

Covington Manors

Knights, ninths, furlongs and treasure in the archives!

This is an overview of a huge topic. Information from numerous documents is included. The references for these documents are available in the History Group archive.

The Victoria County History is renowned for its detailed listing of the manorial descent for the smallest of settlements. Inskip Ladds does not disappoint in his description of the Manor of Covington which appears in the Huntingdonshire volume. However, researches by Covington History Group over the last few years have revealed that this by no means tells the whole story. For full details of current understanding of who owned what part of the Manor when, please contact the History Group. Below are our more interesting discoveries about Covington Manor.

Manors work on the principle that the monarch owns all the land. The ability to earn rents, interest etc from certain portions of land (a manor) is bestowed upon individuals or groups of individuals at the whim of the monarch in return for service, for example in the form of the provision of men for an army. The 'lord' of the manor can give, sell or mortgage the manor and its worth and there is strong evidence that the Manor of Covington was used as a commodity to be traded during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The Manor of Covington consisted of 'Ten messuages, ten tofts, one dove house, ten gardens, 600 acres of land, 30 acres meadow, 60 acres of pasture, 10 acres of wood, 200 acres of furze and heath'. This list is repeated over and over again in deed polls, indentures and other documents from the early medieval to the modern period. The Manor is described 'with appurtances' which includes the normal 'trappings' of a manorial holding. These are detailed variously but, in a terrier of 1614, included 'the Court Leete and view of Frankpledge wastes waste grounds goods of felons fugitives and outlaws' strays deodands royalties and tithes to the Manor of Covington...'. Incidentally, the Manor and Lordship of Covington (without the Advowson -or right to appoint the Rector, Mylle Pasture, Several, Meadow Close and New Close) was sold in that year for £3,475. In 1086 (at Domesday), the 8 1/2 hides (a hide was about 120 acres) that made up the Covington holding were worth £10, an increase on the pre-Conquest value of £8.

Despite much trading of the Manor in the 13th and 14th centuries especially, it was owned by relatively few families. Roger d'Ivry was the first Lord, being awarded the Manor by William the Conqueror. It then passed to other 'cronies' before arriving with the de Bayeaux, Bayons, Baiocis family, where it stayed until being passed to the Sapcotes and, by marriage into the Russell family. The Russells sold the Manor in 1614 and, within the next century or so, it was broadly split in two with the Duke of Manchester and Earl Fitzwilliam (via the Hawes family of Bedford) eventually being the principal landowners. Earl Fitzwilliam retained the advowson. In the earliest times, there is mention of two 'knights' but it is unclear how this could be unless these were of very minor rank as there was not enough land to support two 'Knight's Fees'. There is a possibility that a second moated area to the north of the village (see below) is connected with this period, but, when excavated, no evidence of early medieval activity was found. In 1231, the Manor was granted to the Earl of Cornwall, which is coincidental as, in an area north of the current village, were found two bridle hangers in the form of a shield bearing the arms of Cornish knight Sir Henry Tilly (1296-1334). Sir Henry may have been visiting his fellow knight and Lord of the Manor, de Bayeaux (both men were sometime Sheriffs of Huntingdon). Manure from the Lord's stables would have been transported to the fields as fertiliser. A bridle hanger bearing the de Bayeux arms has also been found, but not in the same location. The shield in the north chancel window of the church, described by Inskip Ladds as bearing the de Bayeux arms definitely does not and more likely carries the arms of Sir William de Rustone or Rouhstone of Cambridgeshire (possibly Prior of Ely), dating from the 1340s. (A de Bayeux seal survives at the National Archives.)

In 1614, the Manor and associated rights were split into ninths, as it was bought by Turner and Loftes from the Russells and then sold back to the nine yeoman who at the time tenanted the messuages and open fields. These individuals were Charles Herbert (Gent), Henry Hardwicke, Henry Rolfe (or Roffe), William Haynes, Henry Mehew, Henry Briggs, Mary Barelegg Widow, Robert Negus, William Bruce. It would appear that not all of these were given Manorial rights along with their land as the first six are documented as each being given one whole ninth and one quarter of a ninth. In 1619 John Hawes of Bedford bought about half the land owners out, four ninths and three quarters of a ninth of the Manorial rights being passed by the Hawes family on to Earl Fitzwilliam in 1769. In 1655, The Duke of Manchester owned one ninth of the Manor of Covington and by 1935 was still receiving 'three pounds fifteen shillings and eight pence for the redemption of a Certainty Rent payable in respect of a piece of land belonging to them situate at Covington...'. So far as we are aware, the only existing Manorial rights in Covington are the one ninth still in the possession of the Manchester family and these have no land attached to them.

Real evidence for a bespoke Manor House is elusive but there are clues! Recent archaeological excavation (COVMAF15) indicated the presence of a ditched manorial enclosure dating to the immediate post Conquest period. An entry in the Calendar of Close Rolls accounts for the sale of the Manor of Covington to Sir William de Burton Knight and Richard de Baiocis son of Sir Richard de Baiocis Knight and is dated 'Covyngton Thursday the feast of St. Thomas the Apostle 31 Edward III (1357)', indicating that the deed was signed in the village and, presumably at the Manor House/Farm. Sir Richard de Bayeux (Baiocis) actively traded and mortgaged the Manor of Covington in the 1300s. He was Sheriff of Huntingdon for a year. There is a purbeck marble coffin lid in the chancel of the church, which was recorded in Victorian times as being inlaid with brass lettering identifying the owner as Richard de Bayeux. There is also architectural evidence of a chantry chapel on the south side of the nave. Both chantry chapels and purbeck marble coffins were fashionable with firstly the King and Court and then the lesser nobility in the 14th century. Another deed regarding the Manor of Covington was signed in Covington in 1443. The current residence named The Manor lies against the southern edge of the churchyard but would appear to date from the 1700s having been built by Jonathan Cuthbert. Terriers and baptism, marriage and death records show that there were earlier Cuthberts of similar status in the village as well as a line of Herbert (Gent), going back to at least 1614, who owned the land on which the current Manor is situated. The village threshing floor, village green and a large 'barn yard' are all shown on maps as being 'under the nose' of a house on the current site. All of the above would seem to indicate that there was a manorial building of some sort on the site of the current Manor continuously from at least just after the Norman Conquest and that, during the 1300s, the house was at least some of the time occupied by the Lord of the Manor of Covington i.e. Sir Richard de Bayeux. However, no deed poll or indenture or other legal document has SO FAR been located which specifically refers to a manor house or farm. Three farms are often mentioned, of which the manor farm might be one.

It is impossible to discuss the Manor without briefly mentioning the Open Field of Covington. For further information about how the medieval field system worked, do refer to Medieval Fields (Shire Archaeology) or The Open Fields of England (Medieval History and Archaeology), both by local archaeologist David Hall. Covington sort of had four fields - three main fields and then an area mainly of pasture south of the Spaldwick road called Netherfield - but appears to have operated a three-field system. The fields were 'West Field' (bordering the parish of Hargrave), 'Middle Field' (an area straddling the stretch of Keyston Road referred to above) and 'Deanacres' (from the boundary with Middle Field down to the current road to Catworth). Four terriers (lists of who owns which strip and where it is) from the 1614 sale of the manorial land and rights to the then tenants were found in the Northamptonshire Archives 'Treasure' (see below) and Covington History Group has been able to use these to plot the fields and furlongs on the ground, referring to the 1945 image of the village on Google Earth for the shape and location of individual fields prior to post war developments in agriculture. We have not yet been able to place absolutely every furlong, but it is possible to walk the footpaths in the parish as they currently are and know which of the medieval Open Fields one is passing through and, to a large extent, which medieval furlong.

Three local archive collections have provided us with a wealth of documents. Huntingdon Archives holds the Manchester Collection and much of the Inskip Ladds material came from here (and from the Norris Museum in St. Ives where his notes are available to researchers). The Manchester 1764 Enclosure Map and the 1801 Enclosure Map give valuable information about manorial holdings. 'Treasure' in Huntingdon archives includes a reference in a 19th century letter to the tenants in Covington having to build an estate road (the present Keyston Road from the top of the village to Cherry Hill Farm) at their own expense on the orders of the Duke of Manchester as Lord. Northampton Archives has the Fitzwilliam Collection - land in 19th century Covington was mostly either owned by the Duke of Manchester or Earl Fitzwilliam. However, a few years ago, real 'Treasure' was found there in the form of a box of deeds that had remained unopened for centuries and uncatalogued. These deeds, mostly indentures, were 17th and 18th century transfers of the Manor and of tenancies within the Manor. They listed the contents of the Manor (as above) together with conditions passed down from medieval times, for example how many sheep the tenant was entitled to graze on common pasture, all of which began to give us a real insight into Covington under the medieval manorial system. The final 'Treasure' was only recently discovered, this time at Bedfordshire Archives, where the Russell collection is held. The Russell family (Earls of Bedford) were in possession of the Manor of Covington in its entirety from 1520 until its sale in 1614 through the first Earl of Bedford's wife, Anne. She was the daughter of Sir Guy Sapcote and the Sapcotes inherited the Manor from the de Bayeux family. So, what was the 'Treasure'? Amongst the Russell papers was an uncatalogued box labelled 'Covington Deeds'. This box appears to have contained the de Baueux papers inherited by Anne Sapcote and then added to during the Russell family tenure. Fortunately, as we are not skilled enough to transcribe the documents, a member of the Russell household in 1703 went through the documents and noted the content of each one on the outside in legible English (rather than the abbreviated Latin or 'Secretary Hand' that readers are otherwise faced with). Notable amongst the deeds is an indenture dated 1368 between William Asser and others and Sir Robert de Baiocis for the erection of a windmill in Covington. There is also an undated deed poll whereby Cecilia Boveton granted 7 acres of land 'in the West Field of Covington' to John Bayus, which is relevant to a moated area of field north of the village known as Mote Close or Bovetune. Later documents in this collection include a 1555 Court Roll of the Manor of Covington and a 1586 Survey of the Manor of Covington. These have yet to be transcribed. This particular box of documents reveals just how much more complicated the descent of the Manor of Covington is even than the Inskip Ladds description.

Finally, a quick note about taxes: The online catalogue at the National Archives contains many references to Covington in its medieval taxation records. Covington appears to have been taxed together with the neighbouring parish of Hargrave although in 1220 it was referred to on its own as 'Covington Township'. There was communal assessment, for example the 1340 Wool Tax to fund a war with France was 'two ninths and fifteenths', which meant that farmers had to give every ninth sheaf of corn, the ninth fleece, the ninth lamb for two years and those who were not farmers had to pay 1/15th of the value of their movable assets, and there was individual assessment (the notorious poll tax) for example in 1380 where every adult over the age of 15 had to pay 12d. These references for Covington in the tax records have so far not been taken up.