The archaeology of the Wymondleys

The communities of Great and Little Wymondley lie between Hitchin and Stevenage. They were once separate parishes, each with detached portions in the south (Figure 1), which probably means that they were one single estate at some point. They have a rich archaeological heritage, which tells us some surprising things about what may have led to the creation of the two villages.

The following account tries to paint a picture of how the place developed up to the Norman Conquest in 1066. After that, the story is best followed in Noël Farris's 1989 book *The Wymondleys*, although we will look at Wymondley Castle and Little Wymondley Priory. This last was the site of one of the few excavations to have taken place in the villages in recent years.

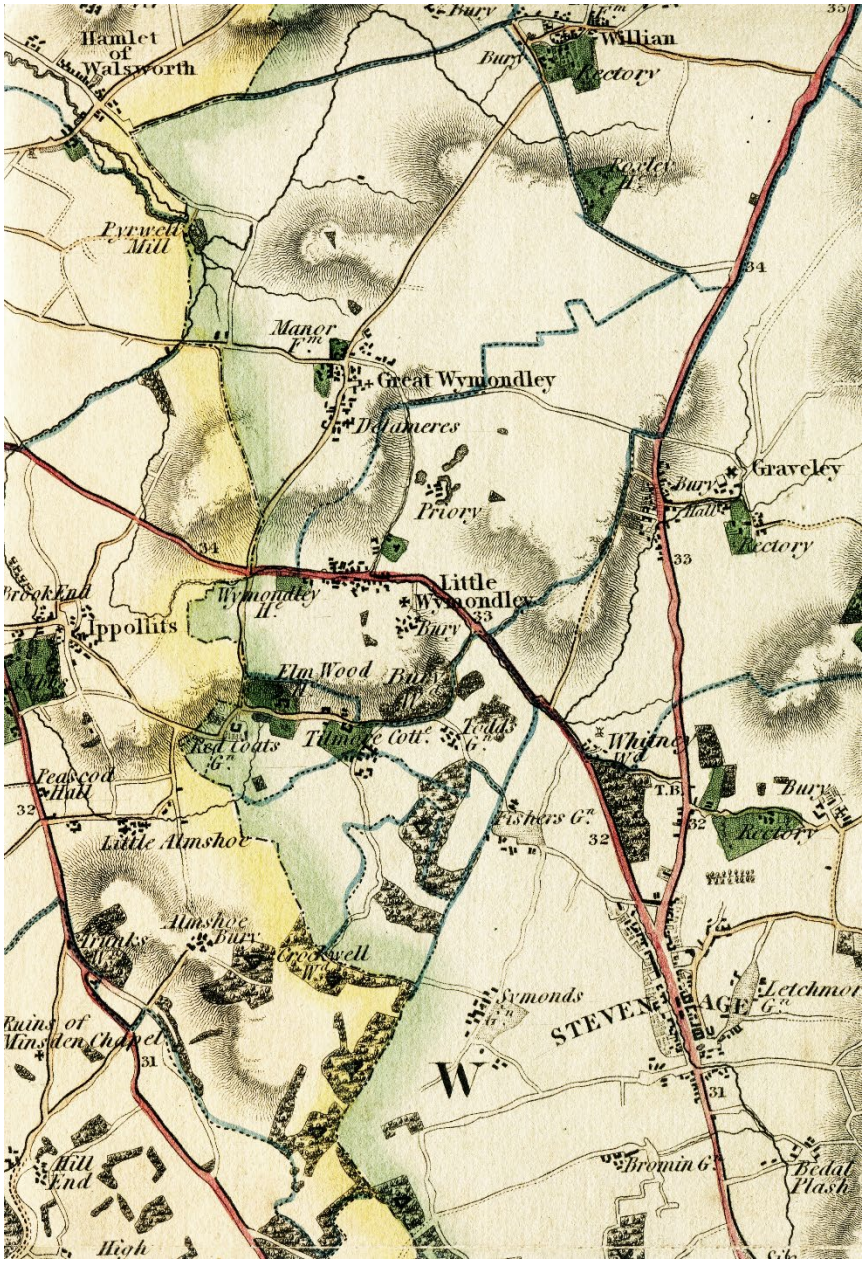

Figure 1: the Wymondleys on Bryant's Map of Hertfordshire, published in 1822

The landscape

The shape of the land is not as constant as we like to think, especially if we consider the long term. Our familiar hills, valleys and streams did not exist before the Pleistocene Ice Age (2.6 million to 11,700 years ago). During the Anglian Glaciation (478,000-424,000 years ago), an ice sheet covered North Hertfordshire. During the warmer periods that followed, periods of high rainfall created valleys that are now dry.

The pattern of hedgerows and lanes that gives North Hertfordshire its character was mostly created through Enclosure. This process cut up the large open fields that were typical of the Middle Ages (and can still be seen around Bygrave and Newnham in the north of the district) into smaller units. Instead of the entire community farming strips in the open field that they were allocated during the yearly manorial courts, each family would now have a block of land that was their sole responsibility.

Enclosures happened piecemeal in Little Wymondley from the late Middle Ages onward, where villagers were able to reach agreements with their lord of the manor. In Great Wymondley, the landowners obtained an Act of Parliament in 1811 to enclose the parish. These Acts were often unpopular, as unlike the piecemeal enclosures of earlier times, they were imposed on the tenants, who had little say in how the land was divided up.

Prehistoric deep time

The Historic Environment Record for Hertfordshire lists two Palaeolithic objects from the parish. One of them is a handaxe, which is in the collections of North Hertfordshire Museum (Figure 2); the other seems to be a mistake. The handaxe is part of a large group of similar objects found across the Hitchin area, where they date from 424,000 to 375,000 years ago. These artefacts are the first evidence we have for human beings in the area, although they were a different species from us.

Figure 2: the handaxe from Wymondley

The Hitchin gap was a migration route for animals between winter pastures in the south and summer grazing in the north. These animals included a hominid species, known to anthropologists as *Homo heidelbergensis*. They were the ancestors of Neanderthals rather than us. These people camped around the shores of a lake that existed in the Hitchin area around 424,000-400,000 years ago. Little Wymondley is on its eastern edge. The lake consisted of melted glacial ice held back by a dump of clay and gravels blocking the valley at its northern end. Instead, there was a channel that drained south towards the Thames.

The lake provided an ideal environment for animals that were passing through the area. As well as the fossil hominids, there were straight-tusked elephants, hyaenas and an extinct species of vole. It is the bones of this last that have helped date the archaeological finds as it has been extinct in Europe for more than 375,000 years.

Tundra conditions returned to Britain around 374,000 years ago, making it inhospitable for the animals that had been here earlier. People no longer came to Britain until another warm period between 300,000 and 243,000 years ago, when a few *Homo neandertalensis* (Neanderthals) visited occasionally. There was then another gap until 57,000 years ago when more Neanderthals visited. There are a few of their tools from the district, including a *bout coupé* handaxe from Hitchin, a miniature handaxe from Letchworth Garden City and the remains of a woolly mammoth from Baldock. There are no finds of this period from the Wymondleys.

The Mesolithic (about 11,000-4000 BC)

People returned to Britain after 11,000 BC; they were modern humans, *Homo sapiens*. DNA evidence indicates that they were descendants of the first modern humans to enter Europe from Africa; their descendants account for under 20% of the current population. Britain was still a peninsula of northwest Europe and, as in earlier times, these people were following the herds of animals that provided them with meat and skins. They were especially fond of red deer, but they also foraged for wild plants and fished. Reeds that grew in wet places provided material for shelters, but they also cut down trees for more substantial constructions.

Their tools were modular, consisting of what archaeologists call microliths, tiny chips of struck stone mounted in bone or wood handles. This important technological innovation was a very efficient use of flint: not only was less stone needed to make tools but also elements could be replaced when they blunted instead of throwing away the whole implement. A few microliths have been found in Great Wymondley, showing that people passed through this area. Their territories were wide-ranging, and although people may have built base camps to which they returned in winter, they had no permanent settlements.

There was an underwater landslip off the coast of Norway about 6150 BC, known as the Storegga Slide. It caused a tsunami, which travelled west, drowning land into the foothills of the Grampian Mountains, where the debris it left behind was first recognised in the 1990s. It also moved south, across the wooded plain where the North Sea is today. At the time, the River Rhine entered the sea through a V-shaped estuary facing north, and the shape of the coast funnelled the water. As the tsunami was increasingly constricted by the land, it became more powerful. It swept over the clay hills south of the Thames (which was then a tributary of the Rhine) and cut through them, creating a stretch of open water between Kent and the Pas de Calais. Suddenly, Britain was cut off from continental Europe.

The opening up of the English Channel did not pose a problem for people, who already had boat technology, but it meant that the herds of animals they had followed for millennia were now trapped. As the animals' territories became more restricted, so did people's. Their way of life became more settled, and they began making clearings in the woodland to attract prey by leaving food.

Figure 3: the tranchet axehead from Roxley Court

People began to build roundhouses that were designed to be more permanent. While some members of the community might go off in search of resources not available in the immediate neighbourhood, others would remain behind. They developed woodworking technology, which we can see from specialised tools. The most distinctive is the tranchet axehead, a chunky flint tools with a cutting edge formed by chopping off a flake from one end (the *tranchet*). One has been found by Roxley Court (Figure 3), which was part of Great Wymondley before being transferred to Letchworth Garden City. People began to plant hazels near their settlements, using the nuts as a storable source of food over the winter.

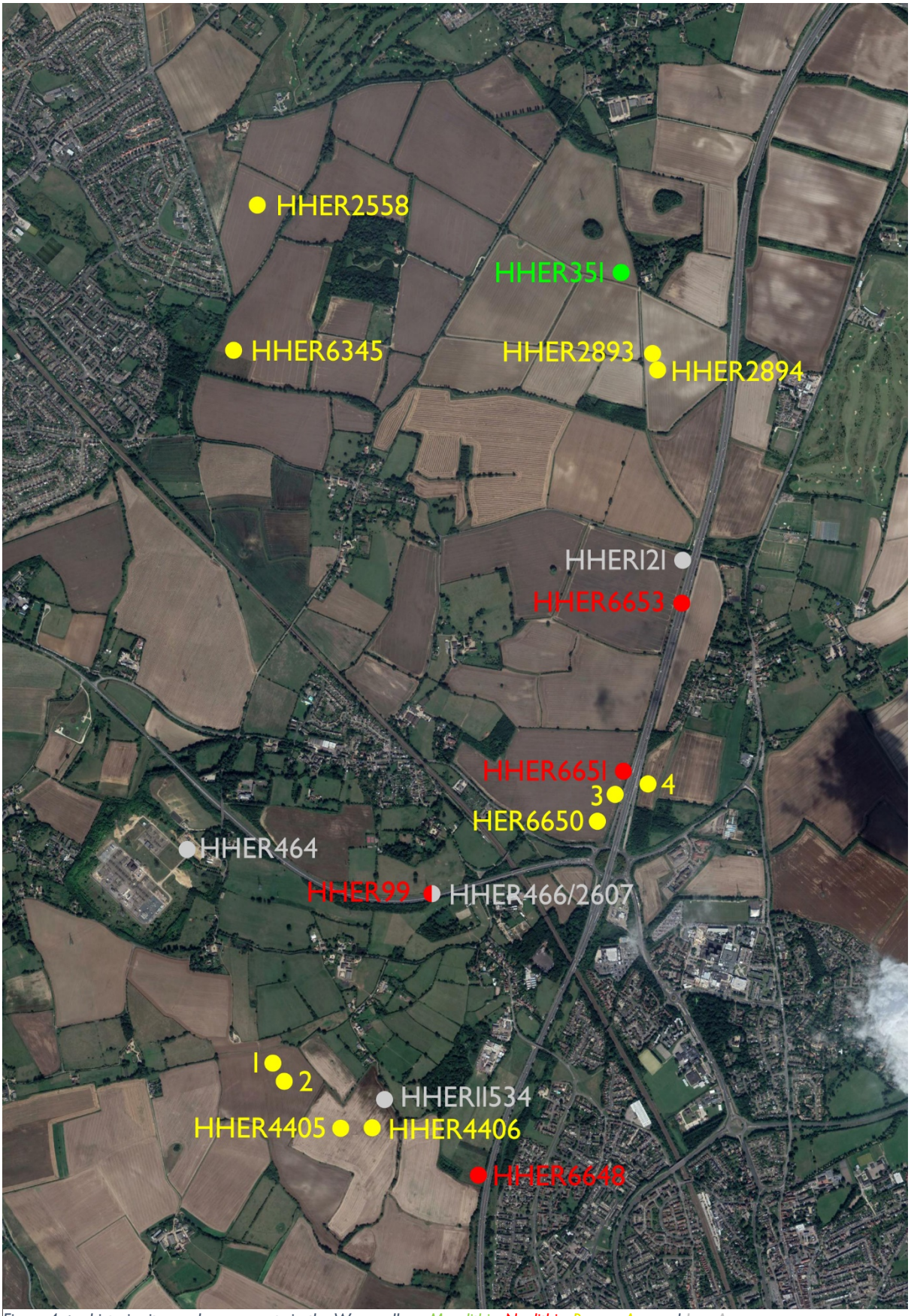

Figure 4: prehistoric sites and monuments in the Wymondleys: Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age

Early farmers (about 4000-2000 BC)

About 4000 BC, a new group of people arrived, bringing farming technology with them. Although they had initially come from the Middle East, they left there thousands of years earlier. The groups that arrived in Britain around 4000 BC had the genetic mutation that allows people to continue to digest milk and its by-products into adulthood. They crossed from the Low Countries and northern France. Their ancestors had travelled across Turkey, through the eastern Balkans and followed the River Danube into Czechia and Poland before spreading west into Germany and the Netherlands. The earliest farmers in Britain brought their crops and livestock with them.

There is little evidence for these people in the Wymondleys, and they may not have had much impact on the local landscape. It has long been known that the early farmers lived alongside forager hunters; the older population may have remained dominant in this area. There is evidence for population decline after 3350 BC and a change in religious beliefs about 300 years later when people changed from building long barrows for burials to large, circular mounds. Some pottery and flintwork found during archaeological fieldwork near the A1 junction may belong to the following centuries, and better evidence for people can be seen after about 2500 BC.

Metalworking communities (2500-800 BC)

Metalworking was brought to Britain by a people traditionally known as the 'Beaker Folk', migrants who also brought ploughs, wheeled vehicles pulled by horses and sheep with long wool with them. These people originally came from an area north of the Caspian Sea, in present-day Kazakhstan. Metal detectorists have found three Bronze Age objects in the Wymondleys. The oldest is a flat axehead, discovered near Titmore Green (Figure 5). They were the first metal objects to be made in Britain and usually date from about 2500 to 2000 BC.

Figure 5: a copper flat axe from Titmore Green (image © Portable Antiquities Scheme)

Much of the evidence takes the form of ring ditches, the quarries that provided material for burial mounds. Two are known at the very north of the parish, south of Roxley Court. There are two not far from Purwell Mill, two north of the A1 motorway junction and three south of Titmore Green (Figure 4). These mounds covered single burials, unlike the earlier types, which were raised over the remains of several individual members of the community. The 'Beaker Folk' brought this innovation with them.

An archaeological assessment took place in 1993 when a proposal was made to widen the A1 motorway between Junctions 6 and 8. To the north of Junction 8, in the field east of Wymondley Hall, a scatter of prehistoric flintwork was found and, immediately north of the junction, aerial photographs revealed part of a tear-shaped enclosure that had been truncated by the slip road (Figure 6). It does not resemble Neolithic, Iron Age or Roman enclosures and may be Bronze Age in date. A similar cropmark is known on the hills north of Kelshall, where it is also close to ring ditches. As Bronze Age burial mounds were sited away from communities of the living, it is unlikely that the site was domestic, if it is of this period.

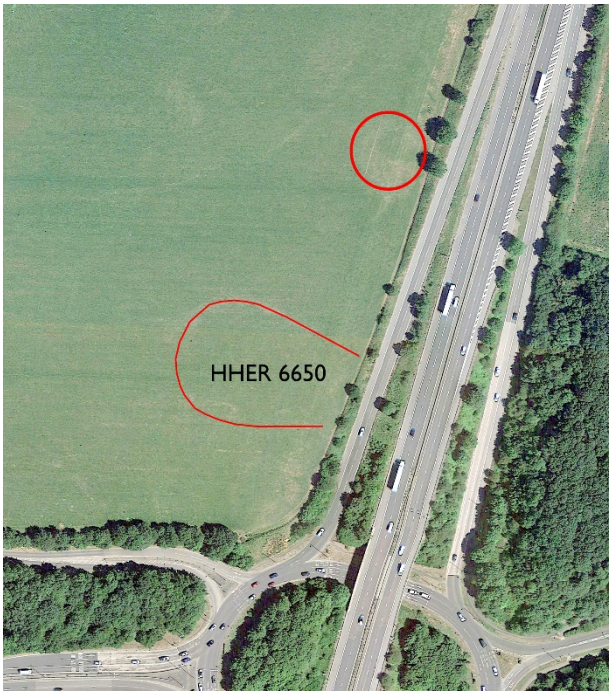

Figure 7: the polygonal enclosure north of the A1M junction

Perhaps it was connected with funerary rituals or with agriculture: many round barrows were built on top of former ploughsoil.

Another feature these settlers brought was a Celtic language. Linguists still dispute where it first split from its ancestor Italo-Celtic. Some have argued that its characteristic features derive from contact with speakers of proto-Basque in the Iberian Peninsula. After moving west, through southern Ukraine and the Balkans, the ancestors of these people arrived in the Po Valley before sailing south to Corsica and Sardinia and then west to Iberia. There, they developed a style of pottery that spread with them across western Europe. Those arriving in Britain were part of a group that migrated through southern France, the Po valley, the Hungarian plain, then west along the Danube and north along the Rhine. Their travels from Iberia account for the distribution of Celtic languages, its spread taking place much earlier than prehistorians once believed.

Figure 6: the ploughed-down banks of the Titmore Green henge can be seen as oval mark just left of centre

There were stories in the press recently that these newcomers completely replaced the existing population. The genetic and archaeological evidence suggests a more complex picture. There is still a component of DNA from both the Mesolithic people and the early farmers in modern populations, showing that the different groups intermarried. Similarly, styles of pottery, buildings and burials show a slow change from 2500 BC onwards, not an immediate replacement with new types of continental origin.

One of these monument types is known to archaeologists as a henge. The earliest were built shortly after 3000 BC and were large, circular ditched areas. After about 2500 BC, they became oval-shaped; the henge at Norton in Letchworth Garden City shows the change, with the bank being reshaped and a new ditch dug. There is one of these later types at Lower Titmore Green henge. It was first discovered as a cropmark on aerial photographs (Figure 7), and an evaluation in 2003 in 2003 confirmed its character. It has an entrance facing east-southeast, towards the top of the hill. It is a classic Class I henge, and although its position on a hillside is usual, other local henges at Norton and Ashwell are in similar topographic situations.

The bank of a classic henge lay outside the ditch, which shows that it cannot have been defensive. Excavations have revealed that the area inside is often filled with scraps of pottery, animal bone, signs of burning and stone tools, many of them burnt or broken. Sometimes, there are cremated human remains deposited in pits, and there are often postholes for settings of wooden posts. These were usually arranged in rings but sometimes stood alone or in other groups.

Bronze technology was expensive, and those who controlled trade in the raw materials became wealthy; those who owned bronze objects became powerful. The growing warrior elite drove the development of bronze technology, with tools and weapons becoming increasingly efficient. Early flat axeheads would slide around and split their handles during use; flanges added to the sides and a stop-ridge at the base of the tang helped prevent this. Daggers were lengthened into dirks and eventually into swords, making hand-to-hand combat more deadly. Spears became essential weapons as warriors could throw them at an enemy some distance away. The broken tip of a Middle to Late Bronze Age spearhead was found north of the railway in 2006 (Figure 8).

Figure 8: tip of a spearhead found by a metal detectorist (image © Portable Antinquities Scheme)

The long first millennium BC (1159 BC-AD 43)

Following a dramatic climatic downturn between 1159 and 1142 BC, made worse by the eruption of Mount Hekla (Iceland) in 1154 BC, communities across Europe were severely affected. Large areas of upland were abandoned as increased rainfall denuded topsoil from farmland. Affected areas became heathland, even at relatively low altitudes, such as on the hills east of Baldock. We know so little about second millennium BC settlement in the Wymondley area that it is impossible to recognise how climate change affected local communities. As a low-lying area, it will not have suffered the topsoil loss that happened on the hills. On the other hand, people leaving higher ground that was no longer cultivatable may have caused conflict with established communities as they tried to find new places to settle and farm.

A resident picked up an odd broken object in 1992 during the construction of the A602 Little Wymondley bypass. It was a heavy iron-rich and gravelly fired clay lump, broken into two pieces and

Figure 9: fired clay mould for a Late Bronze Age socketed gouge

with a hollow in the middle. It is a mould to make a socketed gouge, an item of woodworking equipment dated 1020-800 BC (Figure 9). Although the best and most durable were made from bronze, many smiths continued to use stone and fired clay types like this one. Further north from this find, part of a sword blade of the same sort of date was found in a field east of Wymondley Hall in 2007 (Figure 10).

During the construction of a water pipeline by the Lea Valley Water Company in 1975, Gil Burleigh, the archaeologist from Letchworth Museum, found a ditch at Titmore Green containing pottery of this date. Earlier, potsherds of flint-gritted pottery dated about 1100-600 BC had been discovered at Stutley's Gravel Pit, off Blakemore End Road (now the Wymondley Transforming Station of the National Grid). This increase in the number of sites where finds of the period have been made is probably evidence for a growing population.

Even so, there is a long gap before we can see people in the landscape again. The period from about 600 to 50 BC is devoid of farms. The Celts are usually said to have settled in Britain during this period, bringing iron-working technology with them. However, we saw above that they arrived almost two

Figure 10: part of a Late Bronze Age sword blade from near Wymondley Hall (image © Portable Antiquities Scheme)

thousand years earlier. Iron technology spread with a people originally from southern Ukraine whom classical writers called the Cimmerians. They settled in western Hungary during the ninth and eighth centuries BC, bringing iron swords and speedy horses with them. Over the next century, the Celtic peoples to their west adopted their technology, which soon spread across western Europe.

During the later second century BC, people began building massive ditch-and-bank barriers across the countryside, and there is a concentration in the region around Baldock. A settlement, which was perhaps the first town in Britain, began to grow up there in the following century. One of these barriers, which channelled people across the landscape towards Baldock, can be seen to the east of Purwell Mill (Figure 11). It consists of three parallel ditches, like many of these earthworks.

Figure 11: cropmarks east and north of Purwell Mill, including (top to bottom) a trackway, field ditches, an Iron Age triple ditch, a Bronze Age ring ditch and a Roman villa

When the bypass was being built in 1991 excavation uncovered the remains of a settlement originating in the first century BC. The earliest activity on the site, during the Late Iron Age (100 BC-AD 43), was the digging of ditches to define boundaries. The area of habitation included an area of cobbling that could not be traced in full but was probably incorporated into later surfaces. The cobbled surface was perhaps a farmyard. There was also one cremation burial dating from the early first century AD. During further work in 2001, north of the bypass, a roundhouse belonging to this farmstead was recorded by archaeologists.

Roman Britain (AD 43-411)

It is a truism that the Roman conquest cannot be seen in Hertfordshire. After Julius Caesar invaded in 55 and 54 BC but did not annex Britain to the Empire, the southeast remained tributary to Rome. The

Emperors Augustus and Tiberius were able to influence politics, taking rulers' sons as *hostes* ('hostages', a literal translation, gives the wrong impression of their status). These boys were brought up as Romans, would serve as officers in the army and, on the death of their father, one would be sent as a replacement king. The idea behind this practice, which happened in kingdoms on the edge of the Empire throughout Europe, Africa and the Near East, was to ensure that rulers understood Roman ways and would serve the Empire's interests once they had returned home. It did not always work: on the death of Cunobelinos, the local king, around AD 40, his son and successor Caratacos seems to have been independently inclined. His anti-Roman stance was probably one of the reasons for Claudius's invasion in AD 43.

The Little Wymondley Bypass villa

The settlement south of Little Wymondley that was found in 1991 is an excellent example of how difficult it can be to recognise the Roman conquest. Although there were changes in the middle of the first century AD, which included building a new road that approached the farm from the northwest before turning north to run beneath the electricity pylon, life on the farm continued as it had done for two or three generations.

However, shortly after AD 100, a large building measuring 14.5 × 6.7 m, with at least four ground floor rooms, was constructed (Figure 12). The thickness of the foundations suggests that there was also an upper storey. Although this sort of structure is often referred to as a 'cottage house' by archaeologists, it is a misleading term. The farmhouse was well appointed and 'romanised', taking advantage of new technologies that were distinctly Roman. It had a tessellated floor (in other words, one made from multiple small cubes of cut tile) and a tiled roof. New yards were built to its north and east, with other buildings to the east of the yard. The finds discovered in one of them indicate that it may have been a weaving shed. A new road led north-east, coincidentally almost on the line of the bypass.

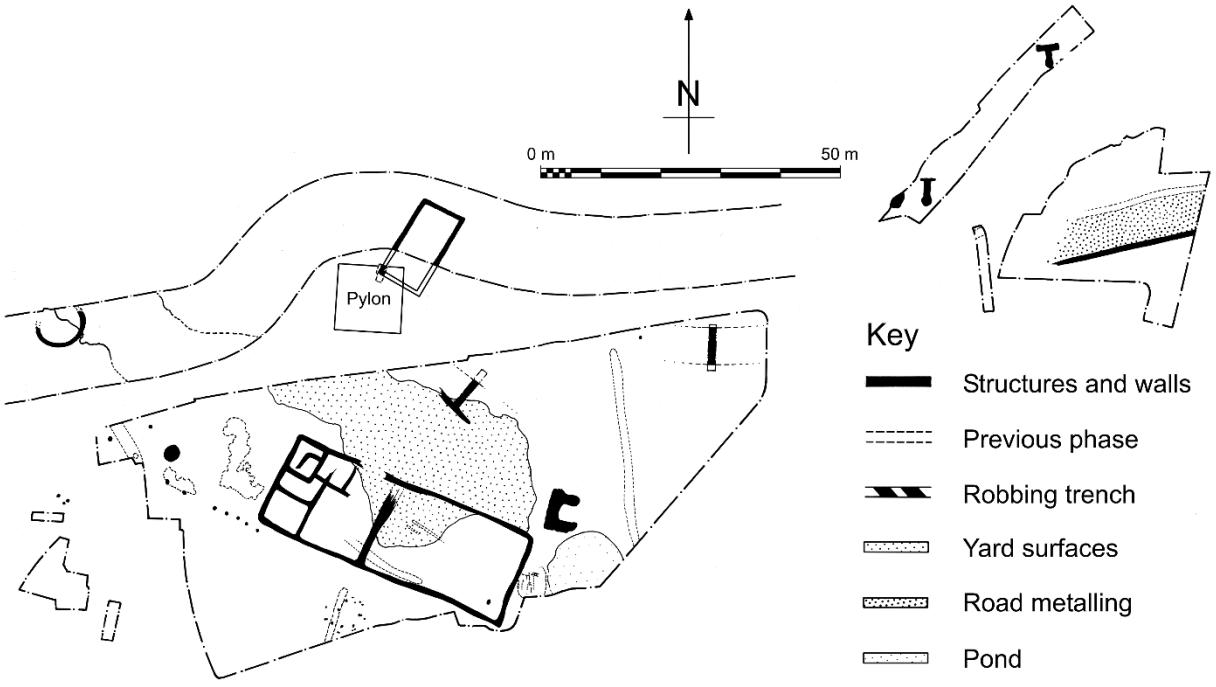

Figure 12: the Little Wymondley bypass 'cottage house'

About AD 150, the house was extended to the southeast. The walls surround a vast area, 34 m long and 16 m wide, too wide to have held a roof without internal supports. Although it appears too big to

have been just a building, there are hints of new rooms added to the original house in this area. This work probably converted the 'cottage house' into a full-scale villa. North of the bypass, where a gas main had to be diverted, three T-shaped kilns were found inside a building with a chalk floor (Figure 13). This style of kiln is usually thought to be for malting barley. The number of kilns suggests large-scale beer production. If this carried on alongside the weaving, it means that the economy of the farm diversified at this time.

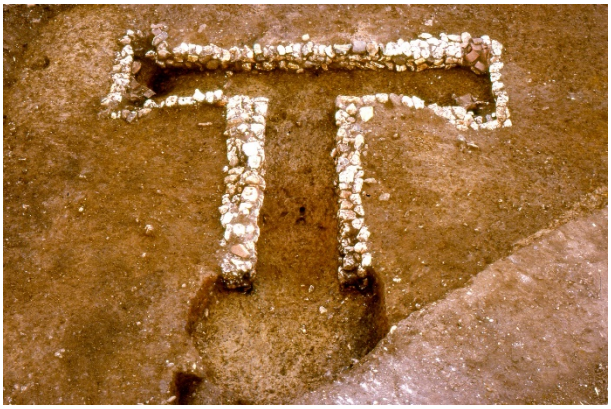

Figure 13: one of the T-shaped kilns found in the gas main trench to the north of the bypass

The structures were demolished or abandoned about AD 250, and the foundations of the extended house were partly robbed out, perhaps leaving the core of the original 'cottage house'. The farmhouse continued to be occupied until about AD 300, probably with a new building added to the north side of the yard. Aerial photographs showing another structure north of the electricity pylon suggest that the focus of the farm shifted. We do not know when it was eventually abandoned.

The Great Wymondley village

Workers installing drains in a field on the north side of Graveley Road in 1882 found a Roman pot. The local antiquary William Ransom heard about it and investigated further. His workers soon found 43 cinerary urns in an area measuring five by seven yards (4.6 × 6.4 m), with accompanying grave gifts (Figure 14). They also observed a '*line of black earth*' in the same field, which turned out to be a ditch filled with broken pottery, ironwork, bronze and glass. These discoveries were part of the cemetery of a community that presumably lay nearby.

Hitchin Rural District Council began building houses south of Graveley Road in 1937, on a plot opposite the field with the Roman burial ground. It lay inside a large rectangular ditched and embanked enclosure,

Figure 14: drawing of the pottery found in graves in 1882

usually identified with the bailey of Wymondley Castle. Percival Westell, the curator of Letchworth Museum, went to investigate in July of that year as the foundation trenches had turned up sherds of Roman pottery. He dug six trenches behind the houses, with large quantities of Roman finds in each (Figure 15). One uncovered a flint and rubble surface, 24 × 6 feet (7.3 × 1.8 m), which Westell believed to be the floor of a building. The dimensions and the material used to make it are more appropriate to a path or track, though. In another trench was a circular rammed clay floor and fired daub, evidence for a roundhouse destroyed by fire.

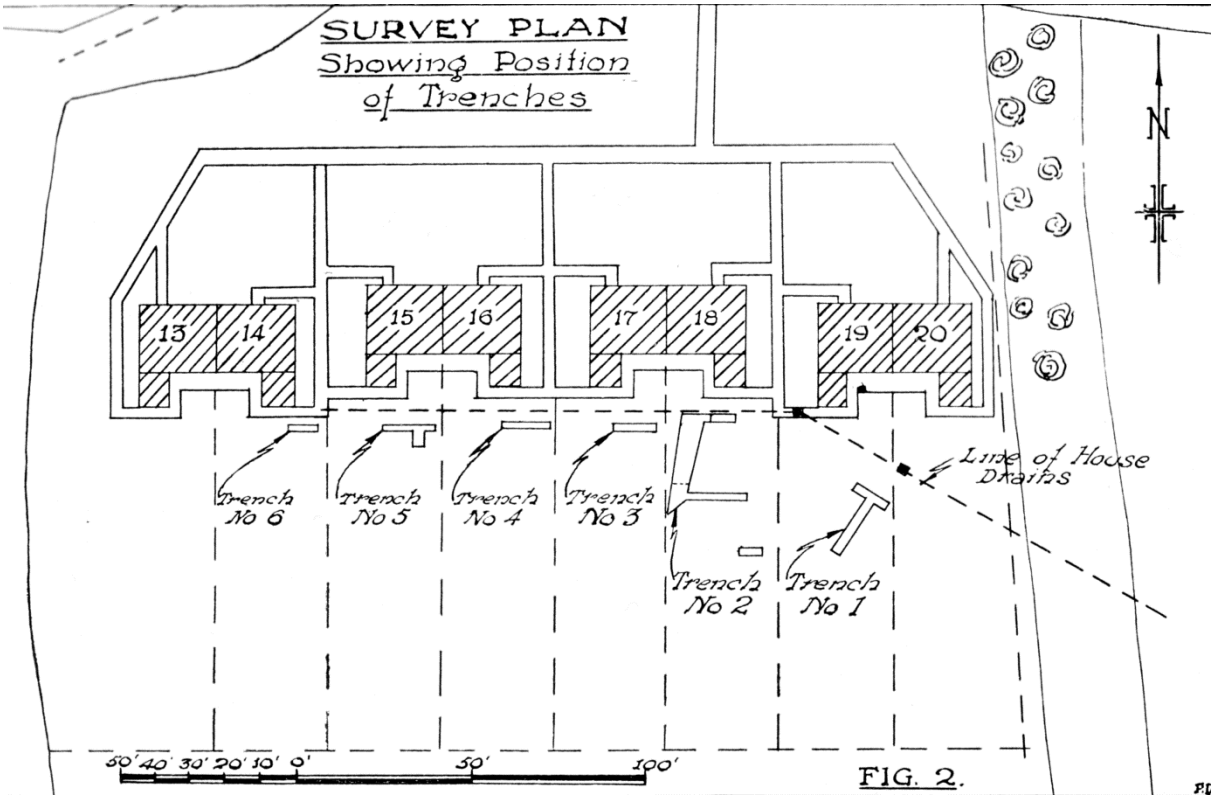

Figure 15: Percival Westell's plan of the trenches he excavated on Graveley Road in 1937

The finds date from the first and second centuries AD, exactly contemporary with the cemetery over the road. The community was less wealthy than that of the Little Wymondley Bypass villa. It was perhaps a community of agricultural workers, tenants on an estate whose wealthy owners lived elsewhere. There is an excellent chance that we know where their landlords' house lay, thanks to another Victorian discovery.

Nineprings or Purwell villa

William Ransom found a scatter of Roman tile in a field near Purwell Mill in 1884, just two years after he uncovered the cemetery at Great Wymondley. It lay on the Wymondley side of Gypsy Lane and in November that year, he and William Hill excavated foundations there. They found a set of rooms with concrete floors and a hypocaust (the underfloor and wall heating used in high-status Roman buildings). There were also mosaic floors, with geometric designs (Figure 16).

These features enable the rooms to be identified as at least part of a suite of baths, which included a sauna-like hot room. A bathhouse of this grandeur would be part of a villa, not an ordinary farmhouse. The best modern analogue to this type of wealthy residence is a large Georgian manor house. Aerial

photographs show an area of disturbed soil at the east end of a corridor villa, indicating that the bath suite was in this wing (Figure 11).

Mark Curteis has re-examined the coins found on the site and bought by the newly-established Letchworth Museum in 1913 from Francis Ransom, the son of William Ransom. In the collection, he identified 62 that plausibly derive from a hoard as their dates are similar and their condition is little worn. They date from the reigns of Gallienus, Tetricus I, Tetricus II, Claudius II and Quintillus. Ransom recorded five more of this date, but they were not part of the collection purchased in 1913. The hoard cannot have been put together before 273, based on the emperors represented (Tetricus II reigned 273-4 alongside his father, Tetricus I). Curteis's work also showed that, based on coin evidence alone, the villa was probably established shortly after 200 and continued to be occupied until the late fourth century, at least.

Percival Westell did further excavation work on the villa in 1921-2. Unfortunately, he never wrote a proper account of his work, which was very poorly recorded. We do not even know precisely where he dug, although he believed that he was excavating close to the bathhouse discovered in 1884. He uncovered a corridor with a red-tiled floor, which he thought to be the same as one found by Ransom, and more Roman finds. He also picked more material from the field surface '*several hundred yards*' north of where he excavated. He interpreted this scatter as deriving from another part of the villa complex. It is more likely to have been part of an ancillary settlement, perhaps estate workers' or slaves' housing.

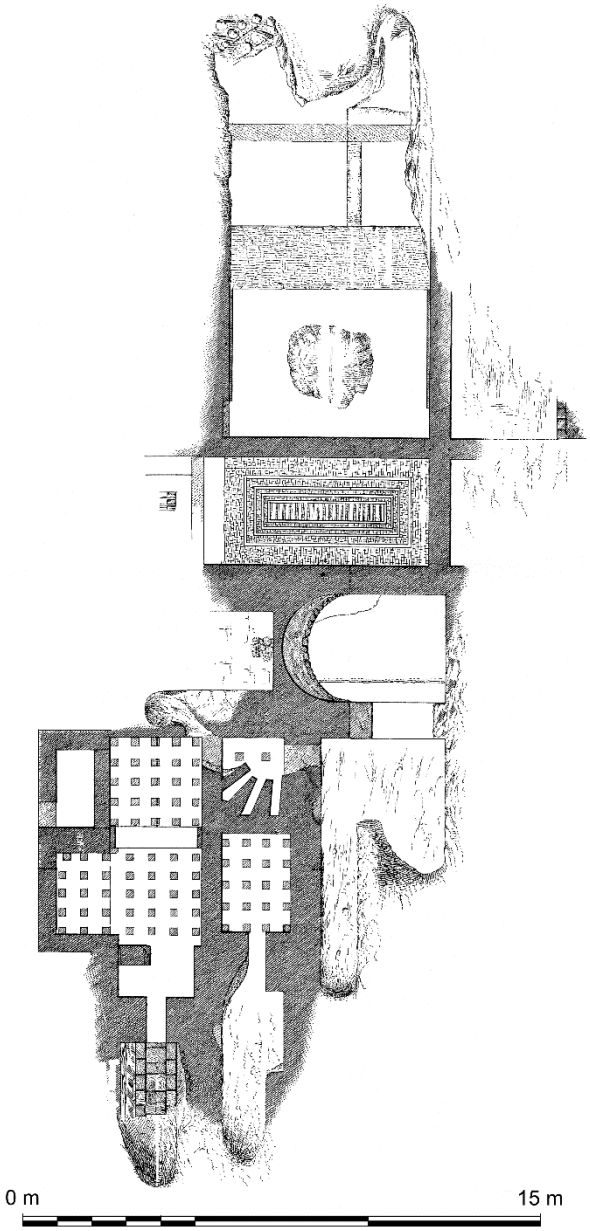

Figure 16: William Ransom's plan of the bath suite he excavated in 1884

Other probably Roman sites

Aerial photographs show a ditched roadway running roughly southwest to northeast in the field northwest of the villa (Figure 11). To the southwest, it is lost under the Purwell Estate, but the projected line would cross the River Purwell close to the mill. To the northeast, it meets a ditch crossing the field southeast to northwest and is aiming at a gap in the ditch. Beyond it, another ditch running parallel blocks the line and may show the road turning to a northwesterly direction. To the west are two ring-shaped marks, the northernmost 11.25 m in diameter, the southern about 26 m across. The smaller ring is about the average size of an Iron Age or early Roman roundhouse, while the other is too wide to have been a building: it would have been impossible to build a roof for it. It may be the ditch of an earlier burial mound.

Figure 17: a subrectangular enclosure west of Roxley Court, probably a Romano-British farmstead

There are several stretches of buried ditch visible on aerial photographs of the fields west of Roxley Court (Figure 17). The geology in this area is very mixed and shows up as cropmarks, making analysis challenging. However, there is a subrectangular enclosure that is Late Iron Age or Romano-British in character, cut by field boundaries. There are two almost parallel lines of ditches to the southwest that may be field boundaries and a second, more closely spaced pair to the northwest that may be part of a ditched road. The enclosure was probably a farmstead.

A Roman landscape

Three areas of settlement are currently known in the Wymondleys, and there may be two others visible in aerial photographs. The Ninesprings villa is the highest status of these, while the Little Wymondley 'cottage house' is also evidence for a landowning family. The village at Great Wymondley, the possible settlement north of the Purwell Estate and the farmstead west of Roxley Court are all settlements of peasant character.

In his pioneering book *The English Village Community*, published in 1883, the economic historian Frederic Seebohm tried to identify an estate for the Ninesprings villa (Figure 18). He

Figure 18: Frederic Seebohm's attempt to define the estate of the Purwell villa, based on the open fields of Great Wymondley

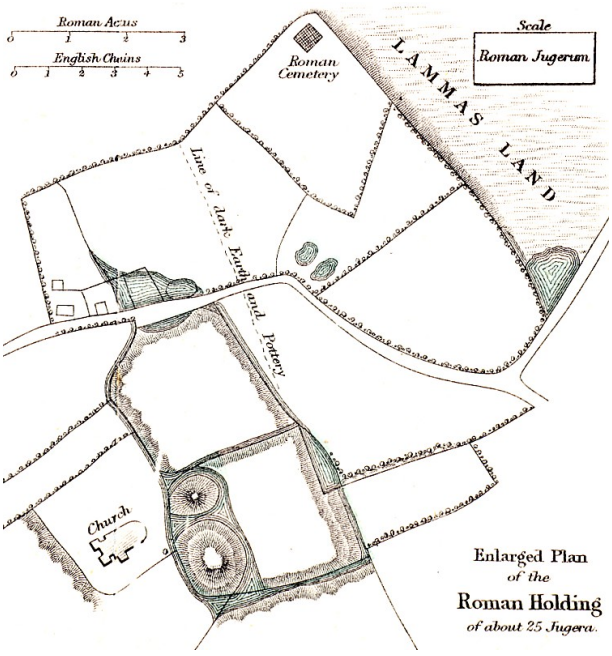

Figure 19: Seebohm's attempt to define the holding associated with the cemetery discovered in 1882

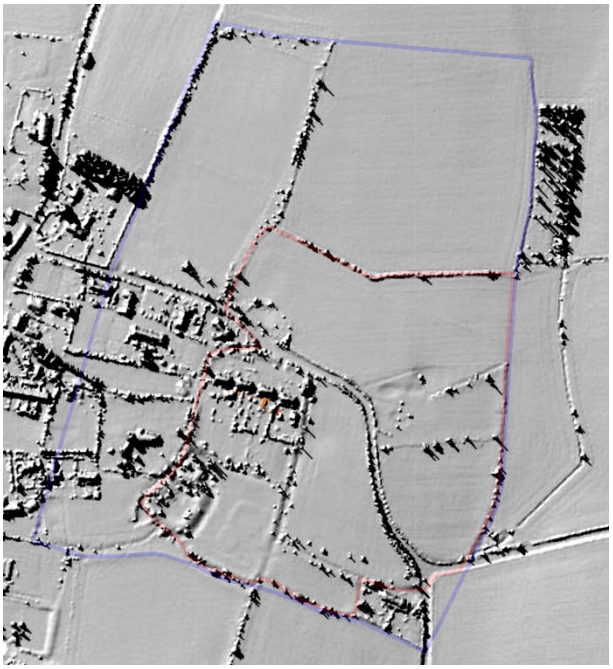

Figure 20: another way of looking at the holding, using Lidar

suggested that the open fields of Great Wymondley were based on ancient Roman measurements that were part of a rectilinear land survey known as a cadastre. He correctly took Ransom's discovery of a cemetery as an indication that a settlement ought to lie nearby and suggested that it occupied a plot of 25 *iugera* (a *iugerum* was a rectangular plot of land 240 × 120 Roman feet, just over 71 × 35.5 m, measuring about 2523 m^2), so some 63.1 ha (Figure 19). His plan is not convincing, though: he omits the plot of land occupied by Milksey Cottages and elsewhere follows boundaries that date from the time of Enclosure. A case could be made for the site occupying a larger area (Figure 20). It is more likely, though, that the rectangular ditched area with the medieval castle at its southwestern corner was the enclosed settlement. The cemetery would then have lain outside it, as required by Roman law.

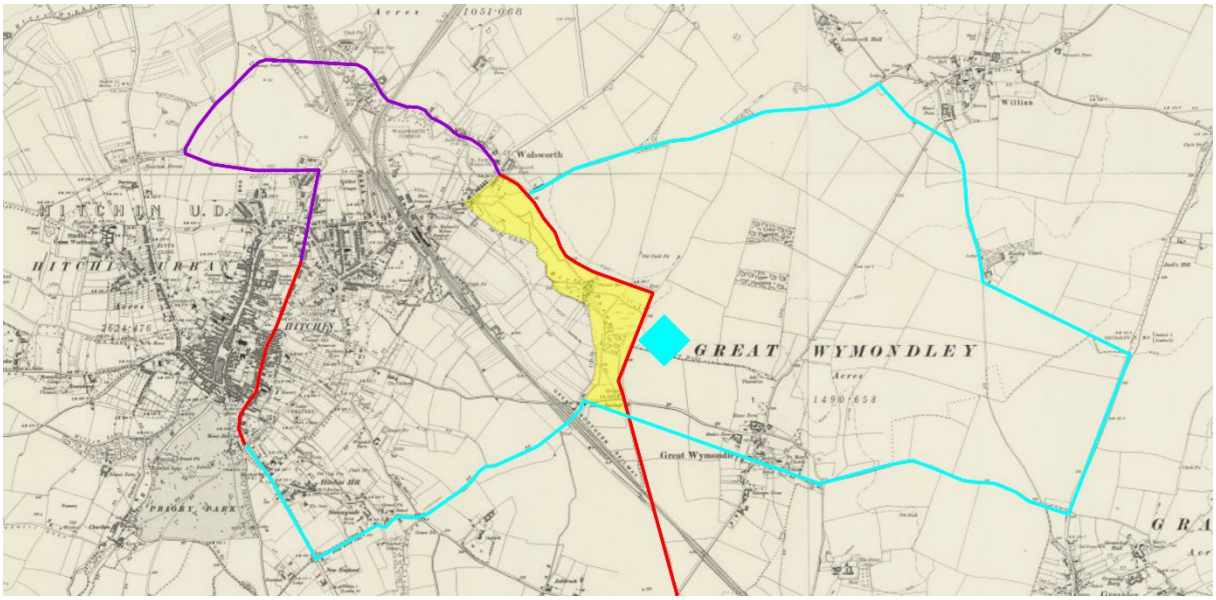

Figure 19: Don Smith's attempt to define the estate of the Purwell villa, showing roads, current boundaries, the Walsworth peasant estate, watermeadows and the villa site ◆

The late Don Smith of Purwell Mill developed Seebohm's ideas but never published them. In his view, Purwell Field (which stretched across the boundary between Great Wymondley and Hitchin) preserved the outlines of the estate in part (Figure 20). He believed that there was an extension to the northwest to accommodate a settlement of peasant workers who gave their name to Walsworth (the name contains Old English *wealh*, which means 'Briton' or 'serf').

Again, although Smith's ideas are intriguing, they go beyond the evidence and make several assumptions that can be shown to be wrong. Like Seebohm before him, he treated boundaries and tracks established at the time of Enclosure as ancient. His use of the placename Walsworth – an Old English name that must have been coined many centuries after the villa was abandoned – assumes a timeless quality to the human geography of the area.

Nevertheless, both Seebohm and Smith were probably close to solving the puzzle. The discovery of the 'cottage house' gives a new perspective, though. Is it a coincidence that both Great Wymondley and Little Wymondley contained Romano-British estate centres? The two medieval parishes may have developed from two older land units. As we shall see, the fragmented territories of each already existed in the reign of Edward the Confessor (1042-1066).

Although we describe the period as 'Roman', it would be wrong to think of Britain being overrun by people wearing togas and talking Latin. The invaders consisted of a multi-ethnic army of about 50,000 people, supported by an administration composed of hundreds, not thousands of people. Given that Roman Britain was home to somewhere between two and six million people, the army and bureaucracy can never have been more than about 2% of the population. We also know that Britain was used as a place of exile by the fourth century, so it is unlikely that it was seen as a desirable place in earlier centuries. People did move around the Roman world, including soldiers, merchants and slaves, but there is little trace of their DNA in the later population.

The wealthier classes – the owners of places like the Purwell or Little Wymondley villas – were most likely descendants of the pre-Roman British warrior aristocracy. The Roman Empire worked by persuading existing élites to collect taxes on its behalf, allowing them to take a proportion, and giving them roles in the new administration. There was no need to coerce people from elsewhere to move to an undesirable province to run it when you could get the locals to do it.

Figure 20: one of the pots used as a grave gift in the cemetery north of Graveley Road

After Rome

There is no evidence to show how the Roman communities in the Wymondleys ended. We have seen that there are hints that the estates from this period survived to give shape to the medieval and later landscape. The processes by which they became Great and Little Wymondley cannot be seen at present.

However, their partial survival is evidence that they were not wholly abandoned. The field systems on these two large estates seem to have continued to be farmed.

New settlers arrived, ultimately from Denmark and north Germany, speaking a new language that developed into Old English. Although Baldock and Hitchin retained their British populations and the name of the latter is Brittonic (it is probably the name of a people, the **Succii*), the Wymondleys have an Old English name. There is no archaeological trace of Saxon settlers, though, which is typical of Hertfordshire.

Figure 21: the village sign for Great Wymondley includes images of the castle, cottages on Arch Road and the parish church

The placename is first recorded as *æt Wilmundeslea* before 1066. It contains a man's name Wilmund, combined with *lēah*, which usually refers to a woodland clearing. These types of placenames became popular after 700. There is little evidence that the area was mainly wooded at this time, though. Perhaps *Wilmundeslēah* lay towards the south of the parish, which historically had more tree cover. Against this, Redcoats Green, Titmore Green and Fishers Green all seem to be secondary settlements, as the term 'Green' indicates. By the tenth century, *lēah* had developed a more general meaning of 'pasture' or 'meadow'. This sense would conform better with what we can understand about the development of the Wymondleys. Intriguingly, the only Wilmund who is known to history was a moneyer who worked in Cambridge. He was alive in 979, and although it is improbable that he was the Wilmund who lent his name to the community, his date of activity may show that it was a popular name during the tenth century.

The hamlets the lie south of Little Wymondley are not recorded until after the time of Domesday Book. Titmore Green was first mentioned in 1176, and the early spellings make it *Tipemere* or *Tipmere*:

the spelling *Titmer* is not recorded before 1629. It probably contains the Anglo-Saxon man's name Tippa and Old English *mere*, 'a pool'. Tippa's pool was likely the pond opposite The Hermit public house.

Figure 22: the Hermit of Redcoats public house

Redcoats Green was first mentioned in 1602, and the name has nothing to do with eighteenth-century soldiers' jackets. The name is found first as a surname, of John *le Radecote*, who died in 1349, possibly during the outbreak of Black Death in that year. The name derives from Old English *rēad*, 'red', referring to the gravel outcrop here, and *cot*, 'a cottage'. It was part of the waste or common land of Great Wymondley and was a triangular plot of land that was enclosed in 1811, with the roads being aligned on their current courses and the edges of the common absorbed into neighbouring fields.

Todds Green is associated with the family of John Todd, named in a document dated 1718. It was earlier known as Warreners or Warners Green, first mentioned in 1405.

The only early medieval archaeological finds in Wymondley come from south of Jacks Hill, where they were discovered in a metal detecting rally. There is little to suggest a settlement in this area, which is on the eastern edge of the parish. Aerial photographs show some ditches and two oval features, both about 20 × 12 m, in this field. All the finds are *sceattas*, an early coin, used from about 675 to 750. This period was when large-scale trade began to resume, after its disastrous collapse in the fifth century. The location, on the boundary between different estates, could have been an excellent place to hold regular markets or fairs.

Ian Friel suggested that Wymondley lay on the eastern edge of the territory of the *Hicce*, a statelet first mentioned in a document known as the Tribal Hidage, probably written in the seventh century. These people gave their Celtic name to the town of Hitchin. The survival of the Brittonic name indicates that

Figure 23: sceattas *found on the edge of the parish, at Jacks Hill (images adapted from the Portable Antiquities Scheme), scale 2:1*

people continued to speak the earlier language for some time, although they eventually adopted Old English. The placename Weston ('the western farm') shows it was on the edge of the territory of another group. The Jacks Hill area could have held a market where trade between different petty kingdoms took place, raising its status still higher.

Domesday Book

Wymondley appears four times in Domesday Book. It is the first manor to be named after Hertford, and although it was part of King William I's land in 1086, the Abbess of Chatteris claimed that Earl Harold had wrongly deprived them of it in 1063. This part of Wymondley was assessed for tax on eight hides of arable. This holding is the most substantial part of the parish of Great Wymondley, containing the village. The next section to be mentioned was held by Adam from the Bishop of Bayeux; he also had land in the neighbouring manors of Almshoe and Graveley. It paid tax on one hide and one virgate of arable. It would be the detached part of Great Wymondley, south of Little Wymondley and containing Titmore Green, as it is the only part to border

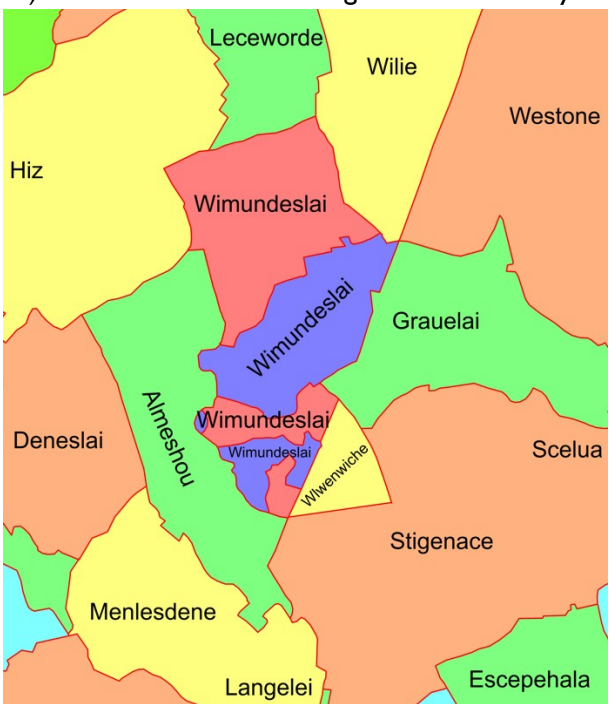

Figure 24: Wimundeslai *and neighbouring manors in Domesday Book*

both Almshoe and Graveley. Next, William held land from Robert of Gernon, taxed on one hide. William also had holdings in the neighbouring manors of Graveley and the lost Woolenwick, which would be the two southern detached parts of both Great and Little Wymondley. Finally, Gosbert of Beauvais held three taxable hides. This holding can be identified with the northern part of Little Wymondley, containing the village and bordering Graveley. However, the Victoria County History inexplicably treats it as part of Great Wymondley.

King William I gave the element of Great Wymondley that he held directly in 1086 to Reginald de Argentein. The donation required the family to serve each subsequent monarch with a silver-gilt cup at the coronation feast, which continued until that of George IV. This manor was known as Great or Much Wymondley. A second manor in the parish, Delamere, is not mentioned before 1487, although the family name was recorded in 1308. The house lies just to the south of the village centre, on Arch Road, and its oldest surviving elements are from the fifteenth century.

The Victoria County History considered Robert of Gernon's lands as the principal element of the manor of Little Wymondley, which is wrong. By 1282×3, the de Argentein family held it as a sub-tenant. Wymondley Priory, founded 1203×7, was the second manor in the parish. The lack of correspondence between the manors and the segmented parishes is striking and confirmation that they were to do with ownership rather than geography,

Figure 25: the tympanum of St Mary's Church, Great Wymondley

The churches

The Wymondleys were once chapelries in Hitchin parish. In 1199, Reginald de Argentein, lord of the manor of Great Wymondley, brought a case against the Abbess of Elstow over his right to appoint

priests. The Abbess claimed that Wymondley chapel was part of the possessions of St Andrew's, Hitchin, and had been granted to the Abbey by Judith, niece of William I. Richard lost the case. Although vicars were appointed to Great Wymondley from 1361, the church remained under Elstow Abbey until the Dissolution. The situation in Little Wymondley was similar, with the advowson of the church (the right to appoint priests) in the hands of the Prior. We do not know what the arrangements were in either case before the foundations of Elstow Abbey and Wymondley Priory.

Great Wymondley, St Mary's

The parish church stands east of the crossroads at the village centre, with the earthwork remains of a small castle to its east. The name and chancel are Norman, dating from about 1100, and is one of only three churches in Hertfordshire to retain an apsidal chancel (Figure 28). The south door has Norman carving, including colonettes and stars in the tympanum (Figure 27). The windows are all later, with thirteenth-century lancets in the chancel and fourteenth- and fifteenth-century types in the nave. The tower, which has a pyramid roof, dates from the fifteenth century; the nave roof was perhaps replaced at the time of its construction.

Figure 26: the apsidal chancel of St Mary's Church, Great Wymondley

A parsonage house, built early in the seventeenth century on Church Green west of the church, was demolished about 1847. By this time, the vicar was living in St Ibbs, the parishes having been united. The church was restored by Joseph Clarke in 1883 for £2,000. The work included a new roof for the tower and new floors throughout, a vestry on the north side; the south porch was perhaps rebuilt at this time. The ecclesiastical parishes of St Ippolyts and Great Wymondley were separated again in 1958, and Great and Little Wymondley united under a single vicar.

Little Wymondley, St Mary's

The church stands on a hill south of the village, close to the moated site of Wymondley Bury (Figure 29). Much of what can be seen today was rebuilt in the fifteenth century, although a church stood here by 1200. It was initially dedicated to St Peter, mentioned in the Chartulary of the Priory as part of the original endowment. In 1372 a document recorded repairs to the structure. The vicarage was reconsecrated in 1863, and the church restored by J T Lee in 1875. During the restoration, foundations from an earlier, apsidal chancel were uncovered. The work involved lengthening the chancel and adding a new north aisle and vestry.

Figure 27: St Mary's Church, Little Wymondley

The castle

The earthworks of a motte-and-bailey castle lie to the southeast of the Church of St Mary. The motte, which held a wooden tower, is 28 m in diameter at its base and survives to a height of about 2.5 m (Figure 30). The bailey lies to its south and measures about 28 m north to south and 25 m east to west, with a large bank on the western and southern sides. The ditch is up to 10 m wide and 2 m deep and, apart from a pond at the southwest corner, is dry. An excavation on the castle in 1882 uncovered both Roman and medieval pottery (described as 'old pots').

There are no documents relating to the castle's foundation, although the historian Noël Farris believed it was the work of John de Argentein. He was a supporter of King Stephen during the Anarchy, the civil war with Empress Matilda in the 1130s and 40s. It was close to his manor house, mentioned in a document of 1283, and stood on land known as *Castel Ley* by 1423. The house was possibly in the bailey of the castle, and by 1318, when the lord of manor John de Argentein died, its location was described as a 'toft', empty land.

The motte-and-bailey was inserted into the southwest corner of an existing rectangular earthwork (Figure 31). This enclosure measures about 155 m north to south and 100 m east to west. The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments inspector concluded in 1970 that this more extensive earthwork was manorial in origin, which is now part of the scheduling description for the castle.

Figure 29: the castle motte

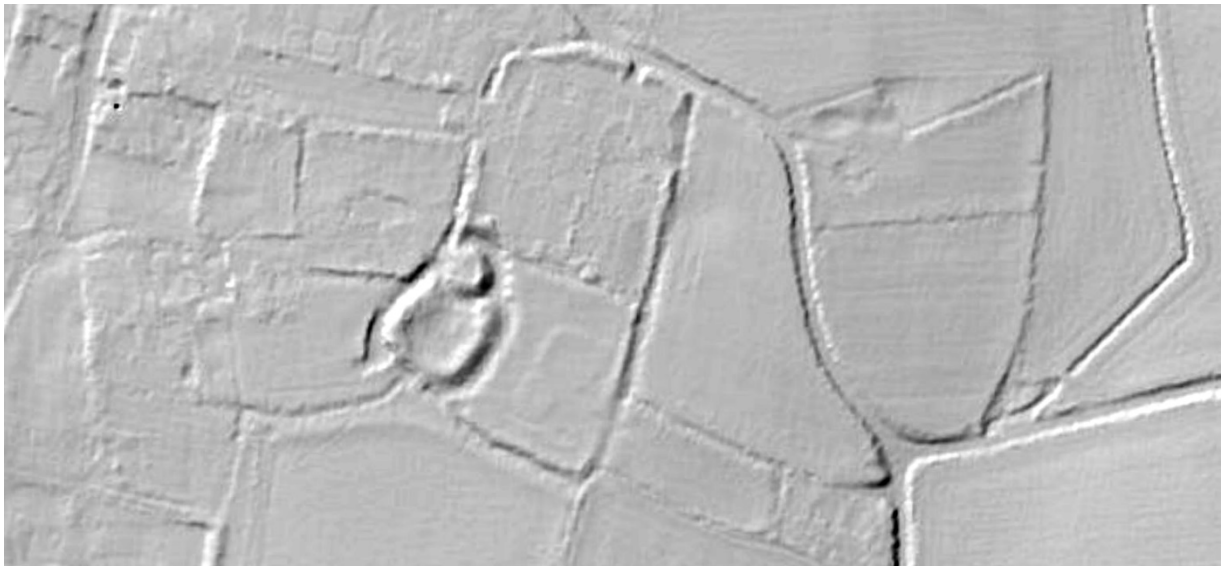

Figure 28: Lidar view of the castle, left of centre

Noël Farris considered this to be the same as Castle Ley, but in the fourteenth century, the southern part of the enclosure was known as The Old Orchard. This name continued in use, eventually becoming Lower Captain's Orchard, recorded in 1814. For this reason, it is difficult to identify this area with *Castel Ley*, which much surely refer only to the motte-and-bailey. The northern part of the enclosure was known as the Old Garden from the fourteenth century on, eventually being renamed Upper Captain's

Orchard. As already discussed above, this embanked area was probably Romano-British rather than medieval in origin.

Wymondley Priory

As already mentioned, a Priory was founded between 1203 and 1207. It stood on land donated to the Augustinians by Richard de Argentein, lord of the manor of Great Wymondley. In 1207, Pope Innocent III took the new Priory into his protection. An excellent collection of documents enabled Noël Farris to recover much of its history. The most important of these is a thirteenth-century Cartulary preserved in the British Museum (Add MS 43972), containing two hundred and fifty documents, most of which relate to land and property. Information may be supplemented from other documentary sources such as Rentals.

The old county historians were muddled about the date and dedication of the Priory, but it is clear that it was initially to the Virgin Mary (Figure 32). It had three altars at the time of the Dissolution: the High Altar, one to Our Lady, another to St Lawrence. It was small, having an average of only five canons. As well as its religious, medical and charitable functions, it made wealth for the Order from agricultural activities. A magnificent tithe barn still stands on the site, and there were probably additional farm buildings.

Figure 30: the seal of the Chapter of Wymondley Priory, showing the Virgin Mary and the Chirst child

The institution was founded as a Hospital dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and the master was a *medicus* ('physician'). A seal survives in the British Museum attached to one of the Wymondley charters and is inscribed S:HOSPITAL:SCE:MARIE:DE:WIMONDESL': (*Sigillum Hospitalis Sanctę Marię de Wimondesleia*: 'The Seal of the Hospital of St Mary of Wymondley'). Medieval Hospitals were not merely places to tend the sick, but also the elderly, the infirm and the impoverished. Several older people were always looked after at the Priory throughout its existence. Indeed, this seems to have been one of its primary functions, even after it ceased to call itself a Hospital, and, probably, there was always an infirmary building.

Before John de Argentein, the founder, died in 1246, it had become known as a Priory. After this, the master was called a Prior. However, Augustinian Canons were associated with the establishment from its beginning. Some charters say the number of Canons appointed was not to exceed five, while others say seven.

There were five Canons with eleven servants at the time of Dissolution on 6 April 1537. The Priory had never been wealthy, and the medieval documents frequently report crop failures and pestilences destroying the livestock. The annual worth of the property was placed by Henry VIII's Commissioners at £34 12s 4d. It was then leased by the Crown to James Needham, a master carpenter and Surveyor of His Majesty's Works.

A proposal in 1989 to convert the surviving buildings on the site into a training centre led to archaeological trial trenching. Although the training centre was not built, the owner obtained planning consent for an extension. An excavation took place in 1992 on the area to be developed to a depth of no more than 0.45 m. Although some structural remains uncovered in 1989 were probably medieval, the limited trenching did not allow any interpretation of their function. The 1992 project did not reveal any early remains, which perhaps exist at a greater depth.

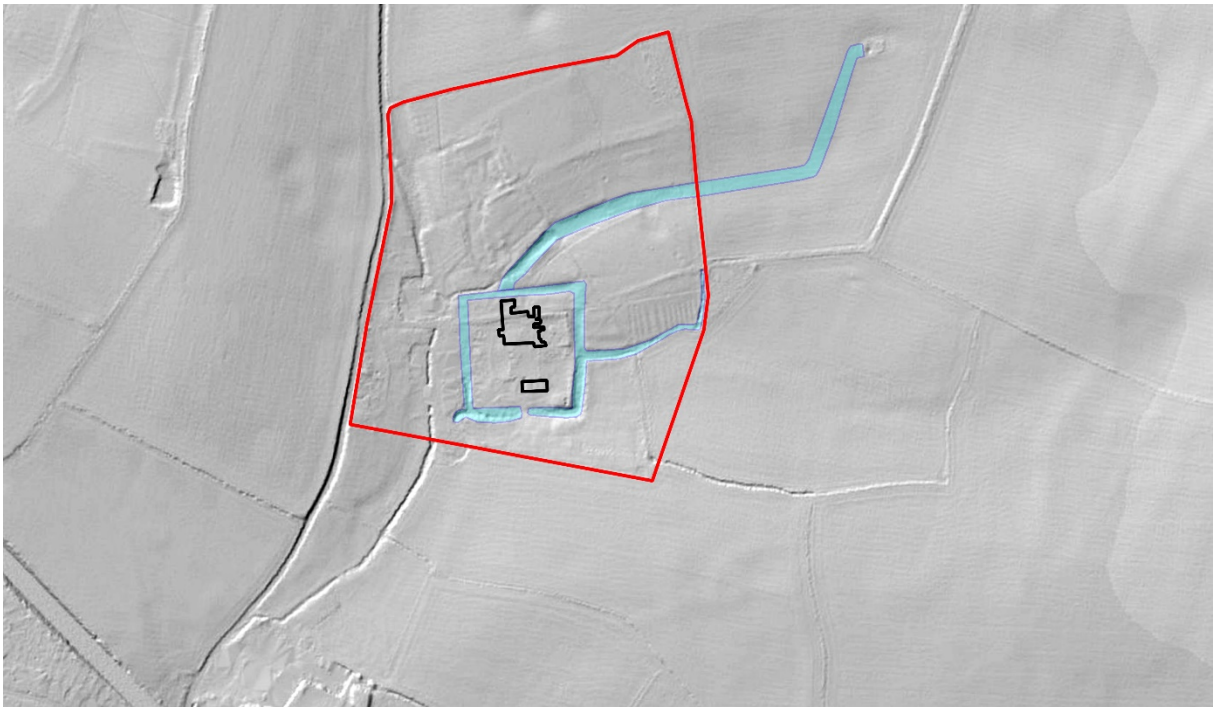

Figure 31: Lidar view of Little Wymondley Priory and its surroundings

Lidar shows the layout of the Priory in considerable detail (Figure 33). The complex is surrounded by a square moat, although the northern arm and the north half of the western arm are filled in. There is a causeway in the centre of the southern arm that appears to be the original entrance. A broad ditch fed the moat from a spring to the east. Water for the Canons came from a spring to the northeast, where a ruinous conduit head building was restored in 1900. The eastern end of the aqueduct is now culverted but survives as a hollow easily visible on the Lidar plot. Lidar also shows the earthworks north of the northwestern end of the moat. They may be the remains of a settlement for the Priory's lay brethren, who did the agricultural work.

Purwell Mill

Domesday Book recorded a mill worth 20s in the part of Great Wymondley belonging to the king (Figure 33). Because part of the mill extended over the river to the opposite bank, in Hitchin manor, the Manor of Great Wymondley had to pay an annual fee of 6d. It takes its name from the River Purwell, although the name of the mill is recorded from the thirteenth century, long before the stream name, which is first mentioned in 1728. The name is Old English, containing *pirige*, 'a pear-tree', and *wielle*, 'a spring', presumably an earlier name for Ninesprings. By the early fourteenth century, the area around the springs included a heronry. Sale of the birds and their eggs was a valuable source of income, and it was perhaps run

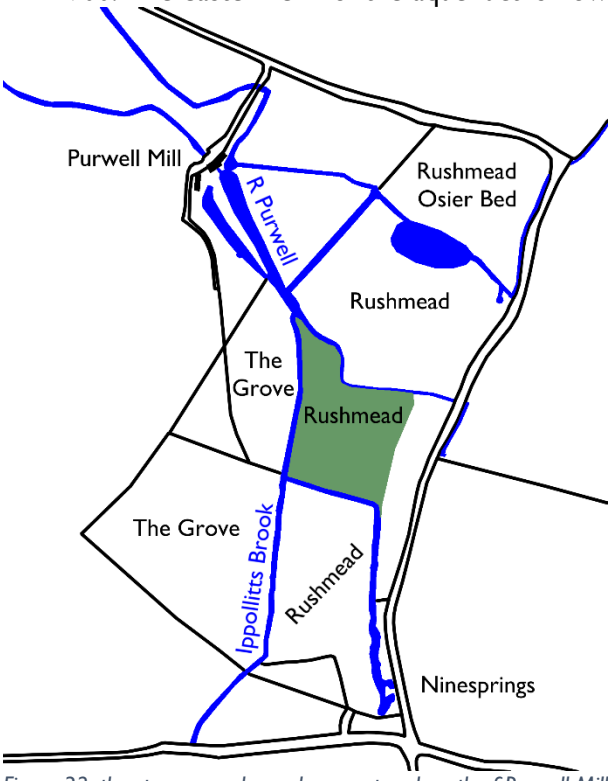

Figure 32: the streams and meadows east and south of Purwell Mill about 1800

as a commercial undertaking. There were probably around 20 nests. Herons were hunted by trained hawks or falcons, and it was in Wymondley that King Henry VIII met with an unfortunate accident in 1525. According to Edward Hall, '*the Kynge following of his Hawke, lept over a diche beside Hychyn with a polle, and the polle brake, so that if one Edmond Mody, a footman, had not lept into the water and lift up his hed which was fast in the clay, he had bene drouned*'. Although the incident is commemorated on the inn sign of the Buck's Head in Little Wymondley, the accident probably happened at Purwell: the Moody family continued to breed herons in this area for many years.

Figure 33: Purwell Mill about the time of its sale in 1882

The present mill is a nineteenth-century building, now converted into a home and Listed as Grade II. Heavy rain in 1824 washed parts of the mill complex away, and a fire in 1861 destroyed much of the timber-framed complex, although the miller's house survived. There was always a risk of fire in flour mills: the machinery and sparks from the millstones could ignite flour dust in the air, making it burn explosively. It was sold in 1882, when it was described as '*a substantially-erected brick and slated water flour mill, the principal walls of which are fourteen inches thick*' (Figure 35). It had an overshot water-wheel, made from cast iron and wrought iron, 12 feet (3.7 m) in diameter, which drove three sets of millstones. A dry summer in 1921 forced it to stop working. It has not been a mill since then.

In conclusion

There is a good deal of ancient activity in the parish, which is typical of northern Hertfordshire. It is an area that has long been agriculturally rich, and by the Roman period, we can start to understand how the landscape was organised. Indeed, the existence of two landed estates in the parish may be why there are still two separate Wymondleys. After 400, we are plunged into uncertainty because we lack the data to show what was happening. By 1000, when surviving documents become available, we have more information again. We can write much of the history of the parish churches, the Augustinian

Priory and the manors. Noël Farris's book *The Wymondleys* is an excellent account of the medieval period and more recent centuries. The gap, when Wymondley acquired its name from a forgotten man called Wilmund, remains a tantalising blank.

Incidentally, the way we say the name today is not historical. Just as Cholmondley in Cheshire is said as if it is 'Chumley', Wymondley was once pronounced 'Wimley'. It was with the advent of universal literacy in late Victorian times that people began to call the villages Wye-mond-ley, based on how it is written. Early maps, such as that reproduced here, often spell placenames phonetically.

Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews
May 2020

Figure 34: Wimley m*(*agna*)* *and* Wimley p*(*arva*)* *on Norden and Kip's map, published in 1637*