

Section 65 Essay topics from the Leighton Manor parish survey

S R Coleman

Cross-references to Digital Supplement in red
Cross-references to Printed Synthesis in brown

The essays were completed in 1989 and revised in June 2007.

See separate files for:

65.01 Map of the Royal Manor of Leighton, Parish of Leighton, and townships

65.02 Chart showing the owners, custodians, and tenants of the Royal Manor of Leighton

65.03 The abbey of Fontevrault and the manor of Leighton

The foundation of La Grava Priory within the manor of Leighton has its origins in 1129 when Henry I granted an annual sum of money to the French abbey of Fontevrault, in Anjou, in the Loire Valley (Calendar of Documents Preserved in France, 918–1206, 372–3). This was confirmed or restored by King Stephen and Matilda but in 1164, in lieu of the money, Henry II instead granted £60 worth of land to Fontevrault. This comprised the whole of the royal manor of Leighton, Bedfordshire, worth £56, and £4 worth of land in Radnage, Buckinghamshire. In addition, 32s worth of land was given as compensation for a charge on Grange Mill in Heath and Reach, previously granted to Woburn Abbey (Calendar of Documents Preserved in France, 918–1206, 373–4, 377, 384). Later documents indicate that the lands of the manor of Leighton received by Fontevrault in 1164 were largely coincidental with the extensive ancient parish of Leighton (Buzzard) which survived until the mid-19th century. The parish comprised five townships: Leighton (Buzzard) with the mother church, along with Billington, Eggington with Clipstone, Heath and Reach, and Stanbridge, each with chapels of ease [65.01]. All had their own separate field systems. However, Fontevrault was to be less influential in Stanbridge since before 1118 the manor of Stanbridge had been carved out of the royal manor of Leighton and given by Henry I to his wife Matilda, remaining separate thereafter (Godber 1963, 32). The manor of Leighton's holdings in 1164 were thus less extensive than they had been at the time of Domesday in 1086.

Domesday Book records a single entry for Leighton (Lestone), the royal manor, which was one of three held by the king in Bedfordshire; the others were at Luton and Houghton Regis. Leighton was assessed at 47 hides, a large and unusual figure, but the entry states that seventeen of these had been added between 1066 and 1086, derived from two previously separate estates in different ownership, one of ten hides and the other of seven (VCH Bedfordshire, I, 1904, 222). Any thoughts on what this sizeable addition meant in terms of the landscape or the townships can only be speculative but perhaps the separating out of the manor of Stanbridge was a partial restoration of the pre-Domesday situation. Of the other 30 hides, four were held by the bishop of Lincoln, together with a church. Although we cannot be certain of the location of this church in 1086, no evidence has come to light to suggest it was anywhere other than on or near the medieval and present church site in the town of Leighton Buzzard. The presence of a substantial compact block of land adjoining the church in Leighton and belonging to the bishop of Lincoln throughout the

medieval period also supports this. It was here that the bishop had an impressive prebendal mansion house in post-medieval times (no doubt with some sort of medieval predecessor), which was the focus of his separate prebendal manor whose four hides of land were scattered properties in the town and strips in the common fields. Domesday also records the toll from a market yielding 7li and two mills, almost certainly on the site of Leighton Mills north of the town where two mills within one building have a long history [65.01].

Fontevrault's possession of Leighton in 1164 is confirmed by an entry in the pipe rolls, the first of a series of annual payments by them to the Exchequer recorded in these rolls at least to 1203. However, this first entry is unusual in that, in addition, it records 112s 8d spent in restocking the manor (Fowler and Hughes 1923, 152; Pipe Roll Society 1886, VIII, 30). This brings into question the state of the manor when it came into their hands, particularly in the light of an Extent (survey) of Leighton prepared in c 1155 for Henry of Essex, the Constable of England: he was engaged in the task of refurbishing and restocking the royal manors after they had depreciated during the Civil Wars of Stephen's reign. The poor state of these manors at this time is demonstrated in an entry in the pipe rolls for 1155-56 where the large sum of £69 12s 8d is shown as spent on restocking the royal manors in Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire (Richmond 1928, 13). The manor of Leighton seems to have been no exception to this run down state according to the Extent of c 1155 [7.03, 10.03, 67.06]. This is a difficult document to interpret due to its ambiguous wording. Detailed measurements of eight buildings, including two barns for grain storage, a threshing barn, two cow-houses and a sheepfold, are given but couched in terms such as 'there should be' and 'there ought to be'. A particularly significant phrase would seem to be: 'to restore these buildings requires 7li 14s, together with the custom which they have of right upon the neighbouring woods'.

This indicates that extensive rebuilding, partly using the manor's own timber from the local woods, on a decayed or ruined site was necessary. Obviously a farmstead complex, possibly also the manorial focus, already existed as stock, 6 oxen only, and a very small quantity of grain, 10s worth, was found there. These low figures contrast starkly with the stock and grain that should have been on the manor - 36 oxen, 2 affers (farm horses), 7 non-draught animals, 265 sheep, 36 swine and substantial quantities of corn, white wheat, barley and oats. The grain was both for consumption or sale and for sowing: 243 acres (customary) were supposed to be sown in winter and 116 acres were supposed to be sown in the spring. It should be remembered that these statistics relate to the demesne only, but a manorial economy of mixed agriculture is indicated though there would have been an arable bias in terms of the landscape, as also indicated by the Domesday entry (Richmond 1924, 22-4). Another factor which may have contributed to the poor state of the property was the prominence of marginal greensand soils, particularly in the north and north-west of the parish. Productivity on much of these lands was probably always limited. Soil exhaustion is certainly recorded in later centuries on neighbouring greensand lands. It is possible, therefore, that Henry II's gift to Fontevrault may, in part, have been the offloading of poor and uneconomic lands of low value (at least in the short term) onto a favoured religious establishment. However, some better-quality land did exist on the estate. The location of the decayed farm/manor site is unknown, the only possibly relevant information being the reference in c 1155 to the 'neighbouring woods'. Woodland was scarce on Leighton manor by this date (only that sufficient for 100 swine is recorded in Domesday Book) and probably consisted largely of King's and Baker's Woods in Heath and Reach which were always the manorial woodlands. Possibly the early 12th-century farm site may have been near these. However, the only known reference to an assart (often indicative of medieval woodland clearance) in the Leighton area close to La Grava occurs in a dispute of 1242 when mention is made of tithes of corn: 'from that land which was called the old assart near to Billington and from

that land at Cocklake ...' (Lincoln Record Society, 29, 1935, 8). Both place-names may indicate that some woodland still existed early in the medieval period near where La Grava was located.