

Bisham Abbey - from Templar house to sports centre



HISTORY

Bisham, its manor, its Abbey and their occupants, has long played an important role in the political life of England.

William I, after he had gained the English throne in 1066, sent out numerous scribes to record information on every County and Parish in the country - the result, known as The Domesday Book, being published in 1086.

Henry de Ferrers, the Norman knight who conducted the survey in Berkshire, liked Bisham (then called Bustlesham) so much that he persuaded William to give him the manor. The building which we now know as Bisham (pronounced Bizzam, not Bish-am) Abbey did not then exist. His son, Robert, Earl of Derby, succeeded him and, in 1138 granted the use of the manor to the Knights Templar.

THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR

The Knights Templar were bound by both religious vows and military discipline. The order was based in Jerusalem and had been founded in the early 12th Century to protect Christian pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land. They were fearsome fighters in battle, but lived as monks when not at war.

In Bisham, the Knights built a Preceptory. The gift of the manor included woods, meadows, pasture and the mills situated in the hamlet upstream from Bisham, still known as Temple.

In 1266, the Bisham lands passed to Edmund, Earl of Lancaster, the second son of Henry II, and later to Edmund's son Thomas.

By this time, the Templars had built up substantial riches and power, so much so that the French King, Phillip IV, began a whispering campaign to discredit them. Having persuaded Pope Clement V to condemn them, he confiscated their estates and had every French Templar arrested in 1307, burning many at the stake.

AFTER THE TEMPLARS

The English King, Edward II, very reluctantly followed suit later in the year by imprisoning all the members of the order, though only in open prisons. He handed over the confiscated Templar lands to their rival order, the Knights Hospitallers, except for Bisham, which he kept for himself!

Soon after this, hostages were lodged at Bisham, the wife and sister of Robert the Bruce. They were released after the Scots routed the English at Bannockburn in 1314.

Edward II gave Bisham to his supporter, Hugh Despenser, who did not hold it long, because in 1327 Edward 11 was

killed and Bisham reverted to the Crown in the person of Edward III.

In about 1330, Bisham was granted to Ebulo L'Estrange, then in 1335 to Montacute the first Earl of Salisbury and a close friend of Edward I. The Earl settled there and, in 1307, established an Augustine Priory, which included some of the Templar's buildings. In 1344 he was succeeded by his son William a friend of the next King, Richard II. The third Earl of Salisbury and holder of Bisham was William's nephew John who supported Richard II. When he was supplanted by Henry IV, John plotted to overthrow the new king, for which he was beheaded.

The fourth Earl, Thomas, John's son, served under Henry IV, V and VI, mainly as a soldier. His second wife was Alice, the grand-daughter of Geoffrey Chaucer. Thomas, who was killed at the siege of Orleans in 1428, had no son. His daughter Alice had married Richard Neville who, through her, claimed the title of fifth Earl of Salisbury. Richard and one of his sons was killed in 1460 during the Wars of the Roses. Alice died of grief at Bisham when she heard the news, and the estate passed to her eldest son, also Richard and already Earl of Warwick, later known as 'Warwick the King-Maker'.

When Edward IV grew up, he married secretly, enraging Richard, who led a revolt against him. This was initially successful but Edward fought back and, in 1471, Richard and his brother were killed. Both were buried at Bisham, which now passed to George, Duke of Clarence, brother of Edward IV and husband of Richard's daughter. Clarence's later treachery reputedly and famously ended with him being drowned in a butt of malmsley in 1478.

THE TUDORS

Margaret, daughter of Clarence, now held Bisham. She was acclaimed 'the saintliest woman in the world' by Henry VIII, appointed governess to Princess Mary, was a staunch friend of Queen Katherine (of Aragon) and was restored to the title of Countess of Salisbury. It was she who built the dovecot which still stands in the grounds. At this time, Henry VIII was a frequent visitor, holding Council meetings there and hunting in the woods.

After the death of Jane Seymour, the mother of Henry's only legitimate son, in 1537 Henry dismissed the Augustine Priory and established a Benedictine Abbey to pray for her soul. The Abbey lasted only 6 months and was dissolved by Thomas Cromwell. Margaret was falsely accused of treason and beheaded at the Tower.

In 1540, Henry VIII gave Bisham to Ann of Cleves as part of her divorce settlement. She exchanged it in 1552 for Sir Philip Hoby's Suffolk estate.

THE HOBYS

The Hobys were to hold Bisham for almost 230 years. During Sir Philip's time, the Protestant Princess Elizabeth was confined to Bisham for about 3 years by order of her Catholic sister Queen Mary. Sir Philip's sons Edward and Thomas followed him at Bisham, but perhaps the most famous Hoby is Elizabeth, the wife of Thomas. She was very well educated and had a formidable personality. She and Thomas had four children, and after his death she remarried twice and had three or four more children. There is a famous story that William, one of her second family, was rather backward at his lessons and frequently blotted his copybook. She beat him, tied him

to a chair and went out riding. While out, she met a messenger, who had been sent by Queen Elizabeth to fetch her to Windsor. She rode straight off and did not return for several days, by which time poor William was dead. Her ghost reputedly haunts the Abbey, crying pitifully for the loss of her child.

During this time, Queen Elizabeth was a frequent guest at Bisham. Lady Hoby died aged 91 in 1607 and was laid to rest in the amazing Hoby memorial in Bisham Church, designed by herself!

Later, Hobys were MPs for various constituencies, until the line died out in 1780 and the estate was sold.

THE VANSITTART-NEALES

The Vansittart family were the next owners. They were soldiers, MPs and civil servants who added Neale to their surname when the Neale estates came into the family in 1805. The estate was bought by the fore-runner of the Sports Council in the mid 1960s, and is now run as a Centre of Sporting Excellence and a Conference Centre.

BUILDINGS

Bisham Abbey today bears little resemblance to the original Knights Templar's buildings. There have been many changes over the years, much demolition and much rebuilding.

PORCH. The south front, shown on the front of this leaflet, has a 13th Century porch, part of the Templar's Preceptory. Note the original door with 13th century ironwork.

SCREENS PASSAGE. The passage inside the lobby, also originally Templar, has blocked arches on the left which would originally have led to kitchens and other offices.

GREAT HALL. This was also Templar and originally had a central hearth, with smoke escaping through the rafters. The stone fireplace on the south wall was installed by the Hobys, but the later carved wooden mantel is Jacobean, showing the arms of James I.

The minstrels' gallery, also installed by the Hobys, is 15th century, but the two flags are the colours of the 1st Battalion of the Royal Berkshire Militia, raised and commanded by George Henry Vansittart in 1800, during the Napoleonic wars. There are several blocked windows, one painted in the 14th century, showing St Peter (holding keys) on the left and St John (holding a chalice) on the right.

Note the several fine paintings (details on a panel by the entrance) and the Tobias tapestries information panel.

WARWICK ROOM. This has interesting paintings (details on a panel by the door).

LOBBY. Note the huge Tudor kitchen table, stored at the bottom of the stairs.

ELIZABETH ROOM. This was used as a Council Chamber by both Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. The windows have stained glass coats of arms of several notable people associated with the Abbey:

Anne of Denmark (Queen of James I); Elizabeth I;
James I;

William Montecute (1st Earl of Salisbury); Thomas Cecil (Earl of Exeter); Richard Neville (5th Earl of Salisbury); Robert Cecil (Earl of Exeter); Richard Pole, married to Margaret, Countess of Salisbury). In the corner is a door leading to a small lobby with a spy hole looking down into the Great Hall.

OUTSIDE. This shows evidence of the many stages of demolition and re-building which have taken place, some with Tudor bricks, some with local chalk blocks and some with stone from demolished monastic buildings.

The remaining cloisters were part of a 14th century quadrangle built by the 1st Earl of Salisbury, three sides of which were pulled down by Thomas Hoby in the mid-16th century.

Of particular note is the dovecot built by Margaret, Countess of Salisbury in the early 16th century which provided meat (squabs - unfledged doves) and eggs when food was scarce in the winter.

A few of those who were initially buried in the priory church were re-interred in All Saints Church, Bisham, when the priory church was pulled down by Thomas Hoby. Most were re-buried in the Abbey grounds, and now lie under the lawns in unmarked graves.

A visit to All Saints Church, Bisham to see the various memorials there, especially the Hoby memorial, is highly recommended.

References:

Bisham Abbey; E T Long

The Story of Bisham Abbey; Piers Compton

Berkshire; Nikolaus Pevsner

Some Historical Notes on Owners who built and altered
Bisham Abbey; Ann Darracott

Produced by Hazel Malpass for the Local History Group of
The Marlow Society 2008