

# Breathing new life into the story of a hidden Wensleydale treasure

**A** FORT to protect the Dales from a French invasion is one of the most unlikely features of a tiny village hidden beside the ancient water meadows of lower Wensleydale.

But this summer visitors to Thornton Steward, near Middleham, will be able to explore this village in detail thanks to a recently-published Heritage Trail and Walks booklet.

Many villagers worked on preparing the booklet, which was illustrated by local artist, Jo Stockdale.

The funding came from the Countryside Agency Local Heritage Initiative, which is delighted with the result.

The booklet not only gives fascinating details about many of the houses in the village, but also describes several walks.

Their classic route, as explored by the local men's walking group, can be accessed from Cover Bridge Inn and the tea rooms at Jervaux.

Copies of the booklet, priced at £2.50, are available at both of these watering holes as well as from the nearby Brymor Ice-cream Parlour, and also at the Queen's Head at Finghall, from which another walk to Thornton Steward can be started.

All the walks are detailed from the village itself, but parking is limited there.

Part of the classic walk goes past St Oswald's, which is said to be the oldest church in Wensleydale. The site has been a place of worship since the seventh century, although the present church is predominantly Norman.

It was built on the foundations of the Anglo-Saxon church by Alan the Red of Brittany, Earl of Richmond and nephew of William the Conqueror.

It was the earl's steward who possibly provided the suffix which

RESIDENTS of Thornton Steward have joined forces to produce a fascinating booklet detailing the rich heritage of their tiny Wensleydale village, as *PIP LAND* reports

distinguished this Thornton from many others.

For some of the earliest history of the village, back to the Domesday Survey of 1086 and even a Saxon land charter of 1041, the villagers have used the research undertaken by Judith Bell. All the other sources are listed at the back of the booklet.

The village has seen many changes over the past 40 years or more, including the loss of its taverns, post office and shop.

These are remembered in a poem written by Janet Harker, who wrote that progress was not always for gain. But there are still very deep links with the past.

"Some houses here have been in the same families for over 100 years," said Julia Waterman, the chairman of the village institute committee. "In the mid 1800s there were ten farms and we still have ten farms."

The booklet was a joint venture between that committee and the parish meeting.

"Almost everybody in the village got involved in the history. We got information from unexpected sources," commented Sue Hird, the institute secretary.

This included the story of the rector's wife, Eleanor Mary Swayne, who was drowned saving two children from the River Ure in 1919. Her tombstone can be found in the churchyard.

Gathering that information from a grandson led to Mrs Hird's mother renewing an old friendship with a member of the family.

An archaeological dig in the churchyard in 1966 revealed the remains of village ancestors dating back to 680.

The church is half a mile down a track through Manor Farm. This is the oldest house in the village, dating back to the seventeenth century.

Compared to that, Captain Horn's fort is a comparatively recent addition. In the early nineteenth century, he held a commission in the Loyal Dales Volunteers, a regiment raised at the time of the Napoleonic threat. He had his very own Fort Horn built in which to house the militia should the French invade England.

It is a castellated house with a central three-storey bay and single-storey wings with Venetian windows. The present owner, it is understood, is already preparing the garden for next year's open day.

This year, in late June, the village held a very successful open gardens day at which the heritage trail was launched. Mrs Waterman and Mrs Hird were delighted at how many villagers participated in this.

The funding which has come into the village in the past few years has helped to draw people together, from the elderly to those with young children, and from the recent arrivals to those whose families have been there for generations.

It all started with a village appraisal which identified St Oswald's and the village institute as places the community saw as important and that there was a desire to learn more about the heritage assets of the area.

Following this they were able to get grants, including one from the Lottery Fund's Awards for All, which enabled them to renovate the institute.

