

Ringshall, Battisford and Wattisham

Stories from The Historic Villages around Orchard Barn

The Ringshall location of Orchard Barn and its associated 1580 Long House are situated in a small but fascinating area of English history.

Thomas Gresham

Thomas Gresham, sometimes referred to as Elizabeth I's banker, had a house in Ringshall, and at least one house in Battisford. The connection between the 1580s Longhouse and Thomas Gresham is tenuous, but possible and intriguing!

Gresham was born in London in about 1518 and was the son of Sir Richard Gresham and Audrey Lynne. His father was a merchant and financier for Henry VIII and became very wealthy. Richard became Mayor of London in 1537 and was a witness at the execution of Anne Boleyn in 1536. He was a good friend to Cardinal Wolsey. His brother John, (Thomas' uncle), founded a School at Holt in Norfolk on the site of a house built by his grandfather James.

Influenced by the ruthless trading and financial activities of his father and uncle Thomas became a trader for Henry VIII after gaining the attention of the King's senior minister Thomas Cromwell. He had been educated at Cambridge and studied Law in London and gained experience working in his uncle's drapery business in London and the Netherlands. He was fluent in Flemish and French and became a member of the Mercers Company in 1543 eventually taking control of the family business in 1546. His trading diversified into cloth, armaments and metals.

The crown of Henry VIII was funded by borrowing from the exchange at Antwerp and during the reign of Edward VI the unfavourably high interest rates negotiated by the King's Agent William Dansall eventually prompted his replacement by Thomas Gresham. Gresham was successful in reducing the crown's borrowing. However during the reign of Mary, following a dispute with the Queen, Gresham returned to trading and the borrowing rates once again became unfavourable. He was reinstated as the royal agent but removed once more as his relationship with the royal court deteriorated. He again became Royal Agent for Elizabeth I and was knighted in 1559 for his services to the crown.

In 1544 Thomas married Anne Ferneley. He acquired manors in Ringshall following the death of his widowed mother in addition to his estates in London, Norfolk, and Antwerp. It was his father's ambition to build a trading exchange in London therefore using his considerable wealth Gresham decided to fulfill his Father's wish. At that

time Battisford Tye was thickly wooded and it is likely that suitable timbers were cut at a sawpit in Sandy Lane Battisford. They were framed at land nearby under the instruction of a Flemish Architect and subsequently transported to Ipswich and then by sea to Threadneedle street in London. The building was completed in 1571.

The 1580 LongHouse at Orchard Barn has been described as being built by 'someone of considerable status'. Some of the large timbers suggest a more substantial building. Therefore is it possible that Sir Thomas commissioned the building of the Longhouse in line with other structures in the area such as a barn near Ringshall Hall? It may also be argued that the timbers may have been surplus to requirement when the Royal exchange was built. Gresham was notoriously mean and he wouldn't have seen good timbers go to waste.

The Gresham Ship

The Gresham ship built in 1574 was an Elizabethan armed merchant vessel that sank in the Thames estuary. It has recently been discovered and named following the recovery of an iron cannon which bore the emblem and initials of Sir Thomas Gresham. Tree ring analysis performed in 2004 suggest that timbers were sourced in East Anglia. Could some of these have originated in Battisford Tye? In the late 16th and early 17th century 26% of ships were built in shipyards in Suffolk and Essex.

St Johns Manor House Battisford

This 1570 house was possibly built for Lady Anne Gresham, wife of Sir Thomas Gresham. It is on the site of an earlier building 'The Preceptory of the Knights Hospitallers'. The order of knights of the hospital of St John began in the 12th century and provided care for pilgrims to the Holy Land, it eventually became a military order. The land at Battisford was gifted to the order by Henry III in 1271. They were also known as the Knights of Malta. The Knights Templar were a similar group providing protection to pilgrims from attack. In 1887 the order created the worldwide St John Ambulance brigade.

The 1933 Tithe war at Woodlands Farm Ringshall

For hundreds of years tithes were paid by farmers voluntarily to support the clergy but eventually the church established a right to one tenth of a farmers' produce. In 1836 a charge was introduced based upon the price of crops in the preceding seven years. During the 1930s depression, farmers rebelled as they had difficulty making a living from the land following payment of the tax. In 1933 at Woodlands farm adjacent to Orchard Barn the British Union of Fascists intervened in a dispute between Mrs Hanna Waspe and her sons Arthur and John who owed £47 in tithes due to Kings' College Cambridge.

Agricultural equipment worth £50 was impounded to pay the debt but as parts had been damaged or removed it was only worth £5. Two fields of crops were then impounded and a bailiff supported by 20 police arrived to guard the crops. This was unpopular with local people as the value of the crops exceeded the tithe owed. Members of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists arrived from Norfolk to support Mrs Waspe though she and her family did not agree to their presence. Slogans were written on the roads and leaflets distributed. More BUF members were sent by Mosley from London when the harvest of the crops was expected. They had provisions for a prolonged stay and contaminated the land with metal to prevent the harvest taking place. A pond used by Police and bailiffs was polluted to prevent its use and when earthenware water containers were delivered air rifles were fired in an attempt to break them. Threats were made to burn the crops with petrol, reporters were given prior details of the plan and an estimated crowd of 1000 people were present at the confrontation. The Waspe family eventually gained the backing of the Suffolk Tithe Association and Kings College decided to release the impounded crop. This was interpreted by the BUF as a prelude to harvesting and subsequently the roads leading to Woodlands farm were blocked with wood bundles and telegraph poles to prevent harvesting equipment entering the farm. Eventually Kings' College abandoned its claim on the unpaid charge because a purchaser for the crop could not be found. The roads were cleared by the Police and the blackshirts and the BUF erroneously claimed victory in their action.

Wattisham Airbase

The construction of Wattisham air base adjacent to Wattisham village and close to the Orchard Barn site began in 1937 and the base opened in 1939. On September 4th 1939 only 29 hours after the outbreak of World War 2, Bristol Blenheim aircraft from Wattisham made the first attack on German shipping at Wilhelmshaven. The base suffered heavy losses during 1940 losing a total of 61 aircraft and 118 aircraft were lost before the end of 1942. In 1942 the base was renamed Hitcham and modified by the United States Army Air Force for use by its heavy bombers, but because sufficient capacity was found for the aircraft at other bases this was not required. The Strategic Air Maintenance depot at Wattisham became responsible in 1944 for the service and repair of all American fighters in the UK. The base also hosted Lockheed Lightning aircraft.

The airbase was handed back to the RAF in 1945 and in 1946 it hosted Gloster Meteors and from 1950 Hawker Hunters. From 1955 Wattisham was the home of the Royal Air Force display team, The Black Arrows who attended air shows around the nation.

In 1960, during the cold war, Wattisham became the front line airbase with fully armed English Electric Lightning aircraft on standby at all times. McDonnell Douglas Phantoms were there until 1992 and the Army Air Corps took over in 1993. Currently Boeing Apache helicopters operate from the airfield and Parachute regiments from Colchester can deploy using Hercules transport aircraft.

RAF Search and Rescue Westland Sea Kings operated from Wattisham between 1994 and 2015.

During the war Wattisham was targeted by the Luftwaffe on many occasions. Stowmarket suffered during the attacks and damage can still be seen on Poplar hill and bullet marks remain on houses in Battisford.

The pioneering days of fast jet flying were witness to many accidents, including several around Stowmarket. In one incident in 1956 Flt, Lt Alan Merriman, a Hunter pilot flying from Wattisham suffered an engine failure when climbing at full power. He ejected from the aircraft at 12000 feet;

'I had the misfortune of parachuting through the roof of a house in (Lime Tree Place) Stowmarket with my feet entering an upstairs bedroom where a beautiful lady was in bed'.

Information Sources

Thomas Gresham

The History of London.co.uk

Encyclopaedia Britannica

Historic England,co,uk

John William Burgon ; Life and Times of Sir Thomas Gresham

Leigh Alston; House at Orchard Barn Ringshall Suffolk an Historical Survey

Pla,co.uk

Heritage.Suffolk.gov.uk

Nigel Nayling, Tree Ring Analysis of Framing Timbers From the Princes Channel

Wreck Thames Estuary. Heritage and Archaeology Research Practice

Dendrochronology report May 2004

Gresham.co.ac Ian Friel FRA Elizabethan Ships and Shipbuilding

St Johns' Manor House

British History .ac.uk

Ancient.eu

The Tithe War

Etheses.whiterose.ac.uk; Andrew Martin Mitchell Fascism in East Anglia: The British Union of Fascists in Norfolk and Suffolk 1933-1940

Sniggle.net

Wattisham Air Base

Forces War Records.co.uk

Wattisham,org ,uk

RAF Museum,org,uk

YUMPU.com