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## *Kibworth Harcourt: its geography and early history*

The manor and civil parish of Kibworth Harcourt lies about nine miles south-east of Leicester on the main road from Leicester to Market Harborough. The parish, roughly triangular in shape and 1475 acres in extent, occupies part of a ridge running from south-west to north-east and forming the watershed, at a height of 350–450 feet, between the head-waters of the River Sence to the north-west and the tributary streams of the Welland to the south-east (*VCH Leics.* V: 78).

Like so many Leicestershire villages, it lies on the spring line where heavy boulder clay gives way to glacial deposits of sand and gravel lying over impermeable rock. As can be seen on maps 1 and 2, the sand-filled basin of impervious lower lias was in fact too marshy a site for the village, which lies on the edge of the boulder clay to the west of it. Numerous wells,<sup>1</sup> sunk to the underlying gravels, provided the village with an ample water supply (Richardson 1931). To the north and west the village arable and pasture extended over fertile boulder clay. To the south-east lay lower lias with its characteristic drainage problems and most of this area was kept under permanent pasture. The village is one of the best sited in the region, a strong argument for its antiquity *vis-à-vis* its neighbours. The whole region, which is shown in map 1, has been described by R. M. Auty as 'the best fattening pasture of the Eastern region [of Leicestershire] and possibly of England' (Auty in Stamp 1937: 254ff).

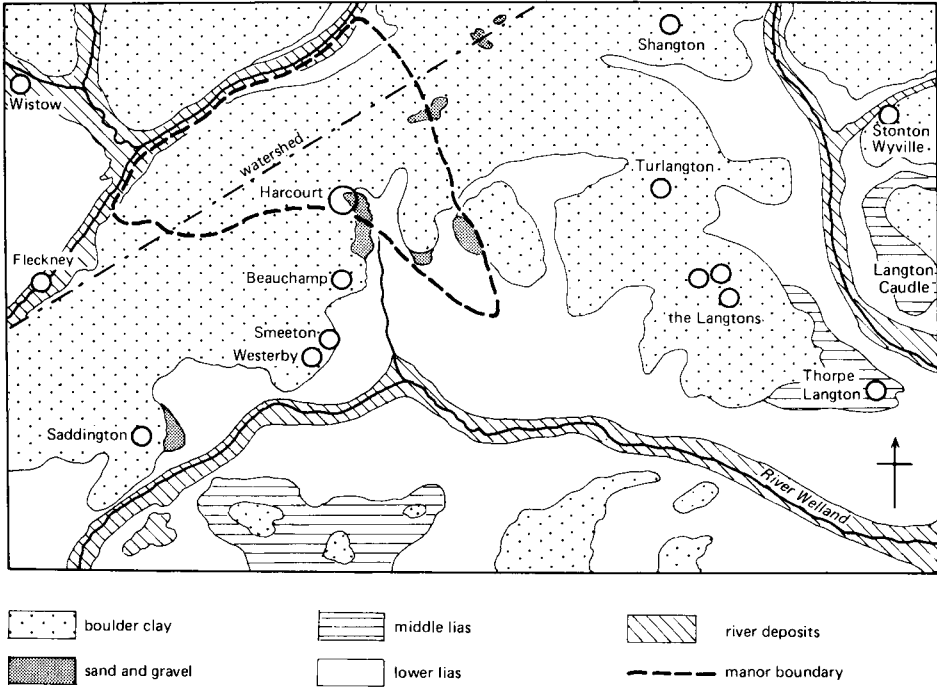
The village has been fortunate in its communications. Today the A6 links it with Leicester and Market Harborough. In 1726 this road became a turnpike road and in 1744 the first coach from London to Leicester via Northampton and Dunstable passed through Kibworth, ushering in a period of prosperity for its five hostelries. The first mail coach used the route in 1785, and in 1810 a by-pass was made through Hall Close in order to avoid the narrow right-angle corner of the village street and its difficult gradient; thus the older part of the village has been spared the noise and grime of modern traffic.

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Map 1 The geological situation of Kibworth Harcourt and the neighbouring villages

Source: Geological Survey of G.B. Section of Solid and Drift Sheet 170 (1963)

However, the old turnpike road was itself a relatively new road, which had probably developed out of a chain of inter-village tracks in the later twelfth century to link the new township of Market Harborough, founded in 1160–70, with Leicester (Hoskins 1965: 53–67). Before this period the principal road had been the east–west one linking the village with the market town of Hallaton in the east and running westwards through Wistow, Kilby and Countesthorpe to Cosby. By the sixteenth century and possibly earlier, the road was known as the Cole Pit Way (see below p. 24fn).<sup>2</sup> At Cosby one branch ran north-east to the Coalville area, the other ran eastwards to the Bedworth coal pits in Warwickshire. A still earlier track, known as the Ridgeway, ran into the village at Cole Bridge Ford, followed the southern headland of Banwell Furlong and then struck north-east towards Carlton Curlieu. This may have been a section of the conjectured Jurassic Way, which ran from the Wiltshire downs to the

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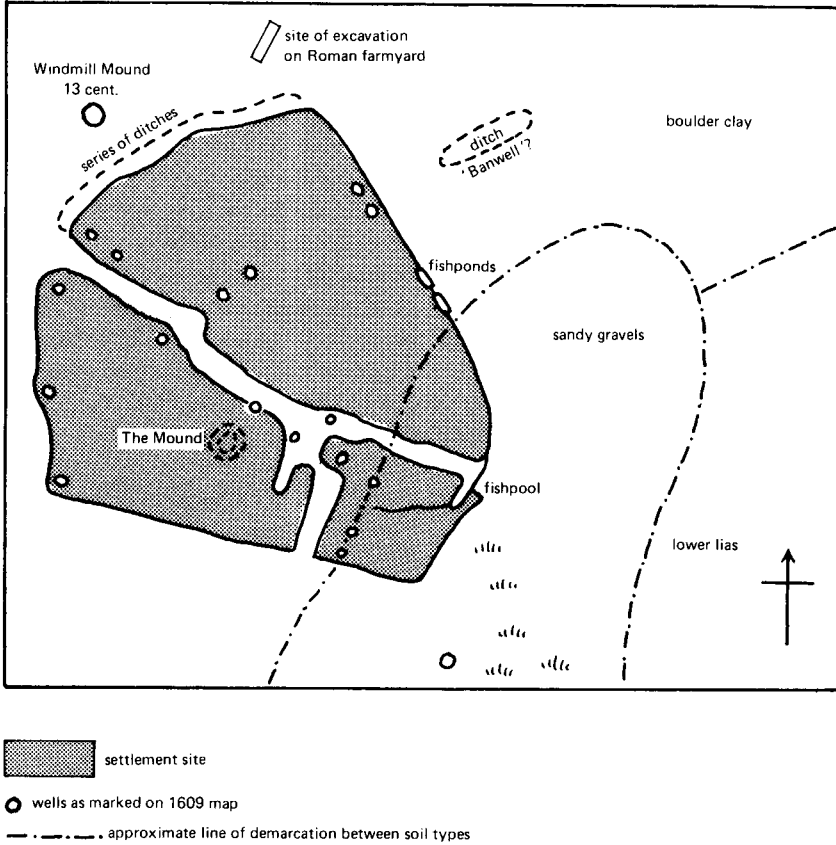
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Map 2 Sketch map of Kibworth Harcourt to show the spring line and archaeological features

Yorkshire wolds in pre-Roman times (*VCH Leics.* III: 57, 60).<sup>\*</sup> Not far east of the village ran the Roman road from Leicester to Colchester known as the Via Devana and locally as the Gartree Road (Bellairs 1893: 292–8, 357–64, map p. 357).

In spite of its advantageous position, half way between the market towns of Market Harborough and Glen Magna, Kibworth Harcourt never became a market centre. Kibworth Beauchamp secured this privilege for reasons which have probably more to do with the activities of the Harcourt and Beauchamp families at higher levels than with geographical convenience. However, there was a market

<sup>\*</sup> The skeletal remains of at least four individuals and associated artefacts from a Beaker burial (1800–1700 bc) were discovered at Smeeton Westerby in 1975. SP 671911.

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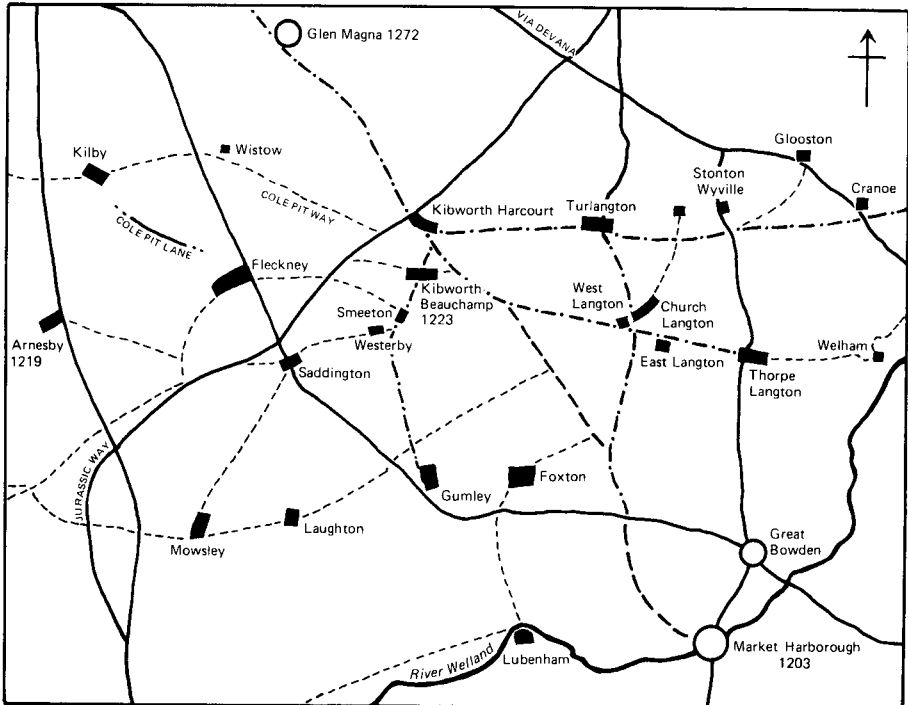
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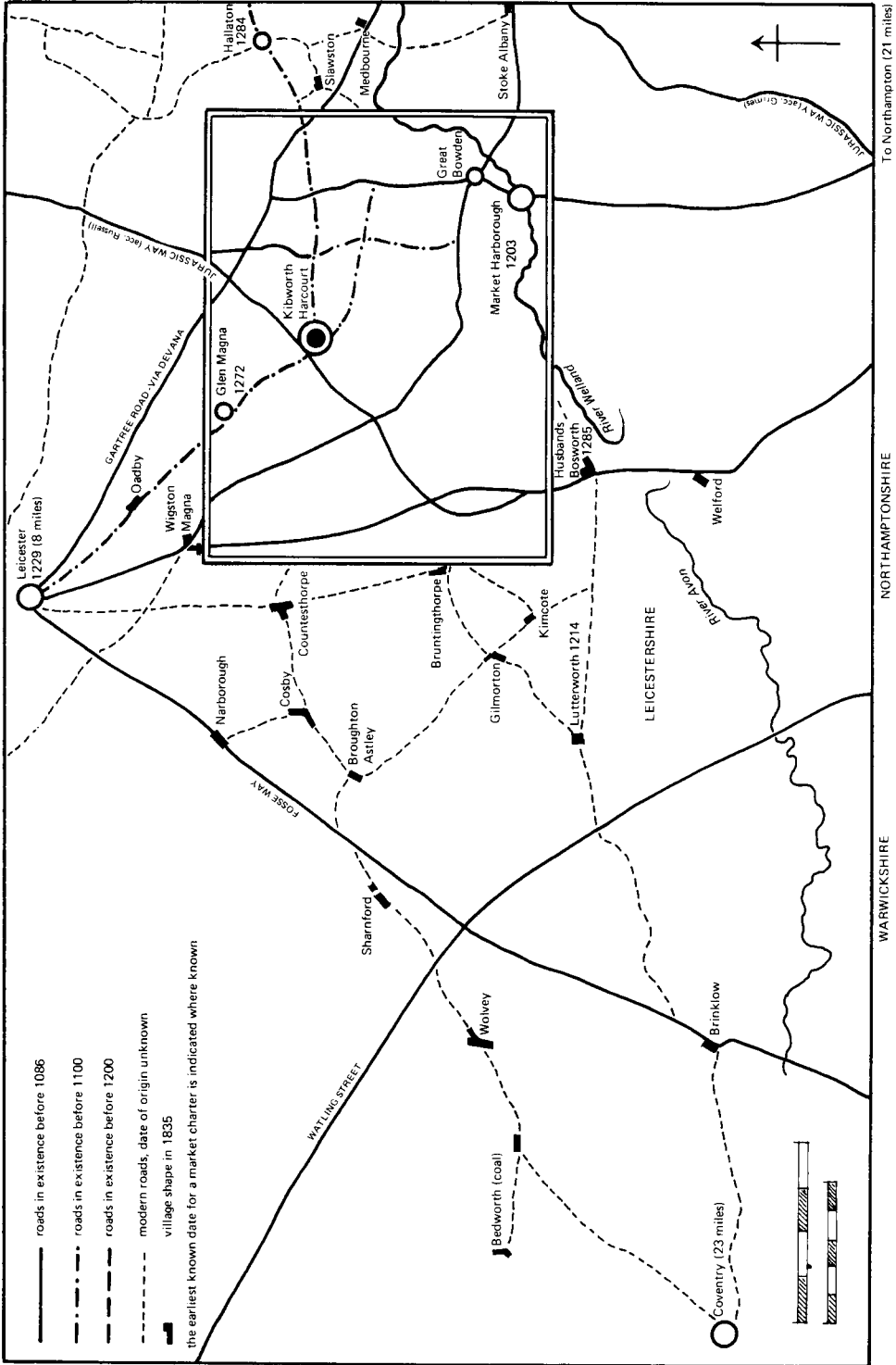
on most days of the week at one or other of the local villages within walking distance, where small surpluses of grain, butter and cheese could be bought and sold. The emphasis should be laid on the exchange of *small* surpluses, since with the exception of St Mary's Abbey, Leicester, demesne farms in the country were small and not market orientated (Hilton 1947: 80–2), while the profit margin on peasant holdings was so small, as we shall see later, that purchases of more than a few bushels of grain or pounds of cheese would have been rare. Indeed, the Kibworth situation would support R. H. Britnell's contention that the proliferation of markets between 1200–1349 was more closely related to the growth of local trade between food producers, craftsmen and tradesmen than to developments in international or inter-regional trade, or to the growth of the landlord's household expenditure. 'Landlords', Britnell suggests, 'founded

— roads in existence before 1086  
 - - - roads in existence before 1100  
 - - - roads in existence before 1200  
 - - - modern roads, date of origin unknown  
 ■ village shape in 1835  
 the earliest known date for a market charter is indicated where known



Map 3a Minor roads around Kibworth Harcourt

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Map 3 The road system and markets around Kibworth Harcourt, and their position in relation to Leicester, Northampton and Coventry

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small, unambitious markets perhaps more to accommodate the poor than for profit' (Britnell 1981: 209–21). One of the arguments put forward for the absence of large-scale demesne farming in Leicestershire is the poor transport system. Before McAdam, the heavy clays of the county had always made road haulage difficult and given the competitive edge to livestock husbandry. However, the difficulties are not insuperable and in a recent seminar paper Professor Sir Michael Postan has argued that with road transport costs at 1.2 pence per ton mile in the thirteenth century, the haulage of medium- and high-value commodities, such as wheat and wool, over distances of up to thirty miles was not disproportionately high.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Postan argues, the increase in labour and haulage costs in the fifteenth century and the fall in agricultural prices led to a decline in long-distance haulage and to the decay of the road system. The argument put forward in the sixteenth century that Leicestershire was 'too far remote from any means of exportation of corn'<sup>4</sup> may not have been equally true of the thirteenth century; the road system *may* have been more fully used in the pre-plague period. However, the winter conditions of roads in a clayland region would have restricted haulage to summer and autumn and necessitated the drying and storing of grain over winter. This is what St Mary's Abbey did, but until we have evidence of other landlords storing grain for summer transport the argument cannot be substantiated. The fact remains that demesne farms in Leicestershire were small and were for the most part parcelled out for rents.

By the sixteenth century specialised markets were developing rapidly in the region. Market Harborough had become famous for its cattle, horse and sheep markets. Northampton specialised in horses and in leather goods; Coventry in cattle; Leicester in cheese, leather goods and wool (Clarkson 1966: 25–9; Everitt in Thirsk 1967: 466–589). The absence of a grain market is noticeable. Lying beyond the influence of the London market, Leicestershire corn prices were marginally lower than in the South Midlands, as was the value of arable land. By contrast, the value of pasture land was appreciably higher; fallow pasture, for example, was valued at 20 shillings the acre in Leicestershire as against a mere 5 shillings the acre in Oxfordshire (Havinden 1965). By the sixteenth century there was certainly no market at Kibworth but the number of shopkeepers had increased from a draper, two broggers and a doctor in the thirteenth century to a weaver, a tailor, a shoemaker, a butcher, a baker, a brewer and a carpenter. In both the medieval and the early modern period there was a long-distance carter.

**The early history of the manor**

Conspicuous in the village is a conical, flat-topped mound some 16 yards in diameter at the top and 122 yards in circumference at the base, while the height in the slope is 18 yards, vertical height 9 feet. So large a man-made feature cannot be lightly dismissed. It should be able to shed some light on the origin of the settlement, or at least upon its development. However, the Mound, as it is called, is extraordinarily reluctant to yield its secrets; not only is it difficult to get experts to agree as to its measurements, but opinion differs as to its origin and function – it could be either an early Roman barrow or a medieval motte.

Apart from a short stretch on its north side, the mound is surrounded by a ditch measuring 9 feet wide and 5 feet deep in the south-west. It was excavated in 1863 by Sir H. Dryden and measured and planned in 1965 by Mr A. Aggas and Mr G. Yates.<sup>5</sup> Dryden's plans survive but they are uninformative without the notes, which are now lost.<sup>6</sup> A somewhat incoherent account of his work appeared in the *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society* for 1863, in which it was reported that the mound in Hall Close, together with 'an elevated barrow connected with it', had been excavated. The 'elevated barrow' was almost certainly that 'considerable barrow' which Nichols described in 1778 as lying to the north-west of the village (*VCH Leics.* I: 275; Nichols 1790: 639). This was excavated recently by Aggas and Yates and proved to be the site of the thirteenth-century windmill. The Mound itself has proved more baffling. According to the *Leicester Journal* for Friday, 7 August 1863, the mound had first been excavated in 1836 or thereabouts when a trench was cut into its western side. In 1863 a second trench was cut, this time from north to south. Traces of both trenches can be seen today, and neither cut through the centre. According to the newspaper report, the

depth of the cutting was in the centre eight to nine feet. About five feet deep was found a layer of black soil and what sometimes appeared ashes and burnt wood. In this layer were found bones, teeth and one or two pieces of Roman pottery. On a level with the same layer a pavement of large stones about four feet by two was discovered. A bone bodkin was also found and an iron candlestick. At a depth of from eight to nine feet there was a regular layer of black soil; looking as if that was the old natural ground, and the above made up ground.

According to a note on Dryden's plan, the pavement was found, not

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in the mound, but near the hedge some 70 feet from the ditch on the east side. It was 4 feet 6 inches under the surface and a second pavement was found a further 4½ feet below the first. Dryden's plan shows the Mound as round, on Mr Aggas's plan it is oval.

One cannot draw firm conclusions from such garbled accounts. According to the *Leicester Chronicle* for Saturday, 8 August, 1863, the Reverend Edward Trollope of Leasingham, whose views were evidently held in high esteem, gave it as his opinion that the mound was 'a ring barrow, and probably that of a Roman military officer or agricultural colonist'. The evidence does indeed suggest a Roman barrow, an unusually large one, on what is known to have been the site of a Roman settlement, but Mr Dunning found the evidence inconclusive<sup>7</sup> (Dunning and Jessup 1936: 37–53). In his opinion, the mound is too large for a Roman barrow, and seems to have been altered at some later date, possibly to provide part of the earthworks of a medieval manor house. Dr V. R. Webster felt it was more probably a medieval motte than a Roman tumulus.<sup>8</sup> Both these distinguished archaeologists had only the plans of Dryden and Aggas to work on and the garbled accounts in the *Transactions* and the local press. To take the suggestion that it was part of a medieval manor house first: this seems unlikely because the village in the medieval period was always a member of a far-flung estate, was never the *caput* of the Honor and was never held by a mesne tenant. Consequently, there was no need for a manor house. The bailiff occupied a modest building with a garden and dovecote to the north of the main street<sup>9</sup> (see below pp. 125–6). However, the mound may have been used as a motte at some time. Approached from the north-west it lies *below* the general level of the settlement, but to the south-east the land falls away gently to the marshy area on the boundary with Kibworth Beauchamp. Therefore, from a strategic point of view, the mound was quite well sited to repulse attack from the south-east, and may have been part of a system of defences in association with the series of ditches further to the north-west. As such it may well have formed a link in the Danish chain of 'burhs' to the south-west of Leicester commanding the Welland frontier (Hoskins 1935–7: 94–109), or have been hastily erected during the disturbances of Stephen's reign. However, the narrowly restricted value of the site, capable of repulsing attack from the south-east only, suggests the utilisation of an earthwork already in existence, such as a burial mound of Roman or pre-Roman origin, given the Roman finds the excavators associated with it. In which case, the settlement at Kibworth was already 'old' in Saxon times and was associated with some fairly important personage. The number of Roman villas identified in the immediate



vicinity testifies to the advanced degree of Romanisation of the area, and though no more than the *yard* of the Roman villa/farm at Kibworth has been excavated, it is sufficient evidence to justify the association of a burial mound with a Roman or Romano-Celtic villa, at least as a possibility (see below p. 82). However, whether Celt or Roman, the villa owner would have employed Celtic labourers, slave or free. With the decline of direct Roman influence, either the local Celtic community or a group of Anglian settlers ploughed over the site of the Roman buildings and established a village immediately north of the mound, between the mound and the ditches, an area easily converted into a burh. The situation of Kibworth Harcourt: on the Ridgeway, on a spring line, on a Roman site, in an area extensively cleared and settled in the Roman period, if not earlier, makes it very improbable that the site was deserted for long, if at all, during the interval between the withdrawal of the legions and the settlement of the Saxons, although the field names are for the most part Saxon (Roberts 1977: 78–81). Fortunately, Scandinavian attitudes towards family land are so similar to those of the Welsh that it is not of critical importance to the thesis developed in chapter ten to establish a firm conclusion with regard to the Celtic or Anglian origin of the community. If, however, the settlement had been established *de novo* around a Danish burh or medieval motte, then the customs *may* have been of a hybrid complexion and of questionable use in interpreting the development of custom in relation to the regional economy. The difference between estate custom and indigenous custom is as yet an unexplored field and may turn out to be unimportant, but it should not be forgotten, hence our interest in the origin of the Mound: it may have been a burial mound later adapted to purposes of defence, or it may have been commissioned as a motte in the early medieval period. If the former, then we have a non-military origin for the settlement; if the latter, we can be certain that the settlement pre-dated the mound and its military character is not of importance to the social structure and development of the village.

By 1066 Kibworth Harcourt formed one of a group of manors held by a certain Aelric, the son of Meriet, a freeman. The estate was considerable, and all of it seems to have passed to Robert de Veci (*VCH Leics.* I: 323), with the exception of a group of manors in Kesteven which one Baldwin held in 1086 but which, it was claimed, had been granted by Aelric to Westminster Abbey.<sup>10</sup> Thus the Veci estate in 1086 consisted of Wolvey and Nether Whitacre in Warwickshire, Braybrooke in Northamptonshire, Great Steeping, Caythorpe, Friston, Normanton, Willoughby, Brandon, *Suanitone* and *Hechintune*

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in Lincolnshire and, in Leicestershire, 14 carucates at Gilmorton, 12 carucates at Kibworth Harcourt, 10 at Newton Harcourt, 6¼ at Shenton, 4 at Kilworth, at Gumley and at Husband's Bosworth, 3¾ at Thorpe Langton, and 2 at Shangton, a total of 59 carucates in Leicestershire alone, with 47 ploughs. Robert de Veci kept only the two Harcourts in his own hand, the rest of the Leicestershire estates he subinfeudated to mesne tenants.

According to the Leicestershire survey made in 1130, one Ansketil was holding the de Veci manors in Gartree Hundred, namely, Kibworth Harcourt, Shangton and Thorpe Langton (Slade 1956: 14, 95). Unfortunately, the remaining manors were not included in the Leicestershire Survey, nor in the Lindsey Survey of 1115–18 (Round 1909: 181ff). G. F. Farnham and H. Round were of the opinion that this Ansketil was Anchetil de Harcourt, the son of Robert and grandson of Anchetil de Harcourt (Farnham 1927: 104–5). The second Anchetil begot William, who begot Robert who married Isabel of Stanton in Oxfordshire. Their grandson, Richard, married Arabella, daughter of Saer de Quincy. Richard died in 1258 leaving two sons, William who held the Bosworth fee and in whose line it descended until 1509 when it was sold, and Saer, the younger son who received Kibworth Harcourt (Wedgewood 1914: 187–210). Saer married Agnes de Segeville<sup>11</sup> and they had two sons, Richard and Simon.<sup>12</sup> Saer supported the cause of Simon de Montfort and forfeited his lands in 1265;<sup>13</sup> they were granted to Saer's overlord, William Mauduit, Earl of Warwick.<sup>14</sup> In 1267, however, Saer received the king's pardon and by October 1268 the manor had been returned to him by Mauduit's widow, the Countess Alice.<sup>15</sup> But Saer's finances continued in disarray and at some date between 1267 and 1269 he conveyed the manor to John le Ferrun of London, perhaps as a security for debt.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Walter of Merton, Bishop of Rochester and Chancellor of England, was engaged in the purchase of property for the endowment of his new college, the present site of which, in Oxford, he purchased in 1268 (Henderson 1899). In 1269 Walter opened negotiations for the acquisition of Kibworth Harcourt by buying out John le Ferrun's interest in the manor,<sup>17</sup> and also that of a Jew named Cok, son of Cresse, who might otherwise have claimed an interest on account of Saer's debts to him.<sup>18</sup> In 1270 Walter paid Saer £400 for the manor,<sup>19</sup> and in 1271 Saer granted the manor to Walter of Merton, saving only to himself an annual payment of 20s for the advowson, View of Frankpledge and all suits of court, customs and exactions.<sup>20</sup> It seems that Walter's original intention was to add the entire manor of Kibworth Harcourt to the corpus of estates belonging to his college. In his second charter, that of 1270, he mentions Kibworth among the