

THE SKYDMORES IN THE RECORDS OF THE POLL TAXES OF 1377, 1379 AND 1381.

by Warren Skidmore

The records of the poll taxes taken in the last quarter of the 14th century are fascinating because they provide information about people who (aside from occasional knight or their widows) rarely get mentioned in any other record. Where they survive they provide data about the husbandry and small craftsmen and their wives and dependants, servants, occupations, and relationships that no other records from the period does.

This is the good news. The bad news is that they survive for only a small part of the population. For some counties such as Hertfordshire not a single scrap remains, while other like the West Riding of Yorkshire are marvelously complete. Some part of the surviving records give (aside from the age of persons taxed) almost as much information as the census of 1841. The condition of the remainder varies considerably; some are as clear as if the clerk had just put his pen down while others are less informative and are faded, damaged by damp, or nibbled by rodents. Many are illegible without an ultraviolet lamp and are, despite modern precautions, deteriorating still further today.

In 1377 the law required that every person 14 or older owed the tax, which was changed to age 16 in 1379. The taxers went from door to door. John Skidemore of Compton Chamberlayne in Wiltshire was named as one of the honest men (*probi homines*) who were selected because they knew the number and financial circumstances of their fellow villagers. They worshiped in the same church, worked in the same fields, and attended the same manorial courts to bear witness to one another lives. Very few individuals evaded the paying the tax by pretending to be poor, or by concealing their dependants, or by “taking to the woods.” The Constables and honest men may have made a few concessions not to aggravate their friends, but they still had to satisfy the Crown with a substantial collection.

While we know that John Skidemore helped in the collection of the tax in 1377 the full return is (alas) missing for Compton Chamberlayne for all every year. So we do not get his occupation, or the names of his wife (ux' eius) or his children (*filius* or *filia eius*) for whom he presumably paid the tax of 4d. each in 1377. We get usually only the given name of male or female servants (*serviens eius*) and so we are left in the dark about the full names they may have used. Some were perhaps known either by the names of their father or their master, or probably on occasion both.

We know that John Skydmore was a descendant of Walter Skidemore who held half a virgate of land at Compton Chamberlayne in 1274. His uncle, Sir Peter Skidemore, died without a son in 1293 and gave Upton Scudamore to his nephew before his death to insure a male descent (but only the head of his honour). His other lands went to his only daughter Alice, wife of Sir Adam Bavant. Compton Chamberlayne, while it was not a Scudamore fee, lies between Fifield Bavant (which was) and

Teffont Ewyas, both manors belonging to the honour of Ewyas Harold in Herefordshire. This John Skidemore left three sons living in 1436, John *the elder* (who had a son Nicholas), Edmund, and John *the younger*. The family, largely yeomen, continued at Compton

Chamberlayne for at least another 200 years. Richard Butler *alias* Skydemore, buried there in February 1577, in the last noticed in the register of the church.

The returns for Herefordshire are very sparse. However in 1379 we find that Phillo Gwyas [*sic*], a franklin, paid the largest assessment of 3s. 6d. at Holme Lacy in Webtree Hundred where 51 men were taxed. Philip Skydmore *alias* Ewyas (and his son George after him) sometimes used the name Ewyas in the right of their descent from an Ewyas heiress. Philip himself had married a Agnes, a daughter of John Huntercombe and the widow of William de la Barre from whom she had a life interest in Hollanton in Holme Lacy.

Unfortunately Ewyas Lacy Hundred in Herefordshire seemingly was never taxed so we learn nothing new about the Skydmores at Rowstone. Irchenfeld (*sic*) in Wormelow Hundred is mentioned in the list of Acquittances for 1377, so we know nothing about the persons at Corras in Kentchurch. Both of these places were quasi-Welsh and easily overlooked.

In addition to the counties of Wiltshire and Herefordshire the Skydmores also had holdings in Devon. The returns for Sheepstor (Roborough Hundred) in Devon are missing but a William Skidemore held Longstone in Sheepstor on 5 March 1377 at the time of the death of Hugh de Courtenay, 2nd earl of Devon. It seems likely that William was a grandson of the Ralph Skydemore who was taxed 12d in Tavistock Hundred (which is hard by Sheepstor) in 1332, and that this Ralph might have been out of Poston in Herefordshire. Descendants of the Skydmores of Sheepstor survived until Sir William Elford, Baronet, died without issue at Bickford, Devon in 1837.

A Thomas Skydmore (living 1391) married Alice, a daughter of William Wortham, lord of Wortham in Lifton Hundred, Devon (which adjoins Tavistock) in the reign of Richard II, but nothing survives for this hundred in the poll tax lists. It seems likely that he was succeeded by the John Skydmore who held Northcombe in Bratton Clovelly (also in Lifton Hundred) soon after. He may also have been the John Skydmore "of Devon" was a mainpernor on 3 January 1411/2 for Thomas Pyfit of Lincoln in a suit brought by John Ryle, a goldsmith of Lincoln, and may the man of this name who later settled in Buckinghamshire.

All of these Devon Skydmores were substantial persons, probably kin, and we hazard that they may have come out of the older family at Poston. There were possibly other Skydmores, younger sons of younger sons now in reduced circumstances, who may also belong here. Added to these must be still others, not genetically kin to these *or to one another*, of whom we have no knowledge. The records of the poll taxes promised some enlightenment, which is alas left largely unfulfilled.