

This is the seventh of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church

THE VERY EARLY MEMBERS OF THE MORLEY FAMILY

I hope eventually to be able to write a history of the Morley family, showing how they fitted in with events in British history, but this could be a lengthy task. But, since I am writing here about Swanton Morley, perhaps I should remind you that, in about 1200, the manor of Swanton was owned by the Mareschal (or Marshal) family as part of the barony of Rye, and was called Swanton Mareschal. It was not until 1316 that the Morleys became barons of Rye and the name changed to Swanton Morley. I thought, therefore, that it might be useful to make a start by looking at the background to the Morley family before they acquired the manor of Swanton.

All that we know about their distant origin is that they held land in Morley, near Wymondham (presumably now Morley St Botolph), and their name was probably assumed after marriage to an heiress of Morley. They also held land in 'Reydon' (Roydon) on the north bank of the River Waveney. A Robert de Morley is mentioned in a 'Feet of Fines' in 1199. Such a document was a record of all sorts of payments made to the Crown for writs, grants, privileges etc. This particular one made reference to 'common of pasture' (rights to graze cattle, sheep and horses) in Bressingham, Roydon and Shelfhanger.

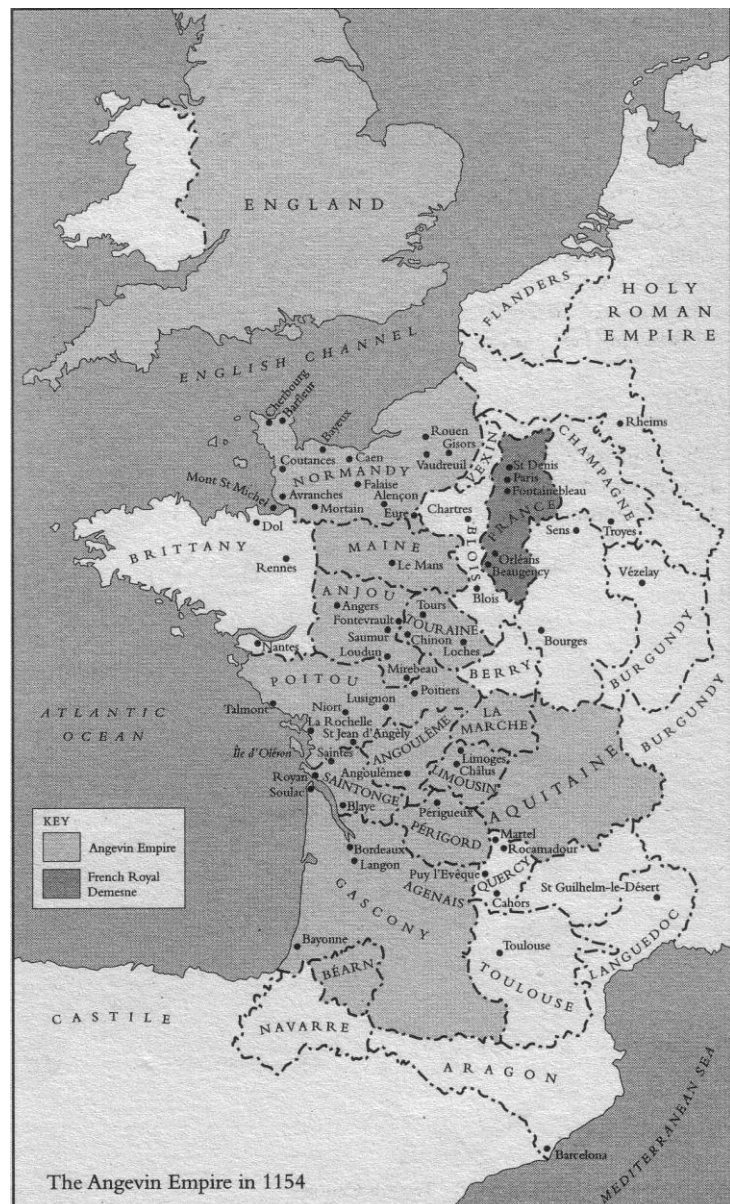
Matthew de Morley

The next Morley that we find is his son, Matthew de Morley, who is mentioned in several of the Patent Rolls of Henry III. These rolls record in amazing detail nearly all of the king's administrative business. One entry, dated 1229, says that he had been appointed a justice at the Norwich assizes. There is also a record to say that two knights were sent to see him when he was ill in September 1250, and that he appointed his son, Robert to succeed him.

Robert de Morley

We can pick him up in another of the Patent Rolls of Henry III. This entry refers to a grant of 'free warren' (the right to hunt certain beasts and fowls, such as pheasants, partridges, hares and rabbits, within a certain area) and specified Robert's demesne lands of 'Reydon and Morleye in the county of Norfolk'.

Now, this entry was dated 27 August 1254, and it was issued in Bordeaux, so Robert was probably serving in Gascony at the time. This is at the very bottom of the shaded area on the map.



What was a rather obscure knight from Norfolk doing in Gascony?

Well, it all goes back to when Henry, Count of Anjou and Duke of Normandy, married Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152, thus gaining vast lands in the west of France. Then, in 1154, Henry was crowned as Henry II of England, so the king of England also effectively owned the majority of France. This is shown as the main shaded area on the map, which shows the situation in 1154. The king of France only had control of a small area around Paris.

Inevitably Henry's sons squabbled over who was to inherit what part of this huge empire. They even made alliances with King Philip II of France and, as Henry grew old, his empire started to fall apart. He died in 1189 and was succeeded by Richard I who devoted most of his energies to participating in the Third Crusade. However, it was his successor, King John who was responsible for the loss of most of the French possessions. By the time that Robert de Morley was in Gascony in 1254, Henry III was on the throne and Gascony was virtually the only part of France still in English hands.

This was a particularly turbulent time to be in Gascony because the governor was Simon de Montfort (who was married to Henry III's sister, another Eleanor) and he had ruthlessly used military power to crush the rebellious Gascon barons. As a result he had fallen out with King Henry and he was replaced in 1254 by the young Prince Edward (the future Edward I).

There are various records which show that a Robert de Morley was in England in 1276, 1279, 1287 and 1288. It is almost certainly the same person, because he was a 'Commissioner of Gaol Delivery', a responsible post. It was his job to order the sheriff to bring prisoners awaiting trial before the appointed justices. You might like to know that among the prisoners that he dealt with were the two sons of the 'le vycaire de Runhale' (Runhall).

The death of Robert in Prussia

We also know, that Robert died and was buried in Prussia, but his heart was brought back to Roydon, and was buried there. The evidence that he was in Prussia comes from a very unusual source. In 1386 the Court of Chivalry heard a charge regarding the right of Sir Thomas Morley (the 3xG Grandson of the above Robert) to bear a certain coat of arms. The proceedings of this court would form a story of its own, but essentially evidence was presented to show that the Morleys had borne the disputed arms for many generations – including during the Prussian campaign. The commissioners even visited the church at Roydon to see the little effigy of a knight under which his heart was buried.

But, what was Robert doing in Prussia? By 1284 the Teutonic knights had completed their conquest of Prussia, but at present I know of no involvement by Edward I – he was probably far too busy subduing Wales – nor by any other English noblemen.

William de Morley

I do not know exactly when Robert died, but from now on we only hear of the activities of his son and heir, William de Morley. In 1294 William took part in an abortive expedition to Gascony, in the company of Roger de Montalt (who had a seat at Castle Rising), and under the command of the Earl of Richmond. He served there again in the campaigns of 1295 and 1296. Then in 1297 he went north in the company of the Earl of Gloucester and Hereford to drive back the Scots who had devastated the border counties after Wallace's victory at Stirling. He also married Isabel the daughter of the above Roger de Montalt and they had a son, Robert. However, she died and some time before October 1295 he married a lady called Cicely. He was summoned to Parliament in December 1299, and by this writ became Lord Morley. He died before the end of 1302 and was buried in Roydon church.

It was this son, Robert, who was eventually to acquire the manor of Swanton.