

VCH Oxfordshire Texts in Progress

Swerford and Showell

Social History

Social Character and Communal Life

Until the late 19th century the parish supported a predominantly agricultural community, which in the Middle Ages comprised mainly unfree villeins and a small number of free tenants. Showell's population was in decline before the Black Death, however, and probably by the 16th century the township supported just a couple of large enclosed farms. From c.1550 local society was sometimes headed by resident gentry, but more usually by the rector and a handful of leading farmers. From an early date Swerford village had a strong connection with the neighbouring hamlet of Southrop in Hook Norton parish, not least because of manorial links.

The Middle Ages

In 1086 Swerford and Showell had a fairly typical mix of *villani*, *bordarii*, and slaves, although before the Conquest some tenants at Showell were evidently free since 'they could go as they wished'. Unusually, two English landholders also retained sizeable estates there after the Conquest.¹ The two settlements were then of almost equal size, Showell's relative independence reflected in its acquisition of a parochial chapel by the 13th century,² while in 1231 'the men of Showell' oversaw the placement of stones to mark a piece of meadow granted to Reading abbey, suggesting communal organization and a modest village élite.³ By 1279 Swerford had three times as many tenants, however, and in 1316 Showell was 'small and poor'.⁴ The populations of both places then mainly comprised unfree tenants owing labour services, although some landowners were locally based, amongst them the Dunthrop family (from nearby Heythrop) and, in the early 14th century, John de Hadlow, lessee of Swerford manor.⁵ Visible signs of lordship included the manorial complex by the river, the walled park extending into Hook Norton, and (earlier) the 11th- or 12th-century

¹ DB, ff. 156v., 157, 161.

² Below, relig. hist.

³ Kemp (ed.), *Reading Abbey Cartularies*, I, pp. 401–2.

⁴ *Rot. Hund.* II, 726–7, 875; *Feudal Aids*, IV, 164.

⁵ *VCH Oxon.* XI, 136; TNA, E 179/161/10, rot. 10d.; E 179/161/8, rot. 3 m. 2; E 179/161/9, rot. 1.

motte-and-bailey castle guarding the river crossing.⁶ Manor courts may have brought Swerford tenants together with their fellows from neighbouring Southrop, which was also usually taxed with Swerford.⁷

After the Black Death customary tenants at Swerford acquired larger holdings,⁸ and probably manorial authority weakened. Enclosure at Showell was presumably facilitated by further depopulation and, despite local opposition and hedge-breaking, much of the township was eventually turned into a sheep run.⁹ By the late 15th and early 16th century, in the absence of a resident lord, the Hall family (owners of the Lyons estate) were prominent in Swerford, their arms displayed both in the house and on a now lost monument in the church.¹⁰ Richard Hall (d. 1508) married a daughter of Sir Edmund Read of Boarstall (Bucks.),¹¹ and in 1524 Anthony Hall (d. 1530), the last of the Swerford branch of the family, was one of the better-off inhabitants, taxed on £13 6s. 8d.¹² Local people enjoyed regular contact with surrounding settlements, and some had connections in places further afield,¹³ while a church house mentioned in 1540 may have hosted church ales in the later Middle Ages.¹⁴ Occasional violence by outsiders included the robbery of the rector and murder of his servant in 1350 by a band of thieves.¹⁵

c. 1535–1800

In the 16th and 17th centuries the parish's major landowners seldom resided, although the Pope and latterly the Brideoake families both had a local presence, the former based at Wroxton and the latter at Tadmarton (each 6–7 miles away).¹⁶ The Travell family established themselves at Swerford House in 1692, and thereafter presumably exercised considerable local influence, John Travell (d. 1745) serving as high sheriff in 1717–18 and augmenting a small local charity.¹⁷ The lordship of Swerford belonged from 1775 to the owners of Swerford Park, albeit with little land outside the park itself.¹⁸ Edward Witts rebuilt the house there and

⁶ Above, landownership (castle and manor ho.); econ. hist. (agric. landscape).

⁷ Below, local govt; TNA, E 179/161/8, rot. 3 m. 2; E 179/161/9, rot. 1–1d.; E 179/161/170, rot 4d.

⁸ For tenant holdings in 1540, above, econ. hist.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Cat. Anct. Deeds*, III, D 978; TNA, C 1/322/32; *Oxon. Visit.* 14, 270–1; *Par. Colln*, III, 293.

¹¹ A. Adams, *The Elkington Family in England and America* (1945), 9–12.

¹² TNA, E 179/161/170, rot. 4d; OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 178.18.

¹³ e.g. *Cal Close* 1392–6, 369; *Cat. Anct. Deeds*, III, D 500; *L&P Hen. VIII*, IV, p. 1152; OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 178.18.

¹⁴ Below, relig. hist. (Middle Ages).

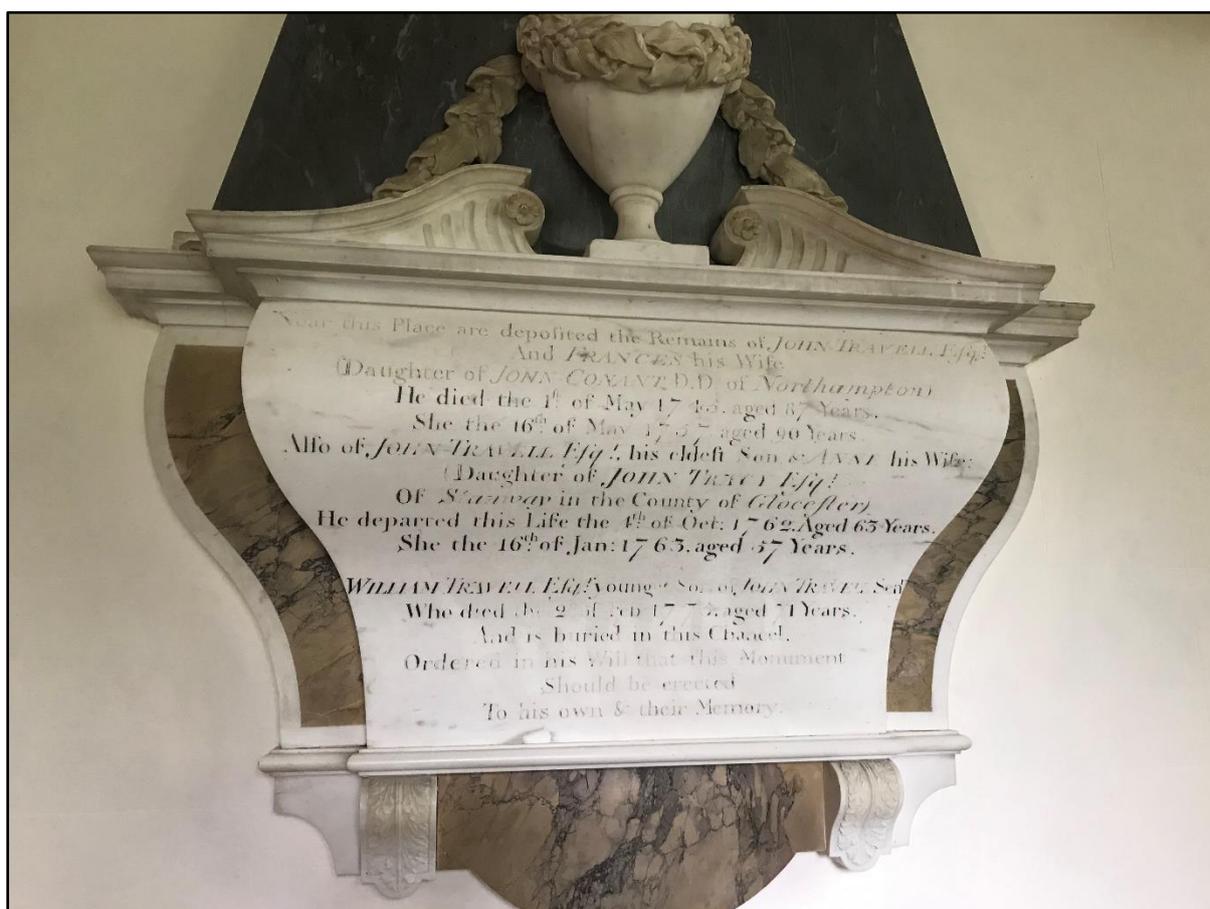
¹⁵ TNA, SC 8/226/11274; *Cal. Pat.* 1350–4, 17.

¹⁶ *VCH Oxon.* IX, 152, 176. From 1705 the Talbots (purchasers of the Showell estate) had their seat at neighbouring Heythrop: *VCH Oxon.* XI, 134.

¹⁷ Peters, *High Sheriffs*, 146 and addenda; below (welfare).

¹⁸ For manor courts, below, local govt.

was high sheriff in 1779–80,¹⁹ but his ‘unprecedented claims’ as lord aroused considerable opposition from the rector John Jones (d. 1779) and other inhabitants. In 1776–8 Witts felled trees and cut turves on the commons (where he had no common rights), claimed possession of open-field land customarily used to pay the fieldsmen’s expenses, and attempted to make the parish liable to repair the road through west field, which he wished to use for his carriage. Jones successfully frustrated those efforts, calling out the manorial jury to identify and restore merestones marking glebe land around the parsonage house to prevent ‘future encroachments’.²⁰



The Travell family memorial in the church.

As the Witts case suggests, much day-to-day influence fell to the rector (when resident) and the leading farmers, the latter occupying the main parish offices.²¹ Amongst

¹⁹ Above, landownership; Peters, *High Sheriffs*, 154 and addenda. Witts moved to Swerford from Salford in 1777, once his house was completed.

²⁰ OHC, MS dd Par. Swerford b 1, ff. 29 and v., 47 and v.; *ibid.* MS Oxf. Dioc. c 456, f. 60.

²¹ *Ibid.* MS Archd Oxon. c 107; *ibid.* MS dd Par. Swerford b 8

the wealthiest farmers was John Humphries (d. 1681), a yeoman who occupied a substantial house with a parlour, and who left assets worth £366 (including £120 owed him).²² The bulk of the population comprised small-scale tenants, cottagers, and labourers who were much less well off, reflected in a median later 17th-century probate value of £64,²³ while two thirds of those paying hearth tax in 1662 were assessed on only one or two hearths, compared with just under a fifth on four or five.²⁴ Amongst the poorer people making wills was Roger Hudson (d. 1557), described as a 'beggar'.²⁵ Longstanding families included those of Haynes, Buggie alias Hosier, Ward, and Gibberd, the last being resident from the late 16th century to the 19th.²⁶ As elsewhere there was much turnover of population, especially amongst servants and young people, with Chipping Norton amongst the outward destinations of migrants.²⁷ Regular contact took place across the Warwickshire boundary.²⁸

Social life is poorly recorded, but by the 17th century presumably focused in part on the village alehouse (The Griffin).²⁹ Other gathering points included the cross where tithe milk was collected, and the pound and well in East End.³⁰ Local gentry and clergy socialised together, and the diary of Agnes Witts (née Travell) shows a preoccupation with visits to family and friends, and with social events in Cheltenham, London, and Bath, as well as at nearby Blenheim Palace and Woodstock. Agnes' husband Edward continued his wool business in Chipping Norton until it failed in 1793.³¹

Since 1800

In the early 19th century Swerford's population comprised mainly farmers, craftsmen, and agricultural labourers.³² The gentry households based at Swerford House and Swerford Park indulged in fishing and shooting, their leisure companions including local clergy;³³

²² TNA, PROB 4/10639; PROB 11/368. Possibly he lived (like his descendants) in Ash Hill Farmhouse at East End, which may be of early 18th-cent. date: OHC, encl. award and map; NHLE, no. 1052491.

²³ Based on 22 inventories dated 1661–99: OHC, MSS Wills Oxon., Swerford inventories.

²⁴ TNA, E179/164/504, rot. 63d. One of two houses with five hearths was the rectory house.

²⁵ OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 182.40.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Swerford wills; *PO Dir. Oxon.* (1854).

²⁷ *Oxf. Ch. Ct. Deposns 1589–93*, pp. 63–4; 1592–6, p. 16; 1609–16, p. 2; 1634–9, pp. 16–17, 26.

²⁸ e.g. *ibid.* 1589–93, p. 5; OHC, MSS Wills Oxon. 29/4/63.

²⁹ Above, econ. hist. (crafts and retailing).

³⁰ For the cross, *Oxf. Ch. Ct. Deposns 1589–93*, p. 64; for pound and well: OHC, encl. award and map (near no. 34) and OS Map 1:2500, Oxon. XV.1 (1881 and later edns).

³¹ A. Sutton (ed.), *The Complete Diary of a Cotswold Lady, Vol. 1: The Lady of Rodborough, 1788–1793* (2008), 36, 41, 44–5, 52–3, 84–5, 87–92, 92, 115–25, 133, 141, 236–8; below (welfare).

³² Above, econ. hist.

³³ e.g. G. Smedley-Stevenson ed., *Early Victorian Squarson: The Diaries of William Cotton Risley Vicar of Deddington ... Part One 1835–1848* (Banbury Hist. Soc. 29, 2007), 15, 66, 95, 121, 149, 181, 220; *Wilb. Dioc. Bks*, 11 (calling Swerford's rector James Chambers an 'old sportsman'), 85. For the families, above, landownership.

fragmented landownership limited their direct influence as landlords, but Samuel Davis of Swerford Park supported the village school, while (less positively) the long-serving rector Thomas Harris (1849–95) won some notoriety for his conduct as a local JP.³⁴ By the 1850s some farm tenants (as well as domestic servants in the gentry houses and larger farmhouses) came from outside the county, but most others were born in Swerford or nearby parishes.³⁵ Swerford was then described as ‘beautifully situate in a wooded dell’,³⁶ but poor housing remained common, including several ‘wretched’ cottages,³⁷ and petty crime amongst labourers included poaching and theft.³⁸ By 1901 some inhabitants found employment in Hook Norton’s ironstone works, but the loss of farming jobs brought a fall in population.³⁹

During the First World War 35 Swerford men enlisted and six were killed, commemorated on a simple limestone obelisk opposite the church.⁴⁰ Swerford was then viewed as in some respects an ‘old world’ parish, its population generally poor,⁴¹ and in 1933 it was ‘very small and struggling’ without ‘a single rich person’, with ‘several men out of work’.⁴² As late as 1939 there were only four private residents including the rector,⁴³ but by the 1960s and 1970s the parish began to attract well-off incomers lured by the village’s ‘romantic site’ and ‘unspoilt’ character.⁴⁴ Most late 20th-century inhabitants worked outside the parish or from home, with commuters travelling to local towns or even to London,⁴⁵ and in 2011 43 per cent of working residents were in managerial or professional occupations. Twenty-five per cent of the housing stock was usually empty (probably mostly representing second homes), and there was just one council house.⁴⁶

A Friendly Society started in 1895 was based at The Masons’ Arms and later at the school, attracting as many as 79 members by 1910. It closed in or after the 1920s, when May Day and Club Day celebrations in June were a social highlight.⁴⁷ After the school’s closure in 1936 part of the building became as a village hall, which was renovated in 1990–1

³⁴ Above, landownership; below (educ.); below, relig. hist.

³⁵ TNA, HO 107/1732; RG 9/912.

³⁶ *Gardner’s Dir. Oxon.* (1852).

³⁷ Ch. Ch. Arch. MS Estates 82, f. 282v.

³⁸ e.g. OHC, QS1839/1/L1/11; QS1841/4/L3/16; QS1844/4/L1/137.

³⁹ TNA, RG 13/1400; above, landscape etc. (popn); econ. hist.

⁴⁰ NHLE, no. 1391555.

⁴¹ *Gore’s Visit.* 301, 550.

⁴² OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. c 2036, 1933 faculty applicn to move organ; *ibid* letter of 1934 (mostly ‘labouring folk’). For younger people moving away for work and a lack of mains water before the mid 1960s: M. Stockford, *All Our Yesterdays at Swerford* (2009), 1–2, 22.

⁴³ *Kelly’s Dir. Oxon.* (1939).

⁴⁴ J. Piper, *Oxfordshire: A Shell Guide* (1953), 58; *Country Life*, 12 Oct. 1972, 20; 25 Sept. 1980, 1071; Stockford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 17.

⁴⁵ *Swerford: A Village Guide*; local information. For a Swerford-based architect and an author writing in the village hall, *Banbury Guardian*, 23 Sept. 1993; 4 Jan. 1996.

⁴⁶ *Census*, 2011. There were originally two: Stockford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 2, 25.

⁴⁷ *Oxon. FS*, pp. 273–4; *Banbury Guardian*, 17 Jan. 1980; *Swerford: A Village Guide*.

and continued in 2020.⁴⁸ A parish council playing field at Between Towns was established in the mid 20th century,⁴⁹ and a Women's Institute shared with Wigginton ran from 1965 to 2013.⁵⁰

Education

In the 16th century and later some better off inhabitants made arrangements for the education of their children outside the parish.⁵¹ An Anglican Sunday school established c.1787 had 40 pupils in 1819, when 24 children also attended three small dame schools,⁵² and by 1835 the day schools were attended by 41 boys and 24 girls, 11 of the children paid for by private individuals and the rest by their parents.⁵³ By then a proper school room was 'much wanted', and c.1850 Samuel Davis of Swerford Park gave a house (later called Church House) for conversion into a National school and became its chief subscriber.⁵⁴ Four years later there were c.45 pupils compared with 60 at the Anglican Sunday school,⁵⁵ and in 1871 capacity was increased from 66 to 82 by addition of a new east wing.⁵⁶ A new infants' classroom provided in 1904 took the total accommodation to c.97, and was paid for by a voluntary rate because inhabitants wished to avoid a school board.⁵⁷ Early 20th-century reports were mainly good, despite ongoing problems with lighting and ventilation, and a poorly surfaced playground.⁵⁸ By the 1910s, however, numbers were falling, and in 1928 the transfer of the senior pupils to Hook Norton left the school with only 16 children aged 5–10.⁵⁹ In 1936 the school closed with just four pupils, and thereafter primary-age children attended schools in Hook Norton or elsewhere.⁶⁰ The closest state secondary school was in Chipping Norton.⁶¹

⁴⁸ OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. c. 2036; *Swerford Village Hall: Its Future in Our Hands* (1990): pamphlet in OHC; *Oxford Mail*, 12 Feb. 1991; www.communityfirstoxon.org/swerford-village-hall (accessed 2020). Church House became a private residence.

⁴⁹ Stockford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 25; 'Swerford PC Register of Assets, Oct. 2018': available (2020) at www.wospweb.com/site/Swerford.

⁵⁰ OHC, O3/2/157.

⁵¹ e.g. in 1583 Henry Edes, lessee of Swerford mill, made provision for his daughter: OHC, MS Wills Oxon 20/1/6.

⁵² OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. c 327, p. 114; *Educ. of Poor Digest*, 731. In 1810 it was supported by a £5 bequest: TNA, CHAR 2/224.

⁵³ *Educ. Enq. Abstract* (Parl. Papers 1835 (62), xlii), p. 755.

⁵⁴ OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. b 41, f. 215v.; *ibid.* CC4/203/1; *ibid.* S263/1/Y1/1; Ch.Ch. Arch. MS Estates 82, f. 297 and v.; TNA, HO 107/1732; *Gardner's Dir. Oxon.* (1852); *PO Dir. Oxon.* (1854).

⁵⁵ *Wilb. Visit.* 145.

⁵⁶ TNA, ED 21/14557; ED 103/113/25; OHC, CC4/203/1; Ch.Ch. Arch. MS Estates 82, f. 326; *Returns relating to Elem. Educ.* (Parl. Papers 1871 (201), lv), pp. 326–7; Brooks, *Pevsner N&W*, 510.

⁵⁷ TNA, ED 21/14557; Ch.Ch. Arch. MS Estates 82, ff. 345--6v.; OHC, POX0579980 (1904 plan).

⁵⁸ OHC, CC4/203/7–9.

⁵⁹ TNA, ED 21/14557; ED 21/38092; *Gore's Visit.* 549; OHC, CC4/203/9.

⁶⁰ TNA, ED 21/38092; Stockford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 20 (Wigginton).

⁶¹ OHC, S137/1/A3/1.



Swerford's former school, the master's house in the centre and the wing now used as the village hall to the right.

Welfare

Numerous small one-off bequests to the poor were made in the 16th and 17th centuries,⁶² and a loan fund for the parish poor existed by 1530 when Anthony Hall contributed 20s.⁶³ The rector William Hollins (d. 1634) charged land called Cradles (in Hook Norton) with a 10s. annuity for the poor,⁶⁴ while John Travell (d. 1745), who acquired part of Cradles, augmented the annuity by 10s., so that 20 poor householders were paid 1s. a year. Beneficiaries were to be chosen by the minister, churchwardens, and overseers of the poor, or by the owner of Lyons Place (known later as Swerford House).⁶⁵

Such initiatives raised only modest sums, and from the 17th century the overseers presumably collected parish poor rates on the usual pattern, providing clothing, fuel, cottage rents, and nursing.⁶⁶ Following a national trend, expenditure increased from £59 in 1776 to

⁶² OHC, MSS Wills Oxon., Swerford wills: e.g. 3/2/43 (Thos Brown, 1588, giving barley to eight individuals).

⁶³ *Ibid.* MS Wills Oxon. 178.18.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 132/1/10; *ibid.* MS dd Par. Swerford c 2, f. 31v.; *Secker's Visit.* 156.

⁶⁵ TNA, PROB 11/740/137 (also leaving leather gloves to every parishioner big enough to wear them); *ibid.* CHAR 2/224; *ibid.* MS dd Par. Swerford b 1, f. 3; OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. d 565, f. 179v.; *Char. Don.* 982–3. The charity was amalgamated with another (unspecified) one in 1992: Char. Com. website (accessed 2020), no. 220052.

⁶⁶ Overseers' accounts survive only for 1764–79 and 1832–48: OHC, MSS dd Par. Swerford b 8; c 4.

£190 in 1803, when 40 people (including 19 children) received regular out-relief.⁶⁷ That year the poor were allotted 20 a. at enclosure, the rent from which (£38 15s. by 1871) was spent on coal.⁶⁸ By 1813, when 35 adults were relieved permanently and five occasionally, poor expenditure stood at £439, rising to a post-war peak of £674 in 1819, then falling to £527 the following year.⁶⁹ Between 1825 and 1834 annual expenditure was between £374 and £471,⁷⁰ until primary responsibility passed in 1835 to the newly established Chipping Norton Poor Law Union.⁷¹ A clothing club established before 1860 was supported by the main landowners, and in the 1890s Swerford became part of a new North Oxfordshire Benefit Nursing Association, along with Hook Norton and Rollright.⁷²

⁶⁷ *Poor Abstract, 1804*, pp. 402--3.

⁶⁸ OHC, Swerford enclo. award; TNA, CHAR 2/224; *Char. Digest*, 58–9. The land was used for allotments in the 1970s but is no longer parish property.

⁶⁹ *Poor Abstract, 1818*, pp. 356–7; *Poor Rate Retns, 1822*, p. 137.

⁷⁰ *Poor Rate Retns, 1825*, p. 172; 1830, p. 159; 1835, p. 155.

⁷¹ *Oxon. Atlas*, pp. 144–5.

⁷² Ch.Ch. Arch. MS Estates 82, ff. 297v., 302, 333–9.