

Using ‘A Vision of Britain through Time’ to investigate an Oxfordshire village.


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Our website *A Vision of Britain through Time* assembles geographical surveys of Britain – there are no purely local sources in the site – and then organises them in new ways to make all the information about a particular place easily accessible by a single search. Built with local and family historians in mind, it is designed to provide a quick overview of a town or village, but also offers considerable detail as you drill deeper into the site: there are hundreds of pages either for the settlement or for the various modern or historical districts containing the settlement. This article explores the information available about just one village, Great Rollright in Oxfordshire.

There are several ways to get to our information about a particular place:

- Type its name into the search box on our home page:

www.visionofbritain.org.uk

- Type a relevant postcode into the same search box.
- Go into our library of historic maps and use the main map viewer. Zoom in to the place you are interested in, then click on the “info” icon  and click again on the exact location:

www.visionofbritain.org.uk/maps

The first option either takes you straight to our home page for the place, or to page with a list and map of the places with the same name, from which you can choose. The other two options take you to a “location page”, from which you can access both “places” near the location and administrative units which covered it. However, most visitors to the site use none of these methods, they just search for a place name in Google. You get the best results by mentioning “history”, and the name of the county. For example, our “place page” is the top result from a Google search for “history of Great Rollright Oxfordshire”:

Click on the map for other historical maps of this place

In 1870-72, John Marius Wilson's *Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales* described **Great Rollright** like this:

“ **ROLLRIGHT (Great)**, a village and a parish in Chipping-Norton district, Oxford. The village stands 3 miles N by E of Chipping-Norton r. station; was known at Domesday as Rollendri; and has a wall letter-box under Chipping-Norton. The parish comprises 2, 360 acres. Real property, £3, 478. Pop., 410. Houses, 93. The property is divided among a few. The manor belongs to Brasenose College, Oxford. The living is a rectory in the diocese of Oxford. Value, £250. * Patron, Brasenose College, Oxford. The church is partly Norman, partly early English, all good: and contains a monument to Shepheard, the friend of Prior. There are two Baptist chapels, a national school, and charities £130.

Figure 1: Part of the place page for Great Rollright

This page tells you where the place is, via a national and a more local map, and includes a description taken from a nineteenth century gazetteer. It also contains links to much more information.

Maps

The local map on the place page is drawn from our large collection of historical maps, and clicking on the map takes you into that library, already focused on

maps covering Great Rollright. The library lets you look at maps in two different ways: as continuous “mosaics” which work like Google Maps and, if you scroll down the page, as separate images of complete maps. Only some of our maps are available as mosaics, and the separate maps are organised into three categories depending on which tab you select: ordinary topographic maps, maps of administrative boundaries, and land use maps. Zooming in or out in the viewer lets you see more or less detailed maps in the list below. An example of a map that is not available via a mosaic is this early nineteenth century map prepared for the Registrar General, on which parish boundaries have been hand-painted onto a printed First Series Ordnance Survey map:



Figure 2: Ordnance Survey Unions map, Banbury, 1803

Historical Text

For Great Rollright, the descriptive text on the place page comes from John Marius Wilson's Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales (1870-72):

***“ROLLRIGHT (Great),** a village and a parish in Chipping-Norton district, Oxford. The village stands 3 miles N by E of Chipping-Norton r. station; was known at Domesday as Rollendri; and has a wall letter-box under Chipping-Norton. The parish comprises 2, 360 acres. Real property, £3, 478. Pop., 410. Houses, 93. The property is*

divided among a few. The manor belongs to Brasenose College, Oxford. The living is a rectory in the diocese of Oxford. Value, £250. Patron, Brasenose College, Oxford. The church is partly Norman, partly early English, all good: and contains a monument to Sheppard, the friend of Prior. There are two Baptist chapels, a national school, and charities £130."*

Entries from other gazetteers are available via the 'Historical places and writing' option in the side bar. This accesses entries from other gazetteers in our system, such as Bartholomew's 1887 *Gazetteer of the British Isles*.

We also link to references by historical travel writers. Of course many villages were never visited by these travellers, but Great Rollright was mentioned in three accounts and the "writing" page links directly to each mention of the village within the relevant chapter, although you can scroll around to read the whole text. Some references only mention the place in passing, such as Arthur Young in 1791 who wrote about a cow sold from the village "*esteemed by many persons, before that sale, to be the finest cow in England*"¹.

¹ Arthur Young; 1791 Tour from Birmingham to Suffolk, from the 'Annals of Agriculture', 45 volumes published 1784-1809.

Others provide more depth. In the 1607 English translation of *Britain, or, a Chorographical Description of the most flourishing Kingdomes, England, Scotland, and Ireland*, William Camden gives a detailed account of the possible explanation for the nearby standing stones in his section on ‘Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire’, as well as this picture of the stones:

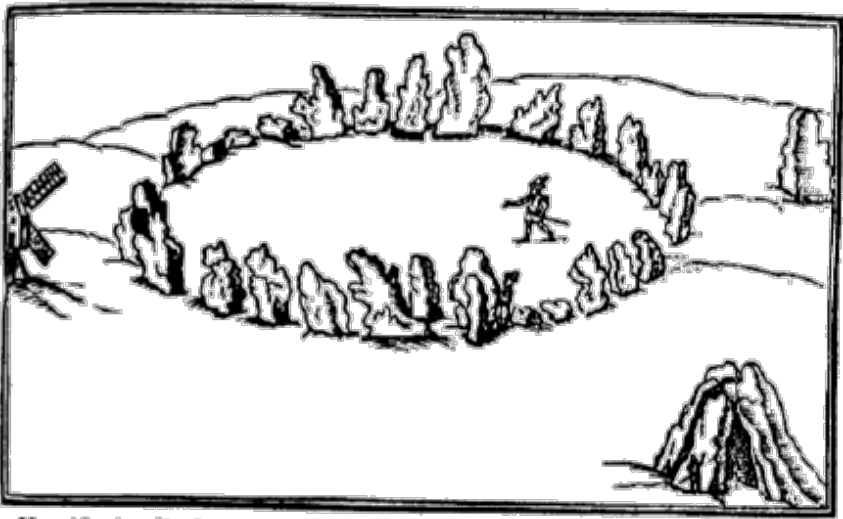


Figure 3: Camden's illustration showing the Rollright Stones

*“riveret in the very border of the Shire passeth by an ancient monument standing not far from his banke, to wit, certaine huge stones placed in a round circle (the common people usually call them **Rolle-rich** stones, and*

*dreameth that they were sometimes men, by a wonderfull Metamorphosis turned into hard stones). The draught of them, such as it is, portraied long since, heere I represent unto your view. For without all forme and shape they be, unaequal, and by long continuance of time much impaired... These would I verily thinke to have beene the monument of some victorie, and haply erected by Rollo the Dane, who afterwards conquered Normandie. For what time as he with his Danes and Normans troubled England with depraedations, we read that the Danes joined battaile with the English thereby at **Hoche Norton**, and afterwards fought a second time at Scier stane in Huiccia, which also I would deeme to be that Mere-stone standing hard by for a land Marke and parting four shires, for so much doth that Saxon word Schier-stane most plainly import. Certainly in an Exchequer booke the towne adjacent is called Rollendrich, whereas it is there specified Tursdan le Dispenser held land by serjeanty of the Kings dispensarie, that is, to be the Kings Steward.”*

Daniel Defoe, the famous novelist, published his *Tour through the whole island of Great Britain* in 1724-27, and described his own visit to the area, referring to Camden’s theory on the stones:

*“...coming down by and upon the west side of Oxfordshire, to **Chipping-Norton**, we were shew'd Roll-Richt-Stones, a second Stone-Henge; being a ring of great stones standing upright, some of them from 5 to 7 foot high.*

*I leave the debate about the reason and antiquity of this antient work to the dispute of the learned, who yet cannot agree about them any more than about Stone-Henge in Wiltshire. Cambden will have them be a monument of victory, and the learned Dr. Charleton is of the same mind. Mr. Cambden also is willing to think that they were erected by Rollo the Dane, because of the town of **Rollwright**, from which they are call'd Rolle Right or Rolle Richt Stones. Aiston wou'd have them to be a monument of the dead, perhaps kill'd in battle; and that a great stone 9 foot high, at a distance, was over a king; and 5 other great ones likewise at a distance, were great commanders and the like...”*

The hyperlinks within the travel writing take you back to the Great Rollright place page, or to the place pages for Chipping and Hook Norton. We have also assembled all the names for our various places appearing in the travel writing, and in various other sources, and list these on the “names” page for the place; so for

example, searching for “Hoche Norton” from our home page will get you to the Hook Norton place page, because of Camden. The other tab on the “historical places and writing” page lists the twenty closest other places, and how many gazetteer entries and traveller references are available for each.

Units and statistics

A large part of the information in the site is historical statistics from census and vital registration reports, and other sources; and note that we have no information about named individual people. These statistics are not for vaguely defined “places” but for administrative units, and our underlying system is very carefully designed to distinguish between places and units while closely linking them. The ‘Units and statistics’ page for Great Rollright, reached from the main place page via the side bar, has two tabs. The second, which we provide for all places and locations, lists all administrative units whose boundaries included Great Rollright, but obviously includes only units whose boundaries we know. The first tab lists units named after Great Rollright. These include the recent ecclesiastical parish, whose boundaries we do not

know, the ancient parish of Great Rollright, and the modern civil parish of Rollright.

Clicking on any of these unit names takes you to the unit homepage, and you will begin to realise the depth of the system. The unit home page again has two tabs: one which always appears listing the unit's name, legal status and relationships with other units, including a mass of information computerised from Frederick Youngs' *Guide to the Local Administrative Units of England*; the other linking to available statistical data, organised into ten themes. One use of the relationships information is to see which Registration Districts and sub-Districts the parish was part of, to help in searching for birth, marriage and deaths certificates from 1837 onwards. Great Rollright was in Chadlington Hundred, but then in the Registration District, sub-District, Sanitary District and, after 1894, Rural District of Chipping Norton. It was merged with Little Rollright in 1832 to create Rollright Civil Parish.

Statistical data for parishes is inevitably more limited than for districts. We include data from the census parish-level tables for 1961 back to 1881, and the 1851 table which included collated data from all earlier

censuses back to 1801, so we can present the population time series below:

Census	Pop. 10 Years Prev.	Current Population
1801		403
1811	403	362
1821	362	419
1831	419	438
1841	438	459
1851	459	445
1881	371	388
1891	388	349
1901	349	318
1911	318	349
1921	349	322
1931	322	289

Data from 1861 and 1871 are not currently included as census geography was then very confused, as the Civil Parish system emerged out of the old Ancient Parishes. The series ends in 1931, as we treat post-1932 Rollright as a different unit. In this case the population listed by each census for ten years earlier always matches that at the previous census, but sometimes it reveals boundary changes.

The only English census report to publish much at parish-level beyond basic population totals was 1831, which listed the occupations of adult males in nine

categories. We include these data as transcribed by David Gatley of Staffordshire University, and we can see that well over males aged twenty or over in Great Rollright worked on farms in 1831:

Farmers employing Labourers	10
Farmers not employing Labourers	0
Agricultural Labourers	59
Manufacturing	0
Retail & Handicrafts	26
Capitalists, Professionals	1
Labourers (non-agricultural)	12
Servants	1
Other	14

We have also been able to include more detailed occupational structure data from 1881, using not the published census report but statistics specially generated for us by the University of Essex from the complete transcription of the enumerators' books coordinated by the Genealogical Society of Utah. For the most detailed view of these data you need to look not at our "Occupations" theme but at the "Census Reports" link, which presents data for the parish using the 414 categories used to present county-level data in the published report. These show that most males in

Great Rollright were “Engaged in Agriculture”, including five farmers and sixty classified as “Agricultural Labourer, Farm Servant, Cottager”. Most women had no occupation listed, but there were 22 domestic servants.

www.visionofbritain.org.uk/census/table_page.jsp?tab_id=EW1881AGE_M10&u_id=10348328

For a broader view of how the area around Great Rollright has changed, you must look at district-level data. We provide data for historical districts, and especially for Registration Districts 1851-1911, and for local government districts such as Chipping Norton Rural District 1911-71. However, the longest time series in the system are for the districts reported on by the 2001 census, most of which are the same today. For these we include 2001 data taken directly from the census, data from 1971 to 1991 computed using a system created by Danny Dorling of the University of Sheffield, and then data computed by us from earlier censuses, sometimes all the way back to 1801. As district boundaries have greatly changed, this involves “redistricting” the numbers, re-allocating data for Registration Districts and local government districts to the modern districts using parish-level population

density data and on the assumption that whatever variable is being redistricted had a uniform distribution over the population of the historical district.

Fortunately, most historical districts were smaller than the modern ones.

Great Rollright is in the modern district of West Oxfordshire, and we provide a direct link from the village place page to the district's home page. From there you can select the Population theme and then a sequence of population pyramids, starting in 1851 and ending in 1971:

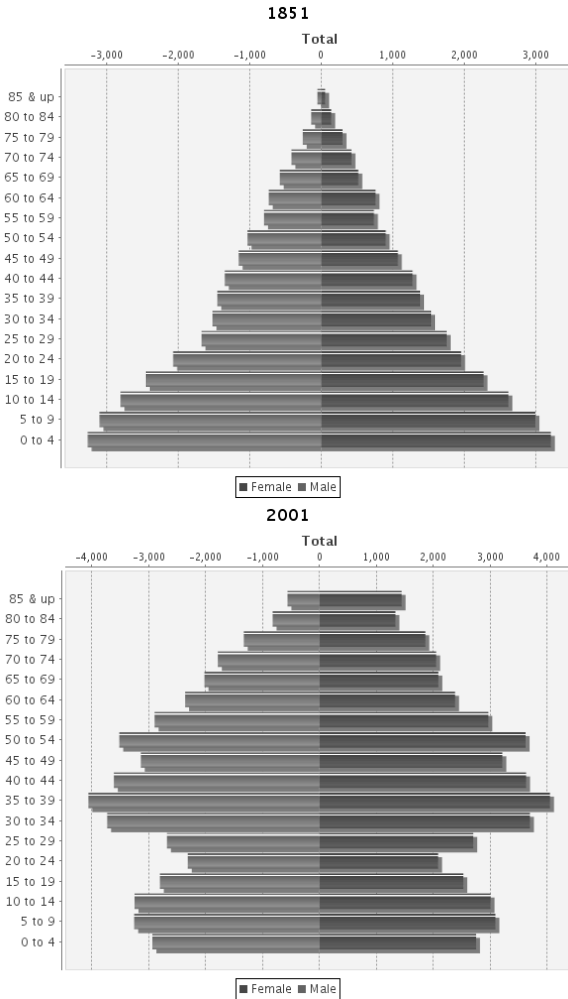


Figure 4: Population pyramids for West Oxfordshire in 1851 and 2001

Conclusion

We have only scratched the surface of the statistical data available for districts and counties, and not

discussed the statistical mapping facilities at all, but hopefully this article has revealed how much our website has to offer local and family historians. Although we do not hold any information about individual people, families, businesses, buildings or streets we very much hope you enjoy using our site to give your historical research a geographical context.