

What was Shrivenham like 100 years ago? By Vivien Moss

It may surprise you that the centre of Shrivenham today is not so very different from how it was 100 years ago. The layout has scarcely changed. The village was a quiet backwater and the census for 1921 shows there were just 592 people and the population had been declining over recent years. As in many villages the Church was the central point. Apart from the Doctor's house, the Vicarage, Fern House and Coplow House almost all the other houses were little 1 or 2-bedroomed cottages clustered around the High Street and Church. It was a village of thatch, box hedges and stone and each cottage or house had its own well. A box hedge bordered almost all the way from the allotments, past the Old Police Station, which was then a new building having been erected in 1915, across the road and past a charming old cottage later demolished in order to place the Memorial Hall there in the early 1920s. The hedge then continued along the High Street and as far as the school and Elm Tree House. Three stately elms stood close to where today's bus-stop is.



The 3 Elms in fine condition that were the Cross Trees circa 1900. Note the cottages – see SHS online Catalogue N1421 for detail

The village was totally surrounded by tenanted farms and it was a small agricultural village where everyone knew everyone else and strangers were looked upon with suspicion. However, just after the First World War things were beginning to change. Up to 1915 the children had been able to play hopscotch and with their whips and tops in the High street since there was little traffic apart from the occasional steam engine which was audible as it hissed and clanked its way from Watchfield at almost 3mph. By 1920 there were now a few more cars on the road and the first petrol pump in the village was put in place outside Benford's Groceryshop on the corner of Church Walk.



Benfords Grocery Shop on the left. Note the petrol pump

Besides the two churches and the Post Office, next door then to the Men's Institute which opened in 1905, there were three butchers in the village, a bakery, two blacksmiths, three grocers (Hammonds, Benfords and Dikes), an abattoir and four pubs – the Prince of Wales, the Barrington Arms, the Crown and the Victoria by Shrevenham Railway Station. A gallon of beer at this time cost 8d. There was no Memorial Hall, no War Memorial in the churchyard until about 1920/21 and no College or Academy. The children attended school from five to thirteen years old. The school leaving age was raised to fourteen in 1921 and they all went to the village school until 1944 when the 11 year olds went to Faringdon.



The area by the Co-Op store in 1925

The Barrington family lived at nearby Beckett House with its 1500 acres of land. They owned almost all the land in the village and provided employment on their estate and in their House. They looked after their employees well and also made themselves aware of anyone in the village who through no fault of their own had fallen on hard times. The longer the second wife, Charlotte, of the Viscount lived here the more perturbed she was by the monotony and drudgery of the villagers and in particular the wives and mothers. The men had their Institute in the High Street and also the four pubs but for the women and children of the village there was nothing. She regularly visited them and often found that there could be up to 10 children living with their parents in a 2-bedroomed cottage. A labourer's wage was about 15 shillings a week with a rent of 2 shillings and six pence. Incidentally, a thatched cottage was sold in Shrivenham in 1921 for £50. The Viscountess decided to embark on a fund-raising project to provide a Hall where classes and social activities could take place. She interrupted this project in order to build eight houses for the disabled married men returning from the First World War. These houses surround the Recreation Ground. She was aware that if the disabled servicemen (with 40% disability) could not be cared for in the village then they would be transferred to institutions many miles away. By building them accommodation locally they would be with their families. Her motivation for these projects was two – fold. It was to improve the quality of life for the most deprived and at the same time to stem the flow of people moving to the boom town of Swindon where they and their families had higher wages and thus a better standard of living. In short she wanted to stop the village from dying back. She achieved both her projects and the Memorial Hall soon became the centre for a wide variety of meetings, both educational and recreational. Clubs and Societies such as the Guides, Scouts, WI and Balls, Film Shows and Jumble Sales have all taken place since the Hall was officially opened in July 1925 by her friend Princess Beatrice. It has been for everyone to enjoy.



The houses built for injured ex-servicemen after the 1914 -18 war



The opening of the Memorial Hall by Princess Beatrice in 1925

As with everywhere else in Britain immediately after the First World War there was a general sense of numb disillusionment but Shrevenham gradually returned to its serene and unhurried way of life. Two things contributed to this. An early drainage system was installed at the eastern part of the village and piped water was available for the first time. The rest of the village was not connected until the 1930s. The second great change was generated by the building of the first council houses in Stallpits Road. In 1919 Lloyd George's Social Service Fund was extended to provide sound council housing.

In conclusion it is interesting to note that a hundred years ago the Memorial Hall stood on the fringe of the village but today stands in the centre. The population has increased to well over 5,000.



Look what the Memorial Hall replaced in 1925