

THE HISTORY OF FIFIELD MANOR

EXTRACT FROM BENSON a Village through its History by Kate Tiller

Fifield: 1575-1665

The Stampes were one of the leading families of Benson in the early modern period, and Fifield was their base. In 1575 a lease was drawn up between John Dinham of Boarstall in Buckinghamshire, then lord of Fifield manor and Thomas Stampe, junior ‘of Cholsey, Berkshire, gent.’¹⁸ Thomas was to rent the manor, and also closes at Oakley in Benson, for 41 years from September 1580 for £34 8s p.a. As we have seen the holding was substantial, in 1596 790 acres of land, a mill and 6 messuages, tofts and orchards,¹⁹ the surviving houses of the shrunken medieval village.

Shortly after the expiry of the Stampes’ first lease their connection was renewed, but now (1623) in two parts.²⁰ John Stampe, ‘of Fifield, gent.’ took on the major part, the manor house, except the kitchen and the Oakley closes for 19 years at £105 p.a.

Thomas Stampe, ‘of Fifield, gent.’, took the part of the manor house called ‘the Kitchen’, 5 bays with lofts and rooms under the roof, a 3 bay barn and adjoining houses, an orchard and hemp plot, the Kitchen, Chapel and House Crofts, and 3 cow commons. The rent was £15 p.a.

The story behind this carving up of Fifield between two brothers emerges from the will of their mother, Joan.²¹ She was buried at Benson Church on 10 February 1611, but had made her will in November 1609. With scrupulous care she itemised each piece of furniture and household utensil she wanted her son Thomas to inherit, including the 2 bedsteads, featherbed and flockbed ‘in the chamber where Thomas lyeth’, the ‘greatest brass pot except one’, and an interestingly detailed set of items for a working fireplace – the iron bar in the hall chimney, 2 iron hangers, a pair of cobb irons, 2 iron dogs ‘to hold up the wood’, a fire fork, a fire shovel and tongs, and a pair of bellows.

It is apparent from the will that she had rights to Fifield as her widow’s estate and during the still unexpired lease of 1580. Thus, apart from the great barn, sub-let to John Barrett (another prominent Benson name of the period), she could ensure that Thomas, who with his wife Avis and family was already sharing her part of the house, had sufficient security there and use of the orchard, hemp plot, gardens, dovehouse, 3 closes, an acre of meadow in Hasley Mead, and six ‘beast commons.’ In return Thomas and Avis must maintain the property ‘tenantlyke’.

The inventory of the manor house at Fifield, mentions the hall, great chamber, middle and inner chambers, buttery, milkhouse, kitchen and loft beneath the hall, and reveals much about buildings, furniture, living standards and household economy. There is the emphasis on wainscotting and window glass as valuable movable goods, the sole fireplace in the hall, the precise listing of utensils and linen (2 dozen and 11 napkins), and the home production – of bacon, cheese, butter and linen yarn.

Outside the house are milk cows, store pigs and her share of the working farm, barley, hay and wheat (both stacked and in February in the ground). However, of a wealth in movable goods of £162 12s fully £100 is accounted for by the remainder of the lease.

NINETEENTH CENTURY FIFIELD from Edith Ditmas

Robert Aldworth Newton, a wealthy farmer and one of Benson's charitable benefactors, bought Fifield Manor in 1850. At this time it was a long, low farmhouse built on the massive medieval foundations of an old grange belonging to the bishops of Dorchester. Robert Newton transformed it by adding an upper storey and a parapet, as well as a classical portico with Doric pillars. The Ewelme brook, running through the garden, was made into a water feature. Robert Newton died in 1879, and left £203 11s 3d in Consols for the benefit of the Benson poor.

FIFIELD IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY BY JOHN ALDRIDGE

Fifield Farm House has a walled kitchen garden. The house is late C.18 - early C.19, with later alterations and stucco facings. To the south is a magnificent "L" shaped range of barns. Late C. 18 - early C. 19 and virtually unaltered except for re-hanging tiles on new battens. On the west side are 15 bays with four hipped dormer entrances and on the south 14 bays with three similar entrances, displaying chequered brick work with ventilation slits. These barns would have housed the harvest from the farm which must at one time have extended to about 500 acres. The name Fifield is derived from Fyfehyde - Fyshide - Fyfeilde. In a document of 1588 it plainly refers to Fif-hydes and the Hyde was the Saxon equivalent of about 100 acres.



Fifield Manor, is three storeys, with a long stuccoed front, and strings at sill levels and a bracketed cornice, with blocking course in eight bays. The four central first floor windows have architrave surround with frieze and cornice on brackets. The central door has five panels with flanking lights under a wide Doric porch. There are four columns, two wall pilasters and an entablature with blocking course, early C.19. There is a small walled garden in front of the house with a trout stream running through the centre. It has a late C. 18 wrought iron gate to the road with dog rails and scroll arrow heads to cross rails. The back of the house is irregular with lower service extensions.

In the grounds to the rear is a dilapidated dovecote with a date stone 1767 and the names of John and Anna Wise. It is built in flint, ragstone and brick with no less than 200 nesting recesses. The house is reputed to be of C. 12 origin with walls of immense thickness. The property was purchased by John Blacknall in 1620 for the sum of £2060. His daughter and heiress Mary Blacknall married Sir Ralph Verney (one of the Claydon House family).

In 1850 the property was purchased by Robert Aldsworth Newton and held until his death in 1883 when it was administered by his trustees until about 1903 when Mrs MacDonald became the Lady of the Manor (as described in Kelly's Directory of Oxfordshire). The freehold carried the title Lord of the Manor, Constable, Assessor and Surveyor.

In about 1924, Charles Henry Wainwright J.P., purchased the property which by now had lost most of its land. He was a leading figure in the Boy Scout Movement and it was in these grounds that I was examined for and was awarded six Scout Cub Badges. After his death in 1936 his widow, Mrs C. H. Wainwright became and used the title "Lady of the Manor".