

husbandmen who served as feoffees and played an important part in the establishment of the Church Estate were Thomas and John Horsington. They were tenants of Church Estate land and also rented land in Compton Dando, first from the Hungerfords of Farleigh Hungerford and later, after 1567, from the Smyths of Ashton Court. The detailed survey of Smyth land made for Hugh Smyth in 1568 shows Thomas Horsington holding by copyhold tenure a tenement, barton, garden, orchard, four acres of meadow, some enclosed fields and a modest area of arable land in the open fields. He would also have enjoyed rights of grazing on the common. John Horsington had a similar holding, and in addition both men rented land from the Church estate.¹⁴ They were evidently regarded as trustworthy members of the community and in fact played an important part in establishing the Church Estate. The Elizabethan government went to great lengths to retrieve former Church land which had been illegally alienated from the Crown, and made a determined effort to seize the land in Compton Dando which had been dedicated to the maintenance of the parish church. The Horsingtons were among the chief of those who resisted these attempts. In 1572 John Horsington and another tenant, John Browne, were charged by the Attorney-General with illegal entry upon land which should properly belong to the Crown. They contested the accusation, but the resulting case dragged on until 1594 before finally being settled in their favour.¹⁵ The protracted proceedings must have been a great worry and expense for the two husbandmen, and this was recognized by the feoffees in 1582 when John Browne was not charged for the renewal of his copyhold tenement in Cockers Hill 'in consideration of the Labour, Services and Expenses ...about the Lands and Tenements of the Church'.¹⁶ No doubt the contribution of John Horsington was also recognized although the incomplete records of the manorial court do not show this. Other copyhold tenants who served as feoffees during the 16th century included Thomas Harvo, William Lyons and William Reade.

The tradition of appointing influential local gentry as feoffees was established from the beginning and was to continue. Sir David Brook's strategy was evidently successful for the Church Estate was able to resist all attempts by the Crown and by local landowners to encroach upon its property. It is interesting to note that in the early appointments no clergy were included. Likewise, Hugh Smyth who, with his brother Matthew, bought the manor of Compton Dando from the Hungerfords in 1567 was not appointed, although he might have been regarded as an obvious choice. The reason was that Hugh Smyth was a notorious rogue and a constant irritant to his neighbours. He maintained a gang of armed ruffians at Ashton Court who terrorized the district, and there were constant complaints to the Privy Council about his conduct. He was excluded from any part in the entertainment provided for Queen Elizabeth in 1574 although Ashton Court would have been an ideal situation for her stay. He was dismissed as a justice of the peace in 1577 but the complaints about his conduct continued. He died in London in 1580 while awaiting trial for involvement in a murder committed by his followers during a night-time raid on a rabbit warren of his neighbour, Sir George Norton at Abbotsleigh.¹⁷ Clearly Hugh Smyth was regarded as totally undesirable to be a feoffee of Compton Dando Church Estate.

Apart from the fact that he evidently took an interest in the career of Edward Brook as vicar of Compton Dando, it is not clear why Sir David Brook went to so much trouble to establish a Trust for the maintenance of the parish church. The time could hardly have been less favourable with every aspect of church life and property being questioned. Nor is it apparent how the Trust escaped being appropriated by the Crown like other monastic properties. The