

## HISTORY OF OVERBURY AND CONDERTON

Situated at the base of the 1000 ft Bredon Hill, midway between the Malverns and the Cotswolds, and close to the towns of Tewkesbury, Evesham and Cheltenham, Overbury is undoubtedly in beautiful surroundings. But picturesque as it is, this is not chocolate-box, preserved England. The traditional agriculture of the area, the main activity of those who have lived and worked in Overbury over the centuries, is still a major part of the community, and the villages have successfully evolved with the times and are still adapting.



“Overbury” is often used to describe both the villages of Conderton and Overbury. The parish extends northward from the Carrant brook to the summit of Bredon Hill, bounded on the west by Kemerton, and to the east by Beckford.

The history of Overbury can be traced back to some years before the Roman conquest. Excavations in 1938 on the summit of Bredon Hill revealed that the site had been the basis of a large settlement for about 500 years up to 100 BC. It would seem that these original inhabitants may have migrated from Cornwall, and comprised part of the great Celtic migration which swept over England in the period before the Roman conquest. From the available evidence, it is likely that the settlement on Bredon Hill was a large and flourishing one. However, it appears to have been sacked and abandoned after a bloody battle for possession, perhaps by Belgic invaders, who are known to have moved up the western side of England ahead of the Roman advance which, in turn, was to overtake them.

With the break up of the Roman Empire and the eventual collapse of Roman authority in England in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, Overbury was settled gradually by Anglo-Saxon farmers, moving up from the south and east of the country, and who were seeking rich, water-fed pastures for their cattle. The name “Overbury” is, in fact, a Saxon name meaning upper or higher habitation, and it is under this name that the village makes its first appearance in written history in AD 875. At this date it was included, along with other land given by Ceolwulf, King of the Mercians, to the Bishop and Convent at Worcester. This settlement by the Anglo-Saxons, after the Roman withdrawal, was sporadic and spread over many years. It is interesting to note that the name “Conderton”, being “Cantuoretun”, means the settlement of the men of Kent. It may not be too far fetched to assume that this hamlet, and the hill above which is still called “The Camps”, or “Dane’s Camp”, was

originally inhabited by people of a different Anglo-Saxon tribe from those which settled most of the West Midlands.

The villages remained in the possession of the Convent of Worcester until the time of the dissolution of the monasteries, when it passed to the ownership of the Dean and Chapter of Worcester. They continued to hold the land until the Commonwealth, when the manor was recorded as having been sold in 1652. However, at the time of the Restoration in 1660, the lands returned to the Dean and Chapter. From 1641 onwards the manor and lands were leased to the Parsons family, who retained their connection with the village until the death of the last holder of the lease in 1723.

The Parsons must have lived at the original Overbury Court which appears to have been a gabled Elizabethan manor house, surrounded by farm buildings, and as such, must certainly have been the principal building in the village.

Throughout the middle ages, until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the working life of the village was based almost entirely on agriculture. Sheep grazed the Hill, and the Vale was under the plough, or planted with orchards.

The connection of the village with the Martin family, direct relatives of Mrs. Bossom, began in 1723. John Martin, a London banker with roots in Evesham, came to live in Overbury Court. The Elizabethan house burnt down in 1738, and a new house was begun shortly afterwards. The house is constructed of golden, ashlar-faced Cotswold stone and has a fine Georgian façade looking south. It remains Mrs. Bossom's home and much of the improvement to the village of Overbury over the years has been due to her family's activities.

John Martin originally held Overbury as a tenant of the Dean and Chapter, but later in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the family purchased both the house and much of the land and the village until almost the whole of the parish of Overbury and Conderton were in their possession. The village today consists of a number of cottages, generally of Cotswold stone, interspaced with larger houses, mainly dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which must have housed the well-to-do millers the village attracted at that time.

It is clearly the stream, and the motive power it supplied, which made Overbury somewhat different in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries from other small villages around Bredon Hill. There is plentiful evidence from the 1700s onwards of the industrial activities in Overbury. At one time, at least six mills, driven by the water power of the stream, were producing flour, paper and silk threads. The village was, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, far from being just an agricultural community. In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the numbers in the two villages was around 350. Then there is a steep rise up to about 800 at the turn of the century, and as late as 1870, the census records 650.

In addition to the main mills, there was also a malt house in Church Row to malt local barley for brewing beer at The Old Brew House. This also made cider using the press at Silver Rill until as late as 1910. Many of the mills have been converted to houses but their origins can still be identified by their names today such as Silver Rill, Silk Mill Cottages, Old Mill or Dormay Cottage named after a silk miller. Silver Rill was used at one time by the

Robinson family who had a paper mill and then left Overbury to start again in Bristol – the Company became ES & A Robinson, which produced Sellotape and other stationery products.

With the decline of the mills, Overbury once more reverted to its agricultural roots and the population fell. They were at risk of falling still further with increased mechanisation in recent years, but an active policy by Mrs. Bossom's family to let houses and small commercial units to those with local connections and home-based businesses, has ensured that the vitality of the community is maintained to this day. Mrs Bossom & her family are actively involved with the running of the farming business Overbury Farms – see link to [overburyfarms.co.uk](http://overburyfarms.co.uk)



*Children enjoying ice cream at Overbury Court Garden*