HERTFORDSHIRE'S
PAST
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EXCAVATIONS AT THE DESERTED MEDIEVAL VILLAGE OF CALDECOTE, HERTFORDSHIRE – AN INTERIM REPORT

by Guy Beresford

CALDECOTE (Grid Ref. TL 237385) the site of a deserted medieval village lies some 2½ miles north-northwest of Baldock on a chalky subsoil approximately 180ft above sea level. The position of the settlement was clearly defined by the church, the manor and the earthworks of the peasant crofts. (Plate i). Five seasons of excavations were arranged by the Medieval Village Research Group and the Department of the Environment to examine the medieval remains of the crofts, the rectory site and the manor before the earthworks were levelled and ploughed.

The chalklands of northern Hertfordshire are easy to cultivate and must always have afforded good open pasture, and the early exploitation of the area is attested by the extensive Iron Age settlement lying some 200ft to the west of the peasants' homesteads. However, the complete excavation of approximately 9 acres revealed no evidence of occupation between the 2nd century AD and c.1050. Before the Norman Conquest the manor was held by Lemar, a man of Archbishop Stigand.[1] In 1086, at the time of the Domesday Survey, it formed part of the Hertfordshire estate held by Ralph de Limesi. Although he held the manor in demesne,[2] there was no archaeological evidence to suggest that he or any of his successors ever lived at Caldecote. In the early 13th century the heirs of John de Limesi were his sisters, Basilia wife of Hugh Oddingsells and Eleanor wife of David Lindsay.[3] In 1213 the former had livery of a moiety of the Limesi inheritance in Hertfordshire and elsewhere.[4] Apparently the manor of Caldecote was included in the lands assigned to Oddingsells in the right of his wife.[5] A sub-enfoeffment was made probably before 1215,[6] the overlordship of the manor descending after Hugh's death in or about 1305[7] to his son Sir John de Oddingsells lord of Long Igington (Itchington, Warwickshire[8]). The latter remained in possession of the overlordship until 1328[9] when he surrendered to the Abbot of St Albans, then actual tenant of the manor, all his rights except scutage.[10] After the dissolution of the monastery in 1539 the king held the manor for a short time, and in 1540 granted it to Ralph Rowlatt; since which date it has been held by various families.[11]

Caldecote, one of the smallest parishes in Hertfordshire, is only 325 acres in extent and could never have supported a large population. In 1087 the Domesday records that there was a priest, nine villeins and four cottars.[12] The excavations revealed that during the 12th and 13th centuries there were approximately nine crofts lying to the north of the church and possibly three others close to the north-west boundary of the present manor garden. The population had declined by the early 14th century: no subsidy was paid in 1428 indicating that there were less than ten householders.[13] The excavation has demonstrated that after the manor was granted to the Priory the lands of the peasantry were gradually amalgamated: by the early 14th century the manor comprised the manor farm, the glebe and four other farms. During the late 15th and early 16th centuries the farms were gradually rebuilt away from the centre of the village. This pattern of settlement was to persist until the early 18th century when the manor took in hand all the lands except those of the Glebe.

Prehistoric Remains

Excavations at Caldecote revealed evidence of prehistoric settlement dating from the early Bronze age. An isolated beaker burial was found lying beneath the 13th century kitchen area at the manor site. Although the grave had been damaged by both an Iron Age trench and a 13th century post hole, sufficient remained to provide much information on the burial. The skeleton, probably that of a male aged about thirty, was buried in a shallow grave and lay in a contracted position on its left hand side with the head towards the south. A short necked beaker was found lying close to the skull in the southeast corner of the grave. No archaeological features associated with the grave were recognised, but the close proximity of the bones to the surface suggests that there has been much erosion of the ground surface since the Bronze Age.

Remains of a substantial Iron Age settlement, covering some nine acres, lie on the gravel some 200ft to the west of the village boundary. Nothing remains to be seen above ground, but at certain times of the year the site comprising circular and rectangular enclosures is depicted by crop-marks in the growing corn.[14] A trench cut through a ring ditch of an enclosure some 100ft in diameter revealed much late Iron Age pottery. The long ditches and their associated water-pits excavated in the manor garden were doubtless field boundaries associated with these remains.

EXCAVATION

The Crofts

The early crofts, considerably smaller than those found in many clay-land villages[15] were only 60ft wide. They extended some 180ft back from the street and were separated by narrow earthen banks.

The excavation revealed a sequence of timber buildings dating from the mid-11th century until the village site was deserted during the 15th and 16th centuries. The houses built before the late 13th or early 14th century, similar to those excavated at other sites,[16] were insubstantial structures which would not have survived for more than twenty-five years without rebuilding or extensive repair. They were built without either stone or earth-fast foundations similar to the early houses excavated at Goltho, Barton Blount[17] and Wintringham.[18] Their remains were sparse, but their positions and alignment were usually defined by the deep water-pits and the plethora of shallow quarry-pits used for the extraction and mixing of daub. (Plate ii).

Excavations at many sites have shown that where there was a plentiful supply of stone, stone houses began to replace those built of timber during the late 12th and 13th centuries; in areas where stone was less plentiful timber or cob walls were built upon stone sills.[19] A similar change was occurring in other parts of Europe.[20] Although chalk blocks (clunch) could be readily quarried on the higher ground within a mile of the Caldecote village site, the houses were not built on stone sills until the late 13th or early 14th century. The timber houses built at Caldecote in this period were structurally complex and more permanent buildings having a life of more than fifty years. Those built during the 15th century were comparable in both size and plan with many of the surviving examples to be seen in Ashwell, Hertfordshire, today.

The excavation of the farms has revealed much information on the ecology of the settlement. The large barns and their associated corndriers indicated that the

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CALDECOTE
CROFT D

DAUB PITS

BARN

HOUSE

HEARTH

MODERN FARM YARD

STREET

0   10   20   30   40 FEET

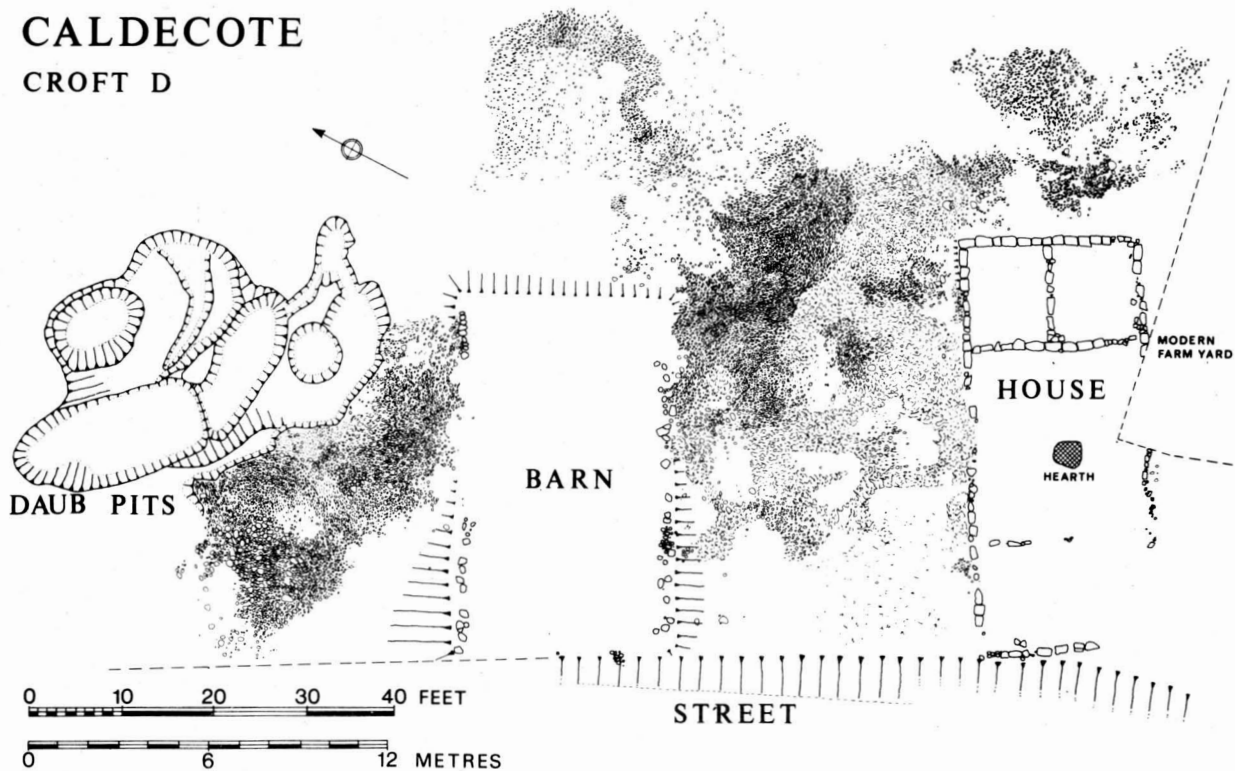0   6   12 METRES

Fig.1. Plan of Croft D, c.1300-1400.

settlement was dependent upon arable farming as today. The prosperity of the farms is attested by the size of the houses and the layout of the farmsteads.

The earliest substantial farm to be identified at Caldecote was excavated in Croft D (Fig.1). The farmstead, comprising farmhouse and barn was built by the side of the village street and was probably occupied from circa 1300-1400. The farmhouse, 44ft long and 18ft wide, was constructed on a stone sill, the construction of which suggested that the house had been built upon interrupted sill-beams. The position of the barn, lying 32ft to the northwest of the house was clearly marked by surrounding cobbling. It was 37ft long and 21ft wide. The foundation stones which had remained in situ indicated that the building had stood on pad-stone footings. Two smaller farmsteads were found nearby each comprising a house and small barn. The buildings, similar to those of the earlier period, were built without stone or earth-fast foundations. Their sparse remains were defined by the wear of the ground surface and by the surrounding stone paths.

The largest and best preserved farmstead was that excavated in Croft B. It was occupied from the early 15th century to circa 1575 and comprised a farmhouse 48ft by 17ft, two barns, one 48ft by 17ft and the other 59ft by 14ft and a dovecot 14ft square (Plate iii and Fig.2). The house had been built upon sills levelled with roofing tiles to support a continuous sill-beam. The archaeological evidence indicated that it was a substantial timber-framed house built to a precise specification. (Plate iv). Access to the house was gained by way of two opposing doorways set at either end of the cross-passage separating the hall from the service rooms. A line of small stones and slight wear of the floor marked the position of the stair in the north service room, which gave access to an upper chamber. The solar at the opposing end of the house provided reasonable domestic comfort, having both fire-place and garderobe. The hall was heated from a central hearth until a large corner fireplace and chimney were built when the hall was chambered over in the middle of the 15th century.

Excavation of Croft A revealed substantial remains of a farmstead deserted in the middle of the 15th century comprising a farmhouse, 50ft by 17ft and an aisled barn, 47ft by 26ft. Similar buildings were found in Croft E grouped around a sunken yard comprising a house, 54ft by 20ft, a barn 32ft by 18ft and a smaller building approximately 30ft long and 20ft wide.

The Rectory Site

Excavation revealed that Caldecote Rectory, demolished about 1900, was built in the early 15th century. It stood on a NE SW alignment approximately 160ft north-west of the church. The timber framed house in its original form was 41ft long and 16ft wide and comprised a single storied hall set between two bays each of two stories and jettied on the north west front (Fig.3). During the middle of the 16th century the house was altered: the solar bay was replaced by a cross-wing; the hall chambered over and the principal entrance moved from the north-west to the south-east front. Much of the timber-framing was replaced by brick during the 18th century. The position of the associated out-buildings was marked by the wear of the ground surface. The removal of the earliest floor levels revealed the sites of three earlier priests houses. They had been built without either stone or earthfast foundations and left sparse remains, but their positions were defined as those of the early houses of the peasantry.

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Plates

1. (Cover) Air-photograph looking south-west, showing earthworks of the deserted crofts, the church and the manor. (Cambridge University Collection, copyright reserved).
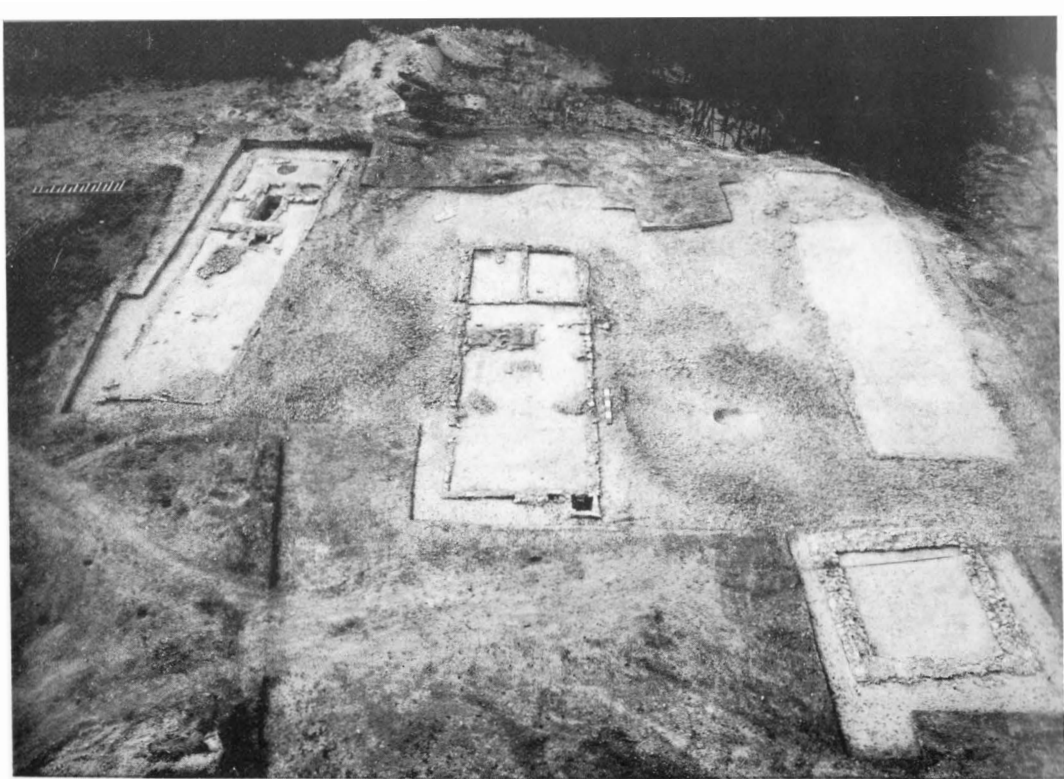
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2. Croft D looking south-east, showing the deep water-pits and the shallow quarry pits of the early houses and the remains of the 14th century farm (Guy Beresford).

Overleaf

3. Croft B looking north-west, showing farm-house, barns and dovecote, cf. fig.2. (Guy Beresford).

4. Detail of the farm-house in Croft B, looking north-west. (Guy Beresford).

The Manor Site

Excavation of the manor garden revealed a sequence of medieval houses dating from the middle of the 11th century until about 1350 (Fig.4). The earliest part of the present manor house dating from the late 15th century probably lies over the manor house built after the demolition of House 6. The medieval levels of occupation lay over a beaker burial and Iron Age boundaries.

Houses 1-3, c. 1050-1200, the earliest houses at the manor site, lay within a large enclosure surrounded by a bank and ditch some 6ft wide and 3ft 6ins deep. The inferior quality of these buildings indicate that the de Limesi family had no capital messuage at Caldecote during the period when they held the land in demesne; these early buildings must represent the remains of the demesne farm-houses. The positions of the earliest two houses were defined by lines of post-holes. The earliest, a quasi-aisled building,[21] was 20ft long and 15ft wide and House 2 was 27ft long and 17ft wide. House 3 was built over the remains of the second house without stone or earth-fast foundations, but its approximate position and alignment were defined by the cobbled thresholds and the spread of occupational material along the south-western side.

In the beginning of the 13th century the early house site was abandoned for a position closer to the church. The homestead was surrounded by a moat, but owing to much of the NE side of the site lying under the present farmyard it was not possible to determine the exact size of the inclosure. The area was probably slightly in excess of three acres and probably included the church. The site was divided in two parts by a deep trench, later replaced by a timber palisade, to provide space in the north-east for the house and out-buildings and in the south-west a garden and paddock (Plate v). The position of the house (designated House 5) and that of the kitchen lying close to its south-western end were clearly marked by lines of post-holes. Two wells, numerous daub pits, a garderobe and baking and brewing ovens were found associated with the house. No remains of the farm buildings belonging to this period were found, but their approximate positions were defined by the many dawb pits in the north-eastern corner of the excavation.

House 5 was built some 80ft to the north-west of House 4 during the late 13th or very early 14th century. It seems to have been built by Gerard Furnivall who was apparently tenant of the Oddingselles in 1287[22] or by William Hurst to whom he conveyed the manor in 1287.[23] Gerard Furnivall's grandfather, also named Gerard, was a patron of Caldecote Church[24] and was possibly the builder of House 4. House 6 was the most important house to be built at Caldecote. A grand approach was provided by the short moat running between the palisade trench and the north-eastern boundary of the moated enclosure. The house was built in two structural phases. The aisled hall about 30ft long and 27ft wide is all that remains of the original building. The arcade posts had shallow footings and the walls seem to have rested on the surface of the ground without foundation. In the second phase two adjacent cross-wings, a wardrobe and garderobe were added to the south-western end of the house. The wall facing the moat was built of stone while the others were of timber built upon a stone foundation. The footings of a chimney in the north-west wall mark the position of the fireplace of the first floor chamber. The service rooms, if any, lay beneath the drive leading to the present manor house and could not be excavated.

The northern part of the present manor house (House 6) was probably built
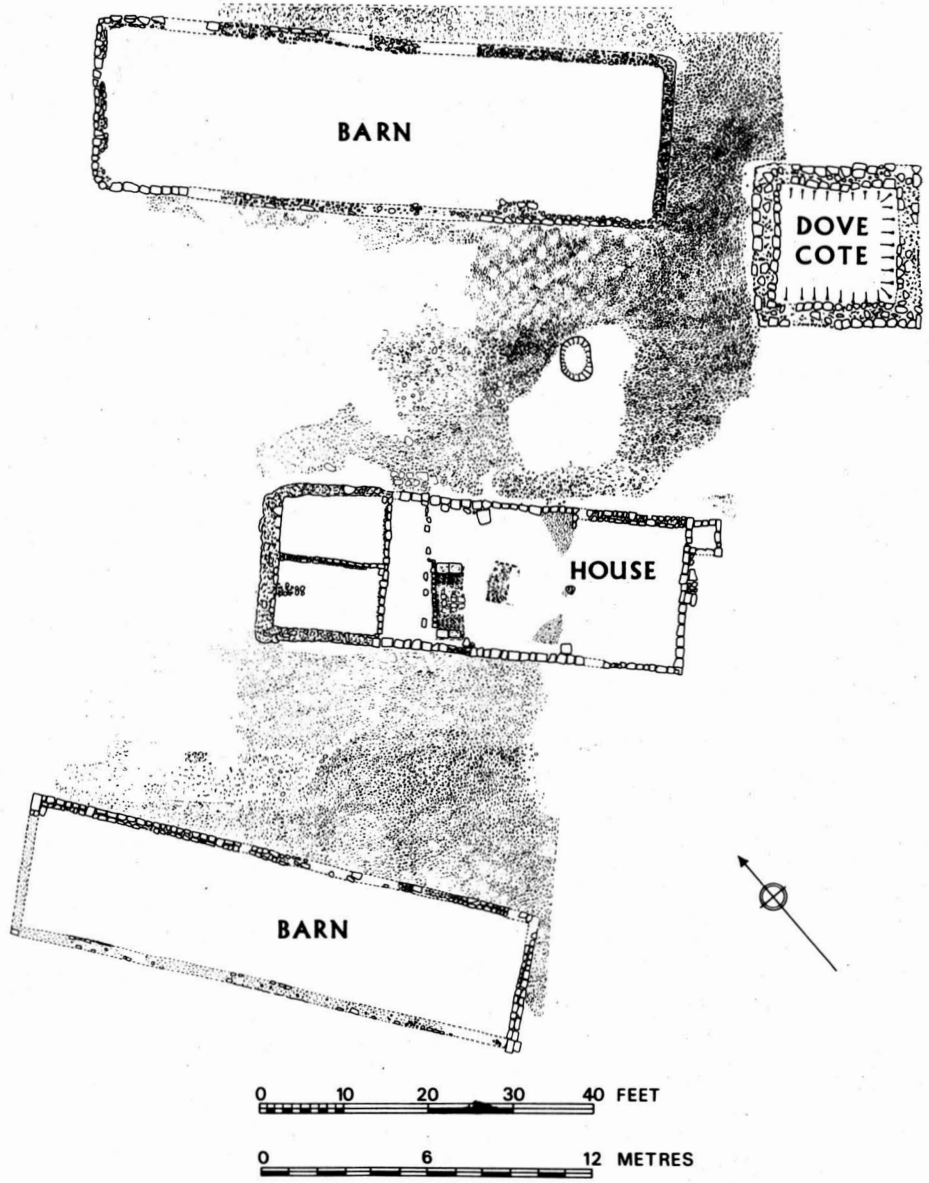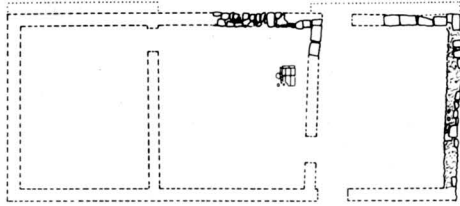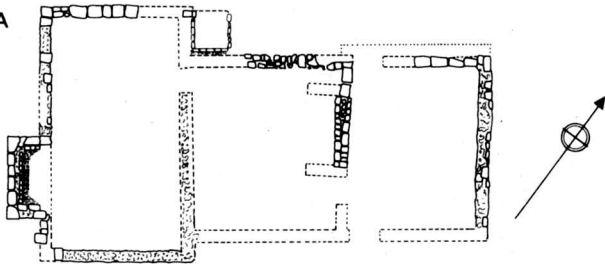
CALDECOTE CROFT B

BARN

DOVE COTE

HOUSE

BARN

0 10 20 30 40 FEET

0 6 12 METRES

Fig.2. Plan of Croft B, c.1400-1550.

CALDECOTE RECTORY

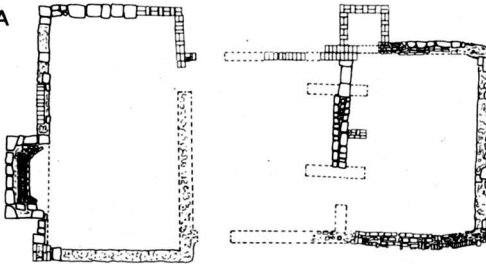Fig.3. Interpretation of Rectory, showing the three principal structural phases.

CALDECOTE MANOR

HOUSE 6

HOUSE 5

HOUSE 4

MOAT

STOCK YARD

IRON AGE

C.1050-1200

C.1300

C.1475

C.1900

12th CENTURY BOUNDARY

POND

MOAT

HOUSES 1-3

0 10   50   100   150 FEET
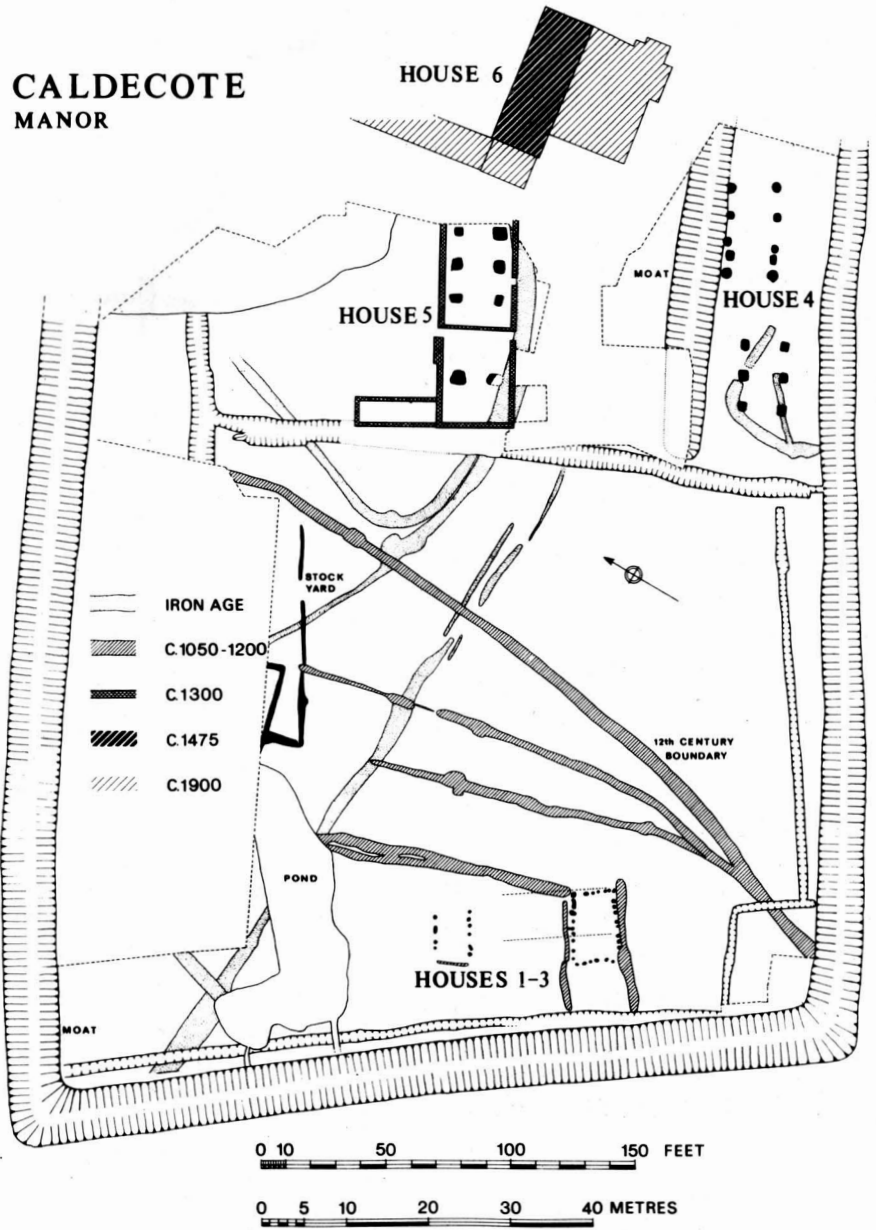
0 5 10   20   30   40 METRES

Fig.4. Interpretation of the manor site, showing the positions of the houses and the principal features.

during the late 15th century. Although the building, originally 50ft long and 20ft wide had been extensively altered and repaired sufficient remained of the original for it to be identified as a house of the wealden type. The manor house was enlarged about 1900.

The other surviving buildings include the church, two timber barns and six 19th-century farm cottages (Plate vi). The church dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene is now redundant.[25] The building, 51ft long and 14ft wide, is mainly of 14th and 15th century origin and is built of chalk rubble, repaired with flint. In the south porch is a fine 15th century stoup under a richly crocketed canopy, with a broken basin supported on a stem decorated with quatrefoiled panels.

The two single aisled barns are of late 17th and early 18th century origin. The largest, that lying to the north-east of the house was probably built at the time when the manor regained possession of all the farmlands.

References

1. *V.C.H., Herts.*, 1, 325b.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Excerpta a Rot. Fin.* (Rec. Com), i, 81, 323.
4. *Rot. de Oblatis et Fin.* (Rec. Com.), 507.
5. *V.C.H., Herts.*, ii, 218, note 14.
6. *Ibid.*, note 15.
7. Roberts, *Cal. Gen.* ii, 690.
8. *Ibid.; Add. Chart.* 19960.
9. *V.C.H. Herts.*, ii, 218, note 18.
10. *Add. Chart.* 19960.
11. *V.C.H., Herts.*, ii, 218.
12. *V.C.H., Herts.*, i, 325b.
13. *Feud. Aids*, ii, 454, 458.
14. The cropmarks were photographed by the Department of Aerial Photography, Cambridge, in April 1971: Cambridge University Collection BFD 2.
15. Guy Beresford, *The Medieval Clay-Land Village: Excavations at Goltho and Barton Blount*, Soc. Med. Archaeol., Monograph Series No. 6, (London, 1975), figs. 2-3.
16. M. Beresford and J.G. Hurst, (eds.), *Deserted Medieval Villages* (London, 1971), 85.
17. *Op. cit.*, in note 15, 20-21.
18. Guy Beresford, 'Excavations of a Moated House at Wintringham, Huntingdon-shire', *Archaeol. J.*, cxxxiv (1977), forthcoming.
19. Interim Notes on Faxton: Med. Archaeol., x (1966), 214; xi (1967), 307, fig. 87; xii (1968), 203; xiii (1969), 279.
20. P. Grimm, 'Hohenrode, eine mittelalterliche Siedlung im Südharz', *Veroffent-lichungen der Landesanstalt für Volkheitskund. zu Halle*, ii (1939), 1-56.
21. Guy Beresford, 'The excavation of the Deserted Medieval Village of Goltho, Lincolnshire', *Chateau-Gaillard, Etudes de castellologie médiévale*, viii (1976), 56, 65; *op. cit.*, in note 18.
22. *Feet of F. Herts.*, 15 Edw. 1, no. 208; Add. Chart. 19958.

23. *Feet of F. Herts.*, 15 Edw. 1, no. 208.
24. *V.C.H., Herts.*, ii, 218, note 21.
25. Noted in *Herts. Past 2,* Spring 1977. See also photograph on the cover of that issue.

Opposite, top: 5. Church, manor house and buildings looking south west. (Guy Beresford).

Opposite, bottom: 6. Manor site excavation, looking west.

(Guy Beresford).

THE BOUNDARY HEDGE OF SAXON WHEATHAMPSTEAD

by Ian Freeman

The Saxon boundary of Wheathampstead was defined in the charter by which Edward The Confessor granted the land to Westminster Abbey.[1] The description of the boundary in the charter reads as follows:

> This syndon tha land gemaeru into hwaethamstede, fram maerforde to thaere' headic, and fram thaere headic aefter daene into deorleage, fram deorleage andlang hecge thaet hit cymth to lippelane, fram lippelane to secgham, and fram secgham to pobbenaettoce, and fram bobbenaettoce to herpedene, fram herpendene to tham aesce to thaecforde, fram tham aesce to plumstigele, fram plumstigele to tham hole beame,

fram than hole beame to gilmere, fram gilmere to thaes ealdermannes mere, fram thaes ealdermannes mere into merdene and swa into maerforde.

The interpretation of the boundary in geographical terms has been discussed in *The settlement of Wheathampstead and Harpenden.*[2] In that discussion there is a reference to a long chain of hedgerows which seems to follow the northern boundary of the territory for a considerable distance and forming a sinuous but continuous line from the Bedfordshire/Hertfordshire boundary near Chiltern Green to the River Lea just below Waterend. For much of its length this line consists of two parallel hedges on

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