

CORRECTING MISTAKES:

The re-examination of a moated site at Whittlesford, Cambridgeshire

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If we are honest all of us have made mistakes in our work on the history of medieval settlements, some more serious than others. I have made some major ones indeed which I am not prepared to disclose. This paper is concerned with a minor one. Not very important but I think interesting in that it bears upon more extensive areas of research and is, perhaps, something from which we all may learn.

One of the features in the landscape with which I was faced at the beginning of my working life was moated sites. They figured large in my first official foray into recording archaeological earthworks when I found no less than sixty-three of them in a small area of thirty-nine parishes. In the event, as well as nice detailed plans of most of them, three new aspects perhaps relating to all moats emerged. The first was that it seemed possible to classify them by form. A complex system was devised and indeed published (RCHME 1968, lxi–lxvi) and, quite rightly, sank like a lead balloon. The second was that medieval moated sites could be interpreted as non-defensive status symbols and thus were little more than a short-lived fashionable form of settlement. This idea apparently was more valid. It was accepted without question for 50 years until Professor Platt launched a not very convincing attack on it (Platt 2010). The third new aspect was the discovery that a number of the moats recorded (8 out of 63) were either medieval moats that had had formal gardens added to them in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries or were not moated sites at all but the remains of gardens associated with adjacent sixteenth or seventeenth-century houses. In retrospect, this last aspect was the most valuable in that it played an important role in the development of garden archaeology (Taylor 1983, esp. 33–40). And, at a personal level, it was the beginning of the discovery of very many more garden ‘moats’ that has continued ever since (Taylor 2013).

Yet, despite this, it has remained true that most moated sites were medieval in origin. These appear to have had two principal locations for two different purposes. One type was a form of dispersed settlement, especially in areas cleared from waste or woodland in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries. The other was as a distinguishing feature around manor houses or the homes of wealthy farmers in and around villages (Roberts 1962; 1968; Taylor 1972). Whether they actually were status symbols or for defence, or both, is still a moot point. Thus when in the late 1960s I moved to a new home in the Cambridgeshire village of Whittlesford the existence there of two small simple moated sites presented no problems of interpretation. Both surely were the centres of manors or of minor estates, a supposition confirmed by the publication in 1978 of the relevant Victoria

County History volume for the area (VCH 1978, 265–6). One of the moats was certainly the centre of the only manor there, the other presumably belonging to a lesser landowner. As a result, for the next forty years or so, these moats were totally ignored except as places to which to take students, and there to explain medieval land-holding. Until, that is, the summer of 2013 when, after visiting a small archaeological excavation nearby, I was invited to take tea in the house standing inside the larger moat. Suddenly, my ignorance, idleness and, most of all, my mistakes of years before, were exposed. How was it that I had been so wrong?

The moat in question is situated in a now isolated position north-east of the village and adjacent to the parish church and immediately above the flood plain of the River Cam (Fig. 1). Previous fieldwork, documentary research and the results of two small unpublished excavations at and just east of the church suggested that by late Saxon times the village was arranged along Church Lane as far as the church and manor house. This lane then continued across the river via a ford that had given the settlement its name. Further it seemed that this, perhaps the original part of the village, had been relocated and extended further south-west, probably in the twelfth century, as the result of lordly intervention (Reaney 1943, 98; Taylor 2006, 121–8; 2010, 3).

The moated site itself (Fig. 2) comprised a simple elongated rectangular area of about one acre (0.4 ha) in extent, once completely bounded by a broad ditch, now 8 m to 11 m wide and 2 m deep. Most of the south-western section of the ditch had been filled in at some time. As previously noted, its function as a manorial site had already been confirmed by the VCH (1978, 265–6). The descent of the manor was reasonably detailed, if somewhat confused at times, from the eleventh century onwards. On the assumption that the moat, like most, was of twelfth to thirteenth-century date it could well have been created by one of a number of different lordly families at this time. However, most of these held extensive land elsewhere and it is doubtful that any were fully resident at Whittlesford. Probably the first lord of the manor to live for any length of time at Whittlesford and certainly the first documented was one Robert Tilney who is said to have repaired or rebuilt the house there in the early sixteenth century (VCH 1978, 266).

The later history of the site is not without interest. What remained of the earlier house was demolished in the late eighteenth century except for a small fragment that was incorporated into the rear of a large country house built at that time across and to the south-west of the moat ditch that was presumably filled in then. This house was built for Ebenezer Hollick, a prosperous mill

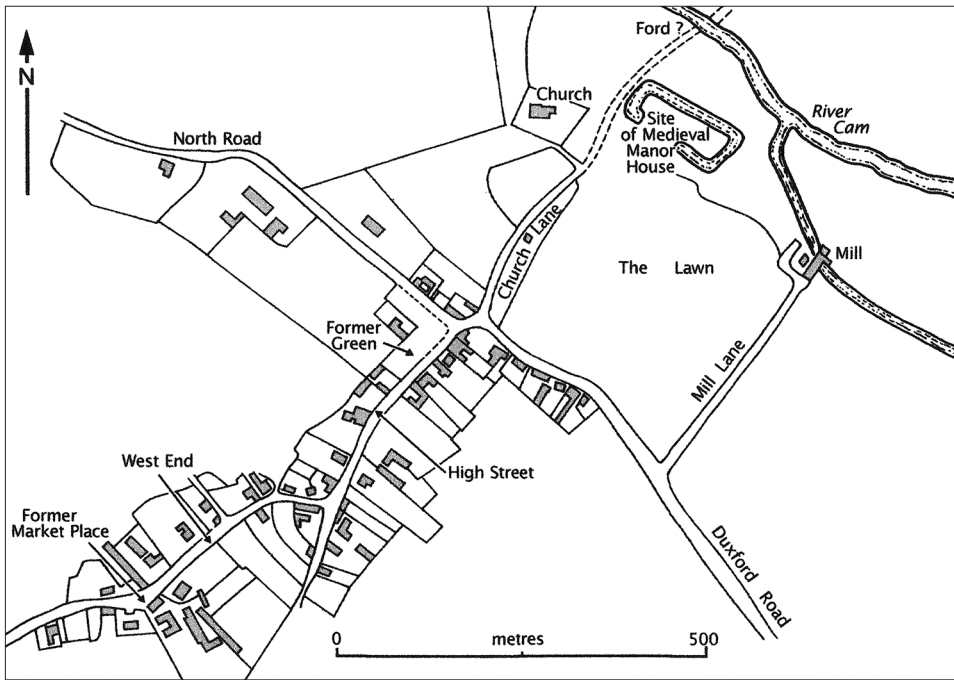


Figure 1 Whittlesford village, Cambridgeshire.

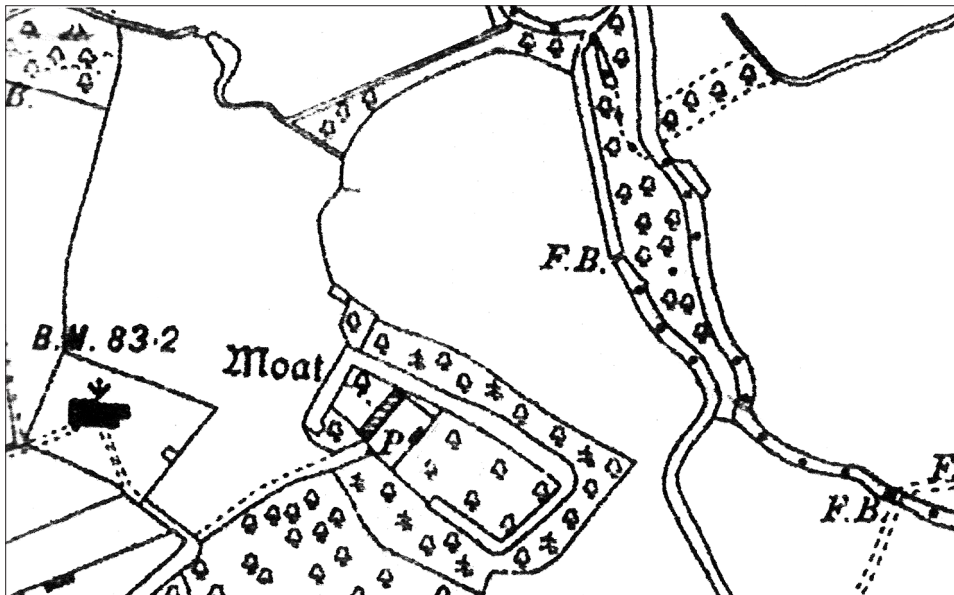


Figure 2 Moated site at Whittlesford, Cambridgeshire. Reproduced from the 1901 6-inch Ordnance Survey Map.

owner, who also laid in front of it out a small landscaped park that still exists. A stable block was erected behind the house within the north-western end of the moat. On Hollick's death in 1792 the estate passed to a nephew who died bankrupt in 1828. The house was abandoned and pulled down in 1858. Only the stable block survived and was converted into a private house (VCH 1978, 266-7).

Nothing in this documentary history changed my view of the moat as a medieval manorial site. But the 2013 visit did. For the first time I queried its elongated form that I realized I had rarely seen before. Further, a more careful examination of the remains revealed a number of previously unrecognized features. The first of these was that the moat is not a perfect rectangle. Its south-eastern two-thirds are twisted slightly out of alignment to the north-western end. This suggests that

the site was of two separate phases, an original small, almost square, moated site to which was added a larger elongated moated area at the south-eastern end.

Also recorded for the first time were the faint traces of the north-western side of the presumed south-eastern ditch of the original moat, surviving only as a low degraded scarp no more than 30 cm high. Within the larger now grassed south-eastern addition further very slight earthworks were just visible. These comprised the remains of a raised central axial path with indeterminate depressions on both sides. These latter can be interpreted as the remains of a garden layout and although their date is unknown, given the documented context, they are most likely to be of the early nineteenth century. However it is just possible that they are earlier.

The observable sequence of development of the site was thus clear. An original small medieval manorial

moat had a larger moated enclosure added to it at some time before the late eighteenth century. Despite the remains of a possible nineteenth-century garden within it, given the large number of medieval moated sites that have now been recognized as having sixteenth and seventeenth-century gardens added to them, it seems likely that the Whittlesford moat was possibly another example. It was thus necessary to look again at the surviving documentation to confirm this hypothesis.

As already noted, most of the medieval holders of the manor of Whittlesford seem to have been non-resident. Thus the first documented resident lord, Robert Tilney, deserves further examination. The manor of Whittlesford passed to the Tilney family in the mid fifteenth century, the result of one of those labyrinthine marriage settlements that only medieval genealogists can understand. In 1450 Whittlesford was held by Philip Tilney of Boston, Lincolnshire, head of one branch of the very extensive Tilney family of landed gentry, holders of estates in East Anglia and the east Midlands. After further legal wrangling Whittlesford was acquired by Philip's son, Robert Tilney, who held it until his death in 1500. His son and heir, another Robert (1491–1542), was only nine on his father's death and so it is unlikely that he would have taken personal control of Whittlesford much before 1510. The existing house within the moat is said to have been in decay in 1514 but was repaired or rebuilt soon afterwards. On Robert's death the manor descended to his son John Tilney who, as a result of debts, was forced to sell it in 1555 to William Hawtrey. Two years later Hawtrey sold it to Sir John Huddleston (1517–77) of the adjacent parish of Sawston as part of the expansion of the family estates there. Thereafter the manor remained part of the Huddleston lands until the early eighteenth century (VCH 1978, 260). There is no evidence that the Huddlestons ever lived at Whittlesford. Quite the contrary. Their own manor house at Sawston was occupied, rebuilt and reoccupied in the mid sixteenth century and certainly by the 1570s all the administration of the Huddleston manors outside Sawston, including Whittlesford, was carried out at courts held by a visiting steward (VCH 1978, 250, 266; Teversham 1942, 64; 1947, 37–9).

All this suggests that at some time between 1514 and 1555 either Robert or John Tilney rebuilt the manor house at Whittlesford, and probably laid out a moated garden there. This is a process well documented at the time elsewhere in Cambridgeshire, the best example being at Papworth St Agnes (RCHME 1968, Papworth St Agnes (2), (9) and (10); see also Taylor 2013, esp. 31) as relatively minor lords attempted to improve their dwellings and show off their rising position in contemporary society. Support for this hypothesis at Whittlesford comes from two other related sources. Before the earlier house was demolished in the eighteenth century, glass in the windows was said to display the arms of Howard impaling Tilney. The actual link between these two families was somewhat tenuous. Thomas Howard second duke of Norfolk (1443–1524), statesman and soldier under four kings of England, married successively two of the first Robert Tilney's cousins (VCH 1978, 266; Cockayne 1936, 614–15). This display must have been another way of emphasizing the perceived status of the Tilneys.

The other evidence is also armorial. The windows in the chancel of the parish church were rebuilt in the early sixteenth century probably by Robert Tilney as part of his responsibility for that section of the building. There is a record that in the eastern and thus the most dominating of these windows there was once glass depicting the arms of Tilney impaling Playter. The Playters were country gentry with considerable lands in Suffolk and their links with the Tilneys were perhaps somewhat closer than those of the Tilneys with the Howards. A John Tilney, whose exact relationship with the Whittlesford Tilneys is not certain, married Mary the daughter of a William Playter (1464–1511) (VCH 1978, 266; Metcalfe 1882, 57).

It thus appears that in the early sixteenth century Robert Tilney, although a relatively minor landowner, set out to leave the mark of his family, forbears and perhaps his hopes for the future on the landscape, albeit in a small way. And like so many of his contemporaries he succeeded. Yet the modern landscape historian very nearly missed it. It is perhaps a reflection on this historian that it took over fifty years to realize his error and to attempt to correct it. If of course it was indeed a mistake.

'I love making mistakes. People who make mistakes should get the most marks because they ventured out and discovered things'

Sir James Dyson, inventor,
The Times 10 October 2009, 34–5

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