

CASTLE RISING, A “CLOSED” OR ESTATE VILLAGE

The character of any village depends on many factors, its age, location, economy, history and underlying geology, but to understand Castle Rising village, either today or in the past, one has to consider the fact that it has been owned as a single estate for most of its documented history. For

five hundred years the estate has been mainly in the ownership of one of several branches of the Howard family. Until the early twentieth century, the owners have been absentee landlords who managed the estate through an agent, and operated it as a business, albeit often taking considerable personal interest in its welfare and success. For the most part they owned the farms, the mills and the cottages and it was they who decided how it should develop.

The term ‘closed village’ was coined by the Poor Law Commissioners in 1834 to identify those villages with land owned by one or two families who sought to minimise their poor rates by excluding poor immigrants from obtaining settlement rights. Population size was controlled by building only enough housing for the workforce needed on the estate and its tenanted farms. When more labour was needed, for example during harvest, it could be obtained from nearby ‘open’ villages.

A classic Victorian “closed village” would have neat cottages in good repair and with well kept gardens, The tenanted farms and farm buildings were well constructed but rarely had tied cottages. Apart from reducing a parish’s obligation to the poor, the advantages to a landlord of managing a closed village included the likelihood of attracting a good class of tenant farmers and labourers. It was fashionable then to be seen to be looking after the poor and an estate of pretty, countrified cottages with attractive dormer windows and fancy chimney stacks, provided a showpiece to reflect the generosity and civility of the landlord. Taken to its extreme, some wealthy landowners completely rebuilt their estate villages, as for example at Sandringham and Houghton, but in Castle Rising it was enough to maintain the appearance of an estate of attractive cottages for tenants seen to be living ‘good honest rural’ lives.



Numbers 5-7 Lynn Road, front and back views.

Often the size and design of a house reflected the status of the tenant but the estates were not charities but essentially working environments, managed primarily for profit. The cottages were not nearly as grand at the back or in the interior as their frontage might indicate. Many were damp, draughty, cold, small and crowded. The 1851 Census shows that **twenty-two** people lived in three adjacent cottages in Lynn Road, originally built with two rooms each. They currently house **three!** Only one had two bedrooms, shared by Robert Marsters, a farm labourer, his wife and their eight children between the ages of eight and twenty-one. In another Thomas Pidgeon, a wheelwright, his wife and four children somehow managed to share their one bed-roomed home with two elderly lodgers. Many lacked piped water or sanitation well into the late twentieth century.

In other respects too, Victorian Castle Rising was a typically closed village. The school, a very early one for the area, was built by the Howards who with the rector contributed to the schoolmaster's salary. It was probably better endowed than schools in open villages where voluntary subscriptions were usually unreliable and less generous. There was generally less development. Apart from farm workers there were blacksmiths, wheelwrights, millers, gamekeepers, shop keepers, inn keepers, shoemakers and dressmakers, necessary for the working of the estate and the village. The only place of worship was the Anglican Church supported by the Howard family who had the advowson or right to nominate the rector. Only when the land owners were themselves non-conformists did a closed village possibly entertain other places of worship.

Conditions in Victorian "open villages" were very different from those of closed villages such as Castle Rising. They were more populous having a high density of small, poorly built, individually owned properties erected by greedy speculators, impecunious families unable to build well or maintain their properties or by squatters on waste land. In many places conditions were overcrowded, unhealthy and squalid. However they did have a plentiful labour supply and the spirit of entrepreneurship was not repressed and there were many more small scale farmers, craftsmen and workers in rural industries. There were also more shops and public houses. Whereas the 'closed' villages might be the home of gamekeepers, it was more usual to find poachers in 'open' villages!

Some of the advantages of living in a closed village are obvious. For most of its inhabitants, Castle Rising would have provided a relatively comfortable and healthy place to live by the standards of their time. We know from correspondence between the Lords and their agents that help was given to the needy in the form of food allocation or clothing and shoes. As well as the school, the Howards provided the village with the Reading Rooms, supplied it what was no doubt good wholesome reading matter. And yet, partly because of this, there is no communally owned village hall.



Castle Rising Reading Rooms, built in 1898

Material conditions however are not everything and there were other more subtle differences between open and closed villages. A situation where the bulk of the population is employed by the estate or its tenant farmers, and where most people live in an estate house, creates an atmosphere of unhealthy deference and subservience which is often accompanied by a feeling of loss of independence and dignity. Many of the inhabitants of open villages on the other hand, despite their poorer living conditions and high Poor Rate, valued their freedoms and it was in these places that radicalism, political, social and religious, thrived.

Even today, Castle Rising shows features of a closed village. Lord Howard, still the major landowner lives in the village, and employs a number of the inhabitants. It is his wish that the village maintains its quaint appearance and avoids becoming part of sub-urban King's Lynn. Owning much of the land and with covenants in the deeds of former estate land, he is largely able to do so. The two C20th housing estates are unobtrusive and the village has remained small and attractive, but at a certain cost. The community has a slower rate of growth and fewer young people than neighbouring villages but one which is unfortunately incapable of supporting many amenities. Employment opportunities are limited, the school closed in 1962, and the Post Office and village shop in 2008. The pub remains.