

Chapter 1: Introduction and Project Background

HIGHAM FERRERS – ITS LOCATION, GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The town of Higham Ferrers is situated along a limestone ridge on the eastern bank of the River Nene, approximately 15 miles east of the county town of Northampton (Fig. 1.1). Occupation extends from the alluvial plain up to the Boulder Clay plateau to the east. Both banks of the Nene valley have been attractive to settlers since prehis-

toric times, both for the productive potential of the land and for the access to a major waterway.

The town lies across the river from Irthlingborough, which has strong Anglo-Saxon connections (not least indicated by its name). A few kilometres to the north is the area of the Raunds Project, site of a major landscape study, which identified intensive multi-period settlement (Parry, 2006).

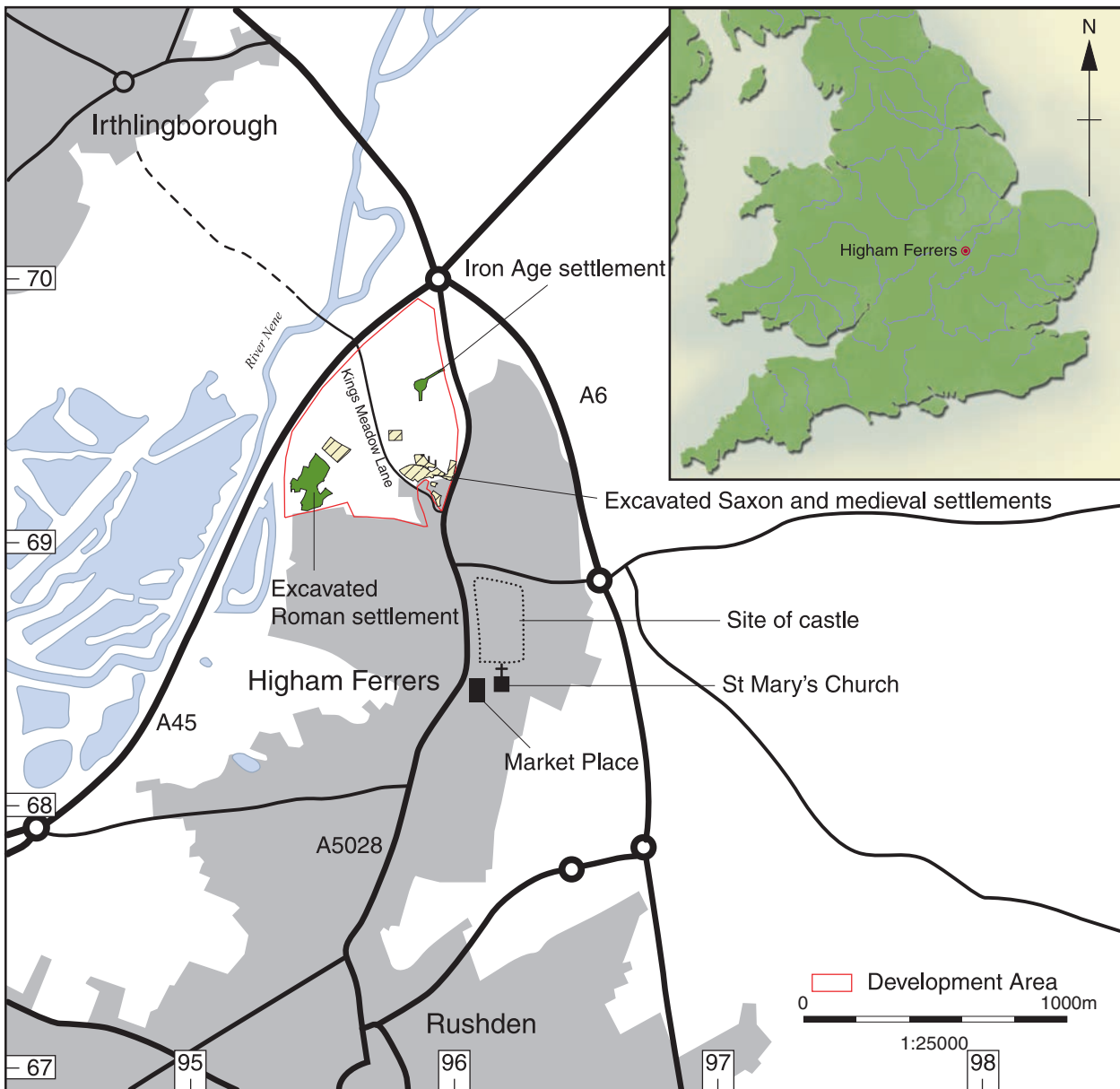


Fig. 1.1 General location of Higham Ferrers, development area and sites

The development area enclosing the investigated sites (Fig. 1.2) occupies an area of approximately 42 ha (100 acres) of mixed limestone and ironstone geology on either side of a small dry valley running up from the Nene, varying in height from 35 m to 65 m OD (SP 959694). The valley has historically

defined the northern edge of the medieval core of Higham Ferrers, and the valley bottom has been used as a route (now known as Kings Meadow Lane) from the northern end of the town, down towards the river, and across to Irthlingborough.

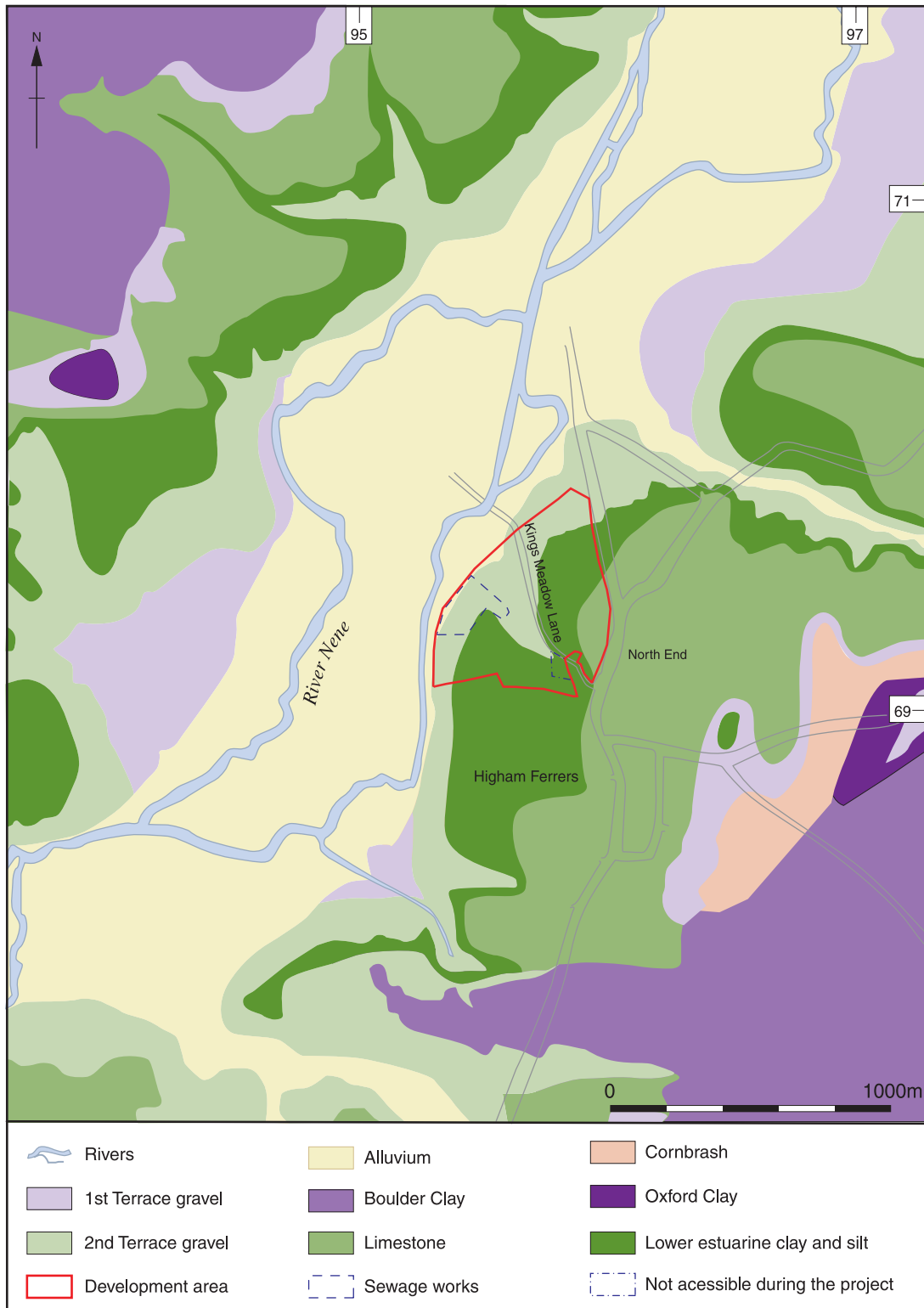


Fig. 1.2 The local geology and development area

THE PROJECT BACKGROUND

In October 1988, East Northamptonshire District Council granted outline planning permission to the landowner, the Duchy of Lancaster (DoL), for residential development and recreational facilities on the site (Planning Application No. EN/88/596), comprising an area of approximately 41 ha (100 acres) on the northern outskirts of Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire (Pl. 1.1).

The initial stages of the project predated the introduction of PPG-16, and consequently the condition relating to archaeology in the original outline planning permission was of limited scope, requiring only that an archaeologist nominated by the local planning authority should be allowed access to the site, to observe the excavations and record items and finds of interest.

The introduction of PPG-16 in 1990, prior to the commencement of any fieldwork prompted a review of the planned archaeological mitigation

involving negotiations between the Duchy of Lancaster, English Heritage, Northamptonshire Heritage, and the Duchy's archaeological consultant, David Miles, of the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU). The archaeological potential of the site, already suspected from cropmarks plotted from aerial photography (see Plate 2.1 and Figure 2.1), was confirmed subsequently by two detailed archaeological evaluations commissioned by the Duchy of Lancaster (NAU 1991; OAU 1994). This work indicated that the site contained an Iron Age and a Roman settlement of 'county' level of importance, and Anglo-Saxon settlements and an oval enclosure of 'national' importance.

Although the all-party negotiations, working within the new framework of PPG16, determined a much more elaborate archaeological strategy, the funding available for the work was still severely constrained in the early stages, and the project design (OAU 1995) established a rigorously



Plate 1.1 The development area prior to the fieldwork, looking west across the River Nene to Irthlingborough (Duchy of Lancaster copyright)

targeted strategy derived from the perceived potential of the site to contribute to local, regional and national research priorities.

This document envisaged that post-excavation analysis would operate under the same financial constraints as the site work, and was expected to ultimately deliver an article to be submitted for publication to *Northamptonshire Archaeology*. However, while the post-excavation stage of the 1995 fieldwork was still in progress, in 2000, the proposed development by DoL of further parcels of land in the Kings Meadow Lane project put the post-excavation analysis programme on hold, while further fieldwork was undertaken. The very productive results prompted an updated Assessment and Research design (OA 2002), which proposed bringing together the publication in monograph form of the Saxon, medieval and post-medieval archaeology from all of the investigated sites (Sites 1, 2 and 3 in 1995, and Sites 4, 5 and 9 in 2001).

A proposal for further new development by the Duchy prompted more fieldwork in 2002 and 2003, encompassing further areas containing Anglo-Saxon and medieval occupation and a large part of the Roman settlement.

Ultimately, virtually all the fieldwork on all the sites was funded by the Duchy of Lancaster, but the scale and importance of the results from all periods led to the decision to publish the results as two separate monographs, one devoted to the prehistoric and Roman archaeology with the post-excavation and publication funded entirely by English Heritage, and one devoted to the Saxon, medieval and post-medieval archaeology, funded entirely by the Duchy of Lancaster. In addition to the academic publication, the Duchy of Lancaster funded the production of a 'popular publication' in 2004, on the Anglo-Saxon and medieval archaeology (Hardy and Lorimer, 2004).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Introduction

It is fortunate for the purposes of this project that the administrative organisation of Northamptonshire in general – and Higham Ferrers in particular – in the Saxon period has been the subject of some close scrutiny in recent times. In 1985 Glenn Foard, then Northamptonshire's Principal Archaeologist, examined the Saxon administrative organisation of Northamptonshire (Foard 1985). In 2000, the archaeological and historical resource of Higham Ferrers was assessed as part of the Northamptonshire Extensive Urban Survey (Foard and Ballinger 2000). David Hall has also investigated the ways in which the character of Middle Saxon estate administration may be discernible in the layout of the medieval landscape, using Higham Ferrers as an example (Hall 1988, 99-122). In the light of this the following section is essentially a summary of that work.

Early medieval history

At some point in the Late Saxon period, the township of Higham became established in its present position, some distance from the apparent focus of Middle Saxon activity to the north (see Figure 5.6).

The first documentary mention of Higham Ferrers (then Higham) is in 1066, as a hundredal manor held by Gytha, countess of Hereford, but by 1086 William Peverell held 6 hides in Higham. At this stage Higham contained 2 hides in demesne, a market, a mill, woodland and a priest. The regional importance of Higham is emphasised by the fact that only three other towns in Northamptonshire had markets at this time. Foard argues that Higham's late Saxon and early medieval importance resulted largely from its history as part of a large estate, which included the Finedon royal soke, Irthlingborough and the properties originally held by Burgred, King of Mercia (857-874). It is argued that in the 7th century this estate's centre was at Irthlingborough, and that Higham's role may have been as a demesne centre complementing the royal centre directly across the river at Irthlingborough (Foard and Ballinger 2000, 14).

The promotion of its market increased its relative importance, both politically and commercially, and what was a market town grew into true urban settlement by the mid-13th century. This was no doubt helped by the construction and development of the castle (begun in the late 12th century), situated on the north-east side of the town centre.

In 1155 the Peverell family forfeited Higham estate to King Henry II, who gave it to Robert Ferrers, Earl of Derby. It is from him that 'Higham' became 'Higham Ferrers'. In 1266 the Earl of Derby's estates were seized by the King Henry III and granted to Edmund Earl of Lancaster – becoming part of the Duchy of Lancaster. The accession of Henry Bolingbroke, the Duke of Lancaster to the throne in 1327, caused the Duchy – and its lands – to be merged with the lands of the crown. From then on The Duchy and its lands, including Higham Ferrers, were managed on behalf of the crown by a High Sheriff.

Commercial and Industrial Development of Higham Ferrers

By the 13th century there was already a clear preponderance of merchants and craftsmen over agricultural tenants in Higham Ferrers. By 1251, when borough status was granted, only two of the 92 new burgesses were agricultural tenants. The limited status of agricultural tenants in the new borough was clear, and it would appear that then they had become concentrated in the northern end of the borough, which became known as Bond End, and later North End (Foard and Ballinger 2000, 36). Although technically always part of Higham Ferrers, in practise this enclave was virtually a separate community.

Trades practised in medieval Higham Ferrers covered a fairly typical range, with the leather and the cloth industries possibly the most significant, at least until the later medieval period (ibid, 37). The only industry that has yielded unequivocal archaeological evidence is the potting. Fifteenth-century pottery kilns have been located at Bond End, on the northern outskirts of the town (see below Sites 6 and 8). In the Hundred Rolls it states that in 1436 William Potter 'took a messuage not built, together with a selion of land in an adjacent croft, in which croft there is a kiln for making pots and other earthen vessels'. Repairs to a pottery kiln are also mentioned in 1467 (Sergeantson, 1917, 44).

The process of wealth attracting wealth, and prestige attracting prestige is evident in later medieval Higham Ferrers in the foundation of Chichele College in 1422, (along with The Bede House and the refoundation of the Grammar School) by Henry Chicheley, Archbishop of Canterbury, whose father, Thomas Chicheley had been a burgess and mayor of the town. The college occupied the area of several tenements in the town centre, and, when fully developed, comprised a quadrangular range of buildings surrounding a courtyard.

The later history of Higham Ferrers

Higham Ferrers prospered through the 14th and 15th centuries, seeming to overcome such setbacks

as the plagues of the second half of the 14th century and a major fire in 1410. The earliest map of Higham Ferrers by Norden in 1591 (Pl.1.2) depicts a urban core with a market place, church, and well developed burgage plots, but significantly with no clear trace of the castle; with the demise of the castle in the 16th century, and the Dissolution, the regional status of Higham Ferrers began to suffer. Commercially, the loss of the corn market to rival Wellingborough in the 17th century was fundamental. In 1712 the historian John Morton described Higham Ferrers as 'small and not very populous'. Evidence of the town's decline is apparent in the number of empty plots shown on the 1737(Pl.1.3) and 1789 estate maps. Cole, writing in the 19th century, spoke of reports of foundations of walls being found in open field to the west and east of the town, implying great shrinkage. It is highly probable, as Foard and Ballinger argue, that medieval occupation probably never extended further than the back lane on the west side of the high street, and it is possible that the foundations Cole reported were actually those of the Roman town, which is known to have extended some distance down the west side of the medieval town (Foard and Ballinger 2000, 36-7).

The lack of population and the decline in artisans and merchants meant a return to a more agricultural regime, and it was not until the 19th century that Higham Ferrers began to expand again, this time on the back of the boot and shoe



Plate 1.2 Nordens map of Higham Ferrers 1591
(Northampton Record Office, Map 4661, reproduced by kind permission of Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

trade, which became a regional speciality. Initially the proliferation of boot and shoe factories was focussed on the east side of the town, but by the middle of the first half of the 20th century the industry had spread to the area between Kings Meadow Lane and North End, in the shape of Walker and Gunn Ltd. The second half of the 20th century saw further light industrial development

around Kings Meadow Lane, but essentially the core of the town around the marketplace and the Church has retained a great deal of its medieval fabric. While Kings Meadow Lane was slightly encroached upon by further light industry, and a sewage farm, in essence the area to the north west of the town, including the Lane, retained its rural character, and its agricultural role.

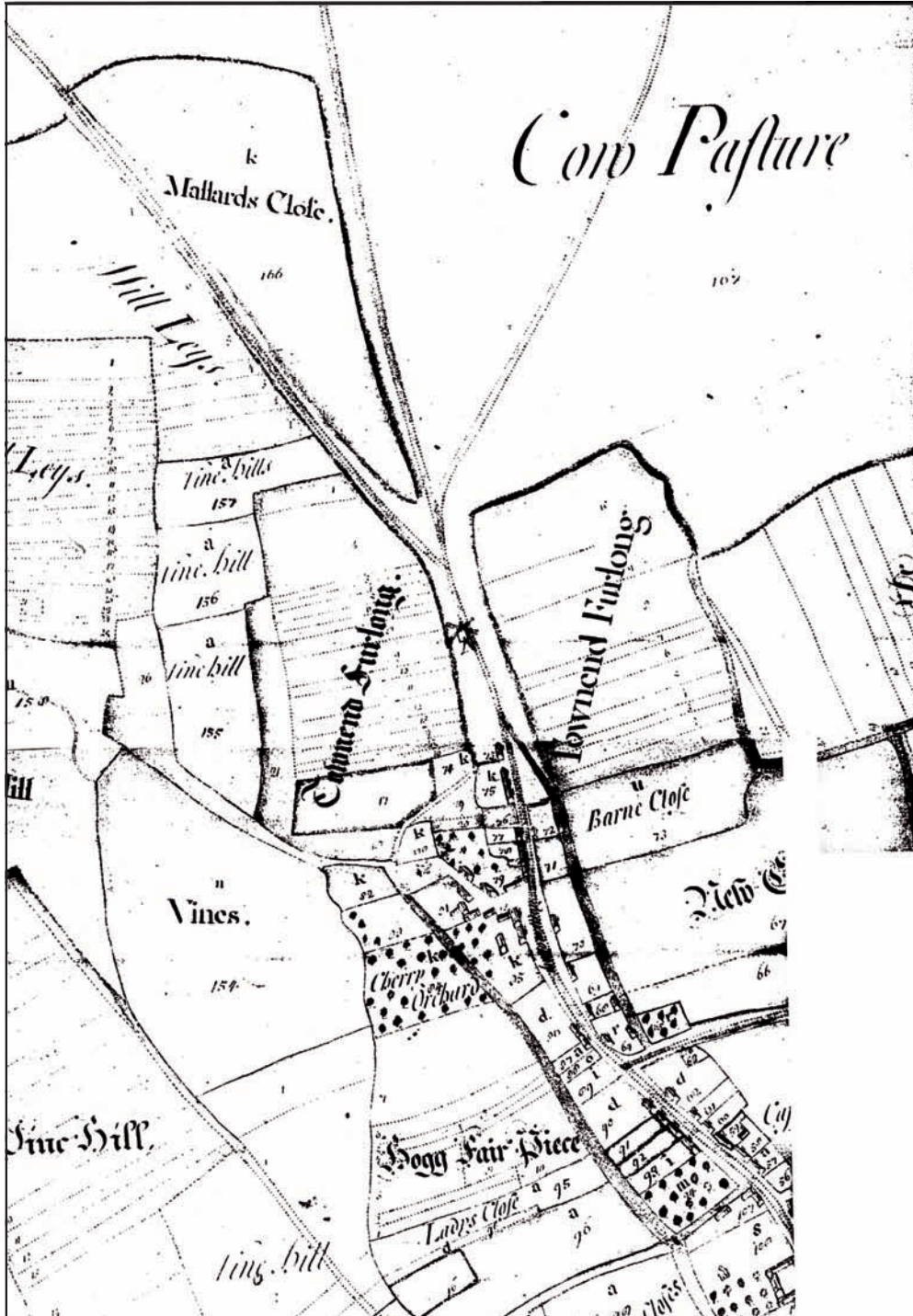


Plate 1.3 Detail from the 1737 estate map of the Kings Meadow Lane area (Northampton Record Office, Map 1004, reproduced with permission of Sir Philip Naylor Leyland Bt. and the Milton (Peterborough) Estates Company)