

Dr Bill Hassell

Well, my last visit is to a very imposing Manor House on the High Street, and it's the home of Dr Bill Hassell, very well known to Radio Oxford listeners, through his phone-in, on the derivations of surnames. Dr Hassell, can I start by asking about the history of this magnificent house?

It was falling down ..only one end was inhabited when we came - there was no floor, there was no staircase, the wall had to be completely rebuilt, and you couldn't get from the house to the road, from broken bottles, and piles of nettles, and so on. And my wife bought it with her savings, but it cost very little, 'course, doing it up - we still haven't done it up. If you look at it from the road, you see a date, 1601, on the house, and that is on the finer end of the house, that was when that end was built by a man called Archdale, who's initials are on the house; he wasn't a person of any national importance, he was merely benefactor for the Bodleian, but he gave away the book, as duplicate in the middle of the seventeenth century, which he gave them. We live in the humbler end of the house, which was built, perhaps, a generation before, before the standard of living of farmers in the Elizabethan times - we lived on the right side of inflation- had gone up - they were able to put in battlements and bay windows

It looks very grand, doesn't it?

Well, the only grand person who had anything to do with it was the milkman who married the niece of Mr Archdale - she lived at Forest Hill, and they didn't get on at all well together and she inspired his pamphlet in favour of the general principles of divorce.

So, in fact, Milton would have come here then?

Yes. At the house, the property would have been rebuilt at different times - 1601, the last big doing up, it had belonged to the monks of Abingdon and the estate of Wheatley was given in 956 in order to get it going again after education had been smashed up, during the Danish raids

Did many of the houses in the village belong to the people who owned the Manor?

Yes, a great many; you were saying about being an open village - the villages around Wheatley tended to be in the hands of single people, like the Bishop of Oxford, like the big house in Holton Park, or like the Shotover or the family Ashurst at Waterstock, and they didn't like someone, because they showed too much independence, and evicted them from their cottage, Wheatley was a place where property was minutely subdivided - more like a French village, and where they could come to live, and could do as a Victorian vicar said- with great disapproval - exactly what they liked!

So really, it wasn't a feudal village , then?

Not at all, and the Manor House was never, economically, that important. I mean, in the

eighteenth century, when one had great books showing how much money they could get out of everybody, it was the publicans and the coopers, and the wheelrights and the maltsters who paid the greater part of the rent, and not the Lord of the Manor-the rates, I should have said

I suppose the free spirit that must have existed in Wheatley made it a very interesting place?

Well, it made it a place which was very shocking to people who had a spirit of reform; Elton, who was vicar in the nineteenth century, and his predecessor, who weren't vicars but were curates, said that all the worst sports and worst traditions flourished here -1 mean bullbaiting, and badger-baiting and dog fighting, and all the rest of it, and he tried, well even before he came, parson in Holton - the next parish- had tried to start up things like cricket, in order to distract people (laugh).

Did it work?

Well, eventually it worked, but it worked through force; I mean, Elton, when it became illegal, he brought in authorities to suppress it; but when I was first here I remembered an old man, who remembered when he was a child, having seen the bull on one occasion, ..

Where would they have done the bull..

They would have done this where the village lock-up is, that was a quarry, i Taken was filled up with rubbish by the late rather un..? Bullingdon rural district council, but having made it a centre for that, now it's nice, got green on top, and is a nice children's playground, and that - but lower down, because it was a quarry and hadn't been filled with rubbish, now planted on top- is where they did it., and the cock-fighting, was probably in the house of a man called Juggins, who lived up on the main road; I think it's the house where, Marion Audley-Miller, who I believe you were talking to earlier, where she lives

What do you know about the origins of Wheatley?

Well, one of the things that makes it different to most villages is that it was a road? -side village - that's why the wheelwrights and publicans and so on, flourished here - it was on the main road from London, not to Oxford- A40 didn't exist - but to Worcester, Chipping Norton and Islip, and Forest Hill and to Wales. That was one thing. Another thing was that there were very important quarries here. They were as famous as Tainton in the middle ages; some of the stone for Windsor Castle, some of it came from Tainton, the stone for the earliest oxford college structure, such as for Merton College, the stone for Abingdon Abbey, and in many churches, came from Wheatley; and a lot of what we know about Wheatley in the middle ages, is not from documents preserved in Wheatley, but from account rolls in the Public Record Office or elsewhere, of places like Windsor Castle, where one has records of stone being collected from Wheatley, and that is why the village received the old houses in the High Street -are all stone, but the stone through a geological fault, lay bang next door to heavy clay, and so there were clay pits and brick works next door to stone quarries and that is why the very old houses turned out to be thatch, but there are red tile roofs and grey stone houses - you see,

quite different from the Cotswolds, which are grey both the roof, and the house and quite different from Thame and places in the Vale of Aylesbury, where one has all red brick; but Oxford, not only the old colleges, like Merton, Wheatley stone, before Headington stone, began to be used ...bricks went - north Oxford, Keble for instance, and Didcot, came out of the womb of Wheatley, just as much as part of Windsor Castle and Abingdon; well, therefore, it was, in a way, an industrial village, not just an agricultural village. Of course there were big farms - Mr Juggins and his family had big farms, but in the thirteenth century one has a record which shows how much tax everybody paid and there was one person in another record, who had very little land at all - one can think of him as a starving peasant -but in fact, was a stone contractor - providing stone, and cutting it, for Merton College chapel, originally in the 1200's

So he wouldn't have been too poor?

Not at all! And you know that in the tax returns - he's the one who pays quite a bit, but didn't have land

What about earlier times than that?

Well, we don't get mentioned in Domesday because Wheatley was a hamlet, in the larger parish of Cuddesdon, just as Henley doesn't get mentioned in Domesday, not because it wasn't there, but because it was subordinate to Benson. But we have a record which is earlier than Domesday book, in 956, there was a charter from Saxon king, ...? in Cuddesdon Abbey of land in Cuddesdon and Wheatley and it describes the boundaries, you can just mark it on a map, and put in a deed and say this is what you have, because there wasn't a map, and the boundaries are described in detail, and some of those boundaries are not only still traceable, but some of the names still survive, for instance, at the edge of what was the Royal Forest of Shotover, there was a quarry there, which names I..

Do we know anything about Wheatley in medieval times?

Yes, these stone quarries were very important. Now, oddly enough, there are very few, less than the average, medieval documents surviving in the hands of people who owned property in Wheatley. Many villages, in Oxfordshire and elsewhere, especially if a college had property there, there are sometimes scores of medieval documents, but I only know one record of a private transaction of relating to land in Wheatley in the middle ages, and if you compare that - there's a parish in Norfolk, which at the moment I'm editing with the British Academy- the documents are between 1250 and 1350, and there's more than one a year for the whole of that century, but on the other hand Wheatley, we have a very good idea about the people, because we know about the quarries, and for instance, there's an order from the king that stone has to be fetched from Wheatley, and the masons are to be brought along with it, and if they're in any trouble, they are to be arrested | There was no trouble, as appears from the accounts at Windsor Castle

Did the village ever fall on really hard times?

Well, it was very poor, yes, in the nineteenth century when the new road was made to Oxford; there had always been an old road going to Worcester, Chipping Norton and the West, but not a big main road to Oxford, but the road that did go to Oxford went over Shotover and was called Old Road, like Old Road in Headington as part of it - but when the new road was made to Oxford, it bypassed the village and Elton said how it was opposed by the reactionary inhabitants of Wheatley, who thought they would be ruined; and, of course, they were ruined, and of course, he was delighted to see large numbers of pubs being closed down, but that is why Wheatley has so many pubs now, more than the local population requires, probably and attracting people who have money to spend, and travel round.