

BAESH CHARITY

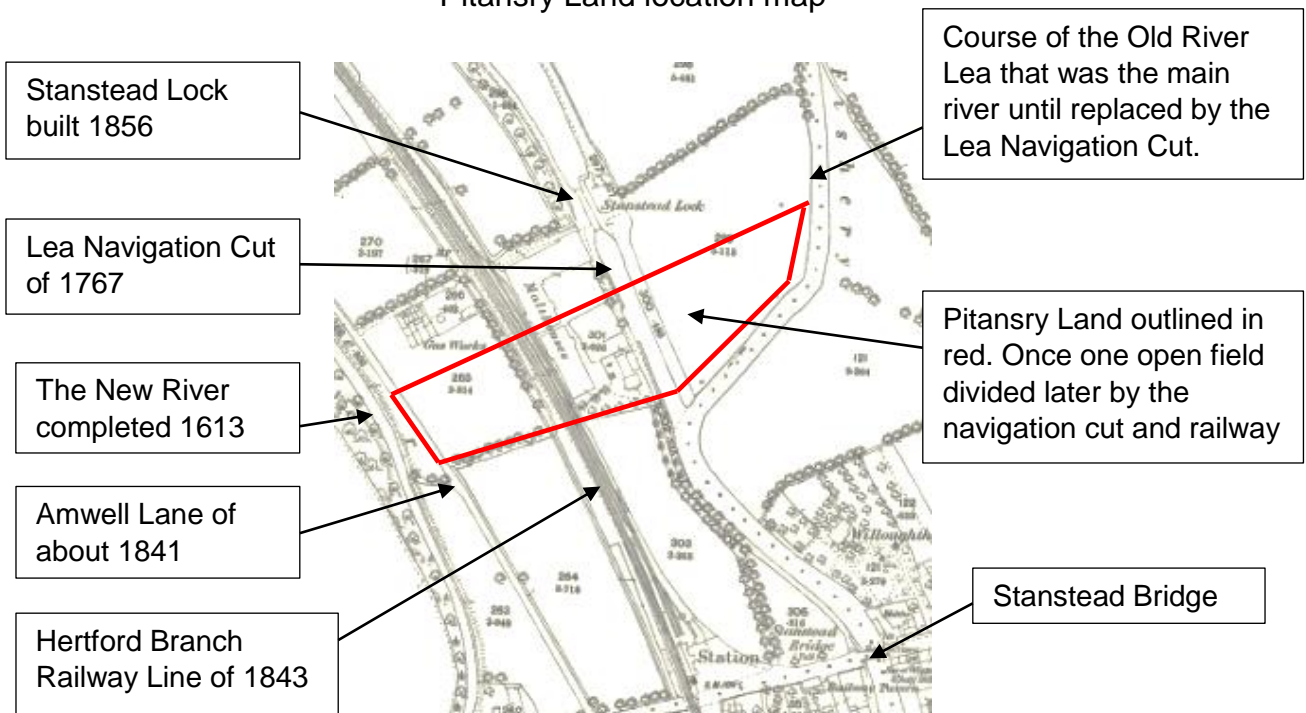
THE PITANSRY MEADOW IN AMWELL

By
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Henry II had a hand in causing the Manor of Stanstead passing from private ownership into the hands of the Religious House at Waltham in 1170. The King was also to change the secular religious house into a Priory in 1177 and subsequently granted it Abbey status in 1184. Sometime after 1177 but before 1203 Ralph Oissel of Amwell granted land in Amwell to the Cannons Regular of Waltham. This Pitansry Land or Meadow appears to have been leased to a local person and the rent arising from this used to financially support the religious house at Waltham. Early records also indicate that this was a riverside meadow. As such it is likely to have been used for summer only pasture as indeed, for centuries was much of the land either side of the river. In 1271 it is mentioned that Pitansry lands belonging to the Abbey at Waltham existed as part of the Manor of Stanstead in both the parishes of Stanstead and Amwell.

These arrangements seem to have remained in place until 1st November 1531 when the Abbot of Waltham Robert Fuller, the last Abbott at Waltham, granted the Manor of Stanstead Abbots to Henry VIII. This included the lands that were part of the Manor but located in the adjacent parishes of Amwell and Roydon. The Pitansry meadow in Amwell thus passed into Royal ownership as part of this arrangement. On the 1st January 1532 in exchange for these properties the King granted The Manors of Blackmore's and Warmingfield both in Essex, Hormead in Hertfordshire and other lands to the Abbots of Waltham. The granting of Stanstead Abbots to the crown in 1531 was not therefore part of The Dissolution of the religious houses as one might suppose. In fact Waltham was the last Abbey to surrender all their lands and property to the King which occurred on the 23rd March 1540. The 1531 exchange of lands was more likely related to the Kings acquisition of additional land around Hunsdon House as he was developing it at that time, into a much larger Royal Residence and surrounding it with extensive hunting parks.

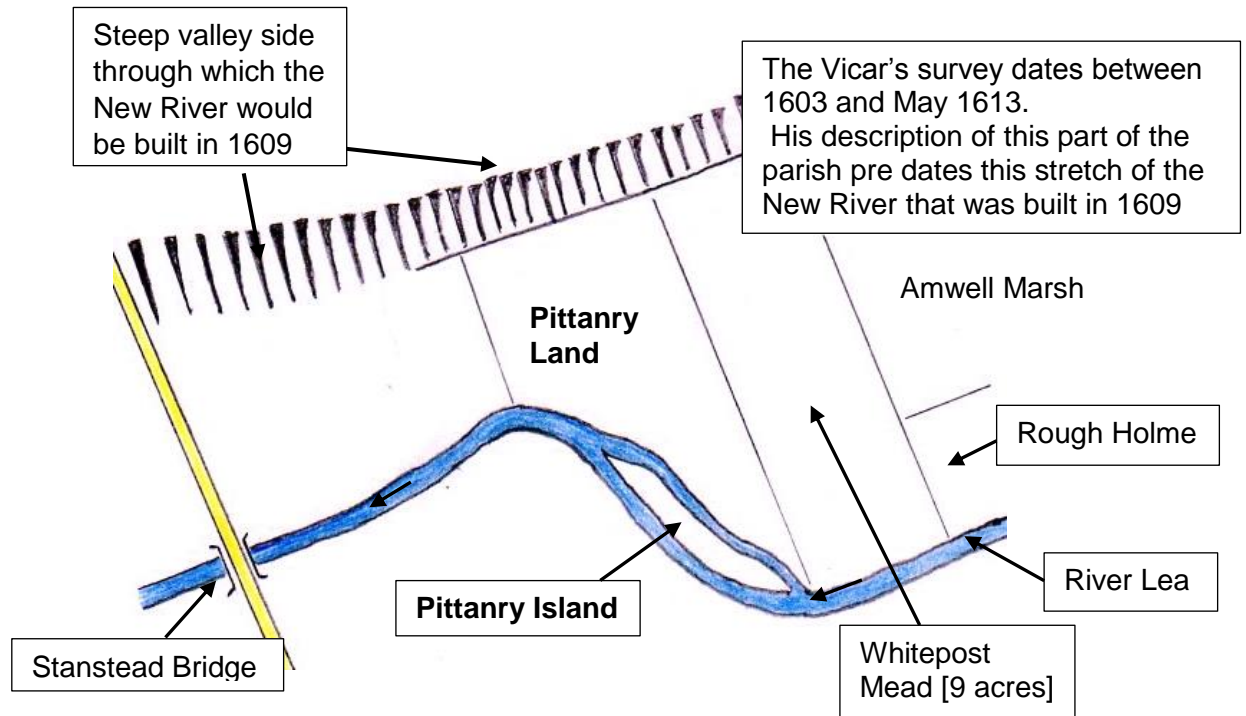
Pitansry Land location map



The Manor of Stanstead Abbots remained in royal ownership until 1559 when Elizabeth I granted it to Edward Baeshe Victualler to the Navy. This grant included the Pitansry Meadow in Amwell but not the lands in Roydon that had been part of the manor in 1531.

It is indeed good fortune that the Rev. Thomas Hassell, Vicar of Amwell from 1600 to 1657, has left us a record of the Pitansry Land from early in the 1600s. The Vicar recorded much concerning the parish of Amwell during his long tenure. His record was part of his efforts to be certain that all tithes owed to the parish each year were being paid as they should be. The following map showing the Pitansry Meadow as it was in the early years of 1600s has been constructed using his writings and other supporting information from other sources.

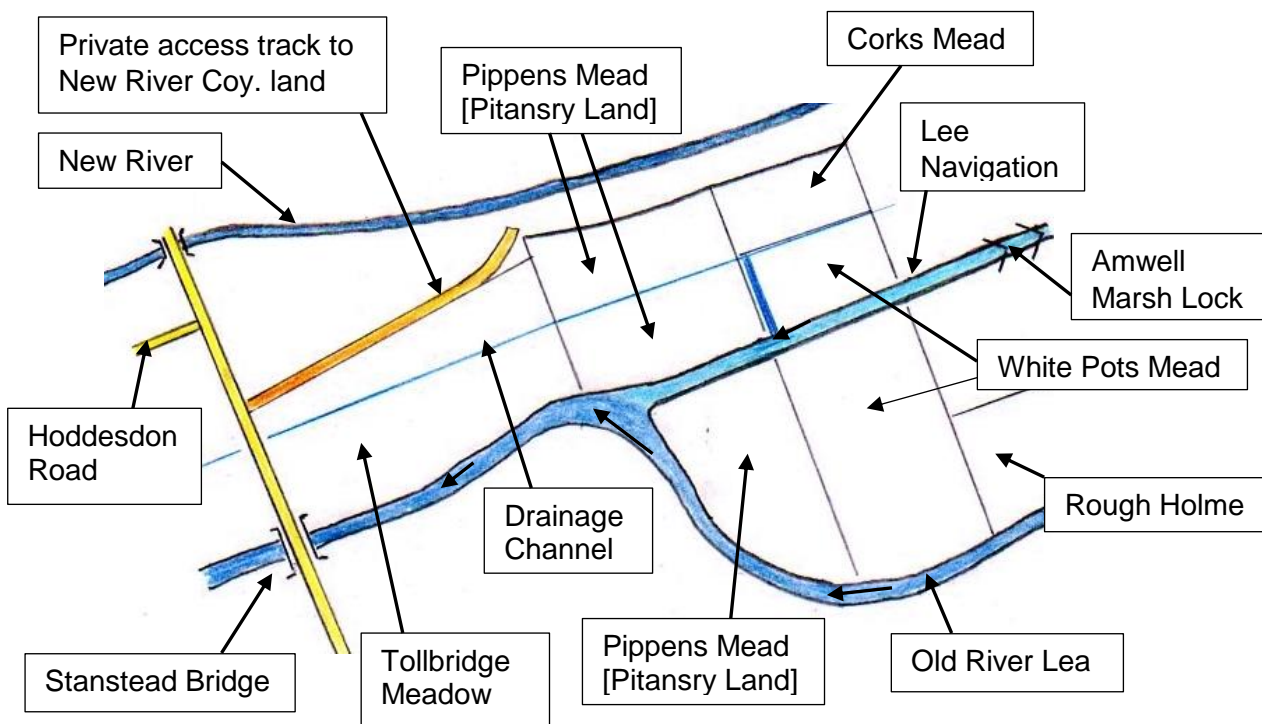
Pitansry Land in 1603 to 1608



The parish boundary between Stanstead Abbots and Amwell lay down the centre of the River Lea upstream of Stanstead Bridge. The Pittansry Island being included in the Parish of Amwell. The word Pittansry has been used on the map as that was the style used by Rev. Hassell in his writings. He recorded the Pitansry Land as being twelve acres and the Pitansry Island being of half an acre in size. The Island was being used for the growing of Osiers as were eleven other islands in Amwell Parish on the Lea between Ware and Stanstead Bridge. Osiers being various species of willow were cut in the winter months and used for wicker work. Some of the Islands were natural islands within the course of the River Lea but the majority would have been artificially created for the purpose of growing Osiers. Given the location and nature of Pittansry Island it was more likely to have been an artificially created island rather than a natural one. Rev. Hassell relates that the Island produced on average 80 boult of Osiers each year worth 4d per boult. As a tithe he would have been expecting 8 boult per year or their value in cash from the person working the land. A boult of Osiers seems to have been a less than precise term but a large bundle which one man could manage to carry seems to provide the best description for a boult of osiers. Unfortunately no tithe value for the 12 acres of land is mentioned. This would have been negotiated each year between the vicar and the person renting the land depending on what animals were being grazed and if any animals had been born on the land. The vicar does mention the problems he had gathering tithe payments from folk renting the riverside meadows with those who lived outside the Parish of Amwell being particularly reluctant to pay any tithe at all. Unfortunately the Vicar did not leave a record of the rent paid for farming the Pitansry Land as his concern related only to the tithe payments due to his parish.

The Manor of Stanstead descended from Edward Baesh to his grandson Sir Edward Baeshe who held the manor from 1598 until his death in 1653. It was Sir Edward who founded by deed the Baesh Charity in 1635 confirmed in his will in 1653. Initially the charity took on the duties relating to a Grammar School in a building that survives today as the Clock House in Cappel Lane along with sufficient income to support the school. By the date of Sir Edward's death the charity had expanded to include six Alms-houses built by Edward Baesh for the poor of the village as well as funds to support those who lived within them along with a Vicarage and various other lands and properties to support the upkeep of the buildings and support the poor of the parish. The land from which a yearly income could be derived totalled some 15 acres and included a meadow known as the "Pitansey Meadow, alias Parentage". The Charity continued in existence as part of the manor of Stanstead passing out of the control of the Baeshe family in 1678 when it was sold to the Fielde family. Little is known of the work of the charity until a report on its activities in 1833 when it had fallen into a parlous state. However the report saw a new set of trustees appointed who appear to have considerably improved the running of the charity. In 1840 the tithe award for Stansted Abbots gives us a new glimpse of the Pitansry Meadow, illustrated in the diagrammatic map below.

Pitansry Land in 1840



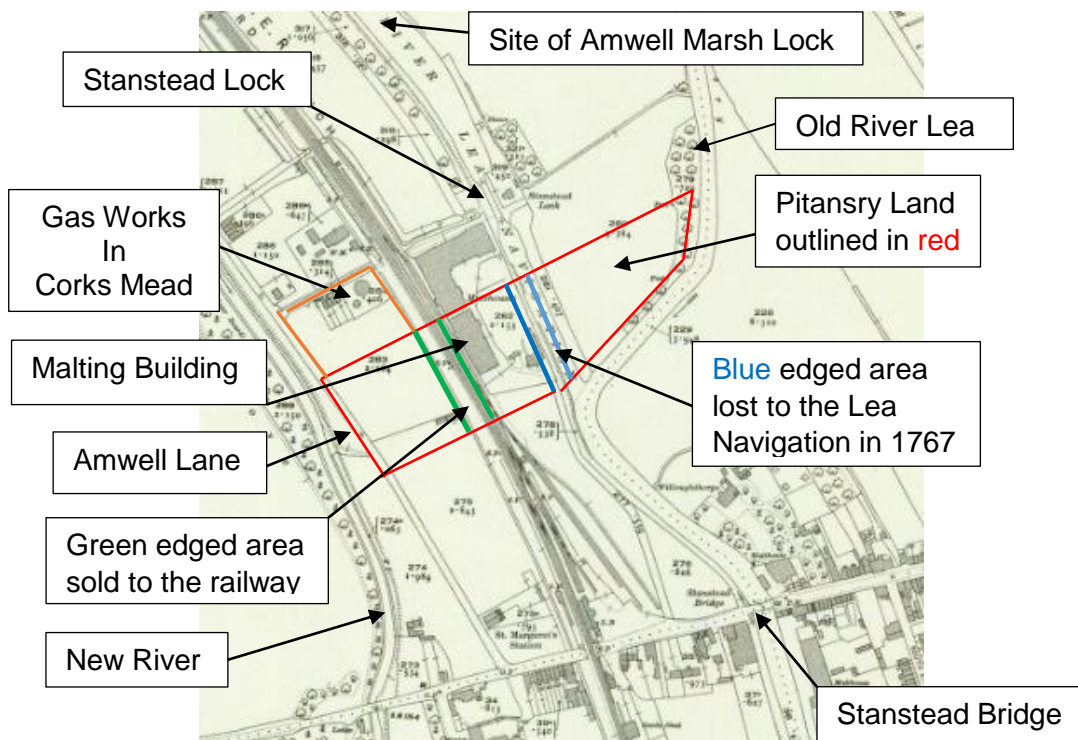
By 1840 the Pitansry land was known as Pippens Mead and had been divided into three sections. Caused by the cutting of the Lea Navigation in 1767 including for the first time a tow path and a new drainage channel that was associated with the draining of the Amwell Marsh between the New River embankment and the new navigation. However the Pitansry Land was still rented out to one individual [George Croft] and was recorded as belonging to the "Poor of Stanstead Abbots". The Pitansry Island had by this time been incorporated into the main meadow. In 1841/2 Amwell Lane was constructed at the base of the New River embankment along the western edge of the Pitansry Land. In 1843 the Hertford Branch railway was constructed through the Pitansry Land. The drainage channel labelled on the map above can be seen today behind the Hertford bound platform at St Margarets Station. It should be noted that Amwell Marsh Lock that was removed in 1856 was located further upstream than the present Stanstead Lock. Also between 1603 and 1840 White Post Mead seems to have been renamed White Pots Mead.



A modern view looking downstream from near Stanstead Lock. The larger part of Pitansry Meadow was located on the further part of the left hand bank of the navigation cut which now separates it from the remaining part of the meadow to the right of the towpath.

As the navigation cut required part of the Pitansry land to be given up for its construction the Baesh Charity subsequently received a yearly wayleave rent charge for the bed of the navigation. The land taken for the railway in 1843 and 1863 would have had to be owned by the railway in order to meet the statutory requirements for operating a railway.

Pitansry Land on an early C20th map



Mention of the Baesh Charity and the Pitansry Land can be found in the Victoria County History [VCH] Volume III published in 1912. This moves us on to a time when the railway has also been built, removing yet more land from the original Pitansry Meadow. In addition the section between the navigation and the railway had seen the construction of part of Richard Hunt's Abbey Maltings, including a house for the manager. The entry in the VCH does raise an issue or two concerning possible changes to this Pitansry Land that might have occurred between 1840 and 1912. The following is the relevant part of the entry in the VCH

“also property formerly described as 'a piece of meadow ground called the Pitansey Meadow alias Parentase,' now consisting of (a) gas works, cottages and land containing 2 a. 3 r. 23 p.; (b) maltings, private dwelling-house and pounds containing 2 a. 1 r. 31 p.; and (c) a meadow containing 3 a. 1 r. 7 p., the whole producing £43 yearly.”

Despite using the traditional name of “Pitansey Meadow alias Parentase” the land described suggests the description for section a) refers to Corks Mead upon which the Gas Works were built in the 1860s along with some workers cottages. The b) section located between the railway and the navigation does appear to refer to the traditional central section of the Pitansry Land. Section c) is a good fit for the section of the Pitansry Land between Amwell Lane and the railway. However the large field of over 5 acres in size next to the Old Lea is not mentioned in the VCH at all. No mention is made either of the rent charge for the bed of the Lee Navigation.

COMPARISON OF EVIDENCE FROM THE TITHE AWARD [1840] AND THE VCH [1912].

Name of land	Tithe area	Land Use in 1840	VCH area	VCH Land Use
Pitansry Land west	3a 2r 0p	Field	3a 1r 7p	Field by Amwell Lane
Pitansry Land centre	2a 2r 22p	Field	2a 1r 31p	Malting and House
Pitansry Land East	5a 0r 39p	Field by Old Lea	Omitted in the VCH	
Corks Mead	3a 0r 38p	Field	2a 3r 23p	Gas Works

Notes

- That coloured green indicates those fields identified as belonging to the Baesh Charity.
- a = acre, r = rood and p = perch
- 1 acre = 4 roods, 1 rood = 40 perch and 1 perch = 30.25 square yards.

The VCH records shown in green above correctly identifies two of the three plots of the Baesh Charity lands named on the tithe map of 1840 as Pippen Mead and owned by the “Poor of Stanstead Abbotts”. However the largest part of Pippen Mead located on the other side of the Navigation Cut was not identified in the VCH. Instead Corks Mead was identified instead even mentioning that the Gas Works as being built on Baesh Charity land.

It appears that between 1840 and 1912 the Baesh Charity Trustees sold off the largest of the three fields of the now fragmented Pitansry Land, as well as that part through which the navigation had been cut. It would also mean that they had purchased Corks Mead during the same period of time. One indication that the largest field north of the Navigation Cut had been sold off before 1878 when maps show by then it had been combined with the adjacent part of White Pots Mead.

The different sections of the ancient Pitansry land in the Parish of Amwell are currently used for very varied purposes. The section between Amwell lane and the railway became a council depot but has for many years been out of use. The part between the railway and the navigation once the Abbey Maltings has been converted into an attractive residential development known as River Meads. The large Pitansry Meadow bordered by the Navigation Cut and the Old Lea, now one large field with the adjoining White Pots Mead is used by the cruising club. Both these original meadows have also been further divided by the flood relief channel that allows water to bypass Stanstead Lock in conditions of high river flow. Corkes Mead once the site of the St Margarets Gas and Coke Works is now occupied by a residential development called Durham Close.

AS IT IS TODAY

A Cruising Club now occupies the combined White Pots Mead and the Pitansry Land on the far side of the Navigation.



The River Meads residential development



The rather care worn former Council Depot as seen from Amwell Lane looking towards the railway.

The Baesh Charity still exists today and looks after the Baesh Alms Houses at the bottom of Cats Hill. In more recent years the six residences have been reduced to three by the expedient of combining pairs of adjacent dwellings into more modern larger homes. The charity also makes contribution to support the wider village community. Villagers are therefore still benefiting from the generosity of Sir Edward Baesh nearly 500 years after he set up the charity.