

HISTORY OF ASHTEAD After the Romans – up to 1558

Period Preceding 1250 after the Romans

After the collapse of Roman administration in Britain early in the fifth century, we do not know whether the Ashtead region was abandoned or the open hillsides continued to be farmed. The raids from the low-lying areas of Frisia and Saxony escalated into invasions with a view to settlement. Cemeteries testify to a substantial increase of settlement in Surrey in the sixth century and after changing hands several times by the ninth century, became part of the kingdom of Wessex.

It is uncertain how early the Saxons reached Ashtead, penetrating up the river valleys and along the derelict Roman roads through the Forests of the Weald, but by the tenth or eleventh century there was a series of striplike estates along the downs between Croydon and Guildford, these later becoming parishes. Each estate contained forest for pig rearing as well as arable and pasture.

Parishes were grouped in “hundreds” and each parish in Copthorne hundred has a district track-way leading to the top of the south of Ashtead Park, near where Headley Road joins Langley Bottom Road. Men of the “hundred” held regular meetings here. A number of burials – especially a mass grave near the Goblin Works in Ermin Way – have been attributed to the Saxon period.

The Domesday Book (1086) mentions 44 heads of households and 9 serfs at Ashtead (stede) indicating a population of perhaps 200 adults and children. The estate had been the property of Earl Harold of Wessex, killed at Hastings and had passed to the Conqueror’s half brother Odo Bishop of Bayeux.

Late Mediaeval Ashtead

It is only in the later middle ages, when much fuller records of landholding and administration appear, that we can form a picture of everyday life of Ashtead.

Our information derives mainly from three types of document: deeds recording buying and selling of smallholdings in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; the court rolls, recording business conducted in the manor court, which survive for the end of the fourteenth and much of the fifteenth centuries; and a few stray account rolls of the manorial bailiffs, all dating from a few years either side of 1400. The Lawrence map of 1638 is often referred to in this publication; Ashtead was little changed from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries.

Ashtead Industries

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there is evidence of industries trading with others outside the boundaries of the manor. Traces of a potter making cooking pots, jugs, chimney pots and fire covers on the site of Newton Wood Road were found in 1939.

A tiler living in Ottways Lane was supplying tiles to the Lord of the Manor but in 1372/3 he supplied 10,500 roof tiles for rebuilding a manor house in

Banstead. The tile works ceased to function in 1400 because the accounts for the year showed a deficit of 13/4d.

A saltpeterer was living on the manor; saltpetre (potassium nitrate) is best known as an ingredient of gunpowder but was also used as a food preservative in the middle ages. It can be obtained in various ways but at Ashted the most likely method was by burning bracken.

Customs and Misdemeanours

The court rolls show that at Ashted "unfree" tenure seems to be more frequent and retained its servile connotations much later than in the neighbouring manors of Leatherhead where freehold was becoming more accepted. Ashted manors retained the ancient custom of "Borough English" tenure where the inheritance favoured the youngest rather than the eldest son. A holding would revert to the lord's hands on the death of its tenant but would normally be granted to his son after he had sworn loyalty to the lord in open court and given appropriate heriot (usually a beast or some chattel such as a brass pot) and an entry fine. A tenant who wished to "retire" in his son's favour by handing on his family holding during his own lifetime could usually do so, though by privilege rather than right.

In 1408 John Matthew senior came to court to surrender his holding and was not required to pay heriot because the lord "pardons it"; John Matthew junior then received the property by the lord's particular grace, to hold according to the custom of the manor at 16/- yearly rent.

Rents paid for swine-pasture were strictly regulated. In 1409 John Bryd, John Rolff, Walter Seymour and John Adam were appointed to regulate pasturage over the common fallow is entered on the roll. Litigation between private parties occasionally occurs; in the same year William Ottway was sued by John Seymour for trespass and William Page by William Rolff for debt. Fines for non-appearance in court are regularly recorded and the illicit felling of trees seems to be a constant source of friction; in 1409 Thomas King was presented for cutting saplings in Barber's Grove to make hooprodde without the lord's permission.

An assize roll in the reign of Edward I records a far more serious crime. On 21st December 1279, Walter de Somerton, one of John de Leddrede's servants at Randalls Leatherhead, was returning home from London with a garment belonging to his master. A tailor named Jordan Hayde followed Walter back along the road and murdered him at Ashted in a sheep fold belonging to John Prestesone. Jordan was subsequently arrested, but died in prison at Guildford.

Manorial Discipline

The far-reaching economic changes of the fifteenth century were sometimes reflected in strife between smallholders and the manorial officials. A newly prosperous and independent peasantry became increasingly to resist attempts by the manor to control tenure of land. In 1408 John Binnes had

alienated part of his holding to William Gobbe without the authority of the court. In this case the tenement was seized until a fine was paid.

It would appear that until now most people were tied into the manorial system without the rights of mobility.

The lords of Ashted had been unusually successful in preserving some of the old restraints; but they were losing the battle against a fundamental social trend. Throughout the fifteenth century it seems to have been quite common for dissatisfied Ashted smallholders and tenants to leave and go elsewhere. Little could be done to prevent the illegal flight though attempts were sometimes made. In 1408 the beadle and all the loyal subjects were ordered to seize Henry, the son of John King, who dwells outside the lord's domain without the lord's permission and bring him to the next court. Also in 1436 John Duke was presented for allowing his son to live away from the manor. Even by the 1490's it records that Robert Rolff had illicitly fled to Epsom, whilst another William Carter was living in Lambeth, attempts were still being made to enforce their obligations.

In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries a serious population decline gave rise to another worry for manorial authorities. Many smallholdings became vacant and had to be amalgamated into larger units. Houses became superfluous and fell into disrepair.

This paradox of the late mediaeval economy substantially improved the accommodation for the peasants and balanced against the dereliction must have made the fifteenth century landscape a curious sight.

The Tudor period from 1485 to 1603 saw many changes, including the disappearance of the feudal system. Power was moved from the barons to the monarch and ultimately to parliament.

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