



Historical Highworth

‘Highworth has a situation corresponding with its name. On every side you go uphill to it, and from it you see to a great distance all round and into many counties.’

William Cobbett, Rural Rides, September 1826

The ancient hilltop town of Highworth, standing at 133 metres or 436 feet above sea level, has unrivalled views out over the Upper Thames valley and is the highest town in Wiltshire. Lying close to the borders of Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire, it stands at the intersection of a minor Roman road rising at Seven Bridges, near Cricklade, and the salt road running from Droitwich to Salisbury. It is closely encircled by the ancient tithings of Eastrop and Westrop.

Place Name

Highworth derives its name from the Old English *worð* (pron. worth) meaning ‘enclosure or homestead’.ⁱ The epithet High was added at some point before 1300. Eastrop and Westrop both derive from the Old English *þrop* (pron. throp) meaning ‘hamlet or outlying farm’.ⁱⁱ

Pre-History

Material remains from the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods found in and around the hilltop of Highworth indicate that the area has been extensively used and settled for well over seven thousand years.ⁱⁱⁱ

Roman

Highworth is situated within an area which saw significant occupation during the Roman period and material from this four hundred year era has been found in the surrounding vicinity. Nearby the remains of a Roman spring temple has recently been discovered at Blundson St Andrew, and there was once a villa at Stanton Fitzwarren. Ermin Street, a major Roman road, lies only four miles to the west. Corinium, now Cirencester, and second in importance to London is sixteen miles away.

Anglo Saxon

By the end of the 8th century the area had been colonised by the Anglo Saxons who established the Hundred of Worth, probably in the 10th century. A hundred was a subdivision of a county with military, judicial and administrative functions. The Hundred of Worth is likely to have been a royal hundred, with its manorial and hundredal centre based at Sevenhampton. The hill of Highworth is a prominent feature of the landscape, and was probably the ancient meeting place of the Hundred.^{iv} At that time the hundred courts of Worth would have been held about every four weeks to ensure the maintenance of local law and order through the prevention of theft and the pursuit of law breakers.^v



Church

An Anglo Saxon minster church was established in the 11th century serving the surrounding area, including its two chapelries at South Marston and Blunsdon.^{vi} An exquisite Anglo Norman tympanum, believed by some authorities to come from the Malmesbury school, is located in the interior of the church above the south door. The 1091 charter of St Osmund, Bishop of Old Sarum, shows that the tithes belong to the canons. By the 12 century it had become a cruciform church, and in 1226/27 Margaret de Redvers (nee FitzGerold), Countess of Devon, who held the Hundred of Highworth with its manor of Sevenhampton, “ordained and made the Prebendary and Prebend of Highworth”.^{vii} Much of the present building was built during the 15th century in the perpendicular gothic style. The church was fortified during the Civil War and the mark made by a cannon ball can still be seen in the stone work to the left of the west door. Pockmarks left by bullets and shot at this time can be seen on the south, west and east walls. The church was re-ordered in 1861-2 under John West Hugall and some restoration work was carried out in 2005.



Norman

Highworth's entry in the Domesday Book records only the tithing of the parson of Worth, the church and land amounting to 3 hides, held by Radulphus the priest.

By 1155/6 the royal estate had been divided and the Hundred of Worth together with Sevenhampton had been granted to Warin FitzGerold, the elder, as part of the estate for the support of his position as Hereditary Chamberlain of the Exchequer.^{viii} It was about this time that Highworth became one of the many 'planted' towns created in the 12th or 13th centuries. The property boundaries of the original burgage plots are still clearly fossilised in the modern property boundaries. Much of the town's early wealth came from its markets and fairs established by Royal Charters in 1206 and 1257, and by 1262 it had achieved Borough status.

Highworth's Martyr

During the Lammas Fair in 1508^{ix}, Highworth's martyr John Goodson of Maggot Mill, was burned at the stake close by the windmill which once stood in Southfield. A Lollard, he was 'executed by burnynge for the Religgion which the queens Majestie nowe alloweth.'^x

Civil War

During the Civil War Highworth Church was fortified from December 1644, and the town was given a permanent garrison of around 200 men. Major Henry Henne was appointed governor of Highworth by the King on 10th January 1645. On the 27th June 1645 the royalist garrison fell to the parliamentarians led by Sir Thomas Fairfax as they moved westward in pursuit of the Royalist forces at Taunton. Highworth remained a garrison until 'an order of 14th August 1646 passed the House that the garrisons of Malmesbury and Highworth should be slighted and dismantled, and the forces be disbanded or disposed for the service in Ireland.'^{xi} Throughout the time it was garrisoned conditions were appalling for both townsfolk and soldiers alike. The graziers moved from Highworth to the Swindon markets and the town did not really recover until the coaching age.^{xii}

18th Century

During the late 18th century three major events took place in Highworth. The enclosure of the commons and open fields in Highworth took place between 1778 and 1783, extinguishing common rights and obligations over them, and was probably the greatest transformation that the town witnessed during that period. The turnpiking of the Highworth to Lechlade road and the Faringdon to Cricklade road took place in the last decade of the century. This resulted in the demolition of the town's market house, built by Thomas Freke in circa 1687, which once stood on the south side of the marketplace. In 1790 Highworth's Workhouse, now known as Westhill House situated in Cricklade Road, opened to accommodate the increasing numbers of the poor in the town. It became oversubscribed and in 1846 a new workhouse was built in Stratton St Margaret. Highworth never benefited from the canal trade as the nearest river is six miles away.

William Cobbett

In the early September of 1826 William Cobbett, writer, politician, and champion of the agricultural labourer stayed for a week at the White House the home of James Crowdy whose company, it appears, he 'liked very much'.^{xiii}

Machine Breakers

Hoping to improve their wages and preserve their winter work which was being threatened by the influx of the new threshing machines, rural labourers took part in protest actions across England. These became known as the Swing Riots. Demonstrations broke out in and around Highworth on the 24th November 1830 and were quickly suppressed. The following day a large troop of over 200 horsemen led by the magistrate Mr Thomas Cally, and Lieutenant Cally of Blunsdon House, arrived in the Market Place where the Riot Act was read to disperse the demonstrators. Seventeen men and one woman from Highworth were taken and tried, and eight men were later transported to Australia. Only one of them, Robert Willoughby, was to return home.^{xiv}

Oriental Fibre and Matting Company

Highworth's first factory The Oriental Fibre and Matting Company opened in March 1872. The proprietor was Mr Thomas Angell Smith. Known as the Vorda Works the company made fibre mats and matting from cocoa fibres and rattan cane. Many of the major railway companies of that time were supplied by the company.^{xv}

The Highworth Bunk

Highworth once had its own railway, known fondly as the Highworth Bunk. Initially proposed in 1832 it finally opened on the 9th May 1883, and ran between Swindon and Highworth via Stratton, Stanton Fitzwarren and, Hannington. After the Second World War road transport dominated and the line was no longer viable. Passenger services were withdrawn, the last train running at 6.05pm on the 28th February 1953. The line continued to carry freight until its final closure on the 3rd August 1962. The site of the old station was close to the lamp post outside no 41 Windrush.

William Joscelyn Arkell

The eminent geologist and palaeontologist William Joscelyn Arkell was born in Highworth on the 9th June 1904. During the middle part of the 20th century he was regarded at the leading authority on the Jurassic Period publishing *The Jurassic System in Great Britain* and *Jurassic Geology of the World*.

World War II

During World War II the local post office, run by Mrs Mabel Stranks and then located at 23 High Street, became the gateway to GHQ Home Forces Auxiliary Units British Resistance based at Coleshill House.

J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis

J. R. R. Tolkien, author of the Lord of the Rings, and his fellow Inkling C. S. Lewis, who wrote the Chronicles of Narnia, visited Highworth in the late 1940's - early 1950's spending time at the Saracen's Head.^{xvi}

Throughout the years Highworth continued to grow very slowly and this has protected the historic core from redevelopment. Some of the medieval buildings still survive but many of the houses you see today were re-fronted in the 18th and early 19th centuries. It was not until the 1950's to 1960's that major expansion and development began to take place on the north and west side of the town.

Happily old Highworth still remains much as it was when the late poet and broadcaster, John Betjeman the Poet Laureate, wrote, 'When I am abroad and I want to recall a typically English town, then I think of Highworth. Church and chapel; walled gardens with pears and plums; inns; the distant cemetery; old shops and winding streets.'^{xvii}

ⁱ Cameron, K. *English Place Names*, B. T. Batsford, 1966. p.150.

ⁱⁱ Cole, A. (2008) Discussion on English Place Names, Oxford, Department of Continuing Education.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stone, M. J. The Archaeology of the Parish of Highworth, *A History of Highworth Part I*.1980

^{iv} Farr. B. (ed.) *Highworth Hundred Rolls 1275 – 1287 Part One*, Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, Records Branch, 1966, pp.2–4.

^v Yorke, B. *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*, Leicester University Press, 1995. p.124.

^{vi} Blair, J. *Anglo Saxon Oxfordshire*, Stroud, 1998. p.57.

^{vii} Aubrey, J and Jackson, J. E. The Wiltshire Collection by John Aubrey and John Jackson, Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, 1862.pp. 158 - 9

^{viii} *Pipe Rolls 2–4 Hen. II* Pipe Roll Society, 1844.

^{ix} Thomson, J.A.F. *The Later Lollards*, Oxford University Press, 1965. p.80-81 & 238.

^x *Depositions as to a plot of ground on which a mill had lately been erected, parcel of the manor of Eastrop, and as to fairs held at Highworth*. National Archives E178/2421.

^{xi} Pafford, J. H. P. (ed.) *Accounts of the Parliamentary Garrisons of Great Chalfield and Malmesbury 1645-1646*, Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, 1966. p.36.

^{xi} Aubrey, J. *Aubrey's Natural History of Wiltshire*. A Reprint of the Natural History of Wiltshire. David and Charles Reprints, 1969. P.115.

^{xi} Cobbett W. *Rural Rides*, Penguin Books, 2001. p. 335 & 377.

^{xi} Chambers, J. *Wiltshire Machine Breakers Vols 1 & 2*, 1993.

^{xi} The Oriental Fibre Mat and Matting Company, *A History of Highworth Part III 1992*. pp.437–447.

^{xi} Hutton, R. (2011) *Re: Highworth Saracen's Head*, email to J. Clark, 6 Feb [7 Feb 2011].

^{xi} Betjeman, J. *Postscripts from Highworth, First and Last Loves*, John Murray, 1952.