

WEST COURT

INKPEN

A HISTORY

by

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[Author of *Tracing the History of Your House*]

ALTHOUGH NOTHING NOW survives of that former structure, West Court stands on or close to the site of an ancient manor house of which in the fullness of time it became the successor. In Medieval times this land formed part of the manor of Westcourt. Humphrey de Inkpen owned it in 1176, the year in which he paid one mark for unjust disseisin.¹ Gervase, the son of Nicholas de Inkpen, was holding this land in 1234, the eighteenth year of the reign of Henry III.² He was succeeded by his son, Nicholas, a few years later.³ This gentleman was still living in 1250 because in that year he witnessed grants of land to the Abbey of Titchfield made by Peter Sukemund and Geoffrey Mansell,⁴ but he seems to have died shortly afterwards when he was succeeded by Richard de Inkpen. Sir Richard was succeeded by his son, Sir Roger, who held this manor in 1273 and settled certain lands here in 1281 on himself and on Emmeline his wife.⁵

Sir Roger de Inkpen was Sheriff of Cornwall in 1285 and 1286. At the beginning of the 14th century his lands and possessions, including his lands and Manor of Inkpen, were commandeered by the Crown until he could account for 'homicides, harbouring of felons, and divers other trespasses'.⁶ The specific nature of these offences is not known. That Sir Roger was able to come up with some sort of explanation is apparent, because in 1302 his lands were restored to him.

When Sir Roger de Inkpen died in 1306, the Manor of Westcourt passed to his widow, Emmeline, who married as her second husband Thomas Randelou. The Lady Emmeline was probably dead before 1344 as the Manor appears to have reverted before that time to the heir of her first husband. This was Sir Roger de Inkpen⁷, who seems to have been constantly serving with Aylmer de Valence, both in Scotland and abroad from 1303 to 1313. He was a prominent figure at Court and in 1313 was pardoned for his complicity in the murder of Piers Gaveston, the favourite of Edward II.⁸ He married Joan, the daughter and heiress of Sir John de Halton, and died before 1314. His widow took as her second husband Robert Bendyn, to whom Edward II had granted her in marriage in 1314. She died about 1331, her heir being her son, Sir Nicholas de Inkpen. His eldest son, John, left a daughter, Ricarda, who married Sir Thomas Fychet of Spaxton, County Somerset.⁹ This marriage produced a daughter, Isabel, who in the course of time carried the Manor of Westcourt to her husband, Robert Hill.

¹ wrongful dispossession. Pipe Rolls. 23 Henry II [Pipe Rolls Soc.] 49

² *Testa de Nevill* [Rec. Comm.] 119

³ *Ibid.* p.111, 126.

⁴ Dugdale: *Mon.* vi 933

⁵ Feet of F. Div. Co. 9 & 10 Edward I, no.49

⁶ Quoted in the *Victoria County History of Berkshire*, iv p.202.

⁷ the son of Alice, the sister of the first Roger de Inkpen.

⁸ *Cal. Chan. R. Various*, 1277-1326, p.81; *Cal. Pat.* 1307-13 pp. 105, 581; 1313-17 p.25.

⁹ *Aug. Off. Misc. Books.* lix, folio 59d.

Robert Hill was a Judge of the Common Pleas. This court was situated at the Fleet Street end of Chancery Lane. It dealt with private civil actions - one citizen versus another, rather than the Crown against a subject.¹⁰ Robert Hill died seised of the Manor of Westcourt in 1423.¹¹ His son, Sir John Hill, died in 1434. The manor then became fragmented and its descent thereafter is obscure and very difficult to piece together.

Two-thirds of the manor – but probably not that section which contained the old manor house – seems now to have devolved upon Sir John Hill's infant daughter, Genevieve. This lady married Sir William Say of Broxbourne, Hertfordshire who died in 1529, when his wife and only child, John, were already dead. Genevieve's various estates appear to have been divided between four co-heirs. The Manor of Westcourt fell to the share of John Waldgrave, whose son, Edward, with Frances his wife, sold it in 1551 to Roger Ricard or Richards.¹² Roger died in the old manor house of Westcourt in 1558 bequeathing it to his son, William, who died seised of it in 1589.¹³ His son, William Ricard, sold it in 1622 to Richard Money.

The remaining third of this manor, and with it the ancient manor-house, belonged by the mid-17th century to Margaret Heron. It seems to have passed at her death in 1671 to her nephew, Richard Twitchen, who sold it in 1671 to Anthony Guidott.¹⁴

For some little time thereafter the history of this estate is obscure. It next surfaces in records in 1738 – the eleventh year of the reign of George II – when on 23 September 'Francis Birkendon of the parish of Inkpen esquire' conveyed to John Stratton of Kintbury, Berkshire, the son and heir of William Stratton, late of Inkpen, yeoman', for thirty pounds of lawful money of Great Britain':¹⁵

*The fee-simple and half-share of a Capital Messuage or Dwelling-house belonging to the Manor of Westcourt in Inkpen and the furze-house or malt house, entry porch and great Barn Stable and pigstie thereunto belonging, also the court called the Groom Court lying before the said messuage.*¹⁶

The identity of this 'Capital Messuage' is not elaborated upon in the conveyance. Its description, taken in conjunction with the circumstantial evidence still extant, inclines the present writer to think it *may* have been the

¹⁰ It was abolished in 1875.

¹¹ *Chan. Inq.* p.m. 14 Ric.II no.23 – but 1425 according to his notice in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹² Feet of F. Berks. Mich. 5 Edward VI

¹³ *Chan. Inq.* p.m. [Ser. 2] dxii, 164

¹⁴ Feet of F. Berks. Trin. 9 George IV.

¹⁵ Equivalent at 1998 prices to about £2,900.

¹⁶ Conveyance of 23.9.1783. Berkshire County Record Office, Reading.

present West Court, although some of the buildings have clearly long since disappeared.

The architectural style suggests that West Court was constructed for a member of the Guidott family, mentioned above, circa 1710-1720. This puts it on the cusp of the reigns of Queen Anne and George I.

When the buildings' inspectors attached to the Department of the Environment examined the fabric on 10 September 1951 they listed it Grade II as a building of 'architectural and historic interest'. Although their report is poorly punctuated and larded with obscure architectural terms, it is worth reproducing here in full.

*House. Late C18 with C19 additions. Brick, grey headers and stretchers, tiled roof. Double-pile in L-plan. 2 storeys with flanking chimneys to north block ridge chimneys to south block with flush grey brick band at first floor, dentil brick eaves flanking stacks to north block and ridge stacks to south block. **North Elevation:** 5 vertical sliding sash windows with exposed box frames and rubbed brick arches, square, central porch with entablature and blocking course supported by wide panelled pilasters flanking doorway, 10-panelled door, rectangular fanlight with diamond glazing.*

It is necessary to disagree with the above in one important regard only. In the opinion of the present writer the northern part of the house, with the porch, probably dates from the *early* 18th century rather than the latter part; and the southern part would seem to date from the late eighteenth century. I am gratified to find that in this opinion the architectural icon, Nikolaus Pevsner concurs.¹⁷

Before 1756 the Manor of West Court had passed to Michael and Joseph Stratton, who in 1756 sold it John Bradburne. At the time of the Inclosure Act of 1810 John Bradburne's son, Harry Bradburne, was Lord of the Manor and residing at West Court. He was a colonel in the army and saw action during Lord Wellington's campaign in the Peninsular and at the battle of Waterloo in 1815.

In 1828, the eighth year of the reign of George IV, Harry Bradburne's four daughters and co-heiresses, together with their husbands – that is, Thomas and Mary Hutchins, Richard and Elizabeth Fry, George and Mary Redman and Anne Nutley, widow, sold the West Court estate to George Sainsbury, a London merchant, who sub-let it to local farmers.¹⁸ Sainsbury sold it before 1840 to a local man, Joseph Mills.

¹⁷ Pevsner, Buildings of England Series: *Berkshire* p.159

¹⁸ Feet of F. Berks. Trin. 9 George IV

At the taking of the first national census, in April 1841 West Court was in the occupation of Joseph's son, Robert Mills, a 22-year-old yeoman farmer. At this date Robert Mills was not married. He shared the house with his shepherd, John Winterbourne 20 and with his carter, William Sharpe 15. He kept no live-in domestics. In an area described on the census return only as 'Detach of the Building' but probably one of the outhouses, lived Mills's three plough-boys, Robert Jenkins, Thomas Barrett and John Griggory, all aged between fifteen and twenty.

In 1843 a tithe map was drawn up for the parish of Inkpen. Tithes - which required that a tenth of the annual produce of land, cattle and other sources of wealth in a parish be given to the Church - were first introduced into England in the 8th century by Offa. In order that the authorities might have some record of those on whom the tithe could be levied, a series of maps was drawn up showing their landholdings. The 1843 tithe map shows the parish of Inkpen divided into portions. Each of these portions is numbered. The number, which relates to the owner [and where different the occupier] corresponds to a similar number on an accompanying list, known as the tithe apportionment

The tithe map, a copy of the relevant portion of which is reproduced overleaf, shows West Court to have been a much smaller dwelling than it is today. On the tithe apportionment, a copy of which is also reproduced overleaf, the owner of the property is shown as Joseph Mills and the occupier as Robert Mills, mentioned above. As can be seen by comparing the map and the apportionment, the family farmed about three hundred acres in the parish.

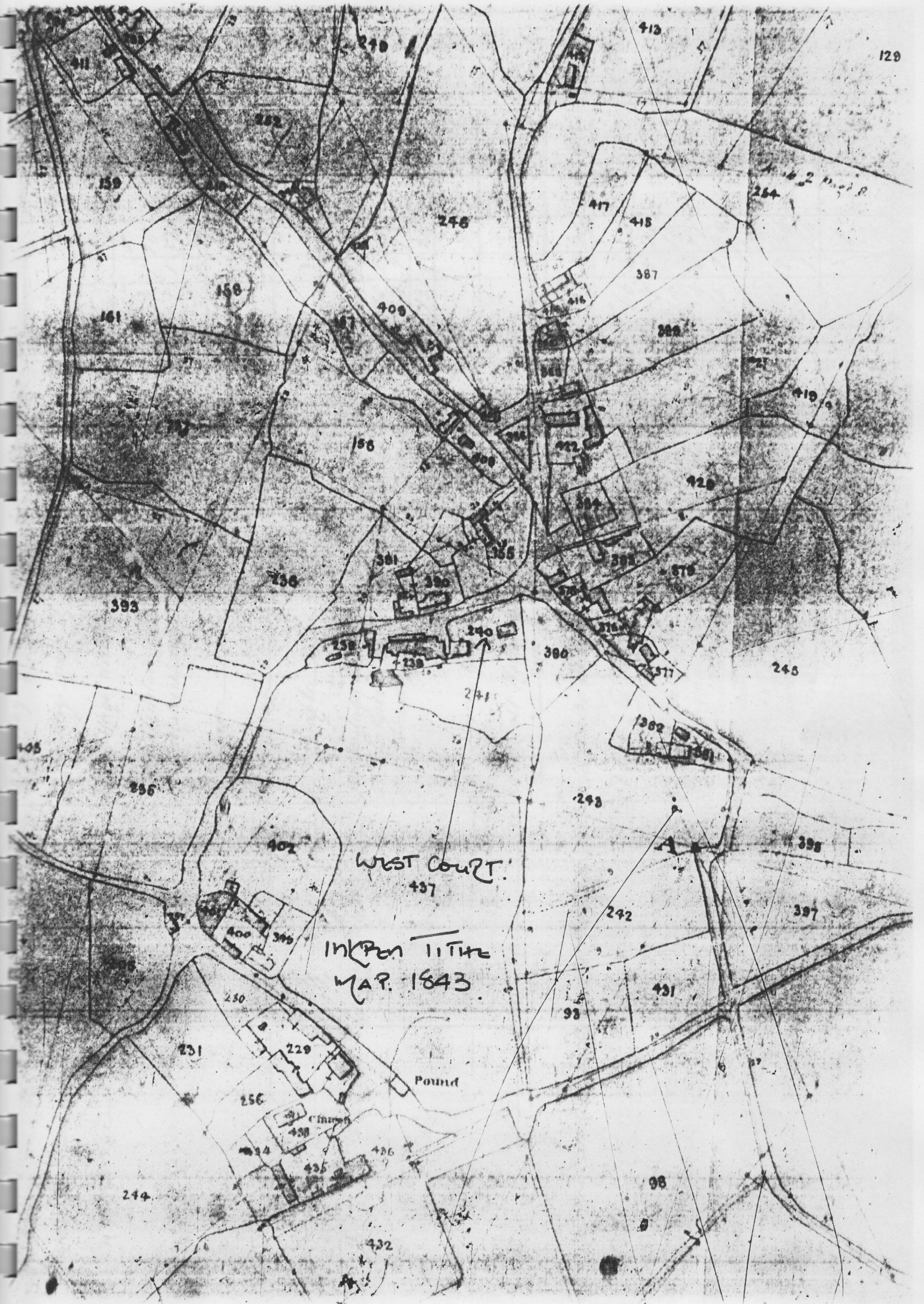
Robert Mills was still residing at West Court, aged 32, in 1851. At this date the village contained seventy-six houses, of which three were uninhabited. The population was 347 - 174 males and 173 females. Mills shared West Court with his wife, Mary, who at 35 was three years her husband's senior. The couple had three children: Maria 3, Emma 2 and Joseph, who on the night of the census enumerator's visit in the April was aged eight months. A fourth child, George, was born about 1853.

The domestic and farm staff lodging within these walls in April 1851 included two house servants, Lucy Smith 23 and Jane Hewett 31, a groom, Charles Froom 27, an under carter¹⁹, Mark Gibbs 19, a fogger²⁰, Joseph Buxcey 14, and three ploughboys: Charles Williams, Job Holt and George Aldridge, all aged fifteen.

West Court was sold in 1865 by Joseph Mills - Robert Mills's father - and others to the farmer, Henry Hissey, who by this date was the sitting tenant. What happened to Joseph Mills's son, and the circumstances which prevailed upon him to give up this thriving farm, are lost to us. Neither do we know what

¹⁹ Charles Froom was the son of William Froom 60, the village blacksmith.

²⁰ An agricultural labourer chiefly engaged in feeding and attending cattle.



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2nd Map R.

WEST COURT.
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IN OPEN TITLE
MAP. 1843

Pound

C. House

527	Collage and garden	Buildings	31
528	Collage and garden	Buildings	31
529	Meadow	Assture	3 1 20
530	Assture	Assture	1 1 33
531	River	Water	1 3 21
532	River	Water	1 10
533	Canal	Water	3 30
534	Arable	Arable	3 7
535	Collage and garden	Buildings	1 3
536	Assture	Arable	10 7 10
537	Assture	Assture	1 2 13
538	Assture	Assture	19 1 26
539	Arable	Arable	1 10 11
540	Arable	Arable	27
541	Collage and garden	Buildings	1 3
542	Collage and garden	Buildings	1 5
543	Collage and garden	Buildings	1 29
544	Assture	Assture	66 3 2
545	Wood	Wood	1 2 26
546	Arable	Arable	18 18
547	Arable	Arable	44 2 27
548	Arable	Arable	22 2 30
549	Homestead	Homestead	23
550	Homestead	Homestead	2 26
551	Arable	Arable	1 14
552	Homestead	Homestead	220 1 6

INKBENTITE APPORTIONMENT

ACR 1987

A

x

ACR 1987

ACR 1987

Mrs. Joseph
(continued)

Robert Miller
(continued)

231	Homestead, Madison	Accepted for	124	6
232	Brook, Alcatraz	Pasture	1	11
233	Wain Spray Pond	Pasture	2	28
234	Wain Spray Pond	Grable	6	30
235	Map Ground	Grable	5	10
236	Kingston Meadows	Grable	3	14
237	do. Another Meadow	Pasture	2	
238	Richford and Shed	Pasture	3	26
239	Offices and yard	Homestead		32
240	House Garden & Pond	Homestead		36
241	Orchard	Buildings	1	29
242	Haynes's Ground	Pasture	3	20
243	do. Meadow	Grable	1	10
244	Barby Richard	Pasture	3	7
245	Haynes's Great Meadow	Grable	3	20
246	Swan Meadow	Pasture	5	3
247	his in Corner of town	Pasture	5	16
248	College and garden	Wood		4
249	Butts Meadow	Buildings		32
250	Another Bath Meadow	Pasture	5	16
251	Miners Grable	Pasture	5	9
252	fishers Meadow	Grable	2	11
253	fishers Grable	Pasture	1	14
254	Round Cowry	Grable	6	3
255	The lands	Pasture	1	12
256	Stack Yard	Grable	2	26
257	Chalk Pit	Homestead	1	23
258	Cart House opposite of State Lane	Buildings	1	1
259	Broadway Common	Pasture	5	22
260	Proachway Ground	Grable	5	36
261	Broadway Great Ground	Grable	8	25
262	do. Pond	Grable	19	10
263	Broadway Meadow	Wood	5	13
264	Sulla Lane enclosure	Wood	2	13
265	joining Broadway	Wood	2	19

William Hissey paid for the property. We do know that he had to raise a mortgage in order to acquire it. It was a mortgage which he was never able fully to discharge.

At the taking of the third national census, in April 1861, Henry Hissey was forty-six years of age. He hailed from the near-by village of Buttermere, just across the border in Wiltshire. A bachelor, he was residing at West Court alone, attended by three servants: his housekeeper, Eliza Fuller 39, a native of Letcombe Regis, his 18-year-old coachman-groom, Francis Hamblin²¹ and Jane Ralfe, the 18-year-old maid-of-all-work. We should spare a thought for Jane Ralfe down the tunnel of the years. As the only general domestic kept she would have been responsible for all the chores outside the kitchen - and a good many within it - including the carrying of coals and bath-water to the top of the house and the lighting of all the fires.

What was life like for Henry Hissey of West Court in the middle years of the Victorian era? How did he live, what was his routine - and how was his house disposed?

The farming community of Victorian England was very diverse. It ranged from gentlemen farmers such as the Prince Consort at one end of the spectrum, to smallholders scraping a living from as little as five acres at the other. William Hissey, with 379 acres, had an average landholding for that period and therefore sat somewhere in between. The total number of farmers remained more or less static at 250,000 throughout the reign of Queen Victoria - from 1837 to 1901.

For William Hissey, farming would have been less an occupation, more a way of life - an enterprise which inextricably bound work with the home. In 1838 William Howitt had likened farmers such as Hissey to 'little kings', enjoying a healthier environment and exercising greater control over their surroundings than the tradesmen cramped in the towns and cities. Their home life was also much praised.

West Court is unlikely to have been short on creature comforts, but one suspects there was no false show. William Cobbett summed it up in 1830: - 'Plain manners and plentiful living'.

If he was typical of the breed, William Hissey would probably have been slow to adopt new ideas. His life was in some respects traditional and unchanging. But due to the second agricultural revolution, which followed in the wake of large-scale mechanisation and the greater use of scientific methods - allied to the spread of the railways and of newspapers - even West Court, buried deep in the Berkshire countryside, would not have escaped the need to change entirely.

²¹ Whose father, James Hamblin 63, an agricultural labourer, appears two entries further down on the census returns..

We know that William Hissey was solidly based - both in the community and within the freemasonry of agriculture. Evidence suggests that he was probably a gentleman farmer - hardly distinguishable from the local gentry and sharing with them the pleasures of the hunt. Given that in 1861 he employed 'nine labourers and three boys'²² a relatively large workforce, one suspects that he was not the kind of farmer who worked alongside his labourers in the fields, in his smock coat. Nor did he share their problems: 'going on' - in the words of Fowler - 'from cherry time to cherry time and getting no forwarder'.

Because it was built to no architectural rules but had evolved according to requirement and vernacular tradition, West Court would have been a rambling, somewhat inconvenient, but essentially comfortable place. Hissey and his family lived cheek-by-jowl with the sights, sounds and smells of the farmyard. Like all farmhouses, West Court would have been divided into two areas - one for service, one for living. The former would have included rooms for brewing, dairying and laundering. At the very least, the latter would have been represented by a parlour - used on high days and holidays, and for funerals.

Bridging the two and serving as the chief focus for the house would have been the kitchen where, sooner or later, all occupants met. The furniture here would have embodied the spirit of Cobbett's 'plain manners' - simple and functional, the product of the village joiner, working to local traditions. Styles scarcely changed. Only the increased use of imported deal in place of native oak, ash and elm distinguished newer articles.

Certain items were basic to all farmhouse kitchens: a robust long table, for example, large enough to seat all the household. Chairs of ladderback or spindle back were common, as were Windsor chairs. Alternative seating was provided by the settle, which was invariably placed beside the kitchen fire, where its back served as a screen against the scything draughts drawn up the chimney. Another essential item was the kitchen dresser, loaded with earthenware such as Staffordshire, which by William Hissey's day had replaced the pewter of an earlier age.

If you had asked William Hissey for a glass of water in the middle years of the 19th century he would have drawn it for you from the well. It would have been good fresh sparkling water, but there was of course no mains supply and no taps to turn on. At night, farmhouses were lit by candles, and from about 1850 by paraffin lamps. The candle provided a beautiful mellow light, soft and golden, but not by modern standards a very bright one. Consequently William Hissey would have tended to go to bed soon after it got dark. This practice probably accounted for the large number of children in rural families. 'Early to bed' was the accepted rule of the village forefathers. By eight o'clock on a

²² 1861 Census returns for Inkpen. RG9/723/ Reel 2. Berkshire County Records Office.

winter night it was usual to find no one astir. This was natural in a place where the only means of lighting at night were tallow 'dips' or rushlights, and latterly by candles and oil-lamps sufficient to 'make darkness visible'.

To sit by the dying embers of the fire, without light enough to see, might be good enough to talk by, and that was when old tales were related and memories of the past recalled, but when work beckoned at first light, it was more comfortable - and more sensible - to get to bed. The old oil lamps were, in fact, steadily improved, but when electricity finally came in the 1930s, the village quite literally passed out of the 'dark ages'.

William Hissey's life was a busy one. He employed a carter, who was responsible for looking after the horses, and a cowman to tend the cattle. The cowman took the animals to pasture, brought them in for milking at 5.30 a.m. and again at 2 p.m., milking them by hand. According to Richard Jefferies, writing in 1872, 'the commonday labourer receives 10-12 shillings a week [about £25] and if he milks a shilling more'.

Hissey's life at West Court was ruled by the seasons - the measured procession from one harvest to the next which determined the farm's routine. Once the autumn harvest was gathered in - later then than now - ploughing would begin. By the middle of October, Hissey would have sown his winter corn. In January his men would have spread manure on the unploughed fields, and the corn of the autumn harvest would have been threshed - a great event. February was a quiet month, known locally as 'February Fill-Dyke' on account of the high rainfall. It was also the month for hedging and ditching, when the men were kept busy trimming, cutting and burning. In March grain was sown, and in April root crops for cattle-food.

With the coming of the warmer weather, and the luscious grass of May and June, the happy and fragrant days of hay-making began, the most evocative of the year. During hay-time the fields smelled delicious and the village children who were sent out to deliver their fathers' 'fourses' - or tea - would stay to play in the hay, hiding in it, tossing it about and enjoying its warmth and smell. In June, when the hedges began to sprout new, tall green growth, the men were put on hedge-trimming again; and in July William Hissey's mind would have turned once more to the corn harvest and the likely success of his crops. Soon August came and all hands were in the fields. There was extra money then both for Hissey's regular workers and those he borrowed from other farmers, all of whom worked until the day-light faded. The corn harvest would have been cut by scythe or perhaps with the aid of a horse-drawn machine. Labour was cheap and three good men using scythes could cut ten acres of wheat if they worked from dawn to dusk.

The days of harvest were in some respects the most memorable of the year. The work was hard and had to be done quickly; but there were rest times at

'elevenses' and at 'fourses', when the men would lie in the shade of the trees and quench great thirsts with cold tea or beer, and eat heartily to 'stoke up' for the next spell of work.

Hissey was not only a farmer. He had also to be his own salesman. Most of what he produced - wheat, barley, beans and oats - found its way to the local markets. He would have taken a sample of his grain in a small cloth bag to show the dealers and the factors of the Corn Exchange at Hungerford - the middle-men of the agricultural world. On the strength of that sample the factors would have offered a price for the entire crop lying in sacks back at the farm. The first price was never accepted and some hard bargaining would have ensued. Corn was sold on to the miller, barley to the brewers, oats to the porridge-makers and manufacturers of cattle-feed. Livestock went to market on a separate day.

When all was gathered in, William Hissey would have provided his workers with a harvest supper by way of thanks. The Harvest Home was the crown of the year, but there were other farm feasts also: the pancake supper for the shepherd and his helpers after lambing; the plum-pudding supper for the carter and his boys to celebrate the end of spring-sowing; and the Whitsuntide Supper, attended by every one. Additionally, the women and the girls had a hay-tea at the end of hay-making each year.

Hissey would have rendered up his thanks for his harvest to God in the church - the church which he served many years as a churchwarden. He is known to have taken a great interest in the day-to-day business of the parish. He was prominent in the conduct of vestry meetings, which until 1894 had final authority in all parish matters, including the election of constables, overseers and surveyors. He saw to the parish finances and was sometimes responsible for presenting the annual accounts of the parish. As a churchwarden he retained the ancient power of arrest.

William Hissey was also an Overseer of the Poor, another important village office. One aspect of this was to enforce the Settlement Act of 1697, whereby strangers were allowed to enter a parish only if they held a certificate to show that in the event of their becoming destitute they would be taken back by their own parish. As a punishment for disobeying this instruction, paupers and their families were forced to wear a capital 'P' on their clothing. Mild offences against the Poor Law were purged by a spell in the village stocks. Serious offenders were liable to imprisonment with hard labour.

William Hissey's other function was the collection of the Poor Rate. This was levied on the property owners of a parish by two men appointed each year to be Overseers of the Poor at the vestry meeting. The money raised in this way was used to assist the elderly, the infirm and the unfortunate - when poor harvests sent up the price of grain or epidemics caused much illness. It was there to

assist those thrown out of work by the increased use of farm machinery or by soldiers rendered redundant by the return of peace. By and large it was an efficient and humane system run by overseers such as William Hissey with care and competence. It suited the smaller communities nestling in the countryside. It could not cope with the vast numbers of poor in the newly industrialised towns, for whose benefit the workhouses were introduced after 1834.

William Hissey was still residing at West Court in April 1881, aged 69, by which date he was describing himself as 'retired farmer'.²³ He had continued to resist any temptation to marry and was still being looked after by a housekeeper, Sarah Stevens 44 and a general domestic, Elizabeth Martin 15. When he died, circa 1888 – the year Jack the Ripper was stalking the fog-bound streets of London's Whitechapel – West Court became the home of his farm bailiff, the widowed Richard Bridgeman.

Although Bridgeman was seventy years of age in the year that he moved into West Court, he would have needed to be an active man, not least because his day was remarkably varied. To a large degree he was very much his own boss. It fell to his lot to take control of the agricultural side of estate life, formulating his programme and policy through a series of meetings with his employer direct - and to whom he was directly responsible. Although he held a relatively exalted position, he was an ordinary working man. Because of this, when his work inevitably brought him into day-to-day contact with other ordinary working folk, some of them were disinclined to grant him respect. Consequently, he almost certainly carried with him a written testimonial from the executors of William Hissey emphasizing the need to obey his orders.

Up betimes each day to superintend the work on the estate, the life of Richard Bridgeman was only a little less exacting than that of the agricultural labourers over whom he held sway, even though he took no part in the manual operations. It was up to him to see that the land was cultivated by orthodox, yet the most up-to-date, methods. He had also to be something of an accountant, keeping a tally of the oxen, cows and horses in the stalls, the sheep in the meadows, the poultry in the yards, the swans on the pond and the bees in the skeps. He had to ensure that all the animals were in sound condition and that they were well-treated by those whose job it was to tend them.

To complicate his life, Richard Bridgeman also had the task of deploying the labour available to him in the most cost-effective manner. He had to calculate

²³ 1881 Census returns for Inkpen. RG11/1273/ Reel 2. Berkshire County Records Office. That Hissey should have described himself as 46 in 1861 and as 69 twenty years later is indicative of the confusion which arose in people's minds about the most basic facts of life before the dawn of the age of universal literacy. The labouring classes of the Victorian era frequently only knew their ages by having them handed down in an oral tradition by their parents or relatives. Once forgotten – and they frequently were – people simply guessed. Similarly, unless folk had lived in the same place all their life, they were frequently unaware of their exact place of birth. In the column reserved for this on the census returns the words 'not known' or the initials 'N.K.' are a commonplace.

how much of the farming programme could be completed with the aid of his own men, and how many extra labourers would need to be brought in at harvest time to supplement the permanent labour force. This was no easy matter to decide upon because he had always to remember those auditors who would be round when the season was over. If more money had been spent than was strictly necessary, William Hissey's mortgagees would have had some harsh words to impart.

From end to end of the village, Richard Bridgeman's responsibilities went with him. He it was who supervised the crops and saw to the ploughing, marling, carting and seeding. He it was who issued the foodstuffs - doling it out by tally - for baking and brewing. He also superintended the allocation of the fodder for the livestock. The trimness of the hedges and the cleanliness of the ditches both came under his charge, as did the condition of the craftsmen's tools, the many implements of husbandry, and the looms and spinning-wheels of the women. We should spare a thought down the tunnel of the years for poor, harassed Richard Bridgeman. One suspects he could hardly move a yard without being accosted with some new question or problem. On the credit side, he enjoyed a rent-free house of some size and prestige, as well as a generous parcel of land for his own cultivation.

By 1891 West Court had been sub-let by the late William Hissey's mortgagees to Ann Osborne, the 47-year-old widow of John Osborne, a farmer who had been killed by a fall from his horse two years previously. At the taking of the 1891 census, a copy of which is reproduced overleaf, Ann Osborne was fifty years of age. She gave her occupation as 'farmer' and her place of birth as 'Wells, Somerset'. The acreage of her farm is not given. She shared the house with her four children: William 20, Julia 17 Mary 10 and Dorothy 4. The family kept no resident domestics. The census returns show William Hissey's retired farm bailiff, Richard Bridgeman 73, living in the unidentified property adjacent.

In 1900 Henry Hissey's mortgagees sold West Court to Mr. W.D. Browne.²⁴ However, it continued to be occupied by Ann Osborne until at least 1920.²⁵ Local knowledge attests that it then passed to Geoffrey Edward Huth [1878-1968c]. A Major in the Coldstream Guards, Huth was the eldest son of Edward Huth DL JP of Wykehurst Park, Sussex. He was educated at Eton, then at Magdalen College, Oxford. In 1907, aged 29, he married Gladys, the daughter of Sir Alexander Hargreaves Brown, 1st baronet, of Broome Hall, Surrey. The couple produced one son and two daughters, Major Huth was a member of the family of Frederick Huth & Co., merchants and bankers, which then had offices at No.12 Tokenhouse Yard, London EC2.²⁶ He was also associated with

²⁴ *Victoria County History of Berkshire* iv p.203

²⁵ From information contained in the county directories.

²⁶ The London Post Office Directory for 1919. Vol.ii p.1482

the Huth Library. In his day the telephone number at West Court was *Inkpen* 12.²⁷

When Major and Gladys Huth moved about 1925 to a house at Ham, near Marlborough, where Major Huth died circa 1968 aged about ninety, West Court became the home of Cecil Pownall Browne, the son of the W.D. Browne who had acquired West Court from William Hissey's mortgagees in 1900. By 1935 the directories were listing the widowed Mrs John Compton for the property.

In 1938 West Court was acquired by Alexander M. Scott, a Colonel in the army. When Colonel Scott died about 1975 his former home was sold to Penrhyn Pockney and Patricia his wife. At the time of writing, in July 1998, the Pockneys hold it yet.

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If it is true, as it is sometimes said, that no sound is ever entirely lost one wonders whether the images of the past ever reassert themselves at West Court? Is that scratching one hears the sound of something small behind the wainscot, or the pen of the long-dead farm bailiff, Richard Bridgeman, as he casts up his farm accounts – a reckoning for the Hissey Trustees of the oxen, cows and horses in the stalls, the sheep in the meadows, the poultry in the yards, the swans on the pond and the bees in the skeps? Could that soft murmuring be a television set left on low in another room, or the children of John Townsend – Maria, Emma and Joseph - heard through a rent in the curtain of time as they chant some long-forgotten nursery rhyme?

No doubt it couldn't be and it isn't. But it would be a brave person who dismissed such ideas entirely out of hand. Houses are more than bricks and mortar, timber and thatch. They are a palimpsest on which every occupant has left an imprint, no matter how small. To that degree the past, and those who inhabited it, still exist ... still walk with us unseen.