

Oakridge Ward

The Oakridge Ward, incorporating Waterlane, Oakridge Lynch, Far Oakridge, Bournes Green and Tunley, can claim to be the more rural of the three Wards. The area, rich in woodland and water, has always been a draw to humans. Traces of early civilisations have been found including a Roman villa and altars to Roman deities.

Many of the subsequent farming settlements grew to support the big ecclesiastical houses in the county including the Abbeys of Cirencester and the manors of Bisley and Over Lypiatt.

Great events across England were mirrored in the Ward. The end of feudalism, the dissolution of the monasteries, civil wars all left their mark in the area. The stories of older residents reveal the courage - and humour - that saw the village through two World Wars.

By the beginning of the 18th century a thriving cloth industry had evolved along the Chalford Valley. Many Oakridge folk found employment servicing the needs of the wealthy clothiers. The prospect of employment drew people to the area and cottages were built to accommodate the workers and their families. No small area of flat land escaped this building boom. By 1733, over 800 houses had been built around the edges of common ground, linked by footpaths, many still in use today.

But the upturn in fortune did not last. The cost of coal (necessary to produce the steam power to the machinery) rose astronomically. Water power became unreliable. Wages fell. Strikes were called. Grinding poverty ensued. A benefactor built a silk mill in Oakridge, but the work wasn't suitable for weavers, being carried out mainly by women and children. Imports of silk from France eventually killed the Gloucestershire silk trade and in 1897, the mill was sold at auction and pulled down.

The enclosure of the common land in 1866 was met by huge resentment. Grazing was lost and the small awards of land did not compensate. Roads were built and the common land divided into fields.

The arrival of the railway and canals in the 18th century lessened the isolation of the area and brought lasting links and trade with the rest of England.

The ethereal natural beauty of the area became a draw to creative people. By 1907, Ernest Gimson, an architect, was producing innovative exciting work at Daneway House. He was joined by Norman Jewson. Both men, from urban backgrounds, were inspired by William Morris and his idea of healthy employment for all in making useful and beautiful things. The ensuing Arts & Crafts movement is well documented, and in this area, it is possible every day to see the impact it made locally. Even the most modest of dwellings sports a hinge, latch or sconce made in the forge of Alfred Bucknell and his son, Norman.

Sir William Rothenstein is perhaps one of the best known of the newcomers to the village at this time, restoring and living at Iles Green Farm. His presence attracted his many friends, well known writers and artists, all finding inspiration in the idyllic setting. At the end of WW1, he was offered the post of Principal at the Royal College of Art in London. He kept his links with Oakridge after selling the farm by buying a small cottage for holidays. On retirement, he bought two small cottages and asked Norman Jewson to extend and restore them. This became Far Oakridge House.

The building work generated by Gimson and Jewson gave employment to many. The skilled men of Oakridge rose to the occasion. Secure in the appreciation of their work, stonemasons, cabinet makers, carpenters, metal workers gave of their best and it did not disappoint. This snapshot in no way does justice to the explosion of creativity where the beauty of prosaic objects was revealed.

The Ward is home to two Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Daneway Banks, home of the once near extinct but now flourishing, Large Blue Butterfly, and Strawberry Banks. These two SSSI of

calcareous grassland, are home to a vast amount of wild flowers, including several varieties of orchid. In turn, these plants provide a habitat for a great variety of insect and animal life. Two meadows in Far Oakridge are totally organic and are one of the joys of an early summer walk, the colours and scent of the wild flowers and grasses creating a feast for all the senses. Later in the year, the sweet hay is enjoyed by lucky organic cattle.

The Ward continues to attract creative people. Many artists, actors, musicians and writers live here and the legacy of the Arts & Crafts movement is an organic community of mindful people embracing a 21st century life.

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