

PLANNED MEDIEVAL LAND DIVISION IN WITHYHAM, EAST SUSSEX

by Mark Gardiner

An area of planned land division is identified in the part of South Malling manor which lay in Withyham parish. The planning is associated with the settlement of this land in the medieval period. It is suggested that the lord of the manor, the Archbishop of Canterbury, may have initiated the colonization of this part of his land.

In the medieval period the Archbishop of Canterbury's manor of South Malling stretched across almost the whole width of Sussex. It reached from near Lewes in the south to Lamberhurst in the north. A small portion of this large manor lay north of Crowborough on the edge of Ashdown Forest in Withyham parish. Within this area there is evidence for a planned division of land.

The earliest detailed record of holdings in the manor of South Malling, the custumal of c.1285,¹ records that the land was classified in various categories. The most important of these were free land, virgate or customary land, droveland and assart land. Later rentals elaborate these types. Free land also included land called shareland which paid a rent of ploughshares or a commuted sum of equal value, and assart land was divided into old, middle and new assart. These categories can be used to date when the land was first occupied. Free and customary land belong to the earliest clearances, while land settled after the early 13th century was termed assart.² The date of droveland is uncertain.

With the aid of post-medieval documents it is possible to plot the precise extent of some of these land types (see Appendix). The manor of South Malling came into lay hands in the 16th century³ and the Wealden part was split into the manors of Framfield and Mayfield.⁴ A number

of documents survive for the manor of Framfield which included the land in Withyham parish and some of these include a record of the land categories. The most important documents which have been used are the rentals of c. 1570,⁵ 1617⁶ and 1810.⁷ Some 19th-century court books of Framfield manor have also been consulted⁸ and the Withyham tithes award⁹ has been used as a source of field names. These documents do not allow all the boundaries to be mapped exactly and where uncertainty remains this has been indicated on the plan (Fig. 1) by a broken line.

The customary land of South Malling manor within Withyham comprised two and a half virgates.¹⁰ During the medieval period the virgate was the unit for the purpose of rent assessment, and in the Weald the virgates took the form of large consolidated blocks of land containing many fields and some woodland. There is no evidence in the High Weald of Sussex for any subdivided field systems such as those found in other parts of the county.¹¹ In many respects the virgates resembled the *jugera* of Kent which have been studied by Baker¹² and others,¹³ and as in Kent the virgates often took their names from the farms or hamlets from which they were worked. In Withyham the names of one of the virgates and of the half virgate are remembered in the names of surviving farms at Gillridge and Alkesford. The

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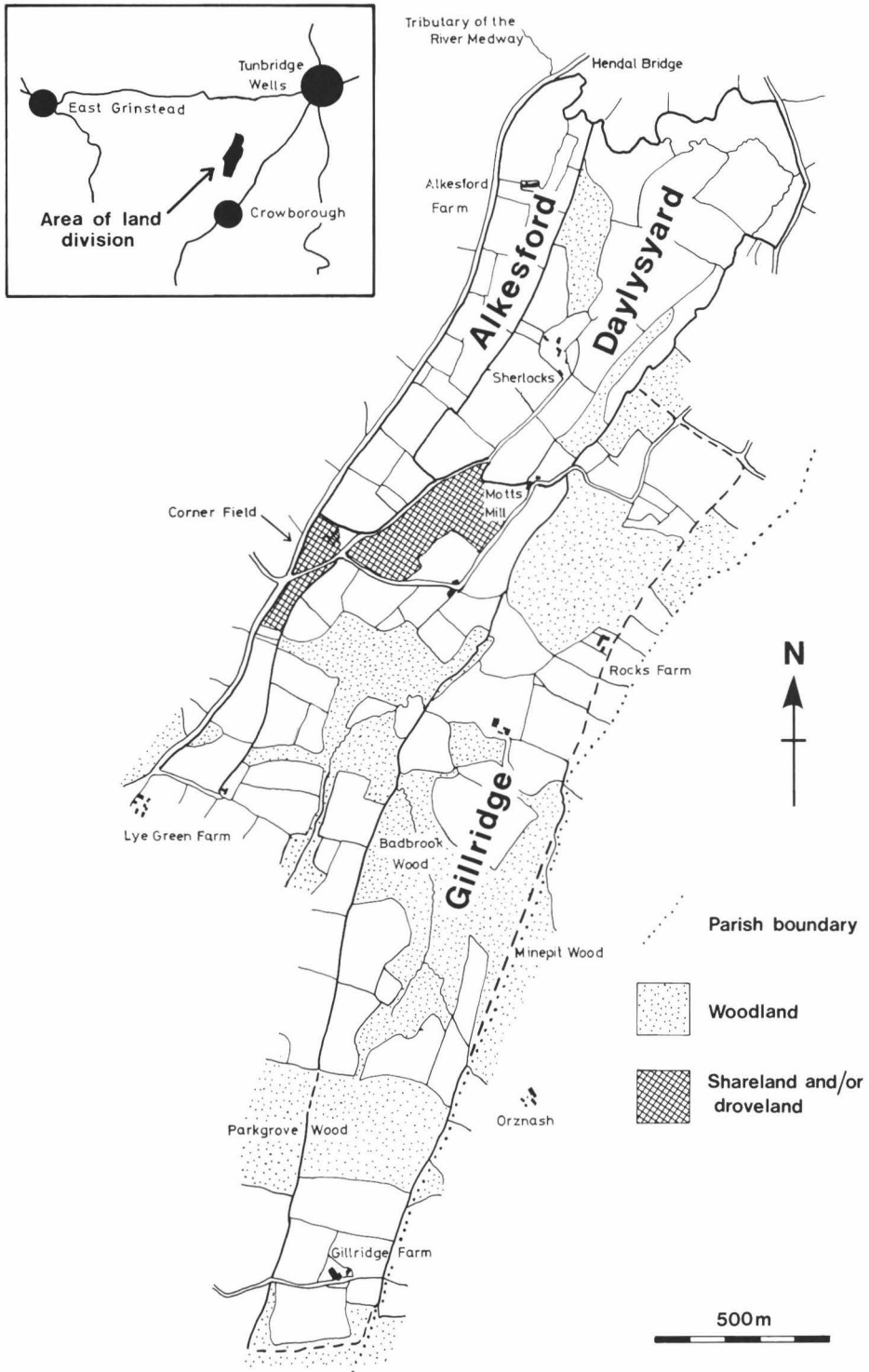


Fig. 1.

name of the other virgate, Daylysyard, is now lost,¹⁴ but the virgate consisted of land later called Sherlocks farm.¹⁵

With their elongated shape the virgates lay across a number of environmental zones. Alkesford and Daylysyard virgates stretched down to a tributary stream of the river Medway and occupied the richer lands in the broad valley bottom, but also ran up to the higher ground to the south. Gillridge virgate lay on the lower part of a slope leading up to Crowborough Beacon, less obviously attractive land.

The western side of Gillridge virgate was marked by a continuous hedge-line which ran for 1.6 km. interrupted only for a short distance by Parkgrove Wood, although here too the boundary was followed for some way by a track (Fig. 1). Beyond this length of hedge-line the boundary descended a valley through Badbrook Wood to Badbrook. Fieldwork has shown that here the boundary was marked by a substantial bank and ditch on which a line of mature trees now stand. The boundary then joined the stream and ran along Badbrook and past Motts Mill.

The eastern side of Gillridge virgate is less clear. Between Gillridge and Orznash farms the boundary can be followed. Through Minepit Wood (formerly called Eachen Wood)¹⁶ it apparently coincided with the parish boundary, and further north the line of the edge of the virgate is very uncertain, although it may be marked by the hedge-line running past Rocks Farm.

Daylysyard virgate uses the stream from Motts Mill for its eastern edge, but on the west a hedge-line 1 km. long running south from a tributary of the river Medway records the division with Alkesford virgate. The other side of Alkesford virgate is marked by the road from Groombridge to Crowborough. A short length of continuous hedge beyond Alkesford virgate to the south has an uncertain function. Its northern part serves to delimit an area of shareland and/or droveland, but beyond this there is inadequate information to specify the

land category. The hedge here runs nearly parallel with the road towards Lye Green Farm.

DISCUSSION

A striking aspect of the plan of the customary land is its regular shape with long, gently curving boundaries. These are quite different from the shapes of virgates elsewhere in the Weald which, though not irregular in outline since they were bounded by roads, paths and streams,¹⁷ lacked the very long continuous hedge-lines and sinuous form of the virgates in Withyham. The Withyham virgates may be compared, for example, with the units of land division called ferlings in the nearby manor of Rotherfield.¹⁸ Although in a similar type of environment, the ferlings there were not orderly in form, but rather angular in shape. It is this contrast which argues that the virgates in Withyham had been laid out with a degree of systematic planning not found so far elsewhere in the High Weald.

The fields within the Withyham virgates are also more regular in shape than those in other parts of the Weald. This cannot be directly attributed to planning for the fields are not so uniform in pattern as to suggest that they too had been mapped out. It seems likely that their rectilinear form is an incidental product of further dividing up the land in the framework of the planned virgates.

An interpretation of the planning of the Withyham virgates will be largely dependent on the date given to the original division of the land. The best parallels for the somewhat sinuous form of the land units are to be found in prehistoric contexts, for example the field boundaries discovered in Essex dated to the Iron Age, and in South Yorkshire and North Nottinghamshire.¹⁹

It is possible that medieval farmers when the area was settled may have re-used a surviving field pattern. The absence of regular land division beyond the area of early medieval settlement and the exact fit of the customary

virgates within the planned boundaries argues, however, against this.

A further possibility would be to associate the field system with the supposed Roman road which, it has been suggested, ran along the parish boundary between Withyham and Rotherfield.²⁰ The road would then have formed the eastern edge of Gillridge virgate and the other virgate boundaries could have been laid out parallel to this. The identification of the Roman road has been made primarily from the length of almost straight parish boundary which is thought to mark its course.²¹ The Ordnance Survey record that the greater length of this boundary is 'undefined'.²² This indicates that two points on the boundary were established and the course of the boundary between them was noted conventionally by a straight line.²³ In the Weald woodland was exempt from tithe charges²⁴ as was common land and it was not necessary precisely to define the limits of a parish in such situations. Between Withyham and Rotherfield the parish boundary is established where it passes between fields near Gillridge and Orznash farms; elsewhere the straight boundary is not defined as it runs through woodland. The case for a Roman road here is therefore not supported by the line of the parish boundary and in the absence of any archaeological evidence its existence is not proven.

A medieval context for the layout of the planned land division seems most likely, and the colonization of this area of the Weald may be fitted into the chronology of clearance and settlement established by Brandon.²⁵ Although some of the area lay in the favoured wide valley bottom on a tributary of the Medway, a typical situation of early settlement, most of it was higher up on the flanks of Crowborough Beacon where the land is dissected by steep narrow valleys, locally called ghylls. Such countryside was not attractive to early settlers.²⁶ Certainly the names of the virgates and farms suggest that settlement in this area was not among the earliest in the Weald. In contrast to

the names of other virgates in the nearby parts of South Malling manor the place-name elements are not those associated with the first Wealden settlements. Daylisyard, for example, comes from the name of a family who were occupying the virgate at the time of the c.1285 custumal.²⁷ In the absence of archaeological evidence it is not possible to date the settlement of customary land more precisely than giving a *terminus ante quem* of the early 13th century, the latest date for the settlement in South Malling on land of this type.²⁸

The land was apparently laid out as a co-ordinated whole, for all the long sides of the virgates run approximately parallel. This arrangement was not a product of the topography, for while the divisions do not ignore the presence of streams and ridges they make only selective use of them. The boundaries of the virgates follow gently curving lines and were not apparently set out by taking accurate sightings. In the woodland environment which preceded clearance such sightings would in any case have been very difficult. Instead the boundaries could have been laid out by marking points on the ground while walking through the woodland for such a method might well account for the slight curves. The resulting boundaries are a compromise between the requirements of an overall plan and the potentialities of the local topography which argues that those directing the planning had some knowledge of the local situation.

The choice of a thin, elongated shape for the virgates appears to indicate an attempt to divide the potential resources of the area between the land units. The portion of South Malling manor in Withyham is itself a long, narrow strip running between Crowborough Beacon, an area of poor land,²⁹ and the valley of the Medway tributary. The latter was the best land and it is probable that the fields by the stream would have been used as meadow which was highly valued in the medieval period. The valley land was divided up between Alkesford and Daylisyard virgates in proportion to their

area. Gillridge virgate included some land at the lower altitudes, but also contained land higher up on the edges of Crowborough Beacon.

The social context in which the land would have been divided is not certain. The pattern implies a co-ordinated and probably a single act of planning. A work on this scale may well be attributed to the lord of the manor, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and his officials. Certainly such a project must have received seigniorial approval and was possibly a systematic attempt by the Archbishop to colonize this remote part of his manor and thereby increase his revenue.

CONCLUSION

The act of planning was confined to the layout of the boundaries of the virgates and

need not imply that all the land was cleared immediately. Even so, remarkably large pieces of land were enclosed with a view to future use. If all the virgates were laid out simultaneously it indicates a high expectation of the demand for land. The pace of assarting on the margins of Ashdown Forest has been discussed elsewhere.³⁰ This area of Withyham is a further example of the expansion of cultivated land, but it is unusual in that it was co-ordinated. Further work will be required to show if this area of planned land division was unique or if such planning occurred more widely in the Weald.

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APPENDIX: MAPPING THE VIRGATES, AN EXAMPLE

The identification of the exact boundaries of the customary virgates in Withyham is only made possible by the survival of detailed surveys which allow parcels of land to be precisely located. The method used relies upon the continuity of the boundaries of the virgates, unchanged from the medieval period until the 19th century when the land was enfranchised, with few changes in field boundaries during that time. This allows post-medieval documents to be used to find the position of boundaries established many hundreds of years before. The plans of the virgates and all other relevant information are drawn up on copies of the Ordnance Survey 1st-edition 6-in. maps, mostly surveyed for this area in the 1870s. These show field boundaries before more recent 'improvements'. To illustrate how this may be done an example is given to show how Alkesford virgate was mapped.

All the references to land in Alkesford virgate were extracted from the rentals of c.1570 and 1617. The 1617 document lists holdings field by field, often providing details of adjoining land, field names and acreages. All the holdings of land lay between Sherlocks on the east and the lane from Hendl Bridge to Sherwood Green on the west. Sherlocks could be shown to be the same as the holding of that name mapped and recorded in the Buckhurst terrier. The lane mentioned is the present road from Lye Green to Groombridge crossing the Medway tributary at Hendl Bridge. Two of the holdings gave the northernmost limit of Alkesford virgate as the river flowing under Hendl Bridge. It remained to fix the southern limit of the virgate.

Just beyond Alkesford virgate was a piece of pasture called The Corner Field which lay in the angle with the

highways from Sherlocks and from Hendl Bridge both going to Sherwood Green on its east, south and west sides. This could be easily located.

To check the accuracy of the plot the names of certain fields in the 1617 rental were compared with field names given on the tithe award map. For example, fields called Brambly Field and Well Croft could be identified in both, their area was recorded similarly and they lay in the expected positions.

Notes

¹ *Customals of the Sussex Manors of the Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. B. C. Redwood & A. E. Wilson (Suss. Rec. Soc. 57).

² P. F. Brandon, 'Medieval Clearances in the East Sussex Weald', *Transactions of Inst. of British Geographers*, 48 (1969), 146; J. S. Moore, *Laughton: a Study in the Evolution of the Wealden Landscape* (Leicester, 1965), 37-9.

³ F. R. H. Du Boulay, *The Lordship of Canterbury: an Essay in Medieval Society* (1966), 324.

⁴ For Mayfield manor see E(ast) S(ussex) R(ecord) O(ffice), Acc 1244.

⁵ E.S.R.O., AMS 5843.

⁶ E.S.R.O., ADA 137.

⁷ E.S.R.O., ADA 139.

⁸ E.S.R.O., ADA 122-5.

⁹ E.S.R.O., TD/E 138.

¹⁰ *Suss. Rec. Soc.* 57, 62.

¹¹ P. F. Brandon, *The Sussex Landscape* (1974), 145-8.

¹² A. R. H. Baker, 'Open-fields and Partible Inheritance on a Kent Manor', *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 2nd series, 17 (1964), 1-23; idem, 'Some Fields and Farms in Medieval Kent',

- Arch. Cantiana*, **80** (1965), 152-74; idem, 'Field Systems of Southeast England', in *Studies of Field Systems in the British Isles*, ed. A. R. H. Baker & R. A. Butlin (1973), 377-429.
- ¹³H. L. Gray, *English Field Systems* (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), 272-304; G. Hewlett, 'Reconstructing a Historical Landscape from Field and Documentary Evidence: Otford in Kent', *Agric. Hist. Rev.* **21** (1973), 94-110; J. E. A. Jolliffe, *Pre-Feudal England: The Jutes* (1933).
- ¹⁴'Lost' in the sense used by the English Place-Name Soc. to mean no longer current.
- ¹⁵So called in 1597-9: *Suss. Rec. Soc.* **39**, 11 and map IV.
- ¹⁶E.S.R.O., ADA 137, 404.
- ¹⁷M. F. Gardiner, 'Later Anglo-Saxon and Medieval Rural Settlement in the East Sussex Weald' (London Univ. Ph.D. thesis, in preparation).
- ¹⁸E.S.R.O., GIL 32.
- ¹⁹P. J. Fowler, 'Later Prehistory', in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, 1 (1), ed. S. Piggott (1981), 144 ff.; P. J. Drury & W. J. Rodwell, 'Settlement in the Later Iron Age and Roman Periods', in *Archaeology in Essex to AD 1500*, ed. D. G. Buckley (1980), 59-64; D. N. Riley, 'An Early System of Land Division in South Yorkshire and North Nottinghamshire', in *Early Land Allotment*, ed. H. C. Bowen & P. J. Fowler (British Arch. Reports, **48**, 1978), 103-8.
- ²⁰J. H. Money, 'Suspected Roman Road Linking the London-Lewes Road (Margary 14) with Trans-Wealden Track VII', *Suss. Arch. Coll.* **118** (1980), 367-9.
- ²¹*Ibid.* 367.
- ²²O.S. Map 6", Suss. XVII (1875 edn.).
- ²³M. L. Faull, 'Public Boundary Records held by the Ordnance Survey', in *West Yorkshire: an Archaeological Survey*, ed. M. L. Faull & S. A. Moorhouse (Wakefield, 1981), **1**, 20.
- ²⁴N. Adams, 'The Judicial Conflict over Tithes', *Eng. Hist. Rev.* **52** (1937), 20.
- ²⁵*Transactions of Inst. of British Geographers*, **48**, 136-43.
- ²⁶*Ibid.* 149.
- ²⁷*Suss. Rec. Soc.* **57**, 62.
- ²⁸*Transactions of Inst. of British Geographers*, **48**, 146.
- ²⁹*Ibid.* 148.
- ³⁰*Ibid.* 139-40.