

History of Woldingham



"Woldingham was once an empty down crossed by the old ridgeway. From Saxon times until the coming of the railway it was a tiny agricultural hamlet. For the last ninety years it has been a steadily growing residential area."

The opening sentence of "History of Woldingham and Marden Park" by John Greenwood, written in 1976, admirably sums up the history of our village. This history is, however, small and fragmented and has to be searched for rather than being laid out neatly before us. The first written record is the Domesday book entry when the population was about 50 and although the village had been worth £4 in King Edward the Confessor's reign, it was recorded that it was only worth 20 shillings when William the Conqueror took it from its Saxon owner, Ulstan, and gave it to one of his knights Richard of Tonbridge.

The old parish was very small, about one square mile, northwards from The Ridge almost to the modern station, the clay on the hilltop was arable land and the chalk hillsides were grazing. The common land comprised The Green and the hillside below Park View Road. The parish was split into two farms, both manors, Upper and Nether Court. The only roads were the present day Northdown Road from the ridgeway up to the village, a green lane from Chelsham past Flinthouse Farm and on to Oxted connected to Woldingham by Slines Oak Road, and a track from St. Agatha's Church down to Marden Valley in the neighbouring parish of Godstone.

Upper Court farmed the land from The Green down to The Ridge and Nether Court farmed the land to the north, as well as Lunghurst and Butlers Dene which were part of the parish of Chelsham. The farms were always tenanted and their aristocratic owners rarely, if ever, visited this remote hamlet. There was a tiny church, now St. Agatha's, first recorded in a document of 1270, which was from time to time ruinous.

In 1671 a wealthy London scrivener, or moneylender, Sir Robert Clayton purchased Marden Valley and built himself an elegant country house. He transformed the barren chalk downland into a beautiful landscaped deer park and was exhorted by the diarist John Evelyn who visited him to the *"repairing of an old desolate dilapidated church, standing on the hill above the house."*



Apart from a legal case concerning the tithes of Upper Court, little changed through the centuries. In 1801 there was a population of 33, less than that at Domesday. Some cottages were built on The Green and are still there today. There was also an ale-house called The Hop Pole. In 1832 the owner of Upper Court rebuilt St. Agatha's which is familiar to us today. The Clayton family let Marden Park from 1800 - one of the tenants being William Wilberforce - and the old house was burnt down in 1879.



Looming over Woldingham from at least 1830 were the plans for a railway. This was not finally completed until 1884 and the station was at first called Marden Park. The porter's house was the green weatherboarded Station Cottage and the stationmaster lived in the grander Station Lodge.

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A teetotal geologist from Redhill, one William Gilford, saw the development potential of the area once the railway was running and purchased the entire parish. He envisaged a complete village, lost in its gardens and marked out large plots each with road frontage. He laid out a simple infrastructure which serves us today, following the old field tracks and boundaries, building a waterworks to replace his optimistic "reservoir" which was the Upper Court Farm pond, and making good roads of hard packed flint such as can still be seen in Church Road.

He designed a high class village with a mix of housing but took great care to control future development. All buildings except lodges had to stand 25ft from the road, no houses were to be built of a value less than £400 (£600 in some roads) and there was to be no industry. He imposed Covenants which are administered today by the Woldingham Association and it is these, together with his foresight, which has maintained the unique Victorian designed village we see today.

After a fracas involving the railway navvies who were constructing the tunnel through to Oxted, Gilford took the opportunity to close down the Hop Pole. By 1890 the population had doubled in twenty years to 132 and the area attracted eminent architects who built comfortable large houses, country estates in miniature. Woldingham was still remote and a strong social life ensued with a golf course, cricket club, and tennis club. Polo was also played in Park View Road near The Green. To cater for the growing population a larger temporary church was erected on what is now the Village Hall car park.



The First World War claimed the lives of many village men commemorated on the simple War Memorial in St. Paul's but it also brought the 16th (Public Schools) Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment to Woldingham Camp, which was later developed into the Garden Village.

A working men's club was formed and William Gilford's strict Covenants were relaxed to allow the opening of the Village Institute in Upper Court Road (annual subscription five shillings). The Crescent of shops was built in the 1920's, Marden Park became part of the parish of Woldingham as well as Butlers Dene and Lunghurst, and in 1934 the great Church of St. Paul, designed by Sir Herbert Baker, was consecrated.

The village was well and truly stepping out of its history into the present day.

Further Reading:

- Woldingham 2000
- The Bourne Society Local History Records
- Victorian County History (Surrey)
- A History of Woldingham & Marden Park by John Greenwood
- Manning & Bray, Surrey.

All these publications can be seen in the Local History centre at the Caterham library.

