

Village History

Introduction

The Domesday Book records the village as being Hohton Magna, Hohton being the Saxon name meaning Farmstead on a Spur. This more than adequately describes the village location together with its ability to both feed and defend itself. Furthermore the overriding necessity for water to sustain both animal and human life in the location seems to have been adequately provided by the existence of many springs and subsequently wells.

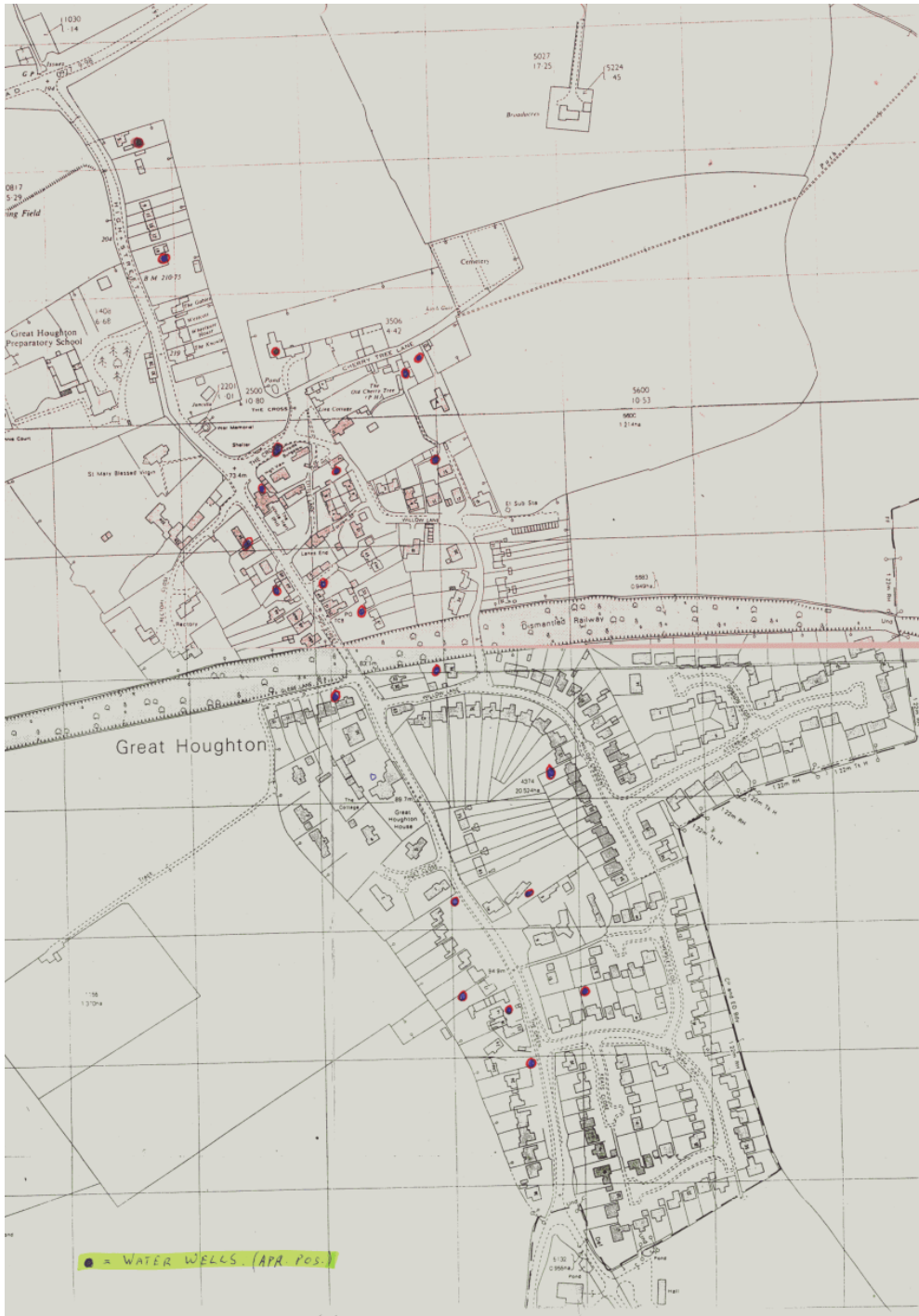
A glance at a modern map showing the known location of wells within the village boundary indicates the extent to which water was (and still is) available despite the village being many meters above the river level.

Water was usually carried from the well to the house by hand but in some cases forms of waterway were constructed to channel water to the more distant dwellings. One example was the provision of water by stone channels to the Hall and The Rectory from the well and pond adjacent to the farmhouse at what is now No1 Cherry Tree Lane. This stone channel was severed during the mains water installation in 1955 but could have been constructed as far back as Roman settlement times.

Further witness to springs resulting from natural drainage in the area is still evident in the Northeast corner of the Playing Field and in the disused railway cutting especially after heavy rainfall.

Thus there is every reason why a settlement was established in the area, finally culminating in the village we know today.

The parish lies on land sloping gently north towards the River Nene between 108m and 52m above sea level. The higher south and southeast parts are on boulder-clay; the centre is on limestone and sands, while to the west and north there are extensive areas of clay. There are broad tracts of gravel close to the river, some of which have been excavated in the past few years but the land has been returned to its former farming use although the 'ridge and furrow' element has been lost. As a result of modern boundary divisions (1974) the parish lost almost one half of its former area to Little Houghton to the east and now covers 370 hectares.



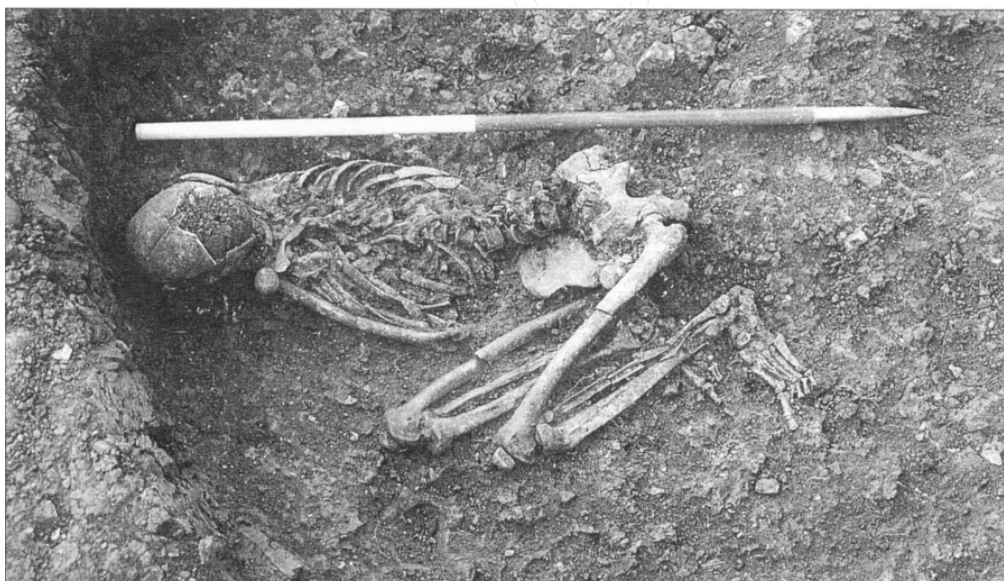
Modern Map of the Village showing at least 21 known locations of wells
Many more exist in the surrounding fields, which would have been used for
cattle

Prehistoric and Roman Findings

There are some archaeological finds of pre-historic nature, e.g. a ring ditch 150ft in diameter with worked flints and iron slag at the end of Glebe Lane, but nothing of great significance has been found.

There are numerous examples of Roman presence or even settlement in the area. Roman pottery and kiln debris were found in a drainage ditch near the Cherry Tree Inn (1959-1960), and Roman pottery, baked clay, and worked flints in ditches and fields near Great Houghton Lodge (1866). Immediately to the east of the village Roman pottery including Samian ware was found in a sewer trench.

When Anglian Water were digging a trench for a new water pipeline the remains of a woman were found and carbon dating showed that she probably lived over 2400 years ago. When dug up she was wearing a lead collar and the experts suggest that this was to keep her symbolically in the grave. They believe she may have been a feared woman for the powers she possessed and may have been buried alive as a witch. An alternative theory suggests that she was buried as an offering for future fertility after a disastrous harvest.



A further Saxon burial site unearthed up to 20 skeletons near the village. The graveyard was near an Iron Age village containing roundhouses, and paddocks for animals and dated from the seventh century. Many of the bones were broken suggesting a very hard life in those days although apparently there was also evidence of some of the injuries healing, suggesting that there may have been some form of medical attention even in those days.

Although there is little other archaeological evidence of Saxon settlement, the village was recorded in the Domesday survey in 1086 by the Normans as Hohton. This Saxon name means “farm or place on a spur of land”. It was distinguished from Little Houghton, which was probably established by a breakaway group by the 12th century. There were at least 10 alternative medieval spellings of the name.

The Medieval Village (The Manorial Descent)

The Manorial descent is unusually complicated. At Domesday the largest manor belonged to William Peverell, with Robert de Pavely as tenant. It descended with the Pavely family of Paulerspury until the early 15th century, when it changed hands several times, coming to William Tresham in 1448. After being forfeited and leased, the manor, now known as “Tresham Manor” descended to Francis Tresham (of the Gunpowder Plot), and then became the property of James Smith of Little Houghton in 1635.

Countess Judith was probably the other major Domesday landholder. In the 12th century some of her land was held by King David of Scotland, and by one “Simon”. By 1230 the property came to the de Houghton family, and upon his death in 1272 was split between three daughters of Simon de Houghton, Isabel, Christina and Joan. Isabel’s third was sold to her two sisters. After changing hands several times, Joan’s moiety came to the family of Parkes in 1407, who retained it until a descendant and heiress, Isabel, passed the property to her husband, Lewis Atterbury, in the late 16th century. He was Lord in 1612, and the Manor was variously called Houghton, Parke’s or Atterbury’s Manor.

The other part of the Manor, belonging to Christina de Houghton in 1272, was split between her three daughters in 1339, but all three parts were acquired by Henry Green of Drayton in the 1360’s. The Green’s land at Great Houghton was divided into two manors in the early 16th century - Vaux’s manor and Mordaunt’s manor. These were in the hands of Ferdinand Bawd and Daniel Ward by 1612, but by 1614 Vaux’s manor was absorbed into Tresham’s.

The manors had little real significance after 1612. Much of the land was acquired by Edward Bouverie of Delapre in the later 18th century and was dispersed again upon the death of his descendant Miss Mary Helen Bouverie in 1943.

No houses or sites relating to the other two manors (Vaux or Mordant) are identifiable physically or described in any surviving documents. However, the Vaux manor may have been in the vicinity of Cracknuts Lane. The manors were never large nor had they resident lords. It is unlikely that any substantial related building existed.

Great Houghton Hall (now a school) is on the site of the 17th century Atterbury Manor. In 1690 it had a dovecote. The site of Tresham Manor, already derelict by 1612, was in the Willow Crescent area.

In 1346 the early Pavely's Manor had two dovecotes, a windmill called Twygrist, and a watermill called Clak. The watermill probably stood on the brook east of the village, later called Hollowell, but whose upper reaches are still called Claxwells.

The Village Topography

The village was established on either side of a north-south road, Main Street, which split into two at its southern end. At the northern end there was a rectangular loop, East Lane (now lost), which ran down from The Cross to what is now the Bedford Road, and east of the central Main Street, (now High Street), another loop road was attached, known as Back Lane (now Willow Lane). The remains of East Lane are visible as a sunken lane behind the 'bus shelter at The Cross descending the field to the Bedford Road.

The original Parish boundary until recent years reflected the typical scarp land/lowland nature of the village. It was long and narrow with water meadows in the river valley to the north and the sheep grazing common land to the south. With an abundant supply of water from the many springs and wells on the north-facing slope, it made an excellent area in which to develop the various agricultural and allied trades and activities to support a community.

Fishponds lay to the east of the village in a shallow valley, intact until filled during 1978 by spoil from the Little Houghton by-pass roadworks. The village pound (animal enclosure) stood east of the Main Street, on part of The Green.

The medieval fields, an example of which is to be found at the end of Glebe Lane, show the result of medieval farming. The land was divided into long, narrow strips, (about 15 feet wide), and for almost 1000 years was ploughed by teams of oxen. The ridges developed from the constantly repeated action of turning the soil inwards to the centre of the strip. The ridges often appear to continue through hedges; this is because the activities of medieval farmers pre-date hedgerows by many centuries.

The headland was untitled land held in common at the head of the strips in the open fields where the plough was turned. Some headlands formed winding routes between fields - the forerunners of today's lanes.

Hollow ways were sunken lanes between higher fields resulting from treading by cattle and water erosion on a slope. An example can be seen near the public footpath that descends the field towards the Bedford Road behind the line of garages in Willow Lane.

Today the parish remains as an agricultural area, although most of it lies within the designated area of Greater Northampton. The meadows to the north have been partially excavated to form the Northampton Barrage Reservoir and some of the Brackmills industrial estate has spilled into the northwest corner.

History of the Village since Medieval Times

Apart from the brief manorial records little is known about the village until the late 16th century. It has to be assumed that the village was a normal agricultural community independent from the nearby town of Northampton. The first thing of importance about which something is known is the enclosure of the village lands.

The agricultural land of Great Houghton was enclosed by private agreement between fifteen parties in 1612, in plots varying in size from 3 to 280 acres. The enclosure seems to have been an improvement made by a few families since many of them were related. Most of the original enclosure hedges survive, although some of the larger plots were subsequently further divided.

At this time there was a fairly large area of woodland to the south of the parish that was probably part of the royal hunting forest of Salcey. None of this remains today and it has become agricultural land.

After the enclosures came the Civil War. Although Northampton was a Parliamentary stronghold and some battles took place in the area (Naseby, Cropredy Bridge) there is no strong evidence of any great affect on the village. Soldiers may have been billeted here as they were in Little Houghton.

The village was touched by the great plague of 1665 since the parish registers note that four London people died of it and also two villagers.

In 1826 the main road that passed through the parish was made a turnpike road, the Northampton to Cold Brafield Turnpike. One of the road's three turnpikes or tollgates was built in the parish. This stood to the west of where the unfenced road from Hardingstone joins the main road. The road remained a turnpike until well into the 19th century (the records from the baptism register mention a turnpike keeper in 1860). The tollgate remained until the early years of this century. After the closure of the turnpike the tollhouse must have fallen into ruin as the present building (Martins' farm?) was built this century.

Village life in Victorian times was full and enjoyable. The activities in the 1860's described below came from the Parish Almanac, which was replaced in 1901 by the Parish Magazine.

“There is a Coal and Clothing Club, a Sunday School Club, a Lending Library, a Benefit Club, a Cottage Gardeners’ Club, a Cricket Club, a staff of volunteer Sunday School teachers and an organised choir. There are fifty allotments on the Glebe.”

Money had to be raised for the alterations in the church and this was partly done by private subscription and partly by evening ‘Entertainments’ organised by the school children and villagers, which were very well supported. The ‘Great Houghton Feast’ was celebrated every year in what was the skittle alley of the “White Hart”. A public house having an alley is very unusual in Northamptonshire, which has its own version of the game, called Table Skittles.

Under the Rev. Woodhams, who was rector at the beginning of the 20th century, social life increased, with choir parties and outings, mothers’ meetings and their excursions by brake and horses to different parts of the county, and the annual Hospital Sunday organised by the village lodge of the Manchester Unity of Oddfellows. This latter event was a band-led parade round the village followed by a service when money was collected for the Hospital.

Thirty men served in the First World War, but only sixteen returned. General Lord Home KCB gave the address at the ceremony, which marked the completion of the War memorial in 1920. It had been built on the site of a tree around which many of the dead had played as children. The names of two villagers who died on active service in the Second World War are also recorded on the memorial. One (Roberts) was survived by a younger brother who became the publican at the “King William IV” in Kingsthorpe, Northampton.

The rapid growth of car ownership in the post-war years, particularly since the 1960’s, has of course wrought dramatic changes in village social life. However, despite its proximity to a rapidly growing Northampton, Great Houghton still preserves an active social life, centring on the Church and the Village Hall in Leys Lane. The Village Hall and the playing field are managed by the Great Houghton Playing Field Association, which was founded shortly before the Village Hall was erected in 1976.

Our Village - Within Living Memory

The few who can still look back on the life of the village over the past 60 years or so, have seen great changes. Their memories provide us with a picture of many interesting village people and their way of life. The community was close-knit, with many families related to one another. Electricity had just about arrived but a sewage system was still many years

away. Drinking water was taken from pumps around the village and, with the approach of winter, these were dressed in straw overcoats to protect them from freezing.

At this time, the village had the same two pubs that we know today, although both have now been enlarged and modernised. Mr and Mrs Walter Seaton ran the Old Cherry Tree with their daughter, Pemmy and son-in-law, Cyril Masters. The landlord of the White Hart was Bunny Smith, a retired London policeman. Each pub had its games room with traditional Northamptonshire table skittles, darts, shove ha'penny, dominoes, cribbage, etc.

Mrs Cook ran a small provisions and sweet shop from a cottage in "Cook's Yard". (This was off the High Street, just above Lane End). Mrs Cook was sister to farmer Alfred Garlick, whose son, Donald, still farms at the end of Leys Lane.

After her retirement as schoolmistress Miss Alice Stevens ran the Post Office, which was situated, in the same house, as the recent village shop and Post Office. One entered from a side door into a small parlour room. The counter was a small dining table covered with a tasselled chenille tablecloth. Some years later the village was shocked when Miss Stevens committed suicide on the railway line a few yards from her home. Rumours were rife and it was believed she had fallen for a married man and could not live without him.

The Post Office was later taken over and run for many years by Miss Margaret Stonton from the front room of her cottage in Willow Lane, which she turned into a veritable Aladdin's cave, as there seemed to be nothing she did not stock.

By this time most of the "home industries" had gone and the only local employment was either on the farms or in service. Up to the 1930's Mr and Mrs John Martin at the Hall (now the Preparatory School) had employed quite a number of staff, some living in, plus several gardeners and a groom/chauffeur. Villagers also found employment at The Rectory and Great Houghton House. The two farms, which were situated at The Green, have now both gone and many homes have been built upon the sites of the farmhouses, barns and land. It was a regular sight to see cattle or sheep being driven through the village on the way to market. Hens roamed freely all around The Green.

Gardens and allotments were full of home-grown vegetables and many villagers kept a few hens for fresh eggs and an occasional fowl for the pot. A good supply of chicken food was to be found by gleaning for corn in the fields following the gathering in of the harvest. Another past time on a warm, dry

day was to go “sticking” in the hedgerow bottoms as a means of obtaining additional free fuel for the open fires.

Mr Day of Piddington brought his churns of milk into the village and people went to meet him with their jugs. Most bought their meat from Mr Panter of Little Houghton and a baker now delivered bread to the village. Great Houghton even boasted a taxi run by Mr Archie Battison from 44 High Street, now combined with No. 42 to make one house. Archie was a man of few words but in the evening, from a corner of the pub bar, his belches resounded around the room like thunder, bringing forth the retort, “Steady, Archie!”

The social calendar was a busy one, although different from today's'. The only place in which to hold gatherings was “The Institute”, which had been the local school before it moved to Little Houghton and was situated at the top of Cracknuts (Rectory Close). There were regular whist drives, which were well attended. The meetings of the Women's Institute were held there, as also were dances and other social events. The building was in a poor state, with no running water, drainage, or toilets. It had two rooms of fairly equal size, one to set out the food and drink and the other, for the jollification, had a large open fireplace. Mrs Annie Roberts, who had one of the largest families in the village, cheerfully undertook jobs that nobody else wanted. She carried both water for the large kettles, which were heated on the fire, and fuel to get the fire going - the only way to heat the room. Nevertheless, many happy events were held there and for the “social” evening there would be entertainment by local people. Mr Frank Munroe always produced his harmonica to play tunes “by his own arrangement” and there would always be someone to play the piano. The W.I. also owned a much-treasured gramophone and would lend this out provided the needles were re-sharpened after use.

With the onset of war in 1939, the village began to change. Many evacuees started to arrive from London to be billeted with local people. Col. and Mrs Finnimore (the Martins' daughter) moved out of The Hall, as this had been designated as a home for evacuees needing special care. For most of the war approximately 25 children were cared for by a splendid Matron and her staff of local girls. They also received their education there so did not attend the local school. With the influx of so many extra children, the school at Little Houghton was suddenly too small, so the seniors moved across the road into the Parish Hall to be taught by the headmaster, Mr W Dobson. Mr Dobson was also Clerk to Great Houghton Parish Council, serving many years in both capacities. He was later tragically knocked down and killed one evening as he returned to Little Houghton after a Parish Council meeting. His memory and dedicated work will be perpetuated by the naming of part of our new estate - Dobson Close

With most of the young men now drafted into the armed forces, the more mature men were formed into a contingent of Home Guard. Their training sessions afforded the villagers much amusement, for with only part uniforms and broom-handles for rifles it was somewhat difficult for them to appear as a smart company of soldiers. The best fun of all was when the proper Army came to engage them in manoeuvres, which took place in and around the village. A trail of onlookers tended to get in the way and give away hiding places of snipers but it was all good practice.

Another exciting day, especially for the children, was when a large army convoy descended on the village for an overnight stay. There seemed to be hundreds of soldiers everywhere and a field where Willow Crescent is now was covered with small tents. Many of the soldiers looked tired and dirty and were invited into homes to wash and be fed.

Luckily, Northamptonshire escaped much of the bombing but damage was done when an RAF aeroplane crashed in the centre of Northampton. A crewmember was spotted bailing out below the village near the River Nene and Sgt. Munroe mustered his Home Guard to capture the parachutist, as the plane's identity was not known. He turned out to be a French Canadian who was 'on our side' but could speak little English. He was apprehended by Mr Morris with a .303 rifle

Several prisoners-of-war were brought in to help on the farms. One, an Italian named Joe, lived in at Lime Farm with Mr and Mrs Spen Courtman. He stayed on after the war and never did return to live in Italy.

There were so many interesting people to remember from this era who gave much to the village such as Mrs Mabel Brunt, who at different times was Chairman of the Parish Council, a great worker for the W.I. and also landlady of the Old Cherry Tree Inn. She was the sister to Cyril, Henry and Charlie Masters. There was the sweet lady, Mrs Paget, who was never the same after losing her son in the First World War. Mrs Munroe, President of the W.I. for many years; and Mr and Mrs Watt, of Lane End, who lost their son serving in the Fleet Air Arm and their daughter Ann in a traffic accident on the Bedford Road. And other family names come to mind - Pallett, Cross, Knibbs, Inglis, Parker, Chapman, Piggott, Robinson and Mr and Mrs Parsons and their son John, who farmed at Lodge Farm at the top of the village all their lives.