

2: History of Chivelstone Parish

Geology and Topography

The parish of Chivelstone includes Prawle Point, Devon's southernmost point. The parish is bounded on the east and north by Stokenham parish, and on the west by South Pool and East Portlemouth. The geological map shows the 'grain' to lie east-west, with the bulk of the parish consisting of the metamorphic mica-schist and quartz-schist.¹ North and south of it lie narrow bands of hornblende and chloritic schists, while the northernmost part of the parish consists of the Meadfoot Group of slates dating to the Lower Devonian period.

The Medieval Period

It is quite possible that most of the farms date back to Saxon times, although evidence is lacking. The name of the parish, first recorded in the Domesday Survey of 1086, derives from *Coefel's* farm, while Prawle may derive from *Præwhyll*, meaning a look-out hill, perhaps dating from the period of the Danish incursions.²

The 1086 Survey recorded three manors in what was to become Chivelstone parish, all assessed at one hide and all owned by Iudhael of Totnes. *Cheveletone* or Chivelstone was sublet to Ralph having been held by the Saxon Aelfric; it had its full complement of three ploughs, which were worked by three villeins and three smallholders, along with three acres of meadow and six of pasture, and was valued at 15s.³ Ralph also held Ford, at the north end of the parish, previously held by the Saxon Othere, where there seems to have been over-provision of ploughs, with the survey recording land for two ploughs, although one was present on the demesne while the two villeins and one smallholder possessed two.⁴ There were also four acres of meadow, six of pasture and fifteen of underwood, giving it a value of 10s. *Alintone*, presumably South Allington, was sublet to Thorgils, having been held previously by the Saxon Goda. There were two ploughs present, worked by four villeins, four smallholders and two slaves;⁵ there were also an acre and a half of meadow and 15 of pasture, giving it also a value of 15s. Baldwin the Sheriff's manor of *Prenla* is regarded as being West Prawle, located in East Portlemouth parish.⁶

It is believed that the country was divided into ecclesiastical parishes by around 1200, in the case of Chivelstone the parish was focused on the church with its dedication to St Silvester, the only such dedication in Devon. However, the medieval dedication was to St Mary, Silvester not being recorded until 1742.⁷ The parish church was a chapelry of Stokenham and this suggests that it was once part of that very large manor, originally served by a minster church at Stokenham, from where a community of priests provided pastoral care over an area much larger than the later ecclesiastical parishes.

¹ Geological Survey of Great Britain 1975.

² Gover *et al.* 1931, 319–320.

³ Thorn & Thorn 1985, 17,57.

⁴ Thorn & Thorn 1985, 17,56.

⁵ Thorn & Thorn 1985, 17,53.

⁶ Thorn & Thorn 1985, 16,176.

⁷ Orme 1996, 144.

The manorial history after 1086 is not straightforward. Chivelstone and Ford became merged, and by 1241 were held by William de Bykelegh of the Honour of Totton [Totnes] for one knight's fee. The owner in 1285 was Robert de Scobehull and in 1346 Thomas Skobahill, the name seemingly deriving from Scoble in South Pool parish; but by 1428 the manor was in the ownership of several families.⁸ In contrast, South Allington appears to have become divided, being held in 1241 by Gilbert Crespin for another knight's fee, while Burrow was held by Richard Crespin for half a fee. The former became known as Alynton Cryspyn, held jointly with Stancombe Cryspyn in Sherford parish.

Chivelstone's status as a separate parish was not fully established by the early 14th century. While the lay subsidy of 1334 grouped the local taxpayers under 'South Pole cum Chevelston' there had been no mention of the latter parish in the 1332 listing, in which the taxpayers were actually named.⁹ They included a John de Cheuleston listed under South Pool and a Nicholas de Pral listed under Stokenham.

The ecclesiastical parish of Chivelstone is somewhat unusual in that its boundary will have cut across a manorial boundary, since four settlements in the south-east corner of the parish: Prawle, Woodcombe, Borough and Allington, were part of the medieval manor of Stokenham. South Allington was to remain a separate manor although it has not been possible to identify its boundaries. A copy of a survey of the manor, believed to date from the time of Richard II (1377–1399), survives in the Huntingdon Library in California, and an analysis of it has been published.¹⁰ The largest settlement was Prawle where there were 15 tenants holding 22½ ferlings, no tenant holding more than two; a ferling is regarded as being equal to 30 or 33 acres, suggesting the settlement was working around 700 arable acres.¹¹ There were also 11 cottagers. Tenants' names such as Garlond, Colyn and Shathe, were still to be found in 18th-century taxation lists. At Allington in the late 14th century six tenants shared five ferlings, perhaps 160 acres, between them, while there were also six cottagers. At Woodcombe there were five tenants, each working a ferling or less, along with two cottagers. This was the only settlement where there was evidence of the marine environment being exploited, with the tenants collectively paying 1s for sea fishing. At Borough there was only a single tenant, who was working four ferlings.

The 16th Century

To finance the war with France the Exchequer Lay Subsidies of 1524–25 imposed a tax on males aged 16 years or over. In Chivelstone in 1524 this was paid by 77 males, which suggests a total population of somewhere around 350.¹² Highest taxed were Robert Perott, assessed on goods valued at £30, William Wadlond at £20 and John Perott and William Partridge, both at £16. No one was taxed on income from land, suggesting that all the landowners were absentees.

⁸ Reichel 1911, 217–218.

⁹ Glasscock 1974, 64; Erskine 1969, 94–5.

¹⁰ Roberts 1982.

¹¹ Roberts 1982, 85; 1984, xix.

¹² Stoate 1986, 187; Goose & Hinde 2007, 79 suggest that 37.5% of the population were under 16 and that 30% either evaded the taxation or fell below the minimum threshold.

The accession of Queen Elizabeth in 1558 led to a threat of invasion by Catholic Spain, in which coastal parishes could be in the front line. Throughout the land all able-bodied men between 16 and 60 were deemed liable to serve with formal inspections known as musters required every three or four years. That for 1569 has been published, with its listings of the better-off citizens required to pay for equipment, seven in this case, none of them designated as gentlemen.¹³ Also named were the archers (by then obsolescent), harquebusiers (who operated this primitive type of firearm which required to be supported on a rest), pikemen and billmen. In all there were 43 bearing arms in the parish, although given the uncertainty as to the proportion of non-able bodied males nothing can be said with confidence about the total population.

The court rolls of Stokenham manor between 1560 and 1602 have survived and been translated and published.¹⁴ These provide some detail of the four settlements in the south-east corner, while a rental of 1582 in the same publication enables comparisons to be made. Unusually some shrinkage of population appears to have occurred during a period when exploitation of the marine environment is believed to have increased. At Prawle 12 tenants held the ferlings while the number of cottagers was down to three, with the Lord of the Manor requiring rent from the settlement for decayed cottages.¹⁵ This was also the case at Allington, where the number of cottages was down from seven to five, with three held by one family; there were by then said to be six ferlings worked by only four tenants. At Woodcombe the settlement was also charged for seaways as well as decayed cottages, the former presumably implying a rent for access to the shore. Here the number of ferlings had increased significantly from just over three to six and a half.

A subsidy roll for 1581 has been published and this shows a fair degree of consistency with the rental of the following year. Those holding between three and five ferlings were being taxed on goods valued at either four or five pounds, while a holder of two ferlings was taxed on goods valued at three pounds, although the family holding one ferling and three cottages were taxed on goods valued at five pounds.¹⁶

The published court rolls are mostly concerned to record changes of tenancy, details of straying farm stock, minor cases of assault and the arrival of wreckage on the shore, which became the property of the Lord of the Manor. Such wreckage varied from barrel staves to a boat. Both Prawle and Woodcombe possessed commons, enabling the cottagers to survive by grazing a few animals. The commons were stinted – numbers of beasts were restricted – as indicated by the occasional reference to someone exceeding his quota, as well as encroachment onto them.¹⁷ There are also references to furze (gorse) being removed from the common,¹⁸ possibly by persons from other settlements, since it must have been an essential resource for the community. A modern note was struck in 1576, when Roger Partridge blocked the path at Horseley Sand, but, more strange to modern ears, six years later a ship called the ‘Emanuel’, laden with fish, came ashore there with all its equipment, ‘and remains there’ after a fortnight.¹⁹

¹³ Howard & Stoate (eds) 1977, 206.

¹⁴ Roberts 1984.

¹⁵ Roberts 1984, 358.

¹⁶ Stoate (ed.) 1988, 54.

¹⁷ e.g. Roberts 1984, 91, 80.

¹⁸ e.g. Roberts 1984, 37.

¹⁹ Roberts 1984, 54, 114.

There were occasional references to trussways and sandways.²⁰ The former appear to be packhorse routes that were to become known as green lanes, while the latter enabled farmers to carry sand and seaweed from the beaches to fertilise their fields. At Woodcombe in 1577 John Pounce 'wrongfully ploughed up a path called a Sande Waye and a Trusse Waye' and was required to reinstate it.²¹ One field there or at Borough was called Hemp Hay, suggesting cultivation of hemp for rope making. There was only a single reference involving Lannacombe Mill, actually to a hedge between it and a meadow in 1561,²² and this suggests that it was not a part of Stokenham manor, but presumably part of South Allington manor.

The 17th Century

A survey of maritime manpower in 1619 named 21 sailors and three shipwrights, although it is far from obvious where the latter were working.²³ However, the shore at Woodcombe or Lannacombe are possible locations, particularly the former, since one of the shipwrights was George Pownd, and the Pound family had been recorded at Woodcombe in the 1570s.²⁴

The failure of the harvest in 1622 led the following spring to a survey being made of the available corn. This survives for Stanborough and Coleridge hundreds,²⁵ and at Chivelstone records the 12 principal farmers whose households contained an average of just over nine persons. In a taxation list of 1624 none of those taxed was identified as 'Esquire' or 'Gentleman', suggesting it was a somewhat egalitarian parish.²⁶

In 1642 the Protestation Oath was taken by 116 adult males, none of them designated as gentry, which suggests a total population of somewhere around 385.²⁷ The ensuing Civil War seems to have passed Chivelstone by, perhaps due to its remoteness and absence of high-status residents.

It has been suggested that the now ruinous Ford chapel originated in 1662, being built close to the boundary with Stokenham, to serve those of the Independent persuasion in both parishes. Independents were one of the more extreme of the groups of Puritans, and the chapel is believed to have been licensed to serve as a meeting house of the less extreme Presbyterians in 1672.²⁸

In the 1674 Hearth Tax (although it has not survived in its entirety) no one paid on more than four hearths, again suggesting there was no high-status residence in the parish.²⁹ Around 58 were taxed, of which 27 paid on a single hearth, while another 29 were exempt on grounds of poverty. It is customary to suggest a total population of around 375 from such figures.³⁰ The figures

²⁰ Roberts 1984, xxvii–xxviii.

²¹ Roberts 1984, 51, 58.

²² Roberts 1984, 9.

²³ Gray 1990, 13–14.

²⁴ Roberts 1984, 49, 51.

²⁵ Gray 1992.

²⁶ Transcript by Charles Edward Banks (in Devon & Cornwall Record Society library), 292–3.

²⁷ Howard 1973, 173–4; Goose & Hinde 2007, 83 suggest that 40% of the population were under 18.

²⁸ Peskett 1979, 208.

²⁹ Stoate 1982, 181.

³⁰ Arkell 1982, 55 suggests an average of 4.3 persons in each household.

returned in Bishop Compton's Census of 1676 indicates that there were 248 adults in the parish, only two of whom were non-conformists, which again suggests a total somewhere around 375.³¹

The 18th Century

A series of listings, known as the Freeholders Books, of those qualified to serve on Devon juries has survived from 1711 for more than half of the years up until 1816. Initially ownership of freehold or copyhold land worth at least £10 a year was required, and only John Partridge and Richard Hardy in the parish were so qualified, but in 1730 the criteria were somewhat relaxed, allowing tenants of land worth at least £20 a year held on long leases to be included.³² By 1733 the number had increased to four, all freeholders, but an increase to eight freeholders and six leaseholders in 1751 is harder to explain during a period when rents nationally are believed to have increased by only around 9 per cent.³³

In 1744, the response to Bishop Claggett's visitation queries showed a significant number of dissenters. Of around 60 families in the parish 12 of them were presbyterian, presumably meeting at Ford, and there was one 'Anabaptist'; at that date there was then no school, almshouse nor hospital in the parish.³⁴ These were the days of pluralism, and the vicar lived at Egg-Buckland, now part of Plymouth, paying two curates £30 a year to serve Stokenham and the two chapelries of Chivelstone and Sherford.

The earliest land tax assessment to survive dates from 1747, although few locations are named, but gentry were now present. The highest rated was Norton Nelson Esqr. at £12. James Tarring was rated at £9 4s, the absence of title suggesting he was a substantial farmer; Mr Richard Came was rated at £8 19s and 'Francis Shath Gent' at £7 10s. Mr Matthew Garland paid £6 18s while John Watts paid £6 16s for Burrough. But evidently the vast majority of the 50 or so required to pay the land tax were excluded from jury service.

In the 1750s the vicar of Stokenham responded to the questionnaire sent by Dean Jeremiah Milles of Exeter. In so far as his handwriting can be deciphered, there were then nine houses at Chivelstone 'Town', 34 at East Prawle, about 13 at Ford and 24 at South Allington. Chivelstone was by then the only surviving manor, belonging to Mrs Ilbert[?] of Bickham, which she had bought from Nathaniel Ryder, who had acquired it through marriage with a daughter of Walter Hele of Stokenham. There was said to be a former chapel at East Prawle, by then converted into dwelling houses. The vicar recorded the existence of Prawle commons, belonging to many persons who stocked it with cattle in proportion to their right, 'but by Bond Marks have their particular Right to Tillage'. There were about 20 acres of arable land to one of meadow. The arable was manured by sand and dung, along with oarweed near the sea. Regarding apples, whitesours were commonly planted at South Allington, while meadgales[?] and queen crabs were plentiful in the parish, with about 150 hogsheads of cider being produced annually. There were few trees in the parish but many acres of furze near and among the Prawle commons. He also provided a late reference to Lannacombe Mills by the shore. As to the stone, the houses were said to be built with common walling stone of the slate kind, while at East Prawle a harder

³¹ Stanes 1974, 25; Goose & Hinde 2007, 85 suggest that 33% of the population were under 16.

³² Dixon 2007.

³³ Dixon 2007; Turner *et al.* 1997, 314–5.

³⁴ DRO Chanter 225B, 533–534.

stone was often used for making posts for hanging gates. Bullocks and sheep were commonly sold at Dodbrooke market and fair, with those cattle bred on the commons being said to be smaller. The only industry was processing wool, which was spun at home by the 'poorer sort of women' for the combers, who then sold it in 'chains' to the clothiers.

Later that century the deterioration of relations with revolutionary France soon descended into actual war, and beginning in 1794 a chain of inter-visible signal stations was established along the channel coastline,³⁵ connecting in one direction to Devonport and in the other to the Admiralty in London via Portsmouth. Signalhouse Point, shown on current maps at the highest point of the Prawle headland dates from this period, the location seemingly being known officially as either Hunter's or Hurter's Top. It was in sight (assuming clear weather) of the neighbouring stations at Start Point and on the cliffs west of Soar Mill Cove in Malborough parish.

The 19th Century

The first census, taken in 1801, recorded a population of 562 in 1801. But by 1816 the number of jurors had been reduced to six, with Nathaniel Prettijohn and Richard Pearce designated as gentlemen, the remainder as yeoman.³⁶ Land values are believed to have almost trebled nationally since 1751, and it is unclear whether the reduction in jurors is due to amalgamations among the larger farms or landowners replacing long leases with much shorter terms.³⁷ The South Hams was among the more progressive areas in terms of replacing the increasingly archaic lease for the duration of three named lives with a fixed term agreement, often for 14 years.³⁸ Population increased to 637 in 1821, but declined much earlier than the typical parish, and then almost continuously to the end of the century when it had decreased to only 40 per cent of the 1821 figure, although the number of houses was to remain much more constant. This could be explained by farmers having accommodated their workers within the farmhouses, only for labour to be shed as arable farming became increasingly uneconomic in the face of competition from abroad, and was replaced by less labour-intensive livestock farming.

The 1831 census provided more detail than the three previous ones. Of the 149 adult males, 15 were farmers employing 91 labourers, while four employed no labour; this does suggest no great change from the 17 villeins and smallholders of 1086. In 1831 there were 26 males employed 'in Retail, Trade, or in Handicraft as Masters or Workmen' with 8 more as labourers, while oddly, since most parishes would have had at least a resident curate, no one came into the category of 'Capitalists, Bankers, Professional and other Educated Men'.

The Chivelstone tithe survey dates from 1842. At that date the largest occupier was Nicholas Pitts Esquire of South Allington House, obviously a gentleman farmer, working what had been two farms totalling some 340 acres. The next largest was Thomas Newman's Chivelstone Barton, of 310 acres, extending northward as far as the road at Cousins' Cross. North of that lay the former manor of Ford, by then consisting of intermingled small estates divided between around ten owners, including Blundell's School at Tiverton, whose manor of West Prawle,

³⁵ Oppenheim 1968, 117.

³⁶ DRO QS7/64.

³⁷ Turner *et al.* 1997, 315–6.

³⁸ Vancouver, C. 1808, 83.

bought by Peter Blundell in 1569, with its centre in East Portlemouth parish, included some ten fields in Chivelstone. By the 1840s that manor included property in six different parishes,³⁹ but it is unclear whether this had been the case back in 1086 or whether small properties elsewhere in the South Hams had been subsequently acquired and incorporated into it.

The 1851 census provides the most detailed picture of the parish thus far. There were by then two very large farms: both Richard Foss at East Prawle and John Huxham at Chivelstone were farming 500 acres (possibly some of it in adjoining parishes). The former employed 18 labourers, while Nicholas Pitts worked his 350 acres at South Allington with 14 labourers. East Prawle continued to be the largest settlement, with 10 fishermen and seven coastguards. It also supported two victuallers, two blacksmiths, two shoemakers and two carpenters, as well as a shopkeeper, a grocer draper and a mole catcher. At South Allington were the curate, four tailors and two masons, a grocer, carpenter and blacksmith. At Ford the only trades were a victualler and a miller, while at Chivelstone itself there were only a 'victualler hawker' and a stone mason.

1851 also saw the country's only religious census, taken on 30th March. The parish church of St Silvester recorded 48 adults at the morning service and 38 children at the Sunday school, with 140 adults and 39 children at the afternoon service. At the Bible Christian Bethel at East Prawle village, erected in 1848, there were said to be 100 at the afternoon service and 80 at the evening service, while at the Independent Chapel at Ford (then said to have been erected around 1750) about 20 attended the morning service and 65 the afternoon service.⁴⁰ The Bible Christian chapel was one of five in that denomination's Kingsbridge Circuit, which was quite isolated from their stronghold in North-West Devon.⁴¹

The earliest tourist guide to feature the parish appears to have been *Murray's Handbook for Travellers in Devon and Cornwall*, which was first published in 1850. It recommended the coastal path from Torcross around to East Portlemouth and suggested that Prawle Point was 'perhaps the finest headland on the S. coast of Devon'.⁴² In July 1854 the Londoner Walter White made a pedestrian tour of the South West; he was a perceptive observer of both the landscape and humanity, and recorded his experiences in a book published the following year. He entered the parish at Lannacombe Mill, which

with one solitary house, stands in a break of the cliff, where a noisy brook rushes to the shore A little farther and you come to a port in miniature — a small basin in which some half-dozen fishing boats may float, surrounded by rocks, with no outlet but a narrow groove worn through the reef. The fishermen, however, turn it to account, notwithstanding the contracted entrance, which must necessitate delicate steering, and use it as a harbour; and in the hollows of the big rock close by they find storerooms for their tackle and vaults for their fish.⁴³

The 1870 Elementary Education Act had required the provision of education for all those who required it, but it was not until 1877 that a school was opened at East Prawle, at the north-west edge of the village, catering for pupils of all ages. Its first master received a very critical report from the inspector: 'The attainments throughout are discreditable, the style of instruction

³⁹ Harding 1847, 112–113.

⁴⁰ Wickes 1990, 60.

⁴¹ Thorne 1975, 48, 72.

⁴² Murray 1850, 41, 43.

⁴³ White 1855, 136–7.

defective, and the discipline and tone perfectly unsatisfactory.... The Infants are neglected'; by the turn of the century the board were offering payments for good attendance.⁴⁴ In 1947 the seniors were transferred to Kingsbridge, and the school closed in 1968 when the juniors were transferred to a new school at Stokenham.⁴⁵

The 20th Century

During the First World War Chivelstone parish provided the first airfield for land-based aircraft in South West England. Royal Naval Air Station Prawle opened in April 1917 on a 50-acre site west of the village.⁴⁶ Sopwith Camels and Sopwith 1½-Strutters of 54 Squadron were flown on anti-submarine patrols, but they proved to be accident-prone and the station was closed during the following winter. The Royal Air Force was formed on 1 April 1918 and later that month the station was re-opened and enlarged as RAF Prawle with 254 Squadron flying DH6 and DH9 biplanes.⁴⁷ Obviously such an installation in a deeply rural area was not free of problems and the extension led to the closure of the road to East Portlemouth, causing the parish council to appeal to Kingsbridge Rural District Council to 'put a stop to this outrageous encroachment of parish and public rights'.⁴⁸ The station closed in February 1919, after which the Rural District Council claimed damages from the Air Ministry of £1434 10s.⁴⁹ As there were no permanent buildings virtually no trace remains of the site.⁵⁰

A nationwide survey of land-use was made in the 1930s and the resulting map shows arable land (which included temporary grassland) slightly predominating over permanent grass at Chivelstone.⁵¹

Chivelstone also made a contribution in the Second World War. In the spring of 1940 the chain of radar stations was extended to include the South West peninsula and this led to the creation of RAF West Prawle on a site to the north-west of East Prawle village. In view of the secrecy attaching to the technology they were referred to as Air Ministry Experimental Stations. The water supply was piped from a reservoir at Sherford Cross, some six miles to the north, this being the first time the parish had been supplied with mains water, and the opportunity was taken to extend the supply to a standpipe in East Prawle village.⁵² When invasion threatened, defensive measures against the landing of enemy aircraft took the form of poles being driven into likely fields, among them the old aerodrome at Prawle.⁵³ The radar installation was expanded with a remote reserve being established above the low cliffs just east of Prawle Point. At the main site six masts were present but all that remains today are transmitter and receiver buildings and possible accommodation buildings; on the lower site there were two masts but the remains of the transmitter, receiver and generator buildings survive, and are visible from the coastal path.⁵⁴

⁴⁴ Sellman 1967, 72, 75, 89, 123.

⁴⁵ Bovett 1989, 66.

⁴⁶ Wasley 2000, 112–114.

⁴⁷ Wasley 2000, 112.

⁴⁸ Kingsbridge Rural District Council minutes DRO R9/6/C16, p443 31.8.1918.

⁴⁹ Kingsbridge Rural District Council minutes DRO R9/6/C17, p44 15.3.1919.

⁵⁰ Wasley 2000, 126.

⁵¹ Land Utilisation Survey of Britain: Sheet 145, Torquay and Dartmouth.

⁵² DRO R9/6/C27, 93, 484.

⁵³ DRO R9/6/C27, 110.

⁵⁴ Pers. comm. Andrew Passmore, Exeter Archaeology.

Personnel were accommodated in the village. The proximity of the main site to the school led to an air raid shelter being provided at the north-east corner of the school yard.⁵⁵

Chivelstone was included in the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty when designated in 1960, and the South Devon section of the South West Coastal Footpath was officially opened in September 1974.

The first half of the century had seen a slight increase in population, reaching a maximum of 461 in 1951; but the decline was then steep, to a minimum of 208 in 1981, no doubt the result of the trend to second homes and holiday cottages. There has been a modest recovery since then, to 286 in 2001, but by then over 40 per cent of the houses in the parish were second homes, and the figure for East Prawle village was 60 per cent.⁵⁶ Another change was that the farms which in 1851 had employed up to 18 workers now employed only casual labour,⁵⁷ and at that date the parish population was almost exactly double what it was in 2001.

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⁵⁵ DRO undated plan 2380C/P50.

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