

## SHORTER CONTRIBUTION

### WHERE WAS GOSEFORD?

by PETER WAIN

THE LOST MEDIEVAL port of Goseford was once a major haven on the Suffolk coast. In the early fourteenth century its importance as an east coast destination to ships engaged in the Bordeaux wine trade was second only to Great Yarmouth and it was wealthy enough to make a significant contribution of ships and men to Edward III's navy in the 1330s and 1340s.<sup>1</sup> The very fact that there is no longer a port, or even locality, called Goseford has contributed to a debate and some confusion over its nature, location and the origins of its name. This article seeks to explore these issues, and argues that both Goseford's location and its name have been misunderstood. The debate is largely resolved, and the confusion explained, by the discovery that this stretch of coastline was dramatically different in the medieval centuries than it is today.

Following the pioneering work of Redstone and Arnott, the general view was that the port of Goseford comprised the area of the lower river Deben and the villages that bordered the river from Kirton Creek to the mouth.<sup>2</sup> Before the construction of river walls and reclamation of the former saltmarshes within the mouth of the river, the area of land flooded at high tide was much greater and the LiDAR map of the area provides a good sense of the possible extent of the port and the anchorages within it (Fig. 143). Whilst this view of the location and derivation of Goseford has become widely accepted, there are dissenting views: one suggestion is that it was based on Woodbridge; while another is that Goseford did not exist at all.<sup>3</sup>

Yet none of these views is correct. The first reference to the port of Goseford (discovered to date) occurs in 1148.<sup>4</sup> If the port was always an area of the lower Deben, then we would expect to find regular references to the villages of the Deben valley — such as Alderton, Bawdsey, Falkenham and Guston — in documents associating them with the port of Goseford. However, there are no such references in extant sources from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and they only appear in later documents from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Hence Guston is named in association with Goseford just once, in 1326, when a ship was arrested on the river.<sup>5</sup> Alderton is first mentioned as part of the port in 1401 and Falkenham in 1402.<sup>6</sup> The nature and timing of this evidence might suggest that Goseford became associated with the whole of the lower Deben later in its history, but before that it had a more specific location. This possibility will be considered below.

What of the origins of the name of Goseford? Both Redstone and Arnott maintain that the name 'Goseford' referred to the general area of the lower Deben, but that it was never a specific settlement for there was no town or village with that name.<sup>7</sup> They do, however, identify a place in Falkenham as the site of the ford that gave the area its name, which Arnott describes as 'the ford haunted by geese' (Fig. 144).<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, another assertion is that Goseford is not named after a ford, whether in Falkenham or elsewhere. It is pointed out that when considering, for example, the place and name of Orford, it is difficult to imagine that there was ever a ford across the estuary in that location. This gives rise to the possibility that the name might have been of Scandinavian origin and that the second element of the name (*-ford*) does not mean a crossing place on the river, but is derived from the Old Danish *fjorth* meaning a flooded estuary or fjord.<sup>9</sup> A further

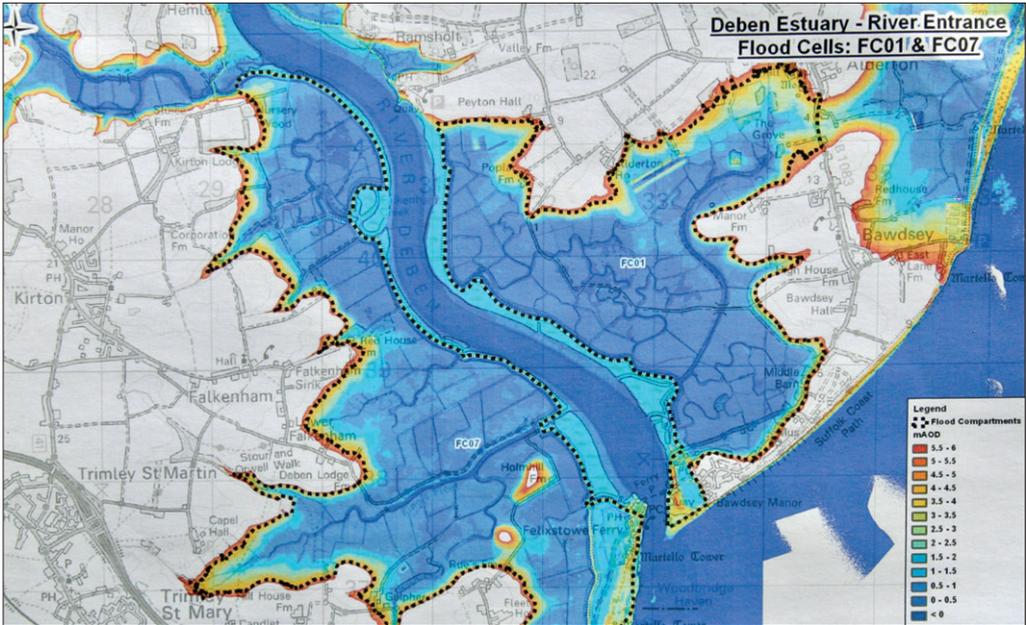


FIG. 143 – The medieval port of Goseford? LiDAR map of the Deben Estuary: River Entrance Flood cells FC01 & 7 in Deben Estuary Partnership 2012 (contains Environment Estuary information and is reproduced by kind permission of The Environment Agency and database).

local example given is Hamford Water, to the south of the mouth of the river Stour, where, again, it is difficult to identify a river crossing. This explanation might appear to reflect the topography of the lower river Deben — the fjord haunted by geese.

Yet there is compelling evidence for challenging all of these arguments about the derivation of Goseford's name. First, the name itself. Briggs' work confirms that the first element, *Gose-* must be 'goose' because there is no reasonable alternative (OE *gōs* = goose, here in the genitive plural *gōsa*). It is a common place-name element with other examples in Suffolk such as Gosford Road in Beccles and Gosbeck. Briggs contends on etymological grounds that the second element, *-ford* cannot be derived from the Scandinavian *fjorth* because the expected anglicisation of the dative form (which is most common with place-names), would be *ferth*, not *ford*. This is why the element occurs in place names as *firth*, as in the Firth of Forth.<sup>10</sup> *Ford* is in fact derived from the Old English meaning a shallow place where water can be crossed. In summary, Goseford must mean 'the ford of the geese'. This explanation would therefore identify the name of Goseford as derived originally from a single locality and a significant feature: a major ford characterized by an abundance of geese.

Other examples where the name refers to a river crossing are the villages of Gosford in Oxfordshire (at a crossing of the river Cherwell), Gosford in Herefordshire (on the river Teme), Gosford in Devon (on the river Tale) and Gosford in Coventry (a crossing on the river Sherbourne). Gosforth in Newcastle (a crossing over the river Ouse) and Gosforth in Cumbria (a crossing of the river Bleng) are additional examples of the use of the name at inland locations.

It is suggested that on the Deben, after first indicating a specific location, the name Goseford was subsequently adopted and applied to the wider area. But where was the original ford? The location identified by Redstone and Arnott lacks the essential characteristic of significance.

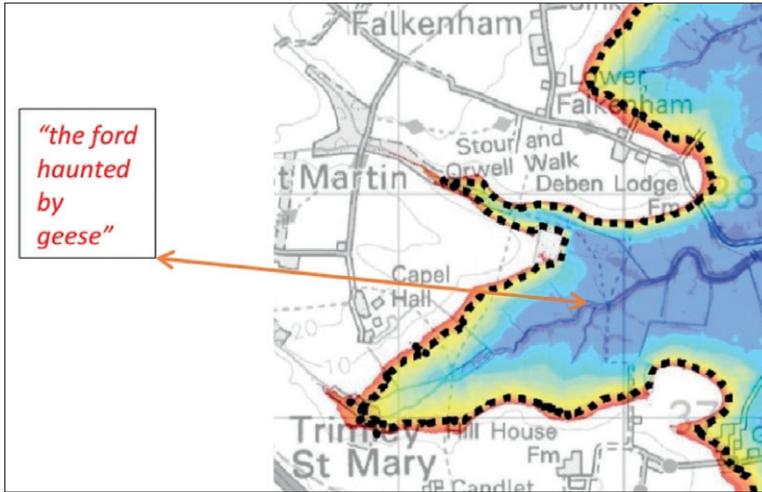


FIG. 144 – The ford haunted by geese. LiDAR map of part of the Deben Estuary: River Entrance Flood cells FCO7 in Deben Estuary Partnership 2012 (contains Environment Estuary information and is reproduced by kind permission of The Environment Agency and database).

There are serious objections to their identification of Goseford with a footpath in Falkenham (marked in Fig. 144). This pathway crosses the upper reaches of the deep water channel known as ‘Kings Fleet’ less than half a mile from the head of the stream, which makes it an unlikely and unnecessary ford. Indeed, it seems more likely that this footpath only came into existence once this area was embanked and drained and so ceased to be subject to the tides. Even if the footpath existed in the Middle Ages, the significance and importance of a ford in this location is not readily apparent. What possible significance did a ford here have within a port that encompassed villages on either side of the river which were in three separate hundreds (Carlford, Colneis and Wilford), and therefore fell under the jurisdiction of different aristocratic landlords — the dukes of Norfolk on the west bank, the dukes of Suffolk on the east?<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, there is no supporting historical evidence of significant early port activity in the villages of Trimley St Mary and Trimley St Martin. Also, as we have seen, Falkenham was not explicitly linked to Goseford until much later. There is, however, evidence of early port activity in villages on the other side of the river, especially Bawdsey, the name of which is unambiguously linked with Goseford.

If a ford near Falkenham is rejected, where might the original Goseford have been? An examination of the LiDAR map of the lower Deben (Fig. 143) shows that the land between Alderrton and Bawdsey was once a channel of shallow water. The existence of this flooded area explains the origin of the name ‘Bawdsey’, that is to say, it was an island — *Baldhere’s island*.<sup>12</sup> At low tide it is likely that the area became a ford connecting Alderton and Bawdsey. This supposition is worthy of further exploration, and is linked to the suggestion that the port of Goseford once covered a wider area than just the lower Deben. Recent research has shown that the coastline between Orford Ness and Bawdsey was significantly different in *c.*1200.<sup>13</sup> The area between the north-eastern part of Hollesley and the north end of Bawdsey island formed part of the medieval coastline, consisting of anchorages and deep water channels directly accessible to the sea. Shingle Street did not exist and Orford spit had not yet cut off Hollesley’s shoreline.<sup>14</sup> Yet this was an unstable coastline, and the storms that caused major

erosion events, for example at Dunwich, also caused major accretion events further along the coast. Deposition was the dominant process in the tidal saltmarshes, mudflats and creeks in this locality. This would have created, firstly, a natural ford between Alderton and Bawdsey, and then, a land bridge ending Bawdsey's island status.

The significance of a ford in this location is greatly enhanced by the understanding that boats could access anchorages south-east of Hollesley and east of Alderton. In this schema, the ford between Bawdsey and Alderton became the fulcrum of two sprawling havens north and south-west of Bawdsey. This fulcrum was the 'goose ford' which gave its name to a port that was originally based on Alderton and Bawdsey. In the thirteenth century the port enjoyed access to the sea to the north, via 'the Great Fleet' and Oxeneye island, and to the south to the river via what was called 'Bawdsey Fleet'.<sup>15</sup>

The inherent plausibility of this new interpretation is supported by other evidence. For example, in 1154 King Stephen granted the right to hold a three-day fair in Bawdsey, and in 1283 Edward I extended the duration to eight days. Isolated at the end of a peninsular, these grants reflect the maritime nature of the commerce. In the adjacent village of Alderton, a quantity of medieval coins has been found, the dates of which peak in the reigns of kings John, Henry III and Edward I (1199–1207), and then decline dramatically. Coins are a crude proxy for trade and there is a need for caution in interpreting such finds. However, these discoveries, coupled with the evidence of where more than three-quarters of them were minted (in port towns), the number of foreign coins, the number of jettons found, and the fact that no other village on the lower river has yielded up coins in such quantities, strongly suggests the commercial importance of Alderton in the thirteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, there is contemporary documentary evidence showing that by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there were places in Bawdsey that were identified as the 'old port' and the 'new port'.

The northern sector of the port, however, suffered major changes in its layout during the later Middle Ages compared with the southern sector. This was a period of severe global climate change, which was characterized by an increase in storm frequency and severity in the North Sea basin from the mid-thirteenth century. Major erosion and deposition events occurred frequently. As Dunwich was washed away, so Orford spit extended southwards and the havens around Alderton and Hollesley silted up. The combined effect was to significantly change this coastline, forcing the location of Goseford to move.

The evidence that Goseford continued to be an identifiable locality, but focused upon new locations, is recorded in two extents of Bawdsey dated 1438 and 1579.<sup>17</sup> The extent dated 1438 refers to the location of a piece of land in Preston which is identified by abutments.<sup>18</sup> One abutment is 'the King's Way leading to Goseford' (Fig. 145). This entry therefore confirms Goseford as a specific place and not a general area on the lower river, and the proximity to Preston (the site of land owned by Butley Priory in the village) strongly suggests this road, and by extension Goseford, was located in the south of the village.

A second extent of Bawdsey, dated 1579, contains the following heading:

*Perambulacio mesuagiorum et curtilageiorum ex parte occidentale cocommunis vie tendent versus Gosforthe haven incipiens ex parte boreale et progrediens versus australem* [Perambulation of messuages and curtilages to the west of the common way leading towards Gosforth haven beginning at the north and proceeding towards the south].<sup>19</sup>

This entry makes it quite clear that *Gosforthe* is in the south of the village and is a specific place. In addition, examination of Fig. 143 shows that the *Gosforthe* referred to was a name that was borrowed and not based on an existing physical feature because there is no evidence of a place that could be a ford south of Preston.



FIG. 145 – The site of Preston. LiDAR map of part of the Deben Estuary: River Entrance Flood cells FCO1 in Deben Estuary Partnership 2012 (contains Environment Estuary information and is reproduced by kind permission of The Environment Agency and database).

The traditional assumption that Goseford was not a specific place is also likely to be, in part, the product of a later misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the word ‘haven’. The *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* suggests that the Latin word ‘*portus*’ can be translated as a harbour, haven or port, whilst the *Middle English Dictionary* refers to ‘port’ as being a harbour or haven.<sup>20</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of ‘port’ is ‘a place on a coast or shore which boats use to shelter from storms, or load and unload: a harbour, a haven’.<sup>21</sup> In the *Middle English Dictionary*, ‘haven’ is defined as, firstly, a harbour or port, and, secondly, a refuge. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* there are also two definitions: the first is ‘a harbour, a port’; whilst the second is literal or figurative, namely ‘a place of shelter, protection, safety or retreat: a refuge, a sanctuary’, with the OED also noting that this is ‘now the usual sense’.<sup>22</sup>

Thus the two words, when referring to a place where ships anchor, appear to be synonymous. The interchangeability of these two words is perhaps demonstrated by entries in the extent of 1438 where, although there is no mention of Goseford as a port, there are references to other places in the village that were described as ‘ports’ and also ‘havens’.<sup>23</sup> In three cases the reference is to a ‘*novus portus* [new port]’, four times to a ‘*newehavene*’ and once to a ‘*veterus portus* [old port]’.

The use of the terms ‘old port’ and ‘new port’ is also significant in that it points to changes in maritime accessibility to the village which had been caused by alterations in Bawdsey’s coastline. The ‘old port’ may have been a reference to the area that was the ford between Alderton and Bawdsey. One location of a ‘new port’ was at the end of what is today East Lane (Fig. 146). The evidence for this comes from the two extents. That of 1438 contains a reference to a piece of land called *Spendlowes* which had as its abutment on the south side, ‘the way leading towards Le Newehavene’.<sup>24</sup> In the extent of 1579, *Spendlowes* is referred to as *Spendlowes*, with this later entry recording the abutment on the south side as ‘the way leading towards the newehaven, now called Eastweye ...’.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the heading set out above, in the extent of 1579 there are fifteen other references to *Gosforthe haven*, whilst the word *portus* is never used.<sup>26</sup> There are strong grounds, therefore, for arguing that as time passed, the use of the term *portus* gave way to the synonym ‘haven’, so that by the sixteenth century Goseford was described as a haven rather



FIG. 146 – The old and new ports? LiDAR map of part of the Deben Estuary: River Entrance Flood cells FCO1 in Deben Estuary Partnership 2012 (contains Environment Estuary information and is reproduced by kind permission of The Environment Agency and database).

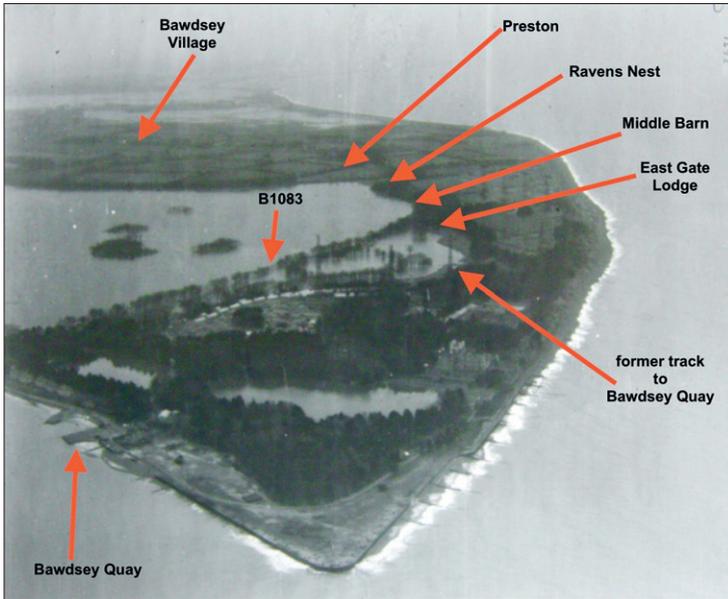
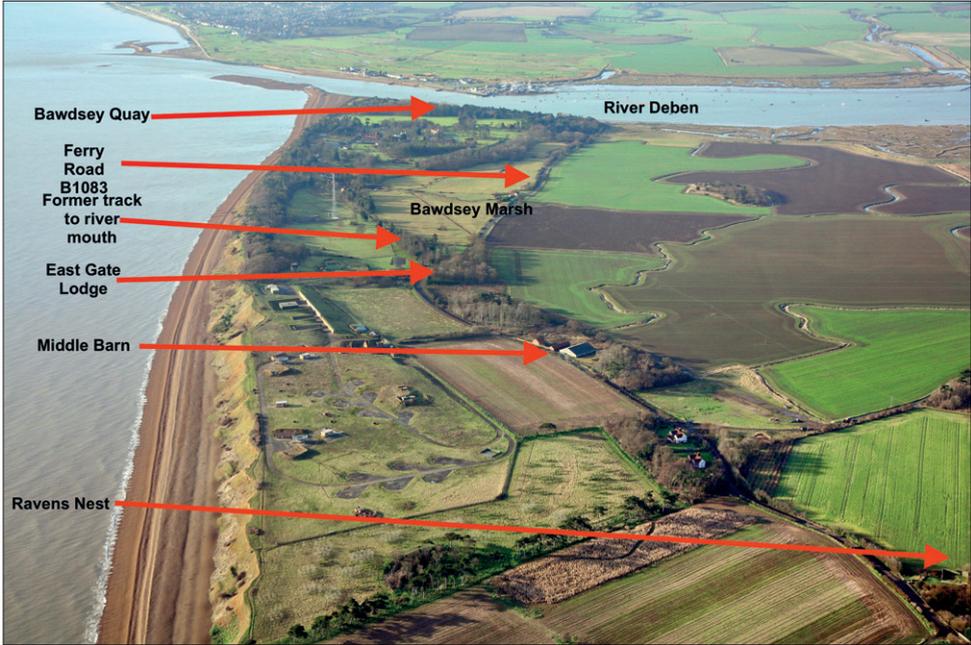
than a port. Thus, when scholars subsequently researched or wrote about Goseford, the absence of a specific town or identifiable place, coupled with the existence of references to *Goseforthe haven* led them to assume that what was being described was not a specific place but ‘a place of shelter, protection or safety’, i.e. the second OED definition of the word. This simple error would explain why Goseford was not regarded as a specific place, but an area of the river.

How far to the south of the village did Goseford move? It is not clear, however an entry in the 1579 extent provides a clue. This entry refers to a piece of land, which has no name, but lies:

next to the tenement at Preston.....of which one head abuts on the way leading to Gosforth Haven towards the east and the other head abuts on land called Ravens Neaste in Preston towards the west.<sup>27</sup>

A map in the Suffolk Archives at Ipswich dated 1802 shows land held by a farmer named Corey Cavell at that time.<sup>28</sup> Lying next to Bawdsey Hall (formerly land held by Butley Priory





ABOVE:

FIG. 149 – After Ravens Nest (2). Aerial photograph of part of the Deben Estuary (reproduced by kind permission of Mike Page).

BELOW:

FIG. 150 – The 1953 flood (source: Historic England Archive [RAF Photography]).

and called Preston) is a field that abuts onto a trackway going south. This field is called *Garden Piece* and to the west of that field is a field named *Ravensneaste*. *Garden Piece* and *Ravensneaste* are again shown on the 1846 tithe map.<sup>29</sup> Today, the field once called *Garden Piece* is not named because it falls within the curtilage of Bawdsey Hall, however, it remains identifiable because it is roughly the same shape as it was in 1802 and adjacent to Bawdsey Hall ('next to the tenement at Preston'). It has the B1083 to Bawdsey Quay lying to the east ('the way leading to Gosforth') and the field still called Ravens Nest (*Ravensneaste*) to the west (Fig. 147).

The continued existence of the name and the knowledge of the location of Ravens Nest is important because it clearly establishes a starting point for a possible new location of the port of Goseford. The LiDAR map (Fig. 148) shows that, after the field called Ravens Nest, 'the way leading to Gosforth' passed along a shoreline leading towards the mouth of the river. It was not until 1901 that Sir Cuthbert Quilter, lord of Bawdsey manor, built a new road called Ferry Road (now the B1083) intending it to provide a route for locals so that they did not cross his estate. This new road began at what is presently called East Gate Lodge and crossed Bawdsey Marshes *en route* to the mouth of the river at Bawdsey Quay. The earlier track followed roughly the present-day east driveway to Bawdsey manor and was protected from the sea to the south-east by an area of high ground known as Bawdsey Cliff (Fig. 149). The area would have created an ideal shallow, sheltered location for ships and appears to have been fed by deep water channels flowing either into Bawdsey Fleet (now Queen's Fleet) or directly into the river. A reconstruction of the sheltered nature of this area and its suitability as an anchorage is shown in a somewhat grainy aerial photograph taken in February 1953 at the time of the East Coast flood (Fig. 150).

Could Gosforthe Haven have been located at what is today Bawdsey Quay? It is possible and Davy, writing of Bawdsey in the mid-nineteenth century records that 'there is a haven for small vessels at the mouth of the river Deben'.<sup>30</sup> However, this area at the mouth of the river would appear to have been exposed to northerly, westerly and southerly winds, as well as the unprotected ebb and flow of the sea. This would make it a much more dangerous and less likely anchorage in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries than the shallow, sheltered area below East Gate Lodge. The port did eventually move to what is now Bawdsey Quay, which is a further demonstration of how anchorages move as land is silted up and marshes drained for agriculture.

## CONCLUSION

What was the port of Goseford and where was it? Its significance as a maritime location on the Suffolk coast in the medieval period is well-established. If it was originally centred on a 'ford of geese' then, on the basis of etymology, landscape features and significance, the only realistic candidate is the shallow passage between Alderton and Bawdsey. This proposition is also corroborated by the reconstruction of the coast in the Middle Ages and by archive material that underlines the principal role of Bawdsey in the port of Goseford, the record of archeological finds in Alderton recorded on the Portable Antiquities Scheme database, and written evidence from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that there was a port (or haven) named Goseford that had moved and relocated to the south of the village of Bawdsey.

Mysteries and loose ends remain. For example, what significance, if any, is there in the place called Middle Barn (Figs 143, 148 and 149)? It is recorded on a map of 1837, so predates Quilter's road by at least sixty years.<sup>31</sup> If its origin is of some antiquity, then what was the barn in the middle of? Two havens? Or is this a red herring? There is still more to learn of this lost landscape, so whilst there is a strong case that the original port of Goseford was located

between Alderton and Bawdsey and subsequently moved, greater clarification might be achieved if there was a detailed landscape and archaeological survey of the historically important areas between the two villages and the land that was part of the former shoreline south of Ravens Nest.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the valuable advice and assistance I have received from Vivienne Aldous, Professor Mark Bailey, Dr Keith Briggs and Val Dudley. All opinions expressed and any errors are however entirely my own.

#### NOTES

- 1 Wain 2016, 582.
- 2 It embraced 'a large area from Hemley as far seawards as the Whiting Bank, but apparently did not include Bawdsey', Arnott 1946, 47, followed in part in Wain 2016, 582.
- 3 Woodbridge: Roger 2004, 490; see Lambert 2011, 138, fn.
- 4 Stubbs 1880, 386.
- 5 'La Godale of Guston (140 tons)' *Calendar of the Memoranda Rolls*, 130.
- 6 Alderton: Henry IV: Jan. 1401, '*et forspris cervoise q'est amesner hors du dit roialme pur vitailier la ville de Caleys par gentz des villes de Baudessey et Alderton sur Gosseford, come ils sont chargez et assignez puis le conquest du dit ville* [and excepting beer which is sent outside the said kingdom to supply the town of Calais by the people of the towns of Bawdsey and Alderton on Gosford, as they have been charged and assigned to do since the conquest of the town]', Given-Wilson 2005, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/parliament-rolls-medieval/january-1401>; Falkenham: Henry IV: Sept. 1402 '*et forspris cervoise q'est amesnez hors du dit roialme pur vitailier vostre ville de Caleys par gentz des villes de Baudessey, Faltenham et Aldertoun sur Gosseford, come ils sont chargez et assignez puis le conquest du dite ville de Caleys* [and except for the ale which is exported from the said realm for the victualling of your town of Calais by people from the towns of Bawdsey, Falkenham and Alderton on Gosford, as they have been charged and assigned to do since the conquest of the said town of Calais]', Given-Wilson 2005, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/parliament-rolls-medieval/september-1402>.
- 7 'The estuary of the Deben has always been known as the port of Goseford from the passage over the river, at a spot on the right bank of the stream in Falkenham called Goseford marshes', Redstone 1908, 237; 'This was not an actual place but comprised a district which stretched up the river as far as Kirton Creek', Arnott 1946, 54; 'Goseford was a port without a town', Arnott 1946, 47.
- 8 Arnott 1950, 54.
- 9 Newton 2011, 297.
- 10 Newton 2011, 297, suggests that the name Goseford derives from the Norse *-fjorth*, which would refer to the river Deben. This interpretation is at odds with the discovery that the port of Goseford extended beyond the Deben to Oxeneye, with a ford/causeway between Alderton and Bawdsey as its fulcrum. Keith Briggs (pers. comm.) is clear in his forthcoming book that the place-name evidence supports the *-ford*, not the *-fjorth* derivation.
- 11 Wain 2016, 588.
- 12 Briggs and Kilpatrick 2016, 9 and Briggs 2021, 48
- 13 Bailey, Wain and Sear 2021, 86–114.
- 14 Bailey, Wain and Sear 2021, Fig. 28.
- 15 Bailey, Wain and Sear 2021 Fig. 30.
- 16 Wain 2022, 2–12.
- 17 *Survey of the manor of Bawdsey, hundred of Wilford, co. Suffolk*; 1437–8, BL, Add. MS 23948 and Add. MS 32134.
- 18 *Survey of the manor of Bawdsey, hundred of Wilford, co. Suffolk*; 1437–8, BL, Add. MS 23948.
- 19 *Survey of the manor of Bawdsey or 'Baudeseye Russhe nuper Willoughby', co. Suffolk*, BL, Add. MS 32134.

- 20 *The Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/portus>; *Middle English Dictionary*, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary>.
- 21 *Oxford English Dictionary*.
- 22 *Oxford English Dictionary*.
- 23 *Survey of the manor of Bawdsey, hundred of Wilford, co. Suffolk*; 1437–8, BL, Add. MS 23948.
- 24 *Survey of the manor of Bawdsey, hundred of Wilford, co. Suffolk*; 1437–8, BL, Add. MS 23948.
- 25 *Survey of the manor of Bawdsey or ‘Baudeseye Russhe nuper Willoughby’, co. Suffolk*, BL, Add. MS 32134.
- 26 *Survey of the manor of Bawdsey or ‘Baudeseye Russhe nuper Willoughby’, co. Suffolk*, BL, Add. MS 32134, fol 9.
- 27 *Survey of the manor of Bawdsey or ‘Baudeseye Russhe nuper Willoughby’, co. Suffolk* BL, Add. MS 32134, fol. 54v.
- 28 SA/I, HD11/475/Bawdsey/1683.
- 29 SA/I, HD11/475/Bawdsey/267.
- 30 D.E. Davy, BL, Add. MS 19113 vol. XXXVII, 32–46.
- 31 SA/I, HA30.50/22/16/2/2.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BL	British Library
OE	Old English
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
<i>PROME</i>	<i>Parliamentary Rolls of Medieval England</i>
SAI	Suffolk Archives, Ipswich