

# Strattonborough Castle Farm - Watchfield

By Neil B. Maw



There is a general consensus of opinion among historians that Strattonborough Castle Farmhouse was built in 1792, commissioned by Jacob Pleydell-Bouverie, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Radnor. Apparently, there is a stone set in one of the walls bearing that date which lends weight to the theory. The Bouverie family had a strong affinity with Longford Castle near Salisbury, Wiltshire and the north facing part of Strattonborough Castle Farm does bear a resemblance to Longford. Being the family seat of the Bouverie family, Jacob had strong connections with the castle and even employed architect James Wyatt to make some quite major alterations to it. He was the son of William Bouverie, the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Radnor and Harriet Pleydell, the daughter of Sir Mark Stuart Pleydell of Coleshill House, that once stood between Highworth and Faringdon. Historic rumour suggested that Jacob built Strattonborough as a Gothic eye-catcher for his view from Coleshill House as well as a working farm, but to date, no documentary evidence has been found to substantiate it.

No record has been found as to who was the first tenant of the farm. The earliest name in documentary evidence is John Crew who ran the farm previously to 1832. In September of that year the farm stock and implements were advertised for sale in preparation to him leaving. (*Oxford Journal* 29<sup>th</sup> Sept 1832). However, in between then and June the following

year he died, as another advertisement offered the farm stock and implements of Mr John Crew, deceased. (*Berks Chronicle* 8<sup>th</sup> June 1833).



The census of 1841 listed Alexander Wornill as the occupier of the farm along with Jane Wornhill and two agricultural labourers, William Simms and Alexander Tott. Wornhill was described as a Bailiff, probably of the Coleshill Estate. But by 1845 it was up to let again and described as a farm of 255 acres in total, 170 Arable and 85 Meadow and Pasture. The occupier was stated as William Giles but it's likely that he was a caretaker farmer of nearby West Mill Farm. (*Reading Mercury* 24<sup>th</sup> May 1845).

It's likely that James Fereman aged 36, was the next occupier. He would become well known and respected in the district as a farmer and land valuer, but unfortunately, he would also become known for tragedy. In 1841, James was still living with his mother and father at their farm in Great Coxwell, near Faringdon. In between then and the next census of 1851, he had married Agnes from Bishopstone, and taken over the tenancy of Strattonborough Castle Farm. His first son James Albert was born in 1852, but another son, George Frederick, was born the following year and subsequently died. This was followed by the arrival of daughter Mary Elizabeth in 1854, although she didn't appear on the 1861 census. Throughout the rest of that decade the Fereman family increased further with, William Henry, Thomas Anger, George G, Agnes Caroline and Cecil Britten.

At the end of that decade James Fereman hosted the Chamber of Agriculture annual ploughing match. The newspaper reported that it was a fine day and there was a large attendance of people. The competition was open to all skill levels of ploughing and included horse drawn and oxen drawn rigs (North Wilts Herald 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1869). The census of 1871 recorded that James, Agnes and their eldest son James Albert were at the farm, but there was none of the other children listed.

Working conditions on farms in the 19<sup>th</sup> century demanded physical hard work. Young boys and girls were often contracted to work with an employer, but not necessarily as an apprenticeship. The reality of it meant that the youngsters could not come and go as they pleased but would have to ask permission to be away from, *'the master's service.'* In 1871 Frederick Rose, a young farm worker for James Fereman was ordered by the magistrate's court at Faringdon, to pay 1shilling compensation and 23shillings costs, for absconding from his master's service (Reading Mercury 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1871). The following year, James Fereman was looking to hire *'two or three strong lads as Under-Carters and a Groom, for liberal wages and accommodation'* (North Wilts Herald 17<sup>th</sup> June 1872). By the census of 1881, the farm had got considerably bigger at 515 acres, employing 12 men, 7 boys and 4 women. James senior and son James were still there, and son Thomas was also working on the farm, but wife and mother Agnes, wasn't listed.

James Fereman was stricken by grief when his daughter Agnes Caroline died at the age of 16. A newspaper column listed that she died on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1875 at Bombey Farm, Stoke Poges,

Bucks, the residence of Mr Adkins (Oxford Chron 10<sup>th</sup> April 1875). Members of his family say that he never recovered from the trauma that it caused him. He suffered a serious bout of ill health in 1884 and by 1886 his mental health deteriorated and caused him to take his own life. With only the housekeeper in the house on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March 1886, he sat in a chair in the corner of the kitchen, put a shotgun to his mouth and pulled the trigger. The inquest was held at his farm and many people expressed their sorrow at the tragic events. His funeral took place at Longcot a few days later but it's not certain whether it was within the episcopal church or the Baptist (Faringdon Adver 27<sup>th</sup> March 1886).



James Albert Fereman (jnr) took over the running of Strattonborough Castle Farm. The census of 1891 described him as a Farmer and Estate Agent, the same as his father. He had married Emily Porter two years earlier at a ceremony held at St Thomas' church in Watchfield (Faringdon Adver 17<sup>th</sup> August 1889). The Fereman dynasty at the farm came to an end after 60 years. A newspaper advert described that the stock and implements that would be sold on the premises on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1904 (Faringdon Adver 10<sup>th</sup> Sept 1904). The census for 1911 showed that he and Emily had moved to Longcott where he was described as an Estate Agent. The Beckett Estate sale catalogue of 1927 provided the information that J.A. Fereman J.P. occupied a small lodge just inside the entrance to Beckett Park on the corner of the road from Shrivenham to Longcott. (Known today as Beckett Cottage).

The same census listed that William Pullin was the new occupier of Strattonborough Castle Farm, aged 52 with his family. A later newspaper advert described a sale that was to take place on 17<sup>th</sup> October 1917, consisting of a large amount of animal stock and farm equipment. The sale was from the instructions of Mrs E.A. Sutton who was retiring from the business (North Wilts Herald 28<sup>th</sup> Sept 1917). Her husband Mr J. Sutton had died the year previous and was described as well-known in farming circles and had previously occupied Manor Farm at Liddington, Wilts. (North Wilts Herald 12<sup>th</sup> December 1914). A clue as to the next occupier came from another newspaper article that described how Mr William Whitfield of Strattonborough Castle Farm had applied to the Law Court at Faringdon to re-gain possession of a cottage occupied by Harold Parnell. The magistrates were of opinion that Mr Parnell had a family, had paid his rent regularly and had not been offered any alternative accommodation, so turned down the application (Faringdon Adver 4<sup>th</sup> December 1920).

Two pieces of information from the newspapers provide the name of John Greig of Castle farm who was fined for speeding in his lorry. When asked if he knew the law he replied that he was a stranger to this country and came from Scotland. He was fined £1 (North Wilts Herald 9<sup>th</sup> Nov 1934). Another advertisement described how a Mr Greig was looking to hire a Cowman at the same farm (North Wilts Herald 17<sup>th</sup> March 1939)

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## Historic England Listing

*Dated 1792 on the north front to the left of the main door above a ground floor window. Built to double as a working farm and a gothic eye-catcher for Coleshill House. Rubble stone and brick with dressed stone quoins and openings. The farmhouse faces its yard to the south, but its north front rises above the dwelling's roofline to form a wall with two castellated projecting sham towers, one square the other polygonal. The combination of materials suggests either a late 18<sup>th</sup> century sensitivity to the organic growth of a building brick additions to an earlier stone structure or a complete rehabilitation at a much later date. The whole north façade is punctuated by mullioned and cross mullioned windows, some blind, others with nine pane sashes. Other features include single and cruciform arrowslits, elaborate string coursing and stone arched surrounds with brick infil. A wall from the main block links it on the east with a stepped gabled barn. This is symmetrically balanced to the west by another, larger, barn with gabled stone tiled roof which is set further back and has a north end with an enormous sham window of five lights, partly ruinous, all bricked in. Below this 'window' is a genuine 11<sup>th</sup> century Norman tympanum and above it, set in brick, the date 1794.*

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