

THE WYMONDLEY CHANTRY

by Noel Farris

It often happened in the mid thirteenth century that the owner of a large estate had his own private or 'free' chapel attached to his house, and the lords of the manor of Wymondley had built one such chapel at their principal residence in the manor, the moated site now called Wymondley Bury. They also had their own priest to officiate at the chapel and the first mention found of this is in the manor court rolls of 1277 — 'Ralph the lord's chaplain'. In the next century the same series of records starts in 1351 to refer to the chapel as a Chantry chapel and there are later mentions of a chantry priest. But before we look at some of the records on the subject which have survived, we may consider briefly what was meant by a chantry.

A chantry was literally a mass that was recited, sung or 'chanted' at an altar, for the well-being and good estate of the founder during his lifetime and for the repose of his soul after death¹. The word 'chantry' came to be applied both to the institution and to the building. Chantry chapels and altars were often established in parish churches and served by chantry priests whose only task was to sing soul masses, for which they were granted special stipends. Large numbers were founded after 1349 when the terrible mortality of the Black Death had turned men's thoughts to the next world. It seems likely that the private or 'free' chapel at the Wymondley manor house became a chantry chapel at this time.

One reason for establishing private chapels at houses was that the house might be at some distance from the parish church. But this did not apply in Wymondley because church and house were only a few hundred yards apart and the Priory church only half a mile distant. And both the church and the Priory had already been endowed for soul masses for the lord of the manor, his ancestors and descendants. So it appears probable that the early private chapel was established for some other reason, perhaps convenience, custom or prestige, and became additionally a chantry chapel at a time of great national disaster.

The endowment of a perpetual chantry was usually a costly business, for even if a building already existed, it was still necessary to provide for the priest's stipend. The usual method of doing this was to make an endowment of land and for this a licence had to be obtained from the Crown under the Statute of Mortmain. We should expect to find a record of the issue of such a licence for Wymondley in the Calendars of Patent Rolls. But no such licence appears although there are several licences for similar endowments at the Priory. The conclusion we may make is that there was no formal alienation of land and that the 'endowment' remained the property of the lord of the manor. This is supported by a statement in the Chancery Inquisition of 1375 which includes land annexed to the free chapel with that of the manor.

The chantry was allotted 42 acres of land to provide an income for the priest². This area which adjoins Todds Green, can be identified today as the land still called Chantry Field of thirty acres and Chantry Wood (now called Margarets Wood) of eleven acres, bounded on the north by Chantry Lane. The priest also had a house on his tenement, apparently in or adjacent to the wood³ and this was probably similar to the houses of the more prosperous farmers in the manor. The tenement must indeed have provided an unmarried man with a good income at a time when

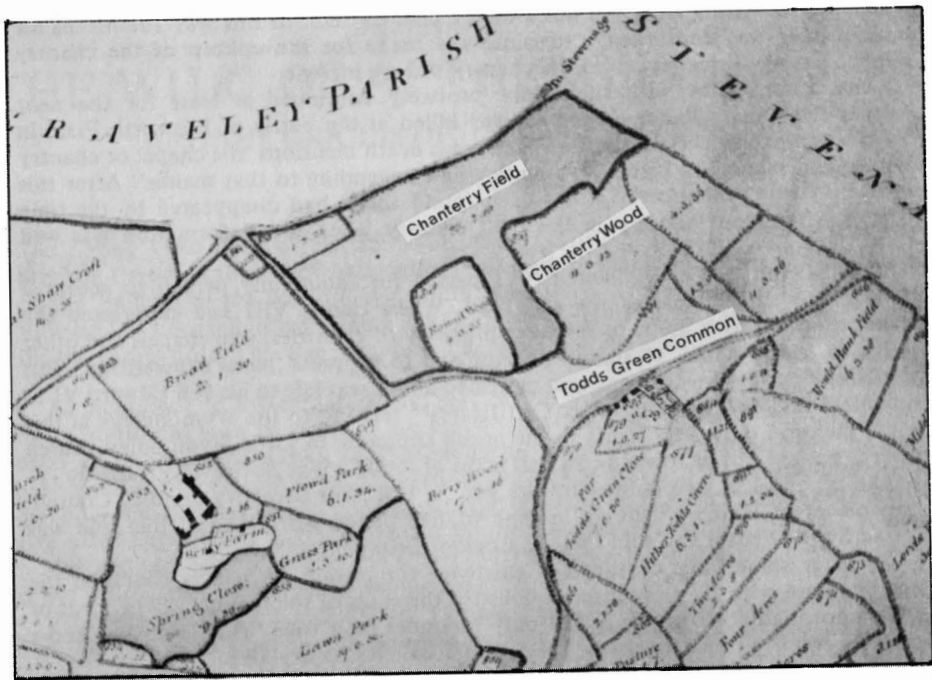
thirty acres of land was considered more than enough to support a man and his family. And the duties of a chantry priest were not onerous, so he would have had sufficient time to tend his land—especially if he was not engaged in much arable farming. Perhaps it is appropriate that the agricultural pursuits of these priests whether of a chantry or otherwise, should have been mainly pastoral.

There are some clues to their use of the land recorded in matters dealt with by the manor court. In 1298 Geoffrey the chaplain paid the lord two shillings for pasturing his sheep in the lord's fold⁴. In 1353 John Qwyth the chaplain was fined sixpence for trespassing with his pigs in Whyteney⁵ and in 1370 Ralph Best the chaplain damaged the lord's barley with his cows in Bradefield⁶. So it would seem that the tenement was used mainly for pasturing sheep and cattle and the woodland for pigs while requirements for grain were met by hiring strips in the open fields and paying hired labour for their cultivation⁷. It appears also that at times there was some cattle dealing and a case is recorded in the court rolls where this led to serious trouble for the priest at that time and later to his dismissal.

In 1351 the chaplain was a man who bore the rather unfortunate name of John Wolf. At the manor court⁸ one Thomas atte Lee was ordered to be attached (to have his property confiscated), for taking a calf value twelvecpence from a shed on the lord's chantry land. Thomas said that he was the servant of John Wolf, the chaplain of the chantry, and that he took the calf on the orders of his master and not of his own wish and asked that an enquiry should be made. The enquiry established that John Wolf had in fact given the order but that he did not own the calf. It was also found that he had committed several other offences. He had wrongly cut down sixteen oak trees value forty pence in Chantry Wood and taken them away, and also forty saplings value two shillings; he had illegally fished on another man's tenement at Wollenwick. But his worst offence was that he had made himself 'bailiff' or agent for delivering several head of cattle 'stolen from certain men of London'. John appeared at court and denied that he was a thief and submitted himself to the lord's mercy. He was fined the very large amount of ten pounds, but half of this was later excused provided that he paid the fine by not more than two instalments. The next court refers to him as the 'former chaplain'.

In addition to the regular chantry priests, there were at times others in minor clerical orders attached to the chantry, perhaps on a temporary basis. As literate men they were required for dealing with the paper work which arose in running a large estate. The account rolls of 1352-53⁹ mention two who were paid for acting as scribes — 'Gave John Derynton, clerk of the lord's chantry, two shillings for writing one commission and two writs', and 'Gave John Wywenham, clerk of the same chantry, three shillings and fourpence for copying the lord's charters'. But entries in the account rolls more frequently refer to repairs of the chapel building.

The chapel was timber framed with a thatched roof and stood near the moat on the east side of the manor house enclosure¹⁰. In 1352 the walls were replastered¹¹. In 1366 the roof was repaired¹² — 'Paid three thatchers to repair with rushes the chapel thatch and the roofs of other buildings, six shillings and ninepence, or five-pence per day each, plus sixpence'. Three years later there were more repairs¹³: 1369 — 'Paid one thatcher named le Reeder, to mend the roof of the chapel and the chamber of the confessor, taking weekly for himself and his servant, five shillings'. The chapel had at least one glazed window, perhaps rather a luxury for such a building at that time — 'one man and his servant for one day, placing a windowpane in the chapel'. Rushes for thatching were obtained from Purwell pond in large quantities — 1020 sheaves being cut for all thatching work in 1372. But although



Little Wymondley. Part of the Wymondley Estate Map of 1803 showing Chantry Lands, Wymondley Bury and Todds Green. (TL 222268). By courtesy of Hertfordshire C.R.O.

The map is orientated with east at the top.

the chantry chapel was to continue to exist for more than another century, changes in the organisation were soon to take place.

In 1396 the tenement called the Chantry with its rents and lands, was leased to the Prior of Wymondley for a term of twenty years at a rent of thirty shillings a year, with a provision for the maintenance of the house¹⁴. But the lease did not run its full term, for a new one was granted to John atte Berne of Graveley in 1402 for sixty years at the same rent¹⁵. This John also leased much of the land of the lord's demesne or home farm and it appears that from this time the lord was an infrequent visitor to this manor. There are few later mentions of names of chantry chaplains, Hugh Menge in 1414 and William in 1437, and these may have been employed on a temporary basis and have also said masses at other chapels. And further changes were to come a few years later.

In 1459 William Alington, then lord of the manor, granted¹⁶ 'to Lawrence Whyte, canon and sub-prior of Little Wymondley Priory, his free chapel for life, to maintain the building without waste . . . celebrating mass in the chapel each day for the souls of the said William and Elizabeth his wife, and for his ancestors, on condition that Lawrence pays annually to his bretheren of the Priory the rents and

other profits arising from the lands of the chantry' etc. In this way the means for soul masses was continued, provision was made for the upkeep of the chantry chapel, and the Priory received the chantry priest's income.

The arrangement with the Priory probably continued at least for the next twenty-five years. William Alington was killed at the battle of Bosworth Field in 1485 and the chantery inquisition¹⁷ after his death mentions 'the chapel or chantry within the manor of Little Wymondley and appending to that manor'. After this time no further mention of it has been found and it had disappeared by the time of the government enquiry in the next century when the Reformation was well under way.

In 1529 an Act of Parliament was passed forbidding any person to accept a stipend for singing masses for the dead. When Henry VIII had suppressed the monasteries he took steps to seize the property of chantries, free chapels and other religious endowments, to obtain revenue and to suppress 'papal superstition'. But the King died before this was accomplished and it was left to his son Edward VI to complete the work. The Chantry Certificates¹⁸ relating to the Wymondleys at this time, mention only altar lights in the parish churches. In Little Wymondley church 'A rent goynge out of fower and a half acres of londe lyinge in Graveley Parisshe . . . to the fyndinge of two lampes by the yere - 12d'. For Great Wymondley Church, two pieces of land brought an income of five pence yearly. All of this land was seized by the Crown and sold to John Cock of Broxbourne¹⁹.

So after some three centuries of existence the private or chantry chapel at the manor house with its daily intercessions for the souls of the families of the lords of the manor, had gone for ever. The only reminder of it today is a field name and a winding country road leading to Todds Green called Chantry Lane.

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