

## **TEN KEY POINTS ABOUT STAPLEHURST IN TWENTY MINUTES OF HISTORY.**

### **THE ROMAN ROAD**

In the Kingdom of Kent in the Weald is part of the forest of Anderida, 35 miles wide, 10 miles deep, lay the embryonic Staplehurst. A Roman Rd skirted the forest from Maidstone to the River Rother, built c. 100 AD. It led to iron workings in Staplehurst and Frittenden and brick works at Golford. Nothing much Roman found - yet. The Jutish Hollingbourne Lathe, one of ten north-to-south strips of downs, arable land and forest where Staplehurst would be sited. The forest was used for cheesemaking in the summer, to fatten swine in the autumn, before all pigs except next year's breeding stock were killed every 11 November, St. Martins Day. Locals could enter the droves and the dens (swine pastures) but not the King's set-aside woods called snodes, nor could they cut down mature oaks and beech trees, providers of acorns and beechnuts. By the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD squatters had established huts in the dens. One of these in 814 was Speldgisella, split log hut, now known as Spilsill, lying to the east of the east of the future church. The soil was mainly thick clay, brick hard in summer, boggy in winter, better for forestry than for crops.

### **LOVEHURST**

In 804 AD Tunlafahirst was mentioned, the farmstead in the set-aside wood, a snode, now known as Lovehurst (BCS 316). It was also mentioned in 863 under the name of Wafingden as one of the six dens selected by King Aethelbert to supply firewood every autumn to his salt-house in the marshes at Mersham near Ashford, a fifty-mile road trip. Curing with salt kept meat sweet. There were over 100 salt-houses in Domesday Book in 1086, and Mersham is not listed, neither is Faversham, so the line was possibly broken by the Danes who ravaged Kent in the 880's. Lovehurst became a den of Thurnham, which Robert de Thurnham gave to found Combwell Abbey in Goudhurst in about 1160. In 1659, the Lovehurst water mill was still called "Thurnham Mill" in Staplehurst. When Henry VIII closed all monasteries in 1540 Combwell became crown property, Lovehurst ended up 200 years later in 1745 belonging to St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London, then was sold to the Steel family in 1904. It was a Liberty, not part of any Hundred. Liberties belonged directly to the King. Other Liberties nearby were Wadd in Frittenden, Faircrouch by Pagehurst, one at Bletchingley and Abbot's Liberty at Friezley in Cranbrook, all on the fringes of Anderida. King Edward III cancelled all their privileges.

### **BLY COURT**

Blecot or Blehecote was one of the Leeds Castle dens transferred to the Abbot of St. Augustines in about 1080. It lay in Cranbrook Hundred, one of the Six Hundreds of the Weald, which became a full Hundred when Edward III introduced Flemish weavers to Cranbrook if they promised to teach English apprentices how to dye well. Staplehurst was never a Hundred, which operated the King's lawcourts and army businesses, but was made up of parts of Marden, Cranbrook, Maidstone and Eyhorne hundreds. (see map) The Marden/Cranbrook boundary lay parallel to Pinnock Lane, up the Roman road to the Church from the south, slipping between the Church and Church Cottages and the backs of the houses on the hill and vanishing down Chapel Lane on a stream which

eventually flowed into the River Beult. Loddenden Manor in Marden Hundred lay on the north side of this stream. On top of the hill was erected the Staple, a post or posts to warn people that they were entering another Hundred with different laws from the one they were leaving.

### **STAPLEHURST**

The village was renamed, first recorded in 1242 in a tax list. Three years later in 1245 our first known rector, T. Capill was involved in a lawsuit with Combwell about tythes belonging to Lovehurst. The church was built on Ply Court land, with an enormous parish to care for, because the early populations was so scanty. T. Capill (Chaplain) could have been the domestic Chaplin there, for he had no glebeland to farm to feed himself, just a rectory, a well and a tythe barn below the Church for the yearly tythes (one-tenth of all produce from animals and crops in the Parish) to subsidise everything the County Council does now. His congregation was composed of scattered woodman unused to authority, archers all.

### **RAGNAR**

The famous South door of the church, once covered in expensive iron work tracery, now missing at the base, has a small cross at its apex above the story of Ragnarök, the Norse legend of the end of the world. One couple, lost from our door, hid in the roots of Yggdrasil, the Druids' magic ashtree and escaped to populate the world again. Another door on the same subject it exists at Stillingfleet 10 miles South of York, where one would expect such a Norse piece of art. But King Harold's father, Earl Godwine of Kent, was a Viking, so was his brother Tostig, and Blecot belonged to Leeds Castle, a royal residence. The door is dated to about 1100. Staplehurst Church probably started life as a timber building, with the Normans replacing it in stone (see the North wall). It once had a South door. Our door has a rounded Norman top, now altered to an Early English point, it is proposed that this is the original church's door, just moved 50 feet west in the 13th century rebuild. The timber was cut from a forest oak about 200 years old, well-seasoned, the crossbars at the back held with roves just as if it were a flat ship.

### **RELIGION IN STAPLEHURST**

But parish register on paper begins in 1537, very early. Before the 1540s all churches were ruled by the Pope in Rome: in 1512 sic Lollards had to carry bundles of faggots around our church barelegged, symbols of their deaths by fire if they had not recanted. Henry VIII chose to invent the Protestant Church of England in 1544 to escape the Pope's authority and marry Anne Boleyn. By 2024 the parish had had 57 rectors. Three came from Wye in about 1470, proposed by Thomas Kemp the Bishop of London who owned Bly Court. One, Thomas Beseley, one of King Henry's 40 chaplains, served 50 years, apart from four years on the Continent to avoid Quenn Mary's Catholic spies. He was a protestant, had married a wife in this church and had children baptised here, all procedures forbidden by the Pope. From c1707 all Rectors have been selected by St. John's College, Cambridge, who bought the living to provide a placement for dons who married and were then barred from university teaching. It was worth about £200 per year. The Old Rectory is now 3 houses; the New Rectory is in Station Road. Other religious sects tried to establish themselves in Staplehurst. Cranbrook merchants were responsible for smuggling English bibles, Lollard-inspired, in with the cloth they brought

from Flanders. Anyone caught reading one was – literally – toast. In 1556 and 1557 three Staplehurst women (Alice Potkins, Alice Benden and Joan Bradbridge) and two Frittenden martyrs (the Allen's, husband and wife) were burnt at Maidstone (Canterbury for Alice Benden) in Queen Mary's Catholic reign for not attending church. They are remembered on the Memorial at the crossroads in Station Road. Later, 1640-1660, when Royalists and Roundheads clashed, all Bishops, Rectors, Vicars and Curates were removed from their posts, and Anabaptists and Nonconformists took over the churches: Daniel Poyntel from London preached powerfully from All Saints, and took his congregation with him to his house down the road at Lower Grove when he quit the pulpit in 1662, he was incidentally buried in the church chancel as a formal Rector he was remembered as a very peaceable man. Richard Kingsnorth built a chapel for Anabaptists at Spilsill, while the curate, Thomas Housegoe, led the Quakers who held house services. Henry Kent the Rector left anguished pleas in Greek in the Parish Register before he died in 1655, and the Parish looked after his wife and little son. Today we have four churches; the Church of England All Saint's; the Free Church on Station Road; the Providence Strict Baptist Chapel in Chapel Lane; and the United Reformed Church in the High Street. Roman Catholics lost their Chapel in Iden Park when the Nuns left, so now attend Saint Theodore's in Cranbrook. The Ebenezer Chapel built by the brickworks men in the 1890s is now a house, and the Wesleyan chapel set up by a former curate became the Snooker Room in the former Village Hall, now the Free Church.

## **PAUPERS**

Anyone could become a pauper, let down by disease, loss of parents, old age or famine. If a pauper, you would be returned to the parish where an ancestor had once held a job for one year, even if that was 100 years ago. These were friendless and resented. The Overseers of the Poor acted in pairs, leaving their accounts from 1646-1834 when the Poor House at Bly Court was given up because a new workhouse catering for, it is thought, 6 parishes was built at Coxheath. In their home village they could draw a relief monthly and stay in their own houses or in Bly court where the neighbours could gossip and knit socks for the grandchildren, but no elderly person would tackle a 12 mile walk to Coxheath and back to say "Hello". There men and women lived in separated wards, as the children. They were fed meagrely, clothed cheaply; children were sent to work in northern factories; and when the paupers died the Workhouse would sell their corpses to the anatomists; and without a body you could not enter Heaven. In the 1830s to the 1870s farming was disastrous, and rates were based on land, not on houses, thus overburdening farmers. Many families emigrated to Canada, America, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. Six families, 47 in all, went in 1839 on the "Bolton" to North Island NZ, paid for by the Parish. Overseers of the Poor chose groups with many children, thus saving the Parish future expenses. One man wrote back to say that he had landed with 6d and now had two houses (he was a carpenter) and had bought his wife the only mangle in town, from which she made 29 shillings per week!

## **EDUCATION**

In 1639 Lancelot Batherst left £150 in his will to be invested in land, (School Farm, now Rabbit Farm), the profits to pay the "poor painefull" schoolmaster to admit "six or more

very poor boys” free to Staplehurst school held in the Church. No girls. Small boys went to a Dame school for reading, writing, arithmetic. In 1707 Major John Gibbons left £1,661.16s 6d for educating and apprenticing poor boys. A proper Grammar School which catered for boarders was established under William Beadle in 1786 at Hill House. The red brick wall by the door is full of scratched names and dates. When he retired at 80 a National School was built in Chapel Lane in 1832. Then after the 1873 Education Act the building now called the Old School was built and paid for by the community, the architect being T Hayter Lewis who planned Staplehurst Place and Iden Manor for the Hoare banking family. The Chapel faction was horrified by the price so squashed the idea of a bell tower. The building held a boys’ school, a girls’ school and two infant classes, and included two flats, for the Headmaster, salary £90 per annum and Head mistress £60 per annum. In 1988 this site was bought from Maidstone Borough Council to become Staplehurst Village Centre. Maidstone kept the playgrounds as a site for the Mote Homes from Maidstone and built three junior schools elsewhere.

### **ROADS AND RAILWAYS**

Roads, always bad in winter and blowing dust in summer, were awful, being mended with sand as there was no local stone available except soft Paludina marble from the fields. The Turnpike Act of 1759 allowed shares in the profits of the two toll houses at Cross at Hand and Knoxbridge to be sold, but the railway bankrupted the road. In 1830 there were over 50 labourers permanently unemployed in Staplehurst, so until 1860s they stoned the roads. In 1842 the railway reached Staplehurst, the important line to link London with France. The planners had intended it to go via Maidstone, but Lord Romney of the Moat (Henry Hoare's father-in-law) refused to have smoke visible from his windows, so it was routed through the empty Weald instead. The engineers planned to build a terminus here but found that the water underground was salty, no good for engines, and moved the works to Ashford. Milk, hops and vegetables, roadstone, passengers, parcels, letters and newspapers went by rail. The post office routed postal services from Hastings to Gravesend to Staplehurst Station, the quick way to London, so amended the road system to do just that. The trains to and from France, like the boats, run on a time tidal timetable, which altered about an hour per day, and which resulted in the 1865 train crash when gangers preparing a bridge mistakenly stripped out the rails before the train got there. It was running at 50 mph. The engine and the first carriage, carrying Charles Dickens, his mistress and her mother leapt the gap, the rest of the train somersaulted into the River Beult. Ten people were killed and many injured: the Staplehurst Station Master telegraphed London and Headcorn, and many of the doctors from Saint Thomas’s Hospital journeyed down, while Headcorn sent engineers to clear the line of broken engine and carriages and rebuild the bridge. People too injured to continue were nursed by local Staplehurst folk in their houses. Dickens was haunted by this experience and died five years later to the day. The trains are still with us, but not the continental traffic.

### **POPULATION**

In 1565- a census was taken in parts of the Weald thought to radical by Queen Elizabeth 1’s government. It is nearly complete, of communicants only (no children under 14) but when they are added the total would be about 650. The 1801 census 1220, 1901 census 1618, 2001 census 6008, 2011 census 5947 and 2021 census was 6693.