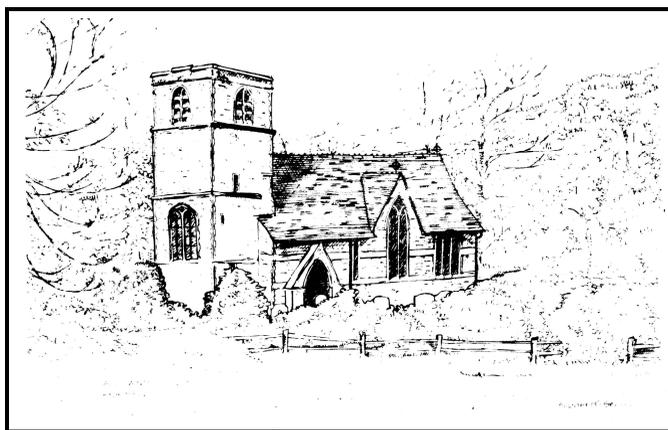


KNAPWELL VILLAGE

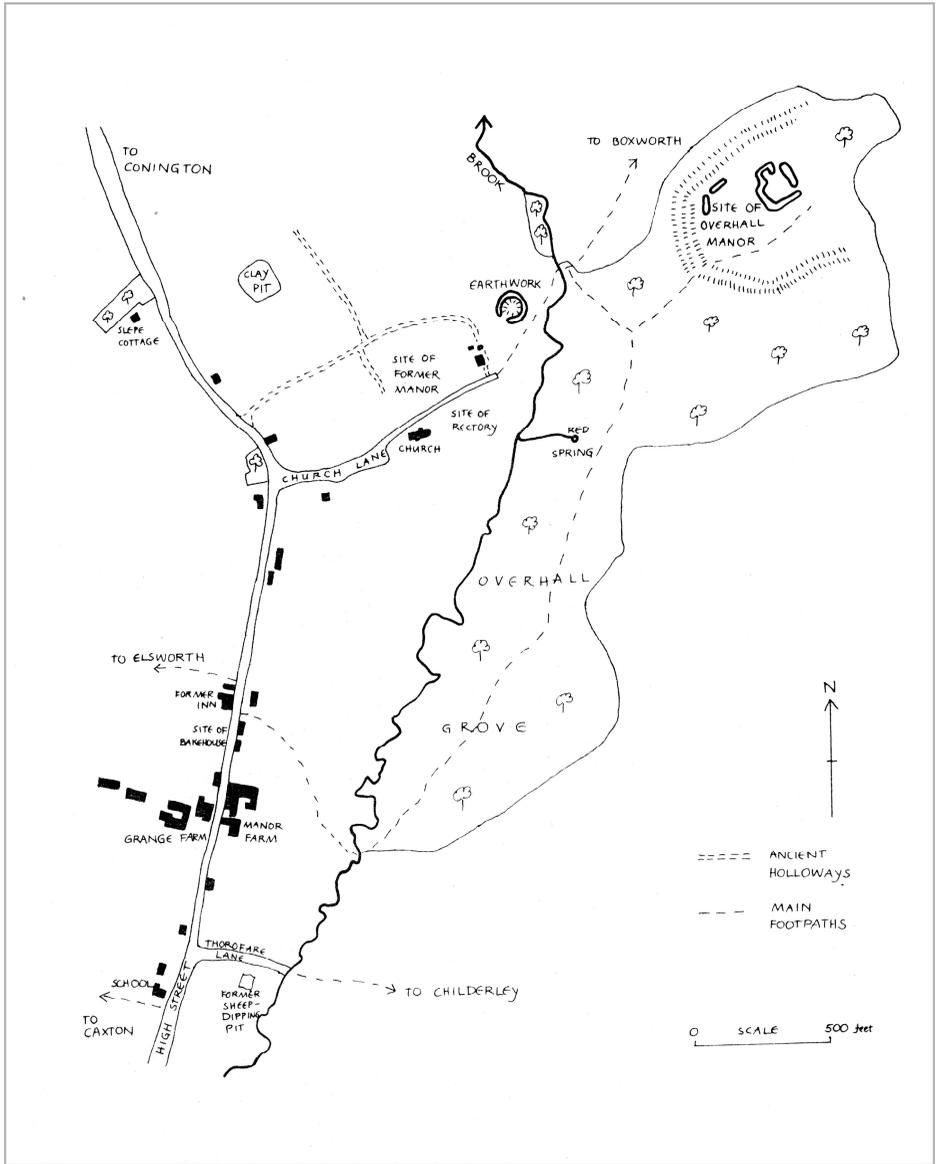
And
The Parish Church of
All Saints



A SHORT HISTORY

Price 25p

In Aid of the Parish Church Restoration Fund



Map of parish of Knapwell

KNAPWELL VILLAGE

AND THE PARISH CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS

Set in gently rolling countryside in the west of the county, Knapwell is one of the most unspoilt villages in Cambridgeshire. So little modern development has taken place in the village that the imprint of a thousand years of human habitation is still clearly visible in the landscape. This booklet gives some account of the history of the village and its most interesting local landmarks, in particular the parish church of All Saints.

The uplands of West Cambridgeshire were once densely wooded, and as a result there was no settlement in the area in prehistoric times. The Romans built great highways through the forests which are still in use today - the Via Devana (the A604) to the north, the 'Ridgeway' (the A45) to the south, and Ermine Street (the A14) to the west - but they, too, did not settle in the wooded uplands. Two hoards of Roman coins, found in Knapwell in 1840 and 1877 respectively, were probably left by a traveller.

The first inhabitants of Knapwell and the neighbouring villages were early Anglo-Saxon settlers who began to clear the woodland for farming purposes. It is significant that the first settlers did not establish their villages along the Roman roads, but rather on the main watercourses which were evidently more useful for transport purposes. The stream which runs alongside Knapwell village, forming the boundary with the adjoining parish of Boxworth, is a small tributary of the River Ouse.

The origin of the name Knapwell, or 'Cnapa's spring', is uncertain. 'Cnapa' may have been the name of the first settler, or might simply mean 'boy' or perhaps 'moneylender'. Alternatively it could be translated as 'mound', possibly referring to the circular moated earthwork at the bottom of Church Lane. There are a number of springs in and around the village, because of its situation on the boundary between the boulder

clay deposited in the Ice Age and the more impervious Jurassic Kimmeridge clay below. The best-known spring is the Red Spring in Overhall Grove, which is so-called on account of its high iron-content, thought to give it medicinal properties. Within living memory a drinking cup used to hang on the small brick arch over the spot where the spring rises. The village of Knapwell was once also known as 'Little Wellesworth', again indicating the importance of the local springs. The suffix 'worth', which also occurs in the names of the nearby villages of Elsworth, Boxworth and Lolworth, means a clearing in the woodland.

The curious shape of the parish, with the village situated at the northernmost point of a triangular area which broadens out towards the Ridgeway in the south, suggests that Knapwell was probably a later settlement than Elsworth and Boxworth, these villages having already occupied the lands to the north. Just as Knapwell seems to have been a daughter hamlet of Elsworth, so Overhall was probably a daughter settlement of Boxworth. The remains of what was presumably Overhall manor, now only a great rectangular moated earthwork overgrown by woodland and inhabited chiefly by badgers, can still be clearly seen in the north-western part of Overhall Grove, the woodland which bounds the eastern side of Knapwell village. Pottery found on the site indicates that Overhall manor was only occupied between the 11th and 14th centuries.

Like the parent settlement of Elsworth, Knapwell is recorded among the lands belonging to the wealthy Saxon landowner, Athelstan Manessone, who died in 986. It passed eventually into the hands of Bishop Aednoth of Dorchester (1044-49) who bequeathed the estate to the Benedictine Abbey of Ramsey, together with the manors of Over and Barton, to make up for having cracked one of the abbey bells with his lusty ringing as a young boy. Ramsey Abbey was one of the most important landowners in the county, leasing its lands to lay tenants, until it was finally suppressed in 1550.

In 1086 Knapwell was described in the Domesday Book among the property owned by Ramsey Abbey:

The Abbot of St. Benedict holds the manor of CHENEPEWELLE. There are 5 hides here. There is land for 8 ploughs. There are 1½ hides in demesne, and there are 2 ploughs here. There are here 8 villeins and 4 sokemen having 1½ hides, and 4 bordars, each with 5 acres, and 4 cottars and 4 serfs. There is wood for the fences and meadow for 2 ploughs. In all it is worth £6; in the time of King Edward (i.e. before 1066) it was worth £8. This manor pertains and always pertained to the demesne of the church of St. Benedict. In the time of King Edward the aforesaid 4 sokemen could give and sell their land without the Abbot's leave, but the soke remained with the Abbot.

A hide was about 100 acres. The serfs were the lowest class, and the sokemen, the only free men, were the highest. Bordars, cottars and villeins, the groups in between, were smallholders who were tied to the estate by various feudal obligations. The total of 24 working men indicates a Domesday population of between one and two hundred. A remarkable feature of Knapwell is that the population of the parish has remained within these approximate limits ever since that time. The population today is just over a hundred.

In mediaeval times the main street of Knapwell was the track now known as Church Lane. At the nucleus of the village lay the church, with the manor on the opposite side of the street. Traces of settlements along Church Lane and along a second parallel street to the north are clearly visible in aerial photographs. The rough mounds and irregularities marking the sites of former buildings can even be detected from the ground. Mediaeval ridge-and-furrow patterns are still visible in the grassy meadows in and around the village, and also in the woods of Overhall Grove. The most interesting earthwork is the circular moated mound at the eastern end of Church Lane, near the spot where the old road to Boxworth would have crossed the brook. The purpose of this construction is obscure, for it is too small to have served as an effective defence for the village. The 12th-century pottery found on the site suggests that the mound might have been erected at the order of the Abbot of Ramsey to protect the estate during the rebellion of Geoffrey de Mandeville in 1143-44.

The economic decline which affected much of Cambridgeshire in the 14th century, even before the onset of the Black Death in 1348, seems to have marked the start of a gradual decrease in Knapwell's importance. William Cole of Milton, who visited the village in the mid-18th century, was not impressed by what he found there, describing the soil as mean, and the population as small (under 30 families), and the church as poor and mean.

With one exception, Knapwell was the first of the Cambridgeshire upland villages to be enclosed by Act of Parliament. The Act was passed in 1775, and the awards dividing the open fields and common lands among the chief landowners were made in the following year. The largest share of the land was awarded to the Lord of the Manor, Wright Squire Esq., while a certain James Rust Gent. received a considerable area on the western margins of the parish. The farm now known as Glebe Farm is so-called because this portion of the parish was awarded to the Rector in place of the glebe lands and the tithes paid to the church from the common lands.

The Enclosure Map, which is preserved in the County Record Office, shows that at this date there were still a number of houses in Church Lane and the parallel street to the north. However, provisions in the Act for resurfacing the public highway leading from the St. Neot's Road towards Conington must have improved transport facilities to such an extent that after 1775 the centre of gravity of the village gradually shifted from Church Lane to the present High Street. The effects of enclosures in the late 18th century led to heavy rural depopulation in England, as the poorer farm workers lost their ancient rights on the land and more efficient farming methods reduced the need for farm labour. In the first census, taken in 1801, the population of Knapwell was only 97. It was probably this slump in population which caused most of the houses around the church to be abandoned. The rectory, which stood below the church on the same side of the street, was among the buildings which eventually disappeared. The house had been rebuilt by John Perne, the last incumbent ever to live in the village; he was Rector from 1731 to 1745. All that now remains is a large flat stone hidden in the undergrowth, said to have been the back doorstep of the old rectory.

Despite the initial hardships caused by the effects of enclosure the 19th century seems to have been a period of partial recovery. By 1881 the population of Knapwell had risen to 188, probably its all-time maximum. The principal landowners now had the opportunity to improve the heavy clay lands and to obtain better yields, and the market for agricultural produce was growing, rapidly. By this time settlement was concentrated almost exclusively along the High Street. The core of the L-shaped brick house now known as Manor Farm dates from the 17th century, but it is not clear at what stage it superseded the old manor opposite the church. The clay-pit to the north of the former manor, now just a pretty, secluded pool, supplied the local brick-kilns which produced materials for new buildings to house the growing population. The two cottages now called Slepe Cottage, near the site of the old kilns, were among those built from Knapwell bricks. The brick house at No. 12 High Street was the village inn in the 19th century. In the adjoining meadow stood the old bakehouse, and it is said that villagers used to take their Sunday joints to be roasted in the baking ovens. The solid Victorian school, originally a single huge room heated by one tiny grate, stands at the south end of the village.

The modern houses in Knapwell are few in number and discreet in style. The photograph of the village illustrated on the back cover, which was taken in about 1916, shows that its appearance has hardly changed since that time. Several thatched cottages, some dating from as early as the 17th century, still survive, but the gaps between the existing dwellings mark the sites of others which have long since disappeared. Although many social and economic changes have taken place since the Middle Ages, and relatively few of the inhabitants now work on the land, the village has nevertheless retained the character of a small, integrated rural community.

The Parish Church of All Saints

The records of Ramsey Abbey indicate that there was already a church in Knapwell in the 12th century, but none of the existing building dates from before the 14th century, pre-14th-century remains being extremely rare in the churches of the area.

The 14th-century tower still stands today, though much restored; but the main body of the church suffered from centuries of neglect and was ruinous by the 18th century. William Cole described it as a small, mean church with nothing worthy of observation except for a small window on the north side. His sketch of the church shows a fair-sized Gothic building with nave and side-aisles, a long chancel, a porch at the south entrance, and great buttresses supporting the nave walls. In 1753 the chancel collapsed, and the Rector, Dr. Pulteney Forrester, obtained permission to rebuild 'the great rambling old chancel to one of smaller and more useful size'. A second sketch, made by the Chancellor of Lincoln and preserved with the Cole papers, shows the church with its compact, newly-built chancel. However, the problems of the decaying structure were far from solved. In 1785 parts of the nave also collapsed and the church became unusable. For the next eighty years services were held in a village barn. Worse was yet to come. In 1857 the Rev. David Craig became Rector, but after only a few weeks he vanished and was found at the crossroads by the Black Mill (at the crossing with the Elsworth-Boxworth road) in his night-shirt totally insane. Eventually in 1861 the tide turned, when a certain Henry Brown was appointed curate and revealed himself to be a man of extraordinary qualities. Every Sunday he walked out to Knapwell from Cambridge to take the morning and evening services before returning on foot to the city. He immediately set about raising money to rebuild the tumbledown church and collected the sum of £700 from villagers and his own friends. A grant of £65 was made by the Incorporated Society for Building Churches. The most successful local architect of the period, W.N. Fawcett, was employed to make the designs, and the new church was completed in 1866. The unfortunate David Craig lingered on in an asylum until 1900, while a succession of

curates carried out his duties and the church once again fell into a state of disrepair. Craig's successors have sought to remedy the neglect but even today the church is badly in need of repairs. A Restoration Fund has recently been launched, with the principal aim of raising money for a new roof.

The ancient tower is built of fieldstones (glacial erratics found in the local boulder clay) and clunch (the soft limestone quarried in West Cambridgeshire). The structure is unusual in having no buttresses, for it is low enough to be self-supporting. The original fabric of the church can best be seen from inside the church, as the exterior was refaced with pebbles and flints set in mortar when the nave was rebuilt in 1866. The old spiral staircase to the belfry survives, lit by the narrow rectangular windows which pierce the south face of the tower. The early 19th-century bell was cast in St. Neot's, and there are spaces in the bell-frame for two further bells. The tower windows are in the Perpendicular, or late Gothic, style, characterised by the flattened tops and tall straight verticals. A similar window-head, a fragment of the old church, is preserved under the present altar table. The original gargoyles still drain water from the flat roof of the tower.

The main body of the church is a typical example of Victorian ecclesiastical architecture. Like many of his contemporaries, Fawcett was a chameleon-like architect, choosing a different idiom to suit each commission. His buildings ranged from the 'Elizabethan' Master's Lodge of St. Catherine's College to the Gothic villa of King's College school. His design for Hughes Hall in Cambridge is described disparagingly by Pevsner as being in the 'Neo-Dutch-Norman-Shaw-London-Board-School style!' However, his churches were exclusively in the Gothic style, in which he must have considered himself to be something of an expert. His Manual of Gothic Mouldings, which he wrote with F.A. Paley, ran to at least six editions. Like the church of Longstowe, which he had rebuilt a year earlier, again preserving the 14th-century tower, Knapwell church is by no means a copy of the previous true Gothic church but is unmistakably 19th-century in character. The great arch at the west end of the nave is tall and very pointed, in striking contrast to the shape of the old Perpendicular tower window beyond, while the nave windows exhibit a variety of different Gothic forms. The decorative

black and red brickwork is a typically Victorian feature, first introduced by the great Neo-Gothic architect William Butterfield. The highpoint of Fawcett's compact and well-proportioned design is the chancel with its elegant 'ship's keel' beamed ceiling and curved apse. The pews, choir-stalls and lectern are solid oak furnishings contemporary with the church, while the organ, still operated by a hand-pump, was installed in the early years of this century.

In spite of long periods of neglect the church has preserved a number of special treasures. The octagonal stone font is 14th-century, and the wooden communion table dates from the 17th century. The printed bible of 1617 must have been a product of the law then obliging all churches to possess a copy of the Bible. An early 18th-century damask altar cloth, decorated with scenes of the seige of Lille, and items of silverware from the 16th and 17th centuries are among the other possessions of the church. A complete record exists of the Rectors since 1349.*

All Saints, Knapwell may not be one of the oldest churches in the county, but it has undeniable charm. The setting among gently undulating woods and pastures with hardly another building in sight is exceptionally fine, and the small, intimate church, well-suited to the needs of a modest country village, takes full advantage of its marvellous setting.

Deborah Longair
August 1978

*Among those on the list is the familiar name of the Rev. W.V. Awdry, author of the well-known children's train stories, who was Rector from 1946-1955.

List of Rectors

1349 John de Elsham ... Clerk
 John Amory ... Priest
1380 Richard Gerpeynt . Rector
1382 John Russell
1395 Richard de Toft
1440 Will Spencer
1443 Richard Somerby
1445 John Lylleford
1457 Roger Keye
 Clement Rude or Rude
1472 Gilbert Robynson
1478 John Totalle or Cotrill
1488 John Bath
1496 Walter Pate
1506 Thomas Smythe
1520 Thomas Wade
1528 Thomas Pyerson or Eyerson
1545 Richard Lockewood
1546 Michael Donning
1559 Francis Skarrell
1605 Adam Siddall
1627 John Staunton
1679 John Bird
1709 Henry Perne M.A*
1731 John Perne
1745 Dr. Pulter Forrester
1770 Edward Musgrave
1773 James Barton
1782 Allen Fielding
1786 Friskney Gunniss
1791 F. Goodwin
1830 James Hale
1833 Martin Mayson
1836 John Thornhill
1857 David Craig
1900 Marcus Steinman Kemmis
1915 W.C. Massey

1923 L.B.S. Abbott
1927 Lawrence Iggulden
1946 W.V. Awdry
1955 Brian Frederick Dupre
1961 Hugh A. Mosedale
1999 Jeremy Pemberton
2008 Fiona Windsor

Sources of Information

William Cole papers, British Museum, mid-18th-century.

Enclosure map and awards for Knapwell, 1775-6, County Record Office.

L.F. SALZMAN (ed.): The Victoria County History of the County of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely, vol. I (1938) and vol II (1948).

J.A. RAFTIS: The Estates of Ramsey Abbey, Toronto (1957) .

L. MUNBY (ed.): Fen and Upland, Swavesey (1961).

ROYAL COMMISSION FOR HISTORICAL MONUMENTS:
Inventory of Historical Monuments in the County of Cambridge, vol I
West Cambridgeshire, H.M.S.O. (1968).

N. PEVSNER: The Buildings of England; Cambridgeshire,
Penguin Books (1970 edn.).

C. TAYLOR: The Cambridgeshire Landscape, Hodder &
Stoughton, London (1973).

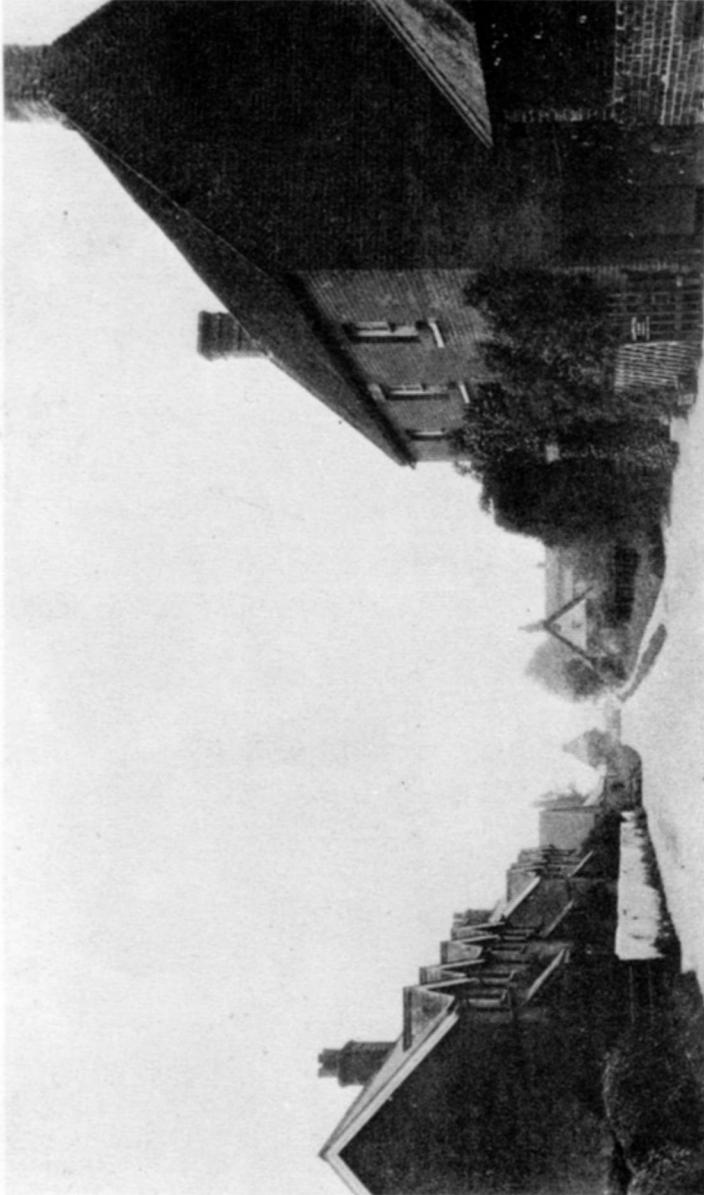
I am especially grateful to Miss W. Chandler and Mr. R.E. Palmer for information and help in preparing this booklet.



Exterior of Knapwell church



Interior of Knapwell church showing “ship’s keel” ceiling



High Street, Knapwell, near Cambridge, about 1916

