

GOOSELAND IN THE UPPER AXE VALLEY, SOMERSET

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Large areas of the central Somerset Levels were owned by the Abbots of Glastonbury and the Bishops of Wells (or Bath and Wells from 1091) from the early medieval period. Relatively little has been written about land and estate management by the Bishops probably because of the dearth of documentary evidence.

Research and fieldwork suggest that Gooseland was created out of the moor as a large hay meadow by Bishop John de Tours at the same time that he enclosed his adjacent deer park in Westbury in the early 12th century (Nott 1997). Its use by wild or semi-domesticated geese then, or later, probably gave it its name.

Gooseland lies below the Mendips on the moors in the upper Axe Valley 7 km west of Wells (see Figure 1: inset). It separates Westbury-sub-Mendip from Wookey, both manors of the Bishops from before the Norman Conquest. Along its southern boundary flows the Wookey Axe, a tributary of the main River Axe, which still flows northwards through the Bleadney-Panborough gap.

INTRODUCTION

Gooseland occupies almost 60 acres of low-lying ground between the open moors of Westbury and Knowle (Figure 1). It stretches as a long tongue about 300 metres wide from the main River Axe towards the westward spur of Chalcroft Hill. On both of its long sides it is bounded by water; on the south by the Wookey Axe, and on the north by

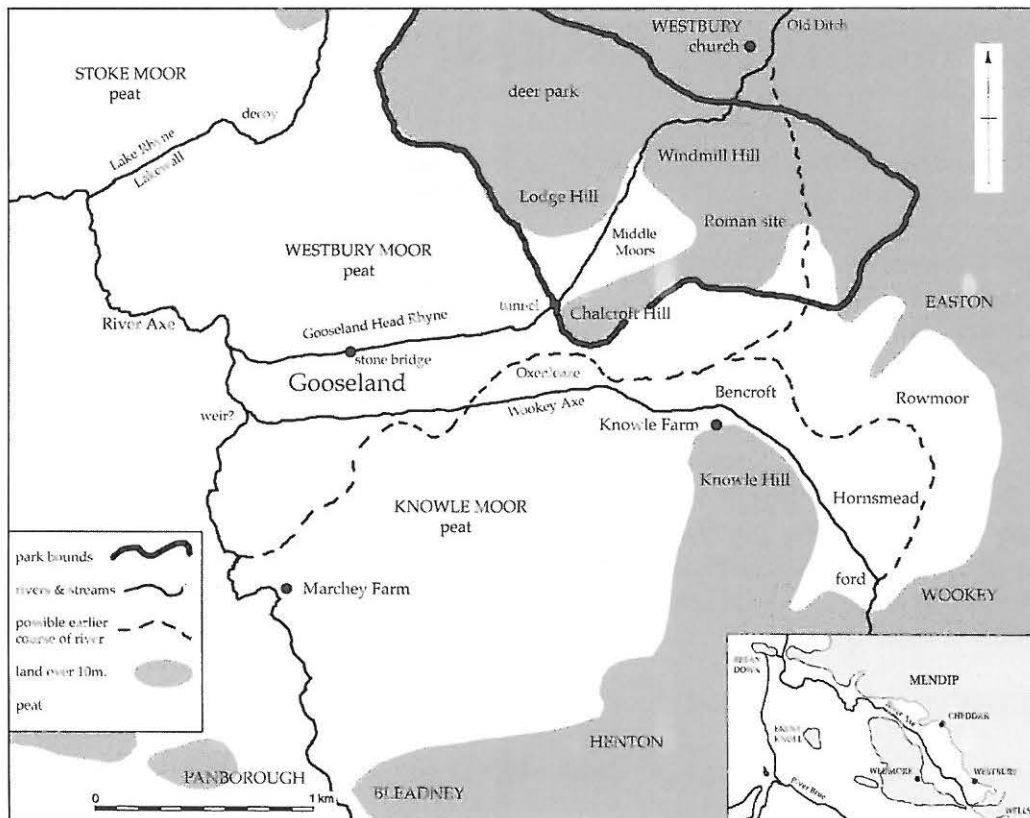


Figure 1: Gooseland in the upper Axe Valley, Somerset.

Gooseland Head Rhyne, which originates as the stream that descends through Old Ditch in Westbury village and then flows alongside Moor Lane, between Lodge and Windmill Hills, and into the rhyne on Westbury Moor.

The former semi-natural state of the levels meant that they were abundantly stocked with wild animals. The waters supported ducks, herons, more or less domesticated geese and swans. As early as the close of the 12th century the tenants of North Wooton paid the rent of newly enclosed pastures in geese, as also did the tenants of the coastal villages of East Brent and Lympham (Helm 1949, 50). Unfortunately there is no comparable documentary evidence to confirm such an early date for Gooseland in Westbury

LATE SAXON ACTIVITY

The natural course of a river is to meander across such a low-lying area as the levels, as the main River Axe still does along the whole of its length where it marks the south-western parish boundary of Westbury CP with Wedmore CP. The River Axe was an important transport route from the sea to the Saxon port at *Bledenythe* (Bleadney) as early as AD 712 (Sawyer 1968, no.1253). The Saxons, the Abbots of Glastonbury and the Bishops of Wells would have embanked the river and scoured its course, both to reduce flooding and ease the flow of traffic. These broad low banks remain today.

Reclamation of the moors in Westbury may have begun in the late Saxon period. Around the edge of the moor, closely following the 10 metre contour, there are several 'hamms' which were probably the first areas managed for meadow and summer grazing - Godwinsham, Reedham, Littleham, Brightham and Pinches Ham. The last three lie between Gooseland and Chalcroft Hill. 'Hamms' are usually Saxon in origin and these may be parts of the 30 acres of meadow recorded in the Domesday Book, ample for the 10 cattle that were also recorded.

HIGH MEDIEVAL PERIOD

By Domesday large areas of the central Somerset Levels appear to have been protected against

marine inundation by the embanking of the tidal rivers including the Axe, but extensive areas were still regularly flooded by freshwater coming down from the hills, particularly the low-lying backfens. In the following centuries these moors became highly valued, as pasture on the higher ground was gradually converted to arable with the rise in population. The great ecclesiastical landowners, including the Bishops of Bath and Wells, and their tenants intensified the exploitation of their estates in this period - causeways were built, rivers canalised and artificial waterways cut across the moors. The diversions of the rivers Brue, Sheppey and Whitelake away from the Panborough-Bleadney gap and the Axe Valley during the 13th century would have greatly reduced the flow of water and must have caused some decline in both the fisheries and river communications (Williams 1970, 70-71).

The aerial photographs that were studied by McDonnell (1980, 81), in his Somerset Claylands Survey, reveal that, at one time, the Wookey Axe took a meandering course between Chalcroft and Knowle Hills, and across Knowle Moor to join the main Axe just north of Marchey Farm, about 0.5 km further south than today. In contrast the present watercourses along the north and south sides of Gooseland are remarkably straight indicating their artificial construction. Both the Wookey Axe and the Northern Rhyne run in deep cut channels between high banks that stand 1.5-2.0 metres above the surrounding moor (Figure 2, opposite). Those along the Northern Rhyne have been leveled in parts in the recent past and further destruction was taking place in the autumn of 1998. However there is enough remaining visible evidence to confirm that the banks were once continuous.

The straight and embanked Wookey Axe from the main river to Chalcroft Hill also marks the Westbury/Wookey parish boundary. Hudson and Neale (1983, 55-69) have argued that a similar straight boundary, *Skitmore* or *Kippmerewall*, separating the medieval manors of Northload and Wedmore, could well be late Saxon in origin. This bank was built by the Dean of Wells in the early 1400s after the resolution of various boundary disputes between the ecclesiastical landowners of Glastonbury and Wells, and as part of a major drainage scheme in the area. However



Figure 2: Gooseland North Rhyne looking east towards Chalcroft Hill, Westbury-sub-Mendip.

it may also be argued that this bank was replacing the earlier Saxon boundary, described in the Panborough Charter of AD 956, that may have followed a more meandering stream from *Thelewell* across Yeo Moor to *Hakewere* on the River Axe.

Rippon (1996), in his studies of the medieval reclamation of the Gwent Levels across the Severn Estuary, has described Monksditch - a similarly straight canalised stream that runs for about 5 km across the backfen and moor of the Caldicot Level. Early references imply that it was constructed by the monks of nearby Goldcliff shortly after the foundation of their priory in 1113 to avoid freshwater flooding their land. It too formed a parish boundary.

More recently Williamson (2003, 177) refers to the expropriation of large areas of land by the Anglo-Norman lords to create managed

woods, in particular deer parks, and how they consumed much of the remaining wood-pastures and meadows. The creation in the early 12th century of the 600 acre deer park at Westbury would have left the village, or at least the Bishop, desperately short of hay and winter fodder for cattle and other livestock (Nott 1997). It is surely very likely indeed that the creation of the park and enclosure of Gooseland took place at the same time. Its close physical relationship shown in Figure 1 would seem to support this view.

A 12th or 13th century date is most likely for the other earthworks of the Westbury/Wookey area. Fieldwork reveals that the Wookey Axe was re-routed, ditched and channelled from the ford at the bottom of Knowle Lane in Wookey so that it ran through slightly higher land hugging the edge of Knowle Hill and passing Knowle Farm before heading out across the open moor. The three parishes of Westbury, Wookey and Easton all

meet in the middle of the low-lying area that backs up to Wookey and Easton and the original course of the Wookey Axe would have been a meander through this marshy area, parts of which were certainly not drained and enclosed until the late 18th century - Rowmore in Easton in 1786, for example.

The Statute of Merton of 1235 encouraged the early enclosure of 'wasteland'. It recognised the lord's right to occupy and enclose the commons or 'waste' provided he left sufficient pasture for his free tenants. In the first half of the 13th century Philip de Cnoll was given permission to enclose 20 acres of moor and 19.5 acres of mead on the east side of Jocelin's moor of Westbury (Jocelin was Bishop of Bath and Wells 1206-1242). Hasler and Luker (1997, 32) have suggested that this may have been the Hornsmead area between the Wookey Axe and Rowmoor. The channelling of the meandering river is likely to have provided the opportunity for this drainage and enclosure.

Croft usually means a small enclosure so that when the name is found in a document of 1390/1 it suggests that some enclosure had already taken place in the Westbury/Easton/Wookey area by that date when alders on Ash Moor, Row Moor and *Bencroft* were sold for the lord of the manor of Wookey (Hasler and Luker 1997, 31).

The earliest documentary reference to Gooseland itself is in an Indenture of 1535 confirming a grant by Bishop John Clerk of Bleadney Mill and 'one close of meadow in Goseland containing 5 acres with one weir within the manor of Westbury overland' (Hasler 1995, 41). The most likely location for such a weir would be on the Wookey Axe where it joined the main river, suggesting that these 5 acres were those at the western end of Gooseland adjacent to the main Axe. Abbot Bere's Perambulation of the Twelve Hides of Glastonbury in 1503-10 mentions *Torneryswere* alias *Stywere* in this area. In his interpretation of the bounds Morland (1984, 35) suggests that this weir was where the rivers Axe and Lower (or Wookey) Axe meet, adjacent to Gooseland.

Gooseland Head Rhyne is fed by the stream from the centre of Westbury village. The

channelling of the stream is evident from just below the former Lodge Farm (now demolished) along Moor Lane and then diagonally across Middle Moors to the corner of Chalcroft Hill. Gibbs (1988, 21) claims that the stream runs under the line of the wall of the Bishop's deer park through a 14th century barrel vaulted tunnel, before entering Westbury Moor (Figure 3). It may originally have been directed southwards to join the Wookey Axe. The alignments of former and present ditches and stretches of river are complex in this area. However, the stream was later diverted to run westwards and parallel to the Wookey Axe all the way out to the main river. Not only did this help to control flooding and enclose land for reclamation, but the high banks also provided a dry route beside Gooseland between the main river, with its water born traffic, and the village of Westbury.



Figure 3: Stone vaulted tunnel under the line of the Bishop's deer park at ST 4705 4755.

At the same time diversion of another stream in the village, to join the other near Lodge Farm, may also have reduced the water that would once have flowed from the village towards the south east; across the fields now called Broadmead and Hurdenwell, passed the Roman habitation site (Webster and Croft 1998, 181) in The Straits (where the former course is still visible and now feeds a wildlife pond), and out past Wilmots Paddock to the low-lying and flat areas of Outer Rodmead and Common Rodmead. These 'meads' may well have been deliberately created at this time to provide much needed additional hay meadow and pasture for the village animal stock.

There are two further pieces of evidence for an early medieval date for the parallel-banked watercourses and creation of Gooseland. McDonnell (1980, 81 and fig. 3) maps the fen peats of the Godney soil series on Knowle, Westbury, Stoke and Draycott Moors, and argues that these peats probably began to accumulate from the 14th century when the climate began to deteriorate. Records indicate increased flooding from the late 13th century on the Levels and that the management of the waterways began to decline after the Black Death in 1348. On Westbury Moor peat is not found south of the line of the Gooseland Head Rhyne, strong evidence that the banks of the rhyne already existed and were preventing flooding from the moor into Gooseland, and hence the accumulation of peat in

Gooseland itself (see Figure 1). The Westbury Moor peat is bounded on the north west by Lake Rhyne and a series of fairly substantial banks, known locally as Lakewall, along the parish boundary with Rodney Stoke. OE *laecc, lecc* means 'a stream flowing through boggy land' and the stream flowing down from Rodney Stoke is banked and channeled like Gooseland Head Rhyne, suggesting a similar early date.

Sir Richard de Rodney exchanged land in Cheddar with Bishop John de Drokensford of Wells in 1316 and acquired 'the whole pasture enclosed by Stokelak' in Westbury; the area where a duck decoy pool was later to be created on the Westbury/Rodney Stoke boundary. Lakewall, which channelled the stream from Rodney Stoke village to the Axe, had almost certainly been constructed in the century before. Other embankments, such as Southlake Wall and the Burwall further south by the River Parrett, were built by the abbots of Glastonbury in the late 13th century (Williams 1970, 53-4).

Finally there is evidence of four small bridges over the rhyne between Gooseland and Westbury Moor. They are clearly indicated on the 1791 enclosure map of the moor. Two have disappeared, removed or buried where the banks have been leveled. One was being buried in the autumn of 1998 when more leveling was taking place, but one remains in use, just (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: 'Clapper' style stone bridge over Gooseland North Rhyne at ST 4821 4736.

The water flows between two stone walls about 0.6 m apart and 3.85 m long. The 'clapper' style bridge itself is made from three enormous limestone blocks, the largest of which is 2.70 m long and 1.20 m wide. Close to the location of one of the other buried bridges there remains a pile of five similar large stones. The size of such rough stones also suggests an early medieval date.

Bishop Pier's Survey of Westbury in 1634 records three separate leases for about 8 acres of Gooseland; presumably the rest of Gooseland was included in other leases but not named. Evidence from neighbouring Wookey indicates that the subdivision and sub-leasing of such pasture took place in the period 1470-1550, for example, of Oxenlease by the Wookey Axe (Hasler 1995, xiii).

When geese arrived in Gooseland is not known but the birds remained important to the local economy until at least the 18th century - 2500 are recorded in neighbouring Wookey in 1746. Demand for comfortable bedding for the many yeoman farmers and craftsmen grew with their prosperity (Hasler and Luker 1997, 91). Demand was also growing in the towns and cities. Thirsk (1997, 91) describes how the urban markets for poultry meat grew in the 17th century. She notes that in 1642 the common fen of Whaplode and Holbeach parishes in Lincolnshire was two miles in compass and that the inhabitants had free common *without stint at all times* for geese, as well as cattle and swine. By the time of Defoe in the early 18th century great flocks of turkeys and geese walked from East Anglia to London; 1000-2000 geese in a single drove (Defoe 1928, 59-60). Did the geese from Westbury and Wookey walk to Wells, Bristol or Bath?

Confirmation that the area of Gooseland was drained before the late 18th century is provided by two maps. The Plan of Westbury Moor that accompanies the 1791 Enclosure Award (Somerset Archive and Record Centre 1791) clearly shows Gooseland as 'Old Inclosures in Westbury'. Similarly 'A Plan of the Old Inclosures in the Parish of Westbury' commissioned by the Bishop of Bath and Wells in 1814, also maps Gooseland (Somerset Archive and Record Centre 1814).

18th AND 19th CENTURIES

Despite earlier drainage attempts the main area of over 2500 acres of unenclosed low-lying peat and clay lands of the upper Axe valley continued to flood regularly. It was not until the late 18th century that large scale drainage and reclamation was attempted, promoted in part by the Bath and West of England Agricultural Society, founded in 1777. Enclosure Awards were made for Knowle Moor in 1782, for Westbury Moor in 1791, and for Draycott and Stoke Moors in 1791 and 1793. However these drainage works were not integrated into the main channels and flooding continued. Severe flooding in the unusually bad winter of 1799 prompted further action. Eventually the 1802 Drainage Act (Williams 1970, 226) proposed a comprehensive system for the Axe Valley that closely followed that put forward by John Billingsley in his *A General View of the Agriculture of the County of Somerset* of 1798. One important feature of the new works was the Hixham Rhyne of 1806 (not shown on Figure 1) which flowed through an inverted culvert or gout under the Wookey Axe and then across Gooseland and Westbury Moor to Stoke Clyse, where it enters the main River Axe.

CONCLUSION

The enclosure of Gooseland in the 12th century was part of complex estate management, probably initiated by John of Tours during his episcopate of 1088-1122 following, or part of his creation of a deer park in Westbury-sub-Mendip. It may have been part of, or have preceded, the more substantial draining and reclamation, not only of Middle Moors but also the far larger area, of over 350 acres of the upper (Wookey) Axe valley beyond the Chalcroft Hill/Knowle Hill gap.

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