

THE FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY OF BODNEY AND THE STANTA EXTENSION

by Alan Davison

SUMMARY

On purchasing portions of the Hilborough and Clermont Estates, the Ministry of Defence funded a fieldwalking survey of the area. This was carried out by the writer for the Norfolk Archeological Unit during the winter of 1987-88 and was followed by documentary investigation. Subsequently, at the invitation of the owner, Mr Ashley Bowes, portions of the site of Bodney DMV were surveyed. Discoveries ranged from the Neolithic to post-medieval. Substantial Iron Age and Romano-British sites were found together with evidence of common-edge and valley-floor medieval expansion of settlement. Some light was thrown on the origin and eventual fate of Bodney and on the identity of the Chapel of St. George in Great Cressingham.

Introduction

The area consists of parts of the five medieval parishes of Hilborough, Bodney, Great Cressingham, Little Cressingham and Threxton. Threxton and Bodney are deserted. Apart from cottages at Fairstead, all inhabited areas of the parishes lie outside the extended military training area; the centre of Bodney, surveyed subsequently, lies outside the area.

Relief is subdued, the highest point being no more than 53m above OD. The area is drained by the Wissey and its tributary the Watton Brook or Blackwater which occupy rather marshy valleys. Much carr woodland survives in the Wissey valley. The courses of both streams have been modified; their junction formerly occurred at a point to the south of Bodney.

The underlying chalk appears at the surface in a number of places but, for the most part, is covered by a mantle of glacial deposits ranging from coarse gravel to light sand. Flints are widely scattered while gravel spreads occur on the valley floors. Soils in the south are very light and, prone to wind-blow, are typical of the Breckland. To the north, the soils are chalky loams which are more tenacious but the sands extend further north in Bodney.

Most of the land is arable, though some pastures survive in the valleys along with carr and reedbeds. There is no woodland of antiquity though some very old pollarded trees exist among pastures at Bodney. The Great Wood in Bodney was shown on the Tithe Map of 1842¹ but much woodland is of recent date, some having been planted since 1945. A few trees, remnants of eighteenth-century parkland, still stand near Clermont Lodge.

In the west lie the remains of Bodney airfield, opened in 1940 and closed in 1945. Dispersal points, perimeter tracks, a control tower, bunkers, pillboxes, hutments and an abandoned sewage works can still be found hidden in woods or standing in heathy grassland.

The Method of Survey

Surface collection of artefacts was made by walking along parallel transects at intervals of 30m. When a possible site was found a closer search was made to determine its nature and extent. All pastures and woods were searched for earthworks; two significant groups were planned.

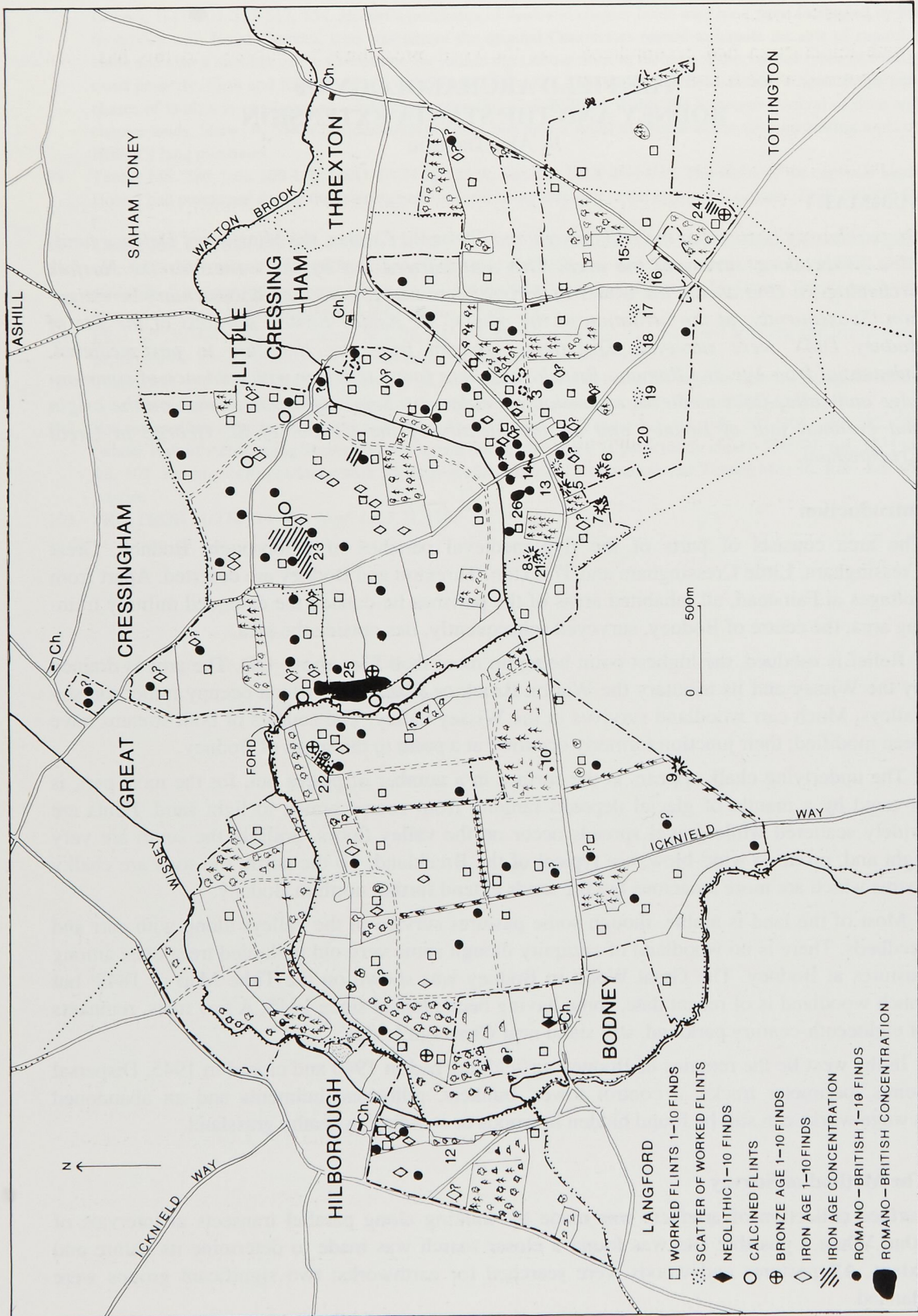


Fig.1
Pre-Roman and Romano-British finds and sites.

The Field Evidence

Some information had accumulated over the years preceding the survey and this has been incorporated in the following account.

The Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Ages c. 2400 BC – c. 750 BC. (Fig.1)

The first fourteen sites are those previously recorded.

Site 1 is a white oval cropmark noticed on an aerial photograph.² Of unknown origin, it could be of much later date. No surface finds were made there in the course of this survey.

Site 2 is still visible as a ring of chalky material in the ploughsoil.³ It was the site of a barrow excavation in 1849, when a contracted male skeleton was uncovered. The grave goods consisted of a bronze dagger and knife, a breastplate and three boxes, all of gold, together with an amber necklace and parts of a gold mount. It was the sole example of a rich Wessex Culture burial in East Anglia.

Site 3 is a ring ditch of which there is now no obvious surface sign.⁴

Site 4, now reduced by ploughing, was a barrow excavated in 1977 when some Beaker, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Late Saxon and medieval pottery was found.⁵

Sites 5-9 are barrows which remain as prominent features.⁶

Site 10 was that of an inhumation burial. The skull of a man was found together with a Bronze Age handled beaker of about 2000 BC and a polished flint axe.⁷

Site 11 is a field from which finds of Neolithic Rusticated pottery are reported near the ford on the Icknield Way; as the surface is now under grass there was no opportunity to verify this.⁸

Sites 12 and 13 are places at which scatters of worked flints had been reported; they were not detected during the present survey despite deliberate search.⁹

Site 14 is where a perforated quartzite mace-head was found.¹⁰

During the present survey, despite thorough search, little was found in the vicinity of the burial mounds, with the exception of Site 21, a scatter of worked flints.¹¹

Sites 15-20 form what appears to be a discontinuous band of areas where worked flints occur.¹² There were a substantial number of scrapers among the finds. A few more were found to the east in Threxton.

Site 22 lies on high ground to the south-west of South Water Ford and close to the causeway of an old road leading from Bodney to Great Cressingham by way of the ford. Here worked flints, including a high proportion of scrapers occurred; a number of flints, again including scrapers, were scattered in the vicinity of the main concentration and an earlier record of a Neolithic flint axe and flakes refers to this site.¹³ A single sherd of Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age pottery was found here, together with finds of a later period.

Apart from these concentrations, worked flints were found on most fields. Overall, none of the finds was of outstanding quality, most being cores, flakes, blades and scrapers, though there was one crude leaf arrow-head. They were all typical of Breckland; most were Late Neolithic though some of the small blades might have been earlier.

A few other sherds of pottery were recovered. The most notable was a Late Neolithic Fengate Ware rim found just to the north-east of the mound on which Bodney church stands.¹⁴ A single sherd of Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age date occurred in a field to the east of Hilborough church where a number of worked flints were found. A decorated Late Beaker sherd was found on Site 24¹⁵ and a grogged Bronze Age sherd on Site 26¹⁶.

In the course of the survey eight 'potboiler' (calcined flint) sites were discovered. Five of them are clearly associated with the Watton Brook; the remainder are close to tributary streams now regulated by modern drainage ditches. It is likely that the pastures close to the rivers may conceal further evidence of prehistoric activity.

The Iron Age c.750 BC – AD 43. (Fig.1)

Iron Age activity must have been widespread as sherds of pottery, certainly or probably of this period, have been found in fields in each of the parishes.

Site 23¹⁷ is the dominant feature of the distribution. In an area of about 35000 sq.m. sherds are densely concentrated and may represent a settlement of some strength. Scattered finds in surrounding fields probably originated from the site and there is a small outlier to the south-east. The site lies on higher ground within a loop of the Watton Brook; the soil there is rather adhesive when wet. The pottery is of a kind which breaks down rather rapidly when exposed to the elements, so that retrieval of some 300 pieces shows something of the richness of the site. Almost all the sherds were of a gritty fabric; only three bore any signs of possible decoration – finger, and finger-nail impressions and grooving. A fragment of a spindle whorl, also gritty was found as well. The only Romano-British pottery found can be safely attributed to later manure-scattering so that there is no question of activity lasting into that period. Sadly, no sign of this site appears on aerial photographs.

Site 24 is very small, only 32 sherds, all gritty and undecorated, being found. The presence of a Bronze Age sherd suggests an Early Iron Age date. The position of the site is curious as it is a considerable distance from surface water.

The position of Site 22 has already been described. Here some 39 sherds, mostly gritty, but with some of a sandy fabric, all again undecorated, were found. This also may, on similar evidence, be of the Early Iron Age.

There is a previous record of Iron Age material from Site 11, but, once again, this could not be verified. This is unfortunate since it is the only one to be near the traditional course of the Icknield Way.

The Romano-British Period AD43 – AD410. (Fig.1)

The only major site (25)¹⁸ is linear and extends across parts of four fields. More than 300 sherds of pottery were collected in conditions which ranged from good to less than moderate. The majority of these were grey- coarse-, or shelly wares but there were also small quantities of Samian Ware, fourth-century Oxfordshire mortaria and Nene Valley, Oxfordshire and East Anglian colour-coated wares, as well as a sherd from an amphora. Many fragments of tiles, including tegulae, imbreces and flue tiles, suggest buildings of a prosperous rural settlement. A well-marked bank and ditch extends from north to south through parts of the site. They are followed by a parish boundary and are much later features.

Some Romano-British pottery had been reported some 100m to the north-east of the site as determined by the present survey.¹⁹ Although scattered sherds were collected there they appear to be mere outliers of the main site and not distinct. It is possible that the location of the earlier finds was wrongly reported, or that subsequent ploughing has destroyed evidence. A few sherds of Iron Age pottery and one of the Bronze Age occurring on Site 25 are insufficient to suggest an earlier origin for the site but evidence may have been concealed by soil drifting downslope from the east.

A small site (26)²⁰ lies further up the valley; from this only small quantities of grey- and

coarsewares have been collected. At best it can only have been the site of a rather lowly dwelling.

Scattered finds of this period are widespread suggesting that cultivation, at one time or another within the period, extended over the greater part of the area, even onto the higher and drier lands. In its heyday, the Romano-British Breckland must have been quite densely peopled.

The Early Saxon Period c.AD410 c.AD650. (Fig.2)

In contrast to the Roman period, signs of Early Saxon activity are few. The only certain concentration discovered during the survey was Site 27²¹, just to the east of what was, at a later date, Little Cressingham High Common (Fig.5). Finds amounted to sixteen sherds of which most could be dated with confidence; fourteen were of sandy/gritty wares, some with organic inclusions, and only one of them sufficiently gritty to be possibly of the Iron Age, and the rim of a bowl of slightly gritty fabric with smoothed surfaces, and, slightly detached to the west, a large, thick, red-grogged bodysherd. A little further to the north, a rim of sandy ware, possibly Iron Age or Early Saxon or even Early Medieval date, was found.

A little to the east of Site 33²² two sherds of dark grey sandy fabric, with organic inclusions, possibly of this period, were found, but an Iron Age origin is more probable.

Previously existing records note a find of Early Saxon pottery south of Hilborough church on Site 28²³; despite a thorough search, nothing of this period was found. Some sherds of an embossed urn were found just to the east of the Icknield Way ford on the north bank of the stream²⁴ but the vegetation cover prevented a new search. In 1970 an Early Saxon spearhead was found on Site 29²⁵.

The Middle Saxon Period c.AD 650 – c.AD 850. (Fig.2)

The most significant of the rather scanty finds of this period are those made on Site 29. Here, at a point some distance to the west of the church, some 60-70m from the road and clear of the edge of the rivers' flood plain, four sherds of Ipswich-type Ware, of both sandy and pimply forms, were found among much later material. Two Ipswich-type sherds had been found in the same position in 1976²⁶. To the south of the road, among post-medieval building foundations in grassland²⁷, an Ipswich-type base found. It seems, therefore, that the core of Bodney village must have had its origin in this period, at the latest.

Of the few scattered finds made elsewhere, two sherds of Ipswich-type Ware, one of pimply form, on Site 27, the other, a fine sandy base, close by to the north, probably represent the last phase of early activity on this site.

A single sherd of pimply Ipswich-type occurred on Site 31²⁸ and another, possibly the sandy form of Ipswich-type, was found in a field well to the north-east of Bodney church close to the line of the Icknield Way.

There is a previous record of a find of Ipswich-type Ware on Site 28 near Hilborough church. During the present survey a thick grey bodysherd of a pimply fabric, possibly Middle Saxon though not of Ipswich-type, was found there.

The Late Saxon Period c.AD 850 – c.AD 1150. (Fig.2)

The chief archaeological evidence for this period is to be found in Bodney. On Site 29, first reported in 1976, finds occur in a band some 75m wide, parallel to the road. Most are of

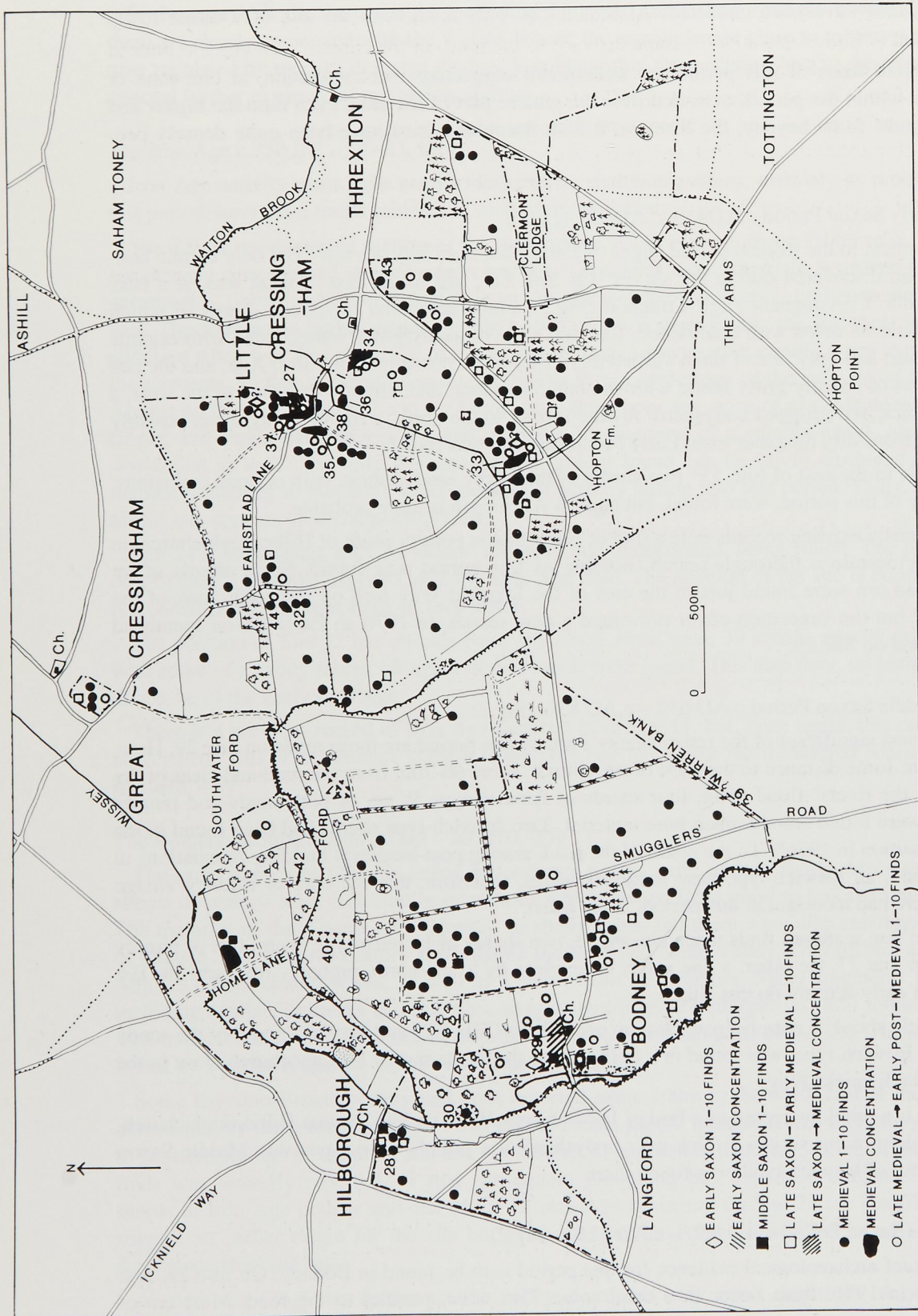


Fig.2 Post-Roman finds and sites

Thetford-type Ware, but there are small quantities of St. Neots-type and Early Medieval Wares. The band extends eastwards for some distance to the north or the church²⁹. Among the finds at the western end of the site were fragments of fired clay daub, some with withy impressions. A spread of daub had also been seen in 1976. To the south of the road scattered finds, certainly or probably of Thetford- and St. Neots-type occur on grassland as far south as the present farm buildings. Further finds of Thetford-type Ware and Stamford Ware were made inside the Stanta Extension to the south of Bodney and these, with a few scattered finds to the east, represent an outer 'aura' surrounding the settlement.

Some Thetford- and St. Neots-type finds were made on site 28, confirming earlier reports, while Thetford-type Ware was found on Site 34³⁰, close to the main street of Little Cressingham.

In each of the three cases the finds are close to what may well have been the core of the original village. Bodney church, at the eastern end of a major area of finds, has a small piece of Saxon interlaced carving in the north-eastern buttress.³¹

Faint traces of activity of this period were found around Hopton Farm, confirming earlier records.³² Elsewhere within the area surveyed the scarcity of Late Saxon and Early Medieval pottery is notable.

The Medieval and Early Post-Medieval Periods c.AD 1150 – c.AD 1450; c.AD 1450 – c.AD 1600

The distribution of finds and other features of this period can be considered most effectively on a parish basis.

Hilborough. The distribution of finds is so scanty that most of that part of the parish lying within the limits of the survey must have been outside the settled area. The exception is Site 28 where some medieval pottery is associated with earlier finds.

Bodney. The main concentration of finds, at Site 29, coincides with the area of Late Saxon activity. Well over 200 sherds of unglazed pottery were collected together with a much smaller quantity of glazed sherds, mainly Grimston Ware. The unglazed pottery probably includes an unknown proportion of Thetford-type sherds which cannot be decisively separated from the later material. Conversely, the daub already noted is, perhaps, as likely to be of medieval origin. Medieval pottery and lava quern fragments had been recorded here in 1976.

To the south of the road, and probably best regarded as a southern extension of Site 29, medieval pottery has been recovered from molehills in the grassland as far south as the present farm buildings. In arable land still further to the south there was a fairly prolific scatter of medieval pottery; of the amount collected about one-third was glazed Grimston Ware. On arable lands to the south-east, east and north-east, the scatter of medieval pottery dies away in intensity, becoming very faint in the most easterly fields. There is an area to the north-east of the church and some distance to the south of the ford of the Icknield Way, where over 130 sherds of medieval pottery, about one-quarter of which were of glazed Grimston Ware, were collected.³³ Although there was no obvious concentration it is possible that the sherds may have been redistributed during airfield construction in 1940.

Site 30 (Fig.3) is the most notable medieval feature.³⁵ It consists of a moated platform forming an irregular quadrilateral; the northern and eastern limbs of the moat are quite deeply indented. The western arm is a former channel of the Watton Brook which fed the moat. It leads away as a drain joining the Wissey where it has taken a sharp bend eastwards to occupy the former channel of the Watton Brook. There are raised features at either end of the platform. The northern one extends the width of the platform, giving it a stepped appearance; the south-

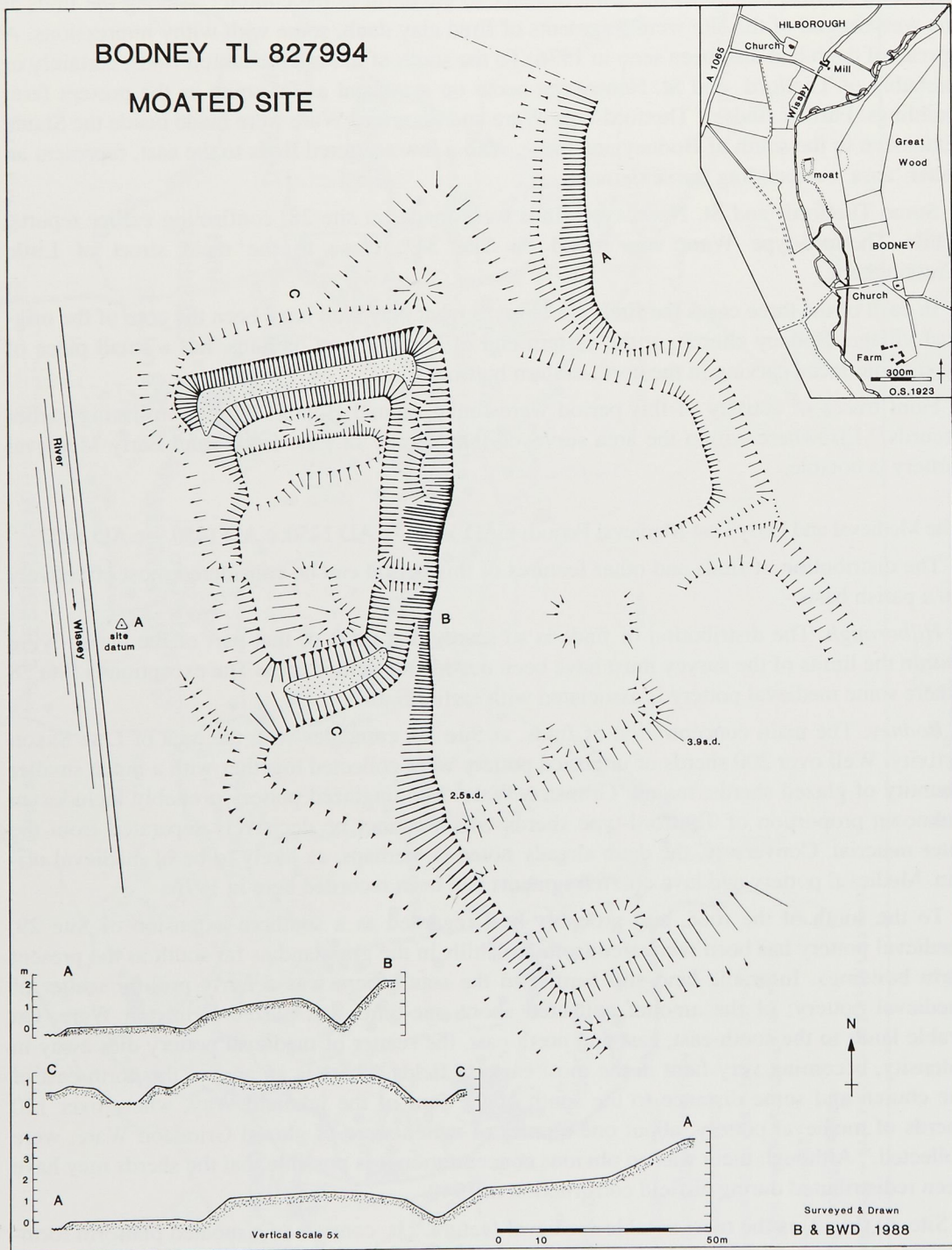


Fig.3
Bodney moated site.

ern one is less distinct. On both, brick fragments and sherds of medieval pottery have been found. Entry to the platform appears to have been by a causeway near the south-east corner. Recent dumping of flints from the fields has given rise to an apparent western entrance.

Associated earthworks to the east consist of a sinuous hollow way, possibly a street leading from the main village, but with no obvious northern destination. A shorter hollow way extends towards the moat and may be the remains for an approach way. A linear depression further south may be the remnant of a lane leading to the stream. To the north of it is a short enclosed depression of unknown significance. There are also parts of two probable enclosures, their joint southern boundary bank rises eastwards in marked fashion. There are signs of a platform north of the eastern enclosure. The earthworks seem to end abruptly at an old hedge bank which truncates them and is, itself, of some age. Pollarded trees in the pasture (called 'Oak Yards' on the Tithe map) within which the earthworks lie are of notable size and age.

There is no firm evidence as to the identity of the moated site which is probably that of one of the three manors of Bodney; the neighbouring earthworks appear to be a northward extension of the deserted village.

A second group of features lies south of the modern road (Fig.4).³⁶ These appear to date from several periods and are less easy to interpret. The existing 1:2500 O.S. plan shows a curving L-shaped feature, narrower and more distinct at its northern end, and described as a fish pond. However, the Tithe map shows a third, southern, arm and, in the course of this survey, this was found to be still traceable, though partly obliterated by infilling. A short narrow depression on the western side of the feature is probably the remnant of a feeder link with a former stream channel. It seems that the feature is not a fish pond but a second moat. If there was ever a fourth arm to the moat it has long since been covered in: no sign remains. Possibly the platform always remained open to the east.

To the south and south-east lies a group of earthworks with foundations of walls. Immediately to the south of the moat is a well-defined length of flint walling with another parallel to it some 58m to the south. They are the north and south boundaries of a flat expanse of land just above the level of the valley floor. Its eastern boundary is a distinct upward slope; at this point the southern wall has a step of 1.8m before continuing eastwards. A gap in this wall close to the step has brickwork on either side suggesting that it represents a gateway. The raised area to the east has a few distinct banks and some rather vague features shown on the plan by dashed lines. One, close to the modern farm drive, may be the base of a wall. It seems likely, from field observation, that the construction of the drive may have modified the site. Buildings shown on the Tithe map conform roughly with the features on the plan, but it is clear that truncation of the northern end of the site occurred when later cottages and gardens were constructed.

The flat lower area to the west appears to be the remains of a walled garden belonging to a house lying to the east. Many of these features are clearly post-medieval but their identity will be discussed later. However, medieval and earlier pottery has been collected from the surface of the site. The surrounding pastures have some surface irregularities but none appears particularly significant. However, some 100m or more to the south-west of the site are three well-defined fishponds, probably medieval. They are roughly rectangular, are unequal in size and are arranged in a row more or less parallel to the former course of the Watton Brook. The present straight course of the Wissey lies between this drain and its own old meandering course, now also serving as a drain, and still followed by the parish boundary. The existence of these fish ponds makes the interpretation of the more northerly feature as the remnant of a moat more likely. The three fish ponds are shown in detail on the 1:2500 O.S. plan.

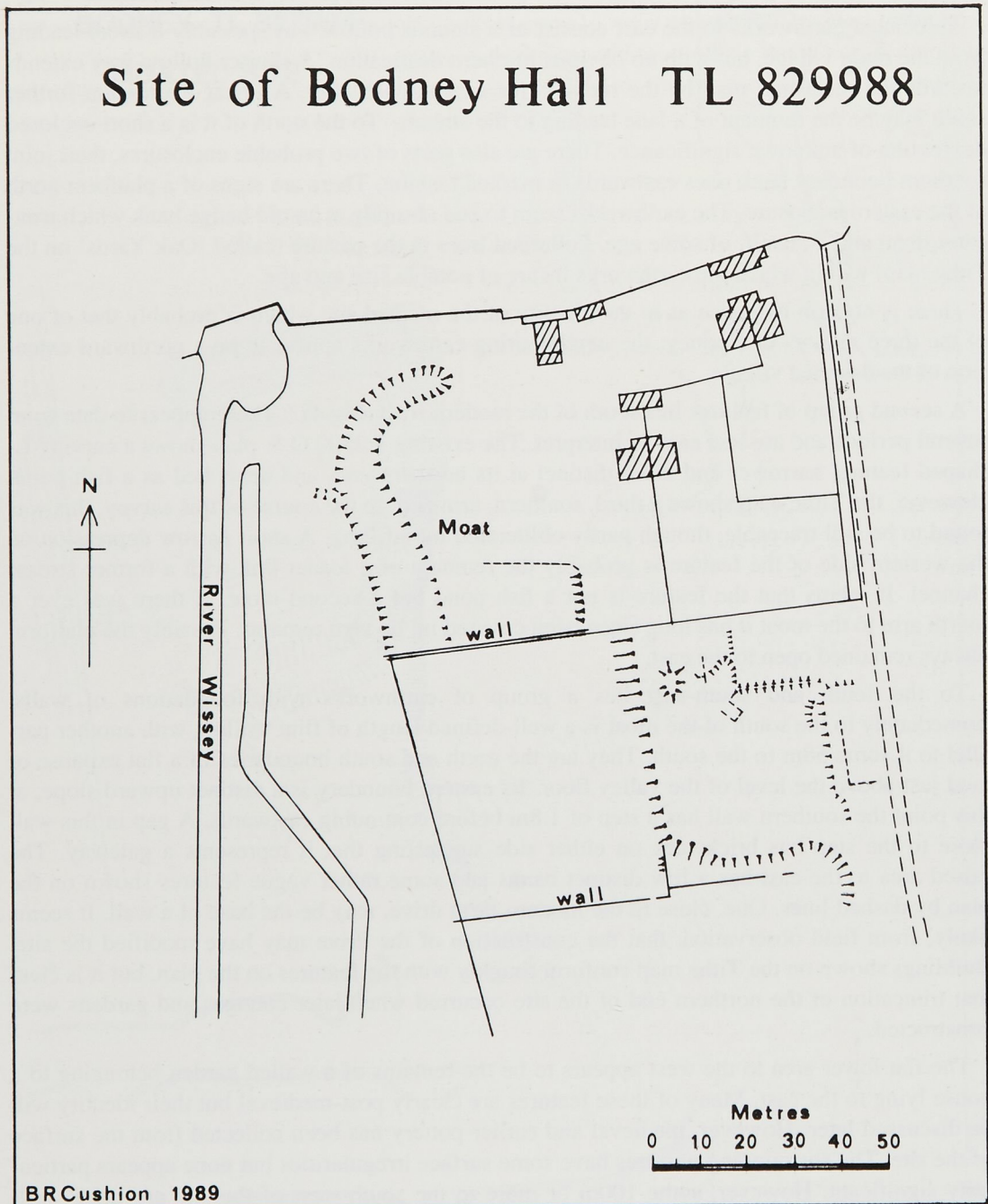


Fig.4
Site of Bodney Hall.

Of the remaining features within the parish of Bodney Site 40 is a short stretch of the Smugglers' Road (Icknield Way), almost certainly in use in medieval times and now surviving as a hollow track between banks leading down to the ford. Site 41 is a short causeway with remains of flanking ditches, survivor of a road linking Bodney with Great Cressingham by way of South Water Ford. Quite possibly medieval in origin, this road was largely obliterated in 1940 during airfield construction. Site 39 is a boundary bank of Bodney Warren. Of uncertain date, it is probably post-medieval but will have been a replacement for earlier features mentioned in 1500.

Great Cressingham. Two small portions of this parish lie within the Stanta Extension. The westernmost part is within the angle formed by the union of the Watton Brook with the Wissey: much of it is covered by grassland, carr and woodland.

Site 31³⁵ is a concentration of medieval pottery lying on the south side of the Wissey valley, close to the Home Lane crossing of the river but clear of the flood plain. The density of finds declines eastwards, but two sherds found on molehills on Site 11 (pasture) immediately to the west of Home Lane suggest a possible westward extension. Of 140 sherds collected, about 17% were glazed Grimston Ware, the rest unglazed. Evidence discussed later points to this being the site of Glosbrigg or Glassbridge Manor and that it was near a former road which ran from Little Cressingham towards Hilborough, crossing Home Lane.

On site 42³⁶ a record of previous finds shows that this was the site of a 17th-century gunflint-knapper's works. Vegetation cover prevented any confirmation, but the survey revealed gunflint waste characteristic of the Brandon industry on Site 28 to the south-west.

The other part of Great Cressingham contains much more arable land. Site 32³⁷ includes the site of the Chapel and Hermitage of St. George.³⁸ Fragments of building materials, including one Romano-British tile, probably taken from Site 25, and faint surface irregularities remain, despite evident change made by the removal of hedge banks. Aerial photography shows not only the vanished field boundaries but also the faint outline of a small church with a nave and apsidal chancel.³⁹ Medieval pottery, about one-third of it glazed Grimston Ware, was collected from the chapel site and from an area immediately to the north-west.

Site 44³⁷ was part of the Fairstead. Some medieval and Late Medieval/Transitional pottery occurs among abundant post-medieval to modern evidence. This includes a considerable quantity of oyster shells, relics of fair-ground sales. Map evidence shows that the wood and the cottages to the north conceal part of the Fairstead.

Little Cressingham. Site 33²² appears to be the site of Hopton Manor, a hamlet of Little Cressingham. The demolition of buildings on both sides of the road, as shown on earlier maps, accounts for the large quantities of modern materials including flint cobbling from yards. Medieval pottery, in the main unglazed but with a substantial amount of glazed Grimston Ware, is concentrated on both sides of the road, with some Romano-British and Late Saxon pottery among it. A smaller concentration lies in some isolation to the west, roughly coinciding with Romano-British site 26.

On Site 34 activity continued through the medieval period to early post-medieval times, but the most striking development was the establishment of settlement at a number of points on the margins of the High and Low Commons of Little Cressingham⁴⁰ (Fig.5). All but one coincide closely with the margins of the commons as they are shown on the Tithe map.⁴¹ Site 35 is that of the former Low Common Farm, demolished in recent times. From an area of dark-coloured soils littered with building materials, almost 60 sherds of medieval pottery, about one-third of it glazed, together with Late Medieval/Transitional and post-Medieval pottery, were collected.

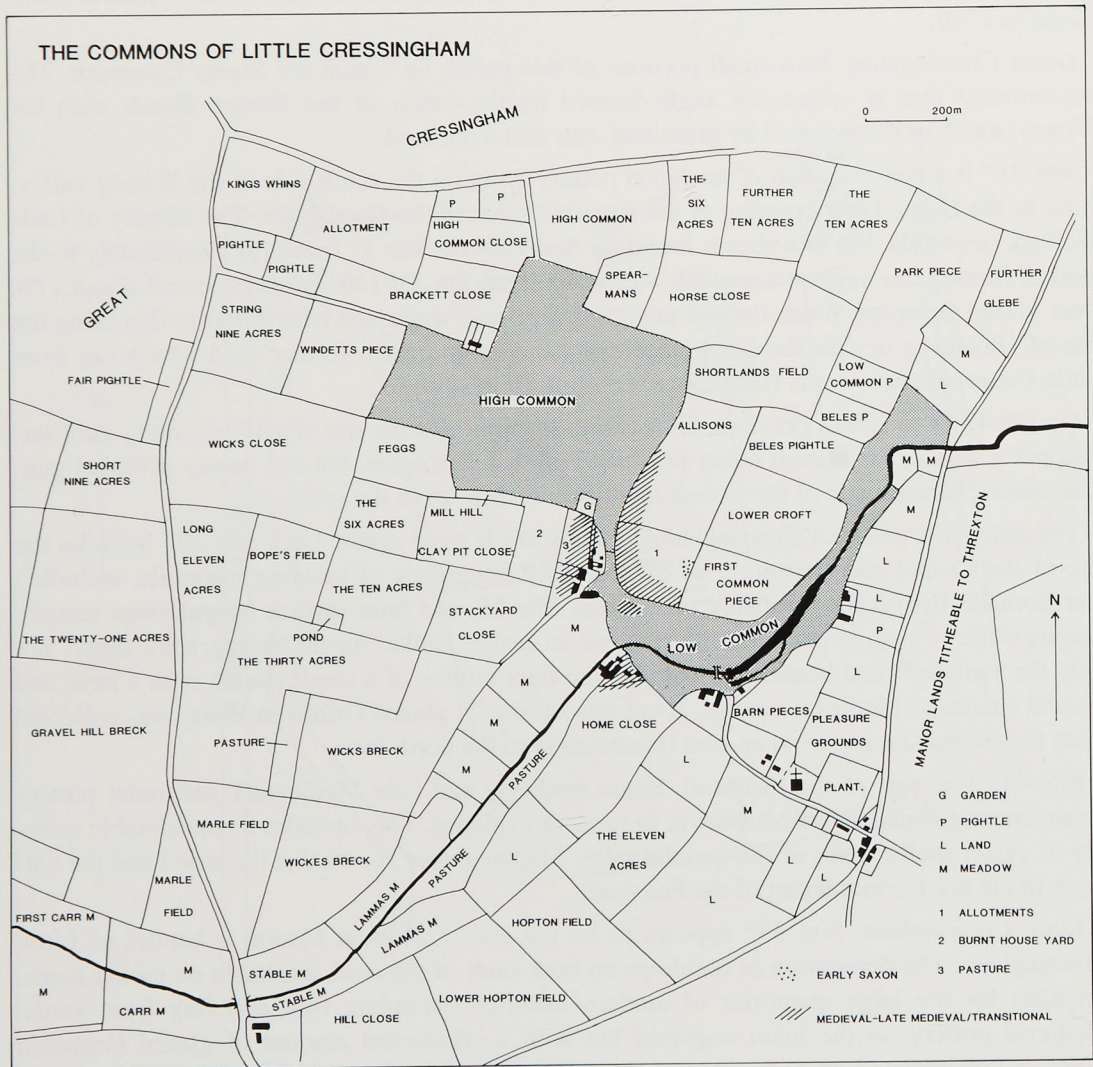


Fig. 5
The commons of Little Cressingham.

More medieval pottery, obviously associated with the site, was scattered on the field nearby. The small Site 36 is also that of recently-demolished buildings. From among the plentiful building materials medieval, Late Medieval/Transitional and post-medieval pottery was recovered. Site 37 is an L-shaped concentration facing the driveway linking the two commons. It appears to have been the strongest of the settled areas: of 131 sherds of medieval pottery collected, almost 37% were glazed, almost all of them Grimston Ware.

In addition, a rim from a large bowl of Grimston Thetford Ware was found, hinting at earlier activity. The 36 sherds of Late Medieval/Transitional pottery were a greater quantity than usual, and activity continued into post-medieval times. A number of lava quern fragments and a hone with a sub-rectangular section were also found. Site 38 is small, about 25m x 12m, and seems to have been located within the common as shown on the map. The pottery found was all medieval and there were three fragments of lava querns. If it represents occupation, it was short-lived and may have been taken back into the common after abandonment.

The incidence of scattered finds in Little Cressingham decreases towards The Arms and Clermont Lodge. Evidence, to be reviewed below, shows that this was an area of large 'breck' fields and also of heathland or warrens, so that spreading of pottery by manuring is unlikely to have happened.

One later site (43) is of interest. A late 18th century map⁴² shows a windmill standing there and depicts it as a post mill. However, it may have been a smock mill.⁴³ No field evidence survives. A mill was recorded at a site further to the south⁴⁴, but, again, no evidence for this was found.

Threxton. Finds were few and confined to the northern part of the small area of the parish which lies within the Extension. The south was void of finds for reasons similar to those for the neighbouring parts of Little Cressingham.

The Documentary Evidence

Place-Names

The earliest known versions of the village names are given in Domesday Book. They are: Bodney – *Budenia, Bodeneia*; Hilborough – *Hildeburh Wella*; (Great) Cressingham – *Cressingaham, Gresingaham, Cresinegaham*; Little Cressingham – *Parva Cressingaham, Parva Cresingham*; Threxton – *Trestuna, Trectuna*. Of these, three are examples of 'ingham' and 'ton' endings; whatever their origins, the two which shared a name were clearly separate by 1086. Bodney is said to mean 'Beoda's island', combining a personal name with a topographical description. 'Island' in the sense of 'dry ground in marsh' aptly describes the situation of Bodney as it overlooks the floor of the Wissey/Watton Brook valley.⁴⁵ Hilborough, known in medieval times as Hildburgworth, probably means 'the farm belonging to Hildeborg' (a woman's name).⁴⁶ Perhaps the most interesting is the minor place-name 'Hopton'. This is rare in East Anglia and appears not to have been previously noted from Norfolk. It has a number of possible meanings of which the most significant are 'enclosure in marsh' or, as in Hopton, Suffolk, 'settlement on a marsh promontory'.⁴⁷ This seems to fit the topography of the Little Cressingham Hopton rather well as it stood just above the floor of the valley of the Watton Brook.

The Domesday Evidence.

In 1086 Hilborough was held entirely by William de Warenne. Its valuation was high (£7) and had risen since 1066, the recorded population remained the same as in 1066 but the number of plough teams had fallen by three. There were three mills. Bodney was divided among three

lords, Warenne, Ralph de Tosny and Hugh de Montfort. De Montfort's holding had shown decline since 1066, with only 1½ plough teams instead of six, a 33% decline in recorded population and a valuation which had fallen from 100 shillings to 60 shillings. In the settlement as a whole, two mills and two quarters of mills were recorded. Little Cressingham was, in the main, held by de Tosny as a berewick of Necton, with a recorded population of 37, a total of 10 plough teams and one mill. Other lands there were held by two of the King's freemen. Great Cressingham was much more divided; the chief lords were Bishop William and Ralph de Tosny, whose holding was a berewick of Necton. On the Bishop's holding recorded population had decreased since 1066 though, overall, there had been a slight increase in plough teams; there were two mills, two fisheries and a church with 20 acres. On de Tosny's holding there were no signs of decline; there was one mill, a fishery and a church with 15 acres. Smaller portions of Great Cressingham were held by a man of the Bishop of Thetford's, by Count Alan and by six freemen who had a mill but whose lands had declined from 60 shillings to 30 shillings in value and who had between them only two ploughteams instead of the six they had in 1066. Of Threxton, largely outside the area, little need be said; it was held by Warenne and Reynold, son of Ivo. Its valuation in 1086 showed decline.⁴⁸

Evidence from Later Taxation.

Some facts about the subsequent fortunes of the five settlements can be obtained by comparing the sums levied from them in taxation between 1334 and 1581. With the exception of Threxton, which was in Wayland, all were in the hundred of South Greenhoe. If sums paid by townships in 1334 are arranged in order of size then, apart from Little Cressingham on the median point, all are in the lower half of the column. After a generally difficult century in which plagues and social unrest and, possibly, famine all occurred, they seem to have emerged relatively less injured than others. When reductions for economic hardship were allowed in 1449, Great Cressingham received none and only Bodney, allowed a reduction of 17.5%, was close to the median level. Threxton, in 1334, contributed a sum even smaller than any of the other four but, in 1449, it too received only a comparatively small reduction. By 1524-25 the numbers of contributors to the payment in Bodney and Little Cressingham seem to indicate decline, while Great Cressingham and Hilborough appear to have been thriving. The fortunes of Threxton seem to have reached a very low ebb. By 1581, wealth in Bodney and Little Cressingham seems to have lain in the hands of a few.⁴⁹

For more detailed consideration of the medieval and post-medieval documentation of the topography it is best to review the evidence parish by parish.

Hilborough

The manor remained as a single unit throughout the medieval period and was held by the Hare family in the 17th century. It appears that the site of the manor house was somewhere near the present Hilborough Hall, outside the designated area. A full survey of the village was made in 1627 by William Hayward. There is no map but the description is sufficiently detailed to establish the main elements in the layout of the village and its lands. There are also earlier surveys from 1497-8 and 1586 which show that there had been few changes of significance between the 15th and 17th centuries.⁵⁰ Beyond the houses and crofts of the village lay three fields Northfield, Westfield and Southfield, which were described as Infield. To the west of the Northfield lay two Outfields called Northfield and Barrowfield. To the south-west of the Southfield lay two other Outfields called Hungerhill field and Southfield and heathland lay on three sides of this outfield area. By the river, meadows and some common land extended northwards to the Great Cressingham boundary. There was a mill on or close to the present site.

It is clear that the small area of the parish within the Extension included part of the southern fields, some riverside meadows and some of the bordering heathland. From scanty medieval documentation it seems that there had been few major changes in the disposition and use of lands over the centuries. A 13th-century charter mentions Southfield and Hungryfield⁵¹ and court rolls of the 14th century mention names clearly identifiable in 1627.⁵² The absence of medieval pottery from the south of the area obviously relates to the heathland of the surveys. Site 28 was in arable land called Churchfield in 1627; the finds made there suggest that the village may have once have extended further south. The survey mentions a road passing along the western side of the churchyard and some traces of this are still visible in grassland there. The present road leading from the village towards Bodney Bridge is, in its northern part, quite modern. Until relatively recent times it followed the field boundary immediately west of Site 28. There is evidence, in two court rolls⁵², of mortality in the June and July of 1349; 26 names of people who died seised of property are recorded. Some tax relief was given to Hilborough after the Black Death but it was for less than one-third of the amount for which it had be previously assessed.⁵³ However, there may have been some contraction in the area inhabited. The 1627 survey records a park around the manor house to the north of the church, so re-modelling may also have been, to some extent, responsible for abandonment of a settled area.

Bodney

In 1086 the principal holding was that of de Montfort. It subsequently passed to the Peleville family at the end of the 12th century⁵⁴ and they continued to hold it in the 13th century.⁵⁵ In the 14th century it was held by the Belhous family and from them it passed, by marriage, to the Oldhall or Holdhalls. Of the de Tosny holding there is little subsequent information, but in 1264 Roger de Tony had the rents and services of 10 villeins in Bodney suggesting that, with an estimated population of 45, it may have been quite a substantial part of the settlement.⁵⁶ The Warene holding was in the hands of the Holdich family towards the end of the 14th century.⁵⁷ Blomefield thought that the manors had been united in single ownership in the early 15th century. By the middle of that century the manors had passed to the Cluniac Priory of Thetford. At the dissolution of the monasteries the manor was acquired by the Duke of Norfolk.

One possible manorial site is the partially-obliterated moat to the south of the road near Site 29. It seems most likely that this was the seat of the principal manor in medieval times. The hall of de Montfort who had the largest holding in 1086 may well have been near the church which, given the survival of Late Saxon interlace, must have been in existence then. The hall could have been replaced at some time after the mid-12th century by a moated structure. When the manors were united it seems logical to suppose that this would have been retained as the manorial seat although the moated platform may have been abandoned in favour of a new building nearby. Bodney Hall was described by Blomefield: 'The manor-house stands near the church and is a large convenient old house built of clunch, stone etc., with good gardens and walks adjoining to the river side'.⁵⁸ Armstrong repeated the description but added of the river: 'this water, on the melting of a great fall of snow, or heavy rains, is very dangerous and to be cautiously avoided'.⁵⁹ A house 'old' to Blomefield could have been built in the late 15th or 16 centuries.

This Hall was still in existence between 1792 and 1805 when the Tasburghs lent it to the nuns of Montargis⁶⁰ but it was demolished in the early 19th century as, in 1836, it was said that a large farm-house had been built near the site of the old Hall 'which was taken down some years ago'.⁶¹ However, the Tithe map of 1842 shows a building described as 'Bodney Hall, out-building, yards, garden and Pleasure Ground' standing close to the three-armed moat. It is not clear whether the features shown on Fig.4 are those of the Hall or a later farm-house or whether

they include elements of both. The 1st Edition O.S. map marks the building 'Hall' and also shows the present farm buildings to the south.

The more northerly moated site (30) is most probably that of the Holdich manor. It lies close to Hilborough, another former Warenne holding, and this may lend weight to the identification. The alternative de Tony holding, with its more obscure history, is less likely. The marked increase in the density of field scatters of medieval pottery to the south of the Icknield Way ford is particularly notable. Although no obvious site can be identified the collection of over 130 sherds of pottery of this period is suggestive and may indicate a third site now dispersed.

It is not possible to give a precise time for the desertion of Bodney but the second half of the 15th century may well have seen the beginnings of drastic decline. Apart from the evidence of subsidy returns of 1449 and 1524-5 and the fact that the parish, not being exempt from the parish tax of 1428, must have had 10 households at least⁶², definite information is lacking. A deed of quitclaim, made in 1453 by Robert Norwich of London concerned lands, tenements, rents and services with the liberty of two folds in Bodney.⁶³ William Norwich was one of four people from whom Thetford Priory obtained the manor in 1453.⁶⁴ Documentary evidence shows that there were, subsequently, disputes between the Priory and the lord of Langford over the inter-commoning of sheep and cattle.⁶⁵ The dispute was settled in 1500 with the Priory reserving its rights to the profits of the conies and warren in any part of the disputed common and also reserving there, to itself and its tenants in Bodney, common rights with 'grete bests fyrrs lyng and brake'. The accounts of the Priory show that, between 1509 and 1521, repairs to the warren lodge were made.⁶⁶ It seems reasonable to assume that sheep farming and rabbit warrens were probably the prime interests of the Priory in this manor. The Valor Ecclesiasticus of 1535 shows that the Priory did own substantial flocks of sheep which were distributed among its various other manorial possessions in Breckland. It is possible that the Priory, like some lay landlords who sought profit by increasing their flocks at the expense of tenants, may have played its part in the depopulation of the village.

The agreement of 1500 provides a few topographical details about the warren. It describes a boundary 'begynnyng at a close called fyshpondyke on the south parte of the comyn of Bodney on to a forowe that leadeth betwene the mounts otherwyse called Copdowe hylles and from there abutting upon the weye leadyng from Stanford on to Thrextton toward the southest . . .'. The mounts appear to be the prehistoric barrow group and the subsequent stretch seems to be that of the parish boundary extending to Hopton Point. This 'forowe' is most probably some predecessor of the existing boundary bank (Site 39).

There is little further evidence of the medieval landscape of Bodney. A glebe terrier of 1709⁶⁷ carries only faint traces of an earlier field system but hardly any sign of them appears on the Tithe map. This map shows the easternmost parts of the parish divided into large 'breck' fields. This may indicate that they had been cultivated only on an occasional basis previously thus agreeing with the sparse distribution of medieval pottery there. Two former roads are also shown on the Tithe map. One extended north-eastwards to Great Cressingham by way of South Water Ford; Site 41 is a remnant of this. The outer was the Smugglers' Road or Icknield Way; only the southern part of this remains in use while a short length of hollow way survives near the ford (Site 40).

Great Cressingham

This village has rather an involved manorial history. The Bishop's holding was passed to Norwich Cathedral Priory in exchange for the fair and Saturday market at Lynn and other property there, the church and its appurtenances were excepted. Leased out by the Priors, the manor

passed into lay hands at the Dissolution. The much smaller portion of the Bishop of Thetford's man seems to have become the manor held by the de Hockham family in 1302. A further portion was held, from the Bishop, first by Clement under the Calthorps and then by le Virley, de Cressingham and de Glosebrigg, all of whom are recorded in 1346. According to Blomefield, the old Clement manor had passed, by 1401-02, to Richard Ryley and he refers to the whole complicated group as Hockham's, Glosebrigg's and Ryley's or Risley's manors. The other Domesday holdings of de Tosny, Count Alan and the six freemen appear to have been amalgamated to form a manor variously called Streethall, Strawhall or Streahall; by the 17th century it was held jointly with the Priory manor.⁶⁸

Priory Farm marks the former Priory manor, later called Colleyns. The Tithe map⁶⁹ suggests that Hockham's lay in the village to the north-east of Priory Farm. Strawhall was also in the village, near the river at Waterend.⁷⁰ These lie outside the Extension; there is evidence to show that Glosbrigg (Glassbridge or Glasebridge) manor lay in the area between the two rivers within the more westerly of the two portions of the parish which concern this survey.

In 1646-7 a piece of common called Hempit Heaveds was described as extending 'south or south-west unto the way at Glasbridge now called Home Lane'⁷⁰ and the same source describes Glassbridge Fen and Further Linghills as being between the Wissey and the Watton Brook. In 1573 there was a reference to Glosebrigg Yards⁷¹ while the same source carries 14th century references to people with the name 'de Glosbrigg'. It seems fairly obvious that there was a manorial site or community near Home Lane and this must refer to Site 31. The references to common pastures such as Southey More and Linghills to the south-east of Glassbridge in the late 16th century⁷² explain the scarcity of finds in that area. From the evidence of pottery this apparently isolated community was established in medieval times but activity may have ceased by the Late Medieval period. However Faden's Map of 1797⁷³ shows a road crossing this area from east to west suggesting that Site 31 was far from isolated in earlier times.

Documentary evidence for the Chapel and Hermitage of St. George, which lay within the other part of the parish inside the Extension, is slight. Of the two churches recorded in 1086, the existing one is that which belonged to the Bishop. Blomefield suggested that the de Tosny church may have been the Chapel of St. George.⁷⁴ The shape of the building as shown by aerial photography lends some support to this, but there is no other archeological evidence. The medieval pottery found nearby might be associated with its later use as a hermitage or as chapel to the fairground nearby. The earliest reference to the building so far found is in a grant, dated 1320, of protection for one year to the parson of Great Cressingham and of the chapel of stone.⁷⁵ All other references are post-medieval.

From a map of 1777 (Fig.6) it is clear that the chapel stood close to the intersections of several roads, only a few of which now survive.⁷⁶ Its position is marked by Chapel Field which was glebe. The most important roads were the one which still leads from Great Cressingham to Hopton and the two which crossed it, one from Little Cressingham and High Common to Hilborough by way of Glassbridge, the other from Watton to Hilborough. The map shows the second of these as joining the Hopton road at Gospel Hill, but Faden shows it as crossing it. Gospel Hill suggests a place where a Gospel passage was read during the beating of the parish bounds⁷⁷ although the 1777 map shows the boundary in a different position. Of the field names more are associated with the fair than the chapel.

A court roll entry of 1606 refers to land abutting on the way to 'Stone Chappell' and another, dated 1613, describes land lying near 'Stoneclose' and abutting on 'Stoneway' together with another piece at Gospel Hill to the east of the way to Stone Close.⁷⁸ As late as 1845 the site of the chapel and hermitage was said to be 'Stone Close' where a cattle and horse fair was held

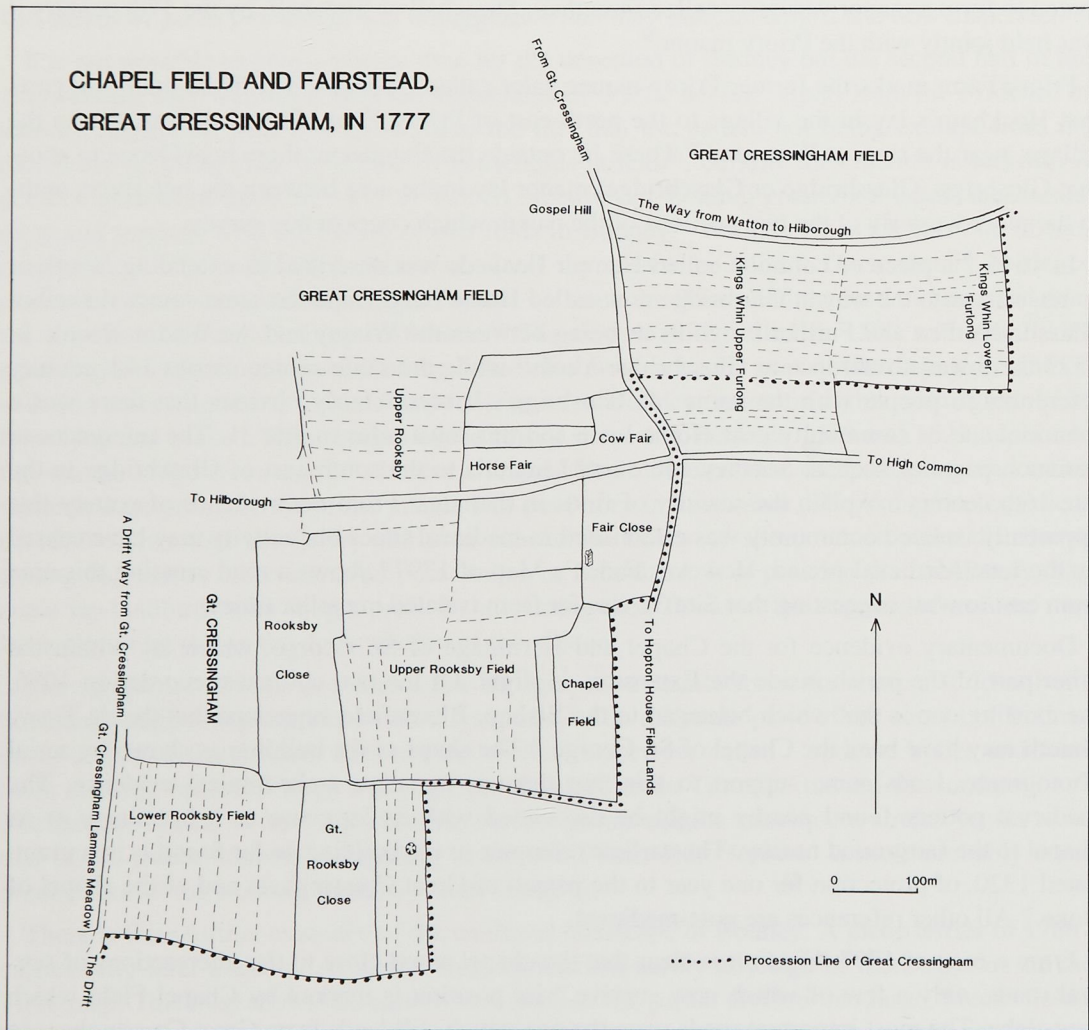


Fig. 6
Chapel Field and Fairstead, Great Cressingham, in 1777.

annually in August.⁷⁹

The earliest reference to the fair found so far is in a court roll entry for 1446 which records that men from Little Cressingham committed trespass 'on the feyrestede called the Stone' (*trans*) driving off 220 sheep belonging to the Rector. They also committed trespass on land in Stonehill furlong which abutted on Stonehill.⁷¹ It seems likely that the various 'stone' place-names, including a 'Stone Cross', were all near one another and that Stonestrete Way was an alternative name for Stoneway.⁷² There is no noticeable stone on the site of the chapel but it could have been robbed for building long ago. It is possible that the chapel, the fair, the road, the close and the cross all owe their name to some other feature long vanished.

The spreads of post-medieval pottery and oyster shells accord well with the survival of the fair into the 19th century. At that time notices of the fair, held on 12th August, required tradesmen, petty chapmen, publicans and others wanting booths to give six days' notice and to be held responsible for the boards issued to them for stalls.⁸⁰

It is possible that there was some relationship between fair and chapel; it may have served visitors to the medieval fair much as Stourbridge Chapel did those who came to Stourbridge Fair, near Cambridge. The proximity of the chapel to the parish boundary may be significant. Little Cressingham, in 1086, was held by de Tosny and it is not unreasonable to suppose that some of his land in Great Cressingham may have been contiguous and that the chapel had been the second Domesday church.

Little Cressingham

This parish, in common with Bodney but unlike Hilborough and Great Cressingham, is not well-documented. The de Tosny manor remained linked with Necton until the 16th century when it was separated. There is no evidence about the location of any associated manorial site, it may have been within the village elsewhere outside the Extension. A manor called Hopton House is said to have come into being by the 13th century.⁸¹ In 1316 land was alienated to the Cathedral Priory in the two Cressinghams and Hopton as if it was by then a distinct place.⁸² It is unlikely that Hopton house stood alone for, in 1229, there was a dispute over three acres of land and a message in Hopton.⁸³ As late as 1777 Hopton House Field Lands appeared on a map⁷⁶ and the survival of Hopton Point as a name for the southern apex of the parish conveys some idea of the extent of the land attached to the manor or hamlet. There is an aura of finds of pottery on the lands surrounding the manorial site (Fig.2).

The Tithe map⁴¹ gives evidence of the former extent of common land in the parish. The locations of medieval sites (35-27) already discussed show that parts of the bounds of High and Low Commons had been established at that time. However, the existence of two enclosures carrying the name 'High Common' at the northern end of that area may point to land being taken in at some time from the common which could thus have once extended to the parish boundary (Fig.5). The form of the enclosures of meadow and pasture downstream from Low Common may also once have been common land. If that had been so Hopton House Manor may have begun as a common-edge settlement.

Unfortunately, there is no certain documentary evidence for the settlements on the edges of High and Low Commons. However, the incidents recorded in 1446⁷¹ could have involved persons living there. They included a case of commoning with a sheep fold in the field of Great Cressingham, the trespass at the Fairstead, already mentioned, and a further offence by the same four people from Little Cressingham on Stonehill furlong which lay between the Boundemere on the north and the boundary between the two Cressinghams. They were joined

by 18 other malefactors unknown 'and in war-like array and rebellious manner' (*trans*) entered land in Stonehill furlong just to the east of Stonehill with carts and stole a crop of peas. These events seem to have taken place near the High Common and a community living close to the boundary around a common which probably reached that boundary may have been staking claims to some debatable rights they considered lost.

To the south of the parish, towards The Arms, there are the remains of the park landscape created, in the early 19th century, around Clermont Lodge. A map dated 1777 shows the area between the Watton road, the road from The Arms to Little Cressingham and the road from The Arms to Threxton.⁸⁴ Clermont Lodge was not built until 1812⁸⁵ and the only building shown in 1777 is a house in roughly the same area. Apart from a wood of about three acres, the landscape then was divided into very large fields, one of them carrying a 'breck' name. Four pits, present within the former park, clearly pre-date it as they appear on the map. The insignificant amounts of pottery found in this area, much of it post-medieval, are in keeping with an area of relatively recent large enclosures, possibly not long reclaimed from occasional cultivation and extensive grazing.

To the south of this lies an area from which no pottery was recovered during the survey; in 1777 this was shown as Cressingham Heath. A document relating to a dispute over inclosure of lands refers to Cressingham Heath and 'Hopton Border' as containing over 361 acres.⁸⁶ The Tithe map shows the area immediately to the west of the road from Hopton to The Arms as 'Coney Hill Ley'. The evidence points to an extensive area used for grazing for sheep or for warrens. With little or no cultivation, there would be no manuring of the land and no resulting distribution of potsherds.

Threxton

The small area of this parish lying within the Extension shows a very slight increase in finds towards its northern end. These can be explained as representing more intensive cultivation nearer Threxton village. The rest of the portion is virtually empty of medieval pottery and even the most modern material is very scarce. A map of Threxton dated 1793⁸⁷ gives the field names there as Shooty Breck, Rye Breck and, significantly, Lodge Breck, implying recent intakes for cultivation and the former existence of a warren lodge.

Conclusion

The Stanta Extension is an area not chosen deliberately by archaeologists but decided arbitrarily through the accident of purchase by the Ministry of Defence. This makes it an area selected virtually at random and, as it excludes present inhabited portions of parishes, one which is apparently empty of settlement. The number and range of finds made is thus all the more notable. The later, deliberate addition of the site of Bodney itself is an exception which does not detract materially from this.

The distribution of finds shows that there were two periods when the Breckland landscape was quite intensively exploited. Scattered finds of Romano-British pottery occur in all but a few peripheral areas and the pattern coincides quite closely with that of finds of the 13th and 14th centuries, when the rural population is considered to have been at a maximum. The blank areas seem to have been heathland in the post-medieval period and may have been so in earlier times. With these exceptions and with the recognition also that some stray finds may be attributable to other more accidental causes, it seems that quite extensive areas of Breckland were cultivated and manured at peak periods of population.

It seems likely that there was considerable activity in the area during the Iron Age. Apart

from the concentrations already described, sherds of flint-gritted and sandy pottery attributed to that period, though not numerous, are widely scattered.

Aside from some which have seemingly anomalous positions, the major sites are confined to the river valleys. The sandy Breckland soils dry rapidly and the floors of the valleys would be one of the few environments where moisture was sufficient to guarantee good grazing throughout the year. Shallow wells dug there would give more accessible sources of water for household purposes. The exceptions are the three Iron Age sites (22, 23 and 24) of which the first is close to a stream but is much higher up the valley side. Site 23 is at a similar height and is unusually strong. It is probable that higher sea levels at that time meant that valleys were much wetter and this may be the explanation. However, the position of Site 24 and the evidence of some form of earlier activity on Sites 15-20 remain enigmatic.

The medieval expansion of population in Breckland resulted in the growth of subsidiary settlements, established at intervals along the valleys between arable land on higher ground and the pastures of the valley floors. Glosbridge and Hopton, both manorial, are of this type, as are Sites 35-38 which grew up on the margins of common land close to the Watton Brook and a small tributary which drained High Common in Little Cressingham.

Some light has been cast on two more specific topics. The Chapel of St. George was probably the second of the Domesday churches of Great Cressingham, though the nature and whereabouts of the community which it was intended to serve are not obvious.

The survey has also identified the core of Bodney and given some indication of its possible medieval expansion along the valley. It appears probable that Bodney was in being by Middle Saxon times at least, though the finding of an Early Saxon spearhead may be a sign of an earlier origin. The church stands within a circular churchyard on a mound at the eastern end of what seems to have been, initially, a linear settlement along a road approaching river crossings. The desertion of Bodney is attributable to no certain cause though it seems to have happened at some point after its acquisition by Thetford Priory. Blomefield's description of it as 'a depopulated village' consisting only of a manor-house, with an adjoining farm-house, and a poor rectory-house at the east end of the churchyard gives a terminal date (1739) for the completion of desertion but the late 15th or 16th centuries appear the most probable times of destruction.

An area in which, apart from the deserted Bodney, no centres of population are obvious has yielded a surprising number of discoveries. This is the more remarkable in that it happens to be part of Breckland, customarily regarded as a relatively thinly-peopled region.

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Barbara and the late Bertram Dollin surveyed a moated site and its associated features at Bodney in January 1988 and drew the plan included as Figure 3. Brian Cushion surveyed the other moat with the features nearby and made the plan shown as Figure 4 in 1989. In each case the surveyors' comments on the sites are incorporated in the interpretation offered here.

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