



Lady Ela and Canford Manor

The name Canford goes back to at least Saxon times and may probably have got its name from being Cana's ford, across the River Stour. Today it is still possible to find a shallow crossing point almost level with the current school – a crossing point that lined up with an ancient pathway that ran down from Parmiter Drive in Wimborne. In the *Domesday Book*, the manor of 'Cheneford' was the property of Edward of Salisbury. (***Cheneford (Keneford (1181), Kaneford (1195), Caneford (1200), Canford (inc. some variations - from 1307), Great Canford (1612) and finally Canford Magna (1774)***). After the Norman invasion of 1066 the estate on the river Stour was granted to the Eureux family by William I ('William the Conqueror') At the time, the manor was recorded as extending as far as Poole, Hamworthy, Longfleet and Parkstone, and included the huge area of Canford Heath. Canford was passed down to the ') Earls of Salisbury; the Montacute family (The words 'Great' and 'Magna' being added to the name of the settlement here showing the original importance of the manor.

So where does Lady Ela come into this tale? The huge manor and all of its lands became the property of Lady Ela, Countess of Salisbury. Ela's mother was a descendant of Walter Fitzpatrick; an ally of William the Conqueror who had been given large estates for his support at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. When Ela was orphaned at the age of nine by the death of the 2nd Earl of Salisbury as often happened at that time with influential, high-born children, she became a ward of the King – at this time, Richard I ('the Lionheart'). She also became Sheriff of Wiltshire as one of her titles.

A rather unusual episode in her life followed in that she was then taken in secrecy away from the wardship of the king by an uncle who hoped to take over Ela's estate for himself. She was taken to Normandy where she was hidden.

As with all folk-tales of knights at that time - if we take fairy tales as a source – they go to rescue princesses. And true to that image of historical fiction, in this case an English knight called William Talbot really did decide to go to find where she was being held and hope to rescue her. He dressed as a pilgrim and went to Normandy – changing to more appropriate clothes to gain access to the court and after discovering where she was being kept, eventually managed to bring her back to England. She was then presented to King Richard I (Richard the Lionheart) and it was Richard who then arranged for her marriage to William Longspée, who was Richard's illegitimate half-brother and aged about 26 at that time – with Ela aged about 10. It would not be expected that she would consummate the marriage for another 4 or 5 years but the marriage was the important event and in that way Ela's huge estate would pass into the extended royal family's hands through marriage.

So in 1196, she married the famous knight William Longespée (Longsword) who was also the half brother of King John – and through his wife's titles that William

inherited, he became the 3rd Earl of Salisbury William served three monarchs; Richard I, King John and Henry III.

Ela's husband William Longspée had a distinguished career during the reigns of his half-brothers; he was in Normandy with King Richard from 1196 (the year of his marriage) until 1198, and on his return took part in John's coronation in May, 1199. In 1213 he was abroad again, destroying the French fleet off the Flemish coast and commanding an army in northern France in 1214 for King John. Then in July of the same year he was taken prisoner at the Battle of Bouvines and held for ransom. He was exchanged in March 1215, for King John's prisoner, Robert of Dreux, who had been captured at Nantes in 1214.

After fighting abroad in Gascony with Richard for several years, in 1225 Longspée was shipwrecked off the coast of Brittany and stories reached home that he had died. Longspée's wife, Lady Ela was 'pursued' amorously by Reimund the nephew of wealthy and influential Hubert de Burgh [1st Earl of Kent] on the assumption that Longspée was dead but Ela insisted that she knew William had not died. This proposal for her to remarry won the support of the king since the wealth of the Canford estate would then be with the 'de Burghs'. However on his return Longspée was fairly naturally indignant at the approaches that had been made to his wife and argued with de Burgh over his involvement and his support for the idea of lady Ela remarrying. An invitation to a banquet followed, apparently to repair the 'friendship' - but immediately after the banquet Longspée was taken ill and died the following day. Without reference to any authority he was buried the following day without any enquiry at Salisbury and so giving no chance for a cause of death to be discovered. The fact that Longspée died suddenly and was buried so rapidly suggests that he was fairly certainly poisoned – a common practice at that time. A much less engaging story is that on his return William's health was suffering and he simply died at Salisbury – and in 1226 he was the first person to be buried in Salisbury Cathedral.

Many years later in 1791 his tomb was opened and a well preserved small corpse of a Black Rat, which when tested showed traces of arsenic, was found inside his skull. Maybe this might prompt a current day visit to **Salisbury museum** perhaps as the rat now forms one of the more bizarre exhibits in Salisbury Museum. Maybe the discovery of the rat throws favour more to the detailed story 😊 ?

In historical terms Lady Ela's husband, Longspée was an important historical figure, having witnessed the signing of Magna Carta – and his son, William Longspée 'the second', also has a significant place in local history through his granting rights to the gradually expanding town of Poole. This was through the 'Longspée Charter' of 1248. The document confirmed the long standing right (**'as always they have been accustomed'**) of local people to graze cattle **'in my heaths'**. The charter was also a means of financing the expenses of the later Crusades and it was on these travels that Wm Longspée (the second) was killed whilst fighting in Egypt.

One additional historical link lies in the fact that on Ela's death, she was succeeded as Countess of Salisbury by her great-granddaughter, Margaret, daughter of William III Longspée. Margaret was married to Henry de Lacey, 3rd Earl of Lincoln, and was the mother of Alice de Lacey, 4th Countess of Lincoln – It was the Earls of Lincoln who owned Shapwick and Blandford. The nearby local National Trust property, Kingston Lacy – the house just north of Wimborne on the Blandford Road, takes its

name from the de Lacy family - Earls of Lincoln - who were tenants at Corfe Castle in the 13th and 14th centuries. In 1635 Sir John Bankes bought Corfe Castle and in the following year he bought the neighbouring Kingston Lacy estate. Sir John was Attorney General to King Charles I.

Coming to more modern times there remains nothing of the buildings from those early days. The main structures that stood were removed in 1765 with only John O'Gaunts kitchen (16th C) still standing and being a part of the current school buildings. The 18th Century manor house was remodelled for William Ponsonby, Lord de Mauley in 1825-36 by the architect Edward Blore - with the house then being again remodelled and extended in 1848-53 by Sir Charles Barry Jnr (architect with Pugin - of the Houses of Parliament) for Sir John and Lady Charlotte Guest. Venture capitalist and South Wales Ironworks owner Josiah John Guest purchased the entire Canford estate in 1846 for £335,000, (around £50 million today) Charlotte his wife, immediately taking upon herself the mammoth work of re-organisation and restyling the buildings - even though it had already been extensively redesigned and completed only six years before. The chosen architect was Sir Charles Barry, who a decade before had designed the new Palace of Westminster (the Houses of parliament) was now commissioned to re-style Canford Manor as a Gothic mansion. This extensive redesigning took several years to complete - and in 1874 the 17,000-acre Canford Estate - now the home of Ivor Guest, the son (who was made Lord Wimborne in 1880) was one of the largest in Dorset. The extensive lands comprising the estate have since shrunk to around a tenth of its former size resulting from a number of sales over the years - including the sale to Canford School in 1923.

<https://historytheinterestingbits.com/2017/04/16/ela-heiress-wife-and-abbess/>

<https://wshc.org.uk/blog/item/the-life-of-ela-countess-of-salisbury.html>