

The Seventeenth Century

Two Anglo Saxon Charters inform us when and how a local Abbey came to own most of the land at Watchfield. Charter number S93 dates from 727AD and informs us that the Saxon King, Aethelbald granted lands to St Mary's at Abingdon. We know that Watchfield must have had a thriving Saxon settlement at this date, by studying the excavations that took place under and by the by-pass. The quality of grave goods discovered suggest that a wealthy and important community was well established. However, it was a complicated period with regard to land ownership, and there is still much to be discovered. Charter S183 notes that more of Watchfield's land was granted to the Abbey in 821AD. This accounts then for why we have no specific '*Lord of the Manor*' until after what became known as the Dissolution in 1539, when Henry VIII confiscated all the landholdings and wealth of all the Abbeys in England.

We are fortunate to have discovered a good deal more about this period very recently and I am greatly indebted to Chris Sidney for his help in passing information to me during his family research. To start from just after the Dissolution:

John Malte was granted the Manor of Watchfield in 1541 by King Henry VIII. He was a Tailor and made clothing for the King. He lived in London and there is no evidence that he ever resided at Watchfield. Malte was also granted the nearby Manor of Uffington. Malte had an illegitimate daughter named Awdrey, but there was a rumour that she was in fact the daughter of King Henry VIII after a dalliance with Joane Dingley a Laundress. With John Malte agreeing to accept Awdrey as his own, it might explain why the King made such a generous gesture of so much land to a mere Tailor.

John Malte died in December 1546 and in his Will he left the Manor of Watchfield to his daughter when she was about 14. Awdrey went on to marry John Harrington, a member of an ancient and respected family. Harrington was well connected; Queen Elizabeth I for instance, being his son's Godmother. So, the question arises as to why such a union would have taken place between a man of Harrington's stature and a tailor's daughter? Perhaps the rumour of her father actually being the King may not have been such a well-kept secret.

At this point in the timescale, a number of complicated legal procedures called '*Common Recovery*' took place. This was a legal loophole available at the time, designed to remove restrictions from property documents and thus enable it to be transferred more quickly and cheaply. But the process can cause problems for the historical record and is probably responsible for the enigmatic listing of, '*Harrington, George Henage & Elizabeth,*' in 1568.

What is certain is that Hester, the daughter of John Harrington and Awdrey, was the legal owner of the Manor of Watchfield in 1568 having reached the age of 15. It was common for the estate of a woman to pass to her husband upon marriage,

hence the title of the Manor passed to William Stubbes when she married him in London in 1574.

William Stubbes and his wife Hester were likely to be the first manor owners to actually live at Watchfield. There are several documents that refer to William as, '*of Watchfield,*' which date to the 1590's. It would be tempting to think that they set up home at West Mill after their wedding in 1574, but we have no documentary evidence to substantiate that as yet. However, we do have their Wills; William's dated 1630 and Hester's 1639. The Wills gave little clue as to what or where the house might be located but both the Inventories attached to the Wills provided the answer.

It became clear from studying the Inventories and matching up the rooms with the earliest part of West Mill House, that the western end of it was the house of William and Hester Stubbes. William died first in 1630 at the ripe old age of 87, leaving the Manor of Watchfield back in the hands of Hester.



West Mill House

It was William & Hester's daughter Susan who provided the next owner of the manor. In the opening years of the 17th century, Susan had run away from an arranged marriage that was due to take place, probably at Shrivenham, and secretly married a man called Robert Tatton. Her father described Tatton's behaviour as, '*by various practises, intised and gotten away my daughter and maryed her.*' The marriage produced at least two sons, George and Thomas, and it was grandson Thomas who inherited the manor from his grandmother Hester just before her death in 1639.

For a century, the manorial rights of Watchfield had remained in the family line of Hester Stubbes. But it was Thomas Tatton who would change that by selling it fairly quickly to Sir Humphry Forster of Aldermarston, as by 1643 it was no longer in his possession. By the end of the English Civil War Humphry Forster had big

problems with his lands being sequestered due to his support of the King. But in February 1648 he managed to sell the Copyhold of West Mill and the premises to William Fairthorne and his son Edward for a total of £770. There are two Indentures within BRO Ref: D/Epb - T46 that confirm this.

The procedure for common recovery would seem to have been used again for the next change, as in 1660, it is recorded that Margaret Pratt and Oliver Pleydell owned the manor. This appears to be something of an enigma. Until more information comes to light it may be plausible to suggest that they acted as the common vouchees in the process, as it passed into the hands of the Willoughby's of Bishopstone, namely Christopher, around the same time.

The Manor remained with the Willoughby family for nearly a century. After Christopher came cousin George and it finally came into the possession of Henry Willoughby. During this time there is no evidence that any of them occupied West Mill House. However, it is likely that the occupier of the property was in the employ of the Willoughbys.

In 1757, the Right Honourable Henry Fox, a Wiltshire MP, was struggling with a turbulent political lifestyle, but opted out of mainstream politics by accepting the office of Paymaster General. Whereas it removed him as a contender for serious high office, it placed him in an ideal position to make a lot of money. This may account for why he purchased Manors such as Watchfield and nearby Bishopstone. It may also account for the commissioning of, '*A survey of the Manor and Tithing of Watchfield by Francis Howard Willington.*' This splendid map details the entire layout of the village and surrounding fields and is dated 1758. But there is no evidence as yet that Fox ever resided at Watchfield, but rather had a Bailiff or Steward to handle the purchase and the running.



The Map Survey of 1758 by Francis Howard Willington

Henry Fox was raised to the House of Lords as Baron Holland of Foxley in the County of Wiltshire on 16th April 1763. Upon his death on 1st July 1774, the

title was passed to his eldest son Stephen, who also inherited his land holdings including the Manor of Watchfield. However, his title and inheritance was very short lived, as he too died only 5 months later in December.

The evidence that we have to date confirms that by around 1785 the Manor was purchased by the Barrington Estate centred at Beckett. However, this leaves a gap of around 10 years from the death of Stephen Fox to the acquisition by Barrington. In the Enclosure Award document for Watchfield dated 1789, it states that the interests of Lord Holland were represented by another person as he himself was under the age of 21. We also have confirmation of this by an Indenture dated 10th December 1774 (WRO 11/394) that the Right Hon Lady Holland and the Hon Charles James Fox were Trustees and Guardians of Henry Richard Lord Holland, an infant, the only son and heir of the Right Hon Stephen Lord Holland.

So now we are able to produce a list of the Lords of the Manor of Watchfield as follows:

1541	John Malte
1546	Awdrey Malte
1568	Hester Harrington
1574	William Stubbes
1630	Hester Stubbes
1639	Thomas Tatton
1642	Sir Humphrey Forster
1664	The Willoughby's
1757	Henry Fox
1774	Stephen Fox
1775	Henry Richard Fox
1785	Lord William Barrington (2nd Viscount)

In the middle 17th century we start to have more documentation available to enlighten us on life in the village of Watchfield. We know that it had a Chapel and we also know of some of its furnishings. An Inventory dated 20 June 1633 (BRO. D/EX151/E/2) describes; *'A Common Table a Carpett a faire Holland Cloth a pewter Flaggon - (illegible), a silver Cupp with a silvoer decant Surplise made with nyne ells and a half fine Holland. Item. A fayre Byble of the largest Volume two Bookes of Comon Prayer with a Chest to putt the Booke and Cloathes in.'*

In this time of strong religious beliefs, the Chapel Wardens were obliged to submit papers to their governing body, the Archdeaconry, which were known as Chapel Presentments. These Presentments formed part of the *'Visitation'* whereby part of the Archdeacon's duty was to visit persons and places with a view to maintaining faith and discipline. In modern language, prior to the Visitation the Chapel Wardens were obliged to *'grass up'* any of their Parishioners who were not behaving themselves, so they could be dealt with by the Archdeacon. These Presentments make interesting reading. (BRO. D/A2/C141)

The earliest Presentment from Watchfield, states that all things are conforming to the Chapel with nothing to report and the Chapel Wardens are Thomas Jenner and Anthonie Angell. The Presentment is not dated but the handwriting style and its location within the volume suggests a date of 1630s. Another of similar date reports that all is well by Wardens, William Avenill and Thomas Joyner. Anthony Anger and Thomas Gerring (the latter cannot write and only puts his mark) report that both the Chapel and the Chapel Yard are in good order.

By 1640, more information appears: *'Berks Watchfield Parochia Shrinham. The Presentments of William Weekes and William Vokins, Chapel Wardens of Watchfield in the Parish of Shrinham at the Visitacon holden in Abingdon the 4th day of October, AD 1640, and as followeth: Concerninge the Article Booke to us in charge given we certify you that we have heard it read and we knowe nothings touchinge the Reparation of the Chappell there amiss wither yet touchinge the Bookes and Ornaments, Clergy, Midwives, Physitions, Parish Clerks nor other Church Wardens nor Parishioners worthy of Ecclesiastical cognisance or fornication, but only.....We Present Mistress Mary Blagrove the wiffe of Mr William Blagrove for that she is a Recusante and standeth excoriate else we present.'* This was signed also by William Pounce, the Vicar. Mistress Blagrove is being accused of not conforming religiously and stands condemned. This was a common cry of the time, a time that was on the verge of Civil War.

On a lighter note by today's standards, but serious then, we have on 12 May, 1641, the Presentment of William Weekes and Thomas Gearinge, *'At the Visitation holden at Abingdon before the Right Worshipful Dr Tooker.'* And after again reporting Mistress Blagrove they also added, *'We present Richard Bayly for incontynency with one Mary Austen of our towne beinge a poore simple mayd, he having a wife of his owne and we beseech your worships that he may be punished severely.'* The dictionary meaning of *'continency'* is refraining from sex.

The year 1642 saw the start of hostilities that became known as The English Civil War, where Englishman fought Englishman, and worse still, Father fought Son and Brother fought Brother. By 1646 the fighting had largely finished but politically the country was in turmoil. Unfortunately, we have discovered nothing as yet in the records that tell us how Watchfield was affected, but its inhabitants must have suffered. We know of fierce fighting that took place in Faringdon, just a few miles away. Certainly, the Chapel records reflect it in that the Presentations don't start again until 1668.

But in many reports, there is little to say, ie; Visitation of 30 March, 1668. Church Wardens Thomas Stratton & Richard Jenner report that; *'Our Chapel is in good repair and we have furniture and books and all other things in good order. There are no persons in our Parish but what comes to Church to hear Divine Service.'*

In 1675, there is only one Church Warden, Anthony Anger, and he reports on 22 April, *'John Haynes and his wife Judith for not coming to Church and not receiving the Sacrement, and not baptising his child. Also Miss Rebecca Blagrove and (illegible) for not coming to Church.'*

Church Warden, William Avenill reports on 3 April 1696; '*John Haynes for not paying his Church tithe. Joyce Allen, Widow. Rebecca Blagrove, Widow and Edward Brookeman, Labourer, for not coming to Divine Service.*'

Four years later John Haynes was still not behaving himself, as Church Warden, Anthony Anger notes; '*John Haynes and his wife Judith for not coming to Divine Service for 6 months and John Haynes also for not paying his rate to our Chapel being one shilling.*' Even after her husband's death, Judith Haynes continues to misbehave as Church Wardens, Henry Gearing and William Young report on 8 April 1700; '*Judith Haynes, Widow, for not paying her Church tax.*'

The Restoration

After the chaos of the Civil War, the restored monarch, Charles II, was in much need of money. Parliament agreed that he must have some form of income and on 19 May 1662, the bill for laying an imposition upon chimney hearths received royal assent. The tax was to serve as a source of income for the king, whereby twice a year, (Michaelmas 29 Sept & Lady Day 25 March) one shilling was to be paid for every fire, hearth and stove within each dwelling. It was intended to be a fair tax in that those with grander properties paid more money. But, like all taxes, it was far from popular. Houses worth less than 20 shillings (£1) in annual rent or containing no more than £10 worth of moveable goods, were exempt, as were the poorest inhabitants of each parish. However, they were obliged to obtain a certificate from numerous sources in order to qualify. The lists that survive provide us today with an insight as to some of the people who were living in Watchfield 350 years ago.

There are three returns for Watchfield held in the County Archives: BRO. MF 652 & 653. Folios 91, 611 & 625. The first is dated, 18 October 1662, and is headed; '*Return made by the Constable of Watchfield of all fire hearths with the money given to the Constable of the Hundred which is due for them by act of Parliament at the feast of St Michael ye Arch Angel.*' (Names in parenthesis I have added.)

Hearths

Richard Franklyn	8
Thomas Young	1
Thomas Blagrove	3
Widow Miles (Elizabeth)	2
Widow Marsh (Mary)	2
Thomas Joyner	5
Widow Stratton (Later Thomas)	3
William Avenill	2
Thomas Young	1
Robert Weeks	1
Isaac Young	2
Robert Anger	2
William Vokins	3

Robert Barrett	1
Widow Gearing	2
Anthony Anger the elder	2
Robert Alder	4
Edward Gearing	1
Richard Joyner	2
William Fairthorn	4
Thomas Lawrence	2
Thomas relative of Tho Young	2
Henry Gearing	1
William Weeks	3
John Young	1
Edward Young	1
Those that pay not to Church or poor	
Walter Bennett	3
Mary Blaggrave	1
John Anger	1
Robert Gearing	1
Anthony Anger Junior	2
John Hedges	1

Seventy Hearths

Given to Mr Christopher, London Constable of the Hundred, the sum of £3.10.

The other two returns are very similar with regards to the inhabitant's names and only alter in the number of hearths by one. The return of Michaelmas 1663 records only one extra person, taking the number of hearths from 70 to 71. The heading on that return states; *'A prompt return made by Robert Alder a Constable, and Anthony Anger and Thomas Stratton inhabitants of our tything of Watchfield being a Levy of all fire hearths within our liberty, and also agreeable in number of hearths to such persons particular not given in under their hands.'*

The first entry on all the Hearth Tax Returns cannot fail but to attract attention; Richard Franklyn, who has been taxed for eight hearths! On the 1662 return his name is followed by Thomas Young with a modest one hearth. On the next return Richard Franklyn still heads the list followed by Thomas Young, but he is described as; *'ye Miller.'* However, the last return shows; *'Richard Franklyn and Thomas Young ye Miller... 9 hearths.'* This clearly implies that there is an association between them. However, it's an implication that creates more questions than is answered.

Tythingmen of the 17th century

It was the function of the Tythingman to act like a modern-day Policeman. The origins of the title are said to have begun in the Saxon era with King Alfred the Great who insisted that the landowners (Thanes) keep their Tything (10 families) orderly. These groups would meet regularly to discuss common concerns and provide a mechanism whereby criminals within these family units would be delivered to the Thane to be dealt with. The head of this group was the Tythingman. The system slowly developed over the centuries and gave us the legal system as we know it today, the Tythingman's duties eventually being taken over by the Police Force.

From the Court Manor Books (BRO MF283) some of the Tythingmen of Watchfield were:

Thomas Browning	1600 approx
Thomas Gearing	1610
Robert Alder	1610
William Vokins	1622
Edward Stratton	1622
Edward Fairthorn	1626 - 1629
William Vokins	1626 - 1629
Thomas Joyner	1626 - 1629
Thomas Gearing	1626 - 1629
John Gearing	1626 - 1629
Thomas Anger	1640's
William Fairthorn	1652 - 1655
William Vokins	1652 - 1655
Thomas Jenner	1652 - 1655

Some of the wealthier inhabitants of the village went to the trouble of making a Will. Here are some of the 17th century Wills with a general summary of who benefitted from them and the source from which the information came.

William Blagrove. 1644. PROB11/196

'And my body to be buried in the Parish Church of Shrivenham near the place where my predecessors have been buried.' Beneficiaries: Ann his wife. Children; Thomas (eldest), William, John, Charles, Colmer, James, Ann (Executor). Overseers of the Will were his Brother-in-Law, Mr Thomas Stratton and his two Brothers, John Blagrove and Francis Blagrove.

Thomas Anger, Yeoman. 1646. PROB 11/195

Wished to be buried in the Church Yard at Shrivenham. Beneficiaries: His wife Anne. Sons Thomas (Executor) and Arthur. Daughter Anne Greenaway and her son Anthony. Overseers of the Will, his Brother Robert Anger and his Cousin Thomas Gearing. Witnesses include William Blagrove and Thomas Jenner.

Thomas Jenner, Yeoman. 1650. PROB 11/ 212

This is Thomas Jenner the Elder. To be buried in the Church Yard of Shrivenham. He gave to his son William (Executor), *'My two messuages or tenements in Shrivenham aforesayed called or known by the several names of Jentyles and Avynings and two-yard lands and a half thereunto belonging.'* Beneficiaries: Sons, Thomas (eldest), Richard, Edward. Daughters, Judith (youngest), Johanne Lane, wife of William Lane. Margaret Weekes, wife of Robert Weekes. Elizabeth Mundy, wife of John Mundy. Her maid servant Agnes Davies. Overseers of the Will are Thomas Blagrove, Gent; Edmund Jacob, Yeoman; and Thomas Gearing. Witnesses are Thomas Gearing and Edward Gearing.

Robert Weekes, Yeoman. 1653. PROB 11/229

This is Robert Weekes the Elder. To be buried in the Church Yard at Shrivenham. Beneficiaries: Grand Son Robert Weekes (Executor). Grand Daughters Margaret Weekes and Margery Weekes. Mentioned in poorly surviving text are Thomas Jenner, William Weekes and Richard Bayly. (The same Richard Bayly reported by the Church Wardens in 1641 for having an affair with Mary Austen ?) The Will is witnessed by William Nash and Tymothy Strong.

Elizabeth Fairthorne, Widow. 1654. PROB 11/232

'And my body to be buried in the Parish Church of Shrivenham unto the place where Edward Fairthorne my husband was buried that is in the Chancell near and of the Millers next unto Watchfield.' Beneficiaries: Her son William Fairthorne (Executor). Her Brother Thomas Seymour. Her Daughters: Mary Cox the wife of John Cox of Coleshill; Anne Cox, the wife of Thomas Cox of Bourton; Eleanor Jenner wife of Thomas Jenner of Watchfield; Susanna Lyall the wife of Thomas Lyall the younger of Bishopstone; Margaret Lawbald, the wife of Thomas Lawbald, Clarke of Shrivenham. Grand Children: Robert Aldworth and Anne Gearing. And also; *'My Man Walter Kenneth, the sum of £10 as a gift from me. And to those servants who shall happen to be in the house at my death I give unto them 2 shillings apiece.'* The Overseers of the Will are John Cox of Coleshill and Thomas James of Watchfield. Witnesses William Pound, Minister and Susanna Willis.

Robert Anger, Yeoman. 1656. PROB 11/255

Asks that he be buried in Shrivenham Graveyard. Beneficiaries: His wife Margaret in that she can have; *'The use of my Chamber over the Hall, and the use of the Hall Kitchen and other houses and Barkside'* His sons Henry (eldest and Executor), Robert, Anthonie and John (youngest), and his daughter Margaret. Also his other daughters Katherine, the wife of Andrew Hathawaite and Anne, who is the wife of Richard Deane. Anne's daughter also called Anne. The Overseers of the Will are Thomas Blagrove and Anthonie Anger who also witness the signing of the Will along with Thomas Gearing.

Thomas Blagrove, Gentleman. 1682. PROB 11/371

Beneficiaries: Daughter Mary (Executor) property in Watchfield, Shrivenham, Ashbury and Swindon after the death of his wife Rebecca. Grand Son John

Saunders, Daughter Sarah, the wife of Thomas Saunders. Grand Daughter, Eleanor Saunders.

Henry Anger, Yeoman. 1682. PROB 11/371

Beneficiaries: His wife Marrian. His Brother John Anger and his son Henry in the first instance followed by his other son Robert. Elizabeth Huse, wife of William Huse of Watchfield and Mary Anger her sister. His own sister Anne Deane, her son Richard and her daughters, Mary, Anne and Elizabeth. John Young the son of Samuel Young of West Mill. His kinsman Anthony Anger the Smith. His friends, Isaac Young the Elder and John Colins, both of Watchfield, are the Overseers of his Will. Witnesses are Thomas Young, John Stibbs and Mathew Neale.