

A short history of West Horsley

The following summary of the history of West Horsley is taken from the West Horsley Neighbourhood Plan:

Years ago the countryside of England was untouched by human hands. Its geology dictated what animals and plants lived in which environment. The area now known as West Horsley would have been covered with trees, which were partly cleared by stone-age immigrants about 3000 BC. On the higher, drier chalk hills they mined flint, for tools. Axe-heads, scrapers and picks have been found at Campfield and Knob Wood. At Woodcote, on the southern boundary was an unexcavated earthwork from the bronze or iron age, c600 BC. Some pre-Roman coins and later Roman artefacts, including fibulae, rings, a broken funerary urn and some skeletons have been found in various locations.

The village name has been interpreted in several ways. Hoseli originally meant a pagan place of worship, so maybe the church, never within the main settlement, was built to destroy the ceremonial site, built over two sacred springs. The earliest written spelling was Horsalaege, meaning pasture land belonging to Horsa, a Jutish mercenary killed in battle in 455.

The community gradually moved downhill and settled around Wix Farm, also known as Strudwick a name derived from the Roman 'vicus', where provisions were available, and a marshy place. The road running through here was known as the Harroway, later Stroud Street, which led to the West up Blakes Lane, and to the East, down Cranmore Lane and across the fields to another settlement by the present West Horsley Place, which was owned by Saxons, around 410 AD.

South of Strudwick was a windmill and further north, near Round Tree Farm, was a watermill. The Church, at first of wood, with chalk-clunch and flint foundations was rebuilt in 1030, together with Church House, next door, also called the Red Lion Inn, which was home to the priest and served as a Pilgrim's rest-house. Both were improved and enlarged over the next few centuries.

The Horsley estates were split up in 1036, and a third, now East Horsley, was given to the Archbishop of Canterbury. In 1066 the Saxon Hall was owned by the Dane, Bricctis who was probably responsible for clearing his land of locals, who were relocated at Strudwick. A separate, sub-manor was centred around Lollesworth on the edge of a lower common, bounded on the northern side by Waterloo Farm Cottage.

The Domesday Book of 1086, states that Orselei was held by Walter, son of Othere, and its assets were 8 hides, 1 church, 8 ploughs, and woodland worth 20 hogs. Fish ponds had been dug in several areas to the west of the Manor House.

During the 13th century more land was cleared for grazing and cultivation as the population increased but the Black Death in 1348 reduced it again and the land was neglected. The Sheepleas was once used for strip cultivation, but since the 14th century sheep grazed there producing the wool for West Horsley's major industry. Tentering, the stretching of washed wool, took place on Tintalow Green, around the present Tintells Lane. New wealth led to larger houses and farms being built, as well as the construction in about 1400 of the Tithe Barn and Dovecote, beside the Old Rectory, unique in Surrey for their use of flint covered chalk walls.

In the 16th century, Lord Berners was in debt to Henry VIII and mortgaged the Manor of West Horsley and Weke (Wix). The threat of the Spanish Armada, in 1588, led to a chain of warning beacons on the downs, one standing north of Woodcote, reached by a Pharos (lighthouse) Lane.

Carew Raleigh owned West Horsley Place and allowed his mother to live there after Sir Walter Raleigh's execution. Legend claimed that she kept his severed head in a velvet lined box under her bed. This seems to have been confirmed as a disembodied head was found under the chancel of St Mary's during 19th Century restoration.

In 1598 the first school was established in the village near the windmill. It fell into disuse in 1725, but another was set up in 1786 and in 1813 another came into being near Old St. Mary's, the former Infant School, now converted to small houses and flats, was given by the Rev. de Cerjat in 1861, for a school and the next year he donated the triangle of orchard for a play area.

1618 saw a licence granted for an ale house, The Mount Eagle, now The Barley Mow. The King William IV was a house until 1830. In the early 19th century the legal enclosure and enforced sale of public land used for farming led to much hardship and the need for a Workhouse, where The Old House now stands in The Street. By 1840 Stroud Street was not a road any more and smaller lanes had given way to The Street.

In 1886 the railway came to Horsley, opening up the wider world, but there had been arguments as to its route and the placing of the station. Lord Lovelace of East Horsley got his way as it was between his two large properties. Easy access to London led to an increase in economic market gardening.

At the bottom of Shere Road the Pumping station, originally powered by a steam engine, brought clean water from tunnels through the chalk to the whole village, replacing polluted wells and ponds.

At this time, two famous artists painted in West Horsley, Beatrix Potter, who stayed with her uncle, Sir Henry Roscoe, a distinguished scientist, and Helen Allingham, several of whose watercolours of local cottages survive.

The Parish Council was formed in 1894, but women, though they could attend, were not allowed to speak or interfere. Topiary, still visible in several gardens, was commented on by Eric Parker in his notable book 'Highways and Byways of Surrey'. In Long Reach, the now demolished Broom House, riddled with woodworm, was a convalescent Hospital during WWI, when 14 local men died in the battles. Canadian soldiers were billeted in huts along the Street, one structure surviving as West Horsley Motors. The four shops, now reduced to just Steve Pain's grocery, were built in the 1930s, together with the Window Box Garage, now Bell and Colvill's. Between the Wars increasing numbers of cyclists, often from London, passed through West Horsley, or stopped for refreshments, and some settled in bungalows along Shere Road, where Olympic cyclists flashed past in 2012.

In 1932 the Rectory Park was bought for grazing and the owners in 1984 agreed with Guildford Rural Council and the National Trust on its preservation for posterity.

The Canadians returned, for training during WW2 and evacuees arrived long before London was bombed. Racehorses from The National Stud, and important historic cars also found a haven in the village. Home Guard units were set up, together with Local Civil Defence Committees. Much land was dug up for vegetables, leading to the later enthusiasm for allotments and the hugely successful Grace and Flavour community Garden. Two enemy bombers were brought down in 1940 and later some bombs were dropped causing little damage, however, in January 1944 a girl of 12 was killed and several houses seriously damaged.

Post war, many sports and arts-related organisations were established, as well as various charitable groups. The Wheel of Care, mainly providing drivers for the elderly or disabled, The Community Bus, Meals on Wheels and social groups, with many residents belonging to U3A and NADFAS, add to the lively life in West Horsley today.