

INTERPRETING THE LANDSCAPE

Landscape Archaeology and
Local History



Michael Aston

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Acknowledgements

I am particularly grateful to Graham Webster, the General Editor, and Peter Kemmis Betty of Batsford for their encouragement during the writing of this book. At times they had more faith than I did.

Very many people have helped with the compilation of material, in discussion and aid with illustrations. My colleagues in the Extra-Mural Department of Bristol University – Joe Bettey, Michael Costen and Bob Machin – provided stimulating discussion, while David Bromwich (Local History Librarian, Somerset County Council) and John Chandler (Wiltshire County Council) went to great lengths to find references and bibliographical details for me. Joe Bettey also gave much useful advice on the final text.

Many people kindly gave me information and illustrations. I hope I have acknowledged them all in the text, but I would particularly like to mention Martin Bell, Andrew Fleming, Bob Croft, Desmond

Bonney, James Bond, Chris Gerrard, John Hurst, Chris Taylor, David Hall, Dave Austin, Roy Canham, Ann Beard, Peter Wade-Martins, Rupert Bruce-Mitford, Barry Cunliffe, Chris Dyer, Stanley West, Oliver Rackham, David Wilson, Edward Price, Rob Iles, June Sheppard, Trevor Rowley, Brian Paul Hindle, Della Hooke, Jim Bolton and Nick Tweddle. Gordon Kelsey and his colleagues did sterling work on the photographs and line drawings.

I owe much to Carinne Allinson. Not only did she type from a nearly illegible manuscript, but her editorial skills contributed greatly to the completion of the book.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to my parents, who for so long have had to live with field archaeology and landscape history – perhaps this will give them some idea of what it is all about.

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First published 1985
by B.T. Batsford Ltd

Reprinted by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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ISBN 978-0-415-15140-5

Typeset by Keypools Ltd

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Preface

This book is written for those who want to know about the English landscape, whether they are archaeologists, historians, geographers or anyone interested in our past, and for all those who may wish to do some local history research, a parish survey or a local study. It draws attention to recent research and studies in the English landscape and shows how these are relevant to the local researcher's own interests. It attempts not only to review recent literature and articles (sometimes published in obscure places) and to make available more widely and easily the ideas contained within them, but also to develop some new ideas, clarify current knowledge and ideas and show how research is proceeding. Its aim is to throw some light on the complicated processes that have shaped the English landscape.

Furthermore, it is hoped that it will make those engaged in all aspects of local research think more deeply about their studies and begin to see them against the wider background of landscape studies. There is a tendency to look at particular or individual landscape features and see only details, but we need to think more about involved historical and natural processes and look at examples of how other places have developed elsewhere. This may teach us something about our own area of study. Attention will also be drawn to those aspects of sites and features in the landscape which have not previously been fully appreciated – features

which are common enough but generally overlooked in the text books, like pillow mounds and duck decoys.

Many text books published today tend to give the impression that the author has personally carried out the huge amount of research needed to compile the volume; alternatively, the reader is bombarded with pages of indigestible references. In this book I hope to have adopted a more honest approach. It is an amalgam of the research of many people and, wherever possible, I have credited individuals with their work in the text. In general, my own research has covered the Midlands (Worcestershire, Warwickshire and Oxfordshire) and the West Country (Somerset, Avon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire); for other areas I have had to rely on the research of colleagues, for which I am most grateful.

The bibliographies for each chapter do not give all the relevant references on the subject. What I have tried to do is to direct the reader to the most significant and important books and articles, which will in turn lead to a multitude of further papers. These bibliographies should be regarded as a door to further, more detailed, studies.

Finally, I hope this book is written in a style most people can understand. I have tried to make it easy to read, but if at times it seems direct, personal or even colloquial, this is because it is my job to communicate by teaching and this is the way language is used today.

PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

I have taken the opportunity of a reprint of *Interpreting the Landscape* to correct errors in spelling, references and so on, drawn to my attention by reviewers and readers. The publishers, and in particular Peter Kemmis Betty, have kindly allowed me to update the bibliography and references to include material published up to Spring 1992 and I hope this aspect of the book, which proved so useful in the original edition, will therefore continue to be of value.

Such is the pace of research into the history of the landscape in Britain that a completely revised edition of this book will be necessary in a few years time.

Introduction

Most people are interested in the past to some degree and almost everyone wants to know something about the locality in which they live. Most areas have local stories of Roman roads, ghosts, plagues, underground tunnels, civil war battles, and the comings and goings of medieval monks, Cromwell and Elizabeth I. There is usually little truth in these stories, but their recounting shows something of attitudes and concerns about the history of particular local environments.

Nearly everywhere in this country has a local history written about it, often in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, and frequently by the local vicar, schoolteacher, or landed worthy. Invariably, these histories are concerned with the church, the manor, and the important families but, whilst interesting in themselves, these studies do not answer some of the basic questions asked about a place today. Indeed, such questions were not even thought of in the past. So, something more rigorous is needed for those of us who are concerned about the history behind the familiar scene. We want to know how old the church is and at what period most of the buildings were constructed, or why the hedges look as they do or why the road takes the particular course it does. Other questions may seem more awkward: when and why was this village or that farm first built there; what do those bumps and hollows mean in that field, or even, where did earlier people find their water or what sort of agricultural system did they employ?

Such questions cannot be easily answered for most of the parishes and villages in Britain, but the fact that they are being asked shows that, over the last quarter of a century, a new way of looking at the landscape and our everyday surroundings, whether town or country, has developed. We owe our initial awareness of questions about the landscape to people like Professors William Hoskins and Maurice Beresford. A generation of research in archaeology, economic history, historical geography and local history, as well as related subjects like historical ecology and place names, is now beginning to put forward explanations for some of the features mentioned above. For a few places, the story

behind what we see around us is beginning to emerge and this will have clear implications for studies in other places. Over the next few decades much more will be learnt.

It is the aim of this book to put some of these questions about the landscape and its development into perspective by looking at research widely scattered over England. Where work has been done and ideas developed, these will be discussed. Some of these ideas will be useful and relevant elsewhere in the country, perhaps a village or parish under study locally, even if the place originally examined is many miles away. Frequently, it will not be possible to answer some of our questions at the moment. It is unlikely that the work done so far will be relevant everywhere, but two things are certain: that research carried out in Yorkshire will have important implications for the local historian or fieldworker in Somerset, and that an awareness of problems posed and work undertaken elsewhere may prompt inquiry into aspects of the landscape hitherto unsuspected or overlooked in our own locality. If this book succeeds in making us more aware, making us think and question, and putting our own 'Little Twittering' into some larger-than-local-history context, the future for landscape studies will indeed be fruitful and exciting.

If we look at our surroundings, we are confronted by a great variety of landscape features. Most of us now live in towns and much of our environment is urban or suburban. Yet until the nineteenth century, most of the towns and cities of Britain were small; even in the inner suburbs we may live in what was countryside until 80 or 90 years ago, and much of the framework of those areas is rural rather than urban.

Over the last ten years I have lived in five different environments. In Birmingham, the row of terraced houses, built around the turn of the century, was all that existed in a road which ran between fields in 1840 and was not built up until the 1930s, '50s and '60s. The last piece of infilling is just beginning. Even so, the rear fence of the garden there reflected an old (how old?) field boundary and opposite the front of the house was

a nineteenth-century brickyard with its pit, later used as an orchard and then as a lorry-breaker's yard. Where was our medieval parish church, where were the farms working the fields, and why did the road, running as it did through fields, have such a sinuous S-shaped course?

At Milton under Wychwood in Oxfordshire I lived in a new bungalow in a village. It was a vast thriving place with many new housing estates, garages, schools and shops. The new estate was infilled in the rear of the older village properties and, when I came to dig the garden, quite some time after settling into the house, I came across the well-ploughed field soil of the former open field strips and a telltale scatter of medieval pottery sherds. My journey to work took me through a landscape created in the 1850s when the old open fields were enclosed and new farms, roads, field boundaries, and even stream courses were laid out. To me, the generally unattractive appearance of the village, and hence, I suspect, its rapid expansion, was largely due to this total landscape reorganisation just over 100 years ago (*Fig. 84*).

In Taunton I lived in a row of large fine terraced houses by the railway station, which had been at the edge of the town until the 1930s. This isolated row must have looked impressive across the fields. Indeed, the outline of the plots owed its shape to the pre-existing fields, although the buildings may have been generated by the Great Western Railway enterprise, begun in that part of the West Country by Brunel in the 1840s. My journey to work there took me over a pattern of medieval roads conditioned by the presence of a possible late Saxon bridge, Norman castle and medieval town.

For a year I lived on the edge of Oxford in a quarryman's house which had a small carved lion over the door. It was near Headington Quarry, famous for its quarrymen and morris dancers. The plot of land on which it stood was the result of 'squatting', or encroachment on a piece of waste or underused land, for across the end of the house ran the old road from Oxford to London. The road is now fixed by tarmac, but in earlier times it must have wandered amongst the mud and potholes between wide hedges. Nearby there were patches of woodland formerly used by Oxford colleges to supply their timber for building and firewood, and the hedges, with their great banks and rich botanical species, indicated old fields.

In Bristol I lived in the inner suburbs in an old stone house of Tudor date. This was part of a larger house, now demolished, which looks splendid on the old photographs and earlier nineteenth-century prints. Land for several miles around was attached to it in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and outlines of fields and the stone walls of its gardens have con-

ditioned the plots built on in the 1890s and early 1900s and the road developments up to the 1930s.

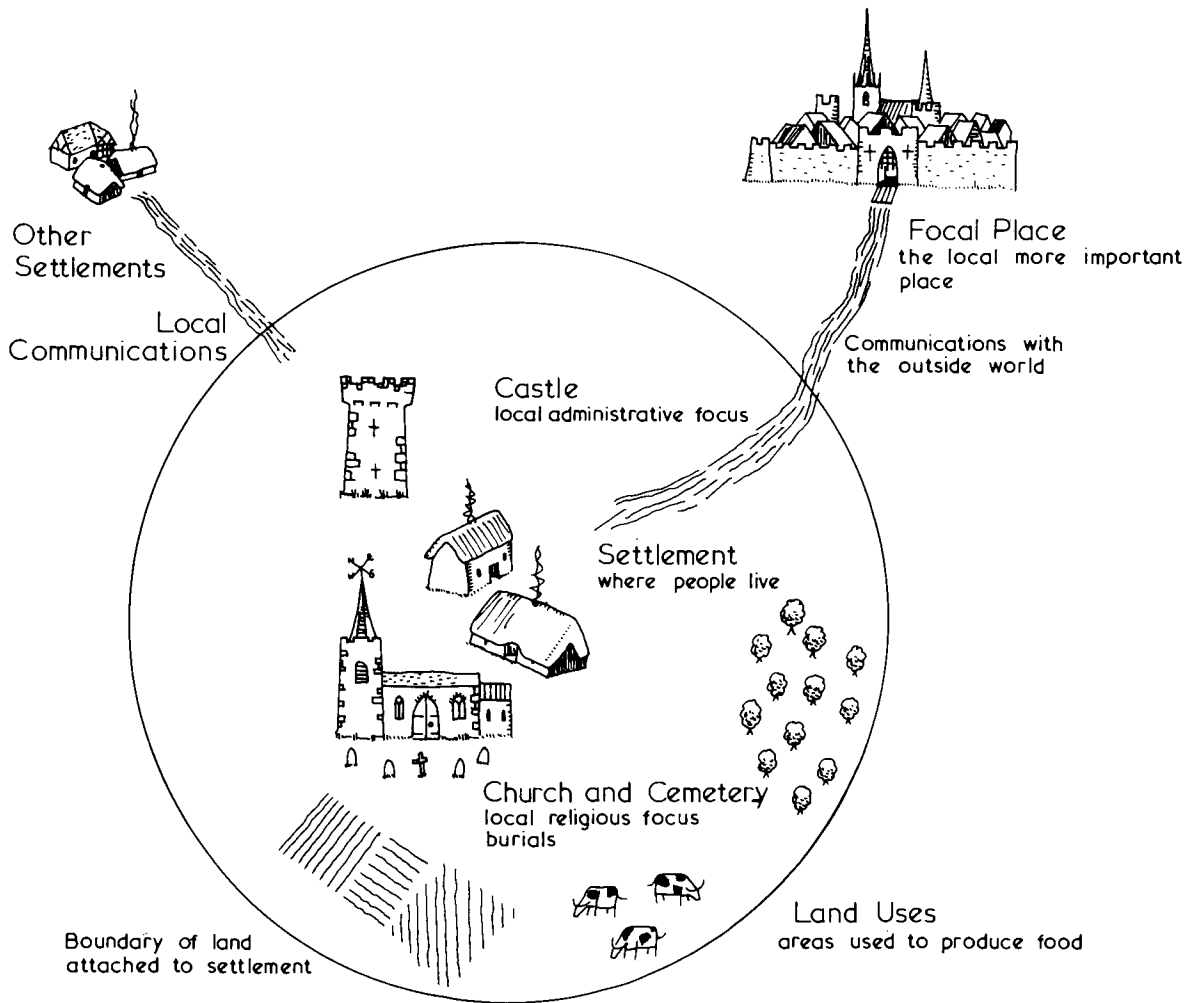
I now live in Sandford, a small nondescript bungalow village outside Bristol. The bungalow in which I live is only 20 years old, but it has an old holloway in front linking Sandford to the main village of Winscombe, and the plot on which it stands is very irregular in shape. One of the property boundaries is an old hedge on a stony bank and this forms part of a series of parallel boundaries running for miles across country linked to a hillfort 3 kilometres (2 miles) away.

The past is all around us then, a truism which deserves to be repeated because it *is* so true; whether we like it or not, in this country we *do* live in a museum. Yet how are we to disentangle and understand it? Some of the likely developments have been indicated above as well as some of the sources which can be used. We shall now look more closely at the landscape and see what we can make of it.

Let us go first to the countryside, because, as has already been mentioned, most of Britain was countryside until as little as 100 years ago, and also because the elements we are going to examine are more obvious to see, though not necessarily more easy to understand, than those in the towns and suburbs. On any car journey in the countryside, fields defined by hedges or walls form the dominant view. Roads run between fields; tracks, footpaths and bridleways cross and join, and every so often a farm is passed. In villages and hamlets we see buildings of all shapes, sizes, ages and functions, with yards, gardens, plots and paddocks around, behind and between them. At the end of the village the church frequently provides a focus for our attention; it may have a manor house next to it or stand alongside a stately mansion. If we have come any distance, we may have crossed streams or perhaps a river, and spent some time climbing up or down hills. We may have noticed areas of unenclosed commonland, old quarries, perhaps the ruins of a castle or abbey, or an old mill or factory in a deep valley. Signposts will tell us the names of the farms and villages and indicate the nearest towns.

What are we to make of all these features, where they are situated and how they are arranged? There are clearly many ways of subdividing them and each of us may have a logical way of ordering the study of such a landscape, but in this book we are going to look at the landscape more from how it has functioned than how it looks. As we shall see, this will clarify many of the problems of why the landscape looks like it does and thus make it easier for us to study the changes which have resulted in the present complex pattern.

The basic shape of the land has geological and geomorphological origins, but our concerns are with the activities of people over many generations. First



I Some of the more obvious relationships in the landscape. The example shown here is based on the medieval period, but the interrelationships depicted, between the settlement under study, its lands, other local settlements and the local town apply equally to all other periods.

and foremost, people must have somewhere to live, even if it is only a temporary encampment, and so our main concern will be with settlements, a difficult word with many meanings. Here we shall consider villages, hamlets and farms: how they originate, what they consist of, how they change, and what they look like today. Secondly, people need to eat, and most of the landscape has been organised in the past to enable the maximum amount of food to be produced. Farming, fields and agricultural operations spring to mind and most land has been used for food production to a greater or lesser degree in the past. Land use is therefore a central theme, with discussion about how land has been used at different times, what field systems have

been employed, and the ways of operating them, and how these patterns have changed through time.

The links between villages, farms and their fields, and between towns and the countryside are clearly evident in the landscape. Roads, tracks, rivers, and the small harbours and ports on rivers, estuaries and the coast were vital for moving goods about in the past. Towns often provided the points of exchange for these goods, and the fairs and markets with which we are so familiar today have a long history, although originally they were very different in character. So, focal places, where special goods or services could be obtained, form another less obvious, but equally important, element in the landscape.

Other aspects of earlier societies are not so obvious until a little thought is focused on them. Churches are a familiar element in the landscape, some of the most attractive and frequently the oldest buildings in any area. As burial places they were the successors to generations of earlier cemeteries and they provided the local religious focus, while the castle, manor house or stately home provided the administrative focus. Monasteries also had this latter administrative function in addition to their religious activities.

Recognition of these different aspects should help us to sort out what we see in the landscape. The obvious features of hedges, woods, buildings and fields are part of the way the landscape was *used*. Some aspects of the landscape have become specialised topics; buildings are the preserve of experts in vernacular architecture and historic buildings, but we can use the results of their research to help us understand our local landscape. Similarly, industrial archaeologists can point to the remains of early industrial activity and processes in the landscape and, even if we do not understand the mechanics or the chemistry, we can use their information in our studies also.

Finally, we must remember that the British landscape is very old in the sense that people have been living in it and using it for many thousands of years. It used to be thought that their influence before the Anglo-Saxon period was minimal and that prehistoric people had made little impact on their environment and left little trace of their activities. As we drive around much of the country this still appears to be true, but, over the last 30 years, fieldwork by archaeologists following motorway schemes, collecting pottery from fields, and looking for earthworks has shown that the landscape was very well developed even by 2000 BC, and air photographs taken by archaeologists show that

vast areas were covered by dense patterns of settlements and their fields well before the Roman conquest. In many areas little can be seen of this, but it certainly exists over wide areas. In any landscape study we need to be aware of what might lie hidden beneath the soil and how this may have influenced the layout of what we see around us, generally attributed to later periods. We shall, therefore, be looking at what we now know of prehistoric and Roman landscapes and how they might have influenced the framework of our present surroundings.

When Professor W. G. Hoskins wrote *The Making of the English Landscape* in 1955, he said (p. 14) 'The English landscape itself, to those who know how to read it aright, is the richest historical record we possess.' Since then, study after study has shown how much can be learnt. We now know that the landscape as created and used by people is much older than we ever thought, with perhaps as much as 12,000 years of intense activity represented. We know that its development has been more complex than we ever imagined, with many combinations of and interrelationships between the factors mentioned above. Change, rather than stability, has tended to be the order of the day. The idea of an unchanging landscape since time immemorial has had to be replaced now by one of great dynamism. If we could see the English landscape developing over the last 6000 years in a speeded-up film, it would certainly resemble an ants' nest, with not only the ants moving about at a great pace engaged in many jobs, but the nest itself being shifted constantly! This ants' nest which is the English landscape will be examined in this book to see how it has developed and what we can learn from it; but first we must look at the sources of information available to us to begin the investigation of the local landscape.

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Because of the complexity of the landscape, the elements within it, how it is changing, and the forces at work within it, we need a model on which to base what we already know and to help us isolate areas of ignorance and to structure our future research. Fig. 93 is offered as a first step: it attempts to show a settlement at any period from prehistory to the nineteenth century in relation to other settlements in the area, local and distant land uses, the larger estate structure, local focal places and distant centres, and the communication links between all of these. Something of potential change is indicated within it, but on the two-dimensional page this is difficult! If nothing else, such a model can act as a check-list for any local study, so that, in accounting for each item in the diagram, attention can be drawn to items and features which at first sight do not appear to be of significance.

Finally, there is man, or more correctly men, women and children. It is all too easy to become so embroiled with earthworks, air photographs, maps,

documents, potsherds, and hedges, that we lose sight of what it is all about. One criticism, sometimes valid, of the archaeologist (and recently of the landscape archaeologist) is that he has lost sight of the people in the mass of data collected: I hope this is not true. I keep as my vision the late thirteenth-century peasant, sitting by his fire, drying his boots and cooking his supper (the activity for February [!] from Corpus Christi College, Oxford, manuscript 285), and the prehistoric man building the Sweet Track. They must speak for the millions like them, from prehistory right through to our own time. It was their kind who not only dug the ditches and constructed the buildings, but who for generations felled woodland, ploughed land and harvested crops. We must not lose sight of them and of their labours. Our studies must be of *people* in the landscape, how they have lived, worked, died and worshipped over millennia. Unless we appreciate this, we are not looking at the real forces in the landscape, and our own relationship with it will be the poorer.

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- TREVOR ROWLEY *Villages in the Landscape* (Dent, 1978)
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- BRIAN ROBERTS 'The Regulated Village in Northern England: Some Problems and Questions' *Geographica Polonica* 38 (1978) pp. 245–52
- BRIAN ROBERTS 'The Anatomy of the Village: Observation and Extrapolation' *Landscape History* Vol. 4 (1982) pp. 11–20
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- J. E. B. GOVER, ALLEN MAWER and F. M. STENTON *The Place Names of Wiltshire* English Place Name Society Vol. XVI (1939, reprinted 1970)
- PETER WADE-MARTINS 'The Origins of Rural Settlement in East Anglia' in P. J. Fowler (ed) *Recent Work in Rural Archaeology* (Moonraker, Bradford on Avon, 1975)
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- The most recent study with current ideas is:
- DELLA HOOKE (ed) *Medieval Villages: A Review of Current Work* (Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, 1985)
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- A. KING 'Gauber High Pasture, Ribbleshead - An Interim Report' in R. A. Hall (ed) *Viking Age York and the North Council for British Archaeology Research Report No. 27* (1978)
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- For colonisation see:
- PETER SAWYER 'Medieval English Settlement: New Interpretation' in Peter Sawyer (ed) *English Medieval Settlement* (Edward Arnold, 1979)
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- MICHAEL WILLIAMS 'Marshland and Waste' in L. Cantor (ed) *The Medieval English Landscape* (Croom Helm, London, 1982)
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- M. WILLIAMS *The Draining of the Somerset Levels* (Cambridge University Press, 1970)
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- HAROLD FOX 'Peasant farmers, patterns of settlement and pays: transformations in the landscapes of Devon and Cornwall during the Later Middle Ages' in Robert Higham (ed) *op. cit.* (chap. 6), pp. 41-73
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8 - Sites and patterns

The best general study is:

MICHAEL CHISHOLM *Rural Settlement and Land Use: An Essay in Location* particularly the 3rd edition (Hutchinson, 1979)

For site catchment analysis see:

CLAUDIO VITA-FINZI and E. S. HIGGS 'Prehistoric Economy in the Mount Carmel Area of Palestine: Site Catchment Analysis' *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 36 (1970) pp. 1-37

A. ELLISON and J. HARRIS 'Settlement and Land Use in the Prehistory and Early History of Southern England: A Study Based on Locational Models' in D. L. Clarke (ed) *Models in Archaeology* (Methuen, 1972) pp. 911-62

B. J. GARNER 'Models of Urban Geography and Settlement Location' in R. J. Chorley and P. Haggett (eds) *Socio-Economic Models in Geography* (Methuen, 1967) pp. 303-60

Changes in the Post-Roman landscape are discussed in:

CLAUDIO VITA-FINZI *Archaeological Sites in Their Setting* (Thames and Hudson, 1978)

FRED ALDSWORTH and DAVID FREKE *Historic Towns in Sussex: An Archaeological Survey* (Sussex Archaeological Field Unit, 1976)

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- JOHN HARVEY 'Vegetables in the Middle Ages' *Garden History* Vol. 12 No. 2 (Autumn 1984) pp. 89–99
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- EVA CRANE *The Archaeology of Beekeeping* (Duckworth, 1983)
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- C. R. YOUNG *The Royal Forests of Medieval England* (Leicester University Press, Leicester, 1979)
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- CRISPIN GILL (ed) *Dartmoor: A New Study* (David and Charles, 1970)
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- For *commons* see:
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JOHN HARVEY *Early Nurserymen* Phillimore, Chichester (1974)

DAVID HALL 'The Late Saxon Countryside: Villages and their Fields' in Della Hooke (ed) *op. cit.* (chap. 5), pp. 99–122

D. R. WILSON 'Alterations to Ridge and Furrow: Some Examples Illustrated' pp. 183–190 and David Hall 'Field Systems and Township Structure' pp. 191–205 both in Michael Aston, David Austin and Christopher Dyer (eds) *op. cit.* (chap. 3)

M. ASTON 'Land Use and Field Systems' in M. Aston (ed) *op. cit.* (chap. 6) pp. 83–97

II – Communications – the links between

A great deal has been said in the past about communications, but little that has been published is any good. There are no good books on early sea and river communications. For roads, the best are:

CHRISTOPHER TAYLOR *Roads and Tracks of Britain* (Dent, 1979)

BRIAN PAUL HINDLE *Medieval Roads* (Shire Archaeology, Aylesbury, 1982) with a very good bibliography

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Medieval maps

BRIAN PAUL HINDLE 'The Towns and Roads of the Gough Map' *The Manchester Geographer* 1 (1980) pp. 35–49

12 – What does it all mean?

C. TAYLOR 'The Making of the English Landscape – 25 Years

On' *The Local Historian* Vol. 14 No. 4 (Nov. 1980). A review of what has been learned as has been discussed already. Followed by:

M. ASTON 'The Making of the English Landscape – The Next 25 Years' *The Local Historian* Vol. 15 No. 6 (May 1983)

Population

J. L. BOLTON *The Medieval English Economy 1150–1500* (Dent, 1980) pp. 48–65

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WINIFRED PENNINGTON *The History of British Vegetation* (English Universities Press, London, 1974)

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Climate

H. H. LAMB 'Climate from 1000 BC to 1000 AD' in M. Jones and G. Dimbleby (eds) *The Environment of Man: The Iron Age to the Anglo-Saxon Period* British Archaeological Reports British Series 87 (Oxford, 1981)

C. D. SMITH and M. PARRY (eds) *Consequences of Climatic Change* (Dept. of Geography, University of Nottingham, 1981)

M. L. PARRY (ed) *Climatic Change, Agriculture and Settlement* (Dawson, Folkestone, 1978)

Technology

A difficult area with little written of any use. Peter Reynold's research at Butser has opened our eyes to a range of new possibilities of how much early people were capable of.

P. J. REYNOLDS *Iron Age Farm: The Butser Experiment* (Colonnade, British Museum, 1979)

General accounts and ideas are discussed in:

LYNN WHITE *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford University Press, 1962)

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