

Biddenham: Saxon Park - whither on road names

The beginning

The oldest roads in Biddenham have not always been known by the names they bear today, and more recent roads have had varying bases chosen at the time for their naming, from the royal inspection of Scottish troops to the Viking (Danish) incursion into this part of Anglo-Saxon England, from the natural world to vicars through the ages, as you'll read below.

I've been prompted in recent weeks to think about a rationale for the names that might be adopted for the roads within the dandara development off Gold Lane, names that could preserve and celebrate the history, characteristics and nature of Biddenham, names that would resonate with villagers who were overwhelmingly underwhelmed by the application to develop that land and who have long strived to retain the rural character of the village.

There is one substantial and significant feature of Biddenham's long history yet to be celebrated and remembered in road names: that is its agricultural and farming heritage. And this development, which is to be built on former agricultural land, is effectively the last substantial opportunity to do that.

For many centuries, indeed for the great majority of its existence as a settlement, Biddenham was a self-contained rural farming community where villagers both lived and worked. But today there are no farms left in the village and very little and steadily diminishing agricultural land: people keep building on it.

It would be most appropriate, indeed quite remarkable and wonderful, therefore when choosing road names for this development to remember and celebrate the village's agricultural and farming heritage.

There are many and various names that can be put forward to that end, and some of these are set out later in this document (on pages 3 to 6 below).

Current roads and their names

Amongst the oldest roads in the village, Gold Lane has previously been known as Gool, Goo, and Go Lane; Main Road as Main Street, Village Street, and Town Street; Duck End Lane as Duck End, Duck Lane, Bridge End and Bridge Lane; and Biddenham Turn as New Road and Grove Lane (there could be now an opportunity to bring Grove back into the reckoning as a road name!).

Into the 20th century, at first individual houses on existing roads but then larger developments with their own new roads were built and the village began to change character. Elger Close, Darlow Drive and Ison Close, for example, are named after individuals with associations with the village, Vicars Close was built on land formerly owned by the Reverend Norman, and roads built in the 1990s on the land formerly Deep Spinney were named after rectors and vicars of Biddenham through the ages, such as Gardener Place (Daniel Gardener 1627 – 1629), Nevern Gardens (M Richard Nevern 1258 – 1293) and Wood Close (Henry Wood 1865 – 1890).

The river Great Ouse was once part of the boundary agreed by the Saxon King Alfred and the Danish King Guthrum between Anglo-Saxon and Danelaw territory, and roads such as Saxon Way, Danegeld Avenue, King Alfred Way and Anglia Way in the development at Great Denham, once part of the Parish of Biddenham but now a separate Parish in its own right, recall the Danish incursion into East Anglia and Bedfordshire.

Most recently on the land north of Bromham Road, in the development at the Bedford end road names such as King George Avenue, Argyll Heath and Seaforth Gardens commemorate the visit of King George V on 22 October 1914 to inspect on the fields then there the Scottish troops billeted in Bedford and surrounding area during the early days of the Great War. At the Biddenham end the village church, St James, is remembered in St James Way, and other road names reflect the natural world of the area, for example, Dragonfly Crescent, Otter Mews, Watercress Rise and Heron Court.

Nowhere, yet, is the village's longstanding agricultural and farming heritage remembered and celebrated, and it bears repeating that the dandara development is effectively the last substantial opportunity to do that.

Biddenham through the ages

Thinking about Saxon Park, I'm not quite sure why that name was chosen. In any event it will not form part of the houses' postal address, that will be simply Biddenham and so it will eventually disappear: it's essentially a selling name for the development, as have been many other names here and elsewhere. Now gone and forgotten.

Probably the most longstanding and significant legacy for the village from Anglo-Saxon times is its name which is of Saxon derivation (see below), though nationally and archaeologically Biddenham is better known for remains of the Old Stone Age. Excavated in 1867 what is known now as Biddenham Pit, at the end of Fleming Close, is said to be the first prolific Palaeolithic site to have been discovered in England.

Items from subsequent periods have been found too in various parts of the parish as it was at the time: Bronze Age, Iron Age, from Roman times at Church Farm two bronze coins, in 1980 at Honey Hill Farm a rare type of gold ring engraved EVSEBIO VITA – Long life to Eusebius. The coins and ring are now in the British Museum.

Then along came the Angles and the Saxons, the Anglo-Saxon period extending from 410 AD after the Romans left to 1066 when Duke William of Normandy arrived and became, as fortune and an arrow had it, William the Conqueror.

During the Anglo-Saxon period the Danes spent a little time in the Bedford area, including Biddenham which was held by 11 sokmen - free men but owing some duties to their Danish overlord, likely near the river in what is now the Parish of Great Denham, and their presence is recalled, as we've seen above, in road names in Great Denham.

Biddenham's name started in the Anglo-Saxon period its long journey to the name we know today: Beda or Bieda being a family name and ham meaning home, homestead, or in Bedfordshire in some cases land in a river bed. Others say Byda leading to Bydaham. But,

whatever, the name has changed many times over the years, due largely to the changing pronunciation by villagers:

Bideham, Bidenham, Beydenham, Budeham, Bydenham, Bedenham, Bydyngham, Bedyngham, Bydna, Byddyngham, Bignam

before at some point it became finally enshrined authoritatively in today's written form.

In the Domesday Book of 1086 it was recorded as Bideham. The Book didn't record everyone, only those who worked. In Bideham that was 20 men of working age: five smallholders, 10 villagers and five slaves. It is estimated the overall population was probably around 80 to 100 people. The Book records also the manor building (at Ford End) and two watermills, the only buildings recorded, no woods were recorded although pigs (normally thought of as foraging in woods) were the most important domestic animal, and oxen pulled the six ploughs. The area of Bideham was around two square miles.

Life went on in the village through the following centuries as a rural agricultural community. Lords of the Manor came and went, a Biddenham settlement existed through progressive reigns as monarchs too came and went, with a Parliament period for a while, and not forgetting the earlier Reformation.

Then, after all those periods and centuries, the big change came as the village progressed into and through the 20th century, transforming from a longstanding self-contained farming community where people both lived and worked in the village to a dormitory village where people could live in the village in the countryside and travel to their work elsewhere. Although that has changed to a degree during the current pandemic as more people now work from home: funny old times!

Some names arising from Biddenham's longstanding farming past

A Lord of the Manor and his heritage

Botoler: Sir William Botoler, Lord of the Manor, created around 1700 the carp pond, now the cherished village pond, to provide fish for the manor table. He died in 1703 and was the last of the Botelers to hold the Biddenham Estate, it passed elsewhere by marriage, he only had daughters, and has ended up with the Wingfields, of whom you may well have heard, by further marriage. Three years after Sir William's death his widow Elizabeth, to provide meat and eggs for the manor table, built adjacent to the pond a ...

... **Dovecote:** which whilst restored in 1932 sadly was demolished early one morning without warning in 1966, a sad loss of a unique part of the village's heritage. It would be particularly welcome to remember the dovecote in the name of a road which would be not too far removed from where it once stood.

Names on a map of 1794

As you will see on the copy below, names associated with the land you will be developing are:

Brooks

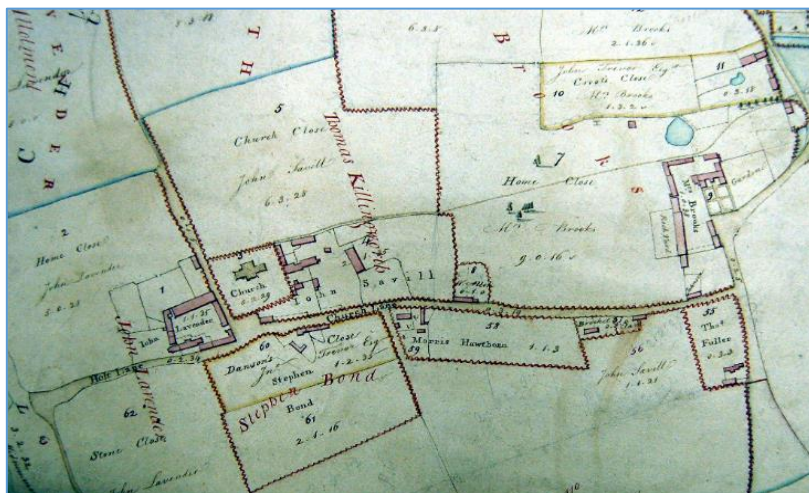
Adam's Close: a ready-made name! And associated with ...

... Staines
Smith

Lockwoods Pightle: in or near the area of land concerned – pightle (sometimes Pyghtle as in the former J P White’s Pyghtle Works, once standing in Hurst Grove, Bedford, and with Biddenham associations) as in an Anglo-Saxon word for a small parcel of land, a small enclosure, a croft.



Reproduction of the 1794 map



Part of the original 1794 map

Village farms

There were latterly six farms operational in the village:

Grove (there once was a Grove Lane (as you read in page 1 above): that was lost as a name but now there is a chance to bring it back!

Clay

Green

Honey Hill

Church

Manor

Green was the only one owned by other than the Biddenham Estate, the other five being tenanted. There are already in Biddenham roads named Church End and Manor Road, so it could perhaps cause confusion, even with attachments other than End or Road, if these were recognised in the new development. But still a possibility.

Names of farmers associated with those farms include:

Howard: Charles Howard of Manor Farm was renowned as a breeder of shorthorn cattle but particularly, nationally and internationally, as a breeder of sheep (**Oxford Down**). His Oxford Down rams were sought by many countries overseas. He held many national offices involved in livestock. His shepherd, **Campion**, lived in a cottage in Duck End Lane, now no longer standing. Charles' father designed and manufactured an improved small mechanical **plough** known as the 'Champion Plough of England'. Two of his brothers continued the works – the Britannia Works in Bedford – and expanded the range of agricultural and other mechanical equipment manufactured, which was sold internationally as well as nationally.



Campion, Charles Howard's shepherd

Lavender: members of the Lavender family farmed at Manor (William), Grove (Joseph) and Clay (John) farms. Lavender Lodge was the farmhouse for Clay Farm. The Lavenders were descended from Huguenot refugees who fled France to escape persecution in the late 17th into the 18th centuries.

Whitworth: Robert Whitworth of Church Farm was a judge during the Great War at the women on the land demonstrations and competitions by women in agricultural operations, taking place at Biddenham on 8 June 1916 on the Grove farmstead and in a field off the Bedford road.

Chibnall: Anthony Chibnall of Grove Farm where in 1900 he had 100 cows, some sheep and some pigs.

Manning: the Mannings owned Green Farm and I think own/owned the land to be developed as Saxon Park. John and William farmed there and a Mr Manning, I assume part of the same family, farmed at Honey Hill.

Trades in the village supporting the farmers and farming

Wheelwright

Blacksmith

Carpenter

Names associated with these trades, their work places no longer standing, include;

Hebbes: Alfred Hebbes was the village wheelwright and carpenter for some 50 years, late 19th into the 20th century, living and working in Duck End Lane. He was also parish clerk and school caretaker. His daughter Florence was the infant teacher at the village school, and his son-in-law Albert Seale succeeded him on his retirement.

Davison: William (Bill) Davison was the village blacksmith for some 45 years, late 19th into the 20th century, the smithy and forge being by what is now 63 Main Road. In addition as cycling became a mode of transport he made bicycles under the 'Cable' brand name.

Conclusion

I hope this paper may inform and help the decision making process as and when road names are being considered: **your development off Gold Lane is the last substantial opportunity to remember and celebrate Biddenham's agricultural and farming heritage over the most extensive period, stretching over many centuries, of its existence as a settlement.** Thank you.

Peter Applewhite
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