

THE FOWLERS OF HARNAGE GRANGE AND ABBEY-CWM-HIR: C.1560–1828

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The village of Abbey-cwm-hir lies in the Radnorshire hills about six miles east of Rhayader. The land was part of the ancient Marcher Lordship of Maelienydd, dominated for centuries by the Mortimers of Wigmore. To walk these hills gives a sense of an ancient history but little, apart from the scant remains of the Cistercian abbey, gives any idea of the part that Abbey-cwm-hir has played in Welsh history, though in his book *Footsore on the Frontier* the late Nigel Jenkins named Abbey-cwm-hir as one of the four most iconic locations in Wales. The Abbey, if it had been completed, would have been one of the largest church buildings in the British Isles, planned as it was for the investiture and eventual coronation of Prince Llewelyn. It became the final resting place of the prince after his death at Cilmeri in 1282. Though historians now debate where Prince Llewelyn was buried, the existence of two letters from John Peckham, the Archbishop of Canterbury, to the Archdeacon of Brecon, demanding to know why he had allowed Llewelyn to be buried at Abbey-cwm-hir, lends weight to the possibility. Peckham, clearly fearful of further trouble with Llewelyn's grave as a rallying point, thought that his permission was required for the burial.

The Abbey was founded in 1176 by Cadwallon ap Madog of Maelienydd. It was endowed with a large tract of land to which his son Hywel and his grandson Maredudd ap Maelgyn added more. The Mortimers also gave land to it. Over the years its fortunes waxed and waned: it was sacked by Owain Glyndwr in 1401, and at the time of the suppression of the smaller monasteries in 1536 barely half a dozen monks remained. The agents of Thomas Cromwell surveyed the monastery's holdings, which then passed to Henry VIII. The Crown sold off the land to raise money for the national exchequer, a welcome boost which would go a long way to finance Henry's lavish lifestyle. Much of the Abbey-cwm-hir land was acquired by William Fowler around 1560.

William Fowler came from an ancient family which could trace its history back to medieval times. In 1190, during the reign of Richard I, Richard Fowler of Foxley in the county of Buckingham went on a crusade to the Holy Land. He served as a commander and, at his own expense, provided a company of bowmen, all of whom were his own tenants. For this he received a knighthood from the king. The family developed a

tradition of service to king and country. A later Richard Fowler, who was knighted by Edward IV, was Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

By the middle of the sixteenth century a branch of the family was settled at Broomhill, Staffordshire. Roger Fowler of Broomhill married Isabella, daughter of William Lee of Morpeth. Isabella was sister to Roland Lee, the Bishop of Lichfield, whose brother George was Dean of St Chad's in Shrewsbury. The Lee family was also related to the Bradshaw family of Presteigne, and they owned Acton Burnell, the adjoining manor to Harnage Grange, which was the home of William Fowler, buyer of the Cwm-Hir Abbey estate.

As was common at that time, Roger and Isabella had a large family, four sons and three daughters. William was the third son and it is through him that the Fowlers became connected with Abbey-cwm-hir. He was married to Mary, daughter of John Blythe, who was a doctor. They too had seven children. The eldest and heir to William was Richard, who duly inherited the estate.

William Fowler owned Harnage Grange, which is located about four miles north-west of Much Wenlock in Shropshire. He had purchased this around 1550. This was also a large estate, whose land had belonged to Buildwas Abbey and was acquired through a deal with Sir John Throckmorton and Edward Grey. He also owned other former monastic estates: documents held by Shropshire Archives show that he had a large holding around Oswestry which had once belonged to the monastery and convent of the Apostles Peter and Paul in Shrewsbury.

The Cwm-hir Abbey estate was purchased by William Fowler around 1560 at a cost of £19,000, payment being made in two halves, one on the Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the other at Michaelmas, and both at the belfry door of the parish church of Burfield, Berkshire. In this purchase Edward Herbert joined William Fowler, although what part Herbert played is not clear, as he immediately made his share over to Fowler.

William Fowler was a man of considerable wealth, which was partly old family money, partly the profits of his trading as a merchant in Shrewsbury and partly the considerable revenue in rents, tithes and herriots from his huge estates. His will, proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury after his death in 1597, shows that he owned land in the counties of Radnor, Montgomery, Merioneth, Stafford, Chester and Derby. He was an important and influential man in the affairs of Shropshire. He was a Freeman and a Burgess of Shrewsbury and, as Steward, he effectively ran it. He presided over the Great Sessions, the principal court, dispensing the summary justice which was normal in those times.

The Cwm-Hir Abbey estate that William Fowler purchased was much larger than the later Abbey-cwm-hir estates created in the nineteenth century by Thomas Wilson and Francis Philips. Measured in tens of thousands of acres, it took in the Manor of Gollon and the Township of Cefn Pawl in Llanbister parish, all of Llananno parish, most of the extensive parish of St Harmon and a considerable part of Llanbadarn Ffynydd parish. To this could be added property in Nantmel, Disserth, Cefn Llys, Llangunllo, Ceri and the more distant Clyro in lower Radnorshire. It has to be remembered that this was only one of a number of sizeable estates that Fowler owned in various counties on both sides of the border. They would have kept him busy, together with his duties as Steward of Shrewsbury.

Day to day management of the estate would have been the responsibility of the estate steward assisted by a bailiff, probably more than one bailiff for an estate this size. The Manor of Gollon had its own Manorial Court which was responsible dealing with matters of tenancy, rents, tithes, amercements and herriots, as well as settling disputes. It also had power to deal with local petty crime. As Lord of the Manor of Gollon, William Fowler would usually be present at meetings of the Manorial Court, known as the Court Leet, although this duty could be delegated to the steward. The court had its origins in medieval times but there is evidence that it survived well into the eighteenth century. Documents show that it met in 1720 and again in 1760 in order to walk the boundary of the manor and deal with encroachments. Where the Court met in the early Fowler years is not known for certain. Some have suggested that in the second half of the seventeenth century the court met at Ty Faenor [Devannor], which had been built by the Fowlers as a hunting lodge, but the absence of a hall large enough to accommodate the substantial numbers assembled for the court would make this unlikely. Ty Faenor is a mile south of the present village of Abbey-cwm-hir, above the Clywedog river and close to the possible site of an early monastic settlement.

It has always been a matter of some debate where, if indeed at all, the Fowlers lived at Abbey-cwm-hir. Whilst widely referred to in the county as 'the Fowlers of Abbey-cwm-hir', for the most part of their long ownership of the estate they were, with two exceptions, absentee landlords. There is nothing to suggest that the first William Fowler and his family resided at Abbey-cwm-hir; neither is it known exactly where he stayed when he visited his estate. In a letter which he wrote in 1564 from 'my poore howse at Cumheere' to his wife and family back at Harnage Grange, he laments the poor state of the house in which he is staying and the conditions he has to endure. His accommodation may have been a

building which had survived on the Abbey site. When William Fowler first came to Radnorshire, most houses were timber-built, typically to a cruck-frame design. There is no evidence of a big house before the nineteenth century. In sub-medieval times even quite wealthy people lived in comparatively modest accommodation with relatively few possessions. A stone-built house was known to exist near the site of the present Home Farm. It might have started life as a single-storey hall-house, constructed of timber but later, like many others, built around with stone with a storey inserted. The house seems to have spanned the Fowler years, with extension and re-building, and it is likely that this was where the business of the manor was conducted. The 'manner howse of Cumheere' is referred to in 1600 and certainly pre-dates the building of Ty Faenor, also known as Devannor [Manor House]. It was the subject of a painting of about 1800, in which it looks strikingly like today's Home Farm. When it was first built is uncertain.

However, care needs to be taken when considering manorial matters in Wales. The system was very different to that pertaining in England and did not exist before the conquest by Edward I in 1282. Even in the Marcher Lordships the manorial system was ill-developed. The 'manor' was simply an area of land, in size between a commote and a township. It did not necessarily have its own manor house. Manors could be very large, some in north-east Wales extending to fifty square miles. When the English scribes and officials arrived at the end of the thirteenth century they tried to impose a system with which they were familiar, but it never developed into a manorial system comparable with the English one. By the early sixteenth century much of Wales still did not have a manorial organisation, hence the absence of early manorial records.

William Fowler (died 1598) represented Shrewsbury on the Council of the Marches, a body set up to deal with complaints, legal matters and enforcements along the border between England and Wales. Owning estates on both sides of the border and actually on the border, he would have had a particular interest in the smooth running of affairs. However, he may have seen the Council as a source of conflict with the Manorial Court of Gollon. In 1562 he complained to the Council that his tenants had been indicted at the Quarter Sessions for 'overpressynge the common of Hirddywel', an offence 'wiche always hath bene heretofore presented in the courte and lawdaye of the Abbey'.

The ownership of large tracts of land gave the Fowlers both status and influence, together with a substantial income. Money tied up in land made it more difficult for hard-up monarchs like the Stuart kings of the seventeenth century to sequester the wealth of others. Like the first William Fowler to

own the Abbey-cwm-hir estate, ensuing generations held important positions in Radnorshire and Shropshire and indeed in national life. In 1611, one William Fowler was described as being 'Secretaire to the Queen's Majestie', that is to say secretary to the wife of James I. Much later, in 1682, Richard Fowler was an equerry to the queen of Charles II.

The Fowlers had a long connection with the University of Oxford: the record shows that at least eleven members of the family attended between 1580 and 1725. Several subsequently qualified as barristers and became members of the Inns of Court. Both the first William Fowler to own the estate and his son Richard (died 1622) were members of the Inner Temple. The middle years of the seventeenth century were turbulent ones, as civil war raged between Royalists and Parliamentarians; King Charles I was executed in 1649 and Oliver Cromwell's puritanical Commonwealth ruled throughout the 1650s. The Fowlers were staunch Royalists. William (died 1667) was a Commissioner of Array for Shropshire, and Abbey-cwm-hir was regarded as a Royalist stronghold, home to a garrison of seventy troops. Radnorshire did not experience the major battles which took place in the English counties, but the local gentry took sides; militias were raised and skirmishes took place. Basic fortifications were built at Abbey-cwm-hir, but in December of 1644 it fell to the forces of Sir Thomas Myddleton of Chirk Castle. The Abbey-cwm-hir garrison, under the command of Colonel Barnard, consisted mainly of men from Shropshire and Staffordshire. After a spirited defence lasting for all of an hour and a half, they were overcome. Today, metal-detector enthusiasts regularly recover musket balls from the fields around the Abbey ruins and Home Farm. This lends weight to the theory that a building on the site of the present Home Farm was the centre of manorial activity.

Both William and Richard Fowler (died 1687) were captured at Alberbury in Shropshire by the Parliamentarians but escaped any serious punishment. Unlike many of their Royalist compatriots, they managed to avoid having their estates sequestered by their opponents. At the end of the civil war Richard was to be found serving on the Commission for Peace as life began to return to some sort of normality. He was also High Sheriff for the year 1656, during the Commonwealth. These appointments and those of other prominent Royalist Radnorshire figures to key jobs reflect the fact that the Parliamentarians were essentially weak in the county and could not call on men of the calibre of Fowler or Lloyd of Caerfagu, who had the status and influence to get things done.

The office of High Sheriff was an important one dating from 1541. The Sheriff was responsible for the maintenance of law and order in his county. The appointment was made on influence and the ownership of land in the

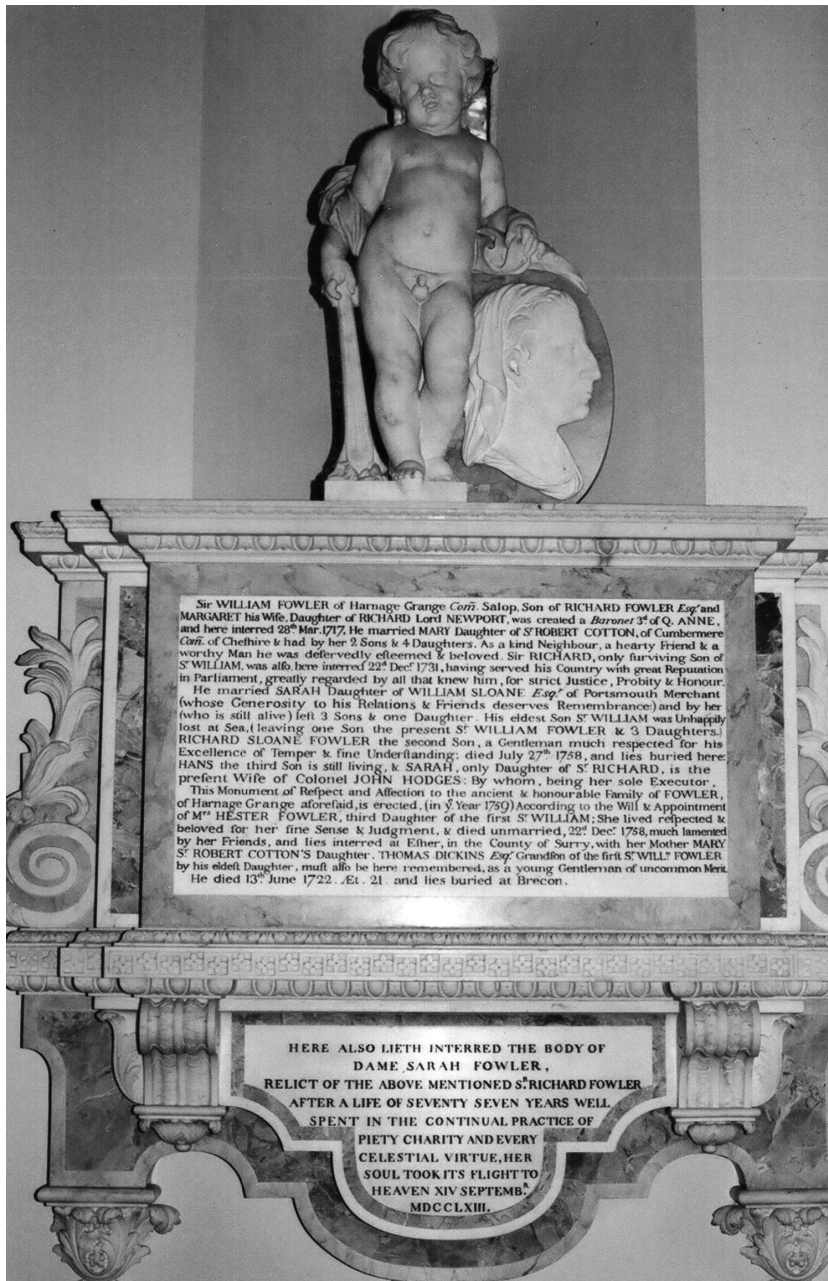
county, not necessarily on long-term residence. That the office-holder was sufficiently wealthy to pay his own expenses was also an important consideration, as these could be substantial. For example, the High Sheriff was expected to pay for the accommodation and subsistence of the judge and his entourage when the Court of Great Sessions was sitting. In a sparsely populated county like Radnorshire this was an important consideration and limited the choice of nominees to the post. Some served more than once; others did not live in the county.

The Roll of High Sheriffs for the county shows that no less than seven Fowlers discharged that duty between 1600 and 1765. They were Richard Fowler of Abbey-cwm-hir (1600 and 1615); Richard Fowler (no place name) (1626); Richard Fowler of Abbey-cwm-hir (1656); John Fowler of Bron y dre [Brondrefawr] (1690); William Fowler of Harnage Grange, Shropshire (1696); Edward Fowler of Brondrefawr (1715) and Sir Hans Fowler of Abbey-cwm-hir (1765).

Richard Fowler (died 1731), son of the first Baronet, Sir William Fowler (died 1717), was elected as Member of Parliament for the county of Radnor in 1715. He defeated Thomas Harley of Brampton Bryan, who petitioned unsuccessfully against the outcome of the election. Richard succeeded to the baronetcy on the death of his father, William, in 1717. He held the seat until 1722, when he was defeated by Sir Humphrey Howarth of Caebalfa and Maesllwch.

As intimated previously, it is difficult to establish which of the Fowler family lived for any length of time at Abbey-cwm-hir. The balance of evidence suggests that they were more likely to have been absentee landlords, resident at Harnage Grange, their home in Shropshire. Reliable evidence of long-term residence can be found in the records of baptisms, marriages and death in parish registers. The Llanbister register records only three Fowler burials and two baptisms during their two hundred and seventy years of ownership of the estate. John Fowler, who lived at Brondrefawr from about 1680 and died in 1697, and his son Edward, also of Brondrefawr, who died in 1722, are recorded. They are buried in Llanbister church, although the exact spot is unknown. The baptism of William Fowler, son of the third baronet, is recorded in 1734 and that of his daughter Letitia in 1736. Finally, the burial of Sir Hans Fowler, with whose death the baronetcy became extinct, is shown in 1771. He was buried in the old church at Abbey-cwm-hir.

By contrast the registers of St Peter's Church at Cound in Shropshire, the parish in which Harnage Grange lies, records more than a dozen Fowler baptisms, marriages and burials in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Others appear in the registers of the Shrewsbury



The Fowler Memorial, St Peter's Church, Cound, Shropshire

churches. St Peter's also contains a fine mid-eighteenth-century monument to the Fowlers of Harnage Grange with a very detailed inscription. It was designed about 1760 by Thomas Farnolls Pritchard of Shrewsbury, who was widely considered to be the best provincial architect of his day.

It is possible to argue that John Fowler and his family, who lived at Brondrefawr, were settled there. He was born in 1629, the third son of William and Anna Fowler (died 1631) and as such would have been apportioned part of the estate. He was a successful merchant in his own right, with considerable estates and business interests. He and his family appear to have been resident at Brondrefawr from about 1680 to 1722. This is interesting as the first date coincides almost exactly with the building of this important house. In a survey carried out in 2002 by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, the building was dated to the late seventeenth century, which suggests that Brondrefawr was built, or more likely re-built, for John Fowler and his family when they came to live in Radnorshire. Whilst the new house was built in stone, it may have replaced a sub-medieval timbered hall-house dating from the monastic period. The building of Brondrefawr was contemporary with the building of Ty Faenor, also of stone, in the third quarter of the seventeenth century. A chapel-of-ease, more or less on the site of the present church, was also built about 1680. This level of activity suggests an actively managed estate. John, though, was a younger son, not the heir to the entire Fowler estate.

John Fowler had three children. Edward, his son, was unmarried. His two daughters, Rachel and Jane, both married into local Montgomeryshire families. Rachel married Jenkyn Lloyd of Clochfaen, Llangurig in 1698. Their marriage is recorded in the Llangurig parish register. Lloyd was mayor of Llanidloes in 1705 and served as High Sheriff of Montgomeryshire in 1713. They had a number of children who all married into families from the counties of Montgomery and Cardigan. This represents an interesting cultural shift from the very English Fowlers to the Welsh-speaking families into which they married. The cultural shift usually went the other way. Rachel died at Cefn Hafod in 1749 and is buried at Llangurig.

Jane, the younger daughter, married George Robinson of Brithdir, Montgomeryshire. Of a minor county family, he was a descendant of Nicholas Robinson, who was Bishop of Bangor in the late sixteenth century. They appear to have had no children. Jane Robinson's will, dated 12 May 1720, is very interesting. After commending her soul to her Creator, she asks that her body be laid 'as near as may be to the coffin of my Father and Mother in the Chapel of Abbey-cwm-hir in the County of Radnor'. If Jane was buried at Abbey-cwm-hir, it would represent another

Fowler to be buried in Radnorshire. However, her name does not appear in the Llanbister register, which is very complete for this period, nor in that of Beriew, in which parish Brithdir Hall lies. That said, it is very unusual for the funeral instructions of the deceased not to be carried out. Perhaps there was a later will which has not survived.

The will also contains a power 'sealed by my husband George Robinson upon July 8th 1712, for my giving £100 to whom I pleased'. Clearly in those days the contents of a lady's will depended on the agreement of her husband! The main beneficiary of the will was her niece and god-daughter, Jane Lloyd, daughter of her sister Rachel, and there was a small bequest to her brother Edward. There was nothing in favour of the Robinsons and this, together with the legal agreement to dispose £100 as she pleased, the burial arrangements and the general tenor of the will, suggests that perhaps all was not well between Jane and her husband.

It has been generally accepted that both John and Edward Fowler are buried in Llanbister church as the register records. However, since their local church at Brondrefawr was a chapel-of-ease to Llanbister, all baptisms, marriages and burials there were recorded in the Llanbister register, it being the Mother Church. The entry usually, but not always, carried the addition 'Gol', indicating the manor or chapel of Gollon. Perhaps a lack of clarity in the register leaves room for debate. If they were buried at Abbey-cwm-hir the exact location would have been lost when the church was rebuilt and moved slightly to the north in 1866.

Further proof that a member of the Fowler family was active at Abbey-cwm-hir is to be found in the will of one John Wilding, drawn up in November 1713. It is not certain who Wilding was or what position he held, but it is significant that he was living at Ty Faenor at the time. As previously suggested, Ty Faenor was built as a hunting lodge rather than as a farm, although by this date it may have been converted for use as a farmhouse. Anyone living there would have particular status. Furthermore, the sole executor to the will was Edward Fowler. It is unlikely that Fowler would act as executor for a tenant, since he had large numbers of them. This again suggests that John Wilding was a man of some importance. Given these circumstances it is quite possible that he was the estate steward, responsible for the day-to-day running of the Fowler estate, and deputising for Edward Fowler whenever necessary, for example at meetings of the Manorial Court. It is possible that Wilding also had an interest in the lease of the then newly re-built Prysgrduon, a hill farm to the north of Abbey-cwm-hir. The initials RW (Richard Wilding) and the date 1711 were carved into the door lintel of the now lost house. Prysgrduon was the last fully timber-built house to be constructed in Radnorshire.

It is likely that John Wilding, together with some other local families whose descendants still live in Radnorshire, came from Shropshire at the behest of the Fowlers to undertake a particular job. The name Wilding appears frequently in Shropshire registers, especially around Church Stretton and in Shrewsbury. It is worthy of note that the burial of a John Wilding appears in the burial register of St Peter's Church, Cound, Shropshire in the year 1706 and this provides a possible link. The arrival of families from across the border as employees of estates created by English landowners contributed to the anglicisation of counties such as Radnorshire. Barely half a century earlier most people were still Welsh-speaking, and when both sides in the English civil war tried to raise militias in the county, communication was a problem.

The status of the Fowler family was boosted at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when on 1 November 1704 William Fowler was created Baronet by Queen Anne. In order the baronets were: William Fowler of Harnage Grange (1704); Sir Richard Fowler of Harnage Grange (1717); Sir William Fowler of Harnage Grange (1731); Sir William Fowler of Harnage Grange (1746) and Sir Hans Fowler of Abbey-cwm-hir (1760). The baronetcy became extinct in 1771 on the death of Sir Hans Fowler, who died without an heir.

The fourth baronet, Sir William, died in 1760 at the age of only twenty-six, whilst serving in the Prussian army. He was unmarried and had no heir and so the baronetcy passed to Hans, a brother of his father, the third baronet. It will be noted that the first four of the baronets styled themselves as 'of Harnage Grange', which indicates that the family home was still in Shropshire. However, the fifth baronet, Sir Hans, styled himself as 'of Abbey-cwm-hir', which suggests that he may, from time to time, have lived at Abbey-cwm-hir up to his death in 1771. However, the death notice which appeared in the Oxford Magazine described him as of Steeple Aston in the county of Oxfordshire. His will is also recorded as that of Sir Hans Fowler of Steeple Aston. In accordance with the wishes expressed in his will, he was buried in the old church at Abbey-cwm-hir and, as previously stated, this is recorded in the Llanbister register. Here there is a suggestion at least that the Fowlers still had an affection for Abbey-cwm-hir, whilst continuing the practice of being largely absentee landlords. Evidence from Shropshire shows that by 1760 the Fowlers were no longer in possession of Harnage Grange, it being occupied at that time by John and Sarah Windsor, whether as tenants or freeholders is not certain.

From this point on the Fowler estates in Radnorshire were in decline. As early as 1734 Sir William Fowler was borrowing considerable sums of money against the surety of his estates. After the death of the fourth

baronet in 1760 there followed a series of sales. In 1769 a large area around Abbey-cwm-hir was sold to Charles Gore, including the historic Devannor, eventually to become part of the Penybont estate. At the same time Jonathan Field bought Bryn Camlo, Esgairwy and a number of farms around Llaithdu. Other sales followed between 1781 and 1828. Not all the sales were immediately successful. Some of the properties were on the market for decades. The Sale Particulars of the time tell a story of many run-down farms, low rents, decayed buildings and poor management of the estate.

At the time Sir Hans died, legal wrangles within the family over ownership had begun to eat into their fortune. The will of Sir Hans Fowler is an extraordinary document, much of which is taken up with an harangue against his sister, Sarah Hodges. On the death in 1760 of their nephew William, the fourth baronet who died without issue, it would appear that Sarah had manipulated the situation to the advantage of herself and her children. Hans accuses her of taking pecuniary advantage of his 'distressed and indigent circumstances'. No indication of the nature of his distress is given. He accuses her of artful contrivances and misrepresentations, aided in this by her attorney and solicitor, Mr Lawrence. He also implicates his late mother, Dame Sarah Fowler (died 1763), in their failure to expedite various articles of agreement made on 15 August 1761 in the settlement and inheritance of the Jointure Estate, then in the possession of his mother. He argued that the property had passed to his sister, Sarah Hodges (died 1790), and her children, though he had the right of inheritance. He also expresses great dissatisfaction with his own solicitor, probably the same Mr Lawrence, and states his intention to assert his rights. It was clearly his intention to recover the estates from which he had been disinherited, even if that meant further legal action after his death. The problem appeared to be the Radnorshire estates, which were held in jointure and dated back to the marriage settlement of 1706 between his parents, Richard Fowler and Sarah Sloane.

Despite his indigent circumstances, his estate was nonetheless considerable. The bulk of it was willed to his wife, another Dame Sarah Fowler, formerly Sarah Dibbs, who came from Oxfordshire. This included his estates in Radnorshire and Oxfordshire, all household goods, plate, watches, rings and wearing apparel, and all coaches, horses, coins and liquors. The will also contained further bequests to his remaining sisters and their children, indicating that his contention was only with his sister Sarah and not the rest of the family. The executors were his wife and his brother-in-law, Joseph Hughes, the husband of his sister Harriet.

Sarah, sister of Sir Hans Fowler, was married to Colonel John Hodges. They had two children: a son, Thomas, and a daughter, Sarah, who

married Colonel George Hastings (died 1802). They had five children. The eldest son, Hans Francis Hastings (died 1828), was determined to prove that he was the legitimate heir to the Earldom of Huntingdon. The Fowlers were linked by marriage to the Earls of Huntingdon in the late seventeenth century. Hans was eventually successful in proving his claim through the courts, but the cost was enormous and almost bankrupted the family, resulting in the remaining Fowler estates in Radnorshire being sold on the orders of the Court of Exchequer.

The death of Thomas in 1820, after he had changed his name to Thomas Hodges Fowler, witnessed the final severance of the Fowler links with Abbey-cwm-hir after two hundred and sixty-eight years. Today little tangible evidence of their ownership of the estate remains. There are just two memorials in Abbey-cwm-hir church and of the many farmhouses of their time only Devannor stands, little changed, as a reminder of the great secular estates which burgeoned after the suppression of the monasteries.

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