


Bedfordshire & Luton
Archives & Records Service
established 1913

BLARS Newsletter No.97 Autumn 2013

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Come along and see the second major
exhibition celebrating our Centenary year

For the Record

12 October 2013 - 5 January 2014

The Higgins, Bedford

Following our successful exhibition at Wardown Park Museum in Luton from March to June this year, which focussed on archives of the southern part of the County, we now switch our attention to the northern half of Bedfordshire. The exhibition will include a selection of archives from our hugely diverse range of collections and details of how the Archives Service has safeguarded them and made them available to the public over the last 100 years.

Willington's Manorial Documents

Dorothy Jamieson explains what her work on the manor court rolls reveals about life in Willington from 1384 to 1674.

Willington has belonged to large landed estates since before the Norman Conquest, until about 1900 when it was sold by the Duke of Bedford. From 1265 to 1483 it was part of the Honour of the Mowbrays, and despite the turbulent history of this family, the organisation and practices used by the Lord or Lady and their council during this long period were remarkably consistent. Some of the medieval practices recorded in the manor courts continued during Tudor times and into the seventeenth century.

More than one hundred records of manor courts in Willington still survive. They do not form a complete series— they date between April 24th 1384 and 20th April 1674 - but forty rolls exist for 1394 - 1426 and fifty-one for 1448 - 1482, during the time of the Wars of the Roses. Most of these documents are held by Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service but some are in the British Library and a few others are elsewhere. Most are in reasonable condition and written almost completely in Latin. They have been translated and calendars (summaries) of them and the full translations are now available on the BLARS website under the Willington section of the Community Archives pages. They will be indexed for names, places and subjects on the online catalogue.

The Lord owned the fields, pastures, meadows, roads, tracks, grass verges, trees, fences and hedges, buildings, probably the ploughs, and most of the people. It seems that all tenants, even the Prior of Newnham and the local gentry, were expected to attend the manor court, unless excused, and were fined if they did not do so. The court juries were made up of villeins (unfree tenants) and the land transfers made at the court were for their holdings, for which the tenant owed services of some sort to the Lord as part of his rent. Some other lands were held freely, and the tenants of these lands paid taxes to keep animals on the common.

Tenants were expected to cultivate their fields, help to keep the roads, lanes and ditches clear, and pay their common fines, and fines for minor offences, to the Lord. If they did not do this they were deprived of their holdings. Everybody was required to maintain their buildings and they were usually given timber to repair them; often building materials were recycled or sold.



The Manor House on Gordon's Map of 1736

Women were considered to be their husbands' property and did not form part of the juries. Some women held lands in their own right, either because they inherited them from their father, or because they were widowed. Widows were treated fairly and were usually given a chance to retain their late husband's holding.

The earliest court roll was written soon after the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, a period of unrest when there were riots against serfdom and low wages. Although the arable lands and common pastures at Willington had all been let out by 1384 some evidence of continuing serfdom can be found. Occasionally tenants left their holdings and the village, but efforts were made to get them back. In 1417 *'they present that John Rydere Tayllour, servant of Thomas Tayllour, serf of the demesne, lives at Ronhale outside his demesne and homage. Therefore he was ordered to be seized.'* In 1420 Thomas Tele *'left the Lord's demesne of his birth and removed all his goods and chattels and but where he is not known. Therefore it was ordered that all the tenants should make enquiries.'* There is no evidence to show whether either of these men returned.

For much of the 14th Century the Mowbrays were Dukes of Norfolk and Earl Marshalls of England, therefore heads of the armed forces. The Chief Steward or his deputy came to Willington twice a year to hold the courts, usually in October and April.

The manor was managed by a bailiff, who was the Lord's representative. Although in many manors the bailiff was an outsider, here he was almost always a local man and a tenant farmer like everyone else. There were two constables and discipline in the village was maintained by a system of tithings. Boys of 12 were considered to be men and were sworn in to a tithing, under the leadership of a tithing man.

Each man in the tithing was responsible for the good behaviour of everyone else in the group. This was still happening in 1674 when *'Richard Titford, John Crocker the younger, William Jones, Thomas Ward, James Logesden, Edward Sansam, Thomas Leonard and Thomas Richardson were sworn and each of them pledged an Oath of Allegiance.'* Twelve tithing men were sworn in to form the jury for the manor court. For many years after 1404 it was the custom for a further twelve man jury to also be sworn in to guarantee that the tithing men spoke the truth and could be believed. This system of co-operative management meant that at least 24 men played a part in the legal process.

The village was regulated by an unwritten code of practice known as the Custom of the Manor and extra by-laws governing the use of the open fields, the grazing of animals and playing of games were passed by the manor court. The court roll of October 1467 recorded *'henceforth none shall play at tennis at any time of the year if they are 12 years of age or more...unless at the feast of the nativity of the Lord...under a penalty for each of 40d and a punishment of imprisonment for one day and a night.'*

Among the fines for assaults and burglaries some unusual cases are heard by the court. In 1420 Agnes, wife of John Abel, stood accused of being *'a common chatterbox & disturber of the peace'* and was fined 12d . The roll for 1456 records that Thomas Gybon *'stands and lingers under the window of Randolph Bawdewyn and eavesdrops'* and was also fined for assaulting John Myton with a *'mukforke'* . In 1457 Henry Maye, the butcher, was fined for selling meat *'without heads'*.

No rolls exist from during the reigns of Richard III or Henry VII, and only 22 rolls and three draft rolls survive for 1515 - 1674, so it is very difficult to say with certainty what happened on the manor during that time.



Willington Dovecote



The Coat of Arms of Sir John Gostwick

Four of the rolls, for the years 1537 - 1540 inclusive, are from the time of John Gostwick (later Sir John) and his management style is reflected in a document which he wrote for his son, explaining how to manage the estate[1]. It has been said that he had *'a shrewd, acquisitive, yet far from inhuman personality.'*[2] Although the manor must have seemed a very different place as John Gostwick's builders erected a new manor house of brick and timber, demolished the old one, extended and rebuilt the church, built a fine farm complex and entertained King Henry VIII, the business of the manor court continued much as usual. However, the second jury had disappeared and Gostwick seemed to prefer to let his lands out to his influential gentlemen friends. Some tenants continued to pay taxes of head silver and land silver, as they had once a year since the end of the 14th Century; bakers and brewers paid a fine, or a license, to allow them to trade on the manor; by-laws designed to manage the commons, protect the Lord's woodland and prevent nuisance to villagers, continued to be passed.

Among all the detail are some especially interesting items: Lord Mowbray appointed his surgeon, Robert de Willington to be Warrener at Willington by letters patent at Rouen, while he was on campaign with the King in 1420, and paid his wife the salary while Robert was away. There was concern about whether three tenants should hold dovecotes on the manor in 1425 and *'that they do not have sufficient free land to occupy and keep the said Dovecots.'* It is unusual to read of the conditions for holding these prestigious buildings.

The rolls from the seventeenth century are much concerned with the management of the commons, the orders for which are written in English. Details of the common fines paid are regularly given and the amounts are little different from those paid two hundred years before, so some aspects of life in Willington still continued unchanged.

1)'Estate and Household Management in Bedfordshire c. 1540,' *Bedfordshire Historical Record Society Publications*, vol. 36, 1955 pp.38-45. 2)'Estate and Household Management in Bedfordshire c. 1540,' BHRS 36, p.38.

Heritage Open Day

Over 100 people braved the cold, rainy weather on Saturday 14th September to visit the Archive Service Open Day and exhibitions at Borough Hall, and to attend the official book launch of 'Bedfordshire Through Time' by Stephen Jeffery-Poulter.

Tours 'behind the scenes' of the service were popular, with 85 people given a glimpse of the archives in their secure protective room on the top floor of the Riverside Building.

Inspecting maps in the stackroom on the 'behind the scenes' tour.



Stephen Jeffery-Poulter presents a copy of his book to Helen Nellis, Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire



Killed by a Lion in Potton in 1826!

Statistically unlikely, but that's what happened to the unfortunate William Circuit, as an account of the inquisition into his death was reported in the Northampton Mercury of 22nd April of that year:

"...on the preceding Monday...a show of wild beasts was exhibiting at Potton, and the deceased, although in a state of intoxication, went to the show for the purpose of seeing them. Being under the influence of liquor, he was not sufficiently cautious, but imprudently approached the part of the caravan in which a lioness was confined, and supported himself by leaning against the side of her den. The savage animal immediately struck his arm with her paw, and inflicted a very serious wound...the deceased was not confined to his bed until the last day or two, when symptoms of mortification appeared...and died in a rather sudden manner.

Verdict – Accordingly.

For more Pottton stories see the Pottton pages on the 'Community Archives' section of our website.



BLARS For the Record Too – Autumn Talks & Events at The Higgins, Bedford

17 October 2013

Patience, Jigsaws and Other Games Archivists Play. Ever thought how nice it would be to work with historical documents, or why some documents survive and others don't? This talk will explain what archivists (and conservators) do all day, why we do it and why a love of history is definitely not the only criterion for the job! 1.00 - 1.45 pm. Free.

30 October 2013 Children's Activity Day - A Date in your Diary. Come along to make a diary to take home. Diaries can be important records of what life was like in the past; start your own diary by making a little book to record your day. Sessions will be repeated throughout the day 11 am - 3 pm starting on the hour. Suitable for children aged 6+. All children must be supervised by a parent or carer. £2 per child.

7 November 2013: Bedford Works: a look at what the archives of Bedford businesses tell us about the development of the town. 1.00 - 1.45 pm, small charge.

28 November 2013: How we used the archives: Project leaders and community groups share their experience of using the archives. 1.00 - 1.45 pm, small charge. www.bedford.gov.uk/archivevents

This newsletter is edited by Susan Edwards, who welcomes ideas and material for future issues.

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