
Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

Volume XCV
for 2006



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Editor Alison Taylor

Published by the Cambridge Antiquarian Society 2006

ISSN 0309-3606

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Landscape History, Observation and Explanation: the missing houses in Cambridgeshire villages

Christopher Taylor

The plans of a group of South Cambridgeshire villages (Little Shelford, Whittlesford, Harston, Sawston, Pampisford, Knapwell, Swaffham Bulbeck and Balsham) are analysed in an attempt to explain gaps where houses formerly must have stood. The conclusion is that 12th-century lords or their servants may have removed the houses and relocated the inhabitants in new planned settlements as part of a policy of estate improvement. This hypothesis is considered in the context of both the wider picture of medieval village development and the methodology of landscape history.

Introduction

One of the problems, exacerbated by age, of being an old-fashioned historian who tries to understand the landscape is that, while one can usually observe what has happened in the past, it is much more difficult to find out why, when and by whom it was done. That is, one can often see the results of human action in the landscape, but not always discover or understand the economic, social, political, symbolic or just plain idiosyncratic reasons behind them. This is particularly true when dealing with medieval and earlier settlements and their landscapes.

For me, with a life-long interest in villages, this difficulty continues to be a major frustration. Nearly everything I have observed about nucleated villages during some fifty-odd years looking at their siting, forms, origins, expansion, mobility, decline and abandonment, has almost always run up against these problems. Of course I have put forward various reasons, dates and names for what I have seen. But while usually I have been confident about my observations, interpretations continue to be elusive. In this paper I want to present another set of observations on some Cambridgeshire villages (Fig. 1), that result from a method of research that I feel fairly sure of, that of analytical fieldwork. But, as usual, the deductions from these observations remain uncertain. Yet the deductions have to be made. Otherwise the history of the landscape would be the history of a dead world.

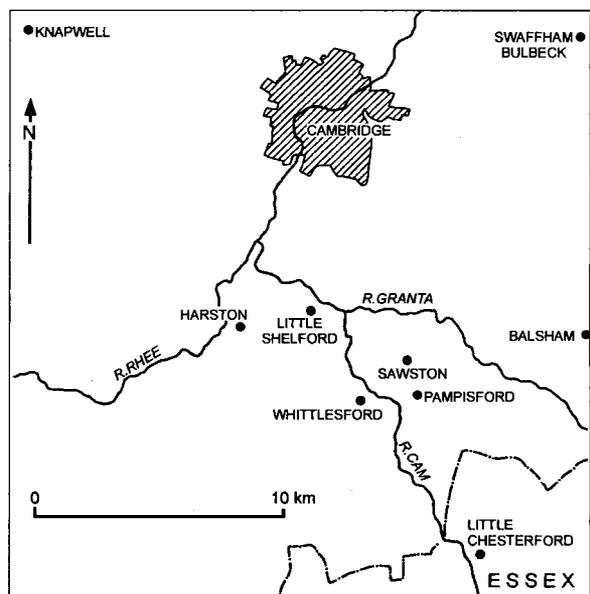


Figure 1. Villages discussed in the text.

Whittlesford (Fig. 2)

I begin with the Cambridgeshire village that I have spent more time studying than any other and, probably as a direct result, the one that I understand least, Whittlesford (Taylor 1989a). There are many unexplained features of its landscape, but the concern of this paper is perhaps the most obvious one. As the plan of Whittlesford makes clear, the main street of the village runs south-west to north-east, heading for a ford across the River Cam that gave the settlement part of its name (Reaney 1943, 98). But, until the 1950s when the modern expansion of the village began, the dwellings along its High Street stopped some 500m short of the site of the ford. The only ancient features overlooking the ford were the medieval parish church and a moated site. There is no doubt that the moat surrounded the house of the principal manor of Whittlesford, certainly from the early 16th century

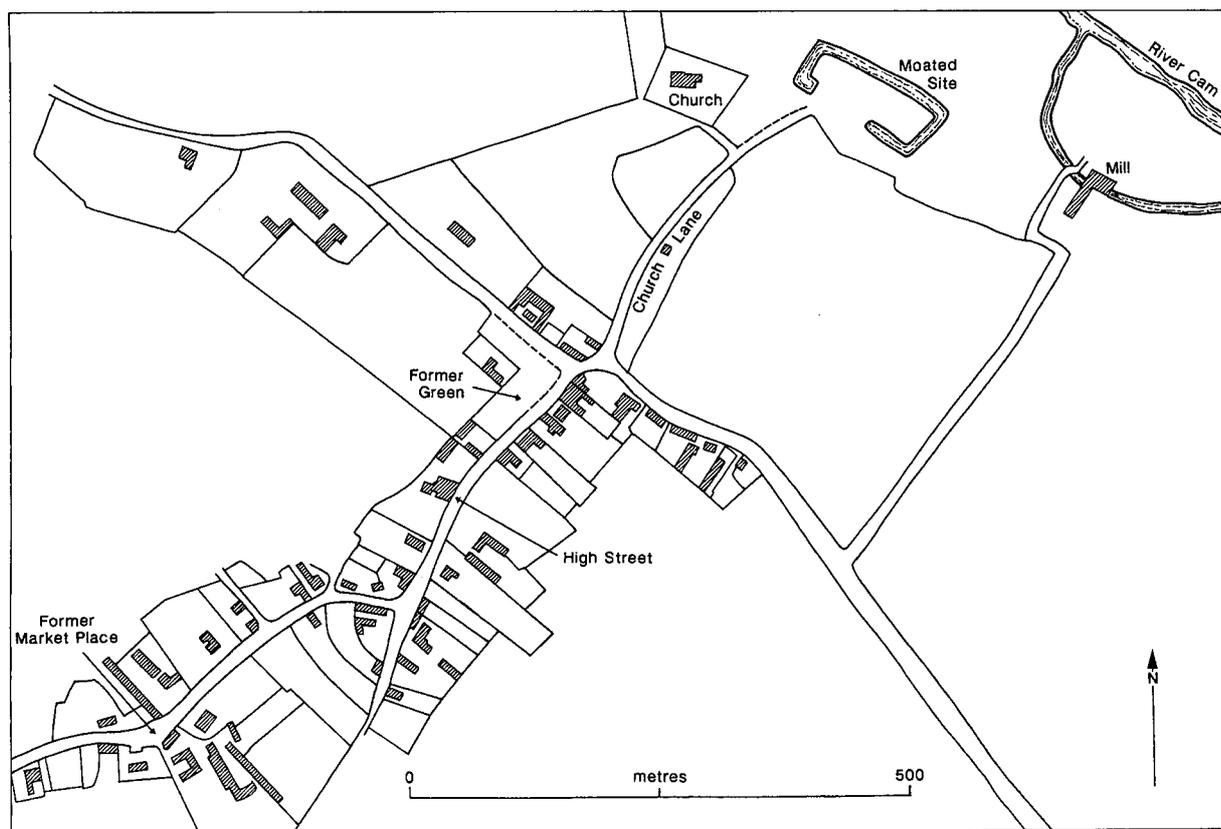


Figure 2. Whittlesford, based on 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps and the 1815 Enclosure Map.

and, presumably, from at least the 12th century (VCH 1978, 265–6). But, apart from one dwelling of 18th-century date, the Church Lane that linked the north-eastern end of High Street to the church and manor house site was devoid of all buildings and had been from at least the early 19th century (CRO P171/26/2). This feature, with the parish church and the site of the remains of a hall or manor house lying somewhat detached from the built-up area of a village, is a not unknown one. And, of course, such a situation has been interpreted in various ways. One, and perhaps the most obvious, is that it could be the result of late emparking that leaves the manor house, often rebuilt as a country mansion, and the parish church, alone in parkland with a new replacement village some distance away beyond the park. In Cambridgeshire, Wimpole and Chippenham are post-medieval examples (RCHME 1968 210–12, Wimpole (15); VCH 2002, 372–3) while Somersham is medieval in date (Taylor 1989b). Another explanation for the occurrence of a gap between the church, manor house and the village is that there has been a falling population, resulting in shrinkage of the settlement and thus a reduction in the length of the village street. Longstowe is a Cambridgeshire example, its numerous gaps being the result of a major decline in the 14th century (Taylor 1973, 136–8), although 16th-century imparking created the largest gap of all (VCH 1973, 120, 122).

A further reason for a major gap between a manor

house and the existing village is that the latter has drifted to or has been deliberately relocated on a nearby road that has grown in importance. Again, this phenomenon is recorded in Cambridgeshire, the best example being at Caxton which apparently moved, or was moved, in the 13th century (Taylor 1973, 227–8; 1978, 128–9; 1982, 23–5). Yet one more reason, also the result of drift, has been recognised in Norfolk, where settlements have migrated from their early sites to the edges of adjacent greens and commons, leaving behind the church and a manor farm (Wade-Martins 1980).

However, Whittlesford does not fit any of these scenarios. There is no documentary evidence of village decline or shrinkage, in fact quite the reverse (VCH 1978, 263). There is no indication of imparking, at least not in the area under discussion, and what there is dates from the 18th century (VCH 1978, 264, 266), and there is certainly nothing that might be interpreted as drift or movement. There is simply nothing more than a 350m long gap between the last house in the village, a 14th-century structure, and the moated site. Yet the place-name and the alignment of Church Lane, continuing the High Street, both suggest that the village did once extend to the moated site and perhaps beyond to the ford and that the gap is not an original feature of the village plan. The situation is made more complex by the fact that Church Lane itself is now a dead-end, although its former continu-

ation can be traced on the eastern side of the River Cam, in Sawston parish. That is, any explanation of the situation has to take account of both the missing houses and the blocking of the original and surely the most convenient cross-river route. So, the general questions already noted are now specific here, when, by whom and why. None of these questions are susceptible to easy answers.

There are three pieces of evidence that might answer the question 'when'. The first is archaeological. Fieldwalking, watching briefs on housing development, and information from house owners over many years have produced material that indicates Roman occupation of the whole area around the church and beyond, with evidence for more restricted occupation along Church Lane from the later Saxon period to about 1200. This suggests that Church Lane was indeed the site of a two-row settlement, but for only a short time, in the 11th and 12th centuries. However, these dates can only be approximate, for archaeological material recovered in this unsystematic way has its limitations. This particularly applies to the beginnings of occupation, which could well be earlier.

Documentary evidence for the date of the creation of the gap in the settlement is even more limited. All that is certain is that by 1400 the lord of the manor at Whittlesford had extensive closes around his manor house, some of which were pasture and some of which, 32 acres, were arable. Not all the pasture was farmed in hand, some of it being leased (VCH 1978, 268–9). The implication is that by then this part of the village had gone. The third piece of evidence is even more unsatisfactory and lies in the form of the existing village. That section of the present High Street, immediately south-west of the Church Lane gap, has the remnants of a regular arrangement associated with a neat former L-shaped green (Taylor 1989a, 223–5). The plan form of this part of the village might therefore mean that it is of late Saxon or early 12th-century date as has been suggested for elsewhere (Brown & Foard 1998; Taylor 2002, 55–7). Whatever its date this plan must be before the subsequent expansion of the village south-westwards, for much of this later development was apparently in existence by 1206 when a new 'market green' was created within it (Taylor 1982, 25; VCH 1978, 268).

This very limited evidence suggests an approximate date for the creation of the Church Lane gap, the closing of the cross-river road and the laying out of closes in the area. It has to be before the late 14th century and was presumably effected by the removal of existing dwellings along the lane. A 12th-century date seems the most likely, perhaps associated with creation of a new, regular and possibly planned settlement, just to the south-west. The approximate date for this replacement lies within the tenure of the de Tony family at Whittlesford who held the principal manor from the early 12th century until the early 13th century. It is unlikely, however, that the de Tonys were directly involved in the process, as they were non-resident lords. The work was thus probably carried out by their bailiff or estate manager at Whittlesford.

The final question, why, can only be guessed at. It can hardly have been for the creation of parkland, for none is recorded at this date and only agricultural closes existed by 1400. The possibility that it was to create an impressive approach, as at Somersham for the bishops of Ely, seems unlikely (Taylor 1989b). Nor was the village relocated to a better site or to a more important route. The new settlement was in a much worse position than the old one, being set up along the strip of very poorly drained, permanently wet ground below the outcrop of the Melbourn Rock, in sharp contrast to the dry gravel river terrace on which its presumed predecessor along Church Lane lay (Geological Survey 1964). And not only was it arranged along the same routeway as its predecessor, merely a little further to the south-west, this route had been closed off at its north-eastern end. The most likely reason for the creation of these closes around the manor house is that they were indeed for agricultural use, perhaps in connection with improved estate management. This analysis of a minor feature at an obscure Cambridgeshire village would be of little interest if it was unique. But it is not and there are other examples nearby.

Little Shelford (Fig. 3)

Little Shelford lies immediately north of Whittlesford, on the same side of the River Cam. It too takes its name from a crossing of the Cam, 'the shallow ford' (Reaney 1943, 87), that its principal street approaches from the south-west. But, as at Whittlesford, the properties along what is now Church Street do not extend down to the river. In contrast to Great Shelford on the opposite side of the river, where late medieval buildings still lie less than fifty metres from the river, the older houses of Little Shelford lie some 250m away from it, with the parish church at their north-eastern end. Between the church and the river there is no evidence of pre 17th-century occupation apart from the manor house or Hall. This, although rebuilt in the 18th century, retains traces of its surrounding medieval moat. Again, as at Whittlesford and elsewhere, there is no reason to suppose that the village did not once occupy the land between the church and the river along the continuation north-east of the present Church Lane. An early village here would mean that the parish church, recorded in Domesday Book as a minster (Rumble 1981, 5.26), would have lain at the south-western end of this village, a position that might indicate that it was later. So much for observation – what of interpretation?

The date of the establishment of the minster church at Little Shelford is not known. It certainly existed in 970 but Oosthuizen (2001, 60) has argued convincingly for it to date from before 870. Oosthuizen, at least partly to explain the gap that she too observed, has also suggested that the minster precinct might have extended further north-east towards the river. While this is possible, the hypothesis put forward here, that the village formerly lay in this area, seems

more likely, if only because almost all villages in south Cambridgeshire that lie at river crossings are so, or were so, positioned. And the site of the modern Rectory, next to the church and with a curved eastern boundary, seems a more likely location for the extension of the precinct.

As at Whittlesford, the date of the creation of this gap is difficult to ascertain. By 1279 there were, apparently, no houses between the church and the river, for some at least of the meadows and several pastures that belonged to the demesne of the manor probably lay in the area, as perhaps did the enclosed meadows recorded in 1521 (VCH 1982, 222–3). More helpful is the layout of the surviving village along Church Street. This has a neat two-row regular arrangement more obvious on the Enclosure Map than now (CRO Q/RDc 24) and perhaps deliberately laid out. It also has the remains of a back lane, converted into a rope-walk in the 18th century, behind the properties on the north-western side (VCH 1982, 224).

However, the most important feature of this part of Little Shelford is the shape of its long external boundaries. That on the north-western side has a markedly reversed S-curve, while that on the south-east is C-curved and echoes further field boundaries and crofts to the south-east again. Such village boundaries are usually interpreted as the result of the associated settlement being laid over existing open field strips, and there can be little doubt that this is what happened here. That is, the regular area of Church Street must be a secondary feature created on former arable land. This in turn would strengthen the argument that the earlier village lay closer to the river, around the hall or manor house. And, as at Whittlesford, it might indicate a 12th-century date for the change. This would place it during the tenure of the de Scaler family who held Little Shelford from before 1086 until the early 13th century. But, like the de Tonys at Whittlesford, the de Scalers were non-resident lords and thus the removal of the village and its replacement must have been carried out by their servants.

It is possible, however, that these changes were earlier. Little Shelford parish was part of a large, probably pre-Danish estate that included the parishes of Great Shelford, Harston, Newton, Hauxton and Thriplow and possibly even extended to the whole of what later became Thriplow Hundred. It was this estate that the minster church at Little Shelford served. In the 10th century this, by then fragmented, estate passed in stages to the abbey at Ely, which seems to have reconstituted and reorganised it. This process included the establishment of daughter churches in its component villages, as at Hauxton soon after 870 (Hart 1992, 46; 1995; VCH 1982, 152, 196, 223, 239; Oosthuizen 2001, 60–1). The reorganisation could also have involved

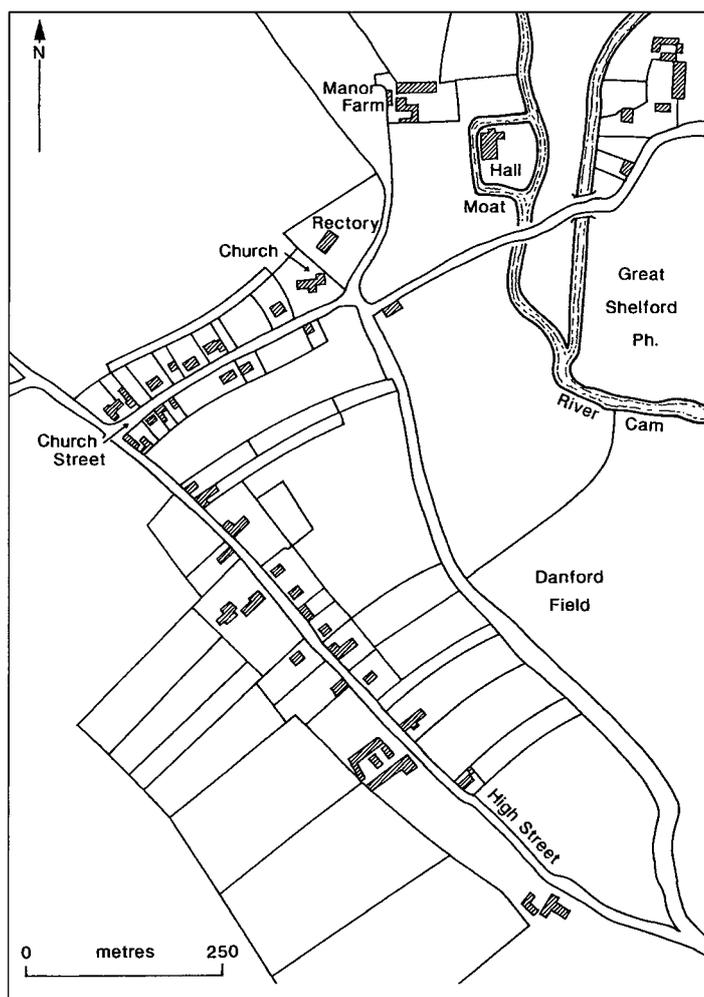


Figure 3. Little Shelford, based on 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps and the 1815 Enclosure Map.

the re-planning of Little Shelford village. Certainly, of the other nine villages in Thriplow Hundred, all but one has regular elements in their surviving plans.

If the thesis put forward here is accepted then further suggestions based on observation of the rest of the village can be made. The church at Little Shelford stands in the north-western corner of a crossroads. The south-west to north-east route leads to the river crossing and the south-east to north-west route is the river-edge road that runs from Newport in Essex through Littlebury, Ickleton, Duxford and Whittlesford to Little Shelford. It perhaps once continued north-westwards to Hauxton. But now, and certainly since the early 19th century, this road north-west of the crossroads has extended only as far as the Hall and Manor Farm and has provided access to the extensive closes further north (CRO Q/RDc 24; OS 1836). If, as at Whittlesford, this road was closed off when the manorial closes were laid out, it would explain the layout of the rest of Little Shelford. The present High Street, a road that in contrast to Church Street was never a compact settlement closely built up, consisted of a scattered line of dwellings. This road leaves the

presumed older river-edge route from Whittlesford, south of the village, runs north-westwards across the extreme south-western end of Church Street and continues to Hauxton. This may be interpreted as a later route to Hauxton, after the river-edge route had been closed. To judge from the surviving buildings along it, this had taken place by the 16th century at the latest, but more convincingly might be connected to the large increase in the population of Little Shelford between 1086 and 1279. This in turn would suggest that the removal and replacement of the north-eastern part of the village near the river was post-Conquest in date (VCH 1982, 220).

More significantly, many of the long narrow croft plots behind the larger properties on the north-eastern side of High Street that extend, or extended, to the Whittlesford road, are markedly C-curved, echoing the south-eastern boundary of the Church Street block. This presumably means that this area south-east of Church Street was once open field arable, perhaps part of the former Danford Field, and that the properties on the north-eastern side of the street were laid out over these fields.

Harston (Fig. 4)

The next village is more complicated. The parish of Harston lies immediately west of Little Shelford and most of its medieval arable land and meadow were

intercommoned with that parish (VCH 1982, 186-7). The village falls into two clear parts. One, the northern section, now High Street, lies along the road running north-east to Cambridge. Until the late 18th century settlement was confined to the west side of this road, the east being occupied by a large area of common created by poor drainage and known as The Moor. The south and western part of Harston lay along a roughly south-east to north-west road leading down to a crossing of the River Rhee. The present main Cambridge to Royston road dog-legs across this road, suggesting that it was once less important than the latter.

Before modern infill the road leading to the river, Church Street, had few buildings along it and the same situation pertained in the late 18th century (CRO Q/RDc 3). At that time and until the mid-19th century there was a much more complicated pattern of roads and lanes there. Church Street itself terminated short of the river crossing. Just east of that was a sharp bend where its continuation, another lane, ran southwards around the Manor House and on to the Mill, where the then river crossing lay. This north to south road was closed up, the existing road cut past the church and a new river crossing established there in 1851 as part of a late emparking around the Manor House (VCH 1973, 228). However, the south-east to north-west alignment of the main Church Street indicates that, prior to the diversion across the river at the Mill, it must have crossed the river near the church.

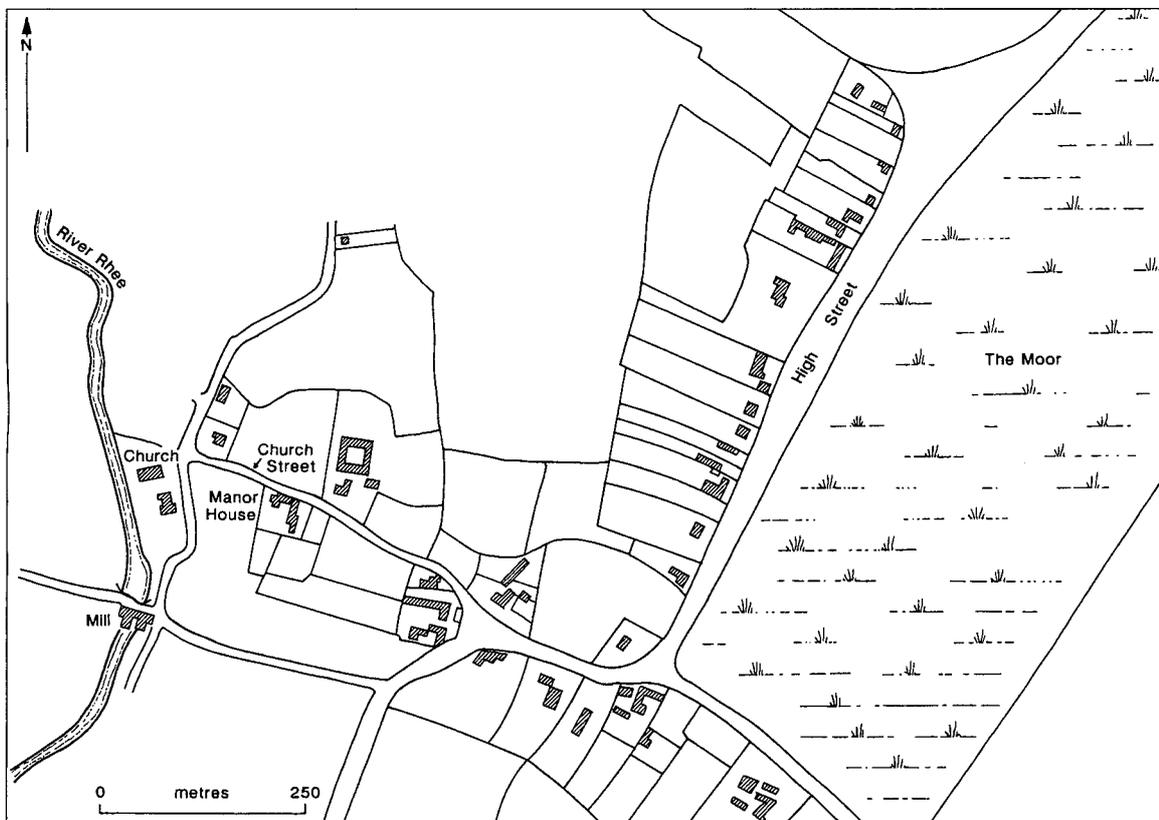
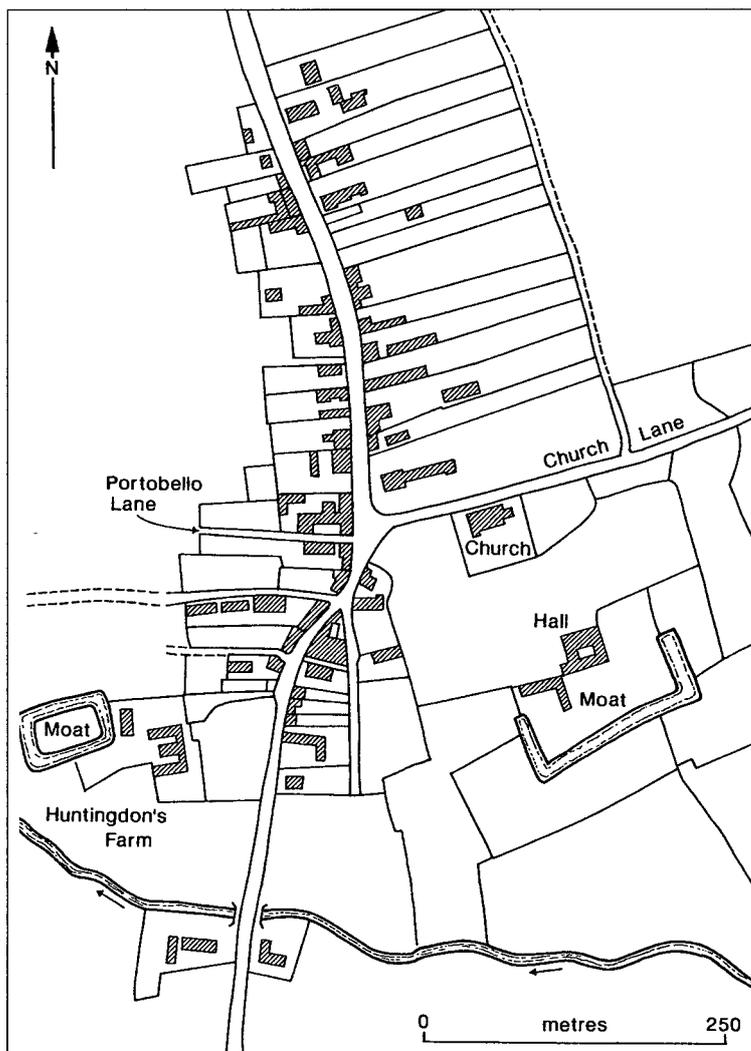


Figure 4. Harston, based on 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps, an estate map of c. 1795 and the Enclosure Map of c. 1800.

This was subsequently blocked and the crossing moved south to the Mill.

In addition to this complicated road system, the area around and to the east of the Church, Manor House and Mill was, until the 19th century, largely occupied by 'ancient manorial closes' that extended to some 55 acres in 1800 (VCH 1982, 178, 185). The exact date of the creation of all these closes is not known, but certainly by the late 14th century and perhaps much earlier the bulk of the village lay further north-east along the north-western side of the then broad road to Cambridge. As at Little Shelford, the C-shaped curves of some of the property boundaries at the southern end of this part of the village indicate that the tofts and crofts there were laid out on pre-existing open field strips (VCH 1982, 186). As before, all the foregoing is reasonably certain. The difficulties emerge with answering the inevitable questions. Harston, like Little Shelford, was a member of the pre-Conquest estate that belonged to Ely Abbey. Thus creation of closes around the church, closing up the river crossing and the possible relocation of Harston village north-west along the Cambridge road might also have occurred in the 10th century. But a 12th-century date is also likely, again during a period with non-resident lords (VCH 1982, 180).



Sawston (Fig. 5)

Sawston village is different from the preceding three, both in the complexity of its form and in the increased difficulty of interpretation. It lies immediately east of Whittlesford on the east side of the River Cam. It is perhaps one of the most physically complicated medieval villages in Cambridgeshire. Its apparent polyfocal medieval arrangement has been partially destroyed and much altered by major 19th and 20th-century industrial, commercial and domestic development. The result is that much of the older pattern can only be reconstructed from 19th-century and later maps (VCH 1978, 246-8). Nevertheless the same picture of reasonably clear observation and then more difficult interpretation is again the problem.

As at Little Shelford, Harston and Whittlesford, before this development the parish church and the formerly moated Sawston Hall to its south-east stood alongside what was once the main street, now Church Lane. Again as at Whittlesford and Little Shelford this street ran east to west to a river crossing, this one leading to Whittlesford itself. In addition to the Hall gardens, there were a number of closes in the area and the gardens themselves are mainly 18th-century

Figure 5. Sawston, based on 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps and the 1811 Enclosure Map.

and later. The latter replaced other closes, all of which seem to have been agricultural in function.

The dating of these closes is difficult. In a 1581 survey of the principal manor of Pyrats that was centred on Sawston Hall, ten small pasture closes of between half and 5½ acres are listed as adjoining the manor house, itself then with six acres of gardens. These closes have been identified as all lying to the south of Church Lane and to the south and east of the Hall (Teversham 1942, 21; 1947, 45, 47; VCH 1978, 254). Though not certainly recorded before this date, they may be the 'Lords closes' referred to in 1349 and 1413 (Teversham 1947, 4, 6). There has been no systematic archaeological work in the Church Lane area to determine whether dwellings did once lie along it. Casual examination of building foundations on a new housing estate in the 1960s, on the north side, and then at the east end of the church, led to the discovery of a few sherds of Anglo-Norman wares, but this cannot be regarded as conclusive evidence.

If the closes around the Church and Hall were created by removal of settlement along Church Lane, is

there any evidence for a new settlement elsewhere? Certainly, unlike at Whittlesford and Little Shelford, no settlement was created at the eastern end of the lane further from the river. This area was once part of the open fields of Sawston, but was enclosed before 1390 (Teversham 1942, 95; VCH 1978, 254). Nor was a new settlement laid out along the continuation westwards of Church Lane, leading to the river crossing (now Portobello Lane). Within two hundred metres the land slopes down into a wide marshy embayment of the River Cam flood plain that even today prevents development.

Thus, if a replacement settlement was created it would have had to have been along the north to south river-edge road from Cambridge to Saffron Walden that crosses the end of Church Lane at a small green. And this is precisely where such a possible settlement can be seen. Or rather there are two possible new settlements. The first lies just south of the south-western end of Church Lane and comprises a rectangular two-row block of very small plots with a former open space in the south-western corner. The present main north to south street cuts obliquely across this block and was presumably later. The other possible settlement is a much larger single-row arrangement with long crofts, again along the north to south road but north of the west end of Church Lane. Either settlement might be considered as a possible replacement for the earlier Church Lane area. However, the fact that the manor house and moated site of one of the small Sawston medieval manors, Huntingdons, adjoins the south-western corner of the southern settlement block makes it likely that this block originally belonged to that manor and not to Pyratts, the principal one. Further, although both the agricultural land and the tenanted dwellings of all four medieval manors at Sawston were eventually mixed together, it seems as if most of the northern settlement block always belonged to the Pyratts manor. Tofts twenty feet wide are recorded there in 1461 and other tenements in 1437 (Teversham 1947, 5, 7). A reference to Townsend, the traditional name for this northern part of the village, in 1360 gives it an earlier date. There is another possible reference of 1250 to 1280 whereby half a messuage or croft, somewhere at the northern end of the village, is granted, with permission for it to be built on (Teversham 1942, 80, 89). If this messuage was indeed in the Townsend area, which seems possible, it might explain the regular variation in the original widths of the crofts there as they survived until the 19th century (OS 1885). That is, by the later 13th century the original plots of this settlement were already being split, perhaps to accommodate a rising population (VCH 1978, 246).

So, again, creation of closes around a medieval manor house by removal of the associated settlement and its relocation on a new site, seems possible at Sawston, and again a 12th-century date is most likely. This would put it in the time of the Pirot or Pyratt family who held the manor between 1086 and 1324 (Teversham 1942, 30–1). Unlike at

Whittlesford, Harston and Little Shelford the Pirotts seem to have been resident lords at least during some of their tenure.

Pampisford (Fig. 6)

Pampisford parish lies immediately south of Sawston and on the opposite, eastern, side of the River Cam to Whittlesford. The probable origin of the village as a late 11th-century planned single-row settlement has been discussed elsewhere (Taylor 2002). What concerns us in this paper is that, certainly by 1799 when the first cartographic representation of the village was made, the site of the principal medieval manor house, now Manor Farm, stood alone and quite separate from the rest of the village (CRO Q/RDz 63). And in the 250m long gap between the Manor Farm and the village there are slight settlement remains that indicate that the village once extended to within at least 80m of the Manor House. That is, alterations to the layout of Pampisford, almost identical to those at Whittlesford and similar to those at Sawston and Little Shelford, seem to have occurred. Unfortunately there is no evidence for when these changes took place. The former settlement area belonged to the lord of the manor in 1799 which might suggest that it had been manorial demesne for some time. But, apart from the physical similarity with its neighbours, nothing can be said about the origins of this gap. Only its position, close to four other examples of the same phenomenon, may be significant.

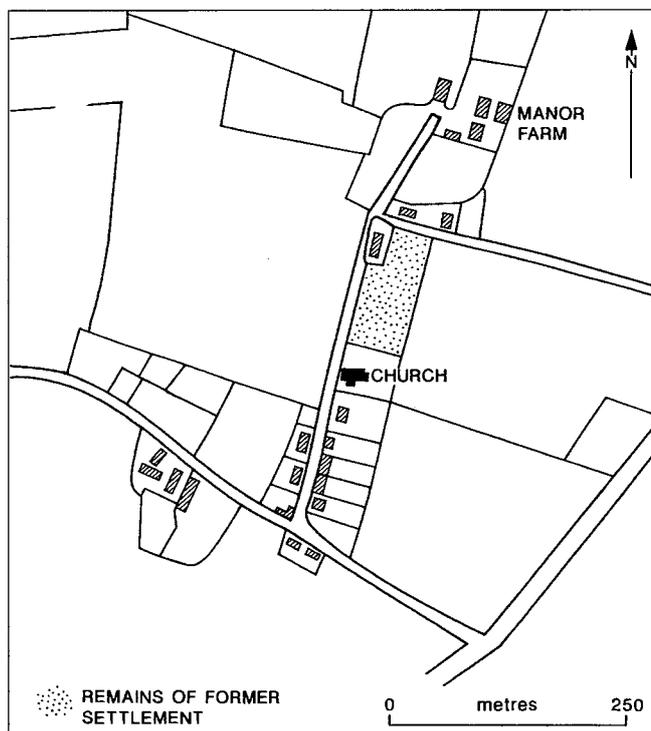


Figure 6. Pampisford, based on 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps and the 1799 Enclosure Map.

Knapwell, Swaffham Bulbeck, Balsham and beyond (Figs 7–11)

At five adjacent parishes in south Cambridgeshire, observation has produced evidence for similar apparent changes. The explanation and dates for these changes are less certain and have required some involved deduction, and not a little guesswork and imagination. The next stage is to look beyond the immediate area and to see if both the observable features and the possible interpretation can be replicated. And, of course, it can be. There are other villages in south Cambridgeshire that appear to have similar layouts to those at Whittlesford, Little Shelford, Sawston, Pampisford and Harston.

One is Knapwell (Figs 7, 8 and 9), where the church, the site of the manor house that survived until the late 18th century and the earthwork remains of possible former houses and crofts lie on either side of the former road from Elsworth to Boxworth. The present village, however, lies to the south along the road to Bourn (RCHME 1968, Knapwell (10)). If the existing village is the result of later deliberate relocation, and it certainly has the fragmentary remains of a regular two-row plan, this relocation must have taken place before the 15th century when the massive shrinkage

that left so many gaps along the main street took place (VCH 1989, 332–4).

As well as the type of village plan discussed so far, a different type of layout has been noted that may be related, albeit with a slightly different interpretation. This is where the 'gap' is not at one end of the village, but in the centre, leaving the site of the manor house and sometimes the parish church standing alone within a group of ancient closes. An example of this type of village is Swaffham Bulbeck (Fig. 10). There, at the northern end of the main part of the village, are extensive old closes around the principal manorial site, now Lordship Farm, its moats and its chapel. The modern road skirts these closes in a series of right-angle bends, but to the north the alignment of the main street is continued by the two-row settlement of Commercial End. Although the latter is usually thought of as a former inland port of the 17th to 19th century, its medieval name, recorded from the late 14th century, was Newnham Street or End. This suggests that it was a subsequent addition, perhaps a replacement after the north-eastern part of the original village was cleared for the enlargement of the manorial closes. The fact that the northern exit road of Newnham is blocked by the site of the Benedictine Nunnery of Swaffham Bulbeck, founded by 1187, may



Figure 7. Knapwell Church from the air in 1956, showing the site of the manor house and the outlines of house plots and ridge and furrow on a lane leading to the stream. Crown Copyright, Ministry of Defence.

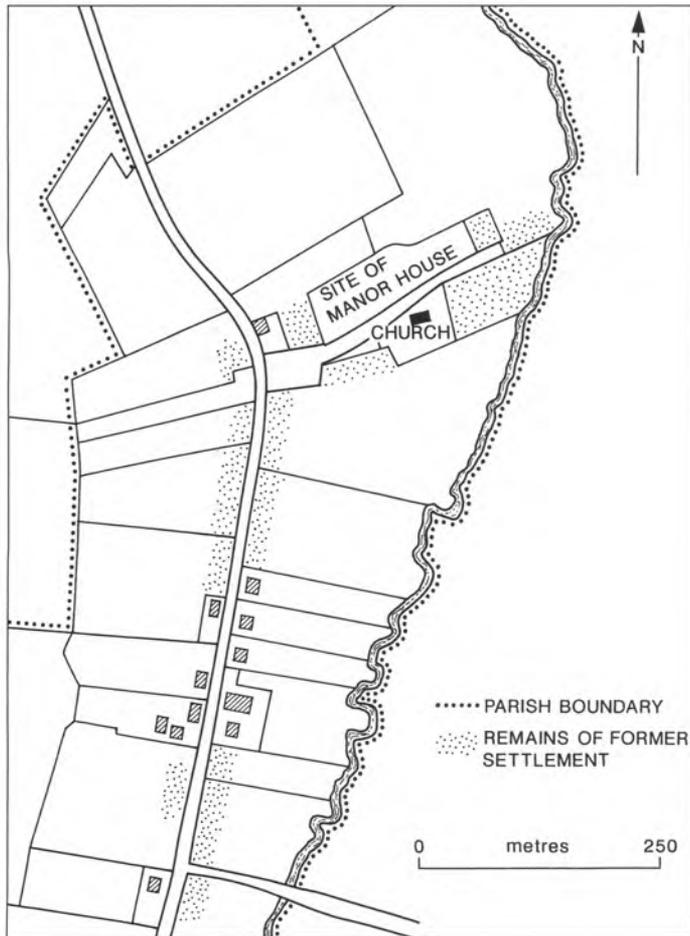


Figure 8. Knapwell, based on 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps and the 1776 Enclosure Map.



Figure 9. Knapwell Church seen across the fields from the present village. Twentieth-century housing has filled some of the gaps shown in Fig. 8.

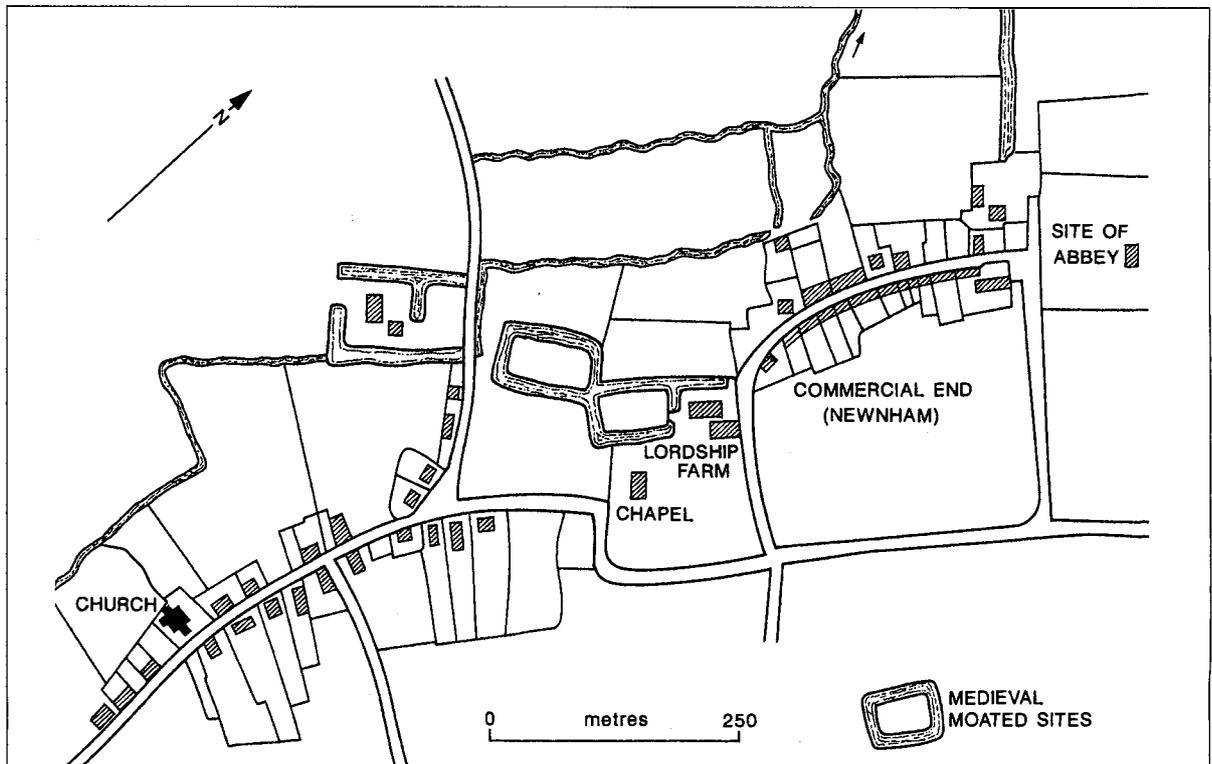


Figure 10. Swaffham Bulbeck, based on 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps, the 1801 Enclosure Map and RCHME 1972 fig. 85.

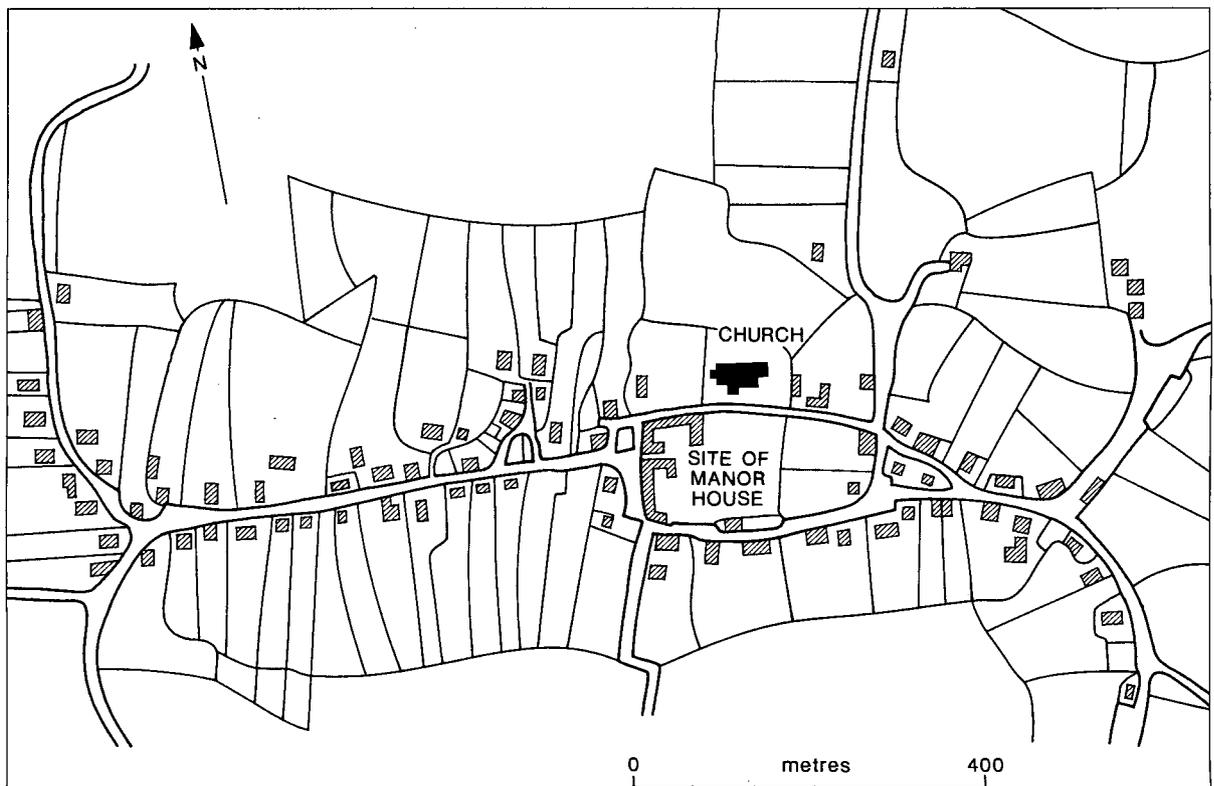


Figure 11. Balsham, based on 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps and the 1617 Estate Map.

indicate an early to mid 12th-century date for it. The principal manor was held by the de Bolbec family who were non-resident lords from before 1086 until 1197 (RCHME 1972, Swaffham Bulbeck (2), (3), (17), (78), 108–9; VCH 2002, 248–50, 252).

Another village with a superficially similar plan is Balsham (Fig. 11). The village has a very complicated arrangement with more than a hint that it was once polyfocal. But its most obvious feature now, already depicted on the earliest map of Balsham of 1617 (VCH 1978, 127; see also CRO Q/RDz 8), is the large central open area containing the site of the former manor house and the parish church that the village streets appear to be diverted around. This area, together with remains of two small former greens, one at each end, seems to break up the overall linear plan of the village. There is no certain evidence for the creation of this 'gap' beyond its existence by the early 17th century. However the ruinous nature of the manor house in 1356 and the fact that it was only rarely visited in the 14th century by the Bishops of Ely, who had held the manor since 1109, suggests that any major change to the area was before 1300. The fact that Balsham had belonged to Ely from the mid-11th century might also be relevant (VCH 1978, 129). Whether the gap at Balsham was originally at the centre of the village, or whether all or part of the village east of the gap was a replacement for the lost houses there, is of course, unknown.

Outside Cambridgeshire similar examples of villages with the same features have been observed at various places although the documentary background has not been researched. In north Essex, Little Chesterford has an area of empty closes around the Church and the Manor Farm that stands alongside the presumed north to south through road, while the apparently later village is a two-row regular block to the east, opposite to the situation at Sawston (Taylor forthcoming). Further away, at least four Northamptonshire villages also have similar arrangements if not explanations. All would be worth investigation (RCHME 1981, Marston Trussel (6), (7), Lilbourne (2), (3), (4); 1982 Evenley (6), Helmdon (4)). In Lincolnshire, detailed field examination of two villages in East Lindsey, Rand and Holton, in the early 1980s led to the recognition of similar layouts and to the same tentative explanations as have been reached here (Everson *et al* 1991, 241, 29–30, 32, Rand (1), (2)).

Conclusion

Three conclusions may be reached from the foregoing discussion, one factual, the other two philosophical. The first is that the tentative interpretation of an observable feature in many Cambridgeshire villages and elsewhere is that, in some cases, the existence of enclosed land around church and manor house, when associated with regular, perhaps planned, blocks of settlement nearby and perhaps with road closures, might be the result of medieval estate management and agricultural improvement. More specifically, the

new closes may have been intended to enlarge the area of land in severalty, close to the manorial farmstead, to achieve more efficient demesne farming. Pre-existing houses seem to have been cleared to create these closes, and their inhabitants re-housed in new planned 'estate' villages. These changes are most likely to have taken place in the 12th century.

The second conclusion is that, although such interpretations are possibly correct, their very simplicity carries pitfalls which require further consideration. For, explaining an observable feature in the terms described here is to contradict all that we experience in the real world, where few features ever stem from a single cause. Yet monocausal explanations have dominated this paper as they do much writing on landscape history. It seems to me to be much more satisfactory and probably more correct, even though much more difficult to prove, to at least suggest multi-causal explanations for features even if we cannot assign weighting to these.

For example, at both Sawston and at Harston relocation of the villages might have been due as much to the growth of a major urban area, Cambridge, and to the development of its accompanying road system as to local agricultural improvements. At Knapwell the increasing importance of the north to south road across the parish as the east to west one declined may also have contributed to the change in alignment of the village. Likewise the interpretation here of the impact of lords and their servants, particularly in creating replacement settlements, may be only partly correct. The importance of the medieval village community in changing whole landscapes is still not appreciated enough despite Professor Dyer's entreaties (Lewis *et al* 1997, 204–10).

The third conclusion relates to the problem that was explained at the beginning of this paper. It has been mainly concerned with the minutiae of the landscape, an approach for which good friends and colleagues have often criticised me. The methodology is partly the result of a professional life that was primarily, and inevitably, concerned with the details of archaeological remains. But it also reflects a firmly held belief that only by working from the specific to the general, and thus drawing any conclusions from a reasonable database, can we be sure (in so far as we ever can be) that we are pushing back the boundaries of scholarship. By observing and identifying individual features in the landscape we can advance from one possible instance, as here at Whittlesford, to other neighbouring examples and thence to the wider world. For even if we do not have convincing answers for an observed feature at any one place, when such a feature is repeated elsewhere it becomes important. That is, uniqueness in landscape history is of little value. The commonplace is much more significant and only by studying it can we really advance our chosen subject.

However, my fears expressed at the beginning of this paper persist although I believe that my approach is as good as any – and perhaps better than most. In the end all landscape historians could do well to

remember two important statements. I think it was Simon Schama who once said: 'Historians are ... forever chasing shadows, painfully aware of their inability to reconstruct a dead world'. Quite. But through observation of the landscape its history can at least be partly resurrected. The second was written by the ultimate non-historian, Giles Coren, in *The Times*, 16 October 2004. 'The thing about history [is that] it just gives more pleasure and lasts a lot longer when you use a bit of imagination'.

This paper was first read at a Medieval Settlement Research Group conference held at Wolfson College in April 2005. It was intended to be an exemplar for more wide-ranging work. However, because of its local content it is published here in the journal in the hope that it may be of interest to Cambridgeshire historians.

Cambridge Antiquarian Society is grateful to the Council for British Archaeology for a grant towards the publication of this article.

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