

Black Death and Tenants' Charter

by Peter Hinman (2000)

The Black Death is known to have caused many deaths in Chesterton and Newbold Pacey, but no record of the extent of its ravages in Lighthorne has been found so far. It is unlikely that Lighthorne escaped. There were three rectors in one year at the time, which seems to indicate that the epidemic was also raging here.

The Lord of the Manor at that time was The Earl of Warwick. He held a farm of 230 acres based on Church Hill Farm, and grazed 600 sheep on common land at Lighthorne Heath. The remainder of the Manor was let to 24 tenants, each holding between 1 and 200 acres in the two common fields. Agriculture was in turmoil, with low prices and many farms vacant for lack of tenants.

When the then Earl, Thomas Beauchamp, was exiled to the Isle of Man for treason in 1397, the management of the estate was put in the hands of two king's stewards, Thomas Huggefurd and Nicholas Rody. Records from the time show that the tenants were having a hard time. In 1398 the stewards leased the Manor to the Rector, Thomas de Blockley, for a period of ten years. De Blockley soon started to complain about falling returns with a fall of 1/12th in 1401 and a further 1/6th by 1410. Rents continued to decline, the tenants complaining that the rents were so heavy they could not stay alive. The widow of the by then reinstated Earl gloomily accepted the situation with the note "Quousque Mundus Metius Relevetur" on the accounts. (*My translation - We must deal with the world as it is.*)

It is worth noting that despite the general poverty and declining rents, the Earl of Warwick as Lord of the Manor was able to find the funds to provide a bell and a commemorative glass panel dedicated to Henry V for the Church in 1413. This was probably to secure his position at court after the treason of his father.

By 1437 the tenants were threatening to quit their holdings because they were unable to make a living. The current Earl then instructed Huggefurd and Rody to draw up an unusual document. This allowed them to both moderate the rents and relieve the tenants of their labour services (*work for the Lord of the manor undertaken at no charge*). This document is interesting in that it gives a full list of the tenants by name and the size of their holdings, which would have been by strips in the common fields, together with the old rents and the new reduced rents. Tenants Jaycock, Hunt, Smyth and Taylor (names which occur many times in village records) can be clearly identified.

The reduction amounted to 5 shillings out of the yardland (*about 30 acres*) rent of 15 shillings and 6 pence and this was maintained for over forty years.

After the Warwick estate had passed through the hands of Richard Neville and George, Duke of Clarence, the tenants still kept the reduced rent, the estate accounts showed in 1480 the full rent of 15s 6d a yardland charged on the receipts side, but with the negotiated allowance on the expenses side and attributed to the negotiations of Huggefurd and Rody in 1437.

*References: "The English Peasantry in the late Middle Ages" by R..H Hilton
SBTLA DR98 672a-d, 674, 674a, 675, 676a, 685.*