

The lost orchards of the Smee

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Smee was the name of an area of common land to the south-west of the village of Great Plumstead. The name of the village is believed to derive from the Old English meaning "the place where plum trees grow". Cooke's map, dating from 1718, refers to it as "Great Plumstead Common called the Smeeth", and a legal document dating from 1625 as "le Smeete". The word smeeth (pronounced smee) is derived from the Anglo-Saxon term smoeth (smooth). As a topographical name it can frequently be found in a marsh or fenland setting and in the old days was used to describe a level plain. An 1812 enclosure map shows that the Smee was bordered by Heath Gate Way (Low Road) in the north, by Wilton Way/Halten Gate Way (Smee Lane) in the south and by the Fourteenth Public Road (Green Lane) in the west, with Dussins Daele (Dussindale) - the site of possibly the most important battlefield in post-medieval Norfolk, where on 27 August 1549 Kett's rebels were defeated by an army under the leadership of the Earl of Warwick at the Battle of Dussindale - separating it from two enclosures known as Little Lunnars and Twenty Acre Close. The name of the local area once known as the Smee is no longer in use, but it has survived in Smee Lane, the road bordering it in the south, and there is also a Smee Farm and a Smee Cottage.

In 1834, Great Plumstead (together with Acle, Beighton, Blofield, Braydeston, Brundall, Buckenham Ferry, Burlingham St Andrew, Burlingham St Edmund, Burlingham St Peter, Cantley, Fishley, Freethorpe, Great Plumstead, Halvergate, Hassingham, Hemblington, Limpenhoe, Lingwood, Little Plumstead, Moulton St Mary, Postwick, Ranworth-with-Panxworth, Reedham, South Walsham St. Mary, South Walsham St. Lawrence, Southwood, Strumpshaw, Thorpe St. Andrew (or Thorpe-next-Norwich), Tunstall, Upton, Wickhampton, Witton and Woodbastwick) joined the Blofield union (dissolved in 1930) and the Blofield workhouse was built in 1836. In 1883 the parish of Great Plumstead came under the Deanery of Blofield in the hundred of Blofield, and registrations of births, marriages and deaths between 1837 and 1930, including the censuses from 1851 to 1901, were recorded in the Blofield Registration District. Today Great Plumstead is one of the fringe parishes of the City of Norwich, located in the Broadland District of Norfolk and incorporating the villages of Great and Little Plumstead and, at its north-western edge, the garden village of Thorpe End. It is bounded by the A47 southern bypass in the south and the Broadland Business Park in the south-west.

In the early 1800s, most of the land on the Smee was owned by Archibald Primrose, the 4th Earl of Rosebery, Lord Dalmeny (1783–1868), whose family by the early 1900s owned almost all of the land in the area. The other principal landowners were Sir Henry J Stracey (of Rackheath Hall), William Birkbeck (lord of the manor of Thorpe-near-Norwich, now Thorpe St Andrew, and Colonel Clement William Unthank (owner of the Heigham Estate in Norwich). The Roseberys were lords of the manors of Postwick, where they had a shooting lodge built, and of Great Plumstead until 1945, spanning a period of nearly 200 years. The 4th earl's grandson, Archibald Philip Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery and 1st Earl of Midlothian (1847-1929), was Prime Minister of the UK from March 1894 to June 1895 and leader of the opposition in the following year, and married to Hannah de Rothschild, the only child and sole heiress of the Jewish banker Mayer Amschel de Rothschild. The family seat is Dalmeny House in Dalmeny on the Firth of Forth in West Lothian, Scotland. The current Chief of Clan Primrose is Neil Primrose, the 7th Earl of Rosebery.



In the mid-20th century, Great Plumstead was still predominantly a farming community, with the former common land located between Smee Lane and Low Road being occupied by a number of smallholdings and market gardens supplying mainly Norwich with fresh fruit, soft fruit, vegetables and flowers. A former employee (known only as John) of E Pordage and Co, a fruit and vegetable wholesaler based in Norwich, recalls that in the 1960s there were a lot of market gardens and smallholdings still located in the vicinity of Norwich which used to grow local produce. "There was no such thing as Iceberg lettuces and things like that. In the winter you had Dutch lettuces but in the summer you had mostly local lettuces like Webb's wonders and Cos lettuce or flat lettuce. Also on a Tuesday and on a Friday morning there was a wholesale fruit and veg market down at the livestock market on Hall Road where the local shopkeepers, and especially greengrocers, used to go and buy their stuff. The growers from around the Norwich area and Norfolk used to take their goods down there. They used to go far and wide."



Commercial fruit growing in Norfolk commenced in the second half of the 19th century, precipitated by the onset of an agricultural depression which led many farmers to diversify and establish orchards. One of the first, if not the very first, market gardeners to establish themselves on the Smee would seem to have been Benjamin and Harriet Shreeve (nee King). Benjamin Robert Shreeve was born in Strumpshaw and his name first appears in Kelly's 1879 trades directory as a market gardener from Great Plumstead a year after he had married (in St Peter Mancroft church in Norwich). In the 1887 parish of Great Plumstead's register of electors his occupation is given as road surveyor and market gardener. The Shreeves lived in a small cottage set back from Smee Road, which was fronted by an extensive garden shown on the 1905 OS map as already being populated by an orchard. An enclosure map held at the Norfolk Record Office, drawn on parchment and dating from 1812, shows that the parcel of land comprised 1 acre and 16 perches, and that the land and the cottage situated on it were owned outright by William Haggata, yeoman of Great Plumstead. The land east, west and north of the property

belonged to the Earl of Rosebery.

In his last will, which he had written in 1827 and signed with an "X", William Haggata appointed his wife, Elizabeth, as the heir of "all and every my message lands, tenements and hereditaments in Great Plumstead and elsewhere, and my personal estates, money and effects during her natural life, and from and immediately after the decease of my wife I direct my friend Henry Mitchell, baker, of the City of Norwich, as executive and administrator to make sale and absolutely dispose of my said hereditaments either by auction or private sale, and that the money arising from the sale shall be held in trust for and be equally divided between and amongst my six children when a son shall attain the age of twenty one yeares or being a daughter shall attain that age or be married." William Haggata died on 19 December 1851.

Living at the western end of Smee Road in 1902 was the market gardener James Solomon Hicks, originally from Colby in North Norfolk, who with his wife Elizabeth, and their lodger James Hancock, a widower, lived in Smee House, a large dwelling recorded to have had nine rooms. Smee House was well set back from Smee Road and surrounded by fields on all sides and was one of the oldest dwellings on the Smee, as Faden's Map of Norfolk dating from the late 18th century attests. An enclosure map of Plumstead and Postwick, drawn by the surveyor Robert Corby in 1812, shows that at the time the property had been owned by Benjamin Saul. The size of the area of land attached to it is given as 4 acres 3 rods and 37 perches. The parcel of land to the south of it, bounded by the 6th public road (Smee Lane) in the south, was owned by Peter Bullock. Rosamond Marker owned a plot of land adjacent in the east, traversed by a public footpath linking Smee Lane and Low Road, which had still been in place until the construction in 2016 of the Norwich Northern Distributor Road which now cuts through it. A house or cottage of which no trace remains was situated at the north-eastern corner of Rosamond Marker's plot. All the land adjoining in the north, up to Low Road and beyond, was owned by the Earl of Rosebery.

James S Hicks's next-door neighbours were the Shreeves, who lived in William Haggata's cottage, which from 1852 until at least 1871 had been occupied if not by his son then presumably a relative, Isaac Haggata, a master market gardener, his wife Margaret, and their son Isaac William. John Webb, a 74-year old agricultural labourer, and Christian Webb, aged 75, are named in the 1861 census as their boarders. Isaac Haggata's name is listed in the 1858 and the 1865 Poll Book for East Norfolk, and the 1871 census confirms that the Haggatas were at that time still living on the property, but by 1881 both their names had disappeared from the parish records. The Shreeves presumably moved into the cottage, which the 1911 census records as having had four rooms, at some time during 1878, after they had married, and they appear to have at once started to set up their market gardening business. Their first and only child was born in March 1883. Sadly, the baby, a boy named Richard Benjamin, died two months later.

James S Hicks's other neighbour, who had arrived in around 1911 and whose land adjoined his own in the west, was a young man named Evan William Frederick Jones, also a market gardener. He was born in 1888 in Norwich where he lived with his parents in 115 St Leonard's road in Thorpe Hamlet. During the early 1900s, Evan Jones was one of the partners of Jones & Baker, market gardeners, and in the winter of 1912 he married Violet Mary Ann Baker from Trowse Newton, who in all likelihood was either the daughter or the sister of his business partner (John Robert or George James Baker, respectively). Their eldest of four sons, William John James, was born in September of the same year, followed by another son, Ralph, in 1914. Jones & Baker appear for the first time in Kelly's 1912 trade directory for the parish of Great Plumstead, and in 1914 Evan Jones's name is mentioned for the first time in the Parish of Great Plumstead's register of electors as the owner of a parcel of land bounded by Smee Road in the south and by Green Lane in the west. A couple of years earlier a few buildings, one being a greenhouse, shown on the 1912 OS map and still standing, had already been erected. Evan Jones

also had a dwelling house built on his land and by 1915 had moved in with his growing family. By 1920, two more sons, Alan (1917) and Eric (1920), had arrived.



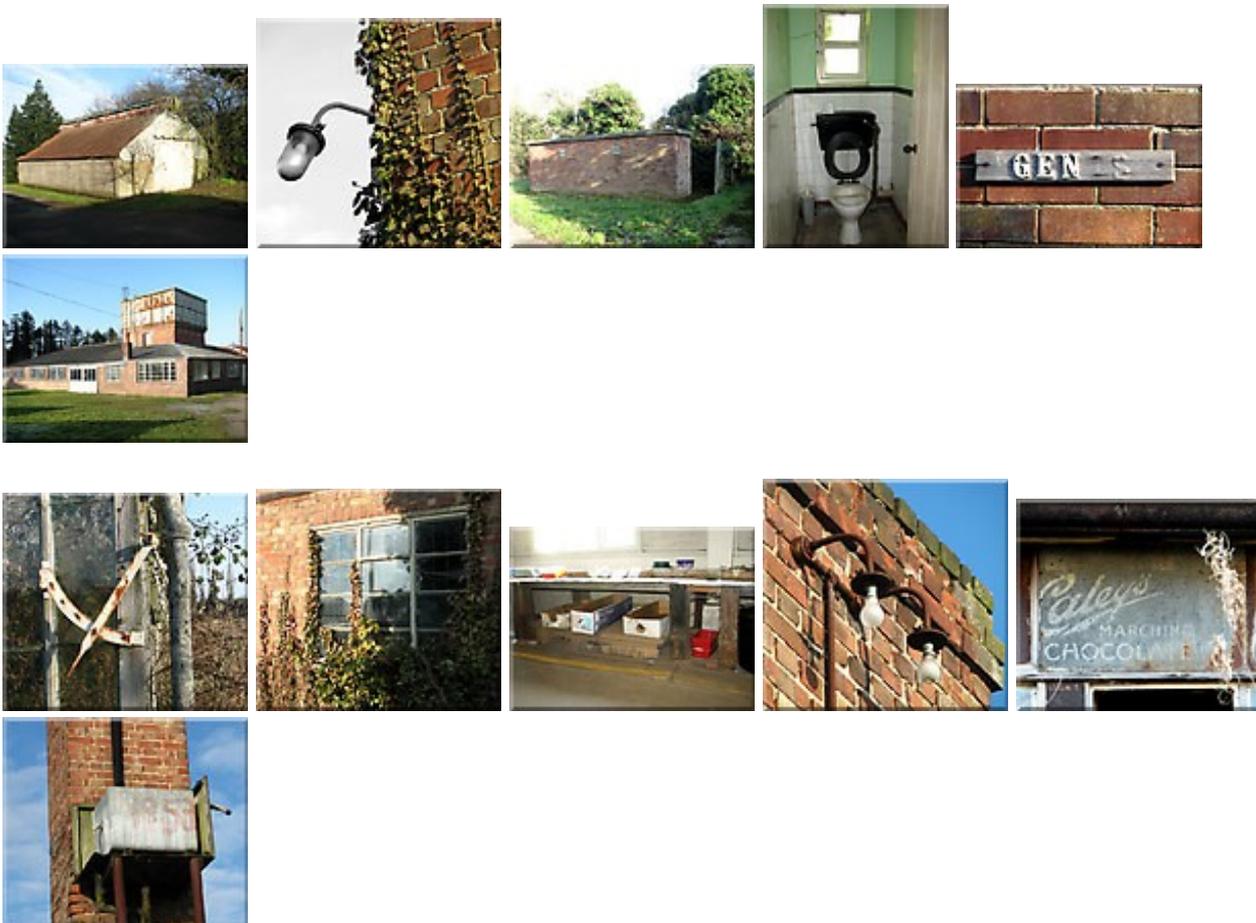
At some time in the early 1900s, Walter Somerville Gurney and Christopher Robert Birkbeck, who by that time also jointly owned the surrounding farmland, acquired Isaac Haggata's dwelling. As the new owners already resided in much grander homes, the Somerville Gurneys in North Runcton Hall and the Birkbecks in West Acre High House on their Westacre Estate near King's Lynn, they had no use for the cottage other than for accommodating one of their farm labourers. From 1905 until at least 1915 it had been occupied by Benjamin Robert Oakley, a farm stockman, his wife Frances Mary and their two daughters Eva and Christobel, and William Lovick, a blacksmith, had lived there before them with Emma, his wife.

Leonard Parker Willet, a fruit grower living in 14 Camp Road, Norwich, had bought the plot of land adjoining the cottage in the east. He is listed in Kelly's 1925 and 1929 trade directories and Great Plumstead's electoral register too confirms that he owned some land in the parish. It is probably safe to assume that it was he who planted new orchards and also erected new outbuildings on the land that he had acquired. One of the buildings is a shed with a loft, a row of three windows at one end and two open-sided lean-tos, adjoined by a small brick-built boiler house with a coke boiler inside for supplying hot water. The hot water tank was situated in the shed's loft. There is also a large, about 1.80m (6ft) deep concrete water tank with a tap at one end. The buildings, and a wind pump - presumably comprising a steel multi-bladed rotor mounted on a wood or steel lattice tower, driving a pump linkage, and connected with a piston pump located in a borehole or well directly below - are marked on the 1926 OS map, which for the first time also records the name of the property as Shreeve's Farm. The wind pump would seem to have been the first mechanical device to have been installed on the property for pumping water from the well situated in the garden to a storage tank in the house, and also to a second tank which supplied the orchards.

A record held by the British Geological Society documents that in April 1935 (two years after Robert and Hugh Glendinning Bainbridge had acquired the property) a boring had been made, which extended the original well on Appletree Farm from 52 feet (15.85m) to a depth of 142 feet (43.28m) from ground level. The record was later updated by a letter from Robert Bainbridge dating from July 1940, according to which 100 gallons of water per hour were pumped over 7 hours a week. On the occasion of a site visit in September 1947, a yield of 500 to 600 gallons per day, supplying the house and the fruit farm in winter and less in summer, had been recorded. By August 1960 an electric pump had been installed. It supplied two 500-gallon storage tanks, one situated in the house and the other in the nearby bungalow. Appletree farmhouse to this day still enjoys the use of its own water supply directly from the borehole.



In August 1932, when Leonard Willet sold his land to the brothers Robert John and Hugh Glendinning Bainbridge, who were listed in Kelly's trade directory as Bainbridge Bros, a fruit growing company, the property was referred to as Appletree Farm in the title deeds, although it continued to be called Shreeve's Farm on the updated OS maps surveyed in 1938 and 1946. In 1933, the brothers, who hailed from the South Norfolk village Hethersett, acquired more of the surrounding farmland as well as the dwelling and Robert Bainbridge subsequently moved into the cottage together with his wife, Florence Edith, and their daughter, Ruth Mildred. Violet Amelia Clark, a domestic servant and presumably the daughter of Mrs Gertrude Clark, a local fruiterer, also lived there. In the following years, Robert Bainbridge had a small bungalow constructed on a plot of land to the south-east of the house. It was then known as Appletree Farm Bungalow and in 1939 Sidney Keith Burkinshaw, a master wall tiler, and his wife Grace Rosina occupied it. Sold by the Feildens in 1987, the property is currently known as Appletree Cottage.



By 1939 James William Hicks, a market gardener and presumably a relative of James Solomon Hicks, as he too hailed from Colby, had moved with his wife, Beatrice Althea, into Smee House. The orchards, which by then, in addition to the original parcel of land to the north and east of his cottage also covered the field to the south of it which had formerly been owned by Rosamond Marker and is bounded by Smee Road, as is shown on the OS map of the time and as can also be seen in an aerial view dating from 1946. He was assisted by his nephew and fellow market gardener, Alfred William Aldis, who was an ARP (air raid precaution) warden during WW2 and also lived on the Smee.

The heyday of commercial market gardening on the Smee, as in all other fruit growing areas in the county, spanned the three decades between 1940 and 1970, when almost all of the Smee was covered with mainly apple tree orchards. Orchards are however documented to have been a feature of Norfolk's agricultural landscape for at least a millennium although most of the county's orchard fruit varieties only came into existence during the last three hundred years. The earliest documentary evidence for any English apple variety comes from the Norfolk parish of Runham where in a 13th century deed it is recorded that Robert de Evermere, the lord of the Manor of Runham near Great Yarmouth, was to pay an annual tithe of 200 pearmain - <http://www.suttonelms.org.uk/pink-pearmain.html> - and 4 hogsheads (1 hogshead was the equivalent of about 250 litres) of wine, made of pearmain, into the Exchequer, on the feast of St Michael.

Frequently the apples were transported out of the county and used for jam making, whereas smaller orchards such as the ones on the Smee provided fresh fruit locally as well as for Norwich markets. Much of the fruit grown in Norfolk until the 1950s was stored or preserved for use throughout the winter in cool but frost-free outbuildings, and varieties less likely to survive storage were either dried, bottled or preserved as chutneys and jams or used for making cider and perry. Apples were also sent further afield to the markets of London and Birmingham, and more locally, the Gaymer Cider Company was a large consumer of local apples. In the late 19th century, William Gaymer had moved his business from Banham to Attleborough and it soon became the largest cider-making factory in the region, relying on many local smallholders for apples. Although the factory closed in 1995, 'Gaymers Cyder' is still a brand name and is now made in Somerset.

By the late 1930s, Evan Jones's plant nursery and orchards had been further expanded to include new greenhouses and work sheds, and staff toilets had also been constructed. By the early 1940s a large shed for housing pigs had joined the assemblage of greenhouses. The pigs were fattened on fruit not fit for selling and the compost they produced was a welcome fertiliser, which was subsequently spread in the orchards as well as the nursery's glasshouses. By that time the company had grown to about 15 to 20 permanent employees, and up to a hundred seasonal fruit pickers were taken on during harvest time, some recruited from local schools during the school holidays and others apparently from the Little Plumstead Hospital, a Norfolk County Council certified mental institution. The 1939 register confirms that the three older of the Jones's sons were by then market gardeners and also farmers, with the youngest son, Eric, being recorded as assisting his father. Due to the Schedule of Reserved Occupations which had been drawn up in 1938, exempting certain key skilled workers such as railway and dockworkers, miners, farmers, agricultural workers, schoolteachers and doctors from conscription, the Jones's sons were not called up to join the fighting in WW2. By that time the enterprise had become Jones & Sons, with their orchards now also covering a plot of land to the north of the nursery. Considering the size of the venture, the whole family must have been busier than ever, especially during the growing and harvesting seasons.



Ever since his arrival on the Smee, Robert Bainbridge, who is described in the 1939 Register as a heavy worker, had been busy planting new top and soft fruit orchards, which by the 1940s had covered almost all of his land east and west of his house and extended all the way north up to Low Road. During the war he too was in a reserved occupation, and like many others in his situation who had joined civil defence units such as the Home Guard or the ARP, he became one of the parish's ARP wardens. His wife had joined the Women's Voluntary Service. In 1949, Robert Bainbridge's daughter married the architect Bernard Feilden who at the time had been working for the Norwich architectural practice of Edward Boardman and Son, but by 1954 had set up his own practice in Norwich with David Mawson. Sir Bernard Melchior Feilden is described as having been the leading conservation architect of his time. His work encompassed the restoration of cathedrals, the Great Wall of China and the Taj Mahal, and in 1977 became Director of the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property. Feilden was appointed OBE in 1969, CBE in 1976, and knighted in 1985. He died in November 2008, aged 89. His wife, Ruth, had already passed on in 1994.

For Evan Jones the cultivation of garden plants, vegetables, lettuces and flowers had initially merely been a diversion from the main business which was to produce fresh fruit and soft fruit, and was pursued mainly during the winter months when there was little work to be done in the orchards. Adapting to the demands of a growing market, an additional five greenhouses had been erected near the northern end of the plant nursery during the 1950s. The greenhouses were irrigated by a system of seep pipes fed by large water tanks, and during the winter months three boiler houses containing a set of two boilers each produced the hot water which circulated in steel pipes traversing the greenhouses, and in so doing kept temperatures above freezing.

Evan Jones died in 1959 but his business, now in the capable hands of his sons, continued to thrive, as did Robert Bainbridge's at Appletree Farm. Smee House, where James William Hicks used to live has, however, disappeared without leaving a trace. It was razed to the ground at some time during the late 1950s or early 1960s and the land taken over by Evan Jones's sons. The fields once populated by orchards now produce arable crops, and they are still farmed by a member of the Jones family.



Britain's entry into the EC in the 1970s had resulted in a sudden increase in the amount of cheap imported fruit from Europe and hence the decline of orchards all over the country. New legislation combined with farm subsidies which were heavily biased towards cereal production, and grubbing grants paid to fruit growers who wished to remove their orchards resulted in the loss of about two thirds of all Norfolk's orchards in the second half of the 20th century. The area of land covered by orchards in Norfolk, measured in hectares, decreased from over 4000 in 1950 to barely 500 in 2004 and many orchards were lost on account of conversion to arable land.

At Appletree Farm, Robert Bainbridge's business closed in 1973 and Jones & Sons subsequently obtained the tenancy for his orchards, which continued to produce apples, pears, damsons and a variety of soft fruit until they were grubbed in the mid-1980s and the land converted to arable. In 1980, Robert Bainbridge sold his house to Brian Oliver Winsworth and his wife Bethia Somerville, presumably a relative of Walter Somerville Gurney who had owned it in the 1930s, and retired to Fakenham, but he continued to own the farmland including the plot of land to the east of the house on which some of the outbuildings were still standing, for nearly three more decades. For some time during the late 1970s and early 1980s Henry Feilden, who had been an American cars enthusiast, used one of his grandfather's work sheds for tinkering with his cars. His initials, painted on the building's sliding door, can still be seen today. After her father's death in 1986, Ruth Feilden inherited the property.





When the Feilden's land was finally for sale in 2008, TSA Group Ltd, a company owned by the family of the present occupier of Appletree farmhouse, acquired it. The house is now much altered and considerably larger than it used to be in William Haggata's and Benjamin Shreeve's time, but the outbuildings dating from the 1920s and later are still in place. The brick-built fruit storage shed has been converted into an office, and the grading machine in the fruit grading shed was removed and the building converted to a workshop. The old packing shed is, however, once again used for the packing of apples still produced here, which are apparently much sought after on the local market. A couple of individual and presumably original fruit trees have also survived on the property, such as an ancient tree which every year again produces an abundance of cooking apples, and a huge pear tree believed to be at least a hundred years old, also still producing fruit.



Despite their orchards having been turned into crop fields like all others in the neighbourhood, the Jones family company still continues to be in business a century after it had been founded. Operating on a much smaller scale it is now a third-generation local family concern which still meets the demand for quality flowers and plants as well as offering flower arrangements for special events such as weddings and birthdays, and funerals. The workshops and sheds, the boiler houses, the water tanks and the piggery are disused and most of the greenhouses stand empty, but the assemblage as a whole is all still there exactly as it had sprung up over a hundred years: from the first glasshouse at one end to its modern-day cousin built only a few years ago at the other, and everything in between, so that when following the main nursery path starting at the entrance one passes through decade after decade of buildings bearing witness to a time irretrievably gone and hence now history.

In 2017, the Smee is still dominated by farmland, and over the years only a handful of new houses have sprung up along Smee Lane which is still bounded by crop fields on both sides. Some of the fields near its western end are however now bisected by the route of the new Norwich Distributor Road (NDR), scheduled to be completed later in the year. The NDR will also cut through Smee Lane, resulting in it being permanently closed, with a turning head and field access at its end, a short distance to the south-west of Appletree farmhouse.



Please note that some of the photographs used for illustrating this article were taken on private properties. My grateful thanks go to the owners, who not only kindly granted access and permission to photograph but also very generously shared details of the history of their properties. Many thanks also to the staff of the Norfolk Record Office's Archive Centre for their kind assistance.

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