

Survey of Thornhill Manor kindly provided by the Principal and Fellows of Brasenose College. Please click on the following links to access Brasenose maps on Flickr

[B 14.1/15/1 | Thornhill, Wiltshire; owner: BNC; surveyor: Ed... | Flickr](#)

[B 14.1/17 | Thornhill Manor, Wiltshire. "The Manor of Thornh... | Flickr](#)



In 1692, Sarah Seymour Duchess of Somerset died without an heir. Born Sarah Alston, she had married three times including to the Duke of Somerset and being the sole beneficiary of her father's estate, she had been a very wealthy woman. She made several philanthropic bequests aimed at educating poor children including the creation of The Broad Town charity to help young men with their education or to enter apprenticeships. She had owned land in Broad Town and rents received from these lands were to be used to fund the charity. Two maps exist and are viewable below. One relates to Broad Town charity and is dated 1753 the other relates to Brasenose College, Oxford and is dated 1736. It is assumed that these maps indicate the acreage and tenant farmers and was used for administrative purposes.

James Rawlins has kindly plotted these maps on Google Earth to try to establish the exact location of each field and building

[Click here to see the google earth map of fields.](#)

Some writing is no longer legible but wherever possible the following information is recorded against the Google Earth map shape:

- Map name and date
- Map reference
- Farm name
- Field name
- Tenant Farmer
- Acreage: ARP (Acres, Roods, Poles)
- Current Google Earth area

Many field boundaries and hedges are still in the same location and even a copse and a willow bed are still present to this day, 288 years later. From local knowledge we also know that some field names haven't changed either.

It would be fascinating to imagine what life would have been like for Broad Town residents back when these maps were drawn up. The second half of the 18th century was a period of rapid change in Britain so this period towards the end of the first half of that century was probably the last hoorah for an older way of life. Here are a few facts and figures to help us picture what life might have been like.

George II was King of Great Britain and Ireland, Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg (Hanover) and a prince-elector of the Holy Roman Empire from 11 June 1727 until his death in 1760. Born and brought up in northern Germany he was the last British monarch born outside Great Britain. He seemed far more active in foreign politics than at home where he left much of the administration of the country to Parliament. During the War of the Austrian Succession, George participated at the Battle of Dettingen in 1743, and thus became the last British monarch to lead an army into battle. I'm sure Broad Town residents cheered him on as he rode into battle, just as we would our own monarch today. But perhaps George should have paid more attention to domestic politics and looked to the north as those pesky Jacobites were at it again. The Jacobite rising of 1745 was an attempt by Charles Edward Stuart to regain the British throne for his father, James Francis Edward Stuart. It took place during the War of the Austrian Succession, when the bulk of the British Army was fighting

in mainland Europe (sneaky!) but proved to be the last in a series of revolts ultimately ending in The Battle of Culloden on 16th April 1746. Often cited as the last pitched battle on British soil, it was fought on Drummoissie Moor near Inverness and lasted less than an hour. It ended in a decisive victory for government forces under Prince William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland.

Sandwiched right in between these two battles was an important piece of quintessential Englishness. The Brasenose map shows an area of around two and half acres called 'Thornhill Green'. We don't know if this was a traditional village green as we might know one today but if the residents of Thornhill fancied some sport the rules for cricket, the first modern ball game were codified in 1744.

Abroad, the American colonies were still very much under the control of London and the Boston Tea Party was still about forty years off. Talking of tea, the East India Company was exerting power over the Mughals in India quelling rebellions there thus expanding the empire. The strength of the wealthy Mughals was weakening, and wars were breaking out between different districts of India. Robert Clive (Clive of India), a Company Officer, recaptured Calcutta from Siraj-ud-Daulah, Nawab of Bengal at the Battle of Plassey in 1757. It's entirely possible that adventurous Broad Town residents could have sought their fortunes in the colonies at this time.

At home the Industrial Revolution was about to change Great Britain from an agrarian and handicraft economy to one dominated by industry and machine manufacturing. This really kicked off in the second half of the 18th century so in the period captured by our maps Broad Town residents were firmly country folk. Thomas Newcomen's "atmospheric engine" of 1712 was set to become the first practical steam engine for commercial use and by 1735 over 100 engines were installed around England. But these engines were mainly used for pumping water out of mines so likely didn't touch the lives of Broad Town residents and must surely have been nothing more than a curiosity, if they'd even heard about them! Some people still don't read the village newsletter.

Broad Town was very rural and we still think of it like that today. In the mid 18th century population density in rural areas was often less than 100 people per square mile but the 2021 census data shows population density of Broad Town to be 118 people per square kilometre so there are far more people here today than there were back then. But I suspect more people were found enjoying a pint in the pub on a Friday night back then than can be found in the Village Hall today! Let's see if we can change that: Fridays 8pm – 10pm. In 1736, when the Brasenose map was drawn up a disturbing piece of legislation was enacted: The Spirit Duties Act 1735 (commonly known as the Gin Act 1736) attempted to establish a retail tax on gin and annual licenses for gin sellers. Gin consumption had increased markedly during the late 17th and early 18th centuries during the so-called Gin Craze. (Sound familiar?) As consumption continued to grow, gin began to be blamed for a variety of social ills including crime, prostitution and mental illness. Daniel Defoe commented: "the Distillers have found out a way to hit the palate of the Poor, by their new fashion'd compound Waters called Geneva, so that the common People seem not to value the French-brandy as usual, and even not to desire it". (The Village Halls stocks a variety of gins but little in the way of French Brandy, which probably betrays the demographic of drinkers in Broad Town then and now.) This fits nicely with the timing of the Moonrakers legend from Devizes. High taxes on goods such as alcohol caused smuggling activities to increase. One night, some locals were retrieving barrels of brandy from the Crammer (pond near the centre of town) with large hay rakes when they were spotted by the local exciseman. In an attempt to hide their loot, the men pointed to the reflection of the moon on the pond and said they were trying to rake in the "giant cheese" they'd found. Thinking the men to be confused and drunk, the exciseman left the scene laughing at the locals. A tale which becomes even more plausible if you have ever spent any time in Devizes.

Perhaps some of this illicit spirit made its way to Broad Town. After mass law-breaking and violence the Gin Act was repealed in 1743 but replaced with further Acts up to 1751 when the licence fee was lowered and 'respectable' gin selling encouraged.

Life expectancy in 1750 was less than 39 and population estimates for England Scotland and Wales showed a relatively slow increase from around 6.5 million in 1700 to 7.5 million in 1750 with far more accelerated growth in the second half of the century reaching around 11 million by 1800. The industrial revolution drove rapid urbanisation but in the first half of the 18th century people still worked in an agrarian economy. Occupational structure estimates show roughly 50% of the population were employed in agriculture in 1700 compared to only 35% in 1800 (less than 0.5% today). At the time of our maps if you lived in Broad Town, you would likely be working on one of the many farms either as a tenant or labourer. This is before the 'Inclosure Act' of 1773 which would be passed during the reign of George III. It created a law that enabled the appropriation of 'waste' or 'common' land, at the same time removing the right of commoners' access. So, our maps still show common land above the hill which was described as 'arable'. Due to the soil conditions this land is still arable today and land below the hill is predominately pasture. There would have been other occupations too though and the Brasenose map shows the position of a Mill, the remnants of which can still be seen today from footpath BTOW28.

If you were working in agriculture it was a period of change. There were several inventions that helped contribute to what's been called the Second Agricultural Revolution. Local boy and inventor Jethro Tull (1674–1741) who was born and died over the border in Berkshire perfected the horse-drawn seed drill, which allowed farmers to efficiently sow seeds in rows rather than scattering seeds by hand (one for the mouse, one for the crow, one to rot and one to grow). One of the most important innovations of this time was the development of the Norfolk four-course rotation, which greatly increased crop and livestock yields by improving soil fertility and reducing fallow. No doubt Broad Town farmers were at the cutting edge of change (or at least the cutting edge of a scythe).

Maybe not much has changed since the time of our maps. In England, the summers of this period were the wettest in a record that began in 1697. 1750 to 1760 show 10 wet summers in a row which produced an overall anomaly of 127% of the modern-era mean. 1751 in particular was regarded as a notably wet year, at least in the London/SE region. It included a wet March, a wet first two-thirds of May and some severe thunderstorms & flooding in November. Sound familiar? Note how many fields on our maps have a name including 'Marsh' (Marfh)

But who could Broad Town residents turn to? Wiltshire was a Parliamentary constituency from 1290 right up to the Reform Act of 1832 (Representation of the People Act). Originally made up of 13 boroughs, three more, including Wootton Bassett were added in the 15th century. And after lots of changes Wootton Bassett was eventually dropped in the Reform Act and the county was divided into two constituencies. Those qualified to vote were a fraction of total population. Wiltshire had a total population of approximately 240,000, yet just 6,403 votes were cast in the county constituency at the 1818 election, the last general election at which there was a contested election. Although Wiltshire was a predominantly rural county, the freeholders from the biggest towns (Salisbury, Trowbridge, Bradford-on-Avon, Westbury and Warminster) made up almost a fifth of the vote by 1818 so very few if any Broad Town residents would have been able to cast a vote at the time of our maps. Wiltshire succeeded in remaining independent of any domination by the local nobility and generally chose members from the county's landed gentry as its members. Wiltshire was unusual in that by the 18th century it had formalised the process of picking its candidates to some degree, the decision being made by a body called the Deptford Club (named after the inn where it met – obviously an eminently sensible bunch). The club consisted of leading local members of both gentry and nobility and was said to have been in existence since 1729. Once the club had met in private and made its decision, the choice was ratified at a public meeting, and only on a small number of occasions

did a disappointed candidate take the matter to a formal vote at the ensuing election. However, in the last half century before Reform, two rival clubs (the Devizes Club and the Beckhampton Club) took over the nominating function, and in 1812 an independent candidate, Paul Methuen (Whig), stood against one of the nominees of the clubs and defeated him. In 1741, the time of our maps Sir Robert Long was elected Member of Parliament for Wiltshire. He was a Tory. Hmmmm, maybe nothing has changed!