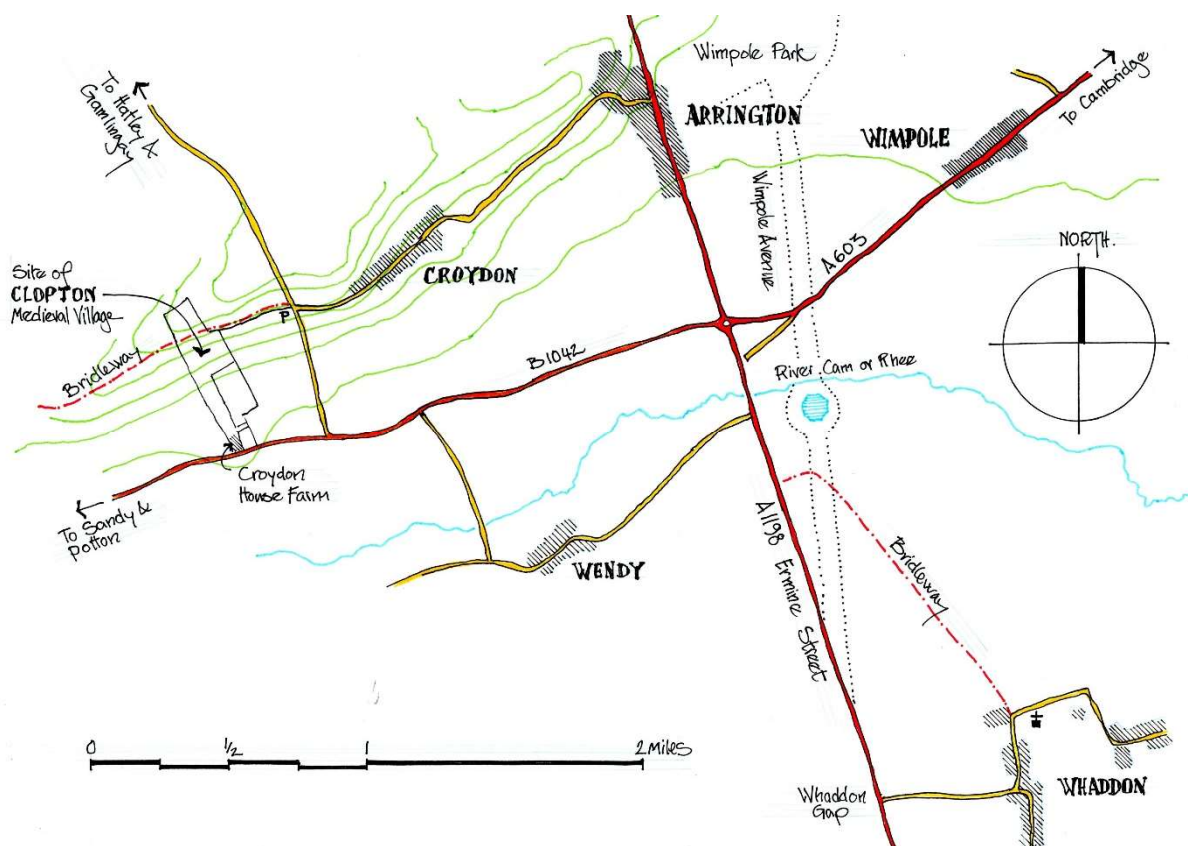


WHADDON FACT SHEET

No.5 – CLOPTON ABANDONED VILLAGE

In Fact Sheet No 1 I made reference to some villages being abandoned as a result of rural depopulation following the Black Death of 1348-9, and I thought it might be appropriate to draw attention to Clopton, our nearest abandoned medieval village, the site of which is still clearly visible on the ground. However Clopton's demise was not due to the Black Death, but took place some 150 years later through greed and litigation.

Clopton is located on the natural spring-line on a low chalk ridge that runs southwest from Wimpole Park through Arrington and Croydon (see map below). To get there, head north up the A1198 as far as the roundabout with the A603, and then turn left on the B1042 towards Potton and Sandy. After about 1½ miles take the first turning on the right (signposted Croydon, Hatley and Gamlingay), and after a further ½ mile there is a small area of hardstanding on the left, opposite a junction that is signposted right to Croydon and Arrington (High Street). Park here and follow the public bridleway that leads southwest through fields for just under half a mile, to reach a gate which is at the northeast corner of the site of the abandoned medieval village. This bridleway follows the route of an old roadway that once linked Croydon to Clopton, and then continued on to Tadlow.



History

Clopton's history has been well documented. Archaeological excavations in the early 1960s identified that the site was occupied by the Romans and early Anglo-Saxons, and that there was a large late Saxon settlement. The village was recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086 and it then expanded considerably in the 12th and 13th centuries. Remains of the cobbled roads, a market place, church and rectory were all uncovered during the course of the 1960s

excavations. There is also a prominent, roughly circular moated site where Clopton Bury Manor (presumably a medieval Hall House) was located.

The village survived the Black Death and continued to prosper in the 14th century when it reached its peak. In 1352 a new church was dedicated, and in 1377 there were 104 tax payers in the parish. There were no particular signs of decline during the 15th century and the open fields, held in common, continued to be cultivated until the 1490s. However, at the end of the 15th century the Manor of Clopton Bury and much of the village was bought by John Fisher, who saw the economic benefits of converting arable land to pasture at a time when grain prices were low, wool prices were high and labour was expensive. Both John Fisher and his son had legal backgrounds, and were willing to use endless litigation to force their tenants and neighbours from their land. One notorious case involved the rector, who tried in vain to keep his glebe (an area of land within the parish used to provide an income for the parish priest), and it was obvious that no ordinary villager would have had any hope of holding on to their rights to access the common land in this situation. By 1525 there were only five labourers left in Clopton, and in 1561 the village was officially declared extinct and the parish was combined with Croydon. By then the church was already ruinous, and it was left to decay further until it was finally demolished in the early 18th century.

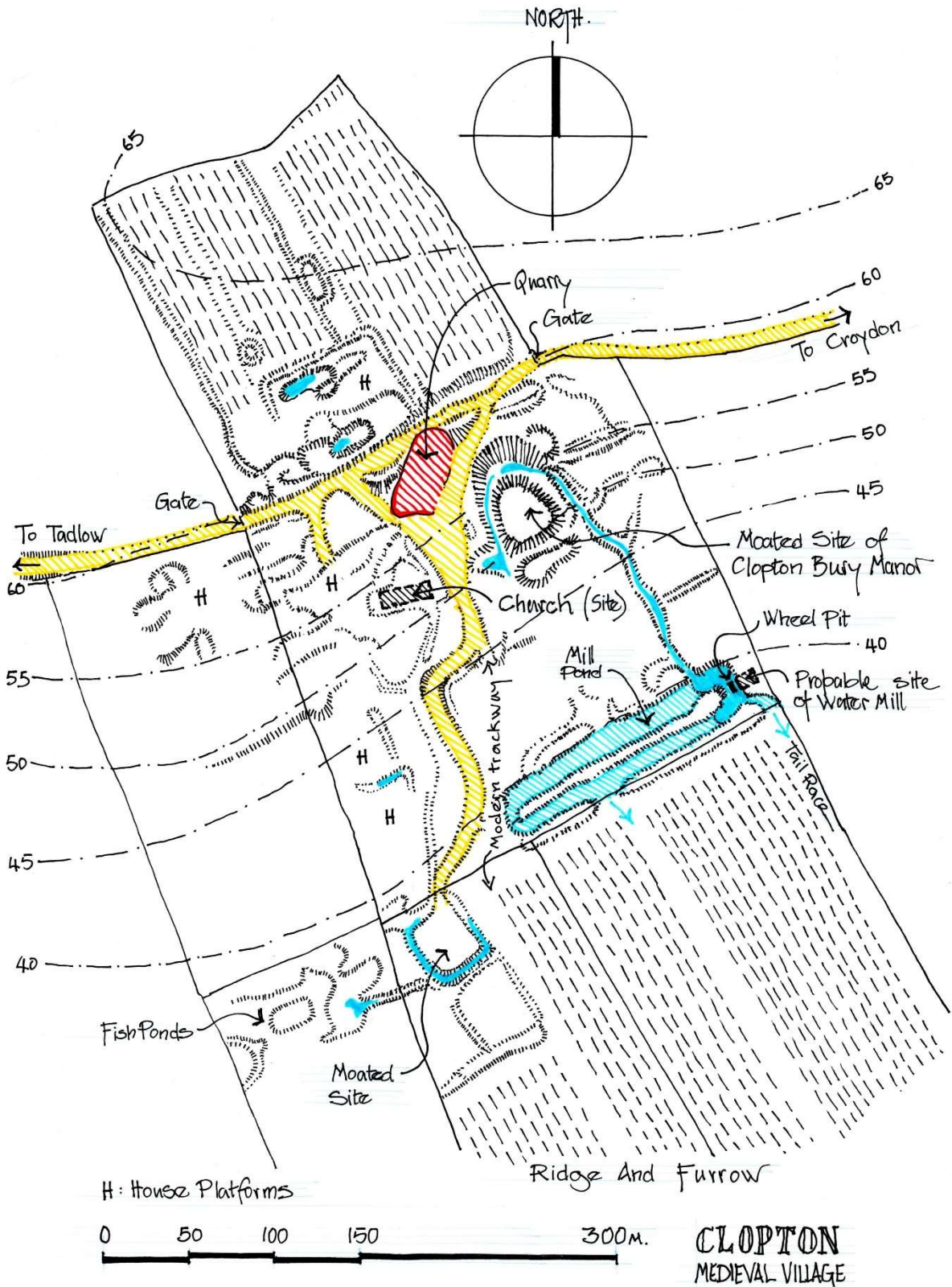
The Fishers subsequently had further litigation with the Chicheleys of Wimpole, but retained their estate and eventually married into the aristocracy, at which point Clopton passed to the Earls of Bedford. Later the estate was sold to the Downing family, who in turn passed the land on to Downing College in 1800.

Clopton Today

Today the site of much of the medieval village remains discernible in the landscape. Most of the village was located on the hillside below the line of the old trackway from Croydon to Tadlow. A small chalk quarry immediately to the southeast of the modern bridleway has destroyed part of the site, and excavations for coprolite caused further damage, but the routes of the main trackways are still clearly visible and the moated site of Clopton Bury is very obvious, even if now partially obscured by trees. Close to the bottom of the slope southeast of Clopton Bury is the site of the former watermill, and the spring from within the moat at Clopton Bury still runs down to the former mill pond. The mill would, most probably, have been sited at the eastern end of this mill pond, with the tail race flowing down through the fields below to eventually join the River Cam (or Rhee). In the southwest corner of the old village is a second moated site that is again clearly visible. This had fishponds on land to the west, but they have now been partially obscured by cultivation in the adjacent field. It is less easy to discern the platforms where the other houses would have been built, and again many were in land to the west now under cultivation. But some of the ridge and furrow markings to the former common land can still be seen in the fields to both the north and south of the village, and these are most visible in winter, and especially in the early morning or late evening when the sun is low, picking out the ridges, and with shadows in the furrows.



A panorama of Clopton, looking southeast from the Croydon to Tadlow bridleway.



There is a sad record from 1348 of a child being drowned in the moat at Clopton Bury, so if you choose to visit please take care.

David Grech, June 2020