



A TALE OF TWO MANORS

HOW BATH CITY FARM REFLECTS THE HISTORY OF TWERTON


Kirsten Elliott

This year, Bath City Farm celebrates its 25 birthday, the charity and company being formally established in October 1995. However, the idea of a city farm for Bath goes back even earlier than 1995 – in their archives they found a document which shows the formation of an association to promote the creation of a city farm in 1985. In 1990, a group of local residents finally took a lease on a piece of land left abandoned after a dairy farm ceased its operations. At that time they had no animals or buildings, just the idea.

Bath is often thought of as middle-class and wealthy yet Twerton, where the farm is based, is ranked among the top 20 per cent of 'highly deprived' areas in England. That does not stop it having a strong sense of community, and hundreds of local residents signed a petition for a community farm. In 1994 they gained planning permission for new buildings and the farm.

As part of the planned celebrations, I was asked to investigate the history of the site. Armed with a plan of the farm, which helpfully gave field names, and the archaeological investigations made in 1992, I began work. A good place to start is often the tithe map with its accompanying registers. Although they are not that old – they were carried out in the early years of Victoria's reign – they are useful because they are extremely accurate surveys and they give both the landowners and the tenants names, as well as land usage. The Twerton map is dated 1839.


An interesting pattern was soon clear. With certain exceptions, the land was split evenly between two sets of landowners. One half of the property, to the east, belonged to two clergymen, Reverends England and Hampden, and the other half to the mill owner Charles Wilkins. This division dates back to Saxon times – Domesday Book states that Twerton, known then as Tyvertone, was divided into two manors. In 1086, the village was one of the larger settlements noted in Domesday, with 32 households.



In 1066 the overlord had been Queen Edith, with the eastern manor split between three thanes, and the western manor controlled by Alvred the Steward. A bank which can be seen running down between two fields on the site is thought to mark the boundary between the two manors.

After the Norman Conquest, these lands, along with many others, were granted to Geoffrey, Bishop of Coutances, by William I as a reward for his loyalty and courage in battle. He leased off the two manors, Nigel de Gournay holding the eastern manor, and Geoffrey Malreward holding the western one, around the church. At this date, Twerton was a centre for agriculture, as shown by the remains of medieval strip lynchets in some of the fields. There were, in addition, four mills. However, its primary industry was the production of wool – there were 400 sheep and 22 acres of meadow between the two manors. Even today, two fields bear the names Great Lamb Sleight and Lower Lamb Sleight.

Between 1276 and 1285, Twerton had the right to hold an annual fair, described as having ‘great trade in woollen cloth’. By the late 15th century, cloth was being fulled at two Twerton mills. In the 16th century, the cloth trade collapsed and by the 17th century one of the mills had reverted to a grist mill but the other continued as a fulling mill. We know, however, that weaving did continue. Most of the weaving was done by hand. At the start of the 18th century there were 160 handlooms, spread among the 800 inhabitants. However, later during this century there was a dramatic expansion of the cloth trade in Twerton with the building of cloth mills and use of machinery. The mills went through various hands before coming under the ownership of Charles Wilkins, a cloth manufacturer from Kenn, near Clevedon, who first became associated with the mills by 1807, eventually acquiring both Twerton Upper and Lower Mills.



During the 18th century, the eastern manor became increasingly split up, with grand landowners such as the Duke of Chandos divesting themselves of Twerton properties after about 1780. Some of the lands went to Reverend William England and his brother-in-law John Hampden, neither of whom lived in Twerton. This included Twerton Farm. However, the western manor remained together, in the hands of one family until sold by the trustees of the Walker-Heneage family to Charles Wilkins in 1836.

Wilkins was something of a philanthropist, who built decent homes for his workers. Although to our ears the conditions in his mills sound harsh, yet he was one of the few mill-owners to approve of the bill reducing the hours children could work in factories. Indeed, he felt meal times should be longer, and the mills kept warm in winter. In 1834, Wilkins gave 8 acres of land, leased to 50 workers as allotments. However, by 1847, Wilkins was in financial trouble.

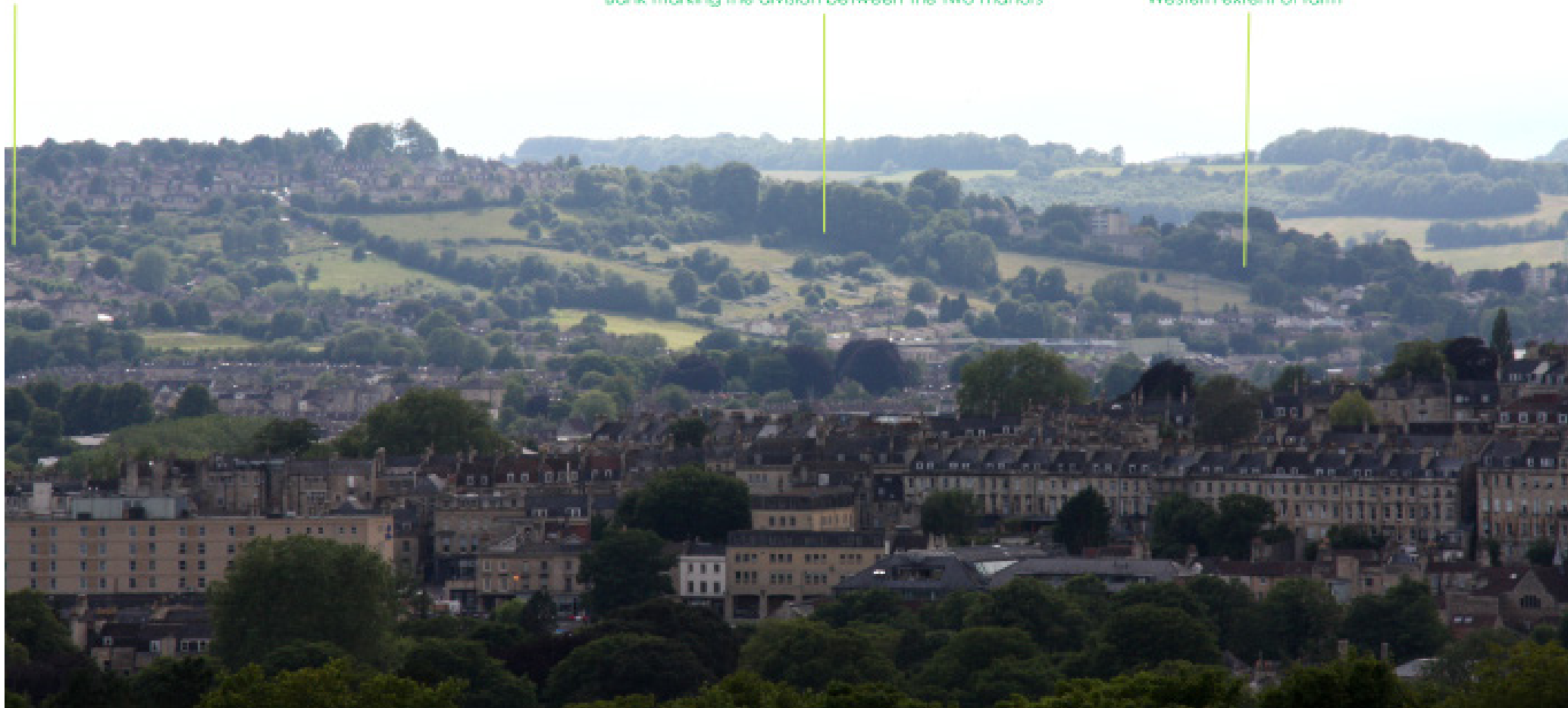
Perhaps trying to maintain decent standards in the face of competitors who were less scrupulous had not helped. His estate was bought by the Carr family, who took over the mills. During these centuries Twerton had not been part of Bath but in 1911, it finally became part of the city. Council houses began to be built after the First World War, and in the 1950s the council acquired much of the Carr estate for housing, including many of the fields which now form part of the farm. Happily, however, they remained as farmland until the point where the council decided not to expand on to these slopes, and Bath City Farm was born.

Bath City Farm seen from Bathwick, showing its importance to the setting of the World Heritage Site


Eastern extent of farm (The Hollow)

Bank marking the division between the two manors

Western extent of farm



Bath City Farm



Today, the farm runs a wide variety of community projects, which can be found on their website bathcityfarm.org.uk . Many are aimed at supporting disadvantaged & disabled people to develop new skills. The organisers responded to the Covid19 pandemic by collaborating with The Quartet Community Foundation, Wessex Water, a team of determined local volunteers and donations from the public, to deliver healthy prepared meals on a twice-weekly basis to people in the community who are in need of support to access healthy cooked meals.

But the farm itself needs your help if it is to survive. It has been hard hit by the loss of income. There is a gofundme page on the website at

<https://www.gofundme.com/f/BCF25>

to raise money to continue this admirable enterprise, or you can adopt an animal. If you have enjoyed this article, please think about a donation, however small.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kirsten Elliott has always had an interest in industrial archaeology, particularly canals, but her other interests are architecture, dance, literature and the social life of the Georgian period. For nearly thirty five years she has taken guided tours of Bath, and she also professionally researches the history of buildings. With her husband Dr Andrew Swift, she formed Akeman Press in 2003, and since then they have produced many local history books by themselves and by other local authors.

