

Taplow History for TPC Website / Nigel Smales (10 February 2014)

Taplow is here because it is high. The story started some 10,000 years ago when Stone Age wanderers arrived on the southerly spur of the Chilterns to discover the perfect place for a settlement – a defensible hill complete with a freshwater pool mystical for being where none should be. They began one of the oldest settlements in England, possibly the oldest in Buckinghamshire. Their Bronze Age and Iron Age successors fortified the hilltop overlooking the River Thames, for centuries a frontier fought for by Saxons, Angles and Danes, eventually the natural boundary between Buckinghamshire and Berkshire.

Sometime around 620, a burial mound was piled high in the south-west corner of the hill fort. There is no historical record of any Saxon, Angle or Viking lord called Tæppa but excavations in 1883 indicated that whoever was laid here was pagan and important, possibly a king or a prince stationed here to defend the frontier. His treasures are in the British Museum, still the third-richest find from England's Dark Ages.

The mystical pool is nearby. Legend has it that St Birinus, Bishop of Dorchester (Oxfordshire), came in about 635 to embrace Taplow's ancient pagan pomp and circumstance by adopting this as a holy place for Christian baptism. It has long been known as Bapsey Pond. The original St Nicholas' Church was built by the Mound in the late-7th Century, replaced after 600 years, relocated to its current site in 1828 and substantially rebuilt in 1912 to incorporate the chancel of 1865.

Taplow was in the gift of the Crown and bestowed upon royal favourites from before the Norman Conquest in 1066 until 1197, a period during which it was held 'to the Honour of Leicester and the Duchy of Lancaster', and again from 1538 until 1628, when it was taken 'to the Honour of Windsor'. In between it was held by the Priory of Merton, afterwards by Sir Thomas Hampson and his heirs until 1700. Two tenant dynasties spanned these five centuries. The first can be traced from William Piscator in 1194 through his son Stephen de Tappelawe in 1213 and their eventual heir Nicholas de Aumberdene whose spectacular brass-inlaid tombstone in St Nicolas' Church dates from about 1350. The second spanned ten generations of the Manfield family from 1433 until 1700. The Priory installed a monastic cell at Amerden Bank, possibly alongside the Piscators and almost certainly with the Manfields in what is now Amerden Priory.

Merton Priory was dissolved by King Henry VIII in 1538. He and his Tudor successors installed a series of intermediary stewards, the last of whom may have built Taplow House in 1598 only for it to be destroyed by fire in 1660. Local lore suggests that Queen Elizabeth I planted the tulip trees in its garden and an oak at Taplow Court. This is contradicted by horticultural history and science. However one of the tulip trees is thought to be the oldest in Britain, possibly planted by William Vigor, a Russia Company merchant who built the second Taplow House in 1751, more probably by Cornish tin and copper merchant Pascoe Grenfell MP who acquired the property in 1794 and remodelled it soon afterwards. William O'Brien, 2nd Marquess of Thomond, made further substantial changes in about 1840. Although tinkering has continued, it is his house which was converted into a hotel in 1957.

Taplow had 1,000 eels in 1086 and a mill (or mills) grinding corn or making paper for 1,000 years until 2006. The original Bolter's Lock was on the Buckinghamshire side of the river from 1746 until 1829 when it migrated to Berkshire as Ray Mill Pound before reverting to Boulter's in 1842.

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Taplow Village clustered around the old church until late-Tudor times when two new cottages were built a quarter-mile to the east. The Old Cottage is the oldest freestanding house in the Village. Its near-neighbour evolved to be the southernmost section of Neighbours, once half of a terrace of six two-up-two-down cottages, home in 1881 to 29 people. By 1607 three cottages, now united as The Porches, had been built nearby with two more, Wee Cott and Rose Cott, added on its northern flank within a couple of decades. Three of Davis Neighbour's daughters grew up to be matriarchs of Taplow's Victorian middle-class in which the farmers Briginshaw and Norrington stood alongside the butchers Rance, the grocers Gurney and James Rutland the builder and amateur archaeologist who excavated the Mound and much else besides.

Taplow's first Stuart steward built Taplow Court in 1610 only for it to burn down in 1616. King Charles I bestowed Taplow House on Sir Thomas Hampson in 1628. He liked Taplow so much he bought it in 1635 and within three years had built Taplow Court anew. Thereafter it remained the seat of the lord of the manor for three centuries during which it was rebuilt in 1706 by George Hamilton, 1st Earl of Orkney, and substantially remodelled in 1855 by Charles Grenfell, director of the Bank of England. The latter's grandson William Grenfell inherited the fourth Taplow Court in 1867 and grew up to be an Edwardian paragon as 1st Baron Desborough and patriarch of the 1908 London Olympics. He lived at Taplow Court until 1939 when it became a wartime school and thereafter the headquarters of British Telecommunications Research in 1945, of telecommunications giant Plessey in 1963 and of the lay Buddhist movement Soka Gakkai International-UK in 1988.

Sir Edward Manfield let the hunting grounds of Cliveden to George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham, who in 1666 built its first grand mansion, later expanded by Lord Orkney after 1706. It was home from 1737 to 1751 of King George II's son and heir Frederick, Prince of Wales, for whom The New Inn was renamed The Three Feathers, The Prince of Wales Feathers and by 1850 simply The Feathers. The second Cliveden was destroyed by fire in 1795 and its replacement, built in 1824 for Sir George Warrender MP, suffered the same fate in 1849. The current (fourth) Cliveden was designed by Sir Charles Barry and completed in 1852 for George Sutherland-Leveson-Gower (pronounced Looson-Gore), 2nd Duke of Sutherland. Cliveden passed in 1865 to the richest Englishman, Hugh Grosvenor, 1st Duke of Westminster, in 1893 to the richest American, William Waldorf Astor (later 1st Viscount Astor), in 1906 to his son Waldorf Astor, whose wife Nancy was in 1919 the first woman to take her seat as an MP, and in 1942 to the National Trust. It has been a luxury hotel since 1986.

Taplow was where things happened, or at least where people who made things happen came to play and to plot. For six years from 1668, the Duke of Buckingham ran the country from Cliveden for King Charles II. The first Lord Orkney's close friendship with both King William III and Queen Anne encouraged the 1707 unification of Scotland and England (and Wales) to create Great Britain. In 1751 his cousin Andrew Murray of Elibank House instigated the last Jacobite attempt to overthrow the Hanoverians. His granddaughter Mary's husband Murrough O'Brien, 5th Earl of Inchiquin, influenced King George III in the 1801 unification of Great Britain and Ireland to create the United Kingdom and his neighbour William Grenville, 1st Baron Grenville of Dropmore, abolished the slave trade in 1807 during his brief term as Prime Minister. Political controversy swirled around the Astors in the 1930s, when 'The Cliveden Set' were accused of appeasement, and in the 1960s, when 'The Profumo Affair' brought down the government.

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Stagecoaches had long been plying the Bath Road before The Orkney Arms opened in 1743. Although retaining that name officially, the inn became known as Skindle's Hotel for William Skindle, its landlord from 1833 until 1867. The Great Western Railway terminated briefly by The Dumb Bell in 1838 before leaping over the Thames on Brunel's graceful brick arches the following year. Trains brought many who came to stay and more to play. Jonathan Bond began hiring out boats to day-trippers during the 1840s and Henry Hoare acquired the hotel from Skindle's sons in 1876. It was this combination that made Skindle's famous before James Hodgson's expansion into the former Guards' Club in 1904 created the iconic riverside image of the heady days when Skindle's meant Maidenhead. During the Great War, Belgian hotels in Poperinghe and Ypres borrowed the name Skindle's to make visiting officers feel at home.

Times have changed. Bond's Boats lasted until the early-1950s, Skindle's for another 40 years and the mill (in various guises) for fifteen more. Bond's riverbank found new life as Maidenhead Rowing Club; Skindle's and the mill await their fate. Some old mansions have been replaced by smaller homes and by 2011 there were 1,669 people living in Taplow, a community of differences proudly united by its intangible sense of place.