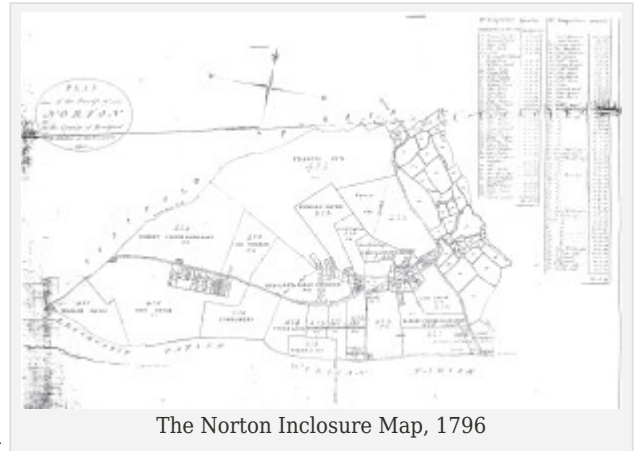


## Locating ancient boundaries in the landscape

A few weeks ago, I accompanied Brian Sawford (the former Keeper of Natural History for North Herts Museums) on a short walk across some fields on the northern edge of Letchworth Garden City, historically part of the parish of Norton. The reason for going out was to look at the landscape of an area that had been put forward for consultation as a potential location for new housing to the north of the present Grange Estate. Although I had not set out with the intention of examining hedgerows, it quickly became apparent that there were some potentially ancient hedges in what I had always considered to be elements of the Inclosure landscape (the Act for Norton was passed in 1796): these hedges were species rich, stood on low banks and separated fields where the land surface was different by up to a metre either side of the hedge.



The Norton Inclosure Map, 1796

Many people are familiar with what is known as [Hooper's Hedgerow Hypothesis](#), the idea that the number of woody species within a thirty-yard stretch of hedge multiplied by 100 (or 110, according to some versions) gives an approximate age for the hedge in years. The original concept was developed by [Max Hooper](#) in the early 1970s and has been used widely ever since. Its appeal is its simplicity: so long as one can recognise the different woody species needed for counting, one can estimate the date of the hedge. There are problems, of course. A recent hedge may have been deliberately planted with numerous species for decorative effect; conversely an ancient hedge may have been kept free from invasive species by diligent farmers. Elms, especially, are likely to have vanished from hedgerows following the epidemic of [Dutch Elm Disease](#) in the early 1970s.

## Hedgerows in Norton

A few years ago, members of the [Norton Community Archaeology Group](#) started work on a hedgerow survey in the hope of identifying a hedge mentioned in medieval manorial court documents. Unfortunately, the distinguishing feature of this particular hedge was that it was characterised by elms. As already noted, elms do not survive well in this area. To compound matters, most of the hedges they examined proved not to be species rich. Rather disheartened, the team stopped work and matters were left there until I went for my walk with Brian.



Field and hedgerow north-east of the Grange Estate

As it was a beautiful morning, I decided that today would be a good time to go back into the fields armed with maps that I could annotate. My intention was to note the principal character of the hedgerow, to determine whether or not it had a bank and to look at differences in height between the ground on either side. These changes happen on sloping ground, where soil moves downhill during ploughing; if there is a hedgerow (or some other boundary, such as a road) in the way, soil will pile up on the uphill side and be eroded on the downslope side. As this sort of soil creep is quite slow, it is a good indication of the antiquity of the boundary; it is even more telling when one or both of the fields are under pasture, meaning that the ploughing that caused the movement of soil was itself ancient.

I concentrated on three areas: to the north of the historic core of the village, towards Norton End in Stotfold; Norton Common (which was only created as a common by the Inclosure Act of 1796 and where pre-enclosure ridge-and-furrow earthworks survive well); and to the west of Standalone Farm. The first and third of these areas include the county boundary, which is named *Stodfaldes dic* ("Stotfold's Ditch (or Dyke)") in the boundary clause of a charter dating from 1007, so the survival of any earthwork here would be very significant.

## North of the village

I started from the village pond, by the junction of Croft Lane and Norton Road. From here, the [Garden City Greenway](#) leads north-north-west, alongside a plain hawthorn hedge with no bank. It runs between two surviving bits of ridge-and-furrow cultivation, the easternmost of which was surveyed by a team from North Herts Museums in January 1986. The Greenway passes through another plain hawthorn hedge with no bank and turns left to follow a hedge trending more to the north-west that again had no bank and appeared to be mainly hawthorn. I followed the path that crosses the field, along the line of a track marked as *the way to Stotfold* on an anonymous [map of c 1700](#). This passes



The track that was "*the way to Stotfold*" around 1700

through a species rich hedge on a slight bank that looks to be ancient; however, it does not appear on the Inclosure Map, so it must be later than 1796. It then passes through the corner of a triangular field, whose northern hedgerow stands on a bank around 0.5 m high. Beyond this, the track continues north with a hedgerow to the east; the field beyond this hedgerow is about 0.5 m lower than the track. As the track descends the slope towards Norton End, the height difference between it and the field to the east increases to around a metre. This suggests that the hedgerow and track are ancient: we have the map evidence to confirm this.

Before reaching Stotfold Road south of Norton End, the ancient track meets a clearly modern farm track, lying between plain hawthorn hedges. Its continuation to Stotfold Road is no longer visible across a ploughed field. To the north-east of Stotfold Road is an area that was known as Mosses Corner around 1700. Leading away to the east-south-east is a track with a very definite hedgebank to its south; this is shown on the Inclosure map and is likely to be ancient. Indeed, the whole landscape between Mosses Corner and Nortonbury is an area that was already enclosed at the time of the Inclosure Award and is probably connected with the late medieval sheep farming known to have been important at Nortonbury. The northern edge of Mosses Corner, though, is the county boundary. In this area, it performs a series of zigzags that look as if they were designed to go around the edges of fields; I have always been puzzled about how ancient they were and wondered if they were a result of some sort of recent changes, as they are not obvious on the map of c 1700. However, there is a very substantial bank here, around a metre in height and probably two to three metres wide at its base. This is a typical early medieval boundary bank and is clearly the feature referred to in 1007 as *Stodfaldes dic*: if my guess that the zigzags were designed to go around existing boundaries is correct, then we are looking at traces of lost features more than a thousand years old. The bank continues west across Norton Road, zigzagging a few more times.



Hedgerow bank north-east of the Grange  
Playing Field

Following the modern farm track south-west from Stotfold Road brings you to a turn to a north-westerly direction and then to a boundary crossing it at a right angles, followed by a drain in a ditch. To the north-east, the boundary is composed of scrubby woodland, but to the south-west, it follows a species rich boundary that includes mature trees. The field surface to the north-west of the boundary lies about a metre lower than the path and the field to the south-east, once again suggesting an ancient origin. This boundary is also shown on the 1796 map. The track then meets the corner of the Grange Playing Field, where LIDAR data shows that ridge-and-furrow earthworks survive (although I could not see them in the strong sunlight today). Following the boundary along the north-eastern side of the playing field, the hedgerow is thick and on a bank, while the field to the north-east is about a metre lower than the playing field. Passing beyond the end of the playing field and still continuing to the south-east, the hedgerow continues on a significant bank.

## Norton Common

Since I was a child in the 1960s, I have been aware that there are significant areas of ridge-and-furrow earthworks surviving on Norton Common, both beneath the greensward and in the woodland. I did a rapid reconnaissance to see if there were any obvious relict hedgebanks. The only potential bank I found lies towards the north-western corner of the common, just east of the path that runs parallel with the tributary of the Pix Brook from almost opposite Grange Road to join the main path through the Common south of the Pix Brook proper.

## Around Standalone Farm

Local residents will know [Standalone Farm](#) as a good place to take the children for a day out, especially when the weather is good. When I was a child, it was an ordinary working farm, with a dairy herd that I could hear mooing from our garden. The place is a bit of an historical puzzle: it is not shown on the early printed map by Dury and Andrews (1776) and does not figure on the Inclosure map (although Standalone Cottages, fronting Wilbury Road, do, even though they appear to be built from Victorian Arlesey brick!). However, it does appear on the draft Ordnance Survey two-inches-to-the-mile map as Waterden Farm. This is very interesting as I've always been puzzled by the fact that the farmhouse is [Listed Grade II](#) and is described as dating from the seventeenth century. I have long wondered why it does not seem to have been mentioned before the nineteenth century, but Waterden appears as an unspecified place in Middle Field in a church terrier of 1637. Better still, Waterden is also named in the later sixteenth century.

West of the farm, there is a hedgerow running almost due north from Wilbury Road (an



enclosure road) to the county boundary. The hedgerow sits on a slight bank and there are stumps of dead and clearly very old hawthorns along its line. The hedgerow does not appear on the Inclosure Map, but then nor does Standalone Farm. I am left wondering how accurate the map is for this part of the parish.



*Stodfaldes Dic* ("Stotfold Dyke"): an earthwork over a thousand years old, as it appears today

At the north end of this hedgerow lies the county boundary and *Stodfaldes dic*, which is a substantial ditch in this stretch. However, it has clearly been cleaned out in recent years (it is deeper and better defined than I remember it being in the 1970s) and its northern edge has been damaged by the construction of the Greenway, which runs alongside it. Reaching the Pix Brook, all trace of the boundary has been obliterated by the improvement works carried out on the Pix Brook in the 1970s. These were done following flooding in January 1969, when the brook broke its banks, flooded gardens in Valley Road to the west and came far enough up the slope to the east to get into the bottom of our garden in Longmead. Between Pix Brook and Valley Road is a thin belt of woodland that we used to call The Spinney when I was a child: I don't know if it has ever had a more formal name. I had a memory that when cycling through it as a child, there were several substantial banks and hollows, but I was evidently mistaken, as I could find none. What I did find was a hint of a relict hedgebank in the south end of The Spinney with another roughly at right angles to it. This may be related to the Lower Wilbury Farm that used to stand here. Before the alterations to the Pix Brook in the 1970s, it was possible to see brick foundations in the bottom of the stream that were part of the farmhouse, which burned down in the 1930s.

## Hedgerows and history

What my three hours of fieldwork have achieved is that I now recognise the need for a fuller survey, accurately measured and carefully photographed. I suspect that similarly useful work could be carried out in every parish in the District. Any volunteers?

Share this:

Email

Print

Facebook

Twitter

Looking for hedgebanks

Pocket

WhatsApp

Pinterest

Reddit