

The Acton moated site: an interpretation

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IT SOMETIMES happens that sites which were accessible up to fifty or sixty years ago are now so covered in roads and houses that there can no longer be any possibility of examining them, for few traces now remain. Such an area lies in Acton (Middlesex) in the Westfields, Moat Place, and on the fringe of North Acton Playing Fields (Fig. 1).

In 1890, however, E. Swainson Cooper published a survey of a moated area in North Acton in the field then called The Moated Meadow (Figs. 2, 3)¹. Photographs of the moat appear in *Acton, Middlesex* by W. King-Baker (1912) and the western portion is shown on the planning map of the Great Western Railway estate which was to cover it.

This report described the area as rectangular in shape with the eastern side longer than the western, 136ft and 89ft respectively. The south measured 255ft, the north 240ft, while the width of the ditch measured from 41ft to 60ft. It concluded with a warning that unless it were properly excavated it would share the fate of a similar site near Willesden Junction that had been completely covered with houses.

There was much speculation about this area. Was it Romano-British as Lysons thought, or Saxon, or even a palace of Henry III as King-Baker suggested?

In 1939 nine previously unavailable or unknown charters were published², relating to land in Acton

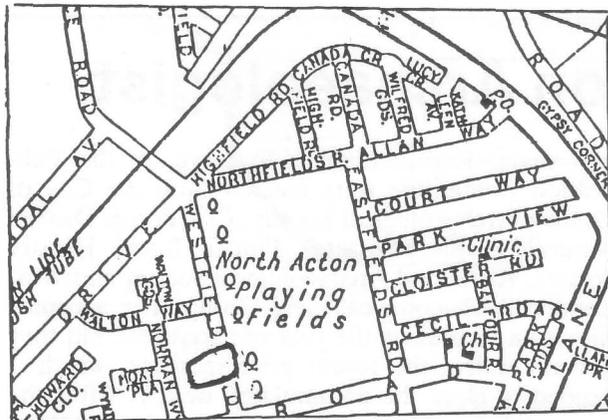


Fig. 1: modern map of part of Acton, showing location of former moat.

conveyed by Peter fitzWilliam fitzAluf to St. Paul's, and by the Chapter to the Dean, A.D. 1200 – 1239.

This gift included the demesne house of the estate. It is described as being on a track (*cheminus*) which runs from Robert of Haringey's wood to the north field. It is surrounded on north, east and west by woods, and by a moat (*fossatum*). The outside dimensions of this moat are 8 perches 10ft by 16 perches 1½ft. The wording suggests that the shape is irregular, for it is the north-east side which is described. Taking the perch as 5½ yards, this gives 142 by 265½ft, a remarkable agreement with Swainson's measurements.

The track by the house is also described in some detail, and gives us the position of the house in relation to its surroundings. It is said to run from Robert of Haringey's wood in the west past the house, then eastwards by the field called Ulrichscroft, six perches below the 'New Riding', along by the Dean's Wood as far as the croft called Grenestrete or Greenland, and then to the great field which is called 'nordfeld'.

If we begin at that end, the site of the North Field, one of the five medieval common fields, is well known. It is shown on the Leybourne map of the Goldsmiths' Acton estates of 1683, the Acton Vestry map of 1805 and the Tithe award map of 1842 (Fig. 4). It must have been much bigger in Peter's time for he gave 50 acres of it to the Dean and Chapter. It is

1. M. Swainson Cooper 'Observations on Earthworks at Acton, Middlesex' *Journ Brit Archaeol Assoc* 46 (1890) 186-92.
2. Marion Gibbs *Early Charters of the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, London* (1939) 299-301, 329-333, 335.

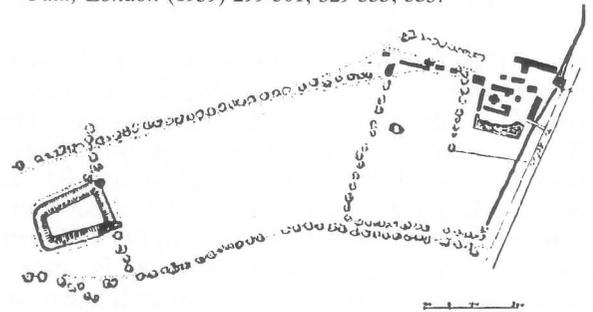


Fig. 2: sketch plan of 1890 for the British Archaeological Association, showing Moat in Meadow on the left, and remains of Moat by farm house on the right in Horn Lane, Acton.

generally thought – largely from field and place names – that the North Field shown on the maps is the north-west corner of the original field, which stretched southwards to the hamlet of East Acton. Both the Leybourne and the Tithe map show a clear track along the north of the field running westwards in the direction of our moated field.

Directly opposite the western end of this track is the ancient Greenstreet (now Horn Lane) for which there is a long record. Across from this the maps show a trackway which passes (in 1842) between a field known as the Thistley Field to the north and the Dean's Upper Field to the south. This is the old Dean's Wood which also has a continuous recorded history. It appears in a number of St. Paul's surveys and in a lease of 1460 is listed side by side with the Dean's Riding (the New Riding of the charter). By 1545 the trees had been cleared and from the 17th century it is known as the Dean's Upper Field³.

The path is said to pass 33 yards (30m) from the New Riding – which also appears to the north in the 1842 map, next to the Five Acre, which also appears in the Dean's lease of 1460.

The 1842 track then passes the southern edge of the Moated Meadow to reach the western boundary of Acton at Mason's Green (a late 16th century name after the Masons of Gunnersbury)⁴. The fields to the north were at that time all called Norwoods. They are where Robert of Haringey's woods are expected. Robert appears as a witness to a number of the Charters as a local landowner.

3. P.R.O. E.318/19 953 and 956.

4. John Mason was at Gunnersbury c 1558-1566. His descendants

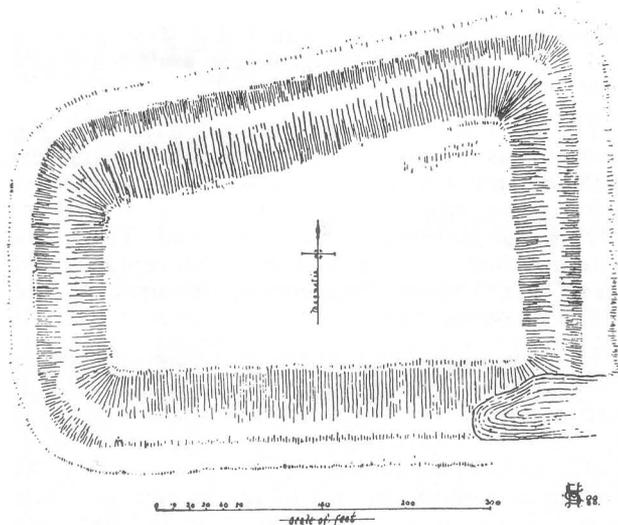


Fig. 3: larger sketch of Moat made in 1890, with a ditch varying from 41ft to 60ft in width. Length of north side 235ft; east 136ft; south 240ft; west 89ft.

We omitted Ulrichscroft on the way. Its position corresponds to the later Friars Place Farm, now, alas, burnt down, which has been identified as the other demesne house in North Acton, that of St. Bartholomew's Priory from the middle of the 14th century⁵. The St. Paul's and St. Bartholomew's holdings covered the whole of the western part of Acton apart from the Turnham field in the south. Friar's Place Farm was another moated site and until its recent destruction part of the moat was still full

farmed just across the Acton border.

5. V.C.H. Middlesex VII, 17-18.

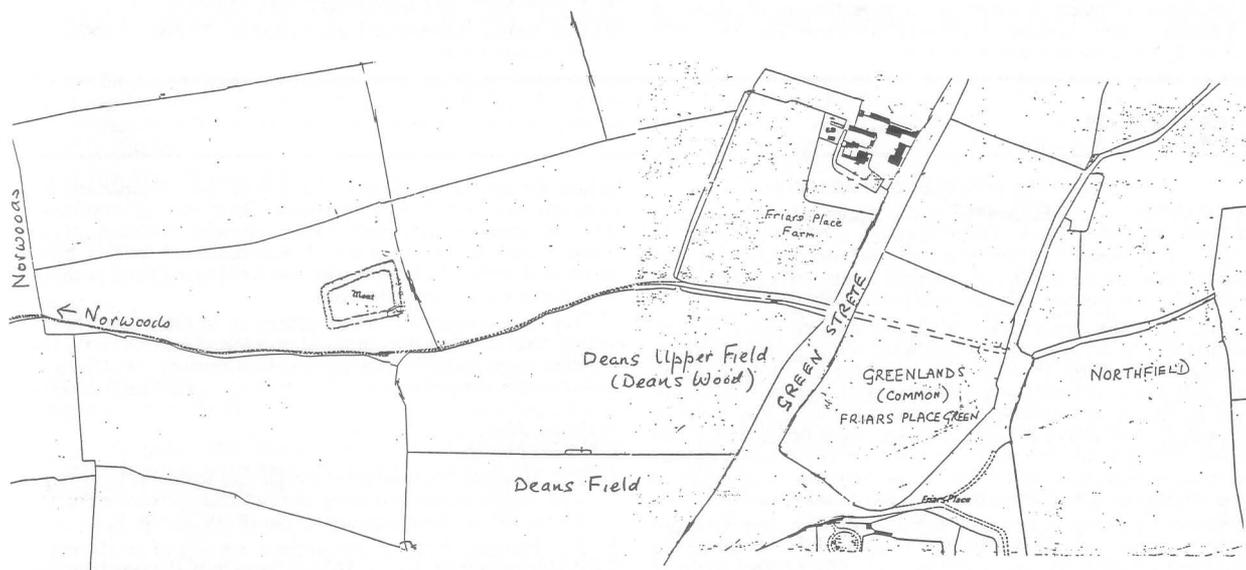


Fig. 4: map of the area from maps of 1683, 1805 and 1842.

of water. It was built in medieval style round a courtyard (*curia*) with a well in the middle and still contained medieval features⁶.

The St. Paul's demesne house described by the charters has the same form: a hall roofed with tiles, with an extension, a buttery, a solar with a chamber below, one large building containing a kitchen, bakery and malthouse, and a cowshed. There is a note attached to the charter in a 14th century hand that Dean Thomas Ingalesthorp repaired it, and added many rooms.

It seems surprising that the two demesne houses were so close together and so far from the centre of Acton, where the church already stood. According to Domesday Book the five hides later given to St. Paul's and St. Bartholomew's were granted by the Bishop of London to two of his socmen in Saxon times⁷. Ulrich is a good Saxon name and there are other Saxon names in the charters. It might well be that the Bishop's tenants in those days would want to live well away from the dangers of the road from Tyburn to Uxbridge.

There has been one other claimant for the St. Paul's demesne house, the site of Berrymead Priory in the centre of Acton on the south of the Uxbridge road. This was suggested by King-Baker, G. H. Monson, and J. E. Lush who wrote a history of Berrymead in 1919. They point out that opposite this house stood Grove House and Grove Road, and that according to the only charter they knew, the demesne house was in a grove.

The area of Grove House and Grove Road was,

6. *Ealing Local Historian* 1966; *Evening News* 7th June 1927.

7. See Pamela Taylor 'A Knight's Fee at Acton, in the Manor of Fulham' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 28 (1977) 316-22, for identification with Acton.

however, part of a common field – the Church field – until about 1700, when it became an orchard. On this area Salmon Burrell built a house in 1826, which he named after the orchard. Grove Road was built about 1860 on his land.

King-Baker and others were misled by the name "Priory". This was not given to Berrymead until 1806, when Col. Clutton gothicised the house, whose history began when Sir John Trevor drained the land and made a lake⁸. He passed on a house to his son⁹. In 1532 this was a piece of land known as "Watleys" belonging to the Frowyk family of Gunnersbury¹⁰. This name, like the later name of Berrymead, describes the marshy meadow into which the springs across the road must have drained, since it was on lower ground.

A reference back to the charters shows that this site was actually excluded from the St. Paul's holdings. The eastern boundaries of their lands south of the Uxbridge Road is given as "versus orientem sicut rivulus qui descendit de Actona" – "towards the east as far as the brook which flows down from Acton" (i.e. the Stamford Brook). Berrymead is actually cut off by the brook and lies to the north-west of it, so it was never included in the St. Paul's area. That, no doubt, is why the Frowyks were able to acquire it.

Perhaps this essay will encourage others to look again at old reports and descriptions where direct archaeological work is no longer possible, for they may yield further information in the light of new knowledge.

8. Guildhall 10312/98.

9. Conveyances in Gunnersbury Park Museum.

10. Goldsmiths' Company Estate papers 17/1790 – minute from old Court Rolls.

Letter

FEET BONES FROM EXCAVATIONS

I WAS VERY interested to read of the discovery at Kingston of 924 bones from the shin and feet of young cattle (Vol. 5, no. 9, 227-32); a minimum of 29 animals was represented. It was reasoned that, in this urban environment, they derived from skins destined for the tanner with the feet still attached.

Some ten years ago we excavated two such groups of bones. The first was at the Romano-British farm site at Nazeingbury¹ in the Lea Valley some 18 miles (29km) north of London. There were 1046 bones representing a minimum of 57 pigs. They were found in the silt of a hollowed-out tree-trunk well. The feet had been cut off just above the metapodials, there being only a few cuboids, astragali and calcanea. At this farm site it was reasoned that these animals had been killed at one time, the resulting meat being salted, dried or sold perhaps on the London market.

The second group of bones, this time of sheep, was salvaged from a machine-dug pile of lime close to a lime-kiln just inside the monastic precinct at Waltham Abbey², 14 miles (23km) north of London. Associated pottery suggested a date of 1500-40 or just

before the dissolution of the monastery in 1540. A knife and a pair of shears were found with the bones. There were 232 bones of at least 56 animals. The metapodials showed evidence of knife marks round the proximal end. It was reasoned that we had the waste and tools of a tawyer with the lime being used perhaps to help remove hair from the skins.

There is a medieval German reference to the sale of hides by weight with the feet attached. It is interesting to see the same practice apparently surviving in 16th-century Waltham and 18th-century Kingston.

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1. P. J. Huggins 'Excavation of Belgic and Romano-British farm with Middle Saxon cemetery and churches at Nazeingbury, Essex, 1975-6' *Essex Archaeol Hist* 10 (1978) 108-113.

2. P. J. Huggins 'Excavations on the north side of Sun Street, Waltham Abbey, Essex, 1974-7; saxon burials, precinct wall and south-east transept' (unpublished).