

# A Brief History of Begbroke Hill Farm

J. E. Y. Hardcastle, J. H. Fearon

## THE LAND

The site has been ideal settlement ground for over 10,000 years and flint implements (arrow heads and scraping tools) found close-by confirm the existence of Stone Age nomadic occupation. It appears that the rich soil in the area attracted the Romans and examples of fine and coarse pottery have been found on the site, indicating the likely presence of a major Roman settlement. The withdrawal of the Roman legions led to invasion by Germanic tribes and there would have been fierce fighting between native Britons and the invaders in which the Britons were victorious. By the time of the Domesday Book in 1087 AD, there was certainly an established Anglo Saxon settlement. After the Norman conquest land was re-distributed by the conquering Norman invaders and written evidence describes the lands of Bechebroc or Begbroke as being part of the land of William the Earl i.e. William Fitz-Osbern.



In or around 1275 the land was split and the Farm was taken over and run by a John Gifford. The Gifford family occupancy ran for nearly 300 years. After a marriage alliance between the Gifford and Fitzherbert family the present house was started by Sir Humphrey Fitzherbert. This is known to be built on the site of a previous building which would have been a wooden Anglo-Saxon manor house, succeeded by a timber framed or stone built Norman open hall.

## THE HOUSE

The present house is built of local limestone and is a typical Jacobean early 17th century building (a date of 1625 would seem to be a reasonable guess). Internally, the room to the right of the porch and cross passage on the ground floor was in all probability the principle living room with a large fireplace, decorated plaster over the beams and four windows, one of which was subsequently bricked up. The dining room would have been to the left of the porch with the kitchen behind it and the large kitchen fireplace is still visible. There remains a cellar from the previous medieval building dating back to the 15th century with a stone arch. It was During the Marlborough ownership in the 19th century that the best oak paneling was removed from the staircase to embellish repairs to the nearby Blenheim Palace. The original stone fireplace in the main room (now the library) was discovered when plaster was removed from the east wall. This fireplace had a Tudor rose carved into each corner. It was later replaced by a marble structure.

## THE FAMILIES

The Fitzherberts occupied the farm until the last named, who had married Keziah Hirons, died in 1735. His son Robert born in the same year inherited the property but died at the age of 18 leaving as survivors his mother Keziah and an uncle, William Cockin, who had married Robert's Aunt, Jane Fitzherbert. She died in 1752. As the only surviving male relative William Cockin appears to have taken charge of the farm, although it still remained the property of Keziah Hirons until her death in 1788.

William Cockin and his wife Jane had a daughter, Elizabeth and then Jane died giving birth to a son. He only lived for 10 weeks. By 1788 Elizabeth Cockin had inherited the whole of the Begbroke land. In the meantime she had married a local farmer, Thomas Tyler. Little is known of him. But local tradition has it that Taylor was a 'cruel and unworthy husband' and this is supported by the Cockin memorial in Begbroke Church which makes no mention of him. There were no children of this marriage and Elizabeth bequeathed her land to three neighbours who had befriended her, giving the farmhouse to a William Young.



The Young's were not noticeably successful farmers and during the cultural depression following the Napoleonic wars, sold the farm to an Oxford Banker. Thomas Robinson retained the Young's as tenant farmers until the farm was sold in 1848 to the Duke of Marlborough. The farm was given over to a succession of tenant farmers until finally, Mr George Partridge took over the tenancy in 1896 and in 1926 purchased the farm from the Duke of Marlborough.

The Partridge occupancy was the last to live in the house and lasted until 1960 and was known as the 'brewing' or 'barley' farm. George won many prizes for his barley, he believed in sowing early and it is recorded that he sowed his barley on January 25th each year for 40 years. In that time the crop failed only 3 times. He introduced steam ploughing in Begbroke towards the end of the last century and started another enterprise selling Christmas turkeys. In 1897 he was appointed an overseer of the Poor for the Parish of Begbroke.