

## The Lordship of the Manor of Olney

People often ask me: "What does the title "Lord of the Manor" actually mean?"

Lordships of the Manor pre-date the Norman Conquest, and Olney was in the possession of Burgred, a powerful Saxon noble, prior to 1066. A Manor is defined as an area of land that formed a self-contained unit granted by the king. Throughout history, Lords of the Manor were closely associated with their property and in many cases provided the only form of local government and justice. Power was exercised through the appointment of principal officers such as a Steward, Bailiff and Reeve. Often the Steward would preside at the Manorial Courts in the absence of the Lord of the Manor. This was the case in Olney when sessions of the Courts Leet and Courts Baron were held at the Bull Inn in the name of the Earl of Dartmouth. The 1922 Law of Property Act confirmed many of the rights of the Lord of the Manor, including rights to minerals under manorial land (today defined as gravel and sand).

Technically, a Lord of the Manor may continue to hold court and transact business, although the jurisdiction of such courts to deal with civil legal proceedings has been transferred to the High Court and County Court by various statutes such as the Courts Act of 1971. In truth, very few Lords attempt to exercise their rights, and cases of those who have make national headlines when by doing so they cause upset in their Manor.

For many Lords of the Manor there is pleasure in association with a community and its history. While such titles have stayed with some families for centuries, many Lordships have been bought and sold since the time of William the Conqueror. The Lordship of the Manor of Olney was put on the market in 1998 by the 10<sup>th</sup> Earl of Dartmouth and purchased by myself. Although my family has associations with various titles throughout history (I am the Baron of Fetternear, a title granted to an ancestor by Charles I in 1631), I chose to be associated with Olney for a number of reasons.

I was, and continue to be, fascinated by many of those who make up the list of previous owners of the Manor of Olney. Shortly after the Battle of Hastings, William the Conqueror granted Olney to Geoffrey, Bishop of Coutances. Geoffrey was a controversial character who became embroiled in a struggle over succession rights to the throne.

He supported the losing side and forfeited his lands to William II who then owned Olney until he granted the Manor to Hugh, Earl of Chester in 1096. On Hugh's death the Manor passed to his son Richard. Unfortunately, Richard drowned when travelling with Prince William, son of Henry I, on the ship *Blanche Nef* in 1120. All of his property was inherited by his cousin, Ranulph le Meschin. Olney stayed with this line until 1232 when a distant relative, Hugh d'Aubigny, came into possession of the estates. Following Hugh's death in 1243 ownership of the Manor passed through several hands including the Beauchamp family, the most famous member of which was Warwick the Kingmaker. When he died in 1471 Olney passed to his daughter Anne, wife of Richard of Gloucester who later became King Richard III. Richard's defeat at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 meant that his lands were now owned by Henry VII and as such Olney became a crown possession until 1549 when it was granted to Princess Mary by her brother Edward VI.

During the reign of the Stuarts the Manor was placed in trust for the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of London until it became the property of the Gunter family. The Earls of Dartmouth took possession of Olney when the second Earl married Frances Catherine, daughter of Sir Charles Gunter Nicholl, who had left her the Manor on his death in 1733. Thus began the long association between the Earls of Dartmouth and the Manor of Olney until its sale in 1998.

William, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Dartmouth (1731-1801) provided patronage for Olney's best known residents, William Cowper and John Newton. This was another reason for deciding on the purchase of the



Manor of Olney. Although I had known of the work of Cowper, it was my interest in the life and work of John Newton that particularly drew me to the town. Becoming the Lord of the Manor of Olney was a way of feeling some affinity to the place where Newton had lived and had written hymns that were so inspirational. Since 1998 I have learned so much about Cowper that my eyes have been opened to a world of wonderful literature. Throughout this time I have also been conscious that, while Olney might have a history to be proud of, it is very much a thriving and vibrant town of the present.

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