

History and Archaeology of Horfield Common

History

The name, Horfield, has passed through many changes. In the Domesday Book it is spelt 'Horefelle'. Robert Fitzhardinge who gave it to Bristol Abbey, knew it as 'Horsfield'. In the reign of Edward I it was called 'Harfelle'.

The name of nearby Golden Hill is possibly pre-Christian, suggesting a beacon-hill, and it may have been connected in ancient fire-rites with Druid Stoke and Purdown.

Formerly, the district was notorious for its forest, termed 'Horwood' which, like Kingswood to the east of Bristol, excluded easy communication with the outside world. The wood was at one time situated on both sides of the common looking northwards towards Filton.

Horfield used to be considered by travellers to be 'a lawless place' - in olden times, 'worse even than Filton'. This was not due to the bad behaviour of the inhabitants but to the fact that the nearby extensive Horfield Wood was the haunt of vagrants. Just over a hundred years ago the rector claimed that an attempt was made to kidnap his child from the hayfield!

Before 1770, when the turnpike road to Gloucester was constructed, there were only paths and tracks crossing the area, some of which are still in use today.

At the beginning of the 19th century the Horfield parish of just over 11 acres contained a few farms and cottages, with a population of just 119. Many of these lived near the common, where any who had commoner's rights could graze one horse, two cows or three yearlings. There are said to be twenty-four Rights of Common from May 14th to February 13th. Commoners are permitted to let their rights, and may appoint a "hayward" to warn off trespassers. The farms, mostly pastureland, varied considerably in size from 260 acres down to four acres.

South of the parish church lies the site of Quab Farm. A quab is said to be a kind of fish found in the ponds which were close by, but it is also an old word meaning 'boggy' and there are several natural springs in the area. Near the centre of the picture is a tump of earth. Around 1750 there were two tumps about 50 yards apart, between which there was a skittle alley. Known as Horfield Butts they were originally for use in archery practice.

There was also a house called Poplar Cottage, later rebuilt and named Ardagh. Nearby was 'Horfield Castle' which, despite its grandiose name, was never a castle. Until 1851 it was known as Lambert's House. The name 'Castle' was probably applied due to the turret-like features included in its design. The castle was demolished around 1950 and the grounds remained derelict, playground of children, until several houses were built in its place in the 1960's.

Two farms faced each other at the northern end of the common. Demolished in 1905, Court Farmhouse, on the east side, was the oldest building in Horfield with some fine oak-panelled rooms. It is remembered in the name Court Road. Manor Farm faced it from the western side.

Archaeology

Excavations have revealed from time to time traces of occupation by early peoples. In 1896 a quantity of human bones were found close to the common, among which were the ribs and thigh-bones of a very tall man.

The remains of one of the two tumuli and traces of earthworks still exist in a field between the Rectory and Golden Hill, some 20 yards from the common. Originally the tumulus would have consisted of a chamber built of flat stones laid around a body. When opened, in 1880, it was found to have been rifled, but calcined bones, bits of metal, charred wood and Roman mortar were found. The latter was sent to the Bristol City Museum.