

## **Compton Dando and the Smyth Family of Ashton Court 1567-1664**

The dissolution of Bath Abbey in 1539 was followed by fierce rivalry among local gentry families to purchase the former monastic lands and properties from the Crown. Part of the abbey's possessions at Compton Dando had been allocated to the Church Estate Trust for the maintenance of the parish church, but the remaining property known as the manor of Compton Dando changed hands several times during the 1540s and 1550s. Among the families who bought and sold land in the parish were the Thynnes of Longleat, the Hippisleys of Ston Easton, the Pouletts of Hinton St George and the Hungerfords of Farleigh Hungerford. It was the Hungerfords, the wealthiest of all the local families, who eventually acquired the whole manor. In 1568 Thomas Hungerford sold some 200 acres with an annual rental of £11 11s 9d to the brothers Hugh and Matthew Smyth of Ashton Court, Long Ashton, and during the next few years the Smyth family purchased the rest of the manor. Compton Dando was to remain part of the widespread estates of successive members of the Smyth family until 1664 when it was purchased by the Pophams. The Smyth properties were carefully managed by professional stewards and as well as regular manorial courts, there are surveys listing all the lands, tenants and rents. These provide a remarkable amount of detail concerning the landscape, place-names, inhabitants and economic life of Compton Dando.

The tenements were all held by the traditional west-country tenure of copyhold for three lives, 'according to the custom of the manor', with low rents and substantial 'fines' for the addition of new lives. The most important of the Compton Dando manorial customs stated that tenants had no right to widows' estate, and that a heriot was payable on death. The land held by each tenant was often widely dispersed, but the bulk of the arable was in three large open areas known as the North, South and East fields. The west of the manor consisted of a large common on which some tenants had grazing rights. There was valuable meadow land along the river valleys numerous orchards and large scattered areas of woodland and scrub which provided firewood. Many of the tenants also rented land from the Feoffees of the Church Estate which was interspersed among the Smyth holdings. The three most valuable of the Smyth properties were the Manor House, Hampton's Farm and the Mill. Since the manorial lords were always non-resident the Manor House or Manorial Demesne Farm was let to tenants and then generally sub-let. In 1663, for example, it was let to a London barrister, Richard Cox, gent., and his son Popham Cox, and was described as:

'The Mansion House, and one Cottage adjoyneing, 17 acres & a quarter of meadow, 31 acres of pasture, 52 acres of earrable land, 90 acres of woodland ground called the Parke and common of pasture in the downe'.

It was said to be worth £668 0s 0d, and the annual rent was £5 15s 8d.

The manorial court was held in an upper room of Hampton's Farm. This was occupied by successive generations of the Court family (earlier called 'a Court') and came to be known as Court House. In 1663 it was held by Richard Court and was described as:

'The Capitall Messuage or Tenement called Ham~~st~~on's Farme, vizt. the house, garden, orchard and backside containing two acres, 17 acres of meadowe, 84 acres of pasture and 95 acres of earrable land and common pasture on the downe.'

It was said to be worth £60 and the annual rent was 40s.

In 1568 the Mill was held by Joan Sutton and was described as:

One Tenement and two water mylles joyninge to the saide Tenement, whereof one is a griste myll, and th'other is a Tucking or Fullinge myll. In the winter the said mylles will go continuallye yf they have worke for them, and in the summer they do goo by poundes and the tenants maye well make three good poundes every daye and night'.

The property included 23 acres of meadow, 96 acres of arable and pasture and rights of common. Joan Sutton also held a ruined cottage and an orchard 'joyninge to the bridge of Wolwarde within the parish of Compton'. The annual rent of the mill in 1563 was £7 6s 8d. By 1663 the annual rent had risen to £80 and the mill was said to be worth £480.

A typical Smyth tenant in the 1568 Survey was John Hawkynges, who also held land which he rented from the Church Estate. His Smyth copyhold consisted of a tenement and barton with an orchard, and an acre of meadow. He held arable land in the north field, one acre at Bathford, a close of pasture at Wallesden in the south field containing three acres and another close of two acres in the east field. He also had scattered strips of arable in the north, south and east fields, pasture land at Clayley and at Grove with rights of pasture in the common. The property was held for his life and the lives of Elizabeth, his wife, and John, their son. The annual rent was 5s 0d and an heriot was payable 'when it shall happen'. He was obliged to attend the manorial court. The fine he had earlier paid to Thomas Hungerford was £2 6s 8d. A Smyth tenant listed in 1595 was John Horsington who was also a copyholder of the Church Estate. During the 1580s he was involved in a long legal battle with the Crown which claimed to own part of the Church land. Eventually, the Crown admitted defeat in 1594.

Throughout the period the manor variously known as Weeke, Wicke or Sewardswick remained separate. At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century it was owned by Sir George Young, who also owned the manor of Grubbeswick (Knowle Farm). He was a Feoffee of the Church Land of Compton Dando. There is a reference to him in the Smyth manorial records because of a dispute over the ownership of land at Barridge Hill (Barrow Hill), which had been let by the Feoffees to William Gaye. In 1601 the manorial tenants were ordered to report on the traditional ownership of the property, but no further reference can be found in the records. Similar disputes concerning the ownership and boundaries of land belonging to the Church Estate were to occur frequently in the records during the next three centuries.

The manorial accounts of the Smyth estate at Compton Dando are in the Bristol Record Office (AC/M11/13-23).

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