



EXPLORING STROUD'S ORIGINS

AN INTRODUCTION

by

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In recent years Stroud has been convulsed by battles between conservationists and those who wish to redevelop areas of the town centre, or build a ring road through some of the older parts. One of the positive results of this argument has been the restoration of No. 33 High Street, commonly known as 'The Medieval Hall'. However erroneous this nomenclature may be, No. 33 is the oldest identified secular building in Stroud. As the arguments have raged over Stroud's future, various claims have been made regarding its character and origins. Some have deplored the appearance of Welsh slate and red brick in the Cotswolds as a Victorian aberration. Others have seen it as a Georgian jerry-built boom town - rather akin to a Wild West shanty town. In fact, when I began to research the origins of No. 33 I found it very hard to go beyond the 18th century. Much has been written about the cloth industry in the area, but little interest has been shown in the town that developed.

Of course in the 18th century Stroud is already recognized as a place of some importance. Atkyns described it as the "metropolitan town for the clothing trade". This rather grandiose title is somewhat reduced in 1757 when it was called the "sort of capital of the clothing villages". Certainly Captain Wolfe, the future hero of Quebec, found it an uncongenial place to stay. There was a lot of mud, and little social life.(1)

Little research seems to have been done on either the earlier history of Stroud or on the configuration of the town. People seem to have been satisfied with Fisher's 'Notes and Recollections'. I found this book inadequate, if only because he made no reference to No. 33. As a result, I have had to explore extensive material which now enables me to reflect on the reputation of Stroud as the offspring of the cloth industry. The former County Archivist, Mr I Gray, wrote that the early history of the town is rather obscure. Stroud "just grew into a town as a result of the cloth industry (and its key position for communications) in the later Middle Ages".(2)

Stroud was accorded the status of a 'vill' in 1248 (3) but no definition of the area exists until in 1304 the chapelry of Stroud was first established. At the time a considerable area of the huge parish of Bisley was separated off to be served by the new chapel. This area was known as "the Limitation of Stroud" and was itself so large that in 1563 it was used as an excuse for not attending church.(4) Covering Paganhill as well as half the eastern side of the Slad valley and all the Frome valley's north side up to Brimscombe, the Limitation contained numerous small settlements as well as Stroud itself. In the 18th century documents increasingly call this the "parish" of Stroud. On the other hand, in the early 17th century documents also refer to the "towne of Stroude/Strode" etc. Individuals sometimes described themselves in their wills as "of the parish of Stroud".

In the late 17th century new buildings were being erected at the upper end of the town of Stroud in the parish of Stroud. Whatever the exact meaning given to the term "Stroud" in books like Atkyns' and Rudder's, it is clear that the area had already grown to importance in the 17th century. A return made in 1650 gave the total number of families as 600, describing Stroud as a market town.(5) This is larger than all local centres except Cirencester with 700 families, and perhaps Wotton-under-Edge with 5,000 souls. The houses remaining in the Stroud area suggest that this population was in scattered groups. Fisher envisaged Stroud as develop-in waves, concentrating first round the market in the High Street, and then spreading up the hill.(6) In fact the story is much more complicated.

My concern is mainly with the western extreme of the Limitation of Stroud where the town finally grew up. It is a point of change. Here travellers who had meandered up the broad valley from the Severn past Stonehouse were finally forced to climb steeply to the top of the Cotswold plateau. The route to London took the Rodborough ridge. The route to Upper Lypiatt manor and eventually the royal manor of Bisley crossed the brook emanating from the Slad valley and struggled up towards the church of St. Laurence. The sinuous line of the High Street marks this old route.

The church was well placed here on dry ground and reasonably accessible from the various valleys joining here. Furthermore, there was a plentiful supply of water slightly uphill at the area now known as The Cross. This seems to have been part of the lord of the manor's waste land,(7) a claim he was still making in the 1760s. The cellars of a neighbouring building, the Medieval Hall, was found recently to have a drain still running with water. An adjoining building had a well which was still full of water.(8) Across the street, an eye-witness reported that the building of the Co-op Stores in the 1930s had dreadful problems with water. Recent roadworks have revealed that even during the dry summer the clay was damp. Water supplies would have been no problem for people living around this area.

At The Cross, from early times the road seems to have forked.. The king's highway to Bisley, as it was known in 1606, continued by a very steep slope up the spine of the ridge.(9) Here it was soon on to what was known as "Strodehill" in 1589.(10) By this point the typical Cotswold pattern of scattered farms had been established as existing buildings prove.

The other route, the present-day Nelson Street, also had to climb steeply from The Cross. At the top it skirted Stroud Field, clinging to the edge of the slope. The land forms a sort of terrace here extending eastward. To the north it slopes steadily more steeply up to Stroud hill, on the south the Frome rushes through its sharply-gouged valley. These fields are mentioned in 1527.(11) Scattered along the edge of the valley are historic property names. Gittoes, an area of land, in 1477 (12); The Castle, dating from about 1610, started as a dwelling house (13); Hemlock Well field was already named in 1618.(14) Finally, at a point where the road is forced to dip down to cross a small stream there is a group of old houses. The major houses in the group are called - Field House, and The Field, names suggestive of their historic position in the town fields. A reference in the Manor Book in 1527 to a "messuage in Strodesfyld" probably can be identified with The Field, though the existing building is 17th century in origin.(15)

These buildings stand just above Bowbridge, an ancient mill site and crossing place of the Frome. Bowbridge is mentioned in Bisle Court Rolls in the 14th century.(16) The road meanders further up the valley, keeping well above the damp bottom. By 1600 mills have been scattered along this beautiful valley for centuries. The earliest mention of this highway near Stroud town itself is only in 1687.(12) However, since it links Stroud and its chapel with Bowbridge and with the mills further upstream, it is reasonable to assume that the route is much more ancient.

Along the valley floor between Bowbridge and Stroud, several mills were sited. In 1527 William Cullam was tenant for a mill which later became Arundell's. The Victoria County History dates the original lease to 1489. At Wallbridge there are other ancient mill sites. Sir Thomas Bigg's lease was traced back to 1460 at Wallbridge. There is no description of the functions carried on at these mills but in the 1550s Orpin's was a fulling mill.(18) It had two closes of land, one of which - Maunsell Mead - extended along the valley floor to Wallbridge.(19) It is likely that the other lay between the mill and Gittoes Close. In the 19th century this area was still owned by the mill and was used for racks and an orchard.(20) The manor records provide information about two other mills emphasising that already by the start of the 16th century mills were becoming concentrated in this area. Margaret Dudbridge on her death was tenant of 1 acre of arable at the Millway leading to Chapmans, and a garden beside the Limebrook in 1460. Dudbridge's, later known as Brokehouse & Roberts, was at Bowbridge, and Chapmans, in 1527 known as Cullam's, was yet another name for the mill site now called Arundell's.

Little is known about the people who gave their names to these mills beyond the fact that they existed. The major exception is that of the Bygge family. William Bygge was recorded at Bowbridge in 1358.(21) The family later appears in Brimscombe where Bigg Place was held of Nether Lypiatt Manor.(22) Their tenance of Wallbridge and neighbouring Cuttels mills was to continue into the 16th century. I have found no reason for Thomas Bygge being knighted. A William Cullam of Strode died in 1523 leaving money and land called "shepesmead" to the Church, and his shears, silver and some money, to his family.(23) The Orpins were the longest lasting of these families, only losing control of the mill around 1581. Like all the millwrights, they were customary ten-

ants and appear not to have enjoyed a secure right of inheritance. The Victoria County History Vol xi is very careful about trying to establish anything very exact about property in Stroud around 1500. It states, "In 1477 ten houses at Stroud held of Over Lypiatt manor were recorded". Using the manor's Court Book, compiled in the early 18th century, something more can be suggested. John Hampton, knight, held two messuages and divers parcels of land worth 23/4d in 1477 in Strode. He already held them as a free tenant in 1460 and owed military service for them. The two messuages are elsewhere named as Rowcroft and Strangis. The name Rowcroft survives and is traceable at intervals until it was split up and built on in the early 19th century. In 1651 it was described as meadow ground in one will; in another document it is 2 closes of pasture and arable, 2 orchards, 2 gardens and a messuage and tenements (totalling 6 acres).

The second messuage - Strangis - later became known as Gittoes Close after a tucker who rented a house there. Although the name disappeared in the 19th century, in the 1650s it was comprised of 2 houses and a close of arable, totalling 4 acres.(25) These are remarkably small pieces of land on which to pay a total of 23/4d and owe military service. It is possible that they were recent creations established after other free tenancies at a time of inflation. An alternative which is more attractive (and will be supported in later articles) is that they performed some function in the development of Stroud. However, it is worth noting here that the Hamptons were an influential family of wool merchants from Minchinhampton. Already John's father had left an estate of 23 tenancies based on the important Minchinhampton mill of Longfords. Further afield Sir John's brother (or uncle) was a Citizen and Fishmonger of London, becoming Lord Mayor in 1472.(26) The economic potential of Stroud presumably influenced Sir John to invest so heavily on two steeply sloping hillsides.

It is possible to identify the messuage and certain parcels of land in "Strode" that Edward Benet held as a free tenant at 2/8d per annum and military service, with reasonable certainty. It was called Benet's Place and in 1460 his son John, aged 40, had rights of inheritance. A John Benet held another free tenancy in Strode valued at 13/4d so some doubt must exist about the following chronology. In 1527 John Benet's messuage in Strowde-field was bought by William Freame and another. When in 1602 Robert Freame died, he held amongst other lands: one messuage, 6 acres of land, and 14 acres of pasture. This is confirmed as Benets. Rather charmingly it was now known as the Joy House, owned by the infant James Clutterbuck. In 1724 Freame Clutterbuck held Benets at 2/8d per annum. Benet's in fact would appear to be Edward Benet's and came to be The Field, well away from the nucleus of Stroud around the Church. The Benet family was concerned not only with the land but also with industry. In 1476 Edmund Benet, clothmaker of Strode-water, was given a royal pardon after failing to answer the claim of a London grocer for a debt of £18. In 1544 Henry Benet of the Limitation of Stroud left in his will, along with a few sheep and a "heyfer", a pair of tuckers.(27)

Other entries for the 1477 court are less definable. An important family at the time were the Aldridges - Aylerugge in 1477.

John Aldridge in 1477 held 3 messuages, formerly Thomas Bigg's, worth 20/-. In 1460 he held, as a free tenant, a messuage in Strod formerly John Lane's. In 1403 it had been held by William Longford, but by the 18th century it had disappeared. The property of Henry Aldridge, also a free tenancy, on which he owed military service and a rent of 8/-, was two messuages called Butt's Place and Strod Place. They were somewhere along Bow-bridge Lane. He also held a "croft between Mansell mead and Smith hill valued at 4d." This is a very loose description, since Smith hill is mentioned only this once. Two other Aldridges held in 1460 free tenancies up on the ridge behind Stroud. It would appear that this was an established farming family, as it continued to be in the 16th and 17th centuries.(28)

Clearly, by 1500 changes were happening in the area now represented by Stroud. Some families, like the Bigges, enjoyed a considerable interest in milling activities. Others, like the Berets perhaps, bridged the agricultural and mill industries. The Manor Book remains mainly a record of landed interests. Fines are levied for not maintaining walls, hedges or buildings. Animals are not to be kept in the high road. However, one entry does suggest wider, newer, concerns.

In 1450 John Loveday was granted a cottage and 10 acres formerly John Howman's. Rent was 6/6d. The entry gives no information about the location of the cottage beyond that it was in Stroud. But it is interesting as it is the earliest direct reference to new buildings and manorial policy towards development. Loveday had built a new "bay" and provided it with cot land. This action was allowed by the court on the condition that the occupant "did not take out wheat without licence". Clearly the manor was prepared to accept the division of holdings and the growth in population that industrial development might imply. However, new inhabitants would have to buy their food; they could not expect simply to share in the existing fields.

This is only one entry. It is not possible to tell how far it forms a pattern or to what extent the ploicy was successful. It is a pointer to future development when land was carved up and people settled in Stroud to make a living from trade and industry, not from agriculture alone. Around 1477 there were scattered settlements: Stroud, or Strode, or Strod, was hardly definable as a unit. The town's emergence from its Limitation must await future articles.

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