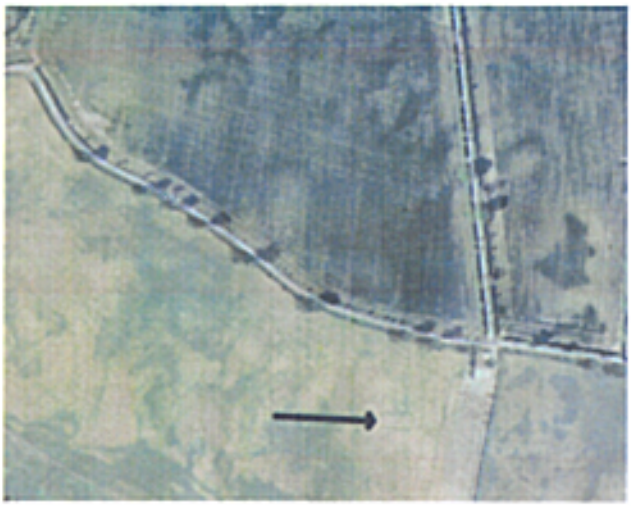
The Story of Beck Lane

The name 'Tuttington' apparently means 'Enclosure of Tutt's people'. Where was this enclosure? There is crop mark evidence for two enclosures in the area. One is, roughly, where the woodland is on the way to Aylsham (but much evidence has been lost under the trees and, earlier, windmills on the site). The second is on Beck Lane, beyond King's Beck, and I will have more to say about it. My guess is that there was a third, that Tutt's people lived not too far from Tuttington Hall in the direction of the church. The land is relatively high today, and would have been even higher then. With houses built on the slopes, rain and slush would run off and not into the houses. The land was an almost pure clay, so that material for the daub of their wattle and daub walls was immediately to hand. Digging clay in one place would leave a pit that would collect water, also very useful. Their enclosure would have kept their animals (some of ducks, sheep, pigs, cattle, goats, cats, dogs; chickens came with the Romans) in and wild ones out. My guess is that there was a second excavated pit, outside the enclosure. It would collect any overflow water from the first, a useful reserve, and attract wild animals to drink. They could be trapped or speared, an extra source of meat. All changed with the arrival of the Romans. They set up a big pottery factory at Brampton to exploit the local clay, including that on which Tutt's people probably lived. Tutt's people were shoved onto nearby land on which there was no clay, that which we now know as the village around Aylsham Road, and so it was this which became (the new) Tuttington. The clay on which they once lived was excavated by the Romans (or their surfs!) and all evidence of Tutt's enclosure lost.

The picture on the next page is a composite of two Google satellite views (joined along Beck Lane). In the upper part we see crop mark evidence for houses, surely within an enclosure, and in the lower what could well be their burial site. Arrowed is an East-West barrow (a direction chosen so that the dead get maximum exposure to the life-giving sun?), approached by a North-South path (so as to interfere with the sun as little as possible?). The field entrance which is straight ahead where Beck Lane turns sharp right after King's Beck seems to have been the original enclosure entrance (top left on the next page). This makes sense. It led to the clay (and so, water in an excavated pond) and also to the other settlements. King's Beck had yet to be dug. I interpret the sharp right turn shortly after the King's Beck bridge as the road still going around the original enclosure. Of course, the link that I have made between the two parts of the picture may be incorrect; the bits may date from different times. Against a link is the absence of a gate in the field that is the successor to an exit from the enclosure to the barrow. On the other hand, if the



Colby Road is later, as is probably the case, any such entrance would have been shunned in favour of the one at the Colby Road junction.

The first event to shatter the traditional, perhaps Neolithic, settlement pattern was the arrival of the Romans. The local tribe (which extended over much of East Anglia), the Iceni, nearly threw the Romans out of Britain. For sure, the Romans watched them carefully, for fear of a repeat. In so doing they will have become aware of large deposits of pure clay at Tuttington - and decided to exploit them (mini-deposits still exist to this day). The settlement-cum-factory at nearby Brampton, had water, needed to process the clay, and river access to the sea, enabling export of the products. If the dates of the Roman coins which have been dug up locally are any indication, the pottery existed for something over 200 years. Not surprisingly, 200 years of excavation of clay changed the shape of Tuttington, and with it Beck Lane.

For sure, the Romans would have excavated the nearby (to Brampton) areas first, digging into a wall of clay and so eroding it. With the land level dropping by perhaps a couple of metres and a surface covering of clay debris, drainage was essential to prevent the excavated area becoming waterlogged. So, some way behind the eroding wall, King's Beck was dug. It was kept to one side of the excavations (and at the lowest level, which sometimes meant meanderings), so that it did not later become an obstacle. How far did the clay digging go? My guess is that it went through the eastern part of Tuttington, to roughly where the Banningham Road narrows (the present road is wide where the Romans needed it wide, to cart clay and wood to Brampton).

Following the Romans came the Saxons (in about 450; the Romans left about forty years earlier). What we know of the village in Saxon time we learn from Blomefield, who wrote an 11 volume History of Norfolk around 1739, published in 1805 to 1810, drawn from sources now largely unknown (perhaps the records of the nobility?), but apparently reliable. He says that

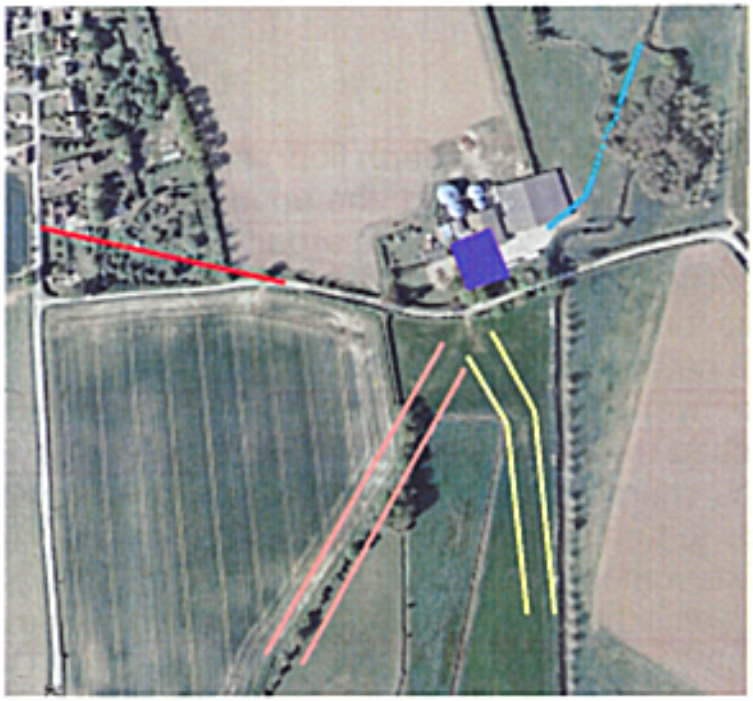
the village belonged to a Saxon Alderman or Nobleman, Agelwin, who gave it with the church - so there was a Saxon church - to the Abbey of St Benet. All the evidence is that this church was, roughly, at the site of the present one (we would expect it to be so, those buried remain on consecrated ground. Indeed, if the Romans respected the dead, it might also be the burial site of the original Tutt's people). A church would imply a thriving agricultural community, so perhaps it was the Saxons who also built the (water) mill. Perhaps it was the Vikings (they arrived in about 800). Whichever, a water mill is recorded in the Domesday (1086) entries for Tuttington.

Where was the mill? I don't think that there can be much doubt. Roughly, at what is now Low Farm. Beck Lane is very ancient and much used; it would have been reinstated at a lower level after the Romans had excavated under it. The mill needed road access and Beck Lane provided it. It also needed somewhere to dump its water, and King's Beck is the only possibility. Low Farm deserves its name. Most other places in the village are higher. So, with all the land covered with clay (eventually it would get blended with the underlying sand to give an excellent soil), a good rain would mean that the Low Farm area was flooded. Build a few banks from clay and stones (of which there have always been plenty) and you have a flood plain which can hold water for the mill. The Google Earth view on the next page shows the flood plain and the channels by which water flowed towards Low Farm. Common Lane did not then exist! The second Google Earth view, below the first, gives more insights. Two old paths (yellow and pink) home in on the mill; used to bring grain and take away the milled stuff (calling it flour would probably be an exaggeration!). There is still a gate where they met Beck Lane. Beck Lane goes round the mill (the purple square is my guess at its position) and its loading area and then heads

for the side of the churchyard (I've shown the approximate original route as a straight red line, but surely it would bend a bit and end close to the corner of the churchyard). The photographs above (of an - almost - working Austrian water mill) give some idea of what the working bits of the mill might have looked like; built with an eye to easy repairs.

The white blobs on the south of Beck Lane presumably indicate the sites of earlier housing. Thick clay daub which, being at the side of the field, has not yet been completely ploughed in. There were surely houses on the north side of Beck Lane too. These houses must be of a later date than those on one side of the (pink) lane from the mill running towards the present Tuttington Hall. There could well have been more in the middle of what is now a field. It is not surprising that there is housing here, there was water nearby (although the early housing kept well away from areas that might get flooded when the mill was running). On the other hand, the drainage was not good, so it was probably housing for the workers (who would have been forced to raise the floor level)! The water level in the flood plain would have to be controlled and I show in turquoise where I think the weir was (the actual weir is dotted; access was also needed to adjust and maintain it). Its presence explains the ב deviation of King's Beck here (partially covered by trees in this view). If you look at King's Beck on a map, you will find that this is not the only ב-shaped kink.

This is not too surprising - there were once over 500 water mills in Norfolk! But the head of water was never great, so to compensate a large flow rate was needed. So great that the water flooded over Beck Lane, on its way to King's Beck. How do I know? Because the drainage ditches are still there, on either side of Beck Lane, between the mill and King's Beck (but they do not extend in the direction from the mill to the village). They are shown below; side lighting is needed to show the contour and vertical to show the detail; the lighting available for the pictures below was not an ideal compromise, better look for yourself. But the mill was neither reliable (the



flood plain had to be full) nor popular (wet feet). To keep it viable, the villagers had to tolerate a village full of slippery clay tracks running with water. Windmills appeared in Britain just before 1200 and Tuttington had one of the first (the earliest record of it is in a will dated 1295). No more clay tracks running with water; the flood plain could be drained and used for agriculture. But the water had to be held back.

The decision was made to build an earth dam. The Brampton-Banningham road runs on top of it; it stretches from the end of Beck Lane to Common Lane (although I think that the Common Lane end of the dam was built more to raise the road to the level of the village than to hold back water). What is now a low-lying field roughly opposite the church became a big pond; there is a record of a woman trying to drown herself in it in 1397 (when it was said to be 'at least six or seven feet deep'). An island in the pond later became the site of the original Ship pub (hence the name) whilst overflow from the dam meant that the Saxon church could sometimes be

too wet to be useable (it had an earth floor) and eventually led to its demise. The pond was probably Γ shaped, the upper arm extended to the present village green (probably with channels dug to drain water from the main village into it). The final filling of bits of this arm took place in living memory. Beck Lane was forced to deviate to pick up the end of the dam (carts could not make it the new steep incline). But people from Beck Lane going to the church or churchyard followed the old, shorter and less mountainous, route until they reached the dam; is this the origin of the gate that still exists at this point in the churchyard (and why it is so low)? How to ensure that all knew the place to turn onto the new path of Beck Lane, particularly at night or in snow? Did someone plant an oak at the junction to block the old path, an oak which is still there? To me, it does not look old enough - but I'm no expert, although it could have been planted much later. On the other hand, it is part of a pattern - there are marker oaks, of much the same age, lining other roads to Tuttington. So, there is one - the 1946 photos (vide infra) suggest two more - at the junction of Beck Lane with the Norwich Road (so the planting was after the building of the dam). I suspect that these trees tell us which tracks were important in medieval times. In which case, Beck Lane is one of them. Next time you are there, imagine you were driving down it in snow, with only trees for guidance. They are carefully placed, given that some have been lost (a set of 1946 aerial photographs is available and shows some of those now gone). Others seem to mark field boundaries, but they are modern, possibly not medieval, field boundaries. Whatever, I think that we can safely conclude from the tree evidence that in medieval times the two important tracks in Tuttington were the present Aylsham Road (to Aylsham!) and Beck Lane (to North Walsham; Beck Lane is called 'North Walsham Road' on the 1821 Enclosure map; it remains the best way there, shorter, fewer bends and less traffic than the B1145). Could it be that the usual way from Aylsham to North Walsham was then through Tuttington? It makes sense that it should be -Tuttington lies almost on a straight line drawn between them. If so, I'd suspect that Beck Lane linked up with what is still called 'North Walsham Road'. It could be that the Beck Lane blocking tree can tell us more. It not only blocks the old track, it blocks the way to a drop in the road (and so prevents a possible fall). Perhaps it is telling us that Beck Lane was built up, to give easier access to the dam. Supporting this, the Lane slopes upwards from soon after where the old mill used to be, all the way to its end. The original height is presumably that immediately behind the marker tree.

I think that the story of Beck Lane tells a good part of the story of Tuttington. But be warned; some of that which I have written is a bit speculative (but with real, even though uncited, supporting evidence), although I have written it as fact. We need to dig deeper, in all senses!

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