

The Historic Buildings of Mere

Mere Park

Mere Park, almost a square mile of the Knoyle Vale, lies in the southern tip of Mere Parish, bounded on the west and north by the Gillingham-East Knoyle road. To the south is the Dorset boundary, and to the east the parish boundaries of Sedgehill and East Knoyle: over four miles in all round the park, of which the symmetry and antiquity indicate Roman planning, and this aspect is now being studied.

From a series of charters c.672 and relating to monastic land at Sedgehill and Shaftesbury, it seems that the adjoining land on the Mere side belonged to the Saxon kings and remained so for about six centuries until 1245. The broad southern boundary which separates the park from the Forest of Gillingham was chosen by the Saxons as the shire boundary. The re-affirmation, published in 1948, of the Saxon mark on the Dorset boundary, by A. W. Marks from the Glastonbury Cartulary, prompted scholarly debate which even evoked the wisdom of Tacitus, the Roman historian. The mark, "a ring of common ground which none of its settlers might take for his own", is a tract of land for Hor Appeldor to Fossa de Kurhigge (1225) now Cowbridge Drove. It consists of a ditch, a hedge and a raised mound on each side of the boundary. The width of the tract is about 22 yards and it is $\frac{1}{2}$ a mile in length. Baker refers to it in his "Notes" as the Double Hedge and a local expression was "shooting down the Double".

It is interesting that while Gillingham park overlapped the Motcombe boundary where it already existed, three Saxon hundreds, later four, and five ancient parishes, both church and civil, were drawn to meet on the symmetrical boundary of Mere Park, a fact which may well be unique among royal deer parks. These civil boundaries were probably confirmed between 688 and 725 during the reign of Ine, King of the West Saxons a few years after the charter of 672.

In the south-west corner of the park was the fish pond, a fathom deep and a quarter of an acre in area, which is still well stocked with coarse fish. It is thought to have supplied first King's Court Palace and later the Castle at Mere. The earth dug from the fish pond must have been used to make the bank for the shire boundary close by, which reaches twenty-four feet wide and six feet high from the road to the River Lodden at Gutch Pool. The Lodden appears in heraldic form in the crests of Gillingham Town and Sturminster R. D. C. Gutch Pool is a reminder of the 13th century Gutch family.

The medieval deer leap extended continuously along the county and parish boundaries from the Gillingham road to Lugmarsh and back around the park. During an archaeological survey Ordnance surveyors expressed the opinion that it is one of the finest to be seen.

The Calendar of Patent Rolls 1453 refers to "the park of Mere, alias le Conewick". The English Place Name Society has traced this through varying forms from parco de Kunewyk 1268 derived from Old English cuna (general place) and wic (cows farm). The name survives in Cunage Lane, leading to an old entrance to the park.

The Norman and Plantagenet kings Henry I, King John, Henry III and Edward I, who stayed at the Royal Palace of King's Court in the forest of Gillingham must surely have visited Mere Park. The fallow deer harboured there were chased in the forest where previously Godric the Huntsman may have enjoyed sport with Edward the Huntsman of Gillingham. Saxon's map of Dorset 1575 shows Mere Park and Gillingham Park as still the only two enclosures in Mere and Gillingham Forest. The way from the King's Court to Mere Park clearly exists by Wolfridge and Cowridge Drove. When the railway came to Gillingham in 1856 a crossing was made to preserve for public use this historic path, still marked for enthusiasts by signs of the London and S. W. Railway. Part of this ancient roadway in the park was to be seen and scheduled in Driver's survey of 1841, and a cross-section has lately been uncovered for inspection.

Accounts of 1299 submitted in Latin by Richard de Chiseldene, Seneschal of the Manor, to Edmund Plantagenet, Earl of Cornwall at Berkhamsted, show that they were busy days at Mere Park. Over a mile of fencing and hedging was done in the year; one charger being rested for 27 days ate 13½ bushels of oats. Even grass brought to the stables was costed. Walter de Cokefield was stud groom and Walter de Wilton groom to the war horses. The chargers for the Black Prince's epic feats at Crecy, Poitiers and Navarrette were by tradition taken from Mere Park.

This "Lordship royall with a faier park" had some well-known tenants and leaseholders. Among them were the families of Stourton, Zouch, Raleigh, Willoughby, Essex, Meyrick, Arundel, Goldsborough, and Aubrey.

The first Sir John Zouche was a High Steward in 1552 and a later Sir John in 1640. The family were lords of the manor of Castle Cary during the 16th and 17th centuries. Elizabeth Zouche was Abbess at Shaftesbury before and during the dissolution in 1539.

Sir Walter Raleigh and his brother Carew were appointed jointly for their lives to the office of keeper to Her Highness in 1577. Carew devoted more time to the office. He was member of parliament for Downton. Sir Walter Raleigh was Ranger of Gillingham Forest from 1593 until 1604.

Near the end of the last century when the fish pond at Mere Park was being cleaned a fine jewelled dress sword was found. It was taken to the British Museum and identifies partly from a picture, as having probably belonged to Sir Walter. It is still unreturned and its whereabouts remain a mystery.

The longest continuous tenancy from 1844 to the present day is that of the Mitchell family. At that time visits by the Seymour's pheasants across the boundary were said to be part of the amenities!

After 1590 Mere Park was gradually disparked. In 1650 a Commonwealth Parliamentary Survey shows that there were 34 fields, 17 of which were arable, indicating that considerable drainage of the heavy clay had already been done - much is still effective. Having been a Royal deer park and stud for more than six centuries Mere Park had reverted to farm land, as at the time of its early Saxon name, Kunewyck, cows farm, and over a thousand years later dairy farming is still the main enterprise. Mere Park continued to be exempt from tithes on payment moduses, 10s. for a doe at Christmas, 6s. 8d. the herbage at Lady Day and £1 for a buck at Midsummer.

An intensive underground drainage scheme using cup and saucer tiles was completed during and after the Napoleonic wars by French prisoners of war stationed in the district. Another drainage scheme using tile pipes was done in 1883 and 1884 under Cyrus Combes, as an excellent drainage engineer. Calculations show that in these two schemes about 500 miles of drains were laid by hand at depths of three feet and more and gradients in places to fractions of an inch.

A survey in 1650 detailed the original extent of the present house at Lower Mere Park which was built before 1594 as the mansion for the High Seward, possibly on older foundations and which then with an annex had fourteen rooms. It was enlarged next in 1726 by building the present middle hall and landing on part of the courtyard, and again in 1884/1885 when more rooms were joined to the original building. They had hewn oak beams and a barrel ceiling upstairs.

In 1822 Colt Hoare regarded the house at Upper Mere Park as very ancient, and in the year Driver, having made a reported survey reported to the Duchy that the house was past repairing. It was soon demolished and the present house built.

The history and the beauty of the countryside in and around Mere Park are reflected in glimpses of its past wildlife. Wolfridge stands on the track to Gillingham Park. Here wolves prowled for their quarry of fallow deer, and in 1210 King John awarded two huntsmen the then royal prize of fifteen shillings for taking a brace of wolves in the forest. Andrew Don received four pence from East Knoyle Churchwardens' account for a polecat head in 1640.

Lady Theodora Grosvenor in her charming notes remembered a pair of ravens nesting in a tall oak at Cowridge nearly a century ago, and until their recent sad decline, nightingales took sanctuary in the Saxon mark.

The fallow deer still linger to watch the careful observer before they fleet away, leaving thoughts of long past centuries at Kunewick while the cows still browse in Mere Park.