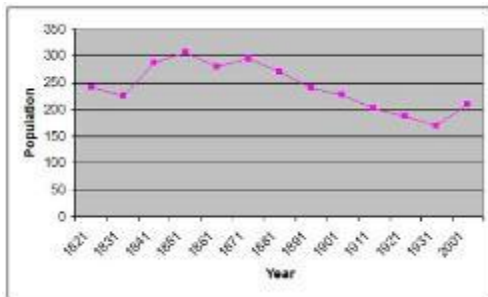


## A Brief History of Avon Dassett

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### Introduction

The history of Avon Dassett is a story of continuity and change. The continuities are perhaps obvious. The population has remained static for the past two hundred years fluctuating between 170 and 306 (see below). The size of the village has changed little from medieval times. Its boundaries have not expanded in comparison with similar communities in the area. Institutions such as the church and parish have retained their status. However, these continuities mask some dramatic changes in the social, economic and cultural life of the community. It is these developments which need to be placed in context to gain a greater understanding of the village of Avon Dassett as it is today.



**Population of Avon Dassett, 1821-2001**

Year	Population
1821	242
1831	226
1841	287
1851	306
1861	280
1871	296
1881	271
1891	241
1901	227
1911	202
1921	188
1931	170
2001	210

### The Early History

Avon Dassett lies on the south-western slopes of the Dassett Hills. The Dassett Hills are an isolated group which form part of the crescent-shaped ridge of hills and escarpments which dissect the country in a line from the south coast to the Humber. The hills, rising from around 400 ft in the south and east to 624 ft above the Anglican church, give the village its character. In the past they yielded both clay for brick making and the characteristic yellow sand stone used extensively in the village houses. At the top of the hill, for many centuries there was a windmill. The assize records of 1284 refer to a man killed when he was struck by the windmill's sails whilst eating his lunch in their shade. Excavations at Avon Hill Quarry have produced many fossils providing evidence of the animal and plant life that existed here before human settlements.



**Marlstone Rock Formation from Avonhill Quarry, Avon Dassett collected by John D. Radley**

The village first appears in the historical record in the Domesday Book. Before the Norman conquest of 1066 the manor was held by three thegns or retainers of the King. In 1086 ownership had been transferred to the Count of Meulan. The manor was rated at 10 hides and included 50 acres of meadow. A hide was a measure of land for tax assessment equating to approximately 120 acres. The Lords of the Manor were not resident however and the manor of Avon Dassett passed through a number of hands between 1086 and 1937. Interestingly, the manor was often held by women who were the widows or daughters of landowners. These exchanges of ownership probably made little impact on the lives of the villagers who continued to grow crops and tend livestock, to pay their dues to the absent lords of the manor and to the church, and to living as a self-supporting community. The landscape still bears evidence of the ridge and furrow strip farming that took place in the fields and meadows around the village.

### **The Early-Modern Village**

Although the manor and church were profitable, many of the villagers, as is common in a subsistence economy, were living on the margins. We only get fleeting glimpses into the lives of the poor. The 1639 Poor Law Returns for Kinton Hundred for example, record that a total of £6 13s 4d was received by a levy of the inhabitants. All of this was spent on the poor including a sum of £2 12s (at 12d per week) for Edward Hands. In another year (undated in the records) £4 10s was given to the poor. In addition to poor relief there were also a number of village charities, some of which survive today. In 1617, the Reverend John James, rector of Avon Dassett left in his will 20s a year in perpetuity to the most needy poor of the parish. The money was mostly allocated to the poor by the minister and churchwardens. In 1754 John Freckleton left land in his will for the use of a school. However, this gift was declared void and instead the parish received the privilege of sending 10 boys and 5 girls to the free school at Farnborough. In 1768 the Reverend Thomas Hindes left £50 for distribution to 'industrious' poor parishioners on Good Friday and St Thomas's Day. When the village was enclosed in 1779, two allotments of land around Church Hill were awarded in trust for the poor. These were given to replace the rights of the villagers to cut furze which had been removed from them by the Enclosure Act. The extent of the village charities demonstrate that the village consisted of a very few wealthy inhabitants, a larger number of the middling sort who paid a sum each year in poor rates to support the poor, and a not insignificant number of poor residents who needed the support of their fellow inhabitants when they grew old or sick or fell into poverty.

### **The Church**

The church, rather than the manor would have been the institution that was most significant for the inhabitants of Avon Dassett. The old church, dedicated to St John the Baptist, dated back to the Norman period.



**St John the Baptist Church c. 1820**

The present church was built on the site of the earlier church in 1868 using only a small portion of the fabric of its predecessor. The church, situated on one of the highest points in the village, is visible for many miles around, its physical presence demonstrating the extensive influence of the institution.



**View of the village from the top of St John the Baptist Church spire (2007)**

One survivor from the ancient church, is the unique effigy of an early thirteenth-century deacon, probably Hugh, Rector of the church who died in c. 1240. The deacon resplendent in his alb, stole and dalmatic is carrying a scroll. At his feet a tortoise is nibbling the foliage.



**The Effigy of Deacon Hugh in Avon Dassett Church**

A fifteenth-century window was also incorporated into the modern church depicting a small figure of a bishop with mitre and staff.

The living, a rectory, was valued at £13 8s. 9d at the time of the Reformation and this had risen to £450 by the mid nineteenth century. The current rectory dates from around the seventeenth century but is probably the descendent of an earlier building on the same site. The right of presenting a nominee to be the rector of Avon Dassett was originally vested in the Lord of the Manor. However by the sixteenth century the two had become separated. Again, a number of women held the right to present their nominees as ministers including Katherine Knapp, Sarah Leigh and Ann Taylor. In the twentieth century the advowson was acquired by the Bishop of Coventry and when the benefice was amalgamated with Farnborough in 1933, the right of presentation remained alternately with the Bishop and the patron of Farnborough. For a short period in the late seventeenth century, the advowson was held by the rabidly anti-Catholic Sir Richard Barker, a physician from London. In 1677 Barker nominated the equally anti-Catholic clergyman, Isaac Tonge to Avon Dassett although Tonge claimed that 'illegal practices' prevented him from taking up the position. Barker also introduced Tonge to Titus Oates who, in 1678, revealed evidence of a Catholic plot against Charles II which was later found to be bogus. A full listing of the clergy of Avon Dassett may be found in [The Clergy of the Church of England Database](#).

### The Civil War

Religious and constitutional conflict came to head in the locality of Avon Dassett a few decades earlier with the first major encounter of the Civil War taking place at Edgehill on October 23rd 1642. On the eve of the battle Charles I held a council of war at Edgecote around ten miles to the east of Edgehill. The area was swarming with both Royalists and Parliamentarians. Neither side knew where the others were as demonstrated by the fact that both Prince Rupert and some Parliamentarian forces tried to set up their sleeping quarters at Wormleighton Manor. The young princes, Charles and James, reputedly spent the night before the battle at Arlescote Manor and the bulk of the Parliamentary forces were quartered in Kineton. Therefore, it seems inconceivable that Avon Dassett itself was untouched by the battle or the fierce religious and political conflicts of the Civil War. The [Battlefields Trust](#) website has more information on the Battle of Edgehill.



**The Eve of the Battle of Edgehill, 1642  
(Charles Landseer) Walker Art Gallery,  
Liverpool**

### The Nineteenth Century

We get our first real insights into the lives of the majority of the population of Avon Dassett from the nineteenth-century censuses. In addition to the size of the population, the censuses reveal a great deal about economic, social and cultural life in the village after 1841. For example, although the population has remained relatively constant from the early nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries there are around double the number of households today with half the number of occupants.

### Number and Size of Households, 1841-2001

Year	Average Household Size	Number of Households

1841	5.42	53
1851	4.94	62
1861	4.52	62
1881	4.44	61
1891	4.73	51
1901	4.63	49
2001	2.26	93

An analysis of the occupations of the adult population also reveals that the nineteenth century was a century of change in the village. In 1841 around sixty per cent of the population were engaged in agriculture as labourers, famers, millers, shepherds, carters and so on. This figure had halved by 1901. The sector to show the largest rise in the nineteenth century was the Landed or Professional category. This demonstrates that there was a move away from farming towards the village providing residences for the leisured classes. For example, Avon Carrow and Orchard Lodge were built before 1900.

The population was far from static during the period with a turnover of around a third between each census. There were dominant village families but these too show great fluctuations in numbers. The most dramatic are the Hawtins and the Marshalls. There were 22 Hawtins and 40 Marshalls in the village in 1861 but these numbers had fallen to 0 and 7 by 1901.

### Turnover of Families between 1841 and 1901.

Surname	1841	1851	1861	1881	1891	1901
Abbotts	6	5	10	13	6	2
Barnes	15	13	12	11	4	3
Bayless	10	6	6	5	2	-
Bloxham	12	11	1	3	10	9
Cooper	28	25	14	29	24	35
Gardner	19	18	12	11	7	3
Hawtin	10	19	22	6	1	-
Marshall	11	14	11	2	1	-
Mason	5	18	15	18	14	10

Mullis	16	31	40	30	10	7
Padbury	13	8	9	7	8	3
Smith	23	14	9	19	11	7
Spike	7	7	9	21	21	19

Perhaps the most important change in the character of the village was the arrival of the Catholic Church, Presbytery and Convent which were built in the 1850s. These institutions were financed by Joseph Knight, a nurseryman from Lancashire who had made his fortune in Chelsea in the early nineteenth century. Knight also established the Italian-influenced Bitham House and planted the surrounding parkland with exotic trees including early specimens of monkey puzzles and giant redwoods. The convent was providing education for fifteen children ranging in age from 3-19 in 1901.

A number of Catholic families were attracted to live in the village in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because of the church and convent. For example, the advert for the sale of Orchard Lodge in 1951 included the fact that there was a Catholic Church in the village. Important Catholic residents in the twentieth century included Professor de Zulueta; Lady Victoria de Trafford and the Worrall family.

### **The Twentieth Century**

In the twentieth century, the village experienced both financial and political scandals. In 1922 a Captain Owen Peel and his wife Violet were summonsed to appear at Bow Street Court for obtaining money via forged telegrams. Peel and his wife had arrived in Avon Dassett in the autumn of 1921 and rented one of the large houses in the village. On 8th October they called at Avon Dassett Post Office where Mrs Peel was expecting a call from London. During this call Captain Peel submitted 45 telegrams to be dispatched to bookmakers placing a bet on Paragon who was running in the 2.45 at Kempton Park. He asked the post office clerk to record a time of 2.45 on the telegrams even though they were dispatched at around 3pm. It was alleged that his wife learnt of the winner of the race from her caller in London and passed on this information to her husband. Peel was found guilty under the Forgery Act of 1913 and the Post Office Protection Act of 1884 and sentenced to 12 months. His wife was acquitted on the grounds that she was subject to coercion by her husband. The trial made much of the fact that this was a crime that could only have taken place in a village such as Avon Dassett. The prosecuting counsel noted 'If the country were searched it would be difficult to find a place more ideal for carrying out a fraud of this kind.' It was argued that the post office clerks were simple people who agreed to put an earlier time on the telegrams because of their deference to the Peels who were living in one of the largest houses in the village.



*Times* report of the Avon Dassett fraud trial, February 16 1922

In 1963 Avon Dassett was again embroiled in scandal when the press besieged the village searching for John Profumo whose family home was Avon Carrow. The Profumo affair a heady mix of sex, intelligence secrets, and the aristocracy, centred on the MP for Stratford-on-Avon who was forced to resign in disgrace. When the affair became public journalists offered local people £100 to reveal the whereabouts of Profumo. In fact, he had escaped from Avon Carrow via The Limes and spent thirteen days hiding at his friend, Air Commodore Victor Willis's home in Radway.



**Mr and Mrs John Profumo**

## War

Even a small community like Avon Dassett was profoundly affected by war in the twentieth century. In the 1901 census, two families are headed by the wives of soldiers fighting in the Boer War. The village war memorial also records the deaths of four men who lost their lives in the 1914-18 and 1939-45 conflicts. Ernest Bloxham of Avon Dassett village, Herbert Cooper of Back Lane and Thomas Weld MC of Orchard Lodge died in World War I and James Worrall of Bitham Hall died in the Far East in World War II.



**Avon Dassett War Memorial**

## Conclusion

The social and economic structure of the village also was subject to profound change in the twentieth century. In particular, household size was drastically diminished whilst the number of households increased. In part, this was due to the splitting up of large residencies to form more household units. Large houses and farms were split up as the impact of the decline in agriculture and the social effects of the wars were felt in the village. For example, in 1947 Mr William Worrall announced a scheme for converting Avon Carrow into a residential and social centre for country people. Although his plans for a dance hall, cinema, tennis court, croquet lawn, library, cricket and football grounds did not come to fruition Avon Carrow was indeed converted into a number of separate dwellings. Bitham Hall was also divided into apartments in the 1980s.



**Avon Carrow today**

The church too suffered a decline in its status. The role as rector of Avon Dassett was first shared with that of Farnborough and then Fenny Compton. On 11<sup>th</sup> May 1983 the Church Commissioners finally declared the parish church of Avon Dassett redundant and today it remains empty used only occasionally for concerts or village Christmas gatherings. Today the village is dominated by those born outside the area. This is in stark contrast to the position in the nineteenth century when fifty to sixty per cent of the population were born in Avon Dassett with a further sizeable percentage coming from the surrounding villages. However in spite of witnessing extensive change, the village retains its strong sense of community. Notwithstanding its small size it boasts a Men's Club, Gardening Club and Fete Committee. The pub, the playground and the Reading Room are also important institutions for different sectors of the community. Although factors such as travel, communications, employment, and education encourage us to make links further and further afield, it is hoped that the current residents of Avon Dassett will also look inwards and continue to celebrate the history and recognise the unique identity of the village community.