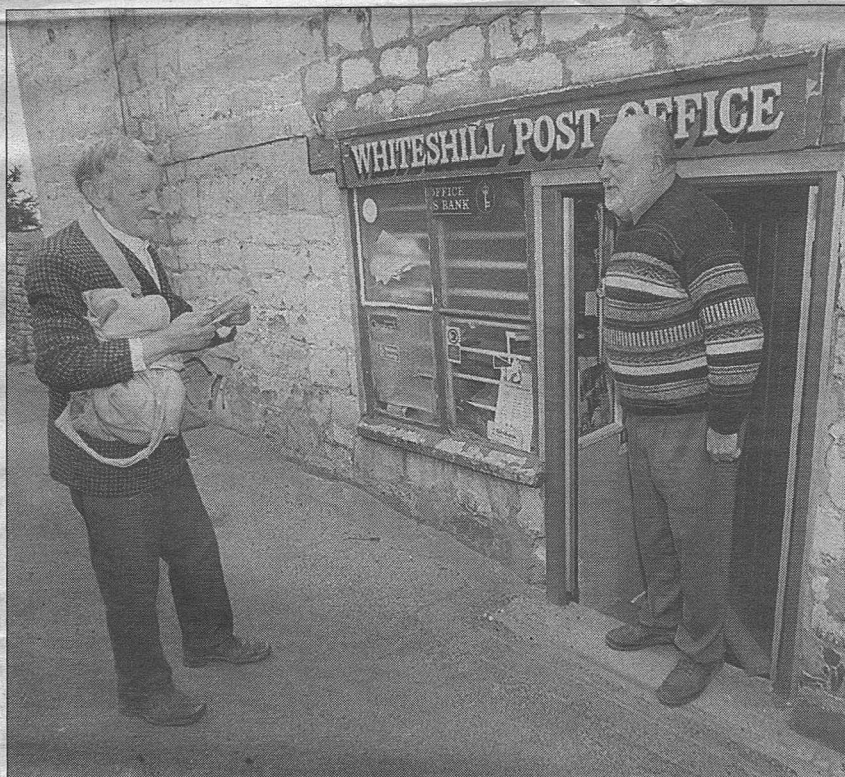


Down Your Way

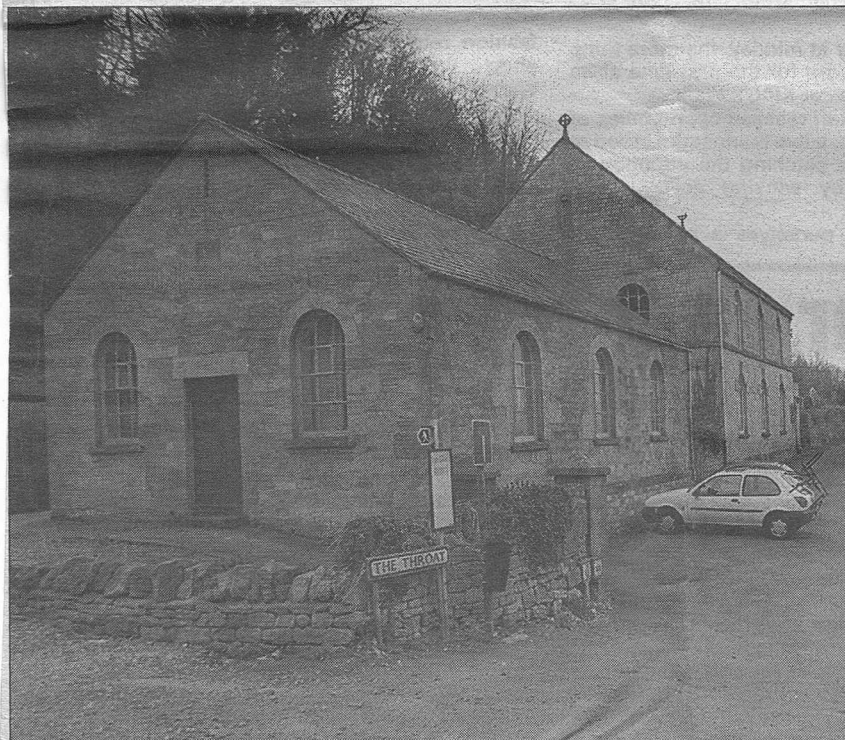
Change hides behind scene of tranquillity

19.4.02



■ **TRADITION:** Sub-postmaster John Mutton emerges from the tiny post office at Whiteshill to chat with villager Richard Boulton.

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■ **PEACEFUL:** The Congregational chapel at The Throat at Ruscombe – a narrow steep-sided lane at the foot of thecombe in which the village is situated.

AT first glance, the tranquil village of Ruscombe looks the same today as it did 100 years ago. Few homes have been built since the 19th Century and the views across the valley are still as breathtaking as they were when the Victorian historian Paul Hawkins Fisher wrote “such as can hardly be excelled for picturesque beauty and variety in any part of the kingdom”.

In fact it is only things like television aerials, overhead cables and cars parked around the narrow, winding streets that put the village in the 21st Century.

Elizabeth West believes the scant number of modern buildings is more by luck than judgement.

“I think the topography has saved us,” said Elizabeth, who has lived in Ruscombe since 1976 and has written a character analysis of the village. “I think it deserves to be made a conservation area.”

Ruscombe, thought to mean “rushy pasture land”, was built on milling, weaving and stone quarrying, all of which have long disappeared. Caves within the overgrown quarry are now home to the rare greater horseshoe bat.

Today the village is linked with the neighbouring Whiteshill for parish affairs and there are few that can accurately pinpoint where one ends and the other begins. One best placed to know is John Mutton, who puts the dividing line at the corner known as The Shard.

This means that his sub-post office is the last building in Whiteshill.

John, 70, is continuing a long tradition in running the business. Over the past 100 years it has been in the hands of his wife's family and John hopes to pass it on to the next generation.

“The women have run it because it was not a full-time job for a man,” said John, who took over the business seven years ago after retiring as a chartered engineer.

“The post office is not only a place where people buy stamps and come and get their pensions. If people don't turn up, I find out if they are OK.

“This is a community centre for the village. We get a lot of villagers calling in to read the noticeboards.”

John, who was born in Hyde, travelled the world working as a chartered engineer before settling in Ruscombe. He set up sugar plants, animal feed factories and flour mills as far away as Africa, the Far East and Russia. In later years he was a manager at Rank Hovis McDougall in Stroud, now the site of the town's Tesco.

Jack Birmingham went to school in