

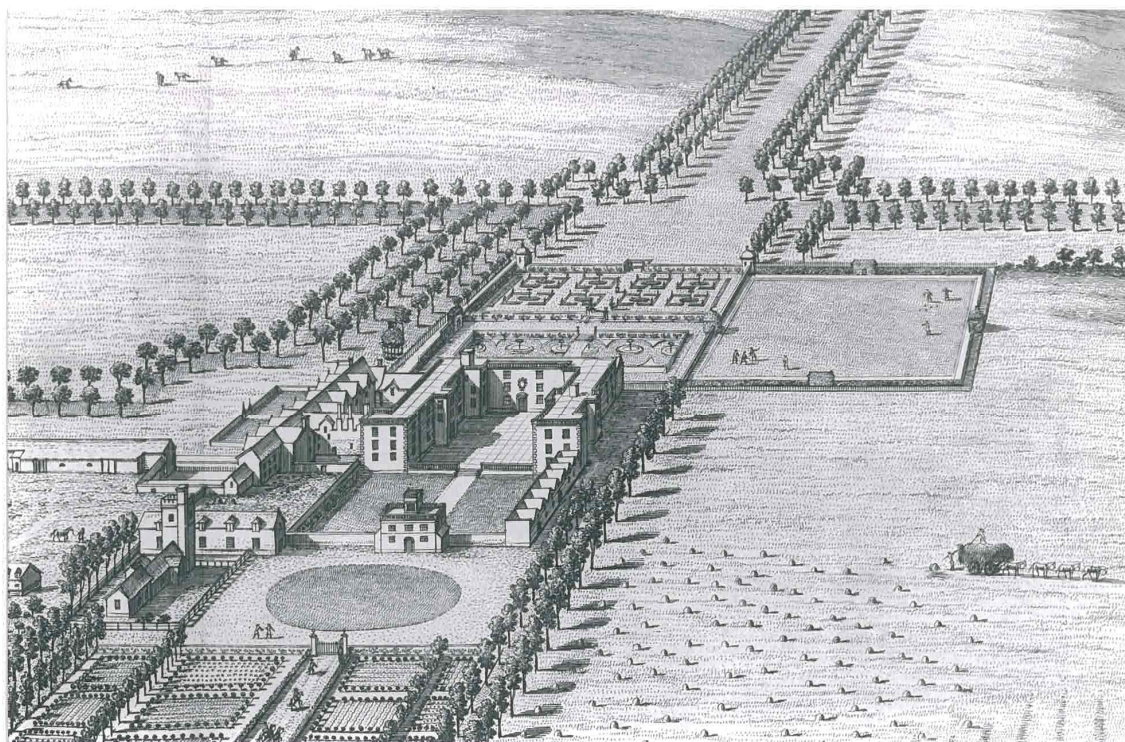
## Orchard Portman and the Portmans

The first reference to Orchard Portman is in 854 AD when Aethelwulf (King of the West Saxons) gave an estate called ocard to the Minster Church in Taunton. As the name suggests the estate contained rich fertile land that may have supported an orchard or garden. By 1135 the estate had passed into the Bishop of Winchester's hands and Elfric de Orchard is recorded as being his tenant.

The original manor house is thought to have comprised a hall with chambers and other rooms. A dovecote, watermill and the parish church of St Michael were all located nearby. The de Orchards seem to have lived in relative prosperity throughout the medieval period until the male side of the line died in 1437 leaving Christina de Orchard as the soul family representative. Such a rich widow was an attractive proposition and 1450 Christina and Walter Portman (an ambitious Taunton merchant) were married.

The Portman descendants entered the legal profession, with the most successful being Sir William Portman (1498-1557) who was knighted in 1547 and became Lord Chief Justice in 1555. Sir William was well known to Henry VIII and he had a good eye for business; in 1544 he purchased significant land belonging to the four dissolved religious houses in Somerset including Taunton Priory. Subsequently he purchased 293 acres of land in 'Marylebone Fields'. It was this land in London that led to the Portman family becoming one of the richest landlords during the 19th century.

During the early 1600s and in keeping with his position Sir William Portman had Orchard Portman House built. An elaborate three storeyed structure, this building may have incorporated part of the earlier medieval hall. Orchard House was later improved by Sir William Portman, Sixth Baronet (1644-1690). The new building stood to the north of the Tudor mansion. It was three storeys high and enclosed a courtyard. A bowling green and a formal garden lay behind the house.



During the Civil War (1625-1649), the Portmans supported Charles I and consequently suffered significant losses; Sir William Portman died in the Tower of London, while Orchard House after months of military occupation became a 'pest house'. It is estimated that the family lost £30,000 as a result of the war, with many of their possessions being looted and their property ransacked. The William, the Sixth Baronet supported James I during the Monmouth Rebellion (1685). This was a little surprising given that during the reign of Charles II the region had suffered appalling cruelty at the hands of Judge Jeffrey's for the support of Cromwell during the Civil War. Monmouth was declared King in Taunton Castle yet 21 days later on 7th July he was captured by Sir William Portman near Ringwood, Dorset.

Subsequently the Portman fortunes continued to prosper; Orchard House was abandoned in favour of their Bryanston Estate in Dorset and a town house in Portman Square. It was Edward Berkeley Portman (1799-1888) First Viscount who finally ordered the demolition of the house in 1843. Orchard House had been given to the tenants of Orchard Farm, but outbreaks of typhus and other mysterious disease led to the house becoming abandoned. A cesspit subsequently found under the servants' hall seems to have been the source.

Today Taunton Racecourse (established by the Fifth Viscount) covers the majority of the site. Despite being levelled for the racecourse, slight earthworks indicate the sites of some of the former buildings. The medieval church is all that remains of this once magnificent estate.