

The oldest secular building in Little Shelford – Farming from the 15th century to the present day

At the southern end of Little Shelford High Street stands a building that most villagers will have passed hundreds of times without appreciating quite how extraordinary it is. Hall Farm and its barns are grade II listed and the Farm House is probably the oldest surviving secular building in the village. Its story provides a remarkable window into more than five centuries of farming, changing land ownership and village life.

The details from the Historic England listing information tells us that at the heart of today's Hall



Farmhouse is a late-15th-century open hall — a great timber-framed room that was once open to the roof and heated by an open fire. Its smoke-blackened roof timbers survive today, providing a rare glimpse of what life was like in a substantial medieval farming household. The farmhouse around it was subsequently rebuilt, extended and modernised, particularly in the 17th century, but the medieval hall remains at its core and is where its 500 year history began.

There is also a separate listing for the substantial timber-framed barn behind the farm house which dates from the early 16th century so probably built around the same period as major changes to the farmhouse open hall were being made. The barn is a substantial four-bay building.

Inside, much of the original roof structure survives. The roof uses a traditional timber construction known as **clasp-purlin construction**, with curved and angled braces supporting the roof. Some of these braces are particularly similar to those found in the roof of the medieval part of the farmhouse. Next to the barn is a smaller three-bay barn known as a “**chaff-house**”, also timber-framed and also dating from the early 16th Century. Its purpose would have been associated with the preparation and storage of animal feed.



There is an interesting chronological relationship between the barn and the farmhouse. The farmhouse contains a late-15th-century open hall, while the barn is dated to the early 16th century. That potentially suggests that the agricultural establishment was being developed or reorganised around the transition from the medieval period into the Tudor period.

The people who farmed Hall Farm in those days may remain elusive in the medieval records, but the buildings they left behind are remarkably eloquent. The farmhouse and the Barn together reveal that this was already a substantial farming establishment more than five centuries ago

The first farmers we can glimpse

For much of its more recent history Hall Farm was part of the estate of the Wale family, who lived in Shelford Hall, one of the most important landowning families in Little Shelford from the

18th Century onwards. But the people who actually farmed the land were tenants, and identifying them is one of the most intriguing aspects of my research so far.

Our most valuable source is Fanny Wale's *A Record of Shelford Parva*, written in the early twentieth century. Fanny was herself a member of the Wale family and had lived at Hall Farm.

She recorded:

"The names of the tenant farmers who have lived at this farm from remote times..."

Her list includes William Clear, "Gentleman" Howard and then Marking, Dennis and Wiles. The order is significant. Although Fanny does not give dates, it strongly suggests that William Clear and Gentleman Howard belonged to the earlier generations of Hall Farm tenants. Research about these two names revealed the following information. Research will be done in future on Marking, Dennis and Wiles.

Gentleman Howard

"Gentleman" Howard can be identified with the Howard family which is recorded in the Little Shelford parish registers. The Little Shelford registers contain a continuous and substantial Howard presence from 1634 until 1892.

The family includes people described in the registers as gentlemen, publicans, shoemakers and — importantly — farmers. The 1767 burial in Little Shelford of "Henry Howard of Foxton", described in the Bishop's Transcript as a farmer, and the 1769 burial of John Howard, he is also described as a farmer. That makes it likely that Henry or John Howard preceded William Clear at Hall Farm. [Further research of the Sun Fire Office records may confirm this – See "The Clue on the Wall" below].

William Clear – farmer to corn merchant

William Clear is much easier to follow. By about 1830, the Victoria County History records William Clear as farming approximately 400 acres at Hall Farm, making him one of the two largest farmers in Little Shelford. Around seventy agricultural labourers were employed on the village's seven farms at that time. Hall Farm itself was a substantial holding, extending westwards into Hauxton.

William Clear's subsequent career is particularly revealing. He did not remain a farmer. By 1861, he was living in Cambridge and the census describes him as a corn merchant, aged 54. His probate record following his death on 19 April 1861 is even more explicit, describing him as "*formerly of Little Shelford but late of Cambridge, Corn Merchant.*"

This suggests a fascinating transition. Clear had moved from managing a large, labour-intensive agricultural enterprise into the increasingly commercial world of the nineteenth-century grain trade. It would have offered a potentially more prosperous business model, less dependent upon directly managing hundreds of acres and a large agricultural workforce.

In that sense, William Clear's career mirrors the wider transformation of Victorian agriculture: farming was becoming increasingly connected to markets, merchants, transport and urban commerce.

Enclosure changes the landscape

Hall Farm's story cannot be separated from the enclosure of Little Shelford. For centuries farmers had cultivated strips scattered across the parish's three principal open fields. The 1815 enclosure award radically reorganised this system, consolidating land into larger, more manageable holdings. Around 860 acres of open and common land were allotted, with Sir Charles Wale receiving the largest allocation of approximately 315 acres.

For farmers such as William Clear, enclosure fundamentally changed the economics and organisation of farming. Larger consolidated fields made it easier to manage crops, livestock and labour, and strengthened the position of substantial tenant farmers. By 1830 Little Shelford was supporting seven farms, with Hall Farm the largest.

The Corn Laws and the Wale estate

The nineteenth century brought another profound change. The repeal of the Corn Laws in the 1840s exposed British agriculture to greater competition from imported grain. The subsequent agricultural depression hit landowners and tenants alike. For the Wale family, whose considerable Little Shelford estate depended heavily upon agricultural rents, the consequences were serious.

Fanny Wale provides a remarkably personal account of this period. Her father, Colonel Robert Gregory Wale, struggled financially as agricultural rents and income declined. By the 1880s the family's large and relatively recently built, Shelford Hall was let, and Colonel Wale moved with several of his unmarried children, including Fanny Wale, into the "commodious Farm House" at Hall Farm.

The farmhouse therefore briefly changed from being the home of a tenant farmer to the home of the landowner himself. But, by 1890, a tenant could once again be found for Hall Farm and Colonel Wale moved to Ivy Cottage.

The Fordham's

The next major chapter begins in 1899, when John Fordham came from Fen Ditton to take over the tenancy of Hall Farm. The Fordham family's association with the farm would last for more than a century.

The 1901 census shows Joseph Fordham, his wife Susan, Son Ernest and Daughter Fanny in residence at Hall Farm along with a visitor and a servant. In the 1911 census only Joseph, Susan and Fanny were in residence while in the 1921 census the family had grown further, there was Joseph, Violet, Joseph's second wife, a daughter, Ivy and two sons, Edward (aged 3) and Jack (aged 1), as well as another visitor and a housemaid. While their daughter Fanny was married in May 1912, Joseph's first wife Susan died in October 1912.

Later records show that it was Jack Fordham who went on to run Hall Farm after his father died in 1945. Newspaper reports from the 1960's, 70's and 80's record Jack serving on Little Shelford Parish Council, while continuing to farm. He raised concerns about roads, bridges, lighting and, particularly, the condition of the watercourse running through his land. Another newspaper report records a substantial straw fire



involving his farming operation as well as vandalism occurring on the farm (See Haverhill Echo article from January 1980).

Jack Fordham and his second wife "Effie" remained at Hall Farm into the twenty-first century and they are remembered by many current residents of the village. With Effie's death on 30th May 2023, the remarkable Fordham era came to an end after 124 years, from Joseph Fordham's arrival in 1899 to 2023.

A new life for Hall Farm

Hall Farm has now started a new phase, under new ownership, disassociated from the surrounding farm land and soon to start life as a refurbished private residence. The new owner, John Thwaites, will so become the custodian of this important part of village history when he takes residence. He is very much looking forward to living in the village and being part of village life. John writes:

"If people might be interested in the new owner, I'm Professor John Thwaites, Head of the Department of Keyboard Studies, Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. My performing specialism as a classical pianist is Chamber Music with Strings, and my Research Specialism is Historically Informed Performance Practice in Brahms. How my musical life in Cambridge will unfold is yet to be charted! I work extensively with London-based string players, but I shall also be devoting more time to other interests at this point in my career".

I'm sure the village looks forward to welcoming John.

One last thing - the clue on the wall

Perhaps the most exciting part of Hall Farm's history is still waiting to be uncovered.

On the front of the farmhouse, clearly visible from the road, is a Sun Fire Office insurance



plaque, bearing the number 524512. These plaques identified properties insured against fire, and the surviving research suggests that this particular policy dates from around 1786–87.

The plaque could therefore hold the key to a missing chapter in Hall Farm's history. If the original Sun Fire Office policy survives, it may identify the policyholder, the occupier, the buildings insured and their value. Most importantly, it could confirm who was actually occupying Hall Farm in the late eighteenth century.

Hall Farm has given us a remarkable sequence: Gentleman Howard, William Clear, followed by successive tenants, the Wale family's own occupation during the agricultural depression, and finally the Fordham's from 1899 to 2023.

The building itself may be more than five hundred years old. Its barn has witnessed generations of farming. Its walls have seen enclosure, agricultural prosperity and depression, the repeal of the Corn Laws, the rise of commercial agriculture and the decline of the traditional family farm.

And, sitting quietly on the wall facing the High Street, the little Sun Fire Office plaque may still have one more story to tell.

Sources specifically referenced

1. Fanny Lucretia Wale, *A Record of Shelford Parva* – particularly Fanny Wale's list of former Hall Farm tenant farmers and her account of living at Hall Farm during the agricultural depression. The book was written in the early twentieth century and subsequently republished.
2. Historic England– Hall Farm, High Street, Little Shelford – description of the farmhouse as early 15th-century, the early 16th-century barn and later alterations; also reproduces Fanny Wale's Hall Farm notes.
3. Little Shelford History Society – Little Shelford history and High Street – information on Hall Farm, enclosure, agriculture and the arrival of John Fordham from Fen Ditton in 1899.
4. Victoria County History of Cambridgeshire – Little Shelford – agricultural history, enclosure, the Wale estate and the scale of William Clear's farming operation.
5. Susan C. May, *A Study of the Development of the Parish of Little Shelford*, 1983 – research into the Wale estate, Hall Farm, the agricultural depression and the difficulties of letting the farm in the nineteenth century. ([Shelfordhistory](#))
6. 1861 Census – William Clear recorded in Cambridge as a 54-year-old corn merchant, providing evidence of his move from agricultural production into the commercial grain trade. ([Capturing Cambridge](#))
7. William Clear probate, 1861 – records William Clear as formerly of Little Shelford but late of Cambridge, Corn Merchant; died 19 April 1861; estate under £3,000.
8. Little Shelford parish registers – evidence for the presence of the Howard family in the village, supporting—but not proving—the proposed identification of Fanny Wale's "Gentleman" Howard.
9. 1901 Census – Hall Farm – William Rider and family resident at Hall Farm, with the farming operation associated with J. E. Fordham.
10. 1911 Census – Hall Farm – Joseph Edward Fordham and family recorded at Hall Farm.
11. Little Shelford Parish Marriage Register, 26 March 1943 – Jack Colin Fordham, farmer of Little Shelford, son of Joseph Edward Fordham, farmer, married Jean Irene Bell.
12. Little Shelford churchyard inscriptions – Susan Fordham, wife of Joseph E. Fordham.
13. Historic Cambridge newspaper reports, twentieth century – evidence of Jack Fordham's farming activities and his involvement in Little Shelford Parish Council, including reports concerning roads, bridges, watercourses and a major straw fire.
14. London Gazette, 2023 – Estate of Henrietta (Effie) Fordham – records Hall Farm, 50 High Street, Little Shelford as her last address and 30 May 2023 as her date of death.
15. Photographic evidence of Hall Farm – including photographs of the farmhouse, barn and the surviving Sun Fire Office plaque, policy number 524512.