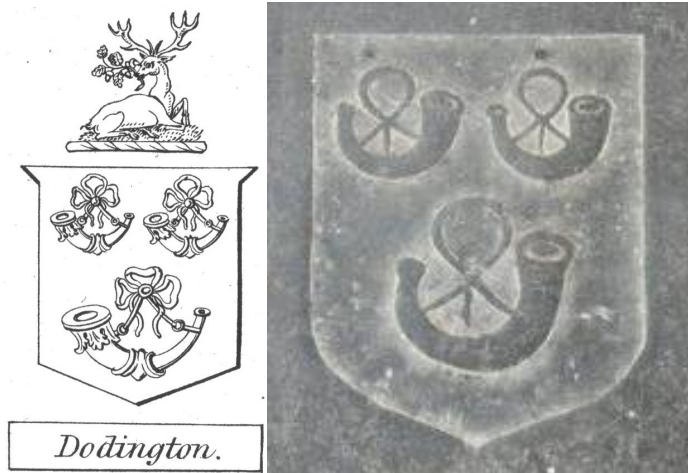


An English Civil War Essay - the ruin of the Dodingtons of Mere

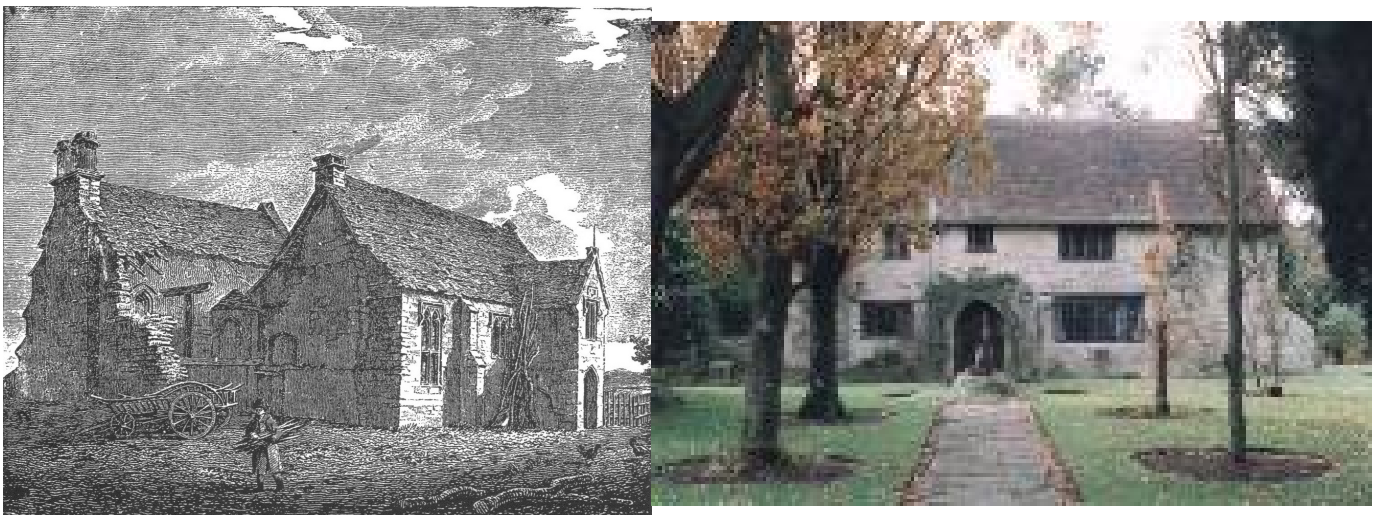
By Mark Wareham, updated February 2015

Please note – this is an historical essay and commentary on a family called Dodington that existed in Mere in the 17th century and were Lords of the Manor. It is no reflexion on any modern day descendants of our long dead ancestors.



The arms of the Dodington family from (left) The History of Wiltshire by Sir Coate-Hoare and on the memorial to George Dodington in Wells Cathedral, 1698

The Dodington family who were Lords of the Manor of Mere was a cadet branch of a family seated in Dodington in Somerset and who had an ancestral line going back to the time of the conquest. In about 1360 widower Thomas Dodington of Somerset married Joan Guphey of Mere in Wiltshire and with this marriage Thomas came to own the estate of the Manor of Woodlands and which was inherited by his younger son Philip Dodington, whilst the senior branch continued in Somerset. The old Manor House building is shown in a picture below from the book 'Story of Mere, 1958', alongside a more modern picture of the building.



Woodlands Manor House, Mere, Wiltshire

Woodlands is situated to the south of the village of Mere and in about 1635-40 it came into the possession, through inheritance, of my great x 9 grandfather William Dodington (c 1595 to 1657). William was a gentleman who resided, previous to this inheritance, at the manor house at Little Durnford to the north of Salisbury. He had married to a daughter of the gentrified Young family of that area in 1617.

There is no direct evidence of the role that the Dodingtons of Mere played in the civil war. William would have been in his 40's or 50's and his sons may have been too young to fight during the first outbreak of conflict - Stephen was aged 18 in 1642 and Vaughan was aged 11.

The Dodingtons had Catholic connections and those of the 'old religion' who took a side were almost all supporters of King Charles I in the war. In the late 16th century when the reformation of the Church under Queen Elizabeth was in full flow, the Dodingtons had sheltered a Catholic nun. They had their own chapel at the manor house and Catholic ceremonies may have continued there, in secret, despite reformation and there is evidence that family records of baptisms, marriages and some burials did not always take place through the established church and may have happened in the chapel and so separate records may have been kept.

The Dodingtons of Mere were distantly related to Sir Francis Dodington of Somerset who became one of the commanders of the King's forces in the west and who committed what may now be described as 'war crimes' in his execution of his role. Sir Francis was active in the area of south Wiltshire and in 1643 he was commanding the Royalist forces besieging Wardour Castle. It is quite plausible that Sir Francis would have paid a visit to his loyalist Dodington family cousins during the war and enjoyed their hospitality, even if none of the family were engaged in the fighting.

There is little documentary evidence about how the civil conflict impacted in the village and people of Mere, although the impact of the war must have been similar to most of the rest of the country in social and economic terms. One reference to the village is at the end of the second war and when, in 1651, after his defeat at the Battle of Worcester, Charles, son of the executed King Charles I and later to be King Charles II, broke his flight in the village and he dined at The George (now The Talbot) in the town square.

In '*The Book of Mere, Portrait of a Wiltshire Town*' there is reference to the Dodingtons being active Royalists after the civil war because Stephen, William's son and my great uncle, may have later been involved in the Penruddock uprising in 1655 –

“The part played by Stephen Dodington of Woodlands is not recorded but his close friend Mr Willoughby of Knoyle was charged and escaped conviction only 'on account of his advanced years'.”

Stephen was related to Penruddock through family marriages because his mother was Susanna Younge of the family of Little Durnford in Wiltshire and her cousin John Younge of Little Durnford had married Jane Penruddock of Compton Chamberlayne in about 1630.

Penruddock's Uprising

Penruddock's attempted Royalist rebellion in 1655 was a serious attempt to overthrow the Lord Protector, Cromwell, but one that was always doomed to failure. The aim was to capture towns like Salisbury and, being a local gentleman from Compton Chamberlayne in Wiltshire, he drew support primarily from the south of Wiltshire and north of Dorset. On 11th March 1655 three to four hundred cavaliers took control of Salisbury and raised the royal standard -

“... eventually Penruddock proclaimed the King himself, then led his little army on through Shaftesbury and Sherborne to Babylon Hill near Yeovil...”

But after they had entered Devon, and with little popular support Colonel Penruddock, was defeated in a three hour street fight in South Molton on 14th March by a single troop of horse of the New Model Army and he was forced to surrender. Penruddock was later executed at Exeter and others of his followers, many of whom would have been from Wiltshire or Dorset, met the same fate and some seventy were shipped to the West Indies as slaves.

In evidence to the trials of the rebels a Richard Rowe of Horningsham (in '*Records of The Rising in the West AD 1655*' by Ravenhill, 1870), a turner who was in the employ of Willoughby

of East Knoyle, said that in February 1655 a meeting had taken place and over a week they hunted for foxes in the day and danced in the night to the sound of a fiddler. He said that most of them had swords with them amongst those present with Willoughby was 'Mr Dorrington [or Dodington] of East Burton in Mere, Wiltshire. It was apparently at this meeting that the rising, which was later to take place in Salisbury, was agreed.

Other testimony in the trials showed that this Mr Dorrington was a servant to Lady Phillips [or Phelips] (wife of Colonel Robert Phelips of Montacute in Somerset) and that this Lady met the conspirators at Salisbury at her house there or in the King's Arms and that she had often been in the company of the widowed Queen in France.

This Mr Dorrington had also told a person called Collier, who also testified to the trials that –

“ [Sir Francis] Wyndham who should have brought a company of horse was taken prisoner.”

This 'Mr Dorrington' may be William Dodington senior of Mere, however William was by this time referred to as 'Dodington of Woodlands' and probably would not have been known as 'of East Burton'. I think that it is more likely to have been his son Stephen or his nephew John (who held Burton Farm in Mere in 1637, Burton farm in Mere which had been in the Dodington family since at least 1574). Whichever member of the family it was, the evidence shows that a Dodington was a servant of the Phelips family of Montacute, would have had intimate knowledge of the Royalist cause and may have been involved in the events of 1651 when the future King Charles II was at Mere, because Colonel Robert Phelips accompanied him on his flight after that battle. Maybe Stephen, his brother Vaughan or John was at the Battle of Worcester?

In June 1655 a 'Dorrington of Gray's Inn' (probably another member of the family who had entered the legal profession) -

“... wrote to Joshua Williamson of Queen's College Oxford (Penruddock's college) of music (June 1655, Commemoration) and ladies to come up for it, and silk stockings and other pleasantries.”

Clearly the defeat and death or enslavement of Penruddock and his followers was worthy of remembrance, and with some ladies and 'pleasantries' thrown in, the spirit of the later restoration was starting early.

There is no direct and absolute causal link between the collapse of the Dodingtons of Mere and the English Civil War but they certainly had been financially 'ruined', compared to their previous high social status, by the late 17th century. Stephen Dodington was forced to sell his manor in 1672 and by the time Vaughan Dodington was buried, my great x 8 grandfather was referred to as being a 'gentleman but poor'. Evidently the £20 a year that his father William had left him in his will, which was supposed to be paid out of the estate of Woodlands, had vanished and no other wealth remained from the roughly 300 years that they were lords of the manor. F Tighe speculates in the work 'Woodlands and the Dodingtons, Mere Papers Number 13' –

“It is apparent that the family had fallen on hard times ... As Royalists they could well have suffered during the Civil War and the Interregnum... There is always the possibility that the family's perceived standing in local eyes could have suffered severe damage if, as seems likely, they had Catholic leanings ... A more likely reason for the decline of the Dodingtons, however, is a socio-economic one, not dissimilar from the fate of 19th and 20th century landowning families. The Woodlands estate was a very small one, and would have become inadequate to support any kind of extended family in the absence

of some external financial interest... The time had come for the commercial or political entrepreneur from London or Bristol to seek acceptance in higher social circles by the acquisition of a country estate which alone gave respectability and the possibility of political honours.”

I suspect that it was a mixture of fortunes that led to their ruin and the collapse in social status and loss of wealth. No doubt the harsh economic realities made survival on their small estate impossible. However when this did bite they had little to fall back on. They almost certainly would have contributed to the King's cause during the wars and may well have been taxed heavily by the Commonwealth Parliament for doing so after the war (although there is no evidence of them facing sanction by the Parliamentary county committee for being so called 'delinquents'). All of this led to the family collapsing from a position of grace and later Dodingtons of the 18th and 19th centuries were to be labourers or skilled craftsman rather than 'gentlemen'. However a result of their slide down the social scale is that they passed their lineage on to many families in the area who, like we Warehams, can thus lay claim to family connections to gentlemen, esquires, knights, earls, queens and kings. The result of this collapse in fortune was to mean that whilst the Hyde family (William Dodington's mother had been Joanna Hyde of Tisbury) was able to become ancestors of Queens of England (Anne Hyde of Dinton married King James II), the Dodingtons became ancestors of poor labourers. The upshot being that whilst Queen Anne held the thrown of the nation her third cousin, John Dodington of Mere, was working as a common labourer.

The line from William Dodington of Mere to my grandfather is shown on the following page.

