

INTRODUCTION TO A FIRST LIST OF DESERTED MEDIEVAL VILLAGE SITES IN BERKSHIRE

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THERE ARE three classic deaths that the English medieval village could die.¹ The earliest type is associated with the Cistercian monasteries or their granges. In these cases the previous use or fertility of the land was irrelevant: the monks wanted solitude for their abbey or for the farming community of lay-brothers, and the existing village was redundant. When the territory of the abbey or the grange passed back into lay hands after 1536 it was extremely unlikely that the agricultural policy of the new Tudor owners would involve the plantation of a village community. Indeed, by that time the trend was towards consolidated holdings, economy in the labour force and decay of houses of husbandry even where arable farming was the main livelihood. These were not the likely conditions for re-creating villages.

The second type of depopulation is associated with the concept of marginal land, whether heath or forest, occupied in the land-hungry days of rising population in the 12th and 13th centuries: but redundant after the catastrophic fall of population in the great plagues of the mid-fourteenth century had reduced the demand for this poorer quality land.

The third type of depopulation is unconnected with poor quality land. Indeed, it showed itself most fiercely where there was good arable land that had produced and supported a flourishing medieval village of husbandmen working at the plough but where the soil was also good for grass, the fashionable and profitable new crop when the woollen industry became voracious in its demand for English wool. In time, this movement was principally of the period 1450–1525.

These three broad types are different in their chronology and in their cause, and they enable the broad divisions of class in column 2 of the List to be made. The types arise from a study of the information which is available for the 1,750 or so deserted villages that are now identified in England.²

The List here published for Berkshire is a preliminary one in every sense. It is an Aunt Sally put up for local scrutiny. It poses a number of questions which can be solved only by detailed work in local documents, manorial and parochial, and by thorough exploration in the fields themselves. It represents work done mainly from London and Leeds with very little field exploration and no work at all in local records. In it, Mr. Hurst and I put ourselves at the mercy of Berkshire local historians and archaeologists. With our limited resources, other work and other interests we can go no further.

The principal sources of the List which follows are: an examination of the 6" O.S. map for isolated churches; for ruined churches in parks; for townships consisting

¹ The subject is treated more fully in Maurice Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England* (1954) and *History on the Ground* (1957), chapter 4.

² The records of the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group are in the custody of the Secretary,

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only of scattered farms; and other cartographically suspicious signs. In addition, Mrs. Betty Grant, working for the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group as a Research Fellow of University College, London, was able to extract information from the principal records of taxation which have been preserved at the Public Record Office. In course of this work she was also able to make suggestions for places additional to those which had been noted on the maps. The *Victoria County History*, completed before the war, is useful for indicating the successive manorial owners (and therefore indicating where further documentation is to be sought), but it is marked by a poor awareness of local topography in general and a virtual ignorance of the significance of a parish or township without a village. A comparison with the volumes currently being produced for Oxfordshire shows one of the disadvantages a county incurs by having its *V.C.H.* written too early.

A study of taxation assessments, so useful in making a first gazetteer of the settlements which once existed in the English countryside, has certain limitations which must now be made explicit. The unit of taxation was usually the *vill* and not the ecclesiastical parish; many of these *vills* correspond to modern civil parishes. In countryside where settlement was broken up into a large number of hamlets or into many scattered farmsteads it was common for medieval tax collections to return one sum of money and group the names of taxpayers under a single heading: 'X and its members' or 'Y with Z, A and B.' But in this respect Berkshire is fortunate: for only three of the places in our list (East Compton, Draycott and Newton) were habitually regarded by the tax collectors as joined with another place; for all the others (on one occasion or another) we have tax assessments which are separate from their neighbours and which enable some estimate of size to be offered.¹ And from another source even Newton can be firmly claimed to have had at least ten households on the eve of the Black Death.

Where there are tax assessments surviving from either side of the mid-fourteenth century plagues, they afford useful evidence that the Black Death did not kill off the village entirely. Thus at Beckett there were 12 households wealthy enough to be worth taxing in 1327 and 16 households (at least) in the village fifty years later, after the plagues had receded. Carswell had the same number of households taxed in 1327 as in 1379; as did Marlston; and the numbers at Inglewood, Maidencourt, Southcote, Sheffield, Tubney and Wyld Court in 1379 were substantial. Unfortunately the poll-tax documents, our best source of post-plague population data, have survived for only a small number of villages in the county.

The average number of households taxed in 1327 in the now-deserted villages was eleven; the average of the poll tax households was the same. On a third occasion, the village tax assessments of 1334, it is possible to measure the villages which were later to be deserted in such a way that they can be seen in comparison with their more fortunate neighbours. The average wealth of the laity who were taxed in the villages of our list was 41s. 6d: while that for the villages of the whole county was 86s. The most vulnerable seem to have been the smaller, as one might expect and

¹ The principal Berkshire documents employed are: E.179/73/6, taxation of 1327; E.79/73/7, taxation of 1332; E.179/73/9 and 10, taxation of 1334; E.179/73/34, taxation of 1351; E.179/73, various files: taxation of 1377, 1379, 1381 (poll tax); Hearth Tax.

as, indeed, one finds all over the country. But to keep proportion it should be remembered that the average wealth of *all* Leicestershire and East Riding villages was no more than 41s. 6d; and that Eaton Hastings, Henwick and Langley all reached Berkshire average. Nor need villages like Eaton Hastings, Henwick, Stroud and Tubney (each with over 20 households wealthy enough to be taxed in 1327) be regarded as pigmies.¹

The proof that there was a medieval community is one thing: to date its disappearance is another. In only five villages of the List was depopulating enclosure reported to the Royal Commission² in 1517; and only at Eaton Hastings, Beckett, Seacourt, Thrupp and Whitley is there tax evidence surviving from the early sixteenth century clear enough to suggest that the villages had fallen victim to some depopulating force by that date. At Seacourt there are documents which state that the village was reduced to only two households as early as 1439. The agglomeration of land in the hands of two owners at Clapcot suggests that it, too, was dead by the end of the middle ages. When the Tudor topographer, Leland, visited Tubney he reported a tradition that a village had once been there, and he mentioned a church which no longer stands: there had been 16 households in 1379, so Tubney was probably also a late medieval depopulation. The absence of poll-tax documents makes it impossible to be more certain of other sites in the list.

The greatest weakness of taxation documents as an aid to dating depopulation comes in those parts of the country where settlement was always scattered. There were few areas of complete no-man's land in England, but the light sandy heaths and the areas of late-surviving forest were both characterised by a thin scatter of population, rarely gathered together in a nucleated cluster of houses which would be recognised as a village. The absence of a village in such townships today is, therefore, no argument for a desertion; even isolated churches in heathland and forest parishes do not bear the implications that they have in (say) the Lincolnshire Wolds or the Midland clays.

In Berkshire this consideration makes it necessary to be most cautious in the admission of claims to desertion in the area of almost continuous wood and heath from Windsor westwards along the whole southern edge of the county; in the wooded triangle between Reading, Newbury and Streatley; and in the belt of woodland along the northern edge of the county from Lechlade to Oxford. In these areas, without much further local research, it is impossible to say confidently that the appearance of a place-name in Domesday Book or in a medieval tax-list or in a medieval *extent* necessarily implies a nucleated settlement which has since been abandoned. Indeed the situation is even more complex: for it is wrong to accept the present frontier of the wood-heath as the medieval frontier; there is much to suggest that at the end of the thirteenth century the process of colonisation had penetrated further towards the margin than at any time since, and that the post-Black Death

¹ For size comparisons of this type elsewhere see Beresford, *Lost Villages of England*, pp. 247-261; *V.C.H. Wiltshire*, iv (1959) pp. 294-314; *V.C.H. Essex*, iv (1956), pp. 296-302.

² I. S. Leadam, *Domesday of Inclosures* i, (1897), pp. 87-150; but places which were not totally depopulated and now flourish also suffered enclosure (e.g. Sutton Courtenay, Aston Turrold). For prosecutions see P.R.O. E.159/298, 299 and 300; C.43/28/2.

retreat has never been reversed. If this is demonstrable on the Norfolk and Suffolk brecklands by the ruined churches; and in the high Pennines by the abandoned ploughlands under the heather; and on the Marlborough Downs by the abandoned plough lynchets: why not in Berkshire also?

With these uncertainties, the List of deserted villages may include sites that further research will erase, but it seemed best to direct local attention to all possible cases rather than err the other way; but it is also likely that a few others have slipped our net, and Mr. Hurst or myself would be glad to have suggestions for additions and subtractions together with any supporting evidence that local workers can supply.

A final difficulty: the desertion of a township has rarely been permanent and total. Whatever the motive for desertion, economic conditions or agricultural technology changed, and land that had been abandoned to a monastic grange or to the ministrations of a shepherd and his dog came in time back under arable cultivation. In such cases, farms re-appeared and records like the Hearth Taxes of the 1660s or the first Census of 1801 will again record inhabitants. Yet unless these new farms occupied the old village site, the village truly remained deserted; and in the post-medieval conditions of farming technique the advantage and attraction lay in having farms set at the centre of their fields and not gathered together village-wise. This after all, is what so many farmers did when Parliamentary enclosure gave them fields in lieu of their scattered open-field strips. The moral is that houses in the Hearth Tax returns and populations in the early Censuses are not in themselves sufficient to deride the desertion of a village. The tax data have to be considered in relation to settlement in adjoining townships. If these are still nucleated then there is a strong chance that our suspect was once nucleated also.

The final appeal must be to the site itself. The characteristic earthworks of abandoned houses and crofts and streets are the conclusive evidence. With a population of 30 in the Census of 1801 a sceptic may have wished to remove Seacourt from the category of deserted villages: but the excavated church and houses have made it firmly one of the type-sites of the English deserted medieval village.¹

It is not to be expected in an area like Berkshire, with timber so widely available for building, that the sites will yield clear signs of stone-built houses such as those at Chalford on the Oxfordshire limestone; rather, one should look for sites like Burston in Buckinghamshire where the fabric of village is preserved in the grass, not in a series of four-square houses but in wandering veins of silted ditches and gentle banks that mark the outlines of former crofts and the directions of former streets: of the timber houses nothing remains on the surface, and the experienced eye can detect them only as saucer-shaped depressions in the grass.² As will be seen from the archaeological classification most of the Berkshire sites still have to be visited.

It is to a task of some complexity that the publication of this List forms the agenda.

¹ R. L. S. Bruce Mitford, 'The Excavations at Seacourt, Berkshire' *Oxoniensia*, v, (1940) pp. 31-40; later excavations are reported in *Oxoniensia* forthcoming.

² M. W. Beresford and J. K. S. St. Joseph, *Medieval England: an Aerial Survey* (1958), Fig. 44, p. 115.

DESERTED MEDIEVAL VILLAGE SITES

DESERTED MEDIEVAL VILLAGE ABBREVIATIONS

Status of Site

DMV	Any site with evidence of former village status but now possessing only a farm and/or Manor (with or without a church and parsonage). Border-line village/hamlet difficult to draw: intended that village include hamlet.	if shrunk part is only a small fraction of the present village.
VS	Very Shrunk: now having six houses or fewer, assuming evidence either from documents or ground that it was once larger.	SM Where it is impossible to distinguish shrinkage from migration.
S	Shrunk: now having more than six houses but clear evidence that it was once much more extensive.	M Migration to new site.
SS	Slightly Shrunk: large villages with gaps or earthworks extending beyond the village,	RES Resettled pre-Industrial Revolution (c.1800)
		REB Resettled c.1800-1918
		HOU Resettled since 1918.
		Gr. For Medieval Grange.
		MAN For Manorial site only.
		MON For Monastic site only.
		FP For Fishpond.
		RF For Ridge and Furrow.

Archaeological Classification

A*	Excellent. (Very good pattern of roads and crofts with house-sites visible.)	E	Lost to the sea by coastal erosion.
A	Very good pattern of roads and crofts, but no house-sites visible.	P	Now ploughed.
B	Medium. (Good street or streets but otherwise confused earthworks).	G	Now Grass.
C	Poor. (Vague bumps making no certain pattern; or church or church ruins without visible earthworks.)	CM	Crop Marks.
D	Nothing to see at all, flat grass.	EM	Earth Marks.
(P)D	Nothing to see but site under plough or crop, so may have been destroyed.	COV	Sufficiently large modern farm or country-house and gardens to have obliterated a suspected site.
		U	Location unknown.

Historical Classification

1*	Excellent documentary evidence for the former existence of a village, with its period of desertion known (DB, Lay Subsidy etc.)	3	Small quantity of documentary evidence for village's former existence, i.e. less than for 1 above, (DB etc.) but period of desertion NOT known.
1	Period of desertion known, but documentary evidence inferior in quantity. (i.e. DB only or Lay Subsidy only)	4	No information whether the name belonged to more than a Manor, Grange, etc.
2	Excellent evidence for a village's former existence, but period of desertion NOT known.	0	No documentary evidence yet seen.
		U	Neither documents nor tradition indicate location of village.

Classification of period of desertion

I	In Domesday Book but no further mention.	IV	c. 1450-1700 Enclosure for pasture/improved arable.
II	c. 1125-1350 Monastic depopulations, mainly Cistercian abbeys and granges.	V	Emparking, mainly 17th and 18th century.
III	c. 1350-1450 Black Death or retreat of settlement from marginal lands.	N	Period of Desertion not known, usually either Retreat or Enclosure.

DESERTED MEDIEVAL VILLAGE SITES

97

BERKSHIRE

Village	Class	Classification		1" Map	National Grid	6" Map
		Arch.	Hist.			
1. BARCOTE	IV		I*	158	SU/320979	VIII NW
2. BECKETT	V		I*	157	SU/246892	XII SE
3. BETTERTON	IV		I	158	SU/431868	XIV SE
4. BOCKHAMPTON	V	(VS)	I	158	SU/335782	XXV NE
5. CALCOTE	IV	U	I	158	c.SU/340698	XXXIII NE
6. CARSWELL	V		I	158	SU/325978	VIII NE
7. CLAPCOT	IV		I	158	SU/605916	XVI NW/NE
8. CRUCHFIELD	IV		I	159	SU/880740	XXXIX NW
9. EAST COMPTON	V	C	I	157	SU/525796	XXVII NE
10. DRAYCOTT	N		3	158	SU/400994	V SW
11. EATON HASTINGS	V	B	I*	157	SU/260982	VII NE
12. FULSCOT	IV		I*	158	SU/545888	XV SE
13. HENWICK	III		I*	158	SU/498686	XXXV SW
14. HILLEND	V		I*	158	SP/466065	II SW
15. HODCOT	III		I*	158	SU/477818	XXI SW
16. HOLT	N		2	168	SU/401645	XLII NW
17. LANGLEY	III		I*	158	SU/498766	XXVII SW
18. INGLEWOOD	IV		I	158	SU/365666	XLII NW
19. MAIDENCOURT	IV		I	158	SU/373760	XXVI SW
20. MARLSTON	IV		I	158	SU/529719	XXXV NE
21. NEWTON	IV		I	158	SU/360980	VIII NE
22. ODSTONE	IV		I*	157	SU/271862	XIX NW
23. PURLEY PARVA	N(IV)		I	158	SU/654769	XXIX SW
24. SEACOURT	III	A	I*	158	SP/486075	II SW
25. SHALFORD	IV		I	168	SU/569648	XLIV NW
26. SHEFFIELD	N		2	158	SU/653693	XXXVI SE
27. SHEFFORD, EAST	N		2	158	SU/391747	XXVI SW
28. SHOTTESBROOKE	V		I*	159	SU/842771	XXX SE
29. SOUTHCOTE	IV		I*	158	SU/375910	XIV NW
30. STROUD	V		I*	158	SP/444075	I SE
31. THRUPP	N		I	158	SU/518973	XXXVI SE
32. TUBNEY	IV		I*	158	SP/446010	V SE
33. WHATCOMBE	IV		I	158	SU/393789	XXVI NW
34. WHITLEY	III	U	I*	158	c.SP/442053	V NE
35. WOOLLEY	IV		I*	158	SU/410800	XXVI NW
36. WYLD COURT	IV		I	158	SU/543760	XXVII SE