

RINGMER PARK - THE LAST FOUR HUNDRED YEARS

by

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Cranmer, Gage and the Cornfords

During the 16th century Ringmer Park was transformed in all but name. For some three hundred years it had been a deer park preserved for the use of successive Archbishops of Canterbury, but after several changes of ownership it emerged by about 1580 as a private agricultural estate.

In 1538 Archbishop Cranmer leased the Park, with the site of the manor of Stoneham and its lands, to Henry Polsted, gentleman, one of the provisions of the lease being that he must "leave in the Park at the end of the term 50 deer, being the number he received". Twice a year he must provide sufficient "horse-meat and manmeat" for the Archbishop's officers when they came on business, but for not more than three days at a time. The lease was for a term of 60 years at a rent of £47. 18s. 3d. and "6 sides and 3 haunches of seasonable Bucks and 6 sides and 3 haunches of 3 seasonable Does yearly". Polsted also had to pay £3 per annum to William Corneforde, the Park Keeper, after whose death John Brackenbury, the Archbishop's servant, was to be the Keeper at 60s. 10d. The rent venison was agreed at "10s. for every two sides and one haunch of Buck venison and 6s. 8d. of Doe venison" (1). This makes it clear that Ringmer Park at that time was still functioning as a deer park, and that the Archbishop intended this state of affairs to continue for at least the next 60 years.

In 1546 the park was estimated to contain about 130 acres (2), about the same size as Moor Park, whereas Plashett, the third Ringmer deer park, and others in Sussex such as Michelham, Hellingly and Petworth were all probably between 600 and 800 acres in extent. Deer parks were normally surrounded by a ditch, outside which would be a bank surmounted by a fence or hedge; this outline was usually curved, which made fencing easier and more economical (3) and the typically oval shape of Ringmer Park can still be traced on a modern map. There must have been hedging as well as fencing on at least part of the boundary, as Heneage Legge gives several references to expenditure on hedging. Three gates are mentioned, "the great gate" and two others, one of which was the east gate (4). These gates would have been built up with a barrier above the road to prevent the escape of deer, while allowing pedestrians through (5). The object was not only to keep the deer in the park but also to encourage other deer to enter, for which purpose deer-leaps were provided, consisting of a lower length of fence with a deep ditch on the park side of the bank, so that

a deer could jump in but would find it difficult to get out (6).

The park probably consisted mostly of woodland, giving cover for the deer as well as providing fodder. Deer can browse on many trees and shrubs including oak, ash, maple, hazel, holly and ivy, and they eat fruit such as crab-apples, pears, and haws; and also acorns and beech-mast (6). Polsted had to purchase for 50 marks (a mark was worth 13s. 4d.) all trees, woods and underwood in the park (1); Legge records more than one instance of the sale of timber, for example in the 15th century "10s. 8d. received for 30 cart loads of timber sold to one burner at the lime kiln," and the fact that there was a heronry (4) implies considerable tree cover. There would have been grassy clearings between the trees called 'launds' or 'lawns' for grazing (6).

Henry Polsted's lease had only run for five years when Ringmer Park came into the possession of Sir John Gage of Firle. This was the result of a Deed of Exchange by virtue of an Act of Parliament of 1543, involving the Archbishop of Canterbury, Sir John Gage and Thomas Culpeper. The outcome was that the Archbishop exchanged possessions in South Malling, Ringmer, Little Horsted and Framfield for manors and lands in Kent owned by Gage; the Archbishop also exchanged some of his properties in Kent with Kentish manors owned by Culpeper, who gained some other Gage possessions in Kent, for example the advowson and patronage of Hever church. Gage by this transaction became lord of the manor of 'Ramescombe', and owner of More Park, Ringmer Park and Plashett Park in Ringmer, and among other acquisitions was the "Ryver of Lewes from South Street (Cliffe) to the mouth called Riche Mouthe" (7). Stoneham was not included in this exchange, and nothing more is known of Henry Polsted's lease of Ringmer Park.

No doubt this property deal was to Gage's advantage, as he was then in high favour with Henry VIII, who had made him a Knight of the Garter, Comptroller of the Household, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Constable of the Tower of London (8). He soon disposed of the two smaller deer parks, which may have been the least attractive of his new possessions. In 1546 he sold Ringmer Park outright for £300 to William Cornford and his son John. This was the same William who in 1538 had been the Park Keeper at £3 per annum. In the two Deeds appertaining to this sale no mention is made of deer, but the description of the property includes "also all and every liberty and jurisdiction of park that I have or ought or could have or enjoy". A third Deed later in the same year explains in detail how an annual rent of 13s. 4d. formerly paid to the King as chief lord had "for divers sums of money" been granted by the King to Gage, who now renounced all rights to this annual payment in consideration of £13. 6s. 8d. paid to him by Cornford (9).

The Cornfords owned the Park until 1580, and it is probable that they were responsible for its disparking, which would involve clearing most of the woodland and planting hedges to divide the land into fields. Many of the old deer parks were converted to agricultural use during the 16th century, due partly to the break-up of the ecclesiastical estates (10) and partly to the great increase in price of timber, grain and other agricultural products. William Cornford had died before 1575, but it is unlikely that John Brackenbury ever became the Park Keeper, for in 1575 John Cornford leased the property to Sir Thomas Sackville, Lord Buckhurst, for a term of 99 years at a rent of £60 per annum (11). John Cornford was then referred to as a yeoman, and for the first time Ringmer Lodge was called "a Mansion Howse", which suggests that he or his father may have enlarged or rebuilt it. In March 1580 Lord Buckhurst assigned his lease to John Turner of Tableherst, but a few weeks later he purchased Ringmer Park complete with its mansion from Cornford, for an unspecified sum (12). According to Legge the property then comprised a "dwelling house, dovecote, two barns, two gardens, 80 acres land (presumably arable), 20 acres meadow, 70 acres pasture and 10 acres wood" (4).

Sackvilles and Stapleys

From this time on much more is known about the absentee owners of the Park than about the people who lived there and farmed the land. Thomas Sackville was a considerable poet as a young man, but soon abandoned the arts to hold high office at the Courts of both Elizabeth I and James I. Among his many appointments were Lord High Treasurer and Lord High Steward of England; he was a Knight of the Garter, was created Lord Buckhurst in 1567 and the 1st Earl of Dorset in 1604, while in 1586 Elizabeth, to whom the Sackvilles were related through the Boleyns, presented him with the former royal palace of Knole in Kent. In 1608 he left a great fortune to his son Robert, the 2nd Earl, who survived him for only a year. Richard, the 3rd Earl, was a gambler and spendthrift who lived beyond his income in spite of his substantial inheritance, and was forced to sell much of the property acquired by his forbears (13). In 1618 he was granted a Licence of Alienation to sell Ringmer Park to Anthony Stapley (14), though it is uncertain how soon after this the sale was completed.

The purchaser was either Anthony Stapley of Framfield, who bought Patcham Place in about 1625, or his son Anthony, born c.1590 (15). The younger Anthony was the owner of Ringmer Park by 1639 (16), at which time he was becoming prominent on the Parliamentary side in the period leading up to the Civil War. Strictly puritanical, he was elected Member of Parliament for Sussex in 1640, served in the Long Parliament, and in 1642 as Colonel Stapley he, with other Deputy-

Lieutenants for Sussex, was commanded by Parliament to "put that County into the like posture of defence as is Kent, and to disarm all such as shall refuse to join with them in securing the County". He was Governor of Chichester in 1643, and in 1649 was one of the Commissioners at the trial of Charles I, whose death warrant he signed. Under Cromwell he was Vice-Admiral for Sussex and then Commissioner of Somers Islands - the Bermudas - at £1000 per annum, as a reward for his consistent support of the Parliamentary side. At least Anthony, the regicide, was loyal to his master, but his son John, who inherited the family properties in 1655, while apparently supporting Cromwell was plotting to restore Charles II to the throne. In this he was joined by his younger brother Anthony, among others. When the plot was discovered John betrayed his fellow-conspirators and was pardoned by Cromwell, but nevertheless Charles II at his Restoration created him a baronet (17). He married Mary Springate of Broyle Place, and after the death of his father-in-law lived there as head of the family and 'squire' of Ringmer.

In 1681 Sir John transferred Ringmer Park to his son Herbert, of Folkington (18), who died in 1698, pre-deceasing his father by three years; Herbert's two children had died in childhood, and the property evidently went to his sister Elizabeth, who had married Dr. Thomas Briggs, Chancellor of the Diocese of Chichester, in 1684 (19).

The Shore family

Dr. Briggs had died before 1716, as a deed of that year gives Dame Alicia Taylor, widow, Elizabeth Briggs, widow, and Thomas Briggs, esquire, as owners of Ringmer Park. The description of the property now includes "all mynes, woods and underwood". Elizabeth Carter, widow, was still the occupier, as she had been in 1681. This deed sets out in detail the history of the 13s. 4d. annual rent once due to Henry VIII and how it "is come to the said Thomas Briggs". The document is a lease of Ringmer Park and other properties in Sussex to Henry Aylward, with a recovery a month later, and in the same year the properties were sold by Briggs to Dr. John Shore, his brother-in-law for £3000 (20).

Two, or possibly three, generations of the Shore family of Chichester owned the property from 1716 until the 1770s. Dr. John Shore died in 1719, and in 1760 there was a lease and release from Robert Wilson and his wife Alice, heir of John Shore, to James Parke, involving a payment of £220. In 1767 at the time of the Broyle Enclosure Major John Shore was the owner, and Jane Shore inherited it from her husband John between 1773 and 1775. Jane Shore, resident in Portman Street, London, mortgaged Ringmer Park in 1778 to Richard Board, a London chemist, for £4000. She paid off over £2000 in 1787, but the mortgage was in existence until 1855 (20).

Jane, who died in about 1801, bequeathed the property to "my good friends" Dr. Thomas Walshman and his wife Elizabeth, after whose deaths it was to go to the youngest son of Gibbs Crawford of Pax Hill, Lindfield. Dr. Walshman was the owner until his death in 1836, his wife having died three years previously (21).

Gamekeepers

Both Jane Shore and Dr. Walshman appointed gamekeepers for the "manor" of Ringmer Park. Richard Cannon, yeoman, of Ringmer, was the gamekeeper in 1785, and James Phillips, yeoman, of the Cliffe near Lewes, in 1800. In 1802 the gamekeeper was Samuel Paine of Lewes, butcher, and in 1805 Samuel Pain of Ringmer (22) who was very likely living at Ringmer Park; Gideon Mantell in his Journal records visiting his friend Charles Pain at Ringmer Park in 1819.

Later Owners and Occupiers

After the death of Dr. Walshman, William Board Edwards-Gibbs Crawford had to prove his entitlement to inherit Ringmer Park as the youngest son of Gibbs Crawford. He produced his parents' marriage certificate, the burial certificates of Dr. and Mrs. Walshman, his own baptism certificate dated 1796, a brief pedigree and an affidavit sworn by Timothy Muddle of Lindfield. This stated that William was the only son of Gibbs Crawford and Fanny (whose maiden name incidentally was Board, that of the first mortgagee). William Gibbs Crawford raised another £2500 on the security of Ringmer Park in October 1836, the mortgagees now being the Rev. Thelwall Salusbury and the Rev. Henry Steward (21). However the preamble to the Ringmer Tithe Award dated 1843 states that the Park Farm and lands "belong to the trustees of the will of the late Gibbs Crawford Esquire". It is difficult to understand why William Gibbs Crawford is not named as the owner. The tenant of the land was William Ridge of Upper Stoneham.

In 1855 the Reverends Salusbury and Steward exercised their right to sell the property in default of interest paid on the loan, and Ringmer Park was put up for auction (21). In March Mary Sharpe, widow, Tenant at Will, was given six months notice to quit, and the sale took place on 26 June 1855 at the White Hart Inn, Lewes. The highest bid of £4,100 was made by George Samuel Gibbs of Ringmer, who thus became the new owner (21). George Gibbs occupied the house and farmed the land himself (23), possibly the first owner to do so since the Cornfords in the 16th century. In 1875 he sold the property to William Langham Christie of Glyndebourne for £13,000, over three times the amount he had paid for it 20 years earlier (21).

John Boxall, farmer, was the occupier of Park Farm in 1878, but from 1887 to 1918 John Porter and then William Porter were living there as private residents, followed by George Eliot Sealey in 1924 and 1930 and Donald Glass in 1938 (24). From the 1950s to the mid 1970s Ringmer Park was the home of Sir Richard Boughy, whose father, Sir George, had lived at Malling House, Lewes.

At the time of writing the property is once more in the market, being offered for sale by Mr. Peter Benning. Instead of Cornford's mansion there is now a spacious and luxurious Georgian-style house built in the 1930s, standing in about 14 acres of land (25).

Area of the Park and use of land

Over the years the following estimations are given of the acreage, and in some cases the use, of the land.

Date	Total acres	Wood acres	Arable acres	Pasture acres	Meadow acres	Reference
1546	130					SAS/TR p. 2
1580	180	10	80	70	20	W.H.Legge
1681	200					ESRO/Danny/343
1716	172					ESRO/GBN/9/6
1760	225	5	70	120	30	" "
1778	172					" "
1836	171	9 (shaws & hedges)	94	32	34	" GBN/15/1
1843	163	1 $\frac{1}{4}$	82	62	16	Tithe Award
1982	13 $\frac{3}{4}$	--	--	Gardens and Paddocks -		Strutt & Parker sale prospectus

Some of these variations might be accounted for by differences in methods of calculation and standards of accuracy, and the fact that house plots and gardens are included in some totals and omitted from others. However the figures for 1760 -- a total of 225 acres with 120 acres pasture -- would indicate that about 50 acres of land had been added to the estate since 1716 and were disposed of again before 1778. Throughout its history Ringmer Park seems to have been quite separate from the Middleham estate which it adjoins to the south-east and from Ryderswells to the south-west, and it is bounded by roads to the north and north-west. The most likely area for exchange of land would thus be with Stoneham to the south, and in fact most of the former Ringmer Park land has been

farmed by Upper Stoneham for many years. It is thought that the parish boundary south of Ringmer Park was re-aligned between 1702 and 1731 (26), and the boundary of the Park itself may have been altered at that period, even if it was later reinstated.

Value of the estate

Date	Lease £ p.a.	Sale £	Reference
1546		300	SAS/TR/p.2
1575	60		ESRO/AMS/3617
1760	220		ESRO/GBN/9/5
1855		4100	ESRO/GEN/15/1
1875		13000	" " "
1982		(Asking price:) 285000	"Sussex Express & County Herald" 8 Oct.1982

As well as reflecting the changing economic background, these figures give some clues as to the way the estate was managed at different periods. The rent of £60 p.a. in 1575 implies a capital value of over £1000, compared with £300 30 years earlier - this may be additional evidence that the Cornfords converted the park to farmland during these years of inflation.

Another significant rise in value is between 1855 and 1875, suggesting that George Gibbs, the new owner, improved and developed the estate after a period of neglect, then sold it at a handsome profit at a time of high prices. The current value of Ringmer Park, bereft of its farmland, will perhaps surprise future historians.

Acknowledgments

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