

The Woodcock family of 17th century Clavering

Most of the overseas visitors to Clavering are Australians seeking their roots, but in June 2015 I met up with an American with a rather different quest - Elisabeth Liebert teaches 17th century literature at a university in Louisiana, and is researching the life of Katherine Woodcock, one of a family of Woodcocks who appear in parish registers here from the 1550s to the 1750s. Her interest in Clavering came about because William Woodcock, born in Clavering in 1595, had a daughter Katherine who married the poet John Milton in 1656 - sadly she died after childbirth less than two years later. Milton's first marriage had been unhappy, but his love for his second wife was expressed in a sonnet with the lines, *"Her face was veil'd; yet to my fancied sight/ Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shin'd/ So clear, as in no face with more delight."*

Elisabeth Liebert's interest in Clavering also centred on a so-called manor called Bollingtons, which was leased by his father to William Woodcock, who sold it to his brother-in-law, but when he sold it to an outsider, the family were left homeless and moved to London. This 'manor' created a string of claims in Chancery, and is listed in various 16th century wills as Bolyntons or Bonyngtons Farm, consisting of manor, messuage, farm or tenement, barns, stables, outhouses, malhouses, orchards, gardens, arable, meadows, pasture and wood - so was quite a substantial holding.

And yet today nothing survives. Thanks to maps, however, we know roughly where it was: a 12-acre arable field called Bonitans appears on the 1783 map owned by the lady of the manor, Mrs Allen; in 1810 it was sold off as Bonitans & Yard 12 acres; and the name appears again on the 1840 tithe map - but no farmhouse is shown. The name Bolingtons was known in the 1930s, and a variant is still the field name used today by the present owners, the Balaams of Place Farm. Of course the field may have been adjacent to the farm house, not the actual site of it.

On her visit in June, Elisabeth walked up to the field to see where the Woodcocks had lived all those centuries ago. It is to the left of the public footpath that goes from Sticklings Green to Wood Hall, perhaps near the back garden of Shovellers, although today the fields are joined up. Clavering's connection with one of the greatest English poets is a new addition to our records, but little else is known about the long-lost farm of Bollingtons.