THE LANDSCAPE
OF BENENDEN

Ernest Pollard and Hazel Strouts

July 2006
INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 2
  Location and size of the parish ........................................................................ 2
  Geology, topography and soils ........................................................................ 3

I. THE HISTORY OF THE LANDSCAPE ................................................................. 4
  Prehistoric and Roman periods .................................................................... 4
  The dens .......................................................................................................... 4
  Lathes and hundreds ..................................................................................... 5
  Manors ........................................................................................................... 5
  The parish ....................................................................................................... 6
  Pattern of settlement in the Weald ............................................................... 6
  The iron industry ............................................................................................ 6
  The clothiers .................................................................................................. 7
  Farming ........................................................................................................... 9
  Hedges, farm and field size ......................................................................... 11
  Marl-pits ........................................................................................................ 12
  Hops ................................................................................................................ 12
  Woodland ....................................................................................................... 12
  Mills and milling ............................................................................................. 14
  The Parish Church ........................................................................................ 15
  Hemsted Estate ............................................................................................. 16
  Roads, bridleways and footpaths .................................................................. 16
  Houses and farm buildings .......................................................................... 18
  Approximate dates given to listed houses (including inns) in Benenden .... 20
  Place-names ................................................................................................... 22

II THE LANDSCAPE TODAY .................................................................................. 24
  The countryside as wildlife habitat ............................................................... 25

III PROTECTING AND ENJOYING THE LANDSCAPE ........................................ 30
  The High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty .................... 30
  Protecting Buildings and Ancient Monuments ........................................ 30
  Protecting wildlife habitat: woods, trees, meadows, orchards, ponds, streams, hedgerows and roadside verges .............................................................. 31
  Protecting flora and fauna ........................................................................... 32
  Protecting our farms ...................................................................................... 32
  Ways to immerse yourself in the landscape: walking, riding and cycling. 33

IV THE LANDSCAPE AS A WHOLE: THE FUTURE .............................................. 34

REFERENCES ........................................................................................................ 36
INTRODUCTION
The high land around Hemsted House (Benenden School) is a watershed; to the north, streams flow to the Thames Estuary, to the south and south-east to the English Channel at Rye. There was a Roman settlement here at Hemsted, close to the junction of Roman roads, and it is likely that the area was occupied even earlier. The name means “The Homestead”.

From such beginnings, and within the constraints imposed by geology and topography, human activity has shaped the landscape. It is our aim to show how this landscape evolved, to report on its condition at the end of the second millennium, to describe some of the measures being undertaken for its conservation and enjoyment and to speculate on its future.

Many people have helped by giving their time to answer questions, by reading and commenting on drafts or in other ways. In particular, we are grateful to Neil Aldridge of Headcorn for his contribution to understanding early settlement in Benenden. This account is an updated version of the Introduction to the Benenden 2000 book, a book written by the people of the village and produced by the Benenden Amenity and Countryside Society and the Benenden Millennium 2000 Committee. A copy of the book is on permanent display in St George’s church.

We welcome comments, suggestions and corrections, via the village web-site.

Location and size of the parish
The High Weald of Kent, Sussex and Surrey is a well defined geographical area. It is hilly with generally small fields and woods, well-timbered hedges and narrow, often deeply-sunken, lanes. In Kent, the High Weald stretches east from Edenbridge (10 miles west of Tonbridge) to Tenterden and contrasts with the Low Weald, or Vale of Kent, a relatively flat area of heavy clay-land which borders the High Weald to the north and east.

The parish of Benenden in Kent, near the eastern edge of the High Weald, lies close to the Sussex border about 12 miles from the south coast. It extends approximately 5 miles from west to east and 3 miles from north to south, giving an area of some 6,500 acres. The population is approximately 1,750. The nearest towns are Cranbrook, 3 miles to the north-west, and Tenterden, 5 miles to the east, with populations of about 4,500 and 7,000 respectively. Proximity to the coast and to the rich grazing marshes of the Rother Valley were once important to the economy of Benenden. Newenden, only two miles from the parish boundary, was an important port until the fourteenth century.

Except where it follows streams, the parish boundary is marked by boundary stones bearing the initials of Benenden and the adjoining parish. The stones can be roughly dated, as they are not shown in a parish perambulation of 1777, but appear on the first large-scale Ordnance Survey maps of the 1870s. On the OS maps, fifty-one boundary markers are shown, distinguished as either “stones” or (a few) “posts”. Modern large-scale maps show about a third of these, but others probably survive, buried under the ground or in dense scrub. One three-sided stone, amongst the roots of an ancient yew at the side of a deeply sunken lane, marks where Cranbrook, Hawkhurst and Benenden meet - the yew was mentioned in the perambulation of 1777. A similar three-sided stone marks the meeting point of Rolvenden, Tenterden and Benenden.
Geology, topography and soils
Benenden, like much of the High Weald, is underlain by a complex mosaic of rocks, known collectively as the Hastings Beds. From oldest to youngest the Benenden outcrops are the Ashdown Beds, Wadhurst Clay and Tunbridge Wells Sand, the last two predominating. These strata are variable, in particular, the Tunbridge Wells Sand, which contains sandstones, clays and silts. A fault known to geologists as the “Benenden Fault” lies across the parish, causing a discontinuity in the normal sequence of strata, and there are other minor faults adding to the overall complexity.

Although complex in detail, the geology of Benenden can be simplified to the following. In the north of the parish is Tunbridge Wells Sand. To the south of this, running east-west across the centre of the parish are outcrops of Wadhurst Clay and Ashdown beds, the latter a narrow band to the north of the Benenden Fault. To the south of the fault, the sequence of Tunbridge Wells Sand and Wadhurst Clay (but not Ashdown Beds) is repeated down to the alluvial deposits of the Hexden Channel. The junction of the Wadhurst Clay and the overlying, more permeable, Tunbridge Wells Sand is marked by numerous springs, the location of which must have played a part in the location of early settlements.

All of the geological formations contain iron-rich rocks, with a rich seam in the Wadhurst Clay, close to its junction with the Ashdown beds. There was iron smelting in the Weald mainly in the Iron Age and Roman periods and again from about 1500 until the late 17th century. There seems to have been only small-scale stone quarrying, mainly of sandstone from the Ashdown beds.

The countryside of Benenden is undulating, with generally high land at Hemsted and Iden Green on the Tunbridge Wells Sand. Erosion by streams has led to the formation of many deep and narrow valleys, known locally as gills, a characteristic feature of the High Weald. Drainage is mainly to the south and east, with small streams running to the Hexden Channel and others to the Newmill Channel, well beyond the parish boundary to the east. These larger streams are tributaries of the Rother which reaches the sea near Rye. In the north-west of the parish drainage is eventually into the River Medway and the Thames Estuary, via the Hammer Stream and the River Beult.

The soils of the parish are generally acid and agriculturally poor, more suited to livestock than arable farming. They are prone to waterlogging, and some, if cultivated, suffer from surface wash in heavy rain. The silt areas of Tunbridge Wells Sand are particularly poor and often carry heathy woodlands. Soils on the Wadhurst Clay are productive if well drained, but effective long-term drainage is not easy because drainage channels quickly become blocked.
I. THE HISTORY OF THE LANDSCAPE

Prehistoric and Roman periods

After the end of the last ice age, some 10,000 to 15,000 years ago, woodland became slowly established over much of Britain and was well developed by 7000 B.C. Clearance of woods by man, and the development of a landscape of settled agriculture began around 3000 B.C. However, the High Weald, because of its dense woods, intractable soils and difficult terrain, was not fully settled until later, but even here there is evidence of prehistoric settlements. Recent archaeological evidence from nearby in the Low Weald, around Headcorn, indicates settlements there from the 1st century B.C. and perhaps earlier, and there is the likelihood of similar early settlement in the High Weald.

There was at least one Roman settlement in Benenden, discovered by a teacher, Miss Wilson, and girls of Benenden School in the 1950s, in the grounds of the school. The area was relocated in 2006; it is close to the junction of the two Roman roads which pass through the parish. It is not far from a Roman iron-working area at Farningham, over the parish boundary in Cranbrook, and suggests a significant Roman presence in the area.

In the Weald as a whole, finds of slag from the Iron Age and Roman periods show that iron smelting was extensive. This in turn implies woodland management, to produce fuel for smelting, and perhaps also clearance of woods for limited settlements and farming. In early Saxon times the area of woods probably increased again and was still extensive at the time of the Domesday survey of 1086.

The dens

The seasonal grazing of pigs (known as pannage) may have been practiced in the Weald since prehistoric times, but we associate it especially with the Saxons and it was this period that shaped the settlement pattern of the Weald as we know it today.

In the early Saxon period, pigs were driven into the Weald each autumn to feed on acorns and other woodland foods. Gradually, from around the seventh century, the Weald was parcelled out into small dens (swine pastures) belonging to people living in the north and east of Kent. The dens varied in size from about 50 to 400 acres, with a few larger. Typically each group of people, under their leader, owned several dens along their drove road into the Weald. The area now occupied by the parish of Benenden was most accessible to the east, to the northern fringes of Romney Marsh and the area around Ashford and it was from these places that Saxon people brought their pigs into the Benenden.

Benenden was originally just one of many dens within the present parish. The origin of the name is uncertain, but it is thought to have been the den of the people of Byyna. There were some 30 to 40 dens in today’s parish. Many, such as Bishopsden, Iden, Walkhurst, Maplesden and Sarnden., are familiar to today’s villagers, but the names of others are known only from documents.

There may have been settlements in the dens quite early in the Saxon period, existing alongside pannage, and by the Norman Conquest, when pannage was in decline, much of the area was farmed. The Domesday Book, of 1086, shows a considerable amount of arable land in the den of Benenden.
Lathes and hundreds
The Domesday survey records England more or less as it was at the end of the Saxon period. Kent was divided into lathes and the lathes into hundreds. Both these administrative units survived for many centuries, with the hundreds shown on the first large scale Ordnance Survey maps of about 1870. The area of the present parish of Benenden originally lay in two lathes, Wye and Lympne, and included parts of four hundreds, Cranbrook and Barclay hundreds in Wye lathe, Selbritenden and Rolvenden hundreds in Lympne lathe. After a 13th century reorganisation, Benenden lay entirely in the new lathe of Scray.

The hundred boundaries often follow small streams or old roads, indications that they are of great age. There are three-sided hundred-boundary stones, of unknown age, close to Stream Farm and Goddard’s Green, each where three hundreds meet. These stones are both on the lines of Roman roads, again suggesting that they mark ancient boundaries. The hundred stones are distinct from, and perhaps older than, the parish boundary stones mentioned earlier.

Manors
From about the seventh century, royal grants of land to the Church and to great men began the creation of manors. Initially, manorial tenants provided services to the lord of the manor, usually in the form of work on his land, and the lord owed services a higher lord or to the King, the ultimate owner of all land.

In Kent, manors were first established in the areas of ancient settlement in the north and east of the county, and the dens of the Weald came under their ownership. The dens now belonged formally to manors rather than by tradition to Saxon leaders and their followers. Dens in Benenden parish now belonged to manors such as Aldington and Lyminge on the border of Romney Marsh, and to Brook, Hothfield, Westwell and others near Ashford. The early Saxon leaders with Benenden dens lived in these areas and the geographical connections were preserved in the manorial system.

The Church at Canterbury owned many manors in Kent. In Benenden parish, Walkhurst and Dockenden were amongst the dens belonging to Canterbury monasteries, though their manors, and Bishopsden was owned personally by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Over the centuries additional small manors were created within the Weald, with the lord of the manor, initially at least, an under-tenant of an older manor outside the Weald. Some of these Wealden manors were based on a single den, others had two or more dens which might be widely separated. Locally the den of Halden in Rolvenden became a large manor, owing a dozen other Wealden dens some of which were in Benenden parish.

The original den of Benenden became a manor in its own right very early and was one of only four such manors mentioned in the Domesday Book. Benenden Manor eventually came into the hands of the Hemsted Estate and a Court Book from the 18th and 19th centuries has survived. This book includes a rental for Benenden Manor for the year 1777, the year in which the earliest map and survey of the village was made. Rental and map together makes it possible to match the people who paid manorial rents with their farms on the map, and so tell us roughly the extent of the manor.

Thus we know that Benenden Manor (and presumably the earlier den) extended roughly from the Old Manor House east, along The Street and Rolvenden Road to Beacon Farm, and south to include parts of
Stream and Frame farms and the Church. The oldest manor house may have been close to the Church, even though the present “Old Manor House” is very old and is on the site of an even older moated house. Those interested in these aspects of parish history will find more detail in a paper on the dens of Benenden, by the writers of this account, published in 2005 and listed in the Bibliography.

The parish
In the Weald the ecclesiastical parishes were formed later than were most English parishes, probably dating from around the 12th century. Although only Benenden church, of the local churches, was mentioned in the Domesday Book, other sources from the same period tell us that the churches of all our neighbouring parishes were in existence by Domesday.

Benenden parish church began as the church of Benenden Manor. We can imagine that it was used by the people from neighbouring dens, and that gradually the area became recognised as a parish. Over the centuries, ecclesiastical parishes took over the functions of general local government and eventually the civil parishes were formed. The older institutions, dens, manors and hundreds and lathes, continued to exist alongside the parishes, but their influence was slowly lost.

Many dens were divided between parishes. For example, Dockenden, now in Hemsted Forest, overlapped Benenden, Biddenden and Cranbrook, while Bishopsden included land in Benenden and Biddenden. In some cases the parish boundary divides individual fields, and at Netters Hall, the Hawkhurst/Benenden boundary goes through the house! The parishes were established when den boundaries would still have been familiar, suggesting that some dens were deliberately divided between parishes.

Pattern of settlement in the Weald
The pattern of settlement in Benenden, and the other parishes of the Weald, was very different from that of a typical “nuclear” English village. Nuclear villages developed from a group of houses around a church, with cultivation of large open-fields shared by the villagers; such villages predominate in the arable areas of central and eastern England, where co-operation was essential for cultivation, harvesting and storage of crops. In these areas hedges were mainly creations of Tudor or Georgian enclosure of the open-fields. Often parish and manor would coincide.

In sharp contrast, in the Weald there were, as we have seen, many small settlements in the dens. Fields were small, with ancient hedges, and open-field cultivation never existed. Farmers had discrete holdings from an early period and were tenants of manors which were often many miles away and had little influence over them. This dispersed pattern of settlement was integral to the character of the Weald and has remained so ever since.

The iron industry
There were two main periods of iron making in the High Weald; the first from the late Iron Age in the first century BC until the end of the Roman period. During this period the ore, dug from pits or stream-side quarries, was smelted using small furnaces, with charcoal as fuel and hand bellows. The method is known as the bloomery process, because the product was a solid “bloom” of iron. The iron produced reworked on a forging hearth before being made into tools and other products. After a long gap, iron
production by the bloomery process was resumed in the Weald in medieval times, but was superseded by water-powered blast furnaces in the 15th century.

In Benenden there have been finds of iron slag from Iron Age or Roman periods, including sites near Diprose, Bishopsden and Netters Hall. Slag can be found most easily in streams or on ploughland, and other sites may lie hidden under grass. The local Roman roads are, in places, surfaced with bloomery slag, suggesting the existence of other local bloomeries, as it is unlikely that the heavy slag was carried far from the smelting sites.

In the second period of iron making, using the blast furnace technique imported from the continent, water-powered bellows achieved high temperatures and liquefied the iron. This was then tapped off, cast, and further processed by the water-powered hammers of the forges. The use of blast furnaces began in the late 15th century and flourished in the High Weald for 200 years. Most were in Sussex, where dammed valleys survive in numbers and “iron” place-names such as furnace, forge and hammer are common. The industry was less important in Kent, although there were furnaces and forges in Biddenden and Hawkhurst, both close to the Benenden boundary, and also at Bedgebury. The industry used large amounts of wood for charcoal and probably some of this fuel came from Benenden.

It was thought that the iron industry depleted the woodlands of the Weald and hastened the end of the industry. Although there were certainly shortages and over-exploitation, the opposite was probably true; many woods survived only because of the heavy requirement for wood for the iron industry and other purposes. Wood suitable for charcoal was “small wood”, up to 2-3 inches in diameter, best produced by coppicing (periodic cutting to ground level) on a short cycle of up to about ten years; hornbeam, so common in Benenden woods, is especially suitable for charcoal. Coppiced woodland provided a renewable resource and the more wood that was required the greater the incentive to retain, or even increase, the area under coppice.

Evidence from field names suggests that iron ore for the furnaces was mined in the parish. The map and survey of the parish of 1777 show several fields, close to a rich seam of iron ore, named “Mine Spot Field” or “Mine Pit Field”, and ore pits have recently been found in Parsonage Wood on the same seam. The date of the Parsonage Wood pits is not known, but they probably provided ore for the water-powered furnaces not far away.

The Geological Survey of the Tenterden District of 1966 noted the occurrence of nodules of an iron ore at Dingleden, together with pits where the ore may have been mined and a bay (dam) across a nearby stream. The Survey authors concluded that this might be the site of a water-powered furnace. The map and survey of 1777 indeed gives the name “Furnace Field” to the field adjoining this bay. However, the site was examined in 1997 by members of the Wealden Iron Research Group and no slag, or other evidence of iron smelting, was found.

The clothiers
Cloth-making grew in importance in Cranbrook and the surrounding villages from the second half of the fourteenth century and became the major source of local wealth. As with iron making, reasons for its growth included the availability of water power and wood. The local streams drove some early fulling mills, water was needed for washing and dyeing and wood was used to heat the vats in which the wool was dyed. The structure of the Wealden farming society, with many individuals possessing some
personal wealth and accustomed to self-reliance, lent itself to the development of small scale industry. The early clothiers came mainly from the yeoman class and many retained their links with the land.

The cloth industry flourished especially during the sixteenth century and declined rapidly during the seventeenth. It has been suggested that the main reason for its decline was the failure of the clothiers to adapt to changing requirements; they continued to produce the highest quality cloth in a period when the market needed a cheaper product.

The clothiers were entrepreneurs, buying in raw materials and supervising their own workers in some manufacturing processes. They also co-ordinated the activities of a range of independent workers and marketed the finished cloth. The wool had to be of fine quality, so that the woven cloth could be felted up in the finishing process. Although some wool came from local sources, such as Romney Marsh, clothiers bought wool from as far away as Hampshire and Bedfordshire, often through wool brokers in London.

The wool was transported to the clothiers’ houses in large canvas sacks on packhorses and stored in their attics. It was sorted, according to fineness, and scoured in dilute urine to remove oils prior to dyeing in the clothier’s “dyehouse” or “workhouse”. Natural dyes were used, such as woad and indigo for blues, madder for reds and dyers broom or greenweed (*Genista tinctoria*) for yellows. A second dyeing, using a different dye, produced intermediate colours. The dyed wool was distributed to carders and spinners, usually women, to produce yarn for the weavers. Weaving was on broadlooms, requiring two men to operate them, master and apprentice, often father and son. The local broadcloth was heavy and of high quality, 28-30 yards in length by 63 inches wide, with fine colours.

The woven cloth was steeped in warm urine to remove most of the remaining oils and then, after adding fuller’s earth, pounded with hammers in the fulling mill, with hot soapy water added periodically. Fuller’s earth further absorbed oils and other contaminants from the fibres. Early fulling mills were on the small streams of the Weald, but later many cloths were taken to mills near Maidstone where the larger rivers, the Len and Loose, provided more reliable sources of power and where there were supplies of fuller’s earth. It is possible that local clays (marls) were used as a substitute for fuller’s earth, but we know of no evidence that this was so. The fulled cloth was dried under tension on tenter-frames (hence the expression “on tenterhooks”), usually close to the clothier’s house, and several “Tenter Field” names survived in Benenden at least into the 18th century. The dried cloth was hung over a beam and the nap raised by brushing with the dried flower heads of the teasel (fuller’s’ teasel, *Dipsacus fullonum*). Finally the cloth was stretched across a low table and trimmed with shears to produce a felt-like finish. The weavers, fullers and shearers were usually independent artisans, but the clothiers were a distinctive class at the top of the industry and included men of great wealth.

Benenden was close to the centre of the cloth industry. Of some 600 known clothiers in the Weald in sixteenth century, 166 were in Cranbrook itself, 100 in Biddenden, with Benenden third with 58. The only other villages with over 30 clothiers were Goudhurst and Hawkhurst. Probate inventories (lists of possessions at time of death) from the late sixteenth century suggest that about 25% of Benenden men were then involved in some aspect of the cloth industry and there were a very large number of women and children who worked at home as spinners but have left no record of their work.

Some of the beautiful old houses in Benenden must owe their origin to the wealth generated by the cloth industry although research linking the houses to their first owners has yet to be undertaken and would be difficult. Agriculture must also have benefited from the wealth generated by the cloth industry. For
example, some Benenden farmers owned grazing land in the marshes of the Rother Valley and presumably were suppliers of wool. Some of the network of old roads in the parish may owe its origin to the industry and another legacy is in place-names such as Frame Farm and Weavers Lane.

There are no known relics of the cloth industry in the Benenden countryside, although there may be evidence in the landscape if we could recognise it. In Cranbrook there are documentary records of fulling mills, and the bays and mill-ponds were surveyed as long ago as 1856 and again in 1954. It would be surprising if there were no fulling mills in Benenden at any period, but no sites have been identified.

At the peak of the cloth industry, in the 16th century, the parish roads must have been busy with the transport of wool, cloth in stages of production, and the finished broadcloth. Agriculture too was profitable and intensive at this time, the woods were heavily exploited and water-mills for flour and paper also made use of the fast-flowing streams. Small industries supported both agriculture and cloth production and many houses and farm buildings were built at this time. The countryside of Benenden was busier and more prosperous than at any other time.

Farming
We have only a few glimpses of early farming in Benenden; for example the Domesday survey tells us that there was even then a significant amount of arable land. The first reasonably detailed picture comes from research on probate inventories and other contemporary records of the 16th century. Then a typical Wealden farm was between 25 and 35 acres, but many were smaller than 10 acres. There were probably only two or three farms of over 100 acres in the parish. The main farming activity was cattle raising and fattening, with relatively few sheep. The annual Benenden Cattle Fair, which continued into the 1950s, was a last reminder of this importance. Most farms had a few acres of arable with wheat and oats the main crops. Some farmers had additional land on Romney Marsh or elsewhere on the Rother or Hexden marshes. Oxen were used for ploughing, although only the larger farmers had their own, and horses were used mainly for transport.

One large farmer in the late 16th century was Thomas Sharpe of Old Standen. He had land around the house and more in Sandhurst, on the marshes at Ethnam, and may have rented still more. His inventory shows that he had 12 acres of winter wheat, 4 oxen, 4 steers, 11 Welsh bullocks, 22 other bullocks, a bull and 10 weaner cattle, 62 sheep and lambs, 4 horses and four colts. He probably had about 30 acres of arable and 100 of pasture; a typical mixed farm.

Given the poor roads and the fact that animals had to be driven to market and to distant grazing lands, the extent of movement of animals in the 16th century may seem surprising. Store cattle for fattening often came from Wales (as in the case of Thomas Sharpe) or from northern England and the finished animals were sold into London or north Kent markets.

Many people combined farming with other activities; the will of the weaver John Everenden in 1567 showed that he had land in Benenden and Sandhurst and that he left cattle to his son and daughter. The income from farming provided a buffer against fluctuations in the profitability of the cloth industry and there is no doubt that farming also benefited from the wealth provided by the industry.

By the 1777 survey there were still 32 farms of between 5 and 20 acres of a total of about 100 farms, but farm size had increased and there were now 16 farms of 100 acres or more. Average field size was
about three acres with a maximum of about 13 acres. A recurrent comment, in an 1801 survey of farms owned by Thomas Law Hodges of Hemsted, is that the farms had more, and better, farm buildings than could be justified by their current profitability; they were relics of more prosperous times. Thomas Law Hodges of Hemsted, was a progressive landowner who promoted land drainage by supporting a local Benenden manufacturer of tile drains.

The desperate condition of farm labourers in the years following the Napoleonic wars resulted in local unrest throughout the Weald culminating in the Swing Riots of 1830. In Benenden a shot was fired through a window at the Overseer of the Poor, sitting in a meeting in the Bull and later in the year there were disturbances on The Green and arrests made by militia. Thomas Law Hodges was sympathetic to the labourers and spoke in their support in parliament. The riots were put down by the army, with some brutality and there was considerable assisted emigration from Benenden and neighbouring villages. A recent book about the brothers William and Joseph Bowman, who left Benenden for Sydney in 1838, shows that, having survived an appalling four month journey, they flourished and, by 1988, there were some 5000 of their descendants in Australia and New Zealand.

After a period of relative prosperity, the “High Farming” of the middle of the century (when some hedges were removed and fields enlarged), there was further depression. This was made worse by some appalling summer weather, culminating in 1879. Lord Cranbrook’s diary for 11 October 1879 reflects these problems “... yesterday John Weston came to say that he could not take The Pump as his hops had done nothing for him. It is a pity that we did not know earlier, as of course I have been precluded from getting another tenant. High Tilt will be a trouble also…… ”. The Pump is Pympe Manor and High Tilt lies just outside the parish boundary in Cranbrook.

Since 1866 there has been a national June census of farms and farming. Unfortunately, in recent years the results are not available for individual parishes and 1988 provides the most recent clear picture of farming in Benenden. Very broadly, this can be compared with the 1777 survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acreage, and percentages of the total in all categories, recorded in Benenden in various land-use categories in 1777 and 1988</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>grassland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* In fact a few acres of hops remained until some years later

The area of land in all agricultural categories has declined by 14%, probably reflecting the increase in housing and gardens. The proportions of grass and arable have remained remarkably stable, although the distribution has changed. Most crops are now grown on a few large farms, whereas, formerly, many small farms each had a small proportion of arable land.

There were some small orchards in Benenden in 1777, but these seem to have been largely for domestic use, as they were not recorded by the surveyor as farm crops. In 1988, orchards had replaced hops in terms of acreage, but whereas hops were grown on almost every farm, fruit is concentrated on the lighter soils. Kent is known for its cherries and apples, but fruit growing in the Weald and more generally in the county is a relatively recent commercial development. It flourished in the 19th century, with arrival of the railway and the growing urban demand for fruit.
In 1988 the numbers of livestock were; cattle 896, sheep 11,816, pigs 4 and chickens 445. The main crops were wheat and barley, with 287 and 222 acres respectively, with 281 acres down to horticulture, mostly apples. There were three dairy farms, but only two where cattle fattening, once the traditional livestock farming of the High Weald, was the main occupation.

In the 1851 census, about 80% of people who recorded their occupations were farmers or farm workers (excluding family); in the 1881 census the figure was 71%. In 1988 only about 5% (91) were farmers, horticulturalists or farm workers, of which about half were part time or seasonal. Since 1988, the number engaged in farming full-time has fallen still further. Until the last fifty years, agriculture had provided the main employment in Benenden throughout its history (even during the peak of the cloth industry). The change to its present minor role has been very rapid.

**Hedges, farm and field size**

Hedges mark boundaries, confine livestock and give shelter. The oldest Wealden hedges may date from when fields were first cut out of woodland, perhaps as early as the seventh century; their shrubs either relics of woodland vegetation or taken from the woods. Some old hedges may even mark the boundaries of dens.

Old hedges often have woodland herbs flourishing in the hedge bottoms, a wide variety of shrubs and trees, and follow an irregular, unplanned line – they “belong” in the landscape.

“New” hedges, that is those planted in the last two to three-hundred years, are usually straight and are often obviously planted with hawthorn, or occasionally elm or blackthorn (the planted line of shrubs is sometimes clear). Other shrubs, such as ash and elder, typically colonise these recent hedges and can sometimes be seen to be outside the planted line. Several hawthorn hedges at Springhill Farm in Standen Street are of this type and are known to have been planted in the 19th century.

Other hedges cannot be easily classified into “very old” and “new”; we should not expect simplicity; hedges were created in different ways and have had different management histories since their creation. The well-known “Hooper’s hypothesis”, linking the age with the number of shrub species provides a rough guide to age, but was not intended as a precise tool.

The patchwork of small farms and fields in the High Weald means, of course, many hedges. We estimate that the mileage of hedges in Benenden in 1777 (the first parish map) was approximately 260 miles. There were losses of hedges in the 19th century, when the fields on some farms were enlarged, but most old hedges survived into the latter half of the 20th century. We discuss the recent loss of hedges later.

Historically, management of Wealden hedges seems to have been mainly by coppicing; that is, intermittent cutting close to ground level, with annual or biennial trimming or “brushing”. Hedge-laying as a form of regular management was practised mainly in areas of more recent enclosure, especially in the midlands. Judging from the multitude of old chestnut spiles that plug, or fail to plug, the gaps in many Wealden hedges, one suspects that most have been poor stock barriers for many years.
Marl-pits
Marl is a form of clay, dug from pits and spread on the land to improve the soil. In Benenden most marl-pits are on the Wadhurst clay and, presumably, the marl was usually spread on the rather lighter soils of the Tunbridge Wells Sand and Ashdown Beds. Digging, transporting and spreading marl, all by hand, was an enormous labour. Current opinion suggests that it was a waste of time. The use of the term “marl” now implies calcareous clay, but the marl from the Wadhurst Clay was acid and has little or no fertiliser value. It might, at best, give a short term improvement in water retention to lighter soils. Marling was practised from the 13th century or earlier, possibly as a by-product of mining for iron ore, and continued at least into the 19th century. It is difficult to accept that the enormous labour expended on marling over these centuries was wasted; farming should in theory progress by adopting or rejecting practices, according to experience of their success or failure. We keep an open mind.

Maps from the first large scale (1:2500) Ordnance Survey of the 1870s show the larger ponds in colour. This makes counting them relatively easy – our estimate is 338 such ponds in the parish. Some were undoubtedly clay pits for brick-making, a few were sand or stone pits, others were perhaps for iron ore, a few for stock, but most were flooded marl-pits, as shown by the profusion of marl-pit place-names. There were noticeable concentrations of pits around Beston Farm, in the east of the parish, School Farm in the west and to the south of Diprose house. Even 338 is probably a large under-estimate, because some pits are dry, some were dug into the sides of small streams or are otherwise drained, and some smaller ponds were not coloured on the maps. A survey of marl-pits in Bethersden, made in about 1845, suggested about 1000; Benenden’s total may approach this.

© Ernest Pollard and Hazel Strouts

Hops
Hops, as a crop for flavouring and preserving beer, are thought to have been introduced to Britain in the mid 16th century; there is a suggestion that the Guldeford family of Hemsted in Benenden were involved in the introduction. The existing pattern of farming, and the proximity of London, made the High Weald especially suited to hops. Heavy manuring was required, and was available in this cattle-raising area. The small woods were once again invaluable, this time for hop poles and for wood and charcoal to fuel the kilns. By the time of the 1777 survey of Benenden there were 145 hop gardens in the village. These were small, mostly between one and three acres. Typically there was one hop garden per farm, showing that hop growing took its place in the mixed farming of the period. The price of hops fluctuated widely, as it does today, and other sources of income were essential. Apart from the short term fluctuations, the industry thrived and grew during the 19th century, aided by the arrival of the railway. Since about 1880 however, there has been a steady decline as imported hops have increased and beer drinking declined. The last hops in Benenden were grubbed in the 1990s, although they are still grown just over the parish boundary in Sandhurst.

The autumn arrival of large numbers of hop pickers from the London’s East End, is still a strong memory for many older villagers. We also have a physical legacy in the large number of Victorian oast-houses, used for drying, cooling and packing the hops, Their kilns and cooling houses, now mostly converted to dwellings, are conspicuous and characteristic features of the local landscape.

Woodland
Each spring, the local woods give us glorious displays of flowers. Now, apart from Hemsted Forest, they have little economic importance, but this was not always the case. From prehistoric times onwards
They have been important for fuel and in Saxon times pigs grazed in the wood pastures of the dens. Kent is still one of the most heavily wooded counties in England. In 1777 woodland occupied 16% of Benenden (1048 acres); since then there have been a few losses, but some additional plantations may mean the current figure is even higher.

There is documentary evidence, going back to the 12th or 13th centuries, for some of the large local woods which belonged to the Church at Canterbury. The Church at Canterbury owned Walkhurst Wood, Church or Knowles Wood (now in Hemsted Forest) and Brogues Wood, mainly in Biddenden. Many of the smaller woods on the steep slopes of gills may be equally old; here farming is difficult or impossible, and it is unlikely that they have ever been cleared. Some plants, especially spring flowers, are characteristic of ancient woods and are absent or scarce in plantations made in the last few hundred years. Substantial banks, characteristic ancient woodland boundaries, can still be seen in many places in Benenden.

Although some of our woods may not have been cleared since the ice age, they have long been managed and owe much of their character to management. The early use for iron smelting may well have involved coppicing, while the grazing of pigs must have led to some form of wood pasture; that is, mature trees without underwood, as saplings would be suppressed by the pigs. We could learn something of the management of local woods from the 12th century onwards, from manorial documents held in the Canterbury Cathedral Archives, but this research has yet to be done.

The 1777 map and survey of Benenden identifies no fewer than 518 individual woods, ranging from the largest, Tottenden Wood, of 110 acres (87 acres in Benenden, the rest in Cranbrook) to the smallest of only 6 perches (about 180 square yards). Many patches of land categorised as "waste", usually abandoned pits, would also have had trees, and the hedges and shaws many more (shaws are small woods, especially linear woods along field boundaries).

After the time of pannage, the woods were again managed as coppice or coppice with standards; the coppice produced firewood and wood for fencing; the standards usually of oak, produced timber for buildings and for ships. Some large timber also came from hedgerow or park trees and their spreading branches provided, for example, the "knees" for the keels of ships and the arched trusses of early houses. The fine oaks of Benenden were probably transported elsewhere in Kent, even before the parish was settled, and contributed to the wealth of landowners throughout its history. Overland transport of wood was very difficult and much was carried by sea to north Kent and even to the continent; there were small quays along the streams penetrating into the Weald from the Rother. The oaks were also valuable for the tannin in their bark, used to convert animal skins to leather in the tanning process. There were two "Tanner Fields" in the 1777 survey, one opposite Pullington House where a wealthy tanner, Thomas Moyse lived, and the other at Dingleden.

In 1332 a dispute between the owner, Christ Church Priory, and the tenant in the den of Knolle (Knowles or Church Wood), about illicit felling of trees, gives an indication of the value attached to woodland at that time. Knowles wood remained in the possession of the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury Cathedral until it was sold to Thomas Law Hodges in 1816. Even in this century Benenden produced a specimen oak for the Wembley Exhibition of 1924/25, a huge tree by Golfdorf Road, known as the Hemsted Oak.

In many woods, old coppice-stools are easily identified today by their clusters of tall trunks, but little coppicing is now practised. In the larger woods, the main coppice species were (judging from their...
present abundance as coppice stools) sweet chestnut, hornbeam and ash, with hazel also quite common. Sweet chestnut was introduced to Britain, perhaps by the Romans, but was extensively planted in the 19th century for hop poles and fencing. Thomas Law Hodges of Hemsted planted many chestnuts and these were admired by Cobbet, as he walked down New Pond Road in 1823. Hornbeam and ash were probably used mainly for fuel, and hazel, because of its flexibility, for hurdles.

Until the 19th century, woods throughout Kent were a valuable, intensively managed, resource. In the latter half of the 19th century many factors coincided to reduce their value; the railways made coal widely available, the new wired system for hop gardens reduced the need for poles, wire also reduced the need for fencing wood, and oak tannins were superseded by chemical alternatives. The woods, which had been carefully managed for centuries, were largely abandoned. There was resurgence in the need for timber during the two world wars, but since then the woods have again been neglected and only their steep slopes, poor soils, and the popularity of game shooting, has saved many from clearance. An exception to this general decline is Hemsted Forest, bought from Lord Rothermere by the newly formed Forestry Commission in 1924. Much of Hemsted Forest, and some other private woods in the parish, is conifer plantation, although 300 acres of Hemsted Forest were already under conifers when taken over by the Forestry Commission.

Hemsted Forest was created in part from farmland that lay amongst the ancient woods of Tottenden, Knowles Wood, Timber Wood and others. Some of “lost” dens of the parish were in the area now occupied by the Forest. The first Ordnance Survey map of 1870 marks the banks of ancient roads though the woods and there may be other earthworks to be found, marking the sites of houses and farm buildings. One house, Dockenden, in the den of that name, has survived deep amongst the trees, but another, Pickhorn House, marked on a map of 1719, has long since gone.

Mills and milling
Water power was an important reason for the location of early industries in the Weald. Although Benenden has no known mills associated with the iron and cloth industries. In the section on the iron industry, we mentioned sites of mills of unknown function on streams at Dingleden; this and the recent discovery of an early (c1600) paper mill site near Bishopsden, suggests that there are more mill sites to be found along the small streams of the parish.

The two best known and longest working water-mill sites were on the largest stream, the Hexden (Hinksden) Channel. Paper Mill house takes its name from the mill which once stood nearby, and Wandle Mill is still standing.

In 1655, the Assize Records tell us that Richard Sharpe was indicted for not “scouring Hinksden River in Benenden, leading from Hinksden Mill [not necessarily a paper mill at that time] and Hinksden Bridge, so that the lands, outbuildings and fields of John Cryer are periodically flooded”. Water-mills are mentioned in the wills of earlier members of the Cryer family, William in 1540 and Thomas in 1560, and John Cryer was probably the owner of an earlier mill on the site now occupied by Wandle Mill.

Wandle Mill, the latest flour mill on that site, was built in 1828 and in 1856 was provided with a steam engine for extra power. It ceased working in the 1930s and the chimney for the steam engine was demolished. The mill has recently been converted into apartments.
Hinxden Mill was a paper mill in 1777; a survey of the Hemsted estate in 1801 noted that it combined the functions of paper mill and corn mill. The surveyor recorded that the mill pond and stream were so silted up that “at no time should I think it capable of doing much”. In the Hemsted Estate Sale Catalogue of 1857, the mill was described as “formerly a paper mill, driving two pairs of stones” and notes made by a local historian in the 1960s suggest that it closed as a paper mill in 1855. The mill is said to have been destroyed by fire in 1870.

The 1777 survey of Benenden was in a period without windmills in the parish. The map shows a relic of an old mill at “Windmill Hill”, at the western end of the Benenden Hospital in East End, and the high mound, on which this mill stood, survives. Beacon Mill on Rolvenden Road was built in the 1790s by a member of the Goble family of Rolvenden and Benenden, a family which included several millers. It was worked well into this century, but now stands boarded up and without its sails. A nineteenth century map shows two mills on this site; we have seen no supporting evidence for this and suggest it was an error.

The use of both water-mills and windmills declined generally in the 19th century as transport improved and large, steam-powered, mills were built. Locally the magnificent wind-powered Union Mill at Cranbrook, built in 1814, must also have provided severe competition for the Benenden mills.

**The Parish Church**

The church of St. George is of central importance in the village landscape. The history and structure of the church have been described by Cecily Lebon, and the information given here is based mainly on her publications.

The oldest discernible remains of the church are cornerstones at the SW corner, perhaps dating from the 12th century. The four main periods of building identified are: 13th-14th century, early 15th century, the rebuilding of 1677-8 after the destruction of much of the church by a great storm and fire in December 1672, and finally in 1861-2. The Victorian rebuilding, included the complete re-design and renovation of the interior, as well extensive repair of the exterior, and was commissioned by Gathorne Hardy (later Lord Cranbrook) when he bought the Hemsted Estate.

The church was granted by the Archbishop of Canterbury to the Priory of Combwell in Goudhurst around the year 1200 and remained under its ownership until the Dissolution of The Monasteries in 1536. The Priory had a tithe barn at Parsonage Farm, but after 1536 the living and tithes went to the owners of Hemsted, returning to Canterbury during the 20th century. The registers of baptisms, marriage and deaths, dating from the 16th century and the long series of churchwarden’s accounts are rich sources for local historians and microfilm copies can be consulted at the Centre for Kentish Studies in Maidstone.

In the late 19th century, building repairs revealed a “grand Norman arch” between the nave and the tower. This arch was described by the vicar of the time and by a visiting antiquarian, Granville Leveson-Gower. The existence of the arch implies that the church once had a Norman tower, which must have fallen and been superseded by the famous bell-tower, probably in the 13th century.

The bell tower, in its turn, was destroyed by a spectacular fire in 1672. It was said to have been, at 132 feet, nearly twice the height of the present tower. A contemporary document says that it could be seen...
from the Channel, from Hythe to Dungeness. A description of its structure has survived, written by an unknown local man immediately after the fire.

The church is a fine, imposing building, especially seen from the Green, and a 19th century wall and lychgate complete the scene. The churchyard is a haven for wildlife, with the lichens on the old gravestones of special interest.

Hemsted Estate
Until perhaps the 15th century there was no single dominant landowner in Benenden, but gradually the owners of Hemsted extended their estate. When it was sold to Gathorne Hardy in 1857, the estate comprised 4,500 acres, mostly in Benenden although with small areas of land in no fewer than nine other parishes.

In the late 14th century Hemsted Manor was granted to William de Guldeford, and it was held by the Guldeford family for some 350 years. For part of that time the main family seat was at Halden, just over the parish boundary in Rolvenden. However they retained Hemsted and replaced an old manor house there with a moated Tudor mansion, which became their main house when Halden passed out of the family. The Guldefords were eminent at a national level, as were their successors at Hemsted, the Norrises, Hodges, Gathorne Hardy (Lord Cranbrook) and finally, Lord Rothermere of Hemsted.

A map of 1599 shows a hunting park to north of the house and grassland to the south, the latter separated from the Cranbrook/Benenden road by hedged fields. The main drive was from the west, from a road no longer in existence known as Simmonden Lane, running north from Mounts Farm. There was a string of fishponds along the stream to the north of the house and a brewery to the south.

By the time of the 1777 map, John Norris had enclosed the old hunting park and created a new park as it is now, between the house and Cranbrook road. This was a landscaped park, with avenues of trees and a walled garden, in accord with the ideas of the time. Thomas Hallett Hodges, the next owner, or his son Thomas Law Hodges, turned the fishponds into a lake and enlarged Park Wood.

When Gathorne Hardy bought the estate from the Hodges family in 1857, he found the house in a “ruinous and dilapidated state”, with unoccupied and unsafe wings. We suspect that, as with the church, he preferred the new to the old; in any event the old house was pulled down and the present one built just to the north-east of the old. A feature of the grounds at this time was the “Merry Tree”, a huge ash said to be visible from the sea; Gathorne Hardy’s diary recorded its fall in a storm of January 1877, although part of the trunk was still alive in 1910. Successive owners from the first John Norris onwards added to the number and variety of trees and today the collection is impressive.

A large amount of woodland in the north of the parish was acquired by the estate over the centuries and most of it is now included in “Hemsted Forest”, bought by the Forestry Commission when the estate was sold in 1924. At the same time, Benenden School bought the house and park.

Roads, bridleways and footpaths
The only roads which can be dated are the two Romans roads, running more or less straight through the parish, north-south and east-west, joining at Hemsted, and a section of the turnpike road. The Roman
roads date from in the second century A.D. and the turnpike from about 1780. Other roads, including many now disused, are of unknown age and it is possible that some are older than the Roman roads.

Neil Aldridge of Headcorn has recorded the lines of the Roman roads (correcting a few errors made by the Ordnance Survey). In places, surfaces of compacted iron-slag have survived, one, near Bishopsden, showing the wheel-ruts made by the last users. Where the north-south Roman road crosses the stream near Stream Farm, are the remains of what may be a Roman ford. The ford merits special mention as, if it is indeed of Roman origin, it may be unique in Britain. However, like most stone structures, dating is very difficult. In a book on Roman Roads in the Weald, there is a photograph from the 1930s showing the ford with many of its Bethersden Marble slabs still in position. Unfortunately, few of the stones now remain and these few are buried or scattered haphazardly in the stream.

We have mentioned the two main drove roads; one, now Goddard’s Green road, through East End on to the Ashford area linking dens such as Hemsted, Dockenden, Walkhurst and Bishopsden with their parent manors, and the other the present road into Benenden from Rolvenden and on to the manors along the edge of Romney Marsh.

Other roads follow ancient boundaries, such as those of the hundreds. For example, the boundary between Rolvenden and Barclay hundreds follows Stepneyford Road northwards from the stream and turns west towards Pympe Manor along the disused road at the northern edge of Backtilt Wood. Such roads are likely to date back to before Domesday.

For a long period, many local roads were almost impassable in winter rain; there is the oft repeated story that Admiral John Norris needed six oxen in line to draw his coach from Hemsted to Benenden Church. In 1523, an earlier owner of Hemsted, George Guldeford, obtained an Act to alter the route of a “right deep and noyous” road, from Hemsted Bridge to a cross near to a great oak called Hemsted Oak (presumably a namesake of the one which went to the Wembley Exhibition, not the same tree – see woodlands section). The high banks of many of our sunken lanes, often a riot of primroses and other flowers in spring, are the result of centuries of use by people, horses, vehicles and livestock struggling through winter Wealden mud. The appalling conditions of Wealden roads in former times have today given us some superb habitat for wildlife.

In the early 18th century, the growth of the Turnpike Trusts improved many of the trunk roads. Benenden’s turnpike road ran from Golford to Sandhurst, with a branch from Benenden to Rolvenden from Benenden cross-roads. The 1777 map of Benenden shows a tollgate on the Cranbrook Road close to the Old Manor House, perhaps controlling both roads; the Benenden Turnpike Act was passed in 1768, but the road took some time to plan and complete. On the 1777 map, the crossroads are shown to the west of the Old Manor House, but were moved shortly afterwards to the east of the house, presumably when New Pond Road was built to improve the turnpike road.

The late19th century “toll house” on Rolvenden Road, now Tudor Cottage, was designed by the architect George Devey, presumably for Lord Cranbrook. We suspect that it was a “conceit” rather than a functional toll house. The name Hemsted Toll on the Golford Road was in use before Benenden turnpikes and can be assumed to stem from another meaning of toll, “a grove or clump of trees”.

Many lanes, linking the farms and hamlets of Benenden, failed to survive long into the age of modern road-making. When roads were selected for improvement, others would be neglected and some were closed in the mid 19th century, to reduce maintenance costs. One closed by the parish, ran from
Scullsgate to the Cranbrook Road past Parsonage Wood, another from Walkhurst Bridge to Mount le Hoe and Mount Hall (sections are still used for local traffic).

Some of the disused roads survive as footpaths, and almost all can be detected on the ground. Some have deep hollows, some remnants of stone surfacing where they are particularly wet in winter. Iden Green in particular had a complex network of roads, perhaps because of its importance at the time of the clothiers. The road from Iden Green to the ford (now a private road past Field Farm) and on to the Cranbrook Road, and that from Iden Green to Pullington, are impressive, deeply sunken, roads.

Houses and farm buildings

Houses: The Weald is renowned for timber-framed hall houses and Benenden has many fine examples dating from before 1550. The medieval houses of Kent were the subject of a recent study by The Royal Commission on Historic Monuments (now within English Heritage) and Benenden was amongst the parishes chosen for survey.

The oldest surviving houses in Benenden are these medieval houses with a central hall, originally open to the roof. Typically there were rooms on two floors each side of the hall: at one end the family lived and slept and at the other were service rooms. There was no chimney and the smoke from the hearth in the hall filtered through the roof. There were many variations on this basic plan, and often fine decorative features, such as moulded timbers and combed plaster work. Over the centuries, the halls of all of Benenden’s medieval houses had chimneys and upper floors inserted, but in Paper Mill House the hall was opened up again early in the 20th century.

For simplicity, we have divided the medieval houses in the parish into just two types. One includes that known as the “Wealden”, although there are many outside the Weald. The roof of the Wealden house is a single structure spanning the whole building, which has upper stories, either side of the hall, jettying out to the front. Other houses of similar general shape are classified according to the type of jettying – here we call them all “Wealden-type houses”.

The second broad class of houses are the cross-wing houses, with one or two wings adjoining the hall and roofed at right-angles to it. In general these are rather grander houses than the Wealden houses.

All except two of the Beneden houses in Benenden surveyed by the Royal Commission are “Wealden-type”. These are Dingleden House, The Old Manor House, The Moat, Paper Mill House, Pympe Manor, Watermill House, Coggars (once Little Walkhurst), Diprose (Upper Hinxden), Little Standen, Old Eaton Farmhouse (Little Goddards). The cross-winged houses are Campion House (Standen the Less), and Old Standen (Great Standen).

Probably the oldest surviving house in the parish is The Old Manor House, built for the Lord of Benenden Manor in approximately 1390. The others span the period 1420 to 1520, although dating of a particular house is seldom precise. These old houses are widely dispersed through the parish, reflecting the scattered distribution of the early settlements in the dens.

The Royal Commission recognised that their survey was not complete. Another source of information on old houses is the listed-building register. The primary aim of listing is to help to conserve the
buildings, not to describe them in detail. Nevertheless, used with caution, the descriptions help to show the number of houses that have survived from different periods.
Approximate dates given to listed houses (including inns) in Benenden

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approximate date</th>
<th>Medieval hall houses, pre 1550</th>
<th>16th century, excluding hall houses</th>
<th>17th century</th>
<th>18th century, perhaps not all listed</th>
<th>19th century, not all listed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of houses</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The listed-building descriptions suggest that there may be at least 9 medieval hall houses in Benenden additional to the 12 surveyed by the Royal Commission, although some are qualified as “probably” medieval. Most of these additional houses have a medieval core, but substantial later alterations and additions. They are: Bishopsden, Cleveland Farm, Eaglesden, Field Farm, Little Crit, Mill Street House, Mounts Farm Cottage (formerly Mounts Farm), Stream Farm Cottages and Weald House.

The surviving old houses were built by wealthy men. The wealth of the clothiers was at its peak in the mid-16th century, but many substantial houses are earlier and the source of the wealth is a puzzle. Farming alone seems unlikely to have made men wealthy, given the difficult soils of the parish.

The listed houses which date from the mid to late 16th century, are, like the medieval houses, spread through the parish, not concentrated in the village centre; The Forest, Summerhill, Crabtree Farm, Dockenden, Redhouse Farm, School Farm and Babbes Farm are all thought to be from this period. Others, Baldwin’s Stores, from the 16th century, Cleveland, Gibbon’s School, the King William and the Bull Inn from the 17th, show the beginnings of the development of the village centre.

The Weald is famed for its beautiful red bricks and tiles almost as much as for its timber-framed buildings. Many of the old timber-framed houses now have some in-filling with brick or have brick extensions, with no loss in attractiveness. The earliest houses built in brick, without a timber frame, seem to be from the late 17th or 18th century and include Maplesden, Leesden and Feoffees, the last of these formerly a workhouse for the poor. On The Street, Cleveland Cottage combines a brick lower floor with mathematical tiles (mimicking brickwork) above. The map of 1777 shows Thomas Munn to be the owner of Brick-kiln house in Walkhurst Road, with “brick-kiln platt” close to the house. At the Iden Green Fair in 1999, a collection of hanging tiles included mathematical tiles stamped with the mark of Thomas Munn, Benenden.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the growth of the village centre gathered pace and houses and cottages were also built at Iden Green. This was a time of rapid population increase. Most of these small dwellings are timber-framed and faced with weather-boards or hanging tiles and such facings were also added to older houses.

The court book for the manors owned by the Hemsted Estate notes the building of houses on land from “the Waste”, beginning in 1764 and continuing into the 19th century. For example, a rental of Benenden Manor in 1821 includes a house built by John Igglesden - and records that the land was…….

“………… next the Turnpike Road one hundred and five feet and at the back part abutting to part of the Manor Farm one hundred and five feet and at the east end thereof abutting to the Waste fifty feet and at the west end thereof also abutting to the Waste fifty six feet”
This seems to be one of the 19th century cottages or small houses on The Street in Benenden village centre. The old road was much wider than the turnpike which replaced them and the manorial “waste” may have been the unused parts of the old road. It is noticeable that the oaks which must have once marked the edges of Cranbrook Road, westwards from the crossroads, are some yards back from edges of the modern road.

Several farmhouses, such as Mount Pleasant, Maplesden, Frame Farm and Stream Farmhouse date from the eighteenth century and probably replaced older houses; that is the farmsteads are older than their present houses. At Springhill Farm in Standen Street; the core of the house is eighteenth century, but the farm was certainly in existence at least 200 years earlier. Maplesden was a den and then a manor and the present house is on or near the site of a house named Court House on a map of 1769. This was probably the court house of Rolvenden hundred.

Some houses in the parish were re-fronted in Georgian style early in the 19th century, a time of relative prosperity for the farmers during the Napoleonic Wars, quickly to be followed by depression. Later in the century, with further depression in agriculture, some of the large houses, once the homes of wealthy clothiers or yeomen farmers, were occupied by two or more families. Even the Old Manor House, where the Lord of the Manor once lived in style, was divided and occupied by several families until early in the 20th century.

The change in the ownership of the Hemsted Estate in 1857 led to a major change in the appearance of Benenden. Gathorne Hardy, later Lord Cranbrook, took on the role of a “village squire”. His money came from northern ironworks and was spent revitalising a village brought low by agricultural poverty. Not only did he build his new house at Hemsted and substantially rebuild the parish church, he was also responsible for some of the key buildings in today’s village centre. The new Hemsted House, built in 1859-62, was the work of the architect David Brandon and has been described as having “alarming vitality”. It was very substantially toned down by Lord Rothermere in 1912, whose changes included the removal of the spire from the tower and the addition of crenellated battlements.

Gathorne Hardy commissioned George Devey (1820-88) to design the Hemsted Lodges and Gardeners Cottage. Devey was also architect for the primary school, Ashlawn, Church cottage, alterations to the vicarage, the restoration of the Bull Inn with a new stable and hayloft, St George’s Club and other buildings. The present character of Benenden Green owes much to George Devey and Lord Cranbrook. Devey built in the style known as “Kent Vernacular”, drawing inspiration from the old buildings of the Weald. His biographer, Jill Allibone, lived in Benenden.

Farm buildings: Many of the scattered farmsteads of Benenden have an old barn, an oast-house, with one or more kilns, and perhaps stables, cow-sheds or other old farm buildings. Few of the barns now have an agricultural use and many have, like the oast-houses, been converted to dwellings. There have been no thorough surveys of Benenden’s farm buildings and this account relies greatly on the information available from the listed-buildings register.

The listed barns, eleven in number, include three, at Mounts Farm, Mounthall and Redhouse Farm, considered to have 16th century origins; all have been substantially altered. The remainder of the listed barns are mainly 18th century. Typically these barns are of the “Threshing Barn” type, with large doors at the front to allow the entry of fully laden carts to the threshing floor and low doors at the back, where the empty carts emerged. Most are weather-boarded with tiled roofs.
The earliest oast-houses were probably modified farm buildings; later they were purpose-built with one or more kilns, where hops were dried, and with stowage where the dried hops were cooled and packed. Drying was by hot air from a furnace or fires and the cowl of the kiln swung against the wind, drawing the hot air through the hops. No early oast-house (pre-1750) seems to have survived in Benenden, but one at nearby Golforord in Cranbrook is thought to date from about 1740. Only the cowl clearly identifies the Golforord oast, as the kiln is contained within the general outline of the building. Such oast-houses must have been common in Benenden as there were “oast-house” fields in 1777 at many farms, including Eaglesden, Pullington and Dockenden.

The many surviving oast-houses in Benenden nearly all date from the 19th century. The kilns vary in shape, partly according to prevailing theories of the efficiency of different shapes, and in the style of brickwork. Only seven in the parish are “listed”; of these, three, at Old Eaton, Mount Pleasant and Stream Farm, are thought to date from the late 18th century.

Place-names

The oldest place-names in daily use in the village include those of the dens, although some farm and field names may be equally old. The oldest dens tend to have simple names, as there were so few named locations that no further description was needed; Hemsted (the homestead) is one example, The Ridings (the clearings) at East End may be another. It has been suggested that the name “East End” is derived from an old den name East Ridden, the east riding. However, East End Quarter was a division of the parish used for the collection of parish rates, providing a simpler and more likely derivation.

Some farms (or former farms) such as Old Standen, Sarnden, Hinxden or Hinksden, Bishopsden, Ramsden and Crit Hall took the names of their dens, the last an aggrandised form of the den of Crithole or Crudhole. Other farms, such as Field Farm, Babbes Farm, Diprose, Bentons, Netter’s Hall and Leesden are named after early owners or tenants. Leesden House does not show the location of the den of Leesden, and was probably named after a 16th century owner, Thomas Leasden.

Hodskinson’s map and survey of Benenden of 1777 provides a rich source of names. Most of the farm names from that time are still in use, although a few, like Crithole, considered to be unattractive have been changed; similarly Mudwall Farm (1777) was changed, via Mudhall (1870), to the present Mounthall, while Pump Farm has become Pymnep Manor. On Iglesden Farm (Eaglesden), fields called Flashey Field and Flashey Brook presumably took their names from the ancient den of Plashed, just over the parish boundary in Sandhurst.

A few of the 1777 field names were derived from the iron industry, including Mine Spot and Mine Pit fields mentioned earlier and Cindery Field at Netters Hall, so named because of cinders left from iron-working. In addition to Tenter Fields, the cloth industry left a Hurdle Field and two Workhouse Fields. “Workhouse” could refer to a dye house or to a workhouse for the poor, as presumably in the case of Workhouse Gill close to the former workhouse of Feoffees in Walkhurst Road. Pymnep Manor had both Tenter Field and Hurdle Field close to the house and was clearly a clothier’s house. The hurdles or “hardles” were frames on which wool was dried after washing or dyeing.

In addition to many Marl-pit fields and Hop Gardens, frequent names were Barn Field and Lodge Field. The Dictionary of Field Names suggests that a “Lodge Field” is a field near to a lodge (a small house, such as a shooting lodge), but here it has another meaning. This is clear from the fact that two local
fields were named “Fatting Lodge Field”, at Caseford (now Cattsford) and Boston (now Beston) Farm, suggesting fields close to buildings where cattle were “lodged” in winter. The 26 Lodge Fields in 1777 reflect the importance of cattle raising and fattening in Benenden’s history.

In 1777 there was, as today, a Chequer Tree Farm and there were nine Chequer Tree Fields. To be useful as a field name, a tree must be conspicuous and not too common. The Chequer Tree (*Sorbus terminalis*, also called the Wild Service Tree) is scarce nationally and even in the High Weald, one of its strongholds, it occurs only sporadically. It has striking white flowers, large berries and rich autumn colour. Other trees used for field names in Benenden were yew, plum, apple and walnut, the three last probably planted, but crab apple occurs naturally and there is a Crabtree Farm in the parish.

There were many intriguing field names in the 1777 survey - Woolhams, Pate Meadow, Case Reeds Field, Peel Rag, Devil’s Race - and many other unexplained names such as Scullsgate and Nineveh, but too little space here to speculate on their origins. New names have appeared since 1777; one is Tank Field, where hop poles were dipped in tanks of tar heated by a fire beneath, and modern names include a doodlebug (flying bomb) field and a tennis court field. We regret the loss of old names, but new ones may soon acquire an interest of their own.

© Ernest Pollard and Hazel Strouts
II     THE LANDSCAPE TODAY

Benenden village has its picturesque green, where cricket is still played in summer. It has village halls, shops, churches, a war memorial, recreation fields and pubs. It lacks none of the ingredients of a traditional English village.

Part of the reason why it has changed so little is that Benenden, and the High Weald generally, escaped major development in the vulnerable period before the 1950s, when effective planning regulations were established. Housing has, in the main, continued with the development of The Street in the village centre and at Iden Green. Council Houses were built in both these areas, but otherwise modern housing has been largely restricted to infilling. There are some striking modern buildings, including the village hall and at Benenden School and Benenden Hospital.

One of the finest of the public structures is the war memorial to 45 villagers who died on military service in the two world wars, and to five civilians who were killed by flying bombs in the second war. It occupies a key position in the village. The memorial is in the form of a graceful seated woman in flowing robes, carrying a laurel wreath. It was sculpted by Albert Toft (1862-1949) and cast in bronze. Kent suffered severely from bombing, especially flying bombs launched from France towards the end of the second war, and houses in Benenden were damaged by blast and direct hits.

As is generally the case with English villages, there are many fine gardens in Benenden which, with the decline of habitats in the countryside, are important refuges for wildlife. Two of these gardens are considered of national importance.

The garden and park of Benenden School at Hemsted contains fine trees, many dating from plantings made by owners of the Hemsted Estate in the 18th and 19th centuries. The park has ancient oaks, limes, beech and sweet chestnuts, including survivors of impressive avenues, although many trees fell in the storm of 1987. One gnarled old sweet chestnut tree was estimated to be 360 years old in 1988. The school grounds include a pinetum where you will find the tallest known British specimens (“National Champions”) of Japanese Thuja (Thuja standishii) and the Japanese Umbrella Pine (Sciadopitys verticillata). Extensive new plantings have been made to offset the losses caused by the great storm. There are formal terraces and pleasure grounds around the main house, which date from the Victorian rebuilding, and there is an ice house and a classic 18th century walled kitchen garden in the school grounds.

The garden at Collingwood Grange (formerly The Grange) was created by Collingwood Ingram (1880-1981) after the First World War. He collected plants from all over the world and bred many cultivars, especially Rhododendrons. Two of his plants in widespread cultivation are the rosemary “Benenden Blue” and the arching, white-flowered, Rubus tridel, “Benenden”. Japanese cherries were his special love, but these have a short life span and few of his cherries survive at The Grange. One survivor is Tai Haku, the Great White Cherry, which he saved from extinction and is now planted in gardens around the world.

Although still a truly beautiful village, many services and amenities have been lost, or are endangered. There are three main causes for these changes: improvements in transport; increase in population; and fundamental changes in the nature of agriculture.
The improvements to transport and increase in population go hand in hand for the first facilitates the second. Much the most important development for Benenden and the Weald was the building of the main rail line through Staplehurst and Headcorn in 1842, with local branch lines to Cranbrook and Tenterden some fifty years later. With the coming of the railway, hop farming flourished and fruit growing became profitable. New markets were now open, fulfilling the hopes of the Benenden farmers who campaigned for the railway in the first place. But with the coming of the railways, there was also a steady increase in the number of people who lived in the parish but worked elsewhere. It became possible to live in Benenden and work in London or indeed, with the coming of the motorways in the 20th century, to live in Benenden and work in any other major city in southeast England.

As this happened, overall prosperity increased. The ancient timbered houses, some of which had been split into two or more households during years of agricultural depressions, became desirable homes for people who simply wanted to live in the country.

These changes are reflected in the present landscape. The houses are probably better cared for today than ever before and many traditional farm buildings are now conserved through conversion into dwellings.

However, the natural landscape is less easy to conserve because by and large, traditional farming is no longer economically viable. Modern commercial farming demands large heavy machinery and large flat fields, but, on the whole, the parish topography and geology lends itself to the smaller-scale traditional mixed farm. Unfortunately, traditional mixed farms find it almost impossible to survive in the global marketplace and for farming of all types it is very difficult. Advantages for other countries may include cheaper labour, fewer regulations and better weather, while the wide variety of attractive produce from the tropics and sub-tropics, now available at all seasons in supermarkets, provides severe competition for the British grower.

Added to these economic trials, there is the as yet uncertain effect of global warming which may alter our ability to produce traditional products and increase pressure to turn farmland over to trees in an attempt to help remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Lastly, the traditional landscape is under threat because of the continuous and compelling pressure arising from the vast differences in price between agricultural land and land on which houses may be built. It is difficult to put a figure on this since prices are constantly changing, but at the time of writing, the cost per acre of average agriculture land may be about £3,000 per acre, although varying considerably, and that of land on which houses may be built is more than a hundred times higher.

**The countryside as wildlife habitat**

The character of the countryside of Benenden has been fashioned by man almost as surely as the roads and buildings. Wildlife habitats in our parish have, until very recently, been incidental to man’s activity in agriculture, forestry and rural industry. Today, wildlife conservation can be regarded a form of land-use in its own right.

A landscape may be beautiful, but have little value for wildlife, for example, an agriculturally improved grassland, with only two or three dominant agricultural grasses and little wildlife value, contributes as much to a distant view as a rich meadow with a wealth of plant and insect life. In this section we consider the major wildlife habitats in Benenden and assess how recent land-use changes have affected them.
Woodlands: The larger woods on the silt soils of the Tunbridge Wells Sand, at Hemsted Forest and east of Iden Green are probably poorer in species than the small woods of the steep valleys (gills), many on heavy clay, and with their own warm, damp microclimates. However the woods on Tunbridge Wells Sand have their own characteristic acid-loving species, for example heather and bell heather in more open areas. Less welcome is rhododendron (*R. ponticum*), an introduced species probably used locally as game cover, which is now often abundant but of little value for wildlife.

The variety of trees in our woods can be great; hornbeam and sweet chestnut are especially common, reflecting their former economic importance, but coppiced species also include ash, alder, birch, hazel and willow. Oak (mostly pedunculate oak) and ash are probably the commonest of the standard trees. Field maple, cherry, hornbeam, willows, yew and other species also occur as standards, with hazel, holly, hawthorn, blackthorn and elder frequent in the shrub layer. Wild service is a notable local tree.

Nobody who travels through our countryside in spring can fail to admire the bluebells, primroses, wood anemones, violets, early purple orchids and other spring flowers. These woodland plants occur widely in the ancient woods and also in hedges and roadside banks. Such plants, and the animals associated with them, flourish in coppiced woodland. Coppicing exposes the previously shaded woodland floor to the sun. It allows dormant seeds to germinate and clearings become colonised by plants, insects and animals which prefer light to shade, providing that the newly available clearings are not too far from existing populations.

One of the plants to flourish in coppiced woodland is the bluebell. We admire our bluebells, but perhaps take them for granted because they are here in their millions. But bluebells are confined to the oceanic fringes of north-west Europe and Britain is of major importance in their world distribution. On the other hand, we have in England plants that are rarer locally, such as the early purple orchid and the native daffodil, but which are much more widespread across Europe.

The nightingale prefers the dense shade of coppice re-growth of about ten years, but does not thrive in abandoned coppice grown tall, with little undergrowth; however, it is still found here, although in much of England it is in decline. In a recent survey over 40 pairs were recorded in the parish. The birds are well-known compared with other wildlife (a list of the current breeding birds of the parish is given in the Appendix). In contrast most woodland mammals are rarely seen, because they are secretive and nocturnal. Both fox and badger are common, but the local status of species such as the hedgehog, dormouse, wood mouse, vole, stoat and weasel is not well known. Deer are rare (though a deer park has recently been established at Bishopdale), but there are occasional reports of tracks of wild boar in Hemsted Forest. Wild boar are native and had probably disappeared by the 13th century. The newcomers are recent escapees, now locally established in the wild.

Several of the ancient woods have been planted with conifers. For example, Church Wood in Hemsted Forest, an ancient woodland owned for centuries by the Dean and Chapter at Canterbury, is now a conifer plantation. Conifers support many fewer insects than the native deciduous trees and thus provide a poor food supply for most birds. Some of the original ground flora may survive in the rides and at the edges of such woods, but after many years of heavy shade the number of both plants and animals is greatly impoverished. Fortunately, the value of deciduous woods for wildlife and their historical importance is increasingly recognised; some seeds of ground flora plants survive many decades in the soil and are able to germinate when conifers are removed.
Nevertheless, a mature conifer plantation provides wonderful walks, protects the land from other development and has some special wildlife of its own; for example, the tiny goldcrest is a local bird associated with conifers and the siskin is another that is increasingly breeding in southern England, and perhaps in Benenden.

Coppicing for poles, fence-posts or firewood, is restricted to deciduous woods. It is a labour intensive activity and generally uneconomic today. It has therefore declined rapidly since the 19th and early 20th centuries and this has changed the woodland wildlife of the parish, as it has in the country as a whole. For example, the pearl-bordered frigillary butterfly, whose caterpillars feed on violets, is especially associated with newly coppiced woodland. It was once common throughout Kent, but is now thought to be extinct in the county. Several once common, butterflies and other insects of open woodland have declined drastically or have disappeared with the decline in coppicing.

Sunny clearings and wood edges are good for wildlife, but, in spite of their increasing shade, our woods remain valuable habitats. In the deep, shady gill of Parsonage Wood is found the rare hay-scented buckler fern, and some mosses more typical of the wetter south-west of England. Again using the butterflies as our example, the speckled wood, a species which frequents shady woods and lanes, became extinct in Kent in the early years of this century, but more recently returned and is now common, no doubt aided by the unmanaged condition of many woods. Similarly, the white admiral, a butterfly which can thrive in overgrown coppice, has returned to some of our local woods where its caterpillars feed on honeysuckle leaves. The heavy shade of unmanaged woods may also be increasingly important with global warming, by provision of cooler habitats, while the growth of the trees may help counteract the increase in carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere.

Plantations of either coniferous or deciduous trees are less valuable for wildlife than are ancient woodlands, because many woodland herbs are slow to colonise them. For this reason, and for their historical importance, the conservation of old woodlands and hedges should take precedence over the creation of new plantations. Nevertheless new plantings are welcome; the parish recently planted a small wood to mark the year 2000 and also provided many trees for individuals to plant on their land.

Orchards: 85% of orchards in Kent have been lost in the last 50 years and Benenden has lost its share. They contribute to the variety of the countryside and, unless heavily sprayed, are rich in wildlife.

Hedges: We estimated the mileage of hedges in 1777 (see part I) and again in 1999, this time using aerial photographs. The approximately 260 miles of hedges in 1777 had fallen to 132 miles in 1999, a loss of 50%. Most roadside hedges have survived but away from roads, about two thirds of the hedges have gone. In some areas, only roadside hedges survive in a landscape that not so long ago was a patchwork of small fields. The 1995 account of Benenden’s hedges, by Elizabeth Taylor, suggests that most of losses have been since 1970.

Old hedges, and most of those in the parish are very old, are of exceptional value for wildlife. They are rich in shrub species, such as hawthorn, ash, oak, hazel, field maple, hornbeam, blackthorn and holly. Wild service, yew and other species are occasionally present and there are often woodland herbs in hedge bottoms. Oak is the dominant tree species, but there are many others.

In addition to their flora, hedges provide valuable habitats for insects, birds and mammals. In Benenden, birds of open country, such as the skylark and lapwing, are rare in spite of the increasing openness of the countryside, but many hedgerow-nesting birds remain quite common. The linnet, chaffinch, yellowhammer, greenfinch, dunnock, blackbird, wren and robin are familiar birds of the hedges, while
the blue tit and great tit nest in the holes of old hedgerow trees. However the parish is not immune from
a recent national decline in farmland birds. One species which has become rare nationally and is now
lost to the parish is the tree sparrow, another hole-nesting species.

The recent hedge survey drew attention to the present poor condition of many of our hedges. Those that
survive often have gaps; others are unmanaged and are growing into lines of trees. Hedge care is labour
intensive and requires skills which are, today, rare. Herbicide drift may reduce the variety of flowers in
the hedge-bottoms and livestock are also a cause of damage. Sheep, when at high stocking rates for long
periods, as is often the case now, are especially damaging. The conclusion of Elizabeth Taylor’s survey
was that “Benenden now possesses just a skeleton of what was once there. Urgent action may be
required to prevent further loss or deterioration”.

Streams and ponds: Grass snakes, frogs, toads, newts, moorhen, mallard and the introduced Canada
goose are amongst the wildlife that flourishes in or around the multitude of ponds and streams of the
parish. Another recent newcomer is the marsh or laughing frog, first introduced to Stone in Oxney in
1935 and now widespread. Their loud laughing croak is a feature of warm spring evenings.

Nevertheless, most of our waterways are less rich in wildlife than they might be. One reason is the
pollution of streams, and some ponds, from agriculture and habitations. Increased regulation of the
disposal of farm wastes and the extension of mains drainage should gradually improve the quality of the
streams. A second issue is heavy shade. The trees that hide the streams and ponds contribute to the
visual landscape and support some wildlife. However, much pond and stream life requires sunlight. This
is particularly true of the water-plants, which in turn provide food and habitats for a wide variety of
invertebrates, fish and amphibians. Day-flying insects such as dragonflies benefit from some trees for
shelter, but also need sunlight to thrive. A wide diversity of water bodies, from open water to deep
shade, will support the widest range of plants and animals. Coppicing however, especially on the south
side of ponds, would often benefit wildlife.

Grassland: Although the fields of Benenden are predominantly grassland, few are rich in plant and
insect species. There are no grasslands here of anything like the richness of, for example, Marden
Meadow, a Kent Wildlife Trust hay meadow in the Low Weald, which is home to green-winged
orchids, vetches, ox-eye daisies, yellow rattle, pepper saxifrage and many other plants. Whether there
were ever equally rich meadows in Benenden we do not know, but believe that they must once have
been richer than they are today. Nearly all our grassland has been agriculturally improved at some time;
that is, subject to re-seeding, treatment with herbicides, and/or the use of high-nitrogen and phosphate
fertilisers, favouring agriculturally productive grasses at the expense of attractive wildflowers. A rich
flora can be lost very quickly but takes many years to recover. The relatively few unimproved
grasslands left in the parish are especially valuable and need careful management.

Perhaps the best local relics of rich grassland are the road verges which are generally cut once a year.
Too frequent mowing reduces plant variety and, where cuttings are left in situ, may favour the growth
of docks, thistles and nettles by over-enriching the ground. Sometimes our verges are mown so
frequently that they are transformed into something resembling a garden lawn. Verges are also
damaged because of increasing traffic on narrow country lanes, with vehicles often going on to the
verges. Another concern is the widening of the asphalt surface to try and accommodate bigger vehicles,
with further loss of verges.
Arable: Crops can provide habitats for many insects and so food for birds and small mammals. However, their value for wildlife has declined because of changes in agricultural practices. Stubble is now ploughed soon after harvest and the autumn sowing of crops is usual leaving less winter food for birds and small mammals. In summer, the weeds that once supported insects are now efficiently controlled by herbicides so that birds which depended on those insects for food, have declined. Among these birds are the grey partridge, skylark and lapwing.
III PROTECTING AND ENJOYING THE LANDSCAPE

In this section we summarise the ways in which the local landscape is protected and made available for our enjoyment.

The government is expected shortly to announce the creation of a new agency called Natural England which will combine work currently done by DEFRA, English Nature and the Countryside Agency. This will work with the existing Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission to protect our countryside.

Natural England will look after aspects of our lives to do with living in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and it will deal with all farm support payments (the Single Farm Payment Scheme and its daughters, the Environment Stewardship Scheme and the Organic Stewardship Schemes). The Environment Agency protects the environment, especially water courses and natural habitats, and the Forestry Commission looks after trees, woods and forests. In addition there is the Local Planning Authority in Tunbridge Wells Borough Council which works, through planning regulations, to ensure that development does not harm our environment. The work of these “environmental defence agencies” cannot always be compartmentalised. If in doubt or seeking help, it is advisable to consult several agencies to get a clear picture of what regulations or services are available to help you.

The High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

In 1983, the High Weald, including Benenden, was designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. These areas are like National Parks, though without independent planning powers. The High Weald AONB Management Plan was drawn up by a forum including 13 local authorities, the National Farmers’ Union, the Environment Agency, the Countryside Agency and local conservation organisations. It provides a framework for all relevant organisations to work together to conserve the landscape and support agriculture.

Protecting Buildings and Ancient Monuments

Listed buildings are of historic or architectural interest and merit protection. The list covers houses, churches, barns and even gravestones. All buildings built before 1700, surviving in something like their original condition, should be on the list; it also includes most buildings built between 1700 and 1840 and some more recent buildings of special merit. There are some 190 listed buildings in our parish, although it is difficult to be precise because some listings are groups of buildings.

If you own a listed building, Listed Building Consent is required in addition to other permits, if you plan extensions, demolition or alterations. The intent is to recognize that we are guardians or stewards of the places where we live and have a responsibility to hand on to future generations as much as possible of the beauty we enjoy. Grant-aid may be available for the repair of listed buildings.

The Borough Council, to which Listed Building applications must be made, acts as the guardian of the public interest. The Council also plays this role in relation to certain other alterations and extensions and to conversions of rural buildings. Overall, the emphasis is on conserving or enhancing the special character of our landscape. A rough guide is that the change contemplated should respect the context of
the site. Effects on wild life (will barn owls be displaced and bat colonies destroyed?) and the effect on roads or lanes accessing the site are also considered.

Listings are as grades I, II* or II. There are no grade I buildings in Benenden; the grade II* buildings are

St. Georges Church  Watermill House
Babbes Farmhouse    Old Standen
Pymphne Manor       Coggers
The Red House       The Paper Mill

**Ancient Monuments** are of national importance - we are fortunate to have one in the parish, the ancient paved ford near Iden Green, although in fact little remains of the stone paving now. The Kent County Council’s **Sites and Monuments Register** includes an ancient stone culvert in Strawberry Wood, north of Dingleden. The culvert suffering flood damage a few years ago and grant aid is being sought for survey and restoration.

Localities of national importance for their architectural or historic interest may receive further protection as **Conservation Areas**. The central area of Benenden, including the Old Manor House, The Street, The Green and the church, is a Conservation Area, as also is the core of Iden Green. Hemsted Park is on a national register of Heritage Parks and Gardens, although this provides no additional planning protection. In addition, the National Lottery Fund, which includes the Local Heritage Initiative, can be a source of funds for projects of special merit and urgency.

© Ernest Pollard and Hazel Strouts

**Protecting wildlife habitat: woods, trees, meadows, orchards, ponds, streams, hedgerows and roadside verges**

Under the Kent Biodiversity Action Plan, individual action plans have been developed to protect key habitats. Those relevant to Benenden include woodland, wetland (especially ponds), old orchards, heathland and mire, wildflower grassland and hedgerows. Grants for the protection of such habitats may be available through the Kent High Weald Project. To prevent loss of countryside, no farmland, woodland or orchard can be added to a garden without permission from the Borough Council.

**Woods:** Benenden has many ancient woods, one of which, Parsonage Wood, is a Kent Wildlife Trust reserve and also an **SSSI** (Site of Special Scientific Interest). The Forestry Authority, which owns Hemsted Forest, offers free open public access, while Moor Wood, accessible opposite the Woodcock, has public access during daylight hours by permission of the owner. There are several woods designated as **SNCIs** (Sites of Nature Conservation Interest); White Chimney Wood, Babbes Gill, Moor Wood, Standen Wood, Willerd’s Hill Wood, Strawberry Wood, Nine Acre Wood and Gill, Handwell Shaw, Beacon Wood, North America Wood, Brogues Wood (mostly in Biddenden), Benenden Wood, Stone Quarry Wood and several parts of Hemsted Forest.

**Trees,** woods, groups of trees or individual trees may be protected by Tree Preservation Orders, usually in response to a specific threat, or because they are within a Conservation area. There are several TPOs in Benenden, including every tree in Brogues Wood and many trees at Collingwood Grange. The Forestry Commission regulates other tree-felling, outside gardens, orchards and churchyards, and applies strict and quite small limits to the amount of felling allowed (see [www.forestry.gov.uk](http://www.forestry.gov.uk)).
Meadows: Of the very few rich wildflower meadows or pastures in the parish, Beston Farm Pasture and Orchard has been designated an SNCI as has Benenden Churchyard. Grants may be available for those wishing to restore species-rich native flower grasslands through the Kent High Weald Project.

Orchards: A local project, with advice from the Kent High Weald Project, was the restoration of traditional orchards at Standen Fruit Farm, on Standen Street. Orchard preservation is now carried out mainly through DEFRA’s Environmental Stewardship Schemes. No specific regulation exists to protect them, but the spirit of government legislation encourages the preservation of those which remain.

Ponds: Grants may be available for those wanting to preserve and manage ponds, for example as part of the Kent High Weald Project’s Countryside Character Grant Scheme.

Streams: The Environment Agency protects the untrammelled flow of streams, as well, in relevant parts of the parish, as the Upper Medway Internal Drainage Board. Streams may have particular significance where they mark ancient boundaries between farms, the parish boundary or the boundary between one borough council and another. These boundaries are, by tradition, unmarked except for the course of the stream.

Hedgerows: Some of our hedges are very ancient, but many have been removed. Most are now protected under the 1997 Hedgerow Regulations which make it an offence, unless one of a few exceptions applies, to remove a hedgerow without permission. Again, Countryside Character Grants may be available for hedgerow planting and Environmental Stewardship Schemes encourage planting and appropriate management (see Farming section).

Road verges: Species-rich vegetation characterises the road verges in the parish especially in our sunken lanes. One roadside verge, on the east side of the road from Iden Green towards the village centre, has been adopted as a “Roadside Nature Reserve” by the Kent Wildlife Trust, which provides management guidelines.

Protecting flora and fauna

Conservation of flora and fauna is best achieved by conservation of their habitats, but some especially endangered species have additional protection.

Long-established legislation makes it illegal to destroy most birds, their nests and eggs; the exceptions being species considered to be pests, and game birds in the shooting season. Some birds receive special protection from disturbance, for example the kingfisher and barn owl, both of which occur in the parish. Similarly all bats are protected nationally, as are some other rare plants and animals.

Some of Kent’s Biodiversity Action Plans relate to individual species and locally these are important for the dormouse, nightingale and great crested newt.

Protecting our farms
The government sponsors schemes to assist farmers and landowners in looking after our landscape. Chief among these are the Single Payment Scheme and the various Stewardship schemes, including organic schemes. All these projects provide funds for farmers to maintain and enhance the landscape and wildlife value of their land. They are only recently getting under way and are currently weighed down by undue complexity and bureaucracy. It is hoped that they will eventually function efficiently and achieve effective conservation of wildlife and flora on farmland. There are also Woodland Grants and a Farm Woodland Premium Scheme to encourage woodland protection and the commercial production of timber.

Ways to immerse yourself in the landscape: walking, riding and cycling

Footpaths: There are 26 miles of footpaths in the parish and 67 footpaths, the longest being about 2 miles in length and running from St. Margaret’s Church in East End to Dockenden in Hemsted Forest, and then out of the forest through the main entrance. Footpaths criss-cross the parish, generally linking every old farm to its neighbours.

Bridleways: There are only two bridleways. One is through Hemsted Forest from Goddards Green to Golford Road and the other coincides with the byway from Dingleden Farm. Equestrians may also subscribe to the privately-run South East Toll Ride and use their routes.

The Kent High Weald Project has taken the lead in the 150km long High Weald Landscape Trail. It enters the parish on a footpath linking Little Coursehorn with Crabtree Farm and goes on to Mount’s Farm, Stream Farm, and Benenden village green, exiting the parish shortly after Dingleden Farm. This route complements the National Cycle Route 18. The Kent High Weald Project, in collaboration with others, has also produced a circular “Parish pedals” cycling route round Benenden.
IV THE LANDSCAPE AS A WHOLE: THE FUTURE

Into the third millennium, the ancient farmsteads and hamlets in the dens still exist, often with their barns and oast-houses used for housing. The 18th and 19th century developments along The Street and at Iden Green remain as exceptionally attractive residential centres. Even Hemsted House and its park would appear familiar to the Victorian owner, the first Lord Cranbrook, and perhaps Admiral John Norris, who lived there a hundred years earlier, would feel more or less at home. The survival of this built landscape requires constant vigilance; it is under threat from social and economic developments, but it is the farmed countryside that seems in particular danger.

The countryside of Benenden remains extremely beautiful. We can drive, cycle, or walk along lanes bordered by rich hedgerows, often on high banks, with a wealth of flowers and, in spring, orange tip butterflies provide an extra splash of colour. We hear birdsong, with the resident birds, like the chaffinch, joined by migrants such as the nightingale and the cuckoo. We can stop at a vantage point and see trees, orchards and small woods, with farmsteads nestling amongst trees and the whole enhanced by subtle variations of colour, texture, slope, and aspect.

However, if we leave the lanes and set out along the many footpaths through the fields, we find a countryside which, although still beautiful, is much less rich in wildlife than that known to our predecessors. The ancient woods mostly survive, although some are converted to conifer plantations, while coppicing, important for much wildlife, is rarely practiced. The streams still run in deep wooded gills and the man-made ponds have also largely survived, although often impoverished by heavy leaf-fall and the shade of trees. Although hedges along the lanes have survived, elsewhere most have now gone and this is a major loss for wildlife. We can also be sure that Benenden has lost very many rich grasslands, although unlike the hedges and woods, there is no historical record.

Throughout history, farmers have produced food as efficiently as they can. Until recently, the best farming methods also produced a countryside that was beautiful and rich in wildlife. This is no longer true; we have lost most of our small mixed farms as they are no longer “economic”, while modern farm technology, through no fault of the farmer, has caused substantial damage to wildlife. With the recent decline in agriculture and the increase in numbers and affluence of the population of the area, there are further dangers. But there is a ray of hope in that the new governmental approach to the countryside may eventually help to improve our landscape.

We are fortunate in that the needs of our landscape and wildlife coincide by and large, with current trends in our own and the European Union’s agricultural policy. The trends are towards treating the countryside as a national resource – a place where wildlife can flourish and a source of well-being to refresh the country-dweller and the visiting city-dweller, rather than just as a source of agricultural products: these can often be imported more cheaply from elsewhere. To strengthen this approach, the new agency called Natural England is expected to be formed (see Part III).

We draw attention to the options for the future of local farming by highlighting two very different approaches, one the organic movement, the other intensive modern farming. Neither of the extremes is likely to predominate as we describe below, but by highlighting them we try to show the very different sorts of countryside which we could have in the future. Both have advantages and disadvantages for food production and for different types of wildlife.
Organic farming already allows farmers to access considerable government funds and continues the long local tradition of mixed farming. Organic farmers are registered by one of a number of certification bodies, the biggest of which is the Soil Association, an association carrying out rigorous annual as well as spot checks on its members to ensure the maintenance of strict standards, prohibiting the use of herbicides, pesticides and artificial fertilisers and manure from non-organic livestock. They provide for the protection of animals through strict housing and handling regulations. In this and similar traditional systems, the aim is to keep the farming countryside in production, sacrificing some productivity but with the certainty of healthy food and an unpolluted countryside. Our familiar farmed landscape would survive and perhaps return to something like its former beauty.

A quite different option is to continue, and develop further, intensive farming on areas of rich soils and large fields suited to modern farm machinery, and to make these areas as productive as possible. Other land, including most of Benenden, would not be farmed. Some grassland would be maintained, for example for horses or simply for nature conservation, other land would revert to woodland, heath or wetland. Our countryside would become quite different from that of our farming past, but the areas of natural habitats would greatly increase and wildlife benefit. The loss of broad swathes of farm land has implications - what quality controls can be placed on imported food? How secure is the supply? Should the need arise, how long would it take to return such land to productivity? These questions are beyond our remit, but should not be forgotten.

We have described the history of the landscape of Benenden and reported on its condition at the end of the second millennium and discussed its future. There is no doubt that, in the latter part of the twentieth century, there has been deterioration in our landscape and losses amongst its wildlife. Nevertheless, much remains and we live in a beautiful countryside that should be conserved. We believe that an understanding of the history of our beautiful countryside provides the key to its conservation, and hope that this account has helped to provide that understanding.
REFERENCES

Aldridge, N. Wealden Archaeology, Kent Archaeological Society Newsletter, 58, 2-3.


Haslewood, F. (1889) The parish of Benenden Kent, Privately printed, Ipswich.


Wallenburg, J.K. (1931) Kentish Place Names: a topographical and etymological study of the place-name material in Kentish charters dated before the Conquest, Uppsala

Wallenburg, J.K. (1934) The Place Names of Kent, Uppsala


The 1777 map and survey of Benenden by J. Hodkinson can be seen at the Centre for Kentish Studies, County Hall, Maidstone, reference P20/27/1 & P20/27/2.