

The Bassett and Despenser families

As a royal manor, Woking Manor was held by Edward the Confessor before the Norman Conquest and in 1086 by William I. The crown continued to hold the manor throughout the following reigns of William II, Henry I, Stephen and Henry II. However, in 1189 Richard I granted the manor of Woking to Alan Basset of Wycombe, Buckinghamshire by which time the site of the future Palace had become established.

Alan Bassett already held a number of other manors and in 1215 his name appeared in Magna Carta as a liegeman of King John. The family's name continues to this day in a number of Oxfordshire towns. Alan died in 1233 and was succeeded by his son, Gilbert who held the manor until 1241 when he was thrown from his horse and killed whilst hunting^{MB}.

Fulk Bassett replaced his elder brother as Lord of the Manor and was Dean of York (1239-43) and Bishop of London (1244-1259). When he died in 1259, the manor passed to his younger brother, Philip (d1271) whose daughter Aliva married Hugh Despenser about 1260 and their son another Hugh was the notorious Elder Despenser.

During the reign of Henry III following the signing of Magna Carta in 1215 there was a continuing dispute between the King and the Barons led by Simon de Montfort demanding more say in the running of the kingdom culminating in 1264 in the Battle of Lewes with the defeat of Henry and the imprisonment of the King and his eldest son, Prince Edward (later Edward I). Hugh Despenser was an important ally of Simon de Montfort but the Bassetts remained loyal to the King.

Hugh Despenser was elected Justiciar of England¹ in 1260 as was his son in law, Philip Basset in May 1261. Prince Edward escaped from captivity and in the following Battle of Evesham in 1265 turned the tables on the Barons leading to the death of both Simon de Montfort and Hugh Despenser

When Philip Basset died in 1271 the manor descended to his daughter, Aliva and in a survey carried out at that time the first mention of a house on the site is recorded^{MB}. Following the death of her first husband in 1265, Aliva married Roger Bidgood, Earl of Norfolk in 1271^{TCP}. The manor remained in her hands until she died in 1280. A survey carried at the time of her death confirmed the existence of a capital house on the site^{MB}.

It is reasonable to suppose that the Bassetts as major participants in the struggle for power during the 13th century would have used their manor house near to London as a base and that the house known to have been on the site in 1272 was built for them. This at a time when Henry III had transferred the seat of government to Westminster

¹ A modern day equivalent would be Prime Minister

Although the Earl of Norfolk put forward a claim to the Manor on his wife's death, the claim was withdrawn and thereafter the Manor came into the hands of Hugh Despenser, the elder Despenser until it reverted to the Crown in 1327 on his execution and that of his son, another Hugh, the younger Despenser.

In 1325 it is said that the two Despensers, father and son, abducted Elizabeth Comyn from her house at Kennington and imprisoned her at Woking and Pirbright and forced her to sign away Goodrich Castle to the father and her manor of Painswick to the son^{MB}. This report would seem to confirm that the Despensers were living at Woking or at least taking advantage of its proximity to the centre of government at Westminster.

A survey carried out in 1327 showed that the buildings on the Palace site then consisted of:

A Capital Messuage, surrounded with Moats, containing an *Hall*, *Chapel*, two *Chambers*, with a *Pantry* and *Butlery* adjoining to the Hall, a *Kitchen*, *Larder*, *Bakehouse*, *Brewhouse*, *Poultry-house*, *Laundry*, a *Chapel* for the household, an *Apartment* of three lodging-rooms for the Knights, Treasurers, and other great Officers; two other *Apartments* for Knights and Esquires under another roof; a *Gate* and *Draw-bridge*.

On the outside of this first Moat and Bridge, was an *Apartment* with two others adjoining on each side: a *Reservoir* with a *Water-wheel* for filling the Moats: a *Curtilage* and *Garden* with fruit-trees; all inclosed with another Moat having a *Gate* and *Drawbridge* over it on the South side of the Garden

Adjoining to the premises, on the outside of the second Moat, were the several appendages to the Mansion, viz. one large *Stable* for the Lord's own horses; a *Barton* or *Farm*, with two *Granges* or *Reck-yards*, for Corn and Hay, a *Stable* for Cart-horses, an *Ox-stall*, *Cow-stall*, *Cart-house* and *Sheep-cote*. Here was also an outer Gate, with a Chamber over it for the a *Stable* for his horses, and a dwelling house for his family^{1MB}.

King Edward III in the first year of his reign gave the Manor of Woking to Edmund of Woodstock. Thus began the period of the Earls of Kent at the manor.

¹ The version shown in Manning and Bray contains a further sentence, *And, what is worth notice perhaps, all the buildings were covered with tyles*. This comment does not appear in the original survey and must have been added later.

^{MB} Manning and Bray.

^{TCP} The Complete Peerage

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