

The Great Barn at Harmondsworth

Compiled by Douglas Rust

This is one of two leaflets to show the rich history of the village of Harmondsworth; it details the history of the Great Barn there. The second leaflet covers the remaining historic buildings situated within the village. Parking is available in Harmondsworth village and behind the Barn when it is open. For those using public transport the U3 and 350 buses run from Uxbridge, West Drayton, Hayes and Heathrow.

The Village

Harmondsworth – Hermodsworth in the Domesday Book (1086) – probably means ‘Heremod’s farm’. From 1391 until 1544 the manor belonged to the College of St Mary at Winchester. It then became part of Hampton Court Chase and the royal hunting ground. The lands were later sold piecemeal, and by the time of the Enclosure (1816) most of the parish was farmed by individual farmers, though certain parts were still in the possession of the Crown.

As a village Harmondsworth has altered very little since the expansive building boom of the 1920s and 1930s, most of which took place on open fields and orchards. The most traumatic change has been the construction of Heathrow Airport, which not only brought considerable noise and added more traffic to the narrow Hatch Lane, but completely obliterated the hamlet of Heathrow, a small village within the parish. The M4 motorway, whilst not affecting the centre of the village, has also been a contributory factor in increasing traffic through the parish. Fortunately the village is a ‘no through road’, and apart from

extensive car parking around the Green which can never be quite explained, it is a fairly secluded residential village. Transport it to Kent or Worcestershire and it would be idyllic.

The History of the Great Barn

This magnificent barn may well have been built on the site of a previous one. At the time of the Norman Conquest the manor of Harmondsworth was owned by King Harold who met his fate at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. William held the manor for three years before passing it over to William FitzOsbern to whom the king was indebted for help during the conquest. The manor then became the property of the Benedictine abbey of the Holy Trinity at Rouen. Harmondsworth was a very rich agricultural manor and would warrant a fairly sophisticated farming infrastructure. Evidence seems to suggest that there were barns on this present site, and as early as 1110 a custumal of the manor records that at the time of sowing seed, any man who was not wanted for ploughing ‘must thresh in the Great Barn until sunset’.

In a 1293-4 survey there is a record of a Granary and in 1324 a further survey records a Grange and a Granary. Apart from a short break of some thirty years, the Manor of Harmondsworth remained in French hands.

In 1391 William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester, purchased the Manor and the revenues from the estate went to support his colleges at Winchester and Oxford. The Winchester College muniments record produce from Harmondsworth being received at the college for feeding the scholars there. Some seven years later a tempest damaged the wheat barn at Harmondsworth and we have evidence of two carpenters being hired to repair it together with the purchase of a large quantity of tiles, lath-nails and other roofing materials. By 1398 the college authorities realised that the storage facilities at Harmondsworth were becoming inadequate and an entry in the accounts of 1426 speaks of a newly

made barn. However in November 1434 an unnamed ‘carpenter of Uxbridge’ arrived in Winchester to negotiate with the authorities the building of a barn at Harmondsworth. Was this our Great Barn? Probably not, as dendrochronology has provided a felling date for the timber of 1426. The barn would have been built with green wood, confirming it is the one mentioned in the 1426 accounts, which agrees with the date, previously assigned on the basis of design, construction methods and joints, of well into the 15th century. Who was the architect? Again we do not know but William Wyse was the main carpenter at New College Oxford and in 1430 he was master carpenter at Windsor Castle. He was also responsible for repairing the aisles at St Mary’s church, Harmondsworth. We also have evidence that carpenters from Ickenham and Uxbridge, which at that time was an established centre for carpentry, were involved, and there is also an entry in the Winchester College accounts that indicate the completion of the tiler’s work at about this time.

The Barn has been considered the finest timber framed barn in England. At 192 feet long, 37 feet wide and 39 feet high it is the largest surviving medieval timber barn in the country. The main timbers are all oak and were obtained from the Kingston upon Thames area as records show two men, John atte Oke and William Kypping, selected timber there in 1425 for a barn at Harmondsworth that was built the following year.

The timber frames would have been made on the ground, then taken to pieces and raised in sections with the timbers slotted into place in the right order to lock the whole structure together. There are carpenters’ marks scratched by many of the joints to make sure all the pieces went in the right places. Despite this care, there are several ‘mistakes’ in the construction; some of the timbers show cut mortises and holes for pegs which were never used. Were these mistakes or timbers from another construction?

The stone footings for the Barn slope from north to south by about a foot. This was never corrected so as

a result the trusses retain a slight lean to the south. The walls are constructed of a local material known variously as puddingstone or ferricrete: it is flint gravel cemented with iron oxides. The massive timber uprights stand on huge blocks of Reigate stone. This sandstone, containing minor amounts of glauconite and mica, was used widely in the lower Thames valley in medieval times. A careful search on the sides of the large stone blocks reveals interesting carvings. Several suggestions have been made for their meaning but that is for the viewer to decide for themselves.

In 1544 the manor of Harmondsworth was taken by Henry VIII to add to his hunting ground around Hampton Court. There is no evidence that he ever used it as shortly afterwards he transferred it to the Paget family with whom it remained until 1869. Sadly William of Wykeham died in 1404, so he never saw this magnificent edifice but his purchase of the manor in 1391 was a wonderful investment not only for Winchester but for the people of Harmondsworth to the present day.

The barn continued to be used for the storage of agricultural produce until 1978, so its original function lasted five and a half centuries.

We hope you have enjoyed your visit.



The Friends of the Great Barn at Harmondsworth

We are a non-profit-making group with the following objectives:

1. To secure the preservation, maintenance and upkeep of the Barn and environs as a heritage building and for community use.
2. To ensure and promote access to the Barn for the general public.
3. To promote and disseminate information on the history of the Barn and its environs.
4. To provide advice and assistance to the owners of the Barn in the management of the Barn and its site.

An organising committee was set up in March 2006 following a public meeting where our MP, John McDonnell, explained to local residents the plight of the Great Barn. Subsequently the objectives of the group were decided, a constitution was drawn up and the first AGM was held in April 2007. Members of The Friends of the Great Barn include local residents, historians and others with an interest in preserving the Grade I Listed Building for future generations.

In 2011 English Heritage bought the Barn and the Friends are now managing it for them. In 2014 English Heritage carried out a major conservation project, repairing the timber frame and cladding, and re-roofing the Barn using hand-made tiles hung on riven oak battens.

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Sources

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I Tyers and H Hibbard, *Vernacular Architecture* 24, 50-54, 1993.

See also <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/harmondsworth-barn/>



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Price 30p