# 6

# The Shapwick Project 1989–99


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The Shapwick Project completed its last field season this year, in July 1999, and even now the final sherds in a collection of over a quarter of a million artefacts are being washed and bagged and the ink is drying on our excavation plans. The Project began in 1989 and since then over 2000 participants and 80 organisations have been involved. To keep track of one of the longest running and largest landscape archaeology projects in the UK there is an annual report (with over a thousand published pages; eg Gerrard and Aston 1997a; Aston *et al.* 1998c), a website (with a popular and irreverent "live" excavation diary), and a growing number of more popular and academic publications (Selkirk 1997; Aston and Gerrard 1999) as well as radio and television programmes.

Throughout its life, the Project has sought to fuse collaborative academic research, education programmes and planning-led work. One of the great strengths of the Project has been the participation of the local community, schools and the wider public. Fieldwork continued throughout the year according to an agreed research design but information from watching briefs and small-scale evaluations has been fed in by using common excavation, post-excavation and publication procedures (eg Webster 1992; Hollinrake and Hollinrake 1997). Effectively, the whole 1284 hectare parish has been treated as one large archaeological site (Figure 6.1 on the next page).

One simple question lies behind the Project, what date might an apparently planned medieval settlement like Shapwick be? The main objective has been to chart the origins and development of settlement, and its associated landuse in the post-Roman period, in a lowland, wetland-edge parish. In particular we wished to understand how and when habitation patterns changed and why certain locations were preferred over others. Shapwick was chosen for a number of reasons. Under the guidance of Harold Fox, Nick Corcos originally pointed out its potential in his MA thesis (Corcos 1982). Some saw the attraction of taking a Levels-edge parish as a kind of detailed case study within the Somerset Levels and Moors Project co-ordinated by Somerset County Council (eg Horner 1992 for previous work). But there were other good reasons too, Shapwick has a good sequence of post-medieval maps complemented by a wide range of medieval documents compiled by its pre-Dissolution owners, Glastonbury Abbey.

The list of techniques in use at Shapwick is a long one and most of the remainder of this article is dedicated to explaining some of their strengths and weaknesses before summarising some preliminary conclusions.

## Archaeological techniques

### In the fields

Out in the fields around the modern village two techniques have proved essential for reconstructing former settlement and landuse patterns. The first of these is documentary and cartographic analysis. A number of medieval surveys, including long and very detailed ones in 1327 and 1515, make mention of minor field, furlong, place, watercourse and lane names (Costen 1990; Costen 1992a) which have

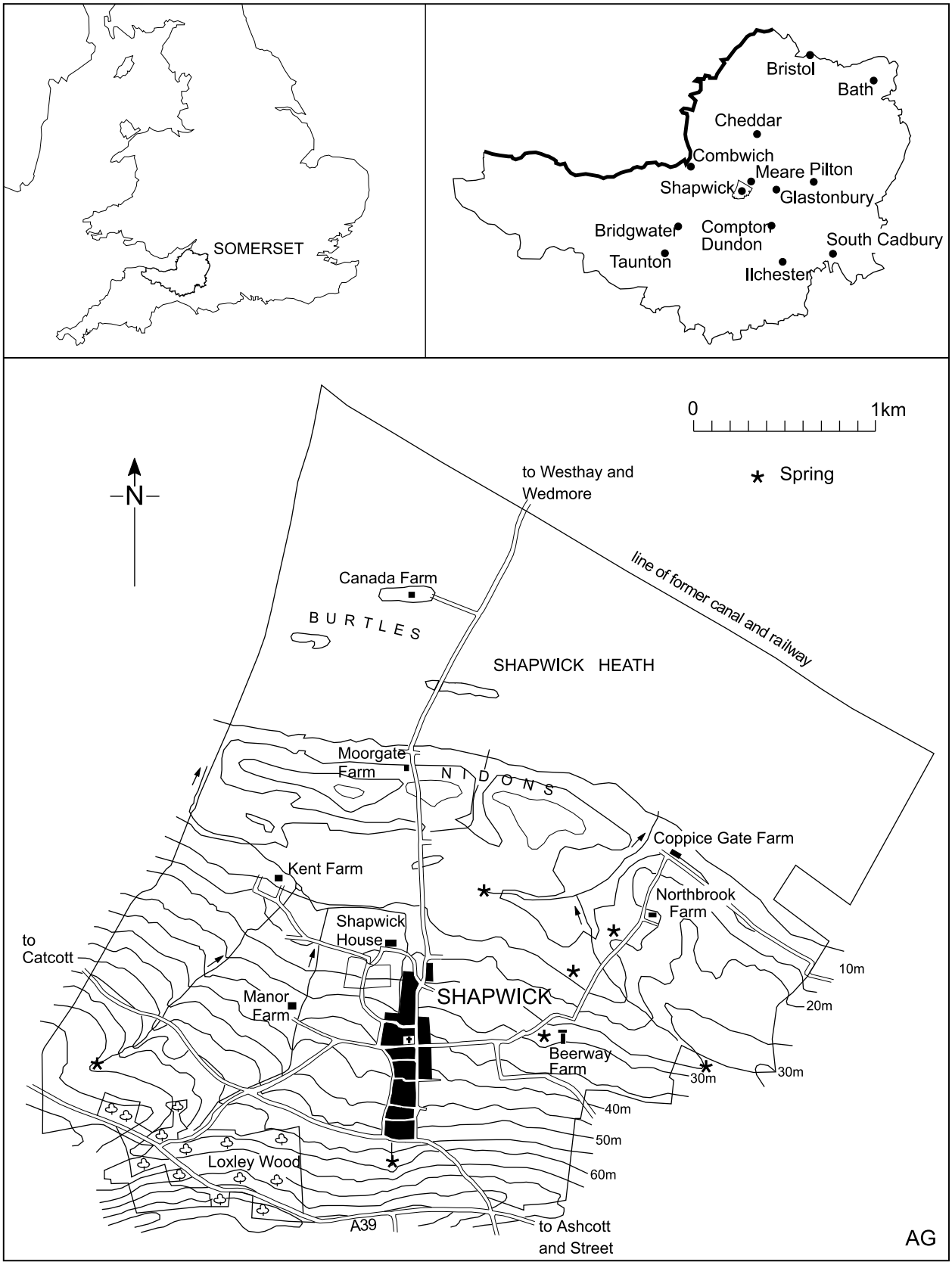


Figure 6.1: *Location map for Shapwick*

been correlated with features transcribed from the eight pre-tithe maps to create two new medieval landuse maps (Aston *et al.* 1998a). An important step is regressive analysis in which post-medieval maps are used as starting points from which progressively earlier landscapes are deduced (Aston 1993c).

Once they can be positioned on a map the field-names can help to locate archaeology. Three obvious examples from Shapwick are Abchester (OE *caester*, "a city or fortification"), Blakelond (modern Blacklands indicating discolouration of the soil) and Chestell (from OE *ceastal*, "a heap of stones"). All of these are accurate signposts to Roman sites. More promising, given the specific aims of this Project, are those field names which may contain a habitative element such as "cot", "tun", "worth" and "wic". Where these names lie in later medieval open fields they must mark earlier habitation sites which preceded open field agriculture (Costen 1993).

A second technique which lies at the heart of the Project is fieldwalking (Gerrard and Gutiérrez 1997). The standard technique has been to collect all cultural material from the surface of the ploughsoil down 1.5m runs, 25m apart, producing about a 6% sample. Some 800ha have been covered in this way. Where the results are encouraging, the field, or a portion of it, is gridded out and all artefacts are collected, a 100% collection of all material considered alien to the fields. This includes post-medieval ceramics, bone (King 1997), slate, slag, stone (Roe 1997) and plastics. There are enough modern artefacts even here to stock a sizable agricultural suppliers but, had we had collected everything from all the fields, there would have been over 2 million artefacts!

The Shapwick fields are carpeted in finds and the difficulty is how to distinguish buried archaeology from material which has been manured or dumped-in (Gerrard 1997b; Figure 6.2 on the following page). This challenge is made all the more difficult when overall densities of sherds are low, as in the case of early medieval pottery. With different volumes of pottery in circulation at different periods, there is no magic figure for the density of material in a field which can then justifiably be regarded as a "site". However, some progress can be made, firstly by broadening our analysis to include all artefact categories, not just pottery, secondly by considering finds of all periods and, thirdly, by widening our horizons from the identification of "sites" towards land-use patterns. For example, fieldwalking results can help to identify areas of former open fields, to gauge the rate of late medieval enclosure on wetland and to suggest the distribution of pastoral or woodland resources at different periods.

Fieldwalking results cannot be taken at face value. As part of the Project the same fields have been re-walked on a number of occasions. Plots of pottery and bone show clear variations in the distribution of material collected (Gerrard 1997b). The densities of pottery recovered from fieldwalking can also be compared with later excavation in the same field and, from this, it becomes clear that material on the surface of the ploughsoil is not always a reliable guide to the precise location of buried deposits. Our more detailed analyses suggest that we should take more account of pottery abrasion and rounding and of sherd size (Tomber 1991) and these conclusions are borne out by experimental work. Numbered and identifiable artefacts have been buried at Shapwick and then ploughed and fieldwalked each year for several years to gather data about the lateral displacement of artefacts down slopes and the percentage of artefacts visible on the surface of the plough soil (Marter 1997). It would seem that artefact material and shape is crucial in determining how far it will be carried from its point of origin. Large "platy" objects, like tiles, flip over and can be carried surprising distances, smaller more friable objects travel less far and so may be more reliable indicators to the location of buried archaeology.

The detailed way in which data is recorded at Shapwick, with each artefact collected under known conditions (eg day, vegetation cover, weather conditions) by named fieldwalkers, allows the biases in our results to be examined in some detail. We have, for example, looked at the performance of individual fieldwalkers, finding that walkers who scored highly in certain categories scored less well in others (Turner 1995; Gerrard 1997b). Partly this may be due to poor observation but it also seems to be true that fieldwalkers have preferences (often worryingly different ones!) for collecting what they perceive to be important in terms of the overall objectives of the Project. Fieldwalking might seem to be simple and intuitive and we tend to assume that anyone could do it with equal effectiveness, but it seems clear that there is no substitute for training and experience.

The combination of documentary and map work with fieldwalking has a great deal to offer the landscape archaeologist. There are well-established archaeological techniques, like the aerial photog-

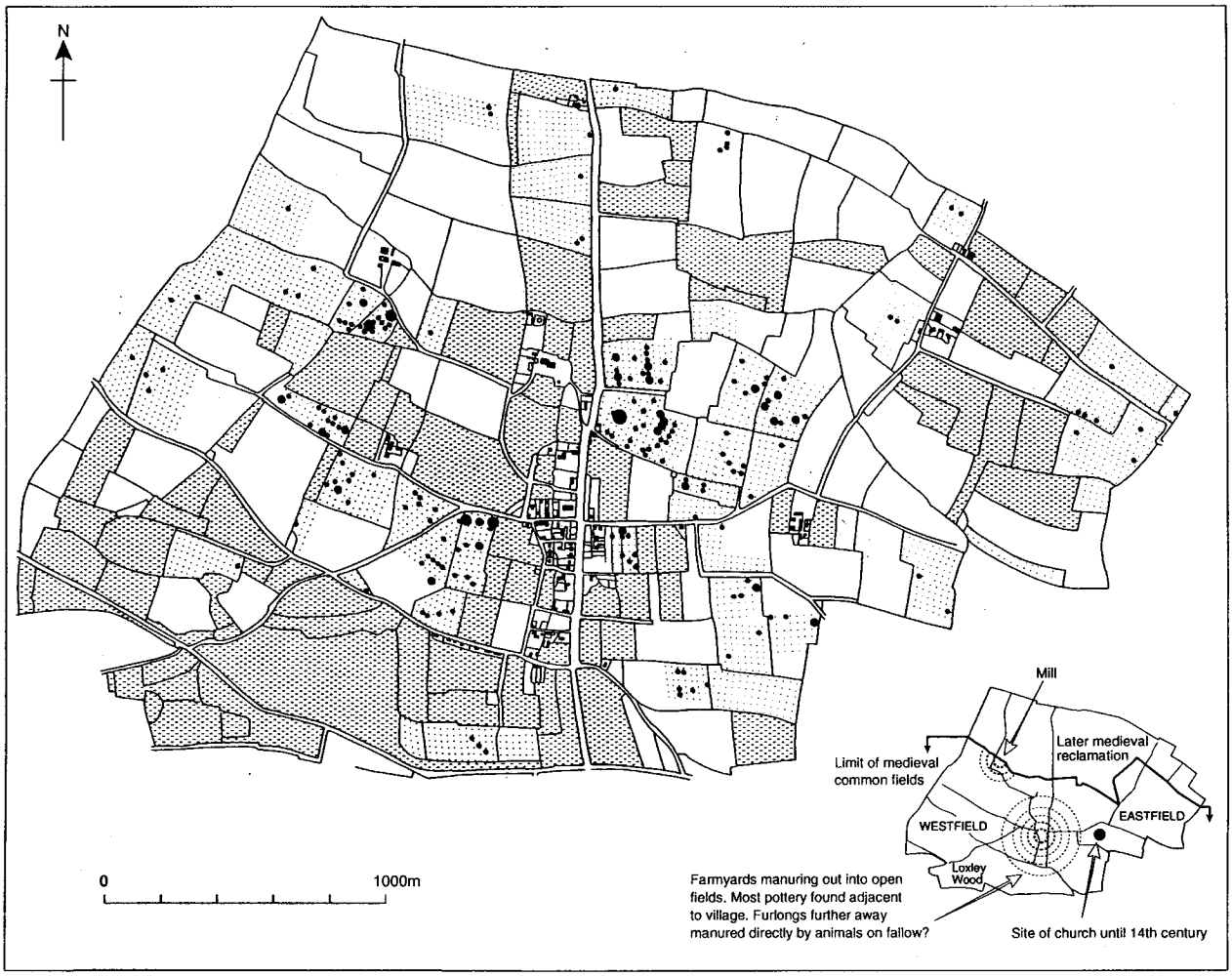


Figure 6.2: *Distribution of 11th to mid-16th century pottery from 302ha fieldwalked up to 1994. Pasture is shaded, walked fields lightly dotted with circles of different sizes representing numbers of sherds (from 1 to 12). An interpretation of the pattern is inset.*

raphy (eg Aston 1992a), topographical survey (eg Bond 1998a) and geophysical survey (eg Aston 1992b; Turner 1997) which we have made use of over the past ten years. But throughout the Project, we have also tried to experiment with innovative techniques and I want to illustrate this by briefly looking at three methods, though many more can be found in the pages of the annual Shapwick Reports.

The first is shovel-pit testing (Smith and Thorpe 1997), not strictly speaking a new technique but one adapted from American and Danish field manuals. Here five ploughsoil samples per 50m square grid are taken (each of 30 litres) for sieving and any artefacts recorded (Figure 6.3 on the next page).

This method is faster than fieldwalking and not subject to the same sort of human bias, it is also not constrained by landuse and can be undertaken on pasture as well as arable, even in quite dense woodland. Like many techniques it needs to be combined with others and it has some obvious flaws, where alluviation and colluviation mask archaeological deposits with an overburden of soil, negative results can be misleading, for example.

The second technique is geochemical survey. This takes various forms at Shapwick and sampling procedures and intervals are still being refined (Aston *et al.* 1998b). Members of the team have been experimenting with magnetic susceptibility and especially with heavy metal spreads, for example cadmium and copper in the ploughsoil. More work is needed to calibrate our results against ploughsoil and subsoil data from excavations; we need to work on blank areas as well as those of identified interest, and learn more about the natural variability in the soils

Figure 6.3: *Shovel pit testing underway to the south of Moorgate Farm. This technique is cheap and rapid, under the right circumstances it can be extremely effective in locating new archaeological sites, mapping their extent and indicating a date.*

but initial results show the promise of these heavy metal signatures, particularly those of lead and zinc.

Finally, field boundaries are often thought of as being the framework of the landscape and suspected as having long histories. Map regression is an important tool for trying to put a date on the more recent boundaries but the composition of hedges has also been surveyed with the aim of comparing species numbers and variation against the enclosure history of the parish and excavation evidence from trenches cut across boundary alignments (Hill *et al.* 1994). The results are a blow for any remaining followers of "Hooper's Rule" and suggest a range of complex factors at work. One of our next tasks is to extend this work to the invertebrate fauna of dated hedges of varying age.

The accumulating evidence for the different fields at Shapwick is best thought of as a series of overlays. Fieldwalking plots for different artefact types can be compared against geophysics and geochemistry surveys and so on, all laid out on common grids and scales (for a case study see Aston and Gerrard 1999). Computing techniques like GIS (Geographical Information Systems) are well suited to manipulating this kind of spatial data and "draping" the results over three dimensional topographic models of the Shapwick landscape. Over the next twelve months individual "biographies" for each of the Shapwick fields will be built up and then brought together to explore broader issues of settlement distribution and landuse.

## In the village

Our understanding of the development of the village is underpinned by a comprehensive survey of the standing buildings undertaken by the Somerset Vernacular Building Research Group (SVBRG 1996). There have been major discoveries, such as the fine 15th-century roof in the medieval manor house of the abbots of Glastonbury, now Shapwick House Hotel, which has been dated by dendrochronology to spring 1428. The matching of architectural features against documented episodes of construction, illustrations, inventories and archae-

ological artefacts from excavations has been hugely rewarding (Gerrard 1999). Where several sources can be interwoven like this then we touch upon the ways in which people thought about their own contemporary landscapes, in the form of texts, on maps and in illustrations and the ways in which they sought to manipulate the landscape around them for their own ends.

Excavating within the bounds of modern villages is notoriously difficult. Where there are open spaces these can be excavated but the "blank areas" in-between, under people's lawns and in garden beds, often elude the field archaeologist. Collections of pottery from garden beds have been made in Shapwick, and although these run the risk of being contaminated by finds introduced in manuring, it is surprising how useful this exercise has been in identifying areas of further potential. Of course, archaeology in modern villages is likely to be masked beneath generations of composting and manuring, and here test-pits have proved useful. These are usually 2m-square holes dug from the present ground surface down to the bedrock. Assuming a fairly complete and even spatial coverage across the built-up area, these small holes have proved a useful guide to the depth and date of underlying medieval stratigraphy (Gerrard and Aston 1997b).

Excavation forms only one part of the Shapwick Project and has generally only been undertaken when other methods have provided a good preview of the underlying archaeology. This has enabled us to target certain types of site, such as later Roman settlements (to see if there is evidence of post-Roman occupation), habitative fieldnames, sites with high environmental potential (eg Shapwick House moat, see Figure 6.4 and Straker 1998) and documented building complexes (in Church Field and in the emparked area to the south of Shapwick House, see Figure 6.5 on the next page and Gerrard 1997a) In all, some 42 trenches have been opened since 1992, mostly exploratory in nature and designed to evaluate the thickness, depth and depositional history of the archaeological deposits (for artefacts see eg Gerrard and Youngs 1997). For the most part, we regard these as samples only and we have tried to leave the sites we have examined largely intact.

Figure 6.4: *Excavation on the Shapwick House medieval moat in 1996. Rural medieval sites are poorly represented in faunal and environmental datasets in the south-west but the wet conditions here had preserved the ecofacts.*

## Conclusions

The preliminary results from Shapwick suggest that, throughout prehistory, sites exhibit very long periods of congruity and possible continuity, albeit with some drifting of the settlement foci. Earlier prehistoric and Roman settlement, boundaries and landuse have considerable influence on medieval and later patterns.

An unexpectedly large number (10) of Roman sites were identified in the course of the Project. Of these ten, about half seem to be abandoned in the post-Roman period, mostly the larger Roman sites which may have been most vulnerable to the collapse of a centralised Roman administration. Sites like "Abchester", "Chestell" and "Blacklands" must still

Figure 6.5: *Excavation to the south of Shapwick House in 1996. Here the artefacts, ecofacts and structural evidence from excavation can be combined effectively with recording of the standing building, documentary and cartographic evidence for emparkment, shovel pit testing and test pits as well as topographical and geophysical survey.*

have been recognisable in the 6th–9th centuries when the field-names were being formed. These links with the past were, by that date, being complemented by new myths and stories, like the legend of St Indracht who was supposedly murdered with his colleagues at Shapwick.

The four early medieval hamlets or farmsteads were amalgamated into the modern village in the 10th century, leaving a mill to the west and an isolated church to the east of the village which was not moved until the early 14th century. This provided ample space for open fields to east and west and also a conscious and quite deliberate break with the past. It created a partitioning of space in which the emerging morphology of houses, roads and landscape enable us, quite literally, to map the privileged positions of particular social groups. The role of natural landscape is worth stressing here. Whereas prehistoric monuments tend to confirm natural features such as watersheds and springs, from the 10th century it is the landscape itself which is manipulated on an impressive scale, to imprint forcefully a new set of economic and social relationships.

It begins to look as if a deliberate decision was made by some large monasteries on selected arable estates to re-order the landscape and settlement on a large scale, perhaps to increase revenue. The context for this at Shapwick might be the re-invigoration of monastic life at Glastonbury under Dunstan in the 940s. Archaeological evidence for other Glastonbury villages like Meare and Compton Dundon in the same area might be interpreted in the same way and the task ahead of us now is to do justice to the quality and quantity of data collected since 1989.

## Acknowledgements

The Shapwick Project is co-directed by Professor Michael Aston. Many people have participated in the Shapwick Project since it began in 1989 and it is the results of their hard labours that is under discus-

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The Shapwick website can be found at www.wkac.ac.uk/shapwick