GREAT STAUGHTON AND ITS PEOPLE

HOW A HUNTINGDONSHIRE VILLAGE MADE ITS MARK ON ENGLAND'S HISTORY

by

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Snapshots of nineteenth-century Great Staughton

The first rudimentary census, carried out in 1801, revealed, for almost the first time since the Protestation Returns of 1641, how ordinary people lived at the start of a century that would transform the country from an agricultural to an industrial economy. The transformation began with improvements to the dilapidated road system, largely unimproved since the Middle Ages. In Great Staughton, for example, in the space of little over two decades a road from Great Stoughton [*sic*] to Wellingborough was authorised under the Turnpike Act of 1775.

Another turnpike, the Kimbolton to St Neots, is mentioned briefly in Georgette Heyer's Regency romance, *Sprig Muslin*, when the main characters stop at Great Staughton to purchase playing cards and other diversions for their journey. Four years later, a turnpike road was established between Great Staughton and Lavendon. Three milestones, one in the centre of Great Staughton and the others a mile to the east and west of the village, mark one of the turnpike roads. The improvements were timely: the impact of increased traffic on the road network was graphically illustrated in 1820 when major repairs were required to Staughton bridge.

The principal competition to the turnpike roads was the canal, which could transport much larger quantities of raw material and commercial goods. In 1812, John Millington put forward an ambitious scheme to build a link between the Grand Junction canal and St Neots. The proposed canal, known as the Millington scheme, would run from Newport Pagnell, passing through Great Staughton, and thence to the river Great Ouse at St Neots. The scheme never left the drawing board.

The phenomenal growth of cities such as Manchester, centre of the cotton trade and Birmingham 'city of a thousand trades', prompted one enterprising businessman from Macclesfield named James Pigot (1769–1843) to launch a comprehensive trade directory, which would provide industry with details of suppliers, merchants, manufacturers and dealers. Thus was born Pigot's pioneering *National Commercial Directory*, the first comprehensive classification of the *Merchants, Bankers, Professional Gentlemen Manufacturers and Traders* in Manchester. Pigot's idea was quickly copied by a senior official in the British Post Office, named Frederic Festus Kelly, and the name Kelly's (more correctly, *Kelly's, Post Office and Harrod & Co. Directory*) was to become synonymous with the trade directory sector.

For would-be historians of the village, however, *Kelly's Directory* of 1847 makes discouraging reading. 'Great Staughton is a small village and parish. It is distant 6 miles from St Neots, 3 miles from Kimbolton and possesses no object of interest, either commercial or otherwise. It has a neat but ancient church with square tower; Rev. Archibald Julius, rector.'

According to the 1841 census, the population of the village was 1,284; ten years later, this had increased slightly to 1,315 (greater than the present 2020 count). People were beginning to move for their jobs. At Gaynes Hall, for example, the staff represented a variety of English towns: the governess came from Walsall, the housekeeper from Oxford and the servants from Westminster, Bristol and Shoreditch, although there were local servants from Great Staughton and Grafham.

The health of the population generally was gradually improving due to advances in medicine and diagnosis. In 1843, arrangements were made in all parishes for vaccinations to be carried out.

In the case of Great Staughton, Mr Peck, surgeon, from Kimbolton undertook to carry out the procedure in the National Schoolroom, with an inspection a week later.

There was local industry in the village. The abundance of clay in the area led many farmers to supplement their income by opening a brickwork. William Love concluded an agreement in 1850 with the Duke of Manchester to open a brickwork in Willow Lane, on the turnpike road from Kimbolton to St Neots. It was a substantial enterprise, producing 90,000 bricks per month. The Willow Lane brickworks operated until 1921. Another brickworks between Great Staughton and Hail Weston closed in 1895.

The Highway, the commercial centre of the village, was well-furnished with inns: *The White Hart*; the *Old Red Lion*, commemorated today as Red Lion Court, and the *Queen Victoria*, situated next to Staughton Highway bridge. Although the vast majority of the male villagers were farm labourers, *Kelly's Directory* recorded a surprising number of traders operating in the village, most of whom were obviously connected with agriculture: grasier, cordwainer, saddler, blacksmith, harness maker. There were others more related to the everyday needs of the population: a boot and shoemaker, butcher, builder, a tailor and draper and greengrocer. Other, more unfamiliar occupations are noted for example, that of higgler (an itinerant pedlar). Women had three principal trades; beer retailer, lacemaker and domestic servant.

The 1851 national census revealed what was arguably the most flourishing trade in the village apart from agriculture and by 1861, there were no fewer than seventy-three lacemakers in Great Staughton, giving employment to several dozen girls and young women. They worked for up to twelve hours a day and in one school were expected to place 600 pins on patterns per hour, singing songs to relieve the drudgery:

The faster I work it'll shorten my score.
But if I do play it'll stick to a stay;
So ho! little fingers, and twink it away,
For after to-morrow comes my wedding day.

They were however comparatively well paid for their work, earning up to twenty-five shillings per week but their good fortune was not to last. By the late 1860s, machine-made lace all but extinguished the hand lacemakers and the import of foreign-made lace accelerated the decline.

Perhaps the greatest revolution in transport and communications came with the railways. The 1840s was a period of railway mania, both in heavy investment and sometimes unwise speculation to develop George Stephenson's revolutionary mode of transport. It bore fruit in 1850 when the new railway line linking London and Doncaster opened for business. Numerous intermediate stations were built, including the station at St Neots, to accommodate the anticipated growth in traffic. Keen to serve this new, modern form of transport, enterprising businessmen were quick to set up coach services that would take passengers to and from St Neots station and transport goods and post from St Neots to the villages.

Apart from passengers, one of the cargoes most frequently transported to St Neots by the new railway line was manure; the 'dung train', as it was swiftly dubbed, combined the twin advantages of ridding the cities (principally London, Birmingham and Wolverhampton) of their mountainous heaps of manure and supplying farmers, such as Thomas Brightman of Great Staughton, with the fertilisers they needed for their fields.

The second of the local railway lines, opened twenty years later on 21 February 1866, was less successful. Initially it was conceived as the most efficient method of hauling the rich iron ore deposits around Kettering to Thrapston, passing thence through Huntingdon where it joined with the London–Doncaster line. Anticipating a profitable traffic, a station was built in Kimbolton on land owned by the Duke of Manchester who stipulated that the new station should not impair the view over his extensive estate. In accordance with his wishes, the station was duly located two and a half miles from the town it was intended to serve. Despite falling traffic volumes, the line struggled on until after the Second World War, eventually closing in 1971.

Of all the developments of the Victorian era, arguably the most widely used and appreciated was the Penny Post, established in 1841 following a long campaign by Rowland Hill. The postal service was an important facility in the village throughout the latter half of the century and it was faithfully recorded in all the directories. The Great Staughton post office was also equipped with a telegraph office.

Much useful local information was recorded in the various directories. In 1863, *Kelly's* reported the consecration of a new burial ground on land opposite the church. In 1866, the interior of the 'handsome and ancient church of St Andrew' was restored at a cost of £1,000, raised by public subscription, according to the 1869 edition of *Kelly's*. St Andrew's Church was not the only place of worship in Great Staughton. In the first half of the nineteenth century three small chapels were built in Great Staughton for the Wesleyans, the Primitive Methodists and the Baptists.

Beer and Nonconformism are not the happiest of juxtapositions but the passing into law of the Beer Act in 1830, spearheaded by the king himself, William IV, was to have profound implications for villages like Great Staughton. Unlike the fully licensed inn or public house, which were regulated by the local magistrate, the beer house was controlled by the excise department. The regulatory hurdles were minimal and within a few years, beer houses were to be found in even the smallest villages, often run by the woman of the house whilst their menfolk were at work in the fields.

One Staughton man saw the possibilities opened up by the passage of the Beer Act. Thomas Henry Murfin established Murfin's Brewery in the Town in 1847 and by 1869, the brewery employed eleven men and three boys. Thomas Henry Murfin died on 12 March 1885 and his son William Henry took over the business. By the time of his death in 1897, the brewery was producing 2,500 barrels of beer annually. Murfin's Brewery and its twenty-five tied houses was put up for sale by auction in London and purchased by Marshall Brothers of Huntingdon, who subsequently ceased brewing in Great Staughton

Of more general concern was the availability of fresh water and thanks to a generous bequest of Jane Bristow Wilson (wife of Rev. H.B. Wilson) a village pump was installed in the village in 1894.

The directory recorded the population of Great Staughton as 1,090, according to the 1881 census.

Towards the end of the century, modern professions came to be recorded in the directories: Harry Hackett, engine driver; John Davison, representative for Prudential Insurance and Charles

Currington, described as a plumber, painter and decorator. One of the most significant new professions was recorded in the 1891 census when Mr Mynott lived on the Highway. It was a convenient central location for him to pursue his profession as village constable. He found plenty to occupy his time. For the frequent occasions of public drunkenness, a lock-up, more popularly known as a cage, was established in many villages. Cage Lane in Staughton is a memento of this facility.

Poverty was widespread and dealt with harshly. To be condemned to the workhouse (known, in an example of black humour, as 'bastilles'), paid for by the forced sale of your house, was something to be feared. The 1881 census gives a depressing picture of the 144 inmates. One, Charlotte Saunders, fifty-five, unmarried, from Great Staughton, was described as an 'imbecile'. Of the 144 inmates described in the 1881 census no fewer than sixty-two were aged sixty or over, including several in their eighties.

One of the most far-reaching reforms of the nineteenth century was the passing of the 1870 Education Act. Until that year, the provision of education in England was haphazard and often depended on the financial support of wealthy individuals, a situation that occurred in Great Staughton. Following the passing of the 1870 Act, a 'very commodious' school, based on non-denominational religious teaching, was established in Great Staughton, on land donated by Denzil Onslow of Staughton House. He also provided land for a house to be built for the master (it still exists, although now it is a private dwelling). In 1880 attendance at school became compulsory for children between the ages of five and thirteen. The school held 180 children and the average attendance was 143. Truancy was a big problem as parents often could not afford to have their children in school when they could be earning money for the family.