

A Brief History of Hambleden

An Extract from "Gone Afield" by Cecil Roberts

'After lunch at Yewden I went on to Hambleden, passing the site of former Roman villas. I would like to keep quiet about Hambleden, to lock it away in its valley and let no one know of it. It is pleasant to think that a fortune founded on W. H. Smith's station bookstalls and bookshops has contributed, in enlightened ownership, to the preservation of the perfect village. But since a film company has visited it, and an excellent guidebook has been written about it, there is no point in my pretending we can keep it to ourselves. I think also Lord Hambleden likes it to be visited, for all the footpaths leading to it are well cared-for, and on a southern slope of a wood commanding a magnificent prospect of the Thames valley, he had placed a pilgrim's seat. On how many a morning I have sunned myself there before striking up through a wooded fairyland leading to Fawley!



'The village of Hambleden is the American's dream of England. I take them there and watch their eyes open. It has all the requisites - an old church, a stream, a village pump, ancient timbered houses by the churchyard, a noble Elizabethan manor house, an elegant Georgian rectory, a village red-tiled, with brick chimneys and dormer windows, an old inn, and ancestral elms inhabited by rooks, all nestling under a film of wood smoke, presided over by a clock chiming the hour from the square church tower. Nor is that all. It nestles in a green valley that rises to beech woods, and to chestnut trees framing Manor and Rectory, and it possesses enough of history, with kings, bishops, knights, and parsons, to make it truly representative of the English scene.



The Stream at Hambleden



Hambleton Manor



Hambleton Village Stores



Hambleton Village

'One of the first holders of manorial rights was arrogant Queen Matilda, according to the Domesday Survey, and William Rufus granted her fiefs to Robert Fitz-Hamon, who held a dozen baronies, and whose blood, I like to think, flows in the veins of my tenant at Fawley, Mr. Harman, the retired village blacksmith.

'The patronage of the living always went with the Manor, and it is a curious fact that King John held it in 1215, when Earl of Gloucester; the first two signatures on the Magna Carta are those of Richard de Clare, and his son Gilbert, who held the Manor after King John. Ralph Neville, the first rector we hear of, in 1215, was also Chancellor of England at the same time.

'The list of the rectors of this lovely old church, long in the diocese of Lincoln, reflects a strange phase of ecclesiastical history. The Pope, in 1240, demanded that the bishop should reserve 140 benefices for Italian clerics. The bishop protested stoutly, though unsuccessfully, for in 1269 one rector, Laurence de Burgh, succeeded a nameless rector who was a canon of St. Maria Rotonda. St. Maria Rotonda, of which this Hambleton incumbent, an Italian undoubtedly, was a canon, is the former Pantheon, the most perfect ancient building now extant in Rome. It became a temple of Jupiter and was rebuilt by the Emperor Hadrian. It is lighted solely by a hole in the centre of the magnificent coppered dome, and it now holds the tombs of Raphael and of the Kings of Italy.

'This business of nominating Italian clerics to English livings was a profitable one for the thirteenth-century Popes. They sold the livings, not always to the best characters. The Bishop of Lincoln's protests were not heeded, and in one year alone he lost revenues out of

his diocese amounting to £20,000. At two villages within five miles of Hambleton there were other Italian vicars, one, Vitalis, at Sonning, and one, Bello Deserto, at Shiplake. The Mass being in Latin, these Italian vicars were not embarrassed, but how much intercourse could they have had with their rude flocks?

'The living at Hambleton came ultimately into the Scrope family. They held the Manor for some three hundred years, from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, and had the appointment of nineteen rectors. Their old manor house is now part of the present rectory, and in the church one can see on the Scrope brass their coat of arms with the Bend d'or, the golden band across it. It was this coat of arms, which provoked a famous lawsuit between Sir Richard Scrope and Sir Richard Grosvenor.

'One of the Scrope descendants became the Earl of Sunderland, and he is memorable for having built, in 1603, the noble manor house that now stands a little way from the church, and where Charles I slept when a fugitive from Oxford.

'Another great family were the D'Oyleys. In 1480 John D'Oyley bought Greenlands from Sir William Stonor. John's son, Robert, died at the Oxford Assizes, in 1577, from a plague that arose from the unsanitary condition of the gaol. As might be expected, our old friend Dr. Robert Plot knew all about it.

" Others again tell us of the Black Assize held in the Castle here in 1577, when a poysonous steam broke forth of the earth, and so mortally seized the spirits of the Judges, Sheriffs, Justices, Gentry and Juries, besides great numbers of others that attended the business, that they sickened upon it and almost all of them dyed."

'However, the learned doctor did not swallow local rumours. " **But let it not be ascribed to ill fumes and exhalations ascending from the earth and poysoning the air, for such would have equally affected the Prisoners as Judges, but we find not that they died otherwise than by the halter, which easily persuades me to be of the mind of Lord Verulam, who attributes it wholly to the smell of the Gaol, where the prisoners had been long, close and nastily kept."**

'A later John D'Oyley owned Greenlands when it suffered a bombardment during the Civil War by the Parliamentary Army, and he was glad to sell the remains of it to his neighbour Bulstrode Whitlocke, of Fawley Court, whose house had suffered also, standing in between Greenlands and the Parliamentary garrison at Phyllis Court, Henley.

'But let us return to the rectors, casting a grateful look at the tomb of Dr. Kenrick, for it was he who built the western front of the rectory, in 1725, fitting it on to the south corner of the Scropes' old manor house. It is a lovely old house now, standing back on the hillside. It has lost something of its ancient grandeur, but it has gained a setting of fine trees. According to a print of 1756, there were two colonnades of clipped yews, and it shows a milkmaid milking a cow, crinolined ladies and the learned doctor in college cap and gown disporting themselves in a meadow below the house, while along the road rolls a private coach-and-four with attendant lackey.'

Hambleton Church

'It is an excellent example of what a well-kept village church should be when the Lord of the Manor has a deep pocket, and the will to put his hand in it. It was built in about AD 1140 and is Norman in style: but the old tower disappeared in 1707, being unsafe, and the new tower, a characteristic example of Chiltern brick and flint work, appeared at the west end some ten years after the first tower had disappeared from the centre. Drastic alterations have changed and enlarged the church. The farm labourers always occupied the gallery, until later times, and it is said the farmers stood in the porch on a Sunday morning to see that their men went up to the gallery.'



Hambleton Church exterior

'An object of interest within is Wolsey's Bedstead. Whether Wolsey ever slept in it is not known, and anyhow it is only the head and foot of a bedstead, bought and fixed on the back of a vestry cupboard by William Henry Ridley. What is undeniable is that it is finely carved, and bears the arms of Cardinal Wolsey and Richard Fox, both Bishops of Winchester in the sixteenth century.'



Hambleton Church interior

Fingest

'In the neighbouring village of Fingest the Bishop of Lincoln had a manor house, and for almost a year Wolsey was Bishop of Lincoln. That seems enough to bring the bedstead near to Hambleden, and without a doubt it contains the arms and the initials of Wolsey and Fox. Considering the number of saints' tongues, toes, and bones we accept as relics in the Roman Catholic churches, we may allow the Anglican Church the bedstead of Wolsey, for it is beautiful and not merely gruesome.

'We must look also at the fine alabaster tomb of Sir Cope D'Oyley and his wife and ten children, with an epitaph by Quarles, the poet, to the knight's wife, his sister. We need not believe that she was

*in spirit a Jael,
Rebecca in grace, in heart an Abigail,
In works a Dorcas, to ye church a Hanna,
And to her spouse Susanna,
Prudently simple, providently wary,
To the world a Martha and to Heaven a Mary,*

but we must applaud the nicely balanced, family of five sons and five daughters she found time to bear while exercising so many virtues.

'Let us now go over to Fingest to look at a saddleback Norman church, and call on a ghost in holy orders. But before departing we will glance at the Hambleden village War Memorial, finely wrought and placed before the churchyard wall. It has forty names on its stone base, and of those forty names it contains those of five pairs of brothers, such was the toll of English village life.

*The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,
The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.*



Fingest Church exterior



Fingest Church Stained-Glass Window

'Two and a half miles up the Hambleden valley we find Fingest, with its odd twelfth-century tower, with four-foot-thick walls and twin red-brick gables. But it is the ghost of the Bishop of Lincoln that we are thinking of while in this distressingly bare church. The diocese of Lincoln once embraced the Chilterns, and the Bishops had a palace at Fingest. One of these, Henry de Burghersh, who died in 1340, obtained a licence to empark his wood with three hundred acres of common land adjoining, to the great indignation of the inhabitants. He died soon

after, and his ghost appeared to one of his gentlemen, attired in a keeper's dress. He was doomed as a penance for his encroachment to act as keeper until restoration was made. He begged the Canons of Lincoln to break down the hedges and fill up the ditches, which they did, and his ghost was laid. All moonshine, probably, and yet the tax assessment records show that the Bishop did enclose the land, and traces of a high bank and ditches were to be seen until the eighteenth century.'

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