

VCH Oxfordshire Texts in Progress

LITTLE ROLLRIGHT

Economic History

Little Rollright's economy has always been based on mixed farming, although in some periods sheep and cattle husbandry became more prominent, prompting the parish's enclosure and partial depopulation in the late 15th and 16th centuries. In the Middle Ages land was divided between Eynsham abbey's demesne and various freehold and customary holdings, but by the 17th and 18th centuries farming was dominated by one or two resident farmers, and from the 19th century most of the parish formed part of a single farm. Non-agricultural activities included quarrying and milling.

The Agricultural Landscape



Little Rollright photographed from the south-east in 2020.

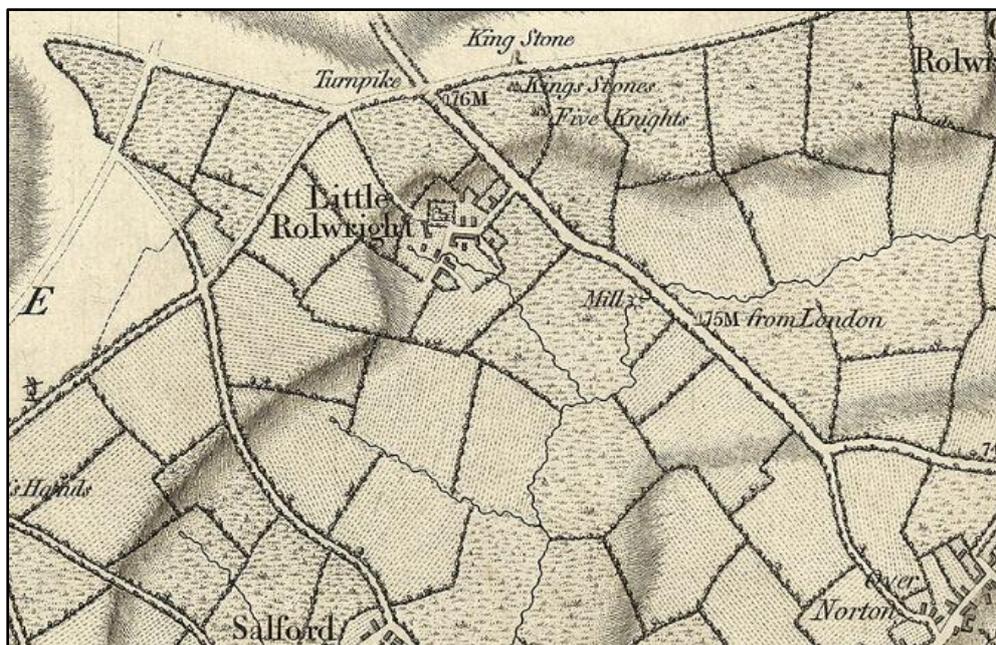
Incipient open fields probably covered much of the parish by 1086 (when 8 ploughteams were in operation), indentations in the parish boundary preserving the outline of open-field furlongs formerly shared with Salford to the south-west and Great Rollright to the south-east.¹ In 1363 two fields covering 150 a. extended the width of the parish, one (58 a.) abutting Salford's fields and the other (92 a.) Great Rollright's, the division between them marked by the 'small brook' and the village. Demesne and tenant lands lay intermixed, and probably the fields were ploughed and fallowed alternately. Two other fields 'on the down' had been formerly cultivated in a similar way, but were then unsown due to the effects of plague, the lord enclosing one or other of them for his own use in alternate years until Lammas (1 August).² Between 1496 and 1505 some 400 a. of former open-field arable were permanently enclosed and converted to grazing,³ although cultivation continued on the

¹ OS Map 6", Oxon. XIV (1885 edn); below (medieval).

² *Eynsham Cart.* II, pp. 57–60; below (medieval).

³ I.S. Leadam (ed.), *Domesday of Inclosures 1517–18* (1897), I, 328, 372.

higher ground around the ridgeway, an area of c.240 acres.⁴ By 1848 the arable extended further south, covering around three fifths of the cultivable area, and extensive cropping remained a feature of the parish's farming thereafter.⁵



Little Rollright in 1797, showing its enclosed fields of arable and pasture: detail from Richard Davis's map of Oxfordshire.

Streams provided plentiful meadow,⁶ which in the Middle Ages was divided into parcels and shared amongst the lord, the rector, and the peasant yardlanders.⁷ In 1848 it covered 59 a. along the Evenlode tributary.⁸ Permanent pasture also occupied the wetter ground in the south of the parish, individual pieces in the Middle Ages comprising mostly small strips, although one close (the unusually named 'salt grass') contained more than 10 acres.⁹ Ley farming (alternate cropping and pasture) was probably practised on the grazing grounds created in 1496–1505, later field names including 'grass piece' and 'sheep ground' (both arable in 1848) and 'the leys', which at that time was one of several pasture closes covering 151 a. in total.¹⁰ Almost no woodland existed in 1848, and probably it was never abundant, that shown on a 17th-century estate map lying mostly in hedgerows or scattered in lightly wooded pastures, with a perhaps slightly greater concentration in Summer Leys

⁴ OHC, E321/M/1.

⁵ *Ibid.* tithe award and map; below (since 1800).

⁶ For Domesday figures, below (medieval).

⁷ *Eynsham Cart.* II, pp. 60–1.

⁸ OHC, tithe award and map.

⁹ *Eynsham Cart.* II, p. 60; *PN Oxon.* II, 373.

¹⁰ OHC, tithe award and map.

north of the village.¹¹ Even so timber including ash, elm, and walnut was valued at £949 4s. in 1705, later sales including 400 ash pollards in 1810.¹²

Medieval Farming

In 1086 Little Rollright manor contained arable for 6 ploughteams and 25 a. of meadow, and yielded £5 including tenants' rents. Its value was unchanged since 1066, though the 8 ploughteams in operation suggest a recent expansion of the cultivated area. Two slaves or *servi* helped run a 2-ploughteam demesne farm, while the other 6 ploughteams were shared among 12 *villani* and 3 lower-status bordars.¹³ By 1279 the manor's annual value had increased to £13 1s. 10d., of which £3 6s. 8d. derived from an expanded 5-yardland demesne and the rest from tenants' rents and labour services. Those were heavy, 12 yardlanders each owing services amounting to around two days a week for 10 months of the year, and more than four days a week during August and September, in all 120 days. Additional works included occasional ploughing, harrowing, and carrying, with individuals' total obligations valued at 9s. 6½d. a year in addition to their 3s. rent. One yardlander may have also been required to act as reeve. Seven cottagers and three free tenants (also with cottage holdings) were less heavily burdened, while the village smith held a yardland for lighter services than his fellows.¹⁴ Division of one yardland between two tenants may reflect pressure on land, and disparities in wealth possibly increased during the early 14th-century agrarian crisis.¹⁵

Sheep farming was already important: Eynsham abbey sold wool from Rollright to a Witney merchant in 1268, while in 1341 £5-worth was seized by the Crown from the Little Rollright farmer Hugh Shepherd.¹⁶ A local reeve continued to run the abbey's demesne and to collect tenants' rents in 1325.¹⁷ Mid-century plague, however, disrupted the running of the manor, whose value fell to £9 12s. 9¼d. by 1363. Seven yardlands were then untenanted and two fields unsown, although the remaining yardlanders still each owed 10s. rent, plus labour services (ploughing, harrowing, reaping, mowing, and carrying) worth 4s. 6½d., an overall increase since the 1270s despite the apparent shift to money rents. Several villeins subsequently left the manor, and the amount of grazing probably increased, the value of

¹¹ *Ibid.*; *ibid.* E321/M/1 (also showing a cluster called The Willows by the SE boundary stream); *ibid.* BOR4/4/C1/10 (lack of timber).

¹² *Ibid.* BOR4/4/C1/5; BOR4/4/C1/7; *Oxf. Jnl.*, 24 Feb. 1810.

¹³ DB, f. 155; *Oxon. Atlas*, pp. 34–5.

¹⁴ *Rot. Hund.* II, 744 (incl. the byname reeve or *prepositus*); cf. *Eynsham Cart.* I, pp. 15, 306; *Tax. Eccl.* 44. One free cottage holding in 1279 may have been the mill (below).

¹⁵ *Rot. Hund.* II, 744 (possibly only a family division); below, social hist.

¹⁶ *Eynsham Cart.* I, p. 251; *Cal. Close* 1341–3, 334.

¹⁷ BL, Harl. Roll E27.

meadow (16*d.* an acre) and pasture (7*d.* an acre) both surpassing that of arable (a little over 5*d.* an acre).¹⁸ Abandonment of buildings and high tenant turnover persisted in the 1380s,¹⁹ and by 1390 the abbey let the manor for £8 13s. 4*d.* a year, reduced to £7 13s. 4*d.* in 1435 when John Hammond received a 50-year lease which included the demesne and tenants' rents, but excluded profits from the manor court. By 1447 the rent was temporarily reduced to £5 6s. 8*d.*, but the Hammonds remained in 1470, and in 1535 the manor was valued at £8 a year.²⁰

Increasingly the parish's extensive grazing grounds attracted outsiders involved in the late medieval wool trade. The Lyneham husbandman Henry Stevens acquired one of Little Rollright's remaining customary landholdings (with its rights of common grazing) through marriage to a bondwoman,²¹ while John and Agnes Clotton (d. 1501 or 1502), later of Chipping Norton, rented pasture at Rollright and sold wool to the prominent Cotswold merchant John Heritage.²² Amalgamation of holdings resulted also in some large arable farms, two unnamed abbey tenants in 1496 holding c.100 a. each, which together required three ploughteams and supported twenty people. That year, however, the abbot ordered their eviction and enclosed the land for grazing, while in 1505 his lessee Robert Lewsham or Leysham enclosed a further 200 a. and evicted another sixteen people from three houses.²³ John Leysham (possibly his son) was the parish's highest taxpayer in 1524.²⁴

Farms and Farming 1530–1800

Despite depopulation and enclosure (directed chiefly towards wool production), a handful of 16th-century tenants continued to pursue mixed agriculture on holdings still measured in yardlands, growing grain and keeping horses, cattle, sheep, and pigs. Edmund Philips (d. 1552) left wheat and rye, while John Ballard (d. 1557), a former churchwarden, grew barley on at least two yardlands, and employed a shepherd and servant. In 1544 he and Philips were taxed on goods worth respectively £8 and £3, while others operating on a similar scale included the Heyrows and Ingrams.²⁵ The Throckmortons (lords 1559–1611) may have farmed much of the parish directly, John Throckmorton (assessed on land worth £20) being

¹⁸ *Eynsham Cart.* II, pp. 56–62; below, social hist. By then a yardland contained 33 a.

¹⁹ TNA, SC 2/197/14; below, social hist.

²⁰ *Eynsham Cart.* II, pp. lxiv, lxxv; *Valor Eccl.* II, 208.

²¹ *Eynsham Cart.* II, p. lxiv. For Lyneham's sheep farming, *VCH Oxon.* XIX, 174, 178, 351.

²² C. Dyer, *A Country Merchant, 1495–1520* (2012), 157; *Oxon. Wills*, 47, 76–7.

²³ Leadam, *Domesday of Inclosures*, I, 328, 372.

²⁴ TNA, E 179/161/198.

²⁵ OHC, MSS Wills Oxon. 179, ff. 146v.–147; 180, f. 112 and v.; 181, f. 97a; 183, ff. 171v.–172; TNA, E 179/161/198; E 179/162/227.

the only taxpayer in the early 17th century. Even so at its sale in 1611 the manor reportedly included eleven houses and gardens.²⁶

The Dixons, though resident, may have let the demesne to Robert Austen (d. 1632 or 1633), one of a family from Tadmarton.²⁷ Resident labourers included Richard Rainbow (d. 1634), whose goods (worth £5 12s. 8d.) included agricultural tools, three pigs, and two sheep, while the spinster Alice Hawker (d. 1633 or 1634), who left no grain or livestock, was perhaps another.²⁸ Robert Fullin, Austen's successor as demesne lessee, owed the Dixons £250 at his death in 1683, and farmed on a considerable scale, leaving almost £112-worth of grain, sheep worth £116, cattle worth £96, more than £50-worth of other livestock, and £5-worth of cheese, plus farming equipment worth £14.²⁹ The pattern continued in the early 18th century, when John Walker (d. 1713) held 688 a. (presumably extending into neighbouring parishes) at an annual rent of £365, the estate's remaining 12 a. being held with the watermill. A malt kiln 'of considerable value', together with a malthouse and new-built barn, suggest a renewed emphasis on grain production, though livestock farming persisted.³⁰

Under the Reades the estate was let in two halves, by the 1780s to Robert Fowler and John Davis.³¹ Fowler was a celebrated livestock breeder who, beginning with just two cows and a hired bull, had built up a longhorn herd famed for the quality of its beef, and who paid £210 a year for 300–400 a. laid down wholly to grass. His pedigree herds and flocks were auctioned in 1791 at the height of the fashion for breed improvement, 50 cattle fetching £4,260 18s. or an average of £85 a head, and a single cow (called Brindled Beauty) £273. His sheep flock, though held in less esteem, also attracted high prices.³² Fowler was succeeded by his son Richard, who left the parish in 1800 when his remaining cattle and sheep were sold with farming equipment including ploughs, harrows, carts, and dairying and brewing utensils.³³ Resident farm labourers included the Woodwardes and Brains.³⁴

²⁶ TNA, E 179/163/398; E 179/163/435; Rosen, 'Little Rollright', 53, citing TNA, CP 25/2/340/9 Jas I Easter; above, landownership.

²⁷ TNA, PROB 11/163/200.

²⁸ OHC, MSS Wills Oxon. 132/1/13; 85/2/38.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 79/4/5.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 156/5/29; *ibid.* BOR4/4/C1/5; BOR4/4/C1/7–8; BOR4/4/C1/10; below (milling).

³¹ OHC, QSD/L/228.

³² *Particulars of the Breeding Stock, Late the Property of Mr Robert Fowler of Little Rollright (1791)*: copy in OHC, E255/D/1; A. Young, *Annals of Agriculture*, vol. 16 (1791), 387–412; R. Trow-Smith, *A History of British Livestock Husbandry, 1700–1900* (1959), 49, 57–9.

³³ *Oxf. Jnl.*, 27 Sept. 1800.

³⁴ OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 177/4/57; *ibid.* par. reg. transcript.

Farms and Farming Since 1800

Nineteenth-century farming was dominated by John Baker (d. 1854), his son Thomas (d. 1852), and Thomas's son John, the elder John taking over Richard Fowler's holding, while by 1817 Thomas occupied the farm formerly run by John Davis, and later by Joseph Rose.³⁵ The Bakers reunited the estate, farming 720 a. in 1851 and employing 21 men and 5 boys, who included the resident Woodwards. Other farm workers must have lived outside the parish, amongst them a Salford cowman who was gored by a cow's horns in 1863.³⁶ Presumably the Bakers constructed the buildings named after them at Baker's Hill, and possibly also those at Rose's Hill, and in addition purchased freehold land in nearby parishes including Chipping Norton and Barton-on-the-Heath (Warws.).³⁷ Farming remained mixed, with almost three fifths of the cultivable land under crops in 1801 and 1848, and just over half in 1870, when the acreage sown with wheat and barley matched that sown with fodder crops.³⁸ Livestock on the younger John Baker's farm at his departure in 1872 included 540 Cotswold sheep, 72 shorthorn cattle, and a few horses and pigs.³⁹

James Bliss (d. 1898) laid down some arable to grass and increased his sheep and cattle numbers, following a widespread response to the agricultural depression. In 1881 (when he worked 605 a. and employed 9 men and 11 boys) the main cereal crop was barley (116 a.) and the main fodder crop turnips (92 a.), while in 1890 (when almost three fifths of the farm was grazed) cattle numbered 92 and sheep 614.⁴⁰ Farming remained broadly similar under Charles Williams (d. 1922), renowned for his Oxford Down sheep,⁴¹ while by 1943 half the farm was grass, a fifth bare fallow, and the rest cropped with mostly wheat, oats, barley, potatoes, and turnips. Sheep numbers had fallen to 103, but 93 cattle remained, and 5 workers were employed. Production later in the 1940s was reportedly much improved by the lessee Frederic Gregory,⁴² and similar practices continued under J.H. Hughes in the 1960s.⁴³ Thereafter the arable was increased in line with a common late 20th-century pattern, covering two thirds of the estate in 2014. Even so some fields were under temporary grass leys, supporting a herd of pedigree longhorn cattle.⁴⁴

³⁵ *Ibid.* QSD/L/228.

³⁶ TNA, HO 107/1732; *Oxon. Atlas*, p. 117; *Oxf. Times*, 16 May 1863.

³⁷ OHC, tithe map; TNA, PROB 11/2150/342; TNA, PROB 11/2187/402.

³⁸ OHC, tithe award; TNA, HO 67/18; *ibid.* MAF 68/255 (135 a. cereals, 133 a. fodder crops).

³⁹ *Banbury Guardian*, 19 Sept. 1872.

⁴⁰ TNA, MAF 68/711 (292 a. cropped, 313 a. grass in 1880); MAF 68/1281; *ibid.* RG 11/1520.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* MAF 68/1851; MAF 68/2421; MAF 68/2985; *The Times*, 27 Feb. 1922.

⁴² TNA, MAF 32/913/88, no. 7.

⁴³ OHC, B28/1/F1/424; B28/1/F1/438.

⁴⁴ *Country Life*, 12 June 2014.

Non-Agricultural Activities

In the 1270s a blacksmith occupying a yardland owed labour services including making the ironwork for two demesne ploughs, and shoeing two draught animals with iron provided by the abbot.⁴⁵ Smiths continued in the early 14th century and possibly (judging from surnames) in the 15th,⁴⁶ while in the late 17th century the Sibford Ferris blacksmith Jeremiah Lamb moved to Little Rollright mill.⁴⁷ Edward Scarlet apparently ran a short-lived pub from the millhouse in the 1770s–80s,⁴⁸ and a female shoebinder lived there in 1851, while a few other 19th-century women worked as dressmakers or gloveresses.⁴⁹

Small-scale quarrying was undertaken from prehistory, when the Rollright Stones were built from local stone.⁵⁰ Late 19th-century maps show small disused stone pits in the parish's north-west corner (some adjoining quarries in neighbouring parishes), and by 1900 limestone quarrying along the Long Compton boundary had resumed, the quarry forming part of the estate sold in 1929.⁵¹ It was extended in the 1940s, and by the 1960s was operated by Kingston Minerals Ltd of Bath,⁵² followed in the early 21st century by Hanson Quarry Products, which extended it further.⁵³

Milling A watermill in the parish's south-east corner may have existed by 1279, when a free tenant with the byname miller occupied a cottage and 4 acres.⁵⁴ The mill itself was not mentioned until the manor's sale in 1611, however, having perhaps been rebuilt.⁵⁵ The tenant in the 1670s was William Castle,⁵⁶ followed shortly afterwards by the Lambs, who continued there until the 1760s and at least one of whom was also a maltster. Rent in 1707 (for the mill and 12 a. of meadow) was £13, though both mill and millhouse were then in disrepair; their upkeep was the responsibility of the miller, who owned three of the four millstones.⁵⁷ Later tenants included the Scarlets (1770s–80s),⁵⁸ Edward Williams (d. 1856),

⁴⁵ *Rot. Hund.* II, 744.

⁴⁶ TNA, E 179/161/8–10; BL, Harl. Roll K30.

⁴⁷ OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 42/2/36; below (milling).

⁴⁸ OHC, QSD/V/2; below (milling).

⁴⁹ TNA, HO 107/1732; *ibid.* RG 9/911; RG 10/1458; RG 11/1520.

⁵⁰ Above, landscape etc. (prehist. settlement).

⁵¹ OS Map 1:2500, XIV.1 (1886–1922 edns); above, landownership.

⁵² *The Times*, 17 Jan. 1952; OHC, RDC9/3/F7/2, f. 8.

⁵³ SMA 30 (2000), 63; M. Sims, 'Flick Quarry, Rollright, Oxfordshire' (Oxford Archaeol. Unit unpubl. report Aug. 2008): <https://doi.org/10.5284/1009203> (accessed May 2020).

⁵⁴ *Rot. Hund.* II, 744. For later location, OHC, E321/M/1; OS Map 1:2500, XIV.6 (1881–1922 edns).

⁵⁵ Rosen, 'Little Rollright', 53, citing TNA, CP 25/2/340/9 Jas I Easter.

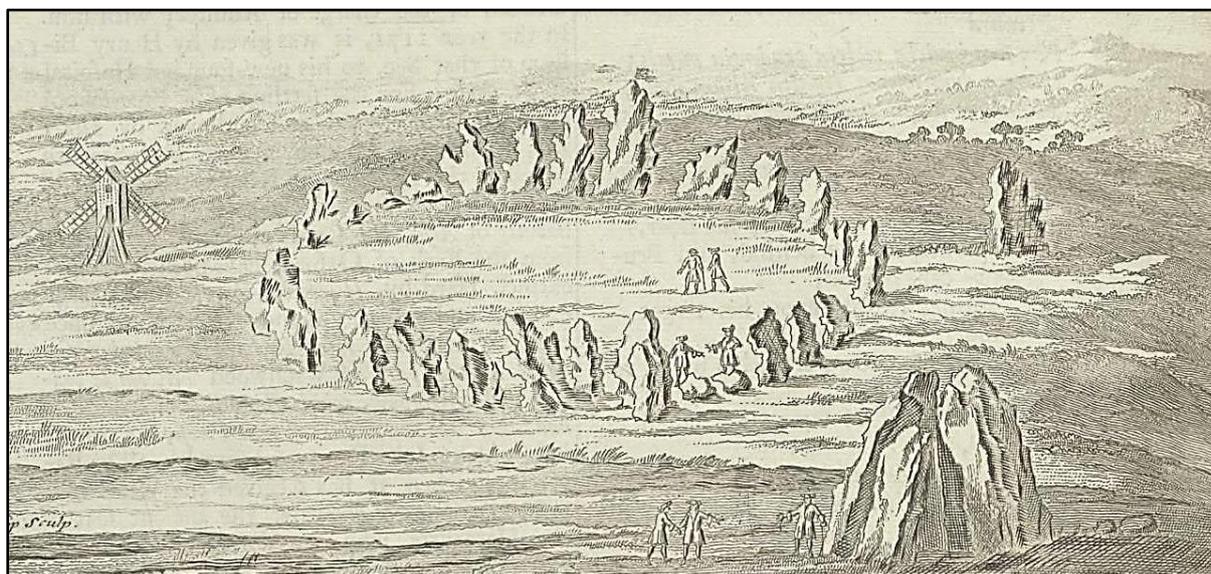
⁵⁶ OHC, BOR4/36/7D/9; BOR4/36/7D/11.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* MSS Wills Oxon. 42/2/36 (mentioning 3 millstones); 211, f. 302; *ibid.* NQ3/1/D4/1–4; NQ3/1/D4/6; *ibid.* BOR4/4/C1/7–8; BOR4/4/C1/10.

⁵⁸ *Oxf. Jnl Syn.* 27 Feb. 1784.

and John Hall (1860s),⁵⁹ but thereafter the mill was probably taken in hand by James Bliss as tenant of Manor farm, and the millhouse let to tenants.⁶⁰ At the manor's sale in 1929 the three-storeyed mill building contained two pairs of stones and six corn bins, while the adjoining millhouse (stone-built and two-storeyed) had a living room and kitchen and two bedrooms. A sheepwash lay at one end of the millpond.⁶¹ The mill probably fell out of use soon afterwards,⁶² and by the 1970s the buildings and pond had been removed.⁶³

A windmill at Windmill Hill (in the parish's north-west corner) was shown on a 17th-century estate map, while a predecessor at Old Windmill Hill (close to the Rollright Stones) appears on the late 16th-century Sheldon tapestry maps and in the 1607 edition of Camden's *Britannia*. Both were probably of the wooden-post type, but nothing further is known.⁶⁴



*Little Rollright's windmill at the Rollright Stones:
illustration in Camden's Britannia.*

⁵⁹ TNA, HO 107/879; *ibid.* RG 9/911; *PO Dir. Oxon.* (1854 and later edns); *Melville & Co.'s Dir. Oxon.* (1867); OHC, par. reg. transcript.

⁶⁰ TNA, RG 10/1458; RG 11/1520; RG 13/1400; *Harrod's Dir. Oxon.* (1876).

⁶¹ *Sale Cat., Little Rollright Manor Estate* (1927): copy in OHC, Marshall XVIII/i/6; HER, PRN 16642.

⁶² OHC, RDC9/3/F6/2 (uninhabited in 1933).

⁶³ OS Maps 1:2500, SP 2930, SP 3029 (1974–5 edn); HER, PRN 180 (1993 survey); W. Foreman, *Oxfordshire Mills* (1983), 108.

⁶⁴ OHC, E321/M/1; *ibid.* POX0078147; www.rollrightstones.co.uk/stones/overview (accessed Apr. 2020); HER, PRN 12722; Rosen, 'Little Rollright', 53, citing TNA, CP 25/2/340/9 Jas I Easter.