

PROCEEDINGS  
OF THE  
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN  
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXXII

for 1982 and 1983

IMRAY LAURIE NORIE AND WILSON

1984

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## SWAVESEY, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

### A FORTIFIED MEDIEVAL PLANNED MARKET TOWN

J. R. RAVENSDALE

#### *The Contemporary Development Of Swavesey*

Field archaeology and documentary evidence combine to suggest that the de la Zouch family re-developed Swavesey in the second half of the thirteenth century as a commercial centre, re-siting the houses around the dock area. The layout is planned and enough ditches and ramparts remain to indicate that the town and castle defences were parts of a single system. There is the site of what appears to be a deserted medieval village at Boxworth End, a little to the north of the margin of the open fields as we see them still in the early nineteenth century. This older village, remote from the docks and church, had an entirely different axis, running down across the line of the present main street towards the fen, rather than away and parallel to its edge.

A few of the fragments in Farrer's *Feudal Cambridgeshire* show the line of development in the thirteenth century:

1. 1230 Swavesey acquired by Roger de la Zouch by exchange.
2. 1232 Roger granted fifteen oak trees for 'making lodgings at his manor of Swavesey'.
3. 1244 Grant to Alan de la Zouch of market and fair at Swavesey.
4. 1261 Further grant, and fair enlarged to eight days at Michaelmas.
5. 1267 Grant to Alan whose corn at Swavesey has been burned by the King's enemies.

The de la Zouch family were obviously, like so many other tenants-in-chief, and even more the king himself at this time, developing land to gain the advantages of urban rents instead of the customary agricultural services and rents.

The location and plan of the deserted village suggest that its *raison d'être* was the exploitation of arable and fen. There appear to have been four main elements in the life of medieval Swavesey: arable, fen, the system of waterways and docks, and the Priory. The framework of its history in the middle ages seems to have been shifts of gravity between these four elements.

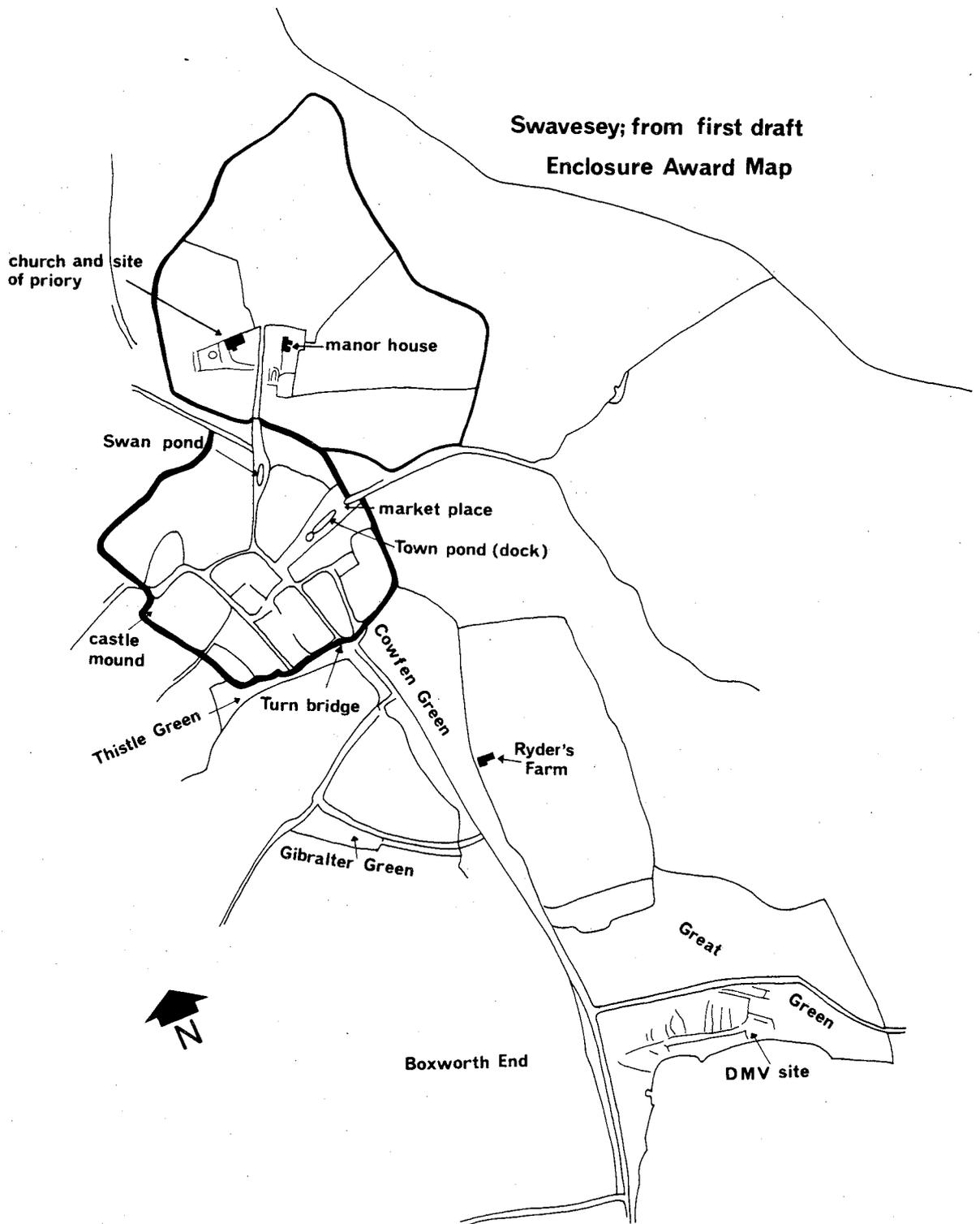
#### *The Place-Name*

To some extent this is reflected in the early development of the place-name. The forms found from the thirteenth century, particularly from the late thirteenth century, seem predominantly to have been derived from *-hythe*, and so mean Swaef's (or possibly the Swabians') landing-place (or dock). But there also exist forms, particularly earlier forms, which seem to be derived from *-eg*, meaning island. The meadow behind the Priory, which formed the northern part of the precinct, was called Eye Meadow: the whole precinct was an island before the draining of the fens, and still is so in time of flood. We seem to be faced not with a choice between mutually exclusive alternatives but with the shift of emphasis between cloister and dock, echoed in the use of changing forms of the name.

#### *The Church*

Domesday Swavesey is something of a mystery. The Priory is not mentioned except under Dry Drayton, where the Prior and Monks of Swavesey hold land. Count Alan of Brittany built the church, and gave it to the Benedictines of SS Sergius and Bacchus at Angers in France, and so it remained an alien priory until sold to the Carthusians of Coventry.

In the church enough 'long and short work', with the rough diagonal dressing with the axe, survives to indicate the size of a substantial Saxon-style chancel, and the width, although not the length, of the nave. Thus it seems that the early church on the island in Swavesey was built after the Conquest, that Saxon masons and builders carried out the work in the traditional way, probably the only way they knew. The south wall of the Chancel of this early church was pierced by two arches in the late thirteenth century to add a second chancel, presumably parochial since a Vicar of the parish appears. The new chancel started from the end of the old nave, but overlapped the old chancel substantially to the east. This awkward arrangement might have been employed to provide enough room for a short second nave as well, where a cloister obstructed further westward expansion at this time along the south side of the old church. The full expansion of the parish church alongside the older nave came much later. The doubling of the chancel would seem, from the mouldings, to have been taking place around 1275. It is very hard not to believe that this was to accommodate the souls from the deserted medieval village of Swavesey when they had moved up to the de la Zouch's new town.



The Episcopal Visitation Returns for 1638 make the peculiarity of the church clear: 'We have a fair parish church, and two fair chancels standing not profaned'. Even then the church was in its way separate from the main township. There is a reference to 'The church causeway that leads through the town to the church, without which no one can come to the church'. The causeway is still running by the western side of the Swan Pond, straight and level in the form of a cobbled path past the front door of the houses. The severest floods, as in 1947, lapped against it, a few inches below the path, but still below it. Experience had taught the men who lived on the edge of the fen the limits that the water imposed on them.

#### *Dock And Town*

In an area such as this, changes in the water-level act like a micrometer. If we can reconstruct the limit of the fen water as it was before the great draining of the fens, a considerable number of historical changes will be staring at us. John Bromwich long ago showed us how to use the 1947 flood line when he was interpreting the history of the Roman settlement in the southern half of the fens.

Mr John Shepperson has reconstructed and mapped the limits of the great floods of the past hundred years in Swavesey, using information collected mainly by his father and grandfather. What had only been tentatively suggested before, but which emerges quite clearly from his plots, is a dock area with four basins, including Swan Pond and Town Pond, and two others in between on the edge of Church Green. The whole of this area was well within the circuit of rampart and ditch that appears to have run round the town.

Mr Shepperson's flood maps and the 1947 air photographs show Church End as one island, connected to the rest only by the causeway. The Town appears as another island, the waters closing in from either side at Turnbridge, the main gate into the town. The ditch which flows under the fixed bridge to-day, with the lower water-table from the great draining, has been narrowed and deepened, its course tidied by cleaning, but Mr Shepperson was able to detect the line and width of the medieval ditch, as a wet depression, silted up and overgrown but coming into Turnbridge straight from the west. This old ditch was much wider than we had imagined previously. Except where the old defensive line has been completely obliterated by factory building, from the air the line of ditch and rampart is emphasised by the trees. The heart of the town is the market place, where the barges came and went by the basin which lasted on until living memory as Town Pond. The one remaining mansard roofed cottage at the far end of Market Street from the Market House is traditionally the place where the coal barges unloaded until almost living memory.

Inside the town perimeter there is a tendency towards grid-iron lay-out. The Market Street is slightly splayed out towards the basin, and the basins themselves seem all to have been splayed towards their entrances. As the rectilinear quality here is modified for convenience, so elsewhere right-angles have often become somewhat degraded by centuries of cutting corners. The rampart and the castle mound have been robbed for gravel, and much of this is recent enough to be detectable from the First Edition O.S. maps.

#### *The Castle And Town Defences*

Burwell Castle is firmly dated to the Anarchy of Stephen's reign, and has proved to be unfinished. Rampton Castle (Giant's Hill) appears similar in plan to Burwell, with its wide, rectilinear moat, surrounding a raised platform and it similarly shows all the signs of being far from finished. If Rampton and Burwell are from the same period they might well be part of a system for commanding the ways that skirt the southern edge of the fens. Superficially it might be thought that Swavesey formed the third castle in that chain, but it is utterly unlike the other two. The mound at Swavesey has probably been much reduced by gravel-robbing, and as it remains is comparable only to the smallest *motte*. Further, its defences are integral with those of the town. The mound is still very steep to climb. Although it has come down in name as the castle, its siting as illuminated by the flood map, suggests that it may have had a relatively limited function of commanding the only spot where a wedge of dry land approaches the town in time of flood.

When the de la Zouch's corn was burned, the church was also attacked and the chest rifled. One is tempted to imagine that the defences of Swavesey were, like those at Burwell and Rampton in the previous century, merely an emergency measure against the threat from the Barons in the Isle of Ely, possibly after the assault and burning of 1267. But far too large an area for immediate needs (and hence

too long a useless perimeter to defend) was established at Swavesey. As so often with speculative ventures in medieval town-planning, the hope exceeded the achievement, and areas set aside for future development were too large for eventual demand. At Swavesey intensive development did take place around the market and dock but most of the big northern bailey was never developed. There is powerful written evidence for something more lasting than emergency measures in face of a raid.

#### *The Hundred Rolls, 1278-9*

The evidence collected by Farrer, cited above, shows that the de la Zouch family had been interested in the commercial development of their manor there as a trading centre a generation before the "Disinherited" were raiding from their lair in the Isle. The Hundred Rolls of 1278/9 leave us in no doubt. Although Swavesey never had a borough charter as far as we know, the jurors of 1278, whose sworn answers made up the evidence in the rolls, took it for granted that there was a borough there. The entry contains repeated references to *Com' burg' et vill' mercator'*, and this was contemporary reality, not a hopeful claim of privilege. In the same source for Longstanton, Cheney's villeins had the duty of carrying their lord's corn by water either to Cambridge or Swavesey. The eight day Michaelmas fair granted in 1261, had in less than twenty years become such a useful place for the sale of harvest, that custom had been modified to suit this.

It would be wrong, because Swavesey lacked the right kind of charter, to class it as a 'failed town'. In 1278/9 there were 218 holders of land, suggesting a population, not insignificant as towns of the period went, of something over a thousand.

The details of status, holdings, and rents recorded in 1278/9 show Elena la Zuche to have 22 burgage tenants, in her market. It is her market, and they are her tenants, yet they are burgesses in contrast to her 63 half-virgater villein tenants. If the burgesses seem not quite as free as we would expect burgesses in chartered boroughs to be, her villeins were not quite as servile as we find elsewhere. Only thirty-one did week work in one year while the other thirty-two paid cash instead at the rate of ½d. per work. In the alternate year these payments were reversed, thirty-two doing labour-services and thirty-one paying the extra cash. This seems a peculiar state of half freedom.

#### *Ryder's Farm And The Suburb*

The date now suggested for Ryder's Farm by the discovery of the crown-post truss with passing braces and the aisle posts and mouldings, places it soon after the founding of the commercial town at Swavesey. It seems to represent a remarkable survival from the first phase of suburban development.

The farmhouse is situated outside the town wall, a little beyond where the tongue of flood water came in 1947. On the first draft enclosure map it is on the edge of a strip of wide street green, called Cow Fen Green. Mr J.C. Barringer had suggested that there might be a fair green here simply on the evidence of the building line of the old houses, and the map backs up the suggestion.

The farmhouse and green conform fairly closely in layout to the axis of the modern village and not to the axis of the deserted medieval village discovered at Boxworth End. Thus the alignment of Ryder's Farm confirms that the pattern of modern Swavesey was essentially determined by the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. We now need excavation to establish the reason for the desertion of the earlier agricultural village, and much more besides.

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