



# THE ASSHETON OF MIDDLETON ARCHIVES

The archives are a collection of 1400 historic documents created by and about the Assheton family, their lives, lands and business between the years 1197 and 1837.

Q: What is an archive? A: Unique record created at a moment in time

Q: Can anything be an archive? A: Yes many things including a shopping list, a webpage, an Instagram post, a medical record, a photograph, school exam results and many more.

Due to generous funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Friends of National Libraries, the V&A, Manchester Libraries Trust and Manchester City Council, the Assheton of Middleton archive has been purchased and now entirely belongs to Greater Manchester in perpetuity. It is held in the Archives at Manchester Central Library.



# THE ASSHETONS OF MIDDLETON MANOR

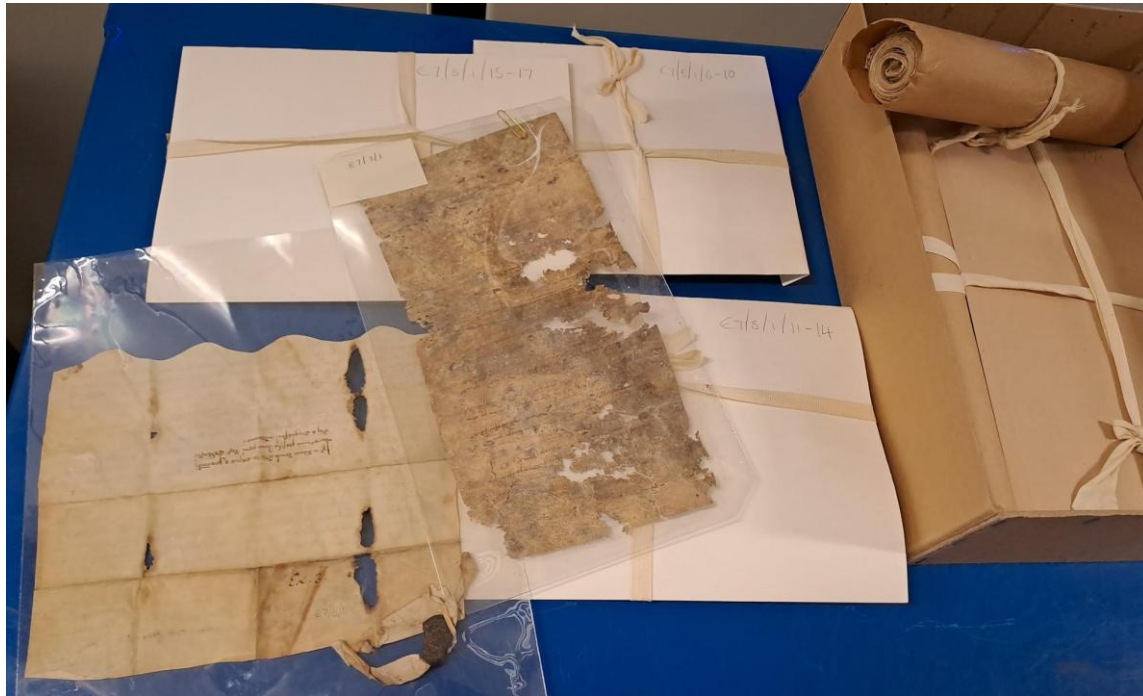
- The Assheton family were lords of the manor of Middleton therefore their archive is a manorial document collection and is included in the Manorial Documents Register maintained by The National Archives.
- The documents are mostly written on paper made from woodpulp or cotton rags or on parchment or vellum made from animal skin which survives longer than paper.
- Each document has a unique number which shows it belongs to the Assheton collection which also has its own number – **E7**.
- We have a list of all the documents - "The Catalogue" and this shows:
  - Structure of the collection – a hierarchy or tree-and-branch structure – eg like a hierarchy of webpages
  - Reference number of each document eg **E7/18/5/2**
  - Date written or n.d (=not dated)
  - Type of document – eg BOND (agreement carrying a financial penalty) or ARTICLES OF AGREEMENT (contract) or SETTLEMENT (eg marriage settlement). There are many different types of documents.
  - A short title or description and sometimes a translation of the document

# THE ASSHETONS OF MIDDLETON MANOR

The archive includes:

- Records (rolls) of the courts leet and baron of the manor of Middleton,
- Military and legal papers for example muster rolls, evidence from English Civil War, documents relating to royal appointments
- Estate documents relating to Middleton, Radcliffe, Thornham, Birtle, Pilsworth and Ainsworth.
- Personal papers relating to Sir Ralph and Lady Anne Assheton
- Surveys, maps, valuations, accounts, rentals.
- Deeds, drawings and correspondence with Harbord Harbord, Lord Suffield, into whose possession the estate passed in 1762.

# Assheton Archive at Manchester Central Library





*A PLAN of LANDS in RADCLIFFE*  
 in the COUNTY of LANCASTER  
 belonging to the late *James Maffison Esq.*  
 taken by Order of the Guardians  
 of *Mrs Maffison, Hisdon*  
 and *Harford Harford Esq.*  
 the Present Possessor  
 in *1767*

E7/18/5/2 1767

The documents are very damaged and fragile in some cases. This b&w microfilm photograph was created prior to digitisation. It is a map or plan of land around Radcliffe which was part of the family estate – the original is made of paper backed with linen material and is too fragile to use so we use a digital copy instead.



*ould...*

# THE ASSHETON FAMILY OF MIDDLETON MANOR

Our story begins in 1197 – over 800 years ago...

- Manor of Middleton – in the County of Lancaster (ie Lancashire)
- Middleton is close to Rochdale, now in Greater Manchester

At that time Rochdale and Manchester were both small settlements with less than 5% of current population – possibly Middleton was only a few hundred people

- What was a Manor? - an area of land held by a lord of that manor from the King under ancient feudal system of land ownership and social organisation
- Consisted of a manor house or hall, villages, hamlets, common land, farming land and a parish church (St Leonard's)

You're on  
my manor!

## Middleton Hall

- Illustration depicting late 1700s
- Hearth Tax – 18 hearths in 1666
- Ancient structure built in different periods
- Original timber house built as 2 courts
- Moat and bridges
- Timber, plaster, later additions in stone & brick
- Panelling & plaster ceilings
- Large masonry chimney built 1587
- “Resembling a ship turned upside down” (1770)
- Demolished by 1847
- Source: Victoria County History of Lancashire
- [Townships: Middleton | British History Online](#)



## Sir Ralph and Lady Margery Assheton

The Assheton family (pronounced Ashton) begins with the first Sir Ralph Assheton baronet – Lord of the Manor

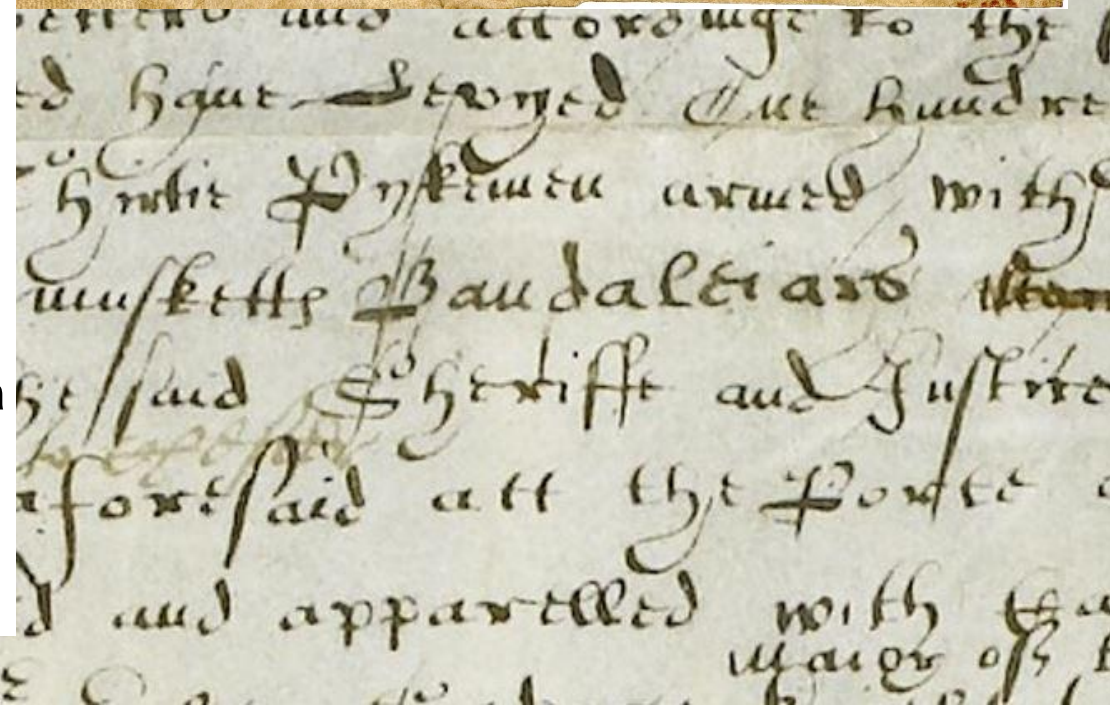
- Ralph was married to Margery (or Margaret) and received the Manor of Middleton as part of their marriage settlement – an arranged marriage...
- They were both teenagers, 15-17 years and it is thought theirs was a love match, rather than a marriage contract for money or land but we don't know this as it is not recorded in any surviving account. The illustration is from the St Leonard's church brasses and was probably created after the death of Sir Ralph in 1485.



Middleton: Sir Ralph and  
Margaret Assheton, 1485

## THE ASSHETON MANOR

- The Assheton estate consisted of all the lands & properties held by the lord of the manor of Middleton from the king
- The estate didn't always belong to the Assheton family. It began life in 1197 under the **ARTICLES OF AGREEMENT** signed by two barons, Roger de Middleton and William de Radcliffe. They agreed to divide their lands in Middleton, Thornham, Pilsworth, Bamford and Radcliffe and their agreement included a payment of 20 shillings 'to end all quarrels'.
- A legal agreement was usually witnessed by local officials – here 6 witnesses sign the document, listing at the end
- "...Adam, parson of Middleton..." **E7/5/1/1**
- A parson was a priest so this is the earliest evidence of Middleton parish church - a Norman church built to replace the earlier Saxon building dedicated to St Cuthbert around 880 AD/CE
- [History - St Leonard Middleton](#) website



# Religion and the Lord of the manor

- Religion was central to medieval life in England. The church was extremely powerful, governing every aspect of life and church attendance all day on Sunday was compulsory for everyone. During the Hundred Years War Edward III passed a law in 1363 to ensure that every able-bodied man must attend archery practice after church. This was to maintain military readiness and national defence capability.
- So far we have found no record of anyone summoned to the Court Leet for not attending archery practice each week – more research is needed
- In 1197 England was still Catholic until in 1534 when Henry VIII decreed separation from the Church of Rome, establishing the Church of England and declaring himself as its head.
- Every parish (village) in England had a church with a priest appointed by the lord of the manor who must be loyal and obedient to the king and his lord.
- The lord of the manor was entitled to hold manorial courts (courts leet and baron) to rule on local affairs and maintain law and order.

## St Leonard's, Middleton parish church

- St Leonard's church in Middleton is very ancient but its dedication is not unique.
- St Leonard's church in Downham, Lancashire, is also very old. The manors of Downham and Middleton were both held by members of the Assheton family from 1438-1530s, being direct descendants of Sir Ralph Assheton of Middleton.
- The lord of the manor usually held the right to appoint the advowson - the priest who held the living attached to the parish church
- Both churches were established prior to the Asshetons and were thought to have been built earlier than the Norman conquest.
- St Leonard was the patron saint of prisoners, women in labour and of livestock and cattle.
- Many churches in rural areas of England dedicated to St Leonard – he is thought to be the patron saint of country folk

## Palaeography – reading historic manuscripts or old handwriting

Historical research involves using “primary sources” like the Assheton archive which are original documents created at the time and are reliable as evidence but only of that specific event recorded. Primary sources can be interpreted differently according to various historical viewpoints and often raise further questions.

Historical manuscripts are extremely difficult to read and to understand. Handwriting changed over time and this collection features two types of writing - Secretary hand and Court hand.

Not everyone was able to read and write so a clerk or secretary would write down the business of the courts or, more likely, take notes to be written up afterwards. These could be the royal Court of the monarch ie the business of the king or queen, or the small Court Leet or Court Baron held by the Lord of the manor under the English feudal system.

Some Assheton documents are in Latin or French but mostly in English from 1500s onward. Letter formation simplifies over time and becomes easier to read but still difficult to a modern reader. Spellings are not standard like now – words were spelt phonetically and inconsistently – one word could be spelt in two or three different ways in one sentence.



## Assheton of Middleton Family Tree beginnings


Sir Ralph Assheton, baronet born 1421  
He was a Page to Henry VI in 1428 age 7 – same age, likely companions  
Married in 1438 - he was 17yrs old  
Known later as the Black Knight, became Knight Marshall and Vice Constable of England – working closely with King Richard III  
Fought at Battle of Bosworth Died 1485/6

Married Margaret Barton daughter of John Barton of Middleton on 15 April 1438 – she was 15 years

1441 – 1452 Ralph and Margaret had thirteen children 7 daughters, 5 sons –more than one per year. 7 survived to adulthood, 6 died young.

Their son Richard b.1449 inherits the knighthood becomes Sir Richard Assheton, marries Isabel.  
Their son Rauf Assheton also marries a Margaret.  
Their son John marries Alice – sons Ralphe Assheton and Richard Assheton.

**The oldest sons usually named Ralph or Richard. They inherited the estate and the knighthood (baronetcy) and so the name continued through the generations.**



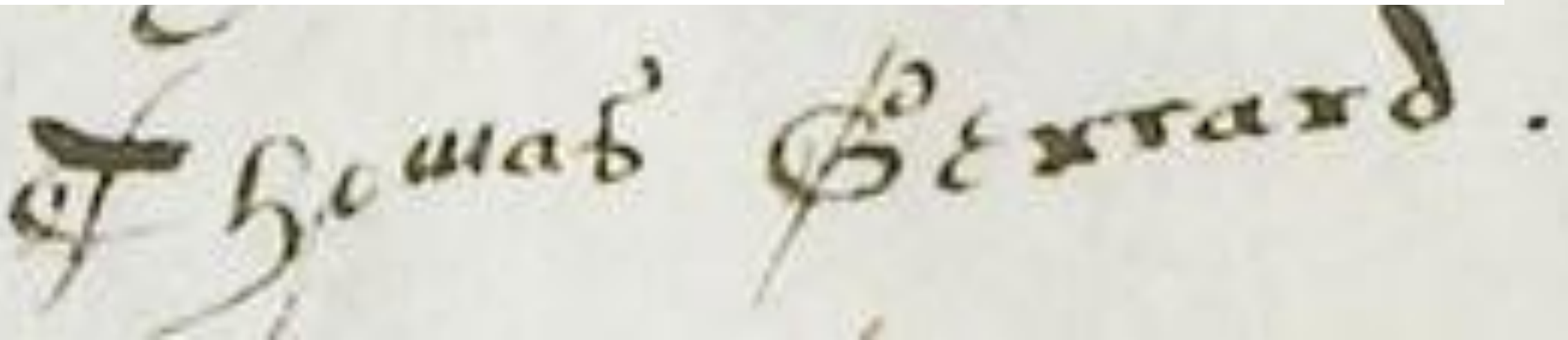
Richard Richard

## Palaeography – reading historic manuscripts or old handwriting

Reading is very difficult, sometimes letter by letter, but practice makes perfect!

Transcribing – rewriting the text as it appears and translating into modern English (similar to translating another language)

Try it yourself – look at the names and then the transcriptions of the names



Richard Richard

Richard Northon

of Bourne Olneyton.

of Bourne Sturton.

Richard Atherton

**Richard Atherton**

Thomas Clayton

**Thom[a]s Clayton**

Thomas Gerrard

**Thomas Gerrard**

Wigard Ashton

**Write your own name** Use the alphabet sheets to guide you in forming the letters

Tricky ones include:

Lower case c – looks like an r

Lower case s looks b with a wiggly top

Lower case h – can have a has a long tail like a y or g

Lower case r – looks like a v

Capital C – elaborate with a cross stroke

Lower case e looks like a backwards 3 or a bun

Assheton Palaeography Alphabet 17<sup>th</sup> century

A.Gill

A		a		I		i	
B		b		J		j	
C		c		K		k	
D		d		L		l	
E		e		M		m	
F		f		N		n	
G		g		O		o	
H		h		P		p	

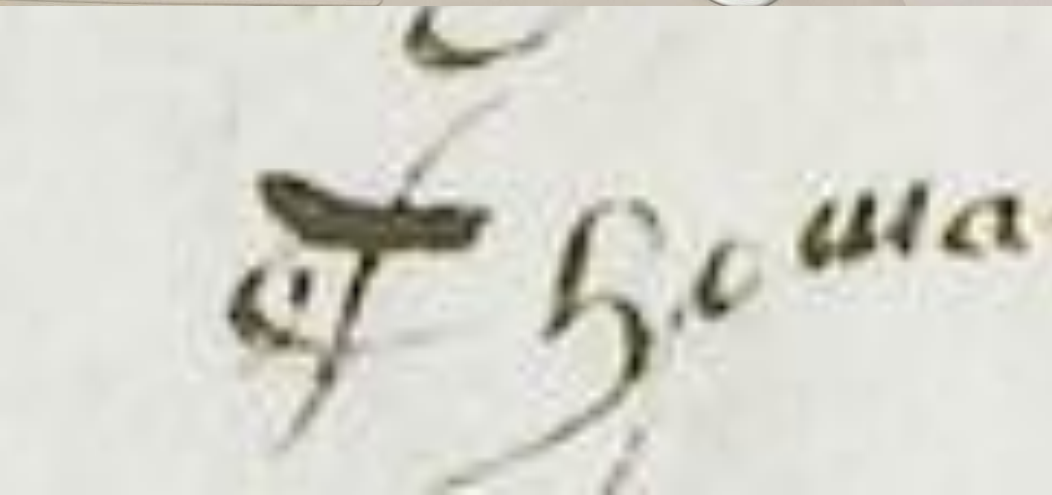
Q		q	
R		r	
S		s	
T		t	
U		u	
V		v	
W		w	
X		x	
Y		y	
Z		z	

## Palaeography – reading historic manuscripts or old handwriting

- The documents contain detailed information but the catalogue lists only a basic title or description for most documents due to the difficulty in reading the text
- There are over 1400 individual items and each document can be up to ten or more pages long
- Many papers are extremely fragile and decayed – they are impossible to handle without skilled staff and techniques.
- Many are too fragile and cannot be produced for researchers. Digitising is essential to allow access so that we can read and transcribe the contents.
- AI can support transcription but only with clear images derived from photography
- AI is not reliable – any transcriptions must be confirmed by expert human eye and knowledgeable interpretation
- Court Leet and Court Baron records contain valuable information about family and local history which with caution, AI may be able to help us unlock.

## Research and Getting Your Eye In

Familiarity with palaeography helps train our brains. The project included workshops for volunteers and students in reading, transcribing, interpreting and responding to the texts. We underestimated the difficulty, skills and knowledge required to become proficient – practice definitely makes better, if not perfect!



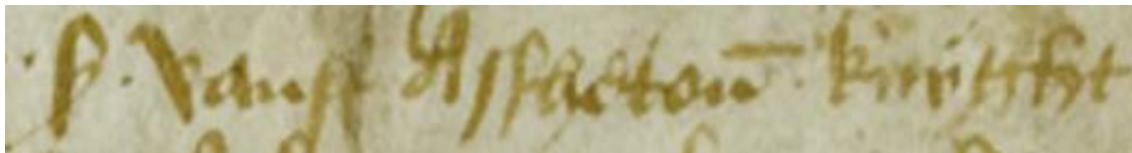
## Experimenting with AI to read and transcribe manuscripts

AI can be very useful in helping us read and understand the documents. It can transcribe the writing and give literal and modern translations.

BUT we have to check and mark the AI homework which frequently misreads text and misinterprets documents.

➤ We still need scepticism and an expert human eye to confirm AI has read and translated correctly – don't rely solely on the internet

➤ Robert Legg



Robert Lewes



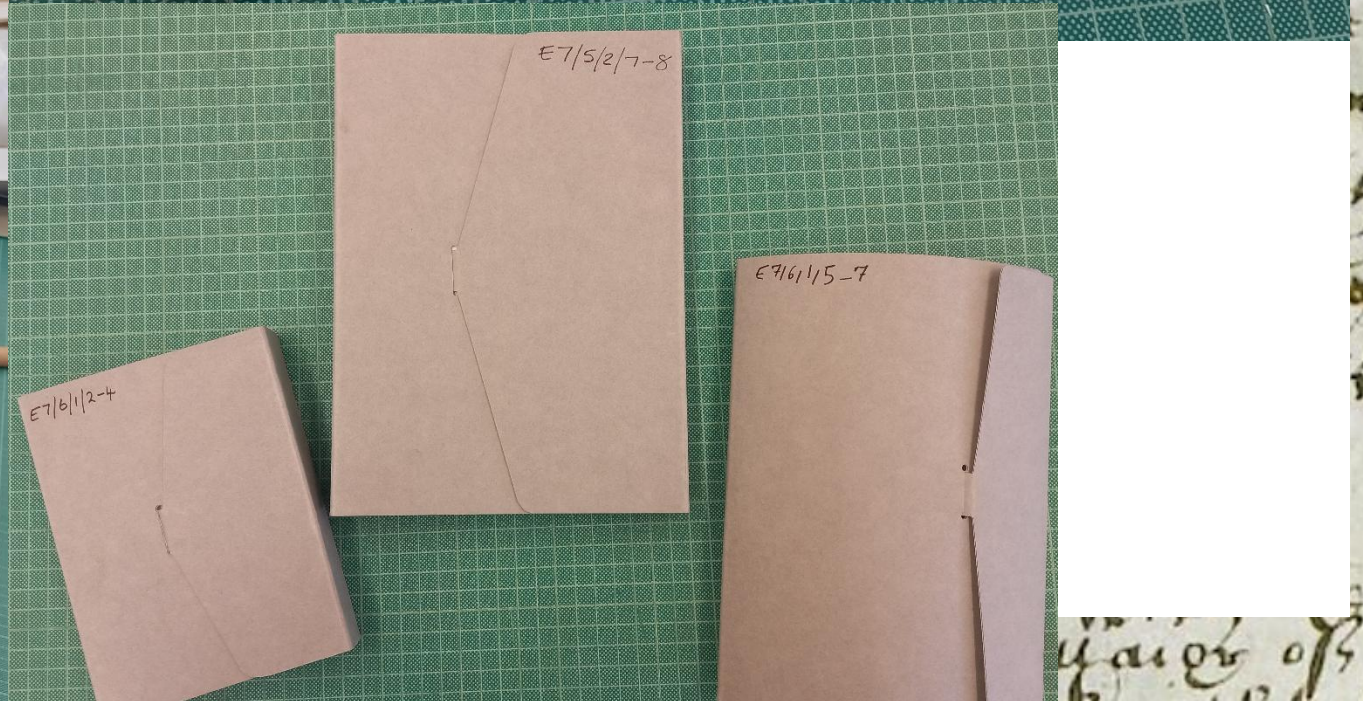
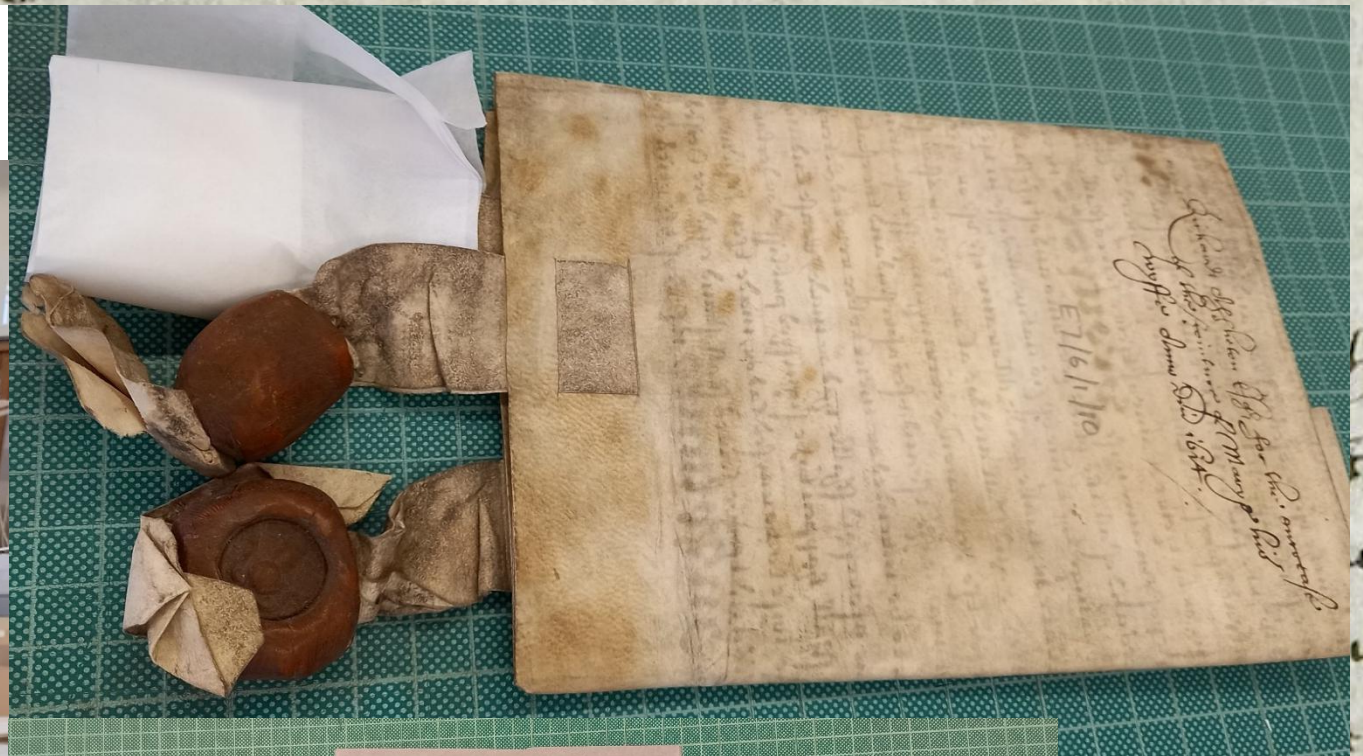
Sir Ralphe Assheton

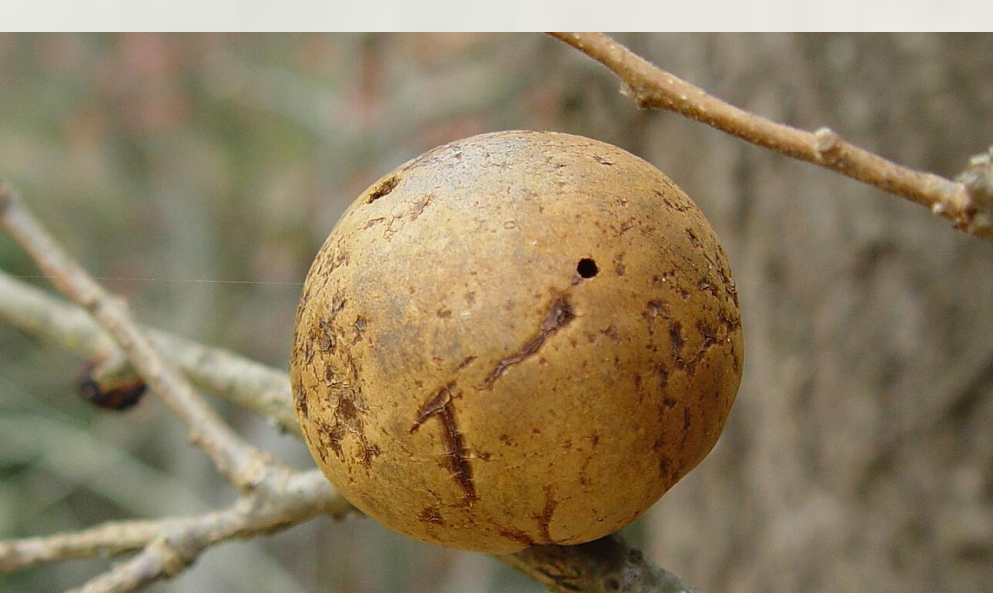
Sir Walter Ashton





# Preserving the Assheton Documents





## How Ink was made

Ink was historically made from oak galls which are growths on oak trees. The gall wasp lays eggs in oak buds causing the tree to exude a protective growth which feeds the insect wasp larvae which eat their way out, leaving a tiny hole in the shell of the oak gall.

Oak galls look like a dry fruit or acorn and are rich in tannins which are intensely acidic. Ink-making involved picking the galls, then crushing and steeping them with chemicals including iron sulphate, gum Arabic and water.



**Figure 1** Franco Folini from San Francisco, USA, CC BY-SA 2.0  
<<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>>, via Wikimedia Commons

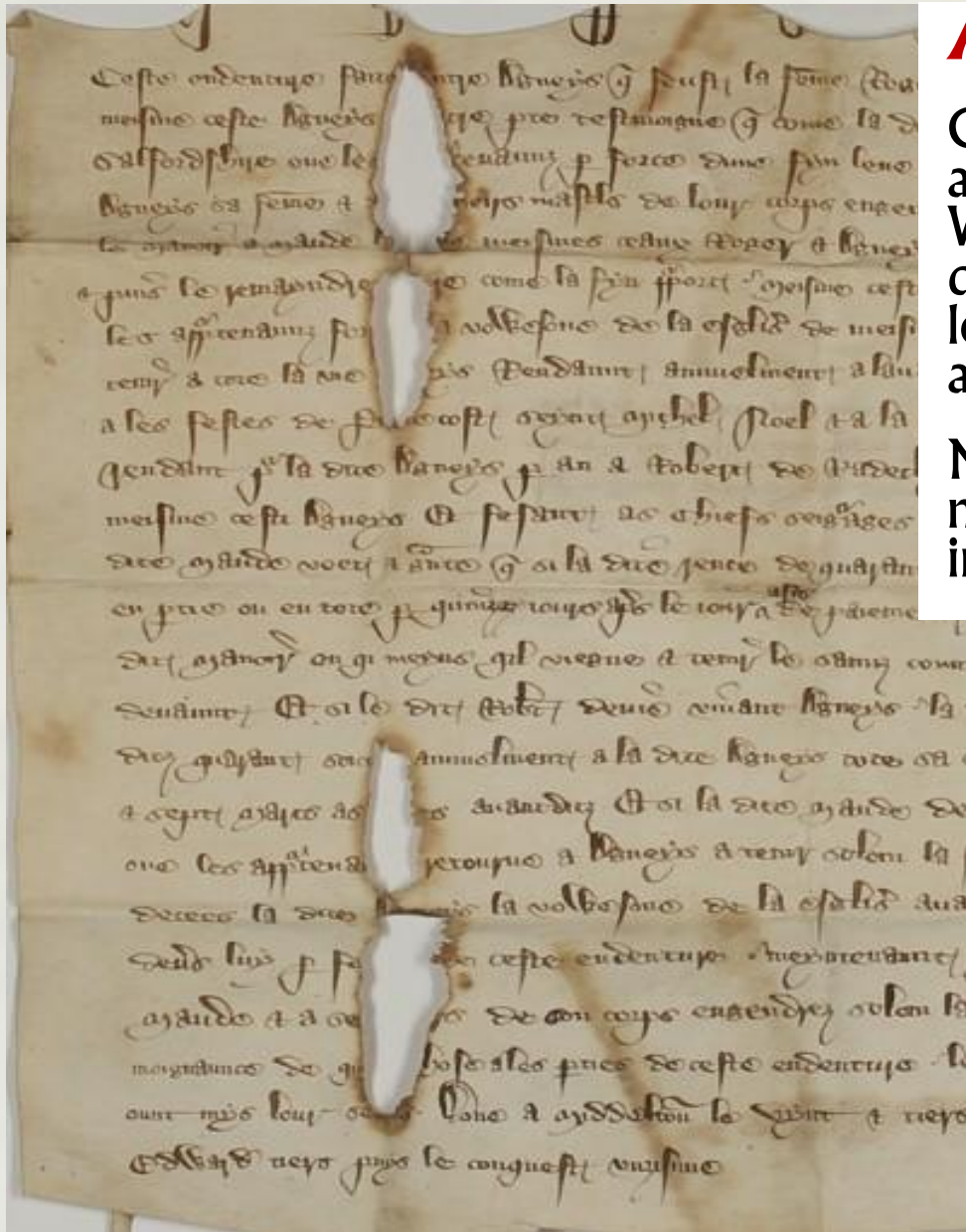
**Figure 2:** Credit Alison Gill, Manchester Archives, CC BY 4.0

**Figure 3:** Christina Butler from Georgia, United States, CC BY 2.0  
<<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>>, via Wikimedia Commons

## Acid damage by Ink

Over hundreds of years the acidic tannins in the ink corrode and eat away at the paper, creating holes in the documents. When folded, the acid is in contact with the neighbouring document and corrodes that too. Iron stabilises the ink for a longer time but corrosion will eventually occur. Paper itself is acidic which causes additional browning and disintegration.

Now we store documents in acid-free folders and boxes but many documents sustained damage from damp or pest infestation before the archive came into our custody.



## Law and Order in the Manor

- Under English feudal rule, lords of the manor such as Sir Ralph Assheton, baronet, owed fealty to the Crown and were empowered to hold manorial courts, the lowest form of jurisdiction and law enforcement.
- -Court Baron was held frequently, up to every 3 weeks. They dealt with business of the manorial court and appointing officers, land and tenants' disputes.
- Court Leet was held twice a year. They dealt with maintenance of law and order, criminal and administrative - essentially local government. Often the different courts merged their business together making them hard to distinguish. Decisions were recorded on court rolls ie long scrolls of paper.
- Stewards sat in courts on behalf of the Lord of the Manor and summoned people to court
- Jurors were local people appointed to attend court and decide on local matters
- Affirrors were appointed officers of the court who decided the penalty or fines – often on their own families
- Tenants – must pay suit to the lord of the manor ie attend manorial court
- Ordinary people often only recorded if summoned to court or penalized (payned) for offences

# Law Enforcement

E7/2/11/2 1625

Constables } Robert Baguley Junr  
for Midleton }  
Subconstable } Edward Heywood Junr

Subconstable }  
for Wynton } Raffe Egelto Junr

Subconstable for Ashwort }  
Birkhill and Bamford } Raffe Hiltob Junr

Common } Abell Dixie } Junr  
Wynton } Robert Barlow

Alecummers } Amor Taylor } Junr  
} Abel Crooks } Junr

Searchers and }  
Sealers of Leatton } Richard Heywood

Affirors for }  
} Thomas Ryssepad  
} Richard Somax  
} Raffe Crooks  
} William Taylor

## **Jobs and occupations in Middleton as a rural manor**

Constables & sub constables - officers of the law for each area

Moorelookers – inspectors of moorlands

Fencelookers – inspectors of fences & boundaries

Alecunners or Gustatores – tasting & checking for quality and fair measures eg sour beer

Searchers – lost animals or people, firewatching

Affirrors – officers who set penalties for offences

Poundkeeper – keeper of impounded livestock (see also: Pinder (surname) and pinfold (sheep enclosure))

## Money – Pounds, shillings and pence = l s d

1 pound (l) = 240 pence or 20 shillings but 21 shillings = 1 sovereign

1 crown = 5 shillings (5s); half-a-crown = 2 shillings & 6pence

1 shilling = 12 pence (d)

Currency might be written in Roman numerals eg *iii l xiii s iv d*

Or in Arabic numerals eg *3 l 13 s and 4 d*

Usually in Roman numerals, the i was interchangeable with a j specifically at the end of a number series to denote the end eg *iiij xiijs ivd*

Contracts (eg an agreement to allow a tenancy) must include a payment to be binding. A token amount for rent might sound unusual eg 'peppercorn' rent, red rose, silver pennies, red gloves but indicated that a piece of land was basically a gift.

Houses, land and farms were rented from the lord of the manor. Rent was paid twice a year – Lady Day 25 March and Michaelmas (29 Sept) in accordance with the religious calendar



## Crime and punishment – Poverty

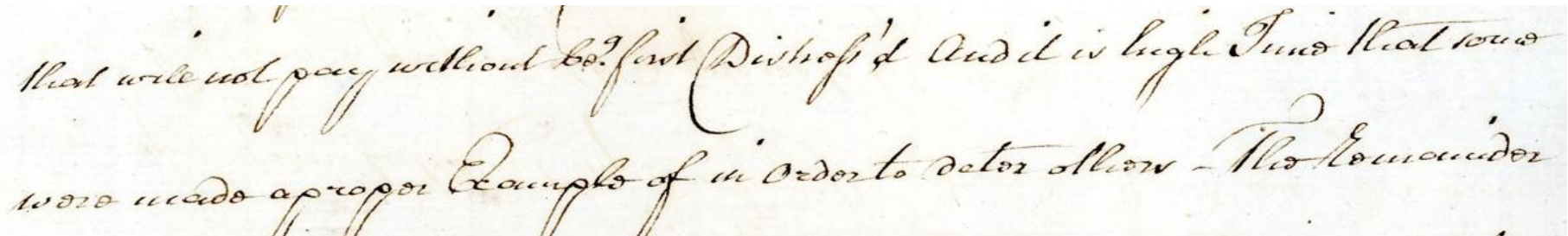
By 1765 the Middleton estate has passed to Harbord Harbord, Lord Suffield as the last Sir Ralph Assheton died without a direct male heir.

Harbord was an absentee landlord who lived in Norfolk and he was keen to ensure the estate didn't pose a financial burden.

His steward Richard Tunnadine wrote in 1770 that many tenants would not pay their rent without being threatened with punishment. He had sent them letters threatening them with a 'Dishef' – an order to seize their property by a bailiff.

Tunnadine requested permission to make a 'proper example' to deter others.

**E7/26/1/16 letter from Richard Tunnadine 13 May 1770**

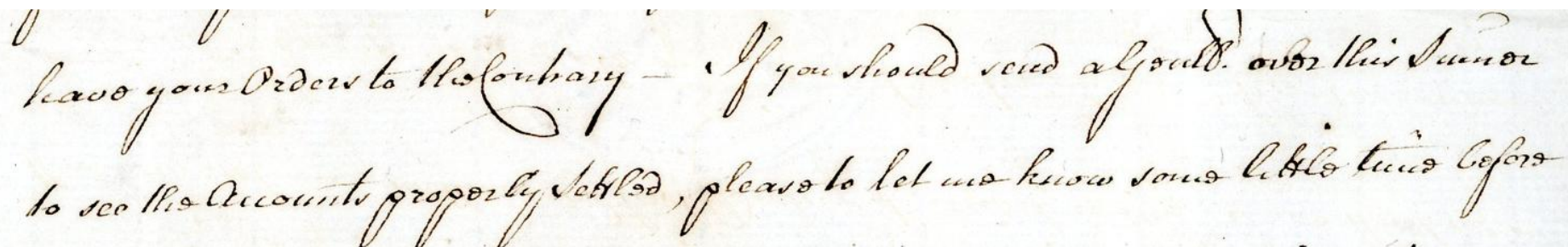


that will not pay without a Dishef & And it is high Time that some  
were made a proper Example of in order to deter others - The Remainder

## Crime and punishment – Counterfeit gold

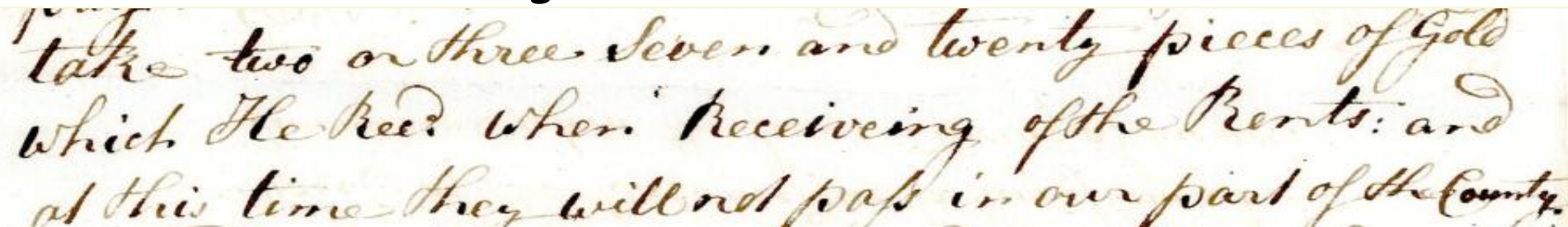
During the 1760s the government's Customs and Excise department was pursuing a criminal gang, the Cragg Vale Coiners, who caused a national crisis. They were devaluing the currency through fraud – clipping or shaving gold from coins and creating new coins by melting the clippings. No-one could trust that the coins they received or exchanged for goods or rent were worth their full value.

In a letter from 1770 Harbord's steward mentions having a 'gould' oversee his accounts – an accountant and expert in valuing gold



have your Orders to the contrary – If you should send a Gould over this Summer to see the Accounts properly settled, please to let me know some little time before

**E7/26/1/25** est. 1769-72 letter refers to receiving from tenants several 'pieces of gold' in rent which were thought fake and refused in Middleton



take two or three seven and twenty pieces of Gold which He Receiv when receiving of the Rents: and at this time they will not pass in our part of the County.

## Manerium of Middleton

## Example of Court Baron held 26 April 1625

<sup>13</sup>  
Maneriu de  
Middleton.

The Record for the Court Baron holden here vicesimo sexto die Aprilis Anno Regis Caroli  
Angliae, Franciae et Hiborniae Regis primo. ~~1625~~ 1625. 1

In primis we present the names of such as made default for not appearing at the court for which default we amerce all the gentlemen and freeholders in xij s a pece and the Tenaunts in vid a pece  
Item we find that Edmund Wrigle hath forfayted xs which he was payned in the last court for not laying forth a p[ar]cell of ground by him incroached from the land called Siddall laine we order the same shall be layd forth before the next court upon payne of xs

This document is written in both Latin and English and is dated by regnal years “vicesimo sexto die Aprill Anno KK Caroli 26 April 1625

Charles I crowned one month earlier on 27 March 1625 so this was the earliest Court Baron for Middleton in his reign. It states:

In primis we present the names of such as made default for not appearing at the court for which default we amerce all the gentlemen and freeholders in xij s a pece and the Tenaunts in vid a pece

Item we find that Edmund Wrigle hath forfayted xs which he was payned in the last court for not laying forth a p[ar]cell of ground by him incroached from the land called Siddall laine we order the same shall be layd forth before the next court upon payne of xs

Offences include not amending a kiln (kylne), not amending a lane, felling trees without licence of the Lady of the manor.

## Women and girls in Assheton archives

Women and girls are usually only named in records such as betrothals or marriage agreements. They could only own property if it was settled on them by a father or brother, usually in relation to marriage. In 1438 Sir Ralphe Assheton came into possession of the Assheton lands by his marriage to Margery (or Margaret) de Barton. Margery was due to inherit the estate from her uncle Richard de Barton which was unusual and probably due to there being no surviving male heirs. Margery had a prominent role representing herself as an equal partner with her husband Sir Ralph in legal disputes over land as recorded in court rolls.

Women are sometimes found in court records relating to domestic or cottage industries (freelance working from home). They are summoned to appear for breaking assizes (breaches of quality or measures) in baking bread or brewing ale. Not always fines – unofficially this was a way of licensing bakers and ale-brewers.

Wives and daughters are mentioned in land or financial agreements to allocate ownership or provide income from land. Widows are named as conducting business in place of husbands eg Lady Anne Assheton or where sons are made Wards of Court.

## Power and Gender Equality

Unusually there is prominent mention of several women in connection with a later Sir Ralph Assheton, baronet, which clearly reveals his character and a darker side to the social history of the archive.

A highlight in the collection are three documents **E7/27/2/10-12** (2 drafts and the final signed by the Archbishop of Canterbury. These include a BOND in £1000 marks (around £660 – modern equivalent of £100k) which is void if he [Sir Ralph Assheton] avoids the company of 9 named women. He was Vice-Marshal of England and Lieutenant of the Tower of London so he was a powerful servant of the crown. Clearly safety in numbers gave protection to these women and girls for his unwanted sexual attentions.

1. ...S[i]r Raphe Ashton Baronett shall not att any time hereafter come
2. Remayne or be in the companyes of Alice the Wife of John Kenyon
3. And Jane Whitacres her Neece with whom he standeth convicted of
4. Incest neither shall come remayne or be in the company
5. Of Elizabeth Holmes, (with whom he standeth convicted of adultery)...



## **Wives and Heirs – Murder of Richard Assheton, esquire**

**E7/6/2/1**

**Inquisition**

**14 April 1580**

An enquiry into the tenure of Middleton Hall and surrounding land which had been maintained for the use of Elizabeth Davenport Assheton, widow of Richard Assheton esq. She was convicted of his murder in July 1563 but not imprisoned and was still living in Garstang in Lancashire in 1580. Intriguingly there is little evidence in this archive about how and why this murder occurred. Other sources suggest poisoning may have been the cause of death.

Her son Richard Assheton was a young child when his father died and so he was made a ward of court by order of Queen Elizabeth I who notoriously made frequent use of the Courts of Wards to raise money for the crown. Widows were at the mercy of this court as their young son's inheritance could be sold out of the family. The income from Richard's inheritance would have been sold for a profit by Queen Elizabeth until he came of age at 21 and fortunately was able to reclaim his inheritance.



Ordnance Survey England  
and Wales, 6 inch, 1844

## Everyday rural life in Middleton

Places recorded include **Pilsworth, Thornham, Birtle, Ainsworth** whose ancient names have survived. Local buildings include **Middleton Hall** which was derelict by late 1700s and demolished around 1847) **NOT** 1966 photography on Local Images! The hall was situated in the area now occupied by Middleton Arena.

Local infrastructure is evident in records with people summoned to court for the repair of Kilns (communal baking ovens), lanes & highways, maintenance of local amenities or community resources. Essential for fuel, building materials and ship building, timber was a cash crop within the manor. Tree-felling without permission from the Lord or Lady of the Manor was a serious offence with hefty penalties.

**E7/1/13** endorsed 'Digging Turvest in Cockey Moor' is dated 1539 and records turvest or turf-cutting which required licensed permission in order to protect supplies. Moorland turf (or peat) was cut, dried and used as fuel for heating and cooking – it was a free community resource but peat fires did not burn as clean or hot as wood and coal. A turbary was a designated area from which turf or peat is cut and were common in boggy or moorland areas like Lancashire, Yorkshire, Scotland and Ireland.

Farming and trading are also highlighted in the papers, recording husbandry of cows, sheep, rabbits, arable and dairy farming. Tenants were summoned over the drainage (or guttering) of **Mosse pits** – each farmstead or hamlet had a midden or waste heap for animal, vegetable and human waste, presenting health hazards such as cholera outbreaks, if not correctly maintained.

## Women and girls - Lady Anne Assheton

- As a widow, Lady Anne Assheton had to fill her husband's place and manage the estate with help from her steward.
- Bills – records show her paying out money she owed for supplies eg tobacco. Smoking was very popular in England by 1670s but very expensive.
- Men and women smoked tobacco via small white clay pipes although snuff (powdered tobacco) was becoming popular.
- **E7/21/7 Memorandum – Cow with the brown back and brown ears**
- Lady Anne bought the cow from husbandman Richard and Mary Nutt for £3 13 shillings and 4 pence. They hire it back for one year for 10 shillings – for milk and calves for future livestock.
- Although official records were written down, not everyone was literate and property transactions were authenticated by physically describing livestock (colour and features eg cow with brown back) or land in relation to other areas (field by Mr x's farm). This was potentially very confusing and relied on everyone agreeing!
- The Hearth tax of 1666 records widowed Lady Anne Assheton having 18 hearths, stoves or fires in her dwelling so Middleton Hall was a substantial building with numerous inhabitants

...said widow, one Cow with a Browne backe and  
...said Cow for in Consideration of the Summe of  
...pound Thirtene Shillings and foure pence  
...of the money of England, alreadye had by the  
...said Lady Assheton into be on the one of be paid  
...the delivery of the said Cow, the receipt  
...of was the said Richard Nutt and Mary Nutt  
...by the said Cow for one year  
...to be fully satisfied for the said Cow;  
...the said Lady Assheton is pleased  
...the said Richard Nutt and Mary Nutt have  
...said Cow from the said day of the date above  
...for one year upon the followinge; to wit  
...Richard Nutt and Mary Nutt on the one of be our  
...and Assignes on some of their paces into  
...said Lady Assheton for the hire of the said Cow  
...the summe of three Shillings of the  
...of Lawfull England, money of England,  
...always and upon this Condition that wether  
...Richard Nutt and Mary Nutt our Executors and  
...of some of them shall and do keep, the  
...Cow until such time as shee shall come to  
...Note wether shee doe now receive her calf  
...about the month of March from her time of  
...An witness whereof was the said Richard  
...and Mary Nutt have hereunto sett our hande the  
...and year above written

Sig: Richard R Nutt  
Sig: Mary Nutt

**Lady Anne Assheton – Widow, Businesswoman and Farmer**  
E7/21/7 Memorandum

Memorandum; That whereas was Richard Nutt  
the Eldest of Middleton in the County of Lancashire  
husbandman, And Mary Nutt my now wife;  
HATH the said and yeare abovesaid written, sealed  
and delivered unto the Lady Assheton of Middleton  
a forsaide widow, one Row with a Browne badge and  
Browne Care for a in Confidation of the Summe of  
Three pound Thirtene Shillinges and four pence  
of Current money of England, already as had by the

## Farming and Lady Anne Assheton

- The 1844 map shows an area immediately north of Middleton Hall named as the Warren. This was an area common to many manors and rural areas, partly maintained and protected to protect rabbits as a cash crop a source of income and food
- One document **E7/21/6** mentions rabbits and coneys in a bond with John Hopwood of Middleton not to kill rabbits in the manor of Middleton. Rabbit meat was valuable as a farmed food and rabbit or coney fur was sold and used as warm soft linings and trim for gloves, collars, cloaks, hoods and footwear. It was mostly worn by lower and middle classes in the medieval period as it was less expensive than fur from rarer breeds of animals eg ermine or mink or red squirrel.
- Sumptuary laws - Think of "sumptuous" - meaning luxurious or beautiful clothing, materials or decoration. These laws determined what you could wear depending on your class and relationship to the king. The wearing and use of certain fabrics, animal furs and colours was strictly controlled with severe penalties for offences including fines, loss of property, title or even life. Even the Asshetons were fined for infringing the rules around acceptable headgear and clothing.

.... John Hopwood shall not attaine tyme or tymes hereafter by himself or aine of his SerVants or Howsehold enter into

and the Lands or Tenements within the manor or Lordshipys

of midleton, to take, Kill, or Destroy aine Rabbett[e]s or Coneyes

or to sett or use anie Ferrett[e]s Hayes, nett[es] or Engins for the...

## **E7/21/6 BOND JOHN HOPWOOD**

Spot the inconsistent spellings and names eg midleton = Middleton

tymes = times

aine – any

Rabbettes or Coneyes (term for an older rabbit)

## War and Military Life

The first Sir Ralphe Assheton was appointed by the King as Knight Marshall and Vice Constable of England. Until 1601, England was continually fighting the French, Scots and Welsh to prevent their invasions to claim the throne. The defence of the North of England was a never-ending battle for every monarch before James 1 unified England and Scotland via the Act of Union. Sir Ralphe Assheton was responsible for mustering forces, organizing & transporting soldiers, armour and weapons to fight wherever the King commanded.

Sir Ralphe's father Sir John had fought under Henry V in 1415 at the battle of Agincourt against the French which victory was attributed to the skill of English longbow archers. Archers were valued in battle as being able to accurately shoot across long distances. Military technology undeveloped and most battles still deployed medieval warfare. Middleton's archers were famous and prized because the use of longbowmen resulted in decisive victories against unfavourable odds.

The stained glass window in St Leonard's parish church in Middleton is the earliest surviving English war memorial. Commissioned by Sir Richard Assheton in tribute to his 17 knight captains who each victoriously led a company of archers (est up to 150 men) against Scottish invaders in the battle of Flodden Field in 1513



Flodden window, Middleton parish church, CC-BY-4.0

...overpaid and appavtled with the  
...major off

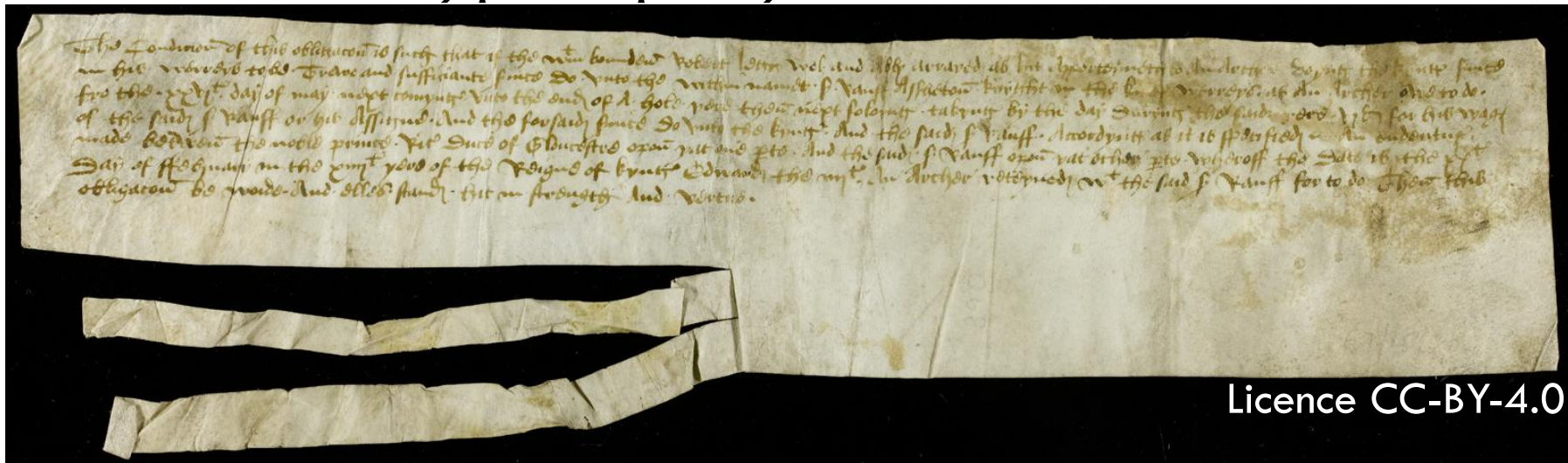


Display in Middleton parish church of longbows used at Battle of Flodden, CC-BY-4.0 licence.

## War and Military Life

**E7/15/5/1** BOND for an Archer 1474 – fighting for Edward IV defending the English crown

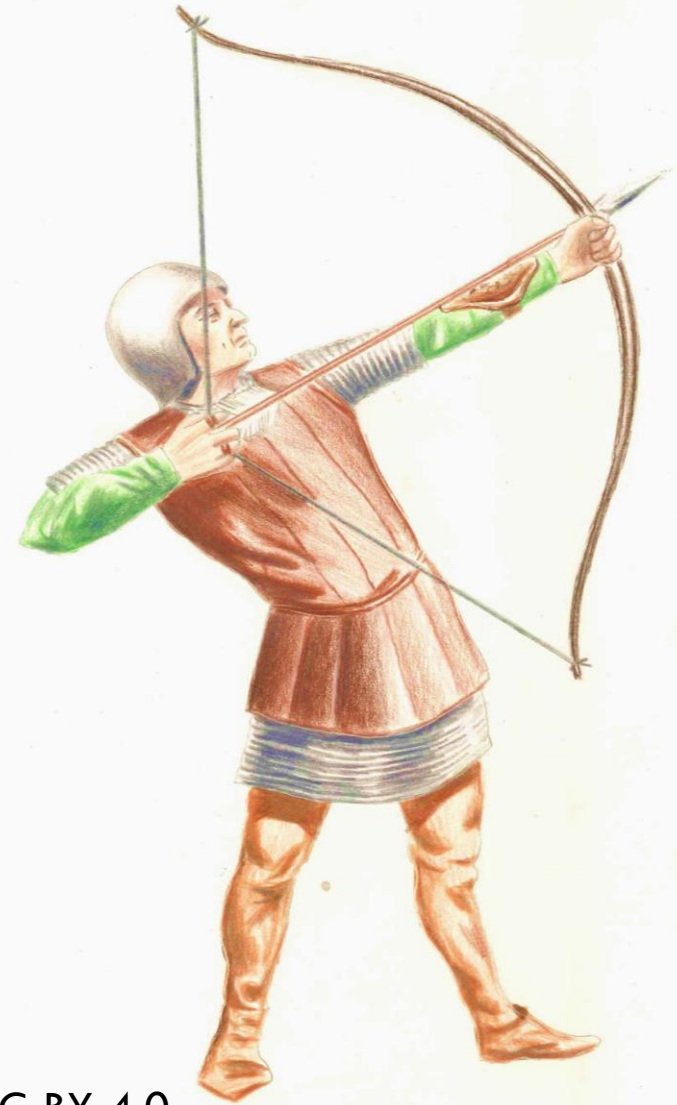
Widow Letitia Holte and her son John agree a £20 bond (financial agreement) with Sir Ralph Ashton to release Robert Legg 'wel and able arrayed as Apperteyneth to an archer' for King Edward IV in the King's Wars. Legg may have been employed by the Holtes – Sir Ralph paid them for the use of Robert Legg but Legg himself was paid 6pence a day for a year whilst away from home in military service. Edward IV invaded France in 1475 and fought in Burgundy so it is likely Legg was sent overseas. He may have been a mounted archer on horseback as it is thought that bowmen on foot were only paid 4d per day.



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## War and Military Life

- Robert Legg was a local worker & trained archer
- English Longbow yew wood with wych-elm
- String made of leather, animal gut, or flax
- Metal arrowtips probably forged by a
- blacksmith who may have accompanied the troops
- Feudal system required tenants' obedience to Lord
- of Middleton and archery practice after
- church attendance at St Leonards's on Sundays
- The Butts in Rochdale town centre was a medieval
- archery ground



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# Schools Learning Activities



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## The first Sir Ralphe Assheton, the Black Knight

The first Sir Ralphe was appointed High Sheriff of Lancaster and of Yorkshire and Vice-Constable of England, and his proximity to King Richard III gave him protection for his unjust actions.

Loyalty to the House of York and military service to the King in the Wars of the Roses resulted in his receiving rewards of lands.

But Sir Ralphe Assheton had a reputation as a cruel and despotic ruler whose behaviour prompted anger and hatred among the local population. He and his brother Robert Assheton both used their position to levy fines against tenants for crops contaminated with corn marigold around Ashton Moss. It is thought the local people rose against Ralph Assheton who was murdered or shot in 1485. A rhyme or prayer about his behaviour survives:

“Sweet Jesu for thy mercy’s sake,    And for thy bitter passion,

    Save us from the axe of the Tower, and from Sir Ralph of Ashton.”

His unpopularity and characterization as the Black Knight led in later centuries to the local custom of parading his effigy around Ashton town centre or “Riding the Black Lad” which may have been a reference to the mode of his death.

## Sir Ralph Assheton and the Princes in the Tower

The first Sir Ralph Assheton 1421-1485 was made Knight Marshall of England (ie commanded knights of England to pay suit to the King. He was close to Richard, Duke of Gloucester and known to be extremely loyal and obedient servant of the King's household. His position as Lieutenant of the Tower of London made him responsible for receiving those requiring royal protection or questioning as well as arranging executions of prisoners in the Tower. Edward IV's two sons, Edward and Arthur, 12 and 10 years, were held in the Tower following their father's sudden death in 1483.



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## Sir Ralphe Assheton and the Princes in the Tower

Their accommodation might have been comfortable if not royally appointed but they were still imprisoned for their own protection. Their uncle Richard Duke of Gloucester had been appointed Lord Protector of England until Edward V would have gained his majority. The brothers disappeared shortly after their father's death in 1483. There is little information about their disappearance but later accounts indicate they were murdered on the orders of their uncle Richard III who had seized the throne. Sir Ralph Assheton's name is not associated with these events but as Lieutenant of the Tower he may have been forced to arrange the disappearance or murder of the brothers. He also had demonstrable links to merchants or gentlemen to whom Richard III was indebted, awarded roles in the Royal Mint (carrying unquestioned access to the Tower of London and who were subsequently rewarded with generous gifts of land and property. Recent research by Prof Tim Thornton, University of Huddersfield explores this complex history

[Sir William Capell and A Royal Chain: The Afterlives \(and Death\) of King Edward V - Thornton - 2024 - History - Wiley Online Library](#)



# Asshetons and the English Civil War 1642 - 1651

Swore whose names are hereunto subscribed  
do hereby that both Assheton hath bought  
in Gunpowder which was spent in the  
publicke service and lost at Boulton when  
the said Gunpowder was burnt in  
the Hall Wall of the said town. Do say  
Rich: Nicolson  
Ralph Assheton  
Thomas Shadwin

£ 30.00.00

E7/15/5/4 CERTIFICATE submitted by Colonel Ralph Assheton (n.d. 1644 – 1650)

## Colonel Assheton, parliamentarian soldier

Receipt for £30 on "Gunpowder which was lost at Boulton when Prince Rupert's horses were in Lancashire"

Earl of Derby and Prince Rupert (brother-in-law to King Charles I) commanded the royalist army - Cavaliers.

Colonel Assheton fought with the parliamentary forces against the King – Roundheads.

The **Storming of Bolton 28 May 1644** was a brutal episode in the English Civil War in which the Royalists, angered by their initial defeat by a robust parliamentarian defence, besieged the town. They viciously massacred up to 1,600 soldiers and civilian residents. Such was the hatred created by this attack that, after the Royalists final defeat, the Earl of Derby was court-martialled and brought to Bolton for his execution by beheading.

Currency converter: 1270–2017 £30 in 1650 worth **£3,105.52** - a lot of money he needed to claim back

Lack of money was a continual issue –another document (E7/15/5/5) certifies he was owed £1900 for his commission by Lord Fairfax in April 1644 - **£223,337.40 in modern value**

## Legacy - Discovery and Access

Conservation work is often necessary prior to digitization. Interventive conservation is often minimal and focused on selected documents because it is labour-intensive and expensive and impractical across the entire collection. Preservation aims to stabilize and repackage documents in order to protect – this is cheaper and easier to do.

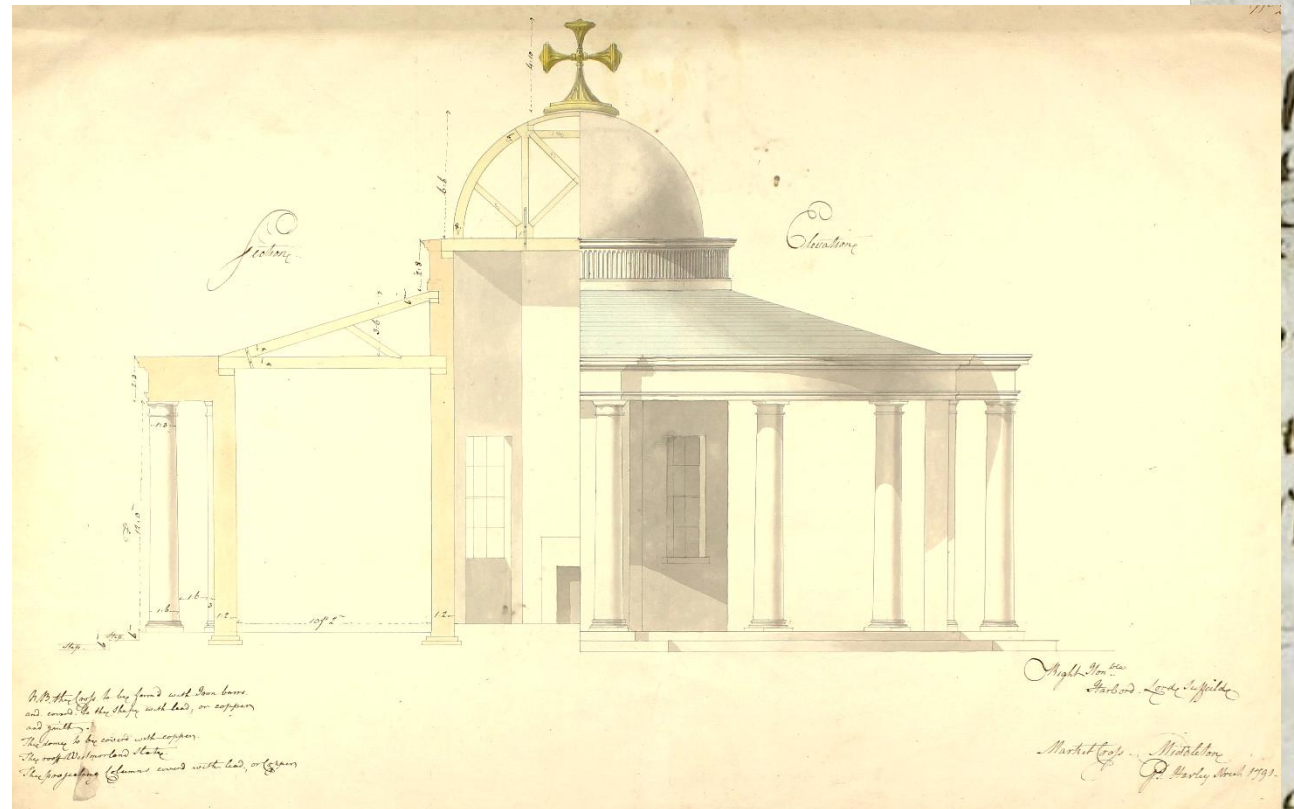
Our volunteers have become familiar with primary source records, acquiring skills and developing their interests in local history via engagement, palaeography and transcription. The Assheton project has focused on a selection of key documents for the purposes of research, palaeography & conservation.

Entire collection of 1400 documents so there are more areas to discover:

Social and military history –

Colonel Richard Assheton - Civil War hero, became MP, unpopularity, 'popish' plotting to restore Catholic monarch.

Middleton's Market House and Lord Suffield's plans for economic development and wealth



# Field Trip to St Leonard



**Much more to explore...**

Football and military recruiting with Captain Aytoun, execution of Samuel Tomlinson, rebuilding church, problems at the Boars Head Inn, raising money, reading manorial documents and court rolls for family history, heraldry, – how to prove connections; evidence...

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## If you'd like to discover more....

St Leonard's Parish Church in Middleton has an informative website

[History - St Leonard Middleton](#)

and is open to visitors

Fridays 1 – 4pm from April to Sept.

Tour guide Leon is friendly and knowledgeable, tea & coffee available

Donations gratefully received.

Middleton Archaeology Society website has useful information and links:

[Our Town | Middleton Archaeological Society](#)

Anne Falloon of Middleton Archaeology Society has a detailed exploration of the women of Middleton manor:

[The-lost-Ladies-of-Middleton.pdf](#)

Manchester and Lancashire Family History Society (MLFHS) has a resource for Key Stage 2-3 children to explore the Assheton collection with challenges including making a Coat of Arms and reading historical manuscripts

[Assheton Collection Home Page](#)



- Assheton of Middleton archive is held and cared for by the Greater Manchester County Record Office, part of the Archives+ partnership at Manchester Central Library
- Documents can be viewed without charge for research or private study
- Mon to Sat 9am-5pm, Thurs 9am-8pm
- Archives, Exhibitions, Performances
- Author Visits, tours and talks, Family Fun Days
- Family History Helpdesk – free 1-2-1 support
- Mon to Fri 10.30am-3.30pm – no need to book
- Local Studies Reference and Lending Library
- Email: [archiveslocalstudies@Manchester.gov.uk](mailto:archiveslocalstudies@Manchester.gov.uk)
- **GM Lives** - <https://www.gmlives.org.uk/>

