

The Neighbourhood of Hildersham & Abington

By

W. M. Palmer, M.D., F.S.A.

Notes for a lecture given with lantern slides

to the Abington W.I., March 6th, 1924.

Reprinted from "Cambridge Chronicle,"

September - November 1924

Hildersham:

If you had come this way to Hildersham before the mill was built, after a heavy snow had melted on the hills, you would probably find a large lake extending from the path across the meadow to the "Blacksmith's Shop" (*on the village green*), right over the recreation ground (*Night Common & Midsummer Meadow*) to the allotments. In the meadow you can see lines of terraces caused by these floods. At some time or other, centuries ago, the stream was diverted & an artificial dam was made to hold up the water to turn the mill.

The mill (*Hildersham Watermill*) is in Linton parish, & was in 1837 in the possession of the "Reeve Family", who also had the windmill that stood on the "Furze Hills" (*The first Ordnance Survey map of 1836, clearly shows a windmill on the middle Furze Hill*), & also Linton wind & water mills.

We first read of Hildersham in 1086, when the 'Domesday Book' was compiled. It is there called "Hildricsham", which means 'Home of Hildric', a Saxon; but Hildric had long been forgotten & the village had lately belonged to another Saxon named "Ulwin" who had been dispossessed in favour of "Aubrey de Vere", Earl of Oxford.

The estate of the 'Earl of Oxford' was too vast for him to farm himself, (Hildersham was just one of many villages that Aubrey de Vere had property or connection to, in the counties of Cambridgeshire, Essex, Suffolk & Norfolk. His main home was the castle at Castle Hedingham) so he let part of it, including the "Manor of Hildersham".

This was, in 1156, let to "Richard de Camville", for the service of one knight's fee. That is to say, when the Earl (Aubrey de Vere) wanted to go to war, he could call on Richard (Richard de Camville) to follow him with his two squires on horseback, fully armed, for forty days, or in default to pay what is equal to about £200 (in 1924) of our money.

Richard had two daughters only, to divide his estate. It will be noticed that frequently there were only daughters to inherit, the sons got killed in battle or otherwise.

"Matilda" married "William de Ros" & had a son & a daughter. The latter became a nun at Clerkenwell, & took with her a yearly rent from Hildersham mill. Matilda's son left only a daughter named "Laura", who was abducted & married a young man named "Gilbert de Kirkby". Their descendants held half the manor until "William Bustlere", whose wooden monument is in the church (Tragically these were stolen in 1977 & are thought to be now in Holland), came into possession in the reign of "Edward 1".

"Idonea", the other daughter of "Richard de Camville", married "William Longsword", 'Earl of Salisbury'. The Earl already had several manors, so he let his half to "Philip the Dane"; who, when he died, left an only daughter named "Ella". She was sold by the king with her lands for a large sum of money to "William Bolville" & married him willy nilly. In 1254 William obtained the right of holding a 'weekly market & a Yearly Fair' at Hildersham.

This portion of Hildersham, afterwards held by "Pancefot" & "Hengham" families, was bought by "Robert Bustlere" in 1316, & added to the other portion.

The "Bustlere" family became of great influence in the county, owning at the same time the manors of Linton, Abington & Duxford.

Later on the parish (Hildersham) became again divided. The owner of one lived at "Hildersham Hall" & of the other in a large house called "The Rookery".

The park round the Hall here is of quite recent origin. During the Eighteenth century the part of it bordering on the Cambridge Road was arable land, so there was no trace of the fine avenue of Beech trees. The road to Hildersham from Cambridge Road ran along "Lady Miller's Drive", continuing the "Pen Road". The present road to the village is only 100 years old (1824, The present Hildersham Hall was built around 1807).

The Hall has had many owners. "Dr. Conyers Middleton", one of the opponents of Bentley in the Trinity College squabbles, owned it, & died here in 1750.

Concerning some of the later owners, Miss Goodwin (daughter of the Rector) & Mr Sam Conder (Beer Retailer) used to tell amusing tales:

One Squire who married three wives, all with money & all 'consumptive', seemed a great hero in the lady's eyes. Mr Conder when a small boy had slept in the butler's pantry at the Hall, & had watched with wonder the eating & drinking which went on, but he says that the food & drink, both in quantity & quality, were surpassed at dinners given by "Mr Thomas Webb", the farmer. That was in the palmy days of farming, when wheat was £5 a quarter & wages 7s. a week.

The other part of the manor descended to the "Burgoynes" & "Stutfields" who lived in the "Rookery House". (see Illustration No. 4.) The picture of this is from a photograph lent me by "Miss M. Conder". It shows the south side of the house, which was needlessly taken down about 55 years ago (1869). The following can be recognised: 'Mr Goodwin', the Rector, 'Mr Carlyon', the Curate, & 'Mr Thomas Webb' (a village farmer).

Some small incidents in the remote past life of Hildersham may interest you:

In 1283, a corn merchant called "Edmund" of Little Abington, bought all the corn in the manor of "Netherhall" (manor on the site of the present Hildersham Hall) for £800 of our money (1924). As the transaction was a large one, four men of substance from Horseheath, Ashdon, & Abington were sureties for him. The corn was taken away but no money was forthcoming. Why, we do not know. There had been a slump in prices, but a steady average of from four to five shillings per quarter. At the Cambridge Assizes in 1286 orders were issued to distrain on the sureties of £800. So you see business had its ups & downs 600 years ago.

At the same Assizes it was stated that a man called "Luke the Storyteller" or Liar, had killed a man in Hildersham by shooting him in the breast with an arrow, & had run away. But in those days every villager was in the mainprize of another villager, who was responsible for his good behaviour. The storyteller was in the mainprize of "Roger Dogget" who lived in the forerunner of the Rookery House. He was heavily fined, & the whole village was fined for letting the liar escape.

In 1521 "Roger Beton", left a cow to the Churchwardens which was to be let out at 2s. yearly. This was to be expended on a candle to burn in church in memory of his father.

A little later "Thomas Cornell" wanted people to be jolly at his funeral, so he bequeathed a quarter of wheat & a quarter of malt for bread & beer, & meat in proportion. There would have been almost enough beer to swim in.

In 1580 "Henry Croxton" was accused of not being to church for a year, which might mean that he was a 'Papist' but the defence was he did not go to church for fear of being arrested for debt.

A little later "James Pamment" was fined for allowing his man to plough on St Bartholomew's day. I suppose many farmers might now incur that penalty through ignorance of the day on which St. Bartholomew died.

There are several very old houses in Hildersham. The one known as "High Buildings" (at one time was called "Withleigh", now called "Mabbutt's") (see Illustration No. 5.), in which "Fred & David Day" formerly lived, was once a farmhouse with farmyard & buildings. It contains some ancient & massive oak beams & a fine oak "Overmantle". In it lived "Mr Mabbutt", who was one of the largest farmers in the village.

Another old house is that opposite the "Manor Farm", in which "Jim Clark" lived for many years. (see Illustration No. 6.) It had a farmyard at the back that opened on "Dovehouse Close". It is a small four roomed house, but the rafters are beautifully moulded & must be several centuries old. (This house was demolished, when the "Arkwright Family" moved to Hildersham in 1960's, after purchasing the land of Dovehouse Close & Dovehouse Meadow part of the Hildersham estate, from the then Lord of the Manor & principal landowner, "Mr Denys Alexander Shine Lawlor Huddleston esq." of "Sawston Hall" had a wooden House called "Thuya House" built in "Dovehouse Close", the wooden rafters from the old cottage, were used as fence posts in the paddock at the rear of the house. In today's heavily regulated conservation & Listed buildings, this wanton destruction of History would never have been permitted).

In this house may have lived "Samuel Sewell", a shepherd, who died in 1699. He was shepherd to "Mr Francis Westrope", who lived in the farm opposite (Manor Farm) & in whose flock he himself owned 14 ewes & 6 lambs, the former valued at 7s. 6d. each & the latter at 5s. each.

"It was a scantily furnished house, in the room where they lay were a bed, two hutches, a box & a little table.

I am afraid Samuel had a vain wife, because although the value of his worldly goods, including the sheep, was only 21 pounds 15 shillings, his wives clothes were valued at over 3 pounds, besides a hood & scarf & two clothes-brushes worth 5 shillings. & some old night-caps 1 shilling, & she had pewter dishes instead of wooden plates to eat from, whereas the shepherds own clothes were only worth 10 shillings, which included the money in his pocket."

The most ancient signs of human occupation in Hildersham are in "Dovehouse Meadow", between the church & the "Aldercar". (see Illustration No. 6.). Here "Mr John Conder" tells me he has seen Roman Foundations exposed & Roman coins found & today if you examine the soil which Rabbits have thrown out, you can soon find fragments of Roman Pottery.

Somewhere here, until it was removed in 1852, stood a conical mound, like a small "Bartlow Hill" . This contained remains of a Roman cremation burial. On this Green Hill used to be set up the "Maypole" in the 17th century, & it was called "Maypole Hill" .

The footpath to Abington through the Park runs across what was once the Parish common, on which the cottagers used to graze their cows. The straight course of the river here is artificial & was made when the bridge was built by a member of the "Goodwin Family" (The Reverend Robert Goodwin's sister "Elizabeth Hemington" in 1886).

At the end of the common was an enclosure for cattle called "The Pen", just as before the "Pen Farm" was built there was an enclosure there called "The Pen".

Passing across the Park by Dr. Thornton's (owner of Hildersham Hall) Chestnuts, we soon come the Toll-gate House at Great Abington; with 'Pargetting' or pattern work on the plaster. (see Illustration No. 7.). The sharp right-angled turn in the main road here (mistake in book's text: surangled turn in the main road here) surprises many travellers. No uncultured person living in the 'Dark Ages' could have accomplished such a masterpiece as this corner. It was reserved for intelligence of the 18th century to make it.

Before that time the main road was what is now the 'Back Road' & I doubt whether the 'Linton Road' was more than a mere field track until the 18th century. Toll-gates or 'Turnpikes', at which all horse traffic had to pay 'Toll', existed up to about 50 years ago. They were still working when I was at school at Royston in the seventies' (1870's). There were three other gates in Abington besides this.

One was at the entrance to the 'Back Road'. This was so situated that a horseman coming from Linton could enter Mr Kent's back gate, have a drink with him & go out by his front gate, without paying toll.

Another was near 'Bourn Bridge' & another on the 'Upper Road' at Great Abington near 'Chalkey Road'. This was called 'Bye Bar'. The tolls were let by auction. In 1795 the two gates in the village were let for £203 17s. 1d. a year.