

Exploring the medieval fields of Wheathampstead, c.1315

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In most parts of the country the field patterns of the medieval period were extensively altered by later remodelling and enclosure, and in many cases they have been completely obliterated by modern urban development. It is not usually possible, therefore, to identify the medieval geography of a locality with any confidence. One exception, however, is Wheathampstead and in this article Mike Smith shows how, through judicious use of documentation and fieldwork, he has been able to recreate the medieval landscape of the parish.

Wheathampstead first entered recorded history in 1060 as Hwaethamstede when Edward the Confessor gifted it to Westminster Abbey, then a small but growing Benedictine order. The gift document gives us little information about the manor other than its boundary.¹ While the 1060 boundary description is obscure it suggests that the manor was broadly coterminous with the modern parishes of Wheathampstead, Harpenden and Harpenden rural and it measured in the region of 11,000 acres. Twenty-six years later the Domesday provides clues about the extent of arable farming and cereal production. It tells us that the manor had eight ploughs. The number of ploughs is crucial in calculating the extent of arable acreage.² Medieval ploughs were very capital intensive because of the need to maintain large oxen teams of up to eight animals per plough. This meant a manor would have no 'spare' ploughs. A medieval plough could plough a maximum of 100 acres a year on light soil. This suggests that the total arable acreage in the eleventh century was no more than 800 acres. This poses an intriguing question. Why was the arable land so small?

Making sense of the medieval manor

The geology and topography of Wheathampstead provides strong pointers as to how and why the medieval manor developed. The parish lies on the Chiltern chalk dip-slope that dominates the west of Hertfordshire. From the chalk escarpment of Dunstable Downs, the gentle dip-slope runs south towards the Vale of St. Albans. It is overlain by a thick layer of clay, in which a series of valleys has been created, the principal rivers being the Gade, Lea, Mimram and Ver. These valleys are separated by plateau areas, called interfluves.

This topography had important implications for the development of medieval Wheathampstead. The best soil for arable farming was in the Lea valley where the river had cut through the top layer of clay. It was made up of fertile and easily worked soil, consisting of chalk and gravel. By contrast the upland interfluves were made up of a mixture of pebbly clay and clay-with-flint. This type of clay is porous and thus promotes leaching which causes nutrient loss and acidity. Consequently, the upland soil was poor for arable farming in the medieval period.³ This explains why early medieval arable farming in Wheathampstead was confined to the Lea valley. The question is: whereabouts in the Lea valley?

A research project undertaken by the Workers' Education Association (WEA) in the early 1970s attempted to map the geography of the medieval manor by identifying fields that were named as 'commons' and 'open fields' on the 1840 tithe map.⁴ The WEA project also highlighted the many 'end' and 'green' place-names across the manor and suggested that they represented the scattered distribution of small hamlets and farmsteads that is frequently seen on the Chiltern dip-slope (Fig. 1).

The problem with this mapping is that it did not give a snapshot of the manor in any specific period. Nor did it distinguish between two very distinct phases in the spread of settlement across the manor. The first phase (and the subject of this study) was the feudal *demesne* and customary land that dated from around 900 to 1400. The *demesne* was the estate farmed by the Lord of the Manor and worked by the customary tenants who provided labour and services in lieu of rent for their own land. The second phase was the growth of the 'free tenancies' that emerged in the

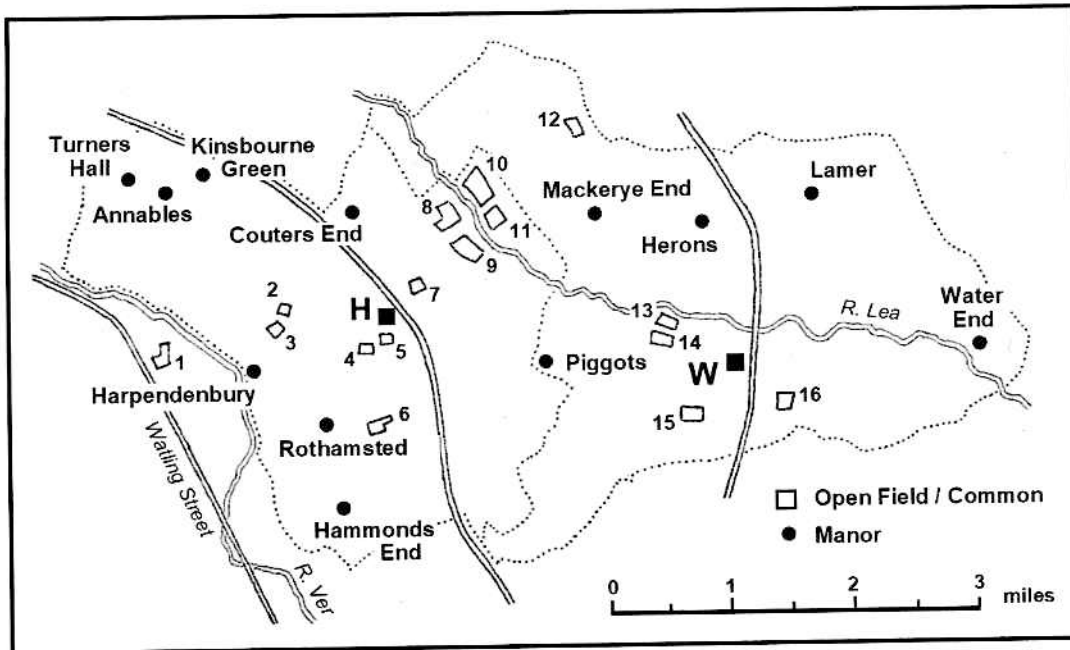


Fig. 1: The open fields and manors of the parishes of Harpenden and Wheathampstead. The map is based on the study published in 1973 by the Workers' Education Association. The study suggested a scattered distribution of small hamlets and farmsteads.

H	Harpenden	8.	Manland Common
W	Wheathampstead	9.	Westfield Common
1.	Northfield	10.	Pickford Common
2.	Cross Path Common	11.	Batford Common
3.	Bury Field Barn	12.	Breadcroft Common
4.	Dene Common	13.	Lower Down
5.	Church Longcroft	14.	Upper Down
6.	Coleman Common	15.	Amwell Common
7.	Breadcroft Common	16.	Wheathampstead Common

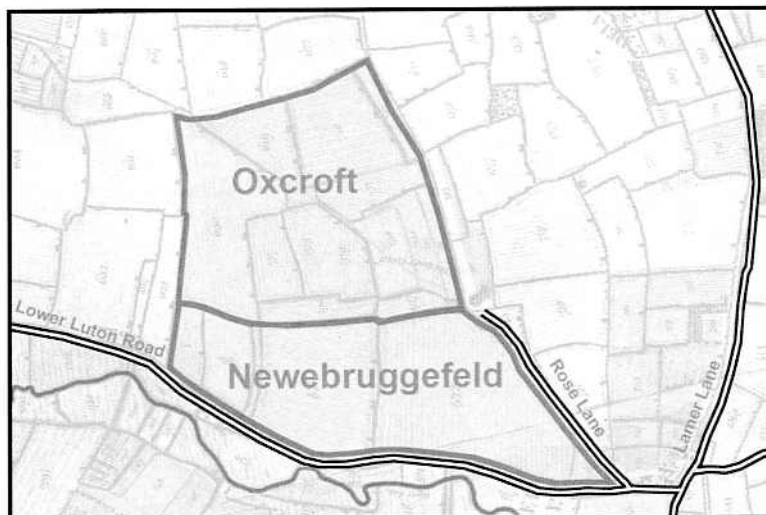
twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The 'free tenancies' were 90 acre leaseholds that Westminster Abbey granted to a new class of tenant who paid cash rent for their land and did not have to provide 'customary' labour and services to the Lord of the Manor. The 'free tenancies' were mostly located on the poor clay-with-flint soil of the upland interfluves. Demand for these new leasing arrangements may have been driven by economic growth, expanding population and the increasing influence of the London market.⁵ This created more opportunities for pastoral farming (particularly fattening and grazing) on land that was unsuitable for arable. Eventually over 90 percent of the manor was leased out as 'free tenancies'. In the early 1400s the *demesne* itself became a 'free tenancy' when Westminster Abbey, responding to social and economic change, began to rent it out rather than farming it themselves.

A number of significant documents have emerged since the 1970s that provide further insight into the development of the first phase, the *demesne*. They include translations of the 1315 *extenta*, a summary of all the assets of the manor, and the 1405-06 manorial roll, a record of income and expenditure of the *demesne*. Significantly, the 1315 *extenta* provides the names of the 12 principal arable fields and the acreage farmed by the *demesne*. This list provides an opportunity to investigate the field system, as it existed in 1315, using landscape archaeology techniques, including name analysis, map regression, LIDAR imagery, document analysis and field walking.

Matching the names

Some of the *demense* field names are easy to identify on the 1840 tithe map and on an earlier map of 1799 which was commissioned by Westminster Abbey.⁶ The *Newe Bruggefild* of 1315 is a close match to New Bridge Field in 1840. Oxcroft was also easy to identify on the tithe map because the name was still celebrated in a series of small-enclosed fields, standing to the north of New Bridge Field. Interestingly, on the 1799 map the two arable fields are separated by a series

Fig. 2: The open fields of Newebruggefild and Oxcroft, superimposed on the map of 1799 commissioned by Westminster Abbey. The fields are easy to identify by a combination of name analysis and map regression. When 't-shaped' hedge boundaries are removed the earlier medieval field is revealed.



of long narrow fields. These narrow fields may have been converted pasture that was located on the raised headlands left by medieval ploughing. The raised headlands are confirmed by LIDAR imagery (Figure 2).

In total it is possible to name-match a further seven fields with the 1840 tithe map. Although it is difficult to be certain of their precise field boundaries in 1315, the location of the fields around the centre of the modern village suggest a plausible pattern. Significantly the higher value fields (valued at 4d per acre) are all in the lower sections of the valley where the soil quality was better.

This leaves three fields that need to be identified. Settcoppe and Thropmennefeld present a particular conundrum. These two fields are by far the largest fields that are mentioned on the 1315 *extenta*. They also appeared on the 1405-06 manorial roll as the two fields farmed by the majority of customary tenants. Fifty-six of the 61 tenants were farming one of these fields. Eighteen of the tenants were farming both. So where were these two important fields?

The first clue is provided by their names. Settcoppe may be translated as 'field on a hillside'.⁷ 'Throp' is Old English for 'hamlet'. This suggests that Thropmennefeld can be translated as 'field of the men of the hamlet'.

Turning the search on its head provides a second clue. What major medieval fields appear on the 1840 tithe map and are absent from earlier records? Two fields fit the bill. They are Batford and Pickford Common (probably originally a single common field) and Wheathampstead Common Field. Both are large enough to be Settcoppe or Thropmennefelde. But which is which?

Pickford and Batford Common is the stronger candidate for Thropmennefeld, the 'field of the men of the hamlet'. It is located two miles to the west of the main medieval settlement. On the

Field name in 1315	Acreage used by demesne	Value per acre in pence	Field name in 1840
Newe Bruggfeld	43.50	4	New Bridge Field
Oxcroft	17.00	2	Oxcroft
Dellecroft	4.50	2	Dellfield
Hullecroft	10.00	4	Hillcroft
Hethfeld	101.00	4	Heath Field
Hethbrach	31.50	2	Part of Heath Field
Unwelle	27.00	2	Amwell
Hamstalfeld	27.75	4	Hempstall Field
Sonnefeld	27.00	4	Down Field
Wodecroft	20.50	4	No match
Settcoppe	128.00	2	No match
Thropmennefeld	68.50	2	No match

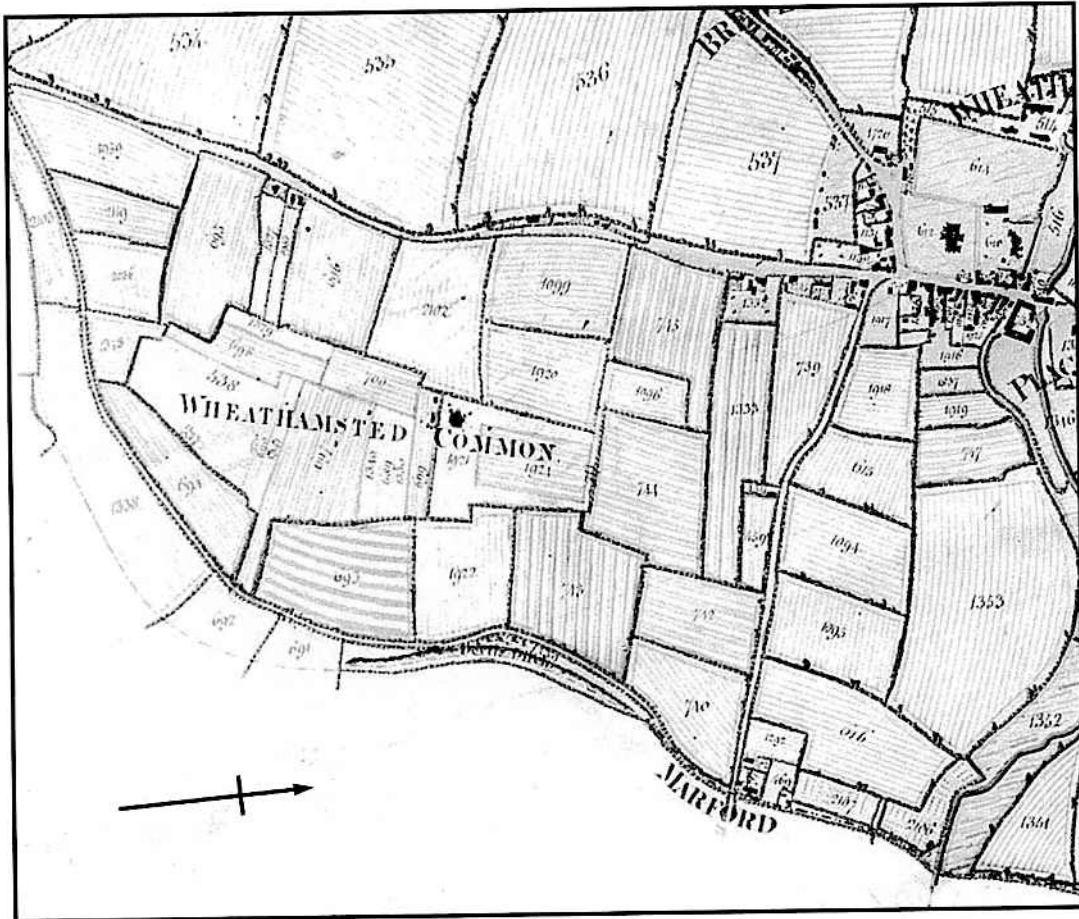


Fig. 3: An extract from the map of 1799 commissioned by Westminster Abbey, showing the area formerly occupied by Wheathampstead common field. This section of the parish still contained obvious signs of a medieval past at that date.

1840 tithe map it is still divided up into furlongs and sub-divided into strips. It is a striking survivor of an early medieval field. The place name Batford may also be based on a personal name *Bata*, suggesting early Saxon origins.⁸

Wheathampstead Common Field also had obvious signs of a medieval past when it was captured on the 1840 tithe map. The common field, in the centre of what looks like a far larger enclosed field, was still sub-divided into strips and connected to Dyke Lane by a track that still exists today. The topography of Wheathampstead Common Field and the enclosed fields that surround it seem to fit the description of Settcoppe as being a 'field on a hill'. The 1405–06 manorial roll provides further confirmation. Edward Feld held an acre of land on Settcoppe, close to Hilcroft⁹ (Figure 3).

What about Westfield and Manland Common, two large and important commons identified on the WEA map? They do not appear as principal fields in the 1315 *extenta*. In 1405–06 the acreage of arable on both fields was not extensive. They may have become significant arable fields at a later date.

This leaves one unidentified field. Wodecroft does not have a name match with the 1840 tithe map, but there is a possible clue to its location. Wodecroft was a high value field (4d a year) and this suggests that it had to be low down in the valley and close to the village centre. There is a gap in the arable fields to the north of the village on either side of what is now Lamer Lane. LIDAR imagery suggests a medieval field boundary of approximately the same acreage as the elusive Wodecroft on the west side of Lamer Lane. The place name also suggests a newly enclosed field, cleared from the woodland, suggesting an early origin.

Other considerations

The 1315 *extenta* suggests that the demesne and customary land measured approximately 1,000 acres. One intriguing question is how much had the manor changed since the time of Domesday? On the face of it the acreage of the arable land had gone up from around 800 acres to 1,000 acres. Arguably, this was not a huge increase in land use considering the pressure of 229 years of considerable population and economic growth. It could represent the conversion of pastoral land to marginal arable rather than the clearance of new fields. The size and shape of the manor in 1315 might have been very familiar to the villeins of Domesday. Interestingly by 1405–06 the amount of arable acreage had decreased to 409 acres. This decrease may have been provoked by lower demand for cereals after the fall in population during the mid-fourteenth century, caused by the Great Famine of 1315–22 and the Black Death in 1348–50. It may also demonstrate how the manor was able to adjust the balance between arable and pastoral land to suit the economic conditions at any one time (Figure 4).

The pattern and location of the reconstructed field system of 1315 appear plausible. Geological mapping demonstrates that all the principal fields were located on the chalk soil. The geology also suggests why there was a gap between Hethfeld and Hethbrach, which may have originally been one field. The upland clay soil cuts the field in half. Thus the interfluvial section of 'Heath Field' may have been used for pasture while the lower sections were used for arable (Figure 5).

Map analysis shows an interesting co-axial field system to the north of the village centre running in the direction of Gustardwood and Lamer. Co-axial field systems are continuous field boundaries that set off at right angles from features such as rivers. They are not uncommon on the Chiltern dip-slope where they often extend up from the bottom of valleys to their watersheds. Interestingly, this co-axial system crosses the manor boundary to the east, suggesting that the fields predate the 1060 manor boundary. How old are they? It has been suggested that co-axial systems could date back as far as the Iron Age.¹⁰ This is a potentially attractive idea as we know

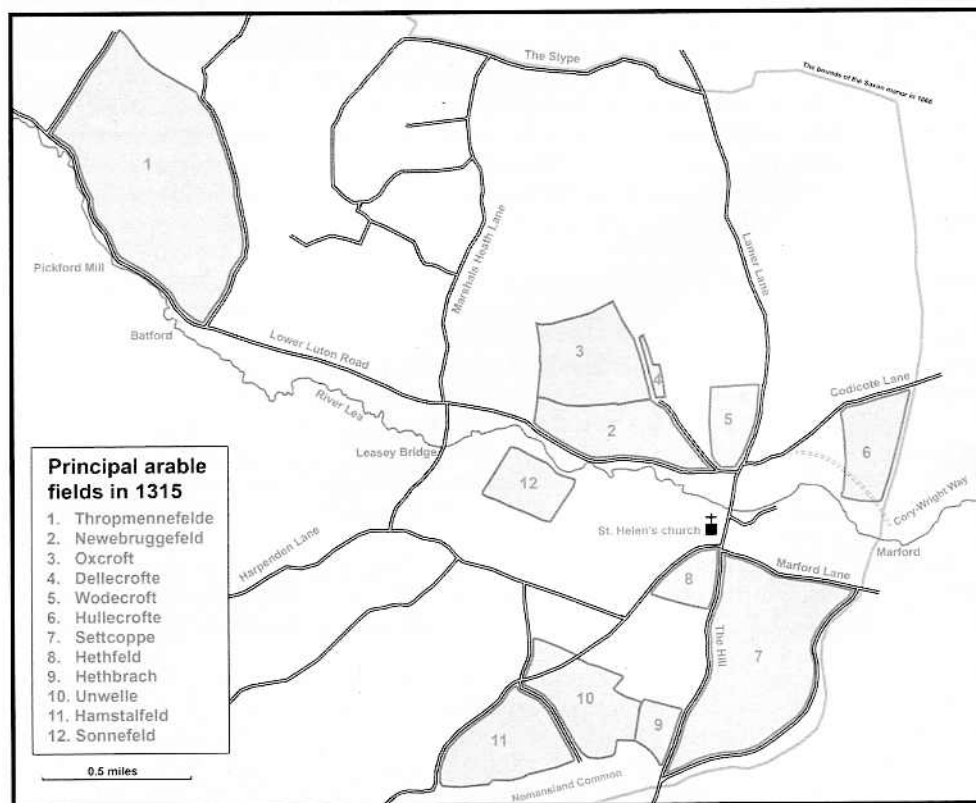


Fig. 4: The reconstructed field system of 1315, based on the map of 1799 commissioned by Westminster Abbey.

that Wheathampstead was settled in the Iron Age. However, Tom Williamson has given a more plausible explanation for the co-axials on the Chiltern dip-slope. He suggests that co-axial fields are the remains of tracks into the woodland to exploit resources such as grazing, fodder and timber. Later, fields were cleared between the tracks and these clearances created the distinctive 'brickwork' pattern of co-axial fields. Co-axial field systems may date back as far as the post-Roman period and the pragmatic change from arable to pastoral farming as the economy shrank.¹¹ Whatever their origins the co-axial fields look to be a comfortable fit with the field system around Wheathampstead, suggesting that they were once an important part of the early manorial economy (Figure 6).

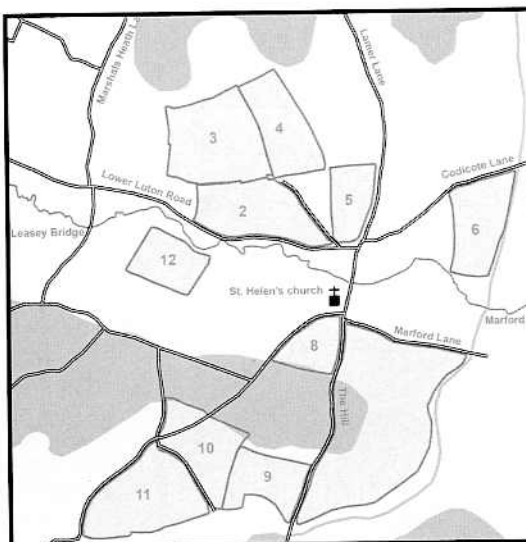


Fig. 5: The reconstructed field system of 1315, based on the map of 1799 commissioned by Westminster Abbey, with the local geology superimposed. The shaded areas represent the clay-with-flint soil of the upland interfluves. The arable field system clearly avoids these areas.

It is rare to be able to identify the complete principal field system of a medieval manor. Extensive enclosure and remodelling from the fifteenth century onwards means that it is often impossible to identify medieval geography with any confidence. For example, in six nearby parishes in St Albans less than 20 percent of medieval field names survive.¹² Wheathampstead is fortunate in having both a medieval field list and a later history of enclosure that has preserved the shape of the medieval fields.

Knowing the location of these fields tells us a great deal. It supports the idea that geology and topography strongly constrained the development of the settlement. Arable farming could only take place on the chalk soil of the valley. What is surprising is the distribution of the field system. The WEA research in the 1970s seemed to point to a scattered, linear settlement that ran down the Lea, exploiting the good soil of the valley. Instead of this the new mapping shows that 11 of the 12 principal fields surround the centre of the modern village high street.

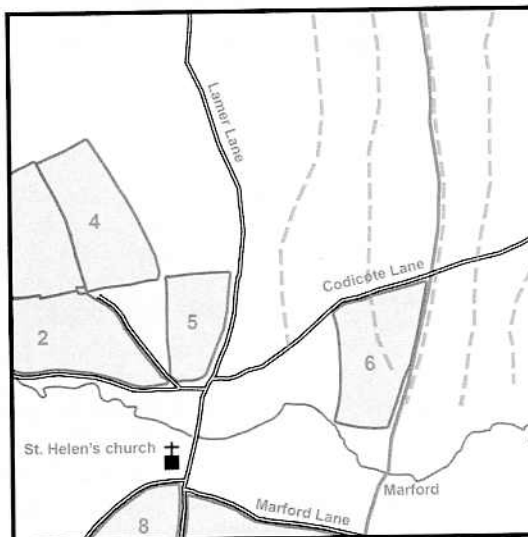


Fig. 6: The reconstructed field system of 1315, based on the map of 1799 commissioned by Westminster Abbey, with the co-axial field system superimposed. The system slights the 1060 manor boundary and this suggests that it may predate it.

This prompts the question: was Wheathampstead an early nucleated settlement in the Saxon period? This is an important question because nucleated settlements, where the villagers lived in close proximity to each other, were uncommon at this time, and particularly on the Chiltern dip-slope. Here we might expect to find medieval estates that are a closer fit to the 'woodland' manor typology. The 'woodland' typology is very different from the 'champion' manors of the Midlands which are based around a nucleated settlement with either two or three large common fields. By contrast 'woodland' manors are made up of many smaller fields with scattered settlements, often farmsteads and hamlets.¹³

Wheathampstead seems to fit between the two manor typologies. It has the multiple field system of the 'woodland' manor but the nucleated settlement of a 'champion' manor. Oddly, it also had a substantial hamlet with a large common field located two miles to the west of the main settlement.

Why was Wheathampstead so different from the other settlements on the Chiltern dip-slope? As we have seen, geology and topography clearly played a major role in spatial decision-making. It could also be that the early importance of the manor in the mid-Saxon period played a part. A high-status Saxon pagan burial was found near the railway station in 1886, overlooking the village. It has been dated to the early seventh century.¹⁴ The history of Wheathampstead in the middle Saxon era is unclear, but it may have been a Royal *vill*, one of many estates owned by the King who would not have had a permanent residence. Instead the peripatetic ruler would tour around his *vills*, keeping an eye on his kingdom. Certainly, we know that Edward the Confessor owned Wheathampstead before he gifted it to Westminster Abbey. There are other clues to the status of Wheathampstead. A mid-Saxon church, possibly a minster, stood on the site of St. Helen's church.¹⁵ This church is one of only 13 churches in Hertfordshire to pre-date 1086.¹⁶ It has also been speculated that there may have been a nearby hall on the site of Wheathampstead-bury, the *demesne* farm. The two buildings were less than 220 metres apart. They could have formed a high status hall-church complex around which an early-nucleated settlement grew.¹⁷ Further work is needed to investigate the Saxon origins of Wheathampstead.

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Acknowledgements

Figs 2–6 are based upon the map of Wheathampstead, dated 1799 and commissioned by Westminster Abbey. The copyright of this map rests with the Dean and Chapter of Westminster, and is reproduced here with permission.

Mike Smith is Chair of the Wheathampstead History Society and an active member of the Hertfordshire-based Community Archaeology Geophysics Group.