

OWNERSHIP OF THE VILLAGE OF CERNE ABBAS

Prior to the Dissolution in 1539, the village existed to serve the requirements of the Benedictine Cerne Abbey that stood to the north of the village. Established in 987, the Abbey dominated the area, farming its own lands and, as landlord of the villagers and smallholders, collecting their tithes. Following the Dissolution in 1539, the large Manor of Cerne Abbas was granted to a Phillip Vanwilder. Further changes in landlord followed, but about 1629 it was bought by Thomas Freke, the Frekes being an old established family in Dorset. Thomas had inherited considerable wealth from his father, Robert, in 1592 and he continued to acquire land in Dorset, including Cerne Abbas. His son, Thomas, inherited the estates in 1633 and controlled them for nearly 70 years. He died in 1701. His son, another Thomas, married Elizabeth Pile and her sister, Lucy, married George Pitt of Stratfieldsaye. This was to be the tenuous link by which the Freke estates in Dorset were passed to the Pitt family.

By a private Act of Parliament of 1705 the Dorset estates came into the ownership of the Pitt family. It was his grandson, George Pitt, who was to head these estates from 1745 to 1803. In 1762 a statement drawn up by his steward, William James, for the purposes of a family settlement (possibly the origin of a 1768 survey map, updated by the Admeasurement Survey of 1798), showed that the Dorset estates yielded an income of nearly £4000 pa which was about half of what he derived from all his estates in other counties. He was created Baron Rivers of Stratfieldsaye in 1776 and died in 1803.

The Baronetcy became extinct in 1880 with the 6th Baron and the estates devolved upon the Lane-Fox descendants of Marcia Pitt (a daughter of the 1st Baron) who had married James Lane Fox in 1789. The Lane-Fox in 1880 was Lieutenant-General August Henry Lane Fox, the pioneering archaeologist and anthropologist. With his death in 1900 the estates passed to his son, Alexander Edward Pitt, who took the additional name of Rivers by Royal Licence. Very heavy death duties had been levied on the death of the General and it became apparent that parts of the estate would have to be sold to meet them. As a result Cerne Abbas was sold at auction by the Pitt-Rivers family in 1919. This was as defining a moment in the village's history as the Dissolution of 1539. The sale raised £67,402 for the family, many of the properties being sold to the tenants.

The 19th century had been difficult times for Cerne Abbas, with its previous prosperity badly affected by the loss of many of its traditional industries such as beer-making, the coming of the railway age which by-passed the Cerne Valley, and the continuing depression in the agricultural industry. In the years following the 1919 sale, there was a gradual renaissance in its fortunes, as people came to live and thrive in this quintessentially English village in the heart of West Dorset. It is now a busy, bustling place, acting as the focus to a wider local community for many essential services, such as a surgery, post office and village stores. It also has pubs and restaurants and other small stores that supply the needs of the local population and the many visitors to the village.

CERNE ABBAS POPULATION

