

HISTORIC THAXTED

1. A Short History

Present day Thaxted forms part of a landscape that goes back to the Iron Age and beyond. During the Anglo-Saxon period (413-1066AD) the "vill" or village developed as an agricultural centre. At the time, it was named Tachestida ("the place where reeds used in thatching grow"), a name which, over time, morphed into its modern form. The Domesday book (1086) provides the first solid information of its pre and immediate post-conquest development. It tells us that Thaxted was a rich agricultural settlement consisting of 108 households made up of 54 villagers, who worked the land, 34 smallholders, 16 slaves and four freemen.

The manor of Thaxted, to which the village belonged, had become the property of Richard, son of Lord Gilbert of Clare. He owned 7 plough teams, each of eight oxen, implying that a large area of land surrounding the village was pastoral in nature, down to cereals and other root crops. The rest of the land was either pasture or woodland with sheep and pigs the dominant livestock.

Thaxted manor was a place of some importance. The Clare family, thought it the "most valuable manor in Essex." Later, in the 14th Century, it was acquired by relatives of the ruling house, the de Audleys. It was home of Alice, daughter and heir to Hugh de Audley, 1st Earl of Gloucester. In 1336 she was forcefully abducted and married by Ralph Neville, Earl of Stafford. Later, the manor passed to another related family, the powerful Mortimers, thence to the Duchy of York, subsequently forming part of the royal estate under Edward IV and later Henry VIII and his wife, Katherine of Aragon.

In about 1205, Thaxted's importance was bolstered by the acquisition of a market, a reflection of its role as a local communication centre. With it came the right to hold a fair. The Poll Tax of 1393 adds further information. It indicated a significant change in the nature of the village, which had grown and was rapidly becoming a township. Though it remained an important agricultural centre, its population now included 79 cutlers, 11 smiths, 4 sheathers and two goldsmiths. Most of these craftsmen were post-Black Death incomers, with 82 new family names being recorded.

The arrival of what was to become a nationally important cutlery centre, come about over the previous fifty years with assistance

from Hugh de Audley. The trade was vital to the growth and wealth of the town over the next 200 years. At one stage over a third or more of the population was involved in the making and sheathing of knives, and other bladed items.

As the power and wealth of the cutlers grew, changes developed in the ownership of the surrounding agricultural land. Feudalism had been the dominant economic system for over 400 years. As late as 1348, land was given to tenants in return for labour services on the lord's estate. The five great open fields surrounding Thaxted were still worked communally in the interest of the ruling family, with strips of land to the south, round Monk Street, divided amongst the smaller tenants. Forty-five years later, in 1393, everything had changed. The lords of the manor were the Mortimers who had brought an end to labour services. Land had been sold off and a number of freehold farms had become established. The remaining land had been leased or rented to tenant farmers, leaving only a very small areas (Park Farm) directly controlled by the manorial authorities. A profound change on this scale did not come about without difficulty. Thaxted was a local centre for the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

Meantime, within town itself, a parcel of land running south from Bolford Street, encompassing Town Street, the Tanyard, Weaverhead Lane and the lower part of Park Street, was developing as an industrial area containing both cutlers and an increasing number of woollen cloth merchants. This was the burgus or borough of Thaxted, an area with growing administrative independence from the manor, and, as KC Newton observed (Thaxted in the Fourteenth Century), "a sure indication that the economy of Thaxted had an important commercial and industrial basis, apart from agriculture."

The trends apparent at the end of the 14th Century were to dominate town and manor for nearly one hundred years. The manor remained, though many of its outbuildings disappeared as its function changed from farming to leasing and rent collection. The cutlery trade, however, came under increasing strain. Other cutlery centres, such as Sheffield, were better placed in terms of resources and able to undercut their rivals on price. By 1500 the trade had virtually disappeared, though individual cutlers appear in the record as late as the 18th Century. This was a disaster for parts of the town. A charter from Mary 1st (1556) described Thaxted as being "in great ruin and decay by reason of great poverties and necessity."

Over time, these economic difficulties were overcome. A woollen cloth industry had developed from the mid-15th Century and had helped to hold off serious economic decline. It went through a bad

patch at about the time of the 1556 charter, but by the early 17th Century had revived. In 1609, the antiquarian William Camden visited Thaxted, and was impressed, describing it was "a little [market] town seated very pleasantly on a high, rising hill." By 1617, the date of Thaxted's second charter, the local economy had improved further. The charter spoke of "people flooding into the borough" to find work in what was called "the new draperies." The trade continued to flourish. As late as 1722, Daniel Defoe wrote that "Thaxted was noted for the manufacture of bays [fine cloth]."

Economic development within the town created a rich and powerful local elite. It dominated Thaxted, was crucial in the development of the church, and came to dominate the borough. As a result, local self-government was granted by a charter of 1556. However, the Cutts family, who had acquired the manor and borough from Catherine of Aragon, were not impressed. In 1586 Sir John Cutts IV, successfully challenged the legality of the charter. As a result, the borough limped on with some difficulty until Thaxted's new manorial lord, Sir Edward Smith, allowed the town a replacement charter in 1617. It granted the borough extensive powers, not least the right to hold its own petty and quarter sessions.

Thaxted remained a corporate borough for a further 67 years. However, Civil War with resulting divisions amongst the town's elite weakened the council over the later period. When challenged by legal proceedings in 1684, the local establishment gave in. Thaxted's time as a borough had come to an end.

2. The buildings of Thaxted.

The wealth of the town in the late Middle Ages is still reflected in its buildings. There are 148 listed buildings, mostly wood framed, concentrated along or adjacent to the main road. (Town Street, Watling Street and the lower part of Newbiggen Street). The width of the footpaths in Town Street indicates the past presence of an important market with, at its head, the Guildhall. Archaeology has shown that many of the Town Street houses were built for cutler and woollen cloth merchants. There are four particularly fine examples of double jettied merchant houses, Records in Town Street and three houses in Stoney Lane.

Thaxted Parish Church (The Church of St. John the Baptist, with Our Lady and St. Laurence): The church has its own website. There is a link available on this site under "Places to Visit".

The Guildhall: its structural timbers were recently dendro-dated, giving a date for construction, as early in the second half of the 15th Century. The Fanne family were wardens of the guild of cutlers and chief burgesses or mayors of Thaxted throughout this period. As such, guild money probably played an important part in its construction. The guildhall had three purposes. First, it was a guildhall in the sense that it provided a meeting place for guild members. Second, it was a moot hall, a meeting place for the borough authorities. Finally, it was a market hall, the administrative centre for the market.

The right to hold markets had been transferred from the manor to the borough sometime after 1425. At the time, the market played an important part in the lives of Thaxted's residents. It justified a new locally owned building which overlooked the market, and contained the market court together with a lock-up for those offending on market and fair days. It was a place where market fees could be safely collected and stored. Finally, it formed part of the market along with the adjacent Market Cross House. The Guildhall acted as a covered market on two levels whilst Market Cross House was used as the corn exchange.

From 1556-1684 the Guildhall was the headquarters of the incorporated borough and the home of the borough court, later the quarter sessions. When the borough collapsed in 1684, the building went into decline but was rescued by Yardleys, the town's major charity. It served as a grammar school for many years before resuming its role as the home of the parish council. A recent restoration led by the distinguished architect, Jim Boutwood, returned it something akin to its earlier appearance.

Recorders (Gifted): located on the west side of Town Street, a double jettied and rendered building from the mid-15th Century. Prominent above its ground floor windows are the arms of King Edward IV (1460-1483). These include the Plantagenet coat of arms, the lion rampant of England and the black bull of Clare. His personal symbol, a griffon, is located to the right. Recorders was originally built as the administrative centre for the manor and (royal) borough of Thaxted. The building is known as Recorders allegedly for its links with William Bendlowes, the presumed recorder of Thaxted, and an important lawyer in the late 16th Century. This is not correct. The town's first recorder was Thomas Lock, who was appointed under the terms of the 1617 charter. The building is named after him and his successors.

The John Webb Windmill: see "Places to Visit" on the web site.

Clarence House: located immediately opposite the north door of the church, Clarence House was built in 1715 in the reign of Queen Anne. It was built as a gift from the parents of Elizabeth Rayner on her marriage to William Heckfort, a local apothecary and surgeon. The house is a striking example of the early neo-classical (Paladian) style, with a Corinthian pilastered front door. Behind the main building are two walled gardens. The one adjacent to the house was for recreational purposes, the second, on the opposite side of the lane, was for flowers and vegetables. It is now a conservation area, open to the public at specific times.