

Wharram: past, present and future

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By Paul Stamper

Forty years of excavation and fieldwork at Wharram Percy came to an end in 1990. Constantly innovative, it was one of the most influential archaeological projects in Europe in the second half of the 20th century. Now, twenty-odd years later, and sixty years after Beresford and Hurst's excavations began there, an ambitious programme of research and publication has been completed with the appearance of volume XIII of the Wharram series, *A History of Wharram and its Neighbours*, edited by Stuart Wrathmell. This is far more than a summary and overview; expert contributors have re-assessed all aspects of the Wharram story, offering sometimes radical reappraisals of previously-accepted conclusions which in a number of cases have a resonance and relevance which are far-reaching.

This celebratory conference, marking sixty years since Beresford and Hurst began their remarkable collaboration at Wharram, took the reappraisal provided in volume XIII as the starting point for further forward thinking and questioning: the event was forward-, not backward-looking. The abstracts of papers delivered at the conference are reproduced below.

Jointly sponsored and organised by the three organisations behind the Wharram Project – English Heritage, the University of York, and the Medieval Settlement Research Group – the conference was attended by a hundred delegates. It included a keynote address on the Friday evening by Simon Thurley (Chief Executive, English Heritage) on Wharram's place in the history of medieval archaeology and state protection for ancient monuments, followed by a wine reception; on the Saturday a full programme of papers; and on Sunday the opportunity to visit Wharram for a guided tour by Al Oswald (with contributions by David Stocker and others), and to combine that with a visit to the English Heritage museum store at Helmsley to see finds from the excavations.

Conference abstracts

Steve Roskams: 'Integrating landscape, site and assemblage: Wharram in the prehistoric and Roman periods'

Wharram is known, of course, for its focus on the medieval village and its landscape context. However, work there has generated a lot of other evidence, partly as a lucky by-product of fieldwork with medieval objectives, partly as a result of investigations deliberately targeting pre-medieval periods. This paper will flag up some results of this work and discuss how they relate to contemporary developments on the Wolds and beyond. In the process, it will consider the problems of using assemblage, stratigraphic and spatial

information to generate interpretations at different levels of landscape resolution. In addition it will suggest that our conventional chronological divisions between the Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman periods may conceal more than they show about developments over time, and propose that we categorise these parts of the past in more meaningful ways.

Stuart Wrathmell: 'Wharram's village origins and the repopulation of the Wolds in the Anglo-Saxon period'

The question of 'settlement continuity' from Roman to Anglo-Saxon times is one that has been discussed on many occasions over the past forty years by those involved in the Wharram Research Project. The starting point of this contribution is the hypothesis that there was a complete break in the permanent occupation of Wharram from the late 5th to the early 7th centuries. It was still the scene of intermittent human activity, because the lands that were to become the two Wharram townships were used as summer grazing pastures by farmers living below the Wolds scarp, in the Vale of Pickering. But it was only in the 7th and 8th centuries that settled communities were re-established at Wharram and more widely on the northern Wolds. The circumstances in which these new communities were formed are explored through the recorded place-names of the area, and through the indications of early trackways and territorial boundaries. Archaeological evidence from both aerial survey and excavation is used to characterise the physical traces of these communities – the remains of curvilinear ditched enclosures and *Grubenhäuser* – and to examine their relationships with the rectilinear-plan villages which seem to have replaced them in the Late Saxon period and beyond.

Ian Riddler: 'Object and Identity in Anglo-Saxon Wharram'

The material culture from Wharram Percy extends from later prehistory to modern times and includes an important assemblage of Anglo-Saxon artefacts. These have been used, in the first instance, to provide a dating framework for activity on site, but they also help to characterise the settlement at various periods. Wharram's development from the 6th century to the 7th century follows a familiar pattern for Anglo-Saxon England except that, somewhat unusually, several high-status objects of Merovingian origin have been found there. The edge of the Middle Saxon settlement has been excavated, revealing a typical layout for the 8th century, with the objects indicating further contacts (direct or indirect) with the Continent, as well as providing an Insular component, suggesting the presence of Irishmen at the site, possibly a reflection of contacts with the monastery of Whitby. There may be a reduction in activity in the 9th century, happening

some decades prior to the Viking incursions. Wharram does not have a vast quantity of Anglo-Saxon finds and many of its features of that date remain to be excavated, but the quality of its objects shows that it remained in touch with developments in the wider world across the 7th to 9th centuries.

Julian Richards: 'A regional Anglo-Scandinavian context for Wharram'

The Wharram project began as an investigation of the desertion of medieval villages but took on a key significance for our understanding of their origins, and the moment of nucleation. The proposal, initially put forward by Beresford and Hurst, that an Anglo-Scandinavian context was most likely for the 'Village Moment' at Wharram has generally been accepted, and whilst the final appraisal suggests a 9th-10th century date, there is some ambiguity in the dating which leaves room for alternative interpretations of the Scandinavian role. This paper will look at the regional context, ranging from the Viking seizure of York in 866-867 AD, to the expulsion of Erik Bloodaxe in 954 AD. Alternative settlement trajectories on the Wolds are reviewed, at Cottam, Cowlam and Burdale, and it is suggested that there may still be a missing link at Wharram. It is proposed that this can best be resolved by detailed landscape studies, and by an increasing use of metal detector evidence to provide fine chronologies of inter-site and intra-site movement.

Paul Everson and David Stocker: 'A fanfare for the noble man? The rise of the manorial elite' (see this volume)

This paper focuses on the impact of lordship at Wharram between the late 10th and the 16th centuries. We propose that the nucleated settlement at Wharram is clearly of similar type to that minority in Lincolnshire (and elsewhere) with a church on the communal green and a regular layout of groups of plots around it. We argue, not that such settlements were without lords (an entirely meaningless proposal), but that, because the lord was not physically in residence, the sokemen organised the settlement on distinctive, less hierarchical, lines. But not all 11th-century sokemen were equal, of course, and their leaders were capable of rising to a position resembling minor lords in all but name. We suggest that the big change into a more conventionally hierarchical settlement of 'lords and peasants', at Wharram as in other places, came with the arrival of 'resident' lordship. At Wharram we propose, the Percys arrived at the South Manor in the mid 12th century. We believe we can see great changes within the settlement following in their wake; most clearly represented in the fabric of the church, the development of which has been re-interpreted in our study. Thereafter, we suggest, 'resident lordship' drives both the physical development of the church and the layout of the village. When that resident lordship departs, of course, the village enters its period of final decline.

Al Oswald: 'Returning to first principles: re-examining the village earthworks'

The history of survey at Wharram Percy began as early as 1555 and the widely published plan of the village's surface remains made in stages between 1954 and 1979

perhaps seemed to be the final word that traditional earthwork survey could offer. However, a decade after the last excavations, a fresh application of this relatively basic archaeological technique by English Heritage, coupled with new geophysical surveys, has achieved much more than merely dotting the i's and crossing the t's left by previous fieldwork. Built primarily upon newly recognised instances of earthwork stratigraphy, the re-analysis suggests a more dynamic overall picture of the village's development and more complex histories for some of its individual buildings. With hindsight, some of the excavated evidence can be put into context. This paper will present the highlights of the recent earthwork survey, focussing on the reinterpretations of two of the village's buildings: the North Manor and Building 5, the first longhouse excavated by Maurice Beresford in 1948.

Christopher Dyer: 'How poor were medieval peasants? A review of the evidence from Wharram Percy, 1200-1540'

The poverty of medieval peasants has been long debated. Historians have deployed many documents in search of an answer, but there is very little written evidence from Wharram, and in any case the excavated material should stand on its own as an independent source. The evidence points in different directions: the human bones from the churchyard have many indicators of the miserable life and early death of the inhabitants, and this receives some support from finds such as the pottery. On the other hand the buildings suggest that their builders had resources and ambitions, and the small finds are varied and demonstrate contacts with towns. The inhabitants were effective farmers and could have received an adequate diet, judging from the animal bones and botanical remains. The story of the Wharram peasants, using documents, archaeology and arguments from analogy, will be taken through the difficulties in the early fourteenth century, when the general stress of the period was made worse by Scottish raids and the great famine. After the Black Death something resembling normality returned, but a long decline after 1400 culminated in the complex combination of individual affluence, the collapse of the community, and the conversion to a sheep pasture in the years after 1500.

David Neave: 'After the village: Wharram and the Wolds in the 16th to 18th centuries'

Wharram Percy may have been deserted but the township and parish experienced all the post-medieval developments in landownership, land use, population and the form and function of farmhouses and farm buildings that affected the northern Wolds. Here, as elsewhere, the chief landowners changed in the 16th-17th centuries. In townships with few freeholders these new owners, with backgrounds in the church, law and trade, consolidated their holdings and enclosed and depopulated the settlements, converting the greater part to sheepwalk and rabbit warren. In townships with more freeholders there was less change but even here there was population decline and the emphasis was on stock rather than crops leading to a reduction in the cultivated area of the open fields.

The pattern changed from the mid-18th century when the farmland became increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few landed families, particularly the Sykes of

Sledmere, the Willoughbys of Birdsall and the Langleys of Wykeham Abbey. It was these landowners who led the way with agricultural improvement, completing the enclosure of the open fields, and dividing the townships into large arable farms with new extensive farmsteads set in shelter belts that were dotted across the landscape. This gave the northern Wolds a unity in appearance and farming practice not experienced since the later Middle Ages.

Elisabeth Zadora-Rio: 'The Wharram project in the context of European medieval settlement studies'

The Wharram project is unique not only by virtue of being the most longstanding project in European medieval archaeology, but also because it has fostered continuous debate over sixty years, leading to changes in interpretation and to the opening up of new questions and enquiries. It has functioned as a multidisciplinary workshop on rural settlement, bringing to medieval archaeology methods first developed in other fields, widening its scope to the "total history" of the community, and leading to new ideas in village and landscape studies. The first part of this paper will focus on historiography, outlining the influence of the excavations at Wharram Percy on the establishment of medieval settlement archaeology in several European countries as a result of the development of research on DMVs and the triggering of a new interest in the layout of peasant houses and the living conditions of the medieval peasantry. The second part will consider in a comparative framework some of the current results and hypotheses formulated at Wharram regarding the nucleation of settlement, the relation between medieval villages and their early medieval predecessors, the development of churchyards and the planning of field-systems.

Wharram in colour

Publication of the final volume of the main Wharram Research series (XIII: *A History of Wharram Percy and its Neighbours*) has indirectly led to a small archiving project by Paul Stamper. He writes that especially for the first twenty years of the excavation, through the 1950s and 1960s, the excavation ran on a shoe-string, and neither the excavation budget nor that of most diggers ran to colour film. Thus the now-seminal House 10 and 6, and church, excavations, are mostly familiar through the black-and-white photographs, mostly populated only by ranging rods, in the published reports.

However, some excavators or visitors were using Kodachrome, albeit sparingly, and those images of 'Wharram in colour', generally with people at work, give a very different perspective. That applies both to individual sites – the depth of rubble overlying House 6, for instance – and to what the excavations actually looked like while in progress, with surprisingly large numbers trowelling away in elegant Capri pants or (for the men) ex-army shorts.

These images are now being collected, with two aims. First, to digitise them before they deteriorate further, and to archive those images and the originals with the main excavation archive. Second, it is intended to publish a 'Wharram in Colour' website, with pictures (and commentaries) arranged site by site, as a contribution to the historiography of Wharram, and more generally to the history of British archaeology.

So far, a half-dozen groups of photographs have been identified, typically of 10–20 slides each. More – even single shots would be welcomed, as would colour or even black-and-white prints. In the first instance please contact Paul Stamper either by email at paul.stamper@english-heritage.org.uk, or at 25 Big Green, Warmington, Peterborough PE8 6TU, or by telephone on 01832 280746.