

HEMPTON HISTORY – by Carole Williams (March 1993)

Hempton, meaning High Farm or High Tun was appropriately named, being sited on a high marlstone ridge forming part of the main highway between Buckingham and Chipping Norton which was turnpiked between 1768 -1871. Only 5 1/2 miles from the famous market town of Banbury, of Banbury Cross fame, it is a hamlet within the larger parish of Deddington, 2 miles away. Most reference books mention only St. John's Chapel as being of any interest and ignore those few farmers, labourers and their families who were its parishioners.

St. John's Chapel was built in 1851 by William Wilson, rector of Over Worton who, 'loved this small place'. He brought a Norman Font to St. Johns from Over Worton's Holy Trinity Church which had almost entirely been re-built in 1844 when its font was replaced by a Victorian design. For many years the North aisle in St. Johns was used as a schoolroom for local children. In recent years a county council attempt to sell St. Johns and so avoid expensive roof and gutter repairs was foiled when villagers grouped together to save it. They collected donations, held bazaars, 'a mile of copper' days and other functions. Their combined fund raising was successful; the sale was cancelled, repairs carried out, the chapel survived. Rev. Wilson's 'love of this small place' lives on.

Most modern-day parishioners moved into Hempton to occupy houses built since the second world war and travel to work outside the village. A few ironstone cottages of the 17th century remain but sadly a 16th century thatched farmhouse named College Farm but known locally as Parish's Farm, was demolished in 1962. Hempton, once a community of small farmers and labourers, had a population which fluctuated quite considerably over the years. In 1662 only 17 inhabitants were taxed. Early 19th century Hempton had a population under 200; by 1851 there were 333 inhabitants then a rapid decline to only 166 in 1891.

Mid—16th century Hempton was connected with neighbouring Ilbury (meaning yellow burh) where a prehistoric hill fort was sited on an outcrop of ironstone. No record exists for the reason why Ilbury was abandoned although locals believe it was burnt down during a plague. In 1980 a hedge excavation off the Hempton Lane revealed Ilbury's former village street, its rubble foundations, and pottery from the 12th and 13th century. Land at Ilbury was thought to be owned then by St. Johns Hospital but Oxford's Magdalen College was its recorded owner by 16th century.

Ilbury's ancient site and Hempton has good grazing land; for sheep at Ilbury and cattle in Hempton. Several fields in Parish's Farm had names, some with obvious connotations such as Dairy Field and Orchard Field. Fields in the dip were known as Slad and Lower Slad (slad meaning cold). A third field where gypsies regularly camped was known as the Dancing Slad, for obvious reasons. Another was known as Barford Field because it bordered the hamlet of Barford St. Michael.

Barford St. Michael? The name means Barley Ford, but that's another story!

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