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The Lost Parish of Thunderley

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Thunderley Hall is a farmhouse on the right hand side of the Thaxted Road, about 3 km from the centre of Saffron Walden (Ordnance Survey grid reference TL5605 3610). It was formerly the centre of a relatively large Domesday manor (*Tunreslea*) comprising 5 hides (a 'rateable' value of some 600 acres of arable). This acreage, judging by the numbers of plough teams, was roughly evenly divided between the Lord of the Manor farming on his own account, and 11 villeins and 5 bordars renting from him. The manor was equipped with a modest amount of woodland (notionally enough for 100 pigs in 1066, but reduced by 20% during the next 20 years), five hives of bees, and sundry other livestock. Interestingly and unusually, a priest is recorded on the manor in 1086, and he seems to rank with the villeins. The five-hide unit for this manor, and the place-name (translated as 'Thunor's clearing') suggests that Thunderley has a much earlier, perhaps middle Saxon origin. This is also one of the examples of placenames with similar etymology existing in the opposite extremities of Essex (cf. Thundersley; also Tilty, Tilbury-juxta-Clare, Tillingham, and the Tilbury in Barstable Hundred).

Unusually in Essex, this manor seems to have formed a single parish of the same name because the Lord of the Manor also held the advowson (or right) to nominate the parish Rector. During the middle ages, the manor, but not the parish, broke apart. Thunderley parish then contained three manors, Thunderley Hall, Abbot's, and Dales (*alias* Caldecots). Abbot's is just a kilometre further down the Thaxted Road. Dales or Caldecots is less easy to locate using documentary evidence, but is likely to be the farm at Cole End that adjoins the former Thunderley parsonage.

It was probably during the 15th century that Thunderley Hall acquired its moat, the remnants of which are a little to the south of the farmhouse. The former Thunderley parish church was also amongst this complex of

buildings. From his church, the priest had to walk or ride about a kilometre north-eastwards to his house.

The former boundaries of Thunderley parish now form the SW, W, and NW boundaries of the combined parish of Wimbish and Thunderley. The earlier boundary between Wimbish and Thunderley parishes probably ran along Cole End Lane and then the track and footpath to its south-east, because Tiptofts and Parsonage Farm at Rowney Corner have always been definitely in Wimbish. Gunters (a kilometre nearer Walden than Thunderley Hall itself) is within the old border of Thunderley, while Brickkiln Leys is in the parish of Saffron Walden itself. Purton End and The Roos (on the Debden Road), were also outside Thunderley Parish. The reconstructed boundaries enclose about 5.4 square kilometres or just over 1200 acres. Thus, Rowney Woods, Peverel's Wood, Crowney Wood, Six Acre Wood, and Smithfield Bottom represent what was a much larger area of woodland in the parish a thousand years ago.

Nonetheless, not even the tithes from some 1200 acres were enough to keep a later medieval priest in the manner to which he was accustomed. By the early 15th century, the rectory at Thunderley had been vacant for a long time; the living was simply too poor for a priest to take it up. The solution was a merger. Dr Kemp, then the Bishop of London authorized the union of Thunderley with Wimbish, and All Saints', Wimbish became the church for this conjoined parish. Thunderley Parish Church, which stood next to Thunderley Hall, was demolished and its churchyard returned to agriculture. However, the rights of the Lord of the Manor of Thunderley were not extinguished, and thereafter the advowsons of Thunderley and Wimbish were exercised by taking alternate turns to nominate each new rector. A legal nuance was that the appointed Rector retained the power previously held at Thunderley to appoint a vicar for the united parishes. Wimbish became a rare Essex example of both a rectory and a vicarage.

The Lords of the Manor of Thunderley were usually important Essex men, with many estates and little specific interest in this small manor. Down through the centuries, these Lords have included the de Veres (of Castle Hedingham and Earls of Oxford), the Wisemans (of Felsted, Cranham, and elsewhere), and Lord Braybrooke. The manor was entirely enfranchised during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and has long been separated from Thunderley Hall. Today, the manor has no obvious emoluments, but the title of Lord of the Manor of Thunderley is still private property. That title is currently on the market, with an asking price of £7500. A buyer's premium of about £1250, and legal fees of £400-600 would leave little change out of £10,000.

Notes

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Rumble, A. (ed.), *Domesday Book: Essex* (1983), entries 35,3.

Smith, R., *A Sale by Private Treaty of Lordships of the Manor and an English and Irish Feudal Barony* (2004), p23. Thunderley is about half way to the dissenters' burial ground at Wimbish (see Nottingham, L., 'The Dissenters' Burial Ground at Wimbish', *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* (2004).