A HISTORY OF CHARNEY MANOR

By Harriet Salisbury

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One fine day, towards the middle of the last century, the Newbury and District Field Club set out on a long-planned educational excursion to Wantage. The Pelican yard was, as usual, the place of rendezvous and happily the weather was highly favourable, the power of the sun's rays being tempered by a refreshing breeze. After some delay a start was made and the party, seated in waggonettes and other conveyances, drove off.

They lunched at Pusey, in the house of Mr and Mrs S E Bouverie Pusey and, after a vote of thanks from the Mayor of Reading, stepped into Pusey Church. Here they examined a monument to Major Dunch, supported by weeping cherubs minus all drapery except their pocket handkerchiefs. The party then got under way and proceeded to Charney. A good specimen of ancient market cross was noticed en route to the Manor House, then the residence of a Mr James Beesley.

Mr E Dolby of Abingdon gave a brief account of the building and its history. The party inspected the ancient "solar" or drawing room, and the small oratory attached, which contained a piscina and ombri. Leaving Charney, the road to Denchworth was taken amid a heavy shower, which drenched those of the party not sufficiently provided with umbrellas and mackintoshes.

Leaving the party to continue their journey let us linger at the Manor House. Not quite a forgotten piece of history, visited as it was by amateur historians and curious sight-seers. A little remote, perhaps, tucked away in the Vale of the White Horse, easy to overlook. A writer composing a guide book some fifty years later also stopped off at Charney and he cast a rather more critical eye over the scene.

> Together with the adjacent Manor House the church forms a pleasing group - that is to say, at a little distance, where the several features are not too distinct; for a nearer view of the Manor discloses a melancholy spectacle of injudicious restoration. The dwelling has been far more ruined than a ruined chapel standing by its side, through whose broken windows may be espied an open timber roof and king-post.
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> The chapel is in a deplorable condition. The roof is falling in, the floor of the upper storey is rotten and full of holes, and indeed the building is in imminent danger.

He was not the only person to take note of the decay. In March 1906 the Rev. Bede Lamme wrote to the Society or the Preservation of Ancient Buildings to ask what might be done to stay the rot in the Old Manor House. For many years Charney had belonged to people who lived elsewhere; the building being let to tenant farmers. On the whole they had simply used the oldest part of the building as an extra hayloft - the illustration of the solar in Parker's Domestic Architecture of

1851 shows clearly the sacks of grain and hay-rakes. Paradoxically, it may be that this neglect was, at the same time, the solar's salvation. The solar and chapel were at least spared the "injudicious restoration" which was, at various times, inflicted on the rest of the House.

At the time of the writer's concern the tenants were a family called Rickards. A vistor to Charney in 1965 remembered how they had kept most of the house shut up and lived in just a few rooms at the front of the building. (He also recalled that his job, as a boy, had consisted of cleaning boots, pumping water for baths in the back kitchen, and tending the strawberry beds). When the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings received the Rev. Lamme's letter it put all its efforts into tracing the actual owner of the estate. She was a Miss Meloney Stephens, and she wrote back to the Society, assuring them that she had already arranged for "competent antiquarian advice". The Society took the hint, and reported at a subsequent meeting that they had decided to take no further action for the present; "the matter being of such delicacy that if pressed they might do more harm than good". In fact the Manor came into the hands of a Mr Price, distant cousin of Miss Stephens and the manager of the estate, only six months later. He immediately wrote to the Society to say that "if moderate expenditure would meet what was necessary" he would be prepared to consider the matter of repairs. The Society sent their architect, Mr William Weir, to go over the house with Mr Price and submit a report. The news, as these extracts from the report show, was not good.

> The Solar retains its open timber roof, in a very ruinous condition and covered with stone tiles. It contains two tie-beams with king post and struts. The south wall has bulged outwards and pulled the tie-beams out of the north wall - they are propped at centre from the floor. Both the tie-beams are broken under the king-post and the roof is in danger of collapsing.
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> The south wall where bulged outwards is in a loose condition and allows of the wet penetrating.
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> The east wall contains a pointed doorway into the Chapel, the wall is badly cracked over the doorway and on the north side of the window.
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> A bad crack occurs at the west end of the wall, where a settlement appears to have taken place. The floor of the Chapel shews evident proof that this portion of the house has been burnt out. The joists are badly burned, as well as the oak lintels of the openings, and the plaster and stonework of the walls. The fire seems to have spread into the Solar and destroyed the east bay of the roof which is renewed with modern timbers (these of fir and not the original oak).
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> The windows are at present unglazed. The exterior of the chapel is completely hidden by ivy, which has been allowed to get a firm hold of the walls and roof. The buttress at

> the west end of the south wall is displaced by the ivy. The modern buttress at the west end of the south wall is forced away from the wall and the top portion is missing. The level of the ground is about two feet higher than the ground floor. The floor is of earth, very uneven.

Having survived for over 600 years Charney Manor was gently rotting away. Perhaps the cruellest blow of all was contained in the last line of the report, which read: "the approximate cost of repairing the walls, roofs and the floors, as set forth above, would probably amount to the sum of Three hundred and fifty pounds". There was no way that this could be considered, in 1907, a moderate expenditure.

However, Mr Price had a great affection for the Manor. He cast his mind back to earlier days when the mill was still grinding and the weir was in good order, when sheep were washed in the river Ock and stray animals were incarcerated in the village pound, whose great circular earthen banks had stood opposite the old house.

He sold the farm land to his tenants, the Rickards, then the Manor was put into repair under the supervision of Mr Weir. The subsequent sale of the house, for £1,900 hardly netted a huge profit, but he expressed himself well pleased with "the preservation of an ancient relic".

Today we have cause to be grateful to Mr Price, the Rev. Lamme, the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, and all the previous owners under whose care, or benign neglect, the Manor of Charney has endured.

But why should we care so much for an ancient building, our concern rising far above mere consideration of practical use? The question vexed Richard Allen when, in 1981, he reported to the Society of Friends on the present and future role of the building. He felt obliged to point out that:

> One of the most important features of the Manor cannot, however, be shown on any plan or reduced to figures - its extraordinary ambience. The building and its surroundings, and some fine pieces of antique furniture help to create a certain "image", but these factors do not explain - still less explain away - the unique atmosphere of the place.
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> The source of this ambience, if it really exists, can only be a matter of speculation. In recent times there has been little to distinguish the Manor from other country houses that have been prized and cared for by their occupants. True, in the first two centuries of its life the Manor had a close association with one of the greatest of the Benedictine foundations, and there is a local legend that a monk lived there while trying to finish some task that he had left undone; but the house was never a monastery or the home of a religious order. The chapel may

well have been a place where "prayer has been valid", but there seems no obvious reason to apply T S Eliot's lines to the house

> And what the dead had no speech for, when living
> They can tell you, being dead; the communication
> Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language
> of the living

Yet it may not be fanciful to feel that the two lines that follow are true of the Manor

> Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
> Is England and nowhere. Never and always.

"Charney Manor"; the name itself takes us back to the earliest settlers of this fertile vale. "Geornei", "Cernei", "Cerneia", "Cerneye", and "Cherney" are all variants. The 'ey' ending denotes an island. In the Vale of the White Horse we find "Hanney", meaning an island frequented by wild cocks, "Goosey" - goose island, "Pusey" - Pea island, "Tubney" - Tubba's island and "Charney" - an island on the river Cearn. The area has always been riddled with streams and rivers, onto which man has imposed his own network of dykes and ditches. "Charn" comes from a word that can be found in Gaelic, old Irish and Welsh; "carn" meaning rocks or stones, (familiar to us as "cairn"; a pile of rocks on top of a mountain). The river Char in Oxford gained its name from its stony bed, and some forgotten river or stream bestowed its name on Charney.

When Stone age tracks still ran the length of the downs, a large hunting community roamed the marshy plains. They have yielded up the most prolific finds of stone axe-heads and arrow-heads in the country. Two thousand years ago there was only a large shallow lake, much marsh land, and small islands dotted here and there. On such islands hunters camped in wattle huts, ready to barter their game and water-fowl with travellers traversing the heights of the downs a mile or so to the South.

Nearby lie the remains of Cherbury Camp, an Iron Age fort, and unlike most such forts it is situated on low-lying land and seemingly impossible to defend. But some years ago, after ploughing, the surfaces of the lower surrounding fields were observed to be white with shells - the shells of long dead marsh-dwelling snails which once inhabited the protective swamps of the camp's defences. A gold coin of Cunobelinus, the legendary king immortalised by Shakespeare as Cymbeline, principal ruler of south-east England in 1 AD, turned up nearby, and local legend links the camp with King Canute.

The earliest record of Charney Bassett dates from the ninth century and is a written description of the bounds. It starts on the river Ock (another old English name, meaning "salmon river") in the South West corner of the parish (see map) which it follows until it meets a stream. Following the stream North a stone bridge is mentioned; this was probably at the

North West corner of the parish. The bounds travel East along the stream which flows past Cherbury Camp until it meets a ford; probably at the point where the road between Charney and Longworth crosses the stream. It then meets up with the River Ock again which flows into the Land brook. The Mead ditch joins with the Ock to complete the outline. The boundary is familiar today, only the Mead ditch has disappeared, and we can see that the "island on the Cern" was aptly named, being entirely surrounded by water. As the map shows, "cerenburgh, "cerenford" and "cearna graf" all occur on one stretch; a stream arising in Pusey and flowing into the Ock.

Well into this century the grand name of Charney Manor appeared on maps as part of Charney Wick. Many wicks, including nearby Goosey, still remain. "Wick" is another old English word, and in Latin "vicus" was a row of houses. In old English it generally meant an abode, but it also developed the localised meaning of a farm, specifically, a dairy farm.

And it is a dairy farm - part of the dispersed estates of the Benedictine abbey of Abingdon - that Charney must first be considered. In the early history of the area there is no escaping the controlling influence of the hand reaching out from the cloister. A writer on Charney in 1890 remarks that it is known locally as "the Monk's House" - and this over 300 years after their departure and the wreck of the abbey.

Abingdon Abbey was just one among many early **monasteriola** which studded the shires of Wessex in the eighth and ninth centuries: there were also houses at Cookham, Kintbury and Cholsey. By a credible tradition, recorded as early as the tenth century, a monastery was founded some time in the seventh century and came into being through a grant of lands by a West Saxon underking named Cissa to his kinsman Haeha. By the year 709, He had become the abbot of a little monastery of twelve monks. At that time the valley of the middle Thames was divided between two kingdoms, and it would appear that the church passed alternately under the protection of the kings of Wessex and the kings of Mercia. The early monastery was destroyed when the Danes invaded Wessex in 871 and it was probably lying derelict by the reign of King Alfred. Under the name of "St. Mary's stow", Abingdon, it received the village of Uffington from the ealdorman of East Anglia in the first years of Aethelstan's reign. Ghostly fathers came and went, leaving no more trace than shadowy names on a few forged charters; the old English Cynenoth, the Germanic Godescalc.

And so it might have remained; a distant and unremarkable piece of history. As a little monastery on a royal estate, the house of Abingdon continued until just before the death of King Eadred when, on his mother's advice, he placed it under the authority of Aethelwold, a monk of Glastonbury. When Aetholwold came to Abingdon his friend and mentor, Dunstan of Glastonbury had already interested him in monastic reform. Finding his new duties denied him the opportunity to travel, he sent on Osgar, trusted monk, to France to learn all he

could about the way of life and intellectual attainments of the abbey of Fleury, which had just been reformed under the influence of the great house of Cluny.

At Cluny monks were sent out to live on estates lying some distance from the abbey and they sent back a fixed proportion of the produce of the lands in their charge. Abingdon appears to be the only English monastery to have adopted this system before it arrived, along with many other French ideas, with the Norman Conquest. When towards the close of the twelfth century Thomas de Husseburne was in charge of the abbey's revenues he declared to the Exchequer that all Berkshire was insufficient to provide milk and cheese for the monks. But the brethren replied that wicks were provided from the time of St Aetholwold to supply the said milk and cheese.

Dunstan of Glastonbury had, in fact, been strongly opposed all external activities for his monks, fearing all that might take them away from the strict rule of the cloister. Together with Aetholwold he drew up the **Regularis Concordia**, a code of practice for the guidance of new monasteries during the tenth century revival, and in it expressly condemned the idea of monks travelling outside the convent on business. Therefore it seems unlikely that Aetholwold himself introduced the living-out system of land management. However, Aetholwold was succeeded as abbot by the trusted Osgar who had first hand experience of the Cluniac monasteries of France.

The first authenticated charter to mention Charney comes from the reign of Ethelred (the Unready, c968-1016). Among the lands he gives to Abingdon Abbey is:

> A certain parcel of land, to wit, fifteen estates in a place which is called by the celebrated name of Cyrne.

And Pope Eugenius III granted divers privileges to the Monks of Abingdon on their estates, naming "Cerni", and, in a further charter, "Cerneiam" among them. There are earlier charters, dated 811 and 821, almost certainly forged. But as an early possession of the abbey Charney is listed with six other manors as an outlying abbey farm. They were: Cumnor, Barton, Marcham, Charney, Uffington, Lockinge with Farnborough and Milton.

Unlike those at Cluny, the manors of Abingdon were for the most part close by: they were all in North Berkshire, five within ten miles of the abbey, and at first sight it may seem that there was no real reason for monks to be actually living on them, as opposed to travelling out to them regularly. But it must be remembered that around 1000AD, (according to the abbey chronicle) the Danes "wiped out" Abingdon. In such circumstances the living-out system may have been seen as the only means, however irregular, of re-establishing a lost control over manors of prime importance for the provisioning the monastery.

Records were kept in the abbey Chronicles of all the wicks, and the weys due from them. A "wey" is an old English weight,

used as a standard measurement for dry goods. It varied according to the commodity (cheese, wool, salt, coal, etc.) and the area. For instance a wey of Essex cheese was 336lbs, but in Suffolk it was only 256lbs. The abbey Chronicles for the period 1100 to 1135 give us some idea of the sort of goods Charney provided.

> These are the wicks which ought to find so many peas... from the wike of Charney 16 weys.
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> These are the wicks which found cheese in the refectory... wick of Charney 16 weys.
>
> Also the kitchener receives 3 times in the year from Charney 3 horseloads at his summons, for carrying fish to the kitchen, from wherever he wishes, which makes one month of farm.
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> For the monks kitchen from Charney 45s and 11d, from 3,000 eggs and 136 hens and 6 ambers of vegetables.

Of course the abbey appears in the great Domesday survey of 1086. In Berkshire it had 47 holdings, exactly as many as the king.

Charney, which was listed as "Carnei", was not a large settlement. The abbey held 2 cirgates, and someone called Warin held half a hide from the abbey. As a virgate was quarter of a hide that makes one hide altogether. Domesday assessments were not so much measurements as figures for tax purposes so it is difficult to determine the exact area, but a hide averaged around 120 acres. There were also 16 acres of meadow so we can guess 136 acres in all. Nearby Goosey had 11 hides; 1,320 acres.

Yet Goosey was only worth 10 pounds, and the value of Charney, unchanged between the Norman Conquest and Domesday, remained constant at 6 pounds. (Warin's stake was worth 12 shillings). Land values at Domesday were a measure of resources rather than the size of land holdings; assessments plummetted in areas like Yorkshire, wrecked by William's army, or South Devon devastated by Irish raiders. The value of a manor was an estimate of the total its lord would receive annually in money and kind from his peasants, including dues paid by mills, proportion of eels caught or pigs kept, and all crops and produce.

England did not then consist of what we now think of as archetypal villages; compact groups of buildings centred around a hall or church. It followed a far more ancient pattern of isolated farms and hamlets, interspersed with fields and spread over most of the cultivable land. 80% of the area cultivated in England in 1914 was already under the plough in 1086. Woodland only covered 15% of the land. In Berkshire we can deduce from the number of swine for which pannage was paid that the woods were in the east and south-east. All Berkshire's agricultural wealth lay in the west, and its manors in the Vale of the White Horse were important

Before the end of the twelfth century the offices of the monastery (called obedientaries) had begun to be assigned to particular monks. In the old records of the obedientiaries and their duties it is laid down that the abbot shall appoint monks outstanding for their integrity, wisdom and other virtues to be in charge of the vills; that is, the seven manors - Cumnor, Barton, Marcham, Charney, Uffington, Lockinge with Farnborough, and Milton - appropriated to the convent from ancient times for the provision of food. The obedientiaries guarded their rights most jealously and there was a strict divison of revenues between the abbot and the convent. Documentary evidence indicates that, at one time, Charney belonged to the office of Coguinarius - the cook of the abbey. A mediaeval manuscript cartulary of the abbey tells us that this arrangement lasted a long time but eventually proved unsatisfactory because the monks who lived outside the monastery pursued a less regular way of life than was fitting or expedient; in other words they were not living in accordance with the monastic Rule. So they were recalled to the cloister, and the manors were transferred to the abbot's custody, though they were still attributable to the convent in the division of revenues.

In return for the manors the abbot undertook to provide fixed quantities of bread, ale, cheese and vegetables to the monks. The abbot was regarded only as holding the manors in trust; and to signify the convent's perpetual rights in these estates, the monks continued to receive eggs and poultry, and also carrying services. From Charney and Worth (Longworth) the abbey received 20s of tithe, and from the custom of bringing wood 20s.

> The lord abbot Faricius instituted this custom of supplying wood, as seemed better to him, both so that more easily should fire be had in the offices of the court, and so that the rustics of the village should suffer it more easily.
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> For the same were accustomed to give their tithes through the abbey, for rebuilding the church. For administering the wood of the church also they found pennies. Whence the abbot, pitying them, so eased their burden that he constituted the custom of finding wood, partly from their tithes aforesaid and partly from the pennies which they gave before.

In 1291 "Wurth and Cerness" that is Longworth and Charney paid £30, annually to the abbot of Abingdon - at that time a huge amount of money. The curtar was in charge of the supplies, responsible for the comings and goings of all wholesale departments; grain from the abbey's manors is specially mentioned as one of his responsibilities. It was also the curtar's duty to visit the manors and to satisfy himself that the supplies were of good quality.

producers of grain and cheese. Eighty-five years later, when Henry II and his host were about to invade Ireland, wheat and cheese were sent from Berkshire to feed them in that savage land. Bread and cheese, along with pork and pulses formed the bulk of most people's diet.

The village probably held 80 people. Cottars can each be considered as heads of households and Charney had 15 cottars, two of whom were on Warin's land, and five serfs (one on Warin's land). Cottars, or cottagers were peasants ranking below villains or borders, owning a cottage, but little or no land. They had some stake in the manor they worked on, but were not free men; they could not leave and were under obligation to render labour services such as ploughing. The demesne farm was the forerunner of Charney Manor and had two plough teams, probably eight oxen in each. Thirteen of the cottars had five ploughs and four serfs between them. Serfs were in effect slaves, owing allegiance to the land owner and unable to move to a different place, or sell without permission. No church is mentioned in 1086, but then the Domesday recording of churches was sporadic at best. The Normans certainly built one here and some of their work is incorporated into the present church, which is dedicated to St Peter. The carvings over the south doorway, the tympanum in the chancel, and possibly part of the south wall of the nave, are all of this period.

The eleventh century saw a rapid advance towards the complete feudalisation of land tenure in England. This meant that the abbot was not only head of a religious establishment but a secular overlord, and as the head of a house owning considerable landed estates, a tenant-in-chief of the king, holding lands by the tenure known as barony.

Under the Italian abbot, Faritius (1100-1117), the abbey nearly trebled its twenty-eight or so monks, and entered a very profitable phase, showered with gifts and endowments. It was certainly helped by the abbot's being a skilled physician who numbered the Queen among his patients. His household and its various offices expanded and became quite separate from the rest of the convent. Faritius built an abbot's chamber and a chapel over a parlour on the west of the cloisters and Abbot Ingulf added another chamber over an undercroft used as a storeroom. The plan bears a strong resemblance to the early Charney Manor. It has sometimes been said that Charney itself once housed the abbot, but this is most unlikely; by the time it was built in the mid-thirteenth century, the abbot's chambers at Abingdon had become even grander, with domestic offices on the south side and separate guest rooms for visiting royalty and great prelates. All we do have is evidence that he visited; the abbey butler's accounts for 1322 show 12d. of wine being sent to my lord abbot at Charney. The abbot in this case was the notorious John de Sutton, who was deposed by the Pope in the same year for embezzlement.

By the late fourteenth century, and possibly much earlier the abbot had a treasurer, a member of his own household quite distinct from the convent treasurer. He is found in the fifteenth century visiting manors in company with the steward, to collect rents and settle terms of leases on behalf of the abbot.

However, relationships between abbot and monks were not always harmonious. For instance the monks' portions of cheese were assigned by the abbot (during Lent they were replaced by fat eels) and, according to contemporary account, some twelfth century monks were moved by the devil to attack the abbot in the chapter on the grounds that the portions of cheese assigned them by the sainted Aethelwold had diminished. When this came to the ears of the King he sent the Archbishop of Canterbury, the bishop of . Salisbury and one of his own officers to investigate. The abbot, called upn to explain the trouble, confessed that the great increase of brethren under his rule had made Aethelwold's allowance of a wey of cheese every ten days. Accepting this, the Archbishop solemnly excommunicated, with candles lighted, all who should hence-forth challenge this settlement.

> 1350, July 12, Westminster
> Commission of oyer and terminer to William de Shareshull, John Golafre, Richard de Williamscote and Richard de Birton, on complaint by John Seys, King's clerk, parson of the church of Henneye, that Roger abbot of Abyndon, and Roger Wyk, John Stapilton, Henry Wodhull, Richard Garston and Walter Glorie, his fellow-monks, John de Leye, Richard Mary, John Mary, William Mary, Thomas de Thorpe, parson of the church of Sonyngwell, Richard Waryner, Robert "le abbotes-chaumberleyn" of Abyndon, John Ingram of Abyndon, Robert Paneter, Henry Bullok, Thomas "the Reve" of Charney, Ralph att Mulle of Welford, John Lucas and others, at Hanneye, co. Berks, carried away his goods and assaulted his men and servants, whereby he lost their service for a great time.

(1248)

John the smith of Charney killed Adam of Claydon on the (Grand) pont of Oxford near Langford mill and fled. He is suspected so he is to be exacted and outlawed. His chattels: 42 shillings for which the sheriff answers. He was in Henry of Coxwells tithing in Charney so it is mercy. Reynold of Frilford, charged with the death, comes and denies the death op and everything and puts himself on the verdict of the country for good or ill. The 12 jurors and the 4 neighbouring vills say on their oath that Reynold is not guilty of the death, so he is acquitted. The hue and cry was raised when John killed Adam and the vill of South Hinksey did not capture him, so it is in mercy. Later it is attested by the jurors that the vill of South Hinksey removed the dead man so that he was never found. William of Hinksey, Ranulf the Merchant of the same, Walter, son of William of the same and William Rufus