

The Winscombe Project, 2009

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Following on the successful completion of the Shapwick Project (Gerrard with Aston 2007; Aston and Gerrard forthcoming) preliminary work has begun on a study of the settlement pattern in Winscombe parish in north Somerset (Fig. 1). This was formerly an estate of both Glastonbury Abbey and the Dean and Chapter of Wells cathedral (Aston and Costen 2008) and the documentation is exceptionally rich with surveys in the twelfth, thirteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as well as long runs of account rolls and compoti rolls from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Before the tithe map of 1840 there is a highly detailed and fine map of 1792 (by William White).

The parish lies in an area of small nucleated settlements, with many parishes having a number of separate small hamlets and some dispersed medieval farmsteads. It lies in part of the West Wessex sub-province (CWEXW) as defined by Brian Roberts and Stuart Wrathmell (2000: 51) an area which ‘contains the greatest density of nucleations in the country – concealed by the fact that many are rather small’. In Winscombe itself there are regularly-laid out hamlets at Barton, Sidcot, Winterhead and probably Woodborough, with what look like ‘row’ settlements at Sandford and Dinghurst. Green-side hamlets existed at Winscombe, Woodborough Green and Sandford Batch. There are documented isolated medieval farmsteads at Nye (one of which is moated) and Hale. Max is the site of the main medieval watermill (Fig. 2).

Many of the settlements in Winscombe parish, and indeed throughout the middle of Somerset had farmsteads with rights of ‘old auster’. These rights were attached to the tenement plot rather than the tenant or farmstead and they entitled the owners to unstinted

grazing access to pasture in the parish (Fig. 3). In many parishes this is mainly associated with the low-lying levels with farmers obliged to maintain flood defences and clear ditches in return for the rights. In Winscombe however the pasture was mainly greens and commons and wayside wastes as well as the limestone uplands of the Mendips at Winscombe, Sidcot and Sandford Hills. One consequence of this tenure was that large quantities of milk were produced and vast amounts of cheese was made. While much of this was used on the manor a lot was probably sold elsewhere. Are we seeing as a consequence of this type of tenure the origin of Cheddar cheese production in central Somerset?

Unlike Shapwick with its open field system based on two large common fields, there is no clear common field system of farming in the parish though there are a few individual strips dispersed in some furlongs attached to particular farmsteads. A number of early buildings remain in the parish including one of the oldest inhabited houses in Somerset at West End Farm in Barton, dated by dendrochronology to 1278–9. The Somerset Vernacular Buildings Research Group intend to survey the parish as their next project.

The contrast with Shapwick parish could not be greater; there the later history of the parish was characterised by a ‘closed’ village economy and controlled appearance while Winscombe is a good example of an ‘open’ village with loose control by the owner, lots of industry and craft work, nonconformity and public houses.

The strategy adopted for this research will concentrate on the village holdings with collections of pottery from flower and vegetable gardens, test-pits, excavations across boundaries, and buildings analysis. There are few

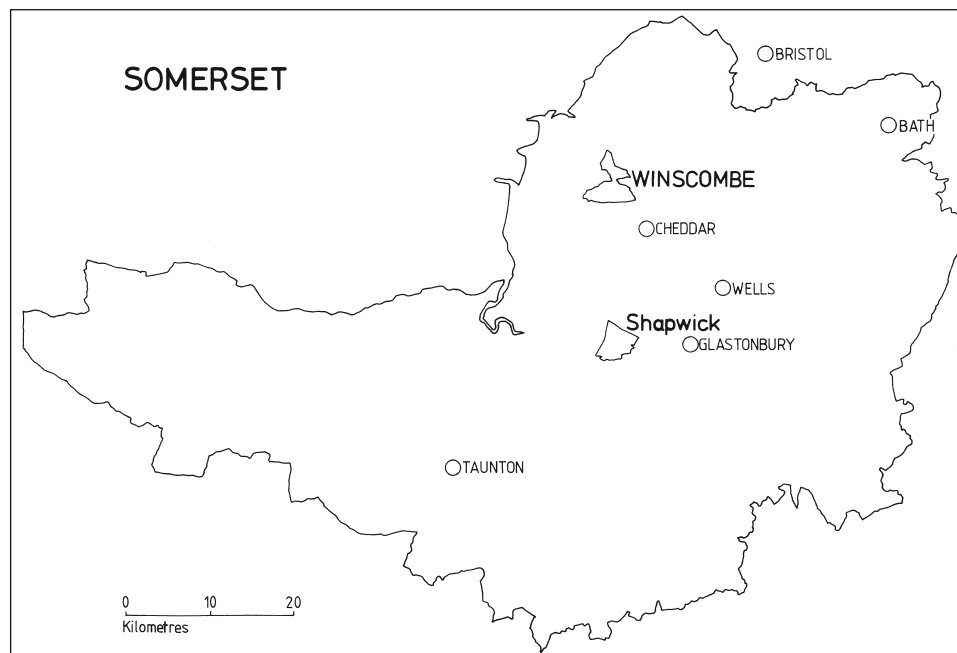


Fig. 1 The location of the parish of Winscombe in Somerset in relation to the parish of Shapwick and major towns

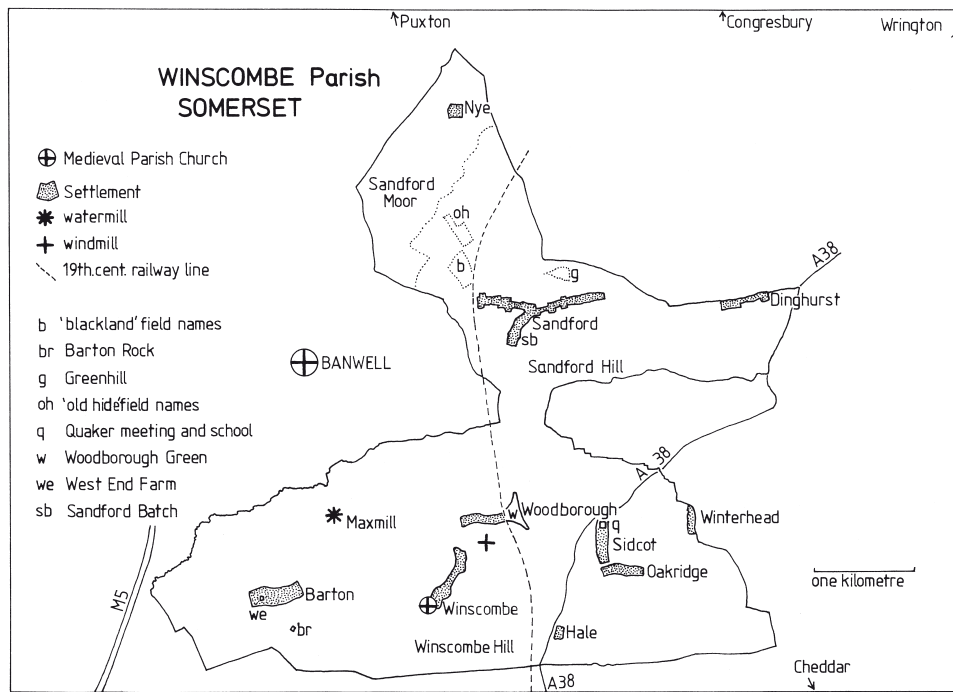
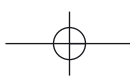


Fig. 2 The medieval settlements in Winscombe parish

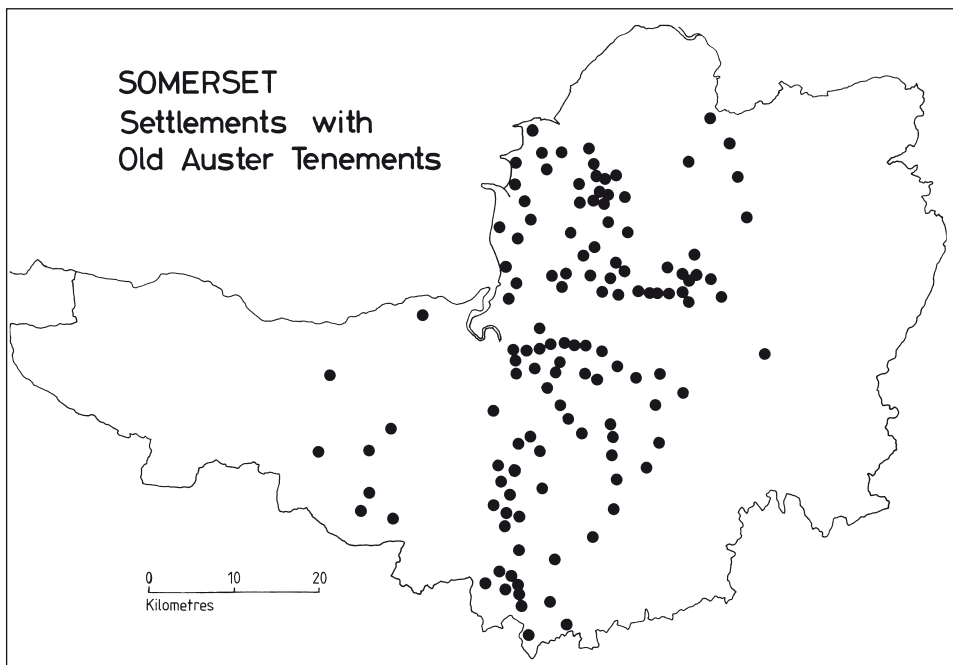


Fig. 3 The distribution of settlements in Somerset known to have 'old auster' tenements (the map reflects the distribution as known in November 2009)

earthworks to be surveyed and little modern arable farming and hence no opportunities for systematic large scale field walking, as at Shapwick. It is hoped that over a five-year period the origin and development of many of the hamlets can be studied predominantly by the people of the parish themselves. Further reports will follow.

References

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