

Wiradsbury Bucks, damage £554" [1706]; "Chalfont St. Peter's in co. Bucks, repair of church" [1709]; "Twiford, in co. Berks and Wilts, loss by fire £1,221" [1709]; "Ensham brief co. Oxon, loss by fire £1,474" [1709]. Between 1704 and 1714 the collections averaged 1s. 6d., but by 1807 they had become very small. Out of eleven briefs read six produced no response at all, and the rest 3s. 4d. between them. The people probably had enough to do to keep up their own church.

(*To be continued.*)

History of the Parish of Beenham.

By *Mary Sharp.*

(*Continued from page 53, Vol. 21.*)

THE BEENHAM LODGE ESTATE.

But little has been traced of the early history of this freehold property. We know that before the year 1828 it had belonged to the Webb family, but although their records can be traced in the Beenham parish books perhaps further back than any others of its inhabitants, yet unfortunately not much information is to be found as to the nature of their holdings.

The earliest record we have comes from Somerset House, a will of one Richard Webb dated 1585, from which we gather that he was a well-to-do yeoman farmer living in the *Parishe of Benhm in the Countie of Barckes*. In it he directs that his body is to be buried in the Churchyard of Benham, and he leaves xij^d. to the *poore man's boxe of the said parishe*, and if that may seem a small sum for a farmer's bequest it must be remembered that money was then at least ten or twelve times its present value; he also gives iiij^d. to his Diocesan Church of Sarum. To his (younger) son William and his three daughters he leaves xij^s. and iiij^d. each, also in

addition *a sheepe, a bullock or a heffer*. He appoints his (eldest) son John his sole executor and residuary legatee, and for overseers William Webbe and George Littlefyld. The latter, in Padworth deeds, styles himself a yeoman, yet he was rich enough, about this time, to be buying up the estates of the lately deceased Lord of the Manor, Peter Cowdray, from his daughter heiresses.

Our next source of information is the return of the Hearth Tax for Beenham in 1663. In this two Webbs are mentioned—John, who may well have been the residuary legatee named in the will, and who lived in a house containing six hearths, a description which would probably apply to the Beenham Lodge of the day, and William Webb (his younger brother), whose smaller fortune only allowed him the comfort of two hearths.

After this date, from 1730 onwards, the Vicar's tithe accounts shew that members of the family continued regularly to pay tithes for their own holding, or living, as it is sometimes expressed. But after 1742 two persons of the name are entered separately as paying for their own land. George Webb, "occupier of Webb's living," paid £7 11s. 4d., and Robert Webb paid £3 10s. Robert Webb, as will presently be related, had then recently become possessed of the estate on Beenham Hill known as Foot Hill Farm.

In 1773 a Mrs. Webb, a widow, paid a fee of 10s. as a mortuary on the death of her husband. This was a gift left by a man to his parish church as recompense for his personal tithes and offerings not duly paid in his lifetime.

It was a Richard Webb with Frances his wife who, in 1828, conveyed to one William Stephen the messuage with its appurtenances known as Beenham Lodge, on the steep hill called Cods hill lying near the western confines of the parish.

The Stephens family had held or rented land in Beenham since about 1786, when they had paid tithes for land belonging to a Mr. Knight. Also in 1811 they were proprietors of some importance in the place and held rights not altogether explained over Beenham Farm, of which it is said in the Enclosure Award that they were joint owners together with Sir William Elford, Thomas Ryder and Samuel Kent, though nevertheless it is stated the property belonged to the Marquis of Downshire.

However that may be, it was to the brothers Stephens that allotments were awarded in the common fields when the award was carried out in 1811. Their share comprised the meadow land lying between Beenham Farm and the Bath Road.

The family then consisted of three brothers, William, Richard and John. It was William who afterwards, in 1828, bought the Lodge estate from Richard Webb.

He died in 1829, leaving three sons, William, John and Charles, as tenants in common of his estates. John took the Beenham Lodge property to his share, and the other two brothers each received £23,881 13s. 4d. Clearly their fortunes could not have been derived entirely from their Beenham property. They belonged, in fact, to a family of Reading bankers. In 1802 one John Stephens is described in a list of Reading voters as Burgess and Banker of Reading, and in later times members of the family continued to pursue that vocation with success.

But to return to the John, son of William, who lived at Beenham Lodge. He died in 1847, and in turn he, too, left his estates divided between three sons, William, Richard and Frederick. In 1858 the brothers conjointly agreed to dispose of the Beenham Lodge estate. They conveyed it to Mr. James Blyth, of Woolhampton Park, who by his will, dated 1865, left all his landed property, including this addition, upon trust for the use of his daughters and their sons in succession, on the condition that every one taking the property should also bear the name of Blyth. In 1906 the whole estate was sold by his son-in-law, Mr. James Pattison Currie, to the South Berks Syndicate, and subsequently Beenham Lodge, with that part of the estate attached to it lying west of Cods hill road, was re-sold in 1907 to Mr. C. E. L. Freeling, the present owner, the rest of the Beenham Lodge estate lying east of the road being bought by the late Mr. Henry Waring, of Beenham House.

Meanwhile the brothers Stephens had also parted with the remainder of their Beenham property, having sold the fields near the Bath Road which they had received by virtue of the Enclosure Award (now known as Gravelpit Farm) to the late Mr. William Strange, of Mile House, Sulhamstead. Beenham Farm, of which they appear to have been part owners, had long before then been purchased by Sir Charles Rich, the Lord of the Manor.

THE FOOT HILL ESTATE.

This property had formed part of the land in Beenham purchased by John Vanden Bempde and settled on his daughter the Dowager Marchioness of Annandale on her second marriage with Col. John Johnstone (see p. 104, Vol. 20). The estate then consisted of a messuage with appurtenances and 58 acres. Some time later it was

sold by her son, John Vanden Bempde Johnson, to Robert Webb, a distant cousin of the family of the same name already living in the parish.

Robert Webb had come from Baughurst in Hampshire, where his family had been settled some time, and where memorials may still be found of them on the tombstones in the chapel yard of the neighbouring village of Tadley, for they had belonged to the little band of Nonconformists who "came out," as it was said, when, on the passing of the Act of Uniformity in 1662, the parish clergy who refused to give their assent to the whole contents of the Prayer Book were ejected from their livings.

At the time when the Webbs first settled at Foot Hill the principal message consisted of a timber building probably not in good repair. This they replaced by a red brick Georgian dwelling house, substantial and comfortable looking, the same which lasted till 1904, when it was unfortunately destroyed by fire.

Robert Webb's name constantly recurs in the Vicar's tithe accounts as paying tithe for his own land, at first in kind, as when Dr. Stackhouse once insisted on taking his tithe of hay after it was ready to carry, not as soon as it was cut, or afterwards in money payment, when, as Robert Webb writes in his day book on Aug. 1st, 1751, "I agreed with Dr. Stackhouse for my tithes till March and from Michaelmas next for three years forward at three pounds ten shillings per year." He had married three times, but survived all his wives. He had, however, made provision for a widow early in his married life, and his arrangement was the rule always followed by his descendants in turn. The widow was to retain the use of two rooms for herself and one for a maidservant in her son's house, also to receive a suitable allowance for so long as she lived or remained unmarried. Robert died in 1788, aged 73. He is buried at Tadley, and on the tombstone is styled Robert Webb of "Benham." His eldest son Elisha succeeded him. He had 15 children, of whom six lie together in their graves at Tadley. He also is buried there, dying in 1810, aged 54. His widow, Judith Webb, who survived him till 1845, is buried in the Chapel yard at Mortimer West, for at that time the family had attached themselves to the recently-built Congregational Chapel there. An interesting celebration was held in the summer of 1898 to commemorate the small beginnings of the services on this spot. The Chapel was built in 1818, and the Webbs from Benham continued to the end to support it.

Another Robert succeeded Elisha, and afterwards a grandson

Richard. This last, like the first Robert, has left some interesting notes. He records the fire at Aldermaston House on Jan. 7th, 1843. "It," he says, "broke out in the lady's bedroom at 5 o'clock in the morning which burnt about half the old mansion. Damage about £4,000." Also on Nov. 9th, 1857, "a fire burnt down the mill at Aldermaston and consumed all."

Richard married as his second wife Annie Elizabeth Tyler. He died in 1866, and his son, also Richard, succeeded to his estate. But times were now no longer so profitable for farming as when the first Robert Webb settled at Beenham, and in 1897 his descendant decided to sell the family property. It was bought by Mr. Alfred Palmer, of Wokefield, the present owner.

Aubrey's Farm is often mentioned in the parish books as a freehold property belonging to a family of that name. It lies a little to the north of the Church and Vicarage and opposite the village green ; it is also contiguous to the Vicar's glebe land. It was probably for that reason that Mr. John Bushnell acquired it, and it has ever since belonged to his family.

Many other small freeholds are included in the parish, though the number has much diminished of late ; they are mostly single houses or groups of cottages or cottages occupied by their owners. Many of these last were legacies from ante-poor law times, when each village was required to provide housing for its own paupers. There were 14 pauper cottages in Beenham, and when, in 1834, the Poor Law Unions were established these were sold. They had not been well built, nor were they in good repair, and they were bought at low prices either by the cottagers themselves or by small investors who could not afford any further outlay, with the result that they became unfit for human habitation, and in some cases have been condemned and pulled down, to the great improvement of the sanitary conditions of the village.

(To be continued).

