A book about Staughton March 2019

A traveller in time

In and about the years 1535 and 1543, John Leland (1503 – 1553), scholar, antiquarian, poet and acknowledged father of local history, criss-crossed the counties of England and Wales, from Bedfordshire to Yorkshire, Cornwall to Rutland. In the subtitle to his Itinerary, it was, he stated, the *“laboriouse journey and serche of Johan Leylande for Englandes antiquitees.”*

He began his *serche i*n Cambridge, proceeded westward to St Neots, and thence, by way of Great Staughton, on ward to Melchbourne and Kimbolton. His first stop is at the village of Eltesle (Eltisely). *“From Cambridge to Eltesle village al by champeyne counterey (through open country) 8. miles. At Eltesle was sumtyme a nunnery Cambridge- wher Pandonia the Scottish virgine was buried, and there is a shire, well of her name yn the south side of the quire. I hard that when this nunnery was destroyid a new was made at Hinchingbroke by Huntendune*…. " (Huntingdon).

A mile from Eltesle toward S. Neotes is the limes (boundary) of Cambridgshire.

From Eltesle to S. Neotes  4 miles.

*"The rivar there* (the River Great Ouse) *harde by the towne stondinge on the estc syde of it devidithe Huntyndunshire from Bedfordeshire and yet a lytle lower bothe the ripes (banks) be in Huntendunshir."*

*"The bridge at Seint Neotes is of tymbar.”* St Neots straddles the banks of the River Great Ouse, which has been since earliest times a vital trade and communications artery linking the important towns of Bedford, ten miles south west, with Huntingdon, St Ives and eventually reaching the North Sea at King’s Lynn.

Leland then follows what is now the B645, from S. Neotes to Stoughton village *"by sum enclosid ground a 3. miles, it is in Huntenduneshir."* Passing through Staughton, he would cross the River Kym by the bridge, called thirty years before, in a bequest for its repair in 1502, the Wrong Bridge, and he would find himself on Staughton Highway, lined with farm labourers’ cottages, and small allotments. The White Hart coaching inn, a prominent feature now, would not be built until the beginning of the next century and the sundial, the most celebrated historical monument on the Highway, was a century away.

Finding little to detain him on the Highway, Leland takes the little road to the left, and descends to the Town, again crossing the meandering River Kym over Staughton Bridge, reaching the church of St Andrew. He may have noted the tower which by 1552 was in a serious state of disrepair. He ignored altogether the interior of the church, preferring instead to visit the splendid, newly-built manor opposite the church, home of one of Great Staughton’s wealthiest and powerful men, Oliver Leder. *"There hard by the chirch is a pretty house of Olyver Leders, and pratie commodites about it."*

*"From Staughton to Meilchbourn (Melchbourn) village a. 4 miles be much pasture and sum corne ground. Here is a right fair place of square stone, stonding much apon pillerd vaultes of stone, and there be goodly gardeins, orchards and ponds and a Parke thereby. This Milchburne is in Bedfordeshire, almost on the egge* (edge) *of it. About the quarters of Milchburn, but not hard by it, ryse to armes of brokes* (brooks) *of divers springs,  whereof one cummith owt of Higheham Parke. These 2 cum to one botom and streame, and so go by How village* (How End), *whereof the broke is caullid How-water…….. How water after cummith to Stoughtoun village, and thens about a mile lower then [St Neotes in to] Use ryver (River Great Ouse).*

Thus Leland describes the source of what would later be named the River Kym, which runs through Great Staughton, passing by the church in the Town, and following a meandering loop round Bird’s Meadow to emerge at the eastern end of the Highway, where it is crossed by the “Wrong bridge.”

From Melchbourn, Leland chose a more indirect route to his next destination, Kimbolton, *"a market towne yn the egge of Huntenduneshire. The toune it self is but bare. The castelle is dowble dikid, and the building of it meately strong ; it longgid to the Mandeviles, Erles of Essax. Then to Bohuns, Erles of Hereford and Essax, and sins to the Strafordes."* The castle here was formerly the residence of the Dukes of Manchester, and it was here that Katherine of Aragon, Henry VIII’s first wife, was exiled in April 1534, and where she died in January 1536.

In *Kimaltoun*, Leland’s curiosity is aroused by the history of the tiny twelfth century priory of Stonely, whose entire congregation consisted of just seven monks or canons, as Leland has it.

*"Syr Richard Wingfeld buildid new fair lodgyns and galeries apon the olde foundations of the castelle. The priory of Chanons not far out of Kimolton was as I learnid of the foundation of the Bigrames. It was a house but of vii Chanons (canons) ……….. There lay yn this Priory few men of name buried : but of the Bigrams and the Coniers."*

Despite the many changes that the village has seen over the centuries, Leland’s itinerary through Great Staughton is recognisable even today, and many of the buildings he describes here and in the other villages he visited are still standing.

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