

THE DESERTED MEDIEVAL VILLAGES OF ENGLAND

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VILLAGES are as mortal as villagers. Villages were created by men coming together for an economic purpose, making a living by exploiting the different potentialities of the English countryside. If the means of making a living were destroyed or disappeared, then the village ceased to be. The agents of destruction were sometimes natural—the Suffolk village of Easton Bavent has been eroded by the sea—and sometimes man-made. Wars have been active agents of destruction, and while re-settlement was easy when houses were only timber-built, there have been occasions when villages have not been rebuilt and the fields have either been abandoned or put to other uses by neighbouring communities. Both the devastation after the Norman Conquest and the long series of border wars with Scotland and Wales have been responsible for the death of English villages.

Villages have also decayed when the local soils have not lived up to their early promise. The deserted villages of the Norfolk and Suffolk brecklands are probably due to the impoverishment of the dry, sandy soils in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Many of these East Anglian villages have fragments of ruined churches remaining to mark the sites. There are villages in the chalk wolds of Lincolnshire where the villagers had all left by the mid-fifteenth century, so that the church had to be abandoned and the living united to a more fortunate neighbour. Such were Fordington and Ulceby, near Louth, where the bishop's grant of permission to abandon the services specifically speaks of the poverty and sterility of the soil.

Many of these abandoned acres could be utilised as rough grazing, and were not wholly wasted. Nearly all the deserted village sites are now grass, and except for areas where the plough has been very active in the last century—such as East Anglia—the fields across which one approaches the sites are also under grass.

Yet this grass is not generally the grass of cornfields abandoned because they were becoming sterile after too long use. Cases such as

Fordington are well authenticated, but they make up only a fraction of the deserted village sites, which now number more than a thousand. In the majority of these other cases the fields are grass because the owner of the fields decided that grass was a more profitable use than corn. This happened most frequently between about 1450 and 1550, so that a now-deserted village might have had anything from five hundred to a thousand years of active arable husbandry before this final conversion to grass. With the conversion to pasture, the need for the villagers' services at the plough ceased; with their departure or eviction, the need for their houses ceased. If they were built of stone and stone was worth taking away, the houses would be demolished; if they were of timber, wattle and daub they could be left to rot and fall: they became one with the pastures. Travellers like William Dugdale, riding England in the mid-seventeenth century, saw the houses reduced to grassy mounds and the churches taken for byres, while the sheep grazed in the churchyards.

The condition in which the sites appear to-day is not very different. The church is probably more ruined and the shroud of grass may be speckled with scrub and trees; but there are many lost villages which did not possess a parish church and yet have clear and recognisable signs of their former existence.

The characteristic earthworks of this particular type of ancient monument are the deeply-incised hollow ways where the streets once ran. In medieval times the surface was worn down below the general level by the continuous passage of men, carts and animals and the scouring action of wind and rain. Since the village was abandoned the sides of the streets have slipped down and rounded off the section, but there has not been enough soil to fill in the whole space, and the grass has come to act as a shield against further erosion.

In favourable circumstances the grass will also conceal the actual foundations of houses and the footings of walls where these have been of stone. In parts of the country (the clay-plains) where buildings were in timber, the houses will only remain as depressions, saucer-shaped hollows in the grass, standing back from and usually above the streets. In between the houses will be long, narrow earthworks which trace out a pattern of crofts, the enclosed gardens behind the houses. Beyond the end of the crofts began the arable fields of the villages: there is usually a perimeter earthwork marking this dividing line between the gardens, where the domestic animals were kept, and the open fields, from which all animals would be excluded between seed-time and harvest. With a palisade on top, these earthworks would serve to keep the domestic animals in and the wild animals out.

The manor house of the village has sometimes survived first as the home

of the grazier and to-day as a farmer's house; other manor-houses have grown into the Great Houses of English parkland, more than one of which stands among the earthworks of the abandoned village. In other villages the manor house is an earthwork like any other village house, distinguished only by its superior size and perhaps by its moats. Dovecotes sometimes survive (as at Barforth on Tees) and the mounds of windmills (as at Burton Constable) can also be seen. It is not uncommon to find single fishponds or chains of fishponds adjoining the village sites, and sometimes the earthworks of village streets and houses have been taken by cartographers for fishponds !

With such distinctive earthworks, it is surprising that the study of the deserted village has had to wait until recent years. One site was photographed from the air by O. G. S. Crawford just after the first world war. Single sites here and there had been noticed by local historians and antiquaries, but almost an equal number had been misinterpreted. The first attempt at a comprehensive list for an English county was published by Canon C. W. Foster in 1924 as a preface to his edition of the Lincolnshire Domesday. In 1933, Dr. W. M. Palmer employed both documentary and field-work enquiries in his model history of the lost Clopton near Croydon, Cambridgeshire. In 1944 Dr. Hoskins published his first list of Leicestershire sites, which has been republished in revised form in 1950. In 1948 I published a list of Warwickshire sites, and began a Yorkshire list in 1951. A county by county list, complete as far as I am able to make it, is appearing in my forthcoming book, *The Lost Villages of England* (Lutterworth Press), and the formation of the Deserted Medieval Villages Research Group is designed to bring together the archaeological, architectural and historical specialists who have interests in this field of study. From its work it is likely that more villages will be added to my list and its errors refined.

The distribution of lost village sites is not evenly spread over the whole of England. There are very few in Devon, Cornwall, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Cheshire or Lancashire; there are very many in Warwickshire, Northamptonshire and Leicestershire. This uneven distribution reflects the fact that the geographical conditions favouring the depopulator are not found everywhere. We should not expect to find the deserted villages very thick on the ground where the soils are such that corn can be grown abundantly and cheaply, for there has always been a demand for some corn even in years of economic depression or in years of falling total population. Thus, the good soils of the reclaimed fenlands are virtually free from deserted village sites. We see this best in a county such as Lincolnshire, where the former fenland, the parts of Holland, have no lost villages, while the Wolds in Lindsey have areas where the death

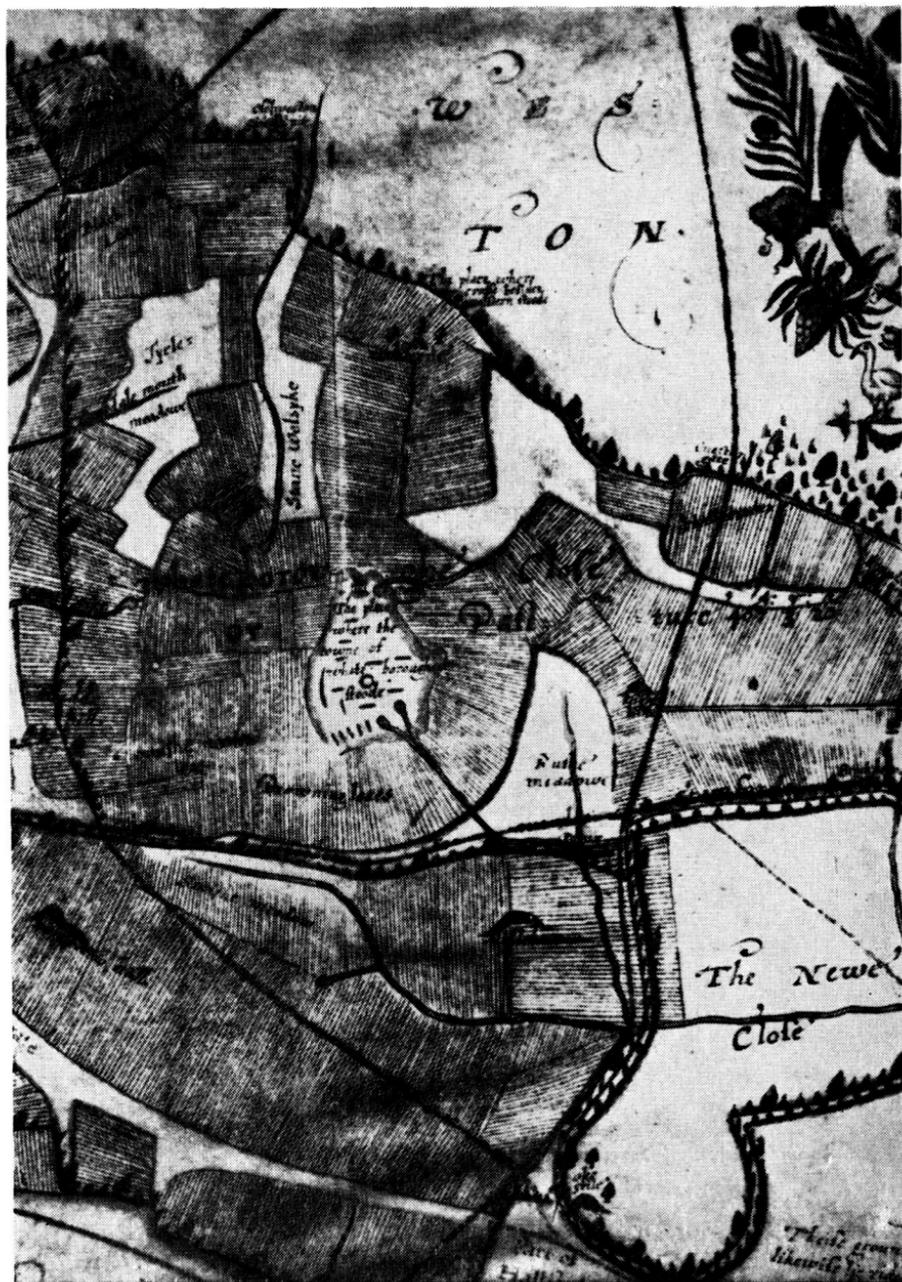


Plate I.

WHATBOROUGH, Leics., surveyed in 1586, nearly a century after the depopulation. In the centre of the map, a single shepherd's house with the words, "The place where the towne of Whateborough stode".

(From the Hovendon maps, All Souls' College, Oxford)

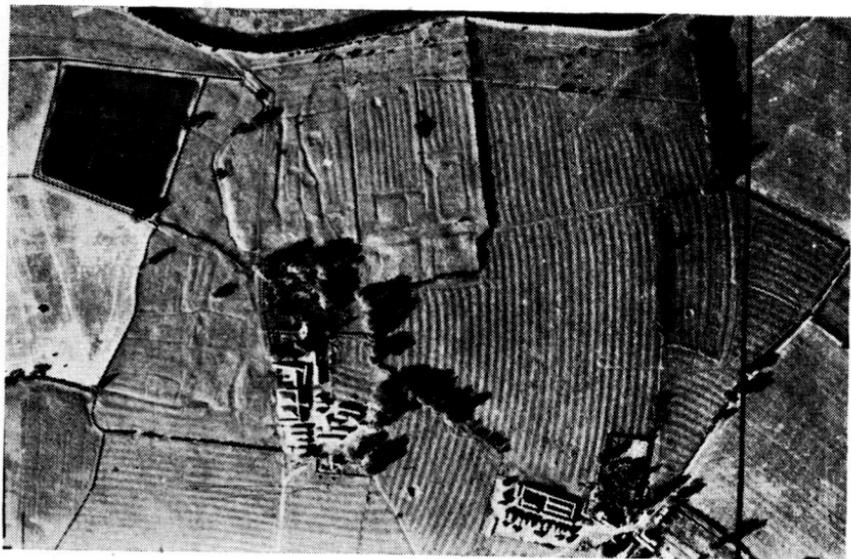


Plate 2.

THE PHYSICAL REMAINS scen from the air. The earthworks of the small village of Eske, Yorks., E.R. There were 63 poll-tax payers in 1377 and at least seven farms in 1458.
(R.A.F. photograph, Crown copyright reserved).

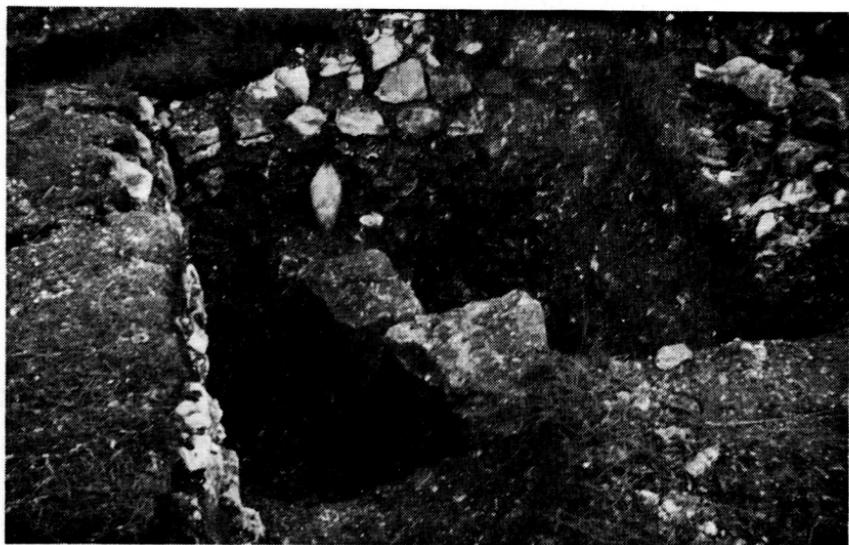


Plate 3.

THE PHYSICAL REMAINS beneath the ground. Wharram Percy, Yorks., E.R. Modern ground level on left. Two or three courses of the outer wall of a house found beneath the turf. The south-east corner of a house measuring *c.* 15 ft. by 60 ft. The trowel stands on an older wall lying beneath the house-floor and running under the walls; there were signs of a third and even older building on the same site.

(Photograph by J. G. Hurst, for Deserted Medieval Village Research Group.)

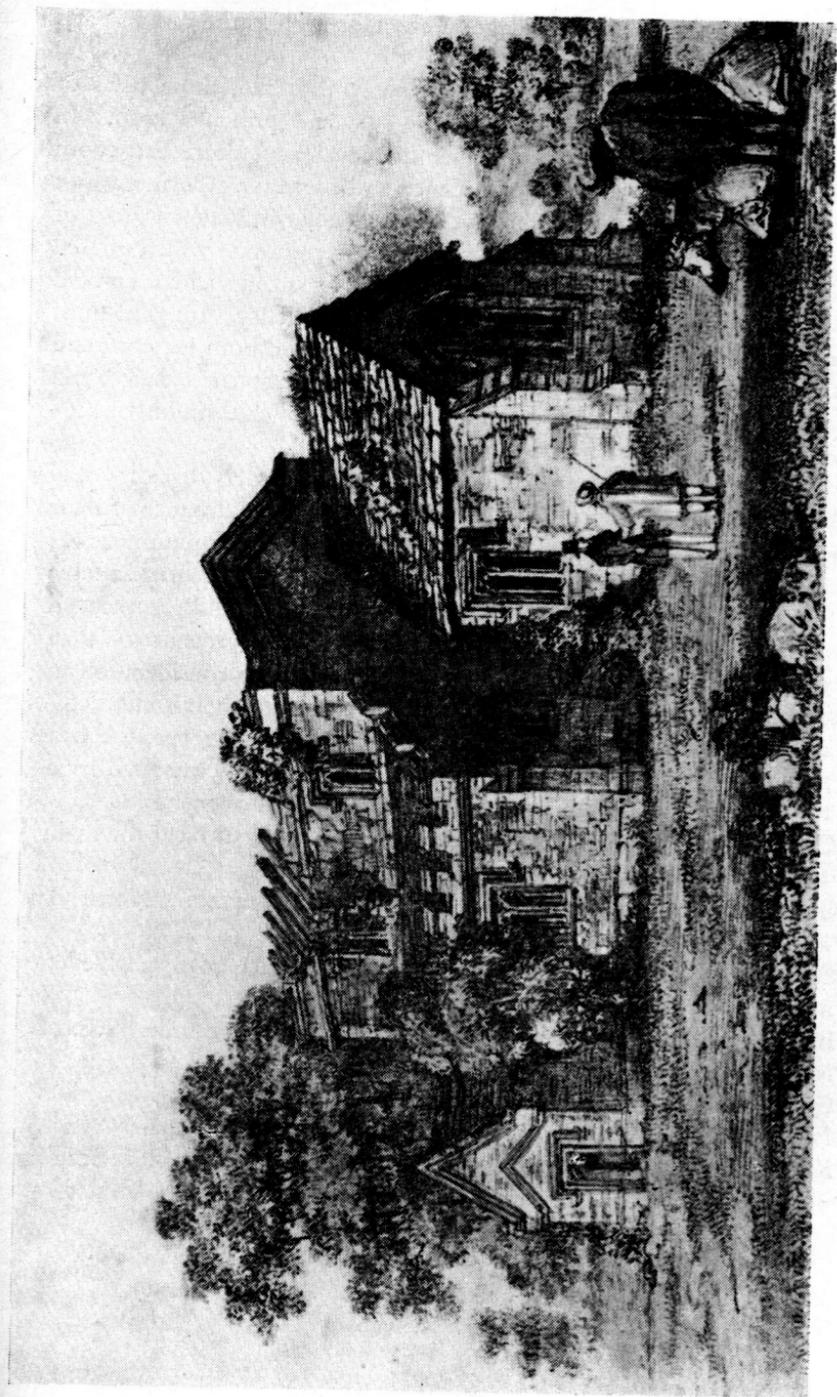


Plate 4.

THE PHYSICAL REMAINS on the ground. Quarrendon, Bucks. The ruined church, engraved for Lipscomb's *Buckinghamshire* in 1847. Only the footings of walls remain in 1953.

rate reaches the figure of one village in eight, as high as the rate in parts of the Midlands.

A similar immunity is felt at the opposite extreme, those parts of England where corn has never been the sole and principal crop. In counties like Cheshire or Herefordshire medieval agriculture had room for the produce of wood, pasture, orchard and meadow. Corn was not the sole crop, and the village did not stand or fall with the fortunes of corn as did the Midland villages. Nor was the terrain one which offered the temptation of long stretches of high quality grassland such as tempted the Midland squires in the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII. The most vulnerable villages were those whose fields were good both for corn and grass: in such villages a small swing in prices would tip the balance, and the growth of the demand for English wool by the cloth industry provided the principal force in that direction.

For this reason, it is not possible to promise all readers that they will be able to find an abandoned site within walking or car-distance of their homes; but the same is true of other categories of ancient monument. If I were asked to suggest half a dozen sites in the whole country suitable (say) for a foreign visitor with a high-powered car, I would recommend the following six. This choice is highly personal and represents less than half of one per cent of the known sites, and the prime consideration in making the selection has been the clarity or interest of the visible earthworks rather than intrinsic historical interest; thus Gainsthorpe, the first site to be photographed from the air, or Whatborough, mapped by a surveyor in the reign of Elizabeth I, have been passed over.

1. CALCETHORPE, Lincs. National grid reference 248885. Near the main road, five miles west of Louth.
2. GODWICK, Norfolk. National grid reference 904220. North of Tittleshall, six miles south of Fakenham.
3. COWLAM, Yorkshire, E.R. National grid reference 965656. Eleven miles S.E. of Malton.
4. BESCABY, Leics. National grid reference 823262. Five miles N.E. of Melton Mowbray.
5. QUARRENDON, Bucks. National grid reference 803159. Two miles N.W. of Aylesbury.
6. KNOWLTON, Dorset. National grid reference 024103. Six miles north of Wimborne Minster.