

Medieval rural settlement

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Early research

In *The Lost Villages of England* Maurice Beresford (1954) listed only 15 deserted medieval villages in Somerset. These were mainly culled from easily available sources such as Collinson (1791), places listed as having fewer than ten inhabitants in 1428 and settlements which had lost their parish churches. Little was recorded from field evidence although Maurice did correspond with field walkers who alerted him to certain sites.



Figure 15.1: Air photograph of Sock Dennis near Ilchester showing the characteristic earthworks of a deserted medieval settlement site.

The 15 sites recorded in 1954 included Sock Dennis (Figure 15.1), “an obliterated place” near Ilchester, where a church and fourteen people were recorded in the 1377 poll tax, and Earnshill described by Collinson as “depopulated” and possibly the best candidate in the county of a Black Death desertion.

Ann Hamlin, then at Exeter University and now an archaeologist in Northern Ireland, began to collect further data on sites in Somerset and this card index was supplied to the writer when he became the first county archaeologist for Somerset in 1974.

Somerset, unlike adjacent counties, had had no big set piece deserted medieval village excavation in the 1960s, though Philip Rahtz had looked at a small area of the Barrow Mead site near Bath. In Wiltshire extensive work had been carried out at Gomeldon near Salisbury, in Gloucestershire Upton in Brockley on the Cotswolds had been examined by Philip Rahtz and Rodney Hilton and in Dorset, Holworth was excavated.

By 1971 when Maurice Beresford and John Hurst edited a series of studies (*Deserted Medieval Villages*) Somerset was credited with 27 sites – four of which, derived from documents, had not been located. A few of the other sites had been located from field evidence but the majority were still identified from historical sources (see Aston 1989).

Research in the 1970s

As part of the writer’s duties as County Archaeologist (from 1974–1978) he was required to compile a Sites and Monuments Record for use in the planning department. In the course of this exercise many hundreds of sites were recognised (the exact figure has never been counted but it is probably about 500).

While documentary evidence still provided the evidence for the recognition of many of these it was field archaeology and particularly aerial reconnaissance which located so many more.



Figure 15.2: Air photograph of Nether Adber in Mudford. Earthworks of the best-preserved deserted medieval settlement in Somerset with lanes, platforms (= farmyards?) and house and barn sites. (Photo: Somerset SMR)

The renewal of study for the *Victoria County History* volumes for the county has produced the documentary evidence for a number of sites such as Little Marston in West Camel, where by 1503 the arable land had given way to sheep, but most spectacularly at Speckington in Yeovilton where from the fourteenth century rents were reduced and in 1457 at least three 60 acre holdings were let at reduced rents “until better tenants should come” (Dunning 1974, 171).

This latter case shows the slow decline and changing circumstances which were the hallmark of Somerset sites rather than the dramatic and drastic decline of Midland sites where there were many well-documented evictions of peasants with precise dates. Similarly in Mudford parish (Aston 1977a) near Yeovil around 1440 the demesne was subdivided between tenants because “Tenancies were so small and so little belonging to them that no tenant was able to keep hospitality, to provide for his wife and children, and to pay the lords rent until about ... 1440”. Nevertheless almost all the settlements in the parish are deserted or shrunken including the

well-preserved site, probably the best in the county, of Nether Adber (Figure 15.2).

This site was recognised from air photographs, the 1966 Cambridge (St Joseph) collection, but it is clear on the 1940s RAF air photographs as well; it had just not been recognised for what it was or the fields visited. Nether Adber can serve as the model for many of the sites recognised from photographs and from earthworks on the ground. It has a lane as the main street in the form of a holloway; this is lined with platforms, on which the farmsteads would have stood, divided from each other by ditches or former paths or lanes. On some platforms there are clear earthworks of medieval longhouses with opposing doorways and probable barns. It is remarkable to see such features still remaining on a site where these buildings were turf built and timber framed. In the field to the north there is the moated manor house site with adjacent fish pond and the site of the medieval chapel. These have been buried in modern rubble by the farmer but should be intact under the ground. All around the site were extensive areas of ridge and furrow but this has now all been ploughed away.



Figure 15.3: *Bagley in Luccombe, West Somerset. The well-preserved earthworks of a building on this deserted farm site.*

Detailed fieldwork in Mudford parish where Nether Adber was situated (Aston 1977a) and in the nearby parishes showed that this south eastern part of Somerset was formerly full of hamlets and nucleated villages but also it was this area that had been subject to most desertion and shrinkage; many of the sites have been damaged by ploughing and agricultural developments in the last thirty years but it is the one area of the county which looks like the great deserted landscapes of the Midlands.

Western Somerset

The western part of the county was very different. For a while I was bemused by the lack of deserted villages on Exmoor and the surrounding uplands (of Brendon and the Quantocks). Hilary Binding, however, drew my attention to a deserted documented *farm* site at Bagley (Figure 15.3) near Sweetworthy. This well-preserved site showed what sort of site I should expect – deserted and shrunken farm sites and hamlets rather than villages. Over the next

few years I used the 1327 Lay Subsidy entries which, under each vill, give the names of tenants and the subsidy paid – these names frequently refer to farmsteads still extant or deserted (Aston 1983). The latter could be located from tithe maps and awards, either because they were still there in the 1840s or the field names retained the farm name, and from the 1940s RAF air photographs. I checked large numbers of these in field visits and added a hundred or so sites to the record.

My attention was drawn to Brompton Regis one day by Derek Shorrocks, the county archivist. He had found a list of seats in the church and the tenements they were attached to for 1629. By mapping the places mentioned and the number of separate holdings at each site I could get a good picture of the pattern of settlement in the early post-medieval period. This study showed that many of the single farms today and in the recent past had formerly been small hamlets of two or three holdings, though some had a lot more. Clearly there had been great changes as well as some desertions. It was not difficult to

show that some of these sites had existed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries but in what form?

A possibility is demonstrated by Upcott in Brompton Regis – a place now called Redcross Farm. Presumably the place name refers to a cottage/farmstead above Brompton but in 1327 three tenants paid the subsidy – Thomas, William and John de Uppecotte – so there was probably a hamlet of three farmsteads. This may have declined back to one farm in the later middle ages but in 1629 there were again three tenements. In 1804 two farms, of Daws and Delbridges, are recorded at Upcott as old tenements on Lord Egremont's estate (Aston 1983, 81); on the tithe map of c.1840 there is only one farm and there is only one today.

The changing fortunes of this site at Upcott mirror very closely the settlements in Hartland parish in Devon, studied by Harold Fox (1983; 1989) in which individual places have been shown to have a varying number of tenements at different times. The same can be seen at Codsand in Cutcombe on Exmoor (Aston 1988, 94–5). It is likely then that the isolated farm sites on Exmoor today and those that have disappeared in the last few hundred years were at various stages (the 13th and 14th centuries and perhaps the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries) hamlets with several farm sites, perhaps occupied by related farmers. This is an interesting aspect of settlement in the west of the county which would repay further research.

Moated sites

Before leaving this discussion of deserted isolated farmstead settlements mention must be made of the moated sites in the county. Somerset is not noted as one of the richest counties for moats (Emery 1962; Aberg 1978) unlike Essex, Suffolk, Warwickshire or Worcestershire though many of the farm sites in the Levels do have ditches around them which are too narrow to be called moats (according to the strict definitions of the former Moated Sites Research Group). As we have seen a number of deserted settlements have moats around former manor houses (the Mudford settlements, Nether Adber). A number of other moats survive in villages including the fine examples of Marston Magna or Cudworth which would have surrounded manor houses and others are known from documents and early maps. Some are isolated such as that at Merryfield (Ilton parish)

around the former Wadham mansion but even in the areas of medieval assarting, where we might expect farm sites to be moated, in the Forests of Neroche and Selwood for example, there are relatively few. Despite ideal geological conditions of clay over much of the county this is not an area of a well-developed moat building tradition.

The development of rural settlement

Since the 1970s interest generally in rural settlements studies has moved away from deserted villages and moated sites to include some analysis and explanation of the origin and development of *all* settlements, deserted, shrunken or not. A general model for Britain has emerged which sees “normal” rural settlement as dispersed hamlets and farmsteads. These are only replaced at certain times and in certain areas by agglomerated nucleated settlements of large hamlets and villages, developing either by earlier separated foci being joined up as population expands or by the planting of planned villages *de novo* on greenfield sites.

Somerset is a good county to look at these ideas as it has a range of settlement types from hamlets and farmsteads in the west to more nucleated hamlets and villages in the centre and east. However because of the lack of pottery for the critical period (c.400–c.900) when nucleation is likely to have taken place (perhaps in the 9th–11th centuries) it is difficult to see the process in archaeological projects. The same problem means it is difficult to see continuity of occupation of sites from the Romano-British to the medieval period.

Thus the site at Pickwick in Norton parish on Dundry, south of Bristol, produced iron-age, Roman, medieval and post-medieval pottery (it was abandoned in the 19th century and replaced by Model Farm) when it was excavated by Ken Barton in the 1960s (Barton 1969). The earthworks suggest that there were at least three farmsteads at its greatest extent. The fact that there was no Anglo-Saxon pottery is what we should expect and does not mean that there was no occupation at that time. A similar case is Maidenbrook near Taunton. Here is a place documented as a Domesday vill in 1086 one of the “lands which pay specified customary dues to Taunton” and which has a fine late post-medieval house surviving. Recent excavations however showed that there was prehistoric



Figure 15.4: Air photograph of Eckweek, Peasedown St John. The remaining farm on the site surrounded by earthworks of the earlier farm site. The site was excavated and has now been destroyed.

and Roman occupation nearby so again this probably represents a continuously occupied farmstead or hamlet site.

If pottery is not available to help with the problem of settlement development then habitative place-names, especially as applied to fields and farms, seem a useful unexpected alternative. Michael Costen has listed and mapped *all* of the names in the county which could be said to be habitative – ie indicating settlement; these include *worth(y)*, *huish/hide*, *wick*, *cote* and so on. Many of these are still attached to occupied farms, especially in the west of the county, but many others now only relate to fields.

Fieldwork on these sites (by Sue Fitton and others) is showing that *wic* sites for example often have Romano-British pottery. They may be occupied later than the Roman period but probably not by the tenth century when pottery is again made and would presumably be found on such sites.

The only sites to be excavated which are early enough to be considered pre-village settlements and therefore typical of the early hamlets are Eckweek (in Peasedown St John, Figure 15.4), Carscliffe (in

Cheddar) and Sladwick (in Shapwick). Other potential sites include the “infields” (really a misnomer for a settlement(?) in a large enclosure) identified by Steve Rippon on the clay belt of the Levels. Puxton has produced Roman, tenth century and medieval pottery for example (Rippon 1994; 1998; this volume).

Yet other sites, like Shapwick, and a number of others identified by Nancy and Charles Hollinrake (Aston 1994a) including Meare, Compton Dundon and Wedmore, which have produced tenth-century and later pottery, probably represent the newly planned or extended settlements, on the way to becoming the villages of the Middle Ages.

These ideas have been most extensively examined at Shapwick in a project which ran for ten years from 1989. A rather regularly laid out village which had two medieval common open fields with a number of habitative furlong names was subjected to intense documentary, archaeological and scientific examination. While the full results are awaited, preliminary analysis (Aston and Gerrard 1999; Gerrard this volume) suggests that a number of farmstead

hamlets (*worthy, enworthy, old church, sladwick* at least) were replaced *by* the tenth century (ie it *could* be earlier) by the apparently planned village.

The driving force behind these changes may have been landlords wanting to increase cereal production for the developing economy of the tenth century. One way to achieve this may have been for them to centralise the labour on their estates into villages where it could be organised for the intensive field-work required for the large scale (“factory farming”) levels of production which they strived for (Aston 1998).

Future research

For Somerset it is clear where future research should be directed if we are to understand the development of rural settlement over the last two millennia. Following on from the Shapwick Project a parish with a predominantly *dispersed* pattern of settlement should be subjected to the same battery of techniques used there. Such a parish should be lowland (rather than for example Exmoor) in perhaps central or northern Somerset (Winscombe perhaps?).

Rather less intensive studies should be carried out at a number of other parishes, hundreds or early estates – rather along the lines of the current research of Nick Corcos (for selected hundreds) or Magnus Alexander (for North Somerset).

In all of these as well as the conventional cartographic and documentary sources which would be used there should be selective archaeological field-work and excavation, buildings analysis, air survey, biological, geophysical and geochemical analysis. Environmental evidence should be fully integrated with all these data from the other disciplines.

The aim of these studies should be to tell the story of settlement development over the last two millennia – the origin, development, persistence and adaptation of the places where most people lived in the past. In some cases there will be movement, decline and disappearance. In all examples however we can be sure of *change*. Settlements are dynamic features in the landscape and while people at the time may not have been aware of the significance of alterations, from our privileged position in later time with the benefit of the longer view, we should be able to see the story unfold in all its complexity in much greater detail.