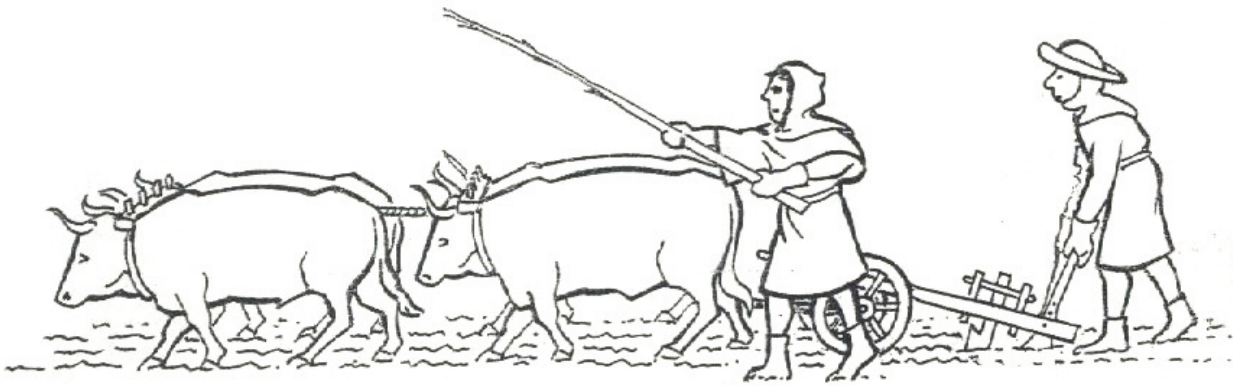


The Middle Ages

Between 1086 and 1220 there is only one set of documentary references to Stratfield Mortimer. Hugh Mortimer gave about 160 acres of land and a meadow called Redmead to the newly founded Abbey at Reading. These lands led to a number of disputes between the Mortimers and the Abbots of Reading, but in the late 1220s the heart of Hugh Mortimer was buried before the high altar in the Abbey so presumably an accord had been reached by then. It is clear, though, that during this period Mortimer continued to be a small agricultural community.



The fact that in 1220 Hugh Mortimer had to pay a tax of 2 shillings on each of his seven ploughs shows that not only did arable farming continue, but that the amount of ploughland held in lordship had increased since 1086 when the lord of the manor had only four ploughs. Meadow and pasture are also mentioned in 13th century documents and one meadow, "le Redemead", is even named, despite the fact that earlier it had been given to Reading Abbey. Clearly grazing animals were kept and oxen would have been used to pull the ploughs. There was also a grant from King Henry III to Ralph Mortimer in 1230 allowing him to keep a rabbit warren in Stratfield Mortimer.

Much of 13th century Mortimer must have been covered with woodland. Soon after he became lord of the manor in 1227, Ralph Mortimer set up a park in Stratfield Mortimer and another at his estates at Chirk in Shropshire. A park at that time was managed woodland which was designed for hunting. In 1239 the King gave Ralph three bucks and five does from Savernake Forest in Wiltshire for his park at Stratfield Mortimer. Hunting obviously took place in the woodland as Ralph's widow, Gwladys Dhu, was given permission in 1250 to keep unexpeditated dogs (that is, hunting dogs which had still got their claws - other dogs had some of their claws removed to stop them taking game). The woodland was also used as a commercial enterprise; evidence of this exists in the details of the sale of timber to Henry III.

An enquiry was held after the death of Edmund Mortimer in 1304 to find out exactly what lands and goods he owned. This states that the lord of the manor held 200 acres of arable land, 38 acres of meadow land for mowing and 3 small pieces of pasture land (called Forewode, Eyemore and le Viner). Three parks had been set up: Chalfgrove and Little Park in which deer were kept and le Shere which was used principally for pannage.

The manor house must have been in a good state of repair at the time as there was a dovecote and two gardens as well as a working water mill. So there was probably someone who lived in it for at least part of the year.

There were 15 free tenants of the manor and nine cottiers (villeins occupying tied cottages with small attached plots of land in return for working on the manor lands) who between them seem to have farmed 810 acres. In addition Reading Abbey continued to hold about 120 acres in Stratfield Mortimer as well as having rights to use the woodland and common pastures.

Although it was a small agricultural community, Stratfield Mortimer evidently had a crime problem. One day in 1248 Walter le Boner of Stratfield struck Geoffrey Hakeman in Thomas de la Beche's house with an axe. Despite the fact that Hakeman died within a fortnight, someone in Mortimer harboured le Boner, and although a hue and cry was raised he was never captured.

Suspicion also surrounds the death of Isabel of Stratfield in 1248. She was found burned in Amfelice of Stratfield's house, but the 12-man jury presented a verdict of misadventure. Less serious were the constant attacks on the property of the Mortimers. In 1318 and 1319 Roger Mortimer's parks were broken into and his goods carried away. Nor was it possible to trust one's friends. In 1320 William de Audley was outlawed (it is not known why) and John Elys was prepared to stand bail for him. Unfortunately, when William did not appear in court, John Elys was sent to prison and was only released some time later when William reappeared.