

# An Estate Fit for a Royal Favourite

Written by Ellen Leslie



**2**021 marks my 15th year as a professional architectural historian and heritage consultant. In that time, I have researched hundreds of houses all over the country, from quaint timber-framed cottages in Yorkshire to palatial manor houses in Berkshire, and from grand Georgian townhouses in Mayfair to stone-built Quaker cottages in Wiltshire.

Each held a fascinating story, unique to that property. A great deal of my work can be categorised as 'myth-busting', using the proof of original documents to confirm as well as deny a popular local story about a place. A popular legend for the older house is that royalty once stayed there. While I am yet to research a house where a monarch actually stayed, I have researched a property with a direct link to Queen Elizabeth I. The house is Mutfords, located just outside Buntingford in Hertfordshire.

Following an inspection of the property I accessed local and national archives, as well as the private archives of Trinity Hall Cambridge, to piece together the history of the house and surrounding land. The house that stands today was built in 1720. In fact, it was in the run up to its 300th anniversary that I was asked to research its long and hidden past. While an early 18th century construction date is impressive enough, in the case of Mutfords, there has probably been a house on this site since at least the 14th century. One of the clues to that is the 'half-moat' that surrounds it even today, indicating a medieval settlement.

Records indicate that in the early 16th century the Mutfords estate was owned (but not occupied) by Richard Nykke, Bishop of Norwich. He gifted the estate to his Alma Mater Trinity Hall Cambridge in 1521. The property remained in the freehold possession of the college until 1918, nearly 400 years later! While the Mutfords estate was owned by Trinity Hall, it was leased to tenant farmers over those four centuries.



Mutfords  
circa 1900

For most of the 16th century the house and farm were leased to the Meriton family. The family lived there for decades, with a series of 21-year leases. But in 1587 Queen Elizabeth personally wrote to Trinity Hall to ask for the 21-year lease to be granted to one of her favourites, Ralph (Raffe) Bowes. The letter is kept in the Trinity Hall Archives. She wrote:

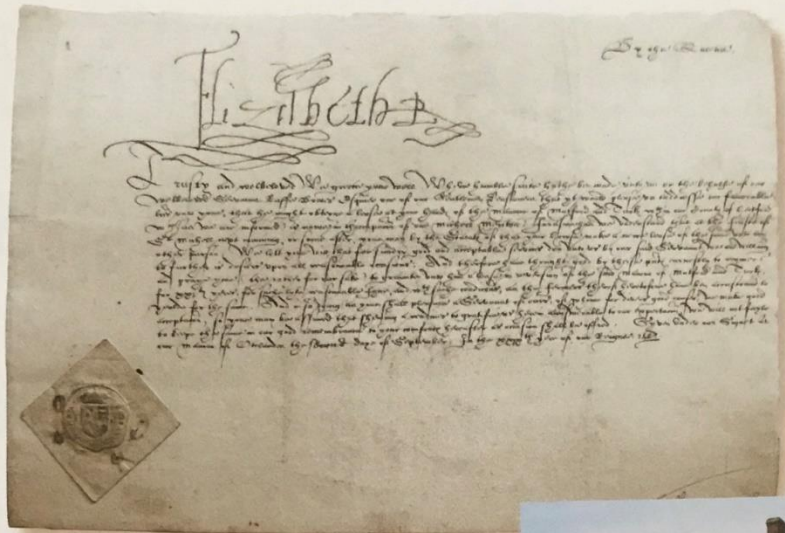
*"We greet you well. Whereas humble suite hath been made unto us on the behalf of our Well beloved servant Raffe Bowes Esquire, one of our Gentlemen Pensioners... that he might obtain a lease at your hands of the Manor of Mutfords and Turks within our County of Hertford which (as we are informed) is now in the occupation of one Michell Meriton."*



Bowes was a Member of Parliament and also held the patent for manufacturing playing cards in England. It is unlikely he wanted to turn his hand to farming himself; rather it was a lucrative lease to obtain and then sub-let. Despite a request that surely could not be refused, there is no evidence that Raffe Bowes became the tenant of Mutfords. Did he decide not to take the lease after all, despite his Queen's best efforts, or did Trinity Hall find a polite way to turn down the monarch's request? We may never know.

According to leases held by Trinity Hall, in 1680 a Samuel Buck leased the Manor of Mutfords and by 1713 William Levine held the tenancy. By 1719 gentleman-farmer Samuel Mason took over the lease and set about building a new modern house on the site of the old manor/farmhouse, the building that stands today. It was during the Mason tenancy that the farm really developed. The estate map dated 1787 clearly shows the arrangement of the house with ancillary farm buildings around it.

By 1918 Mutfords was proving expensive to maintain for Trinity Hall. The estate needed improvements, from land drainage to building repairs. After 400 years the college sold the estate. By 1935 the house and farm (totalling over 400 acres) were bought by the Co-op Ltd Fruit Growers for £3000. It continued as a commercial farm until the early 1970s. In



Queen Elizabeth's Letter

that time the house was divided into three separate residences for co-op workers, but the building itself was poorly maintained and was in a sorry state when the current owner John Kilby bought it in 1975. Over the next four decades he and his family have lovingly restored and transformed the house into the beautiful country residence it is today. 🏡



For further information contact:

[www.ellenleslie.com](http://www.ellenleslie.com)  
 Mob: 07914 35 35 42  
 Instagram: @EllenHBR  
 Twitter: @EllenCLeslie



Mutfords today