THE LOST CHURCH OF ST ETHELBURGA:
MEDIEVAL PILGRIMAGE IN THE VALE OF BELVOIR

The following account has been expanded from lecture notes and is to be regarded only as an interim statement on the subject (David G. Bate, Feb 2016).

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

I've long been curious about this lost church of St Ethelburga, ever since reading about it some 25 years ago in Michael Honeybone's book *The Vale of Belvoir* (first published 1987). Unfortunately he sent me looking for the church site in completely the wrong place. It was some years later, in December 2001, that I began to take an active interest in researching its history. This was in connection with a Higher Certificate in Local History that I was doing at Nottingham University. I chose St Ethelburga's church as the subject of my dissertation because so little was known about it. Unfortunately my research dragged on a bit – the dissertation was never finished, and I never got my Higher Certificate in Local History. In the intervening years I have continued to visit the site each autumn for a spot of field-walking. Latterly I have been fortunate enough to call upon the services of Alan and Celia Morris to undertake some geophysics for me. As the site is under cultivation pretty much all through the year there is only a narrow window of opportunity in late August to early September in which to do field work.

Any attempt to unravel the history of this church is invariably beset with difficulties, not least because its documented history is so widely scattered and open to misinterpretation. There seems even now to be a lack of agreement as to where the church was located, some placing it in Granby, others in Barnstone, either on the site of St Mary's church or on Langar airfield towards Stathern Lodge. According to the Granby cum Sutton Village Plan, which appears to have been issued in about January 2009, the site of St Ethelburga's church is in Sutton! One reason for a belief that the church was located in Granby goes back to an entry in Domesday Book, and Robert Thoroton's interpretation of it. According to Domesday there were two manors in Granby, each with a priest and a church. The second of these manors, which belonged to Osbern fitz Richard, seems to disappear entirely from the written record after Domesday. Robert Thoroton conjectured that St Ethelburga might have been the church held by Osbern fitz Richard. His argument appears to be strengthened by the fact that St Ethelburga was under the jurisdiction of Granby at the time of Domesday. However, Sir Frank Stenton, in his translation of the Nottinghamshire Domesday in the Victoria County History, long ago put forward a convincing argument that this second entry for Granby is no more than a scribal error, and that the entry actually belongs to Colston Bassett, which is otherwise omitted from Domesday. The argument is strengthened by the fact that the two short entries which follow it both relate to lands that are credited to Colston. Stenton's observation appears to have been subsequently overlooked by historians.

Among the many difficulties we encounter in trying to unravel the history of this church is to explain, for example, the several names that have been applied to it:

Church of St Ethelburga the Virgin
Giselkirke
Feldekirke
St Aubrey's
St Ambrose

Can there be another church anywhere with a claim to so many names? Some of these names are distinctly problematic and require some detective work to make sense of them.

There are three established saints bearing the name of Ethelburga (the Latin rendering of the Old English name *Æðelburh*), all of whom lived in the seventh century: Ethelburga of Lyminge in Kent (Queen Ethelburga), Ethelburga of Barking, and Ethelburga of Faramoutier en Brie. Everyone assumes Queen Ethelburga, who is remembered at Southwell Minster. There is likewise an assumption that the church dates from the early Saxon period, which in my view is most unlikely, as will become clear.

Giselkirke indicates a Danish origin and would imply a date well after the Danish settlement of around AD 877. This name might even predate the dedication to St Ethelburga. 'Gisel' could be a person's name, thus 'Gisel's church' (the word *gisel* actually means *hostage*, and occurs in Old English as well as Danish, although in the former case it would be pronounced 'yisel'). In Denmark, for example, there exists an ancient estate and castle named *Gisselfeld*. Domesday also tells us that our church (or at any rate, half of it) was held by a sokeman or freeholder, another Danish indicator.

Feldkirk (with variant spellings): literally 'field church'. This term was employed by the Church to describe the parish or rectory served by our church. Customarily the ecclesiastical authorities did not refer to churches by their dedication, but by their parish name; but since our church's parish consisted of scattered free-holdings with no common name, it was necessary to give it this name of Feldkirk. It was Trevor Foulds in his published transcript of the Thurgarton Cartulary who first made the link between our church and official references to 'Feldkirk', although in none of the documents is a direct link made. Yet it can be inferred that references to 'Feldkirk' can relate to no other church in Thurgarton's appropriation than St Ethelburga's.

St Aubrey's: Aubrey is probably the pet name of Ethelburga, not to be confused with the man's name Aubrey. It can be compared with Audrey, which is the pet name of Etheldreda. Probably of French-Norman origin, since the Normans would have had a problem pronouncing the Old English form Æðelburh.

St Ambrose is a cartographic error, to which I will return later.

PART 2: LOCATION AND SETTING

The site of St Ethelburga's church is not recorded on any Ordnance Survey map. I have therefore inserted it onto the 1:25 000 map below (Fig. 1). The northward flowing stream that skirts the site on its east side is called Stroom Dyke. I feel sure that this name is related to the modern Danish word *Strøm*, and also to a Dutch word which has the same spelling as our word. This word today would translate simply as 'stream' or 'current' in English, but refers to motion, or flow, rather than strictly to a watercourse. It also has another, perhaps older sense, of a deluge, flood or torrent. The Stroom Dyke does have a habit of rising into flood quite suddenly and unexpectedly. There is, for example, a flood defence bank just N of Priory Place.

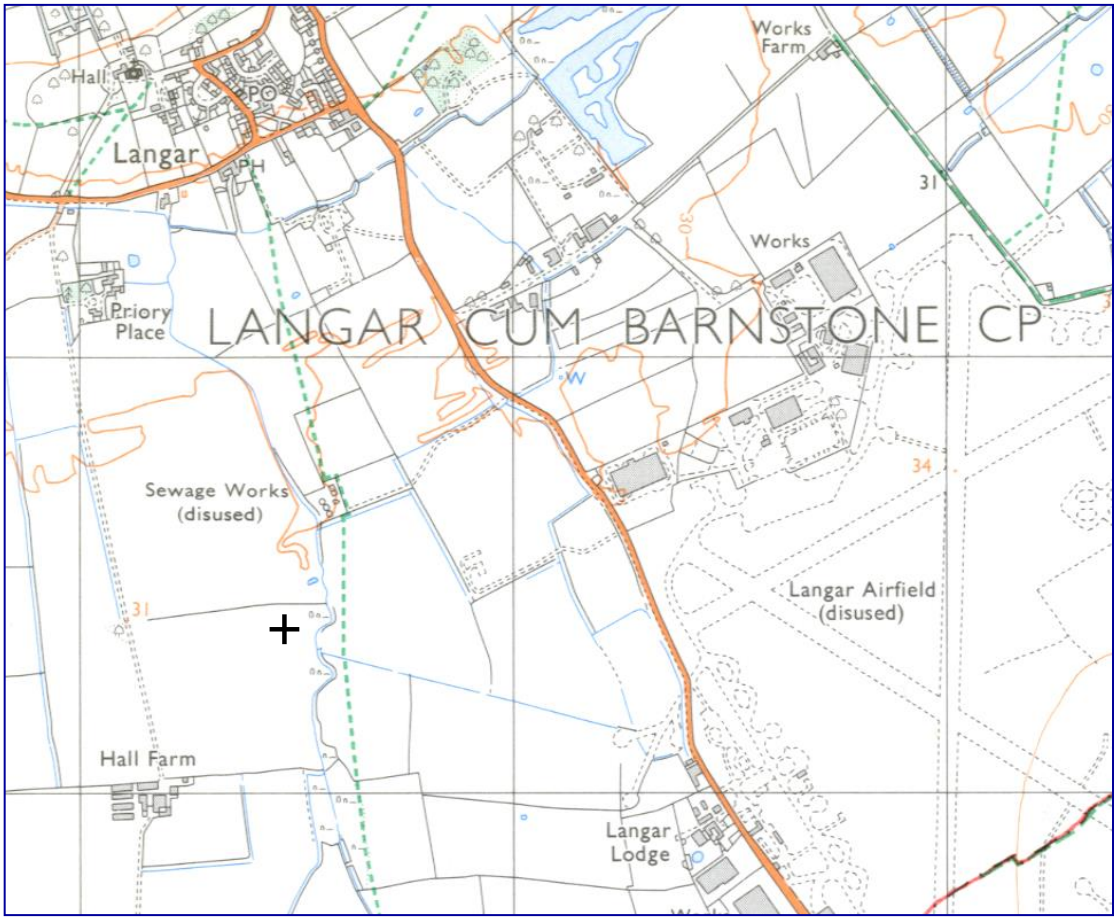

Fig. 1. The site of St Ethelburga's church is today represented by a low mound, about 0.7 m in height, here marked by a cross: Grid Ref SK 72468 33376.

Priory Place (see Fig. 1) was originally called Bleak House. It was renamed by former occupants Dick and Sylvia Shelton on the strength of a local tradition that St Ethelburga's had once been a priory, a tradition that prevails to this day. I'm sorry to say that there is no evidence that it was ever a priory, as the documents will testify.

The field in which the church mound is situated is now called Thirty-five Acre Field, while the larger field to the north is called Sixty-eight Acre Field. Both were formerly attached to Priory Place, but are now farmed by John Parker of Hall Farm.

An estate plan of 1818 (Fig. 2) shows that these fields were then divided differently. The church site was represented by a small field called St Aubrey's Close, with a longer field to the SW called Shipman's Yard, an interesting name. The remaining large field was called Bean Hill Field, though you might well wonder where the hill is. There is however a slightly raised area NW of the church site, perhaps no more than a metre in height. A lot of Roman material has evidently been found there by metal detectorists.

Fig. 2. Estate plan of 1818 with field names and tenants inserted from *c.* 1735 estate book (image kindly supplied by Nigel Wood, Langar)

Looking at any modern OS plan (e.g. Fig. 4), it is rather sad to reflect that in spite of this church having existed on the site for several hundred years, the only visible influence that it now exerts on the plan is expressed by a small kink in the field drain, which corresponds with the NE boundary of St Aubrey's Close; this kink also features on the 1818 plan and relates to a former causeway leading up to the church (see below).

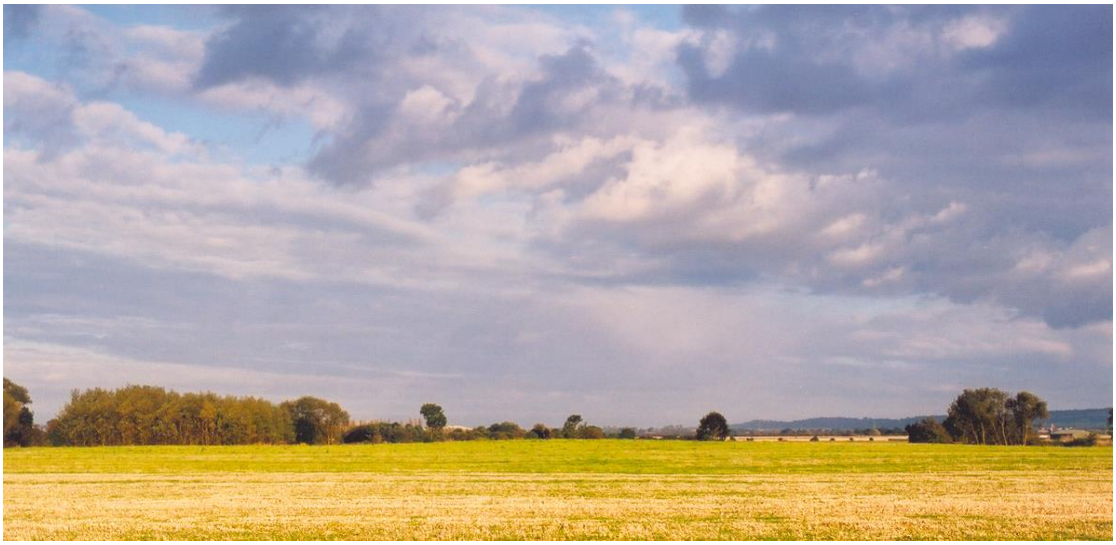

Fig. 3. View of church site looking NE. The church 'mound' appears dead centre in this view. To the right of it, in the far distance, can be seen Belvoir Castle at the end of the ridge on the horizon.

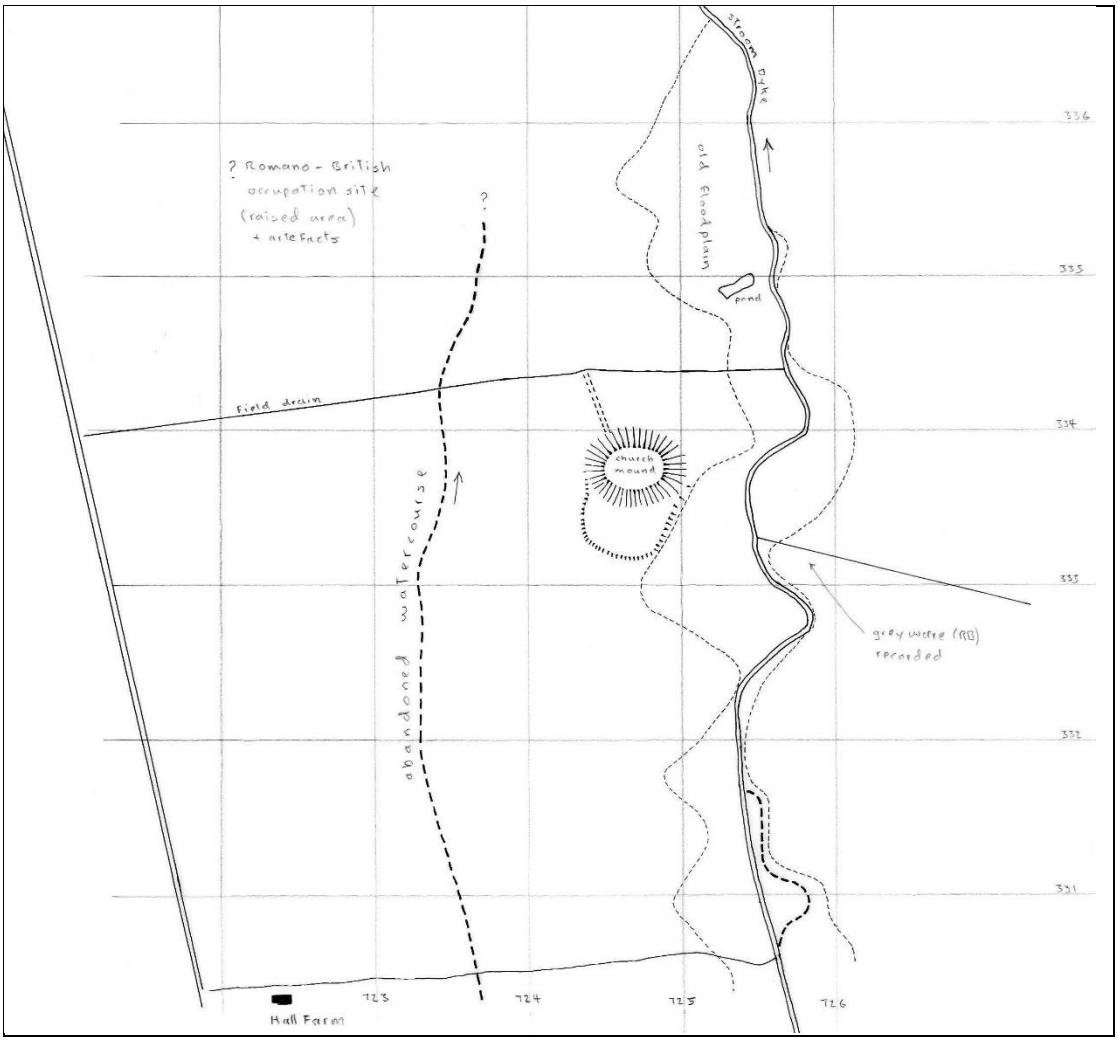

Fig. 4. Working plan on reduced 1:2500 OS base. Floodplain of Stroom Dyke marked with pecked line.

The church mound is closely impinged on its east side by the old floodplain of the Stroom Dyke, which I have surveyed on the OS plan, Fig. 4. To the west there is a vaguely defined channel of a former watercourse, which I have marked only approximately in Fig. 4. Its northward progress into Sixty-eight Acre Field, where theoretically one might expect it to join the Stroom Dyke, cannot be defined, and it may be that a former roadway leading to the church has obscured it. Such a roadway is indicated by a visible causeway leading from the church mound to the kink in the field drain mentioned earlier (Fig. 4). This now lost watercourse would seem to have defined the western boundary of both St Aubrey's Close and Shipman's Yard, and indeed these ancient closes may have been effectively surrounded by water and marsh. Such an island-like situation could have favoured the siting of the church, and could also explain an early use to which Shipman's Yard was put, which I will return to later.

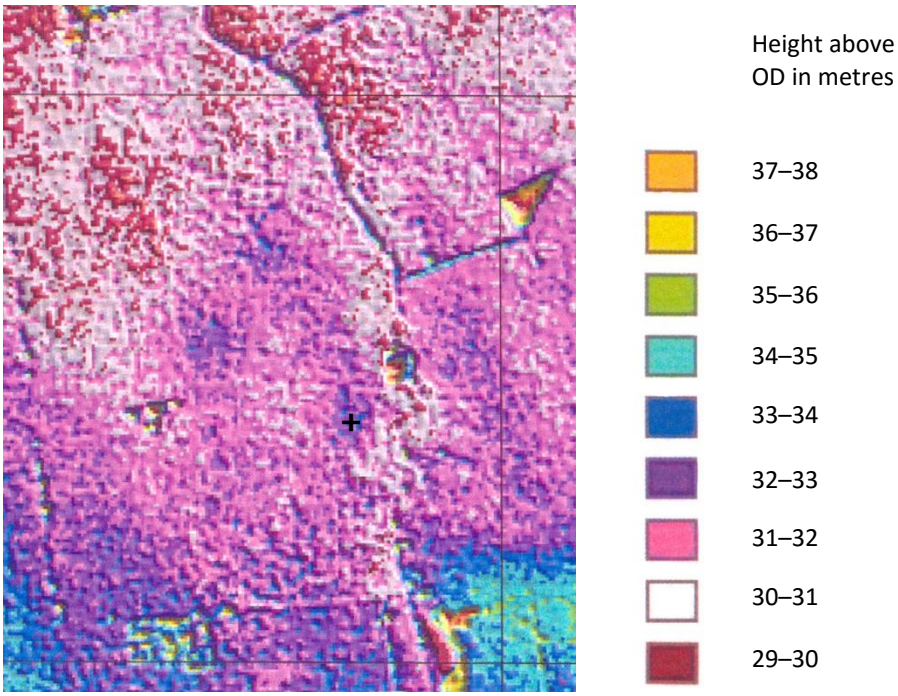

Fig. 5. Unsmoothed digital surface model derived from NEXTMap data (2003), expressed as colour-coded pixels at 1 m vertical interval; shaded relief with illumination from SW.

In the digital surface model above (Fig. 5) the church site is marked by a small cross and is at 33 m above OD. The general fall of ground is from south to north. The course of the Stroom Dyke, to the immediate E, is represented by predominantly white pixels (30-31 m above OD) bounded in part by a bold linear feature caused by trees and scrub. A scatter of white pixels to the W of the church site indicates the abandoned watercourse (or former marshy area) noted earlier. Running NNW from the church site there is a kind of raised causeway denoted by height intervals of 31-34 m. Because of the general fall of ground, these give way northward to intervals of 30-32 m for the same causeway, while the ground on either side falls to 29-30 m (brown pixels). NW of the church site there is an isolated circular raised area which is associated with Roman finds (see Fig. 4); while NE of that (on the causeway) there is another discrete 'island'. These might be Romano-British homestead sites.

Fig. 6. Image from Google Earth, April 2007. Right-hand image is an enlargement from that on the left. Note crop marks indicating buried foundations of church, together with an isolated round feature beyond W end of church, and a small narrow building to NE of church.

The Google Earth image in Fig. 6 reveals part of the church. The SE corner of the building is not defined, and may have been disturbed by the amateur archaeologist, Herbert Houldsworth, who excavated the site in 1961. The isolated structure to the W of the church is intriguing. To the NE is a narrow building which may correspond with a scatter of ironstone rubble noted during field walking.

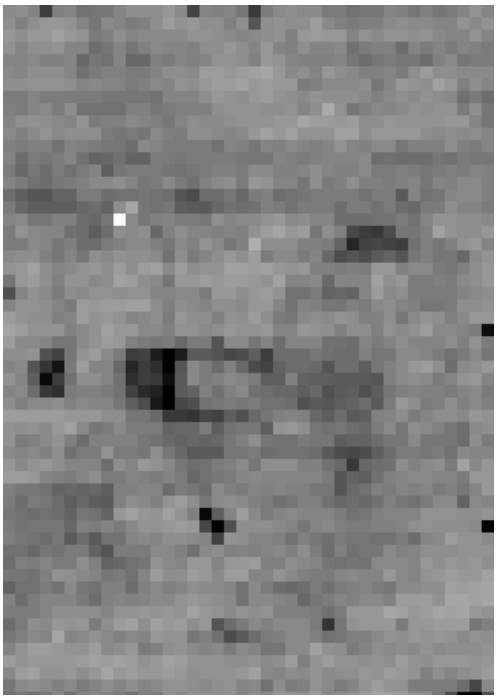

Fig. 7. Resistivity survey of church site (width of surveyed area is 40 metres)

A resistivity survey of part of the site was conducted by Alan and Celia Morris in Sept 2007. It confirms the evidence of crop marks shown in Fig. 6, but provides more detail. The E end of the church appears to be marked by a scatter of rubble. An intriguing isolated feature, perhaps the base of a cross, occurs to the S of the church building.

Resistivity is a measure of the soil's dryness (its resistance to carrying an electric current). The darkest pixels indicate high resistivity, caused by the presence of buried wall foundations, stone footings or rubble, which impede the free movement of soil moisture. The crop marks in Fig. 6 likewise reflect the same thing, where insufficient soil moisture (presumably following a dry period) has left cereal plants above wall footings in a stressed condition.

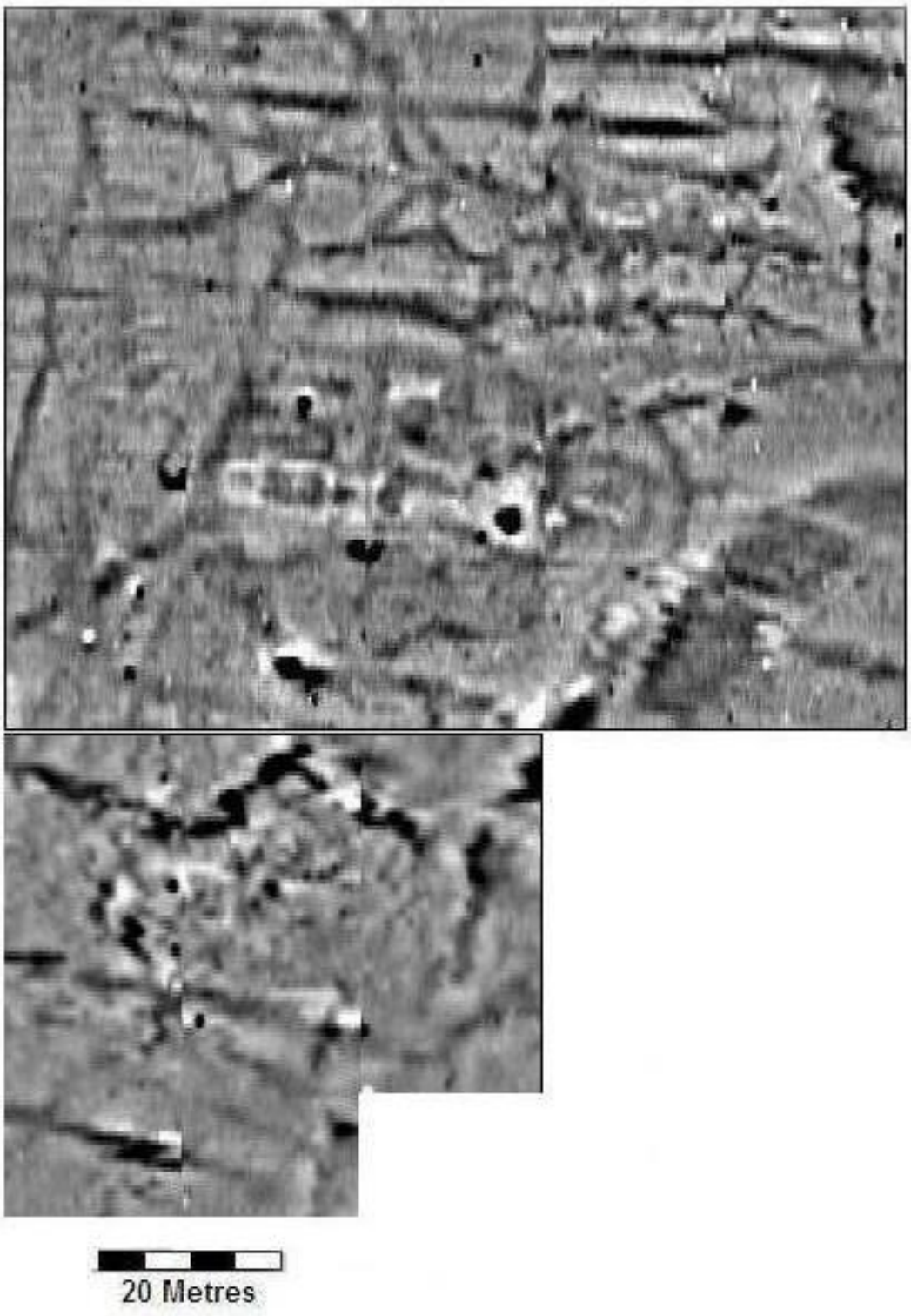

Fig. 8. Magnetic survey, 2008–2014, conducted by Alan and Celia Morris and the writer.

The magnetic survey in Fig. 8 is even more revealing. Magnetometry measures small magnetic distortions caused by buried features such as (1) former ditches and pits infilled with organic topsoil; and (2) kilns and hearths where the magnetic quality of the soil or other buried material has been altered by firing or burning. These features show as anomalies and are represented by the darker pixels. The magnetic survey reveals the area of the church and its surroundings to be very 'busy'. In other words, there is a lot going on here! The site evidently has a long and complex history.

Firstly, the church wall-footings show here as negative (white) pixels. More revealing is that the church chancel (east end) now appears visible as a distinct outline. We can thus say that the church is about 16 m in length and 6 m in width, which is quite small. There was presumably a tower at the west end of the church, since both the resistivity and magnetic surveys suggest a more massive structure here; but other possibilities (which do not however explain the massive foundations) would be a narthex or west porch, since the church is approached from the north, rather than from the south where the porch would normally be situated. We thus have a small church furnished with a clearly defined tower (or west porch), a nave and a chancel.

The small building NE of the church also appears in the magnetometry as a negative feature. Interestingly, the small isolated feature W of the church exhibits a strong magnetic anomaly, suggesting that the stone footings here may have supported some kind of cooking or heating facility, a matter to which I will return when discussing the artefactual evidence.

Several significant isolated magnetic 'spikes' occur, often with white halos, but no explanation of them is here offered. The dark linear features are presumed to be infilled ditches. The church seems to be surrounded by a circular ditched enclosure, with the building touching the western edge. However, this 'enclosure' might be deceptive, arising from the chance interplay of a palimpsest of such ditches. As will be discussed later, the church is sitting on a Romano-British structure, to which some of these anomalies may relate.

PART 3: PHYSICAL REMAINS

Robert Thoroton in his *Antiquities of Nottinghamshire* (1667) cites early references to *St. Aubreys, or St. Æthelburga's*, but does not say whether anything remained of the church in his day. The earliest writer to record a visit to the site was Andrew Esdaile, the Bingham watchmaker and antiquarian, who gives the following account:

> *In the year 1849, the Churchyard of St. Aubrie's was ploughed up by the proprietor,—what a pity for half an acre of land in the midst of 300. I have been on it and gathered many human bones of all ages, it never was disturbed before, and there are potatoes growing amongst the remains of humanity. The local name of the Close is St. Aubries, it was once called Shipman yard*… [this name actually refers to a field abutting St Aubrey's to the south] *One Shipman, a Freeholder lived in the village around St. Aubries, he had 30 acres of land, but he did not plough up the ashes of the departed to grow potatoes in; there was a Shipman at Scarrington then and some about these parts now.*

The allusion to Thomas Shipman of Scarrington (the 17th century royalist poet) is of interest on account of a curious local tradition that links him to this site. His poems confirm a connection to Langar, but it will be demonstrated later that the name Shipman's Yard has a different origin. A newspaper article in 1936, quoting Esdaile's lament, goes on to state that:

> *The good watchmaker antiquarian would be happier in these days, for* [the Rev.] *Mr. O'Kane assures our readers that Mr. Harwood, the present holder of the farm, would be pleased to point out to anyone interested the grass-grown mounds that still mark the site of the vanished church.*

But times change, and the bones of the departed are once again being exposed to view by modern ploughing (Fig. 9). On the other hand, I would have no story to tell were it not for the plough bringing several hundred years of history to the surface.

Fig. 9. Some of 'the ashes of the departed' brought up by modern ploughing over the former church cemetery: fragments of immature femur (left) and cranium (right), noted in March 2003 (not retained)

Herbert O. Houldsworth, an amateur archaeologist who did a lot of poking around in the Vale of Belvoir, but published very little, undertook a trial excavation of the church site during the period 1960–62. The excavation revealed medieval wall footings and nearby burials. From beneath the medieval levels he found evidence of Romano-British occupation of the second to fourth centuries. The evidence consisted of pottery, including Samian, a coin of Claudius Gothicus (*c.* 270), and Lias limestone tesserae. He conjectured that there had been a wooden Romano-British building on the site prior to the church. The following account was supplied by Houldsworth in a letter to the Ordnance Survey, Archaeology Division, dated 17 May 1961:

> *Trenches are being dug in the mound which is roughly pear-shaped, with its broad end to the north. It is some 80 ft long (from N–S), and has a max. width of about 96 ft. Its height above the general level of the field is some 3–4 ft.*
>
> *In the first of two test holes, at a depth of 2'9", part of a full-grown skeleton, with its lower legs bent under, and its knees against the lower footings of a rubble wall, was found. In the complex of rubble to the south of this wall are portions of another skeleton, while from below the first set of bones came R.B. pottery of 3rd–4th c. AD date.*

In the second test hole, some 30 ft to the S. of the other, and in line with the wall therein, portions of human skeletal remains appear in the top 6" of soil. R.B. pottery of (? 3rd c) date – black incised, wheel-turned – has come up.

This correspondence contains the only extended account of the excavation that can be discovered. It appears that Houldsworth's investigation of the site may have been terminated by some unforeseen circumstance, since his excavation tools were left behind at Priory Place, according to local information.

One half of a window sill from the church building, possibly recovered by Herbert Houldsworth or brought up by the plough, has been retained as a souvenir by the Sheltons (formerly of Priory Place when these fields were part of that farm) and is now in a back garden at Bottesford (Fig. 10). I have a mullion, also brought up by the plough (this time by John Parker) which fits this sill. Both of these architectural fragments are made of Lincolnshire Limestone, a high quality oolitic limestone usually reserved for window and door openings, and presumably brought from the Ancaster area. A pivot stone (Fig. 11), also brought up by the plough, is retained by John Parker at Hall Farm. This is a distinctive golden-yellow ferruginous sandstone (Sandrock) from the Dyrham Formation and may have come from the quarries at Holwell. Many buildings in the neighbouring village of Harby utilise this stone. The same stone, as undressed rubble, litters much of the church site and thus must have comprised the principal fabric of the church.

Fig. 10. Part of window sill recovered from the site of St Ethelburga's church.

Fig. 11. Pivot stone, which may have supported a wooden gate (scale bar 10 cm)

The writer has recovered several hundred artefacts, along with animal and human bones and teeth, during the course of several year's field walking. A number of metal detector finds have also been identified from enquiry. No digging has been undertaken. Some of these finds will be mentioned and illustrated in the historical overview which follows.

PART 4: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SITE

There was clearly a Romano-British building here before the church. Roman coin finds made by metal detectorists (Fig. 12D) indicate a date range of AD 260–378 (although this includes finds from the larger field to the north). The site seems too close to the floodplain of the Stroom Dyke for a Roman villa, but could have been a bath-house (with the villa being to the NW, on the raised area of ground indicated in Fig. 4), or perhaps a modest Romanised farmhouse. Fig. 12A shows typical Roman mortar, or *opus signinum* (note characteristic crushed tile fragments; the fragment lower-right appears to have traces of red paint). Fig. 12B shows fragments of box-flue tile (note characteristic comb marks) which formed a system of ducts conveying warm air through the walls of the building from underfloor heating (a hypocaust). These finds were all made in the immediate area of the church mound. Numerous tesserae (Fig. 12C), mostly cut from red tile, have also been recovered. Since this image was made, grey tesserae (local Lias limestone) have also been found, but so far only one white tessera (compact chalk from Lincolnshire or Yorkshire) has been picked up. Thus a tessellated floor in three colours is indicated.

Fig. 12A (upper left) opus signinum; Fig. 12B (upper right) fragments of box-flue tile;
Fig. 12C (lower left) tesserae in tile and chalk, with traces of mortar adhering;
Fig. 12D (lower right) selection of Roman coins in possession of John Parker, Hall Farm.

Roman pottery recovered from this site (not illustrated) includes grey ware (sometimes with trellis ornament), Nene Valley colour-coated ware and rare Samian ware.

No finds dating from the Anglo-Saxon period have been recognised from this site, implying that after the Romano-British building went out of use the site may have been abandoned for a long period. Indeed, evidence from the important archaeological research programme at Raunds, Northamptonshire, seems to confirm a lack of continuity between Roman and Saxon settlement in the East Midlands. The site could easily have become an unusable overgrown island thicket, which in due course would have presented itself as a suitable piece of waste ground on which to build a church. The presence of an existing foundation would also have made it an attractive site, and we know that Romano-British foundations were often favoured as sites for early medieval churches, a good local example being that of Flawford, Ruddington.

The earliest documented reference to the church is found in Domesday Book (1086), where it is recorded as coming under the jurisdiction of Walter De Aincurt's manor of Granby. The entry, here translated into English, runs as follows:

The sokeland of the Manor of Granby:

> *In Langar there are four and a half bovates of land assessed to the geld. There is land for 2 ploughs. There, 8 sokemen have 2 ploughs and 6 ploughing oxen. There is half a church and 13 acres of meadow.*

A sokeman was a smallholder, essentially independent of the manorial system. Such 'freemen' were, however, required by English law to place themselves under a lord's jurisdiction for the purpose of legal representation (Old English *socn*, to seek), for which they would have been required to render certain dues or services. These smallholdings (sokelands) were scattered through the existing manors and were a legacy of the Danish settlement of the late ninth century. Granby, which borders Barnstone, has a Danish name and had clearly been a Danish settlement, having presumably supplanted an earlier Saxon lordly settlement. The presumption here is that the Danish smallholders within the Saxon manors of Langar and Barnstone chose to place themselves under the jurisdiction of a Danish lord in a neighbouring Danish manor, rather than under the Saxon lord within whose manor they happened to reside.

The error has sometimes been made of equating this Domesday 'half a church' with the parish church of St Andrew, Langar, which clearly cannot be the case, since St Andrew's would have been recorded under those lands belonging to William Peverel who gave that church to Lenton Priory at its foundation sometime shortly after 1100. References to portions of churches in Domesday Book are not uncommon and imply shared ownership. Domesday doesn't tell us who held the other half of the church, but we have to assume that the inhabitants of Langar, or some of them, formed the remaining half of its 'parish'; certainly at a later period, when St Andrew's and St Ethelburga's existed in parallel, the rector of Langar claimed a share of the latter church's income. It is most likely that St Andrew's did not exist in 1086. It may be guessed that at the time of Domesday the Saxon lord of Langar was perhaps still pagan, yet open-minded to the desire of some of his people to attend a Christian church established by a Danish-descended freeholder, from which the lord of Langar would derive no profit in tithe. Since the Domesday Survey was concerned only with those things which generated an income, it is not surprising that Peverel's Manor of Langar gave no account of 'its' half of the church.

It may be stated in passing that St Andrew's church is probably founded upon an earlier pagan burial mound. This could explain the large number of disarticulated bones found on the north side of the church during the construction of the millennium extension, these being pre-Christian burials that were disturbed when the modest forerunner of the present St Andrew's was first established or first enlarged. The elevated situation of the St Andrew's site, with its wide view of the surrounding country, would have been a favoured location for a pre-Christian burial mound.

The evidence presented so far, viz: the likely Danish origin of the names *Giselkirke* and the adjacent *Stroom* Dyke, together with the situation of the church within a *sokeland* (Danish-descended smallholding), all suggests that our church was most

likely founded sometime after AD 875, which is the start date for the Scandinavian settlement of eastern England. This settlement appears to have followed an agreed pattern of accommodation between Viking invaders and Saxon landholders, but It was several decades more before things settled down in the region. Allowance also needs to be made for the gradual conversion of the Danes from paganism to Christianity. Thus a date no earlier than the tenth century can reasonably be argued for the founding of *Giselkirke*. I would suggest that the dedication to St Ethelburga came later. This places the construction of the church some 500 years or more after the abandonment of the Romano-British building that underlies its foundation!

In about 1140 the rectory of Granby was given to Thurgarton Priory as part of its endowment. St Ethelburga's church was under the jurisdiction of Granby and thus came also into the hands of Thurgarton.

The earliest charter from Thurgarton which makes reference to our church dates from sometime between 1218 and 1241 (the charter itself is undated), although its reference to the church is purely incidental, since the charter is actually concerned with a sheepfold (perhaps Shipman's Yard?) that happens to be next to the church. In translation it reads as follows:

> *Grant by Ralph de Rodes, knight, to Thurgarton of 2 shillings per annum received by them from lands held by Thurkel of Barnston* (Thurkel de Berneston)*, so that Ralph and his heirs may be exempt from payment of lesser tithes issuing to the church of Granby from a sheepfold next to Giselkirke* (bercaria juxta Giselkirke) *which is partly in the parish of Granby.*

By this time the previously separate manors of Langar and Barnstone were under the single ownership of Ralph de Rodes. Ralph, who claims a sum of 2 shillings per year from Thurkel of Barnston, is here confirming the redirection of that payment to Thurgarton so that he can be free forever from the payment of lesser tithes for a part of his sheepfold which falls within the parish of Granby. We need to be very careful in how we interpret this document. Trevor Foulds, the editor of the published transcript of the Thurgarton Cartulary, says there can be no doubt that the church was situated in Granby, by which he appears to mean the present civil parish of Granby. Such an interpretation would be entirely wrong, reflecting a confusion between the civil with the ecclesiastical parish. The latter consisted of those lands which paid tithes to Granby, including the independent smallholdings which paid tithes to St Ethelburga. Since St Ethelburga was subordinate to Granby, these same smallholdings were technically part of the ecclesiastical parish of Granby. This explains why even so late as the 19th century there were some remaining parcels of land in Barnstone and Langar that paid tithes to Granby.

The next charter is dated 1257 and involves a quarrel that had arisen between Sir William de Rodes, rector of Langar, and Thurgarton concerning the obventions* of the church of St Ethelburga without the vill of Langar (*ecclesia sancte Athelberge extra villam de Langar)*. The charter states that the rector of Langar customarily holds all the oblations† connected with the church of St Ethelburga in one week, and the prior and convent of Thurgarton, in another. It appears that there was some

inequality in this arrangement, particularly with regard to the feast of St Ethelburga. No doubt more people than usual were visiting the church to make offerings on the saint's feast day, and it would appear that this annual event did not fall equally between the two parties. This charter confirms that Langar had a half share in the church.

*Obvention: an incoming fee or revenue of an occasional or incidental character.

†Oblation: an offering made to God for the service of the Church, the clergy or the needy; a pious donation.

The final charter, which dates from sometime between 1304 and 1314, is of value in providing confirmation that the church of St Ethelburga was surrounded by the parish and manor of Langar, and that the name *Giselkirke* relates to this same church.

> *Confirmation by Payn de Tibtot, knight, to Thurgarton of all their lands, tenements, rents and possessions which they have in his demesne in Langar, Barnston and Wiverton* (Wyuerton)*, all tithes and obventions pertaining to the chapel or church situated in his lordship of Langar, founded in the name of St Ethelburga the virgin which the English call Giselkirke, and a free way to and from the church through his fee.*

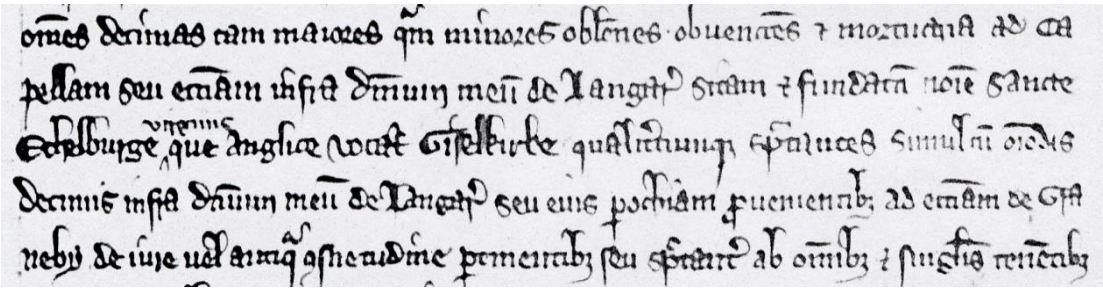

Fig. 13. Extract from the Thurgarton Cartulary in which reference is made to '*Sancte Ethelburge virginis que Anglice vocatur Giselkirke*' (Source: Nottinghamshire Archives Office)

The remainder of the Thurgarton Cartulary only takes us up to the year 1410 and contains no further reference to St Ethelburga's church.

On 13 July 1308 *Feldekyrke* was cited by Archbishop Greenfield as a church in Thurgarton's possession in which no perpetual vicarage was instituted. Official documents emanating from the diocesan authorities, in this case York, almost never refer to a church by its dedication name, but only by the name of the parish which it served. Given that St Ethelburga's parish consisted in part of scattered smallholdings, it obviously lacked a name of its own. The use of the term 'field-church' had been around for a long time, and this was therefore the name chosen by York diocese to describe the unnamed parish or rectory belonging to the church of St Ethelburga. As rector of the church of Granby, and thereby also of St Ethelburga, Thurgarton was required by the diocese to provide for the pastoral care of its parishioners. This meant instituting a perpetual vicarage. By perpetual is meant that the incumbent could only be removed by agreement with the diocesan authorities at York. Instead, it seems that the canons of Thurgarton preferred to employ a moveable chaplain on the cheap, and this had given rise to the note of condemnation made by the archbishop in 1308.

Only one pre-Reformation will can be found granting a sum of money to our church. The will of William Avotson of Langar, dated November 23, 1516, includes a donation of twenty pence to the church of St Ethelburga. But apart from this one example, our church appears conspicuous by its absence from such wills. It was commonplace to leave small sums to a local church or churches for the sake of one's soul. Thus, the wills of William Flower (1471) and Thomas Flower (1537), both of Langar, include bequests to half a dozen or more churches in the surrounding neighbourhood, yet make no provision for the church of St Ethelburga: a curious omission.

In 1534 Henry VIII broke with the Pope and made himself the supreme head of the Church in his realm. This led in 1535 to a valuation of church property for the purpose of taxation: the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*. Under Thurgarton's rectory of *Feldkyrk*, which follows *Grandby*, there is a reference to something called *Typulltythe* (Fig. 14).

VALOR ECCLESIASTICUS HEN. VIII.

PRIORATUS SANCTI PETRI DE THURGARTON IN COM' NOTT' EBOR' DIOC'.

NOTT' COMITATUS.

ECCL'IA DE THURGARTON.

	£	s.	d.
Valet in decimis garbarum ibm cõmunibus annis xij^{li} Inde fol' annuatim archino Nott' pro procuracõnibꝫ per annum vij^{s} vj^{d} priori celle monachor' in Lincoln' pro duabus partibus decimarũ terr' dnical' in Thurgarton et Fyſkerton acetiam unius cotagij in Grandby per compoſicõem per annum ix^{s} vj^{d} Et ſol' abbi Beate Marie Ebor' et ſucceſs' ſuis pro penſione decimarum de Grandby Hiklyng et Cotam per compoſicõem per annũ vj^{li} xiij^{s} iiij^{d} Et rem' - - - -	iiij	ix	viij

ECCL'IA DE GRANDBY.

	£	s.	d.
Valet in proficuis manſionis ibm cum terris glebalibus ibidem cõmunibus annis xl^{s} in decimis garbarum et feni ibm cũ porcone abbis Beate Marie Ebor' cõmunibꝫ annis x^{li} In toto - - - -	xij	—	—

ECCL'IA DE FELDKYRK.

	£	s.	d.
Valet in decimis garbarum ibm Typulltythe cum oblacõnibus et alijs emoliment' per annũ iiij^{li} vj^{s} viij^{d} Inde ſol' archiepo Ebor' vj^{d} et archino Nott' vj^{d} pro ſinodalibꝫ Et rem' - - - -	iiij	v	viij

Fig. 14. Extract from the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, or valuation of Church property, 1535.

There is really only one meaning that can be placed on the word 'typull', which must correspond with the modern 'tipple'. The OED definition of tipple is 'to sell ale or other strong drink by retail.' It would seem therefore that visitors to the church, and by implication these visitors must have been pilgrims, were being sold ale, wine or other intoxicating liquor! The proof of this is to be found in the presence, particularly at the NW-approach of the church, of numerous fragments of lustrous dark brown or purple-glazed cups or mugs, and of bunghole cisterns used for brewing. The mugs are of the type known as Cistercian ware, which was probably manufactured at Ticknall in south Derbyshire.

Following the dissolution of Thurgarton Priory in 1538 its possessions were farmed out by the Crown, and on 3 July 1546 we find the King's Debtors issuing a certificate stating that '*Sir John Chaworthe, farmer of the rectory of Fylde Kyrke, owes 21l. 13s. 4d.*' This is perhaps the same John Chaworth, Knight, (d. 1558) whose effigy can be found in the north transept of St Andrew's church.

A document dated 17 August 1548, records a large grant by Edward VI of former monastic lands, rectories and advowsons, to Sir Thomas Heneage and William Lord Willoughby, including 'the rectory and the advowson of the vicarage of Feldekirke, Notts, late of Thurgarton monastery'. The grant includes a dispensation for '*4l. for the stipend of a chaplain celebrating and keeping cure of souls in the parish church of Feldekirke*'.

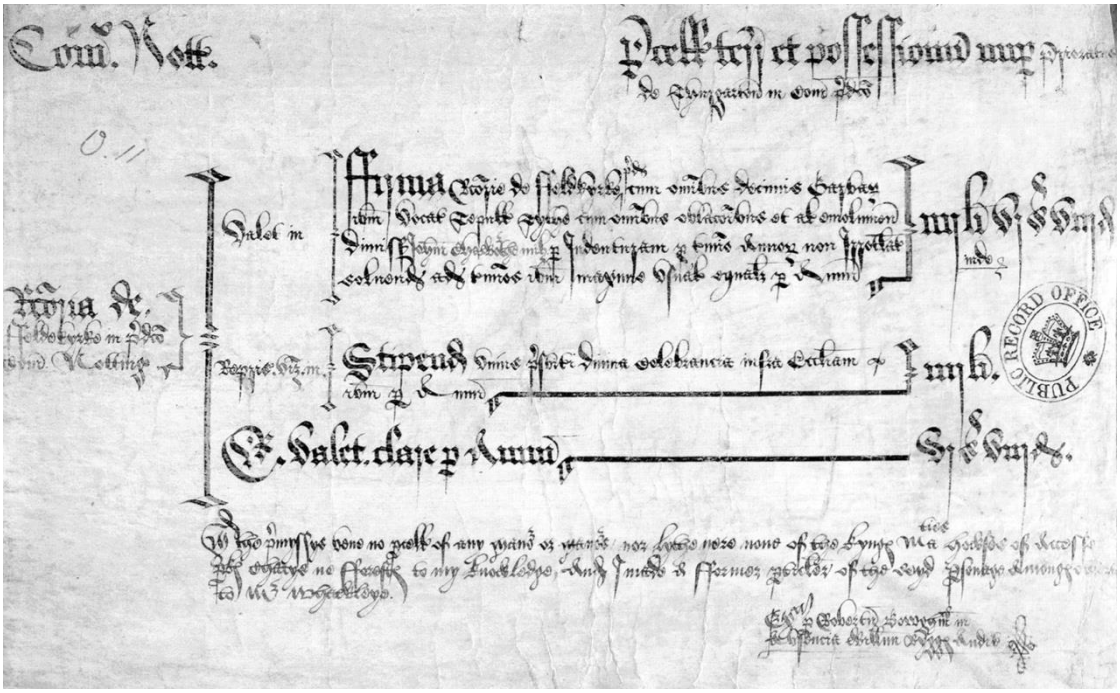

Fig. 15. Certificate of valuation (in Latin) issued by the Court of Augmentations for '*The Rectory of Feldekyrke in the county of Nottingham*' (National Archives).

Although the Crown made provision for the continuation of the church following the dissolution of Thurgarton Priory, it seems clear that it could not survive without the income brought in by pilgrimage, which was thenceforth banned. The income from ordinary tithes would barely have covered the cost of maintaining a chaplain. Thus, although a certificate of valuation was issued (Fig. 15) which required the new possessor to provide a stipend for a chaplain to serve the rectory of Feldekyrke, it was probably never acted upon.

After 1548 a veil of silence is drawn over the rectory of Feldekirke and its church of St Ethelburga. Sir John Chaworth, who presumably remained the tenant (answerable now to Heneage and Willoughby, rather than to the Crown), probably saw no profit in maintaining the church. The site was perhaps rented out by him as a farmstead, evidence for which is provided by the presence of numerous animal bones, post-medieval pottery and brick.

A similar fate befell the church at Saxondale (see Fig. 16 for location). This church, appropriated to Shelford Priory, came into the possession of the Stanhope family and was still standing in 1552. Valued in 1535 at a mere £3 9s 4d per annum, it was

pulled down on the pretext of being only a chapel of ease, in order to save the cost of maintaining a chaplain. The site was subsequently occupied as a farmstead.

The name St Aubrey's, by which our church was known to the common people, continued to be attached to the site for some period after the church itself had gone out of use. Thus it appears as *Sct: Anbrase* on Christopher Saxton's county map of 1576 (Fig. 16). This map was engraved by Remigius Hogenberg, who was Flemish. It would have been very easy for a non-English engraver to misread Saxton's manuscript instructions (Saxton was too busy surveying in the field to check the final proofs of his maps in London, and there was some urgency from Queen Elizabeth to complete the survey owing to the fear of a Spanish invasion). Perhaps Saxton wrote 'Aubrase'. The letters 'n' and 'u' are very difficult to distinguish in manuscript, even in modern writing! Thus, the same error has occurred with the name Flawford near Ruddington, which on Saxton's map is rendered 'Slanford'. Perhaps Saxton had written 'Flauford' on his manuscript, but the engraver made not only the error mentioned above, but mistook Saxton's 'F' for the long 'S'. A Flemish engraver would hardly be aware of the oddness of such names as 'Anbrase' or 'Slanford'.

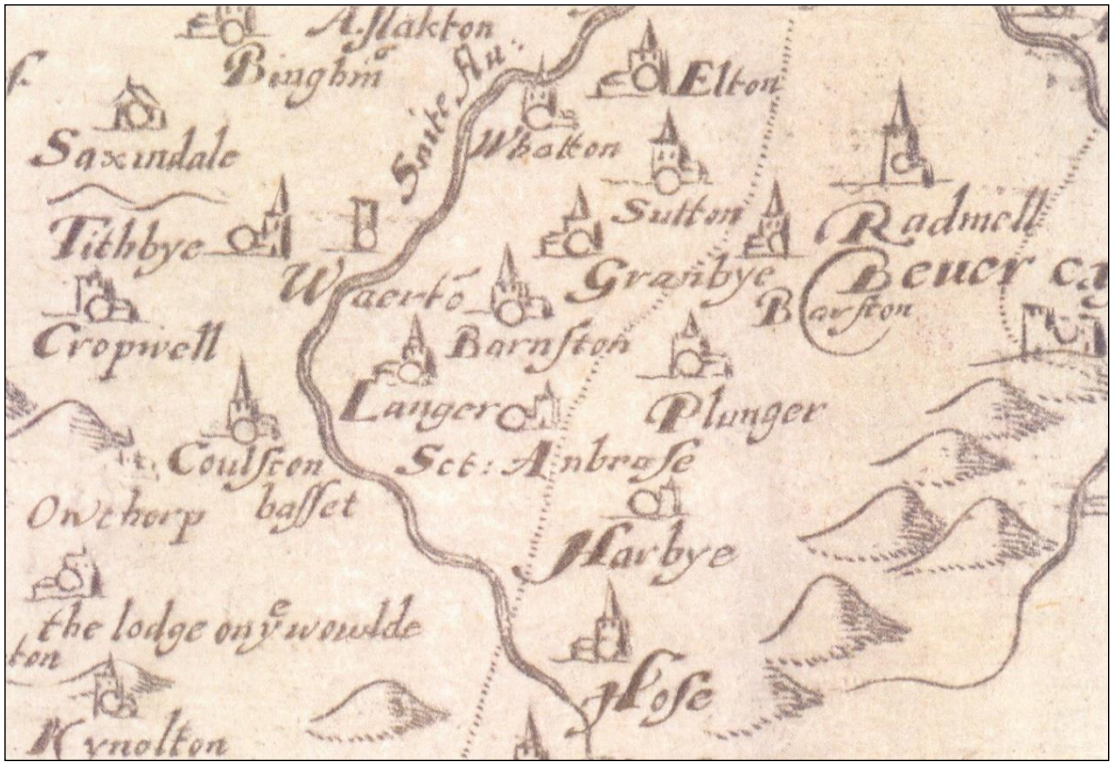

Fig. 16. Extract from a rare uncoloured version of Christopher Saxton's map of Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire, dated 1576. In most versions of this map as sold, the name *Anbrase* is obscured by a wash of colour marking the county boundary with Leicestershire (British Library).

A tapestry map of Nottinghamshire, made in 1632, hangs in the former Museum of Costume and Textiles, Castle Gate, Nottingham, and is based on the celebrated map published by John Speed in 1610, which in turn is derived from Saxton. Speed would have known that no such saint as 'Anbrase' had ever existed, and thus assumed that Ambrose was the intended dedication. Interestingly, a map by William Kip dated 1607, which is also derived from Saxton, renders the name 'Sct Anbrose'.

Fig. 17. Detail from tapestry map of Nottinghamshire (1632), Museum of Costume and Textiles, Castle Gate, Nottingham. St Aubrey's is here incorrectly rendered *S^t^ Ambrose*, taken from John Speed's map of 1610 (Photo: David Bate).

An interesting feature of the tapestry map, which was made at Rampton in Notts, is the way in which 'St Ambrose' is depicted. This aspect is not taken from Speed, but possibly reflects some local understanding (though the 'local understanding' does not extend to an accurate rendering of the name). The depiction of a castellated gatehouse-like feature is used elsewhere on the tapestry map for monastic sites, such as Thurgarton. Either there was an understanding on the part of the person who had the tapestry made that this site had been slightly special (as a place of pilgrimage it might have included ancillary buildings), or an assumption was made that it was a special shrine because of its saintly name.

We might on the basis of the above evidence feel confident in dismissing 'St Ambrose' as a cartographic error, except that a further complication arises from the appearance of the name in two entries in Langar parish register. The first of these, under date 1648, reads:

> *Anne Frizby the wife of Everhard Frizby of S^nt^ Ambrose, alias S^nt^ Auberries, was buried in Langar Church=yard on tuesday, May the 9^th^.*

The second entry, under date 1650, reads:

> *Anne Flower the daughter of Henry Flower of S^{t} Ambrose in the fields, in Langar parish, and Ellenore, his wife, was baptized in Langar Church on Friday, the tenth day of May.*

How do we explain this apparent confirmation of the name St Ambrose?

These two entries provide the only reference in the registers to St Ambrose or St Aubrey's. The same distinctive and clear hand, which makes its first appearance in the register at the beginning of 1646, and last appears under June 1650, is responsible for both entries. The entries made in the register within this period are unusually informative, indicating for example whether the parishioner was an inhabitant of Barnstone or Langar (the registers usually attributed all parishioners to Langar). It is evident that a curate was deputising for the rector, John Featley, at this time. Featley is said to have joined the royalist cause at Newark for two years from about 1643–4 and to have leased the rectory to a curate for a period of three years at some time prior to 1650; a parliamentary survey dated August 1650 records that a clerk was acting in Featley's place during that year. It is unlikely that the curate or clerk was a local person.

Clearly, on two occasions the curate was confronted by parishioners claiming to be from St Aubrey's. He would no doubt have wanted to verify whether such a place was recognised on any map, and on checking a map of the county (almost certainly it would have been a map based on Speed), he would have seen St Ambrose marked on the map... and nobody questions a published map! On the first occasion he gave his parishioners the benefit of the doubt and wrote 'St Auberries' as it was told him, but qualified it with 'St Ambrose', i.e. the 'proper' name as shown on the authorised map! In the second instance, he just ignored them, assuming that St Aubrey's was nothing more than a local corruption of the 'proper' name.

It might seem that these Frizby's and Flowers were living in or around the old church site, although it is equally possible that they merely occupied smallholdings that had once formed part of the scattered ecclesiastical parish of St Ethelburga. For example, in the early nineteenth century some Langar tenants were still paying tithes to Granby for odd parcels of land. If we remember that St Ethelburga (rectory of Feldkyrk) was subordinated to Granby, the explanation of the tithes becomes clear.

PART 5: PILGRIMAGE AND ST ETHELBURGA

In a letter from the Vatican dated 2 September 1405, Pope Innocent VII granted 'relaxation, during ten years, of three years and three quarantines of enjoined penance to penitents who [on specified feast days] visit the church of St Ethelburga by Langar (*juxta Langar in campis in valle*) in the diocese of York, to which a great multitude resorts'.

This document is an indulgence granted to the prior and canons of Thurgarton in order to increase their income from the visitation of pilgrims to the church of St Ethelburga. Those who went on pilgrimage did so often under penance. The penance would be relaxed for pilgrims who visited churches in receipt of such an indulgence on the specified days, thus encouraging more pilgrims and more income. Obviously the feast of St Ethelburga (whenever that was) would have been one of the specified days. The expression '*to which a great multitude resorts*' seems to have been a stock phrase (the original in Latin of course) that was employed where a church was known to attract pilgrims.

The local tradition claiming St Ethelburga's as a priory may reflect the church's unusual status. The canons of Thurgarton might well have maintained a hands-on approach to the church, given its monetary value as a place of pilgrimage (Fig. 18). There would also have been a need to oversee, or at least keep an occasional check on the brewing activity in order to prevent malpractice; or perhaps this was only done on special occasions such as the feast day. Perhaps the local memory of this special relationship has misled people over time to think of the site as having been a small priory, but it never was.

Fig. 18. Was it a canon of Thurgarton who dropped this very fine copper-alloy seal matrix? Found by Steve Colman, a metal detectorist, on the north side of the church mound. The legend, in Lombardic script, reads:

S':FRATRIS:ROBERTI:REMUN':

i.e. the Seal of Brother Robert Remund. The seal is embellished with a device resembling a spiked tau cross and dates from *c.*1250 – *c.*1300. Height 28 mm. (Retained by finder).

Fig. 19. Small lead cross, possibly dropped by a pilgrim. Found by Derrick Smith, a metal detectorist, in the general area of the church mound. (In possession of the writer)

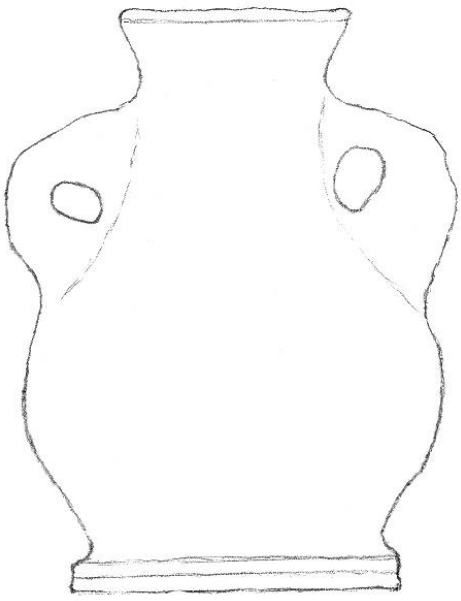

Fig. 20. This costrel, or pilgrim's bottle, was brought up by the plough on the top of the church mound and only narrowly escaped damage, as it was left suspended in the side of the plough ridge. It is hard-glazed Cistercian ware, probably made at Ticknall in Derbyshire, dating perhaps from the first half of the 16th century. It has two lugs for suspension, perhaps from a waist belt. It might have contained holy water, unction or ointment for ritual use or for soothing weary feet. (In possession of writer).

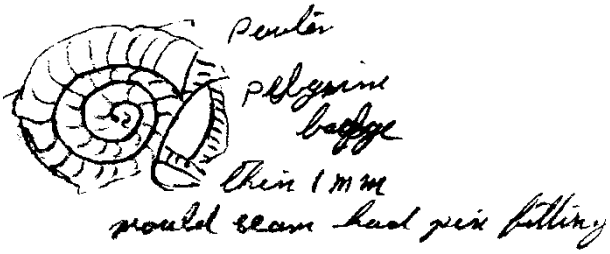

Fig. 21. For the writer, who is a geologist, the most remarkable find to have come from the site is this pewter pilgrim's badge in the shape of a fossil ammonite. It is unique, so far as is known, and was found by the metal detectorist, Derrick Smith. Unhappily it was subsequently lost or discarded, as it probably didn't look much to the untrained eye. This loss is a very great tragedy. The drawing (left) was made by Bob Alvey at Nottingham University, who in the 1980s encouraged metal detectorists to bring him objects for identification. Remarkably, a fossil ammonite (right), which could almost be a model for the badge, was picked up from the site by Shelley Parker of Hall Farm. In fact, fossils are common in the immediate area of the church mound, although they may in part be derived from the building stone that was employed here (fossiliferous sandrock from Dyrham Formation). Yet some may have been brought by pilgrims. Another remarkable fossil find from the church mound was that of a heart-shaped sea urchin in flint, found by the writer. These particular fossils were greatly prized as magical tokens in the past, and were often attributed to fairies.

Figs. 18–21 represent objects related to pilgrimage which have been found in the immediate area of the church mound. Another possible pilgrim offering is a medieval silver penny, also found by metal detectorist Derrick Smith (now deceased). The penny appears to have once been folded in half, perhaps deliberately. If so, the metal detectorist made a great mistake in unbending it. The significance of a 'bent penny' is that people would visit a saint's relic in order to seek a cure for illness. A father with a sick child, before setting off on a pilgrimage to some chosen shrine, would promise to gift a penny (a significant sum for a poor rural family) to the saint's shrine in return for holly intervention leading to the restoration of the child's health. Having made the promise with the penny in his hand, he must offer this coin and no other at the shrine, and as proof, he bends the penny. This silver penny found by the detectorist has some intrinsic value as a coin, but not much. Had he left the coin in its folded state, how much more valuable would it have been as an important social document of people's beliefs, fears and sufferings. As it is, we cannot be certain of the circumstances of the discovery, so that a potentially wonderful and rare find is now just a common coin.

Two kinds of pottery occur in great numbers on this site, mostly around the NW approach to the church, where there was evidently a booth for dispensing some kind of alcoholic beverage (the tipple referred to in the 1535 *Valor*). The pottery occurs as Cistercian ware cups or mugs (highly fired with bright purplish glaze) and as bunghole cisterns (Midland Purple ware, coarse gritty unglazed). Presumably the brewing took place in the cisterns. Note the characteristic cut-out on the illustrated pot rim (Fig. 22). Examples of the bungholes have also been found by the writer. All of this pottery was most likely obtained from Ticknall by way of itinerant sellers (this method of retail in the East Midlands is recorded in early documents). Other potsherds have been found with limescale attached, showing that water was being heated up as part of the brewing process. There is a possibility that the isolated geophysical anomaly to the immediate W of the church (Figs. 7–8) reflects some sort of structure where the water was being heated.

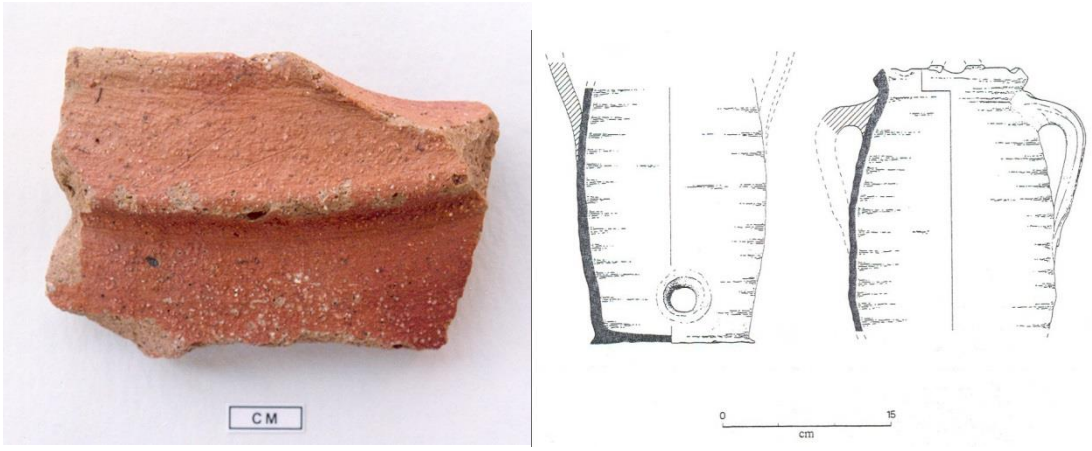

Fig. 22. Strong drink for weary pilgrims. Left: pot rim with cut-out (?designed to permit fermenting gas to escape; many such rims have been found on the site). Right: typical example of bunghole cistern.

Cleary our pilgrims came to Langar with the aim of seeing or touching some saintly relic associated (presumably) with St Ethelburga. Without holy relics there would be no pilgrimage. Steve Colman was the finder of the polished cabochon of rock crystal (Fig. 23) which could have come from a reliquary casket (e.g. Fig. 25), or from an altar cross. The enamelled, copper-alloy and gilt Limoges appliqué figure of a saint (Fig. 24) was found by the metal detectorist, Derrick Smith, although he subsequently sold it to a collector of such religious objects. The figure has two holes by which it would have been fastened to a reliquary casket (e.g. Fig. 25). It dates probably from the 13th century.

Fig. 23. Quartz cabochon found by Steve Colman in area of church mound. (Retained by finder)

Fig. 24. Limoges appliqué figure of the type that would have been affixed to a reliquary casket. Drawing on right made by Bob Alvey. Found by metal detectorist, Derrick Smith, in area of church mound. (Sold to a collector)

Fig. 25. Examples of reliquary caskets of the 13th century. Note the polished quartz and other gem settings in these caskets, and the distinctive appliqué enamelled Limoges figures.

Could the relics of this St Ethelburga the Virgin have resided in some such casket contained within the modest confines of our small church? If so, it would seem to have been deliberately cast out and broken following the Reformation. A Visitation to Thurgarton priory by Henry VIII's commissioners on 28 Feb 1536 recorded that 'A pilgrimage is held to St Ethelburg' (*ad sanctum Ethelburgum*), although they seem to have been confused about the gender of the saint.

But who was this St Ethelburga? It is a difficult question which cannot be easily resolved. It is highly unlikely that this small church could ever have obtained any relics of Ethelburga of Lyminge (Queen Ethelburga of Kent) or Ethelburga of Barking (the Virgin, from Lindsey), both of whose remains were held elsewhere. Ethelburga of Faramoutier-en-Brie is also unlikely for obvious reasons. These three are the only established saints bearing this name. Of course, there were many obscure saints in medieval times who are now lost to us.

One intriguing possibility is that the relics of St Eadburh (rendered Eadburga in Latin) of Southwell Minster, might be the saint represented here. The names Ethelburga and Eadburga do seem to have been confused in the past (although this statement requires further research). When the Normans began the great rebuilding of Southwell, they had no great respect for Anglo-Saxon female saints, most of whom had been the wealthy daughters of royal households and had not suffered martyrdom. Yet relics were a valuable commodity and were not, at that time, to be disposed of lightly. Given that the prior of Thurgarton had a seat in the chapter at Southwell, it is entirely possible that he took the unwanted relics from Southwell (which was rededicated to St Mary) in order to generate income from an insignificant little church within the confines of Langar that brought in very little income, but which he was required by the Bishop of York to maintain for the cure of souls.

David G. Bate, 4 February 2016.