

Of our Ancient Villagers, Romans, evidence of us and WWII Romances!

A History of Olives Farm, Hunsdon Road, the Palmers and many others.

An excellent study of one house in our Parish going back a lot further than you would think.

Donated by Miles Dymock.

History of Olives Farm, Hunsdon, Hertfordshire

Based on research notes compiled by Gladys Palmer, resident of Olives Farm, 1916-2005

Olives Farm is on the western boundary of Hunsdon Parish. It now comprises about 500 acres, some of which are in the adjoining Parish of Stanstead Abbots.

Olives Farm House is possibly the oldest house standing in Hunsdon at the present time, the oldest part of the house being of early 15th century or late 14th century construction. It was originally built as a hall house on a traditional plan, with the hall open to the roof, an open fire on a hearth and no chimney stack. Evidence of this can still be seen on the oldest roof rafters and upper plaster work in the attic of the present house, which have a thick coating of soot, produced over many years by smoke from the open fire. In the original construction, the smoke would have escaped through a small hole made for that purpose at one end of the roof.

At the end of the hall there would have been a cross passage with an outside door at either end. Beyond the passage were two store rooms. At the upper end of the hall, nearest the fireplace, would have been a parlour and a bedroom for the family. Later on, in the first of several major renovations, a chimney stack was built in the hall and bedrooms built above. In the 17th century the house was greatly enlarged, with a new kitchen and other rooms added, running parallel with the hall to make a double block. The third alteration occurred in the early 19th century, with the addition of a single storey wing and cellar to the south of the building. The adjoining brick outbuildings, stables, granary and walled farm yards date from the same period and represent a significant development of the whole farm site.

Olives Farm House and several other farm buildings are now British Listed Buildings, details of which can be found at the website: <http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk>. This includes the listing of the old stables and granary (the buildings opposite the farm house), an old 17th century barn (since sold, renovated and relocated intact to a location in Essex) and The Old Bungalow (since renovated and re-named "Pond Croft", this is the white rendered cottage adjoining the farm pond, to the south of the farm house.)

Close to the Farm House is a moat, which surrounds about an acre of garden but not the house itself. Very little is known about the history of the moat although some

pieces of medieval pottery have been found in this area. The moat had probably been cut through an earlier Roman site, as Roman pottery has also been found on the moat banks. In recent times (c. 1970) when a cutting was made in the outside bank, traces of a pebble floor and a large quantity of Roman pottery were discovered. Unfortunately further excavation was not possible

as a farm road runs across this site. Other than some relatively shallow digging in the vegetable garden and flower beds, the area within the moat boundary has also never been excavated.

In the fields around the farmstead there is evidence of widespread Roman occupation. Large amounts of tiles, pottery and other items are constantly brought to the surface during ploughing. Two formal archaeological "digs" were organized on the farm by the East Herts. Archaeological Society in the summers of 1966 – 1969. This coincided with the introduction by the farm of deep ploughing techniques, which began to reveal significant amounts of Roman remains, concentrated in a field approximately 250 m to the West of the farm house.

The first excavation, under the supervision of Mr Adrian Gibson, disclosed an oven of baked clay, the top of which had been ploughed away. A charred log lay beside the oven with a scatter of tiles and pottery. This proved to be of 1st century origin. At some time later the area around the oven had been partly filled in and a pebble floor made. Although no wall foundations or post holes were found, it seems that the floor and oven were part of a Belgic hut.

A short distance away, after a further quantity of tile and pottery was ploughed out, a second dig was organized. This was carried out by volunteers from Haileybury Archaeological Society under the supervision of Mr Robert Kiln. Part of a building containing a chalk floor was uncovered. The floor was made of pounded chalk, measuring approximately 6 m X 2 m, with walls of flint and mortar and side flues. The whole room was heated by a main flu leading directly onto the floor. It seemed likely that this room had either been used for corn drying or was part of a bath suite belonging to a larger Roman building. The excavation was carried on until November 1969, when an early snowfall and very bad weather forced the work to cease. The field was subsequently returned to cropping and no further work has been carried out on this interesting site.

The area around Olives Farm House seems to have had occasional – possibly continuous – occupation from very early, pre-Roman times. Some rough, coarse, hand-made pottery, which could be dated to 600 BC, at the end of the Bronze Age, has been found, as well as later Iron Age pottery with finger-nail decoration. An aerial survey (c. 1970) disclosed a possible ditched enclosure of an Iron Age farmstead, to the South of the Farm House. Subsequent field draining turned up some Iron Age pottery in the same area.

On other parts of the farm there are remains of four small medieval crofts. One of these, to the South-West of the farm house, has some very early medieval pottery and was apparently called Washerhill Croft. The name appears in a 17th Century list

of fields attached to Olives Farm. It is marked on the 1842 Tithe Map of Stanstead Abbots Parish.

Two other crofts have a large number of dressed flints from the foundations of houses, scattered around with 13th Century pottery. On one of these crofts were found the remains of many 13th century jug handles, which had been pricked and slashed before firing, to prevent splitting, and decorated on the handles with thumb prints. This type of handle has been found on only a few other medieval sites in Hertfordshire.

The other small croft was called Pond Croft (not the same building as the present day "Pond Croft") and was located on the hill on the eastern side of the farm house and moat. This croft is mentioned in a deed of 1494 as belonging to a house called Smythes House, which used to stand in Hunsdon village.

The first mention in local records of the name "Olive" appears to have been in 1344, when John Olive and his wife Avice obtained some land in Hunsdon. It seems very probable that his name became the name of the new holding. There are other historical records of the Olive family in Essex, including another "Olives Farm" in Dunmow and other places just called "Olives".

By 1480 John Shelley, a wealthy citizen and mercer of London, held Olives by rent of 5 shillings yearly from the Abbott of Waltham. He also held Cadyngtons from the manor of Hunsdon. Later records show that King Henry VIII allowed Sir John Cary the use of Cadyngtons in 1542. However, there is now no trace of Cadyngtons, although the naming of three fields grouped together – Old House Field, Dove House Close and Dove House Croft – suggests that there may formerly have been a large house standing between the present-day Olives Farm House and Bonningtons Hall. If this is the case, it may well have been the site of Cadyngtons.

John Shelley, with other wealthy merchants, had fought on the Yorkist side in the Wars of the Roses and was given a Pardon by Henry VII when he became King. Shelley was a very wealthy man and had lent money to the king; he was rewarded by being allowed to export cloth and tin free of tax. Shelley died in 1486 in London and was buried there. His wife Margaret died nine years later in 1495, in Hunsdon. Her unusual brass can still be seen in Hunsdon Church. Their son, John of Michelgrove (in Sussex) inherited the Hunsdon properties.

It is not known when the Shelley family sold Olives but the Shelleys had land in Hunsdon for some time into the 16th century. Sir William Shelley, grandson of the first John Shelly, became a famous judge. He took part in the trial of Anne Boleyn. He was on very good terms with King Henry VIII and once entertained the King at his house in Sussex. A William Shelley is mentioned as a land owner in some 16th century Hunsdon title deeds.

The next mention of Olives is in the will of John Elliot, a Yeoman, who died in 1585. He left "the house wherein I dwell called Olives" to his son Phillip. Phillip Elliot died in 1591, leaving Olives to his wife and then son James, Rector of Rayleigh in Essex.

James Elliot let Olives to his sister Effa and her husband Edward Hellam. When James Elliot died in 1626 he left instruction for his

two young sons to have a University education and the younger of the two, Phillip, to have the remainder of the lease on Olives.

This Phillip Elliot, great grandson of John Elliot, was a Puritan. He became Rector of Hunsdon during the Commonwealth, from 1643 – 1678. His four children were born in Hunsdon. Although he has the lease of Olives, he presumably lived at the Parsonage house and farm, now called Hunsdonbury, and left his relatives, the Hellams, at Olives. According to the Manor Court Rolls in 1643, Edward Hellam was fined 4d for cutting down a tree belonging to the Lord of the Manor. It is not certain when the Hellams' lease of Olives ended but by 1686 Jeffery Hunsdon was farming Olives and Sparkes Farms. Sparkes was the early name of the present day Half Way House Farm. The two properties were farmed together until 1858, when the Calvert estate was sold and split up.

At this time (1686) Sir Thomas Byde was building the large country house of Bonningtons Hall and Olives belonged to the Bonningtons Estate. In the title deeds Jeffery Hunsdon is named as the occupier of Olives and Sparkes Farms. A list of the fields, all enclosed, with names and acreages is given, amounting to 150 acres. The field names are still the same on the Tithe Map of 1842.

The family of Hunsdon at Olives were not related to Lord Hunsdon of the Manor but were descended from Henry Hunsdon of Enfield, who married Sir Thomas Forster's sister Joyce, of Swantons in Hunsdon. In the Hunsdon Parish Register there is an entry of the burial of Mary, wife of Jeffery Hunsdon of Olives, in 1686. Jeffery Hunsdon died in 1710 aged 93, at the Lodge Farm. This had been the lodge belonging to the Deer Park of Stanstead Abbots and adjoining Olives Farm. The house and barns of Lodge Farm were demolished years ago but the foundations of the house and some 17th century pottery are sometimes disturbed by deep ploughing. The fields were added to extend the southern boundary of Olives Farm.

After the Hunsdons, three generations of the Lawrence family farmed at Olives. John Lawrence died in 1756; Joseph Lawrence is recorded as paying £14.8s in Land Tax for Olives in 1762 (he was one of the Overseers of the Poor). William Lawrence was living at Olives in 1785.

It is likely that Richard Darby followed the Lawrence family in 1792, as he is recorded then as also paying £14.8s in Land Tax. Richard Darby had two sons, Benjamin and Thomas, both Hunsdon farmers – Thomas lived at Fowlstowe Farm, opposite Hunsdon Rectory. Richard Darby died in 1821, aged 90, shortly after leaving Olives Farm.

In 1813 William Newman came to Olives. His father, also William Newman, lived at Fanners Farm and was a prominent man in Hunsdon village life. The Newman family had been in Hunsdon for many generations. A Thomas Newman was married

in Hunsdon in 1561. Newmans Green, near Fillets Farm, was probably the home of the early Newmans. When

William Newman moved to Shenleybury Farm his brother Thomas took over at Olives until 1831. A descendant of this family, Mr Reg Newman, was farming at Bury Green until quite recently (c. 1980).

When the Newmans left Olives, the farm was run directly by a Bailiff for the Calvert family. Edmund Calvert lived at Hunsdonbury and kept Olives as a "home farm". When he inherited the Manor he leased Olives to John Castle of Braughing at a rent of £509 per annum, the tenant also paying the Tithe.

From a catalogue of the sale of the Calvert Estate in 1859, Olives Farm House had "3 sitting rooms, kitchen, dairy, pantry, store rooms, 2 cellars, a counting house, 7 bedrooms, outside privy and woodshed". Adjoining the house were "brick buildings, granary, boiling house, slaughter house, chaise house, store room and malt dust pits". Also "Blacksmith's shop with cottage adjoining and a new brick house not yet finished intended for a Bailiff". There were "3 yards surrounded by sheds, a bullock yard and a cow yard. Along the top of the cow yard a barn, weather-boarded and thatched, with oak floors". Most of the features are still clearly discernable today, with the exception of the barn, which was sold and relocated to Essex, c. 1975. John Castle died in Hunsdon in 1860 and his son John in Detroit in 1867.

In 1859 Olives Farm was bought from the Calvert Estate by Mr Charles Phelps of Briggens Park. Mr Phelps was a wealthy Magistrate and at one time High Sherriff of Hertfordshire and a Deputy Lieutenant of Essex. It remained part of the Briggens Estate until sold by Lord Aldenham to the insurance firm, Legal & General, in 1980. It was during this period that the occupancy of the former Bailiff's Cottage on Olives Farm changed to accommodate the Estate Gamekeeper.

Olives was let to Mr Barnard Acres from 1871 until 1886, when he moved to Much Hadham. In 1890 the farm was let to Mr John Burr, who carried on a hay and straw business with the London market. Horses and wagons took the straw to the Haymarket where it was sold by auction – this would mean two or three days away from home for horses and men. Mr Burr left Olives in 1909 and moved to Down House in Hunsdon, where he continued with his hay and straw business.

The next tenant was Mr Norton Morling, who was a nephew of Mr Ledgerton of Brickhouse Farm. Olives then became a dairy farm, supplying milk daily to Allen and Hanburys at Ware. At this time the house was extensively modernized, including the creation of its first bathroom, above the kitchen. A water pump was installed in the kitchen which brought water from a shallow well about 300m away. Water for use in the house and dairy was pumped by hand into a large tank in the loft. The "pumping up" as it was called, was an hour's hard work every day. The moated garden was well laid out and kept by a gardener. However, after only few years of farming at Olives, Mr Morling died and the dairy herd was sold shortly afterwards. The farm was then let to Mr John Palmer of Roydon.

John Palmer came to Olives in 1916 and farmed there for 52 years. It was in these years that some of the greatest changes took place in farming, with mechanization slowly taking over from horses. In 1917 the first "Overtime" tractor arrived on the farm and was one of the first tractors to be used in the County. Olives was considered to be very suitable for a tractor as it had unusually large fields – the largest being about 180 acres. It is not known when the edges were taken out to enlarge the fields but it was probably done to accommodate the large ploughing engines that were used before tractors. These engines were used at Olives for heavier ploughing up until the 1950's, when higher powered tractors were developed that were capable of doing this work. The first combine harvester came into use in 1945 and was a much smaller machine compared to today's equipment. The last horse, no longer used for farm work, was kept on the farm until it died of old age in 1956.

The Second World War also brought many changes to life at Olives Farm, being little more than 20 miles from London and very close to Hunsdon Aerodrome. Royal Air Force, Canadian and other Allied Pilots were billeted at Olives Farm House for much of the war, with neighbouring Bonningtons being used as the Officers' Mess. A mobile anti-aircraft gun was also stationed at the farm. The Farm House cellar was fitted out with bunk beds and used as an air raid shelter. Several bombs fell on the farm but fortunately none of the farm buildings or occupants suffered any serious damage. The eastern side of the Farm House sustained some shrapnel damage when a large bomb exploded close to Lords Wood and pieces of bomb shrapnel are still embedded in the wall.

In the early part of the war, a small German Heinkel bomber crash-landed in "60 Acres" field, having been shot down in one of the frequent "dog-fights" that occurred in the skies above the farm at the height of the Battle of Britain. In this case, the pilot was captured and held by a farm worker until help arrived. A more serious incident occurred about 1943, with the crash on the farm of a fully-laden Mosquito bomber that had just taken off from Hunsdon. It crash- landed in a field between the Farm House and Lords Wood, killing both pilots.

During busy periods over the war years the farm work force was supplemented with the workers from the Women's Land Army ("Land Girls") and with prisoners of war from local prison camps. One of the Land Girls, Margaret Iley, stayed on after the war and married George Palmer. Mrs. Margaret Palmer still lives at Olives Farm and is one of the very few surviving members of the generation that farmed Olives during 1939-45.

A piped water supply was brought to the farm in 1941 and the first electricity supply in 1950. This made a huge difference to life at Olives, providing electric lighting for the Farm House,

cowsheds and barns, as well as the means to run more mechanized farm equipment. The daily chore of pumping up water became redundant, as did the reliance on candles and paraffin lamps.

Three generations of the Palmer family have farmed at Olives since John Palmer arrived in 1916. His sons, George and Victor Palmer succeeded him in 1968 and they in turn have now been succeeded by George's sons, Graham and Andrew Palmer, who currently farm in partnership. Considerable development of the farm occurred over this period, with the erection of three new concrete barns, building of two new brick houses – "Winfield" (c.1950) and "The New Bungalow"(c.1965) and the introduction of a range of new machinery and farming techniques. Compared to the traditional mixed farm of 1916, the present farm business is much more specialized, with no livestock and a much smaller range of crops.

Although the bulk of Olives Farm is still part of Briggens Estate (now owned by City & Provincial PLC) several houses and pieces of land have been sold off in recent years. This includes Olives Farm House, which was bought by the farming partnership in 1980 and then sold to Victor and Skaidrite Palmer in 1994. It was then sold to the Dymock family, following the death of Skaidrite Palmer in 2010. Winfield is now owned by Margaret Palmer and Pond Croft (formerly The Old Bungalow) is owned by Brian Stone and Helen Palmer (daughter of George & Margaret Palmer). The former Bailiff's / Gamekeeper's Cottage was subdivided by City & Provincial in 2010 and half sold off to Tarak Mekni and Ami Hayward for redevelopment. The other half is still tenanted by Mr James Livermore, a farm worker.

Martin Palmer

January 2011

Footnotes:

Ref Cadyingtons mentioned in text

Garden Historian Anne Rowe informs us of references to a house called Cadingtons in the 16th century – but she doubts it was particularly grand and likely less valuable than Olives Farm...maybe, maybe not!. See royal accounts for 1530-32 (TNA E 315/273/2) :53s 4d message called Cadyngton with 5a 1r land & pasture and 3a meadow adjacent ...£7 of Thomas Pavye for Olyves Farme with 186 a 1r arrable land & pasture and 12a meadow adjacent.

R (Dick) Dixon.

On the 31/8/1943 a De Havilland Mosquito NF II. DV739 of 157 squadron took off from Hunsdon airfield. The aircraft was on a test flight piloted by P/O Bernard Jobling with P/O Frederick Weston as navigator , as it climbed away it stalled at low altitude and crashed into a field at Olives farm Stanstead Abbots, killing both airmen.

Gerald Coppen