

The Manor of Wheathampstead

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WHEATHAMPSTEAD HERITAGE TRAIL



Bury Farm Cottages

This medieval building belonged to Westminster Abbey until 1945 and originally served as hall, chambers and gatehouse to the 13th century moated Wheathampsteadbury Manor House. Manorial courts were held here. Visiting dignitaries were entertained by hunting and fishing for pink trout in the River Lea.

Grade II listed

The Manor of Wheathampstead

Wheathampstead and Harpenden have been lucky to have local historians and the 7 booklets that have been published cover the history through the ages exceedingly well. In these booklets there are many references to Wheathampstead Manor. This is an attempt to draw together the history of the manor.

Boundaries

The first positive record of the manor found is the charter of the gift of the manor by Edward the Confessor to Westminster Abbey in 1060. Edward had chosen Westminster Abbey a long time before his death as his burial place and rebuilt the obscure and poverty stricken monastery as a worthy mausoleum. Gifts of this nature were a common method of funding monasteries.

In the charter the boundaries of the whole estate are delineated. They extend to cover some 10,000 acres, a large estate. It is roughly bounded by Friars Wash, Lamer, Nomansland and Harpendenbury. In booklet 1 the antiquity of the boundary is noted and its coincidence with the parish boundary. The charter specifically refers to 10 hides at Wheathampstead Manor. At Domesday there is an entry for 10 hides of land of which 5 were in demesne (roughly 600 acres). In 1300 the demesne was 665 acres, in 1881 443 acres and in 1945 over 400 acres when it was sold into private hands. The wider estate was mainly wooded with no other manor shown at Domesday. There was a sub manor at Harpendenbury, and no doubt there were a number of settlements administered from Wheathampstead Manor. It is probable that the western limit of the demesne would have been along the old Roman / Saxon trackway from Nomansland up Bull Lane over the Lea towards Hitchin. There are remains of this trackway still clearly visible in a number of places. This is the route from Verulamium to the Icknield Way.

In fig 1 there is a map of the demesne in 1758. It can be seen that the northern boundary (Rose Lane) was the start of a route to Luton. The Lower Luton Road must often have been impassable in winter forcing travellers on to the higher route. The southern boundary lay along Nomansland where the old boundary bank can still be seen. The eastern boundary was the St Albans to Wheathampstead Road.

The entrances to both the manor and the rectory were at Bury Green which would have been the 'postal address' and may have led to a belief that the manorial buildings were at Bury Green. At one time there was a market at Wheathampstead but it did not become established. This would likely have been held on Bury Green.

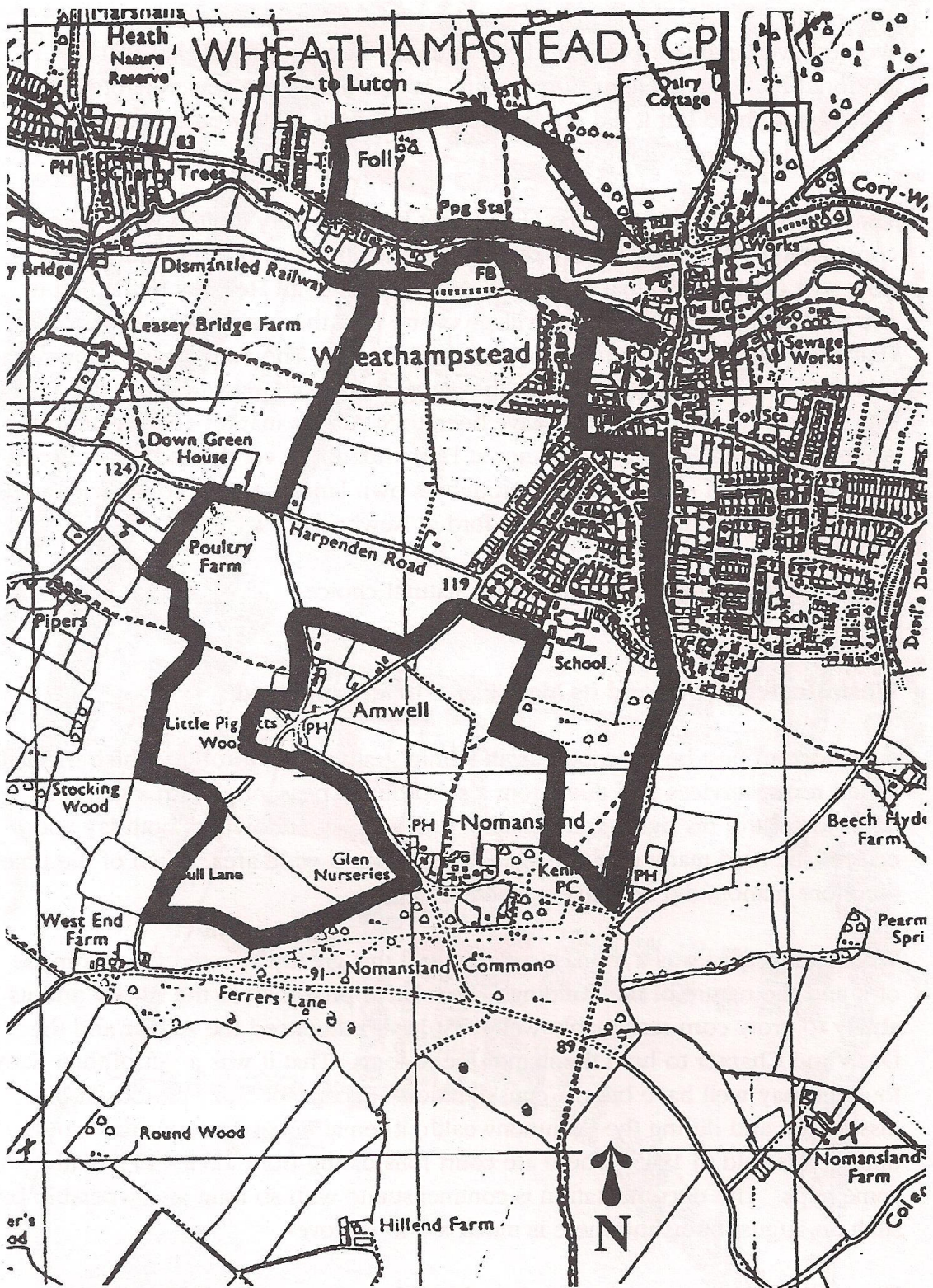


Fig. 1 - Wheathampstead Demesne 1758
 (based on Ordnance Survey 1982)

The cottages to the west of the High Street had only very limited land behind constricted by the 16th century rectory and the churchyard. This old rectory is now part of Helmets Moat Factory. Until the 1950's all Helmets traffic had to use the original route from the village centre past the parish boundary stone (Barclays Bank) and down the crinkle crankle wall. The map clearly shows there was only a footpath through the glebe and the churchyard (see also fig 2). The focus of the manor would have been to St Albans market and Westminster Abbey with a track to its sub manor at Harpendenbury via the old Roman road (now Harpenden road), passing through its own lands. Access to its fields north of the Lea would have been via the ford at Newbridge.

The siting of the manor would seem a natural choice.

Westminster Abbey and its Manor at Wheathampstead

A manor can best be described as an administrative unit, through which the lord levied rents, services and dues from a subordinate peasantry, with a manorial court to control his rights and maintain order. Rich landowners both lay and ecclesiastic held many manors, often spread over a wide area. Much of the time therefore manors did not have a resident lord.

Wheathampstead was a monastic manor and this greatly affected the use made of it and the nature of the buildings. Its relative proximity to the Abbey and its ability to grow corn reasonably well must have influenced the Abbey and the Dean and Chapter to hold the manor for so long. That it was a gift of their Saint founder may well have been a consideration. Except for short periods at the dissolution and during the Commonwealth, it remained in ecclesiastical hands until it was sold in 1945. There are court rolls dating from 1272 - 1937 with some gaps. The documentation is commensurate with so long an ownership by such an august body and there is much left to discover.

Westminster Abbey was dissolved on the 16th January 1540 and for nearly a year lay empty. On the 17th December 1540 it became a cathedral with a bishop.

It seems to have been the only important abbey to have been restored under Mary. Elizabeth dissolved the Abbey founding a Royal Peculiar with a dean and chapter. Thus it remained until the formation of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in 1868 to run church estates, although the Dean and Chapter retained an interest for a further 20 years. The Westminster Abbey manors were built up mostly by gifts and there were few close to the Abbey. Its manors were spread over a dozen counties. The convent of monks could not therefore depend on manors around the Abbey to supply their needs as most abbeys could. But what it lost in prestige by not being in the centre of its

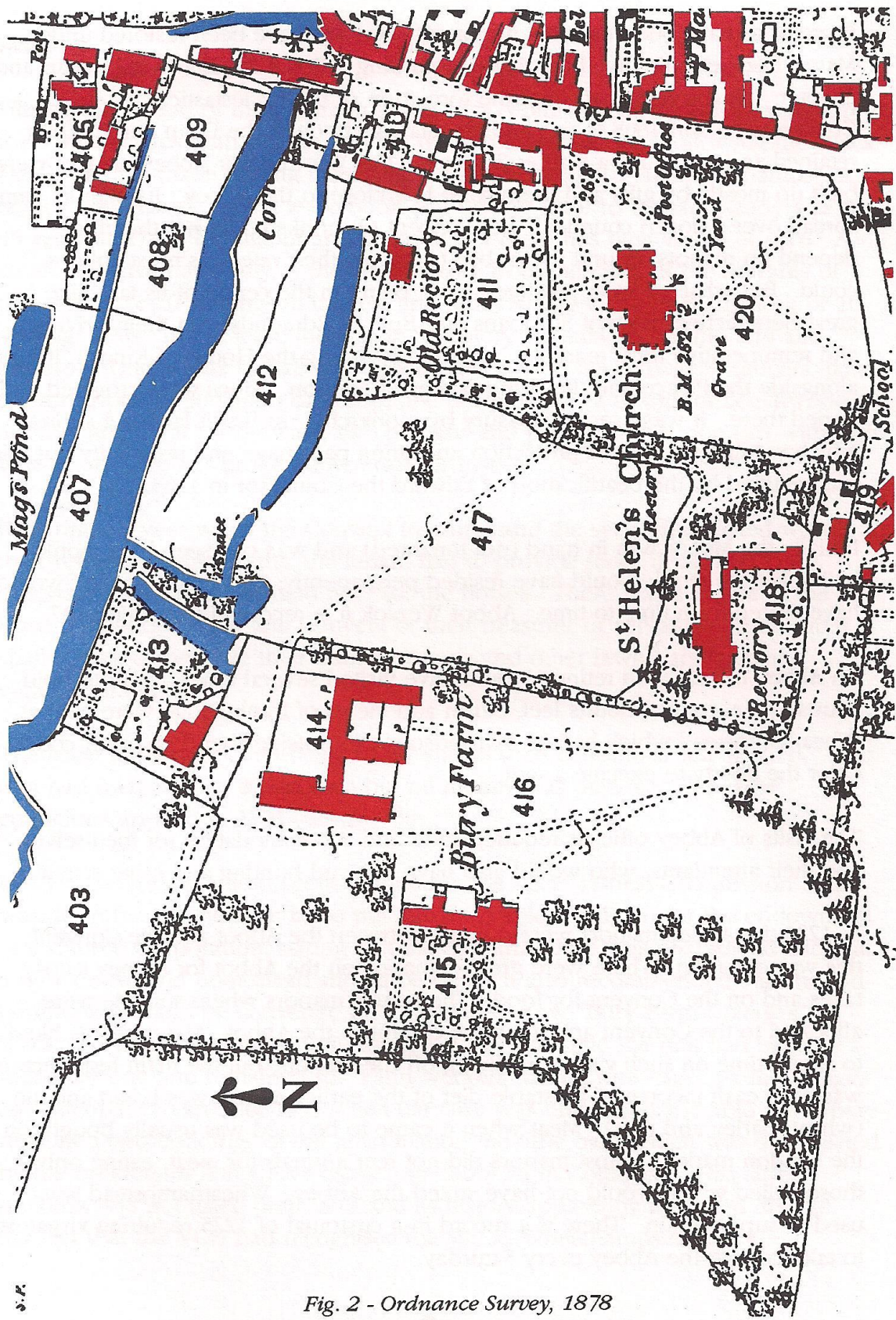


Fig. 2 - Ordnance Survey, 1878

land like its great Benedictine rivals of St Albans and Bury St Edmunds with their thriving and remunerative local markets, it gained by being the House of Kings,. It was alongside the Palace and the rising power of London. Kings were crowned and buried there. It was used as treasury by monarchy. At first it lacked a shrine which would give special protection and bring patronage and prosperity but this was rectified by the beatification of Edward the Confessor in 1163.

Initially the Manor was in hand (not tenanted) and was overseen by a monk bailiff, but no monk would have resided permanently; the Abbot himself would have visited from time to time. Abbot Wenlok it is recorded stayed in 1307.

An Abbey official with retinue would have visited several times a year to hold courts and account. Courts leet, baron and views of frankpledge were held at Wheathampstead which had its own prison. No outside sheriff or bailiff could enter the liberty to execute a writ.

The visits of Abbey officials required food and accommodation for themselves and their attendants, who would also have enjoyed hunting and other pursuits.

In 1225 the Abbey manors were divided between the Abbot and the Convent; this was common. There were great demands on the Abbot for money to pay taxes and on the Convent for food. The nearer manors where suitable were allocated to the Convent and the more distant to the Abbot. Many abbots liked to spend time on such visitations living off the manors, but the main requirement was for a cash income. The staple diet of the earlier monks was bread and ale (wheat, barley and oats). Meat when it came to be used was usually bought on the London markets. Most manors did not rear animals for meat, eating only those culled which would not have suited the Abbey. Wheathampstead was used to supply grain. There is a record in a customal of 1225 requiring virgators to take corn to the Abbey every Saturday.

Leasing

During the period of high fanning in the 13th century most big landowners ran their own estates with a seneschal but the shortage of labour following the Black Death in 1349 made leasing increasingly popular and by 1410 Wheathampstead Manor was leased. In the lease book of 1498 the lease to Richard Laudy was for 45 years at £7 for the manor and lands, £6 for the tithes plus 40 qrs of corn. A cloak was given annually to the tenant made from the cloth of the servants of the Abbey, or 10 shillings in money, and to his wife a cloak of plain cloth or 10 shillings. Also in the lease there is an inventory "in aula, in stabulo and alio stabulo". Under aula or hall is included "tables, benches, chargers, saucers, pans an iron tripod, a 30 gallon cauldron, one old presseur, a trough of beechwood, another and a vat for brewing, two ploughs and ploughshares, one cart with iron wheels and another broken down cart for manure".

Four times a year when the Convent treasurer and the seneschal visited with their retinue to hold courts, the tenant had to provide food, drink and hospitality; also hay, oats and litter for the horses. There was a clause in the lease "the Abbot, Prior and Convent or their treasurer or servants at their order shall if they come have their hunting, sports and other lawful amusements without hindrance".

The lease to George Carpenter in 1737 shows such conditions still applied. The rent had increased to 80 qrs corn but no money was payable. The same conditions applied in 1861.

In 1875 Cluttons the land agent reported to the Ecclesiastical Commission that it was desirable for the farm to be put into a suitable condition for the endowment of a Church Corporation, stating that the old farmhouse was dilapidated and that a new house and homestead should be built. It also recommended that the old farmhouse should be converted into 2 cottages, now "Bury Farm Cottages". Work was completed in 1879/80 for £3650. By this time the rent had become a monetary one and remained so. Farm workers moved into "Bury Farm Cottages" and occupied them until 1953 when the farm was disbanded and sold off. There remained two buildings of the great manor; the tithe barn which was demolished by the builders of Ash Grove estate and "Bury Farm Cottages". This latter building was not listed until 1973 and its history apparently forgotten despite the fact that the VCH had recognised the site as Wheathampsteadbury.

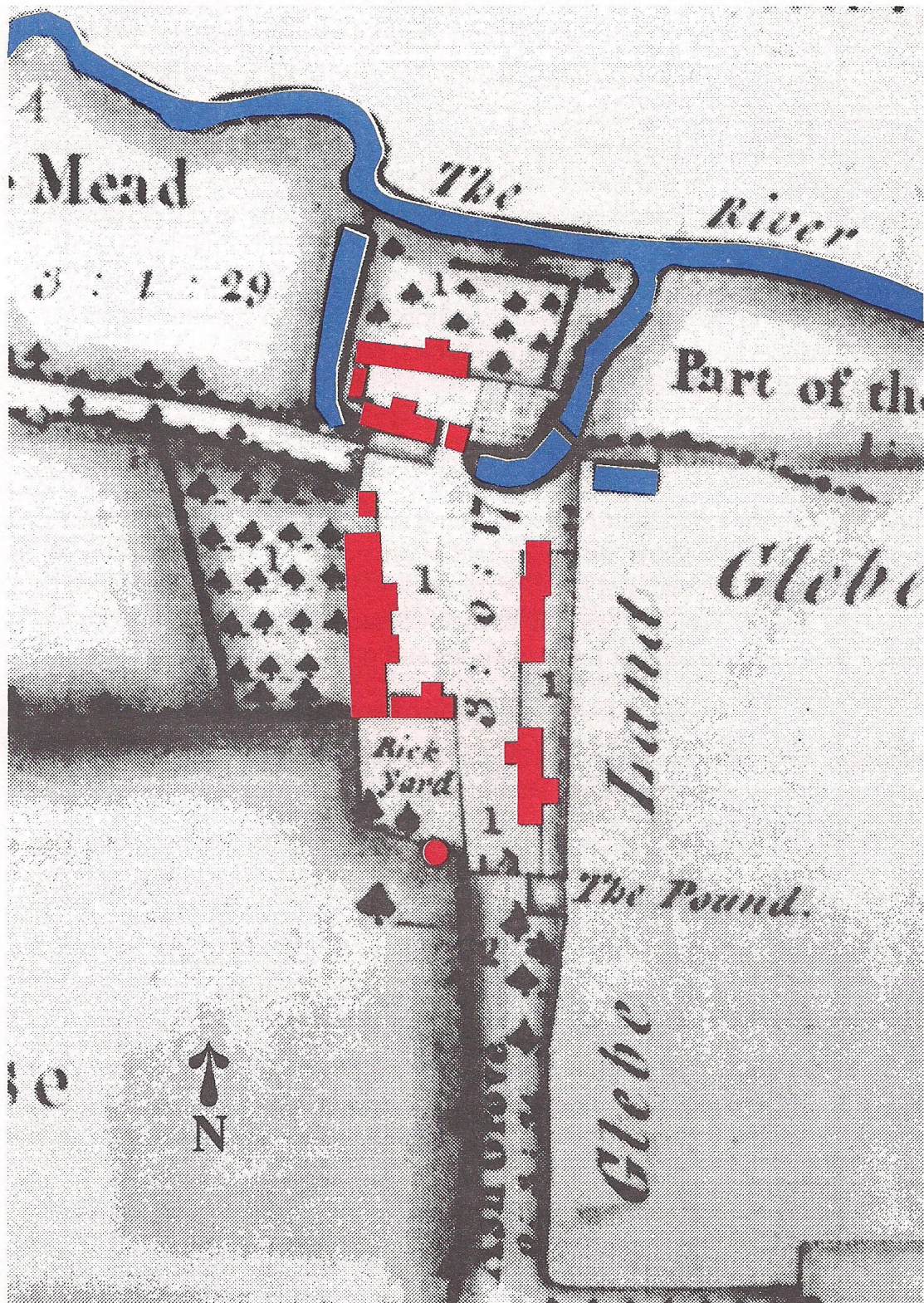


Fig. 3 - Yeoman Plan 1758.
By courtesy of Dean and Chapter of Westminster

Estate Plan

The estate plan of Wheathampsteadbury required from the tenant George Carpenter and surveyed by Yeoman in 1758 (fig 3) is confirmation of its manorial status and has much to tell about the farmstead, its workings and the importance of the Manor to the village. Its importance remained throughout its history. Many present day villagers either worked 'down at the Bury' or knew someone who did.

Apart from the farm buildings and manorial buildings which are clearly shown, orchard, kitchen garden and fields are named with their acreages. Most of these fields are indentifiable today.

The plan also shows moat, fishpond, pound, tithe barn, stables, granary, rickyard and dovehouse (in Dovehouse Close, repaired in 1854). A dovehouse was a perquisite of a lord of the manor, then the Dean and Chapter.

In the lease of 1498 there was agreement for Laudy to "set up a new rennying house 90' by 16' and also a kille house 32' x 16' ". It would seem the tenant was about to enter the cheese market which was then developing.

The Yeoman plan of 1758 shows the curia buildings. "Bury Farm Cottages" is seen in the south west corner of the moated area and the building in the centre was with little doubt the earlier manor house, possibly succeeding another. There was no access to the moated area for carts or even horses, the only access being a narrow one through bay 'd' (fig 4) where there were opposed doors. There is also an original window in this gatehouse bay which would have given a clear view through the farmstead up towards Bury Green. Other than this one door and window there appears originally to have been no other voids to the south of this building.

Moated sites were not uncommon where the sub soil was suitable and were more to do with status than defence. This was especially so in the later medieval period when status became more important. This can be seen from the fact that normally they were wider at the front around the entrance than to the rear which was hidden to the visitor. At Wheathampsteadbury the moat measured about 25' by the gatehouse and 17' to the rear or west. Earlier there may well have been a simple moat in order to make a platform on which to build the house. It was usual for the manor house or main building to be in the centre of the platform with service buildings, garden and orchard. The approach to the manor house would have been through the farm buildings; large barns were seen as a status symbol. Later this became unfashionable and more imposing entrances were designed. At Wheathampsteadbury there would have been no practical alternative and this may have been a reason for it to remain a working farm.

In the reign of King Henry VIII there is an entry for "repairs to hall, chambers and gatehouse" and the Dean and Chapter survey by Mumford in 1799 has the entry "Wheathampsteadbury

Farm, house, barns, stables, orchards, rickyards and ponds almost completely surrounded by moat except in front of hall". "Bury Farm Cottages" is clearly this 'hall, chambers and gatehouse'.

We have further confirmation of an eye witness. Canon Davys who was Rector from 1859 to 1914 recalls in his biography, referring to the building, "there I have met two celebrated Deans of Westminster, Trench and Stanley. They used to lunch at their old manor house, now changed into cottages, and their tenant always endeavoured to have a dish of our famous Lea pink trout on the table, and they used afterwards to come to the Rectory, walk about the grounds and have tea with us".






Such visits may have prompted Cluttons to recommend the building of the Victorian farmhouse. The rectory building believed to be 16th century had been downgraded and superceded in 1815 by a grander building at the top of the glebe field with access from Bury Green. This had a front entrance with large columns, laid out grounds and stables. The previous rector Pretyman had been a pluralist and was not too often in residence. Under him buildings were neglected but Davys was very active in restoring both Rectory and Church.

The old rectory with its crinkle crankle walled garden was retained and the river meadow bought from the Dean and Chapter. The two ornamental trees that remain were no doubt a part of this new rectorial grandeur.

The Construction of "Bury Farm Cottages"

The original building was 77' long by 18'6" wide externally. The floor plan is shown in fig 4. It is jettied both north and south with close studding. There are five bays with 'b' occupying 2 bays on both the ground floor and the first floor. Ground floor 'b' has moulded beams and the room above also displays importance. By the 18th century a ceiling had been inserted throughout at purlin height. The ridge at 29'9" (no ridge beam) has enabled 2nd floor rooms to be introduced in recent years. There is no evidence for original chimneys, but a building within the moat could well have been an outside kitchen. The present stacks inserted to the north of 'a' and between 'b' and 'c' are 18th century. Bay 'd' has no stack and appears originally to have been a separate unit with no access to 'c'.

It was mentioned earlier that the south wall appears to have had voids only in the gatehouse where there was a door and a window. Not all the south bressumer is visible and there are stretches without pegholes which need explanation. To the north most of the bressumer is visible and fig 5 is an artist's impression based on existing pegholes and the 3 four centre headed windows and wide door at 'b' all of which are extant.

- Partition 
- Window 
- Beam 
- Door 
- Post 

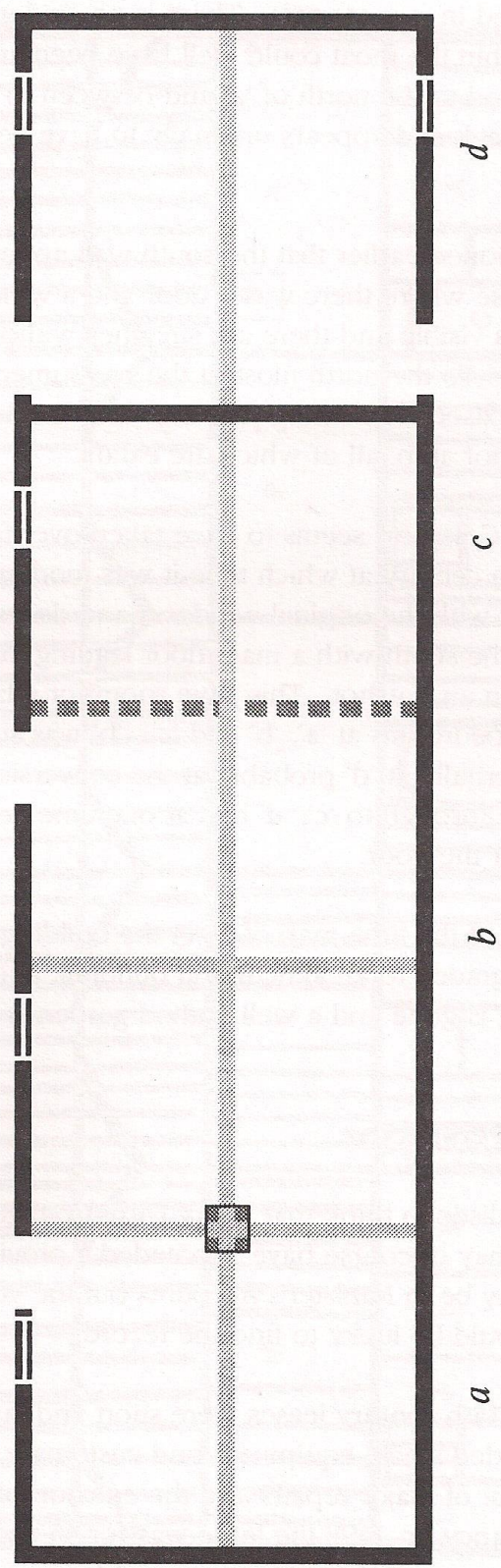
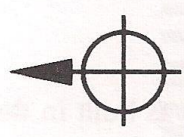


Fig. 4 - Floor plan

"Bury Farm Cottages" seems to have taken over from the earlier manor house in the mid 18th century at which time it was modernised, The building was re orientated with the original windows and doors blocked. New windows were inserted to the south with a main door leading into a hallway. A staircase was added within an outshot. This gave room for a landing at the back of the house connecting bedrooms at 'a', 'b' and 'c'. 'b' was subdivided. A staircase was inserted internally at 'd' probably at the conversion to farmworkers' cottages, and a way made through to 'c', 'd' had at one time been used as a dairy and there is a well under the floor.

By the time of the tithe map of 1843 the building in the centre of the moat had been downgraded to an agricultural building, and by the ordnance map of 1878 the building is gone and a well pathed garden is shown in its place.

Historical Perspective

It seems realistic to think that "Bury Farm Cottages" was built in the 15th century; it may of course have succeeded a previous building. The dating of the building may be in Minister's Accounts but the volume of documents is so great that one would be lucky to find the record.

During the 15th century leases were short and favoured local men. The earlier leases included stock, equipment and customary services. Westminster Abbey bore the cost of major repairs and the erection of new buildings. By the time of Laudy's tenancy in 1498 the lease was for 45 years. The Abbey remained responsible for repairs, except for thatch but the responsibility for new building became the tenants' though the Abbey continued to supply the timber.

There are a number of influences to consider in assessing the conception of "Bury Farm Cottages."

The change to leasing early in the 15th century put a compulsion on landlords to provide good buildings to obtain worthwhile leases.

The presence of a resident tenant would often entail occupation by an extended family requiring more space with more farmstead activity and the need for more famuli.

There had been much dilapidation of Westminster manors in the second half of the 14th century and during the early 15th century the Abbey sought to modernise its buildings. The Abbey officials who regularly attended the manor would not suffer a down market standard especially with their sister Benedictine Abbey only 5 miles away, and on their route from London.

Extant doorway	E.	Window (some evidence)	Q.
Extant windows	D. G. K.	18th Century Outshot (evidence destroyed)	O. P.
Doorways (evidence)	C. H.	No evidence	A. F. I. J. L. M. N. R.
Window (evidence)	B.		

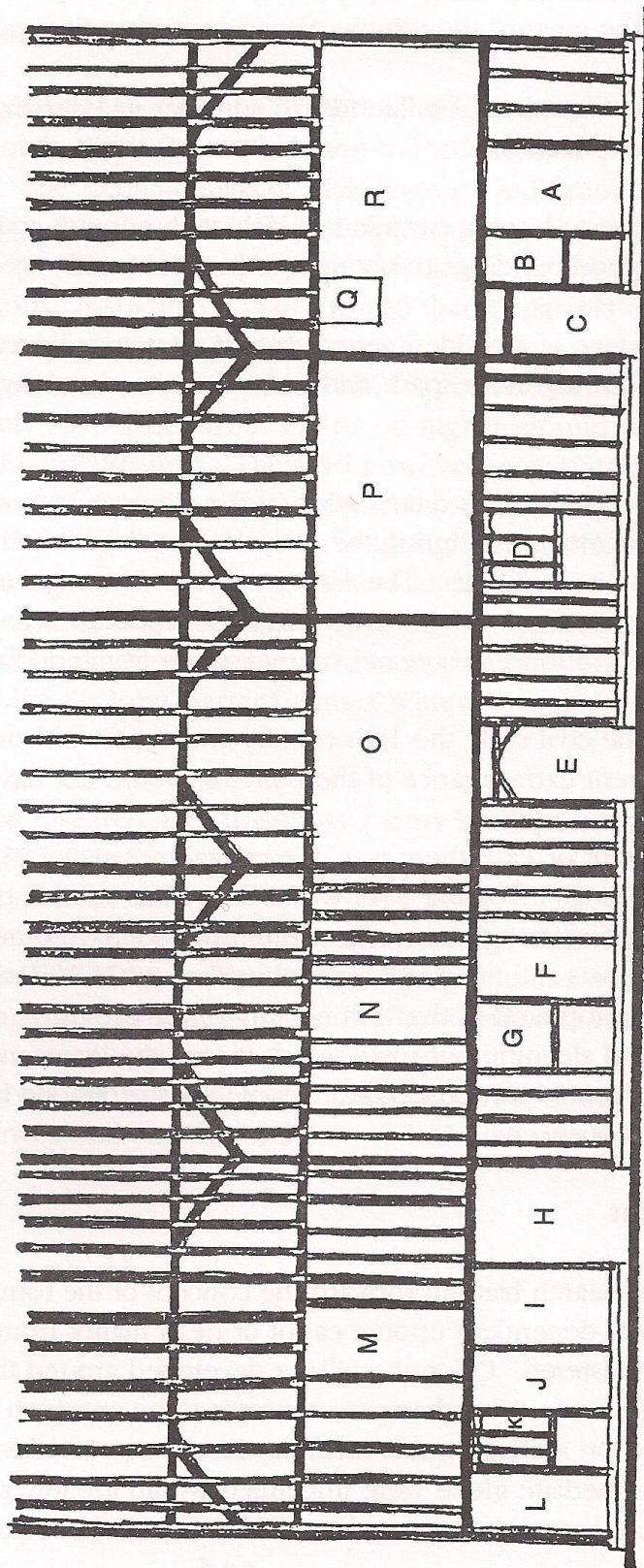


Fig. 5
Artist's impression of original north wall

Despite the civil strife the 15th century was a time of 'conspicuous waste' and the apparent extravagance of the building would not have been unusual.

In the extent of 1315 there was one capital messuage, 75 messuages and 76 lesser holdings involving 1640 works as well as payments in money and kind. Whilst such manor court work would probably have diminished by the 15th century it was still no doubt a very busy court. M.W. Barley has drawn attention to the development in the 15th century of the provision of separate buildings for service and sleeping purposes which turned the larger manor house from a hall in its enclosure into a courtyard completely surrounded by buildings and entered by a gatehouse.

Comment

Modern research has put forward the concept of the formation of accumulated settlements dependent upon a caput or head manor from which the whole estate was administered. Often the village developed around the large manor rather than vice versa. Wheathampstead seems to be one such estate, though this is not based on archaeological research. From maps it does appear that the church and its immediate glebe were implanted within the lord's land. Under the Domesday entry there is a priest; the history of the rector and his land has not been researched here but the map of 1799 shows the glebe lands had developed to the east of the village, rather than in a compact unit.

The demesne was surrounded by open fields; Wheathampstead Common to the east, Hamwell to the south, Piper Down Common to the west and Oxcroft Common to the north. The Yeoman map of 1758 gives no indication, nor does the land ostensibly today, that the demesne participated in the sharing of the open fields with villagers. The Abbey's purpose was clearly for the manor to produce a surplus of com. A survey of 1528 showed that 27 parcels of land had been sold off from the wider estate to wealthy people who were seeking aggrandisement in bigger houses within parklands, for entertainment, hunting etc. These would mostly have arisen from assarts on higher ground which did not conflict with the Abbey's business. They did however remain under the court of Wheathampstead Manor. By contrast the demesne manorial buildings were not upgraded in this way, but remained a working farm which continued to provide a corn rent for the Abbey and the Dean and Chapter. It is perhaps because of its lack of importance in the higher echelons of society that its identity has been lost sight of. Nevertheless its tenants included John Brocket, Sir John Luke of Annables, Sir John Garrard, James Wittewrong and Viscount Lord Grimston.

As a subject of historical research it encapsulates a copy book perspective in miniature of the changes in the life of a manor.

So "Bury Farm Cottages" the last remaining, though not original, building of the manor, having begun its life as the 'hall, chambers and gatehouse' was first upgraded to manor house and then downgraded to farm workers' cottages at the building of the Victorian farmhouse, now also gone. Over the past 40 years most of the hidden timbers and some of the original windows, doors and fireplaces have been uncovered and the building, still divided into two, looks set to last.

David and Ann Godfrey-Evans May 1994

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Also Standard Works

Alan Greening

Glossary

Assart.	A piece of woodland which has been cleared, enclosed and cultivated.
Bressumer.	Beam supporting an upper wall of timber framing
Convent.	Originally a term to denote an actual community of monks or nuns.
Court Baron.	A manorial court which enforced the customs of the manor.
Court Leet.	Manorial court dealing with petty offences and the appointment of officials presided over by the Lord or his representative, and which every male over a certain age (depending on custom) was obliged to attend.
Demense.	Land retained by the lord of the manor for his own use and upon which tenants gave free service according to the customs of the manor. Land which was part of the main farm of the manor.
Extent.	A summary of the extent, customs and valuation of the manor and its tenancies.
Famuli.	"Permanent" workers on the farm, some of whom were resident.
Frankpledge.	A system whereby areas were divided into tithings or groups of ten or twelve households which were held corporately responsible for the behaviour of each member.