

Ramsey Abbey's Manor at Elton I: the Archaeology

by Francis O'Neill

During the construction of a flood bank along the Nene at Elton the Anglian Water Authority, the landowner (Mr P. Proby), and the tenant farmer (Mr R. Hill) arranged to level an earthwork platform lying in 'Berrystead' field and use the spoil for the bank. The work was begun, but was stopped when limestone structures were found below the topsoil. By this time the machine had stripped away about a third of the platform on its eastern side to a depth of 45 cm, removing upper courses of limestone walls as well as floor levels. The stripping left a north-south scarp, almost the full length of the platform, which was eventually cut back and drawn as a section.

The initial discovery was made by Mr S. G. Upex and the Middle Nene Archaeological Group, who began investigation of the site. The Nene Valley Research Committee then undertook to make a full record of the uncovered area prior to the scheduling of the site as an ancient monument. (A proposal for scheduling had already been put forward by the Cambridgeshire Archaeological Committee.) Mr Proby expressed concern and by agreement with Mr Hill and the Anglian Water Authority, he allowed the site to be left open for a period of six weeks. The work carried out consisted of cleaning the exposed site, followed by planning. Time did not allow for sample excavation and consequently no sections for clarification of date or function of any structure could be dug.

The site (fig 16) lies just to the east of the River Nene at River End. The main earthwork platform on which the manor stood has around its western edge what appears to be a moat, consisting of a wide bay-like feature to north and south joined by a narrow ditch. These bays may have served as fishponds and flood basins, while the northern hollow may have served a mill at some time. To the south and west of the platform within 'Berrystead' field lay banked enclosures and further earthworks, suggesting outbuildings and paddocks to the main site.

Finds from the stripped area indicate occupation, possibly continuous, from about the second to the eighteenth century A.D. There was a lot of Roman pottery present, but no buildings to go with it were identified. As the recording of the site progressed eight buildings were uncovered, all rectangular and most with traces of substantial limestone footings.

The earliest building recovered, Building 1 (fig 16), was cut by 3. It is only partially visible; for the rest disappears under the scarp left by the machine. The stonework of this building had been robbed, except for the north-east corner lying within Building 3, which was filled with dense limestone rubble. This suggests that no great time elapsed between the demolition of 1 and the construction of 3.

Buildings 2 and 3 are orientated east-west, with solidly constructed walls and buttresses. Such a design would not be expected before the thirteenth century. There is a distinct later phase in both buildings, implying functional changes. In 2 this takes the shape of two corner-features including burnt stone, possibly ovens. In 3 an interior wall immediately east of the entrance was removed and replaced by a post at its north end, probably when Building 4 was constructed.

Building 4 was built against the south side of 3, being aligned north-south. Incorporated into its much-robbled wall-remains was evidence for buttresses, and there was interior bench seating at its south end around a large rectangular limestone hearth. On the last floor was a scatter of Collyweston roof-tiles.

Buildings 5 and 6 are consecutively later additions to 3 and may be contemporary with 4, dating probably to the fourteenth century. The remains of Building 7, built against the east side of 3, consist of a possible single room with a fireplace and a large gateway to its south. The interpretation of the gateway is strengthened by the discovery of two metal trackways converging upon it. Both appear to start at or near the present gates in the north and east boundaries of the modern field.

Building 8 belongs to a period after the disuse of this part of the manor, possibly at the end of the seventeenth century, and lasted for about 100 years. It may have been a farmhouse as there was evidence for domestic use. The gabled end walls, not visible on the plan, appear to lie to either side of the stripped area under the undisturbed topsoil.

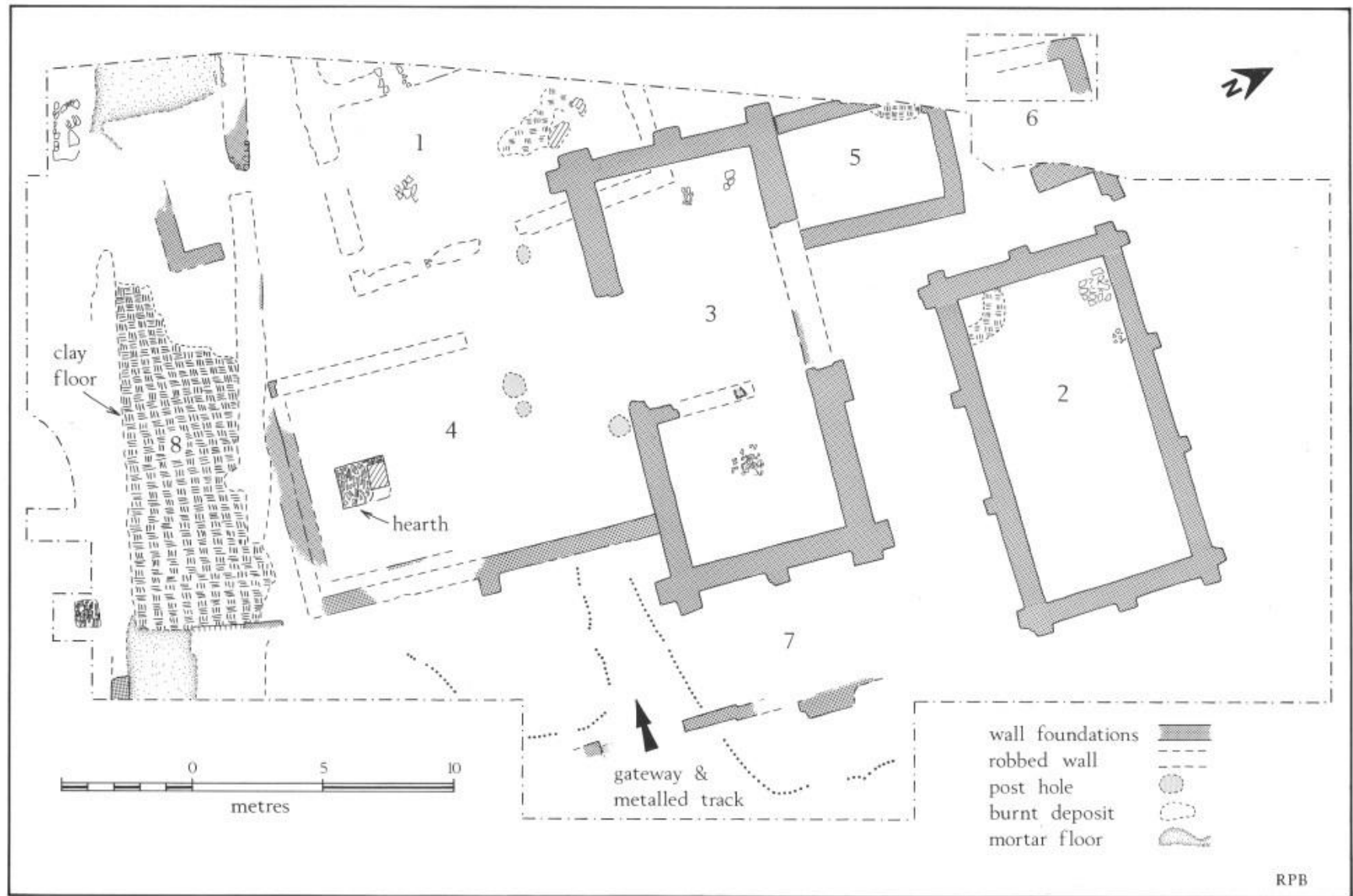


Fig 16 Plan of the Elton Manor exposed in November 1977

Ramsey Abbey's Manor at Elton II: the Documents

by Stephen Upex

The documentary history of the Manor of Elton can be traced back for over 900 years. The first reference is to the granting of the manor site and its lands to the Abbey of Ramsey in the early eleventh century. From this time onwards the field has always been referred to as 'The Berrystead' or later 'Berrystead Close'.

Elton has a very complicated manorial history; for, although Ramsey Abbey held the 'Nether End Manor', by 1218 a subordinate manor in the 'Upper End' of the parish had evolved and the two manors developed their own field systems independently. The Ramsey manor probably held about 550 acres of land in the parish and the profits from the land were sent to Ramsey for the Abbey's upkeep. We also hear of produce being sent: in 1379 wheat was sent by cart to Alwalton and then by boat to the Abbey.

The buildings on the site are referred to in some detail in the documents. In 1351 an indenture lists all the main buildings and gives the contents of each room. Indirect references to other agricultural structures are made. The principal building appears to have been the hall, which had stone walls and a slate roof. In 1391 an account entry records '200 slatston(s)' being used on the hall roof. There also appear to have been some stone benches inside (1345) as well as two tables, one pair of trestles, four forms (described in 1353 as 'rickety') and a basin and ewer. In 1297, a carpenter, a smith and a mason were at work erecting 'gates before the hall'. Presumably close to the hall would be the kitchens and buttery referred to in 1351, with their contents of '3 brazen pots, 2 pitchers and 4 pans' and casks and vats. The larder contained 3 hams and one quarter of beef. There was also a chapel, which may have been built of timber; for only carpenters are referred to in any of the repairs, although it had a slate roof and crest tiles. The chapel had a missal, chalice and 'ornaments belonging to the priest', which are not mentioned until 1453.

As well as the domestic buildings used by the bailiff, his staff and visiting abbey officials and monks, there were buildings related to the agricultural nature of the manor estate. Two granges or barns are mentioned as early as 1298. One, the great barn, had a porch-type entrance and a thatched roof. A granary and dairy are often referred to between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries and other agricultural buildings are shown to have been built in yards and paddocks. In 1379 a new pigsty was constructed on the site of an old one, the pigs having to be moved to a nearby cartshed while the work took place.

Much of the information concerning the buildings comes from the detailed building and repair accounts made for the bailiff. These accounts show that repair-work was carried out continually on walls, roof beams, and thatching. In 1352 masons were employed at 3d per day to repair the walls of the manor after four days of floods, while repairs in 1453 were made to the grange after what appears to have been a serious fire. The hall also underwent much repair work and alteration. In 1453 a 'lover' (louver) was fitted (perhaps in the roof, to let out the smoke from the central fire) and in 1458 repairs were made to the chamber at the west end of the hall. The bailiff had a chamber built in 1379 which was probably close to the hall. The masons were paid for making the wall circuit of this chamber 4 perches long (66 feet) and 14 feet high. Reeds for thatching were possibly local, but the roof-slates seem to come from Collyweston and stone from local quarries (in 1397 from the Barnack quarries).

It is tempting, but dangerous, to marry the documentary evidence for these structures to the plan of the archaeological remains, especially as only limited archaeological exploration was possible. The archaeological evidence seems to indicate that several of the structures changed their function, although these changes remain unrecorded in the documents. Building 4 (fig 16) may fit the description of the hall with its central hearth and stone benching around the walls (built in 1345). Structure 3 seems to predate 4 and it has been suggested that 3 formed an earlier hall. Here again the surviving documents are silent about a new hall, except that in 1345-6 carpenters were employed to support the south side of the hall, perhaps as a preliminary to the construction of structure 4; but no account survives indicating building work on a hall extension. The earliest references to a chapel are made in 1297 and it may be that structure 2 represents this building. Although all the references indicate the chapel to be of wood, the foundations would probably have been of stone; but due to the machine grading of the site only the foundations are left. Even so,

this structure is fairly large for a chapel and the ovens at the west end would indicate perhaps a change of function, if it were to be assigned initially to an ecclesiastical use.

It would be very optimistic to relate any of the other rooms to references made in the documents. Rooms 5 and 6 may well be part of the kitchen-larder-buttery complex and may well be those mentioned as being on the west side of the hall and repaired in 1457. It is tempting to see room 7 as the bailiff's accommodation built in 1379. However, the documents provide positive evidence for Building 8, which must be that shown on the enclosure map of 1784 to be a barn which disappears sometime between 1784 and the mid nineteenth century.

Of the rest of the site, little can be gleaned from documentary sources. It is possible that the two deep basins to the west and north of the site are fishponds referred to in 1279. The only other reference of interest is to the sum of 16 shillings allowed in 1452 to make a ditch around the manor, which may have been the ditch and bank now buried under the modern flood-prevention bank.

I am grateful to Mr P. Proby for allowing me to examine the manuscripts in Elton Hall and to Mrs J. Glen for allowing me to use her office. Other documents relating to the site are located in the Public Records Office and the British Museum.