

The Bunyans as land 'owners'

In medieval England and right up to fairly modern times, no-one other than the king 'owned' land. Even today, when we may have the freehold to our properties, the crown still has the ancient right, in certain circumstances, to buy our property back under a compulsory purchase order.

In feudal times, the King would grant territories to noblemen and those noblemen would be described as 'holding' the title to that land - but they only held that land 'of the king' and the king could take back that property any time he wanted.

As a condition of the lords holding land, the king would charge them to have it cultivated and to produce food surplus to local requirements, so as to support central government.

Noblemen might be permitted to lease parts of 'their' land to others; e.g. to tenant farmers, who would then be described as 'holding' that land of the local lord (who, in turn, held that land of the king). Anyone holding title to land could build properties such as cottages on the land they held and then to lease them out. But, in the case of (for example) a lowly farmer, they would usually need to obtain the prior approval of the lord from whom they held the land. Similarly, a local lord might have to ask permission of the king to carry out any significant building project on his 'own' land.

In his autobiography, (in Grace Abounding), John Bunyan described his family home as being 'of that rank that is meanest and most despised in the country.' From this, many have assumed that the Bunyans were always of lowly stock. However, there is ample documentary evidence that the Elstow Bunyan family, - even before the dissolution of the monasteries - held properties and land of the Abbess of Elstow.

1. In 1199, a court of the King's Bench determined that Willium Bunion of Wilstead owned a virgate (30 acres) of land at Wilstead. In other words, Willium held that land of the Abbess of Elstow, who held it of the King. This William is thought to have been John's great (x 8) grandfather.
2. In 1327, another William Bonyan (John Bunyan's great-great-great grandfather) is recorded as living at the location known as Bunyan's End. It appears that William held some Elstow land as, in that year, and with the agreement of the Abbess, William sold an acre of land and a messuage to Simon Field. (A 'messuage' was a dwelling house with adjacent buildings and adjoining land used in connection with the household.)
3. In the Elstow manor court roll of 13th April 1542, there is a record of the transfer of the properties of William Bunyan, (14??-1541) that had died the previous year. This record states that William had 'held freely of the lord the king as of his manor of Elnestow a messuage and a pightell and nine acres of land of Elnestow.' It

would seem logical to assume that the nine acres mentioned was the 9 acre field at Bunyan's End. Later in the court roll, it says of William's son; 'Thomas Bonyan (b1502) acknowledges that he holds the 'aforesaid messuage, pightell and nine acres of land ...' In other words, the manor court confirmed the transfer of ownership of the properties from William Bunyan to his son Thomas. The title to William's property appears to have passed from Thomas to his son (Christian name unknown) and thence to Thomas' grandson - also called Thomas (15?? – 1641) - John Bunyan's grandfather.

4. In his biography of Bunyan, the Rev'd Dr John Brown says of John's grandfather; 'Thomas was evidently going down in the world and selling, piece by piece, his ancestral land'. Brown quotes, as sample evidence of this, a 1548 document recording the sale, by Thomas, of 3 roods (.75 acre) to Robert Coteys.
5. Further evidence of Thomas' failing finances can be seen in a later conveyance in which Thomas exchanged two cottages for one. This was the cottage immediately north of The Chequer (now a property called Pilgrim House) and was the final home of Thomas and his wife.
6. In Thomas Bonyan's will, he leaves that cottage to his wife but makes no bequests of any other properties or land. So one has to assume that, by that date, Thomas had sold the 9 acre field and cottage at Bunyan's End.

So, it is evident that, even before the Abbey was dissolved, the Elstow Bunyan family was by no means poor, holding a considerable amount of land - at least 30 acres at Wilstead and 9 at Elnestow. What happened to the ownership of the land at Wilstead, and the cottage next to the Chequer has not yet been discovered. But it is apparent that Thomas (15??-1651) - John's grandfather - sold the Elstow land and that none of it passed to his son Thomas (1603-1676) or to John.

Thus, when JB writes of how poor his family was, he was being entirely truthful. But he was perhaps also writing that with some regret, his family having gone from being landowners to mere tenants.