

The Fowlers of Abbey Cwm Hir.  
Myth or Reality?

Julian Lovell

**M**y interest in the Fowler family arose almost by accident. When I first came to live in Abbey Cwm Hir, at about the time I retired from full-time work, I had planned to renew my academic interest in the study of Historical Geography, a subject which, I had studied when I was at university in London, now rather a long time. True I had spent most of the intervening forty odd years teaching history and geography, mostly the latter but that is not the same as getting down to the real nuts and bolts of the subject. My head of department at Goldsmiths College always said that historical geography is best learned through the soles of your boots. How right he was and what better place to get down to brass tacks with the fieldwork and research than Abbey Cwm Hir?

My first project was to study the enclosures, researching the developments of the new agriculture of the nineteenth century, as the expanding Abbey Cwm Hir estate of the Philips family began to grow. Searching through some documents in the Powys Archives I came across some deeds containing a fascinating recital of the original ownership of the lands, included in that particular deed, going back, of course, to William Fowler's purchase of the Cistercian Abbey's lands back in 1565. I was hooked and have been at it ever since!

Like all good historians I started to read around my subject, the secondary resources which can give you so many ideas and references and false impressions. I was struck by the fact that the common assumption, particularly among earlier writers, was that the Fowlers of Abbey Cwm Hir were somehow a local Welsh family and that they lived there full-time throughout the two hundred and sixty years of their ownership of the estate. The more I have come to learn about their history, the more I have come to doubt the assertion that the Fowlers were, indeed, of Abbey Cwm Hir.

Hence my title, 'The Fowlers of Abbey Cwm Hir.' Was it a myth? Was it a reality? Was it a myth and a reality?

HISORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE FOWLERS FROM MEDIEVAL  
AND SUB-MEDIEVIL TIMES.

The Fowlers, an ancient family with their roots strongly embedded in medieval England, were landowners with a record of service to medieval kings. Richard Fowler of Foxley, Norfolk, accompanied Richard I on the Third Crusade to the Holy Land in 1190. He served as a commanding officer, leading a body of bowmen, all of whom, as was the practice of the day, were drawn from his own tenants. For his contribution to the Crusade he received a knighthood from the King, the first

Fowler to bear that title. It was from this Richard Fowler and there were a lot of them, that the later Fowler who owned the Cwm Hir Abbey estate was descended.

They built up a record of service to the medieval crown. William Fowler from Ricote in Oxfordshire was Comptroller of the Household of Richard II. His eldest son, also William, was knighted by Edward IV and made Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

The William Fowler who acquired the Cwm Hir Abbey Estate was the third son of Roger Fowler of Broomhill in the county of Stafford. He had married well. His wife was Isabella, the daughter of William Lee of Morpeth and Treasurer of Berwick. She was also sister and co-heir of Roland Lee who was Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield. Roland's brother was George Lee, Dean of St Chad's, Shrewsbury.

These characters were very much part of the history of the mid sixteenth century, living as they did at the height of the Protestant Reformation. It would be interesting to research them more deeply and set them against the geo-political context of their day.

Roger Fowler's eldest son, also a Roland, married the daughter of John Bradshaw of Presteigne, an early direct link with Radnorshire. They had two sons, both married but both died childless. The end of that brief link!

Roger himself was a man of modest means, a soldier who was part of the garrison at Berwick. He was killed in action against the Scots during a border skirmish. Isabella, his wife, died in 1538, leaving eight orphans, including our William, in the care of her brother, Bishop Roland Lee, who did his best for them, seeking a grant of the Augustinian Priory of St Thomas near Stafford for the use of his family. He asked for ... *an easy rate that the poor boys, my nephews, may have some relief thereby*. It seems that at that point there was a lot of interest in the former priory and he was not immediately successful in acquiring the property. He tried again, and wrote directly to Thomas Cromwell:

*I pray you remember my suit for the Priory of St. Thomas, and if it shall stand the King's Highness shall have not only a certain sum but you also for your goodness. And if that will be not be, then my trust is that forasmuch as the demesne came from the mitre that I may have preferment of the house and demesnes for one of my kinsfolk.*

This tactic paid off and the Bishop duly acquired the Priory which was to provide the childhood home for William Fowler. Clearly Roland Lee, Bishop of Lichfield, Lord President of the Council of Wales and the Marches, prodigy of Thomas Wolsey and associate of Thomas Cranmer, was offering Cromwell a back-hander to make sure that he acquired the Priory. By the standards of his day, Lee had his head screwed on, and unlike some others around him, he knew how to keep it screwed on. He was among the first Bishops to recognise Henry VIII as head of the church in England, rather than the Pope. It is thought he officiated at Henry's secret marriage to Anne Boleyn in January 1533.

Later his name was appended to the document in which, on 9 July 1540, the clergy declared Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn to be illegal. He also took a leading part in the divorce proceedings against Catherine of Aragon.

As Lord President of the Council of Wales and the Marches, under the direction of Thomas Cromwell, he set to bring about law and order to the Welsh regions. What ensued was a reign of terror in which he decided that the best way to deal with the 'lawless' Welsh was to convict and hang with impunity. With many falling victim to his five year campaign he was much despised. Whilst this preceded William Fowler's purchase of the Cwm Hir estate, memories were long in Wales and the knowledge that his uncle was Roland Lee would not have endeared him to his new tenants. Lee owned the manor of Shotton near Shrewsbury but was equally disliked by the Shropshire gentry among whom he lived. They too fell foul of his rough justice. Other members of the Lee family owned the manor of Langley Burrell, adjacent to Fowler's Shropshire base, Harnage Grange.

Like so many Bishops of that period, Lee was kept so busy with affairs of state that he had little time to attend to the running of his diocese. His reputation also suggests that he was not well-fitted to pastoral oversight! In June 1537 he appointed Lewis Thomas, lately Abbot of Cwm Hir, as suffragan Bishop of Shrewsbury to assist in running the Diocese.

The relationship with Rowland Lee helps to demonstrate the background against which William Fowler grew up both in terms of national events and how to succeed in an unstable world. The sixteenth century was one of momentous change. Building on his share of the Priory of St Thomas, William built up a portfolio of land holdings in six counties with all the potential wealth which that was able to create. He was also at the centre of governance in Shrewsbury, quickly rising to become a free burgess and Provost of the town. Effectively he was in charge, making decisions and administering justice. In the latter role the record suggests that he was as ruthless as his uncle. William was also a member of the Council of Wales and the Marches which had its headquarters in Ludlow. He was already a very busy man when he bought the Cwm Hir estate, one estate among many that he owned and one which was remote from the centre of his principal interests. The likelihood of his choosing to live there must be seriously questioned.

#### WILLIAM FOWLER OF HARNAGE GRANGE

William Fowler is generally known by the title 'of Harnage Grange'. Harnage was part of the extensive lands of Buildwas Abbey, a Cistercian house located in the Severn Valley a few miles from Much Wenlock. The schedule of purchase consisted of the site of the monastery of Buildwas with all houses, barns etc. in the precinct of the same and all lands etc. belonging to it in the county of Salop.

The deal by which Fowler obtained the monastic lands was joined by

Sir John Throckmorton. He was a lawyer and Member of Parliament, the seventh son of Sir George Throckmorton of Coughton Court in Warwickshire. His mother, the Hon. Katherine Vaux, was a half-sister to Sir Thomas Parr, making John Throckmorton a cousin of Queen Katherine Parr. The Fowlers were nothing if not well-connected!

Throckmorton became Attorney to the Council of Wales and the Marches in 1550. He also served as Vice-President of the Council from 1565 to 1569. Amongst his other legal appointments he was Recorder of Shrewsbury and in both of these appointments he would have been in regular contact with William Fowler. Again it suggests that Fowler was focused on developing working relationships with well-placed individuals within the English establishment.

William was in possession of extensive land holdings along the border near Oswestry. These too were monastic lands, formerly of the Convent and Monastery of the Apostles Peter and Paul in Shrewsbury. Here he was doing deals with Raynard and Richard Corbett of Morton Corbett. These were more big names, in the establishment of the day, particularly in Shropshire and the Marches.

#### THE PURCHASE OF THE LANDS OF CWM HIR ABBEY 1560

These were lands of another Cistercian house for his collection. It is not clear what happened to the abbey in the years following the dissolution, perhaps that there was not an immediate sale. It is likely that its position in a very remote valley did it no favours. The huge acreage of monastic land which suddenly flooded the market after the dissolution must have given prospective buyers a huge choice and values may well have gone down! The less attractive ones were inclined to stick.

Some thirty years after its demise we find a record relating to the sale of Cwm Hir Abbey. In 1560 a licence was granted by Elizabeth I to one Nicholas Williams to alienate to William Fowler and Edward Herbert the Manor of Gollon, the site of the Monastery of Cwm Hir and certain messuages, lands etc. in Gollon, Llanbister, Llanddewi, Llananno, Llanbadarn, St Harmon, Nantmel, Carnaff and Clyro in the County of Radnor. Nicholas Williams must have been a go-between, acting as an agent for the other two named and in the same year re-conveyed all the list lands to William Fowler.

And the price, was this the bargain of the year? William paid £19,000 for his new acquisition. In today's terms this equates to £4.43 million. He was a man of some substance. Payment was made in two stages, as was the custom of the time, the first to be made on the Feast of the Annunciation and the second on the Feast of St Michael and all Angels. Both payments were to be made at the belfry door of Burfield Church, Berkshire.

It is difficult to know precisely what William got for his money because the individual properties which made up the whole are not listed and the task of working it out is further complicated by the fact that the abbey holdings were not a

continuous whole but scattered, the result of various benefactors endowing the abbey with parcels of land. By a process of working backwards from much later sales there seems to have been several hundred farms in the purchase, as well as mills, woodlands and quarries.

Some consideration must be given as to why people such as William Fowler thought that building up huge estates of former monastic land was such a good investment. To understand it is necessary to look at the potential revenue which could be generated.

#### UPLAND FARMING IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

When he took over the Cwm Hir Abbey lands William Fowler would have acquired a large number of small tenanted farms. The quality of the buildings was often poor, only a small number would have been stone built. Most farmsteads would have boasted a timber framed cruck-built house, similar to the traditional 'longhouse' type which combined living quarters with a byre. In this sub-medieval period houses were routinely regarded as a depreciating asset, given little maintenance and would be replaced after twenty years or less.

Most of the farms were very small, with most having less than thirty acres, enclosed with banks or hedges. Each farmer had rights of common pasturage for as many cattle or sheep as he could winter on the farm. At this time cattle still featured largely in the economy of the upland farm and although numerically there were twice as many sheep as cattle it was the cattle that were the most profitable. Many of the cattle lived outside throughout the year and cow houses were few in number. Their manure was used to improve the limited arable land, since the use of lime and other fertilizers was unknown. This practice often dictated the location of the farmstead. Today almost all of the ancient farms in this area of Mid Wales are situated on the 1000 feet contour, a point where the cattle could be wintered. From here it was easy to haul the manure downhill to the arable fields nearer the valley floor. Fields were small and crop rotation was not practised. They were used to produce grain as a staple for the family but the production of winter feed for the stock was a prime consideration. It was only possible to over-winter as many animals as could be fed. Crops were few, oats and rye predominated. Wheat would not grow in the wet climate. Transport was difficult and carts were of limited use on the difficult terrain.

Pooling of resources was commonplace, something which has persisted into modern times. During the summer months some families continued the medieval pattern of transhumance, moving into the hills to camp out with their stock, living in the Lluest or Hafod. Tradition dictated they could stay there from Whitsun to the middle of August. The milk which was produced was turned into butter and cheese for consumption in the winter months or for sale in the nearest market.

Most of the estates that William Fowler owned on the English side of

the border would have been based on an organisational system which is related to the traditional manorial system. However, things were different for estates in Wales where such a system did not exist up until the time of the Edwardian conquest. This explains the absence of early manorial records. Edward's civil servants found no comparable system of organisation and tried to impose one but with varying and limited degrees of success. The Cistercians also operated a different system of organisation.

However, meetings of the Manorial Court would have been a regular feature of life and a potential source of income. There were two types of manorial court, the Court Leet and the Court Baron. All tenants were expected to attend and failure to do so without a good excuse would have resulted in a fine which duly accrued to the Lord of the Manor. It was not necessary for the Lord of the Manor to be present at meetings of the manorial court, although he would attend at regular intervals to show his authority. At other times the session would be conducted by the estate Reeve and Bailiff, people with authority and who were responsible for the day to day running of the estate.

A study of surviving documents pertaining to the Abbey Cwm Hir estate suggests that the Fowlers often brought over experienced and trusted employees from their Shropshire estates. Down to the present day we find the names of Mytton, Wilding and Pitchford represented in the local population, names that have their roots in Shropshire. In 1713, Ty Faenor was occupied by John Wilding who also had an interest in the rebuilding of Prysgrduon in 1711. Wilding's importance in the estate was underlined by the fact that the sole executor to his Will was Edward Fowler, at that time Lord of the Manor of Cwm Hir. This evidence of location and status strongly suggests that John Wilding was the Estate Reeve at that time. The employment of reliable and trusted management from more distant Fowler estates suggests, at the very least, periods of time when they themselves were not resident. Maybe they also felt that for reasons we can only speculate, they did not entirely trust their local staff.

The location of a suitable meeting place for the Court has been the subject of conjecture over the years. Earlier local historians have always tended to seize on Ty Faenor, or Devannor as it is more generally known, as the meeting place. This ignores two basic facts. Firstly, Devannor does not have a single room big enough to accommodate the large number of estate tenants who would assemble for the Court Leet and secondly, Devannor was not built until about 1670, as a hunting lodge in the Deer Park. By this date the Fowlers had been in occupation of Abbey Cwm Hir for over one hundred years. Further, as the seventeenth century drew towards a close and the eighteenth century opened the system of manorial courts was in terminal decline and the requirement was changed. However, before this came about the manorial court had proved a lucrative source of income through the imposition of tithes, amercements and herriotts.

A possible clue might be contained in an account of the so-called siege of Abbey Cwm Hir during the Civil War. The Fowlers were staunch Royalists and in 1644 they were reported to have garrisoned Abbey Cwm Hir for the King.

In December of that year Sir Thomas Middleton appeared, demanding the garrison to surrender. The Fowler forces refused, battle commenced and after an exchange lasting all of an hour the defences were taken by storm. A number of combatants were captured, including Hugh Lloyd, the High Sheriff of Radnorshire. Middleton had received the following intelligence:

*That the enemy had made them a garrison at Abbey Cwm Hir, a very strong house, and built of stone of great thickness and the walls and outworks all very strong, the house having been in former times an Abbey of the Papists ... This garrison of theirs is Mr Fowler's house, which began to be a great annoyance to us. Since which, our general having thrown down the enemy's works made the garrison unusable for the future.*

It is possible, even probable, that this building was part of the abbey complex – perhaps the gatehouse, almonry or Abbot's lodging and on the site of the present Home Farm house and buildings. We can only speculate on what lies at subsurface level under the yard.

If the Fowlers were to take up residence in Abbey Cwm Hir shortly after he purchased the estate it would imply that a suitable house would be readily available for their use. Whilst people living in the sixteenth century generally occupied much smaller houses than a person of similar status would today and they had far fewer possessions, it is unlikely that there was anything suitable to be found. By 1565 the abbey had been derelict for thirty years and already parts had been removed for other purposes such as the arcading which was taken to Llanidloes. Farm houses were small and probably in poor condition because they often rebuilt after a short time. A letter from William Fowler back to his family in Shropshire in 1564 paints a poor view of his new estate as he says he is writing from ... *My poore howse in Cwmheere* ...

William's duties as Provost of Shrewsbury, his membership of the Council of Wales and the Marches which usually met in Ludlow and his many other estates would have kept him very busy. Given the difficulties of travel, living in a remote location would not have been practical if he was to attend to his other affairs. This is reflected in the family's long-term occupation of Harnage Grange in Shropshire.

On balance there is nothing to support a view that the Fowlers were resident in Abbey Cwm Hir, was there direct management of the estate by a resident family member?

The early years of the Fowler period were one of the absentee landlord who was happy to take the rents, tithes and ameracements produced by the estate but left the day to day running of the estate to others. and this is where evidence of a more pro-active approach can be found.

The benefit of the estate was frequently vested in a junior member of the family and this where evidence of a more proactive approach can be found.

John Fowler, born about 1628, was the third son of Richard Fowler and he certainly did live at Abbey Cwm Hir. He had interests as a merchant and owned other estates but there is clear evidence that he and his family were resident. The role of High Sheriff lists John Fowler as being of Brondrefawr, occupying the post in 1690. He was one of seven Fowlers to serve as High Sheriff over a period spanning one hundred and sixty five years. However, this can be a red herring. Care needs to be taken as residency was not a required qualification for the post. The High Sheriff had to be a landowner in Radnorshire and also wealthy because he had to personally cover the cost of the Assizes, which was considerable. The under-Sheriff would have administered justice on a day-to-day basis.

This was a period of building, although there is little left to show for it today. John Fowler and his family lived at Brondrefawr. A new house was built about 1670 and survived to comparatively recently. Another notable building of the time was Ty Faenor, already mentioned, built about the same time. The Deer Park elsewhere, may also come from that time. In 1680, a church was built on the site of the present church. Although part of the huge parish of Llanbister, it was known as the Chapelry of Abbey Cwm Hir. It is likely that the stock of farmsteads was also improved at this time.

John Fowler had three children, a son Edward and two daughters, Rachel and Jane. Here we can find evidence of integration into local families. Rachel married Jenkyn Lloyd of Clochfaen in the parish of Llangurig. She was married and also buried at Llangurig church. Jane married George Robinson of Brithdir, Berriew. In her Will she requested to ... *be buried as close as possible to my mother and father in the Chapelry of Abbey Cwm Hir*. These are the only examples I have come across of Fowlers marrying into the local Welsh population. Edward did not marry and is buried at Llanbister.

There are very few recorded Fowler burials in Radnorshire. The only other one is of Sir Hans Fowler in 1771. There are also two baptisms in the 1730s. By contrast, over the same period fifteen burials are recorded in the parish church of Count where Harnage is located plus others at various Shrewsbury churches. Births, Marriages and Deaths are a very good indicator of residency. It is fair to say that whilst John Fowler and his family lived at Abbey Cwm Hir, few others did so.

#### WAS THIS THE HIGH POINT OF THE FOWLERS IN RADNORSHIRE?

Edward Fowler died in 1722 and this brought an end to the active management of the estate. After this the records that have survived suggest that the estate went into a very long period of decline. By the close of the seventeenth century the background was very different. It could be contended that this point was the peak of Fowler influence in their remote estates as they focused their interests in other ways.

Two events provided the tipping point for the decline in their fortunes.



In 1704 William Fowler was made a Baronet and in 1706 Richard Fowler married Sarah Sloane.

#### THE MARRIAGE OF RICHARD FOWLER TO SARAH

The marriage of Richard Fowler and Sarah Sloane was an occasion of some splendour, taking place as it did in St Paul's Cathedral. This was a far cry from Abbey Cwm Hir and indeed the many Fowler weddings which had taken place at St Peter's, Cound and other churches in Shrewsbury. This was on a grand scale, and you had to be somebody important and a well-connected, to marry in St Paul's.

Richard Fowler served as one of the MPs for Radnorshire. He defeated Thomas Harley of Brampton Bryan in 1715 and continued to sit until 1722 when he lost to Sir Humphrey Howarth of Caebalfa. Even so, there is no evidence that Richard and Sarah lived in the county. Their home was Castle House (now the Castle Hotel) in Shrewsbury, which they were renting from the Earl of Bradford. There are family connections here. This is the senior title of the Newport family of High Er-call. Richard's grandmother was Margaret Newport who married an earlier Richard Fowler about 1640.

The marriage also caused a long-term problem for the family because the Abbey Cwm Hir estate formed part of the marriage settlement on Sarah Sloane. She lived until 1763, having been widowed in 1731 but the marriage settlement only gave her the benefit of the income from the estate and not possession of it. By about 1760 it was clear that Sarah was attempting to seize the estate for her daughter, also Sarah and her grandchildren. Expensive Court cases were making serious inroads into what was left of the family's wealth. She clearly had a negative impact on the fortunes of the family.

#### WHO WAS SARAH SLOANE?

Sarah was the daughter of a prominent family. Her father was William Sloane, a successful Southampton grain merchant and author of one of the most pettifogging Wills. William's brother, Sarah's uncle, was more notable for different reasons. He was Hans Sloane, Doctor of Physic and by his appointment as doctor to the monarch, George I, moved in the highest echelons of London society. Dr Hans also owned the Manor of Chelsea, giving us today Sloane Street and Sloane Square. He also founded the Chelsea Physic Garden. It would also explain the wedding in St Paul's Cathedral.

On the death of her husband, Sarah remarried in 1737, this time to Francis Annesley, the first Lord Valencia. Sarah was his third wife. They lived in Green Street, St Pancras, one of the early suburbs of burgeoning Georgian London. In his Will, Annesley made sure that Sarah could stay on and enjoy the life to which she was accustomed, or take a cash settlement of £400, £48,000 in today's currency, if she wanted to move out and live elsewhere. Sarah Fowler managed to accumulate considerable wealth, before she died in 1763.

Her will contained bequests which amounted to £8,803, a massive £902,082 in today's values plus effects. This was achieved at a time when women were not expected to have any financial independence. How much of it was Fowler or Sloane money is a matter for speculation. Sufficient to say by this time other members of the family, notably her son, claimed to be short of money.

SIR WILLIAM FOWLER d. 1746 MAY HAVE LIVED AT ABBEY CWM HIR

On the death of Sir Richard Fowler in 1731 the Baronetcy passed to his eldest son, another William. There is some evidence, again from church records, that he and his wife Harriott, lived for a time in Abbey Cwm Hir. Where he lived is not certain but either Devannor or Brondrefawr are the most likely places.

The Llanbister registers show that William and Harriott's son, also William was baptised there on 3 September 1734 and their daughter on 17 January 1736. This shows that another Fowler may have lived here.

By this time, William appeared to be having financial problems. Records from both Powys Archives and Shropshire Archives show loans amounting to £7,133, the equivalent of £840,000 in today's money. Some loans were in the form of re-assignments. One of the parties involved was John Windsor. The loans may have been part of an attempt to retain ownership of Harnage Grange, their old Shropshire home which had been let on lease. This failed and by 1740 John Windsor and his wife were the owners of Harnage.

Sir William died in mysterious circumstances - *Lost at sea*. No accurate details have come to light although there are a number of fanciful tales, such as the bungled attempt to capture and ransom the heiress of a family in North Wales which left him on the run.

On the death of William in 1746 the title passed to his son, then a minor. When he was old enough he joined the Prussian army, only to die in 1760 at the age of twenty six, unmarried and so without an heir.

TITLE PASSES TO HANS FOWLER, 1760.

There was no heir at this time and so the title went back a generation to the brother of the previous baronet, Hans Fowler. He was obviously at loggerheads with his mother, Sarah Sloane, over the joint ownership of the Abbey Cwm Hir estate. Much of his Will is taken up with a tirade aimed at his mother and sister over the state to which their actions had brought him, as well as the solicitors involved on both sides:

*... and whereas I am convinced in my mind that I have been greatly deceived and imposed by the artful contrivances and misrepresentations of my sister Sarah Hodges and Mr Lawrence her Attorney and Solicitor who by taking advantage of my then distressed and indigent circumstances have together with or by the connivance of my late mother Dame Sarah Fowler otherwise Annesley ... and so he goes on.*

The upshot was another very expensive court case which further drained the family resources. At the time of his death Hans was living at Steeple Aston in Oxfordshire where he had another estate, possibly through his wife's family. He nonetheless was buried at Abbey Cwm Hir, the first Fowler to be interred there for almost fifty years and the last. In spite of his, *distressed and indigent circumstances*, his will contained bequests worth about £800,000 in today's money.

The Abbey Cwm Hir estate was broken up for sale on the orders of the Court of Exchequer to clear outstanding debts. The various sales took a long time to achieve and were not finally completed until the 1820s.

In conclusion, this article shows the Fowlers set against the background of the times in which they lived, their social inter-reactions and the society which they were part of. They kept their estates but by the end of the time we have been examining their attention had turned to life in the developing London where most of them lived following the demise of their former properties. True, some of them lived at Abbey Cwm Hir but not the head of the family, except for the short occupancy of William Fowler from 1734 to 1746.