



*Copper alloy coin weight made in Antwerp around 1550-78. The initials BF are those of its maker symbolized by a hand. A corroded plug of a different alloy indicates that the weight of the cast had to be corrected. Dimensions: 16mm square and 4mm thick (photo: author).*

## **Aids to running an estate in the 16th century**

### **By Valerie Fenwick**

After Butley Priory was dissolved by Henry VIII in 1536, the site was sold to William Forth, a Hadleigh wool merchant. His son, Robert, made his home there, adding a mansion to the east side of the huge monastic gatehouse, today known as Butley Priory. Unfortunately no portraits survive of the Forth family, while the mansion fell into ruin and was demolished in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is almost as if they had never existed – almost, but exceptionally two objects do survive which we can be sure were handled by Robert himself.

The first is a survey of his Butley estate commissioned in 1594. From this we know the size and name of each field and the tenant or freeholder who cultivated it. The document and its maps were professionally drafted by Ranulph Agas, and continued to be used by Robert up to his death in 1601, as shown by marginal notes in his own handwriting.

One entry of interest to us records that he planted with trees part of what we know as Oak Wood. Such surveys were invaluable aids to running an estate, and readers will be familiar with the survey made of Sudbourne Estate for Sir Michael Stanhope a few years later.

The second is a small but beautifully preserved copper alloy weight, found by David Boast some years ago close to where the stables and offices of the mansion will have been situated.

We take for granted the value stated on our coins, although it no longer reflects the worth of the metal discs themselves. It was different in the past when silver and gold were used. Then it was essential to check the weight of a coin in order to know if it was genuine, or if the edges had been clipped, thus decreasing its value. However, the problem was complicated; sometimes mints made changes to the weight of a denomination and revalued others. As a result, in the same way that we may rely on a calculator on our desk, in the past an important object on the desk of a man of affairs was a little box containing a balance and selection of weights. It enabled any silver or gold coin to be checked against the relevant weight.

David's weight was made for validating a gold coin – the rose-noble of 120 grains – as opposed to an earlier noble of 108 grains. The 'R' to the right of the ship almost certainly stands for 'rose', while the hand on the back with the letters BF stands