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Who lived in Bayleaf in the Sixteenth Century?

From at least 1556 to c.1600 a man called Thomas Wells lived in Bayleaf with his family. He was a prosperous yeoman farmer who would have been viewed as a man of substance by his neighbours.

Men like Thomas Wells were expected to serve in a variety of local public offices which helped to regulate community behaviour and resources. In 1565 he was one of two collectors of the poor which meant that he was responsible for assessing and collecting parish poor rates and for administering parish poor relief. He was also a constable for the hundred of Somerden (a hundred is a unit of administration covering a number of parishes). As a constable he would have overseen the collection of poor rates, the supervision of parochial officers and the maintenance of roads and bridges. Together with petty constables he would also have been responsible for controlling any disturbances within the community. Both offices were unpaid.

The baptism register for the parish of Chiddingstone which survives for the period 1565 to 1599 records the birth of five of Thomas Wells' children within a ten-year period – three boys and two girls. By this date he already had at least one son, Thomas Wells, which we know because there is a record of his burial in 1572. On 12 June 1569 Percival Wells was christened (he died in 1571). On 7 October 1571 Anne Wells was christened. On 27 September 1573 Henry Wells was christened. On 17 January 1576 Ralph Wells was christened. On 2 November 1578 Martha Wells was christened. A 'snapshot' of the Wells' family in December 1578 at home in Bayleaf would therefore find Thomas and Mrs Wells (her Christian name is unknown), Anne aged seven, Henry aged five, Ralph aged two and Martha aged one month, producing a household of seven to eight people, excluding servants. There may have been one or two older children whose births pre-date the start of the baptism register and who survived to adulthood.

We do not know when Thomas Wells died. He was still alive in 1599 when the parish register ends.