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**OLDBURY COURT: THE PLACE AND THE PEOPLE**  
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The Oldbury Court Park and housing estate is situated about 3.5 miles from the centre of the city of Bristol. It has a recorded history dating back to 1086 and the core of the original Domesday land holding has remained remarkably clear of development for over 900 years. Its proximity to Bristol has inevitably meant that throughout its long history it has been intimately connected with the economic and social development of Bristol.

The pre-history of the Oldbury Court area is difficult to determine due to lack of archaeological excavation on or near the original house site and the extensive alterations to the ground caused by 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century landscaping and 20<sup>th</sup> century housing development. But the survival of the original Saxon name of Oldbury (the old fortified place) suggests a possible late bronze age or iron age embanked farmstead as the original settlement on the site. The first historical mention of the Oldbury site appears in Domesday Book when a riding man is shown as holding a carucate of land (a taxation unit of roughly 120 acres) in 1066 as part of the royal manor of Barton Regis which also included the hamlets of Easton, Stapleton and Mangotsfield. Riding men were free men of fairly low status who were usually found on the estates of large landowners, mostly royal or ecclesiastical. The Oldbury riding man was exempt from labour services and was the only man as such designated in the Barton, his job being probably to carry messages for the reeve. Throughout the medieval period until the mid fourteenth century there are many references to the activities of the holder of Oldbury: in the roll of rents and services for Stapleton which has survived for the year 1294-5, among the free tenants is John of Oldbury holding one carucate of land by tenure of sergeantry which consisted of 'carrying the king's writs, summonses and letters of the Constable of Bristol (Castle) within the county of Gloucester at his own costs'.

By 1402 the manor of Barton had become much depleted with only 40 acres being under the direct control of the Constable of the castle with much of the peripheral land leased out to local landowners. Oldbury was affected by this change and by 1429 was part of the estates of William Doddisham the younger, a lawyer from Cannington in Somerset and MP for Bridgwater with a legal practice which extended to Bristol. However, by 1485 one third of Oldbury was in the hands of the Kemys family that had originated in South Monmouthshire and become established in Gloucestershire by 1422 at the latest. The core of the Oldbury estate was to remain with the Kemys family until 1667. The rest of Oldbury was in the hands of other men: a surviving rent roll of 1498 shows land at Oldbury as part of the land portfolio of the wealthy Bristol merchant, Philip Grene, sheriff of Bristol in 1499/1500 whose daughter Joanna was married to John Kemys of Oldbury. Grene was also shown as owning two mills on the River Frome, which had been under the control of the Constable of Bristol castle during the earlier medieval period, one of which Oldbury mills was rented from him by John Kemys. Between 1485 and 1667 the Kemys family rebuilt Oldbury House with its three gables and gradually added land to the estate. By 1667 most of the original 11<sup>th</sup> century estate had been recovered. In 1667 Isabella Collett, the last surviving Kemys, sold 74.5 acres of land at Oldbury, including the house, to the Bristol glover Robert Winstone.

Winstone lived and carried on his business in what was later to be called the Dutch House on the corner of High Street and Wine Street which he leased from 1676. His business obviously prospered for he was able to purchase part of Oldbury in 1667 for £1410 and in 1668 bought the tithes of corn and hay belonging to the rectory of Stapleton for an additional £50. Part of his capital may have come from shrewd investments in the fast developing West Indian trade and his son Thomas was able by 1696 to move to the more fashionable address of St James Back and cease living over the shop. Thomas caused somewhat of a stir in Quaker circles by clandestinely marrying Hannah Dowell the Quaker daughter of a wealthy Bristol glover, and consequently played a leading

part in the Society for the Reformation of Manners in Bristol. More importantly he embarked on a programme of building up his Oldbury Court estate, buying by 1715 the land on both sides of the River Frome which is part of the park today. His son, another Thomas Winstone, was then able to call himself a gentleman instead of a glover, reside at Oldbury House, enlarge the south wing and develop the land to the rear of the house as a pleasure garden while letting out the land in front of the house to local farmers. He was also able to take part in local activities, become a churchwarden of Stapleton church and a trustee of the new charity school in Fishponds founded by a bequest from Mary Webb in 1729, and was instrumental in the appointment of Jacob More, the father of Hannah More as schoolmaster there. Winstone died in 1760 and after his widow Albinia's death in 1769 the estate reverted to her nephew, William Hayward Winstone, who systematically mortgaged the estate during the next twenty years to finance his Bath lifestyle and finally sold it to his major creditors, three Bristol merchants, in 1798. In October 1799 Thomas Graeme, who had leased Oldbury from Hayward Winstone since 1794, bought the Oldbury estate from the new owners for £9000.

Graeme described recently as a 'West Indian sugar baron' from Barbados, with estates there and in Grenada, was keen to remodel the estate grounds and in 1800 called in Humphrey Repton, who during the next three years made substantial changes in the layout and character of the grounds around the house. Repton was surprised that such a piece of undivided property unaffected by the 'buildings, manufactories and nuisance of every description inseparable from a commercial city' should exist so near the city of Bristol. Repton was able to eradicate field boundaries in front of the house to create a new vista of parkland and build a new carriageway from the Frenchay entrance to the estate that was enhanced by a rustic gatekeepers lodge. Various extra features were added such as a declivity at the rear of the house to provide a view over the Frome valley, and a rustic bridge across the river to give access to a newly built rustic cottage on the north bank called Glenfroom cottage, used by Graeme's nephew and heir Valentine Jones. The south wing of the house was further extended on the west to give a view across the Frome valley to the occupants.

Graeme died in 1820, followed by his heir, Valentine Jones, in 1833, and the property eventually passed to the Vassall family, relatives of Graeme's sister Margaret. The family were descended from French Huguenots who had emigrated from England to America in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and had been forced to return to England after the American Revolution because of their loyalist sympathies. The Vassalls held the estate until 1936, when having no male heir Harry Graeme Vassall decided to sell the estate to Bristol Corporation, who wished to use the land for 'an open space and playing fields', reserving land to the south for housing. However the war intervened and although the land was put to good use growing crops the house inevitably deteriorated. A fire in 1948 severely damaged the coach house and burnt down the stable, and less than a month later lead was stolen from the roof. An architect's report revealed the decay of the main house structure, irreparably damaged by 'a widespread and devastating attack by dry rot fungus, death-watch beetle and woodworm' and recommended demolition. The Public Works Committee of the City Council, despite wanting to keep the house, did not have the funds to restore it and by February 1949 it had been demolished. The other buildings of the Graeme/Repton collaboration disappeared at the same time, except Glenfroom Cottage that had been burnt by suffragettes. Since 1949 the park has become a major leisure area for local people and as such has fulfilled the original aspirations of the City Council in 1936. Unfortunately the house site has been allowed to become a vehicle depot and maintenance area and is unsightly, while next to it a 1960s changing room block lies derelict. Heavy tree planting has also destroyed some of Repton's park vistas, but quite amazingly an early mediaeval site, not engulfed by housing, remains as a living resource, and its ownership by Bristol City Council as heir to the manor of Barton, is an excellent example of continuity of ownership for nearly a thousand years.

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