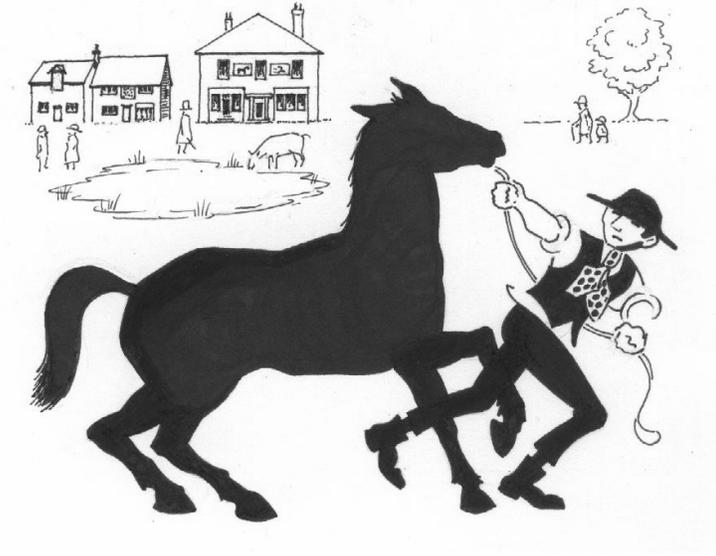


MORTIMER through the ages



Introduction

The two parts of the name Stratfield Mortimer together refer to three periods in the history of the village and its surrounding area. The first half is a Saxon word meaning open land along a Roman road and the second half comes from the name of the Norman lord to whom the village was given after the Conquest. Already from the name of the village you can begin to imagine the succession of people through the ages. This book is mainly an account of these people, both named and unnamed, who have made the village as it is today, and what they have left behind in many ways such as landscape and buildings. No village, however, is created in isolation and the inhabitants of Mortimer were influenced by the physical environment of the area.

Mortimer lies almost centrally along the east - west axis of modern Berkshire, with the Kennet about three miles to the west and the Loddon about three miles to the east. Mortimer is on the southern boundary of Berkshire where it borders Hampshire; the county is so narrow here, however, that Mortimer is not far from the heart of Berkshire. An important geological feature of Berkshire is a thick layer of chalk which dips gently south passing under the Kennet valley. From about the middle of the county and moving towards the east, the chalk has been partially worn away and covered with a gradually thicker layer of clay with flints. To the south and east of the Kennet valley the soils are either stiff clays or pebbly sands on the Bagshot beds which support the characteristic heathland and pine forest of the Berkshire - Hampshire borders.

Anyone who has ever tried to dig a garden in Mortimer Common cannot have failed to notice the gravelly nature of the soil; those gardening nearer the station may grumble of heavy clays. In this difference in soil lies the reason for the village having first developed at

the lower end of the parish - the clay soils are more fertile and were farmed hundreds of years ago. The Foudry Brook provided that other necessary ingredient of old-fashioned farming - the water meadow. For several hundred years, therefore, the village grew around the farms on this better soil. The gravelly soil at the top of the hill was considered unsuitable for anything other than common land. There were other houses dotted around the parish, but the heart of the village lay near the Foudry. Not until a Victorian demand for housing created the developments at the top of the hill on hitherto common land did the centre of the village move to where it is now. This is why the parish church, original village school, and some of the oldest houses in the village appear to be so far way from the current centre on Mortimer Common, which, however, is still part of Stratfield Mortimer.

Until quite recent times ordinary houses were built of local materials and their style was dictated by what was available. The principal construction method in Mortimer from Tudor up to Victorian times was timber-framing (using materials from the abundant woods) infilled with wattle-and-daub or, later, brick from the eminently suitable clay occurring in pockets around the parish. By the 19th century, here as elsewhere, brick had become the predominant method of construction.

The development of a village is also influenced by the Local Authorities. Until the creation of parish councils in 1894, village matters were controlled by the manor courts. In Mortimer there were three manors - Stratfield Mortimer, Wokefield and Abbey Manors.

Today, in addition to the Parish Council, Mortimer is controlled by Newbury District Council and Berkshire County Council although the future of this structure is uncertain. (*Website additional note: Berkshire County Council abolished 1998*)

A precursor in some respects of the district council was the hundred - an ancient division of a county which held its own law court. The parish of Stratfield Mortimer was in the hundred of Reading when the Domesday Book was recorded in 1086. By 1241 a separate hundred of Theale had been created which included Stratfield Mortimer. This was still in operation six hundred years later. The Hampshire part of the village, Mortimer West End, was in Holdshott hundred. The hundred was gradually replaced by a variety of bodies, including Vestries, Magistrates' Courts and, in 1891 for Stratfield Mortimer, Bradfield Rural District Council.

In past times the church had a much greater influence on practical matters. Financed by land and property rents as well as tithes (a tenth of all profit, produce, livestock etc. paid to the church), the church was involved in legal affairs. From Norman times, Stratfield Mortimer formed part of the diocese of Salisbury. In 1836 the whole of Berkshire was moved to the diocese of Oxford. In 1291 the archdeaconry (the subdivision of a diocese) of Berkshire was divided into four deaneries, to one of which, that of Reading, Stratfield Mortimer belonged and still belongs.

A good deal of the history in this book may well surprise those readers who thought Mortimer no more than a modern settlement. Perhaps they will now see the village with new eyes.