

# **GREAT AMWELL A HISTORY OF THE CHURCHYARD STOCKS**

BY  
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The old C18th Great Amwell Parish stocks have stood in the graveyard of St Johns the Baptist Church Great Amwell Hertfordshire for almost a century. A reminder of an historic method of punishing those who broke the laws of the times. This year [2022] these stocks have been replaced by a modern recreation as the originals had decayed to the point that they could not be preserved in situ any longer. It seemed timely therefore to explore the history of these stocks which date back to 1769.



*A view of the stocks in Great Amwell Churchyard as they appeared in 2009*

A record exists in the Great Amwell vestry minutes of the 10<sup>th</sup> May 1769 that it was agreed that a pair of stocks were to be placed in a convenient part of Amwell End for the confinement of Sabbath Breachers and disorderly persons. As the name might suggest Amwell End was located at the edge of the parish on the southern side of the river bridge at the town of Ware. This was about a mile or so from Great Amwell Church. At Amwell End in 1769 part of the land to the south of the river was in the Parish of Great Amwell and the rest in the Parish of Ware. Importantly the parish boundary ran down the middle of the road running from the river bridge to the junction with the road from Great Amwell to Hertford. It was on this shared road leading up to Ware bridge that a fair had been established without any licence in 1768 and had quickly become the cause of much disorderly behaviour often of course linked to over indulgence in the many local hostleries. It seems the Vestry Committee of Great Amwell Parish wasted little time in attempting to bring some order to the situation. Despite the erection of the stocks the fair became notorious for poor behaviour and questionable trading activities. The great and the good of Ware and Great Amwell quickly became determined to remove this nuisance.

The fair being an informal arrangement and straddling the parish boundaries made its removal additionally difficult. However, a way was found to address the problem, which included using the powers of the Cheshunt Turnpike Trust which allowed them to prevent a blockage, partial or otherwise, of the Turnpike Road that might impede the flow of toll paying road users. The undesirable behaviour associated with these fairs was also a valid reason to ask for the closing down of the fair. An application was eventually made to the Quarter Sessions that was to lead to the closure of what many regarded had always been an illegal fair. The need for stocks at Amwell End after the end of the fairs seems to have greatly reduced. However, the stocks appear to have stayed in use for some time.

#### *Hoddesdon End Stocks*

*Although not connected to the stocks that ended up in Great Amwell Churchyard it is perhaps worth noting that on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 1771 the Great Amwell Vestry Committee agreed to a further pair of stocks to be provided at Hoddesdon End. These were to be erected at a proper place at the said End and the care of the stocks was to be left to the Church Warden and Overseer's. In those days a detached part of the Parish of Great Amwell included part of the centre of Hoddesdon in the vicinity of where the clock tower now stands in the fork of the roads to Amwell and St. Margarets. This included part of the area used by the market in Hoddesdon which at that time was divided between the parishes of Great Amwell and Broxbourne. The latter Parish had maintained stocks in the Market place at Hoddesdon End from at least 1647 when they were recorded in use. It is known that a set of stocks and a lockup were located next to the chapel at Hoddesdon, a spot where the clock tower now stands. Which parish they belonged to is unfortunately not recorded. However, the position of the parish boundary would strongly suggest the Broxbourne stocks were positioned next to the clock tower as it was within the Broxbourne Parish boundary. It seems that troublesome fairs and markets were very much an issue around 1770 for the northern and southern extremities of Great Amwell Parish.*

The stocks at Amwell End were to be moved and re-erected behind the George IV Inn, close to Great Amwell Church. This was done to preserve them for posterity as they were no longer needed as a means of punishment. The stocks were erected behind the George IV by Mr Robert W. Mylne in 1887 as part of Queen Victoria's Jubilee celebrations. Because the stocks were preserved at this time it undoubtedly led to them being thought worthy of being looked after in perpetuity later on.



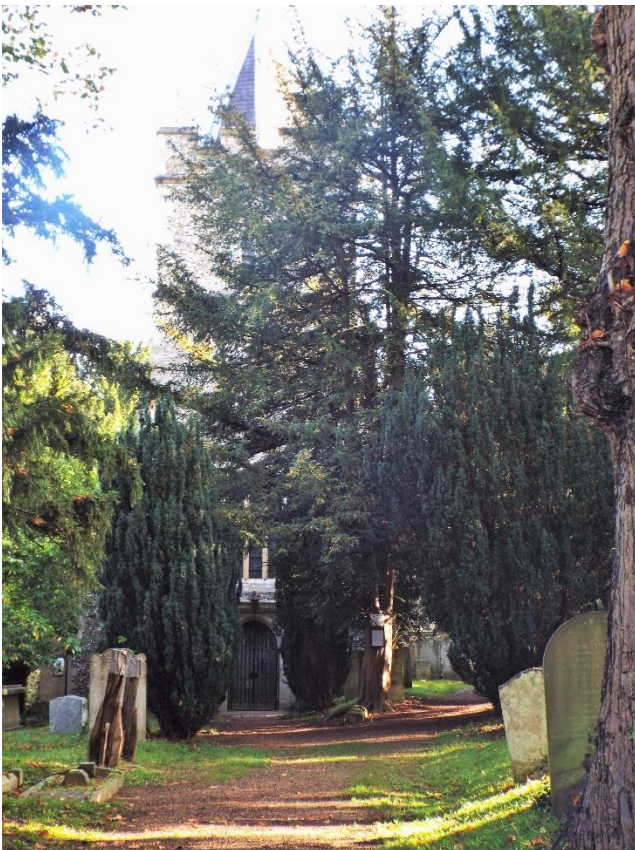
*The stocks as they appeared shortly after they were erected on the steep slope behind the George IV Inn . Not long afterwards it is thought that the stocks underwent some renovation including the replacement of the end posts and the provision of a seat for those detained in the stocks. This may have been part of an idea to make the stocks functional once again after falling out of use.*





*Three elderly men photographed posed captive in the stocks about 1893  
The seat they are sat upon appears to have formed an integral part of the stocks at that time.*

In the 1920s a decision was made to move the stocks from behind the Inn and place them in a more prestigious position in the churchyard. They were placed on the north side of the churchyard path that leads from the Cautherly Lane entrance gates to the tower of the church, some 75 feet [23m] from the west door of the church.



*A November 2014 view of the path leading from the entrance gates in Cautherly Lane to the west door of the church. The stocks can be seen to the left of the path in the near distance. They are exhibiting a considerable lean outward towards the path. The lead cappings to the end posts show up quite distinctly against the weather darkened wood. The stocks had been in this location for nearly 100 years when this photograph was taken.*





*This view of a gentleman in the stocks is dated to 1927 and it is thought was taken shortly after the stocks were relocated to the churchyard. One wonders if the picture of three men in the stocks dated to about 1893 may have been the inspiration for this posed view.*



*This picture taken in 1975 shows the stocks about 50 years after they were relocated to the churchyard. Of note is the lead capping of the end posts to protect the end grain from weathering.*



The stocks are grade II listed and have officially been described as made of Oak with two rectangular end posts some 5 feet [1.5m] tall capped in lead to protect the end grain. Each post has a slot at their lower end about 1 foot 8 inches [0.5m] long which accommodates two horizontal timbers one above the other. Both of these horizontal pieces have six matching semi-circular holes within which the legs of those to be detained could be trapped. The slot in the upright being long enough to allow the upper horizontal piece to be raised to insert and remove one's legs. In later years the upper timber had become fragile and developed a long crack eventually breaking into two pieces. In recent years the general condition of all the wood in the structure was showing considerable decay, despite valiant efforts to protect this historic item.



*A three-view study of the stocks taken in 2013 which shows the features described in the text. Of note is the lead capping to the upright posts and the damage to the upper horizontal timber. The lower pair of images give a glimpse of the vertical slot and the space available for the upper horizontal timber to be lifted enabling legs to be inserted and withdrawn. The view bottom right shows the increasing outward lean of the once upright end posts*





In recent years increasing concern led to investigations into the state of the deteriorating stocks and possible solutions to maintain a physical reminder of this aspect of the parish history. Specialist advice was sought on the matter which was to lead to the conclusion that the stocks were beyond reasonable expectation of being reconditioned. The recommendation being to replace the stocks with a modern replica.



*These recent pictures were taken on the 15<sup>th</sup> August 2022 of the new replica stocks erected on the site of the originals alongside the path in the churchyard of Great Amwell Church. Those responsible for creating this replica have certainly captured the sense and feel of the originals.*



*Two three quarter views showing how the slot for raising the top horizontal bar has been filled with a wooden block, fixing the two horizontal beams firmly together. Stylish wooden cappings to the two end uprights have replaced the unattractive metal alternatives that were present for over a century*





*A rear view of the new stocks with the path beyond. The straw-coloured grass was caused by a series of very hot days and little rain during the preceding two to three months.*

Some readers might be a little concerned that a modern replacement is not really quite the same as an original item. However, an entry in the publication "An Inventory of Historic Monuments in Hertfordshire" published by HMSO in 1910 suggests the stocks may not be as original as one might have thought. The entry states that the stocks were old but with modern side posts. *{That is modern of course for 1910}*. A study of the pictures of the stocks in the 1880s and 90s on pages 2 & 3 above compared with later pictures might suggest the side posts were replaced sometime between 1893 and 1910, during the time that the stocks were located behind the George IV Inn. This may well go a long way to explain why the cross members with the leg holes have deteriorated more over time than the upright end posts.

Once the decision to replace the stocks with a newly made version had been made, a firm with experience of the highly specialised work required for such a project needed to be found. Such a firm was in fact located close by in Stanstead Abbots. The firm of 'Between Times' being engaged to complete the construction of the replacement stocks. The work being carried out in 2022 and erection of the stocks on the site of the old ones in the churchyard was in hand by early summer. Such a good job was done in placing the stocks in position that by mid-August 2022 it appeared as if the new stocks had already been in place for at least a year or two. It is hoped that the replica stocks will last long into the future to remind future generations of a special bit of history of Great Amwell and its once immediate need for this type of punishment for wrong-doers.

Stuart Moye August 2022