

## **William Delafield, 1936–2011**

### **Farmer, philanthropist, bibliophile and compiler of an exhaustive history of his farm and its connection with the Oxford Movement**

William Delafield was a farmer, philanthropist and something of a recluse.

Born in 1936 at Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire, where his father owned a substantial sand quarry business, William Hugh Delafield was educated at Berkhamsted School and Brasenose College, Oxford, where he read geology. As a student, he developed an interest in old books and by the time of his death had built up a small library of mainly 18th and 19th-century books. Before returning to the family business, Delafield completed a BLitt.

In due course, the business, of which he became managing director, was sold and in 1982, Delafield bought Worton Grounds Farm near Deddington in Oxfordshire, where he remained happily until his death. While it would be correct to describe him as a gentleman farmer, he was engrossed in every aspect of the farm.

The history of his farm had a particular fascination for Delafield and, through his tenacity, by the time of his death he had probably created the best documented farm history in Oxfordshire: in fact, there must be few farms, if any, in Britain that can have been so thoroughly researched. When he died, his "Farm Notes", as he modestly described them, must have covered nearly 1,500 A4 pages of narrative, documentation and photographs that left no avenue of inquiry unexplored, no matter how unpromising initially. For especially difficult problems of research, he was grateful for the expert help of Jill Adams, a local historian and genealogist. It would be fitting if copies of this work were to be made available to the Bodleian Library and Oxfordshire Archives.

Delafield was interested in the fact that in the first half of the 19th century his farm had formed part of the estate of the Wilsons of Over Worton, whose family prosperity had derived from the silk industry and who, like many successful entrepreneurs of the time, developed strong religious affiliations, in their case becoming one of the leading Evangelical families. In the early years of the 19th century, Daniel Wilson, then Vice Principal of St Edmund Hall, Oxford, and later Bishop of Calcutta, also looked after Holy Trinity Church at Over Worton where his uncle, William Wilson, was squire and parson. John Henry Newman preached the first sermon of his life at Over Worton in 1824, and made the first public address of his life nearby at Deddington in the following year.

These associations with the Wilsons through their earlier ownership of his farm were of great interest to Delafield, as were the ramifications of the Newman connection and the development of the Tractarian/Oxford Movement of the 1830s. The fascination that Delafield developed for his farm history extended to all the previous owners and tenant farmers.

He felt himself to be a fortunate man and he established a charitable trust through which he provided valuable assistance to many projects. He was not interested in high-profile concerns, nor in seeing his name identified prominently to the task in hand. He rarely, if ever, spoke about the grants made by his trust; everything was done very discreetly. But the help he gave was wide-ranging and included reshelving the library at the Cowper and Newton Museum in Olney and focused particularly on the preservation



and conservation of important archives and their acquisition by appropriate institutions.

In the mid-1960s he met Wilfred Thesiger while climbing in the Atlas Mountains. They stayed in touch and Thesiger visited him at his farm and Delafield went to visit Thesiger a few days before his death in 2003. In 2010 the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford mounted a centenary exhibition of photographs taken by Thesiger for which Delafield made a generous contribution towards the costs.

Recently, he had begun to fund conservation work at Pusey House in Oxford. This unique institution holds an unrivalled collection of books, pamphlets and archives on all aspects of Pusey's life and work and, in particular, documentation of the Oxford Movement.

Delafield was not a churchman or believer, but that did not stop him from attending church from time to time and he was particularly attracted to the services at the beautiful and secluded Church of St Leonard and St James at Rousham, to which he may also have made personal benefactions. One of his old friends, described him, fairly, as a 'Christian atheist'"

Tall, with a shock of white hair, he was extraordinarily courteous and quite formal, and an exceptionally private person. But he was a humorous man of great personal warmth, enthusiasm and generosity. He could establish a rapport with anyone of any age and leaves a wide circle of friends. He never married.

**William Delafield, farmer and benefactor, was born on August 20, 1936. He died on October 9, 2011, aged 75**

*Obituary courtesy of The Times*