

Sample

Wingfield

Suffolk's Forgotten Castle

Elaine Murphy

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Above: Watercoloured print of Wingfield Castle c1820, with lake and mountains added for artistic effect. Below: Two of the 2nd Battalion Gordon Highlanders Regiment billeted at Wingfield Castle, c1940, with companions.



Poppyland Publishing is pleased to announce *Wingfield: Suffolk's Forgotten Castle* by Elaine Murphy.

Wingfield Castle in Suffolk was home to powerful families who played nationally important roles in the story of England. The Wingfields, de la Poles, Brandons and Jerninghams made history and their stories shaped the nation, but later the castle declined to become a residence at the heart of a farming estate.

This book is as much about the story of Suffolk and its changing society as it is about the castle itself. The author's meticulous research gives equal weight to these later centuries, creating for the first time a comprehensive history to shed light on this forgotten Suffolk castle.

About the author

Elaine Murphy is an independent life peer, Baroness Murphy of Aldgate, a well known academic psychiatrist and dementia specialist. She worked in the NHS for 25 years becoming Foundation Professor of Psychiatry of Old Age at the medical schools of Guy's and St Thomas' Hospitals from 1983 to 1996. In her retirement she undertook a Ph.D in Social History, and, as well as being the author of many academic books, she now writes on the history of her beloved



Waveney Valley and counties of Norfolk and Suffolk. her other Poppyland books include, *Monks Hall: The History of a Waveney Valley Manor* and the 21st century commentary in *Suffolk Scene: A Book of Description and Adventure*.

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A Castle Takes Shape, 1385



5. Wingfield Castle gatehouse, 2019.

A Licence to Crenellate. Michael de la Pole was riding high in 1385. He was about fifty-four years old, at the height of his political influence and in favour with the eighteen year old king, Richard II. He had been appointed Chancellor only two years earlier and was also the king's chief advisor, one of a handful of royal confidants. Michael had risen further and faster than any man in England. For this moment at least, he was one of the most powerful men in the land.

Yet, if Michael was sensitive to the nuances of other men's attitude towards him, he would have realised he was not the most popular of men with many of the nobility or with parliament. Resentments deepened when in September 1385 he was created earl of Suffolk and acquired a grant of most of the East

Anglian lands that went with the old lapsed Ufford family title of Suffolk. Michael de la Pole had achieved nobility, which his wealthy father had failed to do and while Michael was by no means as rich as some of the more ancient titled families with whom he mixed, he had just about enough to sustain a household and entourage fit for an earldom. The new additional grants to his already substantial estates finally gave him enough money to build outward symbols of his success.¹

On 27 April that year Michael was granted by the king a licence to crenellate his mansion house in Wingfield and two other properties on manors he owned nearby in Suffolk.² Within two years, the simmering resentments of more established courtiers about Michael's effective control of the king would lead to his spectacular fall. But for the moment let us share in Michael's pleasure at his sensational success as he and his wife Katherine plan their new fortified manor house.

The Choice of Wingfield. Michael chose Wingfield for obvious reasons. He, Katherine and their children already had a home there, Katherine having inherited property from her father Sir John Wingfield. The sixty-nine acres of land, next to an extensive green, was ideal for creating a hunting deer park. More importantly, twenty years earlier, her father had established a chantry college of secular priests, Wingfield College, which provided an opportunity to display status and power through patronage. Chantry colleges were popular means by which wealthy patrons provided an insurance policy of prayers and masses to shorten time spent in purgatory for relatives, patrons and of course themselves.

The wording of the licence acknowledged Michael's plan to enclose the land that went with the three mansions to create deer parks:-

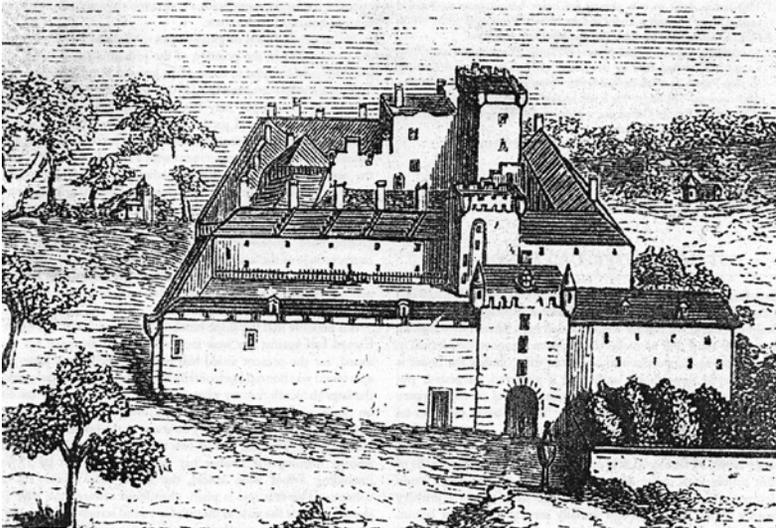
Michael de la Pole the elder, that he and his heirs may at pleasure crenellate a place or places in the mansion-houses of their manors of Wyngefeld, Sternefeld and Huntyngfeld, co. Suffolk, with stone and lime or paling of timber, and also enclose all their woods, lands, meadows and pastures several in Wyngefeld, Stradebrook and Sternefeld, co. Suffolk which are without the metes of the forest, and imparck the same.³

The manors of Sternfield and Huntingfield had been part of the extensive property portfolio brought to the de la Poles' marriage from Katherine's inheritance from her father. But neither estate had the *caché* of Wingfield. In Sternfield there were two medieval manors in the parish, Mandeville's Manor and Virlies or Glanville's manor. Copinger suggested in the nineteenth century

that the licence to crenellate was applied to Virlies manor, which seems to be the smaller manor with a trapezoidal moated site detectable by crop marks and the eye of faith.⁴ Sternfield Hall has a wing of late sixteenth century date and could be the site of a medieval manor house. This may well be the Virlies Manor House site. Is it possible the trapezoidal moat was laid out by the de la Poles, started but not finished?

In Huntingfield however there is good evidence that the old hall manor house dated from before the date of the licence and was a fortified house. There is an early eighteenth century print that shows the old hall, given by the owners of Huntingfield Old Rectory to Eric Sandon, the architectural historian, in the late 1970s.⁵ It was published by Sandon and copied by Emery for his magisterial work on Medieval English Houses but the print is now apparently lost.⁶ It shows clearly a house with towers and battlements, so it seems that Michael may have activated his plans for Huntingfield. The medieval house was destroyed in the eighteenth century.

Michael had then several houses in close proximity, common among wealthy medieval families. A large family of sons and daughters required a good legacy of property for the next generation but these houses also provided a lodging



6. Early eighteenth century print of Huntingfield Old Hall.

place to stay while supervising the estate bailiffs managing the manorial demesne and tenanted land. Families moved from property to property in a kind of rotation although they of course had their favourite homes where they spent more time.

Michael and Katherine had four sons and two daughters who survived infancy; the eldest, also Michael, born about 1361, was already 24 years old when his father decided to fortify his manor houses. A second son Thomas was born about 1363, a third named Richard we know of from his burial in Wingfield in 1403 and a fourth, John, was also buried in Wingfield in 1415.⁷ Their daughters Anne and Margaret completed the family. A modern fortified manor house would be a fine family base for any of them. But it seems possible that events moved too fast for plans for Sternfield and Huntingfield to be implemented in full.

The meaning of a licence to crenellate. A licence to crenellate is not a straightforward permit for a building to be fortified. In medieval feudal society, the licence was used both by king and recipient as a mutual recognition of someone having acquired lordly stature in the fluid hierarchy below the king. It carried the extra cachet of royal recognition, acknowledgement and commendation. The king's right as overlord to license was a right to grant, not to refuse, permission to crenellate. It was not in reality necessary to obtain a licence to crenellate to erect a fortified building. There was little chance of interference by royal officials. A licence was however prestigious and could be had for the asking only if the petitioner had achieved a certain status.

Fortifications were not restricted by law but the cost of building an apparently impregnable solid stone, brick or flint mansion was high. A fortified building exuded a show of strength and impregnability to the local populace, rather like the gated communities of middle class enclaves do today. Unlike other royal patronage, licences to crenellate conferred no fiscal or other financial advantage but they were as eagerly sought by the socially ambitious as any lucrative privilege. We should though beware giving modern meaning to the medieval use of the term 'licence'. Transcription and translations of the original documents often date to the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Licentia is best translated as 'freedom to', rather than 'permission to'.⁸

The building that often, but not always, resulted from these licences had some show of fortification, like battlements, moats and gatehouses. Wingfield Castle, built on a flat plain with no significant geographical advantage against a serious invasion, nevertheless had some serious secure construction. The

building could be used defensively if necessary, if not against an army then at least against thieving insurgents, a defence against casual burglary and thuggery.⁹ The lower social orders organised themselves remarkably effectively in the Great Rebellion, or 'Peasants Revolt' of 1381; they had no trouble in ransacking castles and palaces. Well-organised, belligerent locals seem unlikely to have been put off by the odd tower or two if in an invasive, destructive mood but most thieves and bandits would be deterred.¹⁰ The castle was and is, the most imposing structure in the vicinity. The deer park, gardens and cultivated fields provided some social distance from the villages nearby that set the occupants and their retainers apart from ordinary folk. It was after all a family home where women and children lived and needed to feel secure.

The historian Charles Coulson pointed out that many later fourteenth century grants were to relatively minor knights for quite small manor houses, many of which could only have had token fortification.¹¹ Applications to crenellate soared in perilous times, when wealthy men had good reason to want to protect themselves. Marauding bands in the early years of the fourteenth century were followed by deterioration of public order under extreme population pressure in the 1330s and 1340s and in 1381 civil order broke down spectacularly during the terrifying Great Rebellion.¹²

The events of 1381 may well have been significant for Michael de la Pole's decision to make more secure his main family home. Tellingly, Michael's opening speech as the new Chancellor of England in the parliament called to Westminster in October 1383 was about the causes of the insurrection.¹³ It was a speech designed to warn the assembled 'gentils' that disobedience to the king's local agents could lead to rebellion against the king himself if the causes of the disobedience were not addressed. There is no evidence that Michael's own manor house was attacked during the week's bloody rising in the summer of 1381 but Mettingham Castle fourteen miles away up the Waveney Valley had been ransacked and looted.

Built and owned by the Norwich family, in 1381 Mettingham Castle was under the trusteeship of Catherine de Brewse, who had left the castle in the custody of agents while settling into a nunnery. A rebel army, five hundred strong, local men from Waveney Valley villages, attacked and ransacked the castle on Tuesday 18 June, stealing £1,100 worth of gold, silver and other valuables but also charters, contracts, official title documents and court rolls, the symbols both of ownership and servitude that the rebels targeted with especial fury.¹⁴



7. Mettingham Castle, from an 18th century print, c1735.

Mettingham Castle may have been built by a close relative of Michael. His mother, Katherine 'of Norwich', was possibly the daughter of Walter of Norwich, whose son Sir John of Norwich founded Mettingham Castle in 1342. There are significant similarities between the construction of Mettingham and Wingfield that hint that Michael de la Pole's new building at Wingfield was an attempt to improve on what his uncle had built up the road. Katherine Norwich's connections with East Anglia may also have added weight to her son's marriage into the Wingfield family, although his direct connections to Sir John Wingfield were probably more important.

Well, this all sounds plausible but there is in fact no documentary evidence that Katherine of Norwich was the daughter of Walter of Norwich. She could have been from a different Norwich family entirely. Katherine of Norwich appears not to have been an heiress and if she had been Walter's daughter she would surely have brought substantial land to the marriage, of which there is no record. We do not know for sure where she came from. Nevertheless, events of 1381, including the murder of the locally born Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury, the slaughter nearby of Sir John Cavendish, Chief Justice of the Kings Bench, the murder of the Prior of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds and the hacking to death of popular Sir Robert Salle in Norwich must have been a factor in Michael's desire for a secure base for his family. The final structure though may not have provided the defensive certainty that Michael had originally planned.

Castle or Fortified Manor House? From Norman times, castles were always more than defensive structures. They were centres of administration and justice, of land and property. They were expressions of social status where the latest fashions in architecture and the arts reflected the medieval preoccupation with honour, chivalry and courtly romance. They were also family homes, a place where the retinue of servants and administrators worked and often lived, where prestigious visitors could be accommodated and social gatherings held. They were an imposing local symbol of prestige and power at a time when public display and family lineage was important.¹⁵

As the desire for massive defensive structures waned, new castles emerged that were in truth large manor houses but the old forms, battlements, towers, drawbridges and moats retained meaning and were not to be lightly given up even when their usefulness had declined.¹⁶ Military might was the guiding aspiration of early medieval society and symbols of military prowess had meaning far beyond the obvious, symbolizing status, honour, a continuity with a glorious legendary past. These new castles no longer hosted a military base, indeed earlier residential castles rarely had standing troops, but nevertheless were a potent demonstration of where power lay in the local economy. And as we have seen, rebellious outbursts from the local population were not uncommon in the late fourteenth century. I will return to this theme of when is a castle a 'real castle' in the last chapter. For now I am going to take John Goodall's excellent definition. 'A castle is the residence of a lord made imposing through the architectural trappings of fortification, be they functional or decorative.'¹⁷ If it looks like a castle, well it is a castle! And if this is reminiscent of Humpty Dumpty's scornful remark to Lewis Carroll's Alice 'When I use a word,' 'it means just what I choose it to mean', then so be it.¹⁸

Why did de la Pole choose this particular site for his castle in Wingfield?

The precise location of a castle tells us a good deal about the function of the community of the castle and its park. Wingfield lies towards the northern edge of the clay till plateau in north Suffolk, a flat landscape with little natural drainage. The land is still waterlogged in a wet winter if not artificially drained, unsuitable in the middle ages for arable cultivation. There were small areas with better drainage locally, where the land slopes down to the River Waveney and to streams such as the Dove. There is evidence that these slopes provided some shared common fields in late medieval days. Oddly though, Wingfield Castle is not on one of these good growing areas, it is sited on less good soil.

Like other castles in north Suffolk, such as Bungay, Mettingham, Haughley and Framlingham, Wingfield was sited right next to a large green. Forty acre

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