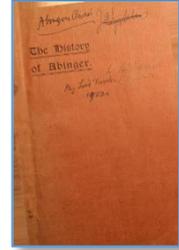


The History of Abinger

By Thomas Cecil Lord Farrer (1859-1940) – from a talk to the Abinger WI, reprinted from Abinger Parish Magazine of 1922



“Happy the people whose annals are tiresome”



WHEN the great French philosopher Montesquieu wrote these words I think we may safely say he was not thinking of Abinger Parish. And yet wars, rebellions and troubles make up so much of written history that there is great truth in the statement.

We who are old enough to remember our peaceful life here before Europe was drenched in seas of blood, may turn this afternoon with pleasure to our own homes, so as to try to trace a little bit of our history, and see what records we have of the sort of people who lived here in the past.

In the first place, can we give any explanation of the shape of the area which forms our Civil Parish of Abinger, one only of the 10,000 parishes in England and Wales! It is a long distance from the northern end of the Sheepwalk at Honeysuckle Bottom to Rowhook on the southern end—nearly nine miles, if I remember right, of hilly land with a great variety of soil, beginning with London clay, going on to chalk, then rough hills of sand, and lastly the heavy clay of the Weald or Wild of Sussex. At the same time the Parish is very narrow in parts, and nowhere I think more than a mile across.

Over all this area our worthy neighbours, the four Overseers appointed through the Magistrates, have sway, and each year have to inform the Central Government of any changes which alter the value of any property in this district so that the appropriate taxes may not fail to be collected.

Well, I fear that the exact reason for the shape of our Parish is not very certain.

I will do the best I can to answer the question, asking you always to recollect the wise words of our neighbour, Sir William Temple, of Moor Park, Farnham, some 200 years ago:—“No man can write of that which passed before he was born: he must take his notions from some evidence or from some authority and he who conceals from those whom he teaches the ground of his own belief may be suspected of caring more for his own views than for the truth of the matter.”

The best authorities are very uncertain on the origin of the Parish. One thing we know, that it depended broadly upon the Church, and when Christianity came to these islands 1300 years ago, the Parish and the Parson or chief person of the Parish were introduced.

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From that time onward, the Parish has been the unit or foundation upon which all English administrative Government has been built, and it is still, in my view, the best foundation for liberty, because good administration begins with individuals.

I will return to administration afterwards, but I want to ask you now to try to form some idea of what our Parish was like two thousand years ago, when our first written knowledge begins. I think there is no doubt at all that most of it was covered with wood and scrub in which wild beasts roamed, with clearings here and there where industrious people had begun cultivation. Of course good water is the first necessary, and so the first inhabitants put their houses near the great springs. Paddington—the town or dwelling of the Paddings — has a splendid spring; we also find a stream in Townhurst Wood and Woodton or Wotton, and our stream is called the Tillingbourne — or stream of the Tillings. The name Abinger itself is probably a corruption of Abingworth as we find it in the old charters, and "worth" means a hedge or warded settlement.

But before these Saxons came and gave their names to our farms, the Romans had settled here. Close to Crossways Farm the plough struck on some bricks about fifty years ago, and I recollect the interest of digging up and tracing out the plan of the Roman Villa and the excitement of finding necklaces and jars (which you may see any day in the Guildford Museum) and coins for about 400 years. Evidently the house had been burned down, as we found charred walls about four feet high. Since then I have discovered the channel which took the water from a beautiful spring near Wotton to the Villa — the Romans were as particular about having good water as the Saxons later on were about having good beer — and indeed our whole valley is full of Roman remains. Recollect the Romans were in England for 400 years. I much expect that *they* began the mills Abinger and Paddington — but there is no evidence.

It may help you perhaps a little, as it has helped me, in picturing the length of time which we have to consider, to recollect that the average generation of mankind is almost exactly thirty-three years. So from the Roman occupation to 1921 there are sixty generations; from the Norman conquest just twenty-six generations. Twenty-six generations does not sound much. And yet a good test of how quickly we forget is to ask yourself whether you can write down the Christian names and surnames of your four great-grandfathers and four great-grandmothers. And that is only ninety-nine years ago.

So written history going back twenty times as long as this, which is when the Romans were here, does really give us a good deal of information, though of course not in detail as regards our parish. I doubt if we can with certainty say there is a single name in our two Parishes of Abinger and Wotton that is of Roman origin except the three streets, Pitland Street, Friday Street and the Stane Street, since the word Street is certainly Roman and means pavement.

Well, next to water, people needed in those days in a forest country a place of wide outlook, so as to guard themselves from attack. This you will find I think in the mound close to the Church and Abinger Manor Farm¹, from which point a highway runs in the one direction almost direct to St. Martha's Chapel — another outlook point — and in the other to Wotton. I think in all human probability

¹ Now, Abinger Manor (2023)

the mound at Abinger Church was the old place of religious worship, and when Christianity came to these islands the new religion built their place of worship quite close to the old. But the Church would demand a paper in itself and I am trying to confine myself to geography and administration.

What I desire to emphasize is this, that in all probability our parish began in the very valley where we now are and spread up north and south into the wild wastes and that is the reason for its curious shape. This view is confirmed after all this long preamble by the first record which we possess in written documents. That is of course the great survey made by William the Norman when he came here in 1066 known to us as Domesday Book, and preserved at the Record Office in London. From this written record we learn that nine hundred years ago there was in our parish our Church and the two water-mills as we know them, mills which ground flour. Even up to my boyhood, there were the manors with probably the same boundaries as to-day, and there was a Hall and farmers and others cultivating the few hundred acres of land.

But what is not said is often as important as what is said. Outside this little belt of cultivated land along the Tillingbourne, and possibly round the Church, there stretched certainly to the south and probably to the north as far as Honeysuckle Bottom and Green Dene huge tracts of forest and heath which the Domesday Book speaks of as producing swine — the wild boars of our childhood's stories. Now we know that the great forest of Anderida stretched over the Sussex weald and reached right up to our hills. Forest Green was a clearing in the wood, but no mention is made in Domesday of a second Church. I imagine there was no Church until you reached Rudgwick or Slinfold which are over the border of the Sussex kingdom. All was probably deep mirey clay and thorn scrub, much as you see it to-day.

Indeed we know that Oakwood Chapel was not built until 1290², when several good men, being ashamed of the ignorance and hardships of the poor woodcutters, and seeing that they had to go so far to their Parish Church, built and endowed a Church for them, just as five centuries later other good men built a Chapel at Felday because the poor people there were so far from Shere and Abinger Churches. For you must always recollect that in these early days the Church was the only centre of learning or books. Even our Kings *sealed* their documents and probably no English King before Henry I could write his name. A cleric or clerk was a man who could write, and a slow process it was. Even the King's Exchequer was kept by tallies or bits of wood, and up to my boyhood, and perhaps even now, the alehouse keeper — and recollect everyone drank beer — always talked of his "score" — the score being the mark he made in a tally or piece of wood with a knife.

I fancy too the Church was the only building large enough for meetings of the inhabitants and was used for this purpose, at any rate it was used for public purposes such as the Relief of the Poor and Highway meetings until almost within living memory.

Nor do we recollect how short a time ago it is since any other school was provided in rural districts. John Evelyn, as we all know, received his rudiments in the church porch at Wotton, but I have no record of similar teaching at Abinger in earlier days than about the year 1854 when the late Mr. King

² [1220 according to others](#)

told me that Mr. Powell, the Rector³, was so much impressed with the need of education that he lent some stalls in his farm stable at the Rectory, which was the first Abinger school. Sometimes too I believe the children were taught in the north aisle of our Parish Church, and I think there were Sunday Schools attached to the Congregational Chapel at Fe1day long before these days. I am quite ignorant of what happened in the south end of the parish until the late Mr. Evelyn built Wallis Wood schools, but I fancy that Oakwood Chapel was always used as a school. A great many more people could both read and write 400 years ago than is generally believed. But the real knowledge as regards our own parish could only be ascertained by a very laborious examination of the wills of people, and seeing how many witnesses wrote their names and how many only made their marks.

I have mentioned Relief of the Poor as taking place in the Church. I wonder how many of us realise what this means, and how old the Act of Parliament is which our Overseers still have to administer at Dorking.

In country places at any rate I think it is the great mark of change which separated the barbarous middle ages from our own times. For from 1601, the date of this Act, it was settled in England that no person need starve. Harsh and cruel as we think some of the provisions of the Act, it was a great advance in charity. The Act dictates "that the Overseers are to meet monthly in the Church of the parish, upon the Sunday in the afternoon after Divine Service, to consider of some good course to be taken and of some meete order to be set downe, and they are to raise weekly or otherwise, by taxation of every inhabitant, parson, vicar, or other . . . in the said parish in such competent sum or sums of money as they shall think fytt . . . towards the necessary reliefe of the lame impotent olde blinde and such other amonge them being poore and not able to work."

It is obvious that each Parish, after such an Act, must necessarily define its boundaries very carefully, since all the inhabitants become responsible for each other. And up to quite recent times this local knowledge was kept up, though I don't suppose anyone could walk round Abinger Parish in one day. The late Mr. William King had the most extraordinary knowledge in detail of every field, every farm and even of the boundaries of the Manors, which are always much more difficult, because there are seldom maps of Manors, and the Lord of the Manor and Copyholders did not always agree as to what was and what was not waste.

There is one very interesting house in our Parish — Hedgecocks — through the middle of which the Parish boundary runs. The north side of the house is in Abinger and rated to Surrey, the south side in Rudgwick and rated to Sussex. An old Dorking Relieving Officer told me a curious tale about this. He was called on to remove a lunatic to the Surrey County Asylum. When he reached the house he found that the lunatic had been moved from the north side of the house to the south and so was no longer in Surrey but in Sussex. Off posted my Relieving Officer to Horsham and told the Sussex Relieving Officer to take his patient to Horsham, as he had no power to take a man in Sussex to Brookwood. Much disgusted, the Sussex officer had to come to do so, and as the patient lived twenty-four years afterwards, and cost about £100 a year, you will see that a knowledge of boundaries may be a useful thing.

³ Rector 1850-1877, d. 1881

Parish boundaries are certainly very curious. All along this Surrey and Sussex border, from Rudgwick Church to Horley, runs a bridle road, generally marking the division between the counties. Nobody has explained this. Was it an old military road or "March"? Anyway in the spring, in primrose time, it is one of the most lovely flower walks that I know, and if it was in Italy we should rave about it. Being only at home, no one goes to see it except a few enthusiasts like myself for the first spring flowers.

Then we have the great Roman Road, the Stane or Stone Street, bounding our Parish for a bit — shewing, I think, that parishes were formed later than Roman times. This was a road made by the Romans from Chichester to London right through the Weald, splendidly engineered and floated on willow boughs in the deep clay of the Weald. It is not very easy to trace now, but just before the war Mr. Lee Steere and I walked it from Rowhook to Ruckmans, because we were afraid someone was trying to close it, but there it is still open as a footway, though I do not advise anyone to try it on a sticky day. But there is another mystery which no one has ever solved. Why was this splendid road, the Stane Street, unused and unknown from about 550 A.D., when the Romans left England, to about 1745? It certainly could not have been used, because that 1745 Act contains the words "Whereas the inhabitants of Horsham in the winter cannot get to London owing to the deep mire without going round by East Grinstead, be it enacted that the new road be made to Dorking."

What happened to the road all these centuries? Why was it forgotten? There it is, still as good as ever to-day, after you pass Furnace Wood and get into Sussex, and I have seen it cut across in a section at Ockley, and it was nearly seven feet deep in good hard material.

There is one other road in our Parish which I ought to mention — that is the one from Rowhook to Ewhurst and St. Martha's. A year or two ago, near Baynards, I saw, after a storm of rain, the very evident marks of the abutments of a bridge across the stream, and the raised embankment of the road is very clear. The road led no doubt past the Roman Temple on Farley Heath, whence the Roman pillars in Albury old Church also came.

As regards our northern Parish boundary it is very mysterious. I believe in all the thousand acres and more of our Parish north of the Downs there is only one house, Sheepwalk Cottage, a lonely enough spot, and more lonely than in past days, for old Mr. Mark King, of Paddington Farm, told me that this bridle track near Crocknorth or Hill Farm used to be the main road for driving beasts to Kingston Market from Sussex and Surrey. The London butchers came as far as Kingston and met their country customers there. Certainly, even in my boyhood, vast flocks used to travel the Drove Road, but that was east and west, autumn and spring, when the Kent sheep from Romney Marsh used to go and return to the Surrey Commons, because the Kent grass was too coarse in the winter.

We can more certainly trace the Pilgrim's Road east and west through our parish.

There runs a road by Merrow Down
A grassy track to-day it is—
An hour out of Guildford town
Above the River Wey it is.

Here where they heard the horsebells ring
The ancient Britons dressed and rode
To watch the dark Phoenicians bring
Their goods along the western road,

So says Rudyard Kipling, and doubtless this east and west track is as old as any human habitation of England. Even to-day, little though most people realise it, our Dorking—Guildford road is the only east and west road south of London. I have no doubt that in early days it followed no very certain route, but in summer people went along the Downs, and in winter kept along the drier sandy tracks and from village to village. When the pilgrimages to Canterbury began, the Pilgrims landing at Southampton made their way through Winchester and Guildford to Canterbury, and the route became marked with chapels such as St. Martha's, a corruption of St Martyr's or the Holy Martyr, Chantry Bridge at Shere. In or close to our Parish there were two Lazars or Lazars' Barns, the lazar being a pilgrim or beggar. One is now pulled down near Gomshall Station, the other adjoins the Bishop's Cross on Evershed's Rough⁴. They mark the line of route from Shere Church to Wotton Church, which crossed the Tillingbourne at a gravel patch where now Coe's cottages are built, and came up past High Hackhurst, no doubt to avoid the low route in wet weather. Recollect that until 200 years ago there were no hard roads in our Parish, and all these lanes were pack tracks, one not much better than another, and as all the farmers rode on horses, the ways were generally tracks from one farm to another or to the Church.

I recollect old Mr. Bray telling me, as a boy, that he remembered twelve gates across the road from Shere to Dorking. They were, of course, common gates, put up by the Manor Court to keep animals from straying. I wonder what motorists to-day would say if we were to assert our rights and put up gates at Abinger Hammer! And yet old Mr. King told me he recollected gates where the yard of the Abinger Arms now is; people went through the farmyard there to avoid the Marsh, and gradually it became a highway. I recollect the forge at the corner, now occupied by the Clock House, and the old miller's house near the Forge Hole. Both were so dilapidated that my father had to remove them.

The forge raises a very interesting question. When did it start? We know it ended in 1792, because the rate books show no further rate collected after that date. Probably the date is 1557, and in Elizabeth's reign all the iron was needed for cannon that could be got together. The pond must have been a large and fine sheet of water, and the thickness of the wall cut through to let the stream out shows how strongly it had to be built. I am glad the Parish have bought the land up to the old Forge so that we may keep the picturesque old mill dam always open to the public as long as its stones last. Notice that they are evidently hard chalk stone out of which so much beautiful building material could be made if we had not lost our quarries; there are fine chalk chimney pieces at Towerhill Manor, at the Hatch Farm, and even at Crossways.

Before we leave the question of boundaries, I should like to point out a curious and interesting thing that very few people know. It is that the western boundary of our Parish at Abinger Hammer marks for some nine miles the boundary of what were the separate kingdoms of Wessex and Kent. It is still the Parliamentary division line, the Postal, the Rural District Council, Guardians, Church, the Police, the Magistrates, the Coroners, and several others. I do not, however, advise you to commit a crime and then escape over the border, because the Police, the Magistrate, and the Coroner have jurisdiction in adjacent districts. Even in old days there were some links between the two kingdoms; for example, the old semaphore telegraph which used to flash the message from Whitehall to Portsmouth by wooden

⁴ Now Abinger Roughts

arms. One of the stations was on Hackhurst Downs, just on the border of our Parish and Shere, where among the gorse and foxgloves you may see the gooseberry bushes of the old telegraph man's garden growing wild, and a few apple trees. I never saw any sketch of this, nor do I know in whose manor it stood, but there is still a Telegraph House on Pewley Down at Guildford, which I suppose was another station.

One other very curious fact in our Parish Boundaries remains. Alas! those of us who recollect back to the doings of 1879 are getting very few in number. In that year our Parish boundaries were revised by a Local Government Order, and pieces of Wotton, of Ockley, and other parishes were added to our Parish, which had been peppered about with curious little bits of land all round Holmbury belonging to other parishes, some even so far as Ockham. No very satisfactory explanation has ever been given of this anomaly. But you will all know that on the top of Holmbury Hill, in our parish and Shere, is a curious earth-work or camp. The most probable suggestion is that these large pieces of land, four or five acres, all round Holmbury, belonging to six or seven other parishes, were the places to which the livestock were driven in times of war or tumult, so as to obtain the protection of the military camp at the top of the Hill.

To go back to the Church. St. James to whom both Shere and Abinger Churches are dedicated, was the Patron Saint of Pilgrims. It is possible that both were so named after the canon law had ordered, in 1296, that all churches must have a Patron Saint, so as to attract pilgrims or wanderers. At any rate both churches have an old Inn close beside them and, as I have said, both have direct footroads from St. Martha's and on to the crossing of the Mole at Box Hill. The name of churches is a subject which is too difficult to enter into, and I must refer you to the Rector, who might preach an interesting sermon on the subject. Why is Ockley Church dedicated to St. Margaret? St. Margaret was only canonized or made a Saint in 1250, and she was a Scottish King's daughter. She was so canonized because she soothed and civilised the rough barbarians of Iona and the outer Scotch. I can hardly suppose that Ockley people were so rude and unlettered that the monasteries thought such a Saint appropriate for their Church. However, as I am speaking to a ladies' meeting, I should like to refer to a charming custom, many hundred years old, that may even to-day remain for all I know. At St. Margaret's, Ockley, when an unmarried maiden was buried, a white rose tree, the emblem of purity, was always planted on her grave. Then again, why was Wotton dedicated to St. John the Evangelist? Even the wonderful carvings round the door, covered up by plaster from John's reign for more than 800 years, and only re-discovered in our own day, do not tell us why? There was nothing in common with King John, who may have used the church as a hunting chapel in his royal forest, and the gentle Evangelist, St. John. But do go and see these heads, carved evidently by an Italian artist, and hardly known at all. They have all been described in the Surrey Archeological Society's Magazine No. xxiv.

It is a very curious fact, as I have said, that Shere and Abinger Churches are both mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1066, but no mention is made of Wotton. The only suggestion for this omission that seems to have probability is one made by Mr. Johnstone some years ago. It is that the Church was then in ruins owing to the invasion having passed it and some great battle having been fought in the neighbourhood. As there are parts of Wotton Church that are undoubtedly older than 1066, it is probable that only part of the Church was burned, and possibly the battle was one which has left its name in the two fields close by, called Great Slaughter Field and Little Slaughter Field, and the big barrow which has never been explored in Deerleap Wood was no doubt a memorial to the dead.

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Some five years ago, close to Wotton House Farm, was found a box, evidently hastily buried beneath the surface, full of curious metal objects that are now in the British Museum, but so much decayed that it is difficult to tell their age. Possibly they were buried by some peaceful farmer when the invading hordes were known to be close by.

Well, I have spoken of a few of the innumerable things of interest which our Parish has to shew. There are hundreds of others, in and close by, and I hope I may induce some local patriot to write a really good history. Many points ought to be cleared up. What about field names? You will find them on the tithe map in the custody of Mr. Joseph Harrison. Here is an almost indefinite mine for parish history. Why are two fields called Great and Little Slaughter Field? What does the Deerleap mean? Why Park Farm and Park Rew? Why Raike's Farm? Why Pasture Wood? Why Tanhurst? Why Smokejack Farm and Slutterly Copse? What does Felday mean? I only give these as instances of innumerable objects of human interest still open.

Finally let me say I think we ought to publish the earlier Parish Registers of Abinger and Wotton in a volume to be edited by the Surrey Record Society. Through the kindness of the Rectors of Abinger and Wotton, and the admirable zeal of a lady who has now passed away, Mrs H. E. Malden, of Dorking, these earlier registers of our Parish, which begun in 1558, have been copied, and thus preserved from destruction for ever, and arranged for printing, and contain a wealth of local names and families. We shall need about £50 to £100 to finish and index the work, and of course we had to wait until the war was over. But when these are completed, there will at any rate be a groundwork for a real history of our parish for the last 400 years, and it would be a fine thing for your Society to have the credit of being the first Women's Institute to publish such a record. I make a present of the idea, with no copy-right, to your Hon. Secretary.

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