



Historic England

Medieval Settlements

Introductions to Heritage Assets



Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which have previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to medieval settlements, ranging from individual farms, through hamlets of a few households, to much larger villages. In addition to these permanent places there were also temporary or seasonal abodes in outlying places associated with activities like summer grazing of the uplands. Fifty years of study have produced an immense amount of data and interpretation, enabling patterns of settlement types to be mapped. Descriptions of medieval settlements and their development is included. Medieval settlements have associations with vernacular houses, places of worship, commemorative structures, animal management and field systems. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

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Front cover

A recent reconstruction of Wharram Percy.

Introduction

In the medieval countryside people lived in a very wide variety of settlement types, from individual farms, through hamlets of a few households, to much larger villages. In addition to these permanent places there were also temporary or seasonal abodes in outlying places associated with activities like summer grazing of the uplands.

Before the mid-20th century medieval settlement was a topic which attracted little academic interest, although the sites of many deserted villages were mapped by the Ordnance Survey from the 1860s onwards. Before 1950 the medieval countryside was principally studied in terms of how it was organised administratively (through manors, estates and the feudal system), and to a lesser extent for information revealed in documentary records such as accounts of agriculture, especially on greater estates. From 1948, scholars including Maurice Beresford and W G Hoskins explicitly recognised that substantial and often extensive earthworks of medieval arable cultivation (ridge and furrow), and villages which had subsequently been deserted, survived in many parts of England. Place names, too, drew attention to lost settlements.

Remains were especially plentiful in the midland and northern counties, a zone now generally termed the Central Province by those studying medieval settlement. The study of deserted medieval villages was most publicly carried forward by an organisation (the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group, formed in 1952) dedicated to their identification and excavation, the latter notably at Wharram Percy (North Yorkshire) where there were annual summer digging seasons between the early 1950s and 1990.

The Ordnance Survey and the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England also gathered and published data, and by the 1970s it was acknowledged that deserted medieval

villages were but a subset of a much wider spectrum of settlement types, all susceptible to study using documents, field survey (including earthwork survey and – where sites had been ploughed up – field walking) and excavation.

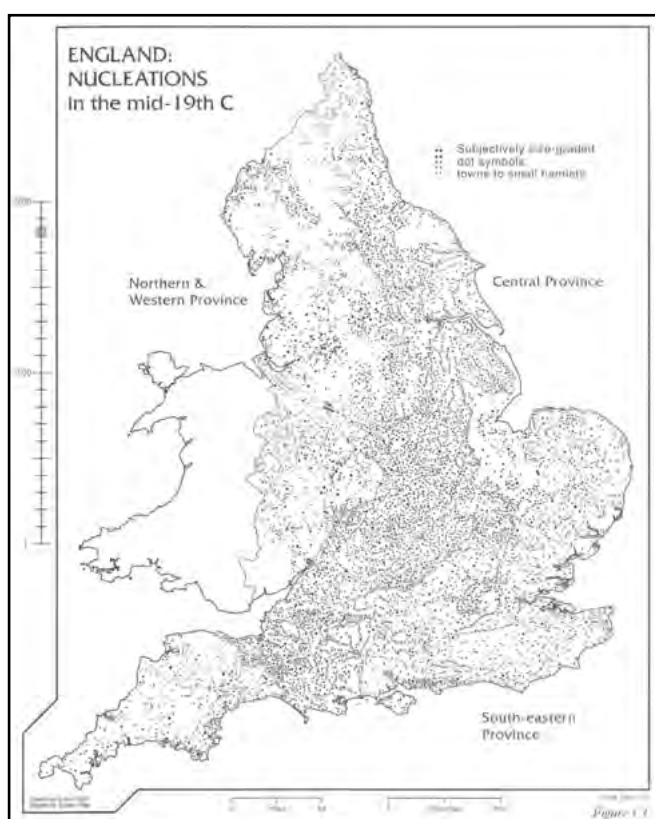
Importantly, the farms, hamlets and villages where people still lived came to be studied alongside abandoned sites, this bringing with it the need to embrace the study of standing buildings – vernacular architecture. That broadening of the subject was reflected in changes to the name of the former Deserted Medieval Village Research Group, today the Medieval Settlement Research Group.

In recent years new approaches to the classification of landscape types have developed using characterisation, which seeks to define areas of countryside which share a common character. Historic England has sponsored a national programme of Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC), and well over half of English counties have been covered.

Areas of particular character (polygons) defined by HLC sometimes coincide with ones defined by analysis of settlement plan forms – and sometimes do not. That does not mean either methodology is necessarily wrong: to some extent it is different data and interpretations that are being mapped. What observed differences do prompt is further questioning of what everyone would acknowledge are complex, and time-deep, reflections of where and how people have lived and worked the land in the past.

1 Description

Fifty years of study have produced an immense amount of data and interpretation, enabling patterns of settlement types to be mapped. Brian Roberts and Stuart Wrathmell have produced the most systematic plotting (Figures 1-3) although the methodology employed – systematically classifying settlement types as shown on mid-19th century Ordnance Survey maps – has attracted criticism as places inevitably changed over the three to four hundred years before 1850. Nevertheless, distinct spatial patterning can often be seen across England, much of it demonstrably of medieval origin.



The most basic settlement division is between the Central Province, where relatively large and compact (or nucleated, to use the geographers' term) villages predominate, and the hillier upland counties of the north and west (and also the Wealden and surrounding landscapes of the south-east) where hamlets and single farms (dispersed settlement) are the norm. Within each of these two main landscape and settlement divisions there is a wide variety of forms. Especially distinctive among villages, for instance, are the regular or planned types found especially in northern England, while the moats dug around isolated farmsteads in the 13th and early 14th centuries, notably in counties with heavy soils such as Essex and Suffolk, are one of the more immediately recognisable elements of dispersed settlement (Figure 2). Sometimes these East Anglian moats lie within areas where greens were historically a common feature: extensive areas of rough grazing with cottages around their edge, very different from the classic village green of popular imagination (Figure 3).

Figure 1
Roberts' and Wrathmell's map showing how dispersed settlement (farms and hamlets) in the 19th century lies predominantly to either side of the Central Province where villages are dominant. This broadly reflects the picture in the Middle Ages.

The transition from one settlement type to another can be very clear (an analogy may be made with vernacular architecture, where the traveller will enter an area where, say, ironstone buildings suddenly appear), capable of delineation as a hard line on a map: a good example is in Warwickshire where there is a clear divide between the Felden (arable) region where villages predominate and the Arden (woodland) one where hamlets and farms are the norm. Sometimes a reason for this can be plausibly suggested (in the Warwickshire case, a divide between the Felden's relatively light, easily worked soils supporting extensive arable agriculture, and the Arden's heavy clay soils which were only gradually cleared of woodland during the Middle Ages). More often, why a particular settlement type predominates remains elusive even when study has specifically addressed the question. That quest for understanding of settlement forms remains a constant of modern research.

But whatever the settlement type, the basic components of the individual family holdings – peasant farms – tend to be fairly consistent. The house and usually some barns or sheds for crops and animals stood within a hedged or walled plot typically called a toft (although there is rich variety in regional terminology). Behind was an often lengthy garden for vegetable cultivation and other agricultural or industrial/craft activity, usually termed a croft.

In a regular or planned village (as in a post-medieval estate village), or in a planned extension to a pre-existing one, these tofts and crofts would be of the same size, and share common front and rear boundaries. Smaller places, or ones with a more organic form, lack this regularity but still tend to be groupings of tofts and crofts although there are regions (like the south-west) where hamlets have farmsteads whose yards and gardens are clustered more irregularly around the dwellings.

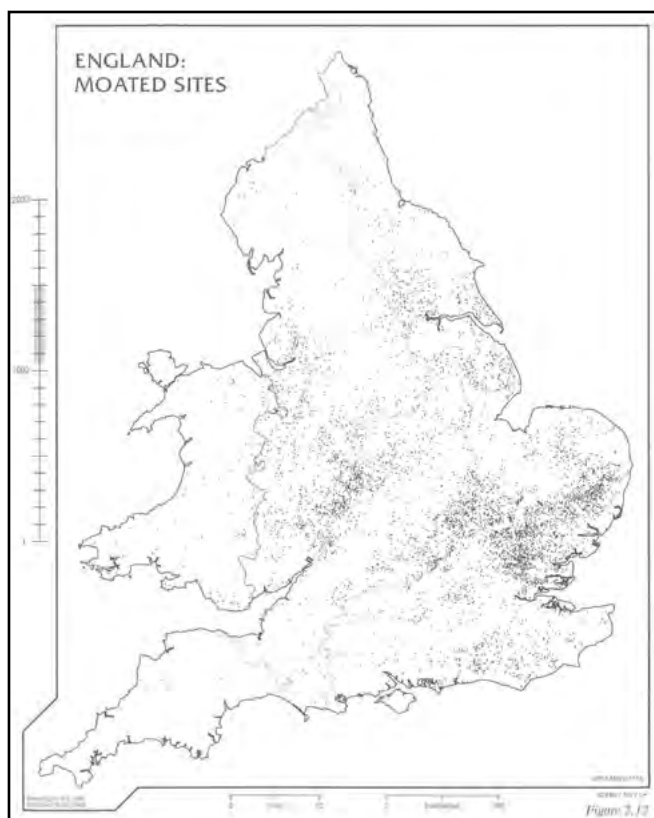


Figure 2
Distribution of a particular type of medieval settlement, the moated site, characteristic of areas of dispersed settlement on heavy soils. Most are of the 13th and early 14th centuries. A desire for home security in an era of lawlessness may have been, in part, one reason for investment in moat-digging.

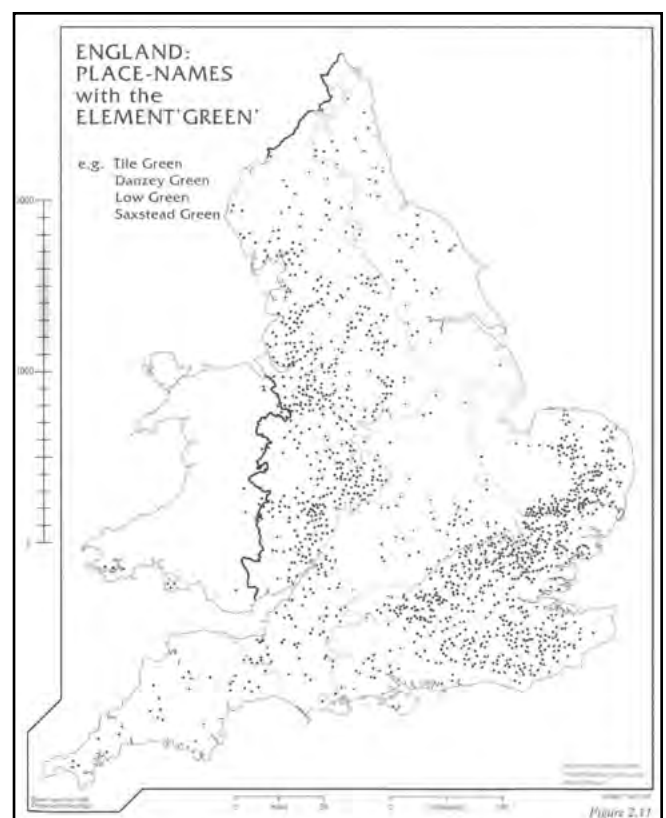


Figure 3
Roberts' and Wrathmell's mapping of place-names indicating greens, again characteristic of areas of dispersed settlement. Many greens were enclosed in the post-medieval centuries.

Like all specialist subjects, medieval settlement attracts and requires a specialist vocabulary. For instance, relatively large, irregular, places are said to be 'agglomerated', while settlements which comprise clusters of houses strung together (sometimes with suffixes like 'End', as in Duck End, or Parva [Little] and Magna [Great]) have been termed polyfocal villages: here Wollaston (Northamptonshire) is the type site. The work of Professor Brian Roberts is rich in such terminology (Figure 4).

Standing somewhat separate from villages, hamlets and farms (although in some ways allied to the last) are specialist outlying centres of agricultural production, such as sheep

cotes (bercarie) on the Cotswold and the cattle farms (vaccaries) found, for instance, in the Yorkshire Dales.

Shielings, temporary habitations associated with the seasonal upland grazing of animals, are the subject of a separate Introduction to Heritage Assets note. The best known, and generally largest of such centres with chambers for accommodation of a permanent workforce, barns, and beast houses, are the granges via which Cistercian monasteries exploited their outlying estates and lands from the 12th century onwards. Some of these survive as farms today, while others have been deserted to remain only as archaeological sites.



Figure 4
The plan of Yarwell, Northamptonshire, redrawn from a map of 1778. An example of a planned village with a double row of tofts and crofts fronting the east-west road, with church and manor at one end. Dating such places is difficult, although what evidence there is for such villages in Rockingham Forest suggests a pre-, rather than post-, Norman Conquest date.

2 Chronology

Two key questions about medieval settlement remain when and why villages became established over much of midland England. Thanks to archaeological excavation and fieldwalking since the late 1970s an approximate answer can be given to the first, and the 9th and 10th centuries AD appear to be the peak centuries for village formation (Figure 5). Whether this was due to organic processes of change, or community-led initiatives, or as a result of rural reorganisation by kings and thegns intent on increasing revenue (put crudely, people being moved to same-sized plots and farms each owing the same rent) is unclear.

Later, especially after the Harrying of the North by William the Conqueror in the winter of 1069-1070 when he razed the countryside after Northumbria revolted, villages were re-established under seigniorial (lordly) control with planned layouts integrating same-size tofts and crofts running back from a main road, often with a back lane linking the rear of the crofts, and typically with the church and manor house in larger compartments at the end of the village.

The landscapes where individual farms and hamlets predominate, notably to the west and north, have always been thought to be longer established, and Oliver Rackham has labelled these the Ancient Countryside. But while these may not have seen the massive change which the midland countryside did in the century or two before 1066, or parts of the north did after that, we must not assume settlements and field systems in these huge areas of England have been fixed and immutable: many saw considerable modification in the 18th and 19th centuries, and of course the 20th century.

Fifty years ago investigation focussed on when and why so many villages were deserted in the Middle Ages. Old notions that the Black Death of 1348-1349 or warfare and famines had been responsible were replaced with a general explanation which laid the blame on the 15th and 16th century graziers who contemporary, Tudor, writers claimed had systematically depopulated villages and put their arable fields down to grass to create extensive and profitable sheep pastures. While this undoubtedly did occur, the modern orthodoxy now sees settlements of all periods as often fluid entities, being created and disappearing, expanding and contracting, and sometimes gradually shifting. In some cases that is in response to particular circumstances, and in others to longer-term trends whether social, economic or even climatic: Hound Tor (Devon), for instance, is one of many upland settlements where the climatic downturn of the 12th – 13th century may have led to a place being abandoned. In other words, while there are undoubtedly regional and local trends of continuity and change, each particular place has its own history of origin, occupation and sometimes abandonment which demands individual investigation and explanation.

VILLAGE FORMS ~ PRINCIPLES OF CLASSIFICATION

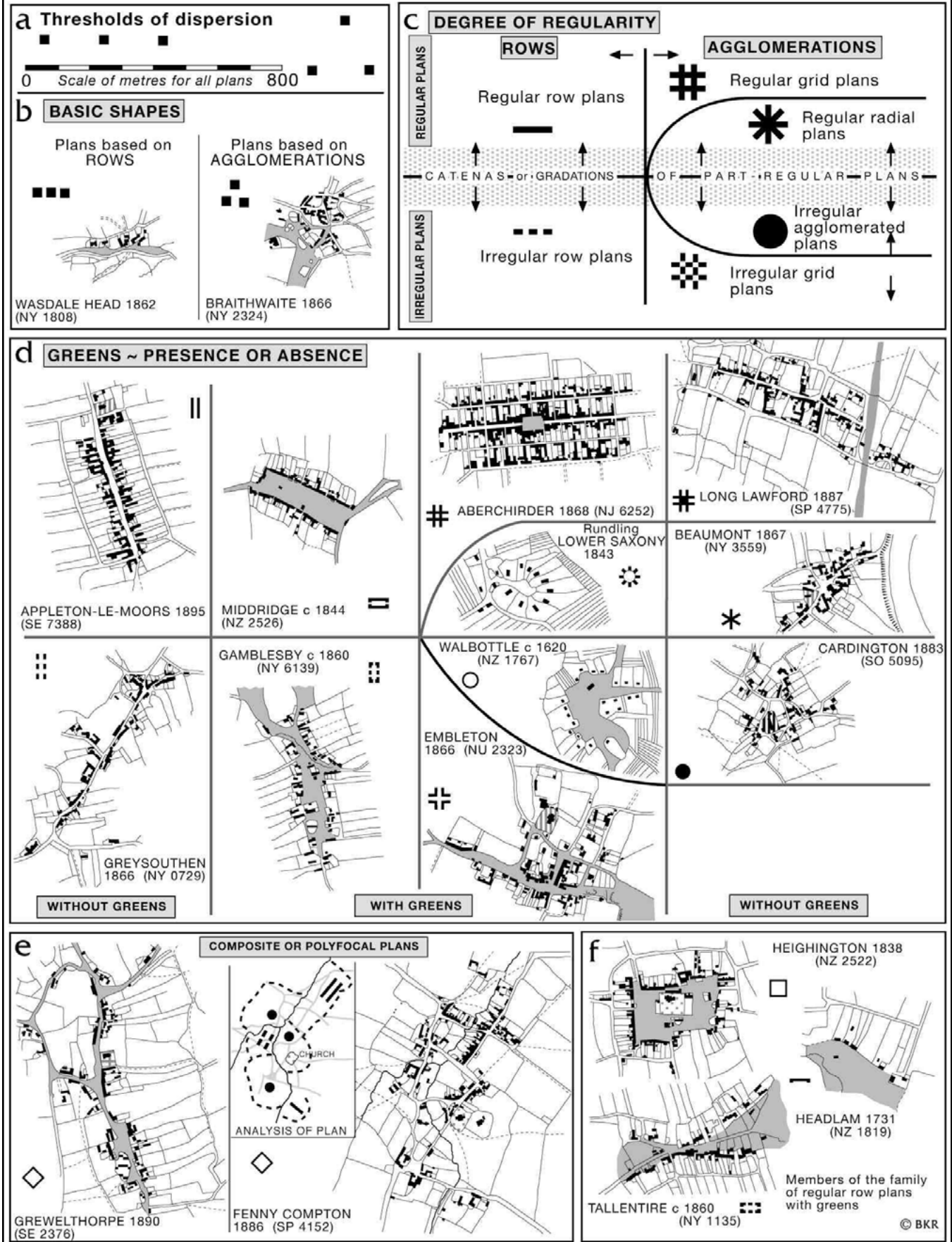


Figure 5 Brian Roberts' classification of English village forms. As he would stress, within and between these types there is considerable variation.

3 Development of the Asset Type

Most analysis of settlement types and patterns has been morphological, using plan forms and patterning visible on maps, air photos and via earthwork survey. Documentary sources can add to the picture, but most medieval settlement formation took place well before written record keeping became common in the 13th century. Excavation (increasingly hand-in-hand with geophysical survey) has the potential to reveal early settlement layouts, for instance Raunds (Northamptonshire), but by definition such investigations are extremely extensive and unusual – although uniquely valuable when they are possible.

What excavation has revealed over the last fifty years is something of the wide variety of peasant house types found in medieval England, and pointers towards broad trends of development. The latter include the move in clayland areas (as at Barton Blount, Derbyshire, and Goltho, Lincolnshire) from buildings constructed with earth-fast posts (that is, timber uprights sunk directly in holes in the ground) to ones where a sill beam or dwarf stone wall was used to raise or underpin the main structural timbers where there was wet, rotting, ground. In terms of house types, long houses (people at one end, animals at the other) seem to have been more

geographically widespread than in more modern times. Sometimes there are clear and illuminating tie-ins between the evidence of excavations, of documents, and of standing buildings.

For instance, on the Yorkshire Wolds, while there are no standing cruck buildings, proof of their survival into the 19th century was found in documentary records: that discovery prompted the reinterpretation of previously-excavated later medieval long houses at Wharram Percy, initially thought to be flimsily framed and short-lived, as substantial and long-lived cruck-built structures (Figures 6 and 7).



Figure 6

Wharram Percy, North Yorkshire. The site has been much investigated by excavation and survey, but even so its origins and development remain debated. Its principal components (other than the valley-bottom church) were three rows of houses, each of which appears to have planned aspects: a long west row (here running down the centre of the photo) set along the crest of the valley above the church; a shorter north row partly taken over by the late medieval North Manor complex (bottom of photo), and a short east row in the valley bottom (to the left).

In terms of other types of houses, in several parts of England (Thrislington, Durham; West Whelpington, Northumberland; Burton Dassett, Warwickshire) abutting houses like linear terraces have been found. In many parts of England, as farms with larger acreages emerged after the mid-14th century, courtyard groupings of house and farm buildings around a farmyard began to become commonplace.

What remain more archaeologically elusive are the houses of the poorest in medieval society, the widows and cottagers who documents show living in small dwellings on the corner of tofts occupied by their children or on the periphery of villages, or on the wayside.

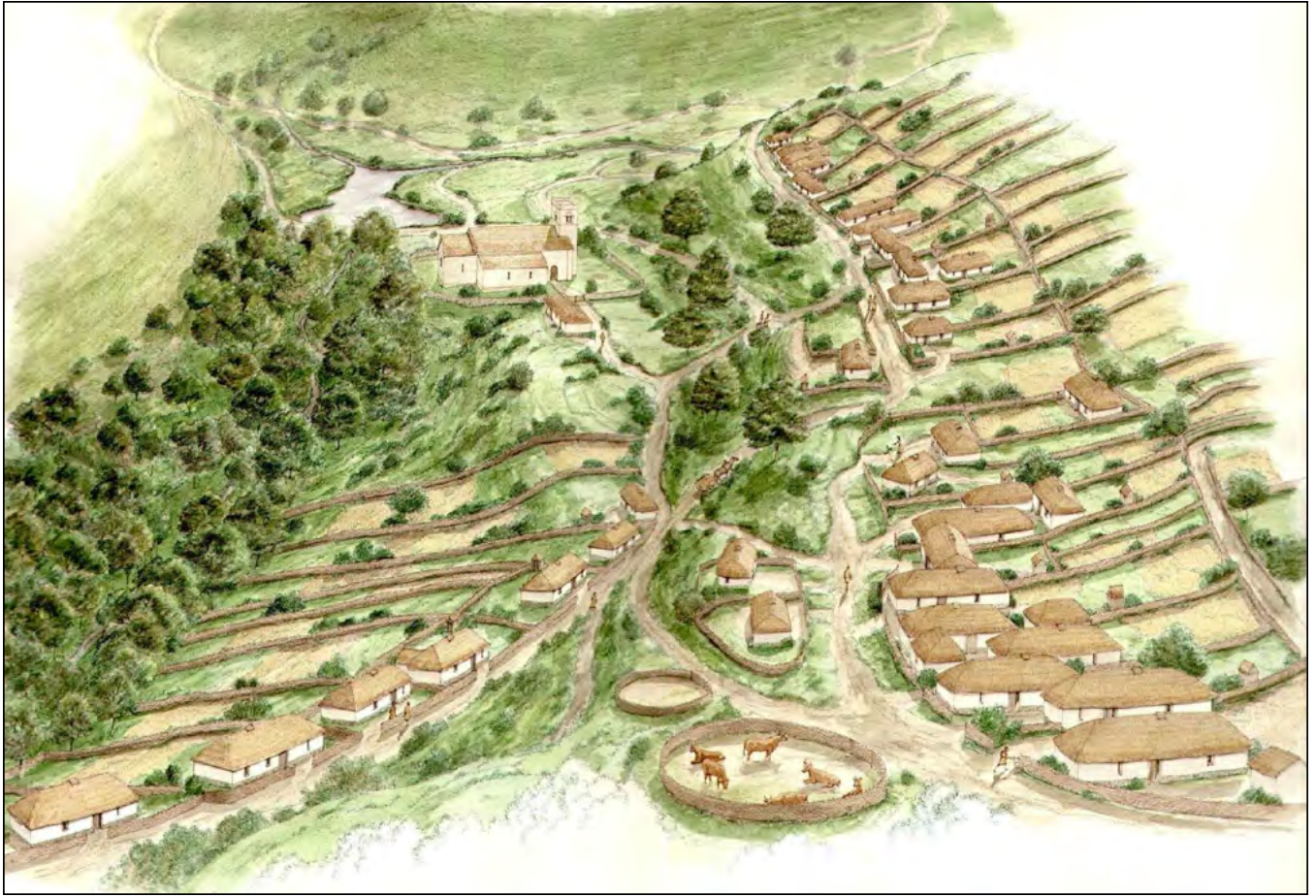


Figure 7

A recent reconstruction of Wharram Percy, from the same viewpoint as Figure 6 but omitting the North Manor.

4 Associations

While the investigation of standing buildings, especially local ‘vernacular’ houses, has not always been integrated with the study of the places they lie in (a notable exception is Shapwick, cited below), this is increasingly seen as mutually beneficial: both together lie at the heart of what gives local and regional distinctiveness.

Historic England’s selection guide on **Vernacular Houses** sets out current understanding and designation thresholds. Church and churchyard are often core elements of settlements; the **Places of Worship** selection guide treats the former, and that on **Commemorative Structures** the monuments within the latter.

Settlements had a fundamental relationship with the field systems around them (Figures 8-11); especially in the areas of ‘Ancient Countryside’ these sometimes survive little altered (although this always needs to be proved, rather than assumed). In the Central Province there has typically been far more change, and especially late (18th and 19th century) enclosure can have eradicated almost all traces of earlier open fields.

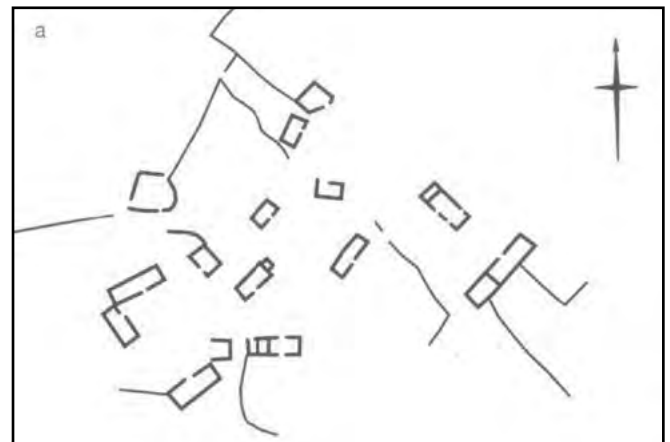


Figure 9
The plan of the deserted hamlet of Badgworthy, on Exmoor, Devon, a loose collection of longhouses and small barns.



Figure 8
Gainsthorpe, Lincolnshire: an example of a large, irregular-plan, village of stone-built houses. This was already deserted by 1616 when it was observed ‘there is nowe neyther tofte, tenemente or cottage standinge... it keeps neer 1,500 sheepe.’



Figure 10
Old Scale, Wythop, Cumberland. A late 13th-century shieling, with its lynchets (cultivation terraces) climbing the hill to its left.

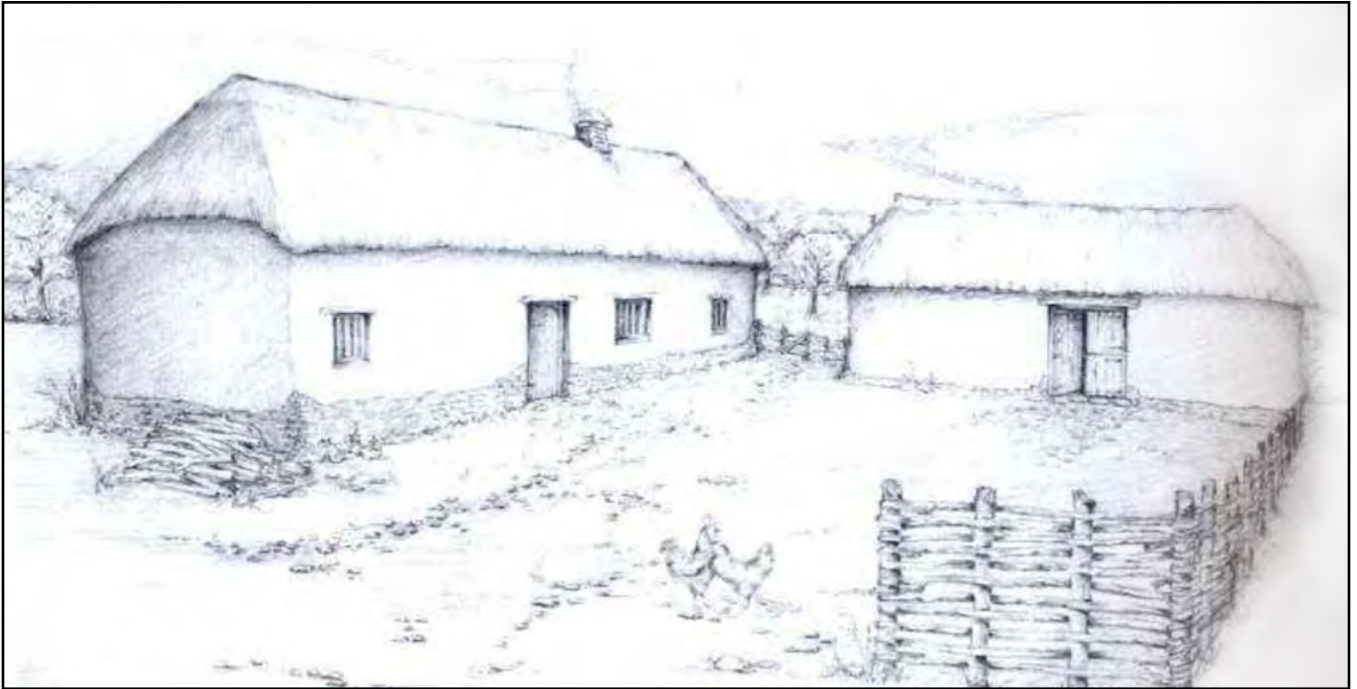


Figure 11

Reconstruction of a 15th century or earlier farmstead with open-hall farmhouse and barn at Middle Halsway on the Quantock Hills of Somerset.

However, elsewhere either fossilized curvilinear strip and furlong boundaries or the earthworks of ridge and furrow ploughing capture important aspects of medieval field systems. Historic England's Introduction to Heritage Assets (IHA) description of [Field Systems](#) provides a broad overview, while the IHA on [Animal Management](#) discusses some of the ways in which lords engaged in more specialist means of exploitation via fishponds, rabbit warrens and deer parks.

Watermills were associated with most villages or estates (windmills were much rarer); many lay on a stream some way away, connected to the villagers' houses by roads and tracks. Many villagers had part-time or seasonal work outside agriculture in some form of industry (potting, iron making, the extractive industries, woodland exploitation), or, especially around the coast, fishing. All these things may leave visible or archaeological remains in or around the settlement.

5 Further Reading

There are a number of general overviews of medieval settlement which are accessible to the non-specialist but the starting point is now the edited volume by Neil Christie and Paul Stamper, *Medieval Rural Settlement* (2012).

Among volumes of collected essays, Mick Aston, David Austin and Chris Dyer, *The Rural Settlements of Medieval England* (1989) has several influential papers revealing geographic and temporal variation.

Regional studies include Blaise Vyner (ed), *Medieval Rural Settlement in North-East England* (1990) and Harold Fox's *Dartmoor's Alluring Uplands* (2012), the latter an essential study of medieval transhumance.

The mapping noted above by Brian Roberts and Stuart Wrathmell forms *An Atlas of Rural Settlement in England* (2002). Roberts, an historical geographer, has written extensively on village plans; some of his work is intellectually demanding, even to specialists: *The Making of an English Village* (1987) is a good starting point.

In terms of influential studies of particular places, a major overview of thinking on Wharham Percy (North Yorkshire) is provided by S Wrathmell (ed),

A History of Wharham Percy and its Neighbours (2012). The English Heritage site guide gives a good short introduction.

Richard Jones and Mark Page, *Medieval Villages in an English Landscape* (2006) reports on an intensive study of dispersed settlement in the Whittlewood area on the Northamptonshire-Buckinghamshire border, while Mick Aston and Chris Gerrard, *Interpreting the English Village* publishes the results of a long-running investigation into a Somerset village of Shapwick and its setting and antecedents.

The Annual Report (from 2008 Medieval Settlement Research) of the [Medieval Settlement Research Group](#) carries reports of discoveries and work in progress, as well as an increasing number of broader overviews.

The best study of monastic granges remains Colin Platt, *The Monastic Grange in Medieval England* (1969).

Grenville Astill and Annie Grant, *The Countryside in Medieval England* (1988) is an extensive and thorough multi-author study, and includes both settlements and the exploited landscapes (fields, woods and so on) around them.

6 Where to Get Advice

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7 Acknowledgments

Figure 1: Source: *Region and Place* (2002), 53.

Figure 2: Source: *Region and Place* (2002), 57.

Figure 3: Source: *Region and Place* (2002), 55.

Figure 4: Source: G. Foard, D. Hall and T. Partida, *Rockingham Forest: An Atlas of the Medieval and Early Modern Landscape* (2010), 305.

Figure 5: Source: B.K. Roberts, *Village Plans* (1982), 10.

Figure 8: Source: D. Stocker, *England's Landscape: The East Midlands* (2006), 78/NMR 17389/23

Figure 9: Source: H. Riley and R. Wilson-North, *Exmoor* (2001), 94.

Figure 10: Source: A. Winchester, *England's Landscape: The North-West* (2006), 79/NMR 20249/003

Figure 11: Source: H. Riley, *The Historic Landscape of the Quantock Hills* (2006), 108.



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