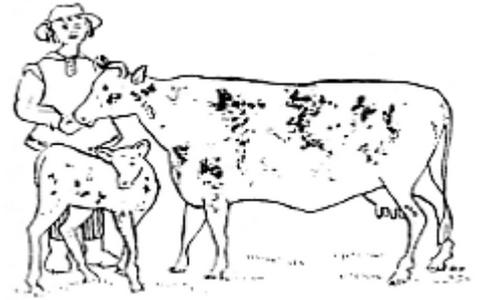


Tudor and Stuart Times

In the early sixteenth century, Mortimer was still a mainly agricultural community in which most householders farmed a few acres of land lying close by their homes; unlike many villages, Mortimer had no scattered fields nor any strip system, although there were some pastures occupied *in common*. The largest of these was a pasture called Kyppingfrithe containing about fifty acres, where the tenants of the manor, and tenants from Aldermaston and Silchester, grazed their beasts and gathered timber. Another of the common pastures, Longmore Slade, is still on the map today, and squatters' hovels occupied this area until as late as 1936.



On their piece of land the people of the village cultivated crops, grew fruit and vegetables, and kept cows, pigs, poultry, and in particular, sheep. The wool trade was the main industry of Tudor England, and at this time there were around eight million sheep in the country. The community was largely self-sufficient, with village craftsmen supplying most local needs: blacksmiths worked iron, and made farm and domestic implements, and shod the horses; carpenters and thatchers put up the houses; millers ground the corn; weavers and tailors made clothes; tanners and cordwainers prepared leather and made shoes. Almost all the villagers, whatever their occupation, farmed a little land as well.

As Mortimer had no resident lord of the manor, it is hard to see that it had a typical squire and indeed no particular individuals' names stand out in the documents of this time as fulfilling that role. Most of the inhabitants were husbandmen or labourers, but the free tenants, who held land by charter, together with some of the copyholders, who held land " *by copy of Court Roll, according to the customs of the Manor* ", styled themselves yeomen. They had certain rights and privileges, but were bound by ancient custom to the land they worked, and could not live away from the manor without permission. These were men who farmed their own land, consumed their own produce and served in the county militia.



In times of crisis, all able-bodied men between sixteen and sixty were liable for military service, and contemporary wills record the weapons and armour they possessed, with bequests of bows and arrows, swords and daggers. The first muster list, compiled in 1523 for the Hampshire portion of the village, contains the names of five " *able archers* " and twelve " *able billmen* ". In 1569, eight archers and seven billmen [armed with long-handled axe-like weapons] were recorded amongst the Mortimer villagers resident in Berkshire.

Customs of the Manor

The main customs of the manor, which were in general observed by the tenants to avoid heavy fines, were these:

- On the death of a tenant, a heriot or fee was to be paid to the Lord of either the best beast or the best of the goods, although if the tenant had no living animals, then no heriot was taken.
- A widow was to have her widow's estate "*so long as she keepeth herself sole and chaste*", but lost it on remarriage. If her heir was under age when she remarried, then she and her new husband were to have custody of both the heir and the lands.
- If a tenant had two sons, and the elder son had a son and then died, on the tenant's death the grandson was to be heir before the younger son.
- If a tenant died without sons, leaving two or more daughters, all the lands passed to the eldest daughter and the other daughters got nothing.
- Providing he had a license to do so, any tenant could let his tenement to "*any person of honest conversation*" as long as he paid the lord one penny a year. He could also sell his tenement, provided he paid a fine of ten years' rent.
- The Lord could take oaks, elms and beeches from the manor, but had to leave enough wood for the tenants' use to maintain the tenement including wood needed to maintain farmcarts and implements. Tenants could sell timber, but had to re-coppice the woods; widows were allowed to take firewood, but not to sell trees.
- Every tenant must take his turn to be elected Reeve and gather the rents twice a year, then pass these onto the Lord.

It should be noted that Mortimer's customs appear to have been vague (perhaps only passed on by word of mouth) until 1603 when they were codified and agreed at a meeting between the Marquis of Winchester and the village elders.

The Church exerted a strong moral and practical influence within the village, and the parson was at the centre of communal life, presiding over holy-days such as Christmas and Easter, and at village festivities. He was probably the only man in the village with an education. Mortimer's longest-serving parson at this time was David George, the vicar here for fifty-five years between 1576 and 1631; he wrote and witnessed almost all of the wills made in the parish during that period.

Everyday life was hard in this kind of rural community: a labourer's working day lasted from dawn to dusk; in the summer this could mean a sixteen-hour day, and for this he was paid



three or four pence. Most women in the countryside worked in the fields alongside their husbands as well as running their houses, and bearing and bringing up children; children were expected to do their share of the unskilled tasks. Despite their labours, however, women had inferior legal status and their property belonged entirely to their husbands. Unless they were widowed and inherited their husbands' property they did not make wills; few women's wills for this period remain.

It is extremely unfortunate that Mortimer's early parish registers have been lost; the fire which destroyed them is referred to in an inscription to be found in the first surviving register, from 1681. "*The Register Booke of the Parish of Stratfeild Mortymer in the Countyes of Berks & Southton of the Marriages Christenings & burials there Commencing from the Nyne & twentyeth day of April 1681. Atte which tyme the old Register Booke was burnt in the house of Nicholas Prince whose house then together with several others were by a sudden & dreadfull fire burnt & consumed*"

The loss of Mortimer's parish registers for the period before 1681 makes it impossible to gain any direct information as to the population of the village during most of the sixteenth century. It is known that the population of England in 1509 was about 2½ million, but poor harvests in 1529-31 and again in 1556-7 caused widespread famine. A sudden revival of the bubonic plague, the Black Death which had killed around half the population in the fourteenth century, was followed in 1558 by a devastating epidemic of influenza which swept the country, killing tens of thousands. It is likely that one-fifth of the population died during those three years. Mortimer wills refer to this as "*the time of sickness*", and it seems that some families sent their children away from the village in the hope that they would escape infection. As the century progressed, however, the country's population began to recover, and by 1603 it had reached 4½ million.

In 1460, following the rebellion of the Duke of York, King Henry VI declared his property forfeit, and seized his lands, which included Mortimer. When Henry VIII came to the throne in 1509, the manors of Stratfield Mortimer and Wokefield were part of the marriage settlement to Katherine of Aragon, the first of his six wives. Following the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the Crown also acquired the holdings in Mortimer belonging to Reading Abbey, and those in Wokefield belonging to Goring Abbey.



Katherine of Aragon

Great Park and Little Park were part of the marriage portions given by Henry VIII to five of his wives in all, Anne of Cleves for some reason being excluded. However, effective control of the manor was placed in the hands of a member of the local gentry, as when Lord Sandys of The Vyne, was appointed Keeper of the Great Park under Katherine of Aragon. In 1543, Katherine Howard granted a lease of the Manor and the Parks to the first Marquis of Winchester, the Great Treasurer of England, who lived at Basing House, and in 1565 he was able to buy them; this is the only time the Manor has ever changed hands for money.

It seems that Lord Sandys did not always have an easy time as Keeper, for in January 1535 he wrote to Thomas Cromwell: *"I heard that hunting had been two nights past in the Queen's Park at Mortimer and therefore willed my brother this day 21 Jan to go and see the manner thereof. On coming thither he heard hounds and hunters among whom were young Trapnell, Mr Inglefield's son in law, and six of his servants, who immediately attacked him and hurt him sore. I write to you for redress for if it were not more for dread of the King than of God I would have been revenged. Young Trapnell has killed 20 of the King's deer on the borders of Windsor Forest. Two years ago he slew a great hart and carried him away in a cart. Unless some remedy can be devised the King's deer cannot be defended."*

In a survey of the manor in 1552, more than fifty tenants are recorded for Stratfield Mortimer, with a further eighteen for Mortimer West End. The list of free tenants was headed by Sir Richard Pexall, who held nearly eighty acres, including Brocas Lands Farm. Trunkwell, at Beech Hill, was at that time part of Mortimer, and was held by Edward Capell. Amongst other places, this survey mentions "Bevers", now Mortimer House, "Hammes House", the old cruck cottage near the amphitheatre, "Whites Lands", now Lovegroves Farm, "le Fyve oken" and "Warnes Wood". One tenant, Robert Frith, was said to hold a "mansion" with an orchard and garden and about fifty acres; this property later became the pub on the Devil's Highway commonly called the Jackdaw. The Marquis of Winchester was lord of the manor at this time, and had control of the 520 acres of the Great Park, although the pasture had been disparked. In 1559 Queen Elizabeth granted her uncle, Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, a licence to re-enclose the Great Park. The rectory was in the hands of the

Provost and Fellows of Eton College, and the living was said to be worth £6 a year. According to the survey, the demesne lands were leased for forty years to Thomas Bullock of Arborfield, with the Crown reserving "*all & every kind of woods, underwood, wards, marriages, mines & quarries growing in & upon the premises.*"

In the same year, Wokefield was also surveyed, shortly before the Wokefield Manor was sold. Here there were ten free tenants and 13 customary tenants. In addition, there would have been a few untaxed labourers, as well as a certain number of squatters living in hovels on the lord's waste ground. It was commonly held that if a man could get a roof on his hut and a fire burning in the grate before morning, then he could not be evicted; in Mortimer he was charged a rent of sixpence or a shilling a year. The population of Wokefield has always been much smaller than that of Mortimer.

The survey also says that "*the Customs of Wokefeld ben tyme out of all men's remembrance in all poynts like to those of the Lordship of Stratfeld Mortymer.*"

In April 1553, particulars were prepared for the grant of sale of Wokefield, for which John Wright and Thomas Holmes were the grantees. These men were probably speculators buying up blocks of Crown land in the hope of making a profit on re-sale. The manor is said to contain 56 acres, with 23 acres of that being planted with oak trees 100 or 200 years old, and 18 acres with oaks from twelve to 100 years old. In addition, 1573 oaks were counted growing in "*divers hedgerows*", and a further 1200 elsewhere. The eventual purchaser of the manor was Sir Richard Rede of London, but in 1555 he sold it to Silvester Cowper of Bray for £530, and by 1566 the famous lawyer Edmund Plowden was in possession. In 1626 Wokefield was bought by Peter Weaver of London, and in 1651 he settled it on his son-in-law Charles Pearce, whose own son-in-law Francis Parry inherited in 1701. The Parry family owned the manor until 1742, then it was sold to Bernard Brocas of Beaurepaire.

Apart from being the chief source of information on family relationships, the surviving Mortimer wills of this period provide a valuable insight into everyday life for the people of the village. Henry Smith's will was written on 15 July 1579, and he left to his nephew John "a lombe [loom] with all thinges therunto belonginge, and my cofer [coffer]", and to his friends Henry Waite and John Dibley "*twoo coobbardes, an andyron [an iron support for burning logs], a broche [a kind of spit], ij pewter platters & a Sawcer[a saucepan], a chaire, a candelsticke, a table, a payre of trestelles, the Longe cofer & another cofer with a haspe, a tubbe, a kever [a tub-like container], a fine lynen sheete & a yonge hogge of the lesser sorte to be equallie devided between them.*"

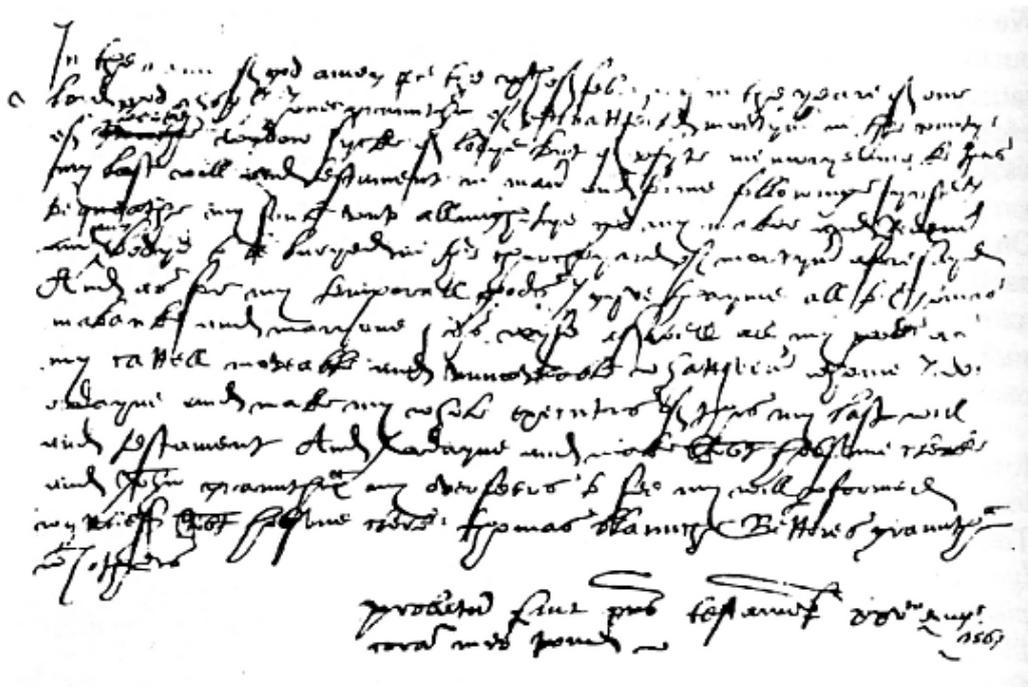
On 9 April 1591 Richard Stoniford, a yeoman, made his will, "*calling to minde the uncertainty of this shorte liffe & pilgrimage upon this earth & that by course of nature my dayes cannot long continue, & willing to settle & bestowe suche things as god here hathe lente me upon my wife & children for their relief & comfote.*"

Joan Grantham, a widow, made her will in 1618, leaving to her son William "one bedstead with a Teaster with ye flockbed and boulder wheron I use to lye, my best Coverlyde [coverlet], Two feather pillowes, one Coffe that is in my Chamber with all that is within yt, and a Chest that my sonne Nicholas Grantham hath borrowed, halfe a dozen of Table Napkins and a table Cloth, one Frame table with a Carpett, and a ioyned forme, and two joyned stooles, one brasspot with a payre of Cottrells [bars for hanging pots over a fire] & a payre of pothookes, the biggest kettle, a possnett [a small metal pot with three feet], Foure platters, two pottingers, and two pewter dishes, a saltseller with a coveringe, two brassen Candlesticks, Two Cowes, a payre of Andyrans and a broach, Two kivers [same as kever above], two Firkins and a Tubb, and twenty shillings in money."



Although the individuals within the parish were supposed to maintain its roads, few Mortimer residents left provision for repairs when making their wills. In his will of 1571, Thomas Waite wrote "I gyve towards the amendynge of the Hyghe wayes in the Forwod iij*l* iij*s*" .

The documents from the mid-seventeenth century are, not surprisingly, much more comprehensive than those from the mid-sixteenth century, and in many cases the useful information is buried beneath a tide of confusing legal language to rival anything one might find today! It is possible to view the gradual progress up the social scale of several of the Mortimer families, to see tin and pewter slowly replacing crude wooden and earthenware vessels for use at table, and to find even in farmers' houses brass, tapestries and fine linen. The inventories which accompany many of the early wills reveal that few people had very many possessions: it was, for example, quite usual for a household to have just one table and one chair.



The will of Jone Grantham, 1568

There are several families whose names dominate the 120 years of Mortimer wills that have so far been studied. The Bever family, first encountered in the parish at the time of Henry III, were fairly wealthy people and played a leading part in village affairs, and their connection with Mortimer lasted until the late eighteen-sixties. Other notable families of the period included the Granthams, the Watmores, the Blanches, the Coopers and the Carters.

During the latter half of the sixteenth century, bequests made in residents' wills to the parish church, and to the diocesan church in Salisbury, died out and gifts to the poor took their place. These could be gifts of money, or provision for bread, ale and cheese to be distributed to mourners at the funeral. Thomas Waite's will gives an example of this: *"I wyll that there be dystributed amonge the poore of the parysshe and other such as shalbe at my buryall a barrell of Beare and v cheeses weyyinge xxx lb and hallfe a quarter of wheate baked in Bread."* Some of the local poor people seem to have taken advantage of this generous custom and regularly attended every funeral of persons likely to have left money, food and drink for distribution. The clamour and annoyance caused by these people became a public nuisance, as is shown by the will of Thomas Harrison of Finchampstead, who died in February 1603 leaving small sums to the poor people of surrounding villages, including Mortimer, *"upon condition that they stay at home and content themselves to receive this my Benevolence at their own Parishes and not to be troublesome at my Buriall."*

The Poor Relief Act of 1601 was a landmark of legislation which forced each parish to take responsibility for its own poor. The magistrates were ordered to appoint churchwardens or overseers to find useful work for paupers and to arrange apprenticeships for their children. However, the effective working of the poor law depended on the goodwill of local people, and often the poor were simply moved on and left to the good offices of the next parish. In fact, the new law often brought yet more hardship to those it was designed to assist, since parishes did their best to dislodge strangers who might acquire a settlement and become chargeable to the parish. An entry in the Wokefield Manor Court Roll of May 1632 is an illustration of this: *"It is ordered that Mary Breach shall remove out of her house William Lane and Mary his wife before Midsummer, upon pain of 40s."*