

## Marl pits in 13<sup>th</sup>-century Sutton Coldfield

By Mike Hodder

A transcription of the Warwickshire Eyre Roll of 1262 was published a few years ago.<sup>1</sup> An Eyre was held by itinerant judges who could hear all civilian and criminal cases in the county they visited. It also investigated deaths by misadventure, as in this case that caught my eye:

*Peter, son of Alexander was squashed in a marl pit in Sutton so that he instantly died. Roger of Walmley, Alexander of Walmley and Geoffrey of Walmley were present when Peter was overwhelmed (p 363, no. 1156)*

Presumably the sides of the marl pit caved in. The victim and all the witnesses to the accident were from Walmley, so the marl pit must have been there as well. “Walmley” would have been Walmley Ash (where ASDA is now) rather than Walmley village, which developed later. The earliest known reference to Walmley is Geoffry de Warmley, who is mentioned in 1231 and 1240.<sup>2</sup> He may be the Geoffrey of 1262.

As far as I know, this is the earliest date that a marl pit is mentioned in Sutton. Marl pits are recorded in the 13th century in Yardley (where similarly a man was crushed to death) and elsewhere in the country.<sup>3</sup> Most, if not all, of the numerous ponds in the Walmley area that are shown on historic Ordnance Survey maps are former marl pits which inevitably filled up with water because they were dug into impermeable clay. Marl pits were dug and used in Sutton over a long period of time<sup>4</sup> and they are therefore extremely difficult to date. Anything filling them dates to their disuse rather than the time that they were originally dug.

Marl pits were dug in locations where the “solid” geological formation, Mercia Mudstone (formerly known as Keuper Marl)<sup>5</sup>, which weathers to a clay, impermeable and prone to waterlogging, is overlain by sandy and pebbly glacial drift, which by contrast can dry out and is slightly acid. Clay derived from the mudstone was dug from marl pits, usually on field edges or corners and spread out over the surface. This improved moisture retention and, because mudstone is slightly calcareous, counteracted the acidity.

Clay was also dug in the Middle Ages to make pottery, at the 13<sup>th</sup>-century “potters pits” near Peddimore<sup>6</sup>, roof tiles like those found in excavations at the medieval lodge in Sutton Park<sup>7</sup>, and floor tiles for churches and manor houses like Sutton’s manor house<sup>8</sup>. It was an ingredient of

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<sup>1</sup> *The Warwickshire Eyre Roll of 1262*, edited by J Rohrkasten, Dugdale Society publications vol 54, 2022. Thanks to Dr Andrew Watkins who drew this publication to my attention

<sup>2</sup> R Pritchard, ‘Geoffrey de Warmelegh’ <https://sclhrg.org.uk/research/proceedings/145-volume-2/2271-volume-2-article-8-geoffrey-de-warmelegh.html>

<sup>3</sup> V Skipp, *Medieval Yardley* (Phillimore, 1970), 44; Rackham, *The History of the Landscape* (Dent, 1986), 370-1

<sup>4</sup> R Lea, ‘Marlpits’, <https://sclhrg.org.uk/history-spot/101-articles-1-40/1901-marlpits-19.html>

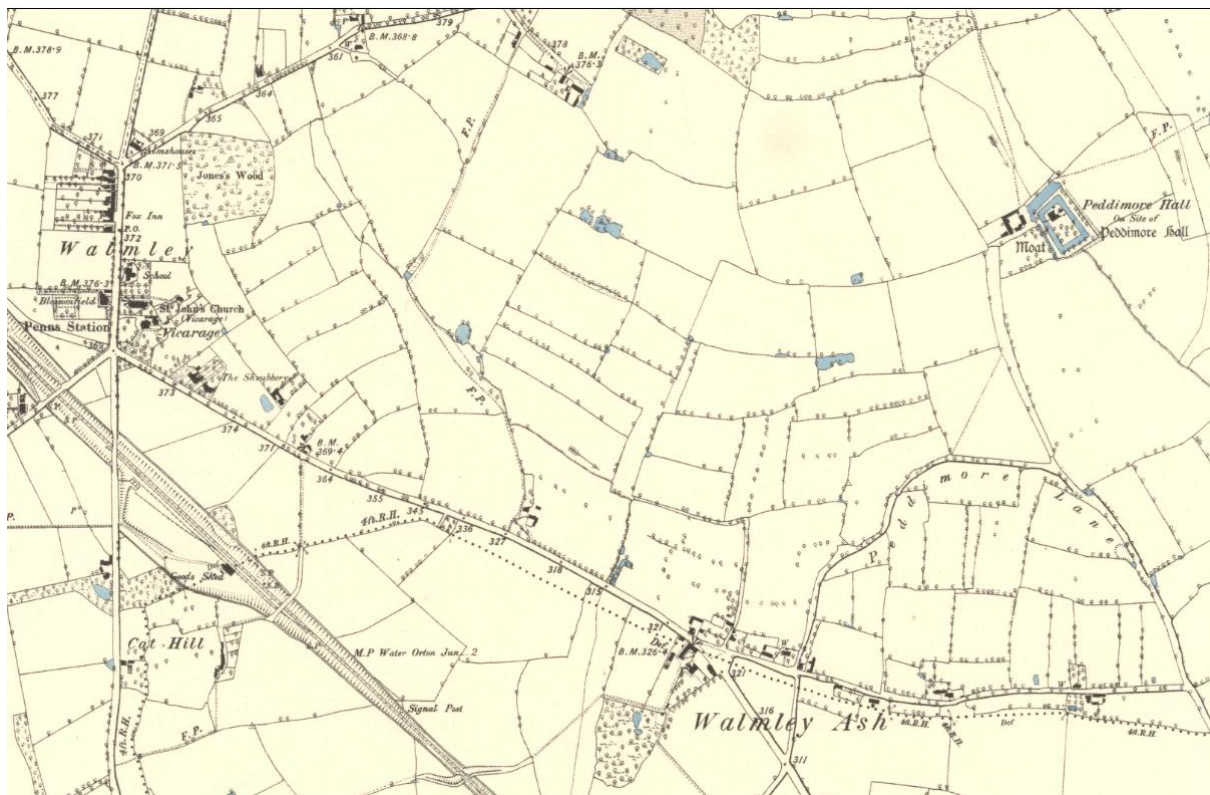
<sup>5</sup> J H Powell, B W Glover and C N Waters, *Geology of the Birmingham area*. British Geological Survey Memoir for 1:50,000 sheet 168 (England and Wales) (The Stationery Office, 2000), 75

<sup>6</sup> M Hodder, ‘Potters at Peddimore’, <https://sclhrg.org.uk/research/original-research/2243-potters-at-peddimore.html>

<sup>7</sup> I Trueman, M Poulton, M Hodder, L Large, S Hancock and S Phipps, *The Flora of Sutton Park* (Pisces Publications, 2023), 106; R White, M Hodder, H Chapman, D Reynolds, and D Smith, ‘Birmingham, Sutton Park, medieval lodge’, *West Midlands Archaeology* 63 (2022), 141–42

<sup>8</sup> M Hodder, *The Archaeology of Sutton Park* (The History Press, 2013), 103

daub that covered wattle panels in timber-framed walls and it was also used as a component of hearths and ovens like the one found in Coleshill Street.<sup>9</sup>



The Walmley area on the Ordnance Survey map of 1887. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland <https://maps.nls.uk/>

<sup>9</sup> M Hodder, *Birmingham: the Hidden History* (The History Press, 2011), 96