

# DOWN MEMORY LANE

## Medieval Stewkley

### The Abandoned Medieval Hamlet of Littlecote

There are many deserted medieval settlements in Buckinghamshire and one of them lies within the greater Stewkley parish at Littlecote, known locally as Lidcote.

The site is identified by well-defined earthworks, representing crofts, former medieval houses and barns, ditches, pits and wells, common in the settlement of pre-Conquest England. The Domesday survey of 1086 lists 'Litecota' as a hamlet in the parish of Stewkley. Post-Conquest, the manor was held by one Walter Giffard, with other portions of the settlement in the ownership of Miles Crispin and William Fitz Ansculf. We know that by 1248, an open, three-field manorial system was operating at Littlecote, allowing one field to be left fallow each year for grazing and manuring the soil. The characteristic 'ridge and furrow' from this ploughing system can still be seen in the Littlecote pasture today. By 1323, the hamlet boasted 15 named free tenants. The medieval manor house had fruit orchards and at least two fishponds, characteristic of high-status residences. Littlecote did not possess its own parish church. However, around 1266, a small Chapel of St Giles was founded by Hugh de Dunster as a chantry for the gentry at the manor. There is no evidence of conflict between the chapel and the vicars in Stewkley with the latter presumed retaining responsibility for baptisms, marriages, and funerals for Littlecote's villagers.

Over the following four hundred years, the manor passed through the ownership of several families until in 1481, it came into the hands of Elizabeth Pigott, wife of Thomas Pigott of Whaddon.

The new landlords who owned the hamlet wanted to take advantage of the growing economic opportunities of rearing sheep in this late medieval period.

After tilling the land for centuries in Littlecote, life for the tenants was suddenly about to change relatively dramatically.

In 1494, Littlecote was to become a very early victim of 'enclosure' when Pigott enclosed 40 acres of his manor lands for sheep pasture, evicting 24 of his tenants from the land. Later in 1507, William Sheppard, Pigott's successor as Lord of the Manor, enclosed a further 100 acres and evicted another eight tenants, causing the abandonment of the hamlet. A government Commission of Inquiry failed to rectify the depopulation and it was estimated that 84 villagers lost their homes and livelihoods because of the change to a pastoral economy. The manor remained prosperous following the depopulation and continued in the hands of the Sheppard family until the late 19th century.

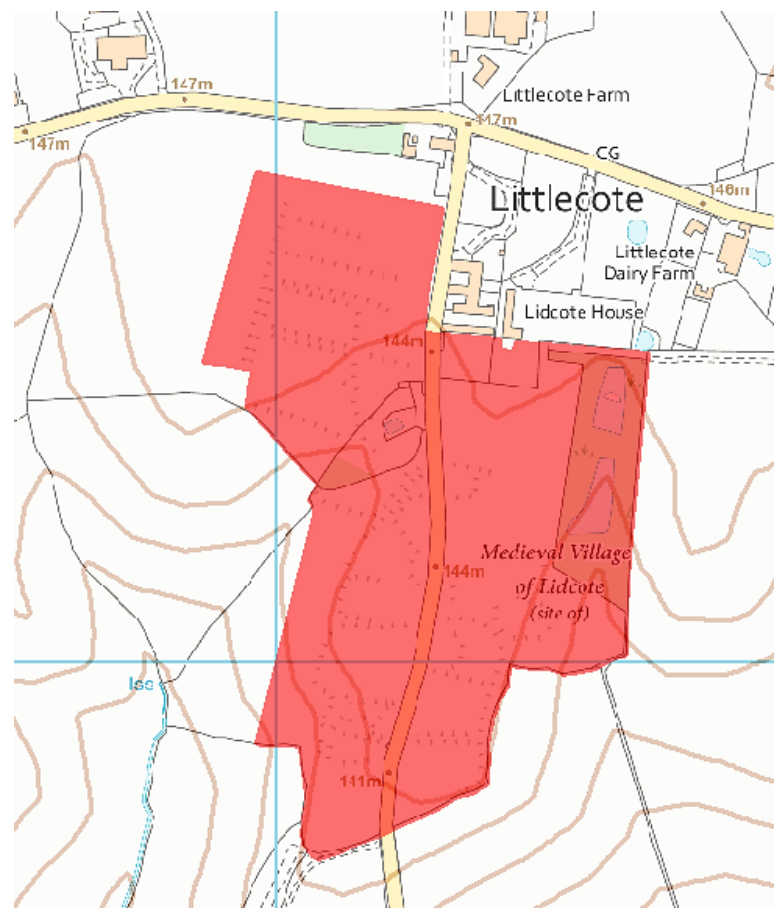
The site of the medieval hamlet of Littlecote was first listed as a Scheduled Monument by English Heritage (No. 1018008) on 28 November 1957.

It was no consolation to the villagers of Littlecote to lose their homes to the progress of a pastoral economy, but without doubt better than it might have been nearly five hundred years later, to lose them to a Third London Airport.

*The Grapevine Heritage Correspondent thanks Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society and Historic England in researching this article, Michael Farley for use of the aerial view and Historic England/Ordnance Survey for the map.*



Aerial view of medieval hamlet earthworks at Littlecote.



Map of site of abandoned medieval hamlet of Littlecote.

**FROM THE GRAPEVINE****10 YEARS AGO...**

From July 2013, 14 of Stewkley's finest (footballers and friends) took on the British 'Three Peaks in 24 Hours' Challenge raising £9,400 for charity...Parish Council Clerk Sue Mordue resigned her post after two years' service...Barbara Ginn wrote to *Grapevine* that the Airport Memorial should remain located at the Spinney... St Michael's School Year 6 pupils held a car wash raising £230 for school funds as their leaving gift to help purchase outdoor seating...the village's biggest employer of 34 local people, Wiltshire Farm Foods, moved premises to the Ploughing Barns on Soulbury Road...AVDC Biodiversity Officer Matt Dodds praised St Michael's Churchyard as 'a good example of a churchyard well managed for its wild flowers'...and *Tailpiece Tales* featured the six tails of swallow chicks successfully fledged under the eaves timbers at 'Old Timbers' in Ivy Lane.

**FROM THE GRAPEVINE****20 YEARS AGO...**

From July 2003, recruitment was underway by Bucks County Council for a 'lollipop patroller' following confirmation of a school crossing patrol in High Street North...the Mothers' Union was inviting villagers to a 'Bears and Prayers' service and picnic in the Vicarage garden...Peter Beer was to give an illustrated talk about his coast-to-coast bike ride across the USA...St Michael's School staged a successful 'Bring and Buy' sale in aid of the Blue Peter Waterworks Appeal...the Parish Council heard reports of vandalism and theft of flower displays at High Street properties and the importance of reporting to the police...and Martin Gregory scored 153 not out as Stewkley 1st XI walloped local rivals Drayton Parslow.

