

Soham Manor - A Brief History

In 1086 the largest manor in Soham was that comprising 9½ hides, which before 1066 had been part of King Edward's ancient demesne, and in 1086 was still possessed by King William. It remained with succeeding kings, save for the alienation of Barway, until the late 12th century.



William The Conqueror



King John



Hubert de Burgh

In 1200 King John gave the whole manor to Alan, son of Henry, a Breton count, who was deprived for disloyalty in 1202. John's chamberlain, the future justiciar Hubert de Burgh, who received the whole royal manor in 1203, kept it longer. When created earl of Kent in 1227, Hubert was formally confirmed in hereditary possession of the king's Soham manor. Although Henry III seized Soham when he dismissed Hubert in 1232, it was restored to him when he was pardoned late in 1234. Within four months Hubert had rewarded Philip Basset, who in 1233 helped free him from captivity in Devizes castle (Wilts.), by giving him 176 acres of his Soham demesne with lordship over numerous tenants.

After Hubert died in 1243 and his widow and joint tenant Margaret of Scotland in 1259, his part of that Soham manor descended to his son John de Burgh. In 1273 Edward I induced John to sell him the reversion of Soham among other estates, retaining a life interest. After John died in 1274, Edward took possession of rights there. In 1283 the king granted that manor, in an exchange, to Sir Robert de Crèvecoeur (d. 1316) for life, but recovered a 'moiety' of it. In 1299 Edward included Soham in the dower of his second wife, Margaret of France, from whom it passed in 1314 to Hugh Despenser, heir to Basset's share.



Henry 111



Edward 1



Queen Philippa of Hainault

In the mid 13th century Philip Basset enlarged his Soham manor by purchasing freehold in and around Soham. He also in 1262 obtained from John de Burgh a lease during Philip's life of Burgh's manor there. Philip married his surviving daughter and heir Aline first c. 1260 to Hugh Despenser (killed 1265), next to Roger Bigod, earl of Norfolk. Bigod succeeded to the Soham estate.

In 1275 Edward I obliged the earl to hand over that manor until he had paid certain debts to the king. After Aline died in 1281, Bigod reluctantly, having had no issue by her, surrendered Soham to her son by her first marriage, Hugh Despenser, then just a child. Hugh was a prominent supporter of Edward II, who in 1314 granted him the reversion of the Crown's share of the Soham manor, which Queen Margaret within a month agreed to lease to him. Soham was among Despenser's manors plundered by Edward's opponents in 1321-2. After Despenser's execution in 1326, Soham was seized for Queen Isabel. When she fell from power in 1330, Edward III included the whole manor, reunited as part of the royal demesne, in the dower of his queen, Philippa of Hainault.

Philippa, who retained Soham until her death in 1368, leased her manor from c. 1340 probably until the 1360s to the neighbouring priory of Ely. In 1370 the king granted a life interest in Soham to the military commander Sir Robert Knolles and his wife Constance. Edward also included it in 1372 in the endowment of his son, John, duke of Lancaster, who by c. 1390 had assigned it to his son, Henry, earl of Derby. It returned to the Crown upon Henry's accession to the throne in 1399, remaining part of the Duchy of Lancaster estates until the early 17th century.



Henrietta Maria



Queen

Even after its sale then that manor, later called **SOHAM AND FORDHAM**, was regularly described as parcel of the Duchy. From the late 15th century the manor was again sometimes included in the dowers of queens consort, and was probably intended c. 1625 to form part of that of Queen Henrietta Maria.



King James 1



King Charles 1



Sir Robert Heath

A first attempt under James I to sell the DUCHY manor in 1604 fell through by 1607. In 1625 James agreed to grant it to a Scots favourite, John Ramsay, earl of Holderness (d. 1626). The earl shortly assigned his interest to Edward and Robert Ramsay, to whom Charles I formally sold Soham, subject to a £90 feefarm, in 1626. Probably then, as certainly later, they were acting for Sir Robert Heath, then Charles's solicitor, soon attorney general, and, 1631-4, chief justice of the Common Pleas. Although Sir Robert settled Soham in 1636 on the marriage of his eldest son Edward Heath, he remained effectively in control into the early 1640s. Edward's legal ownership saved it from forfeiture when Parliament confiscated the royalist chief justice's lands in 1647, but Edward himself, heavily fined for his own royalist allegiance, had to mortgage his Soham estate from 1647, and sold it in 1654, to Sir Thomas Chicheley (kt. 1670) of Wimpole. Chicheley greatly altered the composition of the manorial estate. In 1655 he bought much of the estate from Samuel Thornton. Chicheley, knighted in 1670, also added to the 500 a. in the north-west of Soham's fens which he obtained as inclosures in 1658 by taking over c. 1,050 a. of the fen allotments in the north-east of Soham assigned from the 1630s to the Bedford Level Adventurers.



Sir Thomas Chicheley

He also enjoyed some 1,335 a. in the newly drained Soham Mere, and the 138-a. Sealode fen. By the 1680s Chicheley thus owned up to 3,300 a. in Soham.

Following his death in 1690, his estate passed to his eldest son Sir John's widow Isabel, named as lady from 1699 until her death in 1709, and her son John Chicheley, lord 1710-18. In 1719 the lordship passed to Edward Hughes, brother-in-law and probably representative of Edward Harrison, an East India Company merchant and director, who owned the manor from 1719 until he died in 1732.

Soham was inherited by his daughter Audrey's husband Charles Townshend, 'Lord Lynne', who succeeded his father as Viscount Townshend in 1738 and died in 1764.

It descended to his son and successor George, created a marquess in 1787 (d. 1807), recorded as lord of Soham until at least 1804. The lordship and remaining manorial estate, was put up for sale in 1807, and bought, by 1808 at latest, by Thomas Martin Dennis of Kettlesey (Norf.). Almost at once they were acquired by William Dunn Gardner, who had just married his daughter Sarah to the next Marquess Townshend's son and eventual successor.



Sir Charles Townshend



Fordham Abbey once home to the Dunn Gardner's

The lordship descended to Dunn Gardner's heirs with his Fordham Abbey estate until the 20th century. In 1974 Mrs. Miriam Leader, the Dunn Gardner heiress, sold it to Mr. Timothy Clark, of Clark & Butcher.

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