

Geldeston from the Paleolithic to the Medieval Period

The history of Geldeston is one which is often assumed to be focused in the modern period; most records and buildings in the village date to the 19th century, when the two maltings provided an industrial economy in the rural setting. However, the site has been inhabited far longer than that.

The earliest record of human activity in the Geldeston area comes from what is now the old saw pit, where the fête now takes place. In 1981, a flint handaxe from the Palaeolithic, or Old Stone Age, was discovered. It dates, rather imprecisely, to 500000 BC - 10001 BC, but tells us of an early occupation of the site, or at least of a human presence. At a time when the wooded higher ground met the marshy river valley, the Waveney would have made a fine hunting and gathering site.¹

This is, however, the sole reference to Palaeolithic Geldeston, with the exception of a few flint blades, although it has been suggested that these could be Mesolithic. These would therefore date more roundly to around 10000 BC.² During flood defence work in 2010, a Mesolithic pot boiler site was found; these sites, although the use of them is debated, are generally accepted to be a sign of a non-permanent settlement, perhaps a hunting and cooking spot that hunter gathers returned to year after year. Its siting, next to the river in the eastern marshes of the village, shows again what a fertile and rich site the village would have been on.³ Despite this site not being mentioned in any archaeological reports, with a suggestion that BESL have not gone out of their way to publicise it, it was reportedly several metres in diameter, and, having walked the site after BESL had finished with it, many fragments were picked up from the river bank, just east of the old boat house. These included burnt flint, burnt chalk and some fire residue. But it does not suggest anything more than a passing association. This is not the beginnings of a settlement at Geldeston.

The Neolithic, or New Stone Age, is better represented, with a small collection of finds discovered in around 1907 now being housed in the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology,⁴ but the locations of these are not specified, although one is labelled 'Dunburgh',⁵ perhaps suggesting a location in the east of the village. They are mostly of a standard type, but there are also parts of two polished flint axeheads⁶, and one complete polished axehead, found later, in 1922/3.⁷ But, again, this would not seem to amount to much; Geldeston was certainly not a Stone Age settlement, merely a passing place, close to the Waveney valley.

Similarly, the Bronze Age (2350 BC to 701 BC) would not seem overly represented. A copper alloy spearhead was found in 1993⁸, and two decorated gold strips were discovered when the foundations of the hall were dug, in 1777. It has been suggested, over the years, that they are part of a collar, and that they are possibly of Irish or Continental origin.⁹ Of course, two finds, of whatever quality, do not make a Bronze Age settlement or site of any importance, but, if the continental or

¹NHER 17559

²NHER 10728

³ See GHN OU11

⁴ NHER 10663

⁵ NHER 10729

⁶ NHER 10664

⁷ NHER 10665

⁸ NHER 29779

⁹ NHER 42792

Irish origin of the 'collars' is true, then it would suggest that the importance of the Waveney and Geldeston in particular as a trading site is not new at all. Even if such an object was dropped in passing by a nobleman or local king, then it still shows us the prominence of the Waveney that someone important enough to wear these was passing through, probably along an old trade route.

The Iron Age in Geldeston was represented by a single possible (not definite) harness fitting for a horse¹⁰ until very recently. This has suggested to many that the village was certainly not important until the Saxon and Norman periods. However, the discovery of a late Iron Age (or Romano British) walkway¹¹ during flood defence work in 2010 out in the marshes to the west of the old boat house (quite close to the Mesolithic pot boiler site mentioned above) suggests otherwise. The walkway, although similar to one found in similar circumstances in Beccles in 2006, is not built to the same standard; the posts are at a much more random alignment, and the walkway itself is floored with small branches and scrub, rather than the cut planks of Beccles. However, it is still a substantial structure. Although the final report of the excavation carried out in 2011 has yet to be published, some speculation and interpretation must be attempted.

The posts, of oak, are said to have stuck out of the marsh by as much as four metres, and can be as wide as half a metre. This would have made the structure very imposing in the landscape, and very visible. One interpretation, as a boundary marker, has been proposed, but perhaps the important thing to note here is the sheer scale of the project; not only was there one at Geldeston, but it has been suggested that this matches up with one at Barsham, across the river. It is inconceivable that there was no settlement at Geldeston, given this information. The number of people needed, not only to cut and shape the oak posts, but also to grow them (it is supposed that some sort of forestry management would be needed to grow oaks as straight and tall as the ones suggested here) would have been huge.¹²

But why would you have a huge trackway running through these insignificant marshes, and across the Waveney? The suggestion that it is simply a boundary marker seems a little farfetched to me; the surface of the walkway itself has been replaced many times, so it was clearly used. Similarly, the idea of it as a ritual site is weak, mainly due to the lack of rituality in Iron Age sites, generally. It would seem most likely that, although some elements of the above theories may be correct, the trackway was mainly practical. People needed to get around, particularly through the marshy ground around the river, and across the Waveney itself. From here, London and central Suffolk are one way, and Norwich, Acle and the Icenic tribal heartland the other.

And this trade route was clearly active for some time; as well as some late Iron Age pottery, Roman pottery was also discovered, highlighting the importance and the legacy of the site. Indeed, Roman Geldeston is when the settlement seems to have grown somewhat. On the hill (Dunburgh), which overlooks the route of the trackway, a cremation was found in 1849, with the construction of the railway, consisting of an urn, a cist, some Roman coins and the remains of an infant.¹³ On the same site, around 100 years later, a flue tile was also found. All of this was 2nd Century AD, and

¹⁰ NHER 20869

¹¹ NHER 54133

¹² <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/accessibility/transcripts/artsandlaw/iaa/geldeston-excavation.aspx>,

Birmingham University, Dr. Ben Geary, Beccles and Bungay Journal

¹³ NHER 10667

perhaps gave rise to a local myth about the hill once being the site of a Roman fort.¹⁴ This is generally held to be nothing more than a myth, but recent evidence does seem to suggest a site of some description. The name itself, roughly originating from the words for 'hill' and 'fort/encampment/settlement' would suggest something, and its proximity not only to the trackway, and the troublesome Icenic heartland but to Beccles, of which the views are spectacular, cannot be purely coincidental. However, it must be noted that quite how the name is spelt and pronounced is debated; I have seen it as 'Dunburgh'(modern local), 'Dunborough'(The Broads Authority), 'Dunbury'(1920s) and 'Dunberry' (19th Century OS map).

This is not, however, where the vast majority of Roman finds in the locality are located. Further up, just west of the main driveway into Geldeston Hall, there is a cropmark that has been variously interpreted as a post medieval field boundary, a medieval field boundary, and a Roman road.¹⁵ More recently, the Norfolk Mapping Project has suggested that the feature is a parkland boundary for the hall; it is marked as such on the 1826 Bryant's map. It raises an important issue with the possibility of it being a road; where it leads to; you cannot have a road unless there is somewhere to go to. Perhaps this is answerable with the suggestion of the trackway; the two, although they admittedly do not line up exactly, are unnervingly close to doing so. This would suggest a clear route across the marshes into Suffolk and further afield. This is not a simple solution, though. Even if we accept that the trackway from Barsham is a continuation of this road, there is no clear continuation further north. It cannot be said straight out that there was a Roman road at Geldeston, but it can be said that the site was certainly important.

In the immediate area of the 'road', a Roman copper alloy strap end was found¹⁶, some 23 metres from the hall front gate, and just south west of the driveway; in other words, right where the landmark is situated. In the field just to the west of the crop mark, a Roman coin was discovered.¹⁷ This, rather than being definitive proof of a road, simply shows the importance of the site; Geldeston cannot be dismissed as simply a post Norman Conquest settlement.

The immediate area of Geldeston in the Roman period would have come under the territory of the Icenic, and would have been involved in the revolt of AD 60/61. After this, the area was placed firmly under the control of Rome, with strong legionary settlements and fortifications at Ventulconum and further afield, until the establishment of several other forts around East Anglia as Saxon/Angle raids on the region became more prevalent, particularly at Burgh Castle and Brancaster. By around AD 410, Britain was too precarious to control, and the legions left.

What happened next is a matter of some controversy, but the Icenic and Romano British peoples were either driven out or, probably more likely, integrated with the invaders. The Angles occupied East Anglia, establishing it as a kingdom. Geldeston, at the heart of this kingdom, and possibly of some importance as a trade route, would have seen the struggles to maintain the kingdom's independence, ending in 869, as the Vikings took over.

¹⁴ NHER 10734

¹⁵ NHER 20179

¹⁶ NHER 20356

¹⁷ NHER 25025

Surprisingly, the archaeological evidence for the Angles and Vikings is very limited. Two Saxon broaches have been found (although one might be Medieval)¹⁸ and a Saxon hoard has also been discovered, on the Barsham river bank, very probably from river dredgings, although this is down to interpretation. It consisted of 51 late Saxon coins, and another late Saxon broach.¹⁹ Despite its questionable nature, it highlights again the importance of the river, both as a commercial highway, and as a spiritual space. The date of it probably dates it to the Viking period of control in East Anglia, but the impact of who was in charge for a community like Geldeston is questionable.

However, the name of the village certainly dates to this time. There are various theories as to the meaning and origin of 'Geldeston', but they all agree to a date in the Saxon to Late Saxon period. Perhaps the most prevalent in the modern day amongst the locals is that of the Gelt Stone. Supposedly a stone once stood on the Clumps, a small patch of parish ground, on which the Gelt, a tax levied by the Saxons to pay off the Vikings, was collected. The stone, reportedly a small sandstone rock 45cm x 60cm x 45cm high²⁰, was later taken by children of the Thornhill family and placed in the gardens of Geldeston Lodge, around 1900. As Elizabeth Crowfoot explained in a letter "we were told the story [of the Danegeld] when we came to the village in 1921, and my mother probably helped to perpetuate it by writing a play for us and the village children about the Danes coming upriver and demanding 'gelt', which we acted in our own grove with a makeshift stone not long after". However, it has also been claimed that the stone was instead removed from the rear of the Wherry Inn²¹. In general, even if the 'stone' did exist (and no trace of it is known today), it is very unlikely that it was the reason for naming the village; not only is it an implausible story, but the name is, in itself, self-explanatory.

Geldeston can be broken down into Gyldi's Ton, a Viking/Saxon term, probably denoting the enclosure or settlement belonging to a man called Gyldi. This is, therefore, perhaps the first ever recorded name of an inhabitant of Geldeston. His name, translated into the phonetic Icelandic equivalent, was Gyldir. Sadly, this is all we can tell about this early parish.²² But we can speculate. Gyldir was probably of Icelandic origin. He probably came to this country around 869 AD, with the Viking takeover of East Anglia. His settlement was probably small, but on the Waveney. It was very possibly a rich piece of land, compared to the Scandinavian or Icelandic farmland he was used to. He may well have brought his family with him, or married into the local populace. Whether he survived the fall of Viking power in the region later on, we shall never know. But it is quite likely that he and his descendants remained the dominant force in Geldeston until the Norman Conquest of AD 1066.

The Norman Conquest of 1066 AD had a catastrophic effect on landowners and lords across England, although what it actually did to the locals and others down the line is debateable. According to Francis Blomefield, the 18th century antiquarian, the parish was part of the estates of Archbishop Stigand, a formidable politician and priest, who held both the bishopric of Winchester and the archbishopric of Canterbury. For this, he was duly excommunicated by five successive

¹⁸ NHER 40857 and NHER 40858 (the latter being the one with some doubt attached)

¹⁹ NHER 22467

²⁰ <http://www.hiddenea.com/norfolk.htm>

²¹ Keith Payne of Stockton, in the 'Waveney Clarion', Vol.1, No.6, p.3.

²² http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCgQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fusers.telenet.be%2FHafronska%2Ficelandic_equivalents_of_the_English_place-names_%28uncorrected_version%29.doc&ei=GccNUMm3DsjJ0QXpgo21Cg&usg=AFQjCNGvK9uGAbBKu39zJdInVIZsBHckAQ

popes, but this seems to have had little impact on his role in England. By 1066, he was the second richest man in England, after the king. But by 1070, he had been removed by the Norman invaders. Blomefield states that the King himself then took charge of the land.²³

This all comes from the Domesday Book, in which Geldeston is not mentioned by name. This is quite strange, really, if we consider the name itself is much older than this survey, carried out in 1087. However, Blomefield tells us that this is because the manor was included with that of Stockton. This royal land was, the book tells us, under the control of a William de Noyers, presumably a Norman knight. A church and 1.5 mills are recorded; this being, presumably, the church at Stockton, as Geldeston's church, although the site might be older, dates to the 12th century.²⁴

We pass into Medieval Geldeston, but the village still seems to have been fragmented. Two distinct manors are mentioned in the manorial court rolls, Geldeston Giffards and Geldeston Netherhall.²⁵ Where were these districts? Perhaps one was centred around the present day hall and church, and another around West End; not only is this an individual settlement, even today, but it is also the site of Rush Fen Cottage, believed to be a 14th century aisled hall (the only medieval building in the village still standing?), perhaps the site of the manor hall of either Giffards or Netherhall?²⁶

Perhaps it wouldn't be too farfetched to then suggest that Dunburgh was another separate part of the village in the early medieval period. Again, this is clearly split from the main part of the village, even today, and has a large hall in the shape of Dunburgh Hall. So perhaps Geldeston, in at least the early Medieval period, went from being a part of the large manor of Stockton, to being up to three separate manors.

The find record for Medieval Geldeston is quite large, considering the small level of documentation for the village. In 1854 a red earthenware medieval pilgrim flask was discovered when an embankment was being made on the Waveney, possibly on works on the new railway line?²⁷ Also large amounts of pottery have been found over the years. Examples include a pottery 'knob' for a fire cover, chimney pot or lid from the 13th century, part of the handle and neck of a late 15th century Rhenish stoneware bottle, and sherds of a sagging based jar and sagging based spouted dish found in the cleaning out of a ditch two metres below the surface (one metre below the water table) with fragments of worked timber. Both sherds were wrapped in a hard grey slightly sandy fabric, perhaps 12th or 13th century.²⁸ Various coins have also been found from the period,²⁹ alongside a Medieval lead weight.³⁰

Perhaps the most interesting and surprising record of Geldeston in the period, however, are the two mentions of Geldeston in the Paston Letters. These letters, a unique insight into the personal lives of a medieval gentry family. The Pastons, from Norfolk, clearly had a connection with the village. Margaret Paston, wife of John Paston I, and John Paston I visited at least once each;

²³ 'An essay towards a topographical History of the County of Norfolk', Francis Blomefield, c. 1750-1805

²⁴ NHER 10669

²⁵ The Manorial Court Rolls, The National Archives

²⁶ NHER 12663

²⁷ NHER 17129

²⁸ NHER 12449, 11535, 10689, 10670

²⁹ NHER 30116, 25025

³⁰ NHER 40857

Margaret's stepfather was Ralph Garneys, the lord of the manor of Geldeston in the 1440s. Although the village's name is often spelt in a variety of ways (Gerlyston, Gelston), it is the same place. Margaret Paston was living in the village at some point in 1444, and this year was the year her son, John Paston III, was born. Furthermore, in a letter to her dated 30th April 1471, John Paston III signs off as "John of Gelston", perhaps a reference to his place of birth. It is the only letter in the collection to be signed off thus, but it is also unique in having no address on the outside, suggesting it was confidential. "John of Gelston" was a code that only someone as close as his mother would have understood, and therefore would have been nonsensical to someone intercepting the letter. Interestingly, his spelling of the village is very close to local pronunciation of the name; the 'des' in the centre is often swallowed. Perhaps this suggests Paston knew the village well enough to speak and spell like it's inhabitants. Whatever, John Paston III clearly considered himself 'of Geldeston'.³¹

As you can clearly see, Geldeston, however important as an industrial and modern village, should not be overlooked as an ancient historical site. From the Paleolithic to the Medieval, Geldeston was, and has remained, a community, large or small, split or unified, of some importance. And, whether they were Iron Age track builders, Roman children, Gyldir, the Icelandic chieftain, crooked Saxon bishops or members of a burgeoning Norfolk family like the Pastons, they have left their mark on the village. They were, as much as anyone else, 'of Geldeston.'

A brief note on the footnotes; anything marked NHER followed by a number is from the Norfolk Heritage Explorer, accessible online at www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/ by searching for the relevant NHER number. There is also mention of a GHN find number (OU11), accessible by contacting me. Other sources are named websites or books that should be available at local libraries, etc.

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³¹ The Paston Letters, Oxford World Classics, Norman Davis' translation. Of the letters, Numbers 4 and 95 mention Geldeston. The notes on these letters in this edition have also been used.