

A NEW SUFFOLK LEPER CHAPEL? THE LEPERS OF WENTFORD AND THE CHAPEL OF ST MARY MAGDALENE, CHILTON

by MAX SATCHELL

THE PAUCITY OF documents concerning the *leprosi de Wanteforde* – a particularly obscure Suffolk community of lepers – has been responsible for its omission from the standard reference works concerning medieval English hospitals.¹ The community is only known from a single charter transcribed in the cartulary of the priory of Stoke-by-Clare. The charter records a grant by Alexander de la Cressonnière of an annual rent of 12d. from a property in Gazeley to the lepers.² In 1983 the editors of the cartulary, Richard Mortimer and Christopher Harper-Bill, provisionally identified *Wanteforde* as Wentford in Poslingford and dated the charter to the mid-12th century (Harper-Bill and Mortimer 1983, II, 290). No new documents have subsequently come to light, but recent research means that we know much more about the general context of medieval communities of lepers (Satchell 1998). This new work justifies another look at the lepers of Wentford using a much broader range of evidence than employed hitherto. In the analysis that follows I shall concentrate mainly on identifying the chapel of the community and then use the evidence of this to make a few remarks concerning the community and its significance.

Today the place-name Wentford applies to a farm in the parish of Poslingford about 200m north of Chilton Ditch, the stream that divides Poslingford from Clare. The geographical extent of medieval Wentford is hard to establish because it was always a very minor place. It is not recorded in Little Domesday, nor as the name of a post-Conquest manor or vill.³ Part of it seems always to have been in Poslingford. Individuals with the locative surname *de Wanteford* are listed in the subsidy of 1327 under Poslingford but are absent from the neighbouring vill of Stoke-cum-Chilton and Clare (Green 1906, 203, 214). The imprecision of such evidence makes it dangerous to assume that Wentford was restricted to Poslingford, especially as the name Wentford derives from its location at the crossing of a watercourse i.e. the *wente* (M.E. ‘a path, a way’) across the ford (Smith 1970, II, 254). The topography of such places predisposes their names to apply to both banks of their watercourse. This suggests that the name could also apply to the part of Clare near the crossing on the south side of Chilton Ditch (see Fig. 61).

One way of determining the location of the community is to look for evidence of its chapel. Chapels often marked the location of leper hospitals long after they ceased to function. Hospital chapels were easily adapted for worship by other groups and might survive for hundreds of years after the domestic buildings of the hospital had fallen into disuse. The validity of this approach is dependent upon the single reference to the lepers of Wentford as indicating a permanent community with its own chapel. Two factors suggest that this assumption is sound. First, in the 12th century the use of different terminology concerning the lepers (*leprosi*) and a leper hospital (*hospitale leprosi*) of a designated place did not indicate a distinction between formal and informal communities. Formal leper hospitals, which had a chapel consecrated by the diocesan and one or more priests, were often referred to in documents simply as the *leprosi* or *infirmi* of a designated place (Satchell 1998, 74–75). Second, the possession of chapels by communities of lepers had become a commonplace in the course of the 12th century, especially after 1179 when the Third Lateran Council placed the rights of lepers to have their own churches and cemeteries within the framework of canon law (Avril 1981, *passim*).

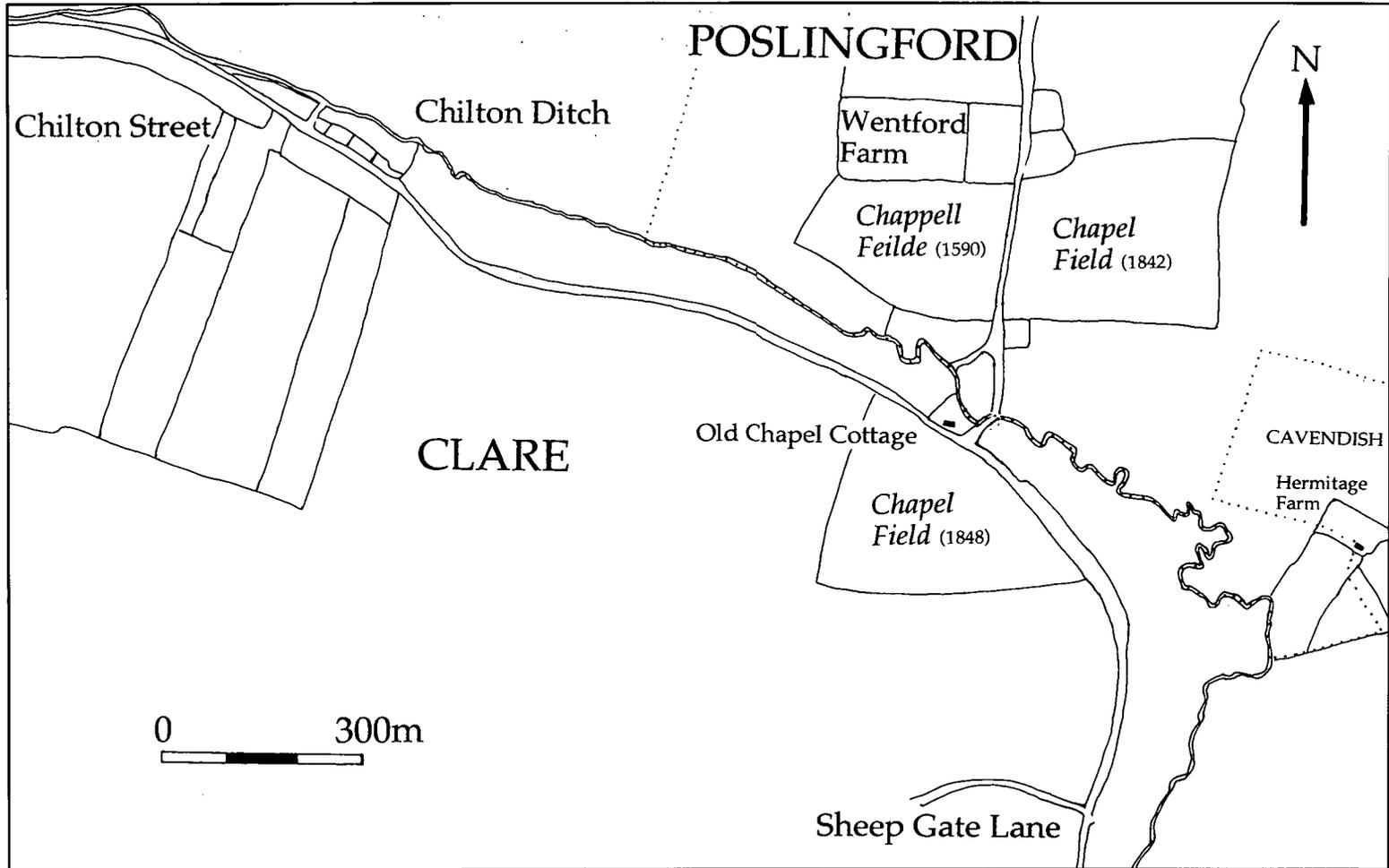


FIG. 61 – Major features and selected plot boundaries in the area around Old Chapel Cottage (after the map of Wentford Farm, 1590 and the tithe maps and apportionments of Clare, Cavendish and Poslingford, S.R.O.I., HD 11/1/49; S.R.O.B., T76/1–2, T90A/1–2, T146/1–2; map : author).

The only medieval chapel extant near Wentford Farm is Old Chapel Cottage, a small flint-rubble building with stone quoins.⁴ A private house since the 16th century, this was formerly a chapel dedicated to St Mary Magdalene. Old Chapel Cottage lies just over Chilton Ditch in Clare not Poslingford (see Fig. 61). Is it appropriate to link this building to the Wentford community? To begin to answer this question it is necessary to establish how many chapels were in the general area of Wentford. The secondary sources are contradictory. Gladys Thornton, the historian of Clare, referred to the chapel that is now Old Chapel Cottage under Chilton but stated that it was sometimes called Wentford Chapel. Unfortunately she did not provide a rationale for this identification (Thornton 1928, 99, 100, 178). The *Suffolk Atlas* locates a proto-church/chapel-of-ease at Old Chapel Cottage and a roadside chapel with an attached hermitage in the vicinity of Wentford Farm in Poslingford (Northeast 1999, 56–57).

Nearly all the documents referring to a chapel at Wentford are medieval. In 1231 Henry III granted Gilbert de Wanteford, parson of the chapel of Wentford, and his successors, an annual fair to be held by the chapel on the vigil, day and morrow of the Ascension of the Lord (*Cl.R.* 1902, 475; *Cal.Ch.R.* 1903, 129). Lands in Poslingford belonging to the chapel of Wentford are mentioned in the bounds of a charter of Robert fitz Hugh and a confirmation to his son William, both of which are transcribed in the cartulary of Dunmow Priory. These charters can be roughly dated to the mid-13th century.⁵ Land belonging to the church (*ecclesia*) of Wentford is mentioned in a charter of Hugh, another of Robert's sons.⁶ The use of *ecclesia* is clearly an alternative for the chapel because the property mentioned in all three documents occurs in the same place. The chapel of Wentford is mentioned in the court rolls of Clare in 1403 and 1443.⁷ The chapel is also mentioned in



FIG. 62 – North doorway from the north-east, showing the capitals and the round-headed arch with its inner order subsequently re-cut as a pointed arch (photo: Chris North).

three late medieval wills. The bad road leading from Clare to the chapel is the subject of bequests in the wills of Joan, widow of William Barker, in 1452 and John Hengestman in 1466.⁸ A bequest of 20d. for the repair and improvement of the chapel of 'the Blessed Marie Magdelene de Wanteford Chappell' is made in the will of John Wryght in 1474.⁹

The *Nomina Anachoritarum* entered in a register of Bury St Edmunds Abbey, also mentions Wentford as one of forty-two *anachoritae* that ought to receive dues from the keepers of the shrine of St Edmund.¹⁰ The entry is in a hand of the 14th century, but may be a transcript of an older original because the volume in which it is found has no dated entries within it later than 1297–8.¹¹ Whether *anachorita* should be read as a recluse's cell or a recluse is not certain, though as the list names places not people it is possible that the former interpretation is correct.

All the documents referring to a chapel at Chilton are post-medieval. A connection between a chapel and Chilton is first implied in a deed of 1445 granting the chapel of St Mary Magdalene to the gild of St John the Baptist 'in the hamlet of Chilton', but the location of the chapel itself is described simply as 'within the parish of Clare'.¹² In 1548 the chantry certificate for the chapel referred to the same grant but added that the chapel stands in the hamlet of Chilton a quarter mile from the church of Clare.¹³ Following the dissolution of the chapel and the grant of its site and lands to Thomas Marsh and Roger Williams, a long series of deeds records the transfer of the former chapel from one owner to another. All the deeds refer to the property as being in the hamlet of Chilton and some of them give sufficient topographical detail for us to be sure that the former chapel is identical with the location of Old Chapel Cottage.¹⁴

Depending on how the evidence is read there might be anything from one to three chapels in the area of Wentford. The number inflates from one to two if notices concerning chapels under Wentford and Chilton refer to separate institutions. The existence of a third



FIG. 63 – Detail of west waterleaf capital of north doorway (photo: Chris North).

chapel is dependent on the unlikely (but not impossible) scenario that the *anachorita* of Wentford was a permanent establishment with its own chapel rather than a recluse or recluse's cell attached to Wentford chapel.¹⁵

A careful reading of the evidence points to there being only one chapel in the area. The possibility that the chapels of Wentford and Chilton were synonymous is raised by their having the same dedication to St Mary Magdalene. *Chapel Field* names confined to a single area in the vicinity of Old Chapel Cottage also point to a single location for the chapel (see Fig. 61). A map of Wentford Farm by the Essex map-maker, Edward Eldred, provides conclusive evidence that Wentford and Chilton were alternative terms for the same chapel. The map, dated 1590, refers to the area of Old Chapel Cottage as 'Wentford Chappell in tenuta Georgii Fenne'.¹⁶ Wentford and Chilton are clearly used to indicate the same property because the original deed of purchase by George Fenne still survives. The deed of 1581 specifies the property as the 'late free chapell called Mary Magdalen chappell within the hamlet of Chilton'.¹⁷ To conclude this argument: it seems that much of the confusion concerning the number of chapels in the area of Wentford Farm was caused by the substitution of Chilton for Wentford to designate the location of the chapel and that this change of terminology apparently post-dates and derives from the grant of the chapel to the gild of St John the Baptist, Chilton.

The evidence for a second chapel attached to a recluse's cell is weak and unconvincing. Apart from the single medieval reference to the *anachorita*, a *Hermitage* place-name applies to a farm located on the boundary of an outlier of the parish of Cavendish some 500m east of Old Chapel Cottage (see Fig. 61). The outlier indicates a long-standing parochial division, but this is explicable without recourse to the presence of a recluse's cell. Much of the area in the vicinity of Hermitage Farm is flat, formerly liable to flooding, and included alder carr, ozier beds, and meadow in the 19th century. The tortuous parish boundaries of Poslingford and Clare within this area, and the presence of an outlier of Cavendish, are typical of the types of boundaries that result from the carving up of an area of shared wetland (see Fig. 61). The *Hermitage* place-name is difficult to interpret because it is not documented before 1792.¹⁸ If the name is medieval in origin, it is just as likely to derive from the endowment of a recluse's cell as from its location. Even if the place-name indicates the site of a recluse's cell, it does not follow that this institution had its own chapel. Hermitage Farm is also an unlikely location for a leper-house.

There is considerable circumstantial evidence to link the chapel that is now Old Chapel Cottage to the leper community. The sites and lands of medieval hospitals are sometimes indicated by place-names that derive from the Middle English word *spital* 'hospital' (Smith 1970, II, 138). A field name *Spitelacre* occurs in a transcript of a Poslingford charter that dates to the first half of the 13th century.¹⁹ Topographical details from this and other documents of about the same date indicate *Spitelacre* lay adjacent to *Dunekewellemede* somewhere in the south of Poslingford. The relative proximity of *Spitelacre* to Old Chapel Cottage is suggestive, especially as the chapel or church of Wentford is also documented as holding land in *Dunekewellemede*.²⁰ The juxtaposition of property that apparently derived its name from possession by a hospital with property that belonged to Wentford chapel could have arisen if the chapel originally served the hospital and retained some of its endowment.

The dedication of the chapel to St Mary Magdalene is particularly appropriate for a leper-house. St Mary Magdalene was the most popular dedication for English leper hospitals. Over a quarter of the 202 English leper hospitals whose dedications are known were partially or wholly dedicated to her.²¹ Of the four other Suffolk chapels known to be dedicated to St Mary Magdalene, two were attached to leper hospitals at Eye and Beccles, and a third chapel at Bungay was associated with a very poorly documented hospital that probably originally served lepers.²²

The location of Old Chapel Cottage is also consistent with a leper hospital. Most leper hospitals were associated with towns. These institutions were generally located at, or just beyond, the limits of the town's territory, frequently beside main roads near places where passers-by could be importuned for alms, such as bridges, causeways and holloways. Clare was an important Domesday market centre and the *caput* of a great honour. Old Chapel Cottage lies at the very edge of the Domesday manor of Clare at the junction of two roads near the crossing of a stream.²³ The road east of the chapel to Poslingford was formerly the main road from Clare to Bury St Edmunds. Like most medieval roads, it is difficult to know when it first became established, but it is referred to as the king's highway from Clare to Bury St Edmunds in the 13th century.²⁴

Alternative functions for the chapel that is now Old Chapel Cottage are less convincing. Some medieval Suffolk chapels originated as late Saxon proto-churches that failed to obtain full parochial status after the Norman Conquest. Most of the late Saxon proto-churches were listed as churches in Little Domesday. The wholesale omission of Chilton and Wentford from Little Domesday, together with the minor nature of both settlements, makes it unlikely that the chapel had a pre-Conquest origin. The chapel is also unlikely to have served as a private chapel of a lord. Chapels of this sort were generally founded close to the lord's hall, such as the chapel of St Nicholas, Stoke-by-Nayland. Founded by the Constable family in the first half of the 13th century, its ruins lie immediately south of the site of the family seat, Gifford's Hall.²⁵ There is no evidence for a medieval hall near Old Chapel Cottage.

The chapel that is now Old Chapel Cottage is also unlikely to have been founded as a chapel-of-ease. These were founded only in modest numbers in Suffolk after the Norman

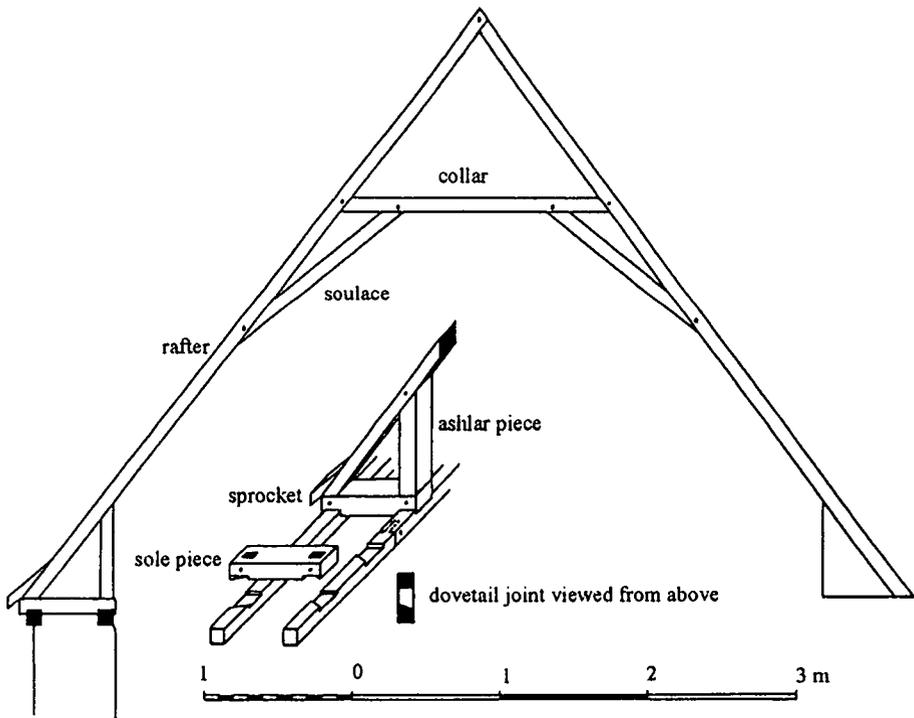


FIG. 64 – Rafter couple, second east of the partition, with detail of jointing (Stephen Heywood).

Conquest, because the county's settlement and parochial structure was already largely established. Many of those founded were built to serve new market centres in and after the 13th century, but the architecture of the chapel that is now Old Chapel Cottage indicates construction in the late 12th century (Dymond 1995, *passim*). A doorway with a round arch with waterleaf capitals is built as one with the north wall (see Figs. 62, 63). This wall is largely built of flint rubble with horizontal coursing that is characteristic of the 12th century in general and the capitals are characteristic of c.1170–1190.²⁶ Some commercial activity is implied by various mentions of fairs at Wentford whose revenues apparently belonged to the lords of Clare from at least 1262. The fairs were of considerable importance in the local economy but significantly Wentford never obtained a market grant (Thornton 1928, 108, 177). It seems unlikely that the chapel was constructed solely to serve something that happened twice a year.²⁷

It is also hard to see how the chapel that is now Old Chapel Cottage could serve any parochial function for Chilton, because it lies 900m east of the main area of medieval settlement which was still visible in the 19th century as field boundaries of a single-row hamlet laid out as a series of semi-regular tofts and crofts along Chilton Street (see Fig. 61). Finally, the single reference to the church of Wentford in the 13th century is explicable without recourse to the chapel having a parochial function. Like conventual churches, some leper chapels were termed *ecclesiae* (Satchell 1998, 214–15).

None of the evidence presented can provide proof positive that the chapel that is now Old Chapel Cottage served the lepers of Wentford, but when taken in the round it seems very likely. What does this conclusion tell us? First, the addition of this probable new leper chapel is especially welcome because of its outstanding architecture that compares very favourably with the more fragmentary remains of the Suffolk leper chapels of St Nicholas, Bury St Edmunds and St James, Dunwich. This is not the place to discuss the architecture of the chapel in detail, but some important features must be mentioned.

The chapel is outstanding in that it probably retains its original medieval roof. This consists of thirty-six rafter couples including those set against the east and west gable walls.

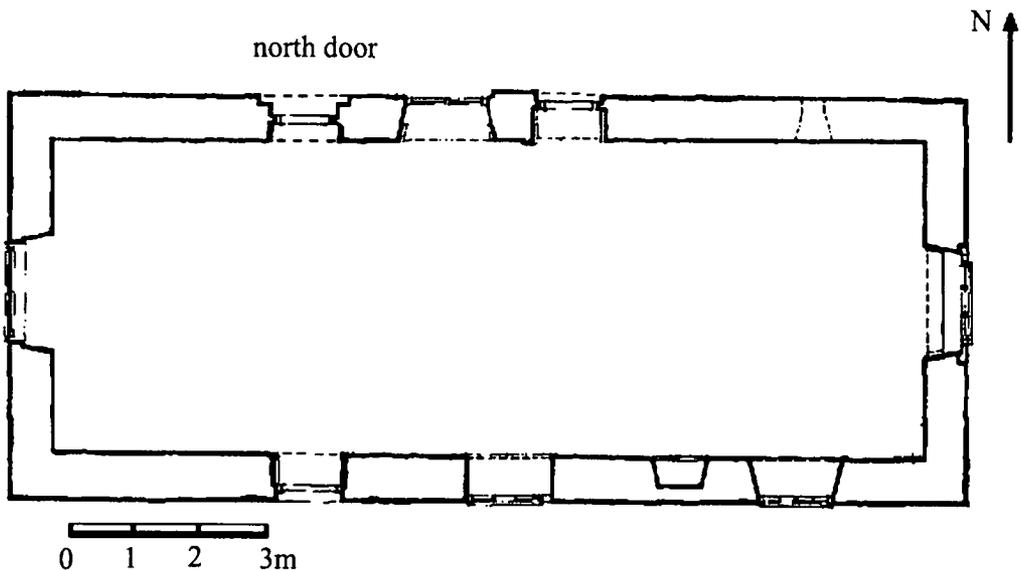


FIG. 65 – Simplified plan of the ground floor of Old Chapel Cottage showing the position of the north door (author).

The rafter couples are set into double wall plates on the north and south walls. A sprocket is attached near the lower end of each rafter to help the roof extend beyond the eaves of the building. Each rafter is joined to a sole piece set into the beams of the wall plate with two half-dovetail joints. Viewed from above each dove-tailed joint is cut at a right angle to the outer edge of the wall plate on one face and a less acute angle on the other face. All the other roof joints are mortised. An ashlar piece rises at right angles from the sole plate and reinforces each rafter. The rafter couple is further secured with straight soulaces – braces which rise from each rafter to the collar (see Fig. 64).

Roofs of this type were built in England from the 12th century (Currie 1990, 19–20). The chapel roof has other early characteristics in its exclusive use of straight timbers, its numerous rafter couples, and the absence of purlins, i.e. timbers which run parallel to the wall plates to reinforce the rafters. If, as is likely, the roof is an original feature of the late 12th century, its survival would be very unusual for medieval churches and unique for English leper-house chapels.²⁸ Dating the roof timbers by dendrochronology is an obvious priority for any future research.²⁹

Features of the architecture of the east and north walls of the cottage are anomalous and require explanation. The position of the doorway in the north wall appears too far east for an ordinary nave of the 12th century (see Fig. 65).³⁰ It may indicate that the western end of the ground floor was blocked off to accommodate a separate section, a feature difficult to explain in an ordinary chapel but more explicable for a leper hospital. The east wall has two narrow round-headed windows of the 12th century that are apparently still in their

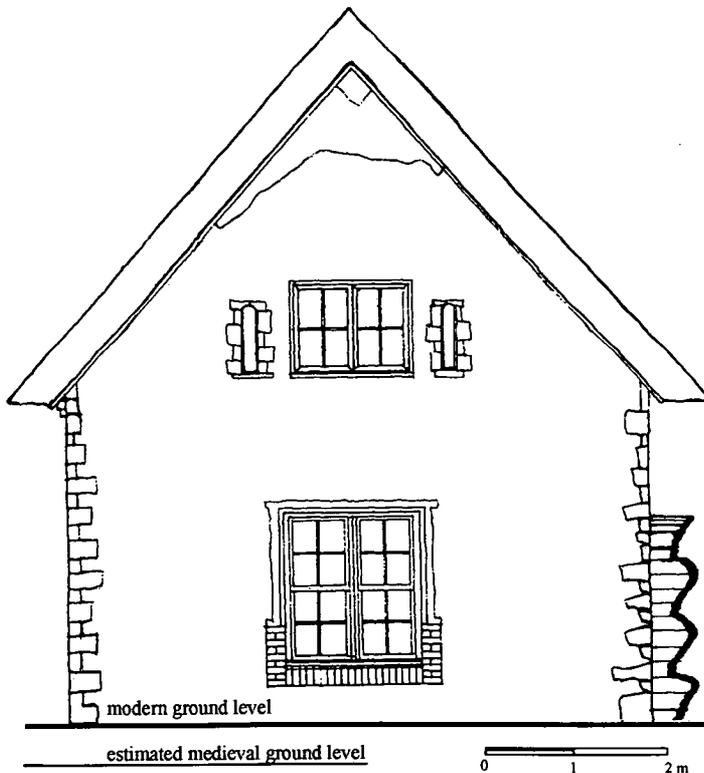


FIG. 66 – Elevation of east wall of Old Chapel Cottage (*author*).

original location at least 4.25m above the original level of the ground floor (see Fig. 66).³¹ The windows seem too high to have been intended solely to light the ground floor. Is it possible that the chapel had some sort of first floor – either full length or as a western gallery – which was a feature of some medieval hospitals? Such a feature would require a stairway, which if set against the west wall, might explain why the north door was placed further east than normal. Only detailed architectural research can address these issues.³²

In terms of the history of the community a good case can be made for foundation in the 12th century by one of the lords of Clare. This is suggested by their descendants having patronage of the chapel in the late 14th century, the land of the chapel being said to be held of the lords of Clare in a court case of 1403, and the location of the chapel within the bounds of the Domesday manor of Clare.³³ A clear statement concerning the foundation of the chapel is found in a deed of 1445 by which Richard, Duke of York and lord of the honour of Clare, granted the chapel to the gild of St John the Baptist, Chilton. Richard stated that the chapel ‘had been built, established and founded by our ancestors’.³⁴ In itself such a rehearsal of the origins of the chapel would not necessarily be reliable, for the donor and the gild would be concerned with giving a history of the chapel to ensure that present possession was legitimate. However, the consistency of this account with the earlier evidence of the patronage of the chapel and the lordship of the lands on which the chapel was founded suggests that it is genuine. To date nothing certain has been known concerning the benefaction of the Clare family to communities of lepers in the 12th and 13th centuries.³⁵ If the arguments concerning the identity and origins of the chapel that is now Old Chapel Cottage are sound, the lords of Clare were far from indifferent. It also seems that such benefaction was not purely altruistic. The location of the community at the place where travellers journeying from Bury St Edmunds to Clare first entered the vill was one that could not fail visually to imprint upon the visitor the charitable largesse of the founders of the community.

Also worthy of comment is the end of the community and the paucity of documents concerning it. The absence of documents is wholly explicable and fits a pattern observed in the history of many other leper hospitals. Many leper communities left little or no trace in the documentary record because of their early foundation date, poverty, general illiteracy, and dissolution or change of function within two or three generations (Satchell 1998, 9–13). The presumed early dissolution of the Wentford community and the wholesale disappearance of all but one of its charters may relate to the general shift of interest of the Clare family away from Clare, which occurred following the acquisition of the earldom of Gloucester by Gilbert de Clare in 1217. This would have left the leper community vulnerable, without an active patron, and unlikely to receive substantial further endowment. The disappearance of the community of Wentford and its records is a classic example of how easily medieval leper-houses became invisible to modern historians. Virtually nothing is known about many of the other medieval chapels of Suffolk.³⁶ One wonders how many of them conceal such a history.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- 1 Page 1907, 132–41; Clay 1909, 321–22; Knowles and Hadcock 1971, 310–409.
- 2 The charter refers to the property as in Needham: Harper-Bill and Mortimer 1983, II, 290. This can be identified as Needham Street in Gazeley because another charter refers to other lands Alexander held in Gazeley: Harper-Bill and Mortimer 1982, I, 289.
- 3 The paucity of settlement in Wentford is also apparent from the tiny amount of medieval pottery recovered during fieldwalking in the area between Wentford Farm and Chilton Ditch on the western side of the road (see Fig. 61.): Hurst 1984, 163–64.
- 4 The chapel is 15.25 m in length and 6.25 m in width.
- 5 B.L., Harleian MS 662, ff. 85r.–v., 91v. The date derives from the charter of Robert fitz Hugh mentioning land formerly of the fee of Roger Gelin. Roger held land in Poslingford in 1236: Maxwell-Lyte 1920, I, 577.
- 6 B.L., Harleian MS 662, f. 86r.
- 7 P.R.O., SC2/203/34, mem. 2r.; SC2/203/68, mem. 8r.; Thornton 1928, 99.
- 8 P.R.O., Prob 11/1, quire 18; S.R.O.B. IC500/2/11, f. 27r. My thanks to Peter Northeast for these references.
- 9 S.R.O.B., IC 500/2/11, f. 18v.
- 10 B.L., Harleian MS 3977, f. 78r.
- 11 *Ibid*; Thomson 1980, 145–46.
- 12 S.R.O.B., HA537/2. My thanks to Jane Isaacs for locating this elusive document.
- 13 P.R.O., E301/45 mem. 4r.
- 14 P.R.O., E 315/67, f.39r.–v.; S.R.O.B., HD 1914/1; HA 537/217, 227.
- 15 For links between recluses and leper hospitals in the 12th century see Satchell 1998, 131–32.
- 16 S.R.O.I., HD 11: 52/1/49.
- 17 S.R.O.B., HD 1914/1.
- 18 S.R.O.B., HD 1748/2/2.
- 19 B.L., Harleian MS 662, f. 88r. The date derives from the charter mentioning Roger Gelin. Roger held land in Poslingford in 1236: Maxwell-Lyte 1920, I, 577.
- 20 B.L., Harleian MS 662, ff. 85r.–v., 88r., 91v.
- 21 Calculated from Satchell 1998, Appendix 1.
- 22 Knowles and Hadcock 1971, 313, 320, 341, 359; White 1844, 428; Raven 1874, 77. The fourth chapel was at Framlingham. Information concerning the dedications of Suffolk chapels comes from the Suffolk County Council Sites and Monuments Record and Peter Northeast.
- 23 For the extent of the Domesday manor see Thornton 1928, 17–18.
- 24 B.L., Harleian MS 662, f. 86v.
- 25 S.R.O.I., HA246/B1/3.
- 26 My thanks to Bob Carr and Rita Wood for help concerning the date of the doorway.
- 27 It is uncertain whether the fair granted to the parson of the Wentford chapel in 1231 was one of those held by the lords of Clare in 1262.
- 28 Currie lists only 20 ‘archaic’ church roofs for Essex, Herefordshire and Worcestershire: Currie 1990, 29. Seventeen Suffolk churches have medieval roofs which fall into the generic category of ‘braced collar roofs’: Haward and Aitken 1999, 171. These roofs have yet to be researched in detail, but may include examples similar in style to that of Old Chapel Cottage.
- 29 In the past attempts to date roofs of this type have been based on the typology and chronology of jointing techniques developed by Hewitt: Currie, 1990, *passim*. This approach was not followed for Old Chapel Cottage because in recent years dendrochronological research has raised doubts concerning this chronology: Pearson 1997, 32–33.
- 30 My thanks to Stephen Heywood for bringing the position of the north doorway to my attention. The distance of the doorway from the west wall expressed as a ratio of the overall length of the building is 30.27:100 (calculated from the centre of the doorway to the outside face of the west wall). The plans of a random selection of chapels and parochial churches of the 12th and 13th centuries generated ratios, when measured in the same way, that were 20: 100 or lower in nearly every instance.
- 31 The splays of the windows within the building are consistent with the windows still being in their original position. The figure of c. 4.25m from the windows to the original level of the ground floor may be an underestimate. The depth of the original floor is suggested by the position of the base of the (missing) right shaft of the north doorway discovered about 3ft below ground level in 1993. The form of the base – semi-circular with three concave grooves and set on a simple square plinth – suggests it is part of the original doorway: photo and information Nick Morton.
- 32 Definite and probable first floors are noticed for 12th-century hospitals at Canterbury and Norwich respectively: Godfrey 1955, 43; Gilchrist 1995, 45, 47–48.
- 33 P.R.O., SC2/203/34, mem. 2r.

- 34 S.R.O.B., HA 537/2.
- 35 For the general benefaction of the Clares see Ward 1981, *passim*. There is a faint possibility that a member of the Clare family founded another leper-house in Suffolk. The hospital of Jesus Christ and B.V.M., Sudbury was founded by Amice, Countess of Clare but it is not clear whether it was for lepers. A document of 1198–1217 listing grants to the house states that one of the properties granted was a house formerly of Walter the leper (*leprosus*): Harper-Bill and Mortimer 1982, I, 44–45. Did Walter enter the hospital? Was it a leper-house?
- 36 Peter Northeast classified nearly a third of the sixty-two medieval chapels within the Liberty of Bury St Edmunds as ‘other chapels’: i.e. chapels ‘about which little or nothing is known’: Northeast 1999, 56–57.

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Abbreviations

- B.L. British Library.
Cl.R. *Close Rolls of the Reign of Henry III Preserved in the Public Record Office 1 1227-1231*
Cal.Ch.R. *Calendar of Charter Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office 1 1226-1257*
M.E. Middle English.
P.R.O. Public Record Office.
S.R.O.B. Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds Branch.
S.R.O.I. Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch.