

# SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

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## Molehill Green Landscape History

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**SSE protest against airport expansion, outside the pub at Molehill Green.  
*Illustration Peter Riding.***

Molehill Green, a hamlet which is part of the parish of Takeley, bordering on Broxton, was envisaged to almost completely disappear if the proposal to build a second runway for Stansted Airport had gone ahead. In preparation for this, landscape consultants carried out a remarkably thorough analysis of the area through fieldwork, trial trenching, landscape analysis, documentary research and building survey. This article is a summary of some of its findings on one of the 14 study areas, described in the report as 'Historic Landscape Units: Mole Hill Green', together with material from other sources.

Hundreds of trial trenches were dug across the G2 area to look at archaeological deposits, and 'predictive modelling' was used to assess other areas. Among many other findings, they discovered early settlement evidence to the south of Molehill Green: a Late Iron Age or Early Romano-British site, showing that people were exploiting the

wooded plateau 2,000 years ago. Excavation uncovered 13 ditches, a hearth, a post hall and another feature. This confirms local impressions and metal-detecting finds, such as an Iron Age potsherd found on one of the local farms.

The general pattern after that seems to have been the gradual abandonment of old settlement and consequent re-growth of secondary woodland, so it had to be cleared all over again when new settlers came into the area in Saxon times. Molehill Green grew up as a settlement in this assarting of woodland, when clearings were made to provide access for grazing, and then remained as valuable resources in the cleared landscape. The green today is a long tapering grassland aligned north-south, and probably at one time had more buildings around its perimeter than it does now. As often happens, the name does not appear in documents until the 13th century, and was probably once a more dispersed settlement: excavations in the 1980s found three 13th century farmsteads near the village.

The late historian of Takeley, Nia Watkiss (who, with her husband John published a book on one of the manors under the present airport), had explored the complex manorial history of this area. Molehill Green later became part of the Manor of Waltham Hall (a Scheduled Monument that came within the G2 area, although there were plans to relocate some of the buildings elsewhere). This was named from its early ownership by Waltham Holy Cross, and aerial photographs suggest an Abbey Grange nearby – this was granted a market by Henry III in 1253 and awarded free warren, but little more is known. Nia Watkiss commented: 'The Waltham Hall records suggest quite a large hamlet, with families recorded back to 1350, many of them the descendants of serfs'. She found references to 'warland' (reminiscent perhaps of the 'wareland' in medieval Walden, where it was some kind of tax arrangement?). 'This could mean that Molehill Green was near the centre of a large Saxon estate, possibly even the 'tun' to which Easton was to the east – its position at the head of the River Roding may be significant. The Waltham Hall survey talks of a 'mansio' which may well predate the Waltham Abbey Grange and Waltham Hall.' All this suggests there is far more history here waiting to be uncovered.

By the 19th century, the village consisted of many small parcels of land, with no one dominant owner. Although there are molehills on the green, this does not seem to be the origin of the name. It could come from *molenda* meaning mill, or from a surname – some sources call it Murrells or Morrells Green. Visiting Molehill Green today, it seems a typical little hamlet of the boulder clay country – quiet and peaceful, attractive in an unobtrusive way, with a mixture of cottages in scale to their surroundings, gathered around the green or straggling along the lanes. Unusually for such a small village, it still retains a number of amenities

such as pub, shop, village hall, smithy and nursery, even a cricket team, whose matches have taken place on the green for a century. This is a place where, in spite of a large rented housing sector, community contact and helpfulness still survive.

The centre of village life is the *Three Horseshoes*, thatched, timber-framed and the oldest building in Molehill Green, locally called 'The Shoes'. Until the 1930s it was also part of a 30-acre farm, and in the 1980s was one of the locations for the *Lovejoy* TV series. This popular pub sits in a typical position, facing down the historic village green, a registered common. It has been an inn from at least the 18th century, probably longer and, although there are various modern additions, the basic structure is 17th century, incorporating remains of a 15th century building. Legend has it that Did Dick Turpin supped ale here, and Edward, Prince of Wales, may have stopped by en route to visiting the Countess of Warwick ('Darling Daisy') at Easton Lodge.

Interesting features include a large fireplace, thick ceiling beams and interesting timberwork and joists. Hidden away in the attic is a crown-post, the typical roof feature of its time. All the signs are that it was most likely a hall house with cross-wing, with the hall floored in or replaced by a later wing. It is even possible, although speculative, that there was a small aisled hall, with the aisles partly surviving and marked by differing ceiling areas.

The G2 plan would have involved dismantling the building and rebuilding it some distance away at Chapel End, thereby removing it from Takeley parish into Broxted. This was opposed by heritage groups who pointed out that it was not possible to retain the integrity of a listed building in this way. It might survive as a pub, but its distinctive quality as a historic building in its natural context would be lost.

At the back of the pub is a little thatched barn, probably 17th century, also timber-framed, its roof of clasped-purlin construction. These old barns are so often lost or changed beyond recognition by conversion, that this makes it a particularly good survival.

### **The village blacksmith**

In and around Molehill Green are other interesting buildings, both listed and unlisted, of medieval, post-medieval and modern origin. Extraordinarily, Molehill Green still has a village smithy, described as an historic encroachment on the green, and Nia Watkiss believed there was a blacksmith here in medieval times. A shop for the wheelwright and blacksmith is recorded from the early 19th century, and it retained the brick forge and a few remnants of timber frame, along with a cast-iron tyre platform outside. There used to be an adjacent wheelwright's workshop. The group of buildings is of considerable historical/social

interest, and the smithy is still something of a meeting place as in olden times, run by Ron Halls like his father before him. This would also have been lost had the airport expanded.

Along the main street, and just over the border into Broxted parish, is an old Methodist meeting place, its weatherworn old plaque proclaiming 'Ebenezer Chapel 1852'. Originally the faithful met in a barn, belonging to the Easton Lodge estate. Primitive Methodist archives record the Murrell Green members in 1873, with familiar village surnames: Baker, Barker, Carr, Clayden, Cheffins, Dixon, Hansell, Ruder, Searles, Simmons, Turner and Willis. The little group continued to thrive, with its Sunday School, until a while ago, but all is now closed up and silent as has happened to most village chapels.

The village hall in Molehill Green was built as a National School in 1852, but closed in 1947, its 19 pupils transferred to Broxted or Takeley schools. Local historian Pat Salmon went there as a child as did his ancestors for a century – he was born 77 years ago in the house he still lives in at Mill End, his family having been here for 200 years, and has written extensively about it in his book on Molehill Green (see endnotes). A single-storey red-brick building, with an 1860s rear extension and porch, this too would have been demolished under G2.

Unlike many small villages, Molehill Green has managed to keep its shop, part of a 19th century terrace of four timber-framed cottages, with modern pargetting. It has been a shop since the 1830s, and the post office transferred there 60 years ago. Although essential to the local community, it would have been demolished by airport expansion. Another local business is Perry's Nursery, a family concern run by Sid and Gerri Perry who live on the premises and have worked hard to build up their nursery, while another family member runs the Perry's haulage business. Although they would have remained just outside the G2 boundary, what future would they have had if the rest of the village had disappeared?

## **Local Buildings**

Village historian Pat Salmon pointed out that historically most people lived along the back lane, known as School Lane or Honeypot Lane. Long ago it was a broad green lane, maybe a driveway, and over time cottages encroached on to the edges. After a short walk, the road becomes a byway, originally a through route to other places, and today a wonderful country walk. Much of it would have disappeared under G2 including some interesting buildings, although one of them, Yew Tree Cottage, has sadly already succumbed to a devastating fire. One of the airport properties which was rented out, this was an 18th century listed thatched cottage, pretty and timber-framed, with hipped thatched roof, an eyebrow dormer window, some original pargetting and an attractive 19th century porch. It

had been a workaday cottage made of coppice timber and wattle and daub, yet many a humble dwelling like this has been lovingly restored by generations of owners, and until the fire was in good condition and still lived in, a well-preserved timber-framed cottage in local vernacular tradition.

Also in School Lane is another house that was probably rebuilt after a fire: Carter's Farm, a 17th century listed, thatched and timber-framed cottage, probably originally the site of a medieval smallholding. It still has original red-brick chimney stacks and some original exposed timbers. This now has the charming name of Polley Luray Cottage. Some large ceiling joists in the living room could be medieval, since the house originated as a late medieval building, of which parts remain including the roof in the west end. The eastern part was added later, perhaps in the 17th or 18th century, and the whole has been extensively rebuilt in the 20th century. But it's all of a piece with the local vernacular tradition and is still lived in and still *in situ*.

Another local farmhouse, this time of 19th century date, is Murrayfield Farm, formerly Heard's Farm, a 100-acre holding which includes a timber-framed barn which is possibly older. Although in need of restoration, the Heritage Volume notes that 'the barn framing where surviving is of local interest'. Then there is White House Farm, which used to be the post-office, and was originally a small house built by Sir Walter Gilbey for an employee in the 1890s. The main house is timber-framed with a tiled roof, weatherboarding and plastered façade, and at one end survives a single bay from the earlier thatched house. There is also Ash Tree Cottage, originating in the 18th/19th century as a thatched and whitewashed cottage of brick and timber, with some period features inside.

Some of the listed buildings, including outbuildings to be turned into bat barns, would have been rebuilt elsewhere, but the unlisted buildings, which contributed to the character of Molehill Green, would not have been saved.

## **The Countryside**

The green and the field systems around Molehill Green are of medieval origin, and there are also many post-medieval features, particularly buildings and boundaries. The survival of the community over a millennium, and good documentary and map archives, make this a particularly fascinating area to study. Although the village has clearly absorbed considerable change over the centuries, most of this was piecemeal and gradual until recent times. But G2-scale development would have significantly affected the key qualities of the local historic landscape.

Molehill Green sits surrounded by rich arable fields, mature woodland and veteran trees and dense hedgerows – a landscape not so very different from the early 20th century, but most of its historic features would have been lost. A remarkable estate map of 1594, discovered only in the 1990s after being thought lost in a fire, offers much evidence of the antiquity of surviving field boundaries, which were there in Tudor and probably medieval times. Considerable evidence survives in the form of hedges, lanes, tracks, ponds, ditches, river, fields, homesteads, green, meadows, pasture and field systems.

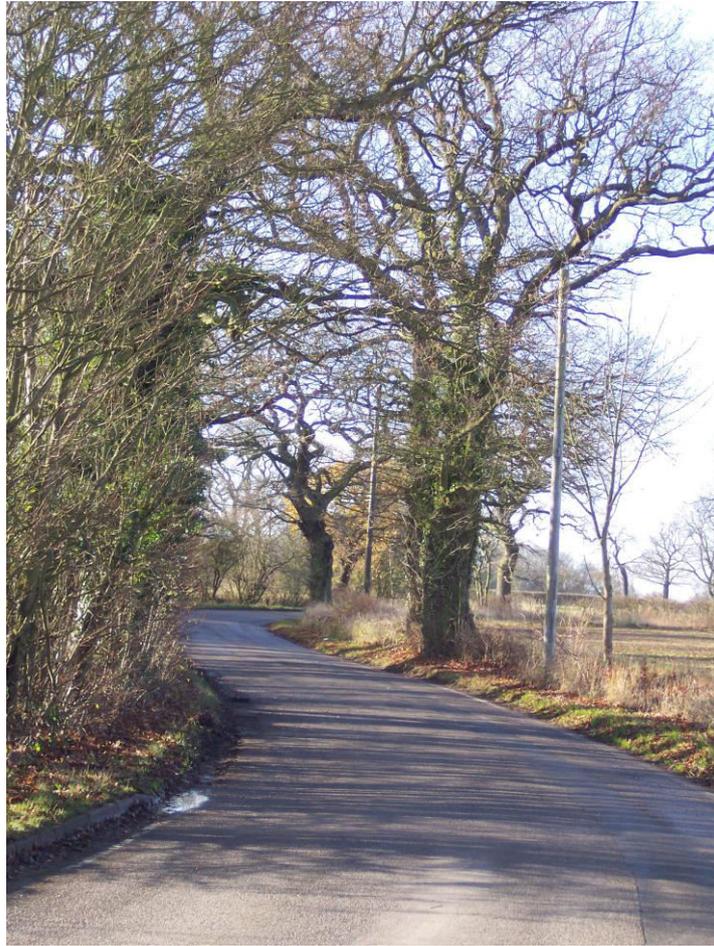
Particularly significant is the evidence uncovered of medieval and even prehistoric field systems. North-west of the *Three Horseshoes* pub, and elsewhere in the area are fields with curving boundaries formed of dense hedgerows with mature trees, which relate to former open field furlongs. This may well have been the primary open field serving the settlement of Molehill Green, and appears to have been reclaimed from the woodland in two or three phases of assarting. The 1594 map shows a lot of freehold land adjoining Molehill Green, and some of the small fields off School Lane may be the remnants of freeholders' fields (or tofts) attached to holdings along the lanes.

Of the 101 historic hedgerows which would have been affected by the second runway plan, there were in the Molehill Green area 37 identified as 'important' as defined in the Hedgerow Regulations of 1997, in addition to others around houses. They are also of great ecological and visual value as wildlife corridors, along with many mature trees along the lanes – a total of 58 veteran trees would have been lost to G2. Many woods would also have suffered, although the nearest to Molehill Green, Eastend Wood, designated Ancient Woodland, was not due to be felled. In the eastern half the wood are a complex of features: a parish boundary ditch, Tudor or earlier field boundaries fossilized within and groups of ridge and furrow earthworks: signs of a farming system that can date back 1,000 years. When the fields were abandoned, they left behind a substantial ditch and bank, with old coppiced and standard trees on the bank, and this became the edge of the woodland as it regenerated.

### **Lanes and tracks**

While it is perfectly possible that the network of lanes and tracks date back to Saxon or even earlier times, the earliest documented reference to those around Molehill Green is 13th century, when deeds of that period mention lanes to Bamber's Green, Broxted and Elsenham which began perhaps as droveways, sometimes of specified width: three, nine or sixteen feet. Today Bammers Green Road, a designated 'protected lane', is quiet and gently winding, bordered by mature oaks, punctuated by wide

views across rich arable fields. If the second runway had been built, this ancient lane and its mature oaks would largely have disappeared.



**Mature oaks along Bampers Green Road. ©Jacqueline Cooper.**

Along the lanes are places which originated as medieval messuages or homesteads, whilst others are later in date, divided by fences, ditches and hedges. Several ponds are scattered along School Lane, hinting at its former use for the movement of livestock and temporary folding. Nearby is a patchwork of fields bounded by hedges and trees, once used as pasture or meadow. Today this is good walking country, and an essential component of the Three Parishes Millennium Walks, which would have been cut up by airport expansion.

## **Conclusion**

In his delightful book, Pat Salmon quoted an article written in 1935 about Molehill Green, describing it as 'one of the happiest villages in England'; fortunately, since the second runway plan was abandoned, the future for this 1,000-year-old community and 1,000 or more acres of countryside is currently looking more secure. But airport expansion plans have a nasty

habit of re-appearing and those who care about the preservation of this ancient landscape need to stay alert.

## Notes

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**Note: The original article was written at a time when it seemed as though Molehill Green and its environs were under threat of airport expansion, an outcome which thankfully never came about since, although the G2 planning application was due to go to public inquiry in April 2009, the scheme was abandoned before this could take place.**

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