

How and why have population size, land use and employment changed in Edlesborough and Eaton Bray over time?

by

David Prÿs-Jones (ca 2000)

Preface

This report was written by my elder son, David, as an 'A' level project in about the year 2000 and is almost entirely unchanged from how it appeared then. It provides an overview of aspects of the history of the two adjacent villages and, as such, could act as a departure point for various more focused and in-depth studies. Note that the website referenced on p. 5 no longer exists.

Robert Prÿs-Jones

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Synopsis

Edlesborough and Eaton Bray are adjacent large villages which lie within a few miles of the major conurbation of Luton/Dunstable. Having lived in one of them for most of my childhood, my interest has grown regarding the background to their development. In particular, there have clearly been changes in population size, land use and employment opportunities which have interacted to produce their current appearance. This study is concerned with examining the nature of these changes and relating them to the hypothesis that the villages have evolved from being predominantly agricultural communities of people employed locally into largely dormitory populations of people working elsewhere.

The data required for my analysis came mainly from three sources: firstly, the U. K. census statistics covering the period 1801 to 1991, which provided information on both population changes and employment; secondly, a set of Ordnance Survey maps spanning five time periods between 1900 and 1995, which provided information on changes in village morphology and land use; and, thirdly, a questionnaire put to local residents examining where they work and how they undertake any necessary travel. These were then integrated with information derived from council planning documents and other relevant literature.

The analysis showed that after reaching a peak around 1870, the population of the villages declined sharply till the end of the century and more gradually thereafter until stabilising in the late 1920s. This was caused by agricultural depression initially driving many people away, but then being partially offset both by increasing village-based employment opportunities and, from the 1920s, by the developing possibility of commuting to work by bus. Despite the successive demise of commercial fruit-growing, nursery gardening and motor parts businesses, the villages have grown rapidly since the 1950s, with large housing estates covering former orchards and continued pressure for further house building. This has entirely resulted from a huge growth in commuting, which has in turn depended on almost ubiquitous ownership and usage of cars.

Introduction

Edlesborough and Eaton Bray are adjacent large villages within Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire respectively, which abut against each other across the small river Ouzel which forms the county boundary at this point. They lie just beyond the northern edge of the Chiltern Hills, where the well-drained chalk and flint soils of the higher ground give way to a lower lying region of more poorly draining shallow clay vales (Reed 1979). They are situated within a predominantly agricultural district and have a very rural appearance, but they are less than five miles from the towns of Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard, within ten miles of the much larger urban centre of Luton (Figure 1) and only about forty miles from London.

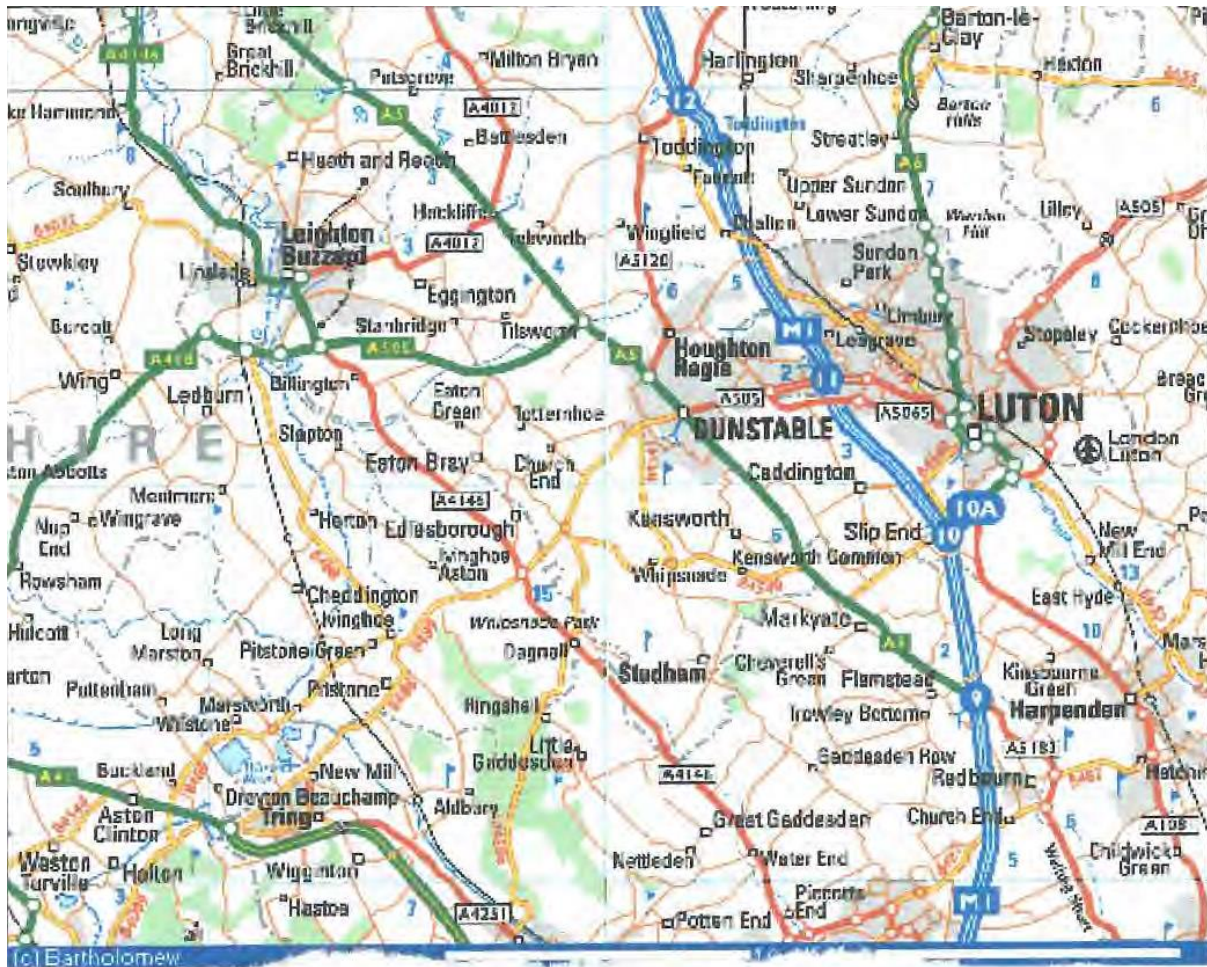


Figure 1. The locational context of Edlesborough and Eaton Bray.

Having lived in Edlesborough since 1987, my interest had been aroused regarding how the village and the lives of its inhabitants had changed over time, which is my reason for choosing to do this project. However, it soon became apparent that it would not make sense to study Edlesborough without also including Eaton Bray, as the two villages have grown physically together so that they function as a single unit (Figure 2). In addition, despite an initial intention to consider only the past hundred years, my research revealed unexpected changes in population during the 19th century whose causes provided a relevant background to understanding developments occurring subsequently.

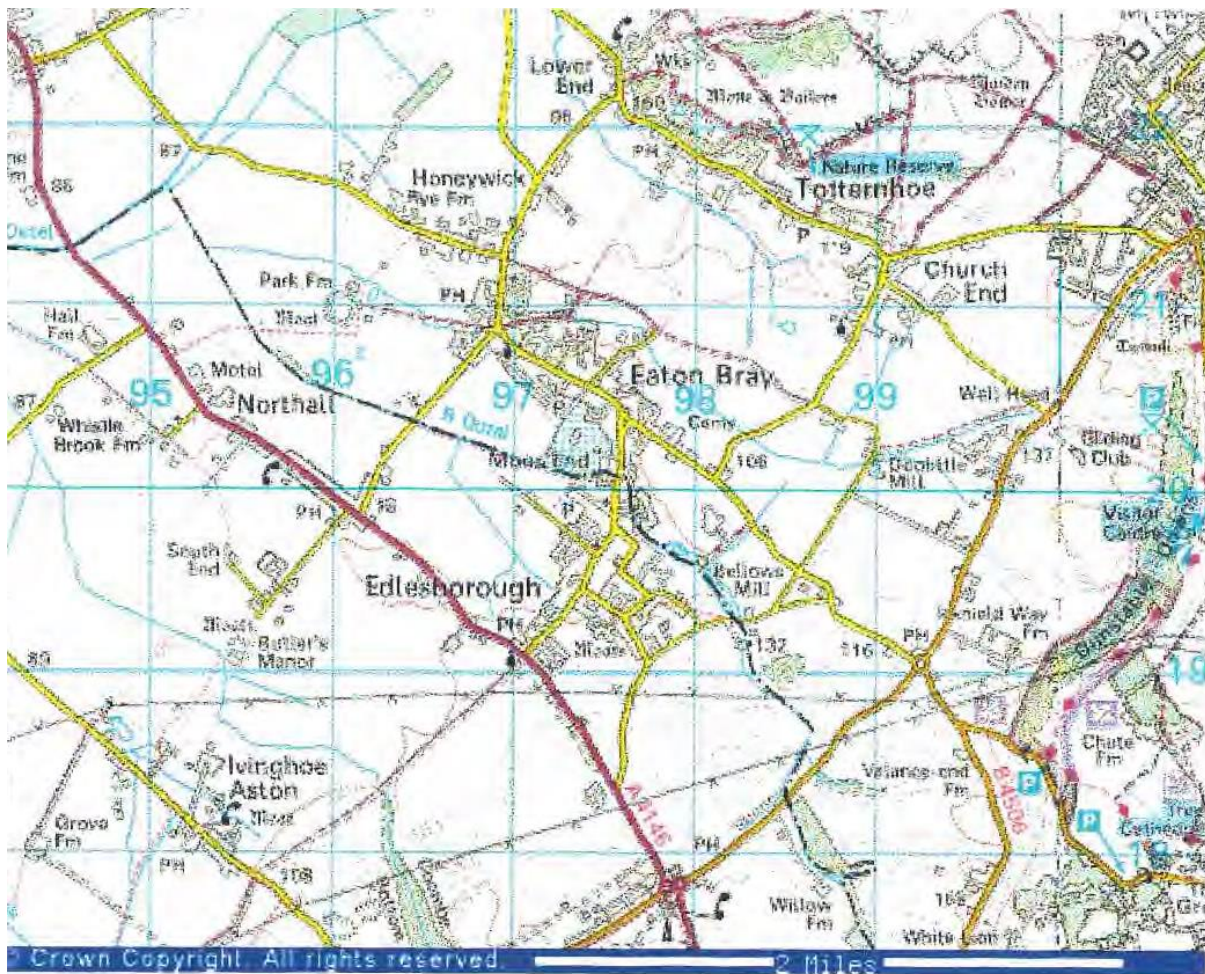


Figure 2. The geographical relationship of Edlesborough and Eaton Bray.

My aims in this project are: firstly, to document changes in population size over time within Edlesborough and Eaton Bray; secondly, to map changes in overall morphology and land use for the villages; thirdly, to document changes in employment patterns of residents and local employment opportunities; and, fourthly, to interpret the results in relation to the hypothesis that the villages have evolved from being predominantly self-contained agricultural communities to being largely dormitory populations of people employed elsewhere in manufacturing or service industries. Rae (1998) has described how villages in southern England have tended to experience rapid growth in recent years, largely due to an influx of commuters working in nearby urban areas, and my project will enable me to examine whether and how this has occurred in Edlesborough and Eaton Bray.

My chosen method of investigation to achieve these aims will be: firstly, to bring together and analyse the extensive information on population trends and village morphology contained in the County Record Offices of Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire; secondly, to obtain a framework for interpreting this by studying books relevant to the historical geography of my chosen villages and interviews with knowledgeable local people; and, thirdly, to fill in details of current employment patterns of village residents by means of a questionnaire.

Methodology

The core of my project comprises use of original source information not created by myself, notably the census statistics and Ordnance Survey (OS) map data held at the relevant County Record Offices. This is complemented on the one hand by a questionnaire of village residents to provide information on current employment patterns and, on the other, by use of secondary sources obtained from the County Libraries to provide a context for interpreting the patterns found in the primary data.

The initial focus of my attention was to obtain a comprehensive sequence of maps of land use, as suggested by the examiner on my Outline Proposal Form. Six inch to the mile OS maps for 1900, 1926 and 1951, and the equivalent 1:10,000 metre metric scale map for 1978, were photocopied in accordance with OS regulations. In addition, the Buckinghamshire County Record Office had a computerised OS map for 1995 which could be printed off at a similar scale.

Population census data for Edlesborough and Eaton Bray for each decade from 1801 to 1991 inclusive, except that for 1941 which was not undertaken because of the Second World War, were next compiled from the official HMSO county census volumes. To provide a wider context within which to interpret village changes, equivalent population data were also collected for the three main local towns (Luton, Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) and the entire counties of Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire. At the same time, information was obtained for 1901 and 1991 regarding the employment of adults in different occupations at county and electoral division level.

My questionnaire (Table 1) was aimed at obtaining precise information regarding the work that village residents currently do and, in particular, how far they travel to undertake it and what type of transport they use. This would enable me to understand to what extent the villages are now places of work as well as places to live. Because most women now work at least part-time, the questionnaire needed to cover both sexes. My intention was to obtain responses from at least 100 adults by targeting 50 or more households divided among at least ten streets containing different types of housing, from small terraced to large detached, in order to include a representative cross-section of village residents. In order to ensure a good and standardised response, my approach was to knock on doors, and get the questionnaire completed on the spot.

County and district planning documents for the villages were obtained from County Record Offices and the village parish clerks. No detailed archive of information on past village-based businesses was discovered, and interviews with some long-standing residents were used to supplement data obtained from sources such as OS maps. The very new Eaton Bray and Edlesborough village website (<http://www.eatonbray.co.uk>) was a source of useful old photographs, but my e-mail enquiry to the compiler revealed he had little additional information. The only publications relating specifically to Edlesborough (Wagstaffe & Lovell 1985) and Eaton Bray (Mayne 1999) are small popular booklets of limited use, although the local straw plait industry is usefully discussed by Grof (1988).

Other problems encountered in data collection included difficulties in obtaining employment information for villagers for the early 1900s, and differences in the categorization of the county-based information that was available compared to that for the 1990s. Two final practical difficulties were the need to use information from two different County Libraries and Record

A Level Geography questionnaire on changes in work patterns in Edlesborough and Eaton Bray

Hello. My name is David Prys-Jones and I am an A Level Geography student studying the links between population size, land use and employment patterns over time within the villages of Edlesborough and Eaton Bray. As part of this project, I have produced a short questionnaire designed to provide evidence on employment patterns of villages. I would like to request your assistance in answering half a dozen questions, which will only take a couple of minutes of your time.

Male

Female

1. *Gender?*

2. *Are you:*

In full-time work

Retired/not working

Part time work

3. *Do you work mainly:*

From home

Within the villages

Less than 5 miles away

5 to 25 miles away

Further away

If further away, in London?

4. *How do you travel to work:*

Car/motorcycle

Train

Bus

Cycle

Walk

5. *What is your job:*

MALE:

FEMALE:

6. *How many cars does your household possess:*

Table 1. Example of the questionnaire used in my survey.

Offices, in Aylesbury and Bedford, both a long way from my home, and the fact that all maps presented in this project required piecing together from separate sheets covering Edlesborough and Eaton Bray respectively. These could only be overcome by increasing the time taken on the project.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Population change

Populations trends in Edlesborough and Eaton Bray have paralleled each other closely over the past two hundred years. During the 19th century, the population of each village increased sharply during the first fifty years, but then fell right back during the last thirty years (Figure 3). During the 20th century, a much slower rate of decrease continued in both villages up to around the 1920s, and it was not until after the Second World War that a sustained and rapid increase occurred; indeed, the populations of both villages took until the mid-1970s to surpass the levels they had achieved in the period from 1850 to 1870.

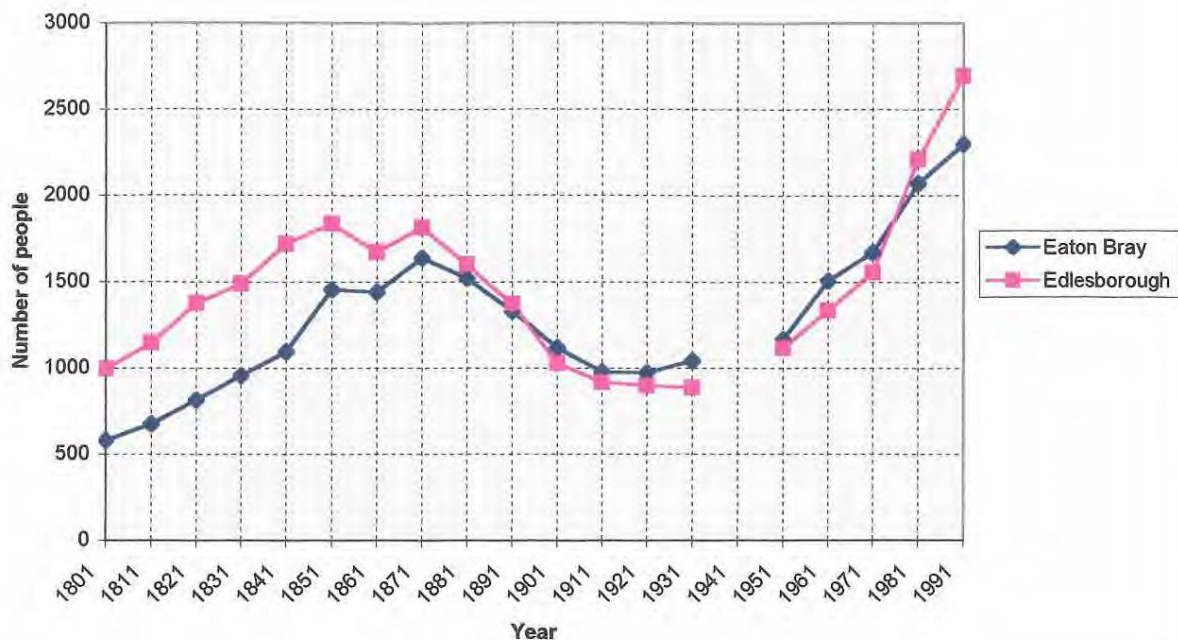


Figure 3. Change in the populations of Edlesborough and Eaton Bray from 1801 to 1991.

Up to the Second World War, this pattern of change in village populations was highly distinct from that shown overall by the counties in which they lie. Both Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire showed steady and sustained population increases for the entire period from 1801 to 1931, with not a single instance of population decline in either (Figure 4); during this time, the populations of both more than doubled. From the Second World War on, however, the more rapid population increase of both counties closely parallels that shown by the two villages. From this it is clear that, up to the mid-20th century, different factors were affecting village population size from those in the counties as a whole.

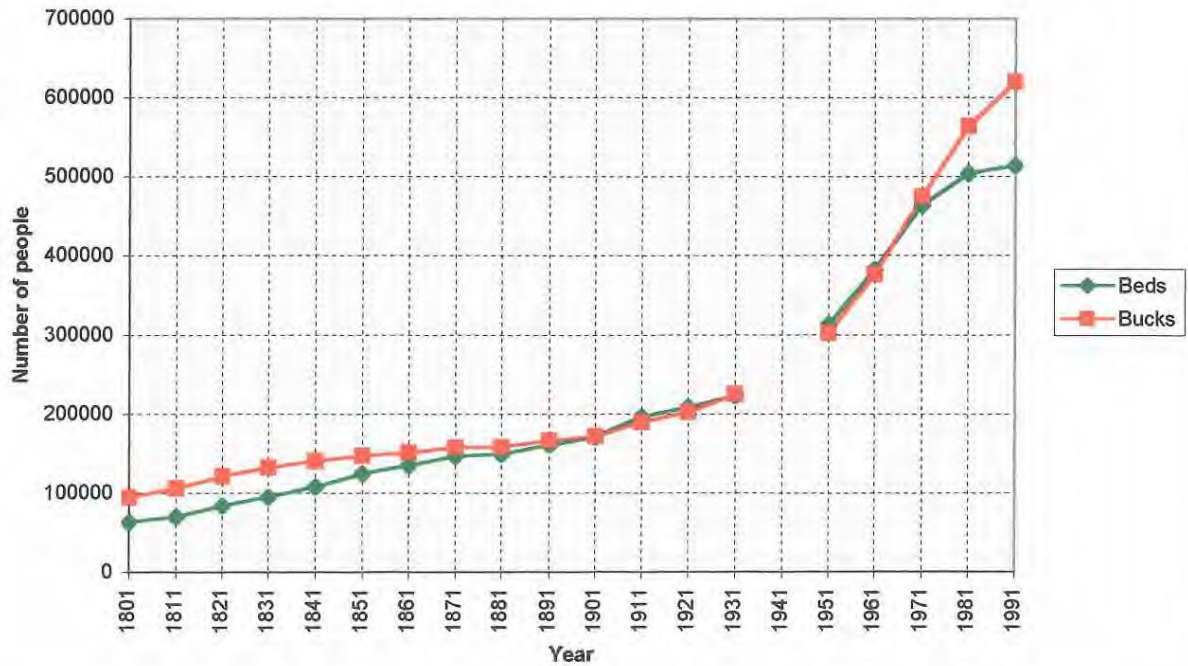


Figure 4. Change in the populations of Buckinghamshire (post 1970 boundaries) and Bedfordshire from 1801 to 1991.

Statistics for the three main local towns show that patterns in urban growth may largely explain the discrepancy. The largest of these, Luton, grew rapidly and continuously throughout the entire period from 1801 to 1971 (Figure 5). The populations of the nearer and smaller towns of Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard increased more slowly than that of Luton up to the Second World War, although Dunstable had a short period of rapid growth from 1901 to 1911, with neither showing any evidence of the population decrease experienced by the villages from 1870 to 1920 (Figure 6). During the last fifty years, the populations of both these towns have, if anything, increased even more rapidly than those of either the villages or Luton.

Village morphology, land use and planning

Old maps from the 1850s already show village structures quite similar to those of 1900 (Figure 7), with small numbers of houses clustered around the village green, which was a communal grazing area. Older houses were largely set back among orchards of plum trees but building during the Victorian period tended to be closer to the road (Wagstaffe & Lovell 1985). The whole setting in 1900 is entirely agricultural, with the map showing only a few flour mills along the line of the River Ouzel, as well as the smithy in Eaton Bray, as evidence of village industry carried on outside the home.

The 1926 map continues to show both villages little changed in overall morphology, with additional housing confined to in-filling along the main roads traversing them. (Figure 8). The area of land under commercial orchards had, however, increased in area by nearly 50% (Figure 9), to the point where they must have been a dominating feature of the local landscape. A large new mill, the Two Counties Mill (Figure 10), on the boundary between Edlesborough and Eaton Bray, is shown, which had been constructed in 1917 and employed over 20 people (BFWI 1993). This soon became the only commercial flour mill in the villages, with the others falling into disuse and not being replaced (Mayne 1999). More than making up for this in terms of employment, however, had been the growth of the commercial nursery garden business, started

by W. E. Wallace in Eaton Bray towards the end of the 19th century, which specialised in growing carnations as well as a wide array of glasshouse vegetables. Its presence is shown by the large glasshouses marked “Nursery” on the 1926 map (Figure 8), at which time it was undergoing a major expansion (BFWI 1988)

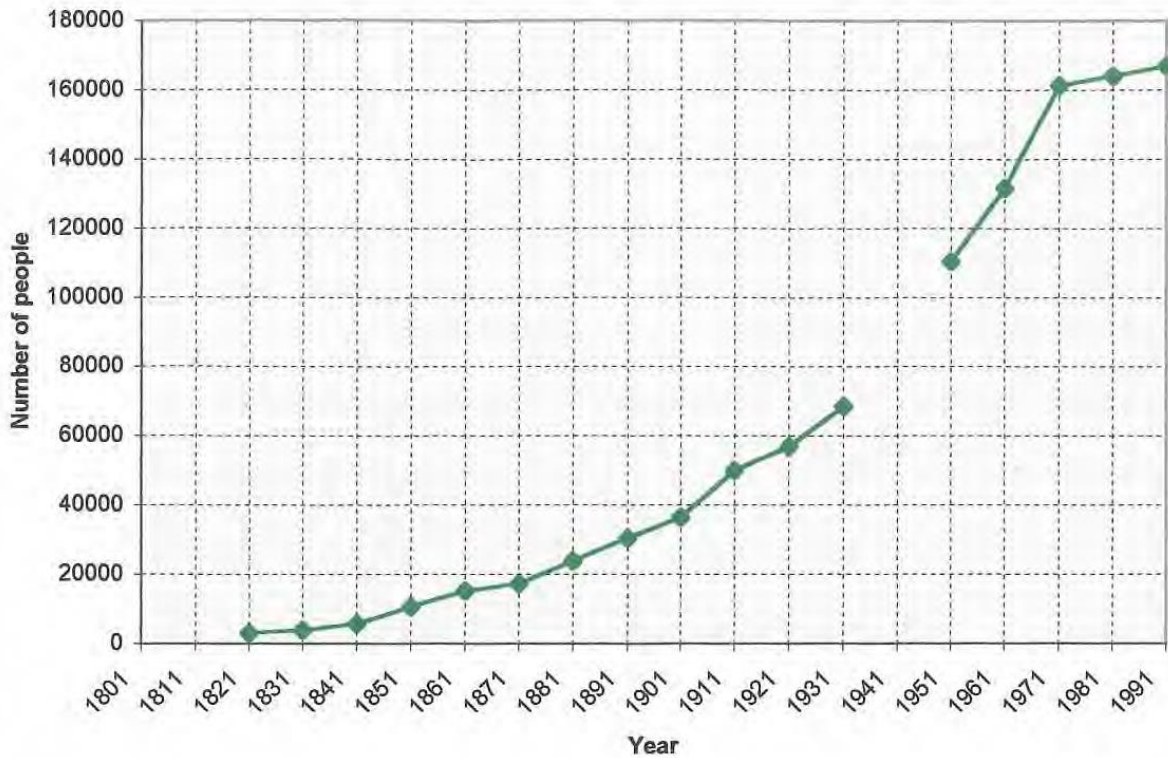


Figure 5. Change in the population of Luton from 1821 to 1991.

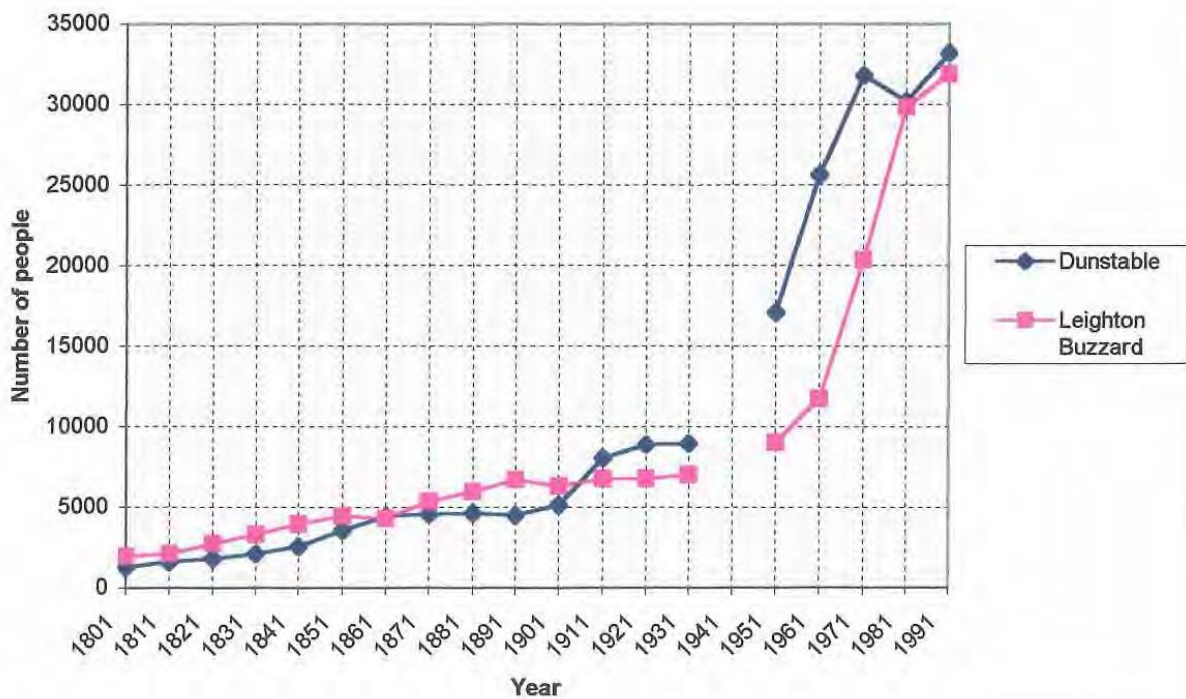


Figure 6. Change in the populations of Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard from 1801 to 1991.

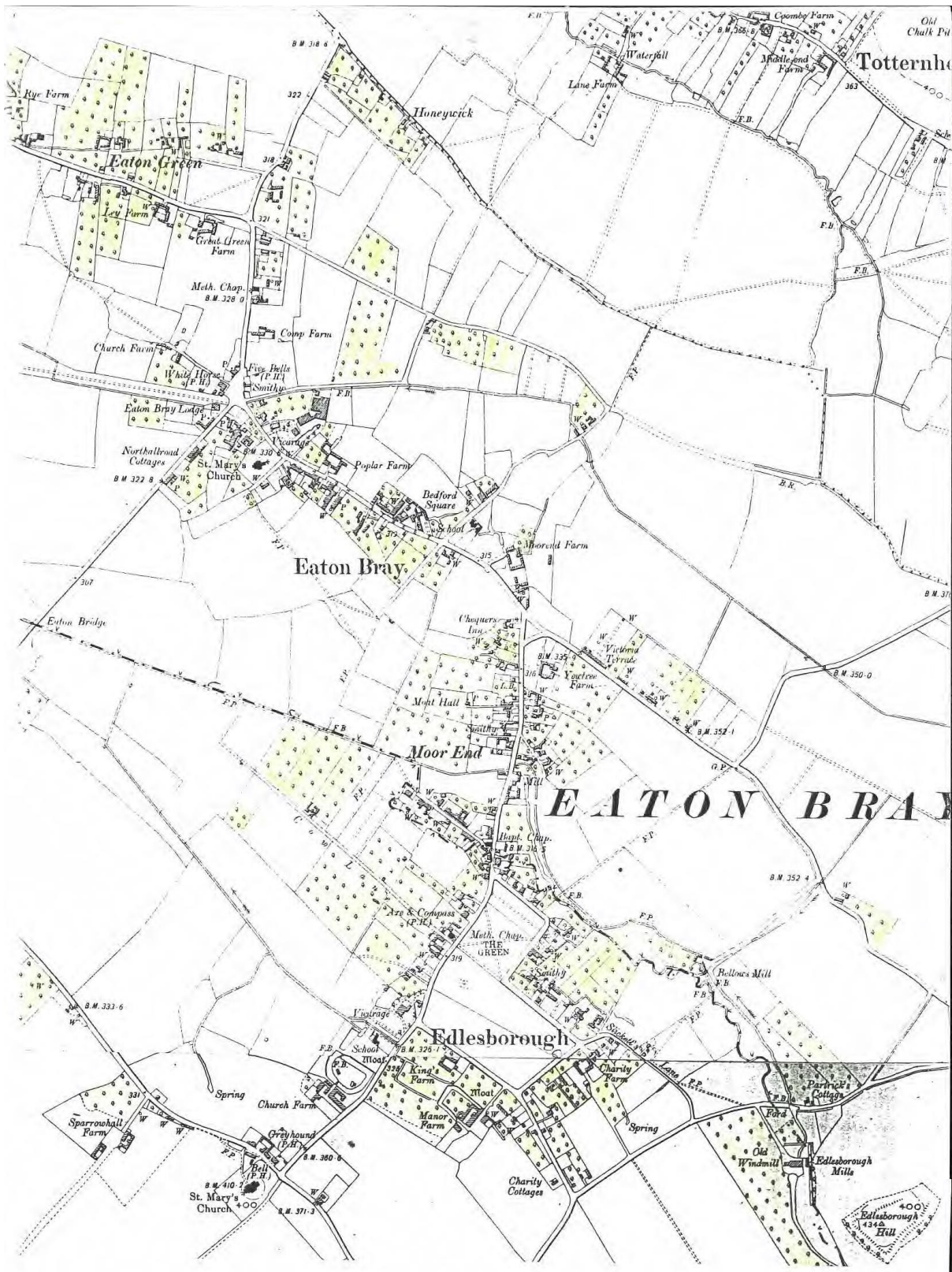


Figure 7. Ordnance Survey map of Edlesborough and Eaton Bray in 1900. Green shows orchard areas.

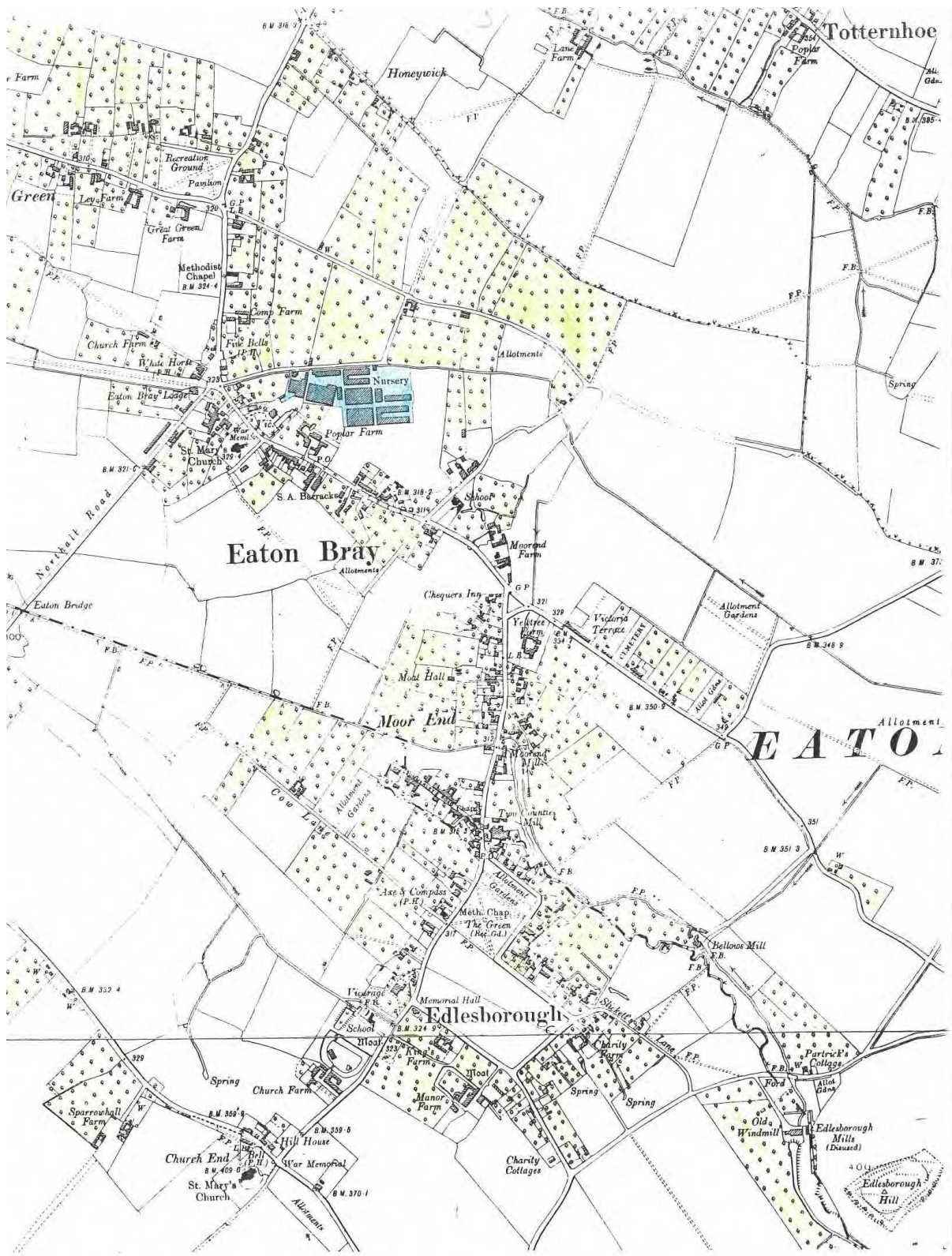


Figure 8. Ordnance Survey map of Edlesborough and Eaton Bray in 1926. Green shows orchard areas and blue shows Wallace's Nursery.

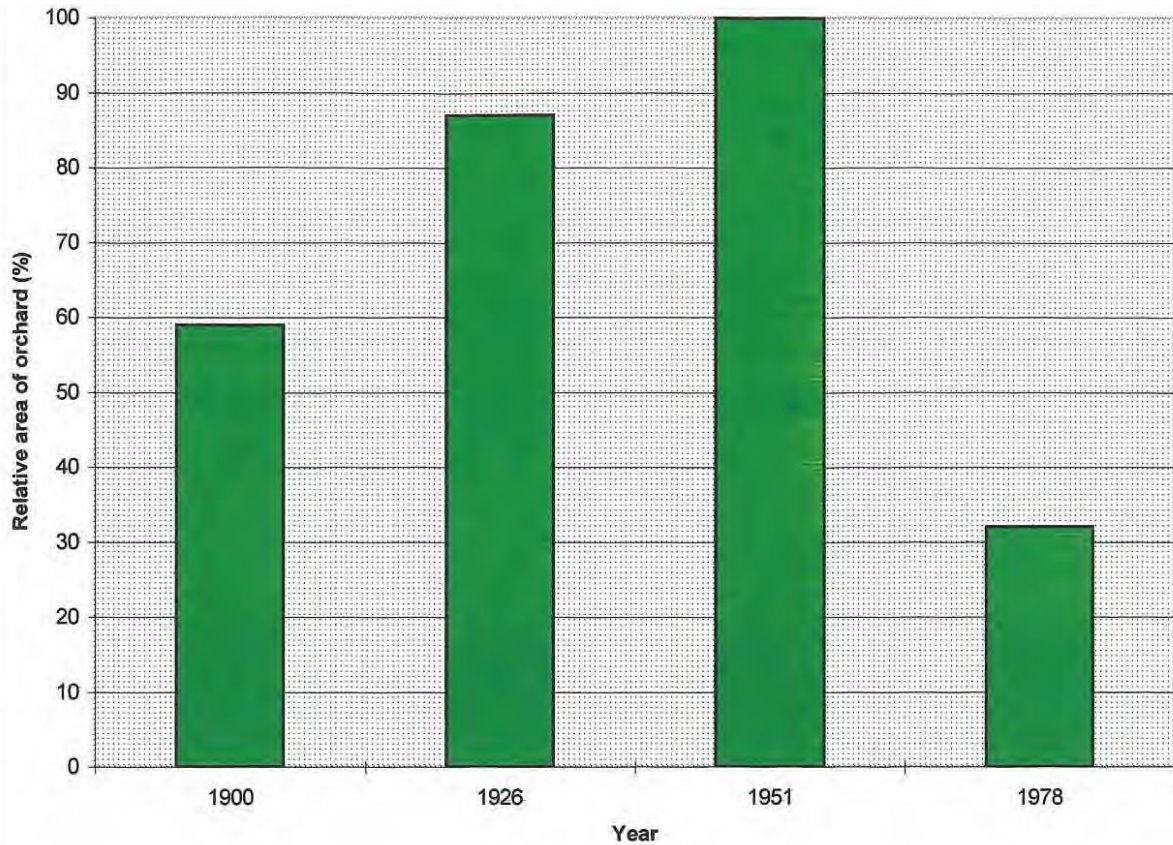


Figure 9. Relative percentage of land devoted to orchard around Edlesborough and Eaton Bray at different times during the 20th century.

The 1951 map (Figure 11) shows the maximum expansion of Wallace’s nursery business, which since the 1930s had been employing over 100 village people on an 18-acre site and was by far the largest local employer (BWF1 1993). Fruit growing had also prospered in the period through the Second World War, with the area of commercial orchards being up by about 15% since 1926 (Figure 9). An ariel photograph from the 1950s reveals the large extent both of orchards and Wallace’s nursery at this time (Figure 12). Small amounts of building on the boundary between Eaton Bray and Edlesborough show the beginnings of an area devoted to light industry such as motor accessories firms. At the northern end of Eaton Bray, the small family firm of Hawkins Transport had been founded in 1935 (Mayne 1999). Considerable new housing construction is evident since the 1920s, including the beginnings of estate construction (Figure 11). These initial estates were of council houses, financed by local government to provide affordable housing for the increasing numbers of working class people in the villages not employed on the farms.



Figure 10. View of the site of the Two Counties Mill in the 1970s (upper) and in the year 2000 (lower) after it had been demolished to make way for a housing estate.

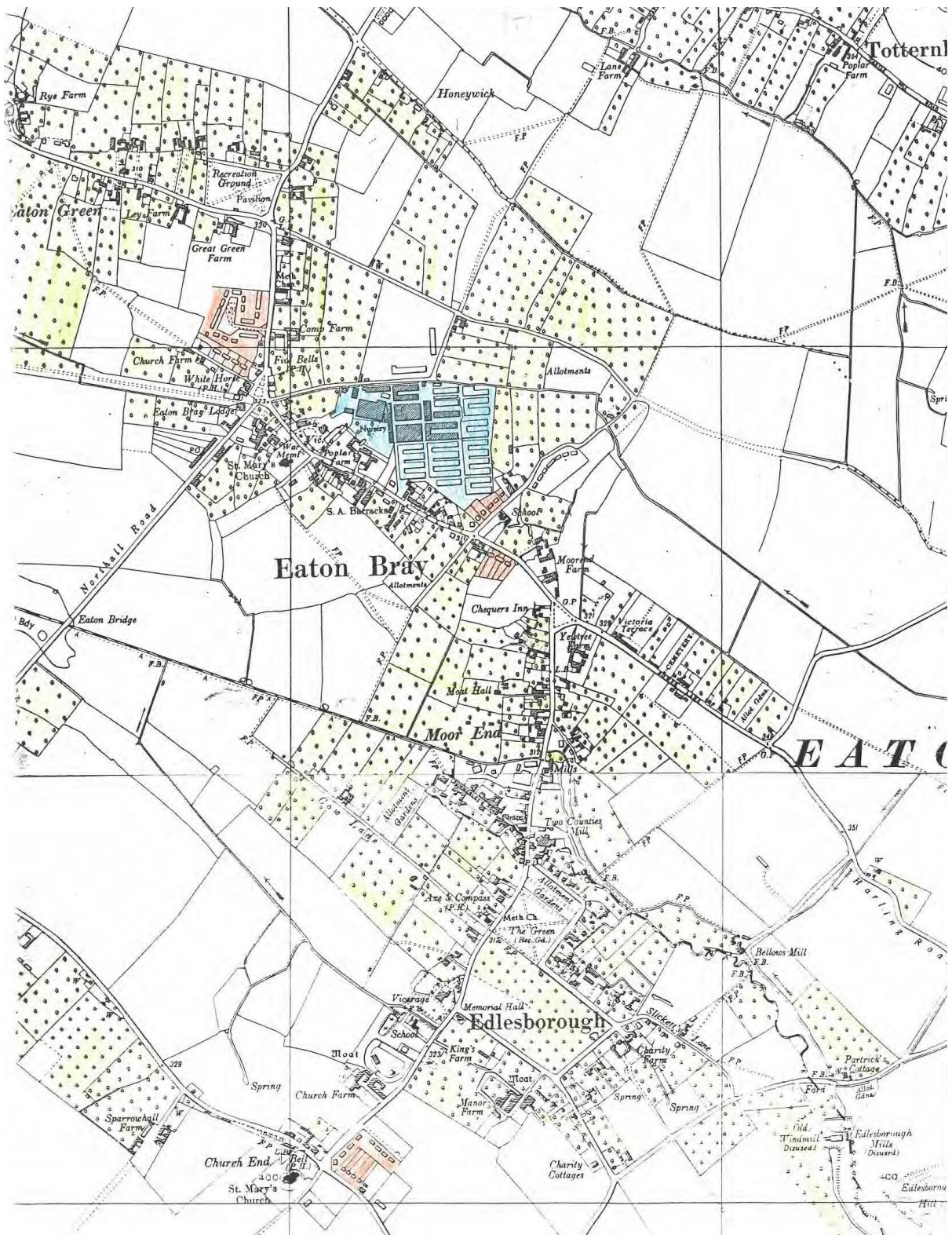


Figure 11. Ordnance Survey map of Edlesborough and Eaton Bray in 1951. Green shows orchard areas, blue shows Wallace's Nursery and red shows main housing developments since 1926.



Figure 12. The site of Wallace's Nursery in Eaton Bray in the 1950s (upper: an aerial view showing both the nursery and the large surrounding area of orchards) and in the year 2000 (lower: showing the housing estate now built on the site).

Comparison of the 1978 map (Figure 13) with that for 1951 reveals a greatly accelerated rate of change in village morphology. Large-scale housing development had begun, comprising substantial estates, mostly of houses for sale rather than rent. Most of this development was on land close to the roads which was sold off by local farmers. The increasingly high demand, and thus price, of land for building purposes had coincided with a collapse in the commercial viability of the orchards, which by 1978 occupied only about one-third of the area they had in 1951 (Figure 9). Little was still being harvested and all would shortly be derelict (Figure 14). Nursey gardening had also gone the same way as the orchards, with Wallace's nurseries being labelled "disused" (Figure 13) following its closure in 1974 (BFWI 1993). The Two Counties Mill had likewise closed, although in this case the site had been taken over by a motor accessories firm (BFWI 1988), expanding the small area of light industry along the Eaton Bray/Edlesborough border now labelled as "works" (Figure 13).

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This greatly increasing scale of housing development in villages during the 1960s and 1970s caused the local county and district councils to start drawing up village plans. Typical in this regard was the first Edlesborough village plan, the key concern of which was to allow for the ever-growing demand for housing while retaining the "character" of the village. It proposed to achieve this by concentrating development into five clearly bounded estates within existing village limits where new housing would be least intrusive (Figure 15). This would entail the population approximately doubling, which was considered to be "... the limit for the village if it is to retain its present rural character ..." (BDAP 1972). Similarly, the Bedfordshire Green Belt plan of the same period aimed to restrict future housing growth in Eaton Bray to within the existing village boundary.

By 1995, all the estate housing proposed in the 1972 Edlesborough plan had been built; in Eaton Bray the former site of Wallace's nursery had been covered with housing, as had the former area of light industrial works, now all closed, along the border between the two villages (Figure 16). This substantial and quite high-density development clearly was both caused by and contributed to the rapid rise in the population of the two villages since 1971 (Figure 3). In order to try and control the increasing numbers of people commuting to work from villages, the new Aylesbury Vale District draft local plan for 1996-2011 specifically sought to concentrate future building in towns where work was available, and it stated that villages such as Edlesborough would only be permitted "... small schemes of up to five homes" (AVDC 1996).

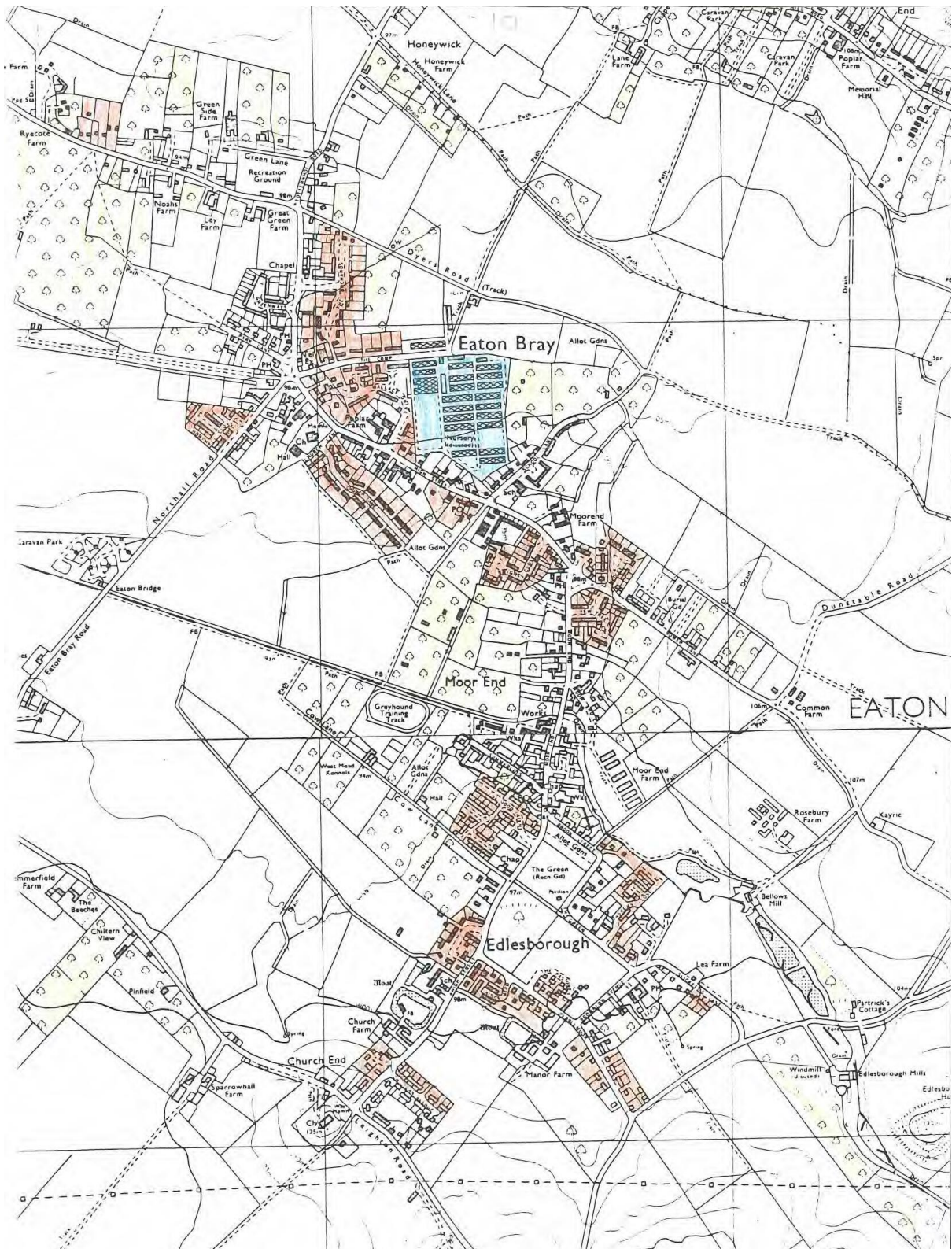


Figure 13. Ordnance Survey map of Edlesborough and Eaton Bray in 1978. Green shows orchard areas, blue shows now disused site of Wallace's Nursery, and red shows main housing developments since 1951.



Figure 14. Disused plum orchards within the villages. Photographed in 2000.



Figure 15. Planned housing development for Edlesborough in 1971 (BDAP 1972).



Figure 16. Ordnance Survey map of Edlesborough and Eaton Bray in 1995. Red shows main housing developments since 1978.

However, within one year of producing this plan, a combination of the huge demand for village housing and objections by local landowners caused the Aylesbury Vale Forward Planning Department to produce a revised set of proposals (AVDC 1997) which included nearly 100 new houses in Edlesborough in two large estates (Figure 17). This caused outrage among many villagers who founded the “Stop Edlesborough New Town” (SENT) campaign in 1997 to oppose these new plans. Partly as a consequence, the draft local plan put forward for approval by Aylesbury Vale District Council contained strict rules governing future house building in the village. However, during the prescribed consultation period, further counter proposals were lodged by local developers involving even larger scale development, which in turn resulted in further strong opposition from the SENT campaign in early 1999 (Figure 18). The subject was then referred to a public local enquiry, from which the government planning inspector’s final report is still awaited.

Employment patterns and opportunities

Life in Edlesborough and Eaton Bray in the mid-19th century was overwhelmingly based on agriculture, with most people living very close to where they worked as they lacked transport to travel further. The agriculture was a mixture of pastoral and arable, typical of much of south-central England, but with certain local specialities which made the area distinctive. One of these was the cottage-based straw plaiting industry, in which women and children could contribute to the family income by making the plait required by the hatting industry in Luton (Grof 1988). Another was fruit growing in orchards, in particular a local variety of small prune plums which were not only excellent for cooking and jam making, but whose skins were also used by Luton’s hat industry for dyeing felt (BFWI 1988).

Census statistics from 1901 for the county of Buckinghamshire show that agriculture was still much the most important source of employment, with over 25% of all working adult males employed in it (Table 2); considering only the “rural” statistics, this figure rose to 45%, showing that in areas such as Edlesborough nearly half of all adult males worked in agriculture. By 1991, however, well under 5% of “employed adults” in the county were recorded as being in agriculture (Table 2). Even at electoral division level, the most local basis for which 1991 census statistics were presented, only 5% of adults in Eaton Bray electoral division were recorded as being employed in agriculture.

My questionnaire was primarily aimed at discovering more about the work patterns of Edlesborough and Eaton Bray residents in the year 2000. Of 102 adults who were interviewed, 91 were in full-time or part-time employment, but only one of these was in a job involving any form of work on the land. Considering all people in employment, just over a quarter (26%) work mainly within the villages (from home or elsewhere), whereas well over half (58%) work at least five miles away (Figure 19). However, among people in full-time employment, over 70% travel more than five miles and over 20% more than 25 miles, with half of the latter working in London. By contrast, people working within the village (including at home) are almost twice as likely to be in part-time (38%) than in full-time (21%) work. Of the 24 people employed mainly within the villages, over 60% (15 people) work either in child-centred jobs such as teaching and home tutoring (8 people) or in retail trades (7 people). The only other full-time village jobs recorded were in medicine, information technology and home-based sales, indicating the limited possibilities available without travel.

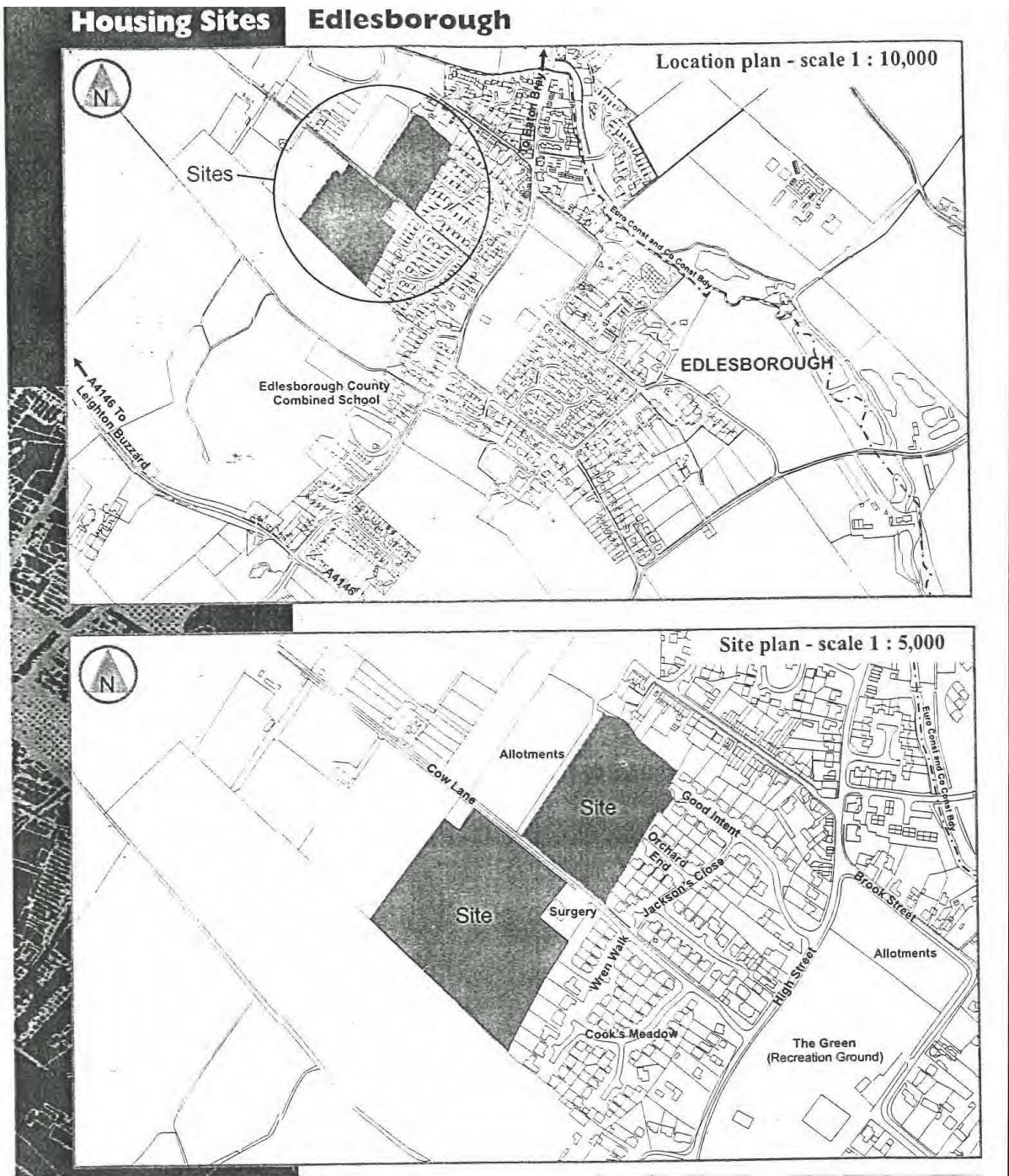


Figure 17. Revised 1997 proposals for nearly 100 new houses in Edlesborough (from AVDC 1997).

You are therefore urged to write now to:

**Head of Forward Plans
Aylesbury Vale District Council
Exchange Street
Aylebury HP20 1UB**

As a reminder I have listed the objections summary below from our last campaign, which still stand firm today. Please use some/all of these and add others as you wish into your letters of complaint.

Local Plan Counter Proposals

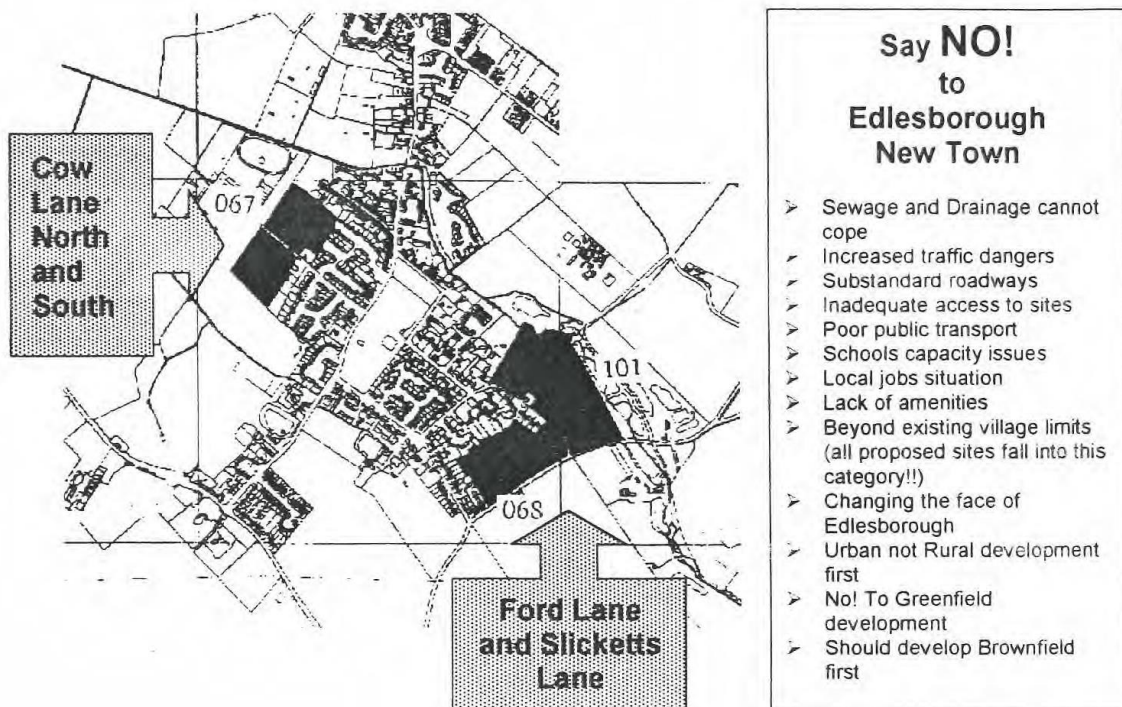


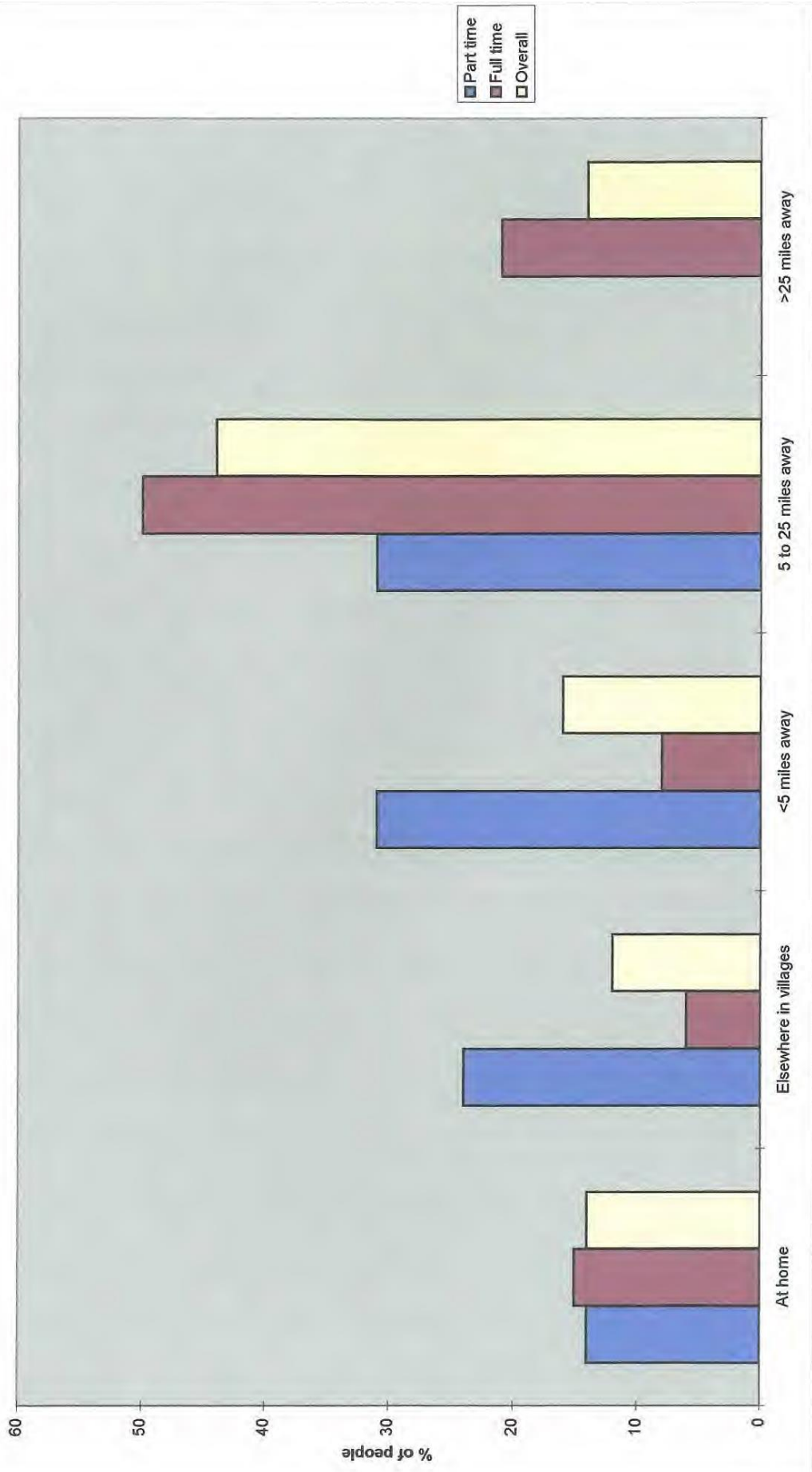
Figure 18. Objections by the village-based “Stop Edlesborough New Town” campaign in 1999 to local plan counter proposals for new housing development in Edlesborough.

The high level of mobility revealed by these employment statistics depends very largely on reliance on car transport (Figure 20). Of people responding to the questionnaire, 80% use a car to go to work, as opposed to under 10% using a train or walking and under 5% using a bus or cycling; remarkably, as many people mentioned using a plane as either of the latter! With households containing two working adults now being the norm, this situation is facilitated by 77% of households owning two or more cars, whereas only 4% do not own one at all (Figure 21).

	1991		1991	
	Buckinghamshire		Eaton Bray Electoral Division	
Agriculture	26.2		22.5	24.1
Construction	10.9		20.6	17.9
Transport	8.8		15.7	12
Wood Trades	8.3		10.8	10.4
Metalwork	8.2		10.8	19.5
Food/drink	7.8		8.8	5.1
Domestic service	6.4		5.9	5.6
Clothing	4.3		3.9	5.1
			Distribution/catering	
			Manufacturing	
			Finance	
			Construction	
			"Other" services	
			"Other" primary	
			Transport	
			Agriculture	

Table 2. Main occupations (%) of employed adult males in Buckinghamshire (1901) and of employed adults in Buckinghamshire and in the Eaton Bray Electoral Division in 1991.

Figure 19. Distances travelled to work by village residents in part-time work, full-time work and overall.



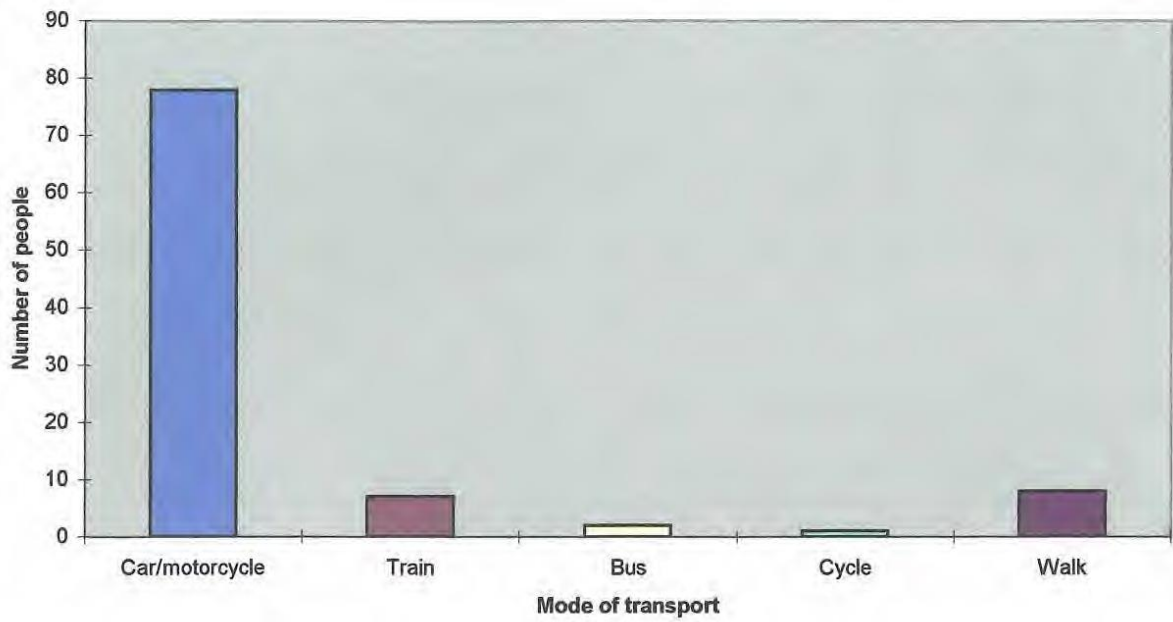


Figure 20. Numbers of village residents recorded using different types of transport to get to work. (NB – Some people used more than one, e.g. car and train).

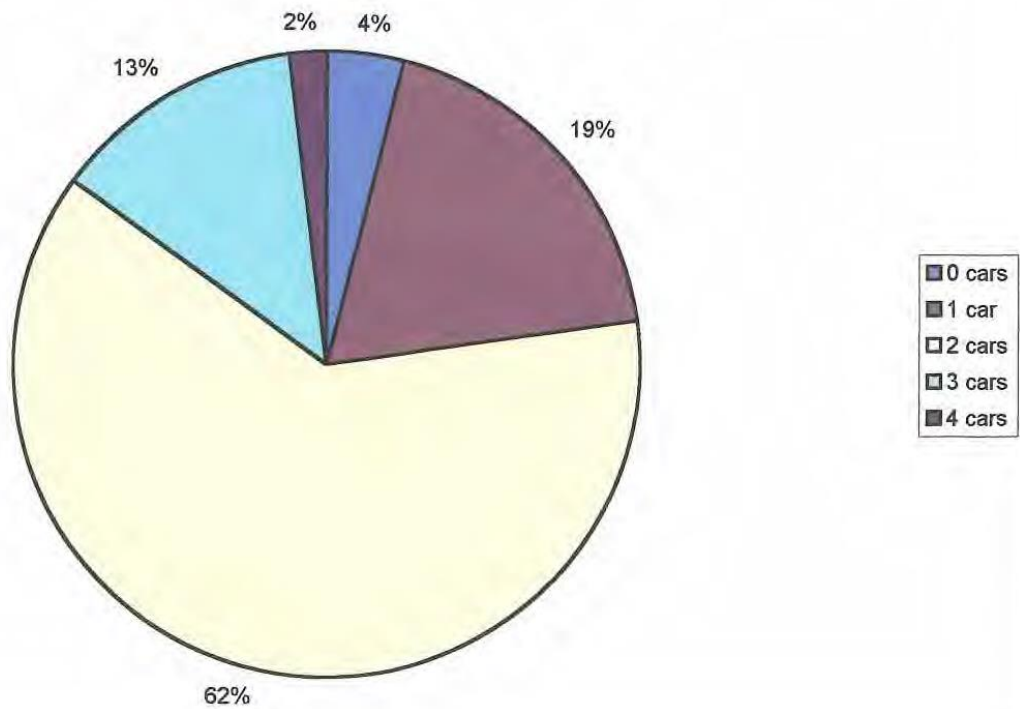


Figure 21. Proportion of households questioned owning different numbers of motor vehicles.

Conclusions

In the middle of the 19th century, Edlesborough and Eaton Bray supported a large, almost totally agricultural population. The last thirty years of this century, however, were a period of major agricultural depression which arose from trade liberalisation permitting the importation of cheap grain and the invention of industrial refrigeration allowing the importation of cheap frozen meat; over the same period, the straw plait industry also collapsed as a result of cheap imports. With no alternative local work, and no means of daily transport to the closest thriving town of Luton, many people were forced to move away from rural villages during this time (Houfe 1995).

During the first half of the 20th century, at least one major village employer, the nursery garden of W. E. Wallace, expanded rapidly providing many jobs, and fruit growing also flourished. Both the orchard and glasshouse enterprises depended greatly on rail transport, with produce being sent to London from the nearby Stanbridgeford station and, from the 1920s, by lorry transport to reach the big Midlands towns (Godber 1969). However, with the exception of a brief period during the First World War, general agriculture remained in depression. In addition, increasing electrical power availability from the turn of the century permitted rapid industrialisation, and hence demand for labour, in towns such as Dunstable and Luton, where the firm of Vauxhall arrived in 1905. The result was a continuing, but slower, departure of village people to the towns, which only finally bottomed out as the advent from the late 1920s of reliable bus transport in local villages (PPC 1999) began to make commuting to work in neighbouring towns a possibility for ordinary working people.

General agricultural conditions improved markedly after the Second World War, but increasing mechanisation of farm tasks continually lowered the amount of labour needed to run farms. The fruit growing and nursery garden operations in the villages continued to thrive in the 1950s, but then went into a rapid decline to extinction as continually improving transport systems allowed importation of cheaper foreign produce. Small scale motor accessory firms opened businesses in the villages during the 1960s and 1970s, which survived into the 1980s, but much more important for the now rapid growth in village populations was the relative ease of commuting to work by bus or, increasingly and eventually overwhelmingly, by car. Initial, small-scale construction of council estates was followed by much larger-scale construction of private housing for sale as ever more people found they could continue living in a village while working many miles away.

From the early 1970s, the pressures stemming from this rapid population growth have required increasing controls on housing in Edlesborough and Eaton Bray to prevent them turning into a sprawling dormitory suburb. The results from my questionnaire demonstrate that nearly 60% of all employed people living in the villages now work at least five miles away, with the figure being over 70% for those in full-time employment, almost all of whom commute by car. Most people working in the villages are either in retailing or education, although a few other village-based enterprises remain, e.g. Hawkins Transport and Hays IT Services, the latter based in a converted tithe barn, one of the most historic buildings in Edlesborough (Figure 22).



Figure 22. The historic Edlesborough tithe barn in the 1950s (upper) and in 2000 (lower) after its conversion into offices for an information technology company.

Bringing together this information on population size, land use and employment patterns, which comprised the first three aims of my project, has enabled me to conclude that the hypothesis that the villages have evolved over the past 150 years from being predominantly agricultural communities into large dormitory populations of people employed elsewhere is undoubtedly correct. Indeed, in the terminology of Rae (1998), Edlesborough and Eaton Bray are together well down the road on becoming a “metropolitan village”, serving the expanding neighbouring conurbations of Luton/Dunstable and Milton Keynes.

The development of this process has not been simple, however, but involved a complicated set of changes in population size and employment opportunities, which was itself linked to the state of transport available at different times. At present, the pressures for rapid growth in village size still exist as a result of continuing growth in the economy of south-east Britain and the multi-car household becoming the norm, causing land use conflicts which local authority planners are struggling to reconcile. A predicted future in which large numbers of people may use computer technology to work from home has yet to emerge according to the employment statistics collected in my questionnaire but is unlikely to diminish pressure for village housing if it does.

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