

CHAMPIONS



Champions Farm house at Abingworth was known until the 19th Century as ***Champions Manor***. The historical part of the existing house dates back to the 16th century, the remainder being a high quality 1930s addition by builder Frank Duke of Steyning. Until around 1900, when a fire destroyed most of it, the house was much larger; luckily, the Tudor part survived.

For over 200 years before then, the Shelleys (of whom the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley is the best known family member) owned the Manor. Edward Shelley was a Catholic martyr, hanged in 1588 for harbouring a priest, but records do not specify whether this was at Champions or his other house at Warminghurst, though the James family (present owners) have identified a likely ‘priest-hole’ at Champions.

Sir Archibald and Lady James bought the farm in 1954 with some 130 acres, for around £15,000; today, their grandsons own and farm around 250 acres, which occupy most of the “Thakeham Gap” between Thakeham and West Chiltington. The farm is run and maintained to a very high standard.

[Thanks to Hugh and Susie James for supplying the basis for this summary.

Roger Taylor, November 2018]

Clerical incident on a Champions field (called Rush Field) in late 13th century:

Fred Francis, whose family farmed Champions from the 1934 to 1955, describes in his 1940 autobiography how he introduced soil drainage to improve the vegetation:

“One meadow, which was little more than marsh land and covered with rush-grass, has been transformed into fairly good pasture in a twelve-month”.

In an appendix, he writes:

“The costly field on Champion’s Farm to which reference is made is known as ‘Rush Field’ ” and quotes from Professor Mark Antony Lower, a Victorian archaeologist and historical researcher of Sussex, a reference describing a violent incident which had taken place (Francis assumed) on that very field in the reign of King Edward 1st:

“In the pleas of the crown, 7th, Edward I, it is averred that John le Suche (Zouche) rector of Chilmington came armed with his neighbours and dependents into a certain field where Martin, rector of Thakeham came with his men and a cart to collect the tithes of the same field and when Suche saw the aforesaid Martin he assaulted him with an iron fork, and a tenant of his shot the said Martin in the right breast with an arrow. Another tenant attempted to kill the poor rector, as he lay on the ground, with a hatchet; whereupon the latter’s servant struck the assailant with a bundle of wood and slew him. A Coroner’s inquest followed but with no result.” *(The old rectory was named after this unfortunate priest).*



Champions in the 1940s

Part of the 1840 Thakeham Tithe Map showing Champions (no. 148) and its surrounding land (see table below map for details of fields). Abingworth pond is shown near the top, by the Coolham/Storrington road (present B2139):



Landowner's Surname	Landowner's First Name	Title	Occupier's Surname	Occupier's First Name	Nos. ref. to the Plan	Name & Description of Lands & Premises	State of Cultivn	Quantities in Statute Measure			Amount of Rent-Charge apportioned upon the several Lands, and Payable to the Rector		
								A	R	P	£	s	d
Sheley	Timothy	Sir	Golds	Thomas	417	Stiff field	Arable	4	1	0			
					418	3½ acres	Arable	5	1	0			
					419	3 acres	Arable	4	0	16			
							13	2	16	2	19	7	
			Duke	John	137	Old Lag	pasture	4	0	0			
		138			2½ acres	Arable	3	0	5				
		139			Holm bush field	Arable	5	1	15				
		140			High field	Arable	6	2	22				
		141			Hovel field	Arable	4	2	6				
		142			Stip field	Arable	4	2	30				
		143			Jacket field	Arable	7	0	12				
		144			Barn field	Arable	5	0	10				
		145			Farm yard & Buildings		1	5					
		146			Ryde plat	Arable	5	0	10				
		147			Farm Lane & ponds		1	2	10				
		148	Homestead		2	2	13						
		149	Little Meadow	Meadow	2	3	0						
		150	Poach field	pasture	3	2	6						
		151	Furze field	pasture	3	3	10						
		152	Long Meadow	pasture	2	3	8						
		157	Common piece	Arable	3	3	0						
							64	2	2	19	0	5	

British History Online ([full link from here](#)) describes the house as follows:

“Champions is an L-shaped house of coursed rubble with brick and moulded brick dressings and formerly had mullioned and transomed windows. The details resemble those of West Wantley in Sullington, built in 1656. Champions was presumably built by John Shelley (d. 1673) or his son Timothy, at whose death in 1671 it had two storeys and attics and c. 13 rooms. The house appears to have faced south; the west range, truncated perhaps after a fire c. 1820, included the hall and the staircase which was replaced in the early 20th century; the east range perhaps included the study mentioned in 1671. An outshot was added on the south side in the 19th century”.

Summary of families owning/tenanting Champions (based on BHO, and sources quoted in Fred Francis' eponymous 1942 memoir):

1296, 1327 – “Champneys of the villat de Sillyngurst cum Thraham” spelled variously Champeneis/Champneys/Champion/Campion
1400s (mid/late) - passed to John Sharpe (a nephew of Edward Champneys)
1503 - left to Richard Brome/Bremner/Bramber
c.1517 - Champneys' descendant John Scutt disputed ownership & had Brome's tenant forcibly expelled
1552 – passed to John Turner, whose namesake son passed it on to his son Edmund in 1578 - who mortgaged it in 1580, but in 1593 - his brother & uncle (both Edward Turners) redeemed it, and the uncle held it in 1601 ...
1660s - (then a freehold of Thakeham Manor) bought by John Shelley from a 'widow Byne'
1673 – Grandson John inherited, (as a minor till 1679), and died in 1740 – leaving it respectively to his wife, and 2nd son Sir Timothy Shelley, who held it in 1748 ...
1804 – the house descended (along with some Warnham property) to Sir Percy Florence Shelley who (along with Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, his mother) sold it on 30th July 1850 to the Hon. George King,
1855 – Passed to the latter's son, Frederick King Esq. of Fryern House, Storrington until 1871 but by 1901 was owned by R. M. King
1921 - King sold it to Hugh Norcott Durant
1934 - Fred Francis bought it from Durant. His son, Group-Capt. Geoffrey Francis, sold it in 1955 to Sir Archibald James (d. 1980) who was succeeded by his widow and subsequently his sons and grandchildren, who farm it now.

***(Roger Taylor
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