

The Old Rectory Kingston: A Short Note on its Origins

Summary

The importance of symbolising lordly authority in the landscape through buildings and the landscapes that surround them has become an archaeological common-place. Very wealthy medieval lords constructed moated 'castles', while the lesser nobility and gentry more frequently had to be content with a large timber-framed (or, for the more affluent, stone) house frequently also surrounded by a moat (cf. RCHME 1968: lxi-lxvi; Liddiard 2005: 97-100). The landscape around such buildings was as carefully designed, with manor and church strategically placed in relation to dependent tenements in order to showcase and emphasise the power, wealth and status of the manorial lord (cf. Everson *et al.* 22-5). This short note explores the relevance of this archaeological context in interpreting the origin of buildings.

The Old Rectory at Kingston in west Cambridgeshire is a medieval aisled hall to which a stone cross-wing was added in the fourteenth-century, and which was later modernised by the insertion of a central chimneystack with two hearths in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century (RCHME 1968: 155-6). 'Old' was probably added to the name of the building when it was secularised in 1931 (VCH 5, 118). The Old Rectory stands immediately east of Kingston Church, at the northern end of a small rectangular green (Figure 1). On the basis of its name, and for lack of any other evidence, it has been assumed always to have been in the hands of the church.

There are, however, some problems with the identification of the building as a medieval rectory. This short note will describe the building, and then outline the problems concerning its origin; it will in conclusion suggest that the house was originally constructed for a secular owner, and only later acquired a new purpose as a rectory.

Description

The present building originated as a timber aisled hall, with outer walls of stone (Figure 2(a)).¹ It was originally thought to have been constructed in the mid-thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, but later revision has suggested dates a century earlier, that is, of the mid-twelfth or thirteenth centuries (*ibid.*).

Two and a half bays of the original open-hall structure survive - parts of two arcade posts have been identified, and the crown- or king-post roof shows general signs of smoke blackening. A hundred years or more later, in the early to mid-fourteenth century, a fine stone-built cross-wing of three-and-a-half bays was added to the west. It was built to the highest contemporary standards of luxury, including ground and first floor fireplaces with chimneys (rebuilt in the sixteenth century), a stone spiral stair to the first floor, and a first-floor guarderobe (in the half-bay)

Around 1600, a brick chimney was inserted into the central bay of the aisled hall, dividing it into two rooms. The fireplace in the new central room has a fine carved clunch surround with a substantial overmantel, and that in the room above it at first floor level also has a clunch surround (Mr J. Wilkinson, pers. comm.).



Figure 1: The settlement at Kingston (my additions and amendment) (based on RCHM 1968: 152; permission of English Heritage National Monuments Record, permission number 1472)

Problems with an identification as a medieval rectory

The Old Rectory at Kingston was undoubtedly a high status building throughout the medieval period. The stone cross-wing in particular is outstanding for its size, but especially for the clunch, clunch rubble and field stone that was used in its construction. There is no readily available building stone in Cambridgeshire, apart from the field stones usually seen in the walling of the medieval parish churches of the county, and as a medieval stone domestic structure in rural south Cambridgeshire the Old Rectory is unique (for comparable examples

in Cambridge, see below). It is difficult to emphasize the wealth and sophistication that this building represented in its period, or how atypical it is of the vernacular tradition within which it stands. From this, it follows that there are difficulties in its identification as a medieval rectory.

The few buildings of this type and status in Cambridgeshire are manorial or the homes of men of great wealth. The contemporary timber-framed aisled hall at Manor Farm, Bourn, belonged to Barnwell Priory, one of the richest in the county (RCHME 1968: 24-5). The similar hall at Ryder's Farm, Swavesey, is believed to have been built for an affluent merchant, like the aisled halls at Barrington and Ickleton (Davis 1984; Bray 1993; RCHME 1968: 9-10; Mrs E. Davis, pers. comm.).

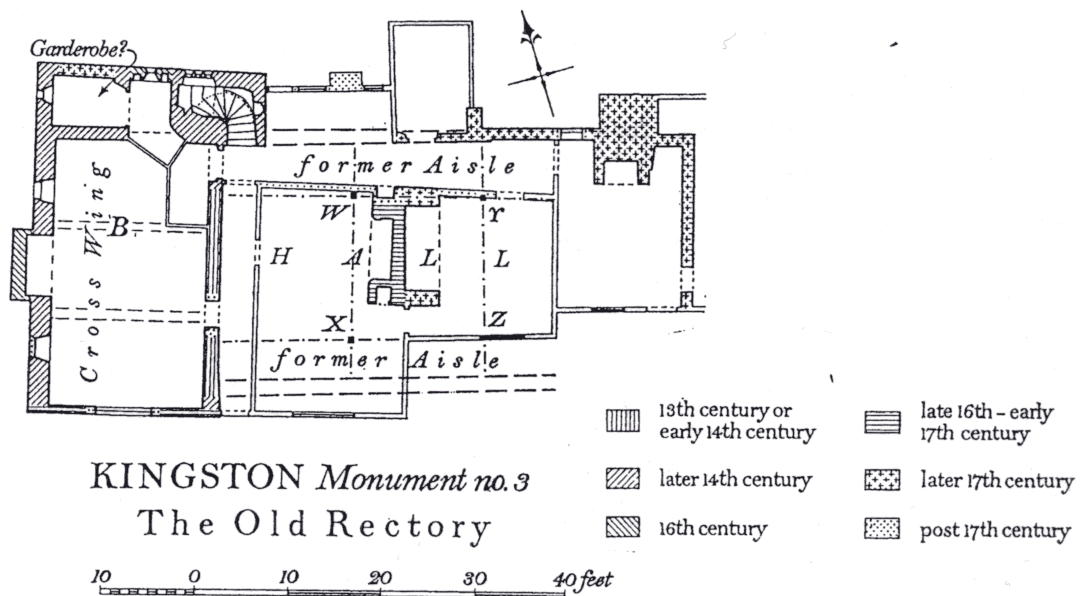


Figure 2(a): The Old Rectory, Kingston (based on RCHM 1968: 155; permission of English Heritage National Monuments Record, permission number 1472)

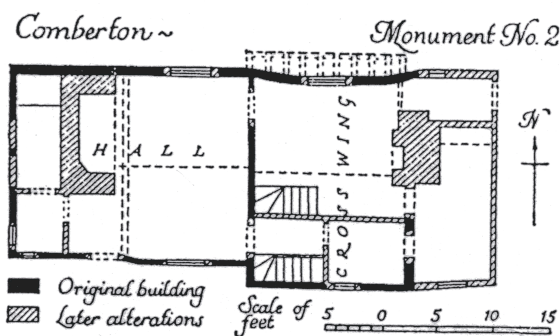


Figure 2(b): The Old Vicarage, Comberton (based on RCHM 1968: 52; permission of English Heritage National Monuments Record, permission number 1472)

The number of secular medieval stone buildings in Cambridgeshire can be counted on one hand: the twelfth-century town house in Cambridge, now known as Merton's Hall, and the fourteenth-century residence of the appropriator of St Andrew's Church, Chesterton (RCHME 1959: 290, 377-9, 381-2).² The stone tower at Chesterton, although superficially of similar origin, has a quite different pedigree. Chesterton was an exceptionally wealthy royal living. It was given by Henry III to the Papal Legate, Cardinal Gualo, who in turn donated it to the church of St Andrew at Vercelli in Italy (RCHME 1959: 290). The fourteenth-century stone tower in Chesterton was not the home of the vicar of Chesterton church, but that of the procurator of the abbot of Vercelli (*ibid*: lxviii).

The question therefore arises whether the incumbents at Kingston had sufficient wealth to construct and later extend a building of the luxurious standards of the Old Rectory. Professor Pounds has commented that 'the majority of priests could barely make ends meet before the Reformation' (2000: 172). This certainly seems to be true of Kingston, whose rector was one of the poorest of his neighbours in the Bourn Valley during the thirteenth century (Table 1). The living at Kingston ranked second from bottom in value in 1217, not much better in 1254, and well below the averages for the area (VCH 5, parish essays). Furthermore, vicarial income was generally about a third of the value of the benefice (Pounds 2000: 53).

Table 1: The value of benefices around Kingston in the thirteenth century

Parish	Vicarage or Rectory	Glebe (acres)	Tax paid on church 1217	Tax paid on Church 1254	Value of church 1291
Bourn	Rectory	219a. in 1842	20 marks	28 marks	42 marks
	Vicarage	2a. in 1279	-	-	15 marks
Caldecote	Vicarage	32-34a.	5 marks	5 marks	24 marks
Caxton	Vicarage	3a. in 1650	27 marks	56 marks (1268)	-
Comberton	Rectory	-	12 marks	12 marks	30 marks
	Vicarage	7a.	-	-	-
Gt Eversden	Vicarage	1a. (17 th C)	-	-	-
Lt Eversden	Rectory	15a. (1279)	-	12 marks	20 marks
Hardwick	Rectory	40a.	10 marks	12 marks	16 marks
Kingston	Rectory	1a. 1306	6 marks	8 marks	16 marks
Toft	Rectory	29a.	7½ marks	8 marks	12 marks
Average		14a.	c. 12 marks	c. 17 marks	c. 21 marks

Source: VCH 5, parish essays.

These figures indicate that it was unlikely that the incumbent at Kingston was wealthy enough from the mid-twelfth to the fourteenth centuries to be able to afford to build and then extend a house of the palatial standard of the Old Rectory.

This conclusion is supported by a comparison with the surviving medieval vicarages at Comberton and Caldecote and against documentary evidence for others in the Bourn Valley. Comberton was a much wealthier living than Kingston, while Caldecote was comparable in income. However, in both cases, the medieval vicarages in these parishes consisted of a

modest timber-framed hall with a single cross-wing (RCHME 1968: 33, 52). Comberton's hall was of two bays, and the cross wing of one-and-a-half; the whole would have fitted into the aisled hall at the Old Rectory alone (Figure 2 (b)). This is consistent with evidence from Caxton. When the vicarage there was rebuilt in 1351 (in a parish with a far higher income than that at Kingston), it comprised a hall, a chamber and a kitchen – very like that which still stands at Comberton (VCH 5, 34; RCHME 1968: 52). Surviving local medieval vicarages in the locality therefore conform to Pounds' view that 'during the Middle Ages the parsonage was a typical hall house, such as would have been occupied by a fairly well-to-do peasant or yeoman' (2000: 177).

Documentary evidence tends to support this interpretation, though it should be read bearing in mind the sensibilities of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rectors and vicars who had by that time become – or aspired to be – members of the local gentry, and would not be impressed by the idea of living in a medieval hall and cross-wing. The vicarage at Great Eversden was 'a mean cottage' in 1783 and 'occupied by a labourer' in 1836; the rectory in Hardwick was described as 'deplorable' in 1790 and 'unfit' for the rector in 1836; the vicarage at Caxton was 'totally unfit for residence' in 1838 and 'miserable and dilapidated' in 1868 (VCH 5: 66, 103, 34). The high style of the Old Rectory is vastly atypical of the dwellings of vicars or rectors in the Bourn Valley in the period of its heyday from the mid-twelfth to the early fourteenth centuries.

On the other hand, if the medieval rectors of Kingston were rich and well-connected in their own right, such objections might fall away. And indeed, it seems that many medieval rectors of Kingston were of good social standing, and many held in plurality, so they may well have had the necessary income to build an opulent house.

The fourteenth century – when the stone cross-wing was built – provides the earliest information about rectors at Kingston. However, they appear to have lived elsewhere. Thomas Alblaster, held the living from before 1357 until 1374, and lived in Coventry; while in 1378 John Podington 'was accused of neglecting his duties'; most subsequent medieval rectors, generally also pluralists, also lived outside the parish (VCH 5: 118). Although there is no information about their predecessors, the pattern of absenteeism makes it possible that they also lived away from the parish, employing a curate to perform their duties, and that it is unlikely that they were involved in building works at Kingston rectory. The conveyance in 1360, for example, of just one acre of land with the advowson suggests that the living was served by Thomas Alblaster's curate (*ibid.*).

An alternative explanation

The Old Rectory lies immediately east of the parish church (Figure 1). Such sites are as frequently occupied by a manor as by a vicarage or rectory. Both church and house are integral to the medieval settlement plan (cf. Everson *et al.* 1991: 41-2). They stand on the highest ground in the settlement, at the northern end of a small rectangular green which forms the focus of the planned village, and down which they had a commanding view. On the western and eastern sides of the green, common front and back boundaries and properties of conforming widths preserved in maps, air photographs and in current hedge-lines indicate an origin as planned tofts for tenants of different social standing – the larger areas of those to the west indicating a higher status than those to the east (CRO Q/RDz7, Q/RDc25; CUULM AGW46). A tentative interpretation of the western tofts surviving in 1811 indicates that around 10 units may have been located here. It is tempting to identify these with the ten sokemen owing commendation to the king before the Norman Conquest, nine of whom were reduced to villeinage in 1066, the antecessors of nine tenants in 1279 (DB: 32,21; *Rot. Hund.* II: 515-6; VCH 5: 114). Three boundary ditches running up to a common

back ditch survive as earthworks to the east of the green. They suggest that there was room for around seven tofts here, perhaps those of the seven villeins on the royal manor in 1086, the antecessors of seven villains in 1279 (*Rot Hund.* II: 516; VCH 5: 114). The location of the Old Rectory in this plan - beside the church, commanding the green, and flanked by free and customary tenants - is characteristically manorial for its location in a landscape carefully designed to enhance the status, wealth and power of its inhabitants (Everson *et al.* 1991: 22-5, 41-2).

The field immediately east of the Old Rectory was known as Bustage in 1791 and as the Burystead in 1680 (CUL QC 17/18; P. Reynolds pers. comm.). The name is a compound of *burh* (often associated with a manorial site) and *stead* 'place' (Reaney 1943: 314, 344). If this were the site of a medieval manor, which one was it? Since the aisled hall at the Rectory was constructed in the twelfth or early thirteenth centuries, this suggests that medieval manors established in Kingston in or after *circa* 1250 are unlikely candidates. It cannot be that of Kingston Wood, established immediately after the Norman Conquest, which appears to have lain from the time of its creation on its present location some way to the south of the village (Taylor 1973: 85, 99; VCH 5: 114). The only other possibility is the manor of the king, which was already 'ancient demesne' in 1086, and which appears to have come into the hands of the St George family by the later twelfth century at the latest (DB: 1, 5; VCH 5: 114).

On the other hand, it has been suggested that the royal manor was located at Moat House Farm (RCHME 1968: 160; VCH 5: 115; see Figure 2). No evidence is given to support this proposal, however, and it may be that it was made on the assumption that the Old Rectory had always been in the hands of the church. That it is unlikely is suggested by the identification of Moat House Farm with the manor of Debden's - which was created by the de Soham family, prosperous thirteenth century freemen, in a period in which moat-building was at its peak (*Rot. Hund.* II: 514; Evelyn-White n.d.: 52-3; VCH 5: 114-5). The geography of the site supports this interpretation. The moat around Moat House Farm appears to have been dug across several consolidated customary or freeman properties in a peripheral location which appears to be a later addition to the existing settlement, rather than integrated into it as one might expect the royal manor to have been (especially as the latter predated the Norman Conquest).

The royal holding at Kingston appears to have passed into the hands of the St George family before 1182, perhaps after some time in administration by Picot, the Norman sheriff of Cambridge, and his descendents, the Peverels (VCH 5: 114). The St Georges were substantial landowners in Cambridgeshire. They lived at Kingston, and appear to have had considerable social pretensions: in 1269, for example, Baldwin St George held a deer park in Kingston (almost certainly in the south of the parish and detached from his manor, which was not unusual) (VCH 5: 114; see also *Rot. Hund.* II: 515). They continued to hold the manor until it was sold in 1556, and in 1559 another sale amalgamated it with Kingston Wood Manor. The medieval grandeur of the Old Rectory would provide an adequate foil for what is known about the social ambitions of the St Georges.

It is possible, therefore, that the aisled hall at the Old Rectory was built by members of the St George family on the site of the former royal manor in Kingston before or around 1189, and that they updated it with the splendid stone cross-wing in the fourteenth century. Perhaps after the amalgamation of their manor with that of Kingston Wood, the building - increasingly old-fashioned but nonetheless substantial - was no longer required as a lordly dwelling, and was sold or given to house the rector or his curate after the Reformation. Clerical living standards rose after 1549 and incumbents might expect to be better educated, and 'to live in a better house than the cottager or even the more substantial husbandman or yeoman' (Pounds 2000: 180, 159).

This interpretation of the house and its landscape deals adequately with the problems outlined above: the high status implied by the building itself compared with the low income of the living; the centrality of the house to the planned settlement with which it is integrated; the location of the most ancient manor in the parish, that originally belonging to the king; and the Burystead field-name. It also encapsulates the reasons for the survival of the Old Rectory into the modern period: from the mid-twelfth century it was occupied by those rich enough to be able to afford a degree of opulence which was still enviable by the end of the middle ages; and from the mid-sixteenth century by those who were too poor to change it substantially. This small case study may, too, make a small contribution to the argument that an analysis of the history buildings of all kinds benefits from an exploration of the wider landscape within which they stand.

Acknowledgements

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¹ Unless otherwise noted, this section is based on RCHME 1968: 155-6 and DoE 1984: 65).

² The twelfth-century Manor House at Hemingford Grey is, of course, in Huntingdonshire.