Lakenheath and Ely Abbey. 670-1109AD. Part 1

When he became King Edward the Confessor gave the monks of Ely the village and lands of Lakenheath so that the Abbey became the Lord of the Manor of Lakenheath. A 'manor' was not a building but an area of land which together with the people who lived on it owed 'service' to it's Lord. A very small number of 'freemen' were exempt from manorial service but not from the payment of rents and taxes and there were also a few slaves who worked solely for the manor and had no rights but were not taxed. Most of the villagers therefore had to provide manorial service but in return they had certain rights.

Manorial 'service' meant regular work by the inhabitants to provide for the abbey's needs. It has been suggested that surnames such as 'Munday' come from this time, the name being the day of the week on which manorial work had to be done.

Under the Normans the abbey retained the Lordship of the manor and the Prior of the Abbey was effectively the Lord of the Manor. A bailiff, who lived in the village, managed the land, controlled labour and collected taxes. Very little, if anything, changed for the villagers under the Normans.

Lakenheath was a large village for the time and it was very important to the abbey. Not only did it provided a wide variety of food for the monks and money from the sale of sheep's wool but rents had to be paid by the peasants for their homes and land.

More evidence of Lakenheath's medieval past came to light in the 1950's-60's. Rosina Bowers' father, Dick Crane, son of Richard Flack Crane, both old landlords of The Fox on Back Street, was given this jeton which it is thought had been found somewhere on Briscoe land near the village.



The jettons are 2.5cms in diameter.

Jettons, in French, 'jeton', were in common use as aids to calculation and accountancy for several centuries before the Arabic numbering system was adopted in Europe in place of the Roman numbering system. (Around 1300). A jeton represented a value, say, 10 or 50 of 'something', so simplifying calculations involving large numbers by enabling multiplication rather than unwieldy additions. If you've had a go at using Roman numerals you'll know what I mean!

The jeton found is of French origin and dates from the 14th century and was probably made in Paris*. On one side can be seen the Fleur de Lys badge, which was particularly associated with the French royal family and which was also closely associated with the Virgin Mary. On the other side is a representation of the cross. Norman French was the language of the ruling classes in England after the conquest of 1066 until around the 15th C.

**'English Jetton's'. Philip Mernick. mernick.org.uk*

It seems a reasonable guess that this jeton, and others like it, may have been used here by a representative of Ely Abbey, (the village steward or bailiff), or probably more likely, by an accounting clerk, who was almost certainly a monk. The computation of the payment of tithes and rents was very important to the Abbey and the use of jettons made rapid and reliable records to be made.

Just as a bailiff was necessary to run the manor estate, so the prior of the abbey needed a vicar to fulfil his religious duties. The vicar and church depended on the collection of a tax (the tithe) for their up-keep. The first recorded vicar was John de Cadsby in 1226.

The demands of rents and taxes could cause great hardship to the villagers when prolonged bad weather seriously affected harvests and payment of 'service' was generally strictly enforced.



Tom Callis

It's worth remembering that as well as Lakenheath, Ely Abbey was the lord of a large number of manors throughout other parts of East Anglia and southern England and was consequently very powerful.

Rev. J T Munday.
Mark Bailey

St Mary's Church.

Saxon Church
We understand that our current Norman Church was a replacement for a much earlier Saxon place of Worship. This Pre-Norman structure would have been a humble place of worship by comparison, being built with local materials with limited brickwork, or even a small amount of Roman salvage stone. Inside a compacted earth floor and poor natural lighting, (the door being narrow and the windows high, for defence and security) it would have been a dark, damp place to gather.

One material readily available and easily worked locally is Chalk, so it is reasonable to assume this would have been used to create clunch walls, with a small amount of stone or bricks used around openings. Without quarried stone and the absence of enough brick, they would have had to use large and ungainly gravity buttresses to build higher than contemporary timber halls. The roof would have been made with light, crudely worked timbers with a simple thatched covering.

We can only ever produce an educated guess at the form of the structure, but by studying the few remaining buildings of the time, we have made best endeavours to produce an illustration with (we hope) a little more education than guesswork.

Rebuilding of the Saxon church was begun by the monks in the early 1100's and about 1170 a tower was added. Much of the medieval carpentry and masonry can still be seen and hanging in the tower are two medieval bells which are still rung. The early Norman font is considered to be very fine and the earliest wall paintings which date from the 13thC are a great treasure.

A visit to this beautiful and important church is highly recommended.
Roy Tricker. 'St Mary's Church Lakenheath Guide'.

Follow the link to find out about the wall paintings restoration project:
https://lakenheathparishcouncil.gov.uk/lakenheath-heritage/lakenheath-wall-paintings/