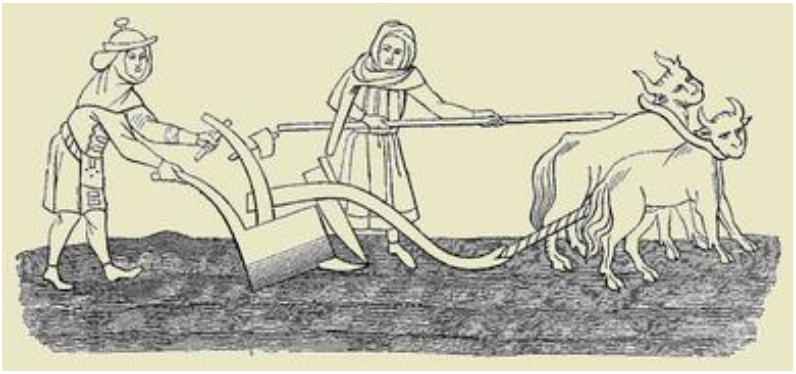
A GLIMPSE OF DORNEY IN THE 1300s

Throughout the 1300s England was ruled by a succession of Plantagenet kings. This was a period of relative stability and peace. Although two of the kings were deposed and died imprisoned, there was no civil war, and the Hundred Years War was far away in France. But between 1315 and 1322 there was a Great Famine, when prolonged heavy rain and cold weather caused crops to fail, and 10% to 15% of the population died. Then in 1348/9, the Black Death killed around a third of the population and was followed by further epidemics of plague in the 1360s. The reduction in the labour force, particularly after the Black Death, was one factor behind the gradual breakdown of the old feudal system under which most people were tied to the manor they lived in, and the requirement to provide services by working for the lord was replaced by cash payments.

In Dorney, life revolved around farming. There were three or four large open fields where people owned or rented strips growing the same crops as their neighbours. Hay meadows ran alongside the streams, passing through the arable fields. Common pasture was available on Dorney Green (Dorney Common) and there were commons also at Lake End, West Town and Boveney. A detached portion of Dorney parish on the higher ground at Dorneywood provided woodland. The church of St James the Less had been built in the 12th century; the font where local babies were baptised dates from the same time. Much of the fabric of the medieval church remains today, but the walls would have been covered with paintings and the chancel separated from the nave by a rood screen, of which only traces survive. Nearby, the church at Boveney was also built in the 12th century and Burnham Abbey at Huntercombe had been founded in 1266.



At the beginning of the 1300s, the lord of the manor of Dorney was William Cave. He died in 1305 when his son and heir Nicholas was only 14. Nicholas could not inherit until he came of age, up to which time he was the ward of Adam de Braye who looked after his estate during this period. When Nicholas reached the age of 22, an enquiry called an “Inquisition post mortem” was called to make sure he really was old enough; there were of course no such things as birth certificates or even parish registers. Thirteen local men aged between 40 and 60 gave evidence that Nicholas was 22 at the last feast of the Purification and had been born in Dorney on that day in the 18th year of the reign of King Edward the king’s father and baptised in Dorney church the following day. They remembered the year for various reasons – it was the year they got married, or their father died, or their son was born. Thomas Worthingpole knew it for the year he returned with his brother Richard from Gascony where they had been in the king’s service; he had gone to William Cave’s house and seen baby Nicholas in his cradle.

This example of a document from 1312 highlights several features of those times. Surnames were only just solidifying and people were identified in various ways. The men giving evidence included Richard atte Lente (as in Lent Rise), John of Burnham and John of Dorney, and they spoke of Walter the son of Walter the son of Robert of Dorney, who was the same age as Nicholas Cave. In other documents we find Nicholas, son of Walter the blacksmith of Dorney, Robert of Brutewell (Britwell), Henry the fisher of Boveney and Richard the merchant of Dorney. As the century progressed, it became more usual to develop a surname, although even in 1364 the vicar of Dorney was described as William of Shiplake, because that is where he came from.

People also recorded dates differently from the way we do today. It was common in official documents for many centuries after 1300 to define the year by the regnal year – the number of years the current or a previous monarch had been on the throne. King Edward I became king in

November 1272 so the 18th year of his reign began in November 1289. Edward had visited Gascony – a region of France which he owned, south of Bordeaux – in 1286 and returned in 1289. The feast of the Purification, or Candlemas, was celebrated on 2 February, so that pinpoints Nicholas Cave's date of birth – 2 February 1289 as it was then, when the year began on 25 March rather than 1 January. Just about every day could be associated with a saint; Dorney documents name Monday next before St Matthew the Apostle, the feast of St Thomas the Martyr, the feast of St Peter ad Vincula, Saturday next before St Perpetua the Virgin and so on. It was a different way identifying a date, but it worked fine for our 14th century forebears.

Nicholas Cave continued as lord of the manor of Dorney well into the middle of the century. In 1348, he was sued for debt in the court of Chancery by William de Evesham. We don't know for certain who this William was, but a man of the same name was buying houses in St Clement Dane in London at this time. Nicholas owed £112, equivalent to over £100,000 today. At the request of the court, the sheriff of Buckinghamshire made a valuation of Nicholas' estate in October 1349. In Dorney, he owned the manor house with its garden, 244 acres of arable land, 17½ acres of mowable land and 200 acres of woodland (this would have been at Dorneywood) and heath which were common land. He also had 11 acres of mowable land in Hitcham and received rents from free men in Dorney. The total annual value of his estate came to £18 16s. 6d.

By 1373, Dorney manor had passed to Nicholas Newnham who was succeeded by John Newnham. John also found himself pursued for debt, in 1395. These debts were owed to London traders, one for 18 marks and another for 40 marks. A mark was two thirds of a pound sterling, so John owed just under £39 – around £40,000 in today's money. John was also taken to court by the abbess of Burnham Abbey. The abbey was entitled to receive the rectorial tithes from Dorney, which in those days were given in actual produce rather than cash. John Newnham seized the abbess's carts loaded with produce and her horses and carried them off to his manor house.

It was not just the lords of the manor who left traces of their lives in Dorney. Records of land transactions in particular include many names of people who lived and worked there. We have already met Thomas Worthingpole, born about 1260, who served the king in France. Thomas was married to Christine and had a daughter Alice and a son Simon, who married Agatha. The Worthingoles owned land and houses in Dorney and Thomas was able to provide for his married daughter and for his wife after he died. Rather sweetly, the rent for the few acres in the strips on the open fields which Thomas granted to Alice and her husband was a rose. Later generations of the family were still in Dorney in 1384. The name Worthingpole is very unusual; could it be a corruption of the place name Warnyngpole noted in Dorney in a deed of 1386, or maybe the place was named after the family, as often happened.

Another Dorney family who owned houses and land was the Fitzwalters, who appeared in the mid-1300s and may have come from Cippenham. Like others, they held land in Boveney and Burnham as well as Dorney. Hitcham, Cippenham, Eton Wick and Eton were other places where Dorney farmers acquired land. The Fitzwalter family seem to have sold their remaining property to Eton College in 1511.

The earliest Dorney manor court roll, dating from 1514, mentions these earlier owners in identifying land held by current villagers. A farm and land formerly owned by William Fitzwalter and

some land once held by Simon Worthingpole were described as “free land”, while a farm once owned by John Worthingpole was held by “knight service”. Free land equates to freehold, for which only minimal payments were due to the manor, while “knight service” was probably copyhold tenure, involving more payments and less freedom. An individual could and did hold both types of land and could also rent it out to a sub-tenant.

Farms, houses, cottages and land, even parts of gardens, were constantly being traded. A significant buyer of property from 1365 was Thomas Comberton and his wife Margaret. Over a period of 25 years, they bought up small and big parcels of land from various owners, including houses and a farm called Bygauntes. This may have been named for Robert Bygaunt, who had been killed by Richard Cave, who was pardoned for the death in 1358, claiming self-defence.

A frequent name throughout the 14th century documents for Dorney was Lovell. The Lovells lived in Boveney where in 1246 Henry Lovell, the king’s cook, was given a farm with 10 acres which he already rented in Boveney. Over time, this became the manor of Boveney, and the family also owned West Town. The last Lovell in Boveney was Richard who died in 1479, leaving two small daughters, Agatha and Joan, and Boveney was sold.

Many other names pass through the records – Simon Saffrey and his son Richard, the Dents who had a little farm with 6 acres, Richard Kenebald and his wife Magota and son William, Ralph Elys who left his cottage to his daughter Margery, Robert and Matilda atte Sawegere who had a cottage; the list could go on.

These people, who lived in our village so long ago, knew the same major landmarks that we know today. To identify the location of a piece of land, they referred to the river Thames, to the common and the church. Some field names are still familiar to us. South Field near the common is remembered in the name of Southfield Close, and North Field has a house named after it. West Field may well be what was later called Thames Field, as it was also linked to Oakley on the opposite bank of the Thames.

These open arable fields were divided into furlongs, designed originally to be the length of furrow which a team of oxen could plough without resting. The furlongs, which might also be given names, contained groups of strips which were individually owned or rented but which all grew the same crop (or remained fallow) at the same time. Typically, a farmer would have strips in several different places. When these strips changed hands, other names were used, reflecting specific local characteristics. Twamthorne would have been either two thorn trees or one that was split. Tordeland was where the dung was spread. Foxhurste denoted a place where foxes lived. Swetelonde was a fertile plot. Middelslade referred to low lying or marshy ground. Wythemed was where willow trees grew. Parkfere probably references the former deer park in neighbouring Cippenham, which had become a royal stud farm by the mid-1300s. These specific landmarks are no longer recognisable, but the features they describe mostly still exist in today’s landscape. The echoes of these people’s lives remain in the church where they were baptised and married, the churchyard where they were buried and the fields and paths they trod as we do today.

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