



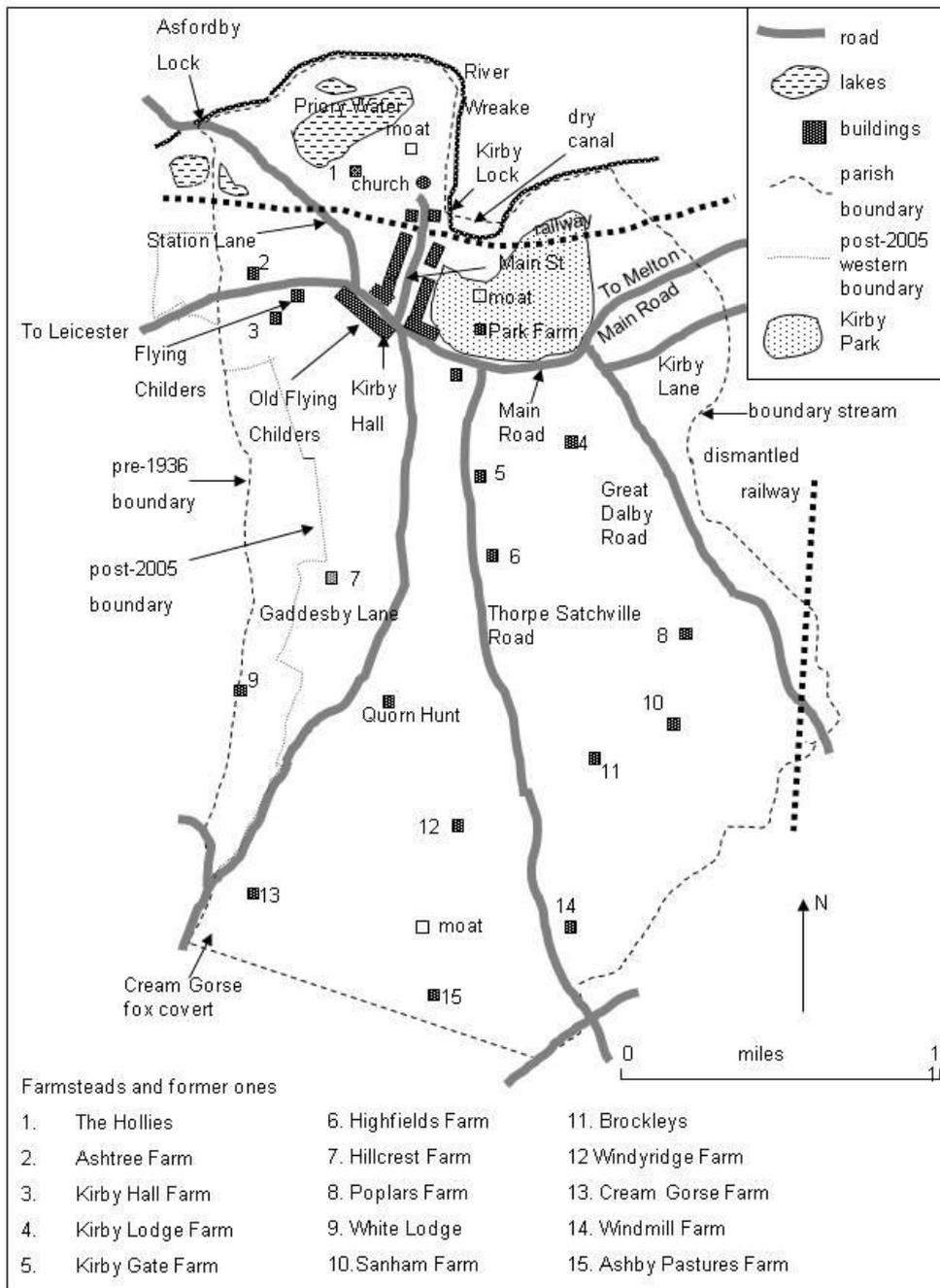
INTRODUCTION

Kirby Bellars is a large parish on the southern side of the Wreake Valley, some three miles west of Melton Mowbray, the nearest market town. The main concentration of population is in the north of the parish in a small village of linear form, stretching along Main Street, which runs for approximately half a mile northwards from the Melton Mowbray to Leicester road (Main Road). The rest of the population is scattered throughout the parish in isolated current or former farmhouses. In the medieval period, the village grew in a south-easterly direction, but this extension was destroyed in the early seventeenth century to create Kirby Park.¹ The traditional interpretation of the spectacular earthworks left behind by this destruction is challenged in the chapter on sites and buildings. In particular the probable site of the medieval priory (and its forerunners) is placed in the Kirby Park area in contradiction of several other sources, including Ordnance Survey maps.² The main economic activity of the parish has always been farming, but most of today's residents are either retired people or commuters to nearby towns. In Domesday Book, the parish is named as Cherchebi.³ The name means 'village with a church', and is of Scandinavian origin.

¹ MS on the destruction was in possession of Wm Herrick Esq. of Beaumanor in 1794 (see J. Nichols, *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester* (1795, reprinted 1971), II, 231.)

² For example OS Map 1:25000, Explorer sheet 246 (2000 edn).

³ A. Williams and G.H. Martin (eds.), *Domesday Book: A Complete Translation* (London, 2002), 643, 644.



Later medieval documents refer to Kirkeby or Kyrekeby on Wreke, with the river name added to distinguish it from other places named Kirkby.⁴ The name 'Kirkeby Belers' first appears in 1380, in the will of Roger Beler (c. 1319-1380), the lord of the manor, and is used widely from then.⁵

Parish boundaries and extent

The civil parish contained 2,754 a. in 1901 and was one of the largest in area in north-east Leicestershire.⁶ It was combined with neighbouring Frisby on the Wreake in 1936, but this union was dissolved in 2005.⁷ To the south of Main Road, the new boundary with Frisby lies one field-width further east than before, but once it crosses Main Road, the new boundary is one field-width to the west of the earlier boundary. This alteration has resulted in a net loss of about 145 a.⁸ The parish measures almost 3 miles north to south and 1.5 miles east to west. The northern boundary with Asfordby, historically followed the River Wreake, but between 1881 and 1889 it was partly changed to follow two sections of canal, which had been created by the Melton Mowbray Navigation.⁹ The southern boundary with Ashby Folville parish lies on the high ground between the valleys of the Wreake and of its Gaddesby Brook tributary. In the east the boundary adjoins Great Dalby parish and the former parish of Eye Kettleby. This section follows the course of a northwards-flowing tributary stream of the Wreake.

⁴ For example, TNA C143/153/9 (1323).

⁵ A. Gibbons, *Early Lincoln Wills* (Lincoln, 1888), 32.

⁶ Census, 1901, County Report (Leics).

⁷ Youngs, *Admin. Units 2. Northern England* (1971), 229; OS Boundaries Section, Southampton, map of Melton (Parishes) order, 2004.

⁸ OS maps 1:10560, Leics XIX NE and SE (1889 edn); OS Boundaries Section, Southampton, map of Melton (Parishes) order, 2004.

⁹ *Ibid.*; Census, 1881, Population Tables 2, Table 4; Census, 1891, Population Tables 2, Table 2.

Landscape

Apart from a small area in ‘Cricket Field’, the whole of the parish lies on the southern side of the River Wreake. The lowest ground in the parish is at Asfordby Lock in the north-west corner at 210 feet above sea level. Immediately adjacent to the river there is much meadow land on a flood plain, which is underlain by river alluvium.¹⁰ Further south the land rises, with a marked steepening of the gradient immediately south of Main Road. Beyond Hillcrest Farm on Gaddesby Lane the land drops to the valley of a small westward-flowing stream, before rising again to the highest point of the parish at 426 feet (130 m) on the southern boundary near Cream Gorse fox covert. Most of the higher ground south of Main Road is covered by glacial boulder clay, which is sticky and difficult to work. The combination of the heavy soil and the conversion of former arable land to pastoral farming has resulted in the survival of ridge and furrow in parts of the parish. Between the alluvial flood plain and the higher boulder clay area, are intermittent terraces of sand and gravel. The village, including the medieval subsidiary settlement, is on these well-drained soils.

¹⁰ Geol. Surv. Map, 1:63360, drift, sheet 142 (1969 edn); A.J. Thomason, *Soils of the Melton Mowbray District* (1971).



Fields to the west of Gaddesby Lane showing prominent ridge and furrow

Communication

Roads

The 1777 Prior map shows that the road pattern was much the same as today, with Main Street a cul-de-sac and the road to Asfordby (now Station Lane) in place well before there was a railway station.¹¹ The most important road in the parish was Main Road, which today is part of the trunk road from Leicester to Melton Mowbray. It was a turnpike between 1764 and 1872, with a tollgate at Kirby Gate. There is considerable evidence that there was a road in Roman times on or near the same route.¹² In the eastern part of Kirby parish this early road followed the line of present-day Kirby Lane and then passed between Melton Mowbray and Burton Lazars and on

¹¹ ROLLR, DG 9/Ma/LI [DG 9/2727].

¹² N.J. Cooper, 'Frisby and Kirby' in R. Buckley and S. George (eds), 'Archaeology in Leicestershire and Rutland 2002', *Trans. LAHS*, 77 (2003), 136-7.

to Stapleford. This was probably the medieval Saltgate of the Kirby manor bailiffs' accounts.¹³

Evidence on roads before 1777 comes from several hollow ways, particularly where the daughter village stood in medieval times. One of these descends the slope from Yew Tree Farm in Main Street to a former River Wreake crossing by footbridge and ford.¹⁴ It provided an alternative route via Sysonby to Melton Mowbray, with a branch northwards to Asfordby Valley.¹⁵ The building of the railway in 1846 was accompanied by a straightening of the river, which made the original river crossing redundant. The first part of the track was diverted to cross the bridge at Washdyke Lane and then run alongside the canal in the Cricket Field. As this route, including the later diversion, would have been prone to flooding, it was of secondary importance compared to Main Road.

In the bailiff's account of manor lands in the late 14th and early 15th centuries mention is made of a number of 'gates' in the three open fields.¹⁶ There was a 'Market gate' (probably the road to Melton), 'beyond Thorp gate' (Thorpe Satchville road) and 'beyond Dalby gate' (Dalby Road) in Eastfield; 'by Priory Gate' in Westfield and Middlefield and 'Wyndmylnegate' in Middlefield. The line of Wyndmylnegate can still be seen on aerial photographs as it ascended southward from Main Road up the slope between Thorpe Satchville Road and Gaddesby Lane.¹⁷ In Main Street a hollow way runs westward in the direction of Frisby on the Wreake from immediately south of the railway bridge. Today it is followed by a footpath. It is possible that this more

¹³ See below, 'Economic History'

¹⁴ ROLLR, QS 73/32

¹⁵ BL, Ordnance Survey two-inch to 1 mile surveyor's map of Melton area (1816); ROLLR, QS73/32.

¹⁶ TNA SC 6/908/23, 24 and 27. See also R. H. Hilton, *The Economic Development of some Leicestershire Estates in the 14th and 15th Centuries* (1947), 153-6.

¹⁷ Cambridge University Collection of Air Photographs, ANW 24.

level route was once used in addition to the Main Road route, which still involves a steep ascent and descent into Frisby.

Melton Mowbray Navigation

The River Wreake was canalized, by Melton Mowbray Navigation, in the 1790s by the deepening the river, building weirs and locks and cutting canals across bends.¹⁸

The Navigation was fully operational from the Soar Navigation at Syston to Melton Mowbray by the mid-1790s. Two short canals, each with a lock, were cut in Kirby parish and they are still to be seen today. Kirby lock, in the former Cricket Field, was cut in December 1793;¹⁹ it is now usually dry. Asfordby Lock is at the north-west corner of the parish boundary. After the Navigation closed in 1877, the company was required to replace lock gates by weirs, as can be seen at both locks in the parish.²⁰

The low height of the bridge at the eastern end of the dry canal in the Cricket Field suggests that it was rebuilt after the Navigation closed.

Railways

The railway from Syston to Peterborough, which passes through the parish, was built by the Midland Railway Company in 1846. The station on Station Lane was originally called Kirby Station, but was renamed Asfordby Station on 1 December 1857, to avoid confusion with Kirby stations elsewhere.²¹ The station was closed to passengers in 1951 and finally for goods in 1964.²² Trains still pass frequently beneath Main

¹⁸ *Leicester Journal*, 19 June 1795.

¹⁹ *Leicester Journal*, 20 December 1793.

²⁰ Navigation (Abandonment) Act, 40 & 41 Vic, c. 78, 1877-8. Copy at ROLLR, 3D42/4/23/10.

²¹ ROLLR, QS 73/32; *Leicester Chronicle*, 5 September 1846; J. Gough, *The Midland Railway: a Chronology* (1989), 80.

²² J. Simmons, 'Railways', *VCH Leics.* 3 (1955), 125; Gough, *Midland Railway*, 80.

Street and in 2011 the arch of the bridge was increased to accommodate container trains from Felixstowe to the Midlands.

In 1879, a railway from Bottesford through Melton Mowbray to Market Harborough was constructed by the Great Northern Railway and the London and North West Railway and passed through the extreme east of the parish. Regular timetabled passenger trains ended in 1953 but special excursion and goods trains continued to 1964.²³ The line of the track is still a clearly visible feature of the landscape as a cutting and embankment.

Population

In 1086, most of Kirby and presumably a large part of its population were recorded as part of eight parishes within the large manor of Melton.²⁴ There is considerable evidence that Kirby had a large population in the medieval period. For example, in the 1327 lay subsidy, 18 people paid tax, representing the fourteenth highest number in 92 parishes of north-east Leicestershire.²⁵ In 1349, the parish was affected by the plague, which caused the death of six of the twelve priests at Kirby Priory.²⁶ Yet in the 1377 poll tax return there were 161 adults in the parish, the twenty-second highest total in

²³ Simmons, 'Railways', 124; TNA, Rail 909/various, Eastern Operating Area Nottingham District Section C, Operating timetables, 1951-3; <http://www.meltonmowbrayrailways.info> accessed on 2 June 2014

²⁴ *Domesday*, 643, 644

²⁵ W.G.D. Fletcher (ed.), 'The earliest Leicestershire lay subsidy roll, 1327', *Associated Architectural Societies Reports and Papers* 19 (1888), 209-312 and 20 (1889), 130-178.

²⁶ Linc. Epis. Reg. Inst., Gynwell, 1349 (cited in *VCH Leics* 1, 362).

Leicestershire.²⁷ In 1381, the year of the Peasants' Revolt, this figure had reduced to a dubious 111.²⁸

The lay subsidy return of 1524/5 still suggests a comparatively large population with 36 heads of households paying tax.²⁹ In 1563, the 57 households in the parish was third equal highest in Framland, suggesting a population of about 250.³⁰

An adult population of 200 was recorded in 1603,³¹ giving the first hint of a decline, at a time when the general population throughout England was rapidly rising.³² In the rank order for Framland, Kirby had fallen from third equal to ninth. The Markham family, lords of the manor, were cited for the destruction of two farmhouses in 1607,³³ and Erasmus de la Fontaine junior (1601-72) was fined for depopulation in 1636.³⁴ The Compton Census of 1676 recorded an adult population of only 104,³⁵ little more than half that seen in 1603. The Hearth Tax figures for 1670 suggest that the number of households (including those exempt from the tax) had been reduced to 43,³⁶ from 57 in 1563.³⁷ In 1706 the number of households was recorded as 35, but only 27 in 1709, 1712 and 1721.³⁸

²⁷ TNA, Poll tax receipts 1377, E 179/133/17-24; C. Fenwick (ed.), *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381, I, Beds-Leics* (New York, 1998), 484-93.

²⁸ TNA, Poll tax, Framland, 1381, E 179/133/34; Fenwick, *Poll taxes*, 500.

²⁹ TNA, E 179/133/108, rot 2d.

³⁰ BL, Harl. MS 595 f 77; A. Dyer and D.M. Palliser, *The Diocesan Population Returns for 1563 and 1603* (New York, 2005), 214-16.

³¹ Canterbury Cathedral Archive, Liber Cleri 1603, DCbNN9; Dyer and Palliser, *Diocesan Returns*, 376-8.

³² R.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541-1871: a Reconstruction* (London and Cambridge, 1981), 532.

³³ Reported more legibly in Star Chamber Proceedings 13 Jan 1610, 8/17/16.

³⁴ Nichols, *History*, II, 231.

³⁵ A. Whiteman (ed.), *Compton Census of 1676: a Critical Edition* (New York, 1986).

³⁶ TNA, E 179/251/5, rot 18d

³⁷ TNA, E 179/133/108.

³⁸ J. Broad, ed., *Bishop Wake's Summary of Visitation Returns from the Diocese of Lincoln 1706-1715, II Outside Lincolnshire* (2012), 765-6; LA, Gibson 12, pp 172-4.

Nichols states there were 28 families in the parish in 1794,³⁹ but the first national census of 1801 gives a total parish population of 173.⁴⁰ The population then increased to peaks of 271 in both 1881 and 1911, followed by a decline to 220 in 1931. Only figures for the combined population of Kirby Bellars and Frisby on the Wreake are then available until 2001, when a figure of 334 was given separately for Kirby. In 2011 the number had increased to 369.⁴¹

Settlement

The findings in the 1990s of two Neolithic axes in separate locations to the south of the present village indicate the presence of man from 4,500 to 6,000 years ago.⁴² Numerous artefacts dating from the Bronze Age, Iron Age and particularly the Roman period, have been found in an area to the south of Chalk Pool Hill, lying astride the present Kirby-Frisby boundary, suggesting that a settlement, or series of settlements, was located in the vicinity.⁴³ These finds are close to a probable Roman road, roughly along the line of the present Main Road.⁴⁴

The church itself stands in a commanding position on a spur of higher ground extending northwards into the flood plain of the River Wreake. More evidence from the Roman period has been found in the churchyard, as has late Anglo-Saxon material

³⁹ Nichols, *History*, 228.

⁴⁰ 1851 census of Great Britain, Population Tables 2, Table [1], 'Population abstract'.

⁴¹ <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination> (accessed 9 June 2014)

⁴² Leics County Council, Leics and Rutland Historic Environment Record, Kirby Bellars parish, 20 May 2011, MLE7265 and MLE7335.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, MLE8840.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, MLE8839.

including around 100 sherds of pottery, a loom weight and a brooch.⁴⁵ Splashes of lead and tin hint at a possible metal working site there.⁴⁶

Evidence of a moated manor house can be seen on the north side of the church, but suggestions that this is the site of the former priory, are unlikely to be correct, as discussed below.⁴⁷

A secondary village in what is now Kirby Park, including areas called Easthorpe and Westhorpe, was certainly in place by the early 14th century.⁴⁸ Another moated manor house, which probably belonged to the Beler family, was located here.⁴⁹ In the early seventeenth century this subsidiary settlement were destroyed by Erasmus de la Fontaine junior (1601-72) to create Kirby Park with its mansion.⁵⁰ All that remains today are the earthworks, including house platforms, hollow ways, windmill mounds, fishpond hollows and the moated manor house site.⁵¹

The shrunken village that remained consisted of houses scattered along Main Street, which runs from Main Road to a cul-de-sac at the parish church, and this situation prevailed well into the 20th century. However, there was a move to build farmsteads, called lodges, away from the village in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.⁵² The imposing Kirby Hall, at the junction of Main Road and Main Street, was built in the

⁴⁵ Ibid., MLE3743; J.G. Hurst, 'Saxon and medieval pottery from Kirby Bellars', in *Trans. LAHS*, 43 (1967-8), 10-18.

⁴⁶ Leics County Council, Leics and Rutland Historic Environment Record, MLE3747.

⁴⁷ OS Map 1:25000, Explorer sheet 246 (2000 edn); Eng. Heritage, scheduled ancient monument no. 1009285; Hartley, *Medieval Earthwork*, front cover; See below 'Manors and Other Estates'.

⁴⁸ TNA SC 6/908/23, 24 and 27; LA, Linc. Reg. III, 1316, 211-13; A. Hamilton Thompson, 'Chapel of St Peter at Kirby upon Wreake', *Trans. LAHS* 16 (1929-31), 154.

⁴⁹ Ibid. See below, 'Manors and Other Estates'.

⁵⁰ Nichols, *History*, 231.

⁵¹ Hartley, *Medieval Earthworks*, front cover.

⁵² ROLLR DG 9/Ma/LI [DG 9/2727]; BL, Ordnance Survey two-inch to 1 mile surveyor's map of Melton area (1816).

1840s and converted into flats in 1960.⁵³



Moated site in Kirby Park: probably the capital messuage of Roger Beler (d. 1326)

Since 1960 there has been a major change with the building of new houses, filling in many of the gaps in Main Street.

⁵³ OS Map 1:63360, sheet LXIII (1835 edn); TNA, HO 107/209/ 62; County of Leicester, Melton Constituency Register of Electors 1961, parish of Frisby, Kirby Bellars Ward.