

Nostalgia for the future



Meet William Bowland, a feudal lord more interested in Bowland's future than in obsessing about its past.

Late last year, the headlines proclaimed that Bowland had a new feudal lord. It was reported that an anonymous buyer had acquired the Lordship of Bowland – an ancient title dating back almost a thousand years - for an undisclosed sum from Lord O'Hagan, a senior representative of the Towneley family.

The Towneleys had owned much of the Forest of Bowland up until the Second World War having been Lords of Bowland since 1835.

Apparently, it was only through a chance discovery by a researcher that the Towneleys came to realise that they owned the title at all. Until then, it had been believed that the Lord of Bowland was the Duke of Lancaster, Her Majesty The Queen, whose father had bought several thousand acres of the Forest – now known as the *Whitewell Estate* - in the late 1930s.

Journalists scrambled to track down the new Lord of Bowland. Under mounting pressure, the Manorial Society, which represents Britain's 1,900 feudal lords and barons, finally released a statement confirming that the 16th Lord of Bowland was in fact a university don with historic family links to the area. But the Society stubbornly refused to name him. And there the trail went cold ... until now.

“Links with our past are so often discarded without an appreciation of their worth”

In the week before Easter, silence was once again broken when it was disclosed that the Lord of Bowland had chosen to exercise one of his ancient

feudal rights and had revived the historic office of Bowbearer of the Forest of Bowland.

According to press reports, local grandee Robert Parker of Browsholme Hall had been appointed Bowbearer. His ancestors had once been Bowbearers - high-ranking ceremonial officers who attended the Lord of Bowland and bore his bow during hunting – but not for almost 150 years.

It was admitted that at least one Bowbearer, Nicholas Tempest, met a bloody end - hanged, drawn and quartered by Henry VIII. But we were assured that no such fate awaits Mr Parker in these enlightened times.

Instead, the 16th Lord bestowed a sumptuous grant upon Mr Parker who, in turn, appeared in the *Clitheroe Advertiser* proudly holding up that grant in its glittering gilt frame as he stood beneath the portrait of one of his ancestors.

The new Bowbearer is reported to have said: "It has been sad no appointment of Bowbearer has been made by previous Lords of Bowland. Even though the role may be purely honorific, links with our past are so often lost cheaply or discarded without an appreciation of their worth. At Browsholme, we are completing the refurbishment of a listed tithe barn to improve our tourism potential. The appointment of Bowbearer is therefore most timely. The grant will be placed on view to our visitors, with other articles associated with the Bowbearer."

So far, so good. It seems we must commend our new Lord for the seriousness with which he is taking his duties.

Yet, for many months now, the 16th Lord has shunned publicity. Surely, the 16,000 folk who live in Bowland have a right to know his identity?

With that thought in mind, I determined to track down "Lord Bowland". I wanted to ask: what does it mean to be a feudal lord in the 21st century? And more bluntly, why on earth does Bowland need a lord at all?

"Vanity doesn't come into it"

What I found surprised me. "William Bowland", as he prefers to be known, is an energetic and articulate man in his late forties who speaks passionately about Bowland and is deeply knowledgeable about its history.

He talks in bewildering detail about the place-names of the Forest and the influence of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and even Welsh on their early development. He also explains with pride his own ancestral links to Newton where one of his ancestors established the village's first nonconformist chapel in the late 1600s.

Apologising for the stir that his succession to the title caused in 2009, he is impatient with suggestions that his Lordship is a mere vanity purchase.

“Vanity doesn’t come into it. For me, this is about Bowland, a very special place I know and love. This is my personal stake in the community, its history and heritage. The Lord of Bowland no longer has any political role. He doesn’t administer justice or manage the forest. The last of that died away in the 1920s.

“As Lord, I have some power to help preserve traditions and for that reason, reviving the office of Bowbearer seemed the right thing to do. Robert Parker, a charming man whose family have played a central role in the life of the Forest for almost eight centuries, will make a wonderful Bowbearer.

“But the future matters more than the past. If we’re smart, we should think of the Lordship of Bowland as a marketing opportunity.”

True to his word, it transpires that the 16th Lord has just sponsored a history of the Lordship of Bowland, expected to be published in late April. “This study breaks new ground in our understanding of the Forest”, he claims. “For the first time ever, we have a comprehensive list of the Lords, Bowbearers, Master Foresters and Chief Stewards. Months of painstaking research have revealed how the ancient courts at Whitewell and Slaidburn interacted and operated. This is the first systematic attempt to look at the history of the Forest from the eleventh century onwards. We’ve also untangled the later complex history of the Forest and its ownership from the 1830s to the present day”.

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I am refreshed by our conversation... and relieved. William Bowland is a thoroughly modern man, not some eccentric throwback. Not the sort you’d find parading around in ermine or beating the bounds of his Forest.

On the contrary, what Bowland appears to have acquired is a new and unexpected champion.

“Think about it”, he urges. “We can dismiss the Lordship as a hangover from a bygone age. Or we can celebrate it as a part of Bowland’s heritage ... just as we might celebrate an historic landscape or a beautiful building. We should exploit the fact that Bowland has a Lordship that goes back a thousand years – an amazing fact - to help protect, preserve and where appropriate, promote Bowland in all its uniqueness.

“Rightly, my success as Lord of Bowland will be judged by the contribution I make. Certainly, I feel I have a duty to serve the Forest community, to try and make a difference. But respect and trust don’t come automatically – they must be earned.

“What contribution might I make? In a sense, I am in the hands of others on this. But perhaps, if the community wishes, I might become a voice for Bowland, some sort of advocate. That is one option.

“Or maybe a guardian of its heritage. Or perhaps, even more excitingly, I could help pioneer a new way of thinking about Bowland based on a reawakened sense of our history- a sort of ‘nostalgia for the future’.

“For instance, did you know that, in the thirties, it was common to describe Bowland as the ‘Switzerland of England’? Not just because of its stunning scenery but also on account of the contentment of its inhabitants, their sturdy independence of spirit and general prosperity. Surely, it is my job to help keep traditions such as these alive”.

As I head home, I find myself cheered by what I’ve heard but I also know that I’ve failed my readers in one important regard. As a precondition of my interview, I promised to keep the identity of the publicity-shy Lord of Bowland a secret ... at least for now.

Mike Harvey
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