

# MEDIAEVAL CHARTERS AT CLAYDON HOUSE

G. R. ELVEY, M.A., B.LIT.

DURING the rearrangement of the Paper Room at Claydon House a number of mediæval charters were set apart and calendared.<sup>1</sup> They were perused a century ago by John Bruce, though he made little use of them in *The Verney Papers*,<sup>2</sup> and Lady Verney alluded to one or two in *The Verney Memoirs*.<sup>3</sup> About half of them relate to lands outside this county and need none but a passing mention here. The rest fall into two groups: those which concern the Claydons, and those which concern the manors that came to John Verney, the son of the Lord Mayor, by his marriage to Margaret Whittingham.

## THE CLAYDONS

Middle Claydon, three times in the thirteenth century the inheritance of a lady, passed by marriage into the family of Cantelou and from them to that of Zouche. It was acquired in the 1460s by Sir Rulf Verney, the Lord Mayor, by exercising his right of pre-emption under a mortgage.<sup>4</sup> At least from the beginning of the fourteenth century the demesne manor was let at farm to the Giffards, and so continued till the seventeenth.

East and Botolph Claydon (there was anciently, it seems, a set of common fields in East Claydon and another set divided between the two villages) were mainly held till the middle of the thirteenth century by the family of de Valognes, from whom they came in marriage to Sir Robert de Grey. They were purchased by the Verneys in the eighteenth century.

Of Claydon itself these documents tell us little that is not well known, but some details are worth mention. A thin but continuous series concerns the family of Spyrke. It appears that, early in the year 1371, a certain Robert Spyrke was holding land in villeinage in John de Grey's manor of East Claydon, and other land by similar tenure in Amaury de St. Amand's manor of Grendon Underwood. It is likely that he and his descendants were bailiffs to the lords of Claydon, and as John de Grey resided chiefly at Shabbington and Rotherfield, the business that fell upon Robert Spyrke may have rendered it desirable that he should have the status of a freeman. Amaury de St. Amand, however, was unwilling to permit his villein to be enfranchised, and a suit arose between the two lords for possession of Spyrke and his progeny, which was eventually compromised by John's paying 50 mares to Amaury for the release of his claim.<sup>5</sup> Whether this sum or part of it was contributed by the Spyrkes we cannot tell. Immediately after, Robert Spyrke and his three sons received their free-

dom.<sup>6</sup> He evidently continued to prosper, and we find him acquiring land in Claydon, Hogshaw and Fulbrook, of which he died seised in 1393.<sup>7</sup>

William his son, who followed him, having been freed from earthly servitude in 1371, was released from the bondage of his sins on his deathbed in 1411 by an Indulgence granted to him, under Papal authority, by the Hospitallers, in consideration of his bequeathing a suitable sum for the upkeep and defence of the castle of St. Peter on the island of Rhodes.<sup>8</sup> He was succeeded by another William, who advanced his fortunes by winning a village heiress, and in the veins of his children ran a trickle of the blood of Nigel the forester of Bernwood.<sup>9</sup> When he died in 1452 he was bailiff of East Claydon.<sup>10</sup> His will, followed by that of his wife, shows him to have been farming on a substantial scale; he bequeaths ten sheep to altars and lights in the Church, four for the mending of a road and six to his godchildren.<sup>11</sup> His son Robert, probably the last of the family to occupy the messuage called Spyrkes in Botolph Claydon, died in 1498.<sup>12</sup> In 1553 Richard, grandson of his brother and his ultimate heir, quitclaimed the tenement to the widow and son of Richard Hykbed. He was at that time a labourer in Aylesbury.<sup>13</sup>

A document of some importance was printed almost in full by Bruce.<sup>14</sup> It is a grant by William de Cantelou, in 1306, to Thomas de St. Andrew, Rector of Middle Claydon, and his successors, of the rents of certain demesne lands for the provision of torches to burn at the elevation of the Host. To the Churchwardens are allotted the duty of performing this obligation during a vacancy, as well as of melting down the stumps of the old torches when replaced at Easter and making candles to burn at the lesser altars. But Bruce overlooked one of the features of the document. It is a tripartite chirograph: one part was to be sealed by the lord for the Rector, one part by the Rector for the lord and the third by both for the churchwardens. This is the foot and it bears tags for two seals; it is therefore the churchwardens' part and one of the oldest documents in the Archdeaconry which can be shown to have lain in a parish chest.<sup>15</sup>

#### THE FITZ-NIGEL ESTATES

Soon after Sir Ralf Verney acquired the manor of Middle Claydon, his elder son John married Margaret, daughter and heiress of Sir Robert Whittingham, of Pendley near Tring. Sir Robert's grandfather, having thriven in the city of London, obtained Pendley by his marriage with an Aignel heiress. His father prospered at Court, and greatly increased his landed interests by the purchase from a private owner of the manor of Dinton, and of the Fitz-Nigel estates from the Crown.

Sir Robert, like his father before him, was in the service of King Henry VI, and in the wars of the Roses he staunchly supported the Lancastrian cause till at last he was slain at Tewkesbury. The story of how Sir Ralf Verney pleaded his own Yorkist virtues to procure the annulment of the attainder of Sir Robert and regain Margaret's lands, and of how Sir John did eventually, when Henry VII came in, obtain them by pleading Sir Robert's Lancastrian virtues, has been finely told by Bruce.

The history of the Fitz-Nigel lands goes back beyond the conquest of

England and is worth considering in detail. The lands that Lewin of Nuncham had held in Bucks. before the conquest he held still in 1086, with the exception of Drayton Parslow, from which he and Ralf Passelewe, his tenant, had been ejected in favour of Nigel de Bereville.<sup>16</sup> The Passelewes, however, returned to Drayton and no more is heard there of any Berevilles.

The estates that Lewin retained lay in Maids' Morton, Beachampton, Salden, Mursley and Wavendon. They later formed the Honour from which in 1166 Richard son of Nigel owed the service of three knights.<sup>17</sup> The little holding in Wavendon, comprising only a single virgate, has seemed to disappear, but the complete integrity of the fee is proved by this charter at Claydon, in favour of the grandson of the Richard of 1166:

"Sciatis presentes et futuri quod ego Iohannes dei gratia luffeldensis prior omnesque eiusdem loci fratres remisimus Ricardo filio Nigelli querelam quam habuimus aduersus eum super unam uirgatam terre in Wawendona quam ex donatione patris sui nos habuisse diximus et ueraciter asseruimus Hanc autem uirgatam terre ipsi Ricardo et heredibus suis liberauimus et quietam clamauimus et absque omni reclamacione imperpetuum cum pace relinquimus possidendam. Hiis testibus Ricardo de Weston Ricardo eius filio Hugone de Castelon Ricardo filio Rogeri Gileberto clerico Henrico clerico de Selueston et Iohanne filio Alani et aliis pluribus."

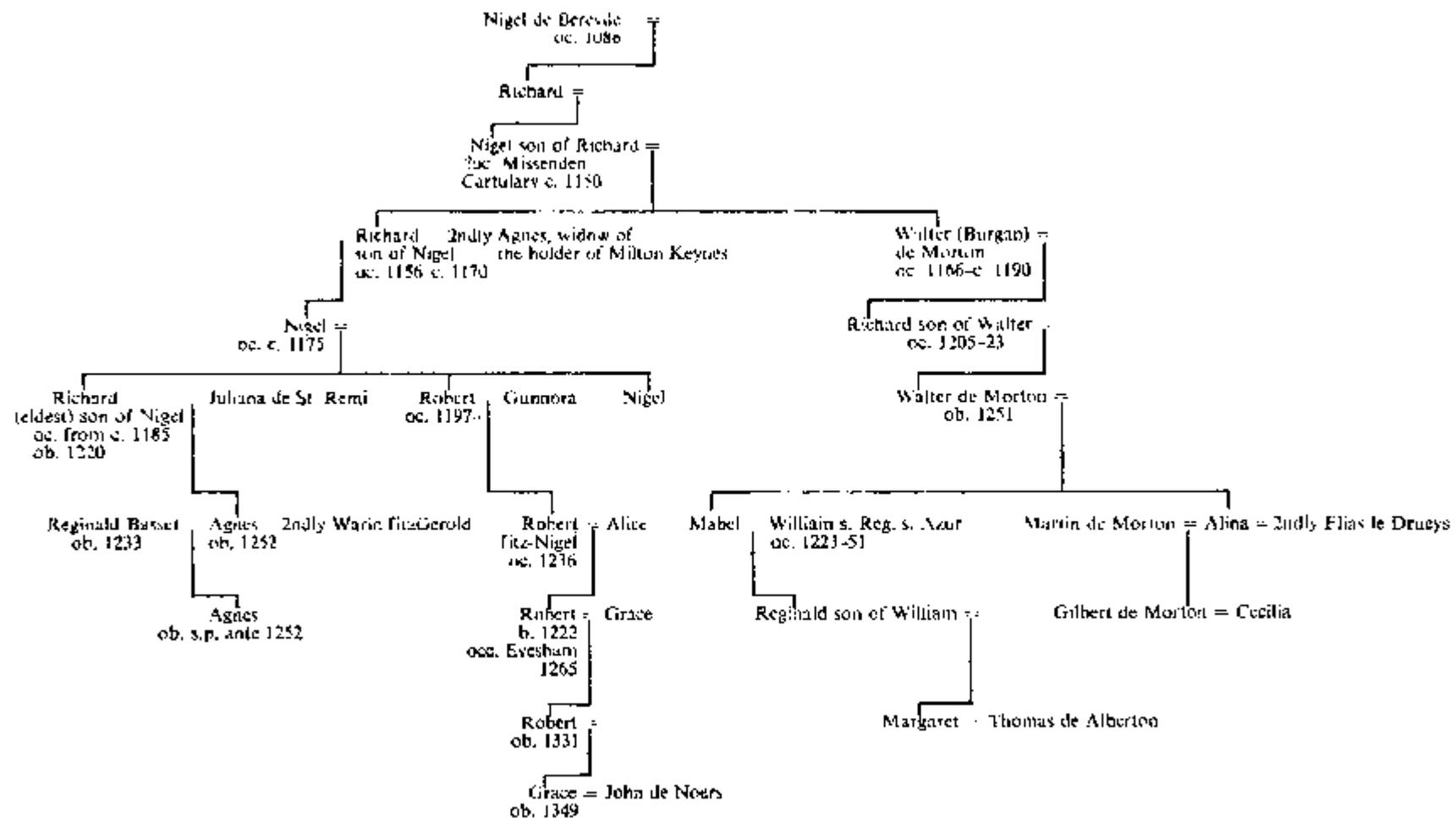
John, Prior of Luffield, quitclaims to Richard son of Nigel one virgate in Wavendon, touching which there had been a dispute between them, the Prior alleging that he had it of the gift of Richard's father.<sup>18</sup>

This charter belongs to the last decade of the twelfth century. It is neatly executed on parchment 7 in. × 2½ in., but the seal of the Prior is no longer on it.

What was the origin of this family cannot be told with certainty. It has been supposed that "son of Nigel" was an established surname in the twelfth century, and that the son of the Richard of 1166 was another Richard.<sup>19</sup> That is not so: a charter in the Luffield Cartulary of the same date as that printed above (the two were no doubt complementary) shows that the father of the second Richard was a Nigel,<sup>20</sup> and there is mention of him elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> There had probably been a succession of Nigels and Richards, and I suggest that its original was Nigel de Bereville, who appears in 1086 to have had some right in Lewin's lands.

The Honour descended in the fourteenth century to Grace Fitz-Nigel, who brought it in marriage to John de Nowers of Gayhurst.<sup>22</sup> Her son John sold it to the Crown. The lands were of the portion of Edward III's daughter Isabel when she married Ingelram de Couci; they were given to Anne, Richard II's Queen, and to Henry IV's Queen, Joan. Finally, in 1432 they were sold to Sir Robert Whittingham the elder. By the time they came into the hands of Sir John Verney they consisted, for practical purposes, only of Salden and Mursley.<sup>23</sup>

A small group of charters relating to the enclosure of little pieces of land at la More in Swanbourne is a reminder that already in the 1270s this was sheep-farming country.<sup>23</sup> In one charter, John Passelewe, lord of the manor, agrees to the enclosure on his own behalf and on that of his villeins. In a second



charter the free tenants give their consent. In a third the lord of an adjacent manor gives his.

A remarkable person turns up in Staines in the reign of Edward II. He was a dentist and surely one of the earliest recorded members of that profession. By a charter of 20th July, 1320, Richard Borreye of Wycombe, violer, enfeoffs Peter le Touthdrawere of all his houses and lands in Staines. Peter, however, made but a brief sojourn there, for on 10th March of the succeeding year he conveyed them to another violer, Richard de Gayton.<sup>24</sup>

Nearly all these documents are in excellent condition; none is illegible. The three most remarkable, the twelfth-century charter, the Torch agreement and the Indulgence are in beautiful state: every letter is clear. More than half have seals still appendant. A heavy seal of the Hospital on William Spyrk's Indulgence, an armorial seal of Michael Belet, the Queen's butler, of 1345 and a delicate oval seal of Cristina, widow of Robert Morgan of Benson, of c. 1230, linger in the memory. It is pleasant to know that these documents will remain at Claydon, where they so manifestly belong and to whose story and that of its owners they bring abundant testimony—valued and cared for as in the past.

<sup>1</sup> A calendar of 81 of the charters has been printed by the National Register of Archives. They are here referred to as N.R.A. 1, etc. Subsequently others came to light, and these are referred to as Cal. 82, etc. If they are eventually printed by N.R.A. they will bear the same numbers.

<sup>2</sup> *Camden Society*, Vol. LVI, 1853.

<sup>3</sup> *Memoirs of the Verney Family*, 1907.

<sup>4</sup> N.R.A. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Cal. 97.

<sup>6</sup> Cal. 98.

<sup>7</sup> N.R.A. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Cal. 105.

<sup>9</sup> I infer from Cal. 108 and 110 that William Spyrk married Agnes, daughter of Agnes Mylward, whose father was Robert Nyell, a descendant of William son of John fitz-Nigel of Boarstall, who was Rector of East Claydon before 1297 and acquired land there.

<sup>10</sup> Cal. 115.

<sup>11</sup> Cal. 114, 119.

<sup>12</sup> Cal. 122.

<sup>13</sup> Cal. 131.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> N.R.A. 1. The Y of Yornibrecht should have been a thorn.

<sup>16</sup> *V.C.H. Bucks.*, Vol. 1, 268, 275.

<sup>17</sup> *Red Book of the Exchequer*, p. 318.

<sup>18</sup> N.R.A. 30.

<sup>19</sup> Bucks. Pipe Rolls 1189-1199, p. 195 N. viij B.6.

<sup>20</sup> Cartulary of Luffield Priory (Westminster Abbey), No. 732.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* No. 411. Rot. Cur. Reg. I, 59. The first of this line who can be said to have used "son of Nigel" as a surname is the father of the Robert Fitz-Nigel who was slain at Evesham; his father's name was Robert.

<sup>22</sup> There were also estates not held in chief in Great Kimble, High Wycombe and Weston Turville. They were probably obtained in marriage.

<sup>23</sup> Maids' Morton had been given in fee to Walter son of Nigel before 1166. Beachampton was settled on Richard, second son of the elder Sir Robert Whittingham.

<sup>24</sup> N.R.A. 26-29.

<sup>25</sup> N.R.A. 62, 63.