

History of Tolleshunt Knights

A brief Introduction

Throughout its long history, Tolleshunt Knights has for the most part had the good fortune of being able to enjoy a fairly quiet and sheltered existence; simply a silent spectator to the great events of history which have swirled around it. I am sure many of its current inhabitants may have been attracted to living in the village for that very reason. But for anyone wishing to learn something about the history of the Village, what written sources are readily available?

In connection with the Parish Council's Web Site a brief history of the village has been written; this is produced below, and it is intended to expand this into a full book giving a more comprehensive history of the village in the fullness of time, but there is still a lot of work and research required before this latter project can be realized. I will refer to this again in the closing paragraph, with a request for help from anyone in the Village who would like to contribute, (especially as regards the correction of any errors!), and will also refer to what source material I am currently aware of.

There is no record of whom the earliest inhabitants of the area may have been, but it is likely that small settlements of the local Celtic Tribe, the Trinovantes would have been present in the area at the time of the coming of the Romans, and local disaffected members of the tribe may well have joined Boadicea in the sack of Colchester in AD 61. However, evidence of any Roman occupation of the area is sparse. Traces of Roman tiles are reported to have been unearthed during construction of the railway, and a small section of Roman paving was reputedly discovered in the 17th century near Barn Hall, but other than as an area in which to hunt wild boar or deer, at that period there would have been little to have encouraged them to settle the area in any numbers.

In antiquity the area would have been a relatively inhospitable place comprising dense forest which would have gradually merged into the coastal marshes. At some time after the establishment of the Kingdom of the East Saxons in 527AD, a small band of Saxon settlers lead by a certain minor chieftain by the name of Toll moved into the area, and he gave his name to the lands on which his small group settled. The main settlement was probably in the Tollesbury area (as indicated by the 'bury' in the name, which is derived from the Anglo-Saxon 'Burh' meaning a defended place) but no trace of it has

yet been found. The derivation of the name Tolleshunt is most likely due to the fact that there were a number of natural springs in the area (sceanta – pronounced 'shunter' being an old Anglo Saxon word for this phenomenon), so the meaning of the name Tolleshunt is probably 'Toll's Spring,' although it may also be that the area, being so heavily forested at one time, was given over to hunting, hence Toll's Hunt. It is interesting to note that in modern day German, the word 'toll' can be translated as fine or terrific. The first explanation for the derivation of the name 'Tolleshunt' is by far the most widely currently accepted, however.

Probably men from the district would have fought with Brythnoth against the Danes at Maldon in 991, but the area would not have presented an interesting target for Viking raids itself, with little population or anything of value to attract the attention of covetous Vikings. But as they are known to have established an encampment on Mersea Island in 880AD they may well have sent hunting parties into the area.

Around the time of the Norman conquest, the local Saxon Thane, Bjarnswald (from which Barnhall Road may have derived its name), seems to have been displaced. Whether he fought at Hastings with King Harold is not known, but that would have been a sufficient reason for William the Conqueror to have divested him of his lands, and to have redistributed them as rewards to his own followers. The district's entry in the Domesday Book in 1086 reportedly shows it to have consisted of 4 manors, with a combined population of 120, possessed of 5 plough teams of eight oxen. It is only after this time that the 3 villages which bear the name Tolleshunt clearly emerge, with title to the land around Tolleshunt D'Arcy eventually being acquired by the D'Arcy family, Tolleshunt Major by the Le Majeurs, and Tolleshunt Knights by the Le Chevalliers (Chevalier being of course the Norman French for Knight). The name of Tolleshunt Knights may also be derived from the fact that the land round about was once given over as tithe land to the most largest of all the orders of crusading knights, the Knights Templar, who had considerable land holdings in Essex until the order was suppressed on the orders of King Edward II in 1311, but it is more likely that the former explanation is the correct one.

In 1155, a certain Robert of Tolleshunt held a knight's fee from the FitzWalter family, Earls of Clare, and he may have been the builder of the church, of which more later. In 1252, a John de Tolesanus was made Lord Mayor of London, but what his connection with the area may have been has not been firmly established.

Although no written records exist, almost certainly some men from the village would have supported Wat Tyler's rebellion, and would have marched with Jack Straw and the other men of Essex to meet King Richard II at Mile End in 1381 to demand the abolition of villeinage and to protest at the imposition of a poll tax, and would subsequently have been among the hundreds executed when the revolt finally collapsed and the King marched through Essex with an army of 40,000. It is probably also unsurprising that the village did not escape the widespread fear of witchcraft which was especially prevalent in the County in the 16th and 17th centuries. Some 700 people were tried for this offence in Essex, amongst whom 3 are known to have come from Tolleshunt Knights. A certain Widow Howe was put on trial in Chelmsford in 1594 and in 1597 a John Manning, together with, presumably, his partner, to use a modern expression, 'Goodwife' Manning. More will be written about what brought them before the Court and their subsequent fates in a subsequent article, which will also discuss the more well-known and various legends concerning the Devil and Barnhall.

The Civil War of 1642-9 had little direct impact on the area, although a grandson of Sir John Spencer, a London Alderman who was given Brook Hall in the reign of Elizabeth I, is known to have died fighting for the King at Hopton Heath in 1643. The majority of the inhabitants however would doubtlessly have provided staunch support for Oliver Cromwell and the Parliamentary cause in common with the rest of the Eastern Counties. The Puritans had a strong influence on the area. In 1540 the parish priest of Tolleshunt Knights, Richard Baldwere, complained to the Ecclesiastical Court in Witham when his parishioners would not pay for a clerk, presumably because they did not want the rector to have a server at mass. Essex was an early adherent to the Protestant cause, with the first regular Protestant church services in the country being held in Coggeshall in the early 1520's, no doubt in part due to the influence provided by county's strong links to, and easy contact with the Low Countries.

Animal husbandry would probably have been the mainstay of the local economy until the early 19th century, especially sheep and pigs. An Order in Council issued by Henry VIII recognized this fact and set out the rights of the freeholders of the villages surrounding the Tiptree heathlands, mentioning Tolleshunt Knights by name. These rights continued into the early 19th century, but the enclosure and giving over to agriculture of the lands, begun in the reign of Edward I with the first easing of the Forest Law in 1306 gradually reduced the wild nature of the area. The process was however resisted for

some time; as a result of complaints, a Tolleshunt Knights yeoman was taken to court in 1642 for enclosing an acre. The cultivation of wheat and cereals only began to take precedence when encouraged by the high price of corn during the Napoleonic Wars, and this may well have contributed to the final demise of the heathlands in Tolleshunt Knights in the 1820's when Paternoster Heath was finally enclosed and brought under the plough. However, the Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 saw a reduction in the population once again with Animal Husbandry temporarily staging a brief come back, forcing many of the local labourers off the land. In order to feed their families, they had perforce to seek work elsewhere, many migrating to the factories and mines being created in the North of England by the Industrial Revolution. Intensive fruit farming characterised the area from the late 19th century onwards, encouraged by the establishment of Wilkins Jam Factory in Tiptree, but whilst agriculture remains today a distinctive feature of the local landscape, it no longer provides any major source of employment.

In the 18th century, a not insignificant part of the local economy was provided by smugglers operating out of the local creeks, bringing in brandy, tea, silk and lace from the Continent. Local Farm Labourers would have found the money they could make carrying contraband inland from the ships a very useful addition to their meagre income. There are two excellent books available for anyone interested in further reading on this subject, *The Smugglers' Century: The Story of Smuggling on the Essex Coast 1730-1830* by Hervey Benham and *Smuggling in Essex* by Graham Smith.

It is unlikely that the village ever supported a large population however, and until modern times primarily consisted of little more than a scattered hamlet. In Henry III's Tax Roll the Parish of Tolleshunt Knights was assessed at just Ten Shillings and a Penny, among one of the lowest valuations in the country. However, according to records in the Guildhall Library in London, in 1678 the Parish's resources were sufficient to be able to make a donation to the rebuilding of St Paul's Cathedral. The census of 1851 reported a population of 371, but with the reduction in the parish boundaries in the 1930's, when the new parish of Tiptree was created, the population fell to about 110. Since that time, Tolleshunt Knights has gradually become somewhat overshadowed by its immediate neighbour to the west, but there is legislation in place to prevent building along Factory Hill, thereby preventing a convergence of the two villages. The parish of Tolleshunt Knights originally extended from Salcott Creek to the Tiptree Cross Roads (where The Factory Shop now stands), and as previously stated is known to have existed since Norman times, whereas

Tiptree is essentially an entirely modern creation, growing up as an industrial village with the establishment of Wilkins Jam Factory in 1885.

Construction of the original village church has been dated to the 1140's. This would have put it in the reign of King Stephen. This was not a happy time for the country as a whole as the realm was wracked by a Civil War between Stephen and Henry I's daughter the Empress Matilda (Queen Maud) for the crown. The relative remoteness of the village may have enabled the work to have gone ahead unimpeded by the chaos of events elsewhere, and who knows, the area may even have provided some sort of refuge for those fleeing from those troubled times. There is no evidence of any earlier Saxon church however. The earliest known parish priest was a certain John of Foxley, who is known to have been presented to the local lord of the manor, William le Chevallier, in 1244 by the Abbot of St Osyth. The church always had strong links with the House of Austin Friars, otherwise known as Tiptree Priory, commencing with the establishment of the latter in about 1218 and continuing through to its dissolution in 1525. The exact nature of the connection is not clear however, but the Priory may have provided a convenient source of supply of parish priests; a remote rural church not necessarily being a posting of choice for any ambitious young cleric. The records frequently refer to the Abbot of St Osyth appointing parish priests, and he would have been the Prior's superior. It is not clear why the village church is somewhat removed from the present-day site of the village. It may have been that the centre of the village was originally contained in the area around the church but was moved to higher ground to escape the effects of the coastal marshes, which would have been an unhealthy location in the Middle Ages. Perhaps the devastation visited upon so many villages by the Black Death in 1349, lead, as so often happened elsewhere, to the relocation of the community, but the church, being the only substantial building of any kind in the village at that time, would have had to have been left where it was. It was enlarged in the late 14th/early 15th century, possibly as a result of the increasing affluence of the area derived from the wool trade, but by the 1920's it had fallen into a state of disrepair, and in the 1930's it passed out of use as parishioners went to attend church services at the then newly built church of St Luke's in Tiptree. The new church also established a school, which lead to the closure of Tolleshunt Knights Village School in 1935 and the transfer of its pupils there. Strange that today Tolleshunt Knights is no longer in the catchment area for St Luke's but rather comes under the geographically more distant Heath School. The funds raised for the repair of the church were donated to an even greater need in 1940 when they were given to the Spitfire

Fund, and by the early 1950's the church had become almost derelict. It received its coup de grace as a result of the great gale of 1953, the same storm which also caused the terrible floods along the East Coast of that year, when exceptionally strong winds brought down a section of the roof. It then became clear that the church was beyond the means of the local community to restore to its former state. A separate article will discuss the tomb of the Knight in the church, reputedly to be that of Sir John atte Lee and dated to around 1380, and his family's possible connection with the Legend of Robin Hood.

In 1958 the village church was sold by the Church of England to the Greek Orthodox Church who have carefully restored it as a chapel attached to the Monastery of St John the Baptist, which they established in grounds around the Old Rectory. The location of the Monastery is a source of some local pride in that the village was chosen for what has become the largest Orthodox Monastery in Western Europe outside the traditional homeland of the church in Eastern and Southern Europe. It has put the village on the map to perhaps an even greater extent than the village's most recent addition, the Five Lakes Hotel and Country Club. Some would have thought Tolleshunt Knights an unlikely location for such a prestigious leisure project, but it continues to prosper, evidence for which anyone looking at the car park on any day of the week can testify.

The village did at one time support at least 4 public houses. The Dog & Pheasant in Brook Road is now but a distant memory, The Plough on Oxley Hill has only in recent years been converted into a private dwelling, leaving the The Rose & Crown on D'Arcy Road as the sole surviving hostelry. In the 18th century an ale house was even reported to have existed close to the church, but no trace of this remains today. The village's other services have also gradually been eroded. That the village once had a Post Office in Barnhall Road is now remembered by very few indeed; the village's own local garage, The Forge, closed in the mid-1990's, to be replaced simply by a used car sales lot, and finally in September 2000 The Village Shop finally succumbed to the cold blast of competition from the Supermarkets in Tiptree. Its demise still regretted by many. However, the village also has, and largely solely through the efforts of the villagers themselves, acquired in recent years one of the best equipped and largest Village Halls in the district.

The coming of the railway in 1904, affectionately known as The Crab & Winkle Line, would have been quite an event for the village, but as further evidence of

what a tiny population the village had at that time, a station was not provided at Tolleshunt Knights until 6 years after the original opening of the line in 1904. As all trains had to stop at the junction of D'Arcy Road and Strawberry Lane, where a level crossing was situated, the railway company after being petitioned by a number of local residents, eventually agreed to build a station at the site, which opened for business on 12 Dec 1910. It is interesting to speculate what further development the village might have seen in the later decades of the 20th century if the line had not been closed in 1951, a victim not only of the competition provided by Osbourne's bus service, but equally as much to the austerity of post-war Britain, where money was not available to upgrade a relatively unimportant rural railway line, and institute the repairs necessary after its over-use and lack of maintenance during the war years, when anti-aircraft guns were run up and down the line as a first line of defence against German bombers flying in from Luftwaffe bases in Holland to bomb London. This is particular food for thought, when one considers that it was the electrification of the main line from Liverpool Street to Colchester and Clacton in the 1960's which was a major contributing factor to the subsequent development of the area, when London became commutable for the first time. In addition, the village population, boosted by the recent construction of the new estate at Blackthorne Way, has increased 10-fold, to nearly 1100, since the railway was closed. It is only too obvious to anyone reliant on public transport, what an asset the railway would be to the village today.

For anyone interested in more information on the old line, the book by Peter Paye, *The Tollesbury Branch*, published in 1985, remains unsurpassed as the complete story of the origins, construction, operation and ultimate demise of the line.

The village made its contribution to the nation in both World Wars. Graves in the old churchyard include soldiers who died locally of their wounds in the First World War, and the Rose Garden at the Village Hall commemorates all the men of the village who made the ultimate sacrifice. Perhaps the most tragic incident to affect the village in World War II has been recounted by Nora Curtis when a Mosquito fighter crashed in the village while attempting to land at the nearby airfield at Birch, inadvertently causing a number of casualties to US Servicemen leaving a dance at the Village Hall. To gauge the atmosphere in the village at that time, and a little of what life was like in the area during the war years, Margery Allingham (1904-1966)'s novel *The Oaken Heart* is well worth a read. The author lived most of her life in the area (for the

most part in Tolleshunt D'Arcy) and is perhaps best known for her contributions to the Sexton Blake detective stories.

There is still a great deal of information in the Essex Records Office and elsewhere which can shed more light on the history of the village, and this work is still therefore ongoing. The Parish Council was established in 1894, and a perusal of the minutes can also provide an insight into the life of the village over the past 100 years. I am indebted to, and would recommend for further reading, the works by HM and ROM Carter 'Tolleshunt Knights Church and Parish' written in 1955 for The Tolleshunt Knights Church Restoration Committee, and additionally, the Rev. Keith Lovell's book, *In the Land of the Tolles*, published privately in 1999. The various articles contributed by Nora Curtis to the Village Newsletter on her reminiscences of life in the Village are also invaluable sources of information.

As originally stated, as it is hoped that this will lead to a comprehensive history of the village being written, any help would be gratefully received and properly acknowledged. For now, I should also like to thank Robert Long, a fellow Parish Councillor, for his advice and assistance in editing the above.

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