

# Notes on the Manor of Fordington

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## Abstract.

Description of the ancient customary land tenure,  
management of crops and stock, that ended in the 1870s,  
mentioning some of the characters of the time.

In these days, when Parish and Manor histories are in fashion, and deservedly so, the Manor of Fordington and its ancient and now obsolete system of tenure should not be overlooked. The notice in Hutchins' History of Dorset<sup>1</sup> is very short. It is as follows:  
"This luxuriant and extensive Manor contains upwards of 4,000 acres of arable, meadow, and pasture, and is divided into 65 tenements or livings, denominated in the court-rolls places and half places, which are held under the Lord of the Manor by grants for lives. Of the above 4,000 acres about 1,300 are annually sown with corn, and on the remainder are fed 4,912 head of cattle."

Hutchins further records that at the beginning of this century a proposal to enclose the Manor was made by the officials thereof. But at a meeting of tenants at the King's Arms, Dorchester, in February, 1801, this proposal was negatived. Here ends my borrowing from Hutchins. For a mass of the details which follow I am indebted to my friends, Mr. Hayne, Mr. Legg, and Mr. Hunt. In 1842 it was decided that the system should be changed. The Council of the Duchy of Cornwall, of which Duchy, an appanage of the Prince of Wales, the Manor is a part, resolved to refuse all applications for "renewing lives." By this means the whole Manor gradually fell into hand; the process being complete in 1873 or 1874. The "whole places," "half places", and "farthing holds" were done away with, the whole 65 of them. The "Fordington Field," to be presently described, was divided into four farms, besides the Church Farm, which was partly glebe held under the Lay Impropiator, and partly "Duchy land." Three large farmsteads, each with an extensive house and cottages, were built. Wire fences were erected bounding all roads and dividing farms from each other. Another great and more recent change may be passingly noticed. Formerly the "Duchy" always refused, but are now willing, to alienate land lying within the borough bounds, either as freehold or on building leases. The first freehold thus acquired was Heathcote Lodge, bought by Mr. W. Galpin in 1875.

But it is the old system with which we have to do. We may take Hutchins' notice, quoted above as a framework, on the lines of which to arrange what seems suitable for record in the transactions of the Dorset Field Club. And at the end we may notice what is known about the early history of the Manor, little enough unfortunately.

In the first place, then, Hutchins calls the Manor "luxuriant," a somewhat odd adjective to apply to a tract consisting greatly of light chalk soil. He is right enough, however, in

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<sup>1</sup> Third Edition, vol. ii., p. 287.

calling the Manor “extensive,” but it is strange that he does not give the least hint of the curious nature of its extension. Old Dorchester, constituting the borough before the enlargement of its bounds in 1836, consists of three parishes, Holy Trinity cum Frome Whitfield, St. Peter's, and All Saints. Then the curious point is that the Manor of Fordington encircles the whole of these three parishes except an isthmus of about 100yds. wide, uniting the two parts of Holy Trinity parish. As far as I know it is a unique instance of three parishes being all but embedded within the bounds of a fourth parish. Parish, I say, for the Manor of Fordington, together with a few curious isolated little freeholds, and the portions alienated for building, &c., of late years, with the glebe and the Liberty of Bindon, is co-extensive with the parish. The Liberty of Bindon consists of Fordington Mill and part of Mill-street. There are curious particulars connected therewith, but we cannot speak of them now. Nor can we, within the bounds of a paper on the Manor, make any attempt to master the obscure history of those isolated freeholds, such as Loop's Land, Mayne Land, and Cistercian Land. The last, at least, probably a possession of Bindon, was tithe free. On the other hand these freeholds carried no pasture rights like those inherent in the copyhold. This mere word must suffice on this curious bye-subject.

In “The Mayor of Casterbridge” Mr. Thomas Hardy likens three-parish Dorchester, within its rectangle, its Roman rectangle, of regular “walks” of trees, to a box-edged garden bed. Round this garden bed Fordington Manor may be in like fancy called a wide encircling grass plot - a 4,000, or more exactly 3,097 acre plot. It gave occupation to a good many gardeners, that grass plot. It is not certain, as far as I know, but certainly likely that each “tenement or living” had in early times its separate copyholder. These would number 65, according to Hutchins. But Mr. Hayne tells me that these tenements consisted of the following<sup>2</sup> :-

Whole Places	each containing	40 to 60 acres	15
Half Places	”	20 to 25 ”	31
Farthing Holds	”	13 to 15 ”	21

making 67 in all. As was sure to come to pass, however, these small properties, like leaves floating in a stream, had a mutual attraction. For instance, the late Mr. Hayne possessed three whole places, five half places, and three farthing holds. On the other hand some copyholders, or tenants of copyholders, to the last held quite small acreages. Mr. T. Sibley thus held a single half place. And in my boyhood it was a tenant who, in white smock and with the yoke on his shoulders, used to bring us our milk. I have called the tenants copyholders and thereby defined their tenure to some extent. Each copyholder held his land, large or small, on three lives. On the termination of a life he went to the next Manor Court and applied for leave to “put in” another life. This was granted on his paying a fine, varying according to size of the holding and, probably, with reference to age of the person whose life was to be “put in”. For instance, my friend, Mr. Legg's grandfather, paid on one occasion £92 10s., on another £111, on his copyhold of three half places and a farthing hold. Now these fines formed the whole profit of the Lord of the Manor - a small and very fluctuating income truly. On the other hand the Lord of the Manor spent nothing whatever on land or buildings. The

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<sup>2</sup> Mr. Legg's recollection slightly differs as to these numbers. He makes the numbers : 8, 30, and 21 respectively.

properties (for so I hear them called) thus held were looked upon by the holders as quite secure. They could sell them, just as Ulster tenants buy and sell farms. Subject to fine for renewal of a "life" the properties were considered as safe as freeholds, and they were dealt with accordingly. In my younger days there were twelve farmhouses and homesteads in Fordington, each the head-quarters of a copyhold property. Like the farms, the farmhouses varied in size. Some (most) of the smaller ones are improved away, others survive as cottages. But those thatched roofs sheltered good men and diligent farmers. One I can see now - the very man he was to sit for the picture of one, one of the old time. And all these houses and all these farm buildings were built and kept up by the respective copyholders; and so was the only fencing on the Manor - viz., that of the closes and of two or three large grass lands as mentioned above. Well, this long-standing customary tenure had no solid legal foundation whatever. The Council of the Duchy of Cornwall, who manage this as all other parts of the Prince of Wales' estate as Duke of Cornwall, were perfectly within their rights in altering it. But it may be imagined that it was no small shock to the copyholders when it was announced to them in 1842 that no more lives would be renewed. An offer was made at the same time that if any copyholder chose to surrender his property an annuity would be granted to him by the Duchy - of what proportion I do not know. By this surrender in some cases, and lapse of lives in the rest, the Manor fell into hand completely in 1874, and was, as above-said, divided into a small number of farms let in the usual way.

I have now to ask you to picture to yourselves, if you can, the extraordinary way in which the 3,097 acres, arable, simple pasture, and water meadow were shared out among the holders, whether 67 as perhaps of old, or 12 more recently. The arable land consisted of Fordington "Great Field," containing, roughly, 1,500 acres. It was divided in theory, not by fences, into four regions in some degree coinciding with the present farms. The regions were Poundbury, Middle, Castle, and Lower Fields. We have said that in old times, pre-railroad times, there was not an inch of fence throughout this expanse, roadsides or anywhere; nor, indeed, was it fenced from the down which bounded it on the west. How was it marked out, then, among the many farmers? Was it centuriated as past doubt it was far back by the methodical Roman agrimensores for the Italian coloni? Was it squared out, as then, into solid blocks of land with a limes, a boundary road, bordering each? Far enough from that. Yet it seems not impossible that the very different and far more minute division done away with in 1874 may have grown out of the Roman centuriation without any actual break. Sub-divided truly it was. The Great Field was parted into an infinity of "lawns" varying from 17 acres down to 27 perches, or perhaps even less. The tithe map gives the number as upwards of 2,000 in the whole Manor. Some idea may be formed from the lawns possessed by Mr. Legg's grandfather. His three half places and farthing hold comprised more than 90 lawns, which must have averaged hardly an acre each, it would seem. The lawns were separated by "walls", not fences in any sense, but banks, or rather strips about 1ft. wide left unploughed. What was the use of that may be asked, for, of course, that 90-lawn farm lay all in one place? The fact was as different from this as it could possibly be. The lawns of a farm might be, and usually were, scattered all over the Great Field from Loud's Road right away to Maiden Castle and round to Poundbury. The mapping of a farm looked most extraordinary, spots of land in all parts of that great expanse. And all the corn had to be carried to the homesteads in Fordington except a little to the one outlying homestead, Damer's Barn; for none was stacked on the land. It may have been partly owing to the great carrying distance, not less than 1½ mile in some instances, that a custom arose in Dorchester with a view to give a hand to the Fordington farmers.

It died out generations ago, but it must have had a wonderful charm of neighbours in it. When two thirds of Dorchester were burnt, in 1613, at first there was scarcely a man in the town to do anything against the fire. Why? Because they were one and all in Fordington Field helping with the harvest. This homely, neighbourly custom did not survive within the memory of man, I think; certainly not within my own. Besides the long carriage of much of the corn and clover-hay home, and of manure outwards, there was another peculiarity in great field farming. Owing to the absence of fences there was also an absence of root crops. One usual rotation was wheat, barley, clover. It was usually, or always, arranged among the farmers to have an infinity of neighbouring lawns under one class of crop. There would be the Lower Field, perhaps, mostly in wheat one year, and Poundbury Field in clover, tares, and pease. Poundbury Field would then be the "Garden Field" of that season. Owing (I suppose) to want of root crops the Duchy tenants kept no sheep; but they took on sheep belonging to neighbouring farmers, who paid at the rate of Is. per sheep for the autumn grazing from Sept. 21st on the stubble, clover, and downs. Each whole place gave the right to take on 120 sheep. Another branch of this right will be spoken of immediately. Dairies the tenants had, and this leads me to say something of the pasture and meadow hay arrangements. In and adjoining the village of Fordington are a good many enclosed grass fields. These are the "closes" which appertained to the various copyholders. In some cases the closes were adjoining to the respective homesteads, sometimes not so. Each copyholder had the exclusive use of his closes all the year round. Such, however, was not the case with any other grass land, not even the few freehold grass lawns. As on the Great Field and Downs in autumn, so, as hinted just above, did neighbouring farmers send sheep on pitiyly other lands at other seasons. The spring grazing for sheep of the East Ward for March and April was let by auction and the proceeds devoted to work on river banks, carriers, floats, and other parts of the water-meadow system, with repair of meadow fences. Then, from July 1st to September 21st, the farmers had right as above to take on sheep to graze on Poundbury Down and North Down. This was called "half-stock" grazing, the autumn stubble grazing which followed it being "whole stock". Then, as to hay. After the spring grazing in East Ward it was watered and laid up for hay. Now comes in the "Hayward," one of the Duchy officials, who may here be passingly noticed. Besides the Hayward there was the "Reeve" or local steward, the "Foreman of Great Field", called also foreman of the Homage, whose duty, inter alia, it was to report the lapse of "lives", and the Constable. These were chosen yearly at the Manor Court. Their profits consisted of holdings of land. The hay ward had 1 acre 3 roods 18 poles, the reeve 3 acres 17 poles, and the constable 4 acres 2 roods 20 poles. The Hayward's standing duty was to pen strays in the great Manor pound, which in my early days had massive oak palings. Then at harvest time he controlled the leazing. He rode about Great Field looking for and chasing off trespassers. No leazing was allowed till all the lawns were carried. Then at evening he went through Mill-street and elsewhere with a bell, giving notice that the leazing was open. A great affair that old Duchy leazing was. A friend has given me a graphic account of how his mother, on hearing the leazing bell, used to sew up her apron for carrying the gleanings, bundle him and the rest up to bed, and then the whole of them would turn out at two next morning under the stars and away to Great Field ; and their leazing often yielded six bushels of grain. But besides penning and leazing the hayward had, as his title tells, to do with the hay. Under the reeve he staked out the East and West Ward lawns every spring. For they had not, indeed in water meadow could not, have the "walls" of the arable land. Each of the copyholders or their tenants made and carried the hay of his own lawn or lawns. From the East Ward, bye-the-bye, the waggons went through a

deep ford. The aftermath grazing of the one or two freehold meadow lawns, equally with those on copyhold tenure, was common to all copyholders. But this aftermath in the East and West Wards was by no means the only common pasture. Through the summer, from May 12th, the copyholders, their tenants, or others renting only cows' grazing, sent their cows into Fordington Moor, to which pasture a rest was given by shifting the cows to Poundbury when thought needful. The copyholders had these cow-grazing rights in proportion to their holdings. A whole place carried right for three cows, for instance. I need hardly say that this part of the system involved great picturesqueness. Every sort of cow there was, from the old-fashioned brindled up to good shorthorns. The herd amounted to 154, tended by a cowherd. He received 1d. a week for each cow if only one came from its owner, but 1½d. for every two if so many or more hailed from one homestead. I well recall J. King, cowherd through great part of my boyhood, asking my father if he could not put in a word in favour of his getting the full 1d. a head. This, to his moderate thinking, "ood a med he a rich man". While the cows were on Poundbury my remembrance is that John, and I suppose other cowherds in their time, bivouacked there all night in a shelter of strawed hurdles. "Mutato mutando" we may say of that abode on Poundbury, as Pepys did of the shepherds on Salisbury Plain - "the cowherd's life was, in fair weather only, pretty". Little remains to tell except that the affairs of the Manor were conducted as to local matters by the reeve above mentioned. And a Manor Court was held by the steward of the Duchy of Cornwall yearly in November at the Court House. This stood near Fordington Green on the present site of a pair of houses called Victoria Villas. At this court, down to the early years of this century, the copyholders did homage for livings by presenting a silver spur. No one will be surprised that the old Manor had a tendency to the evolution of "characters". Besides the reeve, the hayward, the foreman, and constable (Duchy officials), there were the cowherd, already spoken of, and also the shepherd. They were so mixed up in Duchy work that I think the outside public took them to be "Duchy folk" like the others. I have said what the cowherd's work was. The shepherd was employed by those neighbouring farmers, or some of them, who paid for spring, summer, and autumn keep for sheep on grass or stubbles. I think that a new series of Wessex tales, all true, might be written by Mr. T. Hardy, by diligent gathering and gleaning, even now, and all about "Duchy folk". I feel certain that his neighbour, my friend, Cornelius Thome - last hayward but one - could help him out with a good tale or two, and as to Nat Seal - last shepherd - and his father before him, there is plenty yet floating about to fill a small book. I am not going to forestall Mr. Hardy. Certainly not, for your sake and his. Yet I may tell two little bits about Nat which concern myself. Nat was a great man at fairs and cattle shows. These last in my early boyhood were held in Salisbury Field, adjoining my old home. One show came round at a time when Nat had a jet black lamb which followed him everywhere in friendly company with his two dogs. I was looking at this group and so was everyone. Nat, on the other hand, was looking at me. On glancing up I could see in his eye what he was thinking - "Parson's son - take a bit of a rise out of you, sonny ; see if I don't." Some one said to him : "What kind of a sheep-dog d'ye call thik there?" "Sheep-dog, good-now. Tell ye what, er've got un's black cwoat ; blest if I dwunt larn 'un to read and make 'un a parson." I would not tell this of Nat but that I can cap it with another little story, showing that there was a soft place in that rough heart. Quite in Nat's last years I had returned to Dorchester after long living elsewhere. I went up to see Poundbury Fair. There was Nat with his old dog and his crook, with its spiral woodbine-grooved shaft, afterwards left as a legacy to Mr. Burnett, his benefactor. Of course I spoke to Nat. "I be middling, thank ye ; but, there, I can't call your name to mind." " Moule," said I.

“Moule ! Now you dwunt go to tell I that you be any ways belonging to our dear wold Parson Moule?” “ Yes, his son.” “ Parson Moule's son ! So 'tis, and I not to mind ye.” Whereupon he snatched my hand and kissed it, there in the middle of the crowd.

Here ends what I know and have gathered about the system and folks as I remember them. As to the history of the Manor in remote times, as bearing on that system, I can say almost nothing. Of course you will ask what Domesday tells us. I cannot, and what is more, Eyton seemingly cannot, quite answer this : “Rex tenet Dorcestre et Fortitone et sutone et Gelingeham et Frome.” There is the difficulty. These royal demesnes are all grouped together, and we cannot say what portion of the particulars about them belong to Fordington specially. “In dominio sunt vii. carucae et xx. servi ; et xii. coliberti et cxiiii. villani et quater viginti et ix. bordarii habentes xlix. carucas.” That is all we know. As a conjecture I would hazard the idea that the whole places, half places, and farthing holds, in a degree, represented the holdings of the Fordington villani, bordarii, and coliberti of Domesday, respectively. And these Domesday holdings, I think we may suppose, were sub-divisions of the 10 or 12 Roman “Centurise”, the “limites” of which, doubtless, lasted on to the end of the Latino-British Dominion, which died here in Dorset very hard indeed. Further, I venture to ask if Great Field, with its theoretical divisions of Poundbury, Middle, Castle, and Lower Fields, and its customary cultivation of these fields, in their crowd of lawns, each with one class of crop in rotation, may not have been an actual survival of the Saxon “Out Field”, and the “closes” of the “In Field”. My idea is that the “Garden Field” above described represented the bare fallow whereby the Saxons rested the land. But this by the way. The Manor appears to have been first granted away as a fief by King Henry II. In after times it seemed to gravitate to the Earldom of Cornwall. In King Edward the First's time, Edward, Earl of Cornwall, held it. It passed in the next reign to Piers Gaveston's widow. King Edward III. annexed it again to the Earldom of Cornwall and Principality of Wales ; but it was granted away to various persons for their lives. Lastly, King James I. granted to Prince Charles, which grant is still in force.

So much have I set down about the Manor - its system and its history - “Well rid of it,” you may think, “both system and story about it.” I say not a word for the latter; no, nor for the former either. I know my place too well - here “au fin du siecle”. Brand new is the only excellent quality in everything. Just so. Yet, as I say this, I see pleasant sights of the old Manor in long past years. A vast many neighbouring lawns would be in wheat, as we have said. What a picture I see - half-a-mile or more of waving gold, with not a fence to break it. And then, in harvest, as old Augusts shine again in fantasy, what trains and processions of loaded waggons bear down on the village homesteads from all parts of Great Field. Yes, and I see myself leazing among the neighbours, on the stubble of it; my spoil going to some old woman of the scattered busy crowd. Again, what snug quiet little homesteads those waggons made for - deep thatched roof all round the bartons, thatched roofs on several of the farmhouses. But most clear is the picture of that great herd of cows sauntering home at evening from the Moor, through Fordington Ford, below the Mill. Never was anything of the kind more picturesque than the hundred and fifty-four of every colour of the species bos, coming through that wide shallow, past some tall trees, past a high-pitched thatched farmhouse. There is no great herd now, no ford. The trees are gone, and as to the thatched house, there is a Methodist Chapel instead. All is well, let no one accuse me, these remembrances notwithstanding, of that evil crime, *laudatio temporis acti*.