

THE LIBERTY OF ST JOHN

The land owned by the Hospitallers was outside the borough jurisdiction. It was known as the Liberty of St John and those who lived there had special privileges. In medieval times they were free of the obligation to attend the local monthly court; they could sell goods at any market in England without paying a toll; and they were able to inherit property before they came of age whereas elsewhere it was forfeit to the Crown.

The advantages continued, and even in the 19th century wrongdoers in Midhurst could escape punishment by fleeing into St Johns, and vice versa. Local people deeply resented this division of authority, and their only consolation was that those in St Johns could not vote at elections (until the Reform Act of 1832). The Liberty kept its own law court and constable until the Great War.

‘THE COMMANDERY’

Contemporary documents dating from 1338, 1515 and 1540 list the Hospitallers’ properties in Midhurst. There is no mention of a commandery (or priory). No members of the Order lived here. All authority was vested at Poling. There were only lay tenants whose rents were collected twice a year by a clerk from Poling. Yet a plaque on a wall in West Street proclaims:

“IN 1811
THE COMMANDERY HOUSE
OF THE KNIGHTS OF ST JOHN
STOOD HERE”

This is set above a black door in a pseudo-medieval frame, which was listed by English



Heritage as being of special historical interest, supposedly erected in the 16th century. On the contrary it was installed in 1811 by a wealthy local antiquarian, Henry Seymour, who bought all the houses that stood on land that he believed had once belonged to the Hospitallers in West Street. He then demolished them and built a large house for himself on the corner between West Street and the Bepton Road with gardens down to South Pond. He named it ‘St Johns’.



The Midhurst Society, promoting new ideas and supporting our heritage to help Midhurst become a better place to live, work and enjoy. *Like to know more?*

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KNIGHTS HOSPITALLER AT MIDHURST



For 300 years the medieval Knights Hospitaller (the Knights of the Hospital of St John the Baptist at Jerusalem) raised money in Midhurst for the Crusades and for subsequent wars against the Saracens. Originally a nursing order with a 1000-bed hospital in Jerusalem to care for pilgrims to the Holy Land, the Knights later became monks with swords. They

took the monastic vows of poverty, obedience and chastity, lived in monasteries and died fighting. Like the Templars, they believed that sanctification came from killing the enemies of Christendom. Today, their worldwide successors administer hospitals, provide ambulance services and help those in stricken areas.

IN SUSSEX

Pious benefactors throughout Europe gave money and lands to support the Hospitallers. Their English brotherhood had 30

commanderies, or priories, each of which had smaller manors attached to them. The Sussex headquarters were at Poling near Arundel. This housed the Knight Preceptor and his deputy, the chaplain, a steward, two attendants and two clerks. Funds were raised by collecting alms and by leasing out lands given to them at Eastbourne, Islesham, Midhurst, Rumboldswyck and Up Marden.

AT MIDHURST

The Midhurst properties were donated to the Hospitallers in about 1224 by Savaric de Bohun, a religious fanatic (later declared insane) who on at least two previous occasions had given part of his lands in Normandy to monastic orders. His grandfather, Ralph fitzSavaric, had probably given the Knights their Poling estates some 80 years earlier. Both men were, in their time, Lords of the Manor of Midhurst.

Savaric gave the Hospitallers the tithes from his North and South Mills. In addition, he assigned to them the rents from outlying land which they leased to local farmers. It consisted of 50 acres of arable land and a quarter acre of meadow (together worth 13s 4d per year), and 54 acres of sheep pasture (worth 8s 4d). These were at:

- Fernhurst (Moses Hill Farm) 58.3 acres
- Trotton (Milland Farm) 44 acres
- Easebourne (Collyers) 1.3 acres
- Heyshott (Hoyle Farm) 0.25 acres

Outside the then extent of Midhurst, the Hospitallers also received 10 crofts and their fields, 2 meadows and an area of 'wild heathland'. This lay between Wool Lane and Rumbolds Hill, and continued southwards



(probably as far as the present Catholic church), lying between the Bepton Road and the stream that fed the later South Pond. The effect of this was that 'New West Street' extended further west beyond the Duck Lane turning. There, Savaric built a chapel with a rear garden. It and the Midhurst lands were leased by the Knight Preceptor at Poling to a local agent who kept the rents and the oblations from the chapel, off-setting them against an agreed fee that he paid to Poling.

THE CHAPEL

The Chapel was on the south side of West Street, near the present junction with Grange Road (which did not then exist). It was dedicated to St Thomas Becket, murdered at Christmas 1170 before the high altar of Canterbury Cathedral. His sanctification, almost immediately after his death, was due to the miraculous healing power of the smallest drop of his blood. The cult verged on idolatry, and the dedication to him of the Midhurst chapel ensured that it became a place of pilgrimage, conveniently situated between the shrine of St Richard at Chichester and that of St Swithun at Winchester. The founding of the Midhurst chapel in about 1224 links it to the great international celebrations in 1220 when the saint was re-interred in the presence of Henry III, the papal legate and three archbishops.

The chapel furnishings included elaborate vestments, five altar cloths, a silver and gilt

chalice and paten, an alabaster tablet depicting St Thomas, a marble panel over the altar and two most precious illuminated missals: one hand-size, the other larger for the priest. There were two chantries where Masses were said for the souls of the founder's family.

Because the chapel belonged to the Hospitallers, it was outside episcopal control and at one time probably had its own cleric to conduct daily services. By 1514 the lessor was merely required to provide 'an honest priest' to celebrate on four occasions, namely the feast (29 December) and the reburial (7 July) of St Thomas; the birth (24 June) and the beheading (29 August) of St John the Baptist – patron of the Hospitallers.

THE SUPPRESSION

In 1514 the Midhurst lands and the chapel were leased to Robert Gybrishe for 41 years at an annual rent of 33s 4d. He also had to pay 10 marks (about £6 13s 4d) to show his good faith – a considerable amount, but presumably he thought it to be a good investment.

Unfortunately before his term had expired, all the Knights' lands in England were seized by Henry VIII in 1540. Poling was given to the Earl of Arundel and the Midhurst properties became part of the Cowdray estate. The Hospitallers' chapel was no longer in use, but the building survived until 1617 when it was sold by the second Viscount Montague, who was in debt having been heavily fined for involvement in the Gunpowder Plot. It was then demolished and disappears from history.