

Pirton in the Middle Ages (and before)

Like so many places in England, the village of Pirton is first mentioned in Domesday Book, where it is called *Peritone*. Other medieval spellings of the name include *Piriton*, *Pyriton*, *Puriton* and *Pyrtone*. These spellings show that the name contains the Old English words *pirige*, 'a pear tree', and *tūn*, 'an enclosed dwelling or farm'. As we shall see, archaeology helps take the story of the community much further back in time.

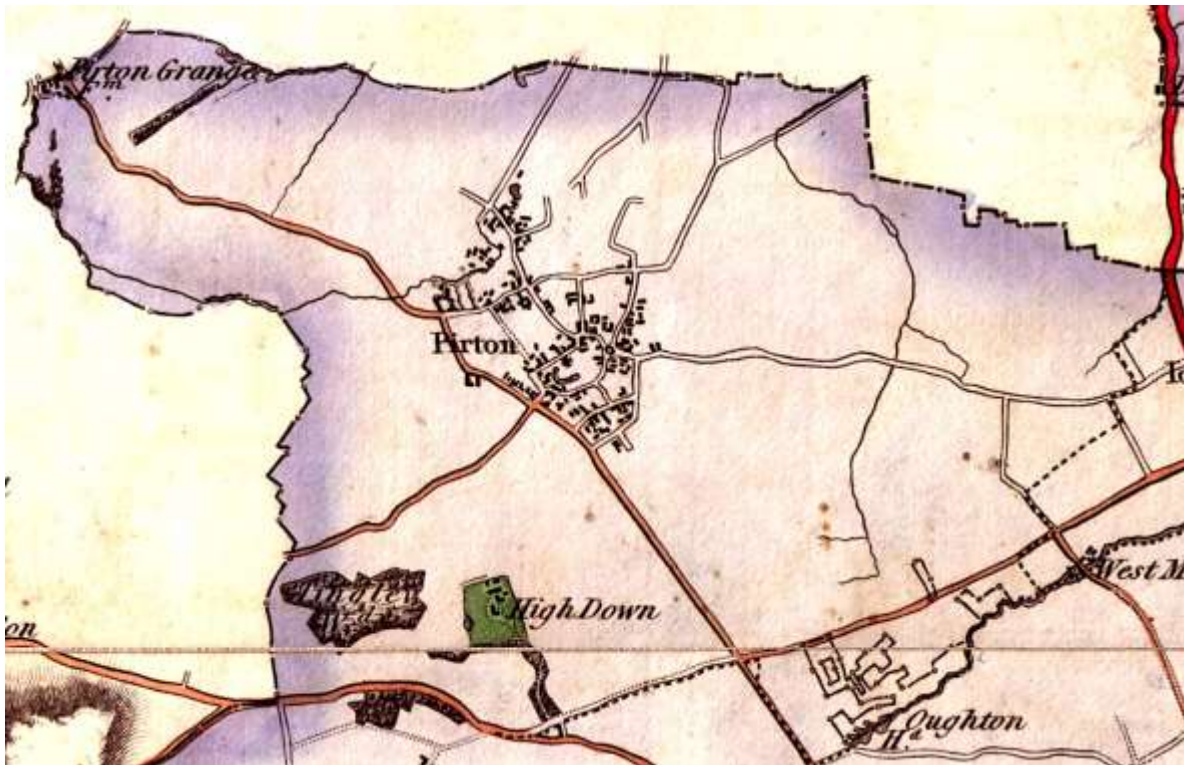


The village from the hills near Highdown

At the time of Domesday Book, which was compiled in 1086, the manor was held by Ralph de Limesy, a landowner who also had holding in the lost *Hainstone* (perhaps near Ashwell), Caldecote and Amwell. Before the death of Edward the Confessor in January 1066, it had belonged to Stigand, Archbishop of Canterbury. It was a big place, with 25 villeins, a priest, 29 *bordars*, an English knight, a freeman and 12 *cottars* liable to pay tax (Domesday Book was compiled to help King William I work out how much tax he could extract from the population). A villein was an ordinary villager who farmed land in the community's field; a *bordar* was another villager who had less land than a villein, while a *cottar* was someone who lived in a cottage, usually farming someone else's land.

Working out how many people this entry implies is not an exact science. It has been estimated that the returns may omit up to 25% of households as being below the taxable threshold. This means that the total of 68 individuals listed might be short by as many as 17 households, so we should be thinking in terms of up to 85 households. The next question is over the size of a household. Historians used to suggest 3½ people in each but this figure is now thought to be too small and that the average ought to be about 5. This would give a population for *Peritone* of up to 425 people.

Although this is small by modern standards, it was huge for 1086. The town of Hitchin, one of the largest places in Hertfordshire at that time, had a population of little more than 600 by the same calculations.



The village as mapped by Bryant in 1822

The history of the manor

The early county historians concentrated on giving the descent of the manor through various families. This was partly because the manor remained an important element of local government until the 1800s. More importantly, the then current lords of the manor were the writers' target audience. All four pages of Sir Henry Chauncy's 1700 *Historical Antiquities of Hertfordshire* that deal with Pirton are taken up with tracing the descent of the manors.

The manor was split into three separate parts, while a fourth part became Ickleford, which was not listed separately in Domesday Book. It remained a family possession throughout most of the Middle Ages, though not always through the direct male line. The descendants of the earliest Norman lord, Ralph de Limesy (or Limesi), held two of the three manors into which the holding was split for up to twelve generations. William Clinton, who was the last descendant to hold the Manor of Lindesei, sold his part in the 1400s, while Edward Oddingsells, the last to hold the Manor of Doddinsells, sold his manor in 1513. Ralph had granted part of the manor to the Priory of Hertford, which he founded about 1087, which remained a church possession until the Priory was dissolved in 1534. It became known as Rectory Manor.

Something that confuses people is understanding exactly what a manor was. Although we can draw the boundaries of a parish on a map, it is much more difficult with a manor, because they were defined legally rather than geographically. Houses next door to each other on a single street might be in different manors; the Cock Hotel on High Street in Hitchin was once part of the Manor of Shillington! In the Middle Ages, the king and the church owned all land, but other people could hold land from them for the payment of rent and services, which might include military service.

Doddingsells Manor was held by the payment of a pair of gilt spurs and the sum of 2/6 (12½p), which the tenant handed over at the annual meeting held at Oughton Head, on the boundary with Hitchin. Gil Burleigh, an archaeologist living in Pirton, has suggested that the importance of Oughton Head began in remote prehistory, when it was a focus for religious activities, which continued through to the arrival of Christianity in the seventh century. The manorial meeting may well have been the medieval 'descendant' of these activities.

The castle

There is an earthwork motte-and-bailey castle, known as Toot Hill, in the centre of the village, south of the parish church. We do not know for certain when it was built, although many historians believe that it dates the mid-twelfth century. This period, known as The Anarchy, was a civil war between King Stephen and Empress Matilda, fought 1139-53. Many earthwork castles were constructed at that time, with local examples at Therfield, Wymondley and Anstey. The Pirton Society has conjectured that the castle was built by either Alan or Gerald de Limesy, son and grandson respectively of the Domesday tenant of *Peritone*, and was dismantled during the reign of Henry II.

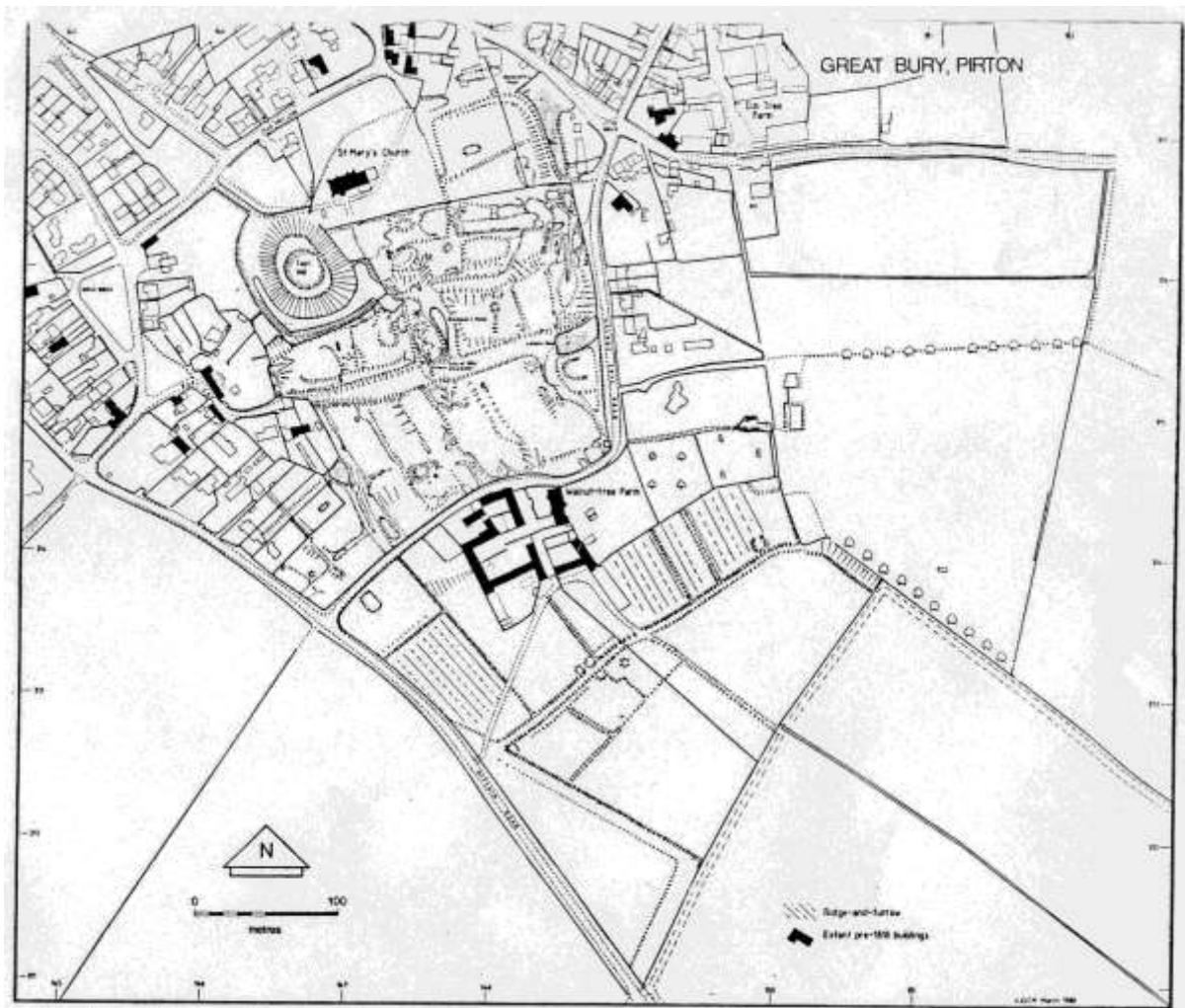


The motte as seen from Great Bury

In 1935, some schoolboys held an unofficial dig on the top of the motte. We do not know exactly what they discovered, although their headmaster kept the pottery they found. North Hertfordshire Archaeological Society sent the sherds to the medieval ceramics expert Paul Blinkhorn, who found that most of them belonged to the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. There were no sherds at all of a type of pottery common in the village after 1400, known as Late Medieval Transitional Ware, which indicates that the site had been abandoned before then. Small quantities of Iron Age, Roman and

early medieval pottery were probably already in the soil that was piled up to make the motte. This is good confirmation of the suspected dates for its construction.

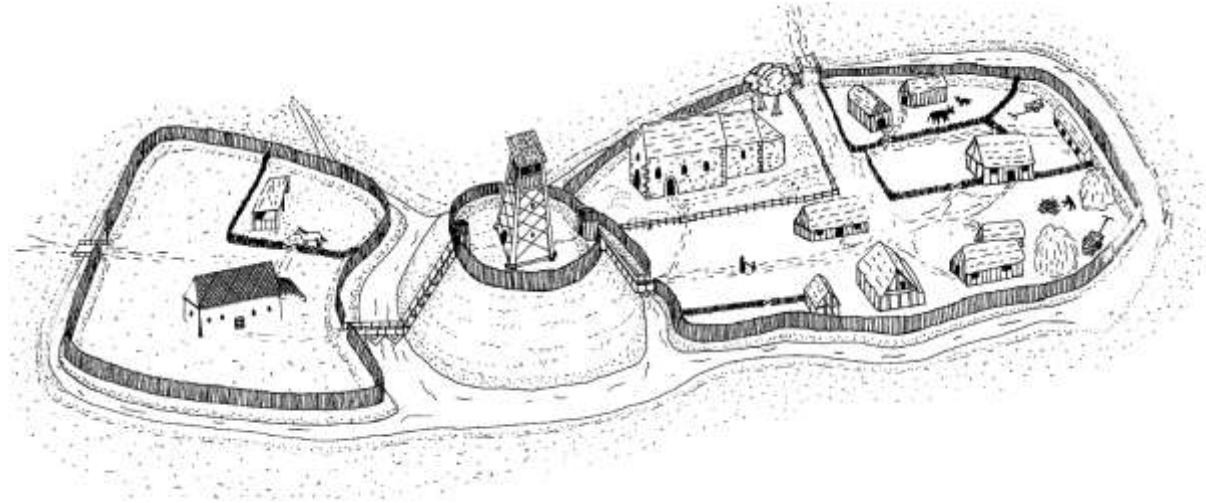
The Field Archaeology Section of North Hertfordshire Museum carried out surveys of the field east of the motte in 1988. These suggest that the castle was intended to be the centre of a planned village or new town. The hollow that runs across the field known as The Bury, which was thought to be part of the castle defences was found to have been still in use as a road called Lads Orchard Lane in the early 1800s. Either side of the hollow, the survey found low banks, the remains of old property boundaries and the sites of demolished building platforms. The team found sixteen enclosures, some matching boundaries still marked on nineteenth-century maps, while others were out of use before then.



The survey carried out in 1988 at Great Bury plotted on a map of the village

The survey found that Toot Hill and the surrounding earthworks in The Bury were an unusual form of earthwork castle with two baileys. The larger of the two lay to the east and included the parish church, while the smaller bailey to the west may have been the site of the manor house. Beyond the smaller bailey, Great Green was once known as Chipping Green. The Old English word *cēping* (pronounced 'cheeping') meant 'a market-place' (the word market was introduced by the Vikings), which seems to show that Pirton had a marketplace here. The enclosures either side of Lads Orchard Lane have more-or-less standardised areas, which makes it look as if this part of the village was laid out deliberately at the same time as the castle. This was a period when, despite the political anarchy,

many lords were setting up new markets as a way of making money: the 'new towns' of Baldock and Royston both date from the 1100s, while Stevenage was only a little later in 1223.



An imaginative reconstruction of the timber castle, drawn by Anne Walker of the Field Archaeology team in 1988

Pirton and the Black Death

The Black Death is currently a topical subject because of the global pandemic of CoViD-19 in 2020. The first record of the disease came from Kyrgyzstan, where gravestones dating from 1338×9 mention that the people buried in these graves died from plague. From central Asia it spread east to China and west to Europe, being reported first in the port of Kaffa (Crimea) in 1347. From there, Genoese merchants unwittingly took it to the Mediterranean and it reached England in June 1348. It was spread partly by fleas carrying one form of the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, but recent work suggests that, like CoViD-19, it also spread from person to person in water droplets in their breath or when they sneezed.

We know of the effects of the Black Death in Pirton thanks to the work of Carenza Lewis, who led the excavation of test pits in people's gardens across the village from 2007 to 2011. After that, the work was carried on by the North Hertfordshire Archaeological Society and Pirton History Group until 2015, eventually excavating 115 pits. This makes Pirton the most thorough-investigated living village anywhere. The project aimed not to investigate the remains of buildings, rubbish pits, property boundaries and the sorts of things that archaeologists usually look for. Instead, the idea was to see how many datable finds – especially pottery – were to be found in different parts of the village. In this way, it could build up a picture of where people were living at particular periods and how the focus of a settlement might shift with time.

The main concentration of finds dated before the Norman Conquest was in the area between Walnut Tree Farm, at the southern edge of the present village, and Hambridge Way, at the eastern end. Over the next 200 years, activity spread across the entire village, with new concentrations around Burge End, at the northern end of the village, and around Shillington Road. Then, from the later 1300s on, the number of finds drops dramatically, with many of the test pits that had contained large number of finds of the period 1050 to 1350 now containing none.

There are 68% fewer test pits containing pottery dating from the two centuries after the Black Death than there are from the two centuries before that. At face value, this would suggest that two-thirds of the village's population died in the outbreaks of 1347×8 and 1361. Careful plotting of the findspots shows that the reduction was greatest in three zones: around Burge End Lane, around

Royal Oak Lane and east of Walnut Tree Lane. These three areas seem to have lost their population completely. The village was now reduced to three main centres, around Rectory Farm, around Burge End and around Great Green. Any hope that the settlement might have grown into a market town would have to be abandoned.



Community archaeology in the village

Before Domesday and the castle

Most communities can boast the discovery of prehistoric finds and Pirton is no exception. The oldest find from the village is of a handaxe (not an axe, but a multi-purpose tool), dating back to between 130,000 and 70,000 years ago when Neanderthals roamed this part of the world. When a site north-west of the village was investigated in 1990 during the construction of a oil pipeline, Late Neolithic Peterborough-type ware, dating from about 3100 to 2500 BC was found; this is the same sort of date as the burial mound at Knocking Knoll, close by on the county boundary to the southwest. More Peterborough-type ware was found during the trial trenching on The Fox site in 1993. There is a site just north of Oughton Head, known from cropmarks, that looks like a henge, a Late Neolithic religious site. Other early henges in the area, at Norton and Ashwell, were close to springs, with entrances facing them. This could be another.

Metal detectorists have also found prehistoric objects in the fields around the village. The most spectacular of these is a Middle Bronze Age shield pattern palstave, dated 1500-1350 BC. It was found in a part of Danes Field, west of the village, known as Cat's Brains and is now on display in North Hertfordshire Museum. A palstave is a type of axehead with a ridge between the blade and the tang to stop the axehead from working up into the handle and splitting it. Later types were hollow, so that the handle would fit inside: there is one of this type from the village, dating from 950 to 750 BC.



Samuel Lucas's painting of William Ransom's excavation of the prehistoric burial mound of Knocking Knoll in 1856

These hints of activity from such remote periods have no connection with the development of Pirton as a village. People have come and gone in our landscape for thousands of years, without establishing settled communities. It was during the Iron Age, in the first millennium BC, that the pattern of our present landscape began to take shape. Once the fields and lanes were in place, settlements have often had to fit into them. Pirton is a good example of how this happened.

Pirton sits half way between Ravensburgh Castle to the west and Wilbury Hill to the east. Both places were hilltop villages set inside banked enclosures built between 1000 and 800 BC. If we draw a line mid-way between the two, that might give us some idea of the territories the chieftains in each place controlled. This would make Pirton a place on the edge, in land that might be disputed between rivals or where a no-mans-land could act as a trading place. Further south, the line passes close to the springs at Oughton Head.

Holwell Road makes a sharp turn to the north-east in the north-eastern corner of the village. Excavations south of the corner in 2011 and 2016 showed that the line of the road after the bend follows the line of a ditch that was first dug some time between about 800 and 400 BC. There are other traces of early lines in the landscape, often marked by groups of now buried ditches, including one group that crosses Hitchin Road near Pirton Cross. These lines run at angles to the dividing line between the territories of Ravensburgh and Wilbury, which may mean that those places had lost their importance by this time.

By the end of the Iron Age, in the first centuries BC and AD, a settlement was growing up alongside a road at the north end of Danes Field. Part of it was excavated in 1990, showing that this village continued to grow through the Roman period (AD 43 to 411) and into the fifth or even sixth century. Carena Lewis's test pits showed the village extended north-eastwards along the stream past Burge End. A cemetery found in Danes Field in the 1790s and rediscovered in 1835 may have been the

burial ground for this village during its later days. At the same time, another community was developing around the sports club, east of Walnut Tree Road.



One of the banks at Priors Hill; this one stands more than 2 metres high

During the fifth century, these settlements shrank, although people continued to live in both. Instead, a new community revealed by excavations from 2015 to 2018 grew up at Priors Hill, south of Rectory Farm. There had been some activity here in the Iron Age, but it did not develop into a village like that in Danes Field. The community at Priors Hill flourished from the fifth to ninth centuries. A group of perhaps three or four rectangular enclosures, parts of which survive as earthworks, developed around this area, each of which seems to have been occupied by well-off families. The survival of these is very rare and the fact that there are at least three is even more unusual.

Between AD 700 and 800, a new location was chosen for a cemetery, which was laid out in a fenced area to the south of a building that was probably a church. This was discovered in the 1990s, during the construction of Coleman's Close, to the north of The Fox. Finds from the graves include part of a broken pottery bottle imported from France, an expensive and unusual object. Activity here continued almost to the time of the Norman Conquest, when it became part of one of the concentrations mentioned above.

Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews
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