

Introduction to Hook Norton's History

*He was born at Hogsnorton, where, according to popular saying,
the pigs play upon the organ.*

Sir Walter Scott, *Kenilworth* (1821), chapter 9

Although the main focus of this history website must be on the present village of over 2,000 people, its geographical limits are those of the parish of Hook Norton. The parish boundaries were established in Anglo-Saxon times: the River Swere to the



The centre of Hook Norton seen from South Hill
© David McGill

south and then a line toward the north-west, keeping Swerford and Great Rollright at bay; the county boundary with Warwickshire to the west, as far north as Traitor's Ford; the River Stour on the north separating us from the Sibfords; and a wiggly line on the east distinguishing us from Wigginton. These boundaries encompass some places not normally associated with Hooky, notably the north part of Swerford Park, with its eighteenth-century hall. We shall also take in places outside the parish that have had influence on its development – Iron Age settlements, Roman villas, an Oxford abbey, castles and fortified mansions, and nearby market towns.

Enjoying a central location in the country, Hook Norton stands close to the highest point in Oxfordshire, amid what were once extravagantly called the Oxfordshire Alps. Most of the parish lies within the Thames Valley, but at the watershed: the village streams join the Swere and flow into the Cherwell, the Thames and the North Sea, but the waters on its northern slopes form the Stour and flow down to the Avon, the Severn, the Bristol Channel and the Atlantic. For much of its history before the Norman Conquest (except for the four centuries of Roman rule), this was frontier country where competing tribes and kingdoms clashed – and would become so again in later civil conflicts.

On the eastern flank of the Cotswolds, Hook Norton stands on tawny brown ironstone rather than the creamy-grey limestone associated with the Cotswolds proper. The ironstone not only affected the character of local buildings and agriculture but was responsible for this rural area's experience of industrialization between the 1880s and the 1940s. Blessed with rail links until 1963, no major road has ever been cut through the parish and so Hook Norton remains isolated, on the road to nowhere, though by no means stagnant or lacking in dynamism.

For hundreds of years the people of Hook Norton were identified as figures of fun. In 1610 William Camden commented that “the rustically behaviour of the inhabitants”, their rude demeanour and unmannerliness, had long been proverbial, while in 1593 Thomas Nash had written that, if ever he was discourteous, “say I was brought up in Hogge Norton, where pigges play on the organs.”¹ The last phrase was much repeated over the centuries, not least by Jonathan Swift and (as above) by Sir Walter Scott, but it is puzzling especially as Hook Norton did not have an organ until the 1850s. It also was long common outside the parish to say of someone a little weak in the head that he must have been “born at Hog's Norton”. The building of an unusual number of lunatic asylums in Hooky in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century probably did nothing to weaken that tradition, however unjustified by the record of those asylums.²

¹ *Britain, or, a Chorographical Description of the most flourishing Kingdomes, England, Scotland, and Ireland* (London: George Bishop and John Norton, 1610); Thomas Nash, *The Apologie of Pierce Pennilesse* (London, 1593), K. 4.

² See “Mental Problems and Mad Houses, 1720-1854”, in the [Health, Education and Welfare](#) section; and, for a fuller discussion of “The Unsavoury Reputation of Hook Norton”, see the [Views of Hook Norton](#) section, of this website.

The most distinguishing historical characteristic of Hook Norton has been not the “foolishness”³ of its inhabitants but the open quality of village life. English historians have long distinguished between “closed” villages - dominated by squire and parson, usually monolithic, conservative and prosperous - and “open” villages where usually no single figure has predominated, where religious dissent has thrived, where a wide variety of trades have been pursued, and a highly diverse society has developed, including, historically, a significant proportion of poor people. Characteristically, the buildings vary greatly in style, facilities and good looks, compared with the homogeneity of many closed or estate villages. When the historian Kate Tiller had to choose an archetypal English open village, she chose Hook Norton as her example, and how it came to develop its energetic, independent and flexible character may be deduced both from her essay cited in the brief bibliography below and from the articles on this website.

The editors have produced this large, if incomplete, body of material and interpretation because they felt there was a need for a readily available, up-dated history. We had Margaret Dickins’s careful 1928 history and wished to produce something more comprehensive, accessible, entertaining and relevant, which revealed how Hook Norton was in the past and how it has evolved into the place it is today. Dickins was strong on certain archival records, especially those then kept in the parish chest – some of which have disappeared while the rest are preserved at the Oxfordshire History Centre in Cowley – but gave no feel for life in the village in her time, or of broader social history. Our history can be considerably larger and more detailed on most subjects because in the past sixty years the work of archivists and librarians (including those in our Village Museum) and the recent acceleration in electronic availability of records have enabled more research than was possible at the time Miss Dickins wrote. Some of the best of that work is represented in our book recommendations below, but much yet remains to be done.

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³ William Camden (1551-1623), quoted in Nares, *A Glossary*, page 236.

Recommended Reading

We recommend the following works as either highly readable or especially informative, and often both. Further recommendations will be found at the end of many of the articles that follow on this website.

Kate Tiller, "Hook Norton, Oxfordshire: An Open Village," in Joan Thirsk, ed., *The English Rural Landscape* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

ISBN: 9780198662198

Margaret Dickins, *History of Hook Norton, 912-1928* (Banbury, 1928; reprinted by the HNLHG, 2009).

Currently out of print.

Hook Norton special number of the Banbury Historical Society's journal, *Cake & Cockhorse*, vol. 9 (1982), pages 1-33 and 73-85, which is available online (GIVE ADDRESS AND [LINK](#)).

Barbara Brown, *Somewhere Along the Line: The Story of the Banbury and Cheltenham Railway and the People Associated with It, 1887-1987* [Hook Norton: HNLHG, 1987, 1993].

Copies available from HNLHG.

Paul Ingham, *Two Foot Gauge Rails to the Ironstone* (RCL Publications, 2000).

ISBN: 9780953876303

David Eddershaw, *A Country Brewery: Hook Norton, 1849-1999* (Hook Norton Brewery Company, 1999).

ISBN: 8601405522832

Rob Woolley, *Brewed in the Traditional Manner: The Story of Hook Norton Brewery* (Studley, Warwickshire: Brewin Books, 2015).

ISBN: 9781858585390.

Pauline Ashbridge, *Children of Dissent* (Kershaw Publishing, 2008).

ISBN: 9780954663216

Kate Tiller and Giles Darkes, eds., *An Historical Atlas of Oxfordshire* (Oxfordshire Record Society, 2010).

ISBN: 9780902509634.

There are also a few fine works of literature, all fascinating and revealing, that deal with people and places outside Hook Norton but close to it and relevant to its experience. Among the more memorable are the following biographical and autobiographical accounts, all available in paperback:

Sheila Stewart, *Lifting the Latch: a Life on the Land* (1987), the powerful and moving tale of an agricultural labourer in Enstone.

Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise* (1939), *Over to Candleford* (1941), and *Lark Rise to Candleford* (1945), the classic trilogy describing rural life in north Oxfordshire and the transition to small-town life.

William Fiennes, *The Music Room* (2009), an absorbing account of growing up in Broughton Castle in a remarkable family.