

# **A Brief History of the South Lenches**

By Councillor David Wilkinson

## **Foreword**

In the process of researching material for the Neighbourhood Plan David Chambers kindly referred me to a document covering a Brief History of the Lenches which had been written by Councillor David Wilkinson.

David has kindly agreed to this being reproduced on the Lenches Website. I think you will find it most interesting.

Ian Jackson, Chairman South Lenches Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group.  
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## **Introduction**

'The Lenches' is the term used to describe the five settlements of Ab Lench, Atch Lench, Church Lench, Sherrifs Lench and Rous Lench, which includes Radford. The latter two are not included in the current South Lenches Parish. These are relatively modern divisions, and the history of the Area was not neatly divided in the same way; so in order to understand something of the history of South Lenches (which did not, in fact, exist as a geographical place name, other than as the title of the parish) it is necessary to consider the whole area.

## **Origins of the place names**

- ◆ The word Lench is derived from an old English word meaning a ridge or area of high ground.
- ◆ The Ab in Ab Lench comes from the name of an individual such as Aebba.
- ◆ For a period in the 16th and 17th centuries Ab Lench was known as Hob Lench.

- ◆ The alternative name 'Abbots Lench' was an attempt in the late 18th Century, by the then Lord of the Manor to make the area and sound 'up market'. Later attempts to revert to 'Ab Lench' have met with limited success since the Post Office has chosen to stick with 'Abbots Lench'.
- ◆ The 'Atch' in Atch Lench either means East, describing its geographical position, or it comes from a personal name Aecci.
- ◆ The name 'Church Lench' denotes the first church in the area, in the 12th century or earlier (although there was also a church in Rous Lench, then known as Bishops Lench, from the same period).
- ◆ For a time during the 13th century Church Lench was known as Lench Roculf, after the family who owned the manor.
- ◆ Rous Lench is named after the Rous family who were Lords of the Manor for nearly 500 years from the late 14th century to the late 19th century. Prior to this it was known as Lench Randolph, and before that it was Bishops Lench.
- ◆ Sheriff's Lench is so-called because it was held, from 1077, by Urse d' Abitot, the Sheriff of Worcestershire, and subsequently by his heirs the Beauchamp family, who inherited the office of Sheriff.

### **Early settlements**

The earliest written references to settlements in the area related to the seventh century A.D. when the region of which Worcestershire forms part ceased to be West Saxon and became part of the Kingdom of Mercia.

The people were known as the Hwiccae and the territory corresponded roughly with the later medieval diocese of Worcester. Much of the area seems to have belonged to the church from early times, the Kingdom of Mercia having converted to Christianity around the year 656 A.D.

So, recorded examples of land transfers involving the church are:

- ◆ In 708 AD, land at Church Lench and Atch Lench was given to the Abbey of Evesham by Kenred, son of Wulfhere, King of Mercia.
- ◆ In 716 A.D, land at Sheriff's Lench was given to the Abbey of Evesham by Ethelbald of Mercia.
- ◆ In 983 A.D., land at Ab Lench was given by Oswald, Bishop of Worcester, to his kinsman Gardulf.

The area remained part of the Kingdom of Mercia until the early 11th century. By this time, Mercia was viewed as a province within the Kingdom of England, not an independent Kingdom, and the former Hwiccian Kingdom was divided into the three administrative counties of Worcestershire, Warwickshire and Gloucestershire. The diocesan boundary, however, remained unchanged. The Norman Conquest

The Norman invaders Took control from the Anglo-Saxons in 1066. In the years immediately following, the relatives and supporters of William the Conqueror were granted extensive lands.

Prominent among them in this area was William's cousin Urse d' Abitot (c1042-1110) who was the tenant of parts of the manor of Fladbury, including Ab Lench and Rous Lench, and who also held Sheriffs Lench.

Land holdings were arranged in accordance with the feudal system, under which all land in England was deemed to belong to the Crown. A small proportion, known as the demesne was retained for the direct use of the Crown, but the majority was leased to various tenants-in-chief in return for specified services.

The tenant-in-chief, or overlord, would similarly keep a proportion of his land 'in demesne' (I.e. for his direct use) and would lease the rest to tenants. This process could be repeated, with the tenants leasing to sub-tenants until, at the bottom of the hierarchy were the peasants who worked the land. The Domesday Book

The earliest comprehensive survey of land ownership was the Domesday book (1086). This was an abbreviated, and in some cases rounded, summary

of a large survey, compiled primarily as a register of the tax liabilities of the various communities.

There are entries in the Domesday Book for Ab Lench and Rous Lench, both of which were part of the manor of Fladbury, and Sherriffs Lench which was held by Urse d' Abitot. There are also entries for Atch Lench (Worcester Church), Church Lench (Evesham Church) and Sherriffs Lench (Urso the Sheriff from the Bishop of Bayeux who seized the land from Evesham Church).

### **Later medieval times - 12th Century to 1485**

A period of political stability followed the Norman conquest, although the Normans proved to be strict rulers, demanding various services, including the provision of soldiers, in return for the grant of land. Life was undoubtedly hard. This period saw disasters such as the cattle plague of 1131 and the Black Death which wiped out about half of the entire population of Europe in the mid-14th century.

The Beauchamp family, heirs of Urse d' Abitot and hereditary sheriffs of Worcestershire held Sherriffs Lench for three centuries, the Manor eventually passing into the hands of the Earls of Warwick, to whom they were related by marriage. They finally passed to George, Duke of Clarence through his wife Isabel Neville, daughter of the 16th Earl of Warwick. When, in 1478, Clarence was convicted of treason and executed his son was still a minor and his estates, including the manor of Sherrifs Lench, passed to the Crown.

### **The Rous dynasty and the Chafy family**

The involvement of the Rous family in this area goes back to 1381 when the tenancy of Lench Randolph was bought by John Rous. Four generations later, in 1546, his brother's great-great-grandson (also called John Rous), bought the manor of Ab Lench.

The Rous dynasty continued to be principal landowners, owning Rous Lench, Radford, Ab Lench, and parts of Church Lench until 1876, when the last of the line, Sir Charles Henry Rouse-Boughton, sold his lands to Dr William Kyle Westwood Chafy.

The Chafy family already owned, since the 1820s, half of Sheriffs Lench and parts of Church Lench. In order to inherit, W. K. W. Chafy appended a second 'Chafy' to his name, becoming W. K. W. Chafy - Chafy in accordance with a loosely worded clause in his grandfathers will.

Dr Chafy-Chafy had also purchased the other half of Sheriffs Lench in 1873, so the acquisition of the Rous family lands in 1876 mentioned that Dr Chafy-Chafy was the Lord of the Manor of all of the Lenches except Atch Lench which was in the possession of the Bomford family from the late 18th century onwards having previously been owned by the church.

### **The great rebuilding**

The last member of the Rouse dynasty, sir Charles Henry Rouse-Boughton, started a program of rebuilding the farm houses, barns and cottages in 1857. This process was continued by his successor as Lord of the Manor, Dr William Kyle Westwood Chafy-Chafy throughout the 1870s. The new buildings are easily recognised today as they invariably include a prominent date-stone, showing the year of construction and the relevant initials (CHRB or WKWCC). (*The example below is in Ab Lench*).



## **End of the manorial system**

By the early 20th century, probably triggered by the social changes and economic depression consequent upon the First World War, it had become increasingly difficult for individual owners to maintain great Estates. Following Dr Chafy's death in 1916 the eldest son Hugh Edward Chafy tried to keep the manor intact but was eventually forced to sell the various parts of the manor.

The various properties were sold to private owners. For example, Manor Farm in Sheriffs Lench was sold to its tenants around 1920. In Ab Lench the four principal farms were sold as follows:

- Easter Hill (Then known as Easter Hall) In 1923.
- Lower Farm (then known as 'Ob Lench Bottom') in 1924.
- Spitten Farm in 1933.
- Manor Farm in 1938.

All four were sold as working farms but only one of the four remains as such today. The manor house itself, Rous Lench Court, was sold to the Burn family in 1926.

## **Church Lench**

Originally Church Lench Manor was held by Evesham Abbey until the 13th century. In the 14th century the manor was leased by the Beauchamps and under them to the Roculfs (who also owned land in Harvington). Some of the land was also granted to the Abbey and Convent of Halesowen.

The land was surrendered by the last Abbott to King Henry VIII in 1558 who granted it in the same year to Sir John Dudley. He sold it on to Sir William Scudamore of Holme Lacy, Herefordshire and it remained in that family. (The family acquired the title Viscount Sligo) until it was sold again in 1627.

In 1627 the manor was bought by William Keyt. His descendant, Sir William Keyt of Ebrington, Gloucestershire burned to death having been supposed to be a lunatic and setting fire to his own house in Norton, Gloucestershire in September 1791. In the same year the manor was sold to Sir Dudley Ryder who was later created Earl of Harrowby. In 1793 John Callow and his wife, Ellen, conveyed the land to John Clarke. After this the manor seems to have fragmented.

The Rev William Chafy purchased part of the land in 1825. In the mid 19th Century the main land owner was Sir W. E. Rouse Boughton. More land was acquired by rev. William K. W. Chafy when he came to live at Rouse Lench. About a third of the land was purchased by the Duc d'Aumale and on his death it passed to the Duc d'Orleans. This part was sold in 1912 to Sir Charles Swinfen Eady.

### **Atch Lench**

Until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539, Atch Lench Manor belonged to Evesham Abbey. In 1542 Henry VIII granted the manor to the Dean and Chapter of Westminster.

In 1553 Queen Mary re-founded the Abbey of Westminster re-endowing it with the Manor of Atch Lench and other lands. In 1559 the Westminster Abbey was dissolved under Queen Elizabeth I and the manor was returned to the Dean and Chapter of Westminster.

During the Commonwealth the lands were sequestrated and sold in 1652 to Sir Cheney Culpepper of Hollingbourne Kent. After the Restoration (1660) the lands were returned to the Dean and Chapter of Westminster.

By 1770 Heming Bomford was the major copyhold tenant (holding his land by copy of the Court Roll). In 1828 at Heming Bomford's death, his sons, Joseph, Thomas and Benjamin became joint tenants of their fathers lands

(living at Manor Farm, Court Farm and Firs Farm respectively). In the 1860s as the Dean and Chapter of Westminster ceased to be the Lords of the Manor, the Bomfords enfranchised their Farms and less than 20 years later sold them to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. Some of the Bomford family continued to occupy the land as tenants.