



News and events

- Our **next meeting** will be on **Wednesday 18 December** when Mike Smith will talk to us about **The rise and fall of the manor of Wheathampstead**. We will celebrate the festive season with mulled wine and mince pies.
- The **programme of talks in 2025** is taking shape. Final details of speakers and topics are not fully confirmed but the first talk is on **Wednesday 15 January** so please make a note in your diary for 2025.

Christmas in Wheathampstead

Five shillings doesn't sound much to spend on a Christmas party but it was a lot of money in 1275 so it's likely that a good time was had by all at the Wheathampstead staff Christmas party 749 years ago. How do we know this? Because we've had the reeve's account for that year translated from the medieval Latin. This is one of 69 reeves' accounts held in the collection at Herts Archive and Local Studies (HALS).

What was a reeve and why was he keeping accounts? During the thirteenth century Wheathampstead was a manor held by Westminster Abbey, a Benedictine monastery. The Abbey was an absentee landlord and they appointed one of their customary tenants to manage the manor for them. This made a lot of sense because the reeve had a great deal of local knowledge and experience about farming in the area. His expertise also meant he was in an excellent position to swindle the monks – and they knew it. So once a year at the end of September the reeve had to present his accounts to the visiting monk-bailiff for auditing. It may have been a fairly robust meeting and we can even see in the accounts where the reeve's figures have been crossed out and the monk-bailiff's version inserted instead.

There are lots of fascinating details in the reeve's account for 1275. We know the name of the reeve was Alfred and the monk-bailiff was William of London. The clerk who wrote out the account was Richard.

So, what do we know about the Christmas party? The account tells us that Alfred the reeve spent five shillings on beer and meat. He had put in for six shillings but William of London had knocked him down to five so Alfred had to make up the difference.

Five shillings in the early thirteenth century would have paid the wages of a skilled tradesman

for 18 days. Celebrating Christmas and rewarding the workforce was clearly important. But how many workers were there in the manor workforce, which was known as the *famuli*? The reeve's account gives us a quirky clue. It tells us that eleven workers who were present at the annual harvest were eligible for a whole cheese from the manor dairy.

And how generous was Westminster Abbey to this workforce, the *famuli*? The answer lies in how many people attended the knees-up.



Villeins threshing

The reeve's account mentions many of the key members of the *famuli*. They included Simon the beadle who assisted the reeve, four ploughmen, two carters, a cowherd, swineherd, shepherd, dairymaid, harrower (the important job of muck-spreading) and William the forester. We know that medieval manor records usually under-report the number of staff who were employed so it's a safe guess that the *famuli* numbered more than twenty workers, some of them part-time but who would still have been invited to the Christmas feast. Many would have had family who would also have been invited. There may have been eighty to a hundred attendees at the Christmas bash so perhaps five shillings wasn't so generous.

Mike Smith