

Leckhampstead

The present-day parish of Leckhampstead is marked by the most dispersed pattern of settlement found within the Whittlewood Project area. Although there is no evidence to suggest medieval usage of the modern 'End' place-names, it is clear that conditions in the Middle Ages were such as to encourage the development of a number of settlements scattered across the landscape. In particular, Leckhampstead was a parish of high population, divided lordship and a large number of free tenants.

There were three manors at Leckhampstead in 1086. The largest was held by Gilbert Maminot of the bishop of Bayeux. It was assessed at 18 hides, had seven ploughs in operation (out of a possible 12), and possessed a recorded population of 26 (18 villeins, 6 bordars and 2 slaves). There was sufficient woodland to support 400 pigs and enough meadow for 12 ploughs. The value of the manor had fallen from £8 before the Conquest, when it was held by Earl Leofwin, to £6 in 1086.

The two remaining manors at Leckhampstead may have formed a single estate before 1066. Both were held by Swarting, a man of Asgar the Constable. In 1086 Hugh held two hides of Walter Giffard. There was a single plough in operation, a recorded population of four (one villein, two bordars and one slave), a mill valued at 20*d.*, meadow for one plough, and woodland for 50 pigs. The remaining three hides of Swarting's pre-Conquest estate were held by Osbert of Geoffrey de Mandeville in 1086. There were 2½ ploughs in operation (out of a possible three), an unrecorded number of villeins, and enough woodland to support 150 pigs. Both manors were valued at 30*s.*

Gilbert Maminot's manor, which soon became known as Great Leckhampstead, was subinfeudated to the Chastilun family in the 12th century. In 1279 Hugh de Chastilun held four hides in demesne, together with 28 acres of assart, nine acres of wood, and the advowson of the church. In addition, 16½ virgates were held of Hugh by 19 tenants in villeinage. Another seven tenants held cottages. A further 13½ virgates, four messuages, one cottage, and a mill, were held of Hugh by 19 free tenants, and the parson of Leckhampstead church held one hide.

A separate estate, of four hides and two virgates, was held of Hugh by Adam le Vavasour. Adam held seven virgates in demesne and one virgate in villeinage, divided between two tenants. A third tenant held a cottage. A further 9¼ virgates were held of Adam by 11 free tenants. At least two of these leased land to their own sub-tenants (*parvi tenentes*). Four of Adam's free tenants also held land of Hugh de Chastilun. One of Adam's free tenants, John Pollard, also held land from him in villeinage.

In the 13th century the pre-Conquest estate of Swarting, which had been divided between Hugh and Osbert in 1086, was once again in the hands of a single tenant. This manor became known as Little Leckhampstead and later as Lymes End, after William de Leame who held the manor in the late 13th century. In 1279 William held two hides and half a virgate in demesne, together with 17¼ acres of assart and seven acres of wood. A further seven virgates were held in villeinage by 13 tenants, and six tenants held cottages. Five free tenants held 4½ virgates, one cottage, and a watermill. One of William's free tenants leased land to his own sub-tenants, and three of them also held land in Great Leckhampstead.

In total, 55 tenants of Hugh de Chastilun were listed by the Hundred Rolls commissioners in Great Leckhampstead in 1279, and a further 21 tenants held land in Little Leckhampstead. This figure of 76 tenants needs to be multiplied by as much as 10 to take account of the sub-tenants, servants, landless labourers, wives and children who were also resident on the two manors at this time. Certainly a combined population in excess of 500 seems likely.

The complex tenurial pattern at Leckhampstead revealed in the survey of 1279 provides a plausible context for the growth of a number of separate settlements and manorial sites. Elsewhere in the region, rival property interests in a single parish encouraged the development of several settlement foci, each associated with the manor house of a different lord. The earthwork survey conducted in 2002 found evidence of a large fishpond at Weatherhead Farm. Fishponds were a mark of high social status in the Middle Ages. They were expensive to construct and maintain, and freshwater fish played an important part in aristocratic diet. The pond surveyed at Weatherhead Farm proclaimed the elevated social standing of its owners, or perhaps an aspiration to such a position in the face of local seigneurial competition. To whom, therefore, did the fishpond belong?

There is little to suggest that the fishpond at Weatherhead Farm belonged to the Chastilun family. Fishponds recorded in two Chastilun dower agreements of 1206 and 1280 were probably located in Church End, to the south-east of Manor Farm, close to the presumed site of the manor house of Great Leckhampstead. Instead, the Weatherhead pond may have pertained to Little Leckhampstead, the site of which manor apparently lay to the west of the Leck, in the present-day South End and Barretts End. In this area, house platforms and pottery scatters reveal the presence of a severely shrunken medieval settlement.

The Leaume family may have sought to enhance their position in the parish by constructing a fishpond to rival those maintained by their Chastilun neighbours. Evidence from the 14th century suggests that considerable hostility existed between the two families. In 1333, for example, Alan de Leaume and his sons, John and Thomas, were accused of stealing goods belonging to Malcolm de Chastilun. On the other hand, in 1345, Richard de Chastilun and his sons, Hugh, Richard, John and William, were charged with maiming and imprisoning John de Leaume at Little Leckhampstead, to the point that his life was in peril, and with mowing and carrying away his crops.

Little Leckhampstead was held by the Leaume family until the early 15th century. Their departure may have been a factor in the retreat of settlement from Barretts End, although the chronology of desertion cannot accurately be traced from documentary sources. In 1492, however, it was claimed that Richard Empson, who held Little Leckhampstead until 1512, enclosed 20 acres of arable which he converted to pasture. Other landholders in the parish followed suit, leading to the unemployment of 12 workers according to the inquiry of 1517-18. A later holder of Little Leckhampstead, George Tyrell, possessed seven messuages, 40 acres of arable and 200 acres of meadow and pasture on his death in 1570. The conversion of tillage to pasture may well have hastened the depopulation of Little Leckhampstead in the 16th century.

Surviving traces of medieval ridge and furrow suggest that arable cultivation was concentrated in the centre of the parish in the Middle Ages, close to the areas of settlement, with extensive areas of woodland to the north and meadow to the south. However, only one reference to the organization of the fields has been found for the medieval period. In 1280 Hugh de Chastilun granted his widowed (?step)mother, Rose, land in the three fields of Morsladefeld (called the east field in 1440), Longeneham Sladefeld, and Northfeld. Three-field systems appear to have been characteristic of the Whittlewood area in the later Middle Ages.

In the late 13th and early 14th centuries, both lords and peasants in Leckhampstead appear to have grown mostly wheat and oats, with smaller quantities of barley and dredge. The same documents also reveal that both horses and oxen were used for draught, that herds of cows, pigs and goats were kept, and that there were relatively few sheep. Sheepfarming probably became of greater significance, however, following the enclosures of the 15th and 16th centuries.

There can be little doubt that Leckhampstead experienced a decline in population and the abandonment of settlement at the end of the Middle Ages. Periods of contraction, however, were not solely a medieval phenomenon. 19th-century census returns show that Leckhampstead lost a quarter of its inhabitants between 1871 and 1881 and a third of the

remainder between 1881 and 1901, at which time the population of the parish stood at just 241, less than half of its likely total at the time of the Hundred Rolls inquiry in 1279.