

The late medieval status of North Marston

By the mid 15th century, with the church becoming increasingly wealthy through pilgrim gifts and bequests, the status of the village approached its zenith as it also became the location for important enquiries generally associated with county towns.

One such example was an Inquisition (Enquiry) held at North Marston on 20th October 1461. This was conducted by the *escheator*, a royal official whose jurisdiction is likely to have covered Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire, and whose job it was to determine the ownership of land in the event of the death of the tenant in chief or if the land-holder or their heir had forfeited the rights to the land due to breaking the law. In a sense, the escheator was the king's County Land Agent and on receipt of a writ from the King's Chancery the Escheator would have convened a jury to hold an inquisition or *inquest of escheat*.

The 1461 North Marston *Inquisition* concerned land in Aylesbury, Bierton and Burcott owned by a man named William who owed 200 Marks (about £86K in today's value) to a Ralph Verney, a draper of London. Although the outcome of the Inquisition is not known, the fact it was held in North Marston is interesting.

In 1478 the church at North Marston transferred from Dunstable Priory to The Dean of Windsor.

The medieval period came to a close with the coronation of Henry VIII in June 1509. In 1511 Henry visited North Marston for the water from Schorne's Holy Well as a cure for his gout. He did the same in 1521. In 1529 Henry VIII declared Aylesbury the county town, possibly to curry favour with Thomas Boleyn who held the manor of Aylesbury (amongst other properties) and whose daughter, Anne, was of interest to Henry.

The dissolution of the monasteries, which began in 1536, meant escheators were busy selling or awarding the land and property previously held by religious orders to those favoured by the king. Surprisingly, North Marston was again the setting for an Inquiry, this time concerning the manor of Wingrave in Bucks which had originally belonged to the Abbey at Woburn in Bedfordshire. The Inquisition was

held on 21st October 1539. The escheator, Thomas Deacons, on behalf of king Henry VIII, granted the manor to John Gostwyke and his wife Joan.

During the Dissolution of the Monasteries Gostwyke acquired a considerable number of other properties and in 1538, a year prior to the Inquiry, he had been one of the judges who sentenced the Abbot of Woburn to be hanged (and drawn and quartered) for refusing to sign the Oath of Supremacy, acknowledging the King's authority over the church. This would have cast Gostwyke in good light with Henry.

In 1539, three years after the Inquiry, Gostwyke was elected a knight of the shire (MP) for Bedfordshire and in 1540 was appointed High Sheriff of Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire.

The manor at Wingrave was assessed to be worth £4 13s 4d a year. But why was the Inquisition held in the village of North Marston rather than the nearby county town of Aylesbury?

The answer is probably logistics. The Escheator would have had a retinue of clerks and aides assisting him with the Inquisition. His needs were for adequate accommodation with reasonable access for those involved such as the jury. Given the King's last visit to the village was in 1521, it seems likely court officials would have been aware that there was a large manor house sited in the village, (which once stood on the site of Manor Farm on the High Street) that had accommodation suitable to house a temporary court.

The original manor building had been built during the 13th century and was held at the time of the Inquiry by Oliver Vachell. The Vachell's were an immensely wealthy Catholic family with property all over the Home Counties and Vachell will probably have made the manor house available to the Royal Court so as to demonstrate his loyalty to Henry. It is doubtful that Oliver Vachell would have been particularly inconvenienced by this as it is unlikely he ever lived in North Marston.

But the spotlight that had shone on the village was soon to shine elsewhere. With the Reformation heralded by Henry's creation of the Church of England, the lucrative pilgrimages to the village quickly ceased. Life in the village returned to a quiet normality. The huge stone Manor House was eventually demolished in 1779, the year after the village was enclosed and the system of open field farming was

abandoned, bringing to an end the last trace of a period that had seen the village become a centre of attraction for matters of national import.

John Spargo

16th August 2022