

A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

Episode 8: THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

Sir Peter de Southchurch, the son of Sir Richard de Southchurch III, was the last male tenant bearing the family name to hold Southchurch manor; he died in 1309, having added to the already considerable family estates. His widow Joan (a relative of the Earl of Warwick) survived him by only five months, leaving two young daughters, Alice and Joan, as co-heirs. In time they married and had children of their own (see below), but those children were not de Southchurchs. The attempt to make Southchurch the centrepiece of a major lordship had failed, and the manor slipped back into a few more hundred years of relatively peaceful slumber.

Sir Peter also had an illegitimate son, Henry, but he, sadly, was something of a black sheep. He started well, spending eight years as a monk at Prittlewell Priory, but for much of his adult life he wandered about as a vagrant. Sir Robert de Rochford had obtained the sole guardianship and trusteeship of the heiresses and their fortune, but Henry made a determined attempt to obtain at least a part of his father's estate. Alice married John de Newyntone, and their son, John de Newyntone II, brought a charge against Henry of having taken wrongful possession, by means of a forged will, of certain Southchurch estates of more than 600 acres, together with a mill and other property inherited by John of his grandfather. Henry was put under sentence of outlawry for failing to surrender to the law as a vagrant monk, the Crown holding the estates pending trial. Henry died unconvicted in 1343, but with his death the male line of the de Southchurch family came to an end. In 1345 the property was restored to John.

Thereafter the monks of Christ Church, Canterbury had a bewildering number of tenants at Southchurch manor. These included John of Prittlewell, a citizen and spicer of London, William de Dersham and John of London. These were no doubt wealthy and respectable men, but they would have had no pretension to high nobility.

England was becoming a less settled place by the second half of the fourteenth century. The manorial system was beginning to break up, as the Black Death had not left enough labourers on most manors to carry on farming in the old ways. Ancient services such as seasonal ploughing and carting on the lord's land were increasingly exchanged for money payments. Despite this, there was much unrest: labourers still bound to perform services resented such restrictions, while free labourers resented attempts to keep their wages down.



Attack on Southchurch Hall during the Peasants' Revolt, 1381
by Alan Sorrell

This smouldering unrest flared into open rebellion in 1381 in the Peasants' Revolt. It began in south Essex when a royal official attempted to collect unpaid poll taxes in Brentwood. At Southchurch armed peasants raided the manor house and seized the manor records. These included the rolls of court, the deeds relating to tenancies,

and particulars of the obligations and services due to the lord of the manor, all of which were burnt. On the suppression of the revolt, the tenants were deprived of their holdings and were compelled to sue for pardon and re-admission. Where granted this was at the lord's will, with whatever conditions he might impose, and on payment of a fine.

In the same year, the lord of the manor at Southchurch granted license to three men, presumably his tenants, to fish upon the Southchurch sands "without the place of the keddles". The keddles were probably long nets hung on stakes and arranged in the form of a letter V, with the point on the seaward side. As the tide came in, it carried the fish past the net, in which some were left when the tide went out. Such keddles were maintained on the foreshore as late as 1772.

An inventory compiled in 1391 - ten years after the Peasants' Revolt - provides an interesting picture of life at the hall. In addition to the main central hall, there was a solar, or upper chamber, several sleeping rooms, a chapel, a kitchen, a brewhouse, a bakehouse, a grange and granaries, a wool chamber and a cider press. The inventory also listed the hall's livestock: 4 cart horses and 8 plough animals; 9 rams and 200 ewes on Southchurch marsh; 10



A Medieval bakehouse

rams and 300 ewes on Canvey Island; 2 sows, 4 porkers and 14 suckling pigs; 2 ganders, 4 geese, a cock and 6 hens. The chapel contained a missal, 2 vestments, a corporal, gilt chalice and paten, 2 frontals of silk, 2 cruets and 2 candelabra of tin, a pyx, a vessel for holy water, an alabaster image, a sacring bell and 2 other bells. A holy place, but clearly one which also liked its food: indeed, we know that the hall was big enough for three eating tables.

Come back in a couple of weeks' time for Episode 9 "The Easter Sepulchre".

- The Clergy and people creeping barefoot and on their knees - really?
- How did parochial officers like the Sexton or the Clerk earn a little on the side?
 - Who rests in the tomb beneath Holy Trinity's Easter Sepulchre?

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