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STILL LOOKING AT COWS: LITTLE WILBRAHAM, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

By CHRISTOPHER TAYLOR

Introduction

From its beginning the study of rural settlement in Britain has been aided, and advanced, by the technique of morphological analysis whereby the origins and development of villages and hamlets have been explained by the interpretation of both their existing layouts and by their depiction on early maps. The method is full of pitfalls and limitations and its usually tentative results have often been corrected, refined or replaced following more rigorous archaeological and historical work (eg Foard et al 2009). Some recent workers in the field have even suggested that most village development is too complex for simple morphological analysis (Jones 2010, 41). Yet this writer believes that the method remains a useful tool, if used with care and the right amount of scepticism. He was taught its value, first at school, then at university and finally working for 30 odd years for the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (Taylor 2005). And he still considers that it has much to offer, even if it does not always provide convincing answers.

Perhaps the greatest value of morphological analysis is not in the overall interpretation of any particular settlement that may or may not be reasonable, but in the way that it can enable ideas, even if based on the flimsiest of evidence, to be developed and then left to be taken up or rejected by other scholars using different methods, if possible elsewhere. For in all landscape studies uniqueness is of little value. Only the commonplace is important (Taylor 2006, 131).

This view of morphological analysis has long been held by the writer. And as both a keen reader of detective stories and as someone who has worked for over 50 years in the green pastures of Midland England, he has always believed in a remark made to Lord Peter Wimsey by his manservant Bunter in the book *Clouds of Witness* (1926) by Dorothy L Sayers: ‘ . . . facts are like cows. If you look them in the face hard enough they generally go away’ (Taylor 1978). This paper illustrates how the writer continues to look at doubtful, unprovable and unlikely facts that can be ignored or will eventually go away and so allow the development of ideas that are much better and that can be confirmed in other places.

Little Wilbraham: setting (Figs 1, 2 and 3)

Little Wilbraham (TL 545585) lies 9 km of east of Cambridge and close to the fen edge. It is located just within the south-east corner of Roberts’ and Wrathmell’s Central Province (2000), an area dominated by nucleated villages but here close enough to its edge to be within a transitional zone with the adjacent South East Province where dispersed settlement is widespread. In detail Little Wilbraham is situated along the northern side

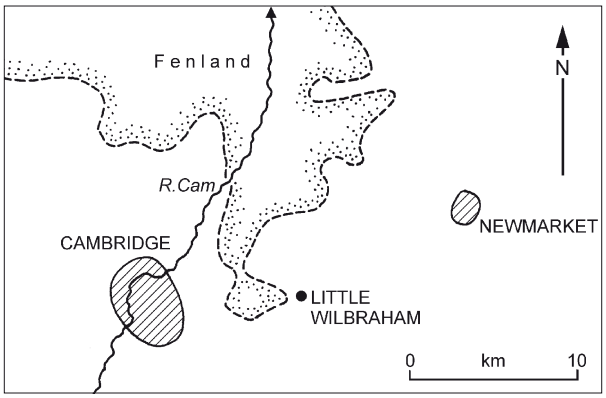

Figure 1 Little Wilbraham: location

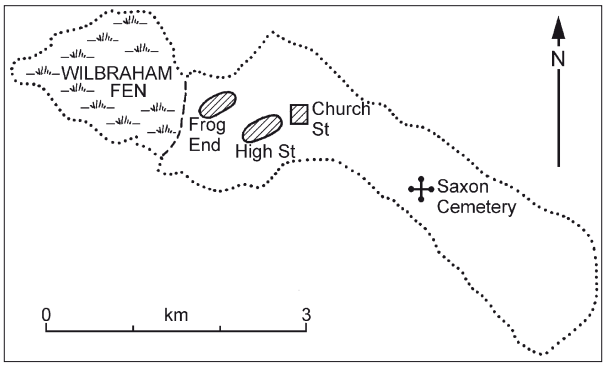

Figure 2 Little Wilbraham parish

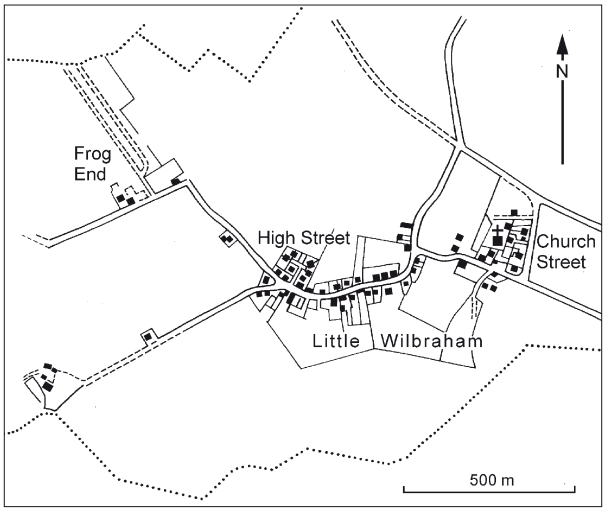

Figure 3 Little Wilbraham village

of an embayment of former fenland, the boundary of which is marked by the outcrop of the Tottenhoe Stone that separates the Upper and Lower beds of the Lower Chalk. The spring line created by the Tottenhoe Stone produces copious supplies of water at the eastern end of the village but little or none at the western end.

At first sight the village seems to have a simple plan, apparently forming a linear settlement some 900 m long. Yet looked at more carefully it is clear that it is polyfocal, comprising two quite distinct sections, Church Street and High Street, less than 100 m apart and in different physical settings. The eastern section lies above the spring line while the western lies below it. More significant, the two parts have totally different layouts.

Church Street (Figs 4 and 5)

Before 19th-century and later development and expansion the eastern part of Little Wilbraham, now Church Street, comprised a single straight street just under 300 m long with dwellings on both sides that divided an overall roughly rectangular 'envelope' 160 m across into two almost equal parts each of about 10 acres (4.2 ha), so creating a regular two-row settlement (CRO P175/26/6, Enclosure Map). The north side, bounded on the east and west by side roads, contains the parish church, slightly off-centre and set back from the street at the head of a small rectangular green. The latter probably was once larger and square but its eastern half has been encroached upon at some time. It was presumably this green that gave the name Green Street to this part of the village by 1460 (VCH 2002, 319). In 1800 there were five domestic properties on this side of the street, two on each side of the church and another on the green. At the west end there was, and still is, an empty space large enough in 1800 once to have held four more similar-sized properties. An indentation on the north side of the churchyard might indicate that there once was a back lane along .this side of the village, subsequently encroached upon by the extension over it of adjacent properties.

On the south side of the street the rectangular 10-acre (4.2 ha) area was, and again still is, divided into two parts by a narrow reversed-S curved lane running south, perhaps once giving access to West Field, one of the former open fields of the parish, and the river-edge meadows beyond (VCH 2002, 304, map). The western section contained a large farmstead and other outbuildings set close to the street and known at various times as Hall or Manor Farm. The paddocks immediately to the south were called College Ground and The Lordship Yard in the late 17th century (VCH 2002, 322; CCC 09/23/24a, Estate Map of c 1670). In all this part covered some 5.4 acres (2.3 ha). To the east of the dividing lane is another very roughly rectangular area of just over 4 acres (1.75 ha). In its north-west corner, adjacent to the street, is the late 18th-century former Rectory, lying within a small plot that appears to have been cut out of the once undivided area. South of the Rectory is another former farmstead, called Rectory Farm in the 18th century but possibly called the 'Halk' in 1261 and the 'Halkhouse' in 1368 (VCH 2002, 323).

Extending along and below this southern half of the village envelope is another long narrow area of some 7 acres (2.9 ha), rectangular at its western end but narrowing to a point in the east probably because of an earlier ditch carrying water from the spring line. This area lies immediately below the outcrop of the Tottenhoe Stone and, as a result, contains a number of water-filled earthworks and is bounded on the west, south and south-east by wet ditches. It also is divided into two parts, both set below the blocks containing the farmsteads described above. The division between the two is a hedge that continues the line of the curved lane and which terminates at a sharp dog-leg in the southern boundary ditch. The western part, now grass paddocks and called The Lordship Close in c 1687 contains part of a former moat or a set of fishponds, various low banks and scarps and a circular feature of unknown purpose. The eastern part has modern gardens and outbuildings, but until recently contained a large L-shaped pond, probably a former fishpond or perhaps a moated site, now destroyed, as well as other earthworks.

This overall layout of the High Street can, in part, be related to the manorial history of the parish. Little Wilbraham is first identifiable with certainty in Domesday Book in 1086 when it was in the hands of Aubrey de Vere who held four hides from the king (Rumble 1981, 29.5). The adjacent parish of Great Wilbraham, as well as having the same name and interlocked boundaries and thus, perhaps, a common origin, was partly in the hands of the Crown in 1086. Both may once have been a 10-hide royal estate although it had already been broken up by the late 10th century (Reaney 1943, 137–8; Rumble 1981, 1.5, 14.65; Hart 1966, 45, 233, 239).

Figure 4 Little Wilbraham, Church Street. Based on the Enclosure Map of 1800

Although the de Veres, as earls of Oxford, continued as tenants-in-chief at Little Wilbraham until at least the mid 14th century, by the 1150s, and possibly soon after 1086, their holding had been subinfeudated into two manors. One was initially held by Aubrey de Vere's chamberlain and thus became known as Chamberlain's Manor, later Rycote's. Its medieval holders are well documented, it was granted to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge in 1570 and the college finally sold it in 1914. The second holding, usually called the Talmasche Manor after its owners in the 13th century, can also be traced from the 1150s until the 14th century when it was reduced in size by sales and grants to a smaller one held by Anglesey Priory situated in the adjoining parish of Bottisham. It belonged to Anglesey until the Dissolution, after which it was further reduced in size (VCH 2002, 321–2).

The location of Chamberlain's/Rycote's manor house can be identified without difficulty by means of 17th to 18th-century leases and terriers, 17th-century and 19th-century maps and the Enclosure Map of 1800 (CCC 09/23/24a and b, 200a, 222, 225, 249, 260 etc; CRO P175/26/6, Enclosure Map) as occupying the western part of the south side of Church Street. The location of the Talmasche manor house is less certain. By implication the eastern half of the south side of Church Street would seem to be most likely. This is its traditional place and the successors to the Talmasche family, Anglesey Priory, certainly held a farmstead here in about 1500 (Taylor 1998, 103; CCC 09/23/16). Further, there is no other obvious site in the village

To summarise so far, the eastern part of Little Wilbraham village seems to have originated as a rectangular, two-row settlement with a large manorial site or curia occupying all of the south side and with the parish church, a green and possibly eight domestic properties on the north bounded by side roads and a back lane (Fig 5). The eight properties is guesswork based on the size and number existing in 1800 and the size of the empty space at the west end. Whether this figure has any relation to the eight villeins recorded on the de Vere holding in 1086 is even more unclear. It is possible that the reversed-S curved lane, and its extension as a hedge across the southern manorial earthworks area and beyond, indicates that this part of the village was laid out over pre-existing strip fields.

This neat arrangement, presumably of late Saxon date, was altered at some time between 1086 and 1150 with the division of the southern curia or manorial section into two parts, each assigned to one of the new subinfeudated manors created at the same time. Both manorial centres were subsequently extended south to provide further space. Copious water there enabled the construction of moats and fishponds, perhaps in the late 12th or 13th centuries.

High Street (Fig 6)

The western part of Little Wilbraham appears to be different from that to the east. It lies below the spring line, here producing much smaller amounts of water than the more easterly one and has a completely different layout, consisting of a single curving street lined with dwellings on both sides. It is now called High Street, but earlier, by 1350, it was known as Hawk Street, after Hawk Mill further west where the road terminates. At least in post-medieval times, this part of the village seems to have been larger in area and population than Church Street and, as the editors of the VCH (2002, 319) perceptively noted, in 1800 most of the farmsteads in Little Wilbraham were located here. A cursory examination of the surviving buildings suggests that this already may have been the situation by the 17th century. Such evidence might be interpreted as meaning that this part of the village had a different social structure from the lordly dominated eastern end. However, it may be going too far to suggest that the five bordars and seven

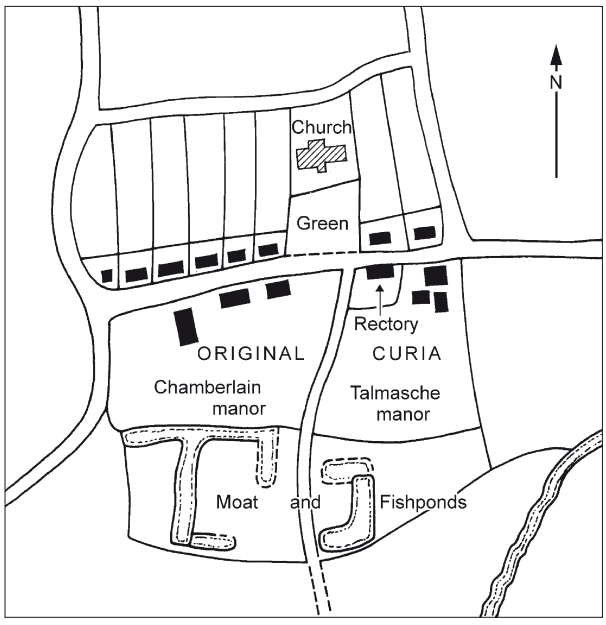

Figure 5 Little Wilbraham, Church Street: conjectural reconstruction of its original layout and subsequent extensions

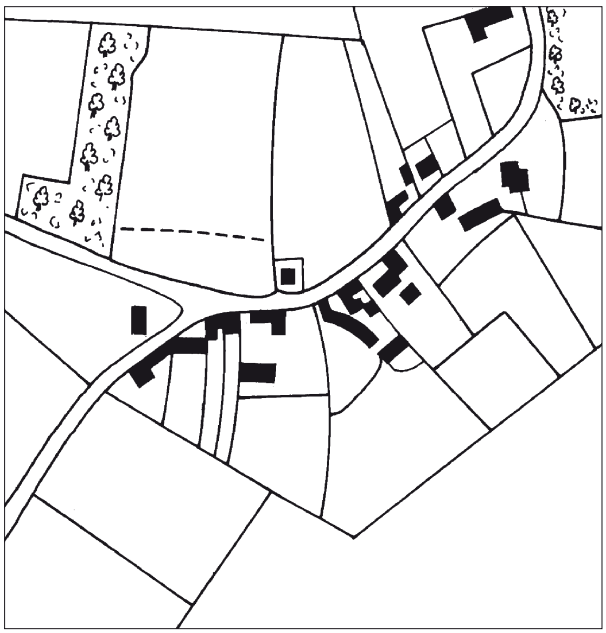

Figure 6 Little Wilbraham, High Street. Based on the Enclosure Map of 1800

slaves recorded in 1086 lived here, with the eight villeins occupying Church Street.

However, the difference between the layout of High Street and Church Street is not as great as at first it seems. In High Street an older arrangement that no longer exists following massive 19th-century reorganisation is shown on the Enclosure Map. The map indicates that before the alterations took place a number of the croft boundaries were markedly curved, indicating that, perhaps like Church Street, this settlement too had been laid out over existing open fields. This is a well known phenomenon, especially in Cambridgeshire, and if these interpretations are correct they add to the growing list of such occurrences both there and elsewhere (eg Taylor 1983, 151–9; 2006, 123–6; 2009, 102–3; Foard et al 2009, 191–305). The western part of Little Wilbraham can thus be seen as another probably planted settlement overlying earlier fields, physically quite separate from the ecclesiastical and tenurial centre of Church Street to the east and possibly socially distinct as well.

Frog End (Fig 7)

In addition to the two parts of the village described above, there is another possible medieval settlement in the parish. This is Frog End, now a single farmstead situated close to the fen edge some 600 m north-west of High Street. Nothing is known of its history and even its name, relatively common in the fens, is not recorded until 1825 (Reaney 1943, 139). However, on the Enclosure Map of 1800 it is shown as a single-row settlement comprizing three long, narrow, curved occupied properties and two empty ones. There are also indications that formerly there were two more such properties and perhaps originally as many as seven. It is even possible that there once were as many as twelve to fifteen tofts and crofts, all some 250 m long and only 25–30 m wide, set within a rectangular area that earlier may have been a single open-field furlong on the western edge of the common fields. When and how such a settlement came into existence is unknown, but it is probably medieval and, again perhaps, deliberately planted there. If so, it adds to the problems of elucidating the settlement history

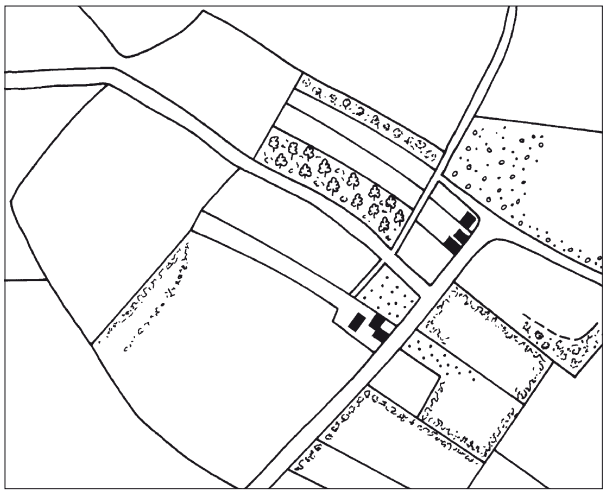

Figure 7 Little Wilbraham, Frog End. Based on the Enclosure Map of 1800

of the parish. Could the three settlements identified be the successors to an earlier pattern of dispersal situated elsewhere in the parish and of a form now known to be widespread in Cambridgeshire and elsewhere, to which the large Anglo-Saxon cemetery of 5th to 6th-century date in the south-east of the parish may be related (Fig 3; Lethbridge 1931; Taylor 1973, 56–63; 2008; Atkins 2010)? Or are they just re-organised settlements on the sites of earlier dispersed Saxon ones and either contemporary with the surrounding open fields or later than them? Or do they represent a new, late-Saxon, lordly designed landscape all planted on an existing field system? All these alternatives are possible.

The Watering System

Although the main concern of this paper has been to explain the origins of the village plan, there is one final feature of the landscape of Little Wilbraham that requires inclusion here, despite already having been described at length elsewhere. This is a system of watering the High Street by means of an open conduit that carried water to the upper end of High Street and thence in a broad ditch along the south side of the street (Taylor and Hawkins 2011). All of the available documentary evidence suggests that this was part of a complicated arrangement of 19th-century date. Its primary purpose then was to carry water to the drier part of Wilbraham Fen and the supply of water to the village street was secondary.

However, the actual layout of the system is so intricate and fits the landscape so awkwardly that it seems possible that most of the 19th-century work was merely the extension into the fen of a much older and simpler system that only involved the watering of the village street. This presumed earlier arrangement would have been fed by water from the very strong springs of the Tottenhoe Stone outcrop below the Church Street part of the village and passed through the moats and fishponds of the manorial extensions and thence, via their boundary ditches, into a conduit leading to High Street. This would have increased the supply of water available to the inhabitants of High Street for, despite being situated below the Tottenhoe Stone outcrop, very little water emerges from the spring line there. Indeed that part of the village relied almost entirely on pumps and wells in the 19th century.

If this, largely unproved, and unprovable, idea of a much earlier origin for the water-supply to High Street is correct two others emerge. First that the construction of such a system, transferring water from the manorial centre of the village to the socially, and physically, lower part might be regarded as another instance of lordly intervention. And second, the system could only have been laid out after the creation of the manorial extensions to Church Street, following the subinfeudations of 1086 –1150 that gave rise to them and perhaps thus as late as the late 12th or 13th century. Whether this suggestion could be used to indicate either a possible post-Conquest date for the creation of High Street itself or should be seen as merely a subsequent improvement to the amenities of the settlement is, no doubt, going too far. Yet both highly sophisticated hydraulic engineering as well as simple systems of water transfer are well known from the medieval period. These can include the complex

arrangements at monastic sites (Aston 1993, 20–2, 60–1, 90–110), the simpler, but still complicated, lay out of fishponds (RCHME 1979, 77–8, Harrington (6)) and the diversion of streams to provide water for domestic purposes and/or mills. An example of the latter has been noted at the village of Scothern, Lincolnshire. This was recorded by Paul Everson and David Stocker who have shown that a natural stream that flowed along the south side of an original large village green was diverted to flow across it. This was probably at the same time as the manorial curia of Barlings Abbey was extended across former peasant holdings on the north side of the green and on to the green itself, the new watercourse forming its boundary. This event may have taken place soon after Barlings acquired their Scothern property at the beginning of the 13th century.

Conclusion

Are there any useful conclusions to be drawn from all this speculation? At one level all that can be said to have been achieved is one more variation on the seemingly endless forms of medieval settlement as the writer has continued the 'stamp collecting' that many of his colleagues believe is a misguided approach to the subject. More specifically, there has been a suggestion that Church Street and Frog End can be interpreted as the result of perhaps lordly late-Saxon planning. The concept of such planning has been rejected recently by a number of scholars who prefer to see regular village forms as being the result of growth over pre-existing structures, usually rectangular fields or furlongs (Foard et al 2009, 57–8). While this may be so elsewhere, at Little Wilbraham the division of Church Street into two almost equal areas, of lordship and peasantry, could still indicate deliberate planning, even if the overall form was influenced by earlier fields. However almost all the final interpretations here are based on the abandonment of obvious facts and on speculation derived from limited and unsatisfactory evidence. Thus they probably are of little academic value and can be ignored. Nevertheless, the writer still believes that this type of morphological analysis, for all its faults, is a useful way of producing ideas on settlement development regardless of whether these ideas are right or wrong. Once they have been suggested they can be taken up, examined by other means and in other places and accepted or rejected. That is the way our subject can be advanced. This being so he will continue to look at facts, and at cows, with the same degree of scepticism, and hope.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Cambridgeshire Archives for permission to reproduce details from the Little Wilbraham Enclosure Map. Paul Everson kindly reminded me of his work at Scothern. The drawings are the work of Phillip Judge.

Abbreviations

CCC Corpus Christi College Archive
CRO Cambridgeshire County Record Office

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