MARLOW'S MEDIEVAL MANOR HALL

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This article explores the documentation through which the existence of an early manor hall and its site have been discovered. It examines the construction and eventual fate of the building, as well as Marlow's connections with the Norman and Plantagenet dynasties.

Introduction

Local historians have long been aware of the possibility that Marlow once possessed a manor hall or house, named Court House, the location of which had been entirely lost. A number of sites, including Court Garden House, Old Bridge House at the bottom of St Peters Street and the site of the Starbucks/Lloyd's Bank building in the High Street were all considered at various times. The site of the manor hall has now been traced, its history charted and the reason for its loss revealed, but before examining this it is necessary to know something of the history of Marlow and its manor lords.

Marlow's Connection to the Norman Dynasty

For many centuries Marlow was a busy inland port on the north bank of the Thames. Since the Vikings once took a war fleet up to Reading, it is reasonable to suppose that some trading was already taking place on the mid-Thames in the Saxon period. The Domesday Book[1] lists four manors under the name *Merlaue*. The largest, boasting a mill, eel butts and woodland for 1,000 pigs, and belonging to Queen Matilda, wife of William the Conqueror, was Great Marlow. At some time before 1066, Great Marlow and Hambleden manors had become annexed to the only large Saxon landholding in England, a huge area of the West Country later known as the 'Honour of Gloucester'. Matilda had confiscated this from its Saxon lord, so after her death in 1083 it became part of the royal estates. Bestowed by William Rufus on a Norman supporter, the Honour returned to the Crown with his eldest daughter Mabel, who was made a Crown Ward of Henry I. He married her to the most favoured of his natural sons, Robert FitzRoy, making him the greatest landed magnate in England. After the death of his only legitimate son in the White Ship disaster, Henry created Robert earl of Gloucester and lord of Caen, positioning him as the chief supporter of his chosen heir, his daughter and Robert's half-sister, the Empress Matilda.[2]

While there was no bar to a woman succeeding to the throne, there was no precedent either. Matilda had lived in Germany as the prospective Holy Roman Empress from the age of eight. After her husband's death she had remained there, flattered and pampered. Henry forced her to remarry, but was aware that she would need strong support in England to succeed. Robert was his chosen tool. He was a son after Henry's own heart, described by Warren, Henry II's biographer as

> *'...a man of honour, generosity and dignity. He was cultured and sagacious.'*

Warren suggests further that

> *'...fate was unkind to Robert of Gloucester. If he had not had the wrong mother he would have been unquestioned king of England on his father's death, and the claims of Matilda and the pretensions of Stephen would have been unknown to history. By all the evidence he was well fitted to rule.'*[3]

A contemporary chronicle records:

> *'Among others came Robert, Earl of Gloucester, son of King Henry, but a bastard, a man of proved talent and admirable wisdom. When he was advised, as the story went, to claim the throne on his father's death, deterred by sounder advice he by no means assented, saying it was fairer to yield it to his sister's son than presumptuously to arrogate it to himself.'*[4]

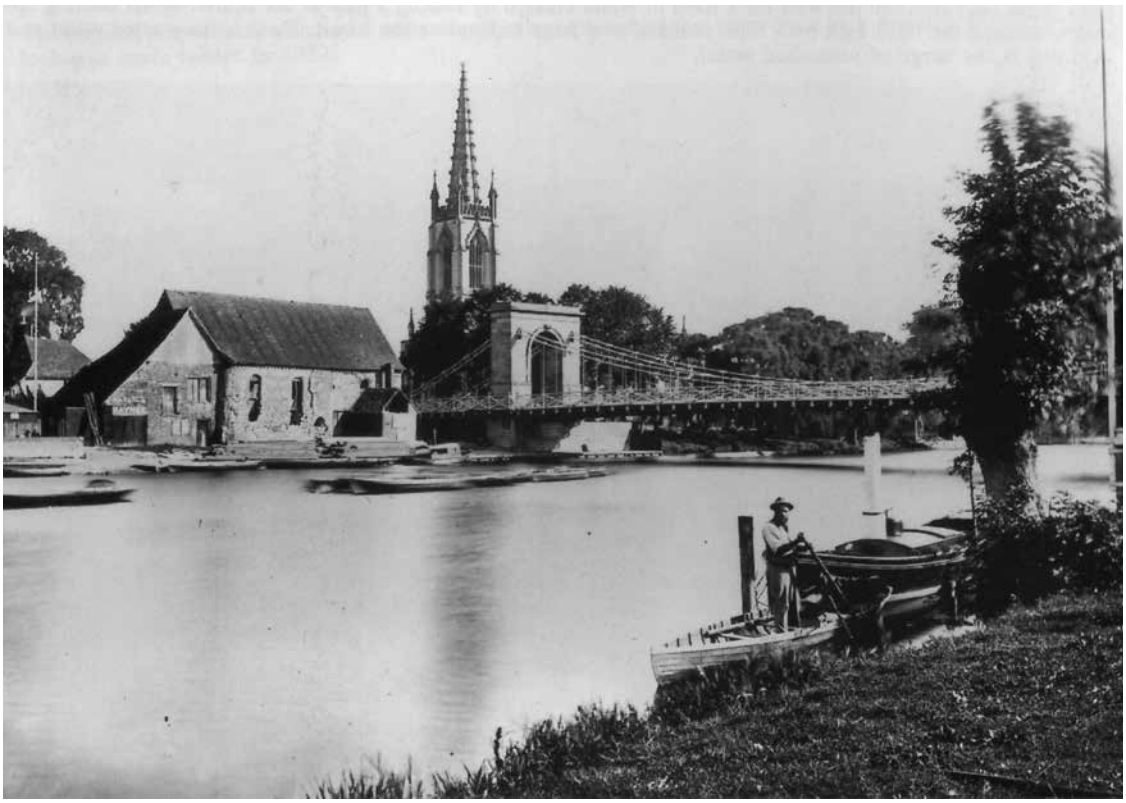

FIGURE 1 The hall on the wharf at Marlow, taken by Henry Taunt. By permission of Historic England Archive

During the remaining thirteen years of his father's reign, Robert consolidated his position. He used his access to the stone quarries of Caen to construct at Bristol first the quays which became the foundation of the port's prosperity, then a castle which proved completely impregnable. In this building he set up his court. When, on Henry I's death, Stephen of Blois seized the throne, Robert kept a watching brief for two years. He was evidently reluctant to commit himself to resistance, but when Stephen's excesses and broken promises became obvious, he raised the standard of his half-sister Matilda in revolt, beginning the civil war known as the Anarchy. The cohesion of the Norman aristocracy, fragile at the best of times, crumbled and England was split down the middle, the eastern half of the country giving allegiance to Stephen in London, the west to the Empress and Robert in Bristol.

Marlow and Hambleden, the only known eastern manors of the earldom of Gloucester, were on the wrong side of the divide, which in this area centred on Wallingford. It is all too likely, since the violence and lawlessness of the Anarchy makes the later Civil War pale into insignificance, that whatever halls or other manor buildings were here at that time were put to fire and the sword at some point during the ensuing mayhem. Robert, perhaps a better administrator than military commander, proved incapable of subduing the whole of England, but the enthusiastic support of his own people meant that Stephen could gain no foothold in the West Country. Eventually Robert settled for retreating to Bristol, where he educated his own sons and, for two years, the young Prince Henry, holding the land he possessed until Henry should be of age to fight for the Kingdom.

In 1147, when Robert died of fever at Bristol, his lands and titles were inherited by William Fitz-Robert, his eldest son.[5] Either William, sometime

between the end of the Anarchy in 1154 and his own death in 1183, or his immediate successors, are the most likely builders of the manor hall on the wharf at Marlow. The subsequent holders of the manor, the de Clare family, had great land holdings in eastern England, but the lands of the first Earls of Gloucester were mostly in the west, with relatively few manors in the south east. Of these, Marlow was the closest to the royal stronghold at Windsor. Moreover, there is evidence that William and his brothers were close to their cousin King Henry and, as some of his closest relatives, willing and able to challenge his fiery temper. William seems either to have been at Henry's elbow as a supporter, or, when Henry's relationship with his sons deteriorated, isolated with others whom the King suspected of siding with his family against him.

The Construction of the Hall

Although the reign of Henry II marked the first great expansion of domestic building in England, relatively little remains. Of the hall at Marlow we have only a few drawings and photographs, including, luckily, an excellent one by Henry Taunt (Fig. 1). This suggests that there is one building still in existence which is very similar. The Constable's House of Christchurch Castle in Dorset, dated by documentary evidence to 1161, is similar in both form and setting although, being beside a smaller river, it is built out into the stream.[6] There may well have been a landing stage at Marlow, but any traces of it are now buried under the concreted foreshore. The hall was much closer to the river than the present buildings on the site, probably in line with the original church, which, like the hall, suffered from periodic flooding.

The hall was built of local materials, flint and clunch. Clunch, used in south Bucks as a more readily available alternative to stone, is another term for chalk, and there is ample evidence of quarrying for it around Marlow. If the hall was built before the bridge, the clunch is likely to have come from the quarry which gives Chalkpit Lane its name; if the bridge was in existence, it may have come from one of the smaller workings in the bottom of Quarry Woods. The flints will have come from much nearer. The subsoil close to the Thames is yellow river clay, with a layer of topsoil above it. Sandwiched between the two is a single layer of fist-sized flints. The closer to the river, the thinner the layer of topsoil that has to be removed to reach them. The home demesne of the manor stretched up to the future Pound Lane, and approximated to Higginson Park and Court Garden (Fig. 2). Immediately north of that, in the area covered later by the lorry park of Wethereds Brewery and now by housing, lies an area known for many centuries as Goblin Pits. The topography of the surface workings at Grimes Graves, the Neolithic flint mines in East Anglia, suggests that this would have been an apt name for such apparently inexplicable hollows in the ground. Much of Goblin Pit Way, which according to the manor survey of 1554 bordered the western end of it, still exists as Portlands Alley.[7]

Before masons had mastered the art of buttressing walls, so that they could be built high and narrow, the only way they had of erecting a high building was to make the walls very thick. Stone walls were built as two skins with a rubble infill, but plentiful materials, such as on-site flint, were treated differently. A good local example is found in the abandoned Norman church of St James at Bix, now stripped of ivy and conserved. The flints are laid carefully in courses, and a collapsed wall shows that these courses ran through the wall, about five flints deep (Fig. 3). The Taunt photograph of the manor hall shows evidence of courses, but it is not possible to see these clearly. Detail of a more general view, taken by the Marsh brothers of Henley, shows the flints to have been tightly laid in flat courses (Fig. 4). All this was achieved with lime mortar. Unsurprisingly, over the centuries, buildings which had no additions and improvements developed a tendency to collapse, evident in the west ends of both the manor hall, which was subject to periodic flooding, and at Bix church after the Victorians removed its roof (Fig. 3). Neither rubble-filled nor solid flint walls produced a top firm and level enough to support the roof unaided, so it was necessary to add a wall plate, a line of stone slabs, to carry the roof trusses and rafters. Internally this was usually finished flush to the wall with a carved or moulded edge, but externally it was extended into a corbel table, a ledge supported by stone brackets. This allowed the roof, many centuries before the invention of iron rainwater gutters, to shed water far enough out to prevent the bottom of the wall being constantly soaked.

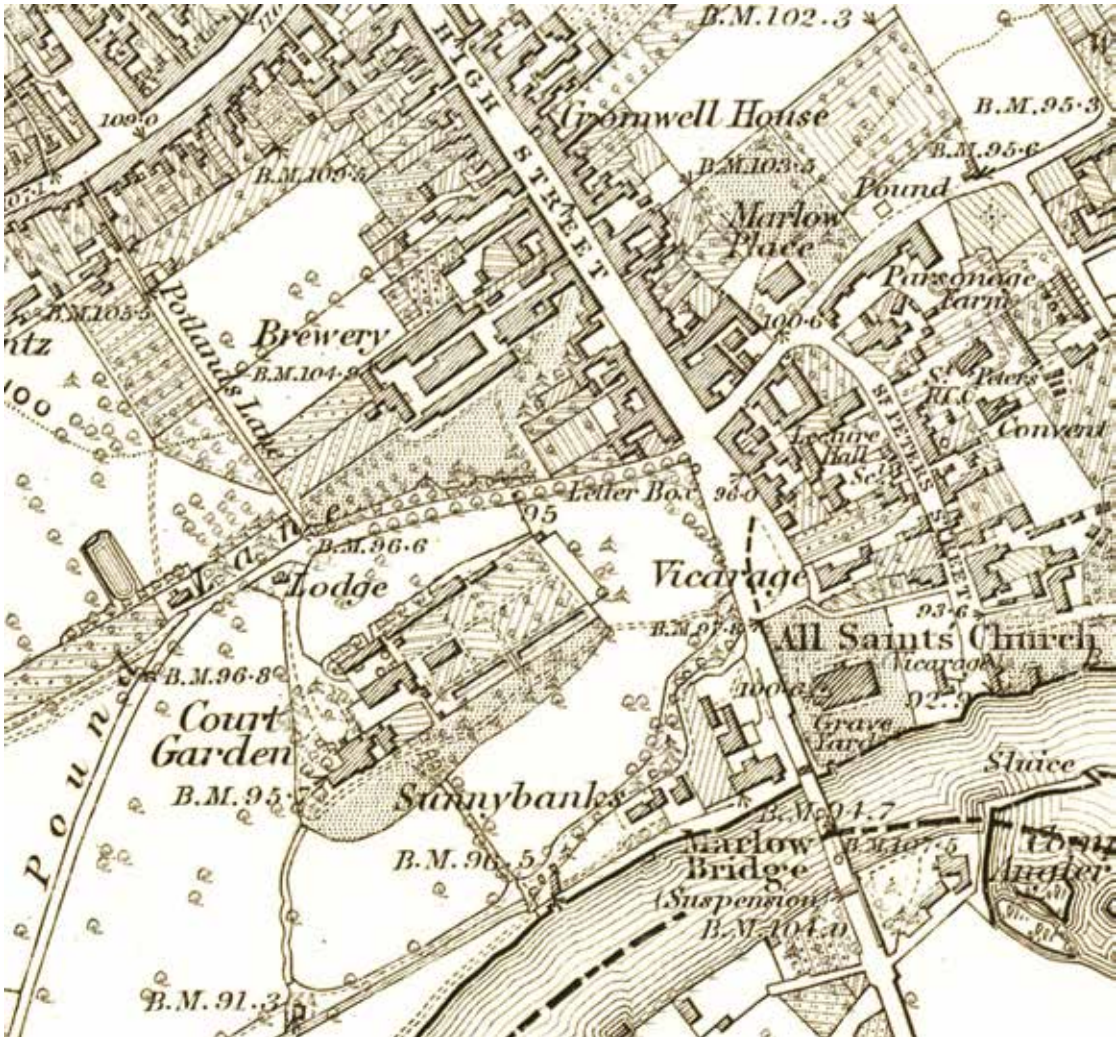

FIGURE 2 Area of the manor hall and Court Garden in 1554. Shown on 6" OS sheet, 1882

Such a corbel table, with plain brackets called billets, had been applied to the hall on the wharf. This alone would suggest that it was built before 1200, but there are several other indications. Chief among these are the windows. Drawings and an early photograph of the hall suggest that these may have been later insertions, but a high-definition copy of the Taunt print allows the identification of the ones on the south front as late Norman round-head windows. Earlier windows had external bands of geometric decoration, but by the middle of the twelfth century this had been reduced to a single recessed moulding (Fig. 5). Originally the windows would have had central pillars and infill panels, dividing them into two single round-headed lights. These would have been unglazed, but fitted with internal hinged wooden shutters. A Marsh brothers' photograph shows an Early English lancet in the western gable end. The Taunt photograph also shows a round-headed doorway at ground level, in the process of being unblocked. Above is a raised portion of wall surmounted by the outer edges of a drip moulding, which suggests an early attempt to deflect rainwater from the doorway. This presumably allowed access to visitors who arrived by water, the safest

FIGURE 3 The collapsed wall at St James, Bix Brand, showing solid flint construction

method of travel at the time. There may have been an internal stair by this date, but there was also possibly an external staircase on the landward side, of which no illustrations exist. Medieval halls, because of the danger of fire, almost always had detached kitchens, which needed an external stair for serving food quickly. In this case a house immediately behind the hall, which existed before 1600, is a possible site of the kitchen.

Altogether, the style of the hall suggests that it was built at about the same time as the tower of the medieval church of All Saints, which stood beside it. The tower of Marlow church appears to

FIGURE 4 An enhanced Victorian photograph showing the close-laid flint construction of the hall

have looked very similar to the one still standing in Bisham, running the full width of the original nave. Drawings suggest that it too was built largely of clunch, and that the church roof was entirely leaded. The hall was tiled at the time of demolition, but may well have been reroofed at some period. Until the construction of the new bridge in 1832, these two buildings stood together in a formation common on medieval manors.

THE LATER MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Throughout the medieval period Marlow was owned, and occasionally quarrelled over, by some of the greatest magnates in the land. The bloodline of the earls of Gloucester, which began with Henry I, continued unbroken, although sometimes through the female line, until the end of Plantagenet rule. The town seems early to have gained a reputation as a rough place, probably because of the presence of so many bargees. These men, in teams of between six and twenty, hauled the

FIGURE 5 An enlargement of the Taunt photograph showing the corbel table, window design and the round-headed doorway being unblocked. By permission of Historic England Archive

barges up and down river and had a fearsome reputation, both in Marlow and neighbouring Henley, for strong drink and violence. Perhaps because of this, few of the manor lords were tempted to make their home in Marlow, although it was valued for its commercial revenues. One possible exception was Gilbert 'the Red' de Clare, a close friend and supporter of Edward I. When his first wife died, he was granted the hand of Princess Joan of Acre, one of Edward's daughters. About this time Marlow's second medieval hall was built in St Peter's Street and the church was enlarged. The new hall was a small but elegant building, with a considerable enclave. Thomas Langley, writing in 1797, tells us that the north window of All Saints chancel contained three coats of arms: the three golden Plantagenet lions on a red ground, the de Clare red chevrons on gold, and the arms of the earl of Pembroke, de Clare's brother-in-law.[8]

Gilbert's son died at Bannockburn without children. His daughters became Crown Wards of their uncle, Edward II. He married one to his infamous favourite, Hugh le Despenser, but after Hugh's very public end in Hereford market-place, his wife Eleanor argued successfully that he had only held the Gloucester lands through her, and retained them for her children. They passed by marriage first to the Beauchamp and then the Neville earls of Warwick, who also owned and lived in Bisham Abbey. When the Wars of the Roses ended in 1485, the Gloucester portion of their estates, including Marlow, was forfeit to the Tudor crown. A few years later the Crown Commissioners gave the church, together with the St Peter's Street hall, to Tewksbury Abbey. Both they and their successors, the Dean and Chapter of Gloucester cathedral, leased the hall, now known as the Old Parsonage, and its lands commercially.[9]

Documentary Evidence

The earlier hall on the wharf, known as the Court House, had apparently remained as the centre of manor administration during the medieval period. The manor was bequeathed by Henry VIII to his daughter Mary. In 1554 she bestowed it in turn on one of her staunchest supporters, Sir William Paget. At this point. either the Crown or Paget himself commanded a survey of the manor and borough of Marlow. This document is the only one so far discovered which pin-points the location of the Court House.

> *'Land of the Lord of the Manor.*
>
> *The Capital House or Manor House with all Houses, barns, stables and curtilages in the tenure of John Salter. Value per annum...*

A close at Corte Garden containing VII acres, situated between Goblynes Pitte on the North part, the river Thames and the Corte House on the south part, abutting on the street on the east part and Cortbarneheys and Goblynespitteweye on the west part. *Value per annum...*

Note that the said close will summer well XII kine. It is a very fertile ground in the tenure of Mr Seymore.

A close on which is built a barn, called Cortebarneheys, containing I acre and 32 perches, Abutting on the north and east to Corte Garden, to the south the River Thames, and to the west to Goblynespitteweye. Value per annum...'

(Survey of the Manor of Great Marlow, Centre for Bucks Studies [CBS]: Folio 40, 1554)

Other documents, known to local historians for much longer, tantalisingly mention the property, but assume that everyone concerned will know where it is.

1515 Tucher Bolde was granted a lease for 21 years, *'the tenant to keep in good repair the dwelling house etc of the manor.'* (Bucks Archaeol. Soc., GM793)

1654 '*John Moore junior holdeth the old Manor House in Greate Marlowe and to it Courtfield 30 acres, with 3 lakes of 10 acres with the wharf to it adjoining, and payeth rent.'*
Terrier and Rental of the Marlow and Harleyford Estate of Lord Paget. (London Metropolitan Archives: Acc/0446/M/147)
John Moore was, as far as we are aware, the first of Marlow's large-scale brewers.

1677 The Lordship of Great Marlow was relinquished by John's son, Robert Moore, to Sir Humphrey Winch of Harleyford.
'Reserved : the Courte Howse, with the lake and ground in Marlowe (3a.), adjoining the Ham (common grazing), and the Courte Fields (26a.), 2 closes of pasture and lakes – the two Horse Leazes (9a.), and the lakes (5a.) meadow and pasture, occupied by John Moore the elder.'
(CBS: AR1).
The reserved area came into the hands of Sir James Etheredge following his marriage in 1683 to Katherine, daughter and heiress of Robert and Joan Moore of the Parsonage (now Brampton House), and it was similarly reserved by him on his sale of Great Marlow and Harleyford to Sir John Guise in 1718.

1735 *'All that chief mansion or manor house of Great Marlow aforesaid commonly known or called by the name of Court House, And all wharfs brewhouses and hereditaments whatsoever thereunto belonging or therewith used situate lying and being in Great Marlow aforesaid and now or late in the tenure or occupation of the said Lattimore, And all that close in Great Marlow aforesaid containing by estimation three acres be the same more or less lying and being behind the said mansion or manor house with all common fishing and commodities whatsoever thereunto belonging and also now or late in the tenure or occupation of the said Lattimore.'*
(CBS: Clayton M320)

1761 '*The Chief Mansion or Manor House of Great Marlow called Court House with the wharfs and brewhouses. Tenanted by Commissioners of Navigation. Rent, £40'*
From "Freehold Estates at Harleyford and Great Marlow belonging to Wm. Clayton Esq."
(CBS: D/CE Box D)

The latter document was drawn up for Sir William Clayton, when he began the attempt to sell the urban manor property which he had purchased in 1735. Because he was asking a considerable price for the political advantage which would accrue from owning the property used to control Marlow's pocket borough, it took him thirty years to find a buyer. In about 1791 he sold out to Thomas Williams of Temple House, the 'Copper King'. The details of this sale are with the Williams papers, which are apparently not at present in the public domain. However, the 1843 tithe map[10] and index confirm that the owner of the hall and surrounding land at that time was Thomas Peers Williams. The family still owned the land when their estate was sold in 1905.[11]

Survival

That the hall survived for so long is due to the fact that it did not continue to be the centre of manor life. By the early seventeenth century the manor court had moved elsewhere, perhaps to Harleyford Old Hall, where the manor tenants then lived. The building on the wharf was known as the Store House[12], and was apparently used to warehouse goods delivered to the town by water. By 1654 it was leased by John Moore, the first known of Marlow's large-scale brewers. In an age when it was safer to drink beer than water, Marlow's brewing capacity was nevertheless phenomenal. The explanation for this appears to be the presence of the bargees, who were perhaps partly paid in beer. The Moore family had a brewery on land behind what is now Brampton House at the bottom of the High Street From the size of their vat, which was valued at £30, indicating a volume of copper comparable to later commercial vats,[13] the Moores would have needed a building as large as the Brewhouse to hold it. The hall was tenanted by brewers until the beginning of the nineteenth century. During this period the south-west end of the hall collapsed or was washed away and was replaced by a curious wing, at right-angles to the original building.

The advent of the Wethered family, with their newer brewing methods, spelt the death-knell of the town's older breweries, and the hall returned in part to its former use as a warehouse. On several occasions it was rented as storage space by the Thames Navigation Commissioners when they were working on local locks or weirs. From quite early in the nineteenth century it also housed a boat-building business. The town's coal, delivered by water, had always been stored on the section of the town wharf beneath the old bridge at the foot of St Peter's Street. As storing it under the new suspension bridge was out of the question, the bottom was knocked out of the hall's windows and it became the local coal depot. The arrival of the railway in 1873 heralded the building's final demise.

Recognition

The nineteenth century saw a new interest in and appreciation of all things medieval. John Henry Parker, the Oxford antiquarian, one of the first serious students of Gothic architecture, had visited Marlow in pursuit of buildings to include in his *Some account of domestic architecture in England from Edward I to Richard II,* and having accurately described the Old Parsonage in St Peter's Street, he continued:

> *Another fine hall remains near the bridge, though in a very mutilated state, it is of earlier character, in the style of the early part of Edward I, belonging rather to the thirteenth than the fourteenth century. It has lancet windows, blocked up, and part of the corbel-table is perfect. The walls are of chalk and flint, but much mutilated; one of the lancet windows retains its moulded dripstone. The finest part is the roof, which is nearly perfect, and very good, though plain, the timbers are arched, and have arched braces, the wall-plate is merely chamfered and recessed, the end collar-beam crosses a lancet window in the gable, but all seems to be original.*[14]

Later scholarship may have rendered some of the conclusions which he drew suspect, but Parker's description and his grasp of which details were important remains impeccable.

Early topographers of Bucks, Thomas Langley in his *History and Antiquities of the Hundred of Desborough,* 1797, and George Lipscomb in his two-volume *History and Antiquities of the County of Buckingham*, 1847, both ignore the existence of the hall. Unfortunately, in 1862 it attracted the attention of a less discerning topographer. James Joseph Sheahan, in his *History and Topography of Buckinghamshire,* made the following comments:

> *On the bank of the river near the bridge is a curious old building (now used as a coal depot, and about to be pulled down) known as the Conventual Barn of Bisham Abbey. The roof is of Spanish chestnut. French prisoners were kept in this building during the war.*

Sheahan has for many years been regarded as an unreliable commentator, not least because he quotes no sources, and the extract above is a blend of fact and fiction. The building had none of the attributes of a medieval barn, and it is doubtful that the Austin Canons of Bisham Priory, never well-heeled, would have needed more storage space than the two huge barns on their own property. The roof, of which more later, is of sessile oak.

It is, however, perfectly true that captured French officers were billeted in this building during the Napoleonic Wars. Sadly, this attribution was accepted in full without question for more than a century.

In 1878 the hall was finally demolished. The reason is unknown, but in that year the periodical *Building News* carried a perspective drawing and plan of a riverside hotel at Marlow, designed for Lewis Cope Williams. The plan stated that the building was under construction, but *Building News* differed[15]. The hotel never appeared in Marlow, on the site of the hall or any other, although it is difficult to identify any other riverside land which was available at the time. The Williams family, who had made their fortune in copper during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, had by then sold out and were living on their capital. In the event, the site contained a boat-building business in tarred-wood huts for some years, followed by the erection of a typically Victorian boat-house. At present the whole area is covered by Tierney Court, an apartment complex.

Legacy

One part of the hall escaped destruction. In 1876, the architect John Oldred Scott had added a chancel to All Saints, Marlow. He then designed a new church for the nearby village of Lane End, where the roof of the old church was collapsing (Fig. 6). On the steering committee for the new building was Thomas Somers Cocks, a banker who lived at Thames Bank in Marlow. He bought the roof timbers of the hall and paid for their carriage to Lane End, where Scott erected them on the nave of his new church[16]. An expert on medieval timber who has seen recent photographs says that the roof is clearly designed for stone walls and almost certainly for a domestic building. It is a simple, perfectly semi-circular arch-brace. It sits so perfectly in its new position that it is difficult to

Figure 6 Holy Trinity church, Lane End, built 1878

FIGURE 7 View of the nave roof at Holy Trinity church. The arch brace trusses, purlins and wind braces are medieval, common rafters and boarding are Victorian.

escape the thought that John Oldred Scott, having seen the roof in Marlow, designed the nave at Lane End specifically for it (Fig. 7).

To sum up, Marlow had an early medieval manor hall, constructed in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, which long outlived its identity. Its domestic function moved within two centuries to a newer hall, built away from the wharf and further from the river. Having throughout the medieval period retained its identity as the centre of manor business, in the Tudor age it became a warehouse for goods delivered to the wharf. Later, by a quirk of fate, it became part of a brewery. When brewing moved away from the river it reverted to its earlier use as a warehouse, then became the local coal depot. By this time it is extremely unlikely that anyone except the owners and their solicitors was aware of the true identity of the building. A legend began, either accidentally or assisted by the owners, that it was connected with Bisham Abbey rather than the town of Marlow, allowing it to be demolished with the minimum of fuss.

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