

4. Origins & Historical Background of Exbourne.

4.1 Early History There is evidence of prehistoric settlement in seven sites within the present day parish boundary of Exbourne. The village of Exbourne seems to have existed since at least Saxon times, when it acquired the origins of its name, *gæces burn*, Cuckoo Stream, more likely referring to the Hole Brook (formerly known as the Exbourne Water or **Woodford Water**) than to the more distant River Okement. It is described in the Domesday Book, when it was one of a number of estates held by Roger de Molis under Baldwin the Sherriff, Baron of Okehampton, the tenant in chief to the king. The whole parish comprises 2,145 acres, and of this the village embraces about 22 acres. In more recent times, 1832, an estate within the “Manor of Exbourne”, was described in sale particulars as comprising around 315 Acres including various cottages and gardens. At the centre of this principal manor was the present day manor house in Blenheim Lane that was built in the XIX century, possibly on the site of an older demesne house. The first Ordnance Survey maps indicated “Site of Manor House” but no further evidence is known to confirm this. There is however evidence of connection of nearby properties to the manor. **There is also evidence of other manors having existed within the existing parish.**

Prior even to the Saxon invasions, the Romans stepped into these parts, possibly in connection with military and administrative functions at their camp at *Nemetostatio*. A recent find of a toga buckle in a field west of Hole Bridge provides enticing evidence. There is evidence too of settlement around Exbourne long before this, including sites recorded by Devon County Council. **Prehistoric Sites.** These are listed in Appendix iii. They were either identified by the Victorians or more recently by observation of crop marks from aerial photography. It is thought that no excavation has yet been attempted on any of these, but in early 2017 an investigatory trench was taken out in Wood Close, and evidence of human activity was discovered in the form of charred remains thought to be in connection one of the ancient monuments.

4.1 The Farming Connection. From modest origins income and development seem to have been entirely dependent on agriculture, and the dwellings and other buildings within the village will have been put there simply to accommodate the needs of the surrounding farms and those who worked on them. By the time of the tithe redemption assessments, of the 2100 acres odd accounted for the vast majority had become enclosed pasture and arable. Two mills (both outside the C.A.) were available to serve local requirements: Coxwell Mill, powered by the Hole Brook and which appears to have doubled as both a corn mill and a tucking mill became disused in the XIX c. (shown as “disused” in 1884 survey), but Stowe Mill on the Jacobstowe bank of the Okement persisted until well into the latter part of the XX c., ending its active days powering timber working machinery until at least 1971. The leat weir was subsequently destroyed by the River Authority.

A “fair for cattle and pedlery” used to be held on the third Monday in April each year, but references to it in gazetteers ceased in the latter XIXc., when presumably the fixture had

ceased, possibly due to improved communications. **No evidence is known as to what numbers of livestock were presented at the fair. A project was promoted in 1915 to hold regular farming auction sales in the village, but, again, nothing has come to light as to how or where this developed, if at all.**

The distribution of land in the 1840 Tithe Apportionment inventory can be typified as a patchwork of subsistence smallholdings and individual fields centred on the village, with a few larger yeoman farms in the outlying areas, many in a form that had carried through for generations. A few strip farming enclosures are still seen on the village outskirts, particularly in the Southern Fields on the west side of Holebrook Lane, many more to the north have been amalgamated and the dividing hedges removed.

No evidence has yet been found of inclosure either by statute or agreement, nor where the ancient common lands of the manor(s) of Exbourne lay. One particular line of boundaries that runs north south on Court Barton between the entrance to Moxhey Lane and the A3072 is suggestive of early inclosure, as is the zig-zag pattern of roads that exists particularly to the east and north east of the village.

That Exbourne's population, like those of the rest of rural Devon, suffered badly due to the serious agricultural depressions of the XIV c. is probably beyond doubt, and the disappearance of buildings marked on earlier maps but no longer existing seems to testify to this. To detail the fluctuations of farming fortunes through times of alternating war, prosperity and depression is beyond the scope of this document, but it may be mentioned that within the last forty five years the number of inhabitants of farmsteads adjacent to the village deriving their main living, or even a substantial part, from their land has reduced from fifteen to four or possibly five. In 1971 there were still three full time male farm servants resident in the village; now there are none.

4.3 Other Industries

Although buildings were built generally of cob, with stone brought up from the River Okement for foundation and base-work, at least two small delphs or local quarries, near Narracott and at Solland, supplied some local stone for building, and the latter in particular provided some of the red sandstone or brecchia seen in some of the village's older houses. There is no evidence of this or any other mineral having been carried and traded far outside the parish; nor was it of sufficient quality to merit such effort, but the existence of these enterprises suggests the occasional opportunity to derive some income not directly from farming.

Although some prospecting for precious metals was carried out at near-by Solland (Sampford Courtenay parish) during World War II, this came to nothing and made no impact on the locality.

Local research has revealed many local residents being described as weavers, full or part-time. The local mills provided some work, but in course of time this activity became concentrated on **The Wool Factory** North Tawton. In an 1851 directory (Billings) there are listed 22 trades people in Exbourne, of whom six counted themselves also as farmers. The two inns would have provided some outside income from travellers and carriers passing through on the two main routes, as follows.

4.4 Travel Communications

The village lies at the crossroads of historically significant highways, as described previously, and **there is evidence as early as the 1670s of long-distance travellers passing through the village**. The two inns in the village, including a “New Inn”, no doubt serviced passing trade. The north-south route is largely in the form of sunken lanes, and travel over largely unmetalled roads in early days was probably too grim to contemplate.

At the time of the 1884/6 survey, there were only two bridges in the whole parish for vehicles over watercourses, both being on the Sampford Courtenay to Jacobstowe & Hatherleigh road (currently A3072). The former pack horse bridge at Stowe Mill had been previously widened to accommodate wheeled traffic. Before this, heavier or wider traffic would need to ford the river at Quay Head, to which there was a dedicated lane along the south side of what is now Riverside (formerly Quay Head).

There was also the bridge over the Hole Brook.

Turnpike roads were planned between Okehampton and Barnstaple routed via Jacobstowe and Woodhall. This would have just avoided Exbourne village, thereby diverting travellers from vittalling there. The scheme was abandoned.

The east-west road was widened and straightend in 1968 as part of a Holiday Route project to alleviate tourist traffic problems in Exeter and Okehampton. This included building a new bridge over the Okement and a replacement bridges over the Hole Brook which is thought to incorporate at least part of the original masonry. Happily the Stowe pack bridge was not taken down and still stands today.

Exbourne was never provided with a railway, though various schemes were promoted from as early as the Bideford and Okehampton Railway Bill, 1831, which would have seen a line routed just on the Jacobstowe side of the Okement. Neither this nor any of the many other proposed lines that would have passed through the parish came to fruition. The nearest station to Exbourne was at Belstone Corner, Sampford Courtenay, a distance of 3 ¼ miles.



4.5 Exbourne in Recent Times.

During the latter half of the XIX century Exbourne saw great social change. The inhabitants relied less on the land and income that came from it – a pattern that had not much changed over the previous 200 years or more. Today, whilst the village still very much retains its rural character, household incomes come more from employment in the towns, in local

artisan & service occupations, businesses run from home and agricultural contracting. Tourism also plays a minor, seasonal, role in supporting local businesses. There are at present three publicly accessible independent non-farming businesses in the village, and at Brooklyns just outside to the north locations are sometimes available to rent for smaller commercial operations. Retirees are now also a significant part of the population, which brings disadvantages to local people who face a difficult task in competing for housing and who consequently have to leave the village for both housing and work; however, the change from subsistence to a more affluent income profile has brought with it not only a greater awareness and appreciation of assets within the Conservation Area but also the potential wherewithal to maintain them.

The population of Exbourne was 421 in 1801, 464 in 1871, 382 in 1901 and 355 in 2010. However, the number of houses has close to doubled.

C.M.H.B. Mar, 2020

[The red copy above comes from additions or corrections by Susan Rose, a representative of Exbourne History Group]