

MEDIEVAL TENANT HOUSING ON THE TITCHFIELD ESTATES

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ABSTRACT

The Court Book, the Register and other surviving documents of Titchfield Abbey make it possible to reconstruct many aspects of the lives of the abbey's tenants – in this article, their interest in building and enlarging their homes.¹ The evidence then enables us to contribute to the discussion of a number of the themes identified by Christopher Dyer in a widely-read article, and to extend the material he assembled, both geographically (he cited few Hampshire examples) and chronologically (the greater part of his evidence was from after 1350). Dyer, for instance, took issue with the view that 'housing was primitive ... for the most part (houses) were small, with one or two rooms for people and animals alike'. He comments that 'there is an evident reluctance to date good timber-framed buildings in peasant contexts much earlier than 1400'. The Titchfield material, starting as it does in 1245, is very relevant to such issues.²

The Premonstratensian Abbey of Titchfield was founded in 1231/2 by Peter des Roches. In the late fourteenth century it had 15 manors, which contained more than 60 villages and hamlets and 500 tenants. The principal sources for the history of the abbey are the four registers in the British Library, and the register for Portchester in the Hampshire Record Office. The most important of these registers is the Court Book, probably written about 1400, which consists of an edited transcript of the court rolls of the more important manors from 1245, and for other manors from shortly after their acquisition to 1377. This body of material gives a detailed picture of the lives of the abbey's tenants, including building activities.³

Evidence is assembled from nine of the manors described in a 1381 Extent.⁴ Titchfield, Swanwick and Fontley formed a block stretching inland

from the Solent between the Hamble and the Meon, with good soils near the coast and along the valley slopes of the Meon, and further inland, heathland commons, and woods on heavier soils. Crofton and Stubbington, east of the Meon, had extensive areas of good soils, and small patches of common and woodland. Portchester had both open fields on the good soils running inland from Portsmouth Harbour, and common and woodland on Portsdown Hill. Wallsworth, geographically an untidy manor, had tenants holding arable land near the coast: fields on the slopes of Portsdown; and closes and pasture in the Forest of Bere. Cadland, across Southampton Water, and also untidy, stretched from arable fields and closes near the coast into commons and woodland on the edge of the New Forest. All these manors had ready access to tidal water on the coast and in the estuaries. The exception, Inkpen in Berkshire, was a downland manor with arable fields on the valley slopes, and extensive commons with patches of woodland on the downs themselves. None seem to have any particular difficulty in this period in getting access to their preferred building materials of timber, straw and wattle-and-daub. Titchfield and Portchester had urban functions, with markets and semi-permanent stalls; all except Inkpen had seamen and fishermen amongst their tenants; Fontley manor included a detached group of tenants in the small port of Hook at the mouth of the Hamble.

A word about names and terms. In the Titchfield rentals a complete tenant holding was a *tenementum*. The most usual names for dwellings were *messuagium* and *colagium*; *tofta* was often synonymous with *colagium*, but might also be an empty plot, and so can be confused with a small croft (*crofta*). Most dwellings had a curtilage (*curtilagium*) – a courtyard, farmyard or garden. In

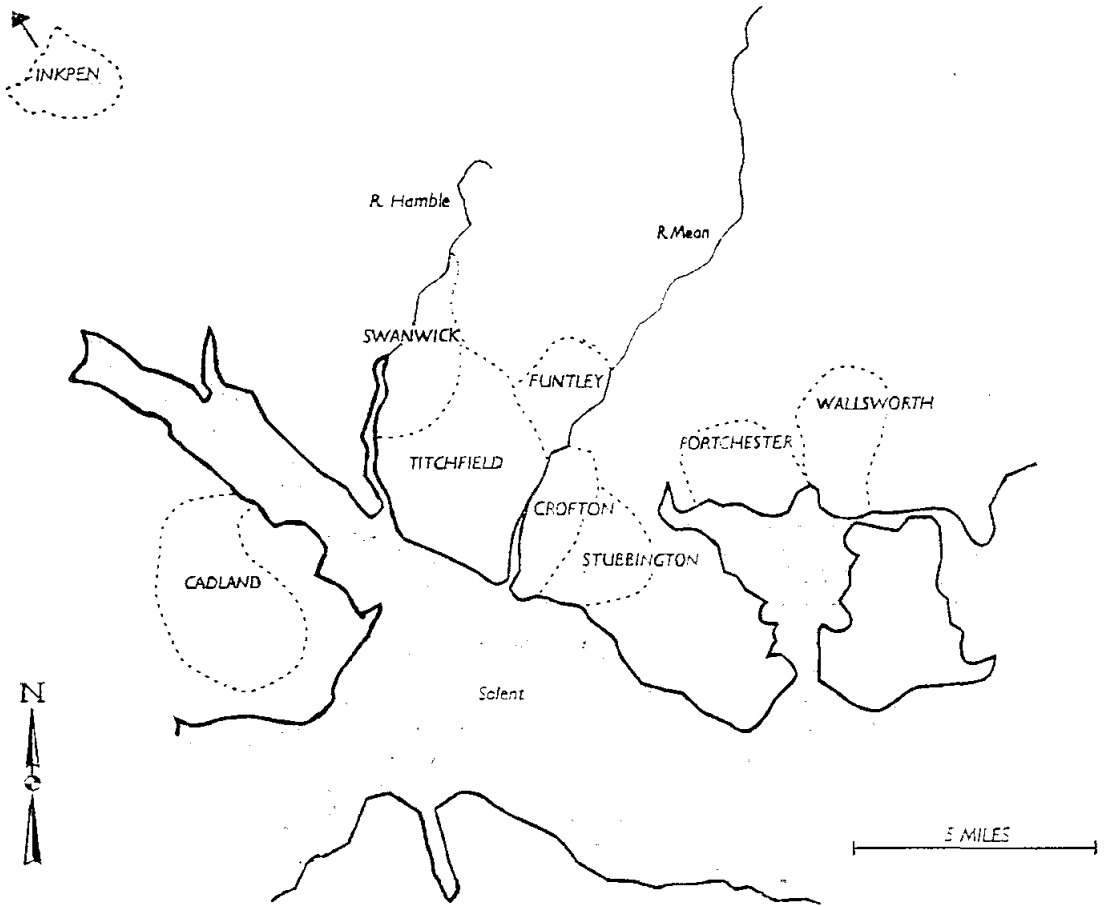


Fig. 1 Titchfield Abbey Manors (boundaries approximate)

the Portchester manor only, a cotsetle (*cotsethla*) was a cottage with a garden. A *domus* was a house, but might also be a building, and seemingly was sometimes just a room. Many dwellings had a barn (*grangia*) which on these manors was apparently usually a detached building, and not an extension to the house. They might also have a detached bakehouse (*furnus, pistrinum*). Within the dwelling there might be a hall (*aula*), a chamber (*camera*) or a solar (*solarium*); we hear of one pentice (*penticium*). Titchfield villagers might have a semi-permanent stall (*stalla*) in the market square. Other names used for dwellings were *domicium*, *mansio* and *hospicium*; a ruined building was a *fabrica*.

Throughout the 140 years covered by the Court Book and the Register (c.1240–c.1380) houses were being built for tenants somewhere or other on all these manors. The largest number of new houses for which we have evidence were built in the twenty years before the Black Death; there then followed a phase of upkeep, rebuilding and some enlargements. The demographic and economic significance of this data is considered below; from the building point of view we can see that most of the new house plots were created by the division of existing holdings.

There are numerous examples of the division of tenements by the construction of additional

Table 1 New tenant building on Titchfield Abbey manors c 1250–1380

	<i>pre-1270</i>	<i>1270– 1289</i>	<i>1290– 1309</i>	<i>1310– 1329</i>	<i>1330– 1349</i>	<i>1350– 1369</i>	<i>1370–</i>	<i>Totals</i>
Titchfield		1	1	4	3			9
Cadland	2				9			11
Stubbington				1	2			3
Portchester					1			1
Swanwick				2	2			4
Wallsworth					4			4
Crofton				1	6	1	1	9
Fontley					13		1	14
Inkpen							1	1
Totals	2	1	1	8	40	1	3	56

dwelling. In Titchfield in 1256, for instance, the Tissi family, with the lord's agreement, sub-let a house (*domus*) on the north side of their messuage. At Warsash in Titchfield manor in 1283, H.H. gave half of his tenement, both buildings and curtilage, to his younger brother W, H retaining the principal house, and W having the new barn. H is to give W three shillings if he wishes to build a new house. In 1343, also in Titchfield, J.K gave 30 shillings to marry M, daughter of the late A.H.; A.H.'s widow then gave the couple part of a cottage to the west of a building called Le Carthous, with the reversion of the whole tenement after her death. At Cadland in 1309 W.C. gave his daughter half a house and half the curtilage in the hamlet of Staneswood. At Stubbington in 1313 J.B., son of R.B., took a croft on the north side of a messuage formerly W.B.'s, and is to build on the croft. After the first plague epidemic, at Stubbington in 1352, J.G. gave a substantial sum of 13s.4d. for a messuage on which there were four houses – presumably he was intending to return the messuage to a single dwelling. And after the second epidemic, again at Stubbington in 1365, where R.M. has allowed a house on his tenement to deteriorate, the jury say that there are three houses on the tenement and that two are enough.

How many people lived in these houses? Were they occupied by extended or nuclear families? The evidence on these estates strongly suggests the nuclear option – a wish for privacy. Widows expected to have their own accommodation, conventionally a third of the dwelling, like Amice D. at Titchfield in 1260. They might also retain the bigger room, as did Edith T. at Cadland in 1333, giving a third of the messuage and two acres to her daughter and son-in-law, with reversion to her if they had no heirs. But family relationships were not always cordial. At Portchester in 1328 H.M., tenant of a cotsetle, died. His widow succeeded, but refused to sustain her son William, who was to have two half acres and to find a lodging where he could.

In the course of land transfers the measurements of a number of buildings, or perhaps sites for buildings, were specified in the manorial courts. The piece granted for a building at Titchfield in 1321 which was 20 feet by 16 feet is suggestive of a two-bay house; as is a house at Fontley in 1348 20 feet by 12 feet. Another house at Titchfield in 1348, 26 feet by 14 feet, may have had two or three bays. The cottage 14 feet by 10 feet taken by a brewer in Titchfield in 1347 was perhaps only a one-room workshop; and a new house at Fontley

in 1346 10 feet by 4 feet was probably a lean-to or an extension. At the other end of the social scale, at Titchfield in 1308, a gentlewoman, Isabella de Clare, acquired for building a piece of land with a frontage on the highway of three perches and one foot, though this may not have been the size of the completed building.

Numerous references to holdings of half a house or a third of a house reinforce the evidence of these measurements that domestic buildings were normally of two or three bays. Sometimes, as has been seen, the rooms and buildings are named. At Swanwick in 1329 Alice, a widow, gave up her tenement except a chamber and two acres. She was to maintain the chamber; the whole to revert to her heirs on death. At Portchester in 1334, in a family settlement, a father granted to his son, and the son granted back to his father and mother, a hall with a chamber adjacent and a bakehouse. After the plague, in March 1362, a tradesman living in the market place in Titchfield was given permission to build a pentice to protect his solar against 'the violence of the wind'. He also paid to have a market stall eight feet by four feet outside his tenement. Stalls were frequently mentioned in Titchfield; and between 1326 and 1377 there were a series of grants of quite small plots of land for extending messuages towards the highway that sound like the addition of shop fronts to buildings. William de Insula, a wealthy man, had obviously been threatening to encroach on the market place when his building in it was taken into the lord's hands in 1321. The most elaborate house we hear of is significantly at the very end of the period and among the first signs of recovery after the plague epidemics. William Hobbelof took a new plot next to his messuage at Titchfield in 1377; and by 1380 he had built an extension with two high chambers, the light to which was obstructed by Henry Smith's trees.⁵

As well as new buildings, there were, as has been seen, buildings ruinous or in need of repair – and not just after the Black Death but throughout the period. The maintenance of these was a constant concern for the manorial courts, and tenants were not over zealous in their care for the lord's interests. Cadland provides several instances. In 1253 for instance J.S had moved his house (presumably the timbers) from the lord's tenement; in

the next court this was described as selling the house. In 1274 A.D. has sold a piece of timber broken from her house, part of which has been burned. In 1325 a widow has demolished her house; and a toft with a ruined house is taken in hand, the thatch to be used as compost. After the plague, W.P. took a messuage and half an acre, and was to repair the ruined messuage. Also after the first epidemic, at Wallsworth in 1351, litter and straw had been taken from a tenement which ought by villein custom have been kept for thatching houses. Wallsworth was the only one of these manors where providing thatch was a communal responsibility: in 1336 all the tenants had been fined three shillings for not collecting straw for thatching a house.

Occasionally we seem to detect a professional builder or contractor at work. At Portchester in 1315 a carpenter took a messuage which had formerly been a barn, with a garden, except for the cottage which has been built in the garden, for the substantial sum of ten shillings. At Wallsworth in 1332, in what seems to have been a phase of demesne decommissioning, J.P. took three acres of demesne for six years. He was to rebuild the barn at East Cosham at the same length and breadth as the one that was destroyed, and to maintain the other buildings at his own expense. And at Crofton in 1338, probably in the same decommissioning phase, J.H. took 2½ acres of demesne and a piece of meadow attached for building, to be completed by Michaelmas. J.H. also took another 1½ acres of demesne for building; and another man J.B. took another 1½ acres, next to J.H., for yet another building. Planned renovation after the first two plague epidemics is evident at Titchfield. In 1367 a messuage and curtilage, unclaimed for 18 years (since 1349) were taken for the considerable rent of 18 shillings, the buildings to be renovated at the lord's expense. In the following year, the very large sum of £20 was paid for a ruined tenement with a curtilage, arable and pasture, all surrounded by a hedge. The new tenant undertook to build a house within three years, and £10 was remitted for this purpose.

The practice on these manors of constructing new houses for family members by the subdivision of tenements was part of a more general

process – the creation of small-holdings out of pieces of land in the common fields, pieces of common and pieces of demesne. Some historians have supposed that this process was a reflection of poverty and hardship.⁶ But here all the signs are that this was an outcome the tenants themselves wanted and which was merely acceded to by the landlord. The small-holdings, often of one, two or three acres, were obviously not big enough to sustain even a small family by arable agriculture. They did give the new tenant a garden, some pigs and chickens and a few sheep on the commons. But another significant source of income – in craft or commercial activity – is clearly implied. As has been seen, all the villages discussed here (except Inkpen) had access to tidal water, and so to seafaring, fishing and shell fishing and to salt production. On land, amongst many other craft occupations, men might be weavers and fullers, women nappers and spinsters. It is significant that however small the units being created, someone was able to afford the cost of the timber and the building work, an entry fine where appropriate and the new rent that was due. As well as a rising population, this points to relative prosperity in the period before the Black Death.

It is misleading to talk about these people as 'peasants'. This was a commercial as well as an agricultural society, and the abbot's tenants, large and small, had keen eyes for new opportunities. For 30 years before the Black Death these arose as small business opportunities offered in a situation of high demand; then for thirty years after they took the form of the amalgamation of holdings in a period of low demand; by 1380 we can begin to see a new phase emerging, in the further consolidation of holdings in the hands of the more successful tenants. Nicholas Coppe, a villein tenant (*nativus*) provides one example of a 'thriving' Titchfield man of the late fourteenth century. In the rental of 1378 he had what was evidently the ancestral holding, a messuage with 8 acres, formerly Richard Coppe's, held by the ancient customs of Titchfield. But he also had a messuage in Titchfield village (next to the William Hobbelof who was building the extension) with five acres (including a half-acre at Stonebridge) which had once been William Kalesknave's; and a cottage and a curtilage, also in the village; another

two-and-a-half acres formerly John Gay's; and ten-and-a-half acres of the lord's demesne at Cumbwell. At Portchester, this process can be seen developing up to the rental of 1405, when 103 individuals were holding 138 tenements. One example is that of the Veyles. When Thomas le Veyle died in 1349, he had only a messuage and a ferdel (quarter of a holding) which his widow passed on to Thomas le Tannere, presumably a son, who was called Thomas le Veyle tanner in 1353. By 1405 John Veyle had three holdings on the east side of South Street, two of them adjoining; and three on the west side, two adjacent, one of them formerly Thomas Veyle's, all held of the abbot. Another instance are the Abrahams. In 1405 John Abraham had a holding on the south side of West Street, held of the abbot; three on the east side of South Street, two held of the king, the other from the abbot; and one on the west side of South Street, held of the abbot. Three of his five holdings had once been held by different members of the Freyne family. Richard Abraham had two adjacent holdings on the east side of South Street, one held of the king, the other of the abbot; and one on the west side, held of the king. One of Richard's holdings was opposite the pillory in the market place.⁷

These changing economic and social circumstances are reflected in the numbers, sizes and shapes of the village houses.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I should like to thank John Hare and Edward Roberts for discussing this article with me.

NOTES

- 1) For the general history of the abbey see Colvin, H M 1951 *The White Canons in England* (Oxford), pp.184-91, and *Victoria County History of Hampshire* (1900), II, 181-6. See also Watts, D G 1958 *The Villages on the Estates of Titchfield Abbey Proc Hampshire Fld Club Archaeol Soc* 22 31-7, and Watts, D G 1958 *The Estates of Titchfield Abbey 1245-1381* (unpublished B.Litt. thesis, Oxford).
- 2) Dyer, C 1994 *English Peasant Building in the*

Later Middle Ages in *Every Day Life in Medieval England* (Hambledon Press), 133–36. See also Hare, J N 2000 Buildings and Economic Change: the Towns of North Hampshire in the Later Middle Ages *Proc Hampshire Fld Club Archaeol Soc Newsletter* 33 23–6.

- 3) The Court Book is BL Add Mss 70509, the rental of 1378 is in BL Add Mss 70508, and the Extent of 1381 is in BL Add Mss 70506; the Portchester rental is in HRO 1M54/4. The Portchester material has been analysed by Munby, J 1985 Portchester and its Region in *Excavations at Portchester Castle IV* (Society of Antiquaries). For soils, see Kay, F F 1939 *A Soil Survey of the Strawberry District of South Hampshire* (University of Reading).
- 4) Table 1 has been compiled from cases of new building on nine of the larger Abbey manors as recorded in the Court Book (BL Add Mss 70509); see Fig. 1. Portsea, which included urban property in Portsmouth, and Winchester, where the Abbey had urban property, have not been included.

Wallsworth is now 'lost'; see Davey, R, Perrin, A & Watts, G 1999 Wallsworth; a Lost Village? *Proc Hampshire Fld Club Archaeol Soc Newsletter* 32 9–11. Portchester was divided between Titchfield Abbey (two thirds), the king and Southwick Priory.

- 5) William Hobbelof appears both in the rental (BL Add Mss 70508) ff.1–17v, and in the Register (BL Add Mss 70506) f.67v.
- 6) The creation of small-holdings on these manors, and the demographic background, have been discussed in Watts, D G 1967 A Model for the Early Fourteenth Century' *Economic History Review* 2nd ser. 20 543–7.
- 7) Titchfield Court Book, Titchfield rental and Portchester rental op.cit. The distinction between the ancient or old customs and the so-called 'new' customs in Titchfield had been established as an outcome of the monstraverunt dispute of 1271–76, see Watts, D G 1983 Peasant Discontent on the Manors of Titchfield Abbey 1245–1405 *Proc Hampshire Fld Club Archaeol Soc* 39 121–35.

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