

A Vanishing Landscape

Archaeological Investigations at Blakeney Eye,
Norfolk

Naomi Field

With contributions by

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ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY



ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD

Summertown Pavilion

18-24 Middle Way

Summertown

Oxford OX2 7LG

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-78969-840-4

ISBN 978-1-78969-841-1 (e-Pdf)

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Cover: Excavations in progress, looking south.
The River Glaven, looking south towards Cley next the Sea.



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Acknowledgements

This publication brings together the results of extensive archaeological investigations across the Blakeney Eye landscape, that were commissioned and funded by the Environment Agency.

Prospect Archaeology would like to thank all the people and organisations who have been involved at every stage of the project.

John Sizer and Graham Lubbock (National Trust) gave practical support and assistance during the excavations, John Wright and John Peake of the Blakeney Historical Society offered support and were generous in their contribution of local and site-specific knowledge. David Gurney (formerly Norfolk County Archaeologist) was instrumental in ensuring that the excavations were finally written up for full publication.

The 2005 excavation was directed by Richard Lee of Lindsey Archaeological Services. He also wrote the MAP 2 report and an early draft of the report. The major burden of sorting out the archive and draft report fell to Kathryn Blythe and Naomi Field. The revised final text and editing was by Naomi Field. Drawn illustrations have been prepared by Jim Bonnor (Chapter 1) James Rackham (Chapter 2) Jacqueline Churchill of Network Archaeology Ltd (Chapter 3) Mick Clark (Chapters 5, 7 and 8) and Charlotte Bentley (Chapters 6 and 7). The team on site were Stuart Callow, Aaron Chapman, Jedlee Chapman, Jon Cousins, Ben Curtis, Gareth Davis, Alison Dingle, Mark Dodds, Mike Garrett, Matthew Hobson, Pat Kent, Wayne Livesey, Lucy Loughman, Katy Murphy, Deborah Riches, Ian Rowlandson, Mark Sidebottom, James Sutton, Tom Watson. Richard Newton undertook the metal detecting survey in 2005. Norfolk Archaeology Unit undertook the evaluation work on the site and provided the evaluation site archive and other documentation from the earlier phases of work. Jenny Young read through the report for the Environment Agency. Finally, grateful thanks go to Peter Doktor at the Environment Agency for his gentle guidance through the lengthy process of bringing this report to fruition.

James Rackham would like to thank Trude Maynard and Alison Foster for the washing and sorting of the environmental samples. The radiocarbon dates were undertaken by Beta Analytic Ltd, Miami, Florida, USA. The site coring was undertaken by Site Investigation Services of Willoughton, Gainsborough and the National Trust staff kindly assisted us during this fieldwork in 2005. John Percival of Norfolk Archaeology surveyed in the drilling locations and producing the base plan of Fig.3.2. Brian Patten of the Environment Agency kindly supplied the image of the EA LIDAR plot of the Blakeney and Cley marshes and thanks go to read to the EA for permission to use this plot in Fig. 3.2. Sue Anderson kindly assisted in the identification of Norfolk brick and tile fabrics.

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Chapter 1

The Site and its Historical Setting

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Introduction

Blakeney Eye, a part of the Blakeney Fresh Marshes or Blakeney Freshes, is located on the north Norfolk coast between the settlements of Blakeney and Cley-next-the-Sea (Figure 1.1). Several of these 'eyes', comprising a raised area of relatively recent glacial deposits of sandy gravels, are located within the Fresh Marshes along the coast from Salthouse to Weybourne

(Carnell 1999, 34-5). In the 1990s the Environment Agency initiated a scheme to improve the flood defence provision along the north Norfolk coast. The marshland strip along the North Norfolk coast has been described as the finest coastal marshes in Great Britain and amongst other designations lies within a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and on the Ramsar List of Wetland sites of International Importance. Areas of these marshes in

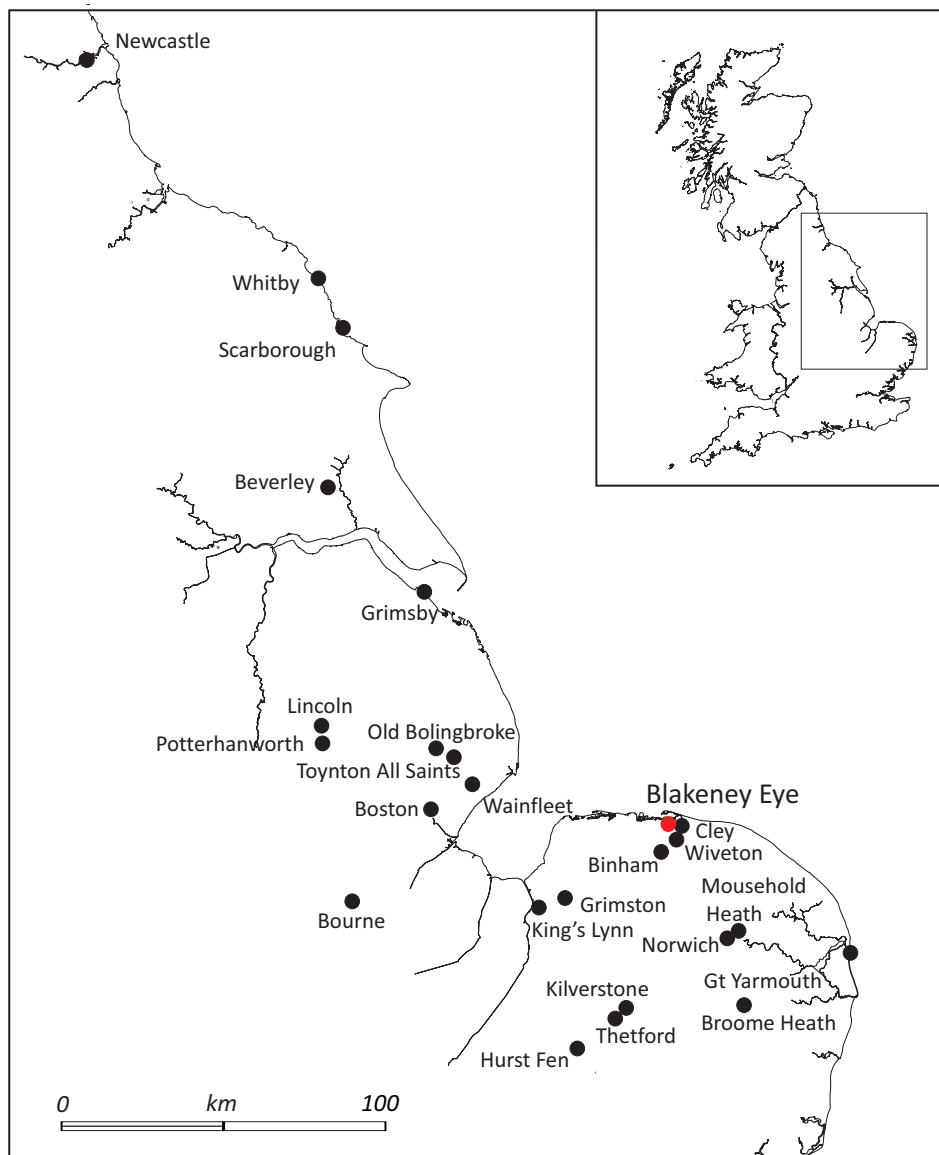


Figure 1.1 Blakeney Eye Site location showing some of the places mentioned in the text.



Figure 1.2 Aerial view of the excavations, looking east, showing the site in relation to the modern coastline and cut of the River Glaven prior to its realignment. Photo Graham Lubbock © National Trust.

the vicinity of Blakeney and Cley were at risk, both from marine flooding and from the potential silting up of the River Glaven. A shingle ridge runs westwards along the coast from Weybourne before becoming a spit extending into the sea at Blakeney. The old course of the river had a history of being blocked by shingle from Blakeney Point following storms and high tides, and the Glaven channel had most recently been realigned in 1924 because an earlier, more northerly, course was becoming blocked, causing flooding of Cley village.

Whilst the existing sea bank would provide protection for a while, it was recognised that the Eye would eventually be consumed by the sea. Proposals for the realignment of the River Glaven would result in leaving Blakeney Eye seaward of the river. Several remedial options were considered. Attempting to hold back the shingle or breaching the spit to create a new outlet for the Glaven would have been expensive and probably ineffective, whilst doing nothing was considered to be environmentally damaging to important marshland habitats. The Environment Agency decided to create a new route for the river, thereby reducing the risk of flooding in the villages of Cley and Wiveton.

In addition to potential environmental impacts there were also archaeological implications to consider. Situated on Blakeney Eye were the enigmatic remains of a ruinous building known as 'Blakeney Chapel'. Nearly a decade of research and archaeological investigation sought to clarify exactly what the purpose and function

of this building was. It was both listed (Grade II) and scheduled in 1960 (SAM no. 305, HER no. 6245) and described in the schedule as '*the ruins of a flint and brick rectangular structure...variously interpreted as a chapel, fort or barn*' but little of its origins and function were known (Figure 1.2).

It was therefore agreed between English Heritage (now Historic England) and Norfolk County Council that a programme of historical and archaeological research should be undertaken covering the whole of Blakeney Eye, an area of around 10 hectares, including excavation of the 'Blakeney Chapel' building. This was also required as a condition on the planning permission granted for the realignment of the channel (PF/03/1615) that covered both the excavations and subsequent watching briefs during the cutting of the new channel (Lee 2005b) and installation of the sluices, east of the River Glaven (Jordan 2006). The key partners in the project have included the Environment Agency, Norfolk Wildlife Trust (NWT), National Trust (NT), Natural England (NE) and English Heritage (now Historic England). The work was monitored by the Norfolk County Archaeologist David Gurney. Records held at the Norfolk County Council Historic Environment Record are referred to by their unique reference number and the prefix NHER.

Historical Background

A substantial amount of research was carried out by the Blakeney Historical Society, combined with non-

intrusive investigations on the ground, comprising geophysical survey and examination of molehills. The results were reported in a series of scholarly articles published in the *Glaven Historian* (Hooton 1998; Carnell 1999; Wright 1999a and 1999b). These have provided an exceptional background resource for the subsequent excavations.

In the Middle Ages Blakeney Eye comprised salt marshes through which various creeks flowed from the Glaven to the sea, and which became inundated by the sea at times of bad weather or during spring tides. Despite its name, Blakeney Eye is actually located in the parish of Cley-next-the-Sea on the west side of the River Glaven, and is so called in order to distinguish it from Cley Eye which lies to the east of the river channel. This land would most recently have been used as common grazing for sheep and cattle (Cozens-Hardy 1927, 355; Peake 2003, 46). Blakeney parish held a small portion of Blakeney Fresh Marshes at the western extent of this area, and the Marshes, where Blakeney Eye is located, were mainly divided between Wiveton parish to the south, and Cley parish to the east (Wright 1999a: 25).

The settlement of Cley-next-the-Sea developed due to its position on the River Glaven, which rises from a tiny headwater in Bodham and flows for 17km out to sea. The place-name 'Cley', is probably derived from the Old English *clæg*, meaning clay. Both Cley and Blakeney were royal estates before the Conquest which suggests they were already significant settlements, or even ports, in the pre-Conquest era. They remained royal holdings after the Conquest belonging to the manor of Holt. Cley was granted a market charter in 1253 and the town was valued at £150 in the Lay Subsidy of 1334 (Letters 2005). From the 14th century onwards the coast of England was divided into 19 areas, each with a head port. Blakeney and Cley were outports (the name given to the creeks and harbours belonging to a head port) of Yarmouth. The area covered by Blakeney and Cley extended from Morston, west of Blakeney, to Mundesley, c.32km east along the coast. There were resident customs officers at the outports where overseas trade took place and merchants were expected to use these ports.

The earliest documentary reference to Cley as a port is contained in a verdict of the jury of Cley and Blakeney (then known as Snitterly) ports in 1285. It was declared that the ports belonged to the lords of the manor, and their liberties and rights to wreck were identified as extending from *Hancon-ketil* (presumed to be Kettle Hill) in Morston to *Carwell Mill* (there is a Carvel Marsh in Kelling), and the liberty of free warren extended from *Bernesherd* (in the channel leading to Blakeney Quay) to *Roger Agges Gate* in Salthouse. A description of fees then followed: all ships that entered the port to buy, or sell, or to dry or 'spread their nets' were to pay an annual

fee of 4d, except for ships from the Cinque Ports and London, Colchester and Rochester. All goods coming in or going out had to be measured by the 'lord's measure', specifically: every herring cart had to pay 1d for every thousand carried out; every pack of wool coming in or going out of the port incurred a charge of 1d; and every ship from Snitterly had to pay '60 custom herrings a year to the lord' (Cozens-Hardy 1927: 369).

The port at Cley was probably at its most prosperous in the 14th century when its chief exports were wool and corn to the Low Countries, although salt fish also was also a major export. A record from 1351 describes an order for 'a great number of salt fish', to Thomas Storm of *Blakeneye*, and the bailiff of the Haven. Salt fish was also compulsorily purchased as supplies for the army in France during the 100 Years' War. In 1523 supplies for the army and navy, including 'dried cod bought from Wm. Momfort of Cley at 45s. per 100,' were shipped from Blakeney to Calais by order of Cardinal Wolsey.

There is little information about where salt fish might have been processed. According to Cozens-Hardy, writing in 1927, the hollow marsh not far from the windmill at Cley was still called the Saltpan. He notes that in a deed of 1721 (unreferenced) the ground is described as "ground formerly used for saltpanns or salt works" (Cozens-Hardy 1927: 369-370). This may be the site marked as saltpanns on the Ordnance Survey 25 inch 2nd edition (revised 1902-7), NHER 6152.

Mounds in the vicinity of the excavation site were interpreted as the possible remnants of salt production sites during The Norfolk Rapid Coastal Zone Archaeological Survey (Norfolk RCZAS) by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit in 2004. This was a project unconnected with the realignment of the River Glaven but which included Blakeney Eye, Area 71 (Robertson *et al.* 2005, 122; Fig. 50). The survey extended westwards from the Glaven channel for c.1.7km and southwards from the beach to Blakeney and Wiveton. During the same survey a series of mounds and hollows were noted at Cowhole, interpreted as possible evidence for salt working or brick production (NHER 41013) and Cranefield's map of 1769, names this area as 'Brick Marsh'.

A small area (c.178m north-south x c.98m east-west) approximately 135m south of the excavations is a group of mounds interpreted as possibly connected with salt working (NHER 42722). Some 31m east of this group at least five mounds or low banks, were identified covering an area of c.115m north-south by c.11m east-west (NHER 41531). These are probably mis-identifications. There is plenty of documentary evidence to show that salt was being imported into both Blakeney and Cley. Whatever the level of local production it was not in

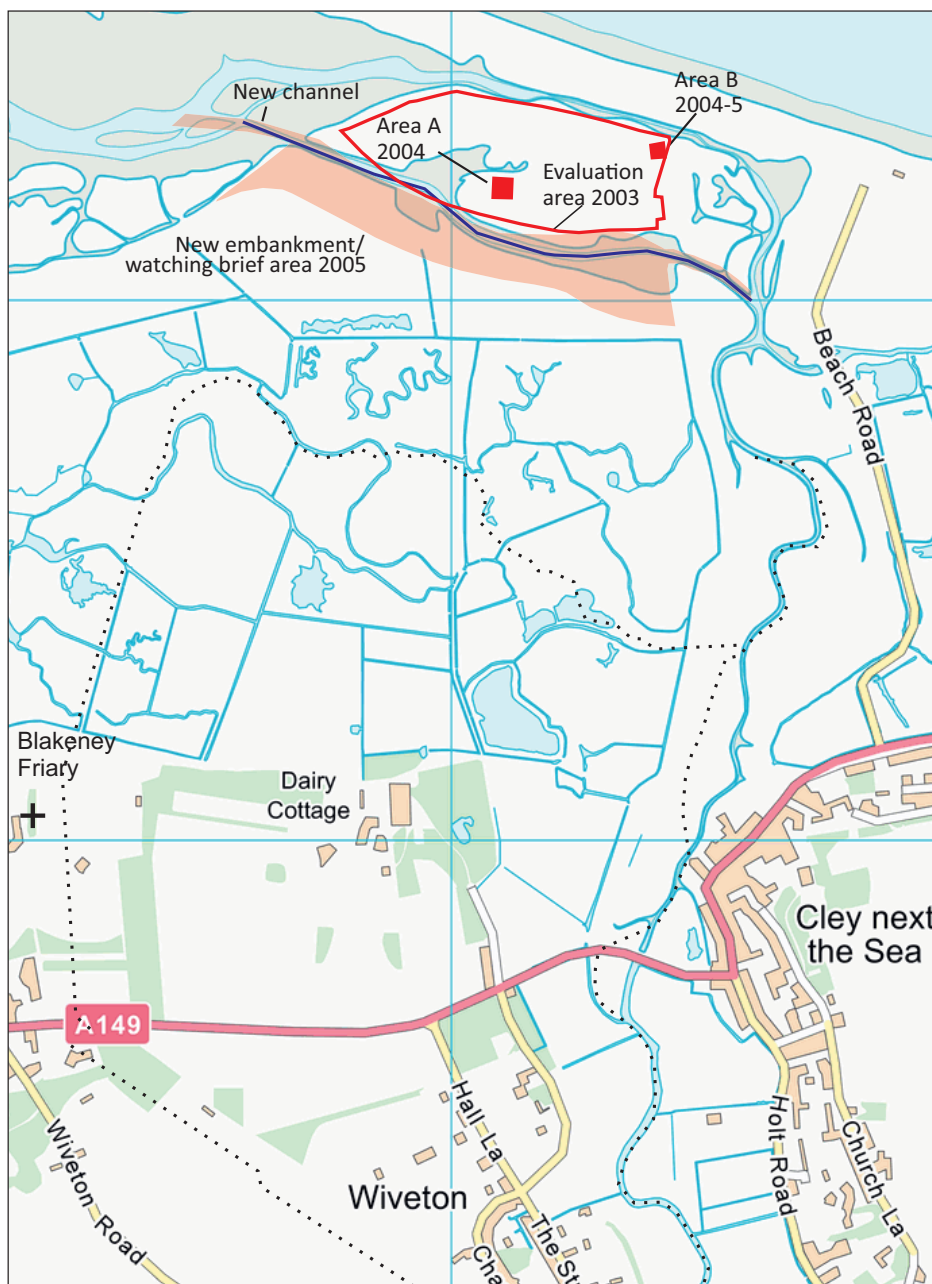


Figure 1.3 Blakeney Eye. Location of evaluation and excavation trenches 2003-2005.

sufficient quantities to meet the needs of the fishing industry producing salt fish. This commodity was being traded out of both ports. No evidence was found for salt making during the excavations between 2002 and 2005. Blakeney Eye was a freshwater marsh so any salt production would have taken place much farther west along the coast or east at Salthouse, and probably brought to Cley from the locality.

There were strong trade links with Iceland; numerous voyages were made in spring and summer to fish for cod and ling, as well as to trade. A survey of the ports, creeks and landing places in Norfolk in 1565 listed nine ships bound for Iceland from Cley and a further four

from Blakeney (Peake 2005: 60-61). By the 17th century overseas trade with Blakeney and Cley was in decline and was replaced by local trade along the coast, for instance, corn was shipped to Newcastle in exchange for coal. Other imported goods included iron, fur, deal and other timber, stone, tiles and salt (Cozens-Hardy 1927: 372).

Enclosure in Cley parish had begun around 1760 when the open fields were sub-divided into smaller pieces of land (Peake 2003: 50). There were two enclosure awards for Cley. The one in 1812 dealt with existing land and reclaimed marsh and that in 1824 with the enclosure of the saltmarsh between Cley and Wiveton (Peake 2003:

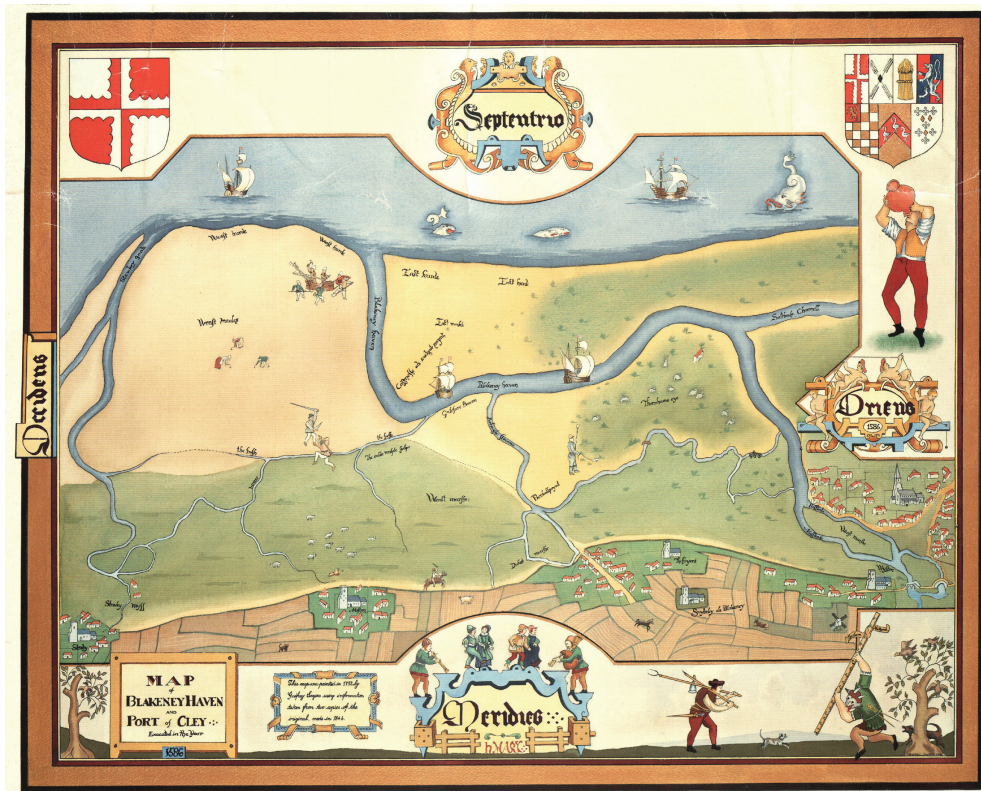


Figure 1.4 Map of Blakeney Haven and the Port of Cley. Colour copy of the 1586 map, based on copies made in 1846. (© Godfrey Sayers 1992).

54). A bank was built at this time in the same location as that built earlier by Philip Calthorpe in 1638. As a result, the Glaven channel was narrowed and became shallower, and larger ships were no longer able to use it (Hooton 1996: 235).

The coastal trade declined steeply once the railway network was in place in the second half of the 19th century, and Blakeney saw its last trading vessels around the time of the end of the First World War (Kelham 2000: 64).

There is scant documentary information about the building known as Blakeney Chapel that was to become the focus of the excavations on Blakeney Eye. The *Calendar of Patent Rolls* records on 20 April 1343 the presence of a hermit and chaplain by the name of Robert de Berton Benedict at Cley by Blakeney Haven, who was seeking permission from the king to seek alms (Wright 1999). As Wright points out there is no detail regarding the location of any hermitage, just that the Cley in question is definitely the one next to Blakeney Haven and not for example Cockley Cley in the same county. The assumption has been made that this hermit was in some way connected with Blakeney Friary, located just 1.5km to the south-west of the site, but there is no actual documentary link to suggest that Blakeney Priory ever had any claim to land on the Eye.

During the cutting of a new channel for the Glaven river in 1924, two human burials were found in the sloping side of the channel, approximately 30m to the north of the 'chapel' site (Birks 2003:2). Very little is known about these burials, the context in which they were found, or whether any artefacts were found with them. They were later reburied in Blakeney churchyard. Local descendants of those involved in the river channel excavation were asked about this discovery, but while confirming the details as described they could add no additional information (pers. comm. John Peake to Richard Lee). Their discovery further fuelled the theory that there was a chapel on the site, even though chapels rarely had rights of burial.

The earliest known map of the Blakeney area was by an unknown cartographer and dated 1586. It depicts the Norfolk coastline from Stiffkey to Cley and includes the Heydon family coat of arms. The Heydon family, whose seat was at Baconsthorpe Castle some 13km to the south-east of Cley, were Lords of Cley manor and wealthy sheep farmers. It has been suggested that the original map was created because of a dispute between the family and the Attorney General and Christopher Newgate, concerning the rights of wreck and salvage on Stiffkey Sands - whether the rights belonged to the Manor of Wighton in the Duchy of Lancaster (of which Stiffkey was a part), or the Manor of Cley (Hooton 1998:



Figure 1.5 Extract from a Plan of Blakeney Parish 1769 by William and Corba Crane.

3, 6; Wright 1999b: 3-8). The map includes depictions of a wreck, thought to be the *Thomas*, a Scottish ship, wrecked at the entrance to Blakeney Haven in 1586, being broken up by six people. A short distance inland, two figures are shown having a fight, these are thought to symbolise the two Lords from Stiffkey and Cley (Wright 1999b: 8). The whereabouts of this map is unknown, but at least seven copies, three of which date from the 19th century, are said to be taken from the original which, at that time, was in the possession of the Thomlinson family of Cley Hall. A modern colour copy was made in 1992 of two of the 19th-century versions copied directly from the original (Figure 1.4). A full assessment of the different copies, their whereabouts and the variations in detail, are discussed in an article by Jonathan Hooton who describes all the known copies, including the 1992 version (Hooton 1998).

The land on which the building stands is labelled 'Thornham's Eye' and a bridge across a stream aligned approximately east/west on the west side of the Glaven is shown at the south extent of this area. The significance of the name Thornham is thought to relate to a family with that name who lived in Blakeney in the

15th and 16th centuries, though no evidence has been found for a connection between them and the land (Wright 1999a: 32). A single-celled building is illustrated but is not named. The depictions of the buildings on the map are stylistic representations, and so caution needs to be taken in seeing the details as factual.

Slightly later than the original version of the map is the earliest known documentary reference to a building on Blakeney Eye. It is from a deed of 1595-96, quoted by Blomefield in his 1808 *History of Norfolk* which states:

'Sir Christopher Heydon, in the 38th of Elizabeth, by deed, demised to James Calthorpe, Esq, an old house called the decayed chapel of Cley, with a piece of marsh and a fir [furze?] ground called Thornham Eye, wherein the chapel stood, butting on Cley channel to the east, and Blakeney channel to the west, between Cley common and the channel on the north, and Wiveton and Blakeney marsh south, excepting wreck of the sea, herring fishery etc'.

The family had made their immense fortune from manufacturing woollen cloth at their estate but were profligate with money. This sale was one of many



Figure 1.6 Extract from a Map of Norfolk , surveyed 1790-94, published 1797 by William Faden.

attempts by Sir Christopher Heydon to reduce the family debts (Hooton 1998: 3, 5).

A further reference to the building has been found in a deed of 1621 which records the sale by James Hobart to Robert Beales of Cley of all his manors of Cley and Blakeney, except for ...

'all that marsh or pasture commonly called Thornham's Eye with an oulde house or chappell thereupon built.....between the haven and common channel of Cley on the part of the north and the marsh of Wiveton and Blakeney towards the south and abutting on the common channel of Cley towards the east and the common channel of Blakeney alias Snitterley towards the west now or late in the occupation of Peter Bishopp....' (Wright 1999a: 32).

The descriptions of 'an old house called the decayed chapel of Cley' in the 1595-96 deed and 'oulde house or chappell' in the 1621 deed are interesting. Whilst it might initially be thought they describe an abandoned building, at odds with the depiction on the 1586 map, they may instead indicate that the old building was in use as a house but was believed locally to have previously been used as (and therefore called) a 'chapel', that use having 'decayed' rather than the building itself.

There is a gap of 150 years before further evidence for the building on Blakeney Eye is found, this time on

William and Corba Cranefield's 1769 *Plan of Blakeney Parish* (Figure 1.5). This map shows a building situated on the Eye labelled 'Eye House' marked out in a stippled effect, possibly denoting a ruin. The land on which it stands is labelled 'furz', meaning gorse. There is no mention of the name Thornham Eye or a chapel. However, Faden's 1797 *Map of Norfolk* shows a building in a similar position labelled 'chapel ruins' (Figure 1.6). Just to complicate matters Faden's map depicts another building on the opposite banks of Blakeney Haven situated on Cley Eye also referred to as a 'chapel' and some sources have not been specific enough to distinguish between the two. The Cley marshes (Cley Eye) on the east side of the Glaven, on which ruins (NHER 6163) have been identified, were embanked in 1651. These ruins may have been a barn (Cozens-Hardy 1927: 358, 364; Wright 1999a: 25, 27) but the final vestiges of these remains were washed away during the great storms in 1953.

No building is shown on a series of 19th-century maps, including the Cley enclosure maps of 1812 and 1824 where the area is just labelled 'salt marshes' and the owner is noted as Lord Calthorpe in the accompanying schedule. On Palmer's 1835 *Map of Blakeney Haven* the parcel of land is named 'Blakeney Marshes' and in the approximate location of the 'chapel' the map is annotated 'old walls'. Land parcel 523 on the Cley Tithe map of 1841 is described merely as 'Part of Old

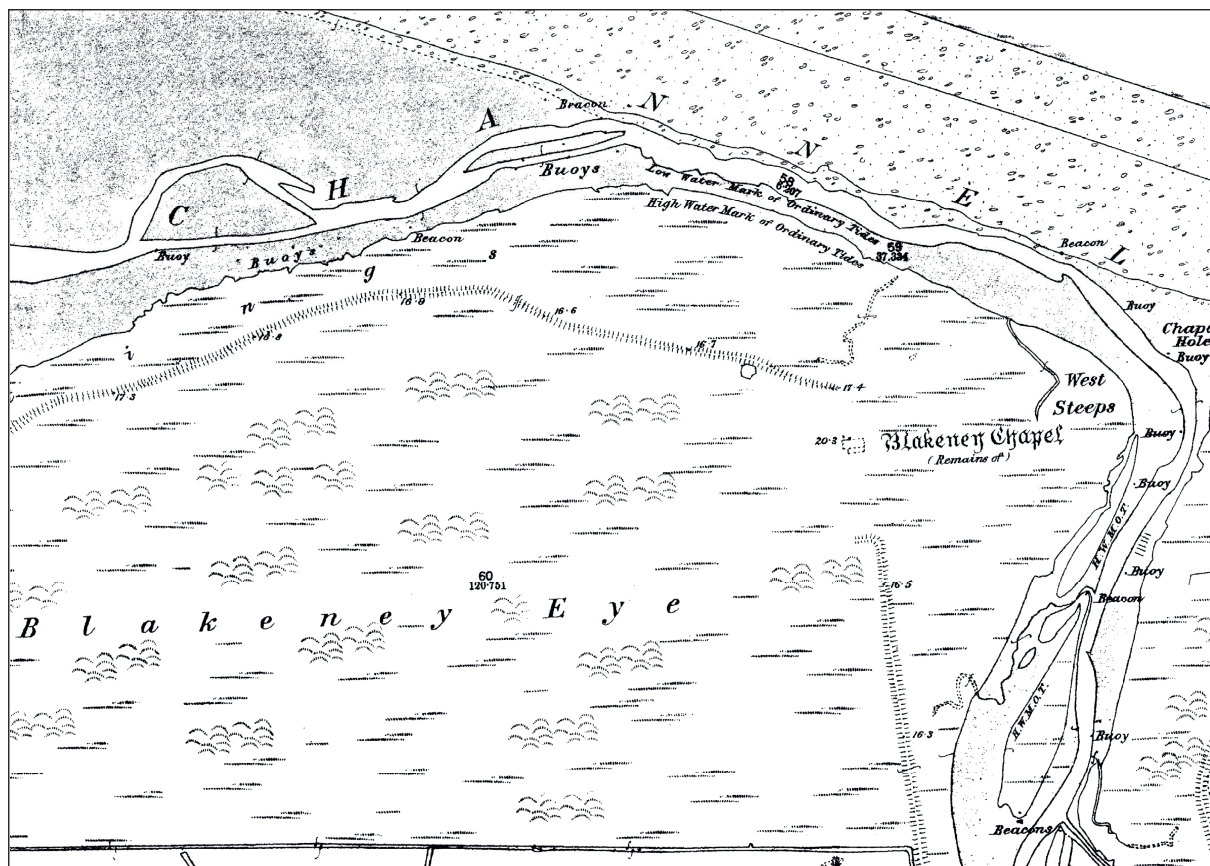


Figure 1.7 Extract from the OS 1:2500 map of 1887.

Eye (Norfolk ref. DN/TA/445)'. On the accompanying schedule the land is described as pasture and belonging to Lord Calthorpe. However, the 1:2500 scale Ordnance Survey map of 1887 names the site as 'Blakeney Chapel (Remains of)', and names part of the tidal channel to the north-east as 'Chapel Hole'. It also shows the remnants of an embankment on the seaward side of the Eye (Figure 1.7).

On-Site Investigations (Figure 1.3)

The purpose of the site investigations was to find out more about the enigmatic building and its setting in advance of its final loss to the encroaching sea, as well as examining its wider context within Blakeney Eye. An initial non-intrusive investigation on the ground, was carried out by the Blakeney Historical Society to complement their documentary research (Hooton 1998, Carnell 1999; Wright 1999a and 1999b). Extensive field investigations on Blakeney Eye, comprising geophysical survey and excavation, were undertaken by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit and Lindsey Archaeological Services between 2002 and 2005 (Birks 2003; Lee 2005a). These are the subject of the current report.

Work to realign a 550m stretch of river 200m inland of the existing channel, to replace the Cley Cut, was completed in 2007. As part of the realignment, new sluices were added at the Cley West Bank and Beach Road to allow Cley and Salthouse marshes to drain seawater more quickly into the River Glaven. There is also a spillway on the East Bank to divert any flood water in the Salthouse Marsh to the Glaven through these same sluices. Archaeological monitoring of all these phases of work was carried out by Lindsey Archaeological Services but no archaeological remains were found (Lee 2005b; Jordan 2006).

Moving the river inland has allowed the shingle to roll back naturally and protect the important freshwater habitat of Blakeney Freshes, designated as a North Norfolk Coast Special Protection Area (SPA) and 'Ramsar' site, a designation that recognises the international importance of specific wetlands. Land on the seaward side of the new river course has reverted from freshwater grazing marsh back to tidal saltmarsh. Despite several severe storm events, including those of 2014 and 2018, the scheduled site of 'Blakeney Chapel' is still intact at the time of writing in 2019.