

Stoke Gabriel – a little history

Given its unique waterside setting and the highly unusual variety of its underlying geology there should be no surprise that Stoke Gabriel has a rich and interesting history. As is commonly the case, there is precious little evidence to go on until late medieval times and there is no single scholastic work to draw upon. But from various sources we can adduce the following.

The earliest enduring evidence of settlement in the parish is a group of low stone walls and ditches on a limestone outcrop to the east of Lower Well farmhouse. This dates from the 2nd century AD and is the remains of a Romano-British fortified farmstead, probably housing an extended family. The site is well chosen, with commanding views all round and a permanent spring nearby. Pottery shards indicate that the Celtic residents had trading contact with Roman merchants in the more substantially occupied areas of Devon to the east. But this rare survival should not be taken to mean that the area was very sparsely populated because dwellings were normally constructed of timber, generally coppice wood. Fast forward a moment to 1086, the year of the Domesday survey, and we see that the area of Devon covered by woodland (including wood pasture) was a mere four per cent (Rackham, 1986, p. 78). It is inconceivable that between the Roman occupation and the Norman conquest vast areas of woodland were cleared in Stoke Gabriel parish by the native British or later the Anglo Saxons. More likely, most of the parish was already pasture or cultivated land, enough to support a population in the low hundreds during the period of the Roman occupation. Much of the patchwork of field boundaries that we see today, formed by hedges and stone-faced banks, has ancient origins.

South Devon was the last area of the county to be brought under Saxon control in the early eighth century (Hoskins, 2003). There are hints of a small Saxon church on the site of the present building and we can assume there was a settlement around it as well as minor outlying settlements in the parish. In early medieval times there would surely have been a more substantial community based on farming, fishing and quarrying, large enough to create the earliest stone church of which the late Norman tower survives. From this period we have two other pieces of notable heritage. At the southern end of the parish, near Waddeton Quarries, there are the remains of early medieval fish traps, the result of a gift of land and fishing rights to the Canons of Torre Abbey by Lady Isabella de Wadestone. The quarries themselves have an important history, reputedly the source of the Permian red sandstone used for the tower of St Mary's Church, Totnes in the 15th century¹. At first sight this seems implausible since the current exposed faces of the quarries are all of earlier Devonian limestone. However, there are other sites within Stoke Gabriel parish (Hoyle Copse and Lembury) where pockets of red sandstone existed and were exploited for building stone, some of it for the parish church.

More outstanding is the Mill Pool, contained by a stone-faced rubble dam and supporting two tidal corn mills for many centuries. There was a tide mill in Dartmouth (on the site of the current Foss Street) before 1243 and, given the more favourable site and much larger catchment area at Stoke Gabriel, it is highly likely that the dam and its two mills at Stoke

were built at around the same time or even earlier¹. The dam and Mill Pool were never owned by the Duchy of Cornwall, which has owned the foreshore and fundus outside the dam since 1337, according to the head of the Duchy legal department. The Mill Pool dam is thus an important part of the parish's early heritage and the two corn mills on it would have supported a substantial area of farmland and dependant population.

Although the Norman conquest and its aftermath led to the spread of substantial stone buildings where timber construction had been universal, perhaps a greater change in the parish was in the pattern of land holding. The Saxons had established a pattern of villages with extensively cultivated "infield" and communally-held pasture and open fields, the "outfield". (Place names and early maps suggest there were at least two such open fields in the parish, near Lower Well farm and near Waddeton.) Much of this was disrupted after the Norman conquest, with the Crown and the Church controlling most of the land area, the former by gifts to loyal henchmen and the latter in the form of the manor of Paignton within the see of Exeter. The Waddeton and Sandridge estates have survived from this early medieval period, but the bulk of the parish came within the manor of Paignton, controlled by the Earls of Pembroke after the dissolution of the monasteries.

As we have seen, most of the parish was under agriculture, not ancient woodland, from early times and the mix between arable and pasture probably changed little over many hundreds of years, being the consequence of the different types of land. The construction of the tide mills was an important innovation that would support arable farming and a modest increase in population, but there were few technological innovations with a great impact in farming practices until the 18th century. A small exception was the introduction of the purposeful flooding of meadows by the building of temporary dams. This brought fresh silt to the "water meadows" and an early crop of lush grass. The derelict stone pillars of such a construction can be seen at Portbridge, just upstream of Pords Bridge itself. These are thought to be late Tudor, the start of the English Agricultural Revolution.

Besides those mentioned above, plus the Church House Inn (16th century) and including the greatly restored church in the 15th century, there are few surviving buildings in the parish until we come to the 17th century, most of the earlier dwellings being of timber or cob construction and less durable than stone. A row of cob and thatch cottages, probably of 16th or 17th century origin was demolished as recently as the 1960s to make way for Mill Hill Court. The adjacent Laurel Cottage is the sole survivor of this group and is listed by English Heritage as 17th century. Other surviving dwellings of that period include Sles, Mill House, Middle Well, King's Cottage, Wayside Cottage and Yarde (all listed Grade II). Of course, at this time there will have been many dwellings of earlier construction that have not survived and some that have survived to this day that have not been listed.

The nine listed buildings from the 18th century are mostly of rubble stone (mostly Devonian limestone quarried locally) but the grander ones include dressed limestone ashlar (Stoke Gabriel House, called Maisonet originally) and Stoke House. The village was clearly prospering and by the end of the 18th century the parish had over 500 inhabitants. The 1801 Census (the first comprehensive one since the Domesday Book) recorded the population as

¹ This view is supported by Risdon,

531, distributed among 96 families in 90 dwellings. Some 38% were recorded as employed in agriculture, considerably fewer than the average for Devon parishes, reflecting the variety of economic opportunities afforded by the parish's geology and its waterside location. Indeed, the 1815 census of property values for each household shows that Stoke Gabriel was the 81st most wealthy of the 475 parishes in Devon, putting it in the top 17%.

By the early 19th century prosperity had risen with the help of an improvement in the parish's roads. The turnpike road from Galmpton to Berry Pomeroy (via Waddeton Road, Lembury Road, Aish and Parliament Hill) would have improved the earlier parish-maintained road. (Sadly the Turnpike Trust records are lost, but the 1840 tithe map confirms that this route was a turnpike, as do the granite milestones along it.) Paignton Road was also a main highway to a substantial market for agricultural and horticultural produce, Paignton having a population of over 1500 in 1801. The foot ferry (abandoned after WWII) from Ashprington Point to Duncannon also provided a route for produce from further afield in the South Hams.

From 1801 to 1831 the parish population grew by 35% to 718. A few years later Parliament introduced the Tithe Commutation Act, forcing landowners to get their tenants to pay them in cash rather than kind (produce or services). This led to the surveying and recording of every single plot of land in the country and a systematic record of its acreage, ownership, name and usage. From this we have a detailed picture of Stoke Gabriel parish in 1840, from which the following table can be drawn.

Land use and ownership, 1840		
Land use	Percentage of land area:	Percentage of plots
Arable	43.8	
Pasture	26.1	
Meadow	2.0	
Orchard	5.3	
House and garden	1.2	
Firs and furze	2.5	
Quarry and waste	3.2	
Road	1.8	
Timber and wood	5.8	
River and beach	9.1	
Owner occupiers	19	22
Tennants	81	78

Land ownership	Acres	Plots
Parish total	2605	799
Largest private owners:		
Henry Studdy	641	187
John Jackson	345	137
Lord Cranston	250	42
Dymond Churchward	168	56
John Churchward	131	43
Sarah Douglas	103	29
Sir Robert Newman	94	17
William Colston	90	27
Richard Adams	89	31
The Church? Rev. Belfield, lessee, glebe land, of which:	337	46
River	140	1
Beach	96	1
Road	44	15
Agric. land	61	29

¹ Historic England, webpage on St Mary's, Totnes. See also WG Hoskins, Devon, p. 263.