

Langham in the first half of the millenium

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In 1086 King William the Conqueror ordered a great survey of England, now known as the Domesday Book. As one might expect, the reason he wanted to know what everyone owned in England was that he needed to levy taxes more efficiently.

It is disappointing that in Domesday Book, Langham was included as part of Oakham, so that we have no knowledge of what there was in Langham in 1086. King Edward the Confessor, who died in 1066, had given part of Rutland, including Oakham and Langham, to his wife Edith in his Will, intending that on her death it should form part of the possessions of Westminster Abbey. Unfortunately King William did not allow this to come into effect. All Westminster eventually got was the Manor of Oakham with Barleythorpe and the great tithes (on cereal crops) for Langham and other villages. Langham itself was attached to the other Oakham Manor (usually known as Lordshold) and the first reference to a separate Manorial Court for Langham is in 1398.

The earliest dwelling houses in the village (which would have been very modest half-timbered structures, roofed with thatch) are thought to have been in the area near Weston's Lane, on the north side of the church. As more land was cleared for agriculture the village would have spread east and west along the borders of the stream. The road from Oakham to Whissendine ran through the centre of the village - there are the remains of a much older bridge under the present bridge in Bridge Street

The villagers were all tenants of the Manor of Oakham Lordshold and in return for the right to cultivate strips of land in the open fields of Langham they would be bound by custom to perform work on the Lord's own land. The land was divided into open fields which were cultivated in accordance with a rotation laid down by custom. A few of the tenants were free men, others would be serfs or bondsmen. A serf was not a slave, he had definite legal rights, but he was obliged to live in the village and carry out work on the Lord's land as dictated by custom, or pay money in lieu. As time went on most bondsmen obtained their freedom, as late as 1525 a bondsman named William Dykeman alias Clarke obtained his freedom. The open fields of Langham were not enclosed by Act of Parliament as in many villages, but they seem to have been divided up soon after the Noel family bought the manorial rights about 1600.

It is thought that between A.D. 1000 and 1275 the climate of England was favourable (rather similar to today) and this encouraged villagers to clear land and extend the arable land. Until 1348 the population of England increased steadily in spite of a number of bad years between 1275 and 1348, but in that year the terrible outbreak of plague known as the Black Death struck Western Europe. In the years 1348-49 it is thought that over a third of the population died. The idea of manorial lords expecting service in kind from their tenants had already largely been changed to money payments in lieu of labour, but the sudden removal of so much of the labour force led to a great deal of tension - the cost of labour rose sharply, a thing which was not liked by employers. A type of land tenure known as copyhold evolved, the tenant holding property "by copy of court roll". A copyholder had the right to sell or lease his land, and to leave it to his heirs, but he had to pay a nominal rent to the Lord of the Manor, and certain fees were payable such as "heriot" (the Lord's right to the best beast on a death). There were copyholders in Langham till the system was abolished by the Law of Property Act, 1925.

In some unknown way the Abbot of Westminster came to own some land in Langham as well of having a right to the great tithes. There is a record of an attempt by Richard de Ware, Abbot from 1259 to 1283 to recover thirty acres of land at Langham alleged to belong to the Abbey, and in 1297 William de Chevington was Steward of the Abbey's interests in Langham. The parish church was of course the most important building in the village and would have been used for parish meetings as well as for services. Langham must have been prosperous enough for the present church to be commenced in the thirteenth century - building went on at intervals throughout the following century and in the fifteenth century the roof was raised, the clerestory windows inserted and the parapets and battlements added. In mediaeval times there was another chapel in Langham, though its whereabouts are not known Bishop Dalderby of Lincoln (1300 - 1325) arranged for funds for the construction of "the chapel of the hermitage of Langham" and two hermits called John de Norton and John de Warnewyck were given royal protection to raise money throughout the country. As late as 1393 Pope Boniface IX relaxed penance of pilgrims who gave alms for the repair of St Helen's Chapel in Langham.

In the Middle Ages life was not all work and no play, there were many holidays on Saints Days, and on the feast of St Matthew in 1374 there was a disturbance which led to an official enquiry. In January 1375 Edward III set up a Commission to enquire into “dissensions and debates” which had arisen between the King’s tenants of Oakham and Langham and Sir Thomas le Despenser’s tenants of Burley. It appears that on St Matthews Day 1374 five Langham men named Robert Noris, Henry and Thomas Dykeman, John Bernewell and John Bythebroke carried a pot full of ale towards the mansion at Burley to drink it there. Sir Thomas le Despenser’s steward Robert Parker asked them what they were doing and told them to drink the ale where they were, and laid hands on Robert Noris. There was a dispute, and a cook from Oakham struck Parker with a staff, three of the Langham men had their heads broken and took sanctuary in Burley Church. They sent a message to Oakham and Langham for help, and many people came. A man called William Wolverton shot two arrows at Parker; he missed, but Parker shot back and hit Wolverton. William Chamberlayn from Oakham and many others beat up a number of Burley men and drove them into the manor house and “called for fire to burn it but no fire could be found”. A man called John de Multon who was “Constable of the Peace” managed to pacify the mob and everyone retired to the inn for a drink. The Commissioners referred the matter to the King for a decision, and nothing more is known of the outcome of the enquiry.

We are very lucky to have a list of householders in Langham in 1305. A survey was made in that year of the Countess of Cornwall's possessions in Rutland including Oakham Lordshold and Langham. It even listed what duties each tenant owed to the Lord, but as each duty has a monetary equivalent attached it is thought that by then the duties had been commuted for cash. In 1305 most people did not have surnames, a man was known by his place of birth, by his occupation, by a nickname, by the place in the village where he lived, or as (for example) "John son of Richard." (By the end of the 1300's almost everyone had adopted a surname.) The survey shows that in Langham there were seven Free Tenants:

Richard de Ware	William de Okeham
Thomas de Bokeland	Gilbert Clere
Henry Stele	William in the Holme
Hugh son of Christiane	

There is a note that "the community of the town" held one acre paying 12 pence a year. Was this a recreation ground? Then there were 58 Bondmen, mostly described by their father or mother's name.

There were some nicknames such as:

Thomas le Goude	Agnes Garbod
Millicent Syred	Robert Spynke

A few were identified by locality:

Roger in le Lane	Hugh a la Grene
Henry Benethegate	William Byeston

Some tenants are women, including "Agnes who was the wife of Richard son of Simon son of Godwin".

Finally there were about thirty one Cottagers, tenants of a cottage and no more. They included:

Robert atte Grene	William Fynche
The woman of Weston	Beatrice Benerech

The survey ends with a valuation of the Windmill at Langham at four pounds. It seems rather exceptional to have a list containing the names of all the householders in a village in 1305: it has been printed as "*The Oakham Survey, 1305*" by the Rutland Record Society and is available from the Rutland County Museum.

It appears that there were about 97 householders in Langham in 1305 and this seems to accord fairly well with the figures given in a record in 1420, when Sir William Bourchier and his wife, the daughter of Thomas of Woodstock Duke of Gloucester held Oakham and Langham by Royal grant. The village of Langham is described as containing: 55 messuages, 55 yardlands (holdings in the open fields), 51 cottages, 65 acres 3½ roods of meadow and 42 acres 2½ roods of pasture.

A hundred years on, in 1522, Cardinal Wolsey, then the chief minister of King Henry VIII, had a bright idea. It seems that he really wanted to know who in England was worth taxing; what he did was to order a nationwide survey into who had arms and armour, bows and so on, on the pretext that he wanted to know how the country could be defended in case of invasion. The survey for Langham has been preserved, and is quite detailed. It recites that the King is the Chief Lord, and William Bromewynd the Parish Priest. Minor landowners were the Prior of Brooke Priory, William Villiers and Richard Flower. The Steward was Roger Ratcliffe Esquire. The wealthiest tenants were Henry Hubberd, husbandman, who had thirty pounds in goods. John Clerk yeoman, and Gregory Smyth, husbandman, who each had twenty pounds in goods. Seven others had more than eight pounds in goods. There were seventy tenants of some substance, detailed as forty-eight husbandmen, one yeoman, one turner, one butcher, ten labourers, one servant and two tenants who are not described. There were also "ten young men and poor" and seven "old men and poor". Finally there is a note that "the town hath a gild" with four pounds of possessions. This Gild would be in the nature of a Friendly Society.

Following up from this survey, in 1524 Cardinal Wolsey levied a tax described as a "lay subsidy" to pay for military expenses. In theory the subsidy was to be repaid, but somehow it never was. In Langham, 48 persons had to pay, mostly the same names as in 1522, all said to be worth 20 shillings or more. Thirty three are said to be husbandmen, eight labourers, two "berkers" (i.e. tanners), a tailor, a wright, a shoemaker, a mason and a butcher. These two surveys are contained in a book called "Tudor Rutland" also published by the Rutland Record Society.

So, this account of Langham in the first half of the millennium ends as it started, with an effort by the Royal government to find out what the inhabitants of Langham were worth, in order to tax them more efficiently. Perhaps in A.D. 2500 some writer will say the same about the events of 1999!