

Notes on the Manor and Manor House of Bulmershe, Berks.

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THE breaking-up of ancient estates is nothing new and those who have a regard for old-time manor houses and demesne lands are now viewing with concern the rapid changes that are taking place in the ownership of the countryside. This wholesale cutting-up may yet come to have a sad significance for the Englishman of the future. It is when an ancient estate bordering upon one's own town comes under the spell of the auctioneer's hammer that one is apt to have real regrets that it is not possible by some interference, magical or common-place, to secure as a "lung" for that busy town the wide fields, lakes and woods that next century will be but a memory of "the oldest inhabitant." Recently such an estate, the Manor of Bulmershe, has passed from its ancient ownership and is in process of division among many whose motives will certainly not tally with those of the long-past proprietors of this interesting domain.

In the year 1818, J. C. Loudon, the professional landscapist, who then resided at Bayswater, was engaged by James Wheble Esq., to advise him upon questions relating to the formation of the Bulmershe Court Estate as we now know it. Before this time there was standing in the park a house known as Woodley Lodge (now Bulmershe Court), which had been in the possession of the father of James Wheble and was afterwards sold, either by him, or at his death, to other owners, among whom was Addington, afterwards Viscount Sidmouth, and from whom it was repurchased by James Wheble in 1801. The story is told that James Wheble was travelling into Wiltshire to view an estate with the idea of settling in that county, when he passed Bulmershe and learned that it was for sale. He went no farther, but bought the house and estate that had belonged to his father. That there was another and earlier house on the site of Woodley Lodge seems assured, but its history has yet to be worked out, together with the somewhat obscure details of that of the "liberty" of Woodley and Sandford.

It is clear from Loudon's report that the great Repton had had a share not only in beautifying the immediate vicinity of the house known as Woodley Lodge, but also in adding to it "all or most of the comforts and luxuries of a modern country residence." At this time the ancient manor house of Bullmarsh was standing in a very ruinous state about a mile away towards Sonning, and while the owner of Woodley Lodge appears to have possessed this old house and its lands, it had formed no part of the estate which he had developed nearer Earley. But let us hear Loudon on this :

"Woodley Lodge, otherwise Bullmarsh Court, possesses naturally a reasonable share of the beauties of the country in which it is situated—natural woods and prospects of distant scenery ; whilst the abilities of so eminent an artist as the late Mr. Repton were exerted in 179—in displaying these to the best effect, and in adding all or most of the comforts and luxuries of a modern country residence. The chief disadvantages attendant on this ancient demesne are the intermixture of its lands with those of adjoining proprietors—its separation into detached portions by lanes and commons ; and a general discordance, both in point of effect and utility, by a large heath (Bullmarsh Heath, where Reading Races were run until 1814), spreading out its '*terra damnata*' (the term applied by Linnaeus to a similar tract in Lapland—see '*Flora Lapponica*') as a leading feature in the principal views from the mansion. Happily an enclosure and local exchange of property have just taken place (1818), by which a considerable increase of acres has been added to Bullmarsh Court, all intermingled lands obtained, and on the whole an exchange concluded in a manner highly advantageous for this property. In short, so desirable an '*arrondissement*' is rarely, if ever, to be met with in so cultivated and populous a country. It is partly on this facility of enlarging the park, and of uniting it more perfectly with the site and remains of the ancient mansion of Bullmarsh Court, that it is proposed to restore this respectable appellation to Woodley Lodge, to which, when built, it was transferred by the present proprietor's father, and by which the manor and lands have been known since the

time of Henry VIII. It is under these circumstances that the proprietor, though more than usually competent to dispense with the assistance of a rural artist, has deem'd it fit to call in the aid of professional experience, with the view of enabling him to reap the full benefit of those acquisitions, and chiefly to consider and suggest how the heath of Bullmarsh may be best united with the present park on the one^hand, and on the other with the arable or other farmed enclosures, so as to combine effect with utility."

In the course of his report, unduly prolix, which, accompanied by a separate large volume of views, diagrams and maps, extends to some hundred and sixty pages of handwriting, and deals with the lakes, the heath, the farmery, the plantations, the woods, the cottages, the lodges and every feature of a large estate within a ring-fence, the artist touches upon the old manor house. This is what he says :

"It is to be regretted that some vestiges of this ancient building or its appendages were not selected and left as ivy'd and picturesque ruins. (By this, presumably, he means when Repton dealt with the estate in the first instance.) Part of the walls of the dovecote may still be retained as a fragment of other times, and made useful to the present generation as a small penfold. The main body of the manor house, which still exists in good condition, may be converted into habitations for labourers, with their gardens adjoining, as indicated on the plan."

The idea of "ivy'd ruins" was a very popular one at that time, and no gentleman's estate was considered complete without them. If there were no ruins to utilise, a "ruin" would be actually erected in some part of the landscape, as was done at "Whiteknights" for the Marquis of Blandford. (This mock ruin may still be seen in the park, and as it has already assumed a venerable aspect it is commonly supposed by the uninitiated to be a relic of antiquity).

The proposal of Loudon regarding the old manor house appears to have been adopted, for a portion of it stands to-day on the Woodley road (which was, by the way, once a tree-lined drive to the house), and it has been converted for the use of two families who were at one time employed on the Bulmershe Court estate. It still possesses its ancient oak staircase.

Mention has already been made of the fact that in 1818 an enclosure of certain lands and a local exchange of property had resulted in a considerable increase of acreage to the Manor of Bulmershe. There had been extensive purchases by the proprietor from neighbouring landowners to obtain a compact domain. In the course of the inquiries preparatory to the Enclosure Award, it was found that certain roads and paths which traversed the wastes and commons had, from the point of view of the growing necessity of better and more rapid communication, ceased to serve a useful purpose and encumbered the ease of enclosure. A very large portion of the Earley and Woodley district was heathland and common and old lines of route that had been made in the course of centuries (they could hardly be termed roads) were either taken in hand and made into highways if they lay in a direction where it would be to the obvious public advantage to have a definite road, or if, as many of these tracks did, they ran in an indefinite and hap-hazard way, twisting to avoid ponds, patches of marsh and bog and aged trees on the heath, they were stopped up. In some instances parts of an old bridle path would be utilised in making the new highway, while in other cases a clean sweep of such ancient tracks was made and a broad well-aligned highway, ditched and hedged on either side, would be constructed with gravel taken from some portion of the neighbouring waste reserved for this purpose in the Enclosure Award. There is some evidence to support the belief that the present Wokingham Road from a point near "The Three Tuns" Inn to the top of Sindlesham Lane is such a new road made out of a previous poor one that at no great distance of time ran across Earley Heath. The four roads which converge near "The Three Tuns" were certainly in part re-made at the time of the Enclosure Award as the available records testify. The present Whiteknights Road is, in the main, formed from a private road which ran round the domain of the Marquis of Blandford, and from "The Marquis of Granby" (then of course in the parish of Earley) to "The Three Tuns," there was no road at all on the right-hand side, save the road into Mopbeggar Farm (now Mr. Oliver Dixon's), which entrance

eventually became the starting point for Crescent Road. Eastern Avenue did not, of course, exist.

The 18th century had seen the culmination of the turnpike system ; but if we go back to the 16th, or even the beginning of the 17th century, we shall find that the expression " main road " as it is understood to-day had no significance. Before the advent of the stage coach, roads ran only to connect towns and villages, and the road to London from Reading would very probably, so far as Berkshire is concerned, link up Earley, Sonning, Hurst, (Twyford was part of Hurst), Ruscombe, Shottesbrooke, the Walthams, Bray and Windsor. It is a matter of remark that the present main road from Reading to London runs through no ancient centre of consequence until it reaches Colnbrook. True, there is Maidenhead, but this town happens to have risen to importance on the river rather than the road, as its name implies, the whole of the north side of the town being in the hundred and parish of Cookham, and the south side in that of Bray. The old centres lie north and south of the present Bath Road. From a purely practical point of view, of what avail to carry a pack across Maidenhead Thicket, or the stretch between Maidenhead and Colnbrook, in mediæval days ? No buyers were there even if there had been a good road, which assuredly there was not. Wares could only be sold in centres of industry and movement and all the roads, lanes, paths and trackways led to them from a diversity of points. Moreover, a pack-horse usually carried the sole stock-in-trade of those who travelled to live. There were few material wants—salt fish from the sea, iron and spices among them—that could not be produced in almost every town and village, and each place had little need of association with its neighbour.

But to pass from the general to the specific. There is a persistent tradition locally that at one time the main road from London to Bath entered Reading by a narrow defile known as Culver Lane, and not by the present well-marked London Road. In volume III. of the Victoria County History of Berkshire it is stated : " The main roads running through Earley are the Bath Road, running in a south-westerly direction from Maidenhead,

and the Wokingham Road in a north-westerly course, which meet at the Reading Cemetery. The course of the former ran through a cutting near Bulmershe Park, but it was straightened and improved for the convenience of the numerous coaches that ran along it." This statement is rather vague, as the route is not clearly defined in it. It is evident, however, that as early as 1669, the main road into Reading ran by its present route, for there is in existence a map of the Common Fields of Earley, prepared by Edward Blagrove in that year, showing the roads in the district, and the "High Way to London" marked clearly as following the existing course. There are indications, however, which go to suggest that the road had not long been formed, as it cuts diagonally through certain strips in the Common Fields, the lie of which is unmistakable. We should, therefore be within the bounds of probability in assuming that it was some time in the 17th century that the route was changed, and that the growing volume of traffic was responsible for the new road. In old maps in the possession of the writer there is indicated at the London Road corner of what is known as Pitt's Lane, a "direction post," and the field to the left of it was called "Finger Post ground." It may be that this signpost was erected when the main road was altered to its present course.

In order to make the situation of these old roads clear to the reader, it will be necessary to traverse the ground somewhat closely. About two hundred yards west of the Sonning cutting railway bridge, there are two roads branching from the main highway; one leading to Woodley (a new road formed in part in 1818 and passing the old Manor House of Bulmershe), and the other, now known as Pitt's Lane, skirting the Erleigh Court estate and having the Bulmershe Court estate on the left hand. At the rear of Erleigh Court this road divides, one part taking an abrupt southerly turn leading past Earley Church to Whiteknights and through to Whitley and Shinfield; the other continuing through Culver Lane and Palmer Park Avenue to Wokingham Road. The route, therefore, at one time into Reading would seem to have been via Pitt's Lane (anciently called Christian Lane), past the rear of Erleigh Court, down

Culver Lane (anciently called Water Lane) into Wokingham Road and thence along London Road to the top of London Street. On the map before referred to (1669) there is indicated another road bearing slightly to the north-west from the top of Culver Lane and coming out at a point in the Wokingham Road near the corner of the present St. Bartholomew's Road, after passing through what is now Palmer Park, but which was then a field known as Mace Field, a name the derivation of which is obscure. Nothing seems to be known of this road and all traces of it have vanished. It shortened slightly the route to Reading and may have been only a broad footway.

Some distance along Pitt's Lane there is a well-known stile at the entrance to a footpath leading across to "The Chequers" at Woodley. This footpath appears to have been formed in lieu of an ancient road called Town Lane, which ran near to it and came out at the green opposite "The Chequers." The road was enclosed in or about 1818. Part of its course can still be distinguished for a considerable way in the woods just before reaching the inn. The way from Reading to Woodley and Sandford Mill in olden times was by means of Culver Lane, Pitt's Lane and Town Lane. In a map in the writer's possession it is shown that the new road formed in 1818 to run from Woodley into the main London turnpike road, while adding very little to the distance, was a more direct highway into Reading than by Culver Lane. The name Town Lane, of very early origin, derives, no doubt, from Sonning Town, and may have been in part an old boundary between Sonning and Woodley and Earley, or in close proximity to such a boundary.

Another old landmark in this vicinity is the pond at the rear of the fields behind Erleigh Court. At one time the north entrance to Woodley Lodge (now Bulmershe Court) stood opposite this pond, and Pitt's Lane ran nearer the house than it does to-day. At the bottom of Culver Lane, a hollow way of great antiquity, what is now called Wokingham Road, was entered. It was anciently called the Oakingham Waye, or Forest Road, the latter name arising from the fact that it led to Windsor Forest, which even at this time threw out wooded

spurs almost up to the borders of the town of Reading. Those familiar with Culver Lane at the present day, especially in the winter months when the drainage of the high fields on either side of the road sends its waters to this natural gully, will hardly credit that so narrow a defile was once a section of the highway from London to Bath. Along it very probably passed in the year 1290, Bishop Swinfeld, of Hereford, when journeying to London at the urgent request of Edward I., and who on his return to his palace stayed at Erleigh Court. That he was many months in coming and returning can be well understood.

Culver Lane is no doubt a shortened form of Culvert Lane, so called from an old culvert which appears to have existed here to carry off through ditches to the Thames the water which came down from Whiteknights Lake and the brow of the Bulmershe lands. There must be many Reading residents who can remember the little stream which, coming down from Whiteknights, meandered across Wokingham Road near the "College Arms," and through which the horses and wagons splashed on their way to Wokingham.

The Act for enclosing lands in the parish of Sonning, in the counties of Berks and Oxon—"Anno quinquagesimo Sexto Georgii III. Regis"—leads off with a preamble reciting that the lords of the manors of the four liberties within the parish, to wit, Sonning Town, Eye and Dunsden, Woodley and Sandford, and Earley, claimed to be entitled to the soil of all the waste lands within their said respective manors and the timber growing thereon. This claim the Commissioners were prepared to allow unless proof were forthcoming that it could not be legally upheld.

In regard to the manor of Bulmershe an objection was lodged by Robert Palmer, Esq., lord of the manor of Sonning, to the claim made by Joseph Wheble, Esq., for right of soil in parts of the waste lands called Bullmarsh Heath, Woodley Heath and Mustard Lane, in the right of the manor of Bullmarsh or Bullmarsh Court, on the grounds that he, the said Robert Palmer, being lord paramount, was entitled to an exclusive right in the soil of all the said waste lands and the timber and trees growing

thereon by virtue of his rights as lord of the manor of Sonning, in which Bullmarsh was situate.

Counsel's opinion was sought upon the respective claims and ancient records were searched to ascertain the true position regarding the origin of the manor in question. It was declared by counsel as follows :—

“ That there was no record when or by whom the manor was given to the Abbey of Reading (whose property it was at the time of the Dissolution), yet it was undoubtedly a separate manor of itself when the abbey was dissolved, and so far as can be collected from the minister's account, 31 Henry VIII., was not subordinate to nor dependent upon the manor of Sonning ; for if it had been so, there would most likely have been some payment made thereout to the lord of the manor of Sonning ; but no such payments or acknowledgments appear in the record. As to what lands within the manor of Bullmarsh belonged to the Abbey of Reading, it appears from the Roll, 31 Henry VIII., that under the head of ‘ Sonyng ’ the farmer, William Grey, answered for £5 for the manor of Bullmarsh, within the parish of Sonnyng, with all lands, tenements, rents, etc., woods and commons and their appurtenances, as also for £2 6s. for three messuages in Arleygh (Earley) within the said parish of Sonnyng, called Greys, Aleyns and Shiphous, with all arable lands, meadows, etc., and these seem to have constituted the whole of the premises which belonged to Reading Abbey in the parish of Sunning.”

It was further held “ that the lord of a mesne manor was entitled to timber and soil of his manor, and that the contention that Mr. Palmer's manor of Sunning was paramount nowhere appears in the ministers' accounts ; nor was any rent or acknowledgment made to such paramount manor if the fact were so. If the manor of Sunning were paramount that would not, as before observed, deprive the lord of the inferior manor of his rights of soil, etc. That Bullmarsh was a manor from the time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary is an assertion which must hold good until the time of its creation can be shewn to have been within time of memory, that is to say subsequent to the first year of King Richard the First—or,

indeed, till it can be shewn to have been created subsequently to the statute of 'Quia Emptores,' 18 Edward I., A.D. 1289-90, for a manor might legally have been made antecedently to this latter date."

(The statute of "Quia Emptores"—the opening words of the Third Statute of Westminster—was passed to check the system of transferring land to sub-tenants, by which the chief lords—and the king was naturally the chief lord of all—lost the usual feudal profit. By the new law all land transferred was to be held of the chief lords.)

The claim, therefore, of Mr. Robert Palmer was disallowed, and Mr. James Wheble was held to be entitled to the soil of all the waste lands within his manor of Bullmarsh and the timber growing thereon.

The question raised by this legal exposition is of considerable interest, inasmuch as new light has been thrown upon the origin of the manor, although the main question of its creation still remains obscure. The first known mention of Bulmershe occurs in the reign of Henry II. (1154-1189), when Jocelin, Bishop of Sarum, exchanged with John de Erleigh two virgates of land at Buleneirs (obviously either a mis-translation or a corrupted form of Bulemers or Bulmershe), one of which had been held by Payn, the reeve, for land which John de Erleigh held in Sonning Park. Now it is significant that Bulmershe is not mentioned in the Domesday Record made less than a century before the bishop's transaction. In Domesday are clearly indicated two main manors in Earley—one held by the king in demesne (Earley Regis, later called Erleigh St. Nicholas or Erleigh Whiteknights) and the other held of the king by Osbern Giffard (later Erleigh St. Bartholomew). It is clear, therefore, that the tract of land, "Buleneirs," was at one time part of one of the Earley manors, probably Erleigh St. Bartholomew. To this day it lies between Erleigh Court and Maiden Earley, the latter of which is a newer manor made out of Erleigh Whiteknights. It is possible that the transaction of John de Erleigh with the Bishop of Sarum, who himself was apparently making a ring fence around his

manor park of Sonning, was the first step in the creation of the manor of Bulmershe.

In quite early times the manor is said to be held of the king in chief by knight service, but until the 15th century its history is obscure. In 1447, as the "manor of Belvershal called Bullnassh," it was in the possession of John Lovell, who in that year granted it to Richard, Earl of Salisbury, John Nanfane and Ralph Mollyns, to hold to John and Ralph and their heirs. It apparently descended to an heiress, for in 1462 Thomas Colard and Agnes his wife, holding in right of Agnes, quit-claimed the manor to Thomas Colt, with warranty against the Abbot of Reading. This, as far as has been ascertained, is the first mention of the Abbot of Reading in connection with the manor and in this respect it is important to note that Thomas de Erlegh was the abbot from 1409 to 1430, and that in the first year of the reign of Henry V. (1413) an inquisition was held to examine whether this abbot had not "unjustly kept back the revenues of the hospital called 'Redinge Spitel,' in which ten leprous persons were to be maintained, and for the support of which he had three hundred acres of land in Spittle Field, Lerket Field and other places."

In 1473 Joan, widow of Thomas Colt and wife of Sir William Parr, was found by inquisition to have held the manor at her death, and it was recorded at the same time that Bernard Delamare and Alice his wife claimed the manor as formerly held by William Delamare and Katherine his wife, with remainder to themselves. John Colt, aged eleven, was Joan's heir. Later Bernard Delamare was sued by the Crown for entering into the manor after John's death and taking the profits. He, with his wife, quit-claimed the manor in 1482 to Sir John Elrington, Treasurer of the King's Household, John Elrington, gentleman, and Robert Forster, possibly agents, in a grant of the manor to Reading Abbey, for at the Dissolution, as we have seen, the abbey was receiving £5 as the farm of the manor.

In 1545 Bulmershe was granted to William Gray, of Reading, in fee for £246 16s. 8d. As the writer of these notes has already published a volume dealing with "Gray of Reading," it is not

proposed to make further mention of him here except to say that by failure of issue to him and his wife Agnes, the manor came to the Blagrave family by settlement on John Blagrave, Agnes Gray's son by her first marriage with Robert Blagrave. Its further descent has been recorded elsewhere.

This, then, is the history of the manor as far as it can yet be traced. When it became a separate manor is still obscure ; when the mighty hand of the monastery at Reading gathered it to its vast rent roll is also unknown ; but at least there are indications of both these events which the learned counsel, with that caution so typical of the law, either did not narrate or probably did not venture to announce, when delving for facts to prove his client's right to the waste of the manor and the timber growing thereon.