The spring by the ash-tree: the archaeology of Ashwell part 3

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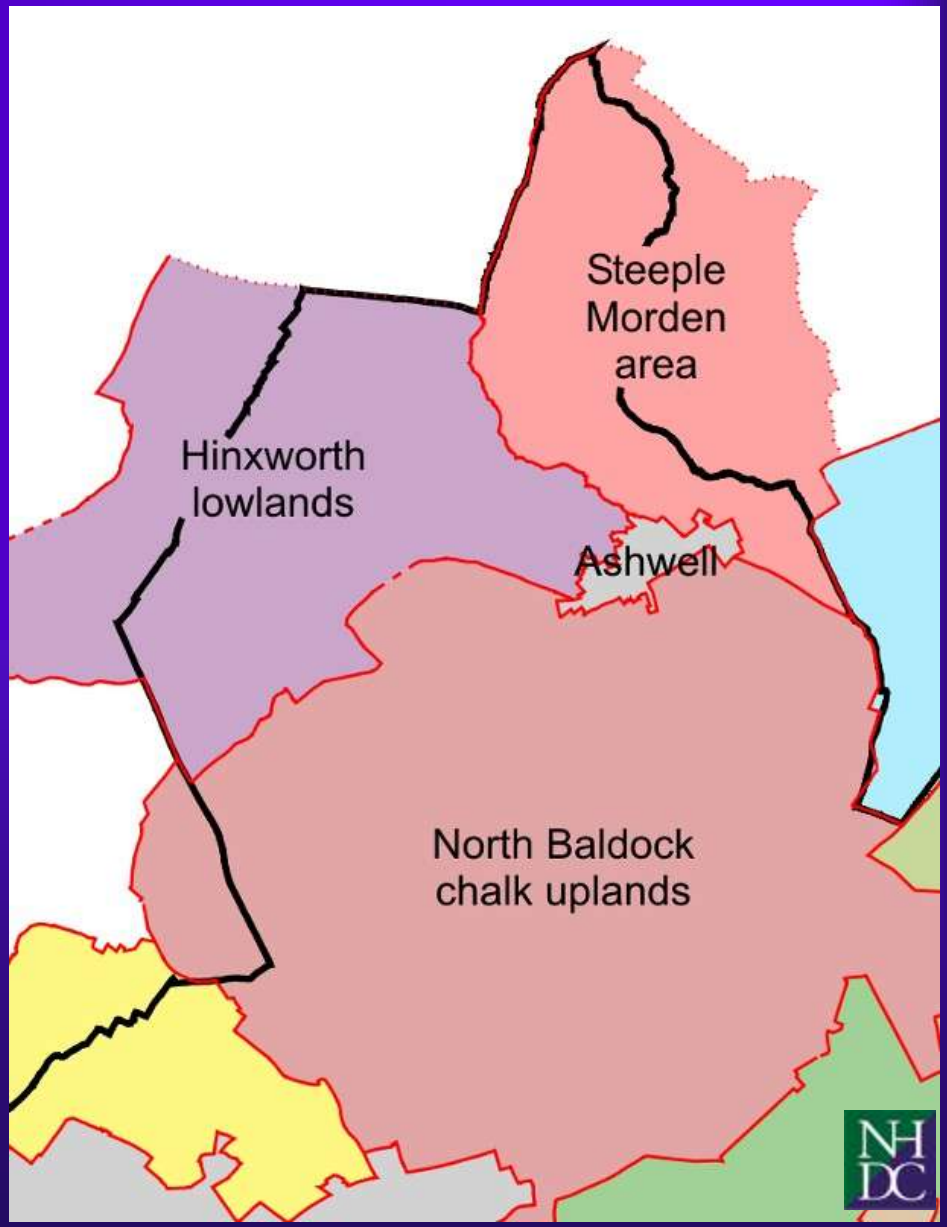
Ashwell

- Occupies a northward ‘projection’ of Hertfordshire
  - Together with Bygrave, Hinxworth, Newnham, Caldecote and Radwell
- A distinctive character
  - The ‘Hinxworth lowlands’ west of the village
    - Outcrops of Totternhoe stone
  - The ‘Steeple Morden area’ village centre and to the north
    - Chalk marl soils
  - The ‘North Baldock chalk uplands’ south of Ashwell
    - Claybush Hill is the highest point in the parish

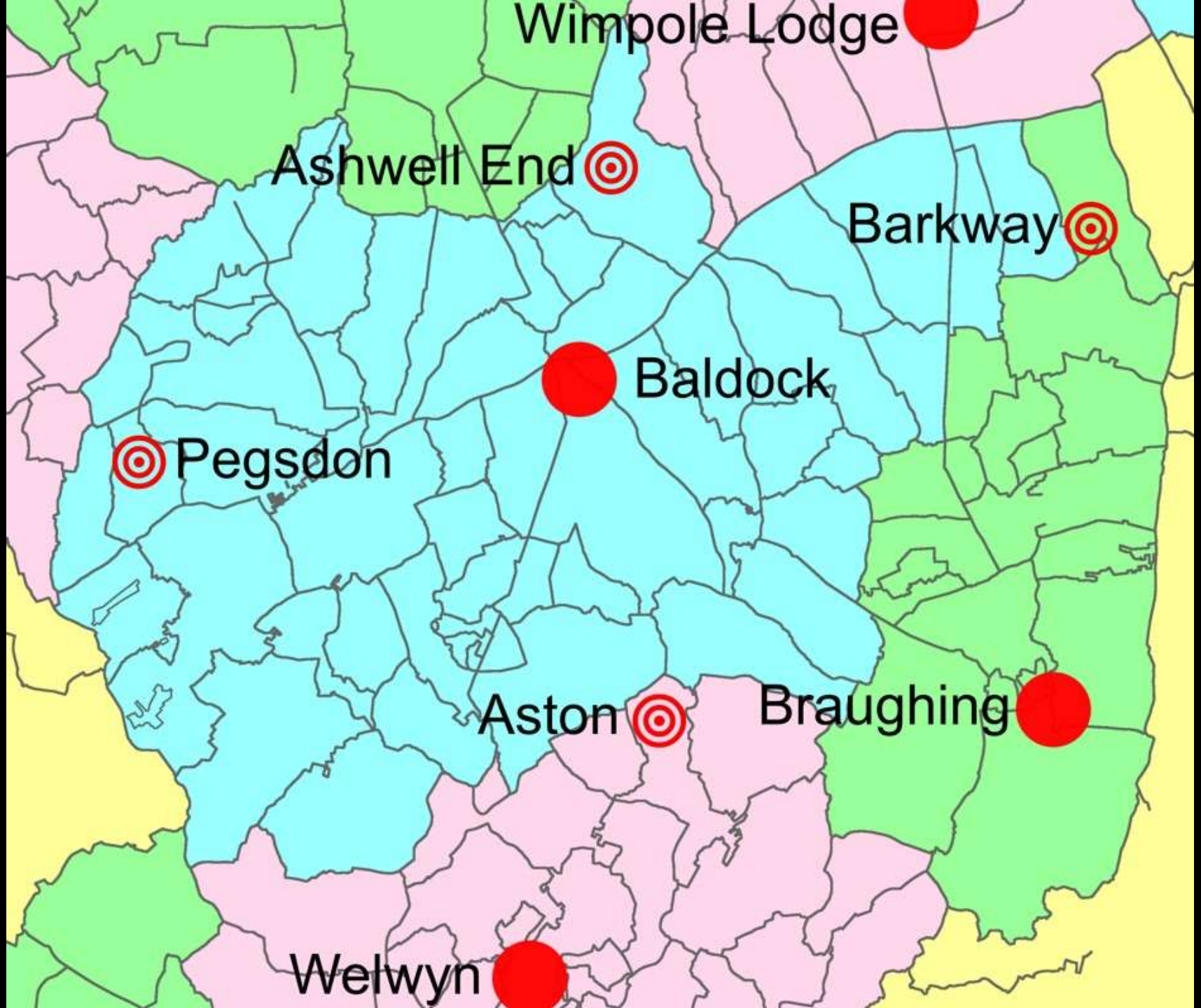


Prehistory

- Rich and diverse prehistory
  - Neolithic long barrows
  - Bronze Age round barrows
- In the Iron Age, Ashwell lay in the territory of Arbury Banks
  - Oval enclosure on a plateau
  - Middle and Late Iron Age date (*c* 400 BC-AD 43)
  - But not really very defensible
    - Similar to Wilbury, on the edge of Letchworth
- Part of the territory of Baldock by the second century BC
  - A developing town

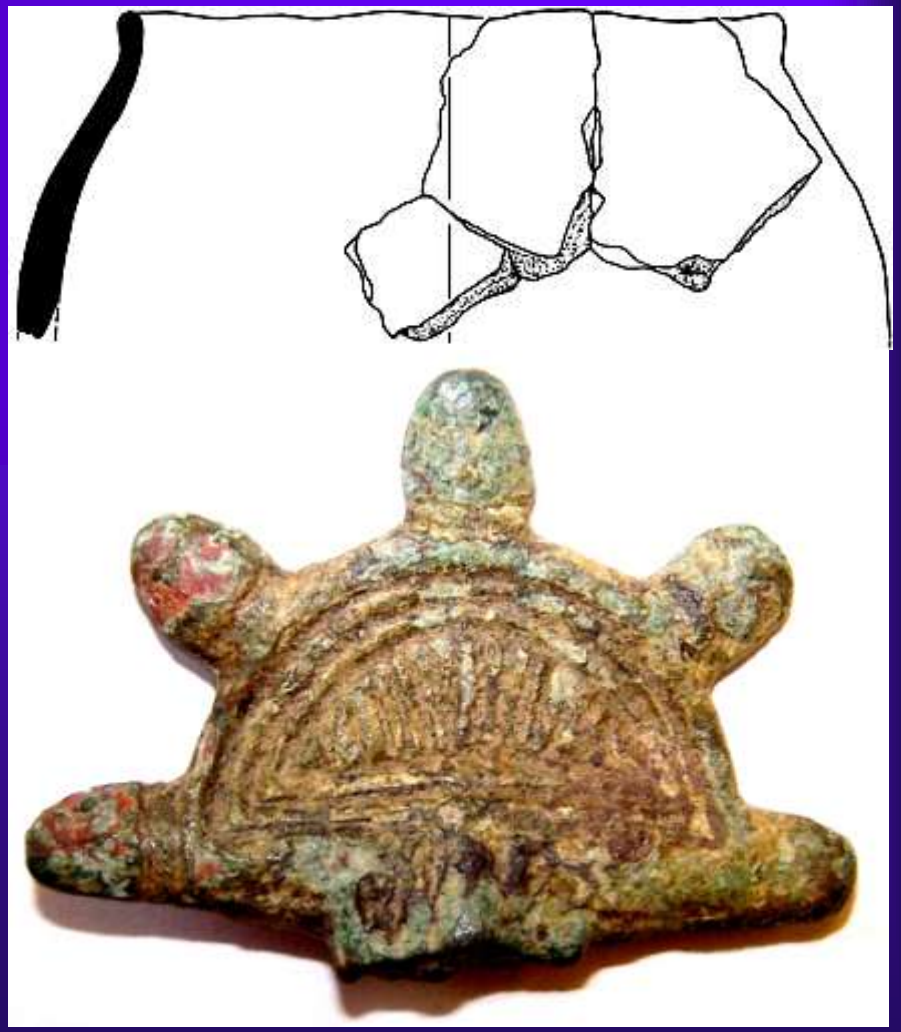
The Roman period

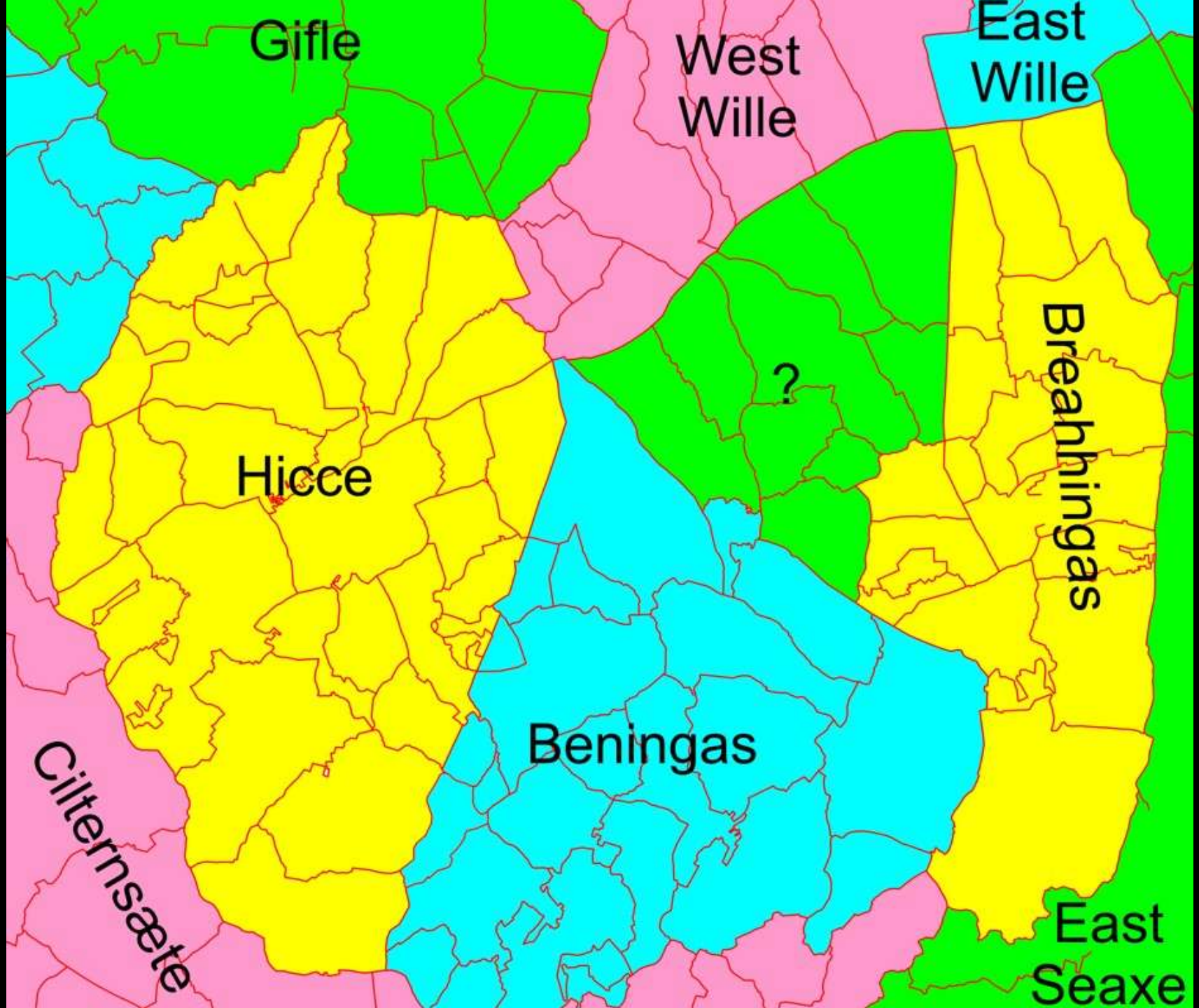
- Baldock was the dominant settlement locally
  - A ‘small town’ with its own council
  - And a prosperous hinterland
    - Numerous large villas
- Gil Burleigh has suggested that its boundaries are marked by religious sites
  - The shrine of Senuna at Ashwell End
  - The shrine of Mars Alator at Barkway
  - A complex at Pegsdon
  - A temple at Aston
  - This is curiously like modern North Hertfordshire!


Wimpole Lodge
Ashwell End
Barkway
Baldock
Pegsdon
Aston
Braughing
Welwyn

After the Romans

- A period for which there is little evidence
  - Although there is more over the county boundary
  - Does this mean the boundary is ancient?
- There is a late sixth-century jar from the spring area
  - Of Anglo-Saxon type
- And some metalwork has been found by detectorists
  - But we know nothing about its context
  - It includes a Viking-era sword chape




Gifle
West Wille
East Wille
?
Breahhingas
Hicce
Beningas
Ciltern sæte
East Seaxe

The origins of the settlement

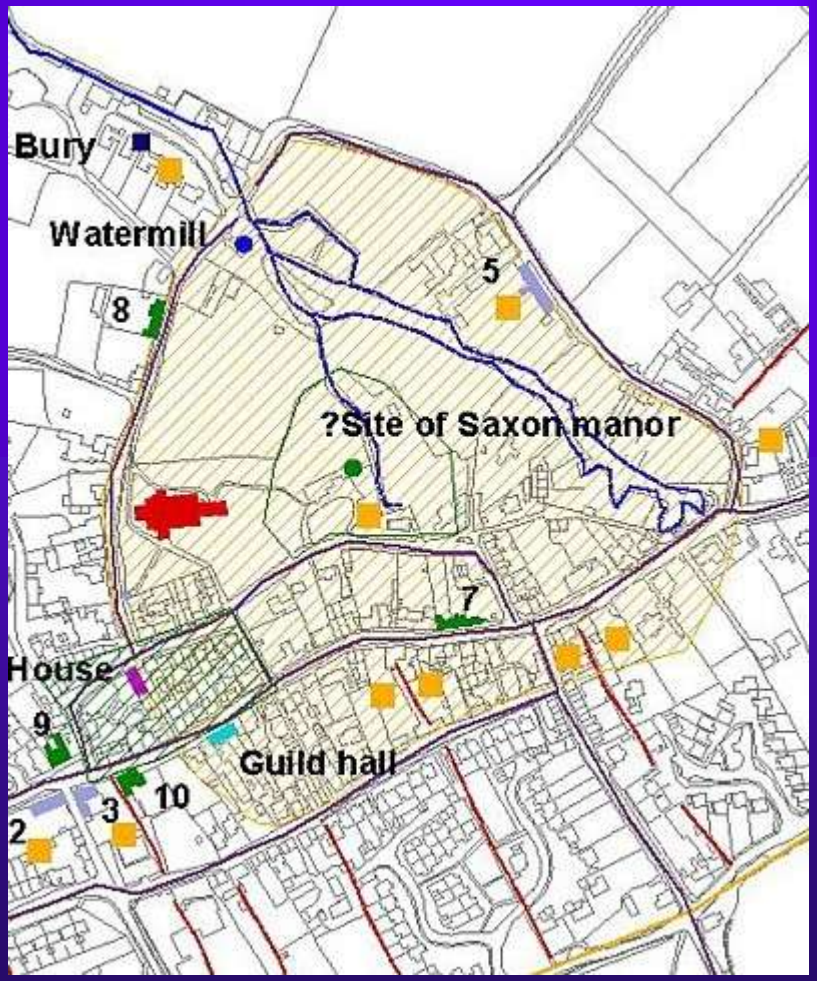
- Ashwell is an Old English name
  - *Æscewelle* means ‘Ash-tree spring’
  - It’s an undatable type of placename
    - So we can’t use it to suggest the origin of the village
- Ashwell is first mentioned in the Will of Æþelgifu, *c* 990
  - Who bequeathed 20 sheep
  - Probably to a minster church
    - This makes Ashwell an important centre

A minster church

- Early churches with responsibility over a wide area
  - A priest is mentioned in Domesday Book
  - Often, there are two in each Hundred
  - Ashwell probably included Hinxworth, Radwell, Newnham, Caldecote and Bygrave
- Nothing remains to be seen of the early church
  - This is not unusual
  - Great rebuilding following the Norman Conquest

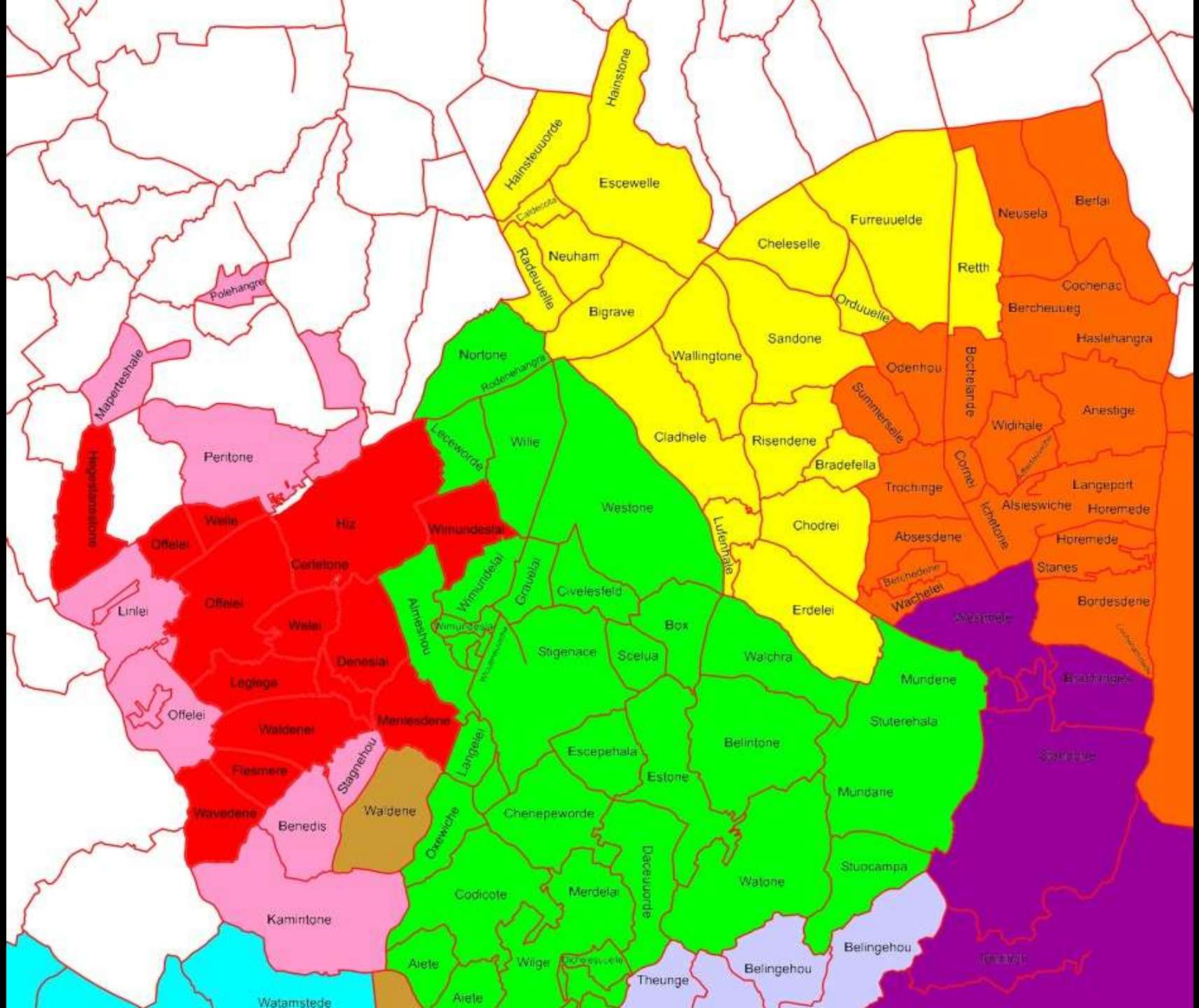
The early town

- Minsters were often the focus for developing towns
  - Often in their own defended enclosures
  - There may be traces of it in Ashwell
- The focal point of the local road system
  - Between two major Roman roads
    - Which continued in use
  - A good site for a market



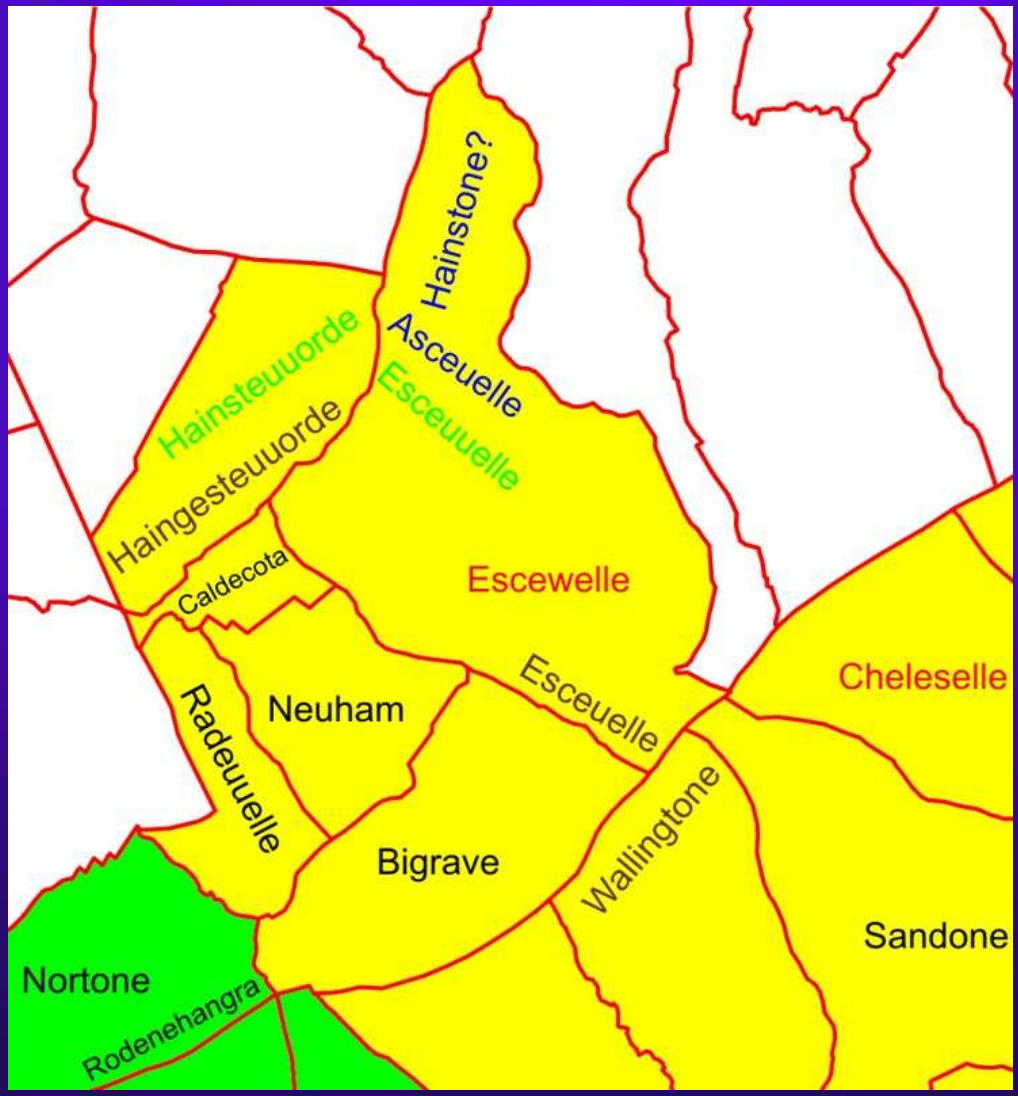
Domesday Book

- A list of places
  - Organised by feudal overlords
  - With details of population etc.
- It's actually a tax list
  - So the king can work out how much Danegeld he can raise
  - So it only mentions taxable people
- Ashwell had 14 burgesses
  - Which tells us about the status of the town
  - It is divided between four tenants
    - The Abbot of Westminster, Geoffrey of Mandeville, Peter of Valognes and Hardwin of Scales


Hainstone
Hainsteuuorde
Escewelle
Caldecota
Neuham
Radeuuelle
Bigrave
Furreuuelde
Cheleselle
Neusela
Berlai
Retth
Cochenac
Bercheuueg
Haslehangra
Orduuelle
Sandone
Wallingtone
Odenhou
Bochelande
Summersele
Widihale
Anestige
Polehangre
Maperteshale
Nortone
Rodenehangra
Leceworde
Wille
Cladhele
Risendene
Bradefella
Trochinge
Cornei
Langeport
Alsieswiche
Horemede
Ichetone
Horemede
Absesdene
Stanes
Berchedene
Wachelei
Bordesdene
Westmele
Hegestanestone
Peritone
Welle
Hiz
Wimundeslai
Westone
Lufenhale
Chodrei
Offelei
Cerletone
Wimundelai
Grauelai
Civelesfeld
Erdelei
Linlei
Offelei
Welei
Almeshou
Wimundeslai
Box
Stigenace
Scelua
Walchra
Denesiai
Leglega
Mundene
Offelei
Waldenei
Menlesdene
Stuterehala
Langelei
Escepehala
Belintone
Flesmere
Stagnehou
Estone
Mundane
Wavedene
Benedis
Waldene
Oxewiche
Chenepeworde
Daceuuorde
Stuocampa
Watone
Codicote
Merdelai
Kamintone
Belingehou
Aiete
Wilge
Theunge
Belingehou
Watamstede
Aiete

The Domesday tenants

- The Abbot of Westminster clearly had the town centre
  - He also held Kelshall
- Geoffrey of Mandeville sublet to Germund
  - Who also held the lost *Hainstone*
  - Which may have been in the northern part of the parish
- Peter of Valognes also held land in Hinxworth
  - Which suggests that his part lay around Ashwell End/Bluegates
- Hardwin of Scales sublet to Theobald
  - Who also held land in Wallington, Hinxworth and other places
- A complexity of tenants and manors suggests complex history

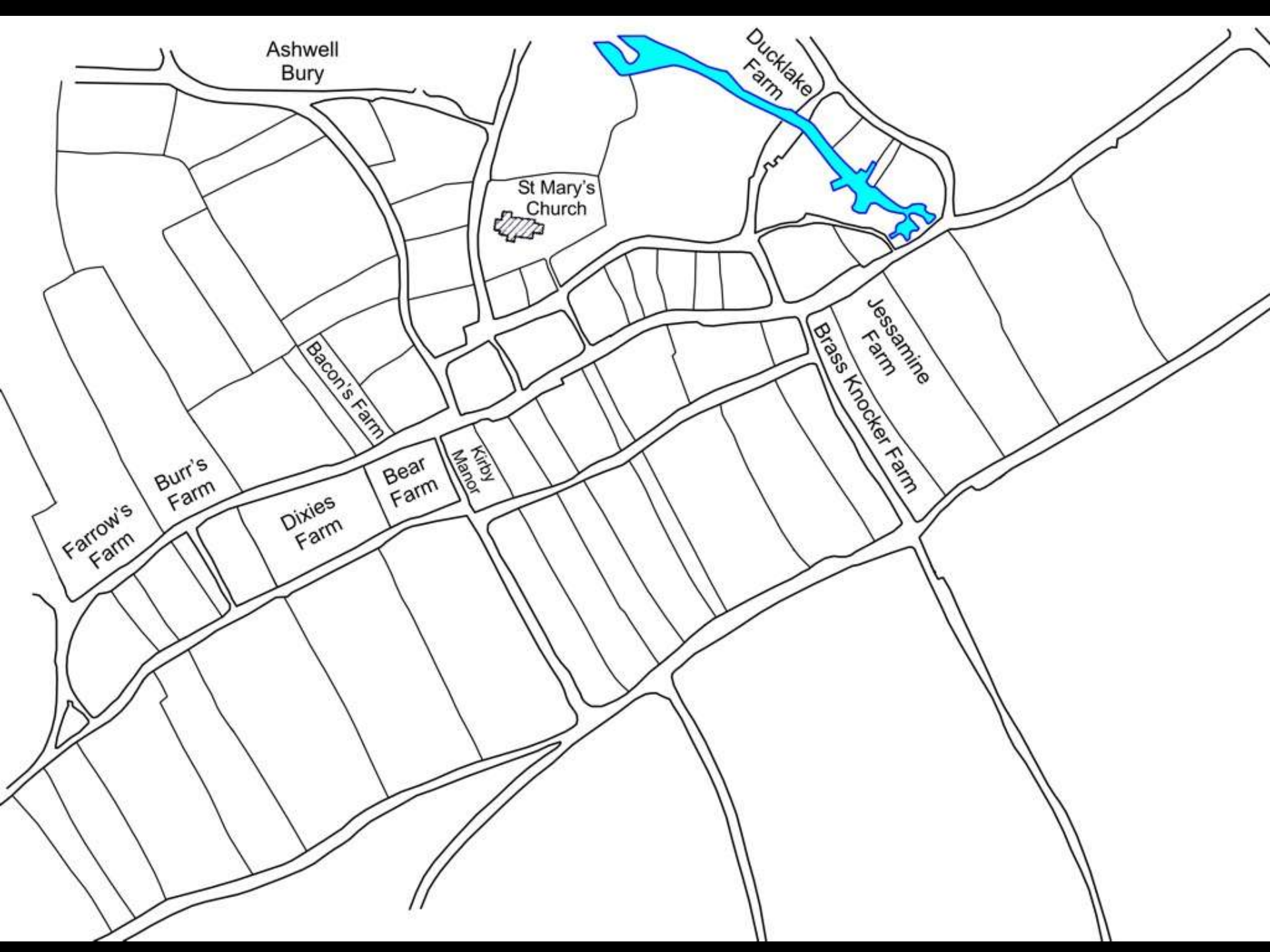


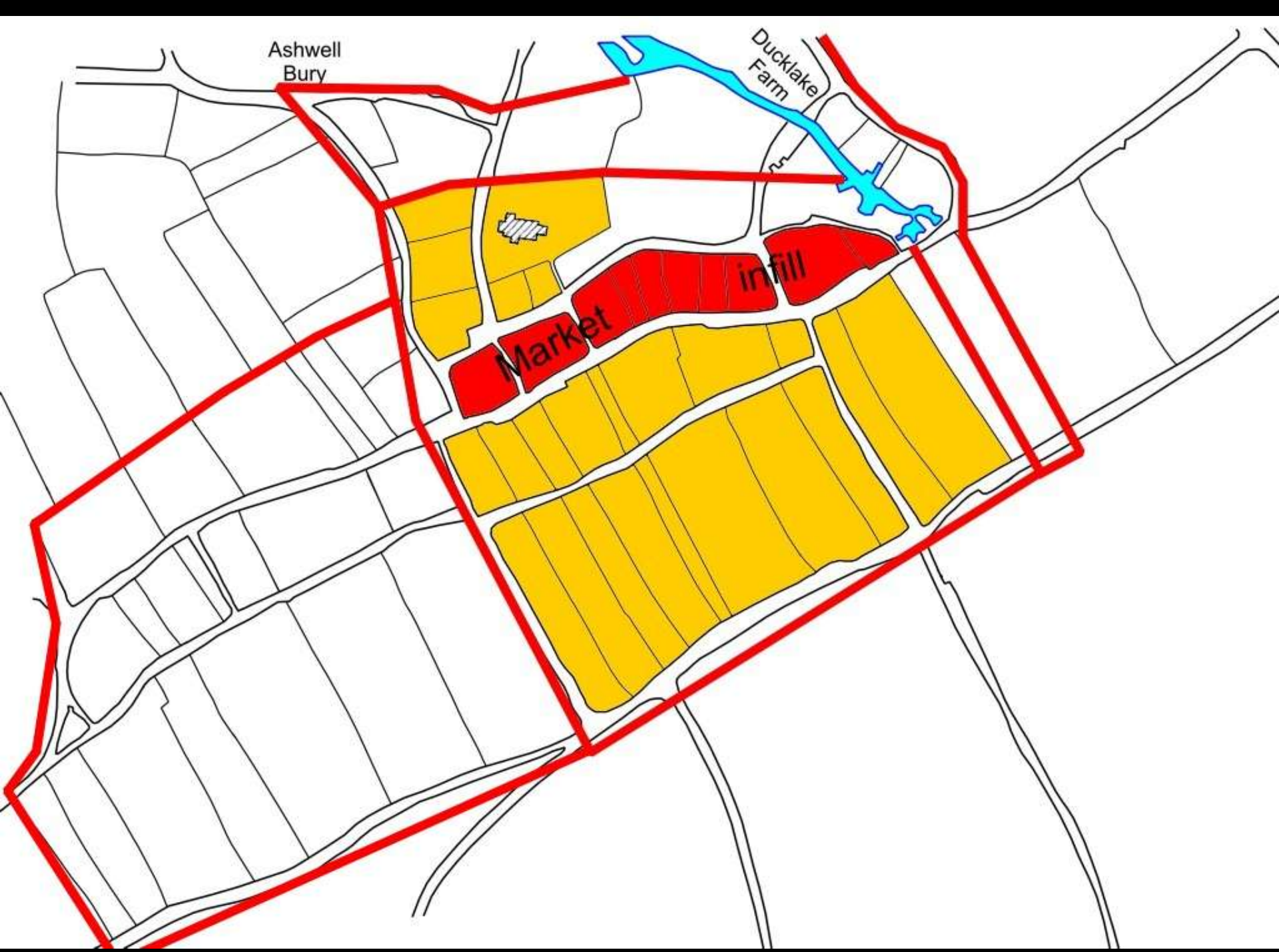
Why burgesses?

- Burgesses mean it was a *burh*
  - Which makes it a specific type of town
    - A market town
    - A defended town
    - An administrative centre
- And it's not the only one locally
  - Hitchin had a burghal ditch
  - Probably part of Edward the Elder's reconquest of Mercia
  - Accomplished by establishing defended towns
    - Usually on existing town sties

Ashwell's *burh*

- Where were the defences?
  - Like Hitchin, nothing remains
    - It's the same at Hertford
  - And they are unlikely to have followed the earlier enclosure
- But we may be able to work out where they were
  - Town plan analysis
    - Looking at the layout of roads and boundaries
  - We know that the market and church must be inside
- Two basic options
  - Minimal and larger


Ashwell
Bury
Ducklake
Farm
St Mary's
Church
Bacon's Farm
Jessamine
Farm
Brass Knocker Farm
Kirby
Manor
Bear
Farm
Burr's
Farm
Farrow's
Farm
Dixies
Farm


Ashwell
Bury
Ducklake
Farm
Market
infill

The manors

- There were several manors
  - Ashwell
    - The manor of the Abbot of Westminster
  - Digswell
    - Appears to have been the manor held by Peter de Valognes
  - Westbury
    - The manor of Hardwin of Scales
      - West of the *burh*
    - Westbury Nernewtes appears to be a part of it
  - Kirbys
    - Situated in the north of the parish
  - Staines or Wafries
    - First mentioned in 1567
  - Sonwell and Otways
    - Always mentioned together
  - Sunings
    - Only found once, in 1585

The market

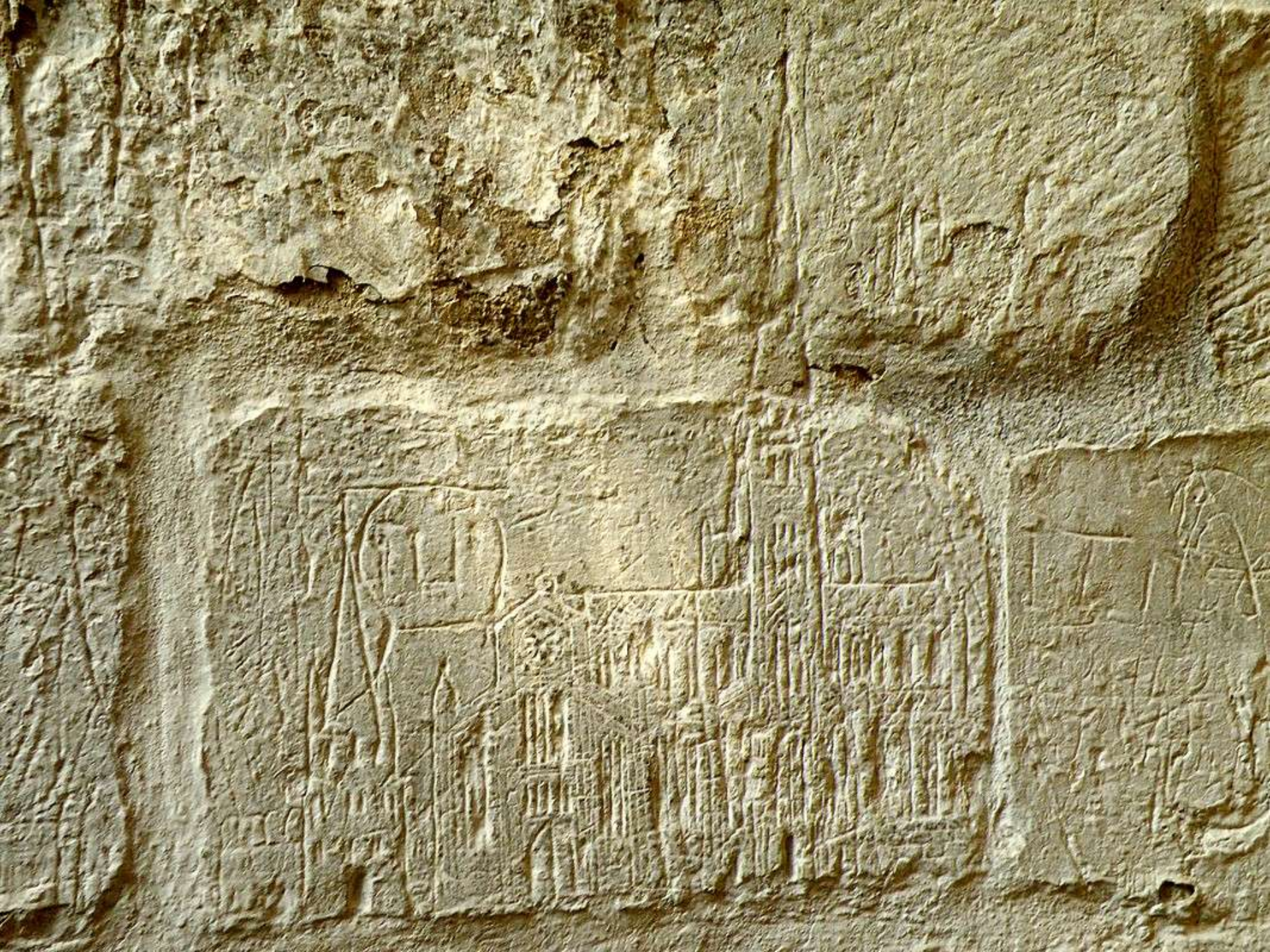
- In 1295, the Abbot of Westminster claimed the right
  - By virtue of the Charter of Edward the Confessor
    - First documented in 1211
    - Renewed by Elizabeth I in 1575
  - Lapsed by 1792
    - But a small market continued until at least 1855
- Market place traditionally between High Street, Gardiners Lan3, Swan Street and Church Lane
  - Probably considerably bigger
    - Appears to have extended to Hodwell
    - The livestock market close to the springs

The fair

- Claimed by the Abbot in 1295
  - Referring to a grant of Henry III
    - It does not survive
- Elizabeth I renewed the grant
  - And extended it to three separate fairs
  - Abolished by law in 1872

The medieval church

- Surviving structure
  - Almost entirely fourteenth-century
    - Completed in 1381
  - The most impressive tower in the county
    - Evidence for the wealth of the town
- Well known for the graffiti in the tower
  - Accounts of the Black Death
    - Outbreaks of 1349 and 1361
  - Drawing of the East end of St Paul's Cathedral in London



The Guild of St John the Baptist

- Founded in 1476
  - A popular time for the foundation of religious Guilds
  - Possibly involved in the government of the town
- Brotherhood Hall stood in High Street
  - 57-61 High Street
  - Built before 1500
  - Altered in 16th and 17th centuries
- Typical of a guild house in decayed towns and large villages
  - Shows that the status of the town had gone
  - But that it still retained some urban pretensions

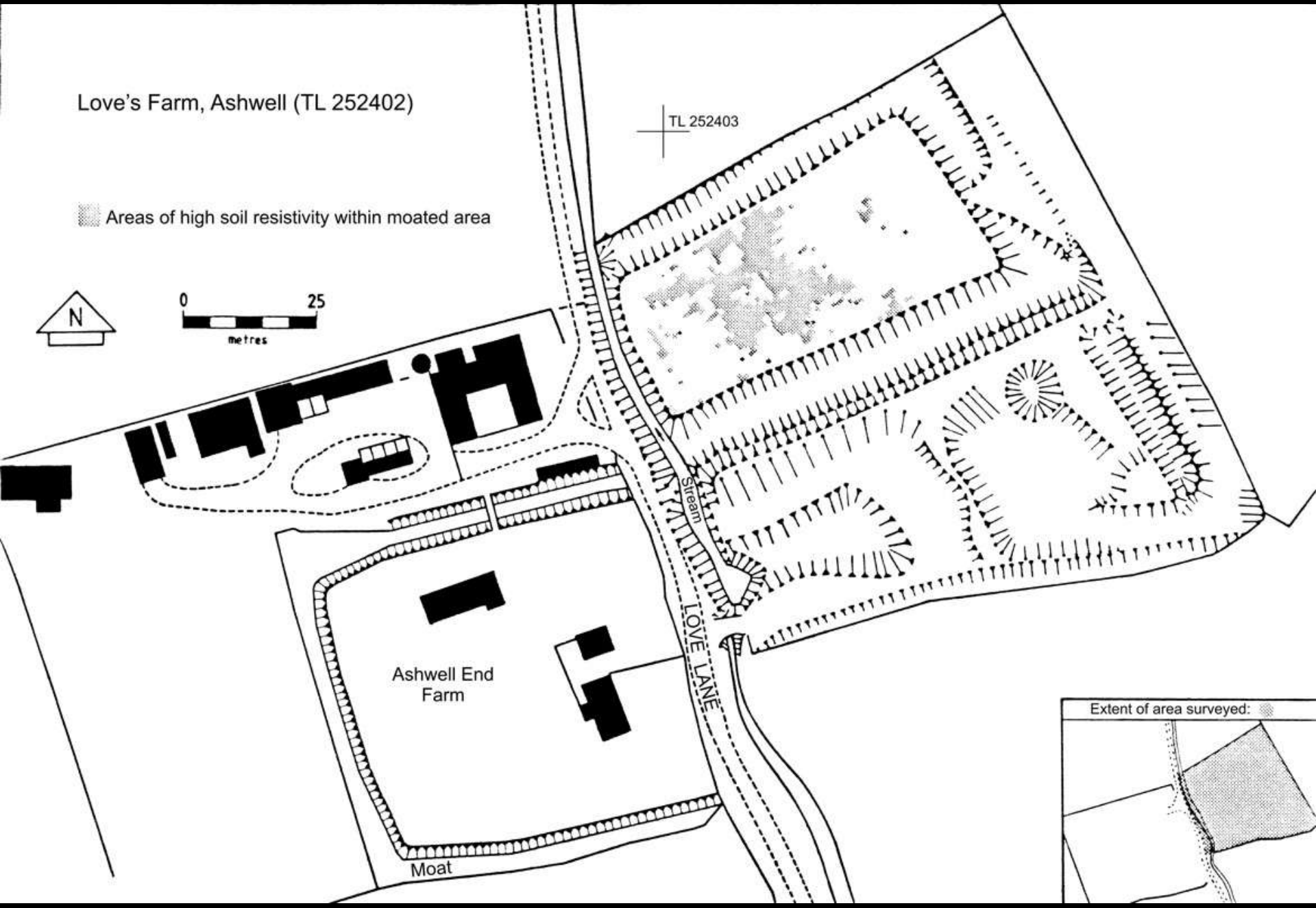
57

Westbury

- One of the medieval manors
  - Held by the Abbess of Holywell (Middlesex) in the twelfth century
- The site of a medieval moat
  - Two separate moated areas
    - A third possible enclosure identified to the east in 1997
  - Excavated by Mrs D G Hurst in 1957
    - Found a complex of 12th-13th century timber buildings

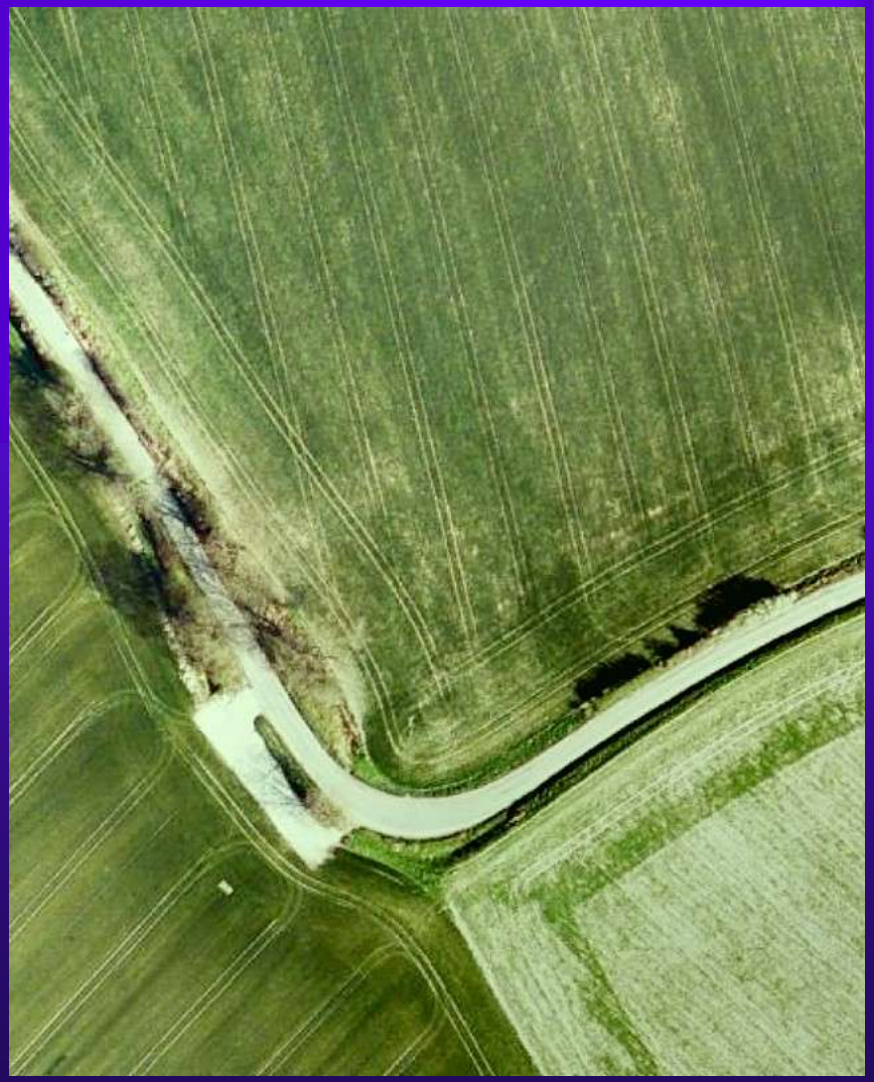
Love Lane

- Another moated complex
  - Partly surveyed by North Herts Museums in 1986/7
- Two or three moats
  - One still has buildings on it
  - The second lies to the north
    - On the opposite side of the road
    - Said to be the site of a demolished chapel
  - A third enclosure lies opposite the first
    - South of the second
    - Unclear if it really was a moat
- The site of *Glitton*?
  - First recorded in 1313
  - No maps show it


Love's Farm, Ashwell (TL 252402)
TL 252403
Areas of high soil resistivity within moated area
N
0
25
metres
Stream
LOVE LANE
Ashwell End Farm
Moat
Extent of area surveyed:

Other moated sites

- Several other moated sites are known
  - Mob's Hole
    - Name first recorded 1782
  - Ashwell End
    - Filled in *c* 1970
  - South of Bluegates
    - Filled in
  - Possible site on Hinxworth road
    - Visible as a dubious cropmark

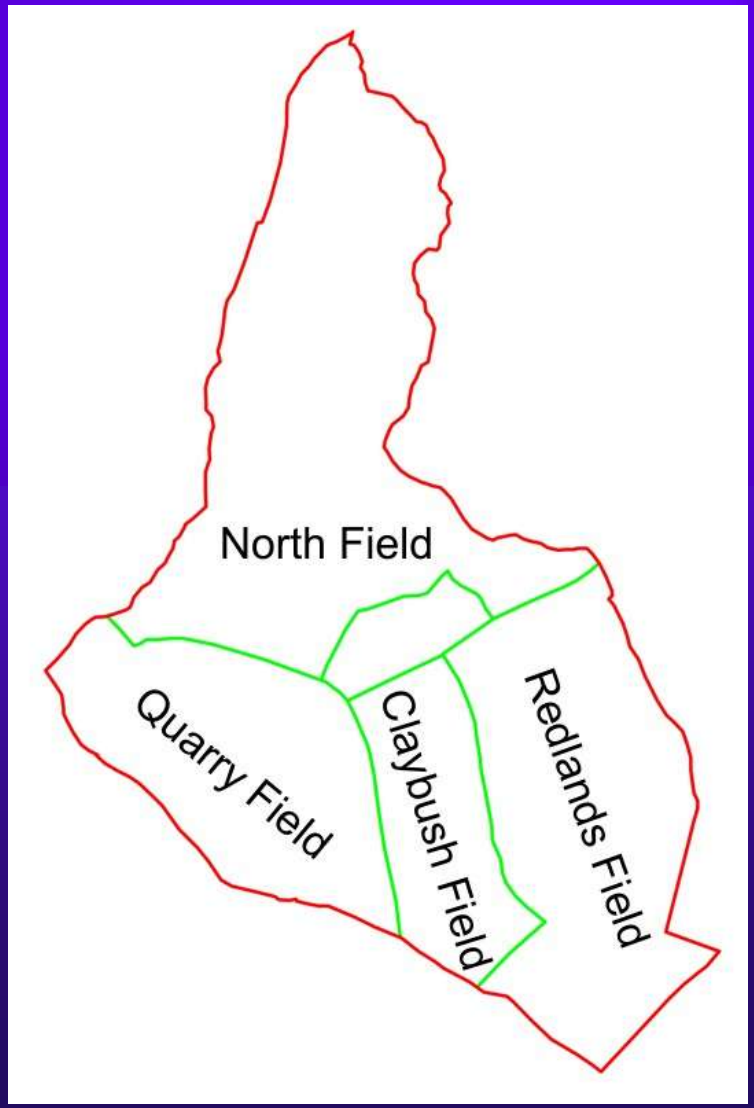


Mills

- Domesday Book records two mills
  - A town mill on Mill Street
    - Name first recorded 1200
    - Mill House was 17th century (partly collapsed 1960)
  - The second may have been north of Bluegates Farm
    - Called Howlet's Mill in 1766

The open fields

- Four prinicpal fields recorded
  - North Field
    - All of the northern part of the parish
  - Quarry Field
    - West of the town
  - Claybush Field
    - South of the town
  - Redland Field
    - South-east of the town
  - Noted for barley
- Sheep pasture on the hills
  - A major source of wealth
  - Especially after the decline of the market



Pillow mounds

- Numerous mounds on the hills south of the village
  - Low, rectangular mounds
  - Used in the breeding of rabbits
    - A source of meat
    - Also for sale at the market

The hamlets

- Known as ‘Ends’
  - Ashwell End
    - To the north-west of the town
  - Ruddery (Redreth) End
    - Where Ashwell Street crosses the county boundary
    - First documented *c* 1100
    - Had its own chapel until the 16th century
  - Slip End
    - At the southern tip of the parish

Buildings

- A number of late medieval buildings survive
  - Despite the Great Fire of 1850
- Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century buildings
  - Mostly along the High Street and West End
  - Many were paid for by wealth derived from wool

The Town House

- Believed to be the first bit of infill in the Market Place
  - Built as a Tithe House by the Abbot of Westminster
  - Dates from *c* 1500
- Built as a one-up, one-down structure
  - A purpose-built shop
  - The ground floor had unglazed windows
  - The third bay was added in the seventeenth century
    - When it belonged to St John's College, Cambridge
- Restored in 1930
  - To become the village museum

The Rose and Crown

- A late fifteenth-century hall house
  - Central hall open to the rafters
  - Service wing to the left (west)
- Evidence for piecemeal rebuilding
  - Including a late seventeenth-century inglenook
  - Added at the same time as upper floor inserted in hall

So what went wrong?

- In 1066, Ashwell was ideally placed to prosper
  - And it continued to prosper for centuries
  - But the market eventually declined and vanished
- Commercial rivalries
  - Baldock, Biggleswade, Bassingbourn and Royston
- Changing communications
  - Icknield Way between Baldock and Royston
  - The decline of Ashwell Street
- Population decline
  - The Black Death
- Ashwell became isolated, its market in decline
  - There was still wealth in sheep farming
  - And barley would become important in London markets after 1600...