

The Lords of the Hook Norton Secular Manor

Barons Hooknorton: the D'Oilly Dynasty, 1066-1253

The Saxon Legacy

Little is known of the Saxon lords of Hook Norton. The last was probably Wigod of Wallingford, a kinsman of Edward the Confessor. Perhaps he had issues with Harold Godwinson, the powerful Earl of Wessex, who became King in 1066. Harold was killed at the Battle of Hastings. Wigod was astute enough to surrender the vital Thames crossing to the Normans, entertained the conquering William on his way to take London, and offered his daughter in marriage to one of William's trusted lieutenants, Robert d'Oilly. For his services Wigod, who already owned considerable lands in Berkshire and Oxfordshire, was richly rewarded. By 1071 his son-in-law had inherited many estates from him as well as lands conferred on him by King William: Robert was recorded in the Domesday Survey as Lord of the Manor of Hook Norton, Watlington, Goring, Bicester, Kidlington, Water Eaton, and Drayton, to name but a few from a long list of titles and estates. But his title was Baron Hooknorton.

Robert d'Oilly, first Norman Lord of the Manor

Robert d'Oilly must have been valiant and shrewd. He had proved himself in William of Normandy's wars on the Continent and in England, and was given great rewards and responsibilities in recompense, among them the reinforcement of key sites on the Thames. It is now thought that Robert used existing Saxon defences — but the Normans built in stone. Their castles were intended to dominate the landscape, and the Conqueror's subjects. Robert built a complex motte and bailey fortification in Wallingford and the Castle in Oxford.



St George's Tower, Oxford Castle
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Ruthlessly, he demolished houses for the new fortifications, and appropriated revenues and land from Abingdon Abbey. According to the 17th-century antiquary William Dugdale, “he was so powerful a Man in his time that no one durst oppose him.”¹

However, Robert's rapacity was punished by a severe illness and a nightmare in which he was tortured by order of the Virgin Mary: in the very meadow that Robert had taken from the Abbey, “rascally” boys peed on bundles of hay, set them alight and thrust them into his face. His wife suggested he should make amends to the Abbey. He restored the revenues and meadow, and from then on proved himself a good friend to the church.

Robert's legacy to Oxford also includes the collegiate church of St George within the castle, and a stone causeway (Grandpont) constructed to take traffic across the flood plain to the old Oxen Ford that gave the city its name. Much of the fabric of the stone causeway remains today beneath St Aldates and the Abingdon road by Folly Bridge.

It's not clear whether Robert ever spent much time in Hook Norton: he moved to Oxford in 1071. His daughter, Maud, had two sons but both were lepers and barred from succession, so after Robert's death in about 1092 (and his burial near the High Altar in Abingdon) his titles passed to his younger brother, Nigel, and through him to Robert II d'Oilly.

Robert II d'Oilly

Robert I d'Oilly had made a profitable marriage; his nephew, Robert II, restored his flagging political power by espousing Edith Forne, a former concubine of King Henry I. A nightmare had shown Robert I d'Oilly the way to salvation by gifts to Abingdon Abbey. For his nephew, it was his wife's vision that led him in 1129 to found the Church of St Mary at Oseney on the river Thames immediately to the west of Oxford

¹ Quoted in Duchess of Cleveland, *The Battle Abbey Roll with some Account of the Norman Lineages*, 3 volumes (London, 1889), p. 329. However, there is controversy about the sources of versions of the Abbey Roll by historians of different centuries.

Castle. ("Oseney" is the older spelling: the present-day suburb off the Botley Road is called Osney.)

Edith was persuaded that a dream of chattering magpies could be interpreted as souls in Purgatory needing release: she might well have thought a religious endowment insurance for her own soul.² Her dutiful husband gave land to the Augustinian priors of St Mary's but his richest gift was all the churches in his many manors, including St Peter's in Hook Norton. Successive Lords of the Manor continued to make generous gifts to St Mary's, which became Oseney Abbey in 1154: it functioned as an independent manor within the parish, owning not only the church and its income but also about a third of the land in Hook Norton. Margaret Dickins, in her *History of Hook Norton*, claims that nearly ten per cent of the Abbey's income came from Hook Norton.³

After King Henry's death, Robert aided the Empress Mathilda in her struggle for power against King Stephen. Robert met his death (in about 1142) in the civil war and was buried, not at Oseney but at Eynsham Abbey, to which both he and his uncle had been generous. Edith was buried at Oseney and her effigy showed her in religious robes: close to her tomb was a painting depicting the myth of the magpies.

Henry d'Oilly

Like his father and uncle before him, Henry held various high offices, including Constable of England and Sheriff of Oxfordshire. He continued the family tradition of making generous donations to religious institutions. Robert I and his brother-in-arms Roger d'Ivry had founded the prestigious collegiate church of St George in Oxford within the castle at Oxford in 1074: by 1130 the church owned the church of St Mary Magdalen in Oxford, substantial tracts of land in Oxfordshire including a virgate (about 30 acres) in Hook Norton, and two-thirds of the tithes of the founders' manors (over 60 of them). Henry and d'Ivry's successor, John of St. John, gave St George's to Oseney Priory (later Oseney Abbey) in 1149, a generous gift. Today only the crypt of St George's remains on the castle site. Henry married into the Bohun family

² Margaret Dickins, *History of Hook Norton* (Banbury, 1928) p 21.

³ Ibid, p. 22. For Oseney Abbey, see the essays under the [Ecclesiastical Manor](#) in this section.

and, according to William Dugdale, had his chief seat at Hook Norton. He died in 1163.

Henry II d'Oilly

Henry II d'Oilly is said by Margaret Dickins⁴ to have been one of the barons who forced King John to grant Magna Carta in 1215. As his mother Maud was the daughter of Henry de Bohun, first Earl of Hereford, and one of the Enforcers of the charter, it seems quite likely that he was there. Because of his participation in the barons' rebellion, his property was confiscated for two years but then restored. He too made a generous endowment to Oseney Abbey – which in turn later bailed him out of debts contracted with moneylenders. According to Henry,

...since the said canons wanted to be found neither ungrateful nor mean to me, their patron, in my great need, they have given me three hundred marks and rescued me and my lands from the hard hand of David the Jew of Oxford.⁵

Though he married twice and had a daughter, she must have predeceased Henry as when he died in 1232, he was succeeded by his sister Margery's son, Thomas, Earl of Warwick. Henry was laid to rest in the Abbey church.

The last d'Oilly lords of Hook Norton manor

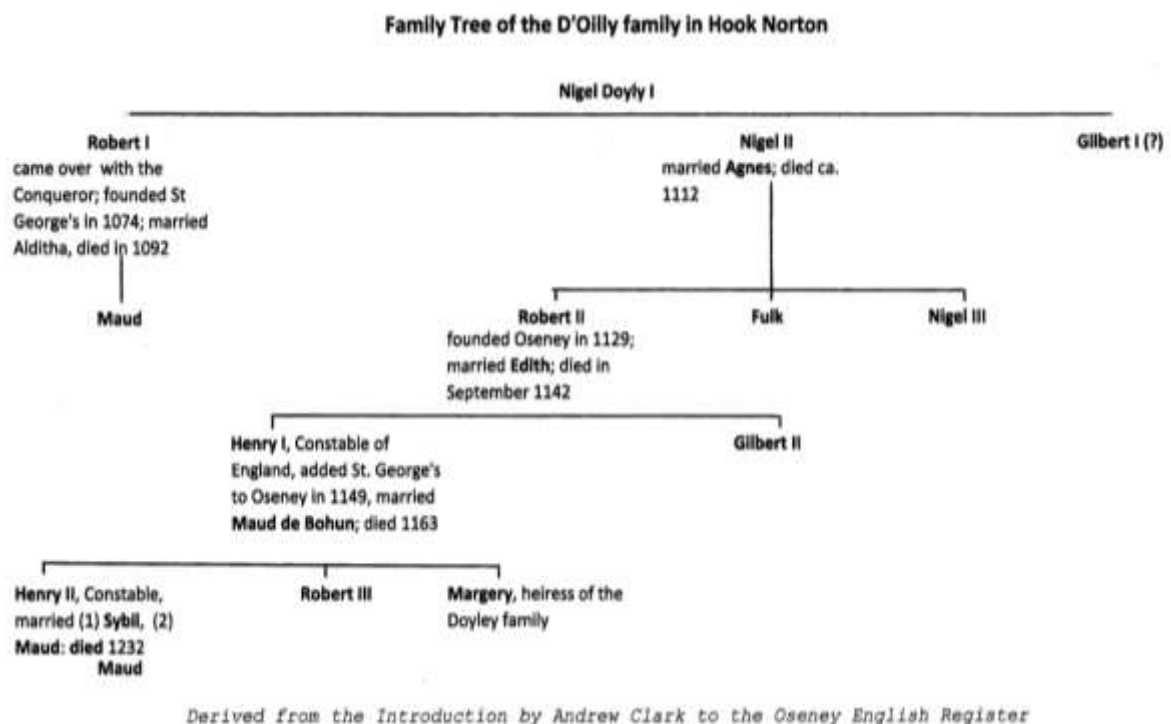
As tenants or villagers had to pay a heriot to the lord of the manor to succeed to land or common rights, so Thomas, Earl of Warwick, had to pay the King a fee (a "relief") for the privilege of inheriting the barony of Hook Norton: in his case, it was the sum of one hundred pounds and two horses. He was knighted at Gloucester and in 1241 he paid to opt out of an expedition into France. When he died, childless, in 1242, his widow Ela received the King's approval to succeed to the manor of Hook Norton. The obligation he placed upon her was to carve before him at Christmas. She was also granted a Free Warren at Hook Norton: no one could take any game without her

⁴ Dickins, p. 7.

⁵ Dave Postles, *Oseney Abbey Studies* (Leicester, 2008), pp. 12-13.

consent. Ela remarried (Sir Philip Basset), but kept her title as Countess of Warwick. She died in 1300 and was buried at Oseney Abbey.

At King Henry III's behest, Thomas's widowed sister, Margery, married John de Plessets, Sheriff of Oxfordshire, in 1243. This was to his advantage: she may have had no choice. In any event, de Plessets' position was so weak that he had to negotiate a lifetime right to the earldom of Warwick and the barony of Hook Norton should Margery pre-decease him. Ela Countess of Warwick and Maud d'Oilly were still entitled to dowers from the manor of Hook Norton, which diminished de Plessets' income. Margery died in 1253, the last of the d'Oilly family to hold Hook Norton.



The years that followed, 1253 to 1414, marked the decline of the Hook Norton barony, and were followed by another turbulent period reflecting the national turmoil of the Wars of the Roses. Both are covered by the following articles in this section on Hook Norton's lords of the manor.

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