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Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

Volume LXXXII

for 1993

Published by the Cambridge Antiquarian Society 1994

ISSN 0309-3606
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Paul E. Firman was the author of the drawings for the report. The Field Group wishes to thank him, and also the late Kenneth Kenham for his contribution to the documentary research.
Saxon Commons in South Cambridgeshire

Susan Oosthuizen

Introduction

The greens and commons in Cambridgeshire exhibit a bewildering variety and range between the extremes of planned sites similar to those in the north of England and irregular greens like those on the Suffolk clays. Some are apparently ancient, for example the Offal at Comberton and the Offal at Haslingfield, as well as the curious, very large, oval 'village' greens at Haslingfield, Barrington and Harlton. Some appear to be part of a planned village landscape, as at Eltisley, Reach and Kingston. Settlement around others might be the result of post-Conquest shifting village patterns as at Borough Green, Weston Colville and Longmeadow in Bottisham; while in yet other examples, manorial exansion onto earlier waste (the result of the frequent subinfeudation of manors after 1100) led to green-side settlement at Croydon, Litlington and West Wratting.1

There are many other examples of greens and commons across Cambridgeshire. This paper restricts itself to three — Whaddon on the southern chalks, Wilburton on Isle of Ely clay and Knapwell on the western clay uplands — and asks whether it is possible, however tentatively, to assess the origins and age of their green and common land (Fig. 1).

Greens and commons have been the subject of dissent and debate among geographers and historians for many years. As recently as 1987, Roberts stated that 'the whole question of defining a "green" remains a troubled one'.2 Yet although a categorisation and distribution of different types of green and commons has yet to be achieved, there are clearly many ways in which greens, commons and settlements can interact as the Cambridgeshire examples mentioned above show.3

The argument between ancient and medieval origins for greens and commons across East Anglia rages fiercely at the moment. Peter Warner has argued for a possible Roman origin for many commons on the Suffolk claylands, suggesting that green-side settlement might be secondary (from primary communities on valley gravels) and


Barrington: R.C.H.M., West Cambs, pp.4-5 and Plate 41; Taylor, Cambs Landscape, p.54.


3 Roberts, pp.184-7.

is little likelihood of ancient greens surviving in Marshland; and while Sylvester, Wade-Martins and Warner are at variance over the date of green-side settlement, battle over origins of greens themselves does not appear to be joined.

The examples used in this paper have been chosen because each lies in close relationship with a planned settlement, and it is this feature that underlies the argument presented here: that of a chronology in which, working backwards, the building of the church postdates the laying out of a planned settlement and landscape which in turn is later than the common. Thus a latest date by which the common was laid out might be suggested.

Evidence from other parts of England suggests that the large-scale planning of integral nucleated villages and open fields began in the ninth century. However, Cambridgeshire is unlikely to have participated in this process until after the reconquest by Edward the Elder in 917, partly because of the uncertainty generated by the activities of Viking armies in the area from the mid-ninth century and partly because of the county's isolation in the outer Danelaw after 870. What little landscape evidence there is suggests that those Danes who settled in Cambridgeshire made few changes to the landscape, and simply settled alongside the existing population. If this is so, then 917 is a terminus ante quem for planned settlement, and 870 a terminus post quem for the commons discussed here.

It might be argued that, as at Dry Drayton, planned settlement (and hence the common) might have been later than the tenth century. But at Whaddon and Knapwell an eleventh-century date for churches which, on landscape evidence, postdate the planned settlement, means that these settlements cannot be later than the tenth century and here, at least, a pre-Danelaw date for the commons is likely.


Taylor, Cambs Landscape, pp.67-9; Taylor, Village and Farmstead, pp.123-4 and 126-8.


Figure 1. Central Cambridgeshire showing location of sites mentioned.
Whaddon

Topography
The parish lies on chalk, apart from a patch of clay in the northwestern corner and a narrow strip of alluvium along the Ashwell Cam. The land rises from the river in the north to about 23 m. above O.D. in the south and east, with the modern village facing north and west from the crest of the hill. Settlement at Whaddon is, and probably has always been, polyfocal along the western and southern sides of the late Saxon manorial estate (now Scalers Manor), along the Great Green and at Dyer's Green (Fig.2). The extent of pasture is emphasised by the large flocks of sheep grazed here in the medieval period: 247 in 1086 and more than 1000 in 1347, and it is worth noting that both the Great Green and Dyer's Green were intercommunal with Meldreth until 1841.

The common
A large funnel-shaped entrance south of the main (Scalers) manor leads east to the Great Green, now enclosed but intercommunal in 1841 (Fig.2). The northern side of the entrance is defined by a stream (which continues west as the northern boundary of the Great Green) and the southern side by another small stream. Both streams have been canalised in places to feed medieval moats, while the northern stream once supported a mill mentioned in 1086. One of two pre-Conquest manors, Scalers Manor lies on the northern side of the funnel. Between 1100 and 1350 moated manors proliferated around the common entrance: the Scalers family subdivided the manor, giving the church and the rectory land to Lewes Priory, and by the mid-fourteenth century Rectory Farm had been built within its own moat, east of Scalers Manor along the northern entrance to the common. Turpin's Manor, derived from the other small pre-Conquest estate, may be identified with Stephen Turpin, who held it in the early thirteenth century. After 1235 half of an estate accumulated by Warin of Soham became Ladybury Manor; this was probably the moat at the western entrance to the green, which was called Lady Bury in the nineteenth century. There is a further moat west of Ladybury whose origin is not known: it might either be Warin's Manor of the other half of his estate (Elsworth Manor).

By the mid-fourteenth century, green-side settlement had also developed along the northern edge of the Great Green, where the late fourteenth-century Green Farmhouse has been identified with that of Alexander atte Green (mentioned in 1347). The ditches that enclose the green and define the irregular settlement along the green edge are similar to those identified by Warner as ancient commons in Suffolk. Dyer's Green, also entered by a funnel and defined by ditches, lies to the south of the main settlement; major encroachment was underway there by the fourteenth century, when a trading hall was built on it.

Evidence for dating the common
A date for the common is suggested by looking at dateable features which lie in close relationship with it, in particular the manorial centre and the church. Before the early fourteenth century the major (Scalers) manorial demesne at Whaddon lay along the entire northern boundary of the common entrance. How ancient was that demesne? Only the core of that estate was desmesne land before the Conquest (one hide was held by Turbert the priest 'under the Abbot of Ely T.R.E. . . . so that he could neither give it nor separate it from the church outside the desmesne farm of the monks'). Most of the rest was held by sokemen in a

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12 Ordnance Survey 1:25 000 TL 34 (1960 revision).
13 V.C.H. Vol.8 p.143.
15 Ibid. p.147.
16 Inclosure Map 1841 C.R.O. Q/Rd 60; O.S. TL34; A. Rumble (ed.) Domesday Book: Cambridgeshire (hereafter DB) (Chichester 1983) 144.
18 V.C.H. Vol.8, p.145.
20 Ibid.
21 P.H. Reaney, Placenames of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely (Cambridge 1943) p.68; DoE List 155 p.95 Ref. 9/244.
22 Peter Warner, lecture 13th July 1993 Cambridgeshire Federation WEA Summer School.
23 DoE List 155 p.89 Ref. 11/232.
24 V.C.H. Vol.8 p.146.
multiplicity of small freehold farms before 1066. 26

After the Conquest, Hardwin de Scalers created a caput at Whaddon for his Cambridgeshire estates by amalgamating Ely's demesne with land held by sokemen who were 'men of the said Abbot who . . . could sell and give [their land] to whom they would without the Abbot's leave, but their soke remained to the church of St Etheldreda'. 27 Can the Abbey of Ely's (and hence the Scaler's) demesne land be identified? The lease of the monastic demesne to a priest in 1065 suggests that a church was present on the land by the mid-eleventh century. As the church physically encroaches on the manor, 27 V.C.H. Vol. I p.418; DB 26: 26-8; and c.f. E. Miller, The Abbey and Bishopric of Ely (Cambridge 1951) pp.61-5 for the relationship between commended sokemen and the Abbot.

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and the advowson and rectory originally belonged to the de Scalers family, it looks as though Ely's demesne was simply taken over by Hardwin to become Scalers Manor.28

Scalers Manor therefore perpetuates a pre-Conquest manor of the Abbey of Ely. It is not known when the Abbey acquired Whaddon, although a late tenth-century date is likely,29 and it might be that the church at Whaddon was built not long after.30 However, the uneasy position of the church at the periphery of the demesne block (its northern boundary encroaches onto Church Lane north of the Scalers Manor), indicates that the church and vicarage were added to an already defined manorial centre (see Fig. 2). As the Abbey of Ely's block of demesne land predated the church, the manorial site is likely to have been in place by the time of the Abbey's acquisition of the manor in 970. As the demesne is unlikely to be later than 970, how much earlier might it be?

The regular outline of Turbort's land (which includes the later Rectory Manor) suggests a formal plan: it is sub-rectangular with rounded corners, similar to those that Warner found in Suffolk and whose shape he suggests was the result of enclosure with a ring-fence.31 Furthermore, the manor and the common entrance form a regular block: the three main village streets (that is, the western, northern and eastern limits of the manor) and the southern boundary of the common entrance form a rough rectangle.32 In the planning lies the clue to the answer of the earlier question: the manor was planned and in place by 970, and is unlikely to be earlier than 917.

However, the common is earlier than the manorial demesne as the manor was laid out respecting the common's alignment. The common itself also exhibits some ancient features, including an irregular boundary, with its position straddling a parish boundary and intercommoning with Meldreth until enclosure.33 The common was retained from an earlier, dispersed landscape when the manor was laid out in the tenth century, and if this is so is likely to have at the latest an early to mid-Saxon origin.

However, there is a little circumstantial place-name and topographical evidence that hints at the survival of a Roman landscape at Whaddon. The place name, meaning 'wheat hill', is topographical, i.e. an indicator of early settlement;34 it describes a cultivated landscape which might relate to one of the nearby Roman villas,35 and it refers to the hill on whose slopes the village now stands.36 As common, demesne and village lie on the hill, the conjunction of place-name and landscape evidence presents the tantalising possibility that the common is the last remnant of a Roman sub-Roman landscape.

WILBURTON

Topography

Wilburton lies on the southern slopes of the Isle of Ely on a long clay promontory reaching out westward into the fen. Its western parish boundary lies along a lane which transsects a large common known as 'Haddenham Pastures', the other part of which lies in the neighbouring parish of Haddenham.37 The village lies along the crest of the promontory on an outcrop of gault; Haddenham Pastures lies on the northern slopes of the promontory on the underlying Kimmeridge clay.38

The common

The enclosure map shows the church occupying the central part of a triangular green, once a funnel-shaped entrance to the Haddenham Pastures to the west (see Fig.3); the 'pasture for the village livestock' mentioned in 1086.39 The map records a lane that defines the northern part of the common's eastern boundary, while the southern part of that boundary near the church

28 V.C.H. Vol. 8 p.149.
29 Miller, pp.16-17.
30 There is no evidence for an early church at Whaddon. There was a minster in the next parish at Meldreth (c.f. DB 5:92). It is very likely that the Abbey at Ely was responsible for building the church at Whaddon as it was at other places which it acquired in 970, for example Hauxton V.C.H. Vol. 8 pp. 194-6 and 202-3. See also Richard Morris, Churches in the Landscape (London 1989) pp.141ff. and pp.228-9. Whaddon's earlier interdependence on its position straddling a parish boundary
31 Warner, Greens, p.45.
32 V.C.H. Vol. 8 p.143.
33 Warner, Greens, p.8.
36 O.S. TL34.
37 O.S. TL47/57 (1984 ed.).
38 C.U.L. Maps 35.01.27 and Atlas 3.017.
39 Inclosure Map 1850 C.R.O. Q/RDc 75; DB 5:51.
shows three successive encroachments on the pasture.\textsuperscript{40} A fine late fifteenth-century farmhouse (significantly known as The Grange') immediately west of the churchyard is one of the earliest (most easterly) of these encroachments. It is a nice example of the amalgamation of holdings from the later fourteenth century (which is also a feature of Suffolk clayland commons).\textsuperscript{41}

Evidence for dating the common

At Wilburton the manorial centre is the Berestead whose sub-rectangular plan, like that at Whaddon, is suggestive of the Saxon 'ring-fence boundary' that Warner found in Suffolk. The manor was given to the Abbey of Ely in 970.\textsuperscript{42} Its name, derived from \textit{burh}, supports a pre-Conquest attribution.\textsuperscript{43} The demesne is laid out in a commanding position along and respecting the northern boundary of the common entrance.

Can the common be dated? An early date, based on topographical and historical evidence is suggested. The argument rests on a three-phase development of settlement at Wilburton of which the church is the latest:

(i) the creation of the Berestead whose rounded corners and sub-rectangular plan are in alignment with the common which was already in place;\textsuperscript{44}

(ii) the addition of planned tofts and crofts, whose regular geometry contrasts with that of the Berestead. The block of four large tenements north of the green might be those that belonged to four sokemen who owned land in Wilburton at the time of the Conquest, while a block of eight smaller units south of the green of uniform width and with a common Back Lane might coincide with the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
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\item \textsuperscript{40} C.R.O. Q/RDc 75.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Warner, \textit{Greens} p.45; \textit{V.C.H.} Vol.4 (London 1953) p.168.
\item \textsuperscript{43} M. Gelling, \textit{Signposts to the Past} (London 1979) p.122.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Warner, \textit{Greens} p.45.
\end{thebibliography}
holdings of nine villeins listed in 1086; the construction of the church on the green. If church and village were con-
temporary, then positioning the former obstructing the common entrance makes little sense. A more likely explanation
is the insertion of the church into the plan where it encroaches on neither arable nor pasture, both increasingly valuable.

Let us, then, consider dating these sequences and relating these dates to the common. Working backwards, it is likely that
the church was built during the eleventh century after the Abbey of Ely acquired the manor. This means that the village was
probably laid out within about a century after 917. The Berestead represents a yet earlier phase of settlement, for which the
latest possible date is the early to middle tenth century (that is, before the planned settlement) and is consistent with Warner’s
suggestion of a mid to late Saxon date for this type of plan. As the Berestead and the settlement are aligned on the edge of
the common, the common must be earlier than both; and as it is unlikely to be part of a ninth-century planned landscape, it prob-
able pre-dates the Danish invasions and an early to mid-Saxon date might be ascribed to it.

Knapwell

Topography
Knapwell is a small triangular parish lying on the western claylands of Cambridgeshire. The medieval village lies on a belt of Kimmeridge
clay that runs west–east, while a finger of Oxford clay runs south along the brook which forms the parish’s eastern boundary. Knapwell is a daughter settlement of Elsworth
to the west, and had evolved into a settle-
ment in its own right by about 1000 AD. The routes that cross the parish from west
to east are derived from a prehistoric ridgeway
of which the modern A45 is the principal survivor. The medieval main street lay along one of these routes which connected Elsworth

with woodland and waste along the Knapwell/Boxworth boundary; it shifted in the post-
medieval period to its present north–south orientation. There was ancient common at Knapwell,
where Elsworth cattle were grazed in pastures that were enclosed by 1290. Despite this right of intercommon and Knapwell’s parish boundaries indicate Knapwell’s earlier dependent status, Rackham has shown that woodland clearance in the parish was well under-way in the Saxon period; parish de-
velopment was sufficiently advanced for Knapwell to be a defined estate by 1000 and an independent settlement by 1086.

The common
The medieval main street of Knapwell runs along the northern side of a funnel-shaped
common (see Fig.4) towards the brook that forms the parish’s eastern boundary. The southern boundary is defined by property
boundaries in the west, whose alignments are continued along a bank in the east. The identification of this bank with the southern
boundary of the common entrance is supported by the existence of straight, post-
medieval ridge and furrow south of the bank, which had defined the boundary between arable and pasture by the mid-eighteenth
century. The present triangular open area in front of the church is its last remnant.

The common might once have been larger: a narrow finger of Oxford clay lines the shallow
valley of the brook to the south. It is tempting to speculate that the enclosed pastures of 1290 lay along the Oxford clay under the post-
medieval plough ridges. Circumstan-
tial evidence in support of widespread pastures in this area comes from the neighbouring parish of Boxworth: immediately on the other
side of the brook lay woodland that had been sufficiently cleared by the eleventh century for a major manor to stand there, connected
with Knapwell by the latter’s medieval high street. That moated site is associated with a large bank which, it has been suggested,
was related to cattle pasturage, while 'Great Knapwell Pasture' and 'Thorowfare Pasture' lay just to the south. All this evidence, it is tentatively suggested, might indicate that the pasture in this area lay along the brook.  

**Evidence for dating the common**

As at Wilburton and Whaddon, it might be possible to date the common by looking at the relationship between the common entrance, the village and the church. A two phase development is suggested:

(i) the rectangular plan of the village with parallel streets, whose decayed grid still just survived in the eighteenth century, suggests that the medieval settlement at Knapwell was formally laid out in alignment with the northern boundary of the common entrance. The manor (which belonged to the Abbey of Ramsey from the late tenth century) was part of the plan;

(ii) the position of the church, encroaching on the common and outside the village plan (which here incorporates the manor) suggests that the church post-dates the primary village layout and was a later addition. There is a slight indication of an early eleventh-century church: the evidence hangs on the exclusion of a piece of land from two successive land grants between 1016 and 1044, and as the latter grant mentions the excluded land in relation to a priest and a monk, it has been suggested that this might be an early reference to the church.  

Let us, then, consider dating these sequences and relating these dates to the common. It seems likely that the church was present by the first half of the eleventh century. This means that the village was probably laid out between 917 and the late tenth century. As the settlement is aligned on the edge of the common, the common must be earlier; and as it is unlikely (on the basis of earlier argument) to be part of a ninth-century planned landscape, it probably pre-dates the Danish invasions and an early to mid-Saxon date might be ascribed to it.  

**Conclusions**

These three settlements share a number of common factors:

(i) each common bears the marks of antiquity, lying across parish boundaries and with evidence of intercommoning in two cases;

(ii) in each settlement the manor occupies a commanding position in relation to the common entrance;

(iii) each settlement is aligned on and post-dates the entrance to the common;

(iv) in each case the position of the church suggests that it is a later insertion into an already existing plan.

By using the inter-relationships between these features to suggest dates before which the commons must have been in existence, it is argued that at latest these commons are survivals of an early or mid-Saxon dispersed landscape, remaining in a late Saxon or early medieval planned landscape.

**Acknowledgment**

I should like to thank Phillip Judge for drawing the figures.
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