

HISTORY OF THE THORNHAM ESTATE AND OF THE HENNIKER FAMILY

which gives a fairly typical picture of a landowning family in the 19th and early 20th Century.

From Roman to Tudor Times

The early history is lost in the mists of time. It is likely that there was a substantial Roman settlement and farm - the Villa Faustina - at Stoke Ash; coins and pottery have been found in the area. The Domesday Book records 52 people in Thornham Magna and 13 in Thornham Parva. One manor was held by a farmer called Isaac and another by Robert Malet who presented it to the Priory at Eye, whence it passed to the Crown and was given by Henry VIII to Charles Brandon, Earl of Suffolk, who had married his sister.

Under Edward III the estate was vested in William de Briseworth, and later passed to the Wiseman family. Thornham Hall was built in the 16th Century and the Bokenhams followed the Wisemans. It is tradition that Queen Elizabeth slept there on one of her East Anglian progresses and the chronicle records that "she lay at Thornham".

The Churches

Records show that there were churches in Thornham Parva and Thornham Magna in the 11th century. Thornham Parva has wall paintings dating from the early 14th century. They are of great interest since they include one of the only two surviving cycles in English wall painting of scenes from the life and death of St Edmund, King and martyr. There is also a magnificent treasure dated about 1410 in this church - a retablo discovered in the stables at Thornham in 1927. It is believed that another panel now in the Musee de Cluny, Paris, originally formed part of the same altar - probably the high altar of the Dominican priory at Thetford. St Mary's church at Thornham Magna was built in the 15th century. It was restored by the 4th Lord Henniker in 1851 with church furniture from the Great Exhibition.

The Killigrews and the arrival of the Majors and Hennikers

The estate passed from the Bokenhams when Jemima married Charles Killigrew. The Killigrews supported Charles I and followed Charles II to the Netherlands. Robert Killigrew was Charles's representative in Venice and returned to England at the Restoration when he was Groom of the Bedchamber and, was variously known as the Master of the Revels or the King's Jester. As such he was responsible for reviving the theatre after its abolition under Cromwell and himself wrote some plays. Charles was his son as was General Robert Killigrew who was killed at Almanza in Spain in 1707 and has a memorial in Thornham Magna Church. Charles Killigrew was succeeded at Thornham by his son Charles, who died without an heir in 1756. He bequeathed Thornham to his godson, the Rev. Charles Tyrell of Gipping, who sold it to Sir John Major.

Sir John Major

The Majors were reputed to be of French origin. Sir John Major was born in Bridlington in 1698. A merchant of the Muscovy company, a Director of the South Sea Company, Elder Brother of Trinity House, High Sheriff for Sussex 1755, M.P. Scarborough 1761, he was created a Baronet 1756 with a special remainder to his son-in-law, John Henniker, 1784. Bought Worlingworth Hall and Thornham 1756. He accompanied Admiral Anson on his voyage round the world.

John Henniker

John Henniker married Ann - elder daughter of John Major in 1747, also a Russia merchant of the Muscovy company, he lived at Rochester and was Freeman and merchant of that city. The Henniker origins are obscure; it is probable that they were descended from de Henkin, Governor of Dover Castle, but they may be Scandinavian, Onegar, from a village near Rochester. John Henniker was M.P. for Sudbury 1761 - 8, and Dover 1774 - 84. Succeeded to Sir John Major's baronetcy in 1761. Created Lord Henniker of Stratford on Slaney, Co Wicklow in the Peerage of Ireland 1800 and died 1803.

Chandos Connection

Both Major and Henniker were associated in business and in Parliament with James Brydges, who became first Duke of Chandos. Chandos began his career as Paymaster General and probably first had dealings with them in that capacity as merchants of the Muscovy company - importers of naval supplies from the Baltic. Chandos was involved in a wide variety of entrepreneurial activities after retiring from the Paymaster Generalship; he built a palace at Canons, Edgware, helped to develop Bath, Bridgwater, Harley Street, Cavendish and St James's squares, Scotland Yard, and Enfield and was in many other developments and speculative enterprises from the South Sea company (with John Major) and the Africa, Levant and Muscovy companies to mining China clay. He died in 1744 having successfully offset his losses in his wilder enterprises with other successes, but the family fortunes declined under his heir and his great achievement - Canons - fell into disrepair.

Elizabeth, second daughter of Sir John Major became the third wife of the heir of the 1st Duke, Henry 2nd Duke of Chandos, in 1767 in an attempt to repair his fortunes. He died in 1771 and she spent much of her widowhood at Thornham Hall, which she earlier visited with the Duke. She brought Chandos pictures and other possessions to Thornham and shared the estate with the 1st Lord Henniker as co-heir of Sir John Major. She died in 1813 at Major House (Thornham Hall). The Chandos connection is recalled by the names of the family and of various properties (e.g. Duchess Wood and Chandos Farm) in and around the estate.

The 19th Century

The first Lord Henniker was succeeded by his eldest son, a Fellow of the Royal Society (as an antiquarian), a Founder of the Royal Institution and active in the Muscovy Company: his extensive Russian travels were recorded in his journal. In the Napoleonic Wars he raised a regiment of Volunteers at Worlingworth and seemed to enjoy being painted in uniform. Like his father and his eventual successors - the 1st, 4th and 5th Lords Henniker - he was a Conservative M.P. and able as an Irish peer to stand for the House of Commons; he was M.P. for Romney 1785-90 for Steyning 1794-1802, for Rutland 1805-12, For Stamford 1812-18. He married Emily Jones and died without heir in 1821. His only sister, Elizabeth, married the 2nd Earl of Aldborough, who hoped and failed by this means to acquire a sizeable income and repair his fortunes. The Hall was improved by adding the stables, designed by the architect - Sidney Smirke. The 3rd Lord Henniker, a cousin and son of Major, (the 2nd son of the 1st Lord Henniker) succeeded. A lawyer, he married Mary Chafy, daughter of a Canon of Canterbury, who planted some of the woods. He took the additional name Major by deed poll. His son - John 4th Lord Henniker was M.P. for East Suffolk 1832-47 and 1858-1866. High Sheriff for Suffolk 1853. He was active in the county, in Parliament and in business, in promoting the railways, the Great Exhibition and the industrial development of the Country. He married Anna Kerrison, a daughter of General Sir Edward Kerrison of Brome Hall and Oakley Park - an important neighbour and landowner. She did much for the estate. In 1866 he was created Lord Hartismere in the U.K. Peerage and his elder son took over his Parliamentary seat. He remodelled the Hall

Masks for the Royal Navy

making additions to enhance its grandeur - building something on the lines of a French Chateau between the two wings and including a grand Louis XVI saloon, adding towers and turrets and blocking out much of the light and leaving the house colder and darker.

The Household

A census of 1851 showed 26 people living at the Hall - 6 family, Lord Henniker, his wife and four children, and 20 staff including a Swiss butler and his English wife who was also the housekeeper, a nurse and nursemaid, a stillroom maid, governesses (one of whom was French), gardeners, needlewoman, a house maid, and four kitchen maids and a ladies maid, cook, labourer and two footmen who stoked fires in all the rooms.

The Estate and the Family

When the 5th Lord Henniker succeeded his father in 1870 the Estate was in its heyday. There were 30,000 acres in Suffolk and probably more in Essex, Kent and Sussex. Disraeli had foretold when the Corn Laws, which protected English agriculture, were repealed in 1849 that a flood of foreign produce would spell the end of English agriculture. But for some 40 years his prophecy was not fulfilled, landowners and farmers continued in their old ways. At Thornham Lord Henniker and his wife Lady Alice Cuffe, only daughter of the 3rd Earl of Desart, raised a large family of 12 children, the house was constantly full of visitors, Lord Henniker had been sent to Cambridge as a friend of Edward VII and his fat and amusing sister Helen was popular for her wit with the King. He moved in circles which included the best game shots of the period who often stayed at Thornham, the Princes Freddie and Victor Duleep Singh, whose guardian he was, with Lords Ripon and Walsingham. The family travelled regularly with all their retainers from Thornham to Worlingworth Hall and on to London where the season was spent at 6 Grafton Street. After succeeding his father and leaving the House of Commons he worked hard. He was in two of Disraeli's Govts, a Lord-in-Waiting and junior Minister in the House of Lords. He was first Chairman of the East Suffolk County Council - all jobs which were unpaid. His children grew up at Thornham untroubled by the world with the standard careers of children of the aristocracy being mapped out for them. The house was always full of relations - many of them connected with the Cuffes (Lady Henniker's family) in Ireland.

The people of the Estate

John Perkins was head gardener in 1883 when the Hall then had 25 acres of garden. He died in 1907. He was well-known for his elaborate and elegant table decorations, on which he published a book which was a minor classic of its kind.

There are no statistics of how many people worked outside Thornham Hall, but the estate was unquestionably by far the largest if not the exclusive employer in the area; at one time as many as 9 gardeners worked in the Walled Garden. One man was employed to flag down trains which stopped in return for Lord Henniker promoting the railway and allowing it to cross his land, and another to supply fresh fish for the table. The stone folly whose ruins still remain, the ice-house, the walled garden and the model farm at the Red House, as well as the water tower, the pets graveyard and the yew walks date from this period. The workshops at the Red House housed many people, cowman and dairymade, horsemen, carpenter and joiners and a wheelwright, woodman and sawyers and gamekeepers of whom there were still 7 until the 1930's.

People moved between the villages and beyond on foot. Today's footpaths show a well used system of paths used by most people to get to work, school, church or chapel, the pub off the mill near the Stoke Ash White Horse.

The family in the 1890's: the decline and preservation of the present estate

The eldest son, Bertie, a godson of King Edward, went to Australia to learn something of politics as Private Secretary/ADC to the Governor of New South Wales; the second, Charles, joined the Rifle Brigade, the third, Gerald, was destined to be a diplomat, but when the time came the family could no longer produce the money (£400 a year) which an aspiring diplomat was expected to have, the fourth, Victor Alexander, a godson of Queen Victoria, trained to become a parson and occupy one of the family's livings, while John, the youngest, was a page to Queen Victoria and earned enough to pay his school bills. The daughters, kept carefully to the bosom of the family, knew nothing of the world or its dangers, a lack of knowledge which tended to prejudice their future happiness.

In the early 1890's Lady Henniker's diaries became very gloomy. The illness from which she died was approaching and economic difficulties were flooding in on her husband. Disraeli's prophecy was now, 40 years later, coming home to roost. North America's transport and marketing systems had improved; steady streams of corn were reaching British ports, while further afield Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and even Argentina were producing livestock efficiently and had mastered the problem of freezing meat. English agriculture was wilting under the strain, rents were impossible to get. For Thornham disaster came apace, and was the start of a decline in agriculture which, with short remissions before and during World War One, went on until the start of World War Two. Other estates in the area declined more slowly. The Kerrisons disappeared and their successors - the Batemans - from Oakley Park and Brome Hall which were pulled down. At Redgrave the Holt Wilsons' home designed by Capability Brown, lasted until World War II before being pulled down! Lord Walsingham retired to the South of France and farmers and landowners fell into sore straits.

my grandfather

my grandfather

In 1892 Lady Henniker died and Lord Henniker was forced to ask for a paid job under the Crown. In 1895 he was appointed Governor of the Isle of Man and remained there with many of his family until his death in 1902.

On his departure from Thornham the Hall was let. Before he died in 1902 his elder son, Bertie, had died suddenly of pneumonia. His heir, Charles, was with his regiment in India. Confusion reigned and from then, until his nephew could return and his own death in 1912, the 5th Lord Henniker's younger brother, General Arthur Henniker, a Guardsman, with his intellectual wife, Florence daughter of Lord Houghton, a close friend of Thomas Hardy, kept an eye on the estate and the family. The children carried on as best they could. John, the future 7th Lord Henniker, was leaving school and it was decided that now that the family had no money, his best prospect would be to be trained as a Land Agent who could eventually manage the estate for his brother. He was sent to Cirencester. For the five remaining daughters the prospects were even more difficult.

The 6th Lord Henniker returned from India, having decided that with 10 brothers and sisters to provide for, he could not marry and must break off his engagement. He took his battalion to France at the beginning of World War **II**. They had dreadful losses at Ypres and these disasters were a constant sorrow for the rest of his life. Debts were astronomical, there were death duties to pay as well and these worries hung over his head until the end of his life. When the war was over, with the Hall leased to Colonel Hughes, he decided he must sell the greater part of the estate; 21,000 acres were sold in 1919. This had to be repeated after World War II when another 7,000 acres were sold, leaving 3,000 acres of the original estate.

In the mid thirties the Hall's long-term tenant Colonel Hughes decided to leave and, after all attempts to find another tenant had failed, it was decided to sell nearly all its contents (except pictures specifically involving the family) and to pull down the greater part of the house, which with no heating, no bathrooms

and some 95 rooms was increasingly unmanageable. The remainder of the house was converted and pleasantly modernized and the 6th Lord Henniker moved in. No sooner had he done so then it was requisitioned for an Army HQ and Lord Henniker decided at the end of the war not to move again. The Hall was again let - to a school - and was burnt down in 1954. In 1956 Lord Henniker died and was succeeded in the title by his youngest brother, the 7th Lord Henniker who had returned in 1932 when the old agent died to fulfil the plan originally made for him to manage the Estate. He and his family, including the present peer, lived at the Red House and he continued to be closely involved with managing the estate which he successfully kept going, until his elder son returned in 1978 from a career in Diplomacy where he had been Ambassador to Jordan and Denmark and in the British Council as Director General. The 7th Lord Henniker died at the age of 97 in 1980.
