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A walk back in time around the bounds of Littlebury

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Boundary Oak. Photograph (c) Gillian Williamson

On one of the Rogation Days, or on Ascension Day, it was the custom to go in procession round the boundaries of the parish to ask God's blessing on the fruits of the earth, and as there were few maps and divisions of land, to call to mind and pass on to the next generation the boundaries of the township or village. The choir sang hymns, and under certain trees, which were called Gospel Trees, the clergyman read the Gospel for the day, with a litany and prayers. Sometimes boys were whipped, or bumped against trees, or thrown into a river, in order to impress upon them where the boundaries were. But they received a substantial recompense afterwards, and the whole company, when the procession was over, sat down to the perambulation dinner, and talked about their recollections of former days.

P.H. Ditchfield, *Old English Sports* (1891), p.34.

On Sunday 21 May 2006 the History Group of the Parish of Littlebury Millennium Society re-created the ancient tradition of beating the parish bounds. The last recorded occasion on which it took place was 217 years earlier when the vicar, William Gretton, noted in the parish register: '19 May 1789 the bounds of this parish were perambulated'. By then the custom was generally dying out as agriculture, especially on larger estates such as Audley End, was subject to scientific improvements and common fields were enclosed.

The route taken by the group followed quite closely the pre-Conquest boundary of the Littlebury estate described in an early-11th-century Anglo-Saxon 'perambulation'. At this time the estate, which included

Strethall, comprised 30 hides or 3,600 acres, similar to the 4,000 or so acres of the two parishes today. It is therefore not surprising that the boundary described over 1,000 years ago is still recognisable today.

The 2006 walk started at Littlebury bridge in time-honoured fashion with a Bible reading and prayer from Rev Michael Lovegrove, but no children were harmed during its subsequent course. Despite cold, wet weather, 30 walkers were there at the off, 20 stoics completed the whole 11-mile circuit and many others joined in along the way. [see map at end of article]

The first stretch took us north along the banks of the River Cam towards Bordeaux Farm, now in Little Chesterford but a part of Littlebury parish when the river marked the boundary (since moved west to the railway line). In the 13th century Bordeaux was part of the extensive land holdings of John of Littlebury, a litigious man who in 1236 was disputing fishing rights here with John de Bret of Little Chesterford. Fishing rights now belong to the Audley Fishing Club some of whose members we saw busy clearing the course of the river, a task reminiscent of the type of work medieval villeins were required to perform at the bidding of the lord of the manor. It was then extremely important to maintain a strong flow to power the two water corn mills and possibly to keep a navigable passage for boats. In 1222 the mill in Littlebury was known as 'Tunhyve', or town hithe, implying the presence of a mooring. The river is still bordered by grass meadows. In the past these provided common pasture for livestock and a hay crop for winter fodder but today livestock farming in the parish has ceased.

Point (2) on the map is close to the starting point of the Saxon perambulation: '*the ford which is Aethelward's boundary of Chesterford and the boundary of Icklington and the boundary of Littlebury*'. Here we turned south-west and climbed uphill on the Icknield Way, crossing the railway and M11. The Icknield Way is a 105-mile prehistoric collection of ancient trackways from Buckinghamshire to Norfolk sometimes described as Britain's oldest road. In Littlebury/ Strethall it follows the high ground of the chalk ridge which is the outer reaches of the Chilterns. The ridge would have ensured a relatively dry path throughout the year and the safety of spectacularly long views to east and west.

The Saxon perambulation hints at two of the potential hazards. There was a wolf trap and a valley named *Sceacerdene*, 'robber valley'. During the construction of the M11 a Bronze Age metal hoard was excavated near Howe Wood. Perhaps this was buried for security by bronze-smiths never able to return to claim it?

We reached (3), St Mary's Church in our neighbouring parish of Strethall, at lunchtime where we enjoyed a fascinating (and dry) talk by local historian David Melford. (4) The stonework of Strethall Church dating from the 11th century is tangible evidence of Christian worship in the area in early times. The expanse of Strethall Field either side of the Icknield Way

is a reminder of the lost medieval landscape complete with lynchets, earthworks created over time by the repeated ploughing of strips within the open common field.

Our post-lunch walk continued along Piper's Lane, Strethall to the old pollarded oak, which marks the meeting point of the three parishes of Strethall, Littlebury and Elmdon. We took the left-hand footpath that skirts the Littlebury boundary and leads to the hamlet of Littlebury Green. We turned left again away from the boundary at the southern end of Free Wood in order to experience a 2,000-year-old feature: the line of a Roman road which once linked the fort at Great Chesterford with Braughing in Hertfordshire. The diagonal 'slash' of the route is clearly visible on maps and Google Earth. At some points (at Elmdon Lee for instance) the modern road follows it. In Littlebury it survives as footpath and hedge belts and in two place names derived from Anglo Saxon '*straet*', or road: Strethall and Streetley Green, as Littlebury Green was known until the 17th century.

The landscape around here is distinctly different - small square enclosures typical of the Iron Age or Roman periods and aligned to the Roman road rather than the modern road through Littlebury Green. The crossroads junction of the footpath and Roman road, just south of Bixett Wood, opens out as a wide grassy space, perhaps a common or green of an earlier settlement before Littlebury Green shifted to its present location.

Elmdon Lee is outside Littlebury parish, but its pond in Ash Grove may well be the '*Streleage Mere*' (Littlebury Green pond) mentioned in the perambulation and the hedge along the boundary from (5) to (6) the descendant of the Saxon '*Crocesthorn*'. It would be an interesting future project to attempt to date it by species count. The curving, circular shape of this south-west boundary indicates that it may even pre-date the Saxon period and have formed the southern boundary of the Roman estate centred on Great Chesterford.

Passing point (6), the 21st century landmark of a mobile phone mast, we descended slowly, again crossing the motorway and railway line. By the railway footbridge is a World War II concrete pillbox. This formed a part of the General Headquarters chain, the final stop line for the defence of Britain in its 'darkest hour'. There are further pillboxes along the River Cam and manhole covers to mining chambers in the Adam Bridge at Audley End House.

We crossed the B1383, the old turnpike road from London to Newmarket, just south of a 19th century stone boundary post set in the flint wall, and passed through Gamages Wood to Audley End House (7) where we sat out yet another downpour in the tea rooms.

We left the grounds of Audley End by the Mill Gate and returned to Littlebury along the banks of the Cam and via Duck Street. These final three miles from Cornwallis Hill marked another clear change in the landscape to that of an 18th century gentleman's planned estate with its

carefully chosen tree planting, studied creation of vistas, ornamental gardens and discreetly placed services such as the kitchen gardens, Home Farm and staff lodges. Originally designed for the private pleasure of Sir John Griffin Griffin who inherited Audley End in 1762, ownership of the house and gardens by English Heritage now allows the public to enjoy some of it too.



Littlebury map annotated with boundary points. ©Essex Record Office

Postscript: Despite the inclement conditions the walk proved so popular that it has taken place, with slight variations and in a range of weather conditions, in most subsequent years.

Note: Some sections of the walk described do not follow public rights of way. The Parish of Littlebury Millennium Society obtained special permissions from landowners for this occasion. It is, however, possible to follow a very similar route on public footpaths and roads. See *Littlebury: a Parish History* (2005).

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