

When Thomas Staveley built his new house in the early 1600s, he built not on the site of the old Hall, but across the road from the old village, leaving the old hall to be used as a farm. The farmhouse there has evidence of a much older existence, possibly as the original hall, and ridge and furrow remains show the probable existence of a village.

It is not known when the village of West Langton disappeared, possibly in the plagues of 1348-90, or even when Market Harborough was created as a town in the twelfth century. It could have disappeared when the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536 and 1539 caused

land to be sold and enclosed by new owners. In 1547 Robert Strelley, bailiff for the Crown, and his wife Dorothy bought the land and manor of West Langton from the Langton family. This was the year that Henry VIII died and eight years after the final dissolution of the monasteries, so releasing land once held by the church, in this case Peterborough Abbey. Subsequently Thomas Staveley bought his land from his kinsfolk, the Strelleys, and built his new manor house.

## WEST LANGTON HALL

Gill Lovett



Thomas Staveley died in 1582 leaving his son Thomas to inherit. He was then just 13 years old. He grew up and married Margery Brooke from Northampton. They had nine children and the oldest Arthur inherited on his father's death in 1631.

About thirty years before his death, Thomas junior had built his 'new stone manor house'. He brought up his 9 children there, in now what is the north wing of the hall. This was built facing north, a favoured position for Elizabethan houses as they considered the south wind was corrupting and brought more warm weather and more smells- there were plenty of those around then! Although Elizabeth I died in 1603, her influence and customs did not die with her but were continued by those who had lived in her reign. What is now the door to the north wing was the original front door and opposite that was the stable block, now separate dwellings. The wall, the gateway and the little lodge can still be seen.

In 1642 the first official battle of the Civil War was fought at Nottingham, and in 1645 the Parliamentarians defeated the King and his Royalists at the battle of Naseby. In 1645 Arthur, Thomas's oldest son and heir was appointed High-Sheriff of Leicestershire, and on February 14th of that year was made one of the Parliamentary Committee for the county. In the same year, when the armistice between Charles I and Oliver Cromwell ended, Arthur's wife Lucy was separated from him. It was probably a political divorce as feelings were high and loyalties divided.

Arthur and his wife had two daughters before their separation, Margery and Mary. Mary succeeded to the estate when Arthur died in 1655. She married first Francis Stanton and then Stephen Pheasant and while she was married to her second husband what is now the main body of Langton Hall was built. Between 1660 and 1669 she built to the back of the existing house, creating the main hall and the staircase wing. She also planted a new garden, probably including the Cedars of Lebanon which were used to panel the main hall in 1802.

Mary had one son by Francis Stanton, Staveley Stanton and two daughters from her second marriage. Constance, who married and moved to Yorkshire, and Suzanna who died unmarried and is buried at Church Langton. Staveley died in 1678, leaving two sons and a daughter Elizabeth. Mary took the two boys to live with her, but they both died, one aged eight and one aged six years. So Elizabeth, her granddaughter, inherited on Mary's death in 1689.

Elizabeth married Sir Gilbert Pickering who died at Langton Hall in 1736. They had four sons and two daughters. Three of the boys died at eight years, sixteen years and three weeks old, and the surviving son Sir Edward Pickering inherited in 1741 when Elizabeth died. In 1749 Edward died unmarried at about thirty five years old, leaving the estate to his sisters, Dorothy-Elizabeth and Frances.

The sisters continued to live at Langton Hall and when Frances married Thomas Byrd he lived there with his wife. Thomas took a great interest in the house and rebuilt the stable block, built the roadside wall and the walled garden. He probably built or rebuilt the courtyard wall with its arched recesses. These recesses have given rise to the theory of there once being a chapel there, but there is no evidence that this is so according to church records of Peterborough Abbey.

In 1749 William Hanbury became rector at Church Langton, the mother church for both East and West Langton, a position he held until his death in 1778. Hanbury had great ambitions to raise money for charity by his gardening schemes. However, he was not helped in this by Mrs Byrd and Miss Pickering as they and their tenants went back on their agreement to use some of the village land and much of his new plantations of trees and plants were destroyed by them.

There is a local story that Hanbury was a friend of Handel, and that when Hanbury was organising his music festivals to advance his charitable plans, he invited Handel to perform his Messiah at Church Langton in 1759. After the performance it was said that the company went to Langton Hall for a banquet of one hundred and four courses. Unfortunately, this has proved to be false as Handel died before this performance and there is no evidence that Hanbury knew Handel. (This episode is described by former vicar of Church Langton, John Prophet, in his book Church Langton and William Hanbury, 1982). John Prophet mentions the meal and William Hanbury in his book The Rise and Progress of the Charitable Foundation of Church Langton, 1767, gives an account of the meal in question. "The company adjourned to the great booth for dinner, which was both broad and long, and in which a double range of tables were drawn out the whole length. On these tables were placed one hundred and four dishes, proper for a cold collation." This "great booth" was erected in the church grounds.

Mr Byrd died in 1755, Frances died ten years later and her sister Elizabeth died in 1766. The estate passed to her cousin, Mrs Anne Ord, then to her son, the sisters' godson, the Rev James Ord (1759-1843). Mrs Ord's husband died in 1768, and she let out the estate to a succession of tenants until 1790. An advertisement placed in 1768 reads -

"To be let and may be entered upon immediately, pleasantly situated upon an eminence in the County Of Leicester, commanding a beautiful and extensive prospect, and in a fine sporting country: 86 miles from London, 4 from Market Harborough and 1 from the great turnpike road between London and Nottingham, The Mansion House at West Langton with or without the furniture, a kitchen garden and pleasure garden, and about 30 acres of ground, more of which if required, may be had from Lady Day next, with the liberty of sporting within the Manors of the Langtons.

BELOW: ILLUSTRATION OF WEST LANGTON HALL - 1830.



The house consists of a hall, 33 feet by 19 feet, a dining room, 26 feet by 18 feet, withdrawing room and parlour, housekeeper's room, kitchen, servants hall etc. on the ground floor, seven bedchambers, with good servants' rooms over them, two coach houses, and stabling for 20 horses, a large barn, brewhouses and other offices suitable for a gentleman's family. Enquire of Mr Pyne, Attorney-at-Law, Leicester."

It is obvious from this advertisement that no structural changes had been made since Mary Pheasant built onto her grandfathers house in the 1660s.

From 1778 until the late 1790s Langton Hall was leased to various tenants, one of the more famous being Hugo Meynell, the 'father of modern foxhunting'. Although the country people had always hunted, he organised the hunt as it is today. He founded the Quorn Hunt in some of the best foxhunting country in the world, and for over two hundred years people have travelled here to hunt. One of the more colourful characters to come here was the Empress Elizabeth of Austria who stayed at Althorp House - the home of the Spencers - but had her horses tended at Langton Hall. She went on to marry the Emperor Franz Josef, who used the assassination of his nephew Franz Ferdinand to attack Serbia and so start what developed into the First World War.

Although Hugo Meynell was famous for his hunting, a contemporary account tells us that he sat his horse 'like a regular little apple dumpling,' probably not the image he wanted to create!

In the late 1790s the Rev James Ord, Ann Ord's son, took up residence at the hall. In 1802 he made extensive alterations to the south wing and the main body of the house. He faced and crenulated the east front and the south wing, put arched glazing bars in the windows and either built or rebuilt the tower. He also plastered the ceiling of the main hall in the then fashionable style of the Elizabethans and used Cedars of Lebanon from the park to panel the hall. These were possibly those planted in the 1680s by Mary Pheasant as 'new trees' for her new garden. These trees were introduced to England in the 1630s by John Evelyn, and not grown here until the 1680s. They were slow growing, so by the early 1880s they would have been of usable size for panels. James Ord also brought over Venetian craftsmen to cover the two sitting room walls with lace, and one of the bedrooms was covered with Chinese silk wallpaper.

James Ord died in 1843, His son, also called James, sold his life interest in the estate, then 1,211 acres, to Marriott, Fox, Youle and Cartledge in 1845; and in 1850 Ann Ord, his daughter mortgaged her interest to Pars Leicestershire Banking Co.

The Ords appeared to have lived in Tenby, Pembrokeshire, and until about 1895 the house was again leased to various tenants. However around 1870 Jemima Elizabeth Ord was still living there as Lady of the Manor. She died in 1876, but in 1872 the estate, 1,198 acres and the hall, the whole valued at £2,894 a year had been offered for sale. It was bought in 1873 by Edward Warner of Quorndon Hall and again he leased it out.

After Warner's death in 1894, his third son Captain W P Warner took up residence there. He built the extension on the west side of the house, including the passageway between the kitchen and the dining room. He also added the kitchens-a glazed canopy on iron columns - and servants' rooms to the north wing. These were removed in 1988-9 as was the game larder built along the courtyard wall. Captain Warner was a keen huntsman and Master of the Hunt in 1886/7, 1889/90, 1890/1 and 1892/3. He died in 1912 and his nephew sold the estate that year.

The hall and land were bought by Mr J T Mills of Husbands Bosworth. He loaned the hall as a military convalescent hospital during the First World War. He also made the first golf course across the road from the hall. Mr Mills died in 1934, the estate was broken up and the land acquired by the Prudential Insurance co. then by various farmers.

The hall was then bought by Barbara Spencer, wife of the Hon. George Spencer, cousin to the late Johnny Spencer of Althorp House. Her son Mr G C R M Spencer was cousin to Diana, Princess of Wales. Langton Hall saw many famous people in the 1930s and in the years after the Second World War. Guests included the King of Nepal; the Duke of Kent, godfather to Bobby, Barbara's son; Don Juan de Bourbon, father of King Juan Carlos of Spain and many members of the European royal families.



ABOVE: ELIZABETH, WIFE OF FRANZ JOSEPH EMPEROR OF AUSTRIA

After George Spencer and his wife Barbara separated she married American Mr L D Cullings. Barbara died in 1978 and her son 'Bobby' inherited. Mr Spencer lived at the hall until 1985 when he sold the estate, the house and its contents. During his residence at Langton Hall, Mr Spencer opened the house and grounds to the public, as a caravan park and also as a raptor centre. Local knowledge and photographs show that his cousin Diana was a regular visitor to the hall.

In 1985 the hall was bought by Lady Caroline Lowell, a member of the Guinness family. She wrote a book about hunting while she lived there, and sold the hall again in 1988. This time the buyers in 1988 were the Cripps family. They intended to build a golf course, hotel and conference centre on the estate, but this was not successful.

The property was sold again in 1994, and planning permission not being granted to an investment company, was sold again in 1997, with Langton Hall, its gardens and paddocks being sold separately from the land. The Hall is now three separate dwellings, the stable block and coach houses are also separate dwellings. The walled garden is still there, with new houses built within it.

There is just one more person to mention - The White Lady. A letter from Bobby Spencer tells us that in the 17th century a lady and her baby daughter were travelling in a carriage on the main highway going south. They were stopped by a robber but were rescued by the owner of Langton Hall. He took them back to the house to recover, but the baby died. The mother was very grateful for their help but eventually returned home. It seems that after her own death she was seen as a white figure on the staircase when there was sickness in the house. A friend of Mrs Cullings said that when Mrs Cullings was very ill and just before her death, the lady was seen twice on the staircase. She was also seen during the Second World War when the house was used as a hospital.

WEST LANGTON HALL - 1988

