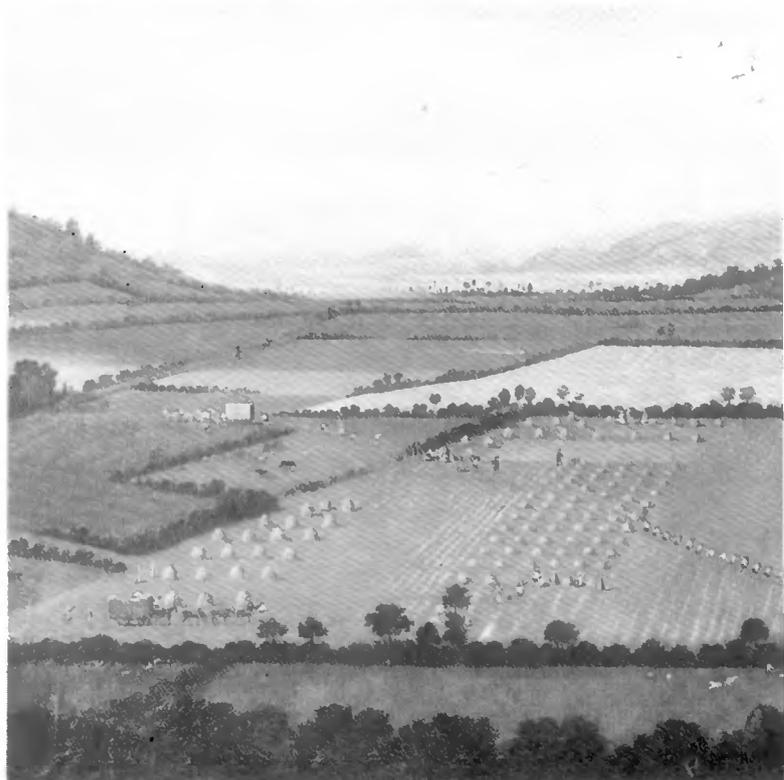


## THE DIXTON PAINTINGS

*by Jane Sale*



*Dixton Manor and Panorama to the south and west.*



*Looking eastwards over Stanley Pontlarge and Alderton.*

# THE DIXTON PAINTINGS

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Dixton is a hamlet, within the parish of Alderton, lying about five miles north east of Cheltenham and three miles north west of Winchcombe. It is dominated by a hill, thought to be a castle mound, at the foot of which is Dixton Manor - a partly sixteenth century house, Manor Farm and a few cottages.

The two large Dixton paintings are panoramic views from the hill. One looks in a south and west direction, sweeping round from the manor on the left, with Prescott Hill beyond and Pardon Hill farmhouse on its slope, across the pasture lands of Dixton, to the

slopes of Woolstone Hill on the right. In the distance is Gloucester Cathedral with, on its left, behind Bishops Cleeve, the Cotswold escarpment and Churchdown Hill, and on its right the rounded shape of May Hill and the far off Welsh mountains. The village of Gotherington is in the middle distance, with the road leading to it from Dixton and Prescott. Beyond Gotherington is the flat, undrained land known as Moormead on the borders of Bishops Cleeve and Stoke Orchard. The track leading away to the right of the painting is still today a bridle-way to Woolstone.



The other painting looks mainly eastwards, with the southern slopes of Dumbleton Hill on the left and the hills above Gretton on the right. In the foreground are the common meadow and open fields of Stanley Pontlarge and Alderton, with the Cotswold scarp beyond Stanway in the distance. The village of Stanley Pontlarge may just be discerned as a row of smoking chimneys in the middle distance to the right of the painting.

The paintings are amazingly accurate topographically, which suggests that a transportable form of 'camera obscura' may have been used. This was a technique which became fashionable in the eighteenth century among both amateur and professional painters, the most famous, of course, being Canaletto. Between them, the two paintings provide a clear idea of the agriculture of the district at that period - in one the hilly, earlier-enclosed, pasture ground with grazing sheep and cattle, in the other the flat open fields with strip cultivation and common meadow.

They were presented to the Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum by two of the descendants of Elizabeth Malleson. She had lived at Dixon Manor from 1882 until her death in 1916. Her husband Frank Rodbard Malleson leased the house with 68 acres of land from Samuel Gist of Wormington Grange, at a yearly rent of £120. The lease included a clause requiring the tenants to pay all premiums of insurance to cover the dwellinghouse, stables, outbuildings and two cottages for a sum of £5,450<sup>1</sup>.

Neither of the paintings is signed, but there can be no doubt that they are by the same artist, who is as yet unknown. On the basis of costume and carriage style, they are thought to date from the first quarter of the eighteenth century, when the Higford family were the owners of Dixon.

## THE HIGFORD FAMILY

The Higford family had been Lords of the Manor of Dixon since the fifteenth century. It was they who enclosed 190 acres around the manor in 1507/8 and converted land from tillage to pasture<sup>2</sup>. Clear signs of ridge and furrow can be seen in the 'manor' painting, and they are still visible today. It was a John Higford (or Hufegord) who extended the house in the sixteenth century. His name, with the date 1555, is inscribed over the door of the three-storey porch, which with the four-bay gabled west front, can be seen in the painting and is standing today. The remaining part of the house has been demolished and rebuilt since then. The painting also shows a chapel to the east of the porch. Alderton parish registers show that Dixon Chapel was being used for family and servant baptisms and marriages up to the 1730s, but Samuel Rudder, writing in 1779, describes it as being 'now disused and fallen to decay'<sup>3</sup>. A tithe map, dated 1839, shows that it had been demolished by then, although the group of buildings to the west of the house - a coachhouse, pigeon cote and cottage, were still there<sup>4</sup>. A later map of 1883 shows that, by then, they too had gone and been replaced by the range of buildings to the east of the house, which stand there today<sup>5</sup>.

## THE FARMING ECONOMY

The tithe map, with its apportionment, gives the names of the fields of Dixon, many of which are named in a Higford marriage settlement of 1716<sup>6</sup> and an Inquisition Post Mortem dated 1626<sup>7</sup>. The hamlet of Dixon was bounded on the south west by the Tirlle brook, and the fields between this brook and the house were called Mill Leys. There is no sign of a mill in the painting, but a water-mill is mentioned in 1626. It is possible to name several of the fields in the 'manor' painting, and to note with satisfaction that there are sheep grazing in Ewes Leys, and cattle in Cow Leasows! Many of these cattle have the brown-red colouring and white back stripe which are so characteristic of the Old Gloucester breed. One cow is being milked in the field, a not-unusual practice according to William Marshall writing in 1796:

If the cow-ground is at a distance from the house or if the ground is very wet and will be poached by cows walking over it, then the pails are carried to the cows. The practice is to milk the cows unfettered; and to use square-topped four legged stools, resting one side of the bottom of the pail against two legs of the stool while the other two give firmness to the seat<sup>8</sup>.

Other farming activities which can be seen in the original

painting are the small group of sheep being penned by a shepherd and his dog and the hounds being exercised near the stable block. The group of ewes and lambs in the foreground do not appear to be the Cotswold breed which have shaggy wool on their foreheads. They look more like Leicester sheep which were becoming popular in Gloucestershire during the eighteenth century, particularly as crosses with the Cotswolds.

Turning to the other painting, depicting the haymaking scene, the enclosure acts for Alderton in 1807<sup>9</sup> and Stanley Pontlarge in 1809<sup>10</sup> give the name of the large meadow as Mickle or Myckle Mead. This name was mentioned as early as 1584, in an Alderton terrier<sup>11</sup>, and means Great Meadow. It lay mostly in Stanley Pontlarge, with just a small portion in Alderton. The common fields in Alderton abutting Dixon were called Harp field and Sausage field - the latter perhaps a misnomer for Socage, as it was spelt Sawcedge in 1584<sup>11</sup>. These fields are on the left of the painting, where the team of white horses with a loaded haywain is making its way to the road. The open field beyond the meadow, with its multi-coloured strips, is in Stanley Pontlarge and was called Barrowdine field.



*Dixon Manor and the Panorama to the south and west photographed in 1991.*



*The landscape looking eastwards, photographed in 1991.*

The Higford family held parcels of land within the common meadow, along with the Tracy family and others. William Marshall wrote:

Gloucestershire common meadows do not lie in long swathes but in square plots... the Hay is private property but the Aftergrass is generally common to the township, either without stint or stinted by the 'yard lands' of the common fields<sup>8</sup>.

Certainly the painting shows the work being carried out in

separate squares or oblongs. It seems as if the team of mowers scythed one block at a time and then the other workers, both men and women, raked it and piled it into cocks to dry before being loaded on to haywains. There are several teams of horses in the painting, the leader of each bearing a coloured plume on its harness - perhaps differentiating the teams of the different owners. William Marshall made the following comments on hay making:

In Mowing, it is observable, the Gloucestershire labourers cut remarkably level. This is chiefly owing to the narrowness of the swath-width and the shortness of the sithle ... the Yorkshireman drives a width of nine or ten feet before him, the Gloucestershireman of six or seven feet only ... It is the practice to form hay into 'windcocks' previous to its being put into stack. This enables the hay to be made when fuller of sap giving it superior quality<sup>8</sup>.

Apart from the haymakers there appear to be musicians in the meadow. It is difficult to find any reference to this practice for

Clark's *Drama in Gloucestershire*, in which he quotes a payment made by a Gloucester Borough Treasurer in 1552/3.

Maister Arnolds servants on May Day at the brynyng in of may 20/- ... and more to those persons that daunsed the moorys daunse the same tyme 5/-<sup>13</sup>.

Katherine Briggs, in *The Folklore of the Cotswolds*, confirms that May Day and Whitsuntide were the most popular time for Morris dancing, but she also mentions Midsummer as another occasion, which fits the hay harvesting scene better. She describes the dancers as

Six or eight men dressed in knee breeches, white stockings, low shoes, bells fastened about their legs, waving handkerchiefs to music from 'Wittle and Dub', a whistle about a foot in length together with a small flat drum, hung on the performer's finger and beaten with a short drum stick. The leader, called the 'Fool' flourished a stick with a bladder<sup>14</sup>.

The track where the Morris dancers are leaving the hay meadow is still a right-of-way which encircles Dixton Hill, joining



haymaking, but Thomas Tusser writing in 1580 refers to musicians in the corn harvest:

Now strike up drum  
cum harvest man cum.  
Blowe horn or sleepers  
and cheere up thy reapers<sup>12</sup>.

The Morris Dancers in the bottom right foreground of the painting are of interest, as this may be the first painting to depict them. An early reference to them appears in Theodore Hannam-

up with the road past the manor.

Returning to the 'manor' painting, it is worthwhile taking a closer look at the group of people who are waiting to receive their visitors outside the manor. The artist would surely have depicted actual members of the family, and if these could be identified then it would be possible to date the paintings more accurately. The group consists of a man holding the hands of a young boy on his left and a lady dressed in white on his right. Behind him stand two more ladies in white and one in red.

## FAMILY RECONSTITUTION

A John Higford had been Lord of the Manor of Dixton from 1657 until his death, at the age of 76, in 1703. He and his wife Elizabeth, who died in 1687, had four sons and two daughters surviving them. In 1695, the eldest son John was living at Alvington in the Forest of Dean, the second son William was in Twining, where he and his second wife Ann had eight children baptised there between 1691 and 1702, and another son James was part tenant of Dixton land<sup>15</sup>. It seems probable that he was living at the manor with his father and two sisters, Mary, who married in 1699 and Frances who remained at Dixton until her death in 1716/17. The fourth son Henry became Rector of Alderton in 1695, and presumably lived at the rectory there, at any rate after his marriage in 1701. His wife and only child died in 1704.

Consequently, in the very early 18th century the Dixton family probably consisted of the elderly John with his unmarried son and daughter, James and Frances - not suitable candidates for the group in the painting.

After John's death in 1703, the eldest son - another John - succeeded to the Lordship, but remained living in Alvington. After his death in 1705, apparently without issue, his brother William succeeded, but he was now living at Ashton-under-Hill with his third wife, another Ann. Their son Henry was baptised there in 1709, but Ann died shortly after. So it seems likely that only James and Frances would have been at Dixton until James' death in 1712. Sir Robert Atkyns, writing in 1712, stated that James Higford was 'the present proprietor' of Dixton, perhaps occupier would have been more accurate.

Did William, the Lord of the Manor, then move to Dixton? One would have thought so, but when his brother Henry died in June 1715, administration was granted to William Higford of Ashton. David Verey, writing about Dixton manor in the *Buildings of England* series, states that the fenestration was sashed in the early 18th century, and that there was early 18th century panelling in the drawing room<sup>16</sup>. Perhaps William took this opportunity to update the house before moving in with his family and fourth wife, Mary. So we come to the period 1715-20 - can the family group fit now? Could it consist of William with his new wife, just moved

into their improved manor, with young Henry aged six, together with William's two unmarried daughters Eleanor and Mary, and his sister Frances? It seems a very likely time to commission a painting, but it would have to have taken place during the summer of 1715. In the following January the Alderton parish register stated that 'Mary the wife of William Higford Esq. of Dixton was buried.'

After that it is more difficult to find a suitable group. Frances died in 1716/17. William's daughter Mary married in 1729, and William himself died in 1733. The eldest son James, the new Lord of the Manor, was living in Ashton in 1719 and Alvington in 1726, where he died in 1742. He was succeeded by his brother - another William, but he does not appear to have married until 1750, and then only had one daughter. After his death the succession passed to his half-brother Henry - who could well be the little boy in the painting, recently moved into his new home.

## REFERENCES

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- <sup>7</sup> GRO D 2819 Inq. P. M. Glos. 1625-42
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- <sup>13</sup> Hannam-Clark Theodore *Drama in Gloucestershire 1928* p. 40
- <sup>14</sup> Briggs Katherine M. *The Folklore of the Cotswolds* p. 44
- <sup>15</sup> GRO D 2819 Glos. Collection
- <sup>16</sup> Verey David *Gloucestershire 2 The Vale and The Forest of Dean* p. 81