

## FWP26a

### **West and East Overtons: village morphology**

The village is superficially a street village oriented W-E along the terrace bordering the S side of the flood plain of the River Kennet. The village's main road apparently has no specific name but is here called the 'Street' purely for identification purposes. It leads up to the church on a slight, but locally prominent, eminence at its E end. About half-way along the street of the present village, a geometrically awkward cross-roads gives off what were in the 1960s minor lanes to N (Frog Lane) and S (South Farm, now destroyed and replaced by a housing estate). This was the boundary between West and East Overton in the C10. The morphology of the village quite as much in its existing lineaments as in its visible archaeology of earthworks and buildings is historically quite complicated and different from both Lockeridge and Fyfield (chap. 10).

Modern development has replaced much that existed 35 years ago, though its control through Town and Country Planning has re-enforced the village morphology, even where new housing has filled in what were spaces. The S side of the W end of the village street has been replaced by such development; and the lane running S from the apparently minor cross-roads in the village centre has now become the major road, leading to a new housing estate on what used to be the space occupied by South Farm. A splendid range of timber buildings enclosing a farmyard opposite South Farm was already seriously dilapidated in 1960 (Pl. \*\*) and has since been destroyed. That this former lane might possibly be of some antiquity is hinted at by the fact that it continues northwards from the cross-roads, passing two houses of C19 or earlier date aligned along this now little used and apparent *cul de sac*. It in fact leads down to the river, past two houses, the earthworks of the C19 road to the W, the water leets, a splendid stone 'clapper' bridge (Pl. 00) and 'The Withy Bed' (Pl. 00). This last seems to be a surviving fragment of pre-improvement bottomland, with a thick vegetation of willow and other aquaeous plants flourishing on a swampy patch. The modern foot bridge across the river's main course remains on the C10 boundary, presumably above a former ford; though the path on the N side moves to the E of the house by the A4 whereas the old boundary goes on up the hedge to its west on its way towards 'Headlands' (*above* p. 00).

Interpretation has now distinguished two medieval villages of West Overton, neither of them the present West Overton (*above*). Indeed, both have in a sense disappeared, the Anglo-Saxon one literally, the later one absorbed into a larger village now confusingly called West Overton but actually East Overton. East Overton was part of a manor belonging to the Priory of St. Swithins, Winchester. Its village lay in the eastern end of the present village. The main local farm was probably the former South Farm, itself on a site of some antiquity respected by the tithing and Anglo-Saxon charter estate boundary (*above*). Its lands were sold in 1995, including the field across the lane on its east.

This field slopes ENE uphill to the Church of St. Michael. It is full of earthworks (fig. 9.00; Pl. 9.00). They represent a totally deserted part of East Overton and with the Church form the most important part of the historical village. The earthworks contain hollow-ways of former roads or tracks, the sites of former buildings, the banks around closes or gardens. Some deeper, larger hollows and other superficial features almost certainly represent disturbance after desertion, probably quarrying and robber pits for the sarsen stones of former walls and foundations.

A possibly more significant pattern appears to be present: a distinction between the earthworks to E and W respectively of the N-S hollow-way which runs into the field to continue southwards the hollow-way already noted as climbing up from the river into the village. East of it is another hollow-way. In the area between those two hollow-ways and the Church, the earthworks are slight and mainly of a cluster of ten or so apparent building sites, bounded on the E by a low bank. To the S, across the E-W hollow-way, is a 'blank' area. The inference is that the E-W hollow-way formed the southern boundary of this part of the settlement.

In contrast, W of the main N-S hollow-way, the earthworks are more upstanding, more rectilinear and apparently enclose somewhat larger spaces. Their almost planned appearance is emphasised by the presence on their S side of 25 m. of non-symmetrical hollow-way, almost certainly a relic from an earlier phase. The earthworks themselves, including perhaps six sites of potential buildings, relate to another E-W hollow-way, debouching into the area of the now-destroyed barns of South Farm. They also relate to, 60 m. N, a parallel bank. That bank and its parallel hollow-way form the axes of the western part of this earthwork complex. Neither

continues E into the area S of the Church; but both are parallel to the eastern end of the present village street now leading up to the Church (*see above* p. 00).

This complex of settlement earthworks certainly comprises an extremely good set of well-preserved earthworks of what would be called, if they existed in isolation, a 'deserted medieval village'. They present a particularly good Wiltshire example of an apparently 'complete DMV' existing, not out in isolation on the downs or alone along a river valley, but actually in a village. Whether they represent a whole medieval village which then shuffled sideways and northwards to its present alignment along the street; or whether they represent just part of a village which became partly deserted, that is, which shrank as distinct from moving sideways, is uncertain. The earthworks may also be the remains of a late addition to an existing village, an expansion perhaps in the C12-13 when population growth burst out of its essentially Anglo-Saxon village shape and size. So far, no documentary evidence has come to light bearing on this desertion, whether it be the result of shuffle, shrinkage or expansion.

A more complex model potentially take the village story back to its beginnings as a village (in the absence of any pre-Anglo-Saxon evidence from the site *cf. Fyfield below* p. 00). We suggest that the hollow-way coming off the flood-plain round the NW side of the 'ancient' church site continued southwards as the N-S hollow-way dividing the earthwork remains as distinguished above (fig. 3.00). Presumably it then climbed southwards to the local resources of arable land, pasture and woodland beyond. Its E branch S of the Church led SE to Lockeridge. These N-S and W-E tracks, we suggest, bounded at least the S part of an early settlement, perhaps a nucleated village, centred on the Church. Potentially this little knoll and its slight slopes above the flood plain is the site of the Anglo-Saxon settlement, and probably of the earliest occupation of this locality whatever the date.

The rest of the earthworks, W of that N-S hollow-way, can be interpreted in conjunction with the eastern part of the present village street as forming a characteristic rectilinear planned village added to an existing nucleated one (as well-demonstrated in south Somerset over 20 years ago, Ellison 1973; Lewis 1994, 188-89, recent discussion of medieval planned settlements in Wiltshire does not assemble similar evidence). Such a development might generally be best envisaged as of C12-13, though no specific evidence for such an event has so far emerged in this case. The earliest reference to West Overton is 1275, which may be telling us that it was necessary to distinguish it (*above*) from this *East* Overton. Planned or otherwise, the point seems to be that the village expanded in a reasonably logical way to the W of its nucleus as far as - but no further than, - South Farm and the western boundary of the manor of Overton Prioris (1167). The boundary - and perhaps with it the village and also the Farm? - was still basically where it had been in the C10 i.e. along Frog Lane leading from the ford to the cross-roads in the middle of present-day Overton and then bending westwards around South Farm.

A possible planned village could therefore have existed some 200 m. square, that is 200 m from the 'old' N-S hollow-way on the E to the probably equally 'old' N-S lane along the E side of (or through?) South Farm to the W; and about 200 m. from the back of the properties along the N side of the northern street to a similar position at the back of the properties on the S side of the southern street (the present road along the south side of the earthworks). This rectangular plan is divided exactly in half, at 100 m. from both property boundaries as envisaged *above*, by the W-E bank running through the centre of the earthworks.

At some later date, the southern half, and eventually the southern strip of the northern half, of this rectangular village was deserted or possibly even cleared. Six buildings appear to be depicted in these fields on the late C18 manorial map; their positions re-inforce the 'early' pattern of the N-S hollow-way and the settlement core to its E. Only one building is shown in the area of the 'planned' earthworks and that had disappeared some 25 years later. Then, only one building, perhaps a shed or barn set up in the hollow-way, is shown in the two fields on the Enclosure Award Map (1815). Only some hachures mark its site on C19 OS maps. The houses on the N side of the approach to the Church have then enjoyed an effectively clear view southwards across a green and pleasant field for at least 200 years.

Whether we are looking at the earthworks of abandonment, slow desertion, 'village shuffle' or manorial clearance, a fairly safe inference is that the change from habitation to grass took place long before 1800. A guess would place it in the C14-15. If the equally unprovable (at the

moment) guess be right that a village was laid out either in the C10 or the mid-C12, then 'new' East Overton lasted between about 500 and 350 years.

They may be irrelevant to consideration of a valley-bottom village because of their marginal location and special status, but two local downland settlements, Raddun (*below* p. 00) and Shaw (*below* p. 00) were deserted around 1300 and 1400 respectively. More generally, following Hare (1994, 167-8) and trends of demographic and economic decline balanced by local stability (Lewis 1994, 177-83), recent discussion points, albeit for different reasons, to the same period; but the best evidence, short of excavation, is most likely to come from an as yet unnoted documentary source. On such a long-established ecclesiastical estate as East Overton, where other records indicate a sensitivity to annual returns and rents, did not anyone notice that the medieval village, or at least a large part of it, was not there any more?

#### *The Church and some village houses*

North of the field of earthworks, the village street rises as it approaches the Church. Clearly we are entering the 'old' part of the village, in as far as this is indicated by standing houses. On the N side of the road is a group of C19 buildings with older origins; then there is the Vicarage or Rectory, now West Overton House (Pl. 00). It looks the part for an upwardly mobile cleric of the late C18: of sarsen and faced with rendered brickwork, its three bays and two storeys plus attics rival West Farmhouse. Then, in contrast, is a range of low, thatched cottages, acutely perched on a sharp corner as the road dives down to the N. In fact, it is a hollow-way still in use, it being as much as 3 m. deep below ground level as it then curves around to the NE. The cottages are C17/18, of sarsen with brick dressings, windows now replacing their end doors.

Across the top of the hollow-way and again up-slope is 'The Old Manor House', visibly one of the oldest houses in the village. Of C16 date with many later additions and alterations, it is basically of sarsen build with a timber-framed and tile-hung upper floor and, south centre, a canopied porch (?C18, though Pevsner, 1963, 505, dates the door C16). The impression of oldness is maintained by the two remaining secular buildings at this E end of the village. To the N, tucked into the slope downhill of the Church, is Church Hill cottage, C17 or earlier with colour-washed brick and thatch, remains of a probable cruck and a sarsen rear wall. Immediately E of the Church are nos. 74/75 Church Hill, two cottages but actually a former cottage, probably C17 at latest, to which the Verger's Cottage was added in 1746 (date-stone). Both are thatched and seemingly crowd into the churchyard, adding their contribution to the antique effect at this E end of the village. On the other side, their E, they seem to be roadside cottages, for the road they front was there in 1815.

The Church of St. Michael and All Angels dominates the village and, because of its impressive tower, is a prominent landmark both along the Kennet valley (pl. 00) and looking S from Overton Down. Undoubtedly its site is ancient, though not the present building (Pevsner 1963, 504-5; Anon, *Church of St Michael*, undated). The tower is indeed of 1883, an addition to an almost complete rebuild of 1877-8 to the design of C.E. Ponting. This was occasioned by the dire state of the then standing church, apparently a C14 chancel with a C15 nave. Though the Victorian nave followed the plan of that church, most of the building shown before rebuilding on fig. 00 was removed. Parts, however, remain: the chancel arch, for example, was moved to its present position in the side aisle next the organ chamber. During the work, fragments of an earlier church still were found, and two early consecration crosses that were unearthed were built into the external E chancel wall where they can still be seen (Pl. \*\*). The present somewhat dramatic church is, therefore, the third known church on the site, taking stone construction certainly back to the C13 and possibly earlier (Norman?).

It is legitimate to surmise that, with East Overton a manor of Winchester from before Domesday (*below* p. 00), an Anglo-Saxon church, in stone or otherwise, is highly likely at least by the C10. It is a guess, but plausibly so, that all this occurred at East Overton because the locally prominent spot was first chosen for Christian worship in earlier times, perhaps in the C7 (*below* p. 00). Something similar may have happened at Avebury. There, unlike Overton, the shape and some of the fabric of the Anglo-Saxon church survives.

**West Woods** (fig. 9.00; Pls. 9.00, 9.00): a small area as an example of permanent woodland (the western end of Savernake Forest: the name has no point otherwise) represented by a field archaeology of earthworks from abandoned planting enclosures and with good documentation for woodland management and settlement colonisation

West Woods long barrow, Barker 1984, 10: summarise his a/c

**Bibliography**  
see biblio.doc