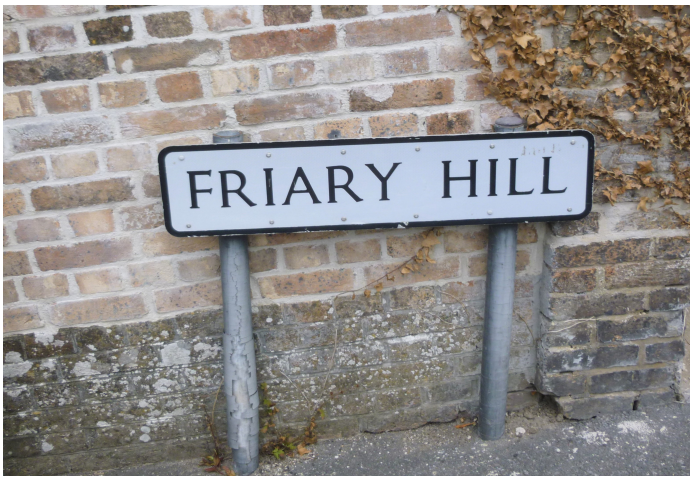
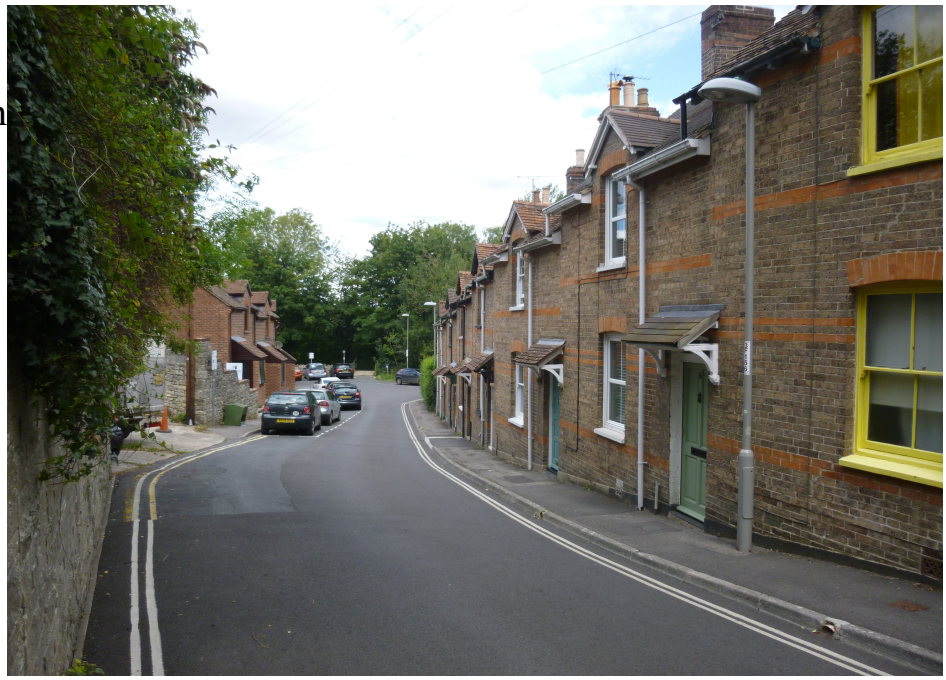
DORCHESTER FRIARY AND ITS MP OWNERS – David Cuckson

I want to say some general things about Dorchester Friary, but I am going to concentrate on a period in the 17th century, long after the buildings ceased to be used for a religious institution. To a large extent, then, this is the story of three successive private owners of the Friary, each of whom served as the Member of Parliament for Dorchester.



There are no visible remains left of the friary buildings. The only indication today that a significant medieval religious building stood here is the street name, Friary Hill.
When I first came to Dorchester we lived just around the corner in Orchard Street – and there was no orchard there either. Apparently fragments of human bone have been retrieved during road works on Orchard Street and during building works for an extension of one of the houses; these seem to date to the time of the friary. Otherwise we have to rely on documentary evidence.



The friary (sometimes referred to as 'priory' or even 'convent') was dedicated to St Francis and occupied by Franciscan friars. The date and circumstances of its foundation are unknown, although we know that it was there in 1267 when action was taken against the friars for erecting a wall that encroached on the road.

It seems to have been built largely from stone taken from the ruins of the old castle on the hill above the site (where the prison buildings now stand). In 1296 there is evidence of there being 32 friars in residence, when Edward I gave them 32 shillings for three days food, through Friar Nicholas of Exeter.

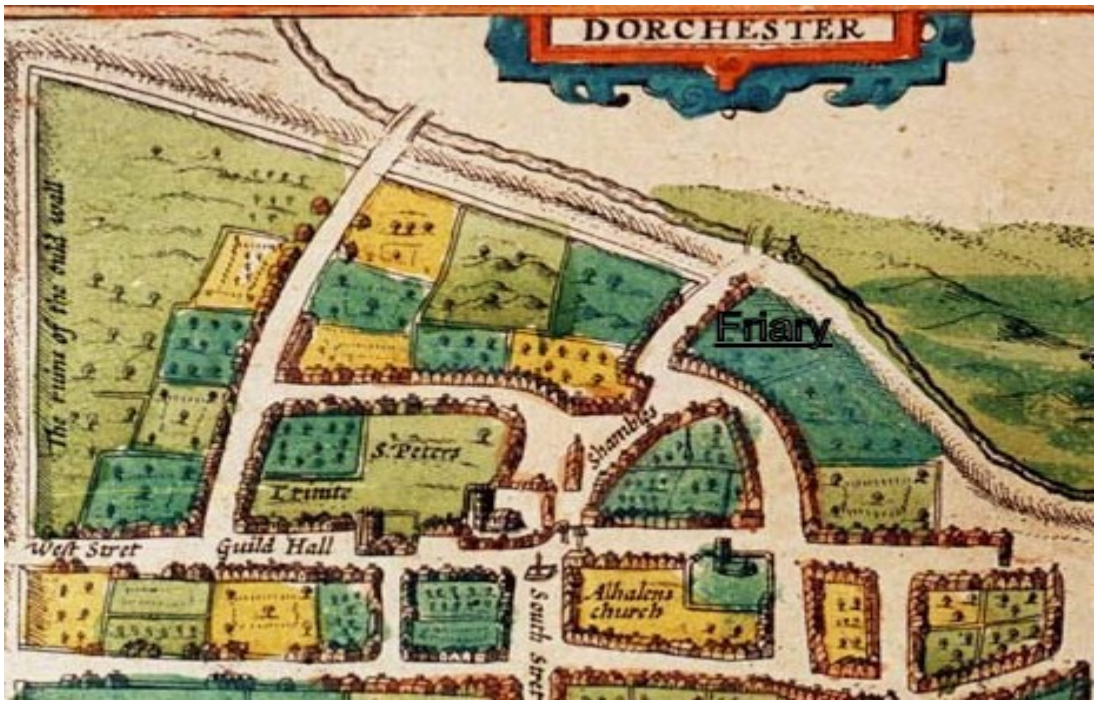
We do not need here to go through the full history of the friary. However, we ought not to fail to record the significant gift of Sir John Byconil in 1485 of some mills which he had built on the waters that run past the site of the friary. The deed effecting this gift formally admitted Sir John and his heirs as a founder of the friary and provided for an annual mass to commemorate Sir John after his death. There was further provision that profits from the mill were to be paid out in educating boys, and also that the brothers were in future to be known as Byconil's Fryers in his memory and no longer to be known by their family surnames.

The 1530s saw the moves for the dissolution of the monasteries in the reign of Henry VIII, and readers of Hilary Mantel's novels will be aware of Thomas Cromwell's part in all this. There was a distinct programme to deal with the friaries and as part of this, in September 1538, the Bishop of Dover made his formal visit to Dorchester Friary. The bishop noted that the warden, Dr Germen, had been there many years and was held in high regard, which made the closure of the friary more difficult. The mill had recently been let, but this was quickly seized into the king's hands and the deed of surrender was actually signed on 30 September 1538.

William, Lord Stourton, who was the recent lessee to the mill, tried to secure a grant of the whole property, but the house and garden were leased in 1539 to Edmund Peckham, a rising individual in the king's service. In 1543 now promoted to the position of cofferer to the king's household (an important position at court, including membership of the Privy Council) and knighted, Peckham was able to purchase the property, with the water-mill and 6 acres of grounds. He subsequently sold the property to Thomas Wriothesley (featured in Hilary Mantel's books as 'Call-me-Risley'), Earl of Southampton, and Paul Dorrel Esq. It then seems to have passed through various hands until in 1622 it was acquired by Sir Francis Ashley (apparently by inheritance from Robert Samways of Toller Fratrum via his wife), by which time the property was ready for a major make-over.

Sir Francis Ashley is our first MP owner of the Dorchester Friary. He represented the borough of Dorchester in the parliaments of 1614, 1621 and 1625-6. He was born at Damerham, Hampshire in 1569. After graduating from Oxford University he studied at the Middle Temple, where he became a

barrister in 1596. He was the third son of Sir Anthony Ashley, who latterly lived in Wimborne St Giles. His mother, Dorothy, was daughter of John Lyte of Lytes Cary in Somerset. James Savage in his book, *The History of Dorchester,* (1833) records that the arms of the Lyte family were incorporated in one of the chimney breasts of the renovated house. The house was described as a long, low and irregular building. The eastern part was thought to be the oldest, with three old windows, whilst at the west end there was a long gallery, perhaps once the dormitory. The Ashley arms were also displayed in two rooms. Savage also noted the presence of a garden and orchard to the east of the building, where once stood a chapel for the friary (hence, presumably, the remains of buried bodies found in the vicinity in more recent times).



Speed's map showing Dorchester in the17th century

As the third son Francis had, to a large extent, to make his own way in the world. He was an active county magistrate in Dorset from 1608. He was appointed Recorder for Dorchester in 1611, and one of his lasting legacies is *The Casebook of Sir Francis Ashley JP, Recorder of Dorchester, 1614-1635*, copies of which are held in the County Library and the Dorset History Centre. He may well have been helped in this aspect of his career by his brother Robert, who was an earlier MP for Dorchester.

Then in 1614 Francis was returned to Parliament for Dorchester, and made an immediate impact. It is recorded that, despite his novice status, he made 28 speeches and attracted 15 committee appointments. He was knighted in 1618, probably largely because of his strong support for the royal prerogative. In fact, he continued to argue that if the crown was to exercise proper jurisdiction it

must also have adequate powers of its own of coercion and fund-raising. In 1625 he was made a king's serjeant, but his outspoken views met with opposition, and he was censured and briefly imprisoned by parliament during 1628. One prominent action as king's serjeant was to represent the crown at the trial of John Felton, who had assassinated the Duke of Buckingham.

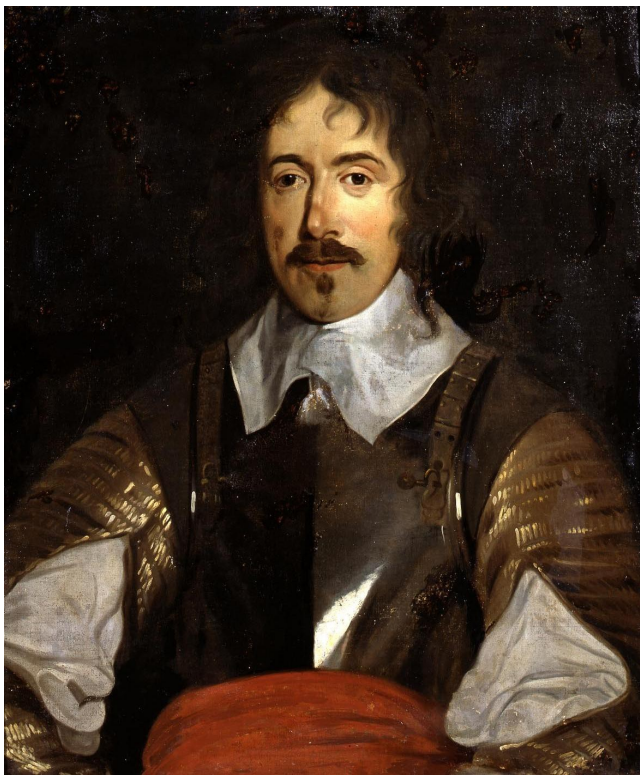
Despite his strong views on the royal prerogative, his religious views were influenced by the Puritan Rector of Dorchester of the time, the Reverend John White, who in due time would support Parliament against the King in the Civil War. He responded to White's call to the town to rally together to rebuild his community after the disastrous fire of 1613, and he was a major contributor to the erection of a Dorchester almshouse in 1616. After buying land at Waterston, near Puddletown, he assigned the tithes to the Reverend Robert Cheeke, minister of All Saints Church, the poorest church in the town. He was one of the leading citizens to support John White's great initiative in The Dorchester Company, designed to promote new settlements in New England. In fact the poet Ralph Crane was so impressed by this side to his life that in 1633 he dedicated to him a volume of religious verse, contrasting his profession as 'the Law Temporal' with his contemplation of 'the Law Theological'. In his will he left £100 to John White, as well as money to augment the living at All Saints.

At the end of his life, in 1635, he became involved in an acrimonious family dispute, concerning money allegedly owing to him by a relative, which he tried to claim back from that relative's heir, then a boy of 15. The boy, who was to go on to become the first Earl of Shaftesbury, claimed that Sir Francis made an excessively long speech to the Court of Wards and then collapsed with a paralytic seizure and never spoke again, dying 12 days later. Another account, however, tells that he remained active until the last morning of his life but then finding himself not well sat down in his chair and died. This was in London, at Serjeants' Inn. He was buried in St Peter's Church in Dorchester.

The property passed to Sir Francis' son-in-law, Denzil Holles, who had married Sir Francis' only surviving child, Dorothy, in 1626. Since 1628 he had been the MP for Dorchester, and so now became our second MP to own Dorchester Friary. He was son of the first Earl of Clare, but he was the younger son, so was not in line to inherit the title. Accordingly he was educated for a professional career, studying at Christ's College, Cambridge and then at Gray's Inn, ready to work as a lawyer, until he married Dorothy. His father had never achieved the success that he craved – he purchased his peerage, and he ended his life bitter and disappointed. Denzil seems to have followed him in this bitterness.

At the time of his marriage he was MP for St Michael, Cornwall, but failed to make any positive mark. On being returned for Dorchester in 1628 he was more active and, in contrast to his father-in-law, showed himself to be strongly opposed to the measures of King Charles I to levy dues from the people without parliamentary approval. He tried, with others, to argue against the King in parliament, and when, on 2 March 1629, the King sought to adjourn the parliamentary session, Holles and others sought to frustrate this. When the Speaker tried to rise to bring the session to a close, Holles and another member, having taken the precaution of sitting on either side of the Speaker, held him in his chair and tried to continue the debate. Holles and others were arrested and summoned before the Privy Council on 4 March. He was imprisoned in the Tower and remained there until November when he submitted to be bound over, with Sir Francis Ashley paying for his son-in-law to be bailed. Holles then refused to plead when the matter came to court but was found guilty and fined – though he never paid the fine and remained technically on bail until years later the proceedings were cancelled by Parliament. Folk in Dorchester clearly approved of his conduct, the corporation giving him a standing-cup worth 20 marks in appreciation of his services in this parliament.

Thus, in 1630 he found himself with no parliamentary role and he lived in a dower house close to Dorchester where he became a close friend of the Reverend John White. He was appointed to one or two of the lesser offices locally associated with a man of his standing but made little impact until he stood for Parliament in 1640 as MP for Dorchester. He now played an increasingly prominent role in supporting the Puritans' opposition to the King and those around him. He was active in the impeachment of Archbishop Laud, he supported a proposal by the Scots commissioners for a religious conformity between Scotland and England (a Puritan model) and he joined the call for the abolition of episcopacy 'roots and branches'. He was not really part of the inner circles within parliament, but the strongly combative tone of his speeches gave him a higher profile as far as the King was concerned and the King named him as one of the five members of the Commons whom he tried to seize and arraign on charges of treason on 5 January 1642. The attempt failed, but Holles enjoyed an enhanced status among the parliamentarians as a result.



When the King raised his standard at Nottingham and effectively declared war on those who controlled Parliament, it was inevitable that Holles should find himself on the side of Parliament. However, he was a reluctant revolutionary. He viewed the King as a basically good but weak man misled by evil counsellors, and the rights and liberties of the people had been severely harmed as a result. Despite his personal reservations he could not avoid getting caught up in military issues; he was made deputy lieutenant of Bristol and, closer to home, he was appointed to help to organise the Dorset militia. He had the rank of colonel. He was one of those deputed to attack Sherborne Castle, but unsuccessfully, losing many of his men, largely to desertion. Having got his regiment back up to strength he took a courageous part in the Battle of Edgehill, but that was his finest hour in the field and he withdrew to play a more congenial role in progressing negotiations with the King. So in parliament he regularly spoke out in favour of putting forward peace proposals, proposing revisions to bring the parties closer together and, above all, to keep talking.

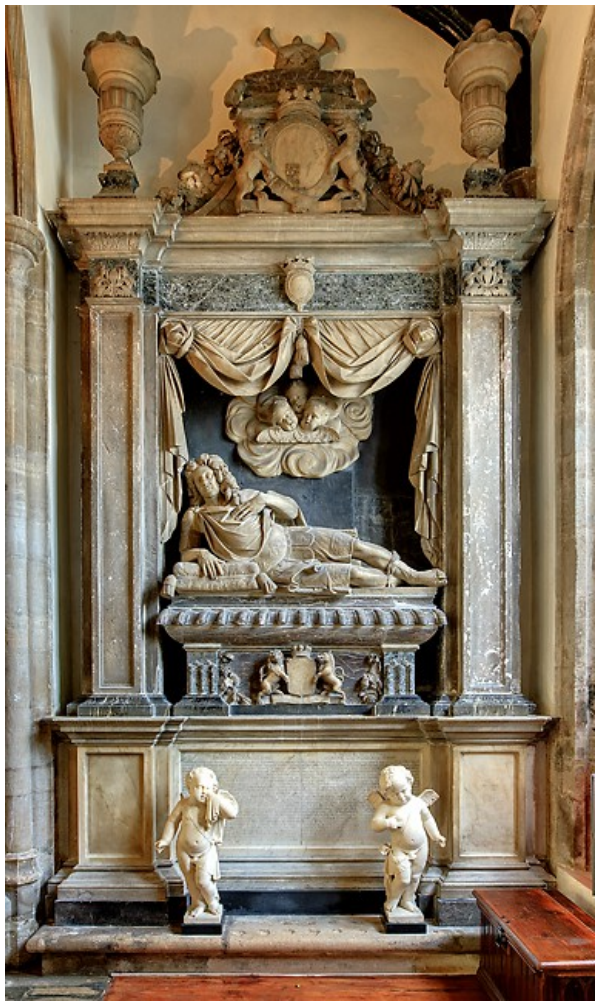
As the war party in the Commons gained ascendancy, Holles discovered that he was being increasingly sidelined. After Cromwell's New Model Army was formed there was a final push to persuade the King to agree terms, and Holles was one of those involved in formal meetings. Some people accused Holles at this time of acting as a secret agent reporting on internal parliamentary discussions to the King. There was no firm evidence of this but Holles withdrew from London for a time in the summer of 1645, presumably back to Dorchester. He later became involved in negotiations with the Scots, at a time when their army held the King, and this time his great idea was to pay the Scots to go home, they having handed over the King, and then to reduce dramatically the size of the parliamentary forces in England. Unfortunately he managed to antagonise many of the military with his detailed proposals, which ignored or downplayed many of the soldiers' grievances, in relation to such matters as arrears of pay and general conditions. Finally, the Army lost patience with Parliament as then constituted and effectively seized power. Holles took fright and hid for a few days before escaping into exile in Normandy. He remained there for almost a year, having previously, and prudently, ensured that his

mother and his eldest son were already established there. His first wife, Dorothy, had died in 1641 and he had married again, this time to Jane, a wealthy widow, whose family was based in Sussex, although she does not appear to have accompanied her new husband in exile.

Even then Holles did not give up all hope of achieving some kind of accommodation with the King. He played a leading role in the process that led to the proposal to the Commons on 4 December 1648 that the King's latest response represented the basis for peace. But then just two days later came Pride's Purge, when the Army arrested some 45 members of the Commons and prevented many more from taking their seats. Holles fled again to Normandy. Eventually in 1654 Oliver Cromwell, now Lord Protector, offered an amnesty to Holles and others, and a free pass home. Holles gratefully accepted and retired to Dorset.

After Oliver Cromwell's death and the deposing of his successor, his son Richard, General Monck was in effective charge of the nation's affairs. Early in 1660 Denzil Holles was able to resume his seat in parliament and, indeed, he was appointed to the council of state. In elections later that year he was again returned as MP for Dorchester. Once more, he came to the fore with proposals for the late king's son to be admitted to the throne. His carefully crafted compromise proposals were outvoted in favour of an immediate settlement based on offers of general goodwill from Charles. In order to set aside his suspicions and objections, he was persuaded to be part of the mission to negotiate face to face, and he seems to have been charmed by the now-to-be-restored King Charles II. In return he was given a place on the Privy Council and elevated to the peerage as Baron Holles of Ifield, the latter location presumably indicating a preference of his second wife's home over Dorchester.

From 1662 to 1665 he served as Charles's ambassador to Paris and his international career continued in 1666 to 1667 when he was employed to negotiate a peace settlement with the Dutch, which successfully brought an end to the Second Anglo-Dutch War. 1666 also saw the death of Jane, his second wife, and his marriage to Esther, another well-off widow. It was noted that from early 1674 his house in Covent Garden became a meeting place for politicians wanting to limit the power of the Crown and to oppose the succession of the crown to Charles's brother, whose reign as James II would create its own constitutional problems. He died on 17 February 1680 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.



The monument in St Peter's, Dorchester was erected in 1699. As with many eulogies the extensive dedication should not be taken literally at face value. Perhaps we should all like to be remembered for our 'excellent endowments and abilities', even if we do not necessarily aspire to be admired for our 'eloquence and valour'. More significantly his support for Parliament in the lead up to and during the Civil War is glossed over, and his service to the King emphasised. But perhaps the point of the memorial is not just about the man – as stated at the end of the dedication it is all 'for the honour of the present age as well as an example to posterity'. But worth a look, in any event.

About our third MP subject, Francis Holles , there is much less to say – on two counts, first that he made very little impact on the political scene, and secondly that, as a grown man, he effectively ceased to live in Dorchester. He was born in 1627, going on to follow his father's footsteps in Cambridge and then the law. He became a baronet in 1660. He was appointed a Justice of the Peace for Dorset, as well as a few other administrative offices in the county. He served as an MP during part of the Civil War period and then in the Protectorate Parliament, first for Lostwithiel and then for Wiltshire. There was then a gap of 25 years before, in 1679, he was returned as MP for Dorchester, but by then he had ceased to live in the town. Then, after his father's death in 1680, he succeeded to the title as the second Baron Holles. That title went no further; his only son predeceased him and his estates passed to a cousin, the 4th Earl of Clare, but the close link with Dorchester Friary had long since broken.

Years later the house was used as a Presbyterian meeting-house for a time but the glory days of the Friary were now in the past. When James Savage recorded his description of the house this was presumably before 1784, and it was then probably in a semi-ruined state, because he records that materials from the buildings were sold in that year to be used in the erection of a gaol at the bottom of High East Street. But the Friary had enjoyed a notable period as a private residence in the 17th century with its three successive owners who represented the town as Members of Parliament.