

What is the Duchy?

By Richard Thomas

The Duchy was, and remains one of the finest residential areas in England and exceeds by far such imitations as Fulwith Mill Lane or Roundhay.

It is well worth us house owners having to negotiate the no-doubt irritating requirements of being in a conservation area. This was designed to protect its character. "The high hedges and mature trees within gardens give Duchy properties an Arcadian feel and a sense of privacy much prized by local residents".

I believe this overall character to have achieved an area to be treasured rather than being "lawn-mowed" without and hoovered within" as Roundhay was once described.

That Harrogate flourished sufficiently to be able to create and maintain this area is in the view of one well-known Harrogate enthusiast "entirely thanks to the beneficial influence of the Duchy of Lancaster whose association with Harrogate since 1372 has been the town's greatest single piece of good fortune".

What is this Duchy? It was created and maintained as a consequence of a desire by two fathers to create a benefit for their sons and by a son to protect his inheritance against all possible eventualities.

The original father was Henry III and was to provide for his youngest son, Edmund Crouchback, after the failure of a scheme to make him King of Sicily. The Earldom, based on the royal estates in Lancashire, was raised to a Duchy for Edmund's grandson Henry of Grosmont by Edward III in 1351 with internal governing powers.

Edward III's son John of Gaunt married Henry of Grosmont's heiress-daughter and he was created Second Duke of Lancaster. He then did a deal in 1372 whereby he surrendered his "spare" Earldom of Richmond to his father in exchange for the Honour of Knaresborough which included the forest in which our area lies.

The connection between the Duchy and Harrogate has remained intact since that time despite Richard II's attempt to confiscate the estate in 1399 on the death of John of Gaunt, just after his dying speech about about "This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle, this earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,... this fortress built by nature for itself".

John's son was not pleased and deposed Richard to become Henry IV and settled his Duchy estate for ever on whoever is monarch.

The golden era of hunting through the forest gradually faded, to be replaced by more mercenary interests and the Stuart/Georgian Kings were keen to maximise any potential. Charles I sold the ancient deer parks within the forest to the City of London, who quickly re-sold Havarah Park to the Ingilbys at Ripley.

Whilst the Duchy retained ownership of the land, this was subject to tenancy rights of an increasingly agricultural scene. Pressure arose to move from farming common land to individual enclosure . The Crown found itself an owner without the ability to derive income from the ownership. An interesting current example arose this summer, when the Duchy, as owners of the Stray, expended a considerable sum in filling in the redundant Sulphur Water storage tanks build below Christ Church Stray.

The Stray is the only remainder of widespread open common lands. It was left as such as part of the Enclosure of the Forest lands in 1778.

The Crown did very well out of the enclosures. In exchange for hitherto valueless rights as lord of the soil, the King received 2,385 acres, including 240 acres on the west of Ripon Road between Irongate Bridge Road (now Cornwall Road) and Oak Beck. Now known as 'The Duchy', this former common brought substantial dividends to the Crown as well as giving the town a series of handsome streets named after Royal Dukes.

Whilst Queen Victoria used to travel incognito as the Countess of Lancaster, in October 1887 she fired the starting gun for the development of the Duchy.

The age of the builder had arrived.