

A Brief History of Plaitford and Melchet Park

Plaitford is a New Forest village on the northern boundary of the New Forest National Park and is mentioned in the Domesday Survey of 1087. From the time of the Norman Conquest it has been part of various manors. Firstly, Plaitford was held by Edmond, son of Aiulf, who held West Grimstead near Salisbury, later to become part of the manor of West Grimstead where it stayed until 1406. The new owner was Sir John de Berkley and Plaitford became part of the manor of Minstead, near Lyndhurst, until it was sold by Richard Compton, a descendant of Sir John de Berkley, to Sir Stephen Fox in 1679.

Sir Stephen Fox was born in Farley, near Salisbury, in 1627 the son of William and Elizabeth Fox, daughter of Thomas Pavey of Plaitford. Sir Stephen accompanied King Charles II into exile and had charge of all the expenses of the royal household. Knighted in 1655 he had three terms as Member of Parliament for Salisbury. He died in 1716. His eldest son Stephen, from his second marriage, succeeded him and became the 1st Earl of Ilchester in 1756. The Ilchester family continued to hold the manor of Plaitford until it was split up and sold by the 6th Earl in 1911. The sale of the manor was an opportunity for sitting tenants to purchase their properties.

The Parish Church of St Peter's



St Peters Church c1900

This small, picturesque thirteenth century parish church stands alone close to the River Blackwater.

In the taxation of Pope Nicholas in 1288 it was decreed that Plaitford Chapel be subordinate to West Grimstead where it remained for almost 600 years until it became a rectory in its own right in 1866.

Some of the thirteenth century features are still visible, they include the chamfered pointed doorway, the chancel and nave, the piscina and sedile on the south side of the sanctuary. The south vestry appears to have been a small chapel and contains the only original window, which faces south.

The church was subject to a major restoration in 1856 when unfortunately all the medieval wall art was plastered over.

Plaitford's Village Hall

This still retains the Victorian façade of its original purpose as the village school. Opened in 1846 the school consisted of a classroom 28x18 feet for 60 pupils and an adjoining head teacher's house with a living room and pantry on the ground floor with two bedrooms above, one no bigger than a box room. The usual facilities consisting of a water pump and earth closets were situated outdoors. The school closed in 1965 after 119 years and 30 head teachers.

During the Second World War a village hall committee had been formed with a view to purchasing a piece of land to build a hall. An attempt to purchase a piece of land close to the school stalled in 1948, with no reason entered in the committee minutes. A current theory is that, with the expansion of Wellow School at the time and Plaitford School managers discussing the closure of the school as early as 1946, it is likely that the hall committee were advised that they had a good chance of buying the school when it closed. As it happens, they had to wait seventeen years until 1965. After a successful approach to the Salisbury Diocese, Plaitford School became a Village Hall on 1 January 1970.

Over the years the old school room was doubled in size and a kitchen and toilets were added. A project to upgrade the facilities started in 2012 with a new kitchen, toilets and a toilet for the disabled.

The Shoe Inn

This was an important coaching inn standing half way between Southampton and Salisbury on what was the Sarum & Eling Turnpike road (now the A36). It is not known how long the older thatched part of the building has been an inn but it is thought to date from the sixteenth century. Records show the building that fronts the main road today was built in the second half of the eighteenth century.

John Biddlecombe, a notorious Plaitford resident involved in burglary, highway robbery and poaching was hunted down by the Ostler (Horse Keeper) of the Shoe Inn and held overnight at the inn before being taken the next day to Fisherton Gaol in Salisbury. At his trial in Winchester he was sentenced to death and hanged on 1 August 1818. He was buried the following day in Plaitford church yard.

It is said that Queen Victoria, as a young princess, along with her mother, the Duchess of Kent, took tea at the Inn whilst waiting for their post horses to be changed. This probably took place in 1832 during a grand tour of England carried out by the princess and her mother.

Plaitford Race Course

Heading east from the Shoe Inn for approximately 70 yards along the main road there is an ancient mile stone. Opposite is the location of Plaitford Race Course, now just an avenue of trees leading out into the open forest. Horse racing took

place here annually as part of a country fair from 1825 to 1848. Usually held at Whitsun time and run over a mile and a half, they attracted a wide following. National sporting publications of the 1840's included Plaitford Races in their calendar of race meetings to take place in the country. An article in the Hampshire Advertiser and Salisbury Journal in June 1840 compared the attraction of this humble meeting to the immediate area with that of Epsom's "Derby Day", Doncaster's "St Leger" and Ascot's "Cup". Another report on the last meeting held in 1848 stated "*The running was the best since the establishment of the races. The course was crowded with a full and fashionable company. These meetings are much on the improve*". It was obvious that the races were expected to continue. The probable reason for them coming to an end was the increased popularity of the railway and the decline of coaching, and hence The Shoe Inn as a major post house.

Plaitford Common

Plaitford Common is mostly grass and open heath land with some wooded and boggy areas. For hundreds of years farmers have been allowed to graze their livestock on the common, in fact most farms in Plaitford still have grazing rights. The original edge of the New Forest is beyond the northern boundary of Plaitford towards Sherfield English and until the fencing of the A36 animals could be seen throughout the village grazing the verges and hedgerows. For the safety of animals on the forest the southern side of the A36, Southampton to Salisbury trunk road, was fenced in the 1970's. In 2005 this fence became the northern boundary of the New Forest National Park and Plaitford's 450 acre common is the only part of Plaitford to be inside the National Park. There is still a remnant of the common to the north of the A36 in the vicinity of the Village Hall.

Trying to invoke the Closure Act in 1877, the then Earl of Ilchester was defeated by prominent persons representing the rights of the inhabitants of Plaitford, parts of Wellow and Landford in his attempt to fence off the common and to only allow access to freeholders and fourteen life holders. Had the closure been allowed the common would be a different place today.

Melchet Park

Melchet Park is situated on Plaitford's northern boundary. At the time of the Domesday Survey, Melchet Wood belonged to the Abbess of Wilton with rights to take wood and feed hogs. From the early middle ages, the office of custodians of the park of Melchet belonged to the Manor of Plaitford when Melchet Forest formed part of the Royal Forest of Clarendon. Throughout the thirteenth century large grants and sales were made from Melchet forest. As well as Clarendon, the priors of Mottisfont, Breamore and the Abbess of Romsey obtained timber from Melchet.

Nothing is known of the Georgian mansion that stood in Melchet Park until the early 1860's. Major John Osborne purchased the park in 1791 and is famous for erecting a Hindu Temple in the grounds dedicated to his friend Warren Hastings, Governor- General of Bengal, 1773-1775. Major Osborne died in 1821 and the park was purchased by Alexander Baring, head of Baring Brothers (Bankers) who in 1835 was created Lord Ashburton. In 1862, his son, William, 2nd Lord Ashburton, demolished the old mansion and started building the Elizabethan style property that stands today.

After William's death in 1864, his wife, Louisa, Lady Ashburton, continued the building work which was completed in 1867. In August 1872 a fire destroyed parts of the house and restoration work was carried out between 1875 and 1879. Louisa, Lady Ashburton, died in 1903 and in 1911 the estate was purchased by Sir Alfred Mond a founder member of the chemical company ICI. Extensive alterations were made to the house between 1912 and 1914.



Melchet Court c1915

During the First World War the house was turned into a 60 bed convalescent hospital for wounded servicemen. Sir Alfred Mond was created 1st Baron Melchet of Landford in 1928. Following his death in 1930, the estate was put up for auction in 1935. After conversion, the house opened as a school in 1939 but in the spring of 1940 it was requisitioned by the army and became the head quarters of Southern Command under the command of Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery. With the threat of invasion over the army left in

September 1940. In early 1941 the house was requisitioned again by the government and was taken over by The Ministry of Aircraft Production for the duration of the war.

After the war, the house reverted to a school for children orphaned by the war. In 1954 it was taken over by Salesian Fathers as a Theological college. Since 1963 it has been the home of St Edwards Boys School.

The Civil Parish

Before the county boundary changes in 1895, Plaitford and Melchet Park were in Wiltshire with Melchet Park being part of the parish of Whiteparish. After the Local Government Act of 1894 Melchet Park became a civil parish in its own right and this lasted until 1932. Following a government review in 1932, Plaitford joined with Melchet Park and they then became the Parish of Melchet Park and Plaitford.

*Article provided by Geoff Cuell
Parish historian and archivist*