



Brighton and Beyond

A History of the Cowley Family

Farming in Ovingdean

Anyone passing through Ovingdean today will find it filled with echoes of its agricultural past. Barns, outbuildings and cottages have been skilfully converted into the most desirable of residences.

The village's best-known and longest-surviving secular building, the Grange, was a farmhouse for centuries. Only in the 1980s was its link with farming finally broken.

Not long after the Conquest, Ovingdean was divided into two parts, one roughly twice as large as the other. The manor estate of some 1076 acres occupied the western two-thirds of the parish. Its lord built the church of St Wulfran in the late 11th century but his descendants became absentee landlords roughly a century later, with the manor house and farm being leased to others.

The eastern estate covered some 554 acres. By the end of the 13th century, however, parts of this land had been donated by the Normans to St Pancras Priory, Lewes. On its dissolution in 1537 its lands reverted to secular ownership.

Among the prosperous tenants on this eastern estate was John Ridge (1506?-1558), who owned cattle, sheep and arable land and left estate estimated at around £95 – a substantial sum in those times.

Around 1600, one Thomas Geere extended what we now call the Grange, which had been built a century or so earlier. It was surrounded by arable land and the farm's sheep grazed the downs. Three generations of Geeres farmed out of the Grange throughout the 17th century.

Nathaniel Kemp (the uncle of Thomas Read Kemp) built Ovingdean House - now Ovingdean Hall School - on his estate in 1792. He decided to farm the land, and employed a 'bailiff' for whom he built a house (now called 'Flints') and put up farm buildings and a barn. His 'Upper Farm' and the Manorial Farm were the two village farms from 1792 to 1843 when Kemp died.

The land and buildings of Upper Farm were gradually sold off over the next century and now only vestiges remain.

For nearly 60 years in more modern times, Ovingdean Grange Farm – the manorial farm - was in the hands of the Cowley family. Henry Cowley held the lease of the Grange and its lands from around 1877 until 1893. He was succeeded by his son, William Arthur, a prominent public figure whose involvement in local affairs ranged from Newhaven to Brighton.

In 1919 William handed the reins to his son-in-law, Percy Filkins, who had a distinguished record in the First World War. A noted sheep farmer, he won hundreds of awards at the Lewes and Sussex shows in the inter-war period. He brought electricity to the Grange and the farm buildings, but was sceptical of its application to milking. Filkins remained the tenant until 1945, then went on to farm in Woodingdean.

Ovingdean's farm in this century clearly inspired great loyalty. A magazine feature written in 1935 recorded that one James Tingley, by then nearly 80 and formally retired, was only happy when doing odd jobs on the farm.

Another worthy mentioned was Charles Sayers, then in his 70th year and still living in the cottage in which he was born. He had worked on the farm for 61 years, which he believed was a record for Sussex, and continued labouring until his death in 1942. His grandson, Ron, now carries the torch, having worked on Ovingdean Grange (now Bulstrode) Farm since 1959.

Mention must also be made of George Harris (1901-81), who in 1966 was presented with a Long Service Medal by the Royal Agricultural Society of England for 50 years' continuous service at Ovingdean Grange Farm.

His older brother Bill was featured in *Sussex Life* in 1968 when aged 80. He had spent no less than 68 years working on farms in Ovingdean and Rottingdean, thus breaking Charles Sayers' record. When he first began, he joined his father and elder brother, Tom, at the tasks the family had carried on in the area for generations.

Members of the Dudeney family also gave many years of their working lives to Ovingdean as labourers and shepherds.

The title 'Ovingdean Hall Farm' first appeared in the late 40s/early 50s, when land bought from Ovingdean Hall School in 1944 was used for poultryfarming. Production was intensified in 1960 by the then owner, Charles C. Curwin (now of Rottingdean), who erected large battery farming buildings. Egg production was transferred in 1970 to his complex in Sayers Common, which was sold ten years later to Stonegate Farmers Ltd, becoming that company's first production unit in Sussex. Chicken-rearing continued successfully in Ovingdean until the 1987 hurricane caused such damage that the business closed the following year.

Whilst running another enterprise in Ringmer (producing broilers), Curwin indirectly continued trading in Ovingdean after the hurricane by leasing one building for the repackaging of bulk supplies of bacon, cheese, etc. and distributing them to shops, hospitals, schools, and so on in vans marked 'Ovingdean Hall Farm.' Despite objections from the Residents' and Preservation Society to business use of this area, operations continued until 1995.

Some sizeable remnants remain of the former poultry houses. Nearby is a stable block and sand school and ten acres of fields for horse grazing and riding still owned by Curwin. An area of adjacent land was tastefully developed by South Bank Homes Ltd into a small residential estate aptly named 'The Ridings.'

Today the village's farm, managed by John Baker based in Staplefield, is in the capable hands of his brother David, who took over from his father and former Mayor of Brighton, Frank Masefield Baker, in 1990.

Only last week, the dairy stock was sold off, since milk production with smaller herds has become uneconomic. An accomplished photographer and craftsman in leather and ironwork - he made the 'Bulstrode Farm' sign - David proudly maintains the centuries-old agricultural tradition in this quiet downland community.

The mix of ancient and modern on the village farm is strikingly revealed in some of the field names. Co-existing with Wick Bottom, Warren Field, Greenways and Happy Valley we have Max Millers, St Dunstans, Bus Stop and Golf Ball!

Douglas d'Enno

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