

## The Village of Steventon

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Steventon, Hampshire, England

Steventon village is to be found between the main roads leading from Basingstoke to Andover (B3400) and Basingstoke to Winchester (A30). At each turn-off point there is a popular inn with history tracing back before the days of four-in-hand coaches. The countryside has the soft folding hills of North Hampshire with abundant trees and woods. At the rise of these gentle hills there are wonderful views to be enjoyed. The soil is chalk with clay and gravel outcrops, and a plentiful supply of flints, many of which can be seen built into cottage walls. The population of the village, about seventy-five families, has not greatly changed over the years. In modern times, however, many people travel to London for their work whereas in 1821, according to the census, most people lived and worked here; all the trades vital to everyday living were to be found in Steventon: the baker, the blacksmith, the carpenter, the shepherd, the carter, the kennel man, the keeper (gamekeeper), and many more.

Relics found in the fields around Steventon tell us that the village is many centuries old. A polished stone axe, scatters of neolithic flint flakes, a small mound in dense woodland (perhaps a Bronze Age barrow), and Roman potsherds are all evidence of an ancient past. An interesting relic now resting in St. Nicholas' Church is part of a Saxon cross shaft which was discovered near the end of the nineteenth century in the wall of the early Steventon Manor. After a brief period in the Victoria and Albert Museum, it has been returned to the church.

Probably the oldest, continuously standing feature of Steventon village is its ancient yew tree. It stands in front of the church, spreading its majestic limbs in welcome. Estimated to be more than nine hundred years old, it has a girth of more than twenty feet. Although it is hollow inside, it appears to be healthy.

St. Nicholas' Church stands along a village lane at the crest of a gentle hill, a site it has occupied since the twelfth century. Its spire was added about the middle of the nineteenth century. It is a simple building with three arches at the east balanced by three at the west. The ancient yew tree guards the approach. In early times there were doors on the north and south sides of the church, the principal one being on the south side where several scratch dials are still in evidence. This doorway was moved to the west entrance and its original stonework and arch are seen there today. The windows inserted after its removal are poor copies of the originals to be seen

towards the east of the nave. These alterations are thought to have been carried out in the thirteenth century when the chancel was built. Several other Norman features were discovered in 1989 when the interior of the church was renewed.

A schedule of restoration work on the church was started in 1976 with funds raised the previous year by celebrations to recognise the 200th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth in the village. The rendering (stucco) on the exterior of the north and south walls was renewed. Now, over twenty years later, this rendering proves to be withstanding the test of time. In 1982 it was time to tackle the roof and spire. As many as possible of the original slates and tiles were used when the roof was renewed, but before the tiles were replaced extensive preparatory work was completed, using new materials. For this project and all those that followed the Parochial Church Council was greatly assisted by grants from the English Heritage and local councils. Generous support was also received from the Jane Austen Society and from members of the Jane Austen Society of North America. In 1989, as funds became available, the culmination of the church restoration was in sight. The renewal and redecoration of the interior of the church was commenced, an enormous task because every pew had to be removed so that the walls could be replastered. The great bonus of this effort was the discovery of a fireplace with its chimney going up through the thick flint walls, the double piscina in the sanctuary, and many medieval tiles lying hidden behind the altar and in the fireplace. Thanks to the cooperation of the contractors, the church was never closed and no service had to be cancelled during the restoration work.

In 1983 the small organ, so suitable for a country church, was completely dismantled and removed to a firm in Somerset where it was overhauled and restored before it was put back in place to give splendid music for our services. There is constant competition from the mice, however, who seem to enjoy the warmth under the organ and the leather supporting the keys!

More recently the three church bells have been tuned and rehung. They are of great interest, two being of medieval origin, from 1470, the other dating from 1670. This project was totally funded by donations from JASNA members and a plaque acknowledging this generosity is placed in the porch of the church.

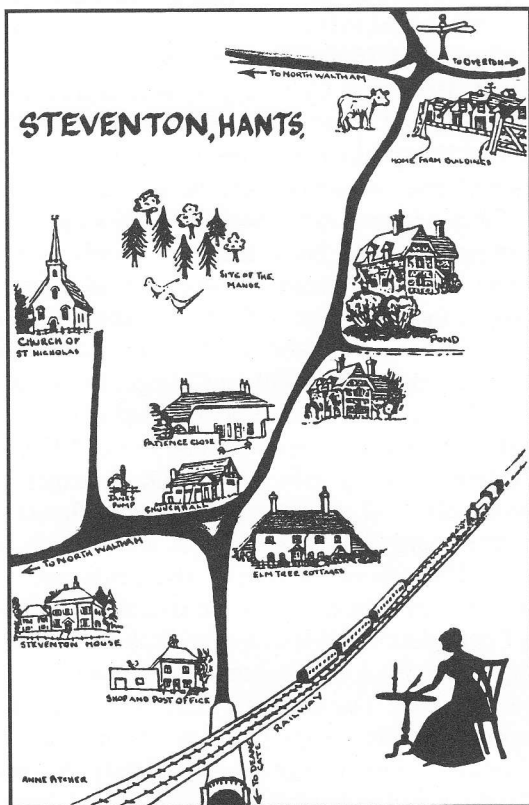
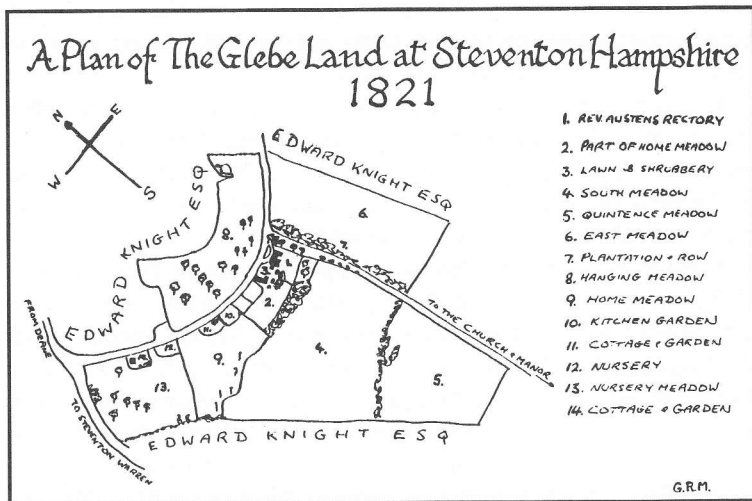
In 1990 the Parochial Church Council decided to cover the kneelers with canvas work in flower designs, each being a different flower on a blue background. These were designed by Atherton Harrison and worked by members of the congregation. Atherton also designed the embroidered falls, completed in 1997. She based her design on

the Victorian wall paintings on the chancel arch; they were beautifully embroidered by Doreen Dean of Exmouth, Devon, who formerly worked for the National Trust.

It is very special to us that your society was first discussed when American and Canadian friends were visiting Steventon for the bicentenary celebrations. They were captured by the atmosphere and in forming the society a few years later made the support of St. Nicholas' Church one of the foremost aims.

The Steventon Estate played an important role in village life for many years. It was here in the imposing Tudor manor house, constructed of flint stones and brick, with fine mullioned windows, that the Digweed family lived. They were tenant farmers of Steventon Estate for more than a hundred years, until 1877, when the estate was sold. [Jane Austen frequently mentioned the Digweeds in her letters.] Before the end of the nineteenth century, the village saw the completion of a fine new manor house on the estate with stables and carriage house, splendid farm buildings at Bassetts Farm and the Steventon school (1893), which became a Council school in 1903. Many trees were planted to form the shelter running north and south above the village road. In the twentieth century the estate changed hands in 1910, 1930, and 1939. These were settled times in the village as farming and sport flourished. A fine herd of shorthorn cattle, a flock of Hampshire down sheep, a herd of large white pigs, and many shire horses were to be seen on the estate, which became well known for its pedigree stock. Sadly, in 1932 a fire raged through the Victorian manor house. Fortunately, the family escaped safely, and rather than repair the Victorian house, they added two wings to the Tudor house, making it one of the finest manor houses in North Hampshire. In 1939 with the outbreak of war, the estate was sold, and the manor house was used by Hilsea College, before it moved to Oakley Hall. The manor remained unoccupied after the war, foreshadowing its eclipse and eventual demolition in 1970. Since then Steventon Estate has been split into smaller acreages, and many cottages have been sold as private residences. Bassetts Farm is home to a dairy herd and includes grassland and an acreage of fodder maize. Throughout the estate, the fields and woods are known by names they have had since the sixteenth century; Cockley Lands, now Cockeylands, Spidos, Grubbs, Waltham Marks, Griseley Deane, Copythorne, Rookery, Biglands, Littlelands, Yew Tree, and Foxytop are examples. The pattern of farming in the environs remains principally arable (crops of wheat, barley, and rapeseed).

The environment of the village was completely changed with the building of the railway embankment and the tunnel through it. The



first train to run straight through from London to Southampton was on May 11, 1840. This was celebrated by the roasting of a bullock at Mitcheldever Station. Part of the roast was brought back to Steventon and consumed with great enjoyment by the villagers in North Down field. There would have been a Steventon station had the owner of the land given his consent. It is difficult to realise that the first trains were open carriages, so during wet weather, the passengers used umbrellas. In the early days, village boys liked to play tricks on the passengers. A favorite prank was to tie the large flowers of the nodding thistle loosely on sticks and hold them up for passengers to take. The boys were greatly amused when passengers grasped the prickly stems.

Today Steventon has a daily bus service, except on Sundays. A bus shelter, splendidly built of native flint and brick, was added in the summer of 1997, a credit to the village for all time.

In 1903 a lamplighter was appointed by the Parish Council to light the lamps in the Steventon Tunnel. He was paid three shillings a week and had to provide oil, glasses and wicks. It was not until the 1960s that electric light was at last installed in the tunnel, making it much safer for pedestrians, cyclists, and equestrians. Electricity was made available to the village in 1938, and mains water in 1954. Prior to that the village was dependent on wells, bore holes and rain water. During modernisation of the cattle barns at Bassetts Farm in 1982 vast rain water catchment cellars were found with splendid load-bearing arches.

The village is extremely fortunate to have its own Parish Council — the beginnings of democracy — the members of which are elected by the residents every five years; they monitor all that happens in the village. As in Jane Austen's day, life is made up of friends and neighbours celebrating happy events and giving help in difficult times. Year by year the seasons come and go. Every farming year is different with varied challenges and satisfactions. All the time the small community in Steventon goes about its everyday business, coming together for attendance at church, summer fete days, harvest festival, and most recently, to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Reverend Michael Kenning's priesthood. Such are the privileges of living in a small village with wonderful history.

#### NOTE

It has been a pleasure to write these few words for *Persuasions*. Some recollections have been drawn from information written by Henry Henshaw, agent to the Steventon Estate in the 1930s. More recent notes result from the Bown family's longevity, they having lived and farmed in Steventon for more than fifty years. These few words would never have been put to paper without the great help of Atherton Harrison, to whom I am especially grateful.