

Extracts from Lettice Sweetapple



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The Nuns of Wilton Abbey

A nun called Wulfswyth was given land in uferan tun (West Overton) by King Athelstan in AD 972. As a member of the community of Wilton Abbey, but perhaps outstationed at Overton, she was part of an extensive bureaucratic estate which came to record the highest rental receipts for a nunnery in the country in the thirteenth century. Two hundred years after Domesday however, Wilton was on the verge of bankruptcy, in spite of generous royal gifts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In 1229, 1252 and again in 1276, the tenants of Wilton were requested to contribute towards the Abbey's relief - rather as if late twentieth-century mortgagees were asked to bail out the Halifax plc.

This demand would have been particularly unwelcome in West Overton, for its resources, in comparison to those of its neighbours, were fairly limited. The growing financial troubles of the nuns at Wilton Abbey are in sharp contrast to the growth and prosperity of the neighbouring estates of the Bishop of Winchester. In fact, right across Wiltshire, indeed much of southern England, the middle decades of the thirteenth century appear to have been a particularly prosperous time. So why were the well-endowed nuns of Wilton Abbey in dire straits?

The answer lies in their lifestyle. Apparently their discipline was lax and they enjoyed a more lavish standard of living than the monks of St. Swithun's who farmed Fyfield and East Overton. To help the Abbey, the abbess was granted permission between 1221 and 1246 to take over a hundred trees per year from within the royal forest of Savernake. Yet this was still not enough to cover their costs of living, so the community, instead of retrenchment, foolishly plunged into illegality to sustain their version of a life of holiness. They decided to begin assarting areas of the forest on the quiet, as well as reclaiming land for tillage without royal permission. Such activities could not possibly go unnoticed for long and, inevitably, the Abbess was charged with illegally obtaining timber and was fined. Today, the result of the Abbey's desperate attempts to balance its books is reflected in the arable land around Park Farm and is remembered in the name of Abbess Cottage. Both lie at the very south-eastern tip of what is now Fyfield parish in what was a detached part of West Overton manor. Bearing in mind what was simultaneously happening in adjacent Lockeridge, the woods were certainly alive in the thirteenth century (55).

The Overtons

Local people will be surprised to see that sub – heading 'Overtons' plural? Surely there is only one (Overton, West Overton? The story goes something like this. The existing village is wrongly called West Overton. It was created, at least in name, only a century ago, though its physical presence goes back a thousand years earlier. Today's village is actually made up of two villages each belonging to a separate estate, each with its own history. The estate of Saxon West Overton belonged to the Abbess of Wilton and passed to the Earl of Pembroke at the Dissolution. Its main village was first of all right on the western edge of the estate, along what is now the Ridgeway by East Kennet. Some cottages are strung along the road there today but effectively this original West Overton, with its church (Chapter 9), might have already been abandoned by AD 972. Two tenth century land charters clearly imply that 'old' West Overton had already moved by that date. A new West Overton was created over to the east. The village moved across the Abbess estate to where it was to stay right up to the present day. It was put down beside the already existing East Overton, in effect making the western half of a double village, the village now so misleadingly called West Overton. For that present village as clearly divided into two named settlements throughout medieval times. The western part was West Overton, the eastern part was East Overton. Each belonged to a separate manor. They were divided by the old estate boundary; the same point can be expressed by saying that each was built up against the old boundary.

All this smacks very much of landlords jostling for position and status.

Perhaps as much as eight centuries later, Lettice Sweetapple lived in this 'new' West Overton. Unfortunately, we do not know for certain when it was created. However, disguised among its streets, lanes and modern housing estates are the lineaments of a rectangular-shaped settlement. This included the manor farm at its north-west corner. The manorial mill, possibly on the same site as that referred to in the Domesday Book, was astride a leat immediately to the north. We suspect that the new village with its manorial fittings may have been laid out on hitherto arable land during a phase of ecclesiastical and land reform in the mid/late tenth century. It is just possible, on one reading anyway, that the AD 972 charter is telling us precisely that but, whether new or not, by that date the village of the West Overton estate was where it is now occupying the land west of Frog Lane. There was also Saxon East Overton (48). This today forms the eastern half of the village called West Overton, that is the area east of Frog Lane but including South Farm. This area contains the church, St Michael's and All Angels, but much of it is now a grass field between the church and the site of South Farm, destroyed in the 1960's. This apparently empty field, called Ring close in 1819, is full of archaeological features - banks, lines of sarcens, house-sites and former lanes. Our survey sorted out the confusion, showing a recognisable pattern of abandoned settlement remains, in some sense presumably 'old' East Overton. Quite when 'old' was we do not yet know for the field was virtually empty when it is first depicted on maps in the later eighteenth century (30).

Our best guess - and it really is no more - is that somewhere within the complex of earthworks, probably up near the church, is the earliest East Overton, Roman or Saxon up to about AD 900. We guess too that the earthworks themselves include, in what appears to be a distinctly rectilinear pattern of the sort that major landlords promoted, an element of planning which is broadly medieval and possibly late Saxon. Overton, together with South Farm and the houses still along the north side of the road up to the former manor house (col. pl. 24) and church, we envisage this as representing medieval East Overton in, say the thirteenth century. Desertion could have occurred for any one or more reasons thereafter, but we would hazard a guess for which there is no evidence at all - yet. Perhaps the site was simply cleared, of peasants, buildings and smells, in the later sixteenth century to improve the setting of; and view from, the much-improved medieval manor house, now becoming a gentleman's residence as a secular landscape began to emerge from the many tenurial changes

following the Dissolution. East Overton was always the more important Overton. It belonged to the Bishop of Winchester and was therefore part of; indeed a significant part of; one of the largest, richest and most powerful estates in England. So too was Fyfield, and the two manors tended to be run together, always with East Overton

as the dominant partner. Indeed, East Overton was one of the pre-eminent Winchester manors, its 2256 sheep in 1248 representing a remarkable rate of growth in the thirteenth century Yet East Overton has been almost forgotten and its former residents must be turning in their graves around St Michael's at the fact that the lesser, upstart West Overton has now blanketed their former existence by taking over the name of the village to which it was in fact an addition.

In 1086, of course, the distinction was quite clear to local people, and even the Domesday commissioners were in no doubt that two different places existed. Of Norman West Overton, they recorded that the manorial holding, or demesne, covered 7 hides and was worked by 2 serfs with 2 ploughs. The rest of the villagers consisted of 11 peasants who farmed the remaining land, again with 2 ploughs. The Domesday entry also tells us that the estate contained 5 acres of meadow 20 acres of pasture and 8 acres of woodland, as well as a mill on the Kennet which paid 10s a year to the manor as rent.

Yet these early civil servants did not in fact complete their job and, as a result, we do not know how many people farmed the neighbouring estate of East Overton, Though the scribe left a space on the page, no-one returned to insert the information. King William may not have noticed, but we are sorely handicapped by that clerical oversight. We do know, though, that the land was worked by 7 ploughs. So we can make a little calculation. If West Overton had 13 peasants working 4 ploughs, then with 7 ploughs and assuming comparability between the manors, the adult males of East Overton could well have numbered around 20-25 This is a fair size for the late eleventh century. The village population could, therefore, have been well over a hundred on these hard figures alone, never mind our trying to estimate the number of people who, for whatever reason, did not enjoy the privilege of working the manorial ploughs.

East Overton also contained 15 acres (6ha) of meadow, a pasture 8 furlongs long by 4 broad (about 320 acres, 130ha) and woodland 5 furlongs long by 2 broad (100 acres; 4ha). This large, rectangular area of pasture lay on the downs to the north of Down Barn, the southern part of Overton Down which had been so active in Roman times (see Chapter 6). We know from our study of the Saxon charters that this same area had been pasture for at least the 150 years before Domesday. It was more surprising to discover, however, that the woodland, described as a rectangular area of about 100 acres (40 ha) in this 900-year-old document, reflects the size and shape of East Overton's wood throughout history, right up until the Second World War. We note later from other evidence in Chapter 8 that the location and extent of West Woods as a whole seem to have been stable since prehistoric times.

Start by the Church

Three Saxon charters have survived for our area. In 939, 15 hides of land at East Overton, a place known of old to the local inhabitants as Bank Farm near the river Cynetan, were granted by King Athelstan to Wulfswyth, a nun at Winchester. Just over thirty years later, King Eadgar granted 10 hides of land at Overton West Overton by the Cynetan (River Kennet), to lady Alfaed, who was probably also a nun but this time at Wilton Abbey. The third plot of land which interests us was at the northern edge of the large southerly estate of Oare which pushed right up against Wansdyke in Fyfield. This land was first granted in 839 to a certain Aethelhelm, but then re-granted in 934 by King Athelstan to Wilton Abbey Both Oare and West Overton, therefore, became part of the wealthy Wilton Abbey estate in the 930s. East Overton, on the other hand, came under the domain of the Bishops of Winchester.

These charters, with their descriptions of streams and ponds, paths and fords, flowers and trees, can provide a reader possessing some imagination with a vivid picture of how ilie landscape was farmed, where people lived and worked, and what sorts of plants and animals were occupying the countryside. Such documents give an unparalleled insight into late Saxon England, its economy and embryonic industries, its farms and homes, even its beliefs. The inclusion of heathen graves, barrows and standing stones (62), along boundaries which have divided the territories of English communities for many centuries (24), also gives us a brief insight into the local folklore of those Saxon peasants. Wodensdic Wodensdene and mere graje and hursely are all places with eerie, heathen connotations - the ditch and bank built by Woden, the great god of Germanic legend; while 'pond grove' and horses' clearing suggest worship of other deities. Suddenly the image of a winter evening in the Great Hall appears, with children huddled around a fire, listening to the story-teller recounting the days when demons, druids and thunderous gods stalked the land around Overton long before their Christian salvation. A church is usually the fixed point in a village around which houses come and go, but no sign of a church has ever been discovered in the first Saxon West Overton (Chapter 7) Careful analysis of the charter, however, tells the landscape detective where to look for clues in the fields hereabouts. As the preceding point on the charter is Lurkeley Hill and the next one a 'streetford' aeniss the Kennet (55), the 'churchstead' would have had to have stood at the western edge of the estate on the boundary now marked by the Ridgeway (61). At first we thought the site may have been near the sixteenth-century Orchard Farmhouse, probably in the area of the original village of West Overton, but the early maps from the Record Office pointed to a spot a little further south. At the junction of The Ridgeway and the track called Double Hedge Way which travels across the downs to West Woods, the cartographer of 1794 had inked in 'Church Ditch'. Caution has to be shown here, for this land may simply have been ecclesiastical. The reference certainly does not prove a church, let alone the Anglo-Saxon church we sought, stood here, yet such a reference might conceivably have caught an earlier memory; and the location itself appears promising (58).

The small church was presumably a simple wooden building in origin but possibly with at least stone foundations by the tenth century. It could have served the needs not only of the small community' straddled along the Ridgeway but also the travellers who were increasingly using this downland route in Anglo-Saxon times to journey, with their flocks, herds and goods, between the Thames Valley and the Wessex chalklands to the south. West Overton in, say the eighth and ninth centuries could well have been a busy spot, the perfect place for a church to prosper catering for pilgrims weary shepherds, monastic staff on business, traders and warriors. The remnants of the church, wherever it stood, have not yet been discovered, even after an extensive aerial photographic search. Walking the fields after the next ploughing, though, may prove more successful.

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