

2. The Liberty of Earley

Earley today sits rather uneasily between the Berkshire towns of Reading and Wokingham, under the influence of both but belonging wholly to neither. In the early nineteenth century Earley was economically already under the sway of Reading, but administratively it was attached to the Thames-side parish of Sonning.

Earley did not have its own church until September 1844, when the church of St Peter was consecrated. The date of creation of the ecclesiastical parish of Earley is variously given as 1843 (in anticipation of the completion of the church) and eleven years later in 1854; Earley became a separate civil parish in 1866. Prior to 1843, however, despite its considerable size, Earley was only one segment of the parish of Sonning. In 1820 Sonning parish comprised four "liberties": Sonning Town; Earley; Eye and Dunsden; and Woodley and Sandford.

Sonning was an unusually large parish with an unusually large river running through the middle of it. As it straddled the Thames, it comprised parts of Oxfordshire and parts of Berkshire. The extent of the parish from north to south, which is to say from Sonning Common as far as the valley of the River Loddon south of Lower Earley, was some eleven miles - which meant that some parishioners had a very long walk to church.

The disparate nature of the parish is underlined by the fact that it formed part of three different hundreds (administrative divisions of mediaeval counties). The liberties of Sonning Town and Woodley and Sandford were in the hundred of Sonning; the liberty of Eye and Dunsden was in the Oxfordshire hundred of Binfield and Longtree; and the liberty of Earley was part of the hundred of Charlton. As parishes were much more numerous than hundreds, this sort of fragmentation was also unusual.

Sonning Town is a Saxon foundation, recorded in seventh-century charters as Sunningas (perhaps meaning the village of the family of Sunna). It was founded at an important fording point, and later bridging point, of the Thames, and from very early times a mill stood on one of the islands in the river. A wooden bridge connected the mill to the village from early Norman times. Sonning Mill was always counted as being part of Oxfordshire.

Sonning was also an important religious centre. In Saxon times, its church (the church of St Andrew) belonged to the bishoprics first of Dorchester and then of Winchester. In Norman times it was allocated to the see of Salisbury. The demesne is described in Domesday Book as belonging to Osmund, Bishop of Salisbury.

The parish of Sonning included a number of important manors, several of which were still of consequence around 1820. The manor of Sonning at the time of the Domesday Book was very large. In addition to its two mills, five fisheries, meadow-land and woodland, it included as a detached portion the whole of

Wokingham, Arborfield and Sandhurst. The manor belonged to the Bishops of Salisbury until 1574, when the then Bishop exchanged it with the Queen for lands in Wiltshire. In 1654 the manor was acquired by the Rich family, one of the great families of Sonning, and in 1795, in a transaction between Sir Thomas Rich and Richard Palmer, it was sold on to another such family, the Palmers.

The manor of Earley Whiteknights belonged to the Earley family from the twelfth century or earlier. After changing hands several times, it was purchased, as we shall see, by the Englefield family in 1606. It is now the site of the University of Reading.

At least four other mediaeval manors can be identified in Sonning parish, namely Maiden Earley, which belonged to the Earley family in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; Earley Bartholomew, which also belonged to the Earley family for a time; Bulmershe Court, whose many forms of name range from Bulnassh and Bull Marsh to Belvershall; and Haywards Manor at Colemansmoor.

Several members of the Earley family achieved fame outside the area. The first documented member of the family is John de Earley, who died in the 1160s. His son William de Earley was the founder of Buckland Priory in Somerset, where the Earley family also owned land. Many later members of the family bore the name John, but one in particular, who served with the English army in Scotland in the 1290s, was known as “the white knight”. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Earley family appears to have declined. Earley Whiteknights passed to the Beck family; Earley Bartholomew to the Fettiplace family; and Maiden Earley (following the death of Richard Earley in 1502) to the Chafyn family.

It is not known how the extended parish of Sonning grew up, nor why the parish extended up into Oxfordshire or down as far as the Loddon Valley. The four liberties appear to have had a degree of administrative independence through mediaeval times, but it was not until the nineteenth century that the liberties were allowed to develop into parishes. The reasons given for this development were not primarily to do with population growth, but rather to do with the distances that the church-going Victorians were being obliged to travel.

After the creation of Earley parish, Sonning parish was progressively dismembered, with the parish of Kidmore End being carved out of it in 1854 and the parish of Dunsden created in 1876. In 1877 Earley itself was divided into two parishes with the creation of Earley St Bartholomew.

The place-name of Earley has a long and diversiform history. Some ancient records show it as Arle. It is recorded as Harlei in the 11th century; Erleye in the 13th century; Erleigh in the 14th century; and Arley in the 16th century, before settling (usually) to its present form.

The connection between Earley and Saint Bartholomew is ancient. The *Victoria County History* (VCH) for Berkshire records that

In 1220 a return was made of 'the chapel of Thomas of Erley, Knight, which is of St. Bartholomew.' At the visitation made in 1224 evidence was given that the chapel was of wood, but that stones had been gathered in heaps 'as if for the construction of a stone building.' There was then no font or bell, but in the area round the church, already fenced as if for a burying-ground, was a wooden cross where branches were placed on Palm Sunday.¹

Local tradition is reported to hold that the chapel of St Bartholomew was destroyed in the reign of Henry VIII and that its stones were later used in the construction of the stables at Sidmouth House in Earley.

The word "Liberty" formerly meant "an area free of County control", signifying exemption from the jurisdiction of the County Sheriff and (often) a separate commission of the peace. Among the best-known examples of active ancient liberties are the Liberty of the Soke of Peterborough and the Liberty of Hexham or Hexhamshire. Closer to London certain anomalous liberties, like the Mint in Southwark or the precinct of the Savoy in Westminster, existed as sanctuaries or "no-go areas" for the sheriff and other legal officers - where felons could go unmolested. Liberties are creations of mediaeval times or earlier, and ecclesiastical liberties are likely to have operated independently of their parishes in the remote past. It is possible, for example, that the Liberty of Earley in early mediaeval times paid its tithes not to Sonning Church but to the Abbot of Reading. By our period, however, "liberty" appears to have signified little more than a subdivision of a parish, usually having no church of its own.²

The Liberty of Earley, extending from the River Thames to the River Loddon, includes a sizeable part of what is now east Reading and most but not all of present-day Earley. Modern landmarks which lie within the boundaries of the Liberty of Earley include the Thames Valley Business Park (formerly Sutton's Industrial Estate) beside the River Thames; the Cemetery Junction area, including the Marquis of Granby inn (formerly known as the Gallows Tavern) and Granby Gardens; all of present-day Newtown to the east of Cumberland Road; Palmer Park; the site of Alfred Sutton Primary School and the former Alfred Sutton Secondary School; the site of the new mosque on Green Road; the area known as Mockbeggar; most, but not all, of the University of Reading's Whiteknights campus; Church Road and the area around Earley St Peter Church; Maiden Erlegh School; much of the Lower Earley residential development (although not the Kilnsea Drive area in the south-east, which was in the Liberty of Woodley and Sandford); and the Loddon Valley running down towards Shinfield Grange.

Until recently it was possible to see in the gardens of the odd numbers of Carnarvon Road in the Redlands area of east Reading the remains of the old mound and ditch which marked the historic boundary between Reading and the ancient Liberty of Earley.

NOTES

¹ VCH, volume III, p. 224.

² For this paragraph, see Sidney and Beatrice Webb: *The parish and the county*. New ed. London: Frank Cass, 1963, pp. 280, 284, 285, 313, 316 etc. The references to mediaeval Earley are taken mostly from the VCH.