

OUR VILLAGE – CHRONICLES OF THE BOATING VILLAGE OF SALTFORD

Published on 10 February 1959 this “brochure” was compiled by six members of Saltford Women's Institute with “knowledge gained from various sources”.

Here we have reproduced the part of the document that describes Saltford and the way of life here in the late 1950s. Whilst some of the early historical information is now considered inaccurate due to the improved availability of archaeological and other records, this nevertheless provides a rare description of 1950s Saltford.

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Introductory description of Saltford's setting

The village of Saltford lies in the North East corner of Somerset, five miles from Bath and seven miles from Bristol, pleasantly situated on the South bank of a particularly picturesque portion of the River Avon and the weirs near the derelict Brass Mill are a prominent feature.

The village proper has a quaint old world appearance due in a measure to its position on the slopes of a hill and to the almost medieval character of some of its habitations.

From the summit of the hill on which Saltford stands, extensive views may be obtained overlooking the winding course of the river below, dotted here and there with ornamental boathouses. Steep, winding paths and curious old streets and lanes combine to give it a romantic attractiveness which one cannot fail to appreciate. Some of them are called by characteristic names such as - The Shallows, The Alley, The Rank, The Batch etc.

Sad to say the houses are now numbered in town style,

though this is an advantage to newly appointed postmen who are not familiar with the inhabitants. Surrounding fields have curious names - Homefields, Hangman's Length, Three Corner Piece, Jacob's Style', Pratt's Orchard, Cox's Close, Moorgaston, Great Pigsmore, Nutman's Orchard, Watney Green, Withy Beds, etc.

Dominating all is Lansdown, the first spur of the Cotswolds, on the summit of which is a natural plateau where there is a well laid out race course.

THE VILLAGE

The original village is on a hillside leading to the river. In the centre is the Church, which is very old with some Norman portions while the remainder has been much restored.

Close to the Church is the Manor House, a wonderful old building, which has also been extensively renovated. It is now believed to be the only old Manor used as a residence in the country.

The village has not been altered for many years, the chief characteristic feature being the rows of cottages built at angles off the road through the village. They have no back entrance or garden but have good front gardens.

Most of the village people are engaged on railway maintenance at Keynsham, Bristol or Bath. Some are agricultural workers.

At the cross roads in the village is the World War I Memorial, a dignified and simple Celtic Cross, surrounded by a tiny garden. Names have also been added of casualties in World War II.

The main Bristol-London road, the upper end of Saltford, is now given to ribbon development, modern houses, many of which are dormitories for residents occupied in nearby towns. On each side, off the main road, there are Council houses of various types, about two hundred in all. These are planned and arranged to give space and beauty for the occupants.

We have a very energetic Community Association, which is working hard to raise funds for a new Community Centre on the Sports ground. This is badly needed as the W.I. Hut is the only hall available for all the local activities.

The Women's Institute opened on the 1st January 1918

and there are now 130 members, the average attendance being 70 to 80 at all meetings. A teak seat is being presented from the W.I. as a Coronation Memorial to the village.

There is also an Evergreen's Club (over 60S), with volunteers to carry delicate members in their cars to and from meetings each week.

A Scout troop was formed in 1927 and Girl Guides in 1931. There are also football and cricket clubs. The golf club is some distance from the village but is popular in the district.

The Saltford Regatta, sometimes called the Henley of the West, has a great appeal for rowing clubs, who come from far and near to take part in this annual event. At the farthest end of the village, close to the Jolly Sailor Inn is the only industry - a paint factory, which, used to be worked by a water-wheel and was lighted by oil lamps. This is now modernised and employs about twenty people. Many years ago there was a Brass Mill, also with a water-wheel.

There is not a resident doctor or consulting room but a house is being built for one so that this should be remedied soon. There are no banking facilities, which is sometimes inconvenient.

The main London-Bristol Railway line passes through the middle of the village in a deep cutting and under a house - "Tunnel House." It is so deep that only steam can be seen and a light rumble heard when a train passes.

The station at Saltford, which was built over an old stagecoach road, is served by local trains. There was also a branch line at Kelston station, across the river, which also served Saltford but this has recently been closed.

The only shops in the old village are a news agent a grocery store but a number of other shops and a post office line a portion of the main Bristol-Bath road and these satisfy most every-day needs.

Before the making of the railway, Saltford was supplied with water from a spring which had its origin in the hill at the south-west of the village. The dipping-wells which it supplied may still be seen in various parts of the village. There is one by the Bird in Hand, another by the Brass Mill and there are some in gardens in the High Street.

When the railway lines were laid, they cut across the spring and stopped the supply and for several years the water was delivered by cart to the inhabitants. Now supplies of water, gas and electricity are in most cases off the main but several properties have yet to experience the benefits of main drainage.

As well as the Church there is also a Mission Hall, or Working Men's Club, where services are held. A small Primitive Methodist Chapel was built in the lower part of the village in 1865. This was later used as a Men's Club and is also the meeting place of the Evergreens'.

THE RIVER

The river Avon does not flow through the village but at the foot of surrounding hills, in a horse-shoe shape, from Old Brass Mill lock to the lock at the Jolly Sailor Inn, and is crossed at the bend by a railway bridge, formerly the L.M.S. It is a very pretty stretch of the river, with weirs adjoining both locks. Willow trees overhang into the river in places and here moorhens build their nests, such a charming picture they make when wee black, fluffy chicks are seen paddling about with their parents.

Swans also nest on the banks and are equally delightful to watch, gliding down the river in single file, with a parent bird at each end of the line of young cygnets. They are far more aggressive when nesting or protecting their young and will readily attack at any unwarranted interference.

There is plenty of fishing in season. The patient fishermen sit or stand all day, wet or fine, on the grassy banks and are sometimes rewarded with good catches of roach etc. At one time eels were caught in traps and sold in neighbouring towns.

Water rats or voles are sometimes seen, searching for food. They are pretty creatures with furry, mud-coloured coats. A lovely sight is the kingfisher, its brilliant blue plumage and large beak catching the sunlight, making it into a flying jewel.

During the summer months, especially at week-end, the river is alive with punts, rowing boats, canoes and similar craft, the main feature being the annual Saltford Regatta.

Many clubs use the river, the Clifton Rowing Club among others, having their own boat-houses there. Sea scouts

also make full use of the water for their nautical training and camp in the adjoining fields.

In 1728 the navigation to Bath was completed, when the first barge was sent to that city, laden with deals, lead and meal. Barges are still to be seen wending their way up river.

For many years there was a ferry in the Shallows, which was worked by Hannah Gregory and her husband. Passengers were not numerous except on Regatta Days and on Lansdown Race days, when many coming to Saltford by train took this short cut to get to the other side of the river. On these occasions a rope was stretched from bank to bank to enable the distance to be traversed more quickly and safely.

The Shallows were so called because in olden times, before there were any weirs or locks, the tide came up to Saltford and where the road is low, there was a ford, or shallow place, where one could cross to the Kelston side of the river. A swift stream ran down the middle about a yard wide, which had to be jumped. The road is now very much higher than it was then, when it was often flooded. There was a flood path for foot passengers and it led through No. 2 Willow Cottages and up the field at the top of the Rectory. The door has been nailed up for a good many years but for a long time there was a strong piece of chain and padlock on the inside of the stair door.

THE CHURCH

The ancient and quaint little church dedicated to St. Mary is situated in a somewhat obscure position in the village.

As to the date when the first church in Saltford was erected, history is silent but it may be taken for granted that a church of either the Saxon or early Norman period occupied the site.

In 1292 the church was valued at six marks and a half. It was at one time rectorial in the deanery of Bedminster and Redcliff.

Few examples could be more typical of a little country church than the interior of that at Saltford with its low wagon roof, covered with lath and plaster, which, if removed, might reveal some fine old timber; its still lower chancel arch; its irregular windows of almost non-de script styles of

architecture, save one in the north wall, which is a good specimen of Perpendicular work.

The most interesting features in the building are the font, an ancient tablet on the wall at the south east end of the nave and an old Bible, kept in the vestry. The font is remarkable, of curious design, and probably dates from the late Saxon or early Norman times. Below the basin it has carved upon it seven [correction: eight] heads of angels. In shape and pattern it is quite distinct from any other font, in Somerset.

The ancient tablet referred to is round-headed. In the centre the following words are inscribed: "Here lyeth the body of Lamorock Flower, who deceased the 6th day of April 1639. Flowers they was nipt in ye springe, but flourishing now with God, their King."

Around the margin, commencing at the left-hand bottom corner, is engraved an inscription which evidently caused the sculptor no little difficulty.

The words are as follows:- "Robert Flower, who deceased the 1st day of July 1631."

All went well with the lettering until the bottom edge was reached, when complications arose and in order to overcome the difficulty the sculptor, realising that the wording must read from right to left instead of the usual way, spelt his words backwards, probably congratulating himself upon his clever contrivance.

The Bible before mentioned is dated 1613 and is in fine preservation. On the title page is an inscription to King James, which, if not characteristic of the Prince, was certainly characteristic of the times.

It reads as follows:- "To the Most High and Mightie Prince James, by the grace of God, King of Great Britaine, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, etc., the translation of the Bible, with grace, mercie and peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord."

On the west wall of the nave is a handsome tablet, ornamented with cherubs' heads and in gold lettering upon a black marble slab is the following inscription:-

"Near here lyeth the body of Lamorock Flower, of this parish, yeoman, son of Lamorock and Susanna Flower, of Bitton, who departed this life August 19th 1719, aged 39.

Also of Lamorock, his son, and Lamorock of Bitton."

The tower, which is low and shows unmistakable signs of old age, is built in two stages and contains one bell. The church, which has accommodation for 200, was restored in 1831 and though not elegant in its interior, it possesses a comely and restful appearance.

On a flat stone in the Churchyard is to be seen the following inscription, dated 1876:-

Stop reader and wonder, see as strange as e'er was known,
my feet dropt off from my body, in the midst of the bone,
I had no surgeon for my help, but God Almighty's aid
On whom I always will rely, and never be afraid,
Tho' here beneath Intred the Ly. Corruption for to see,
Yet they shall rise and reunite to all Eternity.
Frances Flood.

The tradition is that the poor woman came to the Rector's barn suffering from some disease in the feet and did not leave till they dropped off and were buried, as the inscription tells, while she departed on the stumps.

THE MANOR HOUSE

The Manor, lying behind the village school and adjacent to the Church, is undoubtedly the remains of an old Monastic establishment, although, through the centuries, it has been so altered in structure that only a few mementoes are left.

Built in 1160, it is one of the few remaining Norman farmhouses in England. The Norman window, buttresses and gabled porch, surmounted by a cross, all bear testimony to the fact that the building was not always a residential manor house. Formerly there was a lion on the gable ridge but this mysteriously disappeared during the last war.

Inside the building the flooring is of unpolished oak and one room contains an old fireplace, dated 1645 and bearing the initials of the Flower family.

While the present owner was idly scraping plaster from a wall, an ancient mural, since dated at about 1200, was discovered and pronounced unique in the country. Depicting the Virgin, Child and Wheel of Fortune, the painting is of course patchy. It is very probable that some of the Puritans were

responsible for the pitting of the wall and erasing of the Virgin's face.

Formerly the roof bore a weather-cock in the shape of a man, horse and plough, made of brass from the once flourishing local mill. The figure was intended as a portrait of a Mr. Brown, who inhabited the cottage just below the Manor. This cottage was demolished when the school was enlarged.

Behind the Manor were three fishponds with sluices and at the bottom of the slope, Vine Cottage suggests a little vineyard on the sunny hill.

Prior to 1645 the Manor was owned by the Rodney family but on this date the Flower family came into possession and they seemed to have lived there for over two hundred years until 1876.

Local legend avows that there are secret passages beneath the Manor. If this is so the entrance to the tunnels were probably bricked up many years ago as no evidence of these has been discovered during recent renovations.

THE OLD BRASS MILL

The old Brass Mill, to which reference has been made in other sections, was once a flourishing industry in the village and accounts for the Dutch origin of several local families.

The Bristol Brass Co., which had begun its operations at Temple Mills, Bristol in 1702, rapidly extended its business. In 1731 [correction: 1721] the company took a lease of land at Saltford, where later they established their mill, worked by water.

As the English did not understand working in brass, craftsmen were brought over from Holland [correction: Germany] and settled in the district and their descendants are still to be found in Keynsham and Saltford.

Many kinds of brass goods were hand-beaten at the mill with heavy wooden mallets. Large trays were sent out to tea plantations in the East, these trays being the most suitable for tea drying. It is interesting to note that many houses have brass door-steps. These undoubtedly came from the local mill.

It is within living memory that the mill has ceased to operate and although part of the buildings have been demolished, the water-wheel is still in working order and has been adapted to provide current for the electric lighting system recently installed.

THE JOLLY SAILOR INN

The Jolly Sailor Inn is a picturesque old building on the left bank of the river Avon, the farthest point of Saltford. Built in 1736, it overlooks one of the numerous locks between Bristol and Bath.

Years ago it was much frequented by bargees, who plyed their boats from city to city. It was here that curious old customs prevailed, among the burly men as they gathered round the tap-room fire, swigging their ale and puffing at strong smelling pipes.

When a bargee was promoted to master of his boat, his mates thrust a poker into the fire making it red hot and then the new master had to burn a hole in the old, black mantelpiece which surrounds the grate.

This being performed he had to call for a florin's worth of drink for his mates, such was the penalty of promotion. It may be added that the mantelpiece is well riddled.

A visit to this inn will amply repay any lover of the old fashioned as it abounds with the quaintest old staircases, window seats and cupboards. One beautifully designed example of the latter displays a dark blue ceiling on which is depicted a mischievous looking cupid. It is impossible to say how old the design is since for years it has been covered by dust and grime.

A curious picture on wood showing the house as it was before renovation, hangs over the fireplace in the bar. This shows the old form of river lock which has now disappeared and a barge being drawn by three men on the towpath, instead of the horse, used later. The picture looks as though it was done by a Sign-painter with a passion for detail but no knowledge of perspective.

During heavy floods, water has been known to invade the ground floor to a depth of 3 or 4 feet and the walls of the house, which became unsafe, were cleverly clamped together and the front wall, which had bulged four inches, has been straightened.

For over 40 years the house was tenanted by Henry Ollis, whose ancestors came from Holland [correction: Germany] to work at the Brass Mills.

The inn is now modernised to some extent and a large room has been added which caters for table tennis and darts.

The garden is extensively used on summer evenings by those who like to take their refreshments out of doors.

Across the river the land rises 800 feet on the top of which is Kelston Roundhill and Lansdown. The fields and hedges on the slopes make a marvellous patchwork, the crops and trees a feast of colour, providing many artists with material for pictures.

There are two other inns, the Crown and Bird in Hand, former being on the main Bristol-Bath Road, catering those passing through Saltford as well as for "regulars" can also enjoy a game of skittles or darts.

The Bird in Hand has been licenced premises for just Over 100 years and was at one time a coaching station when the main road ran through the village. Parts of the building date back to the 13th century and it is said to have been inhabited by monks. Formerly it was a square building with a stone roof and there still remains a lovely old Norman staircase. A large games room has been added in recent years and it was in this room that some of the first Women's Institute meetings were held, before they acquired their own premises, an ex-army hut, after the 1914-1918 war.

At one time there were two other inns which are now dwelling houses. One was the Old Ship Inn at the bottom of Saltford hill on the main road - another old coaching station - and the other the Old Brass Knocker in the High Street, where the old knocker is still in shining evidence.

THE GOLF COURSE

Situated on high ground on the south side of the Bath-Bristol road, is the Saltford Golf Course most delightfully picturesque and set in natural surroundings of woods and trees on undulating ground. The views from various fairways are beautiful as they are unexpected - even the Welsh hills across the Severn can be seen in the distance, behind the City of Bristol.

The golf course was originally designed for nine holes by Harry Vardon, some fifty years ago and later redesigned for eighteen holes.

Membership consists chiefly of local, Bath and Bristol people. One particular point of interest connected with the club is that its one honorary member is a golden Labrador dog, named Sam who, during the war between 1942 and 1948, retrieved over 3,000 "lost balls." This, at a time when golf balls were not being manufactured, was a most valuable and probably unique achievement.

Longwood, which adjoins the 5th and 6th fairway, is the home of many species of birds, including the nightingale, whose song can be heard throughout the summer evenings.

Formerly part of Lord Temple's estate, the land now occupied by the golf course, belongs to the Duchy of Cornwall.

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