

INTRODUCTION TO OBORNE HISTORY PROJECT

“But you will not want to be bothered with Osborne while to your left opens the truly spectacular view of Sherborne Castle with its lake, its woods and its park.” Thus Richard Ollard dismisses the little village of Osborne in “Dorset” (Pimlico 1995 – Pimlico County History Guides series).

He is probably right insofar as part of the village lies on the A30 main road and motorists tend to sweep through without giving the few houses lining the road a second thought. Sadly, they tend to miss the old St. Cuthbert’s chancel that is also on the main road, and is all that remains of the old parish church, built in 1533. Incidentally, for some reason that I do not yet understand, the chancel and the neighbouring cottages are not in the ecclesiastical or civil parish of Osborne, but in Castleton.

There is more of the village, complete with some interesting houses, many with their own history that has not yet been fully explored. However, for many travellers this would require a small detour, and one would need to be an enthusiast in old English villages to want to bother. After all, to be blunt, there is nothing in Osborne to attract the casual visitor. Dorset has many old villages, and a lot of them have more treasures than Osborne.

This does rather beg the question as to why spend time writing about a village that only a few strangers are ever likely to visit, unless they are staying at our splendid hotel, the Grange, (www.thegrangeatoborne.co.uk) I think there are a number of good reasons.

The most obvious, I suppose, is curiosity. Osborne, like many communities in Dorset, is changing quite dramatically. This is not so much a change in the built environment as in the people who now live there. Before World War II, Osborne was a small, close-knit agricultural community. I understand that by early 1960’s there were some six farms within the village. Later in this document there will be some evidence from a variety of sources to confirm this. Now there are only two, both rented from the County Council, and perhaps the future of these is far from assured. And, as an update since this was originally drafted, those two farms are no longer working farms, so all that is left of the earlier vigorous farming community are the farms that lie at the outer edges of the parish, and not within the cluster of homes. Recently, a majority of the inhabitants have moved into the village from elsewhere, often when they have retired. For many of these new people, there is a very natural curiosity as to the history of the place they have settled in. Of course, this does pose a problem for a local historian. Curiosity is rarely associated with long-term probing; it tends to demand instant answers. Osborne is only 1.5 miles from Sherborne, a very thoroughly studied ancient town of great interest and beauty. Most of the readily available books about this part of Dorset tend, very understandably, to focus on Sherborne. Against such historical wealth, Osborne seems to be a pauper with little to hold anyone’s attention.

With the growth of the internet there has been a corresponding enormous growth of interest in genealogy and family history researching. Every hamlet can be a resource of great value to people exploring their family history. This extends, of course, beyond the paper records such as the various registers recording the main events of people’s lives. Often people who now live a long distance away are interested in exploring more about their family’s origins, including the houses and surroundings. In my work to date on

Oborne I have uncovered some 4,000 names with some sort of link to Oborne, and occasionally receive requests from Australia and New Zealand, for instance, about people whom family historians have traced to the village. It is a truism that we are a product of our backgrounds, and that this background is far more than simply our own personal life experiences.

Perhaps the strongest reason is that of preserving our heritage. Whether one is a landowner with a huge family seat and estate, or someone living in a humble labourer's cottage, there is a duty to preserve what we have inherited for future generations. This doesn't mean, of course, to preserve in aspic. Of course, there must also be change and development. However, such development must always be in keeping with the past, especially in parts of the country like this where past generations have left us such a wonderful legacy of landscape and communities. A small history of a seemingly insignificant hamlet is a simple but important way of making a contribution to that duty of preservation.

I am only too conscious of the fact that, not having had a historian's training, it would be unwise for me to venture too many of my own opinions and allow them to masquerade as facts. This can occur inevitably when one attempts to write a history in a narrative form, and I am extremely conscious of not only how little I still know, but how much less I even begin to understand properly. Thus, I think that it would be better to use the advantages of the web to construct this work more as simply a display of the information that I have come across. For instance, rather than offer my own speculations about the history of St Cuthbert's Old Chancel, I have pulled together into one part material from sources as diverse as Hutchins' History of Dorset to several articles in newspapers and magazines. The result, then, I hope, is a resource that will be of interest and value to any reader who, for whatever reason, has an interest in Oborne and a desire to discover a little more about the village. All I have done is the leg-work; it is up to the reader to formulate the opinions. Indeed, I have only done a small part of the legwork – there is much more still to find and report here. Family historians will have already found the lists of names, censuses and of the "vital events" recorded for Oborne elsewhere on this site – they will know that I have not attempted to make any family links between those names, I leave that to them to do!

I am deeply indebted to the work, active support and encouragement of people within the village. In particular I must mention David & Ann Andrews, my neighbours who, having written a short history of the village some 17 years ago, (now available on this site) have both inspired me to build on their work, and have passed to me their substantial collection of documents and photographs. Also, several of the current residents of Oborne have been very kind and given me copies of their own researches into the history of their homes.

Finally, I welcome with open arms all suggestions for improvement or correction and questions; the suggestions I will try to incorporate within future updates, the questions I will endeavour to answer or at the least offer something of some small value. Please contact me on michael.fraser1@btinternet.com

Michael A. Fraser