

WHY WE BECAME STANSTEAD ABBOTTS

by Ron Dale

There is a scarcity of information about the history of our little village, as it was once. The only solid block is in the big red book beloved of all local historians, the Victoria County History (commonly just VCH), but once this has been absorbed, every small nugget of golden information is elusive and has to be fought for. Such a small habitation does not create much impact in the thread of English history, but to residents who are interested, any early piece of information is exciting and interesting simply because it is a new discovery, another piece of a giant jigsaw puzzle whose size is unknown. Now to find page after page of local information about our village from 900 years ago, quoting names of people who lived here and of places with Saxon names we cannot recognize, is an extremely valuable gift and was well worth the high price I paid for it. Trawling through page after page of these old records, much of it in Latin is not most people's idea of fun. Neither is it mine, but it is interesting and exciting and fun can be had elsewhere. The following information came from *The Early Charters of Waltham Abbey*, edited by Ruth Rainsford published in 2004 by Boydell Press and my copy, which I was ecstatic to discover as something of a rare prize, now resides in SALHS Archives with my other local history books.



The clever man ultimately responsible for our village name - Henry II, described as one of the most able and wisest of English kings, reigned 1154-1189. He was a medium to short man of leonine appearance. He was red-haired and had a fiery temper and was full of boundless energy. He never sat down except to eat or ride. Born in Le Mans, France and became king of England at 21. He was unintentionally responsible for the murder of that other fiery-tempered man, Thomas Becket.

THE ORIGINAL DEBT OF 1170

When in the 12th century the lord of Stanestede manor, Roger de Wanchy, had unknown financial problems, he took out a loan from a London moneylender named Bruno (Brunus), mortgaging the manor to the moneylender in the amount of £270 15s 3d (slightly different amounts quoted on different charters). Being unable to repay this debt, he appealed to his king, Henry II for help. To put the timing of this event into its historical time-frame, this was the year 1170 in which King Henry had unintentionally caused the murder of Thomas Becket with whom he was in contention by his infamous comment, 'Who will rid me of this

meddlesome priest?' I have stood on the spot in Canterbury Cathedral where Becket fell dead, which gave me an eerie feeling, some contact with the past.

The tale of this debt is a long saga, spanning many years and many legal confirmations or agreements and is in rather boring terminology, but I regard it as my duty and my pleasure to transcribe these which are pertinent and to offer the tale in more acceptable, more palatable morsels for readers to digest. You may still find it boring, but any information about our village from many centuries ago is worth study. Also, as is often the case with old documental facts, surprises arise and more questions are posed which cannot be answered. One discovery opens further doors.

Henry II was friendly with canon Walter Gant and was planning to elevate Waltham church into an abbey (founded 1177), said to be due to his guilt for Becket's murder. He later made Gant his first abbot. He offered a deal to Stanestede's lord of the manor, Roger de Wanchy. The king offered to pay off his debt to Bruno to purchase half of the manor, which he the king was to give to Waltham Abbey as a gift. In exchange he asked de Wanchy to donate the other half of the manor to the abbey at a rent of £12 per annum. Henry II was a good organizer and a clever man (charters 354/5 cover the details and are a few years after 1170). Just for a short while, a king of England used his mighty brain on the affairs of our little village. To ensure that de Wanchy received his rent money, in a later charter the king stipulated that Roger should send his messenger to Waltham Holy Cross at Easter and at Michaelmas to collect his rent and to remain there *at the expense of the canons* until it be paid to him. The king also guaranteed that if ever there was a delay in such payment the king himself would pay it to de Wanchy or his heirs. Roger de Wanchy agreed to do this and signed the confirmation. No knightly military service was demanded of either the abbey, which now became the lord of the manor, or of the de Wanchy family. This service would be owed to the king instead from the fee of John de Novaville (John de Neville), the overlord. The village thus became the property of the abbot and canons of Waltham. Those are the basic facts, but it was not to be quite that simple.

BUT WHY THELE ST. MARGARETS?

One puzzling surprise is that it would appear from the Latin terminology that it was not only Stanestead named in the mortgage but also Thele or St. Margarets as it became later. When the Norman lord of Hailey built the church of St. Mary in the 11th century he created a separate manor to which tithe was due to his church and not to Amwell as previously, as Hailey had no church until much later. At first this new manor had no name, but in the Latin charters of the 12th century Stanestead was always referred to as *manerium Stanstede*, but a few properties were recorded as in *pontis de Thele* or *pontem tegule*, which the author of the charters translates as St. Margarets (previously Thele) as I do myself. We do not encounter the proprietary two-word Latin village name of *stanstede abbatibus* until the Feet of Fines property documents of the 13th century. The two translations are bridge of Thele (possibly an abbreviation for *thelonium*, referring to the toll bridge) and *pontem tegule* means tiled bridge. Why there were two descriptions we do not know. (See my discussion on this elsewhere on this site, *A Theory on the Bridge*). Any property over the western side of the bridge was and still is either in St. Margarets parish or Great Amwell on the opposite roadside. There is nowhere any record that Thele was ever part of the manor of Stanstead but there has to be some reason why in these royal Westminster charters Thele was mentioned in the mortgage debt several times. Of course we do not know where the course of the river was 900 years ago or where the parish boundary was, so here is another puzzle. Charter no.355 of 1183 is just repeating details of the transaction agreed between Roger de Wanchy and the king, but

now it is addressed to Roger's son, Michael de Wanchy. There are several such repeats, all just seeking confirmation of agreement as if in fear of a rejection. The charters are all witnessed by many prominent named citizens such as lords of manors, bishops, even curates and our town clerk, Laurence. Sir Simon de Stanstede is also a signatory to most, although he is not titled thus but as Simon the Knight, son of Richard de Stanstede, who was also probably a knight. One document also includes the female name, Helya de Stanstede, possibly the wife of Sir Simon.

EVEN MORE DEBT

Charter no. 357 appears to show a second debt still owed to Bruno which was not paid in 1173 when due, being a smaller amount of about £20 and threatening that if unpaid, interest of 2d per week on each pound owed would be charged. Charter 358 of 1182, now addressed to the grandson of Roger de Wanchy asking him to confirm this additional debt and requesting his agreement to the transaction. In no. 359 of 1183 there is still a small debt and this charter now threatens to charge 6d in the £ per week, an exorbitant amount of interest if not paid by a set date. At such a high rate, a debt of £20 would have an interest charge of £34 within a year! Bruno has now gone (died or sold the debt) and the moneylender is now Benedict Small. What was happening to the de Wanchy family is not clear, but they were either in severe financial difficulty or were careless about paying their dues. There were other charters and confirmations addressed to several of Roger's grandsons, as each one died, another had to sign an agreement. Finally the king (now King John) tired of this and ordered in Charter no. 362 of 1201 in a confirmation addressed to a grandson of Roger, Henry de Wanchy, asking for agreement to the original transaction of 1170, thirty-one years later! He also requests that the remaining debt should be taken from the £12 rent due from the canons. In 1225 (reign of Henry III) charter 364 orders that the £12 rent due to the de Wanchy family now should be paid to Henry of St. Owen whom the king has sent into Gascony (presumably in military service) along with Richard, the king's brother. Charter 365 explains the reason for this. Henry de Wanchy has '*withdrawn from the king's lands into Normandy without licence,*' and the £12 to be paid to St. Owen is for Earl William Marshall in whose fee this lies (the overlord). This was the last charter in the saga of the de Wanchy debt and fully explains why we are now Stanstead Abbots and not just plain Stanstead.

ALWINES FRITH

One very interesting and puzzling document called a chirograph is found amongst these Waltham charters at a time when the village was being handed over to the abbey. This is a document written on a scroll of parchment in duplicate or triplicate and with the separate copies cut by scissors in wavy lines to create indents. One of these indentures would then be given to any party involved in the transaction and which pattern would only match up with genuine copies, as was used in the Feet of Fines property indentures of later years.

This is an agreement between Abbot Walter Gant and the canons of Waltham Abbey and Simon the knight, son of Richard de Stanstede concerning two messuages in St. Margarets (*pontem de Thiele*) and in Easneye Wood, a grove called Alfwine's Frith (stet) which Simon had held with the Hide of Roger de Wanchy and of Michael, his son, rendering 16s. Simon has given the canons 3 silver marks and has surrendered his charters (deeds), but the canons have handed them back to him because while they state they would not harm the canons, they could be of use to Simon and he has sworn on the gospel that he will never claim any right through them against the concord. (Witnessed by a number of manorial lords plus Osbert de Wanchy and Laurence the Clerk of Stanstead).

I must admit I am unable to understand this document. Why should Simon pay 3 silver marks when he is handing over the deeds, and why swear on the gospel? Those were strange times and we may never understand the strange situations these individuals found themselves in so long ago.

However, this is an important document for another reason. This is positive proof that Alwine's Frith was once owned by the Saxon lord Alwine and which was grabbed by the incoming Norman manorial lords along with Alwine's other local lands; in other words that since Saxon times the site was manorial land owned by the local lord and continued to be so after the Conquest. Simon the knight was actually renting this piece of land from the Norman de Wanchy lord of the manor, a strange occurrence in strange times when the whole village was being handed over to the abbot and canons of Waltham. For further reading on individuals and their homes in ancient Stanestede, please read my piece, *People & Places in 12th Century Stanstead*, elsewhere on this web site which is also interesting, being the only record we have of named individuals from our village 900 years ago.

Ron Dale, April, 2017