

THE ORIGINS OF THE PRECEPTORY OF WEST PECKHAM

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THE landholdings of the Knights Hospitallers have been examined in greater detail in Kent than in any other county of England. Despite this unsolved problems remain. For example, we know very little about the 'Preceptory of West Peckham.' In fact the most recent book on medieval England's religious houses states that 'nothing is known of its history,'<sup>1</sup> an observation made earlier by the contributors to *The Victoria History of the County of Kent*.<sup>2</sup> Neither of these studies, incorporating the latest historical research, have been able to solve the riddle—noted by Thomas Tanner more than two centuries ago<sup>3</sup>—of how the property of West Peckham came into the hands of the Knights of St. John or by whom it was given. Even the date of origin is uncertain, though there seems to be a scholarly consensus that the 'preceptory' was 'probably' founded in the reign of Henry IV.

There is a story, circulated by local historians, that the 'preceptory' was given to the Hospitallers in the reign of Henry IV—usually 1408 or 1409—by Sir John Colpeper, member of a prominent Kentish family. This account of the foundation of West Peckham, and its connection with the Colpepers, can be traced back as far as the mid-seventeenth century when Richard Kilburne reported that Sir John founded there a 'preceptory or free-schoole.'<sup>4</sup> Succeeding students of Kentish history enlarged upon Kilburne's narrative. Philpot, Seymour, and Hasted all relate that Colpeper gave the property to the Knights of St. John early in the fifteenth century, though Philpot confused the Hospitallers with the Templars.<sup>5</sup> More recently, Wadmore and Cotton, both of whom deal only with Hospitaller estates in Kent, have accepted the Colpeper grant hypothesis at face value and reported accordingly.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> David Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses, England and Wales* (London, 1953), p. 247.

<sup>2</sup> (London, 1908-30) II, 175.

<sup>3</sup> *Notitia Monastica* (2nd ed.; Cambridge, 1744), p. 288.

<sup>4</sup> *Topographie of Kent* (London, 1659), p. 213.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Philpot, *Villare Cantianum* (Lynn, 1776), p. 269; Charles Seymour, *Survey of Kent* (Privately printed, 1776), p. 628; Edward Hasted, *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent* (2nd ed.; Canterbury, 1797-1801), V, 59.

<sup>6</sup> J. F. Wadmore, 'The Knights Hospitallers in Kent,' *Archaeologia Cantiana*, XXII (1897), 272; Charles Cotton, *A Kentish Cartulary of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem*, 'Kent Archaeological Society: Records Branch Publications,' Vol. XI (Ashford, 1930), p. 78.

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The existence of the Colpeper gift theory among local historians and its absence from the 'standard' works on English religious houses is something of a puzzle. Either the thesis is valid or it is not. If true it deserves to be incorporated into the body of modern scholarship and we may consider the problem of the origins of West Peckham solved. On the other hand, if the story is invalid it should be discarded by local historians and some alternative hypothesis advanced. In other words, the issue should not be ignored as it has been for many years. This leads only to confusion and West Peckham remains a lost preceptory.

Regarding the association of the Colpepers with West Peckham there cannot be the slightest doubt. Walter and Thomas Colpeper, respectively grandfather and uncle of Sir John, were landholders there early in the reign of Edward III.<sup>7</sup> Actually, Walter was also a manorial official of Elizabeth de Burgh, 'Lady of Clare', who held a portion of the manor in chief.<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Colpeper, Sir John's father, a man of local importance, was buried in the church of West Peckham.<sup>9</sup> And, finally, we have the fact that both Sir John and his son, Sir William, were also interred there.<sup>10</sup> Thus, throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there was a close connection between the family and the manor and its church. It is in this close relationship that we find much of the confusion regarding the supposed grant of Sir John to the Hospitallers.

Since the church was the burial place of his father, and was slated to be his own, Sir John decided to endow an altar. On 2nd March, 1409 he paid into the Hanaper £24 13s. 4d. for the privilege of founding a chantry of one chaplain at West Peckham to say prayers for the souls of himself, his wife, and their parents, as well as for the souls of the King and Queen and their royal predecessors. Accordingly, a licence was issued enabling him to found such a chantry and to grant to it, after inquisition, lands, and rents, not held in chief, as much as £10 yearly. The right of presentation to the chaplaincy was reserved to the founder and his heirs.<sup>11</sup>

The date of Colpeper's licence coincides nicely—after allowance for a few historians unfamiliar with medieval dating—with his supposed grant to the Knights of St. John. The difficulty is, of course, that this was not a gift to the military order at all. It is the church of West Peckham, not the 'lands,' that is mentioned in the document. The church was never a part of the 'preceptory' and at no time belonged to the Hospitallers. On the contrary, it was subject to the Prior of Leeds.

<sup>7</sup> Public Record Office, SC 11/Roll 366, m. 3a-4a; SC 12/9/54, m. 2b.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, SC 11/Roll 366, m. 4ab.

<sup>9</sup> J. F. Wadmore, 'The Manor of Old Sore, Near Plaxtol in Kent,' *Archæologia Cantiana*, XXII (1897), 314.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

<sup>11</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls, Henry IV, 1408-13* (London, 1909), p. 55.

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During the fourteenth century he established vicarages there and appointed to them when vacancies occurred.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the church was still in his control at the time of the suppression of the monasteries by Henry VIII.<sup>13</sup>

It appears that the close association of the Colpeper family with the church of West Peckham, and the foundation of a chantry there by Sir John, has been transformed by past historians into the foundations of the 'preceptory' of the same name. But this will not do. Where is the licence to grant land to a religious order? Royal administrators were extremely sensitive about allowing lands to pass into the hands of the church; certainly they would not have done so without first taking an inquisition and exacting a fee. No such inquisition or fee is recorded for Sir John Colpeper. Moreover, at the very time that he supposedly granted West Peckham to the Hospitallers he was himself a tenant of the military order. This is revealed in a deed of November, 1409 between Sir John and Sir Henry Crownhale, Knight of St. John. According to this instrument Colpeper undertook to pay an annual rent for lands at West Peckham belonging to the Prior of St. John of Jerusalem in England.<sup>14</sup> Obviously the order was already in possession of property there at the time Sir John was said to have made his grant. In view of this it is clear that we must look elsewhere for the foundation of the 'preceptory.'

As one probes into the history of the descent of the manor of West Peckham it quickly becomes clear that a large number of individuals were connected with the place during the fourteenth century.<sup>15</sup> It is not necessary, however, to go into detail for each person. All that is needed is proof that some one of them held clear title to the manor, or some part if it, and that he or she granted it to the Hospitallers. The only person who meets this criterion is Elizabeth de Burgh, 'Lady of Clare.' She is, I believe, the founder of what later came to be known as the 'Preceptory of West Peckham.'

When Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Gloucester and Hertford, and brother of Elizabeth, was slain at the battle of Bannockburn he left no direct heir. By declaration of parliament his estates were divided among his three surviving sisters, Elizabeth receiving as a portion of her inheritance the Kentish properties of West Peckham and Swanton.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Registrum Hamonis Hethe*, ed. by Charles Johnson (London, 1948), I, 14-15; II, 877.

<sup>13</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus, temp. Henrici VIII, auctoritate regia institutus*, ed. by J. Caley and Rev. J. Hunter (London, 1810-34), I, 72.

<sup>14</sup> British Museum, Cotton MSS., Nero E. VI, f. 464.

<sup>15</sup> *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem* (London, 1904-I.P.), XII, 37 and 317; *Calendar of Fine Rolls, 1327-37* (London, 1913), pp. 261 and 313; *Calendar of Patent Rolls, Richard II, 1388-92* (London, 1902), p. 223.

<sup>16</sup> *Rotuli Parliamentorum* (London, 1767-77), I, 353; *Cal. Inq. Post Mortem*, VI, 81.

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A few years later, in an effort to consolidate her scattered properties, she sought permission from the King to exchange these two holdings for a money rent in Hertford. The other party involved in this exchange was the Prior of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem. Since West Peckham and Swanton were held in chief an inquisition was necessary before they could be granted to a religious order. Accordingly, a writ *Ad Quod Damnum* was issued 12th October, 1337 and inquisitions taken in Kent on the fifth and in Hertford on the eighth day of the next month.<sup>17</sup> Two weeks later the King granted licence to Elizabeth to alienate in mortmain to the Prior of the Hospitallers two messuages, 680 acres of land, and £4 6s. 8d. rent in West Peckham and Swanton in exchange for eleven marks of rent out of the order's mills in Standon, County Hertford.<sup>18</sup>

The transactions between Elizabeth and the order of St. John was so obviously advantageous to the latter that it can hardly be viewed as anything other than a charitable foundation. But such generosity was by no means inconsistent with the 'Lady of Clare's' personality. In addition to her well known endowment of Clare Hall, Cambridge, she founded a house of Franciscans at Walsingham in Norfolk and bequeathed substantial sums to other orders in her will.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, there had long been a bond between the Clare family and the Hospitallers. The preceptories of Standon (Herts.), Greenham (Berks.), Carbrooke (Norfolk), and perhaps Melchbourne (Beds.) owed their existence to grants by Elizabeth's ancestors.<sup>20</sup> It is not surprising then that she should wish to continue the tradition of her house by a sizeable grant to the military fraternity.

In 1338 the Prior of St. John in England submitted a detailed financial report to the Grand Master of the Order. In this he reveals that the exchange with Elizabeth de Burgh had taken place. Under the bailiwick of Standon is entered the notation that thirteen marks of its revenues were paid to the 'Countess of Clare.'<sup>21</sup> Why the Prior was paying two marks more than the amount specified in the licence is not clear. But we need not concern ourselves with this. What is important is that Elizabeth was receiving her rent at Standon and thus the Hospitallers had come into possession of portions of West Peckham and Swanton.

<sup>17</sup> P.R.O., C143, file 240, No. 20.

<sup>18</sup> *C.P.R., Edward III, 1334-38* (London, 1895), p. 552.

<sup>19</sup> G. E. Cokayne, *Complete Peerage*, IV, 45; *Collection of all the Wills . . . of the Kings and Queens . . . and every Branch of the Blood Royal . . .* Ed. by John G. Nichols (London, 1780), pp. 21-43.

<sup>20</sup> *The Knights Hospitallers in England, Being the Report of Prior Philip de Thame to the Grand Master Elyan de Villanova for A.D. 1338*, ed. by Rev. L. B. Larking (London, 1857), pp. 229-31.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

As a result of the preceding information one question immediately arises. Why is there no reference to West Peckham or Swanton in the financial report of the Prior? The answer to this involves a discussion of the peculiar status of the lands in question and of some of the institutional practices of the Hospitallers. Incidentally, it will also explain why the term 'Preceptory of West Peckham' is a misnomer.

In each priory of the Hospitallers there was one estate, known as a *camera magistralis*, whose revenues were paid directly to the Grand Master of the order. These lands were never preceptories in the usual sense and brethren of the order did not reside there. The general practice was to appoint a 'receiver' who was responsible to the Grand Master for an amount of money specified in advance. It then became the responsibility of this receiver to insure that the estates were continually rented and returned sufficient income.

In England the magisterial *camera* was originally the combined lands of Tonbridge and Hadlow. In 1338 the Prior reported that they returned an annual revenue of 120 marks but that he paid each year to the Grand Master 200 marks.<sup>22</sup> The income of these particular properties puzzled Wadmore. He commented that it was impossible to form any opinion of their size because of the imprecision of the language used in the report. He suggested, however, that according to the land value of the time approximately 1,000 acres would have been necessary to produce an income of 120 marks.<sup>23</sup> Now Tonbridge and Hadlow were only small properties with most of their income derived from the endowment of their churches, and this could hardly have amounted to 120 marks. But if the property deeded to the Hospitallers by Elizabeth de Burgh in the previous year had been attached to the magisterial *camera* we would have an acreage approaching that suggested by Wadmore as well as an explanation of the sizeable income. Inasmuch as West Peckham and Swanton were not returning revenue to the English Priory there was little need for the English Prior to elaborate upon them; he simply lumped them together with other properties set aside for the Grand Master. Thus, they are present in the report of 1338 but not under their proper names.

Throughout the fourteenth century the magisterial *camera* continued to be a losing proposition for the English priory; the amount payable to the Grand Master was seldom realized by the property. Consequently, we find that various estates were detached from other preceptories or *camerae* and added to it in an attempt to increase the revenue, while at the same time a reduction in payment was negotiated with the Grand Master. As early as the fifteenth century the once independent property of Stalisfield and the church of Rodmersham,

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>23</sup> 'Knights Hospitallers,' p. 267.

both in Kent, had been incorporated into the *camera*.<sup>24</sup> During the same time the amount payable to the Grand Master was steadily reduced. Whereas the Prior paid 200 marks in 1338, Sir William Middleton, receiver of the *camera* in 1365, paid only 700 Venetian ducats.<sup>25</sup> This latter figure held constant until the end of the century when it was reduced to 600 ducats annually.<sup>26</sup> In 1413 the receiver was responsible for only 500 ducats and, by 1417, only 400.<sup>27</sup>

An interesting sidelight upon the *camera* in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries is the fact that the receiver was Sir Henry Crownhale, the man who rented the land at West Peckham to Sir John Colpeper. Sir Henry was appointed receiver before 1400 and remained in that position at least as late as 1417.<sup>28</sup> It was undoubtedly he who was responsible for changing the designation of the *camera* from 'Tonbridge and Hadlow,' as it had been called during the fourteenth century, to West Peckham, as it became known in the fifteenth. That only a change of name was involved, rather than the foundation of a new 'preceptory,' seems indicated when we consider the property in question at two different times. In 1338, as has been shown, land at West Peckham was in the hands of the order of St. John but was merged into the *camera* of Tonbridge and Hadlow. By the time of Henry VIII this situation had been reversed. The 'Preceptory of West Peckham,' as it was styled in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, included, among other properties, Tonbridge and Hadlow.<sup>29</sup> All formed a part of the Grand Master's *camera* from the fourteenth century until the extinction of the Knights Hospitallers.

In summary, it is clear that a large portion of the property known as the 'Preceptory of West Peckham' came to the Knights of St. John through the agency of Elizabeth de Burgh in 1337 rather than through any act of Sir John Colpeper during the reign of Henry IV. The lands included in her grant were immediately attached to Tonbridge and Hadlow, thus becoming a part of the magisterial *camera*. Later, for some unknown reason, the property came to be referred to simply as West Peckham, and so it remained until the reign of Henry VIII. With this information before us it seems fair to conclude that the problem of the origins of the 'Preceptory of West Peckham'—or more accurately, the magisterial *camera* of West Peckham—has been solved.

<sup>24</sup> *Knights Hospitallers in England*, pp. 95 and 124; Archives of the Knights of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, Royal Library of Malta, Vol. 340, f. 121a.

<sup>25</sup> Archives of the Knights, Vol. 319, f. 175a.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 332, f. 110b.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, Vols. 337, f. 71b and 340, f. 121a.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Vols. 330, ff. 80b, 134a and 340, f. 121a.

<sup>29</sup> I, 113.