Comment: The East Anglian 'game-place': some facts and fictions

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A year ago, in the REED Newsletter, Richard Beadle wrote about 'the potential significance of the East Anglian game-place' and concluded his article by saying that 'the game-places of Norfolk and Suffolk would seem to offer a possible departure for further research involving textual, documentary and, conceivably, even archaeological evidence'. I am glad to say that documentary evidence will be available in Records of Plays and Players in Norfolk and Suffolk, to be published as Malone Society Collections XI before — I hope — the end of this year and containing the records of thirty-eight towns and villages; those of us who are interested in the East Anglian game-place may, however, be disappointed. Such information as there is about the game-places at Walsham-le-Willows and Great Yarmouth is fairly well-known already. The only new game-place which has come to light is one at Wymondham, in references in a vellum-bound Wymondham Town Book which, until the early summer of 1977, had lurked uncatalogued in the Norfolk Record Office.

The first reference to the Wymondham game-place occurs, probably, in 1583-4, when 'Thomas Haste gent' pays four shillings for 'one acre of land in his Cloase nere the game place by yere' (f 18v). In 1584-5 Haste again pays his rent of four shillings (f 21) and there are two more entries in that year:

- Item payd to hym ye xxvi of marche for takyng downe ye stages at ye game place and workyng at ye Chirche by syxe dayes (f 22)
- Item payd to Thomas Coote for bringynge of ye stagyng tymber from ye game place to ye Chyrche (f 22v)

In the following year, 1585-6, Thomas Talbot, a doctor of civil law and a well-known local worthy, seems to have taken over Haste's land, because he too pays four shillings 'for one acre of lande lyeng in his Cloase nere ye game place' (f 25). Similar entries appear every year until 1620-1, although in 1606-7 the rent goes up
to six shillings and eight pence. By 1618-19 the game-place seems to have become Bridewell, mentioned in that year for the first time: 'Off Mr doctor Talbott for one acre of land within his Close nere the game place nowe Bridwell deteyned by him' (f 118).

Most of the towns and villages of Norfolk and Suffolk seem to have had their games, and references to 'game', 'game booke', 'game gere', 'game players', 'game weke' are found in the records of sixteen towns or villages in the volume. The records of some villages mention the 'games' of others, and in the Snettisham Churchwardens' Accounts, for example, between 1469 and 1491, payments ranging from two pence to thirteen pence are made for the costs of 'Brycham', 'Ryngstede', 'dockyng', 'Walsyrton' and 'Fryng' games. In the sense that all games were presumably held somewhere, 'game-places' for them must have existed, and at Bungay the Churchwardens' Accounts of Holy Trinity for the year 1568 have an entry for 'mony collectyd at the game in the castle yard in the Boothes and elles wher'. Apart from Walsham-le-Willows, however, there is no conclusive evidence so far that 'game-places' were permanent structures designed especially for the production of games; indeed, as the Wymondham evidence suggests, stages could be assembled for the game and taken down when the game was over.

The idea that permanent structures were common seems to have arisen, partly at least, from a misreading and misinterpretation of the records of Great Yarmouth. Several scholars have written of the Yarmouth 'game house'. Glynne Wickham goes so far as to say that 'in 1538/39 a "Game House" was built in Great Yarmouth by the Corporation' and that 'here then, astonishing as it may seem, we have a municipally subsidized theatre legally established in a provincial city nearly forty years before Burbage, with the aid of private-enterprise capital, erected his metropolitan house'. As I have mentioned elsewhere, I have never come across the name 'game house' in the Yarmouth records, and no evidence exists to prove that the corporation actually built the house next to the game-place, although it does seem to have owned the property.

Another topic is briefly mentioned in the article by Mr Beadle. The Great Yarmouth Borough Court Rolls for 1492-3, 1531-2, 1533-4 and 1538-9 record payments of four pence for the 'tentys' or 'tentes' (more correctly 'tentis' if the case is ablative plural) 'iuxta le game place'. My own tentative suggestion that 'tentys' etc (i.e., tenementis) may mean 'tenements' did not find favour with Mr Beadle who said that 'the "Tentys" and "tentes" which appear in some of the Yarmouth game-place documents, and which puzzle Galloway ..., may well have been scaffolds on the site'. He directs us to R.E. Latham's Revised Medieval Latin Word-List where tenta can mean scaffold. Unfortunately, however, the meanings in the Word-list are necessarily of fairly general application and cannot take note of all the customary uses of the same words in different contexts in different parts of the country. The word 'tentys' etc occurs numerous times in the Yarmouth records and even more frequently in the Norwich records. In the Yarmouth Court Roll for 1538-9, in fact, in which two references to the game-place occur, payments of four pence are made for four other 'tentis iuxta' something or
other, including some ‘iuxta Oxney Gatys’. It may be, as Mr Beadle thinks, that the ‘tentes’ in question were scaffolds used in some way for the staging of plays, but are we to assume also that there were, as a result, many ‘theatres’ in Yarmouth and even more in Norwich? By far the most common meaning of the word in Yarmouth was ‘tenements’, seemingly a catch-all term for several different kinds of property.11

While sectors of our standard works on the drama and theatre of England before 1642 often remind me of large inverted pyramids in which a great deal of speculation and wishful thinking balances precariously on a very small base.12 One of the purposes of REED is to reduce the wishful thinking by broadening the base.

NOTES
1 ‘The East Anglian “game-place”: a possibility for further research,’ REED Newsletter (1978:1), 3, 4.
2 John Wasson is the editor of the volume, which includes contributions from me on Great Yarmouth and Wymondham. It does not include the voluminous records of Norwich which JoAnna Dutka and I are preparing for publication, in two volumes, in the REED series.
3 See, for example, Beadle, op cit, 4, notes 6, 7, 8, 9.
4 I owe my knowledge of the Wymondham Town Book to Mr Paul Rutledge, senior assistant archivist at the Norfolk Record Office.
5 The date and folio number are conjectural — although, I think, accurate — because of the fragmentary state of the book before f 21.
6 For a discussion of the significance of the word ‘game’, see Glynne Wickham, Early English Stages, 1300-1600, II, i (London, 1963), 166ff.
8 Wickham, EES, II, i, 166, 167.
10 Beadle, op cit, 4. Strictly speaking, the word ‘tentes’ does not appear in the ‘game-place’ entries. What does appear is the word ‘tent’ plus the ‘es’/‘is’ abbreviation.
11 Paul Rutledge thinks, however, that the ‘tentes/tentis/tentys’ under discussion are ‘tenter frames’ for the stretching of cloth, and I think that the smaller rent of four pence adds weight to his suggestion. In 1538-9, Robert Coppyng was charged the much larger rent of four shillings ‘pro ffirma de le Game place & domus ibidem’. The sixteenth-century Churchwardens’ Accounts of Sherborne, Dorset, contain several references to ‘tentes’ or ‘tentis’ which here seem to mean ‘tents’ in which the players changed their costumes. In 1574, for example, a payment of ten pence is made for ‘setting up of the backer tentes for the players to aray them selves yn’ (Malone Society Collections IX [1977], 13).
12 Speculation about the importance — or lack of it — of the provincial inn yard in the development of the English theatre is one example of the kind of speculation which is based on very little evidence. I discuss the matter in the seventh volume of Elizabethan Theatre, which will be published shortly.