

Jack of Newbury who he?

JACK of Newbury is a legendary figure of early Tudor England akin to Dick Whittington. His story was written as a work of fiction in the 1590's by Thomas Deloney. Deloney makes several claims about "Jack" but his novel is not great literature and never claimed to be so. It is popular literature i.e. it is designed to entertain the less educated. Nevertheless, it went through several editions. 1626 is the earliest surviving edition but apparently there had been ten editions before it.

Deloney identified "Jack" as John Winchcombe but the problem is that Newbury was home to several John Winchcombes, including four generations of the same family where the heir was named John. The first two of these, John Winchcombe I (d. 1520) and John Winchcombe II (d.1557) were both clothiers. So was Deloney right to identify "Jack" with the father rather with the son? Thanks to research of Dr. David Peacock we are in a better position to answer this question.

Deloney's work is a curious mixture of some facts, or pure fiction and what one might term "faction", i.e. parts that combine factual and fictional details. Tales, for example, of Jack locking his wife out and her turning the table on him were lifted from Boccaccio's work "The Decameron". Of interest to economic and social historians, Deloney includes a poem that identifies the different stages in the cloth making process and the number of people employed in it, which adds up to over 1,000. However, some historians, e.g. Peter Laslett, regard this poem as being either a piece of fancy or a fairy tale. Other claims made by Deloney about "Jack" include the assertions that he entertained Henry VIII and his first wife, Catherine of Aragon at his home and his place of work, that he was M.P. for Newbury, and that he organised a petition to the King on behalf of the Clothiers of England when their industry was in difficulties. Thanks to modern research we are now in a better position to test the accuracy of these claims.

Both John Winchcombe I and John Winchcombe II were clothiers and in early Tudor England to be a clothier meant that you were responsible for organising the production of woollen cloth at a time when 90% of England's exports consisted of woollen cloth. John Winchcombe II had at least 250 sheep of his own at Greenham, but he also acquired wool from thousands of sheep across a wide area. Locally this included Kingsclere, Enborne, and places such as Buckland on the Berkshire Downs and from Buckinghamshire as well. He ran his own dye house in Newbury, using woad as his major dye and purchasing it by the ton. He employed his own carders to card the wool and there is documentary evidence that suggests that there may have been 70 or more of them. He used fulling mills at West Mills in Newbury and provided thousands of cloths called Kerseys each year. In the absence of any evidence for a large number of independent workshops needed to produce thousands of cloths, this suggests that John Winchcombe II organised a very large weaving workshop which may well have been sited in Northbrook Street. Thus on the basis of this evidence alone it would seem that the son has a better claim to be regarded as England's greatest clothier than the father does.

What then of the claim that "Jack" was M.P. for Newbury? The problem here is that in the sixteenth century Newbury did not have one. John Winchcombe II, however, is an M.P. In 1545 he is M.P. for Great Bedwyn and in 1547 M.P. for Cricklade. He is also a Justice of the Peace, which is recognition of his status.

Finally, what of the story that "Jack" organised a petition on behalf of the Clothiers of England? The problem, this time, is that the records up to 1520, when John Winchcombe I died, do not contain such a petition and consequently it is assumed that this petition story was a piece of "pure" fiction on the part of Deloney.

But Dr. Peacock has discovered that there is an actual petition in the Public Record Office. However, it is dated after 1536 and therefore comes in the lifetime of John Winchcombe II.

It appears that in 1535 Parliament passed a law that aimed to increase the width of cloth known as “Kerseys”. The Clothiers of England protested about this law and John Winchcombe II organised a petition of protest that finally reached the King in 1541. A minute from the Privy Council dated 5th March 1541 gives prominence to “Winchcombe of Newbury” and agrees to the petitioners’ demands.

So the story of the petitioner is rooted in fact but it is associated with the son rather than the father.

John Winchcombe II not only produced thousands of cloths per year but he also spent thousands buying land and property. He purchased manors, i.e. vast estates. He buys Bucklebury, Thatcham, i.e. the land that stretches from Midgham to Greenham and Farnborough on the Downs that includes Ginge and Lockinge. This is monastic land. Some of it comes from Reading Abbey following the dissolution of the monastery and John Winchcombe II pays Henry VIII in order to take over these estates. Indeed in seven years he gave the king £4,000 which was a vast amount in the 1540’s. He also has freehold property and some land he leases. In Northbrook Street he has property there, in Cheap Street, in West Mills and Eastfields. So John Winchcombe II is a man who ploughs the profits of the cloth industry into the acquisition of both land and property.

His home is in Northbrook Street as well. It stretched from Marsh Lane via where Marks & Spencer is now to Jack Street. It may well have continued as far as the middle of Tesco Metro. Behind the Northbrook Street frontage it stretched back towards Victoria Park or “The Marsh”, as it was then. It was certainly a home that was intended to impress.

John Winchcombe II then was a very wealthy man and this enables him to mix with some of the most prominent people in Tudor England. He is friends with Edward Seymour who became Protector of England in the reign of Edward VI and he received an order from Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII’s Chief Minister between 1532 and 1540, for 1,000 Kerseys. Sir Thomas Gresham, a wealthy and important man, brought Winchcombe Kerseys and exported them to Antwerp. Indeed, in three years i.e. between November 1546 to November 1549 he purchased over 4,000 cloths from John Winchcombe II.

John Winchcombe II is a prominent tradesman and he is a member of the landed gentry. He enjoys the status of being a gentleman, he gained a coat of arms and was able to commission a portrait of himself which was a fashion only enjoyed by those at the very top of Tudor society.

Indeed, in this portrait he makes several statements about himself. He adopts an aristocratic pose, he includes his coat of arms and his merchant’s mark. He leaves nobody in any doubt as to the source of his great wealth.



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The author wishes to express his gratitude to Dr. David Peacock for his researches and scholarship on this subject.

A copy of Dr. Peacock’s PhD thesis entitled “Jack of Newbury or The Winchcombe Family and the Woollen Industry of the 16th century” has been donated by the author to the reference section of West Berkshire Library in Newbury.