

## THE RODNEY FAMILY AND WIELD

*by*

Elizabeth Gibson.

The Rodney family's connection with Old Alresford is well documented but it is not so well known that for nearly a century they also held the Manor of Wield. None of them ever lived in the village, but they seem to have had an affection for the place and their personal involvement is evident,. The period of their ownership, 1761 to 1853, coincided with tremendous changes in the countryside: the land transactions which the Admiral, his son and grandson carried out changed the face of Wield. How much this was due to national influences and how much to propping up the family's often tottering finances is explored in this paper against the evidence so far to hand.

### The Prize of Fame.

The object of a naval commander of the 18th century was the acquisition of Prize Money. George Bridges Rodney was no exception, he was even accused of being obsessed with it. With prize money a man could buy land and land was the epitome of wealth and power in the 18th century. This "national quest for wealth, power and pleasure" (as Asa Briggs described it) affected attitudes to land and the countryside. Men wanted to own land and property. Rodney used prize money from the War of the Austrian Succession to buy land at Old Alresford - an area he knew well from childhood having been brought up at Avington by his godfather, George Rodney Bridges.

Between 1749 and 51 he rebuilt Old Alresford House and two years later he married Jane Compton. Her father, the youngest son of the 4th Earl of Northampton, had died some years previously. Her mother, Mary Lucy, was the only surviving child of Sir Berkeley Lucy of Faccornbe, near Andover, whose family had held considerable property in Hampshire since 1634, including the Manor of Wield. The widowed Mary Compton remarried William Thomson Esq, and in 1747 Sir Berkeley conveyed "the Manors of Wield, otherwise Welde, Godsfield and Wyke, otherwise Weeke and Dawndley" to his new son in law as a sign of "the esteem" in which he held him. So when Rodney brought his bride home to Alresford she was coming to an area long connected with her family. Moreover, her sister Elizabeth, was married to Henry Drummond and lived at The Grange, Northington.

The young Rodneys were immensely happy and settled into a contented domestic routine. A son, George (later the 2nd Baron) was born on Christmas Day 1753, a second son, James (Jemmy) was born the following year. Letters preserved at the Public Record Office testify to the great personal happiness of the Rodneys and of their total involvement with each other, their children, animals and home. The four years Rodney spent with Jenny at Alresford were the happiest of his life.



Soon after his marriage Rodney purchased Lanham, Pinglestone and Gooseland for £5,000. He also owned Godsfield - purchased by his godfather from William Thomson and devised to him in 1751. Expeditions into the countryside to visit the farms would have taken George and Jenny uphill from Lanham to Godsfield, on through the old park at Wield to the thick woods of her step father's neighbouring estate. (A brass spur found in recent years near the double quarry known as Pugdell was identified as that of an aristocratic lady of the 1750's.

Wield was a small, quiet, self-contained community. The thatched cottages, some quite new, clustered around a Green; there were several farms and an ancient Church with a tower. A wide track led across the fields to Lower (or East) Wield while others led out from the centre of the village into the three great common fields of Upper (or West) Wield. No doubt Rodney cast an acquisitive eye over the estate with its valuable woods and excellent sport.

The idyll was all too short... the Seven Years War broke out and Rodney was recalled then on 29th January 1757, Jenny died in childbirth leaving a distraught Rodney with two small sons. For the next few years he was continually abroad while George and Jemmy were cared for by friends and relatives. Successes at Le Havre in 1759 brought him promotion to Rear Admiral and further prize money. In 1760 William Thomson died leaving everything he possessed to his "own dear and most tenderly beloved wife, Mary Lucy Thomson". Within a year "Admiral Rodney" was paying the Poor Rate at Wield.

The Victorian County History states that it was not known whether Rodney acquired Wield by the right of inheritance or by purchases - Thomson's Will makes it clear that it would pass to his wife - did she then settle it on her son-in-law or did Rodney seize the opportunity to purchase it with the prize money won at Le Havre? Either way, at a Court held "in the first year of the Reign of our Sovereign Lord George the Third" George Bridges Rodney's name replaces that of William Thomson in the Court Rolls of Wield as Lord of the Manor.

#### Lord of the Manor.

Wield was a natural extension to Rodney's estate but both by its remoteness and by the way it developed it was always separate from Alresford. It was also an extremely good investment. Apart from the Manorial rights (including a large number of chalk and gravel pits) and the dues paid by copyholders (the number of which had been increased under Thomson) there was a Manor Farm in Upper Wield. The farmhouse, rebuilt by Sir Berkeley about 1706, lay a little way from the farmyard next to the Church. Except for a porch added in the 1850's, the facade of the house today is much as it was in the Admiral's day. The Manor land was partly inclosed while the rest lay along the holdings of the various copyholders within the remaining uninclosed common fields. The real value of the Wield estate lay in its woodlands with their profitable timber and exceptional shooting.

The Admiral was forty when he acquired Wield; he is described by one source as a vain and boastful man (rather more kindly it was also said that he showed a constant concern for others) - no doubt he enjoyed the role of Lord of the Manor, but the man his tenants knew was not yet touched with the bitterness and ill health which marred his later years. To them he was a local man who took an interest in his estates, but they can have seen little of him for almost immediately he was posted to the West Indies for three years. On his return to Alresford he remarried and again turned his attention to the estates, carrying out as much landscaping as his by now depleted finances would allow. (A massive beech tree at Pugdeil which fell recently is thought to have been one of the many he planted).

His appointment as Governor of Greenwich Hospital and his involvement in politics kept him away from Hampshire for long stretches. This period also marked the start of the financial troubles which were to dog him for the rest of his life. He was not a wealthy man and the upkeep of two establishments together with his lifestyle, his passion for gambling, the improvements to his estates and his part in the Northampton election which cost him £30,000, ruined him. By 1768 he was heavily in debt and yet in the following year additional land was being purchased in Wield.

#### The Legacy.

In 1769 there came the chance to increase the Wield estate by some 140 acres. The land which became available, belonged to the Vicary family. It was copyhold and lay in varying sized parcels

close to the existing Manor land, mainly in the Middle Field to the north of the parish. The property also included several, farmhouses and cottages: one called Othens adjoined the Churchyard, another lay "near the. lane which leadeth from Northmore to the West Field (now Manor Cottage). A third was known as Caigers. It was an opportunity not to be missed, and the Admiral was quick to seize it. But coming at a time when he was so heavily in debt how was he able to contrive such a purchase? The answer lay with Sir Berkeley Lucy's Will. Under the terms of the Will, drawn up in 1759, the two sons "of my much esteemed friend George Bridges Rodney, Esq. by my late dear grand-daughter Jane Rodney " were to receive £1500 between them. When Charles Northampton, the main beneficiary, died in 1763 this amount remained unpaid. Northampton left his Hampshire estates to be sold to relieve others in Sussex of debt. Out of the money raised by the sale £1500 was to be paid to Admiral Rodney's children, plus interest. (The Admiral applied for interest arrears to be paid straight away but judgment was given that it should accumulate until they came of age.

The entire Vicary holding was purchased in the names of George and James Rodney, through their attorney, John Lane. An outstanding mortgage of £918 on three of the six copyholds was also taken on and was eventually paid off by the Admiral in 1781. When James Rodney died at sea in 1776 his share passed to his brother and eventually became merged with the Manor. It was appropriate that the legacy from the children's grandfather should be invested in a place so long associated with him. The purchase was an extremely important move and began the consolidation process which led to the final inclosure of Wield.

The transaction marked the end of the Admiral's personal involvement for many years. As his finances worsened (to the extent that he was on the verge of being arrested) he was forced to let Old Alresford House and for most of the 1770's he lived abroad, first in the West Indies and then in France. He loved his Hampshire estates and did everything he could to save them, eventually making them over to his eldest son, a wise move.

The American War of Independence saw him back at sea where "more than anybody he was responsible for staving off total disaster in the least successful of all Britain's wars". At the request of his friend, King George III, he returned to the West Indies. Before he left for Barbados in 1779 he made his son his Attorney.

The Battle of the Saints in 1782 made him a national hero, his name was on everyone's lips - ladies even carried fans bearing his portrait. He was given a peerage and a pension of £2000. Lady Rodney had kept him in touch with matters at home during his long absences but after his retirement they separated. His last years were passed almost entirely with his son's family either in London, or at Alresford. He died on 24th May 1792 and was buried at Alresford next to Jenny. A Faithful Steward.

The Admiral's prolonged absences made him a remote figure to the villagers but his son was not so. George Rodney had been brought up quietly at Alresford, he had known Wield from childhood and he had a strong attachment to the little village with its connections with his dead mother's family. The bequest from his grandfather had provided him with his own land there and by the time he took over the management of his father's affairs Wield was very much a part of his life.

As is often the case with the eldest son he was very different from his famous and ebullient father. His portrait at Berrington Hall shows the smiling countenance of a man at one with the world. He was conscientious and meticulous. From 1782 he kept detailed account books - as Attorney he received the Admiral's navy pension and carefully set out the income and expenditure, eventually paying off his father's debts. George Rodney went into the Foot Guards and was M.P. for Northampton from 1780 - 4. He married Anne, daughter and heiress of Thomas Harley of Berrington Hall, Herefordshire in 1781; they lived in London and at Alresford and had seven children. The marriage brought considerable property to the family ultimately but it also involved an expensive Marriage Settlement. He engaged to pay £10,000 within two years of the marriage to the trustees (the Dean of Windsor and Henry Drummond). His father was to advance £10,000

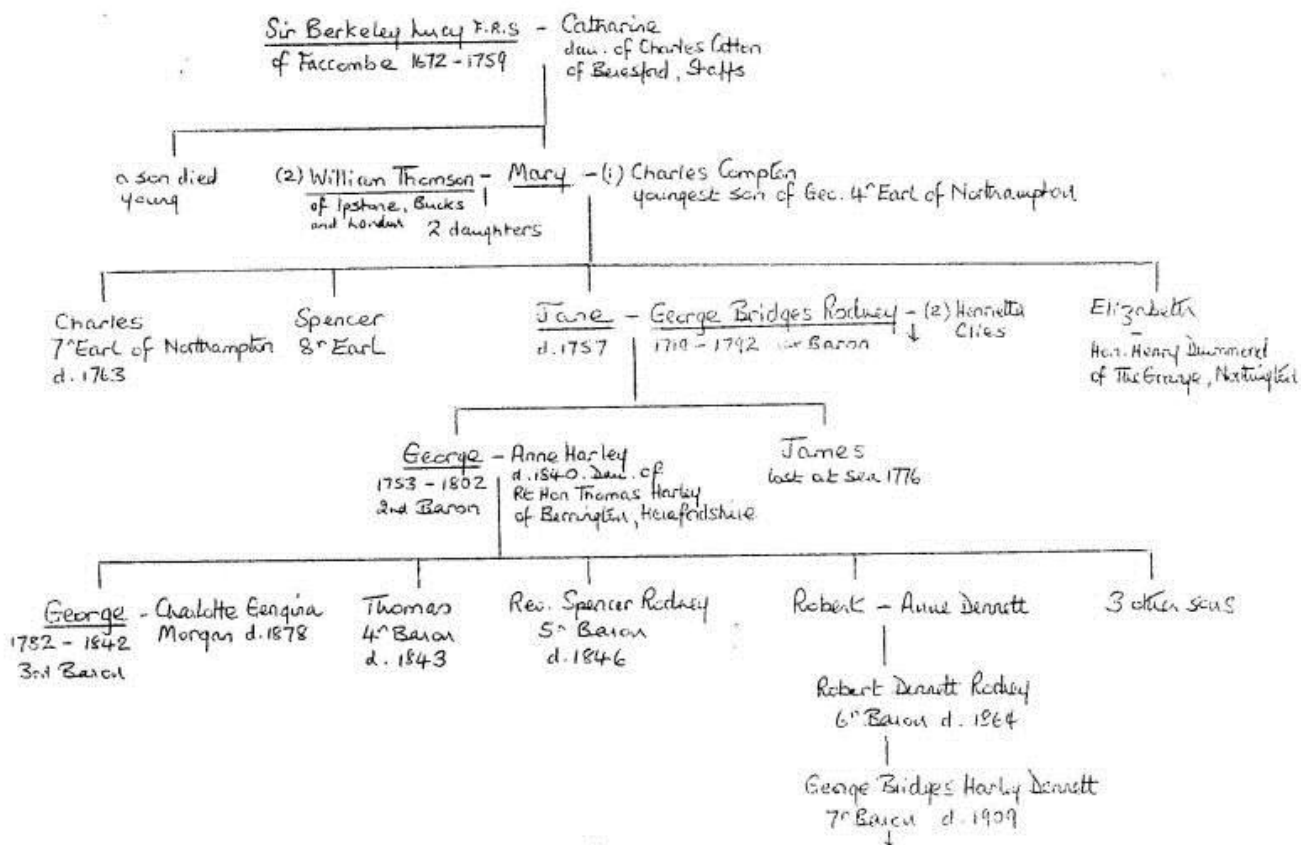
more within two years to be laid out in the purchase of land or investments - Harmsworth (Armsworth) was purchased in 1783. A further £10,000 was to be raised for investment in land - as this, not surprisingly, was never fulfilled a memorandum before his death in 1802 directed, his trustees to raise a mortgage on his Wield estate. The property remained mortgaged to Drummonds Bank until it was sold in 1853.

The bundles of estate papers at the Public Record Office reveal the extent to which he was personally involved with the day to day affairs of the farms in a way his father never was. 'Colonel Rodney' as he was known before he succeeded to the title was very approachable - urgent pleas from tenants were not passed on, he dealt with them him-self. He knew the tenants, there was a mutual trust and respect.

The affairs of the Manor were normally managed through the Courts held on behalf of the Lord of the Manor by his Steward. James Winter had been the Admiral's Steward but all business ceased during the Admiral's long absences abroad in the 1770's.

The first Court for eleven years was held in January 1780 in the presence of Thomas Finden, William Windebank and William Littleworth. The customs were read out and a very long list of copyholders deaths recorded.....the village had changed a lot in the intervening years.

Change, was in the air...on taking over the lordship George Rodney appointed William Faithfull, a solicitor from Kings Worthy, as Steward. Born in 1750 Faithfull married Ann Dibsdaile who bore him nine children. He served both George Rodney and later his son for thirty nine years, diligently carrying out his duties as "eyes and ears" of the Manor. No encroachment on the Lord's Waste or erection of an illegal shed escaped his attention; the Rolls were carefully kept and Courts held regularly at The Swan in Alesford, which provided suitable (and generous) hospitality at Lord Rodney's expense. Bills survive which testify to the large number of brandys it took to conduct the business of the tenants - who were quite happy to travel down to Aresford to attend!



The Agreement.

Most important of all, Faithfull was responsible for supervising the various transactions which led to the final inclosure of Wield. It took twenty years to achieve; that it was achieved without causing the hardship suffered by many communities at this time owes much to the gradualness by which it came about.

Much of Wield had been inclosed by private agreement over the course of several centuries - some may well date from the 3th century - others are documented in the Bishops Roils of the 16th century and in the 17th century Manorial Rolls, In 1667 the whole village agreed to the Inclosure "with hedges and other fences", and to convert to tillage, 247 acres of the Commons in East and West Wield. By 1779 Lower Wield was completely inclosed and in the hands of seven landowners but Upper Wield was still a jumble of strips and closes.

When George Rodney took over the management of his father's affairs he set about re-organising the estates. He had to make them more profitable. At Wield he had a plan drawn up showing the ownership of every field or strip in Upper Wield. This plan snows in great detail the entire layout of the common fields. All were owned by the Admiral, Lord Portsmouth, Thomas Finden or himself.

Lord Portsmouth's family, the Wallops, have always been the most remembered family connected with the village - they held both freehold and copyhold land in Wield from the 14th century until 1920. In addition to their two farms they also leased land from the Manor. In 1779 Rodney and Portsmouth agreed to exchange some fields in order to consolidate their holdings.

The Bargain.

The Findens had long been prominent in Wield - as yeomen farmers their fortunes had fluctuated: at one time as tenants to the Wallops they were substantial farmers but by the end of the 18th century they were feeling the pinch. Reduced to a holding of about 50 acres, their land lay scattered in tiny strips, many of less than an acre. It was totally uneconomic to modern methods of cultivation. In 1784 Rodney struck a Bargain with 'Farmer Finden' whereby he surrendered his holding in return for an annual annuity of £20, payable for life. He was discharged of ail quitrents and granted the use of his house and garden for life. The annuity continued to be paid half yearly until Thomas' death four years later. As Rodney then raised a mortgage of £500 on the Land it proved a profitable bargain.



## The Award.

With the death of the Admiral in 1792 the new Lord Rodney and Lord Portsmouth were the only landowners in Upper Wield. By the following year England was at war with France and there was an added incentive to complete Inclosure to cope with the increased demand for home produced food.

The final inclosure was merely a tidying up exercise. The two peers knew each other and through their surveyors and solicitors they worked closely together to arrive at a satisfactory settlement. Never-the-less William Faithfull was engaged on the inclosures for several years. In the Rodney papers there are bills for his journeys in connection with the Awards : on 26th October 1793 he travelled to Andover 'to see Etwall touching Wield Inclosure and renewal of lease in Wield'. Later in the month he hired a horse (for which he charged Lord Rodney £1.11s 6d) and went to see Thomas Cosens, the tenant at Manor Farm with articles for his signature.

The inclosure concerned White Lain and Middle Fields which lay to the north, and Coppice Close Field to the west of the Preston Candover lane. A plan of the proposed Awards was drawn up by George Barnes (for 'which he charged £43.12s,11d - £29 2s "being Lord Rodney's proportion". The total cost of the Agreement and Award came to £66.10s Rodney paying £44 6s 8d). By far the greatest acreage went to Rodney, it was concentrated to the west of that allocated to Lord Portsmouth. The final Awards were made shortly before the death of the 2nd Earl of Portsmouth in 1797. The two large farms formed remained intact until 1911 (Rodneys) and 1988 (Portsmouths).

"This Parish is lately inclosed and greatly improved' stated the Hampshire Repository of Wield in 1799. 'Produce is almost double than when the lands were. in common and more labourers are employed'. The price of labour was 9/~ a week. the average value of land to let was 10/6 an acre. With consolidated farms there was better use of soil, crops and farm layout. This benefitted landowner and tenant alike; it created jobs and had a spin-off effect on the livelihood of the local craftsmen. Hedges and coppices were planted which gave impetus to the hurdlemaking industry which flourished at Wield during the next century. Inclosure changed the appearance of the landscape: the newly inclosed fields of Upper Wield were larger than the earlier inclosures - many of them are still the same size and bear me same names.

## A Troublesome Tenant.

If the old inclosures had created the yeoman farmer, the new created the tenant farmer. The Rodney's tenant at Manor Farm was Thomas Cosens. In 1790 he paid £132 2s 5d annual rent, plus land tax of £35 15s 2d. Payment was made half yearly at The Swan (another excuse for a dinner.). Together with the Perns, who had been Portsmouth's tenants since 1745, the Cosens dominated farming, and village life, in Wield for two generations., After inclosure, larger farms and rising prosperity increased the social status of the tenant farmers. Inevitably within such a small close community there were rivalries and jealousies which sparked off squabbles from time to time. During the last year of the century Thomas Cosens was right in the middle of several. He had no hesitation in appealing directly to "my Lord" for justice. One such incident over timber illustrates both the role of the Lord of the Manor and Rodney's forbearance with his tenant.

Timber was a valuable item and the woodlands, which were always kept "in hand", were carefully protected. They were supervised by a game keeper and a woodman, William Windibank, who organised the cutting and distribution of timber (and kept Old Alresford House supplied with bundles of faggots for fuel). No one was permitted to cut timber without permission from the Steward. Cosens was constantly requesting materials for repairs - these were usually granted and the bills paid promptly. (Timber supplied from Wield Wood. for a wheat barn in 1797 were re-used nearly 200 years later in the conversion of Cosens' farm buildings to a house). In the spring of 1799 he applied in the usual way to Faithfull for timber to carry out repairs; receiving no reply and unable to get on with the harvest due to exceptionally bad weather, he took the wood he needed and got on with the repairs. A villager named Hall. reported him and accused, him of taking more than he needed. Cosens received a sharp letter from Faithfull, rebuking him and threatening prosecution. Thomas Cosens, a redoubtable man, wrote a series of impassioned letters to Lord Rodney refuting the allegations citing Hall as a "Notorious Villin" and berating Faithfull for "neglecting his duty". Rodney accepted his explanation and let the matter drop.

Within weeks Cosens was in trouble again when a major furor over the entitlement to land at Lower Wield brought him into direct, conflict with the Perns. Cosens claimed a right to about 70 acres surrendered to him by John Cooper - who had already assigned it to Isaac Pern eight years earlier. There was a third claimant through a mortgage of Cooper's. The legal tangle was sorted out at a special Court held in December 1799 when Faithfull ordered the Bailiff to seize the property. Cosens lost the land. Pern gained it. Coming on top of the timber trouble it was too much for Cosens. Writing to Lord Rodney yet again the following March over the tiling of the house "which is out of repair" and the floor of the brewhouse "which is decayed for want of 500 bricks" he added a postscript : "I should have wrote to your Lordship before. My Trouble has been more than I can Express - At this time I have got the better of it and have forgiven Hall". Lord Rodney's patience must have been sorely tried by this troublesome tenant.

## The Third George.

George Rodney; the 2nd Baron, died on 2nd January 1802 at Kenegie, Penzance "of a decline". He was only 48 and was "universally esteemed". He left precise instructions regarding his funeral, which, was to be at Alresford and attended with as little expense as possible.

His son, the third George Rodney to hold the title, was twenty. King George the Third, his grandfather's old friend, was still on the throne, the Perns and the Cosens still "reigned" in Wield, the nation was at war with France, Nelson 'was the national hero and the Rodneys were still short of money.

Just as his father and grandfather had done, the young George Rodney took an early opportunity to expand the estate at Wield. By a series of transactions he contrived to create two extra farms as well as increasing the Manor Farm acreage. Land values had doubled between 1700 and 1790; inclosure, better farming methods and the high prices realised by farmers during the war made it

increasingly attractive to yeomen to augment their capital by selling their holdings and go on to become tenant farmers. William Budd was such a case. In 1800 he had increased his holding of 38 acres at Wield by the purchase of 82 acres from Mrs. Birch. He promptly mortgaged the holdings for £1,230 but within five years, after a series of bad harvests and falling prices he. was in difficulties and sold out to the new Lord Rodney. Budd, who also owned Ashley Farm, on the Wield/Bentworth border, continued, to farm the land as tenant on a peppercorn rent until 1811. (He seems to have retained a small part of his original holding in the centre of Lower Wield, a parcel of land now incorporated in Laurel Farm.

The land Rodney acquired was some of the oldest cultivated land in Lower Wield and was still in small inclosed fields. Several of these remain as they 'were then : 'Dicketts' is exactly the same as it has been for centuries and 'The Hook' is now home to Wield Cricket Club.

#### The Deal.

George Rodney formed a new farm of 99 acres and built a new farm-house on the site of an earlier one, he named it 'Wield Farm' (now Kings Farm) and put it up for sale. In 1809 John Goff, a yeoman whose house, Hog Lodge at Harmsworth, had burnt down, agreed to purchase it but died before the sale could be completed. His son, John, eventually paid. £2,200 for the farm in 1814.

Some sort of deal was struck with the Goffs (which could explain why a field between Wield Farm and The Yew Tree was named as 'Deal Close' on the 1845 Tithe Map) for at the same time that Goff was negotiating the purchase of Wield Farm he acquired from Rodney the cottage now known as The Yew Tree Inn, formerly part of Budd's holding. Rodney, in turn, acquired Goff's land in Old Aresford parish at 'New moor' (now Newmer) which he promptly mortgaged for £2,000, This together with some old common land on the southern boundary of Wield formed 'Common Farm' which was let out on a tenancy.

These, astute manoeuvres brought the Wield estate to over a thousand acres. There were now two tenanted farms; capital had been realised from the sale of Wield Farm and through the raising of mortgages.

The high prices realised by farmers during the war had put money in their pockets (and those of the landowners) but when corn prices fell at the end of the, war the country went into a period of agricultural depression - aggravated by a series of bad harvests. In 1815 the protective Corn Laws were passed with the aim of reviving the prosperity of farmers (at the cost of the consumers) but it remained a very difficult time for farming communities.

It was a time of change, in Wield - Thomas Cosens died in 1816, his tenancy was taken over by John Complin, and Isaac Pern died shortly afterwards. There was not one owner occupied farm in the village, even the smaller yeomen farmers let their land to the "big boys", William Faithfull remained as Steward until 1825 until his place was taken by John Dunn. It is noticeable in the Court Rolls that from the beginning of the Third George's lordship there was a tightening up of encroachments on "the Lord's Waste". A new Custom was added to those that had existed for centuries ; "...Cottagers within the Manor have no right of Common for any Cattle whatever". The harsh game laws were enforced: by a new law of 1816 a. man could be transported for seven years if caught with hare or rabbit nets on him at night. There are several stories of men being transported from Wield.

#### The Settlement.

In 1819 Lord Rodney married Charlotte Georgina Morgan, second daughter of Sir Charles Morgan and part of the Wield estate was included in their Marriage Settlement. Rodney had inherited Berrington Hall in 1804 and made that his principal home, but they visited Old Alresford frequently where they spent liberally on entertaining. Alresford Pond, which the Admiral had purchased to



save "the poor birds" from being shot, was a great attraction, for shooting parties for his grandson and his friends. Colonel Peter Hawker had left graphic descriptions of the entertainment provided at Aresford in his diaries; "this evening all went over to Alresford House where Lord Rodney gave a grand dinner"....."A house full of company and all the luxuries that could possibly be thought, of". Between 1840 and 1850 a miniature railway was built at a cost of £70,000 near the Pond. Rodney had inherited the extravagant ways of his grandfather. He died in 1842 at his father-in-law's house in Pall Mall. Having no sons the 3rd Baron was succeeded in quick succession by his two brothers, and in 1846 the title passed to their nephew.

There were insufficient funds to pay the debts of the 3rd Baron Rodney. There followed Court Actions to administer his estates, ending ten years later - with the Order of Chancery which directed that the lands of the 1819 Marriage Settlement be sold by public auction.

The Sale.

The sale took place on 25th August 1852 - Messrs. Winstanley were the auctioneers. The whole estate of 1019 acres was bought by Thomas Earle of Itchen Stoke for £14,727. The timber on the estate was valued at £570.17s 7d. The sale was completed on 17th January 1853 and after ninety two years 'the Manor, or Lordship of Wield.,.' passed out of the hands of the Rodney family.

Charlotte, the Dowager Lady Rodney continued to take an interest in the village and was present in 1877 at the opening of the new school but with her death the following year, the Rodney's family's connection with Wield came to an end.

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