

In Search of Swatchford

'The unpitying humiliations of old age are upon it – a few years more and the old Manor House will be but a memory, a tale.' (from *'Somerset Folk'* by Ethelbert Horne)

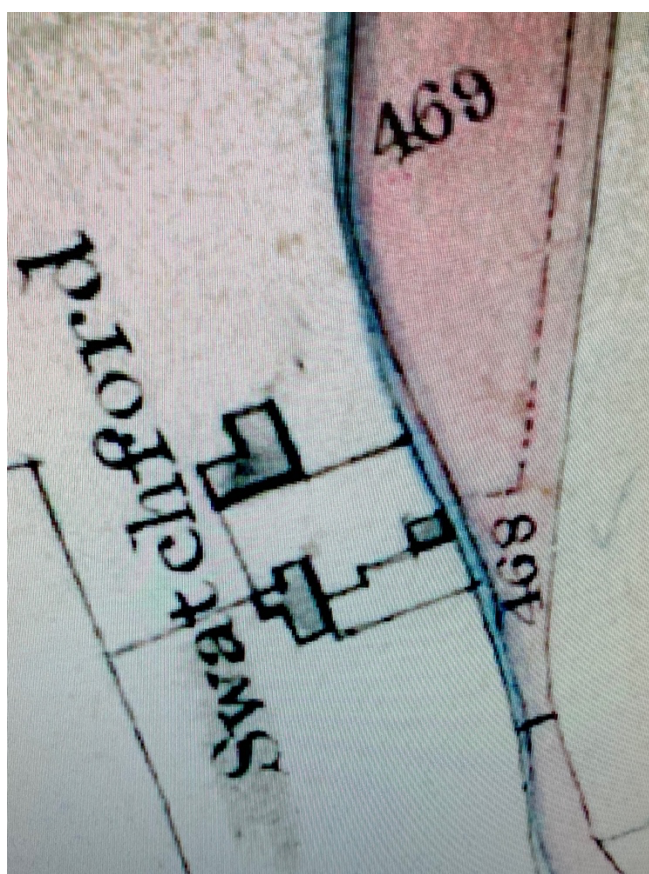
Perhaps you have walked through the fields to the north of Lower Kingsbury, along the footpath that leads to the little stone bridge that crosses the river near a pond. Well, just before that bridge there was once a substantial farmstead or manor called Swatchford, probably still occupied as late as the 1830s, the last remnants of which were destroyed by fire in the summer of 1975. Its situation would have been perfect for the time when it was established: nestled into the dip of the valley, next to the convergence of various tracks and footways leading to Milborne Wick, Charlton Horethorne and Milborne Port and tucked in by the river.

If you look very closely at the aerial view of the site below you can just make out a rectangular shape, with a red dot in each corner.



This is the outline of what is believed to be the main residential building at Swatchford, forming part of a complex of *four* buildings in the 1782 map, *three* in the c1775, 1808 and 1819 maps and then at least *three* in the 1880s map. The aerial view gives a really good impression of just how substantial - and significant - this farmhouse might have been.

c1775



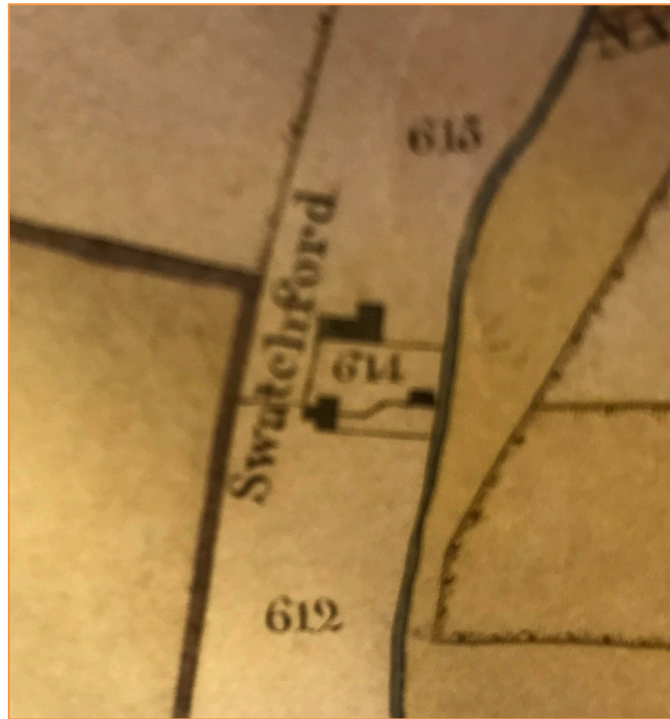
1782



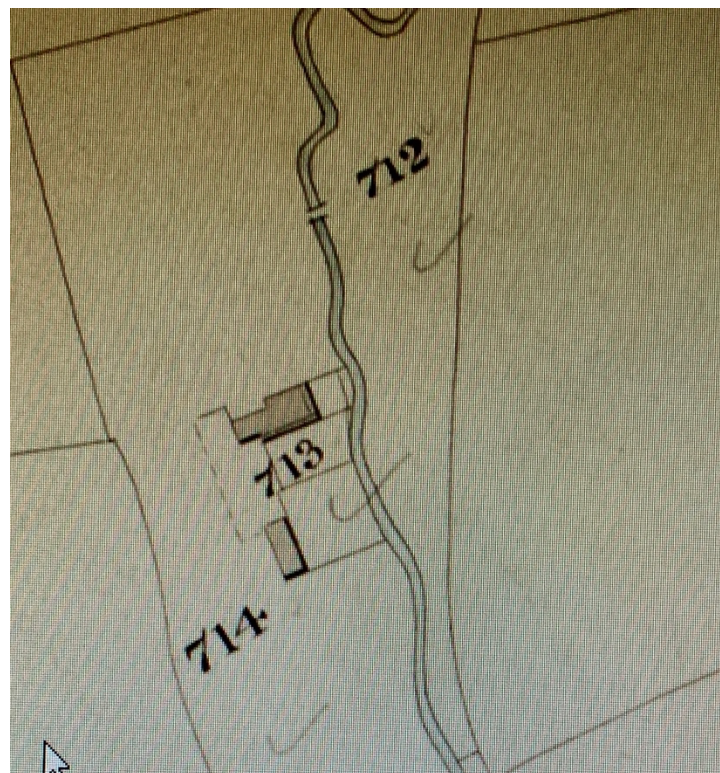
1808



1819



1840



1880s



Nathalie Hetherington of the Milborne Port History and Heritage Group is currently researching the history of Swatchford and its residents and this research has led her in all sorts of interesting directions, to the records of ancient St Mary's Abbey at Cirencester and Regenbald (aka Rainbald) and William the Conqueror, to the Hogwarts-esque archives at Winchester College, from the aristocracy and lords of the manor to the most humble residents of our village throughout the centuries, to the records at the National Archives, Taunton and Dorchester, to the College of Arms, to Hugh Vincent and his detecting finds, to election rigging of the 18th century, to tithe maps and censuses. Her research has touched on so many different aspects of the history of Milborne Port and Kingsbury Regis, stretching as far back as the Domesday Book.

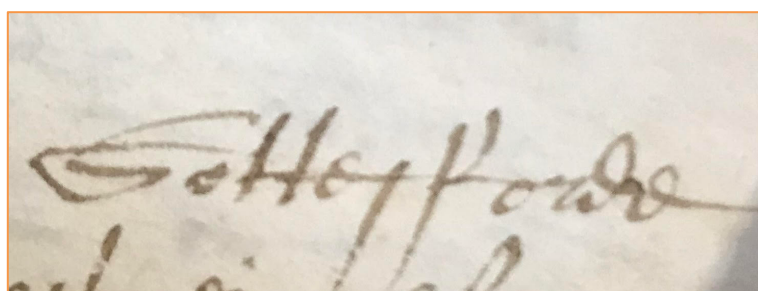
‘What’s in a name’?

The word ‘Swatchford’ seems to be unique! An internet search brings up a list of possibilities but all associated with *our* Swatchford; there seems to be nowhere else in the internet world called Swatchford! Where could this name have come from?

Swatch? A small piece of sample fabric or material. That makes sense... In C&J Greenwood’s 1821 ‘Somersetshire’, we learn that linsey (a coarse twill or plain-woven fabric woven with a linen warp and a woollen weft), stockings and shoes have been the key manufacturing industry for many years, and a few years earlier, in 1813, Rev J Nightingale tells us in ‘Beauties of England and Wales’ that in Milborne Port ‘manufactures of woollen, linen and hosiery are very considerable’. It is probably safe to assume that the villagers of Milborne Port had been busy making a living from these activities for as long as people had worn stockings... According to the Chambers dictionary, the origin is unknown. Another source gives it a 16th century Scots and northern English origin but with very little usage before the middle of the last century. Another source tells us that ‘swatch’ had become a sample of cloth by 1647, then a sample of anything!

This example of its use also given by Chambers seems to muddy the waters further: *These interviews suggest that it may not be just isolated incidents involving suffering which are kept out of awareness but large swatches of personal history, many dealing with loss.* Here the word *swatches* could easily be replaced with *swathes* (a broad strip or area of something). And on the same page in Chambers is the word *swath* – a band of mown ground or grass or corn cut by the scythe or mowing machine; a broad band; the sweep of a scythe. A *swath(e)* was also a measurement for meadow-land. And there is also *sward*, an expanse of short grass or the upper layer of soil, especially when covered with grass. Could our modern **swatch** be a derivation of one or all of these meanings instead?

However, matters are complicated further by **Sottesforde** or **Sottesfoade** in a Winchester College court book from 1613 and in a legal document from 1622... Possibly an incorrect transcription, or a mishearing on the part of the recording steward, or the original name of the building or farm and in fact the ‘Swa...’ beginning of the word that we now have is a corruption?



And ***ford***? That makes sense. Just to the north, between the site and the river, there would have been a ford, now replaced by a small bridge. In some documents it is **Swachford**, **Swatchfield** or **Swatchfields**, which also make sense. **Swatfield** also appears, which one supposes could also make sense if there were a lot of flies around in the summer! However, this is more likely to have been a spelling mistake at a time of much fluidity in the rules of spelling and pronunciation. Imagine the Somerset accent pronouncing **Swatchfield**... the 'tch' sound could easily be lost...

The Beginnings

The Big Question... When was Swatchford born? Well, records of something or somewhere – a field, a farm, a building – go back to the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries during the reign of Henry VIII but there *is* evidence to suggest that it is even older than that. There is possibly a connection with a time even before the arrival of William the Conqueror. As with any historical research, we cannot be certain because, whilst you will see that the connection between the abbey at Cirencester and Milborne Port is clear, the further connection to Swatchford, despite extensive research, remains somewhat tenuous. However, this particular

route of research reveals some interesting history about the village and its connections going back to before Domesday...

This connection between Cirencester and Milborne Port predates the inception in 1117 of St Mary's Abbey at Cirencester to a key character in this history called Regenbald (also Rainbald, Raginbold) in the reign of Edward the Confessor (1003-1066).



This picture shows a model of how the abbey at Cirencester might have looked before the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

Regenbald of Cirencester was a priest high in the royal administrative service under Edward the Confessor; in the Domesday Book, he is the proprietor of seven or nine churches, including one in Milborne Port, where he held the endowment of one hide; from the Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'family', a **hide** was, in the early medieval period, a land-holding that was considered sufficient to support a family. This was equivalent to 60 to 120 old acres (approximately 30 modern acres - 120,000 m² - depending on the quality of the land.) The hide was the basis for the assessment of taxes.

Regenbald first appears in the historical record in 1050, when he witnessed a charter of King Edward, who gave him large estates as a reward for his service to the king as a royal chaplain.

King Edward the Confessor, c. 1003-1066



The Domesday Book records Regenbald owning at least seven churches, but only two of them have any indication that he performed any ecclesiastical services at them personally.



Domesday is our most famous and earliest surviving public record. It is a highly detailed survey and valuation of land holding and resources in late 11th century England. The survey was a massive enterprise, and the record of that survey, Domesday Book, was a remarkable achievement. There is nothing like it in England until the censuses of the 19th century. It is currently housed at the National Archives at Kew.

Regenbald remained at the royal court throughout Edward's reign and into the reign of King William the Conqueror and his lands and possessions were confirmed by King William after the Norman Conquest. It is likely that he bequeathed his land to a religious foundation connected with Cirencester and that it remained in the king's hands until Henry I (the fourth son of William the Conqueror) felt inclined to found a royal abbey at Cirencester. In the meantime, it was with a William FitzWarin and would revert back to Henry I on FitzWarin's death.



William the Conqueror,
c. 1028-1087

At some point between 1117 and the early 13th century, the rectory estate, probably St John's, was leased by the convent of Cirencester – did the 'rectory' estate include Swatchford? This seems possible as there was a connection with Kingsbury Regis; a detailed agreement over intercommoning was made between the abbot

of Cirencester and the tenant of Kingsbury Regis manor concerning arable and meadow, but principally pasture for the benefit of plough oxen, sheep, cattle, and pigs. The land involved comprised the abbot's arable at Hanover on the southern boundary of the parish (probably at Canon Court) and grazing on downland named after oxen (Oxdown) and sheep (Ewedown) in the north.

In the British History Online entry for Milborne Port, there is a tantalising reference to Swatchford: *In the 1540s the former Cirencester estate measured 518 a. and comprised two holdings of 60 a. and 40 a., the later farms at Swatchford and Wick and the rest let to a single tenant for £18 a year and lying principally in the south of the parish.*

So, we know that Swatchford was part of the estate of the abbey at Cirencester via Edward the Confessor and Regenbald but why is all of this important? Well, after the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s, Henry VIII took a liking to an area of land near Hampton Court which he probably wanted as part of the expansion programme of his palace. To whom did this land belong?

Winchester College, then known as St. Mary's College, already a considerable landowner at the time. Presented with the 'offer' of swapping this land in Richmond with land that the king owned in Milborne Port (by virtue of the dissolution of St. Mary's Abbey at

Cirencester), one cannot imagine that Winchester College was left with much choice in the matter!

So, this is how Winchester College became Lord of the Manor of much of Milborne Port, including Swatchford, from 1543 and why there are manor court records dating from this time.



This is a photograph of one of the room of archives at Winchester College. The archivist there, Suzanne Forster, has been a very valuable source of information, help and support in this research.

What did the main farmhouse at Swatchford look like?

No doubt the various buildings at Swatchford had various incarnations over time. If there was a building there at the time of Henry VIII, then it might have looked like this, the beautiful Bayleaf Farmhouse at Weald and Downland Open Air Museum...



Perhaps in later years it looked similar to Manor Farm farmhouse in Lower Kingsbury, with its half-hipped roof structure; the most recent incarnation of the main house at Swatchford is likely to have been built with the same type of stone.



We can just make the main house it out from this photograph of the mid 1920s, taken from the garden of Windy Ridge (now Kingsbury House on Station Road). It was used as a barn by this time.



Two aerial views from 1947 and 1972 also provide images of the main building, showing some of the original compound walling still in situ.



What we *do* know about the structure (from a newspaper article from 1931, by which time the remains of the farmhouse had been used as a barn for many years), is that it was well-built:

It may be of interest to readers to learn, writes a correspondent, that the large barn beside the river about half a mile above Kingsbury Mill, is a part of the old Swatchford Mansion. When Messrs. Hyde & Son were recently replacing the old thatched roof by corrugated iron they discovered a stone in the south wall bearing the inscription: - 'N NF' 1656'.

Mr Hyde stated that the walls which are 2 and half feet thick, are as firm and straight, and the oak principals which support the new roof, as hard and solid as they were 275 years ago. Many of the rafters are also of oak. No nails were used, but the frame was secured by wooden pins.

That date-stone (picture below), now housed in the Chapel Museum after being donated by the family that owned and farmed Swatchford at the time of this article as part of Manor Farm, bears the initials of Nathaniel Napper and probably a Frances Napper, whose family had many associations with the house. However, the date-stone does not of course date the entire building, rather an extension or development of it, perhaps. More on the Nappers later...



Who lived at Swatchford?

Many records exist pertaining to Swatchford in the archives at Winchester College, some of which are in Latin, some of which might as well be in Latin because the handwriting is so hard to read! In order to understand the comings and goings detailed in the manor court rolls, it is important to understand that no-one other than Winchester College actually *owned* Swatchford, which was variously referred to as a field, a tenement, a toft, a manor, a farm,

an estate... Those who lived there were either copyholders or tenants of copyholders and a copyholder had the tenure of the land or property from the lord of the manor and often were able to pass their tenancy (known as a 'life') on to descendants. For example, in 1744, Gerard Napier was the copyholder but Edward Hallett was the tenant who passed his tenancy on to his descendants... More on him to come...

Much more analysis of the research on the early period of Winchester College's ownership of Swatchford needs to be done when various names appear - Sampson, Sheppherd, Popley and Lambert are but a few. The Waremans were there in 1608: *It is presented that George Wareman holds ...* [this missing word could be 'copyhold'] *on the land of the lord of the manor at Sottesforde formerly made* [does 'made' mean 'built'?] *by Thomas Wareman which premises is estimated as 3 lugges or virgates* [about 30 acres]. *He is ordered to make repairs under penalty of 6s 8d or show cause that the premises are maintained.*

An important name that is much associated with Swatchford is Napper, sometimes Napier. The Nappers were a wealthy, of politicians and landowners, well known in this part of Somerset and

in Dorset. The Napper name appears regularly in a variety of documents, many of them associated with legal proceedings. It seems as though they were a rather litigious family! In 1622, Sir Nathaniel Napper of Moore Critchel had the copyhold and sued Robert Popley, then living at Swatchford, because he had not paid enough rent or provided enough wool!

By 1769, a Grace Napier had the copyhold and rented to a Mr Noakes; she later married Edward Eveleigh and this name features in much of the later correspondence held at the Winchester College archive.

The most notable resident of Swatchford was most definitely an Edward Hallett, born in Milborne Port in 1692. Residents of the village will know that there have been Halletts in Milborne Port for hundreds of years and there must be modern Halletts still living here related to Edward!

He was probably a middle-class country gentleman or yeoman, well-educated and well-known in the village, making an impressive living from linen-weaving, hosiery, farming, letting and sub-letting land to villagers in Milborne Port, Charlton Horethorne and Stowell. We know from various documents, indentures and parliamentary

records that Edward Hallett was indeed a 'main player' in local farming, business and politics, and he was certainly living at Swatchford in the 1740s because a series of fascinating letters written from Thomas Medlycott to Edward (known as Ned), which reveal some extraordinary details of everyday life in Milborne Port, are addressed to him there. The letters, held at the Somerset Heritage Centre in Taunton, date from 1739-1746, although that does not mean that there were not more written from before 1739 and after 1746... Medlycott was a very wealthy and influential landowner and politician living mainly in London with rather a colourful history himself.

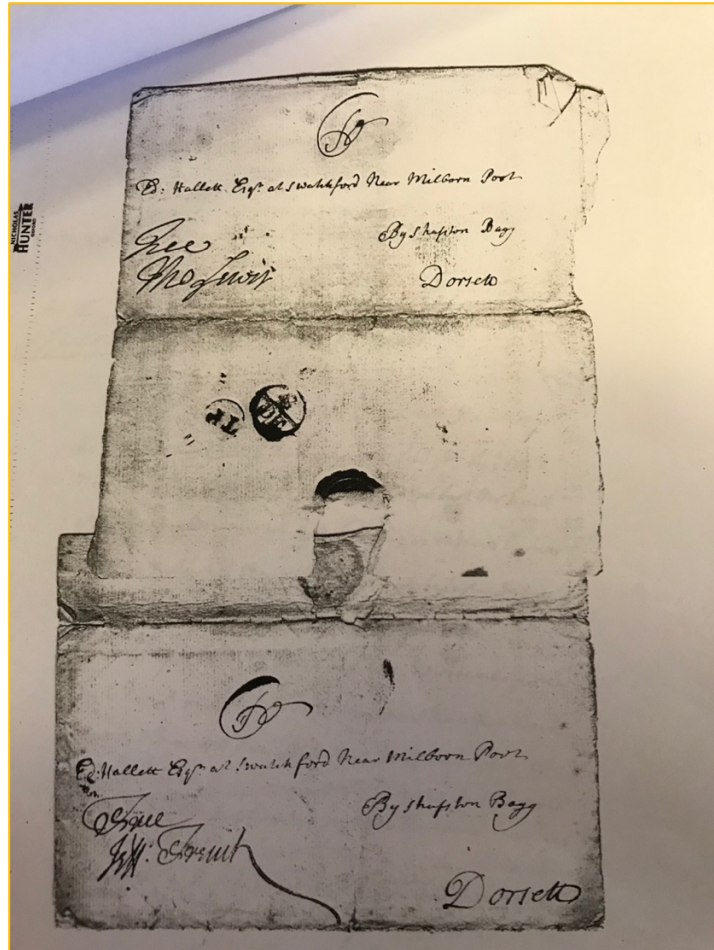


Could this have been the type of clothing worn by the rich, ambitious and fashionable man-about-town Thomas Medlycott? Perhaps his is the lost buckle found by local detectorist, Hugh Vincent, in a field close to Swatchford...



Edward Hallett was Medlycott's land and political agent, responsible for keeping an eye on the comings and goings at Ven House in Medlycott's frequent absences, as well as being responsible for collecting rents and keeping tenants in check! And from the detail in the letters, it appears that that would have been no small task... Ven House was referred to as 'Tattle Hall' by its owner, probably reflecting the gossip and scandal generated from and by its inhabitants, especially the servants!

The picture below shows the outside of two of Medlycott's letters to Edward Hallett Esq. at Swatchford Near Milborne Port, coming via the wonderfully named 'Shafston Bagg', i.e. post that came from London to Milborne Port via Shaftsbury.



So successful was Edward Hallett that he was appointed the High Sheriff of Somerset in 1741. Unlike today's purely ceremonial post, a Sheriff was a powerful man with very important responsibilities across the county, including acting as the returning officer in elections, serving for a term of one year.

Unluckily for Ned, this one year happened to coincide with an election scandal in Milborne Port from which he did not exactly emerge smelling of roses! Thomas Medlycott was initially returned as a Member of Parliament for the constituency but then withdrew... It's complicated but in a nutshell, men known to be

close associates of Ned were accused of bribing voters to vote in favour of Medlycott... You can see the connection, I am sure... However, given that election rigging was not exactly a rarity at the time, when voting was conducted in public and it was common practice for candidates to pay voters for their vote, the citizens of Milborne Port were clearly able to let bygones be bygones, letting Edward Hallett continue for many years to come as an active member of the community, serving in the administration of elections and in the general running of the village.

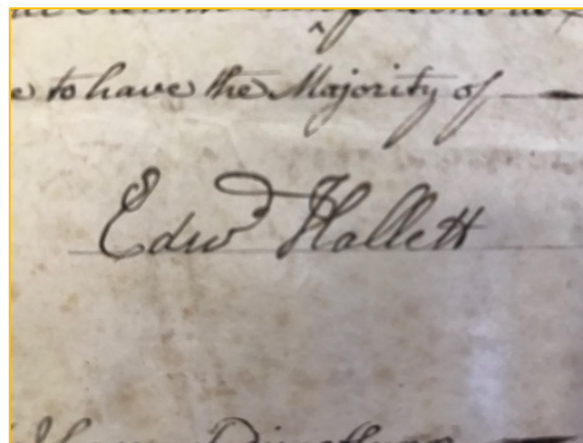


This famous painting by William Hogarth is called *Canvassing for Votes* from his series of four paintings entitled *The Humours of an Election*... from 1755. Although the word 'humours' at the time meant 'nature' or 'physical qualities', the paintings were no doubt also meant to be 'humorous'! Can you spot the attempted bribery of the landlord in the centre of the painting?

Edward Hallett died in 1778, referring in his will to his Coat of Arms. Whether he had actually ever been officially granted a Coat of Arms has proved hard to ascertain... The only grant of arms to someone named Hallett during that time period was one of 1722 to Sir James Hallett who was granted the coat of arms which was used by his father Stephen Hallett of Crewkerne, Somerset (and perhaps earlier generations of the family) but which had never been officially recorded. So, there is a possible connection here, but we cannot know for sure without further genealogical research. Edward Hallett might have used arms which he simply invented himself, or which he had inherited from his ancestors (or perhaps believed he had, whether he really had or not), but he did not procure a new grant of arms to himself. Some records at the Somerset Heritage Centre about the Farewell family, into which Edward Hallett's son married, contain this image of what this coat of arms (official or otherwise) looked like:



I think that we can assume that Edward Hallett clearly considered himself rather special...



It is likely that descendants of Edward Hallett continued to either live at Swatchford or sub-let it for many years to come following his death. In his will of 1811, Ned's grandson (also Edward Hallett) leaves to his sister, Mary Butt, *the ... profits of my ... dwelling house*

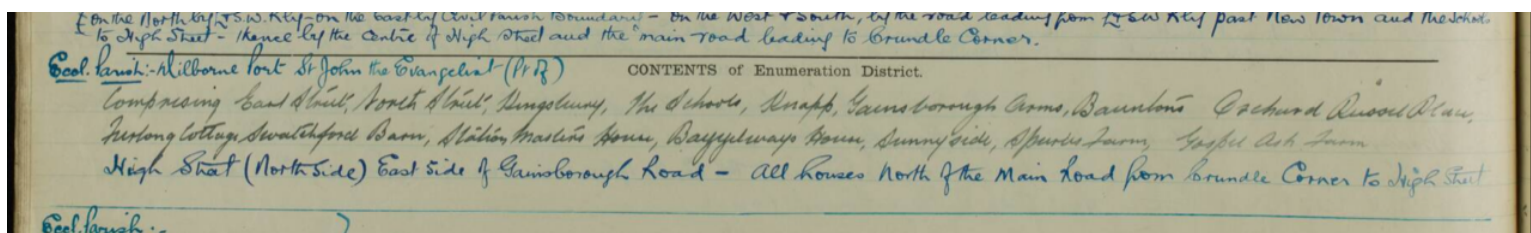
and lands situate in Kingsbury Regis in Milborne Port ... for her natural life... This could, of course, be Swatchford, then held in copyhold by Betty Holden. A fascinating record of 1811 tells us that in 1811, 'Considerable alteration was made in this, the Swatchford estates, this year. The Vicar was accommodated with hares...' The Vicar at the time was George Isaac Huntingford, also Bishop of Gloucester and Hereford during his tenure at Milborne Port... A busy and no doubt hungry man clearly in need of his jugged hare suppers!



In the 1839 tithe documents, Swatchford consists of approximately 25 acres: In Shear Mead Field, Great Shear Mead Field, Little Shear Mead Field, Limekiln Field, Swatchford Home Plot, an area called Eight Acres and Swatchford Bartons, Barn and Buildings. The tythe map (p. 4) shows Swatchford coloured in grey; this meant that the building was not being used as a dwelling, so at some time between 1811 and 1839, Swatchford ceased to be a home and no doubt the buildings were given over entirely to agricultural use. At this point, James Axtens was renting the land and buildings from Reverend Rose, who held the copyhold under Sir William Coles Medlycott.

It was somewhere in this area in 1838 that a fight broke out between two of Axtens' inebriated farm workers, resulting in one killing the other, for which he was transported to Tasmania for 14 years!

In the 1880s map (p. 4), Swatchford is referred to as Swatchford Barn, confirming that there is no longer a proper residence there, and whilst Swatchford Barn is featured in maps dating well into the 20th century - and is a significant enough landmark to be referenced by the enumerator in the 1921 census - it seems most likely that its demise from a farmer's residence to just a set of barns or a single barn was assured by the advent of new technologies and the lack of any proper roads to or from it...



There would have been tracks, of course (and there is still a substantial farm track very close to it) but no proper roads to be maintained by the local authority, and one imagines that any farmer hoping to earn a decent living out of the land would need good transport links, especially with the coming of the railway in 1860.

So, after possibly 800 years of existence in one form or another, its buildings would have required too much investment to be financially viable, its stones being gradually removed to build elsewhere.

On a fateful day in Summer of 1975, a fire destroyed the only remaining building, then used as a hay barn by the owners of Manor Farm. The son of the then-owner recalls that the fire brigade came in the afternoon and said that the roof could be saved but that the crew who attended in the evening did not continue to make an effort to save it and its roof and everything inside was lost, leaving only the walls, whose stones were used over the following years when needed on the farm. In the photograph below taken from Station Road, you can see a cloud of smoke, in the middle and to the right. Nothing physical at all remains, except for a faint rectangular outline, and the only living creature that can see it is a bird, and then only in dry weather...



from Verse 1, East Coker by TS Eliot

In succession

Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.
Houses live and die: there is a time for building
And a time for living and for generation
And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane
And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots
And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto.