

## SHORTER NOTICES

### A 12th-CENTURY MORTAR FROM RYSTON HALL, NORFOLK

*by* John Cherry

This stone mortar (pl. 1, Fig. 1) was dug up some years ago by a gardener in the ruins of an outbuilding of Ryston Hall near Downham Market in Norfolk. Although worn it is a fine example of a mortar whose decoration dates it to the 12th century. Since most stone mortars are dated to the 13th or 14th century this early example is particularly significant. The mortar was crudely repaired with cement after its finding and was used as a flower pot. Mr. Glen Drown, an amateur archaeologist, recognised its importance and informed the Norfolk Archaeological Unit of the Norfolk Museum Service. The mortar is in the possession of Mr. Pratt of Ryston Hall who has kindly given his permission for its publication.

The mortar is carved from a very friable limestone which has been identified as Caen Stone.<sup>1</sup> The bowl is tub shaped slightly curved in profile. There are side handles extending from rim to base each decorated with ribbing on the outside and forming the tongues of the animal heads with which the tops of the handles are decorated. The side handles are pierced by a small elongated hole. Around the outer edge of the rim there is carved a band or zig-zag or chevron motif. At the opposite corners to the two handles there are two bosses both with V-shaped runnels. The inside of the base has been worn through by constant usage and this has been repaired with cement. The mortar is 8.5 inches high and 12 inches across at the top.

Stone mortars have been extensively studied by the late Dr. G. C. Dunning and my comments depend a great deal on his notes and work. In shape the Ryston mortar may be classified as type 2 of the Caen stone mortars in his typology published in the report on the mortars found at King's Lynn.<sup>2</sup> These Caen stone mortars were interpreted by Gerald Dunning as products of the great industry in building stone that was carried on at Caen and in the neighbourhood. His distribution map shows mortars along the S coast up the E coast and exported across the North Sea to Bergen in Norway and to Denmark. The occurrence of a mortar of Caen stone in Norfolk is not surprising.

Decoration on stone mortars is not usual. The contrast between the richly decorated surface of the metal mortar from St. Mary's Abbey dated 1308 in York Museum and the plain surfaces of most medieval stone mortars is striking.<sup>3</sup> Stone lamps were occasionally decorated. The 12th-century stone lamp from Llangwm Uchaf is decorated on its collar and upper parts by a loose ribbon plait.<sup>4</sup> Two of the stone lamps in the Museum of London are made from re-used capitals and there is a fine late 12th- or early 13th-century stone lamp in the shape of a font in Coventry Museum. The relationship between the use of decorative techniques on 12th- and 13th-century fonts in churches and minor stone sculpture deserves further attention.

The Ryston mortar is decorated with a band of chevron or zig-zag ornament and the handles are in the form of animal heads with protruding tongues. The use of a head at the tip of a rib is found on at least two other mortars. An animal head occurs at the top of a rib of a sandstone mortar from Ribe in Denmark.<sup>5</sup>

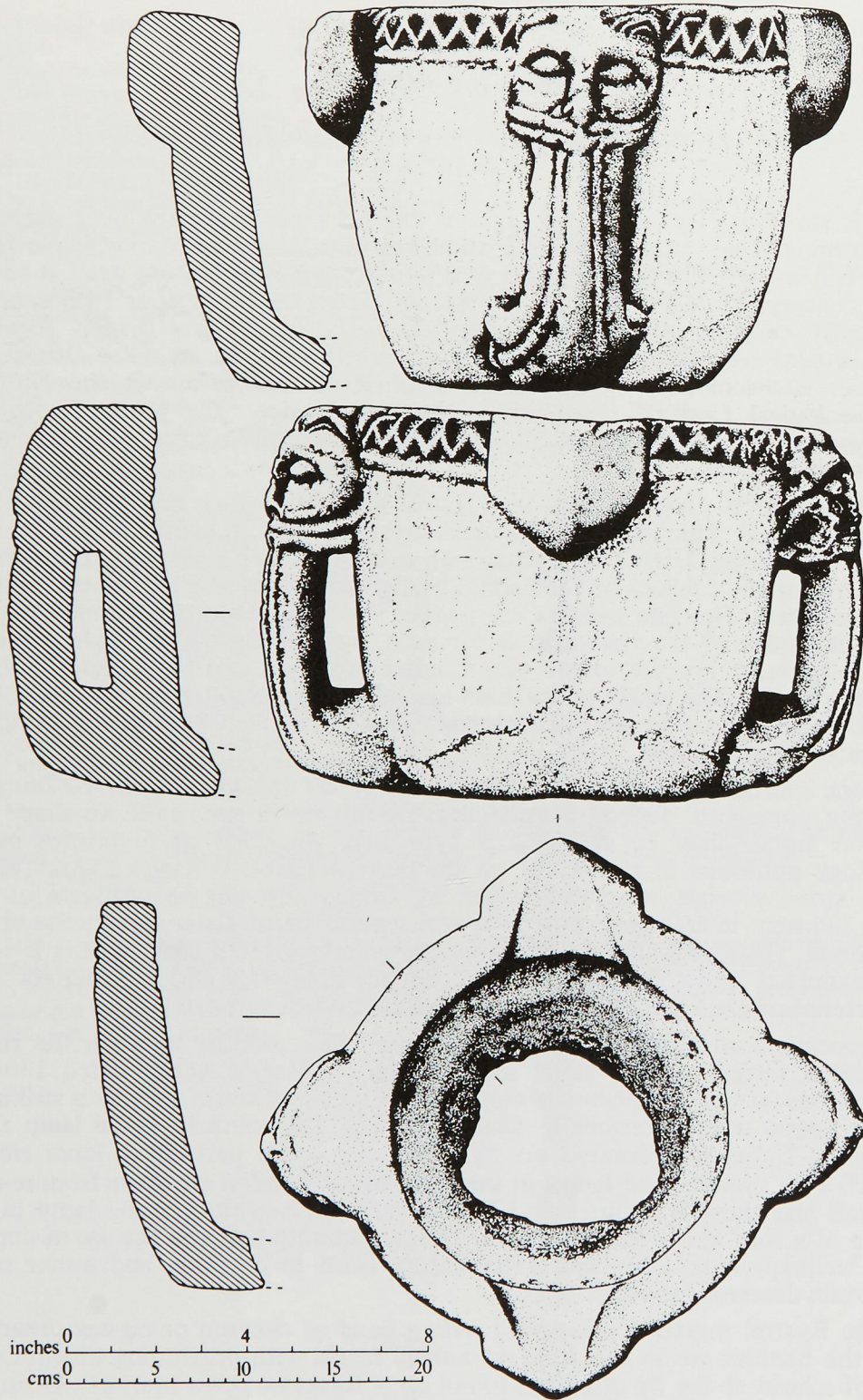


Fig. 1  
Mortar from Ryston, Norfolk. Scale:  $\frac{1}{4}$



Plate 1  
Mortar showing mask and handle

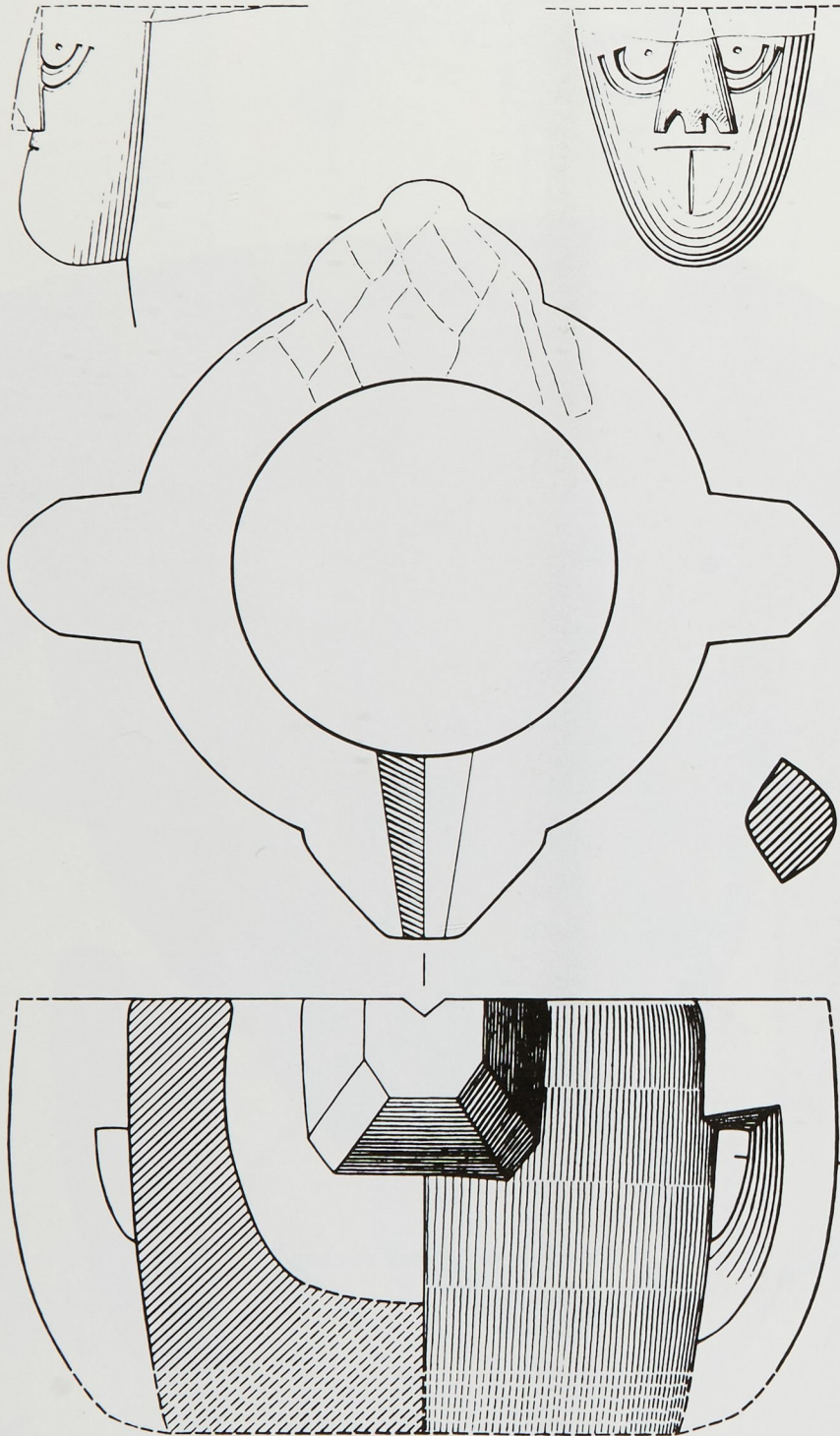


Fig. 2  
Mortar from Birdham, Sussex. Scale: 1/3

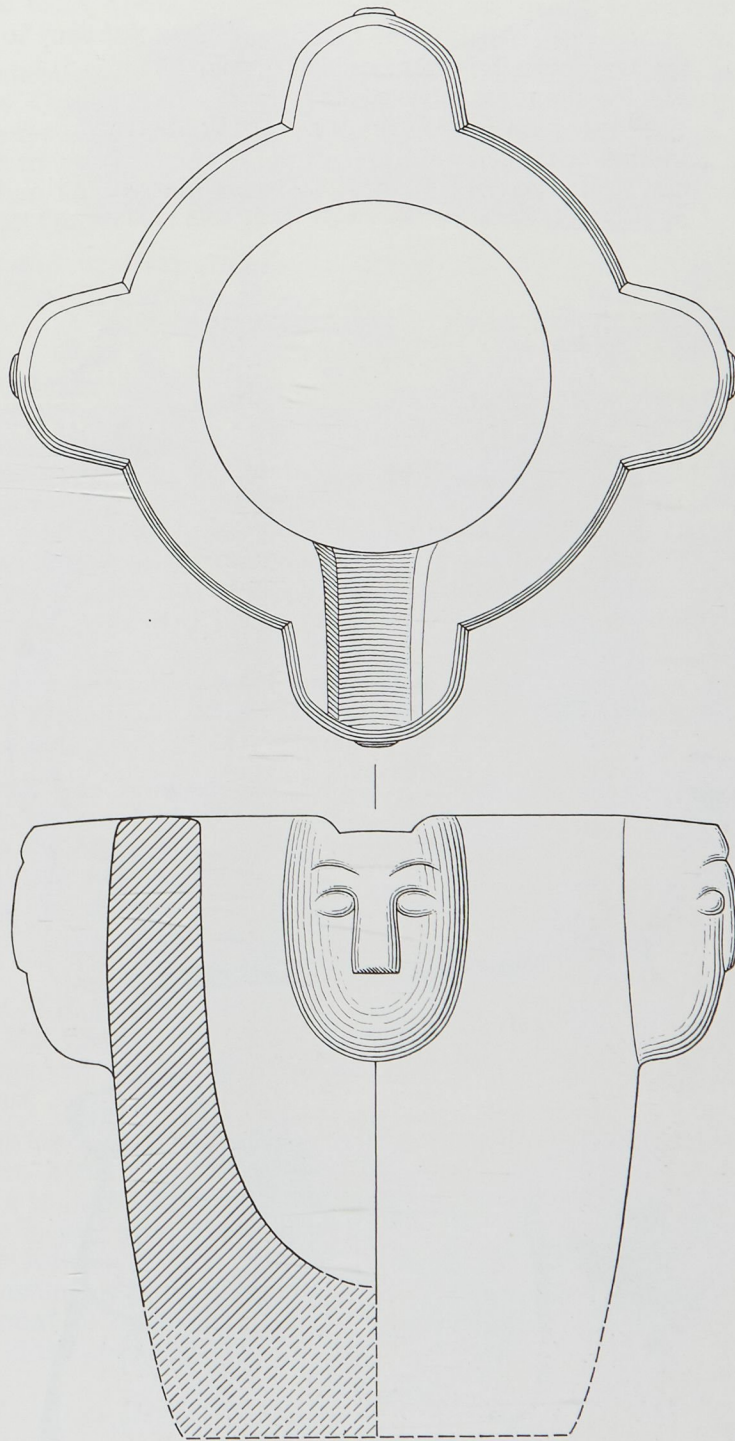


Fig. 3  
Mortar from London. Scale: 1/3. Drawing by Dr. G. C. Dunning

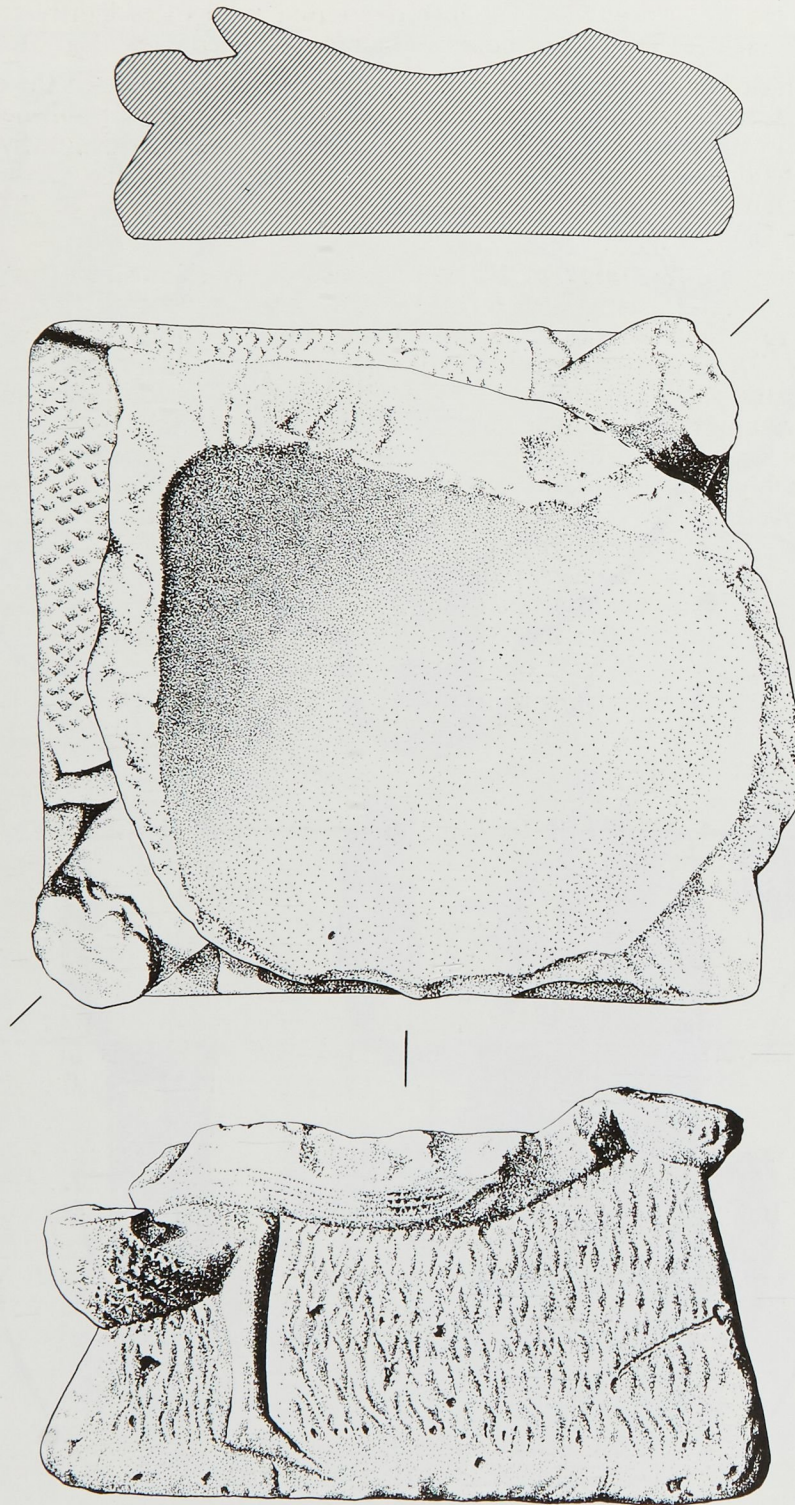


Fig. 4  
Mortar from Datchworth, Herts. Scale: 1/3

An example from London has four lugs decorated with faces lightly carved on the surface of each lug with squat noses and almond shaped eyes (fig. 3).<sup>6</sup>

Since decorated mortars are unusual it is worth reviewing some of the evidence collected by Gerald Dunning about such decoration but never published.<sup>7</sup> The two main ways in which human figures and faces were used as decorative motifs were either to decorate the boss or bosses at the top of the side of the mortar with a human face or to decorate the handle itself on the side of the mortar with a human figure.

The first may be illustrated by the mortar also of type 2 in Caen stone now in St. James' Church Birdham Sussex (fig. 2) which was recovered from a nearby hen run where it had served as a drinking trough. The mortar is circular with straight sides. There are two open handles and a boss with a runnel in the top. The boss is carved in the form of a face with nose and crude eyes and mouth. Another mortar with the human face as a decorative motif was found at Wisborough Green, near Petworth, Sussex.<sup>8</sup> This mortar 16 inches in rim diameter and 9 inches high has a square base with cusps below the four bosses. Human heads are carved on two opposite bosses. The present location of this mortar is not known and its material is not stated in the original publications. A Caen stone mortar found at Rochester has a crude face carved on the boss, but this is a secondary feature on the cut down stump of the upper end of a handle, which has been converted into a spout by cutting a runnel in the top. The face motif is also known on at least one pottery mortar. The fragment of the mortar from Lincoln which was made in imitation of a stone mortar has a large oval boss with a face on its front; the boss has a flat-bottomed runnel in the top which serves as spout.<sup>9</sup>

The second way is illustrated on the stone mortar discovered in Well Wood, Datchworth (about T L 282190) some 6 miles NW of Hertford. The mortar (fig. 4) is in the form of a truncated pyramid. Only the bottom part of the bowl and two handles remain. These show the base of the trunk of the body and two legs grasping the sides of the mortar. The bodies presumably formed the open handles at the side of the mortar. The stone of the Datchworth mortar is Caen stone.<sup>10</sup>

The type of decoration on the Ryston mortar is closer to the first manner of decorating the vessels. The study of decoration on mortars is in a very preliminary stage and the writer would be interested to hear of any other decorated stone mortars.

The importance of the Ryston mortar is that it is the earliest known medieval stone mortar. Stone from France was imported after the Conquest into eastern England as a building material. It is an interesting and difficult question to know whether the mortar was imported as a finished product or whether it was carved by an East Anglian mason from a piece of imported stone. Gerald Dunning tended to assume that mortars were exported as finished items and there is a certain amount of evidence for this, but it is also possible that the stone was imported and the mortar carved by a local craftsman.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Mr. Peter Lawrance the geologist of the Norfolk County Museum Service for his identification of the stone.

<sup>2</sup> H. Clarke and A. Carter, *Excavation in King's Lynn, 1963-70*, London, 1977, pp 319-348.

<sup>3</sup> *Connoisseur*, LXXXIII (1929), 162, fig. 1.

<sup>4</sup>J. Knight, 'A 12th-century stone lamp from Llangwm Uchaf Monmouthshire', *Med. Archaeol.*, XVI (1972), p 130-3.

<sup>5</sup>Mogens Bencard, 'Middelalderlige Stenmortere i Danmark', *Kuml* 1971, p.47, fig. 16.

<sup>6</sup>Museum of London no. 5045. The stone of this mortar was examined in 1973 by Dr. F. W. Anderson and identified as Sussex marble.

<sup>7</sup>The notes and archive of Dr. G. C. Dunning are kept in the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities, British Museum.

<sup>8</sup>*Sussex Notes and Queries*, II (1928-9), p. 224.

<sup>9</sup>British Museum (reg. no. 67, 3-40, 4). R. L. Hobson, *Catalogue of English Pottery in the British Museum*, (1903), p. 66, B67.

<sup>10</sup>British museum (reg. no. 1970, 5 - 1, 1). This mortar was first identified by Mr. Tony Rook and was subsequently given by Mr. J. Wallace to the British Museum. The mortar was drawn by Miss M. O. Miller.

## THE DISPUTE OF THE SALT FEN

by E. M. Yates, Ph.D., M.Sc.

The Priory of Lynn, a cell of the great Benedictine abbey of Norwich, was granted by the Prior of Castleacre the estate of Haveless at a rent of 20s a year, and land in Mintlyn of the same value.<sup>1</sup> In 1438-9 the Haveless lands were worth £6 a year, with fuel (presumably peat) worth £1-9s. In the accounts of the last abbot Edmund Drake (alias Edmund Norwich) the Mintlyn lands were rented by Thomas Thoresby but he had not paid his rents. In the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*<sup>2</sup> no mention is made of Lynn Priory except for the payment of £2-4-4 to Edmund Farewell the bailiff of its lands. After the dissolution the Haveless lands were bought by Thomas Thoresby and he came into conflict with the men of Middleton over the ownership of Salt Fen situated between Middleton and Haveless. Thomas Thoresby came of a rich Lynn family. His grandfather was mayor in 1437, 1442, 1443 and 1453. His father was a mayor in 1477, 1482 and 1502, and his father's will, evidence of the wealth of the family, is given by G. Eller in his *Memorials of West Winch*.<sup>3</sup> The Thomas Thoresby of the quarrel with the men of Middleton is described as a country gentleman,<sup>4</sup> but this dispute was not isolated. He was accused before the Star Chamber in 1535 of attacks on Adam and Ann Foster of Gayton in a dispute over lands<sup>5</sup> and similarly in 1537 for assaults on Nicholas Gurling of Grimston.<sup>6</sup> He was sufficiently eminent in the life of the county to be one of the group of Norfolk gentlemen selected to meet Anne of Cleves at Sittingbourne in 1540, together with William Paston and Sir Edward Knyvet.<sup>7</sup>

### *The controversy*

This is best explained by reference to the map prepared c.1550 for the hearings in the Star Chamber<sup>8</sup> (fig. 1) and the modern six-inch map (fig. 2). The land alleged to have been enclosed by Thoresby is to the north of Middleton Stop Drain. The new dyke cut by him is followed by the parish boundary. The disputed land had been isolated by this cut, the area centreing on TF 660181. According to the details on the documents which originally accompanied the map the boundaries of the disputed land were Haveless to the north, the King's highway to the east (Calseye = causeway), Mintlyn Marsh to the west, and the lands of the Countess of Oxford to the south.

The map was prepared for the Star Chamber proceedings but the matter had been raised previously in the Court of Requests in 1548.<sup>9</sup> The complaint (nominally to the crown but including a plea to Somerset), was made by a group of thirty-two men led by Thomas Fincham of West Winch, gentleman. Only six were able to sign the complaint, the remainder making their marks. Only a few were