

SOUNDS FAMILIAR (Part II) THE FIRST NEW CUT ?

By John Wright

This article was completely unexpected. The previous issue of this Journal contained a transcription of two 16th century documents referring to a request to make a cut in Morston marshes that would be to the benefit of the ports of Cley and Blakeney.¹ After this length of time, some 450 years, there appeared to be little prospect of finding the exact location of the cut – assuming that the work was carried out as intended. Yet, surprising as it may seem, it looks as if this very cut is still visible today.

Introduction

The Glaven Historian No. 1 contains a transcription of a request to the Court of Augmentations² from the *poore Inhabitantes* of Cley and Blakeney asking for permission to cut a channel in Morston marshes that would improve the fortunes of the two ports. This would be achieved by removing some of the *importunate sandes gathered and heped in the same haven by the vyolence of the sees*. The petition claims that cutting a gote or channel would reduce silting in the harbour. In the words of the original: *by the making of the said Gote the course of the sees runnyng into the same got shulde entre into suche parte of the haven as by the vyolence thereof the sands in the said haven shulde be repeled [di]minyshed and wasshed into the sees agayne*. The document also claims that *the lady Richmond* had given her assent to the project. A second document, dated 1547, recorded that permission to make the cut had indeed been given by Mary, Duchess of Richmond.

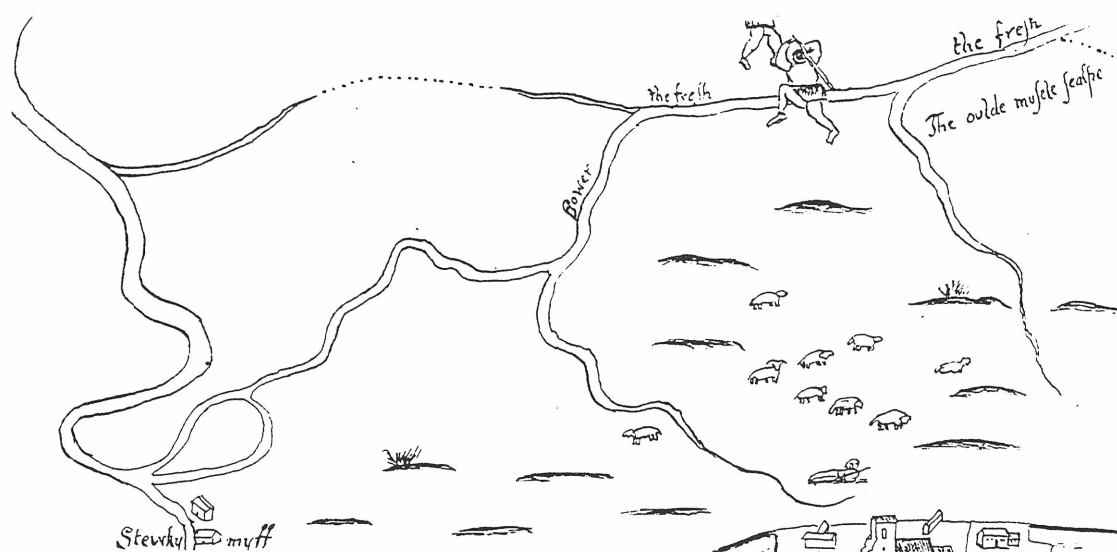
If the new channel were made, where could it have been? The only two points of guidance seemed to be that it was somewhere in Morston marshes and that it would have been to the benefit of Cley and Blakeney.

The '1586' Court Case

A separate article in the current issue of this Journal³ outlines a case heard in the Court of the Duchy of Lancaster over the period 1586-1589 to determine whether it was the Duchy's Manor of Wighton or the Manor of Cley which had the right of wreck on Stiffkey sands. It was this case which led to the preparation of the well-known map of Blakeney Haven in 1586. Much evidence was produced by the two parties and some of it related to the topography of the harbour at that time. In particular, five of the 18 witnesses made reference to the Stiffkey river running into Blakeney Haven. Three of them, Roger Miles, Thomas White and James Damme, all sailors from Blakeney, specifically said that some time ago the river was *forced* into Bower Creek and from there it flowed into the Haven. This would mean that it no longer flowed more or less due north towards a separate exit to the sea at Stiffkey Goat.

The 1586 map, however, shows that both channels were available to take the river to the sea. One led northwards to *Stewkey goate* which seems to lie in approximately the same position as the present entrance to the haven. A second channel leads from the former mill into Bower Creek (now Morston Creek) and from there eastwards along the (then) Freshes into Blakeney Haven and out to the sea somewhere between the Hood and the Long Hills.

The map and the evidence can be reconciled. Thomas White, in his deposition made on 29th March 1587, said that he knew the fresh water going from Stiffkey mill to Stiffkey Goat by the name of Symper Water and that it was forced into Bower Creek about 40 years previously. Roger Miles agreed that it was forced about 40 years back but he knew the river as *Cunyver Water* (a name rendered as *Connyger Eae* elsewhere in the documents). John Downing, appearing for Wighton Manor, provides a more detailed response. He is recorded as saying that *ye river called Cunnyger Eae commyng from Styffkey du sometyme runne thoroughe ye same watercourse lyinge by ye southe part of ye sayd sandes into Blakeney Haven. And he knewe the water to runne in this sorte xx^{te} years togyther about xlth years paste*. In conjunction with the evidence given on behalf of Cley, this appears to mean that a cut was made 40 years before 1587 (ie around 1547) which took the river into Blakeney Haven for some 20 years before the old route to the sea opened up again. Both channels existed in 1586.



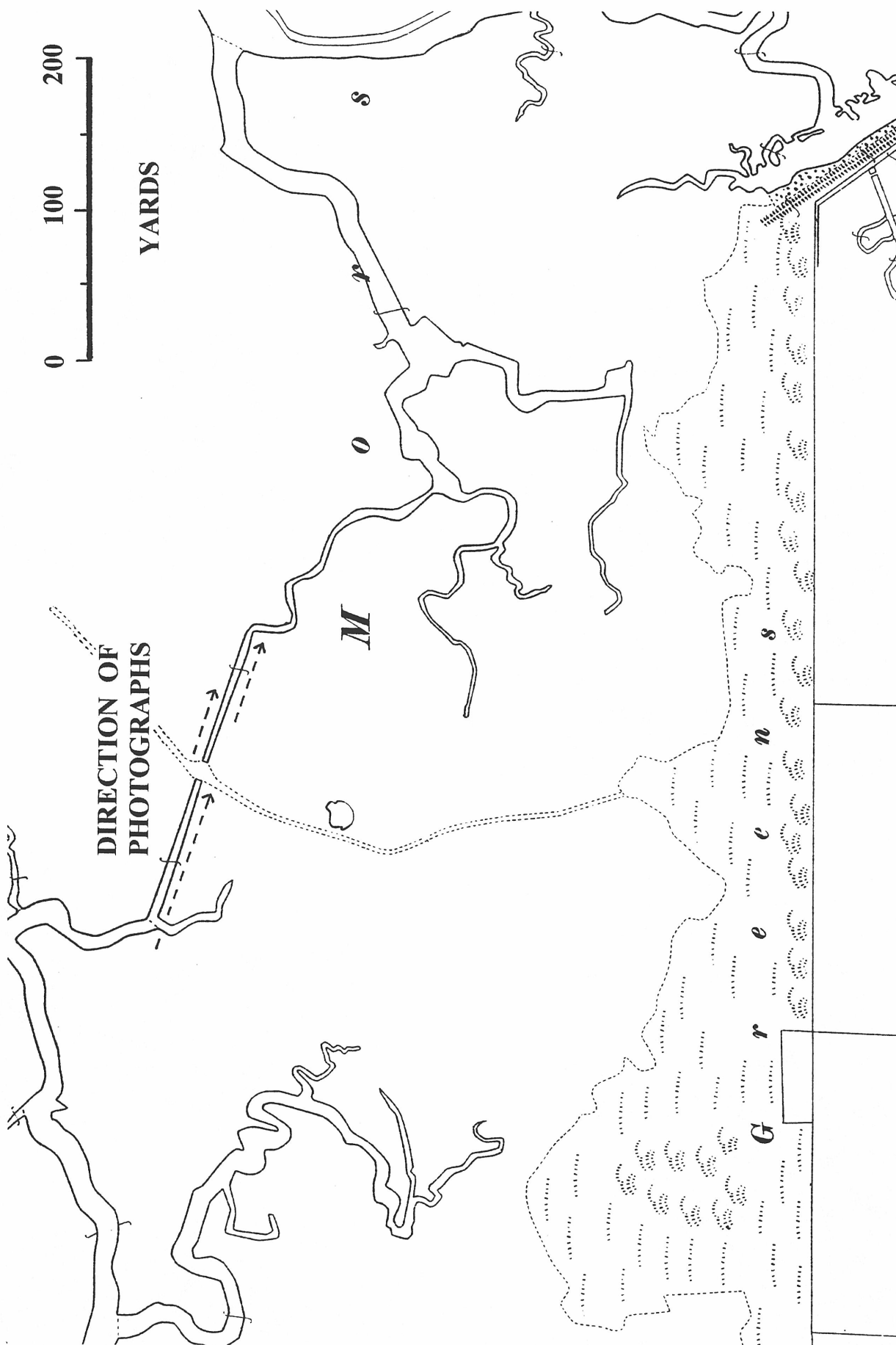
The 1906 map

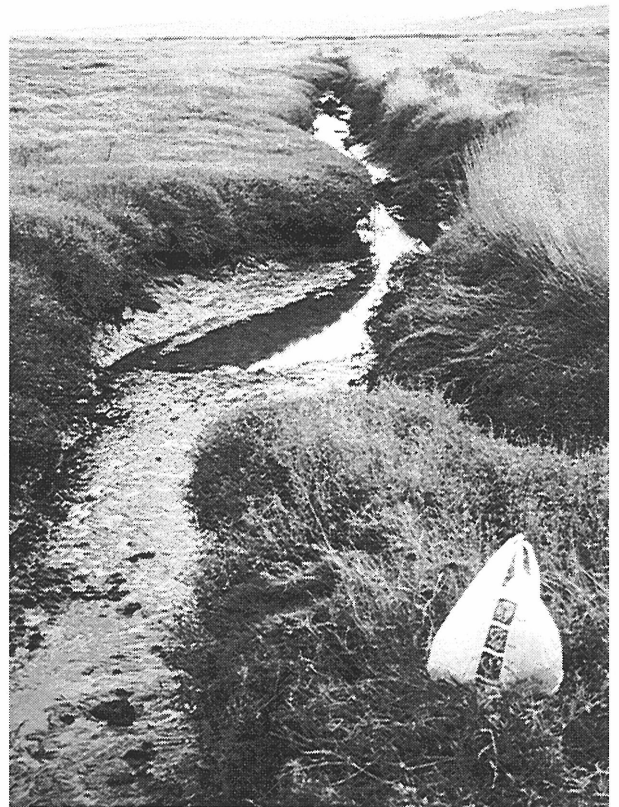
Linking the petition of c.1547, the map of 1586 and the court papers of 1587 gives rise to the irresistible question: can any evidence of the cut be seen on the ground today?

The relevant Ordnance Survey map of 1906, surveyed originally in 1885 and drawn to a scale of 25 inches to the mile, shows in considerable detail the pattern of creeks in the area between Stiffkey sluice and Morston. One creek stands out from the others: it is absolutely straight, quite unlike the irregular meandering of other creeks. It also provides a link, the only link, between those creeks which run to the River Stiffkey and those which drain into Morston Creek. The present path across the marshes from the Greens to the Pit side goes over (or rather through) the middle of this straight creek.

Fieldwork

The creek is still there today: the photographs show, firstly, the wider western half of the creek and, secondly, the narrower eastern half. All three views are looking towards the east, with Blakeney church on the skyline. The change in the width of the creek occurs where the path over the marsh crosses it.





The eastern half of the cut

The western half of the cut



The biggest surprise, however, came when pacing to determine the dimensions of the presumed cut produced a length of c.220 yards and widths at the base of c.6 yards (western section) and c.3 yards (eastern section). These dimensions (220 by 6 yards) not only fit the 1906 map but are exactly those referred to in the 1547 document, a correspondence that is difficult to believe. Can the cut really have remained essentially unchanged for 450 years? It can be shown that the western half at least is the same as in 1885 – one quarter of the way back to 1547. And if water has been flowing unchecked through the creek over the whole period there is no particular reason why it should have changed radically since then.

Comment

Assuming that the present creek really is the old cut, what did it achieve? One suspects not very much, although it was probably worth a try. If a tidal channel is to be kept clear then it is important to maintain a good flow of water during the ebb to help return sediment brought in by the flood tide. The prevailing trend is always towards silting up as sediment in suspension is dropped at slack water when the tide turns – not all of it is returned on the ebb. Embanking quickens the process by reducing the volume of water coming off the marshes to help scour the channels.

If the cut was constructed it is probable that the previous outlet of the river Stiffkey to the sea needed to be blocked. Such a block could well have been breached during periods of storm so that the river would then have returned to its former course. If this did happen after 20 years or so, as John Downing said, then maybe by then the maritime community of Cley and Blakeney had realized that the cut was not having the effect they had hoped for.

One wonders why the Stiffkey people seem not to have objected to the re-routing of their river and hence their own access to the sea. Was there no maritime trade or fishing at Stiffkey at this date? Perhaps it is relevant that in the 1587 depositions the 9 witnesses put up by Cley and Blakeney included 6 shipmasters and sailors. In contrast, the 9 witnesses for Wighton included 3 from Stiffkey none of whom declared any maritime interest. John Downing was a fisherman, but he was from Morston.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that there have been other attempts locally (at Wells, for example) to increase by sluices or other means the flow of water on the ebb in creeks and channels used for shipping. It is also said that at one time the creeks between Morston and Blakeney were controlled so as to increase the ebb flow passing Blakeney quay. The name *Backwater Creek* is probably relevant in this context (a dam is shown at its mouth on Palmer's map of 1835) but the actual operation of the system does not seem to have been recorded.

Notes

- 1 J.Wright, 'Sounds familiar but what does it mean?' *Glaven Historian No. 1*, June 1998.
- 2 The Court of Augmentations of the Revenues of the Crown was set up by Henry VIII to look after the revenues arising from the dissolution of the monasteries. It was abolished as a separate court in 1554 and annexed to the Exchequer.
- 3 J.Wright, '1586 Map of Blakeney Haven and Port of Cley: Part II', *Glaven Historian No. 2*.