

BENWICK, A UNIQUE FEN VILLAGE

by C. V. Awdry



Benwick Church in the early 1960s. After 1966 the spire and tower were removed to a point above the lowest window and the remainder roofed over.

FEN VILLAGES NORMALLY stand around, not upon, the peat fen, a practical fact of Cambridgeshire life which makes Benwick unique. It is the only village in an area of 500 square miles to break this basic rule, and even then, if one may say so without causing offence, it cheats slightly, for a few feet below the black tilth lies a gravel bed atop clay, a spur of the island upon which Doddington and March stand, four and eight miles away respectively. Ramsey, on its own island, lies six miles to the south-west.

There has been a settlement here for many years, and chronicles over the centuries refer to Benwick in a number of different spellings. The name has been variously interpreted too, as the bean-wic or bean-farm, or, perhaps more logically, as the settlement near the beam, or plank-bridge. The closeness of the fen, one imagines, would make the area ill-suited for growing beans. The inhabitants must have made a living by fishing and fowling, though there is evidence of at least one occasion on which this was supplemented by a spot of cattle-raiding.

During the twelfth century the monks of Ely asked Geoffrey de

Mandeville, the Earl of Essex, whose allegiances were many and varied during the civil war between Stephen and Matilda, to station troops at Benwick and Ramsey for their defence. At that time, in an area where roads were practically non-existent, the Old West River, the link between the rivers Ouse and Nene, joined the Nene here and made the village a convenient place for the comparatively swift deployment of soldiery.

Benwick's unique situation is responsible for the incredible angles at which some of the buildings stand. That some of them do stand seems little short of miraculous. It is probably the reason why no really old buildings survive. Constant watch has to be kept on property, for, as the peat dries it



The church as it now stands. In 1979 the insurers condemned the nave as unsafe; only the chancel (right) is now considered safe for use.

shrinks, foundations sink and by no means at a constant rate around the same building. Houses to the west of High Street, having one foot, as it were, on the bank of the now dry Old West River, have a decided tilt away from the road. A cottage in Nene Parade, just beyond the church, is so far askew that only a substantial buttress keeps it from falling. Round about 1950, the roof of a house in High Street, known as the 'Old Rectory', actually slid off! Mercifully the family suffered no damage and were quickly rehoused.

There has been a church in Benwick for many years, though the location of the earliest seems uncertain. There was a St. James's Chapel on the present site of Chapel Farm, recorded in 1518 as being in need of repair - it seems that this building did not long survive. According to the Victoria History of Cambridgeshire, an unconsecrated chapel was built in 1637-8; to judge from the evidence of parish accounts it was a thatched building. The present church, 'built on the same site', according to the Victoria History, had its foundation stone laid on 12th June 1850, though why the dedication was then changed to St. Mary the Virgin appears to be something of a mystery. Perhaps the idea was to link it more closely with the church at Doddington, which has the same dedication, but in any case Benwick's chapel had always been under Doddington's jurisdiction. Anyhow, the new St. Mary's was built with stone from Hunstanton brought upriver and was restored, with a spire added to the tower, in 1902. The spire and the nave roof were covered with copper-coloured tiles which, topped with a gilded weather-cock and combined with the dark brown stone of the walls must have made it an unusually if not uniquely-coloured church. Alas, in the late 1960s subsidence was judged to have made the tower unsafe and it was pulled down. Now gravestones seem to stagger drunkenly across the tiny churchyard, and the east and west ends of the nave are canted to north and south respectively. The church is well-tended as the spotless interior shows, but, standing on the

sanctuary step I began to wonder whether my lunchtime lager had been excessive; looking west one experiences a remarkable sense of unreality as the pews slope towards each other, forming, as it were, a channel along the nave, while the entire west wall leans well to the right. There is a substantial crack from window-frame to roof of the west wall of the vestry (the base of what was once the tower) and it is not altogether surprising that the building's insurers have recently decreed that only the chancel may be used. The builder repairing the chancel-door steps has found that the footings, of brick, are now above ground level due to the shrinkage of the peat. Since the Deanery magazine spoke of the possibility that the church might be condemned as long ago as 1966 it is remarkable that it has survived this long!

Only a single public house remains in a village which once boasted seven. This stands beside High Street, bears the unusual name 'The Five Alls', and is a comparatively modern building on the site of an earlier thatched inn. The name is intriguing, and can be interpreted as follows: the Queen rules all, the lawyer pleads for all, the parson prays for all, the soldier fights for all, and the farmer pays for all. The village school, further along the road towards Ramsey, was built in 1873. There are 65 or so primary pupils at present, who will move on to schools in Chatteris or March as they grow older.

In 1898 the railway arrived, a branch of the Great Eastern Railway from Three Horseshoes Junction on the Peterborough - March line. Until then the main access to the village had been by water; the new station was built alongside the wharf, the piles of which can still be seen, as can the small station office. The line was never more than a freight-only route, but until road transport began to take its toll Benwick station was a very busy one. The branch was closed during Dr. Beeching's pruning of the railway system, on 13th July 1964.

Because water had been such an essential part of Benwick's existence, lack of it has often been a



Buildings in the High Street. Note how doors and windows have been rehung vertically to counteract the tilting of the house.



The old course of the Nene, looking towards March, with the piles of the old wharf against the far bank. The small building in the centre is the goods office of Benwick's abandoned station.

problem as the Parish records show. There is a note on 21st September 1815 of '...digging for water'. Presumably the river had dried so thoroughly that its bed had to be deepened until water could be found for the livestock. Again, in January 1816, there is a record that £2 14s 6d was paid for '...fetching water for the inhabitants'. Piped water did not reach Benwick until 1953. Electricity had arrived in May 1939.

But it is the land that rules in Benwick. Always has this been so, and the village depends more than most upon the result of the harvest. A parish councillor observed that council meetings are invariably fixed with due regard to the season and to what needs doing on the land - rarely do they meet during harvest time. Or, as the Deanery magazine put it in September 1966, '...if the beet needs singling, then it is a

waste of time to hold a meeting of the Mothers' Union.' It is scarcely surprising therefore that the village does not look particularly active at noon on a summer's day, yet to deduce from this, as has been done, that the village is dying is short-sighted to put it mildly. The population in fact is about the same as it was 140 years ago, and though there are fewer tradesmen than there were at the turn of the century no village needs now to be as self-sufficient as was necessary then. Benwick has a Women's Institute, a Mothers' Union, Cubs, Brownies, Scouts, Guides, a darts team, a football team...no, so long as the rich black fen soil continues to give of its annual plenty this village need have no fears for the future.

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