

THE CISTERCIAN GRANGE AT GRANGE FARM, SHIPTON LEE, QUAINTON

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This report details archaeological research undertaken as part of Buckinghamshire County Council's Bernwood Project to help interpret remains of a medieval monastic estate belonging to Thame Abbey at Shipton Lee near Quainton. Earthwork survey at Grange Farm recorded an artificial rabbit warren and a flight of four fishponds fed by a carefully engineered leat. Consideration of the surrounding area and documentary sources enabled the reconstruction of the landscape managed from the medieval grange, the recognition of some of its capital assets and of changes since the dissolution of the monasteries. Some thoughts are offered regarding the choice of location for the grange and the economic strategy pursued by the abbey.

BACKGROUND

Grange Farm lies one kilometre north west of Quainton village on a slight south-facing slope at the western foot of Grange Hill (Fig 1 – NGR SP 735202). To the west of Grange Farm there are today two ponds fed by a small stream that rises in the fields to the north of Grange Farm. This stream runs southwestwards and eventually joins the River Ray.

Earthwork remains in the pasture field to the south and west of Grange Farm were sketch mapped by the Buckinghamshire County Archaeological Service on 28th June 2004 to inform the design of an interpretation panel subsequently installed on the Bernwood Jubilee Way. Earthworks were plotted on to an Ordnance Survey 1:2500 base map, which had been enlarged to 1:1000 for the purpose. The historic buildings at Grange Farm were briefly inspected and information from the County Sites and Monuments Record, historic maps and published historical sources for the farm and the township of Shipton Lee were reviewed.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Until 1886, Shipton Lee was an administratively separate hamlet within the large parish of Quainton (Page, 1927, 93). Shipton Lee, which lay ½km west

of Grange Farm, is shown on Thomas Jefferys' county map of 1770 (Fig 2) and on the Ordnance Survey's 2" surveyors drawings of 1818 but not on Bryant's county map of 1825, although this may simply be an omission. In the 1860s the Aylesbury and Buckingham Railway dissected the hamlet so that only fragmentary earthworks and an isolated windmill mound now survive.

Only limited medieval documentation survives for Shipton Lee (Page, 1927, 95–97). However, the more substantial post-medieval documentation that has recently been collated can throw some additional light on earlier arrangements (Rodwell, 1999). The hamlet was recorded in the Domesday Book, at which time it was divided into three small holdings of one, two and seven hides respectively (Morris, 1978). The placename Shipton (*Sibdone* in Domesday) derives from 'sheep hill' and has later become conflated with Lee or Lee Grange, Grange Farm's former name (Mawer and Stenton, 1925, 110–111). Shortly before 1146 the manor of Shipton Lee was given to Thame Abbey, a Cistercian house founded in 1137 by William Fitz Otho, brother of the first abbot. Lee Grange itself seems to have come into the Abbey's hands rather later having been sub-infeudated to them by the mid-13th century. In 1291 a mill and court are mentioned along with land, sheep and wool valued altogether at £12 4s 11d. In 1365 the Abbot

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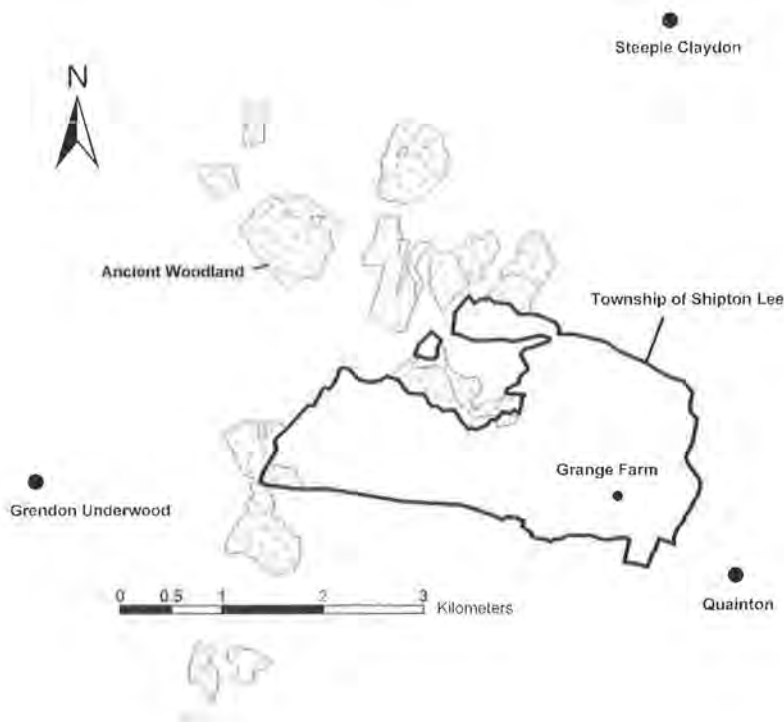


FIGURE 1 Location of Shipton Lee, Quainton.

obtained a grant of free warren. Shipton Lee remained with Thame Abbey until its dissolution in 1539 when it passed back into secular hands. In 1622 Sir Fleetwood Dormer acquired the property.

A survey made in 1624 (Rodwell, 1999, 60–67), provides a detailed record of the manor comprising a recorded total of 1661 acres with manor house, orchards, garden, 2 barns, stables and yards, a warren, dovehouse and fishponds. In addition to the manor itself, the settlement comprised one messuage, 15 tenements, 2 ‘little cottage houses’ and a ‘house’ (unoccupied?). Four open-fields (Woodfield, Middle Field, Mill Field and Field next Quainton) are recorded plus 6 inclosed coppices, a large pasture named Lee Lawne and various inclosed pastures and closes around the manor and lesser properties. Mill Field was small, only 11 acres, and entirely given over to meadow and leas (open field land put down to pasture); it was probably in origin a sub-division of Middle Field. The three main open fields were predominantly arable but with some leas and meadow. However, by 1642

the open fields, including leas and meadow, accounted for just 25% of the manor, elsewhere the land use was principally divided between inclosed pasture and an open common pasture known as Lee Lawne. The inclosed pastures seem to have been created roughly equally from the four open fields and the Lawne, which we are told had covered some 600 acres at the time of the last Abbott. The estimate for woodland has been corrected by inclusion of Lee Wood, part of the township but in separate ownership. Nevertheless, this is probably still a slight underestimate.

Sir Fleetwood Dormer’s heirs held the manor until it was sold to the Calcraft family in 1764, then acquired by the Quinton family and finally, in the late nineteenth century, bought by Corpus Christi College, Oxford (Lipscomb, 1847, 412–418; Page, 1927, 95–97). By the late eighteenth century the manor was entirely inclosed and being described as rich meadow and pasture with eight dairy farms. The Dormer, Calcraft and Quinton families were all of some social standing so it is no great surprise



FIGURE 2 Extract from Thomas Jeffreys county map of 1770.

to find a small park recorded at Lee Grange on Bryant's map of the early 19th century. Lipscomb writing in 1847, notes indications of decorative planting in the paddock to the south of the house and a relict avenue on Grange Hill (Lipscomb, 1847, 417).

THE HISTORIC LANDSCAPE OF SHIPTON LEE (FIG 3)

We are fortunate that the boundaries of the township were recorded a year before their abolition, on the Ordnance Survey's first edition 6" map. At that time the township covered 1541 acres, including a small detached portion at Finemerehill House to the north of Finemere Wood. This is likely to more-or-less represent the township's medieval extent (see below). That the area was extensively cultivated in the medieval period is demonstrated by the ridge and furrow recorded on aerial photographs, which covered most of the northern and eastern parts of the township. In contrast the western and southern parts of the township, including the areas occupied by Lee Woods and the 'great pasture' of Lee Lawne, display little or no ridge and furrow.

The Domesday records show that, despite the obvious difficulties of working the heavy and wet clay soils, arable cultivation was already extensive by the eleventh century with 7½ hides of ploughland, nominally 900 acres at the conventional conversion rate of 120 acres per hide. To this must be added one hide of meadow, but no woodland is

Land Use (1624 survey)



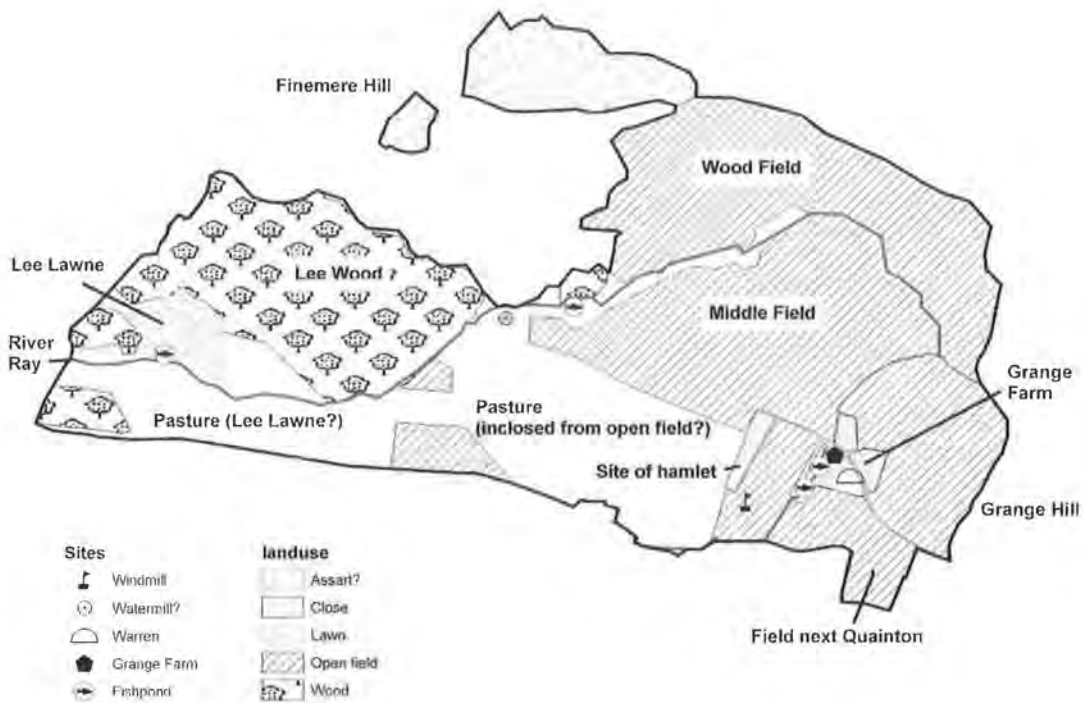


FIGURE 3 A tentative reconstruction of the medieval landscape of Shipton Lee.

mentioned. The omission of woodland is surprising given the concentration of existing ancient woodland immediately to the north and west of the township and the fact that the westernmost part of Shipton Lee, known as Lee Woods, was only cleared at the end of the 18th century (Lipscomb, 1847, 417), and shows few traces of earlier cultivation. Probably this woodland of about 180 acres existed at Domesday but was either recorded under another vill or omitted altogether. If the latter, then some 1200 acres can be accounted for leaving the remaining 340 acres of the 19th century township to be explained perhaps by two other small areas that may have been wooded, the spur of Shipton Lee land between Kitehill Farm and Runt's Wood and the detached land parcel at Finemerehill House, and perhaps a larger area of meadow accounting for a hide.

Taken together with the still extant Finemere Wood (a detached portion of Quainton parish) and the probable assart at Kitehill Farm (a detached part of Hogshaw), this evidence suggests that the

western flank of Shipton Lee lay against a substantial block of woodland or wood-pasture on the higher ground to the west. The low-lying boggy ground along and to the south of the River Ray was used as pasture meadow, including the 'great pasture' of Lee Lawne. On the eastern side of the township lay three large open fields: Woodfield, Middlefield and Field next Quainton. To the north-west of Lee Grange on Grange Hill there is a large roughly oval area containing several furlongs of ridge and furrow and reached from Lee Grange via a short track on either side of which are two small closes with the modern names Shepherds Close and Rick yard. It is tempting to see this as manorial demesne land. Unfortunately, a clear boundary between Lee Lawne and the open fields has not been satisfactorily determined due to the effects of later inclosure; a few small patches of ridge and furrow survive here and fieldnames indicate that some of the fields were, or had been, arable. As we have seen above, this enclosure was well advanced by the early 17th century, and it had probably been

completed by the end of the 18th century. For the most part it displays a regular pattern indicative of deliberately surveyed fields.

Of the three vills recorded at Domesday, two can be identified with the later hamlet of Shipton Lee and Lee Grange itself, although there is as yet no archaeological proof of eleventh-century occupation at either site. Of the other farms in the township, Dry Leys Farm, Hill Farm and Fine Moor Hill appear on Jeffrey's county map of 1770. Dry Lees Farm is believed to have been built by Robert Dormer for one of his daughters early in the 18th century (source: list description) while Hill Farm is the last surviving fragment of Shipton Lee hamlet. The present Fine Moor Hill Farm is of late 19th century date but its occupation of a tiny detached portion of Shipton Lee suggests it may lie on a much earlier site.

The presence of three fishpond complexes within the township is notable. In addition to the complex at Lee Grange, there were two large single 'pond bays' on the Ray itself. The large 'pond bays' cover about 4.4 and 7.4 acres respectively with the former (upstream) pond probably also functioning as a mill pond. The four ponds and leat at Grange Farm are more sophisticated (see below) but cover a smaller area of about 1.5 acres, although they appear to represent a development from an earlier single pond of about 3 acres. Together these ponds indicate significant investment in fish cultivation by the monks at Thame. Further monastic investment is indicated by a windmill mound to the south of Shipton Lee, a possible mill site on the River Ray and an artificial rabbit warren at Lee Grange.

The local road network is little changed since the 18th century and is probably essentially medieval in origin. Grange Farm lies within a cluster of small fields whose names (Warren, Shepherds Close and Rick yard) recall their functions as enclosures appurtenant to the grange.

THE BUILDINGS

Only a brief inspection of the buildings at Grange Farm was possible as part of this study, which therefore depends largely upon the list descriptions. The earliest extant building is a 16th century timber-framed barn. The earliest elements of Grange Farmhouse, timber-framed with brick in fill, are attributed to the 17th century but there is much 18th/early 19th century alteration. There is

also a square brick-built dovecote attributed to the early 18th century and a collection of more recent farm buildings. A chapel appurtenant to Lee Grange was recorded in 1312 but was demolished before the end of the 18th century (Page, 1927, 99).

THE EARTHWORKS (FIG 4)

The earthwork survey was conducted in ideal weather and ground conditions, except for one of the dry ponds (a), which was heavily overgrown.

The main earthworks comprise a flight of four fishponds (a, b, c and d) linked by narrow channels and fed from a straight channel or leat (e) with an embankment on its east side. Aerial photographs suggest that the leat originally extended as far as a small extant pond immediately to the north of Lee Road, where it presumably gained its water from a spring and run-off from surrounding fields. At the time of the survey only ponds b and c contained water, although a and d are apparently still seasonally wet. Ponds a and b are essentially cut features lacking raised dams or embankments. In contrast, ponds c and d are retained by substantial earthen dams between 1m and 2m in height on their downstream sides. The leat (e) is now dry, the stream having diverted through the main pond complex. It has a well-defined embankment on its east side and feeder channels into ponds a and d. The leat is over 1m deep along most of its length and would have retained a substantial body of water, presumably functioning as a header tank, and perhaps an additional pond in its own right. The south ends of both the leat and pond c, are approximately coincidental and appear to be roughly cut across by pond d suggesting that the latter might be a later addition or modification to the complex. A low rectangular platform downstream of pond d may also be related to the fishpond complex but, if so, its function could not be ascertained.

To the east of the fishponds is a broad area of depressed ground (i) below the surrounding land to the north, east and south, overlooked by Grange Farm and defined by scarps to the east and south. The function of this area is unclear but it is tentatively suggested that it may represent the remnant of an earlier, larger and simpler 'pond bay' pre-dating the flight of fishponds. If this is correct then the western flank of the bay would have been remodelled by the construction of leat e.

To the south and east of Grange Farm there are

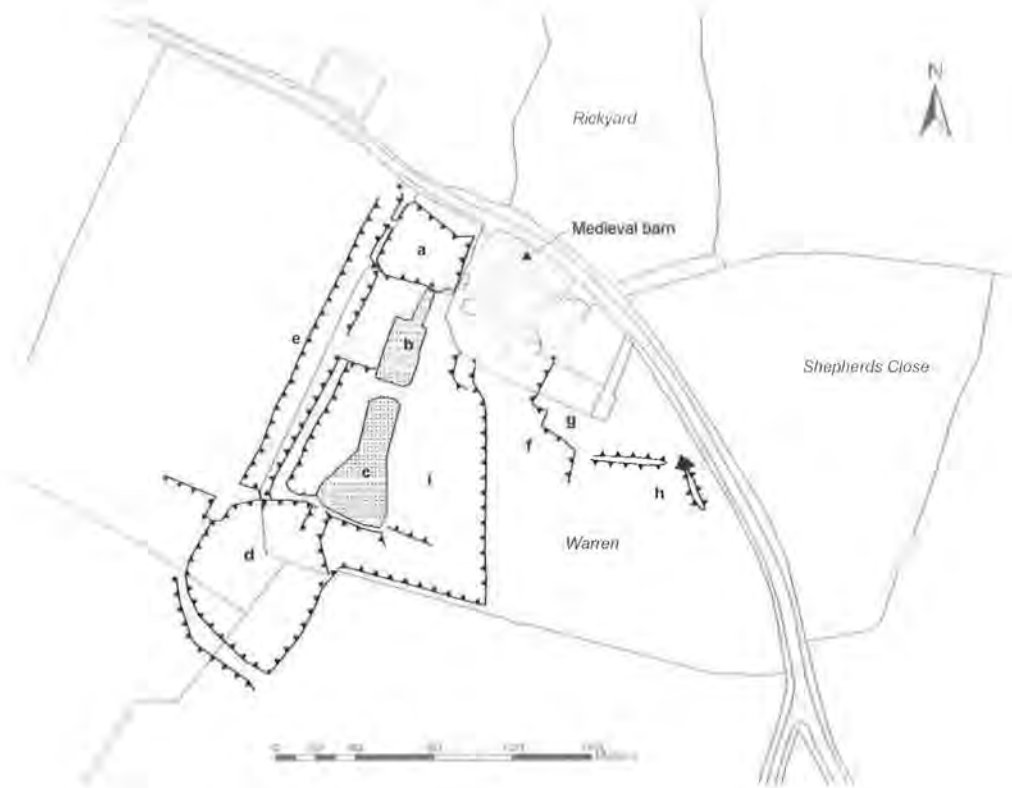


FIGURE 4 Earthworks at Grange Farm, Shipton Lee. Field name in italics.

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two large platforms defined by scarps (f and g respectively). Platform g appears closely related to the farm building complex continuing the line of a north-south boundary wall – it may be the site of demolished buildings of the monastic grange. The function of platform f is unclear, but its form is not suggestive of a building platform.

Further to the east there are two low embankments linked to a roughly oval mound (h). Although originally thought merely to be remnants of ridge and furrow, this field is named 'warren' (Lipscomb, 1847, 417) and it is therefore suggested that these features are pillow mounds similar to the better-defined Tudor examples at nearby Quarrendon (Everson, 2001).

The survey was used to inform an artist's reconstruction of the grange and fishponds produced for an information board installed on the Bernwood Jubilee Way (Fig 5).

CONCLUSIONS

The study is consistent with the interpretation that Grange Farm was the site of a monastic grange attached to Thame Abbey from which the monks ran their estate of Shipton Lee. Despite the Cistercian Order's doctrinal preference for marginal locations for its foundations, the new monastery had quickly abandoned its first site in the marshes of Otmoor removing to a more congenial location at Thame. Likewise, its grange at Shipton Lee occupied existing agricultural land rather than carving a new estate out of woodland and waste, although its proximity to such land on its western flank may have been an attractive feature. When it was gifted to the monks during the reign of King Stephen, the estate apparently lay outside the bounds of Bernwood Forest but was brought into the Forest in the later twelfth century as part of the Forest's short-lived expansion under Henry II (Harvey, 1997). Despite the uncertainty over the precise bound-



FIGURE 5 Reconstruction drawing of the fishponds and monastic grange by Madeleine Smith.

ary of Bernwood at this time, it is notable that each of the Otmoor, Thame and Shipton Lee sites conform to the pattern of early grants to the Cistercians, being situated in or near Royal Forests or other tracts of woodland (Aston, 2000, 88). In this vein it is worth mentioning the interests of other religious institutions in the neighbourhood: Notley Abbey had a hermitage somewhere in nearby Finemere Wood (Page, 1927, 97) while Hogshaw was a commandery of the Knights Hospitaller (Page, 1927, 54). It is tempting to speculate that the fact that the grantee and first abbot were brothers indicates less religious motivations for the grant, maybe to provide for a sibling or even as a means of protecting the family's property from the arbitrary exercise of royal power.

Unfortunately the field evidence does not allow accurate dating of the grange's various features but it would seem that in common with other monastic institutions, and particularly those of the Cistercian

Order (Aston, 2000), the abbey invested significant resources in its estate, diversifying and improving its productivity by constructing three sets of fishponds, a warren, watermill, windmill and a discrete demesne. Although there is no absolute dating evidence for the fishponds, it is common for fishpond complexes to have been attached to monasteries and monastic properties (Bond, 1988). Fish ponds would have been particularly important to monastic communities since their consumption of meat was restricted by religious rules, although by the end of the medieval period fish formed such a valuable commodity that many ponds became essentially money-making businesses. The two pond bays on the River Ray are simple single ponds retained by a dam and this appears to have been the original form taken at Grange Farm only to be converted at a later date to a multiple pond system, presumably to boost productivity.

In the absence of extensive documentary evidence it is not possible to assess the relative contribution of the grange's different products but the survey of 1291 is notable in emphasising sheep, wool and rents from arable holdings, presumably the principal sources of income. Arable declined in importance from almost two-thirds of land use in the 11th century to less than one-quarter by the 17th century. Pasture expanded from its core areas of Lee Lawne and the stream-side meadows into the open fields through both permanent inclosures and temporary 'leas'. Cattle had become more important than sheep by the 18th century. If all three fishponds functioned simultaneously they would have covered a not inconsiderable area of 13.8 acres.

The purpose of a grange was to support the abbey through surplus production and yet it is fairly clear that by the mid-twelfth century there would have been little or no uncultivated land available for increasing production through *extensification* (i.e. bringing new land into productive use). Instead the monks pursued a strategy of limited *diversification*, presumably to increase monetary income through sales in the rapidly burgeoning markets and fairs of medieval Buckinghamshire (Reed, 1978). It is not clear whether inclosure had commenced prior to the transfer of the grange to secular hands but there are hints that the process gathered pace soon thereafter. Otherwise, the most immediate impact of the dissolution was the diversion of the manor's income to private ends.

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