

Mortimer, 1960 and After

At a glance, Mortimer today appears very like the Mortimer of 1960; its overall outline from end to end has hardly altered. Its churches, schools, farms, main roads, pubs, Fairground and railway station are still where they were then, with a few trivial adjustments. Awareness of this heartens those residents who, periodically, unite to repel the twin threats to Mortimer's identity - housing development directed towards it and excessive gravel extraction in its woodlands.

Yet the actual changes within Mortimer's boundaries during the past thirty years have been considerable. In the commercial sector shops have changed hands, closed, been rebuilt, even demolished, despite the fact that their locations have in general remained the same. With the exception of Swards on Victoria Road, the chemist in West End Road (both much enlarged and modernised) and Peggy Shaw's in Windmill Road, no shop premises in Mortimer now stocks the type of goods it did in 1960. Gone are the Co-op, the Southern Electricity Board's showroom, a drapers, two grocers, three butchers and a funeral parlour. Small tinkering with the infrastructure brought re-sitings; Mortimer Common Post Office moved to a new small building next-door, the hardware shop (currently Dad's Shop) was rebuilt after the old one burnt down, and the National Provincial Bank became the Nat West and re-sited itself slightly to one side.

In the 1950s and 60s the Stephens Road and Stephens Firs estates were built at the west end of village on land once part of Stephens Farm, as well as other smaller housing developments and continual infilling. In the early 1960s Stratfield House in West End Road, a large house with ample grounds which had been a children's home for a number of years, was knocked down, together with The Croft which stood where Aborn Parade is now. The land was used for the Croft Road Estate, with additional land owned by Dr. Anderson Hill between Glenapp and the present surgery. The adjoining Leighfield was built on a piece of land which had been allotted to Mr. Leigh.



Briar Lea House

This pattern was repeated when in 1986 Crossways (built in 1874) and The Poplars in Victoria Road were knocked down to make the retirement complex of Badgers Croft; and also when Briar Lea House at Doctor's Corner was demolished, despite vigorous protests, to make the housing development of Groves Lea. At least the inappropriate original name of Windsor Green was dropped for this estate, and there is some historical justification for Groves Lea as this piece of land in the mid-19th century was called Grove's Corner.

The Crescent development was built on formerly wet woodland in the early 1960s. Soon afterwards, Leigh Field - still a pasture in 1960 - was developed, eventually linking up with the other new houses in Croft Road. College Piece woods became a well-landscaped council estate about 1965. Like those in other ex-council houses, its occupants now either own their homes or pay rent to the Housing Association.

Many individual houses and small groupings of them have appeared in accordance with the principle of in-filling containment within the village envelope. New accommodation for the elderly: Windmill Court in Windmill Road, Glenapp Grange and Badgers Croft (the latter two private developments), help to meet the needs of increased numbers of older people.

As the new-look village took shape, parts of the old one - the local bobby, the water tower on the Common, the sweet shop near St. Mary's School, the Post Office at the foot of The Street - continued to disappear. There were gains, however: enlarged, modernised schools, the library (1965), the improved St. John's Hall, a proper fire station in West End Road and a re-modelled surgery for Mortimer's medical practice.

The 1961 Census for Mortimer showed 2,267 inhabitants. The 1991 projected figure is 3,296, plus 315 representing those who, because of recent boundary changes, have been transferred from Hampshire to Berkshire. The 1991 Census for Mortimer confirms a population figure of 3,498. Even if the numbers of those who have died or moved away is taken into account, the figures show a rise of over a thousand residents since 1961.

The influx of families, young and old, has markedly altered the social fabric of the village. In 1960 there was a noticeable gulf between old-time residents and the new. That has effectively gone. Newcomers who wish to do so can integrate quite readily through a host of local organisations and peer groups of all ages. After a while a sense of identity with the community grows, and with it the awareness that no village can survive too many waves of further growth. The people of Mortimer will continue to protect its status as a village, albeit one that has shed its insularity.