

A BRIEF HISTORY OF
STAPLEHURST
FROM
ACORN TO OAK

by

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2005

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF STAPLEHURST IN KENT

IS OURS THE ONE AND ONLY STAPLEHURST?

Oh no, there is a Staplehurst in the Isle of Wight and another one in Hampshire. There is even one in Nebraska, USA, where members of the Jull family settled. I hope the material in this book all refers to Staplehurst in Kent.

THE POSITION OF STAPLEHURST IN THE WEALD

Let's start with some definitions. **The Weald** is or was a forest, stretching through Sussex and Kent in the bowl between the chalky North Downs and South Downs. Think of an eye: the chalk is the white of the eye, the clay the iris and the sandstone is the pupil in the centre of the eye. Staplehurst, Frittenden and Marden lie in the Low Weald, in the clay valleys. Cranbrook and Goudhurst are situated on the High Weald, on the sandstone surrounded by the clay.

A den was a clearing in the Weald, used since prehistory for pasturing animals. Men used to come down to the Weald in summer and autumn, bringing their herds with them, to fatten the animals up before winter. Then they would go home to the uplands before the Weald grew impossibly boggy in November. Staplehurst was a den.



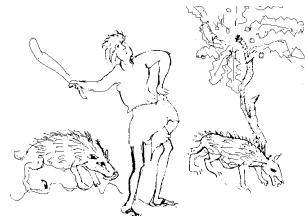
Driving cattle. Copied from "April", Queen Mary's Psalter, BM MS Royal 2Bvii f.75. circa 1325

Let's look at the meaning of Staplehurst. Staple + hurst = post + wood. A post is a man-made object, so Staplehurst is not a descriptive name like Marden, the rich or boggy den. The name was given after men had modified the landscape. Other post-names include Whitstable, the white post, and Staple, just the post.

Perhaps someone put up a post to claim ownership of a certain place, or to mark an important place? The post was probably a marker, *most* probably a Hundred boundary mark (*see page 3*), placed where that boundary crossed the Roman road which is now called the A229. The Hundred system was extended into the Weald in about 1100, and is said to be the area needed to raise one hundred fighting men.

What exactly does hurst mean? It was probably a wooded hill. Many places with -hurst in their name are on hills. (Sometimes den and hurst were used interchangeably).

The Weald was populated in Roman times, but was too dangerous for settlement in what we call the Dark Ages, unless early on by Romano-Britons who fled from the invading Jutes into the forests and the hills. The Weald was used seasonally as grazing land till it was resettled. When? Probably about 1000 AD?



Acorns for swine. Copied from "November", Queen Mary's Psalter, BM MS Royal 2B vii f.81v. circa 1325

So Staplehurst started life as a DEN, one of many, first a "folk" den, available to all of the men on the lathe, then, when the Weald was parcelled out among the manors, one belonging to the men of Hollingbourne Lathe exclusively.

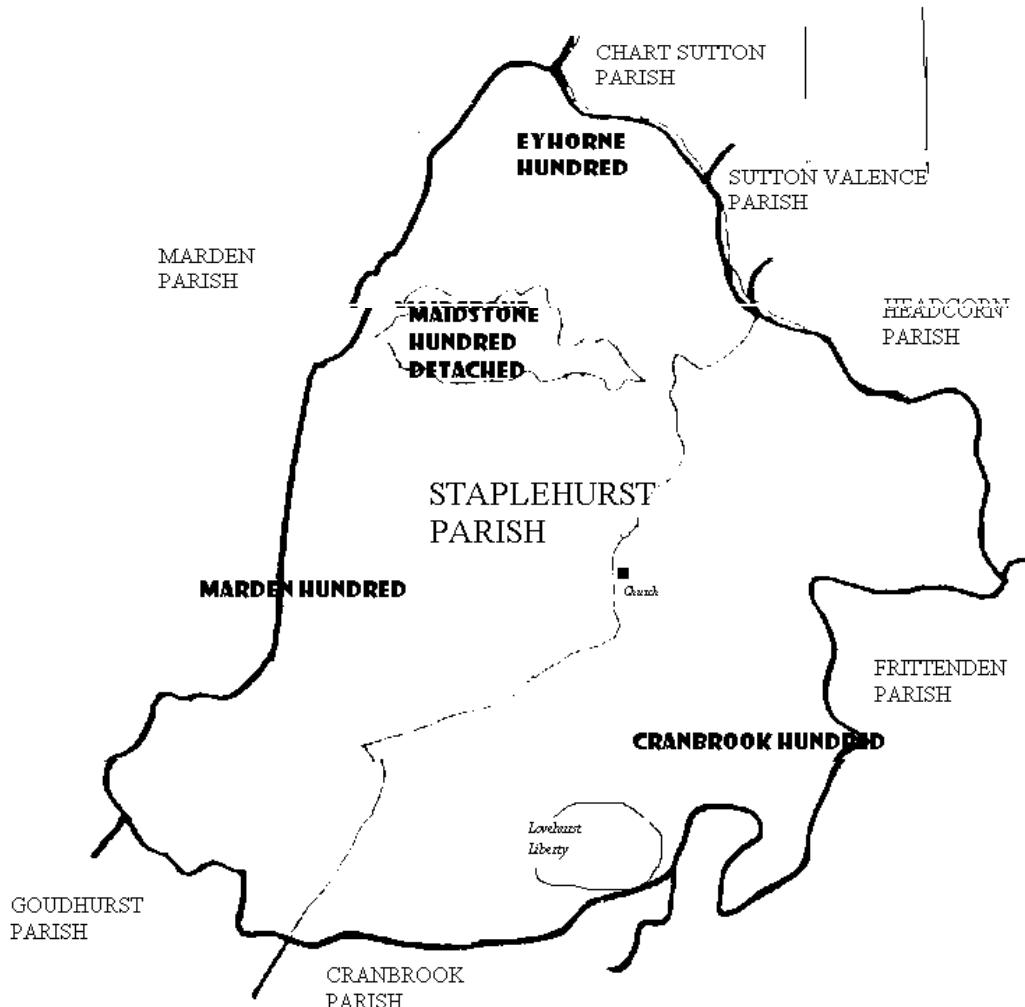
Later it became a Wealden MANOR called **Staplehurst or Bly Court Manor**. Men owed duties and rents to the Manor in which they lived. As they had to travel to their Manor every three weeks to do suit of court, it was easier for those in authority to make sub-manors (like Staplehurst) in the Weald nearer the men's homes. They didn't have to waste time travelling.



Bly Court Manor House, 1938.
Taken from Canon Walker's edition of the Church Guide.

Staplehurst was never a Hundred: in fact it lay in four hundreds - Marden, Cranbrook, Maidstone and Eyhorne, as the map on the next page makes plain. Hundreds were divided into Boroughs. Loddenden Borough in Marden Hundred covered most of Staplehurst village. Northborough in Cranbrook Hundred covered

some of the south of the parish. Staplehurst Borough in Eyhorne Hundred covered the north of the parish, while Detling Borough in Maidstone Hundred reported to Maidstone. Lovehurst Liberty, nominally in Cranbrook Hundred, governed itself.



Map of Staplehurst parish showing the hundreds and surrounding parishes

It really mattered which borough you lived in, because men were responsible for any bad behaviour committed by their neighbours in the borough and could be punished for their neighbour's crimes. Would it work today?

Staplehurst became a PARISH with different boundaries to the Hundreds, and acquired a church. Like most Wealden parishes Staplehurst was huge because so few people lived in the countryside when these boundaries were set out. The parish boundary lies mostly along rivers and streams, but on the west side it now snakes through the middle of fields. I think that area was once all wooded. The church lay on **Bly Court Manor** land in **Cranbrook Hundred**. The first church may have been a wooden building, which was rebuilt later in stone.



The South door of Staplehurst church illustrates the Scandinavian myth of Doomsday, when the serpent which holds the world together will loosen its grip on its own tail, the world will fall apart, and chaos will ensue. The fish will jump on land. The gods will fight. Only one man and one woman will be spared to start the world again. Surt the sunwheel is top centre. Above flies Nithoggr, who eats the dead, and above him is the small cross which turns the pagan myth into Christian art. The only door in England resembling this one is at Stillingfleet, ten miles south of York, in the middle of what was Danish-held territory in 1000 AD. *Taken from Canon Walker's 1938 edition of the Church Guide.*

Besides Staplehurst alias Bly Court there were other manors in Staplehurst parish. Newstead, which belonged to Leeds Abbey, had a chapel, but Staplehurst alias Bly Court had the church and the burial ground. Newstead Chapel was closed down by King Henry VIII in 1546.

Lastly Staplehurst became a VILLAGE, because people preferred living near the church and alongside the road. Other dens grew into farmsteads or into hamlets of three or four houses: Staplehurst village grew bigger than that.



So when we talk about the history of Staplehurst we must be aware of these four definitions. The **den** lost legal significance by the fourteenth century: the **manor** was important from c 1200-c.1750: the **Hundreds** were obsolete by about 1850 (legal matters were decided by Hundreds): and the **Parish** and the **Village** are still with us. In this booklet Staplehurst generally means the Parish.

Therefore Staplehurst was originally the land at the tip of the hill, with the Church or its predecessor (and the Post) silhouetted against the sky whether you were travelling the road north or south. I imagine that the wood (the *hurst*) was quickly cut down for building timber houses, and for firewood.

HISTORICAL STAPLEHURST

History is a record or account of events, almost always written. The first written mention of Staplehurst was in 1232, on a tax list. Obviously the settlement was there before that, but how much earlier? It lies on the Roman road, now called the A229, leading from Amberfield near Maidstone to Bodiam on the Rother. It was not mentioned in Domesday Book in 1086, but not many places in the Weald were. The famous door in the church is variously dated at 1040, 1100 or 1200, but nobody really knows how old it is. They do not even know the age of the church for certain, because Staplehurst is missing from both contemporary lists of Norman churches in Kent, that of the Archbishop of Canterbury and that in the Black Book of the Abbot of St Augustine. The dedication, All Saints, tended to be given to churches founded late.

The manor house of Staplehurst alias Bly Court lay in the valley to the north of the church, next to another manor called Loddenden, a sub-manor of Marden Manor, which lay in Marden Hundred. Staplehurst manor wasn't very large.



Loddenden Manor, Staplehurst, in about 1900.

Between 1232 and 2010 Staplehurst parish has seen the gradual joining up of the hamlets on the main road, until now we motor through an almost continuous band of houses, from Cross at Hand to Knoxbridge. Some houses are new, some date back to the 1300s. Many have vanished altogether, so that even their names are forgotten. Nobody now remembers Horns Lodge, the little settlement disrupted when the railway was built in 1842; or Heasman's Hill in the gap between Loddenden and Staplehurst Town; or where King's Cross was (I don't myself!)

Not much can be found in printed books about Staplehurst, because it was an unimportant place. In manuscript records such as wills, inventories, tax lists, deeds or criminal proceedings, you can unearth a great deal about the people who lived here and their houses or estates. The only way to recreate old Staplehurst is to read the records, to fit them together and to hope that they make better sense when they are viewed overall.

WAS STAPLEHURST A TYPICAL MEDIEVAL KENT VILLAGE?

Kent was a rich county in parts, with good arable and grazing lands. It had trade links between London and the Continent. From Staplehurst the Roman road led southwards to the little harbours on the River Rother, from which one could reach the Continent easily.

The Low Weald was not rich land. Even when the forest had been cleared the Weald clay was difficult to cultivate, but the woods hid deer, wild boar, beaver and wolves, also reserves of iron ore and timber. A living could be made here. Wealden people had to be resourceful (and good at archery). Staplehurst was a typical Wealden village, not as large as Marden or Cranbrook, larger than Frittenden.

Staplehurst seems always to have been rebellious, possibly because, being remote from magistrates' courts, neither its inhabitants nor its masters obeyed orders to do this or that. Let us look at four examples.

The Hundred Rolls of 1279 show that many Staplehurst men were not paying tax to the King. It is true that the Lords of the Manors thought that they had a historic right not to pay tax, but King Edward I speedily disabused them. He had quashed the Liberties enjoyed by the Lords, and his Justices made sure that they would pay in future, and so would their tenants.

In 1317, in the hungry years, many thieves lived here.

In 1381, during the Peasants' Revolt, some rebels from Appledore and Cranbrook en route to Blackheath sacked the Parsonage in Staplehurst and stole twenty pounds. I think that the Rector, John Grantham, must have been the local tax collector to have such a large amount of money on hand. The rebels burnt the poll-tax records too, so that Kent no longer has this important fourteenth-century historical source. This example does not concern Staplehurst people, but I'm sure they were involved in mischief elsewhere, probably in London, where the citizens were appalled at the skinny men who climbed over their houses like rats.

In 1450 the last resident Lord of Bly Court Manor, Robert de Somery, was pardoned for going to London to take part in Jack Cade's Revolt. He took the village barber, who was also the doctor, with him. Robert's widow was buried in 1463, in the church here, next to her man, as she wrote in her will. She left money to Kentish monks and nuns, and to her old school.

Staplehurst was not unique. Other Wealden villages were just as poor, hard to rule and independent. Because the medieval Kings of England were always at war and needed skilled archers in their armies, they had to govern them gently, to allow them both time to practice their archery skills, and enough money to buy their expensive equipment. Chaucer describes a forester dressed in green coat and hood in *The Canterbury Tales*, a man with peacock arrows and a mighty bow, with sword, buckler and dagger, with a knowledge of hunting and woodcraft, the only man the Knight needed to guard him, the Knight's Yeoman. He would have been quite at home in the Weald.

INDUSTRY IN ROMAN, MEDIEVAL AND ELIZABETHAN STAPLEHURST

The first Staplehurst industry was **iron**. The Romans dug for iron ore in the Weald, in Staplehurst and Frittenden among other places. The ore was roasted, processed in small bloom furnaces, then hammered into usable metal. The iron industry moved west to Bedgebury and Sussex, then to the Forest of Dean, but the eleventh or twelfth century ironwork on the South door in Staplehurst church would have been locally made. There was one cutler in Staplehurst, Robert Rydden, who died in 1471, and in the sixteenth century there was a local firm of scythe-smiths surnamed Rode at Broadford in Goudhurst. They had an interest in Duckhurst Manor in Staplehurst.

The second industry was **wood**. From at least Roman times wood was coppiced, that is to say cut every seven to ten years, then burnt in reduced oxygen to make **charcoal** to smelt iron. Though the stumps regrew, the ironmasters in the sixteenth century used so much charcoal to cast cannons and cannonballs that men feared there would be not a tree left standing. In early modern times charcoal fuelled the gunpowder industry and the hop industry. It was also used in towns for cooking and heating because it was a concentrated, almost smokeless fuel.

A great deal more wood was cut, bundled and exported as **firewood** to the Continent through the river ports on the Rother. In England from the fifteenth century the clothiers used wood as fuel: wool had to be washed, dyes had to be boiled, all in water heated by burning wood.

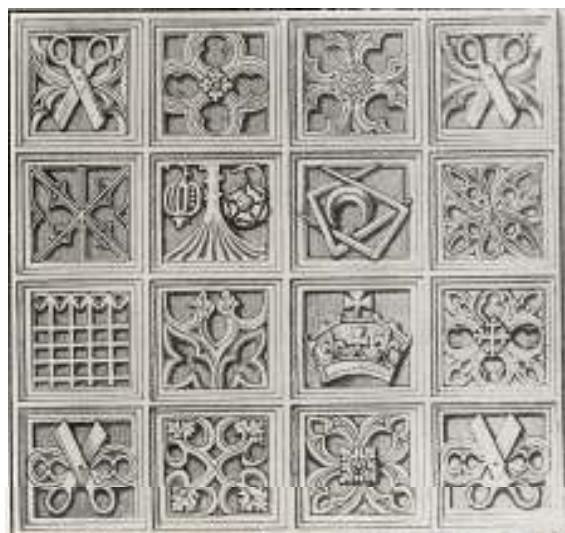
Houses were made of **timber**. The King used huge trees from the Weald, for instance, to help build Westminster Abbey in 1261. Some might have been felled in Snoad Wood, the King's wood in the western bulge of Staplehurst parish. Cloth was fulled and thickened under wooden trip-hammers in wooden watermills.

Specific craftsmen worked in the woods, such as bowyers, fletchers, pailmakers and bodgers who made bows, arrows, spoons, buckets and bowls, and used pole-lathes to turn spinning wheels and other furniture.

The third industry was **tanning**. The Usborne family who built Loddenden were tanners, so were the Buckhursts at Great Wadd. They processed the hides of the big red Kentish oxen into leather for boots, hats, coats, saddles, harness, belts, mugs and jugs, using the dried oak-tree bark called tan with urine and dogs' faeces. Tanning was a smelly trade, best practised downstream and at a distance from other houses.

The fourth industry was **clothmaking**. King Edward III settled Flemish weavers in Cranbrook "to teach the English that art of drapery or weaving and making woollen cloth" in which the English were deficient. They could spin and weave, but they were bad at dyeing and finishing because cloth had traditionally been exported undyed. The men from Ghent also introduced water-powered fulling mills, for which the small streams round Cranbrook were perfect.

In about 1500 Cranbrook clothiers expanded their broadcloth-weaving business into the neighbouring parishes, including Staplehurst. They were successful because they used unskilled labour on the country farms to spin and weave their cloth. If they had been working in towns the Guilds would have trained and overseen their workers and cloth would have been more expensive to make (and of better quality). It took about forty people to manage, fund, spin, weave, dye, finish, transport and sell one broadcloth. For over one hundred years this area was the Black Country of England.



Carved panel from Staplehurst church roof, maybe from a chapel ceiling, showing staples, clothiers' shears and rolls of broadcloth. It may date from 1509 when Henry VIII married Catharine of Aragon, since it has a pomegranate, symbol of Aragon, and a Tudor rose in the sixth square.

There were so many foreigners in the Weald that English speech in Kent was perverted. William Caxton, a Tenterden man who lived from 1422-1491, tells a story about this. Should he, he says, use **EGGS** or **EYREN** as the word for what a hen lays? History has chosen **EGGS**, but at the time he didn't know that.



Kentish people still say catercornered, grattan, emmet instead of diagonally, stubble and ant: and in Charles Dickens' day they still muddled V and W. They called Toby Weller Toby Veller, and John Davis, John Dawes.

The most enduring industry was **farming**. There were still commons in Staplehurst on which cottagers could pasture their cows, and oak and beech trees in the autumn dropped acorns and mast for pigs. A rich man might plant an orchard or try his luck with some hills of hops, but all clothiers needed pasture for their packhorses and rough grazing for their oxen, which pulled the ploughs in the arable fields to prepare them for crops of wheat, barley and tares. Pigs roamed freely in the village, acting as garbage disposal teams. Everybody farmed.

STAPLEHURST HOUSES

The four earliest houses in Staplehurst surviving in part are **Exhurst, The King's Head, Hillcrest/Kent Cottage, and Coppwilliam**, all built between 1370 and 1400 though they were modified later. **Clapper Farmhouse, Little Pagehurst, Cotton's Farmhouse, Peartrees, Lindridge** and **Old Newstead** were built before 1500. These were hall houses built without a chimney stack, with a hearth on the floor in the middle of the 2-storey hall, and they are described in Sarah Pearson's book *A gazetteer of medieval houses in Kent*. She had not expected to find so many early medieval houses in this village.

In 1507, dated by dendrochronology, **Little Harts Heath** was built to a new pattern, having a room built over the hall and an integral chimney with four hearths: in the hall, in the kitchen and in the two bedrooms above them. By Elizabethan times this was usual, and people with old-fashioned hall houses were employing Flemish masons to build double fireplaces, and carpenters to floor over their halls.

Many Tudor houses remain in Staplehurst, such as **Spilsill, Great Wadd, Dorne, Tanyards, Bly Court, Fuller House and Brattle Farm**. They probably belonged to clothiers, were large enough to take a two-man loom in at least one room, and had ample attics in which unused wool and dyestuffs could be stored, where seed corn could be kept safely, and servants could sleep.

Since children could earn their keep from about five years old, and since country life was healthier than town life, the population grew. So did inflation. Small farmers sold their small farms and became day labourers, and their wives and daughters spun wool, work for which they were not paid until the clothier had sold the cloth he made out of their yarn.

RELIGION

When the parish churches were built there was only one religion in England, the Catholic faith led by the Pope, St Peter's successor, in Rome. Churches were brightly painted with Bible pictures and had several altars to honour God and his many saints. Staplehurst church had altars, pictures, statues or stained glass dedicated to All Saints (our Patron Saint), Our Lady (in the Lady Chapel), St George (of England), St Erasmus (with a windlass), St Anthony (who liked pigs

and who found missing things), St Margaret (who helped women in childbirth) and many others. Several priests served each parish.

However Cranbrook clothiers had imported Protestant ideas from the Continent in the fifteenth century, as well as new woollen techniques. The Church tried to root out all heresy.



In 1512 John and Joan Buckherst
Joan and John Dodde,
John and Rabage Benet,
all of Staplehurst,
abjured their heresies.

For three Sundays together they had to walk round the church in their underwear with bare legs and feet, carrying a bundle of wood on their shoulders: bring the wood to the choir steps: and offer a penny at High Mass. The bundle of faggots was a grim warning of what had happened to five of their companions, that is to say, burning to death at the stake.

Staplehurst men and women did not listen to their betters: they clung to their new ideas and were martyred for them. During the confusion of Tudor politics King Henry VIII, in order to marry Anne Boleyn, rejected the Pope as Head of the Church and founded the Church of England, a breakaway Protestant religion headed by the King himself. His son King Edward VI persecuted the Catholics: his daughter Queen Mary persecuted the Protestants, and in 1555 (among many others) martyred three Staplehurst inhabitants, Alice Benden, Alice Potkins and Joan Bradbridge, and a Frittenden couple, Edmund and Catherine Allen: and Queen Elizabeth I., Henry VIII's younger daughter, went back to persecuting Catholics again. The Mayney family who lived at Spilsill remained Catholic, and constructed a priests' hole in the attics in which to hide visiting Catholic priests. Had they been found both they and the Mayneys would have been executed. Conversely the ultra-Protestants, the Anabaptists, thought that King Henry VIII had not distanced himself nearly far enough from the Pope. They too were persecuted.

In 1565 the Government was so fearful of treason in the Weald that it conducted a Communicants' Census in various places. Most of the one for Staplehurst has survived, all but the end of the piece of paper. It is organised by households. We can see that most households had a servant, but this is misleading. From the age of twelve all children were classed as servants, and were expected to work, even when living with their parents. Children under twelve, not being confirmed, were not mentioned on the list. The original document is kept at the Centre for Kentish Studies in Maidstone, reference no. PRC 43/13.31.

The census shows 4 large households of nine people such as that of the tanner James Buckhurst; 5 of seven people and 3 of six. There were 6 single communicants keeping house and 40 couples, 24 with three, 13 with four, and 20 with five in the household before you add any children under 12.

John Baker / Johnne his wife / Alyce Baker / Jane Baker / Agnes Baker ser.
John Rewbuck / Agnes his wife
John Payne / Margery his wife
John Gyles / Agnes his wife
John Mason / Myldred his wife
John Mayny / Elizabeth his wife
James Austen / Agnes his wife
James Duckherst / Mary his wife / Wm Tayler / John Byshope / Thomas Effyke / Steven Rycaud /
Wissn Prevyce / Margery Allyn / Margaret Effyke ser.

Though we know who lived with whom, we do not know where they lived. The 1565 census is in alphabetical order of the householders' Christian names. Nobody gave an address until the arrival of the penny post in 1840.

HARD TIMES

In about 1620 the wool trade collapsed. Staplehurst had by custom fashioned broadcloths, extraordinarily heavy luxury felted material with the merit of being extra wide and almost waterproof. It was mostly exported. But in the late sixteenth century, because new fireplaces were being added to houses, and because being warm was no longer thought to be effeminate, a lighter cloth was more appropriate, and broadcloth became old-fashioned. Some places, like Sandwich, made the "new draperies" and survived.

Cranbrook and Staplehurst continued to make broadcloth, even though none was sold, and the cloth halls in London were stuffed with unwanted goods. As the clothier paid his workforce in arrears after the cloth was sold, there was great misery in the Weald.

Elizabethan legislation had made the parish responsible for all its needy inhabitants, who were returned to their own parish when unable to care for themselves. Staplehurst now needed a Poorhouse and a workhouse

As well as cattle breeding and tanning, which they had always practised, farmers started to make bricks, to grow flax for linen, to grow dye plants, to grow fruit and hops, to get used to desperation, because the Weald is *not* good farming country and the population was very dense. Weavers switched to making linen cloth or wool worsted, the latter on a narrow loom.

The go-getters walked to London or Canterbury. Those fired with religious fervour, wanting a more extreme Protestantism than the Church of England gave them, sailed to America or Barbados. The stay-at-homes stayed at home with stubborn inertia.



Riding pillion c.1625, copied from Tobias Delhafen of Nurenburg's album, BM MS Egerton 1254 f26

RELIGION AGAIN

Religion reared its head again with the Commonwealth in the 1640s, which under Oliver Cromwell came close to communism. King Charles I was defeated, then tried and beheaded in 1649. Church of England Bishops went and Rectors or Vicars were ousted from their livings, to be replaced by Puritan Divines. There were all-day sermons and prayers, no games, no colourful clothes, no Maypoles with dancing, no Christmas. Soldiers were billeted in people's houses and enormous fines had to be found from each village to send to the Government. Royalists' estates were requisitioned. In Staplehurst the Crown Inn had the date 1654 painted on the wall in the soldiers' headquarters.

In 1660 at the Restoration of King Charles II, in came the Church of England Rectors and Vicars again, out went the Divines. The Rector of Staplehurst, John Browne, had died in London during the Commonwealth, and his successor, Henry Kent, was not warmly welcomed. Nobody wanted to pay him tithes, the tenth part of their income. He died in 1650, his successor was appointed in 1660.

In 1662 the man who had run Staplehurst church meanwhile, Puritan Reverend Daniel Poyntell, led his congregation down Staplehurst High Street to his own house, Lower Grove, which he turned into a Meeting House - now the Congregational Church. He was a very fine preacher: people would come from miles away to listen to him. He was also a peaceable man.

The Quakers, led by the former curate of Staplehurst, Mr Howsegoe, and the Anabaptists who met at Spilsill with Mr Kingsnoth, also avoided services at the church. Though at least a third of the Staplehurst population did not attend the Parish Church, risking fines or imprisonment, Rectors still demanded their tithes from everyone. It *was* their only income, but asking for it made them very unpopular.

MORE POPULATION AND POVERTY

The Hearth Tax records of 1661/1662 and 1664 give a mini-census of Staplehurst, limited to heads of household. As they are based on the hundreds they do roughly sort out WHERE people were living - for those two years in which the records

have survived. About half the population was too poor to pay, living in one- or two-hearth houses. Here is an example of some entries.

HUNDRED OF MARDEN			
LODDENDEN BOROUGH			
8 May 1661			
Mr Edward Godden	4 hearths	Mr John Weston	9 hearths
Richard Stider	4	John Py	2
Jeremiah Jennings	2	William Tollhurst	3
William Yorkton	7	Richard Blackbourne	4
Abraham Scoone	4	Walter Viney	2
Thomas Howseygo	4	John Standen	4
John Burren	2	Richard Walter	4
Arthur Hart	3	Matthew Meddhurst	2
Thomas Burren sen,	6	Thomas Usband	6

Mr John Weston was the landlord of what is now the King's Head (then the Bell); Thomas Burren senior was landlord of The Bell (then the Rose and Crown); Thomas Usband lived at Loddenden; Thomas Howseygo at Fisher's Farm. Richard Walter I *think* rented the Rectory; Arthur Hart lived opposite the Church; William Yorkton at Saynden; Mr Edward Godden I *think* at Ely Court. Abraham Scoone was a grocer, Walter Viney a butcher, Arthur Hart a candle-maker.

We know this from their wills, the rate-books, their tombstones or their brushes with the law. It would be hard to establish this from the Hearth Tax list alone.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY IN STAPLEHURST

The eighteenth century was a time of wars. Young men were sent, often willingly, into the Army or the Navy. Any excitement was better than none. Those who came back from Canada, India, Europe or America knew how to fire a gun and how to take orders, perfect fodder for the organisers of smuggling gangs. The Weald was so outside the law that the inhabitants did not consider smuggling to be a crime. Smuggling was more exciting than farm work (if you could find any), and better paid.

There is a strange tombstone on the south side of Staplehurst churchyard to Thomas Hodgson, Officer of the Excise. It has no date of death, gives no age, and Thomas' death is not mentioned in the Parish Register. Was it a real tomb, or perhaps a smuggler's hide? Though Richard Morton, one of our Curate's sons, was a Customs Officer in Staplehurst, and though he might have brought back a colleague's corpse for burial, who paid for this handsome, enigmatic stone?

Nonconformity continued to grow in a village where the pluralist Rectors lived at their other parish while Staplehurst was served by curates. The Quakers declined in numbers, but the Baptists outgrew Spilsill, split into sects and built their own Chapel in Smarden. John Wesley visited and preached in the village several times

at the behest of Joseph Chapman, the vegetarian Minister of the Nonconformist Chapel, who had married an Usborne from Loddenden.

In 1745 the Jacobite rebels, starting from Scotland, nearly reached London before the Hanoverian King George II managed to defeat them. The Rector of Staplehurst from 1786 to 1806 was the Rev. Harry Grove, who owned a pocket handkerchief embroidered in human hair with his Jacobite ancestor's initials, and who at night toasted "The King Over The Water" in Staplehurst Rectory. Apart from regular crime and smuggling, that was as rebellious as eighteenth century Staplehurst got.

In 1755 John Knightley, surgeon, was buried in the churchyard aged 91. He was succeeded by his son of the same name, who lived at Vine House, and who by his powers of persuasion convinced many patients from the coast that Staplehurst was a very healthy place in which to recover from consumption. Several of them still grace the churchyard. Robert Barling wrote in his memoirs that he had a "well-known low cough", no doubt infective.

THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES: BUILDINGS

By the time that Hasted wrote about Staplehurst in 1798 he was able to say that though most of the 88 houses in the parish were old-fashioned and large-timbered, on the hill by the church there were "three or four good modern built houses interspersed among them, which stand pleasantly on the hill, having a fine view over the Weald southward." One of these must be Hill House, one Vine House, and one (by description) part of South View. Green Court's southern side was rebuilt in 1797. Milestone Buildings might be classified as modern in 1798. The (Old) Rectory, however, was not rebuilt until 1808. Dearn, the Cranbrook architect who may have been the underbidder for the contract, says sourly in 1814 that it did not deserve the epithet "handsome" given it by Hasted. Dearn built Great Slaney Farm House at Hawkenbury Bridge, and very handsome that is still.

By the mid-nineteenth century most farms had tied cottages for their labourers to rent, as farmers no longer hired live-in labour. Entrepreneur builders put up rows of cheap cottages, usually on parish boundaries, such as those at Knox Bridge and Cross at Hand, and California Row at Hawkenbury, so very far away.

THE STAPLEHURST HALFPENNY

In 1794 John Simmons the grocer, who was also a tallowchandler, had a copper coin struck to help him give change.



It had a Kentish horse and "For change not fraud" on the reverse, and JS with a stag's head crest and the date on the obverse. Round the edge is "payable at I.Simmons: Staplehurst".

THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY: POVERTY

While Great Britain fought Napoleon there were blockades of the French coast and fewer imports from the Continent, so that English farmers prospered in a modest way. The price of corn went down immediately Napoleon was captured and trade with France was recommenced, so that flour-mills at the coast could buy grain and sell flour much cheaper than country mills. Farmers went bankrupt and could not pay their men. The Swing Riots erupted in 1830, when labourers burnt and destroyed the newly invented threshing machines, which accomplished in days what it had taken a gang of four men with flails all winter to do. No work, no wages, therefore no food, no fire, no house. In Staplehurst the farmers technically committed treason by refusing to be sworn in as special constables against the Swing Riot gangs, because they sympathised with their men.

In the 1820s and 30s wheat (and bread) grew more and more expensive, so that a man could just keep himself and his family alive with his weekly wage. If he became ill and could not work he and his family starved, or asked for parish relief, which was provided in his “home” parish where he (or one of his ancestors) had once held down a job for a full year. Many paupers were sent back to a “home” parish they had never been to before in their lives, where they accepted charity from unwilling benefactors.

As a greater percentage of the population slid below the poverty line, the strain on the ratepayers to pay dole money to the unemployed grew intolerable. Only those with land paid rates, and farmers in their turn became paupers. In 1820 one man moved out of Staplehurst Parish when it was his turn to become Overseer of the Poor.

Generally speaking the Overseers did a fine job: we still have their accounts from 1646 to 1835, and we can see how much of the parish income went on rent, fuel, food, medicine and clothing for the poor. There was a school in the Poorhouse too. You can find these records at CKS P347/12/1-12. From 1754 the Poorhouse was at Bly Court in Chapel Lane, which was gradually enlarged with a fringe of tiny terraced cottages.

In 1834 the Staplehurst Poorhouse at Bly Court was given up, and the paupers moved to the newly built regional Workhouse at Coxheath in Linton Parish. There was no more outside relief, when paupers stayed in their own homes. They now had to go into segregated halls, where husbands were split from wives, wives from children. Coxheath was five miles from Staplehurst, so there were few visits from old neighbours and friends. The Poorhouse was made as unattractive as possible.

At the new Workhouse the regime was so strict and parsimonious that some paupers chewed the raw animal bones they were grinding into bone meal from which to make fertiliser and bone china.

Copied from William



Hogarth's "Gin Lane".

When a pauper died the Workhouse authorities could sell his or her body to the dreaded anatomists, and without a body you could not rise again at the Second Coming of Christ. You were doomed to eternal hell. This explains why our great great grandmothers and grandfathers held the Poorhouse in such horror.

THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY: COMMUNICATIONS

In the Weald all roads were muddy. Charitable medieval people left money to mend roads in their wills. Apart from the Roman road, the A229, their roads were nine feet in width, ample for packhorses. Loddenden has a portion of a packhorse track exposed in front of the gates, made of Bethersden marble slabs set into the clay at a 45 degree angle. Beside this track was an unpaved road suitable for oxen. When wagons came into use, about 1600, they kept two wheels on the narrow causeway and dragged the other two through the unpaved area alongside, thus ruining both surfaces. In winter wagons slid on their axles through the mud: in summer, though the roads were ploughed to level them, they ran on the baked clay surface in foot-deep ruts like inverted railway lines. You really did not wish to meet another wagon.

In 1759 the road through Staplehurst became a turnpike, run by a Turnpike Trust which levied fees at various gates to pay for repairs to the road. The Staplehurst tollgates were placed at Cross at Hand and Knoxbridge. The Turnpike Trust used sand to repair the road surface because stone was scarce in the Weald. This blew in the wind, causing irritation to eyes. Many locals had shares in the Turnpike Trust, and were happy with them - until the railway came in 1842 and turnpike traffic declined.

In 1834 the road through Staplehurst was improved by removing the brow of the hill by the Bell Inn and filling in the deep valley to the north, by Little Loddenden. This was part of a plan to modernise the mail service by linking Hastings to Staplehurst.

In 1842 the railway reached Staplehurst. This was the important line between London and the South Coast. Its planners had intended it to go through Maidstone, but Lord Romney of The Mote refused to have smoke visible from his windows, so they routed it through the empty Weald instead.



“Southview” and “The Bell Inn” after 1834, when the brow of Staplehurst Hill was lowered.

The engineers planned to have a big terminus here, with workshops and assembly sheds: but when they bored for water on Houndsburst Farm they found that it was salty, and salt water is no good for engines. So they changed their plans and built the workshops at Ashford instead. We might have been Ashford!

In 1835, when the railway was not yet built, Staplehurst saw its first commuter, Henry Hoare of Iden Manor. He married Lady Mary Marsham, daughter of Lord Romney of The Mote in Maidstone. Henry and the Lady Mary lived for half the year in Staplehurst and half the year in London, where Henry co-managed Hoare's Bank in Fleet Street. In the course of time the couple produced twelve children.



The East window in the church commemorates them, and was erected in 1888 by their eleven surviving children.

Henry Hoare loved building: he transformed the small farmhouse at Little Iden into a three-storey Italianate mansion, which looked as much like Osborne House (Queen Victoria's country retreat in the Isle of Wight) as he could manage. He was still enlarging it when he died in 1866. He is buried outside the east end of Staplehurst church, just below the window which his children built.

On the west wall inside the church is a monument to the Hoare children's nanny, Marianne Stammers, who served the family for eighty years. Here is a picture of her in old age, drawn by one of Henry Hoare's daughters.

Mary Ann Stammers
was at Staplehurst
Place in 1841, aged
19, under her aunt
Hannah Stammers,
who was in charge
of the nursery.

She died in 1917 at
White Plat, home of
Sophia Hoare, aged
95.



EMIGRATION

In the 1820s the Rector, Thomas Waldron Hornbuckle started a parish weaving shop to give work to some of the paupers. It failed in 1826, so he turned to emigration as an answer. The largest party of emigrants, six families, 47 Staplehurst men, women and children, left for New Zealand on the ship "Bolton" in 1839. They were assisted emigrants, given their passage to remove them and their children from dependence on the Staplehurst rates. One of the men wrote back in 1842 to say that they had had the best seeds, tools etc of any, and that, having landed with a shilling in his pocket, he now had 2 houses, and had bought the only mangle in Wellington for his wife, who was earning 29 shillings a week with it.

The Maori Wars had not at that point broken out, for there were many hardships and atrocities to endure in the 1860's in New Zealand. Not all emigration was assisted: other families paid their own way to new lives in new places.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE RAILWAY

People in Maidstone really thought that Staplehurst was going to take all their prosperity away. They couldn't believe how inept the inhabitants were at forward planning and making money.

It took Henry Hoare to set up a Hotel (The South Eastern) and a shop (The Market Stores) near the new Station. The railway passengers had no street lighting , not even a pavement, to lead them to the village, just a muddy track beside the empty road, with hop-gardens on either side.



The South Eastern Hotel and The Stores, built in 1846 opposite Staplehurst Railway Station.

In 1845, though, they remarked that the railway had "greatly increased traffic on the road." This was because of the Post, which took advantage of the new fast railway. Staplehurst became the Post Town for most of Kent, from Gravesend in

the North to Hastings in the South. That's why they had shaved the top off the hill in 1834.

This importance lasted only until Maidstone had recovered itself and managed, in 1845, to get a branch line connection from Paddock Wood (to Maidstone West station) and another branch line connection from Chatham (to Maidstone East station).

The railway builders thought the lines would be used for freight (fish manure from the coast came to mind, and sheep for Smithfield Market, and stone for road-mending) and for long distance travel via the boat-train to the Channel; but there were also many local passengers, especially the poor, who had had to rely on feet before. Hop-pickers used trains for their annual working holidays in Kent.

Other people from London came with easels seeking the picturesque, and the Bed & Breakfast tradition was born. Later, from the 1880s, Randolph Bourne ran The Cycleries in Station Road, where passengers could hire a bicycle for a week or a day.

Local industry woke up. The brickyard beyond the station, the hop-farmers who started a hop-market in the South Eastern Hotel in 1846, the little men who crammed capons (fattened chickens) on a five acre smallholding, the others who grew strawberries on one acre, the dairymen whose churns went on the milk train, all used the train to get their produce to London. Until the late 1870's there was a bad recession in England, and, as always in recessions, luxury goods sold better than necessities.

Inevitably the commuters came. Station Road began to fill with houses, though it took a long time. Sorrento, built in 1861, was the first. Builders enjoyed the boom.



Returning from the station to Lovehurst Manor Farm with empty churns, c.1910.

POPULATION

From the 1564 census of communicants we can estimate that at that date there were about 650 people in Staplehurst. From 1801 we know the population of Staplehurst, thanks to the censuses taken every ten years. By 1801 it had nearly doubled to 1220. In 1831 it was 1484: in 1861, thanks to the railway, it was 1695.

The 1841 census and the 1839-42 Tithe Map should be the same, given a few movers: but they aren't. Obviously some labourers are living in barns or attics.

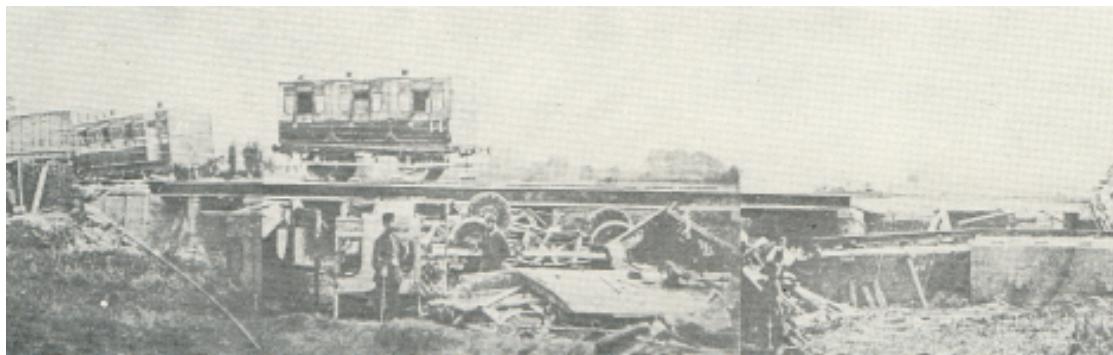
The Tithe Map gives us a bird's eye view of the parish, beautifully drawn, on a scale of 25 inches to the mile. You can trace the boundaries of the modern housing estates in the fields that were there before, and work out what land belonged to which property. The map itself comes in two parts, East and West, and the data is written in the accompanying apportionment book.

FAME

In 1865 Staplehurst's most memorable event occurred, when Charles Dickens the famous novelist was involved - with his mistress and her mother - in a railway accident at a bridge over the River Beult near Hawkenbury.

Ten people were killed, including one man only identified by the laundry mark on his socks, and many more were injured, including Dickens' friend, a young actress called Ellen Ternan.

The stationmaster at Staplehurst alerted Headcorn, Ashford and London by telegraph, and sent a local doctor to the scene within 45 minutes, which could hardly be bettered today. Dickens and the Ternans did not stay overnight in Staplehurst, but went back to London on the train which had brought most of the doctors from St Thomas' Hospital



Photograph of Staplehurst Train Crash, 9 June 1865, taken by Staplehurst hairdresser and photographer Frederick Watson

down to help. The crash happened because Henry Benge, an experienced head ganger, removed rails on that bridge to renew the timber underneath. He thought he had 23 hours to do the job, but had only one until the Tide train (which changed its time daily) came up the line from the Coast, running at 50 miles per hour.

THE MARKET

In about 1869 several market traders, dissatisfied with stall prices at Ashford, set up a market in Staplehurst. The railway provided a siding adjacent to Market Street where an engine could wait to load animals and goods. The market was shut down in about 1937. Recently a well-attended Sunday market has set up in the Station car park



Staplehurst Market circa 1936.

EDUCATION

A new Board School was built in 1873 on what had been called Calves Field. Staplehurst had had a school since at least 1659, when a legacy from Lancelot Bathurst paid “some honest pore paynefull scholemaster” to take in “six or more very pore Children,” along with the children of richer parents who paid tuition fees. Only boys could apply for a place. Mr Beadle, the last of the “Foundation” masters, retired from his boarding school at Hill House in 1832. The Parish School opened immediately in new premises in Chapel Lane, teaching the Three R’s (reading, writing and arithmetic) but no Latin. In 1873 Staplehurst residents, in response to the Education Act, paid for a purpose-built new Board School, with three divisions (Boys, Girls and Infants), and with a Head for each division. The building also incorporated two houses, for the Boys’ Headmaster and the Girls’ Headmistress. The Parish School building in Chapel Lane was sold, and became Mr Harris’ wagon and carpentry works.



Staplehurst School c. 1900. Boys on the left, girls on the right, infants in the middle.

The first Headmaster was Mr Oliver, who had many battles with parents about cleanliness and attendance at school. One parent wanted to use him as a permanent thrashing machine. Term times were altered to allow for hop picking, when no children came anyway, since they were far too busy earning money. Children stayed in the school till they were about 13, pupil teachers till they were

17 or 18. Those who could pass the Leaving Certificate examination were allowed to leave early.



Mr William Oliver (Boys' School Headmaster) between Mr Thomas Reeves and Mrs A M Reeves (Girls' School Headmistress), c. 1901.

IMMIGRATION

Travel had become commonplace. In 1890 the Scott family with seven sons moved to Couchman Green Farm from the Orkney Islands. They had never seen soft fruit or hops before, and thought the house very flimsy, though its brick floors were an improvement on their old blackhouse because they were rat-proof. David reassured his mother that the winds in Kent were not so bad as in Orkney, and that the house would not fall down.

In 1904 the Steel family moved to Lovehurst Manor from Ayrshire, bringing all their stock by train, with a night spent in Birmingham for feeding and watering them. You can see that local interest in the farms was slight, and that farming was in a slump.



The Steel family at Lovehurst Manor

Also in 1904 William Hoare decided to sell his estate at Iden with both manor houses, old and new, because bankruptcy stared him in the face. By now the estate included most of the southern half of the parish. Because of the slump some farms were not finally sold until 1913. The family had helped the poor with clothing clubs, soup

kitchens, savings clubs and employment: and the church with much building work. They went to Benenden.

The Usborne family from Loddenden died out also. They had lived in Staplehurst much longer, since at least 1550.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Modernity struck, but not everywhere at once. In 1903 the North Kent Water Company (now the Mid Kent) brought piped water to the village.

In 1904 the Martyrs' Memorial was set up at the Marden crossroads by the Protestants' Association to remind people of the Maryan martyrs from Staplehurst and Frittenden who had died for their faith in 1555.



The Martyrs' Memorial

In 1908 Doctor Bennett owned a Lanchester, the first car in Staplehurst.

In 1913 the first motor bus plied between Maidstone and Cranbrook at a maximum 12mph, taking the place of the carrier's horse van. A few cars shared the road with governess carts and barouches.

Staplehurst had had gas since the 1870's, supplied from a spherical gasholder in Marden Road (essential to light the path from the station to the village). It had to wait till 1933 for electricity, though the big houses made their own with plants powered by stationary engines.

On Coronation night in 1911 the derelict windmill behind the church, built in 1805, was set on fire by disaffected young men who had been denied a bonfire. Only the brick foundation walls were left. They are still there. It made a glorious blaze, and the youths did have the decency first to let out the chickens roosting inside.



THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Members of the Seligman family who had bought Iden Manor (with both Manor Houses) from the Hoares were interned during World War I. There were scare stories of lights signalling from the top of the hill to the Zeppelins above.



Iden Manor, Staplehurst

They were good to the village people, allowing the boys to bathe in the lake in the early morning, and keeping on the tradition of flower shows and cricket and football matches in Iden Park which had been started by the Hoare family.

The memorial to the dead of World War One in St George's Chapel in Staplehurst Church commemorates forty-two Staplehurst men.

This includes, for example, Charles Edward Harris from Chapel Lane, who died at Epernay in 1918, but not his brother John Edwin Harris, victim of mustard gas and tuberculosis, who died eight years later at a sanatorium in Switzerland.

Food was scarce during the war: we nearly starved. The Misses Hallward at Scarsden on the Frittenden Road ate a frozen parsnip for Christmas dinner. That is why the government set up rationing so early in World War Two.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Another economic depression in the 1930s was followed by another war from 1939-1945. This time Staplehurst was involved in the planning.

Ultra-secret guerrilla fighters, trained by Ian Fleming's brother Peter, made hideouts and ammunition dumps in the south-east so that, had the Germans invaded, they could have emerged behind their lines to attack. Ian and Peter had spent school holidays in Staplehurst, and knew the district well. One of the hidden camps was in Staplehurst but I don't know where.

Mrs Cooper and her son Jim, hop-pickers from London, on Brattle Farm, 1920s.



On Sunday 15 September 1940 the Battle of Britain took place overhead. The day before Freda Tomlin noted in her diary, “At 4.30pm we saw about 100 light bombers going towards London.” She was picking hops at Dunbury Court, Chart Sutton.

She continues, “George had measured out five bins when we heard machine gun fire, so he got his hat and put it on, because as he says, “You never know what might come down.” A few moments later a Hurricane came down in a spin ...”

German bombers used to follow the shining railway tracks from the coast to London, and Staplehurst was the place where the Biggin Hill pilots intercepted them, having received warning of their coming from watchers on the coast.

Freda Tomlin wrote in her diary, “We heard terrific machine-gun fire and roarings and zoomings during the sermon...the station...was on fire...one wing landed on the roof of “Station Cottages”. The pilot, the booking office clerk and a plate-layer, who was being served in Nolan’s shop, were killed. The station master was injured but not seriously....Mrs Moss says that 19 bombs have dropped on Mr F. Tipples farm (Sweetlands) and they have not exploded yet.”

On Saturday 28 September 1940 a magnetic mine blew in windows from Marden Road to Goudhurst Road to the Station. Casualties: one person cut by glass, three sheep killed, one sheep injured.

Mr Hodges was not so lucky in his baker’s shop in Mill Lane. He was badly injured when a doodlebug hit, but he insisted on arranging for an alternative supply of bread for the village before he was taken to hospital.



The baker’s shop in Mill Lane after a V1 doodlebug attack in August 1944

In 1943 an airfield with lightweight metal tracking was set up in 3 months on Milking Pail Farm by the Royal Air Force, to serve as a base for the Canadians

who arrived with their Spitfires on August 6th. The metal tracking was too weak, so was replaced with something stronger. Every hen run in the district was fashioned out of the original wirework.

On 10 October during an initiative exercise five Canadians stole two Spitfires and a Tiger Moth from Ashford and an army bus from Headcorn on their way home to Staplehurst. Their initiative was not appreciated.

The Canadians made way for the Americans in 1944. They used the airfield on D-Day to invade France, then moved over there. The strong steel tracking was taken up and went to France too.



Members of USAAF 363rd FG, at Staplehurst Airfield from 1 April to 1 July 1944

The Army had a base along Headcorn Road called the Loose Barracks. After 1945 this was used to house demobbed men until the Council houses were built on South Bank. Then it became a gypsy encampment. In spite of its existing concrete roads, standings, electricity, water and sewage provision, the owner of the field could never get planning permission there, so the whole site was returned to grass. It is now the Jubilee playing fields.

POST WAR

After the war houses in Staplehurst were patched up, or, like Mill House and Well Cottage and The Firs, taken down so that the materials might be used in the patching process. There was a serious shortage of tiles. Council houses were built at Church Green and at Pinnock Lane.

The population did not rise above 2000 till 1961: then, after new estates of starter homes designed for young commuters had been built in the middle of the village, it exploded to 4550 by 1971. In 1951 there had been seven regular commuters to London: in the 1990s there were a thousand season ticket holders.

Staplehurst became a dormitory town, filled with young mothers and babies in the day, who were joined by their husbands and fathers in the evenings and at

weekends. School numbers shot up, and eventually three new elementary schools were built in Surrenden fields. The old school was bought as a Village Hall, but Kent County Council sold its playgrounds to the Cheshire Homes, who moved from Mote Lodge in Maidstone to this new purpose-built accommodation. A bypass was promised.

By 1985 the population had exceeded 6000, so that Staplehurst was (officially) no longer a village, but a small rural town. The Women's Institute ran a competition for a Village Sign in 1984. The winning entry featured a train, the A229 road, and the houses on Staplehurst hill, complete with a swinging pub sign



Felling the oak for Staplehurst Village Sign in Maplehurst woods, 1984.

In 2000 Staplehurst greeted new inhabitants for 152 houses on the Limetrees estate built in Marden Road, but the promised bypass never appeared. The population in the 2001 census was 6003.



The advent of another 152 houses was delayed for two years in 2004, while there are rumours that a Tesco supermarket might be built on the brown land of the station car park, if the cars can be moved to the marshy ground to the north.

In 2003 Staplehurst won the competition for the Best Large Village in Kent because of its perceived care for all its inhabitants. There are clubs for men, women, children, gardeners, thespians, photographers, model railway enthusiasts, the curious, the aged, the young and the young at heart. There is a village website to keep us in touch, and people from five to ninety-five who regularly use it.

There are four churches which interact in worship (there used to be five, but the nuns have sold the arrow-shaped triple-aisled Roman Catholic chapel at Iden Manor and moved away, and the developers pulled it down in 2006). The two doctors' surgeries are due to close, then reopen in the new Medical Centre behind the Library, built on part of the Primary School playing fields.

Staplehurst has no secondary school yet, and probably never will have since the birth rate in the twenty-first century is falling fast. This circumstance sadly divides the children at 11, half going north to Maidstone secondary schools, half going south to Angley and Cranbrook schools. This split has a historical basis, since Staplehurst was divided thus in the days of the Hundred system.

Staplehurst still has no cinema, no swimming pool, and not much sense of itself as an entity. It didn't even mark the Millennium with a public monument. To answer this, in 2007 the Skateboard Park was opened in the Jubilee Fields. We look forward to a fleet-footed, well-balanced future population.

Staplehurst has an ancient and honourable past. It deserves some civic pride!

I ❤️ Staplehurst