

THE LOCATION OF THE PRIORY AT KIRBY BELLARS: A REAPPRAISAL

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Most references place the medieval Kirby Priory in the field called Brummels, immediately north of the parish church. This article challenges that view and locates the priory about half a mile away from Brummels in the Kirby Park area. It was probably on the site of the seventeenth-century mansion of Erasmus de la Fontaine II and close to the former moated manor house of Roger Beler I.¹

INTRODUCTION

The Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 1) places the location of the medieval Kirby Priory in the field immediately to the north of the parish church of St Peter.² Other sources that place the priory there include the National Heritage for England list,

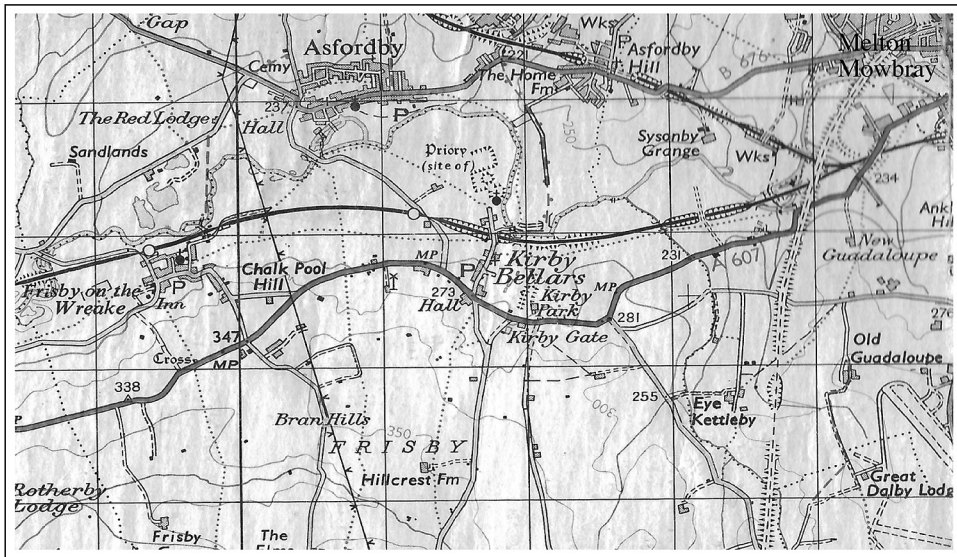


Fig. 1. Location of Kirby Bellars.

¹ Sir Roger Beler I, the founder of the Kirby chantry, was murdered in 1326. Sir Roger Beler II was his son, who succeeded to the lordship of Kirby when his widowed mother died in 1368. Erasmus de la Fontaine I was a Huguenot refugee, then a London merchant, who acquired the ex-Priory property in 1603. He died in 1612. His son, Sir Erasmus de la Fontaine II, acquired Kirby manor and the office of rector in 1622.

² Fig. 1 reproduced from O.S. Map 1:63360, sheet 122 (1962 edn).

Leicestershire's Historic Environment Record and texts on the archaeology.³ This field was called Bromhull in medieval documents and was identified as Brummels in a field name survey of 1974.⁴ Older residents still use the name today. Nichols relates that this location was pointed out as the priory site to local historian Mr Peck by the parish clerk in 1730, but this was nearly 200 years after its dissolution.⁵ However, on another page of the same volume, Nichols places the site in Kirby Park.⁶ Liddle states that the priory was clearly not on the Brummels site and that the Kirby Park location cannot be ruled out.⁷ This paper puts forward a strong case for the Kirby Park location.

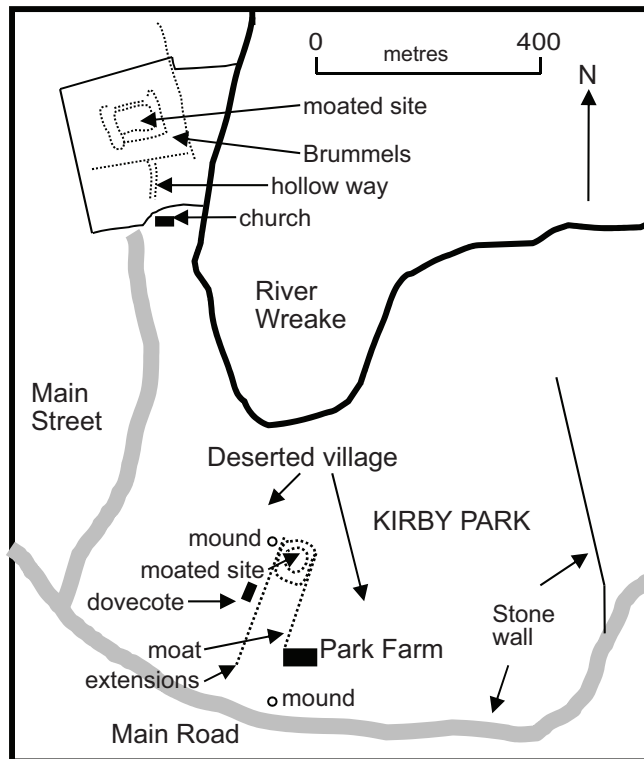


Fig. 2. Map of Kirby Bellars.

³ National Heritage List for England, scheduled ancient monument no. 1009285; Leicestershire County Council, Leicestershire and Rutland Historic Environment Record, Kirby Bellars parish, 20 May 2011; W. G. Hoskins, *Leicestershire: a Shell Guide* (London, Faber & Faber, 1970), p. 63; R. F. Hartley, *Medieval Earthworks of North-East Leicestershire* (Leicester Museums Publications, 1987), front cover, pp. 32–3.

⁴ LA, Linc. Reg. III, 1319, 340–4; A. Hamilton Thompson, 'The Chapel of St Peter at Kirby upon Wreake', *TLAHS* 16 (1929–31), p. 166; Frisby and Kirby Women's Institute field-name survey, 1974, ROLLR, FNS.

⁵ J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of Leicestershire*, vol. 2 (London, John Nichols, 1795, reprinted Leicester, SR Publishers, 1971), p. 224.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁷ P. Liddle, 'The archaeology of the abbeys and priories of Leicestershire', *TLAHS* 69 (1995), p. 17.

Today, Kirby Bellars is a small village, with many of its houses dating from the 1960s and later. Most of the population of the village live along Main Street, which runs northwards from the Leicester to Melton Mowbray road to a cul-de-sac at the parish church (Fig. 2). The church stands rather isolated from the rest of the village and the adjacent Brummels field contains a moated site, in the shape of a square with a central square island (Plate 1).⁸

The road from Leicester to Melton Mowbray is called Main Road, and there are about 15 buildings alongside it as it passes west to east through the parish. On the north side a seventeenth-century mansion called Park Farm (or more recently The Manor) stands back from the road (Plate 2). It is proposed in this article that this mansion stands on or near the site of the priory. It is located in the walled Kirby Park, which was created by Sir Erasmus de la Fontaine II in the 1630s, requiring the destruction of a medieval daughter settlement, which included areas called Easthorpe and Westhorpe.⁹

Immediately to the north of the Park Farm mansion, within Kirby Park, is another medieval square-moated site, with two moat extensions running southwards to the vicinity of the mansion (Plate 3).¹⁰



Plate 1. Moated site to the north of the church.

⁸ Hartley, *Medieval Earthworks*, front cover, 32.

⁹ Nichols, *History and Antiquities*, 231; Bailiff's manorial accounts, TNA: PRO SC6/908/23, 24 and 27: Min. Account Roll, 1395–6, 1399–1400, 1406–7.

¹⁰ Hartley, *Medieval Earthworks*, front cover, 33.



Plate 2. Park Farm Mansion.



Plate 3. Moated site in Kirby Park.

TWO FOURTEENTH-CENTURY MANORS

In 1199, Juliana d'Aywill created two manors in Kirby, by granting a moiety of her manorial holding to Philip de Wasteneis and his wife Amphilisa.¹¹ The evidence presented here indicates that the two moated sites mentioned above held the capital messuages of the two manors.

In the later thirteenth century the former Wasteneis manor was held by John of Kirby.¹² He was lord of one of Kirby's two manors, but he was also rector of the parish church as well as holding part of the advowson. He resigned as rector at Kirby in 1279, but continued as a patron of the church and became Bishop of Ely in 1286. He died without issue in 1290, his property passing to his brother William of Kirby, who also died childless in 1302.¹³ The estate was then inherited by Gilbert of Ho(u)by, husband of William of Kirby's sister Maud/Matilda. The property then came to John of Hoby, the son of Gilbert and Matilda.¹⁴ A charter of 1319 describes Bromhull as the site of the sometime capital message and croft of John of Hoby.¹⁵

In 1316, John of Hoby successfully defended an attempt by Roger Beler I to take the advowson from him.¹⁶ In 1318, however, Beler had become the sole lord of Kirby and he had also acquired the advowson of the church and the Bromhull site.¹⁷ An *inquisition post mortem* of 1391 for Robert de Swillington indicates that the Beler manor house was the one in Kirby Park (see below).¹⁸ Swillington was the husband of Beler I's only surviving grandchild. Roger Beler I had been involved with the rebellion of Thomas Earl of Lancaster's party against King Edward II, but in 1318 he managed to obtain pardons for the Earl and his co-conspirators, and then went over to the king's side.¹⁹ The king rewarded him for his new-found loyalty and Beler later became a justice, a baron of the national exchequer in 1322 and acting national treasurer in 1325.²⁰ Throughout the rest of the fourteenth century, John of Hoby and his descendants attempted to regain their holding in Kirby but without success.²¹

CHANTRY FOUNDATION OF 1316

Before finding favour with the king, and before the acquisition of the Brummels site, Roger Beler I had founded, in 1316, a chantry for two chaplains close to his manor

¹¹ Feet of fines, 1 John 1199, TNA: PRO CP 25/1/121/2–3.

¹² F. N. Davis (ed.) *Rotuli Ricardi Gravesend* (Lincoln, Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1925), 165; G. F. Farnham, *Medieval Village Notes*, vol. 3 (Leicester, privately printed, 1929–30), p. 110.

¹³ W. Stubbs, *Registrum Sacrum Anglicanum* (Oxford, OUP, 2nd edn, 1897), 67; MS Rawl. b. 350, Kirby Bellars, 1302, 30 Ed. 1, Bodleian; Nichols, *History and Antiquities*, p. 224.

¹⁴ Cal. Inq. p.m. IV, p. 54.

¹⁵ LA, Linc. Reg. III, 1319, 345; Hamilton Thompson, 'Chapel of St Peter', p. 166.

¹⁶ Farnham, *Medieval Village Notes*, vol. 3, 113, citing De Banco Roll 215, Trin., Ed. II, 1316, m.80.

¹⁷ Inq. ad quod damnum, 1318, TNA: PRO C143/134/14; LA, Linc. Reg. III, 1319, 340–4; Hamilton Thompson, 'Chapel of St Peter', pp. 143, 167.

¹⁸ Inq. p.m. 1391, TNA: PRO c136/73/8.

¹⁹ J. Röhrkasten, 'Belser, Sir Roger (d. 1326)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, OUP, 2004).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Cal. Close 1354–60, p. 75.

house. The manuscripts concerning this foundation are to be found in the Lincoln Episcopal Registers at Lincolnshire Archives, but a more accessible transcription is in Hamilton Thompson's account.²² The documents state that the chantry was 'at no small distance from the parish church, so that it is with difficulty that on ordinary days they are able to hear their masses in the same church'. It was also stressed that a reason for its location was that 'many strangers pass by the same chapel, which is situate in the high road'.²³ An entry in a patent roll testifies, crucially, that it was 'to the south of town' of Kirby.²⁴ There can be no doubt that these statements place the chantry on the south side of Kirby, well away from the parish church and therefore not on the Bromhull site, which is half a mile from Main Road at its nearest point.

THE COLLEGIATE CHAPEL OF 1319

In 1319, Roger Beler I enlarged his chantry foundation to a collegiate chapel for a warden and 12 chaplains.²⁵ The parish church, which had remained independent in 1316, was appropriated by the new foundation. Beler added further goods and properties to the ones donated in 1316 and one was the Bromhull/Brummels site, which was referred to as the former capital messuage of John of Hoby. However, there is no indication in the documents that the new foundation involved a removal to this location.²⁶ The warden's application, in 1319, to block off the way between the chapel and Beler's manor house indicates that the two buildings were still close to each other.²⁷ However, as the deputy warden had daily duties in the parish church it is possible that the Brummels site was used as a convenient outpost of the chapel, although there is no evidence to support this speculation.

CONVERSION TO A PRIORY

Sir Roger Beler I acquired many enemies and he was murdered by the 'Folville Gang' of Eustace de Folville, on his way from Kirby to a dinner engagement in Leicester, in 1326.²⁸ As his son Roger Beler II was a minor, his widow Alice took over the lordship of the sole Kirby manor.²⁹ In 1359 she handed over control of the collegiate chapel to the Augustinian monastery at Owston.³⁰ The chapel became a priory, with the chaplains becoming regular canons, and it continued in this form until the dissolution of 1536. Again there is no evidence for a relocation at the time of the change.

²² LA, Linc. Reg. III, 1316, 211–13; Hamilton Thompson, 'Chapel of St Peter', 153–65.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Cal. Pat., 1321–4, p. 218.

²⁵ LA, Linc. Reg. III, 1319, 340–4; see Hamilton Thompson, 'Chapel of St Peter', 166–91 for a full transcription of the deed.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Cal. Pat. 1317–21, p. 321.

²⁸ Cal. Pat. 1324–7, 238, 283–4; Assize Roll 1411B (*TLAHS*, vol. 11, p. 460); Nichols, *History and Antiquities*, p. 225; L. Stephen, ed., *DNB*, vol. 4 (Oxford, OUP, 1885), p. 145.

²⁹ Cal. Inq. p.m. VI, p. 443.

³⁰ LA, Linc. Reg. IX, 1359, 372d–373d; Hamilton Thompson, 'Chapel of St Peter', p. 207.

Through nearly two centuries of the priory's existence there are several documents with reference to it.³¹ Although some give details of the buildings on the site, they give no indication of their geographical location within Kirby. The priory church had a choir area and three chapels called St Andrew's Chapel, Our Lady Chapel and the Chapel of St Thomas. Also there was a hall, a chamber next to the hall (dormitory), frater (refectory), a little house, buttery, brewhouse, dey (dairy) house, bailiff's store house, cattle shed and fysse chamber.³² Kirby Park has plenty of earthworks today, but in the Bromhull site they are limited.

An important source of information about the location of Beler's manor house comes from the *inquisition post mortem* in 1391 of Robert de Swillington. He was married to the only surviving grandchild – Margaret Beler – of Roger Beler I. Swillington had inherited Kirby manor from his father-in-law Roger Beler II, who died in 1381. As mentioned above the manor house of Roger Beler I was geographically close to the chantry and the collegiate chapel, which were precursors of the priory.

The inquisition describes a manor house with a hall and many rooms, accompanied by many houses and offices, all within a moat. Outside the moat were granges, cowsheds, sheepfolds, many other houses, a dove house and a windmill. Here is definite proof that the Beler manor house was moated. The description fits very well with the earthworks seen in Kirby Park rather than the Brummels site. The aerial photograph on the front cover of Hartley's book illustrates the point very well, although some of the labelling is disputed here.³³ At the Brummels location the square 'island', surrounded by the moat, measures 52 × 52 m.³⁴ There is insufficient room to accommodate all the buildings mentioned above. In any case, if the manor house was there, where was the priory? There is no evidence of a large number of buildings outside the moat. In fact, apart from the moat itself, as well as a bank and hollow way, the pre-moat ridge and furrow is still clearly visible and undisturbed by building (Plate 1).³⁵

The 'island' at the centre of the Kirby Park moat, measuring 52 × 24 m, is smaller than the one in the Brummels moat (Plate 3). However, it has two moat extensions which enclose an area measuring 177 × 52 m, which shows on aerial photographs the presence of many former buildings.³⁶ Moreover, there is physical evidence of the former occurrence of many buildings outside the moat; in fact, a whole daughter village. Also just outside the square moat is a mound, which may well have been the site of a windmill. There is also a second mound close to Main Road. Only two miles away there was a similar mound in Melton Mowbray, at the Leicester Road/Dalby Road junction, and it had a windmill on top in the early nineteenth century.³⁷

³¹ Cal. Pat., 1391–6, v, 140–1, 151; further acquisitions of priory, TNA: PRO C143/421/29; LA, Epis. Reg. XXXV, Register of William Alnwick Bishop of Lincoln, 1440; A. Hamilton Thompson, *Visitations of religious houses in the Diocese of Lincoln, 1420–49*, vol. 2 (Lincoln, Lincoln Record Society, 1918), pp. 164–8.

³² *VCH Leics.*, vol. 2, 26 citing L&P Hen. VIII, X, p. 496.

³³ Hartley, *Medieval Earthworks*, front cover.

³⁴ OS map 1:2500, Leics XIX.12 (2nd edn, 1903).

³⁵ Hartley, *Medieval Earthworks*, front cover.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, front cover.

³⁷ Melton Mowbray area, two-inch to one-mile surveyors' map, 1816, British Library.

Apart from Park Farm and its outbuildings, the only other existing building in Kirby Park is a seventeenth-century stone dovecote, immediately outside the western moat extension. This could have replaced an earlier medieval one.

The moats and associated areas in Kirby Park have been interpreted as Tudor terraced gardens, with the mounds acting as viewing points.³⁸ It is possible that the moats could have been adapted for this purpose, but their earlier origin seems certain from the 1391 inquisition.

POST-REFORMATION

The manuscripts connected with the dissolution of the priory give no information about its location.³⁹ However, in 1548 the house and site of the former priory was granted to Sir John Gray or Grey of Pirgo.⁴⁰ He also acquired the associated estate, which included closes of land and pasture, two of which were called Overbromehill and Netherbromehill.⁴¹ These were surely referring to Bromhull of the 1319 charter.⁴² Is it possible that the site of a priory had become closes of farmland only 12 years after the dissolution?

Two years later the property of the ex-priory was confirmed as the property of Grey, who was also granted Kirby manor.⁴³ In addition, he became the lay rector and thus gained the advowson of the parish church, which meant he had the responsibility for presenting a candidate as curate to the Bishop of Lincoln.

In 1603 the former priory property came to Sir Erasmus de la Fontaine I, a former Huguenot refugee, who had made his fortune as a merchant in London.⁴⁴ He died in 1612 and, as his son Erasmus II was a minor, the estate went to his wife Elisabeth.⁴⁵ In 1622, Erasmus II obtained Kirby manor and the office of lay rector. In 1628 he paid 31 per cent of the total lay subsidy for the parish.⁴⁶ His widowed mother paid 54 per cent, but this was for goods not land. Elisabeth de la Fontaine died in 1632.⁴⁷

As Sir Erasmus de la Fontaine II was the only person in 1628 paying tax on land worth 20s or more per annum, he had probably acquired the former priory property as well as the manorial estate. Undoubtedly he still held the advowson of the parish church, for in 1633 he actually had the curate living in his house.⁴⁸ At some time before 1636 he built the Park Farm mansion and created the surrounding

³⁸ Hartley, *Medieval Earthworks*, p. 10.

³⁹ J. Caley and J. Hunter (eds), *Valor ecclesiasticus temp. Henrici VIII*, 4 (London, Record Commissions Texts & Calendars, 1810–34), p. 149.

⁴⁰ Cal. Pat. 1547–8, 277; Farnham, *Medieval Village Notes*, p. 128.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² LA, Linc. Reg. III, 1319, 345; Hamilton Thompson, 'Chapel of St Peter', p. 166.

⁴³ Cal. Pat. 4 Edward VI, 21 April 1550; Farnham, *Medieval Village Notes*, 128.

⁴⁴ Feet of fines, TNA: PRO CP25/2/313/1JASIMICH; MS on de la Fontaine 1603 purchase of ex-priory land was in possession of Wm Herrick Esq. of Beaumanor in 1794; Nichols, *History and Antiquities*, p. 231.

⁴⁵ Will 1612, TNA: PRO PROB 11/119/626.

⁴⁶ Feet of fines, 1622TNA: PRO CP25/2/315/20JAS1TRIN; Lay subsidy 1628, TNA: PRO E179/134/303.

⁴⁷ Bishops' transcripts, ROLLR, 1D41/3.

⁴⁸ Cal. SP Dom. 1633–4, 522; A. P. Moore, 'Metropolitan visitation of Archbishop Laud, 1634', AASRP, vol. 29 (1907–8), p. 517.

park which involved the destruction of the daughter village, including Easthorpe and Westhorpe. In 1636 he was fined £500 for this depopulation.⁴⁹ The buildings of the former priory may well have provided the stone for the mansion and the wall surrounding the park, which is largely still standing.

In 1645 the mansion underwent considerable damage by fire in the civil war, so the present building represents a post-1660 rebuild, with nineteenth-century additions of dormer windows and a porch.⁵⁰ According to Nichols, the medieval manor house in Kirby Park was demolished in 1756 and the stone went towards the construction of Baggrave Hall.⁵¹

From the time of Sir Erasmus de la Fontaine II to 1778, the manorial estate and the former priory property were in single or family ownership.⁵² In 1778, however, the manor was sold to Captain Edward Manners of Goadby Marwood, whereas the Park Farm mansion and its estate went to Sidley Burdett of Foremark in Derbyshire.⁵³ Significantly, the advowson of the parish church was attached to the ownership of Park Farm estate, not to the lordship of the manor.⁵⁴ The Burdetts continued in ownership of Park Farm to the late twentieth century.⁵⁵ They also held the advowson of the parish church until 1936, and thereafter held part of the advowson of the combined parish of Frisby and Kirby to 1987, and then a share of the advowson of the Melton Mowbray Team Ministry (including Kirby Bellars) to 1993.⁵⁶ They did not live permanently at Park Farm, but used it as a hunting box in the winter season in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵⁷ The fact that owners of Park Farm and its lands also inherited the advowson of the parish church, once held by the priory, is further proof that Park Farm is probably on the same site as that priory.

SUMMARY

This article has put forward a strong case for the site of the medieval priory at Kirby Bellars in Kirby Park and not in the field called Bromhull or Brummels next to the parish church. The most important points in the argument are:

- Two manors were created in 1199 and their manor houses can be related to the two moated sites visible near the village today. The northern one is located in Brummels next to the church and the southern one in Kirby Park.

⁴⁹ Nichols, *History and Antiquities*, p. 231.

⁵⁰ Chancery Proceedings, Series ii, 1648, TNA: PRO C3/453/16; Harl. MS, 911, BL; Nichols, *History and Antiquities* 232; N. Pevsner (revised by E. Williamson), *The Buildings of England: Leicestershire and Rutland* (2nd edn reprinted, London, Penguin Books, 1992), p. 192.

⁵¹ Nichols, *History and Antiquities*, p. 232.

⁵² Manorial title to Sir Charles Sedley c.1768, LA, REEVE 1/16/1/1; Land tax, ROLLR, QS 62/170.

⁵³ Grant of manor from Sir Charles Sedley to Edward Manners, 1778, Derbys RO, D665 B/T4; Nichols, *History and Antiquities*, p. 232.

⁵⁴ Parish registers from 1812 to present in church.

⁵⁵ W. White, *History, Gazetteer, and Directory of the Counties of Leicester and Rutland* (London, Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1863), 356; Valuation list for Poor Law union, 1908, ROLLR, DE 558; oral testimony in 1990s of late Stanley Green, tenant, then owner from 1970s of Park Farm.

⁵⁶ G. A. Clarke (ed.), *Diocesan Directory 1987–8* (Leicester, 1988), p. 52; Church Commissioners' Scheme, Leicester Diocesan Office, Ref.0196, 1 April 1993.

⁵⁷ White, *History, Gazetteer, and Directory*, p. 356.

- A charter of 1319 refers to the sometime capital messuage (manor house) with croft of John of Hoby, in the area called Bromhull immediately adjacent to the parish church on the north side.
- In 1316, Roger Beler founded a precursor of the priory, a chantry for two chaplains. Several statements in the charter and on a patent roll indicate that it was located well away from the parish church on the south side of Kirby.
- In 1319, Roger Beler enlarged the chantry to a collegiate chapel with a warden and 12 chaplains. He granted the former Bromhull capital messuage and croft of John of Hoby to the chapel, but there is no evidence of relocation to this site.
- In 1319 the warden of the chapel applied to block off a way between the chapel and Roger Beler I's manor house, indicating the close proximity of the two buildings.
- In 1391, Robert de Swillington, the husband of Roger Beler I's only surviving grandchild, died. The *inquisition post mortem* describes the manor house within a moat. Several other features fit well with the earthworks seen in Kirby Park today.
- In 1548, 12 years after the dissolution of the priory, the former priory estate included closes of land and pasture, two of which were called Overbromehill and Netherbromehill, which were very likely the same as Bromhull of the 1319 charter.
- Throughout most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the former Priory property and Kirby manor were in single or family ownership. In 1778 the Park Farm mansion and its estate were sold separately from Kirby manor. The advowson of the parish church, which had belonged to the priory, went to the Park Farm owner and not to the lord of the manor.

Alan W. Fox has recently completed the history of Kirby Bellars for the Victoria County History of Leicestershire, a draft copy of which can be viewed online under 'Work in Progress' at: www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/counties/leicestershire.