

Langdon in the late-18th century

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With minor modifications, this article comprises the text and illustrations of a display which formed part of a WLHS exhibition on October 21st, 2023.

The document can be printed, but has been designed to make it easily read on a computer or laptop screen. For this reason, its format is landscape. When read on screen, the right and left arrow keys can be used to move to the next or previous pages. If the text extends below the bottom of the screen, the down arrow key will reveal it. This can also be achieved by using the minus button in the toolbar at the top of the screen.

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Introduction

In many rural areas, local history investigations have often focused on the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so that detailed knowledge of earlier times is frequently sketchy. In many cases, however, documents are available which enable the reality of earlier circumstances to be established much more firmly. The tithe map, and its accompanying text, are outstanding examples, as are estate surveys conducted for landowners.

Both types of resource are readily available in Wembury, and in this article we focus on one which sheds light on late-eighteenth century conditions in a large part of the parish. The source in question is a map and survey of the Langdon Estate.¹ This was commissioned in the late 1780s by Charles Holmes Everett Calmady² whose wife Pollexfen had inherited the estate, and other Calmady lands in the South West, through the death of Warwick Calmady in 1788.

1 The survey was not confined to Langdon: other Calmady holdings were covered, their maps being drawn together in the impressive *Calmady Atlas*.

2 Admiral Charles Holmes Calmady was actually an Everett by birth. He married Pollexfen Calmady in 1783, and she became an Everett. However, Plymouth and West Devon Record Office documents (PWDRO 372) show that he adopted the Calmady surname in 1788 when his wife inherited the Calmady lands. In this way she once more became a Calmady, and the inheritance continued in her family line.



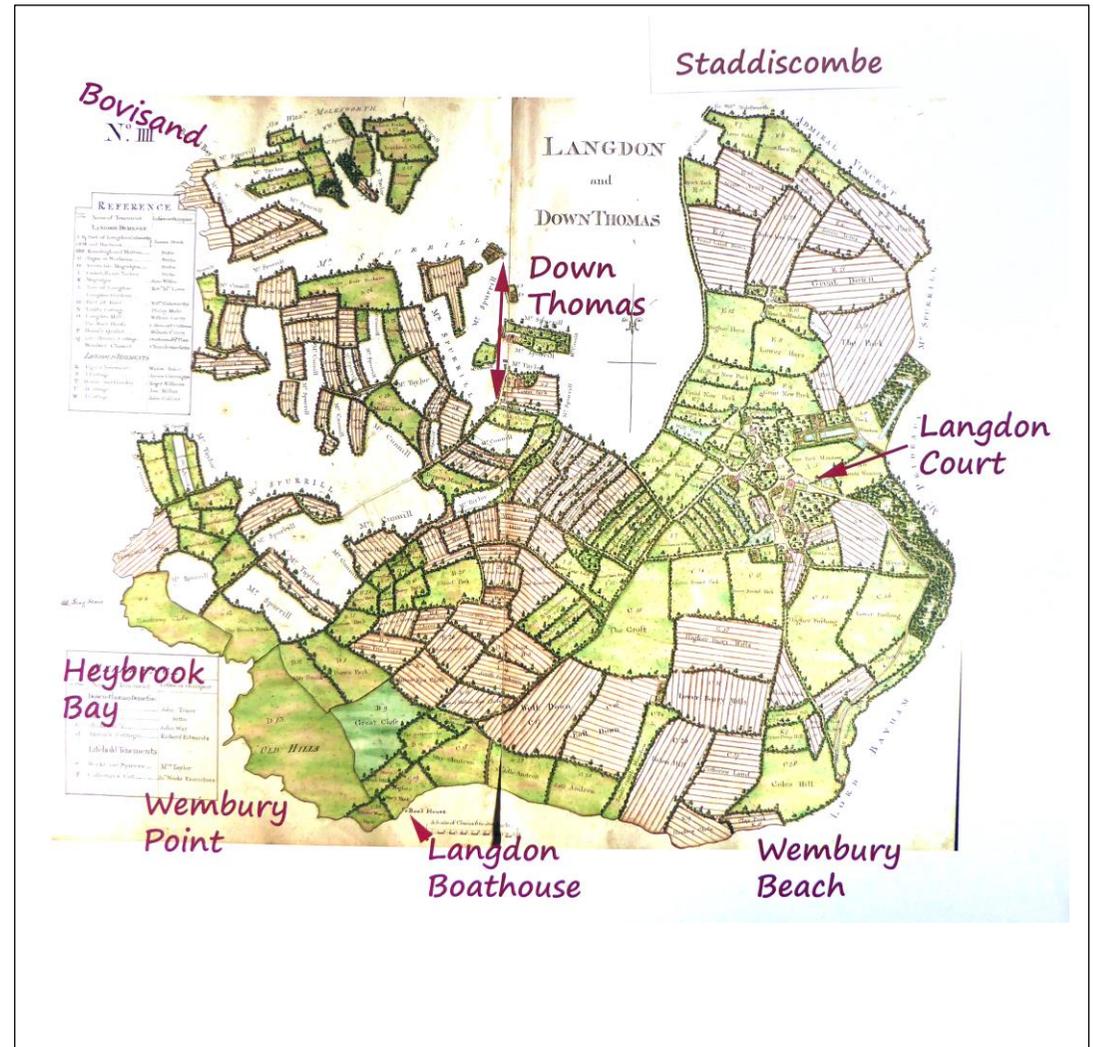
Introducing the map

The survey comprises an impressively detailed map, seen here, plus an accompanying report on the state of farm buildings and housing throughout the estate. Taken together these documents provide us with important insights into both agriculture and living conditions at the time.

We begin with the map. This reveals that the Calmady's either dominated, or at least had significant control, over the western half of the parish.

Langdon land extended along the coast from Heybrook Bay virtually to Wembury Beach. Here the boundary turned northwards, passing Langdon Court, the

Calmady's seat, and running almost to Staddiscombe. South west of there, a fragmentary part of the estate extended well beyond Down Thomas to reach the coast again at Bovisand.

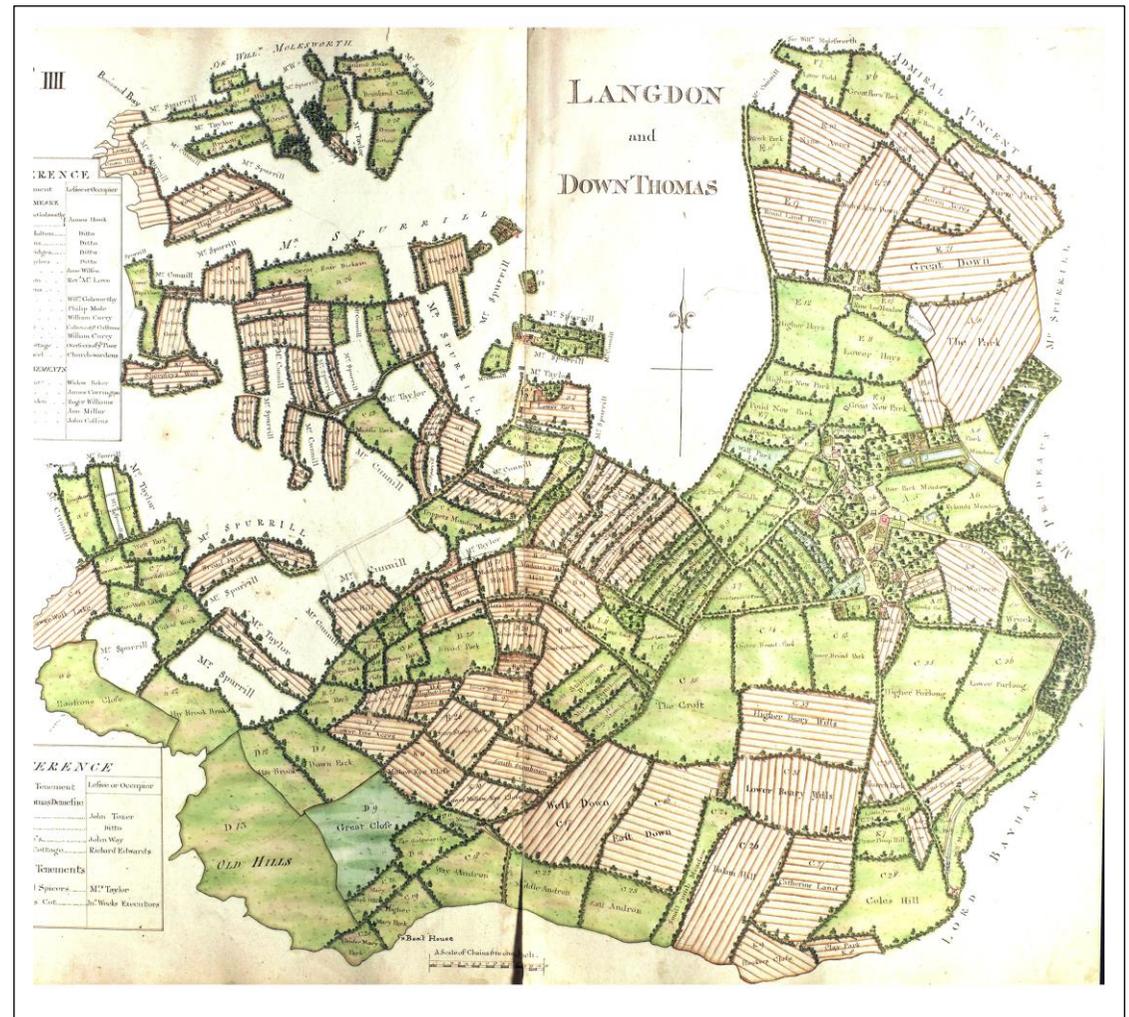


Land management and agricultural (in)efficiency

A striking feature of the map is the sharp contrast in field patterns between the north-west and the south-east sections of the estate.

Parcels were small and awkwardly shaped in the former, but mainly significantly larger and more rectangular in the latter.

These differences had a direct effect on the efficiency of farming, and they were caused by equally different attitudes to land ownership in the two areas. How did they arise?



Echoes from the past

To the north west, the land lay in Down Thomas Manor. In two-thirds of this manor, agricultural modernisation had not been pursued, the consequence being that the fields still bore the imprint, and inefficiencies, of medieval strip farming.

Despite this drawback, there were buyers when parts of the manor had been sold off, presumably to raise cash for the owner. And the Calmadys, who apparently had a reputation for acquiring land, had been the main purchasers, even though the land they bought was organised in such an outdated manner.



Agricultural modernisation

On the bulk of the estate this ownership limitation did not apply because the Calmady's owned all the land. They had therefore been free to create a much more rational field pattern capable of boosting profitability. The outcome was the emergence of a very different farming landscape. Only vestiges of strip farming, mainly located close to Langdon Court, now survived.



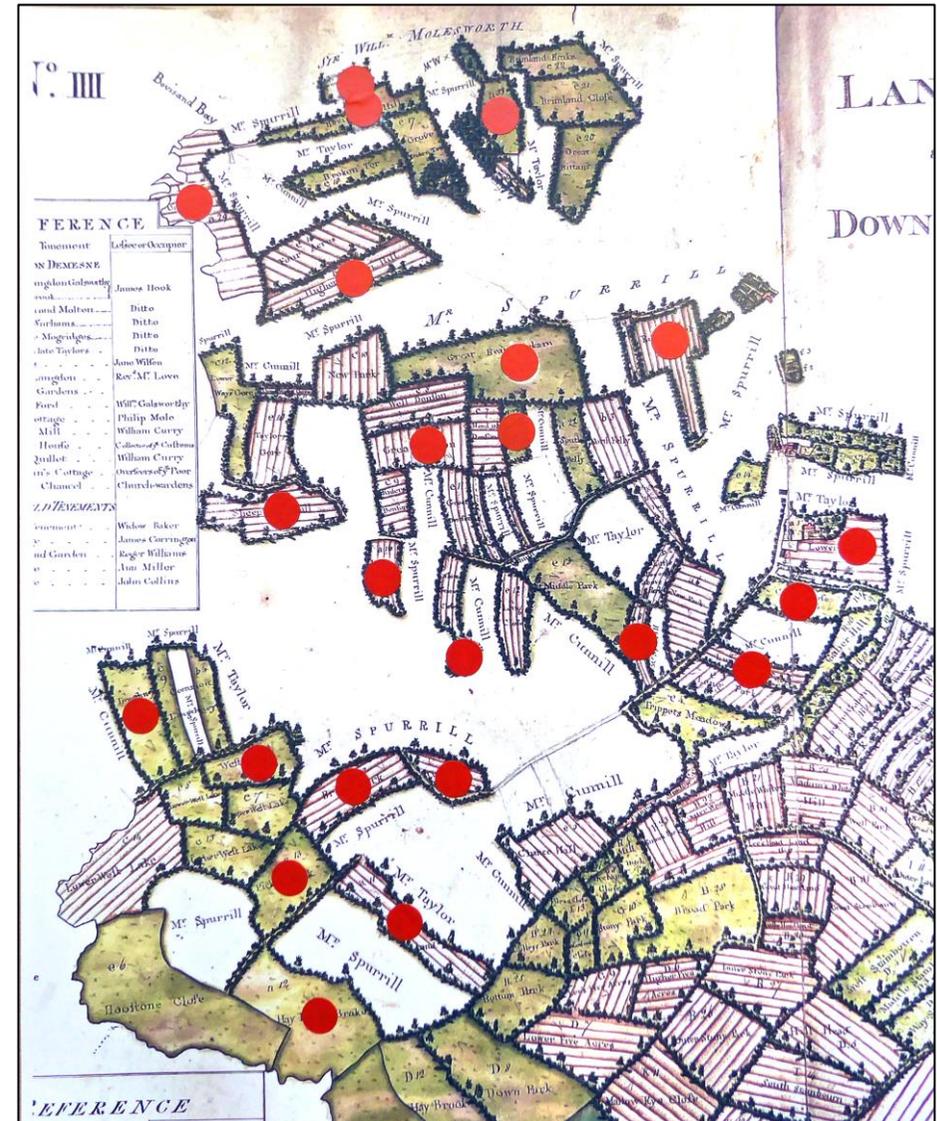
Surrounding them we see clear results of a much more modern approach to farming: generally larger, much more rectangular, and much more efficient fields. Some of these may once have been open downland which was subsequently enclosed, but strip farming is also likely to have been much more extensive.

Tenancy, inequality and the rise of James Hooke

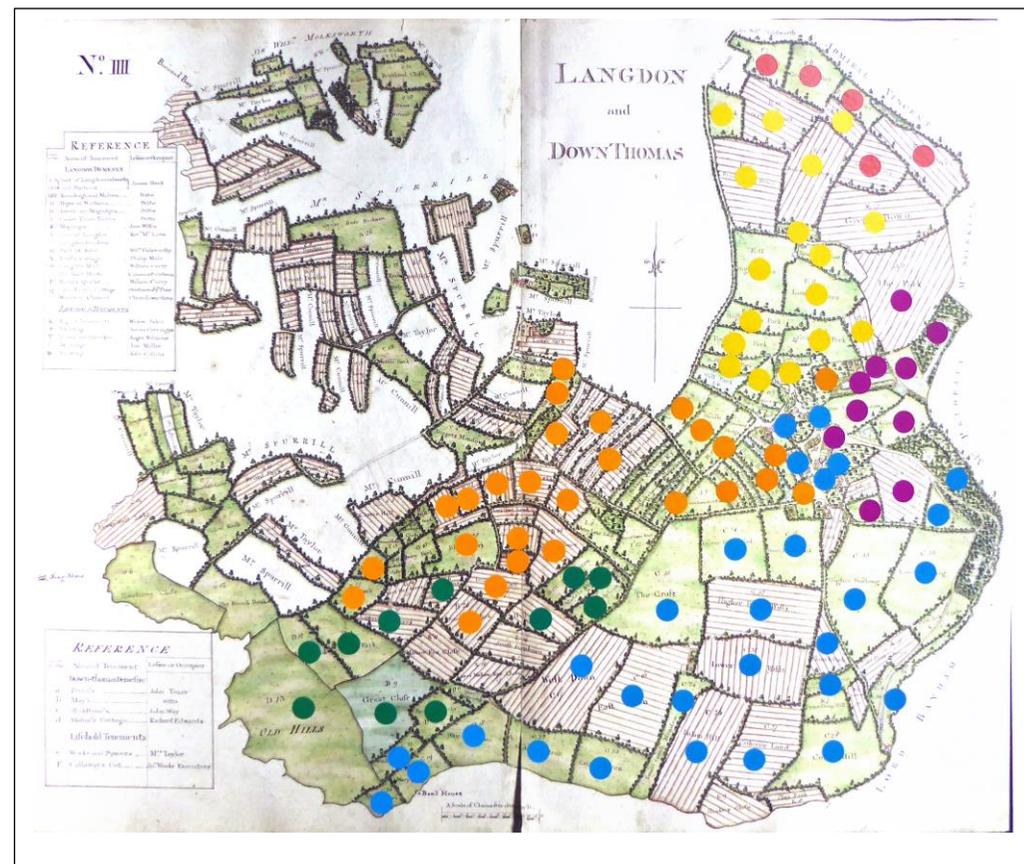
Where strip fields remained, another feature of medieval farming survived: the widespread scattering of each tenant farmer's parcels of land. This can be seen very clearly from this example, Pryn's Tenement.

The aim of distributing the fields widely was to ensure that each tenant had a fair share of land of various qualities. But, by the late-18th century, this was a problem for 'modern' agriculture:

- small parcels were generally very inefficient;
- farmers could waste a great deal of time moving between fields;
- and more distant fields might not be farmed to their full potential.



In sharp contrast, in the southern and eastern parts of the estate, where the Calmadys ownership was complete, they had consolidated previously fragmented holdings. The outcome, seen here, was a mosaic of six farms, each of them almost totally comprising a block of contiguous fields. Compared with circumstances in Down Thomas, this provided the basis for far more efficient farming, which in turn would have benefitted the estate by justifying higher farm rents.



However, caution is needed when interpreting this map. At first sight, it would be natural to assume that the six farms each had a different tenant but, remarkably, this was not the case. Instead, the tenancy of all six holdings – amounting to 750 acres - had been secured by one man, James Hooke. Moreover, Hooke did not sublet these farms, but instead managed all the land himself.¹

¹ Hooke was also the tenant of all the land improved by enclosure in Down Thomas.

To operate on this scale, Hooke must have been an enterprising individual who saw the potential to exploit the increased profitability offered by restructured agriculture. He must also have been prosperous enough to make his vision a reality. But, for some in the community, his activities may not have been at all welcome: by managing all this land himself he sharply reduced the number of tenant farmers, with a significant impact on the local social structure.



In St Werburgh's churchyard there is evidence of Hooke's prosperity. He lies there in a brick vault covered by a large stone slab – quite an expensive investment. In retrospect, however, it is clear that the Hooke era was a passing phase. Hooke died in 1803. By 1801 much of the land was farmed by John Hemsleigh¹. By 1830, farms were gradually being let to individual families. And by 1872, when Langdon was put on the market, eight tenant farms comprised the whole estate.

¹ Hemsleigh appears to have been a volatile character. He ended his days living at Lower Ford in dire straits, having been imprisoned for two years for wounding William Bunker in church. Bunker was the new occupant of Spirewell and his 'offence' had been wanting to sit in the Spirewell box pew.

Langdon's late-18th century housing

The written survey accompanying the Langdon Estate map sheds valuable light on rural housing conditions at the time. Unsurprisingly, it reveals a spectrum, ranging from the relatively good to the extremely poor.

The better end of the scale

(1) Mogridge's Tenement

Now known as Laundry Cottage, Mogridge's Tenement still stands across the road from Langdon Barton Farmhouse, set well down in the valley. Its occupant was Jane Wilson, a widow.

“The farmhouse is tolerably convenient in Middling repair. The walls are good. The roof lays pretty level. A dairy of cellar or outhouse adjoining in middling good repair also. The barn walls chiefly stone and thatched wants new thatch in parts.”



(2) Lower Ford

The house at Lower Ford stood in the dip of Ford Road, between West Wembury and Langdon, and had two tenants: William Galsworthy and Charles Avent.

The surveyor found it to be:

“ . . . stone and slated and in tolerable good repair. An outhouse stone cobb and thatched, the front part of the thatch in bad repair, the back part . . . new thatch.”



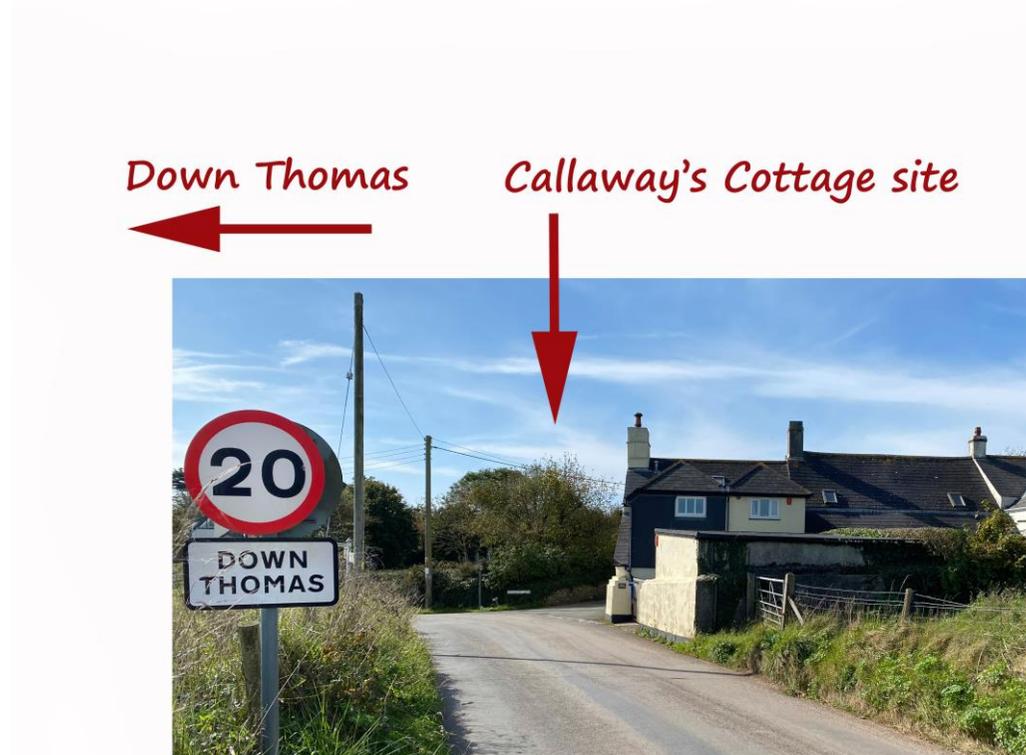
Lower Ford's remaining wall

But at the other end of the scale . . .

While some housing was fairly good, inferior examples were not difficult to find.

(1) Callaway's Cottage, tenant
George Bale

*“Avery's old ruinous tenement.
Built of cob and thatched
altogether in very bad condition,
so that short of entirely rebuilding
would answer to the expence of
£15 at least.”*

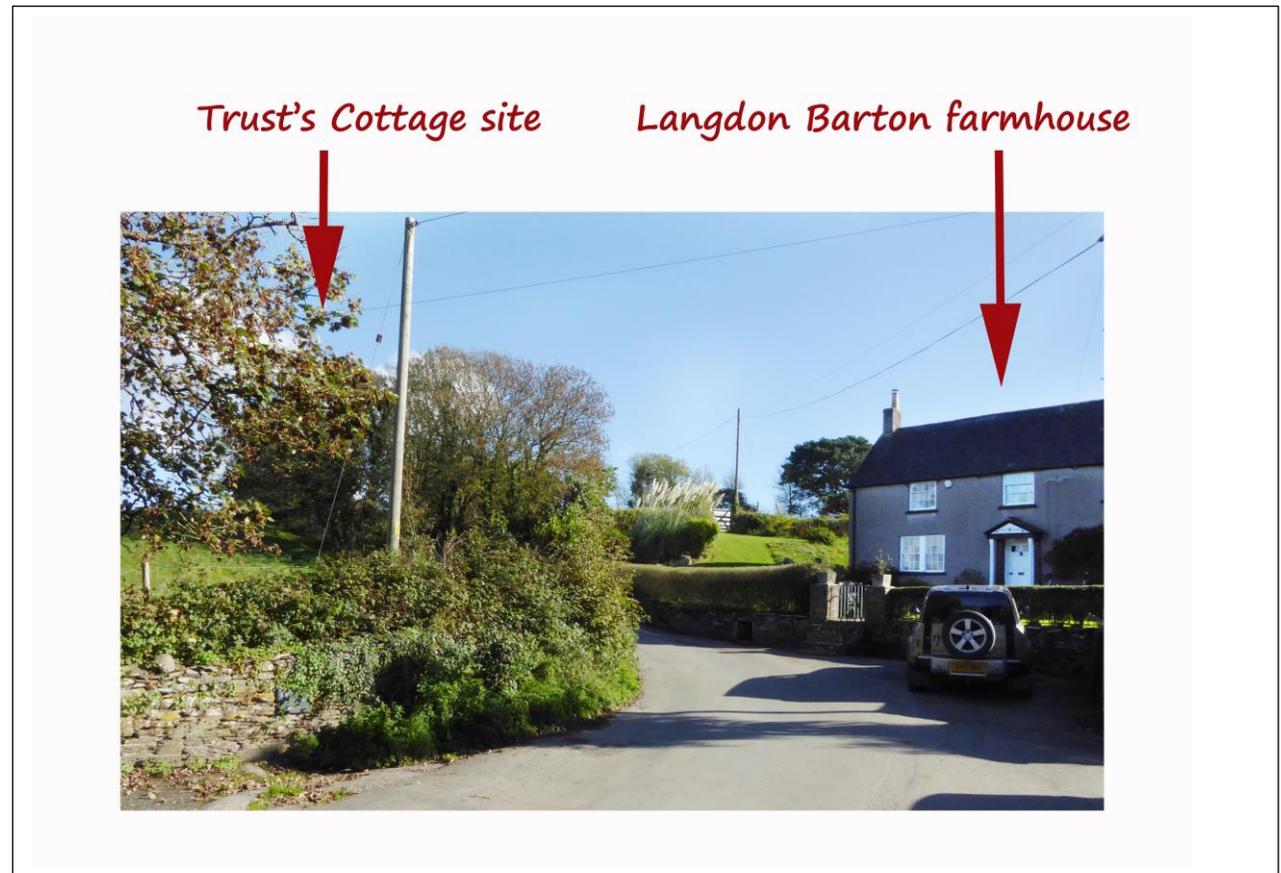


(2) Trust's Cottage

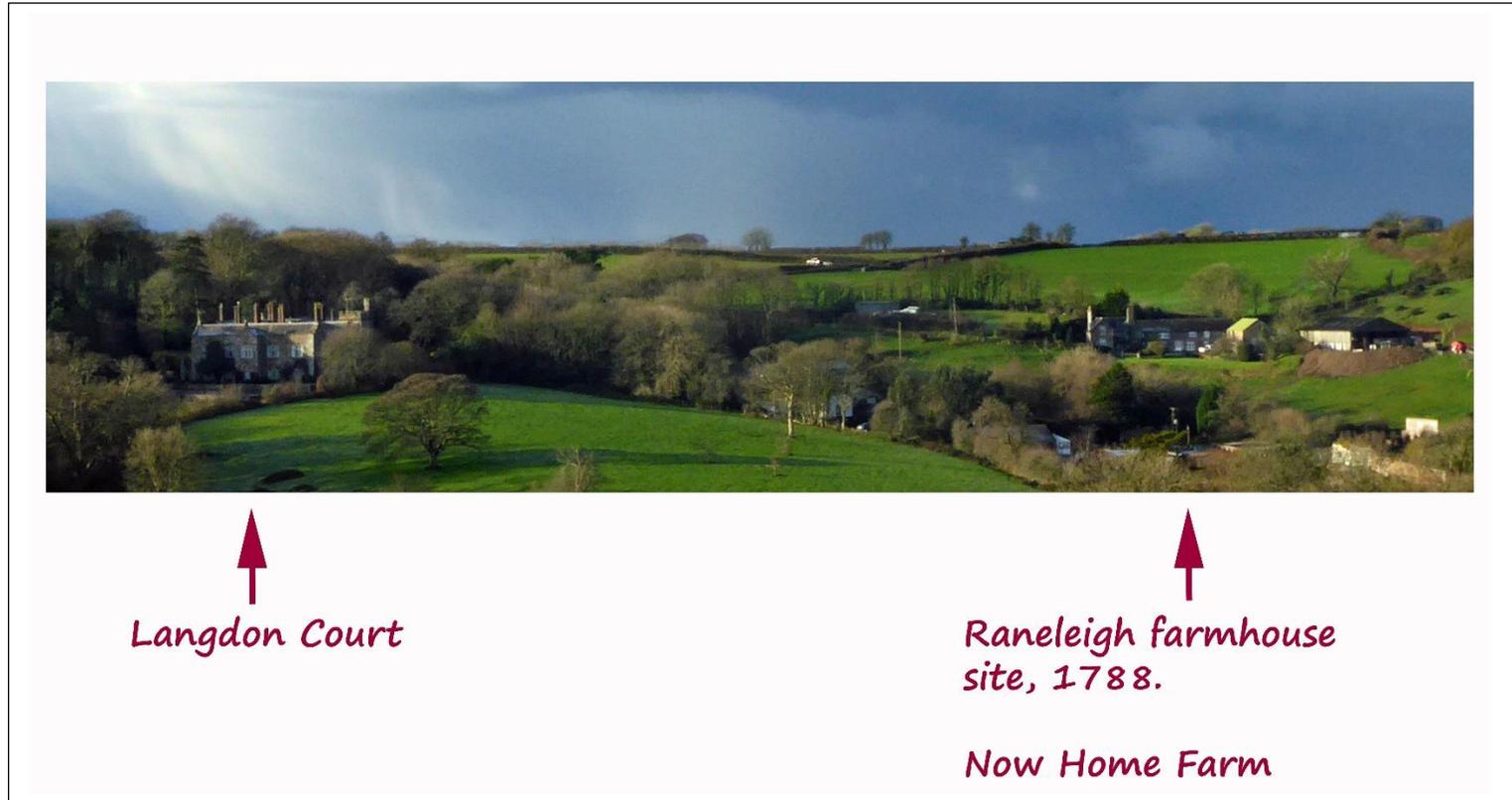
Trust's Cottage stood across the road from Langdon Barton farmhouse, on the bend and above Laundry Cottage. Demolished long ago, it has not been replaced.

“A very mean tenement, stone and slate. The roof sunk and uneven, a window falling out and the chimney

also must be taken down, or it will fall. It would cost £4 to keep it from going to pieces, and more to do it thoroughly than it's worth.”



(3) Raneleigh Farmhouse

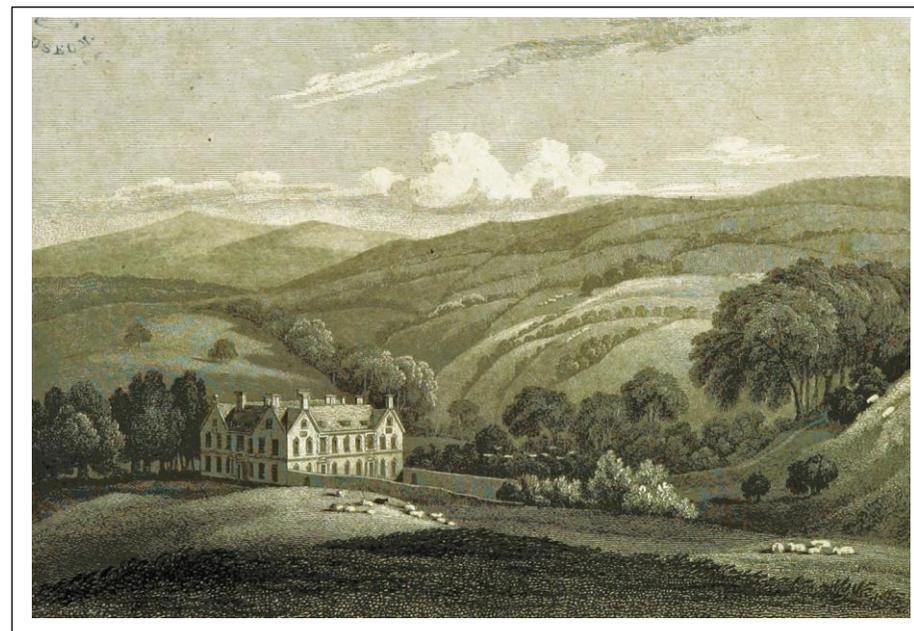


In the late-18th century, Raneleigh Farmhouse stood – in a dire state - where Home Farm stands today – only about 200 m from Langdon Court.

... a large old building ... become much out of repair. The walls weak and feeble, part fallen down. Window frames are twisted by the settling of the walls and much of the glass destroyed. Floors and slating in tolerable repair.”

Wider dereliction

In addition to the survey's exposure of widespread poor housing, many of its comments suggest that neglect was significantly more widespread. Although there were some exceptions, farm buildings were frequently in need of repair. Common assessments of roofs, walls and floors ranged from 'tolerable', through 'indifferent' to 'very bad' and 'ruinous'. Similarly, Langdon Mill – which might be expected to be one of the estate's prime assets - was largely derelict.¹



One cause of this decline was the fact that Warwick Calmady, the owner after 1755, was an absentee landlord who did not live at Langdon for more than thirty years. Another was that tenancies were often let for three lives, with little incentive to maintain a property which would ultimately revert to the estate owner. When the estate passed to Charles and Pollexfen Calmady in 1788, these problems no doubt led them to commission their survey, posing a question yet to be addressed: did they succeed in significantly improving conditions on the estate?

¹ See Pinder, D and Rowland, R (2024) *Langdon's original mill*, a related article downloadable from the publications page of Wembury Local History Society's website.