

Colebrooke Parish

THE MANOR

Bishop BARTHOLOMEW, in his letter to King Henry II, c. 1170, claimed that "the town of Colebrooke has always from the beginning been, and still is, a part of the Manor of Crediton which belongs to the Church of Exeter and the Episcopal See". Thus when the Domesday Survey was made in 1086, the manor lands were included in the Crediton totals without being named. (Where the name `Colebroca' does occur in Domesday, it refers to one of the other two Colebrookes in the county, or to Holbrook near Clyst Honiton.) The connection with Crediton remained unaltered for several centuries, for, when John Mills died in 1635, he was "seised of the Manor of Colebrooke held of Sir William Killigrew Knight, as of the Manor of Crediton by knight service".

Bishop Bartholomew's letter records the name of the earliest known lord of the manor, Alexander de Colebrooke. After him the estate passed to Hugh de St. Vedast, and then the de Bathe family held it for nearly a century (1241-c. 1330) during which time one Walter founded the Chantry in the south transept. After the de Bathes the property passed by marriage to three families in succession, all of whom owned large estates elsewhere, and so never lived in Colebrooke. These were Medstede of Sheepwash (c. 1330), Waleis of Raddon in Thorverton (1349), and Digby of Coleshill in Warwickshire (c. 1490). Sir Simon Digby who married Alice Waleis was one of seven brothers whose valour contributed greatly to the Lancastrian victory at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. A descendant of his, Sir Robert Digby, still held the manor when, in 1620, he became first Baron Digby of Geashill in Ireland. Ten years later, however, the manor had returned to a Colebrooke family and was in the possession of Roger Mills, but, after his granddaughter Elizabeth married John Coryton of Pentillie Castle in 1643, and went to live in Cornwall, there were once again absentee lords of the manor. The estate remained in the hands of the Coryton family until 1919, when, consisting of 800 acres, it was broken up and sold, mostly to the tenants.

Thus during the last six centuries there have been resident lords of the manor for only about twenty years, and it is not surprising that there has been uncertainty about the site of the manor house.

Some Devon historians have identified Horwell with the Manor of Colebrooke, but a deed of 1546 shows that Richard Prye held Horwell as a sub-manor of the manor of Colebrooke and paid a yearly rent of one pound of pepper and one pound of cummin, valued at £6, to Reginald Dyckeby; and in 1818, the Rev. W. W. Bagnall, curate of Colebrooke, told Dr. Daniel Lysons, joint author of *Magna Britannia*, that "Horwell and Painston are both manors but pay Mr. Coryton some trifling acknowledgment".

The statements of the historians may well have been based on the fact that the south transept, which was once the chapel of the lord of the manor, is now called the Horwell Aisle. Probably when Elizabeth Mills, on her marriage to John Coryton, went to live in Cornwall, she handed over the aisle to John Prye, of Horwell, for he was her husband's cousin. It was certainly connected with Horwell as early as 1664, for the Churchwardens' Accounts for that year contain the item: "for glassing Mr. Prye's eld [aisle 6s. 3d.".

The wording of Walter de Bathe's Chantry Charter implies that the Court-house (Curia) was on the site of what was Young's Farm, (now Colebrooke House), which is where we should expect to find a manor, namely near the Church. There is also documentary evidence that this property was part of Roger Mills's estate. Thus it can be reasonably assumed that the original manor stood on the site of Young's Farm opposite the Church.

COPPLESTONE

The village of Coppelstone, part of which used to form part of the parish of Colebrooke, is well known for the cross from which it is said to take its name. This monolith, the `Copelanstan', or 'head-stone of the land', marked the junction of the three parishes of Colebrooke, Crediton and Down St. Mary, and is thought to be the boundary stone mentioned in a Saxon charter of 974 A.D. It is elaborately carved with interleaved Celtic work, and near the top there is a figure on horseback.

Half a mile to the south is Coppelstone House, the seat for several centuries of the family of that name who are commemorated in the old saying:

" Crocker, Cruwys and Coppelstone

When the Conqueror came were all at home."

Documentary references to the family go back as far as 1275, and in 1384 Bishop Brantingham granted a licence to Adam de Coppelstone and Alice his wife to hold services in their private chapel.

Sir William Pole, the historian, who died in 1635, relates how the family "grew unto greatness, and albeit they had great marriages and lands, yett hath not any been knighted, and therefore they received the name of Silver Spur, and for their revenue called Copelston". The John Coppelstone, who was knighted after Pole's time by Cromwell, belonged to a distant branch of the family.

Coplestones held the office of Sheriff of Devon in 1471, 1561 and 1597, and two were Members of Parliament. John, who was buried in the north aisle in 1457, was Escheator of Devon and Cornwall, and Steward of the Earl of Devon's lands. He was one of those who "had

great marriages", for his wife Elizabeth was granddaughter and heiress of the well-known John Hawley, of Dartmouth, and her mother and grandmother were also heiresses.

It was the marriage of John's son Philip to Anne Bonville, of Shute in East Devon, which ultimately led to the family leaving Coplestone House. Philip's grandson, John, as co-heir of his maternal greatgrandfather, in 1494 inherited the Gorges estates, and not long after his death in 1550 his eldest son Christopher migrated to Warleigh in the parish of Tamerton Foliot. There an old oak tree, known as "The Fatal Oak", is said to mark the site where, on coming out of church one day, he murdered his godson for commenting on his gross and brutal after-dinner talk. He obtained a pardon by forfeiting thirteen manors in Cornwall. Only some junior members of the family remained behind in Colebrooke, and the last Coplestone entry in the Registers is dated 1594

On the death of Christopher's great-grandson John at Tamerton Foliot in 1632, the male line ended, and the estates came to his two surviving sisters, Elizabeth Elford and Gertrude Bampfylde. It was the latter's son, and not Sir John Coplestone as implied by Polwhele, who in August, 1658, sold the Coplestone estate of 580 acres to Sir John Yonge of Colyton, and the deed of conveyance contains a list of field-names most of which are still in use to-day.

It is clear from the Churchwardens' Accounts that the various parts of the estate were let to tenants in the seventeenth century, one of them being George Beare, who gave his name to Beers. No evidence of the owners residing at Coplestone occurs again until in 1787 the mansion with 116 acres was bought by Mr. Robert Madge. In 1832 Broomhill was put up for auction, and its purchase by Madge's son, another Robert, joined it to the Coplestone estate once again.

It seems that the original mansion stood slightly to the west of the present building, probably facing up the road from Coplestone village which here makes a sharp detour round the site. Mr. Madge found it not worth restoring, and converted the remains of the Chapel into the present house. The tower, which has what look like Tudor windows, had been lowered by some 16 feet a few years previously. The mullioned windows and thatched roof of Mr. Madge's building were replaced two generations later by the present large Victorian windows and slate roof. One or two pieces of carved stone in different parts of the garden, are probably remnants from the chapel.

These conclusions as to the site of the mansion and chapel are based on extracts from the memoirs of Edward Copleston, Bishop of Llandaff from 1827 to 1848, who visited the home of his ancestors on 20th September, 1803. He was descended from a branch of the family which settled in Dorset in the fifteenth century. His evidence is confirmed in the manuscript of one Richard Ebbels, member of a Colebrooke family, who recorded in the year 1857 what old inhabitants had told him in his youth. (The Rev. Hope's typescript of this manuscript is in the West Country Studies Library).

OTHER ESTATES

Horwell, a sub-manor of Colebrooke, was held for some centuries by the family of Prye. It had a private chapel, said to have been licensed by Bishop Lacy in 1434. All signs of this have now disappeared, though early in the nineteenth century there were men who remembered its ruins. In 1546, when Richard Prye died, the estate comprised 700 acres, much of it heath up on what was known as Colebrooke Moor. The last of the family died in 1699. (His mother was Churchwarden in 1689, an early instance of such an appointment.) The house was rebuilt about a hundred and seventy years ago.

In early deeds the estate is called Buttysford, and as late as the end of the eighteenth century it appears as "Horwell, alias Butsford". This latter name is now applied only to the neighbouring farm where a charming house was burnt down in May, 1939.

Another sub-manor was Painstone House, now Penstone Barton, where the Colebrooke Yonges lived for most of the seventeenth century. One of them held a court there as late as 1685. Soon after, a branch of the Pidsley family, of Great Wotton, settled there, and one William seems to have rebuilt the house, for a plaster ceiling shows his initials and those of his wife with the date 1737, but with the letters and figures all reversed in 'looking-glass' writing.

Great Wotton was the chief residence of the Pidsley family for two centuries. John, who died in March, 1734/5, was a benefactor and when the farm was sold in 1919 it was still "subject to £1 a year to the poor of the parish".

Whelmstone, formerly an ancient farm, had, incorporated in a barn, some old roof-timbers which are probably those of the Chapel for which Bishop Brantingham granted a licence in 1374. Near it there was found over two hundred years ago a mazer (maple wood) bowl, which was thought to date from the latter part of the fourteenth century. A silver band round the top bears a Latin inscription, of which the translation is: Jaspar

brings myrrh, Melchior incense, Baltazar gold. The exact purpose of these bowls is not known. About half a mile away, in a secluded valley called Abraham's Bosom, is a Holy Well and nearby is a copse with the name Ladywell.

The neighbouring estate of Paschoe, with a house rebuilt in 1852, belonged to the Hamlyn family from 1611 till 1950. Here in 1787 the ubiquitous Uncle Tom Copley, of Bow, signed the will which, after his death in 1794, was the subject of a law-suit. Tradition connects him with other properties in the parish (Butsford, Penstone Barton and Great Heale), but the evidence available shows that the holders were a nephew and a great-nephew of his with identical names.

Combe, which is mentioned in a deed of 1249, came to the Sillifants by marriage with the Snells in 1677, and remained in their hands for nearly two-and-a-half centuries, during which time they acquired much land in the district. In two sales after the 1914-18 War, 1,700 acres of the estate in this parish were sold. The present house dates from the end of the eighteenth century.

Thirty 'possessive' names of farms or houses, such as Brock's and Snell's, appeared in the Poor Rate List of 1847. More than half of these names are still in use. In nearly all cases they are those of the families which are shown in the Church Rate Lists to have been the holders in the seventeenth century. Guscott's however, (the ruins of which can still be seen on Broomhill Farm), is 'pseudomanorial' being the modern form of the name Godescote which appears in the Visitation of 1301.

SOME HISTORICAL NOTES

Pre-Conquest

Two roads in the parish are mentioned by antiquarians as the sites of pre-Roman trackways. One is the southernmost of the two roads from Crediton to Bow, which passes through Coleford. It is a continuation of a track which passed to the north of Crediton, crossing the present main road at what is now known as Barnstaple Cross, once Bichstaple. The other leaves the first at the cross-roads near Combe, going through Yeoford and Hittisleigh to Whiddon Down. Both roads coincide with parish boundaries for parts of their length, and both pass close to the sites of ancient barrows, the one near Blackpool Cross in Bow parish, and the other at Leden or Leathern Castle some two miles west of Yeoford.

Some guide-books of the last century named Coleford as a Roman settlement, but on what grounds is not known. However aerial photography in drought conditions has discovered what would appear to be a Ridgeway, crossing the field at the back of Hillcrest, Coleford and the adjoining fields, with a junction leading down to Coleford.

The Civil War

Being rather off the beaten track, Colebrooke was probably less affected than many parishes by the disturbances of the Civil War. A small skirmish on the other side of Bow is the nearest fighting of which there is any record. Tradition relates that Charles I reviewed his troops standing under the porch of Spencer's house at the cross-roads in Coleford. This would be when he was on his way from Crediton to Bow where he spent the night of 29th July, 1644.

Only two entries in the Churchwardens' Accounts reflect the troubles of the time:-

1644: pd for making a grave for a soldier £0. 0s. 6d.

1649: pd at seivall times for collections sent to or parish and paid to pliant wonded souldiers and poor traveling Irish people £1. 19s. 0d.

In the former year the parish even proceeded with the peaceful work of "setting up of seats in the greene" at a cost of four shillings. In contrast with the tragedies which occurred in many other parishes, even the 'intrusion' of a vicar seems to have caused little disturbance or hardship, possibly because the 'intruder' was the son-in-law of the old vicar. The latter, Christopher Eaton, lived on in the parish at his farm of Buttisfar, in Coleford, until his death in 1655. In 1646 the parish even paid 7s. "for tymbre and labor" for his seat in the Church, perhaps to enable him to worship among the congregation.

When the Restoration came, the parish duly paid £2. 1s. 6d. for the "Kinges Armes and Carages" and 2s. 6d. to one John Dagworthy for "hanging the oup" in the Church.

1750-1850

Before the Exeter Turnpike Act of 1753, roads in Devon were so narrow and rough that there was little or no wheeled traffic. As a result of this Act the road from Crediton to Bow through Coleford was turnpiked. This resulted in the present route with the two right-angle turns at the east end of the village being constructed. The previous route descended steeply between Burnhills and Buttisfar. It was thought by some that the railway

construction caused its diversion. However old maps show the toll-road existed some 14 years before the railway. The Parish Boundary Stone can still be seen about 100 yards east of the railway bridge. There was a toll-house on this road at Barnstaple Cross, (now known as The Thatched Cottage) and in 1773 the road thence as far as Coplestone was turnpiked. It may be mentioned that the Churchwardens invested some of the capital of the Parish Charities in the Exeter and South Molton Turnpike Trusts.

In 1826 the well-known William McAdam, who was Surveyor to the Exeter Turnpike Trust, planned the present road to Barnstaple. It was not until this was opened in 1831 that the loop through Coplestone became the more important route from Crediton to Bow. Before this date the Barnstaple Road had run from Crediton over the hills by New Buildings and Bishop Morchard.

It was during this period, in 1769, that the first school in Colebrooke was started by subscription. It was to have children up to the number of twenty-three, and the schoolmaster was to have "two chambers in the Poor house to keep the school in". A further resolution decreed that "if any subscriber shall recommend any child to be taught to write, then such writing scholar shall be taken and go in lieu of two reading scholars". The Poorhouse was then one of the cottages in the churchyard. From 1838 until 1874, the children were taught in the building which is now known as the Old School at the top of Colebrooke Hill. Near to this building, incorporated in a wall of Rowe's Farm, there could once be seen the remains of the lock-up for miscreants. At about this time another school was supported by the Misses Madge at Coplestone in what is now known as Endfield. Coleford had its own school, a "Dame School", under the tutelage of Mary Ann Sutton. This was in a dwelling at Gribbles, situated in what is now the yard of Chris Cann, the thatcher. Under the Education Act of 1870, a new school was built at Colebrooke which opened in 1874. This closed in 1959 and became the Parish Hall.

The last hundred and fifty years

Visitors to Colebrooke will not fail to notice how very scattered the population of the parish is, centering on the three hamlets of Colebrooke, Coleford and Penstone. Whilst the population of the latter two has remained reasonably constant over the years Colebrooke's population has fluctuated. A hundred and fifty years ago there were at least a dozen cottages near the Square. In the north-west corner of the churchyard there was the Bell Inn, later removed to a house at the west side of the square which is still known by that name though no longer an inn. Tradition says that after the move the original inn-house was occupied by a butcher, and a groove in the stonework at the base of the Church tower marked the spot where he sharpened his knives. Below this, along the west side of the churchyard there were as many as five cottages. Facing them, on the opposite side of the road leading up to the Hall, were four more. A fire in 1893, starting in a bakery, destroyed the whole of both rows except for the lowest house on the churchyard side. This was saved by the fact that the parish stables separated it from the others, and it survived until 1930. Two other cottages, probably on the south side of the square, were stated in 1866 to be "uninhabited (burnt)".

Three cottages in 'Lower Town' also disappeared in the 19th century, one in the triangle which is now the Millennium Garden, then called Leason Hill, and two others opposite Jewell's in Duck Street, as it was known in the 18th century, a name that was unfortunately lost but has recently been revived. With the erection of twelve Council dwellings, a number of barn conversions and some sympathetic "infill", the balance has been restored to the levels of the latter half of the 19th century.

In 1847 the Square was listed as a Bowling Green belonging to the parishioners, and it is said that it was once used for wrestling matches. Here Abraham Cann, Colebrooke's only celebrity, must have had his early practice in the art. Born in 1794 he was unbeaten in many championships in the 1820's. In 1864 he was buried in the churchyard, and his tomb can be seen a little to the west of the tower. He is mentioned in *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*, Henry Kingsley's first novel, published in 1859. In this book much of the plot is laid in a village called Drumston, identified as Colebrooke. Another book connected with the parish is *Father and Son*, a study of two temperaments, by Edmund Gosse, 1907, which was written during a visit to Coplestone House.

The modern concentration of trade and industry in the towns is well reflected in the history of the parish. A hundred and fifty years ago there were in Colebrooke and Coleford three inn-keepers and two each of the following: bakers, blacksmiths, boot-makers, butchers, carpenters, and general shopkeepers, besides one tailor and one wheelwright, and a Post Office, a total of eighteen tradesmen in all. Today the New Inn, Coleford is all that remains.

In the seventeenth century there were five mills. These were at Colebrooke, Coplestone (on the stream just above Coleford), Ford, Horwell and Wotton. Only the first named, the old manor mill, survived until the twentieth century. About seventy-five years ago it was bought by a miller in a neighbouring parish and put out of use.

Colebrooke once had its own quarry, too, at Bitter Knowle, less than a mile from the Church. It is probably to be identified with the 'Knowle' quarry from which in 1674 stone was drawn for the repair of the Church tower. Now it is deserted and nothing remains of the farm on whose land it lay.

Another sign of the times may be mentioned. When in 1877 the Ecclesiastical Commissioners offered to repair the chancel, if the parishioners would do the nave, the latter replied that "they must respectfully decline to undertake the heavy expense because the tenant farmers consider that their residence in the parish is precarious, inasmuch as it depends solely upon the renewal of leases". Nowadays all farms are owner occupied. Many farmers took the opportunity to buy their properties when, after the 1914-18 War, 2,500 acres, slightly more than half the parish, came on to the market in the sales of the Manor and Coombe estates. A number of farmhouses have since been sold, and their lands incorporated into larger holdings. Youngs, Rowes, Whelmstone, Westcoombe Hill and Road Farms are just a few names which spring to mind.

One more change of the last one hundred and fifty years remains to be recorded, namely the advent of the railway. In 1854 the North Devon Railway was extended from Crediton to Fremington, passing through the eastern side of the parish, along the route where, some sixty years before, a canal from Exeter to Barnstaple, with a branch to North Tawton, had been planned. Eleven years later the L.S.W.R opened a line through to North Tawton & eventually, with some impressive feats of engineering, passing through Okehampton & Tavistock reached Plymouth. This then became known to locals as the "Plymouth Line". However it was not until 1879 that the track was doubled and the signal-box erected in Penstone at what was called Coleford Junction. Following the "Beeching Cuts" of 1963 the "Plymouth Line" was closed with services terminating at Okehampton. Both lines were eventually made single track, causing the closure of the Coleford Junction signal-box in 1971.

POPULATION, OCCUPATIONS, ETC.

No definite figures giving the population of the parish are available before the first census of 1801, which gave a total of 762. Almost exactly half of these were males, of whom 208 were employed in agriculture, and 39 in 'manufactures'. From 1831 to 1851 the numbers were between 870 and 880 but then a decline set in. By 1881 the total was down to 705 and fifty years later to 562. It may be mentioned that in 1951 there were 332 electors, as against a mere handful of 36 in 1857. (under the old electoral system). By 2001 the population was showing a slight upturn with 335 electors, in spite of losing about 30 electors to the newly formed Coplestone Parish in 1993.

The chief occupation of the inhabitants seemed always to have been agriculture, but over the last fifty years this has declined dramatically. Today probably no more than ten per cent of the parish are actively involved. The parish had its share in the wool trade which was so flourishing in Devon until about 1750, for in a deed of 1634 there appears a "tooking mill" at Horwell, and in the Register, where occupations are seldom recorded, we find in 1699 two weavers and a "woolcomer", and in 1702 a worsted comber.

Finally, a note on the name Colebrooke. It is said to mean 'cool brook', and Polwhele, the historian, names as the Cole the stream which flows through Coleford. He is certainly supported by the fact that this hamlet appears in early documents as Colebrookeford, but this rivulet and the mill-stream, which is itself nearer to Colebrooke 'Town', are now both nameless. A mile below their junction they are united to a third stream which may be mentioned as illustrating an interesting method of name-formation. This stream, on its way from Hittisleigh, passes under what was once a wooden or 'tree' bridge which was therefore called Troney Bridge. From this it was later thought that Troney was the name of the river, and it is marked thus now on maps.