

Contents

1	Introduction	7
2	Where It All Began	13
3	The Feudal Barons Of Mitford	29
4	Kidnapping The Bishop	45
5	Legend Of The Mitford Crest	50
6	Mitford Church And Chapel	52
7	The Squires Of Mitford	62
8	Extraordinary Characters & Notable People	
	(i) William Mitford	122
	(ii) Rev John Mitford	126
	(iii) John (Jack) Mitford	129
	(iv) Sir Robert Mitford	135
	(v) Admiral Robert Mitford	139
	(vi) Squire Osbaldeston	143
	(vii) Mary Russell Mitford	149
	(viii) Edward Mitford FRGS	158
	(ix) Algernon Freeman-Mitford	173
	(x) Godolphin Mitford	177
	(xi) Bertram Mitford FRGS	201
	(xii) The Mitford Girls	218
9	Mitford's Estate Act	226
10	Bibliography	236

Two plate sections with illustrations are to be found between pages 96 - 97, and pages 144 - 145.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Mitford family of Mitford from 1042 to now

It's taken over 960 years and an Act of Parliament to hold one of England's oldest families together. But with no heir it took one man and the stroke of a pen to end a dynasty. From Europe, to the Middle East and Africa, to America, China and Japan, Australia and New Zealand, you'll find the name Mitford.

The family coped with all that was flung at it through the ancient feudal system and medieval wars, through battles and bloodshed, treason, kidnapping, politics and scandal. A family that stood up for freedom as we know it today. The good, bad and the worst of times. Sadly, due to one weak link the Mitford family was unable to adapt, accept change and failed to reinvent itself to continue into the 21st century. A matter of perfect indifference.

The Mitford mainline family was never grand or ostentatious. Unassuming, frugal and eccentric would best describe them. Living life in a modest mansion they waved no flags, other than British flags from flagpoles at Mitford and Hunmanby Hall. The head of the family clan learnt to cope with awkward eccentricities and scandals of other Mitfords, along with the international publicity. One can imagine family conversation along the lines of 'my goodness, how frightful! Not us you know, it's that lot down south that make life so awkward'.

I was born and raised in South Africa; life was a wild and exciting adventure and England was a faraway place. It was only in later years that I came to understand why I was christened with the name Mitford as my parents never fully explained the family story to me. There was always more background and history to what they told me. I knew I was related to someone

called Mitford but had no idea who, where and why? And to be honest, who really cared? People would ask, are you related to the Mitford girls – and I would reply, who are they?

It is not only the sisters – to understand the Mitford family it is necessary to understand nearly 1,000 years of family history, politics and intrigue. Mitford heritage includes a massive ancient tumble down castle, manor house, a (modest) Georgian mansion, family chapel and village life on an estate that once covered over 50,000 acres, managed by the family for over 960 years. How would a parent explain all this to a naïve youngster living in a faraway country who had no idea of what life was like – out of Africa?

We lived in South Africa and I had no thoughts whatsoever that I would ever move. I considered South Africa was one of the best countries in the world. My future was in South Africa and I was going to stay and live there, with no plans to emigrate to the rolling green hills of a centuries old sheep farm on the borders of England and Scotland. Many years later the final pieces of the family jigsaw puzzle fell into place. It would never have entered my dreams that I would be part of a centuries old English establishment. But it turned out in reality that I was.

What the family owned for over 960 years was sold as no heir could be found. Obviously, had I known about my family history much earlier, things would perhaps be entirely different today. I was a few years too late. But hold on... there's an Act of Parliament with a term of 900 years that has not been changed, amended or cancelled. More about that later.

Digging into my family roots I discovered an amazing and unique background of family heritage that spawned a worldwide dynasty. The Mitford family has had a say and influence in the history of England and around the world – the Arab countries, British Commonwealth, the Far East and Europe with links to many great people across hundreds of years. From the beginning of England and South Africa, the Mitford family is part of English history.

With my research, my interest grew and it became evident that I needed to create a consolidated and independent family record and reference of this extraordinary, eccentric, charming and

crazy family, under one cover. Before I go any further I would like to apologise to all the excellent historians out there! I'm not a historian nor do I wish to upset any historians. This is simply my humble attempt to set the record straight as best I can, from the inside out and not the other way around as it has been up to now. Say the name Mitford and most people think of the Mitford girls! This book sets out to change that – they are a branch of the mainline Mitford family. Undoubtedly their lives make interesting reading, however, it's the original Mitford family and dynasty that provides the most fascinating and amazing story.

This book is by no means a definitive and comprehensive record of the entire Mitford family; the family is too vast. My prime focus goes to the direct mainline and a selection of the most notable Mitfords who have left their mark. The mainline Mitford family represents the ownership and succession to the Barony of Mitford, Mitford Castle, Mitford Manor, Mitford Hall, Mitford Church and Chapel and surrounding farmlands of the Mitford estate since it was granted to the Mitford family by Edward the Confessor in 1042. This is where it all started. The estate has been owned and lived on by 32 generations of the Mitford family for over 960 years, until it was sold in 1993 and then finally, the very last link in 2006. The dynasty sadly ended with the death of the last squire in 2002. Amazingly, the trustees sold the manor tower in 2006 which according to the last Squire, was to remain within the family as a token of the Mitford family presence in Mitford.

There are several other Mitford branches – and related families and individuals in the UK and commonwealth countries who have combined, added or changed their names to include Mitford through marriage, inheritance or choice. However, there is only one bloodline on the direct main line of the Mitford family of Mitford since William the Conqueror in 1066 and Edward the Confessor in 1042.

Dating back in history the line of succession was always 'tail male' which means the first born male inherits. This system kept large estates intact (so they weren't split up between the children) providing greater longevity and succession through future generations. The younger brothers and sisters were left

to the challenge of securing suitable marriages to ensure their future. For most without financial means the safest way forward was a career serving the Crown via the church, military, navy or civil service – as you'll note with the Mitford family. A male was preferable, simply because he was expected to fight for his lord and king. It was not a woman's job.

However, there are always exceptions to the rule. For example when a male line died out succession could go via the eldest female with a surviving male line. Name changes happened often and in the case of the Mitford dynasty happened frequently to secure inheritance. On occasion if the name change was not effected within six months the inheritance was lost. Through the years attitudes slowly changed and from 1925 new inheritance laws were passed to keep up to date with trends and circumstances. In essence, if you owned a castle (or the ruins of a castle) or anything.... you could leave it to your favourite dog or cat.

This book is written from information sourced from family archives, books and family records consisting of letters, documents and press clippings and books written by my great uncle, my great-great grandfather and cousins as listed under references at the end of the book. Much of the information used comes from the Mitford Historical Society Archives, started by Peter Else and the village of Mitford. An enormous thank you goes to the excellent scholar and teacher Michael James, a past chairman of the Mitford Historical Society. My emails and telephone calls have been nonstop. A fountain of knowledge and goodwill with all matters Mitford, along with his wife Shirley as Honorary Treasurer.

Many, many thanks to Pat and Billy Elliot MBE, cornerstones of the Mitford village community, with over 50 years on the parish and church councils. They made me feel at home in Mitford. They are warm and wonderful people; generations of their family have lived in Mitford. I have enjoyed afternoon tea, cakes and cream scones in front of a roaring fire on their sheep farm, which is the very essence of English life.

I also dug out an old wooden trunk of letters and envelopes, photographs, documents and newspaper clippings handed down

through the generations. The zinc lined, oak trunk was turned into the family archives by my great grandmother, Mary Margaret Mitford, daughter of Squire Edward Ledwich Mitford FRGS.

Back in South Africa, and totally unexpected, my mother received a notice to collect a large and heavy trunk from Durban Docks. I was around 10 years old when I accompanied my mother to collect the trunk. Porters loaded it into my mother's car and we drove back to our home 35 miles away in the country village of Gillitts, Natal, wondering, with great excitement of what was inside! When my father arrived home from work we opened it.

It was a total surprise and quite amazing. Inside was a full length Russian sable fur coat and buried below, a mass of books and papers. Of course, my mother looked wonderful in the exquisite coat; however in South Africa, with no opportunity to wear such a magnificent coat in a temperate climate, she had it altered to best suit the winters of South Africa. Mary Margaret was the younger sister of Bertram Mitford FRGS, the celebrated South African novelist. Due to her robust nature my great grandmother became the Mitford family matriarch. She married money into the Raymond family. Between Edward her father and her brother Bertram, their lives were covered in a total of 48 books spanning 133 years from 1781 to 1914.

Another huge thank you goes to John Campbell in the United States for the archive material from Bertram Mitford's son, Roland Mitford who died in Cannes in 1932. Roland's wife remarried and became Princess Djoumkovsky, her family kindly passed the archive collection on to me.

Inevitably and naturally much of the information in this book has been cross checked from a variety of sources and there are a few instances where I have found what one person says – differs to what others have said. There are always contradictory answers with diverse explanations. We can't escape from a degree of confusion on occasion. One website records over 93,000 Mitford documents! Likewise, there are 100s (perhaps 1,000s) of people who can link their family ancestry and pedigree to the Mitford family. Rule of thumb - it's always best to check in order to avoid inadvertently passing on mistakes.

The very best reference to the early history of my family is contained in the book written by James Fergusson, entitled "Mitford Church - Its History, Restoration and Associations", published in 1884. Inside this book is a hand written letter from my great-great grandfather, Edward Ledwich Mitford FRGS, Squire of Mitford, recommending the facts recorded, dated 7 September 1884. I believe this book was commissioned by the Mitford family, to provide an accurate record of Mitford history and to celebrate the rebuilding and renovation of Mitford Church. The book includes details covering the Mitford family, Mitford Manor, Mitford Hall, Mitford Castle, Mitford Church and village.

Along with various dilemmas encountered, I have always stuck to John Hodgson and his excellent History of Northumberland. Even he was confused with some names and issues, so dear reader; kindly accept my humble apologies in advance for any errors and omissions that you may perhaps find. In our age of modern technology where would we be without Google, Wikipedia and Facebook? They have been wonderful and a very huge and big thank you to Lila Tretikov, Executive Director of the Wikimedia Foundation and Jimmy Wales, founder. These pages will hopefully iron out the inaccuracies, embellishments and innuendoes that I have found covering the Mitford family?

This book takes you on an amazing insight and incredible journey of one of England's oldest families - through 960 years of the history of England and around the world. It sets the record straight. You'll read about many members of the extraordinary, eccentric and yes, crazy Mitford family covering many different places over many years and amazing situations. There are a few clues here and there, perhaps you'll discover of how the Mitford dynasty ended with perfect indifference?

This is a true story.

All photographs within this book are privately owned and in copyright to the author unless otherwise stated. For talks and presentations - supporting this book, there is a dynamic, professionally produced, full colour MS Power Point - computer presentation of 200 slides, covering the Mitford dynasty & village as it was and as it is today, followed by open discussion.

Chapter 2

Where It All Began

A Synopsis of 1000 years

Once the bastion and flag between England and Scotland, nestling in a sheltered hamlet amidst two rivers, surrounded by magnificent rolling countryside, Mitford Castle guards a troubled history. During the castle's early years - the Kings of England and Scotland reduced the castle and village to ruins between 1318 and 1320. That wasn't enough – they also burnt the church with everyone inside.

The ancient Border stronghold of the Mitford family built in accord with William the Conqueror and his conquest of England in 1066, sits on a picturesque hilltop on the banks of the Wansbeck River, near Morpeth, in the county of Northumberland, England.

Like many of the very old castles in England, once destroyed, Mitford Castle was never rebuilt and the old stones went on to build Mitford Manor House, Mitford Hall and numerous other buildings in and around Mitford village. The immense thickness of the walls, standing to this day, is evidence of its vast strength as demonstrated when Alexander II of Scotland in May 1217, besieged Mitford Castle with his whole army... for seven long days before returning home empty handed. It was built on a massive mound of solid rock alongside the Wansbeck River - the engineers of the day very cleverly diverted a part of the river to run around the castle to form a natural moat and a swamp and marsh making it totally impregnable.

It was 951 years later in 1993, the once mighty stronghold of Mitford Castle was conquered. Not by king or foe, but from within – by the stroke of a pen. Who and what influenced the last squire to sell the castle and lands? Born from nothing the Mitford

family ended in the most perfect indifference. What drove the family to become a worldwide dynasty? Let's go back to where it all began.

The Mitfords were established in the village of Mitford as early as the time of King Edward the Confessor in 1042 AD. To quote my great-great grandfather Edward Ledwich Mitford, 27th squire of Mitford "Of the precise date when Mitford Castle was built time has no record. During the Conquest it was in possession of the Mitford family". His handwritten notes dated 18th September 1883 explain the origins of the Mitford family.

During the conquest of England in 1066, the Mitford lands were seized by William the Conqueror (1066-1087) then given to Sir Richard Bertram in 1080, one of the Norman invaders from Dignam in Normandy who had travelled over and fought with William. Sybil Mitford, the only daughter and heir of Sir John Mitford was also given in marriage to Sir Richard.

The result of this union was two sons William and Roger, the eldest of whom succeeded to the manor and castle of Mitford and its dependencies, the lands and castle were later made into a barony by Henry I (1100-1135). Sybil also had an uncle - Matthew Mitford and a nephew - Nicholas Mitford from whom the families of Mitford of Mitford, Mitfords of Benhall, Suffolk; William Mitford, of Pittshill, Sussex, and Lord Redesdale - the Exbury branch and the Mitford girls, derive their descent. It is from Matthew that the mainline Mitford family has continuously owned the Mitford estate for 964 years. The Mitford feudal barons died out around the 1300's.

During the generations and years of feudal wars and political squabbles, the castle and its lands passed out of Mitford hands – but were mostly, through goodwill and perseverance recovered by the family. However, the question remains, what does one do with a massive pile of very old stones?

Henry III (1216-1272) restored the Mitford barony to Roger Bertram, and when Lord Brough, in Queen Mary's reign (1553-1558) "Granted to Cuthbert Mitford (1582-1613) and his son Robert, forever all his lands at Mitford, reserving only to himself the site of the castle in 1556 and the royalties, which castle and

royalties being in the Crown in the reign of Charles II (1660-1685), were granted by his Majesty to Robert Mitford Esquire” (1612-1674).

The Barony of Mitford originally covered more than 50,000 acres and extended over the whole of the parishes of Mitford 9,595 acres, Meldon 995 acres, Ponteland 10,073 acres, Dinnington 5,538 acres, Felton 12,830 acres, and also included Longframlington 4,962 acres and Brinkburn Chapelry 3,777 acres in the county of Northumberland, and Greatham 3,054 acres, in County Durham, a total of 50,824 acres or 79.4 square miles. The land which is now Newcastle Airport was once part of the Mitford Estate.

The actual parish of Mitford covered 9,595 acres and was divided into 11 townships namely Edlington and Molesden in the west division of Castle Ward on the south side of the Wansbeck – and nine townships in the west division of Morpeth ward, namely Mitford, Newton, Throphill and Nunriding, which lie between the Wansbeck and the Font rivers, and of Spittlehill, Newton Park, Pigdon, Benridge and High and Low Highlaws, with the two Espleys, all on the north side of the Font and Wansbeck rivers.

In 1314, along with his eccentricities, idiosyncrasies and his assumed lover, Piers Gaveston, the troubled Edward II of England was defeated at the Battle of Bannockburn, by Robert the Bruce of Scotland. This major battle was won by the Scottish using highly mobile and opportunistic tactics against the larger, heavily armed and less agile English. The great victory at Bannockburn gave substance to the Scots’ claim of independence and to Bruce’s leadership of his nation. It did not end the war, which dragged on until 1328, when Edward III signed the Treaty of Northampton, the main clause of which read: ”Scotland shall remain to Robert, King of Scots, free and undivided from England, without any subjection, servitude, claim or demand whatsoever.”

This freed Scotland from English control and Robert the Bruce continued to pillage and blackmail Northumberland and Yorkshire. He allowed Scottish forces to raid unchecked throughout the north of England. As a result, Mitford Castle was

left uninhabited. In 1315 it was placed under the guardianship of Sir John Evers, who in turn, passed on the task to Sir Gilbert Middleton, a King's soldier and past captain of the garrison at Berwick, once an English stronghold and last outpost. This decision and choice proved to be a disaster for both Mitford Castle and England.

A year later Pope John XXII was elected, Edward II considered this an opportune moment to reconcile the damage done in the north and his massive defeat in battle at Bannockburn, sent ambassadors to Rome to persuade the Pope to send papal letters to Britain to arrange a peace between England and Scotland and once and for all bring an end to the border wars. This attempt and carefully laid plan was to be totally scuttled in 1317 by the treasonable deeds of Sir Gilbert Middleton and his brother John covered in more detail on page 45 which sent Edward II into a blind rage.

Covered in later chapters in equal grisly detail, Sir Gilbert Middleton was eventually caught at Mitford Castle and shipped to London, tried, found guilty and condemned to be dragged by horses through the city of London to the gallows, hanged alive, then while still alive to be torn apart and afterwards beheaded. His body was then divided into four parts and sent to Newcastle, York, Bristol and Dover. His head was kept in London. King Edward in his rage also ordered the destruction of Mitford village and castle. Between Edward II, Robert the Bruce and King Alexander III of Scotland, Mitford Castle was finally dismantled and destroyed between 1318 and 1320, so no one else could avail themselves of its protection.

Coincidentally, around 680 years later, another Middleton – features in the Mitford story. Not a specialist in treasonable activities, kidnapping and demolishing castles, but rather...as the legal adviser that ended the Mitford legend. After reading this book and all with facts at your fingertips, you be the judge. Be careful to note the many subtle clues you'll read through the book.

Jumping ahead again... and just before WW2 an enterprising rabbit catcher received somewhat of a shock when he found four

human skeletons beneath a large stone slab just inside the main west walls of the castle. The rabbit catcher was digging for his ferret that had gone to ground when he came across the stone measuring about 6ft by 5ft and about 4 inches thick, believed to be the lid of a Norman grave, dating back to the days of the Conquest.

The castle was excavated to some extent many years ago but no record is known today of the discoveries. Various historians have made appeals but the excavation committee could not proceed due to lack of funds. Further investigation was halted due to the outbreak of war. To this day, it is believed that much lies hidden under the ruins of Mitford Castle. Some ancient coffins, hewn from blocks of stone and the size of small children, were carelessly left lying next to Mitford Church but were removed in 1997 their current location is not known.

Treason & Democracy

The bonds that held and united the massive barony of Mitford together did not continue for long. Two major events sent shockwaves through the families from which it would take generations to recover. Surrounded by the wanton lawlessness and desolation of the northern borders the Barons of Mitford had had enough. There were no other options. They put their necks on the block and gambled all their lands and possessions. Even if their deeds were treasonable, they were in the cause of democracy and good reason.

They drove themselves to it. It was what young spirited knights did in those days. Being brave and courageous, needing to make a statement against the corrupt establishment - they took up arms against the king. It was the only way they had to demonstrate purpose and reason, amidst chaos and ruin, living on the wild and desolate borders of England and Scotland. They crossed the line and gambled away their lives, family and lands.

The first major event was Roger Bertram II joining forces with the English barons to force King John to sign the Magna Carta at Runnymede in 1215. Not a bad idea, but King John managed to

get the Magna Carta revoked by the Pope, and in his fury not only destroyed the town of Mitford and burnt Mitford Church with all the villagers inside – he also confiscated the entire Mitford Estate. Roger had to pay a huge fine to reclaim his lands from Philip Ulcotes, to whom King John had given them. Luckily King John died the same year, perhaps divine justice, to be followed by Henry III.

Robin Hood – Broke & Bankrupt

Like father like son. The second major event occurred some years later in 1264, when Roger's son Roger Bertram III, supported Simon Monfort, Earl of Leicester with Roger Godberd (alias Robin Hood), one of Monfort's captains and fought against Henry III, in the 2nd Baron's War of 1263/4. Today, Simon Monfort is known as the father of democracy as he was responsible for being the first person to convoke a parliament for England and was ruler of England for over one year before he was killed in the Battle of Evesham.

Unfortunately, Roger Bertram III was taken prisoner in 1264 and once again...the Mitford Estates were seized by the king and given to the Earl of Pembroke, half brother to Henry III. The Earl of Pembroke was also known as William de Valence 1225-1296, a French nobleman and Knight - he is buried at Westminster Abbey. The remaining parts of the estates which had not been taken in the cause of rebellion, were either sold or mortgaged to raise the sum required for the ransom to release Roger Bertram III from captivity. Sir Roger Bertram III was broke.

Luckily, Roger Godberd survived the battle of Evesham. He continued as a rebel until his capture in 1272, in and around Sherwood Forest. Later to become the character around which the Robin Hood legend is based.

Historians have spent years trying to identify Robin Hood. In historian David Baldwin's book *Robin Hood: The English Outlaw Unmasked*, Baldwin sets out evidence that Roger Godberd was Robin Hood. According to his research, Roger Godberd lived from the early 1230's to the 1290's and was accused of an array of

crimes across the country. It is said that Roger Godberd's career inspired early ballads, leading to the Robin Hood we all know today; for example, Kevin Costner's portraying Robin Hood in the film, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (various locations in Northumberland were used in the film).

The Wreck Of The Mitford Barony

The commissioners making inquests contained in the 1275 Hundred Rolls (census of England) have entered numerous accounts against Roger Bertram III for sales of property up to 1275. He sold the village of Glantley in the parish of Felton to Peter Mitford; the village of Swarland to Agnes Couseudine and the village of Overgares to William Mitford.

Roger Bertram III also sold several estates held in return for previous military services to the Crown, which broke his allegiance to the Crown. Great Eland, Merdisfen, Little Eland and Calverdon were sold to the Earl of Pembroke. Mitford Park and Kirkley were sold to Hugh Eure, Babington went to the Umfrevilles, Tropill was given to his illegitimate son Thomas, Newton went to Wyschard de Charun, Meldon and Prestwick to Walter de Cambhow, and so it continued. All these sales were made during the rule of Henry III (1216-1272).

In the time of Edward I (1272-1307) Roger Bertram III gave his granddaughter, Agnes Bertram, Mitford castle, the village of Mitford, Mitford Mill and the village of Mollisdon. Agnes thereafter amazingly sold everything to Eleanor, dowager Queen of England (Born in Aix en Provence 1122-1204 and married to King Henry III & mother of Edward I). Eleanor, in turn, then sold them to Alexander de Balliol (Balliol college at Oxford derives its name from Alexander de Balliol).

The pleadings and inquests made at Newcastle in 1294 provide a greater perspective of the transactions between the Balliols and Bertrams. They record how the wreck of the barony was collected and reorganised by the former family, and the state in which it was given to their successors. It isn't known how Agnes Bertram enjoyed life in Mitford, she died in 1282. Roger Bertram

III was broke and bankrupt or as we say nowadays, financially embarrassed.

Although it's not documented from the time of the Norman conquest - it is surmised that the original estates of John Mitford's brother Matthew, whose daughter Sybil, was presented by William the Conqueror to Richard Bertram, are not mentioned in any statements of the barony, in acquisitions or any documents - is because they were not part of the barony but belonging to the younger brother and his son Nicholas in their private capacity under the Saxon government. When William the Conqueror gave Sir John Mitford's land with his daughter in marriage to Richard Bertram in 1080, he required Bertram to hold those lands by the service of five knight's fees. As previously mentioned, Mitford was only made became a barony during the reign of Henry I.

Farm Management Through 1,000 Years

According to England's feudal laws landed barons were responsible for the successful management and security of their estates and farms. They had to pay taxes to the Crown - it fell upon the feudal barons or lords to provide to the Crown, as and when needed - trained and armed soldiers and knights with horses, armour, accommodation and provisions.

The property of Matthew and Nicholas Mitford was exempt from this feudal obligation and excluded from the Conquest, so was not subject to military tenure. Much later the estate became more consolidated and Robert Mitford (1612-1674) acquired the castle and royalties of Mitford from Charles II (1660-1680). Once again the estate became whole.

In 1663 the squire of Mitford was assessed for the whole township for a rental of £300 a year. Generations later, in 1815, the squire of Mitford was assessed to the property tax upon an annual rental of £10,321. Farming done used the old system of "strip farming" which later changed to open crop management during the agrarian revolution.

In 1928, the Mitford Estate consisted of the following buildings, dwellings, farms and lands.

Dene House, Pigdon House, Pigdon Farm, Spital Hill House, Spital Hill Farm, Mitford Post Office, Newton Park, Newton Mill, Newton Underwood, Newton Underwood Cottage, Newton Red House, Mitford Steads, Maidens Hall, Nunriding Hall, Nunriding Moor, Nunriding House, East & West Throphill, Throphill Cottage, East & Middle Coldside, Molesden Cottage, East & West Molesden, Coalhouses, Lightwater Farm, Smithy & land, Mill Cottage, Covert, Long Framlington, Framlington Quarry, School Gardens, Village Land, River Green, Stable Green, Mitford Mill, Mitford Castle, Mitford Manor, Mitford Parks, Mitford Hall, 2 New Cottages, Font & Wansbeck Rivers & Woodlands.

With this there were 128 inhabited houses, with 134 families and 625 people. Around 500 people or 70% of the village population were employed in farming. Over previous years the population of Mitford averaged 650 residents - today (2010) it has a population of approximately 430 residents.

Mitford School was built by public subscription on land donated by my great-great uncle Lieutenant Col John Philip Mitford, 27th Squire in 1883 and in 1963 was still in use with 45 pupils and two teachers. It eventually closed in 1966. The school house is now a private home. Another great uncle, Robert Mitford, 29th Squire, donated the use of Mitford Park, alongside Mitford Hall as home to the Mitford Cricket Club, still in operation today.

With farming, the main breeds of beef cattle – Shorthorn, Hereford and Angus were typical until just after the Second World War. The breeds that became more fashionable are Charolais, Limousin, Simmental and Belgian Blue. Similarly, dairy cattle – Friesian and Ayrshire etc, have been replaced mostly by Holstein and Canadian Friesian.

Breeds of sheep in upland regions have largely remained the same for several hundreds of years, hardy breeds (such as the Swaledale) being crossed with Longwool sires (such as the Blue Faced Leicester) to produce cross bred ewes. One of the most successful examples is the North of England Mule which through its good mothering abilities, its prolificacy, and ability to produce marketable lambs, became the mainstay of mid level and lowland farming regions.

Before the 1914-1918 war, heavy horses and steam power were the only way to cultivate the land and harvest wheat, root crops and farm animal feed. Transport was by pony and trap. As Mitford was a privately owned estate most of the farms were occupied by tenant farmers. Farm workers who lived on the farms were in tied cottages or, if single, lived in the farmhouse and were known as servant lads and girls. They often did the milking, cleaned the byres and dairy, and looked after the horses.

Most cattle were housed during winter and fed turnips, corn and hay to fatten them up for market. Shepherds were allowed to keep a few sheep of their own to provide an additional income. Bacon, eggs and potatoes were often provided from the farm as part of a worker's wage. Workers were hired on an annual basis from May with the farmer shaking hands and the gift of one shilling. The farmer's wife usually kept hens, made butter and wholesome kitchen produce with the surplus sold at market to help pay household expenses.

The biggest changes in farming were from 1930 onwards when the first tractors began to replace horses. Two horses could plough one acre a day but the tractor could plough 4 to 5 acres, cutting down the time needed to cultivate the land. Travelling threshers became available and farmers began to help each other with the harvesting, with the wives competing to provide the best homemade dinners and teas for anyone who helped.

When war was declared in 1939 many farm workers were called up for active service. The Women's Land Army was formed and many girls who had never done farm work, lived in the country or even set eyes on a cow had to help out. Producing food became a priority. Later, combine harvesters were introduced which radically reduced harvesting time and tractors equipped with hydraulic lifting machinery eliminated time-consuming lifting and carrying. All the back breaking tasks of farm work has been mechanised. Back in the 1920's with 8 men on a 500 acre farm, the farmer today only needs 2 men and machines to do the same work. As a result, crop production has increased dramatically, along with the increased use of artificial fertilizers. When the population of Mitford was higher, agriculture provided

employment for many people, there are now only a few people employed in agriculture.

In general, with the increase of cheaper produced and imported foods, some lands have been taken out of production. Many of the smaller family farms are no longer viable and the old traditional farm buildings have become unsuitable for modern farming. Throughout the country many of these buildings have been converted into private housing and business activities.

In 1928 the Mitford Estate grossed an annual, rental income of £6,700 and after deductions this amounted to £5,400. Expenses as follows, covered - Insurance £149, Tithe & Charges £327, Rates & Taxes £2,170, Repairs & Maintenance £1,207, Private & Hall Staff £2,703, Allowances off Rents £377, Improvements £149 and Management & Administration £305. With the total being £7,390 it left a deficit of £1,990 for the then squire, my great uncle, Robert Mitford to find.

There was also a village shop, post office, sawmills, snuff mill, blacksmith and the local village pub The Plough, luckily recently saved from closure by Richard Gill, a centuries established, estate family. The sawmills handled all forms of woodwork from felling, logging, sawing, joinery and produced every form of forestry product from mine pit props, fencing, gates, farm wagons, flagpoles to ships' masts. The sawmills closed in 1979 but much lives on in the Beamish Museum in Durham.

In 1993, after 23 years of disrepair and neglect with no resident landlord, the Mitford Estate of 5,000 acres was sold with five houses and nine let farms generating an income of £48,127 in rents for a reported £2.85 million. The only 4 farms still operating in 2010 were Dene House Farm, Maiden's Hall Farm, Newton Underwood Farm, Mitford Steads Farm and East Coldside Farm. Lightwater, Mill Farm, Newton Park, Newton Mill, Spital Hall and West Coldside are now Mitford Estate private houses.

Mitford - Where Two Rivers Meet

Mitford village is situated between two rivers, the Wansbeck and the Font, two miles from Morpeth. In fact, the origin of the

name Mitford is from the old English Myth-ford at the junction of streams or between two fords. Mitford means the lands between two rivers. The scenery along the well-wooded banks of the two rivers is rich, diverse and simply quite beautiful. Much of the soil is rich and fertile and well watered from the two rivers. The village farmed around 4,000 acres and had around 2,000 in grass and meadow lands for pasture with the remainder in woodlands.

At one stage, records show coal mines were worked in Mitford, Nunriding, Newton Park and Coldside, but the coal discovered is apparently of inferior quality and not worth the expense of digging it out. Difficult and dangerous to extract, there is a record of a miner spending eight days in a coal pit with nothing but a little water collected in his shoe in order to survive. When dug out he soon recovered and lived to a ripe old age.

An allied industry to sheep farming, wool manufacturing proved to be unsuccessful and was discontinued. The ancient water-corn-mill at Mitford is now a ruin and the only water mill is at Newton-under-wood, there is a windmill at Edlington. Commercial enterprise by the Mitfords was frowned upon as was the family culture during the nineteenth century. When one looks at the abundant natural resources available it is surprising that no entrepreneurial enterprise was ever undertaken by the Mitford family in order to develop an alternate source of income and revenue other than tenant farming and sheep.

Mitford Church

Mitford Church in pristine condition is one of the most elegant churches in the county of Northumberland. It is quite out of proportion to the size of the village indicating that the village of Mitford was quite large during its prime. Built in 1135 by William Bertram, Baron of Mitford it has survived over 880 years including a troubled history detailed in later pages. At one stage the church had been reduced to a ruin – evidenced by burnt stones and charred wood, proving past plunder and devastation. William also founded Brinkburn Priory which was at one stage, within the Mitford estate. Brinkburn Priory was a medieval

monastery built on a bend of the River Coquet nearly 4 miles east of Rothbury, Northumberland. It is a grade 1 listed building in the care of English Heritage. The priory was dissolved in 1536 after Parliament enacted the Dissolution of the Monasteries Act, of monasteries whose income was less than £200 per annum. Roger Bertram's son Roger is buried at Brinkburn where it is possible to see his inscribed tombstone 'Hic Jacet Roger vx Fundator'.

From 1874 to 1877 the church was totally rebuilt from family funds by my great-great uncle Lt Col John Philip Mitford (1809-1895) at a cost of over £14,000 (around £1.4 million today). The church is 130 feet long with an aisle on its south side, the middle wall of which is supported by heavy pillars and plain semi-circular arches. At the top of the bell tower you'll find an exquisite painting of a white dove, painted by my great-great grandfather Edward Ledwich Mitford in 1898. Today, Mitford Church is a most impressive and significant, historical landmark.

From Castle To Manor & Hall In 835 Years

The Mitford family home took on many shapes and sizes through the centuries. A process of making ends meet. Mitford Hall represents the last of the three separate stages of the Mitford family's residence over a period of 835 years. Using the same old family stones, the family built three totally different and independent family homes or "seats". Uniquely, each one overlooks the other. There is no place in England where this is more perfectly combined than at Mitford.

The Border Reivers were families of raiders based on the English-Scottish border. To defend against reivers or raids many dwellings in Northumberland outside towns and villages were fortified and are known as Bastle Houses. Stone built two floor buildings, livestock were kept at ground level and people lived on the second level which was reached by a ladder that could be pulled-up at night when raids took place. George Macdonald Fraser comments on Border Reivers in *The Steel Bonnets*,

"The Border Reiver is a figure unique in British (perhaps in world) history, a professional cattle-thief who left to posterity

a legacy of great poetry... a merciless racketeer and plunderer who also in his country's vanguard in time of war, a murderous pursuer of feud who held little sacred except his pledged word, and who vanished four centuries ago, leaving behind him the word 'blackmail' and a bloodline that has included among others, Presidents Nixon and Johnson, Sir Walter Scott, the Charlton brothers, Rutherford the physicist, Billy Graham, Robert Burns, Deborah Kerr, Thomas Carlyle, T S Elliot and the first man on the moon Neil Armstrong."

With the Union of the Crowns in 1603 peace was restored along the English and Scottish borders. Families no longer needed to live in fortified castles with guards and soldiers. The Scots finally gave up attacking the English and country gentlemen could sleep safely at night. With Mitford Castle destroyed and dismantled by the Scots the Mitford family decided on something a little more comfortable and modern. Mitford Manor House was built in 1637. One of the first non defensible country houses in England.

Built with old stones from Mitford Castle, the 17th century manor house became home to the Mitford family for over 300 years until it was finally destroyed by fire in 1813. The kitchen wing remained intact and was partly repaired and used as a farm house and accommodation for estate staff for many years.

Today all that remains is the central porch-tower with turrets which bears the family crest and the date 1637. The old kitchen wing was sold off and the new owner turned it into an impressive and spacious modern home, built and blending in with the old ruins, all in keeping with the old style. Passed down with the house from an old family collection, there are several pen and ink drawings that show what the manor was like before the fire. There are also two huge, magnificent old trees, a chestnut and a Lebanon cedar tree that add to the graceful, age old elegance and splendour. In this magnificent setting, in mid-June, the annual garden fête was held - a fun day for the entire village with the local band, stalls and raffles, chatter and laughter and British flags flying.

With no family seat Bertram Mitford (see chapter Lords and Squires) commissioned the well known Newcastle architect, John

Dobson, to build a new home for the family in 1810. Finally, in 1828 with stones from the old Manor house, castle, quarry and river, a new Georgian mansion house was built in Mitford Park on the north side of the Wansbeck River, with sweeping views over the manor, church and castle ruins. It was here, except for WW2, when it was occupied by the British army and 400 soldiers, that the Mitford family, bar the last squire, lived, until it was sold in 1993.

From the grand imposing entrance gates with the impressive, sandstone pillared gatehouse, once home to the butlers of Mitford Hall, one drives through a deep, sun speckled and enchanting deer forest to emerge into light and open space and the requisite gravel driveway sweeping up to the imposing entrance of Mitford Hall. Clearly much thought went into the design and approach, with excellent results... referred to as a “modest mansion”.

In the library stands a large fire-place, recovered from the old Manor house. It has two statues each side of the fire-place. One is said to represent Adam and the other, Eve. Not perhaps associated with a traditional Victorian family, but apparently fashionable at the time. Outside the dining room used to stand the original butler’s table and throughout the house would have been many lovely old family heirlooms, now all auctioned and sold.

As with all grand old homes there was a formidable array of bells, dating from the time the mansion buzzed with butlers, footmen, servant girls and grooms. Years ago, if you had wandered through the rooms you would notice the magnificent walnut furniture and some intricately carved tables from Kashmir and colonial era furniture from South Africa and the British Empire. Sadly, nothing is left.

Today... wander out to the specially built conservatory and you’ll find a magnificent camellia tree, said to have been planted by Charles Darwin around 1839. In the spring it’s a mass of bright pink and crimson flowers. Quite exquisite - as Charles Darwin and brothers Bertram and Robert Mitford, no doubt intended.

The old ballroom at Mitford Hall once hosted annual fund raising fetes and the Morpeth Hunt Ball, along with many other

charitable village events and celebrations. The Hall, grounds and park, are a beautiful event location.

Looking out from Mitford Hall, the past is present. With the magnificent view over the vast, rolling green lawns and river to the old manor house, Mitford Church spire and the ruins of Mitford Castle – it presents a unique and splendid statement to the rise and fall of one of England's oldest and most extraordinary dynasties.

In the next chapters you'll discover what happened to the feudal barons of Mitford and the scoundrel Sir Gilbert Middleton before going on to the succession of the Lords and Squires of Mitford in Northumberland and Hunmanby in Yorkshire and their attempts to hold the estate together for over 960 years.