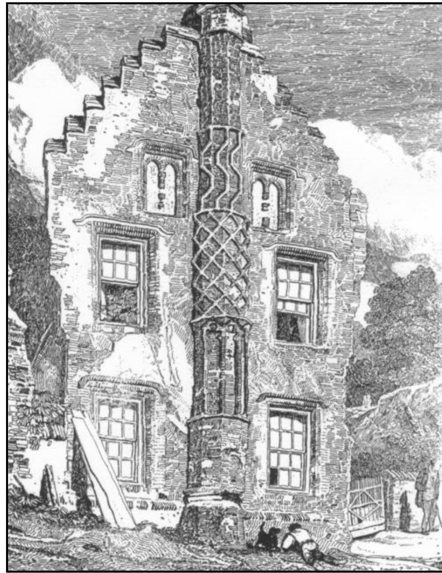
The Landmark Trust

METHWOLD OLD VICARAGE

History Album



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Re-presented in 2015

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BASIC DETAILS

Listed: Grade I

Built: late 15th Century

Acquired by Monica and Harry Dance: 1964

Bequeathed to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 2001 and leased to the Landmark Trust: 2002

Architects: Pamela Cunnington (for the Dances' restoration in the 1960s)
Martin Whitworth (for repairs carried out in 1988)
Philip Orchard of the Whitworth Co-Partnership (for Landmark in 2002)

Contractors: E Fields & Co (for the Dances' restoration in 1966)
Cubbitt Theobald of Long Melford (for Landmark in 2002)
Contracts Manager: Derek Hearnden, Site Foreman Carl Roper

Opened as a Landmark: November 2002

Acknowledgements

Building analysis: Bill Wilson of Wilson Compton Associates

The Landmark books were provided with a donation from Roger Eaton

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Methwold Old Vicarage

Summary

Architecturally, the Old Vicarage is something of a puzzle. Its timber framing and brickwork are early – probably late fifteenth century. Its wall paintings are dated a little later, in the sixteenth century. Originally thatched, it would have been a large and prestigious house for its period; today's roofspace has lime-rendered partitions suggesting that accommodation once extended across three floors. While the central and south sections are later extensions, their brick plinth also dates from 1490-1510, suggesting that the original fabric extended at least the full extent of today's footprint. So why, even at a period when the power and influence of the Church was at its height immediately before the Dissolution of the Monasteries, would the house for a priest in a small village on the edge of the fenland be built with such a glorious but worldly display of moulded brickwork? To an extent the same puzzle applies to the moulded beams inside and even more so to the wall paintings (although these may reflect the taste of later, non-ecclesiastical inhabitants).

The interconnecting rooms and large downstairs chamber suggest multiple uses as well as lodging for a priest. The building of church houses was a common feature of the late-fifteenth century, buildings used much as village halls are today as a meeting room or space for the villagers to congregate for Church Ales. Perhaps there were links between the living and nearby Castle Acre Priory; a church house could also double as a lodging block for visitors to a priory. Equally, the manor of Methwold had been part of the Duchy of Lancaster and therefore Crown property since 1347; perhaps accommodation was required for the Crown representative. Perhaps simply the house was built for a lay owner and passed into church ownership later. Certainly church houses were built to a high standard: the Priest's House in Halcombe Rogus was also a church house from a similar date and is a far more typical expression of the form, with fine but essentially sober detailing. But all this is speculation in trying to resolve why Methwold Old Vicarage presents such an essentially secular form – the documents have yet to provide an answer.

With all the debate that surrounds the divestment of vicarages by the Church, it is somehow reassuring to discover that Methwold Old Vicarage has been an 'old' (in the sense of former) vicarage since the mid-eighteenth century, and possibly long before that. Through all this time, it was an impropriate vicarage, or one whose upkeep had been handed to the lay patron of the living. But Methwold parish had been impropriate since long before that. As early as1533, 'a fine was levied between the King and Thomas, Prior of Castle-Acre, of this [Methwold] Rectory, and the Advowson of the Vicarage, and soon after, on 22 Dec in the said Year, the King granted them to Thomas, Duke of Norfolk' (assuming this does indeed refer to this house rather than a different one since lost). It must be from these next years that the wall paintings date. In 1614, the rectory and the advowson of the vicarage were alienated to Sir Henry Hobart. While some vicars of Methwold listed in St George's opposite must have lived in the vicarage, by the 1670s the house had lay tenants and possibly long before that.

By 1800, the house was in a state of some disrepair, was being lived in by two families and considered unsuitable for the hospitality deemed appropriate for a vicar to offer. This was used by the patron, John Partridge, as justification for the uniting of the livings of Methwold and Cranwich at this date. By the mid-nineteenth century the great Victorian revival in the Church of England had shifted the emphasis from hospitality to care of souls in the duties of their vicars. Cranwich and Methwold were therefore disunited in

1853 and in 1854 a 'neat new vicarage house' was erected at the other end of the parish in Southery.

This was lamented by Rev. John Denny Gedge in his history of the village in 1893: 'Oh! If my predecessor, instead of erecting my vicarage house out of contact with the village, at one end of this enormous parish of nearly 14,000 acres, had but accepted … the New Hall adjoining, and secured the old Vicarage for parish rooms, for clubs, for mothers' meetings… and other such uses, restoring the two long apartments of which it consists to their old dimensions … Oh! if some charitable millionaire even now would buy it, and its price would be very small, and present it to the parish.' By the Rev. Gedge's day, the Old Vicarage was still divided into two cottages and was still showing signs of neglect – 'now, alas! The tenant of one of the two cottages …has been allowed to smother it with ivy. Oh! If some nightly visitant would but sever the stems of that accursed plant. Why should a community have no power against private vandalism?'

The building's decline continued into the twentieth century. By the 1930s, its poor condition brought it to the attention of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. Despite their efforts on behalf of the building, the absentee landlord seemed to be hoping to demolish it and rebuild. It had become tenements for four families. By the early 1960s, it was scheduled for demolition as unfit for human habitation. Its saviour then appeared in the form of Monica Dance (Secretary of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings from 1939 to 1978), who bought the Old Vicarage with her husband Harry in 1964 and restored it with characteristic sensitivity. In 1979 the Dances handed their former home, Manor Farm, to Landmark's care and moved to Methwold. When Monica Dance died in 1998 she left the Old Vicarage to the SPAB, who then approached the Landmark Trust for help with the ongoing maintenance of the building.

It is a timber-framed house of extraordinary richness. Only a single room wide, it is continuously jettied along its west elevation. This range has carved spandrels to the supporting brackets, with stumpy octagonal shafts and capitals. The extension at the rear was added later. The building's spectacular stepped brick end-gable is decorated with moulded terracotta ornament and an octagonal chimneystack. The stack is divided into five zones by moulded bands decorated in a variety of patterns. This gable is unique to the area and possibly beyond. The main ground floor chamber holds some fine beams, the smaller timbers having a simple running roll-mould and the larger with a crumpled ribbon twisted around the shaft, tied at intervals. The motif is echoed on the bressumer above the moulded brick fireplace (which has unfortunately been hacked back in the past). Similar features are also found in the interconnecting suite of rooms above, together with some early wall paintings also dating from the sixteenth century.

When the Dances came to restore the building in the 1970s, they kept the evidence of the building's division into cottages with the change of floor level in the main chamber. They rediscovered the five-light mullioned window beneath later render on the first floor. Their intervention in the repairs of the timber frame and internal fittings and their insertion of the large window on the ground floor are also clear and are identified through the paint regimen. Few changes were made when the building became a Landmark; the Landmark accommodation is limited to the north and central sections of the house (the rest is empty for now). A new bathroom and kitchen were installed and wiring and heating were upgraded. Otherwise, the only visible change is a new colour scheme inside and a heavier coat of limewash for the members in the timber frame. We hope Monica and Harry Dance would approve of this gentle transformation.

Description of the Building

Summary

Methwold Old Vicarage is a building of exceptional quality of its class for various reasons. The north third of the house, timber framed and jettied, was conceived and built on two storeys, and is a relatively early example of the move away from the medieval open-hall system. The high quality of the building fabric suggests that the house was constructed for a comparatively wealthy patron who was able to employ carpenters and bricklayers who built in the vanguard of fashion and architectural development, and who probably learnt their craft from such buildings as nearby Oxburgh Hall.

The earliest surviving two-storeyed houses in Norfolk are all timber framed, and date from the last two decades of the fifteenth century: The Ancient House Museum, Thetford (still retaining a screens passage however); 20 High Street, Walsingham and Church Farmhouse, Kenninghall (both of which abandon the passage but retain a crown-post roof); and then next in order of date we might place the Old Vicarage, Methwold. This would make it the earliest two-storey building in Norfolk to depart completely from the earlier plan form. It also uses brick, and much more spectacularly than does, for example, Old Manor Farmhouse in Walpole St Peter of *c*. 1500 or Forge Cottage in Burnham Market of a few years later.

Similarly, it was still relatively unusual at this date for a house of this size to have fireplaces and chimneys. The extant primary phase of the Old Vicarage has as many as three flues, suggesting that the attic also held a hearth at one time. The brickwork on the two remaining lower fireplaces is also unusually decorative. Indeed the degree of decoration lavished on the whole house is exceptional. The brick north gable has no direct parallels even beyond Norfolk and is a remarkable one-off showpiece. The individual motifs are reasonably well known from the celebrated brick mansions of the late fifteenth century in Suffolk and Essex as much as Norfolk, such as Middleton Tower (1460s), Oxburgh Hall (1480s), Great

Snoring Old Rectory (*c*. 1500-25) and East Barsham *c*. 1520-30 (all in Norfolk), and Layer Marney in Essex or Sutton Place in Surrey, both early sixteenth-century. In fact the patterns of moulded bricks found on the central stack at Methwold exactly correspond to the mouldings at Layer Marney (where work started in 1517), raising the intriguing possibility that the Old Vicarage was in fact at the forefront of such design, rather than following the pattern set by its betters.[1]

Fifteenth-century jetties are rare in Norfolk: only some thirty five survive and the Old Vicarage is one of only three in a rural setting (Church Farmhouse at Blo Norton and Mayton Hall are the others). As for quality of timber decoration, in Norfolk only the Ancient House Museum in Thetford surpasses the Old Vicarage. For all these reasons, it is clear that the Old Vicarage represents a building of great importance. For those interested, a detailed description and analysis of the building follows, based on a building analysis report by Bill Wilson.

Detailed description of the building

Exterior

To begin with the most striking external feature of the building, the spectacular **north gable** is built of red brick, with a plinth course, a central polygonal external stack and stepped gables. It may be dated to between 1490 and 1510 and represents the height of the bricklayers' craft in the period, bearing comparison with the best in the area. The plinth course is tall, the bricks laid in an irregular bond with bull-nosed brick coping. On the rest of the gable, the bricks are laid to a true English bond. The ground floor has two horned sashes which date from *c*. 1850, although it is known from an 1808 water-colour and the John Sell Cotman engraving of 1812 (see page 32) that sashes had even then been substituted for the original brick mullioned windows. The sashes have exposed flush frames which was a feature in common use from *c*. 1720 to *c*. 1760, so these may be older than the sliding sashes themselves. If the mullions were replaced in this

[1] This comparison was noted by Nathaniel Lloyd in *A History of English Brickwork*, London, 1925.

period, it would fit with John Partridge's acquisition of the building in 1753 (see next section). Both the sashes have cable-moulded brick hoodmoulds and enough of the rebates survive to show that these were chamfered like the more intact attic windows. The two first-floor sashes are of the same age and design except that the rebates are hollow-moulded. The two attic windows are blocked, and were so even in 1812.

The gable-end is corbelled to a quite unusual extent. Both the east and west plinth courses extend by differing amounts beyond the wall-line of the east and west elevations, then narrow to the width of the timber frame in time to take the western jetty and the eastern middle rail. Three corbels on each side then enlarge the width of the gable at upper floor level once more so that the top corbel extends outside the plane of the timber framing, each step with rolled and hollow-moulded bricks. The gable head itself consists of seven moulded brick steps rising up to the triple polygonal chimney flues. Each step is gabled and finished with flat brick tiles.

The central stack is so highly decorated that it stands like a sampler of early Tudor brickwork. Five cants are visible of what would be an octagonal structure. A deep waist at plinth level is followed by three tall narrow niches topped with trefoiled terracotta arches, then a circular section covered in deeply recessed diagonal diaperwork. Above this is an area of brick meander decoration, also raised, terminating at a roll-moulded brick necking course, and then there is the five-sided brick chimney flue. This is one of three such flues: the other two are set behind and to either side of the north flue. They correspond to a fireplace in each of the two main floors plus the attic.

Turning to the jettied **west elevation,** there the ground floor frame is divided into four irregular bays by heavier principal studs, each with a moulded polygonal capital to the shafts and solid arched braces to the bridging beams, which in turn support the jetty bressumer. Only close studs are exposed only at the northern

end of the jetty on the ground floor, but these correspond closely to the first floor members, where all twenty-three studs are exposed, undifferentiated by size.

Early photos show that this elevation was largely rendered over by the nineteenth century, with no five-light windows and two doors and a sash window inserted along the ground floor. When the Dances restored the Vicarage, they removed the render from the elevation, which revealed the position of the earlier windows. The wall plate has filled peg holes corresponding to each stud, but none where the five-light window is placed. A door had been inserted in the corresponding window position on the ground floor when the building became tenements. The Dances reinstated both windows according to the evidence. On the first floor the two-light casement dates to the nineteenth century and to the south of that the rectangular panel probably indicates the position of a further window inserted during the phase of multiple occupation.

An outside entrance at first floor level is an important diagnostic for church houses and it is intriguing that the position of the five-light mullioned window precludes definitive evidence of a primary ground floor doorway on the ground floor, which might have been expected to lie on this elevation. The brickwork in the plinth suggests that the original structure continued to the south more or less on the footprint we see today, so perhaps the entrance lay there. If the building was once a church house (see *History of the Old Vicarage* below) perhaps such an entrance from the south suggests an almost ceremonial entry to the main chamber. Certainly, evidence remains of two doorways on today's first floor landing, a typical device to allow men and women to enter separately. We may also wonder whether the difference shown in the Dances' restoration photos (which follow this Section) in the infill of the first floor panels immediately behind the gable end suggests some kind of opening. These studs almost appear to be moulded and at least one crosses into the wallplate, both of which suggest they were later insertions. We do not know how the first floor was originally reached, since the current staircase in this part of the house is not primary. The Dances

excavated a pair of brick arches beneath the current stairs (still visible in the brickwork on the east elevation) which provides clear evidence of a different use for this part of the building as built. Perhaps this related to baking or brewing, another diagnostic of use as a church house.

The gabled **roof** is clad with pantiles, although a little watercolour of 1808 appears to indicate thatch, which is consistent with the excessive height of the north gable parapet[2]. A steeper pitched roof covering would have been necessary to clear the third storey gable windows to light the roof space (where plastered and limewashed stud partitions suggest that it was once used as accommodation) and markings on the brickwork on the chimney flue behind the gable suggest that this was indeed originally the case. The seventeenth-century roof was constructed rather lower than the original so that the attic windows were obstructed by the rafters and it seems probable that the attic was taken out of domestic use at this time.

A little watercolour of the Old Vicarage in 1808. The building may have been thatched at this date. (NRO MC 1524 list)

[2] Norfolk Record Office (NRO) MC 1524. Thatch is often associated with buildings of any age, and pantiles were an import from the Low Countries and were only used from about 1720. Thatch however was a material associated with poverty, and this is a prestige structure on which serious money was spent, so it is very possible that the original material was plain tiles and the thatch only introduced in the seventeenth century when the roof structure was replaced.

Within the roofspace, there are principal rafters, secondary rafters, collars on solid arched braces and clasped purlins fitted with straight windbraces. This is the most common type of roof built in the second half of the sixteenth century. By the middle or late seventeenth century the format had been largely superseded by the butt purlin roof type, but clasp purlined roofs continued to be built when sufficient timber was available.

The timber-framed south wall in the attic has a four-plank and four-rail door on strap pin hinges (i.e. seventeenth century) with a lathe and plaster partition, both indicative that the space was lived in at least until the re-roofing some time in the seventeenth century.

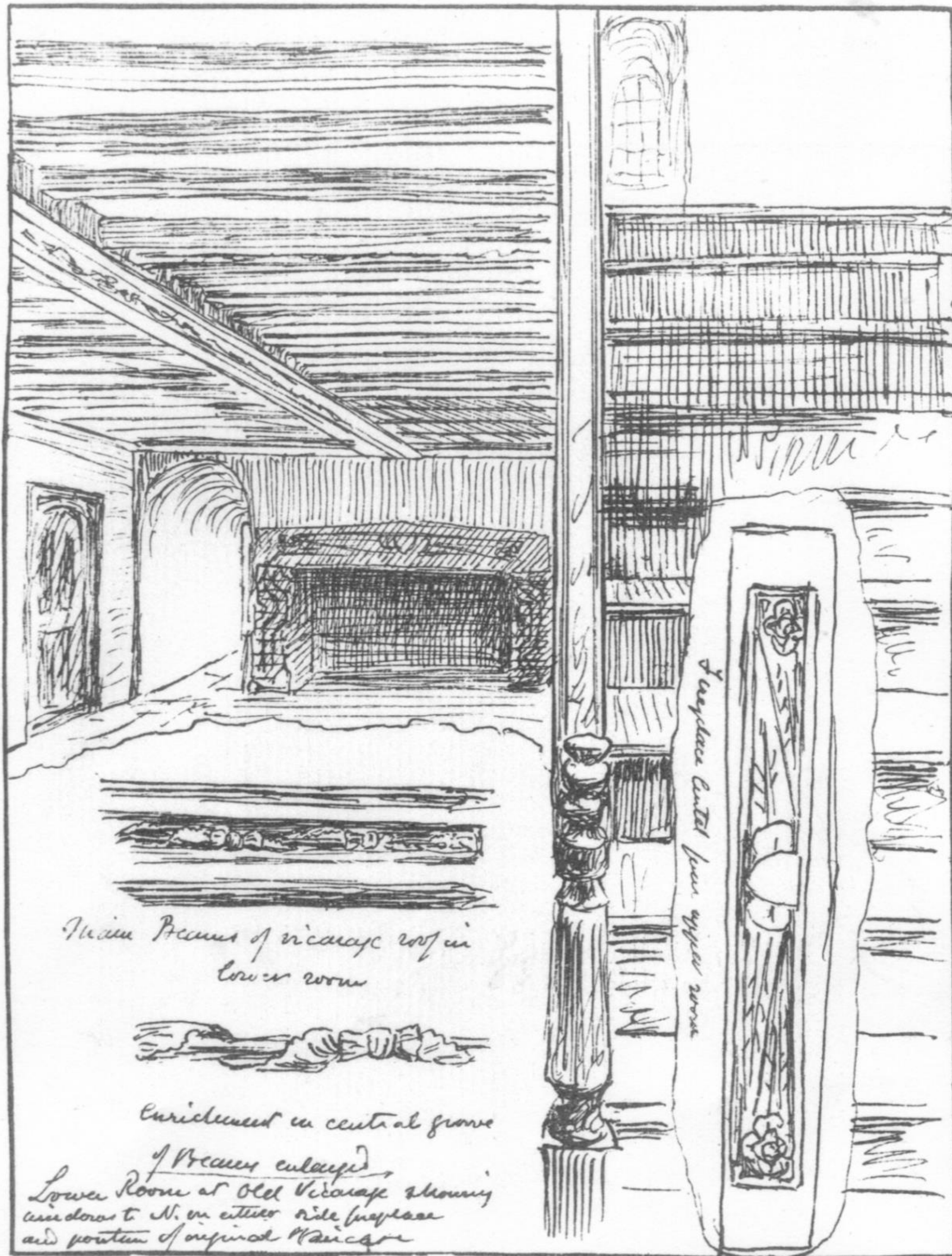
Returning to the exterior, the **east elevation** was never intended to be as visible as the west, and has no jetty. This suggests a distinct hierarchy between the elevations, the public faces of the building being the gable (almost directly aligned with the church porch) and the jettied range. The east elevation appears never to have had any door or window openings, at least to the ground floor. There is a tall flint and clunch plinth carrying the sole plate (part of the Dances' restoration) pegged into which is the close-studded timber frame. Five principal studs divided the wall into four bays in a similar manner to the west elevation, and with the exception of the northern principal they all rise to the wall plate and have each section of the middle rail pegged into them. The northern stud only reaches this middle rail, and is built into the brick of the north gable end.

Just as on the west side, the bays are wider towards the south but the arrangement is much easier to see. From the south the first bay has six secondary studs between the principals, bay two has five, bay three has four and the northern bay only three. This seems a deliberate diminution of width although it is not clear why. At first sight it suggests internal partitions creating four rooms on each floor, but the nature of the decoration of the bridging beams again rules this out. The narrow north bays are easy to explain – they correspond to the

depth of the chimneybreasts inside and allow a bridging or tie beam to pass immediately in front of them. The spacing of the remaining principal studs of course determine the spacing of the bridging beams, the first floor tie beams and the principal trusses of the roof, and this in fact is regular enough not to pose structural problems. Nevertheless such a device is exceptionally unusual, and should perhaps be put to one side for lack of information or useful comparison.

There are two first-floor windows, both original, while the window to the north seems to have been blocked at an early date.

As already noted, the part of the house described so far probably dates to the last decade of the fifteenth century, the north gable end being either contemporary with the timber framing or added no later than about 1510. There have also been two extensions to the south, or rather two reconstructions. Only the central section forms part of the Landmark accommodation but a brief description follows of both these sections for the light shed on the evolution of the building. The **centre section** is of two storeys and has two first-floor windows, and is constructed of coursed clunch blocks. Its plinth course is made of bricks characteristic of western Norfolk around 1500. This strongly suggests that the timber-framed northern section once extended further south until it was replaced in the second half of the seventeenth century. The internal gable-end stack at this point also of irregularly coursed seventeenth-century brick. There is no distinction between the two floors. The door is clearly modern, with a six-paned unhorned sash of *c*. 1850 to its right, although the exposed sash boxes holding the counterweights are earlier. The first floor windows are modern. The east side of the centre section is also of coursed clunch blocks and has four window openings, two to each floor, all with late twentieth-century fenestration. The same brick quoins to the south mark the original extent of the rebuilding.



Sketch of the main downstairs chamber around 1890, showing the original position of the stairs to be apparently within this room and leading straight into the first floor chamber. Note that the window on the west elevation has already become a door. There is the suggestion of coats of arms on the downstairs bressumer as well as in the detail of the one from the upper room. The Vicarage had already become tenements by the time Gedge drew this sketch so it is not clear whether this is drawn from life or after the building was partitioned. He does, however, usually tell us when he is being speculative. (J. Denny Gedge, *History of a Village Community,* 1893)

The **south section** of the building also appears to replace an earlier building, of which only the brick and flint plinth course remains on the west side. The plinth was once rendered, patches of which still remain, and there is a very distinct butt join where it meets that of the centre section, indicating that it is likely to be part of an extension (or perhaps a separate structure) of *c*. 1500-10. Above the plinth the wall is brick and clunch, with a single mid-nineteenth-century unhorned sash window with six panes to each leaf under a segmental head. Above there is a modern two-light casement under a flat lintel. To the south on the ground floor is a blocked segmental-headed doorway. The east side of this section is slightly recessed behind the wall plane of the brick plinth and has two openings in deep square recesses, one above the other.

The **south gable** is built of fibrous brick quoins with a high straw content reaching up to a tumbled gable head, the three courses of tumbling indicating a date of *c*. 1760, again close to when the Partridge family appear on the Methwold scene. There is brick-on-edge coping and an apical finial pedestal. On the west side, the outshut was added in **the** twentieth century.

Interior

The **ground floor chamber** in the north section is one of the most decorated and high-quality interiors of any house of its class in Norfolk. Structurally, the presence of the bridging beams shows that it was intended as a house of two storeys from the start, at an unusually early date for this characteristically modern plan form. It was also intended to be a single open room, and there is reason to believe that the room originally extended further to the south, though details of the entrance, site of the earlier staircase and the relationship between this principal room and the service rooms has been obscured by later rebuilding of the centre and south sections and the present staircase.

The ceiling has two east-west bridging beams into which are mortised north-south spine beams to create a cruciform arrangement. These timbers have double

wave mouldings to the sides and elaborate carved ribbon mouldings to the recessed lower surface. They stand on heavy chamfered wall posts, some of which are jowled and chamfered. The north post on the west side has chamfering on both sides and retains one visible upper tongue stop, while the south post on the same side is chamfered on both sides and is jowled. This is partly embedded in the south wall and carries a further bridging beam, which is moulded on both sides, the south side facing into the present entrance hall. The under surface is not visible, but the beam was clearly intended to be fully visible, strongly suggesting that the partition wall is a later insertion where no wall had been intended.

On the east side, the jowled tops to some of the wallposts were hacked off at some time in the past. At the north end is a projecting brick fireplace with cable-moulded bricks arranged in a herringbone pattern and supporting a heavily carved bressumer, a very elaborate piece of carved timber in a county not noted for this skill.

The **first floor chamber** has been subdivided by an east-west partition wall between the two west windows, with a modern doorway at the east end of it. The northern half, now the main bedroom, has four chamfered and jowled principal studs. Mortises remain in the northern opposing pair for curved braces to the tie beam over the. The ceiling is again made up of cruciform bridging beams: here the carpenters were content to provide only double wave mouldings, but the joists have the same rolled edges as those to the room below. Once again there is a brick fireplace projecting from the north gable wall, this time with moulded brick jambs in the form of rolled meanders (east jamb) and rolled chevron (west jamb), echoing the decorative features of the exterior stack. The fire opening has canted sides, which is one of the earliest known examples of this feature. The chimneybreast has a sizeable alcove built into each side, whose original purpose is not clear. The bressumer dates from the nineteenth century, if not later; Reverend Denny Gedge’s sketch gives evidence of a beautifully carved bressumer

removed in his own day, which tantalisingly seems to include coats of arms. Unfortunately, Gedge did not copy their detail.
The window to the west is, as we have noted, a replacement by the Dances, though the heavy sill plate remains visible, pegged into the principal stud on the south side. In the window to the east there is a rebate for internal sliding shutters in the wall plate, necessary for an opening which was unglazed originally.

The wave-moulded bridging beams continue in what is now the adjacent room, so that the ceiling pattern reflects that of the room below. Unlike the lower room, however, the first floor chamber room seems always to have extended only to its present south partition wall, which has a greater display of wall paintings than the northern bedroom and which are repeated on the west wall. The southwest principal stud has an arched brace to the adjacent principal stud, and the corresponding southeast principal has the mortise slots for a similar brace, confirming that the structure anticipated a fixed wall to the south. A further arched brace and mortise slots for a missing brace remain in the partition wall dividing the original room into two. That the timber-framed house did continue south of this point is evident from the blocked four-centred doorway in the south wall, visible on both sides, while at the extreme east end of the wall is the space for a further doorway, now completely blocked and plastered over. Perhaps one of these provided an outside entrance at first floor level. The present door adjacent to this dates to the seventeenth century. The four-light east window has wave-moulded mullions and again has rebated grooves for sliding internal shutters.

Details from the wall paintings in the first floor chamber at Methwold.

The wall paintings on the first floor are a highly unusual survival and may be dated to the late sixteenth century, during the period that the vicarage was impropriate to the Dukes of Norfolk. Such decoration was fairly common at the time in buildings of status, indicating that the vicarage was still well-cared for at this date. Their subject matter is neutral, neither religious nor grotesque, and therefore offers no particular clue as to the building's use at that time, other than that it was still of high status.

The wall paintings were cleaned and conserved for the Dances by Hirst Conservation in 1997. At first glance, it may seem that remnants in the two first floor chambers are different, but a closer inspection reveals them to be a repeat of the same scheme. The artist was faced with two types of surface, timber and plaster, and could choose whether to integrate or differentiate them in his design. Here, they are painted differently and demarcated by a vertical black line. A foliate design was painted on the plaster infills, dominated by acanthus leaves in black, white, red and yellow ochre on a grey background. The studs have a similar leaf pattern, done this time on an orange/red background. At the top is a painted border or frieze of a leaf pattern in grey, black, white and red ochre on a red lead background, distinguished from the lower walls by a black line. Such painted friezes served to 'straighten' buildings' structures visually. Unfortunately most of the scheme has been lost in the northern chamber; more remains in the east. The paintings appear to have been stable for many years, although will continue to be carefully monitored.

The **entrance hall** is essentially a product of nineteenth- and twentieth-century remodelling, presumably required for the accommodation of four families. The present staircase was inserted by the Dances, and replaced an existing one they found there. In the south wall at the west end is a seventeenth-century pegged doorframe containing a blocked-off three-plank door, while in the landing above the doorway into the timber-framed section is square-headed rather than four-

centred, indicating that this landing space was perhaps an entrance lobby considered of less importance than the space to the north.

The entrance hall stands in the part of the house reconstructed in the seventeenth century, and what is now the Landmark kitchen to its south contains features relating to that century. The wide inglenook fireplace has a patched plain chamfered bressumer but is otherwise featureless, as it would be for a purely utilitarian role. The spine beam is decorated only by simple chamfers and tongue stops. The joists are fixed into it simply by dropping them from above into slots cut for the purpose, which is the cheapest way to unite them, and not a method likely to have been adopted by sixteenth-century carpenters.
The remainder of the reconstructed range, beyond the Landmark accommodation, offers no further clues to the building's early history.

The Dances' restoration, 1964-1989

When the Dances acquired the Old Vicarage in 1964 they were responding to a building in obvious distress, indeed condemned as unfit for human habitation. They kept a careful record of what they found as work progressed and the photos included here and many others now form part of the Dance Scholarship Trust Archive, to whom we are grateful for permission to reproduce the photos which follow. The Dances' work fell into two main phases, an initial restoration of the structure below eaves level and a complete new roof in 1989.

The gable end seems always to have been fully exposed and had withstood the ravages of time remarkably well: it needed only gentle repair and repointing. However, while it was clear from the outset that the rendered west elevation was jettied, it was only when the render was removed that it became clear not only that the third bay on the first floor originally held a five-light window which had been entirely rendered over. A door to the first cottage had been inserted into the corresponding bay on the ground floor, the rest of the bay having been crudely filled with brick. It was a not unreasonable assumption that the ground floor chamber would originally have been lit by a window of some status on this public

elevation and in this bay, so the Dances not only reinstated the first floor window according to the evidence in the timber frame but also created a six light window across the whole width of the bay on the ground floor. The cottage door which opened directly into this main room was blocked, as was the window beside it. No attempt was made to reinstate the timber frame in these last three ground floor bays of the jettied range, which were instead filled honestly with brickwork.

Inside, the ground floor chamber at the north end had been partitioned in line with the bedrooms above to create two cottages; the Dances removed this ground floor partition in order to restore the original dimensions of this gracious room. A small change in floor level acts as a reminder of this earlier phase. The posts and joists in the interior needed considerable patching and repair; here and elsewhere in the building, this was carried out honestly in new timber, making these interventions easy to identify today.

A new doorway was created at the north-western corner of this middle cottage, which opened into today’s hallway, with new double doors leading into what became the Dances’ sitting room. Doorways were also created to link the central to the south cottage.

Repairs to the timber frame were carried out honestly and in new timber. Other new timberwork introduced by the Dances at this time is identified within the Landmark painting regimen in being dark red. The stairs were replaced in the central section and new kitchen and bathroom facilities were installed. The Dances’ living accommodation then extended the full length of the building, which they re-unified by limewashing the same colour across all three sections.

In 1988 it became necessary to re-roof the Old Vicarage and the opportunity was taken to introduce various bracing members and structural reinforcement measures, as well as subtly altering the pitch at eaves level to improve rainwater run-off. The Dances also installed rainwater goods in the building.

In the early 1970s, the Dances acquired the Bothy, the former coach house adjacent to the Vicarage. They sold the eastern part of the Bothy, which now forms the adjacent house, No. 9. The garden associated with the two buildings make it logical for the Bothy to remain in the same ownership as the Old Vicarage.

Under the Dances' ownership, the Old Vicarage became the venue for many happy gatherings, both personal and professional and this is witnessed not only by the many letters of appreciation in the Dance Scholarship Trust's archive but also by the verbal reminiscences of SPAB scholars and others who enjoyed Monica and Harry Dances' hospitality over the years.

Landmark's restoration, 2002

It perhaps overstates the case to call the Old Vicarage's conversion to a Landmark a 'restoration' since the building we leased was of course perfectly habitable. In addition, the building had such strong associations with Monica and Harry Dance that we felt it would be inappropriate to carry out anything but the lightest of interventions. The decision was taken early on that the Landmark accommodation would be most successful if limited to the north and central sections of the house and so for now the communicating door from today's kitchen through to the south section has been blocked and this section will be kept empty. A new bathroom and kitchen were installed in the same rooms used by the Dances for these purposes and wiring and heating were upgraded.

Most historic buildings look better without rainwater goods and usually function quite happily without them, so we have removed the gutters on the west and will, as usual, monitor this aspect closely as the building settles down again. Otherwise, the only visible change is a new colour scheme internally and a heavier coat of limewash for the members in the timber frame.

There was happy continuity in our housekeeper when we opened the Old Vicarage as a Landmark: Margaret Somerville has lived in Methwold all her life and remembers the Old Vicarage when it was four tenements. She was also housekeeper to the Dances. Margaret oversaw the house's transition to a Landmark with serenity and excellent homemade cakes, although decided to retire in 2003. There seems no reason why the conviviality enjoyed here by so many should not continue.

History of Methwold Old Vicarage

The unique combination of features found at the Old Vicarage have already been detailed in the previous section: outstandingly decorative brickwork and timbers both inside and out, a two storey plan in its primary phase, rare late sixteenth-century wall paintings on the first floor. The north section is one of the most decorated and highest quality interiors of any house of its class in Norfolk, and beyond. So why, even at a period when the power and influence of the Church was at its height immediately before the Dissolution of the Monasteries, would the house for a priest in a small, unremarkable village on the edge of the fenland be built with such glorious but worldly display, and to such a progressive plan? Landmark's New Inn over the county boundary at Peasenhall also dates from the late fifteenth century and is a much more typical plan for the date with its open hall, solar and high and low ends, even if it was built as an inn. Perhaps simply the house was built for a lay owner and passed into church ownership later, but there is another hypothesis.

Reverend John Denny Gedge, the late nineteenth century clergyman who wrote a history of Methwold, also noticed something strange about the form of the house. 'If this residence, which might even have been erected in the reign of Henry VII, was thus originally intended for a celibate vicar, we need not, any the more, wonder at an arrangement which would have compelled his housekeeper to pass through the one large chamber on her way to her own apartment.' Perhaps Gedge speaks as a man of his own time – but perhaps too the large chambers suggest multiple uses. The building of so-called 'church houses' was a common feature of the late-fifteenth century:

> 'After the church, the most important building in the parish was the church house, also called the church ale-house…it was the parish's place of entertainment [typically] a two-storey building furnished with a fireplace and spit, with cups and platters and trenchers of treen [turned wood] and tin and pewter: its tressle tables and tablecloths were sometimes loaned to parishioners for events like weddings. Visiting merchants could hire a 'sete' or stall there to sell their wares…Above all, the fund-raising banquets known

> as church ales, organised by the church wardens and by the Young Men of the parish (the 'grooming' ale) and which between them provided the bulk of the parish's income, were held here. Beer brewed or bought by the wardens and food cooked in the church house itself were sold and served at these ales...Parishioners were expected to attend and spend their money, and official representatives came and supported from surrounding villages, a favour which had to be returned when the parishes concerned held their own ales.'[3]

Detailed research on church houses suggests that every parish south of the Wash may once have had one.[4] They have several distinctive characteristics that discriminate them from the general building stock of the day. Those shared by Methwold Old Vicarage are that they are almost all two storeys, often well before this plan had become typical, with large chambers on the ground and first floor. They held at least one large fireplace and were built to a high standard. They often had a bakehouse and brewhouse either incorporated or nearby, which might have been the original function of the south end of the range, since rebuilt. (There is an old bread oven in the south section today, although this is likely to belong to a later date). During the 1960s restoration, small brick arches were found under the present stairs and these too might perhaps have had some connection with such activities. Church houses also often had an outside stair (evidence for this is not conclusive at Methwold) which gave separate first floor access for the feast, often held in the first floor chamber. They usually consisted of a single range without wings, typically jettied and twenty to thirty feet wide and sixty to a hundred and fifty feet long. Methwold Old Vicarage is such a jettied single range, some nineteen feet wide and eighty seven feet long to its original plinth. Inevitably, church houses were generally built close to the church. Sometimes the building of a church house was the result of a long-standing incumbent wanting to make an impression: the list of vicars in St George's tells us that Henry Spycer apparently served from 1485 to 1533.

There were also links between the living and nearby Castle Acre Priory, a Cluniac house founded by Earl de Warenne. The Priory held some land in Methwold and

[3] Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath* (2001)
[4] Dr. Jo Mattingley has researched church houses in detail across the country.

was endowed, among other gifts, with Methwold Church; sometimes a church house doubled as a lodging block for visitors to a priory. and this use might explain the interconnecting chambers that so troubled Gedge. Equally, the manor of Methwold had been part of the Duchy of Lancaster and therefore Crown property since 1347; perhaps accommodation was required in the parish for the Crown representative.

Certainly church houses were built to a high standard. Two other Landmarks, the Priest's House in Holcombe Rogus, Devon, and the Parish House in Baltonsborough, Somerset, date from the same period and are far more typical expressions of the form, with fine but essentially sober detailing (both were originally church houses). Definitive evidence for the identification of a church house is usually documentary, but none of the documents have so far yielded any such clue. The earliest documentary reference so far discovered is in 1533, when it was already known as the vicarage. Certainly a good case can be made for the Old Vicarage as church house in its origin, but until indisputable documentary proof is found, all the above must remain purely circumstantial evidence as we try to resolve why Methwold Old Vicarage presents such an essentially secular form. During their restoration of the building, the Dances found remains of an earlier building beneath the large sitting room floor, so it was not the first on the site.

So few of the 'Old Vicarages' and 'Old Rectories' in our villages and towns fulfil their original purpose today and, with all the debate that surrounds their divestment by the Church, it is somehow reassuring to discover that Methwold Old Vicarage has been an 'old' (in the sense of former) vicarage since the mid-eighteenth century, and possibly long before that. Through all this time, it was an impropriate vicarage, or one whose upkeep had been handed to the lay patron of the living. The patron was then obliged to present a vicar to look after the parish and to maintain the vicarage. For this responsibility the tithes and any other income generated by the living fell under the patron's discretion.

The Old Vicarage became impropriate early in its history. The first volume of Francis Blomefield's *Essay towards a Topographical History of Norfolk* (1739) tells us that at the Dissolution of the priory at Castle-Acre on 6th November 1533, 'a fine was levied between the King and Thomas, Prior of Castle-Acre, of this [Methwold] Rectory, and the Advowson of the Vicarage, and soon after, on 22 Dec in the said Year, the King granted them to Thomas, Duke of Norfolk'.[5] This makes clear that, even if originally built as a church house or for secular purposes (probably between 1490 and 1510), by 1533 it was already a vicarage. By 1603, the parish held 252 communicants and was still within the gift of the Howard family: 'the Lords Thomas and William Howard were Patrons and held the Parsonage Impropriate'. In 1614, Thomas, Lord Arundel was given a licence dated 1st September to alienate the rectory and the advowson of the vicarage to Sir Henry Hobart, who built Blickling Hall.[6] The wall paintings had probably appeared by now and while there is a list of vicars of Methwold in St George's Church opposite, it seems few, if any lived in the Old Vicarage after the 1530s.

Impropriated tithes could often be pursued aggressively by lay patrons. For example, three cases were brought in the 1670s by Dame Katherine Zouche, widow, pursuing the payment of tithes on impropriate land where the custom has become eroded over the years. Dame Katherine's first husband had been James Hobart, son of Sir Henry Hobart who had acquired the vicarage in 1614. By the 1670s, 'Lord Richardson and Thomas Reeve were possessed of the impropriation or rectory of Methwold to the use of or in trust for Dame Katherine.' Anthony Franks, vicar of Methwold, is one of those called to give evidence but clearly he is not living at the Vicarage. Residency in the building seems to have been a purely commercial arrangement and had little to do with the formal holder of the

[5] Villagers might take matters into their own hands in the turbulent sixteenth century. According to Rev. Gedge, when one Ambrose Ede, a rector, obtained a warrant to enclose common land in the parish, the local parishioners threw him over the churchyard wall and made him eat his warrant, washed down with foul water. When the sheriff's officer arrived to keep the peace, they shot arrows at him.

[6] This same Lord Arundel was to facilitate a major shift in British architecture as patron to Inigo Jones, enabling Jones to travel to Italy to observe the principles of Classical architecture at first hand in 1615.

impropriation – in 1672, for example, an Edward Colebourne 'entered into the Rectory and enjoyed the same for several years'. It would seem that the redoubtable Widow Zouche merely enjoyed the income from the impropriate vicarage rather than living there herself.[7]

Another useful source is the bishop's visitation records. Every seven years, the Bishop of Norwich required certain information from all the incumbents in his diocese through the process known as visitation. The earliest visitation records tend to be sketchy notes except where a dispute arose and provide no illumination here. By the mid-eighteenth century the information required had become codified into a series of standard questions. Methwold, in the Deanery of Cranwich, had Thetford as its visitation centre and from the responses of its incumbents to the formulaic questions asked at each visitation, we learn not just about how the religion of the parish evolved, but also something of the history of the Old Vicarage.

In 1777, Reverend William Green reports a parish of 'more than 20 miles in circuit. It Families [sic] about 100; without any of Note.' There are no Presbyterians, Independents, Anabaptists, Quakers or Papists in the parish. Asked whether any persons 'commonly absent themselves from Public Worship of God on the Lord's Day' Green reports 'There are such but, their Number doth not seem to increase.' Perhaps strange to modern church practice but not untypical for his day, Green reports without comment that the sacraments were administered three times annually 'at the least' and that 'The Receivers [are] about 30.'

And to the question 'Do you constantly reside upon your Cure, and in the House belonging to it?' Green replies 'I have the Vicarage of Methwold and the rectory of Cranwich the Churches whereof are three miles distant: but, I live at Northwold: which is within 2 miles of each. The Mansion Houses have usually

[7] PRO E134/31Chas2/Trin7, E134/33Chas2/Mich4. The PRO at Kew holds numerous documents relating to Methwold. Further examination might well tell us more about the Old Vicarage.

proper tenants.' As we have seen, the letting of Methwold Old Vicarage to tenants was already established practice.

And by 1794, there are signs of the Anglican complacency about which Gedge was to complain a century later. It was, he says, 'an age of pluralities and non-residence.' The vicar of Methwold in1794 reports that 'I have a Curate who resides 5 miles from the Parish. His name is James Parker, his salary, 3 guineas – he serves no other cure – the Chancellor has been informed of it – I have employed him more than a year.'

This situation became further rationalised (not necessarily to the benefit of the Anglican creed in Methwold) in 1800. On 12th April 1800 Henry Partridge Esq. of Cromor, who was patron of the livings of both Methwold and Cranwich, petitioned Charles, Bishop of Norwich that the benefices be united.

The Partridge family first appears in the story of Methwold Old Vicarage in 1753 and they were to have considerable influence upon it.[8] An agreement in 1753 records that

> 'In cognisance of £3000 paid by Henry Partridge of King's Lynn to [Revd.] Montaigne North, Montaigne North did grant, bargain, sell, alien [sic], release and confirm unto the said Henry Partridge and to his heirs All that the Rectory or Parsonage Impropriate of Methold otherwise Methwold with the appurtenances...then or then late in the tenure or occupation of John Poole his undertenants or assigns and the advowson, free gift and patronage of the Vicarage of Methold otherwise Methwold aforesaid with all singular their rights [...?...] and appurtenances whatsoever and all singular barns, stables, lands, glebes, tenements, tithes of corn, hay, wool, hemp, flax and conies and all other tithes and heriditaments whatsoever.'[9]

[8] One Sir Edward Partridge from Kent was involved in the draining of the fens in the 1650s (see Volume II of this album). This Partridge, who did well out of the Great Level and went on to live in a fine house in Ely with nine fireplaces, was perhaps a forbear of the Partridges of Lynn who acquired the Old Vicarage in 1753.
[9] NRO MC 506/1

We do not know who John Poole was – he is not recorded as incumbent but perhaps served as a curate. Revd. Montaigne North came from Glenham in Suffolk so was not a local man.

This Henry Partridge of 1753 is the father of the Henry Partridge who petitioned the Bishop of Norfolk to unite the benefices of Methwold and Cranwich in 1800. His memorial to the left of the altar in St Geroge's shows a very Georgian profile. Both father and son were Recorders of Lynn and lawyers of the Middle Temple. It does not come as a particular surprise to find the incumbent of the united benefice from 1791 to 1813 was one John Partridge, probably a younger brother or relation; similarly, John Anthony Partridge served from 1819 to 1833.

In his petition to the bishop to unite the benefices in 1800, Henry Partridge the younger claimed:

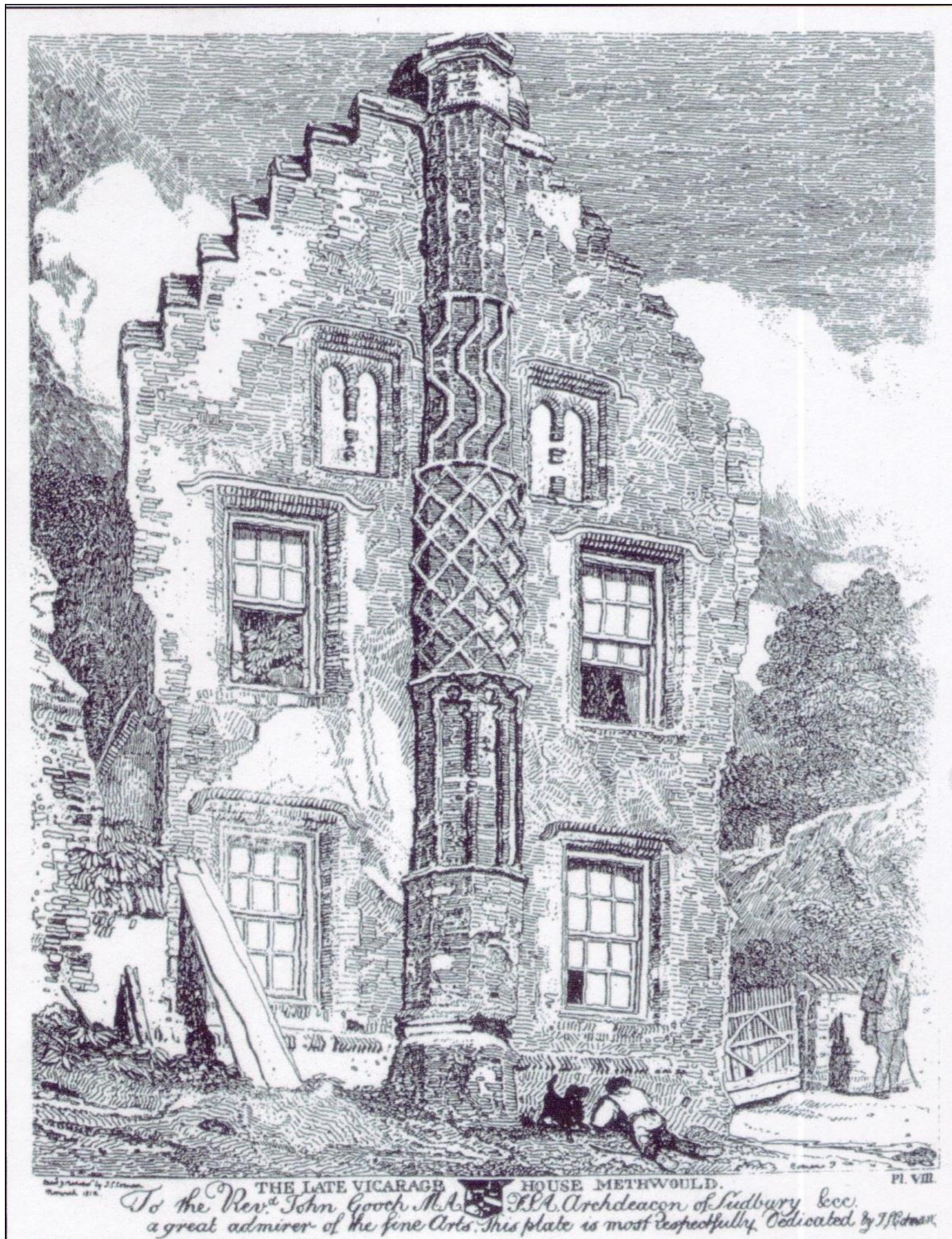
> 'That the said Churches may be conveniently served by the same Minister; That the said Rectory of Cranwich is valued in the King's Books at Eight Pounds nine shillings and seven pounds, but is discharged of first fruits and Tenths and is of the yearly value of One Hundred and thirty pounds of thereabouts...the Vicarage of Methwold is valued at £9 & 1s 3d, yearly value Eighty Pounds or thereabouts...That the Parsonage House belonging to the said Vicarage of Methwold is a very old and ordinary building and inhabited only by two poor families and is not fit or proper for the residence of the Minister of the said Parish; That the parsonage House belonging to the said Rectory of Cranwich is in a very good state and condition and very proper and commodious for the residence of the Minister of the said Parish of Cranwich who has usually resided therein; That the Revenues of the said two Benefices will make together but a moderate and comfortable provision (in these times) to encourage and enable a Minister to reside and exercise Hospitality there; That the said two Benefices are now vacant and void of an Incumbent, and that a perpetual union and Consolidation of the said two benefices will be beneficial to the succeeding Incumbents thereof and no way detrimental to the parishioners and Inhabitants of either of the said parishes, as it will encourage and enable worthy men in time coming to undertake the Care and exercise Hospitality among them.'

Since upkeep of the vicarage was one of the duties that came with the impropriation of a living by a lay person, Partridge himself must bear responsibility for the sorry state of the Methwold Vicarage. The Bishop of Norfolk nevertheless agreed with his reasoning, the benefices were duly united and Methwold's vicar moved to Cranwich. Yet another Henry Partridge did a smart land deal in 1814 with the then incumbent, Nathaniel Poyntz. Partridge gave nine oddments of land in exchange for 80 acres of Methwold glebe land which were conveniently bounded by his own estate (and within which they therefore became incorporated), 'And also all other the Glebe Land whatsoever belonging to the said Rectory'. These were to be 'To the sole and only use and behoof of him the said Henry Samuel Partridge and of his heirs and his assigns forever.' This transfer of Glebe land almost included the Vicarage except for the following insertion: 'Except only the Site of the Parsonage house with the Yards, Gardens and Land adjoining the same...'

Gedge counts it 'significant of English consciences of the time' that the petition to unite the benefices was signed by only three residents. He says the vicar had previously lived in a hired house in Methwold, perhaps the New Hall next door to the Old Vicarage. As for the Old Vicarage, Gedge tells us that it became a 'factory' for a while (perhaps workshop would be a more appropriate word today) and then 'it served the far worse purpose of a local workhouse', the need for which Gedge links with 'the iniquitous Enclosure Act' passed in 1807 (and of which more in the chapter on the history of Methwold below).

The churchwardens and overseers accounts and receipts[10] record a flurry of activity relating to the workhouse in 1829 -30 which may well reflect the point at which the Old Vicarage being adapted for this new use (the building is referred to simply as 'the workhouse'). Mr. Larner submitted his ironwork account in October 1829, for items including 'New bars to window', curtain rods and hooks, grates, keys, bolts and an 'Iron lid [?] to Chimble to workhouse.' Chairs

[10] NRO PD 313/51



An engraving of the Old Vicarage by John Sell Cotman in 1812. Sash windows are already in place. The Old Vicarage was perhaps the parish poorhouse at this date.

and bedsteads are bought and repaired, and new shutters fixed. There are receipts for significant amounts of alcohol for the workhouse – gin, rum, ale – reminding us of the need of the poor to dull the harshness of their existence. In 1832, £8 was paid to William Newton 'To 1 years Rent for the Workhouse from Michaelmas 1831 to Michaelmas 1832.' 1832 was of course the year of the great Poor Law Reform Act, and in the same year, the parish authorities purchased 'Thomas Boyden's Estate in Methwold for the use of the parish as a poor house.' Perhaps the Old Vicarage was no longer thought suitable even for this purpose.

By 1893, Gedge was writing his history of Methwold after the great Victorian revival of the Anglican church in the mid-nineteenth century, launched in response to the increasing popularity of the Dissenters and of which the church restoration programme of Gilbert Scott and his friends formed a part. Gedge's school of Anglicanism disapproved of the easy accommodations of the Regency period. 'Strange things', he comments laconically, 'were done in those days', and 'hospitality' seems to have formed little part of his own duties.

Partly as a result of this Anglican complacency, by the 1830s Methodism had become the established religion in Methwold. A Wesleyan chapel was built in 1831 with a resident minister just over the road from St George's and this was followed in 1866 by a Primitive Methodist chapel. The success of the Nonconformists may be traced in the visitation records. In 1777, Reverend Green reported that there were no 'Presbyterians, Independents, Anabaptists, Quakers or Papists' in the parish. By 1820, however, we find about '100 Dissenters (Wesleyans) Farmers and Labourers...who are very orderly.' A licensed chapel had opened twenty years earlier (perhaps significantly around the time the benefices were united) which had 'caused perceptible diminution in the ordinary congregation of the Church.' By 1838 'Many of the parishioners attend the Church and Wesleyan chapel indiscriminately – the number of the congregation is therefore uncertain.'

The Church of England, here as in so many parts of the country, was rapidly losing influence and it was recognition of this fact that initiated the great Victorian revival movement.

In 1838 an Act was passed 'to abridge the holding of Benefices in Plurality and to make better provision for the residence of the Clergy'. This act gave power to the monarch to issue separation orders for benefices united for sixty years or less and in 1853, 'the Queen's Most Excellent Majesty in Council for Disunion' approved the disuniting of the Methwold and Cranwich benefices. The papers reflect an interesting contrast between the Church of England in 1800 and 1854. Whereas the union of the benefices in 1800 seem to have been justified primarily for the benefit to the clergy (it 'will make together but a moderate and comfortable provision (in these times) to encourage and enable a Minister to reside and exercise hospitality there'), by contrast, the disuniting in 1853 is to be made 'with advantages to the interests of Religion.'

Methwold parish had been without a resident vicar until 1840. The resident curate who had filled in was a 'notorious drunkard' with 'an immoral wife', according to Gedge. He also disapproved of his immediate predecessor as vicar, who had been somewhat lax in his observance of the Lord's Day, not only countenancing a general game of camp-ball, or football, in the Hall Close, but also, at the conclusion of the afternoon service, starting play by making the first kick from his raised position at the church door over the church yard wall (then somewhat nearer!)

In the middle of the nineteenth century,[11] a new vicarage was built for the parish, not in Methwold but at the other end of the parish, in Southery. Gedge also regretted this relocation to Southery; as a conscientious man, it certainly made

[11] Gedge, writing some fifty years later, has 1840 for the building of the new vicarage. In terms of the sequence of events over the disunion, it seems more likely that it was built after 1853. Francis White's *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Norfolk* (1854) states that 'a neat vicarage house has just been erected', but does not say where.

his job harder. Before the Duchy put a road through the centre of the fen in 1881 from Feltwell to Southery, he tells us, ‘I kept in touch with that part of the parish by a cottage lecture, to which I made my way over lands and across ditches with a lantern strapped to my waist, on Wednesday evenings, through snow and storm, without fail, in winter; and by a service in a barn seven miles away on Sunday evenings in summer’.

Gedge also loved the Old Vicarage He bemoaned its fall in status and made this careful sketch of it.

From Gedge’s *History of a Village Community* (1893). He is wrong about the evidence for the projecting windows, but his sketch does emphasise the fragmentary nature of the primary phase in today’s building.

This sketch, he tells us, is:

> ‘greatly taken from a very ingenious model of what it would be, if fully restored, executed in oak, under my advice, by the sexton.. The projecting windows to the upper window do not exist; but the places of their insertion are evident from within. The carved posts of the ground floor remain, but we had to pick out the plaster and colouring with which they are defaced, to discover their beautiful workmanship and ornament. The brickwork of the gable remains as perfect, and shewed as in the sketch when I drew it a few

An early postcard of the Old Vicarage, c 1910.

> years since - now, alas! The tenant of one of the two cottages into which it is divided has been allowed to smother it with ivy. Oh! If some nightly visitant would but sever the stems of that accursed plant. Why should a community have no power against private vandalism? Oh! If my predecessor, instead of erecting my vicarage house out of contact with the village, at one end of this enormous parish of nearly 14,000 acres, had but accepted, as he might have done at a very low price, the New Hall adjoining, and secured the old Vicarage for parish rooms, for clubs, for mothers' meetings, for G.F.S., and other such uses, restoring the two long apartments of which it consists to their old dimensions, by only pulling out the rough partitions knocked up midway. Oh! if some charitable millionaire even now would buy it, and its price would be very small, and present it to the parish. As it is, the New Hall was bought directly after by a worthy citizen, who congratulates himself on the insertion of brilliant white sashes in place of the mullioned windows he found there; and the same has been done in the two lower stories of the vicarage gable.'

As it was, the decline of the Old Vicarage continued. Some forty years later, the Old Vicarage makes its first appearance in the archives of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the correspondence provides good illustration of the persistence of the Society over the fate of individual buildings, often over decades.[12]

In November 1936, Mrs M E Wilkinson wrote from Feltwell Rectory, Brandon, concerned about the state of house, which was 'now inhabited by labourers & it is probably in a very bad state of repair.' Four families now lived there; no one knew the owner but the rents were collected by Alfred Whitton of Methwold, an auctioneer and Registrar. The Society wrote to Mr Whitton in December, who confirmed that it was now four cottages. 'As to your query whether it is likely to come under the notice of the Authorities under the Housing Act, I think there is little doubt that it will in due course as each cottage has but one Living Room.' He was the agent for the owner, who lived far away in Gosforth, Newcastle-on-Tyne.

[12] Reverend Gedge himself corresponded with the SPAB although ironically about the de Mundeford house in nearby Mundford rather than Methwold Old Vicarage.

The Old Vicarage in 1946(from S Wearing,
***More Beautiful Norfolk Buildings*, 1947**

Then in April 1955, G. H. Jennings, architect, was working on churches and almshouses on behalf of the SPAB. He wrote to the Secretary, Monica Dance, 'In Norfolk at Methwold we were distressed to see the squalor around the fine old Tudor rectory with its lovely brick gable end and chimney. As you probably know it is in part used by the British Legion and in part as cottages.'

By October 1956 the Rural District Council had declared cottages I & 2 unfit for human habitation and rehoused both families. Nos. 3 &4 were due for a similar order shortly and in November 1958 an application was made to demolish the Old Vicarage by its owner, by now reported to be living abroad and wishing to rebuild.

On 15th January 1959, Norfolk County Council issued a provisional Building Preservation Order under the 1947 Town & Planning Act – the building was already listed as Grade II*. Mrs N J Clogstoun of Blakeney and Neighbourhood Housing Society wrote to Mrs Dance as a friend in the same month, 'You will get a proper report from Mr Mawson, all I want to say is, couldn't you do something yourself? We thought it could be bought very cheaply, the owner has never even seen it!' Mr. Mawson duly filed his report. 'Each cottage has only one room and a larder downstairs and two bedrooms upstairs, with the exception of No 2 cottage from the north which has three bedrooms upstairs. At present there is virtually no water supply laid on to the cottages, but there is a tap outside for their communal use.'

On 28th January 1959 Miss Dance was sent the keys to Numbers 1 & 2. 'The tenants of numbers 3 & 4 Old Vicarage will, I think, show you round their cottages although I dare say these old ladies are beginning to wonder what it is all about.' But by 12th February 1959, the period for confirmation of the provisional preservation order had expired so that the owner was in a position to demolish. Her solicitors wrote: 'There is no difficulty in getting rid of rubble in this part of the country at the present time and we think this site bare might well

fetch £250.' Finally on 24th April the Ministry of Housing & Local Government confirmed the preservation order – 'The Minister accepts the view that this building with its very fine example of a stepped Flemish Gable is of such special architectural interest that it is worthy of preservation if at all possible.'

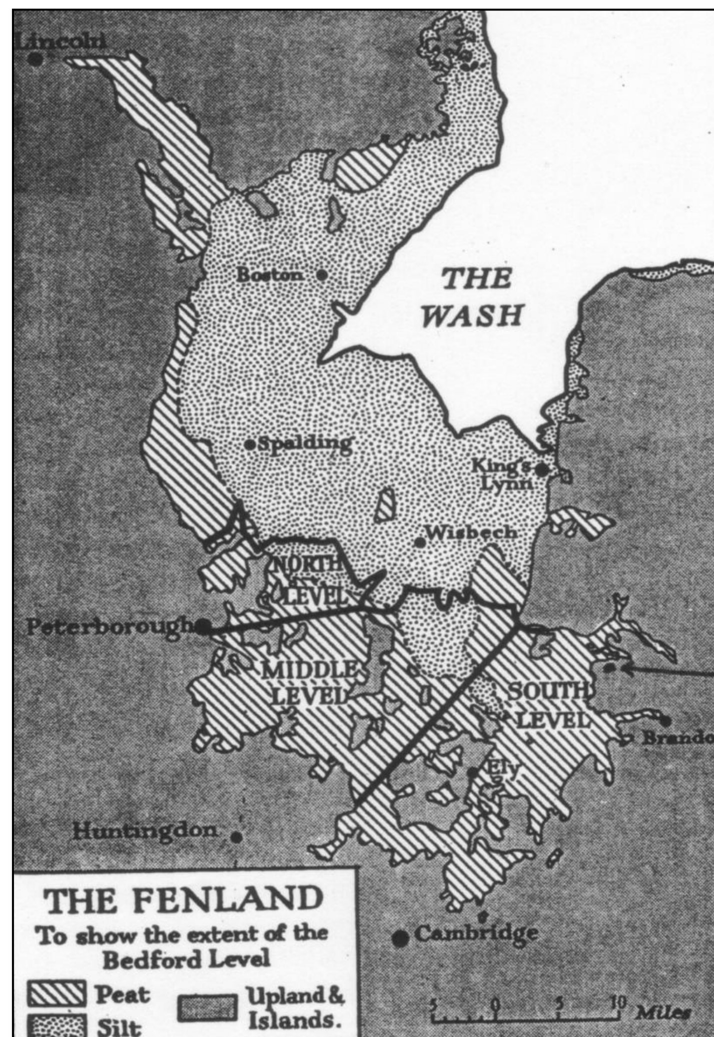
A Mr Matthew Sisson from Godmanchester, Hunts., then bought the Old Vicarage, but by February 1961 Mr Mawson reported that it was in an even worse state than before. In September 1963 the Norfolk & Norwich Archaeological Society reported 'Most of the windows smashed and some of the ceilings partially pulled down'. Finally, a further letter on19th September 1963 suggests Monica and Harry Dance themselves had decided to take it on themselves, which they did the following year. The scale of their undertaking is apparent in a grant application in 1964: ' The parapet walls of the gable walls are eroded and dislocated but they are not otherwise in too bad a condition. The sidewalls are in a worse state, partly die to alterations and perhaps partly due to very many years of defective rainwater disposal. At least one flint wall is bulging and dislocated and the framing and panels of the north section are badly decayed – the sole plate in the east wall having apparently rotted away completely.'

True to SPAB principles, the work undertaken by the Dances is honestly expressed and sensitive towards the various phases of the building's history. While the Dances were far from 'the charitable millionaire' that Gedge sought to conjure to the Old Vicarage's rescue in the 1890s, this gracious old building had finally found owners to cherish it.

Brief History of the Village of Methwold

Topography

The village was named 'Methelwaud' by the Saxons, as the 'wold' or high land in the middle, between Hockwold and Northwold. The Normans, says Gedge, speaking as they did 'that rippling babble of low Latin which is now styled French' found the 'straggling name of Methelwold' unacceptable and it became Muelle or Muel. 'And this name held its place in common parlance up to the last half century, though it has pretty well fallen into disuse in these days of education and railway porters.'



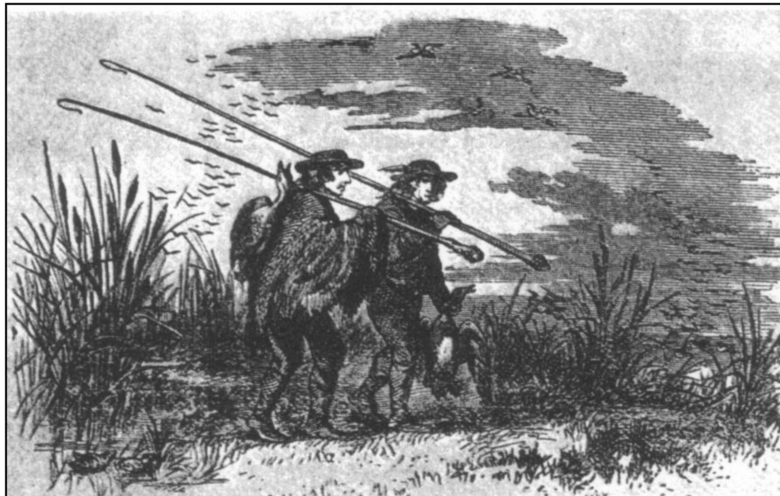
Methwold's topography in the 19th century. The areas of silt and peat merged more gradually than appears from the map.

Methwold's history and character are intertwined with its topography. It has always been somewhat off the beaten track, with the Crown as remote absentee landlord and the manor something of an afterthought for a series of gentry tenants who also had their main seats elsewhere. It is a fen-edge settlement, perched on a chalk bluff as it rises from a former marsh, the eastern end of the parish extending onto the belt of sands which runs north from Bury St Edmunds. Until early modern times, there were three contrasting areas of land use: the fens, the well drained, light loam for arable on the chalk outcrop and the warrens in the sands – ideal for rabbits, considered for centuries to be important livestock. This tripartite topography persists today. Then, the three areas worked together as an integrated system: the resources of the fens and the heaths provided extra grazing, permitting a high stocking rate which in turn maintained the fertility of the arable, which was grazed by the cattle and sheep when fallow. Burning was also used to improve the pasture, both lawfully and unlawfully, since burning was incompatible with the production of sedge for thatching. Sedge (reeds) and osier (willow) were valuable resources that could not be sold outside the township and sedge cutting also formed part of feudal duties. Taking peat from the fen was also restricted from early times.

Fish and waterfowl too were a resource: desmesne fisheries were recorded in the Domesday Book and some rents were paid in fish. But the most important products were sheep and barley. St. George's Church in Methwold, may well have been financed with profits from the wool trade. It was built on a slight rise to dominate the landscape around and in Gedge's day, a north-easterly was known locally as a 'Muel-wind' because Methwold church stands in the eye of it.

After the Conquest

The ancient interdependence of the land types was eventually to be upset by two main events: the draining of the fens and enclosure. First, though, we must imagine centuries of fenland existence in an area of characteristic occupations and practices arising from the particularities of the terrain.



Two 'Fen Slodgers' returning from a fowling expedition.
(P. Thompson, *History and Antiquities of Boston*,1856)

Descriptions of the Fenland change little between those of Hugo Candidus, a monk writing near Peterborough in 1150:

> 'From the flooding of the rivers, or from their deep overflow, the water, standing on unlevel ground, makes a deep marsh and so renders the land uninhabitable, save on some raised spots of ground, which I think that God set up for the special purpose that they should be the habitations of His servants who have chosen to live there...This marsh, however, is very useful for men; for in it are found wood and twigs for fires, hay for the fodder of cattle, thatch for covering of houses, and many other useful things. It is moreover, productive of birds and fish. For there are various rivers, and very many waters and ponds abounding in fish.' (Darby, *Medieval Fen*, p 21)

to William Camden in his Britannia (1586) on the inhabitants of the peat fens in Cambridgeshire:

> 'a kind of people according to the nature of the place where they dwell rude, uncivill, and envious to all others whom they call *Upland-men*: who stalking on high upon stilts, apply their mindes to grasing, fishing and fowling. The whole Region it selfe, which in winter season and sometimes most part of

the yeere is overflowed by the spreading waters of the rivers *Ouse, Grant, Nen, Welland, Glene* and *Witham*, having not loades and sewers large enough to voide away: But againe when their Streames are retired within their owne Channels, it is so plenteouse and ranke of a certaine fatte grosse and full hey, (which they call *Lid*) that when they have mowen downe as much with the better as will serve their turnes, they set fire on the rest and burne it in November, that it may come up again in great abundance. At which time, a man may see this Fennish and moyst Tract on a light flaming fire all over every way, and wonder thereat. Great plenty it hath besides of Turfe and Sedge for the maintenance of fire; of reed also for to thatch their Houses, yea and of Alders, besides other watery Shrubbes. But chiefly it bringeth forth exceeding store of willowes, both naturally, and also for that being planted by mans hand they have serv'd in good steed, and often cut downe with their manifold increase, and infinit number of heires (to use Plinies word) against the violent force of the waters rushing against the bankes.'[13]

- and Michael Drayton's description of the varied activity of the undrained fen in his *The Second Part, or a Continuance of Polyolbion* (1622):

'The toyling *Fisher* here is tewing of his Net:
The *Fowler* is imployd his lymed twigs to set.
One underneath his Horse, to get a shoot doth stalke;
Another over Dykes upon his Stilts doth walke:
There are other with their Spades, the Peats are squaring out,
And others from their Carres, are busily about, Carr: a fen or bog
To draw out Sedge and Reed, for Thatch and Stover fit'. [Stover: winter cattle fodder

Puddleglum the Marsh-wiggle – a modern echo of16th century stereotypes of fen-dwellers (C S Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, 1953).

[13] Translation into English from 1610 edition.

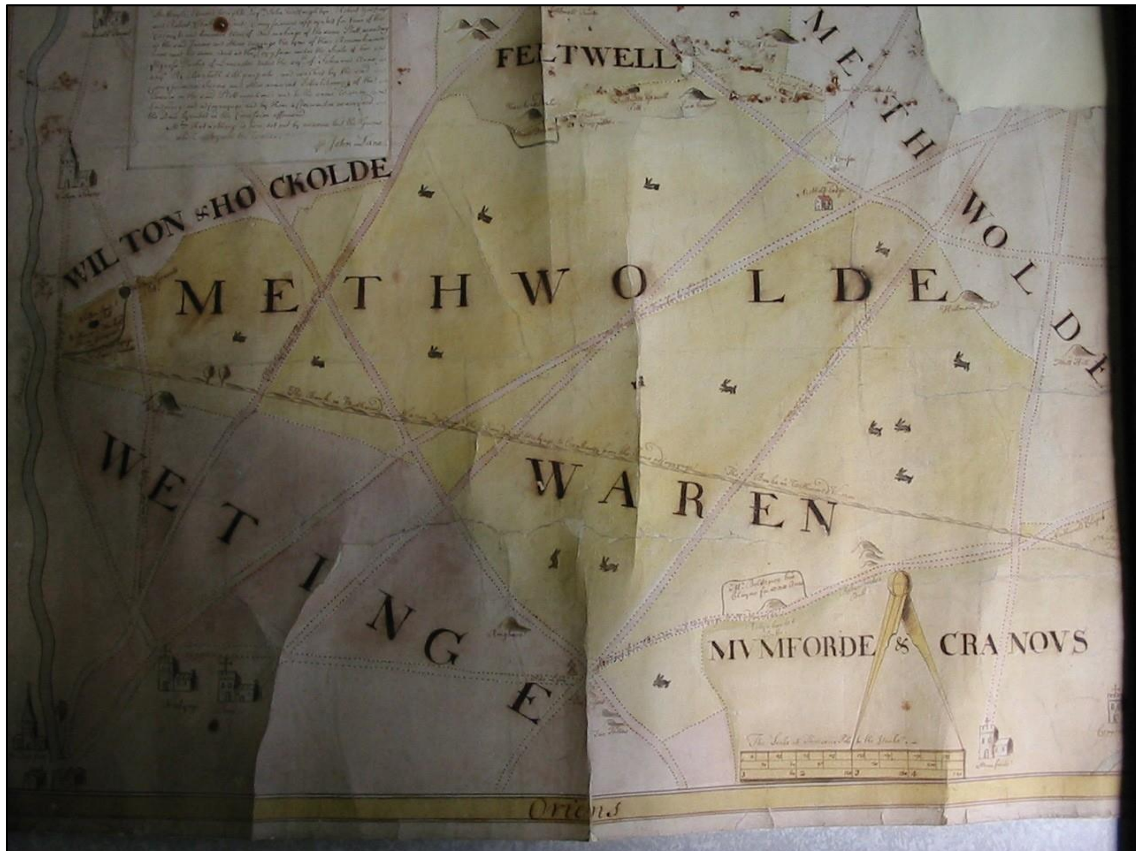
The wealth of the fen and its potential as improved land led to disputes sometimes coming to blows. In the sixteenth century, Northwold men built a causeway that impeded drainage and led to the drowning of the Methwold land. Methwold men dug through it, thus destroying the road to Stoke Ferry and Brandon Ferry. Northwold men restored the cut; the Methwold men returned but fled under a shower of arrows shot by the Northwold men in self-defence.[14]

According to Blomfield, Methwold was 'given to the Monastery of Ely, by Ethelwold Bishop of Winchester, in the Time of King Edgar, and when the Tenures and Services of several Lordships belonging to that Monastery, were settled…. In the Time of the Conqueror, Stigand Archbishop of Canterbury was Lord, but was deprived of it at the Conquest.'

Around 1070, William I gave the Manor of Methwold to his sister's husband, Earl de Warenne, as a reward for his loyalty. From the Domesday Book, we know that Methwold then had two mills and no fewer than seven fisheries on its desmesne. A fortified house known as the Warrene Castle was erected on the manor as part of the campaign that finally destroyed Saxon rule. Gedge tells us that the heathland was even then occupied with (rabbit) warrens so it was a fitting gift for a lord of that name (although it is commonly held today that the Normans introduced rabbits to Britain). Sixteenth-century maps show a huge warren of 1500 acres. 'So celebrated were the warrens of Methwold even down to the present century,' says Gedge, 'that the title of "Muel" rabbits was affixed to most rabbits offered for sale in London.' The warrens were a valuable resource and brought their own disputes. Difficulties included the dishonesty of individual warreners selling rabbits privately and poachers using dogs, ferrets and traps, including pitch (reminiscent of Brer Rabbit and the tarbaby). On St. Peter's Day 1545, for example, it was stated that Robert Tree, rector of Weeting, Thomas Crane, shepherd and Richard Fowler, Herdsman, poached 130 rabbits between them. The warren's actual boundaries were also the subject of

[14] Norwich PRO DL3/33/B8C.

numerous disputes. The people of Methwold complained that the rabbits ate their corn and burrowed into their arable lands and that the area of the warren had been extended. Poachers apart, the warren yielded a large number of rabbits – in 1431, three thousand were culled valued at £24.



Methwold Warren, an important resource for the parish: an eighteenth-century copy of a map dating from 1580 (NRO MC 556/1)

The Warrene line failed in the fourteenth century when the manor passed first to Edward II and then at his death to Edmund, Duke of Lancaster. The manor was to be held 'by the Service of one Bearded Arrow' (a later record, even more charmingly, has it held 'in free Soccage, by the Service of a Rose'.) Eventually, Methwold passed through marriage to Blanch, wife of John of Gaunt, and then to their son, the future Henry IV. The lordship of the manor thus became a personal possession of the Sovereign as part of the Duchy of Lancaster. The De Warennes' castle was either deliberately demolished or else left to decay.

St George's Church

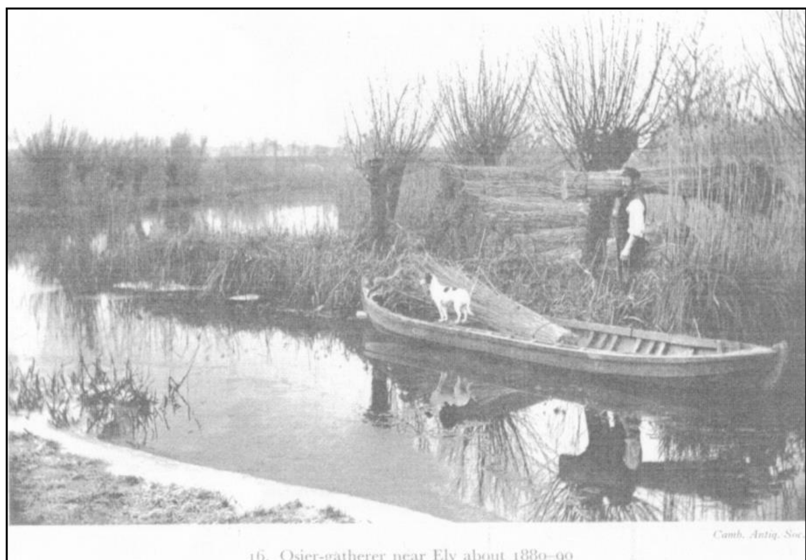
St George's Church was erected in the mid-13th century on the erstwhile Fair Ground, where a regular market had been held for centuries. An edict under the same king prohibited fairs and markets from churchyards so that the Methwold markets probably moved to Fair Hill to the north. We do not know whose generosity enabled the church to be built but Gedge speculates that the Duke of Lancaster may have allowed the disused castle to be pillaged for stone – certainly, coping stones on churchyard wall seem to have come from the earlier castle.

There is a tradition that the body of the original church was destroyed by fire within a century of being built. 'The free use of candles in Romish ceremonies,' Gedge cannot resist adding, 'always rendered such conflagrations frequent.' Only the chancel, chancel arch and tower survived the fire. The nave was rebuilt in the early fifteenth century, when perpendicular windows were inserted in the sidewalls of the chancel and the tower. The church is embellished with many carvings, which seem to have been executed by two very different craftsmen. The lively detail of the capitals especially reflect a lively and irreverent mind, commenting on the politics of his day – as Gedge comments, 'in those days, when *Punch* was far away in the future, the church-carvers did supply the place now filled by such as Leech, or Du Maurier'. The design of the tower is now probably unique, with its octagonal corona and slender spire. The only comparable design is purported to have been the belfry in Bruges, celebrated by Longfellow and later destroyed. Perhaps they may even have shared the same architect. In May 1853, the church tower was struck by lightening and badly damaged; it was repaired by subscription. In the Second World War, the tower provided a navigation marker for RAF and USAF aircraft returning to their nearby bases. Perhaps in an attempt to destroy it as such a marker, eight bombs fell around the church during the war, happily all missing. Methwold had its own airfield then (now the site of Darby's Nursery) and RAF and USAF continue to operate in the area out of the airfields at Lakenheath and Mildenhall.

Methwold in nineteenth century

Reverend Gedge wrote a lively, opinionated but affectionate account of his village in 1893 and it serves as a very good record of life around and probably in, the Old Vicarage during the nineteenth century. As we have seen, the draining of the fens did not necessarily lead to a more prosperous life for many and conditions were made still worse by the enclosures which took place in the parish in the early nineteenth century after what Gedge calls the 'iniquitous Enclosure Act' passed in 1807. Henry Partridge was not slow to take advantage of any means of enclosure; in 1805 he was claiming rights of patronage to the Vicarage of Methwold, which included common land in the parish. Various villagers gave an account of their rights relating to common land, of whom a widow, Mary Boggers, is representative. Mary's considerable rights must have made quite a difference to her life:

> Right of Common, of Pasture for Commonable Cattle upon the said Commons and Waste Lands at all Times of the Year....She also claims a Right of cutting and taking 9000 Turves and 2000 Flags, for her said Commons and Waste Grounds, for necessary Fuel for Firing, to be spent and consumed within the said Messuages, and to yearly Mow and take Fodder in the Queen's Ground, and Litter in the broken Ground for her said House and half Tenement in the usual manner of mowing and taking the same, and to dig and take Clay from and out of the said Commons and Waste Lands, for repairing her said Messuages, and to cut and take Brakes, and dig and take sand from and out of the Warren in Methwold, for repairs and for Litter or Firing, to be used, spent, and consumed upon the said Premises.[15]



16. Osier-gatherer near Ely about 1880–90

Camb. Antiq. Soc.

[15] NRO MC62/1 507x7

The Enclosure Act gave the landowners shares in the enclosed common land in proportion to the size of their existing landholding. The villagers lampooned the unfairness of the system in a quatrain still current in Gedge's day:

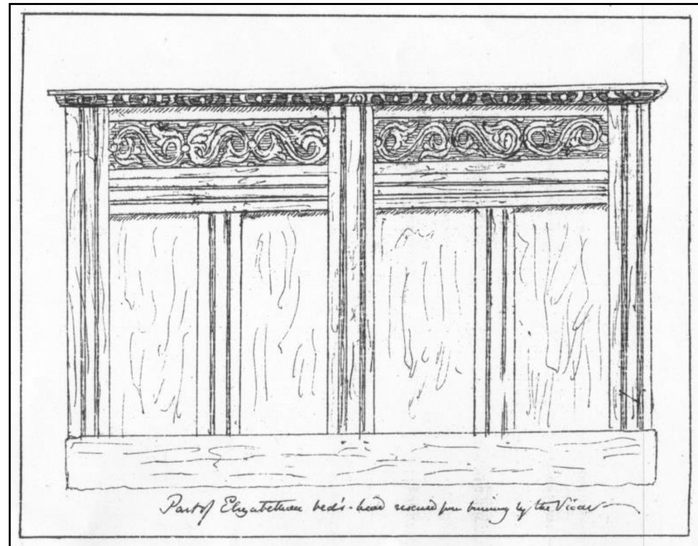
There was Dugmore for the College	- Christ's and Sidney Sussex, Cambridge
And Bansbridge for the Crown;	- an official at the Duchy of Lancaster
Houchen for old Newton, -	a canny lawyer who acted for a local
And the Devil for the Town.	local farmer called Newton

As Methwold was an open parish (allowing outsiders to settle), there was at least there was no demolition of squatters' cottages after enclosure, banishing labourers to country towns. But the removal of rights to access to and produce from common land placed the labourer entirely at the mercy of the employer, removing the provision for the cottager to keep his own livestock of common lands and a small buffer of independence. 'The labourer became a weekly beggar', says Gedge, kept from slipping below subsistence level only by the weekly dole from the committee of parish worthies at the workhouse (which, as we have seen above, seems briefly to have been the Old Vicarage). The amount of the dole was determined by the number in the household, which Gedge believed encouraged illegitimacy. But he had some sympathy for his parishioners' plight, even if it led to disillusion with his own established religion:

> 'The establishment of Wesleyanism here, sadly easily accounted for, is distressful to a clergyman, but the free and independent spirit of the place tires me less than it would do many. Mine have been days of calamity for the farmer and I wonder at the courage with which it has been borne.'

There are glimpses in Gedge and the other records of the harsh desperation of life for the Methwold labourer at times. The workhouse receipts include ones for significant quantities of gin, rum and ale and we have already had one reference to opium, which might or might not have been administered medicinally. Gedge casually cites a clear case of opium addiction without particular comment, and the passage is so characteristic of this likeable Victorian clergyman that it is worth quoting at length – partly to share his tone and style, but also because it coincidentally records an act of desecration to the Old Vicarage and tells us that

there was at least one 'beautiful mantel' to its fireplaces. Gedge is in full antiquarian flow:



'I give [above] a drawing of a portion of a late Tudor bedstead, the head-piece, which I found a labourer just about to break up for firewood, that once doubtless had its place in one or other of the houses of that period. The tenant of the vicarage house who aggravates me with his ivy, had already cleared away the beautiful moulded brick side-posts of the chamber fireplace, and heaped them with his other rubble, when I purchased of him the beautiful mantel also condemned to the fire. The oak cradle which I shall give in, and which belongs, properly speaking, to the Stuart period, for it is dated, as will be perceived, 1660, came into my hands in a more tragic fashion.

'With regard to all such objects, I shall delay my tale for a moment to say, that it would be well if the Society for the Protection of Ancient Monuments kept a fund in hand for the recouping of poor vicars and such like, who wrest them from destruction and who would in that case pass them over to some museum established for the purpose.

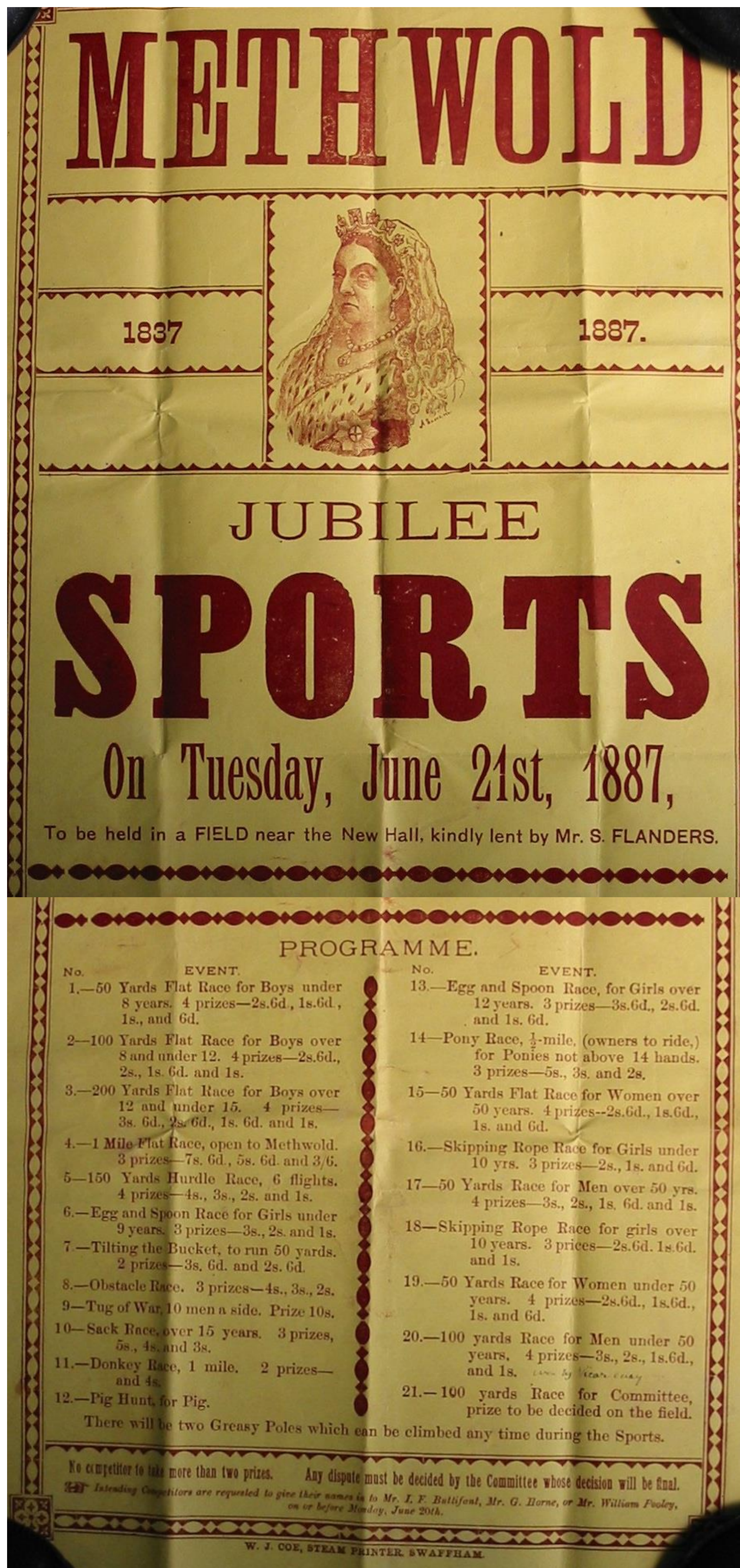
'As to this cradle, then, it had drifted about amongst the cottagers, and formed a feature at their petty sales for centuries, before I at last came upon it in the outhouse of a minute two-storied cottage, whither it had been hastily carried, with one pannel [sic] already split and burning. For the occupants of this tiny cottage, a very aged couple, addicted to the habit that is now happily becoming less common in the Fen country, of soothing the troubles of a blank senility with opium, having left a candle alight too near to their bed curtains, had unconsciously laid themselves down for the last time alive. The curtain nearest the light had heated till it took fire, after the smouldering fashion of timber, their unnatural slumber held them unaware of it; and when in the morning the attention of neighbours was drawn to the smoke issuing from every crack and cranny of their dwelling box, and the

> door forced in, and way made, at the risk of suffocation, into the chamber, and the old lady was found already dead of suffocation, and the partner of her joys and sorrows and hour later shared her fate. A woman who had sat with the old lady, who had been "keeping her bed" on the previous day, had brought her infant with her and her cradle, and when she left at night-time removed the infant but not the cradle, which she was glad to receive the means of replacing by a more modern and removable contrivance.' [16]

Despite the decline in his own income from the tithe, which did not 'afford me an income equal to that I once enjoyed as curate', Gedge was an improving incumbent, overseeing new heating and lighting for the church, the glazing of the porch, the tidying of the neglected churchyard and the lighting of the village streets, 'which fact has added much to nightly decorum as well as convenience.' He ran a coal club, guaranteeing sixty of the poorest households coal at less than 7d the hundredweight for fifteen weeks of the winter; the village also had a clothing club, a shoe club and a penny bank. The Duchy of Lancaster had established a free school built in a disused chalkpit in 1812, which they replaced in 1852 with a 'fine room and residence' in Bone Close. As Gedge's predecessor responded to a visitation question in 1852 on the number of uneducated children in the parish, 'no children are uneducated for want of opportunity.'

St George's Hall, big enough to hold 500 persons, was erected in 1893, the same year as Gedge published his *History of a Village Community.* A reading room provided labourers with carpentry and drawing classes. Against some opposition from his peers, Gedge changed the time of the parish meetings to enable the poorer ratepayers to have their say in the face of the perceived injustices of village life, believing 'in the good sense of humanity as a whole, when they come under the correction of experience, and the ennobling effects of confidence; still more in the good sense of Englishmen; and most of all in the good hearts of my own people.' (p106)

[16] *History of a Village Community in the Eastern Counties* (1893), pp. 66-70.



Order of the Day for Methwold's celebration of
Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 (NRO PD 313/87)

Elizabeth's Golden Jubilee. At the Queen's Silver Jubilee, the Dances organised the planting of a Jubilee Tree on the green at the bottom of Globe Street in Methwold. On 21st June, 1887 Methwold celebrated the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria. Norwich Record Office has an evocative bundle of receipts and remnants from this occasion, which enable us to reconstruct the day with some accuracy.

The Duchy of Lancaster had given £10 towards the day; Reverend Gedge loyally pledged three guineas and a Mr Boggers, perhaps the descendant of Widow Boggers who registered her claim to commonland rights some eighty years earlier, gave half a guinea (10s 6d). More than £86 was donated in total. A committee met regularly to discuss the celebrations and the meeting always closed with members singing the national anthem.

The receipt for Union Jacks and banners ordered for the 1887 Jubilee

A Union Jack flag was purchased, plus three banners and nine hand flags, and seven boxes of tacks; also timber to build 500 ft. of tables and 1000 ft. of seating. A barn was swept, the band was paid £1 and there were fireworks. Rev. Gedge paid £4 10s for two and a half barrels of beer from Hogge and Seppings –

Brewers, Malsters and Spirit Merchants, and there was food aplenty: salt beef, suet, roast beef, boiled beef, mutton, candied peel, raisins, currants, moist sugar and loaf sugar – and ginger beer, bought from Buttifant the Dispensing Chemist and Druggist. Rev. Gedge was provided with a specially written prayer:

'A Form of Thanksgiving and Prayer to Almighty God, Upon the Completion of Fifty Years of Her Majesty's Reign. To be used on Tuesday the 21st of June next...In all Churches and Chapels in England and Wales.'

'Almighty God, who didst call Thy servant Victoria, our Queen, as at this time to the Throne of Her Ancestors in the governance of this Realm; we yield Thee humble thanks for the abundance of Dominion wherewith Thou hast exalted and enlarged Her Empire, and for the Love of Her in which Thou hast knit together in one the hearts of many nations.'

And finally there is the Order of the Day:

10.40am	Band conducts school to church
11.00am	Jubilee Service choral
12.0	Procession from church from porch; Populace all disband here and go home for their plates, mugs, and knives and forks
12.45pm	Come to Feast by Front Gate to Hall

Sports from 4 p.m.

The sports were held in a field near the New Hall, which suggests that the 'Feast by Front Gate to Hall' with its 500-foot table took place in the road outside the Old Vicarage too. The sports include all the good old English favourites that still feature at so many a village fete today: egg and spoon race, sack race, donkey race, skipping race and not one but two greasy poles. What was no doubt a happy and memorable day was rounded off by a 100 yards dash by the Committee – in which presumably the redoubtable Reverend John Denny Gedge also competed. The Old Vicarage must have witnessed many such village events over the centuries and the sprinting clergyman (cassock tucked high?) is a happy mental image on which close.

Monica Dance, OBE (1913-1998)

Monica Dance's career spanned almost fifty years of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. She joined it as a secretary in 1931, becoming the Society's Secretary from 1939 until she retired in 1978. She became perhaps the best known figure in conservation during this period and was a tireless campaigner, on occasion writing hundreds of letters in a building's defence.

Her legacy lives on not just in bricks and mortar but also in a more actively practical form. In 1930, the SPAB had set up a scholarship scheme through which young architects could learn the sensitive approach to historic buildings advocated by the SPAB. After the Second World War, Monica Dance was instrumental in reviving the scheme, which went from strength to strength. Many of today's most respected conservation practitioners are former SPAB scholars, actively and personally encouraged by the Dances. The scheme thus moulds much of today's conservation practice. In 1988, many of these past scholars came together to form the Dance Scholarship Trust to raise money for future scholarships so that the transfer of expertise may continue. Such was the affection inspired by Monica and Harry Dance (who had no children) that the Dance Scholars, as they are known, have become something of an extended family. For Monica's memorial service in St Paul's Cathedral, various Scholars contributed to an appreciation, which is appended here, a tribute to special life from those who knew her personally.

The Landmark Trust has benefited from the Dances' legacy as much as any. It is only thanks to the generosity of Monica Dance and her husband Harry that the Old Vicarage can be enjoyed by a wider audience as a Landmark today. They bequeathed the house to the SPAB, who decided that the best way to ensure its upkeep and widest enjoyment was through a long lease to the Landmark Trust. The Dances had already entrusted their previous home, Manor Farm, to Landmark's care in 1979. But many of Landmark's other buildings owe much to

Monica Dance's foresight and zeal in support of conservation. Many of the architects, past and present, who have worked on our buildings have been SPAB or Dance Scholars and so our buildings too have benefited, and continue to benefit, from their practical but measured ethos of conservative repair.

When the Dances moved to Methwold, retirement did not prevent them from being as active as ever in pursuit of causes dear to their hearts. Monica Dance was instrumental in raising funds for the repair of St George's Church, for a new organ, for many other village causes. The brief selection of letters which follow from the Dance Scholarship Trust files give a flavour of Monica Dance's boundless enthusiasm for the causes in which she believed, as well as the breadth of the Dances' involvement in the life of the community. As well as making the Old Vicarage available for village events, they also hosted many gatherings of the Dance Scholars at the Old Vicarage so that it retains a special place in the hearts of many.

It was the Dances' wish that their ashes be mingled with the earth in the garden of the Old Vicarage, the lovely old house they had so loved and saved from demolition. This request was carried out by Rev. David Kightly, at the time of writing still vicar of Methwold.

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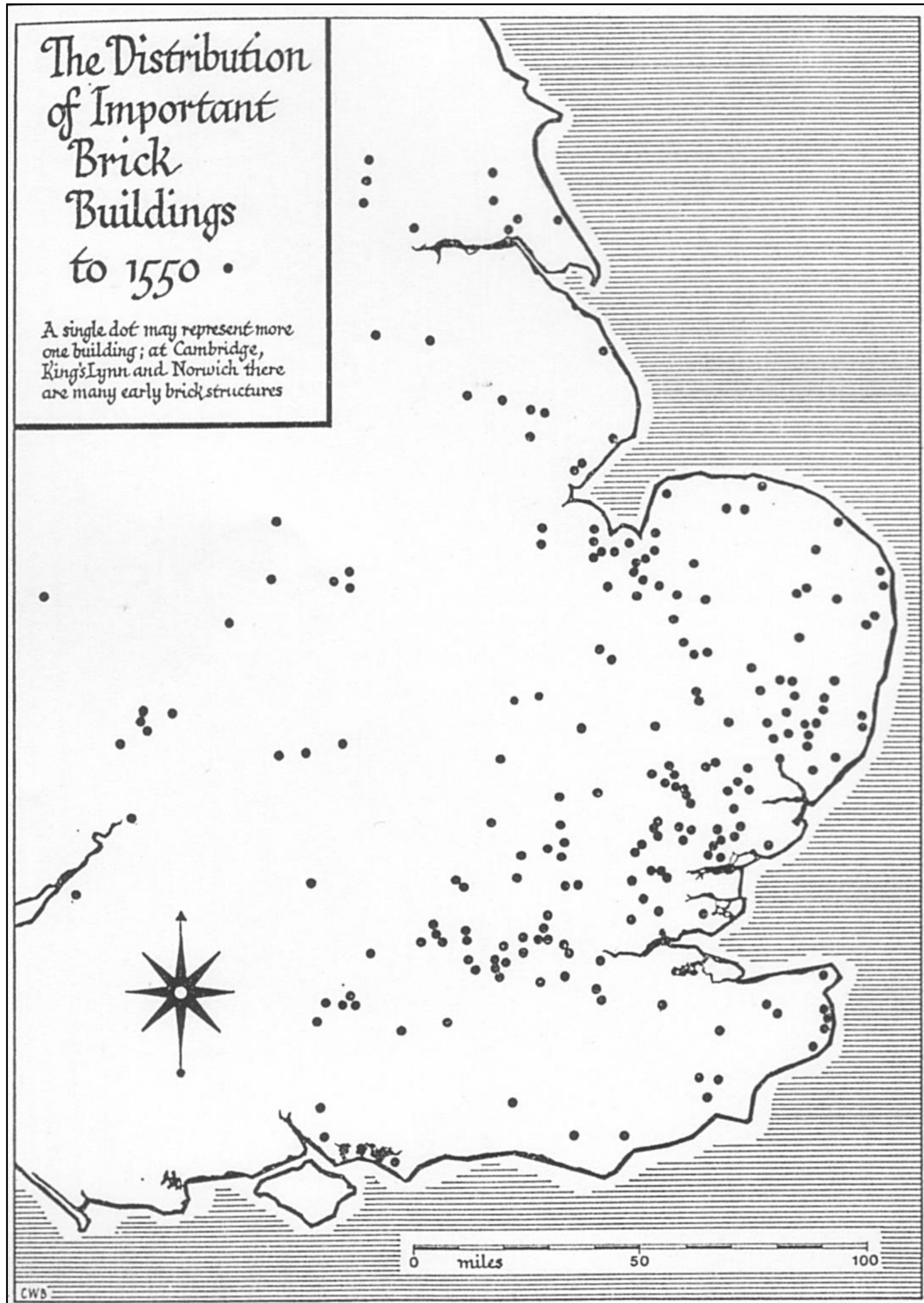
The Distribution of Important Brick Buildings to 1550 •
A single dot may represent more one building; at Cambridge, King's Lynn and Norwich there are many early brick structures
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Early Tudor Brickwork

Our word 'brick' originated from the French, *brique.* Before the fifteenth century, the most usual term for a baked clay slab used for walls was a *waltyle* and they were usually used in an entirely utilitarian fashion, without particular artistic pretension.

Bricks were introduced to Britain by the Romans, but after their departure the native British reverted to wood as a building material until the late thirteenth century. The industry was then revived by the Flemish who were exporting bricks to Britain from this date. Over half the brick buildings which remain in England from before 1550 are in Norfolk, Suffolk or Essex, and nearly all are east of a line from Humber to Solent. This seems to have been partly because these areas are not rich in stone, but perhaps more because these areas had stronger links with the Netherlands and practices on the Continent, where brick making did not fall into such decline. The trading confederation known as the Hanseatic League, founded in 1241, played a significant role in strengthening these links through trade with the east coast ports. There was a Hanseatic office in King's Lynn from 1271. There were often disputes with the Hanseatic League and this caused a slackening in the use of brick until after 1474 when a lasting settlement of differences was achieved. Continental craftsmen and ideas returned to England and the trade in bricks increased rapidly. It was perhaps as a result of this acceleration that the unknown builder of the Old Vicarage decided to embellish his building with its brick end-gable.

Brick had been used as the sole material in a building only from early fifteenth century. At Methwold, it plays a largely decorative rather than structural role: in the decades after the 1440s, skill in shaping dressings and ornamental details become increasingly established in Britain and early Tudor brickwork exudes confidence, for show as well as utility. Brick was no longer considered inferior to stone, although the manner of its use owed much to the techniques of stone masonry. It is characteristic of the period that brick walls were essentially walling

in a Gothic masonry style, and the Old Vicarage gable bears this out with its plinth and parapet. Brick was also perfect for the new-fangled chimneystacks, necessary to lift the foul-smelling smoke from a new fuel, coal. At Methwold, the hearths are of a size to have taken either coal or wood, but we may be sure that the Old Vicarage was exceedingly modern in its fine chimneystack. For firebacks, specially hard 'firebricks' were used, often laid in herring bone or chevron patterns – again a feature at Methwold.

The best historical guide to date of bricks is texture rather than size, since size was always dictated by ease of handling in one hand so the bricklayer could keep his trowel in the other. This is especially true of width, which relates directly to width of a man's hand and therefore has varied little through the centuries.

When a brick building was to be built in this period, a brick maker, often itinerant, would be hired to find suitable clay. He was then paid to excavate, mould, fire and deliver the bricks to the client. He was a skilled worker, his trade controlled by guilds. The clay was dug or 'won' from shallow pits close to the proposed building site before 1st November when the frosts might be expected to set in. Often the pits left by this excavation became a moat or pond. The dug clay was then turned stirred or turned before 1st February and wrought before 1st March, rain and frost having broken the earth down through the winter. This weathered or tempered clay was then thrown into pits to be trodden by men or oxen and puddled (squeezed and blended to give a smooth dough free from impurities, free especially from pebbles and chalk). Clay that was insufficiently puddled led to creasing on the surface of the finished bricks. The clay was then ready for shaping and moulding. Up to about 1350, 'place bricks' were often moulded by simply cutting the tempered clay into approximate shapes with spades, or individual bricks might be made using wooden bats, just as butter might be shaped. By the time the Old Vicarage was built, however, it had long been the custom to use a mould or 'forme'. Typical practice would involve a moulder at a bench, where he would throw his clay lump – clot, clod or warp – into an open mould.

This mould was positioned over a flat wooden board called a stock, which was nailed to a bench and sprinkled with water to prevent the clay sticking. Any excess was smoothed off using a flat wooden stick called a strike. The mould was then lifted away and the brick placed onto a thin flat board or pallet on a bed of straw for drying. Sometimes early bricks still bear the imprint of the straw they lay on; sometimes a dog or cat might run across and leave its pawprint (these may have been attributed apotropaic or magical powers since they often seem to be laid to be seen, in for example a bread oven or on a step).

A brickmaker at his bench dashes a clot of clay into his mould.

The bricks were then burnt in clamps or kilns, constructed as big stacks of dried bricks. The outer shell was of previously burnt bricks or 'casings'. Green or unfired bricks were arranged inside with layers of fuel (heather, charcoal, turf or peat). The top was closed with burnt bricks, then daubed on the outside with clay and faggots of brushwood, tree toppings or anything else to hand placed all around. A single clamp on a large site could hold up to two million bricks. Fires

were lit at several points depending on the wind direction and the clamp was then allowed to burn itself out, with little or no control possible of the firing process. Inevitably, there was both considerable wastage ('wasters') and much imperfection: these were used as hardcore. Building contracts of the day often demand sufficiently or well-burnt bricks, suggesting that the reverse could be a problem. The colour of the bricks derived primarily from composition of the clay – most clays contain iron which gives the characteristic red colour. The shade of any given brick resulted from its position in clamp and therefore the temperature at which it was fired; fuel type also had an effect. At first, decorative possibilities emerged from natural variation, and the brickmakers gradually became more skilled, using higher temperatures for a darker shade or even vitrification, when the sand content in the clay melted to give dark glazed effect. (A proportion of sand helped reduce cracking due to shrinkage during the firing, although too much led to the bricks shattering). The unfired bricks were carefully stacked in the clamps so it was the ends not the sides that burnt most – and these headers were then used for diaper work. Less well burnt bricks were known as 'samels'.

An illumination from 1425, theoretically showing exiled Jews brick making in Egypt, but actually of contemporary practice.

Unless huge quantities were required, ornamental details were created with a brick-axe to create an approximate shape and then laboriously rubbed to the final form. This seems the process most likely to have been used for the moulded bricks at the Old Vicarage although some authorities would claim that such bricks were moulded before firing.

The gable-end on the Old Vicarage is built in English bond: this means layers of headers alternating with layers of stretchers. This was the norm in the fifteenth century: it is a strong bond because it has no straight joints but it is also expensive in its use of bricks and difficult to lay well – the longevity of the Methwold gable even through centuries of neglect is testimony to the skill of the craftsmen who built it. Eventually, English bond was to be largely superseded by Flemish bond, which was easier to lay.

Did the unknown craftsmen who built the Old Vicarage move on from Methwold to use their skills at the much grander but comparable project at Layer Marney? Did they even use Methwold as a showpiece for the various patterns within their repertoire? We shall probably never know.

The Draining of the Fens

Even in the late nineteenth century, two thirds of Methwold parish was fen, bounded by the streams of the Wissey to the north and the Little Ouse to the south and west. The Romans had drained Methwold fen but their intervention had long since disappeared by the seventeenth century. We must imagine a watery landscape right up to the early seventeenth century, when Isaac Casaubon, on a visit to Ely, described a landscape where cottagers spent their lives travelling by boat, fishing and fowling amidst bittern and dotterel, walking on stilts or high shoes as they drove their cattle onto the dry pastures.

The Crown received continual complaints about inundation resulting from attempts to drain the fens in the Middle Ages. Things were to get worse. The dissolution of the monasteries through the 1530s removed at a stroke some of the largest landowners of the region, who had held responsibility for the upkeep of many of the waterways. The monastic estates were divided and subdivided; responsibilities and liabilities were often disputed by the new owners and the 'custom of the fen' eroded as well as the banks. But we must beware of the all-too pervasive nostalgia that followed the Dissolution. H C Darby, historian of the fens, refuses to be drawn into a generalisation that matters deteriorated, saying simply that some places may have been left worse off without their former clerical masters.

As ever, we learn much about customary life in the fens from its regulations and the infringements against them. In1534 An Acte agenst Destruccyon of Wyldefowle in the fens was passed: no birds were to be killed from May too August, and no eggs taken from certain fowl. In 1550, this former provision was repealed to help the poor who had depended on such fowl. In 1548, a code of fen laws drawn up by Council of the Duchy of Lancaster at the Great Inquest of the Soke of Bolingbroke which remained in force until the enclosures of the early nineteenth century. The code contained 72 articles, which included provisions for branding of cattle, cutting of thatch and reed, interference with common drains,

regulation of fishing nets and the keeping of swan. And gradually but steadily the idea was growing of a large-scale draining project to replace local and individual efforts by some co-operative enterprise, as landowners strove to find ways of improving the yield and condition of their holdings.

In 1600, a General Draining Act was passed. But lack of capital, common rights and the lack of great estates in the region were all obstacles to its success. Events around Methwold in the early seventeenth century were typical of a multitude of small-scale local schemes that resulted in confusion and dissatisfaction. Many fen towns petitioned James against draining. Abraham Younge petitioned in these years on behalf of the inhabitants of Methwold:

> 'That they have several Sheep-walks which consist of not less than 1700 Sheep, which used to feed Winter and Summer upon our common Fens, &c. And that when any floods happen to be, they come not by Wind-catches [mills], and run over but some part of our Grounds, and continue not long: So we are never hurtfully surrounded, but find these Grounds much better by such Overflowings. And on these Grounds we used to keep 3 or 400 Milch-kine for Dairies, and fed our working Horses, and bred Store of young Cattle, which were kept on the Common, time out of mind, in Winter.'

Three worthies of Northwold were even more to the point in their submission: 'That their Common is excellent good smooth Grass-ground: that 3700 Sheep usually feed upon it, and it does by no means want draining.'

Nevertheless, in 1605, Lord Popham ordered a new bed to be cut from Erith to Denver in order to relieve the pressure on the level above Denver, which included the Methwold fen. In 1608, inhabitants of Methwold had complained that the Wissey was silting up because of a harde connecting Ford-holme and Helingseye and a year later Popham's scheme was declared a failure in 1609 and his new river closed by order of the Government.

Meanwhile, stimulated by increasing financial hardship, in 1607 James I had ordered a survey of Crown Lands in to determine whether their yield could be

Sir Cornelius Vermuyden, attr. Van Miereveld, Private Collection.

increased. One of the pieces of lateral thinking to emerge from the 1607 survey was that it would be profitable to assert royal rights in marsh and fen, in what was to become a typical abuse of royal power by the early Stuarts.

In 1618, the Commissioners of Sewers came to the unanimous decision that to drain the Great Level, it was essential to improve the outfall of the Ouse, Nene and Welland. A Commission in 1618 entrusted the drainage of these fens to Sir William Ayloff and Anthony Thomas Esq., authorising them to take for themselves for their efforts a proportion of the improved lands. This proportion varied from a tenth to one third; in Methwold it was to be one fourth of all improved land, regardless of who owned it.[17] In 1620, Ayloff and Thomas were summoned to Whitehall, where James, holding among his many titles that of lord of the manor of Methwold, stated (disingenuously, we may feel) that there was in fact nothing in his prerogative that enabled him to sanction the grant of improved lands. Ayloff and Thomas must therefore be satisfied merely with half the profit accruing to the lands as estimated by the owners. In fact, James wanted to be chief undertaker himself but had no funds. In 1621, a Dutchman called Cornelius Vermuyden arrived in England, probably at James' invitation and in 1629 the reclamation scheme finally began. We know nothing about Vermuyden before his arrival in England, but can safely assume that he brought with him a reputation in matters of drainage and his schemes were to play a crucial part in the draining of the fens. Francis, Earl of Bedford was another key player: he owned a large tract of the Level in his Thorney estate and saw draining it as a profitable investment. In the Lynn Law of January 1630, the Earl became the principal undertaker and figurehead of the drainage scheme in partnership with thirteen co-adventurers,

[17] Methwold's relations with its royal landowner were not always bad. Gedge tells an anecdote that Charles II visited Methwold from Newmarket, drawn by the reputation of its cockfighting. He saw a main fought, ate a good dinner of Muel rabbit from his own manor and spent the night at the Cock Inn (much of which dates from the seventeenth century). Content with his visit, he granted Methwold a charter relieving them of tolls on markets, bridges and roads in the parish and also granted permission to hold a weekly market. However, if such a royal visit did indeed precede the grant of the charter it must rather have been by James I, since the royal charter to be found at Norwich Record Office (granting rights of market and fair at Methwold, with a writ to the Sheriff of Norfolk that the men and tenants of the royal manor of Methwold should not have to take oaths or serve on juries outside the parish) is dated1618.

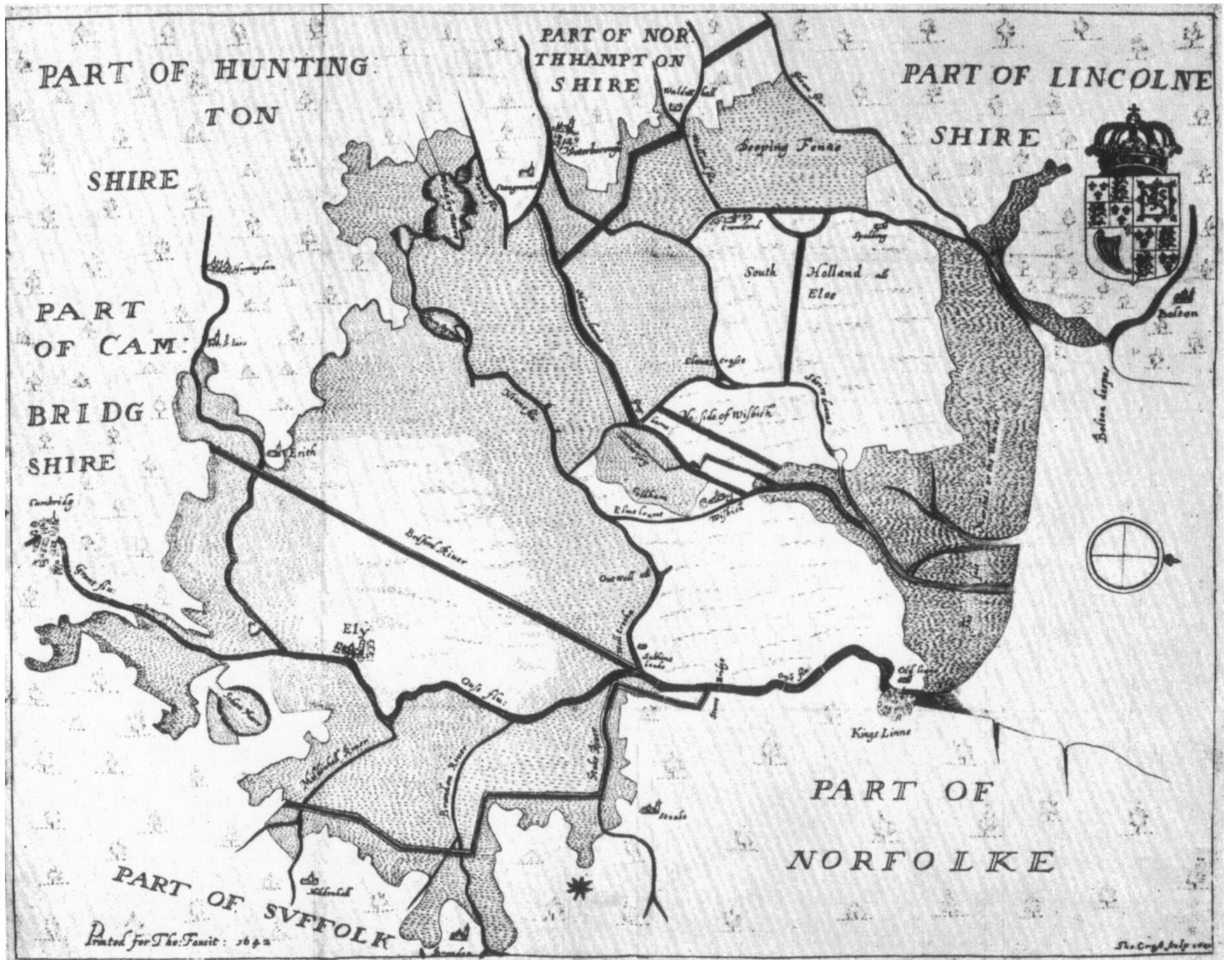
one of whom was Vermuyden, as Director of Works and the mind behind the project. The recompense for the work carried out was to be 95,000 acres of the reclaimed land 'in free and common Soccage....and without paying any Rent .... other than a Fee-Farm Rent of Ten Pounds by the year.' The drainage scheme to be completed within six years but there was no clear definition of what constituted drainage.

To drain the Great Level involved not just drainage but also keeping the outfalls clear from the Ouse and its tributaries, the Cam, the Lark, the Little Ouse and the Wissey; the Nene and the Great Ouse. Like Popham before him, Vermuyden identified that for the southern part of the Level the solution lay in increasing the discharge capacity of the Great Ouse by providing a straight course between Earith and Denver. There he cut the Bedford River, twenty-one miles long and seventy feet wide, completed in 1631. Sams Cut was made in the same years running northwest across the Methwold and Feltwell Fens taking water from Feltwell direct to the Great Ouse.

In 1637 at St Ives, the Commission of Sewers duly found that 'the Earl of Bedford had at his own costs and charges, and with the expense of great money, drained the said fenny and low grounds, according to the true intent of the Lynn Law' and decreed that his 95,000 acres be duly allotted to him. 400 acres in Methwold, by Powplot, were part of this 95,000 and to make matters worse, the king and his engineer were considered to have damaged the Methwold Common fen as well as the royal Severals at Methwold. A petition from Methwold in 1640 against 'the late drainage' speaks of 1700 sheep and 3-400 cows feeding on the Common Fen between the Methwold Severals and Otteringhythe until the erection of the dam at Denver by Vermuyden. There had been immense opposition to the dam in Parliament; some declared that the damming of a natural stream contravened the Magna Carta and the measure was only carried by a single vote.

A flood of petitions followed this allocation of land to the Earl, to do more with matters of ownership than drainage. The unimproved region was often misrepresented as unproductive by those with an interest in reclaiming the land. A pamphlet in 1646, *The Anti-Projector or the History of the Fen Project,* claimed the undertakers had 'mis-informed many Parliament men, that all the Fens is a meer quagmire, and that it is a level hurtfully surrounded, of little or no value.' In reality, it gave employment throughout the year to 'many thousand cottagers' gathering 'reeds, fodder, thacks, turves, flags, hassocks, segg, fleggweed for fleggeren collars, mattweed for churches, chambers, beddes and many other fenn commodytyes of greate use both in towne and country'. Such far-reaching change was therefore far from painless in such an integrated economy. Sometimes local opposition to the draining had to be quelled by force. Sir Miles Sandys of Wilburton wrote to his son at Court in 1638 that if 'order be not taken, it will turn out to be a general rebellion in all the Fen towns..'

Eventually, Charles I himself became involved in trying to right the wrongs done by the Commissioners at St Ives and a further commission was appointed to sit at Huntingdon. The Commission duly declared that the Earl and his co-adventurers had not after all performed the contract of drainage which was left incomplete and defective, that they were not therefore entitled to their recompense and that the His Majesty the King would therefore take over the undertaking, at an increased recompense. As a sop to the discontented landowners, it decreed that every man should retain his customary rights until the undertaking was complete. Vermuyden was again appointed as the engineer for the new scheme which now aimed to create not just 'summer grounds', (i.e. 'fit for meadow, or arable or pasture' in the summer months only) but also 'winter grounds', or land which would be water-free all year round.



Methwold

Vermuyden's Map of the Fens, 1642, which adopts the usual convention of the day of making due north to the right. Methwold has been indicated with a star.

Oliver Cromwell, meanwhile, was also intimately concerned with these events. His family had held and farmed territory in the Fens for generations. Interests of gentry and commoners were united against what amounted to enclosure: in 1638 'Mr Cromwell of Ely had undertaken, they the Commoners paying him a groat for every cow they had upon the Common, to hold the drainers in suit of law for 5 years, and that in the meantime they should enjoy every part of their Common.' The Huntingdon Commissioners would almost certainly have reversed the St Ives decision even without the King's intervention, but Charles' impetuosity laid him open to charges of prejudicing the commission in advance. His whole initiative must also been seen in the context of the crisis in the royal finances and increasingly poor relations between King and Parliament. Here was yet another scheme by the Crown to increase income without resource to the House of Commons and one of the many factors contributing to the eventual complete breakdown of relations between Charles and Parliament that led to the Civil War. Inevitably the whole undertaking was shelved for eleven years, by which time the royal undertaker had died on the scaffold.

However, Parliament too recognised the potential of the scheme. By 1646 they had drawn up an Ordnance for the draining of the Great Level and had also reaffirmed the Earl of Bedford's (now William, Francis' son) right to pursue the scheme. In May 1649 an Act was passed 'for the Draining of the Great Level of the Fens.' The Bedford Level Adventurers reconvened and, after much haggling over terms of contract, Vermuyden was appointed as their Director. Interestingly, another of their number was a Sir Edward Partridge who came from Kent and seems to have had little connection with the fenland before his involvement with the 1649 Act. There was friction between Vermuyden and Partridge, to the extent that the latter even put forward his own scheme to drain the easiest third of the Level, which was at one point accepted during the negotiations. Partridge was still to do well out of the Great Level and went on to live in a fine house in Ely with nine fireplaces. Perhaps he was a forbear of the Partridges of Lynn who acquired the impropriate vicarage in Methwold in 1753.

Despite the debatable success of the 1638 scheme in failing to provide winter as well as summer grounds, Vermuyden was fundamentally committed to this earlier scheme when work began again under the Commonwealth because the 21-mile-long Bedford River had already been constructed to relieve (and to a large extent replace) the tortuous, thirty mile course of the Ouse between Earith and Denver. Vermuyden effectively divided the Level into three sections: from Glen to Morton's Leam; from Morton's Leam to Bedford River and from Bedford River south. Methwold fell within the south level. The work he did to drain the south level in the early 1650s was largely forced upon him by the conditions which had been created by the creation of the Bedford River, necessitating the cut closest to the Methwold Severals which became known as the New Bedford, or Hundred Foot, River. This in turn created the Washlands between the two and necessitated the construction of the Denver Sluice. The system worked relatively well in the north and middle levels, but flooding became commonplace in the south level and controversies raged about the scheme long after Vermuyden's death. Nevertheless, the twin Bedford Rivers and the Denver Sluice remain integral parts of the modern flood relief measures for the Fens.

By the closing years of the seventeenth century, the extent to which the symbiosis of centuries had been upset by the drainage schemes was all too apparent. The ancient pattern of summer and winter grounds had been disturbed. Locally, the introduction of the Denver Sluice had caused waterways to silt up, impeding navigation - the new cuts and sluices made the waterflow more manageable and so more sluggish, so that the banks were no longer scoured by the 'white water' at times of flood. 1696 saw another flood of petitions from Methwold and other local towns and villages against the Bedford Corporation. The petition of Clackclose Hundred was typical:

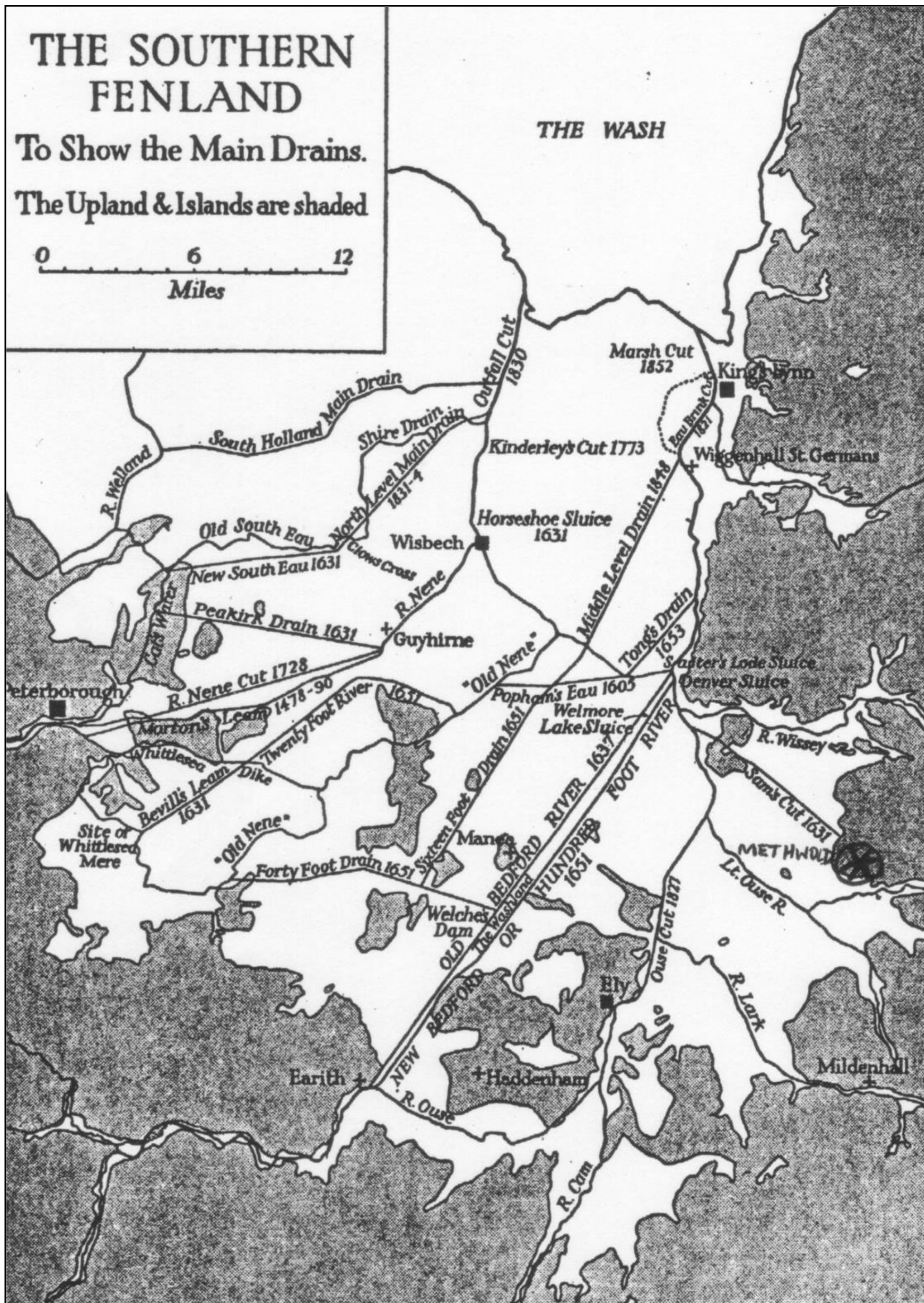
'of late Yeares, since the placing [of] a Great Dam and Sluice cross the River Ouse near Salters-lode, and other Works made by the Adventurers for draining the Level, the River Ouse is raised so high with Silt from the Sea, that not only the ancient Drains and Outfalls are thereby stopped and become of little Use, but also the Waters of the said Level being by the said Sluice and Dam, and others

Works penn'd up and restrain'd, and diverted from their ancient Course, upon evry Flood or Downfall do swell and overflow our Petitioners Lands and cannot be gotten off; whereby they often lie drowned, and are of no Benefit the whole Year..'[18]

The Corporation of the Bedford Level prevailed however and the sluice was allowed to stay until the forces of nature intervened. In 1713 the combination of a particularly high tide and violent floods caused the sluice to be first undermined 'and afterwards blown up and destroy'd by the Tides from the Sea.' The condition of the South Level, upon which Methwold perches at the southern end, worsened still further after the demise of the sluice. The burden of maintenance grew ever greater: the river outfalls became increasingly choked by tidal silts, while the watercourses continued to 'grow' above the level of the surrounding countryside at an alarming rate. Inland, this was primarily due to the wastage of the peat surface, a process apparently unrecognised at the time and yet the single factor that underlay the difficulties of maintaining an effective drainage system.

By the 1720s, the Corporation of King's Lynn reported to their member of Parliament (no lesser person than Sir Robert Walpole, First Lord of the Treasury) 'the total Loss of their Navigation (caus'd by the choaking up of the Ouse River)' and 'that from the same Cause the adjacent Country is overflow'd and rendered unprofitable'. Walpole commissioned Thomas Badeslade to conduct a survey of the present state of affairs and to produce proposals to remedy the situation, published as *The History of the Ancient and Present State of Navigation of the Port of King's Lynn and of Cambridge.* Badeslade's map of the area follows this page.

[18] Darby, *Draining of the Fens*, p.83.



The approximate dates of drains up to the nineteenth century are given, although in some cases there was a considerable interval between the beginning of works and their completion.

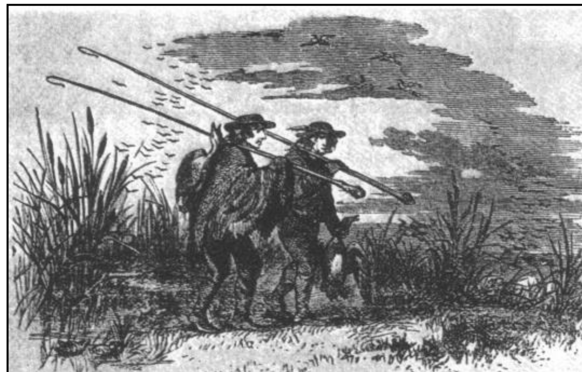
After much debate, a new Denver Sluice was built from 1748-50 to improve the situation. This prompted a fresh wave of activity to improve drainage, culminating in the Eau Brink cut across the Ouse below Salter's Lode, which was completed in 1821. This produced a clear improvement in the condition of the South Level – but the robbing of the peat layer continued. Even a usually astute observer like Arthur Young failed to understand the danger of losing the peat layer. In his *Annals of Agriculture,* xliii, 149 (1805) he wrote that 'I went on [the Tongs drain] to the Tongs bank; and Talbot informed me that he had thrust a long pole in many places into turfholes, but without finding any hard bottom. The upper turf is spongy, but good fewel; it is better and better with every spit being at bottom of such holes as are commonly made solid, heavy and quite black. Of the value of it, if cultivated, nobody entertains any doubt....but the general drainage must be completed before anything of the sort can profitably be undertaken.'

Yet although by the beginning of the nineteenth century the greater part of the Fens were drained in theory if not in fact, this had not led to an improvement in standards of living. Arthur Young was particularly moved by his survey of the southern Fenland: many areas were 'in so dreary a state, that waste was the only appropriate term to be given' them. Life in Methwold continued to be hard for many throughout the century as testified by Rev. Gedge's comments in the 1890s.

Eventually, further intervention was necessary, and this happened sooner at Methwold than many other settlements in the late nineteenth century. The area drained naturally into Sam's Cut through Hunt's Sluice into the River Ouse until 1883. Then as the ground levels fell, it became necessary to install artificial drainage. In 1883 a dam with culverts was built across Sam's Cut at Hunt's Sluice, and an engine and pump erected. In the following years however the fen sank so rapidly that the pump was unable to drain the Fen properly, as the peat layer gradually decayed and compressed, until it shrank to a layer of a mere one or two feet above the clay beneath. As late as 1877, around Crowland, old ague-

stricken fenmen could still be found whose “lustreless, opium-bleared eyes” lit up as they told of “the glorious times of 70 years ago when they could run a pole ten feet into the moor without touching clay”.[19] It was estimated at the time that the fen had sunk some five or six feet in the previous half-century.

At Sam’s Cut as elsewhere, the waterflow was found to be inadequate to keep the pump working, as the peat surface lowered progressively. So in 1913, a second pumping station was built at the other end of Sam’s Cut to raise the water in the cut back to its old level, the first of a succession of increasingly powerful pumping units. It is a classic example of the importance and power of steam-power in restoring a prospect of prosperity to the general desolation of the area in the early nineteenth century, but also of the dangers of disturbing the ecology of these ancient lands – a problem with which we are still wrestling today.



[19] S B J Skertchley, *Geology of the Fenland* (1877), p. 154.