

A ‘truth universally acknowledged’?: morphology as an indicator of medieval planned market towns

Susan Oosthuizen

ABSTRACT

The paper explores, through the case study of March, a large town in the northern part of the Cambridgeshire peat fens, the general invariability of interpretation as planned markets of new medieval settlements that include both regular plots and one or more geometric open spaces. It asks whether manorial lords might achieve similar ends to those derived from medieval market grants — an increase in income from rents and tolls — by applying lessons learned from commercial planned settlements in other economic contexts.

KEYWORDS

Medieval market, medieval port, planned settlement, river transport, water management, hythe, common rights, fens

INTRODUCTION

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a planned town or village in possession of a geometric open space can fairly reliably be interpreted as a foundation around a medieval market — whether constructed *ab initio* on a green-field site or added to an existing settlement.¹ That consensus is solidly based on the publication in 1967 of Maurice Beresford’s *New Towns of the Middle Ages*. The historical geography of medieval towns is so well known today that it is difficult to remember how new Beresford’s ideas were at the time; yet his study was so carefully researched,

and so well founded in documentary and other evidence, that it was widely accepted from the outset and remains a classic. The locational and morphological characteristics of urban settlements he identified are now recognised as diagnostic criteria from which medieval commercial foundations can reliably be inferred, whether on new or existing sites: a location on or near a parish and/or county boundary, the diversion of roads towards the new foundation, the introduction or consolidation of infrastructure through the construction of bridges and causeways, regularity in street plan and property boundaries, surviving or market places, halls and crosses, and, on occasion, commanding relationships between manorial centre and the market place (see also Beresford & St Joseph 1979). An excitement of publication followed *New Towns*, as archaeological excavation and morphological analysis explored and confirmed Beresford’s conclusions (*e.g.* Barley 1975; Schofield & Palliser 1981; Haslam 1984; Hodges & Hobley 1988).

The substantial scope of Beresford’s study was significantly extended in an innovative publication by Christopher Taylor (1982), who pointed out that the same typological characteristics could be found in any number of minor rural settlements. He demonstrated the large extent to which such analyses could be supported by documentary evidence for the grant of a market and/or fair to manorial lords, enthusiastic speculators in search of vast rewards from successful foundations,

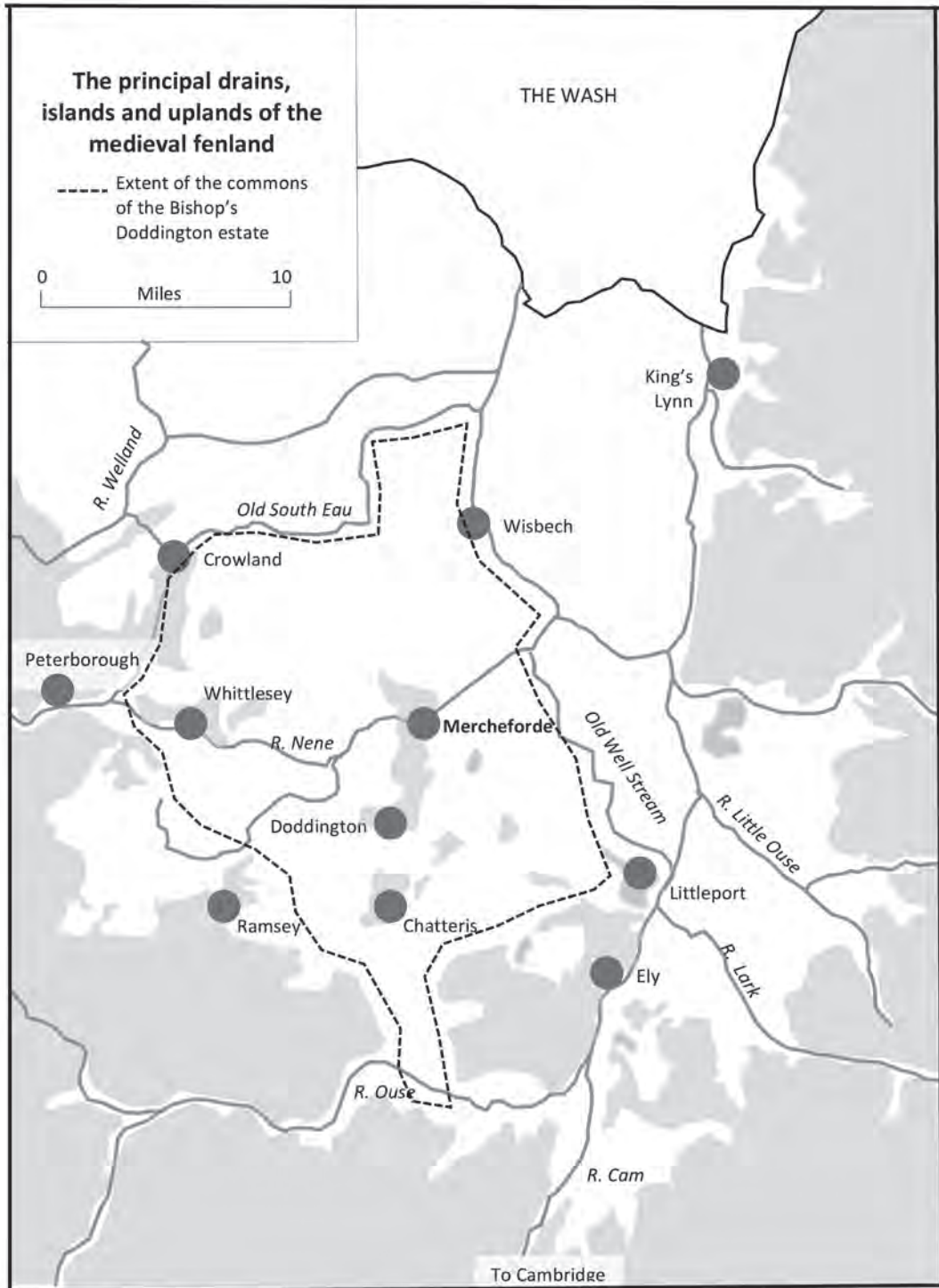


Fig. 1. The principal drains, islands and uplands of the medieval fenland (after Darby 1956, p. 43).

whether new or simply formalising existing patterns of local trade. In some cases that initial investment was successful, but more frequently the market failed — sometimes quite quickly, in other cases fading away over a couple of centuries, either way leaving in the landscape only the tell-tale geometric boundaries of a once-hopeful market green. The clarity and force of Beresford and Taylor's arguments, subsequently confirmed in extensive archaeological excavation and documentary research, underlies that 'universally acknowledged truth': that a planned town or village in possession of a geometric open space can fairly reliably be interpreted as a foundation around a medieval market.

This paper explores that proposition through the case study of *Merchbeforde*, the large medieval predecessor of the modern town of March (*Merche*) which lies along the banks of the Nene in the northern Cambridgeshire peat fens (Fig. 1). By 1251, its first documentary record, it was already a large settlement of ninety messuages, even though it was at the time just a berewick of the Bishop of Ely's nearby manorial centre at Doddington. *Merchbeforde* is generally believed to have been founded in the early thirteenth century, shortly before it was first documented, well within the peak period for medieval market grants between about 1190 and 1230 (Taylor 1982, p. 20). The earliest maps of the settlement date from around 1600, and show a plan virtually identical to that of the modern town, the regularity of whose properties appears to indicate a planned origin (discussed in more detail below). The period of its origin, its unusual size compared with other medieval rural settlements of similarly low status, evidence of planning, and its strategic location on the Nene have meant that *Merchbeforde* is usually interpreted as an example of 'a port or hithe at the river crossing' which either developed from a medieval plantation of the thirteenth-century bishops or was informally encouraged by them (Hall 1987, p. 46; see also Taylor 1973, p. 255).² Such an explanation makes intuitive sense given the geography of fenland and the commercial interests of its ecclesiastical lords.

In the undrained peat fens, travel on foot, horse

or wagon across a largely waterlogged landscape was particularly difficult. Boats offered the most efficient means of moving people and goods around medieval England, and the waterways of the Cambridgeshire peat fens were 'thronged with traffic' throughout the Middle Ages (Darby 1974, p. 100; see also Langdon 1993, p. 7; Langdon 2007). Any settlement with access to a natural or man-made watercourse — and especially one (like *Merchbeforde*) on one of the great English rivers — had immediate opportunities to engage with local, regional, national and even international trade. It is little surprise, then, that the remains of, and/or documentary evidence for, public and private medieval hythes can be found in almost every fenland settlement, including the modern town of March (e.g. Taylor 1995, p. 267).

If *Merchbeforde* were a commercial plantation of the thirteenth-century bishops of Ely, there were plenty of successful international markets and fairs founded on the major fenland rivers to inspire a bishop's dreams of substantial profits. King's Lynn and St Ives had been new ecclesiastical plantations, while the grant of a twelfth-century grant for a market and fair to the Abbey of Ely transformed the existing town (Oosthuizen 2012, pp. 210–11). The trading enterprises of fenland abbeys and bishops were, furthermore, complex, large scale and far flung, involving them directly in national and international trade. Substantial agricultural surpluses, aggregated at collection points, were exported both within Britain and into Europe by the abbeys of Ramsey, Thorney, Peterborough and Crowland, and by the abbey and bishopric of Ely, through fenland fairs and ports (Raftis 1957; Page 1934; Biddick 1989; Miller 1951). While many European imports were humdrum — like timber and mill-stones — others were exotic: 'Figs and raisins, almonds, pepper and ginger, nuts and sugar, honey and wine, salmon and porpoises' all found their way by boat into the larders and onto the tables of medieval bishops of Ely (Miller 1951, p. 85). The bishop's markets on the Ouse at Ely and on the Nene at Wisbech might, it could be argued, be complemented by another at *Merchbeforde*: the settlement lay half way between Peterborough and

Wisbech, and also provided the first landfall in the bishop's estate for traffic travelling east along the Nene. A planned market town at *Mercheforde*, from this perspective, might not only tap passing trade along the river, but also act as a focus for trade to and from a wide hinterland in just the same way that the Abbey of Ramsey's new town at St Ives exploited the similar potential of the Ouse to draw in trade from across Huntingdonshire and west Cambridgeshire (*ibid.*, p. 85, n. 4).

Yet arguments for a commercial origin for *Merchford* are so problematic that they raise the question of whether everything that *looks* like a medieval planned town really was one, or whether there might be other explanations for large-scale planned settlements in the Middle Ages. That question forms the focus for this paper.

MERCHEFORDE: A COMMERCIAL ORIGIN?

Although *Mercheforde* occupies both banks of one of the major rivers of eastern England, and might reasonably be expected to have grown large and wealthy on the basis of trade with passing shipping, any medieval market there remains stubbornly invisible. The first recorded market grant dates from 1670, and there is no surviving documentary evidence that it was preceded by a medieval trading centre (CA P116/28/20; *VCH Cambridgeshire IV* 1953; Letters 2003). Nor is there any medieval record of significant trade through the town. The omission is the more stark when other places in Cambridgeshire did achieve national commercial status even though they were less accessible. Burwell, for example, lay sixty-second in the list of nationally important inland ports between 1294 and 1348 even though its hythe lay at the landward end of a fairly long lode linking it to the Cam, while the principal focus of the settlement was nearly another 2 km further south (Langdon 1993, p. 5; see also Oosthuizen 2012). For all its easy access to the Nene, *Mercheforde* does not appear anywhere in those lists.

On the other hand, it would fly in the face of reason to suggest that there was *no* medieval

waterborne traffic or trade of any kind to or from *Mercheforde*. Its location on the Nene, the place of fen products in the manorial economy, and strong evidence for the dominance of boats as the preferred form of medieval transport must have encouraged some trading traffic to and from the settlement (*e.g.* Langdon 1993; Jones 2000). Customary tenants on the Bishop's Doddington manor were expected to carry goods 'by fresh water' across the breadth of the peat fens — not only to the major centres like Peterborough, Cambridge, Ely, and St Ives, but also to those of the bishop's manors where land-based transport was difficult, like Fen Ditton, Willingham or Little Downham (CUL EDR.G3.27). How feasible is it, then, that it may after all have originated as a planned medieval port and market?

TOPOGRAPHY

Topographical and morphological analysis can often lead to the identification of medieval commercial plantations even where documentary evidence is lacking (*cf.* Beresford & St Joseph 1979; Beresford 1988; Taylor 1982). Such new markets tended to be founded where there were easy intersections between waterways carrying regional, national and international traffic, and networks of roads linking them with a wide hinterland. It was not unusual for ecclesiastical and secular manorial lords to undertake engineering works to improve these connections, for example, in canalised river courses that brought a riverbank close to a new market, and in the construction of causeways and bridges to carry travellers across boggy (or even inundated) ground. A regular, planned open space frequently survives in modern settlements, often still carrying a 'market' place- or street-name; there may even be the remains of a medieval market cross or hall; existing roads were re-aligned on new markets; and sometimes planned blocks of freehold properties (burgage plots) were laid out around its sides as an enticement to traders and craftsmen (Beresford 1988; Beresford & St Joseph 1979; Taylor 1982). If some or all of these locational and morphological characteristics could be

identified at *Merchforde*, they might breathe fresh life into an apparently moribund case for medieval commercial origins.

One of the strongest arguments for a planned medieval market at *Merchforde* is the widespread acceptance that the modern eastward route of the Nene through the town runs along a man-made canal, 12 km in length, whose banks still rise unnaturally high above the water in the river below (Hall 1987, p. 46; 1992, p. 186). The proposition that the necessary engineering work for this diversion was undertaken in support of a new market is based on good contemporary analogies: a fresh twelfth-century course for the River Ouse moved shipping right up against the hythes and market of Ely in the same period in which the abbey received its market grant; the Welland was diverted by several miles to flow between wide hythes through Crowland close to the site of the abbey, and a natural watercourse was straightened, widened and deepened to bring river traffic into a broad canal alongside the new market outside the gates of Ramsey Abbey, also in the twelfth century (Hall 1996, p. 40; Oosthuizen 2012; Spoerry *et al.* 2008).

There are, however, two problems in interpreting the origins of the artificial course of the Nene through *Merchforde* in this way. The first is in the relatively early date at which the work was apparently carried out, and the second is that there were other, more pressing, reasons for getting it done. The construction of the artificial course for the Nene was almost certainly undertaken in the early eleventh century, that is, more or less at the time that the Abbey of Ely built up a large estate at Doddington (Hall 1987, p. 46; Hart 1966, pp. 220–1).³ The re-routing of the Nene appears to have been undertaken long before the heyday of medieval market grants, pre-dating the activities of most entrepreneurial lords by a century or more. Either the Ely monks were prescient, investing in a market which might only become profitable after decades or even centuries, or they had other aims in mind.

Two more convincing (and complementary) clues to the motives behind the re-direction of the Nene lie, first, in the name for its older course

and, second, in the surface geology of the locality. The later Anglo-Saxon name for the river appears to have been *Plantewater*, describing a watercourse by that period 'choked and decayed, probably by *phragmites*, *cladium* or similar [suckering and spreading] plants' (OE *plante*, Reaney 1943, p. lix (my addition), 14; Fig. 2).⁴ The consequence of such obstruction in northern fenland to water flowing from the uplands of Northamptonshire and Huntingdonshire would have been the backing up, even in normal conditions, of large volumes of water across the thousands of acres of the western fen basin between March in the east and Peterborough in the west, Wisbech in the north and Ramsey in the south. The consequences of flooding would be disastrous. Evidence for precisely these conditions can be found in the steady extension of peat to an eventual depth of around 3 metres across the western fenland from the post-Roman period onwards, when water levels in the fens rose by around 1.5 metres (Hall 1992, pp. 6–8; BGS Sheets 158, 159, 172, 173). Gradual silting of the river, a recurrent problem resulting from the slow passage of water across the flat fenland floor, exacerbated these problems.⁵ The geological record, millennium after millennium, shows the meandering bed of one major watercourse succeeded by another, often on quite different alignments, as old rivers gradually became blocked by silt and the volume of water accumulating in the basin behind them eventually forced a new course towards the sea (Hall 1987, pp. 11, 38 and 46; BGS Sheets 158, 159, 172, 173).

Water backing up across the fen basin posed a substantial and immediate threat to monastic incomes and peasant livelihoods. The Nene carried water from the uplands of Northamptonshire and Huntingdonshire through the rich meadows and pastures of the fen basin on which great herds of cattle belonging to monastic lords and their tenants fed 'horn under horn'. The health and accessibility of those pastures depended on the avoidance of unseasonable and excessive flooding by efficient water management: as Darby commented, 'the winter floods, *provided that they did not last too long*, served only to make the

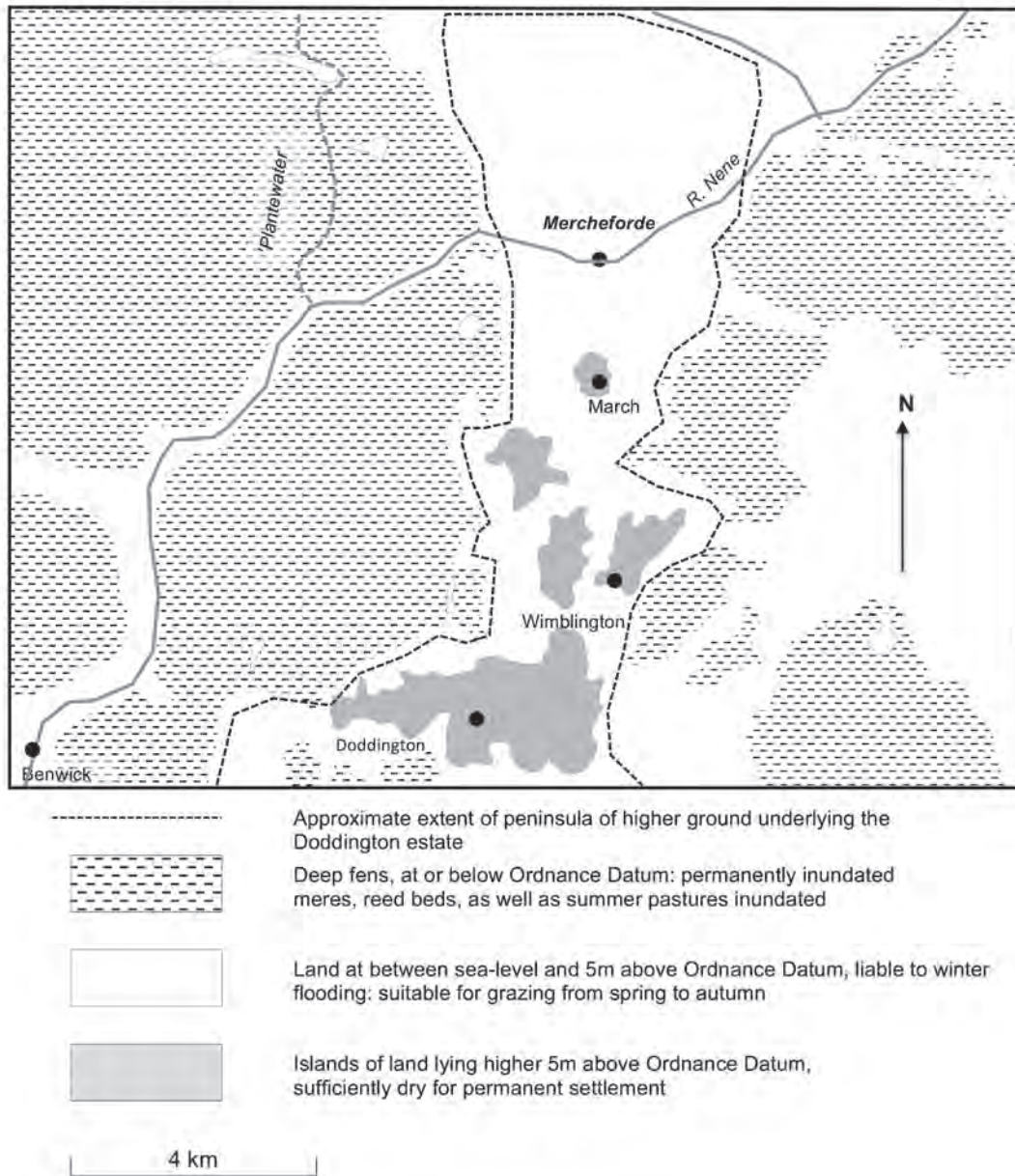


Fig. 2. The topography of the bishop's Doddington estate.

meadow richer for the following summer' (1974, p. 62, my emphasis). Any sustained obstruction to the drainage of the Nene would be potentially devastating to grazing in the flat landscape of the peat fens; if water were held up near March,

not far from the river's outlet in the Wash, the consequences would be felt across the whole of western fenland.

These conditions posed three problems for the eleventh-century monastic houses among whom

the fenland basin was divided. The first was that it was impossible to predict whether a new river-course might be forced naturally within a year or two or perhaps only after decades or even centuries of severe flooding. It was similarly impossible to predict the alignment of any new river. It might lie along a course which beneficially both watered and drained the pastures and meadows of each abbey, but it might as easily benefit the lands of one house at the expense of another. A third problem was that in the late Anglo-Saxon period a new outlet for the Nene towards the north had been made virtually impossible by the steady growth over previous millennia of raised peat sphagnum bogs. The *Plantewater* was hemmed in by raised peat to the west and the higher ground of the Doddington estate on the east; once its course had begun to silt and become overgrown, there was no leeway for its waters to find an alternative route towards the north (*ibid.*, pp. 11, 38, 46). Rather than waiting for nature to take its course, it appears that a proactive solution was implemented by diverting the Nene eastwards before the Norman Conquest along a new, shorter, artificial cut that took the water directly into the Old Well Stream at Outwell, and thence to the existing outfall at Wisbech. These significant engineering works appear to have been as 'part of the concerted action to replan the drainage of the Wisbech region', almost certainly by the Abbey of Ely within whose estate the new course lay (Hall 1987, p. 46). The argument that the canalisation of the Nene along a new course was part of a strategy to establish a new market at *Mercheforde* thus seems less likely. The work appears to have been carried out in the early eleventh century before investments in market grants became commonplace, and there are good reasons to indicate that it may instead have been undertaken to protect from destruction by flood the contribution to monastic incomes of goods and profits derived from fenland grazing and other products.

The second topographical characteristic of new fenland towns, the establishment of a nodal intersection between road and river, was unfulfilled at *Mercheforde*. The settlement lies

on the northernmost tip of a 'partly drowned peninsula' rising above the flat floor of the fenland basin (Hall 1987, p. 38; OS 1985, 1986, 1988, 1999, 2000). Those areas of the peninsula that rise above the winter floodline (5 metres above Ordnance Datum) provided a reliably dry archipelago of 'islands' for settlement and cultivation (Fig. 2). Below the 5-metre contour, the degree of dampness of the lower areas of the peninsula varied with height above sea level along a continuum from mostly dry to permanently wet, encouraging the formation of peat. *Mercheforde*, on the northern part of that peninsula, was significantly isolated by the fen from the nearest dry ground in any direction except, of course, to the south. The hamlet of Coates in Whittlesey to the west, Wisbech to the north-west and the silt fens at Upwell to the north-east were each around 10 km away, while the nearest part of the Isle of Ely was over 15 km distant. The most feasible land-based route involved island-hopping from *Mercheforde* to Doddington across the intervening islands in the archipelago, and thence to Chatteris and Somersham; but there is no evidence that this route was any more than a trackway in the medieval period, running for some distance along the bank of the Old West Water between Chatteris and Somersham (and fossilised in sections of the modern B1050) (Hall 1992, pp. 84, 94; OS 1999, 2000). There was no network of major roads connecting the settlement to the other villis of the region, nor were there any substantial twelfth-century causeways like those between Stuntney and Ely, Willingham and Aldreth, or from Hemingford Grey to St Ives (which includes a spectacular stone bridge). There was no equivalent investment to link March with Wisbech, Outwell, Little Downham or with Coates; not even with Chatteris and Somersham. It is particularly significant that the seventeenth-century market was only established twenty-two years *after* Vermuyden and his labourers had dug and built the first and second Bedford Rivers — that is, when large-scale fen drainage for the first time permitted the construction of proper roads to Wisbech, Ely and Peterborough. Of course, there must have been some limited movement

around medieval *Merchbeforde* by foot and hoof along the silted beds of earlier watercourses, along river banks, and between atolls of drier ground.⁶ But such ways were localised, slow, only available in drier conditions, and mostly inaccessible to wheeled traffic (Darby 1974, pp. 105–7). They had little in common with the major medieval roads that led from Cambridgeshire and Suffolk into Ely or from Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire into St Ives. They could not support *Merchbeforde* in offering a regional intersection between traders travelling to the settlement by road and those arriving by water.

MORPHOLOGY

Might morphological analysis of the settlement be more helpful? The planned layout of *Merchbeforde* appears to have been fixed by *c.* 1601–3 (CA R59/31/40/1; CUL Maps.bb.53(1).93.114–; Pl. I).⁷ An estate map of that date is sufficiently detailed to record the boundaries of individual properties running in apparent ribbon development from west to east along the north bank of the Nene, and a single block of properties south of (and at right angles to) the river crossing. The

boundaries of almost every one of those properties were still preserved in 1840, and most remain readily identifiable on the Ordnance Survey map of 1900 (CA R51/28/1A–C; Pl. II). Digital comparison of the seventeenth-century estate map with the tithe map of 1840 and the Ordnance Survey map of 1900 reveals the precision in the former's cartography (CA R51/28/1A–C).⁸ The layout of the settlement at *Merchbeforde* thus remained more or less unchanged from about 1600 over the following 300 years. Although the estate map shows that there were regular open spaces north and south of the river crossing in *Merchbeforde*, together with the ordered layout that might suggest a planned market, the difficulty remains in using a map of *c.* 1600 to extrapolate the morphology of a mid-thirteenth century settlement.

The survival of an extent of *Merchbeforde* made in 1251 goes some way towards illuminating that question (CUL EDR G3.27). The Ely Coucher Book, an account of the Bishop of Ely's manors in that year, records ninety messuages in *Merchbeforde*, where single messuages usually paid an annual rent of 6*d* and fractions of a message a closely proportionate amount (Appendix 1).



Plate I. *Merchbeforde*, *c.* 1601–3 (detail, photostat copy by permission of Cambridgeshire Archives).

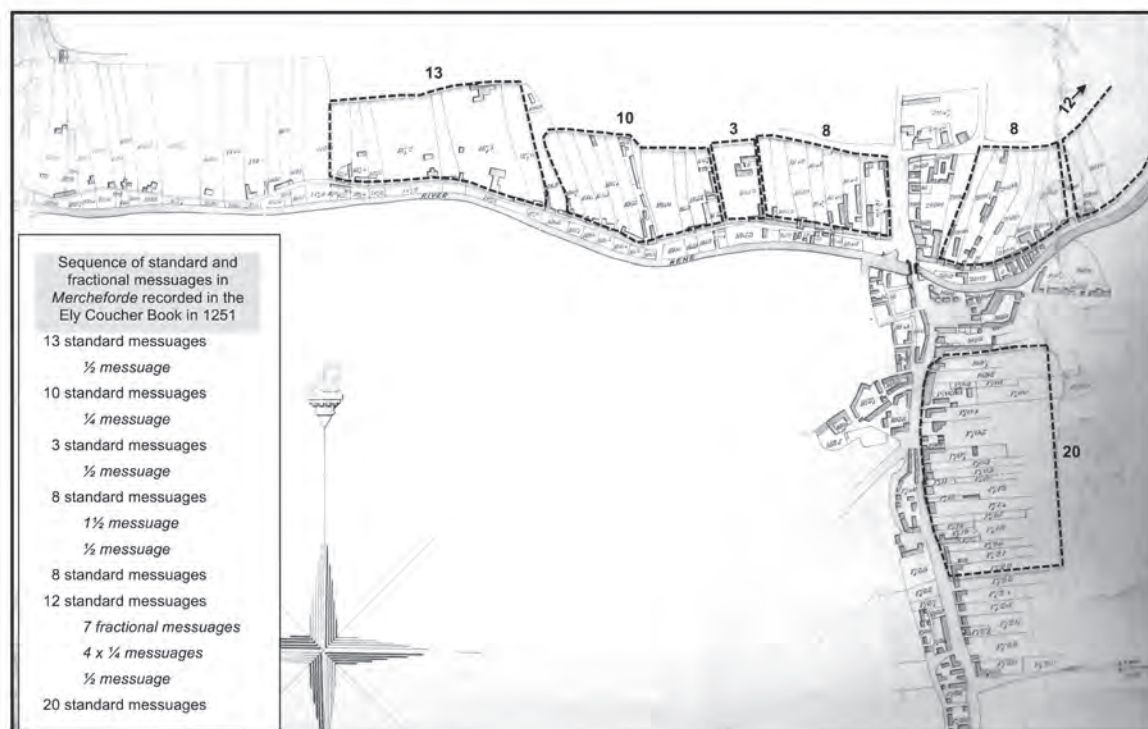


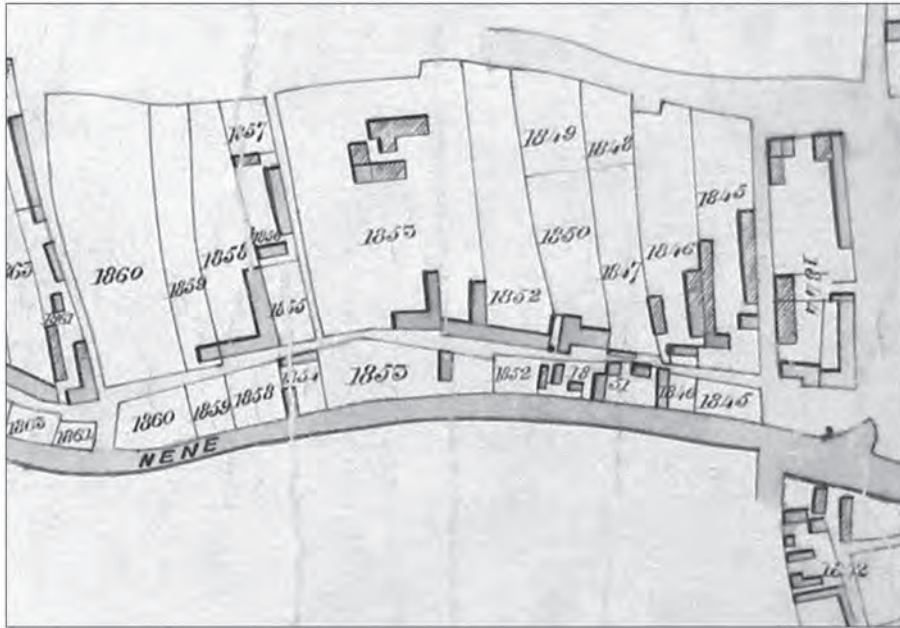
Plate II. March, 1840 Tithe map (CA R51/28/1A–C, by permission of Cambridgeshire Archives; with my additions).

The almost-universal consistency of the same annual rent for single messuages, and the careful pro-rata calculation of most fractional rents suggest that the area of each message was reasonably constant. The examples of Richard son of Ralph and Robert Clayland who each held two messuages for $12d$, or Thomas son of Adam who held five messuages for $2s\ 6d$, illustrate the point. It is underscored by the holdings of men like Walter Spendlowe who held $\frac{1}{4}$ message for $1\frac{1}{2}d$ and Richard son of Thomas who held $1\frac{1}{3}$ messuages for $8d$. The general conformity in the value of rents among the holdings might indicate that the holdings themselves were of roughly similar area.

The similarity between the regularity in the value of rents in 1251 and the properties mapped in *c.* 1601–3 and 1840 is, of course, immediately apparent. That the single messuages of 1251 may indeed have been of a *standardised* area might be

indicated by the tithe map, which shows that in 1840 properties along the north bank of the Nene tended to be around three-quarters of an acre in area, while those to the south of the river usually contained around $1\frac{1}{2}$ acres (CA R51/28/1A–C). In 1840 larger properties were generally multiples of these units. Plate III, for example, shows a block of properties along the northern bank of the Nene where the areas of each of five properties conform reasonably well to 3 roods and 30 perches.⁹ To take just one example, the holding numbered 1860 on Pl. III contained 1 acre 3 roods and 20 perches, very close to twice 3 roods and 30 perches. If the layout of the town recorded by the early seventeenth century did in fact reflect the character of the settlement in 1251, then it might suggest a degree of regularity most commonly found in the formal planning of settlement.

There, however, the possibility of long-term



Tithe Apportionment Ref.	Acreage	Note
1844	0.3.3	
1845	0.3.3	
1846	0.2.28	
1847-8	0.2.23	
1849-50	0.3.14	
1851	n.k.	
1852	0.3.23	
1853	2.2.29	3 x 0.3.3 = 2.1.9
1854	0.0.13	
1855-7	1.0.1	0.3.3 + 0.0.13 = 0.3.16
1858	0.2.38	
1859	0.2.11	
1860	1.3.2	2 x 0.3.3 = 1.2.06

Plate III. March, 1840 Tithe map (detail, CA R51/28/1A-C, by permission of Cambridgeshire Archives).

persistence in the layout of the settlement from 1251 to 1601–3 might stall were it not for another coincidence between the data which allows the hypothesis of such continuity to be pursued. Both the order of the holdings in the thirteenth-century extent and the blocks of properties on

the early seventeenth-century map present a syncopated appearance. Messuages in *Mercheforde* in 1251 were listed in a sequence of seven sets of standardised messuages (made up of thirteen, ten, three, eight, eight, twelve and twenty holdings respectively) interspersed by small numbers of

fractional messages (both greater and larger than the standard holding). Similarly, the early seventeenth-century settlement was made up of a number of regular blocks of properties of apparently standardised area which were divided from each other by small numbers of properties irregular in shape and area. (The layout may be the result of attempts to reconcile a fundamentally regular system of land apportionment with minor meanders in the course of the river.) If the messages in *Mercheforde* were listed clockwise from north-west to south (as was conventional practice), then the syncopated sequence of holdings in the 1251 extent can be overlaid with a fair degree of accuracy onto both the *c.* 1601–3 map and that of 1840. The acreages recorded in 1840 provide a crosscheck for this hypothesis, demonstrating a fair degree of conformity with

the standard and fractional holdings of 1251 (Pl. IV; Appendix 1). If these calculations are accurate, the layout of mid-thirteenth century *Mercheforde* appears to have remained largely unchanged into the mid-nineteenth century (and beyond) and bring us back to the possibility of insights into the morphology of medieval *Mercheforde* on the basis of the estate map of *c.* 1601–3.¹⁰

The early seventeenth-century map indicates that there were two potential locations for a planned medieval market-place (Pl. IV). One lay immediately north of the bridge, framed by holdings to west and east and by pasture closes to the north. Another lay on the south side of the Nene immediately east of the approach to the bridge from the south. It was bounded to the west by the north–south route (running to the manorial centre at Doddington), to the

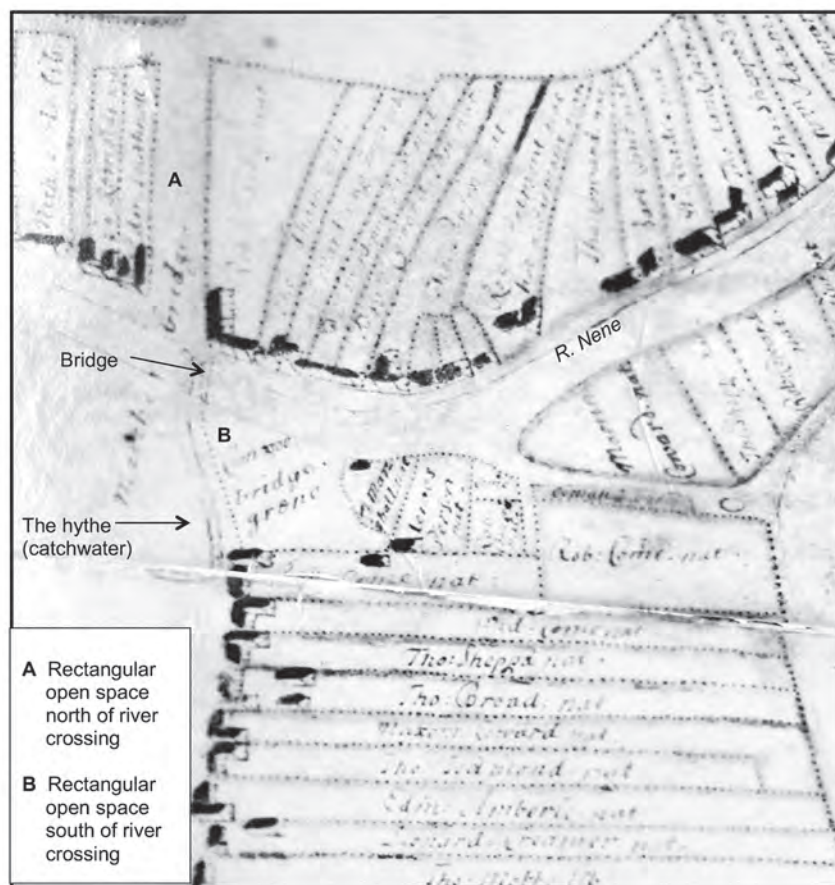


Plate IV. *Mercheforde*, *c.* 1601–3 (detail of area on either side of the bridge across the Nene; photostat copy, by permission of Cambridgeshire Archives).

north by the Nene, and to the south by the northern boundary of the block of messuages already mentioned. The eastern boundary had already been obscured by encroachment along the southern bank of the river.

At first sight this set of evidence is a hopeful development for the argument for a medieval market at *Mercheforde*. Called the ‘hythe’ in 1840, the area around the bridge was almost certainly used as a landing place for goods coming into and going out of the manor by boat from the Middle Ages onwards, and it is very likely that some of that activity was commercial. There was at least one shop in the vicinity by the later sixteenth century: in 1571 the churchwardens recorded that ‘Robt Vandelowe hath hired the shoppe at the hyh bridge for 6/8 to be paid to days before Ely fayer’ (CA P116/28/20). As the town is most likely to have received the shop as a bequest whose rents were intended to generate charitable income, the business there was probably reasonably profitable and perhaps one of a number around the bridge. Of interest in this context is the large messuage (rated as 1½ messuages) held by Peter *le chapman* in the 1251, whose position within the list of holdings suggests that it stood towards the eastern end of the open space to the south of the bridge. If that interpretation is correct, the holding would have been well located for loading and offloading goods from the river.

But evidence for some commercial activity is not necessarily the same as evidence for a market. Neither open space was called a market before 1670, nor is there a record of a medieval market hall or cross on either site. Although the open area south of the bridge *was* the location of the new later seventeenth-century market, it does not appear to have had a market-related name two generations earlier. The estate map of *c.* 1601–3 names it in three words: the first is indecipherable, the second two are ‘Bridge Green’. The bridge was called ‘hyh’ bridge in 1571, and ‘toun bridge’ in 1582, and the strongest likelihood is that the open space was called ‘High (or Town) Bridge Green’ rather than ‘Market Bridge Green’ (CA P116/28/20). The ‘Green’ suffix suggests that its origins lay in a planned communal amenity which

may have included some informal trading — like the village greens of many upland settlements — rather than a market *per se*. The character of some of those activities was recorded in the churchwardens’ accounts: in 1593, for example, ‘the washing of shipe by straungers at the bridge is letten to Thomas Scottwill for iis for this yere and he to take no man above ijd for every skore’ (CA P116/28/20) (Pl. V).

The two remaining morphological characteristics of medieval markets — the orientation of roads and tracks on the new market place, and the presence of burgess plots — are equally unproductive for *Mercheforde*. The route leading northwards from the open space on the north side of the bridge appears originally to have meandered across a large area of open pasture. By *c.* 1601–3 it was clearly subordinate to enclosures which had by then forced it into a number of changes of direction. If the track had been important, it is reasonable to infer that it would have dominated the alignment of new enclosures, rather than the other way around, and its insignificance in the landscape suggests that it did not lead to a central place like a market. South of the bridge, possibilities for any re-alignment of the route between the settlement and Doddington were tightly confined by the local topography. The block of properties south of the Nene lay on a narrow neck of higher ground between fen to both west and east (the former sufficiently deep to be called ‘The Sumps’), so there was little leeway for movement in the orientation of the track (Wells 1830, Vol. 2, p. 204, citing Hayward’s early seventeenth-century survey; CUL Maps. bb.53(1).93.114–).

While the alignments of roads and tracks in *Mercheforde* do not suggest that the open spaces performed any major market function in the Middle Ages, it might be argued that trade was instead focused on the canal which can be seen on the map of *c.* 1601–3 and which ran along the entire frontage of the planned block to the south of the Nene. If this were the case, the messuages of this most southern block of holdings would have faced directly onto the trading space. However, although the canal (or, more strictly,



Plate V. The High Bridge across the Nene, with inns and landing places lining the northern bank of the river.

the causeway along it) was called 'the hythe' by the nineteenth century, both it and the layout of this part of the settlement are straightforwardly explicable in terms of local geography. The block of holdings occupies a marginal situation at, rather than above, the winter flood-line and between two fairly deep areas of fen. These properties were particularly vulnerable to the risk of flooding: they lay too low to be predictably dry in winter and too close to areas particularly likely to collect water in time of inundation. It is significant, then, that the canal along the front of the properties has an exact double in another water-filled ditch which was still visible along the back boundary of the block in 1889 (Ordnance Survey Cambridgeshire Sheet XVI.5 25 inches to the mile). Both ditches were constructed at

the boundary between fen and high ground, and the purpose of each was almost certainly to drain excess water from the settlement into the Nene as efficiently as possible; that is, to prevent the winter floods from reaching this block of holdings. Although the 'hythe' may not have been constructed for transporting goods, once it was there any property-holder would have been mad not to have made use of it to bring fen products and other goods as close as possible to his/her front door.

The presence of ordered freehold properties around new market places is frequently cited as another indication of a medieval market, particularly where those occupying them were referred to as burgesses. However, although the messages on each side of the bridge were

undoubtedly planned holdings — of standard area with shared front and back boundaries — none of those on the southern or the northern banks of the Nene were laid out to face the regular open spaces which might be candidates for a market place, lying instead at right angles to them. Nor was anyone with a message in thirteenth-century *Merchbeforde* called a burgess. It is unlikely that any tenants were in fact burgesses even if their surnames did not emphasize this status since almost all the holdings in *Merchbeforde* were customary ('nat.', *nativus*) rather than free ('lib.' *liber*) in *c.* 1601–3; burgesses tended to be freemen (Miller 1951, p. 150).

There is one further line of enquiry in the search for a medieval market in *Merchbeforde*: if the settlement were primarily focused on commerce in 1251 one might expect to find more tenants with occupational surnames there than on the remainder of the estate. The population of the commercial centre at Ramsey, for example, generated more than 100 occupational surnames between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, while most people at the Bishop of Norwich's mid-twelfth century market port of King's Lynn were generally identified by the places from which they had come, their occupation or some personal characteristic (DeWindt & DeWindt 2006, p. 114; Reaney 1967, pp. 37–58; fig. 1). The surnames of people of *Merchbeforde* (and other parts of the Doddington estate) were quite different: there, most individuals were identified by surnames recording a family relationship, especially with a parent. That familial identifier suggests not only that most of the bishop's tenants were born on the estate but also that the local community valued personal relationships more highly than any other attribute. In this, they had more in common with most rural communities across agricultural Cambridgeshire than with the inhabitants of contemporary market towns.

While Fig. 3 also shows that there *was* a higher percentage of tenants with occupational surnames in *Merchbeforde* in 1251 than on the remainder of the bishop's Doddington manor, closer inspection suggests that this distinction may be more illusory than real. An analysis of

the occupations pursued by thirteenth-century tenants in *Merchbeforde* and Doddington suggests that the proportion of tenants in *Merchbeforde* with occupational surnames indicating crafts and/or manufacture was very similar to that across the remainder of the estate (Fig. 4). Nor were their occupations distinctively urban or even commercial; most could have been found in any rural community. Richard *clayland* (a plasterer), the soapmakers Henry and Wymark *sapayn(e)*, and Gilbert *le coverer* (a roofer) could probably have made a living in most settlements. The presence of a market would, it is true, enhance profitable opportunities for almost any producer; but it was not essential for men whose principal income was derived from small building works or the production of daily necessities. It is more difficult to make this argument for two other tenants in *Merchbeforde* — William *survel*, perhaps a maker of savoury food, and Henry *tympon*, a drummer, who might indeed be heralded as indicative of a market function there. The problem in treating these men as active evidence for a market at *Merchbeforde* is that men with similarly non-agricultural specialisms held land elsewhere on the Doddington estate where no market has been suggested. Alexander *nynter* (vintner) was part-holder of a cottage in *Merche*; the *burgeys* (burgess) family were fishermen, also with a cottage in *Merche* and a few newly assarted acres there; there were two boatmen — William *le botsler* (boatman) was a *cenuarius* with 55 acres in Doddington, and Richard *le flotiere* held a message at Benwick; a plasterer, Geoffrey *le claver*, was also a *cenuarius* in Doddington, while Robert *slaner*, perhaps a weaver, held a fishery there (CUL EDR.G3.27; Reaney 1967, pp. 55, 180, 184, 208; Stratmann 1891, p. 229; Latham 1965). The point is underscored by the case of Geoffrey *blancgeron*, one of the Bishop's free tenants, who held *Oswaldegrave* in Doddington in 1251 for ½ lb cumin to be paid each year at Easter. He held no land in *Merchbeforde* (CUL EDR.G3.27). In 1294 a man with the same name was accused of forestalling — that is, of intercepting merchants on the way to Ramsey market, buying their goods more cheaply than they would have

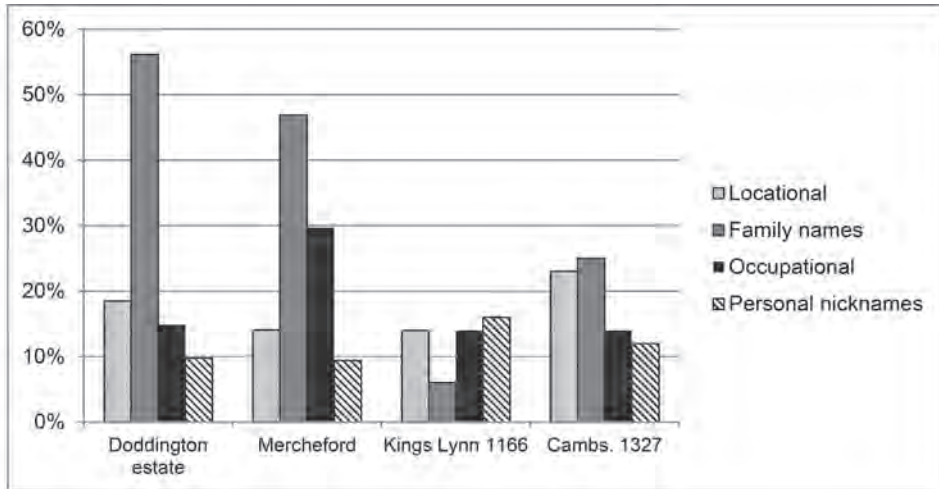


Fig. 3. Identifiable surnames in Doddington (N=276, excluding *Mercheford*) and *Mercheforde* (N=18) in 1251, compared with those of King's Lynn in 1166, and across Cambridgeshire in 1327 (Reaney 1967).

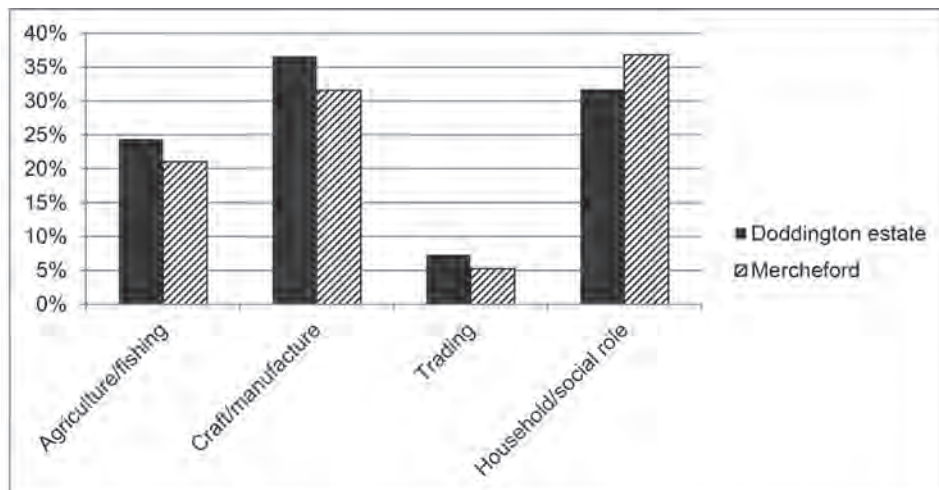


Fig. 4. Breakdown of occupational surnames by sector on the Doddington estate (excluding *Mercheforde*) (N=41) and in *Mercheforde* (N=18) in 1251.

sold for there, and selling them on at a profit (DeWindt & DeWindt 2006, p. 165). We cannot be sure that both references are to the same man, of course, or whether Geoffrey (if it was indeed he) had acquired a holding in *Mercheforde* in the intervening forty years. If there is any connection between this incomplete and tantalising pair of records, then it may just mean that at least one trader did not think that a message in *Mercheforde*

was an essential prerequisite for his business.

There is, then, little to support the contention that the origins of *Mercheforde* can be found in the establishment of a planned market along the Nene, or even in the gradual movement of population towards informal trading activity there. There is no evidence for the foundation of a medieval market there, nor for its role as a medieval centre for trade. It might be argued

that *Mercheforde* is an example of a failed medieval market, but this seems to me to compound the difficulties, since it would involve acceptance of a foundation for which there is no evidence, of at least some market activity for which there is no evidence, and of a disappearance, for which there is also no evidence (as in ‘there was a market here once’). That is, only the ‘universal truth’ based on settlement morphology would be held to be sufficient justification for that interpretation.

The remainder of this paper offers an alternative proposition: that the planned, medieval foundation at *Mercheforde* may have been established by the bishops of Ely as a strategy for maximising income from rents in a restricted geographic location. An analogy can be found in rural industrial estates which can produce good income in rents for modern farmers: the loss to agricultural exploitation of a relatively low acreage of land is compensated several, or even many, times over by rental income. That proposition is explored in five ways: the geography of the settlement; the status of holdings in *Mercheforde*; patterns of landholding across the Doddington estate in 1251; the benefits to peasants from common rights across the fens; and benefits to the Bishop from rents.

EXPLORING OTHER EXPLANATIONS FOR *MERCHEFORDE*'S ORIGINS

The thirteenth-century messuages in *Mercheforde* mostly lay on planned plots. If they were not laid out as burgess plots, why were they laid out in this way and on such a scale? It is clear from the large number of messuages, all of which were occupied in 1251, that there was a substantial demand for customary tenancies of this kind. The geography of the archipelago meant that there were few locations within the Doddington manor on which new villages of any size could be planted in order to meet such a need: the dry-land sites secure from the risk of winter flooding had been fully occupied by existing settlements for centuries. There were, however, other parts of the surrounding peninsula which, although they lay at the floodline, carried a narrow gravel

cap. If settlement were restricted to that narrow corridor of gravel, the risk of flooding on these well-drained ‘hards’ might be mitigated in ways with which fenland husbandmen were already familiar — that is, by constructing catchwater drains. Upcast from the excavation of the new river channel lying on top of land already more or less along the flood line offered a further narrow shelf for settlement along the northern bank of the Nene. A planned foundation at *Mercheforde* may have enabled the bishops to maximise occupation in a landscape in which opportunities for settlement were severely limited and in which there were large numbers of men eager to take up non-arable holdings (Miller 1951, p. 108).

This does not, however, explain the anomalous ‘message’ status of *Mercheforde* holdings: unlike most messuages, no customary arable was attached to them. This does not appear to be simply a *lacuna* in the documentary evidence: extensive fieldwalking during the fenland project around the settlement found ‘no evidence of medieval strips’ and the settlement does not appear to have been endowed with any arable land (Hall 1987, p. 47). A rent of 6*d* per year appears to have brought each tenant only the house and the acre or so of toft on which it stood. Why were these holdings not referred to as *coteria* instead? Miller defined cottagers as ‘men with a mere acre or so who could not have subsisted entirely on their land’ and while it is true that many cotlands were smaller than this, others were not: Adam *unmyne*'s cottage at Willingham, for example, came with 2 acres, while that of Nicholas son of Adam at Little Downham contained an acre (Miller 1951, p. 137; Smail 1968; CUL EDR.G3.27).

Their status as customary holdings rather than rent-paying *censuarii* is as puzzling. Miller has commented that villein status was distinguished by the character rather than the volume of services required of customary tenants, especially regular labour (Miller 1951, p. 137, also p. 141). Yet the tenants of *Mercheforde* did not owe week work or carrying duties, nor were they subject to putting their sheep in the lord's fold. In fact, they owed remarkably few customary payments or services: they attended only the ‘great harvest

boon' at Doddington, and paid just the most general dues — tallage, *leyrwite*, *gersuma* and twice their rent for relief and heriot. Even some of the hundredors and all the *cenuarii* on the estate were required to provide some labour services, and to undertake carrying duties (CUL EDR.G3.27). Despite their customary status, only the most general responsibilities were attached to the *Merchbeforde* messuages.

Such ambiguities might, perhaps, be explained as the consequence of the commutation of villein or cotland services for a money rent. The complete absence of customary arable from the messuages suggests, however, that an origin as villein holdings is unlikely; and if these were commuted cotland services, then they would be more likely still to have been called *coteria* rather than messuages. Moreover, cotlands in *Merche* to the south held by quite different rents and conditions: not only did they generally pay an annual rent of around 12*d* as well as customary payments like bridgesilver and cranesilver, they also had to perform 'the same [labour] customs as the holder of a full land' (CUL EDR.G3.27, my addition). Yet the messuages in *Merchbeforde* paid only 6*d* per year, without any customary payments, and owed none of the customs of villeins with full or half holdings or even of cottagers. Their lower rents and light responsibilities seem unlikely to have originated in commutations.

The messuages in *Merchbeforde* might alternatively be interpreted as the result of a large-scale, planned assart in the higher parts of the fen. But they were not described as *purpresturae* or as *nova terra* in 1251, nor were their tenants described as 'newly (or recently) enfeoffed' or enfeoffed 'in the time of' an earlier bishop, even though there is good evidence for the scrupulous application of these terms to thirteenth-century assart in other parts of the bishop's Doddington estate (Miller 1951, pp. 110, 119). Thirty-four new holdings at *Cunivode* (just west of the medieval hamlet at March), for example, were described as 'enfeoffed' in 1251; furthermore, unlike the messuages in *Merchbeforde*, they were remarkably varied in area, ranging from 1¼ roods to 12 acres (CUL EDR.G3.27). The evidence of only

very limited reclamation in the landscape of Doddington, and the marked focus of that activity in the south of the estate, appears to confirm the documentary evidence. There is nothing in the landscape of *Merchbeforde* that demonstrates similar characteristics to the fen-edge reclamations identified in the peat fens at Burwell or Apesholt in Littleport, or the extensive reclamations in the silt fens around Wisbech and Spalding (RCHM 1972, pp. liv-lxii; Hall 1992; Silvester 1988; Hallam 1954). There is nothing, then, to suggest that *Merchbeforde* originated as assart.

The most significant attribute of the messuages in *Merchbeforde* was that they had full rights of common and intercommon in the manor (CA 606/M2 and 606/M9).¹¹ Rights of common pasture on the Doddington estate allowed almost unlimited grazing on some of the richest fenland in the region. The medieval vill (including Doddington and its hamlets at Wimblington, Benwick and March) was one of the largest in the country, extending over nearly 38,000 acres (15,323 ha) of which most was fen pasture and meadow. Beyond the vill, the bishop's customary tenants had rights of intercommon across a vast area whose boundaries ran from Upwell to Littleport and Little Downham, past Somersham and Ramseyreside to King's Delph, along the Catswater to Singlesole, Throkenholt and Tydd, and then along the Old Well Stream from Wisbech back to Upwell (Fig. 1; *VCH Cambridgeshire IV*, 1953, p. 110; Hall 1987, p. 38). Individual common rights could further be enriched by joint-stock negotiations with the manor for control of large areas of grazing by discrete groups of tenants and this was certainly a strategy pursued by the men of *Merchbeforde* in 1251. With the tenants at *Merche*, they held 'newly 360 acres of fen and 20 acres *de pollote* by charter for 60*s.* in equal payments; and also 64 acres of fen next to *Idenbe*¹² for 20*s.* 8*d.* in equal payments; and 40 acres of fen in *Elnesorchard*¹³ for 7*s.* 2*d.* in equal payments' (CUL EDR.G3.27). Acting on their own, the *Merchbeforde* tenants held a further '188 acres of fen next to *Upstavendik*¹⁴ for 23*s.* 6*d.* in equal payments' (*ibid.*).¹⁵

Rights of common were conventionally attached to ‘all tenants of ancient arable’ but, as we have seen, no arable, ancient or otherwise, was included with the messuages in *Mercheforde* (Neilson 1929, p. 732; 1920, p. lxxvi). Perhaps the point of defining the holdings at *Mercheforde* as messuages rather than cottages may have been to provide them with the status which brought with it rights of common grazing across thousands of acres in the western fen basin *as if* they were conventional customary holdings? Was this the prize in which there was evidently so much peasant interest — as modern marketers might say, their ‘unique selling point’?

The possibility that access to common rights of grazing may have been an important motive for men seeking messuages in *Mercheforde* may explain the high proportion of tenants there with family surnames. Figure 5 suggests that families on the Doddington estate saw in messuages at *Mercheforde* an opportunity to diversify their land holdings: by far the largest number of tenants with family surnames were either individuals with a portfolio of landholdings across the manor or were representatives of extended families with collective property interests (*cf.* Miller 1951, p. 148). Of the latter, men with no other holdings on the estate, and who had siblings and parents living elsewhere in the vill, may have been the younger sons ‘of a prosperous peasantry’ who might otherwise have struggled to make a

living (*ibid.*, p. 98). Yet four of the eleven family groupings included jurors, men almost certainly among the better-off in their communities and, perhaps, looking for investment opportunities (DeWindt 1991, p. 628). Table 1 shows the character of these mixed bags of holdings. Thomas, son of Adam, to take one example, held a messuage in *Mercheforde*, while his brothers held three fisheries on the estate, some hundredal acres in Doddington and Wimblington,¹⁶ a censuerial messuage at Doddington, a full villein holding at Wimblington and a part-share in another, and a number of small plots of censuerial land in *Cunivode* and Wimblington. They were almost certainly the sons of Denise, widow of Adam, who held a censuerial messuage at Doddington and a few assarted acres in *Cunivode* and Wimblington. These men were not defined by the status of the land they held: they were clearly as happy to hold freely as to take on land with full customary services. Their primary focus appears to have been the construction of a range of landholdings which together maximised access to as wide a range of rich fenland resources and economic opportunities as was locally possible (Dodwell 1944, p. 170).

The wealth of the fenland landscape was a truism by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Ely was ‘praiseworthy for its woods, vineyards and waters, exceedingly rich in all fruit, livestock-breeding and crops ... richer than average in its

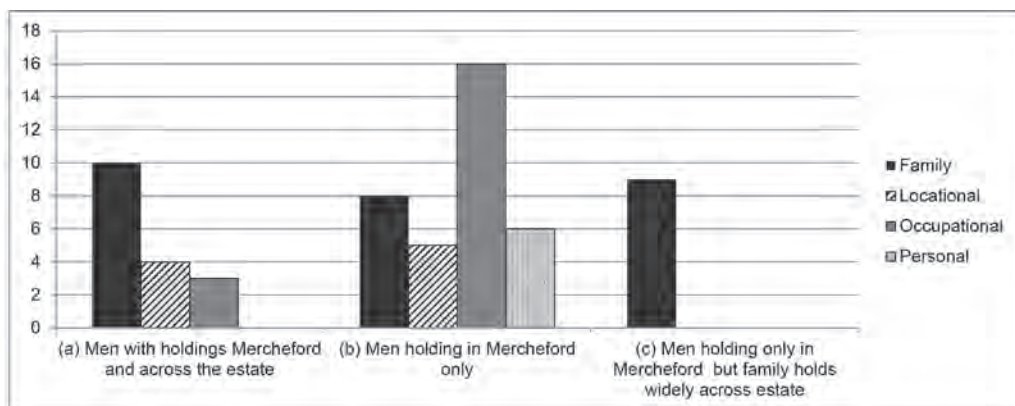


Fig. 5. Surnames of (a) men with holdings in *Mercheforde* and elsewhere on the Doddington estate; (b) men with holdings only in *Mercheforde*; (c) men holding only in *Mercheforde* but whose extended families held land more widely across the Doddington estate.

TABLE 1. PORTFOLIOS OF LAND: INDIVIDUALS AND EXTENDED FAMILIES WITH MESSAGES IN *MERCHEFORDE* AND OTHER HOLDINGS IN THE DODDINGTON ESTATE.

Tenant (bold); extended family below	<i>Mercheford</i>	Fishery	Free holding	Free assart	Villein / coteria holding
		(nos)	(nos)	(nos)	(nos)
Thomas, son of Adam; brothers Peter, Ralph, Richard, Walter & William	½ message	3	1	6	2
Godlomb, son of Aylmer; brother Richard	1 message	1	0	2	1
Avice, daughter of David; brothers Simon and Thomas, and mother Amice	1 message	0	0	1	2
Henry, son of Elena (juror)	1 message	1	0	1	2
Richard, Stephen & Everard Gase	2 messages, 1½ message and ½ messages	1	0	2	0
John and Richard, sons of Hugh; brother Thomas	<i>Languetta</i> , 2 messages with <i>languettae</i> , 3 messages	1	0	3	3
Richard, son of Odo	1 message and 1½ acres of fen	1	1	0	1
Richard, son of Ralph; brothers Herve, Roger, Walter, sister Margaret, uncle Peter and mother Maud	2 messages	3	4	3	1
Peter and Richard (juror), sons of Thomas; brother John and mother Alice	1 message, 1 message and ½ message, and a plot of land	6	5	1	4
Eliot and Aldus, sons of T(h)oly and sister Agnes; brother Thomas (juror)	3 messages	1	0	0	1
Henry and Thomas, sons of Walter; brothers Alan (juror), John, Peter, Robert and Roger, and mother Maud	5 messages	2	2	3	3

pasture for cattle and horses' and 'a productive breeding-ground for farm animals and beasts of burden' (Fairweather 2005, p. 213); the marshes at Thorney 'abound in trees, whose smooth height stretches towards the stars. The plain there is as level as the sea; which with its grass flourishing delights the eye, and which is so smooth that there is nothing to hinder him that runs through it'; and at Ramsey there were 'fair gardens, rich pastures, shady groves, and rich meadows; which in the spring time look most beautiful' (Darby 1974, pp. 53–4). The value of the peat fens lay in their non-arable products.

The most important crop was grass: pastures flooded in winter produced rich 'whiteseed' grass ('fen hay') which could be mown twice each year, its productivity and quality underpinned by the winter flooding which made them natural water-meadows (provided that the water did not linger too long). By the thirteenth century the rental value of an acre of fen meadow, or the lactage from a single cow grazing upon it, could bring in three times or more income than an acre of arable land, stimulating a two- or three-fold increase in the acreage of meadowland in the fen and along the fen between the mid-eleventh and the mid-fourteenth centuries (Campbell 2000, p. 146; Raftis 1957, pp. 153, 157; Darby 1974, p. 67).¹⁷ Even in the early nineteenth century it was still meadows and pasture which produced the greatest returns for fenland farmers (Gooch 1811, p. 179). By the time records become more frequent, in the mid-twelfth century, the peat fens were supporting such large numbers of cattle that they were customarily and vividly recorded as grazing 'horn under horn' (Neilson 1920, pp. xxxviii, xliii, xlix; Miller 1951, p. 80; Darby 1974, pp. 66, 68, 77–8). Annual roundups involved enormous numbers of beasts: a contemporary muster on 'la Est fen' in Lincolnshire involved so many animals that it took three days and required 'a bailiff, and twenty-two men' (Neilson 1920, p. xiii). The vaccary of the Bishop of Ely at Doddington held at least 100 cows and five bulls in 1251, while there were more than 1,200 cattle in total across the early fourteenth-century estate of

the Abbey of Peterborough (Miller 1951, p. 79; Biddick 1989, p. 81). The central role played by cattle in the economy of the peat fens was not based on breeding or the production of meat or leather, but on cheese and butter from dairying (Biddick 1989, p. 96; Campbell 2000, pp. 135–145; Darby 1974, p. 66). The demesne herd at the Crowland manor at Cottenham, for example, produced one 5½ lb cheese each day between 7 May and Michaelmas 1280–1281, and 12 stones of butter in 1288–9, adding significance to the customary duty of the men of *Merche* in 1251 to take a 'boatload of cheese' to King's Lynn each year (Ravensdale 1974, pp. 59–60; CUL EDR. G3.27).¹⁸

The significant contribution of the fen to the local economy of fenland manors meant that 'in no part of England were common rights more important' (Darby 1974, p. 68; Neilson 1920, pp. xxxiv–xliii). Medieval and early modern peasants with access to fen pasture and other fen produce were able to exploit the same opportunities as their manorial lords, and tended as a result to be significantly better off than their upland counterparts (Darby 1974, pp. 22–38; Thirsk 1953, pp. 40–45; Spufford 1974, pp. 131–4). A man with little arable land but with a right of common in fen grazing and other products could live very well, often better than an upland peasant with 30 acres of arable land: at Waterbeach in 1340, for example, even 'men with little or no land could support themselves through their rights over the extensive common pastures and fens' (*VCH Cambridgeshire IX* 1989, p. 250). Part of the reason could be found in the profits from dairying. Freeman and customary tenants were as keen cattlemen as their manorial lords; for example, at about 4.5 cows per taxpayer, peasant cattle herds in the Liberty of the Abbey of Ramsey in 1291 were twice the size of those of their upland contemporaries, while almost every thirteenth-century Ramsey tenant owned *at least* one cow (Postan 1973, pp. 230, 245). That pattern appeared unchanged along the fen edge in the late sixteenth century when Ravensdale concluded that 'the keeping of cattle was almost universal among the peasantry' and seventeenth-

century commoners of Cottenham still grazed over 2,000 dairying cattle on their fens (1974, p. 62; see also Fortrey 1685, p. 59 and Spufford 1974, pp. 131–3).¹⁹ Dairying income could be augmented within the parish boundary by other rights of common to fish, fowl, peat, reeds, sedge, osiers and other fen products.

Messuages in *Merchbeforde* thus offered the prospect for individuals as well as extended families, generally already established within the Bishop's Doddington manor, to exploit new or additional rights of common pasture across extensive fenland pastures, where even those otherwise landless might achieve a reasonable standard of living (Pl. VI). That these benefits were attractive to thirteenth-century fenmen is suggested by the large size of the settlement, its planned layout and — despite the substantial number of messuages — the absence

of unoccupied holdings in 1251. Together they indicate a high degree of demand for holdings there.

The benefit to the Bishop lay in the substantial annual rents from the holdings at *Merchbeforde* that accrued to his estate: £2 5s 9½d (CUL EDR. G3.27). He may well have calculated that, per acre, income from these rents was likely significantly to outstrip his income from grazing of the same area, whether directly managed from the demesne or leased to tenants. The attractiveness of the sum can be gauged by comparison of the rents received from the farm of the bishop's market and fair at Wisbech in 1251 where the tolls of the market were let at 50s a year, while those for the fair brought in an additional 20s (CUL EDR. G3.27). The farm of the tolls of Wisbech market brought in just 5s per year more than the rents at *Merchbeforde*.



Plate VI. March: nineteenth-century peasant cottages along the northern bank of the Nene.

CONCLUSION

The large number of planned messuages in *Merchbeforde* attracted a range of constituencies. On the one hand, they may have offered the chance of an established occupation and a reasonably reliable income to a growing, frequently landless, population of younger sons from the Doddington estate and beyond; on the other, they seem to have enabled extended families and more affluent individuals to broaden portfolios of existing free and customary landholdings, small assarts, and fisheries. There did not need to be a medieval market at *Merchbeforde* to justify its existence: the access to one of the largest and richest areas of wetland grazing in England provided by rights of common attached to its messuages was more than sufficient.

The extent of the planned settlement, the consistency of the rents, and their standardised status and rights all suggest that the idea of establishing a substantial, new settlement at *Merchbeforde* was implemented within a relatively short period of time. A planned layout provided an efficient framework for settling large numbers of tenants in a location where the availability of land suitable for occupation was very limited. It is, then, no wonder that *Merchbeforde* had the appearance of an urban development since new market towns shared the same requirements: the establishment of a reasonably large population of tenants of equal status within a reasonably

confined area. In the case of the latter, proximity to a market place was essential; in the case of the former, there was a paucity of land on which settlement on this scale could be achieved. Yet they shared a common principle: in both cases, lords released a relatively small acreage from agricultural use and recouped the consequent loss of crops many times over through rents. In *Merchbeforde*, local geographic constraints provided a context within which creative and entrepreneurial bishops of Ely might extend their manorial incomes by applying old lessons learned in the establishment of new market towns to new conditions for establishing other large settlements through which new sources of rental income could be exploited.

Perhaps a codicil might be added to the 'universal truth' which Beresford and Taylor have so powerfully established, that planned settlements were usually laid out for commercial purposes. Most cases were probably aimed at the establishment of a centre for trade, but in some places (like *Merchbeforde*) economic activity might be expressed in some other way. Either case would satisfy the general incentive for manorial lords: investment of a relatively small area of land in a planned settlement from which substantial profits from rents (and, sometimes, tolls) might be expected. Provided that the inhabitants of a new foundation could make a good living and thus pay good rents, how important was it really to lords how that living was made?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper owes an enormous debt to discussions and debates with Christopher Taylor to whom many improvements and insights are owed; the mistakes and misconceptions that remain are all the author's own. David Edwards was generous enough to provide a copy of his transcript of Rev Walker's note on the date of

origin of the early seventeenth-century estate map. Edna Stacey at March Museum was kind enough to allow access to the Museum's photostat copy of the estate map, which is printed in greater contrast (and thus shows more detail) than those in the Cambridge University Library and the Cambridge Archives.

NOTES

1. With apologies to Jane Austen.
2. CUL EDR.G3.27. A messuage is essentially a toft on which a dwelling stands, the former large enough to contain in addition some agricultural outbuildings, a kitchen garden and, sometimes, a paddock (Onions 1973, 'Messuage').
3. The Doddington estate was consolidated in the hands of the Abbey of Ely in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries; the new Bishopric of Ely was endowed with a large proportion of the abbey's manors when it was established in 1109.
4. 'Plantwater' Drain is now just a sinuous, partly canalised ditch, which continues the Nene's northward alignment from the point at which the modern river turns east. *Phragmites*, the common reed, is a plant of damp or waterlogged ground; it reaches a height of around 15 feet and spreads easily; the fen-sedge, *cladium mariscus*, can grow to 2.5 metres.
5. Medieval and post-medieval descriptions of silting of the estuary at Wisbech provide a vivid illustration of the relentless recurrence of this problem (Stone 2005, p. 29; *VCH Huntingdonshire III* 1936, p. 253). Fenland conditions made this a recurrent problem, of course, and the construction in the fifteenth century of Bishop Morton's Leam, the artificial canal between Peterborough and Guyhirn, represents another attempt to address the same conditions.
6. The herds of cattle that grazed on the rich grasses of the region were mostly driven on the hoof between vill and pasture, although boats could also be used: early fourteenth-century cattle drives in East Fen of the Soke of Bolingbroke, Lincs, were undertaken by 'a bailiff, and twenty-two men with twelve horses, and eight men with boats' (Neilson 1920, p. xiii; see also Darby 1974, p. 62).
7. The estate map has been securely dated to 1601–3 by correlating the names of landholders on the map with parish records (d1894). It is, however, catalogued in the Cambridge Archives and in the Cambridge University Library as *c.* 1680. I am very grateful to Mr David Edwards for drawing Revd Walker's convincing argument for this earlier date to my attention and for giving me a copy of his transcription of Revd Walker's text. Smaller-scale early seventeenth-century maps (some preserved as copies) show the same layout, *e.g.* CA R59/31/40/1, CA 59/31/40/176, CA R52/24/31).
8. While each block of properties on the map can be overlaid digitally almost exactly on the same areas in the 1840 Tithe Map or the 1900 Ordnance Survey map, there are problems in overlaying the map as a whole. It seems likely that these difficulties result from the distortion over time of a very large map on parchment (CA R51/28/1A–C; Ordnance Survey 1900).
9. The plots numbered 1863–1867 on the tithe map measured 3 roods 14 perches, 3 roods 29 perches, 3 roods, 35 perches, 3 roods 16 perches, and 3 roods respectively (CA R51/28/1A–C).
10. Although unusual, such detailed reconstructions of the layout and holdings of medieval settlements have been attempted before at Cuxham (Oxon) and Kibworth Harcourt (Leics) (Harvey 1965; Howell 1983).
11. This may confirm that they were not assarts: Neilson noted that 'to tenements in assart no rights of common could pertain, since the assart itself was originally subject to the common rights of the vill' (1920, p. liv).
12. *Idenbe* was another name for the *Plantewater* (Reaney 1943, p. 14; Wells 183, p. 21).
13. The east side of High Street, March (CA P116/28/19).
14. 'Somewhere on the old stream which divided Wisbech from March in Goosetree' (CA P116/28/19).
15. Miller suggested that such group actions may have been focused on reclamation, but this seems unlikely. Although reclamation was common in the silt fens, there is little evidence of widespread reclamation on the peat fens (Miller 1951, p. 120; Hallam 1954).
16. That is, held of the hundred but administered by the manor.
17. Although far beyond the peat fens, the wealth of medieval Holderness was similarly derived from the rich summer pasturage available in its marshes rather than from any arable produce (Siddle 1967, pp. 44–5).
18. Seventeenth-century farmers protesting against fen drainage described the range of products which made their herds profitable: 'we breed and feed great store of young cattle, and we keep great dayeries ... and multitudes of heyfers, and Scots and Irish cattle have been fatted on the Fens, which afford hides, and tallow' (CUL *Anti-Projector*; see also Gooch 1811, p. 268).
19. While the average herd in early sixteenth-century Willingham held eight cattle, the median herd in upland Orwell was two, and the former could be held by men with little or no land, while the latter tended to be restricted to customary tenants (Spufford 1974, pp. 130–1, 98–9).

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Cambridge Archives

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P116/28/19–20 March, late 19th-century transcription of copies of documents relating to March 1222–16th century.

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R59/31/40/1 Hand-drawn and coloured copy of William Hayward's 1604 map of the fens, by R. Peylor Smyth 1727.

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Map of Doddington, Wimblington and March c. 1601–3, Photostat copy made in 1939 from an original, now mislaid, then in the ownership of March District Council.

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APPENDIX 1: TENANT HOLDINGS IN MERCHEFORDE IN 1251, AND APPORTIONMENTS
ON TITHE MAP OF 1840

(CUL EDR.G27; CA R51/28/1A-C)					
Tenant name, listed in same order as in 1251	Size of holding 1251	Rent in 1251	No. on 1840 tithe map	Area on 1840 tithe map (acres)	Notes
NORTH BANK OF THE NENE FROM WEST TO EAST					
Richard son of Ralph	2 messuages	12d	1874-5	n.k.+0.2.23	
John de Beynwick	1 message	6d	1873	0.2.25	
Henry son of Elena	1 message	6d			
Henry son of Walter	1 message	6d	1872	0.3.13 +n.k.	
Godlomb son of Aylmer	1 message	6d			
Reginald clerk	1 message	6d			
Ralph powe	1 message	6d	n.k.	n.k.	
Thomas son of Adam	5 messuages	2s 8d	1870-1	N.k.+1.2.14	
Sub-total: 13 standard messuages¹					
Robert de Estworth	½ message	3d	? 1868-9	n.k.	
Sub-total: 1 irregular message					
Aldus Tholi	1 message & a <i>languetta</i> ²	7d	1867	0.3.14	
John bule	1 message & a <i>languetta</i>	7d	1866	0.3.29	
Thomas de Walsokne	1 message & a <i>languetta</i>	7d	1865	0.3.35	
Richard son of Hugh	1 message & a <i>languetta</i>	7d	1864	0.3.16	
Richard his brother (sic)	1 message & a <i>languetta</i>	7d	1863	0.3.0	
MARYLEBONE LANE					
Stephen de Stratham	1 message & a <i>languetta</i>	7d	1860	1.3.2	2 x standard messuages = 1.2.2 acres
Richard de Westreye	1 message & a <i>languetta</i>	7d			
Robert schad	1 message & a <i>languetta</i>	7d	1859	0.2.11	
Henry Chaumperneys	2 messuages & 2 <i>languettae</i>	14d	1855 ³ -8	0.0.37+ 0.2.38+0.3.34	
Sub-total: 10 standard messuages					

Walter spendelowe	¼ message	1½d			
Sub-total: 1 irregular message					
ROOKS LANE					
Robert de Hedele & Geoffrey nosey	1 message	4d	1853	2.2.29+n.k.	These properties formed a single coherent block in 1601–3 and 1840
Christiana munek & Richard le convers'	1 message	6d			
Avice daughter of David	1message	6d			
Sub-total: 3 regular messages					
Dick Gase	½ message	3d			
Sub-total: 1 irregular message					
William butler	1 message	6d			
John clericus	1 message	6d			
Peter son of Thomas	1 message	6d	1852	0.3.23	
Dawe spendelowe	1 message	6d	1849–50	0.3.14	
Stephen Gase	1 message	6d	1847–8	0.2.23	
John son of Hugh	1 message	6d	1846	0.2.28	
Everard Gase	1 message	6d	1845	0.3.30	
Dave spendelowe	1 message	6d	1844	0.3.33	
Sub-total: 8 regular messages					
THE BRIDGE					
Richard son of Thomas	1½ ⁴ messages	8d	2088–2094	1.3.13 + buildings in 1840	1½ messages = 1.0.24 acres; ½ message = 0.1.21 Sum of the two is 1.2.5
Ralph son of Richard	½ message and a small piece of land	4d			
Walter Palmer, John son of Hugh & john de Beynwick	1 <i>languetta</i> ⁵	½d			
Sub-total: 2 messages⁶					
Robert son of Richard	1 message & a plot of land	7d			
Eliot son of Tholy	1 message	6d	2095	0.3.08	
Ralph son of Geoffrey	1 message and a plot of land	7d	2096	0.3.7	

Richard Gaze	1½ messuages	8d	2099	1.0.27	1.0.24 acres = 1½ messuages
Walter le paumer	2 messuages	12d	2103	0.2.27	
John Em	2 x ½ messuages	6d	2104–5	0.1.6 + 0.2.8	½ message = 0.1.21
Sub-total: 8 messuages					
Alice widow of Gilbert, & John son of Hugh	1 message	6d		These properties not shown on the 1840 tithe map	n.k. Shown as a coherent block of 12 properties in c. 1601–3.
Richard clayland	2 messuages	12d			
Henry tympon	1 message	6d			
Geoffrey pekoe	1 message	6d			
Clement son of John	1 message	6d			
Agnes daughter of Toly	1 message	6d			
Robert de estiwith	1 message	6d			
Ralph son of Godfrey	2 messuages	12d			
Richard spirhard	2 messuages	12d			
Sub-total: 12 regular messuages					
SOUTH BANK OF THE NENE FROM NORTH TO SOUTH					
Walter survel	½ message and a plot of land	5d			
Ralph son of William	3 messuages and a plot of land	20d			
Peter son of Thomas	½ message and a plot of land	4d			
Peter chapman	1½ messuages and a plot of land	9d			
Richard son of Odo	1 message and 1½ acres of fen	9d			
Sub-total: 7 messuages⁷					
Thomas son of Roger abbot	¼ message	2d			
Reginald clerk	¼ message	2d			
Richard spirhard	¼ message	2d			
Richard Wynebotesham	¼ message	1½d			
Richard abbot	½ message	3d			
Sub-total: 5 irregular messages⁸					

Richard scad	1 message	6d	1697	1.1.36	
Matthew shepherd	1 message	6d	1698	1.2.30	
John shepherd	1 message	6d	1699–1703	3.0.10	2 x 1.2.0 = 3 acres
Stephen de Stratham	1 message	6d			
Roger cat	1 message	6d	1704	1.2.21	
Walter Munby	1 message	6d	1705–7	4.2.29	3 x 1.2.0 = 4.2.0
John Cugeray	1 message	6d			
Agnes oppere	1 message	6d			
Henry sapayn	1 message	6d	1708	1.0.19	
Henry Chaumperyneys	1 message	6d	1709–11	1.2.19	
Gilbert le coverer	1 message	6d	1712–13	2.1.28 + buildings	2 x 1.2 = 3 acres
Richard son of Hugh	1 message	6d			
Elyot hunt	2 messages	12d	1714–19	5.0.34 + buildings	4 x 1.2 = 6 acres
Wymark sapayn	2 messages	12d			
Henry, & Thomas son of Walter	2 messages	12d	1720–1	1.0.9 + 1.1.26 = 2.1.35 acres + buildings	2 x 1.2 = 3 acres
Reginald, & Robert de Hidele	2 messages	12d	1722	2.1.07 + buildings	2 x 1.2 = 3 acres
Sub-total: 20 regular messages¹⁰					
TOTAL: 90 MESSAGES					

1. Thirteen properties are shown in this block on the estate map of *c.* 1601–3. Where the correlation between the 1251 and the Tithe apportionment seems incomplete in this Appendix, the attribution of messages to a geographic location is consistently confirmed by the early seventeenth-century estate map which shows that the appropriate number of properties can be located in the particular block to which they are attributed here. The accuracy of the cartography of the estate map has been confirmed in the accuracy with which it can digitally be overlain on both the tithe map and the 1900 O.S. map.
2. A *languetta* is a tongue of land. The possibility that these might be the narrow frontages on the river bank between the messages and the Nene was investigated, but there is little evidence that this was the case. It is more likely that they were narrow strips of land in the fen, ditched on both sides.
3. Plot number 1855 was a narrow block of river frontage measured at 37 perches in 1840.
4. It is difficult to be sure whether this means one full *and* one half message, or whether it means one message containing 1.5 times the standard area. I have interpreted it as the latter.
5. It is very tempting to see this languetta as a landing place on the north side of the Nene, but there is nothing in the landscape to suggest that this was the case. The river bank remains a public right of way.
6. The first two blocks of messages east of the bridge on the north side of the Nene suggest some division and

agglomeration of messuages had gone on since they were first laid out. Nonetheless they appear to show an underlying regularity.

7. It is possible that these messuages might be identified with the properties that lay east of the open space south and east of the bridge in *c.* 1601–1603.
8. The small areas of these properties suggest that they may have be the small encroachments against the southern side of the open space shown on the early seventeenth-century estate map.
9. It will be noted that this block held more than TWENTY properties in *c.* 1601–3 and in 1840. However, the 1900 Ordnance Survey map shows that the back (eastern) boundary of the properties numbered as 1697–1722 is continuous both around the northern boundary of 1697 and around the southern boundary of 1722. This suggests that those north of 1697 and south of 1722 are later additions to an existing planned block formed of 1697–1722. Indeed, the Ordnance Survey map shows that the back (eastern) boundary of properties 1723–1730 abuts the back boundary of those to the north (1697–1722) at a right angle.