

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY CORRESPONDENCE FROM WESTON BIRT

From the 17th century the manor of Weston Birt, a small village near Tetbury, was held by the Holford family. In these early years they were for the most part absent landlords who also owned land in Avebury. Although the letters as a whole, and there are over 600 of them, cover the period roughly from 1661 to 1742 I have had time only to look at a small part of them mostly dated in 1709 and 1710 although this period was a prolific one whilst in other years letters are few. At this time the lord of the manor was Sir Richard Holford who was a Master in Chancery and almost all the letters are addressed to him at his house in London. He had acquired the estate by his marriage to Sarah Crewe. At his death his son by another marriage, Robert, who also became a Master in Chancery, inherited. The letters also include copies of Richard Holford's replies. Most of them are of little value to historians generally as they mostly concern, as one would expect, purely village matters and petty squabbles in particular. They do give some insight into the character of some of the inhabitants and very occasionally reflect national events such as the Great Storm of 1702.

Two of Holford's principal correspondents were Francis Goodenough of Sherston and John Drew. The former seems to have been a person of some substance who acted as Holford's agent. John Drew was poor but a prolific writer who kept Sir Richard in touch with all that was going on in his manor and losing no opportunity to present himself as a dutiful god-fearing man looking after Holford's interests and the other villagers as men who were responsible for the damage to his trees, hedges, and so on.

The rectors of the village seem to have been a source of trouble at several times. According to a letter from Holford to the Bishop of Gloucester (12 Dec 1702) one Broadhurst had 'proved a very troublesome and unhappy man'. He had gone as chaplain on a man-of-war and sailed with the fleet to Cadiz and Vigo. On return he had come ashore at Portsmouth and there died and so '... that small rectory (about £50) is now vacant'. His affairs surface again in the letters about 8 years later. Mr. Broadhurst had left a number of debts and a letter of 13 September 1710 explains that his creditors are pressing his widow for £87 still due and Richard himself expects to be reimbursed for dilapidations to the parsonage which Broadhurst had allowed to go to rack and ruin.

More trouble broke out in 1710 when a Mr John Jackson was Rector. He lived at Dursley but a Mr Millechamp was curate. Jackson had decided to get rid of his curate ostensibly on the grounds that his new curate would live at Dursley leaving Jackson free to visit Weston Birt more often. The villagers however seem to have had a genuine liking for Millechamp and suspected that the real motive was that as the new curate-to-be was very young he would cost Jackson less. On 13 March 1709/10 the villagers

send Sir Richard a petition.

'We your humble servants and Inhabitants in your parish of Weston Birt humbly entreat your Worship to continue Mr Millechamp to be our Curate under whose ministry we are extraordinarily well pleased and our Church and Congregation is as full if not much fuller than formerly. We are very unwilling to be scattered abroad again and think it extremely hard that our minister that lives now ... near us and never neglected his Duty since he came should be put off and we supply'd by a very young man that is to live constantly at Dursley ....'

There are other letters on Millechamp's behalf including, naturally, one from himself. On the following day John Drew writes that Jackson had ordered the clerk, Ambrose Ball, not to ring the bell for the old curate nor to open the door to him. The churchwarden told the clerk that if he persisted in his refusal to open the door and allow the people into the church they would break down the door and enter by force. Drew himself claims the credit for persuading Ambrose to hand over the key. The rector's own letter asks Holford to write to the Bishop for '.... Mr Millechamp is a man wholly given up to his own interest which makes him so troublesome in this matter therefore I think unfit to stay where he is.' We know from other letters that Holford was very desirous of having a 'resident' minister who would always be on hand to care for his tiny flock and on several occasions he expresses disappointment in Jackson. On 7 October 1710 Jackson writes to tell Holford that the Fellows of Eton College have signed his presentation to the living of Hullavington and requests Holford to signify his assent to the Bishop of Salisbury. Holford quickly replies. Most of his letter concerns the tenancy of his farm but he adds:

' ... when you accepted that small benefice (i.e. Westonbirt) I very well knew how requisite the having a good man there to put the poor Wretches in Mind of their Duty to God, towards each other, & how very kind you might have been therein to me and them by y<sup>r</sup> constant residence but foresaw that y<sup>r</sup> merit would quickly call you to better preferment & I do now find the inconvenience I then foresaw.'

Writing to Dame Andrews, a tenant, in December 1713 Sir Richard says:

'I am afraid Mr Jackson by reason of the bad ways and weather & the short days & lack of health spends but little time at Weston Birt which is a great trouble to me and a very great disappointment.'

Another villager who gave Holford much trouble was Issac Humphries or Humfrys who was the tenant of his farm. He and Drew seem to have been bitter enemies. In May 1709 Drew complains that the farmer will not allow Drew's kinswoman to live in Weston Birt even though she has a certificate from Horsley where her husband is settled. Drew can only assume the motive is malice. A further complaint is that Humphries does not

give enough work to the other villagers but employs strangers. Drew says that in spite of a letter from Sir Richard asking him to be neighbourly not one man in the parish has had a days work out of him. Isaac's reply to Holford says he does not fail to employ his neighbours 'whilst they behave themselves' but declares he is not bound to keep them against his own interest.

Over a period of over a year from November 1709 many of the letters concern the tenancy of the farm. Sir Richard wants to increase the rent and tells Humphries that if he wishes to renew the lease he must pay another £20 a year, but the farmer is hard to pin down to a clear reply. Writing to John Drew Holford says of the farmer:

' .... I gave him time to consider of it and to give me his Answer which he hath not yet done & therefore I am free to treat with your friend & not to wait on a Wilful Stubborn Man.'

The friend referred to was a man put forward by Drew as being a prospective tenant but this particular deal fell through. In December 1709 Holford reminds Hemphries that the lease is expiring and complains of his rudeness, non-payment of rent, and the hitchins. These last seem to have been small enclosures in the corners of the fields and Humphries had apparently made several even though the lease strictly forbade or limited the number, Holford adds:

' you told me I was governed and misinformed by John Drew but you are very foolish to accuse me in such a manner for I do not love to be governed but by truth and reason and what I do know and see ... '.

In January 1709/10 Drew is telling Holford that Jackson has preached only one Sunday since Sir Richard's visit at Michaelmas but Mr. Millechamp served the Church every Sunday and is 'esteemed a Son of Thunder'. Drew is concerned for the right way of doing things - when he takes over a tenement he complains about the 20 shillings he has to pay for his Copy and adds:

'I think it is very dear for a Copy so barefaced as mine is for it is not done as it ought to be done for it ought to be delivered in Court in the presence of the Homage.'

Jackson's feelings about his parish and John Drew are hinted at in a letter of his dated 13 February 1709/10:

'I am now at Weston Birt where I preached yesterday & find the poor as full of complaints & stubbornness as ever.'

' ... Y<sup>r</sup> correspondent John Drew is in a very poor low condition & sinks in everything but his own good opinion of himself which indeed is the epidemical distemper of Weston Birt.'

In the same letter he reports the death of one of his flock but the rector's concern (or satisfaction) is for the parish money-bags:

'old blind Hiller is dead by which means our payments are lessened something though there are others ready to step in his place for Alms whom we keep off as long as we can. ..'

A week later Drew is writing on behalf of the dead man's widow and asks Holford to intercede with the minister, churchwarden, and overseers:

' .... (she) have lived already in this world about 90 years is also a cripple one of her eyes the sight of it she hath lost and the other is very dim...'

On the 6 March 1709/10 Drew is again complaining about Farmer Humphries and charges him with bad husbandry. For example:

' ... the poor timber trees ... and hedgerows have had as much reason to weep and cry as ever the Kings of the Earth had to cry out before Alexander the Great for deliverance for they had had very little rest since the first time that William Humfrys (Isaacs dying father) took the farm of your Worship.'

The farmers family seem to have had apartments in the manor house and in this same letter Drew goes on:

' ... Isaac's wife do say that your great house at Weston Birt is greatly troubled with several sorts of noises in the night season for any time this two or three years past .... and another voice like to the voice of a child is there heard to cry in the night very often towards the hall when the family be all in bed and other voices are heard in the night very bad as knockings of several kinds ... which have caused her to be greatly troubled .....

Richard Holford's assessment of Drew is hinted at in a letter to Francis Goodenough of 12 April 1710

' ..... If you could see John Drew's elaborate epistles and did not know the man I am persuaded you would think him a man of great integrity, a valuable friend and a knowing husbandman and as such I treat him & though he prides himself to work for me yet he labours for himself & hath assurance enough to expect, nay to demand (in an humble honest manner) an acknowledgement for his industry and considering his condition and my circumstances I must gratify him.'

On 6 September 1710 Sir Richard comes again to Weston Birt. He sees Isaac Humphries the same day but the latter was 'unmannerly and foulmouthed' and they parted 'pretty rough'. On Sunday 10 September the Beverstone singers came in the forenoon and the Tetbury and Shipton men in the afternoon. 'I made them all drink for their psalms and anthems. During his stay he is introduced to a Nathaniel Wells who is a prospective tenant for his farm. From September 1708 to October 1710 the Great Seal was "in commission" and after his return from Weston Birt Holford complains to Goodenough that business is slack:

' .... Our Chancery Trade is totally becalmed until the Seal shall be disposed of which we hope will quickly be but how or to whom is yet a secret in Chancery Lane.'

He did not have long to wait for in October Sir Simon Harcourt became Lord Chancellor. In his reply Goodenough remarks that Wells 'is as errant a contentious K as any in the country ...' (K for Knave?), and gives several instances of his misdeeds. Holford must by now be getting weary of all the haggling over the tenancy for on 2 November 1710 he is writing to Goodenough to the effect that a bad tenant is better than no tenant and he is thinking of allowing Isaac to continue for his present rent but without hitchins or inclosures. But almost immediately Drew has found another man - Robert Andrews of Tressham a 'laborious, honest, quiet man'. Holford replies expressing interest and outlining the terms telling Drew he will want Andrew's proposals in writing so that he could consider them further - after all, all Drew's previous attempts at finding tenants had foundered. He was outraged and astounded to receive Drew's reply which consisted of a covering letter and what Holford had labelled 'John Drew's Pretended Agreement with Robert Andrews'. It begins portentiously with the words.

'I John Drew of Weston Birt in the County of Gloucester husbandman have as Agent to Sir Richard Holford ....'

There follows the terms of a lease bearing the signatures of Drew, Andrews, and two witnesses. In the covering letter Drew asks Sir Richard to ratify what has been done in his name.

Holford writes to Drew a lengthy and angry letter denying that he had ever intended to give him such powers. He also writes to Francis Goodenough and other gentry to seek information about Andrews. The replies were mixed and cannot have given him much comfort. Most are agreed that Andrews is behind with his rent in his present bargain and one goes so far as to say:

' ... that when any of his neighbours cattle chance to break on to his ground he will destroy them as ... or his scnes (who are of the same temper) did .... (to some sheep) ... by cutting them off in the middle with a hedge bill.'

However on 24 December 1710 Sir Richard writes to Drew accepting Andrews as a tenant apparently persuaded by the fact that Andrews will be helped by his son and so will have less outgoings on labour. On February 16 1710/11 Drew is writing his last letter:

' ... Your little nursery hedge in Lamas Hay is all every stick of it plucked up and carried away by wicked people, your trees and wood are very much cut and abused by the people of Parish this season

..... I have done to the very uttermost of my power for you in everything that I have done for you. I hope you will be kind to me and to my wife and children in case that I should dye and leave them to the Parish before that I do see you again, if so for god sake let them have Right.'

This last is prophetic for on February 26 the rector is telling Holford that he has buried John Drew. With Drews death the spate of letters abates. On the 24 March 1710/11 Goodenough has the lease and covenants signed and sealed by Andrews and they ride to Weston Birt where Isaac Humphries is leaving. They drank beer together and 'parted very fair'. A few letters up to December 1713 suggest that Andrews is managing fairly well but by December 1715 he is dead and Widow Andrews is working the farm with her sons.

Dame Andrews has two sons but it is George who is at the centre of a new scandal which breaks out in 1716. In November 1716 Holford learns there has been trouble between George Andrews and Walter Watts the latter being accused of breaking gaps in a new quickset hedge at the instigation of Isaac Humphries. Walter himself says that his neighbours are sorry to find the ancient ways hedged up and have to go large distances out of their way. This is only a small indication of the ill-feeling that exists between George and some of his neighbours but later in November Holford is shocked to receive a letter from Mr. Jackson which starts:

'I suppose Sir you may have heard something of a prosecution for Sodomy commenced against your tenant George Andrews ...'

Jackson is writing from Hullavington of which parish he is vicar (as well as still holding Weston Birt) and in which he lives. Holford writes to Goodenough for more information and on the 28 November 1716 he replies. It seems a William Lingsey, a poor man's son from the city of Gloucester, came to Weston Birt seeking work. Andrews would not employ him but he was taken on by Walter Watts. In August there was whispering in the village that George had buggered him and it seems that some seized on the rumours as a chance to have fun at George's expense. Isaac Humphries got a sack of malt and made good ale and others contributed with joints of meat and 'belly-timber' or food. On the 22 November they had a mock 'groaning' or lying-in:

' ... Walter Watt's wife furnished Lingsey with a ...petticoat, white apron and head clothes that he might look something like a woman. One Rolfe Smith of Duckington was the midwife. The invited company which was numerous pleased themselves with the ale and good things. Lingsey by their assistance and the skill of the midwife was delivered of a child viz a wad of Shaw made up and dressed with clothes in that form which they pretended was a male child ..'

The company rejoiced at the 'birth' and drank more ale and resolved to have it christened and chose Samuel Wallis to be Parson. He was dressed in a white apron to represent a surplice. He went through as much of the service as he could remember and christened the child whom the 'Godfathers' called George and threw water over it, signed it with the sign of the cross and said the ritual words of baptism. According to another witness the words used were instead 'I christen thee George Buggerer and you are to live in that religion and no other.' and then the witness adds:

'after the ceremony was over the Curate sprinkled his congregation with all the consecrated water that remained which amounted to a benediction as good as the Popes.'

All this was no more than village high spirits and the matter could easily have been laid to rest but it seems that after this and the trouble with the quickset hedge George threatened Watts with legal action. Hereupon Watts and Lingsey went to the magistrate Mr Kingscote for a warrant to arrest George. This was done and Lingsey was examined on oath and related to the events of 4 August when the offence was supposed to have taken place. A parson Swinfin, also a Justice, who was with Kingscote at the time wanted George committed to jail but Kingscote took a cooler line and allowed him bail when committing him to appear at Quarter Sessions.

Holford does not seem to believe that George would do such a think although he makes it clear in his replies and requests for more information that he regards the offence as an abomination. Lingsey seems to have been foolhardy for as Holford points out if the case is proved he too will go to the gallows unless he can prove compulsion. He is also very concerned about the mock religious rites and writes several strong letters to Jackson making it clear to him that he has a duty to 'God, of his Holy Religion, and those committed to your charge.' Holford takes it very amiss that his rector knew nothing of these goings on until November and even then was able only to give much less information than Holford obtained from Goodenough, It is more than evident that Jackson has very little contact with his flock. When George goes before the Quarter Sessions they refer the case to the Assize but allow him to continue bail. Some of his friends also indict 13 of those present at the groaning for Riot. On 20 March 1716/17 Andrews is on trial in Gloucester. In his summing up the Judge called attention to the character of Lingsey (a vagabond) and other witnesses and the length of time between the alleged offence and the initiation of action. After about an hour the jury returned a not guilty verdict. The action against the 'rioters' also came to nothing. Holford however sends details of the events at the groaning to the Bishop and his chancellors and they think it necessary that the case be presented at their Court to bring about a 'just censure and suitable punishment'.

This is almost the end of Sir Richard's problems with Weston Birt for by June 1718 Goodenough is writing to his son, Robert Holford, giving him details of his lands in Weston Birt although at first Robert wanted to dispose of this particular inheritance but was unable to do so for legal reasons.

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#### Reference

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