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Survey of one of Kent's largest Tudor estates is now on-line

A rare sixteenth century Kent land survey that previously could be read only in an ancient volume at the British Library in London has been transcribed and published on-line by a team of Kent Archaeological Society volunteers.

The document originally belonged to the Wotton family, whose estate covered 6,000 acres in nearly every part of the county, from Ringwould in the east to St Mary Cray in the west, and from Cliffe on the Thames estuary to Lydd on Romney Marsh.

The estate was established from the early fifteenth century by five generations of Wottons, mostly in Boughton Malherbe (the family's country seat) and neighbouring parishes. By the middle of the sixteenth century it comprised a total of 67 manors and plots scattered across more than 30 parishes.

It was one of Kent's largest estates in the Tudor era, exceeded in size only by those held by the Church and a few 'lay lords'. Most of the Wotton family's contemporaries among the landed gentry held fewer than 1,000 acres.

In 1557 the head of the family, Thomas Wotton, then about 36 years old, decided to record precisely how much land he held, where it was, who occupied it, how it was used and whether, after his death, feudal law would require it to be divided equally among all his heirs under a Kentish custom called 'gavelkind' or handed down in its entirety to his eldest son.

So, between October 1557 and November 1560 he and his assistants surveyed each and every plot of his land, using measuring rods sixteen and a half feet long – the standard measuring tool of the day.

Most of the measuring was done by William Clarke, a husbandman (tenant farmer or small landowner) of Lenham and Robert Kennett of Boughton Malherbe, one of Wotton's labourers. When Thomas was unable to attend he sent his servant, William Dymming, to supervise.

Thomas died in 1587 and the Wotton male line became extinct when his grandson (also named Thomas) died on his 43rd birthday in 1630, leaving only daughters. The Wotton estate then passed to the Stanhope family, into which the eldest Wotton daughter, Katherine, had married.

The survey, written in English on 338 folios (676 individual pages) of vellum, was still being used in the early seventeenth century but subsequently the estate's papers were either inherited by relatives, or sold, and it somehow disappeared.

It was not seen or heard of again until 1929 when it was sold at auction in London by an unknown vendor. In about 1932 it was acquired by the British Library in London and for the next 80 years could only be consulted there.

It took the KAS team three years to transcribe the manuscripts. Some of its members were experienced in reading sixteenth century handwriting; others were complete beginners. Digital images were supplied on CD by the British Library and the volunteers worked from enlarged (A3-size) black and white copies of the images, which were more legible than the brown ink on cream vellum of the original folios.

Thus a document which is an important source of local, social and family history and essential reading for place-name scholars is now freely accessible to all. To read it visit www.kentarchaeology.ac

The Wottons of Boughton Malherbe

The Wottons lived at Boughton Place, near St Nicholas Church, Boughton Malherbe, which contains several of the family's graves and memorials.

Thomas's great great grandfather, Nicholas Wotton, a draper, was elected Sheriff of London in 1406, during Dick Whittington's second term as Mayor of London. Nicholas was twice Mayor of London and acquired the Manor of Boughton Malherbe through his marriage in 1416 to Joane Corby, daughter of wealthy landowner Robert Corby.

From this time Boughton Place became the Wottons' main residence for more than 200 years, from the reign of Henry V until that of Charles I, and the family estate grew as a result of a series of dowries, legacies and purchases.

Nicholas's grandson, Sir Robert Wotton, was Sheriff of Kent in 1498-99 and King Henry VIII's Chief Gatekeeper of Calais and Comptroller of Calais.

Robert's son, Sir Edward Wotton, was a member of the court of Henry VIII, a Justice of the Peace, a Sheriff of Kent, and a guest at the coronation of Anne Boleyn and the baptism of Prince Edward, the future King Edward VI.

Thomas Wotton, Edward's son, was three times Sheriff of Kent.

In August 1573 Queen Elizabeth I stayed at Boughton Place and planted an oak tree in the grounds during her progress through Kent.

Sir Henry Wotton, a diplomat, poet, publisher and friend of Isaak Walton, was born at Boughton Place in 1568.

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St Nicholas, Boughton Malherbe, the Wotton family's parish church. (Ref no. TW1)



Boughton Malherbe village sign. (Ref no. TW2)



Boughton Place, the family seat of the Wottons (Ref no. TW3)



Memorial to Nicholas Wotton Jnr and Elizabeth Wotton in St Nicholas Church. (Ref no. TW4)



Memorial to Thomas Wotton in St Nicholas Church. (Ref. TW5)

