

## The Ancient Common Fields and Common Mead of Earley.

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**S**TUDENTS of local history have long known that in the reference department of the Reading Free Library there is a copy of a valuable and exceedingly interesting map, accompanied by a terrier, of the Earley Common Fields and Common Mead, dated 1669, prepared by Edward Blagrove, of Earley. It is stated in the terrier (which was prepared later than the map) that the original of the tracing was then in the possession of the Earl of Macclesfield. There has, however, been discovered locally an original, and one can only conclude from this that several copies were made by Edward Blagrove at the same time, one for each of the interested parties. The newly discovered copy is now in the writer's possession, and while it is generally in excellent condition some of the identification colours have almost disappeared. The map is on heavy parchment and measures 45 inches by 30 inches. The land delineated was a large tract bounded on the east by the ancient boundary of the Abbey of Reading, a ditch and hedge running due south from the Kennet (about three hundred yards from its junction with the Thames) to Whiteknights; the other boundaries were the Thames, Earley Court, the Redlands, Holme Park rising woods and Woodley. This tract was divided into six Common Fields and a Common Mead bordering the Thames towards Sonning and known to this day as the Earley Meadows. Access to the Mead was by the little lane now known as "Shepherd's House" lane, in the 17th century pleasingly termed "The Road waye to ye Mead Shore" and this lane ran direct from Earley Court to the Thames. Half of its length is now enclosed and thrown into the park.

The names of the six Common Fields were as follows:—"The Wharfe ffeild," "Linch ffeild," "Symons ffeild," "Hawthorne ffeild," "Mace ffeild" and "The Park ffeild." Wharf field, which was so named from an ancient wharf or landing place at the junction of the two rivers, had for its western boundary the hedge and ditch before referred to, the western delimitation of

the parish of Sonning. This hedge and ditch ran from the Kennet south to the London Road and then continued by the western side of the " Marquis of Granby " (then not in existence) towards Whiteknights. It may not be out of place here to remark that part of this old boundary has recently been destroyed in the course of the erection of houses at the junction of Eastern Avenue and Erleigh Road. There are, however, still traces of the ditch behind Cardigan Lodge in Eastern Avenue, and it is hoped the present owner of that house will endeavour to keep intact one of the most ancient landmarks in the neighbourhood. But to advert to the Wharf field. The London highway, the Thames and Linch Field were its other boundaries. Almost the whole of this field is now occupied by the streets and roads on the north side of London Road from Cumberland Road to the tram terminus. Adjoining Wharf field on its eastern side was Linch field (or Links). The origin of its name is obscure. Its boundaries were the Wharf field, the Mead (on the north), the London Road and the way to the Mead. Linch field is now practically Sutton's seed trial grounds.

The Park field which lay on the rising ground towards Holme Park was bounded on the west by the way to the Mead, on the north by the Mead itself, on the east by Holme Park and on the south by the London road. A portion of the new motoring highway has been cut through it. These three fields, then, Wharfe, Linch and Park, lay on the north of the main London highway. We will now glance at the south of this road.

Hawthorne field, the westernmost of the southern three, ran from the hedge and ditch aforesaid across to Mopbeggar farm, then called Aleyns, an ancient homestead referred to in the fifteenth century. It is now in possession of Mr. Oliver Dixon. The field was delimited by the " Oakingham waye " back to the western boundary. Many highways are now part of it. The fifth field, Mace field, occupied the angle between the London and Wokingham roads and had for its south-eastern boundary the sixth field called Symons field. Mace field is now almost entirely occupied by the Reading cemetery and Palmer Park. The name of this field is obscure. Symons

field, the sixth, occupied approximately the present park in front of Earley Court, and on its southern side was bounded by a lane called "The waye leading to the pound" which appears to be the present Culver lane in part. The "pound" may have been either at the rear of Erleigh Court, or close by the "Three Tuns." There was certainly a pound in front of the Inn almost within the memory of man. A small stream (referred to as "the Gutter") ran down from the springhead at Whiteknights (there was no lake here then) by Mopbeggar farm, across Wokingham Road, through Mace field, across London Road, across Linch field and into a ditch on the western side of the way to the mead, whence it eventually found its way to the Thames. It is remarkable that it still follows practically the same course from Whiteknights Lake, but in part has been piped.

Each of these six Common fields (and the Common mead) was divided up into scores of long strips or shots, running at every conceivable angle, the majority of them one acre in extent, with here and there larger pieces from three to twenty acres and a few of less extent even than an acre. Over four hundred and fifty pieces of land are thus indicated, the smallest being half a rood, the largest twenty acres. They were owned by the following families: the Hydes, the Fettiplaces, the Blagraves and the Englefields, the big landowners of the manors. In addition there were two freeholders, John Greenaway and George Thorne, owning a few acres, while the Provost and scholars of Queen's College, Oxford, had some scattered strips by virtue of a gift made to them in 1526 of certain lands in Earley by Sir William Fettiplace.

The plan drawn up by Edward Blgrave appears to have been the outcome of a difficulty experienced in settling what lands were titheable to the Rectory of Sonning, the Earleys being liberties within the parish of Sonning. A glance at the map will convince the veriest tyro in these matters that confusion would be a mild term to use in this connection. The whole business was complicated by four ecclesiastical interests. In the first place the Dean of Sarum and the Vicar of Sonning, from time immemorial, had received tithes from the Common

Fields of Earley. Added to this, the lands titheable to the Chapels of Earley St. Bartholomew at Erleigh Court and to Earley St. Nicholas at Whiteknights were scattered up and down in the same Common Fields. By the Act of 1545 (for suppressing chantries, etc) the grantees of the Crown conveyed these two chapels and their appurtenances to the owners of the manors in which they were situate. Thus we find that in 1669 the Englefields of Whiteknights, the Fettiplaces and the Hydes of Erleigh Court had become possessed of many of the rights and privileges of these ancient free chapels. The obvious happened. The dissolution of the chapels left the chapel estates tithe-free, and no move was made to ascertain if any other indebtedness existed. But here the mother church of Sonning stepped in, also the Dean of Sarum, and contended that the lands anciently titheable to the two chapels were also titheable in part to the Rector and the Vicar, since it was only by permission of the Bishop and the Dean that a lord could have a free chapel attached to his manor. Moreover, the concession apparently had only been made originally on condition that dues were forthcoming for the upkeep of the mother church from her pensionaries.

In 1715 it was proved that for some six hundred years the Vicar of Sonning had received "*Omnes obventiones altaris*" from the chapel of Earley St. Bartholomew. Thus we find the following note in the terrier: "As this survey is of use to prevent confusion of property in tithing, so a terrier of the same nature relating to the inclosed lands would be very proper for preserving the Rector's interest, which otherwise, though founded on common right, may extremely suffer, because it will be very difficult to find any other witnesses in order to settle what is or is not due by usage to the chappells, besides the servants of those that own them, who probably will cut large pieces out of the Rector's loaf unless timely care be taken to the contrary." It was not until the early part of the 18th century that a Vicar of Sonning arose who prosecuted his claim with sufficient vigour to force payment of the neglected dues, and produced evidence of a notorious usage on the ecclesiastical side going far back beyond the memory of man.

To make confusion worse confounded there had been considerable dealing in the lands by the families who came into possession of them. Thus the Hydes had become possessed of lands which were originally titheable to the chapel of Earley St. Bartholomew. They sold them to Valentine Crome, and his son disposed of them to Lewis Legrand. In 1720 Thomas Benwell agreed to pay yearly on the 16th March £5 10s. 0d. and two pullets and two ducks and a day's work with his team of horses and wagon for tithes arising on Earley St. Bartholomew Farm rented of Mr. Owen Buckingham's heirs at a yearly rental of £148 and on other lands held of Mr. Legrand at £13 per annum—an example of part payment in kind and part in money which was slowly passing into desuetude.

The tithes of the Rectory of Sonning had also been dealt with. By an indenture dated the 9th of Charles I., Anthony Barker leased from Edmond Mason, Dean of Sarum, the Rectory and the tithes belonging to the Parsonage, on a lease of the three lives of William Barker, Nathaniel Barker and William Sambourne, under the rent of £38 yearly, "to be paid at the font-stone in the Cathedral Church of Saint Paul, London, or in the place where the font-stone then stood, on December 25 and June 24 between 8 and 10 of the forenoon." The first Earl of Macclesfield bought at the beginning of the 18th century from the heirs of the Barker family a quarter of these tithes, and this would account for a copy of the map being in the possession of the Macclesfield family.

But to revert to the Common Fields themselves. It is not here proposed to attempt to deal with their origin. Many learned treatises have appeared upon this subject and the vexed question of the rise of the system, and to this day the respective claims raised by the opposing schools of the Teutonic "mark" and the economic mould of the Roman villa have not been finally settled. When the whole of the area with which these notes are concerned is covered with streets and buildings, the local historian may be led to approach the subject of the origin of the community that lived in what we know as Earley, and he will find that his enquiries will lead him far beyond the time

when on the east of the district there arose a mighty ecclesiastical overlord to refashion its economy and control its administration. For the communal organisation of the English peasantry is far more ancient and deeply rooted than the manorial order. It was not until the nineteenth century that locally almost the last trace of the system that had its origin in remote times was finally dissolved by the Enclosure Act known as the Sonning Award. Indeed, within the last two years a long narrow strip of the ancient Earley Mead, a solitary remnant of other days, has been disposed of and the present writer is at the moment enquiring what sum he should legally contribute by way of tithe to the mother church of Sonning for the small plot upon which his house is standing. The following details may be of interest as to the owners (and the extent of their holdings) of the Earley Mead just prior to the Enclosure Award of 1818 :—

Sir Henry Englefield (of Whiteknights) owned 52 pieces these comprising 33 acres and 17 perches.

Sir William Scott (afterwards Lord Stowell, of Earley Court) owned 22 pieces, comprising 22 acres 1 rood 8 perches.

E. Golding, Esq. (of Maiden Earley), owned 18 pieces, comprising 11 acres 3 roods 37 perches.

J. Wheble, Esq. (of Bulmershe), owned 15 pieces, comprising about 11 acres.

It is hoped on another occasion to treat of the pre-Conquest aspect of the Earley manors and other points of interest which have arisen on the discovery of some ancient documents dealing with local manors.