

Feudal Lakenheath: 11-16th century.

Lakenheath 1042- to the Black Death (1349).

A manor was an area of land granted and possessed at the monarch's pleasure. This included all its natural resources and the people living on it. The manor at Lakenheath came into being about 1042AD when the recently crowned King Edward the Confessor gave the settlement (village) of Lakenheath and surrounding land and fen to the Abbey at Ely. By this act the prior and convent of the abbey became lord of the manor of Lakenheath.

The early manor hall was sited to the south of St. Mary's church, possibly as early as the late 12th century, on an area which eventually became known as Hall Yards. This is where the manor steward lived and it was the administrative centre of the village. The manor Court Leet met once or twice a year under the direction of the steward to give justice, order punishments, and to view the records of rents and tithes paid. The 'Frankpledge' was sworn here by every male over 12 years, marking the boy's arrival at manhood, binding him to his 'lord'. Additionally, the Court Baron met to adjudicate village disputes and to award or renew tenancies. Complaints about bad ale, or short measure from the miller, could be made here; so too could the serious accusation of the encroachment by one villein on another villein's rented manorial land.

A large timber and thatched barn on the same site provided stabling for the manor's horses and carts.

*In late 1649, shortly after the execution of Charles I, following a survey of the manor by parliament, it was found that the medieval barn was still here.

"William Steward, Esq., holds all that the site of the manor of Lakenheath, consisting of one walsched barn built with timber and covered with thatch, containing in length one hundred, three score and ten foot of assize, in breadth thirty and six foot, and standing in one yard or parcel of ground called the Grange or Hall Yard, the Churchyard of Lakenheath on the north, the head abuts upon the Street. 1acre, 2 roods." =1.5 modern acres.

**Rev J T Mundy in Lakenheath Records no. 6. 1970.*

At some time in the late 17th/early 18th century both hall and barn were burnt down.

The feudal system: "Everyone had to have a lord".

The feudal system was based on obedience to a lord.

Peasants fell into three groups, free villeins or commoners who paid rent for their land, tied villeins who had to work a set number of days for the lord and could not move away from the manor without the lord's permission, and slaves who laboured entirely for their lord's benefit. In return the lord provided a shelter and a piece of land sufficient to provide for the tied villein's family and gave justice and protection to all the villeins. Villeins could have other rights, for example they might be allowed to gather wood or peat for heating at certain times of the year but they would have to pay to have their corn milled into flour at the lord's windmill in the manor. Practical skills were valuable; peasants with special skills such as blacksmithing or carpentry could have a higher status than others. This particularly applied to the village miller.

The punishment of being without a lord (outlawed) was greatly feared because the security of the village was forfeit.

The 'pecking order' of the feudal system was something like this:

God. (Was the King's lord.)

King. (Was everyone's lord.)

Lord of the Manor.

The church (priest or vicar).

The peasants: free villeins or commoners and tied villeins.
 serfs (slaves).

Who's who in Lakenheath village?

Lord of the manor: The prior of Ely Abbey. The prior was probably rarely seen in the village, if at all. The gift of the vill of Lakenhythe by Edward the Confessor to the abbey was intended to do 'Hommage to God' by supporting the life and work of the abbey. After the return of the abbey to the Church in 1541 following the dissolution of monasteries by Henry VIII, the lord of the Manor of Lakenheath was the Dean and Chapter of Ely.

The steward. He represented the lord, being responsible for all aspects of manorial life, work, and governance. He judged all disputes between villagers, petty and some not so 'petty' in the Manorial Court.

The Church. A priest or vicar was responsible for the 'souls' of the village. Lakenheath had a vicar. Vicars were, in effect, 'stand-ins' for rectors, performing the rector's priestly obligations in the village. In Lakenheath the rector was the prior of Ely Abbey. Until the mid12th century priests could marry and have children. All the vicars, from 1226, are shown on a memorial board in St, Mary's church. The first vicar was John de Cadsby.

*Free villeins or *commoners.* Peasant tenant farmers were the most 'successful' peasants, they had exclusive commoners' rights to graze their cattle and sheep on manor land and could negotiate specific long-term rights such as the right to fish from a boat in the fen. They had some independence, but they might also do some manorial duty connected with the manor court such as a bailiff who assisted the steward or later, the village constable. Commoners' rights still existed here into the mid20th century.

Tied villeins. They were 'tied' to the manor, labouring at specified times of the year, harvest, ploughing, gathering of fuel and wind fallen timber, etc. in some cases they could rent land or fishing rights. Their self-built 'cots' were surrounded by a piece of land which was intended to provide their food. It was possible for a diligent tied villein to become a commoner by the 'lord's pleasure'. They took part in the manor courts but were not allowed to leave the village to live elsewhere without the lord's permission.

The serf or 'un-free'. They worked solely for the lord of the manor with no rights. A slave. This died out in the 12th century.

*"One word which we use, 'Common', needs explaining. Some of the land in Lakenheath parish (and rights of pasture and so on over most of the rest) was held in 'common' by the 'Commoners'. A common was not a place where anyone could do what he liked, but an area where the Commoners had exclusive rights. The Commoners had rights of one kind or another over nearly every piece of land, except for the Closes. These Closes were small pieces of land, each enclosed with hedge or fence, which only the individual occupier could use."

*J T Munday: 'How We Lived in Lakenheath 600 Years Ago'.

The Black Death (Plague)1349: The roots of ‘modern’ Lakenheath?

The high death rate (one third of the village) meant many fewer peasants to work the land, reducing the Abbey's income. The threat of a shortage of peasant labour was so serious that a law enforcing peasant labour was enacted. (The Statute of Labourers 1351). To make good the shortfall in income the Abbey began to let out vacant land previously occupied by deceased peasants producing regular cash payments rather than seasonal payments through labour, or the sometimes uncertain ‘fruits of the land’, (bad harvests, plague or war). These agreements became known as copyhold tenancies which were eventually paid annually.

Some villagers rented the vacant land, increasing the yield from their labours beyond the requirements of the abbey and this surplus could be sold at local markets. (There was a market here in the early 13th century). Some villagers flourished and were able to take on further vacant leases. We know about this partly from **original records and also from the evidence of gifts to St Mary's church in the village. John Munday found evidence in wills of the time which suggested a significant upturn in prosperity of Lakenheath by the early 15th century.

***Rev, John Munday MA, former vicar of Eriswell and inhabitant of Lakenheath*

The Black Death and the Peasant's Revolt of 1380 are two of the main reasons for the gradual weakening of the feudal system. Lakenheath village became associated with the rebellion/rising of Suffolk peasants in 1381, becoming notorious for the execution/murder of Sir John Cavendish, King's Justice, in or near to the village in 1381.

15th- 16th centuries.

The decision to give tenancies on manorial lands resulted in a possibly unforeseen development. By the end of the 14th century both commoners and tied villeins could benefit from the security given by copyhold tenancies which meant that it was possible to be sure of staying in one place, on ‘my land’ because tenancies could be inherited, potentially remaining in a family for generations, or they could be transferred at the manor court.

With hard work and decent harvests money could be saved and perhaps invested in other ways, or more tenancies taken on. Bequests to the church could be made; a larger more comfortable house might be considered. The difference in status between commoners and tied villeins began to disappear.

By the 15th century there were a number of families in the village who were prospering and by the 16th century a small group of villagers could afford to lease of whole manor!

“Lease of Lakenheath Manor by the Prior and Convent Of Ely, 1516.

To:- William Gerrade, vicar. William Mann, fisher and Thomas Mann, butcher.”

The lease entitled the use of all the Manor Hall, stabling and Barn on Hall Yards as well as all the manorial land for twelve years.

J T Munday. ‘Lakenheath Records No.2 ‘Manns Manor’: 1969.

After a short break due to Henry VIII's dissolution of the Abbey in 1539, the manor was returned to the Dean and Chapter of Ely Cathedral in 1541 and this continued for many years. The feudal system effectively ended in the early 16th century but the abbey retained control of land in and around the village into the 19th century.

[Click here to link to Lakenheath Manor Hall Estate 16th-20th century.](#)