

## Chipping Dassett

Burton Dassett lies midway between Warwick and Banbury. Its most prominent landmark is the medieval stone tower which stands on the ridge of the Burton Hills. Few of the many visitors to Burton Dassett today will realise that around the Hills there was once a thriving market town, known as Chipping Dassett, which in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century was one of the largest places in Warwickshire. Today the main part of the town, Dassett Southend, lies underneath the M40. The deserted houses and streets, which had been reduced to a series of earthwork platforms and hollows in a grassy field, are thundered over daily by thousands of cars and lorries. The only medieval building to survive is the chapel, which for many years was reduced to a cowshed.

The earliest village at Burton Dassett belongs to the Anglo-Saxon period: a cemetery of this date was found during quarrying on the Burton Hills in 1908. This probably belonged to a settlement whose original nucleus was around the parish church at Burton. The first historical record of the church is in the Domesday Survey of 1086, by which time Burton Dassett was a well-developed and prosperous settlement. Apart from Burton there were then two other hamlets in the parish, at Knightcote and Hardwick (now deserted). The 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries saw further expansion and a shift in the focus of settlement down the hill to two new settlements, Northend, which survives today and Southend.

The growth of Southend was encouraged by the Lords of the Manor, the Sudeley family, who hoped to profit from the rents and tolls to be gained by establishing a market here. In 1267 a royal charter was acquired allowing a weekly market on Friday and a three-day annual fair to be held at Southend, which soon became known as Chipping Dassett (Chipping meaning market). Southend also acquired its own chapel, dedicated to St James, in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. The market prospered rapidly and early 14<sup>th</sup> century taxation records list Burton Dassett with the third highest number of taxpayers in Warwickshire after Coventry and Warwick and the bulk of the population, which can be estimated at about 800, was in Southend.

This was, however, the peak of the settlement's prosperity and through the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries it went into a decline. People drifted away and the villages dwindled. Documents speak of deserted house plots. This decline was caused mainly by a failure of agriculture. The climate generally worsened causing a series of bad harvests and making the heavy clay soil of this area more difficult to work. The Black Death of 1348-9 decimated the workforce, put tenants in demand and allowed them to move to the better land. These factors also affected the other villages in the area on which the market relied for business.

About half the villages that once existed in this area disappeared. At Southend the final stage in the process came in 1497 when the landlord, Sir Edward Belknap, evicted the last 12 households, demolishing the surviving houses and enclosed the land as sheep pasture. Like other landlords in the area, he reacted to the decline in rents by going over to large scale sheep and cattle farming, where, with a small, cheap labour force, profits could be maximised by producing the goods in highest demand (wool, meat and hides).

The Chapel of St James is the only medieval building to survive at Southend, although little trace of its former function remains. It was being used as a cowshed until its conversion into a house at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The building has two elements: the western part being the Chapel; the eastern a priest's house built in 1632. The west wall of the chapel contained a window with tracery dating to the 1290s. This survived until 1943 when the west wall was removed but it is shown on photographs. The doorway in the north wall is an original feature, and was balanced by another in the south wall, destroyed by a storm in 1981. Survey of the masonry has identified a blocked

opening which probably contained a window similar to that in the west wall. There were probably originally two of these in both north and south walls.

By 1632 Southend had long been abandoned and the Chapel was probably ruinous. Much rebuilding was necessary and a rectangular window similar to those in the Priest's House, was inserted in the north Chapel wall. The conversion was carried out for Lady Wotton who lived in Northend Manor House nearby. The open installation of a Roman Catholic priest here is remarkable as Catholicism was outlawed at this time.

The rescue excavation of the Dasset Southend site started in 1986 and continued for two years. The final report is due to be published in 2014 and a link to it will be placed on this website once it has been published. Information reproduced, with thanks, courtesy of Warwickshire County Council.