

Little Scotland and the Shepherds' Spy

by
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Mary Warner Almshouses, Boyton

Among papers viewed by the author several years ago relating to the Mary Warner Almshouses in Boyton was the response by the Trustees of the almshouses to an incursion on to their land in 1748 at a remote place where the heaths known as Tangham Heath and Boyton Heath met in the featureless landscape of those days. This dispute arose because 'metes and bounds' namely posts had recently been set in the ground claiming to define the boundary of the Duchess of Hamilton's estate in those parts where it abutted on lands belonging to the Trustees. To the north of the disputed area stood Tangham Farm which was undoubtedly part of the Duchess's estate. A tenant of this farm in the early seventeenth century when the estate was sold by William Forth to Francis Warner, was Walter Armiger who farmed what had once been Tangham manor house in Capel St. Andrew.

Sometime around 1748 the Duchess of Hamilton employed a new steward, Mr. Graham. It appears he took it upon himself to enlarge the Duchess's estate and claimed heathland said to be nearly 200 acres. On behalf of the Boyton Trustees, their agent, Robert Sparrow, appointed in 1736, put together extracts from 'ancient records' going back to the purchase of the Manor by Forth and Morison after the Dissolution. He commented that the piece of land in question had been enjoyed by the Trustees 'for time beyond the memory of man' and was dismissive of Mr. Graham's claim, especially as he was a stranger, from Scotland, who could not know anything about the ancient boundaries.

Sparrow made a sketch of the disputed land and consulted two shepherds, one aged seventy, and they confirmed that the boundary was where it had been before Graham set up the new posts. He also asked John Fuller, the current Trustees' tenant to swear under oath that he had always fed his sheep and cut both heath and furze on this land until Graham gave him notice to cease doing so, thus he would lose fifty acres of heath from the 300 acres let to him. He too confirmed where the boundary had been.

It is an interesting question how the old boundary was identified on heathland with no obvious land marks. It was a common practice on sandy soils where there is no stone except flints to be found, to place 'dooles'. Around the time of this dispute the bounds of Wantisden were written down and they included 'a piece of land called Highfields belonging to the said Thomas