

# The origins of Ickleford

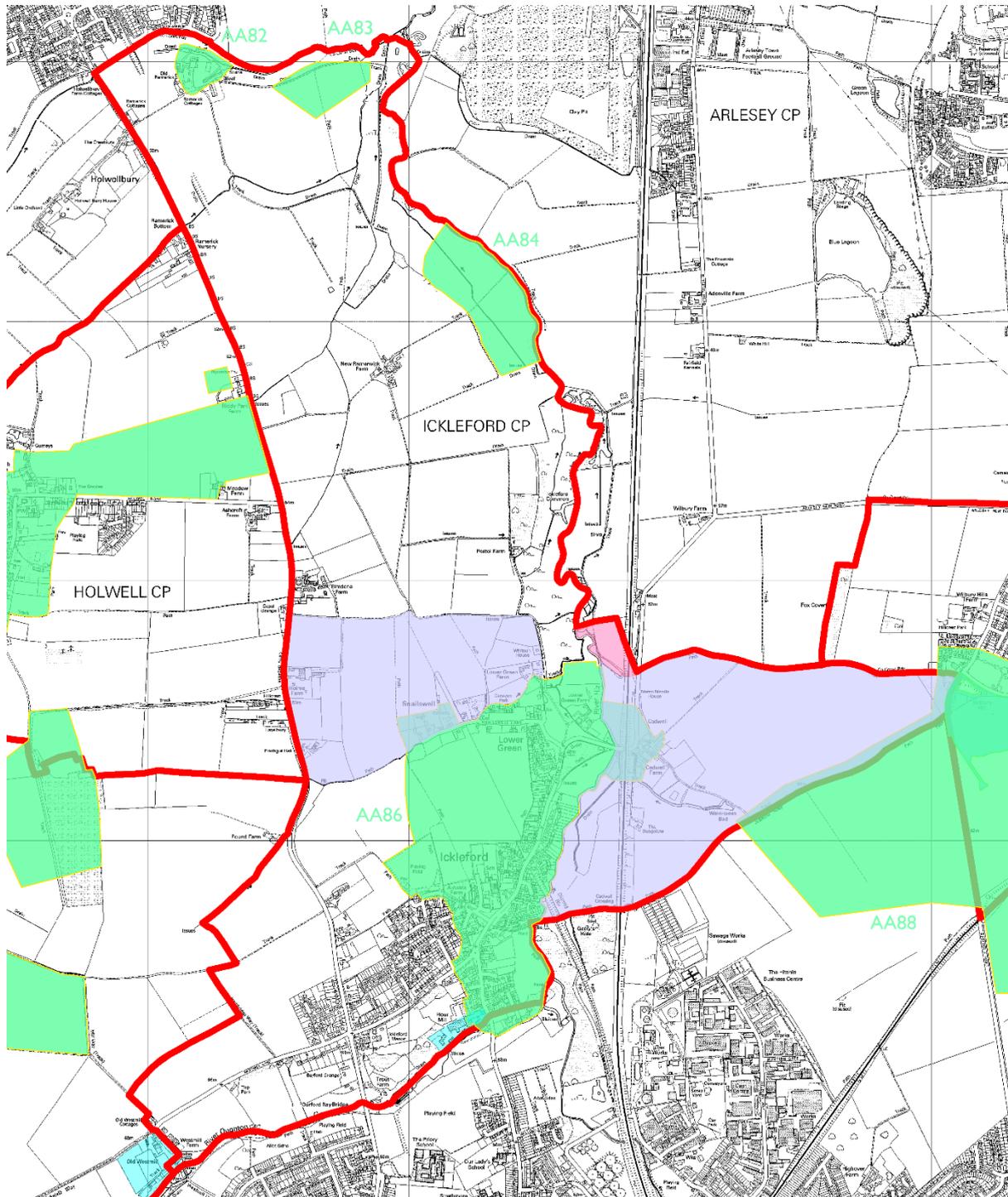


Figure 1: Ickleford in the twenty-first century; pale lilac areas were once in Holwell (in Bedfordshire before 1894) and pale blue in Shillington (Bedfordshire); green areas are Archaeological Areas previously used in planning (© Ordnance Survey)

## Introduction

The village of Ickleford lies to the north of Hitchin and sits astride the Icknield Way. The historic parish – formerly part of Pirton – consisted of two separate lobes, joined by a narrow section of Lower Green between Snailswell (previously in Holwell) and the River Hiz (Figure 2). The manor of

Ickleford occupied the southern lobe, while the northern was the manor of Ramerick. The 'tongue' of Holwell that projected east from the Bedford Road around Snailswell and the detached part around Cadwell were transferred to Ickleford in the later twentieth century; both parts lay in Bedfordshire before 1894.

The southern and eastern boundaries of the parish followed the Rivers Oughton and Hiz respectively. Since the incorporation of Cadwell into Ickleford, this remains true only north of Lower Green Farm and south of the Icknield Way. The northern boundary follows an unnamed stream, branches of which rise in Holwell and Stondon. To the west, the Bedford Road (A600) forms its northern line, while it follows hedges, field baulks and minor roads in a zig-zag to the River Oughton.

Ickleford became a vicarage in 1215, with two chapels: one lay in Ickleford, the other at Ramerick. Each chapel served a separate manor, both of which were subinfeudations of Pirton, each held for a quarter of a knight's fee from that manor. It would require the lords of Ickleford and Ramerick to provide an annual tax, known as scutage, to the lord of Pirton Manor. The imposition of increased levels of scutage under King John (rising from one mark (13s 4d or 66.6p – a third of a pound), a pound or a pound and a mark, to three pounds in 1214) led to the rebellion in 1215 that created Magna Carta. The fees for Ickleford and Ramerick would, therefore, have been between 3s 4d (16.6p) and 8s 8d (43.3p).

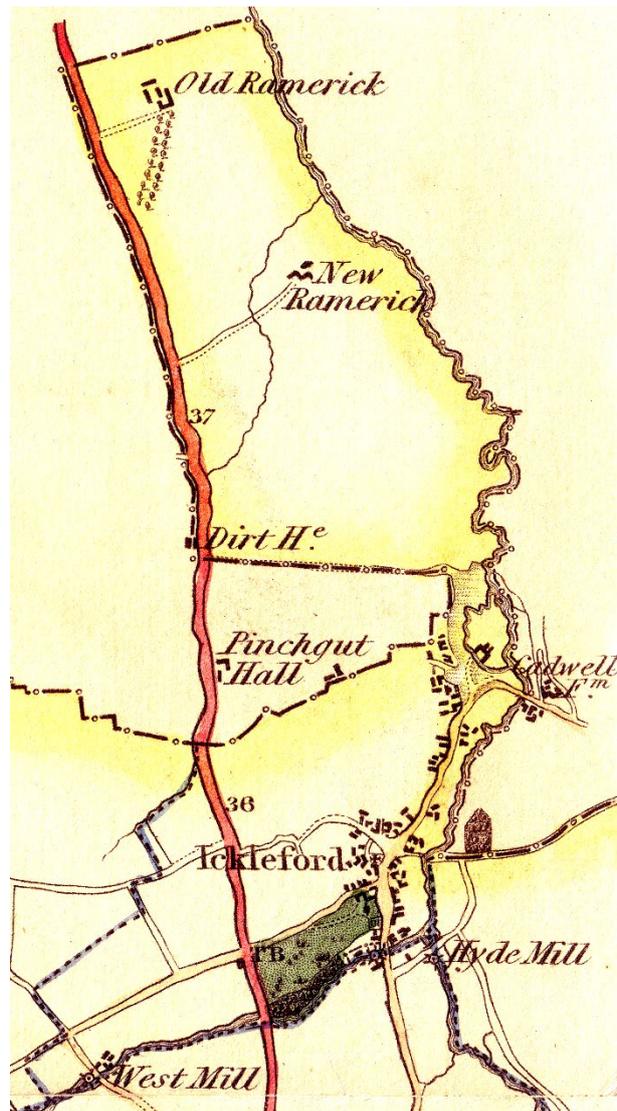


Figure 2: Ickleford in 1822, from Bryant's map of Hertfordshire

## Placenames

### Ickleford

The first record of Ickleford dates from the twelfth century when it was named *Ikelineford*, and the place is not recorded separately in Domesday Book. Most early spellings agree that the second syllable was *-ing-*, making the Old English original *\*Iceling(a)ford*, 'the ford of Icel' or 'the ford of the Icelings (Icel's people)'. Icel occurs as the name of an ancestor of Mercian kings, and the dynasty was known as the *Iclingas*. The personal name is found as an element in other placenames but is unrecorded outside the Mercian royal genealogy.

Although the meaning of the name Icel is not entirely clear, it may be connected with the verb *ican*, 'to augment, increase'. Any connection between the placename Ickleford and the Icknield Way, the meaning of which is also obscure, is fanciful, as the former always has *-l-* and the latter, *-n-*. Neither name is related to *Icenī*, the East Anglian people led to rebel against Roman rule by Boudica in AD 60; the Brittonic root of the 'tribal' name may nevertheless be a cognate of Old English *ican*.

The Old English name *Icel* is also found in Icklingham, Ickleton and Ixworth, north-east of Ickleford in Cambridgeshire and Suffolk; Icklesham in East Sussex is an outlier (Figure 3). This mostly restricted distribution may indicate an area under the control of a ruler with that name. Although someone of this name was claimed as an ancestor by the kings of Mercia, placenames based on names carried by the earliest historically-attested members of the dynasty (Creoda, Pybba and Penda) appear to locate them in the southwest Midlands. There are several possible solutions: that the link with *Icel* was fabricated, that the placenames commemorate a different individual of the same name or that a family originating in southwest East Anglia became rulers of a kingdom further west.



Figure 3: placenames containing the Old English personal name *Icel* (base image from Google Earth Pro)

If the *Icel* of Ickleford were genuinely an ancestor of the Mercian kings, he would have lived around AD 475×550 as his great-great-great-grandson Penda was killed in battle in 655. The name of his supposed son, Cnebba, underlies the placename Knebworth, the only instance of this otherwise unrecorded name. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, king Ceawlin of Wessex killed a man of this name in the second half of the sixth century at an unknown location called *Wibbandun*. If this is the same Cnebba, *Icel*'s lifetime would be closer to 550 than 475. It is, therefore, possible that these placenames reflect a forgotten part of early Mercian history.

Old English placenames with the element *ford* are frequent, and nine examples were recorded before 730. Of these, five refer to settlements and two to river crossings without an associated village. Where the element is compounded with a personal name, as at Ickleford, they mostly refer to minor routes used by the community, perhaps ruling out an identification with the spot where the Icknield Way crosses the River Hiz. The placename probably refers to an estate in which the river crossing lay rather than ownership of the ford alone.

If Icel's ford was not where the Icknield Way crosses the River Hiz, others might have been the site. There was a ford at Burford Ray across the River Oughton and probably one between Lower Green and Cadwell, both places with road bridges today. Although we know that Icknield Way existed, we do not know when the part of Bedford Road that enters Ickleford from Hitchin first developed, or when that to Cadwell came into existence. Burford Ray seems to be *\*burhford*, 'the ford of the fortified town', i.e. Hitchin, where the fortifications probably date from the early tenth century, so the name must be later. If this were the site of Icel's ford, the name would be a replacement and would be evidence that the settlement name Ickleford is older than the tenth century.

### Ramerick

The second major name in the parish is Ramerick, which the English Place-Name Society called 'difficult'. Although the earliest form dating from 1202 is *Ramworwic*, most early forms have a *-d-* or *-th-*, as *Ramwardwike* in 1212 or *Ramwurthewyk* in 1247. The second element is Old English *wīc*, 'a dairy farm, an outlying settlement'; the second meaning is appropriate for a place at the extreme north end of the parish. The first part would usually be a descriptive or a personal name, which could be *\*rammworþ* or *\*rammward*; the first would be 'ram-enclosure' and the second, 'ram-keeper'.

The second possibility, *\*rammward*, is a plausible personal name, although it is not attested in Old English. However, there was a Ramward Bishop of Minden (Westphalia, Germany) from before 996 to 1002. The name probably means 'Ramward's outlying settlement'.

### Cadwell

Cadwell originally lay in Bedfordshire, a detached part of Holwell. The name is first recorded in 1227 as *Cadewell* with most early forms retaining an internal *-e-*. It contains a personal name *Cada* and *welle*, 'a spring'. *Cada* is a hypocoristic name form, being reduced from something originally longer. It is of Brittonic origin, although its popularity in Old English placenames shows that English speakers adopted it. The original form may have been the equivalent of Modern Welsh *Cadfan*, from Brittonic *\*Catumanos*; the earliest English poet whose name has survived, *Cædmon*, shared this name.

### Snailswell

Like Cadwell, Snailswell was formerly in Bedfordshire and a part of Holwell parish lying to the east of Bedford Road. It was recorded in 1298 as *Snelleswelle*, which probably derives from the Anglo-Scandinavian personal name *Snelle* rather than Old English *sneġel*, 'a snail', and *welle*, 'a spring'. If the analysis is correct, the placename cannot have existed before the beginnings of Scandinavian settlement in the ninth century. It is also evident that the first element was understood to be 'snail' by the seventeenth century at the latest, as a record of 1608 calls it *Snayleswell*.

### Minor names

Hyde Mill was attested in the reign of Henry III as *le Hide*. It was one of the founding parcels of land granted by Richard de Argentein to the Hospital (and later Priory) that he founded in Little Wymondley between 1203 and 1207.

West Mill seems to be mentioned under that name first in 1604, as a legacy of Thomas Ansell, lord of the manor of Ickleford, to his son Edward. It appears to have been the *Hulemill*, revenue from which was granted by Roger de Lenken to Wymondley Priory to maintain the poor.

The Herne is a name given to a parcel of land formerly in Holwell. The River Hiz forms its boundary to the west, the stream flowing from Cadwell on the east and the Icknield Way to the south. It is now cut by the mainline railway. It probably derives from Old English *hyrne*, 'a corner', as it lay in the angle between the Icknield Way and the Hiz.

Pinchgut Hall, in Snailswell, is a derogatory name. It was initially a field name, indicating poorly productive land, which was later applied to a building isolated from the rest of the community. The open field in Snailswell was called Milldens on the estate map of 1771.

## Prehistory

Prehistory covers an unimaginably long time. The earliest discoveries in North Hertfordshire date from between 424,000 and 400,000 years ago, during a warm phase of the Pleistocene Ice Age known as the Hoxnian Interglacial. After this, there is a lack of information about what was happening until the third millennium BC. There is then a complete sequence of sites and finds enabling us to tell a story of the development of the parish into the present day.

### Lower Palaeolithic (424,000-375,000 years ago)

Several palaeolithic flint tools have been found in the parish, although their precise findspots are not adequately recorded. One, North Hertfordshire Museum 73, has an ink label that states it to be from 'Ickleford Pit'; none of the historic maps shows either a working or a disused pit in the parish. The most likely context is from the former quarry of Gerry's Hole, a pool to the south of Icknield Way and east of the disused Hitchin to Bedford railway, and technically in Hitchin.



Figure 4: two of the Palaeolithic tools from Ickleford in the collection of North Hertfordshire Museum (79 to left, 1922.1480 to right)

The Hertfordshire Historic Environment Record (HER) gives four entries for the collection of Palaeolithic material (HER 313, 314, 1232 and 1233: the grid reference given for the last two is wrong, as it points to a grid square entirely in Pirton). They list a minimum of 22 lithic discoveries; however, 313 includes two handaxes duplicated in 1233 (Hitchin Museum 78 and 79 are the same objects as Letchworth Museum 1922.1940 and 1922.1489), while only two objects from the Sadler

collection (HHER 1232) are said to be from Ickleford (1976.1189 and 1976.1190). One of those listed, 83, is not a handaxe but a Clactonian chopper.

According to Sir John Evans, writing in 1897, ‘at Ickleford, near Hitchin, numerous implements, some of them much water-worn, have been found by Mr Frank Latchmore and others in gravels lying in the valley of the Hiz’. These probably include the thirteen objects accessioned to the British Museum (HHER 314) and perhaps the Clactonian chopper, 83. The HHER quotes Oakley as stating that Sadler’s discoveries were ‘found in brick earth, c.1.5 mile N of Hitchin’, but this must be an error as the brickearth does not extend as far north as Ickleford.

Reference	Description	NGR
HHER 313	Four Palaeolithic handaxes	TL 18 31
HHER 314	Acheulian flints and six scrapers	TL 18 31
HHER 1232	Palaeolithic handaxes and flake tools	TL 18 31
HHER 1233	Palaeolithic flint implements	TL 18 31

Table 1: Palaeolithic finds

### Neolithic/Early Bronze Age

After the Lower Palaeolithic tools, many of which may have come from Gerry’s Hole, there are no recorded finds or sites until the third millennium BC, although there is a hint of a feature that may date from the fourth millennium if its suggested identification as a causewayed enclosure is correct. Monuments of this class belong to the mid-fourth millennium BC, with the earliest dating from about 3650 BC and the latest evidence for use dating to about 3400 BC. This feature, to the northeast of New Ramerwick Farm, measures some 80 × 46 m (Figure 5). Lying in the floodplain of the River Hiz, its eastern half is composed of short ditch segments, while the western half is less clearly defined. Although some causewayed enclosures, such as Etton (Cambridgeshire), do lie in floodplains, they are



Figure 5: archaeology and geology to the northeast of New Ramerwick Farm: possibly archaeological features are marked in red, former courses of the River Hiz in blue (bright blue for the lidar-derived course and dark blue from soilmarks) and geology in lilac (base image from Google Earth Pro)

usually on low sand or gravel islands. The LIDAR plot for this area suggests that it may be slightly elevated above the surroundings. It is even possible that some of these sites were designed to be flooded periodically. The fields in which it is situated are also an area with complex underlying geology, and what appear to be causewayed ditches may be natural in origin. Nevertheless, the size is correct for a causewayed enclosure, and the oval shape would be unusual for a geological feature.

This period overlaps the traditional division between Neolithic and Bronze Age. It was a period when large numbers of settlers arrived in Britain from the continent, bringing with them a Celtic language that developed into Brittonic and, ultimately, Welsh and Cornish. The popular press has exaggerated the scale of this settlement, beginning about 2500 BC, making claims of complete population replacement. This view is unlikely, as there was an overall continuity in burial traditions and the use of ritual sites such as henges. The settlers seem to have integrated well with the existing people, who eventually adopted the new language.

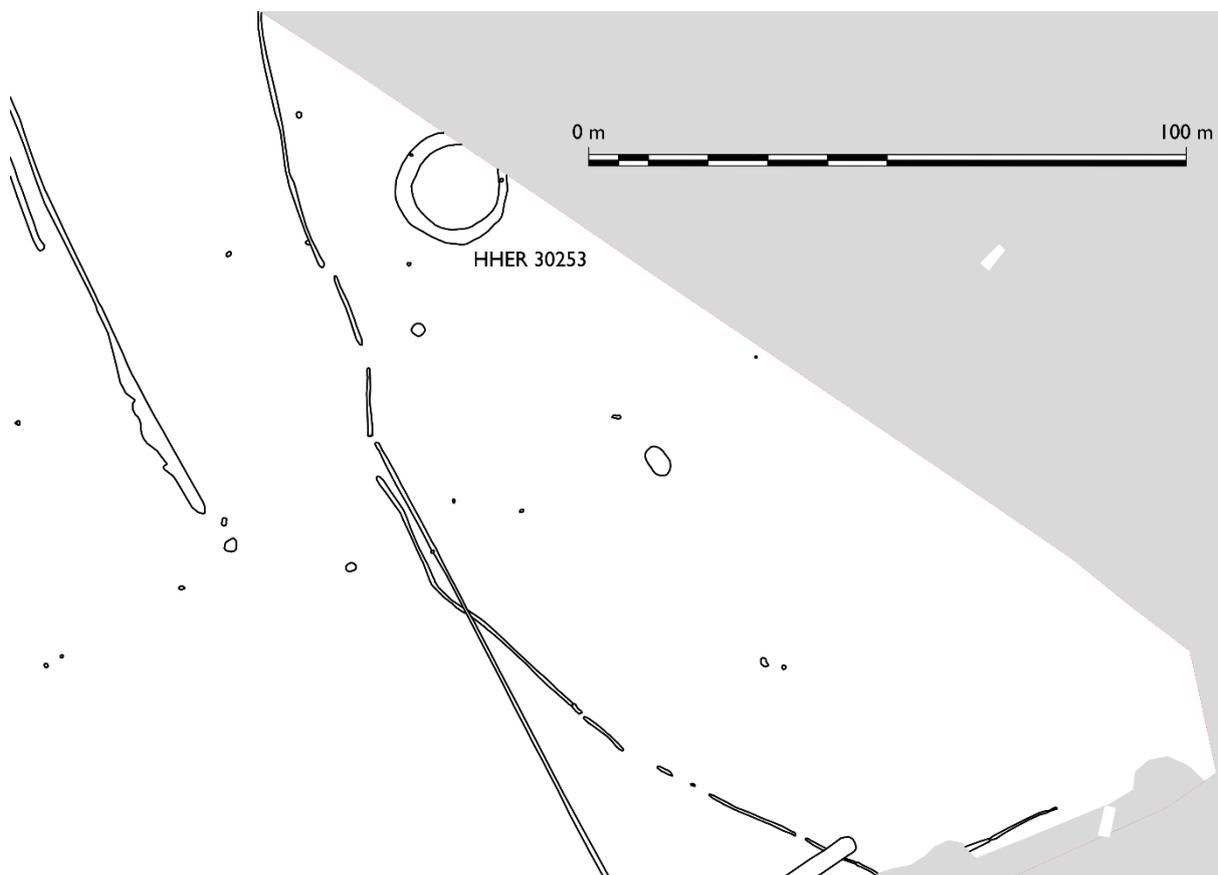


Figure 6: a ring ditch in Cadwell, west of Wilbury Hill (HHER 30253) and interrupted ditch enclosure ditches to its west

It is a period dominated in North Hertfordshire by ring ditches, the quarries for material to build burial mounds. Most such round barrows have been destroyed, mostly by agriculture. Three ring ditches are recorded in Ickleford: one in the north-west corner of the playing field north of Chambers Lane, one between Arnolds Farm and Snailswell and a third in Cadwell, to the west of Wilbury Hill. The first of these was probably destroyed when the playing field was levelled, reducing the ground level in that corner. The second is known only from one aerial photograph and is said to be surrounded by numerous pits; this may be a misinterpretation of vegetation, which includes recurrent fairy ring fungi and other amorphous patches of darker growth.

The third is more definite, as it was partly excavated during the evaluation of the hilltop west of Wilbury Hill before quarrying in 2012. It was 19 m in diameter but only between 0.2 and 0.4 m deep,

owing to the truncation of the chalk through ploughing. It was surrounded by an interrupted ditch enclosure containing late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age material possibly contemporary with the ring ditch. It may have been a precursor to the later fenced enclosure that preceded the construction of the hillfort at Wilbury in the first millennium BC. It was cut by the line of the Icknield Way, suggesting that it did not exist in the early second millennium BC. A group of pits lay about 250 m to the west of the ring ditch that were contemporary with it (Figure 7); one of them contained carbonised material, including burnt flint.

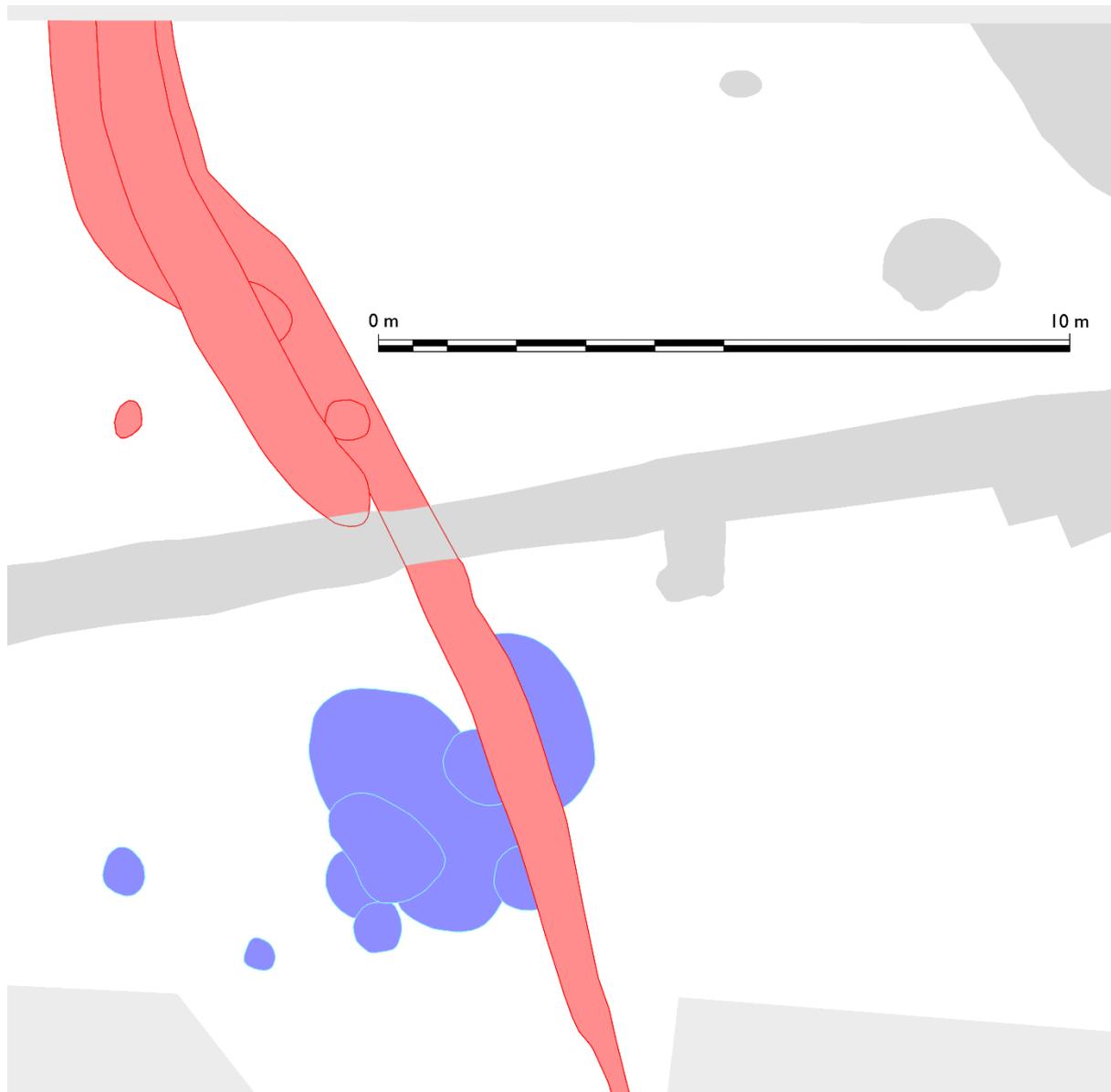


Figure 7: a Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age pit group (HER 30254, purple) and Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age field ditches (pale red)

The HHER records a barbed-and-tanged flint arrowhead from Cadwell, accessioned to Letchworth Museum (1922.1534, although the entry wrongly gives the number as 1934). The register records it as purchased, but does not state from whom or where in Cadwell it was found. Another lithic, found by Owen Williamson in 1949, was part of the Hitchin Museum collections (Accession 1138, also 1976.996 after transfer to Letchworth in 1975); the findspot Cadwell and date of discovery are written on it, typical of Williamson's recording. There are some other flints found by him for which the location

details are simply C, followed by a number; while they may have been found in Cadwell, there is now no way to confirm the suggestion.

Reference	Description	NGR
HHER 311	Bronze Age flint arrowhead, Cadwell	TL 192323
HHER 2553	Cropmark of ring ditch	TL 179319
HHER 17908	Cropmark of ring ditch north of Arnolds Farm	TL 181322
HHER 30253	Round barrow west of Wilbury Hill	TL 197325
HHER 30254	Pits west of Wilbury Hill	TL 194325

Table 2: third millennium BC sites

## Middle and Late Bronze Age

The development of Bronze Age society was driven by metalworking technology. The manufacture of tin bronze was well established by the Middle Bronze Age, beginning about 1500 BC, making tools and especially weapons more durable. A lot of the technological innovation was put towards making killing people more efficient, part of what the prehistorian Mike Parker Pearson has called ‘the first European arms race’.

After burial beneath circular mounds became unfashionable, by about 1400 BC, it is harder to see how people were using the landscape, as we lack the numerous ring ditches of earlier periods. People were continuing to farm the land, and some ‘Celtic’ field systems probably originated around this time, as the growing population established more permanent fields. The climatic downturn that followed the eruption of the Icelandic Mount Hekla in 1159 BC led to increased rainfall and generally colder conditions. Low-lying places such as the valley of the River Hiz became unsuitable for human occupation owing to increased risks of flooding.

A concentration of activity on higher ground may be visible in the parish, where the only discoveries of this date are on the hilltop west of Wilbury Hill (Figure 7). Here, excavation before quarrying in 2011 showed the presence of a field system with ditches containing pottery from about 1150 to 500 BC, a period overlapping with the Early Iron Age. There were nearby pits containing similar material, which may indicate the presence of a nearby settlement. The enclosed site at Wilbury, outside the parish in Letchworth Garden City, originated at this time. Discoveries during the construction of the Hitchin Grade Separation rail loop in 2011 showed that far from being an isolated settlement dominating its territory, the hillfort of Wilbury was an element in a densely occupied landscape, surrounded – at least to the west and south – by fields and settlements.

Reference	Description	NGR
HHER 30255	Pits and ditches west of Wilbury Hill	TL 195325

Table 3: late second to early first millennium BC sites

## Early and Middle Iron Age

The middle centuries of the first millennium BC saw sustained population growth and the development of fortifications at Wilbury Hill. The fortifications seem never to have been completed and, eventually, the settlement spread over the line of the abandoned ditch. The field system to the west, on the hilltop in Cadwell, remained in use. A longer linear ditch traced for at least 150 m nearby and scattered pits (HHER 30256) belong to this period. A pit was cut into the ditch of the Bronze Age burial mound identified on the hilltop, suggesting that it remained a focus for activity into the first millennium.

Traces of a field system have been identified to the northeast of New Ramerwick Farm, around the possible causewayed enclosure (Archaeological Area 84). However, most of the visible features in this area are likely to be of geological origin, including ice-wedge polygons that formed during the tundra conditions of the late Pleistocene, and former courses of the River Hiz. The land is very low-lying and unsuitable for arable fields; the few features that appear to be of anthropogenic origin (apart from the

oval enclosure) are all linear and aim towards the river, suggesting that they are probably former drainage ditches. There is nothing that confirms it as a prehistoric field system: instead, they may be drains within a medieval or later water meadow (named as Michaelmas Mead, Lamma Mead and Long Butts on the survey of 1771).

The supposed ‘mass of pits’ visible on aerial photographs in the fields north of Arnolds Farm (HHER 17907 and 17908) are also probably not of archaeological origin. As already noted, the visible maculae seem to be darker patches of vegetation, including recurrent fairy ring fungi.

One of the HHER entries describes a clay loomweight from Ickleford ‘in Hitchin Museum’ (actually accessioned to Letchworth Museum, as 1927.4267), It was donated by J Peat Young on 30 April 1927. No further details appear to be known about the object, including its provenance.

Reference	Description	NGR
HHER 186	Clay loomweight	TL 15 30
HHER 17907	Cropmarks of pits, north of Arnold Farm	TL 181319
HHER 17908	Cropmarks of curvilinear ditch and pits north of Arnolds Farm	TL 181322
HHER 30253	Pit cut into ring ditch	TL 197325

Table 4: Early and Middle Iron Age sites

## Late Iron Age/Romano-British

From 100 BC onwards, Britain was brought increasingly into the Roman world. Julius Caesar’s raids in 55 and 54 BC may have created client kingdoms in the southeast (including Hertfordshire), dependent upon and paying tribute to Rome. By the time Claudius invaded in AD 43, this region was already effectively Roman in all but name, making it impossible to divide its archaeology between Late Iron Age and Romano-British.

Older accounts of archaeological discoveries in the village include references to coins from West Mill and elsewhere, as well as pottery. There is a description of a ‘black urn 3½ inches high decorated with two incised lines round the shoulder and below the rim’, although it is without provenance. A vessel of this description could date to anywhere between the late first century BC and the early fifth century AD: without knowing details of its form, the shape of the rim and the ceramic fabric, this type of description is useless.

A group of amateurs identified a dense network of what they believed to be Roman roads in the southeast Midlands during the 1950s and 1960s, publishing their work under the pseudonym of The Viatores. One of their supposed routes, from *Verolamium* to Bedford, runs through Ickleford (HHER 4600 and 9542). However, there is no evidence that any stretch of this road in Ickleford is of Roman origin. Although its use as a parish boundary between Pinchgut Hall and Holwellbury Farm Cottages shows it to be pre-modern, mostly it does not run in straight lengths. There is also no trace of an *agger*, the raised bank on which engineered long-distance routes would be sited. It can be discounted as Roman. Instead, it probably developed after the *burhs* had been created at Hitchin and Bedford early in the tenth century, linking the two places.

The Icknield Way is a less controversial and undoubtedly ancient route. There is good evidence for its use in the Late Iron Age and Roman periods in Letchworth Garden City, to the east. The side ditches were excavated during the quarrying at Cadwell in 2011 on a line just north from the present bridleway (HHER 17903). To the west of Ickleford, a pair of ditches north of the River Oughton visible on aerial photographs probably marks its route from the first century BC onwards. The track lies to the south of the ‘traditional’ line and can be traced further west into Offley, trending even further to the south. There is no trace of it across Beacon Hill and Telegraph Hill, which would have necessitated the types of steep gradients usually avoided by Roman roads.

In the very north of the parish, east of Old Ramerick, a set of cropmarks defining several enclosures have long been known (Archaeological Area 83 and HHER 4414; Figure 8). The discovery of Late Iron Age and Roman coins in this area by metal detectorists (Figure 9) is a good indication that the buried remains date from the first century BC to the fourth century AD. The site occupies a low ridge between Ramerick Bottom to the south and the stream forming the parish boundary to the north. The underlying geology is complex, making it difficult to recognise archaeological features. There is a polygonal (nearly oval) central feature, with at least five internal 'blobs' that may be pits. It is surrounded by ditches that may define a larger (and possibly later) enclosure, together with others that may be parts of field boundaries. The findspots of metalwork lie outside the visible cropmarks, but this may not be significant owing to the challenge in identifying archaeological as opposed to geological anomalies.



Figure 8: cropmarks and findspots east of Old Ramerick (base image from Google Earth Pro)

Although there is a 'gap' in the coin sequence between the end of the first century BC and the late fourth century AD, this may not be significant. There is nothing in the form of the cropmarks to suggest a period of abandonment and re-establishment: they indicate an occupation site, probably a farmstead, with little change throughout its use. Many farmsteads lack significant numbers of early Roman coins – they are less common than third- and fourth-century coins on most classes of site – and the pattern here may be partly an accident of discovery. One intriguing find is a coin issued by the House of Constantine (possibly Constantius II) during the period 330-348. It has been counterstamped, with a cross or an X in a circle, and pierced for suspension. Piercing is not unusual with Late Roman coins, which may have been converted to use in jewellery; this was especially common during the Early Middle Ages, but fourth-century examples are known. The countermark is more unusual. They are found more frequently on early Imperial coins and rarely on fourth-century bronzes. The form of the countermark is also rare: the closest parallel is on a coin of Tiberius from Syria. Countermarks were



Figure 9: some of the Late Iron Age and Roman metalwork from the site near Old Ramerick (© Portable Antiquities Scheme, reproduced under a Creative Commons licence)

added to coins sometimes to guarantee an old issue as still valid and sometimes as a mark of provincial identity. The purpose of the mark on this coin is unknown: if it is an X, it may be the numeral 10.

There is also a possible site in Snailswell. Aerial photographs show a group of cropmarks that appear to define a trackway running west to east and field boundaries (Figure 10). Immediately to the north, metal detected finds include a Late Iron Age coin and a first-century AD brooch. If they can be associated with the possible field system, they may indicate a nearby settlement, although none of the visible crop marks looks like part of it.



Figure 10: cropmarks north of Snailswell, possibly showing a trackway and Roman fields (base image from Google Earth Pro)



Figure 11: metal detector finds from north of Snailswell (© Portable Antiquities Scheme, reproduced under a Creative Commons licence)

During the quarrying operation at Cadwell, evidence was found for occupation at this period. An enclosure stood on the hilltop (HHER 30257), mostly lying outside the excavation area, with an entrance on its eastern side. Mollusc remains show that it stood in open grassland, while cereal remains show that both wheat and barley were cultivated. A gap at its northeastern corner was complicated by a group of recut pits and ditches (Figure 12), as well as some cremation burials. This intense activity, spanning only the first century BC to second century AD, suggests that something other than practical considerations for cleaning was going on. Combined with the burial evidence, it is likely that there was some sort of religious or ritual focus in this area. The human remains recorded in this general area by HHER 1434 and 4854 are probably part of the same concentration of activity.

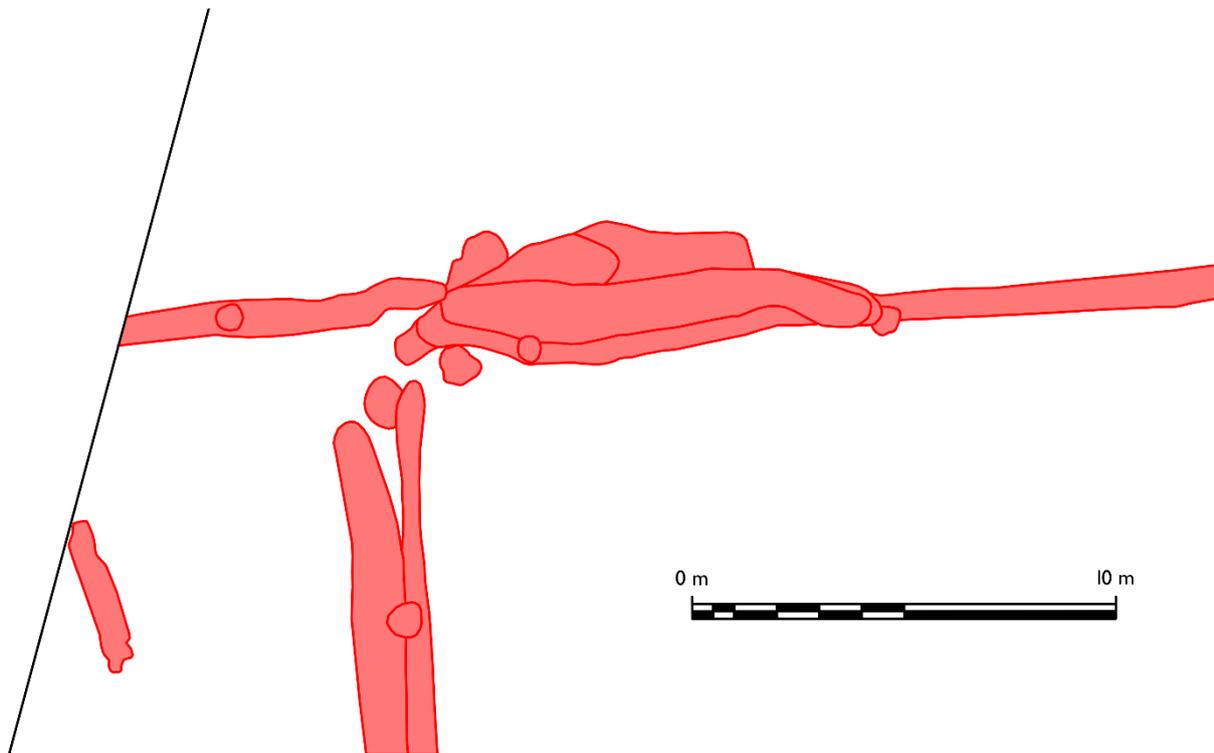


Figure 12: intercutting pits and ditches at the northeastern corner of the Late Iron Age to early Roman enclosure on top of the hill west of Wilbury

The period from the first century BC to the start of the fifth century AD has evidence for scattered farming settlements across the parish. This picture is typical of North Hertfordshire, which was a wealthy agricultural part of the Roman province. Its communities lay in the hinterland of the market town at Baldock, part of what was termed its *pagus*. The local administrative centre lay at *Uerolamjum*, one of the largest cities in *Britannia* and central place of the *Ciuitas Catuvelaunorum*. It was where people had to go to pay their taxes, where they would have legal cases heard and where they were most likely to meet 'real' Romans (people from Italy).

There has long been debate about what language the people of Roman Britain spoke. Whereas other former provinces in Western Europe speak a language descended from Latin, Britain does not. In the east, we speak English, a language introduced by settlers from northern Europe who began to arrive in the early fifth century. In the west, the indigenous languages are Welsh and, formerly, Cornish. Does this mean that Latin never took hold?

The Dutch linguist Peter Schrijver has made an intriguing discovery about the sound changes that separate English from other West Germanic languages: they are paralleled in Welsh and in the Latin spoken in northern Gaul during the fifth and sixth centuries. He believes that this is a result of people in south-eastern *Britannia* speaking a type of Latin identical with that of northern Gaul fleeing west towards Wales during the wars against the Saxon settlers in the middle of the fifth century. By the time they fled, their pronunciation of Latin had affected that of Brittonic, the language of the countryside. The peasants mostly stayed behind, as they continued to farm their land and were useful labourers for the small numbers of settlers. But in trying to speak the language of the newcomers, they affected its pronunciation, creating a distinctly English form of West Germanic, quite different from the dialects that went on to become Frisian and Dutch.

Ideas like this are intriguing but unprovable. Schrijver's hypothesis explains the otherwise apparent coincidence that the changes separating Old English from Old Frisian are precisely the same as the changes that Old Welsh underwent. If he is right, it means that much of the population of Roman

Britain – especially the poorer, farming and labouring classes – remained behind and influenced the development of the English language.

Reference	Description	NGR
HHER 1230	Roman coins from West Mill	TL 170307
HHER 1234	Roman coins and pottery	TL 18 31
HHER 1434	Romano-British burials	TL 193325
HHER 4414	Cropmarks of sub-circular enclosure	TL 176349
HHER 4600	Supposed line of Roman road	TL 174180
HHER 4854	Burial of unknown date	TL 193325
HHER 6370	Cropmarks of a field system	TL 183340
HHER 9542	Supposed line of Roman road	TL 178327
HHER 17903	Trackway on line of Icknield Way	TL 197323
HHER 30253	Pit cut into ring ditch	TL 197325
HHER 30257	Enclosure and cremation burials west of Wilbury Hill	TL 194325
BH-9106A7	Bronze unit of Cunobelin	TL 180330
BH-90D82E	Iron Age brooch	TL 180330
BH-447FDE	Whaddon Chase stater	TL 176349
BH-973E15	Roman Republican coin of Hosidius Geta, 64 BC	TL 176349
BH-96F6AA	Coin of the Gaulish Senones, 60-50 BC	TL 177348
BH-96DF57	Silver unit of Tasciovanos	TL 178348
BH-873517	Roman bow brooch fragment	TL 177348
BH-294649	Barbarous radiate coin	TL 175348
BH-292A28	Roman coin dated c 300×402	TL 175348
BH-291916	Roman coin dated c 260×402 (contemporary forgery)	TL 175348
BH-19B196	Roman zoomorphic bracelet	TL 175348
BH-0E26BF	Coin of Theodora	TL 177348
BH-0DFD45	Coin of Theodora	TL 177348
BH-0DDA52	Coin of the House of Constantine, probably Constantius II	TL 177348
BH-0DA588	Roman coin dated 260×296	TL 177348
BH-0D770C	Coin of Allectus	TL 177348
BH-25080A	Roman coin dated c 260×402	TL 177349
BH-24FCDC	Roman coin dated c 260×402	TL 177349
BH-24D273	Roman coin dated c 260×402	TL 177349
BH-8722E1	Roman greyware rimsherd	TL 177348
BH-871C2E	Roman coin dated c 300×402	TL 177348
BH-8714A6	Roman coin dated c 260×402	TL 177348
BH-870530	Coin of Claudius II	TL 177348
BH-86FB35	Coin of Claudius II	TL 177348
BH-86F2A0	Coin of Claudius II	TL 177348
BH-86EBD4	Roman coin c 260×275	TL 177348
BH-86E072	Coin of Gallienus	TL 177348
BH-86BA26	Roman coin dated c 260×275	TL 177348
BH-86B2DF	Roman coin	TL 177348
BH-869242	Coin of the Tetrarchy	TL 177348

Table 5: Late Iron Age and Roman sites and finds

## Post-Roman

The end of the Roman period is as obscure in Ickleford as it is across most of North Hertfordshire. Where evidence exists, as at Baldock and Hitchin, it shows that the Romano-British population continued to live in existing settlements, trying to maintain their way of life against a backdrop of

economic decline and political turmoil. At the same time, new settlers were arriving from northern Germany and Scandinavia, although there is little evidence for their presence in North Hertfordshire.

Ickleford emerges as a manor in records during the twelfth century, although this is simply the earliest surviving documentary record. Discovering how much earlier the community came into existence is a challenge for archaeology, not history. The currently available evidence does not permit an easy answer as finds earlier than the tenth century are rare and not properly provenanced. Nevertheless, they suggest that a settlement was developing by about 900.

### Early medieval

There are two antiquarian reports of discoveries in the village dating from the period between the collapse of Roman rule and the unification of England. The first followed gales in 1895 when several elm trees were uprooted, probably during the severe weather in February; the same storm destroyed the windmill in Charlton. Seven coins, said to be of base metal, were found in the roots by workers removing the stumps. Frank Latchmore was able to examine four of them. Three were of Burgred (king of Mercia 852-874), the moneyers being Eadnoð, Huðhere and Liafuald, all of whose coins first appear 868×70. The fourth was of Æthelred I (King of Wessex 865-871 and brother-in-law of Burgred) with the moneyer Biarneah. Latchmore was unable to find out precisely where in the village the coins were discovered but believed that they were part of a more substantial hoard that had remained buried. The dates of the coins indicate that it cannot have been assembled before the late 860s. The second discovery, of three spearheads, was reported to the St Albans Architectural and Archaeological Society in 1905 and published in its Transactions. They are said to be ‘Saxon’, although the grounds for their identification are not given.

With the lack of finds and dated sites, it is impossible to know what became of the communities of Roman Ickleford and where the first medieval settlements developed. The Roman settlement at Cadwell was abandoned during the second century AD, although that at Ramerick continued until at least the fourth. The Icknield Way continued in use and seems to have become a major route between East Anglia and the Thames Valley only in this early medieval period.

Reference	Description	NGR
HHER 1616	Three spearheads	TL 18 31
HHER 4870	Probable coin hoard	TL 18 30

Table 6: early medieval finds

### High medieval

Following the ninth-century wars against the Danes, the kings of Wessex united much of England in a single kingdom. Although the wars continued – and England was permanently conquered by a group of Vikings who had settled in northern France, the Normans – medieval England developed a robust centralised bureaucracy. The well organised local infrastructure, based around hundreds and landed estates enabled William I’s survey of 1085, better known as Domesday Book, to be completed in a matter of months. The system of landholding, in which peasants paid taxes, often in kind, to their reeve (*gerefa*), who in turn owed services to the king, was similar to the feudal system imported by the Norman administration in 1066. Its imposition led to little change in the structure of land ownership but was devastating to the landowning aristocracy, which mostly lost its possessions.

As previously noted, Ickleford and Ramerick were parts of the manor of Pirton at the time of Domesday Book and continued to be throughout the Middle Ages. They were probably held by the unnamed *miles anglicus* (‘English soldier’) and the *sochemannus* (a freeman obliged to attend his lord’s court but without the burdens of other villagers) who had held the land in the time of Edward the Confessor. They held two hides between them, and there were one *villanus* (‘villein’) and eight *cottarii* (‘cottagers’) living there. This is a clear indication that both manors existed and that there was a community, probably based at Ickleford. Applying the rules for estimating population (the numbers in

Domesday Book are of householders liable to pay tax, assume that 25% were below the threshold for paying and that each household consisted of five people), we come up with a total of about 69 people in the two places.

### The manors

The family of Foliot held the manor of Ickleford by the later thirteenth century, when Isabel, widow of John Foliot, held it. John Fitz Simon held it by 1303 and his descendant Hugh held it along with several others in 1346. One of those coparceners, Simon Francis, became sole lord of the manor, which remained in his family until Richard Francis mortgaged it to Thomas Ansell in 1585. The Ansell's descendant Mary Goostrey sold it in 1788.

The first records of the manor of Ramerick show it to have been held by Richarch de Reincourt. His daughter Margaret (or Margery) married Robert Foliot, who died in 1175. Their son Richard married Milicent de Hastings and had a daughter Margery, who married Wischard Ledet. Through their daughter Christine, the manor passed to the Braybrook family. The heiress in 1428, Elizabeth widow of Gerard Braybrook, married twice and her second husband, Roger Toocotes became lord of the manor, dying in 1491. It then passed to Richard Beauchamp, Elizabeth's son by her first marriage, who died in 1508 leaving only an illegitimate son, Anthony Wroughton. He conveyed it to St John's College, Cambridge, in 1520×21, which still owns the manorial rights.

### Moats



Figure 13: LIDAR plot showing the moat around Old Ramerick

There is a moat around the manor house at Old Ramerick (HHER 1929). The expansion of the farm during the nineteenth century destroyed its western arm, but LIDAR shows its original form to have been an approximate isosceles triangle, the long axis aligned west to east (Figure 13). The long arm on the north side and half the long arm on the south side survive, although modified to form garden features, including being cleaned out by a drag-line in the 1950s. It was fed by the unnamed tributary of the River Hiz that flows in Ramerick Bottom and is followed by the county boundary. Most moats were created in the half-century 1275-1325, often in previously uncultivated land ('waste' in feudal

terminology, as they brought no revenue to the manor). This date would make it a creation of a tenant of the Braybrooks.

The house has a late medieval core, was converted into a farmhouse by 1625 and was restored in 1953-4. The earliest part was a hall house, which had upper floors inserted at different times during the seventeenth century. The eastern cross-wing dates from the sixteenth century and is probably timber-framed, with late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century additions.

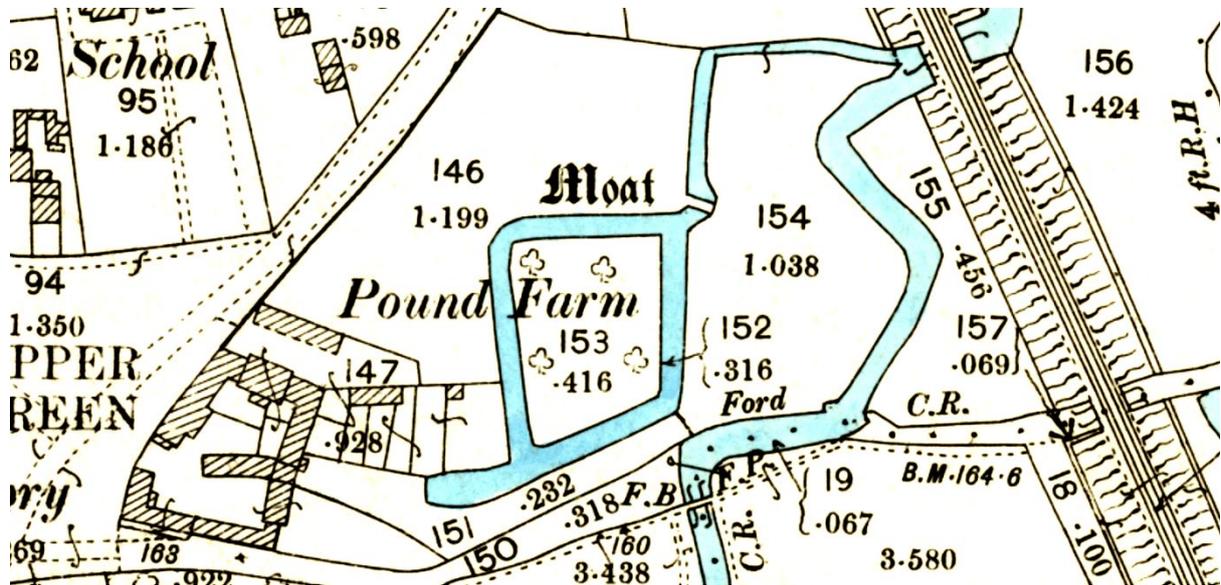


Figure 14: Pound Farm moat in 1897

A moat formerly existed at Pound Farm, east of Upper Green and north of the Icknield Way (Figure 14). It was rectangular and fed from the north-east by the River Hiz, while the southern arm extended west towards the Green. By the late nineteenth century, the moated island was an orchard. North Hertfordshire Archaeological Society excavated the site in 1966 when the site was granted permission for redevelopment. It had been thoroughly disturbed in recent centuries, although some finds were recovered (Accession 1976.1442 and 1976.1443), including medieval pottery dumped by contractors working elsewhere in the village (HHER 1229, 1976.1444). The excavation was abandoned after a group of travellers camped on the site.

It has been suggested that Lower Green Farm occupies the site of a moated enclosure, based on cartographic evidence. Nineteenth-century maps show a pond to the northeast of the farm resembling one arm and two corners of a moat. Although the Historic Environment Record cautions that the mapped pond might represent a former course of the River Hiz, LIDAR evidence shows that this is not the case. The



Figure 15: excavating at Pound Farm in 1966

LIDAR confirms that the southwest to northeast arms still exist and hint at the location of the southwestern arm.



Figure 16: LIDAR plot showing the moat at Lower Green Farm, outlined in red

### St Katherine's church

The parish church is older than the vicarage of Ickleford. The latter was created in 1215, but the church nave and chancel date from the mid-twelfth century. The tower dates from about the time the



Figure 17: the nave of St Katherine's church, 3 June 2010

vicarage was instituted (perhaps it was constructed to show the elevation of the building from chapel-of-ease to parish church) and the south porch is fifteenth-century. The church was restored in 1859, when a south aisle and chapel and a north vestry were added.

### Medieval fields

Several slight earthworks in the parish have been thought to be evidence for ridge-and-furrow cultivation (HHER 17899, 17905, 17906 and 18441). They include eroded headlands (Figure 18), which suggest an organisation of the landscape on a large scale. Some cut across the line of the A600 Bedford Road in the southern part of the parish, showing that this stretch must be later than the field system. The estate map of 1771 shows something of its organisation (Figure 19), with the names West Field, Home Field and North Field marking three open fields (Milldens, The Herne and Cadwell were all part of Holwell). The continuation of headlands into Snailswell from Ramerick shows that these adjoining

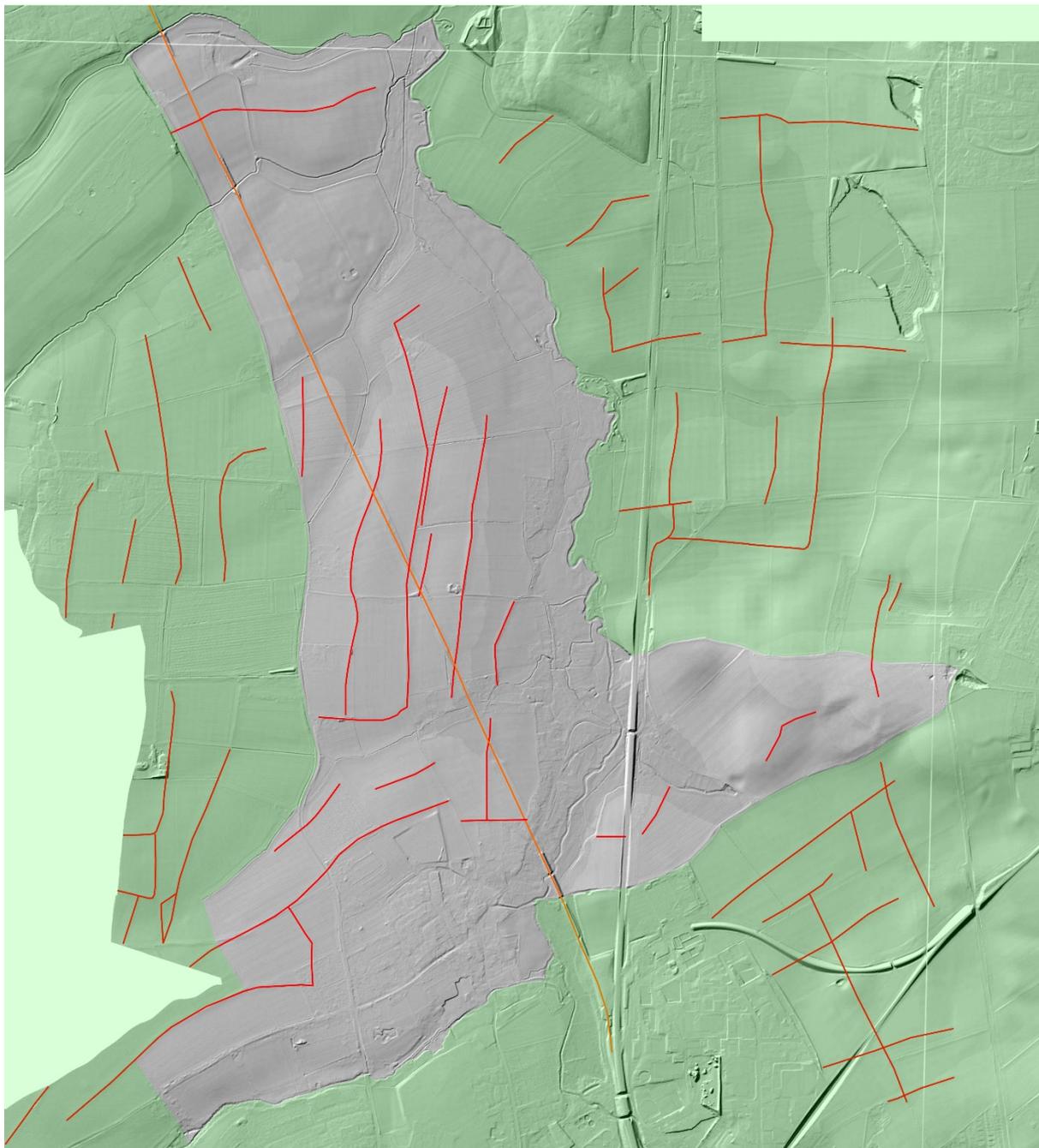


Figure 18: possible field headlands (red); the closed Hitchin to Bedford railway is marked in orange

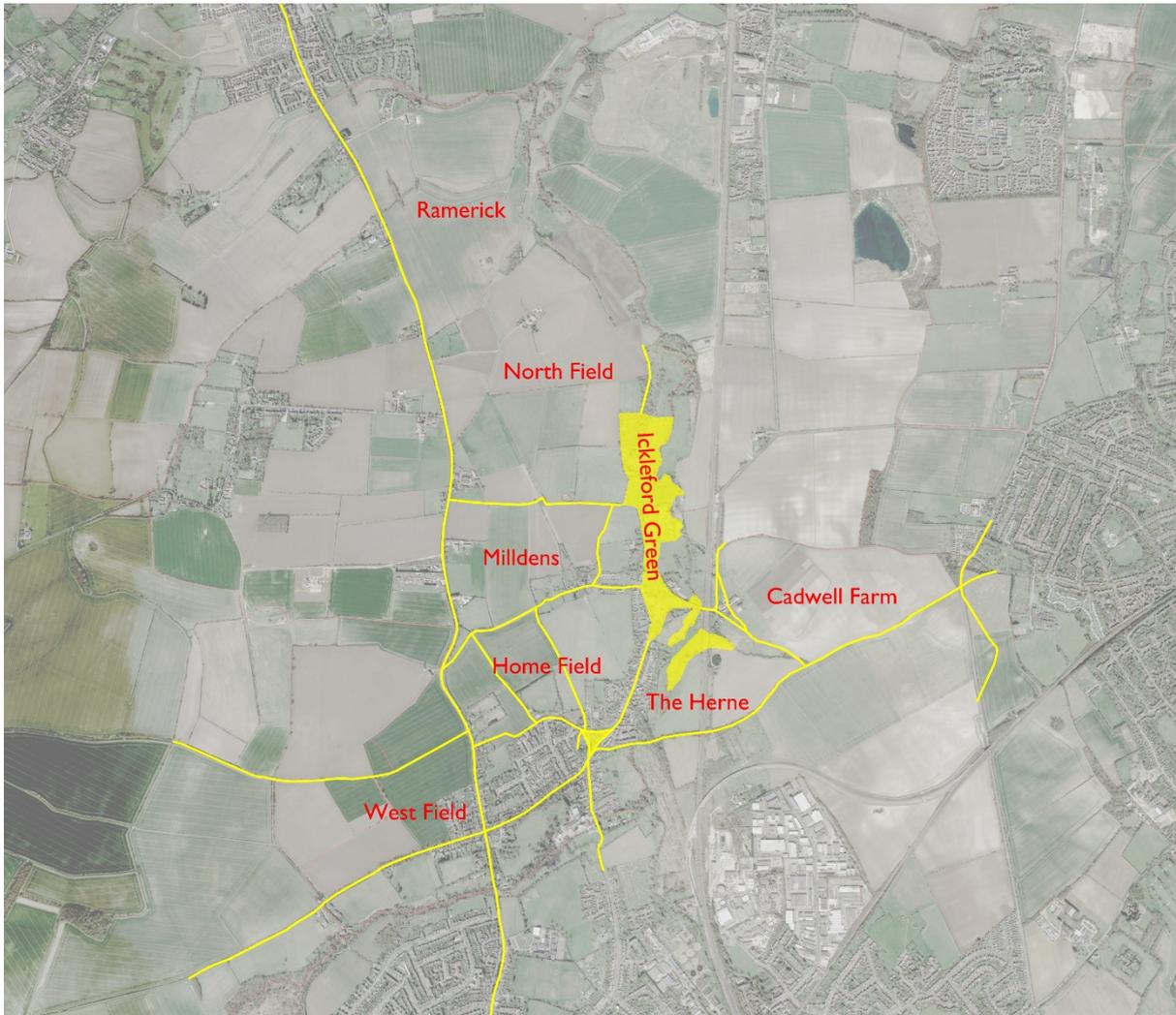


Figure 19: field names and the location of streets in 1771

parishes, then in different counties, nevertheless farmed area in common, unless there is an alternative explanation. This question involves understanding the relationship of Ickleford and Ramerick not only with Holwell and Pirton, but with a larger area of northern Hertfordshire and south Bedfordshire, to be explored below.

Reference	Description	NGR
HHER 1228	Site of moat at former Pound Farm	
HHER 1229	Medieval pottery and ironworking debris	
HHER 1929	Moat at Old Ramerick	
HHER 2882	Old Ramerick manor house	
HHER 4306	Church of St Katherine	
HHER 13222	Possible moat at Lower Green Farm	
HHER 13274	Ditch at Duncot Close	
HHER 17899	Cropmarks of plough headlands	
HHER 17905	Ridge-and-furrow	
HHER 17906	Ridge-and-furrow	
HHER 18441	Plough headland bank	

Table 7: High medieval sites

## Late medieval and post-medieval

By the time of the Black Death, Ickleford is likely to have had much of the shape recognisable today. The field system was well established, the core of the village had likely clustered around St Katherine's church, and many of the roads were on their present lines. The mills were operating – although some were in Shillington parish – and moats had been constructed at Old Ramerick, Pond Farm and Lower Green Farm. The northern part of the settlement was arranged around Ickleford Common (now Lower Green), and it is possible that it originally extended as far south as the parish church, where Upper Green is a fossilised remnant. The village would, therefore, have developed as gradual encroachments on this larger area of common land. It is worth noting that it extended across the River Hiz into Cadwell.

## The parish shape

As already noted, the historic parish consists of two almost separate lobes, with Ickleford proper to the south and Ramerick to the north. The two parts of Holwell lay either side of the 'neck' of land joining the two lobes. However, the detached Cadwell and Snailswell, which separated the main part of the parish from Ramerick, were incorporated into Ickleford in the later twentieth century. This attenuation of Ickleford and the splitting of Holwell must be related.

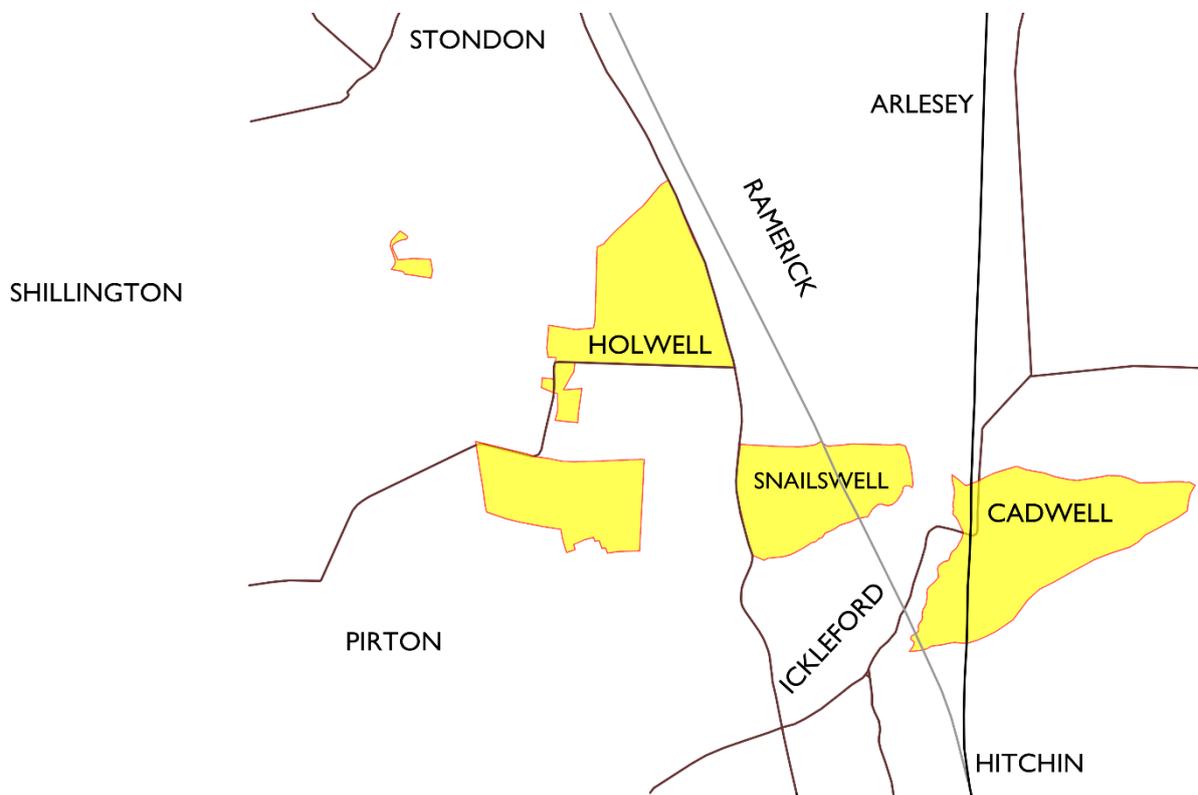


Figure 20: the five separate elements of Holwell about 1850

Holwell lay in Bedfordshire until 1894, and its incorporation into Hertfordshire formed part of the nineteenth-century tidying-up of administrative arrangements in England. The situation had been even more complex earlier in the century when significant elements of Holwell lay inside Shillington, and the parish was segmented into five parts (Figure 20). It is also curious that Holwellbury – a placename that shows it to have been the manor house – lies in Stondon. Further north, a large part of Meppershall and Polehanger lay in Hertfordshire (they are recorded as being in Hitchin Hundred in Domesday Book, as *Maperteshale* and *Polehangre* respectively; see Figure 21). Although Polehanger had been transferred to Bedfordshire before its donation to the Knights Hospitaller of Saint John of Jerusalem in 1258, the Hertfordshire element of Meppershall was not transferred until 1844.

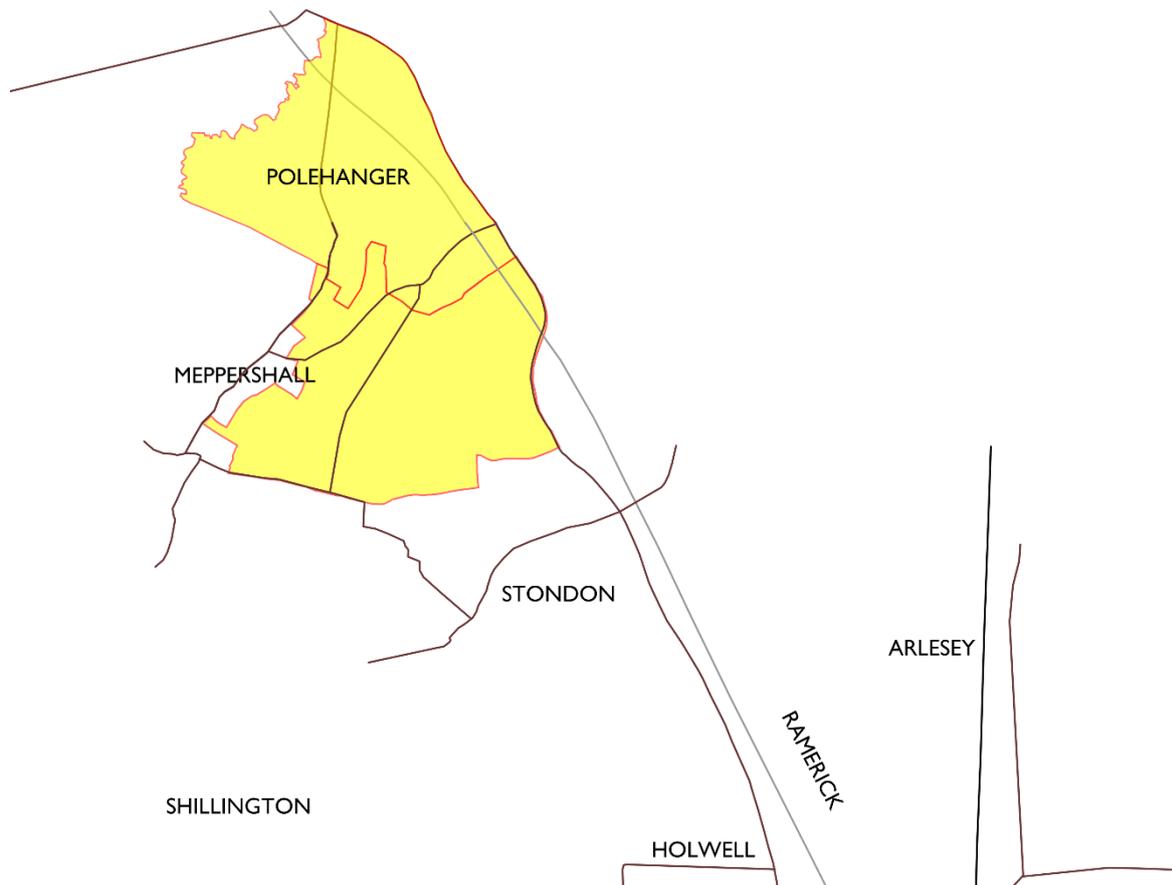


Figure 21: elements of Meppershall that lay within Hertfordshire in 1086 (Polehanger was transferred to Bedfordshire before 1258; the Hertfordshire part of Meppershall was transferred in 1844)

It is then necessary to see the interrelationship of Ickleford, Ramerick, Holwell, Cadwell and Pirton. They form a mostly logical interlocking unit, although the extension of Cadwell to the east of the River Hiz looks strange, as does the failure of Pirton to continue west of the road linking it with Preston (Figure 22). Moreover, the southern parts of Pirton and Ickleford contain detached parts of Shillington (five in all, of which one itself contains a detached part of Pirton), indicating something extraordinary in not only the manorial and parochial arrangements but also the division between the counties of Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire.

The two counties are first mentioned in an entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 1011, describing how the Danish army had overrun parts of England. They are named as *Heortfordscire*, the sixth region to be occupied, and *Bedefordscire*, the eighth. From this listing, it is clear that they already existed as recognisable administrative units, but their earlier history and origins are more obscure. The system of shires developed first in the Kingdom of Wessex, and it was probably imposed on Mercia during the campaigns against the Danes carried out by Edward the Elder (King 899-924). The shires formed the basis for defence, organised by an Ealdorman (the precursor of a Sherrif) and administered from a central *burh* (a fortified market town). Important *burhs* were established at Hertford in 912 and Bedford in 914, with lesser places at Hitchin and (probably) Ashwell, perhaps in 913. The convoluted boundary between the two counties, not just in the Ickleford area, shows that it was an artificial creation and ignored earlier administrative arrangements.

We can deduce that the Pirton/Holwell/Ickleford/Ramerick/Cadwell unit must have existed before the county boundary, so its origins ought to lie before 900. There is a further complication, though: the numerous detached parts of Shillington that cluster around the River Oughton. There is no hint of this in the Domesday Book entry for Shillington, where it is a single manor, listed next to one of two

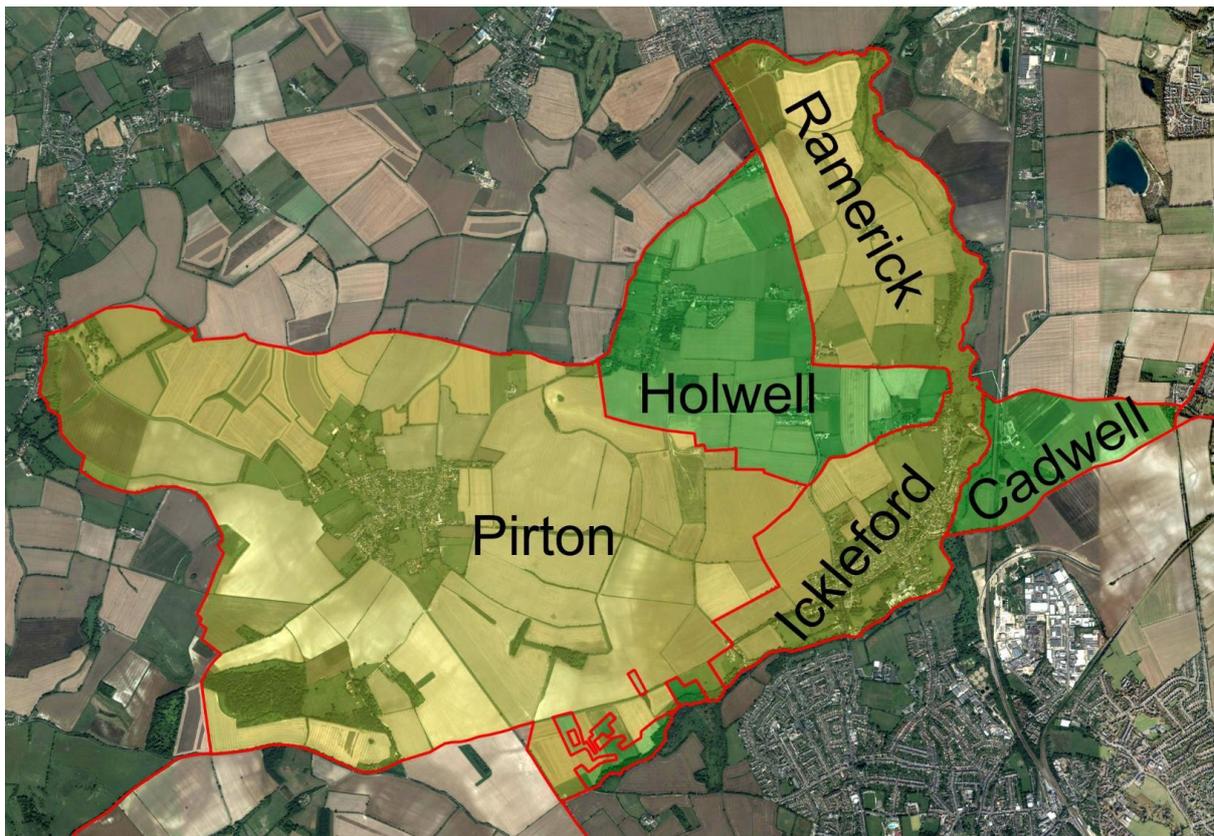


Figure 22: Pirton, Holwell, Ickleford, Ramerick and Cadwell

entries for Holwell, which is the Cadwell element. Both places were in the lordship of the Abbey of St Benedict at Ramsey. Pegsdon, now a part of Shillington, was a manor of St Benedict's but in a different Hundred. The more extensive element of Holwell was the only Bedfordshire possession of Westminster Abbey.

One explanation of this apparent confusion over the organisation of these manors and parishes is that they were initially larger blocks. During the process of subdivision – the creation of the county boundary is only one part of the process – rights to land distant from the manorial centres were retained. There is even a placename that hints at the type of territory involved: Shillington. The earliest record of the name is in a fourteenth-century copy of a charter dated 1060 when it was written *Scytlingedune*. It can be analysed as *\*Scyttinga-dun*, 'the hill of the *Scyttingas*'. This type of name is an Old English folk-name, the *Scyttingas* being a group of people associated with a leader called Scyttel.

Reconstructing the territory of the *Scyttingas* could account for the dispersed parcels of land belonging to Shillington into the 1890s. A minimal view would include Meppershall, Shillington (but not Pegsdon), Pirton (including Ickleford and Ramerick), Holwell (but not Cadwell) and Stondon. These parishes form about half of the historic Clifton Hundred, with the addition of Pirton. However, it does not account for the inclusion of Cadwell into Holwell or Pegsdon with Shillington. A solution could be to include the remaining parishes of Clifton Hundred (Clifton, Henlow, Arlesey and Stotfold). It is a convincing block of land, with the *Scyttingas* an early folk-group integrated into the larger administrative unit. Again, as the county boundary cuts it, this must have existed before 900.

That is not the end of the trail, though. The analysis does not account for the inclusion of part of Meppershall (said by Domesday Book to be *apperciata in Bedefordscyre*, 'assessed in Bedfordshire') and Polehanger in Hitchin Half-Hundred. The origins of this Half-Hundred must be linked with a people known as the *Hicce*, mentioned in an obscure document known as the Tribal Hidage. The town name derives from *Hiccum*, 'among the *Hicce*'. At the time of Domesday Book, much of Hitchin Half-Hundred

contained a block of land held directly by King William I and several churches in adjacent Hundreds were chapelries of Hitchin. Westoning in Bedfordshire was part of this holding, although it is detached: the placename ought to be Weston Ing (Ing being the name of a family that once held the manor). The name could mean that it originated as the westernmost part of the estate centred on Hitchin. Similarly, Aston ought to have been the eastern element and Norton the northern.

East of Aston, the name of Benington suggests another folk group, the *Beningas* ('the people of the River Beane') and to the south, Tewin, the *Tiwingas*, were either 'the people of *Tiwa*' or 'followers of the god *Tiw*'. These groups probably place a southernmost limit on the *Hicce*. To the north, Southill contains the name of the *Gifle*, a people named after the *Hicce* in the Tribal Hidage, so this imposes a northern limit. These constraints allow an approximate reconstruction of the *regio* to be made (Figure 23), bearing in mind that most boundaries were not recorded until more than a millennium later.

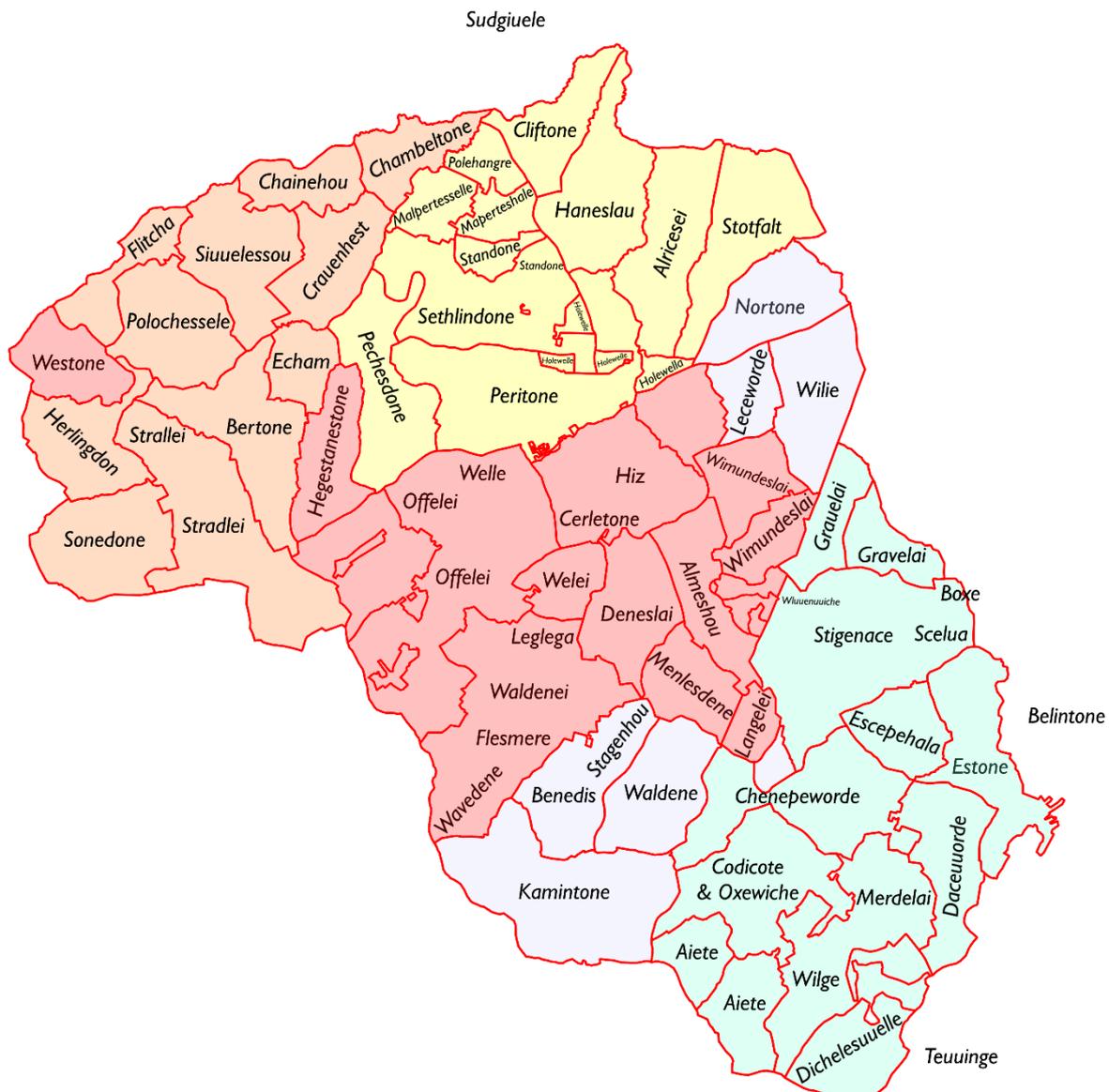


Figure 23: a suggested reconstruction of the regio of the Hicce: the 'Hitchin estate' of 1066 is shaded red; other elements probably part of that estate are shaded lilac; the hypothetical territory of the Scyttelingas is shaded yellow; the hypothetical territory of the Herelingas is shaded orange; a fourth subdivision, unnamed, is shaded green

The reconstruction proposed here can be no more than provisional, and none of its boundaries can be regarded as more than approximate. However, it may approximate to a seventh-century territory in which the communities of Ickleford, Ramerick and Holwell developed. It helps to explain some of

the administrative complexities of Holwell and Pirton and its four-fold division between early folk groups is plausible. However, the detailed subdivisions into manors and parishes is a later development, probably during a period after the creation of the counties of Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire.

Is it possible reconstruct a subdivision that accounts for the fragmented nature of Holwell? It can be proposed that its original northern boundary followed the line of the stream through Ramerick Bottom, past the moat in the detached part of Holwell at Fakeswell (incorporated into Shillington in 1883) toward the county boundary north of Burge End in Pirton. This proposal has the advantage of bringing Holwellbury into the parish, where it must once have lain. The inclusion of Ramerick to the east would make Snailswell less anomalous as part of the parish. On the other hand, Cadwell looks to be an addition. Indeed, it makes more sense as an eastern part of Ickleford/Pirton. We can perhaps regard this 'Greater Holwell' as an early landholding in the early medieval territory of the *Scyttelingas*.

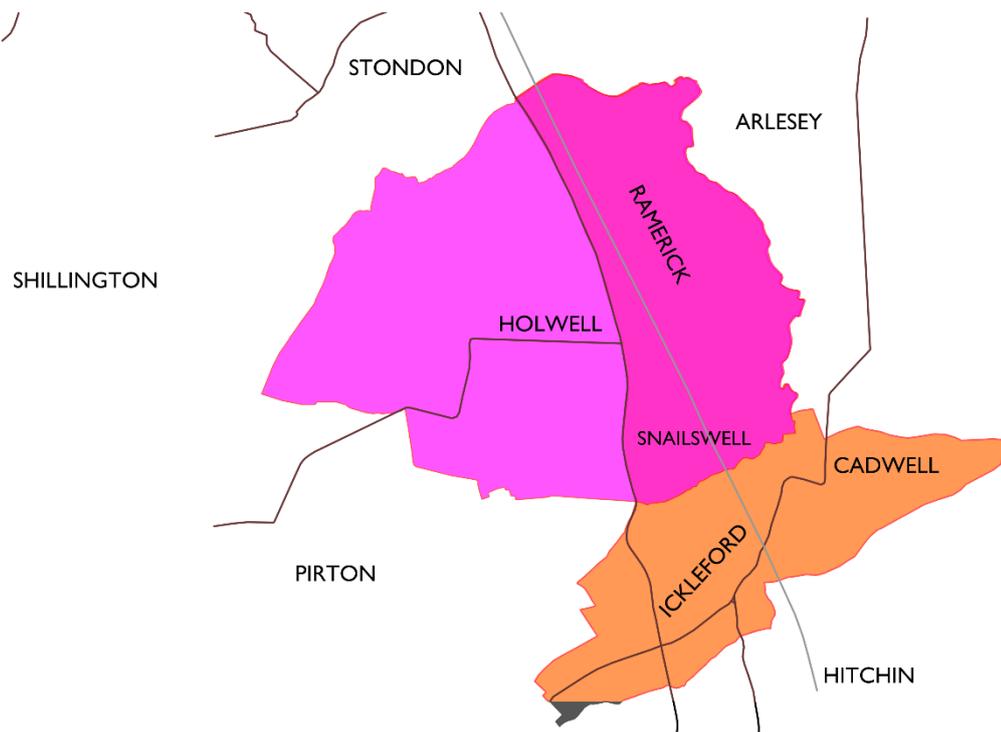


Figure 24: a reconstruction of 'Greater Holwell'

The community of Ickleford developed at some point during this fracturing of territories in the politically turbulent centuries of the Early Middle Ages. While much of the peasant population of the former Roman *pagus* run from Baldock survived, as probably did their field systems, the new political masters, Angles from southern Denmark and northern Germany had no use of the old political arrangements. They established themselves in places where there were power vacuums, carving out areas they could be controlled by a single powerful warrior and his followers. There was a period of consolidation between the sixth and seventh centuries, during which territories were amalgamated under kings. The *regio* of the *Hicce* probably developed as a result of a determined ruler or his dynasty swallowing up neighbouring groups such as the *Scyttelingas*.

Whether units like 'Greater Holwell' and 'Ickleford/Cadwell' were surviving Late Roman estates or new creations is now difficult to assess. By the time they emerge into documentary history, they are fragmented, held by multiple feudal overlords and split between the High Medieval administrative Shires and Hundreds. The degree to which Holwell, in particular, was sundered into non-contiguous elements argues for a long period of development, with groups of fields and properties changing hands over centuries. Perhaps we can indeed see the origin of Ickleford/Cadwell as a land unit in the Roman period, although this hypothesis does not answer when the community as we know it came into being.



Figure 25: The Old George: some might argue that this is the present focus of the community

In a way, that is the wrong question. There have been communities living in this landscape for millennia, with different rulers, varying territorial arrangements and settlements. Many so-called 'medieval' villages did not exist in their present locations during the Middle Ages when there was often just a church close to the manor house. The villagers might live dispersed throughout the landscape in hamlets of two or three farms, a pattern that is still common to the southwest of Hitchin. We can see through archaeological excavation how the focus of settlement has often shifted around a parish, with a community sometimes nucleated in a single main village, sometimes spread between several hamlets. The abandoned Romano-British farmsteads identified in Cadwell and Ramerick are part of this slow dance of population through its landscape over the centuries.

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July 2020