



Reunion Presentation by Craig Albiston  
With assistance of David Barkdull

- Eaton Bray is a rural village in South Bedfordshire at the foot of Dunstable Downs (797 ft). The Downs, the highest point in Bedfordshire, are part of the Chiltern Hills, a 75-mile long chalk escarpment a/k/a the Chilterns (876 ft).
- The village is just 2 miles in size. Current pop. c. 3,000.
- Nearby larger urban centers: Luton (Beds) /Dunstable Area Union has a population c. 230,000. Luton is approximately 32 miles north of London and the Luton London Airport is the 5<sup>th</sup> busiest UK.



Eaton Bray is listed in the Domesday Book (1086) as Eitone, meaning an island settlement. This refers to the abundant water supply from the springs at the foot of the Downs. In fact, Eaton Bray's parish boundary is largely defined by streams. Eaton Bray was famous in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for straw plait and its carnations. The village homes are a mixture of stone, brick, timber and thatch, interspersed by a few modern structures. Some of the homes today are many hundred years old.



The first missionary work in Bedfordshire began early in 1837. The Bedfordshire Conference was created out of the London Conference and existed from 1843-1874. Its members were mostly landless laborers or the rural poor. It is interesting to note that all but about 20 of the nearly 200 missionaries who served in Bedfordshire were English converts or home missionaries. Benjamin Johnson, a well educated resident of Eaton Bray and son of the local Baptist minister, converted to the Church in 1847. He and his wife were the first members in Eaton Bray and did much to build the church. He confirmed most of our Smith ancestors after they were baptized in 1848 and 1849.



The Good Intent Inn in Edlesborough was where LDS services were held in the 1800s. An adjacent pond was where the new members were baptized. This photo was taken by David Barkdull when he visited the area.

The Edlesborough Branch was organized in 1849. Johnson, who was actually born in Northall, Edlesborough parish, moved back to Edlesborough and was called to serve as Branch President. Church records indicate that Johnson helped bring more people to the Church than any other missionary in 19<sup>th</sup> century Buckinghamshire.



David Barkdull also took this photograph of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Tithe Barn in Edlesborough. A number of these old structures have been renovated and made residential. Some historical accounts say that LDS services at Eaton Bray were held in a barn, probably a lot like this structure.



The Dunstable LDS Ward Chapel was built around 2002. The Luton Chapel which is also nearby was built around 1968 (photo by Paul Elvidge).



The church at Eaton Bray dates to 1215, the tower to about 1320. The structure was built of local stone quarried from Totternhoe in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Totternhoe stone is a chalk-like stone which is soft with a grayish tinge, making it easy to carve but not too durable when exposed to the weather.

The cemetery churchyard was closed in 1882 although there is a remembrance garden along High Street which is used as a place for cremated remains. The Church of England parishes of Eaton Bray and Edlesborough were combined in 1975.



The stone church at Eaton Bray replaces an earlier structure which was probably built of daub and wattle with a thatched roof. It is not known for sure if both churches occupy the same site.



St. Mary's churchyard runs along High Street.



In the middle part of the church is a line of pillars which support the pointed arches. This Gothic style of architecture is what you'll find in most English churches from the late 1100s to the Renaissance of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.



Just inside the church is baptismal font which dates to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The ironwork on the door of the church is attributed to Thomas of Leighton who also built the grill around grave of Queen Eleanor (d. 1290), wife of King Edward I, at Westminster Abbey.



This Wesleyan Chapel in Eaton Bray was built in 1795. Five of George Smith and Patience Timson's eight children were baptized here, including George W. Smith. Edward Smith and Ann Burrows, grandparents of George W. and Thomas X, also attended the Methodist Church, at least for a time. Their last four children were christened there on July 20, 1813.

## Straw Plaiting







At beginning of the 19th century, the plaiting industry took hold with the invention of a straw splitter, partly attributable to a member of the Janes family, blacksmiths in Edlesborough. Straw plating or creating the long lengths of plaited straw that would later be made into hats was centered around Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire. A plait market was held in Eaton Bray for most of the 1800s.

References: 'Parishes: Eaton Bray', A History of the County of Bedford: Volume 3 (1912), pp. 369-375. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=42448>. Date accessed: 13 July 2009.

Laszlo L. Grof, Children of Straw (out of print).

According to the 1851 census, almost 15% of the female population was listed as straw plaiters and nearly 60% of all girls. Girls started plaiting at around age five and continued on throughout their lives. Although a predominantly female occupation, men and boys often worked as plaiters: boys, mostly from ages five to fourteen, or until they were required to work full time in agriculture; men, usually to supplement their farm income but there were quite a few males who listed their main occupation as plaiters on the 1851 and 1861 censuses.



The Whipsnade Lion was created in 1933 to advertise the wildlife park. It is about 1 mile north the Village of Dagnall (Edlesborough parish) on the Dunstable Downs. It was covered with netting and turf during the war.





The Aylesbury Vale or Vale of Aylesbury is a large flat area of land mostly located in Buckinghamshire. The Vale is bounded by the Chiltern Hills on the south and Milton Keynes on the north.



Edlesborough St. Mary's is located on a chalk hill in the Vale of Aylesbury. There are about 1800 people who currently live in Edlesborough. Most all of the ancestors of Hannah Sears, mother of Margaret Gurney Smith, were from Edlesborough. The building has been turned over to the Churches Conservation Trust, a C of E charity which preserves redundant/closed buildings of architectural significance.



An old home in Eaton Bray.



The White Horse, a traditional village inn on Eaton Bray's Market Square has been in business at least 300 years. This particular structure dates to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century so we can be pretty sure that our Smith and Gurney ancestors visited this pub for a pint or two.



Located on High Street, The Five Bells undoubtedly takes its name from the five bells which rang in the church tower. Incidentally, a 6<sup>th</sup> bell was added to the original five around 1913; so now the parish tower rings 6 bells, not 5.



Note the thatched roof on the main building at Church Farm.



More Eaton Bray homes (photos taken by Mick and Mel Mugford).





This house, known as Woodside on Moor End, was once owned by Rose Wood, a local duck breeder. Some of the Smith's lived on Moor End (photos by Mick & Mel Mugford).



Poplar Farm was the Eaton Bray home of William E. Wallace from about 1911. The Wallace family owned a large nursery that was founded in 1886. With 18 acres of greenhouses, they were the largest carnation grower in England. There were also miles of prune orchards surrounding the village. The prunes, actually a black plum, were used to produce dye for the hat factories in Luton.





High Street – Eaton Bray. The yellow house (#22 High Street) is where unmarried sisters Nellie and Clara Gurney lived. The house which dates to around the late 17<sup>th</sup> century was the home of William Gurney, blacksmith and postmaster, although the blacksmith shop was closer to the corner. Clara died in 1991 at age 90. Nellie is also deceased.

The red brick structure, Coffee Tavern, was opened in 1901. William Wallace, a local businessman had donated a 1,000 pounds and suggested to the Parish Vicar that there needed to be a place to get the men of the village out of the 16 pubs around the village. When it opened there was a billiard table and comfortable chairs upstairs, with a coke-burning stove for heating. Downstairs there were reading rooms, with coffee available over a stable door in the kitchen. The Parish Council and Youth Group still meet there to this day.



Entering Eaton Bray on High Street from the south. A number of the homes on High Street date to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Photos taken by Paul Elvidge.



The Old House is located at 56 Totternhoe Road in Eaton Bray and built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was refurbished in the 1960s. Photos by Mick & Mel Mugford.



Bellows Mill - Eaton Bray

On the outskirts of Eaton Bray is Bellows Mill. An active mill until 1955, it is now a B&B. Bellows Mill has been occupied by the same family for several generations. The main structure is 17<sup>th</sup> century.



The Grand Union Canal between Leighton Buzzard (Beds) and Ivinghoe (Bucks). The Grand Union connects Buckinghamshire to London. Before the railways, the British canal system was the principal way commerce was moved about throughout the county. Photo taken by David Barkdull.



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Near Ivinghoe and Leighton Buzzard is the Pitstone Windmill, thought to be the oldest windmill in England dating to 1627 and possibly earlier. For hundreds of years, grain from the nearby villages was ground here. It is listed with the National Trust (photo by David Barkdull).

Many thanks to relatives and LDS member Paul Elvidge (not a relation) who contributed photos.