

The Manor Courts

Long before the coming of Parish Councils in 1894 secular village affairs were dealt with by the Manor Courts. They were at some periods held at the Horne Inn for Stratfield Mortimer and sometimes at Mortimer West End. Wokefield and the Abbey Manor held their own Manor Courts. Landowners and tenants attended. They were known as The Homage and formed a kind of jury, presided over by the Lord of the Manor or his representative, who no doubt had the last word. Villagers could be fined for non-attendance unless excused. The courts dealt with such matters as changes of tenancy, maintenance of highways, footpaths and water-courses, and minor infringements of the law. The village officials were appointed by the courts and reported back to them.

Manor Court proceedings were recorded on rolls of parchment known as Court Rolls. People affected by a decision of the court were given a copy of the relevant part of the roll. A tenant whose copy was the only title to his holding became known as a copyholder. These few examples from surviving rolls show the variety of matters dealt with and give an interesting glimpse of village life of the times.

Mortimer Court, 12th May 1473: Alice Whyte, a widow, re-married without licence, whereby she forfeited her holding. New tenants, Thomas Godwin and his wife Joan were admitted on payment of 12d.



Mortimer Court, 8th January 1476: *"At this day was elected William White into the office of Keeper of the Palings of the Great Park."* William Lane was the same day entrusted with Little Park.

Mortimer Court, 9th June 1477: Thomas Hertogold of Wokefield entered the Great Park with his greyhounds and caused them to attack and kill a deer. This case was so serious that it could not be settled at a manor court and a writ was issued for his prosecution. Not unusually, no further mention is made of the incident and two years later Hertogold, this time described as a butcher, is fined for an unspecified offence. Perhaps more disturbing were the violent scenes played out in October 1479. John Frith, a servant to the vicar, assaulted William Southampton and drew blood. It is faithfully reported that the stick which he used to do this "*was of no value*". Clearly not everyone in Mortimer were good neighbours as Stephen Briggam, the vicar, was also accused of assaulting William Southampton with a wood knife worth 1s 8d. John Frith had to pay a fine of 4d, but Briggam (perhaps because he was the vicar) was not fined, but he did have to surrender the knife to the court. Clearly Briggam enjoyed a certain amount of support from his flock as he remained vicar until he died in 1504.

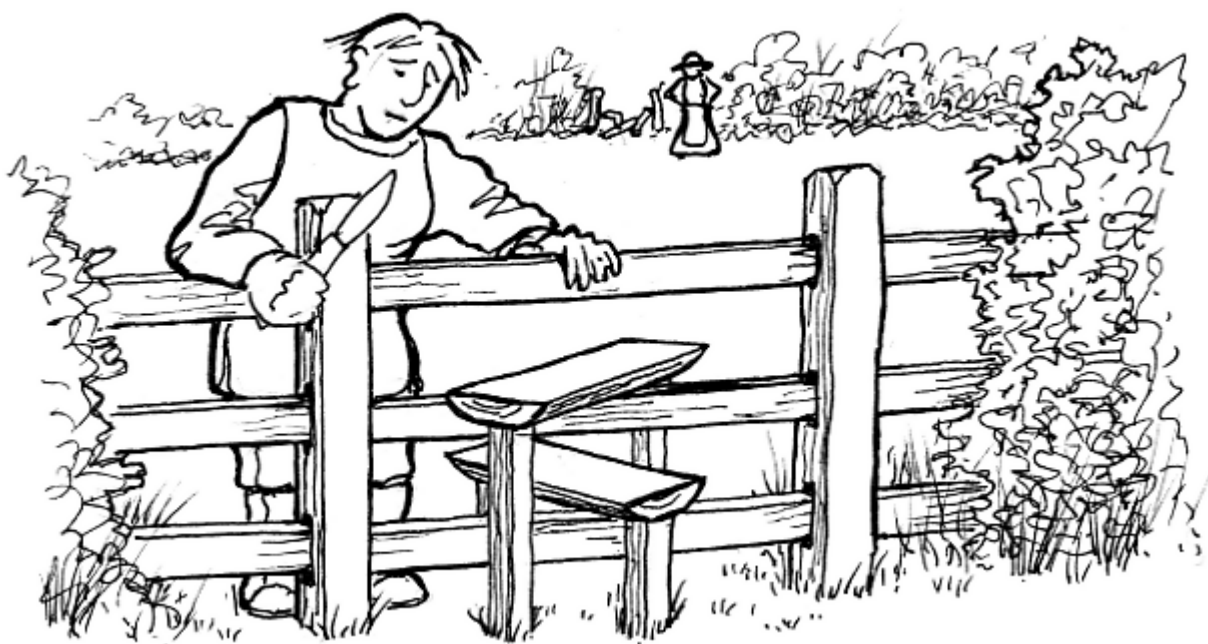
Another writ for prosecution was issued by **Mortimer Court on 29th October 1481.** John Ashley of Aldermaston had "*removed and carried away a large stone called the Ympstone bounding four houses in the heath.*"

At the **Abbey Manor Court on Tuesday 29th November 1492** Robert Bever, William Thorne and John Wilmot were held to be responsible for allowing Russell's Lane to flood and if they did not clear out their ditches and restore the lane, they would be fined at the next court. William Thorne was also responsible for the rather more serious offence of flooding the King's Highway. Three men and Isabel Hopkins (who always seemed to be getting into trouble) had to pay a fine because they had baked bread which was underweight and brewed beer without the proper permission.



Another name appearing several times in the Rolls was Simon Pays. At the **Abbey Manor Court in October 1596** he was admitted with his wife Alice and told to build a "*dubble chimney of bricks and mortar made with lyme and sand, also a new loft costing 20 marks, also repair of the stabling before Pentecost under pain of 20s.*" On May 1599 he forfeited his holding because of waste and destruction. It was restored to him on payment of £3 6s 8d, and on 7th June 1619 he was elected constable for the ensuing year and also told to "*scour his ditch*" or pay 6s 8d. At the same court arose a matter still of interest to those who walk in the country today. William Birch was told to make a stile "*at the end of Broad Close on the way to the lands of Agnes Parfitt because it is a Church way.*" or pay 6s 8d. Fines of the same amount were held over Agnes Parfitt if she failed to make a stile next the gate called Pound Close, and over Thomas Burch if he failed to make a stile between the two closes called Pickcrofts. The Burch family were, it seems, careless about footpaths because on the 10th

October 1657 Stephen Burch was told to maintain a footbridge over the little gully between his two coppices "it being a Churchway" before Christmas or forfeit 3s 4d.



At **Wokefield Court on 28th November 1632** it was directed that Stephen Maior shall "*amend and repair the dam of his mill pond and head which is in decay and ought to be repaired by him before the feast of St. Michael the Archangel [29th September] next ensueing under penalty of £5.*"

Cutting down mature trees without permission was forbidden, and John Hothorne appeared before **Wokefield Court on 28th November 1636** having "*grubbed down one walnut tree of three loads, and cut down one pear tree of one load without leave. Therefore he is in mercy.*"

