

WEEDLEY WINDMILL SITE

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Objective of research

As I live a few miles from the site of Weedley village, I have been intrigued by the fact that until recently the reference to a windmill in Weedley was regarded as the earliest reference to a windmill in England.

The objective of the first phase of the research was therefore to attempt to locate the precise site of the windmill and thereafter to arrange for the site to be excavated. Members of the East Yorks. Arch. Assoc. have offered to undertake the dig if the site can be identified with reasonable certainty. The land owner has also expressed his willingness to allow the dig to take place.

Significance of the Weedley site.

Weedley is certainly one of the earliest known windmill sites in Western Europe. The 1185 reference is contained in an inventory of the Templar's lands. The windmill was clearly in existence before that date.

There are two principal assumptions regarding the early English windmill:

That the early windmills were post mills,

That there were no windmills at the time of the Domesday Survey.

So far as the first assumption is concerned, in my view the evidence is purely negative. The first illustration dates from ca 1270 and the earliest archaeological evidence dates from around the same period. There is a period of 100 years during which I would have thought there was plenty of time for experimentation before the post mill version was adopted as standard.

So far as the second assumption is concerned, this was arrived at at a time when it was thought the earliest windmills dated from around 1190. The Swanborough reference (Brunnarius) takes the windmill substantially closer to Domesday.

The 1155 reference also makes the Crusader theory completely untenable. I think it has in any event been ruled out, although it has always struck me as interesting that the manor of Weedley was held by the Templars. I understand historians take the view that very few new ideas arrive as pure inspirational inventions; they are more likely to be a development of an existing technology to a new purpose. I can't help thinking that we should look to developments in sailing ships for ideas, coupled with Rex Wailes's theory that the windmill is a watermill turned upside down.

Having said that, I feel that the recent TIMS publication of research by Dr Limona-Trebela could be very significant. It appears that in the Greek Islands we have a region where the vertical windshaft windmill developed into or was superseded by the horizontal windshaft windmill. The difficulty is that these mills have not so far been dated. Nor do we know whether the development took place indigenously or whether it was affected by outside influences. The Greek watermill is well known outside that region; could we possibly have a line of development - Greek watermill - vertical windshaft - horizontal windshaft?

The Greek or Norse watermill was certainly known throughout England in the 12th century.

The origin of the English windmill is still an open question. The excavation of one of the 12th century sites could provide firm answers.

Available evidence re the Weedley site.

Enclosure A (copy 1st ed. O.S. Map 1855) shows the probable site of the manor. The topography is helpful. It can be seen that the part of the manor to the north of the village comprises a steeply sloping valley where in earlier times there were a large number of springs. This may have been heavily wooded; the name Weedley is thought to mean "in the willow clearing". South of the village the ground rises less steeply to the highest point at the SW corner marked A on the map. The present farm buildings are situated at the SE corner and it is claimed that part of the buildings were in existence during the Cromwellian period.

Aerial photographs show the village site. Unfortunately they do not cover the land to the south which most likely contains the windmill site.

The earliest map of any use is the 1st Ed. O.S.

There is some documentary evidence available.

Domesday includes a reference to three carucates of land (say 145 ha) at Weedley.

The 1185 reference gives no clue as to its location.

In 1308 the Templars' land is described as "poor land" valued at £130-15-11d.

By 1338 the manor had passed to the Hospitallers. It comprised:

| | |
|----------------------------|--------------|
| 3 carucates of barren land | 145 ha (say) |
| meadow | 9.7 ha |
| underwood | 2.8 ha |
| pasture | 2 ha |
| 17s rents | ? |
| | ----- |
| | 159.5 + ha |

It is noted that there is no reference to land under the plough. In fact the village economy was based on the wool trade.

It is thought the hamlet may have been deserted by the 14th century. (The wool trade moved to West Yorks.)

In 1539/40 Weedley is described as pasture.

There are a series of deeds from 1723 down to the present. I had hoped to be able to trace the use of the land but it appears there was a substantial break in continuity in the middle ages. The evidence from the deeds indicates that the land has mainly been used for pasture, meadow, sheep walk and rabbit warren. The first area to be tilled during the last two centuries was probably that shown hatched on the plan (Fig 1).

One other fact worth mentioning is that several of the windmills excavated in Yorkshire were built on existing mounds, dykes, etc.

On-site investigation

I have walked the "manor" on many occasions but can find no physical evidence.

I considered that the best place to start looking would be at the highest point, marked A on Fig 1, and in 1982 Arnold Aspinall of Bradford University undertook a magnetometer survey of a limited area around point A.

Comment

One of the factors in choosing site A was that I had assumed from early documentation that no grain was grown in the village. However, in a recent discussion with John Hirst of English Heritage, he stated that the village would almost certainly have grown its own grain, on part of the 3 carucates. It was usual practice in other villages for the mill to be built on the selions of the cultivated fields.

In my view site A would be unlikely to be the area of the cultivated fields. It is more likely that the fields would be around the village, possibly including the area cultivated in the 18th century. I suspect the mill would have been to the windward side of the village; i.e, to the S or SW. This is also at a higher level than the village.

A possible next step could be to take up Arnold Aspinall's point and extend the magnetometer survey. However, I can't help feeling now that site A is less likely to be the correct location. I propose therefore to attempt to arrange an aerial survey of the area to the south of the former village, but other suggestions would be welcome.

Weedley Magnetometer Survey

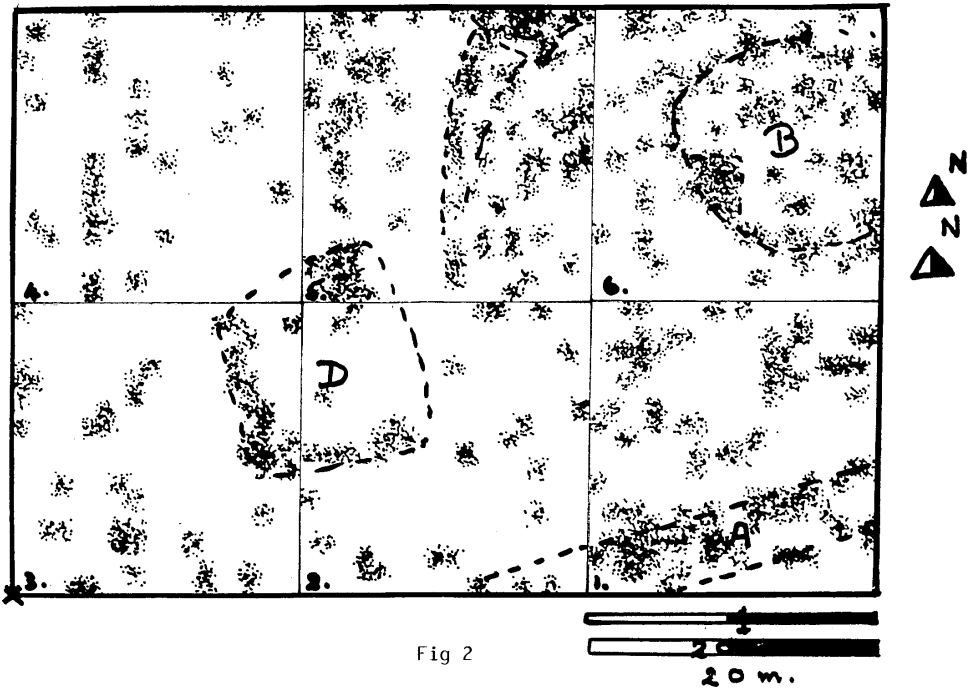


Fig 2

Over page; Fig 1, plan of the area.

