

LEIGH HISTORY

The following article was completed in 1946 by Commander F N Stagg who lived in Ivy Hatch. It covers the history of the village up until the time of Samuel Morley but gives particularly useful information for the period 1250-1750. (Some of his generalizations about the Romans and Saxons need to be supplemented with information from later articles on the website).

SOME NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF THE PARISH OF LEIGH, KENT

Early History

In days of old LEIGH lay entirely within the great forest of Kent - The Weald.

The Romans do not seem to have settled this part of the Weald and used its timber solely for their primitive iron-furnaces called 'bloomeries'. The site of the only 'bloomery' known to have been worked in Leigh has been called for many centuries CINDERHILL - from the waste refuse left behind by the old ironworkers.

The Saxons

However, the Saxons used the wealden forest to herd pigs in - and many a grant of 'pannage for hogs' appears in charters of their kings. These areas were called 'dens' and were exploited by the lords of the more populated areas to which they had been appropriated. 'Den' names in Leigh Parish that have survived are, of courses, Hollanden, Hayesden and Moorden, but alas we do not know whose swineherds and pigs lived and grew fat upon the acorns and beechmast in these three areas. We do know, however, that *Charcott* belonged to Royal Dartford as one of the group of a dens centred around Cransted (near the modern Bough Beech) - and a strange survival of the name of a locality owning a Saxon 'den' occurs just beyond the bounds of Leigh Parish in *Meopham Bank*, which used to belong to Meopham beyond Wrotham. *Ramhurst* was a den of Kemsing.

And then came the time when these dens became sufficiently populous to necessitate some form of civic and church organization, and so the Parish of Leigh was formed from their amalgamation. The 'dens' that were assembled to make up Leigh Parish were very scattered, and so down all the centuries there have been no less than 4 detached portions of Leigh Parish, viz:- Hollanden (beyond the Sevenoaks-Tonbridge main road), the two Hayesdens and that minute three-cornered piece by Hale Oak.

The Saxons were very slow to make clearings in the Weald, and there is no evidence that they cultivated the soil of Leigh. The name, however,

is Saxon, having been 'leah' in its original form, which is, of course, our word 'lea' but then meant "an unenclosed place" as distinct from an enclosed one. The last remnant of this ancient 'leah' is your village green. There is no record of a Saxon place of worship at Leigh.

The Normans

When the Normans conquered England in 1066, the Conqueror installed a garrison of his own race in a castle at Tonbridge and placed it under the control of a half-brother, Richard de Tonbridge, who was the progenitor of that famous family of Clare, ennobled under the title of Earls of Gloucester. (The name does not appear in Domesday Book, or in that wonderful record of properties belonging to Rochester Cathedral called *Textus Roffensis*.)

Richard at once carved out an area around his castle which he called the *Leuga* (or *Lowy*) of *Tonbridge*, wherein all overlords were dispossessed and whose inhabitants had to provide certain necessaries for the upkeep of the foreign garrison. In course of time the Normans ceased to fear insurrections and the garrison was withdrawn, but the family of Richard held firmly to its privileges, and indeed endeavoured to extend their properties into the domains of other owners - in particular those of the Archbishop. In 1258 - i.e. 200 years after the Conquest - disputes had become so serious that King Henry III ordered a perambulation of the *Lowy* to be made by his commissioners. The result of their arbitration did not satisfy either party, so King Edward I ordered another perambulation to be made in 1280 - i.e. 21 years later. Fortunately the findings of both commissions have been preserved, and enough boundary marks can be recognized to make it a certainty that almost the whole of Leigh parish came within the *Lowy*, and was therefore under the overlordship of the Earls of Gloucester.

Redleaf is mentioned as being within the *Lowy* in both perambulations, but 'the Pond of Ralph Dorkynghole' - which is in all probability *Moorden* of today - lay without. The next name mentioned is 'Richette' on the boundary itself, which is possibly the flat land around *Wickhurst Brook*. Next comes *Coppings*, a name which still exists, and lies without the *Lowy*. Then we read 'The House of Ralph Wykhurst' is on the boundary, which must surely be the *Wickhurst* of today - and then, also on the boundary, 'land of the Prior', and, of course, we still have a *Priory House* and *Priory Wood*. 'The Highway of Edinhurst' (wherever that may have been) also forms the boundary, whilst 'Newsole', i.e. *Nizels* is within. From here the bounds run to 'Quadrivium de Rithersden', which is undoubtedly the 4-went way at the foot of *Riverhill* on the old Roman 'Castivene Way' - but here we are far away from Leigh Parish.

The Church

The earliest reference I have found to a church at Leigh states that the rector from 1215-1226 was one Richard Canucus (modern CHENEY), and that the vicar was Alanus de Ros. The then patron of the Church of 'Leghe' - Sir Thomas Canewe - granted to Thomas de Peneshurst and his heirs, with the consent of Benedict, Bishop of Rochester, a free chapel for ever within his Manor of Penshurst, but actually in Leigh Parish, to be served by its own proper chaplain. The said Thomas and his heirs were to pay 2 pounds of wax yearly to the Church of Leghe as an acknowledgement of the rights of the mother Church. Where was this Chapel?

There is a record of 1240 A.D. referring to "That venerable man Sir John Bellemeyns, Canon of St Pauls, London, the Lord of the Manor of Penshurst", whilst a few years later the great Sir Stephen de Penchester confirmed "to the Chapel of Leigh, lands given by John Bellemeyns, my uncle".

In the middle of the 12th century the Earls of Gloucester founded an Augustinian Priory in Tonbridge, where now lies the railway Goods Station. This was totally destroyed by fire some 200 years later (in 1337) and in 1353 a prayer was addressed to King Edward III which resulted in the revenues of the Church and Vicarage of Leigh being appropriated to the Priory, for the maintenance of two canons there and the rebuilding of the Priory itself. In 1353 John de Shepey, Bishop of Rochester, ordained a vicarage at Leigh, and in his mandate defined the rights of the vicar to consist of:

"A Manse for the Vicar and his household to be provided at the cost of the Priory, and to consist of a hall, with two chambers, a kitchen, a stable, and one curtilage - all to be such as befit the Vicar's position ... "

There follows a long list of tithes, vestments and Church Plate.

Ecclesiastically Leigh remained for the next 200 years a perquisite of Tonbridge Priory, but Cardinal Wolsey obtained letters patent on 10 May 1526, licensing him to appropriate the rectories and churches of Leigh. On the attainder of Wolsey 4 years later those were forfeited to the Crown, and were later granted by Queen Elizabeth to Sir Henry Sidney, in whose family they continued till our times.

Leigh and The Penshurst Connection

The northern arcades of the Church were burnt down in about 1485, and the existing north wall of the Church was erected along the line of

columns of the old aisle, which were built into the wall. One of these columns was opened up during the complete restoration in 1861, and shows the original decoration.

Sir Stephen of Penchester had acquired most of the lands in Leigh Parish before the year 1300, and these, together with the manors called *West Leigh* and *Ensfield*, passed through the same hands as the Manor of Penshurst until some time after the death of Sir Pulteney - (the builder of the ancient hall at Penshurst Place) - in 1349. The Polle's acquired West Leigh Manor in about 1399, after which date it was often referred to as *Paull's Leigh*. Thomas Colpper, Knight, was a tenant in that year - no doubt for *Ramhurst*. John, Duke of Bedford, (the man who burnt Joan of Arc) was an owner of Leigh, as also Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, who had as chatelaine at Penshurst that extraordinary woman Eleanor Cobham of Starborough Castle, Lingfield, whose crazy behaviour is described by Shakespeare in his King Henry VI. Leigh then passed in succession through 3 Dukes of Buckingham, the last of whom in 1519 was making extravagant preparations to accompany King Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey to "The Field of the Cloth of Gold" in France, when he found time to spare to visit his Kentish estates. He then learned that his tenants of Tonbridge Castle, Penshurst, Leigh, etc. were clamorous against the exactions of his steward (or 'surveyor') one Charles Knevet. He summarily dismissed Knevet, who then divulged certain conversations respecting the succession to the Crown which he stated the Duke had had with a Carthusian monk. Shakespeare's version of Knevet's charges made before King Henry VIII and Wolsey can be read in his King Henry VIII, Act I, Scene 2, where Knevet is called 'Surveyor'.

Buckingham was tried for High Treason and executed at Tower Hill on 17 April 1520, amidst the regret of all. After the attainder of the 'Great Duke' a survey of his manors and estates was made and Knevet managed to acquire some of them, including Leigh HALL PLACE. There is still in existence a deed of mortgage dated 1532, in which Knevet borrowed £60 from Viscount Rochford on the security of "*HALLE PLACE in LYE* and land there now inclosed about with pale".

Hall Place

The owners of the largest mediaeval house in Leigh - which was perhaps the predecessor of Hall Place - were in all probability the family of CANEWE, whose name is spelt CHENEW in the Court Rolls of West Leigh Manor as late as the 15th century, but whose modern equivalent is CHENEY. One of them accompanied John of Gaunt to Spain in 1370, when he is referred to as John de la Lye or merely John Lye. What hands Hall Place passed through before it belonged to the 3rd Duke of Buckingham is not known, but, after the egregious Knevet, it came to William Waller, whose descendant has a brass dated 1611 in Leigh

Chancel. Then to the Dixon's, one of which family owned it through the reign of Charles I. Abraham Harrison Esquire possessed it till his death in 1717, whereafter the Burgesses acquired it and a member of that family re-built the house, dying in 1794, when his widow married James HARBROE. A lady writes on 29 June 1802: "... Last Wednesday week I received an invitation from Anna to go with her to Leigh Fair, and being young I accepted, and we set off about four and drove to Mr Harbroe's, where we had tea instantly . . . We then paraded on the green and entered a grand caravan to see a variety of beautiful wax figures, among which was the late King and Queen of France as natural as life. The Cricketing was Tunbridge against Wrotham ... " (Apparently this was Madame TUSSAUDS earliest display - on a tour from Brighton to Canterbury). After the Harbroe's, the Bailey's came to Hall Place, and a lady writes in 1846: "Mr Farmer Bailey of Leigh has been adding to Hall Place. One room is 70 ft. long and all in proportion".

Hall Place has been the Manor House of *Leigh Hollanden* since the 17th century (the earliest recorded Manor Court being 1641) and that is the reason why the name of HOLLANDEN has crept into Leigh proper, whereas its use was originally confined to the detached portion of the parish lying eastwards of the Sevenoaks-Tonbridge main road. Since there was emphasis on the word 'West' in the Manor of WEST LEIGH, one is tempted to guess that an old name of the Manor of Hollanden would have been 'East Leigh'. In later years, at all events in 1803 and 1829, the Courts of the 'Manor of Leigh Hollanden' were held at "THE PORCUPINE" which stood above the Green just by the eastern entrance to Hall Place. The 'Leicester Arms' at Penshurst was likewise called "The Porcupine" 200 years ago, that animal being, of course, in the Sidney arms.

The Children Family

The ancient family of CHILDREN had been settled in Leigh and the Tonbridge district for many centuries. The wealthy George Children was living at Ferox Hall, Tonbridge, when the Tonbridge Bank, of which he was the senior partner, was bankrupted in 1816 and amongst his properties then subjected to a forced sale were those in Leigh Parish. We know from the Court Rolls of Leigh Hollanden in 1815 that he owned *Stonepitts* and 6 acres, and an unnamed house and 18 acres, as well as the *Manor of Barnetts* and two houses with 18 acres, and *Ramhurst alias Culverhouse Grove* - all held of the Manor.

Ramshurst

Ramhurst is referred to in 1292 as Rammeshirst, and the name probably signified 'Ravenswood'. One Gilbert de Remherst is named in a suit in 1313 as possessing 1 house and 30 acres of land in Leigh and Tonbridge. It belonged to the famous Kentish family of Culpepper from the middle

of the 14th century for several generations, whilst in 1748 Richard Children was of *Ramhurst* and perhaps it was he who re-built it in 1729. *Ramhurst Farm* and 123 acres was sold after 1816 to Sir John Shelley Sidney.

Barnetts

Barnetts was known as 'Bernette' in 1283 and denotes "a place cleared by burning". It must at one time have been moated, whilst its mounting block - or 'Jossing Block' - stands picturesquely by its gate to remind us of times when roads were mere dirt tracks and impassable for wheeled traffic. So all produce had to be carried on pack-horses, and these 'jossing' blocks were erected to facilitate loading up the packs on the horses backs - as well as to help unathletic riders mount. The word 'jostle' means 'to come as close as possible' and the horses were jostled to the 'Jossing Block'. "Part of the Manor Farm called *Barnet* and 133 acres" were sold to Sir John Shelly Sidney after the Tonbridge Bank crash in 1816.

Le Broke and Great Brooks

Le Broke was a house and garden in 1496, when Richard Gilwyn - who lived at '*Gilwyne alias Cinderhill*' - left it to John Chyldern (Children) and Dionisia his wife. In the 1496 deed *Le Broke* is described as bounded to the N. by Churchyard, to the W. by Chyrchelane (Church Hill) and to the south by "a common called Le Grene". It is, of course, now the Post Office with the land and dwellings behind it - but in 1496 its boundary on the east was 'the land of Thomas Dorkynghole'. By 1815 the name of *Le Broke* had fallen out and the present Post Office, Forge and Forge Square were called *Great and Little Boydens* - the 'Little' part of it belonging to the Overseers of Leigh Poor. But a survival of the name of *Le Broke* was then found in *Great Brooks*, which lay to the east of Forge Square and bounded the churchyard to the west and north.

Paul's Farm

Paul's Farm gets its name from the oldest known family in the parish - the POLLE'S (or de la Pole). Martin and Alured de la Pole were representatives of the Earl of Gloucester in the perambulation of 1259, whilst William de Polle and Maud (his wife) had land transactions with Stephen de Penchester in La Leghe in Kent. Their house was surely *Paul's Farm*, the modern name derived from Polle through many variations, whilst the family seems to have moved here from Detling where they figured in a law-suit in about 1190. They later drifted *Sundridge* way and, under their amended name of *Polhill* have christened the road over the North Downs beyond Dunton Green. In 1309 there was a transaction by which Ralph de Cheney bought from William de Polle and Cecilia (his wife) 1 messuage and 300 acres in *Leigh and Tonbridge*, whilst in 1337 a boundary line touches the mansion of Johannes de

Polle, and this is certainly *Pauls Farm*. On 15 April 1399, William Polle held a Court of West Leigh Manor at which it was recorded that he had recently purchased the Manor from William Kirkeby de Fawkham. In 1759 *Paul's Farm* with 160 acres was the property of the Hon. Elizabeth Perry of Penshurst Place. We have the name of Polle in Leigh definitely into the 15th century, and it may well be that Margery Polle, who was burnt alive for her Faith at Tonbridge in the reign of 'bloody' Mary, was a daughter of Leigh.

Black Hoath

Black Hoth (Blackheath - now known as Black Hoath) was also known as *Newberrie Hoth* in 1602, whilst in 1636 John Mylls held *Sinderhill* with 16 acres in Leigh of the Manor of Penshurst by the rent of 2/- and 'one barbed arrow'.

Wickhurst

Wickhurst seems to have kept its independence from the 2 large Leigh manors all through the 400 years during which we have its records, that are known as "*Wickhurst Rents*". A picturesque traditional custom is detailed in an endorsement to a deed of 1642: "A Rentall of Wickhurst Rents to be received on St Andrews daie at Suneriseing at A Mapletree standing in Leigh parishe in Kent neere the high waie leading from Sevenoake to Penshurst. And I have agreed with Thomas Medhurst neere the place to collect ye said rents on the time and place abovesaid and have delivered him an horne to sumon in the Tennants with according to the custome of the said Mannor".

These "*Wickhurst Rents*" were collected for 6 houses: *Wickhurst, Little Wickhurst, Coppins, Pettlands, Quynots* and *Funckes* and run from 1461 to 1795, in which latter year "All that the Manor of Wickhurst, otherwise Wickhurst Rents, late of Nathaniel Barham, formerly purchased (in 1610) from Sir Percival Willoughby by Nathaniel Studley" was bought by the Rev. Thomas Harvey of Redleaf for £48.

Tapners

"*Little Farm* in Leigh on the eastern side, without the Park pales of Penshurst and between them and the Medway" - (now known as Tapners Farm) was owned by the Hon. Elizabeth Perry in 1759. There are 59 acres and included is 'A Waterhouse or edifice in which a spring of mineral water arises'. This is, of course, Tapner's Spring - or Kidders Well - which was at one time claimed to have a richer iron content than Tunbridge Wells. This land is referred to as *Tappenesse* in older deeds.

The Priory

Priory House and *Prior's Wood* are no doubt the "Land of the Prior" mentioned in the Lowy perambulations of the 13th century, whilst the old

name for the road dividing *Priory House* and *Southwood* in '*Penshurst Lane*'.

The Bid Brook and the Hollanden part of Leigh

About halfway between *Leigh Green* and *Hildenborough* station is *Bid Bridge* (which was *Bittebregge* in 1353) across the stream that divided Leigh Parish from that of *Tonbridge* for many centuries. But in 1844 a new Parish of *Hildenborough* was formed that absorbed much of the northern portion of *Tonbridge*, and also that detached part of Leigh called *Hollanden*. Although *Hollanden* now belongs to *Hildenborough* its history is bound up with that of Leigh - indeed it is probable that its Manor was once known as '*East Leigh*'. Its position lay between the *Old Cock Inn* and *New Trench Farm* on *Riding Lane*, and between *Hildenborough Schools* and the *Seal Boundary* - though it did not abut the main *Sevenoaks-Tonbridge* road, and *Watts Cross* windmill lay anciently in *Tonbridge*. It is known that the ancient Leigh Family of *Cheney* held *Hollanden* in mediaeval times, and for long after their extinction several fields here were known as *Cheney Fields*, indeed *Hollanden* (and not *HALL PLACE*) may have been their ancestral castle.

In about 1500 *Hollanden* passed to the name of *Stace* (or *Stacy*), and some of that family have memorials in Leigh Church. In the 17th century it became divided up amongst several owners. The largest farm within *Hollanden* was called *Tyherst*, of 80 acres, lying between the *Watts Cross-Hollanden Farm* road and *Riding Lane*, the ancient name for which was '*Riddens Lane*' which is our modern word '*riddance*' meaning '*clearance of bad rubbish*'. (There are some fields round *Wickhurst* called '*riddens*'). In this farm were three fields named '*Dunmore*', and its farm buildings lay south of the present *Hollanden Farm* which was just outside its limits. In the map of 1742 it belonged to *Henry Streatfeild* of *Chiddingstone Castle*.

The Powder Mills

An industrial undertaking has been established on the bounds of Leigh for very many generations - The Powder Mills. I have been unable to discover the date of its commencement, but it was flourishing in 1802, and four years later its proprietor, Mr *Burton*, was entertaining lavishly in *Tonbridge* and giving parties at the Mills also. In 1810 Mr *James Burton* was living at *Mabledon* on the crest of *Quarry Hill*, *Tonbridge*, and that family still owned the mills in 1847.

Samuel Morley

At the mansion of *Hall Place* there lived, and died in 1886, Samuel Morley, an industrialist and politician who possessed a social conscience which prompted his magnificent philanthropy. He has been summed up as one "who had all the business talents of a man of this

world and all the warmth and piety of a man of the next". It was he who re-built the village of Leigh as we know it today, and the pleasant dwellings that he erected remain as his grand memorial. He had the old Porcupine Inn, which stood at his entrance gate, made into a private house and the Fleur-de-Lis arose to join the remaining inns to make the heart of man glad. In the most ugly period of industrialism, the Leigh of Samuel Morley was created as a thing of beauty.