

(Photo of Oxenhall landscape on cover page)

OXENHALL PARISH PLAN (Draft version)

This draft Parish Plan draws on the information we have about Oxenhall from the last census in 2001, and from the consultation event at the Parish Meeting in July this year. We shall update the draft when we have comments from Oxenhall households. .

The Plan is more of an evaluation of the Parish than a prescription for the future, and has been written in response to new requirements for Parishes to produce similar documents as a condition for funding of community projects. Whether or not Oxenhall has requirements for such funding in future, the existence of this general document, produced within the local community, may at least ensure that outside bodies are informed about Oxenhall and about the features of the Parish that we value most.

The Plan takes stock of Oxenhall in 2006 with a snapshot of the physical and human geography of the Parish. It also identifies what people who live in Oxenhall have to date said that they most value about the Parish, and what they most hope to see in the Oxenhall of the future.

Oxenhall today and in the past

Before we look ahead, how different is the Oxenhall of today from the Parish of 200 years ago?

The following description of Oxenhall from “A History of Gloucestershire”, written in 1779, may help to set the local scene:

“...The lands lie dry and healthy, in very beautiful slopes and swells; and the soil, which is

a rich, sandy loam, inclining in some places to clay, produces the great necessaries of life in perfection and abundance.

This parish, and those of Dimmock, Kempley, Preston and Pauntly, make as fine a district of the country as any in the county of Gloucester, but it is not, perhaps, equally well cultivated. The roads cannot be commended at any time, but in the winter they are almost impassable.

The arable lands, which constitute the greater part of the parish, are intersected with rows of fruit-trees, whose blossoms, in the spring, are captivating to the senses, and from whose fruit, in the autumn, the farmer derives no inconsiderable profit.....

Among other vegetable productions, the following plants, viz Hoarhound, Wood-Wax, Wild Sorrel, Fox-Glove, and Daffodil, grow plentifully here.....

At the beginning of this century, there were 46 houses in this parish, and about 200 inhabitants, whereof 8 were freeholders; yearly births 6, burials 6 The present number of families is 46, of inhabitants exactly 202."

The Land and People in 2006

The 1779 reference to 'not inconsiderable profit' for farmers may bring some wry smiles in 2006. But, overall, the description of the landscape and human geography of Oxenhall remains remarkably familiar more than 200 years later.

The number of inhabitants is not very different now, although there are more houses and more of them are owner-occupied. Nor, it might be said, has there been much change in the condition of some of Oxenhall's lanes, particularly in winter.

Landscape

The distinctive rural landscape and character of Oxenhall certainly remains and, as we shall see, is one of the features of the Parish most valued by the majority of today's residents.

Oxenhall continues to be a rolling landscape of grazed pasture, cultivated farmland, orchards and deciduous woodland, lying to the north east of May Hill. The Ell Brook and its tributaries still run through the South of the Parish, with Hay Wood and other woodlands lying to the West. The wild daffodils have survived in some of our lanes and fields, and in the woods. The field patterns have changed, but not beyond recognition. The Church, renovated in Victorian times, still occupies a prominent position, with the Victorian Church School Rooms opposite now the Parish Hall.

The sites of the small coal shafts, the canal and the railway can still be seen, but they all came and went as commercial operations, as did the earlier iron works. The Oxenhall Pumping Station continues to extract water from the aquifer below the Parish for wider distribution.

Woodland

Some 450 acres of Forestry Commission woodland (about a third of the larger Dymock Woods), lie within Oxenhall Parish. It is of high landscape value, consisting of mixed broadleaf / conifer forest, an important component being the older sessile oaks dating from 1840 and nationally valued. Much of the oak woodland is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

The nationally known wild daffodils are found in the broadleaf woodland. There is freedom to roam throughout the woods.

Farming

The appearance of the Oxenhall landscape relies overwhelmingly on the continuation of mixed farming as the principal activity within the Parish, not least the grazing of sheep and cattle, and the maintenance of commercial orchards (in contrast to the intensive glasshouse and polytunnel soft fruit production to the northeast of Newent). Some former crops are now uncommon while relative newcomers, particularly forage maize, are now a

common sight. Most Oxenhall farmers have gone out of milk production, with some moving to beef cattle. Sheep and goats are also kept.

Links with nearby towns

The nearby market town of Newent, together with other towns and cities within commuting distance of Oxenhall, are used and valued by Oxenhall residents, for shopping, education, health and other essential services. In perhaps the biggest change from earlier times, it is these centres outside the Parish that now also provide essential employment for the majority of Oxenhall's inhabitants.

However, most residents of the Parish feel that they belong to a distinct Oxenhall community. When proposals were made to merge Oxenhall within Newent, Oxenhall people clearly voiced their desire to maintain the separate rural identity of the Parish. More recently, 55 Oxenhall households took the trouble to create an embroidered representation of their house to hang with others in the Parish Hall as a record of Oxenhall dwellings at the beginning of the new Millennium.

The Parish is one of very few in Gloucestershire to opt for the simple and inexpensive local government mechanism of a Parish Meeting rather than a Parish Council. One consequence of this arrangement is that local residents are not charged an additional Parish precept as part of their Council Tax. The Oxenhall Parish Hall Trust, formed as a charity in 1997, manages the only public meeting place in the Parish and is run entirely by volunteers.

Separate but not insular

While Oxenhall values its distinct character, it is by no means insular. Apart from its close links with Newent, Oxenhall has long encouraged visitors from further afield to enjoy its natural assets. The annual Daffodil Teas have for many years attracted hundreds of visitors, some coming long distances. Increasingly this is also the case with the annual Strawberry Teas and with Apple Day.

Horse riders and cyclists enjoy the quiet lanes, and visiting walkers make good use of the many footpaths in Oxenhall's fields and woods, with some

joining the annual Parish Walk at Christmas. The Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust brings visitors to Gwen and Vera's Fields and to Betty Dawes Wood. The Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Canal Trust is making a significant contribution to the Parish's visitor amenities with its ongoing restoration of the canal, lock and aqueduct.

Oxenhall Facts and Figures

The information below is taken from the latest UK National Census (2001) and from the 2005 Survey of UK Agriculture. In most cases we lack the data to make comparisons with earlier times, although that should be possible as and when the Plan is updated.

Population

In 2001 there were 181 people living in Oxenhall, which makes it the smallest parish population in the Forest of Dean District (Gorsley and Kilcot 256 and Upleadon 272), but by no means the smallest in the County of Gloucestershire.

Age distribution

In 2001, there were relatively few children aged 4 and under (now aged 5 to 9) but there were significantly more 5-9 year olds (now aged 10-14) than the County average (18 persons).

The 25-29 year olds (now aged 30 to 34) were thin on the ground. The 30-44 year olds (now 35 to 49) were the second largest age group in the Parish (34 persons) with the even more numerous 45-59 year olds (now 50 to 64) accounting for almost a third of the Parish's population.

Households

In mid 2001, there were 76 households in Oxenhall. Approximately 13 were people living alone, 9 of whom were pensioners. 3 houses were rented from a social landlord.

Car ownership

There were 6 households without a car, a lower percentage than the county average but significant in a rural Parish without public transport.

Employment

In 2001 no-one in Oxenhall was recorded as unemployed. 4 persons were recorded as economically inactive and permanently sick or disabled.

We have no information about types or locations of employment, other than for farming (below).

Education and Qualifications

Oxenhall was significantly above the County average for the number of persons with Level 4 or 5 qualifications. There were slightly fewer than average persons with no qualifications.

Health

In 2001, 73% of Oxenhall's inhabitants described their health as good, a percentage slightly better than the County average. 27 persons suffered from limiting long-term illness.

(The 2001 statistics also record that 20 Oxenhall residents were providing unpaid care for between 1 and 19 hours a week.)

Farming

According to the June 2005 Survey of UK Agriculture and Horticulture there are 23 agricultural holdings in Oxenhall, with a total area of 682 hectares (1685 acres), employing 51 people.

More than half this area (450 hectares) was under permanent or temporary grass. Another 193 acres was classified as under crops or fallow. We do not have a total acreage for orchards but they remain a significant feature of the Oxenhall landscape.

As for livestock, a total of 842 cattle were recorded on 10 holdings and 2113 sheep on 11 holdings. We know that there is now also a flock of some 800 goats in Oxenhall. We do not have figures for poultry kept in the Parish.

What Oxenhall Residents value most

The consultation process at the July 2006 Parish Meeting sought residents' views on what they value about Oxenhall, what concerns they have, what improvements they would like, and what the future holds. The main comments, compiled from thoughts recorded on post-it notes, on flip charts, and from discussion at the Meeting, are set out below.

Most Valued

Oxenhall residents set greatest store by two principal features of the Parish.

- *The sense of local community and good relations within Oxenhall*
- *The beautiful countryside and local farming*

Of course many other features of Oxenhall were identified in a positive way in the preliminary consultation process. But these 2 themes stood out.

Principal local concerns

The principal concern of local people is to ensure the continuation of the good community relations, beautiful countryside, and local farming.

Other more specific concerns identified in the preliminary consultation process included

- *Lack of housing for young people of the Parish*
- *Creeping suburbanisation and other threats to the rural character and landscape*

Improvements and Hopes for Oxenhall's Future

Again, the implicit but clear outcome of consultation to date is that Oxenhall residents hope that the Parish will not lose its present distinctive rural character and the quality of its local community relations.

So the key questions for the future are perhaps the extent to which these most valued features of Oxenhall may come under threat and, if they do, what might be done at the local Parish level to counter the effects.

Oxenhall residents of course appreciate that the determinants of future developments in Oxenhall will be influenced only marginally at the Parish level. But what local options might there be?

Community Life and Relations

The future threats to the fabric of community life in this dispersed rural community are likely to be

- *General apathy, or a failure to engage succeeding, younger generations in local community life*
- *The external imposition of ‘amalgamations’ of small communities, perhaps involving the loss of the Oxenhall Parish Meeting, or of St. Anne’s Church as a functioning community asset. This would inevitably undermine the sense of a distinct Oxenhall community.*

Subject to additional or alternative suggestions from within the community, the principal local options for guarding against such threats appear to be

- *to encourage as many local residents as possible to participate in existing community activities such as the Parish Hall Trust, the Parish History Group and the annual Parish Meeting; to encourage additional new activities at the Parish Hall, particularly use by younger generations, or for educational, musical or childcare purposes.*
- *To ensure that, despite its 1842 vintage and modest size, the Hall continues to provide facilities that meet the new standards required eg those for kitchen hygiene in village halls*
- *to emphasise to local MPs, Councillors and officials the value placed on existing community life and institutions within small rural parishes such as Oxenhall.*

- *To consider, as a community, successful initiatives taken elsewhere to provide affordable local housing for local young people in rural areas...and to be prepared to contemplate a small number of well-designed new houses for this purpose provided that they avoid compromising the rural landscape and character of the Parish. (One useful starting point for Parish consideration of this subject may be the Report of the Affordable Rural Housing Commission issued in May 2006. www.defra.gov.uk/rural/housing/commission/)*

Landscape and Farming

The most obvious threats to the existing landscape and / or to the continuation of the local farming on which it depends, seem likely to be

- *Continuing consumer preference for cheap agricultural products, including milk, meat and fruit, regardless of how and where they're produced, or of the local cost of production. Local farming could simply become unviable.*
- *Climate change; not least the effect of periods of drought on the light sandy soils of Oxenhall, combined with occasional heavy rains.*
- *Suburbanisation, mainly in response to pressures for new green field sites for 'executive-style' homes in the countryside.*

The past year has of course seen fundamental and potentially far-reaching changes in EU and UK Government policies on agriculture, with production subsidies giving way to payments geared to compliance with environment-friendly measures. But no-one knows for how long the new arrangements will continue. The rewards for (increasingly rare) farming and animal husbandry skills may be unattractive when compared with those involving less skilled work and less demanding life-styles.

Again subject to additional or alternative suggestions, the principal local options to guard against the threats to the features of Oxenhall valued most by the majority of residents are likely to be

- *For the local community to support Oxenhall farmers and fruit growers in every way they can, from buying direct whenever products are available, to spreading the word about the quality of the meat, fruit and other produce of Oxenhall. We all have a direct interest in helping to cut food miles and in trying to maintain a vibrant*

agriculture sector in our Parish, not least because local food often tastes better.

- *To consider, as a community, what local measures to combat the most likely effects of climate change, specifically within Oxenhall, might be appropriate, effective and possible.*
- *In relation to the risk of gradual suburbanisation, to stress to local Councillors and MPs and to planners, whenever the opportunity arises, that Oxenhall considers its distinctive rural character and landscape to be its primary economic asset. Creeping suburbanisation would bring homogeneity, to everyone's loss.*
- *To continue in every way we can to encourage visitors to enjoy the rural character and landscape of Oxenhall so that they too have an interest in protecting it. More small events, facilities, maps and other information..... for walkers, riders and cyclists.*
- *In respect of our local lanes, to maintain, as a community, a regular dialogue with the local division of the County Surveyor's Department concerning day to day problems. Also, if the District Council's refuse contractor is now able to use small vehicles on some lanes, can we and the County authorities encourage more major suppliers to do the same with their delivery and collection fleets? (We need to recognise however that there is sometimes no alternative to large vehicles servicing the farms that are such an essential feature of the Parish.. Damage limitation may then be the only option.)*

Further Action

The Oxenhall Parish Meeting is the principal mechanism for liaison with the District Council and other authorities. When this consultation is complete and the Parish Plan finalised, a Parish Meeting will be held (with advance notification to all households) to consider how best to pursue those issues identified in the Plan that require further action.

The Oxenhall Parish Hall Trust (whose next AGM will be on 29 January 2007 and is open to all) will also consider appropriate further action, working in close consultation with the Parish Meeting.

Some things work better when tackled at a very local level! So please let us have your response to this draft by completing the very brief survey form and returning it in the stamped addressed envelope enclosed.