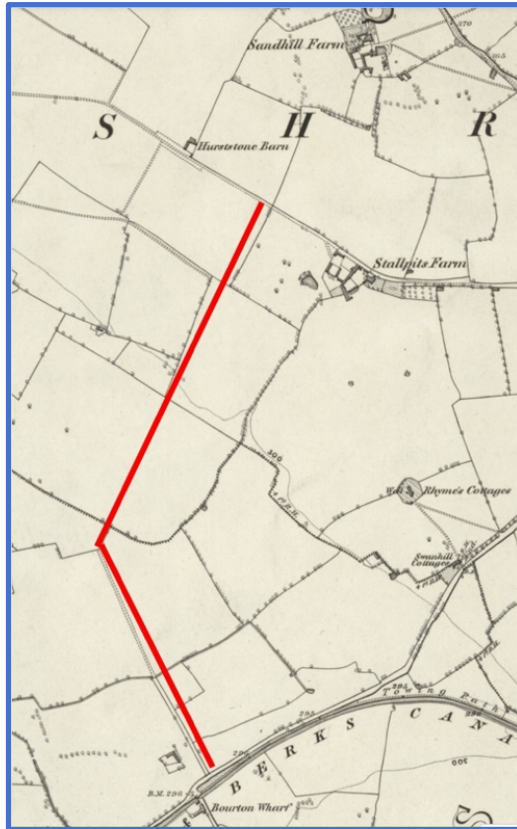


Sandhill Farm, Shrivenham – the Old Rectory Manor

By Neil B. Maw

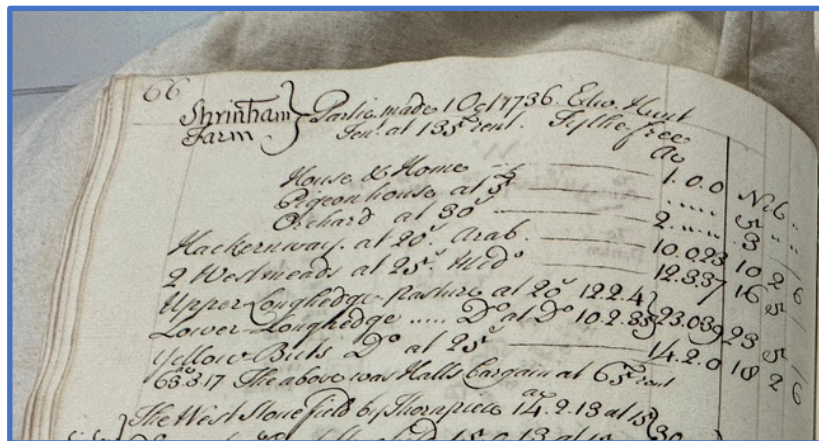
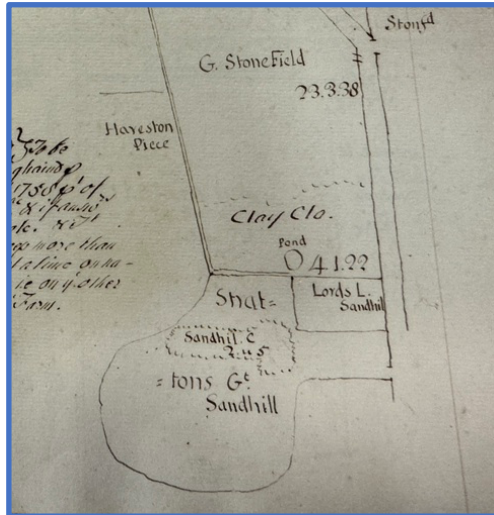
A recent discovery (February 2024) at the Berkshire County Archives (BCA) at Reading has altered the historical record of Sandhill Farm, Shrivenham, significantly. Sometimes new or forgotten information written within original documents can be contained within one sentence. This was the case with an Indenture stored within the Pleydell Estate collection. One of the principal Manors of Shrivenham was known as Rectory Manor. Unlike the Manors of Stallpits, Salop and Beckett, it wasn't known where the seat of Rectory was located – until now. (BCA - D/EPB/T49). It was dated 9th September 1726 and the transaction being recorded was between Mark Pleydell of Coleshill Esq, and John Benwell of Shrivenham, Maltster. He farm lets to him, *'All that the Manor and Site of the Manor of the Rectory of Shrivenham together with all the Buildings, Barns, Stables, Dovehouse, Orchard and other appurtenances.'* The description goes on to include the *'enclosed ground called Hackronway Longhedge and one mead called Westmead and one pasture ground called Yellow Butts.'* The ground called Hackronway Longhedge is puzzling and suggests a road or driftway from the area of Sandhill Farm towards present day Acorn Bridge (Historical Hackron). There is no road there today but the Hundred Map of 1768 shows that there was one then (BCA D/EX52/M1). (Map extracts below).





The road shown on the Hundred Map does not exist today and only came about in the middle of the 17th century to provide access to the fields in the extreme west of the parish but continued on down the slope to join the Swindon Road. We have evidence of this from the enclosure document of 1658 *'There are driftways to be allowed which are not yet set forth'* (See SHS N825 Transcription Page 9).

A Survey book of the Pleydell Estate shows the names mentioned and clearly locates it at Sandhill. Within a list of the type of crops contained in the fields also include *'House & Home'* in one acre of ground. This evidence confirms that the Sandhill Farm of today was once the seat of the Rectory Manor, Shrivenham. (Below both extracts from BCA - D/EPB/E158/1).



The Victoria County History backs this up and informs that at the 'Dissolution' (1539 when Henry VIII confiscated the monasteries) Rectory Manor was held by William Pleydell of Coleshill. The Manor passed down the Pleydell line and we can only assume that a member of that family occupied a house at Sandhill. There are many documents that refer to an Oliver Pleydell of Shrivensham, and his son Thomas. The son of Thomas was Mark Pleydell who would become Sir Mark Stuart Pleydell and resided for most of his life at Coleshill House. When the Indenture above was written he was young and had just taken over the Lordship and hence is referred to as Mark.

The Enclosure document of Shrivensham in 1658 portrays a situation whereby nobody occupied a traditional farm as we would know it today (See SHS N825). Instead of a farmhouse and a multitude of fields surrounding it that made up the farm, the document revealed a system where an individual held small pieces of land scattered in different parts of the parish. There is much

evidence to suggest that from the Norman period, most of the land, although being part of a Manor, was widely dispersed among the tenants, and for two reasons. Firstly, it prevented any one person holding large clusters of land that could become a militia stronghold, and secondly, the land was agriculturally more evenly distributed in quality. The wording of the enclosure document of 1658 makes no reference to Rectory Manor but this is not surprising as the enclosure was brought about by John Wildman who was Lord of the Manors of Salop, Beckett and Stallpits.

The principal house at Sandhill that still stands today, is the red brick, typical Georgian farmhouse. (Below). At the rear it clearly shows marks and scars of being attached to part of a previous building. However, to date there has been no suggestion as to when or by whom the house was built. From the Pleydell collection we now have the answer. In a gathering of documents that were put together to form a small booklet, one of the notes next to a measurement stated, *'The measure of all the land which Mrs Stratton had adjoining to Mr Lydiard's new erected farm house at Sandhill in Shrinham.'* It's dated 1741. (BCA - D/EPB/T49).





A list contained within the Manor Rental documents held in the Berkshire County Archives, under the heading of *'The Messuages'* (Dwellings), show that Mrs Stratton occupied the earlier building that stood at Sandhill Farm before the new one erected by Mr Lydiard. (BCA D/EX52/M1).

A newspaper advertisement from the end of the 18th century provided the information that by then it was a freehold farm. (Bath Chronicle 10th Jan 1799 - below). It was advertised again in late February and yet again in February two years later. (The Sun of London 2nd Feb 1802). But we have yet to discover when it left the ownership of the Pleydell estate and who purchased it. It's likely that it was John Lydiard who was still there in 1768. However, it wasn't unheard of for tenants to build on copyhold land as a legacy for children to inhabit during the term of their lives, but the size of that house makes it unlikely.

BERKS.

To be SOLD by Private Contract,

A Most Desirable FREEHOLD ESTATE,
 known by the name of SAND-HILL FARM, consisting of One Hundred and Twenty-seven Acres, more or less, of excellent Meadow, Pasture, and Arable Land; together with a good Farm-House, and all requisite Buildings, in good repair, and now in the occupation of Wm. Ackerman, tenant at will. The situation of the Estate is particularly convenient, being a quarter of a mile from the village of Shrivenham, 3 miles from Highworth, 5 from Farringdon, and 7 from Swindon.

For further particulars apply personally, or by letter (post paid) to John Baverstock, esq; Marlborough, Wilts.

The tenant will shew the premises.

There is confirmation from the letters of George Merryweather that by 1815, the farm was in the possession of the Barrington Estate at Beckett with Moses Ackerman as the tenant. Therefore, it's likely that it was purchased after 1802 by the trustees of the estate, but no documentary evidence has yet been discovered. (See SHS publication Beckett & The Barringtons for more info on the Trust period). An advertisement in 1840 provided the information that a Mr Giles was leaving, and we can only assume that he took over the farm after Moses Ackerman had been forcibly removed by estate steward, George Merryweather in 1818. But then something must have occurred that prompted extensive activity at the farm. A completely new wing was added to the east end of the 18th century farm building and created an impressive view of an Elizabethan style house facing the road. However, why it was built is not clear, and to add to the enigma, the house bears the coronet and initials of Dowager Lady Elizabeth Barrington, the widow of George Barrington the 5th Viscount. Elizabeth died in 1841 and the tablet on the new wing bears that date, so it may simply have been a memorial to her by her son, William Keppel Lord Viscount Barrington (6th). Also, the size of the farm may have been increased around this period. The sale in 1799 shown above, clearly states that the farm amounted to 127 acres, and yet by 1917, it was 283 acres. When this happened is unknown, but it's possible that when it was purchased by the Beckett Estate, other land was bought with it.





A newspaper article in 1847 carried the story of a barn at Sandhill Farm that had been struck by lightning and set on fire, and this carried the information that Mr Hewer was the occupier. (Bath Chronicle 23rd Sept 1847). The census of 1851 showed that Jane Hewer was the head of the household at the Farm. Her husband Joseph had died a year previously and was buried at St Andrew's churchyard on 28th February 1850, aged 72. The electoral system in that period was different from today in that tenant farmers were included among those eligible to vote. At the court session convened at Faringdon in October 1862, Robert and George Hewer stated that they rented the farm jointly for £520 per annum and that up until Christmas 1857 the farm was in their mother's name and thereafter placed in their names. (Reading Mercury 4th October 1862) The census of 1861 confirmed that situation and Robert and George were listed aged 30 and 28. But by 1871 the census showed that Robert had left the farm and was renting a cottage in Highworth and George had taken over the running of Sandhill. A series of events might suggest that the two brothers had fallen out perhaps? In 1873 and 1874, the newspaper reported George selling animal stock and implements. (Oxford Journal 13th Sept 1873 and North Wilts Herald 21st February 1874) From the summer of 1876, Robert was selling crop, animals and implements. (Swindon Adver 24th July 1876 and 2nd December 1876). The census of 1881 showed that George had moved down the hill half a mile to Stallpits Farm and Robert in a freehold house at Highworth.

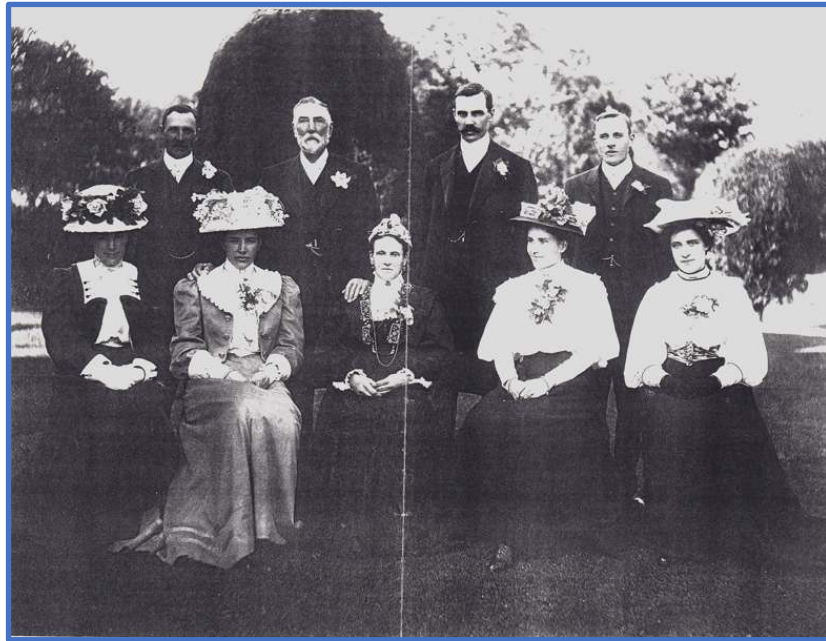
Next running Sandhill Farm was Edwin Hiscock, aged 37, with his wife Mary Martha, aged 28 and his two sons and a daughter. He was still there in 1891 but had added another two daughters

to his family. The Kelly's Directory for 1895 listed Edwin still there but by the next census of 1911, he seemed to have left farming and was living in Lorne Street, Reading with his wife and two of his children. At the farm in 1901 was listed John Snook, aged 65 with his wife Martha, aged 64 and four children. But just before the census of April 1911, the head of the household, John Snook died aged 76 and was buried in St Andrew's churchyard, Shrivenham on 21st January. The Snook family photograph shown below is from the former RMCS Library. It is assumed that the senior man shown is John Snook which helps to date the image to circa 1910 or earlier. Upon his father's death, George Harvey Snook took over as head of the farm, aged 28.



A newspaper advertisement in 1917 described George Snook selling off his herd of young milking dairy cows. (North Wilts Herald 16th Feb 1917) The advert explained that it was purely because of the lack of milkers that he had decided to sell the herd, presumably to take advantage of the high prices that they would attract because of the shortage. It may also have been for another reason. George could have been tipped off that the Barrington Estate was to be sold and the farms were to be auctioned first. Sandhill Farm became Lot 1 in the sale catalogue. At the auction that took place at the Goddard Arms in Old Town, Swindon on 24th September 1917, a newspaper reporter noted that the farm, '*aroused considerable competition.*' However, the reserve price was not reached, and it remained unsold. (Faringdon Adver 29th Sept 1917) George seems to have

made an agreement with Lord Barrington's agents, as he did manage to purchase the farm. The reason this is known is because on 27th June 1932 the farm was sold on account of George being made bankrupt. The mortgagees had forced the sale to recover their money (North Wilts Herald 27/5/1932). A subsequent newspaper article reported on the sale and described that the farm was sold to a Mr J.T. Diment of Ham Court, Bampton, Oxon for £5700. He also purchased the cottages and accommodation land that was offered with the sale. (North Wilts Herald 1st July 1932)



An incident that occurred four years later was noted in the newspaper. Local policeman, P.C. Giles, had discovered 16 head of cattle wandering about and obstructing the public road. It was Robert B. Diment who ended up in court and was fined 10 shillings. He blamed the two local hunts who had been over his land and had caused considerable damage. (North Wilts Herald 24th April 1936) In October 1936, Robert Diment and his wife left Sandhill Farm and moved to Park Farm, Newton St Loe, Somerset. This information comes from a long and detailed newspaper article concerning Robert's alleged affair with a woman from Bath, and his wife hiring agents to keep surveillance on him. (Bath Chronicle 4th December 1937). However, it seems that it wasn't the end of the Diments at Sandhill Farm. The Electoral Register for 1958-9 listed that James J.T. Diment was still there as well as Doris M. Diment and a lady called Ruth Hall.

Currently (2021) the farm is owned by Robert Gay who purchased it in the early 1970s. He is well-known within the community and has taken an active part in village affairs. We thank him for

allowing us to photograph the farm buildings. (Below). A Lidar image of the farm showing considerable earlier activity.

If you have any further information to add to the history of the farm, please contact us on:
info@shrivenhamheritagesociety.co.uk

