

VCH OXFORDSHIRE:
ONLINE TEXTS IN PROGRESS: BROADWELL PARISH: KELMSCOTT
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INTRODUCTION: TOPOGRAPHY, POPULATION, AND SETTLEMENT

Kelmscott, famous as the occasional home of the writer, designer, and socialist William Morris (d. 1896), is a small, secluded hamlet on the north bank of the river Thames. It lies some 17½ miles (28 km) south-west of Oxford in what was, until 1974, the county's extreme south-west corner; the market town of Faringdon (formerly Berks.) lies across the Thames 3 miles (5 km) to the south, and that of Lechlade (Glos.) 2¼ miles (3.5 km) to the west.¹ Though increasingly populated by

commuters, it has remained a small and predominantly agricultural hamlet. Among its features are several high-quality 17th- and 18th-century farmhouses, built mostly by prosperous yeoman farmers. Among them is Kelmscott Manor near the river, in origin a moderately sized 16th- or 17th-century farmhouse with later additions, which Morris rented as a summer home from 1871.² The hamlet's riverside landscape, though broken up by hedgerows and trees, is predominantly flat and featureless: the artist and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a friend of Morris who spent time at Kelmscott in the 1870s, called it 'the most uninspiring I ever stayed in', though to



Kelmscott Manor

Morris, with more idealized views of rural life, Kelmscott was a 'beautiful grey little hamlet' unspoiled by industrialisation.³ Morris's influence continued during the 20th century, both in the erection by his widow and daughter of a number of Vernacular Revival buildings, and in the subsequent emergence of Kelmscott Manor as something of a shrine to his life and work.⁴

¹ The principal maps used were OS Maps 1:2500, Oxon. XXXVI. 15--16, XLIII. 3--4 (1876 and later edns); *ibid.* 1:2500, SU 2499--2599 (1976 edn); *ibid.* 1:25000, sheets 45, 170 (1998--9 edns); Kelmscott incl. map (1799): photo. in Bodl., from original in private possession. This article was written during 2000--1.

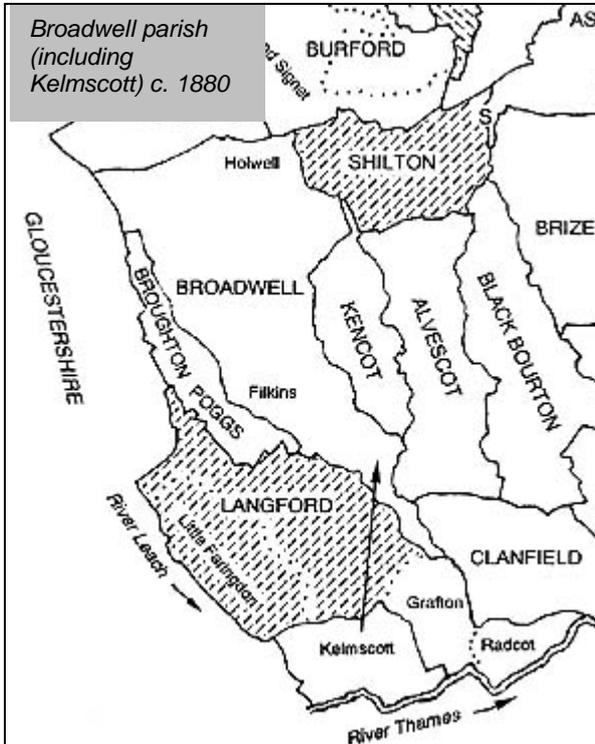
² Below, manor; buildings.

³ *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. O. Doughty and J.R. Wahl, III, p. 961; *Collected Letters of Wm Morris*, ed. N. Kelvin, I, pp. 133, 153.

⁴ Below, manor; social life; buildings.

Boundaries and Landscape

From the Middle Ages until the mid 19th century Kelmscott was a detached township and chapelry of Broadwell parish, a result of pre-Conquest tenurial arrangements: in the 11th century it belonged



to a large estate which may have included nearby Langford as well as Broadwell, Filkins, and Holwell, and it remained part of the reduced manor of Broadwell until the 16th century or later.⁵ From the late 19th century it was usually counted a separate civil parish, though for ecclesiastical purposes it remained attached to Broadwell until 1960, when it was combined first with Clanfield and later with other neighbouring parishes. Its acreage, 1,037 a. in 1881, remained unaltered in 2001.⁶

The township's boundaries were established in outline in or before the 11th century, when Kelmscott was first defined as a detached part of the large Broadwell estate.⁷ The southern and

western boundaries, respectively following the river Thames and a small tributary of the river Leach called (in the 18th century) Marlake ditch,⁸ coincided with the shire and hundred boundaries, which were both established by the early 11th century.⁹ A small detour from Marlake ditch in the township's south-west corner, which brought into Kelmscott an additional parcel of meadow, was established possibly before the Conquest and certainly by the mid 18th century.¹⁰ The markedly straight north-eastern and eastern boundaries seem also to have been established before the mid 18th century, when they were marked by watercourses and hedges demarcating Kelmscott's and Grafton's fields, commons, and meadows:¹¹ in 1320 the eastern boundary was marked by a north-south road, now lost, dividing Kelmscott's and Grafton's pastures, which ran from a stream called 'Lake' towards Radcot, perhaps roughly on the line of the modern boundary. The road ran past Radcot's gallows, which stood presumably on or near the boundary, and from which Kelmscott's

⁵ Above, Broadwell, manors; below, manor.

⁶ *Census*, 1881--1991; *OS Area Bk* (1877); for ecclesiastical arrangements, below, relig. hist.

⁷ For boundaries, *OS Maps* 1:2500, Oxon. XXXVI. 15--16, XLIII. 3--4, XLIV. 1 (1876 and later edns); Bodl. incl. map (photo.).

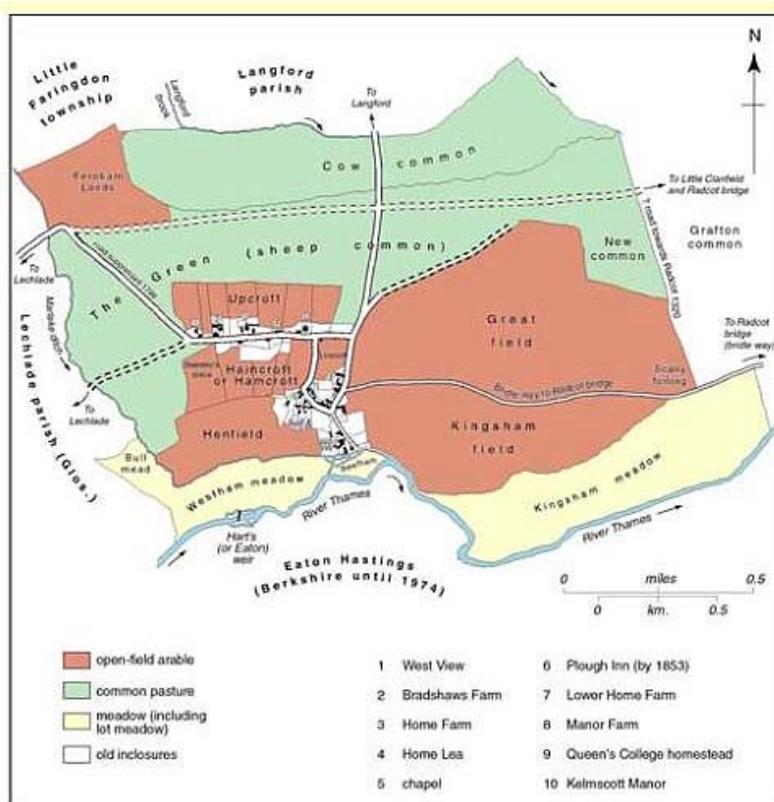
⁸ PRO, Kelmscott incl. award.

⁹ J. Blair, *A-S Oxon.* 102--4.

¹⁰ J. Rocque, *Berks. Map* (1761), sheet 12; Jefferys, *Oxon. Map* (1767); Bodl. incl. map (photo.).

¹¹ J. Rocque, *Berks. Map* (1761), sheet 12.

adjoining Gallow or Galloway field was named.¹² The township's boundaries elsewhere, apparently unaltered at inclosure in 1799, followed small watercourses.



Kelmscott before inclosure in 1798-9, showing boundaries, fields and roads

The entire township is flat and lowlying, rising from around 68 m. on the eastern boundary to only 71 m. in the village's northern part.¹³ Riverside alluvium provided rich and extensive meadows, central to Kelmscott's agricultural economy until modern times. Most of the township, including the village, lies on river gravels of the First and Second Floodplain terraces, overlying Oxford Clay; Kelmscott Manor, at the village's southern end, stands on the extreme southern edge of the gravel, close to the former meadows.¹⁴ Flooding, both of agricultural land and occasionally of the village's southern part, has long been endemic. The name 'at flood', attached to a house in the early 14th century, may have denoted only its proximity to the river,¹⁵ but extensive new drainage channels were deemed necessary at inclosure in 1799, including a stank to prevent drain water flowing through the village.¹⁶ Despite extensive improvements to upper Thames drainage in the late 19th century seasonal flooding of meadows remained commonplace, and there was more serious

¹² C.D. Ross (ed.), *Cartulary of Cirencester Abbey*, I (1964), p. 206; for Galloway field, Queen's Coll. Mun. 4.O.86, f. 25v.; below, econ. hist. (open fields).

¹³ OS Maps 1:25000, sheets 45, 170 (1998--9 edns); for Rossetti's unflattering comments, *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. O. Doughty and J. P. Wahl, III, pp. 951--4, 961.

¹⁴ Geol. Surv. Map 1", solid and drift, sheets 252--3 (1971 and 1974 edns); below, econ. hist. (open fields).

¹⁵ Below (village topography).

¹⁶ PRO, Kelmscott incl. award.

flooding of the village in 1893, 1903, 1915, and 1947.¹⁷ Flood-water came close to Kelmscott Manor and the Plough Inn in the winter of 2000.



The Kelmscott Landscape:
the Upper Thames valley, from
Faringdon

Communications

Though no through-routes now run through the village, several early roads connected with important routes outside the parish. The 'royal highway' from Broadwell and Langford to Kelmscott was mentioned in 1320,¹⁸ and the main east-west route north of the village, running from Lechlade (Glos.) to the road crossing Radcot bridge, probably also existed by the Middle Ages, though in the 18th century it seems to have been only a relatively minor track traversing the common. Until inclosure a branch-road ran south-east to the modern village's western edge, and may once have connected with the existing road to the river past the Plough Inn and Kelmscott Manor, which is on the same alignment.¹⁹ Lesser routes mentioned in 1320, besides that running apparently along the township's eastern boundary, included tracks to riverside meadows, among them an 'ancient' way called Thamesway.²⁰ A bridle-way from Kelmscott village to Radcot, running through Kelmscott's fields and neighbouring meadows, existed by the mid 18th century,²¹ and a footbridge crossed the Thames at Hart's weir in the late 18th century and possibly from the Middle Ages.²²

At inclosure in 1799 the Lechlade road was upgraded as a carriageway 40-ft. wide (including verges), together with intersecting roads running northwards from Kelmscott village into Langford, and northwards to Little Faringdon. The connecting road to the west end of Kelmscott's main village street, formerly running south-eastwards across the common, was replaced with a new

¹⁷ *Diary of W. M. Rossetti*, ed. O. Bornand, pp. 116, 139, 211; *Collected Letters of Wm. Morris*, ed. N. Kelvin, I, pp. 418--19; II (2), pp. 388--9, 401; III, pp. 39--40; V. J. Hollands, *Kelmscott, a Village Hist.* (priv. print. 1990), 89, 94, 104; Kelmscott parish meeting min. book, s.a. 1946--7, 1951, 1974 (in parish custody, 2001).

¹⁸ Ross (ed.), *Cirencester Cart.* I, pp. 206--7.

¹⁹ J. Rocque, *Berks. Map* (1761), sheet 12; Jefferys, *Oxon. Map* (1767); Davis, *Oxon. Map* (1797).

²⁰ Ross (ed.), *Cirencester Cart.* I, pp. 206--8; above (boundaries).

²¹ J. Rocque, *Berks. Map* (1761), sheets 11--12.

north--south road also 40 ft. wide, and several smaller paths and private roads were laid out or confirmed.²³ During the 20th century the poor repair of many of Kelmscott's roads and footpaths caused frequent local concern, particularly as the volume of heavy traffic on the Lechlade road increased from the 1970s. The parish meeting pressed frequently for improved public transport from the 1940s, though with limited success.²⁴



Kelmscott in 1761
(J. Rocque)

River transport was important probably by the 13th century, when traffic from Radcot to London was mentioned.²⁵ By the later Middle Ages navigation so far upstream was more limited, though river traffic from Lechlade, where several leading Kelmscott farmers had connexions, is documented from the 17th century, and increased after the opening of the Thames and Severn Canal in 1789, despite continuing problems with navigability on the upper Thames itself.²⁶ A flashlock at Hart's weir, south-west of Kelmscott village, was in poor repair in the late 18th century, and in 1883 the weir collapsed; though it was rebuilt soon after there was still only a flashlock in 1914, and in winter small pleasure boats could scarcely fit under the bridge.²⁷ By then, river links had been superseded by the railway: stations were opened respectively at Challow (then Berks.), at Witney, and at Faringdon in 1840, 1861, and 1864, and a nearer one at Lechlade, on the GWR's Witney--Fairford branch, in 1873.²⁸ Kelmscott and Langford station, on the same line 1½ miles

²² Bodl. incl. map (photo.); for the weir, below, econ. hist. (open fields and agric. resources). The bridge was rebuilt in 1997: Kelmscott parish meeting min. book, s.a. 1997.

²³ PRO, Kelmscott incl. award, s.v. roads; Bodl. incl. map (photo.).

²⁴ Kelmscott parish meeting min. book, passim.

²⁵ BL, Cotton Nero A xii, ff. 47v.--50; VCH Oxon. XIII, 10 and n.

²⁶ VCH Glos. VII, 106--7, 115--16; H. Household, *Thames and Severn Canal*, 29, 32, 84 sqq., 121 sqq.; for Lechlade connections, ORO, MSS Wills Oxon. 65/4/33, 155/1/34; Soc. Antiq., Kelmscott box 2, will of Chas. Turner.

²⁷ F.S. Thacker, *Thames Highway* (1968 edn), I, 7, 240; II, 47--9; Hollands, *Kelmscott*, 86. For the weir and fishery, below, econ. hist. (agric. resources).

²⁸ E.T. MacDermot and C.R. Clinker, *Hist. G.W.R.* I, 54, 452, 461; II, 3, 307; for railway links before 1873, *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. O. Doughty and J. R. Wahl, III, nos. 1156, 1248.

north of Kelmscott village, was opened in 1907 and continued until the line's closure in 1962, though its isolation and lack of goods facilities meant that it attracted few passengers and proved useless to local dairy farmers, who evidently continued to transport milk from Lechlade.²⁹ Post was delivered through Lechlade from the early 19th century, and in 1908 the parish meeting pressed for Sunday deliveries; a village post and (later) telephone office opened before 1911, reopened in the 1920s, and closed in the late 20th century.³⁰ No village carriers are recorded.³¹

Settlement and Population

Early Settlement

Undated cropmarks west, south, and east of the modern village suggest extensive early settlement, ranging probably from prehistory to the Roman period. A rectangular inclosure immediately south of the village may be of Iron-Age date, and traces remain of several undated early trackways, some of them apparently related to parts of the existing road system.³² Roman coins were found near Kelmscott church in 2000, unearthed apparently from a cable-trench in the churchyard.³³ No physical evidence of Anglo-Saxon settlement is known, though the place-name Kelmscott, meaning Coenhelm's cottage or cottages,³⁴ suggests at least a single farmstead in the 10th or 11th century, on the fringes of the Broadwell-Langford estate, and it seems likely that some of the 60 tenant households noted on Broadwell manor in 1086 were in Kelmscott.³⁵ A chapel was built in the 12th century or earlier, and by the 13th century Kelmscott was an established village of approaching 30 houses, with its own fields.³⁶

Population

In 1279 the village contained around 28 households, a total population of perhaps 130, of whom most (22 households) were unfree villeins or cottagers.³⁷ Between 18 and 23 people, most of them probably householders, were taxed in the early 14th century.³⁸ Only 41 people over 14 years of age paid poll tax in 1377,³⁹ suggesting marked, though not catastrophic, depopulation through

²⁹ S. C. Jenkins, *The Fairford Branch: Witney and E. Glos. Rly.* (1985), 52, 99--100; C.R. Clinker, *Reg. Closed Passenger Stns.* II, 57; cf. *Achievement of an Ideal [Kelmscott Dairy Farm]* [n.d., c. 1914], 5: copy in Bodl. GA Oxon. 8° 977; below, econ. hist. (19th and 20th centuries).

³⁰ *PO Dir. Oxon.* (1847 and later edns); *Kelly's Dir. Oxon.* (1883 and later edns); Kelmscott parish meeting min. book, s.a. 1908, 1928; OS Map 1:2500, Oxon. XLIII.4 (1921 edn); *ibid.* SU 2499--2599 (1977 edn); Hollands, *Kelmscott*, 111.

³¹ For deliveries from Faringdon in the 1870s, *Letters of D. G. Rossetti*, ed. Doughty and Wahl, III, no. 1156.

³² D. Benson and D. Miles, *Upper Thames Valley: an Archaeol. Surv. of the River Gravels*, 30--3; COS, PRN 1158, 8100--4, 8109--17, 8722, 12126, 15198, 15206--7.

³³ Inf. from Mr T.G. Hassall, Kelmscott Landscape Project.

³⁴ *PN Oxon.* (EPNS), II, 325--6.

³⁵ *VCH Oxon.* I, 422; the figure excludes 14 slaves, housed presumably on the demesne in Broadwell.

³⁶ Below (pop.); below, econ. hist.; relig. hist.

³⁷ *Bampton Hund.* 44--5.

³⁸ PRO, E 179/161/8--10.

³⁹ *Ibid.* E 179/161/42.

plague, and the population may not have recovered significantly by the 16th century, when only 12 or 13 taxpayers (each presumably prominent householders) were noted in 1544.⁴⁰ Possibly such depopulation contributed to the emergence of the prosperous yeoman farmers who dominated the township thereafter, and who from the 16th century benefited from the gradual break-up of Broadwell manor.⁴¹ In 1642 and 1676 the total adult population appears to have numbered around 65--70, and 16 households were taxed in 1662, probably an under-assessment.⁴² During the succeeding century and a half, the population seems to have risen only slowly: in 1759 there were reckoned to be 18 families in Kelmscott, and in 1793 around 20 houses, accommodating a total population of 100.⁴³ In 1801 there were 27 houses accommodating 132 people.⁴⁴

Between 1801 and 1821⁴⁵ the population fell to 118, possibly reflecting labourers' difficulties following inclosure in 1799, although the overall number of families and households actually rose slightly to 30. During the 1820s and 1830s the decline was reversed, the population reaching 179 by 1841; by then over 80 per cent of householders were agricultural wage-earners employed on the four main farms, a pattern established apparently by the late 18th century and probably accentuated by inclosure.⁴⁶ During the mid 19th century the population again fell steadily to only 101 in 1881, recovery to 164 (accommodated in 32 houses) by 1901, untypical for the period, perhaps reflecting the expansion of the Hobbs family's labour-intensive dairying business: in 1891 over 70 per cent of the population came from outside the township, compared with only 45 per cent in 1851.⁴⁷ A small decline before 1921 was followed by a more rapid fall from 152 to 114 during the 1920s, and although the population reached 136 in 1951 following smallscale building of new housing,⁴⁸ thereafter it fell steadily to only 82 in 1981: in the early 1960s there was said to be no demand for new houses, and some younger inhabitants were moving away.⁴⁹ A small increase to 95 by 1991, following further smallscale building, presumably reflected the village's attractiveness to commuters, over half of its households then owning two or more cars, and most working elsewhere.⁵⁰

⁴⁰ Ibid. E 179/162/223, m. 4d.; E 179/162/234, m. 3.

⁴¹ Below, manor; econ. hist.

⁴² *Protestation Retn and Tax Assess. 25; Compton Census*, ed. Whiteman, 423--4; PRO, E 179/255/4, pt iii, f. 247.

⁴³ ORO, MSS Oxf. Dioc. d 555, f. 77; b 12, f. 45. For periods of high mortality, COS, Broadwell par. reg. transcript, vol. I, f. 2.

⁴⁴ *Census*, 1801.

⁴⁵ Para. based on *Census*, 1801--1991.

⁴⁶ PRO, HO 107/872; below, econ. hist.

⁴⁷ PRO, HO 107/1687; *ibid.* RG 9/728; RG 10/1258; RG 11/1278; RG 12/0975; below, econ. hist.

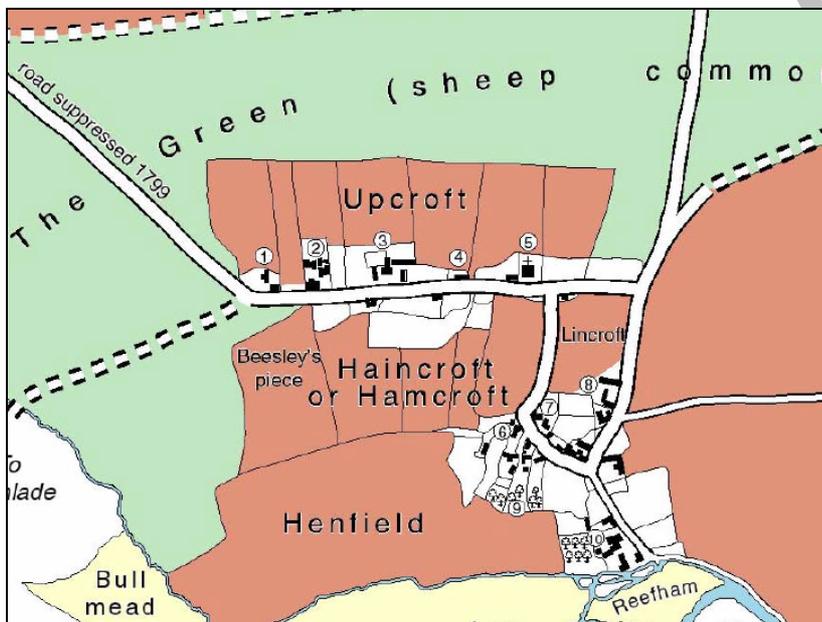
⁴⁸ Below (village topog.); buildings.

⁴⁹ W. Tadd, 'Cotswolds Stone's Fading Glory' (undated cutting from *Daily Telegraph* in COS, c. 1964).

⁵⁰ *Census*, 1991.

Village Topography

The earliest surviving building is the chapel, built in the 12th century or earlier at the modern village's northern end beside the main east--west street.⁵¹ Undated medieval pottery found nearby, just south of the road,⁵² suggests settlement in the same area, but there was also early settlement further south, around what may formerly have been a through-route from the Lechlade road to the river.⁵³ A house mentioned in 1302 seems to have stood south or south-east of the modern Plough Inn,⁵⁴ and a freeholder's house mentioned in 1348 stood north of Reefham, presumably near Kelmscott Manor.⁵⁵ Long, sinuous tenement boundaries south of the Plough Inn suggest that house plots there were taken from the adjoining common field, perhaps in the 12th or 13th century as population increased,⁵⁶ and the medieval surnames 'at flood' and 'at water' imply further settlement near the river.⁵⁷ The base of a 14th- or 15th-century preaching cross stands



Kelmscott village c. 1798

1. West View
2. Bradshaws Farm
3. Home Farm
4. Home Lea
5. church
6. Plough Inn (by 1853)
7. Lower Home Farm
8. Manor Farm
9. Queen's College homestead
10. Kelmscott Manor

near the Plough, at the intersection of the main street and of a road running north towards the chapel, past the modern village hall;⁵⁸ a parallel road past Manor Farm seems also be part of an

⁵¹ Below, relig. hist.; buildings; cf. OS Maps 1:2500, Oxon. XXXVI.16, XLIII.4 (1876 and later edns).

⁵² At New Houses: inf. from Mr T.G. Hassall, Kelmscott Landscape Project.

⁵³ Above (communications).

⁵⁴ Snow's, apparently that later belonging to the Queen's College, Oxford: below, manor (other estates).

⁵⁵ J. Stevenson (ed.), *Edington Cart*. (Wilts. Rec. Soc. 42, 1987), p. 155; for Reefham, PRO, Kelmscott incl. award, s.v. Beesley; Bodl. Kelmscott incl. map (photo.).

⁵⁶ Bodl. Kelmscott incl. map (photo.); above (pop.).

⁵⁷ *Bampton Hund.* 44--5; *Edington Cart.* p. 155; 'Arch. Queen's Coll., Oxf.' (typescript, 1931), II, no. 2068: copy in Bodl.

⁵⁸ COS, PRN 2641; B.J. Marples, 'Medieval Crosses of Oxon.' *Oxoniensia*, 38 (1973), 307; OS Map 1:2500, SU 2499--2599 (1977 edn).

ancient pattern,⁵⁹ and there was at least one house there by the 17th century and probably earlier.⁶⁰ Settlement west of the chapel presumably also represents early expansion before the population stagnation of the later Middle Ages; several houses there, bordering northwards on the open fields until 1799, are of 17th-century origin,⁶¹ and certainly by the mid 18th century the broad settlement pattern throughout the village was little different from later.⁶²

Kelmscott's buildings, which include several fine examples of the 'Cotswold vernacular' which so impressed William Morris, are described below.⁶³ Early 20th-century additions in Vernacular Revival style, designed under the auspices of Morris's widow and daughter by the likes of Ernest Gimson and Philip Webb, essentially preserved its character, and by the early 20th century Kelmscott, already eulogised by Morris in *News from Nowhere*, was being consciously promoted as a 'charming old world village' and 'picturesque hamlet'.⁶⁴ Development during the mid and late 20th century was largely confined to further small-scale building in traditional styles and materials,



Kelmscott village street

no doubt partly influenced by such attitudes, as well as by stagnant or falling population.⁶⁵

During the 1960s and 1970s the parish pressed for new bungalows suitable for old and retired people,⁶⁶ but only in the 1980s was there smallscale new housing development near the Plough Inn.⁶⁷ In 1991 there were 34 households, little different from the township's average since 1801, and in the mid 1990s

further development was proscribed by the creation of a Conservation Area.⁶⁸ Electricity

was available by 1939, but there was still no mains water in the 1960s, and no mains sewerage in the late 1980s.⁶⁹

During the Second World War a landing strip at Kelmscott served as a relief landing ground for RAF Watchfield (then Berks.), and in 1944 was used for beam-approach training. Before the

⁵⁹ Benson and Miles, *Upper Thames Valley*, 31, showing traces of a lost trackway apparently connecting with it.

⁶⁰ Manor Farm: below, manor (other estates); buildings.

⁶¹ Doe, *Revised Hist. Bldgs List: Kelmscott* (1989), 36--40: copy in COS; below, buildings; cf. PRO, Kelmscott incl. award; Bodl. incl. map (photo.).

⁶² J. Rocque, *Berks. Map* (1761), sheet 12; Jefferys, *Oxon. Map* (1767); Bodl. Kelmscott incl. map (photo.).

⁶³ Below, buildings.

⁶⁴ *Achievement of an Ideal* [c. 1914], 3: copy in Bodl.

⁶⁵ Below, buildings.

⁶⁶ Kelmscott parish meeting min. book, s.a. 1964, 1970, 1974.

⁶⁷ Hollands, *Kelmscott*, 105; local inf.

⁶⁸ *Census, 1801--1991*; Kelmscott parish meeting min. book, s.a. 1993, 1995.

Normandy landings extensive practice parachute-drops were made in the area, many parachutists reportedly missing the site and landing 'in fields and trees for miles around'.⁷⁰ Concrete pillboxes, part of a chain designed to stop German invaders from crossing the Thames, survive just north of the river, beside the track leading from Kelmscott Manor.⁷¹ In 1958--9 controversy erupted over the siting of a navigation beacon for the military airbase at Fairford (Glos.), which the Air Ministry wished to erect near Kelmscott Manor. Following local inquiries and the involvement of both the William Morris Society and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the beacon was built in a compromise location 500 yds. east of the house, screened by trees.⁷²

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⁶⁹ *Kelly's Dir. Oxon.* (1939); Kelmscott parish meeting min. book, s.a. 1964, 1987--8.

⁷⁰ *Record of Witney*, [vol. 1], no. 5 (Dec. 1978), 10: copy in COS.

⁷¹ COS, PRN 15702--6.

⁷² Oxford Univ. Arch., BEQ/5, file 2; Kelmscott parish meeting min. book, s.a. 1958.