

'Our far-flung poor little manor in Devon': Docombe and its Canterbury Overlords

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The back-story

In 1174 King Henry II put his seal to confirm a charter that changed for ever the destiny of a corner of north-east Dartmoor.

'I grant & make over to the Chapter of Canterbury, for the love of God & the salvation of my own soul & the souls of my ancestors, & for the love of blessed Thomas Archbishop & Martyr, of venerable memory, by way of alms in perpetuity & free from any & all charges, one hundred shillings' worth of land in Moreton[hampstead], namely Docombe with its appurtenances & with the adjacent lands, in such manner that those hundred shillings' worth of land may be made up from Docombe & the other adjoining lands. I grant this for the clothing & provision of one monk in that monastery for ever, who may celebrate masses there for the salvation of the living & the repose of the departed.'

The original grant had in fact been made by William de Tracy in an Italian monastery. Docombe is not mentioned in Domesday Book and as far as we know had not hitherto been a separate manor. So who was de Tracy and why did he make this grant?

It was once thought that he was an illegitimate son of Henry I. Meticulous research by Professor Nicholas Vincent has recently found, however, that he was probably the son of Turgis de Tracy, of the hamlet of Tracy, near Vire in Normandy and married to an English heiress. He held considerable property in Normandy and Devon, including Moretonhampstead for the nominal annual fee of an unmewed sparrowhawk. Earlier he had made similar charitable grants on his own account e.g. founding a leper hospital at Couesmes-en-Froulay in Maine. But this one was different.

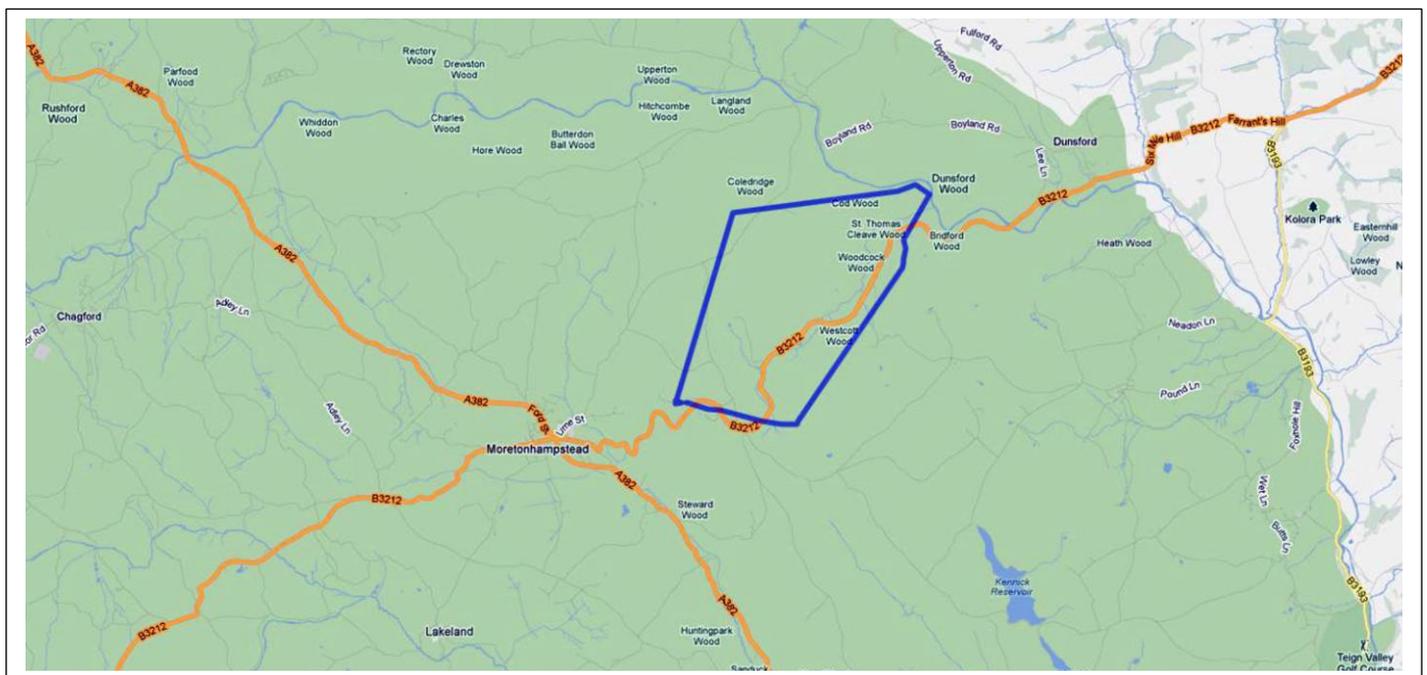
Described as having *'often performed bravely in military action'*, presumably on the king's behalf, de Tracy was with the King in Normandy at Christmas in 1170 when the latter heard that the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, had excommunicated two of his friends. For Henry this was the final straw in a long-running power struggle with Becket and he went into one of his notorious rages, allegedly asking: *'Will none of you rid me of this turbulent priest?'* De Tracy and three other knights promptly departed for Kent to force Becket to rescind his action. When he refused, they murdered him at one of the altars of the cathedral; de Tracy probably played the leading role and struck the first blow.

Roof boss in
Exter Cathedral
showing de Tracy
striking the first
blow on Becket.



Full of remorse, he confessed shortly after the murder to Bartholomew, bishop of Exeter, in Devon who sent him to Rome. In turn the Pope ordered him to continue his journey to the Holy Land. Reaching Cosenza in southern Italy, he caught a disease and Herbert of Bosham, a cleric, gleefully gives horrific details of Tracy's death, & although in an alternative version he reached the Holy Land, his account of events is preferred by modern historians.

The area carved out for this grant covers about 1300 acres and remained a discreet manor owned by the Prior and Chapter of the Benedictine monastery of Christ Church Canterbury until the Dissolution of the Monasteries. In 1541 it passed to the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury Cathedral who sold it to the Gregory family; they ran it from 1864 until 1921 when it was sold off to the tenants. It stretches from the east side of the town of Moretonhampstead to the river Teign; there were once nine farms (six today) with a part of one still called Canterbury, 300 acres of woods, including one still called St Thomas Cleave, and 400 acres of moor land, known as Mardon, that the commoners only acquired ownership of in 1992 from the Gregorys. Some of its land also covered the hamlet of Westcot that is now in the parish of Bridford where the church is dedicated to St Thomas Becket.



Approximate area of Doccombe Manor

The sources

Thanks to its long period of ecclesiastical ownership, Doccombe is said to have one of the best sets of records for a manor of its size and location. The vast bulk of those records are kept in the archives of Canterbury Cathedral and include charters, court rolls, the customs of the manor, surveys, rentals, accounts, leases and correspondence. Moretonhampstead History Society has recently paid for a number of them to be copied digitally. A dedicated group of members has begun to first transcribe them and then also to translate and ‘decipher’ the ones in abbreviated

Latin that cover the medieval and early modern period. There are other sources, in particular three volumes of Canterbury Letters issued by the Camden Society in 1887; the texts are in Latin, Norman French and English, with translations provided for the French documents. They contain a number of letters written specifically to and from Doccombe as well as general correspondence to all their manors that were mainly in the south-east. Doccombe is often called *'their far-flung poor little manor in Devon.'*

What have we learned so far?

We have a long way to go but there have already emerged from the smudged, creased and torn documents a number of fascinating insights into life on a medieval manor with an ecclesiastical landlord. It was very much a two-way relationship. The inhabitants had their obligations and their rights with a lot of canny playing of the system in between on both sides. Here are a few examples:

Doccombe was not just any ecclesiastical manor but it had a particular connection with St Thomas Becket – the most revered English saint and martyr. Hence one of the great pieces of English medieval literature is Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. This meant the manor was carefully protected from attempts to raise money from it by the Courtenay lords of Moreton who were frequently admonished by the Prior for trying to tax or claiming the moor and woodland of 'our poor little men' of Doccombe.

On the other hand the monks were assiduous in collecting their rent and the inhabitants were frequently reminded that they had not yet sent it to Canterbury. Moreover there were extra payments such as the provision of a palfrey horse to celebrate the election of a new Prior; it had to be delivered by an inhabitant 'in person' to Canterbury – something like a three to four weeks' round journey!

Women were also in positions of weakness and strength. On the one hand:

The Prior objected to a Doccombe bondswoman marrying a freeman 1332

'...We have heard that a certain woman, Agnes of Smalregg {Smallridge Farm today} by name, Our bondswoman, would wish to contract marriage, if it were Our pleasure, with a certain freeman named Richard, son of Roger the Shearman of Moreton {hampstead}; but it doth not seem to Us, or to Our Council, that a contract of this kind could be made without prejudice to Our church....'

On the other hand the tenants usually held their tenure for three lives and the last widow could, until she remarried, retain the copyhold tenure of her late husband's land. It was not a dower or gift, but a free right independent of the will of the husband. **So we find complaints from Canterbury that:**

'...It often happens that the last life in a 3 life copyhold even on his deathbed conveys the right of widowhood by marrying a female 'friend' when even unable to speak or walk...

And:

'Many widows who enjoy their property on this tenure live in public fornication with a man so not to forfeit their title to the property by marrying...'

We are also learning a lot of details about people and places:

The names of the farms and their tenants e.g. John of Kyngwell occurs in the thirteenth-century. Most of the farms have kept the same name (give or take spelling variations) for over eight hundred years and a 'John' farms at Kingwell today.

There was a mill, a chapel and possibly a resident priest before Moreton had one, and a 'yoleway' that Harold Fox identified as a Saxon name for a drove road up to the High Moor. He dated it to 1492 but we have now found it in earlier documents.

The buildings are also recorded, including 'hall-house with a house for cows under the same roof' with a separate kitchen and a separate bake-house for safety – perhaps learning from Moreton that is notorious for its destructive fires.

In fact relations with neighbouring Moreton had to be carefully regulated. There were disputes in particular over the woods and moorland. Today there is still visible a line of stones in the woods that delineates the ownership and we have found documentary evidence of a 'turf war' about six hundred years ago that led to them being established. The woods were crucial to the medieval economy. The tenants had to appoint wood wardens to ensure they took only their allotted share for repairs to their buildings and fences – called '*howsevoite*' and '*vencevoite*' in the documents. **Here is an extract from the Customs of the Manor to show another use – at a price:**

'In a mast year each tenant to have all his or their swyne, hoggs & piggs to go in the Lords woods of Docomb & in the woods of Sir William Courtney from the Feast of St Michaell Th'Archangel to the day called All Soules every Tenant to pay for a swyne 4d, to pay for a hogg 2d & to pay for a pigg 1d. Our Lord or farmer to have the third part & Sir William Courtenay the two parts of the mastage money.'

Finally, we have just found another example of trouble with the neighbours. A random search by a member of the group at the Record Office found the following case in a volume of the Selden Society. In the Diocese of Exeter Consistory Court a case was heard in 1559 between John Kingwell (sound familiar!) and Robert Taylor of Moreton. **John complained that Robert:**

'did say, speak, assert, utter and publicly and maliciously proclaim that John Kingwell is a witch! And other defamatory and abusive words to be more fully specified and proved in the course of this suit by legitimate proofs.'

Unfortunately, no more details were given in the Journal's extract so we shall have to delve into the Court's records ourselves - we'll keep you posted on what we find.

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