

Ham Village

Ham is an attractive village with thatched cottages clustered around the village green. It is also steeped in history.

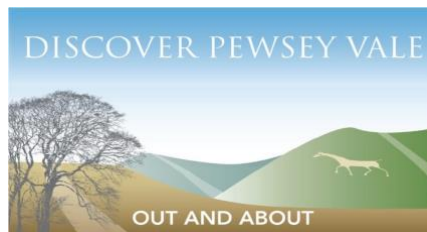
The remains of Celtic earthworks including a bowl barrow can be found on Ham Hill, most of which are now overgrown with trees and vegetation. Vestiges of Wansdyke, the Saxon defensive ditch (**see Wansdyke**), can be traced along the public footpath, Old Dyke Lane, on the eastern boundary of the parish, and photographs of crop shadows show that Wansdyke continued to the foot of the Ham Hill escarpment. The Flaxfield “gate” or gap in this eastern extremity of Wansdyke can be accurately placed to where the road from Ham (Wiltshire) to Inkpen (Berkshire) crosses the county boundary – marked by a small metal county boundary sign.

In 931 King Aethelstan, the first king of all England, granted the lands of Ham to his thane Wulfgar; the boundary charter is in the British Library. Ham also features in Domesday Book. The oldest dwelling in the village is now Rose Cottage, situated beside the Crown & Anchor public house. The cottage has 16th century origins, and in front of it are the remains of well-winding gear used to draw water before the arrival of mains supply.

From the Norman Conquest until the second half of the 19th century the parish of Ham was owned by the bishops of Winchester, although for much of the time before the Reformation this ownership was delegated to St Swithun’s Priory. It is probable that Henry of Blois, grandson of William the Conqueror and a powerful Bishop of Winchester, was responsible for the building of All Saints’ Church at some point before 1171. It is believed that the upper stages of the church tower were built as a thanksgiving for the village escaping the worst effects of the Black Death which struck Ham in about March 1349. The church underwent major restoration in the 18th century which saved it from a radical Victorian makeover. The box pews still remain and overall its calm post-Reformation simplicity has been retained, with its “stag’s horn” Queen Posts supporting the roof beams. On the north wall, above the manorial pew, is a monument to John Hunt (1500-90) and his wife Christian. He became the first of a dynasty of John Hunts who owned the Ham Manor estate. The tombs of three other John Hunts lie outside the entrance to the church.

The churchyard is shaded by a great yew, probably planted in the 16th century. Amongst the graves is that of the village blacksmith, Alexander Shearman, who died in 1763, with its epitaph:

My Sledge and Hammer lies reclin’d
My Bellows too have lost their Wind
My fires extinct, my forge decay’d



And in the dust my Vice is laid
My Coals are spent my Irons gone
My Nails are drove my work is done

Other graves include those of Sir Robin Darwin, great grandson of the naturalist Charles Darwin, who became Rector of the Royal College of Art, and his colleague Professor Richard Guyatt, a later Rector at the RCA, who coined the term “graphic art”. Both men served in the Camouflage Directorate in the second world war.

Prominent members of the Bloomsbury Group came to live at Ham Spray House in 1924. They included Lytton Strachey, the author of Eminent Victorians, who died there in 1932. Three months later his companion, the artist Dora Carrington, shot herself at the house wrapped in his silk dressing-gown. The house was sold in 1961 by Frances Partridge, the chronicler of the Bloomsbury set whose publications include A Pacifist’s War. Much of the interior Bloomsbury designs was later removed from the house. Ham Spray House is privately owned and is not open to the public. Another well-known Ham resident was Geoffrey Webb, one of the two original script-writers for the long-running radio serial The Archers. He frequented the Crown & Anchor and part of the farming lore in the early life of the programme stemmed from these visits. He died in a traffic accident rushing to Hungerford to send off one of his scripts.

A booklet on walks around Ham which feature many of these sights is available from the Crown & Anchor.

