

Mapping the Medieval Landscape

Robert F. Hartley

Evidence of Medieval landscape is widespread in Leicestershire, most obviously in the form of earthworks, but also in many places as soil-marks and crop marks where ploughing has levelled the features. Although earthwork evidence of large prehistoric sites was noted in the 19th century, and published in the early volumes of *Victoria County History*, it was not until the 1930s that W. G. Hoskins began to draw attention to the earthwork remains of deserted villages and their ridge-and-furrow fields.

Hoskins was primarily interested in understanding the documentary evidence of medieval Leicestershire, but once he realised that he could compare his documents with surviving earthwork features in the county's ancient pasturelands he started a growing process of discovery that has continued to the present day. His detailed study of Wigston Magna was paralleled by numerous expeditions on foot to other parts of Leicestershire, in the course of which he recognised an increasing number of medieval village and field-system earthworks (Hoskins 1937; 1944).

Hoskins was not working alone; Frank Cotterill, the Leicester Museum curator, aided him in his understanding of archaeology. It is interesting to note that when the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group (DMVRG) was set up in 1952, three of the four founders had lived or worked in the area of Leicestershire and Rutland, these were John Hurst, Maurice Beresford, and Gerald Dunning. Beresford and Hurst began compiling an inventory of deserted medieval villages (DMVs) for publication in Beresford's "Lost Villages of England" in 1954

Seven of the largest of the largest Leicestershire DMVs were mapped in more detail at a scale of 1:2500 by the Ordnance Survey at the instigation of C. W. Phillips, and published by Hoskins in 1956. More and more sites were identified, and a list was published by the DMVRG in 1963. In due course some of them were given protection by being scheduled as Ancient Monuments. Around the same period J.K.St.Joseph of Cambridge University photographed DMVs from the air.

Aerial photography revealed the beauty and complexity of the best surviving areas of earthworks. It also showed the way in which large areas of landscape were being destroyed by modern mechanised agriculture. In response, the modern practice of selective and scientific excavation began, but concentrated mainly on prehistoric and Roman sites. Few rural medieval sites have been investigated in this way. Hoskins made a tentative start at Hamilton, and John Wachter excavated at Martinthorpe (Wachter 1964). Excavation of the pottery kilns at Potters Marston provided a comparative series of forms of medieval sandy ware that could be referenced against further discoveries from excavation

and fieldwalking (Haynes 1952). Later medieval wares were studied in detail on sites such as the Austin Friars in Leicester (Mellor and Pearce 1981).

During the 1970s great progress was made in the identification of medieval field monuments. A prime example was the work done by A.E. Brown and students in recording all the sites and find spots in Rutland, using aerial photographs and museum records (Brown 1975). Some specific fieldwork was done on medieval villages and their field systems, most notably by Terry Pearce, Kay Gowland and others at Theddingworth, a village that had both good open-field maps and a fair amount of surviving earthwork evidence.

From the mid 1970s there was an integrated Museums Service covering Leicestershire and Rutland, which was involved in five areas of archaeology; survey, excavation, preservation, display, and publication. Peter Liddle was appointed as Archaeological Survey Officer and began the huge task of creating a comprehensive Sites & Monuments Record (SMR). His assistant, Lynn Barrow, began some mapping of medieval ridge and furrow, and when the present writer joined the team in 1979 he began to carry this process forward in a systematic way.

Using two sets of vertical photographs - the RAF series in the Record Office and the Hunting Survey of 1969 - the ridge and furrow of Leicestershire and Rutland was plotted out parish by parish (Fig. 1). Additional information, and ideas for new avenues of interpretation, came from James Pickering, whose aerial photography surveys of the changing landscape often suggested a more complex history than had at first been apparent. The Museums Service was able to use its own preserved Auster and other aircraft, and volunteer pilots, to carry out a certain amount of additional oblique photography of earthwork sites. In this way more detailed evidence was gradually added to the S.M.R.

In addition to identifying and noting more and more archaeological features, the Survey Team also began doing detailed ground survey work on earthwork sites, most notably in conjunction with David Bawden of Trent Valley Archaeological Research Committee for the Vale of Belvoir Survey. The present writer took up this branch of fieldwork, and over the period 1980 - 1990 surveyed most of the larger medieval sites - villages, moated sites and ponds - surviving in Leicestershire and Rutland (Hartley 1983, 1984, 1987 & 1989). This work also produced much evidence of post-medieval parks and gardens, which were also surveyed. The surveys were carried out at a scale of 1:1000, allowing more detail to be recorded even on the sites already measured by the Ordnance Survey. At first, sites tended to be considered in isolation, but gradually it became clear that surveys were of more value when the relationship to surrounding



Fig. 1. Hamilton Medieval Village Survey (Hartley 1989, 16)



Fig. 2. Ridge and Furrow Survey in North-East Leicestershire (Hartley 1987, 65)

features such as roads and field systems was as far as possible interpreted and included on the plan (Fig. 1).

Much of the academic impetus for this work came from the Adult Education Department of Leicester University, particularly through the weekend courses in landscape studies organised by A. E. Brown and C. C. Taylor, who was then surveying Northamptonshire for the R.C.H.M.E. The Medieval Village Research Group, and the Moated Sites Research Group (later amalgamated to form the Medieval Settlement Research Group) both proved valuable forums for discussion and learning, and for the publication of survey work. Research in other areas of the country (and sometimes abroad) inspired and informed progress locally, and Leicestershire in its turn provided models for others to use.

Some other aspects of the medieval landscape were published as separate topics, notably granges (Courtney 1977 & 1981), windmills (Moon 1981), watermills (Ashton 1977), fishponds, castles (Cantor 1978) and deer parks (Cantor 1977 & 1980). Fox and Russell (1948) first addressed the subject of forest and woodland at length in their account of Leicester Forest. The other deer parks and woods of the county have been studied successively by Professor Cantor and by A. E. Squires and W. L. Humphreys (1987).

The survey work done by John Crocker (1981) and the Loughborough Naturalists in Charnwood has great value for our understanding of the history of that piece of landscape. The writings of Oliver Rackham have opened our eyes to the complex and fascinating historical relationship between human communities and the local plant and animal life they drew their resources from.

General surveys of the medieval landscape remains of Leicestershire, compiled by the present author, began to be published, district-by-district, in 1983. The first was *The Medieval Earthworks of Rutland*, followed by similar reports on North-West Leicestershire (1984), North-East Leicestershire (Melton District) (1987; Fig. 2), and Central Leicestershire (1989). The 1990s saw this publication programme halted by financial cutbacks and then by the regrettable breaking up of the Museums Service. However most of the fieldwork has been done and it is hoped that progress can shortly be resumed on the publication of the Medieval Earthworks of two remaining districts of Harborough and Hinckley & Bosworth. The Sites and Monuments Record at County Hall holds maps at a scale of 1: 10560 with ridge and furrow patterns sketched in for the whole of Leicestershire and Rutland. While there is always potential for adding detail to these maps, the general pattern is now clear for almost the whole of Leicestershire, although rather less is known for Rutland because over large areas all the evidence had been ploughed away before the era of aerial photographs.

It is now possible to draw up some figures for the number and importance of medieval landscape features in Leicestershire and Rutland. Several phases of Scheduling have seen sites given protection as Ancient Monuments

The importance of Leicestershire's medieval landscape has been amply demonstrated, and a recent report by English Heritage, drawing on the S.M.R. records and others, has identified several Leicestershire parishes as amongst the best in the country for their preservation of medieval landscape features. These parishes are Hungarton, Owston, Saddington, Hallaton, Welham, Mowsley, Gumley and Thorpe Langton in Leicestershire, and Belton, Braunston and Stoke Dry in Rutland. Some of these areas may be given a degree of protection, but any such moves will need to come soon, as the pressure of agricultural changes has reduced once widespread medieval remains to comparative rarities. This process is likely to be accelerated by recent disastrous diseases afflicting the livestock industry, by the fall in demand for meat, and by the low prices being paid for dairy produce.

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