

## Life in Langtoft – Medieval Style Part 1: The Manor

Prompted by a post on Life in Langtoft Facebook group asking about the feature in East End known as “The Moat” and not being able to work due to the Covid-19 crisis I decided to research medieval Langtoft to try to settle some of the questions once and for all.

The Domesday Book tells us that even before the Norman Conquest in 1066 Langtoft belonged to the Abbey of Crowland a situation that continued until the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII in 1536. Langtoft had 32 households recorded in 1086, putting it in the largest 40% of settlements recorded in Domesday. This equates to a population of about 130 individuals. Few of these people owned their own land, most being villains and bordars who were unfree peasants who owed service, usually 2-3 days a week, to the lord of the manor, Bordars had less land than villains. Sokeman were freeman who nevertheless had to attend their lord’s court. Sokemen could pass on their land to their descendants on payment of a 16 shilings fee. The ploughland around the village was about 720 acres.

Most people lived in long houses constructed of wood, turf or baked earth with simple roofs of branches which with improving construction techniques from the 14<sup>th</sup> century would have been replaced with thatch of reeds. A longhouse would have housed a family of parents 2-3 children and possibly, an older relative or unmarried sister or brother. A small room at one end would not have, as is usually thought, housed the pigs, but would have been a storeroom for ploughs and other equipment. Robert Manning of Bourne described the house as a place “to rest in, ‘til the day of doom.” Outside would have been a shelter for the animals, a latrine pit and a water pit or well. Some wealthier peasants may have owned iron tripods and gridirons for cooking on and a selection of dishes, mugs, plates and bowls perhaps from the potteries of Stamford and Bourne. We are never likely to find any of these houses as they were made of perishable materials. However, it is likely that many of the older property boundaries in East and West End follow their medieval predecessors.



In 1280, the newly elected abbot Richard of Crowland set about an improvement scheme on some of the abbey’s manors. This included building a hall in Langtoft. This is the building which once stood on what is now Barn Owl Close. The predevelopment archaeological dig concluded that the medieval hall lay under the Victorian crewyard. This was misidentified early on in the excavation as a priory, a theory which has no support in the historical record and which was omitted from the final dig report. The hall which would have been built of stone would have been the residence of the reeve, the Abbey’s representative in the village responsible for managing the land, overseeing the peasants and

collecting rents some of which he held to cover on going costs, the rest he passed to the abbey. At the time the reeve at Langtoft was called William and by 1280 he had already served 13 years in post. He was to serve another 6 years.

In 1288, the abbot's servants in Langtoft, who lived in the hall, hired minstrels for the feast of St Bartholomew (24<sup>th</sup> August) to coincide with the abbey fair and charged the cost to the abbey. A few years later, in 1314, Edward II visited Crowland Abbey on his way north to fight the Scots at Bannockburn. The abbey, its farms and manors were called upon to provide supplies for the king's army. Langtoft provided hens, geese and capons, oxen and pigs, cheese, and oats and peas for the horses and sold a further quantity of hay, drage (mixed grain), pigeons and oil for the sum of 23s 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>d.

What is interesting about this list of stores is that rabbits are not mentioned. Nor do they feature in the annual accounts of agricultural production remitted by the manor of Langtoft to the abbey. If the feature known as "The Moat" was a medieval rabbit warren as



is generally believed, it was huge and would have produced far more rabbits than the manor could have consumed, particularly as rabbit was a high status food at the time. Indeed, the archaeology didn't find any bones identifiable as rabbit bones. Furthermore, The Moat doesn't conform to any acknowledged medieval warren. These generally had pillow mounds:

artificial "hills" in which the rabbits lived to make it easier for the warrener to reach the rabbits. So, if The Moat was ever a warren it was after the manor was sold in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. What it was actually for is likely to remain a mystery for now.

Life in Langtoft continued with little disruption despite war, pestilence and civil unrest until on 8 February 1543 after the Dissolution by Henry VIII, Langtoft, along with the rest of the Crowland Abbey holdings was leased for 21 years to one John Pen, a member of the Royal Household.

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