

West Thorney. Part I: History and People

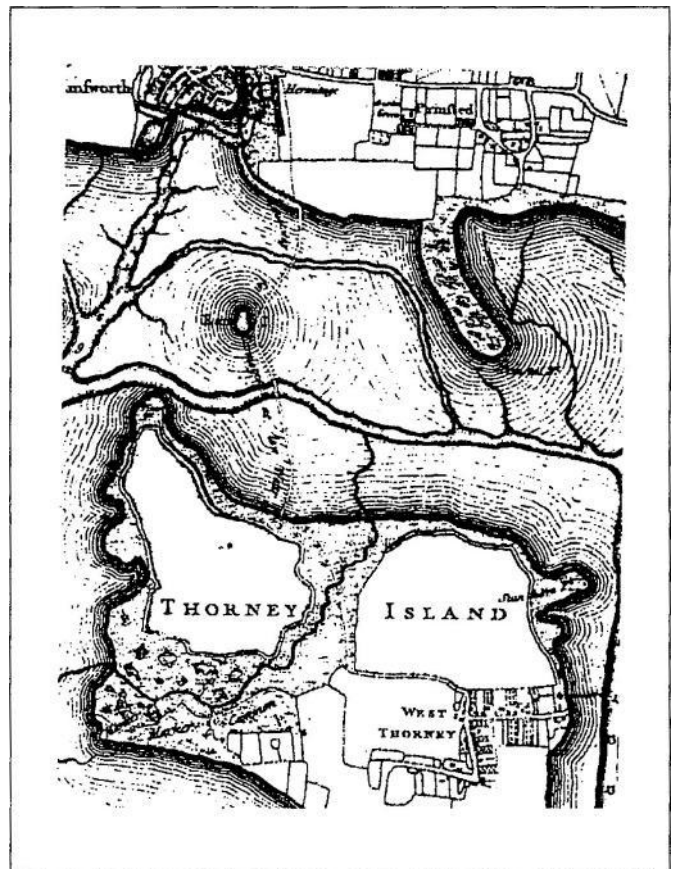


Thorney is Emsworth's near neighbour, but its early links were with Bosham and it had an interesting connection with Exeter.

Old English Thorn Isle, it was until the 19th century a veritable island, accessible other than by boat only by a wade-way from Emsworth at low tide; even then the two Deeps had normally to be forded. By the 18th century at the latest there was a built track like the one leading to Hayling Island, marked on the Yeakell and Gardiner map of 1778 as a "causeway for carriages at low water". The passage was dangerous even to those who knew it, and three drownings were recorded in the 18th century alone.

The Island is very flat, apart from the slight eminence on the east coast on which the church stands, near the site of the former small village of West Thorney, and the hard which is now the home of the Boat Club. The designation West was adopted to distinguish it from another Thorney Manor, formerly in the Manhood peninsula, which became a prebend of Chichester Cathedral; this lay in an outlying piece of East Wittering parish, now largely lost to the sea in Bracklesham Bay, and was still marked as a manor in Budgen's map of 1724, but in the 19th and early 20th centuries only as Thorney Farm and finally just Thorney Marshes. The name painted on one of the Prebendal stalls in the cathedral refers to this (East) Thorney. The soil of West Thorney is very fertile brickearth, in common with most of the coast of Chichester Harbour. The islet of Pilsea which stands off the southern shore was once farmed and occasionally inhabited, but is now greatly diminished.

Thorney has historically been desirable in three respects: for its valuable agricultural land; for its utility for sea traffic; and for its seclusion and restricted access which could make it a refuge or a stronghold. The island was occupied in the prehistoric and Roman periods, as is shown by the fragments of artefacts that have been found, some of which are preserved in the church. Thorney appears first in written history on the violent stage of Anglo-Norman politics in the 11th century: one version of the Anglo-Saxon chronicle records that in 1051 Earl Godwine took refuge on the island from the displeasure of King Edward and sailed from here to the Continent (he very quickly returned). This Saxon magnate had been a power in the land for three reigns, was son-in-law to Edward the Confessor whom he had helped to put on the throne, and father of the Harold who was to be crowned and slain at Hastings in the same fateful year of 1066. Godwine and Harold had a base at Bosham, and they acquired or controlled most of the coast of Chichester Harbour, as well as vast estates elsewhere. However one



Thorney and the causeway; Yeakell & Gardiner 1778
(after Reger)

property escaped them, in the very heart of their empire: a rich estate belonging to Bosham Church and a community of secular priests which the Confessor gave to his Norman kinsman and chaplain Osbern. Osbern continued in favour with the Conqueror, who allowed him to keep the Bosham estate, albeit diminished, and made him bishop of Exeter into the bargain. Thorney was part of this Bosham Chapelry, and the bishops of Exeter remained, generally speaking, its overlords until the Reformation.

The Domesday survey of 1086 records Thorney under Bosham, among Bishop Osbern's Sussex possessions; it was let as one manor to a certain Mauger who paid tax on eight of his twelve hides and had thirty-two peasants with eight ploughs. The patronage of the Bishops of Exeter probably explains the comparative grandeur of Thorney Church in this remote and lowly populated parish.

In the late 12th and 13th century the manor was held by a William and a Richard de Thorney, whose name indicates that the island was their base; but thereafter the manor was increasingly divided and subdivided, the shares being at times as small as a *sixth*. We hear of three manors: Thorney Aglands, Thorney Bickley and West Thorney, the two former perhaps not much more than substantial farms, and the last a little grander with some sort of manor house to the north west of the church. Many desired a share of these manors — to name but a few, the nuns of Easebourne Priory in the 13th century, the Bickleys of Chidham in the 16th, the Earl of Berkeley in the 18th and Richard Barwell, the nabob of Stansted, and his widow Catherine Miller Mundy of Hollybank House, in the late 18th and early 19th. But few or none of these share-holders wished to live on the island, and the true inheritors of the land were the husbandmen, tenant farmers and yeomen who tilled it.

Theirs are the handsome carved headstones of the 18th century that stand in the churchyard, and the names of the church-wardens, vestrymen and rate-payers in the parish records. Long-lasting families mentioned already in the 17th century are Hunt, Bolton and Lang, to be joined in the 18th by Neal, Lane, Harfield, Crasweller, Morey and Pennicutt, all farmers. They prospered. John Reger has shown through the wills of a Bolton father and son who died in 1709 and 1726 that the family almost doubled the value of their property in that interval, and attributes the general increase in prosperity to the establishment of the grain trade with London.

Two correspondents of the Gentleman's Magazine in 1796 and 1797 have left us between them a valuable first-hand impression of the Island at this time, which is worth quoting from and still appreciable today. Both writers are concerned with topography and the people's way of life, but one is also interested in the *picturesque*:

The little island of Thorney stands between two arms of the sea on the Southern shore of Sussex, serving as a boundary for that county, and is everyway remarkable for a rich and fertile soil At low water there is a causeway leading from Emsworth into the island; but at spring-tides only the water runs out entirely; at other times, at two places called the Deeps, the water is nearly half-leg deep at low-water, which the inhabitants are obliged to ford.... There is no ferryboat or public house in the island, the inhabitants living in a manner secluded from the world. The view over the wide expanse of mud on passing the causeway at low-water is dreadfully dreary; but some of the views in the island are pleasing, particularly that from the churchyard.There are three farms (formerly four) in the island.

The church, which is the most remarkable structure in the place is a very ancient pile of building, standing on the remote part of the shore beyond the houses.. ... Bordering on the sea, it appears venerable, and a spectator is highly amused to perceive the waves come rolling over each other, the noise occasioned by their continual motion, the cries of sea-birds around the church, all which conspire to raise the most sublime ideas in a person's mind.

The houses in general are placed in this situation, and are in the whole about ten, and, at a moderate calculation, the number of inhabitants sixty.... I could scarcely discern an oak tree; elm is the prevailing article.. ..partridges and hares are very plenty.... The prospects around this island are very extensive; to the North, the forest scenery beneath the hills of Portsdown.... On the East and South-east, plains, interspersed with villages and gentlemen's seats, woods which cover large districts, and the slender beautiful spire of Chichester Cathedral.

Two families stand out at this period: Harfield and Crasweller. Both arrived on the Island in the early 1700s, and retired from it around 1820. They were perhaps rivals, acquiring more and more land and taking turns in parish office till by the early 19th century they had risen into the ranks of the gentry. They were now styled Mr. or Esq. on their memorials, in the parish records, and on the award map relating

to the enclosures of 1811 — 12, which shows them as major landowners on the Island, and John Crasweller occupying the house and farm near the church in effective if not formal manorial status. Robert Harfield had the advantage socially — he had acquired at least part of the Aglands manor, and Harfields were being buried inside the church from 1796.

The Craswellers were however the link with the next important family, the Padwicks, who were to take Thorney into a new era. They were becoming known in the locality as landowners and developers, with interests in Chidham, Havant and Haying Island. In 1776 and 1782 two Padwick brothers, John and Tom, had married two Crasweller girls, and when John Crasweller retired in 1820, Tom's son David succeeded him, and founded a Padwick dynasty which was to last nearly 100 years and provide Thorney with a resident squire such as it had not known before. David's son Frederick (1816— 1905) grew to be the outstanding figure of the family. He took over in 1840 from his father, who retired to Westbourne, and by the 1860s owned most of the Island and had acquired manorial rights and parts of the advowson. A school was founded in 1856, and a substantial new rectory provided — henceforth Thorney would have a resident parson; and Frederick built himself a grand new manor house with a park and tree-lined avenue. His greatest achievement was to join Thorney to the mainland in 1870, reclaiming the land between, bridging the Deeps and constructing an approach road from the Chichester - Portsmouth highway. The population rose from 71 in 1801 to 148 in 1901. There was a smithy on the Island, and even a pub — The Fountain — marked on the 1875 ordnance survey map.



The Padwick Manor House, 19th century. (Havant Museum)

Frederick Padwick's son Herbert sold the property in 1918 to R Metherell, who acquired the outstanding share of the manor, introduced modern farming machinery, and owned the first motorcar on Thorney. When the Metherells sold Thorney Manor in 1927 it was indeed the "important residential, agricultural and sporting estate" advertised by Frank & Rutley. Two substantial farms remained also, one of which, Elm Tree, was farmed for fifty years by the Clayton family, known to David and Ernie Rudkin in their boyhood.

This era ended abruptly in the 1930s when under the threat of war Thorney was transformed into a Royal Air Force base. In 1933 a Hawker Fury aircraft crashed on the north side of the manor, and the investigating team noted the Island's unique suitability for an airfield. Work started in 1935. Padwick's bridges were rebuilt; ponds were filled in; the elms that had survived the Emsworth boat-builder J D Foster were felled; farm land became the green airfield, soon to be crossed with long concrete runways; huge hangars and barracks went up, and the Manor was replaced by the Commandant's house and imposing Officers' Mess. The station opened under Coastal Command in 1938, barely in time to face the Battle of Britain. Thorney had fulfilled its potential as a defensible enclave but was now contending with a new element.

The wartime rector reported that only the rectory, one farm house and two cottages were left in civilian occupation. The school survived, precariously, until 1940. After the war the RAF remained until 1976; in 1950 the air navigation school had moved here and latterly there was a base for helicopters engaged in air sea rescue. There was then an interval when the Island was not regularly occupied, though the Royal Navy was briefly involved and from 1978 to 1980 the disused Officers' Mess was used to house Vietnamese refugees. Finally the Army took over Thorney in 1984 when the Royal Artillery were established in Baker Barracks.

To be concluded in Part II: The Church and Memorials.

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recording churches and churchyards

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