

The History of Alpheton Manor

"Ignored by the passage of time in its isolated picturesque location beside the parish church, Alpheton Hall is one of the earliest and most historically important houses in Britain"

"The key stylistic features of the late 12th or 13th century can all be seen in the Alpheton BarnRemarkably a number of posts that relate to the 13th century structure contain empty joists and brace trenches that appear to belong to a still earlier barn.... "

"..on stylistic grounds would rival any candidate for the title of the oldest continually occupied domestic house in Britain."

Leigh Alston



Notwithstanding the remains of the Roman Fosse running through the horse paddocks, the history of the present developed site would appear, to the best of our knowledge and research, to commence with the death of Aelfgar Ealdorman of Essex. On his death @ 946 / 951 he left very substantial tracks of land to the Church, his son Aelfwold, and to his two daughters. The principal beneficiary being his eldest daughter Aethelflaed (not to be confused with the eldest daughter of King Alfred) who married (944) Edmund 1st (Edmund the Magnificent) King of England upon the death of his first wife. On Edmund's death (@946) her already substantial wealth was increased even more. On her death (@962) she left the bulk of her estate to her younger sister Aelfflaed and her husband Bryhtnoth, the new Ealdorman of Essex, subject to a reversion to the Abbey of St Edmunds. This Estate included substantial tracks of land in the neighbouring villages of what are now known as Cockfield and Lavenham.

The year 991 arrives and the Vikings are increasing their incursions into England. Having been badly defeated in the past by Bryhtnoth, on landing they challenge him to battle. Bryhtnoth (now aged about 60) hurried down from Northumberland and engaged them with what few men he had to hand. Sadly his haste was his down fall and having allowed the Vikings to cross over the causeway at Maldon (in Essex) he lost his head and most of his nobles as well. This battle of Maldon is acclaimed by many historians to be of more historical importance than the latter Battle of Hastings in that it paved the way for this latter battle. Bryhtnoth's body (less its head) was recovered from the battle field by his wife Aelfflaed who together with the monks from the Abbey of Ely fled the battlefield and entombed the body (with a wax head to replace that lost) in a crypt in what is now Ely Cathedral. Aelfflaed, now a widow, retreated to settle on lands she had inherited from her sister and set up a manor there on. This manor becoming known locally as Aelfflaed's Tun, (tun being the Saxon word for estate or lands). Not until after the doomsday book did this name come in to wider use and then over the years become corrupted in the current name of Alpheton. In a tax survey in 1186 it was already changing its name and is recorded as being called Alffledetun and occupied by a Walter De Bernham, Kalendar of Abbot Samson Abbot of St Edmunds, the lands having by now reverted to the Abbey of St Edmunds on the death of Aelfflaed's daughter.

Aelfflaed is understood to have developed the site using her very substantial inherited wealth and created the backbone of what is here today, the Western most three bays of the South Barn, the Hall / Manor House and the Chapel which is now the Church. On her death (@1002) she left her estate to her only child a daughter named Leofflaed, who in turn had three daughters, Aelfwyn, Aethelwith and Leofwaru. The date of the death of Leofflaed is not known.



All this could however be considered as being merely subjective without the historical evidence of the actual structures themselves. Two separate and independent architectural historians have several years apart produced remarkably similar reports. They date the house and two principal barns to the 12th / 13th century or earlier and specifically refer to the evidence of pre 12th century Architecture being present.

Perhaps more convincing is the detailed research by Norman Scarfe published in his book, *Suffolk in the Middle Ages*. In this he manages to provide a link from the occupancy of Aelfflaed through her daughter Leofflaed, to her grand daughter Leofwaru, to her great grandson Thurstan (died 1043 - 1045) whose widow Ailad (also recorded as named Aethelgyth and Ailith) is recorded in the doomsday book as holding "under the glorious king Edward" the great manors of Shimpling and Kedington. It seems that the names Aelfled's tun seems to have been carved out soon after the recording of the doomsday book and is a fitting tribute to Aelfflaed who might otherwise been lost in the shadows of history.



The site has been much altered in recent decades, however with the growth in wealth of near by Long Melford and Lavenham the site became unfashionable and was largely ignored by those with money and influence. Resultantly little was done to change or alter the premises for many years.

"Certainly Sir John Raynsford of Bardfield in Essex, MP for Colchester in the Reformation Parliament and absentee lord of Alpheton in 1522, would have been ashamed to entertain his guests beneath a Norman roof."

Leigh Alston Nov 2004

The Bury Abbey Seal

Frederic Ouvry ([[1814]]-[[1881]]), president of Society of Antiquaries, treasurer, 1854-74, president, 1876-8; friend of Dickens; made fine collections of manuscripts, ballads, and autograph letters.

He came into possession the seal shown on the right which was found in Alpheton Hall. It shows St Edmund in the centre with on the face of it, Edward the Confessor (1002 - 1066) and King Canute (985 - 1035) to the sides.



Architectural History

You have already read some of the comments written by Archeological Historians on the Barn, but why did they write them.

It all started with a commissioned report on the Hall when investigation of the roof caused a heart stopping moment. There was clear evidence that it was an intact Norman roof, albeit that it had been raised up intact at a latter date. Further investigation revealed the fact that the flint wall, notable by its absence of terracotta, was still intact and again dated back to the 12th century or earlier. Decorative finishes applied over the centuries have made a very detailed investigation and dating impossible added to which there just aren't any other structures around for comparison.

The reports go on to compare the roof with that of Fyfield Hall in Essex, the oldest timber framed (as opposed to stone) hall in Britain with tree ring dating to 1160 -1187 "but with a less archaic roof than Alpheton Hall !!

The reports go on to say: "The survival of exceptionally early buildings at Alpheton Hall extends to its farmyard, where both timber framed barns contain elements that can date from no latter than the 13th century." Remarkably a number of the posts contain empty joints and braces that belong to a still earlier barn.

Without tree ring dating (dendrochronology) we will never know for sure, resultantly we have commissioned and are awaiting the results of a dendrochronology survey. The results should solve any uncertainty over the sites history.

