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This fascinating book has been written with the hope that it will preserve some memories of Rowton for those who will live there in the future. It will also appeal to those who have an interest in the history of Shropshire.

Elizabeth Jordan was born in Ellesmere, Shropshire, where her father’s family lived for several generations. She attended Oswestry Girls’ High School and gained a degree in English Literature at Exeter University.

‘A must for all amateur local historians. **Rowton Recorded** shows that history can be informative and entertaining.’

Shropshire Unfolded

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The front cover shows the Baxter monument and Hop Cottage.
Introduction

Rowton is a small hamlet set in undramatic countryside with no pretensions to being picturesque or historically significant. Yet Rowton has a rich and varied past which is worth recording.

This book is not intended to be an historical study of Rowton but information and memories collated from a variety of sources. It was written in the hope that it will interest people living in the village now, those who lived here in the past, and those who will live in Rowton in the future.

I am very grateful to everyone in Rowton who helped me by providing information and photographs. My thanks also to Joan Maddox, Jack and Marjorie Beard, David and Jenny Shakeshaft and Allan Frost for their help, and to my husband Nigel for his support and encouragement.

Rowton Recorded would not have been published without the money raised by the Rowton residents who organised and took part in the Fun Ride, car-boot sales and other fund-raising events. They deserve special thanks.

I have tried throughout the book to be accurate in recording past times and events in Rowton. Any errors or omissions are regretted.

Elizabeth Jordan
Rowton, 2000
1. A Short History of Rowton

The word ‘Rowton’ derives from Anglo-Saxon and means a hamlet or settlement built on rough ground. There are several other Rowtons in the area, including one near Shrewsbury and another near Chester. ‘Rough ground’ in this period was usually stony ground or waste land in a non-wooded area.

Although present day Rowton is only a small hamlet it has ancient origins. We know that there has been a settlement at Rowton since at least Anglo-Saxon times. There is talk of an Iron Age hill-fort on the ridge at the top of the lane leading out of the village towards Ellerdine, known as The Cop, an old English name for a hill.

Some sources say there was a settlement here in Roman times called Rutina and The Firs was previously known as ‘Villa Farm’ because it was thought to stand on, or near, the site of an old Roman villa. This is quite feasible given that Rowton is not far from the major Roman settlement at Wroxeter (Viriconium) or from Watling Street, the old Roman road which ran diagonally across the country from London to Chester, passing through Wellington.

In Anglo-Saxon times the village was part of Ercall manor owned by Leofric, Earl of Mercia. His wife was the Countess Godgyfu (Godiva), the famous Lady Godiva who rode naked through the streets of Coventry in 1040. Lady Godiva often visited the area with her husband to receive her dues of 20d (8p) from each of her tenants. Earl Leofric and his wife were well-known for the improvement of their estates and Ercall manor would have benefited from their ownership.

Rowton was an established village by the time the Domesday Book was compiled in 1086 following the Norman conquest of England by William the Conqueror in 1066. There is an entry in the Domesday Book for Rowton which tells us that it stood in the Hundred of Hodnet. A hundred was a subdivision of a county; originally in Anglo-Saxon times it meant a grouping of about a hundred households. It was then spelt Routone and was held by a lady named Edith for Earl Roger de Montgomery, the powerful Norman lord who founded Shrewsbury Abbey and owned three quarters of Shropshire under King William. Before then, Morcar and Dot, who were free men or women, held Rowton as two manors. Nothing is known of Edith except that on her death Rowton reverted to the Crown.

The Domesday Book was compiled for William the Conqueror as a statistical study of England and its resources. Rowton’s entry mentions there being a priest here together with four smallholders with one plough and three slaves. There was enough land for four ploughs in the village. As 60-64 acres could be ploughed by a team of oxen every year, this equates to around 250 acres.

If there had been a church, fish-ponds or woodland belonging to the village, they would also have been mentioned but there were none. Smallholders and slaves were the heads of the households, so allowing four or five to a family the population would have been around 30 people in total. Two hides (approximately 240 acres) paid tax and in 1086 the value of Rowton to the king in tax was reckoned at 15 shillings (75p).

To put this in perspective, Shawbury, which was similar in size to Rowton, was valued at 16 shillings (80p) while Ercall manor was much wealthier with woodland, two mills and a fishery. It was worth £20. High Ercall did not exist as a village at the time of the Domesday Book. Ercall manor was the land belonging to the lord of Ercall Hall, the Lakemoor brook marking the boundary between his land and that belonging to the lord of Rowton.

At the time the Domesday Book was
written, Rowton was larger and more important than Ellerdine or Cold Hatton as can be seen from their respective entries. From the 12th century onwards Rowton and Ellerdine were linked as one manor.

During the Middle Ages Rowton and Ellerdine were a manor (an estate held by a lord), which was part of the Bradford Hundred. The name Bradford came from the ford one mile south-west of High Ercall where the road to Shrewsbury crosses the river Roden; The Mill House now stands there.

When Henry II reigned (1154-89), Rowton was part of the lands given to Jorwerth Goch for his services to the king as an interpreter in Wales. Jorwerth Goch was Lord of Mochnant and of the royal line of Powys. His descendants, the Kynastons, were stewards of Ellesmere manor in the 14th century and built Oteley Park which still overlooks Ellesmere mere.

By the 13th century we know that the Lestranges of Blakemere (also near Ellesmere) owned Rowton and Ellerdine as they exchanged them for Marlbury in 1268. This was part of a move to re-unite the Lordship of Whitchurch after its division amongst heiresses earlier that century.

In 1294 Rowton passed to the Ludlows of Stokesay and by 1489 was owned by Humphrey and Alive Vernon. From the Vernons it passed to Sir Richard Newport as part of the Newport estates which later became the property of the Duke of Cleveland. Rowton appears on maps of Shropshire throughout the centuries. The map below dates from around 1610.

From the 15th century the largest freeholders in Rowton were the Adeneys (also spelt Adney). Rowton's most famous son, Richard Baxter, was an Adney on his mother's side and many members of the family are buried in High Ercall churchyard.
Indeed, the first recorded burial in the High Ercall Parish Registers is of one George Adeney, yeoman of Rowton, who died in 1585. He was 87, an incredible age for that period.

The Shropshire Hearth Tax Roll of 1672 (an early census) shows a Thomas Adney (the spelling of the name has now changed) and a Thomas Buttry (later spelt Butter), living in Rowton. There were still Adneys and Butterys in the village up to the first half of the 20th century. The last Adneys lived at High House Farm and the last Butterys at The Stone House.

The Adneys and Butterys once farmed close to one another near Newport. They each left their farms in the 14th century when the land became too wet and marshy to farm due to the silting up of the lakes around Newport after they ceased to be royal fisheries. There is a hamlet called Adeney near Edgmond today which either gave its name to the family or was named after them. The spelling reflects the correct pronunciation of the name: Ade-ney. There was also a hamlet called Butter near Kynnersley in medieval times. The Adneys moved to the Rowton area and the Butterys went to Crudgington first and later moved to Rowton. As the two families are so closely connected it is strange that they never inter-married. This may be because the Adneys were higher up the social scale than the Butterys and at times over the centuries members of the Buttery family acted as servants to the Adneys.

The first Adney to be born in Rowton was George born in 1498 and the last was Richard Adney who died around 1940. Bill and Kath Preston of High House Farm have a family tree of the Adneys family dating back to John Adney of High Ercall who died in 1542. We can thus trace the family living continuously in Rowton up to Noel Adney who, according to the Wellington and District Directory, still lived here in 1937. For most of this period the Adneys were living at High House Farm.

Other Rowton family names recurring over the centuries were Powell, Morris, Grice and Humphreys. Meredith Powell (clearly a Welshman) is mentioned as a smith living in Rowton in 1608. The Morris family (also of Welsh extraction) lived in Rowton from at least the early 18th century. The Grice family lived in the village in the 16th and 17th centuries but there is no trace of them after this time. Robert Humphreys was blacksmith in Rowton in the 18th century. His daughter Mary married George Vickers who became Rowton’s blacksmith in turn in the 19th century.

By the 19th century much of the land in and around the village was part of the Raby Estates, known as the High Ercall Estates, owned by the Duke of Cleveland and later, when the last Duke died without issue, Lord Barnard, his heir.

Some land around the village was part of the Lilleshall Estate; for example, the land and properties bordering Cold Hatton. This includes the cottage where John and Carol Weston live on Twiney lane. The Lilleshall estates were owned by the Duke of Sutherland whose family owned much of the land and houses in Crudgington from the Middle Ages onwards.

Some of the cottages in Rowton today have characteristics of Duke of Sutherland estate houses, such as pointed gables. The Westons’ house on the Twiney and Corner Cottage in the village are good examples of this architectural style which is quite common around the Lilleshall and Newport area.

The Duke of Sutherland stipulated that all his cottages should have a pig-sty and apple tree in their garden and that a walnut tree was to be given to the cottagers on the birth of their first son.

The lands and houses belonging to the Lilleshall Estate were sold by the Duke in 1912 when many local farmers bought their farms and the cottages attached.

The map below, which belongs to John and Suzanne Proudley, shows a plan of
Rowton as it was when four lots of the Estate were sold by Barber and Sons in 1912.

The owners of the Lilleshall and High Ercall Estates never lived in this area, which is why we have no mansions or parkland. The High Ercall Estate was eventually sold off over a period from 1919 up to the 1930's.
2. Richard Baxter

The granite obelisk which stands on the small green in the centre of Rowton village is a monument to Rowton's most famous son, the eminent 17th century Puritan preacher Richard Baxter. It is visited by people from as far away as the U.S.A. who are interested in his life and work. The Richard Baxter Society, which is based in Kidderminster where Baxter lived and worked for several years, was founded in 1991 following commemorations of the tercentenary of his death to promote a better understanding of Baxter's work and influence.

Richard Baxter (1615-1691) was a famous preacher, teacher, writer and theologian who was born at Rowton on 12th November 1615 at his mother's family home and lived here until the age of ten. His mother, Beatrice Adney, was the daughter of Richard Adney who lived opposite the present day Baxter House in a timber-framed house which subsequently burned down in a fire.

The Adneys were a well-established and respected Rowton family who continued living in the village up to the first half of the twentieth century. Baxter's father, also called Richard Baxter, came from Eaton Constantine. Beatrice Adney and Richard Baxter were married in High Ercall church in 1614 and their son Richard was later baptised there. Beatrice Adney was twenty-one when her son was born and she died when he was nineteen.

In his autobiography Reliquiae Baxterianae, Baxter wrote that his father was known as a gentleman because he was of a good family but he only had a small estate and that was 'entangled by debt'. Baxter's father had been addicted to gambling in his youth, as was his grand-father, and he went into debt as a result. This is probably why his son Richard was born at his grand-parents house in Rowton and lived there for most of his childhood until his father could support a family in his home village of Eaton Constantine.

Surprisingly, as he must have been warned of the evils of gambling by his father's example, Baxter tells us in his autobiography that he was briefly addicted to gambling himself as a youth, when he was studying in Ludlow in 1632, aged seventeen. He describes Ludlow at that time as 'full of temptation'. Perhaps there was also an hereditary factor at work?

While living at his grandparents home in Rowton, Baxter had four teachers in six years. They were the successive readers at Rowton chapel, all of whom he described in his autobiography as 'ignorant'. Two preached at the chapel once a month and the other two didn't preach at all. Two of them Richard Baxter regarded as 'immoral'. The last of his Rowton tutors drank himself, his wife and children to begging.

The Adneys must have been a devout Puritan family as Richard Baxter tells us they were annoyed when a maypole was set up in Rowton in front of their house because of the connections with the old
May Day celebrations. Richard's parents also disapproved of morris dancing which they regarded as 'pagan' although Baxter himself was ambivalent on the subject.

As a boy living in Rowton, Baxter enjoyed climbing The Wrekin which overlooked his home. He wrote, 'When I was young, I was wont to go up The Wrekin Hill with great pleasure (being near my dwelling), and to look down on the County below me and see the villages as little things'.

On 2nd February 1626, not long before the young Richard Baxter left Rowton, an exciting event occurred. It was the day of the coronation of King Charles I, a school holiday, when at 2 o'clock there was an earthquake at High Ercall. This event fascinated the ten year old Baxter, who wrote of it many years later in his autobiography.

At the age of ten, Baxter moved to his father's village of Eaton Constantine and began to attend school in Wroxeter shortly afterwards. He later became a pupil at the Free School at Donnington for a time and then spent 18 months as a pupil of Richard Wickstead who was chaplain to the Council of the Marches of Wales based in Ludlow.

Baxter studied in Ludlow from 1632-3 as, he tells us, an alternative to going to university. By this time he had decided to prepare for the ministry. His parents would have preferred their clever son to gain employment in the Court in London; Richard did try this briefly but tells us Court life and its ways were not for him.

Later, after he had completed his education, he became a minister at Bridgnorth in 1639 and then moved to Kidderminster in 1641. When the Civil War began in 1642, Baxter moved to Coventry and became a chaplain to Oliver Cromwell's Parliamentary army. He later said he would have preferred to have remained neutral during the war but had no choice in the matter. He was strongly opposed to the execution of King Charles I and disagreed publically with Cromwell over this at risk to his own life. Baxter did not really enjoy his time as Cromwell's chaplain; his approach of reasoned moderation did not fit in well with most soldiers' views of war.

Baxter returned to Kidderminster in 1649 and his preaching there had an extraordinary effect, making Kidderminster a model of Puritan order and discipline. His pulpit is still preserved in the town. Baxter wrote his best known works whilst living in Kidderminster: The Reformed Pastor and The Saints Everlasting Rest. Both books remained for centuries in constant use by the 'Reformed' churches in England and America.

When the Civil War ended, Baxter was influential in bringing about the restoration of the monarchy and became King Charles II's chaplain in 1660 when Charles came to the throne. He was allowed frequent access to the king who treated him with great respect.

However, he could not accept the extremely intolerant views of the new regime and when he was offered the bishopric of Hereford, Richard Baxter declined the honour. He wanted to return to Kidderminster, of which he was very fond, and become a preacher there again but this was denied him by the authorities.

In 1662, at the age of forty-six, Richard Baxter married. His wife, Margaret Charlton, who was twenty-six at the time, was the daughter of a wealthy and distinguished Puritan family from Apley Castle near Wellington. The Charlton School in Wellington is named after them. Despite the age difference it proved to be a happy marriage. When Margaret died in 1681, she was buried at Christ Church in Newgate, London; Baxter was buried with her ten years later.

When the Act of Uniformity was introduced in 1662, it curtailed various religious freedoms. Baxter disagreed with the Act and joined the non-conformists and was subsequently persecuted as a result by the notorious Judge Jeffreys, Baron of Wem.
In 1685, at the age of seventy, Baxter was imprisoned for over a year by Jeffreys on a charge of sedition because he had ‘libelled the Church of England in one of his publications’. Baxter's health, which was already frail, was made worse by his stay in prison. Upon release, he spent the remainder of his life as a Non-Conformist preacher in Acton and London.

Richard Baxter died on 8th December 1691, aged 76, and was buried in Christ Church, London. We are told his funeral was well attended by people from all ranks of society.

Although he suffered almost continually from illness throughout his life, he is credited with having written nearly 170 works on Christian subjects, his most famous being The Saints Everlasting Rest. He preached more sermons, wrote more books and became involved in more controversies than any other non-conformist of his age.

Baxter is regarded as a pioneering minister and a man of considerable courage who spoke up for what he believed to be right at the risk of persecution and even death. His life and work are important because he was a central figure in the 17th century Puritan movement which has influenced not only religious thought but English life in general.

Puritan ideas inspired life in this country well into Victorian times and still affect us today with their emphasis on the work ethic and personal responsibility for our own and our families' well-being.

Richard Baxter's life and work are crucial in the history of English religious ideas. He was always a moderating influence wanting a purer and more honest form of practical Christianity with less emphasis on church government and administration. Today, Baxter is recognised as a pioneer of the Ecumenical movement in his efforts to unite Protestant Christians.

Although Baxter's mother's family, the Adneys, remained in Rowton and were still living in the village up to the 1930's, it took Rowton a long time to publically recognise its most famous son. Perhaps this was because the people and parish of Rowton were not Presbyterian like Baxter.

The present granite monument was erected near to the site of Baxter's first home to commemorate his connections with Rowton. It was officially unveiled on Saturday 14th July 1951. Shown below is a photograph of the monument draped in the Union Jack at its unveiling by Mr Algernon Pearce J.P., Chairman of Ercall Magna Parish Council and father of Bill Pearce who lived at Oswald House (now The Olde Smithy).

The photograph below was taken by Jack Beard of Ellerdine. Bill Preston also remembers watching the ceremony as a boy and has a similar picture.

The inscription on the monument reads as follows:

Richard Baxter
Great Divine Author and Eminent Citizen of the 17th century
Son of Richard Baxter and Beatrice nee Adney
Born here in Rowton AD 1615.
Died in London 1691.

The monument is a plain but striking chunk of rock which symbolises Richard Baxter's steadfast and unwavering character.
3. Fire!

There have been several fires in Rowton’s history. In particular, there was one major fire in Rowton which proved disastrous in the days of timber-framed buildings.

There were once about thirteen houses opposite the present day Baxter House, including the Buttery’s farm. The story is that they were destroyed because ‘a fiery stick’ on a windy night set the barns and stacks of the Buttery’s farm alight. Where the fiery stick came from we don’t know! During this fire the home of Richard Baxter, owned by his mother’s family, the Adneys, was destroyed. The fire is believed to have taken place in the 18th century. There was certainly a fire in Rowton at this time but whether this is the same fire is uncertain.

Another version of the story given to Tom Picken by Mr Richard Adney claimed that the houses burnt down during a severe thunderstorm while the men were bringing in the harvest. He refers to the lane where they stood, which leads down to present day Baxter House, as ‘Drog Lane’. Mr Adney says the house where Richard Baxter was born stood directly opposite the gate to the back of Baxter House and the stackyard of Rock Farm.

Hop Cottage is now the only surviving house of the thirteen or so which once stood along this lane.

We know there was at least one other major fire which destroyed two old timber-framed cottages which stood on the site of present day 14 and 15 Rowton. The date of this fire is uncertain.
4. Victorian Rowton

The Census returns in Shrewsbury Records and Research Library provides us with a fascinating snapshot of Rowton in Victorian times. They show, for example, that most people living in the village then were born in the parish of High Ercall. We can see from the census taken on 1st January 2000 at the end of this book that this is not the case today and the majority of the adults living in the village now were born outside the parish of Rowton and even outside the county.

Listed below are those people living in the village in 1851. No house names are given in the Census records for Rowton and the census officer’s numbering system does not correspond accurately with today’s house numbers, so it is not always possible to link names to present day houses.

1 Rowton - Charles Jukes, farmer, and his family. A maltster called David Lewis was living at the house as well so this may be Rock Farm where we know there was once a malthouse.

2 Rowton - Samuel Nicklin. Shoemaker. His son, who lived there as well, was his apprentice. Another shoemaker called Nicklin lived at 9 Rowton.

The Nicklins were freeholders living on Ellerdine Heath at the time Ellerdine Commons were enclosed at the start of the 19th century. They were traditionally blacksmiths and shoemakers from the 1730’s.


4 Rowton - John Whitfield. Freeholder and farmer. He lived at Villa Farm (now The Firs) and was Chairman of the Wellington Poor Law Board of Guardians, so would have been connected with the nearby workhouse.

5 Rowton - George Fowler. Farmer

6 Rowton - George Vickers. Blacksmith. He lived at what is now The Olde Smithy.

7 Rowton - John Adney. Farmer. This was the largest farm in the village in 1851 employing 8 labourers and several servants. It was almost certainly High House Farm as we know the Adneys lived there for generations.

8 Rowton - Joseph Williams. Agricultural labourer.


11 Rowton - William Sandlands. Farm labourer.


13 Rowton - Thomas Butterly. Shoemaker. The Butterys and the Adneys were the oldest families in Rowton. The Butterys were boot and shoemakers and small-scale farmers.

14 Rowton - Sarah Humphreys. Dressmaker.

15 Rowton - Elizabeth Adney. Farmer. She was aged 75 and employed 6 labourers, a Housekeeper, a Bailiff and servants.

16 Rowton - John Butterly. Farmer. He employed no labourers, only his son. This was The Barnes where the Butterys farmed 12 acres.

17 Rowton - John Nicklin. Wheelwright and his wife Ellen, a dressmaker.

18 Rowton - Mary Pierce. Labourer’s widow and her son William, an agricultural labourer.


20 Rowton - John Ash. Agricultural labourer.

21 Rowton - Thomas Challinor. Agricultural labourer.


24 Rowton - Thomas Hulston. Agricultural labourer.


26 Rowton - George Colley. Tailor. The Colleys are another old Rowton family who had lived in and around the village for centuries. Bill and Kath Preston of High House farm have a family tree of the Colley family going back to 1682. Benjamin Colley lived in Heath Lanes in the 1730’s and in 1884 the family inter-married with the Adneys when Lucy Allen of the Colley family married Richard Adney.

27 Rowton - Thomas Nicklin. Wheelwright. This makes a total of five Nicklins living separately in the village. Two were shoemakers and three wheelwrights.

29 Rowton - Richard Hughes. Agricultural labourer.

Then came an uninhabited house.

30 Rowton - William Lewis. Master of Ercall Magna Workhouse and his wife Sarah, the Matron. Also John Davies, a schoolmaster, and the children living in the workhouse, boys and girls aged 2-14. There were also a few adult women living there referred to as ‘inmates’.

It is interesting to note how many tradespeople lived in the village at that time and how many were shoemakers and wheelwrights. There were also several inter-related families living in the village in 1851, probably even more then the census shows because of the married women who would have changed their surnames.

By 1861 the Census record shows that the population of Rowton had peaked at two hundred and fourteen. Many of these were not living in the village but on the outskirts, in the workhouse. The majority of people in the village itself by then were children and young people. Families were generally large and often there were six or seven children living with their parents in the village’s ‘two-up two-down’ cottages.

The adults listed on the census were mainly connected with farming: farmers, labourers, carters and stockmen, many of them living in at the large farmhouses. Most of the women and girls of the village are listed as general servants or domestic servants and would have worked in the more prosperous households in and around the village. They often lived in as well. Those living in the farmhouses worked alongside the farmer’s wife and daughters. They would have been employed in the dairy, making butter and cheese as well as cooking, washing and cleaning in the house.

On Twiney Lane there were a number of cottages where now only one remains. We know from maps of the 19th century there was once a small row of houses where now only the Westons’ house stands. You can still see the foundations of some of the other buildings today.

The 1861 census also shows people living in a house in Rowton Meadows which was presumably close to the workhouse because they had consecutive numbers. There were also five cottages on what was called Heath Lane. Heath Lanes was once the name for the whole area around what is now Cliff Crescent near Ellerdine village hall, close to the present day Heath Lane.

There were also three houses in an area called Waterside whose numbers follow those of the houses on Heath Lane. These would have been in the Sytch lane area which was once called The Waters. The river Tern was at that time the boundary between High Ercall and Waters Upton parishes, with houses coming under Rowton village on the census going right down to the river, including the workhouse. The workhouse by now mainly housed children from the Wellington area referred to as ‘paupers’.

It is interesting that, of all these buildings which stood outside the village in 1861, only the Weston’s house now remains.

By the time of the 1881 census, there were thirty-three houses in Rowton with four uninhabited. The population had dropped to one hundred and twenty-eight, forty-five of whom were children. By now the workhouse had closed and most of the residents had been moved to Wellington workhouse. People were living in parts of the old building in 1881, including a James Tudor, baker and grocer.
5. Fun and Games

Times must have been hard for most of Rowton's villagers much of the time. As well as working long hours and bringing up their families in cramped conditions with none of our labour-saving devices they also had to tend their gardens to produce food in the form of fruit and vegetables.

Gardening was not a hobby then but an essential part of self-sufficiency. Contrary to the image of the traditional cottage garden, few of the cottagers would have grown flowers which were a waste of valuable space. Most kept a pig as it could eat the household's left-overs, and then the family could eat the pig. Corner Cottage had the foundations of its pigsty in what was 12 Rowton until recently when Nigel Jordan dug them up to create his own vegetable patch!

Of course, life was not all work for the villagers in the past. There would have been games played in the village, such as cricket in the summer and football. There were hunts, shoots and cock-fights. The Ercall Magna Parish map for 1839 shows there was a field in the village called Cockpit Leasow (meadow) which was where cock-fights once took place.

At Cold Hatton there were races held around what was then a common with the grandstand on the high ground in the centre of a circular racetrack. High Ercall had a two day market and fair held on dates including 8th September, the Nativity of the Virgin. No one worked on fair days. There would be a short church service followed by beer, either brewed by the church in earlier times or, later, provided by a local benefactor. Then the fair proper started and the fun began. High Ercall also had a visiting fair which must have been one of the main social events of the year. It was held just after harvest time when there was a short lull in the farming calendar.

Rowton once had two alehouses in the village which would have been popular meeting places. They were called The Plough (now the appropriately named Hop Cottage) and The Rising Sun, which stood on the site of the original Baxter House opposite the present day house of the same name. We know that in 1841 John Morris was the landlord of one of these pubs. These were probably alehouses or beerhouses as opposed to public houses. Alehouses were encouraged as an attempt to discourage spirit drinking in the 18th century. (In 1740 the nation consumed a gallon of spirits a head on average each year!) It is not clear whether these 'pubs' had a justice's licence to sell beer or were unlicensed drinking houses. Today we no longer have a pub in Rowton but we do have a pub sign 'The Rowton Arms'. This was commissioned by David Sear and is often seen hanging wherever we have a social event in the village.

At the alehouses games like cards and dominoes would have been played and, in earlier times going back to the 16th and 17th centuries, shovelboard and nineholes.

Up until the early 19th century, on the first four Sundays in May, there were The Wrekin Wakes and Wellington also had its own town Wakes on 1st November on All Saints (the name of its parish church) Day. Wakes were originally annual celebrations of the building or dedication of a church, accompanied by much merrymaking with booths selling food and drink and trinkets. They were relics of medieval times later revived in the 1760's and included cock-fighting, juggling, horse-racing and plays.

Shawbury revived its Wakes around 1768 which must have been an attraction for many of the people of Rowton. However, some people disapproved of the Wakes and regarded them as pagan. These wakes later gave way to annual fairs.
There used to be a substantial brick and tile workhouse just outside the village close to the junction of Sytch Lane and Constitution Hill in what is now Waters Upton. In those days the road from Rowton crossed over the present day A442, forming part of the main road which then ran along Sytch Lane. The remains, which can still be seen on the left hand side at the bottom of the lane, were part of an old mill which stood opposite the workhouse buildings.

The slope leading down to the river was known as Workhouse Bank up to the 1950’s. Attached to the workhouse was a single-storied building, used originally as the workhouse schoolroom, then a Wesleyan chapel and later, in the early 1900’s, a bungalow home. There used to be a fletcher’s shop and a bakery nearby.

On the opposite side of Sytch Lane stood the workhouse master’s house. In the garden there were steps down to the river Tern close by to enable the workhouse inmates (as they were called) to draw water for washing. Unfortunately, there are no traces of the steps remaining now. The pictures below show the old workhouse buildings.

Workhouses, also known as Poorhouses, came into being in the 18th century alongside a system of ‘outdoor relief’ for the poorest members of the community. Outdoor relief was parish employment on communal work such as road repairs. This was combined with the labour rate system whereby farmers took on extra workers in return for a reduction in their parish rates, and the roundsman system where men, women and children went round from house to house asking for work or money. In return the parish (in our case Ercall Parish) supported the poor and their families. By early Victorian times there was general dissatisfaction with poor relief among taxpayers. Many saw it as a way of supporting able-bodied men and women who did not want to work. Poverty was often viewed then as a symptom of moral failure rather than social and economic circumstances.

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 embodied this view. It did away with outdoor relief relying on the workhouse as the primary means of support for the poor. Parishes were banded together in Unions and large buildings, often called Union Buildings, erected to serve several parishes. The intention was to reduce the burden on taxpayers as poor people would only seek parish relief by entering the workhouse if they were desperate.

The workhouse situated on the outskirts of Rowton was the Ercall Parish workhouse for the poor of High Ercall and the surrounding area. The people of High Ercall village, which was a prosperous area, did
not want the workhouse near their houses so it was built three miles away right on the edge of the parish close to the border with the neighbouring parish of Waters Upton. At this time the boundary of Rowton village ran right down to the river Tern at the bottom of Sytch lane. According to John Beard in his book *My Shropshire Days on Common Ways*, the two parishes did not always agree which may have been another consideration. Let the people of Waters Upton have the workhouse on their doorstep! The Workhouse was originally supposed to have been built for adults and Joan Maddox believes returning soldiers from the Crimean War (1853-56) were amongst the inmates.

For most of the Victorian period, however, the census records show the workhouse was used mainly for children, most of whom came from the Wellington area.

We know from the Census records of 1841 that of Rowton’s 181 inhabitants, 43 lived in the workhouse. It was also referred to as the Union School as it incorporated a school for the workhouse children. The workhouse housed a few adult paupers as well, mainly poor widows. By 1851 there were around one hundred children living there, many of whom are buried in Rowton churchyard in unmarked graves. The workhouse for most adults at this time was in Wellington, on Walker Street. By 1876 Rowton’s workhouse was closed and the people living there were moved to the new workhouse in Wellington, which had accommodation for 350 adults and children. This building eventually became Wrekin Hospital. The only reference to the old workhouse in Rowton in later census records is the existence of a building called The Old Workhouse and Union Buildings where it once stood. Part of the original workhouse had been converted to domestic dwellings by then but was still listed as part of Rowton village.

Conditions in workhouses across the country were generally spartan and the food poor. They were maintained by the local ratepayers who had an interest in keeping the running costs down. Both adults and children had to wear uniforms and their hair was cropped so they would have been easily identifiable.

Men, women and children were segregated so families had to split up. Elderly couples forced into the workhouse when they could no longer earn a living and maintain their independence were sent to live in separate buildings sometimes miles apart.

Elderly people had no pensions before 1908 and many could not earn enough in their working years to both keep themselves and their children and save for the time when they could no longer work. Their families often could not, or would not, support them when they finished work, or they might not have any family. Then their only option was to enter the workhouse.

It is not surprising that, within living memory, the workhouse was hated and feared by country people. To have to go into the workhouse was the ultimate social stigma and the last resort, only to be contemplated when you had no alternative.
7. Schools

Rowton never had its own school. In early Victorian times, before compulsory education was established by the 1870 Education Act, children from the village would go to the Dame School at Ellerdine Heath run by Dame Buttery or later to the Ellerdine Day School, also known as the Bethel School, which opened in 1866. Kelly’s Directory of 1891 tells us the average attendance at the school was sixty-five pupils. It was later known as the Board School and subsequently the Public Elementary School.

Some boys from Rowton families would have attended the Grammar School, also known as the Free School, in High Ercall which was founded in 1663 by Thomas Leake. This school closed in 1866. There was also a school at the workhouse on Sytch lane for the children who lived there, chiefly for teaching them the Bible and gospels.

During the first half of the twentieth century, most children from the village attended Ellerdine school which had pupils from four to fourteen, then the national school-leaving age. Rowton was part of the catchment area and children from the village would have walked to the school along Twiney lane. Many children left school at fourteen but, later in the century when the school leaving age was raised to sixteen, would have attended the secondary modern school in High Ercall or, if they passed their 11 plus examination, the grammar school in Wellington.

Most of Rowton’s children in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and certainly those from the poorer families would have left school by the age of thirteen or fourteen. They then started work on the local farms if they were boys or went into domestic service in the wealthier homes in the area if they were girls. John Beard tells us that he left school in 1881 age ten and a half (the state leaving age was eleven at that time). Sometimes they would have to leave their families in the village to work on farms or in houses elsewhere, wherever there was work available.

The standard of teaching generally in the state schools of the 19th and early 20th century was not considered to be very good. Labourers’ children often fell behind with their education because they were kept off school to work in the fields or to look after younger children while their mothers worked. Sometimes it was due to the distance they had to walk to school, especially in bad weather. Often they were kept at home to work because their parents did not feel education was important to their children or could benefit them in any way.
8. The Railway

Rowton used to have a railway passenger halt (request stop) on the Wellington to Market Drayton line of The Great Western Railway. You still cross the bridge which went over the tracks as you leave the village going towards the A442. Looking down from the bridge you can see the remains of the tracks below and the railway embankments. The nearest railway station was close by, at Crudgington, which was where local farmers loaded their milk and sugar beet and where the food produced at Roden nurseries (mainly tomatoes and cucumbers) was put on trains for the Co-Operative Wholesale Society in Manchester.

Rowton Halt was opened on 29th June 1935 and ceased to exist as a halt for passengers due to Dr. Beeching’s cuts on 9th September 1963. It was never a halt for freight traffic. It was closed to all traffic in 1967 and the lines were later removed and the tracks filled in. The Shakeshafts, who farm at Cold Hatton, had the opportunity to buy the land where the railway lines ran over their fields in 1970. The lines were filled in twelve years ago and are now such an integral part of the fields on the Cold Hatton side of the bridge near the A442 you can no longer see the railway cutting.

The main Shrewsbury to Wellington railway line was opened in 1849 and later became part of the Great Western Railway (GWR). Wellington station was opened in the same year.

In 1867, GWR introduced a branch line running from Wellington to Market Drayton; Crudgington station, opened in 1868, was on this line.

A railway worker called George Bailey lived in Rowton at the time of the 1871 census at 35 Heath Lane, close to the lines. He may have been a lengthsman whose job was to maintain one section of the line.

An eighteen year old boy called James Baxter is buried in Rowton churchyard. I believe he was killed nearby in 1865 while helping to build the Wellington to Market Drayton railway and, as was the policy at the time, was buried in the local cemetery. James Baxter’s headstone must have been of good quality stone because, unlike the other headstones of the 1860’s, it is still completely legible. Perhaps it was paid for by his employers, the GWR, who were a wealthy company at the time. Cutting the railway tracks out of sandstone, which involved the use of explosives, was dangerous work and the railway company may have felt an element of guilt at the young man’s death; this could be reflected in the expensive headstone.

Rowton Halt was just two small up and down platforms built on sleepers with a timber shelter on either side of the track. It was not manned. It did, however, give Rowton villagers railway access to local towns where they could pick up connecting trains to larger towns and the cities.

This picture shows one of the platforms taken from a train coming into Rowton Halt heading towards Crudgington.

Railway halts were created in the 1930's and 1940's as part of an effort to serve local needs by utilising existing facilities to the best effect and to tackle competition from road transport. We think Ellerdine Halt opened in 1932 and we know Rowton Halt was opened in June 1935. By this time GWR’s passion for opening halts to try to
counter road traffic increase was at its peak.

The Milk Marketing Board was set up in the 1930’s and led to an increase in demand for milk. It is possible that the halt was intended to assist in transporting the milk. However, as Jim Preston remembers, there were steep steps leading to both platforms and no ramp for milk churns, so this is highly unlikely. Milk would have been taken instead to the main stations at Cruglington and Peplow.

The Wellington to Market Drayton line was a busy one and the villagers of Rowton in the years 1935 to 1963 would have been used to hearing trains going through at all hours. Boat trains passed through from Dover and cattle trains from Holyhead and The Pines express from Manchester to Bournemouth used the route during the west coast electrification.

Rowton Halt was well used during World War Two owing to its proximity to the RAF camp at Osbaston near High Ercall and the army camp in Rowton itself at High House farm. Geoff Fletcher from Peplow remembers the large cage on the platform at Peplow station for blue RAF bikes on a Saturday night when the men took the train to Wellington or Market Drayton for a night out. No doubt there were a few bikes left at Rowton Halt too!

Jack Beard of Ellerdine, a retired Operations Manager on the railway, recalls a local farmer from Ellerdine who used to regularly hitch a lift out to The Seven Stars pub at Cold Hatton on the trains in return for eggs or a chicken or a Christmas turkey. The last train out of Wellington at ten o’clock used to pick him up for the trip home. The late Mr Alan Pearce, who was an engine driver, used to say that he had time for a quick pint when the train stopped. Perhaps the local farmer used to bring him out a pint from The Seven Stars in return for his lift?
9. The Rowton Meteorite

This iron meteorite, also known as the Rowton siderite, is only the second known to have fallen in Great Britain. This is a rare event in the scientific world as iron meteorites are seldom seen to fall and it is the only one ever to have been seen to fall in England.

The meteorite is currently on display in the Natural History Museum in London, where it is described as ‘an irregular low pyramid covered with oxidic and metallic fusion crusts’.

This is an account of what happened on the day it fell taken from Dr W Flight’s Philosophical Transactions of The Royal Society of London 1882 Volume 173, a copy of which is kept in the Records and Research Library in Shrewsbury.

On the afternoon of 20th April 1876 at about 3.45 pm, a strange rumbling noise was heard followed almost immediately by a startling explosion described as resembling a discharge of heavy artillery. At the time it was raining heavily and the sky was covered with dark clouds but there was no thunder to account for the noise.

About an hour after the loud noise was heard, Mr George Brooks was in a field adjoining the Wellington to Market Drayton railway line ‘about a mile north of The Wrekin’ when he saw a hole in the ground. Dr Flight’s account tells us the land belonged to the Duke of Cleveland and was in Rowton.

Observers later questioned said the noise when it fell sounded like something falling during a heavy shower of rain accompanied by a hissing and then a rumbling noise. When George Brooks found the lump it was ‘quite warm’.

The meteorite was black on the surface (this was magnetic oxide of iron), but where it hit the earth the oxides had come away to reveal the metal below which was bright metallic nickel iron. When the meteorite was later subjected to detailed analysis it was found to consist of:

- 91.250 percent iron
- 8.582 percent nickel
- 0.371 percent cobalt
- + a trace of copper.

The Duke of Cleveland’s agent, Mr Ashdown, obtained the Duke’s permission to present the meteorite to the trustees of The British Museum from where it was later transferred to the Natural History Museum where you can still see it today.

The account of the meteorite given by Dr Flight is confirmed by the Rowton meteorite’s entry in The Catalogue of Meteorites and V. Buchwald’s 1975 Handbook of Iron Meteorites which gives the grid reference for where it fell as:

- Latitude 52° 46’ North
- Longitude 2° 31’ West

There is also an account of the fall of the meteorite in the local paper of the time, The Wellington Journal and Shrewsbury News dated 29th April 1876. Under the heading of 'Fall Of A Meteorolite Near Wellington' the account, reproduced in part below, reads as follows:

'A most remarkable phenomenon occurred near the village of Crudgington on Thursday week, which created some alarm amongst the inhabitants in that locality and has given rise to considerable discussion and inquiry in scientific circles. About 3.40 an
unusual rumbling noise in the atmosphere was heard, followed immediately by an explosion resembling the discharge of heavy artillery. About an hour after the report Mr. George Brooks went to a meadow in the occupation of his step-father, adjoining the Wellington and Market Drayton Railway, about a mile north of the Crudgington station. Seeing that a hole had been cut in the ground, he probed it, and found a mass of metal of irregular shape which, upon being dug out, proved to be a meteoric stone weighing about eight pounds. The metal had buried itself to a depth of 18 inches, passing through 4 inches of soil and 14 inches of clay strata down to the gravel. It was quite hot when found, although nearly an hour had elapsed from the time of the explosion being heard. The hole which has been protected for further examination, is almost perpendicular, and the meteorite is assumed to have fallen in a south-easterly direction. Labourers were at work at the time of the phenomenon, close at hand, and were greatly alarmed.

Mr. Gibbons of Tettenhall Road, Wolverhampton, was allowed temporary possession of the stone, which he purposes submitting to the Birmingham Natural History Society.'

The article goes on to give the possible scientific origins of meteorites from Brande's *Dictionary of Science* which refers to them as 'aerolites', the fall of which is accompanied by meteors called 'bolites', or fire balls. The account says these fire balls explode with a great noise (like the discharge of heavy artillery described by observers of the Rowton meteorite) often 30 to 40 miles above the earth. As they plunge into the earth's atmosphere enormous heat is generated and the aerolite is the product of this combustion. Sometimes the fire ball is entirely consumed before it reaches the earth in which case no aerolite (meteorite) falls. The fall of meteorites, the article continues, was mentioned by the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers but men of science refused to believe in phenomena they could not explain. In 1803 a shower of meteorites fell in Normandy in France in broad daylight and were scientifically examined. Since then the fall of meteorites has not been called into question.

The reporter goes on to admit that ‘it is comparatively rare for the fall of a meteorite to be discovered and examined and the time, place, and circumstances of its fall proved.’

It is interesting to look at the similarities and differences in the local newspaper account of the time and Dr Flight's account which is the one accepted in scientific circles. The descriptions of the meteorite tally as do the circumstances surrounding the fall and discovery, even the times only differ by five minutes. However, the place where it fell is described by the Wellington Journal as 'about a mile north of the Crudgington station' but by Dr Flight as 'about a mile north of The Wrekin'. There is a good six miles between the two locations.

The only other material difference in the two accounts is what happened to the meteorite after it was removed from the field. The newspaper says that a Mr Gibbons was given temporary possession of the stone which he planned to give to the Birmingham Natural History Society. According to Dr Flight, because the meteorite was found on the Duke of Cleveland's land, his agent Mr Ashdown obtained the Duke's permission to donate the stone to the British Museum in London. This account explains the present home of the Rowton meteorite in the Natural History Museum. The meteorite fell in 1876. In 1880-1881, the natural history exhibits in the British Museum were moved to the newly created Natural History Museum in South Kensington. Whether Mr Ashdown obtained the meteorite from Mr Gibbons, the Birmingham Natural History Society, or elsewhere, or whether the newspaper account is inaccurate, is uncertain.

We know that the Rowton meteorite is
quite rare and it has put the name of Rowton on the world map of meteorology but which description of its fall is correct? Did it fall in Rowton at all?

Roger Evans from Bleak House decided to investigate and his research has thrown up some interesting findings.

To begin with Dr Flight's account and the Wellington Journal's version do not tally entirely. Dr Flight describes the meteorite as falling on the Duke of Cleveland's land at Rowton adjoining the Wellington to Market Drayton railway line, 'about a mile north of The Wrekin'. Rowton is almost seven miles from The Wrekin. This may be a mistake on the part of a man who was not local and probably never visited Rowton. He does say it fell close to the railway line at Rowton so the site of the fall of the meteorite should be in a field south of the old railway bridge on the lane leading to the A442, about a mile north of Crudgington station, exactly as the contemporary local newspaper account describes. The spot is marked on the map below.

Using his contacts at RAF Cosford, Roger Evans asked them to plot the grid reference to show exactly where the meteorite fell. These grid references have never been questioned to date.

The surprising outcome is that the point where the meteorite is said to have fallen is close to the B5062 road to Newport, between The Terrill and Shray Hill. The grid reference was checked by RAF personnel but they kept coming up with the same result. Even as the crow flies this site is two to three miles away from the old railway line where the meteorite is supposed to have fallen.

The Ordnance Survey Helpline advises that grid references have changed slightly since the time the meteorite fell. This could account for the difference between the two sites. However, on consulting an Ordnance Survey map of the period with latitude and longitude lines clearly marked the map reference points to exactly the same site as the RAF identified, between The Terrill and Shray Hill.

Either the original grid reference or the contemporary accounts, neither of which have been challenged to date as far as is known, must be wrong. Dr Flight's account, which was published in 1882, six years after the meteorite fell, differs from the local paper's description which was published only days after the fall of the meteorite and which places the site on the outskirts of the village.

My belief is that the local paper was correct, the meteorite did fall just outside Rowton and this is how it acquired its name. If it had fallen where Dr Flight described surely it would have been known as the Wellington or Wrekin meteorite. If it fell where the grid reference says the Shray Hill meteorite would have been a better description.

Miss Joan Maddox from Cold Hatton Heath has some interesting recollections concerning the meteorite which confirm my views. She is positive it fell in Rowton in the field between the lane to The Barnes farm and the old railway line. Miss Maddox recalls that when she was a girl she and her father were shown the site by Donald Burgess who farmed the land at the time.

Miss Maddox has published her own account of the fall of the meteorite in a local history book on Cold Hatton and the surrounding area. It graphically describes how Mr Brooks saw the meteorite fall. He ran to the spot and tried to pick it up but it was too hot. He then ran back to his farm in Rowton, fetched a spade, dug the meteorite out and carried it back to his farm. It was the size of half a brick and dark brown in colour with silvery markings.

If anyone reading this knows anything more about where the meteorite fell, please let me know. My view is that the rare iron meteorite on display in the Natural History Museum did fall in Rowton although I cannot account for the grid ref-
ferences. Even if this comes to be disproved, it has always been known as the Rowton Meteorite and deserves a place in this book for putting the village on the scientific world map!
10. The Church

There has been a church on the same site in Rowton for hundreds of years. The medieval church was a chapel of ease for High Ercall, a chapel of ease being a church built in a parish with a church already but too far away for the congregation to attend on a regular basis. However, there was almost certainly a church or chapel in Rowton before there was a church in High Ercall.

The original church in Rowton was probably a simple wooden structure dating from Saxon times. We can assume the existence of such a church because Rowton’s entry in the Domesday Book tells us Rowton had a priest. Where there was a priest there was usually a church of some description. We also know there was a priest and a church in Shawbury, a settlement about the same size as Rowton, at that time. High Ercall had no priest or church in 1086 although the present church was built soon after, around 1090. The only remaining trace of Rowton church’s medieval origins now is said to be some masonry in the nave, the original nave having been about half the width of the present one.

We have some information about the church during the medieval period. We know that John de Roulton (Rowton?) held the church at High Ercall and the chapel at Rowton in 1384 and that Rowton church had a connection with Wenlock Abbey because the Abbey received tithes from Rowton. After the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in 1538, when the country’s religion changed from Catholicism to Protestantism, Rowton church passed from one owner to another for a period. John Tayleur of Longden-upon-Tern bought it in 1614.

In 1912, Rev. D. H. S. Cranage published his book The Churches of Shropshire, Volume 2 which describes Rowton church as ‘a dull and depressing little building’! Rev. Cranage thought the church was rebuilt from the medieval chapel in the 17th century. Certainly in 1697, High Ercall parish paid £2. 10s (£2.50) for building a ‘steeple’ on the church which is likely to have been the wooden bell-turret mentioned in later accounts. Bells were cast for the church in 1698 following other work in 1697 which included providing a communion table and rails. These had disappeared by 1912 when Rev. Cranage’s book was published.

The present All Hallows (All Saints) church dates back to 1882 but there had been previous extensive re-building in 1835 in the Early English style. The church register dates from 1840. The living was a curacy in the gift of the Duke of Cleveland. A Short History of Rowton Church by Mr Richard Adney, a descendant of the 17th century Adneys and therefore of Richard Baxter, was written in 1935 and contains memories of the church from 1835. Mr Adney was eighty-five years old at the time he dictated his memories of the church and its vicars; he died the following year, 1936.

The 1835 church was described in Kelly’s Directory of 1851 as ‘unpretentious’, built of red stone with a wooden bell turret. It had pews with high backs and narrow seats which must have been extremely uncomfortable, especially during long sermons! The pews had quarry floors and some had red curtains around them. There was a gallery along the north end of the church and a stone font near the door. Mr Adney, drawing on his own recollections and those of the oldest villagers, tells us that few people attended the church regularly from the village; the congregation was mainly composed of children from the local workhouse.

Money to rebuild and enlarge the church in 1835 had been donated by the Duke of Cleveland and the Bishop of Lichfield. Grants were also obtained from
the Ecclesiastical Commission and Queen Anne's Bounty. The parish made up the rest. The new church was double the width of the old medieval chapel. The vicar at the time of the rebuilding was Mr Robertson and he walked each Sunday from Shrewsbury to take the service until he came to live in the parish at Cold Hatton.

In 1850 Rowton was formed into an ecclesiastical parish with Ellerdine, Ellerdine Heath and Cold Hatton becoming part of Rowton parish. The sketch below shows the extent of the parish which is much wider than the boundaries of the village itself.

In 1881-2 Rowton church was altered again to give us the structure we see today. The Shropshire Journal carried an account of the re-opening of the new church on Tuesday 14th March 1882. The re-opening service was very well attended and £27 15s 5d (£27.77p) was taken in the collection and went towards the rebuilding fund. The total cost of the alterations to the church was £450. The Duke of Cleveland paid £150 towards the work which was carried by a local (un-named) builder.

The basic red sandstone structure remained from the 1835 rebuilding but the uncomfortable old pews were taken out and replaced with new seating in pitch pine. The gallery was removed altogether, the church was almost totally re-roofed, and the present bell-turret, chancel and porch were built. The parish could not afford stone for the chancel so had to make do with bricks. The windows were not altered, only re-glazed so the present windows date from at least 1835 when the church was first rebuilt. We are informed in the newspaper article that the new church was 'efficiently heated' by an underground stove.

A tea-party and dance were organised to help pay for the work and local farmers and their men helped cart the material for the rebuilding, so it was a community effort. The old font was replaced by a 'newer' one which the vicar at the time, Mr Payne, had found in Hadnall churchyard almost hidden by grass and covered in moss. The original font from the church, which was larger, went to Crudgington church. Some ladies of the parish of Rowton presented the new church with gifts of needlework which the Shropshire Journal says 'helped adorn the church, a building otherwise singularly devoid of ornamentation'.

After the work was finished, the opening day had such an excellent congregation attending that the collection paid off the remainder of the debt.

The solitary bell in the small stone turret on the church is dated 1825 so predates this turret and probably belonged to the previous wooden one. The bell had fallen into disuse and had not been sounded for many years but in 1999 Rowton residents John Mulhern and John Proudley removed and repaired it and the bell was briefly rung again on 30th August 1999 at 11.40am.

The picture on the following page shows the bell being repaired. John Mulhern is on top of the 'cherry-picker'.
We hoped to be able to ring our one and only bell at midnight on New Year’s Eve to mark the new millennium but unfortunately the rope later broke and at the time of writing we are waiting for a proper bell-rope to be fitted.

As the nearest Anglican church serving the villagers of Rowton, Ellerdine and Cold Hatton, Rowton church would have been a focal point of village life through the centuries. Some parishioners would have walked to church across the field paths to attend services and meet up with friends and relatives to catch up with the news. Our present day rights of way crossing the fields were once shortcuts from hamlet to hamlet used by people going to and from Rowton to work, worship and socialise.

We have to remember that there is a strong Methodist tradition in this area so some people from Rowton would have travelled in the other direction to Ellerdine to attend chapel. Methodism became increasingly popular in the 19th century and there were once two chapels in Ellerdine, one being Wesleyan (named after John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement) and the other a Primitive 'break-away' chapel built in 1871. The Primitive (or Bethel) chapel housed the local school. It was sold in 1964 and became a private house. The Wesleyan chapel built and opened in 1813 is the current Methodist chapel and is one of the oldest in the county.

In 1929 John Bourne of Ellerdine set up a charitable trust to benefit widows and widowers living in Rowton parish. The John and Eliza Bourne Trust still continues and has now widened its scope to include people ‘in need’. Anyone who thinks they may be eligible can apply to the trustees through the vicar.

A high point in the more recent history of Rowton church came on 6th August 1949 when Mr Bill Pearce from Oswald House (now The Olde Smithy) saw three of his daughters married there on the same day. By coincidence, all three girls – Olive, Hilda and Phyllis – married men named Cartwright: John, Walter and William. There were two brothers from Pound House, Wollerton, and a third Cartwright who was unrelated, John Cartwright from Bleak House, Rowton. The whole village took the day off to celebrate and the church was packed to the rafters with people having to stand outside in the churchyard to listen to the service as there were no seats left inside. The ceremony went off smoothly except for one small hitch. The vicar, Rev. D. Rees, nearly forgot to marry one of the couples and the congregation had risen to sing a psalm when the assisting vicar, Rev. Trevor Pugh, remembered in time.

All three couples celebrated their golden wedding anniversaries in 1999.

The yew trees in the churchyard at Rowton are older than anything else there, including the gravestones. They certainly
pre-date the major church rebuilding programmes of 1835 and 1881-2 and there have probably been yew trees on this site since the time of the medieval chapel. Yews grow to a great age and are traditionally planted in churchyards as a symbol of death. In pagan times, before Christianity came to this country, they were also said to ward off evil spirits.

When Mr Adney was writing about the church in 1935, he says the first tombstone in the churchyard was that of a young man who was killed while helping to build the local Wellington to Market Drayton railway line. Mr Adney gives no name but this is probably James Baxter whose headstone is still completely legible today. It tells us that James died suddenly in his 19th year in 1865. This ties in with the building of the railway line which was opened in 1867. Why Mr Adney call it 'the first' tombstone is unclear. It is not the first as you enter the churchyard (this is the grave of John Wright of Cold Hatton who died in 1883). However, it is the oldest legible headstone which may account for the description.

James Baxter's stone has a touching, but rather chilling, inscription which reads:

'You that are young prepare to die
I was young though here I lie
Repent in time and don't delay
For I was suddenly called away.'

There are probably graves and headstones older then James Baxter's in the churchyard but sandstone does not weather well and they are now illegible.

The churchyard was enlarged twice in the early part of the 20th century and a licence for marriages obtained at the same time. The Duke of Cleveland gave the church the land for the additional burial ground and the stone and lime. He also donated £10 towards the cost, which the parish council of the time thought very generous. The people of the parish did all the work. To cover the costs, the larger farmers gave £2 each, the smaller farmers gave £1, the smallholders 10 shillings (50p), the cottagers 1 shilling (5p) and the children 6p (2.5p). Only three people in
the village refused to give anything. They were told neither they nor their families could be buried in the churchyard but Mr Adney says that this was not actually carried out.

As you walk around the churchyard today, you see the recurring names of local families from Rowton, Ellerdine and the surrounding area such as Pearce, Gregory, Picken, Beard and Buttery.

There are also names familiar from the Victorian census records like Adney and several from Kelly's *Directory of Shropshire* of 1934, including the Bournes who farmed at High House Farm, the Burgesses from Church Farm and Miss Lizzie Hopkins of Villa Farm. Miss Hopkins died in 1934 aged 49 years; her headstone reads 'she did what she could', which may hide a story. Perhaps she was limited by ill-health?

There is a very elaborate headstone to Ella Bourne who died in 1910; unfortunately this is now lying on its side at the back of the church.

There are two graves which have large conifers growing directly out of them; one belongs to Margaret Judith Price and the other to Ellen Withington who died in 1943. It is difficult to read their names as they are now so obscured by the trees.

We can also see headstones of the families of people still living in the village, such as the Norris family from Rock Farm and the Evans of Church Farm.

Mr Adney's account mentions paupers' graves on the south side of the church of people from the workhouse. These were mainly the graves of children taken to be buried at night with no coffins, just wrapped in a shroud or even sacking. John Beard says the dead from the workhouse were carried to their graves on a hand-pulled 'parish hearse', in effect a cart. It is impossible to identify these graves today as they never had headstones or other markers. There are two very overgrown large square graves with weathered stone surrounds at the rear of the church but no writing on them is legible. There are also a number of headstones stacked at the back of the church and near the far churchyard wall which have fallen down and been stacked there. These mostly date from the 1880's. There are also a number of discarded metal grave markers with numbers on them in the same place.

When you enter the churchyard you notice the two trees on the left hand side of the path leading to the church. One is a cherry tree planted as a memorial to Mrs Violet Preston of High House Farm and the other a rowan tree or mountain ash in memory of John Beard and his son John Cecil from Ellerdine. John Beard the Elder (author of *My Shropshire Days On Common Ways*) had his ashes scattered in Rowton churchyard around the graves of his family. Although some graves and parts of the churchyard are a little neglected, it is still an orderly and peaceful place with fine views over the surrounding farmland to The Wrekin in the background overlooking the village as it has always done.
Rowton is described in Kelly's Directory of Shropshire of 1934 as a perpetual curacy endowed by the last Duke of Cleveland assisted by grants from Queen Anne's Bounty (established to assist small livings) and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, with a net yearly value of £245. It was in the gift of the Duke of Cleveland and later his heir, Lord Barnard.

The parish of Rowton (which included Ellerdine and Cold Hatton then as now), was in the rural deanery of Wrockwardine, the archdeaconry of Salop and the diocese of Lichfield.

Thanks to Mr Richard Adney, a former churchwarden, whose *Short History of Rowton Church* was compiled in 1935, we have a record of the vicars of Rowton from 1835 to 1935 which one of our present churchwardens, Mrs Kath Preston, has since kept up to date. Mr Adney's typed record of Rowton's vicars is available from Kath Preston and is a fascinating insight into past vicars of the parish.

Mr Sidney Robertson was vicar at the time the church was first re-built in 1835. There was talk in the parish about his drinking and the church hierarchy held a meeting where the vicar admitted he had been drunk on several occasions. The Duke of Cleveland said he would pay Rev. Robertson his stipend for the rest of his life if he resigned, which he did. His successor was a Mr Burden; he was very musical and while he was vicar the church acquired a harmonium played by a local lady, a Miss Brookes. There were a number of young people in the parish at this time and they formed a good choir. During this period church expenses were paid by voluntary subscription and there was a collection only on the first Sunday of each month.

Up to 1939, no vicars of Rowton had permanent homes in the village but most rented rooms in Rowton or nearby. Other past vicars include Mr Smith (a farmer's son who died suddenly at a meeting in Shrewsbury) and Mr. Yonge (who lived at Waters Upton), described as a good plain preacher and popular vicar. He is buried in the churchyard. Then there was Mr. Tellow, also buried at Rowton, and a Mr. Phillips, who was not generally popular.

Mr Phillips was particularly upset by the organist at Rowton church who was an elderly lady who kept making mistakes. He asked a local girl called Vaughan Adams to play instead. She lived at Church Farm and was half sister to the farmer, Mr Burgess. She was only about eleven but played very well and remained church organist until she went to college.

Mr. Payne was vicar at the time the church was again altered in 1881-1882. He lived with his wife's family at Stanton and took rooms in Rowton where he visited nearly the whole of his parish every week.

Later vicars include Mr William D. Davies, another vicar described by Mr Adney as 'not popular'. Often only three people were present at his services, including the churchwarden.

Rev. Davies was followed by the Rev. Albert Edmund Lane Sanson. He was a graduate of Cambridge University and became vicar of Rowton when he was appointed Rector of Waters Upton in 1931. However, he could not please the people of both Waters Upton and Rowton (his churchwarden told him this was an impossible task!) and the poor man's 'mind gave way' and he had to leave the parish. Miss Joan Maddox of Cold Hatton Heath remembers an occasion when she and a friend walked across the fields one Sunday to Rowton church. They were the only people at the service; even the churchwarden who was there when they arrived did not stay. Later Miss Maddox learned that there was some scandal surrounding Rev. Sanson, involving a woman she believes, and the people of Rowton had boycotted
his services as a result. She also heard the vicar used to sometimes sleep in the gravedigger’s hut in the churchyard.

By 1935, Rev. Sanson had been replaced by the first vicar to have a permanent home in the village, the Reverend Cecil Geoffrey Boileau Turner who came to live at what is now The Firs. This had been the farmhouse for Villa Farm, and was owned at the time by Mr. William Donald Burgess of Church Farm, Rowton who sold it to the church for £825. It was then renamed Parsonage House. Joan Maddox remembers Rev. Turner as a very active vicar who started the parish magazine which she used to help deliver. He also organised outings and other social events.

Our last vicar was the Rev. Desmond Minty who was a master at Wrekin College before he trained for the ministry. Rev. Minty and his wife Valerie moved to Admaston on retirement and our present vicar is Graham Horner.

Graham, a former accountant, lives with his family in the vicarage at High Ercall and covers the parishes of High Ercall, Rowton, Crudgington and Longden-on-Tern.
12. Two Celebrities and a Character

John Beard
John Beard, author of *My Shropshire Days On Common Ways*, was born and brought up in Ellerdine.

He helped to establish the Workers Union in 1898 and became President of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU).

In September 1930 John Beard was elected by Congress as President of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) for a year. In 1938 he was awarded the CBE for his services to the trades union movement.

John Beard is remembered both for his fight for better conditions for working people and for his book which contains interesting insights into the history of families living in the villages and hamlets around the Rowton area. He was also instrumental in erecting the monument to Richard Baxter on Rowton green.

Although he moved to London as his career progressed, John Beard retained close ties with the Rowton and Ellerdine area where he grew up. During the second World War he wrote *My Shropshire Days On Common Ways* while staying in the area at the home of his friend Algernon Pearce J.P. in Ellerdine.

John Beard died while visiting Ellerdine in 1950 and his funeral was held at the Bethel (formerly the Primitive) chapel. His ashes were scattered around the graves of his family in Rowton churchyard, where there is now a rowan tree planted in his memory.

John Beard’s nephew, Jack Beard, who lives in Ellerdine, is quite often contacted by people who have read *My Shropshire Days On Common Ways* and are interested in learning more about its author and the people and places described in the book.

William Hazeldine
William Hazeldine was a well-known clockmaker who lived in Rowton in the 17th century. He made the clock for St. Mary's church, Shawbury, in 1672 and later the clock for St. Chad's church, Prees, in 1684.

Ern Watkins
When people talk about life in Rowton in the last fifty or sixty years one name keeps recurring, that of Ern Watkins.

Ern was a farmworker, a big man, who lived in 12 Rowton, which is now part of Corner Cottage. He grew some fine vegetables in his front garden, including a clump of parsley near the door which he is said to have watered in his own unique way. The mystery is why it didn’t turn yellow!

Ern Watkins and his fellow farmworker, Arthur Bailey are recalled by John Butler, formerly of Mount Pleasant Farm, Cold Hatton, in the 1940’s. They visited his family’s farm each October to thresh the corn sheaves which were stored in two ricks. This was before combine harvesters were introduced in the 1950’s. John’s mother used to disappear the day Ern and Arthur turned up!

Arthur drove the tractor (an Oliver 90 Lend-Lease with a Ransome’s Threshing box). Ern was on the baler at the back. John remembers that they wore corduroy trousers with broad belts, Oxford collarless shirts, boots and flat caps. When they stopped for lunch they ate bread and cheese and raw onion sandwiches.
13. Rowton at War

In times of war no community, even one as small as Rowton, can remain entirely unaffected. There were two periods we know of when the village was directly involved in the action.

The first was during the Civil War between the Royalists and Cromwell’s Parliamentary army in the 17th century. We do not know exactly how Rowton was affected by the Civil War but the villagers must have been caught up in the conflict because of the proximity of Rowton to High Ercall, which had a momentous time during this period. In 1646 the Royalists holding High Ercall Hall which belonged to Sir Francis Newport, an officer in King Charles’ army, surrendered to Cromwell’s army after a siege lasting a year. The Hall was left badly battered. The church at High Ercall was also damaged as the Royalists had used it as a fort when they were besieged. It still bears shot marks on its walls.

The church registers at High Ercall show that Richard Dory and Francis Hotchkiss were killed near Rowton in 1643, probably fighting on the Royalist side. We believe there was fighting alongside the Lakemoor brook in this period and it may have been here that they were killed. Because of the presence of so many opposing troops in the area there must have been several skirmishes and a number of casualties, of which Richard Dory and Francis Hotchkiss were two.

The parish of Rowton was badly affected by The Great War of 1914-1918. There is a memorial in Rowton church to thirty-seven local men who died in the conflict (including a John Buttery of Rowton), a considerable number of men when we consider the total population of the parish was around five hundred people at the time.

The war memorial shows that another three men from Rowton parish were killed during the Second World War (1939-1940). This war had a direct impact on the village because of Rowton’s proximity to High Ercall Aerodrome at Osbaston. When the airfield was built in 1938-39, farm land in that area was requisitioned for the RAF. Bill and Jim Preston’s father, Philip Preston, farmed near the airfield and when his land was taken he moved to High House Farm at Rowton and remained there after the war ended.

During the Second World War there was an army camp at High House Farm. It was built to protect the nearby airfield and used as a camp for men who had been evacuated from Dunkirk in 1940 to ensure they stayed together as a fighting unit and to train them for the next stage of the war. This was a tense time when the country was expecting invasion and the number of pill-boxes in the area testify to this. The photograph on the next page shows the remains of the camp in the 1960’s before it was dismantled in 1976. There was once a firing range, an officers’ mess, a cookhouse, and a series of Nissen huts which can clearly be seen in the picture. The army buildings ran up the fields at the side of Twiney lane behind the farmhouse. The photograph also shows in the foreground two sandstone and timbered cottages owned by the Evans family of Church House Farm before they were demolished to make way for Yew Tree House.

Wives and girlfriends of the RAF officers at High Ercall stayed at homes in the Rowton area when they came to visit and there were also German and Italian prisoners of war working on local farms. One German prisoner of war married a local girl and remained in Rowton when the war ended. His name was Walter Hess and he lived at Hop Cottage.

The Home Guard was active in the area and farmer Philip Preston was a corporal. They used the firing range at the army
camp for target practice.

The area around the village was land-mined, as we know because Donald Burgess, who farmed most of the land around the village then, had a cow blown up by a mine when she strayed on to a field by the Lakemoor brook.

**Royal Air Force, High Ercall**

Work began on the air base called High Ercall Aerodrome at Osbaston in 1938 when 300 acres of farmland were requisitioned.

In October 1940, the first maintenance unit opened to receive, store and despatch aircraft. This civilian-manned unit remained at the aerodrome until it closed in 1962. The first aircraft to arrive were American Mohawks followed by other American planes and British Hurricanes and Hampdens.

One Hampden bomber which had just taken off from High Ercall airfield during the war crashed in a field known as The Leg of Mutton between Rowton and Ellerdine. A Mustang also came down in a field near High House farm alongside Twiney lane.

An unwelcome visitor, a Luftwaffe bomber, attacked the RAF station on March 7th 1941 at 17.00 hours. Bombs were dropped on the airfield from 500 feet but luckily there were no casualties and the bombs caused only minor damage.

Shortly afterwards, on April 10th 1941, High Ercall became a night fighter station with the arrival of 68 squadron with their Blenheims. Other squadrons followed as the war progressed.

The United States Army Air Force had a brief stay during 1942, with the 309th Fighter squadron flying Spitfires.

Three pilots killed locally are buried close together in military graves in High Ercall churchyard. Two of the pilots were in the Canadian Airforce, the third being a British sergeant in the RAF. They were killed between 29th July 1942 and 31st May 1943. Perhaps they were killed in the planes which crashed near Rowton?

When the Second World War ended, the airfield was used for storage and the scrapping of first Halifax bombers and then Spitfires. The maintenance unit finally closed in 1962.

After the war the airfield was known as the Graveyard of the RAF as it was full of planes awaiting disposal or scrapping. The disposal was finally completed in 1969. Following the closure, 32 acres were sold to the Road Transport Industry Training
Board to form their Multi-Occupational Training and Education Centre (MOTEC). Hangars not used by MOTEC were (and still are) used for storage by Harman Warehousing.

The site of the old airfield was occupied by CENTREX Ltd, providing training for the Motor and Road Transport industry, until 1999 and has recently been sold to a religious organisation.
14. Field Names

All the fields around the village were once known by individual names.

The Ercall Magna Parish Map for 1839, copies of which are held by David and Linda Sear and Bill and Kath Preston, show the field names carefully written in. Part of this map is shown on the opposite page.

These field maps were based on the Tithe Apportionment Maps drawn up between 1837 and 1840 to provide parson's tithes when these changed from payment in kind to payment in money.

The field names give us fascinating clues to the past life and resources of the village. They tell us about the quality of the soil, the crops grown, where old buildings stood and ancient customs and traditions.

The fields on the left hand side of the road from High Ercall as you pass the junction to Rowton village were called Upper and Lower Cockpit Leasow (meadow) which is where village cock-fights were once held.

The next field as you go towards Ellerdine was BrickKiln. This was land where the under-lying clay had been used for brick-making for local buildings.

Some of the names were not very imaginative; there are a number of Little Fields and Cow Pastures. Others are more interesting, such as Nightly Britches which was the name of the field at the back of the Weston's cottage on Twiney lane. The word Britch occurs a lot in the names of the local fields, for example Cuckoo Britch. It is an old name for land newly broken up for cultivation, taken from the surrounding heath or waste land. Nightly Britches is probably where animals were kept at night.

The sloping road leading up to Ellerdine, which villagers still call The Cop, was bordered by fields called Far Low Cop and Low Cop in 1839. The word 'Cop' means a hill or summit, as in Wyle Cop in Shrewsbury or The Kop, the steep stand at Liverpool Football Club's ground.

The bridge on the road leading out of Rowton towards High Ercall was in existence in 1839 and was bordered by Bridge Meadow. The nearby pond was also there, part of Pool Furlough. Furlough is a term for a group of medieval strips of land all the same length, all a furrow long. The original length of a furrow was the land a team of oxen could plough in a straight line without turning. Where the oxen stopped to turn at the end of the strip was called the headlands and the term is still used for the waste area around a cultivated field. Where the word Yard or Furlough is used to describe a field, it means it was once open land for use by the whole village. The word 'field' itself originally meant the same.

As well as BrickKilns field there was also Marlpits. Marl was a clay soil with carbonate of lime used as a fertiliser from the 13th to the early 19th century. Farmers believed the deep undersoil dug out from the marlpits was good for the soil when spread on the surface. These marlpits were in the fields which lie on the right hand side of the lane directly opposite the crossroads.

There must once have been a bridge somewhere near The Stone House as a number of the field names around there refer to this, calling it the Old Bridge in 1839. What had been the purpose of this bridge? We are not far from the river Tern here; did the river or a tributary stream run near the Stone House once with the bridge used as a crossing? Jim Preston who lives at The Stone House thinks it may have referred to a bridge to cross the ditch which still runs along here and may then have been a stream.

When open land started to be enclosed for cultivation and grazing, a process which started in the Middle Ages and culminated in the Enclosure Act of 1801, the fields created were much smaller than those we see now. The Parish Map of 1839 shows a patchwork of fields, some of them very
small indeed. Only in the twentieth century, with the rapid increase in mechanisation and changes in farming methods after the Second World War, were hedgerows grubbed up to create many of the larger fields we see around the village today.

The photograph, taken by Jim and Anne Tranter on 1st May 2000, shows the present-day village surrounded by larger fields than in 1839.
Farming was the main occupation of most people living in Rowton up to the last 40 years. Most of the buildings in the village today are either farmhouses, cottages built to house farmworkers or barns once used for cattle and grain.

At the time the Domesday Book was compiled, Rowton was entirely a farming community with four smallholders and land enough for four ploughs.

In those days the fields would have looked very different with no hedges but open strip farming introduced to this country by the Anglo-Saxons.

A complex web of feudal relationships would have defined life for the inhabitants of medieval Rowton. Most of the villagers would have been classed as villeins who, in law, owned nothing of their own. Everything belonged to the lord of their manor; they worked on his land and paid him various dues and fines. They paid to have their corn ground at his mills (there was a local mill on Lakemoor brook by the 13th century) and for the right to gather wood on his land. They could even be sold or given to another lord. There were some compensations; on most manors the villein’s working day finished at 3.00pm and he did not have to work on his lord’s land himself at all if he had a son he could send in his place.

Few villeins had enough oxen of their own for a plough-team so they had to pool resources. Ditches and drains alongside each strip of land had to be kept clear or your own and neighbours’ land would flood. Everyone had to work together so medieval Rowton must have been a tight-knit community to survive and prosper and may have had a ‘committee’ to decide on planning and timetables for ploughing, harvesting and grazing. It was an inward-looking community. Even people from outside the immediate area were known in medieval times as ‘foreigners’. Although there were prosperous towns in this region at that time, such as Shrewsburry and Much Wenlock, it is unlikely that many people from Rowton ever travelled that far afield.

Throughout medieval times Rowton had large arable fields divided into long narrow strips farmed in rotation with one field lying fallow each year. There would also have been an area of meadow for grazing sheep. Any waste land left over would have served as common pasture for all the villagers to use. There were no compact farms. Farmers grew wheat, barley and rye using the straw for thatching the roofs of their houses. This part of Shropshire was also a big barley growing area. Barley was used for making bread and gruel which were part of the villagers staple diet, or it could be boiled whole to eat or malted for brewing ale. Ale was then an everyday drink for the whole community and safer than the water because it had to be boiled in the mashing process.

Shropshire was noted for the quality of its wool in medieval times and the wool trade led to the prosperity of Shrewsbury and Ludlow in this period. There would certainly have been flocks of sheep grazing around the village. Practically everyone would have kept a pig as well. The land was ploughed by teams of oxen, horses being introduced much later. Some of the oxen were killed for beef each winter. The only vegetables likely to have been grown in medieval times were peas and beans.

The majority of the villagers would have lived in simple mud or timber-framed houses which they shared with their livestock. These ‘cottages’ were usually single-roomed with bare floors with perhaps some rushes scattered around and few conveniences beyond a roof and a fire. Glass was very expensive at that time and cottages generally had only one small window opening covered by a piece of sacking.
or wood. Medieval peasant housing appears to have been re-built about every thirty years as it did not last much longer. What we think of as typical medieval houses that we see in places such as Shrewsbury would have belonged to people of a much higher social standing. There may have been a few of these wealthier people in and around Rowton at the time but they would have been the exceptions.

Most households in the village would have been smaller than we imagine, averaging four or five. It was never the norm in this country to have extended families living under one roof and fertility and family size were reduced by premature death.

Cattle belonging to the village were taken down to the Lakemoor brook to be watered. There was a mill (known as Lake Mill) on Lakemoor brook in the early 13th century built by William, lord of the manor of Ercall. This was on the Osbaston side of the stream but also served the villages of Rowton and Ellerdine. The mill was owned by the lord of Rowton at that time, Griffin ap Jorwerth Goch and his sub-tenant Robert FitzWarin. Griffin also owned a pond there, stocked with eels and fish, which was in existence before the mill. The tenant farmers in Rowton were allowed to bring their grain to the mill to be ground to flour but not allowed access to the fishpond. Only Lord Griffin had the right to have a boat on the pond to fish. The Rowton tenants had to pay William of Ercall part of their grain for the privilege of having it ground at the mill. Robert FitzWarin, however, was exempt from this because he had given up his fishpond to William.

In 1245 the mill was improved by William of Ercall and this caused a falling out between neighbours. Two of Rowton’s tenant farmers, William Le Franceys and John of Rewelton, claimed that their land and their own ponds on the Rowton side of the mill stream had been damaged by the work on the Lake Mill which had raised the mill bank. They clearly had a case as they were awarded compensation of two marks.

The mill closed in 1350. It had always been a problem obtaining enough water for the mill. The draining of surrounding land called Penmarsh in the early 1300’s and the clearance of the woodland on either side of the Lakemoor brook would have contributed to the difficulty. When the mill closed, Rowton tenant farmers had to go back to using the Bradford mill between Roden and High Ercall, where a mill-house still stands.

The Lake Mill has left its mark in the names of the fields in the area. The Ercall Magna parish map for 1839 shows an area of land called Lake Mill Meadow where the mill once stood.

We know that waste land and woodland was cleared for cultivation for meadow or arable use very early in this area. By 1345 there was barely enough waste left for common pasture for the lord and his tenants. Around 1285 William, lord of Ercall manor, cleared six and a half acres of land for cultivation near Broadlake meadow, next to Lakemoor brook for the lord of Rowton and Ellerdine. William made an agreement with the lord of Rowton at the time to free what had been waste land from common grazing rights previously enjoyed by the farmers of Rowton and Ellerdine. There were compensations for the tenants as they acquired more land for their own use. There was another drive to cultivate land around 1312 and in total every tenant’s holding in the area was trebled in the period 1290-1320.

Tenants were jealous in guarding the remaining common land for their stock to graze as without the stubble fields sheep, cattle and horses would not have survived the winter. There were no root crops then to feed them and little hay. In 1339 William of Ercall (there were several successive lords of Ercall, all called William!) let a small four-acre piece of his common land at Moortown to a free tenant Thomas Fraunce (or France) of Rowton. Thomas did
his best to exclude the Moortown tenants from putting their stock on the land after the harvest. He brought a case against one of them for doing so and when the case went to court Thomas of Rowton won and was awarded 12d (5p) in damages.

Farmers made regular trips to local markets in the medieval period to buy and sell their produce. Wellington market was chartered in 1244 and was the nearest large market. High Ercall had its own market which was started in 1267 and would have been very convenient for Rowton. This market was not a great success, however, because it had to compete with the larger established markets in Shrewsbury, Newport and Wellington.

In Tudor times the economy expanded and the 16th and 17th centuries were generally more prosperous times for country people. Standards of living rose for farmers and country craftsmen. This would have been around the time Hop Cottage and, a little later, The Olde Smithy were built. Plague had greatly reduced the population in the 14th century and may well have affected Rowton but by Elizabethan times the population had risen and continued to rise.

More cottages were being built throughout Shropshire at this time and by 1589 an Act was passed which meant local Justices of the Peace had to authorise the building of any new cottages. This was not out of concern for unplanned development as it would be today, but because of fears that the occupants of these new homes might prove incapable of supporting themselves and become a cost to the parish. In order to build a cottage you had to prove you could support yourself and your family.

The appearance of Rowton village would have continued to change in the 16th and 17th century as more and more waste land was brought into cultivation and more of the open fields were enclosed by hedges, fences and ditches. Although the Enclosure Acts did not come into force until the 18th and early 19th centuries, enclosure started much earlier in this part of Shropshire.

We know from records referring to the land around High Ercall that enclosure was largely completed in the Rowton area by the end of the 17th century. However, Ellerdine Heath was not enclosed until 1802 when the Earl of Darlington (later Duke of Cleveland), obtained the consent of 9 local freeholders to enclose 500 acres of the heathland.

A notice was posted on the door of High Ercall church to this effect. Among the freeholders who agreed to this were the Adneys, Morris' and Nicklins of Rowton. We do not know how much say they had in the matter or if they were granted some concessions for their cooperation. Prior to this anyone could turn over a sod of earth on waste or common land between sunset and sunrise and then claim that land for themselves to build on or to add to their holding. After enclosure, those living on the commons had to pay rent to the Earl for their home and were dispossessed of their land.

Enclosure meant that rights to grazing on common or waste land and other common rights were taken away from the villagers. This had a profound effect on the rural way of life across the county and must have affected Rowton as it was so close to the Commons of Ellerdine Heath and Cold Hatton. In the case of the poorest people, the squatters who had built homes on the waste land, enclosure meant eviction as they could not afford to pay rent. Others slightly better off who had been relatively self-sufficient could no longer make a living now that they had no free grazing for their animals and no free wood to gather for their fires. The old way of rural life whereby the villagers combined task-work for farmers with their own independent small-scale food production largely disappeared. Most of these people became farm labour-
ers dependent on wages. We know, however, that there were a surprisingly high number of trades and crafts people such as tailors, shoe and boot makers and blacksmiths in Rowton in the nineteenth century. John Beard thought Methodism became popular in this area because it appealed to this type of independently minded person who was not comfortable with the values of the establishment. They combined some task work on the farms with carrying on their own trades.

By the nineteenth century Wellington was second only to Shrewsbury in the county in terms of size and importance and the people of Rowton would have had reasonable access to the range of services, supplies and entertainment to be found there. There were horse fairs in Wellington at this time and a large cattle market where Morrisons supermarket now stands.

By 1800 most of the farms in and around the village would have been mixed farms with cattle, sheep, arable crops and a few pigs. Cattle were kept for milk by then rather than beef, although some were fattened and sold at the local cattle markets in Wellington, Newport and Shrewsbury. Much of the milk went for butter and cheese which was made on the farms. Farmers often made cheese commercially.

Crops grown then would have included wheat, barley, oats, potatoes, turnips and swedes. Wellington had a corn market, held on Thursdays, for buying and selling grain.

Rotation would have been practised, probably the Norfolk Method using a four year rotation of wheat, turnips, barley and clover. Horses were used for ploughing as well as transport and there were regular horse sales in Wellington up to 1927.

By the 19th century there was a trend towards more profitable farming methods and a more responsible attitude towards the living conditions of farm labourers by some landlords who were influenced by the philanthropic ideas of the time. A large number of estate cottages were built in the 19th century by the local aristocracy, in this area the Dukes of Cleveland and Sutherland. Estate cottages were generally well-built and often, like the local Duke of Sutherland cottages, had a distinctive architectural style because they were built to one design to keep costs down.

As the Industrial Revolution took hold more and more people left the country for the towns and cities to find work and from about this time the country cottage became thought of as an idyllic rural retreat away from the grimy, over-crowded towns.

The reality of cottage life in Rowton at this time would have been a little less than idyllic. Although the village’s farm-workers cottages dating from the early 19th century may have looked attractive, inside they were probably cramped and poorly equipped.

The National Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture in Shropshire in 1870 states that cottages in the county generally were 'infamous'. In the majority of parishes they visited they were 'tumbledown and ruinous, not water-tight, very deficient in bedroom accommodation and decent sanitary arrangements'.

There is no reason to believe Rowton's cottages would have been much better although many of them date from the early 19th century so would not have been in a 'ruinous' state by 1870. Farm workers did not earn enough to pay a high rent and landlords and farmers without a reasonable return on their investments were reluctant to spend money on repairs, so the condition of cottages in the village would generally have deteriorated slowly. It is unlikely, however, that Rowton was an especially poor area judging by the number of large red-brick farmhouses in the village from around this date. There was a growing tendency by this time for farmers to copy the
local gentry and having had substantial houses built, they gradually moved away from the traditional practice of having their workers living in with them. Instead they built the farm-workers cottages we see in Rowton today, such as Oak Apple Cottage (11 Rowton) and Corner Cottage. These farm-houses and cottages are a tribute to the skills of the local builders and the materials they used as so many of them are still in good condition today, some despite years of neglect.

By the mid 19th century Rowton would have looked much as it does today as all the red-brick farmhouses and cottages in the village were built by then (some were rebuilt on, or extended from, much older foundations, like The Firs). The cottages mostly belonged to the farmers or the landowner's estate and were 'tied', which meant they went with the job. Often the farmer would not own his house either but would rent it from the local landowner.

The chief crops grown at this time were wheat, barley and turnips. The soil is described in Kelly's *Directory* of the period as 'good, mixed in nature, with a sand and clay subsoil'.

Most of the villagers worked on the farms although a number carried out their own trade or craft, often combining this with casual farm work. The hours for the labourers were usually 6am to 6pm with a 4pm finish on a Saturday. Most farmworkers had Sundays off.

If you were a stockman or a shepherd, however, you often worked evenings and Sundays as well to look after the animals. At lambing time the shepherd usually lived out in the fields with his sheep to be on hand in case of problems. They sometimes used a hut similar to a caravan with a corrugated iron roof and chimney pipe for the stove and I believe there was once one of these huts in the fields along Twiney lane.

As always farming followed the seasons with the arable year starting with ploughing, then sowing, weeding and hoeing and finally harvesting.

The importance of harvests to the village cannot be over-emphasised. There were no pesticides then to help ensure a good yield and the farmers were totally dependent on the weather for a successful year.

In June the hay was brought in and dried and stacked to feed the cattle through the winter. Everyone prayed for good weather. If it rained heavily the hay would turn black in the fields and be fit only for bedding. Then the farmer would have to buy in hay during the winter to feed his cattle. The hay was cut with scythes by the mowers with the haymakers coming after them, spreading the grass to dry then raking it into long lines. These were made into haycocks which were then gathered in by horse drawn hay-wains for stacking in the stackyard. Women and children helped with the haymaking, tossing or tedding the hay to dry it and raking it into lines.

August was the month of the corn harvest when farmworkers received extra pay for the long hours they worked and, if it was a good year, plenty of free beer and cider at the traditional harvest supper. Despite the popularity of Methodism in the Rowton and Ellerdine area, total abstinence was not popular. There were few teetotallers, John Buttery the blacksmith, a staunch Methodist, being one of the few.

During the harvest the men worked all the daylight hours to bring the crop in while the weather held. The women brought their food and drink out to the field, slabs of bread with ham or cheese, perhaps a piece of fruit pie or cake and plenty of tea and home made lemonade or barley water to wash it down. There was usually beer and cider on hand too but the farmer rationed this and supervised the handing round of the stone jars himself to ensure the men stayed sober until the work was done. When the last small area of corn
was left standing in the centre of the field the women and children armed themselves with sticks and as the reapers started moving towards the centre they killed the rabbits which had taken refuge there and were now running out making for the hedges. This may sound bloodthirsty to us but times were harder then and a rabbit made a good meal. This practice went on until well into the 1930's, by which time the mowing was done by machines. My mother remembers taking part in this in a small village near Ellesmere and that it was something of an event.

Historians estimate that in Edwardian England (around 1910), a quarter of all village children suffered from malnutrition and rabbit was the staple meat at that time.

Poaching was widespread throughout the countryside to provide meat and game for the table although the penalties were harsh. In 19th century England you could be transported for poaching and, even in the 1930's, three offences resulted in seven years imprisonment

Victorian official reports often portray rural life as one of grinding poverty and some rural areas were certainly very depressed, especially in the south of England such as Dorset. Although the general standard of living was poor by our standards, Shropshire was not one of the country's worst affected areas especially the north of the county. Although pay was low for farm labourers (about 15 shillings (75p) a week), cottages were usually rent free and beer and food often provided in addition to wages, depending on the generosity and means of the farmer. Much also depended on the attitudes of local aristocracy, clergy and gentry, who could make a big difference to the life of the poor by providing food, clothing, medical and nursing care as well as acting as good employers and paying fair wages.

On the whole there was a better quality of life in the country at this time than in the towns. In 1850 life expectancy for the farm labourer was close to the top of the league in a survey of 25 trades (carpenters came top). If a labourer reached the age of 20 he could expect to live to be 65. There was a distinct north/south divide in the country but not the way we might expect. Agricultural workers in the north were better off than those in the south of the country. The increased life expectancy for country people would have been partly due to living in a healthier environment with plenty of fresh air and exercise and no air pollution. The diet of the average villager would also have been relatively healthy, if rather stodgy, with plenty of bread, potatoes, eggs, cheese and a little meat for protein. Most farm-workers had enough garden to be self-sufficient to a degree, growing their own vegetables and perhaps fruit and keeping a pig and maybe a few hens. Not only the men but also many of the women and girls of Rowton village would have worked on the farms, some as milkmaids, some in the dairy making butter and cheese, some looking after the poultry and some working in the farmhouse cooking and cleaning. Unless the farmer was well-off his wife and daughters worked alongside them.

Women also worked in the fields at harvest time and throughout the year gathering potatoes, topping and tailing swedes and picking stones. Children were used for bird-scaring. Girls often stayed off school to look after the smaller children while their mothers worked.

If there were a lot of children in the family and they could not find employment in the village when they left school, they had to be hired out to farmers under legally binding contracts of six to twelve months. They were only paid at the end of the term if everything had proved satisfactory. Parents had little choice in the matter as they could not generally afford to keep their children at home unless they were earning.
The Harvest
The gathering of a good harvest was always a cause for celebration. Most of the village would have been involved in some way, although in this area Irish labourers were often brought in to assist. There was a group of Irishmen who lodged at Frankwell in Shrewsbury who came out to the farms around Rowton to help with the hay and corn harvest in the nineteenth century. The Harvest festival service of thanksgiving at Rowton church is still well attended today, in recognition of how dependent we are on the farmers for our food and how dependent they are on factors beyond their control in bringing in a successful harvest. Giving thanks for a successful harvest in this way takes us back to Anglo-Saxon times in Rowton and beyond. Gathering the harvest then was an activity that involved everyone in the village. In those times a good harvest meant the difference between life and death as starvation was always a possibility.

In the 19th century this service was one of the highlights of the church and social year and even those villagers who did not attend church regularly went to the harvest thanksgiving. Extra chairs and benches were brought into the church for the occasion. Most of the village was dependent on the land then and if there was a good harvest there was more chance of the farmer remaining solvent for another year and everyone keeping their jobs.

When the corn was harvested it was stored in the barns we see around the village today, some of which are now converted to private houses and holiday cottages. Corn was stacked on staddle-stones which we see now as garden ornaments at High House Farm and The Olde Smithy. In Victorian times they were used to keep the grain off the floor of the barns where mice and rats could eat and contaminate it. Poles were placed on top of hedge brushings or clippings on these stone ‘mushrooms’ to stop vermin climbing into the corn stack. The hay harvested earlier in the year in June was stored near the farmhouse in what farmers still call the stackyard and covered by large tarpaulins or stack-cloths against the rain. The hay was made into stacks by the local thatcher until needed. Fire was a big risk and there was a strict 'no smoking' policy around the stacks. Dutch barns were introduced in 1906 and from then on they housed the grain.

At the end of the harvest up to 1914 when war intervened, a showman came to High Ercall with a steam roundabout, swings and sideshows which, for the children and young people especially, was a highlight of the year.

Rent days were also important in the farming calendar; they took place twice a year in December and June in High Ercall. During the 19th century (and possibly before), they were held at the Cleveland Arms. The farmers of Rowton would go there to pay their rent to the local landowner. When they paid they were given a ticket with their receipt entitling them to a free lunch (usually bread and cheese or ham) including, in Victorian times, a jar of ale. There would be a social event after lunch: a cricket match or game of skittles in June and a pigeon shoot in December.

Around the time of the First World War, changes in farming methods came rapidly and the old ways of farming which had remained largely unchanged for centuries started to disappear. The break-up of the large estates due to death duties and taxation led to a transfer of social and economic power to owner-farmers, usually former tenants who had bought the farms the aristocracy were forced to sell. The break-up of the Lilleshall Estate dates from around this time when the properties owned by the Duke of Sutherland in the Rowton area were sold by Barber and Son in 1912 in four lots.

The majority of farms and most of the
land around Rowton was owned by the Duke of Cleveland as part of the High Ercall Estate. The last Duke died childless and was succeeded by his heir Lord Barnard in 1892. Most of the farms and houses were sold to the existing tenants when the Estate was broken up in the 1930's.

More machines were introduced at this time which made farming far less labour intensive. Many farmworkers now had to look elsewhere for work and a number of farm lads all over the country took advantage of the cheap fares then on offer to countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada to start a new life there. In 1930 fares were as little as £10. The figures speak for themselves. In 1850 one in five of the population of England worked in agriculture; by 1924 it was one in fourteen.

In 1927 the sugar beet factory opened in Allscott and had a major effect on farming in the Rowton area. Sugar beet is one of the chief crops grown in the village now which started in 1927 when the local market for beet was established.

The 1920's and 30's saw a Depression in farming as well as in manufacturing and industry; this affected Rowton as it did every farming community.

Crafts were dying out in the villages; jobs were harder to find and no longer automatically passed on from father to son. Many farmers' sons and farmworkers had to leave their villages to find work elsewhere, often moving from one short-term job to another. Farms frequently only employed boys as they were on a lower wage and sacked them when they reached 21 and became eligible for a man's wage.

Farmworkers at this time earned one third of the average wage in the towns and there was a national drift of a quarter of a million men in the 1930's from the country to the towns and cities.

Those who remained working on the land had their accommodation provided but this was in the form of a tied cottage, often virtually unfit for human habitation. This was a time when many of the early nineteenth century cottages in the village deteriorated. Some were later demolished as no longer being fit for people to live in. Mortality rates, especially among young children, were much higher than today; poor diet and housing and the unavailability of free health care all were contributory factors. Families did all they could to be self-sufficient by growing their own vegetables and keeping chickens and a pig but times were undeniably hard for most villagers in the 1930's, the farmers included.

Most householders in the village were not connected to an electricity supply and many obtained all their water from the pumps we still see in the village.

The 1930's also saw an increase in dairy farming in Rowton as well as across the whole country following the setting up of the Milk Marketing Board in 1933.

After the Second World War the government decided the country must produce more of its own food in future as had been done so successfully during the war. In the event of another war, the country must not be vulnerable to U-boat attacks preventing food getting through: we must be self-sufficient.

The 1947 Agriculture Act was passed as a result and the old ways of farming had to change. Large fields were more efficient when using machinery, so hedges were grubbed up. Pesticides and fertilisers began to be used more to increase the yield and subsidies and quotas were introduced. It was the start of modern day farming and in the next thirty years the face of the countryside changed more than it had in the preceding three hundred years.

The greatest influence on farming in the last thirty years has been the introduction of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in the 1960's. Its aims were to increase productivity, raise farm incomes, stabilise markets, assure availability of supplies and ensure reasonable prices for the
consumer. However, surpluses like the ‘butter mountain’ became the norm and farmers were then given grants not to produce food in the form of set-aside of land. In recent years it has been accepted that the policy has not worked. Farm incomes have fallen, exacerbated by other problems such as the BSE scare. The CAP is now being reformed again to try to integrate environmental concerns, improve food safety and quality and to ensure animal welfare. Following recent food scares such as salmonella poisoning in eggs, BSE in cattle and publicity on genetically modified foods and the effects of pesticides, we are beginning to see a move back towards more traditional methods of free-range food production and organic farming. At the time of writing The Barnes is planning to become an organic farm, specialising in free-range pigs and organically grown grain. As organic farming becomes more profitable and the European Union encourages farmers to be more environmentally aware, this is likely to be a trend for the future. We have already seen the beginnings of this with the large number of free-range herds of pigs around the village in the last two or three years.
16. Twentieth Century Rowton

Kelly’s *Directory* of 1934 gives us an insight into how the village had developed by this time. Described as ‘a township and ancient chapelry’ Rowton’s principal landowners were William Donald Burgess, Edward Bourne and Miss Lizzie Hopkins. The *Directory* states that the soil around the village was good, of a mixed nature, the subsoil being sand and clay.

The chief crops at the time were wheat, barley and turnips and the area covered by the village was 2,960 acres. The population of the ecclesiastical parish, including Ellerdine, Ellerdine Heath and parts of Cold Hatton, was 559 in 1921, a decline from Victorian times when the population of Rowton alone was over two hundred. There were post offices at Ellerdine, Waters Upton and High Ercall.

The Midland Motor Omnibus Company Limited ran a bus service through Rowton via Cold Hatton. Kelly’s *Directory* does not give the bus route but it would certainly have gone to Wellington, especially on market days.

The railway halt at Rowton did not come into existence until 1935 so, before that time with few cars in the village, the bus would have been well used. When the halt opened it must have taken some trade from the bus company although it would have been a good walk to the halt from the village, especially for children and the elderly who probably continued to use the bus.

In 1934 the residents of Rowton listed in the *Directory* were:

Edward Onslow Banks - Smallholder
Edward Bourne - Farmer (High House Farm)
William Donald Burgess - Farmer (Church Farm)
J. Buttery - Farmer (Stone House)
Charles Fletcher - Grocer
Miss Lizzie Hopkins - Farmer and landowner (Villa Farm)
William Algernon Pearce - Carpenter (Oswald House, now The Olde Smithy)
John Woolley - Farmer

Only Mr Bourne and Mr Burgess had farms of 150 acres or over.

Of course these were not the only residents in the village at the time, just those who owned land and property and were therefore considered important enough to warrant a mention!

By the 1950’s Rowton had become a quiet village after the upheaval of the Second World War when there was considerable activity due to the army camp at High House Farm and the airfield at nearby Osbaston. Farming had become increasingly mechanised after the end of the war and many farm labourers had moved out to find other work elsewhere.

John Butler, who lived at Mount Pleasant Farm, Cold Hatton as a boy, remembers Rowton at this time as ‘a soggy, doleful place in winter. People pleasant enough’.

Social events took place in The Hut at Ellerdine, a first world war German prisoner of war hut from Prees Heath camp. Ellerdine village hall now stands on the site.
17. Rowton, Present and Future

Essentially, Rowton is remarkably unchanged in many respects from earlier times. The number of houses in the village has remained fairly static at around twenty-five to thirty for at least 200 years. Although some buildings have been demolished since then and some new houses built, there are many houses in the village dating from that time or earlier.

The population of Rowton has decreased from Victorian times, however, largely due to the decline in the birth-rate. There are now fewer people, especially fewer children, in each household and the current permanent population of seventy is probably similar to that of medieval and Tudor Rowton.

Rowton is still a farming community surrounded by land in agricultural use with varying traffic of farm vehicles as the seasons change. Farming still affects the appearance of the village with farm buildings still in agricultural use, those converted to housing and the different crops and animals in the fields.

Although we can see the lights of the Telford conurbation on the horizon, the absence of street lights means the village looks much as it always did at night. There are still houses in the village which have their own water supply and are not linked to the mains and Rowton does not have gas supplied to any of its houses.

Only half of the village is linked to the main sewerage system, the other half having septic tanks. We still have a small Victorian post-box, which has served the village for at least a hundred years, built into the wall of The Firs.

The red telephone kiosk which stood near the green was removed around 1993. British Telecom said this was because the new type of kiosk is harder to break into and the old red box was being repeatedly robbed. We now have a far less attractive telephone box which appears to be broken into just as often by thieves using oxy-acetylene equipment.

The main difference in Rowton today from times past is probably the level of noise pollution which we tend to take for granted. We have cars, lorries and tractors passing through the village, RAF training helicopters and planes overhead, car stereos and radios playing. This level of background noise would have been upsetting to our ancestors but to us Rowton is still a relatively quiet place where you can hear the sheep bleating and the birds singing.

We now have cars and lorries going through the village but most days we still hear horses passing by as they have done for centuries, although now they are being ridden for pleasure rather than used as a means of transport or for working the land.

Rowton still has a sense of community as in times past, as was proved by our year 2000 millennium celebrations when most people in the village became involved in fund-raising for the church and planning and/or participating in the New Year's Eve party.

The party was held in the Prestons' barn at High House farm and started with a short service in the church which was filled to capacity on the night. We then processed, carrying flares, to the Prestons' field where we were treated to a firework display. Everyone then partied in the barn to music played by our DJ David Sear the equipment being supplied by Robert Weston. To keep us going until midnight we had a buffet with plenty of Scotch eggs (a village joke!) and regular supplies of alcohol! Just before midnight everyone went outside to celebrate the new millennium with champagne and more fireworks set off by Bill and Phil Preston. From where we stood, we could see the beacon lit on top of The Wrekin and were surrounded by firework displays from The Wrekin itself and the neighbouring villages.
The pictures above show the party in full swing and some of the villagers after clearing-up the next morning, reflecting on the night before.

In total, nearly £2000 was raised by the villagers of Rowton in 1999 through a Fun Ride, social events and car boot sales; quite an achievement for a hamlet with only twenty-seven houses. The money was spent on the New Year’s Eve party, restoring one of the church windows and publishing this book, the profits of which go back into our village fund. Most of the money was raised through the Fun-Ride organised by John and Suzanne Proudley and Jim and Anne Tranter. The ride, which took horses and riders through Rowton, Ercall Park, Walton and surrounding countryside raised around £1000 and, through the hard work of the organisers and good weather, was a great success.

The photographs below show some of those who took part.

Much of this book has concentrated on Rowton’s past but what does the future hold for our village?

Most of the people living here now work outside the village, some commuting long distances. We often see little of one another during the working week, especially during the dark winter months. The only people working in the village during the day on a regular basis are the farmers, whereas Rowton village in Victorian times and earlier had several tradesmen at work as well as many men, women and children working on the farms. Nearly all the adults living in the village now were born outside Rowton and many outside Shropshire. Could we become a dormitory village? Or is the future in teleworking, where more of
us work from home via computers using e-mail and the internet? Is there potential for housing development and will the land surrounding the village remain in agricultural use?

We may not attract house-buyers in any numbers because the only access to the village is along narrow country lanes. This is a deterrent for many people as is the lack of local facilities nearby such as a school, shop or pub. Whether all the present land around the village stays in agricultural use is uncertain, given the current decline in farming. If the farmers cannot make a living and are forced to sell and if there are no buyers interested in acquiring agricultural land because there is insufficient profit in it then the local planners may agree to a change of use.

Rowton would never have survived for so long if new houses were not being more or less continuously built. At the time of writing a new house is about to be built next to Bleak House. What is more important for the character of the village is the number and design of any new houses. Where homes have gone up which are in keeping with the appearance of the village using local styles and materials, these have blended in well. We may also be able to create new homes through more adaptation of existing buildings as with the barn conversions carried out in the last few years.

Most of these barn conversions, such as those belonging to the Evans family at Church Farm, have been created to meet the increased interest in Shropshire as a tourist area and the national trend for more holidays and week-end breaks. The caravan sites at Church House and Melverley Farms also cater for this market as does the Bed and Breakfast service they offer. This growth in tourism which has brought many new people to the village is likely to continue and even increase. We are well placed to cater for tourists having easy access to North and South Shropshire’s old towns and lovely countryside as well as the modern facilities Telford can offer.

If times continue to be difficult for farmers more of them may be encouraged to try this form of diversification or we may see an increase in organic farming. The Taylors at The Barnes farm are planning to become organic at the moment. We have four working farms in Rowton today but of these two are largely devoted to tourism and leisure by providing holiday accommodation.

Along with the farms there has been a church in Rowton for many centuries. As the farmers have had to adapt to survive and will have to continue to do so, likewise the church has to adjust to a more secular society. The recently published Lichfield 2000 Diocesan Directory tells us that Rowton church has the second lowest average Sunday attendance in North Shropshire. We have to be careful how we interpret these statistics as the attendance is given as 6 out of a population of 693. Obviously this is not the population of those within easy reach of the church but covers Rowton parish. This is a widespread area where most people have cars and may attend other larger churches such as High Ercall and Waters Upton. Even so, the figures are cause for concern if we want the church to remain open. Our fund raising efforts during 1999 and 2000 will pay for the repair of one of the church windows in the nave but we cannot, as a very small community, expect fund-raising to continue at this level in the future.

The decline in Church of England attendance at Rowton is part of a nationwide trend as the older generation of regular churchgoers passes and fewer of the population as a whole go to church, except for weddings and funerals. Our present vicar, Graham Horner, has introduced 'family-friendly' services and other activities to attract younger people as a way forward for the church to survive. The people of Rowton are sufficiently drawn to the
church to attend in good numbers for special services which are meaningful to them like Harvest festival, Remembrance Sunday and Midnight Mass at Christmas. The church was full for our short New Year's Eve service before the village party.

It would be fair to assume, therefore, that the majority of people in Rowton would like the church to remain open. We have, with our vicar, explored the possibility of using the church for functions as well as services as we have had some successful concerts there in the past. One option we considered was taking out the fixed pews to make them free-standing to create more space and widen the aisle for disabled people's use. As we do not have kitchen or toilet facilities at the church and no funds to build them we would be very limited as to the type of events we could hold. We also have Ellerdine village hall close by which can be used for social events.

We know we are unlikely to have a church in use within the next century if there is no change and it would be sad to contemplate this as there has been a church in Rowton on this site for at least 800 years and it has always been part of the fabric of our village.

Another issue affecting Rowton in the year 2000 is that of public transport. As part of the present Labour Government's plans to improve access to public transport in rural areas, our one bus a week has increased in the last year to three a week due to the Telford and Wrekin Rural Transport Partnership pilot community bus initiative the 'Wrekin Rider'. Unfortunately, the buses run on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays when the majority of people who live in Rowton are at work and run at times which are not suitable for full time workers.

Although these buses are probably a boon for retired people living in High Ercall they are unlikely to be used by Rowton residents, most of whom run at least one car through necessity. The bus service has been devised following extensive consultation with rural communities including our parish council Ercall Magna and it not only travels to Wellington and Telford centre but also links to buses to Newport and Shrewsbury. Perhaps we should take the opportunity to use the service when ever we can for the days when we can no longer drive or afford to run a car. With the rate at which petrol prices have been increasing over recent years, that day may not be too far off!

Like most farming villages, Rowton is not and probably never was picturesque, although it has its share of attractive buildings. The Rowton we see today has evolved over the centuries as villagers have done what villagers always did: move with the times and change their homes and way of life as their tastes and circumstances allowed. Some may feel it a pity that we now see mobile `phone masts, TV aerials and parked cars around the village but Rowton is a working community, not a picture postcard scene. For Rowton to continue to have a future it must continue to adapt or risk being relegated to a museum piece of rural life, an object of curiosity rather than what it should be: a home and a community.
18. Village Houses

**The Firs**
This was the farmhouse for Villa Farm, so called because the farm was reputed to stand on the site of a Roman villa. The present house dates largely from around 1800 although parts of it are much earlier, probably 17th century. The Firs was the home of Rowton's vicar from 1935 for a short period when it was called Parsonage House.

**Court Barn/The Granary**
These houses were created by converting a large barn no longer in agricultural use in the late 1980's.

**Crown Pot Cottage/Primrose Croft**
Also known as 14 and 15 Rowton. These cottages, built in the 1940's, occupy a site where there were two old timber-framed houses which burnt down in a fire. There is a deep sandstone well and a pump in the garden of Primrose Croft which would have been used by the occupants of the surrounding houses. You can still see the outline of the gate which led to the well in the garden wall of Crown Pot Cottage.

John Proudley from Crown Pot Cottage is the only current resident of Rowton with local connections going back over the centuries. The Proudleys lived in Walton in the 1680's and moved to Crudgington in the 1780's where members of John's family lived until his mother died quite recently.

**Corner Cottage**
This house was formerly two farmworker's cottages (known as 12 and 13 Rowton) dating from around 1820. They once belonged to the Wilcox family who farmed at Ellerdine.

The cottages were scheduled for demolition in 1960 because they were in such a poor state of repair but were modernised and converted to one house by local solicitor Stephen Carver and his wife Susan in 1981. This is how they looked prior to renovation.

**High House Farm**
This is listed as a late 18th/early 19th century farmhouse but parts of the building are much older. In the 1930's it is mentioned as having belonged to the Adney family for over 300 years.

There are the remains of a sandstone building in the orchard next to the house which may once have been occupied, possibly as a squatter's cottage.

**7 The Twiney**
This house is all that remains of what was once a row of farmworker's cottages. The Ordnance Survey map of 1881 shows what appear to be about six buildings. The house is a good example of a Duke of Sutherland cottage with its distinctive pointed gables.

It was attached to The White House Farm in Cold Hatton in 1956 when it was bought by Philip Preston of High House Farm, Rowton.

There used to be more cottages along Twiney lane. When the soil is bare in a field owned by the Taylors of The Barnes Farm, the outline of building foundations can be seen because the soil is coloured differently. The area is near the group of sycamore trees close to the turning to Cold Hatton.

**The Barnes Farm**
The modern farmhouse is close to what
was an arable feeding unit with brick outbuildings and cottages which were all once part of Church Farm.

**The Stone House**
We know this sandstone house was built later than 1830 as it is not shown on a map of that time. It is alleged that some of the materials used to build the house were taken from the thirteen houses in Rowton village which burnt down in a fire, including the original Baxter House. Jim Preston found some blackened stones when Stone House kitchen was altered which could prove the story to be true. We also know Stone House was built from locally quarried sandstone for the Buttery’s to replace their house which was burned down by a fire.

**Melverley Farm**
This house was part of Church Farm and described in 1959 as 'two detached modernised cottages making a small country house' when it was purchased by Mr Ted Evans.

**Church Row**
Numbers 4, 5 and 6 Church Row also used to belong to Church Farm. This is a photograph of these cottages as they were in 1959.

**Church Farm**
This is a Grade II listed early 19th century red-brick farmhouse, parts of which are probably older.

Church Farm was described as being in a poor condition and ‘farmed-out’ in 1920. Shortly after this it was bought by Mr W.D. (Donald) Burgess who made it into a successful dairy farm with a prize-winning herd of Friesian cattle known as the Burwillton herd.

Mr Burgess owned much of the land and houses in Rowton in the 1920’s up to the 1940’s. Church Farm at that time included an arable feeding unit and two cottages at The Barnes, Melverley farmhouse, 4, 5 and 6 Church Row and 7 Rowton. These houses were needed for the farmworkers and stockmen necessary to maintain a successful farm of this size.

The photograph below, provided by Robert Evans, shows Church Farm in 1959.

**Orchard Cottage**
This house occupies the site of an orchard belonging to Church Farm. It is a good example of how a modern house can be built to blend into the area by using sympathetic materials and design and has been commented on favourably by local planners. It was built in 1991 by James Griffin of Great Bolas and took six months to build. The owners, Keith and Karen Cooper, lived in a caravan during the building and helped out.

**Yew Tree House** (7 Rowton)
There was once a timbered Shropshire longhouse with a sandstone gable here. You can see it in the photograph in the chapter 'Rowton at War'. The cottages, which were in a poor condition, were demolished when the present house was built for the late Mrs Marian Evans in the 1970’s.
**Hop Cottage**

This is a fine example of a well-restored Tudor timber-framed cottage and probably the oldest house in the village. It was once a public house called 'The Plough' (hence its name). It was one of around thirteen cottages which may have looked very similar and which once stood on Hop Cottage side of the lane running down to Baxter House; they were burnt down in a fire.

**Baxter House**

A Grade III listed early nineteenth century building which stands opposite the site of Richard Baxter's home, the original 'Baxter House'. It is called Baxter Villa in the 1937 Directory of Wellington and District.

**Rock Farm**

Although listed as being early 19th century, the house is considerably older and has definitely been dated back to 1752. During recent renovations horsehair plaster was found in the attic so it is likely to be older still.

One of the farm outbuildings is known as 'the malthouse' from the time when a Charles Jukes lived here in Victorian times and malted ale probably for the village beerhouses.

**10 Rowton**

Formerly a farmworker's cottage attached to High House Farm.

**Oak Apple Cottage** (11 Rowton)

Another red-brick nineteenth century farmworker's cottage which once belonged to High House Farm.

**The Olde Smithy**

One of the oldest houses in the village (probably 17th century), this was once the home of the village wheelwright and blacksmith. In its time it has also been used as an undertakers and a timber merchants. The timber yard was where the Baxter memorial now stands on the green. It was formerly called Oswald House.

**The Bungalow**

First occupied in 1970, this house has had three names in its short life. It was first The Lilacs, then Yamara and in more recent years, The Bungalow. The land on which it stands was part of Oswald House (now known as The Olde Smithy) and, like much of the land and houses in the village, was once part of the Raby or High Ercall Estates.

In 1930 the owner Lord Barnard sold much of the estate, including Oswald House and the land where The Bungalow now stands, to Ernest Leopold Payton as part of the sale of a large parcel of land and houses. Mr Payton sold Oswald House and its land to William Algernon Pearce, Wheelwright and Blacksmith, in 1931 for £325. Twenty years later, Mr. Pearce was declared bankrupt and the property and land were sold again to a Mr and Mrs Crane. Part of the land which was the garden of Oswald House was sold by the Cranes to the Lilleshall Building Company in 1968 and The Bungalow was built. Thanks go to Maureen Sandford from The Bungalow for researching this information.

**Bleak House**

This is another building described as late 18th or early 19th century but with older origins.

There is a fire insurance plaque on the house which is probably 18th century. These markers were added to buildings to show the owners had paid their insurance and could call on fire-fighters for help. Given Rowton's history of fires this seems a sensible precaution! The front garden of the house was designed by the famous Shropshire gardener, Percy Thrower.
Listed below are all the residents of Rowton as at 1st January 2000, kindly compiled by David and Linda Sear. The only exceptions are people living in temporary accommodation in the village (holiday cottages, bed
and breakfast and caravans) and Yew Tree House (at the occupiers' request).

House names are followed by residents names, their place of birth, occupation or nature of work (if in employment) and the length of time they have lived in the village (if known). The photograph on the opposite page shows most of the residents. It was taken on Rowton green on 18th June 2000.

The photograph below gives each person a number which is shown in brackets after their details to assist identification in the main photograph. If no number is given, they are not in the photograph.

**The Firs**
David Sear. Born Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire. Housing Consultant. [50]

**Court Barn**

**The Granary**

**Crown Pot Cottage**

**Primrose Croft**
Simon Kiernan. Born Wrockwardine, Shropshire. Farrier. 4 years.

**Corner Cottage**
Nigel Jordan. Born Chorley, Lancashire. Lecturer. [33]
Elizabeth Jordan. Born Ellesmere, Shropshire. Personnel Manager. [34] 8 years.

**High House Farm**
Bill Preston. Born Rowton. Farmer. [54]
Kath Preston. Born Shrewsbury. [45]
Philip Preston. Born Rowton. Agricultural work. [52]

**7 The Twiney**
Carol Weston. Born Cannock, Staffordshire. Osteopath's Assistant. [37]

**The Barnes Farm**
Sam Taylor. Born Hinstock. Farmer. [14]
Sarah Taylor. Born Trentham.
Emily Taylor. Born Rowton.
David Taylor. Born Rowton. [24]
Rebecca Taylor. Born Rowton.
18 years.

**Barnes Cottage**

**The Stone House**
Sue Preston. Born Donnington, Shropshire. [22]
Adam Preston. Born Rowton. [23]
15 years.

**Melverley Farm**
40 years.

**Hope Cottage**
Rita Groves. Born Hartlepool. Seamstress. [18]
13 years.

**3 Church Row**
15 years.

**4 Church Row**
Duncan Lane. Born Trench. Production worker. [42]
Debby Wedge. Born Wellington, Shropshire. Dental Nurse. [41]
7 months.

**5 Church Row**
Joan Allan. Born Hadley. Retail work.
20 years.

**6 Church Row**
Luc Gill. 6 days old. [4]

**Church Farm**
Virginia Evans. Born Hall Green, Birmingham. [30]
Christopher Evans. Born Rowton. Student. [38]
Nicholas Evans. Born Rowton. Student. [29]
Marian Harris. Born Kings Heath, Birmingham.
21 years. [17]

**Orchard Cottage**
Ben Cooper. Born Rowton. [10]
8 years.

**Hop Cottage**
2 years.

**Baxter House**
Jim Tranter. Born St. Georges, Telford. Accountant. [40]
Anne Tranter. Born Syston, Leicestershire. Administrative work. [31]
15 years.

**Rock Farm**
Alan Miles. Born Hendon. M.O.D. Civil Service. [8]
5 months.

**10 Rowton**

**11 Rowton**
Wendy Norman. Born Gornal. Manager. [16]
Chloe Norman. Born Shrewsbury. [12]
9 years.

**The Olde Smithy**
Jane Asquith. Born Willenhall. Adoption and Fostering Consultant. [51]
Nathan Asquith. Born Rowton. D.J.
32 years.

**The Bungalow**
7 years.

**Bleak House**
Roger Evans. Born Loggerheads, Staffs. Lecturer. [46]
Nicola Evans. Born Birmingham. Agricultural work. [48]
8 years.
1. Henry Wood, Vicar of High Ercall, was the inventor of the Hot-Air Engine and the Engine driven Air-Pump. His family had Rowton connections.

2. The Seven Stars public house was a drovers' inn and was on its present site and being used as a pub well before 1800, although the present pub was built in 1876. The drovers used common land near the pub to graze and rest their cattle overnight before driving them on from Liverpool to London.

3. The Cleveland Arms, High Ercall, was named after the major landowner of the area – the Duke of Cleveland – and was in existence as a pub before 1841.

4. The Royal Oak at Ellerdine, better known to locals as The Tiddly, is an old pub nicknamed The Tiddlywink in the 19th century (probably due to its size as it was just one room at the time). It was well known as a meeting place for people from the far flung farms and hamlets around Rowton and Ellerdine for exchanging news and passing on or collecting messages. John Beard recalls that if you wanted the chimney-sweep to call you left a message for him at The Tiddlywink.

5. There was a local police presence in 1900. A policeman was stationed in Sytch Lane.

6. There were once stepping stones laid over the river Tern as a crossing in the area where Nobridge nursery now stands. There were stepping stones over the river but 'no bridge', hence the name of the area.

7. Joan Maddox of Cold Hatton Heath tells us of an interesting superstition lasting up to the 20th century. In 1905 on New Year’s Day, a young woman from Sytch lane was walking with her baby through Rowton. The baby needed feeding but no one would let her into their house to feed it because they believed it was bad luck to admit a woman into your home on New Year’s Day, as to do so would bring death to the household during the next twelve months.

8. A former tenant of Hop Cottage who was an RAF pilot landed his Wessex helicopter in one of the Preston's fields one day. He had just dropped in to return a wheelbarrow he had once borrowed from Bill Preston! It was winter and the snow flew up in flurries as the aircraft landed and the children gathered round to see what was happening. The pilot gave Bill and Jim Preston and their families a ride in the helicopter before flying off again.
Further Reading

Books

Beard, J.
*My Shropshire Days on Common Ways.*

Ridgway, W. H.
*LIFE IN HIGH ERCALL FROM THE TURN OF THE CENTURY.*

Foxall, H. D. G.
*Shropshire Field Names*

Nuttall, G.
*RICHARD BAXTER.*

Hill, Mary
*The Demesne and The Waste.*

Miscellaneous

Wynn, Linda
*A Study of Rowton and Ellerdine.*
School project kept in Rowton church.

Adney, R.
*A SHORT HISTORY OF ROWTON CHURCH (1935).*
Typed manuscript also kept in the church.

*BAXTER NOTES AND STUDIES Vol. 2 No. 1 1994.*
Published by the Baxter Society,
Kidderminster.

Maddox, Joan
*A SHORT HISTORY OF COLD HATTON AND ELLERDINE.*