

The Lord Farmer Crokers, 1530-1670

The Crokers were the dominant family in Hook Norton for well over a century, building their fortune on the privatisation of church property. In the spirit of Henry VIII's uniting of Church and State, they gained control – at least for some decades – of both the historic manors into which the parish had traditionally been divided. This made them the single local power source resident in the village, in a way that was unprecedented and potentially threatened the development of the open village. It is therefore disappointing that we know so little about them, especially in their later years.

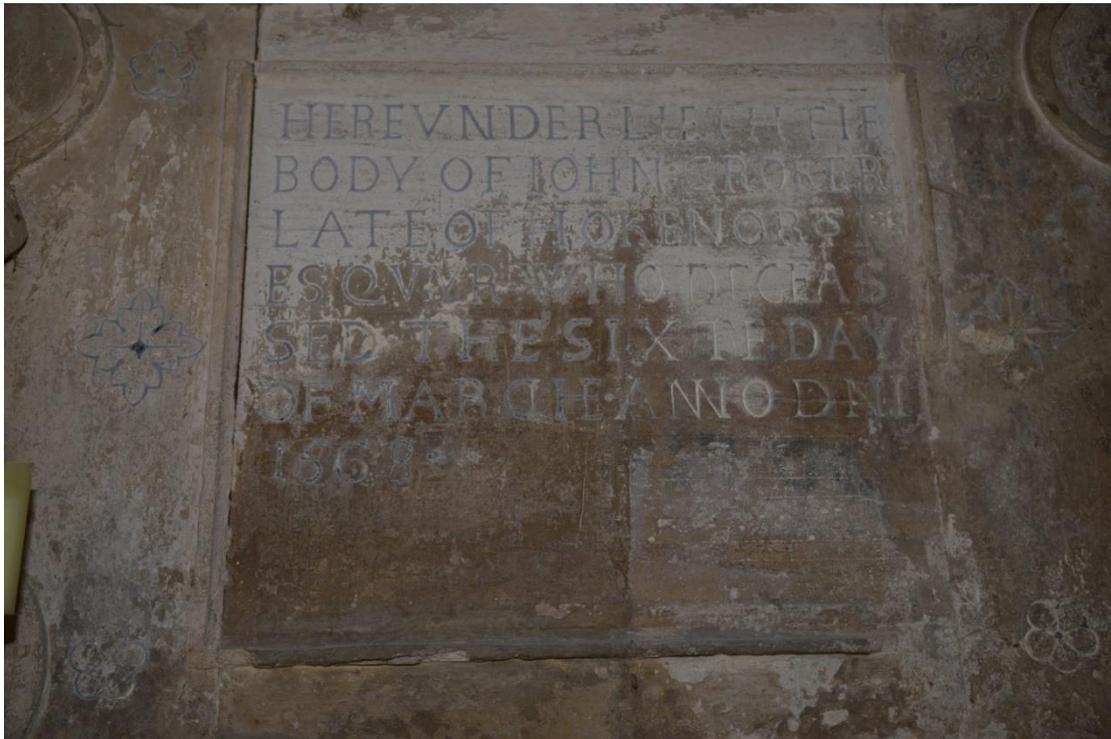
The Founders

The first Croker of local note, John Croker, was born a gentleman, the son of Thomas Croker of Faringdon. Apparently John was born in Hook Norton in 1500 and married here in 1523. Certainly by 1530 he was “Lord Farmer”¹ of Oseney Abbey's Hook Norton manor and by 1535 bailiff for the abbey lands at Little Tew, Swerford and Chastleton as well. By then he had gained a lease for eighty years of the abbey's manor and farm in Hook Norton, including both “vicarage” and “rectory”, which meant all the proceeds of the lands and tithes. (The tithes were the one-tenth of all produce paid by the people for the upkeep of the local clergy.) After the dissolution of the abbey in 1539, the arrangement was confirmed successively by Henry VIII and Edward VI, and renewed in 1553 by Mary Tudor for ninety years. The rent was payable to the new lord, the Bishop of Oxford - except that Queen Elizabeth kept that office vacant for periods amounting to forty years, so that the money went straight into the royal coffers!

Under Edward VI, “Lord Farmer” Croker also acquired the lease for 41 years of the main manor of Hook Norton manor, which had traditionally lain in the Crown's gift; this included The Park, including the present Park Farm and Grounds Farm. In

¹ The term “farmer” referred to someone who made a fixed payment for the right to collect revenues and who then made a profit on the collection. It did not develop its modern meaning until the eighteenth century.

addition, he gained many landholdings elsewhere – including Milcombe, Warmington and Steeple Barton – but lived in Hook Norton. In 1556 the Heralds of the Royal College of Arms confirmed his right to use a coat of arms resembling that of the Crocker family of Devonshire, which he could bear as an esquire. In 1562 he became High Sheriff of Oxfordshire. This first John Croker died in 1568, leaving £6 to the poor of the parish; he was buried in the north transept of St. Peter's and commemorated by the most impressive memorial stone in the church, still visible (with difficulty) on the hacked-about memorial next to the transept window:



Croker Stone in St Peter's

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John left the lease of the Bishop's manor to his wife for her lifetime. The royal manor passed to his son, the first Gerard Croker, and then, on his death in 1577, to Gerard's son, the second John Crocker. Several law cases arose thereafter over the Crokers' lands, the most high profile because the politically prominent Richard Lee of Ditchley, who had married the widow, hung on to the Hook Norton lease even after her death. Rumour had it that the Earl of Leicester, Queen Elizabeth's favourite, successfully intervened in the case in Croker's favour; certainly in 1591 Croker was

in control of both manors. At his death in about 1610, John passed on the episcopal manor and probably the royal manor too to his son, the first Henry Croker, and he in turn was succeeded in the 1620s by his wife Elizabeth because their son, the second Gerard Croker, was not yet of age.

Ecclesiastical Power

Control of former ecclesiastical lands brought great privileges within the Church of England. Since before the dissolution of the monasteries the Crokers enjoyed Oseney's former right to appoint the vicar of Hook Norton and to receive the tithes. Several of the family "lye buried in a vault" near the John Croker memorial in



The "Low Side" Window

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the north transept. The Crokers were probably responsible for the "low side" window inserted in the south chancel wall; it is now visible only from the outside, but looks clearly Elizabethan or Jacobean in style. As Margaret Dickens suggested, such windows were usually inserted because Patrons were allowed to sit in a privileged position within the chancel during service and often wanted more daylight on their pew to help them follow the service in Bible and Prayer Book. Presumably in Hook Norton at the time the altar lay within the chancel, separated from the congregation by the medieval rood screen, and so the Crokers enjoyed spiritual privileges denied other laymen.²

As Patrons, the Crokers used their position to deprive Hook Norton of a proper Vicar. In a 1597 law case the second John Croker declared in court that during the sixty years his family had held the lease the vicar of Hook Norton had never been an Incumbent, holding the office in his own right and enjoying the full tithes; those appointed had been either temporary curates or stipendiary ministers employed on terms by the Crokers. In other words, the Crokers took the income and paid the clergymen at cut rates, allowing them part of the tithes. One elderly resident called as a witness said she never knew "since the plucking down of the abbey any

² Dickens, *History of Hook Norton*, pages 107-108; quotation, p. 118.

vicar of Hooknorton but only the cure thereof served by such as those who were hired” by the Crokers, who were not always of the highest moral standard.³

Such abuses were typical of the deprived state of much of the Church of England by the early seventeenth century. In effect, the Crown had privatised the right to appoint clergymen and receive tithes, to the detriment of religious provision. Puritans demanded reform and some “Godly” laymen used their control to appoint and pay decent clergymen, making possible the great expansion of Puritanism under James I. Then after 1625 Charles I and Archbishop William Laud tried to reverse this process and give the Crown effective control once more, which they could use to impose religious reform of a more ritualistic nature. It may be that when the Crokers at last appointed an Incumbent to the Living of Hook Norton in 1638, they did so because continuing favour at court depended on supporting the king’s favoured ecclesiastical policy.

Civil War

Certainly the Crokers were careful to retain royal favour as political disputes became more embittered under Charles I. In 1628 Elizabeth Croker paid up when the king demanded a Subsidy and in 1641 the second Gerard Croker (who had come of age since 1634) paid Ship Money, both of them unpopular taxes not approved by Parliament.⁴ Like the Wilmots in Adderbury, they were out of sympathy with local political sentiment and chose the unpopular side as political relations in England degenerated towards civil war between King and Parliament.

When fighting broke out in 1642, the second Gerard Croker fought at Edgehill and was one of the first to be equipped with a regiment of horse by the King in 1642. There is some evidence that his horses were armoured, which was unusual in the civil war. Promoted early to Colonel, he took on the job of raising money and supplies from a largely unsympathetic local population in Hook Norton and neighbouring parts of Gloucestershire and Warwickshire. Highly abrasive and high-handed, Croker was deeply disliked by locals, though his unpopularity may have

³ Dickins, pages 165-68.

⁴ With Miss Dickins, page 169, I assume the Ship Money list’s reference to Bernard Croker is an error for Gerard.

owed as much to his overpowerful economic and social position locally as to his extortionate and bullying use of his military command. Even his superior officer, the Earl of Northampton, on several occasions wrote to Prince Rupert asking him to check Croker's "hard usage" of even well-inclined local people. In response, the King himself in June 1643 praised the efforts of "our trusty and well-beloved Colonel Gerrard Croker", and insisted that the towns under Croker's control, specifically including Hook Norton, must pay the costs of quartering Croker's regiment of 400 horse.⁵

As the fortunes of war swung towards Parliament, Croker was captured by the Roundheads in June 1644 and his lands sequestrated. He suffered imprisonment in Gloucester Gaol and died, after his release, in March 1647. Gerard's younger brother and heir, a second Henry Croker, managed to get their lands back by paying a hefty fine to the County Committee established by Parliament, including an order to "settle thirty pounds a year on the church at Hook Norton". Others claimed possession of the Croker lands but Henry fought them off in law cases that dragged into the 1650s. Henry died in 1665 without issue and his nephew (possibly great-nephew) William inherited.

A Frustrated Restoration

The Crokers appeared to have substantially restored their position in the parish. When the Restoration Parliament introduced a tax on hearths, the official survey of 1665 showed that William Croker's house had thirteen chimneys; the next highest number in the parish belonged to George Austin, who had eight, in what was presumably the house rebuilt by Robert Austin in 1636 that we now call the Manor House, which it certainly wasn't at the time. The Crokers had previously lived in the village at the old manor house called Court Place (in what is now Shearing Close), but by this period they had probably moved to the only significant building outside the village, namely Grounds Farm.⁶

⁵ Philip Tennant, *Edgehill and Beyond: The People's War in the South Midlands, 1642-1645* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1992), pages 100-102.

⁶ Dickins, *Hook Norton*, 19, 50, 62 (quotation), 74, 169, 172.

The family may have restored its financial superiority in the village but it could not re-establish its former social pre-eminence. Its hold on the established local church no longer greatly enhanced its standing because the emergence of the Baptists during the civil war era, and their persistence through the persecutions of the 1660s, meant that St. Peter's was no longer the single arbiter of local behaviour. The Baptists were soon reinforced by the even more heterodox Quakers, and the Toleration Act of 1689 confirmed the legitimacy of such nonconformists as rival centres of faith within the village. The increasing diversity of village life simply prevented the re-establishment of the Crokers' former hegemony.

In any case, the Crokers were once more under legal challenge, partly arising from the confusion over land titles created during the Interregnum. In 1668 Thomas Wise brought a case against the Crokers claiming that the episcopal manor of Hook Norton should be his by inheritance. After long legal wrangling, he won; in 1676 Wise was listed as Hooky's sole member of the gentry and in 1689 as Deputy Lieutenant for Oxfordshire. But in 1699 William Talbot became Bishop of Oxford and, at "great expense at law", brought a case against him. After lengthy argument Wise was "detected of a forgery", the court accepted that the original lease had long expired, and the manor reverted to the bishopric. The bishop then leased the manor to his own family, and it remained with the Talbots for the next 150 years!⁷

The Talbots may have taken over the Crokers' command of the ecclesiastical manor in Hook Norton but in a different world. There were now more wealthy landowners in the village, and the Talbots themselves were members of the extended family headed by the Earl of Shrewsbury and would, in time, themselves inherit the title. Like nobility of the past, they had large interests elsewhere and lived far from the village. Once more immediate local influence was shared by a number of families, as in the days before the Crokers.

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October 2015

⁷ Dickins, *Hook Norton*, 64.

References:

Margaret Dickins, *History of Hook Norton*, pages 46-47, 50, 58-64, 70-77, 133-34,
162-69.

Philip Tennant, *Edgehill and Beyond: The People's War in the South Midlands,
1642-1645* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1992), pages 86, 100-102, 169.

Online genealogical sources.