

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - April 2014

### Fillets Court and the families who passed through the estate.

There was not a spare seat to be found at the April meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society, when Elizabeth Hazeldine gave a talk entitled Fillets Court and the Families who Passed Through the Estate.

Elizabeth explained that in the 7th and 8th centuries, the area around Henley came under the Manor of Besington (what would now be known as Benson). Many Manors were changed during the reign of William I, although Fillets was not listed at that time. It is first mentioned as a separate manor in the 1340s, when piecemeal grants were being given to set up new manors - the Manor of Fillets Court was granted to John de Molyns, comprising the land in Besington that was not included in the Manor of Henley. It is thought that the name Fillets is derived from the Old English word for hay (fillide) - the area at that time having meadows close by. There was also a Phyllis Lane nearby, which is another possible derivation of the name.

Subsequently, John de Molyns was sent to the Tower, because he had taken possession of property at Fillets Court which the previous occupant had been given as security against a debt, and the manor was forfeited to the crown. In due course, the matter was resolved, and all of de Molyns land - including Fillets Court - were restored to him following his release.

Following the death of John de Molyns, the estate passed to his son William. He spent much of his time fighting the French, and so had let Fillets Court to William Wyott at a rent of £8 per year. The house was rather neglected at this time, and fell into disrepair, although Wyott did add some nearby land which he called Countess Gardens. When William de Molyns was killed in battle, the property passed to his daughter, Alianora - and to Robert, Lord Hungerford when he married Alianora. The latter, however, supported the Lancastrian in the War of the Roses, and beheaded - as a result Fillets Court was again forfeited to the crown for the rest of the reign. There were apparently seven properties on the estate at that time.

During the reign of Edward IV, the manor of Fillets Court was granted to William Marmyon, and in his will he left the estate to his wife. When she remarried, it passed to her son William Mantell. The land was considered of value not so much for the house, but for what it could produce. There were about 3000 acres of arable, 3000 acres of meadow, and 300 acres of wood. At the time, London was developing, and had a great need for timber, and so there was a large trade by barge along the Thames - the area around Henley being known as 'feeders of London' - and not just for food.

In the late 15th century, one Thomas Hayles became the tenant at Fillets Court. He was a stapler (meaning a dealer) in the wool trade), and so spent much of his time at Calais. On one of his visits back to England, he married, and their daughter married her cousin, so keeping Fillets Court in the family. The estate was then let, in the mid-16th century, to John Vennor at a rent of £48 per year. The latter, however, got into financial difficulties, and so passed part of the estate tenancy to his creditors. The estate then was acquired by a John Swinnerton - (probably the one who was a Merchant Taylor and became Lord Mayor of London). Yet again, the estate is passed on by marriage - this time ending up belonging to a John Mellor who came from Dorset - and a strong Royalist. He in turn passed the property onto Bulstrode Whitelocke, whose family also by this time owned nearby Fawley Court. As in previous time, it was the wood that was the really desirable asset on the estate - Bulstrode Whitelocke making £980,000 in the first year. Under his ownership, the many parts into which the Fillets Court estate had, for various reasons, been divided were again united and also merged with the Manor of Henley. He gained an income from the fees charged

for the holding of fairs, and also for landings at the riverside. To try and circumvent such charges, temporary jetties would be built, and so it was a routine task for these to have to be destroyed, to protect his interests.

This was the time when the Civil War broke out in England, and Henley was at a 'central point' between Oxford (Royalist) and London (Parliamentarian). Bulstrode Whitelocke - strongly Parliamentarian - was ordered to go to Wallingford to break up a meeting. Both sides in the conflict recognised the importance of the (then wooden) Henley Bridge, and when it was damaged, repairs were soon ordered to be made. At that time, the bridge was close to Fillets Court, so in due course a watchman was stationed there, and the house became a fortified mansion. Twice Henley came under attack by Prince Rupert - the first time approaching along the Fairmile, when he held the town for about 6 weeks, and then again when he attacked from the Reading direction along Duck Street (now Duke Street). The Henley Corporation was not happy at the town being fortified, and complained about the landing of troops etc. there - Fillets Court was home to 3000 horses and soldiers at the time. For those who objected, life was harsh - one woman was intercepted carrying a letter from the King - her sentence was to have her back broken on a wheel, but due to her age (she was 70), was sent to prison instead, whilst another who complained about the taxes to be paid was punished by having her tongue nailed to a signpost on market day.

Bulstrode Whitelocke was keen to defortify Fillets Court, and returned to live there in 1650, until he moved to Wiltshire, when the estate passed to his son, William. Bulstrode had also owned Fawley Court, and that passed at the same time another son, James. The latter sold the property to a William Freeman - the Freemans being described as "never quite gentlemen", and involved in the slave trade - including the development of a 'slave factory' in St Kitts and Nevis, making a huge fortune in the process.

In due course, the estate passed to Ann Whitelocke, and when she married Gislingham Cooper, he acquired the property. He owned the Manor of Henley as well as that of Fillets Court, and therefore the rights to hold markets in the town, although that was contested. Gislingham Cooper, therefore, took the matter to court, supported by a petition signed by 290 of Henley's tradespeople, when his rights were ratified. Fillets Court was then inherited by Gislingham's son, Edward, who soon sold the property on to Sambrook Freeman of Fawley Court. He in turn soon leased it on to Sir Charles Montague, although the latter never made it his home. The house at that time was described as having two storeys, twin gables and mullioned windows. By the 1820s, the house belonged to another of the Freeman family - Strickland Freeman., but in the 1830s he had a large part of the old house (by then known as Phyllis Court) demolished, leaving only the kitchen - the associated summer house was also knocked down.

Strickland Freeman was living at Fawley Court at this time, and had a new house built at Phyllis Court - much as it now appears. In 1853, the property - along with Fawley Court - was sold to Edward Mackenzie. Described as a magnanimous man, he had made his money as a railway entrepreneur, notably in Britain and France. He used some of his fortune to support homes for orphans in London and Slough, and gave the land for a hospital for Henley. Phyllis Court was then leased to Hugh Mair and, from 1906, by Roy Finlay established the Phyllis Court Club - later buying the property from the Mackenzie family.

Despite a long and complex history of ownership, the Manor of Fillets Court was only used as a home by one of its owners (the Whitelockes during the Civil War) - all the others acquired it for where it was situated, and what else came with it.

Elizabeth concluded by mentioning a much earlier period in the area's history. The Romans had a road through the area, and it seems likely that the site of Fillets Court was used as a resting place by their crossing point over the River Thames. A large Roman site was also investigated when the present Waitrose store site was being developed.

Elizabeth Hazeldine conducts 'heritage walks' of Henley, and is also author of a book on 'Henley on Thames, Its Church and People'. She can be contacted at [Henleyheritagewalks@outlook.com](mailto:Henleyheritagewalks@outlook.com)

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The next meeting will be on Tuesday, May 13th, when Caroline Stanford will give an illustrated talk on The Work of the Landmark Trust, which is based at White Waltham, and then on Tuesday, June 10th the senior archivist at the Berkshire Record Office, Mark Stevens, will tell us about the history of Broadmoor Hospital.