

The Normans & Mediaeval

After the defeat of the Saxon army at Hastings in 1066, the invading Norman, King William, wanted to know just what he had conquered and how much it was worth. At Christmas 1085, he commissioned the great survey of England. Because it recorded everything, it meant that there was no escape for anyone from taxes, hence bringing doom and gloom, and its name, Domesday Book. The survey was carried out during 1086-7 and the King's Commissioners also visited Watchfield. The entry reads; *'The Abbey itself holds Wachenefeld and held it TRE (meaning in the time of King Edward, before the conquest of 1066). It was then assessed at 20 hides; now at 10 hides. There is land for 12 ploughs. In demesne are 3 ploughs and 14 villans and 10 bordars with 6 ploughs. There are 8 slaves, and a mill rendering 25s, and 150 acres of meadow. Of this land Gilbert holds 3 hides and 1 virgate of the abbot, and Wimund 1 hide. There is in demesne 1 plough and 2 villans and 7 bordars. The whole TRE was worth £15; and afterwards £10; now what the abbot has £12; what the men have 50s.'*

So, from this we have confirmation that a small village called Wachenefeld still existed and it was then in an England where the system of government had completely changed. It had moved from the Saxon era to the Norman, bringing with it the feudal system, purposely designed to keep the people subjugated and ensure that peasants remained peasants.

Around this period of the chronology, information is more difficult to find. The little documentation that does exist generally involves government and some form of taxation or other. The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381 for example, do provide us with a little more on medieval Watchfield, due mainly to the dedicated research of Carolyn Fenwick and her findings published in the British Academy Records of Social and Economic History. A certain amount of luck was involved here as the original rolls that still exist and that contain the information for the Shrivenham Hundred are badly damaged, so much so that the information for Shrivenham village itself is illegible. However, some of the Watchfield entries are still readable but a little lacking in detail. Broadly speaking, these Poll taxes were introduced by Parliament as a means of including more people who were liable to pay. The collections of 1377 and 1379 included all persons of 14 years of age and older. People who were classed as poor were exempt. Like all taxes, they were very unpopular and even the raising of the minimum age to 15 was not enough to prevent the historic '*Peasants Revolt*' that occurred after the 1381 collection. The following is what remains legible on the roll of 1381. The male name is followed by his wife i.e. William Norman & his wife Alice.

Wachenefeld

De Johanne Sturyng

*** Stere

...ux' eius

...

...ux' eius

Willelmo Ro...

Alicia ux' emus

Willelmo ...ason

Willelmo...

Alicia ux' eius

Waltero ...

Agn' ux' eius

Willelmo Duk

Editha ux' eius

Johanne Baker'

Johannaux' eius

Nicholao Hug'

Mat' ux' eius

Roberto ...

Agn' ux' eius

Willelmo Norman

Alicia ux' eius

Henrico Roulphe

Christiana ux' eius



How the centre of the village may have looked in the 9th & 10th centuries. Note the chapel in the middle of 'The Street'. Illustration by Alec Chambers.

More evidence of just who was living in Watchfield can be gleaned from the Muster Rolls of 1522. During the 16th century, all able-bodied men between the ages of 16 and 60 were liable for military service within their own counties in special circumstances. The Lord Lieutenant of the county was responsible for raising troops, based on the written list. The original lists are difficult to read but fortunately they were studied and transcribed by Lis Garnish in 1988. Watchfield is located in Folio 8 within the Shrivenham Hundred.

Main Landholders in Watchfield

The Abbott of Abingdon

Master Haines

Abbott of Cicester (Cirencester)

John Fetyplace Squire

Sir Thomas Fetyplace

Prior of Braddystok

Thomas Mason

Those liable for service

Thomas Rede

John Mondy
John Jenyns
Thomas Jenyns
Thomas Mason (tenant to the Abbott of Abingdon)
Richard Parker
John Bryne (tenant to Abbott of Abingdon)
John Halmon
John Trynder
Roger Reve
Walterus Yonge
Johanna Palmer (wydou)
John Loker
William Kinge
Margaret Mondy (wydou)
John Geringe (theldo)
John Geringe (thongo)
Richard Povy
Edmund Povy
John Clerk
Thomas Geringe
Agnes Mony (Wydou)
Richard Couper
Thomas Jeynor
William Bull

From this list we can see some familiar names emerging, Young, Jenner, Gearing, Looker. From the authoritative publication that is the Victoria County History, (VCH) we can follow the feudal system and the various Lords of the Manor. In the case of Watchfield it is straightforward in the early period for it belonged to the Abbey at Abingdon. For nearly 500 years the people who scratched out a living in the fields around the little hamlet would have handed over their rents and dues, which would have ultimately ended up in the Abbot's coffers. It was exactly that wealth King Henry VIII wanted to get his hands on, and in 1538 he did just that with the Dissolution of the Monasteries.