

History

Spring 2003



The ownership of the Abbots Hall estate can be traced back several hundred years, to the times when it was the gift of Kings and Queens to favoured Dukes and Earls.

Medieval estate

The oldest part of the house foundations dates back to the Domesday Survey of 1085, when "Wicgheberga" was valued at £10. This princely sum included the manor house, 1400 acres of land and three houses in Colchester, as well as 20 oxen, 12 cattle, 2 horses, 14 swine and 230 sheep.

Tudor turmoil

The manor of Abbess Hall took its name from the Lady Abbess of Barking Abbey. It is believed to have stayed in the ownership of the Abbey until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1530. In 1540 King Henry VIII granted it to Thomas Lord Cromwell, Earl of Essex, who at the time was Lord Chamberlain of England. Cromwell was beheaded later that year and the manor returned to the King who granted it to Charles Tuke. The manor returned to Elizabeth I in 1562, who then granted it to Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk until he too was beheaded in 1572.

Queen Elizabeth granted Wigborough to the next Thomas Howard in 1597 because of his valour in the battle of the Armada. Howard, who was made 1st Earl of Suffolk by James I, repaid the honour by discovering the Gunpowder Plot.

Private estate

Wigborough was sold in 1647 by the 1st Earl's grandson James Howard, to John Aylett and Challoner Chute for £3,500. Mr Chute was a barrister who was elected Speaker of the House of Commons on January 27, 1659, but then died only eleven weeks later. Aylett later sold the property to Sir Mark Guyon of Coggeshall and it remained in this family until 1810 when it was sold in two lots by the estate of Colonel



John Bullock. The house, barns and about 654 acres were bought by Henry Cline Esq. for £23,500.

The oldest part of the existing house dates from about 1780. Sir Leonard Crossland, former Chairman of Ford UK, overhauled the buildings to their present form in 1970. After his death, the Essex Wildlife Trust purchased Abbots Hall Farm in 2000, with the benefit of the legacy of Joan Elliot. The house is a Grade 2 listed building.



ESSEX Wildlife Trust

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ENGLISH NATURE

Heritage Lottery Fund



DEFRA support the environmental schemes on the farm

Further Information

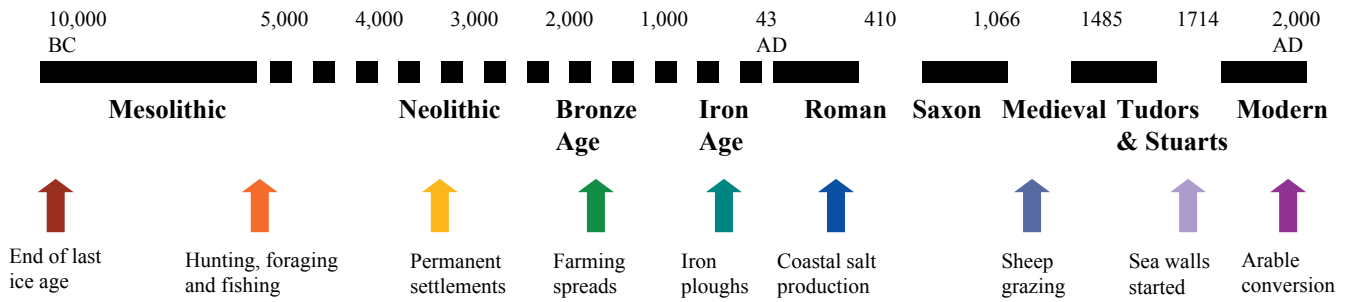
Royal Haskoning, 2001, Abbots Hall Farm Environmental Statement

Ross Clark, *First, open the Domesday Book*, The Sunday Telegraph 2 January 2000

English Heritage, 1997, *England's Coastal Heritage*, Archaeological Report 15

Thomas Wright, 1806, *The History and Topography of the County of Essex Vol.II*, page 739

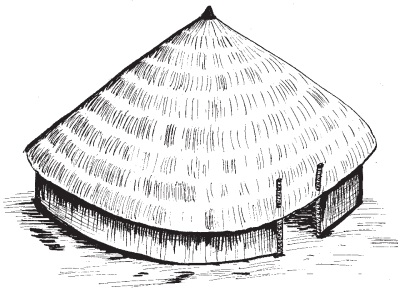
Philip Morant, 1768, *History and Antiquities of the County of Essex Vol.I*, page 420



The changes being made at Abbots Hall Farm can be best understood in the context of the way the land has been used through the ages.

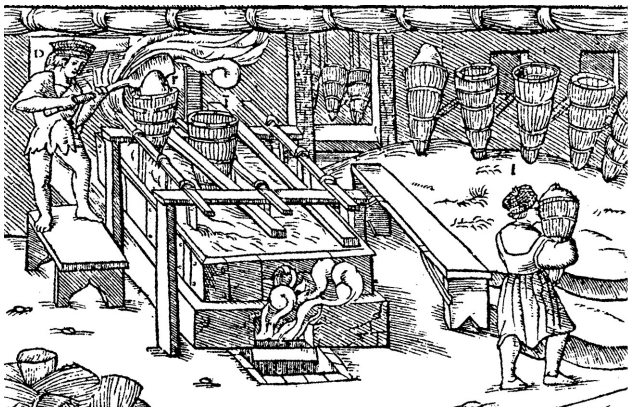
At the beginning of the Mesolithic period 10,000 years ago the predominant form of subsistence was based on hunting, foraging, and fishing. All of these were influenced by the seasons, so that human activity along the coast was intermittent and temporary.

In the Neolithic and Early Bronze Ages, a trend towards permanent settlement and the management of land for agriculture and animal husbandry began. Great Wigborough Henge, located in the field called Mount Shies at the northwestern end of the farm, is thought to date from Neolithic times and could have been a roundhouse.



Domestic sites were located near to the sea and could have been used seasonally for fishing and wildfowling. The course and location of the river would have been similar to the present, but the sea level up to 3m below its present levels.

By the late Iron Age and Roman period the sea level had risen to 1-2m below its present level. In Essex land around the high tide mark was used for salt production on sites now known



as red hills. There are more than 300 red hills around the estuaries of Essex, with concentrations around the north shore of the Blackwater suggesting that salt making was a significant industry. The sites show as low mounds or, when ploughed or eroded as deep red soil with a loamy texture, caused by exposure to fire and salt water.

Water levels continued to rise during the medieval period and use of the inter-tidal zone may have moved towards more water-based activities such as fishing and oyster farming. Under Barking Abbey the farm was run as a large sheep farm. By the 1700s the sea walls were gradually raised and the land drained to improve the quality of grazing, either initiated by various government commissions or paid for by the landowner. Salt marsh therefore became grazing marsh.



Essex County Council

All the land was still grassland until 1943 when it was ploughed for cereals under the direction of the War Commission. Norman Baldwin was the Farm Manager for Mr Mortimer at that time and from 1950 for the next owner Mr Horn. Norman remembers ploughing up the “lively grass” and levelling several of the Red Hills on the Big Marsh. The Essex Agricultural Committee administered coastal farms such as Abbots Hall from their headquarters at Writtle. Farm labourers included Prisoners of War from Hyland and High Garnet camps and Land Army girls from Romford. The main crops were wheat, sugar beet and flax, as well as some barley and potatoes.

Following the 1953 floods, which covered the low fields, the sea walls were again raised and concrete blocks were added. By 1970 the whole farm was transformed to arable. The main crops were winter wheat on about two thirds of the land and a mixture of barley, rape and marrowfat peas on the other third.

In 1993 the owner flooded 50 acres by piping seawater through the sea wall during each tide as a trial of habitat recreation under the Saltmarsh Habitat Scheme. The Essex Wildlife Trust aims to recreate 201 acres of marshland, of which 117 acres will gradually become saltmarsh and 84 acres have been sown with grass.

In 2003 there are again sheep grazing at Abbots Hall Farm.

