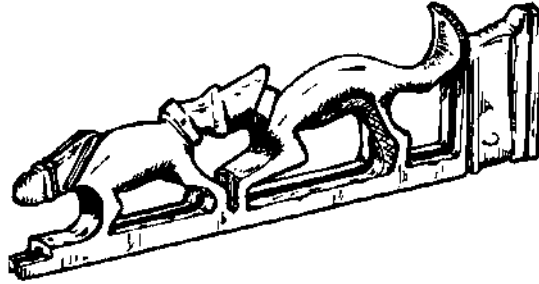


Amphill & District Archaeological



& Local History Society

**Location & Review of an
Ancient Duck Decoy
In the Parish of Houghton Conquest
TL 04134015
Revised 2011**

Kevan J Fadden

In search of a Duck Decoy

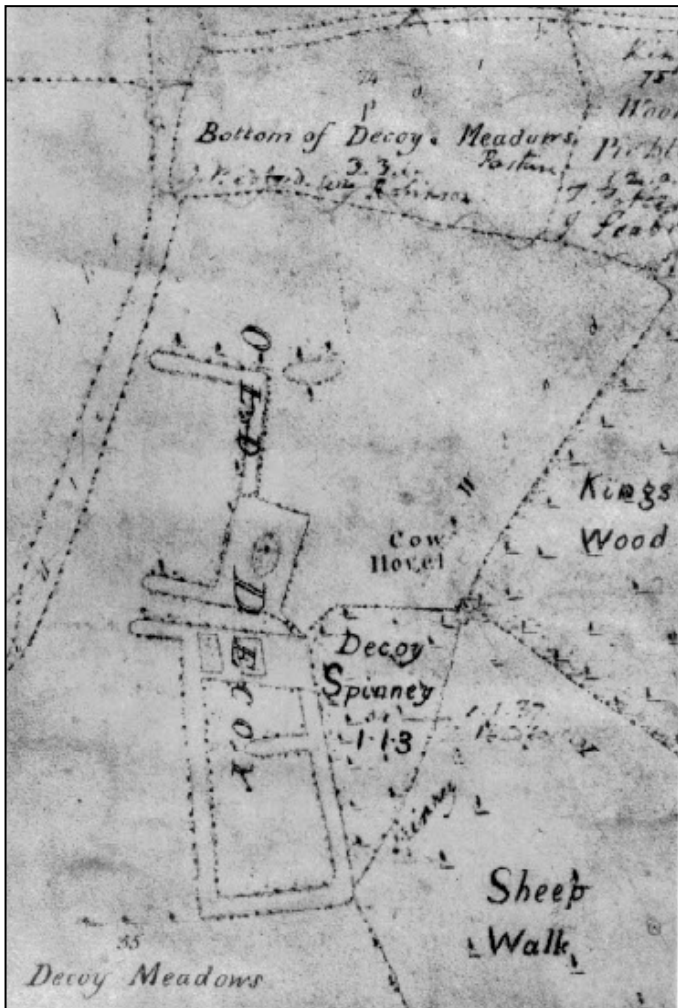
The Society's interest was aroused when we found an article on Duck Decoys by J Steele Elliott in "The Bedfordshire Historical Record Society Survey of Ancient Buildings Vol. 111, 1936" The decoy was near Kings Wood between Ampthill and Houghton Conquest. A copy is produced below of the article that shows his research and gives a good insight into their use. The Society investigated the area and checked records to establish its exact position and its present condition.

LOCAL DUCK DECOYS BY J. STEELE ELLIOTT The Bedfordshire Historical Record Society Survey of Ancient Buildings Vol. 111 1936.

'The name 'Decoy,' like the contrivance it refers to, is no doubt of Dutch origin, and connected with the Dutch word Kooi or cage, for taking these wildfowl. Decoys date back at least to medieval times, but at that earlier period the ducks were driven from extensive areas of water into netted enclosures, a method that would only be possible during the moulting season of the adult birds, or before the

young ducks were sufficiently strong on pinion. The decoy of later years, which dates back in this country to about the middle of the xviiith century, could be restricted to quite small areas of water, frequently an acre or less; in this latter type the ducks had to be enticed into it, and not driven as in the earlier form. Such a decoy had the advantage of being worked through the whole season, save in severe frosts.

There were decoys in many English counties and a few in Ireland and Wales. Their success depended upon their situation, and those in such favourable counties as Lincoln, Essex and Norfolk obtained the heaviest bags. Upward of 10,000 duck of various species have been recorded as taken at a decoy during one winter, but this was under the conditions of a century since, Nowadays a season's bag of 1,000 fowl would be very exceptional, even on the most attractive waters. Some few decoys only took sufficient duck for the owner's personal needs. Bedfordshire is one of the counties in which no decoy has been recorded hitherto; in the adjoining county of Herts, one only, and that at The Hoo, near Welwyn, and in Hunts. there was one at Holme Fen; both of these have long since been done away with'. In a map of Houghton Conquest, dated 1797, at the County Record Office (Map.1), and again in the Enclosure Map of 1808, a decoy is indicated about half a mile N.N.W. of Houghton House and N. of King's Wood. The sites of the 'Old



Map. 1 Detail from pre-enclosure map 1797

Decoy' the 'Decoy Meadows,' 'Decoy Spinney' and Moats are also marked. The plans on both maps are similar; they show a rectangular construction, which is puzzling, and does not conform in any way to the usual planning of a later date decoy. A visit to the actual site with Mr. Chas. Oldham, F.L.S., helped us little, as there is no definite indication of any part of the actual decoy site at the present time; and the water-logged ground has evidently been drained. The date of this decoy probably coincides with the erection of 'Houghton House,' for the service of which it was no doubt constructed; this would carry it back to the very early years of the xviiith. century, when the modern form of a duck-decoy had barely been introduced into England. I think we can safely conclude that we have on these maps one of the earlier and far less common forms of a trap or cage device, where the pond was equipped with a netted tunnel-like enclosure, under which the ducks were enticed with food and then trapped with a falling shutter. Probably the earliest decoy known in the country is at

another Houghton, in Nottinghamshire, on an estate map of Tempsford which can be dated as of the early sixteenth century, another decoy is shown. The site of this decoy was found to be still very definite. It is one of later type, oblong, and so-called crab-shaped in form, with four curved pipes leading out from the angles. This decoy actually stands within the Huntingdonshire border in a small plantation immediately S. of Hill Farm and N. of Cold Arbour Farm, but the Bedfordshire boundary actually encloses it on the W. side. The adjoining round is still known as the 'Coy Field'. 'Bryant indicates this decoy in 1826. The 'Fowler's Meadow' at Little Barford is met with in the Tithe Apportionment map of 1844. It is a meadow of about 24 ac. behind the Manor House and Church, and bounded on the far side by the river, a likely enough site in former times for a small decoy and at the present day a frequent haunt of wildfowl.

¹Payne-Gallway: Duck Decoys, 1886.

Research in the Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service by Society members provided the actual location from the pre enclosure map of 1797. It was also established that:-

In the 17th. Century Lord Ailesbury paid a woman 6d per week for looking after the duck decoy.

Prior to the Enclosure Award the decoy meadows were owned by Lord Ossory and were passed in exchange to John Gudgeon of Park Farm in 1808. This supports the suggestion that the ducks would have been for the table of Houghton House.

An extract from: 'Account of Houghton Conquest, its Church, and its Rectors', by Dean L. W. Burgeon, brother in law of Archdeacon Rose* records the demise of the decoy.

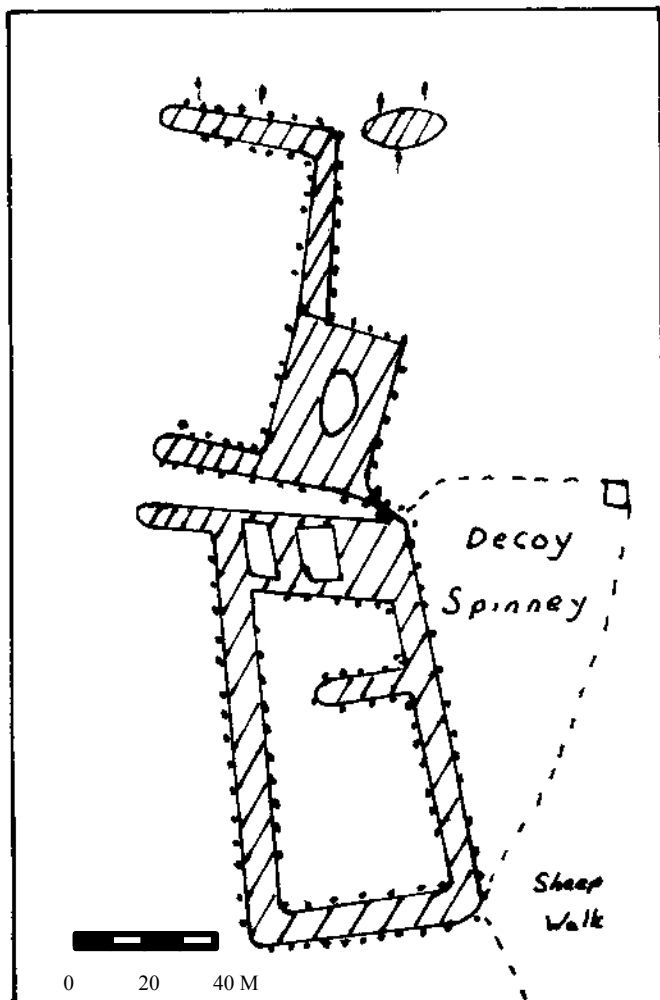


Fig. 1 Suggested layout of the decoy

In 1838 then, as already explained, many traces of the former state of things lingered on in Houghton, some of which are now disappearing or have already disappeared. The road past the Rectory House could be traced all the way to the ruins of the site and the ponds or decoys in 'Coy Meadow' (as it is still known) all existed embosomed in foliage in the hollow. The ponds have since been filled, the trees grubbed up and the land ploughed over.

A visit by the Society located the actual site of the decoy. It had been filled in as described above but a shape similar to that shown on the map could be made out, viewing a combination of shallow indentations and changes in grass colour. The main moat shaped feature was very clear and was unmistakably that shown on the 1797 map. The illustration in Fig 1 is a reconstruction of what we consider the decoy was like, using evidence from the ground and the map. The low relief showed where the water would have been, leaving a number of islands where ducks could live and nest, safe from predators. The area to the north was not so well defined due to drainage ditches put in after the decoy was destroyed.

Since this work was carried out in 1998 an aerial photograph has appeared on Google Earth (Photo.1) showing an earthwork which appears to confirm the shape of the decoy.



Photo. 1 Aerial Photograph showing the position of the Duck Decoy 4/2/2009

Acknowledgements

LOCAL DUCK DECOYS BY J. STEELE ELLIOTT The Bedfordshire Historical Record Society Survey of Ancient Buildings Vol. 111 1936.

ACCOUNT OF HOUGHTON CONQUEST, ITS CHURCH, AND ITS RECTORS BY DEAN L. BURGEON.

Bedfordshire & Luton Archives and Records Service.

Google Earth Photography.