Chapter Three: Croxall and Oakley – the lost villages

Croxall's boundaries have changed little over the years. To the north, it is largely bounded by the Catton estate (some of the Catton land is within Croxall), to the east, Pessall Brook, and to the west, the River Mease and, for a short length, the River Trent. It is only within the village of Edingale that the manor boundaries have changed over time. Even up to the end of the nineteenth century, Croxall manor stretched a 'finger' through Edingale to the Mease just north of the White Lion pub at Harlaston (opposite the present-day football field). Croxall is now all located in the civil parish of Edingale.

Croxall Hall by Helen Pilgrim

After the Norman invasion, King William dispossessed the Anglo-Saxon thegns. He split his land, manor by manor, giving control of it to the Norman nobility who had supported him. His tactic was to grant several manors to one noble, but to ensure that these could not be combined into a single land block, where too many peasants would owe allegiance to their lord and not to their King. Thus, Henry de Ferrers was granted over 100 manors in this area, including Croxall, Catton, Tutbury and Twycross. Clearly, the de Ferrers couldn't live in all of these manors, so, in effect, they sub-let them.

Giraline de Curzon held Croxall (and, famously, Kedleston near Derbyshire) as a knight's fee from de Ferrers, so the Curzons would have owed the de Ferrers military service. Although the de Ferrers fell from favour in 1266 and had their lands forfeited, the Curzons held Croxall until 1645. In fact, the Curzons went on to become one of England's 'great families', with a Kedleston Curzon becoming Viceroy of India, and then Foreign Secretary in 1917. He came close to becoming leader of the Tory Party in 1923.

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See Croxall tithe map

Insert Croxall tithe map

But back to Giraline de Curzon. He was a Breton who fought with King William at Hastings and before. He had three sons, one of whom, Richard, inherited both Croxall and Kedlestone. Richard's son was Robert, and it is here that our story really should start.

Robert was short lived. He married Alice and they had three sons: another Richard, Thomas who (eventually) inherited Kedlestone and Robert, who became Cardinal Curzon. Richard married Petronella de Camville (of Clifton's family) and they lived at Croxall. Cardinal Robert Curzon was a close ally of Pope Innocent III and became his legate in Paris. He rode alongside Simon de Montfort (father of the more famous son) in the rather shameful Albigensian crusade in southwest France. Robert died at Danetta in Egypt in 1218.

Alice Curzon, mother of all the above, was responsible for much of our written record of Croxall in this period. Rather than for any positive reason, this is because she seems to have been avaricious in the extreme. After Robert de Curzon, her husband, died, she married Sir Roger de Somerville (ironically Lord of Alrewas Manor – and so owner of the other half of Edingale). Alice seems to have thought that she had been promised Kedlestone as her dowry from Robert and she tried at court to prevent her grandson Thomas (son of Thomas above) from inheriting it. Years of legal dispute followed with records of many cases concerning 'Alicia de Somerville'. Eventually, it was settled by her being granted a rather paltry 'two and a half virgates of land' at Croxall, and Edingale Mill, as compensation. Anyone who has ever visited Kedleston will understand what she was giving up.

At Croxall in 1239, Sir Robert Curzon, (grandson of Alice) gave the right to appoint clergy and the 'living' of the church at Croxall to the priory at Repton. Repton had long been an important ecclesiastical centre in Derbyshire. The Earls of Chester re-established the monastery after the Danish devastation. It had gradually extended its influence over the Repton wapentake (the Danish equivalent of the Saxon hundred) including Croxall. In practice, this meant that the priory appointed priests to serve the chapels at Edingale (the one that no longer exists – and for which we have no other evidence) and at Croxall itself. The great tithes (the most valuable) were payable to the priory, and the minor tithes to the local priest directly in order to sustain him as the tithes were goods rather than money. This grant is the first time that there is documentary proof of a church at Croxall.

And so the line of Curzons continued. In 1421, John Curzon sold all his manors except Croxall and *"that part of Edingale not in Alrewas Manor"*. John was 'escheater for the Counties of Derbyshire and Nottingham' meaning that he took control of properties for the king where there was no heir, or land had been confiscated. This John's great grandson – another John – fought with Henry VIII in France. We also have deeds showing more prosaically that he held land in Alrewas for '1 lb of pepper'. His son, Thomas, married twice: first to Anne Aston of Tixall by whom he had many children including Joyce Curzon. Joyce was twice married, secondly to Thomas Lewis of Mancetter. She became greatly influenced by the Protestant reformers at a time when Queen Mary's Counter-

Reformation was at its height. Joyce was burned at the stake at Lichfield on 18th December 1557 for refusing to recant her beliefs.

George, a son of Thomas Curzon by his second marriage, inherited Croxall. George's son, Sir George Curzon, Sheriff of Derbyshire, was the last male Curzon to hold Croxall and there is a lengthy inscription to his memory in Croxall church. The manor passed to Sir George's daughter, Mary. Mary had married Edward Sackville, who later became the fourth Earl of Dorset. He was Lord Chamberlain to King Charles I, and Mary (now the Countess of Dorset) thus became a governess to the royal children. These were, of course, turbulent times to be associated with royalty and, on July 7th 1643, Charles's wife, Queen Henrietta Maria, stayed overnight at Croxall as she brought an army of 3,000 men south to join the King. Quite where the tiny settlement of Croxall found the wherewithal to sustain an army, along with its horses and followers, is not recorded.

Mary died in May 1645, and, in a most unusual gesture, Parliament voted to pay for her funeral. This despite the fact that her husband was a devoted Royalist who had fought with the king at Edgehill. Although her funeral was at Westminster Abbey, Mary was buried at the Sackvilles' church in Sussex.

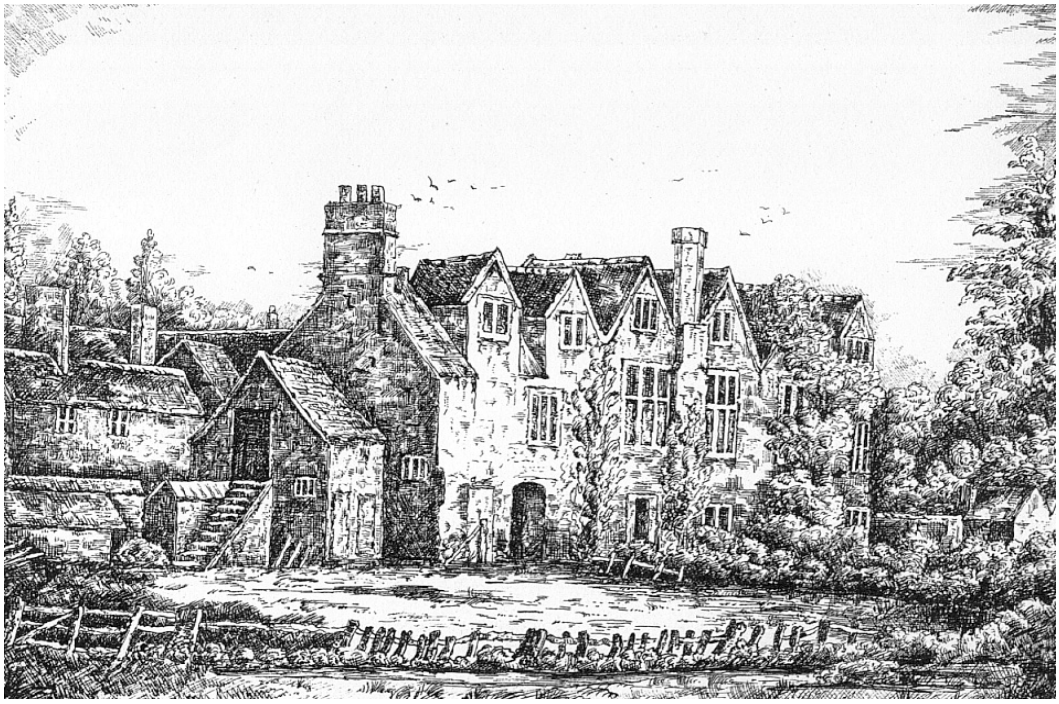
Mary was the last Curzon to hold Croxall – almost 600 years of lineage. Croxall passed into the ownership of her family by marriage, the Sackvilles, Earls of Dorset.

The fifth Earl, Richard Sackville, was, similarly, an ardent monarchist and was a close supporter of Charles II. He was one of the judges at the 'Regicides': the trials of those responsible for the death of Charles I. Richard's son, Charles, the sixth Earl, was a scholar and statesman. Perhaps surprisingly, given their other lands and commitments, the early Dorsets seem to have spent considerable time at Croxall. This is evidenced by the fact that the poet Dryden, a friend of the sixth Earl, stayed at Croxall often enough to have his favourite walk named after him. 'Dryden's walk' is still marked on modern maps and runs along the top of the river bluff from Croxall towards Catton. Appointed Poet Laureate by James II, Dryden was a Catholic convert. After the Catholic King's death, Dryden would not recant his religion and so he had to be deprived of his laureateship by his friend the sixth Earl (who was, like his grandfather, Lord Chamberlain). Richard replaced Dryden's lost income with a sum of money from his own estates.

The Dorsets must have been in favour, as Richard's son, Lionel, – the seventh Earl – was created the first Duke of Dorset. Lionel was one of those who travelled to Hanover to bring the Elector, later King George I, back to England, so ensuring a Hanoverian succession. In 1730, he was made Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. Perhaps it was the wider scope of these duties that meant that the Dorsets spent less and less time at Croxall. Indeed, there is some evidence that they were letting out the Hall to local farmers.

In 1779, Lionel's grandson, John Frederick, the third Duke, sold Croxall to a commoner – Thomas Prinsep (in fact, some say that the disposal was a wager). Prinsep was a famous agricultural 'improver', noted for his cattle breeding, especially of Longhorns. However, for some reason, the Hall continued to fall into decay. Prinsep had a son – also Thomas –

who died without children of his own. Croxall then passed to Thomas's nephew, the son of his sister, Theophilus Levett. Levett (whose paternal grandfather was the owner of Wychnor Hall) adopted the name 'Levett-Prinsep'.



Croxall Hall prior to its restoration (the west wing – later destroyed by fire) from Ussher

By this period, the Hall was in severe disrepair – one wing was said to be used as farm buildings. Levett-Prinsep's son, Thomas, became one of Croxall's 'great' owners. In the period between 1867 and 1872, he restored the Hall (in a largely sympathetic way), moved the core of the Hall's farming activity to The Grange (now farmed by the Startins), which he built in its entirety, and he commissioned the (less sympathetic) repair and renewal of the church. He also financed some of the extensive work to the vicarage, (now White Knights).

By 1920, the Levett-Prinseps were feeling the strains of running a small 'country house' and had to sell the Hall. The First World War had seen the end of many such dynasties and Croxall was no exception. The massive sale catalogue with its detailed maps and photographs of the Croxall farms, including Pessall Farm and Broadfields, provides us with a link with another era. It includes details (but not photographs) of every tenant of 'Edingale' Croxall cottages, including those at the Woodyard and those standing between the present day houses on Croxall Road and Blakeways Close, and even the position of every earth closet.

But the disposal was hard to conclude: many country estates were for sale about this time and there was a deep recession in agriculture. The estate was split up and in 1930, Captain and Mrs Charlton bought Croxall Hall and the 100 acres or so farmed directly from the Hall. The remainder of the Hall's farms were sold either to their tenants, one by one, or to

the Prinsepses' neighbours, the Ansons of Catton Hall. The Charlton family went on to become involved in many village activities as we shall see later.

Major Nicholas Charlton, son of the purchaser, had seen action in the early part of the Second World War but he was invalided out of active service after Dunkirk. Unfortunately, that was not the end of war-time tragedy for him, for, on 7th November 1942, barely 70 years after its rebuilding, there was a major fire at the Hall in which he and Ethel, his wife, died. The fire destroyed the most valuable wing of the house and the library, the long gallery, and the principal guest bedroom where Queen Henrietta Maria had slept were all razed. Major Charlton's mother, Edith, escaped the fire by climbing down the ivy that covered the Hall. Three servants, a land girl and a two-year-old child also escaped.

In wartime, little or no restoration work was possible and the damaged wing was demolished. The Hall thus lost its classic Tudor 'E' 'footprint'. Restrictions on building continued even after the war and, in 1953, a local businessman, Jim Rose of Tamworth, bought the Hall. He and his family gradually restored the building to its former glory.

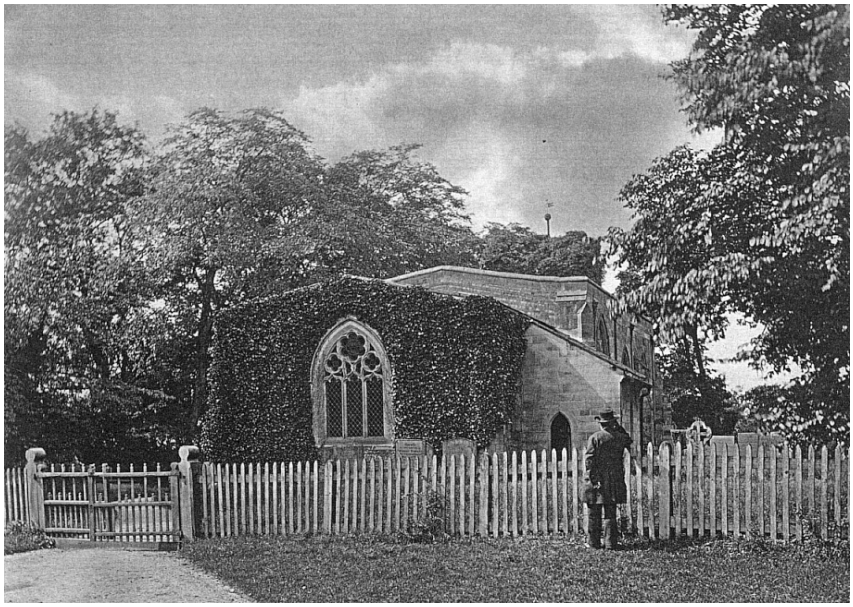
The "lost" west wing in about 1920. The photograph is taken from a position between the Hall and the dovecote

Now on its third owner since it passed out of the hands of the Rose family, the location and grandeur of Croxall Hall make it one of the finest sites in the local area.

The Church of St John The Baptist

How many of the present citizens of Edingale have been inside Croxall church? How many would even guess that this building, not Holy Trinity, undoubtedly has the claim to be the 'senior' church in the civil parish of Edingale?

As we saw earlier, the earliest record of the church was when it was given over to the control of the Augustinian Priory of Repton in 1239. It remained in the control of the priors until the dissolution of the monasteries. Repton was a wealthy institution and that wealth is reflected in its churches. By the early 1500s, the church was a much bigger building than it is today. It seems to have had both a south and north aisle off its nave. The north aisle is supposed to have been demolished around 1500 and the south aisle in the early 1600s. Traces of both are easily visible in the church building today – their absence leaves the present building lacking some cohesion in its appearance. The church was refurbished on three occasions in the nineteenth century, most comprehensively in 1868-70, and many of the present internal fittings and some of the external envelope date from this period. The photograph – copied from Ussher's book - shows a clerical gentleman reviewing this work some time in the 1870s.



Croxall church from the east

The right to appoint clergy went to the manor of Croxall on the Reformation, but soon passed to the king. Appointment to the 'living' of Croxall then remained with the monarch until as late as 1874, when it reverted to the Bishop of Lichfield. The church has been in the diocese of Derby since that diocese was formed early last century. Even so, for much of the first half of the twentieth century, Croxall was served by the vicars of Edingale, which presumably meant that they had a living in two dioceses. It might have been sensible to continue that arrangement even when Edingale joined the Mease Valley parishes, as Croxall church undoubtedly suffers in its isolation from Edingale. Now, both Croxall and the chapel at Catton Hall are served by the vicar of Walton.

Croxall church still shows evidence of its ancient past: there is a small early English window above the priest's door in the south side of the chancel. There are several fourteenth century windows and the Reverend Cox dates most of the tower and the font from the thirteenth century. The belfry has space for three bells, but only one bell hangs in it. Strong oral tradition says that the other two bells are in Edingale church and were moved there when the village was depopulated.

Croxall church interior around 1930 showing the Chantrey monument on the far right

There are many opulent stone monuments recalling the 'great families' of Croxall, Oakley and Catton. Some of these have been damaged in various restorations of the eighteenth century. As might be expected, there are several ancient monuments to the Curzons, but of equal interest are the more modern alabaster monuments. One of these, located on the south wall of the nave, is by Chantrey and has two women leaning on a tomb. These are the daughters of Eusabius Horton of Catton Hall, and one of them, Anne, was immortalised by Byron in his *Hebrew Melodies*.

> "*She walks in beauty, like the night*
> *of cloudless climes and starry skies*
> *And all that's best of dark and bright*
> *Meet in her aspect and her eyes."*

Whatever her relationship with Byron, Lady Wilmot-Horton entered a thirty-five-year marriage with Sir Robert Wilmot-Horton MP (who became Governor of Ceylon), before her death in 1871. She was generous to many causes including Edingale school.

More prosaically, Croxall church also contains the monument to Anna (Maria) Booth of Oakley, the original benefactor of the *Maria Booth Charity* from which Edingale widows benefit each Christmas. Her monument reads:

> *"To the memory of Anna Maria, widow of Charles Booth, late of Oakley, gentleman, deceased, who died 11th February 1870, aged 86 years. The charity which she so long practised has been perpetuated by an annual gift to the poor widows of this parish. Her venerable life, bright with the virtues of a Christian, closed in peace. The dead shall rise incorruptible."*

The church (along with the chapel at Catton) is now in the care of the vicar of Walton and occasional services are held there.

Croxall village

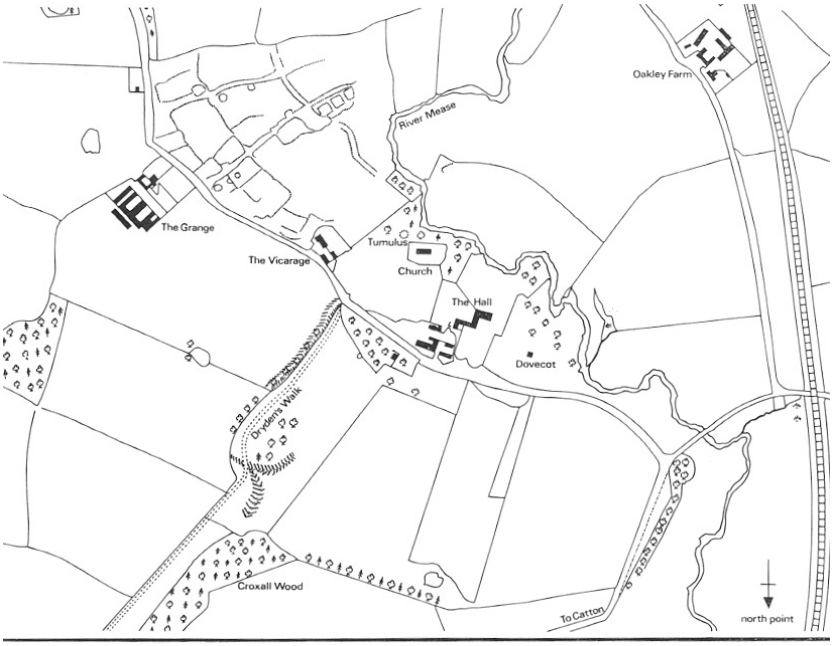
So why did there cease to be a village at Croxall? We are no nearer knowing the answer to this. There are two theories. The first is that Croxall was ravaged by the plague to the extent that remaining villagers could not sustain themselves and the survivors moved to Edingale and Alrewas. The second is that this relocation was forced by one of the lords of the manor at Croxall in order to create a deer park or parkland.

At face value, the former explanation seems more likely and would fit in with a pattern of some of the other 'lost' villages locally. Croxall is not listed in Edward III's poll tax records in 1377 – this is some 50 years after the Black Death first struck this country. Plague is not just a function of the Black Death; the disease was still striking well into the seventeenth century. Lichfield was severely hit by the plague in 1593/94 and again in 1646 (during a siege of the Civil War). Estimates are that between a quarter and a third of the city's population may have died at that time, so Croxall could have been hit too. Also, a visitation of 1596 concluded, "*village formerly stood on south side of church*."

However, there are more subtle arguments of timing that might favour enforced resettlement by a Curzon, or a Dorset lord. If the 'church bells' story is true, Croxall would have been resettled after 1685, the date on one of the bells, and this would then point to resettlement for the purpose of creating parkland or a deer park, as the more substantial dwellings of the time would have had to have been demolished and removed. Croxall certainly had a deer park; it is marked in the old maps of Derbyshire and it is mentioned in both Wolley's *History of Derbyshire* and *Saxton's Survey*. Brick remains are also found occasionally. An innkeeper is listed for Croxall in 1577 but, given the usual confusion about names, this entry could actually relate to Edingale.

Whatever the reason, we do at least know where Croxall village was, as visible signs of its location survived well into the second half of the twentieth century. On 8th December 1948, an RAF reconnaissance plane (perhaps from RAF Lichfield at Fradley aerodrome) took a photograph of Croxall from the air. The long evening shadows were falling on the bare December ground making the outline of the village clearly visible. As the rather grainy photograph – and plan – (drawn by the Staffordshire Archaeological Society) show, the

village lay opposite The Grange (Startins' Farm) with the principal village road intersecting with the main road just north of The Grange. In fact, even today, the roadside ditch is incomplete at this point, which may be the most direct evidence of the village now visible. 'Footprints' of various buildings are clear to see on the aerial photograph. Roads from the village extended almost to Croxall church – and are now obscured by woodland behind White Knights (formerly the vicarage). Also visible – but more clearly marked on the plan – is the path of the ancient road from Alrewas to Edingale. This crossed the Tame by Mytholme Cottage, climbing the bluff at Croxall by the wood marked near the words 'Dryden's Walk' on the plan.



Plan and aerial 'photo of Croxall village, Staffordshire Archaeological Society

Oakley

Oakley only fully became part of the civil parish of Edingale in 1934, when the present boundaries were confirmed. But Oakley has been in the ecclesiastical parish of Croxall for many years. Oakley Farm (now the Llewellyns' residence) is the site of an ancient manor. Written evidence for its existence predates Edingale in that it was mentioned in the will of Wulfric Spot, an eminent Mercian nobleman. There is mention of the village at Oakley - 'Acle' in the Domesday Book - and it was, as noted earlier, site of the discovery of the early British urns and bones.

Robert de Stafford was granted the manor after the Norman conquest (the Staffords still live in the county) but they lost it in the twelfth century when it passed to the Earls of Chester. After this time, Oakley is best seen as having two 'areas of influence': the first stretching from Oakley Farm towards the Mease belonged to whoever owned Catton Hall, and the southern part, along with Mytholme, belonged to the owners of Elford manor. At one time these included the Howards – which in part explains Edingale's (or rather, Croxall's) connection with Mary Howard.

Oakley village is supposed by Peter Stanley to have been sited just to the south of Oakley Farm, either side of where the railway now lies. He refers to the poll tax of Edward III (in the 1370s), which seems to provide evidence of at least 37 people over 14 years of age in Oakley. Very little else is known of the settlement.

Because the manor was effectively split between the great families of Catton and Elford, no grand house with parks, lakes and gardens was created at Oakley since they already existed at Croxall, Catton and Elford. Stanley supposes that the village slowly faded away as its inhabitants sought employment in the grander houses nearby.

Oakley is the site of one of the main routes into our parish – the A513 over Salters' Bridge. This ancient name refers back to the Salters' Way that crossed the Tame around here. Such an old route has crossed – or forded – the Tame at many points. The Alrewas parish registers note in 1601 *"This year, the first of July, the bridge upon the Tame called Salters' bridge, being greatly in decay and broken down was of new begonne and made broder by two foote, which coste the workmanship two hundred pounds …"*. Always prone to flooding, in 1795, there is a reference. *"It is very remarkable that Salters' bridge … sustained very little damage, which is supposed to be preserved from the breadth of the centre arch and the great sweep it commands."*

In 1824, traffic was such that the 'new' 1601 bridge was replaced with the present structure. Sir George Chetwynd was chairman of the relevant 'Sessions' and he gave us the alternative name for the structure: Chetwynd bridge. The bridge is now in the care of English Heritage and is one of the oldest of its type still in use on a major trunk road.

On the same road at its present-day intersection with the minor road to Catton and Edingale, stood a tollgate. Turnpike roads (or toll roads) grew in significance through the eighteenth century as traffic between towns increased. Road maintenance was a haphazard affair and

the absence of coherent management was a barrier to industrial and commercial trade. Groups of individuals were therefore enabled to apply to Parliament to create turnpike trusts. A trust controlling the 'Tamworth Roads' supervised four toll roads. One, the Tamworth and Alrewas Turnpike Road Trust, was responsible for what is now the local section of the A513. The trust operated from 1770 to 1863 and had powers to erect tollhouses, gates and to collect tolls. Not everyone had to pay: people travelling to church on Sunday, mail horses and soldiers on horseback were exempted.

The first mention we have of the Oakley tollgate is in the Croxall burial register in 1826. Anne Tunnicliffe, aged two, drowned in the Mease and her address was given as Oakley Gate. The Croxall census and parish registers record the names of some of the toll collectors: 1838 – Thomas Tilley; 1847 – John Hollis; and 1851 – Richard Billington. By 1881, Robert Beasley lived in the Toll Gate House and his profession was "agricultural labourer", confirming that there were no longer tolls being collected. The fields either side of this site are Turnpike Piece and Toll Bar Close respectively. No trace seems to remain of the Tollgate cottage, although it is clearly marked on the OS map of 1834.

The other major communication route in our parish also runs through Oakley: the railway. This stretch of track opened as the Birmingham and Derby Junction Railway in 1839 but was soon absorbed into the South Staffordshire and then the Midland Railways. On 15th June 1840, some ten months after the line opened, a small station, 'Oakley and Alrewas', was opened where the line crosses the A513 (just to the left of the railway arch when travelling from Edingale to Alrewas). A tall, narrow stationmaster's house stood at the foot of the stairs that are visible even today. The reference to 'Alrewas' was because the LNWR line at Alrewas was not then built, and so our tiny halt really was the station closest to Alrewas. When that was no longer the case, in February 1849, the station was renamed 'Oakley' and, in December 1856, as 'Croxall' until it closed on 9th July 1928. In 1851, trains stopped there eight times a day in each direction.

The station house remained in use after the closure – and many present-day villagers will remember its last occupants in the early 1960s and its sad dereliction until it was finally demolished.

The Croxall parish registers and census record some of the stationmasters: in 1849, William Sutery was the station clerk; in 1851, William Keeling was stationmaster; in 1865, Richard Winter; in 1867, Andersbye Chapman; in 1881, Charles Radcliffe Cooper; in 1896, Thomas Gray; in 1907, Frederick Swain; and in 1909 Henry Winmill. It is presumed that Henry Winmill then remained at the station house because his burial is recorded in the Croxall register for 6th October 1935 – and his address is given as Station House, Oakley portion.

We have been unable to trace any photographs of the station.

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See Oakley tithe map

Insert Oakley tithe map