

## Michael and the East Meon History Group

Interviewer: Michael, can you please tell me about the selection of East Meon to be the Domesday Village?

Michael Blakstad: Well, this happened very early on in our time in East Meon. I was asked to sit on a committee to discuss how East Meon would react to this.

What had happened was that Edward Roberts and the historian at the Hampshire museums, called Elizabeth Lewis, had decided that East Meon should be designated the Domesday Village in 1986.

Interviewer: This is for the whole country?



*Domesday model of East Meon*

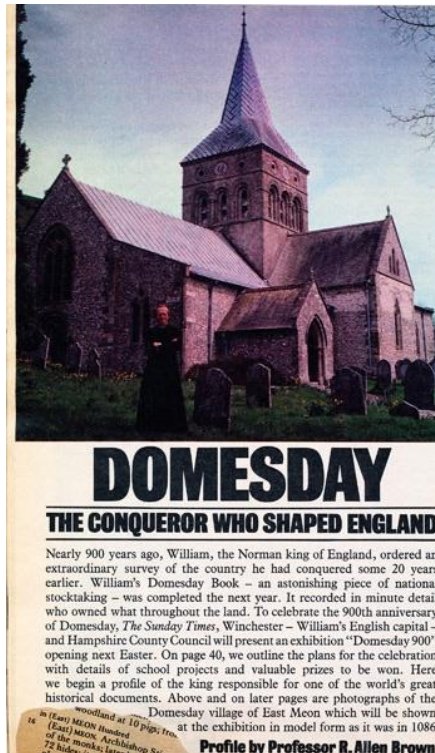
Michael Blakstad:

For Hampshire. But it turned out to be for the whole country, because The Sunday Times then came in. Of course, Domesday came from Winchester. The Sunday Times came in on it, and they did a big supplement about East Meon and the Domesday Village.

Interviewer: Do we have a copy of it anywhere?

Michael Blakstad: Yes. It is in the library. I will talk about that later.

But I am afraid I came out of it rather badly, because we were fairly new to the village but people knew that I knew Andrew Neil, who was the editor of The Sunday Times, and when this appeared...



The photographer didn't keep very good notes, because he took a photograph of the front of our house, which he described as a Georgian townhouse, (Laughter)

and he took a photograph of the back of the house, which he described, correctly, as an Elizabethan house. And everybody thought that I had got our photo in twice because I knew the editor. And Andrew had nothing to do with the colour supplement, but anyhow, there it went.

No, the reason that Elizabeth and Edward chose the village was that the layout was not very different from when it was a Domesday village. It is not on a main road, so its character hadn't changed. And it does have a larger percentage, per head of population, of listed houses than any other village in the county.

Interviewer: An extraordinary number.

Michael Blakstad: So they commissioned a model, which is now in the Musée de la Tapisserie in Bayeux, which is a fantastic model of...

In fact, I will tell a little story there. When Tricia and I went to visit it...in Bayeux, I bought a postcard. The teenager behind the cash desk... I was trying to make conversation. I said, 'C'est notre maison: nous habitons la" And she looked at me in some pity at this old gentleman, thinking we lived in a straw house.

Interviewer: Lovely. (Laughter)

Michael Blakstad: Anyhow, it is still there.

No, they also chose it because it is well recorded in the Domesday Book, of course. There are two entries. One for the overall Menes Manor, which is the larger parish/hundred.

But equally there is the smaller one of Menes Ecclesia which nobody quite knows exactly what it was, and it does vary a bit. It moves around a bit. It was certainly Court Farm, Park Farm. The Park, I mean. Now Park Farm. And probably South Farm and Lower Farm. But at times it seems to have included quite a lot of Oxenbourne. Anyhow, that was a much smaller area.

But between them they were the largest and richest of the hundred/parish and manors.

Interviewer: Was the Bishop of Winchester in play in those times?

Michael Blakstad: Absolutely. Well, at the beginning Archbishop Stigand was a bit of a parvenu, because he had not only Bishop of Winchester but Bishop of Canterbury. It had never been done before and has never been done afterwards.

Interviewer: Of Canterbury and Winchester?

Michael Blakstad: Yes. Unsurprisingly, Richard took a negative view of this and demoted him, and when he died he took over East Meon. Or they took over Winchester as a royal estate and East Meon was thought to be a Royal Peculiar. I haven't gone into that, because I don't really understand it.

But then in the 12th century it batted backwards and forwards. Stephen gave it back to Henry of Blois, who was his brother and by then Bishop of Winchester. Then Henry III took it back again because he wanted to pay for Portchester Castle. And then it came back into the diocese.

Basically, for a thousand years the Bishops of Winchester were the lords of the manor.

Interviewer: So at what stage did we see the development of all these glorious hall houses in East Meon?



*Forge Sound*



*Riverside*



*The Tudor House*



*The Hall at The Court House*

Michael Blakstad: Well, basically the ones we have today are 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The three best are Riverside and Forge Sound, which are next to a crossing over the river, which are probably the

oldest and the best preserved as medieval houses. Edward was very excited that the new owner-

Interviewer: Edward Roberts?

Michael Blakstad: Edward Roberts. When the new owner took in Riverside. It had been owned by a man called Leo Wild, who would never let anybody in. He was very suspicious.

But the new guy not only let us in but actually is refurbishing it, and Edward established that it is a much more important house than he had realised.

Forge Sound, where Tony Perkins lives, is a perfectly preserved and delicious little yeoman's cottage.

And our house, The Tudor House, was then a two-and-a-half bay hall house along the road. Subsequently developed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century into a Tudor house.

And of course the Court House itself was immensely important and is still the best preserved of the bishop's palaces, but in those days was simply the hall itself, with bishop's quarters at one end and a chapel at the other.

The hall was used for administration, and the servants of the diocese lived there and slept on the floor and looked after the farm. And twice a year they would have manorial courts which they would administer. So that was the administrative hub.

And of course, in the meantime, the church is far larger than the parish warrants but was then a parish that stretched right to the Sussex border and beyond.

Interviewer: The old hundred of East Meon?

Michael Blakstad: There is even a bit of Ambersham. And it was hugely important.

And the bishops were rectors of East Meon All Saints, which means that they got the greater tithes, which meant they pocketed all the money, both the tithes and the rental from the land and the produce of the land.

So it is not surprising they gave quite a lot back, in terms of developing an absolutely stunning church, which we have to this day thanks to the Victorian vicar being too mean to do much to it. So we escaped the Victorian deprivation. That is my theory anyhow.

Interviewer: The other thing in the background is the bishop recorded everything, or his people did, in the Pipe Rolls. [So there is a] unique record of the history if your Latin is up to it.

Michael Blakstad: Yes, outstanding, if you can follow the Latin.

Interviewer: Is that ever going to be fully translated, do you think?

Michael Blakstad: No. Certain years have been translated, as you know.

Interviewer: Yes, I have looked at the ones that have been translated.

Michael Blakstad: I have tried reading some of the Latin and you can get the hang of it. It is both the handwriting and the text. Some of them have been printed up, so you can understand it a bit easier.

Interviewer: We need to get some artificial intelligent software on it.

Michael Blakstad: Well, it would have to understand a lot.

Interviewer: It could do that.

Michael Blakstad: And every scribe had different shorthand, so it is a nightmare. To this I owe Edward a great deal, because when I had difficulty I would go to him. But there are other records. There was a land rental. It is pretty well documented.

And of course in the 14<sup>th</sup> century the Archbishop gave some of East Meon to Magdalene College, to help fund it, because he



founded it, Archbishop Wykeham. And that is well recorded. They have got wonderful records there.

Interviewer: So this was the background to the history. You then mentioned earlier on that you built a village website. Then you had so many enquiries about East Meon and family trees and everything you felt the need to start a history group and a website for the history group.

Michael Blakstad: Yes. Which is slightly ironical because I have never done history. Well, I did ancient history at Oxford but nothing to do with modern history.

I happened to be asked by my golf club, which is Liphook, because I was a journalist, to write their history.

Interviewer: It is lovely. I have read it, as you know.

Michael Blakstad: Two old dears... I shouldn't call them that. Two very enterprising but elderly gentlemen had done all the research, which was a nightmare. There were piles of stuff. So I discovered what it means to take a lot of sources, sort them out, and write them up. And that gave me not the appetite but an awareness of what could happen.

Anyhow, as I mentioned, there was always a page of history on the website. We had a very good history, a very thorough history, written by a solicitor called Freddie Stanfield in the 1980s and 1990s. Very thorough but slightly dull. But anyhow.

Interviewer: Very, very dull.

Michael Blakstad: It was not that bad. But that gave us the basis. I sort of boiled that down.

The then vicar, Terry Loudon, was a keen historian, and he gave a lecture. Or a sermon, I suppose. He gave us a talk anyhow on the history of East Meon. So I had the raw materials.

Then people kept writing in and both telling me things but also making enquiries. So what they told me I put on the website, where possible, and when they made enquiries I tried to find somebody who could deal with them.

There were two main sources. One was the vicar. The other was a splendid man called Denys Ryder, who had made his fortune in chicken batteries.



*Denys Ryder*



*Rev Terry Loudon*

Interviewer: Battery farming?

Michael Blakstad: Battery farming. Along with an East Meon resident called Brian Blacker. They did this at Steep Farm.

In 1969, Denys moved to the mill, Frogmore Mill, and converted it. Well, he moved into the house and subsequently converted the mill.

And Denys was one of these people who knew everybody. He was a wonderful networker. He would know every farmer, every cottage, and he would know their parents and so on. So he would put his tendrils out and find out the answer.

So when people wrote asking about their ancestors – they wrote from Australia or Canada, America, you name it, and England – I would pass them on to Denys and he would tell me what he could. Which was fine if they still had living relatives. And the vicar would look up the church register.



But I discovered that some of Denys's stuff was not entirely accurate, so little by little I decided we had to do something a bit more methodical.

Indeed at that point the parish website was becoming a burden. It partly became Meon Matters. It partly became a parish website.

I kept hold of the history part and I did a history website, with a bit of money from the parish council, designed by a man called Robert Gerard and WordPress.

Denys was a great help. Denys put me on to Robert Gerard. Because Dennis of course had his website. He was a great digital experimenter. He would never do anything the orthodox way. Everything would be an experiment. And usually failed. Anyhow, that is by the by.

Interviewer: Robert still maintains one of our websites today. And I still have battles with him.

Michael Blakstad: Well, he is lovely. You know him of course.

Anyhow, we then launched the history group. I only knew one historian in the area, and that was a man called Tim Concannon, who is a QC who works out of Portsmouth, but he lives I think in Steep or one of those villages.

I asked him to come and give a talk about his theory that East Meon, before the Normans came, was a very important minister, i.e. a lay community that used the church for its worship and the hall, the Bishop's Palace – well, it wasn't the Bishop's Palace, the hall – for communal work.

I asked him to come and talk about this, and he had got some stuff but he gave the most discursive and inaccurate talk you ever heard. He took in the whole of the Saxons. It was terrible.

Anyhow, enough people came to that that I knew there was the basis of a history group. That was in February. In May that year I invited Edward to come and do a guided tour of The Tudor House, and that was lovely. Then we started to meet in...

We also got the... What is his name? Doug Saunders from Buriton, who had been running the Buriton Association, which did a lot of history. They had been doing it for 20 years.

Interviewer: Doug Jones?

Michael Blakstad: Doug Jones. What did I say? Yes, Doug Jones. He came with Lynette, his number two, who did all the clerical work. We have never had one of those. We need one.

Interviewer: But you need one now.

Michael Blakstad: We have always needed one.

They came and gave us a talk on what they had done, and out of that grew a society which would meet in people's sitting rooms. We limited the number of members to 25, because most sitting rooms can only take about 18 or 20, and we had a variety of speakers, some of whom we invited. We went to visit the Hampshire Record Office. And it grew and grew.

Then we had our first big initiative on the research front, because a speaker came to talk – and I have just forgotten his name – on tracing the history of houses. Damn. My brain is going. It is on the website.

Interviewer: It is on the website? Okay.

Michael Blakstad: He is a splendid speaker. He had been the first researcher on Who Do You Think You Are, in the days when the-

Interviewer: On the old television programme on tracing your family?

Michael Blakstad: Yes, tracing your family. He was then an archivist or a curator at

*Nick Barratt with Michael*



Kew. The BBC had found him, and instead of pretending that all the research just comes up magically he was the guide and mentor of the celebrities whose families were being traced. Nick Barratt. He did a book, and he did a very

good talk and was incredibly helpful in guiding us on how to do house histories, which about a dozen of us then did.

Then we had an exhibition that year, 2012 or 2011, on house histories. It wasn't just houses. It was the church. It was the whole village.

One should mention that there were some very interesting estates in East Meon – Bereleigh, Leydene, Westbury and Bordean – which are sort of stately homes. But because East Meon has never had a squire, as such, or never had a resident lord of the manor, it was simply successful families that have established houses.

So we did some of those. We did some of the old houses. We also did the Victorian school and so on, the alms houses. So it was quite an interesting history of the village.

We also had a lovely lady called Marjorie Lambert, who was a district nurse, who with Denys' help drew a map. Which is totally topographically inaccurate, but very accurate in terms of...

Interviewer: It is on our website

Michael Blakstad: ...it remembered who did what in every one of the houses. So as you looked up the High Street you could see there was not only the shops but there was a wheelwright and a coffin maker and so on. Because the whole village was entirely self-sufficient



*Marjorie Lambert with her map*

Interviewer: At what stage did you start to think of going to get grants for research? How did that come about?

Michael Blakstad: Well, that came next.

We then began to accumulate rather more material, in the form of quasi archives and photographs and so on, than we could cope with. So I applied to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a grant to have an Open Day ostensibly.

And the Open Day was one-seventh of the iceberg, because we invited villagers to bring their records, which we would then scan. We didn't ask to keep them. We scanned them and indexed them, and we wanted to put them on a website.



*Open Day, 2013*



*'Who do you think they were?'*



*Scanning memorabilia*



*Battle of Hastings*

So the six-sevenths of the iceberg was to get a very ambitious website – well, database really – built by a firm in Brighton, Community Sites. It was the most ambitious site they had done to then. Because they had an archive facility. We got Hampshire Record Office to advise us on other sites, but the other ones were just too anally academic.

Anyhow, so we built the website. We also that year got involved in Saxons in the Meon Valley, which was an initiative that came out of Corhampton and Meonstoke. Some very enterprising people. We don't have many Saxon relics in East Meon, because the Norman church was built on the old Saxon church.

Interviewer: It was horrible that we didn't find any records when they built the church hall. It was a big hope we would find some of the Saxon stuff.

Michael Blakstad: It was too far against the hill.

Anyhow, that enabled us to entertain the young at the Open Day, with a re-enactment of the Battle of Hastings. They brought helmets and tabards and that was great fun. It was a wonderful day. About 300 people came. And that was the basis of our

archive. That was where most of the money went that time. Or where all the money went that time. The website, the archive, the open day, and the scanning.

Interviewer: I have to say, we have now renamed the website “The Archive Created by Michael Blakstad”.

Michael Blakstad: Thank you for that. It sets a bar.

We also got involved in oral history at about that time.

The Record Office always provided speakers, and one of the speakers talked about oral history. And we visited the Record Office a couple of times. They have been a great supporter and mainstay of the group.

So we got a coach, who was not terribly good, and she ran a seminar on what to do and what not to do. She was bad, but the results were quite good. I think we have done about eighteen or twenty now.

Interviewer: More than that because I have done three or four recently.

Michael Blakstad: Okay. And the rules are very strict, as you know. You have got to do a transcript. You have got to get permission. You have got to log it. I don't think that we really need do all that, because do we give the transcripts and the audio to the museums?

Interviewer: We haven't recently. I must look into that.

Michael Blakstad: Yes, that was the purpose of oral history.

Interviewer: Well, obviously the thing that this has all led to is the major research project we recently completed, which is the Farming the Valley project. As you say in your introduction, farming is the industry of the village. It is the story of the village.

Michael Blakstad: Well, it is also a stepping stone in the evolution of the history group. I have always said that if there are now 50 members odd



about a fifth of those will be active. Of whom about a half will be active in administrative ways and run the group, choose the speakers, and do the money.

Interviewer: That is certainly true.

Michael Blakstad: And the other half, plus a few others who are not totally committed, would be willing to do serious research. And you are one of those.

And a man called David Hopkins was originally extremely... He was assiduous in doing that. And there were four or five others. Because research is, as you well know, quite time consuming and needs a certain set of skills. Anyhow, we got enough people.

We had two workshops in my house in The Green, in 2016, and we decided that this would be run from the bottom up. People wouldn't be told what to do. They would choose a subject, and they would choose a subject that was either a period or a farm or an estate or a topic.

Most people went for topics, because that is by far the most interesting, so it was poverty or pestilence or whatever. And the things that they didn't do I ended up doing, for the most part, or you did with Betty.

For two years we did these researches, most of which were turned into research reports which are at a sort of half-finished stage. They need finishing. They need finalising.

One of them we have finalised. That is the history of the church. But the other ones are on the website as PDFs. I think they have some use because they have got references.

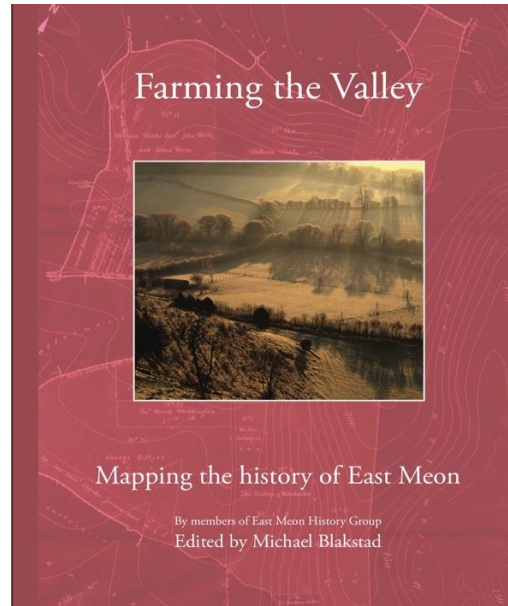
Interviewer: They are very good. People have been very complimentary.

Michael Blakstad: But anyhow, I then set out to turn them into a book. Now books are not cheap. Nobody was going to publish this book commercially. So I got another grant. It was sheer luck. One of our speakers had been a man called David Spurling, who I discovered is very involved in something called the Hampshire Archives Trust. I think that is the name.

Michael Blakstad: They turned out to have quite a lot of money they wanted to spend, and I applied for quite a lot of money to do the book.

I had also applied to the Lottery Fund again for a grant to do the cartography. Because we decided to do farming, obviously, but you can't do farming over the periods without maps, because people had no idea. Topology is vastly important.

So we had two grants. We had the £7,000 grant to do the maps and another £7,000 to do the book and the design and all the rest of it.



We have always had a designer called Zoe Kay, who is a remarkable lady. She is not famous. She is not particularly stylish or whatever. I shouldn't use that word. But she is not trendy. She works extremely inexpensively and efficiently. For

instance, she is very good at proofreading and all the rest of it. She is very organised. And I was very keen that she designed the book.

She in turn worked with a man called Paul Martin, who is a Buriton man, who ran a design agency. And I think the end design is very good indeed.

Anyhow, to cut a long story short, we produced the book in November. It was published in November 2019.

Interviewer: Yes. Obviously, the book has been widely praised. They are delighted with it. The problem now in the group is that we don't have anything immediately for our next research project. Neither do we have many people wishing to participate. So we need another generation to come along.

Michael Blakstad: You have got to strongarm them.

Interviewer: Yes, to do things.

I think that brings our chat on the history group to an end, unless you have got anything else to say.

Michael Blakstad: I don't think so.

I will just mention that the committee came up with some very ingenious financial ideas on the book. We did a hardback, which pre-sold for about £100 to subscribers

Interviewer: To get a sponsor's name in the book.

Michael Blakstad: And they got their names in. Then the book itself sold for £25. The 60 copies, hardback copies, I think we have sold about 35 or 40, and that put a lot of money in the bank. It covered the cost of the printing. So the other sales have left a bit of money over. And there was more money in the grant for doing archives and what have you.

Interviewer: That is the final thing. We should talk about the image library.

Michael Blakstad: Yes. Well, where we started with the original Heritage Lottery Fund, the pictures continued to grow. We continued the tradition that we wanted digits, not paper, and there are probably 3,000 more images on my desktop. There's also as many documents, which we must talk about.

And I wanted to make those much more accessible. The website was okay, the archive website, thanks to Google, because you can search and find things, but there is still a lot of stuff that wasn't on it.

So the rest of the grant that the Hampshire Archives Trust gave us went towards... Well, it didn't really go towards, because we haven't spent it. But anyhow, there was money in the bank.

So I persuaded the committee that we should do a favour to the church, and we put some of the money towards producing a short history of All Saints Church, at our expense, which they could then sell and raise money for the roof and what have you.

It is meant as a guide book, but it has got more than most guide books, because it has got quite a colourful history of what the position of the church was. And that grew out of the research done for Farming The Valley. And there is plenty of work, I think, to be done developing some of the things that we didn't finish researching.

Interviewer: The thing I would love to see finished, and we never really got cracking with it, was the history of Bereleigh as a shooting estate. I think that would be fascinating.

Michael Blakstad: Yes. Well, Bill was supposed to give a talk, and he probably will.

Interviewer: Yes, I am sure he will. And we will record it. Don't worry.

Michael Blakstad: No, but there are lots of topics.

Interviewer: I asked Bill how he would like to show his slides. He said, "I won't have any." That was a good starting point. (Laughter)

Michael Blakstad: Yes.

Interviewer: Well, thank you very much, Michael. That has been fascinating.

Michael Blakstad: Do you want to talk about Meon Matters?

Interviewer: Yes, let's talk about the relationship to Meon Matters as a final topic.

Michael Blakstad: Well, I have always been very fond of Meon Matters. It was founded by a great friend of mine, who died last year, called Chris Brough, as a church newsletter. It was originally a cut and paste job, mainly done by his secretary on his photocopier. He was an estate agent. He then moved to France and some of us kept it going.

Then it fell into the very capable hands of Denys Ryder, who made it far more glossy, and then Mark Atkinson made it a really glossy village magazine, which somehow covered its costs.

Interviewer: But eventually couldn't.

Michael Blakstad: And eventually couldn't.

Its philosophy has always been that what you write appears, which I think is possibly something they could work on, because the material is... Some of it is fascinating. (Laughter)

It is auto-generated. It is not an editorial. The editorial consists of getting the pages together, getting it to the printers, and distributing it.

Last year – yes, it was early last year – it found it couldn't cover its costs. I had been rebuffed twice, once by Denys and once by Mark, when I suggested that we should merge that with the village website.

That people who could, would read it on the web, and then you could have up-to-date information at your fingertips. But those who didn't would have a printed copy which they could access. Because there has always been a lot of people, myself included, who like to have a hard copy lying around.

Interviewer: Dinosaurs, we call them, in the IT world.

Michael Blakstad: Well, it is quicker to turn a page than to turn on the computer sometimes. Anyhow...

They agreed to do that last year, and that is what it is today. How it is working I don't know. I have rather lost touch.

Interviewer: Mixed. Obviously, we have got lots of references and many articles from Meon Matters on the archive website, so it is an important source of historical data as well.

Michael Blakstad: Yes, I certainly dug into it. I got blanket permission to use their photographs and stuff, and that has been useful, but they don't keep it terribly scientifically.

Interviewer: It is interesting there are now other websites going, or Facebook pages going, on East Meon.

There is East Meon Memories, which is a Facebook group with about 200 people on, which puts memories and photographs. Most of which are in fact on our website already, the history group, but occasionally I will pick up a new one.

There is also a fascinating Historic Photographs of Hampshire Facebook page, which is quite useful. Some great stuff on. So it is interesting that Facebook and the web gradually are getting many more people interested in history.

Michael Blakstad: Social media and the way it is going, yes.

Interviewer: And you were one of the pioneers, I think.



Michael Blakstad: Well, sort of, but I wasn't directly responsible. I did edit one edition of Meon Matters. I did used to write a regular article about history taken from our research, which is all on the website.

Interviewer: Well, I have just taken over being the editor of the Langrish equivalent. I was looking back at the archives I have inherited, and the very first edition, when it went electronic from cut and paste, says, 'We are struggling to find contributors'. It is not like it used to be. And it never has been like it used to be.

Michael Blakstad: It reminds me that I managed to compile all the editions of Meon Matters and took them to the record office, for future historian. That should continue and should happen [in the next week or two].

Interviewer: Well, I have got all the electronic copies now.

Anyway, thank you very much, Michael. It has been fascinating. Thank you.

Michael Blakstad: Okay.

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