

Chapter 29

Castor Parish Council

Introduction

Castor Parish Council came into being as a consequence of the Government's Parish Councils Act in 1894. Before this time, the responsibility for local administration was shared by the Church Wardens, the Overseers of the Poor and the Manor Court. The Church Wardens were (and still are) elected at the annual Vestry Meeting, while the Overseers of the Poor and the Manor Court were elected at an Annual General Meeting of the parish. These annual Parish Meetings continued to be held until the mid-1980s when they were superseded by an Annual General Meeting of the Parish Council, a session which is open to the public. The Manor Court was responsible for access issues and for the overseeing of local businesses and farming. This was particularly important as the farmland around Castor and Ailsworth was not enclosed until 1894, with crops being grown on scattered field-strips and livestock pastured on common land.

The Enclosures Act did, at least, make provision for recreation grounds for each village as well as field gardens or allotments of land. Castor was unusual in that it was the only parish to be granted its own riverside bathing place in addition. This was situated at the end of the Splash Lane footpath and was later furnished with a wooden changing hut by the Parish Council. A newspaper report, dated February 16th 1894, quotes the Commissioner for the Board of

Agriculture, who, speaking at a public meeting in the Castor schoolroom, explained the allotments to his audience, saying "*the quantity to be set out would give a quarter of an acre to every cottage in the villages. This land would be vested in the Churchwardens and Overseers as trustees, who would be bound to let the land to the labouring poor at an agricultural rent*" [1]. These recreation grounds and allotments later became the responsibility of the newly-formed Parish Councils. Castor Parish Council still owns most of the land allocated then, although the old field names like Rush Lees, Oldfield and Ferryfield may not be familiar, and the village still benefits from the income generated from letting the land.

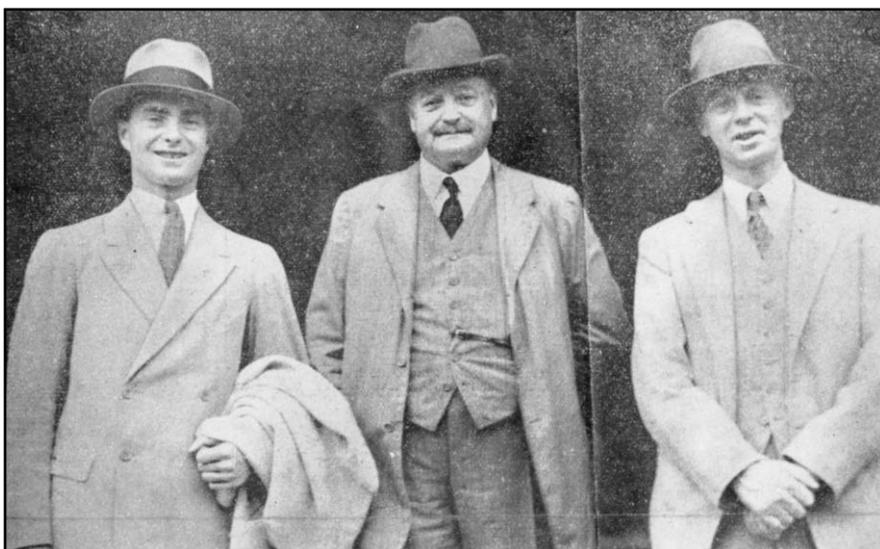


Fig 29a. George Fitzwilliam Esq., flanked by his two sons, Toby, on the left, and Thomas, on the right. George and Thomas, who later became Earl Fitzwilliam, served as Chairmen of the Castor Parish Council for 69 years between them.

The first Parish Council

On December 4th 1894, the first Parish Meeting to be held under the newly-passed Local Government Act took place at Castor Infant School [2]. It would seem that there was considerable interest in the village because it was recorded that 65 out of a total of 133 electors attended the meeting and 13 names were put forward for the seven seats on the Parish Council. Those elected were as follows: George Charles Wentworth Fitzwilliam, Esquire, of Milton Hall, George Edwin Holmes (Headmaster of Fitzwilliam School), Alfred Briggs (coal merchant), Alfred Sykes (architect), John Thomas Darby (farmer), Thomas Wootton (tailor, grocer, etc) and Lewis Winsworth (shepherd). Major Frank Armstrong White, later Colonel White, of Castor House, who had chaired the Parish Meeting, was unanimously elected as chairman, whilst Mr Holmes agreed to act as the unpaid parish clerk.

The early years

The new Parish Council worked diligently to maintain and where possible, improve the village and its environs. The early meetings were infrequent and the business was mostly about the maintenance of the footpaths and drainage ditches, the renting out of land owned by the Parish Council and the annual election of School Managers. The minutes of every meeting were, and still are, written up in a businesslike fashion by the clerks, briefly and to the point. There is never more than a hint of the sometimes heated discussions which must have taken place over the years and only on the

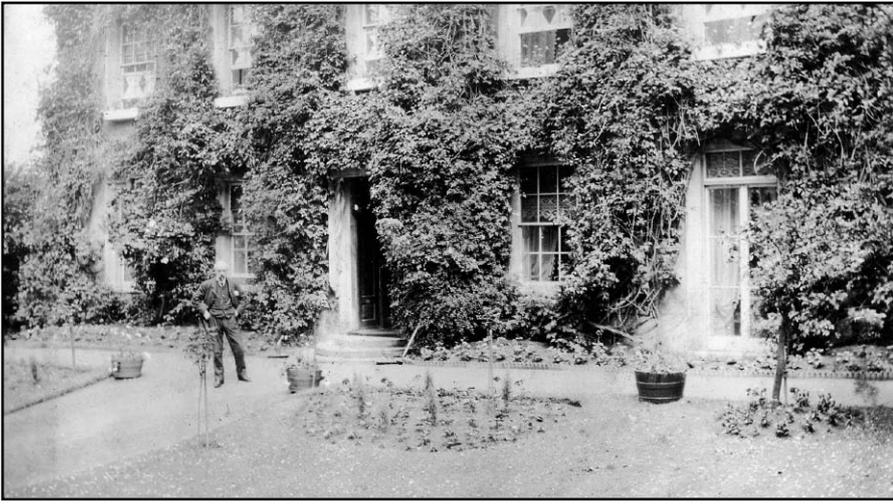


Fig 29b. Colonel White, Chairman of Castor Parish Council from its founding in 1894 until 1910. (Courtesy of Ian Balfour).



Fig 29c. Sir Richard Winfrey, Parish Councillor in the 1930s. (Courtesy of Claire Winfrey).

rarest occasions has any dissent been detailed. Only once, and that relatively recently, have matters come to such a pass that the councillors have had to resolve *'that all members address the chair and do not speak when others are doing so'*.

On the whole, matters ran smoothly in those early years and there were few interruptions to the steady way of life of the village. There was one notable exception, however, and feelings ran very high, as evidenced by the number of column inches devoted to the case in the *Peterborough Standard*. Without warning, a footpath running beside what is now the

Old Rectory, over to Water Lane, then across a field belonging to Colonel White, before reaching the Peterborough Road, was blocked off by a 'dead hedge' just inside the Colonel's field. The villagers were reported to have been *'much inconvenienced'* and they were very angry. Mr G Holmes, agent to Colonel White, on the other hand, was reported to have remarked that he had *'never before heard such a storm not in a teacup but in a spoon'*. At the next Parish Council meeting, the clerk, Mr G Holmes (yes, the same one), produced maps of the 'proposed' footpath diversion and asked the Council to sanction them. As Colonel White was chairman of the Parish Council, but absent, perhaps diplomatically, from this meeting, it was tactfully proposed that a committee should be formed to look at the path. In the meantime, at the dead of night, some enterprising person or persons chopped a neat hole through the hedge. Mysteriously, it was never discovered who was responsible for this act of vandalism, but the contented villagers immediately resumed using the old path. To be charitable, the villains of the piece were probably just being presumptuous, but the villagers refused to accept the *'fait accompli'* and in the end a special meeting of the Parish Council was called and by true democratic process the old course of the footpath was restored.

The Second World War

The Council minutes from the period of the Second World War are, perhaps intentionally, not very informative, though much must have been discussed. It is interesting to note that already in January of 1939 the

Council was debating the possible need for extra sanitation in the event of the Government Evacuation scheme coming into force. The Parish Council's Allotment Committee evidently took its work very seriously, and the members zealously inspected the allotments, chastising those tenants who were not putting their plot to full use. There was also some concern expressed when the Roman Bank (Ermine Street) in Normangate Field was ploughed over and it was agreed that this should not have been done. After the end of the war, the Parish Council asked the County Land Agent if the ploughing could stop and in early 1947, the War Agriculture Executive Committee eventually replied that this could happen *'as soon as the state of emergency no longer existed'*.

The Fire Station and Reading Room

In an obituary for Mr G Holmes, published in the local newspaper in 1911, he was described as school headmaster, clerk of the Parish Council, churchwarden and 'Lieutenant of the Castor Fire Brigade', which he organised. The Parish Council had borrowed £100 in 1901 *'to purchase the engine and appurtenances and for the erection of a suitable engine house'*. Newspaper cuttings from the following year tell that the voluntary Fire Brigade had a Shand, Mason and Co. manual engine and that each member had been equipped with boots and a cap. The villagers felt that the men should be properly equipped with uniforms and that year, and on several other occasions, a concert was held in the schoolroom to raise funds. There are few reports of the Fire Brigade's work, though we do know that when lightning struck thatched cottages in Upton, the Castor Fire Brigade was called out. Later, in July 1928, it attended a fire at three

thatched cottages in Church Hill. There was not a lot that could be done to save the thatch, though the damage was limited to some extent by their efforts. They had been more successful at subduing a fire which broke out over the stables at The Elms in 1927 and were no doubt very satisfied that the Peterborough Voluntary Fire Brigade, which had also arrived on the scene, was not needed. In December 1927, a special Parish Meeting was held, presumably because so much concern had been expressed about the ineffectiveness of the old manually-pumped fire engine. A resolution was passed *'That this meeting approves the steps already taken for the purchase of a Motor Fire Engine for the Parish from Martins and Co. Ltd, Stamford'*.



Fig 29d. Members of Castor Fire Brigade c.1912. Left to right: Will Cooke (Captain), John Gibbons, Dick Taylor, Alec Cooke, Charles Goodyer.

Occasional notes appear in the minutes of the Parish Council meetings regarding the upkeep of the Fire Station and equipment and it was not until April 1939 that the Fire Brigade Act shifted the responsibility for the Fire Brigade to the Soke of Peterborough Rural District Council. The village's Fire Station and equipment were sold, but ironically, just over a year later, the Parish Council felt the need to request the allocation of six stirrup pumps in view of the danger of bombing.

The Fire Station was on Castor Village Green, along with the Reading Room. This was another important village amenity, for which the Parish Council became responsible in 1906. The Council noted with some satisfaction in 1933 that the Reading Room had made a profit of five (old) pence with receipts of £22 3s 6d and outgoings of £22 3s 1d, despite the fact that a sum had been paid for the laying on of electricity and installation of an electric light that year.

Other duties

It was also the Parish Council's responsibility to provide 'receptacles' and a night-soil cart (a wheelbarrow in the early days, but as the years went by, a cart with a tank on it was purchased) and it is sobering to realise that this was the situation until 1954, when a sewer pipe was laid. Even then, there appear to have been mixed feelings about this particular piece of progress. A note appears in the minutes for the meeting on October 24th 1954, to the effect that the Council wondered if the sewer pipe was adequate to serve the whole of Castor and Ailsworth and it was reported that *'since the sewer had been laid very offensive smells have been noted'*. Not all the properties were immediately converted to the wonderful new water closets and in 1962, the Parish Council noted that some cottages still had pail closets and resolved to ask the Peterborough Rural District Council to complete the work.

The maintenance of the recreation grounds has been an important job and the villagers have benefited much from the Parish Council's work. However, there have inevitably been a few occasions when it has proved impossible to please everybody. Initially, all the recreation grounds were rented out to local farmers for grazing, the rent providing useful income. In 1934, the Castor and Ailsworth Cricket Club sent a letter of complaint to the Parish Council about the state of the Rush Lees Recreation Ground, now more commonly



Fig 29e. Castor Fire Brigade in full uniform, early1900s. Standing, left to right: Rev A Bek (Curate), Mossendew, Unknown, Unknown, C Darby, R Taylor, G Holmes (Clerk to Castor Parish Council). Sitting, left to right: G Ward, AA Cooke, W Cooke (Captain), L Longfoot, Unknown.

known as the Castor Cricket Ground. The farmer who rented this field, a Mr Fletcher, obligingly agreed not to let his cows onto the field on the day of the match or the preceding day! In 1936, some swings were erected in the same recreation ground, as part of the Silver Jubilee celebrations for George VI and, when these were handed over to the Parish Council, it was decided that a caretaker should be provided and two locks and chains purchased to fasten up the swings every Saturday night until Monday morning. Attitudes slowly changed and in 1965, a children's playground was created on what had been part of the TweenTowns allotments, after a decision had been made to sell a small portion to raise funds. In 2003, the Parish Council again provided funds to completely redesign the playground and install new equipment to make an area which is colourful and challenging as well as safe for today's children.

Planning Issues

After the war, the Parish Council became progressively more involved in planning issues. Perhaps the first major one was the attempt to requisition Ailsworth Heath as a practice bombing range in 1948. Needless to say, the Parish Council resolved to *'write to the appropriate authority, protesting with the utmost vigour against the proposed requisitioning'* and the idea was thankfully dropped.

During the 1950s, demand for new housing grew and the quiet farming villages began to change. The Council tried to ensure that decisions were in the best interests of the village, but its influence was limited. In 1959, the Clerk procured a copy of the County Development Plan, which evidently caused some concern and prompted the Parish Council to ask the County Planning Officer to inform them if any large developments were planned. Again in early 1960, the Council minutes state that the Council *'decided to inform the County Planning Officer that the Council considered that the village had grown enough and that they would wish to be informed of any large-scale development proposed in the vicinity of the church or rectory and to hope that any development would be of a higher standard than that being carried out at Ailsworth.'* It was realised that the Council would need more strength and in 1963, Castor Parish Council was canvassing support from other parish councils in their request to be able to comment on plans for development in the village before the plans were approved. By 1965, the Parish Council was supporting a Private Member's Bill in Parliament which was intended to ensure that parish councils would receive notification of all planning applications for development in their area and would be given 14 days to give their comment.

In 1966, the infamous 'Hancock Report' was published, with its plan to extend Peterborough Westwards to include Castor, Ailsworth and Sutton. In April of that year, the Council held a special meeting, well-attended by parishioners, at which Mr Hancock himself explained his plan and answered questions. The fears of residents were not however allayed, and an ad hoc committee of the parishes of Castor, Ailsworth, Sutton and Upton was formed. Castor Parish Council wanted the committee to be an official committee, with fully delegated powers, under the Parish Councils, but Ailsworth Parish Council disagreed with the move and the committee worked on independently. Although opposition was not unanimous within the Council, a strong letter was sent to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, voicing the Council's objections to the plans. The view was expressed that *'All village life in the rural community encompassed by the four villages of Castor, Ailsworth, Sutton and Upton would be eliminated'* should the plan be implemented and that *'The villages should be allowed to develop naturally.'* There is little further reference to the progress of this plan, which must have caused some heated debate, except that in December 1969, there is a note referring to the fact that Castor and Ailsworth would not be developed before 1980.

The idea of a major expansion of Peterborough did not however go away. In 1975, Peterborough Development Corporation invited the Parish Councils of Castor, Ailsworth and Sutton to the unveiling of plans for a Castor Township. Throughout 1975, the Parish Councils of Castor and Ailsworth worked together, producing comments on the plans.

The debate rumbled on and then in April 1978, an open meeting was held in the Village Hall to discuss the development plans. After much debate, the Parish Council voted at the council meeting afterwards by five votes to three in favour of the resolution *'that the Council are against the latest proposals of the Development Corporation on economic grounds and are prepared to make representations at all levels to stop the future development of the Western Sector (of the proposed township)'*. The provision of a bypass had been linked to the acceptance of the new development, but the Parish Council focussed its efforts on getting a bypass whatever the outcome. The campaign against the township was taken up by an informal committee. This committee, initiated over a cup of coffee by Mr and Mrs Reg Lambert, Mr and Mrs Arthur Freer and Mr and Mrs Ken Trevitt, was quickly joined by Mr Arthur Chilvers, Deputy Chairman of Castor Parish Council. Help was enlisted from Ailsworth, Sutton, Upton and Marholm and Sir Stephen and Lady Hastings of Milton also became involved. The committee and its allies worked hard, gathering information and lobbying the organisations concerned, until finally, after a change of government in 1979, the plans were once again shelved.

In 1986, Cambridgeshire County Council undertook the first five-yearly review of its Structure Plan and once again the idea of a township around Castor and Ailsworth was raised. This time, the villagers were better prepared (and probably more united!). The County Council sent out questionnaires to residents, to assess local opinion. The Parish Council for its part sent a letter to all parishioners stating that its members were unanimously opposed to the development and encouraging everyone to complete the questionnaires to show the strength of feeling against the township. Ailsworth Parish Council acted likewise.

In addition to the official channels being taken by the Parish Councils, an 'Action Group for the Preservation of the Nene Valley' was organised, which was well supported. The fund-raising event which was held in Harrison-Smith's barn in Ailsworth ought to be part of local folk history, as about 400 people attended and a substantial sum of money was raised for the cause. Once again, the plans were eventually shelved, in favour of developing the old brick pits to the South of Peterborough where Serpentine Green and the Hamptons are now emerging, but who knows what the next Structure Plan might propose?

The Bypass

Traffic problems were not new. In 1935, the Parish Council had asked the County Council to erect 30mph signs for the village, but received the reply that Peterborough Road was not deemed a built-up area. In 1960, a bypass was first mentioned, with the County Planning Officer promising to keep the Parish Council informed of any developments. Progress on this issue was slow and, in 1971, the Clerk reported to the Council that there would be no bypass until 1985. The minutes record that in May 1973, a petition was handed to the Minister for Transport, signed by Castor parishioners, requesting that the date of construction be brought forward. In 1976, the traffic through the village, particularly the increasing number of ever larger lorries, was causing damage to roads and stonework to such an extent that the Parish Council even attempted to get the A47 temporarily re-routed until the bypass was built. The re-routing proved impossible and a cycleway was suggested as an alternative way of avoiding the increasing numbers of accidents. This too came to nothing. In May 1981, a letter was received from the Peterborough Development Corporation stating that

'one of the consequences of the Secretary of State's decision concerning Castor is that the Corporation no longer has any material interest in a Castor bypass. The matter now appeared to be for the Department of Transport in Consultation with Cambridgeshire County Council.' The villagers continued to suffer from the rumbling of laden lorries, the crashing sounds of empty lorries driven over bumps in the road, the vibrating of windows and doors (and sometimes everything else) and the alarmingly rapid decay of stone walls. Then in December 1981, the villagers heard on the national news, no doubt with mixed feelings, that 40 tonne lorries were to be allowed on the roads and the construction of bypasses was to be speeded up as a consequence. Two more accidents were recorded in the village within a fortnight. The Parish Council continued its lobbying, and by July 1982, the Council minutes record that of the two routes proposed for the Castor Bypass, the Council was *'overwhelmingly in favour of the Southern route'*. This route would have passed just to the South of the Cricket Ground and villagers' opposition grew, such that in March 1983, the minutes record that after what was termed 'a healthy discussion' on the merits of both routes, a vote was taken and there were five in favour of the Northern route and four in favour of the Southern. The Secretary of State for Transport confirmed the Northern route and by October of 1984, the Council was informed that soil tests were to be

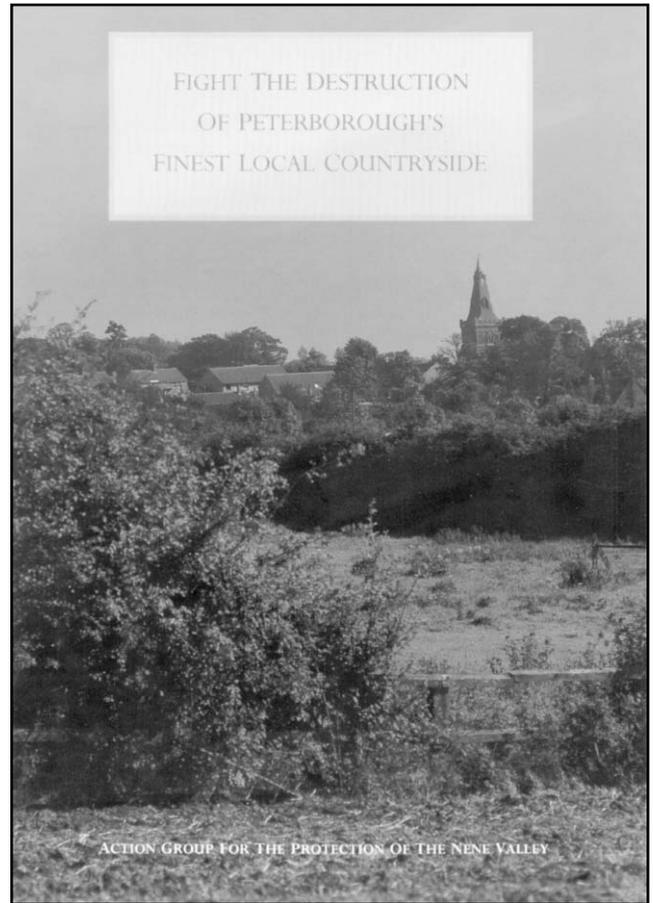


Fig 29f. Campaign Brochure published by the 'Action Group for the Protection of the Nene Valley'



Fig 29g. Devastation caused by a lorry which jack-knifed and demolished both the bar of the Royal Oak and a garage on the opposite side of the road. The garage had just been rebuilt following a similar accident.



Fig 29h. The handing over of a plaque to commemorate the completion of the bypass. Left to right: Michael Hinton (Chairman of Ailsworth Parish Council), a representative of the Roadworks Co Ltd, Charles Winfrey, Reg Lambert (Vice Chairman of Castor Parish council).

undertaken, the first step towards the building of the new road. The villagers enthusiastically celebrated the eventual completion of the bypass. A fun run/walk/pushchair push took place along its length on the day before the new road was opened. The next day, despite the rain, other events were held to celebrate, including the tying of a white ribbon across Peterborough Road outside the Royal Oak to symbolise the closure to through traffic. The Chairman of the Parish Council was finally able to report to the Annual General Meeting in May 1992 that *'the much awaited bypass has changed the face of the village beyond all recognition and it is now a place of some tranquillity'*.

The Councillors

The Parish of Castor has been fortunate in that it has had many dedicated people, willing to spend much time and effort in the interests of the village. It is remarkable that in the first 85 years, the Parish Council had only three chairmen. Colonel Frank White and George Fitzwilliam, Esquire, served on the first Parish Council in 1894 as

Chairman and Vice Chairman respectively. Then, in 1910, George Fitzwilliam took on the post of Chairman, serving until his death in 1936, when he was succeeded by his son, Thomas Fitzwilliam, later Earl Fitzwilliam, who in turn served for a grand total of 43 years until his death in 1979. Other names are noted in the Council minutes: Major Pelham, for instance, died in 1946, having been a member of the Parish Council since 1925 and in 1955 Mr W Cooke retired after 33 years. More recently Mr Reg Lambert served for 20 years; Mr Alec Jakes served for 32 years and Mr E J Wood for 37 years, all of them at a very significant period in Castor's development.

Castor Parish Council today

The Parish Council has changed with the times and nowadays councillors tend not to serve for such long periods. Today's councillors no doubt wish sometimes that life still went at the easy pace of a hundred years ago, when the only business at one Annual Parish Meeting concerned moles and resulted in a proposal *'that a voluntary association for the purposes of catching moles be hereby formed'*. It may be disputed as to whether Parish Councils have more power now than they used to, but they are at least consulted on issues affecting their areas. All applications for planning permission are passed to the Parish Councils for their approval or not and Councils make recommendations about such matters as roads, footpaths and lighting. It is good to know that the village has an official body to represent the interests of its residents and deal with all the intricacies of local government on our behalf.



Fig 29i. Charles Winfrey giving a speech, before symbolically tying a ribbon across the road to close it to through traffic, while his wife, Jay, prepares to open a celebratory bottle of champagne.



Fig 29j. The completion of the flood relief scheme, 1977. This much-needed scheme was championed by the Parish Councils of Castor and Ailsworth. To celebrate its completion, a seat was donated by Anglian Water. The ceremony was attended by Albert Burgess (far left) and Arthur Chilvers (third from left), the Chairmen of Ailsworth and Castor Parish Councils respectively, as well as John Sharpe (second from left) and Elizabeth Goode (far right), the oldest residents, at the time, of Ailsworth and Castor respectively.



Fig 29k. Jim Wood, Parish Councillor from 1965 to 2002



Fig 29l. View of the Glebe Field from Castor church. This is the field in which the row of elms known as the 'Dancing Ladies' used to grow (see Fig 25j.) The field was part of the Rectory grounds until it was compulsorily purchased by the Development Corporation. The field's presence, in the middle of Castor next to the school, helps preserve the 'open feel' of the village centre. The walls round the field, like many in Castor, lead one to speculate how many walls in Castor contain stonework that has been re-used since first being used in the Roman 'praetorium'.



Fig 29m. The Village Hall Castor, formerly the Fitzwilliam School. The Village Hall is run by a committee on behalf of the residents of Castor and Ailsworth, the Chairman of which is Ian Sheldon.



Fig 29n. Castor Green looking South in the 1950s. Note the socket and stump of the old village cross on the right underneath the tree.



Fig 29o. View of the old barn at Manor Farm Castor from Church Hill, 1950s.

Stephanie Bradshaw

Stephanie moved to the old Schoolmaster's House in Castor in 1990, but her interest in the geology and archaeology of the area dates from a decade earlier.

Notes

1. All quotes from newspapers in this chapter are based on a collection of newspaper cuttings, compiled by Joan Marriott, many of which were written by Annie Cooke. Headmistress of Castor Infants School from 1886 to 1927, Annie Cooke was also the local correspondent for the Peterborough Standard, the Peterborough Citizen and Advertiser and the Stamford Mercury for 40 years.
2. The minutes of the Annual Meetings of Castor Parish and the minutes of the meetings of Castor Parish Council have provided much of the material for this chapter.