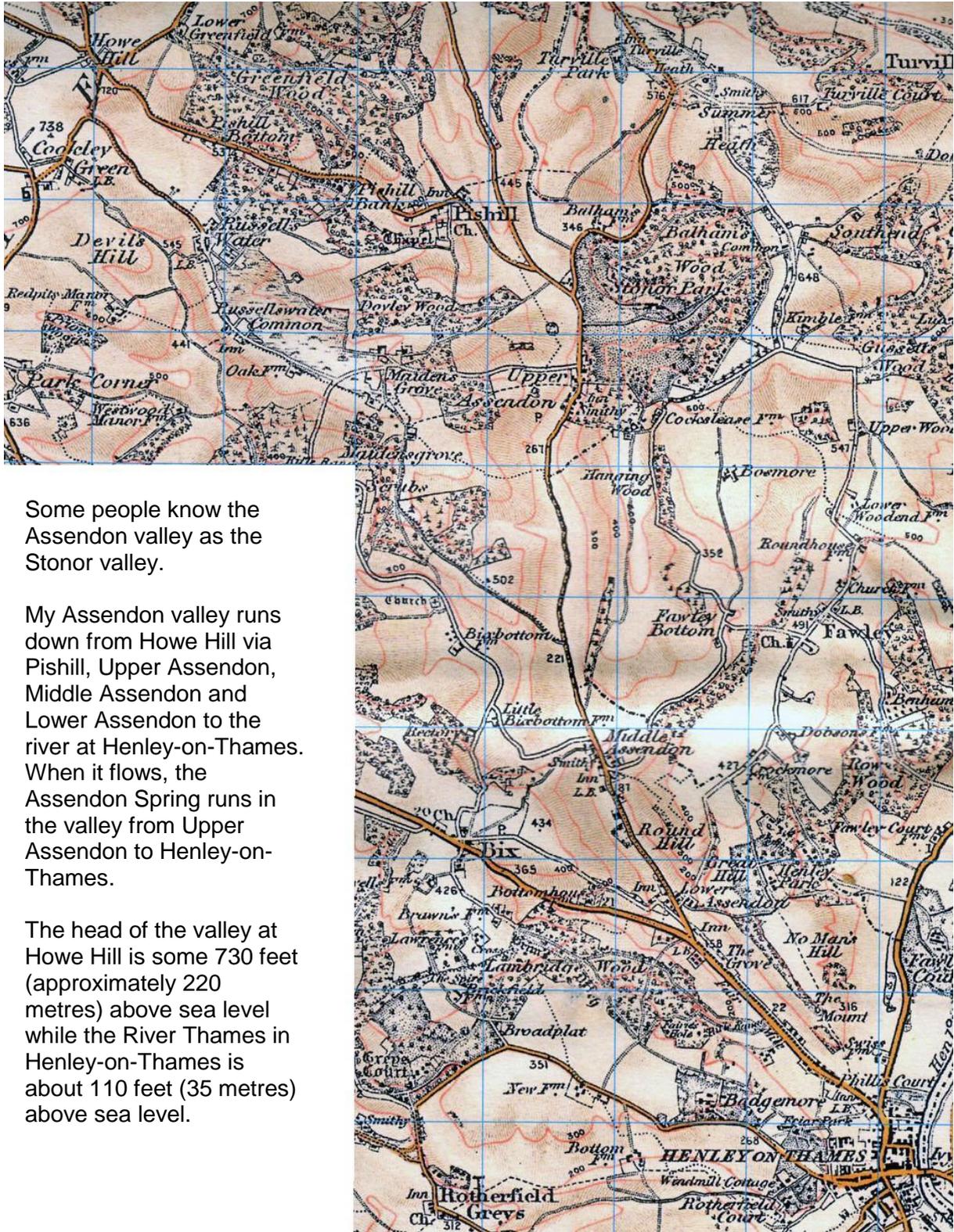


# The Assendon Valley

This article is about the Assendon Valley in South Oxfordshire. It is shown below on an Ordnance Survey map from 1920.



Some people know the Assendon valley as the Stonor valley.

My Assendon valley runs down from Howe Hill via Pishill, Upper Assendon, Middle Assendon and Lower Assendon to the river at Henley-on-Thames. When it flows, the Assendon Spring runs in the valley from Upper Assendon to Henley-on-Thames.

The head of the valley at Howe Hill is some 730 feet (approximately 220 metres) above sea level while the River Thames in Henley-on-Thames is about 110 feet (35 metres) above sea level.

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From Howe Hill to Pishill the valley descends by almost 350 feet (about 110 metres) in a distance of 1½ miles (2.5 kilometres) to the east. This is the steepest part of the Assendon valley.



The area known as Pishill Bank that was once used for growing peas



A derelict worker's hut on Pishill Bank

## Pishill Village

Notable buildings in Pishill village are The Crown Inn and the church and old rectory. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century there was also a schoolroom that is now closed.

The Crown Inn dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century as a coaching inn. It would have been an important stop before the horses climbed the hill towards Howe Hill. It has a priest hole that was used to hide Roman Catholic clergy from nearby Stonor in the time of Henry VIII. In the 1960s the barn alongside The Crown Inn was converted into a nightclub and hosted performances by local artists such as Dusty Springfield and George Harrison.



The church has served the villages of Pishill and Upper Assendon, as well as Stonor House. It is Norman and dates back to at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It is not dedicated to a saint. The Rectory was built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but there are remains of a 13<sup>th</sup> century building nearby. It was built when Pishill changed from being associated with Nettlebed to Assendon and a separate Rector was installed.

As parishes were combined in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Rectory was sold as a private dwelling. By 1954 the church became part of the parish of Bix and Assendon and the Rector of the time, the Rev. Ernest Lewsey, lived at Bix.

The church is located at the top of Church Hill, a small steep hill to the south of the village.



The flint and stone Pishill church showing the south porch



Pishill church from the west, showing the north aisle

An unusual feature of Pishill church is its north aisle. Sitting in the pews in this area it is possible to see the pulpit but not the altar. It is also known as the Stonor aisle and may have allowed the Roman Catholics from Stonor to use the church after it became protestant.



The interior 'split' of Pishill church: north aisle to the left and chancel to the right



View of the chancel arch and altar



Simple pews in the north aisle



The view when seated in the north aisle

Prior to the installation of Ernest Lewsey as Rector, the Rev G.M.Hall served the church for many years. He died at the age of 97 after being 'vicar and friend of the parish' for 58 years. For most of this time his wife assisted him as a church worker and organist.

In recent years a window (shown to the right) designed by John Piper has been installed in the chancel to commemorate the Rev G.M.Hall.

Today (in 2008) the parishes of Pishill, Bix and Assendon (St. James), Highmoor (St. Paul), Nettlebed (St. Bartholomew) and Rotherfield Greys (St. Nicholas) are combined in a single Benefice.

As the valley continues to gently descend through farmland towards Stonor, you can look back towards Pishill and see the church on the hill.



John Piper window

## Stonor and Upper Assendon

The modern village of Stonor is an amalgamation of Stonor Park and Upper (or Over) Assendon. The only remnant of the Upper Assendon name is at Upper Assendon Farm, located at the southern end of the village.



Upper Assendon Farm in the present day village of Stonor

Stonor Park is the location of Stonor House. Lord and Lady Camoys and the Stonor family have owned the house for over eight centuries. The Catholic chapel has been in constant use, including during the Reformation. As the estate workers were expected to be Roman Catholic, no Church of England chapel was built for Upper Assendon, the nearest church being at Pishill.



The entrance to Stonor Park



Stonor House



Old school house at Stonor



Former estate workers' cottage

Stonor once had its own school, Post Office with village store and an inn, the Stonor Arms. The latter was reopened in 2013 as a public house and village store.

The original estate workers' cottages have been converted into single dwellings, as illustrated above. Expansion of the village in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen new houses built as infill between these cottages. The village has had a cricket team since 1797. In the 1950s and 1960s many of the cricketers played for Bix on Sunday and Stonor on Saturday. Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century village cricket became more popular as people were more mobile and had increased leisure time. The Bix and Stonor teams are now autonomous and Stonor has improved the facilities at its ground opposite Stonor Park.



Stonor Cricket Club's ground opposite Stonor Park

Between Stonor and Middle Assendon the B480 road that follows the valley forms the boundary between Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire.



The B480 in the Assendon valley between Stonor and Middle Assendon

## Middle Assendon

Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Middle Assendon was a tiny hamlet comprising three farms and a handful of cottages. There was an inn called The Royal Oak in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century The Rainbow inn opened, possibly replacing The Royal Oak.



The Rainbow public house, Middle Assendon

A sawmill was established in Middle Assendon in 1866 and houses were built for the almost 100 workers. The sawmill continued to operate until 1966.

Only the Mill House remains, with the area used to stockpile wood being used to build bungalows at The Green (see right) and the site of the sawmill developed as Mill Close housing estate.



For a while a shop was opened in Mill Close and there was a Post Office at the southern end of the village. The Post Office was opened in the front room of a private house when a similar situation closed in Lower Assendon.

Between Middle Assendon and Lower Assendon, Henley Corporation built a sewage works between 1883 and 1896. It remained in use for about a century, being replaced by works on The Marlow Road in Henley in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. For a while the old works were used as landfill for Henley's rubbish. The house at the site entrance was sold as a family home.

## Lower Assendon

Before the growth of Middle Assendon and Stonor, Lower Assendon was the most important of the Assendon hamlets. While some houses have been extended, there was little new development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Lower Assendon was well served with inns. The Golden Ball was built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as two cottages. It then became a coaching inn with stables on the London to Oxford road. One branch of the road passing the inn is now part of its garden. The Assendon Cross, later called The Red Cross, that stood closer to the Fair Mile closed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and was replaced by The Travellers Rest. This inn was closed in 1939 for road widening. The 'Cross' is shown on maps in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



The Golden Ball was a stopping place for the mail coach from Aylesbury to Henley, the 'Tantivy' from Birmingham, the 'Magnet' from Cheltenham, the 'Alert' from Oxford and the Gloucester and Stroud mails. The highwaymen Tom King and Dick Turpin who operated on roads throughout the Chilterns frequented the Golden Ball. When law enforcement officers approached, they would hide on a secret stairway hidden in a bend in the chimney and giving a view of the bar below.

A blacksmith operated from premises next to The Golden Ball until the 1890s.

The picturesque Pilgrim Cottage (see right) became famous in the 1930s when occupied by the author Cecil Roberts.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century there had been two cottages that were bought and knocked into one to make Pilgrim Cottage.

At some time one of the cottages had been used as a general village store. This was certainly the case in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.



For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Lower Assendon had its own Post Office. It was run from the front room of a cottage owned by Miss Ellen Froomes.

A village notice board, post box and telephone box stood outside the Post Office (see right). Being close to the Henley to Oxford road, the telephone box was used by passing motorists as well as the villagers.



A former gamekeeper's lodge (see right) stands beside Pack and Prime Lane. This lane links Lower Assendon with Henley Park and was used by Charles I as he escaped from Oxford to spend a night at Hambledon Manor in 1646.

Mr and Mrs Birch of Henley Park had the little brick and flint cottage built in the 1840s as a school and chapel for the villagers. They also provided a schoolmistress and a weekly evening service at their own expense.



The original building had two rooms facing southwest and a kitchen to the rear. During much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a Miss Appleby occupied it. In the 1970s she sold the property to a Mr Thatcher, who owned the woodland above the property, but she continued to live there. Since her death, the cottage has been extensively extended and new houses have been built in the woodland.

## The Fair Mile

At Lower Assendon the B480 road joins the A4130 into Henley-on-Thames. It is a straight road for almost one mile lined with trees and with a broad expanse of grass on the verges on either side. When The Travellers Rest inn stood at Lower Assendon it was claimed that its window ledge was level with the top of the tower of St Mary's church in Henley-on-Thames.

In 1804 the Mackenzie family, who owned Henley Park above Lower Assendon, had a brick and flint wall erected round their deer park along the eastern side of the Fair Mile. This was later broken by the building of new houses at the Henley-on-Thames end of the Fair Mile, though most of the wall still exists.

Up until 1953, the Fair Mile was lined with a row of elm trees, planted in 1752. As an increasing number of the trees died, the Henley-on-Thames Town Council decided to replace them with an avenue of Turkey Oaks. There was a formal planting ceremony at the Henley-on-Thames end performed by Princess Margaret and attended by pupils from local schools and youth groups, as well as the general public. There is a stone commemorating this event with a plaque shown on the right.



In 1977 a further avenue of trees was added to the Fair Mile to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. This second row is of Lime trees.



The deer park wall



The Fair Mile

Almost at the end of the Fair Mile there is a bend before it reaches Northfield End. It is here that there is one final item of interest.

A small stone (see right) has been erected that reads: *Jimmy. A tiny marmoset. August 16<sup>th</sup> 1937. There isn't enough darkness in the world to quench the light of one small candle.*

