



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

The 1522 Muster Role for West Berkshire (Part 2)

by Lis Garnish

Musters had their origin in the Anglo-Saxon 'Fyrd', the system by which each householder had to equip himself with arms and fight in defence of his county. By the sixteenth century this had been formalized into a requirement for every adult male between the ages of sixteen and sixty to be prepared to serve in the county militia, equipped with arms suitable to his rank and wealth (1). The Lord Lieutenant of the county was responsible for raising troops, based on a written list, usually called a Muster Roll. The Muster of 1522 was utilized by Wolsey in a covert preparation for taxation in support of Henry VIII's French wars. The usual method of taxation, the Subsidy, was grossly under-assessed, but attempts to modernize it met with strong resistance. This Muster was used as an excuse to compile a new assessment by claiming that, in addition to the names and weapons of able-bodied men, it was also necessary to know each man's land holding and wealth to assess his contribution towards the defence of the realm. The assessments given were then used for a shock taxation of 10% on lands or goods of £5 value and above, and the duplicity of the method caused much resentment.

The Muster Certificates for 1522 are the earliest surviving returns, although they give a very incomplete coverage of the country (2). The Certificate for part of Berkshire survives amongst the papers of the Court of Augmentations in the Public Record Office (3). Because of its hidden fiscal purpose it is a much more comprehensive list than normal Muster Certificates and closely resembles the returns for the 'Amicable Grant' or Great Subsidy of 1524-5. The Berkshire returns are not as full as the return for Babergh Hundred in Suffolk, which includes the trades and occupations of most people (4), but much information can be extracted regarding land-holding and wealth. The totals given had to be sworn on oath by each person and probably represent a fairly realistic assessment of the wealth of Western Berkshire in 1522.

Lay Subsidies, Hearth Tax Returns and Census Returns can be used by both genealogists and local historians to trace families as they move from parish to parish and to chart the economic life of an area from the financial strength of settlements at various points in time, but Muster Rolls are less commonly used. My own area of study is Wantage Parish, which covers the Manors of Wantage and Priorsfold, the townships of Charlton and Grove and the village of West Lockinge. Having studied a number of Lay Subsidy Returns for Wantage Parish I was disappointed to find that the Returns for the Subsidy of 1524-5, usually considered to be the most complete, only had a total for Wantage, with no individuals listed. The 1522 Muster Roll was then drawn to my attention by a staff member of the Public Record Office at a Day-School. Having studied the Wantage section I realised its importance to other local historians in West Berkshire and obtained Xerox copies of the whole Roll in order to make a transcription for deposit in the Oxfordshire and Berkshire Record Offices (5).

The Certificate was compiled by Sir William Essex, William Fetyplace, Esquire, Thomas Apporie and John Latton, gentlemen. Two of the Commissioners, Essex and Fetyplace, had extensive land holdings within West Berkshire and acted as Stewards in a number of manors. Sir John Latton is represented only by lands, held in the Wantage area. Thomas

Apporie does not seem to have held any land or sinecures in West Berkshire. The Muster Certificate includes the Hundreds of Shrivenham, Faringdon, Lambourne, Wantage, Ganfield, Faircross, Kintbury-Eagle and Compton. As can be seen in the accompanying map these form a wide band at the western end of the old county of Berkshire, and include forty parishes now in New Oxfordshire, as well as three which were, geographically, always in Oxfordshire and some in Wiltshire and Gloucestershire.

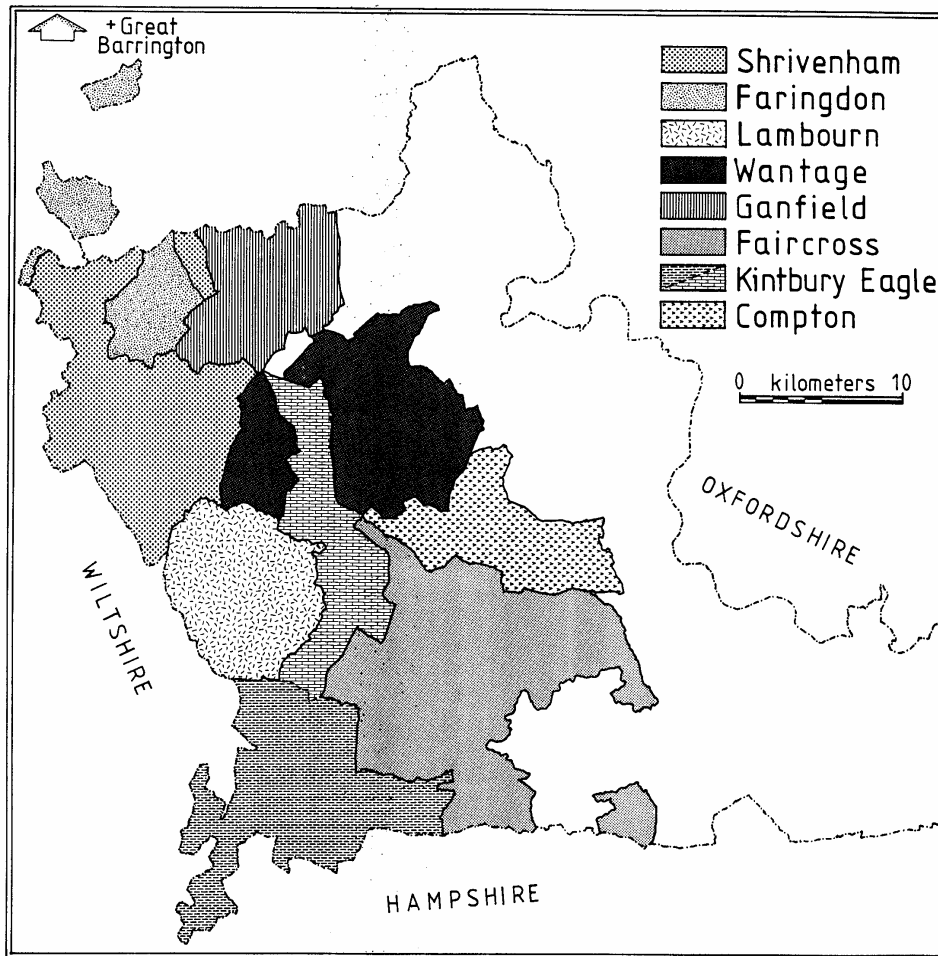


Fig. 1 The Hundreds of West Berkshire covered in this Muster Roll

The Certificate is a book of 131 folios, written on both sides. The first five Hundreds are recorded in an elegant Court Hand, whilst the last three are in a more cursive script, and have the air of a draft, with plain headings and no enlarged titling. Each Hundred is sub-divided by parish and township, and in some cases by manor or tithing. The amount of information given varies from Hundred to Hundred, but some items are always present. Within each parish or township the entries are of three types - lands, goods and 'harness'. Christian name and surname are given for each person, and in many cases their status - servant, son, widow or householder, for example. This last term occurs frequently and may denote a resident occupying a recognised tenancy and answerable for a household of family and servants. The sworn details of annual income from lands or goods are given in pounds, shillings and pence or in marks. Weapons are usually noted next to a name as 'bill' or 'bow' or a letter is used to indicate 'billman' or 'archer'. In the northern parishes 'harness' is entered in a separate section, sometimes as complete suits of armour but sometimes only as a helmet with some body armour. In the southern parishes 'harness' is usually noted next to the entry under 'goods'. In the case of tenants the landlord is named.

The transcript of the whole Muster Roll was entered as text files on a BBC Microcomputer using a word-processing programme, which allowed the subsequent indexing to be done semi-automatically. In addition, the material for Wantage Parish alone, 358 entries, was entered into a data-base file to enable sorting and searching. This also allowed the entry of information from the earliest Parish Registers or other records, such as wills. Sorting and searching the data brought out many interesting facts, some of which have been described in more detail elsewhere (6). In Wantage parish the income from freehold land covered a wide range, from 8d, 9d and 1s per annum to £44, £45 and £67, but the majority of the holdings were worth less than £10 per annum. The total income from land in the parish was just over £406, of which absentee landlords received £342. All the largest estates were held by absentee landlords; the Dean of Windsor had £67, the vicar, Doctor Hyggyns, had £45 and John Bowsar, the future Earl of Bath £44. No resident held more than £8 worth of land but the smaller land-holdings, of less than £10, were divided fairly equally between residents and absentees, and forty one of the fifty one absentee landlords of these smaller holdings lived within a twelve mile radius.

One aspect of land-holding which is not recorded consistently is land of 'ancient demesne' status. Great Faringdon and Great and Little Coxwell each have a section titled "Auncyent Demean londes". In June 1372, and again in July 1426, Faringdon and the Coxwells had applied to the Exchequer for an exemplification of their Domesday Book entries, to establish if they were ancient demesne (7). On the other hand there are no special notes

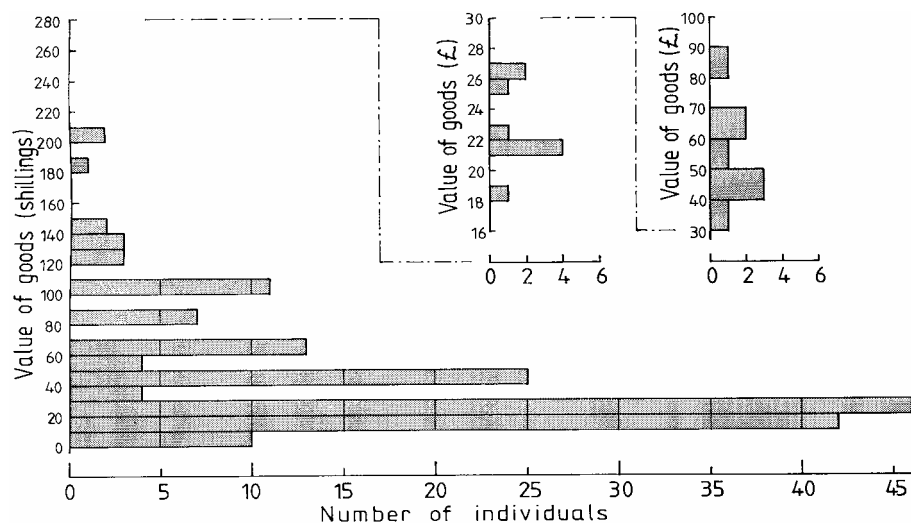


Fig. 2 Distribution of the valuation of goods owned by individuals in Wantage Parish

for any of the other twelve parishes which positively qualify as ancient demesne, such as Langford, Shrivenham and Wantage, although Wantage and Grove had been accepted as ancient demesne for the Lay Subsidy of 1334.

People were entered for 'goods' in their parish of residence only. For example John Cokes of Stanford held land in Wantage worth 33s p.a., but he was only entered for 'goods', worth £5, at Stanford, where he was called 'householder' and where he had other-land worth £1. Wantage parish had 183 people registered for 'goods' and a further ten who were resident but without visible income. The total income for the parish from goods was nearly £1,000, ranging from the least at 10s per annum to £80 per annum. Three of the men with no income were 'alien strangers' born in the Low Countries and may have been travelling on business. Three others were labourers, who perhaps existed on casual work, and three were servants, who may have been apprenticed with board and lodging. The tenth was listed after a householder and may also have been a servant.

As can be seen in the histogram the majority of people were worth between 10s and 50s per annum, and very few were worth more than £5. Twelve of the 'householders' were worth only 10s, although one of these had some additional income from land. Five other people worth 10s were described as 'servant' and five have no status given but may have been labourers, but all these residents can barely have supported themselves and may have had some hidden 'income' such as undisclosed casual labour or common-land rights for fuel and gleaning. Of the group between 10s and 40s per annum twenty six were householders, twenty five were servants and even the parish priest, Sir William Calloway, was worth only 13s 4d. The incomes declared for people described as 'servant' may represent their annual salary and most of them earned £2 per annum or less. Four of the six servants who earned more than £2 worked for prosperous householders with incomes of £20 or more.

In the range £2 to £4 per annum the majority of the entries are for 'householders' and seem to be for families who were financially fairly secure. For example, Thomas Kepe of Grove, who was sworn for £4, made his will in 1529 and left his wife a close and twenty four acres of "purchace landys in grove" and mentioned two other closes and copyhold arable land. He requested burial in the north aisle of Wantage church "byfore owre ladye of pittie", which again suggests a moderate affluence (8). Three servants fall within this group, none earning more than £3, and there were also three widows, all with land, one of whom is described as "Lady Rede".

Between £5 and £10 per annum there were seventeen householders, three servants, a chantry priest and one unspecified person. Their social standing is perhaps indicated by Sir Thomas Odams, the chantry priest, who had two suits of armour, and Myles Kechen who was Under-Bailey for Lord Fitzwarin. Twenty people had incomes above £10, all of them householders and three of them rich widows. Alys Talbot, who was worth £40, was the widow of Walter Talbot, for whom a brass was placed in Wantage church (9). Wantage was notable among the northern parishes for the number of people with sizeable incomes. In many of the surrounding parishes there were one or two prosperous families and the rest had modest incomes. Even in Faringdon only ten people had incomes above £10, whilst Wantage had twenty such people, with a joint income of £636. Individually though, none of these persons could compare with Thomas Snodenham of Stanford, Merchant of the Staple, worth £400 per annum, or John Wynchecombe of Newbury, worth £630 per annum.

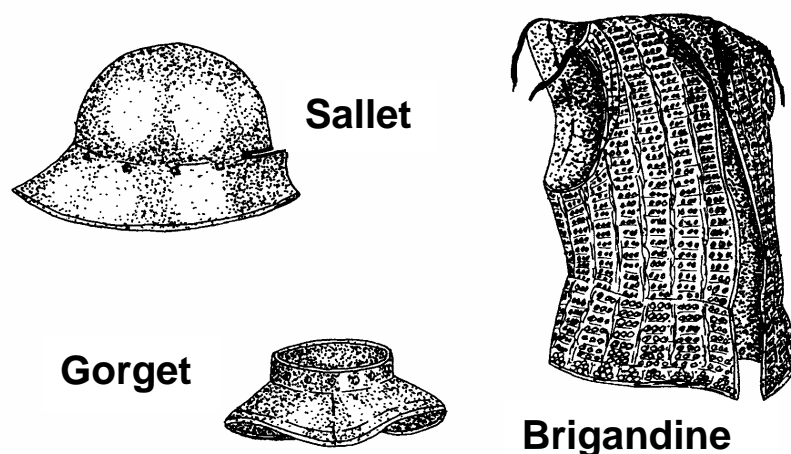


Fig. 3 Some of the items of harness mentioned in the Muster Roll

The purported reason for the Muster, to assess the quantity of arms and number of able men, takes a secondary place in the Roll. The requirement for parishes to supply a set of

parish armour was honoured in only thirteen of the parishes. Wantage Hundred did best with six of its parishes providing 'harness'. Lambourn Hundred could supply only "ij Saletes a paire of Splyntes and a gorgett" from its entire population! Where individual pieces were noted the most common items were sallets, a type of helmet, and brigandines, a canvas or leather jacket with rows of small horn or iron plates riveted on. Splints, which were plate armour protection for the elbows, seem to have been popular, as were gorgets to protect the neck. The two joust irons noted, box like helmets with a slit for viewing, sound like antiques. Potential troops were denoted by a letter or word beside their names or, in the southern parishes, were noted as 'able', with roughly twice as many billmen as archers. For weapons there were bills and bows, but one or two more exotic items were noted, such as the glaive owned by William Meryotte of Grove and the sword owned by Longcot parish.

The information from the Muster Roll can be combined with that from other sources such as parish registers, wills and contemporary documents. For instance, in 1522 there were eighty nine different surnames for people in Wantage parish described as 'householder'. By the decade beginning 1540 only sixty of these surnames are still found in the Parish Register (10). In 1580 the number is reduced to forty one, and by 1620 only thirty two remain. When the first register ends in 1653 only twenty seven names can still be traced, whilst the best Hearth Tax Return, for 1664, gives only nineteen original names. From 1540 to 1664 the loss is, very roughly, 15% every two decades, but the initial fall, from 1522 to 1540, is much steeper at about 30% for the two decades. This would suggest that there was either a high mortality rate between 1520 and 1540, or marked migration.

Very few early wills survive for Wantage parish, but some matches can be made. In 1522 Thomas Kepe, mentioned above, was living in Grove and had land worth 13s 4d and goods worth £4. A 'John Kepe' was working as a servant in Charlton and had goods worth 13s 4d. In 1529 Thomas made his will and left legacies to his wife Johane, his son John and his 'yongyst sone' Thomas. Johane was to have half his goods and his sons were to have a quarter each. John was to work the land with his mother, and Thomas would inherit two crofts, four and a half acres of arable and a close when his mother died. The presence of John in the 1522 Roll would suggest that he was over sixteen, whilst Thomas the younger was not old enough to qualify. Therefore John must have been born before 1506 and Thomas after 1506. Many men in the Wantage area do not seem to have married until about age thirty, and the lack of any reference in the will to a daughter-in-law or grandchildren would suggest that John was unmarried when his father died in 1529. We can postulate therefore that John was born between 1500 and 1506 and that Thomas may have been born between 1506 and 1510. These can only be rough estimates but it might help to identify a particular 'John Kepe' in other deeds or Manor Court Rolls. In fact a 'John and Alce Keepe' are found in the Wantage Parish Register having children between 1540 and 1550, with Alce dying in 1557 and John in 1566.

Contemporary material will vary from parish to parish, but a search which was made for Berkshire 'Lollards' turned up several local names which could be matched to the Muster Roll. The Bishop of Sarum's Register for 1493 to 1499 contains several cases of heresy (11). One is for William Berford alias Carpenter, of Coxwell, carpenter and in the Muster Roll entry for Little Coxwell we find William Barford, householder, entered for 6s 8d worth of land and £3 in goods. A later wave of prosecutions in 1507,(12). revealed John Est the elder, of Buscot, husbandman and in the Muster entry for Buscot we find Agnes Est, widow. Foxe also gives details of many Berkshire Lollards prosecuted in 1521 (13). He names thirty four people living in western Berkshire, of whom eleven are women, but twenty three are adult men who could be expected to appear in the Roll. In fact, sixteen of the men appear there, such as John Rabettes of East Challow and the Collins family of West Hendred, West Ginge and Betterton. However, Edward Gray and William Halyday

of East Hendred had both "gon over the see", presumably having fled to avoid further persecution.

Apart from the work which can be done to estimate the population in a parish, or to study the variations in wealth between the Vale and Downland parishes, the 1522 Muster Roll offers the opportunity to examine the extent to which local residents held land in a variety of parishes in an effort to overcome the restrictions of a limited amount of available freehold land, and the percentage of land and wealth which was controlled, directly or indirectly, by the Church. I am sure that other local historians would find the Roll both interesting and profitable, and will find many ways in which to employ this source material.

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This article was first published in "Oxfordshire Local History", Vol. 2, No. 8, Oxfordshire Local History Association, (Spring 1988), pp281-289 and revised October 2000.

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