

## A Potted History of the Group Parishes

The parishes lie together in West Dorset AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) and their landscape has been shaped by agriculture over many centuries. The chalk and limestone ridges and lush clay valleys are a patchwork of small fields with hedges and coppices and many streams.

Settlement has been dated from at least the Iron Age. There was a large Roman villa and farm in Halstock and there are signs of Roman activity elsewhere locally.

From Saxon times there were many scattered small farms in a feudal system. Royal charters mapped out the (still traceable) boundaries of Corscombe and Halstock and gifted produce from these parishes to Sherborne Abbey. A Grange at Court Farm, Corscombe, acted as a collecting point for provisions for the monks and a court for settling disputes. Other parts of the area sent supplies to Forde Abbey or Frampton Priory.

The settlements are recorded in Domesday Book – Coriescumb (includes Halghestok), Catsclive (Catsley) and Celburge (“12 unbroken mares, 5 cattle, 5 pigs”) - sparsely populated, with some cultivated land but mostly woods. There are remains of a motte and bailey on Castle Hill at East Chelborough. Their date and purpose are not known.

Life continued in a feudal pattern till the dissolution of the monasteries when Henry VIII gave much of the area to the distant Earl of Pomfret. After this, farms and land were gradually sold off or given, so that a patchwork of holdings emerged. Though there have been some greater landowners (notably Thomas Hollis in the late 18th century who renamed his fields according to his philosophies) there is no tradition of an overall ‘lord of the manor’ and the area has always included many small independent family farms.

Two main settlements emerged, Corscombe and Halstock (populations of each parish now approx. 500), but there were, and are, many other smaller groupings of widely spread farms and cottages. Some still exist, some have decayed. Facilities grew to support these: mills at Corscombe and Halstock, inns and alehouses, churches, and local trades, and later, schools. There was even a lunatic asylum at Halstock from about 1722 to 1858. By Victorian times the area was thriving and productive. However, by the early 20th century agriculture was in decline, larger holdings were sold off and population numbers plummeted. There was no real change until after WWII when in the 1950/60s (!) electricity, piped water and sewerage were installed in the villages. Houses were renovated, and now, although farming and equine activities dominate the landscape, few work on the land. Residents now largely work elsewhere or are retired, with a growth in small businesses.

The Church’s influence is evident from Saxon times. The original church buildings were probably wooden. Now there are much renovated but comely old-established churches at Corscombe, Halstock (dedicated to St. Juthware ‘the quiet woman’), Lewcombe and West Chelborough; and a mid-19th century one in Toller Whelme.

Buildings before the 20th century are mostly of local stone. There are some notable larger old houses such as Corscombe Court (with its tithe barn), Toller Whelme Manor and Benville Manor, and many listed farmhouses and cottages.

Roads and tracks in the parishes were mainly for access between farmsteads, to church or school, to work in the fields or to common grazing. Some drove roads skirt the area. The only major roads are now the A356, built by the Maiden Newton Turnpike Trust along the downs in the late 18th century for stagecoaches to avoid the muddy valley tracks; and the B3163 from Toller Down Gate to Beaminster. All others, like a former turnpike road via Benville, are minor, narrow, and many have degenerated to tracks, bridleways or have disappeared. The present network of green lanes and rights of way echoes the old routes.

## History References

For more information and local tales see:

- A History of Halstock, by Pam Lemmey ISBN 0 951 2063 0 3
- Corscombe, by Eric H Cox 1970
- Corscombe Through the Ages, by Mary and Peter Sadler 1990
- St Mary's Church, Corscombe by Andrew Tomkins 2015
- Adam's Green - Memories of Life on a Dorset Hillside, by Maurice Walker
- The Toller Whelme Book, Wayne Bennett 1987
- A History of Halstock Mill, Beaminster Museum