

The Rectory Manor of Shrivenham

By Neil B. Maw



The site of the Rectory Manor House – now Shrivenham House

The Victoria County History (VCH) states that William Pleydell of Coleshill by a lease from the Abbot in 1535, held the Manor or Rectory and the Demesne lands (Owned by the Crown or the Manor Lord) that belonged to Cirencester Abbey at Shrivenham. This information clearly came from the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, that was a survey ordered by King Henry VIII, of every religious institution in England and Wales. It was a complete inventory carried out in 1535 of ecclesiastical wealth, one year before the Dissolution of the Monasteries began, as he seized that wealth. It's highly likely that the Pleydells held the Rectory many years previous to this. They were a long-established gentry family, well respected and some of them legally trained and proficient. They had not been involved in political rebellion, were generally non-controversial, loyal to the Crown with steady finances from sheep farming on a large scale. They were just the type of family with whom the Abbey's administrators could rely upon to collect the tithes that were legally due to them, hence they were the Lay Rectors. The Rector paid the Abbey in cash, the amount agreed in their lease. Hence

the farm belonging to the Rectory was sometimes called a Fee-farm. The tithes payable by law in force at the time, were due from the entire ecclesiastical parish. The village of Watchfield next to Shrivenham, although the Demesne lands were held by the Abbey at Abingdon, historically they did not hold the Rectory of Shrivenham Parish. The same was the case for other landowners within the parish. Therefore, Watchfield lands were subject to payment of the Great Tithes. This also applied to Beckett and Bourton, so the amount due would have been very large and lucrative. This meant that the Rectory Manor at Shrivenham was not just a landholding but an ecclesiastical power base.

As the Lay Rector the Lord of the Rectory Manor had considerable powers and the significance of this has diminished from historical memory over the long period from when it was active. The Rector was the representative of the Abbey, responsible for collecting the Great Tithes which was ten percent of the production of Wheat, Barley, Oats, Hay, Timber and other produce arising from the ground. They also farmed the Glebe lands that were assigned to support the Rector i.e. themselves. This included fields, meadows and buildings. The house occupied by the Lay Rector was often called a Parsonage, a name that over time had multiple meanings from the house of the Rector to the place where the rectoral tithes are due. In the earlier mediaeval period the tithes were literally collected as produce that would be stored in Tithe Barns. There is a well-known, very large one near Shrivenham in Great Coxwell that still survives.

(Below 1) The barns would have been strategically placed for the convenience of the Bailiffs to reach, and is without doubt the reason why in 1635 John Pleydell specifically put in his Will the bequest of money for distribution to the poor of Shrivenham that: *"No money should be given to anyone that shall be known to be a breaker of hedges, a stealer of corn out of the fields or otherwise vehemently suspected to be a burglar or privy stealer of corn out of barnes."* (SHA Listing N1387). We know where the large Rectory barn in Watchfield was located, and it's likely there was a large barn at the Rectory Farm of Shrivenham that is modern day Sandhill Farm. (Below 2. See SHS Listing N995). The collection of Tithes in produce legally ended in 1836 with the Tithe Commutation Act, which replaced all remaining tithes with a monetary payment called 'Corn Rent.' After 1836 no parish could continue collecting produce.



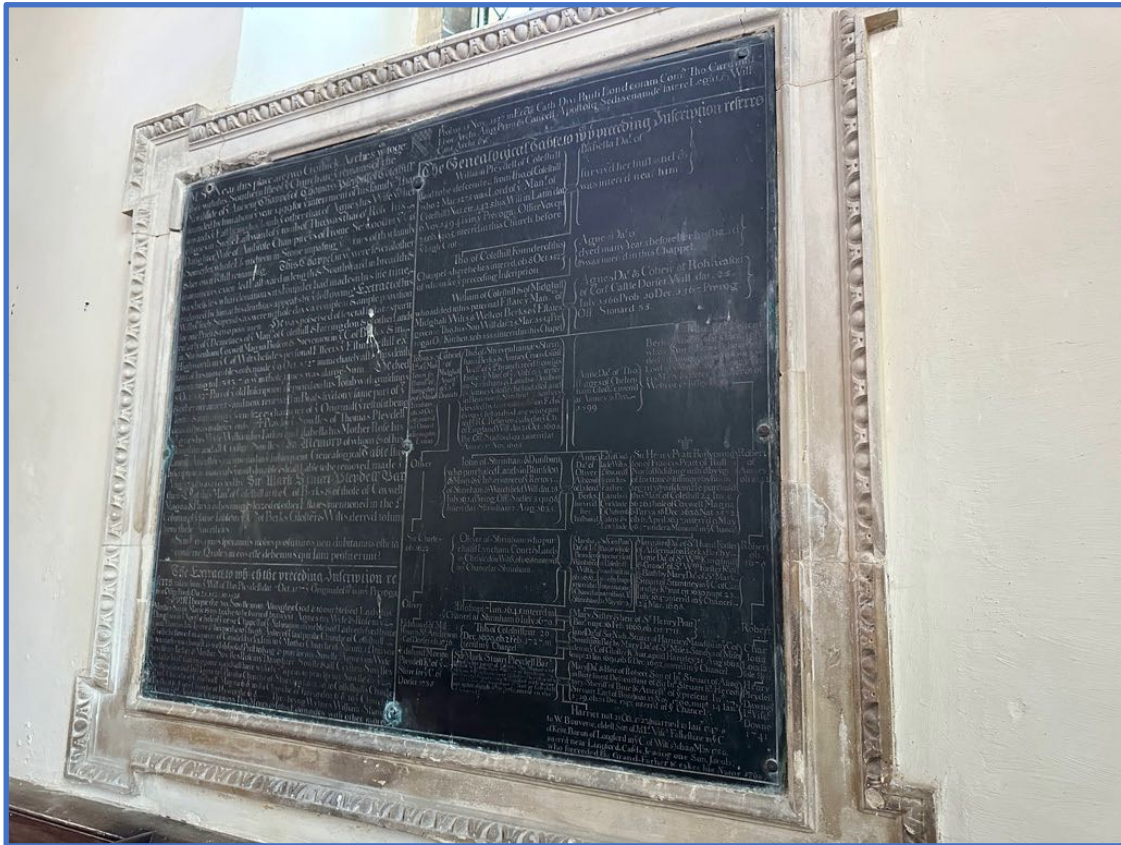
The Rectory was also responsible for paying a stipend, a fixed sum of money to the Vicar, who also received the small or lesser tithes. The Rector could appoint who should be the Vicar. The Rector was also responsible for the maintenance of the fabric of the church but in particular the Chancel. However, he had no authority at all on the spiritual matters of the church; that was the responsibility of the Diocese. And this is where it can be confusing. There are many 16th and 17th century Wills of Shrivenham people who left small monetary legacies to the '*Mother church of Sarum.*' This was the Diocese, the spiritual administrators who were located at Salisbury. The fabric, bricks and mortar lay in the hands of the Rectory, the Abbey of Cirencester. The Lay Rectory stayed with the Pleydell family right up into the 20th century. However, at the Dissolution in 1536 the Pleydells lost their lease from the Abbey and it's likely that many years followed of confusion and chaos as the King's administrators gradually dismantled their affairs. But eventually they somehow managed to get the lease back. The VCH recorded that they had done so in 1585 and this might account for why the Vicar George Ellys, was maintaining the Chancel at his own expense (SHS Listing N395). He then had what seemed to be the arduous task of trying to claim the money back from the Rectory.



Much research has been carried out to discover more information on the Shrivenham Pleydells. Documentary evidence confirmed that they occupied a Manor House on the site of what is now Shrivenham House. (SHS Listing N3575). Previously, there must have been a large building, probably on an orientation that faced the main street of the village and accessed via a formal drive that is now the Prince of Wales public house rear entrance. (Below with AI). This prime spot next to the church has likely been monastic land and property from the 12th century from when it belonged to the Abbey at Cirencester. Indeed, the VCH noted that the Abbot had a house at Shrivenham in 1346.



Inside the church of All Saints at Coleshill, the seat of the Pleydell family, there is a large plate on the wall that shows the family tree. (Below). It's likely that it was Sir Mark Stuart Pleydell (1692 - 1768) who commissioned it. He too, was a remarkable man, intelligent and well aware of the historically important role his family had played, and would hopefully continue to play, in local affairs. On this board it is Thomas Pleydell (1525 - 1605) who is listed as, '*of Shrivenham*', and it also notes that he was the first in this line of the family to have quitted the Roman Catholic church and died a member of the Church of England. But that would have been normal at the time, the right thing to do to fall in line with King Henry VIII's Reformation in 1534. The text on the board also states that Thomas, '*received from his father, the Manor of the Abbot of Cirencester in Shrivenham.*' A true demonstration of loyalty to the Crown and likely one of the reasons the family retrieved their Lay Rectors status.



Towards the end of the 16th century it was inevitable that there would be disputes among the landowners and farmers of the Parish of Shrivenham. An attitude of understanding that if the King could help himself to the Monasteries wealth, then why shouldn't they. It was the Rectory Manor Bailiffs who would bear the front line of any disagreement, but the blame would rest on the shoulders of the Lay Rector. In 1605 Thomas Pleydell died leaving his son John to continue the succession. John was clearly eager to stamp his authority on his position as Lord of the Manor and, more importantly, Lay Rector. He too must have had close contacts with the Royal Court because at that same time, Queen Elizabeth granted him a Pardon that has survived in the County Archives. (Below. RBA. D/EPB/F1). It's a beautiful document with an enormous wax seal attached that has been wrapped up to keep it safe by the conservators. It is written in Latin and follows the standard layout for such a document at the time. The pardon covers; felonies, trespasses, transgressions, contempts, riots, routs, unlawful assemblies and all other related offences in which he may have been implicated. It is a general pardon that wipes clean all offences, whether

already prosecuted or merely alleged, and it came from the highest court in the land at the time – the monarch. It placed John Pleydell to full legal standing. And further to add to this process, the VCH stated that in 1606, *a grant of the property (Rectory Manor) in fee was made to Robert Morgan and Thomas Butler, probably in trust for John Pleydell*. This was clearly the use of *Common Recovery*, although it doesn't label it that. But John certainly had full control of the manor by 1615 when he leased two properties in Shrivenham (BCA. D/EPB/T4 Lease of 1615. See SHS Listing N3575). This method would also have removed any troublesome entails or restrictions that might have been attached to his lease. To read a more detailed explanation of how it worked see *SHS Listing N782*.



The process' described above seems to be an extraordinary amount of effort to exert and so here it would be prudent to summarise. As Lay Rector and Lord of the Rectory Manor of Shrivenham, John Pleydell held a legally defined package of powers and obligations under English canon law and manorial custom. These were real, enforceable, and substantial, far beyond mere social prestige. They gave him control over the financial, architectural, and legal life of the parish church, though never the

spiritual authority. Appropriately, the Lay Rector was legally responsible for the upkeep and repairing of the Chancel of the church. The family clearly understood that obligation as two centuries later the Earl of Radnor (Pleydell descent) paid for repairs to the Chancel in 1793. (SHS Listing N1335). Financially, pre-Dissolution, it gave the Rectory Manor absolute authority to collect tithes from the ecclesiastical Parish of Shrivenham, that included, Watchfield and Beckett, but not Bourton – more on this below.

Understanding all the information above may help to solve the long-standing mystery of Shrivenham Parish Church. We know that it was previously cruciform in shape and was completely altered to the large rectangle that it is now. Dr. Jonathan Foyle's opinion of it given recently was that it's construction appears of the Laudian era, referring to the influences of William Laud (Below1. 1573 - 1645). He was a high ranking Bishop in the Church of England, one time Bishop of Bath & Wells, and appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633 by King Charles I. It was he who spread his ideas of the beauty of holiness in the form of places of worship being deliberately simple and rustic to save money. The Tuscan order was associated by Palladio (Famous Architect 1508 -1580) with agricultural buildings, leading to the nickname of the '*Finest Barn in Europe*' ie a rectangle, built like a barn for simplicity. This was at the same time that the famous Inigo Jones was active, who may well have influenced the fine barn at Shrivenham, (and possibly the Summer House at nearby Beckett). It was Laud who wanted communion tables moved from the crossings to the east end of churches the same as cathedrals and raised up to become known as Altars, and that is so at Shrivenham. Inside the church there are arcades in the Nave consisting of three bays and also in the Chancel two bays, all supported by columns of the Tuscan order, and what is significant is that the pillars have entasis which is a swelling to the shaft that corrects what the human eye might perceive as pinched to look perfectly straight. Entasis is characteristic of the early 17th century emphasised by Jonathan Foyle. (Below2.). When we look carefully at St Andrew's church, it becomes clear that it was built cheaply mainly of rubblestone. Dressed Ashlars as quoins are used on the corners as usual for strength, but the rest is local stone.



It would be logical to assume that there must have been some record of the major alterations to the church within ecclesiastical archives. The need to produce a *Faculty*, an ecclesiastical licence to carry out any change to a church structure or fabric, had started in the early 17th century – ironically initiated by William Laud. However, it was patchy and very few survive from that period. An examination of where documents might be found is not encouraging. Previous to 1836 the Archdeaonry of

Berkshire was overseen by the Diocese of Salisbury (*anciently Sarum*). After this date it was moved to the Diocese of Oxford. The Oxfordshire History Centre does still hold some documents for Shrivenham, Berkshire, such as Bishop's Transcripts from 1836 – 1858. However, all of the surviving earlier records were placed with the Royal Berkshire Archives (RBA) at Reading where there are some useful records. For instance, there are a few Penances from the 1630s. There are also numerous volumes of *Instances* and *Causes* from the late 16th and early 17th centuries. These are the records of church courts that were dealing with lawsuits brought by private individuals, and the causes are subsequent actions taken by the diocesan courts. They are written in a mixture of Latin and English and are onerous to read. I have searched some of them for the likely period in the faint hope that maybe somebody at the time in Shrivenham did not like what was happening and started a legal action – nothing yet – but it's an act of desperation and very time-consuming. It's interesting to note that in the Manorial Court records held at the RBA, there are none for the Rectory Manor. It's likely that if any early records survived, they would have been deposited with the Radnor Estate collection but none are there. It is hoped that written evidence may exist in some private archives somewhere yet to be made available. There are no ecclesiastical records for Shrivenham at the W&SHC at Chippenham, Wiltshire

To gather the evidence thus far. Court of Exchequer records held at the National Archives (Ref: E134/27and28Eliz/Mich28) determine that the old, mediaeval, cruciform-shaped church was still in existence in 1585. (See SHS No: N395). Two Penances from 1631 and 1633 (RBA D/A2/C178) contain wording that strongly suggest the alterations to the church must have taken place by then. A vicarial extract from the Shrivenham Burial Register by the late Rosemary Church (page 11) suggests that the alterations to the church took place during the reign of James 1st and finished during the early reign of Charles 1st (1620 – 1630). (SHS Digital Vault). Stylistics. Dr. Jonathan Foyle, well known architectural historian and lecturer at the University of Bath, favours Laudian era, for the reasons explained above.

The source of the historical belief that the church was rebuilt by Lord Craven in 1638, originates from the papers of Capt. F.C. Loder-Symonds of Hinton Waldrist. On a leaf

of parchment dated 1638, there was discovered an acknowledgement by Henry Marten (Junior) on behalf of his father Sir Henry, of the receipt by Thomas Boyland on the 13th June for £320, being the remainder of £500 given by Lord Craven for the repairing of Shrivenham Church. Whereas it may be genuine, it likely refers to just that, repairs, rather than a full rebuild as it simply was not enough money. By comparison to other church builds of the time the approximate cost to carry out the work at Shrivenham would have been around £4000.

All of the above is a credible, evidence-led case to suggest that the alterations to the church took place during the decade of 1620 to 1630. The person who was the main mover was John Pleydell, who not only had the opportunity but also the legal right to do so. Even if the need for a Faculty was necessary it would not have applied to him, he had the absolute authority. He also had the money. It's likely that it started with a problem in the Chancel. Close examination of the east wall of the tower today suggests that the earlier Chancel may well have had a flat roof as there is no sign of any weather moulding on the tower above, whereas the other three facets do. (Below AI). However, it may be that the mouldings were removed in subsequent repairs but there is no clear evidence of that.





We have no documentary evidence to suggest how Rectory Manor was conducting business during the Civil War that began in 1642. It's likely that there was disruption dependent upon where the fighting was the most active at the time. John Pleydell's son Oliver had taken over from him after his death on the 2nd August 1635, and we can only assume that the Manor's Bailiffs had been continuing their tithe collections as normal. Practicality must be the reason why the collection of tithes became a commodity and was regularly traded. Buying the right to collect legal tithes could be lucrative but presented the owner of that right with the problem of collection. To purchase such rights was expensive and consequently took place within the community of those who could afford it, and those transactions created legal documentation. However, at the moment we have no documentation dated from that period.

Within the Radnor collection of documents at the RBA there is a bundle that gives details of deals being carried out with the tithes of Bourton. In January 1630, Roger and William Parson made a deal with John Pleydell and signed a 21 year lease assigning him the rights to the tithes of the Manor of Stainswick. (RBA. D/EPB/T43A). It was owned by Magdalen College, Oxford and had been since the early 15th century. The lease described that that it was in the occupation of John Parson, the brother of

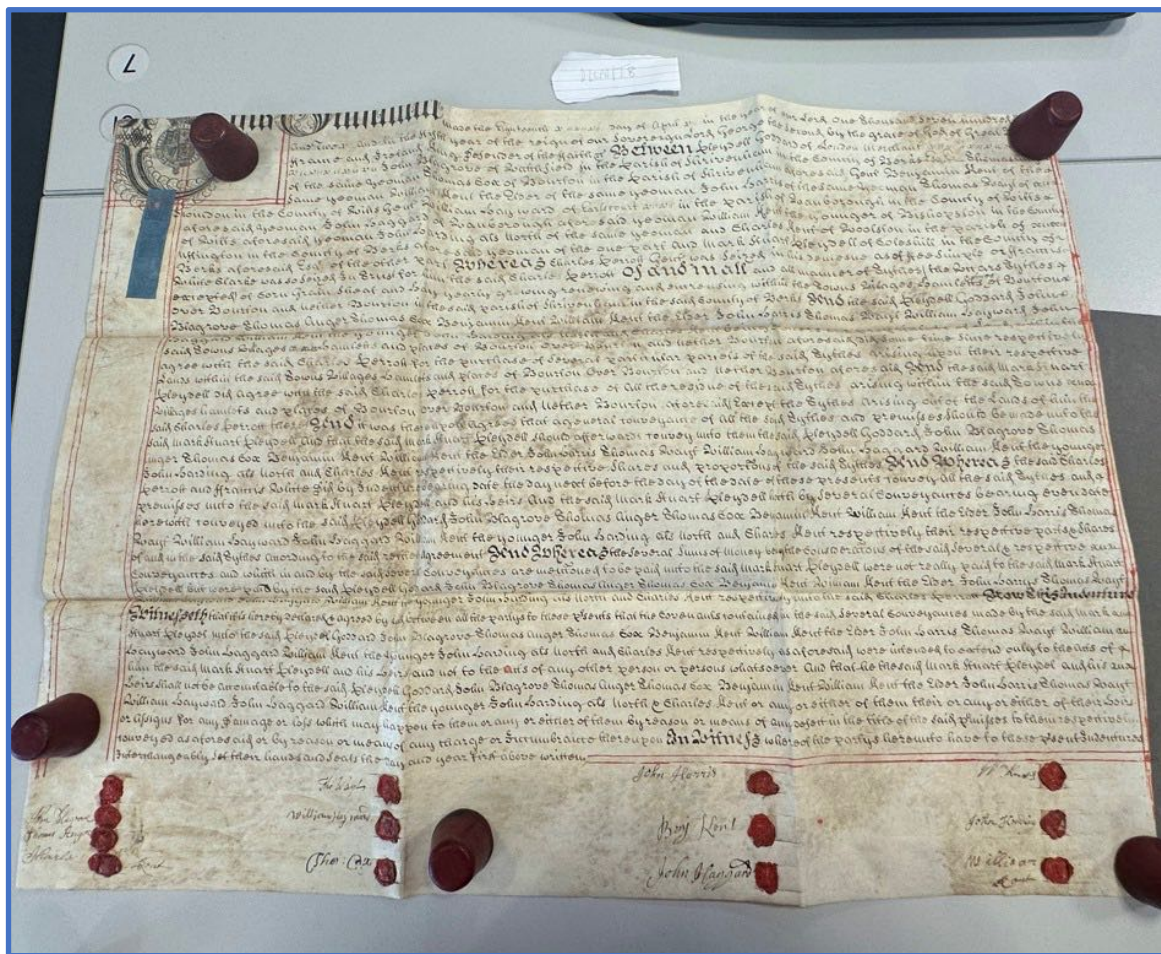
Roger and William, which connects neatly with the death of John in 1628 and the oldest recorded gravestone in St Andrew's churchyard. (Below).



But this information brings to light some details that are lacking within the records of the VCH, that of what happened after the Dissolution of 1536. It may be that Stainswick being owned by Magdalen College had misled the VCH historians away from noting that the Lay Rectory had been sold off separately from within the ecclesiastical parish of Shrivenham, assuming that Bourton Rectory was with the Pleydells of Shrivenham pre-Dissolution. And more documentation exists in the RBA (D/EPB/L1) which explains that in 1653, just after the Parson to Pleydell lease expired, Mary Langton, a widow, gave over to her son William and his wife Katherine, of the Manor of Stainswick, *'All manner of Tythes and Tenths of Corn (etc) growing within, Bourton, Over Bourton and Nether Bourton.'* So at this time, the Langton's were the Lay Rectors for the whole of Bourton. This explains why in 1668 William Langton in his Will left Katherine his *'Rectory and Parsonage of Bourton.'* This bundle of documents can be described as the *'Deeds to the Rectory of Bourton.'* At this time the Langtons had

problems with the line of succession, there being six sons and three daughters. Such were the problems that legal proceedings became necessary. In one statement it was claimed that George Langton had, *'given out in speeches that he will arrest all or any person that shall meddle in the gathering of the tythes and will lay great damages against them and will carry them to goal.'*

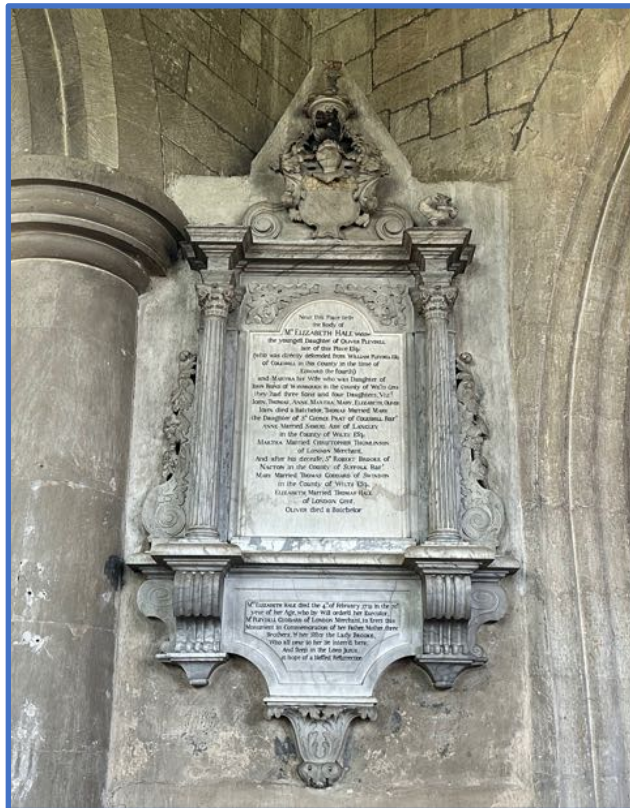
The Langtons left Bourton in the later years of the 17th century and moved just over the county border to Oxford. They took with them the long-running legal dispute over the Rectory of Stainswick. There are numerous references to cases heard in the Court of Chancery, London in the National Archives, and whereas we don't know all the detail we do know the outcome. In March 1732, the legal title to the Lay Rectory of Bourton was in the hands of Charles Perrott, Gent, of Burford. The following month, Charles Perrot sold the Rectoral rights (excluding the Vicarial) to Mark Stuart Pleydell of Coleshill, who's family were the original Lay Rectors, for the considerable sum of £2737.12.0. However, the exchange was not direct, for Mark Pleydell had negotiated a deal with: Pleydell Goddard of London, Merchant; John Blagrove of Watchfield, Yeoman; Thomas Cox of Bourton, Gent; Benjamin Kent of Bourton, Yeoman; William Kent the elder of Bourton, Yeoman; John Harris of Bourton, Yeoman; Thomas Day of Swindon, Gent; William Hayward of Earls court, Wanborough, Yeoman; William Kent the younger of Bishopstone, Yeoman; John Harding alias North of Bishopstone, Yeoman; Charles Kent of Woolstone, Uffington, Yeoman. Between them they paid the price shown above directly to Charles Perrott. Most of the people, if not all, owned the lands to which the tithes applied, so in effect, they were buying the right to collect tithes from themselves. (Below – the final agreement document). Separately, SHS has within the Bourton House collection, documents that deal with Thomas Cox & John Harding (Listing No N1393).



Mark Stuart Pleydell also featured in another bundle of documents in 1715 (RBA. D/EPB/T17). Again it concerned the rights of Tythes and Tenthhs of Corn, Grain, Hay etc, belonging to the Manor of Beckett. The price was £939 and the buyer was Anthony Swymner a Merchant of Bristol. John Barrington had just recently inherited Beckett and received the title of Viscount of Ardglass, and one can only assume that Pleydell would have offered it to him first, being the decent thing to do, especially among the aristocracy. Sir Mark was off-loading his rights to the collection of tithes, preferring the one-off cash up front.

By the beginning of the 18th century the collection of Tithes as a monetary equivalent to the produce was the normal practise. Like all taxes it was unpopular and disputes were common, mainly over the computation of what a produce was worth. For the Pleydells, the latter part of the 17th century was the end of their tenure of Shrivenham Rectory Manor House (Present day Shrivenham House). There is an extremely ornate

monument in St Andrew's church (below) that gives the impression of an end to the Pleydell dynasty of Shrivenham. Sir Mark Stuart Pleydell was the direct descendant of John who had obtained the Pardon from Queen Elizabeth I, but he chose to make his seat at the large family Mansion at Coleshill. And we have seen from the information above that he was not particularly favourable to the tithe system as he had been getting rid of it whenever the chance arose.



Through most of the 18th century the Rectory Manor House at Shrivenham was rented out to numerous people. Tithes were still a separate legal payment and were owed to the tithe owner, the Rector (also called an Impropiator), and not the landlord. Payment of them was enforceable independently in ecclesiastical or civil courts. But in practice, many estates and landowners negotiated tithes within leases. This was especially common on large, well-managed estates. Sir Mark had a great personal interest in the running of his estate at Coleshill, especially agriculturally, and we can be certain that the tithes, where possible, were a composite part of his leases to tenants. But other

landowners in Shrivenham parish were still bound to pay tithes to the Lay Rector which was the Pleydells at Coleshill. However, Bourton for the most part was not as many of the landowners had purchased the Lay Rectory from Sir Mark (Below – AI from a marble bust) in 1732 as explained above. But the name '*Parsonage*' lived on for all of the 19th century and much of the 20th by the name Parsonage Farm at Lower (Nether) Bourton, so called because up to 1810 it was owned by the Pleydells (See SHS Listing N1325).

The Tithe Commutation Act of 1836 abolished tithes in kind and converted them to rent charges. This was the moment when tithes legally became part of the land's financial burden rather than a separate ecclesiastical claim which could no longer be enforced.

