

The Medieval Hall at Lewknor

By JOHN FLETCHER

RECOGNITION that the large barn at Church Farm, Lewknor, includes what was formerly one of England's most impressive halls is a surprising and important development. The surprise is that it escaped detection until 1969, while it is important in adding to Oxfordshire's scanty heritage of major medieval timber-framing. Both the documentary¹ and the architectural² evidence recently presented leave, disappointingly, the origin and approximate date as well as the purpose and fate of the hall in doubt. This paper attempts from regional and economic considerations to answer some of the problems but others remain and it is hoped that there will be the further study which this building and the unusual history of Lewknor merit.

In her paper on the documentary evidence¹ Hilary Turner established that what she calls the 'great barn' is and was part of Church Farm, that is the rectorial farm acquired in 1440 by All Souls College from Abingdon Abbey with the glebe land, rectorial tithes and advowson. However her suggestion that the abbey constructed the hall has no documentary evidence to support it and in this case seems particularly unlikely as the abbey by the fourteenth century was nominating a rector as well as presenting to the vicarage which had been established in 1241.³ A different explanation is offered by the conclusions that were reached about the Lewknor rectory by Sir Edmund Craster in his scholarly and detailed research on the parish for the Victoria History of the County of Oxford.³

By virtue of being lords of the manor, the abbot and convent of Abingdon were at first the patrons of the church of Lewknor and as such received a pension of 10 shillings a year. Apparently the church had been founded and endowed by Ansger de Lewknor, a clerk who held the vill and other parts of Lewknor manor from Abbot Ingulf in fee and inheritance in the middle of the twelfth century. For a century or more the rectorship was hereditary in the de Lewknor family, members of whom included Master Nicholas (*fl.* 1173-93),⁴ Roger (*fl.* 1219-41) and Sir Geoffrey (*fl.* 1249-80). Its value to the local family must have lain in the profit from farming the rectorial glebe and from the tithes of Lewknor and Lewknor Uphill. Those for Lewknor alone were exchanged at the enclosure of 1815 for 68 and 431 acres respectively.³

Towards the end of the thirteenth century, perhaps as one of the financial and administrative reforms stimulated by Archbishop Peckham's visitation in the early 1280's,⁵ Abingdon Abbey started to exercise their right to present to the rectory,

¹ Hilary L. Turner, *Oxoniensia*, xxxvii (1972), 187-91.

² M. C. J. Morrey and J. T. Smith, *ibid.*, xxxviii (1973), 339-345.

³ *V.C.H. Oxon.*, VIII (1964), 98-115.

⁴ A. B. Emden, *Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to 1500* (1957-59), 1139.

⁵ Gabrielle Lambrick, *Business Affairs at Abingdon Abbey in Medieval Times*, Friends of Abingdon (1966), 22.

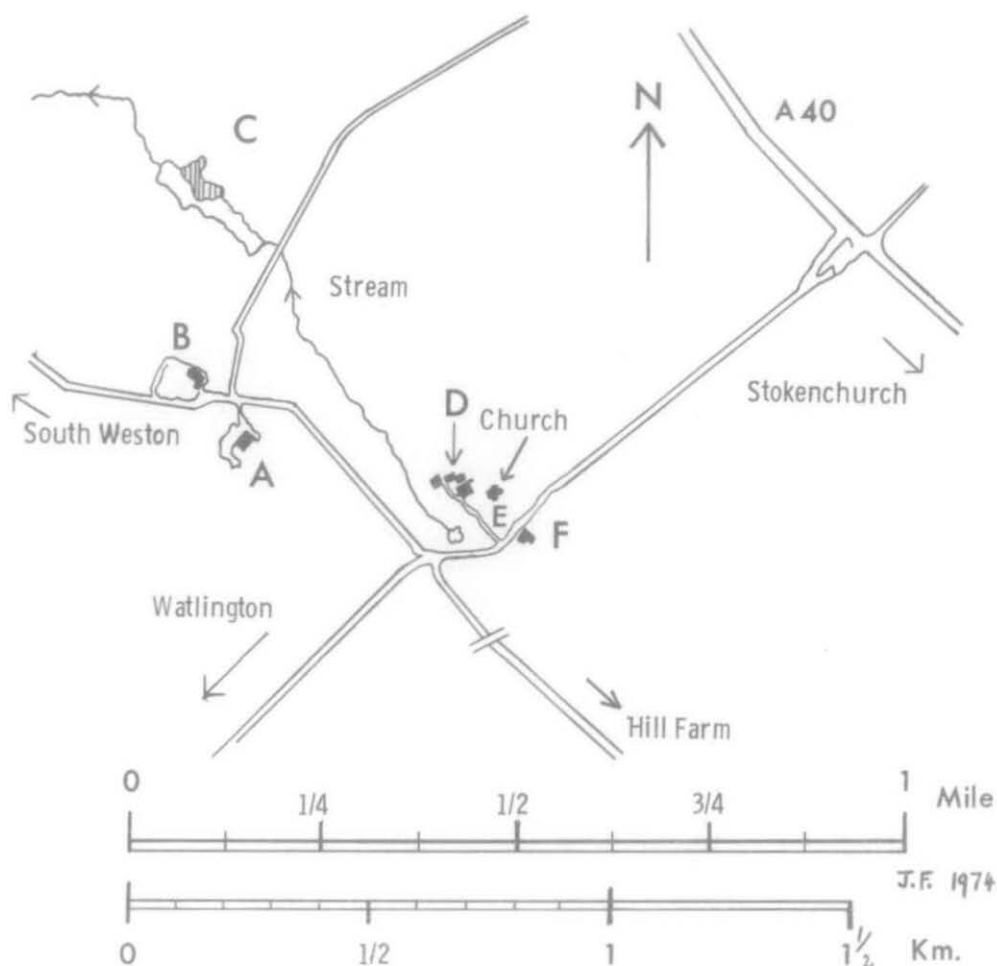


FIG. 1

Lewknor Village (elev. 400 ft.)

- A. Curia of Manor of Lewknor (The Place, 17th century).
- B. Curia of Manor of Moor Court, moated.
- C. Fish Pond and site of Nethercote.
- D. Parsonage or Church Farm (for rectorial glebe and tithes). Includes the medieval hall and new 17th? century house for the tenant.
- E. Original Vicarage and vicar's farm in Churchyard, in use as such c. 1250 to 1790.
- F. Former rectory house or parsonage of late medieval date. In 1805 handed over as Vicarage and now divided into two houses and known as the 'Old Vicarage'. (Page 99 in *op. cit.* note 3).

Simon de St. John being their nominee in 1298. This arrangement would not have interrupted the management of the rectory farm by Ralph, Sir Geoffrey's heir, but as tenant rather than hereditary lay rector, a money payment to the nominee would have been involved. However this was not Ralph de Lewknor's only source of income as by 1300 he also held the manor of Moor Court (FIG. 1) which had its own moated *curia* on the outskirts of the village.³ Furthermore, he or another mem-

ber of the family was the abbey's tenant for its demesne and as acting lord of the manor was in possession of the manor house.

Lewknor was at that time a long and narrow parish of over 4000 acres stretching from the vale past the chalk of the Chilterns almost to Marlow. The 2000 acres of detached woodlands known as Lewknor Uphill lay up to 10 miles from the village and included Cadmore End and Moor End (FIG. 2). There were a dozen or so similar parishes on either side of the Goring Gap with woodland and pasturage for sheep on the hills (Chilterns or Berkshire Downs), good arable land on the lower slopes, and meadows in the vale. For this region the tax yield in 1334, about 60 shillings per 1000 acres, reflected its agricultural prosperity and was one of the highest in England.⁶ For one parish, Sutton Courtenay, which like Lewknor gave its name to a Hundred and had large detached portions that had originated from a Saxon manor, the consequences of the wealth of the rectory are well known. As the value of its rectorial tithes and glebes were large (£60 in 1219) and much prized, there had been feuds in the 13th century between Abingdon Abbey and the Courtenay family over the right to present.⁷ In 1258, it had even been worthwhile for Pope Alexander IV to usurp this right and confer it on an Italian youth.⁸

My own interests⁸ have lain in the North Berkshire parishes to the west of the Goring Gap and have included manor and rectory houses in the villages (geographically comparable to Lewknor) of East Hendred, Harwell, South Moreton, Steventon and Sutton Courtenay (FIG. 2). Details of large two-bay halls of the fourteenth century in some of these villages are given in Table 1. They are far from vernacular. One was built by the head of a knightly family, two others by franklins who had risen to be knight of the shire and the fourth by a king's clerk to Edward II who had been presented to Sutton's wealthy rectory, already mentioned.

It will be noticed from Table 1 that the two-bay hall at Lewknor is wider than the four in North Berkshire. This does not imply an even higher social standing of the projector as oak was plentiful on the Lewknor manors, for example in Lewknor Uphill, while for the manors below the scarp of the Berkshire Downs it was relatively scarce. Smith² maintained that the date for the construction of the hall 'is difficult to state with any precision'. So he resorted to a wide bracket, namely from the mid fourteenth century to 1440, with 'the turn of the century' being likely. However, there is less difficulty when comparisons are made with other halls in the region, such as those in Table 1. Its great width and height imply that it was designed to impress (at Tiptofts Hall, Essex is another such hall) and so prominent details, such as the cusped and ogival timberwork, would have represented up-to-date fashions.

Some features must be expected to have persisted from the thirteenth century. Such are the heavy horizontal braces in the four corners of the hall at tie-beam level and the aisled treatment of the end trusses. But the unaisled central truss and the presence of side-purlins (as well as square set ones) in the three-tier roof, otherwise comparable to that of 1300 over the Warden's Hall⁹ at Merton College, Oxford, mark the hall as being built well into the fourteenth century.

⁶ W. G. Hoskins and E. M. Jope in *The Oxford Region* (1954), 109-11.

⁷ A. E. Preston, *Berks. Bucks. & Oxon. Arch. J.*, 25 (1919/20), 33-38 and 103-113.

⁸ J. M. Fletcher, *Berks. Arch. J.*, 62 (1965), 45-69; *Med. Arch.*, XIII (1969), 268 and 274. Pre-1974 county boundaries are used in this paper.

⁹ J. R. L. Highfield, 'The Aula Custodis', *Postmaster* 1970 (Merton College, Oxford), 14.

TABLE I
Large 2-Bay 14th-Century Halls Surviving in North Berkshire⁶

Parish	Hall of	Attributed to	Approx. Date	Dimensions (Internal)
Sutton Courtenay	Rectory House*	William le Breton (King's Clerk)	1320	34½ × 24 ft.
South Moreton	Sandervill Manor	Thomas de Sandervill (Holder of Knight's fee)	1330	28 × 21
Harwell	Brounz's Manor (now Middle Farm)	Richard Brounz (Knight of the Shire, Sheriff of Berks. & Oxon.)	1360	27 × 22
Sutton Courtenay	Brunces Court (now Manor House)	William Brouns (Knight of the Shire)	1390	34 × 24
cf. Lewknor (Oxon)	Tenant of the Parsonage Farm	John de Lewknor (Knight of the Shire)	1335-49	34 × 29
Marlow (Bucks)†	Parsonage	Rector	1340	36 × 24 (for 2½ bays)

* This rectory house was well-described and illustrated but given an inaccurate orientation by Turner and Parker, *Domestic Architecture*, III (1853), 272-4. In *Med. Arch.*, VIII (1964), 173-4, I continued the tradition, elaborated by Turner and Parker and by later writers, of associating its construction with Abingdon Abbey (Smith even called it the manor house) but in subsequent research, unpublished, have established its connection as the rectory house with the series of influential clerics, such as Thomas Bekynton, appointed by the Courtenays as rectors from c. 1300 onwards. The hall and solar as well as the contemporary rebuilding of the chancel of the parish church is attributed to William le Breton, rector from 1311 to 1333.

† M. E. Wood, *J. Brit. Arch. Assn.*, XII (1949), 53. This was one of the wealthiest livings in Bucks. (£33½ in 1291). Marlow lay only a few miles from Lewknor Uphill.

It differs from the first three Berkshire halls listed in Table I in not having crown posts with a collar purlin, while its ogee arches and cusping are paralleled in the third example, Brounz's Manor (now Middle Farm) Harwell, but not in the first two. Elsewhere in England these forms of decorative treatment though introduced in the early fourteenth century¹⁰ are rare in timberwork before the second quarter of the century. Early examples, c. 1320, occur in the former window to Prior Crauden's chamber at Ely, now to be seen in the south porch to the cathedral, and on the wind-braces of the former Guesten Hall at Worcester.¹¹ In the Oxford region they were used c. 1335-40 in timberwork at Fyfield Manor, Berks.,¹² a house associated with John Golafre; and in stonework not only at the Parsonage, Marlow (see Table I) but in the great east window and sanctuary of Dorchester Abbey (FIG. 2) dated by the heraldic shields in the south window and by the ball-flower decoration to the 1320s. Thus the architecture of the Lewknor hall implies, in the context of such a presumptuous structure, a date probably between 1325 and 1350 and unlikely to be after 1360. While Abingdon Abbey was grappling in this period with the aftermath of the insurrection of 1327, the career of John de Lewknor, the son and heir of Ralph (fl. 1300) points to him as the person likely to have had the wealth to build such a hall at Lewknor.

¹⁰ Margaret Wood, *The English Medieval House* (1965), 341, uses the phrase 'the introduction of the ogee curve, so popular in the early 14th century'.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 310 and Fig. 98.

¹² *Ibid.*, 151.

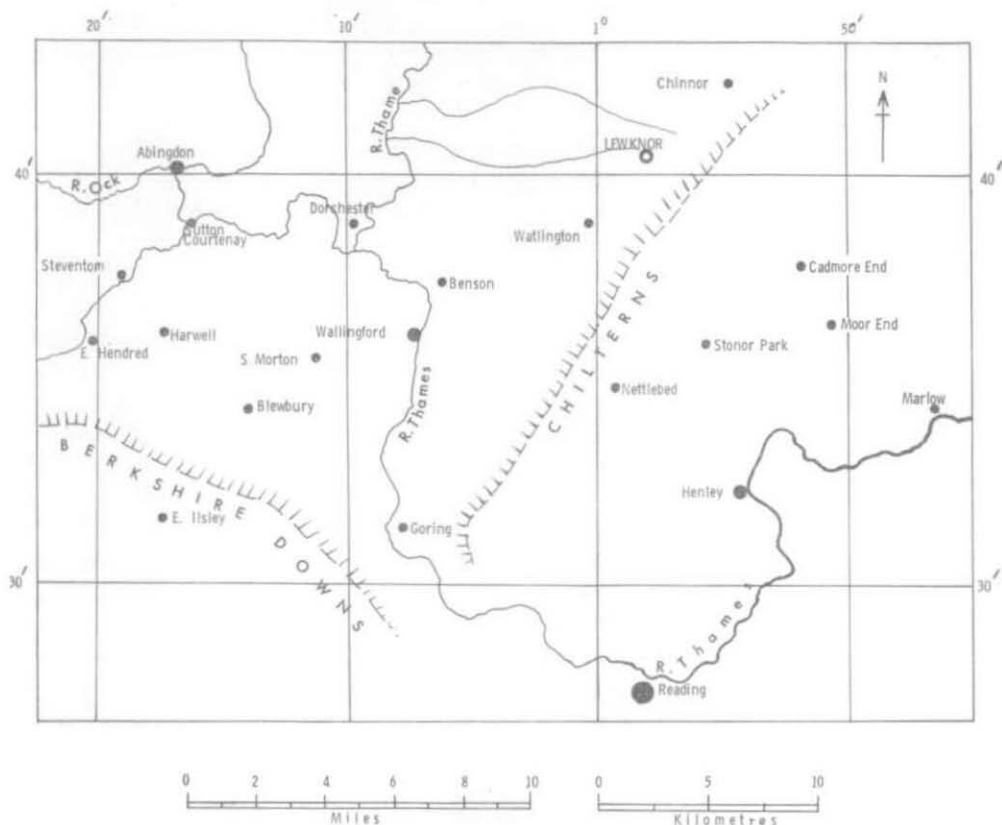


FIG. 2

Map showing Lewknor in relation to the Chilterns and parishes related similarly to the Berkshire Downs.

References, quoted by Craster,³ to John de Lewknor appear in 1316. In 1331/2 he received his first summons to represent Oxford County in parliament (John Golafre had sat in the previous one) and thereafter he attended successive ones in 1336-8, another in 1342 and his last in 1354.¹³ He was thus comparable in rank to Richard Brounz and his cousin William who built two of the manorial halls in North Berkshire listed in Table 1. He would have been aware that in the adjacent hundred of Pyrton his important neighbour, Lord Chief Justice Sir John Stonor, had added a hall and solar¹⁴ at Stonor Park (FIG. 2) soon after the beginning of the century. John de Lewknor's hand is also to be seen in the church as the second quarter of the century was also the only time in which there were changes to it between the 12th and 15th centuries. Its chancel was rebuilt (*cf.* Sutton Courtenay church), four new windows were given fine examples of decorated tracery, while the adornment of the priest's doorway, sedilia and Easter sepulchre represent expensive or unusual features.³ The south aisle and porch belong to the same period.

¹³ *The Official Return of Members of Parliament (House of Commons Accounts and Papers, LXII, Pt. I)* 1878; W. R. Williams, *Parliamentary History of the County of Oxford* (1899), 18.

¹⁴ *V.C.H. Oxon.*, VIII (1964), 145. The existence of scissor-braced roofing suggests a date little if any later than 1300.

Although John de Lewknor was again summoned to the parliament of 1354, this was after a lapse of 14 years and may have represented the dearth of suitable younger persons to survive the outbreak of 1349 and be available for such duty. When John died, *c.* 1360, he left no son as heir. However his daughter, Isabel, who inherited the manor of Moor Court, married Sir Robert Symeon of the adjacent parish of Pyrton,¹⁵ so the family connection with Lewknor was maintained. These events imply consequences from the Black Death that were not foreseen and point to John de Lewknor having commissioned the hall before 1349.

For its size and time, the hall at Lewknor has one feature that is unique and may enable its date of completion to be assessed closely. Although there is smoke-blackening visible on the roof timbers, it is relatively slight, so there can never have been many fires in an open hearth below. The hall seems never to have formed part of a house¹⁶ and so may owe its strange survival in a barn to this fact. Yet in the Oxford region a new hall of this size usually replaced an earlier one that had been at right angles to a chamber range, or it was a new structure of hall and wing. The unusualness of the Lewknor hall may well be due to its erection in the period 1335/9 and then interference by the Black Death with the remainder of John de Lewknor's plans, whatever they may have been. Lack of incentive, insufficient wealth and shortage of labour in the succeeding years could all have contributed to the project not being completed. The rector, John de Aldebourne of Merton College from about 1335 to 1390, to whom there is a brass in the church, may have resided at times in the village but he would scarcely have wished to add to the hall. So perhaps for a while it served the community as the manor court and court of the hundred, possibly part of its original purpose.

Craster³ tells us of a fifteenth-century account in which the parsonage hall is described as 'of medieval pattern with a louvre for its central hearth. The kitchen was a separate building and within it was a well. Adjoining it were the various buildings of the steading; the great barn which was the rector's tithe-barn, a smaller barn or hay-house, a stable, sheep-house and hog-stye; likewise a brew-house, malt-house, and kiln. Their roofs were thatched; they stood on base courses of Headington stone; and their walls were wattle and daub'. Just how rapidly the hall declined in status and was incorporated in the present barn presents a problem for further study.

To interpret both the accounts that have survived for Lewknor and its existing buildings requires the existence at one time or another of two sets of rectory or parsonage buildings (FIG. 1, D & F) and two vicarages (FIG. 1, E & F).

The hereditary rectors farmed the glebe and received the tithes at the older of the two parsonages (D), now Church Farm, which includes the post-medieval house said³ to be 'no older than the 17th century', and occupied by the present tenants of the farm. A parsonage house (F), with no attached farm buildings, was built apparently either after *c.* 1290 by Abingdon Abbey for the rectors appointed by

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 102 and 149. The Thomas de Lewknor mentioned in Sussex in 1337 and Roger de Lewknor escheator in that county somewhat later (*Cal. Ing. p.m.*, 10 and 28 Edward III) may have been connections of the Oxfordshire family.

¹⁶ Smith (ref. 2) speaks of an original 'hall-house' of three bays, but his categorical statement needs to be supported by some evidence for a single, third bay. There are, however, original rafters and braces with slight smoke-blackening which extend for a quarter of a bay to the west of the hall and may have lain over a $\frac{1}{4}$ -bay screen passage.

them, or between 1458 and 1484 by All Souls College¹⁷ for disposal as they wished. It lies on the other side of the road and is now, confusingly, known as the Old Vicarage because it was handed over by the College for the use of the vicar from 1805 onward.³ The first and much earlier vicarage (E) lay in the churchyard (near Church Farm) and before 1241 had housed the priests paid by the de Lewknors as hereditary rectors.

The discovery of this medieval hall and its link with the de Lewknor family of county status opens the possibility firstly of the survival of other medieval houses in the village of Lewknor ; secondly, of a comparable situation in some of the other Oxfordshire villages on the north-western slopes of the Chilterns, now not far from the Buckinghamshire boundary.¹⁸ For the North Berkshire villages of Harwell, East Hendred and Steventon the known medieval houses have been increased from the very few recognized before 1945 to ten or more per village;¹⁹ for a number of them the medieval occupants have been identified from the numerous documentary sources available. Few of the Oxfordshire villages have been explored in such depth. Perhaps there are further surprises to come.

I am grateful to Mr. L. Graham, the tenant of Church Farm, for giving me access to the barn and information about it.

¹⁷ Hilary Turner (ref. 1) deduces from the accounts dated between 1458 and 1484 that the college was not undertaking any new work at Church Farm. However she also refers to the parsonage being 'under construction'. If so it was presumably the second parsonage house, F in Fig. 1.

¹⁸ Since 1896 much of the medieval parish of Lewknor is in Bucks.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.* note 8 : also J. Fletcher, *Oxoniensia*, xxxiii (1968), 71-88, and unpublished work by C. R. J. Currie.