

Village Echoes

Combwell, on the southern edge of our present parish, was founded by Robert de Turneham as the Abbey of St. Mary Magdalene in about 1160. However, by 1220 its assets had dwindled to the point where they were considered insufficient to maintain its estate as an Abbey; the Abbot's poor health led him to resign; and, with the consent of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the patroness, Mabel de Gatton, née de Turneham, the status of the house was reduced to that of a priory.

In July 1227 Henry III granted to the prior and convent the right to hold a yearly fair at Combwell "on the feast and the morrow of St. Mary Magdalene" whose feast day was 22nd July. In February 1232 he also granted permission for a weekly market to be held there on Fridays, though a year later he altered the day to Tuesday! Both events were probably held in the field behind the present Lady Oak house: it is shown as Fayre Place on an estate map dated 1622.

The name Lady Oak is a contraction of Lady-by-the-Oak and refers to a wayside cross or shrine, thought to be dedicated to St Elizabeth of Hungary, that once stood near Pillory Corner on the A21. There were at least three other such memorials at Goudhurst road junctions in medieval times.

Today the villages of Flimwell and Kilndown are quiet places, but this certainly wasn't the case on 3rd May 1264 when the 'Massacre of the Archers' took place. This was an act of retribution by Henry III for the murder of his cook, Master Thomas, on the London to Hastings road near Combwell Priory - '*above Flimwell*', which could mean on the Fayre ground. 315 archers were beheaded that day, some as young as eleven, though their burial place has never been found.

Over the centuries, Combwell Priory developed a regrettable record as a badly run establishment. Archbishop Langham visited it in July 1368 after many charges had been brought against the prior: he had "gone to Rome without leave, had sold priory property and led an immoral life". Archbishop Courtenay found a similar state of affairs on a visit in 1387: Prior Roger Tyshurst was absent "having gone away and taken goods of the priory with him. He was charged with having cut down trees and made dilapidations, and with being adulterous". In 1512, under Thomas Patenden, who had been Prior for 32 years, "the infirmary was in great need of repairs and nobody attended to the sick, who had to lie in the dormitory. They had not enough food and drink or clothing, the prior never rendered any accounts, and there was no teacher of grammar".

When the priory was dissolved by Henry VIII in 1536, its annual value was only £80 17s. 5¼d; Thomas Vyncent, the deposed Prior, was awarded a pension of £10 a year. After the dissolution, ownership of the estate passed through the Culpeper and Gage families, and then into the hands of the Campion family for many years. The original building was demolished in about 1657 and the remainder some time in the late 19th century. (illustration published in 1809). The present day Combwell Priory was built in the 1930s on the site of the old buildings, re-using the same materials.

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