

## 4 History of the Village

### 4.1 Comberton Time Line

4000BC -2352 BC Neolithic	2350 BC – 701 BC Bronze	43 AD -409 AD Roman	1066 AD – 1539 AD Medieval	1540 AD – 1900 AD Post Medieval
<i>A Neolithic polished stone axe found to the south of the village</i>	<i>A tumulus – and round barrow to the North of the parish</i>	<i>Roman Villa and pottery, bones and jewellery found</i>	<i>Ancient stone cross once stood at the crossroads</i>	<i>Coprolite Mining takes place in Comberton</i>

Comberton parish covers 1,954 acres. At the Madingley boundary Comberton is 200 feet above sea level, but by the time we reach the brook we are barely 50 feet above!

A lot is said about the name of the village and its origins. It is believed that the name is of Celtic origin, possibly named after a landowner by the name of Cumbra. The Domesday Book (1086) has it recorded as Cumbertone. According to William Kip's map of the area in 1607 Comberton is spelt as it is today and interestingly Barton is spelt Berton.

1



Early archaeological finds date from 4000 BC – 2352 BC -a Neolithic polished stone axe found to the south of the village. There was evidence a Bronze Age round barrow to the north of the parish. By the time the Romans had arrived (43 AD -409 AD) the claylands of Cambridgeshire remained predominately forested except for major incursions at

Comberton and Barton. Granta Valley was cleared of forest to make way for settlements at Linton, Bartlow and Horseheath. Villas existed at Ickleton, Swaffham Prior, Bartlow, Comberton, Landwade (nr Newmarket), Girton, Litlington and Horningsea.

The Roman villa was just east of Fox's Bridge; this was discovered in February 1842 by workmen digging gravel on the low ground between Comberton Church and Bourn Brook. The walls were of Ketton stone. The area was filled with roman tiles and plaster. In October 1842 a hexagonal room was discovered along many fragments of glass, Samian pottery (characteristically rich reddy-brown) and painted plaster. The room was later destroyed. During the excavation many human bones were found in good preservation, as well as an abundance of ash and charcoal. There were also remains of a Roman bath block. Some of the finds can be seen at the Archaeological department at Cambridgeshire County Council.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Early example of Samian pottery <sup>2</sup> Medieval trading tokens



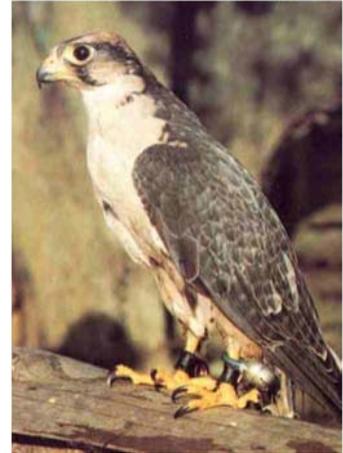
The Romans also used the track, which runs on the ridge from Barton passing Comberton church on its way to Ermine Street at Caxton, Millhill Way to the west and the Great and Little Hodge Way to Barton.

By the Norman Conquest (1066), Comberton was a Manor belonging to the Crown, with nine freemen.

## 4.2 The Manors of the village

3

After the Norman Conquest, the village was divided into separate manors. The largest, in Green End, remaining part of the Royal estates until 1177, when Henry II gave it to Esveillard de Seissum in return for keeping the royal falcons and a retriever. He held it until 1195. Nicholas Mucenbote occupied it from 1196 until 1200. In 1200 King John granted it to John Merk. He was to keep two lanner falcons and one retriever, trained to catch herons from Michaelmas (September 29<sup>th</sup>) to Candlemas (February 2<sup>nd</sup>) at the Kings costs.



The Merk's held it until 1364, when it passed to Sir Henry Green, Chief Justice of the King's Bench, after whom the manor became known. His son Henry was beheaded in 1399 and the lands forfeited to the Crown, as he was found to be one of Richard II's evil counsellors. Henry IV restored the manor to Ralph Green, the eldest son and the manor stayed in the family until 1505 when it was divided between three surviving sisters. Each share then passed through various owners until the middle of the nineteenth century, when it was again re-united. Of this Manor only the moat remains, opposite the doctor's surgery.

The second manor (Berdlines, also known as Birdlines, Birdling and <sup>4</sup>Burdelins) was granted to Picot, the Sheriff of Bourn Castle. After his death it passed to his son Robert, who was accused of plotting against Henry I and had to flee the country. The lands were confiscated and later granted to Pain Peverel. (The distinguished Norman knight who acted as Robert's standard-bearer on the First Crusade, and who upon his return was granted a barony in England by Henry I, and became patron of Barnwell priory.)

By 1300 the Manor was held by the Burdeley's family until passing by marriage to the Chamber's of Epping. In 1514 Burdeley's manor was sold to

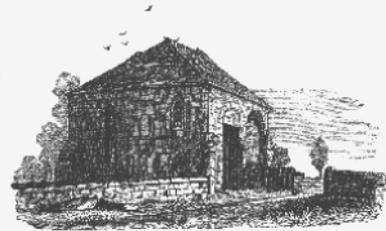
<sup>3</sup>Lanner falcon <sup>4</sup>Henry II

the Bishop of Winchester, who included it in the endowment of the Savoy Hospital in London. Birdlines Manor became part of the Savoy Hospital estates, granted in 1553 in King Edward VI's charter (originally to the City of London and later earmarked by the City for the support of St. Thomas').

The lands were granted to St. Thomas' Hospital, and the Governors became the titular Lords of the Manor. According to the London Encyclopaedia, ed. Weinreb/Hibbert (ref 67.2 WEI), in 1974 the Board of Governors was abolished by Act of Parliament and the hospital is now run by the South East Thames Regional Health Authority.

5

The third and smallest manor was given to Erchenger, the baker, who had to provide a hot simnel loaf to the King each morning in return. It became known as Heved's after Robert Head of Hardwick, a later owner. By 1250 the lands passed to Barnwell Priory of Cambridge, who added them to their other



holdings to form the Rectory Manor. Lepers from the King's court, who recovered at Barnwell Priory, were given the right to dwell in Comberton. At the Dissolution it was claimed by the Crown and finally granted to the Bishops of Ely, who held it until 1964.

### 4.3 Village Churches

There has been a church on the site for at least 800 years and probably longer as it was customary consecrate land and build on the site of former places of worship. The church of St. Mary is constructed mostly of freestone and field stones (the



same type of stones used for the Causeway) in the Early English and later styles. Nothing survives from before the 13<sup>th</sup> Century when the chancel, nave and south aisle were built.

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The rood stairs and doorway remain and there is an octagonal Early English font. As glass was rare in

the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the windows in the church were probably unglazed. The tower was added in the fourteenth century, and as well as housing the bells, it would have also been used a form of defence. The rood screen was added in the fifteenth century. Their main purpose was to separate the chancel from the nave, a way of separating the mundane from the holy, as the nave was also used for a variety of other events, such as business meetings, dances and public gatherings. By this time the church building would have been stunningly beautiful, every window filled with stained glass. The villagers had worked hard and given selflessly. However

<sup>5</sup>Barnwell Priory

<sup>6</sup>St Mary's Church

they were about to see their hard work destroyed ruthlessly. In 1643 the parliament appointed a commission to destroy everything that offended the Puritans. Therefore, William Dowsing visited the church on March 9<sup>th</sup> 1643 and this is the entry in his journal...

*'We brake downe a crucifix and 69 superstitious pictures we brake downe, and gave order to take downe 36 cherubims, and the steps to be taken down by March 25.'*

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the people of Comberton lost some of their love and pride for their church. In 1665 it is recorded that the village plough was kept in the church along with stones, lime and rubbish.

The church is recorded as being repaired in 1850 and restored in 1877-8 by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners and was again restored in 1884-5. Further restoration and renovation has taken place the tower and the bells more recently.

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There is evidence of non-conformist worship within the village. In 1851 they were meeting in a stable. In fact at one time there were two meeting places, one barn in West Street and another in Barton Road (this one being demolished some time between 1960-70).



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The Union Nonconformist (Baptist) chapel was erected in 1868 on a site given by G. E. Foster esq. (Of Foster's Bank, Sidney Street, Cambridge, Foster also worked with Eaden Lilley and Robert



Sayle in 1840 to buy and hold in trust land for the YMCA). The union chapel was built with the aim of bringing together 'the dissenters'.

The non-conformists often had full services and enjoyed community events, such as picnics in the orchard behind Old Farm and magic lantern shows.

7 Font in St Mary's Church 8  
Baptist Chapel Green End

#### 4.4 The Village Green

An ancient stone cross once stood on the village green (1066 AD – 1539 AD) hence the name Cross Farm at the Cross Roads.

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On the green there was a turf maze which, when the National School was built in 1846, was in front of the main entrance and therefore became very worn down. In 1908 it was re-cut in the southwest corner of the playground, but when the school was extended in 1926 it was again in the way and was covered over to form the playground. The Maze or Mazles was circular 50ft across. The patterns separated with shingle, which the villagers renewed every 3 years. There was a trust deed that required that it was preserved, but, because of its close proximity to the school, it soon became trampled down, eventually being covered with tarmac! There is a similar maze at Hilton near Fenstanton, which is known to have been cut in 1600 to mark the restoration of the Monarchy and it is believed that the inspiration for the maze at Hilton came from Comberton as his brother-in-law Barron Britton lived here.

The village pond (originally referred to as the Horse pond for obvious reasons) was resurrected in 1953 as a Coronation Memorial. It was again restored in 1972 and again in 1996.

The Village sign was erected in 1978 to mark the Queen's Silver Jubilee (1977). This 2 sided sign depicts our village history. The herrings were traditionally given to the poor just before Easter. These were bought with income from the Herringfield Charity. The Mill on the other side depicts our relationship with agriculture; Comberton originally had 2 mills, one belonging to Merk's/Green's Manor and one to Burdeley's. The mill on 'Merk's/Green's' land was converted to steam in 1900 by Robert and William Beldam.

<sup>9</sup> Turfmaze

<sup>10</sup> Turf maze (diagrammatic)

#### 4.5 Roads and tracks

The earliest reference to Fox's Bridge (on the Royston Lane) is 1567, where it is named as Fox Holes Bridge.

By the sixteenth century the road from Cambridge was becoming increasingly important, and early seventeenth century road books show it as the main Cambridge to Oxford route. Its use did not decline until 1772 when the present A428 (St Neot's Road) was turnpiked, making a more direct route for through traffic.

#### 4.6 Coprolite mining in Comberton

What is a coprolite?

*Copro* means "dung" (from the Greek word *kopros*). The ending "-lite" is a common ending for fossil or mineral terms, coming from the Greek word *lithos*, which means *stone*. The term coprolite was coined around 1830.

A miller named John Ball, of Burwell was one of the first people in the area to discover the importance of Coprolite. (He may have discovered that his turnips and veggies were growing with extraordinary liveliness and decided to dig up the soil to see what was underneath...we will never know what really happened.) But what is certain is that in 1851 he discovered the hard rounded fossils which were only a few feet below ground. He dug out a quantity and according to a fenland doctor, washed the clay off them and ground them to a powder in his windmill. He then treated the powder with an acid to make a fertiliser. Coprolites were found in Comberton in considerable abundance, lying near the surface of the soil. Two medieval earthworks just east of Comberton village were systematically destroyed in the coprolite diggings. The first was on Jaggard's Farm, just south of Bin Brook, where the work took place in 1864. The second was in the field northeast of the crossroads where the work had spread to between 1868 and 1878. The old saying of '*where there's muck, there's brass*' was certainly true for the folk of Comberton that were involved with the mining. But their source of wealth was short lived.

#### 4.7 Field patterns in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century

Comberton consisted of 4 fields.

- The West Field - Land to the west of the village including Birdlines Manor and the midsummer pasture
- The North Field - Land from St Neots Road to North Brook
- The Stallow (Stallan) Field - Land from the road to Cambridge to Bourn Brook including Midsummer Ground and Clay Pit Hill in the NE
- The Harborough Field - Land from Barton Road to North Brook

At the time of the Enclosure Act all the land in these fields was reallocated in blocks so that the farmers had all their property together. In doing this many of the old roads and paths became unnecessary and they were closed and new ones created. By the Act, Lammings Lane, which ran through the Vicarage meadow was closed.

In September 1850 a fire destroyed a large Tithe Barn at Rectory Manor (Farm) home of William Bonnet; approx £1500 property was destroyed. This fire was described as an act of incendiary and there is some evidence that the fire reached the North door of the church.

Rectory Farm also was the home of the brewery and one can only suppose that this was in place at the time when the manor was occupied by the monks of Barnwell Priory.

#### 4.8 Village occupations and population trends

In 1851, the village had a population of 548 and there was a shoemaker, butcher, baker, bricklayer, harness maker. But by 1916, the population had fallen to around 440. However, Comberton employed a boot repairer, carpenter, cow-keeper, butcher, cattle dealer, 4 publicans, 2 carriers, grocer, post mistress, beer retailer, sadler, miller, tailor, dressmaker, draper, blacksmith and a mineral water retailer.

There is no record of a district nurse in the village until the arrival of Ruby Crisp, who moved to Comberton in 1926. Ruby lodged at Old Farm in Green End until she married Percy Prior (9th June 1934 - St Mary's Church, Comberton). After her wedding Ruby moved to Woottens Farm (36 Barton Road) and continued to work as the district nurse and midwife. In 1937 Ethel Missen (who trained with Ruby Crisp in London) arrived in the village. Ethel lodged and worked with Ruby until she was established. There is no record of a Doctor until 1961.

Modes of transport were rapidly changing and the village was moving with the times. In 1929 Charter Brothers were trading as Cycle agents and the village had a cycle maker, Mr Brown, at the old Malthouse, now a garage at the crossroads. Pop 514



1937, the multi talented Parish Clerk, Mr Warboys was also a builder and the village undertaker. Between the first and second world wars there was a need for further housing, resulting in the local authority housing on Barton Road.

By 1961, there had been further development with the creation of Bush Close and further development along Barton Road, The population reflects this, as it had risen to 812.

Defined as a centre for rural growth, the village grew rapidly in the late 1960's with the creation of the estate around Harbour Avenue, often referred by

<sup>11</sup> Old Post Office South Street

locals as The Janes Estate, after the builders. Following this, the population rose to 1,650.

Further development in the mid seventies, which according to planners would spread out the development of the village, again this increased the population to 2,400.

<sup>12</sup>



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<sup>12</sup>National School Comberton <sup>13</sup>  
The Causeway



14

14 Barton Road

