

Taunton

The Taunton Estate has at least three distinct roots of title:-

1. Taunton Southside

Orchard Portman etc.

The Orchard family owned much of what is now Taunton Southside in the 1300s. Thomas de Orchard was killed by the Black Death in 1348. The Orchards held sway until the 1400s when Christina Orchard, widowed in 1437, married Walter Portman, a Taunton merchant. Walters's son, John, a lawyer, moved to Temple, London and was followed by his son – another John – and grandson, Sir William Portman 1498-1557 into law. Sir William entered Middle Temple in 1517. Sir William added extensive lands to his Taunton holdings following the Dissolution of Taunton Priory in 1539. Initially, Thurlbear passed to the Carvanyells, a merchant family from Taunton, but by 1600 had passed to the Portmans. It was Sir William who also acquired 293 acres in Marylebone initially by lease (1532) and then by freehold purchase (1554) which were subsequently developed as the Portman's London estate. The family connection to Somerset is indicated in the naming of Orchard Street. The Taunton holdings were augmented by the purchase of Taunton Northside in 1873, for which see below.

The First Viscount Portman, 1799-1888, and his son, the Second Viscount, were responsible for building 'scores of good labourers' cottages'. Lord Portman's brother, the Hon. and Rev. Fitzhardinge Berkeley Portman (1811-1893) was rector of Staple Fitzpaine, Bickenhall, Orchard Portman, Thurlbear and Stoke St Mary. He built Staple Manor for his own occupation.

2. Taunton Northside – Hestercombe

The Hestercombe estate was in the ownership of the Warre family from 1391 to 1872 when the 'eccentric' 83 year old Miss Elizabeth Warre died, apparently the last in her line. The Warre family – cousins – had connections to Oporto and thus are likely to be the well-known 'Port' family. The Warres established a garden by the house under Copletine Warre Bamford in the mid-1700s.

In 1873 the estate was purchased by the First Viscount Portman who had the house remodelled. In 1904, Edward Portman commissioned Sir Edwin Lutyens to reform the garden which he did with his 'associate' Gertrude Jekyll. The Portmans were already established to the south of Taunton.

3. Chilworthy

Chilworthy was purchased from Mrs H W A Kemmis at Michaelmas 1952 for £72,500 who had purchased much of the land from Lord Hudson a few years before. The Permanent Commissioner, Mr Eastwood opined 'I believe the estate was bought without being seen by anybody from this office and it should be a lesson never to do this again, for as far as I can make out, it has been a thoroughly bad buy'. He goes on to castigate the condition of the holding, the dispersed nature of the holdings, the steep terrain etc. A decision to sell this element of the estate was taken in the 1990s and by 2006 most had been sold.

Crown Estate Purchase

The Taunton Estate (north and southside) was purchased from the Portmans in 1944. The estate was managed by a resident agent. These arrangements were continued, with the management being conducted by Crown employed land agents until 1974, when the management was passed to Humberts, with Tom St. John Ellis and Geoffrey Osborn both being taken into the firm. Humberts managed the estate until 1989, then Bruton Knowles took over and then, following a restricted tender, from 2006, Smiths Gore. The estate is managed with Dunster.

The acquisition was subject to a life interest of The Hon. Mrs C M Portman of Hestercombe House and 234 acres. Mrs Portman died in May 1951. Sir Osmond Cleverly wrote 'an unattractive and pretentious place...the garden is quite lovely'.

After being canvassed as a school training centre or nurses home, the building was leased and subsequently sold to Somerset County Council as a headquarters for the county fire brigade.

Hestercombe Farm was the home farm associated with the house.

Taunton racecourse also formed part of the purchase.

Westover Farm was bought from Bradford Agricultural Seedsmen 'who used it as a lock up for their money' during the war – presumably a bomb proof investment. Sold in the 1960s.

The estate was run from an office on the ground floor of Billetfield house in the centre of Taunton, the upper floor being let as a flat.

The purchase was facilitated by the then recent (1942) payment of compensation for loss of coal rights following the Coal (Transfer of ownership) Act 1938.

There was an estate yard and sawmill at Shoreditch, Orchard Portman, with a staff of 20 foremen, 4 carpenters, 1 painter, 1 stripper, 2 labourers, 1 tractor driver, 1 lorry driver, 2 sawyers, a foreman and 4 woodmen (circa. 1950). These workforces continued until the late 1980s when they were laid off with the building force in the guise of Orchard Vale Builders taking over the maintenance work on the estate from the Shoreditch Yard by arrangement.

There were supplementary purchases from Lady Portman of 26 acres in Whitelease Lane and of Thurlbear Rectory in 1947. The area totalled 58 acres.

Anecdote:-

One tenant 'A burly man known locally as Mussolini' Osmond Cleverly 1949

Sources:-

Primary

Black visit note file

Secondary

Stirnet.com/HTML/genie/british/ww/warre

Humberts into the eighties – Derek Barber

History of Thurlbear 1957 R A Sixsmith

Orchard and the Portmans – TW Maybury 1986