

## Early & Mediaeval

In the 1950s, Major Sewell (DCMT) mentioned an area that lies just to the South-East of Beckett House. It's an area to which he pays particular attention and even gives us a National Grid ref 2480 - 8905. Here he stated *'The soil in this area is sandy and lies to a depth of about four feet on a bottom of sandstone. The pottery, distributed throughout the depth of soil, is mixed with a small number of flint flakes which show the usual signs of manual flaking. If, as seems probable, these are Neolithic remains, the area must have been in occupation five or more thousand years ago.'* Although the pottery mentioned appeared to be medieval contained within un-stratified material, it does lend weight to the fact that the land has been in use for millennia.

There can be little doubt that some sort of settlement existed at Beckett during the Roman and Saxon periods. Indeed, we know of a Roman presence in two locations on the border of the park. (See Watchfield Chronicle). We also know that a settlement existed during the Saxon period, and whereas I can find no documentary evidence as yet that gives any detail, it must be the case as Beckett has its own separate entry in the Domesday Book.



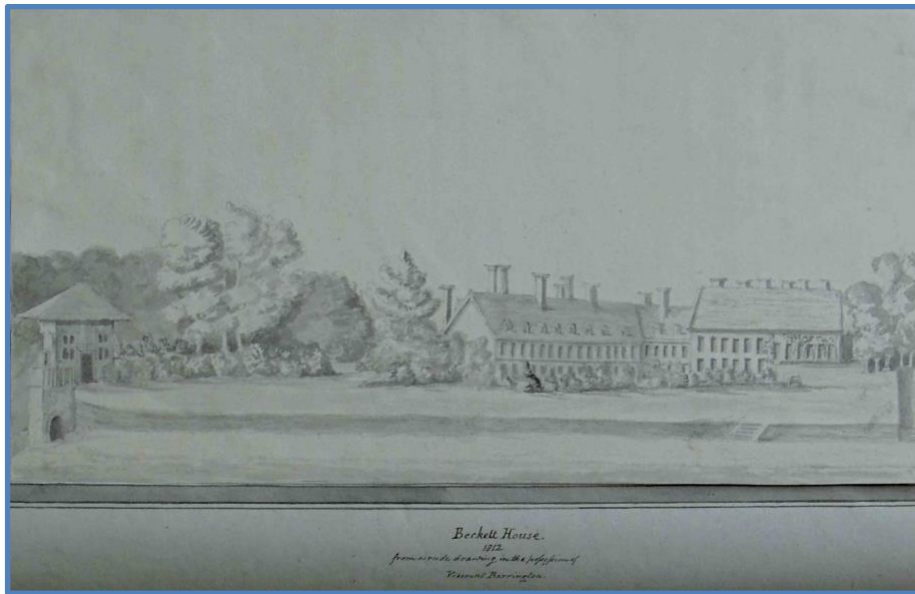
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The flints were found in the area to the right of Beckett House  
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After the defeat of the Saxon army at Hastings in 1066, the invading Norman, King William, wanted to know just what he had conquered and how much it was worth. At Christmas 1085, he commissioned the great survey of England. Because it recorded everything, it meant that there was no escape for anyone from taxes, hence bringing doom and gloom, and its name, Domesday Book. The survey was carried out during 1086-7 and the King's Commissioners also visited Becote (Beckett). The entry is headed; 'The Land of the Count of Evreux,' and states; 'The count himself holds Beckett. 2 free men held it of King Edward in alod (freehold) as 2 manors. It was then assessed at 5 hides, now at 2 hides and 4 acres. There is land for 4 ploughs. In demesne are 2 ploughs and 2 villains and 13 bordars with 1.5 ploughs, and 100 acres of meadow less 7. It was worth £4; and now the same.

So, before 1066, not only was Beckett a village in its own right, but it was held by two freemen as two separate manors. But after Hastings, the new Norman King gave Beckett to one of his supporting nobility, William, the Count of Evreux. The Victoria County History informs us that William in turn gave it to the Priory of Noyon, France, which was dedicated to St Evroul. Later, William's successor, Simon, confirmed that the Priory still had possession of Beckett in the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. They seem to have held on to it a little longer as VCH notes that the Priory received a 'Quit-Claim', in 1202 from Gilbert Martel for five hides of land at Beckett, which is a deed that relinquishes any rights over a particular piece of land. It's interesting to note that at this time, the English Plantagenet, King John, wrote a mandate which was delivered to the Sheriff of Oxford. This document has survived and is dated 1204 and dispatched from Beckett. What would King John have been doing at Beckett? The most probable answer is hunting game. Worthy of note though, is that only 11 years later, this particular King was to go on to sign the most famous of all documents in English legal history, Magna Charter.

Although, as yet, we have no documentary or archaeological evidence for support, it would be logical to assume that at this period, a substantial building must have stood somewhere close to the Village of Beckett. It would be difficult to imagine that the likes of King John would have stayed at anything less than befitting his high status. I suspect that this particular building would have also been the foundation for the high-status dwelling that would follow in subsequent centuries, up to the turbulent events of the Civil War in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.



The first Beckett House. It's likely that the foundations of a much earlier building lay somewhere in among this huge dwelling. (Picture courtesy of Antony Alderson)

Villata de Burscote (Beckett)	
2s 0d	de Roberto Dangewyle Lucia ux' eius
2s 6d	Rogero Cras Agn' ux' eius
12d	Johanne filio eius
12d	Thoma filio eius
12d	Alicia filia eius
2s 0d	Willelmo Cras Mat' ux' eius
26d	Johanne Cras Alicia ux' eius
12d	Nicholao filio eius
12d	Johanne filio eius
12d	Alicia Jaffrays
16d	Johanne Pentond Alicia ux' eius
2s 0d	Thoma Perkyn Cristina ux' eius
18d	Johanne Cartere Cristina ux' eius

The tenure of the Manor of Beckett then continued with nearly two centuries of those who took on its name; firstly, with Walter de Beckett, succeeded by John. In

1367 John's younger brother Walter, succeeded in 1375 by his son also called John. Then follows Oliver de Beckett who passed it on to yet another John.

The next readily available documentation that exists during this period concerns the village itself and is a valuable source of information. The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381, provide us with a little more on medieval Beckett, due mainly to the dedicated research of Carolyn Fenwick and her findings published in the British Academy Records of Social and Economic History. A certain amount of luck was involved here as the original rolls that still exist and that contain the information for the Shrivenham Hundred are badly damaged, so much so that the information for Shrivenham village itself is illegible. However, some of the Beckett entries are still readable but a little lacking in detail. Broadly speaking, these Poll taxes were introduced by Parliament as a means of including more people who were liable to pay. The collections of 1377 and 1379 included all persons of 14 years of age and older. People who were classed as poor were exempt. Like all taxes, they were very unpopular and even the raising of the minimum age to 15 was not enough to prevent the historic 'Peasants Revolt' that occurred after the 1381 collection. The following is what remains legible on the roll of 1381. The amount to be paid in shillings and pence is on the left. The male name is followed by his wife and children ie, Roger Cras, his wife Agnes, sons John, Thomas & daughter Alice.

The above then, represents the little community of Beckett for the year 1381. There may well have been others who were classed as too poor to qualify for taxation, but they were not listed on the Returns.

Around this period, and in the ground between the farms Home Leaze and Broad Leaze, (SU 2563 - 8967) ancient farmers had laid out a field system of strips and ditches. In an aerial photograph taken in 1935 the field systems can clearly be seen (see below) Also, clearly visible are three circles. At first glance one could be forgiven for thinking that they may be some kind of round barrow from the Bronze Age. This particular type of circle is common in the area. In Longcott, barely a mile from this spot is three very similar and in fields near Highworth there are many. Excavations carried out in some of them resulted in no evidence to suggest what they might have been. Popular opinion is that they are mediaeval and were most likely some kinds of animal enclosure. They were certainly not substantial earthworks as no trace of them is now visible. There is also another theory, but lacking in evidence at the moment, they could be the site of mediaeval Windmills.



Dated 9/11/1935. The edge of Broad Leaze Farm is in the top left. Photo courtesy of Ashmolean Museum Picture Library, Allen Aerial Photo Archive AA809. Neg AA1070



Above. The area as it is today. Broad Leaze is in the bottom right



Above. What remains of Homeleaze Farm today is in the top right