

Thurnham Today

Thurnham lies three miles north east of Maidstone. A large, essentially rural parish, it comprises some 3169 acres that stretch from the top of the North Downs to within a few hundred yards of the River Len in the south.

As noted above, Thurnham's shape has been considerably altered by various boundary changes over the years. The current parish is shaped somewhat like a spanner, the 'jaws' of which surround on three sides the adjoining and far more heavily populated parish of Bearsted which contains many of the services, both public and private, on which the residents of Thurnham rely.

The parish is divided into four broad areas by the main transport arteries that cut across it. To the north of the A249 the land is essentially flat. It is the site of the former aerodrome, now dominated by the County Showground and an industrial estate. South of the A249 the land slopes gently towards the scarp face of the North Downs. The dominant feature here is White Horse Wood.

Planted as a Kent County Council Millennium Project the wood is slowly maturing and extends south towards the edge of the scarp face of the North Downs towards a viewing point created by the Parish Council



(Above) White Horse Wood and the view south



as its Millennium Project. On a clear day this provides fine panoramic vistas for many miles across the valley of the River Len towards Leeds Castle in the east, to the Greensand Ridge and beyond in the south and beyond Aylesford in the west.

To the south east of White Horse Wood lies the remains of Thurnham Castle and a little way to the east of that in Friningham is the Thurnham Weather Station (known as the Thurnham Weather Beacon). This was a joint venture between the Environment



Agency and the Met Office. Located on the highest point in Kent the Station's range covers the whole of the Thames Estuary, Northern France and Holland. It can analyse the weather in 3D so that they can predict the type of rain that will fall.

All this land lies within the North Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) which extends south to the boundaries of the CTRL and the M20 motorway. Between the scarp face and the CTRL mixed pastoral and arable farming predominates.



Some pockets of old woodland remain (notably Honeyhills, Longton and Longham woods) but much of that which once dotted the North Downs and lined Water Lane was cleared during the 1950s and 60s to make way for cereals. Many old hedgerows were removed at the same time and the pond opposite Court Farm that once formed a natural drainage point filled in. Field sizes now reflect the demands of modern agricultural machinery.

In recent years, however, individual householders (making use of grants available), farmers and the Parish Council have all added to the stock of trees and added new hedgerows in this part of the parish.

This goes very much with the grain of local opinion. The preservation of trees and hedgerows and encouraging the planting of new trees are matters



the people of Thurnham feel passionately about and strongly support.

The land between the motorway and the A20 is designated as of special landscape and bio-diversity value. Agriculture and leisure activities again predominate with Bearsted Golf Club occupying this whole area of land from Thurnham Lane in the east to Hockers Lane in the west. Originally laid out as a nine hole course in 1895 on land made available by Sir George Hampson Bart F.Z.S. of Thurnham Court, the course was extended in 1922, 1948 and substantially in 1976 by the incorporation of land from Chapel Farm.

Population

The area north of the railway line contains around a fifth of the parish's population, in a number of small hamlets: in the southern part of Thurnham Lane; in the area around Thurnham crossroads and Aldington Lane, in Water Lane and Coldblow Lane. A few properties border Detling near Scragged Oak Lane. Over 70% of the population live south of the railway.

For more than 150 years Thurnham's population grew modestly, from some 350 in 1801 to just over 1,500 in 1971. Changes in parish boundaries in the 1970s resulted in a major transfer of households from Thurnham to Bearsted. Since then the parish's population has risen significantly, largely as a result of the Bearsted Park housing development in the 1980s.

Today, nearly 60% of residents live in this south western area of the parish (which includes Chapel Lane and parts of Ware Street, Hockers Lane and the hamlet of Weavering) – a proportion that will only increase when Ragstone Place is fully occupied.

A further 16% of the population live in the south eastern corner of the parish defined by the A20, Caring Lane and Crismill Lane.



(Above and right) Ragstone Place before and during construction

Homes and households

The overwhelming majority of Thurnham's residents (97%) are owner occupiers. This compares with 70% nationally and 75% in the South East as a whole. One per cent of homes in Thurnham are provided as part of the occupier's employment.

Most people (66%) live in detached houses, with a further 16% in detached bungalows.

Forty four per cent of those properties were built in the last thirty years, reflecting the development of Bearsted Park. Twenty eight per cent were built in the first fifty years of the last century, 19% were constructed before 1900.



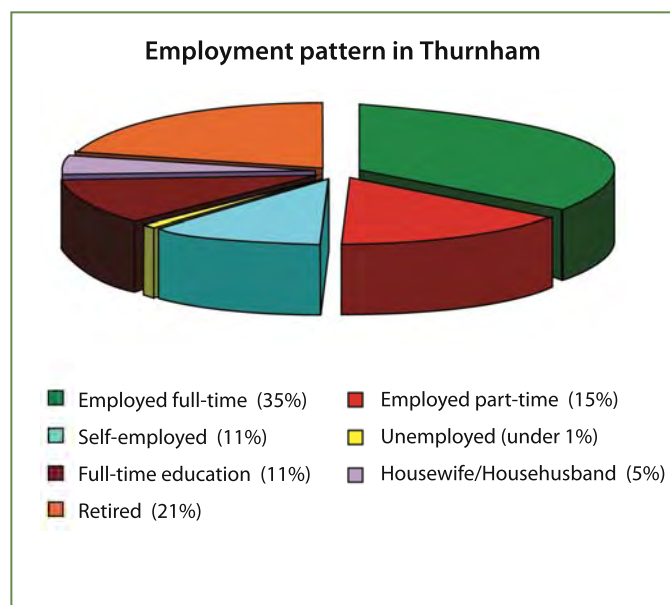
Thurnham's households span a range of sizes: 42% are made up of two people, while those with one or two children comprise 37% of the population. Thirteen per cent live alone.

Our survey showed that Thurnham contained a well-balanced cross-section of age groups. Those between 45 and 59 form the largest group (29%), while those aged 25 – 44 make up 19%. Twenty three per cent are under 18 as are those aged 60 or over. Fourteen per cent of Thurnham's population is over 65 compared with nearly 17% nationally.

Contrary to many people's expectations when we started this exercise, the returns to our survey showed that there is a significant movement of population in and out of Thurnham. Only 2% of people have lived in the parish for more than 50 years, and 33% between 16 and 50 years. Most (44%) have lived in Thurnham for between 6 and 15 years.

Employment

Half the population is engaged in full or part-time work and just over 10% are self employed. Unemployment in the parish (at under 1%) is virtually non-existent and falls well below the national average. Five per cent are unwaged housewives or househusbands; 11% are in full-time education and 21% are retired. Eleven per cent work from home; 5% elsewhere in the parish; 39% within a radius of 15 miles and 24% over 15 miles away, of whom many commute to London.



Services and businesses

Thurnham has no shops, doctors, dentists, post office or other public services. Residents look to the neighbouring parishes of Bearsted, Boxley and Detling for many of these services and, of course, to the county town which is on the parish's doorstep.



It does, however, have two pubs: the Black Horse (above left) and the Bell (above right). Both establishments have changed dramatically over the years in response to changing public demand and now provide extensive restaurant facilities alongside the bar, and, in the case of the Black Horse, bed and breakfast accommodation as well.

Bed and breakfast is also available at Thurnham Keep. Coldblow Camping Barn provides overnight accommodation for campers, walkers and horse riders.

The largest businesses in the parish are the Marriott Tudor Park Hotel, which includes a gym and conference centre as well as its own golf course; the Bearsted Golf Club and the County Showground which was relocated to its current site in the 1960s.



The industrial estate, located on the site of the former airfield, has grown like Topsy in recent years and it is

a matter of concern both to the Parish Council and local residents that this growth has taken place without the degree of planning control that seems appropriate within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The parish also includes a long established garage and car repair business, a firm of roofing contractors, an established IT business that has recently moved to Caring Lane (below left) and the large and well stocked Potted Garden Nursery (below right).

Cobham Manor (bottom of page), though no longer a riding school, is still a centre of equestrian activity.



We were very disappointed that only two of the above businesses (the Bell and the Black Horse) responded to the questionnaire. It is a matter of particular regret that those which did not included the County Showground.

