

Mysteries

We used to be taught at school that history is about dates, so where in a history book should we expect to find things that cannot be dated?

The first mystery concerns the diversion of the Foudry Brook. In some lucky villages the church is part of a picturesque group of traditional buildings, with manor house, manor farm and watermill nearby. Mortimer was once like that. The mill was mentioned in Domesday Book and was still working in 1304. By 1426, however, it was "...*unoccupied, totally devastated and broken.*" It was never rebuilt. Its exact site has not been determined, but it must have stood just below St. Mary's Church, most likely where the bridge over the brook gives access to the field. Ladyfield House is probably on the site of the miller's house. The millpond is still there although it is very silted up and the sluices have long since gone. In order to provide a good head of water an artificial channel or leet runs for 900 metres (just over half a mile) to the mill site. The water then flows rapidly downhill to Tun Bridge, where it joins the original course of the brook, which was interrupted by the construction of the railway in 1846. Josiah Ballard's map of 1775 shows both waterways clearly. The digging of the leet must have been a big job for a small community but there is no record of the work; one can only guess it was done in Saxon times.

The second mystery also concerns a mill, if it ever existed. Halfway down Turks Lane, on the left side, is Mill Copse, in which there is a dam large enough to hold back the water of a considerable pond, although it is breached and through the gap flows a tiny trickle of a stream. The Ordnance Survey marks it 'Pond Bay' in the lettering for 'Saxon or medieval sites (AD 420 - 1688)'. Just behind it, not far from the Foudry Brook, was the tile kiln where land drains for the Brocas Estate were made. It was still there in 1872 but has now quite disappeared, and there is no reason to suppose it had any connection with Mill Copse or the dam.

Such labour-intensive exercises in manual earth moving might make one suppose that Mortimer suffered large-scale depopulation. It must be remembered, however, that even before the development of Mortimer Common in the 19th century, only a small proportion of the population lived in the 'old' village at the end of Mortimer Street. Most of the agricultural workers occupied cottages scattered all over the parish, and in the small hamlets like Hoods Green, Hale Green and Little Heath. Most have now gone, also many old farmhouses, taken down after their land was thrown into larger holdings. The sites of many are lost; five at West End Farm, three at Simms and four at Perrins. Longmoor is now a depopulated area, but was a squatter settlement which flourished on the common in the 19th century. A walk across farmland can be a lonely one today, but in the past there would nearly always have been a dwelling in view, and only in winter no workers in the fields.