

The Old Cottages in Hazell's Lane

The cottages that once stood in Hazell's Lane, Shrivenham, are well known to those interested in local history. There are many who regret the loss of the cottages, but they were condemned as, *'unfit for human habitation,'* in the 1960s; a time when attitudes to buildings were entirely different than today. Attitudes to ancient buildings and improvements in building technology would certainly have saved them were it today, but we can at least finish off the history of them by explaining some new information that has come to light.



Lord William Viscount Barrington was the second Barrington to bear the title. He was a very successful and influential man. As well as being an M.P. he also held the position at various times of Secretary at War, Treasurer to the Admiralty and Chancellor of the Exchequer. He also held the, *'Ear of the King.'*

In his personal life he had no children, so this required that he had to look to his brothers for an heir. It was his younger brother John who led a distinguished military career as a

Major-General, that provided the three sons to continue the Barrington line, William, Richard and George. However, the first two caused much trouble and concerns for their uncle. In his letters that accompanied his Will, we learn that William despaired of the behaviour of his two delinquent nephews; so much so that he decided he could not trust either of them with the administration of his beloved Beckett Estate. Consequently, on his death in 1793, the estate was placed in Trust to be overseen by his three surviving brothers, until such time as a suitable heir was apparent. This happened in 1814 with the death of Lord Richard Viscount Barrington. (4th)

Having been ordained as a priest, George, the third son of John Barrington, tended the Living in Sedgefield, Durham, and was happy to inherit the title of Lord George Viscount Barrington (5th). With full control vested in him, George needed a suitable person to act as his Steward for the Beckett Estate. The previous 21 years of '*Caretaker Stewards*' had left the estate in a mess. Little had been done to keep the farms, houses and cottages in good repair, and many of the tenants were in arrears of rent.

Enter: George Merryweather



We learned recently that a large collection of Barrington family documents had been moved from the archives at Ipswich to the British Library in London. Shrivenham Heritage Society members, Neil Maw and Vivien Moss made several visits to London to search those documents. In the file of Ref No ADD-MS 73758, there are 68 letters written by George Merryweather, Steward of the Beckett Estate, to his employer Lord Barrington. These letters have now been transcribed.

In Letter number 51 dated 17th January 1818, George Merryweather writes, *'We are just on the point of finishing the 7 cottages formed out of Lewis's premises.'* Letter number 53 dated 22nd April 1818, the work on the new cottages was continuing when he includes in a list of work, *'the pointing of the walls of the 7 cottages late Lewis' premises.'* Then in August of that year a fire took hold of two cottages elsewhere in the village and he reports, *'Adjoining the farming premises now in the occupation of Thomas Rich, but which come into hand at Michaelmas were two cottages, the worst we have, and most inconveniently situated for their farming premises. I have often wished they were removed or taken down. Last Thursday week they took fire at noon day and were burnt to the ground by reason of a girl throwing some hot ashes to the dung hill behind the house. A subscription is made for the suffering which re-instates them in a better property than that which they have lost, and I am quite certain your Lordship's estate is improved by the accident. I believe every body sees it. Mr Berens (the Vicar) wishes the two cottages to be rebuilt, but I see no advantage to your Lordship in that. Quite the contrary and as 7 cottages were lately made, the town has a balance of 5 in favour of its convenience, for Thomas Lewis who sold your Lordship the premises has left Shrivenham.'*



With the above information the obvious question is the location of the seven new cottages. It is an habitual problem when researching whereby seldom is any location given. There is a clue in the Barrington Estate Accounts Book held at the Berkshire County Archive Ref No D/EX52/E1 where an entry for April 1818 reads, '*Work on 7 cottages at the East end of the village.*' When we look at the East end of Shrivenham, there can be only two candidates for cottages built at that period, Park Cottages and Hazell's Lane Cottages.

The great Tithe Survey of 1844 provides more information, 26 years after the '*new*' cottages were built. Park Cottages are shown as two blocks (as they are today), one of four and one of six, whereas Hazell's Lane clearly state that at that spot (No 204) it is made up of seven tenements and gardens. When looking at the photos that survive today, what cannot clearly be seen are more buildings to the rear. It is noticeable from the photographs that there is a large gap along the roof top lacking chimneys. This is because the chimneys were on parts of the structures to the rear.

It's possible to deduce from this information that farm premises at Hazell's Lane were owned by Thomas Lewis who sold them to the Barrington Estate. Unfortunately, we have no record of that transaction. Because of the shortage of housing in the village, which is mentioned by George Merryweather, the decision was made to convert the premises in

Hazell's Lane to seven dwellings. They would have been very small, poorly lit and ventilated, but quite normal for the period, simple Hovels.

Even though the cottages no longer exist, it is satisfying to think that historically the story of the cottages have now been completed.

