



VCH Oxfordshire Texts in Progress

Swerford and Showell

Landownership

In the Middle Ages most of the parish belonged to Swerford or Showell manors, although the latter was divided early on amongst several religious houses and other landholders, until reunited (without manorial rights) in the 16th century. Swerford manor was much reduced by the 18th century, the lordship descending from the 1770s with Swerford park and its newly built country house. Other early holdings included a substantial glebe, and a small medieval estate held of Swerford manor continued into the 20th century, long focused on Swerford House.¹ Substantial later landowners included the Boultons of Tew Park (in Great Tew), who bought Pomfret farm c.1816 and owned 323 a. in Swerford in 1910, the Great Tew estate retaining Buttercombe and Ley farms in 2009.² By the later 17th century enfranchisement of copyholds had also helped create some smaller landowners,³ half a dozen people owning between 15 a. and 60 a. in 1803.⁴ Until the 18th century most lords and larger landowners were non-resident, although a medieval manorial site at Swerford succeeded the earlier castle, and owners of the Swerford House estate resided intermittently from at least the later Middle Ages.

Swerford Manor

Descent to 1770

In 1086 the 5-hide manor of Swerford was held with Hook Norton by Robert d'Oilly (d. c.1091/2),⁵ probably then (as later) including land in Southrop in Hook Norton parish.⁶ The d'Oilly family probably erected Swerford's small riverside castle,⁷ but subinfeudated the manor at an early date, since during Henry I's reign it was forfeited by Geoffrey Luvet and granted to Wigan Marshal, whose son Ralph lost possession to the d'Oillys after his absence

¹ Below, this section; below, relig. hist. (advowson, glebe, and tithes).

² Below (Lyons estate); OHC, QSD/L/271; *ibid.* DV/X/62; OCC Register of Landowner Statements, no. 1604 (accessed online).

³ Bodl. MSS Ch. Oxon. 2776–8; TNA, PROB 11/368/391 (John Humphries, 1681); *Oxon. Poll, 1754*, 38.

⁴ OHC, enclosure award and map (including members of the long-established Franklin and Humphreys families).

⁵ DB, f. 161.

⁶ Above, Hook Norton, landownership.

⁷ Below.

on the Third Crusade (1189–92).⁸ His attempts to regain it were unsuccessful, and the d'Oillys retained the manor until the 1220s, when the last Henry d'Oilly (d. 1232) acknowledged the lordship of Peter son of Herbert.⁹ Peter was followed in 1235 by his son Reginald and before 1279 by Reginald's son John,¹⁰ on whose death in 1303 the manor passed to Hugh le Despenser, Lord le Despenser. In 1305 he granted a lifetime lease to Sir John de Hadlow,¹¹ who retained possession after Despenser's execution in 1326. Eleanor, widow of Herbert son of John, nevertheless obtained a dower portion in 1328.¹²

In 1337 the king granted the reversion to Sir John de Moleyns (d. 1360), who obtained possession on Hadlow's death in 1346.¹³ From 1357 Moleyns was imprisoned, but in 1359 his estates, including Swerford, were restored to his son William (later Sir William) because they had been demised to him before his father's impeachment.¹⁴ Sir William (d. 1381) made a lifetime grant of the manor to feoffees, an arrangement confirmed in 1378 by his son Richard (d. 1384),¹⁵ and the manor was subsequently acquired by Hugh (d. 1386), earl of Stafford, then held in turn by his sons Thomas (d. 1392) and William (d. 1395).¹⁶ The manor was not amongst the estates of William's brother and heir Edmund at his death in 1403, although in 1428 Edmund's son Humphrey (d. 1460) held (as ½ knight's fee) certain lands and tenements in Swerford formerly belonging to John de Moleyns.¹⁷

The manor itself was apparently recovered by Richard Moleyns' grandson William Moleyns (d. 1429), who enjoyed the same liberties in Swerford granted to his ancestor John de Moleyns.¹⁸ William's heir was his infant daughter Eleanor, and on his death the manor was retained by the king until 1440 when, still a minor, Eleanor was married to Robert Hungerford, later Lord Hungerford and Lord Moleyns (d. 1464).¹⁹ In 1460 the couple mortgaged Swerford and other properties to pay for Hungerford's ransom in Aquitaine,²⁰ and in 1471 Alice Chaucer, duchess of Suffolk, bought the manor from Walter Blount (Lord Mountjoy).²¹ Alice was succeeded in 1475 by her son John (d. 1492), whose younger son

⁸ *Rot. de Ob. et Fin.* (Rec. Com.), 21; *Cartae Baronum* (PRS n.s. 62), 130.

⁹ *Rot. Cur. Reg.* (Rec. Com.), I, 20–1; II, 59, 132; *Cur. Reg.* I, pp. 176, 376–8, 420, 429; XII, p. 357. The barons of Hook Norton retained overlordship in the late 14th century: e.g. *Cal. Inq. p.m.* XVI, p. 160; XVII, pp. 90, 483.

¹⁰ *Cal. Close* 1234–7, 105; *Book of Fees*, II, 828; *Rot. Hund.* II, 726; *Feudal Aids*, IV, 160.

¹¹ *Cat. Ancient Deeds*, II, A. 3203–3204; *Cal. Inq. p.m.* VIII, 494. For Hadlow (or Haudlo): *Complete Peerage*, VI, 398–400.

¹² TNA, SC 8/111/5537; *Cal. Close*, 1327–30, 331–2; 1337–9, 273.

¹³ *Cal. Chart.* 1327–41, 399; *Cal. Close* 1337–9, 273; *Cal. Inq. p.m.* XXV, 331.

¹⁴ *VCH Oxon.* XVI, 74; *Cal. Close* 1354–60, 564.

¹⁵ *Cal. Close* 1377–81, 198.

¹⁶ *Cal. Inq. p.m.* XVI, p. 160; XVII, pp. 90, 483; *Complete Peerage*, VI, 12 (1), 177–80.

¹⁷ *Cal. Inq. p.m.* XVIII, no. 853; *Feudal Aids*, IV, 188.

¹⁸ *Cal. Inq. p.m.* (Rec. Com.), IV, 199 (dated 1439–40). His inquisition post mortem does not mention Swerford manor: *ibid.* 127; *Cal. Inq. Misc.* VIII, p. 187.

¹⁹ TNA, SC 6/961/32–33; *VCH Oxon.* XVI, 74; *Complete Peerage*, IX, 42–3.

²⁰ *Cal. Close* 1454–61, 452; *Cal. Inq. p.m.* (Rec. Com.), IV, 328–9.

²¹ *Cal. Close* 1468–76, 176.

and heir Edmund (d. 1513) fled abroad in 1501 and was formally attainted three years later.²² Swerford manor was vested in trustees for the life of Edmund's wife Margaret (d. 1515), but in 1509 Henry VII nevertheless granted it to Sir Ralph Verney (d. 1525).²³

Verney was succeeded at Swerford by one of his sons, John, who died without male heirs in 1540.²⁴ The manor then reverted to the crown and in 1545 Henry VIII sold it to his privy councillor Sir Thomas Pope (d. 1559), and it subsequently followed the same descent as Hook Norton until 1770, having been bought by Ralph Brideoake (d. 1678), bishop of Chichester, in the early 1670s.²⁵ As at Hook Norton, remaining copyholds were apparently sold at that time.²⁶

Descent from 1770 (Swerford Park Estate)

By the time it was settled on Henry (d. 1812), duke of Buccleuch in 1770 the manor comprised only the 58-a. Swerford park, a tenanted farm of just under 2 yardlands, and £1 7s. 6d. quitrent. The park itself, which straddled the Hook Norton boundary, had belonged to the manor since the Middle Ages, and in 1775 was sold with the lordship, a trout stream, and 'a neat dwelling house and offices lately erected',²⁷ built presumably for the duke of Buccleuch.²⁸ That was replaced by a grander house soon afterwards, and the lordship descended with Swerford park until the 20th century.²⁹

The purchaser in 1775 was the Chipping Norton wool-stapler Edward Witts (1746–1816), whose wife Agnes was a younger daughter of John Travell (d. 1762) of Swerford House.³⁰ In 1791 Witts' financial difficulties forced him to sell the estate to James Smith Barry (d. 1801),³¹ whose trustees retained it until 1819 when it was bought by General Sir Robert Bolton (d. 1836).³² Bolton was followed by his daughter Louisa (d. 1839) and her husband Samuel Davis (d. 1874), then by their son Robert Bolton Davis (d. 1896), and by

²² VCH Oxon. 18, p. 203.

²³ TNA, C 43/2/42; *L&P Hen. VIII*, XXI (2), p. 428; *Complete Peerage*, XII (1), 451–3.

²⁴ TNA, SC 6/HENVIII/6904.

²⁵ *Cal. SP Dom.* 1675--6, 412; TNA, C 8/299/16.

²⁶ e.g. Bodl. MS Ch Oxon 2777–8, 3771; TNA, PROB 11/368 (will of John Humphries, 1681).

²⁷ OHC, Hyde IV/i/1; Oxf. Jnl Syn. 27 May 1775; for park, below, econ. hist. In the early 19th cent. the estate comprised 33¾ a. in Hook Norton and 24½ a. in Swerford: OHC, Shrew. VII/i/1; Bodl. (R) MS Dep C17:49 (160); OHC, enclosure map.

²⁸ Jefferys, *Oxon. Map* (1767) shows buildings at or near the site of Swerford Park, although those may have been the earlier lodge.

²⁹ Below (Swerford Park); OHC, M1/1/F1/33; *ibid.* Hyde IV/i/1; *PO Dir. Oxon.* (1854 edn); *Kelly's Dir. Oxon.* (1883 and later edns).

³⁰ A. Sutton (ed.), *The Complete Diary of a Cotswold Lady, Vol. 1: The Lady of Rodborough, 1788–1793* (2008), 21–36.

³¹ *Ibid.* 23, 36, 44–5; OHC, QSD/L/271; *ibid.* MS Oxf. Dioc. b 11, f. 143.

³² OHC, QSD/L/271; TNA, PROB 11/1860/113.

Robert's daughter Sophie and her husband Sir Charles King, Bt.³³ Later owners included members of the O'Connor family, and from 1983 (when the estate comprised 201 a.) the Law family.³⁴

Swerford Castle and Manor House

Swerford's castle, which commanded the river crossing to Hook Norton, was of a type which might have been constructed at any time in the century after the Conquest, comprising a probably wooden tower on a motte, and two baileys which probably contained stables, kitchens, store rooms, and possibly a windmill. Based on pottery and other finds from trial excavations, E.M. Jope suggested that it was constructed during the Anarchy of 1135–53 to protect the d'Oilly barony, making it a counterpart to the castle at Ascott D'Oyley to the south-west.³⁵ If, however, the d'Oilly family were indeed the builders (as seems likely), then presumably the castle was erected at an earlier date, since Swerford manor was subinfeudated before the end of Henry I's reign (1100–35).³⁶



The castle earthworks, viewed from the churchyard

³³ TNA, PROB 11/1921/157; OHC, par. reg. transcripts; *Kelly's Dir. Oxon.* (1883 and later edns); OHC, DV/X/62.

³⁴ *Sale Cat., Swerford Park* (1983); copy in OHC; local information (2021).

³⁵ E.M. Jope, 'Castle Hill, Swerford', *Rep. Oxf. Archaeol. Assocn* 84 (1938), 85–93; HER, PRN 1151 (incl. DRF); 'Swerford Castle, Oxfordshire: Topographical Survey' (unpubl. Oxford Archaeology report, 2012); NHLE, no. 1014748. Cf. *VCH Oxon.* XIX, 88–9, 94 (Ascott D'Oyley).

³⁶ Above (descent to 1770).

The castle appears to have been abandoned before 1200 (being possibly slighted as early as the 1150s), and was replaced by an unfortified manor house on a neighbouring site. No 13th-century evidence has been found, but Sir John de Hadlow appears to have been locally based in the early 14th century,³⁷ and manorial buildings repaired in the 15th included barns and a dovecot.³⁸ The site is probably recalled in the name 'Bury close', which extended from east of the church down to the river and mill; most or all of the buildings had apparently gone by 1559, however, when the name 'Burne close' (later 'Burnt house') appears.³⁹ The supposed 'manor house' mentioned in 1574 seems in fact to have been Swerford House in East End, which was attached to the separate Lyons estate.⁴⁰

Swerford Park

The duke of Buccleuch's small 'neat' house of c.1770 was rebuilt on a larger scale by Edward Witts in 1775–6,⁴¹ the new building (just over the boundary in Hook Norton parish) occupying a hillside overlooking the Swere valley. Remodelling in 1824–9 for Sir Robert Bolton by Joseph Gandy, previously an assistant to Sir John Soane, produced a three-bay north entrance front with gabled wings, and an east (garden) front of five bays; both are two-storeyed with attics and lit by tall sash windows, the north front featuring two recessed Doric columns in the centre supporting a balustraded first-floor balcony. The eight-bayed south front (overlooking the river), which escaped remodelling, has three storeys because of the fall in the land, and includes two full-height three-sided bays at each end. Internal 18th-century features include finely carved pine doorcases in the hall, while alterations carried out by Guy Dawber for Terence O'Connor in 1927 include an 18th-century-style staircase. Nineteenth-century stucco was removed from the north front during restoration work in the 1980s.⁴²

The house's setting was described in 1805 as 'the most romantic dell... in Oxfordshire'.⁴³ Access was originally by a drive just west of the village, which led north across the open fields and curved west through the parkland to the house's north side, from where a branch led past Archell Farm towards Hook Norton village.⁴⁴ In 1778 Edward Witts

³⁷ Below, social. hist.

³⁸ TNA, SC 6/961/32–3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*; *L&P Hen. VIII, XX* (2), p. 119; OHC, M110/E/1; Bodl. MS. Top. Oxon. c. 769, f. 14; enclosure award and map (nos. 7–10, incl. no. 8 'Burnt House homestead'); below, econ. hist. (mill).

⁴⁰ *Oxon. Visit.* 14; below (Lyons estate).

⁴¹ OHC, Hyde IV/i/1; *ibid.* MS Oxf. Dioc. c 456, f. 60.

⁴² Description based on Brooks, *Pevsner N&W*, 511; NHLE, no. 1369836 (containing numerous errors about the house's ownership); *Sale Cat., Swerford Park* (1983). For photos, OHC, POX0169276–7, POX0169358–64, POX0170923–30 (online at www.pictureoxon.com).

⁴³ Sutton (ed.), *Diary of a Cotswold Lady, Vol. 1*, 23.

⁴⁴ OHC, encl. award and map; Bodl. (R) MS Dep C17:49 (160).

added an additional carriage drive into the south-west corner of the park through an entrance cut through the park wall.⁴⁵ Landscaping c.1815 involved the damming of the Swere to create a lake, at whose eastern end was built the three-arched stone ‘Waterloo’ bridge. A stable yard west of the house (adjoining a walled garden) is bounded on the east by a stone stable block, which lies at the end of Witts’ south-western access drive and may be contemporary with it. A higher northern block with an 1864 datestone includes a central archway giving access to the yard from the north. Probably contemporary is the two-storeyed gabled stone lodge at the park’s south-eastern entrance (west of the village), which is accompanied by stone gate piers and iron gates.⁴⁶



Showell Manor

In 1086 a 5-hide estate at Showell held of the bishop of Bayeux was divided between Wimund (who held three hides), and Godric and Count William of Évreux (who each held a

⁴⁵ OHC, par. reg. transcript.

⁴⁶ NHLE, nos. 1001108 and 1193876 (containing errors re ownership); OHC, POX0170930–33.

hide). William, who held an additional hide at Showell in chief, subsequently granted his English lands to his new monastic foundation at Noyon (Oise),⁴⁷ whose Showell estate was held in the late 12th century by a family named from nearby Dunthrop (in Heythrop parish).⁴⁸ A ½ hide given by Robert d'Oilly (d. 1142) to Eynsham abbey was evidently distinct from the Domesday estates,⁴⁹ and by the 1190s most of the rest of Showell was held by the de Simplingford family. In 1197 Hugh de Simplingford and his son Adam granted 5½ yardlands to Mabel, daughter of Robert de Simplingford, which she and her husband Henry de Peasehall sold to Reading abbey c.1207. About the same time Adam de Simplingford confirmed the abbey's purchase of 6 yardlands from William de Pikesulle and his wife Alice, and from 1220 the abbey rented the remaining 5 yardlands of the de Pikesulle estate, buying them outright before 1258.⁵⁰ By 1279 Reading abbey held 16 yardlands, Bruern abbey 8 yardlands under Nicholas son of Savary of Dunthrop, Eynsham abbey 3 yardlands of the d'Oilly fee, and the prior of Cold Norton 2 yardlands of the honor of St Valery.⁵¹ By the end of the Middle Ages Bruern abbey had increased its holding (known as Showell grange) to c.440 a., apparently after 1401, when the duke of Lancaster was named as overlord.⁵²

At the Dissolution all the monastic lands at Showell reverted to the Crown, and were sold in 1540 to Sir Thomas Pope (d. 1559).⁵³ In 1651 his successor Thomas Pope, earl of Downe, sold Showell to Daniel Harvey (d. 1663) of Coombe (Surrey), succeeded by his son Sir Daniel and grandson Edward, who in 1710 sold the estate to Charles Talbot (d. 1718), duke of Shrewsbury.⁵⁴ It remained with the Talbots until 1870 when Charles, earl of Shrewsbury, sold it as part of his Heythrop estate to Thomas Brassey, the great international civil engineering contractor, who the same year gave Heythrop to his son Albert (d. 1918) as a wedding present.⁵⁵ All of those owners leased the estate, latterly as two farms,⁵⁶ and though it still covered 779 a. in 1910 it was broken up from the early 1920s.⁵⁷ By 1931 Henry Horwood owned Coldharbour farm (368 a.), and ten years later J.V. Rose Showell farm (419 a.).⁵⁸

⁴⁷ DB, ff. 156v., 157; J.H. Round (ed.), *Cal. of Documents Preserved in France* (1899), 220.

⁴⁸ *VCH Oxon.* XI, 136.

⁴⁹ *Eynsham Cart.* I, 77.

⁵⁰ *Reading Cart.* I, pp. 392–7. The abbey had 11 yardlands in Showell in 1242–3: *Book of Fees*, II, 831.

⁵¹ *Rot. Hund.* II, 875; *Cal. Pat.* 1364–7, 345 (Bruern land).

⁵² *Cal. Inq. p.m.* XI, 110; *Cal. Close* 1360–4, 204; *Feudal Aids*, VI, 626; *Valor Eccl.* II, 209, 266.

⁵³ *L&P Hen.* VIII, XV, pp. 169–70; XX (1), pp. 216–17.

⁵⁴ *VCH Oxon.* XI, 136. For the Talbot family, *Complete Peerage*, XI, 720–9.

⁵⁵ OHC, QSD/L/156; *ibid.* E38/3/18/M/1; Sale Cat., *The Heythrop Park Estate* (1870), copy in OHC (descr. Showell as a manor); *VCH Oxon.* XI, 134; *Kelly's Dir. Oxon.* (1883 and later edns); *ODNB*, s.v. Thos Brassey. Albert (resident at Heythrop) was MP for Banbury 1895–1906 and high sheriff in 1878: Peters, *Sheriffs*, 184–5.

⁵⁶ Above, landscape etc. (settlement); below, econ. hist.

⁵⁷ *Kelly's Dir. Oxon.* (1883 and later edns); OHC, DV/X/62.

⁵⁸ *Kelly's Dir. Oxon.* (1931 and later edns); TNA, MAF 32/919/100.

The Lyons (Swerford House) Estate

In 1279 Roger de Lyons held a hide from Swerford manor in return for scutage, and before 1288 Roger's son Richard obtained an additional £5-worth of land from Hugh of Tew, whose predecessor held 8 yardlands in Swerford in 1221.⁵⁹ John de Lyons obtained a grant of free warren for his demesne land in Swerford in 1335,⁶⁰ but by the late 15th century the estate was held by the Hall family, whose family arms were displayed in Swerford 'manor house' in 1574.⁶¹ The house was presumably Swerford House, called Lyons Place in 1742.⁶² The Hall family left soon after the death of Anthony Hall in 1530, and in 1662 the estate was owned by Sir Thomas Rowe, who had a 'good house' with six hearths.⁶³

Sir Thomas was succeeded in 1686 by his younger son Sir Thomas (d. 1695), of Muswell Hill, who in 1692 sold his Swerford estate to the London linen draper John Travell.⁶⁴ Travell enlarged the estate by modest piecemeal acquisitions in Swerford and Hook Norton,⁶⁵ and was succeeded in 1745 by his son John (d. 1762), then by his grandsons Francis (d. 1801) and the Revd Ferdinando Travell (d. 1808).⁶⁶ In 1796 Ferdinando's elder daughter Martha married (as her second husband) the clergyman William Whalley, and in 1803 the Swerford part of their estate covered 464 a., including a block of c.116 a. of enclosed land around Pomfret Farm near the Little Tew boundary.⁶⁷ The Whalley family sold most of Pomfret farm to M.R. Boulton of Tew Park c.1816, and the remainder of their estate (429 a. in Swerford and Hook Norton) to Christ Church, Oxford, in 1860.⁶⁸ The college retained 277 a. in Swerford in 1910, sold in 1950 to Major General R.G. Fielden (d. 1981).⁶⁹ Swerford House (occupied in 1841 by Harriet, Maria, and Anne Whalley) was described in 1858 as a substantial stone and slate-roofed mansion of 'considerable antiquity', but was

⁵⁹ *Rot. Hund.* II, 727; *Oseney Cart.* IV, 253–4; *Cur. Reg.* X, 142–3. For the Tew fee (held of the d'Oillys) in Duns Tew, Adderbury and Swerford: *Book of Fees*, II, 821, 838; *VCH Oxon.* IX, 19.

⁶⁰ *Cal. Chart.* 1327–41, 342.

⁶¹ *Oxon. Visit.* 14. In 1494 a William Hall (formerly of Shorthampton) lived in Swerford: TNA, C 1/322/32.

⁶² TNA, PROB 11/740/137 (John Travell's will).

⁶³ *Oxon. Wills*, 96 (Ric. Hall, 1508); OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 178.18 (Ant. Hall, 1530); A. Adams, *The Elkington Family in England and America* (1945), 9–10; *Par. Colln*, III, 293; TNA, E 179/164/504; *Hearth Tax Oxon.* 165.

⁶⁴ TNA, PROB 11/430/379; C 11/1012/21; Sutton (ed.), *Diary of a Cotswold Lady, Vol. 1*, 26. Travell was high sheriff 1717–18: Peters, *High Sheriffs*, 146 and addenda.

⁶⁵ OHC, Flick/I/xvi/3; TNA, PROB 11/740/137.

⁶⁶ Bodl. MS Don. e 107, f. 49 and v.; TNA, PROB 11/1361/48 (Francis Travell); OHC, Flick/I/xvi/39.

⁶⁷ *Glos. Archives*, D4582/5/1; OHC, encl. award and map. For the land in neighbouring Hook Norton, Bodl. (R) MS Dep C17:49 (160).

⁶⁸ OHC, Flick I/xvi/45 and 47; Ch. Ch. Arch. Swerford A, nos. 1–2; Bodl. MS C17:49 (120).

⁶⁹ OHC, DV/X/62; Ch.Ch. Arch., Swerford A, catalogue.

then in poor repair.⁷⁰ It was demolished in the 1880s, though its late 18th- or early 19th-century coach house and stables survive.⁷¹

⁷⁰ TNA, HO 107/879 (calling it Swerford Mansion); Ch. Ch. Arch. MS Estates 82, f. 280 (1858); cf. *Gardner's Dir. Oxon.* (1852) describing it as 'ancient'.

⁷¹ OS Map 1:2500, Oxon. XV.1 (1881 and 1900 edns); NHLE, no. 1194058; Ch. Ch. Arch, MS Estates 82, f. 280 (stating they were built c.1818); *Swerford: A Village Guide*, claiming that the house's cellars are incorporated into The Yews.