

The Manor of Watchfield

The evidence so far by Neil B. Maw

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.

John 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 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 is 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 14. The same legal process was probably carried out in order for Hester to pass the title of the Manor to her husband 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.

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 Humphrey Forster of Aldermarston, as by 1643 it was no longer in his possession. Forster was still in possession of it in 1650 as attested by legal documents in the possession of the late Derek Luker of Oak Road, Watchfield.

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. (see page XX). But there is no

evidence as yet that Fox ever resided at Watchfield, but rather had a Trustee to handle the purchase and the running.

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 1800 the Manor was purchased by the Barrington Estate centred at Beckett. However, this leaves a gap of over 20 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. This would strongly suggest that Henry Vassal Fox, the son of Stephen Fox had inherited the manorial title, he being only 16 years old at that time.

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| 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 Vassal Fox |
| 1800 | Lord Barrington |

The above information is a vast improvement on what was previously known about the Manor of Watchfield. As more information comes to light, I will continue to update the story. My thanks go to Chris Sidney for providing the relevant information during his family tree research.