



VCH Oxfordshire Texts in Progress

## Spelsbury parish

Social History

### Social Character and Communal Life

#### *The Middle Ages*

Spelsbury manor (whose medieval lords were generally non-resident) included most of the parish during the Middle Ages, although each of its four hamlets formed a distinct agricultural community. So, too, did Dean, whose separate lords (or their lessees) were more often locally based. The church at Spelsbury nevertheless formed a community focus for the whole parish, whose inhabitants played an active role in religious life particularly in the later Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> The social structure was broadly typical of the area. Spelsbury and Dean manors both had a preponderance of *villani* in 1086, with a smaller number of lower-status bordars and *servi*,<sup>2</sup> and villein yardlanders were in the majority in 1279, alongside a few cottagers and some free tenants paying low rents. The leading freemen were Thomas ‘the huntsman’ (of neighbouring Chadlington), John ‘the franklin’, and William Colthurn, who respectively held 3½ yardlands, two yardlands and six acres of assart, and a mill and six acres.<sup>3</sup>

Early 14th-century tax lists suggest as usual a range of wealth, although in 1316 the proportion of individuals paying more than 2s. was higher than in neighbouring Enstone, while almost half of those at Taston paid 4s. or more. The most prosperous taxpayers included John le Frankeleyn of Spelsbury, possibly the free tenant of that name mentioned in 1279 (or a relative).<sup>4</sup> Some other inhabitants, including cottagers, were presumably too poor to be taxed, but probably benefited from the woodland resources of the parish and of nearby Wychwood forest, where (like the poor of other local villages) they illegally gathered wood

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<sup>1</sup> Above, landownership; econ. hist.; below, relig. hist.

<sup>2</sup> DB, ff. 157v., 238v.

<sup>3</sup> Rot. Hund. II, 747; G.C. Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (1941), 225; above, econ. hist. For Thomas: OHC, E36/2/13/D/1 (witnesses).

<sup>4</sup> TNA, E 179/161/8–9.

and poached game.<sup>5</sup> Local men were allegedly also involved in thefts from the rector and the abbess of Godstow in 1346–7.<sup>6</sup>

One or two gentry were apparently resident after the Black Death, amongst them Thomas Wilcotes (d. 1473), the lord of Dean manor.<sup>7</sup> Manorial officers such as the Spelsbury reeve and warrener presumably also exercised considerable influence, the reeve occasionally riding to Warwick castle on the lord's business,<sup>8</sup> and a broad-based social structure continued thanks to the survival of numerous yardland holdings.<sup>9</sup> Engagement in the parish's religious life was evident in 1447, when men from each hamlet (including Dean) were party to an informal vicarage augmentation. The dozen 'most sufficient' men helped the vicar determine the alms to be given to the poorest, and extended families such as those of Barre, Maynard, Challoner, Bontie, Duke and Taylor were represented by two or three households.<sup>10</sup>

Family turnover increased in the second half of the 15th century, implying expanded in- and out-migration: almost a fifth of the taxpayer surnames recorded in 1327 still featured in a manorial rental of 1446,<sup>11</sup> whereas 90 per cent of those later names had disappeared by 1486.<sup>12</sup> Even so communal life continued. Parishioners were closely involved in raising and administering funds for the church, including overseeing a parish stock of sheep,<sup>13</sup> while manorial custom threatened those who refused to meet their communal obligations with ostracism from their neighbours' hearths and having thorns set in front of their doors.<sup>14</sup> Church fundraising included Whitsun ales, and annual celebrations included a summer dinner or drinking.<sup>15</sup> A broad range of wealth persisted, with most taxpayers in 1524 assessed on goods worth £2–£9, and Edward Osbaldeston at Spelsbury and Richard Belcher at Taston being each assessed at £16. Wage earners (probably servants or labourers) were mentioned in Spelsbury village and Fulwell, though an unknown number of other inhabitants probably fell below the tax threshold.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Schumer, *Oxon. Forests, passim*; and *ibid.* 7, where Wm Carter may be the cottager of that name mentioned in 1279 (*Rot. Hund.* II, 747). For oaks taken from Ditchley's Bloxham wood, *Rot. Hund.* II, 41–2.

<sup>6</sup> *Cal. Pat.* 1345–8, 187, 231, 302.

<sup>7</sup> Lobel, *Dean and Chalford*, p. 64 and n.; Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. d 196, pp. 227–9, describing also the brass to John Heye, esq. (d. 1470), and his wife, now on the floor of the tower.

<sup>8</sup> OHC, E36/2/2/F1/1–16; TNA, DL 43/8/19; *ibid.* LR 2/189, f. 75.

<sup>9</sup> Above, econ. hist.

<sup>10</sup> C. Fonge (ed.), *The Cartulary of St Mary's Collegiate Church, Warwick* (2004), 198.

<sup>11</sup> TNA, E 179/161/9; OHC, E36/2/2/F1/17.

<sup>12</sup> TNA, DL 43/8/19. A 'Welshman' was mentioned in 1524: F.W. Weaver and G.N. Clark (eds.), *Churchwarden's Accounts of Marston, Spelsbury, Pyrton* (ORS 6, 1925), 39.

<sup>13</sup> Below, relig. hist. (church estate; relig. life).

<sup>14</sup> OHC, E36/2/1/E/2.

<sup>15</sup> *Churchwarden's Accounts of Marston, Spelsbury, Pyrton*, 41–3 (from OHC, PAR246/4/F1/1); Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, f. 5v.

<sup>16</sup> TNA, E 179/161/170.

**c. 1535–1800**

From 1487 to 1599 Spelsbury manor was in Crown hands, with lordly authority largely delegated to royal officers and lessees.<sup>17</sup> Locally active and influential figures included Thomas Penistone (d. 1556), Oriel College's lessee at Dean, who with his wife was commemorated by a brass in the church.<sup>18</sup> Others included the Osbaldeston family (as rectory lessees)<sup>19</sup> and the landowning Gibbons family at Ditchley, where they were succeeded in 1581 by Sir Henry Lee (d. 1611), the lessee of Spelsbury manor since 1570.<sup>20</sup> Lee, high steward of Woodstock by 1584, was an influential courtier who hosted Elizabeth I at Ditchley House in 1592, and who was locally a large-scale sheep farmer.<sup>21</sup> An abortive plot to murder him was hatched during the so-called Oxfordshire Rising of 1596, but apparently did not attract any strong local support.<sup>22</sup> His purchase of Spelsbury manor in 1599 made his family (who from 1674 were earls of Lichfield) the dominant landowners in the parish and, eventually, in the wider area. Later royal visits (partly for the hunting) were made by James I and Prince Henry,<sup>23</sup> and Francis Lee's influential widow Anne entertained Sir Edward Hyde (later earl of Clarendon) at Ditchley in 1642. After the Restoration she hosted lavish dinners such as one attended by John Evelyn in 1664,<sup>24</sup> while Charles II visited the following year.<sup>25</sup> Even so much day-to-day influence was delegated to stewards such as George Pickering (d. 1645)<sup>26</sup> and the long-serving John Cary (d. 1702), who founded a row of almshouses in Spelsbury village.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Above, landownership.

<sup>18</sup> *Par. Colln*, III, 276–7; Lobel, *Dean and Chalford*, pp. 75–6. J. Bertram and E. Gemmill (eds.), *Mediaeval Inscriptions: The Epigraphy of the County of Oxfordshire* (ORS 77, 2024), p. 221 suggests that the date is 1506/7, but that is disproved by OHC, par. reg. transcript (burials of Thos. and Anne Penistone, 1556).

<sup>19</sup> *Visit. Dioc. Linc.* II, 45; OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 181.181 (Anth. Osbaldeston, gent., 1557).

<sup>20</sup> Above, landownership.

<sup>21</sup> *VCH Oxon.* XII, 362, 382; C. Leech, 'Sir Henry Lee's Entertainment of Elizabeth in 1592', *The Modern Language Review* 30:1 (1935), 52–5; above, landownership (Ditchley manor).

<sup>22</sup> J. Walter, 'A "Rising of the People"? The Oxfordshire Rising of 1596', *Past and Present*, 107 (1985), 90–1, 113–114; S. Simpson, *Sir Henry Lee (1533–1611): Elizabethan Courtier* (2014), 128; *Oxon. Atlas*, 82–3. For Lee's involvement in disputes with tenants over woodland rights in Charlbury: *VCH Oxon.* X, 141.

<sup>23</sup> Above, landownership (Ditchley manor house).

<sup>24</sup> *ODNB*, s.v. Wilmot, John, 2nd earl of Rochester (1647–80); J.W. Johnson, "'My Dearest Son': Letters from the Countess of Rochester to the Earl of Lichfield", *University of Rochester Library Bulletin*, 28:1 (1974), unpag.; E.S. de Beer (ed.), *The Diary of John Evelyn*, III (1955), 382–3.

<sup>25</sup> M. Cousins, 'Ditchley Park – A Follower of Fashion', *Garden History*, 39:2 (2011), 145 and n.

<sup>26</sup> Brass in church; TNA, PROB 11/195/514 (Geo. Pickering, 1645).

<sup>27</sup> OHC, par. reg. transcript (1638 baptism); *Acts and Ords. Interregnum*, I, 122, 306, 475, 672, 974; TNA, C 104/263, bdl 16; *ibid.* PROB 11/290/199 (Sir. Hen. Lee bequest of £500 to Cary, 1659); Bodl. MS Ch. Oxon. 2850; Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 233–4; below (welfare).

The broad run of the 16th- and 17th-century population comprised small to medium farmers, labourers, and a few craftsmen,<sup>28</sup> alongside a significant number of poor cottagers.<sup>29</sup> Long-established families, often living mainly in a single hamlet, included the Colings, Rymans, Souches, Trinders, Huckwells, and Fletchers, five of whom died in an epidemic in 1616, while the Freemans eventually became park-keepers at Ditchley.<sup>30</sup> Strong social links existed with Chadlington, Charlbury, Enstone and Stonesfield.<sup>31</sup> Church ales continued until at least 1588, with men such as the ‘musician’ Augustine Coling (d. 1622) probably supplying entertainment.<sup>32</sup> In 1640 the constables of Dean and Spelsbury were imprisoned for refusing to assess the unpopular Ship Money,<sup>33</sup> and high mortality five years later was possibly associated with disease spread by Civil War troop movements.<sup>34</sup> By the second half of the 17th century there was a widening gap between a handful of wealthy individuals and the bulk of the population, represented by a median inventory value of £67.<sup>35</sup> By contrast Stephen Harris (d. 1683), miller at Coldron Mill, had assets worth £326 (mainly in money owed to him),<sup>36</sup> while three yeomen farmers were worth between £340 and £631, albeit mainly in farm stock and debts.<sup>37</sup>

During the 18th century the Lees (then earls of Lichfield) invested lavishly in their new mansion, parkland, and hunting facilities (especially hounds),<sup>38</sup> and stewards such as James Burr (d. 1815) were much involved in local life.<sup>39</sup> Resident lessees or sub-lessees at Dean included Thomas Rowney, MP for Oxford 1722–59, who died whilst hunting with the 3rd earl and who was followed by Joseph Walker and his widow Elizabeth (tenants 1768–1818).<sup>40</sup> The period also saw the growing dominance of a few larger farmers such the Coling family, tenants of Spelsbury farm from 1740,<sup>41</sup> although Ditchley farm tenants seldom stayed long, and in 1738 the inhabitants were judged to be ‘chiefly husbandmen and none of

<sup>28</sup> A.G. Hann, ‘Kinship and Exchange Relations within an Estate Economy: Ditchley, 1680–1750’ (Oxford Univ. D.Phil. thesis, 1999), 82–4; above, econ. hist.

<sup>29</sup> e.g. OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 58/1/67 (six in Spelsbury, 1585); *ibid.* PAR246/4/F1/1 (typed copy in PAR246/10/X/1), money given to 36 poor people in 1617; below (welfare).

<sup>30</sup> OHC, par. reg. transcript.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*; *Oxf. Ch. Ct Deposits 1570–4*, p. 33; 1589–93, pp. 4–5, 50–1; 1592–6, pp. 24–5.

<sup>32</sup> OHC, PAR246/10/X/1; *ibid.* MS Wills Oxon. 12/2/3.

<sup>33</sup> *Cal SP Dom.* 1640, 371.

<sup>34</sup> Above, landscape etc. (population); cf. below, relig. hist.

<sup>35</sup> Based on 36 inventories dated 1650–99 in OHC, MSS Wills Oxon.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* MS Wills Oxon. 34/2/2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* MSS Wills Oxon. 174/1/47 (Chris. Scott, Fulwell); 18/4/49 (Edw. Dennett, Spelsbury); 56/3/23 (Francis Rawlins, Dean).

<sup>38</sup> OHC, E36/1/12/F/20–1 and 23; E36/1/13/MS/1 (venison gifts); Hann, ‘Kinship and Exchange Relations’, 142 and n.; above, landownership (combined estate).

<sup>39</sup> e.g. OHC, E36/2/8/A/1; E36/1/4/D/14, 16, 17; E36/1/4/E/6; stone plaque in church.

<sup>40</sup> Secker’s Visit, 142; OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. d 557, f. 53; *ibid.* par. reg. transcript; TNA, PROB 11/1609/276 (Eliz. Walker, widow, 1818); Lobel, *Dean and Chalford*, pp. 73–4.

<sup>41</sup> OHC, E36/1/4/D/2–14; E36/2/11/D/2–11; E36/18/10/E/4.

superior rank',<sup>42</sup> with no substantial freeholders.<sup>43</sup> Migration (in contrast with neighbouring Enstone) tended to be outward rather than inward, a reflection, no doubt, of the Ditchley estate's control over tenancies and housing, though women and girls found some extra work at haymaking and harvest time.<sup>44</sup> The Chequers inn (and its predecessors) in Spelsbury supplied a social focus, and from c.1779 became the meeting place of a Spelsbury Friendly Society,<sup>45</sup> while at Taston a November 'wake' was established before c.1718.<sup>46</sup> The lords of Spelsbury and Dean also provided tenant dinners and occasional gifts for the church bellringers.<sup>47</sup>

### **Since 1800**

The Dillons were mainly resident at Ditchley for much of the 19th century, and maintained facilities for hunting and shooting.<sup>48</sup> By mid-century the estate's housing stock was in a poor state, and though Charles Dillon demolished a number of cottages c.1860 (replacing some of them), much of his concern was allegedly to discourage immigration and (thus) increased poor rates.<sup>49</sup> A more positive paternalism was manifested in the erection of an elaborate covered memorial drinking fountain in Spelsbury (c.1859) and of a smaller fountain at Taston (in 1862),<sup>50</sup> and in the supply of blankets, soup, and rabbits to the poor in winter, along with provision of allotments offered for 15s. a year.<sup>51</sup> Such measures were prompted by low agricultural wages in a population divided between tenant farmers and landless labourers, of whom the latter (as well as taking on piecework) resorted to illicit nut gathering and poaching.<sup>52</sup> The formation of a Spelsbury branch of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union caused some tensions, including (in 1872) a man's dismissal for union activism, but led ultimately to increased wages.<sup>53</sup> Despite the pressure against immigration, by 1901 the

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<sup>42</sup> *Secker's Visit*, 142.

<sup>43</sup> Oxon. Poll, 1754, 55, 63.

<sup>44</sup> Hann, 'Kinship and Exchange Relations', 99–105, 118–119, 314–16.

<sup>45</sup> Above, econ. hist; *Oxon. FS*, p. 255.

<sup>46</sup> *Par. Colln*, III, 276.

<sup>47</sup> e.g. OHC, E36/18/10/F1/3 (Spelsbury, 1692); Oriel Coll. Arch., S II I 3 (Dean, 1778).

<sup>48</sup> OHC, E36/1/13/R/1–3; E36/1/13/F/1; E36/1/13/C/2. For the Heythrop hounds meet at Spelsbury: e.g. *Coventry Herald*, 16 Nov. 1849; *Oxf. Jnl*, 21 Feb. 1852.

<sup>49</sup> OHC, E36/1/11/E/1, p. 41; Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, f. 146v.; above, landscape etc. (settlement).

<sup>50</sup> *Dutton, Allen & Co. Dir. Oxon.* (1863); *PO Dir. Oxon.* (1877); HER, PRN 4394; Brooks, *Oxon. N&W*, 481–2 (misdating the Taston fountain to 1872); NHLE, no. 1262769 ([Taston] memorial fountain).

<sup>51</sup> P. Horn, 'Aspects of Labouring Life: The Model Farm at Ditchley, 1856–73', *Cake & Cockhorse*, 6:1 (Autumn, 1974), 13; Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 224, 256.

<sup>52</sup> e.g. OHC, QS1835/2/L5/16; *Oxf. Jnl* 18 Sep. 1858; 16 Oct. 1858; *Westmorland Gaz.* 8 March 1862 (murder of keeper).

<sup>53</sup> Horn, 'Aspects of Labouring Life', 13; P. Horn (ed.), *Agric. Trade Unionism in Oxon. 1872–81* (ORS 48, 1974), 23, 33, 36, 79, 85.

proportion of adults from outside the parish had risen to almost 70 per cent (from just under 50 per cent in 1861), although as earlier many of them had been born nearby.<sup>54</sup>



Popular social activities included agricultural feasts and May Day games. The Spelsbury Friendly Society arranged a two- or three-day fair starting on Ascension Day, which included processions, dancing, and sports, held outside the Chequers. The (by then) week-long Taston 'wake' involved a dinner, sports, and dancing, accompanied by 'gipsy' fiddlers.<sup>55</sup> A troop of young women morris dancers was active at Spelsbury in the 1820s, their male contemporaries continuing for perhaps another thirty years.<sup>56</sup> Both fair and wake probably ceased by c.1870.<sup>57</sup> Other diversions included lectures and events in the school,<sup>58</sup> while a cricket match, games, and meat tea were organised for Queen Victoria's jubilee in 1887.<sup>59</sup> Even so, a temperance fete held in the vicarage garden in 1883 was said to have caused 'quite an excitement among the quiet inhabitants'.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>54</sup> TNA, RG 9/910; RG 13/1398.

<sup>55</sup> *Oxf. Jnl*, 10 March 1849; E. Corbett, 'Spelsbury', *Folklore*, 40:1 (1929), 79; Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 256–7. *Oxon. FS*, pp. 255–6 notes the society existed 1779–94, and indicates that it was reformed (or another society established) in 1802.

<sup>56</sup> K. Chandler, 'Morris Dancing at Spelsbury: An Analytical Essay', *Oxon. Local History* 1:7 (1983), 2–13; Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. d 200, p. 235.

<sup>57</sup> Chandler, 'Morris Dancing at Spelsbury', 8.

<sup>58</sup> e.g. *Oxf. Jnl*, 20 Jan. 1855.

<sup>59</sup> Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 268.

<sup>60</sup> *Oxf. Jnl*, 11 Aug. 1883, mentioning many attendees from Charlbury and a band from Enstone.

The First World War brought the usual dislocation, with nine local men killed.<sup>61</sup> A village war memorial hall was built in 1920–1, promoted by the vicar Thomas Tanner (who was a Freemason), and much used by the newly established Spelsbury Women's Institute and for dances, whist drives, and other events.<sup>62</sup> Kathleen Dillon (d. 1958) of Spelsbury House and her companion the Hon. Elsie Corbett (d. 1977) were leading WI figures and were later described as 'heads' of the village,<sup>63</sup> while Ronald and Nancy Tree, the Dillons' successors at Ditchley, were avid high-society hosts and entertainers in the mid to late 1930s, hunting and maintaining a shoot, and laying on cricket and other events for locals.<sup>64</sup> Social opportunities for most inhabitants were limited, however, especially after the Chequers Inn burned down in 1924, and slightly later initiatives such as a young farmers' club and a young men's social club proved short-lived because of the dwindling number of youngsters.<sup>65</sup> Fulwell and Ditchley inhabitants in particular engaged more fully with neighbouring Enstone's social life.<sup>66</sup>



Elsie Corbett, suffragist and local WI leader. Image from Wikipedia.

<sup>61</sup> Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 271–3, 276–7; E. Llewellyn-Smith, *Lest We Forget: The Men of Spelsbury Who Died in the Great War* (2018).

<sup>62</sup> *Oxon. Weekly News*, 2 June 1920; Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 281–3; *Lifting the Latch: A Life on the Land, as told to S. Stewart by Mont Abbott of Enstone* (2003 edn), 104–5.

<sup>63</sup> *Oxon. Weekly News*, 25 Jan. 1922, 21 Mar. 1923; *Banbury Guardian*, 8 July 1926, 17 Oct. 1946; Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 254, 273–5.

<sup>64</sup> R. Tree, *When the Moon was High: Memoirs of Peace and War, 1897–1942* (1975), e.g. pp. 41 (17 servants), 47, 68; G. Jellicoe, 'Ronald Tree and the Gardens of Ditchley Park: the Human Face of History', *Garden History* 10:1 (1982), 83; *Sale Cat., Ditchley Park* (1953): copy in OHC; OHC, PAR246/17/N/1 (parish magazine, e.g. June and Sept. 1936, May 1937).

<sup>65</sup> OHC, PAR246/17/N/1 (parish magazine); Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 278–9.

<sup>66</sup> Spelsbury Women's Institute, *A Record of the War Years 1939 to 1945* (1945).

The Second World War saw the absence of many younger men and the arrival of evacuees and soldiers of the Durham Light Infantry. Local inhabitants billeted the newcomers, establishing generally good relations after the departure of the first influx of evacuees, who were described by one local as ‘the worst of the Londoners’ and who for their part disliked the quiet of the country and ‘dirty’ garden vegetables. In addition a temporary military aerodrome was reportedly established near Dean Buildings.<sup>67</sup> In the 1950s Spelsbury village remained (according to one incomer) a small world of closely related people and self-appointed ‘elders’; shops and other facilities were lacking, and Charlbury (two miles away) had the nearest doctor and policeman.<sup>68</sup> Regular buses and car- and motor-bike sharing nevertheless allowed people to travel to Charlbury, Chipping Norton and Witney both for work and leisure.<sup>69</sup>

By the 1980s there was a growth in affluent incomers including commuters and retirees.<sup>70</sup> One prominent arrival was the future prime minister David Cameron, who bought a house at Dean in 2001 on becoming Conservative MP for Witney. His presence attracted controversy in 2014 when the house was picketed by the campaigning group Fathers 4 Justice, and again in 2017 when a £25,000 ‘shepherd’s hut’ was installed in the garden, followed by extensive building work which caused resentment amongst some villagers.<sup>71</sup> Spelsbury village hall was refurbished at a cost of £180,000 in 2004,<sup>72</sup> but then (as later) much social activity took place in neighbouring Chadlington, Enstone, Charlbury and Chipping Norton.<sup>73</sup> In 2021 the parish’s social make-up remained fairly typical for the area, with a preponderance of older white residents and almost half of those in employment working mainly from home. Even so it was slightly less affluent than some neighbouring places: 62 per cent worked below the managerial, professional and administrative level, and almost 40 per cent lived in rented accommodation, of whom 9 per cent rented from the local authority.<sup>74</sup>

## Education

Dame schools for young children were established in Spelsbury, Dean and Taston in the early 19th century.<sup>75</sup> By 1831 it was claimed that very few children were without means of

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. (also mentioning the aerodrome); OHC, PC246/A3/1 (parish invasion cttee war book).

<sup>68</sup> B.P. Martin, *Tales of the Old Villagers* (1997), 116–21.

<sup>69</sup> Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 277.

<sup>70</sup> e.g. *Witney Gaz.*, 22 Jan. 1987; *Oxf. Times*, 9 Sept. 1988, 25 Jan. 2002.

<sup>71</sup> *Oxf. Mail*, 30 Dec. 2014, 5 Feb. 2019; *The Guardian*, 30 Apr. 2017.

<sup>72</sup> <https://spelsbury.org/village-hall> (accessed Mar. 2024).

<sup>73</sup> *The Parish Magazine of Chadlington and Spelsbury* (May–July 2024).

<sup>74</sup> *Census*, 2021 (online datasets).

<sup>75</sup> OHC, MSS Oxf. Dioc. d. 567, f. 111v.; d. 577, f. 100v.; *Educ. of Poor Digest*, p. 730.

education, although many went to school in neighbouring Charlbury.<sup>76</sup> A school for 30 boys and 30 girls (with a master's house between the two school rooms) was built by the 14th Viscount Dillon (d. 1865) c.1839, on the site of the former parish 'workhouse' in Spelsbury; a clock and octagonal bell turret were added later in his memory.<sup>77</sup> The Dillons gave financial support and laid on periodic treats for the pupils, but for long periods would not allow any religious instruction by the Anglican incumbents.<sup>78</sup> The school was enlarged in 1870 to accommodate children from Dean,<sup>79</sup> but six years later provision was made for 23 children (chiefly those from Fulwell) to attend the school in Neat Enstone.<sup>80</sup> Attendance in the later 1880s was usually over 50, but fell with bad weather and at harvest time. In 1884 pupils were said to be in a 'dreadfully backward' state, but marked improvements brought a glowing report and examination successes in 1902.<sup>81</sup>



The old school house, now a private residence.

Despite some local opposition the 17th Viscount Dillon closed the school that December, in response to the Education Act and inspectors' calls for improvements to the

<sup>76</sup> OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. b. 38, f. 185.

<sup>77</sup> *Oxf. Jnl*, 10 Aug. 1839; OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. c. 347, f. 388; TNA, HO 107/879; *Wilb. Visit.*, 134; *Dutton, Allen & Co. Dir. Oxon.* (1863); OHC, E36/2/10/E/1 (1903 surveyor's report); Brooks, *Oxon. N&W*, 481; Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 214, 234, 241.

<sup>78</sup> *Kelly's Dir. Oxon.* (1883 and later edns); *Oxf. Jnl*, e.g. 5 Aug. 1854, 16 July 1859; *Oxf. Mail*, 20 July 1901; Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, ff. 97–8, 200; OHC, S246/1/A1/1; *ibid.* MS Oxf. Dioc. b 199 (1902); Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 248–54.

<sup>79</sup> Oriel Coll. Arch., DLR 5 (loose papers).

<sup>80</sup> TNA, ED 2/363, no. 7; above, Enstone, social hist.

<sup>81</sup> OHC, S246/1/A1/1.

building and furnishings. After alterations were made it reopened in 1905 as a council school,<sup>82</sup> and despite the hiatus received generally positive reports thereafter.<sup>83</sup> Numbers fell with the population, however, and in 1927 pupils aged over 11 were transferred to Charlbury school, spelling the end of the children's annual May Day procession. By 1937 there were just 20 pupils, and the school finally closed in 1958 when the remaining children were transferred to Charlbury.<sup>84</sup> In 2024 the closest primary schools were in Chadlington, Charlbury, and Chipping Norton, and the nearest secondary schools at Chipping Norton, Witney, Woodstock, and Burford.<sup>85</sup>

## Welfare and Charities

During the late Middle Ages the poor may have received occasional payments from the 13s. 4d. which the parish received annually from the church's appropriator, and some late bequests to the parish sheep flock (maintained chiefly in support of the church) also specified distribution of the proceeds amongst the poor, in one case annually on Good Friday.<sup>86</sup> Interest on cash loans was distributed after the flock's sale c.1556.<sup>87</sup> A poor men's box was mentioned in 1548,<sup>88</sup> and bequests to the poor were common in 16th- and earlier 17th-century century wills, Thomas Guy and Edmund Langford (both of Taston) giving as much as £6 13s. 4d. and £5 respectively in the 1610s.<sup>89</sup> The vicar John Feriby gave nearly £20 from the profits of vicarage to the poor's stock 1651, and Sir Francis Lee bequeathed £50 to it in 1667, but by 1738 (when it amounted to £70) the money was held on 'bad security' and it was lost by the 1760s.<sup>90</sup> 'Church houses' mentioned in 1556, probably part of the parish's medieval church estate, were used to house poor parishioners,<sup>91</sup> and may have been the three cottages or 'workhouse' in Spelsbury mentioned c.1781–1835.<sup>92</sup> Those were damaged by fire and were demolished to make way for the school c.1839.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>82</sup> TNA, ED 21/14544; OHC, S246/1/A1/1; *ibid.* E36/2/10/C/2–3; *ibid.* E36/2/10/Y/1 (plan).

<sup>83</sup> OHC, CC4/190; TNA, ED 21/38080.

<sup>84</sup> TNA, ED 21/38080; ED 21/59669; *Gore's Visit.*, 533; *Oxf. Times*, 8 Aug. 1958; Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 250–3 (incl. for the procession).

<sup>85</sup> <https://spelsbury.org/about> (accessed June 2024).

<sup>86</sup> C. Fonge (ed.), *The Cartulary of St Mary's Collegiate Church, Warwick* (2004), 198; *Chant. Cert.* 36; below, relig. hist.

<sup>87</sup> OHC, PAR246/10/X/1.

<sup>88</sup> OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 179.272 (John Bumpas).

<sup>89</sup> OHC, MSS Wills Oxon. Spelsbury wills, incl. 12/2/13 (Aug. Coling, £2); *ibid.* PAR246/10/X/1, incl. gifts from members of the Penistone family in 1575; TNA, PROB 11/121/595 (Thos. Guy, 1613); PROB 11/128/61 (Edm. Langford, 1616).

<sup>90</sup> OHC, PAR246/10/X/1; *Secker's Visit.* 143; OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. d 560, f. 76v. In 1759 13 a. belonging to the poor was mortgaged: OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. d 557, f. 55v.

<sup>91</sup> OHC, PAR246/10/X/1.

<sup>92</sup> But not listed in *Poor Abstract*, 1804, 402–3.

<sup>93</sup> OHC, PAR246/10/X/1; *ibid.* E486/1/M/1; *ibid.* PAR246/5/F1/1–8; *ibid.* par. reg. transcript; TNA, CHAR 2/222; Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 243, 248. In the 15th and 16th centuries the churchwardens held a

A row of four gabled stone almshouses at the north end of the village was established by the Lees' steward John Cary in 1688, supported from 1702 by an endowment of £10 10s. a year from Cary's own manor of Wilcote. The four inmates received £2 annually and a gown every other year, with vacancies filled by the vicar, churchwardens and overseers from amongst the parish's 'poorest, ancientest and honestest' inhabitants. Though both men and women were eligible there was a preponderance of widows, of whom a number in the 19th century had one or two of their children living with them. Costly repairs were required in 1817 when a group supposed to be farmers' sons broke the windows and damaged the garden walls at night.<sup>94</sup> The complex, which includes stone-mullioned windows and chamfered stone doorways, was restored in 1927 and continued in 2024 under a Charity Commission scheme of 2010.<sup>95</sup>



The almshouses, Spelsbury.

Other initiatives included small charities established by the Lees and their relatives, and occasional subsidies of wheat during periods of dearth (as ordered by Lord Lichfield in 1766).<sup>96</sup> By then the bulk of Spelsbury's poor relief costs fell on the parish rates, however,

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house (the 'town house') and ½ yardland from Spelsbury manor: TNA, LR 2/189, f. 71v.; OHC, E36/2/1/E/1.

<sup>94</sup> Datestone (Cary 1688); OHC, PAR246/13/F/1; *ibid.* E36/2/9/W/2; TNA, CHAR 2/222; Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 229–34. For 19th-cent. inmates: TNA, HO 107/879; HO 107/1732; *ibid.* RG 11/1519; RG 12/1178.

<sup>95</sup> Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 232; Char. Com. Website, no. 221722; NHLE, no. 1251415 (Almshouses and attached front garden walls) (both websites accessed July 2024).

<sup>96</sup> OHC, PAR246/10/X/1; *ibid.* E486/8/8; Oxf. Jnl Syn., 13 Dec. 1766.

which also paid for apprenticeships and were said to be ‘very burdensome’ in 1772.<sup>97</sup> Expenditure rose from c.£140 in 1776 (when there were at least 45 poor, over half of them in Spelsbury village) to over £235 by 1783–5, and 1803 it was over £445. Medical care for the poor was supplied by visiting apothecaries, of whom one came from Charlbury, and by local women.<sup>98</sup> Expenditure rose to £871 by 1814 (when 68 people were relieved permanently and 11 occasionally), but fell from c.1822 when a select vestry was established.<sup>99</sup> By then poor people in Dean received small sums from a £143 7s. 4d. trust established in 1820 by Elizabeth Walker’s executors.<sup>100</sup>

Primary responsibility for poor relief passed in 1835 to the newly formed Chipping Norton Poor Law Union, but local overseers continued to be appointed by the vestry and later the parish council.<sup>101</sup> Allotments in Spelsbury, Taston and Dean, supplied by the Dillons and Oriel College in the 19th century, continued until the 20th, and a separate small allotment site in Spelsbury was managed by the parish council by 1974,<sup>102</sup> while from 1945 Dean’s Walker charity (by then amounting to c.£6 16s. a year) was given chiefly to parents with school-age children.<sup>103</sup> No doctor was based in the parish, and in the 21st century the nearest GP surgery was in Charlbury.<sup>104</sup> The disused Spelsbury fountain was transferred to the trustees of the adjacent village hall in 2010 and reroofed in 2018.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, f. 19; OHC, PAR246/10/X/1.

<sup>98</sup> *Poor Abstract*, 1804, pp. 402–3; OHC, E36/2/4/A/1 (list of poor in 1777, excluding Dean); *ibid.* PAR246/2/A1/1; PAR246/5/F1/1–8.

<sup>99</sup> *Poor Abstract*, 1818, pp. 356–7; *Poor Rate Retns*, 1822, pp. 137–8; 1825, p. 172; 1830–1, p. 159; OHC, PAR246/2/A1/1.

<sup>100</sup> Oriel Coll. Arch., DLR 5 (declaration of trust, 1820).

<sup>101</sup> OHC, PAR246/13/F/4; PAR246/2/A1/2; *ibid.* PC246/A1/1–2; *ibid.* parish reg. transcript (burials); *below*, local govt.

<sup>102</sup> OHC, E36/1/10/F19/7; E36/2/11/D/12; DV X/88, nos. 81–3; PC246/A1/3; Oriel Arch., 1857 map of pt of the common in Dean.

<sup>103</sup> OHC, PAR246/13/C/1; PAR246/2/A1/2, for a note about the ‘uproar’ in 1943 when the vicar decided to hand out the money in church rather than in Dean.

<sup>104</sup> *Kelly’s Dir. Oxon.* (1883 and later edns); Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 279–80.

<sup>105</sup> Char. Com. Website (accessed July 2024), no. 304370; <https://spelsbury.org/history/spelsbury-fountain/>; <https://spelsbury.org/2018/02/19/spelsbury-fountain-a-new-roof-and-more/> (accessed July 2024).