

## New Buckenham: the history of a market town

by Elizabeth Rutledge, 2018

From a lecture given to Norfolk Archaeological & Historical Research Group

The town of New Buckenham has at least two claims to distinction. The first is that it is one of the relatively few Norfolk settlements that is NOT mentioned in the Domesday Book.



The second is that it can be quite difficult to find on a parish map, squashed between Old Buckenham, Carleton Rode and Banham. This is because New Buckenham was a late settlement created artificially. By 1146 the first Earl William d'Albini had moved his existing Buckenham castle to a new site, giving his old stronghold to the Augustine canons. The town was founded before his death in 1176, and as it would have been needed primarily as a marketplace and craft

centre to serve the new castle household, the date was probably nearer to 1146 than 1176.

Together with the town the parish consisted of 95 acres of common to the east with about 80 grazing rights and 180 acres of arable land to the south in an oval enclosure known as the Haugh field. The Haugh had to be acquired from the bishop and was an outlier of the bishop's manor of Eccles some 5 miles away.

To encourage settlement, with the land came rights. Two charters, granted by the first D'Albini's son and grandson, confirm that the new town was a borough, with the right to buy and sell properties and hold a court and the same right to hold their liberties and free customs as was done by the burgesses of Norwich.

New towns like New Buckenham were very much a feature of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, one of the best known examples probably being New Winchelsea founded by Edward I in 1287-92. New Buckenham was not a royal creation and so belongs in a lower tier of town planning. However, as a planned town it ticks many of the boxes. In the first place it was positioned, like Castle Acre and Castle Rising, to serve a castle. Then, much as at New Winchelsea, it was laid out in a chequer-board pattern. The chequers would have been divided into house plots, described as messuages once they were developed, and each of these paid ½ d ground rent, later known, as at Norwich, as landgable.

The town also had defences. The moat we shall see later on may not look much of a defence, and of course was not intended to deter armed men, but it served to delineate the edges of the settlement and to give its inhabitants a measure of control over who came in. There may also have been a leper house, another frequent attribute of these castle boroughs.

Above all, the castle had been sited above a route from Norwich to Thetford and the main Norwich to Bury St Edmunds road, and this road was diverted through the new town and the market place in a series of right-angled bends. No grant of market survives, but there can be no doubt that one was there from the beginning. For the most important factor in New Buckenham's long-term survival was not that it was a planned town, or even that it was connected to a castle, but that it had a market. In fact from the very beginning, with its concentration of properties and its minimal agricultural base, it was not a rural village but a mini-urban settlement.

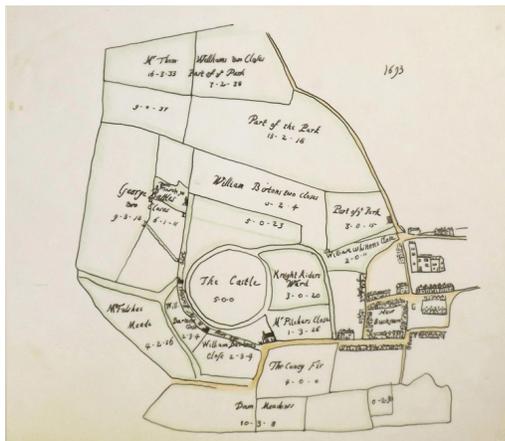
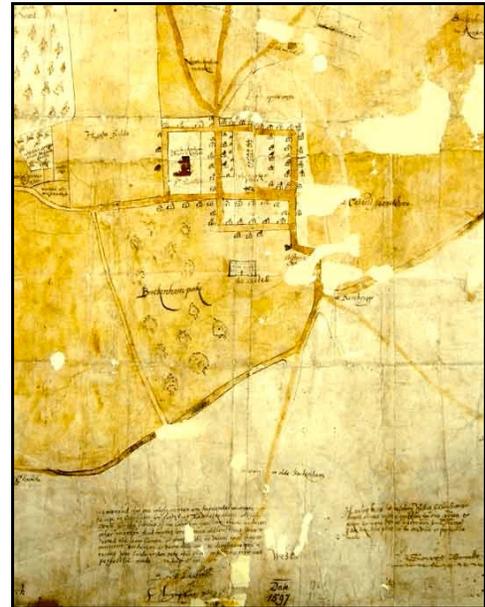
Not all the space in the northern section may have been taken up immediately, leaving room for the church built by 1254. Previously the townsmen would have used the chapel outside the castle. Despite this, the limited information available suggests that the initial settlement flourished. By 1284/5 there was a fair at Martinmas (in November) as well as the weekly market and a tollhouse with a prison. We know about the prison because two men, Robert Ganel and Richard son of William, got into a fight and Robert hit Richard over the head with his staff. When Richard died three days later Robert was first taken to the castle but then handed over to be imprisoned in the tollhouse. In 1334 the town was assessed in the lay subsidy at £6 3s. This was both almost £2 more than the average assessment for parishes in the adjacent hundreds and but also placed New Buckenham well up in the table of the tax paid by other planted towns. Liverpool, which was founded by King John, was way down the list. Occupational by-names in the early 14<sup>th</sup> cent landgable and subsidy assessments indicate that New Buckenham had taken off as a market centre – baker, bottlemaker, carpenter, chapman, coalman, cooper, currier, cutler, dyer, harness maker, locksmith, merchant, shoemaker, smith, thatcher and weaver. Although it obviously suffered from the consequences of the Black Death and had its subsidy payment considerably reduced in 1449 this only brought it down to the local average.

Population figures are always a problem. Landgable lists of the early 14<sup>th</sup> century suggest possibly 80 house plots and perhaps a population of about 240. Totals based on the number of communicants give a similar figure 300 years on of 230 in 1578, rising to about 350 in 1603 and 550 in 1676. The landgable list of 1634 lists almost 90 properties, which fits reasonably well with the 350 in 1603. Blomefield suggests only 400 in 1737 but a detailed listing in 1803 gives 637. The peak of population came in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the 1830s to the 1860s it was approaching 800, falling back to 516 in 1901. These higher figures clearly led to subdivision of properties. White's 1854 directory notes a population of 766, in 188 houses. The downward trend continued after 1900 with 442 in 1931. Today it is a little over 400.

With most settlements you can say something about their development by using surviving maps. This is much less the case with New Buckenham, because the area of development remained almost entirely within the medieval boundaries. The earliest map of the town, and we

are lucky to have one this early, was produced in 1597 in connection with a dispute with the parish of Carleton Rode. There was no love lost between New Buckenham and Carleton Rode – after all they were neighbours and they shared a common. One of the comments made in the course of the 1597 dispute was that it had been a Carleton Rode man who shot the first deer in the castle park at the time of Kett’s rebellion in 1549 and Carleton Rode men were also accused of ‘rifling and embesealing’ goods and evidences in the castle at the same time.

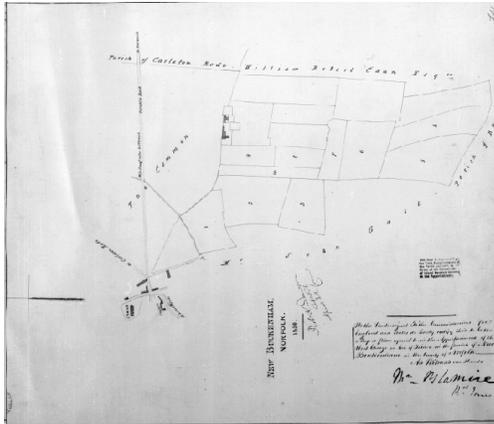
The 1579 gives a stylised picture of New Buckenham as a small town, with the castle to the west, the common to the east and the Haugh field to the southeast. It places accurately the church and the market place, together with the castle chapel and a rather odd depiction of the castle. But it would be unwise to refine too much over the detail of the housing, or even the roads. There is, for instance, no house shown on the corner where the Old Vicarage stands, even though part of this has been dendrodated to the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century. The town was not at issue, it was simply there for context. At issue was this easterly part of the common, which was being claimed by Carleton Rode. In support of this claim, the map is actually showing a much wider parish boundary. The parish situation was complicated by a third church between the present Old Buckenham and New Buckenham churches, St Andrew’s, shown here as now a barn, and New Buckenham seems to be trying to claim what had been part of St Andrew’s parish. The claim failed, and if not by this time, then soon after, even the north-western corner of the town, where there had been earlier 15<sup>th</sup> century development, fell back into the parish of Old Buckenham.



The area just outside the east gate must have been pretty busy. The fair was held here, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the market, also extended beyond the gate and there was a gameplace for the staging of plays. Incidentally, it is the reference to the Spittle Croft, here, that suggests that there may earlier have been a leper hospital.

The next plan is about 100 years later, from 1693. Again, it would be unwise to refine too much on the detail, as the plan was also produced in course of a dispute, this time over access to one of the fields to the

west. But again it shows New Buckenham as a well built-up little town, and this time includes the Old Vicarage. Another hundred years later, in 1797, Faden shows the town schematically in a series of chequers, giving it the same size lettering as Hingham, Wymondham or Diss.



After that even the usual stand-bys fail us. There was no enclosure award as the common was never enclosed and there was no formal agreement for the Haugh field. Similarly the tithe map is minimal, covering only 50½ acres of the Haugh, and virtually ignoring the town. This tithe map shows the church, the forge on the market place and the market cross in its present position, but almost nothing of the town. In fact if you try looking for the New Buckenham tithe map on the historic-maps website all you get is a big black hole.

The parochial situation, as you will have gathered, was complicated. Tithes from the Haugh were payable to the rector of Eccles.

It is therefore just as well that other sources for the town are so good. The picture of New Buckenham as a market town really comes to life in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century with the survival of the borough court books and high bailiff's accounts. New Buckenham's economy was firmly centred on the market place. 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century sources show it as above all a provision and leather market; there were stalls for meat, fish and poultry as well as for shoemakers, and corn, malt and timber were also sold there. The butchery was thatched, paved with cobbles and gravel and drained by a gutter. An early 17<sup>th</sup> century account records 19 lettings in the butchery, although 10 to 12 were more usual. The town bushel was chained under the market cross, which was moved to its present position in 1715. All around the market were shops and properties part of which acted as warehouses. A probate inventory relating to one of these, with its main door leading straight onto the market place, lists an amazing assortment of goods starting with black buckles, red wax and worm powder and working through ginger, pepper, yellow ochre, prunes, raisins, red sugar candy, frankinsense and much else besides. As well as those operating in the market there were the more prestigious drapers and mercers, several of whom referred to themselves as gentlemen. One of the last of these was Thomas Blake. In his will of 1739 he mentions his wife's jointure of £1000 and the property inherited by his son, himself a gentleman, boasted a long pond formed from part of the town moat and an ornamental garden house built from fragments of the castle including a coat of arms. Cloth finishing was another New Buckenham industry and tenters for stretching cloth are shown on the 1597 map. Bakers and butchers in particular came into the market in noticeable numbers from the surrounding area. Blomefield describes the market as much decayed in 1735 and it had ceased to operate by the 1830s but commercial activities simply moved to other premises.

More specialised occupations listed in White's 1836 directory include basket maker, watch and clock maker, stationer, solicitor, wine and spirit merchant, furniture maker, agent to the Norwich Union fire office and surgeon. There were two fairs for horses and cattle and a hiring fair for servants, and the town was served by coaches to Norwich and Bury St Edmunds and carriers to and from London, Norwich and Diss. All Old Buckenham had was one carrier to Norwich. Occupations listed in 1937 are not that dissimilar, including in addition a branch of Barclays Bank, a photographic store, motor and cycle agents, an optician, a vet and a music teacher.

As a busy market town, New Buckenham obviously needed inns. It can be difficult to tell quite how many there were at any one time, as they tended both to change name and to move around. The oldest (and one of the longest running) was the Bull. This is first mentioned in 1542 and dominated the entrance to the town from the east. In 1560 the innkeeper was accused of running an immoral house, harbouring suspect persons and keeping open during divine service. The Bull had a bowling green and offered 'civil entertainment' to racegoers on Wilby warren as late as 1722. It is last documented as an inn in 1780.

Other 16<sup>th</sup> century inns were around the market place. The innkeeper of the Lyon alias the Crown obtained a monopoly on the sale of tobacco in New Buckenham in the 1630s. There was a furore when a tailor, John Dowghty, tried to get around this by negotiating sales in his house in New Buckenham but actually handing over the tobacco just over the parish boundary into Old Buckenham, first in an outhouse near the castle and then in a booth outside the north gate (more or less where the village hall is now). John Dowghty ran a small school and used his pupils to deliver the tobacco. Also on the market place was the original White Hart. This was acquired in 1599 by Richard Hulse and immediately became the centre of a dispute among the county justices. The godly party wanted to close it but Hulse was supported by Thomas Knyvett at the castle, who complained of the defacement of his crest when the sign was hauled down, and the inn survived until at least 1676. Another inn, the Three Feathers, later the Crown, was built by Old Buckenham priory in the 1520s, and had been opened as an inn by 1634. It was a high status building. There are copies of its oriel sill boards on the market cross and the originals are preserved in the church.

Another major inn was the George, which spread over the northern part of the market place. This was owned and let out by the town from 1649 but was pulled down about 1870. This mustn't be confused with the George Hotel, now the Inn on the Green, which was built after the old George went. The only surviving early inn on the market place is the King's Head, originally Broadgate, which was probably an inn by 1700.



Watercolour of New Buckenham in 1820 showing the old George and the King's Head.

One point that comes across from the documents is the level of control exercised by the townsmen. As a borough, New Buckenham lay outside the normal manorial system. The only rent payable for the burgess tenements was the minimal groundrent – the landgable – which came to an end in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Properties could be freely transferred, with just an acknowledgement in the borough court. The inhabitants could try their own civil cases and after 1582 they were free from toll and jury service. There was oversight from the lords of the castle, to whom the borough belonged, and in the medieval period the chief steward or high bailiff was chosen by the lord, but later the town was given the right to elect him annually. The possibility of resident lords on the doorstep went in the 1640s when the castle was slighted. Earlier on, the town was probably lent on to some extent by Old Buckenham priory. The priory had little formal standing in New Buckenham but owned several properties there, taxed at 34 s. 3 d. in 1428. These may have made up its tiny manor here (Blomefield describes it as the outsocken part of the main Old Buckenham manor) and the priory sacrist acted as the minister of the church. After the dissolution both the manor and the living went to the Knyvetts, the then owners of the castle. The living was sold soon after 1603 to be settled on the parishioners and the town acquired the manor in 1617. The minister was a perpetual curate, who lived in the Old Vicarage, previously a guild hall. He was chosen by the parishioners and was paid a stipend raised from a rate of 3d in the pound based on the rental value of each property but received neither tithes nor glebe. As already said, the town came to own the George Inn and under

William Juby's will of 1646 paid for the schoolmaster. There was also a tendency to dissent. There were 40 nonconformists among an adult population of 381 in 1676 and New Buckenham had its own Congregational meeting house by 1727. A Primitive Methodist chapel was built in 1807 and a Wesleyan one in 1808. In 1851, by which time there was also a Free Gospel chapel, the number of dissenters was similar to the number attending the parish church.

This independence, and the position of New Buckenham as a market centre used to mixing with outsiders, may have made it, in a purely informal sense, a relatively open town. It was certainly noticeable in the 1970s that New Buckenham was far more willing to accept newcomers than most of the neighbouring parishes.

New Buckenham seems a small place to us now and it has sometimes been described as a failure because it has barely exceeded its medieval boundaries or rebuilt its early-modern timber-framed heritage. And its population is still little over 400. But if it did not grow it achieved remarkable stability. The jurisdiction granted by the 12<sup>th</sup> century charters continued to be exercised by the borough court until 1879. The landgable rent was still being collected in 1723. And the common, now owned by the Norfolk Wildlife Trust, is still grazed through its common rights. New Buckenham was one of only 25% of known medieval markets in Norfolk that was still operating in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the fairs continued until about 1900. The Norwich to New Buckenham turnpike set up in 1772 is an indication of its standing as a town on a major route, as well as being a local centre. In turn, of course, the existence of the turnpike would have increased the importance of the town. And it may even have affected the 20<sup>th</sup> century bus routes. When my family came in 1971 the buses all more or less terminated in New Buckenham with two routes into Norwich, one via Attleborough and Wymondham and the other going down the turnpike. Though the market petered out, New Buckenham continued to act as a regional centre. In the early 1970s, with three grocers, a butcher, a post office, barber, hairdresser, two garages, a cycle repair man, an antique shop and two pubs, together with branches of a local solicitor and doctor's surgery, New Buckenham continued to serve as a hub for the villages around. With the growth of supermarkets and general centralisation this is no longer the case, though we do still have our two pubs. But taking everything together, although New Buckenham never became a Liverpool or a Hull, I think that William D'Albini should have been well pleased that his new settlement at New Buckenham, unlike so many others that fell by the wayside, was still fulfilling its basic function 800 years on.