

HISTORY

Earliest Beginnings

West Grimstead probably began as a small hamlet housing gamekeepers and forest workers on the great medieval Royal Forest of Clarendon. The Domesday Book of 1087 gives several entries about "Grimstede" and there are earlier references indicating a pre Norman settlement. From its earliest beginnings right until the start of the 20th century, West Grimstead was part of the Manor or

Estate of a wealthy nobleman, starting with the de Grimstede family.

Grimstead was eventually sold to the Earl of Radnor in 1801 and remained part of his Longford estate until 1916 when the whole

village was sold (mainly to sitting tenants). So for all of that time few houses were owned privately and there is little documentation from which to learn more about the village.

We know that houses were made from the materials found locally - timber, cob (a mixture of chalk bound with chaff, horsehair, and water), and after the building of the brickworks by Lord Radnor in 1850, brick. Until the arrival of modern housing in the 50's and 60's West Grimstead was largely a thatched village.



Haymaking at Rowden's Farm

A Self Sufficient Village.

It remained a self sufficient and remote place until well into the 20th century. Our roads were made and maintained by the residents - from flint stones which were collected from local fields by the women and laid on chalk. The first reference to a new road surface comes in 1937 and records show that chalk was still in use right up to 1947.

It was in this spirit of self sufficiency that our village hall was built in 1912-13. The Parish Room, as it was then called, was built entirely by local people. Lord Radnor gave the land and the services of the architect. The builder (Mr. Penn) and the eight farmers who hauled the materials from local sites were all from the village and their contributions greatly reduced the cost of the project.

We also had our own school until 1992. The first mention of a school house is 1837 but the date on the building is 1850. It was designed to take about 60 children and this is how many there were at the school when it eventually closed. Originally it would have been a very cramped and noisy environment with just one room divided into two by a makeshift wall of cupboards, their backs painted for use as blackboards. During the 19th century children were often removed from classes for field work, or to perform the task of beating for the shooting parties, or in the case of the girls, to help at home.

Getting Connected

By the middle of the 20th century West Grimstead was starting to get connected! In the early part of the century the villagers had been reliant for transport on *Hopkins' Cart* which went to Salisbury on Tuesdays and Saturdays (always market days) returning on the same day and it wasn't

until 1929 that the Wilts and Dorset buses started running through the village.

After the second world war a new mains water supply replaced the supply from the Longford Estate, and the wells and pumps of the remoter cottages. Older people in the village still affectionately remember Hollands Well which was an important gathering place and landmark at the Dean crossroads. In 1939 our jealously guarded phone box arrived in the village, and what with the arrival of electricity in 1938, and the impact that this had on lighting and cooking, life must have seemed to be getting a little easier. By 1963 Gas had arrived, and in 1973 we were put onto the main drainage system.

Two other important transport developments which have touched West Grimstead have been the arrival of, first the ill-fated canal in 1802 and then, in 1847, the railway. Both projects brought labourers from all over the country into the area. The navvies (navigators) were men of huge physical strength who needed their statutory gallon of beer and two pounds of beef a day to keep going. They caused much concern to the farmers and landowners, and indeed the women of the village for whom they had equally large appetites!

Constancy and Timelessness

Although our post office and our pub have come and gone, St John's Church remains the enduring pillar and focal point of our community. It is an ancient structure. We do not know who built it, or the date, but local tradition asserts it was built during the reign of William Rufus during the years 1087-1100. Given that the style of the building is simple Early English, a date in the 12th century is probably more likely for the building, though an earlier structure may of course have existed. The earliest known Rector of the Parish was Ricardus Brionne - 1294. If you picture a thatched roof and an earth floor, strewn perhaps with straw, and no tower, we can visualise with fair accuracy this small place of worship at the time of the early Norman kings. The tower was added at the beginning of the 18th century and, although pleasing, has nothing in common with the fabric of the rest of the church.

An active Methodist chapel also remains in the village. John and Charles Wesley began their ministry in Bristol and it is known that they were in touch with dissenters in Wiltshire in the mid 18th century. Although there was friction between church and chapel in the latter half of the 19th century they have continued in friendship until the present day and now worship together every other month.

A history of West Grimstead, (now unfortunately out of print) was produced in 1987 by the West Grimstead history group. Copies are held by various villagers and will be happily lent if the reader would like further information.



Holland's Well