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WEST WALTON: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SILTLAND PARISH

by R.J. Silvester, B.A., M.I.F.A.

SUMMARY

West Walton, one of the silt fen villages in the west of the county, was the subject of an intensive field survey in 1982-83. This revealed a previously unrecognised Romano-British settlement phase and the development of the village from the middle Saxon period to the fifteenth century. The wealth of the area in the Middle Ages was based largely on the exploitation of unreclaimed land around the village. The signs of this activity and of the attempts to prevent flooding are still visible in the modern landscape.

West Walton lies on the east side of the River Nene, one of the two most westerly parishes in Norfolk. It covers an area of 1,564 ha, but this figure has only been attained by the gradual accretion of land through reclamation during the last millennium, and more recently by the loss of several hundred hectares when the parish of Marshland St James was created in 1935 and when reclaimed land, west of the Nene, was absorbed into Cambridgeshire. Today the small village, centred on the church of St Mary, is linked by modern ribbon development to the subsidiary settlement of Walton Highway which has grown up around the main road linking Norfolk and the Midlands. Despite the proximity of Wisbech, which has encouraged the growth of Walton in recent years, it remains essentially an agrarian community.

Although not immediately apparent from its present appearance Walton was an extremely wealthy parish in the medieval period, part of a larger region termed Marshland that incorporated most of the Norfolk siltland villages and had a distinctive social and economic unity for many centuries (Fig. 1). However, to understand the emergence and pattern of settlement in this region it is necessary to appreciate how the Norfolk silt fens have evolved over the last four thousand years. After the last glaciation the fen basin became a freshwater marsh and the deposition of peat continued until the third millennium BC, when a rise in sea level created an extensive saltwater lagoon in which fine sediment, now known as the fen clay, settled. Marine silting may have continued into the second millennium. In parts of the Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire fens a later marine deposit of clayey silt is separated from the fen clay by a thin band of peat. In Marshland no such band is detectable, but in freshly cleaned dyke sections along the course of the new Wisbech bypass the top of the deposit is at about 0.4m O.D., which contrasts with the situation in the southern fens where the fen clay rarely rises above 0m O.D. (Hall 1981a, 56). This implies a longer period of sediment deposition in the region now bordering the Wash. When the sea finally regressed freshwater fen spread from the south, drained by meandering rivers and numerous tributaries which emptied into the main estuaries on, or close to, the present courses of the Rivers Ouse and Nene.

The formation of peat was abruptly halted by another phase of marine flooding, probably in the second half of the first millennium BC. The sediments laid down were by no means homogeneous but they were generally coarser than the earlier deposits and created the siltlands between King's Lynn and Wisbech. This was the last major inundation of the Norfolk fens but there were possibly smaller ones subsequently (see

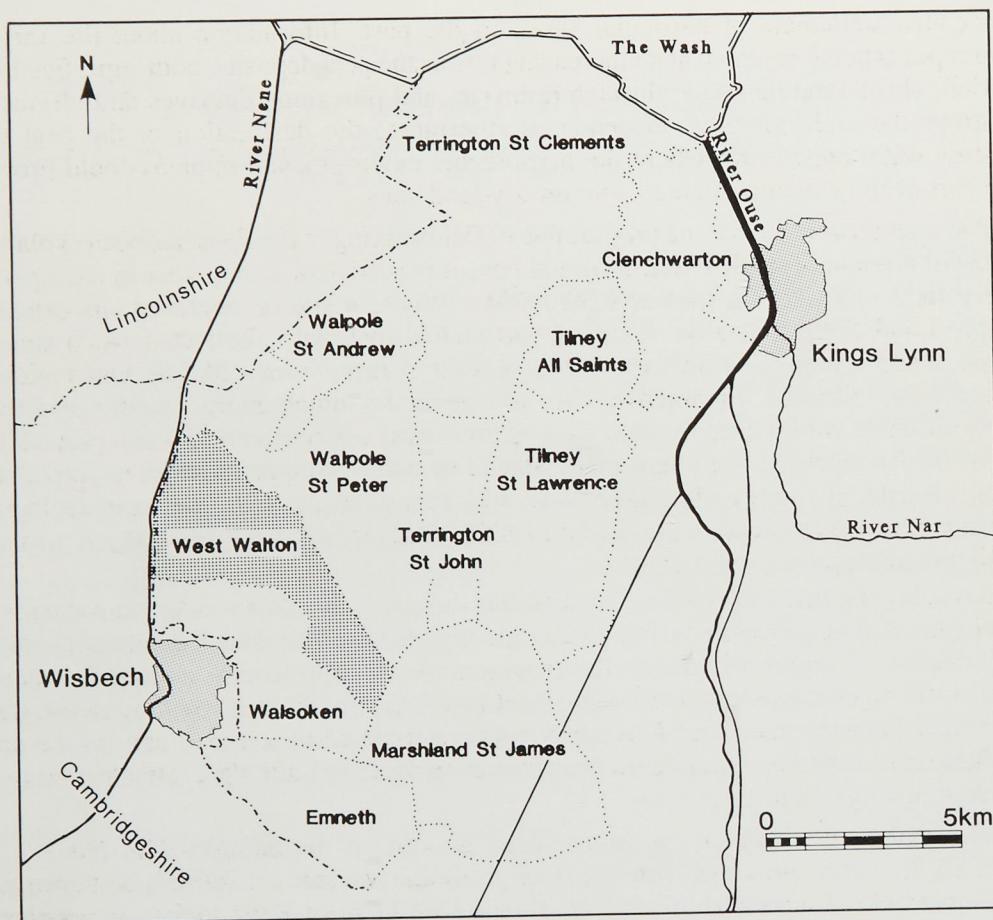


Fig. 1
West Walton and the parishes of Marshland.

below). Although the degree of silting was considerable, it is possible that flooding was intermittent, with some watercourses retaining their original channels but the majority quickly filling with silt. Subsequent compaction and shrinkage of the peat led to the lowering of the ground surface, but where watercourses had cut down into the clayey silt beneath the peat, the ground level was not markedly altered and the silt-filled channels gradually emerged as low sinuous ridges known as rodhams. Beyond the sea defences silt continued to accumulate so that today there is a difference in height of well over one metre between the fields on either side of the seabank. Fuller descriptions are provided by Godwin (1978) and Hall (1981a).

From an archaeological viewpoint Marshland has received no more than token attention in the past. Although the silt had dried out sufficiently by the first century AD to permit settlement, the nature and extent of Romano-British activity was unknown, while the picture of medieval settlement was apparent only from documents. In 1982 the Fenland Project, already effectively in operation in Cambridgeshire since 1976, was extended to Norfolk and Lincolnshire. Working on a parish basis the brief of the Project was to record the archaeology and the soils of the Fens, with a view to understanding, and ultimately depicting, in map and gazetteer form, the nature of the fens and their

associated settlement at particular times in the past. Information about the various fenscapes is being revealed at an increasing rate as the peat deposits, both superficial and buried, shrink and desiccate through drainage, and ploughing damages and ultimately destroys the archaeological evidence. Furthermore, the desiccation of the peat will destroy waterlogged sites where the organic and environmental remains could provide the sort of information unobtainable on dry-land sites.

The method adopted for the programme of fieldwalking in the Fens has been explained in detail elsewhere (Hall 1981a, 53), and here it is sufficient to note that in each parish every field is walked in transects 30m wide. Where a site is identified, its extent is mapped and a representative sample of artifactual material is collected. As a general guide, a site is defined as an area yielding at least 15 finds from a 10m by 10m square in 10 minutes, although in practice sites are generally much more prolific and their recognition becomes largely intuitive. Earthworks are normally sketch plotted but occasionally more precise plans are produced by using oblique aerial photographs and detailed ground survey. Rodhams and soil types, along with the archaeological information, are recorded in the field on 1:10560 Ordnance Survey maps which form the basis for subsequent publication.

Inevitably the fast field-by-field method has its drawbacks. With soils and rodhams in particular, it is not always possible in a single visit to establish their location accurately, and ideally one would collect material from a single site over several seasons in order to provide an objective assessment of its extent and date. However the method in use does have the advantage that several parishes can be completed in one year and, in the case of Norfolk it should be possible, over a five year period, to build up a reliable picture of the past history of the Fens.

West Walton was one of the first fenland parishes to be completed in Norfolk in 1982-83. The study presented here provides preliminary results and clearly demonstrates the validity of the survey method adopted. However, because of the social and economic unity displayed by Marshland in the medieval period this single parish cannot be totally divorced from its neighbours, such as the Walpoles and the Terringtons, and a fuller consideration of the growth and importance of the area as a whole must await the full publication of the other parishes on the Norfolk silts.

The Roman Landscape

The story of West Walton effectively begins in the Roman period. Before this time the area had been covered by the sea or by freshwater fen for thousands of years. It is possible that in the second and earlier first millennium BC islands of mineral soil may have projected above the fen to provide dry spots for temporary occupation, and such islands have been recorded on the opposite side of the Nene estuary in Elm (Hall 1978, 23). However, no islands have been discovered in Walton, although prehistoric activity is revealed nearby with the discovery, in the nineteenth century, of a Bronze Age axe and rapier in Walsoken. Not surprisingly both came from digging operations at levels beneath the marine silts of Iron Age date.

The apparent absence of Romano-British settlements in Marshland has always proved something of a puzzle. In 1970 the Royal Geographical Society's memoir, 'The Fenland in Roman Times' (Phillips, 1970), assembled a considerable amount of data revealing that on the silts, from Wisbech and the Nene in the east around the Wash coastline of Lincolnshire for a distance of about 60km, the incidence of known settlements was

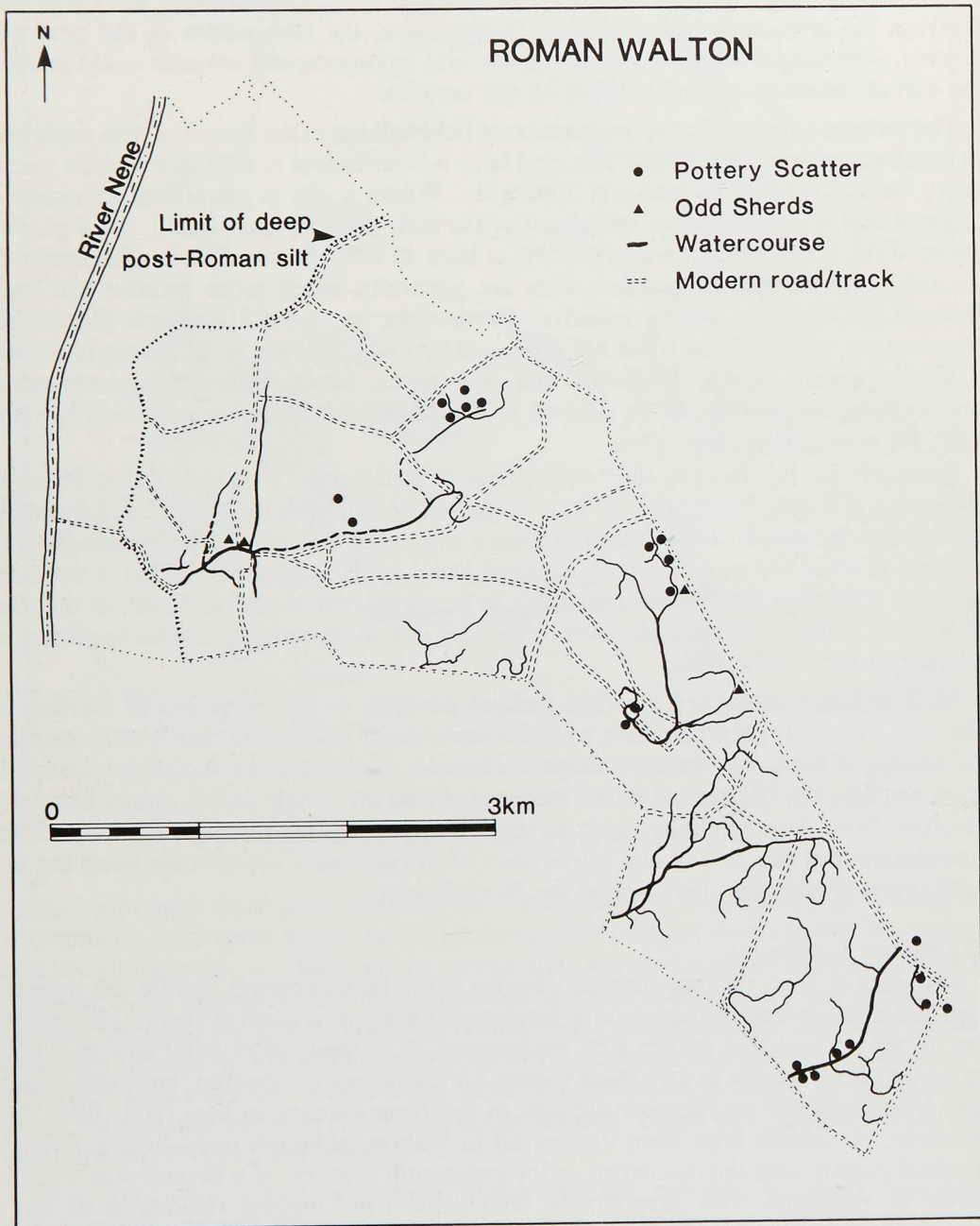


Fig. 2

The distribution of Roman pottery scatters in relation to contemporary watercourses.

extremely high. Aerial photography showed dense concentrations of cropmarks, and the extensive gazetteer in the Memoir attested the frequent recovery of pottery and other debris through field work and chance discovery. Similar settlement traces were visible on the silts bordering an early course of the River Ouse, south of Outwell, where these spread into Norfolk. By contrast Marshland had produced very little. Despite regular aerial reconnaissance no cropmark complexes had been photographed, while chance finds were extremely rare: two coin hoards from Walsoken in 1938 and West Walton in 1941; two stray coins found in Walsoken in the nineteenth century; an imitation Samian vessel of uncertain authenticity from Walpole St Andrew; and two groups of pottery fragments found during graveyard work in Walton in the 1950s. While it remained a possibility that Marshland had not been settled in the Roman period, perhaps because of locally unfavourable conditions, the generally held belief was that post-Roman silting had effectively disguised both the physical traces of settlement and the debris associated with them (Hallam 1970, 42; Gregory 1982, 367).

That belief has been largely justified by the West Walton survey. Twenty discrete concentrations of pottery were recovered, with a distribution weighted towards the southern part of the parish (Fig. 2). More recent fieldwork in the adjacent parishes of Walpole St Peter and Terrington St John has reinforced the impression that the degree of Roman activity is greater towards the southern edge of Marshland. The most likely explanation for this is that the post-Roman silt deposits become progressively deeper towards the coast, thus completely smothering the Roman landscape. Corroborative evidence is furnished by the earlier finds from around Walton church which reputedly came from depths greater than one metre.

The tendency for most of these pottery concentrations to fall into discernible groups is apparent from the distribution map, particularly when sites just beyond the parish boundary are also included. The most obvious group contains five scatters in two adjacent fields to the north-east of Walton village, while there are a further two areas where three sites are closely associated. A slightly more widespread group extends into Walpole St Peter and Marshland St James at the southern end of the parish. Only rarely do individual scatters appear in isolation and it is clear that what are appearing on the surface are minor manifestations of much larger complexes, where occupation or debris levels are disturbed by the plough. In this context the discoveries on the line of the recently constructed Wisbech bypass in Walsoken are significant (Johnson: forthcoming). Of the two Romano-British settlements which came to light, one, consisting of pits and ditches of largely fourth-century AD date, is surrounded by orchards which prohibited the collection of surface material, although in a field 400m to the east two scatters were recorded. The second site, 1.5km south-east of Walsoken church, is of more importance. Here, within the curving line of a ditch, perhaps representing an enclosure defence, were several small linear gullies and a small sub-rectangular compound formed by a slot, the inner core of charcoal suggesting wooden stakes or hurdles. Again the pottery associated with these features was predominantly of the fourth century. In the field to the west of the bypass line, where the remainder of the enclosure must lie, only one pottery scatter was noted and that close to an infilled dyke, suggesting that the material may have been thrown up during periodic cleaning. In the dyke adjacent to the new road the Roman ditch was covered by c. 0.5m of silt, although it is difficult to know how thoroughly the layer was mixed by ploughing.

The recent cleaning of the dyke which bisects the main group of sites to the north-east

of Walton village showed no traces of contemporary sub-surface features; on the other hand in the large dyke adjacent to the group of sites south-east of Walton Highway Roman pottery was recovered at a depth of *c.* 1m, although it was unclear whether the material was derived from a contemporary ground surface or the fill of a Roman feature. Nevertheless, if the depth of silt observed in Walsoken is consistent across the rest of Marshland, it would tend to explain not only why some scatters occur in isolation but also why aerial photography has proved to be so unsuccessful in the region.

As a whole the evidence available offers little insight into the form that the Romano-British settlements would have taken, but it is unlikely that they would have been significantly different from the settlements of the Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire silts: simple houses, sometimes within their own enclosures, ditched tracks or droveways, paddocks, and fields are the normal components of these individual settlements (Hallam 1970, 23). Equally uncertain is the frequency of the settlements. On the west side of the Nene aerial photography indicates that in the southern part of Elm parish the Romano-British utilisation of the siltlands was virtually continuous. Conceivably a similar pattern might be expected in West Walton only 6km away, particularly around the southern edge of the parish. But this can only be demonstrated by a combination of excavation, fieldwork, and the observation of newly cleaned dykes.

Stock rearing is now assumed to have been the major activity of the settlers in the East Anglian siltlands (Salway 1970, 14) and it is reasonable to assume that Marshland was no different. However, there is one significant difference in the material available from fieldwork. Salt manufacture was a necessary adjunct to specialised stock rearing and the fragments of crudely-made fired clay containers known as briquetage, used for the evaporation of sea water, reveal a widespread industry close to the peat fen in Elm and other Cambridgeshire parishes (Hall 1978, 26). The industry utilised the streams which were flooded with salt water at every tide, and the peat was an invaluable source of fuel. In contrast very little briquetage has been recovered from the West Walton sites and even where it has been found there can be no certainty of on-site salt working, merely the transport of salt in containers. It would, however, be premature to place too much reliance on negative evidence, given the incomplete picture provided by fieldwork. For one thing briquetage is less likely to survive the effects of regular ploughing than the harder Romano-British coarse wares. Clear evidence of this comes from Marshland St James where a pasture field, only recently turned over to cultivation, produced both pottery and substantial chunks of briquetage on a rodham which was undoubtedly an open stream in the third century AD. The site is exceptional, not only in its degree of preservation, but also in that the amount of post-Roman silt overlying it is probably minimal. This point leads on to another which may have a bearing on the detectability of a salt-working industry in Walton. A large proportion of the Walton sites (90%) lie on, or adjacent to, rodhams (Fig. 2). This could indicate a preference for slightly raised ground for settlement, but this presupposes that the silted watercourses were showing as rodhams in the Roman period, an unlikely occurrence given that even today, after two thousand years of compaction and drainage, few show as prominent features in the landscape. A more likely explanation is that, as the rodhams emerged gradually, later flooding deposited sediment around, rather than on top of, them: consequently in such locations occupation levels are liable to be closer to the surface and more prone to plough damage. Consequently the apparent coincidence between settlement traces and rodhams may be misleading; on the evidence from the Cambridgeshire silts these rodhams could

have been open watercourses in the Roman period, thus strengthening the circumstantial argument for salt working.

The date range of the settlements must remain an open question until a reasonable sample has been excavated. At present there is a little evidence for first-century AD occupation in the extreme south of the parish, while several sites have produced material covering the second and third centuries. However, the emphasis appears to be on later Roman activity, the majority of Walton sites (65%) producing only third to fourth-century pottery. Again the problems of recovery may have distorted the true picture, but, if the material collected during the survey is at all representative, it indicates the gradual expansion of settlement to a maximum in the late Roman period.

The Saxon Landscape

From the abandonment of the Roman settlements until the development of the Saxon village the history of West Walton is obscure, as it is for the whole of Marshland. To demonstrate that the Romano-British farms continued to function into the fifth century would be difficult even by excavation, and certainly impossible through fieldwork. The breakdown of central administration may well have influenced the desertion of the siltlands, particularly if, as has been argued, the region was an imperial estate (Salway 1970, 10). Indeed the abandonment may have been swift, for both the adjacent coastline and the river estuaries to the east and west made the region vulnerable to seaborne raiders. At some time prior to the growth of medieval Walton considerable quantities of silt were deposited, sufficient to cover the Roman settlements. Marine inundations of limited duration were common-place in the Middle Ages but their effect, in terms of silt deposition, seems to have been negligible. More extensive flooding in the immediate post-Roman period may therefore have been a cause of the desertion of the siltlands; and the effects of the flooding may have been more pronounced simply because there was nobody to combat them.

It has been argued that in the early Saxon period the Fenland rivers were prominent access routes to central England for incoming settlers from the continent (Stenton 1971, 26), but this perhaps exaggerates the importance of the Wash as a point of entry and as yet no traces of early Saxon activity have been noted in Marshland. However a pagan Saxon urn was found during construction work in Wisbech, on the opposite side of the Nene, and sites on the Lincolnshire silts are producing pottery which could be of much the same date. (P. Hayes: pers. comm.).

By contrast there is now unequivocal evidence of the middle Saxon origin of West Walton. The Old English placename and the entries in Domesday Book signify a pre-Conquest origin but fieldwork has provided a rather more detailed picture of the early growth of the village. Within a radius of 300m of the church six scatters of middle Saxon Ipswich-type ware reveal a small settlement dating to the seventh or eighth century AD. The topography of the landscape was clearly of great importance in the siting of this fledgling settlement. The adjacent estuary provided food resources and a useful means of communication, but most significantly the location had the most prominent rodham system in the parish; in the centre of the village silted watercourses merge from the south, east, and north, before running westwards towards the Nene. At the confluence the rodhams are nearly 2m higher than the surrounding fields and, although they may not have been as high in the Saxon period, they must nevertheless have been readily visible and attractive to the Saxon settlers.

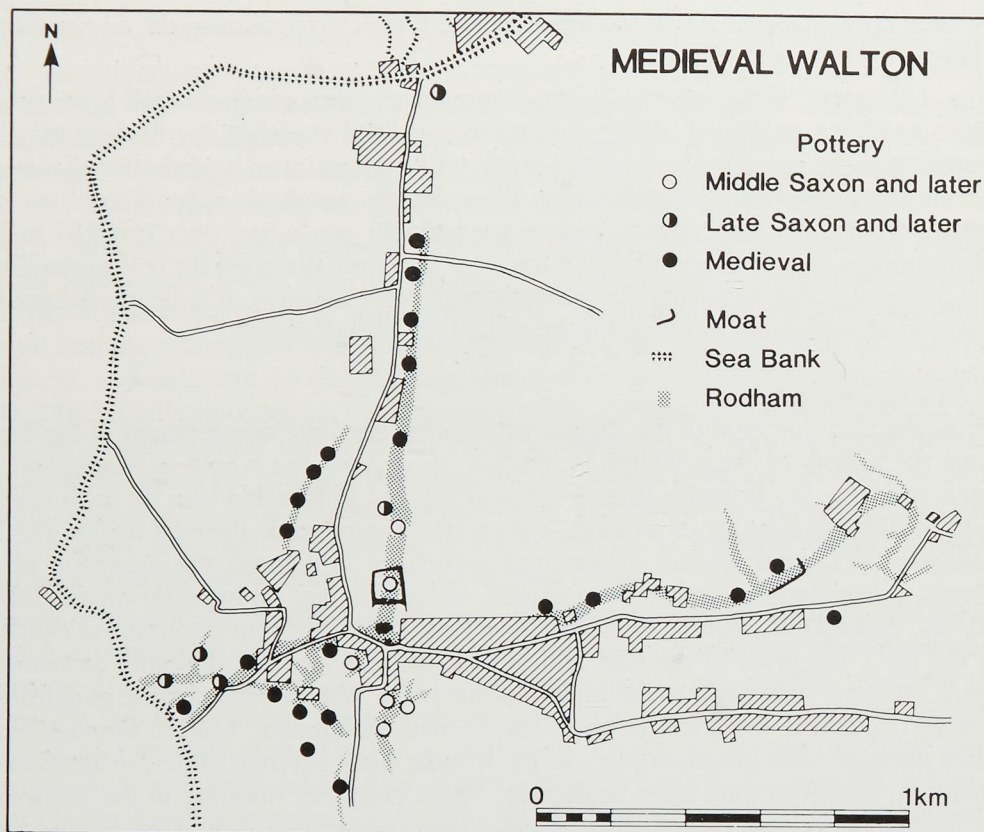


Fig. 3
The growth of Saxon and Medieval Walton.

The subsequent growth of West Walton in the late Saxon period can also be charted from pottery scatters. With one exception the groups of Ipswich-type ware also contained late Saxon Thetford-type ware and Stamford wares; and in addition a further scatter on the northern edge and three to the west reveal the gradual expansion of settlement over the next three centuries (Fig. 3). The only exception to this nucleated pattern is a single scatter 1.2km to the north, but only a few shreds were collected from there.

The placename, however, does present a problem. The prefix is clearly a subsequent addition to distinguish it from the manor and parish of the same name 23km to the east, while Walton is certainly pre-Conquest and is generally interpreted as the farmstead or hamlet by the wall. But unfortunately there are no early forms of this name (Schram 1950, 431) and the alternative, that the name indicates the survival of a Celtic-speaking community, cannot be entirely dismissed. However, as the adjacent parishes of Walpole and Walsoken contain the same first element and all three lie just behind the great sea bank which embraces Marshland, the original interpretation seems more logical. This barrier, about 3m high in places, is known locally as the Roman Bank and is marked as such on some modern Ordnance Survey maps but it is now evident that this attribution

goes back no further than the seventeenth century, the invention of the eminent antiquary, Sir William Dugdale (Hall 1977, 67). In medieval documents the sea bank is simply termed *fossatum maris* (Darby 1974, 4) and altogether there is no convincing evidence of a Roman construction. On the west side of the Nene the excavation of a wooden culvert beneath the bank at Newton gave a radiocarbon determination of 1250 ± 40 a.d. (Taylor 1977, 65) and this coincides nicely with the earliest documentary references to this sea defence. But the scientific and documentary dates can only provide the latest date for its construction and, if the evidence of the placenames is accepted, it follows that the construction of the bank (or perhaps a predecessor) must be pushed back into the Saxon period, a not unreasonable assumption, for the early settlements including West Walton would surely have needed some protection from the sea, if only at the spring tides. This is not to say that the sea bank, as now visible, is of Saxon construction, for it must have been strengthened and even rebuilt on several occasions in the medieval period. Confirmatory evidence comes from Cambridgeshire where a well-preserved section of the bank was cut through. 'Old land surfaces . . . indicated that the original bank had been only 3 feet high and had been built up to its final height by three separate additions' (Fowler 1950, 12). One final piece of circumstantial evidence can be introduced. In Walton the bank consists of a number of straight or curved lengths which presumably ran close to, and parallel to, the Nene estuary and were built across unenclosed land. However, to the west and north-west of the village, the bank bulges outwards and was obviously constructed to respect existing landscape features (Fig. 4). There are no indications of actual dwellings this far west so the bank must have been aligned around the edge of the small fields which surrounded the early village.

The Medieval Landscape

The documentary history of West Walton starts with Domesday Book which records two large manors, one acquired before the Conquest by the Abbey of Ely which later passed to the Bishopric, and the other which had been granted to the Priory of Lewes by William de Warenne not long before 1086. Two other manors have also been attributed to the vill. That held by Ralf de Bellofago was worth 20s, considerably less than the Ely and Lewes manors which were valued at £15 and £17 10s respectively; the later history of this small holding is obscure (Johnson and Salisbury 1906, 149). The encroachment of Hermer de Ferrers was probably even smaller for its value in 1086 was put at 11s 4d (Johnson and Salisbury, 197). The holding included half a church and, in view of the later history of the Walton advowson, it is likely that de Ferrers' land was soon incorporated in the manor of Ely or, more probably, Lewes.

The Ely and Lewes manors were clearly both sizeable estates with a combined total of 184 sokemen, villeins, bordars and serfs, making Walton one of the most populous vills in Norfolk, and in Marshland approached only by Tilney (Darby 1971, fig. 27). Furthermore Walton held a primary position in the county in terms of meadow (230 acres) and sheep (2100), and was second only to Caister on the east coast in its number of salt pans (37). Ostensibly this indicates a wealthy vill by Norfolk standards, but Darby's Domesday maps (1971, fig. 27 et seq.) offer a different perspective, for the adjacent parishes of Walpole and Walsoken have remarkably little attributed to them, in spite of the fact that both had manors recorded in 1086. As there are no grounds for claiming that Walton developed faster than its neighbours in the late Saxon period we must assume that the Walton manors held land in the adjacent vills; certainly this was the case two centuries later. It is also significant that the Domesday entry for the

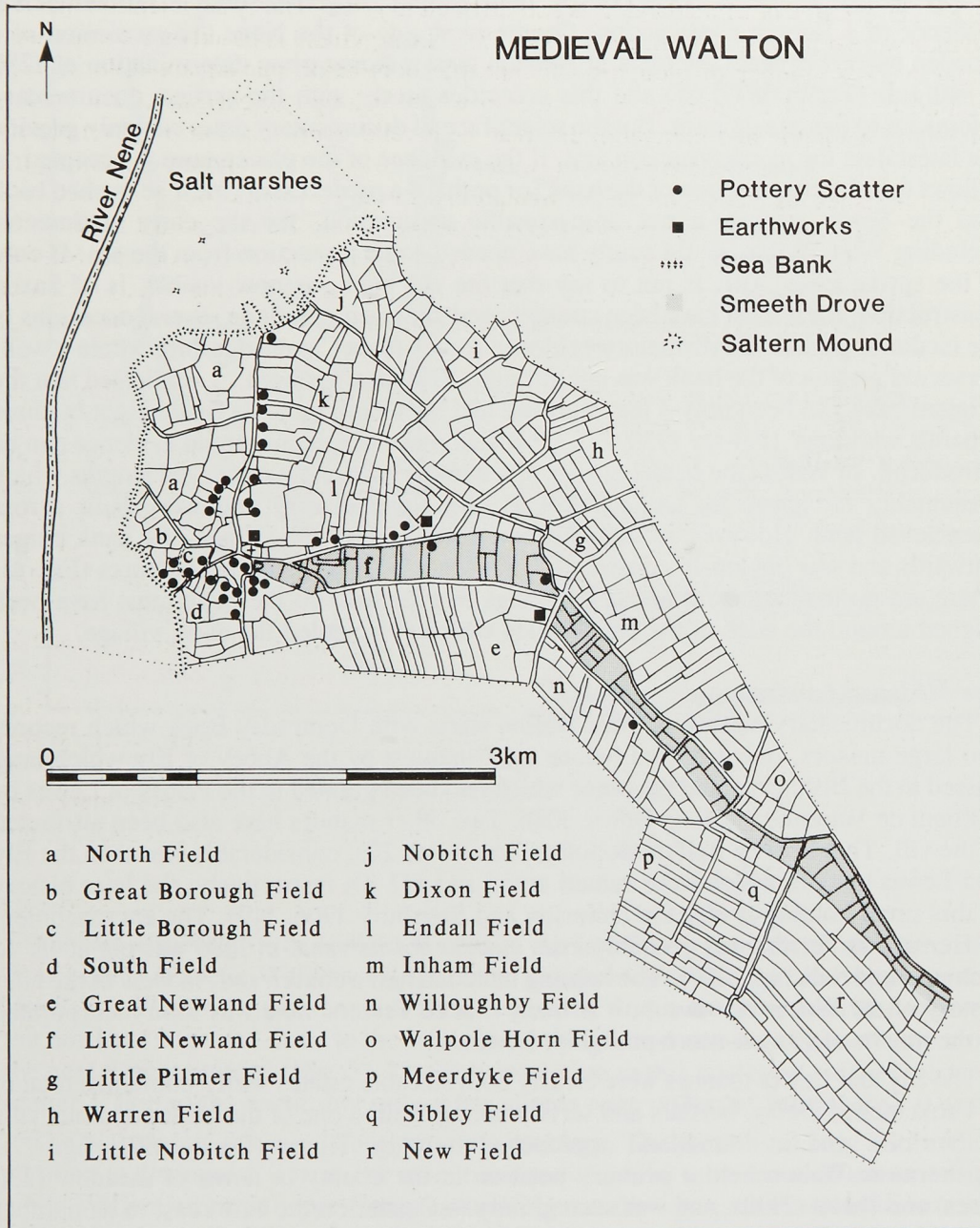


Fig. 4

The Medieval landscape of Walton. (Field names are from the Tithes Apportionment of 1844 and Ordnance Survey sheets of various dates).

Ely manor specifically includes 47 acres in Islington, a detached block more than 10km to the east.

Even though the recorded wealth of Walton in the late eleventh century has to be spread across a larger area of Marshland, it is still difficult to justify Darby's contention that the siltlands were relatively poor in 1086 (1983, 18). The argument is based on a comparison of the average number of plough teams and the population per square mile in each hundred or part of a hundred. For a region where a large proportion of the land is potentially habitable and cultivable this may be a valid approach, but it is completely misleading to use the modern extent of western Freebridge, the hundred containing the siltland parishes, as a basis for such calculations. In the eleventh century at least 40% of the area consisted of salt marshes and undrained fenland. A readjustment of the figures would bring western Freebridge more into line with other areas of west Norfolk and, though this does not suggest that Walton and the neighbouring vills underwent remarkable growth in the late Saxon period, it cannot be claimed that the region was particularly poor.

From the twelfth century onwards the documentary history of Walton is largely the history of the manors of Ely and Lewes, primarily because of the preservation of the Ely muniments (Miller 1951) and the Lewes Cartulary (Bullock 1939). Other holdings are sometimes mentioned in passing, as in the agreement between William de Sculham and Lewes, probably in the first half of the thirteenth century, that the newly built chapel in his manor house in Walton was to be dependant on the parish church (Bullock, 54). But it is the affairs of Ely and Lewes which inevitably come to the fore. The Lewes Cartulary reveals the growth of the Walton manor with grants of land occurring regularly in the deeds, while the importance of Ely's Walton estate, together with its other Marshland holdings, is demonstrated by the fact that the Marshland bailiwick contributed in 1222 one third, and in 1299 two fifths, of all the assized rents paid by the tenants of the bishop of Ely (Miller, 120). An agreement of 1272 between the prior of Lewes and the bishop of Ely is significant in that it confirms their estates as the most important in the parish. Both already held a moiety of the church, and following the grant of a weekly market and annual fair by Henry III, they agreed to hold these in common, with a joint bailiff to levy fines and make arrests (Bullock, 53).

The presence of these two estates has left little obvious evidence in the landscape, except for two moated sites which probably mark the centres of the demense farms. One, 70m to the north of the church, was recognisable as an earthwork until the 1960s but was then levelled almost completely to facilitate ploughing. It covers an area of *c.* 0.8ha and aerial photography reveals the inlet and outlet channels to the moat and a causeway across it, all on the southern side. A demense enclosure appears to have been constructed around the site; curvilinear dykes, anomalous amongst the fairly straight dykes around the village, define this outer precinct on the north and north-east giving an area of *c.* 24ha.

One kilometre to the east a second moat lies in pasture to the south of Priory Farm. Only two of its sides survive as earthworks and no continuation can be traced in the adjacent orchards. Adjacent to the moat are several platforms, presumably for dwellings or outbuildings.

Both moats are set on sizeable rodhams which converge on the church, although in the case of the first moat the rodham appears to have been deliberately levelled prior to construction. Neither site can be dated. The complete range of pottery from middle Saxon to late medieval was found within the moat to the north of the church and, though

a Saxon attribution can be disregarded, greater precision within the medieval period is not possible.

The evidence for linking these two moated sites to the manorial holdings of Lewes and Ely is largely circumstantial. A terrier of 1342–43, relating to the Lewes demense, mentions 'a manor with the calfmedwe which contains within the ditched close and the water surrounding it seven acres' (Norfolk Record Office: Hare Ms. 4051, Box 210 x 4) but this cannot be linked directly to either of the moats. The name Priory Farm is obviously suggestive but the farm has no demonstrably old buildings and Faden's map of Norfolk (1797) implies that in the eighteenth century it was called Place House. 0.6km to the west, a much older structure, West Walton Lewes, was at one time the Old Rectory for the Lewes portion of Walton (Holgate 1936, 83), so it seems that both houses recall a tradition that the Lewes manor was located in this part of the village. Further indirect evidence is provided by the 1532 transferral of Lewes Priory's manor site and the 'New Hall' to John Repps (Blomefield 1806, 135). Later maps of Marshland record that Repps' house was in the vicinity of West Walton Lewes and in the nineteenth century the tract of land on the opposite side of the lane was still called Hall Green. On the other hand, as the Ely manor was already well established by the Conquest, it is likely that it would have been located close to the centre of the village and a correlation between the Ely manor and the moat behind the church seems reasonable.

These ecclesiastical communities undoubtedly played a major part in the post-Conquest exploitation of the siltlands which, by the mid-fourteenth century, was one of the wealthiest regions in the country (Glasscock 1976, Fig. 35). On the basis of the Lay Subsidy Roll of 1334 Darby has charted a dramatic rise in prosperity in the two hundred and fifty years after the Conquest (1974, 131; 1983, 18). These figures, however, are concerned largely with the secular holdings in each parish; the value of the ecclesiastical holdings has to be taken from an earlier document of 1291, the Taxation of Pope Nicholas IV (Hudson 1910). The accuracy of the assessments cannot be established but the combined values of 1291 and 1334, while giving a much higher absolute total for each parish, do not fundamentally affect the relative positions of the Marshland parishes, when compared with each other, and with parishes in upland Norfolk. Of the Marshland parishes Terrington had the highest assessments with £94 16s 8d in 1291 and £40 9s in 1334, while Walton was ranked only sixth and paid £28 13s 4d in 1291 and £23 in 1334. But as Darby points out (1974, 131), all of the major villages in Marshland had higher assessments in 1334 than every other vill in Norfolk with the exception of Norwich, Yarmouth and Lynn; and this picture is not changed by the addition of the 1291 figures.

To a limited extent the prosperity revealed by the fourteenth-century assessments was due to agriculture, but it would be wrong to view the agrarian system of medieval Walton in terms of the ubiquitous arable farming visible today. Before the Second World War large tracts were under grass and we may presume that in the medieval period the fields included at least some meadow and pasture. An inquisition of 1277 recorded that the Bishop of Ely's demense contained 201 acres of arable and 90 acres of pasture (Blomefield, 134). The significant point about the siltland parishes was the considerable opportunity for the expansion of farmed land. To the north and west of the Saxon village were limited areas of small fields, which stand out through their irregularity and imply reclamation on a restricted scale (Fig. 4). Towards the peat fen, over a distance exceeding 5km, were tracts of silt, poorly drained but potentially reclaimable. During the early medieval period blocks of land were taken in and divided into long dyked strips, which

in the intakes furthest from the village, show very regular and organised layouts. The names of the fields — Great Newland Field, Inham Field (i.e. enclosure) and New Field — reflect the gradual accretion of land. So too does the parish boundary. On the west and north the sea bank was the effective limit of cultivation, while on the north-east the parish boundary describes an irregular course, presumably reflecting fields already laid out. However, further south the long straight lengths argue for a more carefully planned landscape within which tracts of silt were reclaimed.

The individual fields were separated by droves defined by dykes and most are still in use today. But unlike the siltlands of Cambridgeshire (Hall 1981b, 43) and Lincolnshire (Hallam 1965) there is little evidence for substantial barriers to protect the new lands from fen floods. The dates at which these lands were reclaimed cannot be established with any precision, although a comprehensive search of the documentary sources might produce a picture comparable with that built up for Elloe and other areas of Lincolnshire. However, there are sufficient hints in the Lewes Cartulary to suggest that most of the West Walton intakes existed by the end of the thirteenth century.

Of greater importance for the economy of medieval Marshland was the provision of pasture and meadow. Although some strips within the intakes were probably given over to grass, there were more important areas which could be used for grazing. Beyond the sea bank were the salt marshes, flooded at spring tides and therefore not cultivable without much effort being spent in embanking. Vague references in the medieval records imply that attempts were made to farm small portions of land beyond the sea bank, but these were clearly unsuccessful. For instance, in the second half of the thirteenth century, 33½ acres of arable within the Ely demense was lost to the sea and turned to marsh (Blomefield, 134). It was not until the eighteenth century that the permanent reclamation of the salt marshes began. Nevertheless the economic advantages of this tidal zone would have been readily apparent to the medieval farmer, for, after the high spring tides, the salt flats would have provided excellent pasture for stock, particularly sheep. In the damp inland pastures sheep would be at risk from footrot, but on the marshes this condition would be effectively countered by salt water (Applebaum 1972, 215). Documentary references to the use of the salt marshes for pasture are rare, probably because this tidal zone was common to all the parishes bordering on the Wash, but on the Lincolnshire silts there is some evidence that even the salt marsh was held in severalty (Hallam 1965, 15).

In contrast the inland fens were the subject of numerous agreements and complaints. Until the Enclosure Act of the late eighteenth century the present parish of Marshland St. James, covering about 2500ha, was intercommoned by eleven villages. It consisted of two zones; the largest, known as West Fen in the medieval period, was peat fen, often flooded in winter but providing pasture and fuel in summer. The second zone, around the northern and western sides, consisted of a large silt rotham, now termed Marshland Smeeth, which must have been a drier tract of land. There is, however, no indication that this area was settled until the nineteenth century and Dugdale's seventeenth-century map of Marshland shows only a cross in the middle of the Smeeth. As grazing land though, it was invaluable and there are claims that up to 30,000 sheep could be pastured in this area. An oft-quoted document of 1207 preserved in the Lewes Cartulary records how the Bishop of Ely, the Prior of Lewes, and other landholders in the Marshland villages reached agreement over common rights in West Fen whilst excluding the men of Wiggenhall (Bullock, 67). Less than twenty years later the Marshland villages were

responsible for the construction of the Old Podike, across the fen from Outwell to Stowbridge, as a defence against flood waters from the fens to the south. That this embankment was built, not on the silt for the immediate protection of the Marshland villages, but on the southern edge of West Fen, demonstrates the desire to protect the rich summer grazing lands as well.

A manifestation of the seasonal movement of stock to and from West Fen can be seen in the wide drove which led from Walton village to Marshland Smeeth (Fig. 4). Close to the village it is over 200m wide and appears to have been deliberately dug out, so that the silt level on either side is at least half a metre above the drove bottom. It was enclosed in the post-medieval period but even today, to the west and south-east of Walton Highway, its bounds are respected by modern roads. The section south-east of Walton Highway is still called the Common. In places the drove is difficult to follow, particularly in the southern part of the parish.

Closely integrated with stock rearing was the production of salt, of vital importance for preserving carcasses after butchery. As has already been noted Walton had a large number of salt pans at the time of the Domesday compilation, but after this references to the salt industry are infrequent. A document of fourteenth-century date records the rent assessment of 3 acres in Neucroft which was in the sea (i.e. beyond the sea bank) and adjacent to the lord of the manor's salt pan (N.R.O., Bradfer-Lawrence VIb (VII), 18). References such as this reinforce the logical assumption that any salt workings would have been located in the marshes, for the streams draining Walton's fields were channelled beneath the sea bank, though culverts and perhaps sluices, thus severely restricting the quantity of salt water that entered the village lands. The survey of Walton has failed to produce any medieval salt-working debris, but abutting the outer face of the sea bank are several large mounds, up to 200m long and 3m high, which may well be the saltern mounds of the medieval vill. On the basis of the detailed fieldwork conducted by the writer the view that the rodhams beneath Walton village are saltern mounds (Owen 1975, 43), cannot be substantiated.

The assessments of 1291 and 1334 provide us with incontrovertible evidence of the prosperity of West Walton and its neighbours in the centuries after Domesday. The wealth engendered by stock raising and the general expansion of agriculture can be detected in the great parish church, which Pevsner had claimed to be one of the most sumptuous of Early English parish churches (1962, 379). Constructed about 1240, it replaced an earlier building of which no trace remains. There is little to be gained from reiterating what architectural historians have written about St. Mary's, except to comment on the massive detached bell tower and the substantial buttresses supporting the west front of the nave. These testify to the problems of constructing a large building on unstable rodham silts. There is a gentle irony in the fact that the rich lands, which provided the wealth for such a splendid parish church, could in a literal sense, fail to give it adequate support.

In keeping with the national trend, Walton saw a dramatic rise in population between the Conquest and the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century. The settlement expanded from its original nucleus around the church along all the rodhams which converged on it. All of the Saxon sites reveal later occupation and an additional twenty-two sites around the village were newly established in the medieval period. Virtually every one of these was positioned on the top or side of a rodham and the dependence of settlement on these ridges can be seen clearly on the one which runs for over one

kilometre north of the village. At regular intervals along it there were medieval houses and a drove, now a minor road, followed the rodham until it faded out just south of the sea bank. The settlement also expanded down the sides of the main drove to the Smeeth. This is not so clearly discernible in West Walton as in other Marshland parishes because modern houses and orchards have masked traces of earlier settlement. Nevertheless, we can presume the fairly regular spread of settlement along the drove for about 3km to the east of the village and, although these habitations are generally detected only as pottery scatters, a pasture field, adjacent to the modern A47, reveals what may be two or three tofts surrounded by low banks.

Over these settlements hung the continuous threat of flooding, from the sea to the north and from the undrained fens to the south. On the fen side the land was given some protection by the Old Podike from 1223 and by the New Podike from 1422, but these defences were not always successful and Dugdale considered that the upland waters presented more of a threat to Marshland than the sea (1772, 299; Beloe 1895, 318). Against marine flooding each parish had to maintain its own length of the sea bank, but despite the precautions the sea broke through the defences regularly and in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries hardly a decade went by without several of the Marshland villages being inundated. Walton was flooded no less than four times between 1309 and 1335 (Dugdale 1772, 256), but the most poignant reminder of this ever present threat is much later in date. In the church is a seventeenth-century plaque which records that in November 1613 'the sea broke in and overflowed all Marshland to the grate danger of mens lives and losse of goods'; in March 1614 'this country was overflowed with the fresh'; and in September 1671 'all Marshland was againe overflowed by the violence of the sea.' Attempts to reduce the effects of a breach in a particular part of the bank were made by the construction of embankments and dykes between each parish. That between Walton and Walpole was called the 'war-dike' or 'ward-dike' (Dugdale, 244; Beloe, 323), but compared with similar features in the eastern part of Marshland, it was a fairly small-scale barrier.

With the later phases of Walton's history we are not concerned here for the field survey sheds little light on subsequent developments. Darby's assessment of the changes in Marshland's prosperity between 1334 and 1525 (1983, 27) would seem to indicate a decline in the rate of growth, although in terms of absolute wealth the region remained remarkably high compared with upland Norfolk. However, by this time the reclamation of land had come to a halt and two centuries passed before there were renewed efforts to reclaim land beyond the sea bank. The pattern of settlement changed too. With the creation, in the second half of the eighteenth century, of a turnpike road from King's Lynn to Wisbech, incorporating an earlier road which linked the Ouse crossing at Watlington to the Nene, the importance of Walton village declined and Walton Highway expanded. Utting's map of Marshland (1826), though perhaps stylised, shows a significant number of houses around Walton Highway and on either side of the droveway to the south. In contrast few buildings are depicted in the vicinity of Walton church, and it was not until the present century that housing development along the drove-edge roads effectively linked the old and new settlements.

June 1984

Acknowledgements

My thanks are due to: the farmers of West Walton, who, without exception, allowed me to trek over their land in the winter of 1982; Tony Gregory and Andrew Rogerson, who classified and dated the pottery recovered during the survey; Alan Davison for examining some of the relevant documentary material in the Norfolk Record Office; and to David Hall, Alan Davison and Andrew Rogerson for their valuable criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper. Needless to say any remaining errors are my own.

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The Society is grateful to the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England for a grant towards the cost of printing this paper.