

WEASENHAM IN TIMES PAST

Historic records show settlers in this area going back more than 3000 years. The most convincing evidence of population during the mid/late Bronze Age is the existence at least 15 barrows (burial mounds) in the areas known as the Weasenham Plantation and the Lyngs. These are said to be some of the finest preserved barrows in Norfolk and following an excavation of one, it was dated to around 1389 BC. There are four different types of barrow, namely bowl, bell, saucer and disc types.

Later the Romans settled in this area. A Roman villa was excavated near the Weasenham/Massingham boundary. Numerous Roman artefacts and medieval finds have been discovered in the fields around Weasenham and Rougham by Mr. Albert Hooks, a farm worker born in Rougham and educated at Weasenham School; and latterly by Weasenham-born local historian, Mr Glynn Burrows.

There are two schools of thought as to the derivation of 'Weasenham'. One is from the Old English meaning 'Wissa's homestead' and the other is from Anglo Saxon, 'waes' meaning water or wet soil and 'ham' meaning dwelling or dwellings. In the time of Edward I (1272-1307) the name was spelt 'Weseham', but within some fifty years it had evolved to 'Wesenham'.

The Domesday Book of 1086 records both the villages with details of the population, land ownership and productive resources, most of which were owned by William de Warenne. The parishes of All Saints and St Peter have been united for ecclesiastical purposes since the earliest records in the 12th century; they are, however, separate civil parishes.

Weasenham All Saints, formerly called Upper Weasenham, is the older of the villages and was one of the larger villages in the Launditch area during the 7th and 8th centuries. The two Weasenhams grew during the Middle Ages in different ways. At All Saints, the village was still arranged very much on the same lines as a Late Saxon village plan; only in the latter part of the 15th century was there any significant growth near Whin (otherwise Weasenham) Common. This hamlet remained until the late 16th century while a similar one at St Peter's had already disappeared. By 1590, settlement was well dispersed around the parish and the church, formerly the centre of the village, had become isolated; as the village expanded so the old village nucleus decayed. Probably owing to the fact that the land surface is more level in All Saints, the roads and fields were either aligned north to south or east to west, indicating deliberate planning (unlike Weasenham St Peter) with later roads cutting across this pattern.

The re-alignment of the A1065 through the villages changed their appearance significantly, particularly in All Saints, since the road system prior to this was one that was used during the Middle Ages with little change. The old road from Swaffham passed in front of The Ostrich and bore right, past the Old Police House, along School Road, right into Massingham Road at the War Memorial, past The Green and in front of The Fox and Hounds which at that time was at road level. The new roadway and the increased traffic further separated several dwellings, St Peter's church and the school from the rest of the village, and the pond in front of The Ostrich was filled in at this time. Later there was new housing development along Massingham Road, Lamberts Close and Rougham End. Unfortunately, however, other cottages and bungalows in Common End fell into disrepair and were demolished, as were some cottages by the old Chapel and The Ostrich, thus changing substantially the layout of the previous All Saints village.

Weasenham St Peter, formerly known as Lower Weasenham, started on a spur of land in the late 9th century on the site now occupied by the church. In the 10th and 11th centuries it spread uphill to the south and during the Middle Ages the village reached as far as Whim Common. The way the village spilled over into All Saints is unusual but emphasises the close links between these two parishes. Thorpe Green was a 12th century offshoot from the main village and 'Thorpe' indicates a secondary hamlet, an offshoot from the main village, and was not a Scandinavian settlement as the name might suggest. By the 16th century there was nothing left of the medieval village except a small cluster of cottages at the church crossroads. The medieval village had been replaced by three separate groupings: Thorpe Green, Northings Green and a hamlet to the south. The occupation of Northings Green and the hamlet was short-lived and by 1590 they had vanished. The population shifted around the Green with more settlement on the one side than the other throughout the Middle Ages. During the mid 18th century there was continuing encroachment upon the Green through staking out of garden plots and later by building houses.

Weasenham St Peter also includes the lost village of Kipton. From the Middle Ages to the end of the 19th Century, Kipton Ash (believed to be on the site of the former village of Kipton) used to hold a Sheep Fair which was the largest in the County but because of an outbreak of animal disease it was transferred to Hempton Green.

There is a record of a late Saxon/medieval Church called St Paul's at Weasenham which was listed in 1368 as separate from St Peter's and All Saints' Churches, but the exact site is unknown.

All Saints Church



All Saints Church has had a fluctuating history and has undergone several major rebuilds, the tower on the western side having collapsed in 1653 and being replaced by a curious brick addition built as a belfry. The screen was once one of the glories of this church. Of the eight saints which once looked out from its panels only pathetic ghosts now remain, since not only were they defaced by Cromwellian soldiers during the English Civil War, but they were also peppered with bullet holes. The soldiers are also said to have used the church as a stable for their horses. In 1905 the Second Earl of Leicester restored the nave to its original length, the chancel was rebuilt and a new south aisle constructed, thus restoring the porch to its proper use. Following years of lack of maintenance, grants have recently been obtained to enable roof repairs to be carried out in the near future. In the western part of the churchyard there is an impressive 18th century marble tomb chest topped by an Adam style urn.

St Peter's Church is a building of flint and stone in the Early English and Perpendicular styles, it has a low western tower which is embattled, pinnacled and containing one bell. Of architectural significance is the ornate north side with its fine flush work arcading. The font is of particular note and is believed to pre-date 1607. There are two pieces of medieval stained glass inserted into the north window. The Church was restored in 1870 by the Campbell family at a cost of about £2000; the Lady Chapel was restored in 1920 and a stained glass window erected by Mrs Overman, J.P. to commemorate Lt. John Gilbert Overman, killed in action in 1918.

St Peters Church



The names of the villagers who lost their lives during the First and Second World Wars are shown on the War Memorial sited on the boundary of the two villages.

In addition to these villagers, three airmen from the Raynham airfield were killed when their Bristol Blenheim bomber crashed in the field behind the school in 1944. Each year they are remembered by the placing of poppies in the verge beside the field in Common End. Other crash sites are shown on the plan at the end of this narrative.

The Fox and Hounds was an inn as far back as 1732. Although having had various other names including The Duke's Head and The Chase, in 1796 the name changed to and has remained as The Fox and Hounds. Today it remains a family-run freehouse with restaurant and games room and is a popular meeting-place for villagers.

The Ostrich public house building was originally a smithy but the tenant, William Brunton, was granted the licence by the Earl of Leicester in 1832 to open a hostelry. There was a blacksmith in the building until 1916 and next door was the wheelwright. In front of The Ostrich was a pond which was used by both the blacksmith and the wheelwright for their businesses.

The White House, facing the Green was at one time also known as the White Horse. It is recorded as being used as a beerhouse and schoolroom during the mid 1800's and was subsequently used as a Post-Office.

A post windmill used to stand on a mound on the Massingham Road. It is thought to have had two pairs of sails on the front, and on the opposite side there was a window in the upper floor and a door with a ladder below. It was demolished in 1869 and close to its site are Mill Cottages.

The villages used to have their own butcher, baker, carpenter, blacksmith and wheelwright and whilst these trades are no longer practised, the names of some cottages show where the trades were carried out.

In March 1859, Thomas William, Earl of Leicester, gave land comprising one acre and thirty perches to the Vicar and Churchwardens of the Parish of All Saints for "a school for the education of children and adults or children only of the labouring manufacturing and other poorer classes in the Parishes of Weasenham All Saints and Weasenham St Peter". The School was built in a mock-Elizabethan style, with a house attached, at the cost of £900, and at that time there were 125 names on the attendance register. Today the School has been extensively refurbished for the 21st century and children from the Weasenhams and Rougham use facilities together with children from Rudham School, as the schools presently share a Head Teacher.

The former Primitive Methodist Chapel in Dodma Road was built in the mid-1800s, probably about 1870, when it was said to be the only place for worship in All Saints at that time. However, the Chapel was closed in 1957 because of the dwindling attendance and subsequently sold some 25 years later for use as a private residence. Brian Mickleborough, who lived with his parents and grandparents in Wheelwrights Cottage, recalls going to worship at the Chapel and listening to sermons by various preachers, notably Mr Frost, who lived in Tilly House. In the 1950's Mr Mickleborough worked on Kipton Farm with horses and tended the sugar beet fields earning 20 shillings for a 48 hour week. When he learnt that Weasenham Farms paid sixpence (2 ½p) an hour for the same work, he went to work for them and with the additional fringe benefits, he nearly doubled his weekly wage.

The Water Pump outside the Old Police House was at one time the only place to obtain fresh water for All Saints village. Although no longer in working order, it is maintained by the Parish Council as part of village history.





In 1904/05 a new hall was built for the second Earl of Leicester to the south side of Rougham Road and it was used to accommodate evacuees and airmen from Raynham during the Second World War. Consent for the demolition of Weasenham Hall was granted in 2000 and implemented shortly afterwards.

The Reading Room was built in 1905 to provide somewhere for men to read newspapers and periodicals and it had a caretaker's cottage attached. The building has also been used as a community centre, held meetings including those of the WI and was the venue for village celebrations. In particular, the VE Day party following the end of WWII is remembered in particular by older villagers as a great celebration. In 1986 Major Richard Coke sold the building and during renovations it was discovered that a fireplace in a downstairs room bore the coat of arms similar to that at Holkham Hall. Subsequently regular auctions were held, attracting many people from across the County. Following the closure of the shop and Post Office on the Green, the Post Office moved to the Reading Room. It was still used for this purpose and for village functions until 1996 when the post office transferred to Lamberts Close.

During the mid 20th century visitors would come to the Weasenham Azalea Wood, especially in mid-May and June to admire not only the azaleas, magnolias and rhododendrons, but also the bird life and various trees planted in the 1880's and early 1900's. Rare species of trees and shrubs were also introduced by Major Richard Coke from 1907 onwards and in 1973 the Weasenham Estate was awarded second prize in the first National Woodlands Competition for the best-managed woodlands under 500 acres. During the summer months it is still possible to enjoy walks in the woods subject to an admission charge, and part of the woodland is also used for a high ropes adventure course.

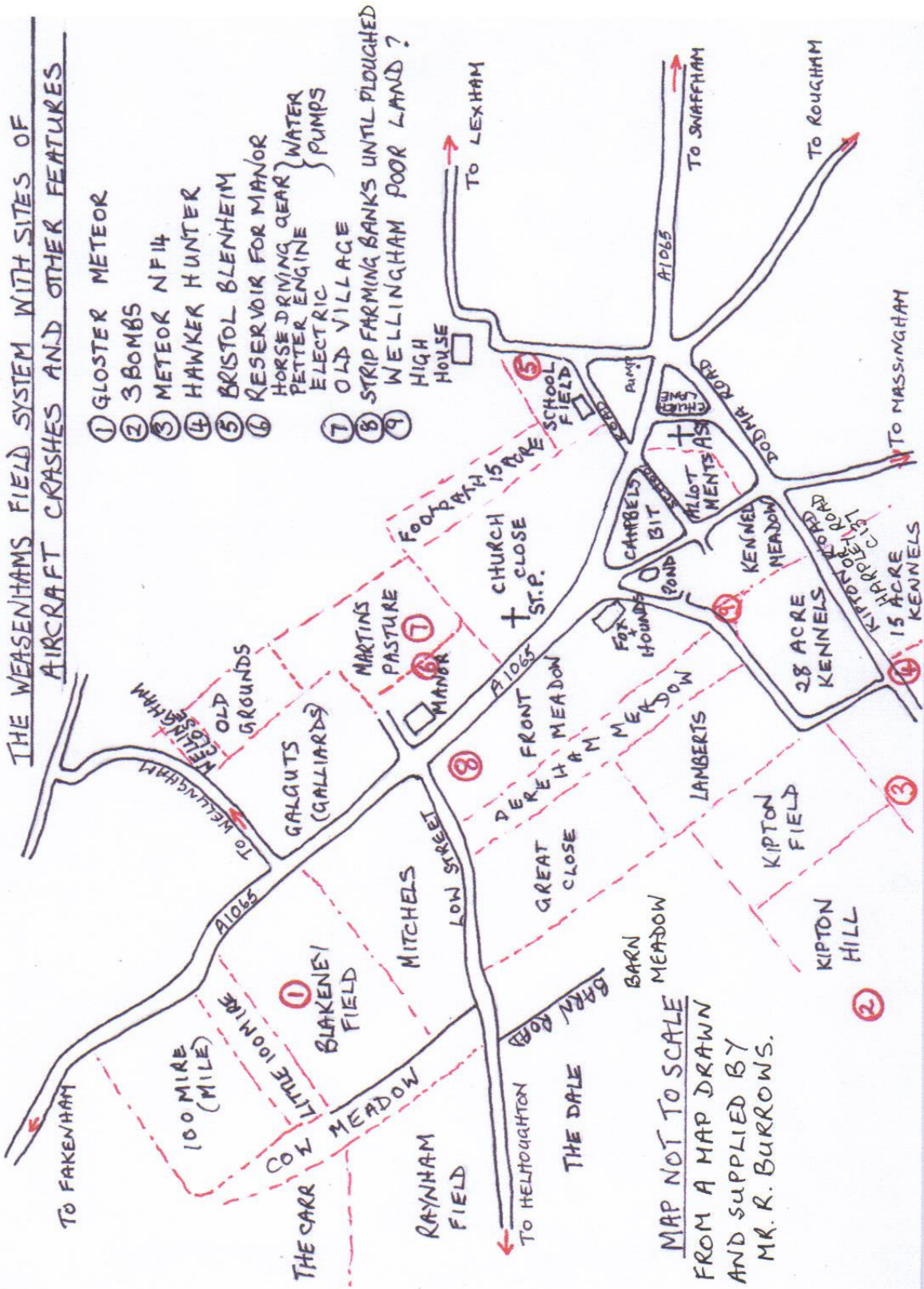
One of the most colourful characters connected with Weasenham was John de Wesenham, who held the important post of Butler to King Edward III (1327-1377). He and another wealthy merchant, Sir Robert Causton, were commissioned to seize and fit out all the ships between the Thames and the Wash and to provide men-at-arms and archers to resist a threatened invasion by the French. In lieu of payment he held the King's Crown in pawn!

In 1698 William Bear married Anne Buckenham and it is from this couple that the Bear families of Weasenham Rougham Hempton and other villages in this area originated and one of their descendants still lives in the village. Other old village names from the 18th century are Harrowing Asker Whitby and Carr (the All Saints millers) and from the early 19th century Wix and Blower.

Alan Pearce was Loft Manager to the Queen 1984-1991 and lived on The Green where he maintained a large pigeon loft at the bottom of his garden keeping and training prize-winning racing pigeons. His widow, Gilly, still continues this tradition, and recounts the story of how Her Majesty the Queen, wearing wellies and the usual headscarf arrived one day with just one bodyguard in a Land Rover to visit the loft - although she did not stop for tea!

In time there is certain to be change. There may be new homes built, old churches restored, people may come and go, but as history has shown 'The Weasenhams' move with the times and Norfolk village life will continue.

THE WEASENHAMS FIELD SYSTEM WITH SITES OF AIRCRAFT CRASHES AND OTHER FEATURES



- ① GLOSTER METEOR
- ② 3 BOMBS
- ③ METEOR NF14
- ④ HAWKER HUNTER
- ⑤ BRISTOL BLENHEIM
- ⑥ RESERVOIR FOR MANOR
HORSE DRIVING GEAR } WATER PUMPS
PETTER ENGINE }
- ⑦ OLD VILLAGE
- ⑧ STRIP FARMING BANKS UNTIL PLOUGHED
- ⑨ WELLINGHAM POOR LAND?

MAP NOT TO SCALE
FROM A MAP DRAWN
AND SUPPLIED BY
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East Anglian Archaeology – Report No: 10 – Norfolk by Peter Wade-Martins

The Buildings of England, Norfolk 2: North-West and South by N.Pevsner and B. Wilson.

Weasenham All Saints' Church guide

Weasenham St. Peter's Church guide

Weasenham St Peter Heritage Register

Kelly's Directory of the Counties of Norfolk and Suffolk – 1929 edited by A. Lindsay Kelly.

Eastern Daily Press

Daily Telegraph

Weasenham Azalea Wood guide

William White's History, Gazetteer and Directory of Norfolk 1845

Francis White's History, Gazetteer and Directory of Norfolk 1854

Norfolk Heritage Explorer @ www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk

The Megalithic Portal @ www.megalithic.co.uk

Norfolk Public Houses @ www.norfolkpubs.co.uk

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