

Farming in C17th to C18th Canley and Fletchampstead.

Information about land ownership can be traced using family papers and wills.

The **Holbeche** family was originally from Lincolnshire but a branch settled in Fillongley certainly by the C15th. As numbers grew, the family spread to neighbouring parishes. We learn from the Hearth Tax that there was a **John Holbeche** gentleman in Stoneleigh parish in 1660s. A '**Basil Holbeche**' called yeoman of **Canley Hall** died 1687. An inventory shows this to be an 8 roomed house: hall, kitchen, parlour, dairy, chambers over kitchen, hall, also cheese chamber and a green chamber, and a barn with 152 acres of enclosed fields. At his death he was growing, winter corn and barley, peas and oats.

William Holbeche married **Jane Hart nee Gregory** of Stivichal Hall between 1709 and 1711 and died in 1742. Jane's sons were **Thomas Hart** born 1705 and another **Basil Holbeche** born 1712 + 3 daughters of the Holbeche marriage. Thomas Hart died without a direct heir leaving his property to his half-brother, Basil Holbeche who had no direct heir either. So it passed to a relative, nephew, **William Meigh**, his sister Ann's son. Jane Gregory/Hart / Holbeche died 1721.

The Meighs at Over and Nether Fletchampstead Hall

William Meigh senior, at Over Fletchampstead Hall, from c. 1670. was succeeded by his son **William Meigh junior** (b.c. 1670) on his father's death in 1695. He had married the previous year and was probably farming at nearby Nether Fletchampstead Hall. William Meigh snr was a tenant of the Smiths of Crabbett, Sussex who sold this property to Lord Leigh in 1698 as Sir John Smith was bankrupt. This sale had no effect on the tenant whose lease remained unaffected until it fell in. Meigh died worth. £601 farming 193 acres. As richer farmers they intermarried with the minor gentry like the Holbeches. William Meigh son of Basil Holbeche's sister Ann and Thomas Meigh inherited the Brook Farm property Eastern Green on Basil's death in 1752. See also Nat Alcock's book on Stoneleigh, p84/5. DR 18/10/42.

The Harts. Thomas Hart gentleman originally from Foleshill, died 1709 at Nether Fletchampstead Hall worth £466.00 with/ 251 acres of enclosed lands. He took over ownership of Brook Farm Eastern Green from Thomas Miller its owner. His son Thomas Hart by Jane Gregory of Stivichal married Mary Atkins at Corley in 1728 but she died in childbirth the next year as did the baby, Thomas died in 1730 aged only 25. See his will at Stafford. Such tragedies were common place at the time but can affect us today.

Farming trends.

Cattle dealing. The cattle market at Berkswell evidenced since a 1521 will was part of a significant trade passing through the Midlands from Wales. There were several routes: from Brown Hills or Lichfield via Meriden into Coventry and beyond or Stonebridge, Berkswell to the Welsh Road or into Coventry by way of Canley. John Hart of Gt Packington in mid Tudor days was a significant cattle dealer selling cows in Coventry's twice annual market. Welsh cattle drover William Pryce of Canley's 1592 will shows he had family links in Sutton Coldfield and Shrewsbury. Meriden's market may have declined but temporary grazing of cattle on the hoof was profitable from 1550s to 90s in the hands of the Crowe family. Unnamed temporary cattle dealers used the village in 1620s for overnight shelter and feeding leading to a chancery law suit in 1629. At the outbreak of the Civil War, butchers seem to have relocated to Meriden to outstrip the vendors at cattle markets like Warwick for example.

By mid C17th farming innovations and patterns were changing because of population growth. This area of Warwickshire was one of innovation as we can see from the writings of Walter Blythe a younger son of farming stock from near Coleshill who had moved to Allesley and he to Hampton in Arden on marriage in the decade before the Civil War.

Innovations sometimes based on different farming experiments seen in various local villages included enclosures or crop rotation. Rye and oats being superseded by spring sown barley perhaps. It depended on farm size. There were also alterations in dairying.

By the C18th Smaller farms still planting rye and legumes, were becoming more important too. After 1725 these crops were found on all farms in Stoneleigh parish. With more dairying the animals wanted barley and legumes for the feed.*** see John Webster 1 and 2***

Farmers used lime and dung for fertiliser; some grew flax and hemp. Horses replaced oxen as beasts of burden or plough animals. Typical numbers were 8 to 10 per farm.

Warwickshire cheese was famous, though no recipe survives. Was it sheep's cheese, popular once again in Beerkswell? Cheese mongers needed a licence by 1675. The main monger in Arden was the Shakespeare family with farms in Meriden, Fillongley, Arley etc Vast quantities were collected in the Arden area sometimes initially in local barns as in Meriden by Strawberry Bank and then exported by road to Stratford on Avon where utilising the river system it reached London on shallow barges. It was popular with Queen Anne.

The WEBSTERS, John Webster snr and jnr of Canley. Webster snr (died 1727) was one of the earliest farmers breeding longhorn cows. His wife Sarah inherited part of her great-uncle's farm in Canley in 1705. They moved to Stoneleigh parish by 1713, when John leased the other half of the farm from his wife's cousin. They were farming along Canley Brook by 1721. Webster bought the nucleus of his breeding herd from Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire where he owned lands on the River Trent. He and his son also bred horses. Webster jnr has not been given correct credit by agricultural writers of later C18th. He was breeding larger animals by 1730. Robert Bakewell probably only edited his book on longhorn genetics and experiments in 1740-50 era. Webster also had maternal connections with Leicestershire. He had died by 1769. Warwickshire rents were £1/5/6 an acre. Generally farms were mixed with arable with meadows along streams. Dairies had 10/15 cows + sheep and oxen. There was a problem with clover failures; farmers used bone manure on crops for cattle fodder. By 1813 drilling of seeds and light iron shod ploughs gained favour though the 4th Earl of Aylesford had such tools soon after they were invented in 1780s. If there was no dairying, farmers might fatten oxen in closed yards. They reared Tamworth pigs on sour foods like boiled swedes and meal. Tenant farmers had 90% of the land by 1830s.

High Farming Era. 1821-1881 the population increased from 12 million to 26 million. By 1841 1/5 of our food needed to be imported leading to the development of more efficient methods, tools and selective animal breeding. The Aylesford Estate held annual sheep and cattle shows and sales at Heath Farm.

Royal Agricultural Society.

This was founded in 1838 and its Journal 1840. The 1856 Prize Essay was on Warwickshire. This is on line.

Mid-century improvements included a massive programme of drainage on the southern parts of Meriden Heath, helped by government grants; there was a growth of mechanisation after 1850;

Development of the brick industry locally in Fillongley Lane led to wholesale rebuilding of farmsteads on the Aylesford Estate; individual farmers hired out portable steam threshing equipment, foods for cattle included oil cake. Chilean nitrates improved crop yields;

1870s Great Depression. This was a disaster for farming in general but milk production grew to supply the urban population in Birmingham using the railway from Hampton in Arden to transport, it as did market gardening in villages like Allesley with a demand for fruit and vegetables in nearby Coventry..

