

COLD ASTON PARISH PLAN

MARCH 2014

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1. Cold Aston Parish



Cold Aston is a typical North Cotswold rural parish. Most of the land is agricultural, bounded by stone walls. There are 2 main settlements, Cold Aston village consisting mainly of stone built houses, and Whiteshoots with more varied housing. There are also some outlying houses generally farm-related in origin. The population in the 2011 census was 256.

Community facilities include a Church, Village Hall, Primary School and Pub. There is a Doctors' Surgery and Community Hospital within easy range by car. Parish employment is in agriculture, a motor workshop, the school, the pub and some part time services. Most workers commute in or out, so road infrastructure is crucial.

Horse activities, walking and shooting are popular recreations, and the school has a small playing field. Various indoor events take place in the Village Hall and there is a popular annual Village Fayre. Overall there is good community participation.

2. History of the Parish

Cold Aston (alternately known as Aston Blank) is a parish originally of 2,360 acres (966 hectares), built on a medieval road junction linking Oxford to the Severn Valley. Its northern boundary is the River Windrush, its eastern the Fosseway, its southern the upper waters of Sherborne Brook and its western the field boundaries dividing Cold Aston from Notgrove; these boundaries have remained almost unchanged for roughly 1,000 years. The parish includes Little Aston, now a farmhouse and two cottages but once a separate village.

The soil here is mostly shallow and stony, exposed to cold winds and heavy snowfalls with few ancient trees or hedges: in 1986 only 45 acres of woodland were recorded. Local place names reflect this poverty – Dryground, Starveall, Folly Farm, Clearcupboard. Ice and snow drifts close two of the three access roads most winters.



Early records show extensive arable farming in the 10th and 11th centuries in conjunction with sheep rearing. There was common grazing and hay meadows along the valleys.

In the early 10th century the Abbot of Worcester gave land to build a church, the earliest written record of which is dated 1220, and a vicar was appointed in 1289. However the signs of modest prosperity changed after 1300; in the 1270-80s there were killer outbreaks of sheep scab, unusually heavy royal tax demands, bitterly cold winters and consequent disastrous harvests in 1315-17. The Black Death in 1347 was the final blow and there was an almost universal decline in population, farm livestock and cultivation in the Cotswolds. Little Aston Village was abandoned.



Prosperity returned after 100 years as the richer villagers reared sheep and sold their fleeces at the great annual wool fairs at Stow and Northleach. Their landless neighbours wove coarse woollen cloth, and processed it in the village fulling mills. Two millponds and numerous sheep dips still exist. The village owes its elegant church tower, nave parapets and Perpendicular windows, built c. 1520, to the wool boom of the 15th and 16th centuries.

However 15 years later Henry VIII's systematic plundering of the Church's wealth had consequences in Cold Aston, leading to the mutilation of statues, demolition of the stone altar, and the defacing of the Easter sepulchre in the church.

We know from the only two monuments in the church of the gratitude of parishioners for survival in the Civil War which raged around the village at the time of the Battle of Stow-on-the-Wold in 1646.

The parish was enclosed by private act of Parliament in 1796 and the landscape and social structure of the village changed out of recognition. Out went the medieval yardlands and common grazing rights; in their place came fewer and larger farms of stone-walled fields, new barns and roads. The population changed from being independent cultivators to paid farm labourers, and in 1851 six farms employed 55 of them.

Within a very short time the whole community benefited, life expectancy rose and the population reached its record height of 360. In 1876 the church was restored, schooling became available to parish children through a charity fund, and a school was built. The first pub, The Keepers Arms, was opened in 1852, and the second, The Plough, ten years later on the village green. By 1861 the inhabitants included a blacksmith, several wheelwrights and carpenters, a baker, shoemaker, tailor, several stonemasons and slaters, a woodcutter and a gamekeeper. Allotments reaching from the church to the Longbrook stream were cultivated, with the encouragement of the parson. The parish diet improved.

The parish lost 10 men in the First World War, only 1 in the Second, and suffered as the entire countryside did from the agricultural depression between the wars, with its low wages and lack of capital to fund improvements and keep cottages and buildings in good repair. Since then the village has seen many changes, the most notable being the near disappearance of the farm labourer due to mechanisation and contract farming. There are now no village shops, only one pub and no resident parson. The present inhabitants work in many and varied local businesses or from home: the school flourishes, the pub has been completely renovated and there is a weekly church service. Cold Aston continues to have a lively sense of community as a parish after a thousand years of existence.

3. Parish Plan Objectives and Development Process

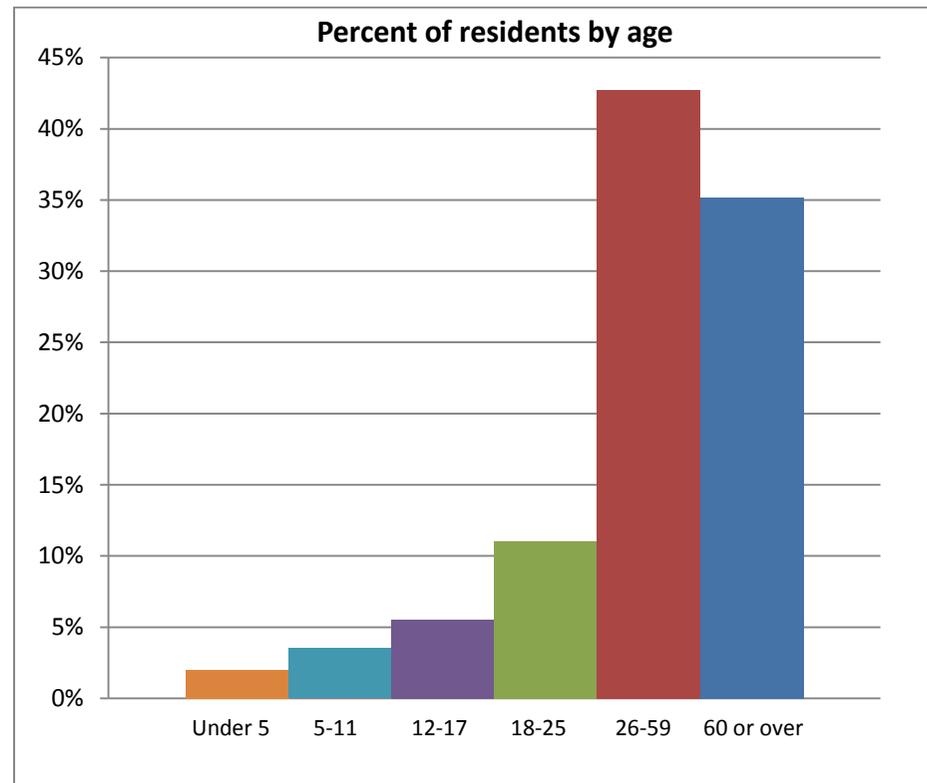
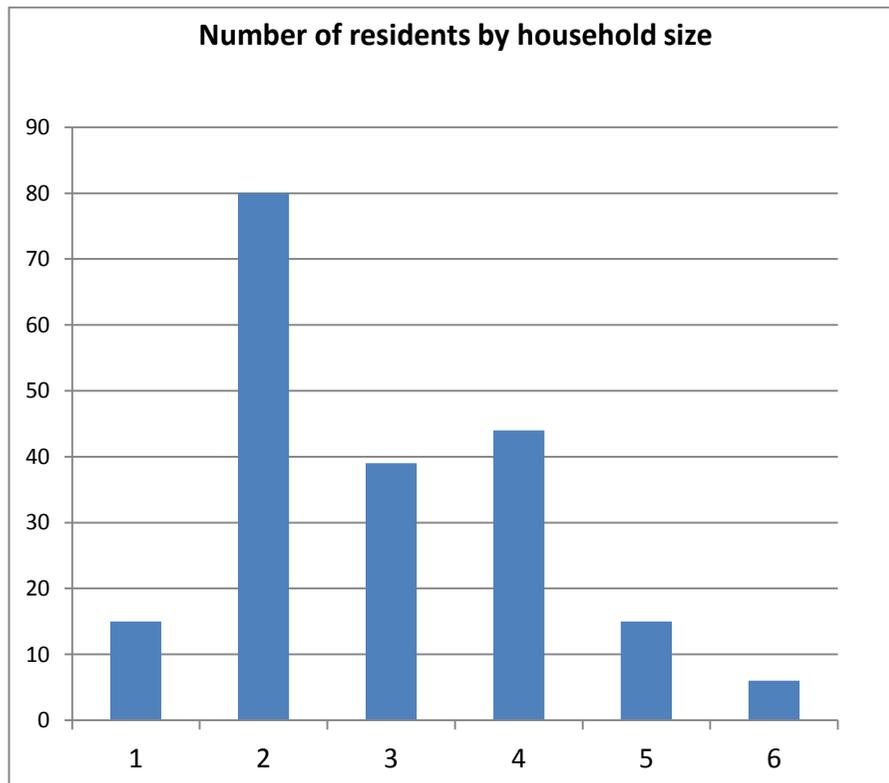
The Parish Plan is an opportunity for the community of Cold Aston Parish to establish and set down a shared view on matters and issues that are important to the parish. The plan will then provide a reference point for external agencies whose decisions may impinge on the parish; and include action plans to meet shared community objectives.

A working group which included individuals from across the parish was established, and potential topics and issues were identified for assessment. A questionnaire was produced and distributed to all homes in the parish, and then collected and collated. The results were presented and discussed in a parish meeting and the agreed conclusions were then taken forward for inclusion in this plan.

4. Parish Demography and Attitudes

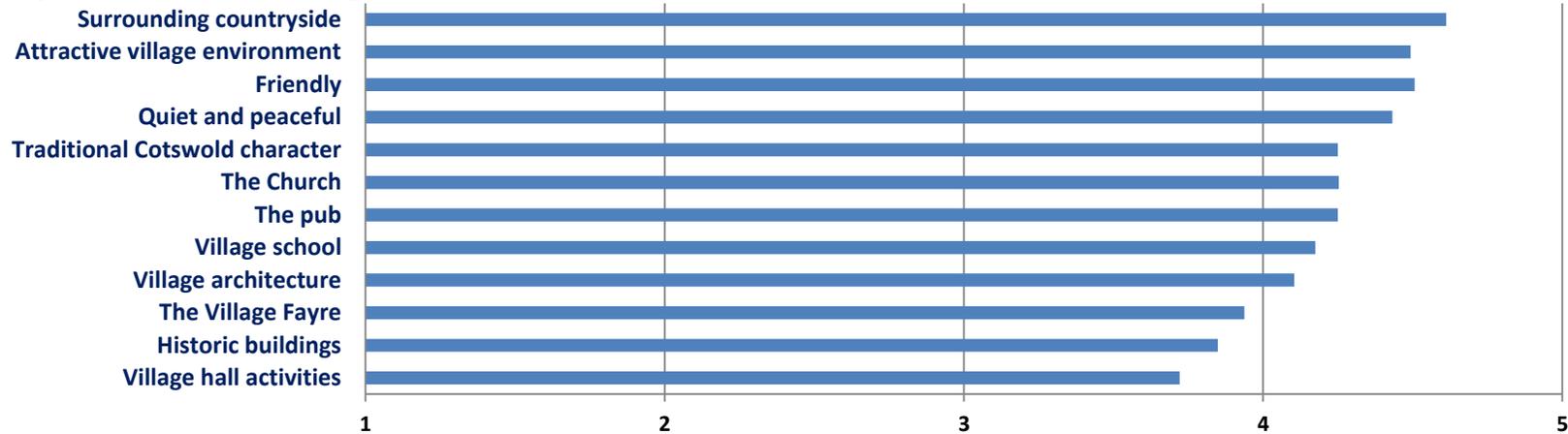
The parish questionnaire was returned by 83 households, representing 199 residents.

Amongst these 53% live in households of 3 or more, 65% are under 60 and 22% under 25.



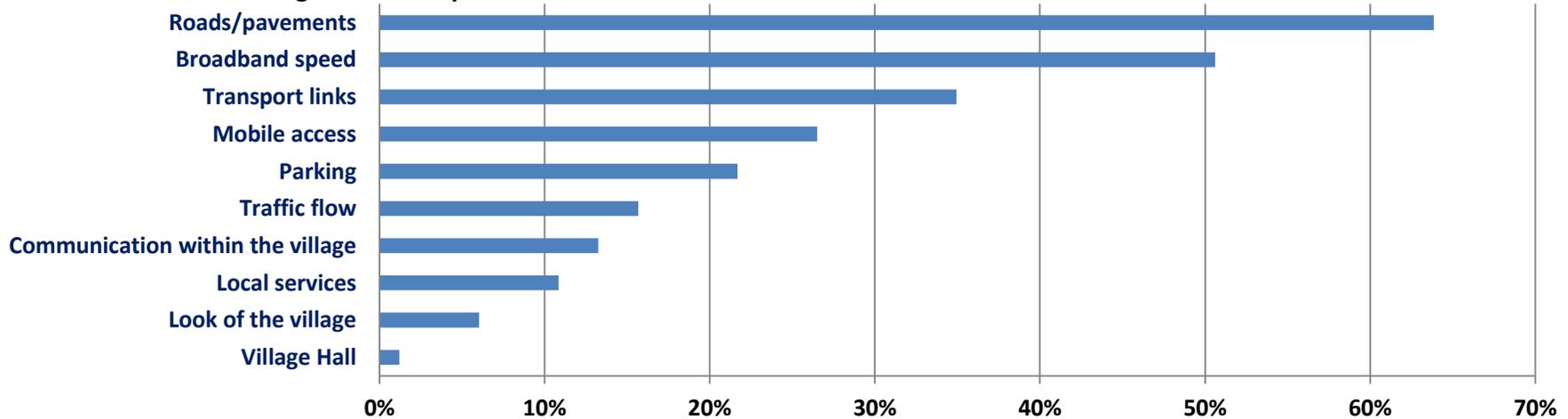
The surrounding countryside, attractive village environment, friendliness and quiet and peaceful character were rated highly as being of importance to Cold Aston.

How important are the following to Cold Aston? (1 is not at all, 5 is very)



Almost two thirds of residents who responded felt that roads and pavements in the parish were unsatisfactory, over half felt that broadband speeds could be improved and a third wanted better transport links.

Which of the following could be improved?



The parish's opinion was sought on a number of specific topics. Of these the suggestion to stop referring to Aston Blank as an alternative name for the parish was rejected by 47% to 34%, with 19% not expressing a preference. The parish rejected the introduction of street lighting by a factor of 16 to 1 (80% no, 5% yes), and a majority, 65%, felt that access and signposting for footpaths was adequate.

57% were not in favour of the parish planning for additional housing, and 18% did not express an opinion. However a quarter were in favour, with most suggesting affordable housing or housing for 'locals', built on Notgrove Road or Bang Up Lane. Similarly, 58% were against additional small businesses in the parish, with 15% not expressing an opinion. However 27% were in favour and suggested small multi-purpose facilities could be established on Bang Up Lane, or in existing farm buildings.

Over 90% of households have a vehicle, with around two-thirds having two cars or more. Whilst almost half were happy with current traffic management in the village itself, a third were not; the school run, and speeding were the most mentioned areas of concern. There were also concerns expressed by around a quarter about the safety of traffic conditions on the A429 at Whiteshoots, and 19% expressed similar concerns about the A436.

The survey underlined the importance of the Parish Newsletter as the most frequent source of information about Cold Aston, with Village Hall and Parish Council emails also a regular source. Around a quarter attend activities at the Village Hall on a monthly basis. It also identified strong support for the pub, with over 90% believing it will be an asset to the village although a number of residents highlighted the need for careful management of parking.

5. Environment

Background

Our parish lies in the Cotswold Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and within the parish we have remnants of the special habitat/landscape types in the Gloucestershire biodiversity action plan. Predominant among these is wildflower-rich unimproved grassland of the high Cotswolds, but there are also water meadows alongside streams and the river Windrush, dry valleys and winterbournes, ancient woodlands and hedgerows and wide verges alongside the historic droving roads.

The farming and forestry heritage of the area is still reflected in the local landscape although land management practices have changed vastly in the last 60 years. Seven small mixed farms in the parish, with flocks of hundreds of sheep, grazing beef cattle, two dairy herds, pigs and poultry, have been replaced by larger arable units. We still have some sheep but with farm livestock largely gone, dewponds and other water supplies have lost their main purpose.

The character of the Cotswolds is still defined by stone built houses and fields enclosed by drystone walls. A well-built wall of new stone may last for 60 years but they have become prohibitively expensive. Patching of old walls can slow the process of loss to some extent but it seems unlikely that many drystone walls will be left in the wider landscape in 50 years' time.



Historically the majority of residents in the parish relied on the land for their livelihood. For many people today the land is appreciated for leisure activities with footpaths and bridleways well used. Changes to resident's lifestyles have led to more vehicle usage which has increased pressure on highways.

The Present

These changes have meant that whilst the rural environment of the parish has all the appearances of good health - it is still lush and green – our soil, plant and animal life have suffered in ways not immediately visible. Soil characteristics are changing – much of the land now lies in designated nitrogen-sensitive areas and land managers have to follow soil protection requirements.

For our wildlife the picture overall is one of falling populations and declining diversity. Since 1948 the parish has lost important wildflowers. Relatively common species have declined greatly and even formerly abundant species are met less frequently. Recent local studies have identified low levels of wild bees and moths and the cuckoo has not bred in the parish for over eight years. Although some small animal wildlife may be declining, various species of deer have steadily increased in numbers and together with grey squirrels are a serious threat to trees and the establishment of new plantations. Several hardwood favourites, including Oak and Ash are at risk from relatively new diseases. The evidence that badgers, infected with TB, cause serious losses of cattle has been widely accepted, though a satisfactory solution remains controversial.

The Local Plan and the Parish Environment

The Parish questionnaire of 2013 demonstrated conclusively that a large majority of parishioners place great store by the health and appearance of their rural environment. The surrounding countryside was ranked most important by respondents, ahead even of the village environment and its facilities. Of the natural environment wildlife (meaning wild birds and mammals) was ranked first (equal with trees and walks) and roadside wild flowers and roadside verges were ranked sixth and eighth respectively, out of ten categories.

The Importance of Flowers

Although roadside wild flowers ranked only sixth in importance for respondents they are vital for our wildlife. Birds and mammals rely on insects which in turn rely on flowers in order to complete their life cycle. It is not just the number of flowers but also their variety that is important in order to provide sustenance to a broad range of insects.

Generally, high diversity means that all the niches available within habitats are filled by species. Conversely, low diversity means that some niches will be unfilled allowing easier ingress of pests, disease and alien species into the environment.

The Future

Some parishioners have already addressed these concerns about diversity. Several farmers have adopted `agri-environmental` schemes but they all, or mostly all, depend on subsidy so their long term existence is not guaranteed. Game rearing may create temporary habitat for native species too. Other parishioners now manage their gardens and also the verges outside their homes for wildlife.

Our public spaces, particularly our roadside verges offer perhaps the best chance for the long term survival of many wild species. Not only do they provide a refuge, they also can act as wildlife corridors along which species can migrate to recolonise others areas naturally. The village allotment land, which includes a rare quarry face and is home to lizards, can act in a similar manner. Many churchyards are managed for wildlife; our own has the rare whiskered bat and owls.

In 2008 the roadside verges of the parish were surveyed and registered by the Parish Council. Protection measures were introduced in three pilot locations outside the village, and one within, to make County Council cutting regimes appropriate to enhance wildflowers, and most wildflowers have increased in abundance in these areas. We are confident that enlightened management of cutting times, perhaps combined with re-seeding and re-planting will have an enormous impact on wild flowers and wildlife in general.

Unfortunately verges are often damaged by the weight of traffic, particularly in winter when the ground is soft. Although it must be acknowledged that some destructive disturbance is good for the establishment of many native species, allowing as it does the germination of seed in the absence of competitors, the repeated damage of verges on narrow sections of road and sharp corners must be addressed.

The Measurement of Progress - Indicator Species

Specific wildflowers such as cowslips and meadow cranesbill are good indicators of the health of our grassland habitats. Populations of all these were ravaged by herbicide treatment of verges and pastures in the 1960s but have slowly been making a comeback, particularly in the last few years as mowing regimes have been cut back due to the economic climate. With an enlightened mowing regime on verges they can return. On the River Windrush, success would be indicated by the return of lamprey. Generally, the return of the cuckoo to the parish would tell us if the population of small birds was recovering, itself a reflection of more insect life and ultimately of the wellbeing of our local flora.

6. Conclusion and Action Plans

The main conclusion is that parishioners seek to retain the status quo with little change. The Parish does not have obviously suitable sites for housing development that are within the current planning guidelines, nor job opportunities within the parish for a larger population.

Any increase in traffic load would add to the already congested road and lane network which even now has a negative economic cost. This negative is likely to worsen with the extra houses being planned for Bourton-on-the-Water, Upper Rissington, Moreton-in-Marsh and Northleach.

The following action plans are proposed:

1. Continue to work with Gloucestershire County Council to improve the poor state of roads.
2. Encourage lobbying for improvement in broadband speeds and mobile telephone coverage.
3. Encourage the pub to minimise parking disruption in the village.
4. Seek solutions to the serious damage to some verges in the village.
5. Continue to monitor and prevent excess speeding through the village and on main roads, and seek out and implement ideas to reduce traffic levels eg car sharing, bulk oil buying.
6. Protect and foster the natural habitat and wildlife of the parish.
7. Support and encourage a wide range of activities in the Village Hall, Church and School, and events in which the whole village can participate, e.g. Harvest Lunch, Monthly Coffee Morning, Village Fayre, Carol singing etc
8. Maintain the current high levels of cooperation with the school to minimise the impact of school run congestion.
9. The Parish Council to review the Parish Plan and these action plans on a regular basis.