



SPEEN

A Historical Essay

by

Alice Dean

To my grandson
Andrew with love
Alice Dean.

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Our village lies on a small plateau in the beautiful beech wooded Chilterns; whichever way one approaches the village a hill has to be climbed, and until the times of motorised transport very few houses were built, thus making a very small close knit community.

The name of Speen does not seem to have existed in any records before the Land Survey of 1823, being referred to as Uphill, and until 1896 formed part of the parish of Princes Risborough, and now is part of Lacey Green and Loosley Row Parish.

The Oxford Dictionary of names gives two explanations of the name Speen; Spinis, Spene or Spinae, or the Hawthorn, or Spon meaning wood shaving.

The whole of this area was once covered by thick forests, which were over-run with thieves and vagabonds, as the forests were almost impassable Leofstan Abbot of St. Albans was given the right to cut them down so that the undesirables could be hunted down and the forests made comparatively safe to travel through.

The Domesday map at the time of William the Conqueror's first census shows that in the Speen area there were five or six dwellings, long since vanished; however there are in the village a number of fine examples of sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century houses and inns, which have been kept in very good condition, and lovingly cared for by the owners, approximately ten in all.

The year 1823 saw the next largest change in building as people were allocated plots of land at a small charge in exchange for the common rights, this being Picketts Common, now known as Piggotts. The transactions were mainly between people living in the area and John Grubb of Horsenden Manor. Building of brick and flint houses went ahead and increased the number to 36 houses. There are now 176 houses and approximately 380 residents, excluding the children.

THE BAPTIST CHURCH

This Church was built in 1802 on land given by Joseph Gibbons; it is built of brick and flint, the flints were picked up in

the fields of Speen by the women, who day by day filled their aprons with stones and carried them to the paddock where the meeting house was to be built, and the Church was formed in January 1813. During the intervening period of building and opening the Church, worship was held each Sunday in houses in the village. In 1817 a vestry was added, and the Church again enlarged in 1834.

This meeting house became the focal point for the inhabitants, the highlight of the year being Anniversary Sunday which was always held on the second Sunday in July, and still is. People travelled from quite long distances to be there to meet all friends and relations, in other words one day in the year for a dedicated re-union of all those who loved Speen. The Church would be full to overflowing on this day, and those who could not get inside sat on the grass in the churchyard. The day started with a prayer meeting at 7.30 in the morning and services were continued during the day. The children recited poems, the choir and orchestra, who had given many hours of practice, sang and played the special Hymns and Anthems, some of which were composed by a man born in the village, Cornelius Ward.

Mr. Plumridge senior was Sunday School Superintendent for many years, and his wife, sons and daughters also played a great part in the running of the Church. The Anniversary festivities went on into the following week, with a Treat on the Monday, including tea, races and games. One game remembered by most of the old inhabitants was called "Cat and Conjur". This was played with a long pointed stick and a short stick about six inches long. Two rings were drawn some yards apart and the short stick struck by the other to see if one could get it from one ring to the other. Another game played was called "Threading the Taylor's Needle". All the children held on to one another and sang, danced and weaved in and out all round the village, led by the Band. People from surrounding villages used to come to the Church every Sunday; they would bring a day's supply of food and heat it on the stove in the vestry so that they could stay the whole day for worship.

THE VILLAGERS

The inhabitants were a very industrious community and every home seemed to house its own cottage industry and small holding.

Chairmaking, carpentry, lace making, wood turning — this was done at home and in wattle shacks or sheds in the Hampden Woods.

The women could cure their own bacon, churn butter and make most of the products needed for the family.

Boys were apprenticed within the village to the trade he or his parents chose, and the indentures were properly drawn up, the following being an example:

"Sidney Cartwright apprenticed to Edward Ward of Speen for three years, to learn the art of carpentry, such trade to be taught for the payment of £5.

During this time the apprentice shall faithfully serve his master and his secrets keep, his lawful commands obey, and gladly do.

He shall not waste the goods of his said master, nor unlawfully lend them to others.

He shall not contract matrimony, nor play cards or dice tables or any other unlawful games.

He shall not haunt taverns or playhouses and shall not absent himself from his masters service day or night unlawfully.

The apprentice shall work ten hours a day and during the first year receive six shillings per week; the second year eight shillings per week; the third year twelve shillings per week.

Dated ninth day of April 1899."

In the Winter when it was too cold for the men to work they would go to the woods to do what is locally called "roots chucking"; this was the process of digging up the rotting roots of trees which had been cut down sometime previously, and made a wonderful substitute for coal, the roots burned and glowed sending out a considerable heat.

Most homes kept a set of perambulator wheels and the women in the Summer would walk to the woods pulling their trolleys and load them with the dead branches which had fallen from the trees. They also took with them the well pole, a long pole with a hook on the end, which they used to pull dead branches down which had lodged in the trees — this they called "Wood Hooking". If enough journeys were made during the Summer a considerable pile of wood accumulated ready for the Winter months. A permit for collecting wood was obtained from the Hampden Estate for one shilling, this was later increased to two shillings and sixpence.

Travelling was restricted, so if one wanted to go into one of the towns shopping the only means of transport was by horse and cart, pony and trap, Mr. Lovatt's waggonette or walking.

Later when motorised vehicles came Messrs. Ward and Turner bought a lorry to fetch coal, this was utilised once a week to take the women into town shopping, and would be cleaned out and seats put in for this purpose. This was a most popular outing, and one had to book up early to be sure of a seat. On special occasions the lorry would make the trip twice, mostly I understand for football, or any other activity going on in neighbouring areas.

The youths of the village were very lively and used to get up to all manner of tricks, the favourite being collecting the gates from all the houses and dumping them in the village pond, or just going round the village lifting the gates from their hinges and lodging them back in place, so that when the house owners tried to get out of the garden, the gate would just fall down. Most of these mischievous tricks were dealt with by the village policeman, now sadly a thing of the past, a reprimand from the constable or a sharp slap if caught in the act seemed to be sufficient to stop the most outrageous offences.

I remember with nostalgia some of the older village residents: MR. OWEN RIDGLEY who would always be ready with a weather report plus a little jingle to go with it. Once when it was very severe weather in November and the ponds were frozen over, he said that it was a sign of a mild Winter and went on to quote the following:

“If in November the ducks can skate,
Muck and mud will be our Fate.”

and his wife Daisy while bobbing a baby up and down on her knee would play with the child's fingers, saying:

“Tom Thumbkin
Betty Bumpkin
Long Lacey
Short Sara
Little Whisgig.”

Old MR. GEORGE RIDGLEY the village postmaster leaning on the fence when he was about 96 remarked that he had now been promoted from postmaster to messenger boy. He was awarded the B.E.M. for long service to the community and died at the age of 100 years 11 months.

An old lady called GRANNIE PAT RIDGLEY used to sing to the babies the following:

“Two little eyes winking at me,
Two little ears like shells by the sea,
Two chubby cheeks as red as a rose,
That's Mummy's baby everyone knows.”

This was chanted with the necessary actions to go with each line. FREDERICK CARTWRIGHT is remembered as one of the first to build a brick and flint cottage in Speen and one of the oldest families of Speen. From a story written by his grandson, Albert Frederick Ward, he must have been a most jovial and pleasant character, and became one of the Senior Deacons of the Church and a man who loved people. His eldest son, William Montague Cartwright, spent three years at Spurgeons College and, after ordination, went to his first Church in Sydney, Australia, and became General Secretary of the Baptist Union there.

MR. GEORGE JANES and EMMA his wife, whose family owned the Plough Inn for over 50 years, and whose children and grandchildren still live in the village.

MR. DELL who lived in a thatched cottage behind the Plough, now demolished; once when some boys visited him, one boy said he did not believe in God, Mr. Dell sent one of the other lads outside to get a blade of grass. He held it up and said “Look, boy, could you make that?”

MR. & MRS. H. TILBURY; he worked as a chair bodger in the woods, and Annie his wife was always pleasant and ready with a story or ditty, and a good listener to one's problems.

The Family of MR. & MRS. ELI RIXON who always took a great interest in village affairs.

MR. RICHARD DEAN; most people remember him with his pony and cart delivering wood — a most gentle man.

LAURIE KENNEDY accidentally killed in August 1970 at the age of 22 was one of our most talented village boys. He became interested in playing the flute at the age of five when he first heard the flute played. He studied at the Guildhall School of Music and became principal Flautist of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and was said to be the most outstanding flautist of his generation; not only was he a brilliant musician but was well loved by the people of the village, and on the sad day when we heard of this tragedy the whole village seemed to be covered with a blanket of

stillness and quietude. He rests in our pretty little churchyard, where also is a memorial seat for people to sit and meditate, given by the people who knew and loved him.

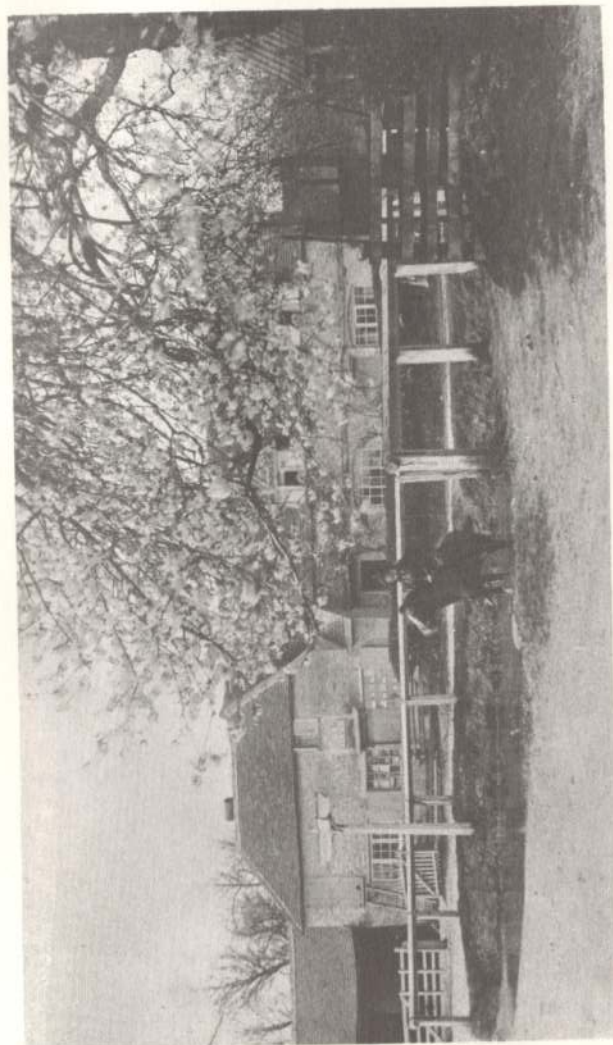
DONALD POTTER, F.R.B.S., Architectural Sculptor, came to live in Speen in 1931 and worked with Eric Gill until 1936, first as his pupil and later as his chief carving assistant, afterwards working as a freelance for several years in Speen, moving to Dorset in 1940. He has done a considerable amount of Church work up and down the country, including work in St. Paul's Cathedral, Winchester Cathedral and Zombu Cathedral, Nyasaland.

EDMUND RUBBRA, Composer, was born in Northampton. He came to Speen in the early 1930's and lived in Highwood Bottom. He studied under Cyril Scott and Gustav Holst. He is particularly known for his settings of the Spenser Sonnets and the poems of Baines Maria Bilke. He has composed symphonies, Church music and other instrumental work, and was for several years Faculty of Music at Oxford. The C.B.E. was only one of the many honours he received.

MR. & MRS. ALBERT BRISTOW lived in Woodbine Cottage. He was a Stone Mason, and with other men of the village was once engaged at Windsor Castle to do repairs on the stonework, as the stones from this district were the same as those used to build the Castle.

The following is a list of people and their trades, which shows how independent the original families were, almost everything could be made or bought within the village.

Ebenezer Anderson	—	Shoemaker
Alan Gibbons	—	Tailors
Roy and Bob Stevens	—	Milkman
Isaac Willott	—	Shopkeeper
Eliza Plumridge	—	"
Emily Saunders	—	Chair Leg Turner
Richard Dean	—	Farmers (Speen Farm)
Frederick and Walter Hatt	—	Chimney Sweep
Albert Hickman	—	King William IV Publican
Alfred Lovett	—	Chair Back Maker
William Plumridge	—	Chair Turner
Charles Ridgley	—	Postmaster and Baker
George Ridgley	—	Chair Turner
Charles Rixon	—	



Speen Post Office



Speen Village Band, 1889



Speen Baptist Chapel



The Bodger in Monkton Wood, Speen

George Ward and Son	—	Builders
Harry Ward	—	Carpenter and Undertaker
Albert Ward	—	Carpenter
W. Parslow	—	Wheelwright and Ladder Maker

The Registrar of Births and Deaths used to come from Princes Risborough in a pony and trap, and when he visited Mrs. Ridgley at Pye Cottage to register her tenth son, he remarked "I don't know where you keep finding all the names" and she replied, "Lor' love you man, I haven't started on the apostles yet."

If tragedy or trouble came to any family in the village help was always available. People were never without a kindly word or helpful action, help was always near from one or other of the residents, indeed a community which knew the secret of gracious living.

EDUCATION

The first School was built and partly endowed by Mrs. Grace in 1862 for the teaching of fifty children, but at times as many as 67 attended. It was not obligatory for parents to send their children to school so attendances varied from day to day. If a child was needed at home for harvest or haymaking or any other purpose they just stayed away from school, as they did also for fairs, festivals and racing in the surrounding areas.

The older children were taught by a mistress in charge of the school and the younger ones by monitresses, these being the older girls of the school who were sufficiently bright to teach the infants reading, writing and simple arithmetic. They were not qualified in any way, but some of them did go on to take the necessary examinations to enable them to teach the older pupils. This first building became too old and dilapidated and in 1965 a new school was built on the opposite side of the road, and commands one of the most beautiful views in Speen.

The Teachers who taught at the school were most devoted to their work. Miss Attwell was Headmistress from May 1904 to January 1924. Miss Hopton then took over and retired in August 1951 after 27 years' service. Miss W. Smith of Downley was a teacher in 1919, became Headmistress in 1951 and retired in 1967 — 48 years of service to Speen children. The school is now in the very capable hands of Mrs. G. M. Sargent as Headmistress.

In the 1800's a Lace Making School was in existence in a flint

THE OLD HOUSE occupied by Miss Sterry is reputed to be the oldest house in Speen, being 15th century. Some say it was a game keeper's cottage, but it could also have been an Inn known as the "Cross Keys". This cannot be substantiated in any way, but when the present owner had the cottage altered many beer bottles were found under the floor.

THE KING WILLIAM IV was built in the 17th century and altered in the 18th century, and was owned for 100 years by one family. This is now the only Inn in the centre of the village and stands back from the Hampden road, with the playing fields next to it.

THE GEORGE FARM was built in the 17th century and later became the "George" Public House, the last landlord being Mrs. Rose Ellis who took over the licence when her husband died. However in 1954 the pub was closed as the brewers thought it was no longer necessary to have two public houses in the village.

Other interesting cottages are "Pye Cottage" built 1672 in Charles II's reign, and Pye Cottages being built a little later. The name is of some interest, as this occupies the triangular piece of land dividing the parish of Hughenden and Lacey Green, Loosley Row and Speen Parish.

COTTAGE FARM although only early Victorian is one of the prettiest cottages we have, and the barn belonging to this cottage seems to be older, and is supposed to have been a Tithe Barn, which has been kept in wonderful condition by the present owner.

Three small cottages standing back from the Hampden road are said to be Tudor period, and although modernised have not lost any of their charm.

Opposite the Village Hall is "Orchard Cott". This also has been cared for by various owners and stands back from Studridge Road with a fine sweep of green lawn in the foreground. This lawn, although it has had centuries of people walking across it, has never had a path worn; this has been a source of much conjecture as to why this has been so.

Our village Post Office standing at the centre of the Hampden/Speen crossroad is thought to be 16th century, and was once the village Bakery. Mr. George Ridgley owned it, and his daughter Jean is now postmistress. The first Post Office was at "Spinning Wheel Cottage" where Miss J. Coleman does spinning and weaving.

These are a few of the buildings of Speen, and if any one cares to walk round the village it will have been really worthwhile, for although one historian says of Speen "Nothing to detain one", a quiet walk will prove this to be wrong.

THE WOMEN'S INSTITUTE

This was formed in 1926 and the first President was Mrs. M. D. Daniell and it was a great success; plays and pantomimes were produced, and at Christmas a Carol Choir was formed to go round the village singing and collecting for charity. One night would be set aside when cars were available to visit the larger houses in the district to sing. We would start from Major Caldwell's, who always warmed us up with a glass of port, and then his two sons Richard and Hugh and Miss V. Daniell and several others would take us on the rest of the planned round. Colonel Pritchard always gave us cherry brandy; this happened at most of the houses we visited even as far off as Horsenden Manor, but it was a very pleasing outing for all.

Mrs. Hulton was also a very active President and spent hours making costumes for the plays produced, she also designed and worked in tapestry a banner for the W.I. She and her daughter Miss B. Hulton went into the woods to photograph the chair bodgers. Mrs. Hulton then drew the picture on canvas, and did the stitching, thus producing a unique banner in keeping with this area of the Chilterns. Through lack of interest the W.I. was disbanded in 1946.

In January 1960 it was reformed with Mrs. Greenman as President, and is still a source of great interest in the village.

THE PLAYING FIELD

The land for the playing field was bought from Wheelers Wycombe Breweries Ltd. in 1935 for the sum of £160, this sum being lent by residents and later paid back when sufficient funds had been raised. Mr. W. C. Woods was Secretary and Mr. A. H. Hulton, Treasurer. Both did much work to enable the village to own this fine plot of land in the centre of Speen, as did the Trustees and those who lent money. Because of their untiring efforts this has become a real asset for the benefit of the people of Speen.

The present committee have gone ahead with other improvements and are hoping to purchase the adjoining land to enlarge

and complete the "King George V Memorial" playing field; a really great effort. The first big event to take place here was the Coronation celebrations for King George VI and Queen Elizabeth on 12th May, 1937. The programme was well planned with "Fancy Dress Parade" and Grand March round the village headed by the Band, Folk Dancing by Speen W.I. and the school children, tea for all in the Village Hall and Sports of all kinds. The day ended with fireworks and bonfire in the Grubbin Lane.

From this the idea of a choir came, and under the leadership of Miss M. Hopton the Speen Coronation Choir was formed and is still in existence, with a number of the original members.

THE CRICKET CLUB

It seems that there has always been a Cricket Club, but when it first started remains a mystery. However, the first matches always seemed to be played between Speen and the surrounding villages. This in itself caused keen competition and much rivalry, and a source of stories to be told over a pint in the local afterwards.

They must have started league cricket somewhere in the early 1900's and in 1922 they won the Third Division Cup, in 1933 the second Division Cup and in 1936 the First Division Cup.

The War made it difficult to run a team as most of the best players were serving in the Forces and after the War the same interest never returned, and in 1964 the remaining Cricket Club funds of £54 16s. 4d. were incorporated with the Playing Field.

MEDICAL CARE

This in the main was carried out by women of the village, and only absolute necessity would make them send for a Doctor. Some of the recipes used are as follows:

Groundsel, Simgreen or common House Leek mixed with home-made lard was used as an ointment for skin troubles or poulticing for swellings and boils.

Dandelion Root Tea was made for internal conditions.

Linseed Poultice or Goose Grease for chest ailments.

If a Doctor was needed he came from Princes Risborough on horseback. Times have changed and we have a Surgery in the village where one can see a Doctor on Mondays or Thursdays.

Doctor H. G. Edwards has treated most of the families in the village for the past 36 years, and is considered a friend as much as a medical adviser, and has given unstinted service to Speen.

THE VILLAGE GHOST

It would seem that no story of town or village would be complete without a phantom spirit.

In Highwood Bottom is a stone said to be the burying place of Mr. Cooper, Highwayman. He is supposed to have been buried here with his treasure. On the odd occasion people swear that they have seen the ghost of Cooper roaming the lane, and children used to be told to hurry home from School or the Highwayman would get them.

Some of the more adventurous boys planned to lift the stone to see what lay underneath, but when it came to carrying out their intentions they became scared and ran away.

The tale is told that no one would venture alone along the lane, and if they had to use it would go in groups.

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I have tried to include most of the original families, and somewhere in the book their names have been mentioned.

Alice Dean