

SHEEP BONE FLOOR IN SUMMER HOUSE AT AVENUE FARM, SUTTON BRIDGE

Beryl Jackson and Pat Jakes

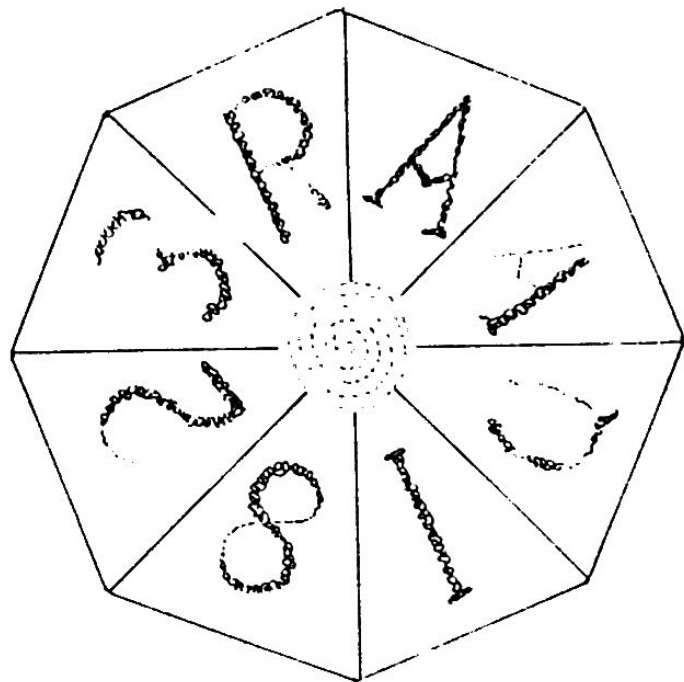
In the garden of a farmhouse at Avenue Farm, Long Sutton, now hidden by shrubs, is the floor of a former summer house. The floor, eight feet in diameter and octagonal in shape, is made from the leg bones of sheep. The bones are embedded vertically, most of which are laid with the knuckle end showing on the surface, giving a cobbled effect; the bones are reversed to use the flatter end of the bone, to depict the letters and numbering (Fig.).

The farmhouse and land was once part of Guy's Hospital estate, who owned a large area of the reclaimed marsh until 1919, when the Smallholdings Act was passed, and the entire estate was acquired by the Ministry of Agriculture. The whole of the Guy's Hospital estate consisted of silt marshlands which were enclosed by the sea banks of 1640, 1720, 1747 and 1865. The land at Avenue Farm was enclosed by the sea bank of 1640.

On Bryant's map of 1828, Avenue Farm is shown as Anderson's Farm; this name could possibly be the explanation for the lettering in the bone floor which reads, as far as we are able to decipher, R A AD 1823. In the 1841 census, there is a reference to a Richard Anderson, farmer and grazier in Sutton Wash, Sutton Wash being the 'wash of Sutton', (now known as Long Sutton). Thousands of sheep grazed the marshes after they were enclosed from the sea, as well as the outmarsh.

The imposing family tomb in Long Sutton churchyard shows that Richard Anderson died in 1842, aged 42. Also named on the tomb is his wife Martha, 'daughter of the late ... George Clarke' - the Clarkes were also known to be farmers and graziers in Sutton Wash. The date of her death is not known, the lettering being badly decayed. The tomb also records their only son, Frederick Clarke Anderson, who died 13 May 1903, aged 65, and his daughter, Elizabeth Ellen, who died 10 December 1911, aged 41 years, apparently unmarried.

The wooden structure which covered the knuckle bone floor fell down several years ago. It too was octagonal in shape, the entrance being on the south; the seating was simply a shelving arrangement attached to the walls. The floor has been examined by a butcher, who was of the opinion that only the fore legs of the sheep were used, in which case, it would have taken the bones from approximately 5,000 sheep in the making of the floor. Large numbers of sheep were drowned on the marshes, one theory is that their bones were used to make the floor, which is quite elegantly done, with serifs and varied 'pen strokes', possibly the work of a professional, or at least, that of a gifted amateur. Does any reader have comments on the matter?



Avenue Farm, Sutton Bridge: diagram of arrangement of bones. The site is not easy to photograph. Does anyone know of anything similar in the county?