



*Widmere Farmhouse*

## WIDMERE – Manor and Chapel

Widmere farmhouse is partly Georgian with later additions, but some of the adjacent buildings show traces of Elizabethan or earlier work. The portion of greatest interest is the chapel (Grade II listed) with its Norman crypt (complete with massive Norman pillars) possibly dating from the 1100s - i.e. shortly after the Battle of Hastings - and the 13th Century upper building (with three arched and traced windows and three lancet windows). The chapel was converted into living and storage rooms many centuries ago and adapted as a type of modified hall house. It adjoins the present house.

The manor of Widmere is one of the four Marlow manors listed in Domesday Book (1086). The origins of the manor are uncertain, but a man called Godric held 570 acres in Saxon times. Widmere was entered in the Domesday Book (1086-7) as a  $6\frac{3}{8}$  hide estate held by Walter Vernon. This may seem an odd valuation, but, if it is added to the  $8\frac{5}{8}$  hide estate of Miles Crispin in Little Marlow, it can be assumed that the two were taxed together at 15 hides. Vernon's estate has been linked with Marlow land granted to various religious orders at various early dates.

How and when it became the property of the Knights Templars is not known – perhaps soon after 1128. In 1254 and again in 1338 the manor was described as '*formerly belonged to the Templars*'. The Templars had a settlement at Bisham, and when they held Widmere they needed access between the two. It was probably this that inspired the first bridge at Marlow.

The dissolution of the Templars in 1312 would have entailed a transfer of the property and it was probably then the Hospitallers (The Knights of St. John of Jerusalem) acquired their interest. Before 1312, the Hospitallers had been prominent in the Marlow region, where their activities were first mentioned in 1249. That year, the Prior of Hospitallers acquired lands in Marlow from the Master of St. Thomas' Hospital, Southwark. In 1262, his lands included '*a messuage in Wodmere*'. If this was on the site of the present manor, the Hospitallers may have owned the manor before the Pope's dissolution of the Templars in 1312. Perhaps the Hospitallers built part of the present chapel.



*The exterior of the chapel*

In 1357, the Prior of Widmere was ordered by the bishop of Lincoln (in whose diocese Marlow then lay) to answer certain complaints. The bishop's command was conveyed to Marlow by a Mr. Simon Ward. The Prior did not think much of either the Bishop or Mr. Ward, and demonstrated this by throwing the unfortunate Mr. Ward into a water-tank. He then wounded Ward, cut off the tail and ears of his expensive horse, which cost 100 shillings, and paraded the two of them through Marlow for all to see.

Between 1336 and 1549, the manor was leased in turn to four or five tenants. About 1530, the Hospitallers had been dissolved and their property confiscated by Henry VIII. In 1541, a grant of Widmere in fee was made to John, Lord Russell. The next owner was Sir William Borlase, Lord of Little Marlow, who bought Widmere in 1623. There is a record of John Borlase, M.P. for Marlow, holding a court at Widmere in 1671, and in 1756 a Court Baron was held there for Daniel Moore to appoint Constables, Aletasters, leather dealers etc. It should be noted that by this time, the manor included jurisdictions of other manor properties in Lane End, Hambleden and Great Marlow, probably by inheritance but also by purchase. The record mentions that a good and substantial pair of stocks should be erected in Lane End for that part of the manor of Widmere. Various properties in Marlow are listed including the house of the Vicar (Rev. Cleobury) and the Mills (for which the tenants are listed) and various inns (including the 'Crown and Broad Arrow'). The yearly rents are carefully mentioned, including that for certain neighbouring lands called Spittle Croft of 'one pound of pepper' or land 'next the Windmill' in West End or Street in Gt. Marlow for which the rent was 'one gillyflower'.

It was also ordered that every tenant of this Manor should set up an Iron Cross 'according to ancient custom' of the Manor on the top of their house or chimneys. Early prints and pictures may show these.

John Borlase died in 1681 and the property passed through the heirs of a daughter of Sir William Borlase (M.P. for Marlow) to the Temples of Stowe, and others, and finally descended to the Claytons of Harleyford. Thomas Langley records that a sale in 1747 was postponed while Richard Temple transplanted a quantity of beech from Widmere woods to the grounds of Stowe. By the time Langley wrote (1790s) they were 'of great size and much admired'.

Thus by the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, three of Marlow's manors were in the hands of the Clayton family, whose estate was not finally broken up until after the First World War. The grandfather of the



present owner was the tenant of Widmere in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (as he was of part of the Clayton estate in South Wales) and his son was able to purchase Widmere.

The crypt of Widmere chapel is probably the oldest surviving structure in the old parish of Great Marlow. The site certainly has a very long history. Jerome K. Jerome was particularly interested in it and always maintained that there had been a considerable village there. He was convinced that he had

found traces of an old watch tower. The crypt has four bays, a row of central columns and low segmental arches between them to the side and end walls (well cut ashlar). It was used as a dairy until recently.

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century renovation of Widmere Chapel was assisted by English Heritage and provided much additional information about the building. A cement render had been applied externally; a very unsuitable material for the old walls, which it was harming. This was removed, as was the original coating render (which was a very simple material containing hair and dung with earth mortar). The original 'putlogs' were exposed. These are holes left during the wall's construction to allow timber scaffolding to be inserted. The exceedingly thick walls were found to be faced by chalk blocks and filled with flint rubble.

It was particularly interesting that the 'Gothic' arched and traced upper windows showed remnants of earlier rounded Norman arches, so there had obviously been an attempt to bring the building 'up to date' in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. After the restoration work had been completed, a render similar to the original was applied to the external walls. The ferrament (iron fitting) for medieval glass has been preserved by later brick blocking and some early glass (possibly 16<sup>th</sup> century) is still to be seen. The roof is 13<sup>th</sup> century with 18 trusses. The timber is not of the highest quality but has survived well. Pegs can be clearly seen. A framed partition is maybe 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century, but the inserted ceiling is 18<sup>th</sup> century elm. A vesica window high in the east wall was probably glazed.

During restoration of the chapel building, the architect drew attention to part of the floor above the crypt which appeared to be partly paved with small, reddish coloured, square, decorated medieval tiles. These were very worn and damaged (due to prolonged use as an agricultural building). Others were dug up nearby. Careful washing and examination securely identified them with Christopher Hohler's designs F66 and 49, a product of the Penn Bucks tileries and which were probably made between 1332 and 1380. Similar tiles have been reported in the floors of churches at Hurley, Little Marlow, Thame Abbey, St. Bartholomew the Great (London), and many others.



#### REFERENCES:

Marlow: A Pictorial History (Rachel Brown and Julian Hunt 1994)

The History and Antiquities of the Hundreds of Desborough: (Thomas Langley 1797)

Cuttings from The Bucks Free Press: (Francis Colmer 1932-3)

Records of Bucks XXXIII 1991 and XIV 1941 (Christopher Hohler)

Court Roll of Manor of Widmere 1755 – 6: (Bucks Records Office – papers of the Clayton family)

Victoria History of the County of Buckinghamshire 1905 – 27, Vol. III

History and Antiquities of the County of Buckingham 1847: (G. Lipscomb) Vol. III

Preliminary Notes by the Architects for English Heritage 1999

*Written by Dr. Rachael Brown and published by the Local History Group of the Marlow Society, July 2009*