

2.0 HISTORICAL VILLAGE TO THE CURRENT DAY

2.1 History

The Parish of Leigh on Mendip lies on the north facing slopes of the Mendip Hills approximately half way between the market towns of Frome and Shepton Mallet. The actual village of Leigh on Mendip is a linear settlement running east to west on a plateau of carboniferous limestone called the Mendip Plateau.

There is evidence of human activity dating back to pre-Roman times. Prior to the expansion of Halecombe quarry, there were signs of flint working in the area but, with the obliteration of the evidence, it is not known whether the material being worked was a small, localised, igneous intrusion (as at Moonshill quarry, Stoke St. Michael) or material imported to the site. Pottery shards have also been discovered in the area.



First mention of the area of land we now know as Leigh on Mendip is in a record from Glastonbury Abbey dated 681 AD chronicling the gift of land by Hedda, Bishop of Winchester to the Abbey. The parish is referred to as Luntocae – in fact a very Roman sounding name – and probably the source of the pronunciation of the name “Leigh” to this day.

As far as documentary evidence is concerned using the modern name, the earliest document to mention Leigh on Mendip is a charter by King Edmund dated 942 AD granting land to Glastonbury Abbey. The Parish of Leigh on Mendip was part of that land and remained so until the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530's.

At that time, Glastonbury Abbey was the most powerful and wealthy religious institution in England. Much of that wealth came from the woollen industry, developing in the



heavily wooded hills to the north east of the Abbey proper. Although the hills had a relatively low human population, gradual deforestation was opening up what had previously been unproductive land. Certainly from the beginning of the 16th century, the processing of wool was the most important industry in the parish of Leigh on Mendip.

On the dissolution of the monasteries, the three parishes, which were to be known as the Mells Estate, were sold by the King to Thomas and John Horner for the sum of £1,802. The parishes were Leigh on Mendip (spelt Lye in the original document), Mells (Melles) and Nunney (Nonney). The estate was to remain in the Horner family until 1922 when the whole estate was sold off after the death of the last remaining Horner during the Great War.

The Mells estate is thought to be the inspiration for “The Plum” in the children’s nursery rhyme “Little Jack Horner”.

The parish church of Leigh on Mendip dates from Norman times, although much was added in the 15th century, including the bell tower. In his series “The Kings England”, Arthur Mee described it as “The jewel of the Mendips”. A tad fanciful, perhaps, but it remains a striking and important building dominating the surrounding countryside. It is dedicated to St. Giles, the patron saint of cripples and mendicants. There is an interesting link in that the village was on the pilgrim route to Glastonbury and several of the houses close to the Church were actually used as pilgrim accommodation.

Until the middle of the 18th century the economy of the parish was, almost entirely, agricultural. Three large farms dominated and still exist to this day. They were Manor Farm, Great House Farm and Sparks Farm. Smaller farms that are still in existence include Grove Shute Farm, Soho Farm and Whitehall (Whitehole) Farm.



3

There still remained, however, a large amount of timber in the ancient woodlands not removed for the purposes of sheep rearing. This was to become economically significant when, in 1791, James Fussell – described as an “edged tool maker” – set up an iron forge in Mells. As the forge grew in size, a sawmill was established in Leigh on Mendip to produce wooden handles for the iron tools being produced by Fussell. Over the next century, small metal working concerns would spring up all along the banks of the stream marking the northern parish boundary.

In the 19th century the work of the sawmills expanded to include the production of wooden pit props for the developing North Somerset Coal Field. It has only recently ceased operation but its importance to the parish economy is still remembered, with the

renovation of the chimney of the boiler house and the naming of a small 1990’s development after it.



4

Mineral extraction, within the parish, was traditionally limited to cut stone required for local building projects. From the air, there are the remains of, literally, dozens of small disused quarries. The desperate need for building materials during, and immediately after, the Second World War fuelled a massive expansion in quarrying aggregate in the whole of the Mendips. Leigh on Mendip

was not left untouched by that expansion. Halecombe quarry is now the biggest single employer in the parish but (to put things into perspective) employs a very small minority of inhabitants of the parish. The majority of people in employment in the parish, however, work outside the parish boundaries.

2.2 Present Day

The present day village of **Leigh on Mendip** (population 501 at the 2001 census) lies, like an open bracelet across part of the Mendip hills with the central jewel being the beautiful church of St. Giles. The village, which is situated approximately half way between the towns of **Frome** and **Shepton Mallet** and to the north of the A361, has magnificent views with many adornments, that when added together make up a thriving community which is the envy of many other villages.



It also 'hosts' a strong **Equestrian** activity with public footpaths covering the surrounding area giving rise to the healthy and active recreation of riding and walking.

There is a **Bus service** to other parts of the county plus **Free buses** to nearby supermarkets. **Police Community Support Officers** and **Neighbourhood Watch** operate within the village.



Leigh on Mendip First School at present educating 42 children, gathers together fresh young minds and guides them on the path of useful, happy and responsible citizenship. Education for children over nine years old is provided in Frome, which is 6 miles away, at Oakfield Middle School and Frome Community College. **Owl Babies' Pre-School**, on the same site as the school, provides an excellent start for younger children.

Various Businesses contribute to the overall productivity and stability of the community. **Farming**, arable and dairy, is carried out in various locations. There is a very busy **Vehicle Workshop** established in 1946 by the present owner's father. General repairs are carried out with MOTs in nearby Holcombe.

There is also a popular **Fabrics Supplier**. In addition to these, there are a good many self-employed people who have made the village their home.





10

There is a **Stonemasons** with a wide circle of customers and a well-stocked yard.



11



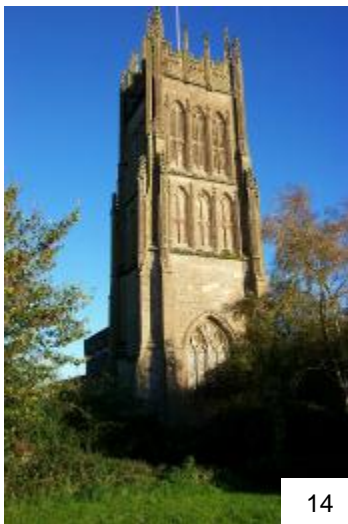
12

Quarrying – Halecombe quarry was reopened in 1984, owned by Hobbs Holdings and operated by Tarmac Ltd. and extracts limestone for road construction and as a basis for cement. It employs on a day to day basis about 80 people including sub-contractors, as well as generously supporting the annual Leigh on Mendip Country Fair.

The Bell Inn provides relaxation, entertainment and excellent food after the labours and frustrations of the busy working day and acts as a focal point for the community as a whole. Facilities include a restaurant, skittle alley and a pool table for the youth of the village. It is a popular venue for visitors from across Somerset.



13



14

St. Giles' Church provides for both the spiritual and physical needs of the community and the sense of peace and tranquillity felt upon entering this House of God has to be experienced to be believed.



15



16

The Memorial Hall, managed most efficiently by a committee of volunteers, provides a venue for various activities such as monthly community coffee mornings, art classes, yoga classes, short mat bowls, the toddler group and private parties as well as many fund raising events. The hall is also used by the Parish Council and for annual events like the harvest supper and auction, which, together with Burn's Night, always prove

a "sell out". It also provides the venue for the **Women's Institute**, members of which enjoy monthly meetings and social functions together with group and county events. The photograph shows the carved stone Millennium Bench to the left of the hall.

The **Recreation Field** committee support more energetic activities such as regular football and cricket matches, as well as providing a children's play area and basketball net. The field provides a substantial open space within the village for play, quiet relaxation or sitting on one of the many benches.



17



18

The annual **Country Fair and Dog Show**, based on this field, with its many stalls, games, static displays and musical offerings attracts visitors and dog enthusiasts from far and wide.

It is organised by a separate committee of volunteers. The Fair donates the profits made to the village organisations that have taken part.

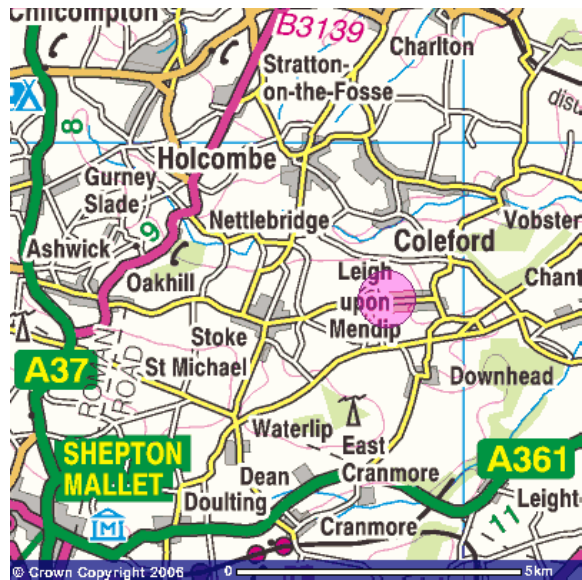


19

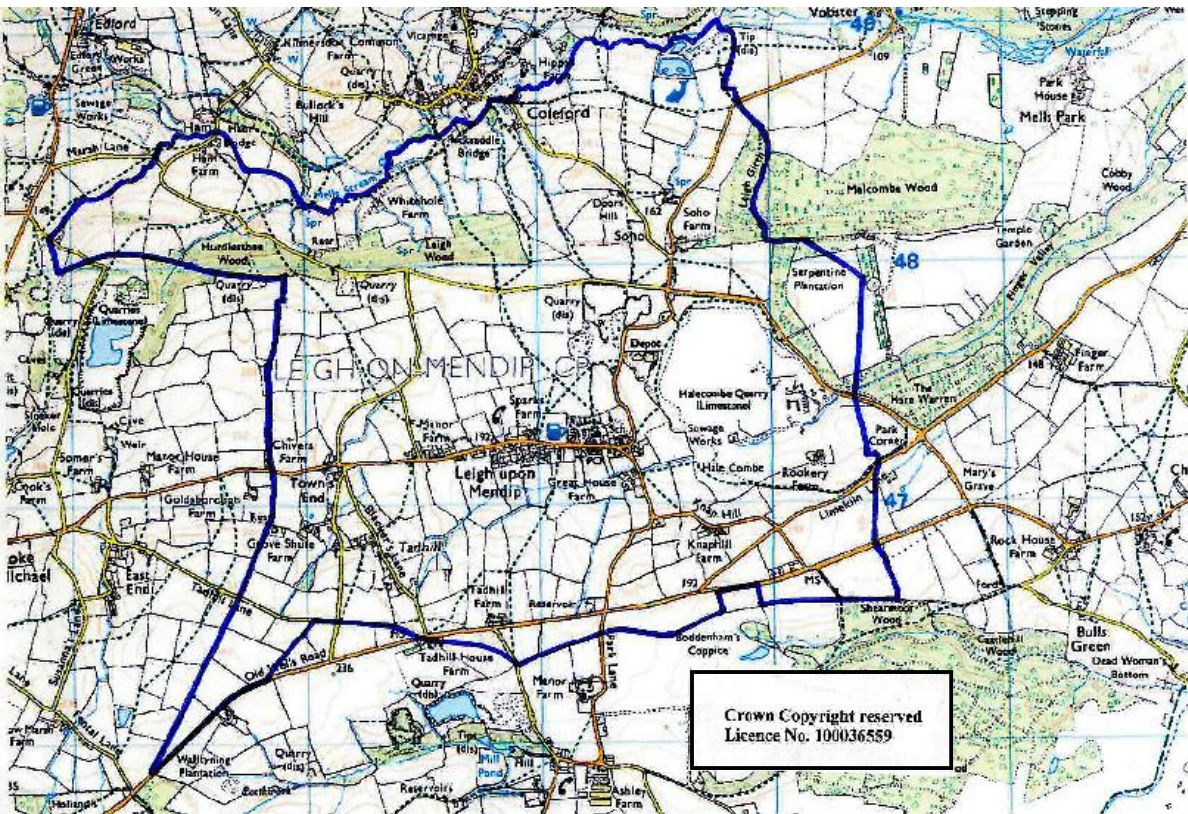
Leigh on Mendip is a dynamic, living, thriving village. The vast majority of activities are provided by the considerable efforts of volunteers, whose purpose is to help foster the community spirit and bring about a better and more satisfying lifestyle for all concerned.

The Steering Group members hope this Parish Plan will further these efforts and enable Leigh on Mendip to thrive in the long-term as a sustainable and vibrant village within the Mendip community.

2.3 Location Maps



Crown copyright reserved. Licence No. 100036559



Map showing the extent of Leigh on Mendip parish boundary in blue