

THE FORESTERS OF DOTHILL

A Tale of Two Williams

In its long history, reaching as far back as the Domesday Book, Dothill Park has seen more than its share of colourful characters but for me by far the most interesting were Sir William Forester (1655-1718) and his son 'Just' William (1690-1758). As far back as reliable history goes the park had been passed from family to family through marriage from the De Praeres to the Hortons to the Steventons, until it came into the possession of Sir William Forester in 1675. This was the beginning of the glory years for Dothill Park.



Sir William was a keen and very active politician, representing Much Wenlock as a Whig, for 14 years. At that time parliament was made up of Tories, who believed in absolute monarchy, and Whigs who were opposed to it. Charles II was on the throne and was felt to be far too close to Louis XIV & Charles' brother, James, had secretly converted to Catholicism. This made the Whigs very fearful of the succession and so a power struggle ensued and Sir William was right in the middle of it.



CHARLES II

Politics in those days was a much more serious business than it is today. You did not just run a dirty tricks campaign against your political opponents, you took up arms against them. Following various accusations made in the House of Commons, Sir William challenged and fought a duel with fellow MP Colonel Beaumont, who managed to disarm Forester.

In a similar vein the Whigs were not about to sit on their hands while the power in the land slipped into the grasping hands of a Catholic monarchy, and so the Rye House plot was hatched.

In 1683 a group of anti-papist, republican Whigs plotted to ambush and kill Charles and James on their way back from Newmarket at Rye House, which was owned by one of the plotters. Due to a fire the timing backfired and the plot failed. Some of the plot leaders escaped to Holland but a number of them were captured, tortured and put to death. The King's troops were despatched to the countryside to root out some of the plotters' supporters. They visited Dothill Park, where they discovered 50 muskets, a quantity of pikes and a large amount of gunpowder hidden in the grounds. Sir William's life was spared but he received a heavy fine, which he funded by selling a large amount of oak from the Wrekin.





Not discouraged by a close encounter with the hangman he continued his crusade against the crown and in 1685 was deeply involved with the Monmouth Rebellion. The Duke of Monmouth, the illegitimate son of Charles II, believed the English people would join him in rising up against his uncle, James II, a practising Catholic.

He got it badly wrong. He had quickly amassed an army of 4000 but was defeated at the battle of Sedgemoor by the royal army. In what would be the last pitched battle to be fought on English soil, the rebel army was totally destroyed. Monmouth himself was captured and later executed, and hundreds of his supporters suffered ferocious reprisals at the hands of the

infamous Judge Jeffreys' Bloody Assizes. Again Sir William eluded the hangman but was eventually committed to the Tower of London for a spell, on suspicion of 'dangerous and treasonable practices'.

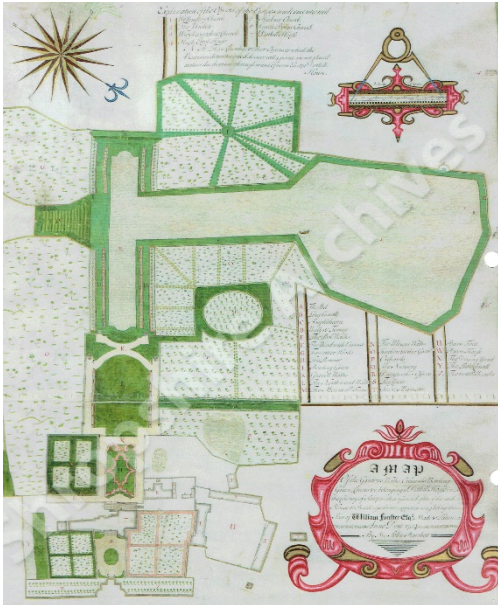
After some time in the Tower he was exiled to Holland. Once settled in he quickly became the intermediary between King James's enemies back in England and the Prince of Orange – another William! In 1688 these two Williams landed in England and the Glorious Revolution took place. Not a drop of blood was spilt and James II slipped silently away to France. William was knighted the following year and given a place in the Household, which necessitated residing in Whitehall, his second home. Sir William eventually retired and was allowed, in consideration of his long service, 'to keep his lodging at Whitehall for the rest of his life'. He died the following year, leaving, besides his estates, stock in the Bank and the East India Company. He was buried at Wellington in Shropshire on 22 February 1718.



On Sir William's demise his son, also named William, inherited the Manor and Park. Although he was also MP for Much Wenlock his ambitions and energy were not to be consumed by politics but in turning Dothill Park into one of the finest country residences in the Midlands. When Sir William had inherited the Park from his half-brother, Richard Steventon, it was effectively just a large farm and remained so during Sir William's tenure. Well, things were about to change, the younger William soon got to work.



The park was very much self-contained with a working farm, dairy, greenhouses, an orangery, rabbit warrens and walled gardens. Then William started to add. First the house was extended, then a deer park created, a large brick dovecote was built and the long canal pools were excavated and stocked with fish. The Foresters owned vast tracts of land south of the Wrekin, Abraham Darby had just started his factory in Coalbrookdale and needed lots of coal and that's what the Foresters had. The money started to roll in and William's ambitions grew.



During the next few years he created 7 hectares of formal gardens. To the south an ornamental lake was cut, with a grassed amphitheatre beyond, a common feature in 18th century gardens. Tee Lake was developed into a theme park with frequent water sports including sculling, swimming and water jousting. A large boathouse and amphitheatre were built at the south end and earth mounds were constructed on each side so the park workers could enjoy the spectacle.

By the 1770s the gardens were gone, back to grass. What had happened? Did William run out of money or interest? Or maybe there could be another reason. While William had been pruning his roses under the arbours of the Dothill estate, an agricultural revolution had been going on. George III had come to the throne. The industrial revolution was in full flow, the population was rapidly expanding and George, or 'Farmer George', as he was affectionately nicknamed, was keen to ensure his kingdom was well fed. He embraced the new developments in agriculture, going out to the major landholders in his realm and encouraging them to get on board.

There were three major developments that would revolutionise farming practices in England. Firstly, the invention of the seed drill. Jethro Tull was a Berkshire farmer and each year, when it came to sowing time, he instructed his farm hands on how he wanted them to sow the seeds carefully and in drills. Each year they reverted to the time-honoured method of scattering the seed to the winds. In utter desperation he sat down one day and invented the seed drill, which substantially increased the return on sown cereals.



As far back as history goes the farming community had followed the practice of fallowing, which meant a third of all the farming land was unproductive every year. The Dutch had recently discovered what became to be known as the 4 field rotation system. Wheat, turnips, barley and clover were planted in 4 fields in a year and the next year they were all switched. This was a win/win situation. It meant an increase to the productive farmable area by a third but it also meant that farmers had enough fodder to feed their livestock throughout the winter and did not have to slaughter them each year.

The third breakthrough was in animal husbandry. Thomas Coke, Earl of Leicester, inherited his father's estate on his death. Up until then the farmers on the estate had practised an open field system, often overstocked. Thomas introduced the practice of enclosures which made it possible to experiment. He experimented with feeds and selective breeding. He promoted cocksfoot and lucerne as grass and feed respectively and crossed the Norfolk Horn (sheep) with the English Leicester. By 1793 he had 2,400 sheep at Holkham. There were just 700 when he had inherited it. His practices spread far and wide, even as far as Dothill Park.

William had died in 1758 and by 1776 the gardens had gone and so had the Foresters. They had moved to Willey (Broseley) and from then on Dothill Park was rented out to tenant farmers.



Dothill Park – Early 1800