

Early Defenders of Compton Dando Church Estate

When the Compton Dando Church Estate was established in c1530 by the last prior of Bath abbey, William Holloway, and the ambitious lawyer, David Brook, the property to support it came entirely from the land belonging to the abbey. In 1539 the abbey was suppressed and all its lands and possessions passed to the Crown. It might have been argued that the abbey's wealth included its land at Compton Dando which had been used to found the charity to maintain the parish church, since the church and its advowson were part of the property acquired by the royal treasury. In fact the Court of Augmentations which had been established in 1536 to handle the vast new sources of revenue flowing into the King's hands from the dissolved monasteries ignored the unusual arrangement at Compton Dando and it continued to exist throughout the final years of Henry VIII's reign. The religious upheavals of the short reign of the young Edward VI (1547-53), and the restoration of Catholicism under Queen Mary (1553-58) meant that no action was taken in the matter during their reigns. With the accession of Queen Elizabeth in 1558, however, there was a renewed interest in increasing the sources of wealth for the Crown. A good deal of revenue had been lost by portions of monastic land illegally appropriated by laymen, and much other land formerly belonging to the chantry foundations which had been acquired by the Crown in 1547 had also been lost. The Elizabethan government under the efficient control of Sir William Cecil made major efforts to recover these 'concealed lands' and achieved considerable success during the 1570's. Among the properties formerly part of Bath abbey estate which were reclaimed were lands in South Stoke 'a towne some 3 myles from Bathe' and Corston 'a towne some 3 myles from Bathe on another syde'. Lands at Priston were also recovered for the Crown.¹ The land at Compton Dando belonging to the Church Estate did not escape the attention of the hunters after concealed lands, who were well rewarded for the land and property they were able to restore to the Crown.

By the 1570's and 1580s the influential local gentlemen who had been persuaded to become original feoffees of the Church Estate were dead and their replacements lacked the power and authority to oppose the royal government. The defence of the Church Estate was therefore left to the tenants in Compton Dando. Among them were members of the Horsington family, several of whom were tenants of the Church Estate as well as holding land and tenements from the Smyths of Ashton Court, Long Ashton, who had acquired the manor of Compton Dando from the Hungerfords of Farleigh Hungerford in 1567. A survey of the Smyth lands made in 1568 shows that John and Thomas Horsington were tenants of houses, orchards, meadows, small amounts of arable land and rights to grazing on the common.² Both men also held land from the Church Estate. There are several other references to Horsingtons in the manorial records. Thomas is recorded as attending the manorial court in 1562, another Thomas was fined 6d in 1603 for overstocking the common land with his sheep.³ Thomas and Robert Horsington were both witnesses to a survey of Glebe Lands and Tithes made in 1623,⁴ These men were far from wealthy, but they were evidently regarded as leaders of the community and were largely responsible for ensuring that the Church Estate land was not reclaimed by the Crown as part of the spoils of the dissolution of the monasteries.

Other tenants who took part in protecting the land of the Church Estate included John Browne who held a copyhold tenement in Cockers Hill, Thomas Harvo and William Lyons, who was described at his death as 'gentleman'. William Lyons is recorded in 1568 as