



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

Wantage Manor House

by Lis Garnish

One of the uncertainties about medieval Wantage is the site of the manor house of Wantage Manor. Successive writers have assumed that the medieval house stood on the site of Alfred's 'palace' and that this in turn stood on a Roman site. As Christopher Taylor shows in 'Village and Farmstead' (1) this is highly unlikely; not only buildings decayed and were re-built on new sites, but whole villages shifted. As Kathleen Philip writes in 'Reflected in Wantage' (2), one of the few facts which we do know is that in 1431 *'the capital messuage is decayed and worth nothing. There is one dove house which is worth nothing because there are no doves therein'*. If, perhaps, we accept that the Roman, Saxon and Medieval settlements of Wantage may have had different administrative centres we can then look at the information in a fresh light.

Three manors can be identified in Wantage: Wantage Manor, Priorshold Manor and Bryan's Manor. Wantage Manor was held by the Fitzwarin family, then by the Earl of Bath and finally by the Earl of Bradford. Priorshold belonged first to the Abbots of Bec, in France, and then to the Dean and Canons of Windsor. Bryan's acquired its name from the Brian family, passed through several hands, came to a cadet branch of the Fitzwarins, passed on again through various people to the Yorks and then the Hungerfords (3). Each manor controlled a different area of the town and had a compact block of demesne land. Each probably had a medieval manor house which was subsequently abandoned in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, and for each a new manor house or capital messuage was built. Wantage Manor controlled the Market Place, Mill Street, Grove Street, Newbury Street, large areas of land along the present Manor Road and Newbury Road and all of the village of Grove. Priorshold included the area of the church, much of Church Street, Priory Road, the land west of the church and all around The Ham. Bryan's Manor covered much of Wallingford Street and land both to the north as far as Garston Lane, and to the south round Ormond Road.

The traditional site for the medieval manor house of Wantage Manor is somewhere to the west of Grove Street. A more specific suggestion can be made based on four points: the property and place names, the topography of the town, the attachment of a manorial right and the later history of the site. Leaving Wantage in a northerly direction one of the last properties on the west side of Grove Street is the Abingdon Arms. In 1693 the site belonged to Philip Allen, a tanner, and was known as 'Duces'. The first identifiable record of this property occurs in 1620 when Richard Brooke, gentleman, bequeathed the contents of his *"Messuage called Joycise"* to his son Richard, together with *"all Messuages Cottages, howses, buildinges, Barnes, stables, dovehowse, and all other buildinges"* (4).

In 1631 Richard Brook, the son, held Juces (5) though it was occupied by Richard's widowed mother Margery and her second husband, William Jennings. Richard died in April 1663 but at Michaelmas 1663 his widow, Anne, was still living in the house (6). In 1672 her son, another Richard 'of Ducey', died and listed amongst his goods and cattles are *"Pigeons and poultry about the backside £1.0.0"*. He was also leasing *"a peece of ground called or known by the name of high Garden of Which ground a Leace was taken from the Countesse of Bath the remainder of which wee vallue to bee worth £110.0.0"* (7).

Anne and another son, Thomas, both 'of Ducy', continued to live in the house until Thomas died in 1678, when the lease of High Garden was sold for £80 (8). Finally in 1688 Anne died and left her goods and property to her grandson, Philip Allen (9). Philip retained Ducus until 1694, when he sold "*all that capital messuage or Tenement ... commonly called or knowne by the name of Joyces*", and all the land to the west of it, to Alexander Boote of Wantage, Gentleman. Amongst all the cottages, the gardens, an orchard and 150 acres of land was one dovecote (10).

Alexander was not a Free Tenant, however, as he still owed a Quit Rent of £1.6.8 per annum to the Earl of Bath, as a commutation of manorial services due under the feudal system. It was not until about 1758 that his son, John Boote, was able to buy the freehold from the Lord of the Manor. He was holding "*a house homestall and land in Grove Street called Ducus*" (11). Did Alexander know that he had bought the site of the medieval manor? He was a lawyer and it is possible that he had realised from the deeds of various properties that Ducus was the site of the Fitzwarin manor house. The idea that the Brook family had held some part of a manor was certainly current, but it was assumed to be Bryan's Manor, probably by confusion with the name of Bryan's Brook (12). However in 1763 the next owner of Ducus, Thomas Giles, purchased the title of Lord of the Manor from the Earl of Bradford, together with the few remaining manorial rights (13). Inadvertently or not, he may have recombined the title with the possible site of the medieval manor and the demesne lands. Thomas Giles looked at whatever remained of the old house at Ducus and decided that it was by no means grand enough for the Lord of the Manor of Wantage. Instead he drove a carriage way west from Ducus, over the brook, across the demesne land and almost up to the Denchworth Road, where he built himself a grand new house (14). Ducus declined, becoming a public house, 'The Squirrel', by 1835 and, by 1861, 'The Abingdon Arms' (15).

The place name information can be interpreted as follows. The site name of 'Ducus' would seem to be the same as the second element of the Wiltshire village name of Collingbourne Ducis. It comes from the Latin 'dux' and means 'of the leader' or 'of the duke', but there have been no dukes connected with Wantage Manor. However, the first English dukedom was not created until 1377, when Edward III created his son, the Black Prince, Duke of Cornwall. Prior to that date the highest rank of the English nobility was that of Earl, and 'ducis' was 'of the Earl' (16, 17). By 1224 two Earls had held Wantage, the Earl of Albermale and the Earl of Pembroke (18). It is possible that the term 'Wantinge Ducis', was used to distinguish the manor from those of Wantinge Brian and Wantinge Priorshold. It is unlikely that 'ducis' referred to the Earl of Bath as he did not receive his title until 1536 by which time 'ducis' would only apply to a duke.

Immediately to the south of Ducus lay Great High Garden and Little High Garden. 'Garden' comes from the Norman-French and meant an enclosed piece of ground devoted to horticulture, the cultivation of flowers, fruit and vegetables (19). To the east of Ducus, on the other side of Grove Street was "*a certain field called by the name of Gaston*" (20). The 'gaers-tun' meant 'grass enclosure, a paddock' and it could be used for the pasturing of riding horses, or the cattle of the lord (21). To the west of Ducus were the demesne lands of Black Crofts, Long Mead and Broad Mead which together were known as Ducus' Meads. A little further south were Strays More and Pallet's More, 'strays' meaning 'open, unenclosed' and Pallets from 'palis, a palisade', so fenced or enclosed (22). Nearer to Mill Street were 'Court Closes'. 'Court lands' were demesne lands kept in the lord's hands to supply his family and household (23).

The site of Ducus is about twenty five feet above the level of the Letcombe Brook, and there were streams both north and south, the Humber Ditch and Bryans Brook. The stretch of Grove Street between these two brooks was called Lowsehill, and it is the last high ground

that the A338 crosses until, beyond the Noah's Ark, it climbs the slight rises of the Corallian Ridge. It would give a dry site, with good access for water, and is in a dominant position over the low lands along the Letcombe Brook, and centrally placed to administer both Wantage and Grove. The route approaching Wantage from the east divides twice, forming a double pattern of back lanes round the town, but both of the northern arms, Garston Lane and Stirlings Lane, stop at Grove Street and do not continue across the Letcombe Brook. If the medieval manor site were inserted into an existing road pattern this could explain the truncation of these routes. There was in fact a possible remnant of the Stirlings Lane route provided by a lane which led from Grove Street into High Garden, and which was continued by the line of the boundary between Great High Garden and Little High Garden (24, 25). There is, though, no indication of any earlier continuation of Garston Lane.

Great High Garden and Little High Garden fill most of the north-west quadrant of the town, and their close association with Duces would suggest that these were the enclosed gardens supplying the manor house. The garden for horticulture was an essential element in the economy of the manor house, providing fresh fruit and vegetables for the kitchen, and herbs for stewing and medicine. The property boundaries would also suggest that there may have been yards and orchards as in other rural manors.

To the north-west of Duces were two ponds, shown on the Inclosure Map of 1803. One was horse-shoe shaped, giving the close its later name, and it was probably an 'ox-bow' left by a meander of the brook. The other pond was rectangular, however; and it could have been an old manorial fish pond. The proportions are similar to those of the fish pond at Cogges in Oxfordshire (26) and one at Cottesbrooke, Northamptonshire (27).

The right to have a dovecote and to keep doves was reserved to the lord of the manor. The doves or pigeons were a pest, feeding on the grain crops, but the lord benefited from fresh meat during the winter and squabs and eggs in the spring, so the tenants were not allowed to kill the birds and nor were they allowed to keep their own doves. The right to a dovecote was a jealously guarded privilege and is a good indication of the 'manorial' status of a site (28, 29). Duces is the only 'messuage' in Wantage Manor where mention of a dovecote and pigeons has been noted, and this indicates its superior position.*

Although Duces declined in status, the site continued to be associated with the lordship of the manor, and it may have been the acquisition of this site which caused Thomas Giles to seek to purchase the title of Lord of the Manor. Although he abandoned the site, and chose to rebuild to the west of the Letcombe Brook, his carriage drive started at Duces and he retained the compact block of enclosed demesne lands which seem to have been associated with the site.

The site name and the possession of a dovecote are perhaps the strongest indicators of the 'manorial' status of Duces, but the topography of the town and the continued association with the lordship of the Manor are supporting evidence. The external appearance of 'The Abingdon Arms' had already suggested to the writer that a 'hall house' might remain within the structure, and the present landlord confirms that there are 'huge, old timbers' to be seen. The remaining buildings at 'The Abingdon Arms' deserve proper investigation in case any structural evidence remains to confirm the status of the house.

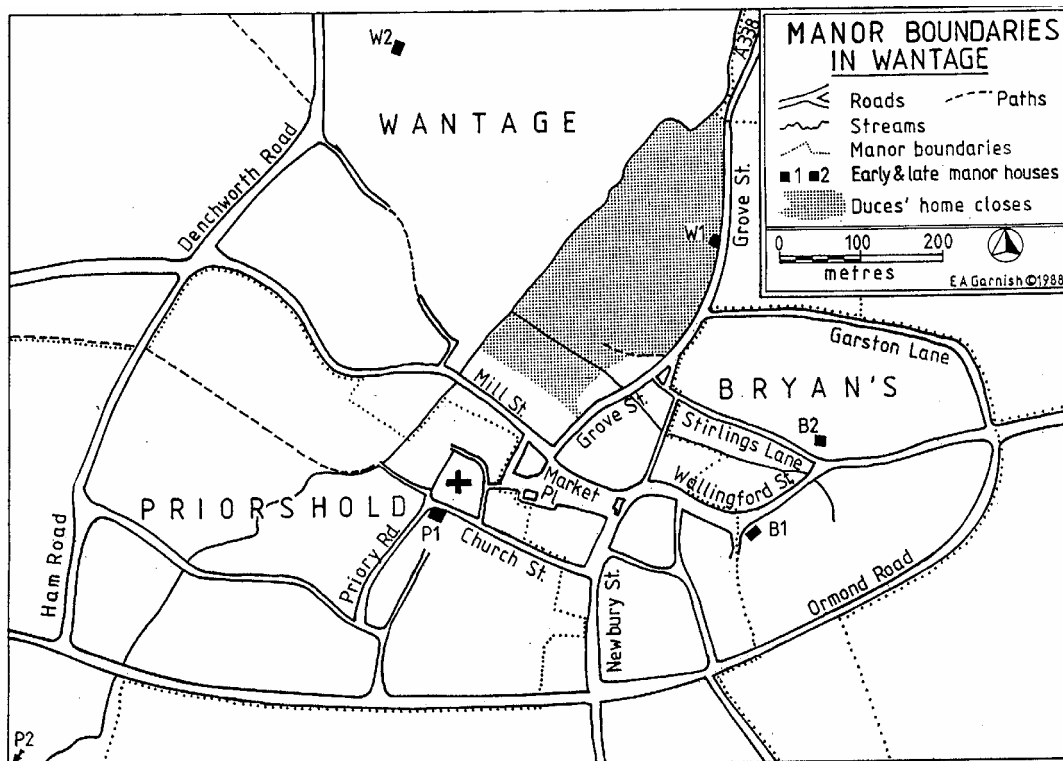
* Since this article was written evidence has come to hand of a second "capital messuage" with a dovecote attached in Wantage Manor. An "Abstract of Title to Wantage Manor" of 1707 (31) lists *"thirty messuages, forty two cottages, one Mill, two Dovehouses etc"*. An Insurance Policy for "Bossingers" in Wallingford street, dated May 1724, lists a *"Dwelling House, Outhouses, great barn, Cart House and Pigeon House"*(32). The "Dovehouse" is mentioned again in 1757, 1766 and 1771

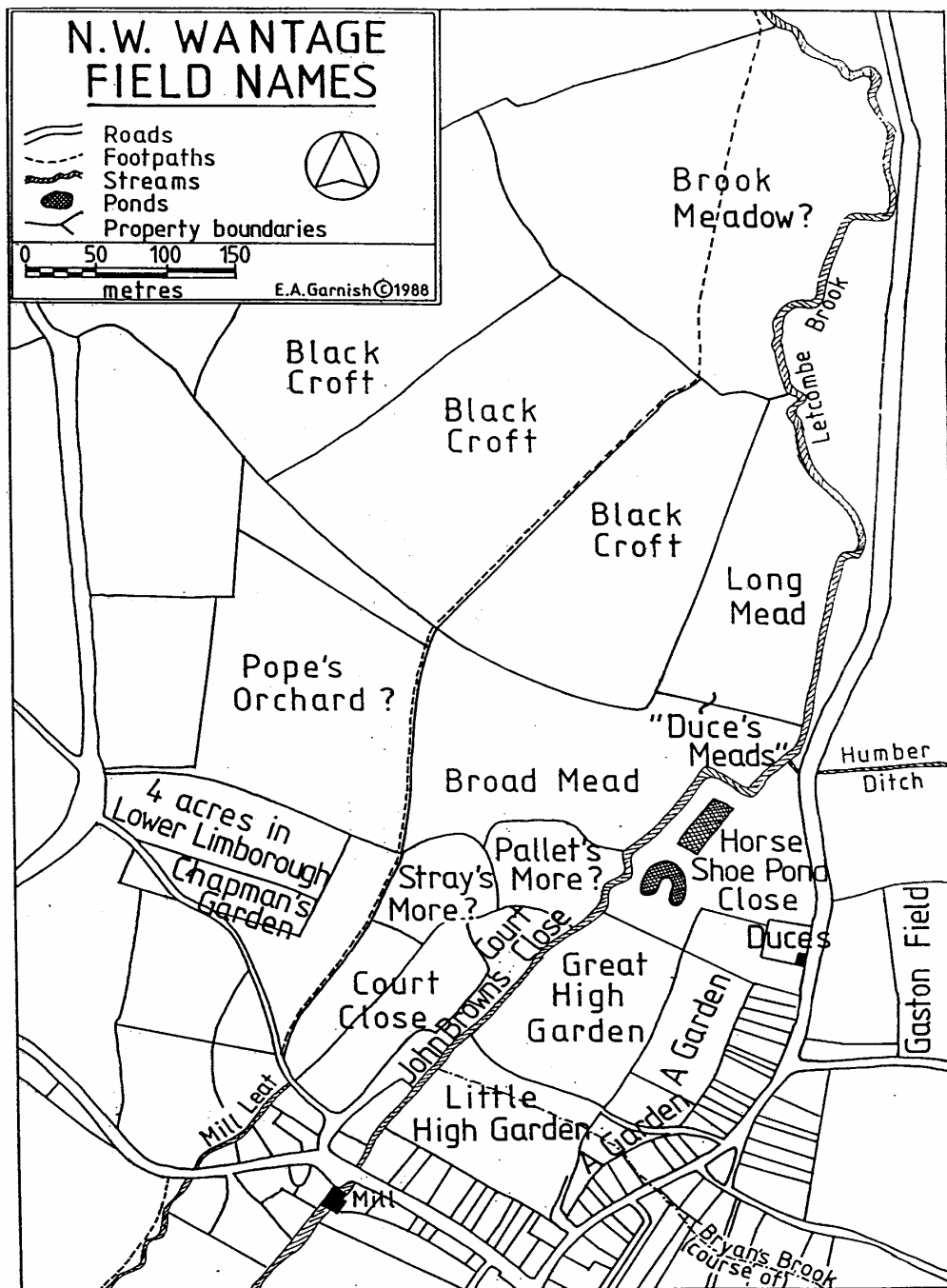
(33). The Manor of Wantage was divided into moieties (halves) at least twice. In 1261 the manor was leased to Adam Fettiplace of Oxford who arranged with Sir William de Valencia to hold the manor in moieties with him and "*to hold with him in common (and) ... share equally the profits arising from the said manor*" (34). The manor was divided again in 1430/1 when it was inherited by Thomasina and Elizabeth Hankford, the neices and co-heirs of the last Fulk Fitzwarin (35). On either of these occasions one of the larger copyholds could have been designated as a secondary manor house and some manoral rights attached to it. The position of "Bossingers" had not been determined positively but may have been in the area of Partridge Close.

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Vale and Downland Museum Trust, 19 Church Street, Wantage, Oxfordshire, OX12 8BL
 Telephone: 01235 771447 e-mail: museum@wantage.com