

Dale Hall - know your Manor

Most people who live in Lawford are probably unaware they live within the old Manor of 'Dale Hall'. They may be even more surprised that the Hall still exists in its medieval form sitting at the centre of the locality.

William the Conqueror's Domesday assessment of his new kingdom in 1086 lists the lands of 'Leleforda' or 'Laleforda'. A few years later this large land holding was split in two. The posh end, held by the King, became Lawford Hall, with the Lord of the Manor having a church built close by, whilst across the small valley carved out by Wignal Brook, a separate Manor on grounds originally held by Eustace, Earl of Bologne was created, later becoming the business end of the parish. It took its modern name from Thomas de la Dale who either held it or acquired it through marriage to Isabel de 'Leyham' from Suffolk in about 1315. After he died she took over the estate and it passed in turn to her son Sir John de la Dale in 1336, then down a series of short lived 'Thomas Dales' through to 1416.

The current Dale Hall sits on a small promontory and despite its proximity to the main road, is often overlooked. At one time it was a fruit farm which did 'pick you own' off an entrance at the top of Cox's Hill. On its south-western edge is a dip in the landscape that crosses the main A137 road before feeding into Wignal Brook, which may have marked its boundary.



The sharp cut made by the Stour river valley gives rise to a line of springs just to the north of the Hall, providing access to fresh water all year round (these springs occasionally flow out across the bottom of Cox's Hill Road). The large Manor extended right down to the river where the extensive marsh was used for grazing and included a holding called Downe Land and Causewayend farm, which once stood towards the bottom of the hill near where Nash Close can now be found.

On its eastern side, Dale Manor met with Manningtree along the boundary marked by a stream, fed by springs which emerge between Waldegrave Way & Long Road, flowing down to the Town through the old Mill pond, under Mill Lane, Brook Street and out into the estuary behind the Skinners Arms.



The current building is at its heart a timber framed medieval Hall with a Georgian brick façade dating as far back as the 15/16 century. It is said to be the oldest House in the parish, given that the original Lawford Hall buildings have been completely lost through a series of renovations.

Dale Hall starts appearing in the historic record in 1477 as the location for the local manorial court. This was where all the business was done in the name of the Lord of the Manor, including payments for use of his lands and one off fees when small holdings were passed down the generations. Farming was the prime industry of the time and land the main asset.

One common problem at the Court Leet was who got the job of ale taster. It sounded like a good job, but was a mixed blessing no one wanted to take on. No brewer likes to be told their ale was overpriced or not up to standard, whilst everyone else liked to complain about the state of the local brew. The appointed ale tasters as well as the brewers were regularly fined. Robert Blossie and Margery Strondior were each fined 3d for the state of their ale, to little effect as they were fined annually for some years to come.

Dale Hall was held by the Darcy family in the 16th Century before it passed to the Waldegraves into the 17th century. They rebuilt parts and sold it onto Henry Bishop in 1722 who re-thatched it in 1729 just before he died. His daughter Sarah managed to hold onto it through a difficult divorce after her young, 'well to do', husband Richard Williams was declared bankrupt. She finally sold the Manor in 1779 to Richard Rigby from Mistley, then still expanding his estates. In 1805 it was sold by Francis Rigby to George Bridges who carved Lawford Place out of the estate. He split the Manor from its title when he sold Dale Hall and the surrounding lands to Edmund Lushington in 1816. The collection of Church tithes led to a detailed map in 1839 which gives us some interesting field names.

