

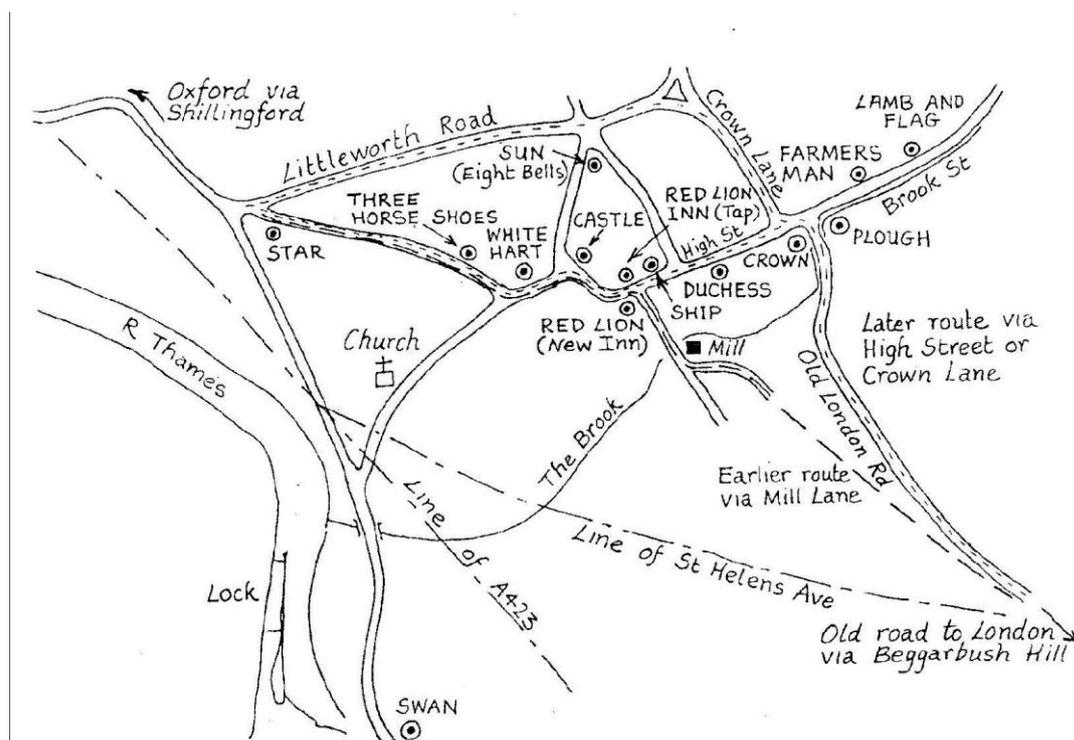
20th CENTURY DEVELOPMENT OF BENSON

From the book **BENSON A Century of Change**
by Janet Burt and Peter Clarke

For most of its history, Benson has been positioned four square on the road from London to the West. Earlier records indicate that the main road from the West went up the present Oxford Road into the village, turned right into Mill Lane and then exited onto what is now the airfield, in the direction of Beggarsbush Hill via the present lane known as Coach Way.

In another era, it appears horses and carts may have gone up Littleworth, turned east into what is now Crown Lane, then again east along old London Road. Benson was a stopover, to change or shoe a horse, replace a wheel in Birmingham Yard, take a meal, or stay for the night en route.

By the start of the nineteenth century, coaches rolled up the Oxford Road, through Castle Square and up the High Street to turn east at The Crown Hotel. Whichever of these routes was used, something of a 'dogleg' was performed for traffic passing through Benson, which was fine as a pause but for people in a hurry, it was a delay in the journey to and from London.



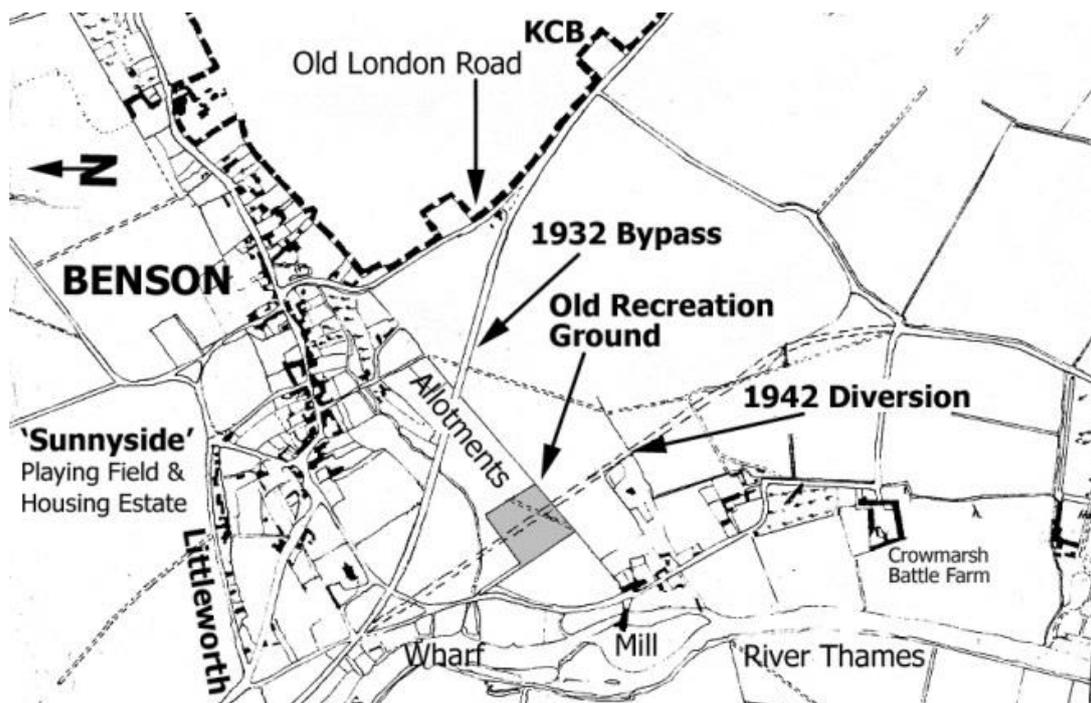
Benson Inns and coach routes

By 1900, with the Great Western Railway depriving the village of much of its through traffic, Benson appears to have become largely an agricultural, albeit vigorous, community. The population was now just over 1000 and truly, ‘everybody knew everybody’. Houses and farms were still widely spread out. Numerous small orchards, consisting of large standard apple and pear trees, provided fruit in due season.

There were some minor developments prior to the First World War: brick cottages were built – numbers 5 to 11 Brook Street in 1905 and Coronation Cottages in Chapel Lane in 1911 are examples. After the First World War, Hale Road houses were built in 1922 and Port Hill from 1922-24, with the mock-Tudor houses completed in 1927.

Alison Reid, in her chapter on the 20th Century in Benson – A Village Through its History [page156], gives a succinct account of the next stage, which simply cannot be bettered:

“In the 1920s, Benson began to regain its role as a stop on the routes between Oxford and Henley. Buses came through from Cheltenham and Oxford and coach excursions and tourism became popular. Traffic brought some prosperity but also accidents, noise and eyesores. Congestion in the village led drivers to seek alternative route, so planners suggested a bypass, which took traffic from the end of Oxford Road to the London Road at the point that is now the end of St Helen’s Avenue. The evening it opened in 1932, villagers stood on their doorsteps in the High Street commenting on the uncanny peace and quiet.”



In 1942, the direct result of a war emergency quietly resulted in the 'change in a millennium' for Benson: extensions to the runway led to the permanent truncation of the London Road. Instead, a new bypass was built; diverting the route through Crowmarsh, and Benson was no longer on the main highway to London. It became a backwater with plenty of space, ripe for postwar expansion.

The Housing Explosion

From the 1950s the massive growth of new houses started in earnest. Bullingdon District Council officially designated Benson 'a growth area' – the population was to be allowed to grow from around 1,400 to some 4,000. More houses were built along the Old London Road. There then began a veritable land grab, exchanging the agricultural open spaces between existing houses for building sites. Today, 40 years on, it is difficult to plot this explosion accurately, but it appears to have gone more or less thus:

1950s "Granny Aldridge's" Gospel Hall demolished and replaced by housing.
Houses built between Crown Lane and Chapel Lane.

1958: St Helen's Crescent houses built. Bungalows on north side of Brook Street, opposite the present Passey's Crescent, and up to The Cedars built. Wychwood Close built.

1958-60: 34 houses in St Helen's Ave.

1961: Old Barn Close built

1962: Cedars estate built – Phase 1 (bungalows intended for the elderly)

1963: College Farm redeveloped.

Four houses along what is now Churchfield Lane (East) built

1960-65: Sands Way & Rumbold's Close built

1965: St Helen's Way main development. (41 houses) and St Helen's Avenue, seven houses between paths built

1966-67: Westfield Road/Blacklands Road development

1968: Free Church's 'Tin Tabernacle' demolished and replaced by two houses

1969: Monarch's Court development begins

1970: A further seven houses in St Helen's Way/Castle Close

1972: St Helen's Avenue: more houses completed to the end of the Avenue. Observatory Close built

1972/3: Churchfield Lane (East) three houses built

1973: One End Lane (six houses) and Church Close built

1977: One End Lane: further four houses built. Westfield Close terraces and Aldridge Close built by SODC for the elderly.

1980s: Millstream Surgery and nearby flats built for pensioners.

1980: Pensfield built on part of the former Churchfield Farm meadow.

Cedars – Phase 2 (those backing on to Braze Lane)

1985: Horseshoe Lane built

1986: Passey Crescent built

1987-89: Chiltern Close built in orchard of Mrs Bloomfield's house

1993: Forge Close development

1993/4: White Hart converted to two blocks of Flats

1995: A large part of the village designated a Conservation Area

1997: Gravel Close built

1999: Saxon Court built on former Rivers site