

CENTURIES OF ABSENTEE LORDS OF THE MANOR

Centuries of absentee Lords of the Manor?

Is this true? Yes, it's true - since late in the first millennium till the middle of the 18c we had no resident lords of the manor, who were also the landlords and patrons of the church. It was the Lord of the Manor's right, it was, and still is, to present his choice of priest to the bishop for the installation of that priest into the living of his parish.

So what were the circumstances behind these Lord of the Manor absentees? We have to go back into early historical documents to discover the reasons.

Bath Abbey Ownership

The first known reference of ownership of Priston is recorded in the Hemming's Chartulary. This includes a charter of King Athalstan (grandson of Alfred the Great), granting, in 931 AD, to the Abbey of St. Peter at Bath the gift of 10 hides, in Priston, a hide being 120 acres. In an appendix to this charter these lands are said to have belonged to the Etheling Alfred. The reason for the grant? Alfred had been accused of treason, and was sent to Rome to clear himself of the charge by oath before the Pope. He swore falsely and he died before the altar of St. Peter.

Athalstan was the 3rd of the great West Saxon kings. By comprehensively defeating the Norse, Scots and Irish armies in 937, he united the various "English" kingdoms and termed himself "King of all England". He also concerned himself with spiritual matters. It was Athalstan who had the Bible translated into Anglo-Saxon and had a copy placed in every church. It is reasonable to assume, that at least from that time Priston had a church, the Abbey now having a spiritual and financial interest in the community.

Priston therefore came under the direct jurisdiction of the Abbot of Bath (and subsequently the Prior) and remained so for the next six centuries. A few years after Priston was gifted to the Abbey one of the great events in early English history occurred in Bath. The Coronation of King Edgar took place at Whitsun 973. This occasion is considered to be the start of the nation of England and put the seal on the process begun by Athalstan. Incidentally, it was this service which became the basis of all subsequent coronations.

It is not unreasonable to conjecture that people from Priston, as servants of the Abbot, were expected to be in Bath to pay homage to their sovereign.

The next event known to be recorded is that of the Domesday survey of 1086. In the entry under the Church of St. Peter of Bath, Priston is described immediately under that of the Abbey itself. It states that the village is under the direct control of the Abbot. There is land for 8 ploughs (the area which could be ploughed by a team of 8 oxen in one day), of that land 2 hides (a hide is equivalent 120 acres of grazing) are in full ownership of the Abbot and there is one plough and 3 servants. There are 7 villeins (villagers) and 8 bordars (smallholders) with 6 ploughs and 4 hides. There is one riding horse and a mill, which pays seven shillings and sixpence tax (equivalent to 37¹/₂ p.) per annum. There are 20 acres of meadow and 80 acres of pasture. It has a worth of £6.

In 1091 John of Tours, Bishop of Wells, was granted lands which included the monastery at Bath. The Abbacy was annexed to the Bishopric when it was moved to Bath, so St. Peter's became a Priory. The first Prior, John, was appointed in 1121. The priory remained thus until Prior Holleway (aka Gibbes) surrendered the monastery to Henry VIII's Commissioners on 27th January 1539. It was this House that continued to administer Priston.

There are occasional references of the management of the church and village in various documents other than that mentioned above which give a brief insight into the life of the village at that time. Typical entries, many undated, are:

Prior Robert (1198-1223):

"Grant by R, (Robert), Prior to Richard, the priest of Priston, 1³/₄ virgates of land in Priston (virgate is ¹/₄ of a hide) which Godric de Priston held".

"Grant by R, Prior to his clerk Alexander de Alnet, of the vicarage of the church of Priston for the term of his life. Rent, half a mark (a silver mark being worth 13 shillings and 4 pence [66 p.]) to John Rufus."

Prior Thomas(1223-1261):

"Grant by Thomas, Prior to John de Alynton of the office of farm bailiff of Priston. Date: Feast of St. Gregory the Pope, 8 Ed. III." (1335). Check date

"Grant by R., Prior to his clerk, Richard de Kaning' of the church of Priston, saving the vicarage which Alexander de Alneto has in the same church."

"Grant by Robert, Prior to John Rufus, of Bristol, of the church of

Priston, saving the life interest of Alexander de Alneto”

“Grant by Robert, Prior to his clerk Alexander de Alneto, of the vicarage of the church of Priston for term of his life. Rent, half a mark to John Rufus”

“Thomas, Prior, we have quit claimed John of Priston our villain, from servitude, and grant him freedom, with his children, and chattels, and that he may have free ingress and egress, and remain on our land as a free man, or go elsewhere to better himself” Interesting that there is no mention of his wife, or maybe she is considered a chattel!!!

Easter Week, 1269 in his 2nd year of pontificate, Bishop “W” held court at Priston.

There are a number of clues as to the importance of Priston to the Mother House.

First is the fact that Priston was the first-named parish in the original charter. Significant or not? Possible!

Second, The fact that the Bishop held court here. Whether he held court in all his parishes, I do not know but I think highly unlikely!

The turn of the 13th century was an unsettled time for the Priory. There were money problems. The Irish cells of the Benedictine Order were impoverished. There were problems of appointing priests in the Devon churches under the jurisdiction of the Prior, which required expensive representation at the Papal Court in Rome. The problems were compounded by a quarrel between the King and the Church, which if the Priory yielded to the King’s demands, incurred implicit excommunication.

In 1244 Bath and Wells share cathedral status. Roger of Salisbury becomes the first Bishop of the joint diocese of Bath and Wells

In 1293 there was a significant change of the relationship of the village with the Priory. Prior Walter procured from the King a Charter of free-warren (the right of keeping ones own animals and the right to hunt) in all his lands within the Manor of Priston. Presumably, this was a means of reducing expenses by not having to directly oversee the running of the estate.

It is at this time that records show the names of incumbents for the first time. Where a church was a cappella (chapel) attached to a Mother Church, or to a monastery, lists of the priests are not found. The year 1297 was the date of the institution of the first “independent” priest. He and subsequent incumbents are recorded on the board on the south wall of the nave. Although independent,

the right of presentation of a priest to the Bishop remained with the Prior, as Patron, until the Reformation when this right became the prerogative of the laity.

However, in the mid 15th century the Priory still appears to have its problems. There is a nice story told that the Prior, monks and citizens of Bath were squabbling amongst themselves about the petty privileges they thought they should be entitled to, rather than looking to the substantial interests of the church and city. They were arguing about the privileges of bell ringing instead of using their energies to support the buildings in which the bells hung.

King Henry VIII pushes ahead with the Dissolution of the Monasteries and on the 27 January 1539 Prior Holloway and eighteen monks surrender the Priory to the King's officials and sign the Deed of Dissolution. The Abbey, and other monastic buildings and land, are sold to private individuals

After the dissolution of the monasteries, there is evidence that the vast bulk of the Priory estates, having been held by Henry VIII for 3 years, was sold off to those who would buy them. The records show (from the Hugo manuscripts in the British Museum) that there was no change at Priston for a number of years.

The Long Dynasty

"You are sentenced to confinement within Marshalsea Prison to await the King's pleasure." These words were used in the punishment meted out to the Lord of the Manor of Priston, Mr. Walter Long, by the Star Chamber on 7th May 1629. His crime? "For being outspoken of the King", Charles I. But the King's pleasure was not satisfied, for by royal edict, Long was committed to the Tower on 24th June that year, and was not released until four years later. Long was a person from whom His Majesty obviously felt safer with him locked up in the most secure prison of the realm.

But more of Walter later. The story of the secular ownership of the Manor of Priston begins some ninety years earlier, with the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

We have first definite proof of the subsequent ownership of the Manor from the Bishop's Register of 1554 where it is reported that Robert Wheatacre was presented to the bishop for installation as priest to the parish of Priston by Christopher Bayley of Stowford. The right and privilege to choose a priest was held by the Lord of the Manor. The new parson was presented to the bishop for formal installation into the living. This right of presentation passed into the hands of the Bayley family when it took possession of the Manor.

However, the first thread we pick up on this family Bayley is through the chronicles of John Leland, the famous traveller of Tudor England. His tour of the west country took place in 1542. Locally, he passed through Malmesbury, Bradford, Trowbridge, Bath, Paulton and Wells. It might be surprising to learn that the Priston interest centres not around Bath but the towns of Bradford and Trowbridge. In his notes of Bradford Leland names only three people, one of whom, a clothier called Horton, having an involvement with Priston. At Trowbridge he mentions four people, two of whom relate to Priston; one is the Horton from Bradford again and the other is another clothier called Bayley. It is reasonable to assume that the people that he mentioned by name were in a position of influence and were of high standing within the community. At that time cloth making was the staple industry of this area and was extremely remunerative. The successful clothmakers made a lot of money and as one commentator observes they were a branch of middle class England.

The Bayley mentioned by Leland, is in fact, Thomas Bayley who was the father of Christopher who I have previously mentioned. Thomas was known to have lived in Trowbridge before marrying into the family of William Clevelode, another clothier who leased Stowford Mill from the Abbot of Keynsham at the time before the dissolution. Stowford is a small hamlet about 3 miles to the west of Trowbridge on the road to Radstock. It is situated where the road crosses the river Frome, not far from Farleigh Castle.

Bayley married Agnes, the daughter and apparently the heiress of Clevelode, and according to the deeds for the reversion of the property at the dissolution, Bayley was named as owner.

Not only did Thomas take over that business, presumably because of Clevelode's increasing years, but he was granted by the King Wingfield Manor, about a mile back towards Trowbridge, which had been also in the ownership of the Abbot of Keynsham before dissolution. It is said that Bayley found favour with the King because at an earlier date, he had loaned the King £20. It is possible that Priston was come by in a similar manner. However Thomas did not have long to enjoy the benefits of Wingfield (and maybe Priston) as he died in 1543.

The estate was inherited by his son Christopher.

It is Christopher of whom we have a definite record as being the first secular Lord of the Manor of Priston whether he came by the Patronage by purchase or gift.

As has been previously mentioned, it was he who presented Robert Wheatacre to the Bishop for installation as priest for Priston in 1554.

The fact that Priston now had a lay patron did not seem to be of any benefit to the village.

This was a period when the whole country was in ecclesiastical turmoil. Not only did Henry VIII asset strip the monasteries, he had the problem of divorce to contend with at Rome. It is significant, of course, that his first born, Mary, was bought up a Roman Catholic by her mother, Catherine of Aragon. He then broke with Rome with the Act of Supremacy, declaring that he was answerable only to God. Then Elizabeth was born to Protestant Anne Boleyn and Edward to another Protestant, Jane Seymour. On Henry's death in 1547, the ailing nine year old Edward succeeded, dying eight years later in 1553, being, in the mean time, manipulated to proclaim Mary, a Roman Catholic, his successor. She, of course, married King Philip of Spain in the hope of making England safe for Catholicism again but the union did not produce an heir. On her death, on 17th November 1558, it was her Protestant half-sister Elizabeth who came to the throne. So the country again swung back to Protestantism with Elizabeth stabilising the reformed church with the issue of the 39 Articles of Religion in 1563, although she was being pressed to go further by the Puritans.

The priest holding office in Priston at Mary's accession, one John Cole, was deprived of his living on 21st September 1554 a year after her succession, so he could well have been the first "Anglican" priest of Priston. It is likely that his successor, Robert Wheateacre was a Catholic again. In May 1558 John Kerell was appointed Priest by the Patron and it can be concluded that, as this was the same year as the accession of Queen Elizabeth, this was a protestant appointment.

So back to the Bayley's.

It is with Christopher's marriage that we come into contact again with one of the other families mentioned by Leland. He married Maud Horton, who was daughter of the Thomas Horton who had met Leland. Another Horton sibling, Mary, married a Henry Long of Whaddon, yet another clothier, a predecessor of Walter mentioned earlier. Christopher and Maud had one son, Thomas, born in 1546. On Christopher's death in 1558, apparently at an early age, four mills at Stowford were bequeathed in his will. For whatever reason, Christopher's widow Maud wasted no time in remarrying, doing so to Walter Bush, second son of John Bush also of Stowford. That she was still in her prime is demonstrated in that she had a further nine children by him! It is reasonable to assume that her

son Thomas lived with them until his marriage some eight years later.

It was in 1558 that another priest for Priston was presented to the Bishop. As Christopher has died earlier in the year, the duty of presentation fell to William Horton as presumably he was the next male in line being the husband of Christopher's sister. It could not be performed by Thomas as he was still a minor of twelve years old.

Troubled times continued, not only for Priston but also for the diocese. When Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558, the Diocese of Bath & Wells was one of the last to have a Roman Catholic bishop, Bishop Bourne. He was to be deprived of his position for rejecting Royal supremacy. He, like the monks of Bath 20 years earlier when dissolution became imminent, granted and gave away from the See of Bath & Wells various manors and other possessions before his Anglican successor, Bishop Berkeley, could get hold of them. Priston had already been disposed of earlier as mentioned above. The new Anglican bishop, Bishop Berkeley, who was enthroned in 1560, was ordered to "proceed roundly" with clerics who were not conforming, these numbering about twenty four and affected several parishes in the Bath area including Priston (and, indeed, Marksbury). The Priston priest referred to is presumably Richard Cove. During the period of royal patronage of Priston, a total of seven incumbents held office, three of whom resigned (or maybe "asked" to resign) and the one deprived of his living.

At this time an interesting development occurs in Priston. In 1565 another priest is presented, this time, not by the Patron (Lord of the Manor) but by the Sovereign, Elizabeth. She does so on seven successive occasions over a period of twelve years. Priston was one of only two churches in the locality (the other was Compton Dando) that the sovereign thought necessary to take over the patronage. One may conjecture on the reason for this. It may be because of Her Majesty's displeasure, either because the leanings of the Long's were too Protestant or that the sentiments of the people of Priston had remained too Catholic, so that the Sovereign felt she had to intervene. It is possible that it may have been just an administrative device to tied over the period when the nominal Lord of the Manor was a minor, particularly as these were changing times in the Church. Whatever the reason there was bound to have been a certain amount of "pluralism" (individuals who were playing lip service to one denomination but believing in the other). There is some evidence to support this: records relating to Roman Catholic activity in the Bath area mention Priston. The Uniformity Act of 1559 allowed a penalty to be imposed, where those not attending church every Sunday and Holy day, known as recusants, were fined 12d. (5p.) Offenders' names were entered initially in the Pipe Rolls and latterly, between 1592 and 1691, in a separate series of Recusant Rolls. There is a report of at

least one priest, Richard Cove, who was deprived of his living, in 1572, for not toeing the line. During this time, five Priston villagers, two from the same family, Joan, wife of William Browne and their daughter, also called Joan, were named in the rolls as convicted recusants. In addition, a priest's hole has been discovered in what is now Rectory Cottage.

Troubled times indeed for Priston.

As I have said, Christopher Bayley died when his son, Thomas, was about twelve years old. Thomas married at about the age of twenty for he had a daughter by the time of his early death in 1568 at the age of 22. The daughter was named Rebecca and was taken into wardship on her father's death. Thus, the Lord of the Manor was a minor between the years of 1568 and approximately 1588 when Rebecca is thought to have reached majority.

Rebecca's first guardian was a Nicholas Brooke but during the same year, in fact only 10 days later, the wardship was assumed by a brother of her Great Uncle William, Edward Horton.

So it was that Rebecca Bayley was brought up within a privileged class and socialised in a circle of land owning businessmen. It is one such of these that she met and married. He was Henry Long of Whaddon. The marriage took place about 1589 in the small church of St. Andrew on the estate of Whaddon, a manor also in the environs of Trowbridge but to the north about a mile to the north of Hilperton. It's reasonable to assume that Rebecca and Henry set up home at Whaddon Manor where he would have continued farming and making cloth.

It is also in 1589 that John Wyatt was presented to the Bishop as priest of Priston by Henry, "in jure uxoris suae" in the right of his wife as she was the "lord" by succession through her father. The Sovereign had restored the right of presentation back to the family on 15th January 1589.

All these activities add poignancy to the exhortation on the memorial tablet to Thomas Watts above the door on the porch of the church dated 1589, the year after the Armada,

"Priston repent and believe the Gospel. Thomas Wats Preacher of the word of God

Departed ye world the 20th November 1589".

The Bishop held a visitation here in Priston sometime after 1604 where there was a presentment of 9 woman charged with witchcraft. This included a

Priston woman, Joan Blackborough. She was described as being “old, lame and sick and unable to come to Court”. She was accused of being suspected of having bewitched Widow Launsden, also of Priston “who died thereupon”. As a result the Bishop who was present at that particular court handed over the business over to the local Justice of the Peace, Barnaby Samborne, of Timsbury, who was of the family of the Lord of the Manor of Timsbury.

In the fullness of time a son and heir was born to Henry and Rebecca named Walter. Henry died about twelve years after their marriage on 1st May 1612. During the early life of Walter there had of course been a change of monarch, James I succeeding Elizabeth in 1603 with the King looking again towards Rome for spiritual leadership. This is likely to have had a profound affect on Walter as his future behaviour will indicate. His leanings were becoming distinctly Puritanical. These were further strengthened by his mother’s second marriage. As early as 1613, the year after Henry’s death there is a document of a Deed Before Marriage between Rebecca and a Henry Sherfield. This was also to be Sherfield’s second marriage, his first wife Maria dying in 1613. The eagerness for the two to unite would appear to be unseemly which may well have been because of Sherfield’s need to have a mother for his daughter! However it was not until 1616 that the knot was tied. Sherfield was a man of high standing being an eminent lawyer with the position of the Recorder at Salisbury.

In time, Walter married one Mary Coxe, daughter of a deceased London grocer, which on the surface is a strange alliance as he was a member of the landed gentry and she a daughter of a common tradesman. It was particularly so as it was not until 1627 a son, also called Walter, was baptised. During these few years the political and religious turmoil in the country did not go by without Walter getting involved. Charles I had come to the throne and dissolved Parliament. Walter Long was known to be an avid Puritan and in 1629 was summoned to the Star Chamber to answer the charge of being outspoken of the King. The Court of the Star Chamber, thus called probably because of it being convened in the hall of that name in the Palace of Westminster, was evolved in the late 15th century from the King’s council. Initially it was a useful tool to prevent abuses of the courts and judicial system and in the prevention of public disorder. However, as the years went by, it became more and more tyrannical with its Draconian rulings on libel and sedition so that by the time of Charles I it was being used as an instrument of Royal censure. Long was one of Nine to be made an example of. He was defended by stepfather Henry Sherfield, remember he being an eminent lawyer for what good it did him.

While he was confined his wife Mary died in 1631.
He was released in 1633.

This was also a torrid time for Rebecca. Not only had her son been sent to the Tower but on 6th February 1632 her husband also stood before the Star Chamber Court on the charge of desecrating a window in St. Edmund's Church in Salisbury in 1632. This may well have been his last act of defiance as by 1635 Rebecca is described as a widow in the records of Southwick Court in 1635. She was still alive in 1638 when the bishop's register records it was she who presented the next priest in Priston. He was a William Long and it is not beyond reason for him to have been a relation. He remained priest throughout the troubled times of the Commonwealth until 1662. The last record concerning Rebecca is of 1639 with an agreement that she was to hold the Manors of Priston, Southwick and North Bradley (yet another estate in the environs of Trowbridge close by Southwick) for life.

In 1641 Walter was elected to the Long Parliament ending up as a baronet of the Realm, for services to the Crown of Charles II. In 1662, Sir Walter presented William Hall as priest. Walter the Elder died in his early eighties in 1662 to be survived by his son and heir Walter the younger.. So ended the life of one of the most colourful lords of the manor who was a person of strong convictions and was willing to fight for them.

At the time of his succession, Walter the younger was in his sixties and not much seems to be recorded about him. It is reasonable to assume that he was overshadowed by his father. It is known that he married a woman called Martha and that he died without issue in 1710 at the age of 83. During his period as Lord of the Manor, he presented one priest, Christopher Brown in 1679. Brown is distinguished by his office here that, over the 20 years he was here, he spanned the reigns of James I, James II and William and Mary. But Priston is not yet out of the denominational maze. There is an incident with Brown where he too was also deprived of his living. He was appointed during the reign of the Roman Catholic sympathiser, James II, in 1679 and with the Protestant monarchs from the Netherlands William & Mary acceding to the throne in 1689 Brown leaves three years later on 4th June 1692. The sovereign again takes over the patronage, putting in place, Samuel Catheral, who remained in office apparently until 1723, well into the reign of George I. Incidentally, Catheral was at some time the Patron of Farmborough!!

It would seem that there is still a strong and influential faction of Roman Catholic belief in the village.

Because Walter had died without a surviving child the succession went to the issue of his sister Rebecca. She had married Sir Philip Parker, baronet of Erwarton in Norfolk. It was the second son who inherited, Calthorpe Parker at

the age of 53. His marriage was of local interest, as he married a daughter, Diougsia, of John Harrington of Kelston, from the family of the famous diarist.

At this stage the family appear to become more and more remote, climbing the social scale and seemingly having little interest in Priston. The family interests had switched to East Anglia since the Parker family assumed the Priston lordship. Sir Philips 1st daughter and co-heir, Martha married Lord Chedworth, dying without issue. There were two other brothers both dying without issue thus the line became extinct in 1804. So it was in the time of Martha's Lordship that the lordship of the Manor of Priston was sold on alluding to pass to Lord Harcourt and then sold to William Jenkins on 18th December 1756.