Discuss the significance of the ‘Hethel Thorn’ and its associated earthwork.

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List of Abbreviations.

NHER – Norfolk Historic Environment Record

NRO – Norfolk Record Office

OS – Ordnance Survey
**Introduction**

Attention was drawn to the ‘Hethel Thorn’ and its associated earthwork whilst conducting a fieldwork exercise in recording the landscape of Hethel in the summer of 2015. The ‘Hethel Thorn’ today is the smallest reserve belonging to the Norfolk Wildlife Trust who tell us that the ‘thorn itself is thought to be one of the most ancient in England, possibly dating from the thirteenth century’.¹ They explain the superstition ‘that the hawthorn grew from the staff of Joseph of Arimathea – a folk tale associated with other thorns around the country including at Glastonbury – as well as being a place where rebel peasants allegedly gathered in the time of King John’.² It is this folklore, which has promulgated for at least the past two centuries that presumably led to the preservation of the thorn and has allowed it to become a veteran tree. This project will explore the ‘Hethel Thorn’ and its associations with folklore, it will discuss other examples of trees and folklore, and it will also consider the practical uses of Hawthorn which may help to explain the origins of the ‘Hethel Thorn’. The ‘Hethel Thorn’ grows on an unexplained linear earthwork. This project will discuss the relationship between the earthwork and the ‘Hethel Thorn’, it will also analyse the landscape evidence to propose potential explanations for the earthwork, including its age, significance and survival.

¹ Norfolk Wildlife Trust, Available at: http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/blog/aspecialplaceeachweek/2014/12/19/hethel-old-thorn, Accessed on: 22/11/15
² Ibid
Hethel

Hethel is situated just south of central Norfolk and forms part of the parish of Bracon Ash. The landscape context of Hethel includes moated sites, scattered settlement, pockets of woodland and a medieval church, now virtually isolated. *Faden’s Map of Norfolk* shows Hethel to have also had common land and a country house estate in 1797.³ There are also earthworks in a field to the east of Hethel church which have been associated with a deserted medieval settlement.⁴ An earthwork plan of 2015 shows them to resemble remains of holloways and fields (see Appendix 1). Although the village of Hethel today is small and scattered, the NHER suggests that it was once much larger and wealthier, and that it was ‘the centre of a much larger estate before the creation of the manorial system in the Middle and Late Saxon period’.⁵

Blomefield tells us that ‘Hethill’ manor was one seventh of a larger manor that was divided up after the Conquest, the others being ‘Jerningham’s, Penne’s, Goldingham’s, Word’s, Twait’s and Nevile’s’.⁶ It is interesting that ‘Hethill’ is the only name to reference the environment, whereas the other manors bear personal names. According to The Institute of Name Studies, ‘Hethel’ is an Old English name meaning ‘Heather Hill’, which suggests that it was a heathland landscape at least in the Anglo-Saxon period.⁷ Dymond tells us that this is typical of infertile soils in South and Mid-Norfolk.⁸ The NHER highlights that ‘the parish is situated on the

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³ Baringer J.C., *Faden’s Map of Norfolk. First Published 1797* (Norfolk, 1989) Sheet 21
⁴ Norfolk Heritage Explorer (Norfolk County Council), Available at: [http://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/](http://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/), NHER 9497
⁵ Ibid., NHER 30071 ‘Parish Summary: Bracon Ash’
⁷ The Institute of Name Studies, *Key to English Place Names* (The University of Nottingham, 2015) Available at: [http://kepn.nottingham.ac.uk/map/place/Norfolk/Hethel](http://kepn.nottingham.ac.uk/map/place/Norfolk/Hethel) Accessed on: 11/10/15
⁸ Dymond D., *The Norfolk Landscape* (Suffolk, 1990) p34
boulder clay plateau’ which has poor draining heavy soils. Wade-Martins tells us that in ‘the heavy clays of mid- and southern Norfolk, areas of forest…survived, and cleared land was more suited to pasture than to arable farming.’ The entry for Hethel in the Little Domesday Book reflects this as it described as an area of meadow, woodland and pasture predominantly. This suggests that Hethel is located on marginal land which was used as common land from the Anglo-Saxon to the medieval period. Wade-Martins also suggests that the clay land areas of mid and southern Norfolk were ‘often enclosed at an early date and held by small independent farmers’. This can be seen on the 1882 OS which shows Hethel to be an area typical of ancient countryside, with dispersed settlement and irregular fields which suggest piecemeal enclosure (see Appendix 3).

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9 Norfolk Heritage Explorer (Norfolk County Council), Available at: http://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/, NHER ‘Parish Summary: Bracon Ash’
10 Wade-Martins S., A History of Norfolk (Sussex, 1984) p51
12 Wade-Martins S., A History of Norfolk (Sussex, 1984) p51
13 1882 Ordnance Survey 25 inch:1mile
The ‘Hethel Thorn’, Trees and Folklore

Fig. 1 The ‘Hethel Thorn’. Photographed by L. Houseago 2015

The ‘Hethel Thorn’ is first referenced on a published map in 1882 when the OS shows it to sit north-west of the church in a field, which shall be referred to as thorn field (see Appendix 2). This field is numbered 103 on the 1842 Tithe Award map and is recorded as ‘Church Meadow’, suggesting that it was the property of the church at the time (see Fig. 2). The field was also larger as it encompassed the adjoining land to the east of the church which contains the holloway and field earthworks thought to be associated with the medieval settlement of Hethel, and which is divided from thorn field at least by 1882. The Tithe Award Map shows the proximity of the church and the thorn field to the parish boundary which is visible to the east, and the buildings close to the north of the church which are recorded as school houses in the

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14 1842 Tithe Award Map and Apportionment by William Drane of Norwich, NRO, DN/TA 597
apportionment. It is worth noting that the map includes landmarks such as ponds and woodland trees, but omits the ‘Hethel Thorn’.

Fig.2 The 1842 Tithe Award Map and Apportionment by William Drane of Norwich, NRO, DN/TA 597. Sourced from the Norfolk Record Office.

Surviving written documentary evidence regarding the ‘Hethel Thorn’ is limited. Francis Blomefield does not mention either the thorn or the earthwork in An Essay Towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk: Volume 5, published in 1806. However, James Grigor has much to say about the tree in The Eastern Arboretum: Or, Register of Remarkable Trees, Seats, Gardens… In the County of Norfolk, published in 1841. Grigor sees the ‘Hethel thorn’ as the most interesting hawthorn in East Anglia and the most celebrated in the county, whilst suggesting that Norfolk was rich ‘beyond a parallel’ in hawthorn trees. He comments on its ‘extreme old age’ and suggests that ‘In looking upon it, one would suppose it

15 1842 Tithe Award Map and Apportionment by William Drane of Norwich, NRO, DN/TA 597
17 Grigor J., The Eastern Arboretum: Or, Register of Remarkable Trees, Seats, Gardens... In the County of Norfolk (London, 1841) p281
18 Ibid., p284
had been here for thousands of years’.\textsuperscript{19} He also comments on the remarkable size of the thorn and provides its dimensions from which he estimates the tree to be more than 500 years old in 1841.\textsuperscript{20}

Grigor provides what appears to be the first published account of the folklore associated with the ‘Hethel Thorn’. He quotes the proprietor at the time, Hudson Gurney Esq, who admits that the story of the thorn is unclear, and who claims to have heard Sir Thomas Beevor, a former proprietor, once say that he possessed ‘a deed bearing date early in the thirteenth century, in which, referring to it as a boundary tree, it is mentioned as the ‘old thorn’’.\textsuperscript{21} Hudson Gurney Esq acknowledges the lack of documentary evidence when he states

\begin{quote}
‘I have innumerable deeds from the court rolls of the manor of Hethel, but none of them earlier than the time of Edward III and amongst them I can find no such mention. If therefore, Sir Thomas had such deed, he must have taken it out and kept it as a curiosity. I have also heard that in one of the chronicles, the thorn was mentioned as the mark for meeting in an insurrection of the peasants in the reign of King John; but I have never been able to get a reference to what chronicle’.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

This information perhaps provides a clue to the propagator of the mythology connected to the thorn, and Hudson Gurney Esq further implicates ‘the first Sir Thomas Beevor’ when he comments that it was he who ‘put a rail around it and took great care if it’ in the late eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{19} Grigor J., \textit{The Eastern Arboretum: Or, Register of Remarkable Trees, Seats, Gardens... In the County of Norfolk} (London, 1841) p282
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.,p282
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.,p282
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p282
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p282
\end{flushleft}
In a collection of twentieth century documents at the Norfolk Record Office, an undated handwritten guided walk of the ‘Hethel Thorn’ tells another story of the tree. It claims that it is mentioned in a boundary deed of the fifteenth century, and that by the eighteenth century it is under the care of the Beevor family, followed by the Gurneys, and later the Myhills who presented the thorn to The Wildlife Trust in 1960. It also describes a custom of children dancing around the maypole on mayday and the racing to Hethel thorn to count the ‘props’. Grigor implies that the thorn may have ancient ritual associations when he tells us that ‘Druids, Saxons, Celts, Pagans and Christians, have all done observance to the may-morn, and the custom is looked upon to the present hour with a lingering affection’. Hageneder suggests that hawthorn has ‘always been seen as the herald of summer’ and that the white flowers have been linked with ‘spring celebrations, fertility rites and marriages for millenia’, which offers an explanation as to why the hawthorn may have held symbolic importance, especially to an agricultural society who depended on the harvest.

In 1841 Grigor states that the ‘Hethel Thorn’ was also referred to by the community as ‘the Witch of Hethel’. The term ‘witch’ does not always have sinister implications, however, in 1885 Rye published a history of Norfolk which contained a collection of local folk-lore, in which thorn is described as one of the ‘Omens of Death’, he says ‘if a branch of may, or whitethorn, is brought into the house, it brings with it misfortune and death’. Hageneder adds

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24 Hethel Old Thorn Guided Walk, NRO MC371/197 USF 3/10 (undated)
26 Hethel Old Thorn Guided Walk, NRO MC371/197 USF 3/10 (undated)
27 Grigor J., The Eastern Arboretum: Or, Register of Remarkable Trees, Seats, Gardens... In the County of Norfolk (London, 1841) p281
29 Grigor J., The Eastern Arboretum: Or, Register of Remarkable Trees, Seats, Gardens... In the County of Norfolk (London, 1841) p282
30 Rye W., A History of Norfolk (London, 1885) p291
that hawthorn has been linked with spells and superstitions which survive from at least the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{31}

Thomas argues that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century there was increasing sentimental attitude to old trees which led to publications about ‘handsome trees, famous trees, ancient trees and how to draw trees’, Grigors book is one.\textsuperscript{32} Thomas tells us that in eighteenth century England, trees became

‘increasingly cherished…because of what they symbolised to the community in terms of continuity and association. Part of this new feeling might almost be called religious. The English no longer worshipped sacred groves, for early Christian missionaries had always been hostile to so-called ‘Holy’ trees, and in the eleventh century the church had made it an offence to build a sanctuary around a tree. Yet green branches were carried in procession on May Day or at midsummer. Churchyards had a yew, and in popular folklore many trees had a protective significance which made it unlucky to cut them down’.\textsuperscript{33}

Thomas combines an association with May Day rituals and the church, which is interesting because the ‘Hethel Thorn’ appears to have been within the control of the church at least in the nineteenth century. It is possible that Hethel church propagated a connection between the thorn and the staff of Joseph of Arimathea, as at Glastonbury. There are other examples of churches in Norfolk which had thorns and imposed biblical connotations upon them, for example in 1885 Rye tells us about ‘St. Michael at Thorn [in Norwich], still with a thorn-tree in its churchyard’.\textsuperscript{34} Thomas also implies that ‘Hethel Thorn’ may have been preserved for good fortune, or

\begin{enumerate}
\item Hageneder F., \textit{The Living Wisdom of Trees} (London, 2005) p71
\item Ibid., p214
\item Rye W., \textit{A History of Norfolk} (London, 1885) p211
\end{enumerate}
cherished because its age symbolised longevity, which could perhaps also be applied to the earthwork.

The ‘Hethel Thorn’ folklore may have competitive origins with other folkloric trees. Thomas believes that, by the eighteenth century, ‘few parishes were without their famous trees’. Close to Hethel, in Hethersett is the ‘Kett’s Oak’, a veteran oak tree thought to be the site of a meeting or rebels in 1549. It is interesting that both the ‘Kett’s Oak’ and ‘Hethel Thorn’ folklore is associated with peasants revolt, which perhaps tells us more about the social nature of Medieval and Early Modern rural Norfolk than the thorn itself. As we have seen, another important example of a hawthorn with folkloric associations is the ‘Glastonbury Thorn’. Grigor tells us that it is ‘most famous of all’. He comments that it blossoms every December which

‘has given rise amongst ignorant people to many superstitious tales. According to the tradition of the Abbey of Glastonbury, it is said to have been originally the staff of Joseph of Arimathea, who… founded the first Christian church on Weary-all-Hill, the spot where Joseph and his company are said to have sat down all weary with their journey, and owes its origin, as the tale goes, to the staff which the former stuck in the ground, and which, as a proof of his mission, immediately shot forth branches’.

It is interesting that Grigor emphasises that the tradition came from Glastonbury Abbey, which would suggest a questionable agenda, perhaps for tourism in an age of pilgrimage and saints relics. Hageneder offers the rational explanation that ‘the ‘Glastonbury Thorn’ belongs to the

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36 Norfolk Heritage Explorer (Norfolk County Council), Available at: http://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/, NHER 9451
37 Grigor J., The Eastern Arboretum: Or, Register of Remarkable Trees, Seats, Gardens... In the County of Norfolk (London, 1841) p284
38 Ibid., p284
subspecies *biflora*, which produces leaves earlier than normal and occasionally on early but smaller crop of flowers in winter’. It is also worth noting that Grigor describes believers of the tale to be ‘ignorant’. Thomas tells us that such traditions came under threat in the late seventeenth century as ‘the scientific attitude towards popular errors had become aggressively rationalist’. So it appears that the ‘Hethel Thorn’ folklore either survived the rationalism of the seventeenth century, or perhaps postdates it.

The ‘Hethel Thorn’ Earthwork and Other Types of Linear Earthwork

Fig. 3 Earthwork plan of the ‘Hethel Thorn’ and its bank (a). Drawn by L.Houseago, 2015.

The earthwork on which the ‘Hethel Thorn’ grows is a linear, albeit slightly meandering, earthen bank (a) which is orientated roughly north-west to south-east, and reaches for at least 85-90m or 279-295ft, although it can be seen to reach further on an aerial photograph taken in the 1940s (see Fig. 4), and it is possible that it once extended further in both directions. The ‘Hethel Thorn’ sits on the northern end of the long axis of the bank, which is also the higher end. It is 18m or 59ft wide at its widest point, and 12m or 39ft wide at its narrowest, although it is worth considering that later activity truncates the ‘Hethel thorn’ earthwork (see Appendix 2). The gradient is steeper on the eastern side of the bank. At about 13m west, there is a slight ditch which has not been drawn but is visible on the ground, and also appeared as a cropmark in June (see Fig.6). This is likely to be a twentieth century field boundary which can be seen on a 1988 aerial photograph (see Fig.5).
Fig. 4 The 1946 black and white aerial survey of Norfolk photograph taken by the RAF, which shows the ‘Hethel Thorn’ and the earthwork which reaches from the western boundary of the church, and appears in the cropmarks of the field to the north. The earthworks of possible medieval holloways are also visible in the field to the east of the church. Sourced from Historic Map Explorer (Norfolk County Council) Available at: http://www.historic-maps.norfolk.gov.uk/mapexplorer/

Fig. 5 The 1988 colour aerial survey of Norfolk commissioned by Norfolk County Council which shows cultivation to the west of the ‘Hethel Thorn’. Sourced from Norfolk Heritage Explorer (Norfolk County Council), Available at: http://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/
Fig.6 Image showing the cropmarks of twentieth century field boundaries which can be seen in Fig. 5. Photographed by L.Houseago 2015.

Fig.7 The ‘Hethel Thorn’ earthwork indicated by a pathway on the 1977 OS (highlighted in red). Sourced from Edina Digimap (University of Edinburgh). Available at: http://digimap.edina.ac.uk/roam/historic
The earthwork is not indicated on the 1882 OS, only the ‘Hethel Thorn’ (See Appendix 2). The earliest published cartographic reference to the earthwork is on the 1977 OS where it is indicated by a path running from the church perimeter to the ‘Hethel Thorn’ (See Fig.7). We know that the ‘Hethel Thorn’ was acquired by The Wildlife Trust in 1960 so it seems likely that they were responsible for initiating the pathway which can still be seen on the 2014 OS.⁴¹ This pathway may have preserved, and even led to the reinforcement of the earthwork. Surviving written documentary evidence which refers specifically to the ‘Hethel Thorn’ earthwork is sparse, and Rackham argues that types of linear earthwork ‘can include practically anything…linear defensive ditches, barrows, trackways, Roman roads, deserted settlements, moats and hedge-banks’.⁴² However, it is possible through interpretation of the landscape evidence, to propose some potential explanations for the earthwork which shall be discussed here.

- **Hawthorn Hedgerows**

The ‘Hethel Thorn’ could be a relic tree from the hedgerow of an early field boundary. Barnes and Williamson provide a table which shows that hawthorn is present in more than 50 per cent of Norfolk hedges.⁴³ They suggest that it is in fact the most common hedging species in England.⁴⁴ Much of this is due to eighteenth and nineteenth century parliamentary enclosure when hawthorn was used because it was a quick setting tree, sometimes known as ‘quickset’.⁴⁵ However, Hoskins tells that hawthorn has been used as hedging since Saxon times, and ‘hawthorn is the oldest of hedgerow trees, for it gets its name from the Old English word *haga*, ‘a hedge’ or ‘an enclosure’, therefore hawthorn

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⁴¹ Hethel Old Thorn Guided Walk, NRO MC371/197 USF 3/10 (undated)
⁴⁴ Ibid., p66
⁴⁵ Ibid., p64
means ‘hedge-thorn’. Rackham agrees and says that the earliest evidence for thorn hedges appears in Anglo-Saxon charters.

In a study of north-east Norfolk, Barnes and Williamson observe that many hedges grow on substantial banks, a metre or more in height, and those that were enclosed through piecemeal enclosure, and therefore most likely to be older, sit on smaller, shallower banks. Martin and Satchell cite William Marshall and Nathaniel Kent with providing instructions of how to raise a ditch and bank for the enclosure of fields in the eighteenth century, the authors observe that ‘the size of ditches and banks varied with regard to the type of land they enclosed and to external features such as roads’. Martin and Satchell also quote William Marshall describing how the boundaries were constructed and hedges were raised; ‘The hedgling is defended on one side by a deep ditch, while the other side is sufficiently guarded by the excavated mould formed into a mound, and crested with a stout brush hedge’. We have already concluded that Hethel was enclosed by piecemeal enclosure from an early date, and that the ‘Hethel Thorn’ and its earthwork both predate the eighteenth century, however, similar processes may well have been employed in earlier enclosure as already inferred by Barnes and Williamson.

Hageneder argues that thorns are not only fast growing, but they are also ‘among the hardiest and most adaptable trees’, which may explain the survival of the ‘Hethel Thorn’. Barnes and Williamson believe that hawthorn grows on almost any soil, which means that it is capable of

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46 Hoskins W G., The making of the English Landscape (Dorset, 2013) p181
47 Rackham O., Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape (London, 1976) p54
49 Martin E. and Satchell M., Wheare most Inclosures be. East Anglian Fields: History, Morphology and Management East Anglian Archaeology 124 (Suffolk, 2008) p236
50 Ibid., p236
51 Hageneder F., The Living Wisdom of Trees (London, 2005) p68
flourishing on the heavy clay in Hethel. It is possible that a hawthorn hedge was original planted as a single species field boundary, which then colonised, and the other species have since perished or removed for wood, timber, or other uses.

- **Woodland and Wood Banks**

It is possible that the ‘Hethel Thorn’ is a relic of former woodland, and the bank formed a boundary of the wood, although if this was the case, it would mean that woodland came very close to the church which seems unlikely. However, we know from the Domesday Book that Hethel had a woodland landscape. There is also woodland close to the west of the thorn, which can be clearly seen on the 1882 OS marked as ‘Bush Close’ (see Appendix 2), and as ‘Dairy Wood’ in Bryant’s 1826 Map of Norfolk. Thomas argues that ‘between 1500 and 1700 the number of trees was substantially reduced’ due to ‘contraction of woodland for the sake of pasture or tillage in response to market forces’. The Tithe Award Apportionment tells us that in 1842 the thorn field was pasture.

Rackham explains that by 1270, wood boundaries were ‘carefully defined by a great bank and ditch, usually with a hedge or fence’. He highlights that ‘In lowland areas… nearly all woods more than 100 years old have some kind of earthwork round the edge’. He describes a wood bank as, on a wood edge, measuring 20-40ft in width, ‘the profile is usually rounded but may

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54 Barringer J.C., *Bryant’s Map of Norfolk in 1826* (Norfolk, 1998) Sheet
56 1842 *Tithe Award Map and Apportionment by William Drane of Norwich, NRO, DN/TA 597*
be steeper on the outer face’. This corresponds with the ‘Hethel Thorn’ earthwork which measures 18-39ft in width and is steeper on the outer face from the woodland (see a. on Fig.3).

Fig. 8 A photograph of a Medieval (or earlier) wood-bank in Felsham Hall Wood which resembles the ‘Hethel Thorn’ earthwork. Sourced from Rackham O., *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (London, 1976) Plate V, between pp80-81

- **Common-edge Settlement and Common Land Boundaries**

It is possible that the earthwork represents a boundary of common land. Dymond explains that commons are land on which common rights of grazing are executed, which can include greens, heaths, warrens, moors, or fens, and can form the focus of a settlement, or surround a settlement. He continues to say

‘In spite of their diversity of soils and siting, commons share certain characteristics, generally a clear boundary prevents animals from wandering off to adjoining fields.

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60 Dymond D., *The Norfolk Landscape* (Suffolk, 1990) p107
On the heavier land especially, commons are bounded by very large earthworks, particularly deep ditches and thick hedges containing many species of shrub”.\(^6^1\)

Dymond also suggest that ‘pits were regularly dug on common land’, which may also explain the pond in the thorn field (see Appendix 2).\(^6^2\) We know from the name that Hethel was heathland. Barringer explains common land was needed for ‘managing sheep flocks, especially on the heaths’.\(^6^3\) There is also evidence of greens. Deeds exist from the late sixteenth century which document the division of Hethel Green.\(^6^4\) *Faden’s Map of Norfolk 1797* also shows a green which runs along the eastern perimeter of Hethel Hall which curiously aligns with the site of the church (see Fig.9), although neither the area of the ‘Hethel Thorn’ field, or the field to the east of the church is marked as common land.\(^6^5\)

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\(^6^1\) Dymond D., *The Norfolk Landscape* (Suffolk, 1990) p109
\(^6^2\) Ibid., p109
\(^6^4\) *C.1580 Deeds relating to the division of Hethel Common*, NCR Case 25d/1322
\(^6^5\) Barringer J.C., *Faden’s Map of Norfolk. First Published 1797* (Norfolk, 1989) Sheet 21
Baringer tells us that ‘the mapping of commons, heaths, greens and warrens appears to have been accurately done’ for Faden’s map, although he also suggests that in Kimberley and Carlton Forehoe for example, which neighbour Hethel, ‘pre-enclosure surveys’ carried out in the mid eighteenth century may have been used by the surveyors. However, Faden’s map can be used to demonstrate that most of the common land in the vicinity of Hethel has a church either just within or just outside its borders, clearly to serve the settlement which also bordered the commons. An observation can also be made that churches tend to sit on topographical boundaries, except in the case of Hethel church. Dymond epitomises Hethel when he tells us that on the clay plateau of central Norfolk,

‘Villages are frequently loose knit and churches often lie isolated in the fields; hamlets abound, [which] originated around commons or greens; farmsteads are peppered all over the map, and many turn out to be…standing within water filled moats. The traditional farming landscape…contains frequent small patches of deciduous woodland, irregular fields bounded by mixed hedges and ancient pollards, deep man-made ditches and winding lanes’.

Dymond tells us that ‘moats are often found within villages or on their edges…Their distribution is particularly dense on the heavier lands of South and Mid-Norfolk.’ This is interesting because there is a medieval moat sited close to the north-east of the church (see Appendix 3). The evidence suggests that the church may once have bordered common land, along with the rest of the common-edge settlement which included the moated site and the Holloway and field earthworks in the field east of the church. However, a lack of archaeological finds in the surroundings of the church, thorn, and moated site may lead us to

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66 Baringer J.C., Faden’s Map of Norfolk. First Published 1797 (Norfolk, 1989) pp9-10
67 Ibid., Sheet 21
68 Ibid., Sheet 21
69 Dymond D., The Norfolk Landscape (Suffolk, 1990) p33
70 Ibid., p102
question the presence of a settlement, although it could represent a recording issue rather than absence of artefacts.\footnote{71}

- **Ridge and Furrow and Headland Banks**

The earthwork could be a headland bank formed by ridge and furrow ploughing. We know that Hethel is marginal land which suggests little arable agricultural activity, however, there is evidence of ridge and furrow in the form of reverse ‘S’ field shapes caused by the turn of the medieval plough in the open fields, this can be seen to the west of the ‘Hethel Thorn’ field (See Appendix 3). Taylor explains that headlands are the ridges ‘between the furlongs of the open fields, where the strips terminated and the ridge and furrow ran out’.\footnote{72} He notes the existence of headlands in East Anglia, and continues to suggest that they were used as access as well as a turning point for the plough team.\footnote{73} Apart from the length, which is essentially unknown, the ‘Hethel Thorn’ earthwork roughly meets the criteria specified by of a headland, which are ‘long, slightly sinuous ridges. They can be of almost any length, up to around 700 metres and they range from 10 to 20 metres wide. As they are now usually ploughed over they are rarely more than 0.5 metre high and usually considerably less’\footnote{74} However, he adds that even a modern farmer has difficulty removing them.\footnote{75} Taylor suggests that where headlands do survive, the earth around may have been lowered by modern plough and possibly deposited on the headland.\footnote{76} We know that part of the thorn field was under cultivation at least in the twentieth century as plough marks can be seen on a 1988 aerial photograph (see Figures.5 and 6), the perimeter of which also follows the alignment of the

\footnote{71}{Norfolk Heritage Explorer (Norfolk County Council), Available at: \url{http://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/}}
\footnote{72}{Taylor C., *Fields in the English Landscape* (Gloucester, 1987) p85}
\footnote{73}{Ibid., p85}
\footnote{74}{Ibid., p85}
\footnote{75}{Ibid., p85}
\footnote{76}{Ibid., p86}
earthwork. This may have exaggerated the difference between the level of the fields and the earthwork.

If we compare the earthwork plan of the ‘Hethel Thorn’ earthwork with other plans of ridge and furrow and headland such as the plans of Ryston and Stradsett in *Earthworks of Norfolk* by Cushion and Davison, it is hard to find any distinctive resemblance, other than it being a linear earthwork (see Appendix 6).77 There appears to be no other earthwork evidence for ridge and furrow in the field. Perhaps, as Wade-Martins suggests, ‘sixteenth century map evidence shows that [much of Norfolk] was farmed in strips, and where much of the heavy clay land was put to pasture at the end of the Middle Ages, little evidence for ridge and furrow remains’.78 However, on the plan of Panworth, there is an earthwork which is thought to be a headland shares some similarities, except that it has a ditch along its crest (see Appendix 5).79

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77 Cushion B. and Davison A., *Earthworks of Norfolk* East Anglian Archaeology 104 (Dereham, 2003) pp204-207
79 Cushion B. and Davison A., *Earthworks of Norfolk* East Anglian Archaeology 104 (Dereham, 2003) pp120-121 (9)
Anglo-Saxon Charters and Estate Boundaries

Fig. 10 Earthwork plan of the ‘Hethel thorn’ and its associated earthwork (a) showing its alignment with the churchyard boundary ditch (b). Drawn by L. Houseago 2015.

The ‘Hethel Thorn’ earthwork (a) is situated north-west of Hethel church. Analysis of the earthwork plan shows the earthwork (a) to share the alignment of the churchyard boundary (b) (See Fig. 10). This suggests that the churchyard was abutted against the linear earthwork, meaning that the earthwork may predate the church site. Hoskins refers to ‘boundary banks of large Anglo-Saxon estates’ which he suggests can be traced with the aid of surviving Anglo-Saxon charters which are unfortunately unavailable for Hethel. He provides an example of an estate in east Devon which has a ‘high earthen bank’ forming part of its northern boundary which is named as ‘dic’ in a charter of 670. Although it appears to be more likely that it was the ditch that was intended as the landmark, and the raised bank resulted from the spoil from the ditch. The ditch has survived as a sunken road, but it is worth considering that without the sunken road to preserve the feature, it may have silted up and ended up resembling an earthwork like the ‘Hethel Thorn’ bank. Rackham emphasizes that banks change over time.

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80 Hoskins W G., *The making of the English Landscape* (Dorset, 2013) p68
81 Ibid., pp69-72
There are other linear earthworks in Norfolk which are thought to be Anglo-Saxon boundaries, which include the Launditch in west Norfolk, Panworth ditch or Devils Dyke, Devils ditch in Breckland, and Fossditch in Feltwell.\(^{83}\) Interestingly, they all survive on poor soils, and all are aligned roughly north to south. In addition to the earthwork evidence, the NHER records Anglo-Saxon artefacts which suggest ‘the presence of a Saxon cemetery in the parish’.\(^{84}\) The church tower is also reported to have elements of Saxon construction, which might lead us to conclude that it was part of an Anglo-Saxon settlement in Hethel, and that the church was inside the estate for which the earthwork formed the perimeter boundary.\(^{85}\) If however, the church dates to the eleventh century as has also been proposed, then it is possible that it sits outside the Anglo-Saxon estate, which could indicate continuity of settlement.\(^{86}\) Dymond suggests that ‘fieldwork [by Wade-Martins] emphasises that churches mark the sites of Anglo-Saxon villages (whether or not they were subsequently deserted), and that early settlement was often very fluid’.\(^{87}\) Taylor gives an example of Rivenhall in Essex, where ‘excavation has shown that the area round the church has had a long history of almost continuous occupation from an Iron Age farmstead, through a Roman villa, to a succession of saxon and medieval halls or manor houses, all of which seem to have lain in slightly different positions. These occupation sites all seem to have been the centre of a large estate, probably the present parish’.\(^{88}\) So archaeological excavation may provide the answers.

The presence of the ‘Hethel Thorn’ on the bank may reinforce the theory that it is an Anglo-Saxon boundary. Rackham explains that charters were used before maps, they were ‘a deed of

\(^{83}\) Norfolk Heritage Explorer (Norfolk County Council), Available at: [http://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/](http://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/), NHER7235 ‘Launditch’, NHER1082 ‘Panworth Ditch or Devils Dyke’, NHER 6115 ‘Devils Ditch’

\(^{84}\) Ibid., NHER 30071 ‘Parish Summary: Bracon Ash’

\(^{85}\) Ibid., NHER 9523, and ‘Parish Summary: Bracon Ash’

\(^{86}\) Ibid., NHER 9523, and ‘Parish Summary: Bracon Ash’

\(^{87}\) Dymond D., *The Norfolk Landscape* (Suffolk, 1990) p72

\(^{88}\) Taylor C., *Village and Farmstead* (Worthing, 1983) p181
gift or sale of a piece of land to contain a perambulation, or description of the boundaries’. Rackham highlights that ‘In Anglo Saxon charters about one feature in fourteen is a tree, usually in a hedge or free-standing’, the thorn is predominant in charters as a landmark. He provides a table showing that thorn is mentioned in 23 out of 50 charters mainly in south-east England, the second most often mentioned tree was oak which was mentioned in 3 charters out of 50 in south-east England. Thomas agrees that ‘from Anglo Saxon times [trees] had been essential landmarks, demarcating local boundaries or indicating the meeting place for assemblies. The annual parish perambulation picked its way from one tree to another, pausing to read the scriptures at some ‘gospel oak’ or ‘holy oak’’. Perhaps this was why the rebels of King John decided to meet at the ‘Hethel Thorn’ if the folklore is to be believed.

- **Long Barrows**

It is possible that the ‘Hethel Thorn’ earthwork predates the Anglo-Saxon period. There is little Roman evidence in the parish, but there is evidence of prehistoric occupation. A Neolithic scraper was found to the east of the thorn field adjacent to the B1113. There are also Bronze Age round barrows in the area, including one in neighbouring Ketteringham. As well as four Bronze Age bowl barrows in Kimberley which acted as the meeting place for the court of the Forehoe hundred. Cummings tells us that it is the Neolithic period in Britain that ‘is marked by…the beginning of the construction of monuments’ and offers a simple classification of the diverse range of them, which include cursus monuments, causewayed enclosures, long barrows

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91 Rackham O., *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (London, 1976) Table 2, p54
93 Norfolk Heritage Explorer (Norfolk County Council), Available at: [http://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/](http://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/), NHER 30071 ‘Parish Summary: Bracon Ash’
94 Ibid., NHER 9842
95 Ibid., NHER 8873
and chambered tombs. Cummings tells us about linear monuments, such as a cursus, which vary in size but typically from 200m to 4km, and even 10km like the Dorset cursus. The vastness of a cursus suggests that the ‘Hethel Thorn’ bank is more likely to be a more modest type of prehistoric earthwork such as a long barrow.

Pryor clarifies the difference between barrows which are mounds, and cairns which are ‘more specifically mounds made of stone’. He suggests that most long barrows are ‘trapeze – or wedge- shaped’. He goes on to say that ‘Viewed from outside, the mounds of long barrows...look remarkably smooth. They are higher at the wider end...and slope gradually down towards the narrower ‘tail’. Both of these features could be applied to the ‘Hethel Thorn earthwork (see (a) on Fig.3). Ashbee highlights that they are usually flanked by ditches, which is not evident on the ‘Hethel Thorn’ earthwork. However, Ashbee emphasizes the effects of ‘weathering and deruidation, change and decay. The mounds as we see them today are the end product of these factors’, suggesting that the ditches may have been infilled, ‘by man or nature, through ‘silting’ for example.

Ashbee explains that most long barrows are between 100ft and 200ft (115 out of 203) and only 7 lie between 250ft and 300ft where the Hethel Thorn earthwork would be categorised, he adds that there are only four recorded as over 500ft. Ashbee suggests that there are local groupings...
of long barrows, each one with one large barrow, which would be the ‘Hethel Thorn’ earthwork
if we took Norfolk as the group. Castleden tells us about the other long barrows in Norfolk.
There is Broome Heath long barrow in Ditchingham, ‘one of only three long barrows known
in East Anglia in 1960’, which is ‘35m long and 2m high, its long axis lying roughly NE-
SW’. He also describes Harpley Long Barrow, ‘a grass-covered long barrow 45m long,
which was until recently under the plough which is, as a result, now very low. The quarry
ditches are not visible’, and West Rudham long barrow which is 66m long, 18m wide and 2m
high, and aligned north to south, however it is surrounded by a ditch ‘which proved on
excavation to be 3.7m wide and 1.2m deep’. The NHER records another earthwork which is
now considered to be a possible long barrow in Felthorpe which is 11.8m long, 4.2m wide and
up to 1m high, it is aligned east to west. The ‘Hethel Thorn’ earthwork is orientated roughly
north-west to south-east (see Fig. 3). Ashbee says that ‘The more-or-less east-west orientation
of earthen long barrows has received comment from the first…More than four-fifths are
orientated east-west or within 45 degrees of this direction…This pattern is followed with minor
variations in each region, although everywhere there are a few mounds with north-south
orientations’. Wymer states that ‘The characteristic monumental earthworks that arose in response to the
larger, more socially-organised population, so dramatically represented in Wessex and other
parts of Britain, exist rather sparsely in Norfolk. To some extent this may reflect destruction of
them through the intensive agriculture of later periods’, which suggests that more could exist.

106 Ibid., p144
107 Norfolk Heritage Explorer (Norfolk County Council), Available at: http://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/
NHER MNF7763
Dymond suggests that of the 228 prehistoric burial mounds, not specifically long barrows, which survive as visible mounds, the majority lie on ‘where large areas of heathland ensured that many barrows were not attacked by the plough until modern times’. Ashbee acknowledges the East Anglian examples which survive on acid heathland, and adds that ‘earthen long barrows might be considered a lowland zone phenomenon’ but usually on the chalk land, it is ‘long cairns that are mostly on acid moors and boulder clays’. The ‘Hethel Thorn’ earthwork meets his criteria, except that we cannot tell if it is completely earthen or in fact contains stone chambers.

Long barrows have also been associated with folklore. Ashbee also tells the tale of St Patrick and the Dichuill long barrow, when St Patrick supposedly awoke the pagan giant at rest in the barrow, and told him that if he accepted god he would no longer suffer in death. This is interesting because it is a story which appears to have been used to reinforce Christianity, implying religious associations with long barrows as well as folkloric. Cummings suggests that prehistoric ‘monuments…are not exclusively ‘connected with the burial of the dead’, they were intended as permanent places for memorial, ritual and ceremony. Cummings argues that they were erected ‘in locales that were already known and used and that were significant in the landscape’ and were not isolated points in the landscape but were intimately connected with their wider settings and environments’. Ashbee provides an interesting connection which reflects this ambition of longevity when he suggests that ‘long barrows were of significance to the Saxons for they noted the more prominent long mounds in their charters’ like the ‘langan

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110 Dymond D., The Norfolk Landscape (Suffolk, 1990) p43
112 Ibid., p4
114 Ibid., pp148-149
hlaew’ term used in the ‘bounds of the parish of Taddey, in Oxfordshire’.\textsuperscript{115} This information may suggest continuity of use for the ‘Hethel Thorn’ too.

Ashbee exemplifies the varied nature of long barrows and warns that regarding monuments, creating a typology is often virtually impossible, and that ‘except in the most favourable circumstances, to impute more than general relationships’ is too.\textsuperscript{116} The evidence neither confirms, nor excludes the ‘Hethel Thorn’ earthwork to be a long barrow. Archaeological excavation may provide more conclusive findings.

\textbf{Other}

An exercise in map regression shows the evolution of Hethel. It also revealed an interesting feature on Bryant’s map of 1826 in the form of a road leading from Hethel Hall to the church and onto the Dairy farm which may align with the ‘Hethel Thorn’ bank. A faint trace of it can be seen in the Hall grounds on Faden’ Map, but on the 1882 OS, it is not recorded (see Fig.11).

\textsuperscript{115} Ashbee P., \textit{The Earthen Long Barrow in Britain} (London, 1970) pp4-5
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., p4
Fig. 11 Three maps which show the evolution of Hethel, and of particular interest, the road from Hethel Hall which can be seen on Bryant’s map of 1826.
Conclusions
So we can see that there is a vast array of possible explanations for the origins of the ‘Hethel Thorn’, its folklore, and its earthwork. If we consider the landscape context, it seems most likely to be a feature of medieval Hethel, assuming the role of a field boundary, be it common land or arable. The folklore was potentially propagated by the church, or perhaps by Thomas Beevor in an attempt to gain notoriety for his estate. However, there is the possibility that it is a product of a complex combination of many different aspects, perhaps dating back as far as the Neolithic period. In the absence of written documentation, perhaps archaeological excavation, or non-penetrative investigation such as a Lidar survey, may shed more light on the subject. Until then, it remains an enigma.
Appendix 1

Earthwork plan of possible medieval holloways and fields situated to the east of the church in Hethel. Drawn by L. Houseago 2015
Earthwork plan of the ‘Hethel Thorn’ and its associated earthwork (a) showing its proximity to the earthworks of the churchyard boundary (b), and the surrounding field boundaries and pond (c). Drawn by L. Houseago 2015.
The 1882 OS showing the reverse ‘S’ ghosts of ridge and furrow (highlighted in red) to the west of ‘Hethel Wood’, and possibly on the western border of the ‘Hethel Thorn’ field (which is highlighted in green). Sourced from National Library of Scotland, Ordnance Survey Maps, Available at: http://maps.nls.uk/os/index.html
Appendix 4

_Faden’s Map of Norfolk 1797_ showing common land (outlined in green) and churches (highlighted in red) to explore their interrelationship. Note the churches on the edges of Caston and Deepham Common in particular. Sourced from Barringer J.C., _Faden’s Map of Norfolk. First Published 1797_ (Norfolk, 1989), Sheet 21.
Appendix 5

Earthwork plan of the ‘Hethel Thorn’ earthwork and a possible headland bank at Panworth common-edge settlement. The plan of Panworth is sourced from Cushion B. and Davison A., *Earthworks of Norfolk* East Anglian Archaeology 104 (Dereham, 2003) pp120-121.
Appendix 6

Earthwork plan of Ryston showing the remnants of ridge and furrow. Sourced from Cushion B. and Davison A., *Earthworks of Norfolk* East Anglian Archaeology 104 (Dereham, 2003) p205.
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**Maps**

1797 *Faden’s Map of Norfolk*

1805 *Ordnance Survey of Great Britain, Sheet 661 Inch: 1 Mile*

1826 *Bryant’s Map of Norfolk*

1838 *Ordnance Survey of Great Britain*

1824-1838 *Ordnance Survey Landranger, Sheet 144, Old Series Cassini Historical maps 1:50,000*

1842 *Tithe Award Map and Apportionment by William Drane of Norwich, NRO, DN/TA 597*

1882 *Ordnance Survey of Great Britain, 25 inch: 1 mile*

1971 *National Grid Tile TG1700 1:2500*

2014 *Ordnance Survey Vector Map Local*

**Documents (Available at Norfolk Record Office)**

Undated *Hethel Old Thorn Guided Walk NRO MC371/197 USF 3/10*

1842 *Tithe Award Map and Apportionment by William Drane of Norwich, NRO, DN/TA 597*

1614-1908 *Glebe Terriers DN/TER 82/4/1-34*

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