

PROCEEDINGS  
OF THE  
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN  
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME XLVIII

JANUARY 1954 TO DECEMBER 1954

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# SOME NOTES ON THE BIGGIN, FEN DITTON

D. V. M. CHADWICK

A FIELD'S WIDTH distant from the river Cam at Baitsbite lock, stands one of the oldest domestic dwellings in this part of the world. It is known as the Biggin, and although there is now little about it to suggest palatial rank it has been able to claim such, and has, time and again, sheltered the King of England with his attendant court.

In the days when Byrhtnoth the Saxon made history at the battle of Maldon, Ely already possessed a famous and flourishing monastery, and it was greatly enriched by this hero of the Saxon Chronicle. He was laid to rest within its walls, and his devotion to its welfare was maintained by his family. Many years later, in the reign of Canute, the monks of Ely obtained from Byrhtnoth's grand-daughter, Leofwaru, and her husband, Lustwine, confirmation of a bequest made by Leofwaru's great-aunt, Æthelflæd, of the estate at Ditton which that lady had inherited from her father, Ælfgar. Some confusion has arisen and has at times even affected the scribes of *Liber Eliensis*, through the fact that this Ælfgar was also owner of another Cambridge-shire Ditton (later known as Wood Ditton) and that this estate also came into the possession of Ely, but in this case through his younger daughter, Ælflæd, widow of Byrhtnoth.<sup>1</sup>

Upon the estate at Fen Ditton was laid the charge of finding a fortnight's provisions for the monks once in every year,<sup>2</sup> and when, in 1109, the See of Ely was founded this manor was made over to the Bishop, and Hervey, first Bishop of Ely, made a grant of land, together with three *mansiones*, to Aluric, his chief agent or bailiff at Ditton, in recognition of which Aluric was bound to pay a yearly tribute of a mark of silver to the Bishop and to send three horseloads of meal for the use of the monastery, one at the festival of St Etheldreda on 23 June, and two on the festival of the same saint held on 17 October.

It is not known whether Hugh de Northwold, the great builder Bishop of Ely, restored and enlarged one of the *mansiones* already standing or whether the palace he raised at Ditton was an entirely new foundation, but there can be little doubt that some of his handiwork survives in the Biggin. He had achieved a mansion fit to accommodate him in princely style by the year 1251, when he received a grant of

<sup>1</sup> Much information on the early history of these estates may be gleaned from Miss D. Whitelock's *Anglo Saxon Wills*. Here can be found the Will of Ælfgar, in which he grants to his daughter Æthelflæd (wife, in turn, of King Edmund and of the Ealdorman Æthelstan) the estate at Ditton 'on condition that she be the more zealous for the welfare of my soul, etc.'. He desires that Æthelflæd shall grant this estate to 'whatever holy foundation seems to her most desirable, for the sake of our ancestors' souls'. The Wills of Æthelflæd and her sister, also given by Miss Whitelock, fully explain the descent of the two Dittons.

<sup>2</sup> *Liber Eliensis*, ed. D. J. Stewart, II, cap. 84.

hunting rights (then a jealously guarded royal prerogative), but he may have done so very much earlier.<sup>1</sup>

We learn from the Patent Rolls that King Henry the Third stayed at Ditton for three days in 1238 and, during that time, attended to a variety of business, including a dispute with Norwich Priory, the settlement of the estates of the Earl of Chester, a writ to the tenants of the honour of Taunton, mandates to deliver Taunton and Farnham castles and the manor house of Wolvesey (all these possessions of Winchester having fallen into the King's hand while the See was vacant through the death of the warlike bishop Peter des Roches) and an order concerning the walling of the town of Hereford.<sup>2</sup>

It may be a matter for speculation why this low-lying, exposed and, at that time, marshy spot should have appeared a desirable residential site in the eyes of the Bishop of Ely, but it provided him with an invaluable base from which to overlook the activities of the rising town of Cambridge with its already numerous student population, to guard the rights he possessed there and to annex others as opportunity arose. Nor was Ditton itself an inconsiderable trading port. Several glimpses of this aspect of things appear in the stormy history of the Muschett family. The Muschett held a small manor under the Biggin for at least three hundred years, and were so enterprising in many different directions that their activities at times constituted a serious nuisance to neighbours, who were not slow to retaliate. The Record Office calendars supply details of a series of affrays in which the Muschett were concerned, but they continued to prosper; they were acting as money-lenders to the Abbey of Eynsham in 1346,<sup>3</sup> and in 1339 William Muschett of Fen Ditton was one of the two merchants of England who were concerned in a £1,000 deal in wool bought in Antwerp for the King's use.<sup>4</sup> Other Ditton merchants were at this period employed in royal and episcopal transactions. In 1318 John de Hotham, Bishop of Ely, Chancellor of the Exchequer and later Lord Chancellor, sent William Jour of Ditton to convey corn and victuals to the north for his sustenance and that of the clerks of the Chancery.<sup>5</sup> Jour's ship, the *Annot* seems to have made a safe and satisfactory voyage, and Bishop Hotham, after taking part in the battle of Myton-upon-Swale, arranged a truce with the Scots. But six years later disaster fell upon the *Annot*, for, by the King's command, she was laden with 3000 stockfish, 1000 cod and two barrels of sturgeon to be delivered in London for his use; somewhere unspecified between Lynn and Deptford pirates attacked her, killed the mariners and conveyed the vessel and its cargo to the port of 'Sheford' (Seaford) in Sussex, and warrants were issued for the arrest of several persons who fell under suspicion of having been concerned in this outrage.<sup>6</sup>

In the meantime, Fen Ditton<sup>7</sup> was still basking in the sunshine of royal visits,

<sup>1</sup> Charter Rolls, 14 Oct. 1251, Westminster.

<sup>3</sup> Close Rolls, 8 May 1346, Westminster.

<sup>5</sup> Patent Rolls, 15 Sept. 1318, Clipstone.

<sup>2</sup> Patent Rolls, 11-14 June 1238, Ditton.

<sup>4</sup> Patent Rolls, 24 Dec. 1339, Antwerp.

<sup>6</sup> Patent Rolls, 10 March 1324, Westminster.

<sup>7</sup> It has been suggested that, apart from the visual proofs of the Biggin having been, in its day, a commodious and princely habitation, there is little evidence as to which of the two Dittons was the actual venue of these visits, but study of the Royal itineraries throws all the weight of reason upon the side of Fen Ditton,

although these were not, in the Middle Ages, considered quite such joyous occasions as in our own day. Since the King was apt to bring with him all the chief officers of state and a very large company of attendants besides, the drain on the resources of the surrounding countryside was such as to make the moment of departure more productive of popular enthusiasm than the Royal arrival and sojourn had been. Lady Stenton, in her recent book, *English Society in the Early Middle Ages*, vividly portrays these tours and brings before us the harassed suitors who were forced to pursue the Sovereign from place to place until, amid the multiplicity of his occupations, time could be spared to hear and settle their claims. Many matters which were in later times delegated to the itinerant Judges, were in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries dealt with by the King in person.

Henry the Third paid several visits to Fen Ditton, and Edward the First came at least once while he was heir to the throne, and three times after his accession. In 1284, when he had subdued the followers of Llewelyn and bestowed the title of Prince of Wales upon his own infant son, he made a slow and meandering journey back to London and claimed the hospitality of the Bishop of Ely at Ditton during its course.<sup>1</sup> He was here again in the autumn of 1289 shortly after his return from campaigning in France,<sup>2</sup> and in 1298, when he had overthrown the power of Wallace at the battle of Falkirk, the 'hammer of the Scots' rested at Ditton on his way back to London.<sup>3</sup>

Edward the Second was here for three weeks in 1315 and, during his stay, transacted a considerable variety of business ranging from an inquiry respecting alleged usurpations of the lands of Queen Margaret, his step-mother, in Surrey and some necessary repairs to the sea defences between Ipswich and Dunwich, down to a small matter of a theft at Trumpington.<sup>4</sup>

From that time, however, the Biggin seems to have lost favour with the English monarchs and apparently came to be less regarded by the Bishops of Ely, for we have no later records of any attempt to improve or modernize the establishment—indeed the crenellation carried out by Bishop Hugh de Balsham in or about 1276 seems to have been the final dignity bestowed on the palace of Ditton, and by 1478 the manor had declined to the humbler but still useful function of providing a handsome pension for Dr Walter Lempster, a former Fellow of King's College, who became one of the most fashionable physicians of his day and was held in high esteem by the then Bishop of Ely, the valetudinarian William Gray, whom he constantly attended.<sup>5</sup> The Ditton manor was yielded up, along with other plums of the See, to the first Queen Elizabeth by Bishop Heton, and thenceforth the Biggin sank to the standing

and it is difficult to picture so methodical a traveller as Henry the Third leaving his direct route from Ely to Royston and trailing bag and baggage up into the rough and hilly country south of Newmarket simply to pass a single night at Wood Ditton, and it is equally hard to imagine why he should, more than once, terminate a sojourn at Chippenham in order to remove himself and his cumbersome train to a destination less than eight miles distant.

<sup>1</sup> Patent Rolls, 12 April 1284-5, Ditton.

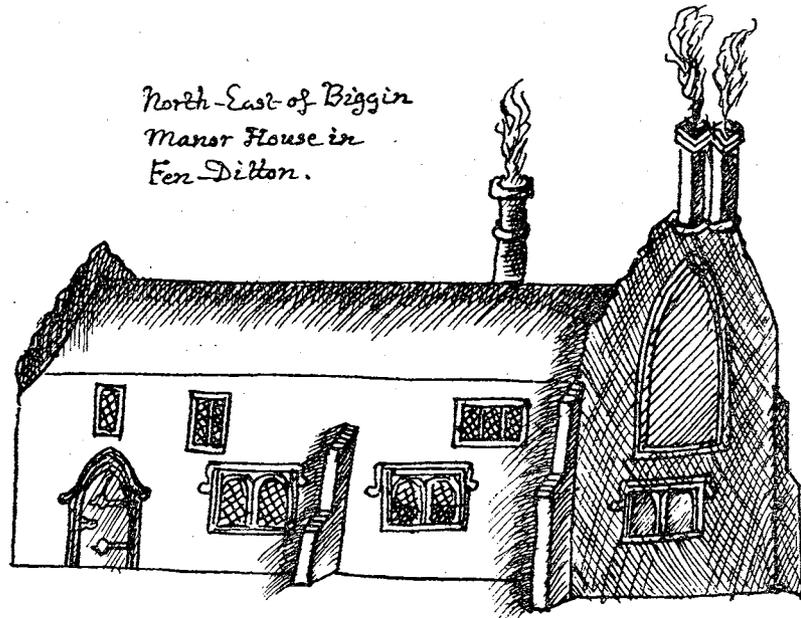
<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 28 Jan. 1298-9.

<sup>5</sup> Register of Bp. Gray, fo. 97.

<sup>2</sup> *Itineraries of Edward I*, ed. H. Gough, 17 Oct. 1289.

<sup>4</sup> Patent Rolls, 18 Sept.-12 Oct. 1315.

of a farmhouse. In 1775 the Reverend William Cole, correspondent of Horace Walpole and local antiquary, was living at Milton and, in fulfilment of a promise made to his friend, Dr Gooch, then Rector of Fen Ditton, he wrote a very comprehensive and carefully documented history of the latter's parish. Gooch left it to his successor in office, and it has thus been handed down until the present day. In 1939 the Reverend F. E. Stanbury, now Rector, took the precaution of depositing it on loan in the Cambridge University Library. By his courtesy and that of the University Librarian it has been possible to obtain from this source a good deal of the material



"There is a mole round the House. Dr. Gooch."  
That there was a Chapel in this House, where meals were celebrated is evident from  
the Document, p. 14. at the End of this Book.

Fig. 1. William Cole's drawing of the Biggin in 1768.

on which this brief account of the Biggin is based, and also a photograph of the drawing made by Cole in 1768 when, as he states in his manuscript, 'Having a desire to see an House in which the ancient *Bishops* often resided with great *Hospitality*, and from whence many of their *Instruments* in their *Registers* are dated, I went *July 29. 1768*, with Dr Gooch, and minuted down the few following Particulars, and took the rough sketch of the *Remains*, which I see every day from my garden at *Milton*'. Since Cole's time the main portion of the house has been encased in cement and, apart from the remaining window frames and buttresses, shows little exterior trace of its great antiquity, but the twisting stone stair down which the feet of Kings, Chancellors and Bishops must so often have passed is still to be seen and a great brick chimney stands isolated in the centre of one of the bedrooms. Cole says that there was, in his time, no painted glass in any of the windows, nor could he discover

any arms on the stonework which was then fast decaying. The arch shown in his drawing, at the north end below the gable, can still be made out between the rafters and the present roof and a curious enclosed structure, traditionally known as the 'Monk's prison', may conceivably have been the chapel mentioned in the manuscript. It is rather remarkable that the memory of the monks has lingered through nearly eight and a half centuries which have elapsed since their departure from the premises, while that of their distinguished successors appears to have faded utterly from local legend and story.

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