, described in **Chapter III**, suggests too that the Pirton farmers were prosperous. Although corn must still have been important in the Middle Ages, sheep had risen in importance in the area, and continued so till the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, because of the woollen industry in East Anglia. The chalk slopes of south west Pirton were ideal for sheep grazing, while in the north of the village at Burge End was a central sheep dip, in Washbrook Lane, for Pirton and several surrounding parishes to the north. The last farm however, in the parish to give up sheep rearing, which grazed in the higher south west, sold the last 200 two years ago.

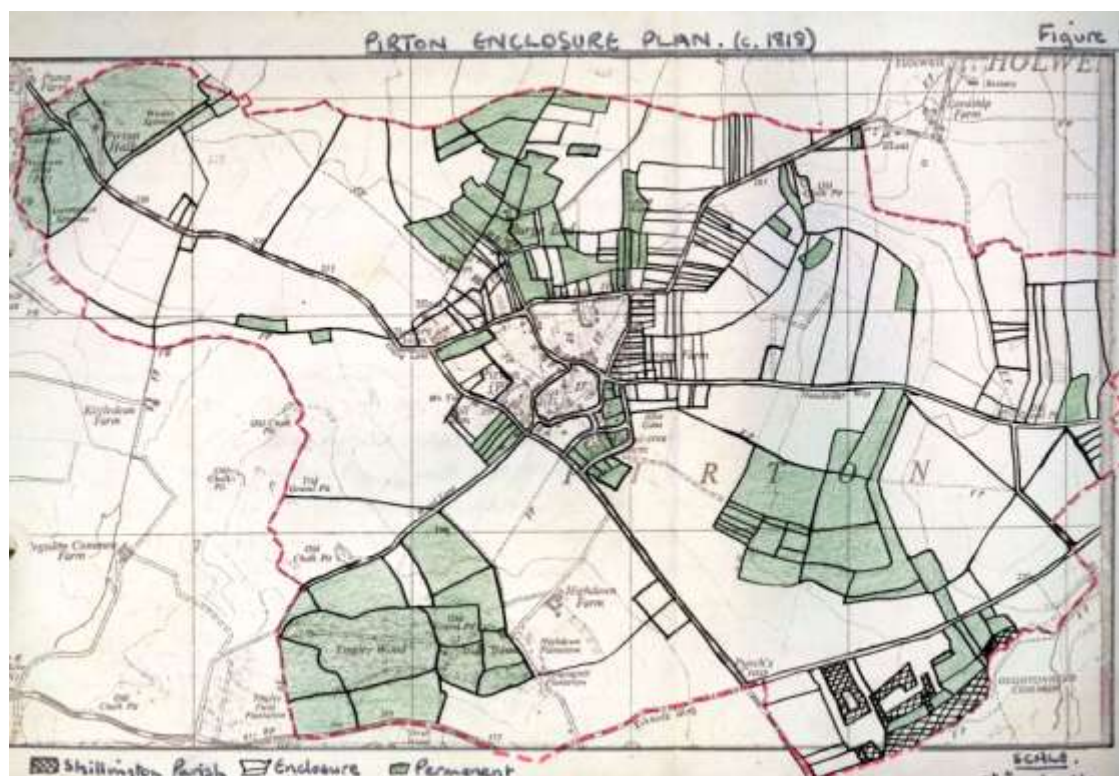
A passage (P.141) in Franklin's History of Agriculture reinforces the picture of corn growing.

"In 1760 Hertfordshire was the best corn county in England. Its farmers had early realised the importance of turnips and clover, and tradition has it that Oliver Cromwell paid a Hertfordshire farmer £100 for the successful cultivation of these crops. A farmer of the county who died in 1758 attributed its good farming reputation to 'good ploughing, mixing earths, dunging and dressing, and resting the ground with sown grasses and clovers.' Certainly Hertfordshire men were good farmers, and their ploughmen celebrated, they chalked the heavy lands and marled the light ones, they imported large quantities of manure of all kinds from London and sowed tares on the turnip fallows as fodder for the two year old horses that they bought in Leicestershire."

In the 1930's there were 12 farms of over 50 acres situated in the parish. At present this number has been reduced to six, marked numbers 1-6 on **fig 15a**. Farms 1, 2 and 3 occupy the original area of the Manor of the Rectory, the present Rectory Farm occupying two-thirds of the land, since the farm of no.7 (Wright's Farm) retired and 120 acres reverted to no.2. The old Manor of Pirton d'Odingsells is no longer farmed from the manor houses of Burge End and Hammond's Farm, both now having the status of private houses. Elm Tree and Little Green Farm (no5) is the only area farmed and owned within the village in this Manor, no.4 having been sold recently and now farmed in conjunction with a parent farm outside the parish, and area farmed from three farms in the parish of Holwell. No.8 is a small holding farming only 14 acres within the parish boundary. The Manor of Pirton Lindsey is now

farmed almost as a complete unit from Walnut Tree Farm (no.6) except for 50 acres to the south-west and 150 acres to the south-east (areas 12 and 11).

**Figure 13 Pirton Enclosure Plan 1818**



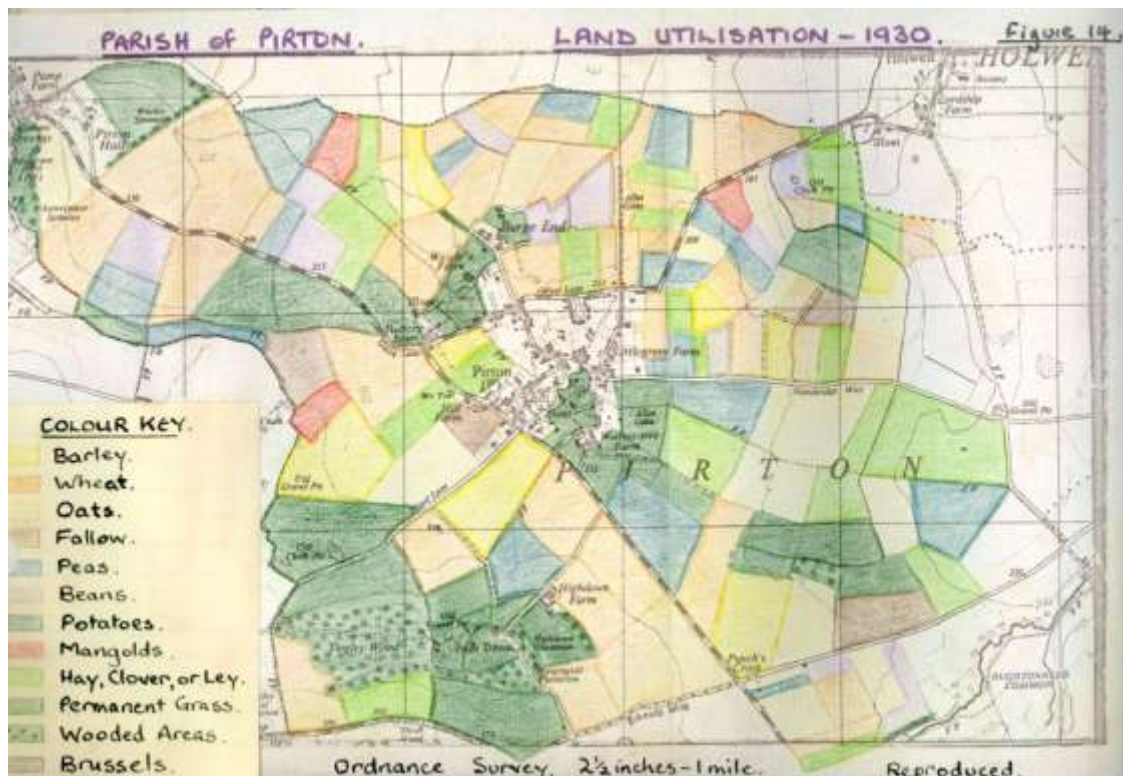
In the following land utilisation study, farms 1 to 6 will be considered in the table (**fig 17**) covering 1965 acres. In the graph and land utilisation colour maps (**figs. 14, 15, 16**) a total of 2169 acres is covered, including farms 1 to 6 and areas 5b, 7, 8, 9 and 12. This has been made necessary in order to have the same total area under comparison for the 1930-31 and 1965-66 statistics.

Mechanisation and specialisation have brought about tremendous changes in land utilisation in Pirton. On the map of the Enclosure plan (**fig 13**) dated about 1818 a total of roughly 430 acres is shown under permanent grass, in the area under study. This figure closely compares with the 399 and 455 acres in 1930 and 1931 respectively. The first tractor appeared in the village in 1919 at Burge End but the approaching mechanisation had not yet shown any effects. By 1965 the area under permanent grass had been reduced by more than half to 177 acres.

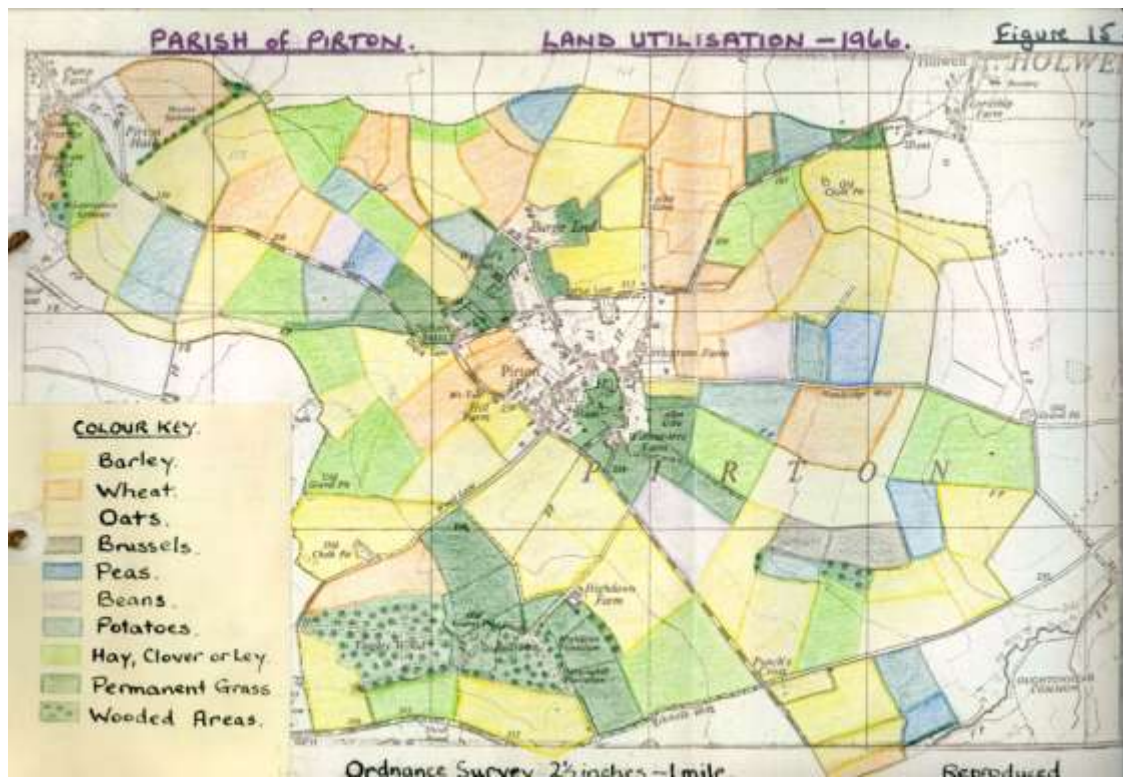
Mechanisation had caused the total disappearance of the horse from farms in Pirton, and has drastically reduced the total manpower needed. In 1930 Rectory Farm (no.2) used six teams of horses when ploughing, keeping a total of 15 horses, which were kept in the 34 acres of the Park (field numbers 17 and 18 **fig 18**) 15 men were regularly employed at Rectory Farm at this time, whereas this total is now only 4. Manpower changes have not been so drastic over the parish as a whole – a total of 52 employees in 1930 and 12 farmers, reduced to 20 employees and 11 farmers – but nevertheless quite marked.

Specialisation too has effected many changes. In the 1930's the soil divided the parish into two areas – each having a basic five year plan of crop rotation.

**Fig 14 Land Utilisation 1930**



**Fig 15 Land Utilisation 1966**





The higher ground to the south-west had an amount of permanent grass for sheep, with the ground below it having a rotation of wheat, oats, sheep feed, barley and clover. Of the five crops three were associated with livestock feed, sheep feed (ley usually) and clover for sheep and oats for cattle. The lower ground to the north and east consisted of pastures for dairy cattle and fields with a rotation of wheat, vegetables, wheat, oats or fallow, clover/hay. The last dairy herd was sold from Pirton in 1955 and the last sheep flock two years ago. Apart from reducing the acreage of permanent grass, the change has theoretically erased the need for oats, sheep feed and clover from the higher ground rotation and the oats and clover/hay from the low or heavy ground rotation. The temporary grass and hay acreage has not however, been reduced much in fact, the 1966 total exceeds that of 1930 because of the importance of a nitrogenous crop in a cereal-dominant rotation. A beef herd is kept on five of the six farms totalling 270 head of three year olds and over, plus heifers and yearlings to make use of the hay crop.

Cromwell Farm (no 4) has had no beef herd since the farm was sold two years ago and has substituted the hay crop with an increased acreage of peas and potatoes. Besides the fact that beef-rearing is quite a profitable sideline, needing very little labour cost, there are limiting factors of casual labour, heavy soil and market conditions in following the example of Cromwell Farm. Irregular casual work cannot now compete with part-time jobs in Hitchin, and no automatic pea or potato harvester has yet been produced which will work on the heavy soils of Pirton. In the last four years many tons of peas have been ploughed in or returned from Covent Garden at a loss because of prices too low to be economic. A steady decline in the local pea acreage has been apparent in the face of heavy competition from the quick-frozen and canned pea industry of East Anglia. Potato and brussel acreage has suffered too; this has not been apparent from the graph because the pea, potato and brussel acreage rose greatly during and after the Second World War up to the mid 1950's. An example is that in the mid 1950's Cromwell and Rectory Farms grew about 120 acres of potatoes – the same total as on the six farms today. The type of vegetables grown in the rotation has changed too. Mangolds and tick beans have been greatly reduced, for artificial products have replaced these as cattle feed, while cash crop vegetables of peas and brussels have taken their place in the crop rotation. By far the largest change that has taken place in Pirton since 1930 is the fivefold increase in the barley acreage.

**Fig. 16a**      **Corn Acreage and their changes**

	Average of 1930-31 totals		Average of 1965-66 totals		<b><u>Change in acres</u></b>
	Acres	% of total area	Acres	% of total area	
Barley	130	6	764	36	+30
Wheat	520	24	493	23	-1
Oats	256	12	131	6	-6
Corn total	906	42	1388	65	+23
From a total of	2069	100	2069	100	

The corn acreage total rose from 906 acres in 1930-31, 42% of total acreage, to 1388 in 1965-66, 65% of total acreage, an increase of 23% of the total acreage or an absolute increase of 53%. Of this total, wheat acreage remained almost constant and oats showed a loss of % acreage of 6% or an absolute loss of almost 50%. Oats, in this part of the country, are used only as a fodder crop, this fact accounting for its loss

in acreage. Barley rose from an average of 130 acres in 1930-31 to 764 acres in 1965-66, an absolute increase of 488%.

Several factors seem to have contributed to the rise of barley, not the least of which was that in the early 1930's a governmental subsidy was payable for wheat but not for barley. Wheat has not increased in acreage, though demand for it has increase. Yield per acre of 18 cwt/acre in the 1930's has helped cope with the demand by more than doubling to about 40 cwt/acre. 40 cwt/acre is the average for wheat, winter wheat yielding up to 45 cwt/acre while spring wheat only yields about 35 cwt/acre. This makes winter wheat most profitable theoretically of the three from yields barley yielding 40-41 cwts/acre, but winter wheat cannot be followed by winter wheat because of disease especially the bulb fly, and at any time is the most susceptible to disease. Two years of barley on average will be safer and get a slightly higher yield than one of spring wheat and one of winter wheat, giving a normal crop rotation of wheat, vegetables, barley, barley, ley. Local conditions allow barley to be grown of good enough quality for sale as seed, and failing this good prices are achieved by sale as malting barley. Barley also ripens up to two weeks earlier than wheat, allowing more of a leeway in a bad weather harvest. A last factor in the achievement of barley is that the seconds grind well as beef cattle feed, whereas wheat seconds are only good for chicken feed.

The statistics giving a breakdown of the parish into farms (**fig 17**) show a reasonable consistency. Discounting the highest and lowest of 1966 barley figures they show a range of 6 from 30% to 36%. Wheat for some unknown reason shows a much larger range of 15 even discounting the high and low, though the 1965 figures are better.

**Figure 17 Breakdown of 1965-66 Crop Statistics**

Farm	Grange	Rectory	Burge End	Cromwell	Elmtree LittleGreen	Walnut Tree	Total	Average % of crops
Number of men on each farm	7	6	1	2	5	10	31	
Acreage	160	409	81	214	278	823		
Barley1965	48	106	21	70	119	342		33
Barley1966	57	121	20	92	99	302		34.25
Wheat1965	63	129	29	97	90	152		34
Wheat1966	40	94	28	100	54	63		26
Oats1965	9	15			10	65		3
Oats1965	15	9			33	75		5.5
Brussels1965						39		1
Brussels1965						22		.5
Peas1965	5	23	10	24	20			6.5
Peas1965		12	11	10	24	17		5.25
Beans1965					18			1.25
Beans1965		10			20	30		2
Potatoes1965	35	31	8	23	21	12		9.75
Potatoes1965	30	22	10	12	21	29		8.75
Hay1965		76	10			13		6.75
Hay1965	18	112	9		27	145		13
Grass1965		29	3			140		4.75
Grass1965		29	3			140		4.75
No of beef	50	30	20		50	120	120	
No of pigs	80						140	

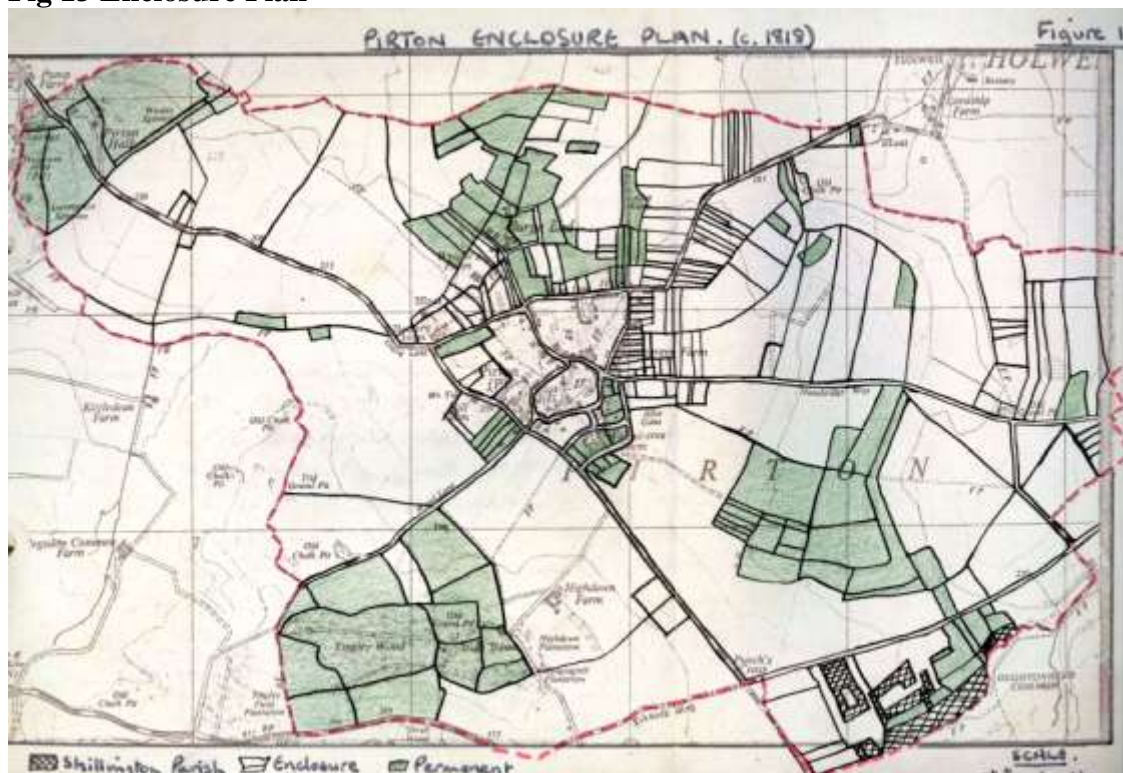
One suggestion that can be put forward is that of soil conditions and drainage. Walnut Tree Farm which gives the highest acreage and deviation from the average, is situated on the lower chalk, and usually begins harvest a week earlier than Rectory (on the heavy clay and chalk marl). This earliness would help to counteract wheat being ready for harvest later than barley and hence, here wheat would not be the same 'risk' as on the heavier ground. The only other large anomaly is the large clover/ley total at Rectory. 50% of this total is under a three year ley on the chalk slopes, ploughed only about every fourth year to avoid erosion. Hay/clover acreage averages at about 2 beef cattle per acre over the six farms.

The average number of acres per man on the six farms is 63, ranging from 23 acres/man at the Grange to 107 acres/man at Cromwell. At the Grange however, four of the seven are the brothers, near to retiring age, who farm the land, so that their acreage moves up to 50 per man if only the employees are counted.

### Field Names

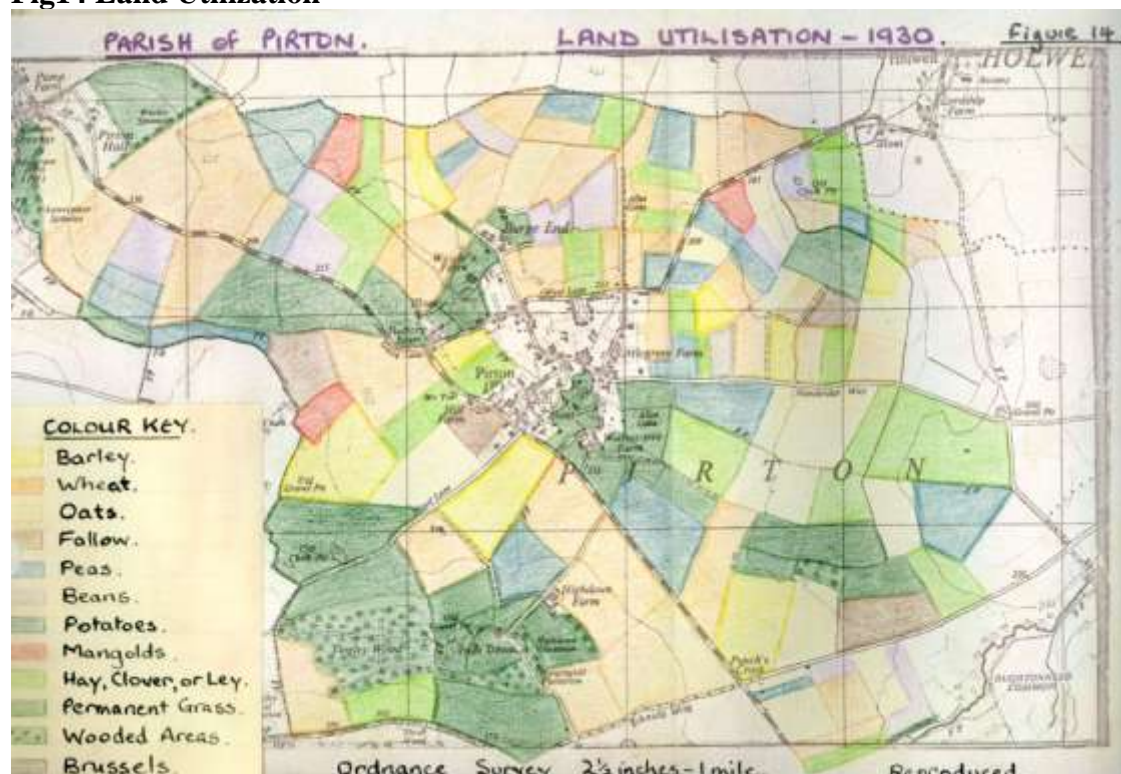
Little appears to have changed from the time of the Enclosure map (fig 13) to the 1930 Land map (fig 14) as far as can be seen except for the field names.

**Fig 13 Enclosure Plan**



The strip system has disappeared but the field shaping and general pattern has remained, with the smaller fields to the north and north-east of the village and the larger fields elsewhere.

**Fig14 Land Utilization**



Of the 73 listed present field names (**fig 18**) 7 have lasted from a pre Enclosure map of 1800 and 18 from the Enclosure map of about 1818. Two of these have suffered changes in spelling sufficient to alter the connotation – namely no.19 (**fig 19**) Rack Pit to Rat Pits and 206 Cats Brain to Catsprain. The fields originally named White Marsh are in the process of change to Whitmash, and close by the present Wesley Spinney between fields 1 and 2 is a corruption of the Enclosure name of West'ley. No.31 West Lane, at the time of the enclosure was named Wet Lane, the confusion arising from the adjacent lane which was named by some people as the name of the road leading west and by others after the dampness of it.

The fields of Pirton claim a wild variety of names, many of which give a clue to the past. Trees are a common donor to field names. Examples in Pirton are field no.1 called Hollybush, 11b Dockbush, Walnut Tree Close (no,24), Oak Tree Field (no.27) Willow Closes (nos. 33 and 59) and Beech Tree Shot (no,37c). That the north-west end of the village is low and used to be for pasture and permanent grass is ascertained from the Enclosure names of West Ley for field (no.2) and Meads for no.7. Other traditional areas of wet and marshy ground are shown to the north of the village by the name Whitmarsh and Duck Riddy (reedy). Fields 12 and 13 do not seem too agreeable for agriculture from the old name of Stoney Lands.

Field names also give clues to local geology and history. Field 41 is called Hullock Pit containing the Totternhoe stone chalk pit from which the stone for the rebuilding of the Parish Church tower in 1883 was taken. The soil in Clay Pit Close, no. 59 is still very wet and heavy, being near the source of the stream of Holwell Brook. Field 63 gives a reminder of the chalk hills under it with the name of Lime Pits.

In 1278 “Hugo d’Odingsells was summoned to account to our Lord the King concerning the plea by what warrant he claimed to have view of ‘Frank Pledge’ and



ammendation of Assize of Bread and ale broken (infringed) – Gallows, Tumbril (right of punishment) and Warren (right of chase) in Piriton, which pertain to the crown and dignity of our Lord the King.” (Placite de quo warranto – 6 Edward I A.D.1278) Though no records of hanging exist in Pirton, gallows were often placed on a boundary, projecting into the next parish or county so that the spirit of the hanged would not haunt the parish that hanged them. The rectangular piece at the north end of Gallows Piece Field and called Gallows Corner, lives up to this conjecture, taking the county and parish boundaries on a 75 yard detour around this rectangle.

**Fig 18 Field Names of Pirton Parish**

<u>Field No</u>		<u>Present Names</u>	<u>Enclosure Names</u>	<u>Pre-Inclosure</u>
1		Hollybush		
	a		Westley Close	
	b		Gallow's Piece	
	c		Long Westley Spring	
2		Back-o'-the-hall	Westley Close	
3		Longyard		
4		Common Field		
5		Middle Field		
6		Low Piece	Lower Piece	
7		The Meads	The Meads	
8	a	Great Whitmarsh		
	b	16 Acres	Long Blakewell	
9	a	Gallow's Corner	Short Blakewell	
	b	Gallow's Corner		
10	a	Duckriddy		Long Lacey
	b	Duckriddy		
11	a	Duckriddy		Duckriddy Shot
	b	Duckriddy		Dockbush Shot
12	a	Grove Shot		Cross-Honey Lands
	b	Grove Shot	The Doles	Hart hill Shot
13	a	The Meadow		Stoney Lands
	b	The Meadow	Grove Close	Cross hart Hills
14	a	Beggarbush		Dock lands Shot
	b	Beggarbush		Whitmarsh Shot
	c	Beggarbush		Cross Whitmarsh
15		Little Whitmarsh		
16		Longyard		
17		The Park	Rack Pit Close	
18		The Park		
19		Rat Pits	Rack Pit Common	
20	a	The Driftway		

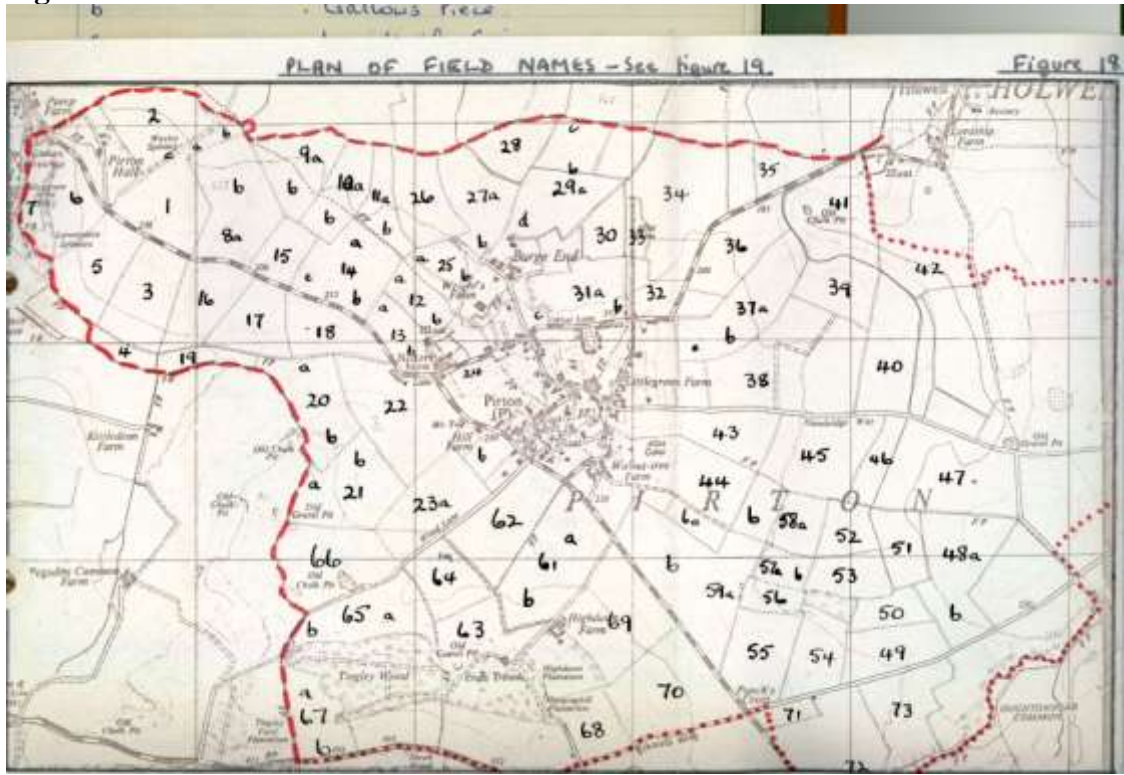
	b	Catsprain		Cats Brain Shot
21	a	Lind's Baulk		Danehill Shot
	b	Lind's Baulk		Dane Lands
22		Priors Hill		Pryors Hill
23	a	Wood Lane		Dane Shot
	b	Wood Lane		Puddle Dane
24		The Piece	Walnut Tree Close	
25	a	Home Field		Bridge Way Shot
	b	Home Field		Millers Close
26		12 Acres		
27	a	Oak Tree Field		
	b	Oak Tree Field		Millers Close
28		North End Field		
29	a	Hammond's Farm		
	b	Hammond's Farm	Gold Croft	
	c	Hammond's Farm	North-End Close	
	d	Hammond's Farm	Washbrook Close	
30		13 Acres		
31	a	West Lane		
	b	West Lane	Wet Lane Close	
	c	West Lane	Great Dial Close	
32		Will Burtons Field		
33		The Willows	Willow Closes	
34		Longbold		
35		Holwell Common		Holwell Common
36		Bradshaw's Field		Cow Hill
37	a	Low Field		Slave Head Shot
	b	Low Field		Monk Spit Shot
	c	Low Field		Beech Tree Shot
38		Millway		
39		Culvert (Kirby) Well	Slave Head Close	
40		Handscomb's Field	Pym's Close	
41		Hulluck Pit		Watch Furlong
42		Crow Furlong		Low Furlong
43		Little Bury Field		
44		Bury Field		
45		Big Bury Field		
46		Horse Mead		
47		Big Green Moor Hill		
48	a	Green Moor Hill	Gt. Elstow Close	
	b	Arlesey Ditch		
49		Oughton Bottom		
50		Gt. Rush Meadow	Canterbury Close	

51		Little Green Moor Hill	Gt. Rush Meadow	
52		Footpath Mead	Sheep Meadow	
53		Double Ditch	Double Ditch	
54		Rends Park	Little Rush Meadow	
55		Breach Piece		
56		Colts Meadow	Great Breach	
57	a	Little Braches	Upper Little Breach	
	b	Little Braches	Lower Little Breach	
58	a	Burnt Close	Lower Burnt Close	
	b	Burnt Close	Upper Burnt Close	
59	a	Hitchway		Willow Piece
	b	Willow Piece		Clay Pit Piece
60		Malting Orchard		Malting Piece
61	a	Longshot		Whitbread Piece
	b	Balding's		Green Ditch Shot
62		Reckmans Piece		
63		Lime Pits	Lime Pit Close	Ball Land Shot
64		18 Acres	18 Acres	
65	a	Wood Leys	Wood Leys	
	b	Wood Leys	9 Acres	
66		Dane Field		
67	a	Windy Acre	Windy Acres	
	b	Dead Man's Field		
68		Dogholes		Doghole Shot
69		Beanslong		
70		Marm		
71		Punch Cross		
72		Pirton Field		
73		Oughton Head		Oughton Bottom Close

Mention has already been made of fields 25b and 27b called Millers Closes giving suggestion to a nearby mill. Fields 37b and 50b, Monk Spit Shot and Canterbury Close remain as a reminder that the Lords of the Manor of Pirton were once the monks of Hertford Priory.

The hills to the west-south-west of Pirton on the parish border are one of the few places that the anemone pulsatilla grows wild. The local name for this bright red flowered plant is Danesblood – that wherever a drop of Danish blood was spilled in their fight to conquer the area in 914 one of these plants grew. The large area of fields to the west of the village had such names as Danehill Shot, Dane Lands, Dane Shot and Puddle Dane. These names have changed but 54 the name lives on in the council estate facing out across this field to these hills and called Danefield Road.

Fig 19 Plan of Pirton Field Names



## CHAPTER V

### PIRTON VILLAGE – AND ITS PEOPLE

Although there are outliers of settlement around the parish, the village of Pirton is predominantly nucleated. The mound of Toot Hill is the original centre of the village. Its outer defence works circle along the present course of Crabtree Lane to the north, south-east across the Bury to the south of the village pond into Walnut Tree Lane, which marks the east and south sides, with Bury End and Great Green composing the west. 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Pirton developed around this periphery especially at Bury End, Great Green, Upper High Street and Little Green, see (**fig 20**)[unavailable]. This was not however, the total extent of the village. Settlement had occurred through the Middle Ages to all corners of the parish, though each was fortified in some way.

High Down to the south-west had the natural defence of being situated high on the Hanging Hills overlooking the parish. It had but one artificial defence, which is best introduced by an extract of an article in the Hertfordshire Illustrated Review. "There used to be a small room attached to the exterior of the south side of the tower of the Parish Church, called 'St John's House', which was probably connected in some way with the Docwra who built the earliest portion of High Down and who held the office of Lord Grand Prior of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem." "Connected" was an apt word, for connected it was by means of a three quarter mile tunnel from High Down house, through the Old Hall and on to this very room.

The four other main outlying buildings of the parish were all fortified by moats, at the Grange and Rectory Farm to the north-west, and Burge End and Hammond's Farm to the north. The latter three have already been described in Chapter III, so brief mention will here only be made of Grange Farm, situated two miles by road from the village centre. It was a 16<sup>th</sup> century or possibly late 15<sup>th</sup> century courtyard house with various outbuildings, and enclosed by a moat (see **fig 20**). Much has been added and modified through the centuries. The southern L-shaped wing is all that is left of the original building, while the main northern part is early 17<sup>th</sup> century with 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century alterations.

Smaller old buildings are to be seen around the village, several of which are worthy of mention. Four thatched cottages still remain, three of which have been recently restored and recorded here on photographs (**fig 21a**). Three ingle nook fireplaces are known to be revealed in different areas of the village. One is to be seen inside No.3 Great Green and the remains of another are on display in the Post Office /General Stores.

Fig 21a Thatched Cottages



The third has just been opened up, to be restored at what is thought to be the oldest complete house in Pirton, No.28 Shillington Road (**fig 21b**). This small timber framed building is of mid 16<sup>th</sup> century origin with a cross wing at the east end. The

**Fig21b Traditional Framed Cottages**

TRADITIONAL FRAMED COTTAGES.

Figure 21b.



No. 4.

9, Great Green.

(16.)



No. 5.

Ivy Cottage, Crab Tree Lane.

No. 6.

Oldest complete house in village

(16.)

28, Shillington Rd.



main block was originally one storey. The whole building is in the process of being restored and apart from revealing internal walling of traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century lath and

plaster, has revealed two most interesting pieces of earlier wattle and clay. The wattle is of local hazel, similar to the wattle fencing for sheep pens, and has been filled and lined with a mixture of local chalk marl and clay.

19<sup>th</sup> century settlement shows a more linear development. Infilling occurred mainly at Great Green, but the most development in this period sprang up to form High Street. One settlement area grew at the north end of High Street (then called Town Street) with the junction of Shillington Road and West Lane, and another along Royal Oak Lane (formerly Dead Horse Lane) and the Little Green area of High Street. A kind of friendly rivalry has persisted ever since between the 'down-towners' and the 'up-towners'.

Little settlement occurred in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Pirton, and even until after the Second World War. The only new areas of settlement were a thirty house council estate of Davis Crescent (**fig 21c**) and a row of eight private houses in Royal Oak Lane, which were built in 1924-25. These two groups were the first of the village to be supplied with tap water, a well being bored along the footpath between the two, and a water tower erected. Plans were to build 22 houses, instead of the eventual eight, to be for sale at £250 each, but there were no buyers and so only eight, for the builder's relatives, were completed.

Since the Second World War development has been almost wholly contained within the outer triangle of Pirton because of Green Belt restrictions. As a result, infilling in the village has occurred wherever space and planning permission have been available. A second council house estate – Danefield Road with 38 houses and bungalows was built in 1950-51 in the west end of the village (**fig 21c**). Individual private house development has occurred along northern High Street, the southern side of West Lane, and along Royal Oak Lane. A small development occurred in 1964 in Docklands, behind the school, containing nine semi-detached bungalows, and a later addition to the village, in the process of occupation is the Cromwell Estate (**fig 21c**). This private estate of 38 houses, over which much controversy has raged, is only the second, Docklands being the first, to provide for a new population to the village. Hitherto new houses could only be inhabited by people who had been born in Pirton, had lived in Pirton for two years, or had close relatives in the village.



**Fig 21c Housing Estates**

HOUSING ESTATES OF PIRTON.

Figure 21c.



1924

Davis Crescent

No.7.

30-house Council Estate.



1950

Danefield Road.

No.8

38-house Council Estate.



1966

Cromwell Estate.

No.9.

38-house Private Estate.

**Fig 21d Buildings Using Local stone**

BUILDINGS USING LOCAL STONE.

Figure 21d.



No. 10

P. O. and General Stores

Ingle-Nook  
inside.

Chalk pebble-  
and-dash  
outside.

No. 11  
5, Crabtree Lane

Formerly  
Red Lion.

Chalk Pebble-  
and-dash.



No. 12

The Church.

Tottenham  
Stone Church



In 1930 a survey was made by Pirton School of the number of rooms in the houses of the village. Of the 226 houses included on (fig 22), 58% had four rooms or less. A similar survey was performed in 1966 to show how much this percentage had decreased. The rather unexpected results appear below in (fig 22). The actual percentage did fall, by just over 2% to less than 46%, but the total number of houses in this category increased by 24. This increase is accounted for in the four room house category and by modern house design. Many of the new houses have an L-shaped lounge-dining room as a single room and had been counted as such. Most of these have a very small kitchen which has not been classed as a room because it seems probable that small kitchens were not included on the 1930 survey. Under these conditions a three bedroom house could fall into the category of a four room house, making this category as the most 'popular' in the village.

**Figure 22 Number of Rooms in Pirton Houses**

No of rooms	1930	1966	Increase/Decrease
7-19	23	27	+4
6	20	43	+23
5	62	102	+40
4	92	126	+34
3	26	19	-7
2	3		-3
<b>Total</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>+91</b>
<b>New houses since 1930</b>	<b>107</b>		
<b>Houses 2 knocked into 1, disappeared</b>	<b>-16</b>		
<b>1966 Total</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>317</b>	

The large increase has occurred in the five room house, mainly accounted for by the change from a standard of two bedrooms to three. One other reason why the room numbers have not increased as much as expected is that Pirton was not on the mains water supply in 1930. Once the mains did appear many of the three bedroom houses converted one to a bathroom thereby reducing the number of rooms by one in these houses.

The difference between the 1930 and 1966 totals is brought into balance by 107 new houses being added to the 1930 figure and 16 being subtracted for those cottages which have disappeared or been joined together into larger houses.

### **Working Population**

In the inter-war period the village was still an almost self-contained unit. About 60 were generally employed on the farms, and another 45, mostly women, employed at the Glove factory, next to the Old Hall. The Glove factory was started in 1916 and lasted till 1947 at its height producing 400 dozen pairs of woollen gloves per week. It was owned by John Partridge, whose Leicester firm made the cuffs which were then sent on to Pirton to have fingers and thumbs made and sewn in.

The most important home industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and persisting into the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was straw plaiting. More than an industry it was a part of the village way of life and an account of its beginning and practise is included because of its past importance to the village.

It was introduced into Great Britain by Mary Queen of Scots, who during her stay in France as wife of the Dauphin, noticed that those rural inhabitants of Lorraine who practised straw plaiting were better off than those who did not. On her return to Scotland in 1552 she brought back several Lorrainers to teach the craft. In 1603 James VI of Scotland came to the throne of England and brought some of these plaiters with him, sheltering them with the Napier family at Luton Hoo. Luton grew on straw plaiting and straw hats to become one of the busiest towns of the East Midlands.

**Fig21e A Member of the Pratt Family Plaiting**

A MEMBER OF THE  
PRATT FAMILY  
PLAITING.

FIGURE 21e



Part of an article written by J E Thrussell (deceased) shows best how straw plaiting made up part of the Pirton way of life in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

“At the age of three she learned to plait and by the age of five was a good plaiter though not a very fast one. She would attend a plaiting school where children would go to learn plaiting and a very little reading and writing.

Her father earned 7/6d a week working on the farm. In the winter he would thrash the corn in the barn and Sadie would visit him, so she gained a considerable knowledge of corn. At this time the country was more dependent upon home grown wheat than now and if the weather was wet, it would make the flour heavy and the bread would be almost black, and at times barley meal would be mixed with the flour....

From the straw to the finished article i.e. a hat, all was done in the house of the Pratts but this was not the case in many families. (The usual practice was that the villagers would glean, split and plait the straw which would then be sold in Hitchin market by the year to the hatters of Luton). Aunt Sally had been away and gained some knowledge of making hats. The straw used was wheat straw and often grown especially for straws. It must be straight and not too coarse.

The corn was reaped by hand with a sickle and harvested in the usual way. It was stored in a barn. During the winter the straw drawer would take a few sheaves and bind them tightly with a leather strap. He would then hold them between his legs and with both hands would pull out a handful by the ears with an action similar to pulling a cork from the bottle. This stripped off most of the flag, that remaining was stripped off with a small rake. The ears were then cut off and the straw laid on one side. When about 50 or 60 pounds weight of straws were drawn, they were tied in a bundle. The straw has now to be cut into proper lengths, cut at the joint and sorted into various grades, the finest for whole straw, and the other to be split. This was done at home and splitting was done by a small instrument known as a machine ( a small hand instrument with a conical point of metal at right angles to the handle.) The split straws then needed 'milling' i.e. putting through a small wooden mangle. They were then ready for use but if too dry would break so they must be used wet, and for this they were often put into a jug of water while the more careless folk would pull them through the lips. A good plaiter would earn 10/- or even 15/- a week (more than the breadwinner), and in some houses everything was left to do plait. The babies if at all fretful would be given a dose of Godfreys to quiet them (a mixture containing opium) and some even boiled poppy heads and gave the liquor. Sewing and cleaning were often neglected; yet for all that all was put away on Saturday by midnight and no-one would think of working on Sunday.”

Besides these three large employers, of the land, gloves and straw, the village in 1930 boasted an undertaker, two blacksmiths, several builders, four shops, a Post Office, a newsagent, a shoe-maker and mender, up to seven public houses and ten bakers. All farms produced beef, pork and lamb, and delivered fresh milk round the village.

Electricity did not reach the village until 1934 before which everyone relied on paraffin lamps. No gas has ever been supplied by mains to Pirton, but a plentiful supply of water was to be had from the 75 wells in the village, shown on (**fig 20**). The water level was found at only 5 – 6 feet below ground in the lower parts of the village to the north and 12 – 18 feet in the higher parts. Most of the wells therefore, were only 25 feet deep, though others were 100 feet, according to whether it was a surface supply from the clay or from a fissure in the chalk. Unfortunately, with most

of them being of the former type, contamination was a problem, resulting in a 330 foot well-bore in 1930 at the bottom of Priors Hill to supply fresh water to the whole village. This never really succeeded because of choking of the pumps by fine greensand. It was 1937 before the scheme had spread through the whole village, and only lasted till just after the Second World War when water was piped in from King's Walden and Offley.

Although Pirton is still a pleasant country village, civilisation and urbanisation are showing signs of encroaching. Pirton has its own kind of commuter problems, being a dormitory village for the surrounding towns. In 1930 195 people were employed in the village, 23% of the total population, whereas in 1966 only 68 men were employed in the village, 7% of the total population. Below is a table of the male population of the village classified by general occupation and place of employment.

**Figure 23**

Male Population Over 21	Pirton	Hitchin 4 miles	Letchworth 6 miles	Stevenage 9 miles	Luton 12 miles	London 40 miles	Travellers	Elsewhere	Total
Manufacturing & Office		13	12	22	11	2	3	2	65
General Building	15	20	1	2				2	40
Bricklayers	8	2							10
Carpenters	2	7	1	1					11
Plumbers	2	3		1					6
Labourers	3	8						2	13
Shops/Utilities	14	31	4	8	4	7		3	71
Farm and land	39	3					1	1	44
TOTAL	68	67	17	32	15	9	4	8	220
Retired	45								

The four general classifications of type of employment have split fairly evenly, somewhat less than a quarter of the total in each of the building industry and farming, and somewhat over a quarter in each of the manufacturing/office and shops/utilities classifications.

For places of employment roughly one third stay in the village, one third travel to Hitchin and one third travel further afield. Although only nine commute to London every day nearly two thirds of the total travel south towards London to work. Of the 125 who travel daily along the Hitchin Road to work in Hitchin or beyond, 56 were observed to travel more usually by bus and 69 by private transport including 49 cars. The remaining 27 who work outside the village have to travel by private transport, because there are no buses before nine in the morning along the Shillington and Holwell Roads from the village.

Buses have been a source of much controversy in Pirton because it is on no direct route between towns. Bus services therefore, through the village are dependent upon demand. In the last ten years bus services have been reduced by half while fares have increased by 75% to 1/2d for the 4 mile trip to Hitchin. The Birch Bus Company and

the United Counties Bus Company blame lack of demand for the cuts in service, while the inhabitants of the village say that private transport is necessary because of bad services and high prices of the bus service. Birch buses used to run from Hitchin to Holwell and return via Pirton and the United Counties from Hitchin to Shillington and return via Pirton. Half of the buses now come from Hitchin to Pirton where they turn round to return instead of going on to Holwell or Shillington. Total weekday buses amount to 12 services each way, with a last bus from Hitchin at 7.35p.m. Services are increased on Tuesday, market day in Hitchin by 20% and on Saturdays by 40%.

The change in the village from its self-contained status has been most noticeable in the winter. In three of the last five years the village has been snowbound and cut off on occasions, leaving it with no milk, none of the farms now having a dairy herd, no bread, the bread now coming from Northampton – 40 miles away and no mail or newspapers.

Pirton now has only two general stores, two having closed within the last three years, but has a butchers shop/grocery store, a Post Office, a shoe mender, and electrical shop, a garage, three public houses and one inn. Public buildings in the village are the pleasantly modernised infant and junior school, an excellent village hall, a Methodist Chapel and the Anglican Church.

The noble, white, local stone church has a nave and central tower dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century before which another stood on the same site. Standing within its walls of solid serenity there is a feeling of warmth, a sense of living history – the imagination frees itself from the bonds of the ever quickening speed of life, eons of time unite revealing a culture of communal oneness that is dying maybe forever. Hands of a new society, a new world are stretching forth through the parish walls, strangling that corporate unity of village life with the epidemic of urbanisation. Looking from without, the haven of spiritual man becomes a stark monument – standing out in the colour of cold purity, an iceberg in a fast evaporating sea of green – as a lone survivor. What blossom will spring forth from this once dormant bud on the great tree of evolution? Time will show the answer.



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