

THE LOST VILL OF NESS

By CHARLES GREEN

AFTER the revolt of the earls in A.D. 1075 and the flight of Ralf Wader (or de Guader), Earl of East Anglia, Roger Bigod, who was the founder of the family of the Earls of Norfolk, came into greater prominence. A large part of his holdings was of single, or small groups of, freemen in places where the king or leading tenants-in-chief already held. Many of these, as Johnson (1906, 19) explains, were granted to Roger in compensation for lands, formerly Earl Ralf's, which had been given to Isaac, a Suffolk holder.

In the *Norfolk Domesday* (Johnson and Salisbury's translation, 1906, 103) is a record of these newly-granted holdings in the Hundred of East Flegg. They comprise men in Thrigby, Runham, Filby and Mautby and, in the passage which describes these, there occurs also:

"In Nessa 1 freeman (with) 15 acres which Ailwin took possession of in the time of King William, and Roger (Bigot) reclaims it to his fee of the king's gift; then as now 2 oxen and 1 acre of meadow and 3 parts of a saltpan and it is worth 16 pence; and the same holds it".

Unlike the other parishes, Ness is not again mentioned in the Domesday record, nor is it included in the assessments for Danegeld. It may be suspected, therefore, that Ness was not a separate economic unit, *i.e.*, a "manor", but a "borewick" of a manor as defined by Johnson (*op. cit.*, 9).

Where then was Ness? After this fleeting appearance in Domesday there seems to be no other mention of it, as Allison (1955) has shown, though Blomefield (1810, xi, 200) quotes occasional references to men known as "de Ness". The name "Ness" indicates a promontory of sorts as the site of the settlement and the possible positions for this appear to be limited. Blomefield (*op. cit.*) apparently had no doubt, as he confidently placed it at Winterton Ness. In this he has been followed by Johnson and Salisbury (*op. cit.*, 103) who quote his identification without further comment. Mosby (1939, 415) though not naming Ness itself, accepts the existence of a former township at Winterton Ness and Allison (*op. cit.*) also follows Blomefield without comment. Steers and Jensen however (1952, 259 fn.) while admitting the possibility of its having stood here, qualify their statement with "there is considerable uncertainty as to the actual position of that place".

Yet Winterton Ness is the most northerly point of West Flegg Hundred and Domesday clearly includes Ness in the "East Hundret of Flec". And with it there go four East Flegg manors, all in the south-east part of the hundred. It would seem therefore that Blomefield was in error and that a further search for its probable site should be made.

We may conveniently begin with the evidence given in a nineteenth-century legal action, that of Thomas Clowes *v.* Beck, a Highway Surveyor who took



Fig. 1

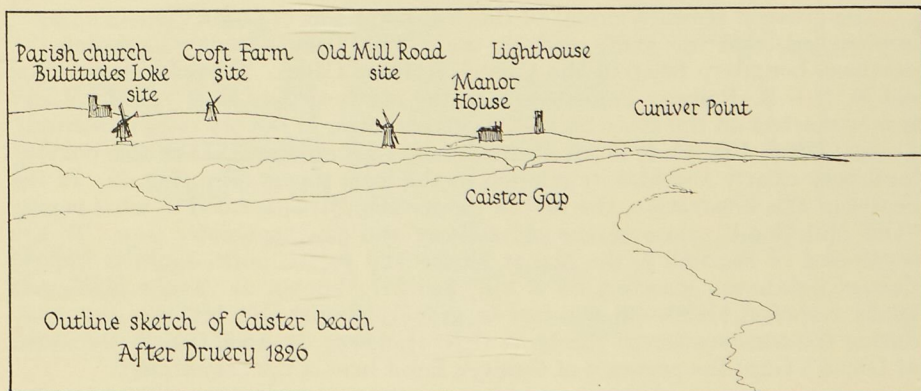


Fig. 2

stones from Caister beach (L.J.R., 1851, Jan. 17, 18, 23). Clowes was Lord of the Manor of Caister and claimed rights on the foreshore. Evidence was given by a boatman, a member of the Beach Company, to the effect that many acres had been washed away from the shore at Caister during his recollection. A coastguard officer said that, between 1831 and 1837, the sea washed away two ranges of hills and a valley near the said seashore measuring about 250 yards from the sea westward, at a place called Cuniver Point. Another beachman said that the sea had advanced on the land very considerably for about a mile north of Caister Gap (*i.e.*, Beach Road), but had receded south of the Gap. He thought that high water mark was about as far from the Manor House as it was forty years earlier. The Manor House (later the Manor House Hotel, the front of which was washed away in 1941) stood some 200 yards to the north of the Gap and was close to the southern end of the eroded area.

Opposite the old Manor House, erosion has been more severe in the last century. An eye-witness still living has described how, about 1890, the edge of the low cliff at the head of the beach was a considerable distance from the front of the building. As at that time he was a small boy, he cannot with confidence estimate this "considerable distance" in terms of feet. However, as the coping of the sea wall is some 200 feet west of the former house-frontage, there has clearly been a loss of the order of 100 yards or more in less than 100 years.

It seemed possible to follow up the evidence given in the law court and estimate the real extent and location of the eroded area. For this, recourse was had to the maps prepared for the Inclosure Commissioners (1815) and the Tithe Award Commissioners (1843). These were careful and accurate detailed plans drawn to a fairly large scale. Measurement between comparable fixed points enabled these scales to be transferred accurately to that of 6 in. to a mile, so that the "marram line" and high water mark could be plotted on the O.S. maps at this scale. These plots showed that, though the coastguard officer had somewhat exaggerated the amount of erosion in the six years he specified, his "Cuniver Point" was clearly recognisable. The measured distance of the loss on its axial line was some 500 feet between the dates of preparation of the two maps.

The greatest seaward extent of this lost point was opposite "Dinah's Gap", approached from the main road by the "Long Loke", to-day bordering the northern boundary fence of the Caister Holiday Camp. The loke crossed the old M. & G.N. Railway immediately to the north of the "Halt" platform and is now marked on the shore by the re-entrant angle in the old railway sea wall. Druery (1826, 104, Pl. 5) in his illustration of Caister beach, shows this point of land very clearly and also its relation to the local topography (Fig. 2). In the centre of this illustration, the mill in the middle distance stood in what is now "Old Mill Road", close to the old railway station and Caister Gap. To the north-east of the mill is the Manor House and to the north again is the old Caister lighthouse standing on a hill, formerly known as "Light Hill". As Blake recorded (1890, 42) the bed of gravel capping this hill was cut away during the construction of the M. & G.N. Railway. It stood just to the north of Dinah's Gap; the presence of Cuniver Point here is thus confirmed.

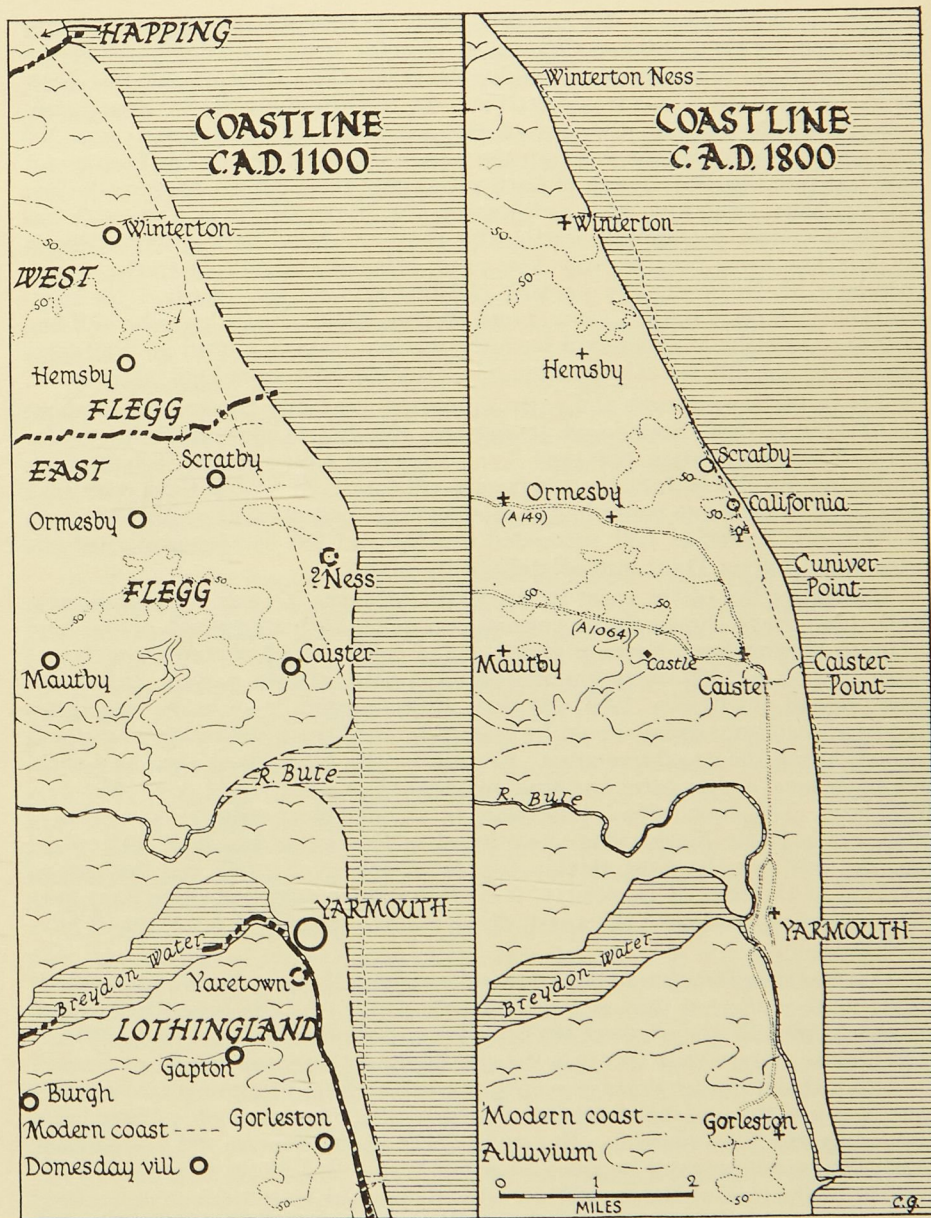


Fig. 3

This reconstruction of the coastline from the two Award maps was taken as far north as the California Gap for, it must be remembered, an area to the east of the main road, and bordered by the byroad to California and the coast, lay in Caister until it was transferred in 1926 to Ormesby with Scratby parish. Opposite California Gap the loss to the sea since 1815 has been some 300 feet, whereas opposite Dinah's Gap the loss in the same period has been about 1200 feet (see Fig. 3b). South of Caister Gap and the Lifeboat station, the loss has been very small and, as is well known, the North Beach at Yarmouth has greatly accreted, particularly during this century. Northward from California the loss has been progressively less until, near the Scratby/Hemsby parish boundary at Newport, the ancient cliff-line still stands, masked by long-established dunes (Green, Larwood and Martin, 1953). From here the cliff-line recedes progressively northward from the modern waterline until at Winterton village this old cliff-line is approximately a quarter mile from high water mark.

Yet in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the sea was washing the Winterton cliff. Steers and Jensen (*op. cit.*, 263-5) give the evidence for this and suggest that in this area ". . . little net gain appears to have been established until well into the nineteenth century". It would thus seem that changes in the offshore banks had so modified the currents that, from Winterton to Newport, accretion had succeeded erosion and led to the erosion of the projecting Cuniver Point immediately to the south.

Recent studies of the coast in the Yarmouth area (Green and Hutchinson, 1960, 1965) have shown that a marine regression with emergence of the land occurred during Saxo-Norman times and a fairly rapid submergence began again about A.D. 1300 which gradually slowed down as time passed. It has also been pointed out (Green, 1961, 25) that, after a certain level in the emergence had been reached, erosion would be negligible until the same relative level was passed during the re-submergence. Erosion on the Flegg coast therefore could not have been severe after the time of Domesday until about A.D. 1350 or a little later. This conclusion is buttressed by the fact that, with the exception of Ness, not a single Flegg village mentioned in Domesday has been lost to the sea. As this was the most thickly populated area of Norfolk and perhaps of England at the time of Domesday, it is clear enough that had there later been very extensive erosion of the coast, three or four villages at least would have been lost.

It seems therefore that in the fourteenth century Cuniver Point was probably much more extensive than it was 400 years later. As the base of the point occupied virtually the whole of the open-sea coastline of the East Flegg upland, it is almost certain that this was the site of the ancient settlement of Ness.

Other than Cuniver Point, the only area where East Flegg might have had a ness was on its ancient southern coastline along the former estuary, now fringed by the Bure marshes. But as has been shown (Green and Hutchinson, 1960) the marsh-pastures between Breydon Water and Flegg were already dry pasture at the time of Domesday. Here then there can have been no real change in the upland outline. South of Caister Point, the spit which now links it with Yarmouth had not then been formed, so that here there can have been no

significant build-up at that time. Clearly the coastline of the old Caister parish is the area from which the ness has been eroded. And the now almost forgotten name "Cuniver Point"—perhaps given because of its extensive rabbit warren—provides the clue to its position.

Both the local topography and some of the record evidence tend to support this hypothesis. In Caister and Scratby there are several ridges of land standing above the 50-foot contour. This level is approximately the base in this area of the Lower Chalky Boulder Clay (Lowestoft glaciation) (Green, Larwood and Martin, 1953 and the writer's personal observations during excavations). If, as has been done in the accompanying map (Fig. 3a), these contours are extended along their probable lines towards the east, it will be seen that the small ridge with its western end at California would have formed a "spine" for Cuniver Point and an elevated sheltering ridge for a settlement-area on its south side.

In Blomefield's account of Caister (*op. cit.*, xi, 201-216) there are several record items which appear to have bearing on the site of Ness. For example, he says that in addition to the parish churches of Caister Holy Trinity and Caister St. Edmund, there was a free chapel of St. John belonging to the fifth manor called "Caister Hall". Founded in 1280, this chapel stood "on the bank and almost devoured by the sea" and was therefore removed shortly before 1386 to another manor.

In Plantagenet times the two parishes of Caister comprised no less than seven manors. These were Caister Bardolfs, St. Benet's Abbey Manor, Vaux's and Bozoun's Manors, Caister Hall and Reedham Manors and Horninghall. Later these seven manors were amalgamated to form Caister Bardolfs and Caister Fastolfs (or Pastons), both of which ultimately passed into a common ownership. Evidence to enable the boundaries of the original manors or even of the two composite ones to be defined does not exist, but it is probable that the original seven holdings reflect those named in Domesday and one of them may well represent the ancient settlement of Ness. In support of this it is known that in 1291 the then Earl of Norfolk conveyed his manor of Caister to the king. It is not known which of the seven this was, but it suggests that it represents his predecessor's holding at Ness, for Domesday makes no mention of Roger Bigod holding at Caister.

An interesting Caister reference in 1368/9 (Coram Rege Rolls, Hilary, 43 Edw. III) may have some bearing on this identification. It was presented before Justices appointed to enquire concerning trespasses oppressions and grievances done in the lands and tenements and free warrens of (Sir) John Bardolf deceased that Wm. Elys and two others hunted and killed hares in the warren of Castre. Two of the said persons were summoned before the King and say that the town of Castre within the warren whereof they were supposed to have hunted is not within the Lordship or warren of the said John Bardolf and that the Justices had no power to enquire as to trespasses elsewhere. *Judgment* that Defendants may go *sine die* as it does not appear that they did any trespass within the Lordship of the aforesaid John de Bardolf.

The narrow strip of land which to-day lies between the old railway line and the shore on either side of Dinah's Gap is still known as "The Warren".

But this must earlier have been of much greater extent and, as has been suggested, may have led to the name "Cuniver" being given to this area.

To sum up, the Domesday settlement of Ness was probably a berewick of Caister and stood on a promontory of the north Caister shore. It began to suffer erosion in the latter part of the fourteenth century and the remnants of the promontory, later known as "Cuniver Point", finally disappeared by erosion in the second half of the nineteenth century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the former rector of Caister, the Rev. J. G. Markham, B.A., and a former Parish Clerk, Mr. L. W. Harrison, for giving me access to the Tithe Award MS. volume and Enclosure Award MS. volume, held by them respectively. My friend Mr. R. H. Haylett has been most helpful, both in giving an account of his personal observations in the past and with the record evidence. I must also thank the editor of the *Eastern Daily Press* for permitting me to use material originally contributed by me to his columns.

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