

## OUR FARM OF GULES

### The search for a lost site at Widcombe, Bath

by

Penny Gay and Elizabeth Holland

#### Part I

The historic church of Thomas à Becket at Widcombe, Bath, lies next to 'the Golden House'<sup>1</sup>, known as Widcombe Manor. A pamphlet on the Golden House, compiled by Elizabeth Holland for the Survey of Old Bath and the local history group, is available on the websites of the Widcombe Association and the History of Bath Research Group.

The oldest inscription in St. Thomas's refers to 'Jane Gay of Gules'. A while ago, the Survey and the local history group received an enquiry from Penny Gay, as to who Jane Gay was and where 'Gules' lay.

'Our fferme of Gules', mentioned by the last Prior, was the last remaining unknown medieval site of significance in Lyncombe and Widcombe, as discussed below. Elizabeth therefore gladly joined Penny in the search for it, and together, after much labour, they came to a definite conclusion.

#### The Manor of Lyncombe

The district south of Bath was originally referred to as Clifton. With the Normans, it became known as 'Lincuma' or Lyncombe. Medieval documents state that the manor of Lyncombe had acquired four centres of settlement, **Berewyk**, **Holloway**, **Lyncombe** and **Widcombe**.

In recent years, much research has been devoted to clarifying these sites and superseding guesswork and legend. Allan Keevil made a detailed study of **Berewyk** or 'Barracks'. **Holloway** has attracted much attention, and the two groups mentioned above held a successful exhibition on it at the Museum of Bath at Work, attended by visitors from far and wide.

There had long been a quest to find the exact site of the *caput* or administrative centre of the manor of Lyncombe. The two groups established that it lay in **Lyncombe** itself, by the Lyn brook which gave the manor its name, at Lincombe Farm, now called Lyncombe Hall.

In **Widcombe**, Mike Chapman identified and studied the old hunting park, and John Hawkes investigated its history from the Dissolution to the time when it was re-assembled as a single venue by Ralph Allen. As indicated above, the two history groups made a special study of the house called Widcombe Manor, while the area's mills have been a topic for mill enthusiasts.

Old maps of the area indicate names like the East Field and West Field, and the Dolemeads. (John Hawkes set out to trace the history of the old fields, but unfortunately died.) Finally, as said above, only one significant medieval property remained to be discovered in 'Lyncombe and Widcombe', the site referred to as 'our fferme of Gules'. It might have remained forever obscure, if Penny Gay had not sent the enquiry already mentioned.

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<sup>1</sup> The name 'the Golden House' comes from Horace Annesley Vachell, who lived there from 1927-1954. His novel, *The Golden House*, was published in August 1937 by Messrs. Cassell.

The pamphlet by Elizabeth Holland is entitled, *Widcombe Manor – The Golden House: Widcombe Manor, Church Street, Bath*.

The Widcombe and Lyncombe Local History Society, named on the pamphlet, was previously entitled The Widcombe and Lyncombe Local Study Group. The WLLHS lapsed in lockdown, but local history studies have been revived by the Widcombe Association under the interim name 'the Local History Club'.

Documents state that Gules lay in Widcombe, the district on the east side of the manor. Drawing on the work already described, Penny and Elizabeth examined Widcombe field by field, and decided that there was only one possible conclusion, that Gules lay in the grounds of the White Hart Inn at Widcombe, and its Home Field on the slopes of Widcombe Hill opposite the site of Prior Park Buildings.

Mrs. Connie Smith, always a pioneer, had already hinted at this, saying that Gules lay opposite the Dolemeads. Mrs. Smith's work was not always easy to access. Her comment on Gules came in some hand-written notes on the Bayly-Colthurst estate, and was read by the two present authors only towards the end of their study, confirming what they already thought. She did not lay out her reasons for this conclusion.

### **The White Hart Inn**

The White Hart stands at the foot of Widcombe Hill, at the junction with Prior Park Road and the eastern end of Claverton Street. Richard Jones, Clerk of Works to Ralph Allen, states that he built it, and it is mentioned in the Vestry Survey of 1737. Jones also had the 'ten houses in the Withy Bed' built, known as the Ralph Allen Cottages, presumably used by workers at the stone wharf. The withy or willow bed probably once stretched across the site of the road, and is mentioned again farther south.

Ralph Allen had bought the land from the estate of Thomas Colthurst (not a direct descendant of the former Colthursts of Bath). He bought other land along the valley so as to be able to run his stone tramway down from the Combe Down stone mines. William Chapman the Distiller, owner of Lyncombe Farm, sold him part of the Dolemeads, and he placed his stone wharf by the river. Originally, a brewery was built there as well.

'The White Hart' was a popular inn name. The actual figure of a hart on the Widcombe inn first stood outside the later demolished Hart in Stalls Street, Bath, and after a spell elsewhere, was replaced in Widcombe. It was stolen, but its body was recovered in the Lyn brook by Prior Park Buildings, and its head recarved under the direction of Dr. Michael Rowe, now chairman of the History of Bath Research Group.

The myth of the White Hart comes from the Grail legends. It dates back to the *Ramayana*. It is an elusive figure, like a trick of moonlight or of sun and shade. It was the badge of Richard II, and appears on the Wilton diptych.

### **The farm of Gules**

Before Colthurst, the well-known Stuart physician Ralph Bayly owned Gules, and died one day riding home from his practice in Bath. Before that the Gay family held the lease.

The most likely place for the farmhouse seems to have been on the site of the building behind the White Hart Inn, shown in old pictures. In modern times, the building was used successively as a brewery, a skittle alley, and a backpacker's hostel. Whether old stones in a wall visible from Prior Park Gardens came from an early stage of the building, is not known.

Penny Gay has provided information on the deeds of Gules and on the Gay family, to follow in Part II.

In the meantime, we include here a piece on the renovation of the White Hart Inn sign, by Dr. Michael Rowe:

## **The Renovation of the White Hart Inn Sign**

2003 saw the re installation of the historically important lifelike carved wood white hart sign on the porch above the front door of the inn at the bottom of Widcombe Hill.

It is considered to be of considerable age and was above the door of the White Hart coaching inn in Stall Street until the building was demolished in 1867. It was then it moved to a position above the single story building on the corner of Bond Street and Upper Borough Walls which was at that time a wine and spirits shop.

Sometime later (I don't know when) it moved to its present position in Widcombe.

About 2001 it was stolen one night and the body but not the head was found in the stream at Prior Park Buildings. Some of the legs were damaged when it had been torn down.

For some years the body languished in the basement of the Inn until the Renovations Committee of the Bath Preservation Trust, heard about it and started work on having it restored.

The Inn and the Trust and some private individuals contributed the funds to have the body repaired and a new head carved.

The carving was done by Charles Oldham, the woodcarver of Frome, who carved some of the bosses for the ceiling of the State dining Room at Windsor Castle after the fire.

Historically it was common for lifelike inn signs of animals to be fitted with the appropriate real horns or antlers and for the White Hart, fallow deer antlers were given to the Trust by the owners of deer farm then on the Warminster Road near Bath.

During conservation of the body it was found that the hooves and the hair on the chest had previously been gilded. Once the body colour of white was re applied gold leaf was used for the decoration.

The fully conserved and restored hart was re installed in 2003 with an accompanying street party and with an exhibition about the history of Widcombe in St. Matthew's church.

The church and inn were linked on the pavement by a hand knitted trail and the hart unveiled by the MP for Bath.