

Who lived here 900 years ago?

It is unlikely we shall ever know the answer to this question. The Domesday Book tells us who lived in our neighbouring Manors and what was there. Each had a Lord of the Manor and Domesday counted each separately.

It was Wells Cathedral, however, that owned Hwete Circe and Bezenhangra Manors, our parish from 1065 to 1937. In 1086, the time of Domesday, Bishop John of Tours (the Rotter) had hiked up his cassock and taken his See off to Bath. Wells entered a period of decline during which the Bishop's nephew, Archdeacon John, stole the Cathedral lands, claiming them as his own.

All of this means Domesday is vague about Wells Cathedral's land, never mind who lived here.

From their size, we can guess that the Binegar and Whitchurch Manors might have supported 10 families.

The highest-ranking villagers were *villeins*, firmly established in customary holdings or tenements of land. Each villein might hold up to 20 acres of land spread in strips across common, open fields. He (they were always he then) had a small fenced home paddock and rights to graze his animals on common land.

Next came the *bordars* or *cottars* with less land – maybe 5 acres – plus grazing rights. They eked out a living as best they could.

The lowest were the *serfs* or slaves who worked for the landowner full time. Villeins and bordars also paid their rent in this way, working part-time.



Did you ever wonder how, in a big, open field, you could tell which strip of land was yours? The medieval method of ploughing helped by creating a ridge along the strip with valleys between each one. You can see evidence of this in fields on the Levels after rain. It is amazing how medieval strip farming has survived all those centuries.

We can make a stab at who lived in our Manors. In neighbouring Emborough Manor, Domesday recorded six villeins, four bordars, three cottars, and two serfs. Seven ploughs worked the land. There were 23 cattle, 25 pigs and 1

horse. Above all, you will not be surprised to learn, there were 159 *wethers*, sheep over one year old.

From later evidence, there might also have been a mill at Gurney Slade Bottom and one on Wellow Brook, north of Whitchurch's Manor House.

Our manors may then have supported some 40 men, women and children in 10 families. They were subject to Archdeacon John, to whom they owed service.

The work was hard relying mostly on muscle-power. Living was tough and life, in the words of Thomas Hobbes was probably "nasty, brutish and short".