

MIDDENS AND MIASMA

A portrait of seventeenth century village life in Banburyshire

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The English village. Three words which evoke images of rustic stone cottages, country pubs, rosy-cheeked inhabitants and cottage gardens. Strip away this romantic perception of rural living and what remains? What was the reality of a seventeenth century English settlement – a centre for industry as well as recreation? Most of all, what did it smell like?

This article will explore some of the everyday activities associated with seventeenth century village life within a ten-mile radius of Banbury, traditionally known as ‘Banburyshire’. It will focus on those enterprises that would have contributed to the overall miasma that hung over the settlements of early modern England.

Agriculture

Although the effect of ‘inclosure’ was beginning to be felt, the area was still dominated by open field husbandry – a system that made the furlong, rather than the field, the cropping unit.

Since the end of the fifteenth century attempts had been made to increase the yield of arable land., but were with limited success.

*‘...it must be admitted that the sort of husbandry exemplified by the Midlands system was never wholly successful in overcoming the central need for manure, limited by the availability of grazing’.*¹

The shortage of manure increased its value. In an inventory taken in 1667 of the household goods of George Whitewell of Kings Sutton ‘the dunge in the streete’ was appraised at four shillings, showing that manure was a valuable commodity.

There is also a case of a Kings Sutton man instructing in his will that, on his death, his dung heap be equally divided between his two sons.

Manure comprised both animal and human waste. Along with the smaller dung heaps scattered about the village, there were also public cesspits where ‘nightsoil’ from chamberpots was emptied. R.B. Wood-Jones details the design and use of these cesspits.

¹ J.A. Sharp: *Early Modern England: A social History 1550 – 1760* (London, 1987, 2nd edn 1997).