

## Intriguing History from Luton Lane

Luton Lane in Wheathampstead, now known as Lower Luton Road, may seem an unlikely source of historical interest but this country lane, running parallel to the River Lea and well-travelled by carriage, horse and cart and on foot for centuries, has several remarkable and enigmatic stories to tell. Historical maps of the area reveal buildings that have long since disappeared, raising intriguing questions about origins and ownership.

The Dury and Andrews map of Hertfordshire of 1766 shows a number of minor settlements in parishes across the county around buildings named as 'Halls'. The vast majority of 'Halls' on the map bear names of 12th or 13th-century origin and sometimes those of a medieval owner or occupier. Over the years many 'Halls' became dilapidated and were not destined to survive beyond the late 18th or early 19th centuries.<sup>1</sup>



Detail from Dury and Andrews Map, 1766

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<sup>1</sup> Macnair, Rowe & Williamson, *Dury & Andrews' Map of Hertfordshire: Society and Landscape in the Eighteenth Century* (2016) p 125.

The section of this map featuring Wheathampstead shows three Halls. Bride Hall, in Ayot St Lawrence, is now a Grade II building of Wheathampstead. Ribbon Hall and Peckford Hall are on Luton Lane.

The earliest documented reference to the Bride Hall estate is dated 1150. The Garrard family of Lamer owned it from 1606 and it was substantially re-built in 1617. Bride Hall was destined to survive and much of the building that exists today dates from that time.<sup>2</sup> But what do we know of the 'Halls' on Luton Lane?

### **Ribbon Hall**

Ribbon Hall stood just west of the present Folly Fields, on land called 'The Folly'. Its date of origin is unknown, but it was likely to have been a traditional timber-framed late medieval dwelling owned by a yeoman holding a small estate. Unlike Bride Hall, it did not survive beyond about 1840.

Daniel Nicholls worked in 1801 and again in 1817 for Ralph Thrale, a member of a well-known family from Sandridge, who could have been the last owner of Ribbon Hall. Daniel, who described himself as 'a labourer at Ribbon Hall', with his wife, Hannah, took their children from there to be baptized at St Helen's church, their son in 1820 and their daughter in 1823.<sup>3</sup>

In 1840, Charles Benet Drake Garrard (1806-1884) owned more than a thousand acres in Wheathampstead, but outside the Lamer estate most land was in the hands of local farmers. Some worked their own land and others employed men or boys as labourers. The Tithe Map of 1840 shows how land was divided and this map is accompanied by a schedule, listing map items by number, sometimes with field names. Ralph Thrale died in 1836 and plots of land belonging to Ribbon Hall passed to his wife, Abigail, and appear in her name on the Tithe Map schedule. Ribbon Hall itself does not appear on the map so by 1840 had probably been demolished.

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<sup>2</sup> Hill, M., *The Story of Bride Hall – the House and its People* (2006).

<sup>3</sup> [www.WeRelate.org](http://www.WeRelate.org). Daniel Nicholls.



Detail from Wheathampstead Tithe Map, 1840

Ribbon Hall Field (72) and two adjacent areas (70 and 71) were owned by the Earl of Verulam. Ribbon Hall Field (68) and the strip of land next to it labelled 'cottages and gardens' belonged to Abigail Thrale.

The 1841 census shows a group of cottages on the Ribbon Hall site, possibly for labourers working there. Listed on the census as 'Folly', these cottages were occupied by 7 households, a total of 27 named residents.<sup>4</sup> At one time the foundations of these dwellings could be traced on the front lawn of Lea House, 204 Lower Luton Road. The 1851 census shows all the 'Folly' residents living elsewhere, so their previous homes must have been demolished.<sup>5</sup>

When Abigail Thrale died in Wheathampstead village in 1849, her eldest grandson and the husbands of her three daughters shared ownership of her Ribbon Hall land between them. These four men were all traditional artisans

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<sup>4</sup> *Ancestry*, 1841 census, Folly, HO107 442 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ancestry*, 1851 Census, Former occupants of The Folly: Burgoyne, Smith, Allen, Munt, Warner, Bundy and Wilshire.

from well-established families and from the 1850s the hamlet of cottages now known as Folly Fields was gradually built on the site.

The intriguing Ribbon Hall remains a mysterious shadow on Luton Lane. No-one named 'Ribbon', as a possible early resident, has come to light and the remainder of its occupants and any other origin of the name have disappeared into the mists of time.

### **Pickford Hall and Pickford Mill**

Also marked on the Dury and Andrews map of 1766, opposite Ribbon Hall but on the other side of the River Lea, is another substantial 'Hall' named Peckford Hall. Did this, perhaps, have connections with Peckford (or Pickford) Mill, which stood beyond Batford Mill and is also marked on this map?

Four Wheathampstead mills were recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086 but they were not named so it is not possible to assign an early date to Pickford Mill. However, the medieval Pickford Bridge, documented in 1305 and 1396 as 'Pykfordbrygge', crossed the River Lea. Pickford and Batford commons also have a long history, so it is reasonable to suppose that there was an ancient mill by the river there.

As far as we know, Pickford Mill was initially a flour mill and the first miller recorded was John Sharp, who died in 1721 at the age of 51. His widow, Elizabeth 'of Pickford Mill', made her will in 1739, leaving all her 'goods, chattles, ready money, horses, carts and all the implements of husbandry' to her son, Henry.<sup>6</sup> The 18th-century Wheathampstead Militia Lists identify Henry as the miller there between 1759 and 1762. Pickford Mill became a paper mill in 1775 and a Sun Fire Insurance Company policy dated that year, records Francis Owen insuring 'his corn and paper mills....utensils and stock'.<sup>7</sup>

Pickford Mill was bought in 1796 by Thomas Vallance, who had been making paper in Hatfield since 1788 and it remained with the Vallance family for more than 30 years. Paper-making was fuelled in part by the London

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<sup>6</sup> Will of Elizabeth Sharp, widow, Wheathampstead, 17 March 1766, PROB 11/917.

<sup>7</sup> [www.harpenden-history.org.uk](http://www.harpenden-history.org.uk)

newspaper industry and in part by an expanding government bureaucracy. It continued at Pickford Mill until 1851, when the mill reverted to producing flour. The mill closed in 1897.

Pickford Hall, which appears on the Dury and Andrews map in 1766, is marked again on the 1808 edition of Charles Smith's map of Wheathampstead, but the date of the house, its owners and/or tenants and whether it was connected to Pickford Mill remain another intriguing mystery. As with Ribbon Hall there is no further reference to Pickford Hall during the 19th century.

### **The Fulling Mill**

A building that has also long since disappeared from Luton Lane is the Fulling Mill. It is labelled on John Seller's map of 1676 near Leasey Bridge, but is not mentioned on any other historical map.

From the medieval period the fulling of cloth was done in a watermill. 'Fulling', derived from the word 'furling', meaning to bind tightly, achieved two main purposes: one was to remove any animal oil and grease from the cloth and the other was to tighten up the weave, both shrinking and thickening the cloth to give strength and increase water-proofing.<sup>8</sup> A fulling mill in St Albans dated from the 14th century and there were others in Hertfordshire at Codicote and Ware.



A Medieval Fulling Mill

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<sup>8</sup> John Langdon, 'Fulling and Fulling Mills in the British Isles' in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Dress and Textiles*.

In 2019 Mike Smith attempted to identify the site of the Wheathampstead Fulling Mill. He had earlier noticed an 'earthwork', a rectangular platform measuring approximately 10 x 5 metres on Melissa Field, an open space opposite Folly Fields, and wondered if this might be the site. His investigation involved LIDAR (laser imaging, detection and ranging), a GPR (ground-penetrating radar) survey and relied on his interpretation of historical maps.

He regarded John Seller's map of 1676 as insufficiently precise to identify individual features so he looked elsewhere. The Yeoman map of 1758, commissioned to show holdings of Westminster Abbey, indicated a small building near the present site of Melissa Field, but it was unidentified. He assumed that small unnamed buildings in a similar position on the Dury and Andrews map might be evidence of the Fulling Mill and decided to investigate on Melissa Field.

A GPR survey of the rectangular platform offered little convincing evidence of a building so he concluded that the speculative mill owners of the Westminster Abbey estate, 'robbed out' the largely wooden building and the stone foundation in the late 18th century as useful building materials.

The most striking evidence for old mill sites is a 'leat', or millstream, which provided water for the mill, and such a feature is often plainly visible on 19th - century Ordnance Survey maps. This was not the case at Melissa Field, but 'lumps and bumps' in the field looked like 'a contour leat snaking across the pasture'. The leat was visible in the Environment Agency LIDAR data, but when a UAV, an unmanned aerial vehicle, was flown over the site, it hinted that the leat extended further west than expected, perhaps connecting with the river upstream at Leasey Bridge. Overall, the results of this investigation of a possible site for the Fulling Mill at Melissa Field proved inconclusive.<sup>9</sup>

In 2021 I was asked to research and write a history of Castle Farm for Chris and Ruth Coles, who live there. Formerly known as both Caswell and Causewell, it was built in about 1620 for a member of the Brocket family, a relatively small farmhouse, as the Brocket family's power and influence was in decline. Soon

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<sup>9</sup> Mike Smith, 'Discovering a Fulling Mill at Wheathampstead', *Wheathampstead History Society website: Local research*.

afterwards, the farm and surrounding land became the property of the Garrard family, who let it out to tenants.

In 1742 Bartholomew Humphrey moved from Sandridge and his tenancy of Caswell was recorded that year. Sir Benet Garrard, the 6th baronet, required the land to be measured before the following Michaelmas Day. This measurement took place in 1743 and the lease schedule shows that land belonging to Caswell stretched westward from Leasey Bridge to Pickford Common. It included the House, Yard, Barns, Pond, Orchard and Spring Gardens of Caswell, arable fields and meads such as Warren Field opposite the farm, and Batford and Pickford Commons to the west. Next to Leasey Bridge and directly opposite Great Marshals Field was 'The Fulling Mill Close'.

This lease schedule of 1743 is the only known document containing a reference to the Fulling Mill and it tallies with the site of the mill given on John Seller's Map of 1676.<sup>10</sup> Could this be the site of the Fulling Mill, rather than Melissa Field?

The earliest fulling mills in England date from 1185 in Yorkshire and Gloucestershire and by the 14th century they were common across the country, often built where sheep farming occurred so there was a good supply of wool. Sited where the river had a strong current, they were usually built away from an established town or village because the sound of water pounding the cloth and the hammering of the stocks could be heard at some distance.



The hammers and cog wheels of a fulling mill

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<sup>10</sup> HALS, D/EB2/102/T31, Deeds of Caswell Farm.

Following the fulling process inside the mill, the cloth was taken to an adjacent field where tenter frames could be erected. They were similar to fences with ‘tenter hooks’, L-shaped iron hooks pointed at both ends, fixed at intervals along them. The hooks on the top bars pointed upwards, while those on the lower bars pointed downwards. The edges of the fulled cloth were attached to these tenter-hooks and the lower bars were adjusted to stretch the cloth to the required dimension and tension. Tenter frames also acted as a way of evenly drying and bleaching the cloth in the sunlight. Field names such as ‘The Fulling Mill Close’ have been used to identify sites of former fulling mills.

The 1743 Caswell schedule, produced nearly seventy years after John Seller’s Map of 1676, indicates such a field name, but there is no reference to a mill building at that time. This suggests that the Fulling Mill, which may have earlier origins than expected, had been demolished by 1743 and could date back to the 14th or 15th century. Perhaps it was owned by the Brockets before being passed to the Garrard family.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century dawned, Causewell appeared on Bryant’s map of 1822 and also on a map of 1827, which was part of a survey commissioned privately by Charles Benet Drake Garrard using theodolites and surveying instruments. The acreage of land at Causewell had expanded from 135 to 156 acres but retained a similar shape to that shown in the lease schedule of 1743. The Fulling Mill Close name had disappeared but ‘New Fields Pasture’ was listed by Leasey Bridge.<sup>11</sup> Inevitably, with the passing of time, the Fulling Mill would have vanished from the memory of local inhabitants.

### **‘The Folly’**

On 7 January 1888, *The Herts Mercury and Reformer* published an enquiry from one of its readers:

At Wheathampstead is a small hamlet containing a few houses known as The Folly; perhaps some resident in that neighbourhood can give particulars why the name was originally applied to that place.

No response was recorded.

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<sup>11</sup> HALS, DE/GD/P1 (1827).



Following his work on Melissa Field, Mike Smith suggested the investigation provided an obvious answer to a local mystery, namely that 'Folly' was a corruption of 'fully', itself a corruption of 'the fulling mill'.<sup>12</sup> If the Fulling Mill site was near Leasey Bridge, as the 1743 document and John Seller's map indicate, and not on Melissa Field opposite The Folly, then this argument is no longer valid and we need to explore an alternative explanation.

The first appearance of the name 'The Folly' was on the Dury and Andrews map in 1766. It is likely to have been in use before that date, but for how long is unknown. The word 'folly' has been in use since the early 13th century, as 'an example of foolishness'. Its use relating to buildings, as a 'costly structure considered to have shown folly in the builder', dates from the 1650s. It was also used much earlier in place names, especially on country estates, probably as a form of the French word 'folie' meaning 'a place of delight'. As the word derivations in this article show, 'folly' and 'fully' have different roots and are not connected.

It is plausible that when Ribbon Hall was in its heyday, an early owner decided to erect a folly to enhance the surrounding landscape. As the 17th century began, so did a craze among the well-to-do for building follies of all descriptions. No style or scale was off limits and it was one way an owner could demonstrate his wealth. Even in a small place like Wheathampstead it could reflect an appreciation of rural surroundings and a playful sense of humour. As time passed such a folly, like Ribbon Hall itself, could have fallen into decay, leaving just a grassy hillside carrying its name, while its origin and significance were soon forgotten by local people. Alternatively, an owner of Ribbon Hall or even local people could perhaps have named the area as 'The Folly', a 'place of delight'. Inevitably, amid such mysterious and unfathomable circumstances, the origin of 'The Folly' on Luton Lane remains speculative and obscure.

Historical maps are a valuable source of intriguing information about buildings no longer in existence. As research progresses, amendments and re-interpretations will continue to be made and that is as it should be. Modern technology of various kinds offers opportunities to find out what previous generations of historians could not even have imagined. At the same time we

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<sup>12</sup> Mike Smith, 'The fully at the Folly'

also have to accept that over time some places, people and events disappear and we may never be able to re-capture them.

Dianne Payne 2024