

☞ The Village in the Nineteenth Century ☞

In the 1880s, former Finmere curate John Burgon recalled village life in the mid-nineteenth century using romantic phrases typical of many writers of his period.

A humbler village one has seldom seen... And yet... There was an air of cleanliness, of decency, even of comfort, about the place and about the people. Squalid poverty there was none. The peasantry behaved respectfully to strangers. The Church, however unattractive aesthetically, was fully adequate to the requirements of the parish, and was filled twice every Sunday with a truly devout and attentive congregation...

The poverty may not have been squalid but it was extensive, and Finmere was far from an idyllic village in which to live.

Palmer's Finmere

For much of the first half of the nineteenth century, the parish can be accurately described as Palmer's Finmere. Although he resided at Mixbury until 1852, Reverend William Jocelyn Palmer dominated life in Finmere for nearly forty years from 1814. John Burgon described him as a 'grave good man, who exercised supreme parental and patriarchal authority throughout the parish.' Palmer took a conscientious interest in the physical and pastoral well-being of his parishioners and brought a period of stability to the church. He made great efforts to improve the lives of the village poor and subsidised the village charities. In return for his benefaction, villagers were expected to abide by Palmer's strict views of how they should conduct their lives.

The parish was a patchwork of fields set to pasture or ploughed for arable crops, and worked by hand and horse. Agriculture was profitable for the landowners and tenants but rarely provided sufficient work for the men of the parish. Poverty had been a problem since the medieval open fields were inclosed in 1667 and probably from before then. Many poorer villagers struggled to find adequate food, clothing and warmth. They were dependent on village charities, poor relief and growing food on the subsidised allotments known as the Poor's Plot.

The main part of the village was known as Towns End and stretched along what is now Fulwell Road between the church and the village pond. In 1851, two-thirds of the villagers lived in this area (238 people). Their crowded cottages, with their thick walls of limestone and thatched roofs, would now fetch a premium price but nearly all have been demolished. Only Westbury Cottage, the Thatched House and Cross Tree Cottage remain. Within Towns

Palmer's work is well documented. He was a prolific writer of letters and made diligent notes of meetings. Several maps of the parish from this period have survived. John Burgon, an outstanding biblical scholar and later Dean of Chichester, was curate during Palmer's illness in 1851–53. Burgon penned a rose-tinted, but informative, portrait of village life in Palmer's time for Blomfield's History of Finmere. In the 1880s, Louisa Ashwell painted a series of watercolours of a village little changed since Palmer's time.



The view towards the Cross Tree

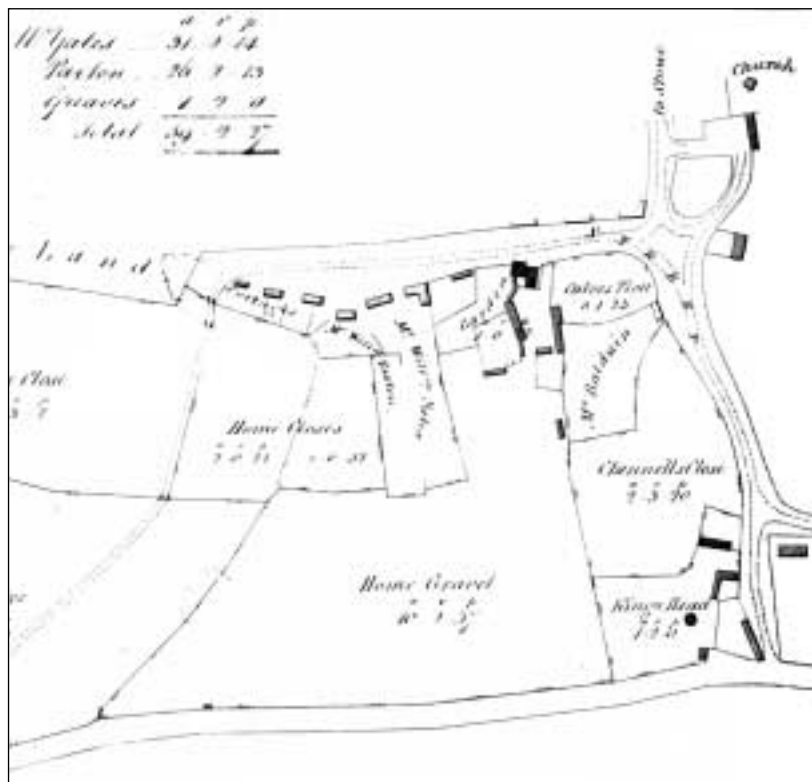
A painting by Louisa Ashwell in the 1880s. The painter was sitting between Town Farm and Falcon Hethe. The railings of Town Farm can be seen on the right. Louisa was wife of Rector Seymour Ashwell.



The Cross Tree in the 1880s

This painting by Louisa Ashwell shows the Cross Tree to the left, already then a substantial tree, and workers' cottages on the Water Stratford Road.

End, Thomas Shephard's farm stood on the north side of the road. This was later known as Tile House Farm and the farmhouse is now Falcon Hethe. Opposite was the farm of Robert Paxton; the farmhouse is now Town Farm at the entrance to Stable Close. Robert was one of the wealthier farmers. He emigrated to America in 1830 and in 1851 poor relatives occupied the farm.



Plan of part of Towns End and the Kings Head: 29 June 1813

The houses and Tile House Farm on the north side of Fulwell Road were omitted from this map.

In the 1880s, a large tree was growing at the cross roads near the church. It was known as the Cross Tree and may have been planted in 1809 when the road was widened. In the mid-nineteenth century, a set of stocks standing near the Cross Tree was used to punish offenders; these had been removed by the 1880s. The Water Stratford Road was probably diverted to its current line in 1809—the narrow lane to the church originally continued past the church tower to rejoin the current road. This left a small strip of land on the opposite (west) side of the road, which originally was used as gardens for the cottages.

The small school along the church lane was erected in 1824. It was packed most days with about sixty children aged five to sixteen, though children were frequently absent to help their parents on the land. Beyond the school was a fine brick building built by Reverend Robert Holt in 1793. This is now Glebe House. Church House, a thatched cottage now demolished, lay between this house and the church.

In the 1850s, St Michael's church was in need of repair and expansion to accommodate the growing congregation. The Parish Clerk, Gabriel Friday, aged seventy-three, administered parish matters. The Rectory was a low thatched cottage at the entrance to what we now call the Old Rectory. It was occupied by the Rector's sister, Mary, and two servants, Thomas Dale and William Spacey. John Burgon described Mary as 'the best ornament of the Rectory... a lady full of almsdeeds, well read and of a most excellent understanding.'

Along what is now Valley Road, five families occupied cottages on the site of the house now known as Titch's Cottage. Opposite, Stone House was a two-storey thatched cottage until 1879. The next house was John Tappin's thatched cottage on the site of the bungalow now named Debdale.

Dr Charles Clark lived at Finmere House with his brother, James. Robert Greaves, publican, brickmaker and farmer, occupied the Kings Head. Bricks were made in two brickyards in the south of the parish, one at Widmore Farm and another further east, and were stored behind the Kings Head. A bakery traded from the house, now named Kings Cote, next door.

There were further clusters of houses around Hawthorne Cottage, on the present Mere Lane, and at Little Tingewick, around the Red Lion.

Outside the straggling village, there were four farms. In 1851, William Markam and Samuel Lett farmed at Widmore, Richard Lambourne at Warren Farm, Mary Tredwell at Bacon's House and William Barrett at Finmere Grounds. Gravel Farm was then just a barn and yard. One in three men laboured on the land. Five farmers employed eighty-four boys and men aged

The original line of the Water Stratford Road can still be seen on the east verge just north of the present Rectory. Miss Margaret Rankin, who inherited the cottages in 1976, gave the strip used for cottage gardens to Fred Tew in 1990. It is now his chicken run.



The view towards the churchyard gate and Church House

The picture was painted by Louisa Ashwell in the 1880s. The churchyard is bounded by Church House (now demolished), which adjoined the present Glebe House.

Palmer's labourers were allowed a quart of Palmer's home brewed beer daily. John Burgon noted that the remains of the rent dinner were put to good use. 'The liquor in which the beef had been boiled, and the remains of the beef and vegetables—with the addition of dumplings and two or three loaves of bread—made an excellent soup, and next day dined one hundred children.'

thirteen to seventy-two, including the Measey brothers who were shepherds; James at Finmere Grounds and John at Bacon's House.

Many village cottages were in a good condition, especially those let at subsidised rents by the Rector. Palmer purchased and let eighteen at subsidised rents from 30s to £3 a year, paid half-yearly. He employed a mason and carpenter to keep the cottages in good repair, and provided his tenants with a dinner of beef and plum pudding when they paid their rents. His tenants, however, faced eviction if they did not conform to his 'conditions of holding,' including to 'maintain a fair character for honesty, sobriety, decency, and good neighbourhood in all respects, and at all times, and towards all persons.' The rules also dictated that tenants' sons and daughters had to enter work, service or take up apprenticeships once of age. Villagers who obeyed the rules were well cared for by Palmer and his sister, Mary, who lived at Finmere Rectory. Those who crossed him encountered the sterner side of his character. After Palmer's death, Seymour Ashwell continued Palmer's good work on the houses, though it is not known if he also hosted rent dinners.

The 1851 Census

Robert Greaves, landlord of the Kings Head, enumerated the first full census of Finmere in 1851. There were 399 people, including nine visitors, living in Finmere parish; 355 lived in the village and 44 on the farms. About 20 people lived in Little Tingewick. Finmere's population was larger than at any time before and is only now again approaching that level after a period of decline.

Thirty-three women were in work including nineteen lacemakers, eleven in service and three assistants to the doctors at Finmere House. The parish also supported a number of tradesmen and craftsmen:

Blacksmiths: John and William Cozens

Brewer: William Adkins at Warren Farm

Butcher: Corbett Coleman

Carpenters: Isaac and Isaac Jones (father and son), William Bayliss and John Tapping

Cooper: Benjamin Godfrey

Errand boy: Joshua Bayliss aged 21

Gardener: James Holland

Gatekeeper: William Baxter, who collected tolls on the Turnpike

Grocer: Charles Cattell, also a shoemaker

Shoemakers: John Hunt, Joseph Aris and James Rouse

Railway labourers: Edward Paxton and Daniel Windsor

Eighty-four year old William Horwood laboured to maintain the roads.

Three men and twenty-one women were paupers. The larger number of women may reflect the Rector's opposition to lacemaking and increasing competition within the industry. Some Finmere paupers had been sent to the workhouse at Brackley. People did not move home as often as today: two-thirds of adult men were born in the parish, along with one-third of adult women.

Palmer's Later Years

In the 1850s, Finmere was rapidly changing. The Buckinghamshire Railway was opened in 1850 as part of the London and North Western Railway (LNWR). The single-track line linked Banbury to Bletchley and Oxford and carried four trains a day in each direction. There was a station near Finmere at Fulwell from which Banbury could be reached in thirty minutes, Oxford and London in two-and-a-half hours. The railways were changing rural life, making it easier to migrate to the towns and, as the towns grew and the villages shrank, they helped villagers keep in touch with distant friends and family. The population of Finmere reached a peak of 399 in 1851, at the end of Palmer's residence. Thereafter, numbers fell as people left to find employment in the towns.

Palmer's health began to fail under the strain of old age and family problems. His family life had at times been gruelling: his wife was seriously ill for several years; a son died at the age of nine; another was lost in a shipwreck homebound from Quebec; a third son, William, caused Palmer considerable anguish as he debated joining the Russian Orthodox Church, finally converting to Catholicism after his father's death. Under these pressures, Palmer's judgement began to fail.

When the Buckinghamshire Railway cut through the north of the parish, it destroyed meadows in the Rector's glebe land. Palmer unwisely used the eight hundred pounds paid as compensation to purchase houses and land near the Rectory on the plot of land now occupied by Titch's Cottage. Six years later, Rector Frederick Walker was given permission to remove the 'Farm House and Outbuildings divided in Five Cottages.'

Two classes of pasture and certain parcels of land on which are now standing a small House and Eleven Cottages and an Infant's School... [The] Cottages were, when purchased, and are now, in a ruinous state and condition; and that a part thereof are so ancient and dilapidated as to admit of no reparation; so that the same are an incumbrance and not any advantage to the Rectory of Finmere. (Faculty to take down and remove certain Cottages belonging to the Rectory of Finmere... 1854)

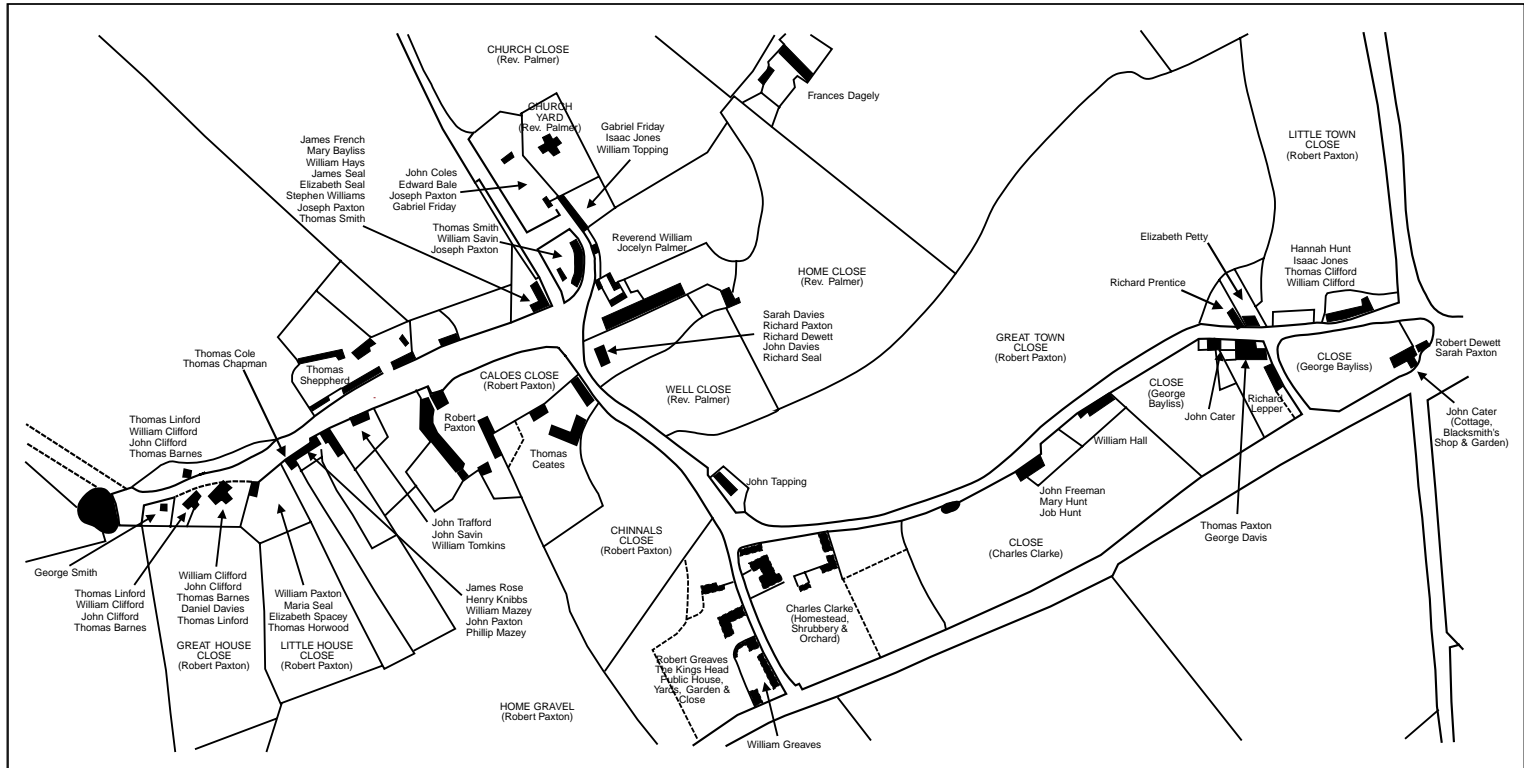


**The view from the Rectory garden towards
Mere Road**

The picture was painted by Louisa Ashwell in the 1880s.

As his faculties weakened, Palmer failed to keep the church in repair and his admonitions of parishioners increased. From 1851, he was too ill to discharge his duties. Curate John Burgon took charge of the parish and recorded Palmer's death:

This saintly man entered into rest on the 28th September, 1853, aged 74 years and 7 months; greatly loved and deeply revered, as well as severely mourned by all that knew him... In compliance with his orders, he was interred in the simplest manner, and sleeps among his children in Mixbury churchyard.



Houses and Tenants in 1840
The map is based on the 1840 Tithe Commutation map.