



VCH Oxfordshire Texts in Progress

Swerford and Showell

Economic History

The parish's economy was long based on mixed farming. Showell was apparently enclosed by the end of the Middle Ages, and was divided into large rack-rented farms from an early date; at Swerford, however, open-field farming continued into the early 19th century and copyholds until the 17th, with some small farms continuing thereafter. As elsewhere in the area, modest mid 19th-century agrarian prosperity gave way to agricultural depression which lasted until the Second World War. Craft and trade activity was limited, save for milling and a small specialism in stonemasonry and other building trades, which continued into the early 20th century.

The Agricultural Landscape

Open fields surrounded Swerford village from the Middle Ages until parliamentary enclosure in 1803, with private closes restricted mainly to the village fringes and to low-lying areas of grassland by the River Swere and other watercourses. The main fields by the 17th century were the east, west, south, and middle fields.¹ Some meadow (including High mead, by west field) was still held in lots in 1614,² while commons included the c.118-a. Swerford heath in the north-east (which provided rough pasture and furze), along with verges and small pieces of waste in the village and elsewhere.³ Swerford's small medieval park was mentioned in the 13th century (when it may have included a rabbit warren), and since it straddled the Hook Norton boundary was most likely established by the d'Oillys before the 1220s, as joint lords of Hook Norton and Swerford;⁴ in 1540 it was reckoned at 32 a. (perhaps excluding a part then being leased), and c.1800 at 58 acres.⁵ By the 1430s, and possibly from the start, it was enclosed by a stone wall which would have required much labour to build, a feature adopted mainly by very high-status owners.⁶ at least part of the wall survived in 1778, although nothing can be traced today.⁷ The park's woods were mentioned in 1540, and

¹ OHC, MS Archd. Oxon. b 41, f. 121; *ibid.* Swerford enclosure award and map.

² OHC, MS Archd. Oxon. b 41, f. 121.

³ Greens of 1½ a. and ¾ a. survive at Chapel End and Church End: 'Swerford PC Register of Assets, Oct. 2018', available online.

⁴ *Oseney Cart.* IV, pp. 275–6; *Rot. Hund.* II, 727; above, landownership.

⁵ OHC, M110/E/1; above, landownership (Swerford manor from 1770).

⁶ TNA, SC 6/961/32; cf. *VCH Oxon.* V, 56–7 (Beckley); XII, 436 (Woodstock); XIX, 251 (Cornbury).

⁷ TNA, C 8/299/16; OHC, MS dd Par. Swerford, b. 1, f. 29v.

pockets of trees survive there and elsewhere, but woodland seems otherwise to have been largely absent.⁸ Showell's open fields were enclosed probably before 1500, resulting in a higher proportion of grassland,⁹ and there, too, trees remained scarce. Numerous small quarries pockmarked the parish as a whole, some dug for stone, others supplying lime for the fields.¹⁰



Swerford's undulating terrain: view to the west from near the village hall.

Medieval Agriculture

In 1086 Swerford manor was worth £5 (as in 1066) and contained land for eight ploughteams, along with 12 a. of meadow and 12 a. of pasture (presumably representing only the more intensively managed grassland). The demesne had three slaves running three ploughteams, while seven *villani* and six bordars held another six ploughteams, the total number of teams in operation (compared with the eight-team assessment) suggesting a recent expansion of the arable. At Showell 5½ ploughteams (distributed amongst six slaves, six *villani*, and two bordars) operated on land for five teams, three of them on the two

⁸ Below (1535–1800); OHC, Swerford enclosure map; OS Map 1:2500, Oxon. XV.1 (1881 edn); Ch.Ch. Arch. MS Estates 82, ff. 275v., 288–290v.

⁹ Below (medieval agric.).

¹⁰ e.g. OHC, Swerford enclosure award and map; Shrew III/1 (lime kiln at Coldharbour, 1805); OS Map 1:2500, Oxon. XV.1 (1881 edn), showing an old lime kiln south-west of Swerford Park.

demesnes, while grassland was apparently more extensive than at Swerford, since it included 18 a. of meadow and 26 a. of pasture. Both the Showell estates had doubled in value since 1066, to £5 and £1 respectively.¹¹ Later medieval expansion of the arable is indicated by remains of ridge and furrow overlying part of the 12th-century castle site, abandoned probably by c.1200.¹²

By 1279 a higher proportion of land was in tenant hands. Swerford manor had a one-hide (4-yardland) demesne worth £5, while its villeins held a total of 24 yardlands, separately itemised 'customary tenants' 16 yardlands, and free tenants 2 yardlands. The majority of tenants occupied whole yardlands, for which customary tenants each owed rent and labour services together worth 9s. 9d., and the villeins rents and services worth 6s. 8½d. Pressure on land is suggested by the sharing of several holdings between co-tenants, including the three largest of two yardlands each. Additional dues included pannage for tenants with pigs, and there were also two cottagers.¹³ At Showell Reading abbey maintained a larger 2-hide demesne, while its eight serfs (*servi*) each held a yardland for 5s. plus services and tallage. Eynsham abbey's three tenants (all free) held yardlands for money rents (two of them paying 2s. 3d. and the other 4s. 6d.), while Bruern abbey had four yardlands in demesne, and its villeins another four for rent and services. Cold Norton priory held one yardland in demesne and leased another at will for 5s.¹⁴ Nothing is known of the management of the Lyons' Swerford estate, which perhaps already included some enclosures around the later Pomfret Farm.¹⁵

After the Black Death the Swerford demesne appears to have been leased piecemeal to local tenants, although some was in hand in 1437 probably for want of takers.¹⁶ In the 15th century the park was also kept in hand and its grass and underwood sold, though all or part was leased for £2 a year in 1527,¹⁷ by which time the former demesne was permanently attached to customary tenant holdings.¹⁸ Enclosure at Showell was apparently under way in 1391, when rioters including John Eburton of Swerford and the vicar of Enstone assembled to burn John Thame's hedges and to trample his crops and grass (worth 20 marks). Thame, who had several servants, was presumably a substantial farmer.¹⁹ By the

¹¹ DB, ff. 156v., 157, 161.

¹² 'Swerford Castle, Oxfordshire: Topographical Survey' (unpubl. Oxford Archaeology report, 2012), incl. aerial photo.

¹³ *Rot. Hund.* II, 726--7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 875.

¹⁵ For estate, above, landownership.

¹⁶ TNA, SC 6/961/30–33.

¹⁷ e.g. *ibid.* SC 6/961/33; OHC, M110/E/1.

¹⁸ Below (1535–1800).

¹⁹ E.G. Kimball (ed.), *Oxon. Sessions of the Peace* (ORS 53, 1983), 118–19.

15th century Bruern abbey had a large grange at Showell, probably mainly used for sheep,²⁰ and in 1535 (when the grange was in hand to supply the abbey) its farmland comprised 300 a. of enclosed pasture, 20 a. of meadow, and 120 a. of arable, in all worth £8 a year.²¹

Farms and Farming c.1535–1800

Swerford's 16th- and earlier 17th-century farming was based mainly around copyhold farms held by secure customary tenure.²² In 1540 17 copyholders of Swerford manor held 26½ open-field yardlands, plus 4 yardlands of former demesne land held in parcels of a third of a yardland called 'Burydolls'.²³ Five of the tenants held two or more yardlands each, while three tenants-at-will held another yardland and two Burydolls between them. Individual yardlands (said in 1589 to be worth £2 a year)²⁴ were held for 12s. 10d., presumably with intermittent entry fines. Subletting was probably common, but few tenants seem to have had substantial freeholds, with just one taxpayer assessed on land in 1577.²⁵ Swerford park was kept in hand by the Popes but leased for £19 a year in 1669,²⁶ while the c.65-a. glebe, mainly comprising scattered strips in Swerford's fields, seems also to have been usually worked directly, presumably by a bailiff.²⁷ The pattern at Showell was quite different, since the township was fully enclosed and probably already shared amongst a few large rack-rented farms.²⁸ By 1808 (and probably before 1767) there were just two, the 426-a. Coldharbour farm and the 361-a. Showell farm.²⁹

At Swerford the period from c.1650 saw changes in tenure and apparently some small-scale enclosure, although most farmland remained part of the open fields until 1803. Copyholds were bought out, most of them passing eventually to the few main landowners, chiefly the Travells of Swerford House.³⁰ By 1785, when the glebe was held by a tenant, there were c.13 farmers, of whom just four were small owner-occupiers, including one who rented additional land.³¹ Detached farmhouses amongst early enclosures at Pomfret Castle

²⁰ Above, landownership. Bruern obtained free warren at Showell in 1366: *Cal. Chart.* 1341–1417, 196.

²¹ *Valor Eccl.* II, 266.

²² OHC, M110/E/1; Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. c 769, ff. 14–15v.

²³ OHC, M110/E/1. Figures exclude the manor's copyholders in Southrop (above, Hook Norton, econ. hist.).

²⁴ *Oxf. Ch. Ct. Deposns 1589–93*, p. 5.

²⁵ TNA, E 179/162/341, rot. 10d.

²⁶ *Ibid.* C 8/299/16.

²⁷ OHC, MS Archd. Oxon. b 41, f. 121; *ibid.* MSS Wills Oxon. 69/4/58; 132/1/10.

²⁸ e.g. *ibid.* SL30/1/6D/1 (1702 lease of three closes for £120 a year).

²⁹ Jefferys, *Oxon. Map* (1767); OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. c 449, f. 47; cf. *ibid.* Swerford tithe map (Showell township).

³⁰ Above, landownership; below.

³¹ OHC, QSD/L/271.

and Buttercombe (both owned by the Travells) seem to have been established in the late 17th and early 18th century, their creation possibly facilitated by consolidation of nearby open-field strips.³² In addition, the small open field called 'between the towns' appears to have been enclosed piecemeal, at least some of it by 1700.³³

Farming at Swerford was mixed. Cereal crops included wheat, barley, oats, maslin, mancorn, and peas, while livestock comprised sheep, cows, pigs, and poultry. Orchards supplied fruit, and some tenants kept bees, while furze, fern, and thorns were gathered from Swerford heath.³⁴ Arable was increasing at the expense of pasture by the early 17th century.³⁵ Trees were carefully conserved, and in 1540 Swerford park (or that part kept in hand) contained 21 a. of coppice wood, of which 9 a. was ready to sell at 6s. 8d. per acre; another 8 a. was pasture worth 8d. per acre, with 3 a. of meadow worth 2s. per acre.³⁶ At Showell, there was a continued emphasis on grazing: in 1635 the local farmer Ralph Marshall kept 500 sheep in 'Showell grounds', and Thomas Skay, lessee of Shipton-under-Wychwood's prebendal estate, apparently another 100.³⁷ The market network incorporated nearby Oxfordshire and Warwickshire villages, as well as Chipping Norton and Banbury.³⁸



³² *Ibid.* encl. award and map; above, landscape (built character).

³³ OHC, MS Archd. Oxon. b 41, f. 121; *ibid.* encl. award and map; above, landscape (built character), for Church House.

³⁴ OHC, MSS Wills Oxon., Swerford inventories, e.g. 20/1/6; 59/1/39; 22/2/1; 129/1/45; 133/1/8; TNA, PROB 11/368/391; *Oxf. Ch. Ct. Deposns 1589–93*, pp. 63–4.

³⁵ OHC, MS Archd. Oxon. b 41, f. 121.

³⁶ *Ibid.* M110/E/1.

³⁷ *Oxf. Ch. Ct. Deposns 1634–9*, p. 26.

³⁸ e.g. OHC, MSS Wills Oxon. 20/1/6; 3/2/43; *Oxf. Ch. Ct. Deposns 1589–93*, pp. 63–4.

Farming since 1800

Enclosure of Swerford's open fields in 1803 was promoted by the rector Nicholas Earle and the Travell family. The rector was allotted 195 a. in lieu of tithes, and soon afterwards established Heath farm on land allotted in the north-east of the parish. Ferdinando Travell received 286 a. for 16½ yardlands, consolidating his block of land south of the village.³⁹ By 1841 there were 11 farms, of which nine were held by tenant farmers. Showell farm and one other were run by bailiffs, but ten years later were also leased.⁴⁰ The Whalley (formerly Travell) estate included much 'good turnip and barley land', the stronger soils producing good crops of wheat and beans. There was also some good dairy land, and timber was plentiful (presumably in small stands and hedgerows), though the farmsteads were old and unsuitable.⁴¹ Showell township had 640 a. arable, 126 a. grass, and 7 a. wood in 1843.⁴²

In 1861 the two largest farms were Coldharbour and Showell (400 a. and 370 a. respectively), occupied by John Badger and John Bury. Pomfret Castle farm (run by Elizabeth Badger) was 208 a., four other farms between 125 a. and 168 a., and four more 38 a. to 96 a.⁴³ Henry Golding held the 168-a. Fox Hill farm (which included land south and east of the village) for £398 a year, and William Golding the 166-a. Cradle and Lands farms (mainly in Hook Norton) for the much lower rent of £280.⁴⁴ There appears to have been a surplus of agricultural labour, some inhabitants presumably seeking work in neighbouring parishes.⁴⁵ In 1870 Badger paid £418 a year for Coldharbour farm (then 429 a.) and Bury £406 for the 351-a. Showell farm.⁴⁶ During the late 19th-century agricultural recession rents were reduced and some farmers failed, though sheep-corn farming continued alongside the usual shift to pasture and dairying.⁴⁷

By the beginning of the 20th century several farms had been divided up, Rectory and Holywell into numerous parts, probably reflecting a lack of tenants for large holdings. Coldharbour farm (368 a.) remained intact, but Showell farm (391 a.) was split between two tenants.⁴⁸ In 1900 the 83-a. Swerford heath farm included productive turnip and barley land

³⁹ Swerford Enclosure Act, 42 Geo. III c. 61 (1802): copy in OHC; *ibid.* Swerford enclosure award and map.

⁴⁰ TNA, HO 107/879/18; HO 107/1732.

⁴¹ Ch. Ch. Arch. MS Estates 82, f. 280.

⁴² OHC, Showell tithe award.

⁴³ TNA, RG 9/912

⁴⁴ Ch. Ch. Arch. MS Estates 82, f. 288 and v.; *ibid.* Swerford A, no. 2; Bodl. MS C17.49 (120).

⁴⁵ *Oxon. Atlas*, p. 117.

⁴⁶ *Sale Cat., The Heythrop Park Estate* (1870), copy in OHC.

⁴⁷ Ch. Ch. Arch. Swerford A, nos. 4–9; *ibid.* MS Estates 82, ff. 328--30; Orr, *Oxon. Agric.*, statistical plates.

⁴⁸ OHC, DV/X/62.

but very poor pasture, and much of the rest of the glebe farmland was in a neglected condition.⁴⁹ The effects of agricultural depression continued in the 1930s, when the rector struggled to collect farm rents.⁵⁰ By the early 1940s Swerford was described as a parish of 'bad farming', partly because although land was ploughed up for crops many farmers lacked knowledge of arable farming. The 368-a. Coldharbour farm had been almost all grass before the war and had an indifferent water supply and lack of skilled labour. At Showell farm (419 a.) J.V. Rose kept 284 breeding ewes alongside 86 very good dairy cattle. The closest railway station was at Hook Norton but many farmers preferred to use Chipping Norton's because the route was less steep.⁵¹

During the later 20th century arable was expanded at the expense of dairying, with barley coming to predominate; at the same time sheep numbers fell.⁵² In the 1970s–80s David Barbour combined conservation efforts with profitable mixed farming on his c.350-a. Heath farm, keeping pigs and growing cereals, rape, and potatoes. By 1993, however, falling profits prompted him to diversify by converting redundant cattle sheds to holiday accommodation.⁵³ At that time several farms were still based in Swerford (which had five holdings over 30 ha.), but by the early 21st century farmers almost all operated from neighbouring parishes.⁵⁴

Non-Agricultural Activities

Mill In 1086 Swerford manor had a watermill worth 6s. a year, presumably by the Swere.⁵⁵ Two mills which Henry d'Oilly confirmed to Peter son of Herbert with Swerford manor in 1226 may, however, have been the separate Hook Norton mill on the north bank, since Hook Norton's inhabitants were obliged to grind corn there.⁵⁶ A mill remained attached to Swerford manor in 1540, when it was leased with Bury close and a house (possibly Griffin House) for 43s. 2d. a year for 40 years, and a later lessee was mentioned in 1583.⁵⁷ If that was Hook Norton mill it was detached from Swerford manor before the 1750s, however, when it was owned by the duke of Marlborough and run by the Colegrove family, continuing into the early

⁴⁹ Ibid. MS dd Par Swerford b 10.

⁵⁰ Ibid. MS Oxf. Dioc. c 2036

⁵¹ TNA, MAF 32/919/100. For local retailing of milk: M. Stockford, *All Our Yesterdays at Swerford* (2009), 9.

⁵² TNA, MAF 68/5189; MAF 68/6123.

⁵³ *Banbury Guardian*, 31 Oct. 1985; *Oxford Mail*, 1 Sept. 1993.

⁵⁴ TNA, MAF 68/6123 (1988); Robson, 'Blue Row History'.

⁵⁵ DB, f. 161.

⁵⁶ *Cur. Reg.* XII, p. 357; above, Hook Norton, econ. hist. (mills). The 'two mills' were most likely a single double mill.

⁵⁷ OHC, M110/E/1 (lessee Ralph Hawes); *Oxon. Wills*, p. 145 (Hen. Edes); above, landscape etc. (built character).

20th century.⁵⁸ At Showell, a disused mill pond south-east of Showell Farm was marked on late 19th- and early 20th-century maps,⁵⁹ although no evidence of a mill is known.

Crafts and Retailing Thirteenth-century Showell bynames included mason and tailor,⁶⁰ and in 1425 John Eburton the younger ‘of Swerford’ was a mercer.⁶¹ Swerford was predominantly agricultural, however, and little evidence has been found before the 16th century for rural trade or industry. In 1581 the fuller William Ward owed 2*ş*. 6*d*. to a Charlbury dyer, and in 1612 John Hale owned two weaving looms, one for wool and one for linen.⁶² A mason and a well-off slater were active during the 17th century, both trades continuing in the early 20th.⁶³ In 1801 only 15 inhabitants were employed in trade or handicraft,⁶⁴ but in 1841 there were seven masons, a builder, two slaters, and three carpenters, as well as a blacksmith, a cabinet maker, two tailors, and two shoemakers. Retail was represented by two grocers, a coal merchant, and a general dealer.⁶⁵ Craft and building work petered out in the 1920s.⁶⁶ In the mid 20th century a butcher and a baker from Hook Norton delivered to Swerford, and hardware and paraffin van came from Shipston-on-Stour (Warks.).⁶⁷ In 2021 nine businesses were based at Heath Farm (including a motorcycle dealership and two joiners), where holiday cottages were also let.⁶⁸

A single victualler operated from the 17th to the late 18th century, usually from The Griffin by the river, although in 1781 John Langham also had premises called The Chequer.⁶⁹ In the earlier to mid 19th century there was a second village pub, The Fox in East End; the premises were mortgaged to the Banbury brewer Richard Austin, and in 1831 were purchased by the Chipping Norton wine merchant William Simkins Hitchman, but the pub closed in the 1870s.⁷⁰ The Masons’ Arms was built on the Banbury road in 1831, possibly by Hitchman, and in 1910 was owned by the Banbury brewer Dunnell and Sons.⁷¹ It continued

⁵⁸ Above, Hook Norton, econ. hist. (mills). Jefferys, *Oxon. Map* (1767) shows only Hook Norton mill.

⁵⁹ e.g. OS Map 1:2500, Oxon. XV.5 (1881 and 1922 edns).

⁶⁰ *Eynsham Cart.* I, 217; *Rot. Hund.* II, 875.

⁶¹ *Cal. Pat.* 1422–9, 305.

⁶² OHC, MSS Wills Oxon. 69/1/21 (Ward, inventory worth £8 18*s*. 8*d*.); 297/4/50 (Hale, £4 9*s*. 2*d*.).

⁶³ *Ibid.* 299/5/14 (Thos. Palmer, mason, 1629, £11 14*s*. 8*d*.); 23/1/33 (Wm Franklin, slater, 1666, £215 13*s*. 10*d*., incl. £160 in bonds and bills); Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, ER15/15/2; TNA, HO 107/879; RG 13/1400.

⁶⁴ *Census*, 1801.

⁶⁵ TNA, HO 107/879.

⁶⁶ *Kelly’s Dir. Oxon.* (1883 and later edns).

⁶⁷ Stockford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 1.

⁶⁸ VCH fieldwork, May 2021.

⁶⁹ TNA, PROB 11/254/46 (John Heywood, 1656); OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 132/3/28 (Geo. Haynes, 1684); *ibid.* QSD/V/1–3.

⁷⁰ OHC, Flick V/i/1–13; *Lascelles’ Oxon. Dir.* (1853); *Melville’s Dir. Oxon.* (1867); TNA, RG 10/1458.

⁷¹ Brooks, *Pevsner N&W*, 511; OHC, DV/X/62; local information.

in 2020 as a gastropub called The Boxing Hare, though the Griffin, which was said to have little trade in 1859, closed in the early 1960s.⁷²



⁷² *Oxford Mail*, 14 Mar. 1998; 31 May 2000; Ch. Ch. Arch. MS Estates 82, f. 282v.; local information.