

Lords of the Manor

The Decline of the Barony: 1253 – 1414

After the Hook Norton d'Oilly line expired, the de Plessets were to hold the manor for just over a hundred years, from the mid-thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth centuries. The long reign of King Henry III was marked by wars in France and at home, against the Welsh and the Scots, but is also remembered for the two Barons' Wars that were to limit royal power. Today the concessions won from the king are seen as significant steps towards parliamentary government, though the barons were far from altruistic in their conflict with the king. The lords of Hook Norton manor were to face many tests of loyalty and probity in these turbulent times.

John de Plessets clearly had King Henry III's favour. A royal whim had brought him an advantageous marriage to Margery d'Oilly, last of the dynasty to rule Hook Norton, and taken him from relative obscurity to various high offices, among them royal tax collector and Sheriff of Oxfordshire. However, the year that Margery died, 1253, was not a good year for him. He had been into Gascony with Henry, but was seized and imprisoned on his way home. The king appealed to de Plessets' tenants: their lord, he said, had done valiant service and he promised royal favour if the tenants contributed to the debts incurred on his behalf. Whatever the results of the king's fund-raising, John de Plessets was freed and participated in two royal forays into Wales in 1258 and 1260. By an irregular arrangement, de Plessets managed to ensure that his son by an earlier marriage would inherit the barony of Hook Norton. What the villagers thought of this high-handed disposal of them is not recorded: it is said that de Plessets' peers were offended. John died in 1263. He was buried at the Augustinian house in Missenden.

He was succeeded, as planned, by his son, Hugh, who married Isabel de Ripariis, or Rivers. When he died in 1282, he was buried at Oseney Abbey, the Oxford Augustinian house which had been strongly supported by the lords of Hook Norton: his widow was buried in Hook Norton church which suggests that she had an affection for the village.

His son, another Hugh, succeeded to the barony of Hook Norton in 1282 at the age of 25. He served in the Scottish Wars of King Edward I, but like his father and grandfather seems to have had problems making ends meet. William Dugdale reports dismissively that Hugh passed some of his manors to the king in return for £200, using his lordships of Hook Norton, Kidlington and Missenden as security: "For being no longer summon'd to Parliament, and consequently not in the rank of a Baron, I shall not pursue the story of him any lower".

The next lord of the manor in 1301 was another Hugh, who became a ward of the king. His mother Margaret was still alive, and the king extracted an oath from her in 1302 that she would not remarry without his permission. However, she was ejected from "divers tenements" in Hook Norton as a consequence of a dispute with John of Segrave who had been appointed to manage some of Hugh's lands during his minority. Margaret won the law suit, and her rights were restored.

Hugh came of age in 1318 and was granted seisin (possession). History repeated itself. He left a child as heir in 1337, and a widow, Milisenta, who had to take a similar vow of not marrying without royal consent. That year Edward III was claiming to be the rightful ruler of France — this led to the Hundred Years War which actually lasted until 1453 — but he still had time to confiscate Milisenta's property when she rashly married Richard de Stoneleigh without royal approval in 1338. However, he restored her manors to her shortly afterwards. When Milisenta died in 1361, her father John Lenveysy succeeded her to the manor of Hook Norton.

The war in France had gone well; even though he renounced his claim to the French throne in 1360, the king had secured valuable territory.

John Lenveysy held the manor of Hook Norton from 1361 to 1372. His son, John, had died by 1380 and his widow Elizabeth married Philip de la Vache, an intimate of the royal court (with a princess as his godmother), keeper of Woodstock Manor, Knight of the Shire for Buckinghamshire and Captain of the Castle of Calais — which brought him the privilege of taking livestock from the king's enemies and importing them into England free of taxes. Given that "vache" is the French for "cow", this seems particularly appropriate. Philip seems to have been rather a wheeler and dealer, entering into various profitable transactions, selling anything

from French prisoners of war to marriages of royal wards. He associated with a group of religiously unorthodox knights, the Lollard Knights. And though he sold off Elizabeth's life interest in several of her estates, he took steps to keep possession of Hook Norton and Kidlington which brought in a valuable 100 marks a year and profitable feudal rights attached to the honour (or barony) of the d'Oillys.

The Oxfordshire manors should have passed after Elizabeth's death to a Buckingham landowner, Sir William Moleyns, who gave up his rights to a group of trustees who in turn transferred the estates to de la Vache, having been given "recognizances" (an obligation sworn before a court of law) in 1,000 marks.

De la Vache successively weathered the political uncertainties of the times, being elected a Knight of the Garter in 1399, and adjusting smoothly to the deposition and murder of Richard II. Under Henry IV he retained most of his income and titles, including the role of Chamberlain to Richard's widowed Queen.

He knew the poet Geoffrey Chaucer, who advised him to retire and be content with the possessions he had and devote himself to prayer.

Therefore, La Vache, cease your old wretchedness;
To the world cease now to be in thrall;
Cry Him mercy, that out of his high goodness
Made thee from naught, on Him especially call,
Draw unto Him, and pray in general
For yourself, and others, for heavenly cheer;
And truth shall deliver you, have no fear.

Truth: Balade de Bon Conseil, Geoffrey Chaucer

De la Vache did not follow Chaucer's advice immediately. He outlived the great poet, and died in 1404, childless. Perhaps betraying his Lollard sympathies, de la Vache ordered a very plain funeral for himself and, unusually in those days, left no legacy for the monasteries, though there was plenty of silver for his widow.

Elizabeth survived him, retaining most of his lands, including Hook Norton and Kidlington, but on her death in 1414 they were acquired by Thomas Chaucer, Geoffrey Chaucer's son.

A new era had begun. Thomas Chaucer's daughter, Alice, and her husband were ambitious. In the following essay in this section, "The Wars of the Roses", Hook Norton becomes part of the dukedom of Suffolk... and one of its lords claims the throne of England.

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