

London Letter

Lord of the Manor

by
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AN EIGHTY-FOUR-PAGE gift catalogue published by the King Korn Stamp Company of Chicago claims on the front cover that these stamps "bring you the joys of living." It is flattering to English susceptibilities to find that the very first page gives pride of place among these joys to the acquisition of an "Authentic English Lord of the Manor Title." So highly does King Korn rate this somewhat esoteric status symbol that the candidate for lordship must collect 600 completed books of trading stamps at \$4 a book. Any man who shows such persevering singleness of purpose can scarcely fail to prove a worthy and conscientious Lord of the Manor of Felsham and Drinkstone "in picturesque Suffolk, England."

The catalogue frankly admits that "no properties remain," but "the title carries with it many legal rights over any existing commons or waste lands, including green timber and mineral rights, plus ownership of many ancient documents which must resign 'esquire' after his name and his wife becomes Lady of the Manor." The varied measures of the prospect thus presented appear equally arcaic and antiquarian, social and speculative. Should the satisfaction of signing oneself "esquire" eventually pall, the excitement of drilling for minerals in the manorial waste land (if any) must surely reanimate one's "joy of living."

In the complex history of manorial law, this must be the first transfer of a lordship by trading stamps, but it will not be the first time that an American citizen has become the lord of an English manor. Among the many distinctions of Mr. John Villiers Farrow, of Beverly Hills, one must reckon first his having married Miss Maureen O'Sullivan and, secondly, his having acquired the lordship of the manor of Surlingham in Norfolk.

Manorial Customs

The new lord of the manor of Felsham and Drinkstone will be an exceptional and remarkable character if he has anything more than the vaguest notion of what he is acquiring. Throughout the Middle Ages and long afterwards England was a checkerboard of manors and manorial lands, but where the manors came from nobody can say for certain. One theory is that the manor developed from the earlier Roman villa. More likely both were superimposed by alien conquerors on some primeval system of communal landholding. Even in the small overcrowded, overpopulated England of today there are still between one-and-a-half million and two million acres of common land. That does not mean land publicly owned, but land in private ownership over which a limited class of persons in the neighborhood, other than the owner, have certain rights, for instance, the right to graze cattle or geese, to cut turf or gather wood.

Bound up with the regulation and use of the common land was the manorial system. The lord of the manor, holding his lands of the king within the feudal system, administered the manor, in particular the succession of its tenants, saw that its customs were observed, periodically held the court leet for the purpose, and possessed a limited power of awarding punishments. In 1268 the lord of the manor of Felsham had a grant of a market, a fair and a free warren, and in 1262 the lord of the manor of Drinkstone had a market, pillory and ducking-stool. The lord of the manor had his rights and the tenants had theirs, and the customs and the rights varied with picturesque extravagance from manor to manor.

Thus at Great Bradley in Suffolk the tenants were obliged "to render a pair of red silk hosen on Michaelmas Day to the bedchamber of the lady of the manor," while the shepherds who pastured their sheep on the common of the manor of Hutton Conyers came to the customary court and "did fealty by bringing to the court a large apple pie and a twopenny sweet cake." At the manor of Enborne in Berkshire a copyholder's widow had a right to "free-bench" or dower in his lands, so long as she remained "sole and chaste," but if she lapsed she could avoid expropriation by appearing at the next customary court, mounted on a black ram, her face to the tail, reciting some pungent verses beginning:

"Here I am

Riding upon a black ram . . ."

The Present Scene

As the feudal system decayed and modern landholding evolved, the manorial system ceased to be the framework of rural life and lordship of the manor often became divorced from the ownership of the former lands of the manor. But courts leet still meet, though more spasmodically, to protect and regulate the enjoyment of the old common lands. A few years ago the people of Minchingfield in Essex were worried because automobiles were cutting away their village green, piece by piece. Only the lord of the manor could intervene and, since they had lost him, they engaged lawyers to try to locate him.

For many years lordships of the manor have had a saleable value and periodical auctions of them are held. At a sale of eleven lordships held last July at Faringdon in Berkshire the average price was £505. The lordship of the manor of Lambourn was bought for £1,400 as "a sentimental joke" by a Mr. Norman Lambourne, a businessman celebrating a £1,500,000 deal. In the previous December at Colchester a sale of sixteen lordships fetched prices averaging £628.

With the lordships go the manor rolls, maps and records, but these, as sources of English history, may not leave the country. Apart from that, the lord will have an odd variety of rights over the common or waste lands of the manor if they have survived. If the Post Office puts a telegraph pole or a telephone booth on it he can demand a rent. If travelling showmen hold a fair on it he can collect a charge. He will have the right to the shooting over it and the minerals under it. If the manor is by the sea, he may have rights to "flotsam, jetsam and lagan."

It is an interesting historical evolution that a manor once held by King Henry of England should now be bestowed by King Korn of Chicago. One hopes that the very novelty may inspire the new lord with a new vigour. It would be pleasant if perhaps a few hundred more trading stamps could procure him a residence within the bounds of the manor from which he could keep a watchful eye on the activities and interests of the commons, re-invigorate the court leet and see that its meetings were celebrated with the sort of old-fashioned hospitality which used always to mark (and in some places still does mark) the occasion.

The customary dinner of the royal manor of Hitchen in 1592 included "two dozen tarts, a capon, three geese, two dozen pigeons, two couples of rabbits, four dishes of boiled meat, two double ribs of roast beef and half of mutton." That went with two gallons of wine, beer in proportion and afterwards "warden pyes and fruet."

Felsham and Drinkstone would not be by any means indifferent to a lord of the manor who revived such good old customs of the manor.