

Prestbury Garden Village

by David K Jones

What have you found to talk about? A friend and neighbour scoffed, thinking “Prestbury Garden Village” a little pretentious sounding...; just a mid-1950s development of quite modest houses near to an ancient village centre.

And it set me thinking “why” was it so called? Surely, road names like Apple Orchard, Mill Street, Lake Street, Whitethorn, Willowherb, Bramble and Briar, tell us something about what was here before?

Sure, no Roman villa or Saxon hoard has been discovered yet, but everywhere has a history and so I set out to find what it was. Although I think there may have been some Roman remains found in Noverton Lane years ago?

The origins of this area is of interest when we understand how the land was divided and used by local farms on land originally owned from the 16th century by the Baghot-Delabere's at Hall Place, now Upper Noverton Farm, possibly Prestbury's oldest surviving house.

There was presumably a house at Noverton by the 13th century when the name Overton occurs as a personal name. In 1964 a large moated site was visible at Lower Noverton, among mid-20th century houses.

There is no other evidence, however, that Noverton was more than a very small settlement centred upon a few farm-houses, of which those that survived in 1964 were of the 16th or 17th century.

Noverton was regarded almost as a separate from the village; the inhabitants being known as “uphillers”. In the early 19th century Noverton Lane, running eastward from the High Street, was an unmetalled country lane leading to the uphill farms, fields and later, orchards and allotments to the south or, right hand side going up.

Within living memory, this lane, had water running down the side of the road from one of the many up-hill springs, though without the mills that define Mill Lane.

The lower slopes of Prestbury, above Bouncers Lane, had been called Linworth or Lynworth, meaning low lying marsh and must have required a lot of ridging, furrowing, and ditching to make it workable. We now associate Lynworth with the lower part of Prestbury Road opposite the playing fields.

Over time, the area became popular with local hunts and chases and for many years and the Cotswold Hunt, until 1815, part of the Berkeley Hunt, operated from the ‘Plough Hotel’ in Cheltenham and had kennels and possibly stables at Prestbury.

Then in 1844, Colonel Berkeley began a steeplechase that ran – through Noverton Lane ‘over a stone wall into an orchard, over a stanked brook with gorse bushes on the taking-off side, across the meadows to the Hewletts’.

Years later, Prestbury's most famous son, Fred Archer, the jockey who had lived at the Kings Arms, lost his eldest brother, William, in a fatal accident during a similar steeplechase known as the 'Country Rider's Classic' of 1878, on a course across where the cemetery now lies.

From the 19th century farming locally was mixed, but with an emphasis on dairy farming; Noverton farm, comprising about 150 a. in Prestbury on the lower slopes, was a dairy farm retailing its own milk.

A feature of the village at that time was the number of orchards and market gardens surrounding the houses south of the High Street below a boundary described by Blacksmiths Lane, until as recently as 1933. From the mid-19th century the number of market-gardens in the village increased.

There were 3 in 1856, 6 in 1889, and 8 in 1906, and remained about the same until about 1935. From the turn of the 19th century Finchcroft Lane, as it eventually became known, was one of many lanes or drives to and from dairy farms that later became the market gardens and orchards.

From the mid 1800's the only house built on the eastern, or upper side of Finchcroft lane, was No.1, now empty, may have been built on the site of an earlier house in Noverton Lane, just below the moated site mentioned earlier.

The two old late 19c houses further along the lane would, when new, have had almost unbroken views downhill over the orchards, gardens, and allotments stretching down to Bouncers Lane, where the Church School was built in 1826.

The Beehive Inn was originally built as a large house on two floors with 6 adjoining cottages on land called Randall's Orchard in 1836. This land originally belonged to Randall's cottage on the corner of Bouncers Lane and Blacksmiths Lane running south. Sometime between this and 1850 the Beehive became an Inn.

Market gardens, plantations and orchards continued to thrive in this area well into the mid-1930s, indeed The Church Hall was built in 1955 on gardens that had previously belonged to the school.

After the Second World War the old market gardens, orchards and allotments around the village began to decline and, probably because of the increasing value of land to satisfy the growing demand for new houses, bit by bit they were sold off.

The Garden Village was to be one of the first of many new developments built in Prestbury, whose population was expanding steadily. For instance, there were 2,154 people in the village in 1931, but houses spread along Prestbury Road, New Barn Lane and Bouncer's Lane; so by 1951 the figure had risen to 2,858, then to 4,325 ten years later. This was inevitable with so many people pursuing new opportunities in and around the area, while seeking a pleasant place to live.

In 1955 a group of newly formed developers, Prestbury Investments Ltd, of London W.14, approached the local authorities, through their agents, Heaven and Sadler of Reading, to build a garden village estate of 143 plots on abandoned gardens, orchards and allotments between the Pieces or School path, Bouncers Lane, Noverton Lane and Finchcroft Lane.

Joseph Webb & Co Ltd of Staffs, were hired to build 6 different types of houses and bungalows set out in curves at different angles so as to avoid long unbroken lines of new building.

This was to cover 6 new roads –South View Way, named after the house that once stood at the top near Finchcroft Lane, - Court Road, Purbeck Way, Studland Drive, Corfe Close and Fawley Drive. No one seems to be able to explain why so much of the estate was named after so much of coastal Dorset...?

The 6 types of dwelling were:-

The Arlington; a large 3 bedroom semi-detached house:

The Amberly; a smaller 3 bedroom semi-detached house:

The Painswick; a small 2 bedroom semi-detached house:

The Overbury; a moderate 3 bedroom semi-detached house:

The Berkeley; a 3 bedroom semi-detached bungalow:

The Bredon; a 2 bedroom semi-detached bungalow:

In 1957, local agents, Parker & Son, 111 The Promenade, Cheltenham, offered these new houses for sale from £1,997 to £2,450.

Later the number of building plots, due to demand, now to include more houses and fewer bungalows, increased as South View Way extended downhill in late 1957 to meet the similarly extended Fawley Drive to form, what turned out to be, the final boundary before the allotments, all that remains of the old market gardens.

That these allotments of 145 plots, one of the largest in Cheltenham, still survive today, and may even be seeing something of a revival, is remarkable considering the pressure over the years to build more housing.

Not only that, but the infamous Prestbury Bypass, which sometime in the late 1970s, early 1980s, was proposed to continue the A46, as it was then, southward beyond the right hand bend into the High Street, straight through houses, the allotments, completely eliminating Backsmiths Lane, at no small threat to Randall's cottage.

After 55 years, the unfinished, bottom end of South View Way, still awaits the arrival of this phantom development. Another Prestbury ghost perhaps...?

As part of a much later development, housing in Court Road also increased to form a square with a pleasant green at its centre; although these houses, along with those in Florida Drive, are of the 1960s and 70s and are not typical of the original garden village.

Today many of the roads and gardens still have some old trees, hedges and remnants of the old orchards that covered the area and despite many changes including house extensions, long gardens being sold off and built on, Prestbury Garden Village, still largely comprising 240 households, retains much of its own individual character of being a village within a village.

Postscript:

The above is part of a collection of information currently printed, generally available, is still work in progress and in no way represents an authoritative official history.

Acknowledgements:

A Portrait of Prestbury: Florence Jackson

Prestbury; Our Heritage; An Architectural Survey: Prestbury Women's Institute

Notes on Historic Prestbury: Valerie Braunholtz

A History of Cheltenham: Gwen Hart

Fred Archer, Sporting Hero 1857 - 1886: Steven Blake, Edward Gillespie, Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museums

'Parishes: Prestbury', A History of the County of Gloucester: volume 8 (1968)

David Jones