The ownership of land in Felsham from medieval times to the 19th century?

In this introductory study of land ownership in Felsham a range of historical sources are explored. These sources include archaeological surveys, feoffments, wills, church records, hearth tax returns, estate maps, title deeds, court rolls and tithe maps with their apportionments.

The parish of Felsham is situated about eight miles south-east of Bury St Edmunds in the county of Suffolk.¹ In 1086, it was recorded that Felsham had a relatively large population of 39 households with enough oxen to cultivate up to a thousand acres of plough-land. Like most Suffolk villages, Felsham was to remain a farming community right up to relatively recent times.

Figure 1 Felsham in 1838 and showing Baldwin Cocksedge’s inferred and approximate landholding in 1467 within Brook Hall Manor

At the beginning of the 16th century, Felsham was part of Suffolk’s wood pasture region engaged in rearing and dairying with some pig-keeping, horse-breeding and poultry. The crops were mainly barley with some wheat, rye, oats, peas, vetches, hops and occasionally

¹ See: http://felshamhc.onesuffolk.net/a-brief-history-of-felsham/
hemp.\textsuperscript{2} The whole area was dominated by the Abbey and ecclesiastical authorities in Bury St Edmunds. Population size is difficult to gauge, though we know that there were 32 taxpayers in 1524 and 42 households in 1674. The 1801 census records 301 inhabitants.

Most of Felsham’s farmhouses are associated with medieval moats and their prevalence was noted by Arthur Rackham:\textsuperscript{3}

\begin{quote}
“Moats are abundant where the traditions of village communities and open-field agriculture were weak, where there was a multitude of small freeholders or weakly-bound tenants with independence to be asserted. An extreme example is Felsham with at least twelve moats scattered over the parish.”
\end{quote}

It has been argued\textsuperscript{4} that moats were status symbols: the common yeoman could not afford a castle but he could have a moat. Presumably, the bigger, squarer, broader and regular the moat the greater the prestige they provided their owner.

The distribution of moats gives an indication of how land within the parish of Felsham was divided into manors, sub-manors and independent farmsteads.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2.png}
\caption{Felsham's Medieval Moats}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{2} J. Thirsk (ed.), \textit{The Agrarian History of England and Wales, Volume IV: 1500-1640}, CUP, 1967
\textsuperscript{3} A. Rackham, \textit{The History of the Countryside}, Dent, 1986, 363
\textsuperscript{4} E. Martin, ‘Medieval Moats’ in Dymond, D. & Martin, E., \textit{An Historical Atlas of Suffolk}, Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History, 1989, 60
Most of the moats are about half an acre in size which suggests that they were associated with ancient free tenements. It has been possible to identify the owner of one of these moated sites: Baldwin Cockseedge. He occupied the sub-manor of Brook Hall/Lovaynes which was associated with the manor of neighbouring Thorpe Morieux. (See Fig. 1).

The site can be identified through a 15th century source: FEOFFMENT of a croft and appurtenances called le Cherchecroft in Felsham.\(^5\)

> Between lands late of Walter Stark on both sides, one head abutting Felsham churchyard, and the other a meadow of Baldwin Cockseedge, with the hedges on both sides and a way between the lands and tenement called Howines leading from the highway to the aforesaid croft.

The last will and testament of Baldwin Cockseedge, gentleman\(^6\) is a richly detailed document giving us an incredible insight into daily life within a 15th century moated farmhouse and an extract is included here:

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“Denise my wife to have 20s for her dower and my place called ‘Upwode Hall’, otherwise ‘Cokesedesys’, in Felsham, during her lifetime. She to have the new house called a parlour with the kitchen and the chambers pertaining to the said parlour and kitchen in my said place during her life, if she live sole without a husband; she to have the little garden on the east side of the said parlour, between the parlour and the chambers on that one ‘party’ and the quick hedge set from the gate unto the hall door on the other ‘party’, during her life; she to have all the garden on the west side of the said parlour and chambers with all the curtilage on the west side of my place, within the moat, from the kitchen door unto the pear tree and from the pear tree to the west side of the bakehouse and so forth to the moat side, with all the commodities within the said garden and curtilage growing and being, as in herbage, fruits, feedings and fishings in the moat and the fruit of the said pear tree and of an apple tree standing in same ‘cours’ falling within the said curtilage, and other profits, without destruction or cutting down of trees during her lifetime as aforesaid. Denise to have her easement in the bakehouse in lawful time for brewing, for baking and drying of malt, and a stable within the moat, and her easement in the malting house joined thereto, with this condition, that the occupier of my said place shall have his wetting of his barley in the vat of Denise during malting time, that is, Denise one wetting and the occupier another wetting. Also the going of hens and fowls ‘clovefotd’ as it please Denise reasonably, with twain hogs-going and free incoming and free outgoing in lawful time to and from the said parlour, kitchen, bakehouse, stable, malting house, gardens and curtilage, with her carriage of all manner of things such as she needs at both bridges well and in peace, without any impediment of the occupier of the said place during her life as above…”
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The rectangular shape of Cocksedge’s moat with its varying widths of water were still apparent on a map five hundred years later:

![Figure 3 OS Map 1st edition: the moat at THE ELMS](image)

The extent of Cocksedge’s land ownership and the range of land purchases that he made leading up to 1469 are listed towards the end of his Will:

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John my son to have my said place called ‘Upwode Hall’, otherwise called ‘Coksedgys’, in Felsham, with all the appurtenances....

Denise to have my tenement called ‘Beeryns’, with all the appurtenances for the term of her life..... She shall have all the lands, meadows, pastures and feedings called ‘Southwode’ and ‘Walymerche’ which I bought of Piers of Stonham....

My daughter Agnes to [have] the farm of all the lands called ‘Mekyll Southfield’ containing 8 acres by estimation, lying on the south ‘party’ of my land called ‘Meryeakyr’ and ‘Brookhallende’, and a croft with a piece of meadow containing 4 acres by estimation, which I bought of Sir John Gooderyche, priest, the said 8 acres with the said 4 acres abutting upon my lane towards the west;

and a croft lying upon the west side of John Skettes, sometimes called ‘Dychehows’, with a piece of pasture lying the nether end of the said croft containing 3 acres, more or less by estimation;

and the land called ‘Lytyll Southfield’ lying on the north side of ‘Brookhallende’ on one ‘party’ and the land of Robert Gentilman on the other ‘partye’, the which I bought of John Dyche, Walter Moore and John Moore of Felsham aforesaid;

and another piece of land lying on the west side of the ‘Otercofte’ otherwise called ‘Cotelericote’, with a piece of meadow lying between the meadow of the said Robert Gentilman on the one ‘partye’ and the meadow of William Cotelere on the other ‘parte’, till the sum of 7 marks be levied for the said Agnes....]
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Some of the land mentioned is still identifiable today though virtually none, apart from a reference to an eight-acre field, retain the 15th century nomenclature. The map below is an attempt to position some of the places mentioned in the Will and shows the extent of

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7 Reproduced by kind permission of the Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds
pasture and grassland as it was recorded in the early 19th century but which was probably far more extensive three hundred years earlier.

Figure 4: Map showing pieces of land belonging to Baldwin Cocksedge in about 1469. The blue boundary demarcates the land owned by the 19th century Lord of the Manor based in Thorpe Morieux and which may have formed the boundary of Cocksedge’s land.
The Will of Baldwin Cocksedge describes him as a 'gentleman' and the references to land purchases suggests that he was almost certainly a freeholder within the manorial system. “Freeholders enjoyed a secure title, the rights to sell, lease and bequeath their land, and the protection of the common law.”\textsuperscript{8} Manorial court rolls for Felsham survive for the period 1437 to 1452 but, as currently they have not been transcribed and translated, it is not possible to examine them for references to Cocksedge's land-holdings nor to those of his neighbours mentioned in the will. Many gentry and wealthier yeomen had their will proved by the Prerogative Court of the Archbishop of Canterbury\textsuperscript{9} but only fifteen Felsham residents are listed in their records between 1500 and 1800 and there is no mention of the Cocksedge family, except that a Thomas Cocksedge is listed for neighbouring Drinkstone in 1653.

Another major Felsham landowner at the end of the 15\textsuperscript{th} century was Walter Scarpe who owned land near the centre of the village. His descendant, Thomas Scarpe, died in 1636 heavily in debt.\textsuperscript{10} He owed a Margaret Brundish of Felsham £130. The Scarpe family crop up repeatedly in the record\textsuperscript{11} but by 1838 their only presence in Felsham was ownership of the wood at the southern end of the parish. Walter Scarpe may have died considerably in debt but, in general, living standards were rising among yeomen and husbandmen households at this time.\textsuperscript{12}

16\textsuperscript{th} century records of land ownership for Felsham remain to be explored but it would be remarkable if the Dissolution of the Abbey at Bury St Edmunds, which was accompanied by the greatest transfer of property throughout the country, did not impact on the parish.

Church records provide information on land ownership for the beginning of the 17\textsuperscript{th} century. A glebe terrier of 1630 lists the buildings as 'a parsonage house', a backhouse and two barns, with a yard, an orchard, totalling three acres, and also three individual plots of glebe land in total amounting to six and a half acres.\textsuperscript{13} Glebe lands originated in Saxon times and Jessel points out that “they were little different to other lands and in many cases the rector had to work them along with his fellow villagers.”\textsuperscript{14} Rectors could also be landowners in their own right; Baldwin Cocksedge bought 4 acres of land from the parish priest, for example.

The Suffolk Hearth Tax Returns lists Felsham households in 1674 and provides us with some insight into land ownership and the distribution of wealth.\textsuperscript{15} Some property owners may well have been relative newcomers arriving after the disruptions of the Civil War and the Restoration.

\textsuperscript{8} K. Wrightson, Earthly Necessities: economic lives in early modern Britain, 1470-1750, Penguin, 2002, 72
\textsuperscript{9} The National Archives online: last accessed 16 June 2016.
\textsuperscript{11} W.A Copinger, The Manors of Suffolk Vol. 6, Taylor, Garnett, Evans, 1910
\textsuperscript{12} K. Wrightson, 2002, 140
\textsuperscript{13} Glebe terrier, Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds, Ref: FL570/3/8-10
\textsuperscript{14} C. Jessel, A Legal History of the English landscape, Wildy, Simmonds & Hill Publishing, 2011, 62
\textsuperscript{15} See Centre for Hearth Tax Research, \url{http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/}
With the number of hearths averaging about 4, the people of Felsham were mostly living in farmhouses and cottages. There is no large house listed. The Lord of the Manor in 1674 was John Risby Esq. who lived in Thorpe Morieux in a house with 11 hearths. (To help put these village statistics in some sort of perspective it is worth noting that the house with the largest number of hearths in West Suffolk was Hengrave Hall with 55, while more locally we had Rushbrook Hall with 33.) The only family names re-appearing as landowners in the 19th century are ‘Spurgeon’ (Sturgeon) and Cocksedge.

Mr Robert Goodrich is, perhaps, the most interesting person among the list of Felsham tax payers. Certainly, we know more about him than some of the others. To begin with he is...
buried in the centre of the chancel of St Peter's Church and the flagstone that marks his grave bears his impressive coat of arms. The extent of his land ownership has yet to be uncovered.

The making of estate maps became widespread towards the end of the 17th century. A Felsham estate map dated 1729 surveyed the lands associated with The Hall owned by Joseph Thompson, Esq., and perhaps preparatory to sale. Daniel Defoe extolls the attractiveness of West Suffolk to prospective purchasers in his *A Tour through the Eastern Counties of England* 1722. This was a time when many estates in Suffolk were being bought up to provide a ‘country seat’ with hunting potential and a steady income from rents, but “the possession of a large agricultural estate conferred upon its owner many more advantages than the purely economic. Land was a ‘positional good’ as well as a productive resource.”

The owner of The Hall, Joseph Thompson (1698-1743), belonged to a family that gained preferment during the Commonwealth and he inherited much property in England and over 2000 acres in Massachusetts. Moreover, it is recorded that he bought Nonsuch Little Park from the Duke of Grafton in 1731. Property magnates like Thompson were not uncommon and the source of their wealth could be traced back to successful trading ventures, manufacturing, the professions and to service for the Crown or even the East India Company.

Although trained as a barrister Thompson never practised as he lived comfortably on his substantial property portfolio. It is difficult to gauge exactly when Felsham Hall came under the ownership of the Thompson family but a *Court Roll* refers to a Joseph Thompson (his father?) in connection with various parish properties going back to 1688.

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16 Reproduced by kind permission of the SRO, Ipswich.
17 Quoted in Jessel, *Legal History*…, 117
19 See [http://www.epsomandewellhistoryexplorer.org.uk/NonsuchMansion.html](http://www.epsomandewellhistoryexplorer.org.uk/NonsuchMansion.html)
20 Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds E7/18/Sa, 6-7
Title deeds and associated documents provide further evidence of ownership. The importance of security of title was important throughout our period. Jessel\textsuperscript{21} points out that the ability to sell property depended on solid entitlement:

“No one would go to the cost and trouble of building a house, shop or tavern unless he could be sure that either he, or his family on inheritance, would keep it long enough to recoup their investment or would ultimately be able to transfer and sell it, or preferably both…”

For Felsham a set of papers\textsuperscript{22} have survived in relation to the ownership of the 60-acre Quaker Farm which go back to 1586 when a certain John Bixby made a Settlement. An ‘abstract of title’ was made covering the period 1678-1725 and the 1712 entry is shown below:

\begin{center}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>23 July 1712. Sale £100. Abraham Philips of Cockfield to Robert Clark of Lavenham. (Indenture)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“All that messuage or tenement in Felsham... with all those four crofts or closes of land, meadow and pasture now divided into or being made... and now or lateward in the (?) occupation of William Barnham his assignee or assignees / and which (?) formerly the Estate of John Bixby, and since that of Richard Bixby of Cockfield aforesaid deceased, and (?) the last Will and Testament of the said Richard Bixby bearing date the fifth day of June one Thousand Seven Hundred and seven devised (?) and given to the said Abraham Philips and his Houses [heirs?]...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In occupation: William Barnham, John Bixby, Richard Bixby</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
\end{center}

Later in 1758, the title deeds include the Will of a William Bauley, a Felsham broom-maker living at the farm, who left 20s a year “for the use of the poor belonging to the people called Quakers of Bury monthly meeting.” Such references provide a clue to how the names of farms frequently refer to the name, occupation or, in this case, the religious allegiance of a previous owner or tenant.

The Felsham Tithe map of 1838\textsuperscript{23} provides a comprehensive summary of the pattern of land ownership towards the end of our period.\textsuperscript{24} That the perimeter boundary of Felsham Hall Farm in 1838 is identical to that of the 1729 survey suggests a possible, if approximate, continuity for all farm boundaries within the parish for over a century.

No single person or family had an overwhelming landed interest in Felsham\textsuperscript{25}. The Tithe Apportionment of 1838 listed thirty-five individuals who between them owned 1605 acres of land subject to tithe. (See Fig. 6) About half owned only cottages, gardens and small fields. This multiplicity of ownership meant that Felsham was, to use sociological terminology, more ‘open’ than ‘closed’. Unlike neighbouring Brettenham which was dominated by the Wenyeve family for over two centuries, Felsham contained too many

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\textsuperscript{21} Jessel, Legal History..., 102
\textsuperscript{22} SRO, Bury St Edmunds, Ref: HD 1561/1
\textsuperscript{23} SRO, Bury St Edmunds, Ref: FL 570/3/3
\textsuperscript{24} C. Bornett, Felsham landowners in early Victorian times, in ‘Signposts to local history’, Felsham History Forum, May 2014
\textsuperscript{25} John Harrison, Lord of the Manor and living in Thorpe Morieux, owned a total of 645 acres, of which 299 lay in Felsham. He was the largest landowner, and his land is coterminous with that which in the 15th century was wholly or partly farmed by Baldwin Cockedge, but he does not seem to have dominated village affairs.
ownerships for any one individual to dominate. The government of Felsham was, therefore, in the hands of an oligarchy of minor gentry, principal farmers and a resident magistrate-cleric.

Landowners dominated village life. Most were wealthy proprietors who lived on their rents and left the farming to their tenants. Some were yeoman farmers or owner-occupiers (like Isaac Sturgeon at Slough Farm), others were petty smallholders or craftsmen (like John Gladwell, the thatcher living on the Brettenham road). The Rev Thomas Anderson was only a minor landowner in addition to his glebe (which provided a reasonable income), but this belies the enormous influence he wielded in Felsham because of his exceptional social status.

Figure 6 Map showing the pattern of land ownership in Felsham in 1838 when tithes were commuted into money payments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key</th>
<th>The main Felsham landowners in 1838</th>
<th>Acreage owned</th>
<th>Cottages owned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Harrison, John</td>
<td>299</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Holmes, Timothy</td>
<td>218</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Garnham, Elizabeth</td>
<td>151</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Brooke, Arthur</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sturgeon, Isaac</td>
<td>106</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Hercy, John</td>
<td>94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bletsoe, John</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Goodwin, Charles Rev.</td>
<td>64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Davers, Robert Rev.</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Cockedge, Henry</td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>(Barber)James,Cook</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Steward, James</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Dalton, William</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Hotham, Lady Jane</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Cook, James/Charles</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Anderson, Thomas Rev</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Mudd, Elizabeth</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Land was still a major economic resource and the ownership of land conferred social status, political influence and power over other people’s lives. So, who exactly were these landowners and what was their background? We focus first on those who owned more than a 100 acres:

**John Haynes Harrison (1756-1839):** An example of a well-established gentry family. He achieved ownership of the manorial land at Brook Hall through marriage.

**Timothy Holmes (1785-1840):** An example of a professional man keen to establish a country residence. He was a solicitor in Bury St Edmunds who during the 1830s became Town Clerk, Under Sheriff for Suffolk, and Clerk of the Peace. With a successful law business in Bury St Edmunds he may have wished to establish himself as a country gentleman or he may have had a genuine interest in farming.

**Elizabeth Garnham (1754-1848):** An example of a woman inheriting a farm on the death of her husband. The widow, Elizabeth Garnham, was farming the 151 acre Felsham Hall Farm in 1838 at the grand age of 85. On Mrs Garnham’s death in 1848, Felsham Hall Farm was put up for sale. The investment and status potential would have been attractive to the ‘newly rich’ tradesman or industrialist. (See the newspaper advert to the right)

**Arthur Brooke (1773-1859):** In 1838, Arthur Brooke owned 146 acres of land consisting of Maiden Hall Farm and Rookery Farm (Cockfield Road). He lived at Brooke House in Horringer where he farmed 50 acres of land. He was an important member of the local gentry frequently serving on the Grand Jury at the Suffolk Assizes

**Isaac Sturgeon (1778-1850):** Of all the male landowners in Felsham, “Isaac Sturgeon, gentleman”, was the only one who lived permanently in the village farming his own land. With the exception of James Steward at the small Quaker Farm, all his contemporaries in the village were tenant-farmers.26 Thompson points out that England at this time was overwhelmingly a land of tenant-farmers.27

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26 C. Bornett, *Felsham’s tenant farmers in early Victorian times*, in ‘Signposts to local history’, Felsham History Forum, August 2014
How typical was the pattern of landownership in Felsham in comparison with that elsewhere? To take just one aspect, Beckett\textsuperscript{28} has suggested that by the end of the 18th century, landownership was concentrated in the hands of a small elite: “the received figures suggest a halving of small owners’ total holdings during the period 1690-1790”.

**All the Felsham landowners owning less than a hundred acres** lived outside the parish boundaries, some in neighbouring villages, and some in the county town of Bury St Edmunds. Some had their origins in trade, two were associated with minor aristocracy, one was an adventurer recently returned from the Americas, one was the Deputy Lieutenant of Berkshire, and another was the widow of a local surgeon. Finally, there was the man who may or may not have been a descendant of our 15\textsuperscript{th} century Baldwin Cocksedge: **Henry Leheup Cocksedge**. This landowner lived at Drinkstone Hall. As a young man of 19 years, he purchased a commission in the 15\textsuperscript{th} Light Dragoons and was soon promoted to Lieutenant. In 1843 he married the daughter of Lieutenant-Colonel Rushbrooke, MP of Rushbrooke Hall. This family was clearly well connected in military circles.

The patchy and incomplete nature of the source material does not permit us to draw any but the most tentative of conclusions. What is clear is that Felsham was largely enclosed before 1500 and that it contained a weak manorial system with numerous relatively independent farmers living in scattered moated farmsteads. Over the centuries the newly rich bought up farms to provide status and income but seldom settled permanently within the parish. Unlike the neighbouring villages of Brettenham and Thorpe Morieux, Felsham was never dominated by a single landowner and at the beginning of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century the village was largely owned by numerous ‘absentee landlords’ which placed the onus on the clergy and tenant farmers to provide stability and leadership in local government.

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Bornett, C., *Felsham’s tenant farmers in early Victorian times*, in ‘Signposts to local history’, Felsham History Forum, August 2014