



VCH Oxfordshire Texts in Progress

LITTLE ROLLRIGHT

Social History

Social Character and Communal Life

The Middle Ages

Continuities in Little Rollright's tenurial structure between 1086 and 1279 suggest close control by Eynsham abbey as lord, the 12 *villani* of Domesday Book being succeeded by 12 yardlanders owing heavy labour services, though with an additional yardland created apparently for the village blacksmith. Three bordars and 2 slaves were replaced by 10 cottagers, of whom 3 were free tenants.¹ The 13th-century bynames Norton and Salford suggest immigration from neighbouring parishes, and though some families disappeared, others (including the Baldwins, Bovetuns, Gates, and Smiths) remained in the 1310s–20s, alongside newcomers such as the Jolliffs, Russels, and Wythehulls. Most yardlanders (with c.33 a. each) probably produced a surplus, although disparities of wealth may have increased with the early 14th-century agrarian crisis. The value of goods taxed in 1316 ranged from 16s.–41s. 4d., widening to between 10s. and 100s. by 1327.²

Mid 14th-century plague had a marked effect, leaving only 4 yardlands and a cottage holding occupied by customary tenants in 1363, and much of the rest in the abbey's hands. The vacancies possibly reflected not only mortality but the departure of tenants fleeing the abbey's relatively oppressive lordship, since six villeins were living illicitly outside the manor in 1382, including three members of the long-standing Gate family. Others (including the Bovetuns and another of the Gates) provided some continuity, although most tenants in 1363 were apparently newcomers, and in 1382 the appropriately named John Newman took on a vacant half-yardland and a house and garden. The same year Robert atte Gate appeared in the manor court accused of failure to maintain his buildings and remove a dung-heap, typical offences in a manor experiencing population decline.³ Similar cases continued into the 15th century, and in 1434 one inhabitant was an alleged 'peace breaker'.⁴ Even so

¹ DB, f. 155; *Rot. Hund.* II, 744; above, econ. hist. (medieval).

² *Rot. Hund.* II, 744; TNA, E 179/161/8–10. For yardlands (in 1363), *Eynsham Cart.* II, p. 61.

³ *Eynsham Cart.* II, pp. 61–2; TNA, SC 2/197/14; above, econ. hist.

⁴ BL, Harl. Roll K30; *Cal. Pat.* 1429–36, 394.

villeinage persisted in the 1440s,⁵ possibly facilitating the forced evictions and enclosures of the later 15th century. Meanwhile the presence of large demesne farmers (living probably at the manor house) and of some other large-scale wool producers presumably further changed the parish's social character.⁶

1500–1800

The wealthiest taxpayer in 1524 was the abbey's demesne lessee John Leysham (paying 20s.), while two servants (possibly his employees) paid the 4d. minimum, and Richard Heyrow and John Lambert 3s. each.⁷ Heyrow (d. 1546) was a small-scale farmer who left £14-worth of goods, his social connections including Robert Catesby, one of an influential gentry family in the region, and the churchwarden John Ballard (d. 1557), who in turn had good relations with Humphrey Ashfield of Heythrop, a manorial lessee at Great Rollright.⁸ Catesby and Ashfield were involved in the wool trade, and it seems likely that all (along with Heyrow's son-in-law James Ingram) were part of the wide social and economic network which buying and selling wool generated.⁹ Perhaps partly as a result few inhabitants remained for long, none of the families mentioned immediately after the Dissolution appearing later, although their disappearance may also reflect the Throckmortons' arrival as lords from 1559.¹⁰ In the early 17th century John Throckmorton became embroiled in local land disputes, allegedly imprisoning a rival's servant in a 'dark chamber' in his house in 1607.¹¹ The parish's seclusion no doubt contributed to the robbery and wounding of a passer-by near the Rollright Stones in 1580, reportedly by assailants from Buckinghamshire.¹²

The Throckmortons' successors the Blowers and Dixons left a physical mark on the parish, erecting or remodelling several buildings (including the church and manor house), and leaving imposing funerary monuments in the church.¹³ William Blower (d. 1618) moved to Little Rollright from London, establishing himself as a member of the landed gentry,¹⁴

⁵ *Eynsham Cart.* II, p. lxiv.

⁶ I.S. Leadam (ed.), *Domesday of Inclosures 1517–18* (1897), I, 328, 372.

⁷ TNA, E 179/161/198.

⁸ OHC, MSS Wills Oxon. 179, ff. 146v.–147; 181, f. 97a; *ODNB*, s.v. Catesby family; above, Great Rollright, econ. hist.; social hist. Ballard was also one of Little Rollright's two billmen: P.C. Beauchamp (ed.), *Oxon. Muster Rolls 1539–69* (ORS 60, 1996), 41.

⁹ Above, econ. hist. (1530–1800); for context (from a slightly earlier period), C. Dyer, *A Country Merchant, 1495–1520* (2012).

¹⁰ Above, landownership; cf. *Oxf. Ch. Ct Deposits 1570–4*, p. 33 (Wm Moore of Kingham, formerly of Little Rollright for 10 years).

¹¹ Rosen, 'Little Rollright', 52–3, citing TNA, STAC 8/85/22.

¹² *Acts of PC 1580–1*, 31–2, 34–5 (mentioning Thos Lee of Bigging: *VCH Bucks.* IV, 49).

¹³ Above, landscape etc. (built character); below, relig. hist.

¹⁴ Rosen, 'Little Rollright', 53–60.

while his nephew Edward Dixon (d. 1660) took over the estate on his marriage in 1632 to Cecilia, a younger daughter of the distinguished judge and Woodstock MP Sir James Whitelocke.¹⁵ Cecilia's brother Bulstrode Whitelocke hunted with Dixon at Little Rollright, paying the parish's shepherds to tie up their dogs during the chase.¹⁶ Her premature death in 1647 was provoked by the rough treatment of Parliamentary soldiers quartered in the manor house, and Edward departed for Kent in 1652, having probably commissioned the elaborate family monument in the church.¹⁷ Other resident family members included Edward's unmarried sister Jane (d. 1658) and their brother John, who occupied a six-hearth house in 1662 and let another (of seven hearths) to a fellow gentleman, William Hastings.¹⁸ Four other inhabitants (occupying much smaller houses) were farmers or labourers, of whom the yeoman Richard Bickerstaffe (d. 1672) served as parish constable, witnessed Jane Dixon's will alongside the rector, and lent money to a local labourer, his family moving later to Salford and Great Rollright. The name of another (John Izard) survived as a 19th-century field name.¹⁹



The monument to Edward Dixon (d. 1660) and his wives Cecilia (d. 1647) and Anne.

From the Dixons' departure Little Rollright was dominated by its large-scale tenant farmers, many of whom held the whole estate, and who in the 18th century included several generations of the Walkers,²⁰ alongside the long-lived labouring families the Brains and

¹⁵ Ibid. 62; *Hist. Parl.* s.v. Jas Whitelocke; *VCH Oxon.* XII, 383, 401.

¹⁶ Rosen, 'Little Rollright', 62–3; R. Spalding (ed.), *Diary of Bulstrode Whitelocke, 1605–75* (Recs of Social and Econ. Hist. n.s. 13, 1990), 109, 116.

¹⁷ Rosen, 'Little Rollright', 64–5, 67; below, relig. hist. (church archit.).

¹⁸ Rosen, 'Little Rollright', 68–9; TNA, PROB 11/278/227; *ibid.* E 179/255/3.

¹⁹ TNA, E 179/255/3; *ibid.* PROB 11/278/227; OHC, MSS Wills Oxon. 6/4/38; 85/2/38; 115/5/14; *ibid.* tithe award (Iszards Hill). Bickerstaffe probably occupied the rectory house.

²⁰ Above, econ. hist.; OHC, MSS Wills Oxon. 79/4/5; 156/5/29; 158/1/46; *ibid.* par. reg. transcript; *ibid.* MS Oxf. Archd. Oxon. c 95, ff. 130–44.

Woodwards.²¹ The Walkers' close attachment is demonstrated by continued family burials in the churchyard long after their departure,²² while the farmer Robert Fowler exercised the lord's hunting rights in the 1780s.²³ The tiny number of burials and baptisms testifies to the smallness of the population, more transient inhabitants including the paupers Elizabeth (d. 1783) and John Gibbs (d. 1784), of whom John allegedly married a Chipping Norton woman 'of weak intellect' following unlawful pressure by the town's overseers.²⁴ Few crimes were reported, although in 1784 'eight villains disguised in smock frocks [and] with faces blacked' attacked and robbed Edward and Thomas Scarlet at the mill.²⁵

Since 1800

The tiny 19th-century population comprised the main farmers (principally the Bakers and later James Bliss) and a few labourers, the rest drawn from outside.²⁶ Baptisms in Little Rollright church suggest that some farm workers (from Salford, Long Compton, and elsewhere) may have temporarily lodged in the parish, although other outsiders using the church (notably occupants of the outlying Choicehill Farm in Over Norton) did so probably only for convenience.²⁷ The parish was certainly not closed off, more than half its residents in 1851 having been born elsewhere, while the farmer Thomas Baker (d. 1852) came from Oddington (Glos.). In 1901 only 10 out of a population of 39 were parish-born, 7 of them from the long-standing Woodward family.²⁸ The parish had no pub or school and no resident clergy,²⁹ though the annual harvest thanksgiving provided a particular community focus,³⁰ and church services were timed for the convenience of farm workers.³¹ Religious Dissent (as earlier) remained minimal, based also on external links.³² Livestock were entered for competition at local agricultural shows, and the Heythrop Hounds regularly hunted across the parish.³³

²¹ OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 177/4/57; *ibid.* Cal. QS, IV, 666–7; *ibid.* par. reg. transcript.

²² *ibid.* par. reg. transcript, s.a. 1785, 1801, etc.; also Sarah Scarlet (1843).

²³ Oxf. Jnl Syn. 17 Dec. 1785, 23 Dec. 1786, etc.

²⁴ OHC, par. reg. transcript; *ibid.* Cal. QS. II, 6b.

²⁵ Oxf. Jnl Syn. 27 Feb. 1784.

²⁶ Above, econ. hist.

²⁷ OHC, par. reg. transcript.

²⁸ TNA, HO 107/1732; *ibid.* RG 13/1400.

²⁹ Below (educ.); relig. hist.

³⁰ e.g. *Oxon. Weekly News*, 19 Oct. 1892. Harvest festival remained the church's most popular service in the 1950s: OHC, PAR227/1/R7/1.

³¹ OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. c 338, f. 343v.

³² Below, relig. hist.

³³ e.g. *Banbury Advertiser*, 17 Sept. 1885; *Sporting Gaz.* 12 Nov. 1892.

From 1893 the estate was owner-occupied by Bliss and later by the Williamses and Flicks,³⁴ who were sole landlord and employer. Charles Williams retained the locally-born Willie Woodward as farm foreman and other Woodwards as carters and labourers, recruiting a groom, shepherd, and cowmen from elsewhere.³⁵ Incomers included the medical doctor Thomas Holmes Ravenhill (1881–1952), who from the 1920s rented the White House (by the ridgeway), and after leaving general practice published a study of the Rollright Stones.³⁶ Few tenants remained so long, although the church continued its unifying role, the dozen or so inhabitants of 1952 achieving ‘marvels in money-raising’ to fund its restoration.³⁷ By then the benefice was merged with that of Salford, while Chipping Norton and neighbouring villages provided the nearest social facilities. In the early 21st century the estate’s acquisition by wealthy incomers and Manor Farm’s subsequent enlargement introduced a new social exclusivity, reflected in the 2014 guide price of £18 million.³⁸

Education and Welfare

By 1854 children attended the day school at Salford and were catechized there,³⁹ while John Hill (rector 1871–88) encouraged attendance at Long Compton school. He also established a Sunday school, catechizing children in the chancel before the service,⁴⁰ though by c.1900 most such teaching had lapsed.⁴¹ By then children attended either Long Compton or Salford schools or (by 1907) Over Norton school, which continued to serve Little Rollright until its closure in 1933.⁴²

The farmer John Ballard (d. 1557) left 6s. 8d. to Little Rollright’s poor, although John Hudson (rector 1559–82) made bequests only to Great Rollright, Long Compton, and Chipping Norton, perhaps suggesting few inhabitants in need.⁴³ Poor relief was subsequently funded entirely by parish rates, with £6 11s. 6d. spent in 1776 and £10 3s. in 1783–5, rising to £60 5s. 8d. in 1803 when twelve people (including six children) received regular out-relief and ten occasional relief, in all between three fifths and three quarters of

³⁴ Above, landownership.

³⁵ TNA, RG 14/8255.

³⁶ *Sale Cat.*, *Little Rollright Manor Estate* (1927): copy in OHC, Marshall XVIII/i/6; J.B. West, ‘Thomas Holmes Ravenhill and his Contributions to Mountain Sickness’, *Jnl of Applied Physiology* 80.3 (1996), 715–24; T.H. Ravenhill, *The Rollright Stones and the Men Who Erected Them* (1926).

³⁷ *Banbury Advertiser*, 20 Aug. 1952; below, relig. hist.

³⁸ *Daily Mail*, 30 May 2014; above, landownership; below, relig. hist.

³⁹ *Wilb. Visit.* 121; *Secker’s Visit.* 125–6; OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. d 563, f. 7.

⁴⁰ OHC, MSS Oxf. Dioc. c 338, ff. 343v.–344; c 341, ff. 364v.–365; c 344, ff. 341v.–342; c 347, ff. 351v.–352; c 350, ff. 332v.–333; c 353, ff. 346v.–347; below, relig. hist. (relig. life).

⁴¹ OHC, MSS Oxf. Dioc. c 365, f. 337v.; c 368, f. 329v.; c 371, f. 115.

⁴² *Kelly’s Dir. Oxon.* (1899 and later edns); above, Over Norton, social hist. (educ.).

⁴³ OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 181, f. 97a; *ibid.* 131/2/6.

the small population.⁴⁴ Later peaks came in 1813 (£95 supporting eight people permanently and two occasionally) and 1822 (£98 6s. or over 70s. per head), falling intermittently to £53 18s. in 1834. Responsibility passed the following year to the new Chipping Norton Poor Law Union.⁴⁵ A Little Rollright clothing club existed c.1899, subject possibly to fraud by the rector.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Poor Abstract*, 1777, 141; 1787, 190; 1804, 402–3; *Census*, 1801–11.

⁴⁵ *Poor Abstract*, 1818, 354–5; *Poor Rate Rtns* (Parl. Papers 1822 (556), v), p. 136; (1825 (334), iv), p. 172; (1830–1 (83), xi), p. 159; (1835 (444), xlvii), p. 155; *Census*, 1821; below, local govt.

⁴⁶ OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. c 1986 (pps June 1900).