



## History of Princes Risborough

Princes Risborough lies in a broad gap on the western slopes of the Chiltern Hills to which, in all probability, it owes its existence. This provided travellers with a link between the River Thames and the Icknield Way, both of which were routes of prime importance from earliest times. Added to this, the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty which we protect today for our leisure would have had much greater practical significance for those travellers. The chalk downland of Saunderton Lee and clear springs, such as Pyrtle Spring, are cited by J.F. Head as making the area particularly favourable to early settlement, when much of the region was either wooded or marshy. Local names such as Slough and Ilimire (Ilmer) and even Summerleys (the summer fields) point to a generally higher water table than that of today.



There is ample evidence of these first inhabitants. The block of pebble conglomerate, commonly known as a 'Pudding Stone', which has (recently) been restored to proper prominence at the roundabout in Horns Lane, is one of several in the Chilterns thought to have been way-markers for prehistoric man. For many years only its tip was visible, at the foot of a post in Back Lane, and it was a very happy decision to use it to mark the New Road and signal a growing awareness of our heritage.

More familiar human traces lay in the recently re-excavated Neolithic barrow, some 5,500 years old, near Whiteleaf Cross and in a Beaker burial found in 1983 in Clifford Road, close to where an old track known as Barrow Way crossed the hill to Culverton. A Bronze Age axe was found on the site of the British Legion Hall, and the Iron Age is represented by earthworks on Pulpit Hill and Lodge Hill. Whiteleaf Cross itself, which dominates the landscape, remains a mystery. It is curious that it is not mentioned in writing before 1738 and the earliest known drawing of it is in the Bodleian library and entitled 'Crux Saxonica' dated 1742. Whiteleaf Cross stands on the face of a promontory of the Chilterns above Whiteleaf and can be seen clearly across the Vale of Aylesbury. By the Enclosure Act 9 of George IV it was declared to be public property. In autumn 2003 severe erosion was repaired and surrounding areas renovated, helped in part, by funding from the National Lottery.

Kop Hill is a long climbing road that leads from the town up towards Whiteleaf Cross. This steep, straight hill was a very famous venue for Motor Racing in the early 20th C with the famous Kop Hill Climb being a very popular and regular event in the racing calendar. On the left as you climb Kop Hill, you will find the Brush Hill Nature Reserve. An Area of Special Scientific Interest, Brush Hill has just been awarded a grant from The Heritage Lottery Fund to help with its management and maintenance, as it is an important site for rare and endangered plants and wildlife.

A Romano-British villa at Saunderton, excavated in 1937 and then re-buried, may have had a neighbour at Pyrtle Spring, since Roman tiles and pottery may still be found there. Roman control of Britain ended officially in 410 AD and the Danes and Saxons moved in, to their 'wicks' and 'hams'. As late as 871 AD, a Danish army marched along the Upper Icknield Way and soon after, in 903 AD, we find the first reference to Risborough by name, 'Hrisebyrgan be cilternes efese', which has been translated as 'the brush covered hills by the Chiltern eaves'.

**Princes Risborough Town** The Norman Conquest is the historical landmark that starts to define the town and its associated villages. The Domesday Book contains several references to 'Riseburg'. The manor had belonged to Earl Harold and been passed to William the Conqueror. What a spectacle it must have been as the latter marched his army from Wallingford to Berkhamsted past his new estate, though at the time the population density here has been estimated at less than ten per square mile. There would have been little need for crowd control!

In 1343 the manor passed to Edward, the Black Prince, and the site formerly known as Court Close, later The Mount, and now the Stratton Road car park, was traditionally known as his Palace. Records show, that even before his day, there was a Royal Stud here, and the Prince was known to visit his manor, to view stallions, with such resounding names as Grisel, Tankarvill, and Morel de Salesbirs. Excavations in 1955 at The Mount revealed both evidence of a substantial manor and a penny of Edward 1, minted in 1280 and representing a day's wages for the stud-keeper's page. The site continued to be occupied until the 17th or 18th century. The Mount bears traces of banks, and entrenchments, enclosed by a moat, and is originally believed to have been a Saxon Encampment. The high bank that separates the churchyard from Stratton Road can still be seen and the name Court Close has been retained for a nearby cul-de-sac. Today you'll find a plaque denoting 'The Site of The Manor of The Black Prince'.

Henry VI succeeded to the manor in the 15th century, when his army was confronting Joan of Arc. The cottages in Church Street, now converted into a restaurant, are of the same era and narrowly escaped demolition in 1934.

A living link with the Middle Ages stems from the Charter granted in 1523 by Henry VIII for a weekly market and two annual fairs, 'for the improvement of the status..... of the inhabitants..... by the making common of saleable things'. The fairs are still held, in May and October, though in our impatient age some do not share King Henry's views. Like the pudding stone, if the fairs were regarded as a part of our heritage, they might be seen as a focus for other activities rather than an intrusion, and we might all still be improved by the 'grand, galloping horses'.

Tradition says that Queen Elizabeth 1 stayed at a manor called Brooke House which has long since disappeared. The present Manor House, dating from early to mid-17th century, situated next to the church, probably stands on the same site. It is a handsome house of mellowed brickwork built around a magnificent Jacobean staircase and balustrade. In 1766 the Manor House was sold to John Grubb, of Horsenden, and was eventually bought by the Rothschild family and presented by them to the National Trust in 1925 by the widow and family of the Hon. Charles Rothschild. It is open to the public for viewing on specific dates. Contact The National Trust for more details.



Opposite The Manor House, in Church Lane is a very pretty 17th century half-timbered house, which was once the Vicarage and is now known as Monks Staithe. This was once occupied by the famous Aviatrix of the 1930's, Amy Johnson.

The well known 17th or 18th C Market House, originally timber-framed but altered and its upper storey rebuilt by John Grubb (grand-nephew of John Grubb of Horsenden), in 1824, is the focal point of the town. The upper floor was used by the Town Council as the Council Chamber until mid 2001, when due to accessibility problems it was forced to move to alternative premises. It is used by Risborough Countryside Group for occasional displays. In 1994 to celebrate the centenary of the Civic Parish, the Town Council undertook a major refurbishment of the Grade 11 listed Market House, with assistance from English Heritage, Buckinghamshire County Council and Wycombe District Council.

The 19th Century opened with a disaster, when the church tower collapsed, destroying the roof and peal of bells which had been hung in 1552. The century did, however, give birth to modern Princes Risborough. The fields were enclosed in 1823, at which time there were 1,958 inhabitants in the Parish of whom about 1,200 actually lived in the town. With the enclosures came road improvements, which in turn led to the development of the area known as Parkfield, and later, in 1862, came the railway and the gasworks. Two schools were established, the British School in Parkfield in 1836, and the National School on the site of the old workhouse by St Mary's Church in 1841. They catered between them for about 260 pupils.

The Literary Institute, in the High Street, was leased at a peppercorn rent to the town in 1891 by the first Baron Rothschild for use as a public reading room. Today, the upstairs room can be hired for meetings etc. and the downstairs room, housing a billiards table, is used as a snooker club.

The Lion or Welch Ale Brewery was an important employer until it closed in 1927. The lion surmounting its gateway surveyed the Market Square until 1960 and the last vestige of the brewery, the malthouse, was demolished in 1987.

A new spire, built in 1908 for the Parish Church of St Mary, pointed the way to the 20th century and the town has continued to flourish with it.

Other properties, old cottages or houses built at various times during the last four centuries, mix happily together to create a blend of interesting and pleasant architecture.

The central part of the town still retains its old world charm and is designated as a Conservation Area. Various improvements have been made in the Market Square, High Street, Church Street and Duke Street; the whole area has been repaired and improved lighting has been mounted on Victorian style metal lamp standards. Considerable improvements and new building of residential and commercial type have taken place within the boundaries of old properties. Two-way traffic still passes through the High Street and Duke Street, but much of the heavy traffic load has been removed by the New Road 'by-pass' completed in 1987. At the same time road narrowings with, pedestrian crossing points and raised flower beds, were introduced.

The Town contains churches of various denominations all of which are referred to later under the heading 'Churches'. Princes Risborough is well served by both state and independent schools, details of which can be read under the heading 'Education'.



There are two medical and three dental practitioners in the town, NHS General Hospitals at Stoke Mandeville (which also houses the National Spinal Injuries Unit), High Wycombe and Amersham. The Paddocks in the Aylesbury Road built at the turn of the century and once a family home has been considerably enlarged and is now a private hospital. See section on 'Local Medical Services' for more information.

**Monks Risborough** was confirmed in the Domesday Survey of 1086 as belonging to Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury, and it remained a possession of the See until the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII. At the present time the parish comes under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Oxford. Monks Risborough has the distinction of being the oldest documented Parish in the country; its boundaries being defined in a Charter of 903 AD which was itself a replacement of an earlier charter destroyed by fire. Parts of this boundary known as the Black Hedge, which can be seen from the Brimmers Road crossing the hillside to the east, still remain to this day. Known then as East Risborough the land was conveyed by Aethelfrith to his daughter Ethelgyth. The land later passed into the possession of monks of Christ Church, Canterbury and from this ecclesiastical association is derived the first part of its present name. The parish church of St. Dunstan stands behind a charming group of thatched cottages in Burton Lane, just off the Aylesbury Road. Beyond the church is the St. Dunstan's Recreation ground containing an interesting 16th century Dovecote with a richly carved doorway, now a listed building that is testament to the age and importance of this parish. Monks Risborough is served by Chiltern Railways through a halt in Crowbrook Road. Trains run approximately hourly at peak periods between Aylesbury and Princes Risborough and continue to High Wycombe and London. Monks and Princes Risborough became one civil parish in 1934 and were physically united by 1965, with the completion of the Wellington and Place Farm Estates.

Mill Lane still has its watermill house, but a windmill mentioned in the 14th century was moved to Radnage in 1650.

Five other settlements are included in the Parish, namely Alscot, Horsenden, Askett, Cadsden and Whiteleaf.

**Alscot** is a charming cul-de-sac hamlet mid way between Longwick and Princes Risborough. It is also the smallest conservation area in the Parish, hiding itself by the Longwick Road. The road crosses a stream, now hardly noticed by drivers hastening to Thame. It is called the 'foul brook' in the Charter of 903 and it is interesting to see the traces of the wide ford that an older, muddier road created.

**Horsenden** is a delightful and peaceful village some one-mile from the railway station, secluded at the end of a narrow country lane. It was here that the Grubb family lived from at least 1662, though the present Manor House was not built until 1810. The Manor house is adjacent to the small church of St. Michael, which consists of a chancel built from the remains of a previous larger building. It is to a former Rector, Edward Stone, that we owe the benefit of aspirin, the active ingredient of the Willow bark, with which he treated his ague. Also in Horsenden Lane are The Windsor Playing Fields where Risborough Rangers Football Club, the Risborough Cricket Club and Horsenden Lawn Tennis Club meet. The Phoenix Cycle Trail passes through Horsenden.

**Askett** was a renowned centre for lace making during the late 19th century, and has been recently described as 'A conservation area in a hamlet in a meadow'. Thatch, brick and flint and considerate modernisation characterise it. Sadly, conservation came too late for the old manor house, which had to be demolished in 1969, but was until then renowned to be the oldest house in the county. Askett lies to the west of the Aylesbury Road, opposite Whiteleaf and beyond Monks Risborough.

**Cadsden** even further along the Aylesbury Road and lying behind Whiteleaf on the road to Hampden and Great Misenden and underneath Longdown Hill is the small hamlet of Cadsden. Travellers on the Ridgeway Path may refresh themselves at Lower Cadsden in the shadow of Longdown Hill. A path branches off past the one cottage of Middle Cadsden to Upper Cadsden where Tudor cottages became Whiteleaf Golf Club. The Cadsden Road and Upper Icknield Way transect at Gallows Cross, a reminder of the days when the Prior of Christ Church had gallows, tumbrel and pillory in the manor.

**Whiteleaf** is a picturesque village east of the Aylesbury Road between Princes Risborough and Cadsden. The name of this village is reputed to derive from Whitecliffe as it is situated on rising ground under the Chiltern escarpment and immediately below the White Cross carved in a clearing at the top of the hill. The Icknield Way leads through Whiteleaf village, where again thatch and flint delight, before bringing us back to look over Risborough Gap, described by John Nash the artist, and F.C. Parsons the historian, as the finest view in the south of England. The houses in Whiteleaf command extensive panoramic views across the Vale of Aylesbury towards Oxford and the southwest. Just above the village and approached by Golf Club Lane (Thorns Lane) is Whiteleaf Golf Course. This is a nine-hole golf course set in a fold in the hills with marvellous views over the Vale towards Aylesbury.



Adjacent to the golf course is Monks Risborough Cricket Club, which celebrated its centenary in 1993 and is reputed to have a square with 'views second to none'. Whiteleaf Fields, comprising three acres opposite the lay-by near the church of St. Dunstan, Monks Risborough, and two acres along Icknield Way, were vested to the National Trust in 1925. Covenants protect a further fifty-eight acres of adjoining land.

The population of the Risborough parish has grown from 2,418 in 1883 to some 8,500 today. This has inevitably led to change and relatively large housing development. While these have created their own individuality they all remain in harmony with the heart of the old town. That heart beats with renewed vitality and Princes Risborough remains a very pleasant place in which to live.