

65.04 The origins of the Grovebury block and its manorial site

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The Priory of La Grava, later Grovebury, lay 2.5km south of the developing town of Leighton and clearly served as the medieval manorial centre. It was isolated from other settlement in Bedfordshire, though the (now deserted) Buckinghamshire village of Grove (La Grave in medieval documents) was nearby on the opposite side of the River Ouzel which formed the county boundary. Was the priory established on an entirely new site in the mid-12th century, or did it take over the pre-existing site of the former royal manor? If the latter, had the manorial centre always been at this location, or did it move from elsewhere to this site after 1155 when documentary evidence suggests substantial rebuilding, or even earlier in the 11th or 12th century?

Historical topography and the pattern of township boundaries provide some evidence. Thede Way (*Thiodweg*) is perhaps the earliest identifiable topographical feature in the area. It was a Saxon route on the line of an earlier, perhaps originally prehistoric, one, running between the Icknield Way north of Luton and Wing in Buckinghamshire. This included a 7km stretch through the Leighton Buzzard district, crossing the River Ouzel at *Yttingaford*, the scene of the signing of a peace treaty with the Danes in 906 [see 3]. Thede Way was obviously significant in the landscape when utilised to help define five relatively regular land units of similar size or economic and agricultural value in the pre-medieval landscape: Linslade parish west of the Ouzel, for which it was the southern and part of the western boundary, and four of the townships in Leighton parish east of the river. It formed the northern boundary for Stanbridge and Billington, and the southern boundary of Eggington with Clipstone and Leighton Buzzard. Post-medieval boundaries show the Grovebury area, with the site of La Grava at its heart, as an anomaly in this pattern, as a tongue-like extension of the Leighton Buzzard township lands southward, cutting across the Thede Way. Its eastern boundary with Billington runs in rectilinear zigzags around the edges of closes belonging to the hamlet of Little Billington at its southern end [65.01].

This anomaly suggests a major change in the organisation of the pre-medieval landscape at some date. The boundary of the Grovebury block respects Little Billington village rather than vice versa, so was presumably fixed after the village had already developed considerably. Little Billington existed in 1400 as West Billington (CRO: KK 944/2), with a level of organisation indicating an existence of some duration. Its origins, whether early as a dispersed Saxon settlement or later as colonisation from Great Billington, are unknown, as is whether the carving out of the Grovebury block of land from what was originally part of Billington and the establishment of the boundary with Little Billington were contemporary. However, the definition of the Grovebury block does seem to have been a subsequent change to the pre-medieval arrangement.

These changes were Bedfordshire developments: at no time during the medieval period or later did the Grovebury block have any ownership, manorial or other links with land to the south-west on the other side of the Ouzel county boundary. The small Buckinghamshire Grove parish was an entirely separate land unit consisting of the village, church and two manorial estates: Grove manor was there at Domesday and Broughton manor, whose manor house site is now deserted, existed from at least the 13th century (Page 1925, 361-3).

The history of the Grovebury block of land in the 15th century and the post-medieval period indicates that for some time previously it had not been part of any common or open field system such as surrounded it in the Leighton Buzzard district. Had there been any communal interests, it could not have been leased separately as an entire block from c 1400 nor its lands thereafter utilised as a single farm in one tenancy. Other 15th-century documents from the Windsor archives also indicate that the Grovebury block was regarded as a separate unit and the inference is that a single party, in this case the lords of the manor, had sole influence [5, 65.11].

This suggests that before the 15th century the lands at Grovebury were part of the manorial demesne, the home farm retained solely in order to provide the lord of the manor with agricultural produce for consumption and cash sales. Demesne land could be organised as a consolidated and separate block of land on the manor, as strips alongside and amongst those of the tenants in the open fields, or, as was the case in Leighton Buzzard, in both configurations. The demesne lands were usually cultivated by the tenants who gave their services free according to the customs of the manor (Thirsk 1973, 265–7). Grovebury seems likely to have been a deliberately created consolidated block of demesne land, additional to other demesne land in the Leighton Buzzard district, though some of it may have been obtained by exchanges with tenants.

In considering whether this was done in the context of royal manor or La Grava, the location of the excavated site at the heart of the surrounding Grovebury block of land needs examination. Were both site and demesne defined at the same time or as part of the same process? Or was the laying out of the demesne distinctly later than the occupation of the settlement site, or is the apparent arrangement of the two quite accidental, with the formation of the demesne block pre-dating occupation of the settlement site? The site occupies an obvious topographical location on the raised ground beside the confluence of the Ouzel and the Cocklake stream. The ideal semi-circular shape of the block of demesne around the home farm facilitated good management and economic use of the land, because the distances to all the edges were similar, apart from some distortion due to the long boundary along the Ouzel with its valuable river meadows. There is a later analogy in the creation of 19th-century post-enclosure farms, moving their base from the village to the centre of a newly created block of farmland in one part of the parish, replacing a landholding of many strips scattered throughout the parish. Indeed, the laying out of the site and the demesne block around it could have been done without affecting the centre of any community's field system though a substantial part of Billington seems to have been affected [5, 6].

A crucial question about the dating of the creation of a manor site and/or demesne area is why it was required, for which both general and specific contexts can be sought. Perhaps the old demesne consisted entirely of lands divided up and scattered throughout the open fields, prompting a desire for a more compact holding with at least a substantial proportion of the demesne in a block, allowing more efficient and economic management [6]. More specifically, social status or privacy may have influenced the choice of a new manor site, either as an isolated royal retreat away from the rest of the populace, or for the lifestyle of the founders of the priory of La Grava. It is worth noting that in Great Sturton in Lincolnshire during the mid-12th century the lord of the manor there gave half of his demesne to Kirkstead Abbey. This demesne had formerly been divided and scattered amongst the village fields but by agreement and exchange with his tenants he created a consolidated block of demesne towards the parish edge which he gave to the abbey:

since the furlongs of my demesne lie mixed among the lands of my men and the monks wish to dwell apart from others I have therefore brought

together the land of my demesne and the lands of my men in the further part of the fields and I have given that land to the monks to have together and I have given to my men for their part of the land which they had, an exchange from the land of my demesne at their pleasure (Stenton 1951, 124-5).

This demonstrates that in the early medieval period reorganisation of the landscape and of landholding to create demesne blocks was possible by a process of agreement and exchange or compensation. Did this same process occur in Leighton, whether or not it was related to the priory? There is also the possibility that there was a wholesale transference of the manor site and demesne block from elsewhere due to decay and perhaps poor or inadequate soils on the old site. For example, if the original manor site and demesne had been at Heath and Reach on the poor, sandy, soils of the lower greensand¹, soil exhaustion may have occurred, resulting in economic difficulties and decay. Documents of 1341, 1376, and 1377 indicate this happened in Linslade on similar sandy soils, with the manor house no longer present by this time (*Nonarum Inquisitiones* 1807, 326; Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous, III, 1348-77, 392; Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem, XIV, 111). If this had been the case earlier with the Leighton royal manor a new area of more fertile soils (the Grovebury area consisted of greensand overlain by gault and boulder clays) may have been sought and utilised. Could this relate to the assart near Billington referred to above [see 6 and 8]?

These matters show the importance of studying the La Grava Priory-cum-manorial site within its larger context of the Grovebury block of land. Whatever was set at what time in the centre of its own block of demesne land had been well sited, no doubt deliberately, to take advantage of the surrounding land. The remains of ridge and furrow show it was dominated by arable during the medieval period, with meadows alongside the River Ouzel. A ready water supply and power source existed in the Ouzel and Cocklake stream which probably also provided fish. From a date as yet unknown fish were also bred and kept in the priory's own fishponds, formed out of natural water courses alongside the Ouzel to the south-west of the occupied site which had perhaps been suitable for fish over a long period without adaptation. It may be that the desire to have fishponds was an important factor in the initial location of this site. There are also hints of a warren in the vicinity. The documentary record before 1164 is uncertain, but the establishment of La Grava Priory sometime after that date would have placed it in the centre of its own block of demesne land. This would have aided agricultural self-sufficiency and may have produced a profit from surplus after Fontevrault had spent 112s 8d in stocking the manor in 1164 (Fowler and Hughes 1923, 152) [65.03, 4].

¹ Editor's note: on the basis of the figure showing geology [1.11] and the figure identifying parishes [6.04=65.01], there was very little lower greensand in Heath and Reach.