

# Thorpe Langton Town Land

by Leslie Hughes

Thorpe Langton's ancient Town Land is today an active and useful village organisation but its origins are uncertain. During the nineteenth century it was frequently referred to locally as the 'Cooper Charity', which suggests it might have been related to an East Langton charity of a similar name. The latter was endowed in 1546 by John Cowper who gave lands, situated in the parishes of East Langton and Great Bowden<sup>1</sup> to provide equipment for a man-of-war, including a horse and its harness, if the villagers were called upon to supply them. Income from the land was also to be used to contribute to the repair of highways and bridges and to assist the parish in paying taxes of 15ths and 10ths.

An alternative explanation of Thorpe Langton charity's origin was put forward during a meeting of the local Waywardens in December 1864<sup>2</sup>, when a suggestion was made that the surveyor should *'procure a term of all property in the district belonging to the highways and the roads of such properties'*. In replying, a Mr Grant said that he was a trustee of the property in Thorpe Langton and he thought the deeds were then in a chest in the village church. He added that, *'He believed the property was left at the time of the civil wars to find a horse and cart to carry baggage'*, (i.e. to support an armed man) *'and with the balance to repair roads'*. The deeds are

no longer to be found in the church, but if this version of the origin is true it means the Thorpe Town Land is about a century younger than its East Langton counterpart. Nevertheless, like the latter, when first set up its purpose included the provision of military equipment.



Photo 2. The centre upper window has been blocked with large bricks, probably to avoid window tax. A much later blocked doorway may also be seen..



Photo 1: The east end of Main Street, Thorpe Langton. The two brick-built houses and the cottage in the centre left of the picture originally were five of the Town Land

Towards the end of the eighteenth century some very significant changes took place in the Langtons when an act of Parliament allowed enclosure of the previously open village fields. When this took place, the Enclosure Commissioners allocated two fields totalling about 13 acres (5.3 hectares) to the trustees of the Thorpe Langton Town Land Charity<sup>3</sup>. The larger of the two enclosures, lying deep in the Presborough field to the east of the parish, had an area of 10a 1r 23p (about 4.2 hectares). A smaller field of 2a 2r 33p (about 1.1 hectares) lay in Pellings Holme, close to the bridge carrying Welham road over a brook near the village where the remains of an old sheep dip still can be seen.

Enclosure of the land enabled a change from labour intensive mixed farming to more specialised



*Thorpe Langton - March 1898*  
Photo. 3. The thatched cob cottages standing to the west of Shop Lane in March 1898.

Photo. Speight of Market Harborough, 1898

and more profitable animal husbandry which required fewer workers. Some of the larger landowners prospered, but many labourers began to suffer hardship due to the difficulty of obtaining regular employment. In common with many similarly placed communities at the time, the parish officers began to take steps to guard against incurring excessive costs in supporting people who were unable to look after themselves. By 1800, two village orphans, James Bruce aged 10 years and William Goodman aged 11 years, had been placed by the Overseers of the Poor as apprentice framework knitters in Wigston<sup>4,5</sup>. Ten years later, Thomas Wilkinson, a framework knitter in Thorpe Langton, was required by the Overseers to enter into a bond for £80 (about £4,500 in present day money) to ensure that he did not take an apprentice who might thereby acquire a right to settle in the parish<sup>6</sup>. In 1824, William and Alice Horton, having moved to the village, became unable to support themselves and therefore were chargeable to the parish. They could not produce a certificate giving them the right to settle anywhere, so they were removed to Great Glen<sup>7</sup>, where presumably at least one of them had been born. In those days, people evicted from many communities would have been escorted to parish boundaries and left to walk onwards as best they could, but the Hortons were, at least, provided with transport to their destination by the Thorpe Langton Overseers.

It was against this background that the Town Land trustees appear to have changed their policy, metaphorically 'converting swords into ploughshares' by purchasing houses for the benefit of disadvantaged villagers, using income originally donated to support an armed man. By 1854, when the Charity's annual

income was a little over £55 (Equivalent to about £3,000 today), the trustees had acquired thirteen cottages in the village, most of them with gardens. Three of these cottages were then lent, free of rent, to very poor villagers. The remaining ten were let at annual rents ranging from 15 shillings (75p, approximately £40 in present day money) to £4 - 6s (£4.30, equivalent to about £225)<sup>8</sup>.

Five of the Town Land cottages were located in the brick-built row which still stands attached to the Baker's Arms public house on the road originally known as East Gate but which is now the east end of Main Street (Photograph 1). Before the town of Market Harborough was established during the medieval period the lane entry, visible in the left foreground of photograph 1, formed part of one of the main through routes southwards from Leicester, via the Gartree Road, to Great Bowden and beyond. It entered Thorpe Langton parish at the ford near the ancient site of a water mill and, during Victorian times, the lane itself was still called Mill Gate. Later it became known as Shop Lane, after a village shop was established for a number of years in the end cottage of the row. A window in the cottage at the centre of the row appears to have been filled in after the houses were built, with bricks which are larger than those used in the remainder of the structure (photograph 2). If, as seems probable, this was done to avoid window tax, it would suggest these cottages date from before the year 1808 when the threshold for the imposition of the tax was reduced to six windows per house<sup>9</sup>. At that time, this particular house was divided into two separate dwellings, but with similar windows at the rear the right hand cottage would have become taxable.



*Thorpe Langton - March 1898*  
Photo. 4. Three of the thatched cob cottages standing to the west of Shop Lane in March 1898.

Photo. Speight of Market Harborough, 1898



*Photo 5. Upper Church Lane. This was probably the medieval village main street which ran further west than the present path when the majority of the village houses stood to the west of the modern settlement.*

Before 1898, four of the Town Land properties let at low rents were thatched cottages facing Main Street to the west of Shop Lane (photographs 3 and 4). Their walls were made of cob, a mixture of clay with sand, straw and sometimes animal dung, which was watered and puddled, or trampled repeatedly by draught animals, to mix it to a fairly soft muddy consistency. It was then built up in successive layers to produce walls of the required height with a thickness of up to 24 inches (approx 0.6 metres). When dry this material formed a sturdy, well insulated structure which was very resistant to weathering provided it stood on high stone foundations and had a roof with a large overhang at the eaves to minimise erosion by rainwater.

The locations of the remaining Town Land cottages are not known with certainty, but Cyril Harbord, who lived in the village for most of his life and occupied one of the Town Land houses for many years before his death in 2003, said that at one time two thatched cob cottages stood in Upper Church Lane, nearly opposite the north door of St Leonard's church. (Photograph 5) There was also another near the corner of Bowden Road and Welham Lane. These cottages have long been demolished, although some slight traces of their existence might have been discerned until quite recently.

Before the last decade of the 19th century the Charity had made annual donations of £40 to the Highways Board<sup>10</sup>. After 1894 it seems to have had some difficulty in meeting this commitment, and in 1897, when two elderly occupants of the cob cottages died, its payment was reduced to £27. About half of the charity's income was derived from the rent for two fields, amounting each year to £27-12s-0d (£27.65), whilst the remainder was obtained from cottage and a garden rents. Regular outgoings included an annual tithes of £1-15s-6d (approx £1.78) paid to the Rector of Church Langton, income tax of £1-10s-0d (£1.50) on land and cottages, and a fee of 5s (25p) for making up the accounts each half year. These expenses did not leave a great deal of money available for

repairs and, although the thatch was kept in good order the cob cottages, in particular, had deteriorated to a poor condition. Nevertheless, refreshments were provided for the tenants on the bi-annual payment days. With beer costing only 2d per pint (approximately 1.5 p/litre)<sup>11</sup>, the typical half yearly bill of about 11s (55p) would have provided ample ale to reward the cottagers for paying their rents on time, with possibly something a little stronger available for the gentlemen! After 1898, the tenant's refreshments were euphemistically referred to as 'expenses incurred in collecting rents'.



*Photo 6. The Town Land gardens in November 2014. Still a useful village facility 115 years after they were first laid out.*



*Photo. 7. The two replacement dwellings built on the site west of Shop Lane in 1899. Photographed in 2011.*

Amongst the consequences of the changes taking place in the country was a fall in the number of people living in Thorpe Langton. From its peak of 215 people in 1821, the population had fallen to just 83 in 1881 and then risen again to 127 in 1891, by which time the Trustees no longer required all the accommodation they had accumulated earlier in the century. Over a period of some years, they had built up a cash reserve of about £84 and, presumably with the agreement of the Highways Surveyor, decided to suspend, temporarily, payments to the Highway Board. They also applied for permission to borrow £200 to allow replacement of four cob cottages by a pair of newly built semi-detached houses.

Speight of Market Harborough photographed the cottages in March 1898 (photographs 3 and 4) and, although no separate payment for the work is recorded, demolition must have commenced almost immediately afterwards. Cob is essentially a 'green' building material. The straw from the roofs could have been recovered and composted but, judging by how quickly the work progressed, it was probably burnt. At least some of the wood would have been salvaged for other uses and the cob itself, once deprived of shelter from rain, would have broken down quite quickly into passable garden soil. By September of that year five garden plots had been laid out, on and adjacent to the site of at least one of the cottages (Photograph 6). The gardens were let at rents of 5s (25p) per year, although two were subdivided and let as half-plots.

On August 4th, 1899, a loan of £200 was received

from the Leicestershire Banking Company, and four days later £150 was paid to Messrs Haycock and Sons of Market Harborough on account of two houses being built. A second instalment of £140 was paid to the builders on February 13th, 1900. Work progressed quickly and in March 1900 one of the tenants, T Buszard, was paid 10s (50p) to level the ground around the building site. In the same month, the first two tenants took up residence in the new houses, each paying an annual rent of £5 for a house with a garden, (Photograph 7). Later, Haycock and Sons received further payments amounting to about £53 for their work, so the final cost of the semi-detached houses was £343.

The bank provided its loan at an annual interest of 3.5%, but required a joint promissory note to cover the remaining balance when the rate of loan repayments was halved in 1904, after resumption of annual donations of £30 to the Highways Board. These changes added £2 8s 6d (£2.71) to the bill but, by the time the final repayment was made in 1906, the total financing cost amounted to only £23 10s 6d (£23.53) a figure that present day house purchasers might well envy.

In 1907, for the first time, the Trustees took out insurance to cover their cottages at an annual premium of 17s (85p, equivalent to about £45 in present day money!) It is a sad reflection on the uncertainties of those days that they considered it necessary to take out an additional insurance in 1916, at an extra cost of 18s (90p), to cover themselves against the possibility of their property being damaged by air raids. Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin's invention had brought the war to England but, although there was loss of life and damage to property on the east coast and in London due to bombing raids by German airships, the risk to property in Leicestershire was comparatively small. The trustees did not renew the cover subsequently.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century four of the dwellings in East Main Street were converted into two by blocking up two of the front doors and opening internal connections, reducing the original five dwellings to three. One of the blocked street doors may be seen in photograph 2.

Although now brick clad, the small cottage attached to the inn still has a substantial exposed

ironstone foundation course which suggests that originally it might also have been a thatched cob structure. This cottage was probably re-roofed with slate in 1896 when the records show £30 was spent on roofing work.

As well as maintaining the stock of housing, the Trustees of Thorpe Langton Town Land charity continue to assist the community in other ways, such as by offering grants to students and trainees. Recently the charity has paid for an historical booklet to be distributed to all houses in the parish, and currently it is engaged in a major project to purchase

and convert former glebe land lying south of St Leonard's church into allotment gardens which will be let to parishioners.

### **Acknowledgements.**

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