

The Manor of Watchfield

After the Dissolution

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 and grateful to Chris Sidney for his help in sharing information from 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 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, several complicated legal procedures called '*Common Recovery*' took place. This was a legal loophole available at the time, designed to remove restrictions or entails 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

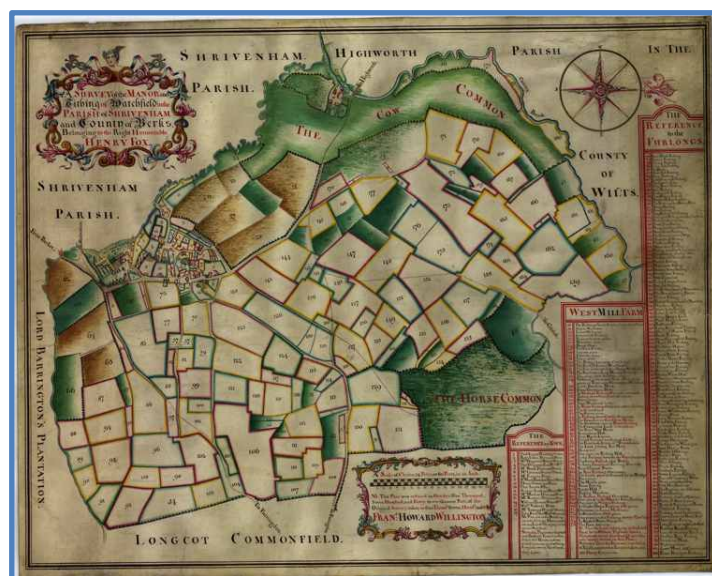
It was William & Hester's daughter Susan who provided the next owner of the manor. In the opening years of the 17th century, Susan had run away from an arranged marriage that was due to take place, probably at Shrivenham, and secretly married a man called Robert Tatton. Her father described Tatton's 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 quickly to Sir Humpfry Forster of Aldermarston, as by 1643 it was no longer in his possession. By the end of the English Civil War Humfry 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, and there are two Indentures within BRO Ref: D/Epb - T46 that confirm this. However, this was only for the Mill

and he sold the rest of the Manor, that is West Mill Farmhouse and everything else to Sir George Pratt at Coleshill, but we don't have the documentary evidence of that transaction. But we do have the Indenture dated 19th March 1673, (BCA. D/EPB/T45) whereby Jane Pratt, the widow of Sir George, sold the Manor of Watchfield to Christopher Willoughby for £3000. There are other names attached to the sale including Oliver Pleydell of Shrivenham, but they are lenders of the money to Willoughby.

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.

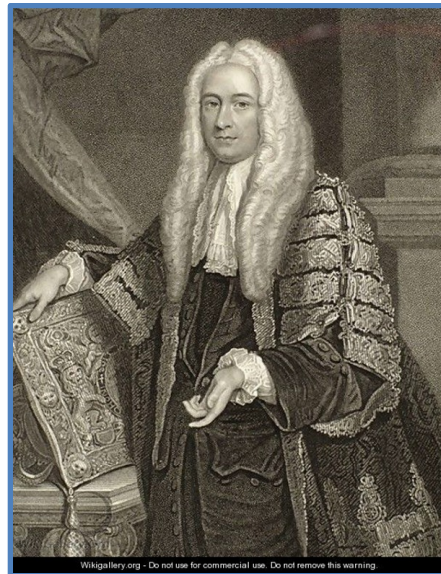
In 1757, the Right Honourable Henry Fox, a Wiltshire MP, was struggling with a turbulent political lifestyle, but opted out of mainstream politics by accepting the office of Paymaster General. Whereas it removed him as a contender for serious high office, it placed him in an ideal position to make a 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 yet that Fox ever resided at Watchfield but rather had a Bailiff or Steward to handle the purchase and the running. The map was discovered at West Mill farmhouse which is significant in that it became the Manor House.



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 were very

short lived, as he too died only 5 months later in December. (Below. Portrait engraved by Henry Robinson from a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds).



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 stated 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 can 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
1643	Sir George Pratt
1673	The Willoughby's
1757	Henry Fox
1774	Stephen Fox
1775	Henry Richard Fox
1785	Lord William Barrington (2nd Viscount)