

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - June 2004

### The A'Bear Family

David Nash Ford is connected to the A'Bear family, and has done much research on the origins of the family and its name, much of which is documented on his website [www.mayfamilyhistory.co.uk/odds/nameheraldic.html](http://www.mayfamilyhistory.co.uk/odds/nameheraldic.html)

The A'Bears were prolific in the parish for many centuries, though there are now none in Wargrave, and only one in Berkshire. Until the 1890s, the family lived at Hill Farm, in Hare Hatch. The 1890s was not a good time for farming, and in order to pay an annuity to his brother, John A'Bear sold Hill Farm and moved to Dunsden, the family later moving to Letcombe Regis, and then Gloucestershire.

There are several legends as to how the A'Bear name came about. In one, Mr Bear was leaning on a gate in the middle of Windsor Forest when the king came riding by, asking for the gate to be opened. Bear replied "Open it yourself". "You're a bear of a man for standing up to your king" he responded, and so the name stuck - maybe.

It seems that all the A'Bears in the country descend from the 18th century A'Bears of Hill Farm. In earlier times they appear in many records around the 1480s - nearly all called John A'Bear - or by the 1700s, John Burton A'Bear. A family tree when the same first names are used is difficult to follow, but fortunately most generations left wills, which helps.

From the 1460s, the family lived in Hare Hatch. They had an 8 roomed house, the walls hung with 'imitation tapestry'. Oak trees from Piper's Grove were used to maintain the house, and the farm (according to the inventories) kept mostly pigs and sheep, with some bullocks. Apart from their property in Wargrave, they owned land in Twyford, Hurst and Henley, and the A'Bears married into other local families, such as Newberry's of Waltham St Lawrence.

In 1544 there was a "family disaster".. In the Wargrave parish records that year there were 9 burials in 23 days - all A'Bears. Quite why the one family, but not the rest of the village, was affected is somewhat of a mystery. Earlier documents, from the early to mid 14th century also record A'Bears here - a complaint of trespass made by the Earl of Lancaster in 1318, a land grant from the vicar of Wargrave in 1325, a document about Berkshire residents being unable to pay church taxes in 1340 and a complaint against a Wargrave man in debt, in 1341. Around this time the name is spelt either de la Bere (in more 'legal' documents) or A'Bear (in church documents). This is most likely due to the clerk for the former being of Norman descent, and the clerk for the church of Saxon origin - each writing the name in the form they would be used to.

The family coat of arms is said to have been granted to an A'Bear ancestor who saved the life of the Black Prince at Crecy. The de la Bere's also claim this distinction. What is known is that Richard de laBere was in France and a friend of the Black Prince - and was knighted after the battle. The de la Beres had lived at Weobley Castle, built about 1310 on the Gower peninsula. Previous generations had lived inHerefordshire. John de la Bere, of Weobley, was a very rich man, and in 1316 became MP for Oxfordshire, and the following year is recorded as collecting taxes in Shiplake. In 1318 he became Sherrif of Berkshire, and 1325 is again MP for Oxfordshire. Presumably he had a residence in Berks or Oxon at the time. Maybe this was at Bear Court, Pangbourne, or maybe at Bear Place, Hare Hatch. The latter is now a Georgian mansion, but there is also a medieval moat there as well. It is also only a mile from the A'Bear's later home at Hill Farm (where they probably lived from 1468 onwards).

About the same time, John de la Bere left Weobley castle (1433) and another John de la Bere was Bishop of St David's (although he never visited there) - and lived in Oxfordshire, in Clifton Hampden. He paid a lot towards the restoration of the bridge at Dorchester. The Bishop resigned in 1460, about which time a William A'Bear is listed as owning land in Wargrave - possibly William was a brother to the Bishop.

The A'Bear / de la Bere family had been given lands in Herefordshire and Wales, so maybe were of Breton descent. To them, 'Bear' means 'high place' or 'hill' -- the family name being 'of the hill', and the A'Bears were certainly 'of the hill' when they lived at Hill Farm in Hare Hatch.

In 2002, as a result of various connections being made between members of the A'Bear family through the local historians of Wargrave and Hare Hatch, a reunion was held of some 80 family members from around the world. There is a report of this event in the archive, and another family member, David A'Bear continues to research the recent generations and publish his results on his website, [www.abear.co.uk/abear geneology.htm](http://www.abear.co.uk/abear_geneology.htm)

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