

9. The Monks and Their Tenants

From the account rolls kept by the bailiffs of the abbot of Tavistock we can obtain a fairly detailed picture of his tenants in St Thomas in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.⁽⁶⁵⁾ The accounts list the names of all who paid rent to the bailiff, and give details of the property occupied by each individual.

In each account roll the first group mentioned are the freeholders, whose lands had probably once been part of the demesne, but had long ago been granted away in perpetuity in return for an annual rent. By far the most important of the freeholders in the 1460s was Thomas Holand, a lawyer and member of Parliament for the city of Exeter, whose house at Bowhill can still be seen today. The Holands were a Devonshire family who acquired wealth and influence in the course of the 15th century. It was Richard, father of Thomas Holand, who (probably about the year 1410) built for himself a substantial mansion on the north side of what is now Dunsford Road.⁽⁷¹⁾ Bowhill house still possesses a magnificent medieval timber roof; at the time when it was built it must have been the finest private house in St Thomas.



Bowhill house, photographed in 2024

[photograph by Geoffrey Yeo]

In 1473, ten years after the surviving account rolls begin, there were about twenty freehold tenants of the manor of Cowick. The total amount due from them each year was just under £17, of which almost half was to be collected from Thomas Holand. As the level of the freeholders' payments had probably been set long ago, it is unlikely that they reflected the current value of the properties. Thomas Holand paid 8 pounds, 2 shillings and 7 pence yearly; this covered his occupation not only of Bowhill house itself but also of "lands and tenements in diverse places within the manor". He may have possessed all the land between Bowhill and what is now Isleworth Road.⁽⁷²⁾

None of the other freeholders paid even a quarter of the sum which the bailiff collected from Thomas Holand. The heirs of John Wynard paid 8 shillings for land near Marsh Barton, and an additional 18 pence in lieu of the six capons which had originally formed part of his rent. John Toket paid just 2 shillings for his tenement and garden “on the west side of the churchyard of St Thomas the Martyr”. The heirs of Philip Copleston paid a little over 23 shillings for freehold lands and tenements “in the west part of the road leading to Alphington”.⁽⁷²⁾ These were probably where Queens Road was built in the mid 19th century, in the area long known as “The Freehold”.

The next group of tenants were those who held property “at will”. In the 1470s there were fourteen such tenancies in the manor of Cowick; most of the properties concerned were cottages in Cowick Street. Repairs to the walls, doors and thatched roofs of these cottages were the responsibility not of the tenants but of the abbot of Tavistock as lord of the manor. In theory, perhaps, the tenants could be ejected at the will of the abbot, but they were almost certainly given some protection by manorial customs limiting the abbot’s power. Nevertheless in the six years between 1476 and 1482 all but two of these properties changed hands at least once. From the tenants’ point of view a tenancy “at will” must have been the least attractive available in Cowick. Men like Henry Vincent, the weaver who in the 1470s paid 6 shillings and 8 pence yearly for a Cowick Street cottage, would not have felt that their tenancy was as secure as they might have wished.⁽⁶⁵⁾

The tenancies at will were probably those which in earlier times had been “villein” tenancies, occupied by men who had no personal freedom and were bound to the manor on which they lived. All were small properties and in 1480 only one tenant paid more than 10 shillings in rent. By this date, however, the tenants were by no means always men of lowly status. One cottage was let to the vicar of St Thomas, while a barn and a field in Cowick were rented by Sir John Courtenay as tenant at will. By the 1520s these properties were being let to tenants for the term of their life, or for the life of the tenant and one or two other persons such as his wife or son.⁽⁷³⁾

Under a system of this kind the occupiers of the cottages enjoyed greater security of tenure. A prospective new tenant would attend the manor court of Cowick; after swearing fealty to the abbot he would be admitted to his tenancy, and given a copy of the relevant entry in the roll recording the court’s business; and as this copy provided evidence of his right to occupy the property, he would be entitled to describe himself as a copyholder.

The third group of tenants were those who rented, for a limited term, a part of the demesne lands of the manor. In the 15th and 16th centuries there were about 300 acres of demesne land in Cowick and Exwick. The demesne in Cowick lay chiefly around the site of the priory, and included three fields “above the highway” (i.e. west of Cowick Lane), with at least eight others between the priory and Cowick Street. To the east lay Cowick wood, also part of the demesne, which remained as woodland until about 1608 when the trees were cut down and the land converted to pasture.⁽⁷⁴⁾

By the 1460s all the demesne lands were in the hands of tenants; the monks retained for their own use only the priory buildings and the plots immediately adjoining them. In 1533 there were twentyone tenants renting parts of the demesne. The fields on the west side of Cowick Lane had been let to Thomas Horsey and Nicholas Stocker, each of whom paid 20 shillings a year in rent; while a barton house which had been built on the demesne lands at Exwick was in the occupation of Simon Jakes, who paid to the monks the annual sum of two pounds.⁽⁷⁵⁾

Some of the demesne tenants were copyholders, admitted to their tenancy at the manorial court; but others held their lands under a lease from the abbot for a fixed term of years.⁽⁷⁶⁾ The total annual income from the demesne lands in 1480 was a little over £31, and in the 1530s almost £40.⁽⁷⁷⁾ These figures represented the true value of the properties more exactly than did the income from the freeholders, because the regular opportunities to grant new leases or copyholds enabled the monks to adjust the rents when necessary.

The fourth and final group were those who rented land outside the demesne at Exwick and in the area then known as Barley, which extended from Little John's Cross to Redhills. In the 1520s they included John Rondell, the tenant of Over Barley, Thomas Hamlyn, who probably occupied the farm which still bears his name, and Henry Loveryn, the miller at Exwick. In November 1520 Henry Loveryn found that he was late in submitting his accounts; the note which he then drafted still survives, addressed by the miller "To John Thomas, steward to my lord of Tavistock, this to be delivered in all haste possible".⁽⁷⁸⁾

In the 1470s all eleven of these properties were held as tenancies at will, although the abbot was not liable to pay for repair work except at the mill. Between 1476 and 1482 not one of the tenancies changed hands, and the introduction of the word "conventionary" to describe these tenants from about the year 1500 suggests that agreements for secure tenure had been negotiated at this time. In the 16th century it appears that the so-called "conventionary" tenants of Exwick and Barley were copyholders; two who obtained copyholds in 1522 were still in occupation in 1560. Most of the properties comprised a number of adjoining fields which were probably let as working farms.⁽⁷⁹⁾ In the 1480s all but one of the tenants paid a rent of more than 13 shillings. The abbot's total income from this group of tenants rose from about 9 pounds and 17 shillings in 1480 to a little over 11 pounds and 7 shillings in the 1530s.⁽⁷⁷⁾

In 1517 there were altogether fiftythree people paying rent to the abbot's bailiff for properties in the manor of Cowick. The total number of tenancies was greater than this, as some individuals rented more than one property. In addition there must have been a large number of sub-tenants, since much of the land was rented by men of substance who would not have needed it for their own occupation. In 1506 two fields beside the churchyard were let to John Brydgeman, the Exeter merchant who also had the tenancy of the Bear inn, the abbot's town house in South Street; in 1526 thirty two acres of demesne at Barley Parks on the north side of the road to Dunsford were rented by the abbot's steward, the influential lawyer Sir Thomas Denys.⁽⁸⁰⁾ In both cases the land must have been sub-let, but the sub-tenants' names are unknown.

From the evidence of the parish registers, which begin in 1554, it seems that there were between 500 and 750 people living in St Thomas parish in the 16th century.⁽⁸¹⁾ Some families lived outside the manor of Cowick, but most were probably sub-tenants of the freeholders, lessees and copyholders of the manor.

(65) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/1; W1258M/G4/53/4.

(71) *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* 66 (1934), pp.94-104; *Devon & Cornwall Notes & Queries* 18 (1935), pp.300-7.

(72) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/1, 12-13 Edw.IV.

(73) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/4, 19-20 Edw.IV; W1258M/G4/49/1, survey of 1560.

(74) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/49/1, survey of 1560; W1258M/G4/53/1; W1258M/G4/52/27.

(75) *Devon & Cornwall Notes & Queries* 35 (1986), p.324; Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/1, 25-6 Hen.VIII.

(76) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/52/1-11; W1258M/G4/49/1, survey of 1560.

(77) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/4, 19-20 Edw.IV; W1258M/G4/53/1, 25-6 Hen.VIII.

(78) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/1, 12-13 Hen.VIII; W1258M/G4/53/5.

(79) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/1; W1258M/G4/53/4; W1258M/G4/49/1, survey of 1560.

(80) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/1, 8-9, 17-18 Hen.VIII; W1258M/G4/52/4.

(81) R. Pickard, *Population and Epidemics of Exeter* (Exeter, 1947), p.77.