

Caldecote: a deserted village in North Hertfordshire

The parish of Caldecote, five km north of Baldock, is one of the smallest in Hertfordshire, covering only 131.5 hectares (325 acres). It was first recorded in Domesday Book, compiled in 1086, but archaeological excavations have shown that its origins go much farther back. Today, it is an isolated community, away from main roads (Figure 1). In the Middle Ages, it was a single manor, which is described in detail in a survey written on 16 February 1321.

The village lay beside an ancient road linking Stotfold with Ashwell. Both were places of greater importance in the Middle Ages than they are today. Its main street was visible under pasture to the north of the church until a significant excavation in the 1970s and later ploughing (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Caldecote today (map licensed from the Ordnance Survey)



Figure 2: the earthworks of the village street and abandoned tofts before excavation, looking southwest

The village today has only six cottages, a manor house and the redundant village church in the historic village centre, with two more homes on the A1 south of Farrowby Farm. Its population in 2011 was 17 residents. The village is difficult to visit as it lies away from main roads and can be reached only by a single track lane.

Guy Beresford carried out extensive excavations between 1973 and 1977 at Caldecote, focusing on the earthworks north of the church before they were levelled and ploughed. The work was undertaken on behalf of the Department of the Environment and the Deserted Medieval Villages Research Group. It was one of the most extensive excavations ever carried out on a later medieval rural site in Britain. Beresford examined five crofts, the former rectory and most of the moated site.

The excavation at Caldecote is still one of the most important ever carried out on a medieval village site, deserted or otherwise. It has much to tell us about life in the Middle Ages and the origins of English farming communities in North Hertfordshire and more widely.

Deserted villages

The idea of the abandoned village has long had a romantic appeal, from Oliver Goldsmith's well-known poem (*The Deserted Village*, published in 1770) to the 'ghost towns' left after the California gold rush of 1849. Interest in deserted medieval villages developed around the middle of the nineteenth century when John Wilson excavated the site of Woodperry (Oxfordshire) in the 1840s, and the Ordnance Survey began to mark their earthworks on the first edition of the 6-inch to the mile maps.

During the 1930s, some more pioneering excavations of deserted villages were undertaken, but it was after the Second World War that the real value of their study was appreciated. In 1948, work began on the investigation of the deserted village of Wharram Percy (Yorkshire), followed by the creation of the Deserted Medieval Villages Research Group in 1952 and the publication of Maurice Beresford's *Lost Villages of England* in 1954.

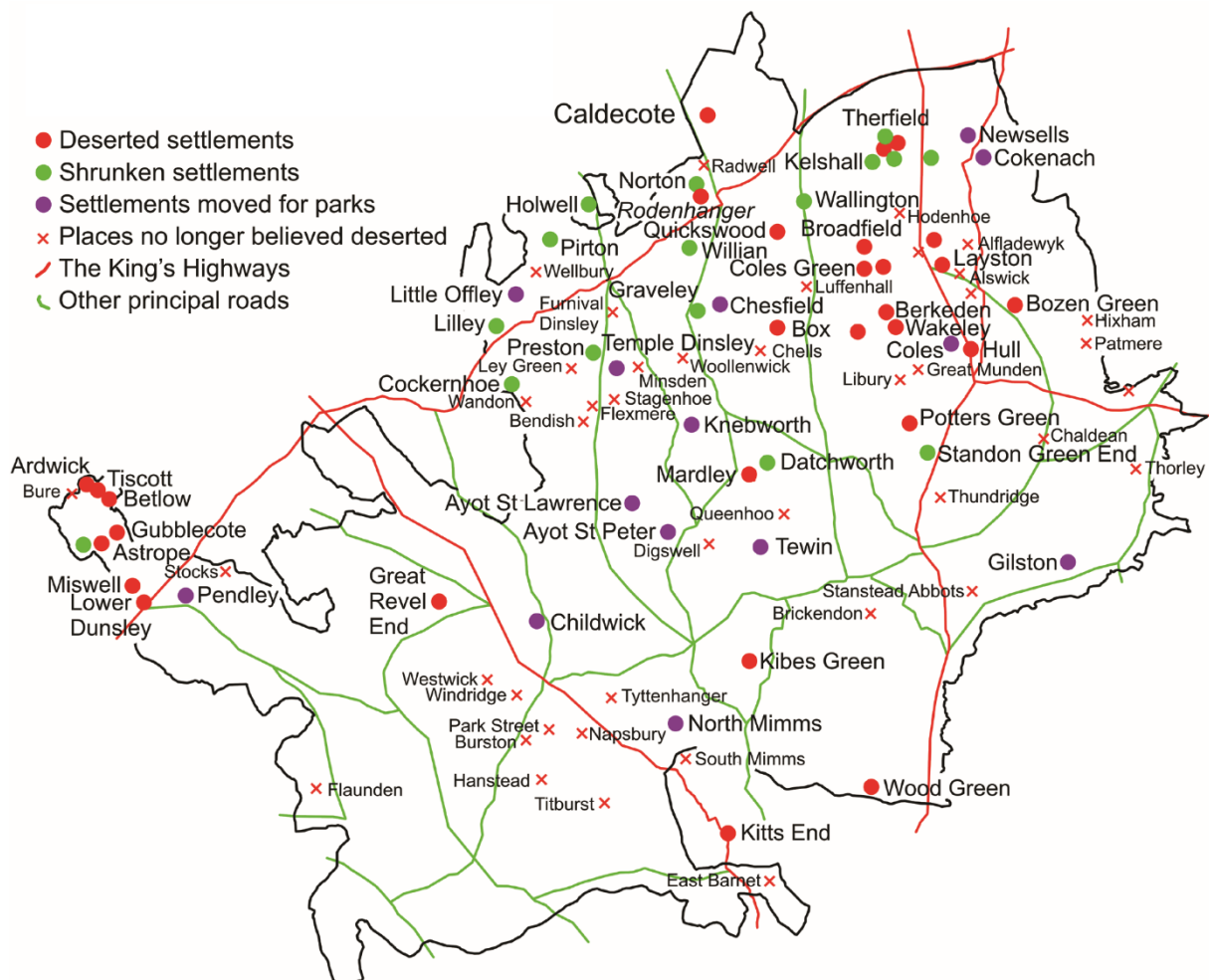


Figure 3: deserted, shrunken and migrated villages in Hertfordshire, including places no longer believed to be such

Caldecote was one of ten deserted villages listed in Beresford's book; over the following years, the number of identified and proposed sites grew enormously, and in 1971, some 44 possible sites were

listed in Hertfordshire (Figure 3). By this time, there was a growing feeling that it would be a good idea to examine an entire village, and Caldecote was put forward as a possible site for a large scale excavation.

The way we understand references to places in medieval documents has changed since the 1970s. If a place is named as a 'manor', there is no guarantee that it had a settlement attached. We also know, thanks to the work of Carenza Lewis and others, that not all medieval villas were nucleated villages but could consist of scattered communities. Figure 3 shows that a significant number of places once on the list of deserted villages are no longer believed to be such. Nevertheless, there are concentrations of deserted settlements in northeastern and northwestern Hertfordshire.

Why were villages deserted?

There is no simple answer. Some villages, like the fictional Sweet Auburn of Oliver Goldsmith's poem, were cleared of tenants by their lords, who moved them off to create parks and gardens. In North Hertfordshire, this happened at Knebworth and Chesfield (between Graveley and Great Ashby) among others.

The populations of some, like Caldecote, Norton or Pirton, were severely affected by the Black Death in 1347-8 and 1361. Even if the villages were not wholly abandoned, they sometimes never recovered. A late medieval shift from arable to sheep farming might cause landlords to throw tenants off the land, as happened at Cockenach, near Barkway, when the Prior of Royston decided to graze 200 sheep there.

The early history of Caldecote

The earliest remains found in the excavation consisted of an Early Bronze Age burial of about 2200-1700 BC (Figure 4). Although disturbed by later activity (it lay beneath the kitchen floor of the medieval manor house!), the remains consisted of the crouched skeleton of a young man aged 21-25, with a beaker pot next to his head and a meat offering by his feet.



Figure 4: disturbed burial with an Early Bronze Age beaker

There is a ring ditch, the remains of a ploughed-down round barrow, east of the village (Hertfordshire Historic Environment Record 2423; Figure 5). The ditch shows as a cropmark, 35 m in diameter, while the central grave is also visible. The grave could resemble that found beneath the medieval manor house. There is a cluster of pits around the ring ditch, densest to the north, which may be further graves, not marked by mounds, or part of a settlement of later date.

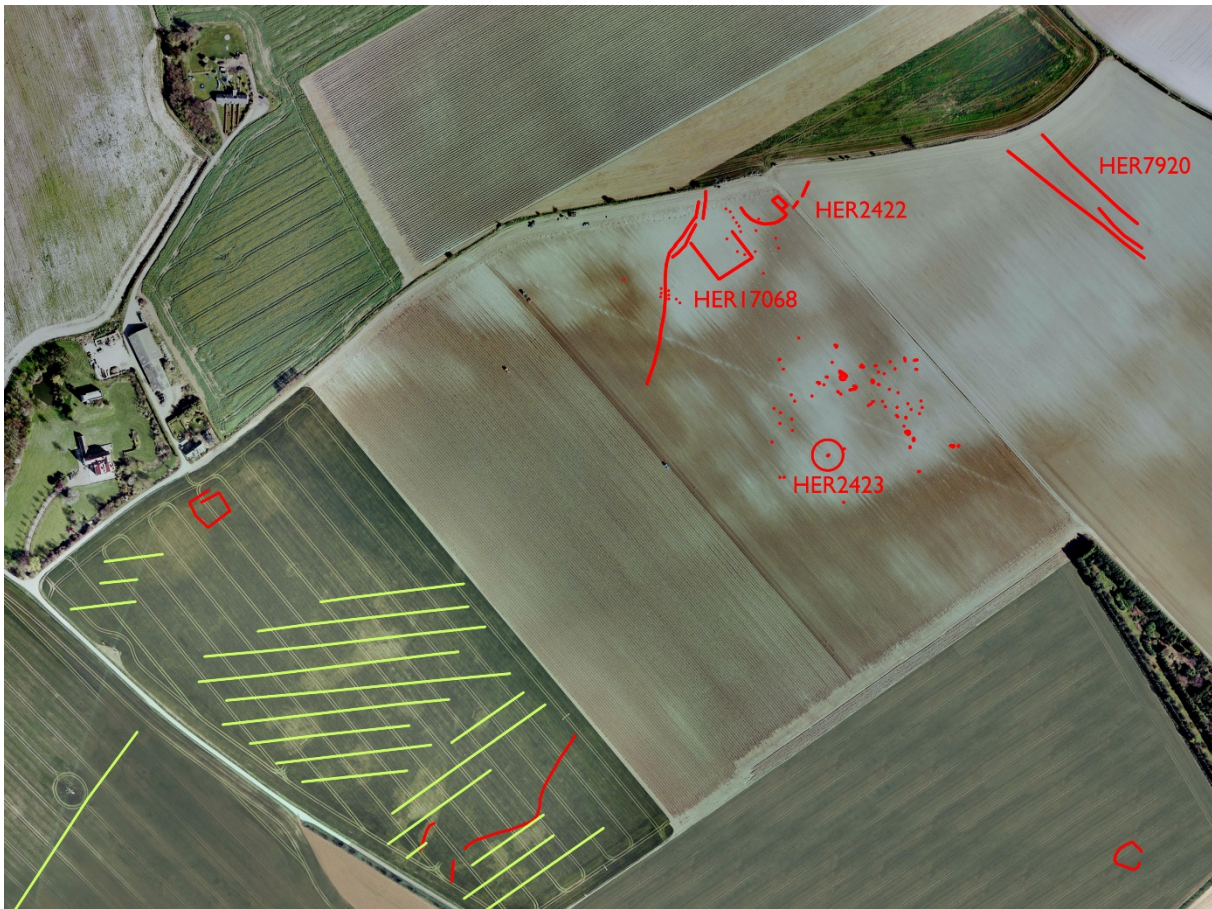


Figure 5: aerial photographic anomalies visible east of the village; red marks are archaeological, pale green are land drains

Part of an oval enclosure (HER2422) is visible further north in the same field; its northern part lies in an area that has never shown cropmarks, so the complete circuit of the ditch is unknown. There is a rectangular anomaly close to the south-eastern side. These types of enclosures may belong either to the Bronze or Iron Ages, the second and first millennia BC. The rectangular shape is likely to be later, perhaps from the Roman period. Gil Burleigh has recently drawn attention to how compounds with a ritual purpose during the Iron Age continued to be used into the Roman and early medieval periods, and this may be what can be seen here in Caldecote.

To the east of this site, a group of linear ditches (HER 7920) has also been seen on aerial photographs. Three or four can be defined. Multiple linear ditches seem to date from the second and first centuries BC and are found in a dense concentration in the area around Baldock. They are probably associated with the development of the power base of a local ruler, whose grave was found in the town in 1967. Archaeologists long regarded these dykes as boundary markers, but there are so many that this is unlikely. Instead, they restricted movement through the landscape; some were turned into roads during the Roman period, as at Slip End, Ashwell.

To the west of HER2422 is a rectangular enclosure, HER 17068. As already noted, rectangular shapes are more likely to be Roman or later than prehistoric. To its east is a group of ditches and several pits can be seen around and inside it. The southern end of the longest ditch aligns approximately with a ditch to the southwest, in Newnham. Extended meandering features are perhaps more likely to be Bronze or Iron Age in date than later, so it may be associated with the oval enclosure.

A complex of enclosures, pits, roundhouses and a ditched trackway is known to the north-west of the abandoned village site (Figure 6). The track is unlikely to be any earlier than the late first century BC. It defines the northern and eastern extent of this settlement, which much have been the source of Late Iron Age pottery found during Beresford's excavations. It dated from the first centuries BC and AD occurred across the site, mostly in later deposits.

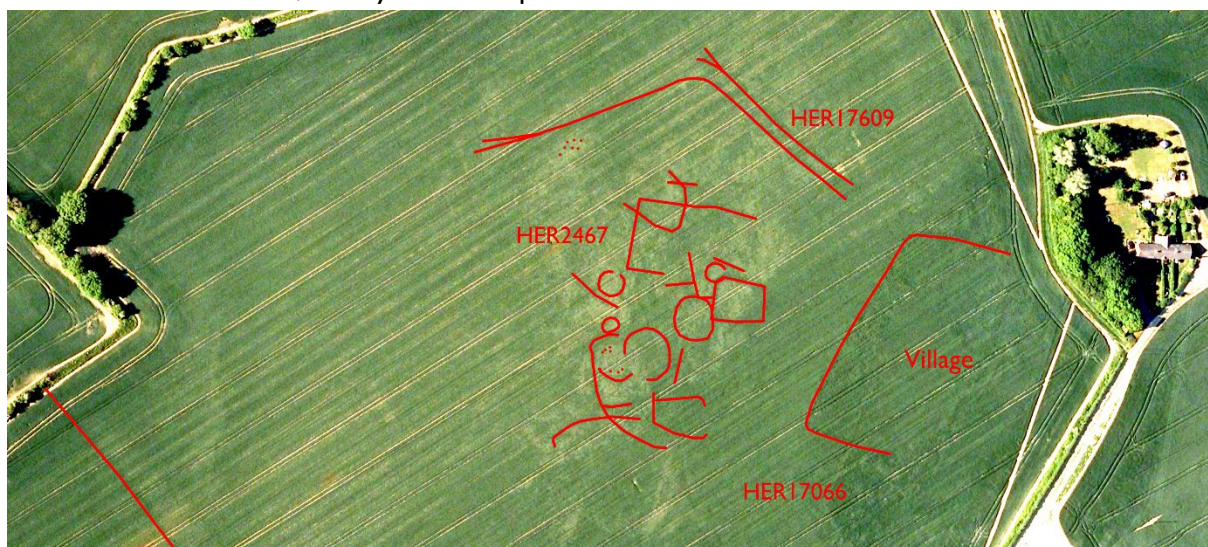


Figure 6: the Iron Age (and Roman?) complex north-west of the deserted village

Another area that appears to have Late Iron Age activity lies in the south-western part of the parish (Figure 7). Listed in the Historic Environment Record (HER 17070) as a trackway, the most likely ancient features are some evident roundhouse foundations, a cluster of pits and two apparent pit



Figure 7: a probable Late Iron Age settlement east of Farrowby Farm; some of the lines probably relate to twentieth-century services, but the settlement area lies north of the centre

alignments, partly overlain by later ditches. Pit alignments are typically Middle Iron Age (400-200 BC). However, they continued to be respected in the Late Iron Age. They seem to have marked significant boundaries: in Baldock, one separated the settlement from a zone reserved for burial and other ritual activities. The site is close to Iron Age and Roman burials discovered in 1911 at Newinn in Hixworth.

Roman finds were found scattered through the medieval and later layers in Beresford's excavation of the village, which presumably came from the settlement to the north-west. There is a report that Roman burials were found by workmen in Caldecote in 1724, both skeletons and cremated remains. The graves included pots, a brooch, glass vessels and glass rings, but its location is not known.

After the Roman period, there is no sign that people were living in the vicinity of the village until the tenth century, a gap of more than 500 years. However, the property boundaries established in the tenth century were found to follow the edges of what had previously been strips in open fields. People were farming the land, although we do not know where they were living.

It is now thought likely that during the five centuries after the end of Roman rule, settlements were dispersed. People probably lived in individual farms or hamlets spread across the landscape, rather than in farms grouped around a single high street. Village communities existed in the Iron Age and Roman periods (about 850 BC-AD 411); they became common again from the Central Middle Ages on (about 900-1150).

The medieval village

In 1086, Domesday Book records that in January 1066, the village had belonged to someone called Lemar who held it from Stigand, Archbishop of Canterbury (Figure 8). Lemar also owned land in neighbouring Bygrave, Radwell and Newnham, as well as in Graveley, 11 km to the south. The name, which is Old English *Caldecote*, 'the cold cottage(s)', suggests an isolated community in an exposed location.

Following the Norman Conquest in October 1066, there was a wholesale reorganisation of land ownership, with English landlords removed so that William I could reward his Norman followers. The block of land held by Lemar was broken up, and Caldecote became one of two groups of manors held by Ralph de Limesi; he also had property in the lost *Hainstone* and at *Pirton*. Interestingly, Domesday Book records a priest at Caldecote in 1086, showing that the church had already been built. The manor remained with the de Limesi family until Ralph's great-grandson John died without children. It passed via John's sister Basilia's husband, Hugh Oddingselles, to his family; in 1328, Sir John Oddingselles surrendered the manor to the Abbot of St Albans, who was then the tenant.

The manor was sub-let to the Furnivall family, the first of whom to live at Caldecote was probably Gerald Furnivall, and the first moated manor house was probably built for him around 1221. His grandson, another Gerald, conveyed the manor to William Hurst in 1287, which could be the date of the second manor house. In 1317, his widow transferred it to John Hurst, who conveyed it to Adam Flaun, rector of Newnham in 1321, who was probably acting as an agent for the Abbot of St Albans.

The first phase (about 900-1100)

The first phase of settlement in the village began in the tenth century, at a time when history tells us that eastern England was under attack from the Danish Vikings. Six crofts (enclosed properties) of this date were excavated, but there were clearly more. Unfortunately, constant rebuilding on the same

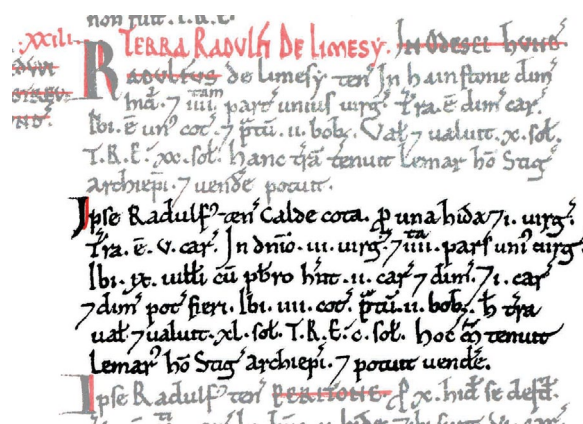


Figure 8: the entry for Caldecote in Domesday Book

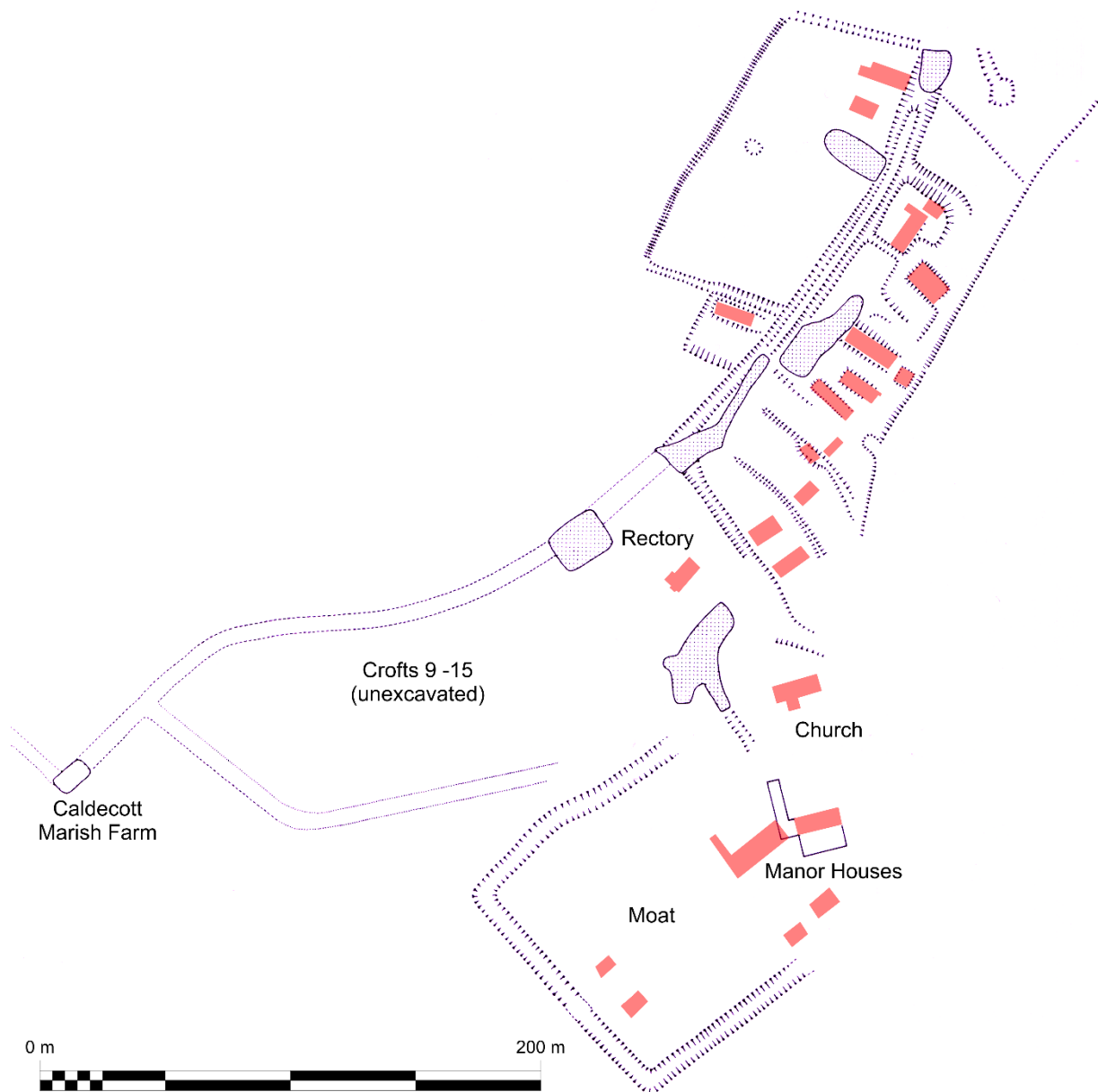


Figure 9: a plan of the village based on Beresford's excavation, showing the locations of medieval buildings (pale red) and the earthworks surviving in the early 1970s

sites meant that few traces of the early houses survived and the earliest house remains dated from the eleventh century. Their walls were probably built from cob (clay mixed with straw and chalk), strengthened by wooden posts set into the ground, and the roofs were likely hipped (without gables) and thatched.

The church was established during this phase although the earliest masonry to survive dates from after the Norman Conquest. Perhaps the first church was wooden or was rebuilt entirely by the new Norman lord of the manor. The priest's house seems to have been on the site of the later rectory.

There was no manor house, though, and it is thought that the lord lived elsewhere, managing the estate through a steward.

The second phase (about 1100-1360)

During the twelfth century, the village grew: in the excavated areas, the six crofts became ten. The houses were now of a type known as a longhouse. One end was the home, and the other was a byre for livestock. They still used cob for the walls, and Gault clay was quarried from the numerous pits found throughout the village.

The first moated manor house was built about 1225, to the southwest of the church (the leftmost building labelled Manor Houses in Figure 9). The house lay in the northeastern corner of the enclosure, while the south-western part was the lord's garden and orchard. Not enough survived of the first manor house to establish what it would have looked like, although a hall building and separate kitchen were recognised. It was replaced around 1275 by a more massive aisled hall, with a cross-passage and double solar (private living room); a wardrobe and garderobe (toilet) were added later.

The third phase (about 1360-1600)

Crop failures struck Caldecote in the early fourteenth century, leading to a famine in 1315-17; a plague of cattle followed soon after. There were two significant outbreaks of Black Death, in 1347-8 and 1361, wiping out almost two-thirds of the families. Just six of the fifteen houses that stood there in 1300 remained, now grouped around farmyards.

The church underwent substantial alterations, with new windows and the addition of a south porch. Many people turned to religion after the disaster of the Black Death, fearful for their souls and believing that investment in churches would help secure their eternal lives. A rectory house was built c 1450 and survived until it was demolished in 1900.



Figure 10: the Church of St Mary Magdalene, showing the late fourteenth-century south porch

The moated manor house was unoccupied after Adam de Newnham's death in 1357 and was perhaps used as a barn for a while. After this, it became derelict. A new house was not built for more than a century: the present manor house was constructed about 1475. This house still stands, much altered.

Abandonment (after 1600)

In the seventeenth century, the six farms that were established in the later fourteenth century were gradually deserted until only two survived. One of these was the manor house and the other a farm known as Caldecote Marish. When this was abandoned, it left only the manor house, the church and rectory together with the cottages of the farm labourers. Four workers' homes were recorded in

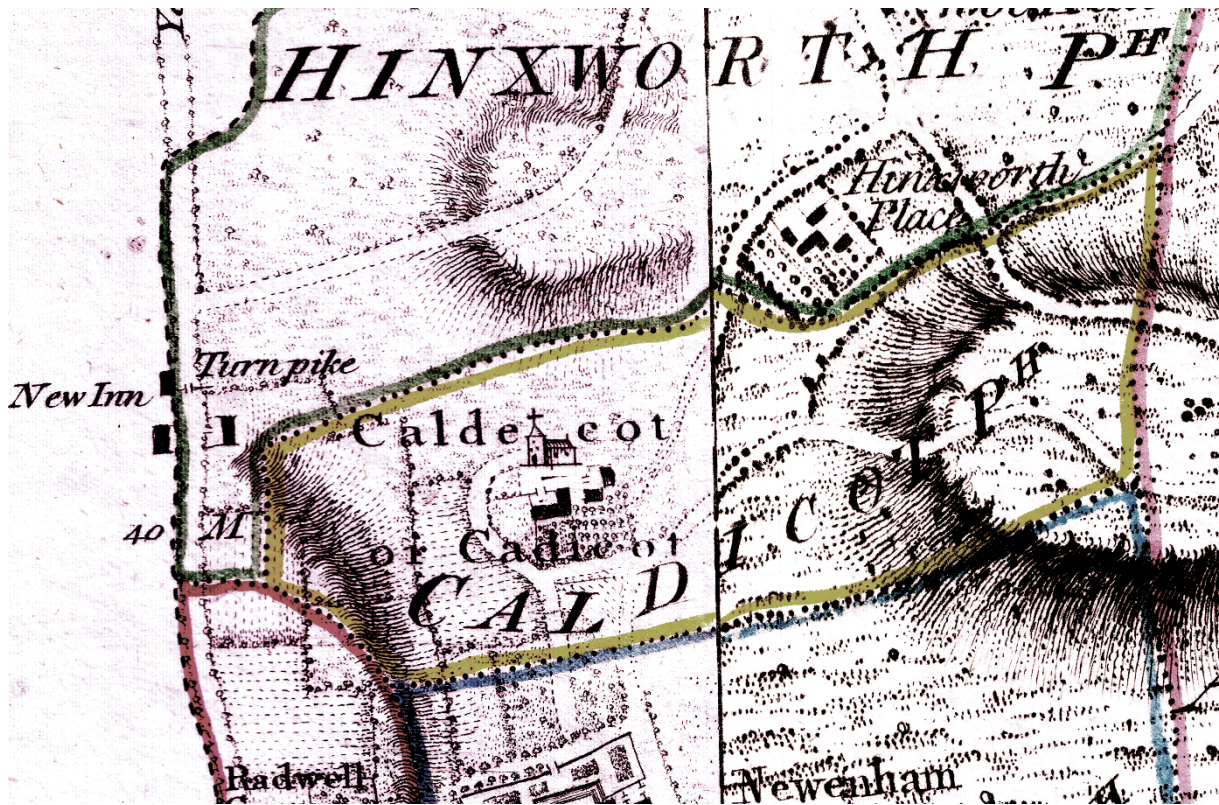


Figure 11: Caldecot on Dury and Andrews's map of 1766

1700, and five were shown on the Tithe Map of 1841. Dury and Andrews's map of Hertfordshire (Figure 11) shows the much-reduced community in 1766. By 1885, all the cottages had been demolished. They were replaced by the row of five red brick cottages that now stand north of the manor house.

The church

The earliest parts of the church, which is dedicated to St Mary Magdalene, are the north and west walls. They were built before 1100, using flint rubble and raised when a tower was added at the western end around 1300. During the Middle Ages, the rood screen separated the nave and chancel, but it was removed in 1836-7. The building is only 15.5 m (51 feet) long and 4.42 m (14 feet 6 inches) wide.

New windows and doors were added around 1400, together with a crenellated south porch, the only highly decorated part of the building. The elaborate font and the pews date from about 1480, and the east window contains stained glass of a similar period.

The church escaped the desecrations meted out by religious fanatics in the later sixteenth century. The parish was combined with neighbouring Newnham in 1657. However, alterations continued to be made, with a new bell by Robert Oldfield hung in 1675 and a replacement window on the north side of the nave in the nineteenth century.

It was made redundant in 1975, although services are held once a year, usually on the feast day of St Mary Magdalene (22 July). Since 1982 it has been cared for by a charity, the Friends of Friendless Churches. The charity relies on donations and the work of volunteers. The Caldecote Church Friends group was formed in November 2007 and puts on concerts and exhibitions to raise money for the upkeep of the building.

The manor house

The current manor house was built around 1475 but has been much added to and altered (Figure 12). The original part is a timber-framed Wealden House, but this is now hidden by later brickwork and



Figure 12: the manor house; this view, which is now the 'back' of the property, was originally the front

plaster. The central hall had a crown-post roof. The east wing was added in the seventeenth century; at the same time, a chimney stack and first floor were put into the original hall of the house. The ground floor was encased in a brick skin during the eighteenth century. A large extension was added to the front of the house around 1900, not visible on the photograph here.

Caldecote people

Few early records survive from medieval Caldecote: manorial records were often lost or destroyed, so this is not unusual. Even after St Albans Abbey took over the manor in 1328, few records survive until 1381. As a result of the lack of documents, most of the people who lived, worked and died in the medieval village are anonymous.

The most important early document to survive is the Extent of February 1321, now preserved in the British Library, written the day after Abbot Hugh became the tenant of Sir John Oddingsells. It contains a description of the manor, its demesne, its tenants, their holdings, rents, customary services and obligations. It provides a snapshot of life in the village on a single day in the fourteenth century.

It names 19 villagers in all. As these were the tenants, we should imagine that most of them had families, apart from the rector. There are a few people who share surnames, which probably means that they were related. Richard and John Burgeys, Richard and Simon le Revesone, and Alexander and Richard Otwey may have been pairs of brothers, fathers and sons or some other relation.

There were also Walter Vincent and Alice, daughter of Walter Vincent; Alice was the only woman to be named. Women were not allowed to hold property in feudal law, so she must have been a widow. If she was the daughter of the Walter named by the Extent, this means that she was relatively young. It was common in the Middle Ages for young people to marry someone much older, and when their partner died, they would, in turn, marry someone much younger.

Some surnames are found over many generations in other documents. The families of Burgeys/Burges, Edmund, Martin, le Reuesone and le Yonge occur over many years and show how families tended to remain in the village. There are also new names, from time to time. People moved around during the Middle Ages more than we tend to think and it was not unusual for daughters to marry men from other villages or for people to move into towns in search of work.

One of the most remarkable characters in the history of the village was Mary Flint (Figure 13). She was born in 1755 and married her cousin, John Flint, who became the parish clerk. Mary had nineteen children and, after her husband died in 1818, became the parish clerk in her own right. Her role was unique for a woman in the Church of England at that time. She served until her death, at the age of 83, in 1838. Her great-grandson, Thomas Inskip (the first Viscount Caldecote, 1876-1947), was Minister of Defence from 1936 to 1939, Lord High Chancellor 1939-40 and Lord Chief Justice of England 1940-46.



Figure 13: print showing Mary Flint inside the church

Finds from Beresford's excavation

North Hertfordshire Museum holds the finds made during the excavations of 1973-77. They include our best collection of medieval ceramics, so many of them are on permanent display. When they first arrived, in 2012, Letchworth Museum held a small exhibition to draw attention to the importance of the site and the range of finds from the excavation.

What follows is a catalogue of the objects that were selected for that exhibition.

Pottery

Pottery is one of the most common finds on any archaeological site. Often, only small sherds are found, as most excavated pottery found its way into the ground after it had broken. Some 24,140 sherds were found at Caldecote, a huge number. They belong to at least 27 types, made at different times and different places. The earliest medieval pottery from the excavation dates from the tenth century and the latest types date from the nineteenth century.

Much of the medieval pottery was made locally. One type has large chalk inclusions and is found on sites between Pirton in the west and Therfield in the east, while another resembles sandy wares found on kiln sites in Hitchin. Others were traded from farther afield. Among the early types were St Neots Ware, probably made in the southeast Midlands. In contrast, later medieval vessels seem to have come from Essex, Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire, with Essex products gradually becoming the most popular source.

From the eighteenth century on, earthenwares were probably produced in Potterspurty (Bucks) or Harlow. These changing sources of pottery tell us something about market patterns and the development of wider-ranging transport in the medieval period.

Cooking pot, ceramic (earthenware), 900-1150

One of the oldest medieval vessels from the site is a St Neots-type ware cooking pot. The clay used in St Neots Ware pots included large quantities of fossilised shell and has a soapy feel. It was thrown into a well, which is why it is almost complete. Unusually for a medieval cooking pot, it has a flat base, which shows that it is an early example, perhaps even earlier than the date of 900 usually accepted as the origin for this style.

St Neots Ware is the commonest fabric of the first phase of the village at Caldecote, accounting for 96% of all pottery. It has also been found in excavations at Ashwell, Therfield, Norton and Pirton. The ware was made across the southeast midlands, from Oxford to Northampton and into Cambridgeshire, not just at St Neots.



Jug, ceramic (earthenware), 1050-1280

This large jug with a rounded body and tall neck has a flat base, decorated all the way around with thumb impressions. By contrast, the body and the strap handle are plain. There are deposits of some kind of whitish residue above the inside of the base. It resembles the calcium carbonate deposits left by hard water, such as is found locally. These deposits may indicate that the jug was used as a water container: it is a myth that medieval people did not drink water because they thought it unsafe.

The jug is made in a fabric known as iron-rich quartz-tempered ware. This ware may have been produced at sites such as Everton and Flitwick in Bedfordshire. Similar products have been found across North Hertfordshire.



Cooking pot, ceramic, about 1050-1300

This small cooking pot has traces of sooting on the outside. Like many medieval cooking pots, it has a sagging base, so that it will not sit flat on a table. The curve helped to prevent the bottom from shearing off when it was placed on the fire.

The pot is made from a fabric known as medieval coarseware with chalk, a local type. It is thought to have been made locally and has been found at sites in Letchworth Garden City, Therfield, Pirton, Ashwell, Broadfield and Stratton (Beds). Although no kilns have yet been found, the production centre probably lay somewhere in eastern North Hertfordshire.



Jug, ceramic (earthenware), 1150-1300

This very plain rounded jug has a single line of incised decoration on the shoulder. The base is flat, and it lacks the common thumb-impressed decoration, seen on the example above. The strap handle is also plain. It is misshapen and was probably a potter's second or waster. Nevertheless, it was used in a domestic setting, which shows that potters could sell inferior quality goods. Perhaps they were cheaper than perfect products.

The jug was made in a fabric known as South Hertfordshire greyware but was probably made in Hitchin. Two kilns have been identified in the town, one on Bancroft and the other off Tilehouse Stree. We would expect this to have been a common fabric at Caldecote, yet it accounted for only 1.5% of the pottery from this period.



Jug, ceramic (earthenware), 1450-1550

This rounded jug was found whole. It has a tall, simple rim and pinched spout. There are four thumb impressions around the base (below the handle, below the spout and on each side). There is also a 'bib' of oxidised orange lead glaze at the front, below the spout. The rest of the vessel is undecorated.

The fabric of this vessel is Colchester slip-painted ware. Pots were often painted with a white slip before being glazed, giving the glaze a more vibrant colour. This jug is a later type in which glaze was used less often and more sparingly. Imported wares from outside the immediate area were very rare in late medieval Caldecote, accounting for under 0.1% of the pottery of this period.



Other domestic items

Parts of five mortars – large stone bowls for grinding – were found in the Central to High Medieval (c 900-1360) village. There were also fragments of seven stone querns, used for milling flour in the home, all dating from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Spindle whorls were also found. These are lead, clay or stone balls with a hole through the centre, which were used for spinning wool by hand; ten examples came from the High Medieval (second phase, c 1100-1360) village. There was also a late medieval loom-weight. These show the importance of the wool industry throughout North Hertfordshire at this time. Seventeenth-century needles, pins, thimbles and lace bobbins show that lace-making was carried out as a cottage industry in the village at this time.

Quern, stone (lava), 13th/14th century

This object is half of a circular upper stone from a rotary hand quern. Querns were used for grinding flour by hand, with the grain being dropped into the central hole and the stone turned using a wooden handle. The grooves were on the underside during use and would help to push the ground flour from the quern.



In the Middle Ages, all grain was supposed to be ground at the lord's mill; people using their own querns could be fined and have their querns destroyed. There was no mill at Caldecote. Perhaps the regulation was relaxed for the villagers, although we know that the Abbots of St Albans's bailiffs regularly confiscated peasants' millstones.

Hone or whetstone, stone (micaceous schist), medieval

A whetstone was used for sharpening metal blades. It would have been held in one hand; the blade edge was drawn over it, changing sides with each pass. Some hones were pierced at one end so that they could be threaded onto a leather thong, although this one was not.



This example was found on the manor site and is a type used for sharpening personal knives. The stone used was probably quarried in Norway and imported to England. The first imports belong to the Viking age (c 800-1050), but they were continued to be brought to England throughout the Middle Ages.

Weight, lead, 14th century

A conical lead weight, weighing 98 g (just under 3½ oz). It has a hole for hanging it at the top and is too heavy to use as a weight for spinning wool, for which the maximum is 30 g. It may have been used in spinning flax or as a weight for some other purpose.



Fibres from the stems of flax are spun to make linen, a luxury cloth in the Middle Ages. Flax seeds are eaten or can be crushed to extract linseed oil, used in paint or as a furniture polish. It would have been challenging to grow on the local soils in Caldecote, so the weight may have been used for some other purpose.

Mortar rim, stone (sandy limestone), 1360-1600

This is the rim of a stone mortar; when complete, it would have been bowl-shaped, reinforced by four vertical ribs. They were used in the kitchen for grinding foods to make pastes such as marzipan or to crush spices. They could also have industrial uses, such as grinding pigments for paint.



Mortars of this type were common from around the time of the Norman Conquest until after 1600. They are found across England and were made from a variety of different kinds of stone.

Loop hinge, iron, late medieval

This iron spike with one end turned to make a loop would have been used as a door hinge. The spike was embedded into the wall so that the loop was horizontal. The door would then have been hung with a downward-facing hook placed through the loop. There is little sign of wear around the loop, which suggests that it was not used for a heavy door, but perhaps in a wall cupboard.

Simple hinges of this type have been used since the Roman period, making them difficult to date. This example was found in the fill of a late medieval well.



Handle blank, bone, late medieval

This rough handle shape was carved from part of an animal long bone. Towards the narrow (blade) end, a series of scored cut marks run across the bone. It cannot have been used, as there is no hole for the tang of the blade, so it is a half-finished blank.

Bone handles were used on iron knives, which would have either a spike-shaped whittle tang to insert into a single piece handle or a scale tang the full width of a two-part handle. Both types were present at Caldecote, where more than a hundred knives were found.



Gaming counter, bone, late medieval

A circular bone counter, decorated with concentric rings and four dot-and-circle patterns. The decoration would have been scored with a set of compasses. This piece was found on the site of the manor house.

Some counters could be very elaborately decorated, although this example is rather crude. It may have been used to play a game known as 'tables' (*tabula*), which was an early form of backgammon; the game of draughts was not introduced to England until the sixteenth century.



Spindle whorl, stone, late medieval

This stone spindle whorl was carved from a pebble and used in spinning yarns from fibres. The weight of this example, 25 g (1 oz), is perfect for spinning wool. The whorl would be placed on a wooden spindle, where it would act as a fly-wheel to keep the spindle turning.

Spindle whorls have been used since the Bronze Age. Spinning wheels were available from the fourteenth century but did not become popular until the late sixteenth. Even then, they did not wholly replace spinning by hand using spindles and whorls.



Awl, bone, medieval or later

Awls are used for piercing holes in textiles or leather. Stiff fabrics could not easily be sown by hand without first making holes to push through the needle and thread. Awls were used to make these holes. Bone types like this were a cheap alternative to metal awls with wood or bone handles.



Bone was a commonly used material for making all sorts of household items that are now made from plastics. Modern awls, though, are generally made from stainless steel with plastic handles.

Spoon handle, pewter, 16th century

This object is part of the handle of a pewter spoon. Its round-waisted terminal is a type that was popular in the sixteenth century. The bowl would have been fig-shaped. People used spoons as an all-purpose eating implement before forks became popular shortly before 1600.



Pewter, consisting mainly of tin alloyed with lead and copper, was a popular metal for making spoons. Often, there was enough lead in the mixture to poison regular users, causing stomach pains known as "dry gripes". Pewter is now made without lead.

Spoon, lead or pewter, 1600-1650

This poorly preserved spoon was made from white metal (lead or pewter, which is an alloy consisting mainly of tin). The stem has a circular cross-section and has a seal-shaped terminal. At the time this was used, tables were not laid with cutlery and people would have to bring their own forks and spoons to a meal.



Pewter was commonly used to make spoons during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. All but one of the spoons from the excavations at Caldecote date from after 1600. This example is identical to one found in an excavation in a village coincidentally called Caldecote in Buckinghamshire.

Die, ivory, 17th century

This small die was used in gambling games. The pips consist of dot-and-ring motifs, now commonly associated with casino dice. The symbols on opposing faces add up to seven. The arrangement of numbers is known as right-handed (when the one is on top and two to the left, three is to the right). Left-handed dies have two to the right and three to the left when the one is on top.

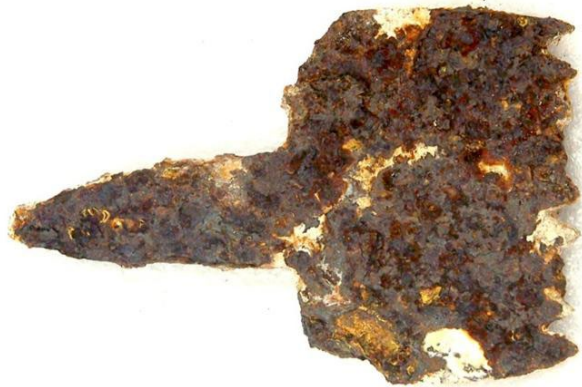


Cubic dies were first used in Britain during the Roman period and became popular for gambling in the seventeenth century. The most fashionable game was known as Hazard, a forerunner of craps. Most were made from bone, but this one is ivory, an expensive import. This example is tiny and may have been designed to be easily hidden in a pocket when gambling was frowned upon by Puritans and illegal during the government of the Commonwealth (1649-1660).

Scarifier, iron, post-medieval

This iron tool was used in plastering and is known as a scarifier. It is used to scratch the surface of a wall or old plaster before applying a fresh coat. The scars, which are usually made diagonally, help the new plaster to stick to the wall.

It could also have been used on finished plaster to create a decorative effect. On the outside of buildings, a mixture of sand, lime and horsehair could be used to create decorative panels known as pargetting. This type of work was popular from the sixteenth century onwards.



Lace bobbin terminal, bone, 17th/18th century

This object is the tip of a bobbin used in lacemaking. Lace was made on a pillow, with threads twisted around pins set into it. Bobbins were used to store lengths of the linen, silk, wool or cotton threads; their weight would help to keep the thread taut.



Because lace was a luxury item, lace making was a profitable trade for countrywomen. Evidence for its production is rare, and other objects found at Caldecote, including pins, scissors and thimbles were part of the tools of the trade.

Lacemaking bobbin, bone, 17th/18th century

A worked and polished bone object with a hole in the thicker end. It is well polished with use and battered at the thin end. Its function is unclear, but it was not a handle. The hole appears to have been designed to take a metal insert or plug.

This artefact may be a type of lace-making bobbin; there are types in use today made from wood with a stainless steel insert to hold the thread that resemble this object. Like the bone bobbin terminal above, it was found on the site of the rectory house.



Horseshoe, iron, 19th century

This large iron horseshoe has a toe-clip at the front, and one of the nails is still in position. A shoe of this size would have been used by a draught or shire horse. Horses were used for traction during the Middle Ages but only replaced oxen during the 18th century.

Altogether, 67 horseshoes were found in the excavation. All but one of the recognisable types was of post-medieval date. There were also 53 horseshoe nails, all but three of which were also post-medieval. However, horse bones were most numerous in late medieval contexts.



Items from clothing

Buckles are often the commonest items of personal adornment found on medieval sites, and this is the case at Caldecote. The best types were made from copper alloys (bronze or brass), with some in pewter and the cheapest made from iron.

Several purse bars were found, including a complete iron example of late medieval date. They were the solid part at the mouth of a bag-shaped purse, which would have been carried by men as well as women.

Brooch element, bone, 900-1100

This polished bone disc, with traces of copper staining on one side, is not a gaming piece. It is perforated and too finely made: gaming discs were often crude but decorated. The copper staining indicates that it was initially attached to a bronze or brass mount, which would have incorporated the pin.

It may have been part of a disc brooch. The hole may formerly have held a piece of coloured glass. Although most medieval brooches were made from metal, bone disc brooches have been found in Ireland, and there is an example from the outskirts of Lincoln. They appear to date from the tenth and eleventh centuries and are associated with areas settled by Vikings.



Rowel spur, copper alloy, about 1700

This elegant bronze or brass spur is broken at one side of the rowel box. The rowel (spiked wheel) is missing, but part of its iron pin has survived. There are studs to attach the leather straps. This type was popular from the late seventeenth to mid-eighteenth centuries.

This spur must have been worn on the right boot, as buckles had to be kept to the outside. A painting of 1688 by Jan Wyck shows King William III wearing an identical spur. There are also examples of the same design made from silver.



Shoe buckle, pewter, late 18th century

This large shoe buckle is made from pewter. The style is known as the Artois Style as it was made fashionable in England by the Comte d'Artois. He was the younger brother of the French King Louis XVI and ambassador to the Court of St James during the 1780s. He was king in his own right as Charles X from 1824 to 1830.

Oversized buckles of this sort were purely decorative, and the fashion was short-lived: after the French Revolution in 1789, they became unpopular. The more elaborate types were decorated with paste glass 'gemstones'.



Button, bone, 19th century

This bone button has four holes measuring 28 lignes. A ligne is a button measure, equivalent to 0.635 mm or 1/40 inch. This size is too big to be a shirt button, which are typically 16 lignes, and may have been used on a jacket. It was found on the site of the rectory.



Buttons became popular during the late Middle Ages when tight-fitting clothes were fashionable. Bone was a favourite material for their manufacture before plastics were invented. Other buttons from the site were made from copper alloy and white metal (pewter or lead).

Rowel spur, iron, 19th/20th century

This iron rowel spur has traces of plating, probably of tin. There are single mushroom studs to attach the leather strap at the front ends, one of which still has a rusted trace of the strap. This type was used in the bloodsport of fox hunting from horseback.



Although controversial today, this type of fox hunting became popular in England among the wealthy from the middle of the eighteenth century. At the time, foxes were less numerous than today and sometimes had to be imported from Europe for hunting.

Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews
May 2020