



Local History Collection

1 - The History of Braywood - 28.10.2010

Written in 1950 by unknown member of Braywood Women's Institute
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In the strict sense of the word, Braywood is not a village at all. It consists of two main parts, Fifield and Oakley Green, with Forest Green and Hans Hill making up the outlying parts of the parish. The church and the school are known respectively as Braywood Church and Braywood School, but there is no Braywood village. How then did this strange state of affairs come about?

The answer is that Braywood is a very new parish, having been taken from Bray parish in the year 1871 and created a parish of its own. Unlike so many Berkshire villages, it has no long tradition of village life, deep rooted from the days of the land loving Saxons, though doubtless many of the Saxon rovers sailed their boats up the Thames and settled on these flat, fertile fields by the riverside.

The early history of Braywood is to be found in the records of Bray parish, of which it formed a part less than a hundred years ago. The first authentic mention of Braywood probably occurs in the Domesday Book, containing enough oaks and beeches to feed 60 pigs on acorns and beech mash all the year, probably covered a big part of what is now the parish of Braywood.

A survey of the Manor of Bray dated 1608 includes those commons, a common near Water Oakley, East Oakley Green and Fifield Green. There are no more commons now but there is quite a group of cottages at Water Oakley, and both Oakley Green and Fifield have become sizable hamlets.

When Charles 1st was beheaded, the manor of Bray was offered for sale by Parliament as having belonged to the late King. It was then stated that there were within the manor divers commons, and this time in addition to the commons already mentioned, New Lodge was mentioned as a 'plain lying between Bray Wood and Bray Nayts'. New Lodge figures largely in the subsequent history of the village, indeed but for New Lodge and its original owners, we should probably still be a part of Bray.

At this time it was stated that the beadle of the manor of Bray had the right to take four loads of wood yearly from Bay woods for executing his office. It had taken Braywood nearly 600 years to graduate from being mentioned as a means of sustenance for 60 pigs to gain fame for supplying the beadle of Bray with some of his fuel!

Fifield can lay claim to having some share in the beauties of Bray Church, for in 1647 it is recorded in the church's Arden's book that Mr Winch of Fifield was paid £1.12s.3d for the new 'phaunt'. This seems enough for the 'phaunt' but the same item records that Waul the joiner was paid the sum of 6d for carrying the font home to his house.

There is an interesting legend concerning Hawthorn Hill which lies just on the edge of the parish. A certain inhabitant of the place, which was supposed to derive its name from a venerable hawthorn tree, had a dream telling him to go to London Bridge, where he would

hear something to his advantage. As the dream was reported three times, he decided to go. On the bridge he met a stranger who told him that he too had a dream which told him to go to a place called Hawthorn and dig beneath an ancient hawthorn tree, where he would find a pot of gold. The worthy inhabitant returned to his native heath with all speed, dug beneath the hawthorn tree, and found a pot of gold. The Latin inscription on the pot was found to read:

'Beneath the place where this pot stood. There is another twice as good'

The second search revealed the other pot and the lucky finder was wealthy beyond all his dreams.

Notable houses in the parish include Fifield House, Down Place, Oakley Court, New Lodge, and Foly-John Park. Of these Fifield House was a manor farm thought to have been at one time in the possession of the Norres Family. William Norres of Fifield House was keeper of Foly-John Park, and his son, Sir John Norres of Fifield was knighted by Queen Elizabeth in 1601 at Reading. It may have been on this very journey to Reading that the imperious Queen Elizabeth dined at Foly-John, and the church at Bray was fined for lack of loyalty because they did not ring the church bells to mark the occasion. The present Fifield House is probably not built on the site of the original one. Down Place is noted for the number of Roman coins which were found in the grounds, and has been called Down Place for centuries.

Oakley Court was erected in 1859; the ground was formally by known as Water Oakley Wharf. In the year 1333, Reginald Beler, the tithing man of Water Oakley collected eight shillings in boat tolls, 6d, from each of the sixteen boats which passed up river in the course of the year. Though toll was a heavy one for those days, when a good pig could be bought for a shilling, if the present owner of Oakley Court could collect 6d. for every boat that passed in a year he would make considerably more than eight shillings.

It's worth mentioning that thought the bridge just beyond Oakley Court, known as Bullock's Hatch Bridge, derives its name from a small estate owned by the Bullock Family, who lived there as long ago as 1292.

Two nearby houses known as Bishops farm and Windors, probably derived their names from two later owners of Bullocks Hatch. In 1696 John Pouncy sold Bullocks to George Bishop, who in 1673 sold it to John Windor.

Folly John of Foly-John Park as it is now called, was the residence during the war of King of Norway. The tall king, sitting so uprightly in the back of his big black car became a familiar sight as he drove by on his way to London almost every day. With our own Royal Family frequently at Windsor and the Dutch Queen living not far from Maidenhead, this was a Royal neighbourhood indeed during the war years.

And so to New Lodge, for so many years the ruling house in village affairs. New Lodge was built by Sylvian Van de Weyer, a great friend of Queen Victoria. Sylvian Van De Woyer was the first ambassador of the newly created land of Belgium formed of the southern half of the Netherlands which in 1832 rebelled against the Dutch. The new king was Leopold, Uncle of Queen Victoria. New Lodge was built on a site known as Hounds Lodge, which was once the home of Lord Raleigh. This first house was the place where a tinker, who met King James I in the forest, and not recognising him, offered him a drink of beer and said he was

hoping to see the King, who was that day hunting in the forest. The King took a liking to the tinker, and after a long talk created him a knight with £500 a year.

The present house is a beautiful model of an English mansion of the sixteenth century, and looks out over a fine park. It passed out of the ownership of the Van De Weyer family during the 1914-1918 war, and after in turn becoming a privately owned clinic, and then the home of the Czech Trust authorities, is now a boys home belonging to Dr. Banardo's. The records of the beginning of Belgium as a separate country were kept at New Lodge. After Sylvian De Weyer's death, they were placed in a fireproof, waterproof strong room and were not to be touched for fifty years. Queen Victoria wanted to put them in the Round tower at Windsor but Madame Van De Weyer wished them to remain at New Lodge.

When the strong-room was opened, no papers remained. The strong-room was a converted still room, with a sink and a tap, and throughout the long years the papers had been sealed up with a slowly dripping tap. Nothing remained of the records of Belgium's birth as a separate country.

After the death of Sylvian Van De Weyer, his wife built the present church dedicated to the memory of her father, Joshua Bates. The church was erected in 1867, not far from New Lodge, on the hill known as Sparbury or Sparboro'. The new church largely took place of the school chapel, which has been used previously. The school, and the chapel which adjoins it, were built in 1857 and services in the chapel were conducted by the Vicar of Bray or his curate.

After the church was built it was decided to make Braywood a separate parish, and in August 1871, while the court was at Balmoral, the Queen Victoria gave her royal assent to this. The church and vicarage stand in a fine position overlooking the village, the church is not easily reached on dark evenings or wet days. A footpath across the fields makes a pleasant walk in good weather, but the journey round the road is a long one.

Sparboro, across which at some time the Roman legions marched, has kept a measure of fame throughout the years – not because of because of its Roman road, but because of its blackberry bushes, and people came from miles around to gather the most abundant berries in the autumn. It was a lovely spot, almost prodigal in its generosity to those who visited it. Here could be found sloes for wine when there was sugar to spare for making wine, crab apples for jolly, more blackberries that could possibly be gathered, and on misty September mornings big fresh mushrooms for those who knew where to look! There were Tinsels for winter decoration slender sprays of scarlet and orange spindle berries, and branches of rosy crab-apple blossom in spring.

It was a wonderful place for birds, and in spring the nests of all well known birds could be found. Moorhens nested in the pond at the bottom of the hill, barn owls in the great hollow oak, the roofed nest of magpie could be seen in the high hedges and blackbirds, thrushes, wrens, chaffinches, bullfinches and many others in the hedges and bushes. Here one could see any number of great spotted woodpeckers and in the spring nightingales sang from the willow copse near the pond. In the winter great flocks of field faros flow chattering among the hawthorns. Scattering the hard white seed of the haws when they had eaten what they had wanted.

Now in the spring of 1950, bulldozers have uprooted bushes, the trees have been cut. The Sparboro' stand bare and desolate, waiting to be ploughed and sown with corn. The corn

will probably be more useful but there will be plenty of regrets for the wild beauty of the field the people have known for so long. Will the nightingales recognise their own home with the willows gone and will the field fares find enough berries on the few hedges left untrimmed?

The village grows as the years pass. Since the war, new council houses, bungalows for old people, and several cottages for agricultural workers have been built.

The Memorial hall, built as a memorial to the men of war who gave their lives in the 1914-1918 war, is the special centre of the village. Here are held whilst drives, socials, wedding receptions, W.I Meetings and the various activities which form part of village life.

Braywood, the great wood from which the village took its name, is no more. Its trees were numbered and sold by auction in 1817. But the parish of Braywood continues to grow. Not yet a hundred years old, which is young compared to many of the ancient villages of our island, it has a lot still to do in the building up of a really vigorous and thriving social life. Towards this end, our Women's Institute has proved a great help and we look to it to be an even greater help in the future.