



# The North-West Frontier

*Wendy Austin reports from the Hertfordshire Salient*

A glance at a map shows our county is of a fairly compact shape, except that one finger of land projects on the north-west border. Over the years proposals that this tongue of land should be included in Buckinghamshire, which surrounds it, were strongly resisted. The villages of Puttenham, Long Marston and Wilstone remained

firmly in Herts.

In medieval times this low-lying area, close to the Vale of Aylesbury, was known by the unattractive name of 'Blackmire' or 'Blackmoor'. The ground was often waterlogged, farmland poor and, even today, one of the longest roads in the salient is called Watery Lane. The nature of the terrain may be the reason why Bucks never tried harder to annex it.

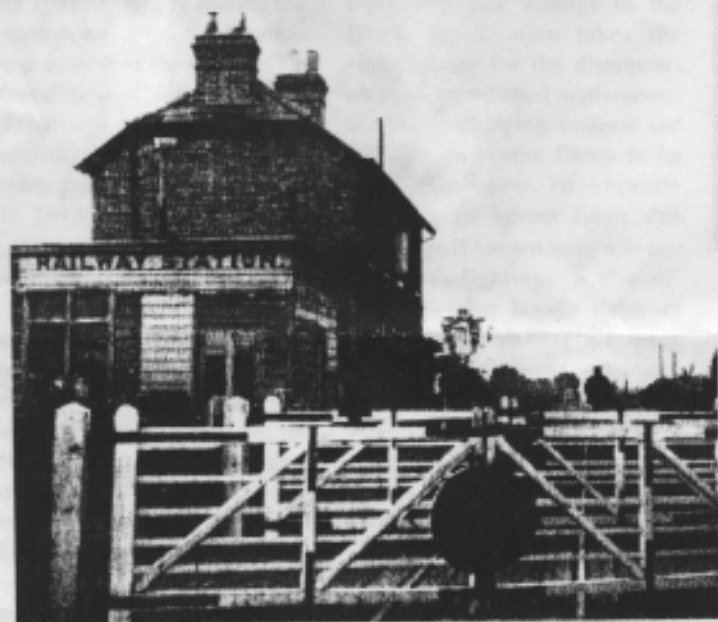
When William the Conqueror arrived to claim the throne, he chose to make a wide sweep to the west of London, curving north of the Chiltern Hills. When he turned south towards the capital, he by-passed Tring, and is believed to have chosen a route through Puttenham. Whether the poor folk there welcomed their visitor is doubtful, for William's army lived off the land and left a swathe of destruction in its wake. Nevertheless the village's long history had adapted it to changing circumstances, and the arrival of the Normans was just one more chapter. In medieval times it was to feel the effects of depopulation; later, during the Civil War the church was used as a lock-up for prisoners; and, in the early 19th century, the Aylesbury Arm of the Grand Junction Canal was dug just south of the village.

Puttenham is still tiny, but boasts a 14th century church set in a beautiful churchyard. The flint and limestone chequered tower is one of only two in Hertfordshire. The interior is plain, for the parish was always poor. A notable item is a memorial plaque, the lettering telling us that from the parish of 71 souls, 14 young men served in The Great War. Thankfully, and

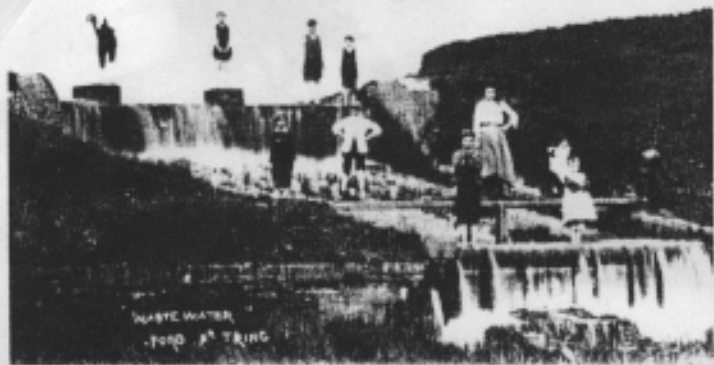
unusually, all returned safely.

In the village one still feels 'off the beaten track', but it does have some modern features, including a smart new village hall and the now ubiquitous barn conversions.

Unlike Puttenham, its near neighbour of Long Marston has greatly increased in size over the years. It has a more modern aspect and is fortunate in still retaining its Post Office, but some ancient corners remain. A narrow stream, a tributary of the Thistle Brook, meanders alongside a lane to Church Farm, and a delightful half-timbered cottage. In the garden stands a Grade II listed church tower dating from the 14th century. It is the only part that remains of All Saints', a chapel-of-ease of Tring Parish. The old gravestones and surrounding yew trees create an atmospheric feel. In the past the inhabitants of Long Marston were obliged to help maintain Tring Church, and their slender resources could not be stretched to keep their own small church in good repair. The building deteriorated and became unsafe. It was eventually abandoned, and a new All Saints' in the north of the village was built in 1882. The old manor house encircled by a moat (for drainage, not defence) has



Top left: Long Marston, c1915. Top right: Long Marston, c1925 showing Post Office on the left. Both The Boot public house in the centre and village school on the right were destroyed by enemy action in 1941. Above: Marston Gate Station c1955 (picture by H. C. Casserly)



*Outflow from Tringford Reservoir c1910*

long since vanished.

Events of more recent times have affected life at Long Marston. The arrival of the railways led, rather surprisingly, to the siting of a station near the village. As the rail network grew, branch lines sprang up linking many remote parts of the country, and Long Marston benefited from an offshoot of the London to Birmingham route. A track was laid from Cheddington to Aylesbury and the one station sited on the way was at Marston Gate, on the road to Wingrave. This provided villagers with a convenient way to reach a large town, and it was with regret that some people saw the station fall under the Beeching axe in the 1960s.

World War Two disrupted life in the village as everywhere else. In the late afternoon of January 30th 1941, a stick of bombs fell, demolishing *The Boot* public house as well as the school. The infants' school mistress, Ruth Whelan, was the only fatality as, mercifully, the children had already gone home.

In 1942 land in the area was requisitioned from local farmers for the construction of an airfield to be used by the US Air Force. Fields were levelled and trees uprooted; 92 tons of concrete were used to build three runways. During the war the airfield had many uses, including a base for aircraft dropping propaganda leaflets over Germany. Also a branch of the CIA were said to be stationed there. Among the famous names who flew from the airfield were Eliot Roosevelt (son of the President), James Cagney and James Stewart. There was accommo-

modation for 2500 personnel and Tring and its nearby villages reeled under the impact of this influx. The district shook off wartime blues and came alive, especially on Saturday nights when the US forces flocked to any dance or entertainment on offer. Some local girls married service men, and sailed for America at the end of the war.

During the course of the conflict, 68 men were lost from this station and a memorial plaque was erected in the 1990s. Even today, elderly Americans can sometimes be seen wandering round the villages, revisiting the scenes of their youth.

Beyond Long Marston and almost at the northern limit of the area lie the deserted medieval villages of Alnwick, Boarscroft and Tiscot, discovered in the 1920s by aerial photography. The scourge of the Black Death often takes the entire blame for the disappearance of established settlements, but the underlying reasons are complex and more likely to be land exhaustion or climatic change. In former times this locality was known to be a venue for cock-fighting, a 'sport' which became legally liable to penalties in 1849. In some remote country areas, this cruel pastime continued, and the site was chosen carefully to allow a quick get-away over the county border when the approach was signalled of local constabulary.

At the opposite end of the salient is the attractive village of Wilstone, with its composite village green and larger reservoir. The nature of the landscape made this the ideal spot in the early 19th century to conserve



*The Aylesbury Arm of the Grand Union Canal at Pottenham*



*The rebuilt Boot at Long Marston today*



*St. Mary's, Pottenham*

large areas of water. The Wilstone reservoir, together with smaller ones at Marsworth, Startopend and Tringford, supply an average of two million gallons each day. This ensures that, at 400 feet above sea level, the summit of the Grand Union Canal always has a sufficient supply of water, pumped from the pump-house at Little Tring. Today, as well as their original purpose, the four reservoirs are a wildfowl reserve and attract

winter migrants, as well as being home to the Great Crested Grebe, many kinds of ducks, and reed-nesting herons. Walkers and bird watchers are assured of refreshment from the nearby café or the *White Lion* on the canal bridge at Startopend.

Although there has been the inevitable increase in traffic, and the lanes of the area are usually busy, this remote corner of the county rewards a visit with much hidden charm and interest.