THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF CURRENTLY OCCUPIED MEDIEVAL RURAL SETTLEMENTS: EVIDENCE FROM LEICESTERSHIRE AND RUTLAND

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Introduction

This paper will present summary results of a recently completed review of developer-funded excavations within Currently Occupied Rural Settlements (CORS) in Leicestershire and Rutland (Fig. 1). The project was introduced a couple of years ago (Thomas 2007) but briefly, the broad aim was to synthesise the archaeological evidence from these projects to provide both an accessible 'overview' and also a usable framework for analysis, interpretation and comparison. Of the fifty or so sites that have produced evidence (Fig. 2), approximately fifteen could be given 'case study' status, based on their size, the archaeological information they have produced and their potential for future exploration. The results of these sites formed the basis of the study, supplemented by information from smaller projects.

Until relatively recently much of the research-led work in Leicestershire and Rutland has favoured deserted settlement sites (for example at Martinsthorpe (Wacher 1964); Brooksby (Christie 2002) and Nether Hambleton and Whitwell (Clough 2007)), but following the introduction of PPG16, archaeological work in response to 'village infill' development has increased, helping to redress this imbalance. Admittedly there are problems with this new evidence, not least that the location of each site and the level of recording are entirely dependent on the scale and nature of each new development. Nevertheless, the results of these projects have highlighted the extent to which medieval remains can survive in CORS and their research potential has rightly been highlighted (Dyer 1997; Lewis 2006a, 212; 2007). Furthermore, recent projects involving test-pitting within CORS have indicated the significant contribution to knowledge that can be gained (Aston and Gerrard 1999, Lewis 2006b (and regular updates on the Higher Education Field Academy CORS project in the *MSRG Annual Report*), Cooper and Score 2006, Jones and Page 2006).

Unfortunately a key problem has been the lack of publication of individual sites or synthesised results for wider areas. The small-scale and piecemeal nature of much of this work has not lent itself easily to meaningful publication and, inevitably, much information lies unpublished in 'grey literature' reports. This is not just a problem for medieval studies, but for all periods, given the increase in data resulting from the rise of contract archaeology in recent years (Bradley 2006). The great potential for this new information to add to our understanding of the past has been illustrated for prehistoric Britain and Ireland (Bradley 2007), but for other periods remains a largely untapped resource.

The project timeline

The chronologies used in this review are based on the regional ceramic sequence for Leicestershire and Rutland and are intended to reflect the wares and date ranges associated with the sites that are under consideration (Table 1). Pottery is often the only source of dating for such sites and given the relatively imprecise nature of this method the date-ranges are necessarily broad.

Results of the project

Pre-village settlement

As well as providing information about medieval origins and development, many of the study sites have revealed evidence for longer histories of settlement, perhaps in part highlighting the suitability of particular areas of the landscape for occupation.

An unusual example was unearthed at Glaston, where evidence for a c. 30,000 year old Palaeolithic hunters camp and hyena den was revealed during excavations which initially focused on medieval village remains (Cooper 2001, Thomas and Jacobi 2001). Additionally, a flint scatter and a discrete pit containing pottery also

Table 1   The main ceramic phasing showing key pottery types and associated date-ranges

Ceramic phase	Pottery types	Approximate date range
Early Anglo-Saxon	Hand-made/ local manufacture	c. 450–650
Middle Anglo-Saxon	Predominantly hand-made. Small quantities of imported Ipswich & Maxey wares	c. 650–850
Saxo-Norman	Coarse Stamford ware, St. Neots type ware, Lincoln shelly wares	c. 850–1100
Earlier Medieval	Fine Stamford ware, Potters Marston ware, Stanion-Lyveden ware	c. 1100–1250
Medieval	Very Fine Stamford ware, Chilvers Coton ware, Nottingham ware	c. 1250–1400
Later Medieval	Bourne ware	c. 1400–1500

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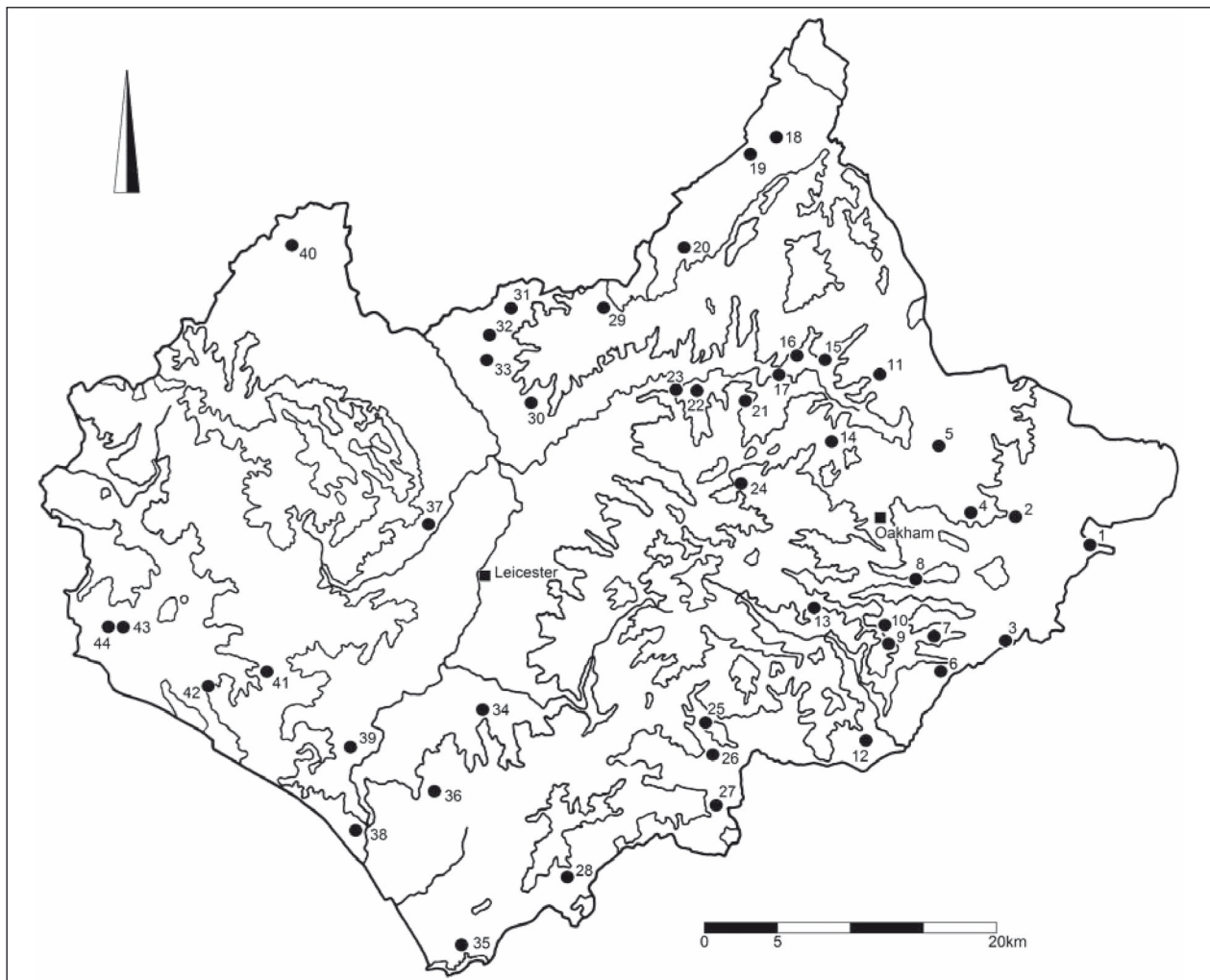*Figure 1   Location of the study area.*

Figure 2   List of CORS where PPG16-related work has been undertaken: 1) Tinwell, 2) Empingham, 3) Barrowden, 4) Whitwell, 5) Cottesmore, 6) Seaton, 7) Glaston, 8) Manton, 9) Uppingham, 10) Ayston, 11) Wymondham, 12) Great Easton, 13) Loddington, 14) Whissendine, 15) Saxby, 16) Freeby, 17) Wyfordby, 18) Barkestone-le-Vale, 19) Plungar, 20) Long Clawson, 21) Burton Lazars, 22) Eye Kettleby, 23) Kirby Bellars, 24) Burrough-on-the-Hill, 25) Stonton Wyville, 26) Thorpe Langton, 27) Great Bowden, 28) Husbands Bosworth, 29) Old Dalby, 30) Seagrave, 31) Wymeswold, 32) Burton-on-the-Wolds, 33) Walton-on-the-Wolds, 34) Countesthorpe, 35) Swinford, 36) Dunton Bassett, 37) Anstey, 38) Claybrooke Parva, 39) Sapcote, 40) Hemington, 41) Stapleton, 42) Stoke Golding, 43) Sheepy Parva, 44) Sheepy Magna.

reflected activity in the Mesolithic and Bronze Age (Cooper and Thomas 2001), whilst earlier excavations in an adjacent field had recovered Bronze Age cremations and Anglo Saxon burials (Powell 1950, Leeds and Barber 1950). Glaston provides a good example of the kind of palimpsest of archaeological activity that can be encountered in a village context although it is not unique, with prehistoric and Roman remains regularly revealed as a result of excavation within CORS.

It would be unwise to stretch ideas of continuity of occupation to the above examples but they do serve as a reminder that by the time people began to live together in villages, the landscape had already been settled, worked and re-worked by many generations and elements such as ploughland, boundaries and ponds will have been often re-used and adapted.

The Anglo-Saxon evidence
The distribution of Anglo-Saxon settlements in the two counties has become clearer as a result of systematic fieldwalking that has produced pottery scatters in river valleys and on boulder clay promontories (Knox 2004, 95). Where excavation has occurred it is evident that these pottery scatters do provide a good indication of settlement, as at Eye Kettleby (Finn 1997, 1998) and the recent Time Team project at Knave Hill, Stonton Wyville (Wessex Archaeology 2008). Although sometimes spatially close, the links between Anglo-Saxon settlements and the earliest village sites are far from clear. At Eye Kettleby for example, a 6th century hamlet lies immediately adjacent to deserted village earthworks

(Fig. 3). On face value, this might suggest that one transformed into the other over time. What limited excavation work on the DMV has been done however, suggests a 10th–11th century date for its origins (Finn 1999, 2000).

A number of CORS sites have produced small quantities of residual Anglo-Saxon pottery, suggesting they were earlier foci of activity. This may also be inferred from the small group of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries that have been identified adjacent to and within CORS (for example at Glaston (Leeds and Barber 1950), Seaton (Pollard 1997, 1999) and Stoke Golding (Coutts *et al* 2007)). At Whissendine a pair of Early Anglo-Saxon boundary ditches were apparently part of a system of land division, but a pit containing domestic debris also hinted at nearby occupation (Browning 2007; Hyam 2006). Evidence for occupation at Loddington was characterised by deposits containing pottery, burnt stone and iron slag indicating an area of Early Anglo-Saxon metalworking (Hunt 2008). While both of these sites offer tantalising evidence for Early Anglo-Saxon occupation in close association with later village remains, the fragmentary nature of these deposits makes it difficult to understand fully their nature and the detail of their relationship to later developments.

Early signs of nucleation: village activity during the late 9th to 11th centuries
The earliest evidence for village formation from the two counties can be dated between the 10th and 11th centuries, although a number of sites have revealed evidence for slightly earlier origins, suggesting that
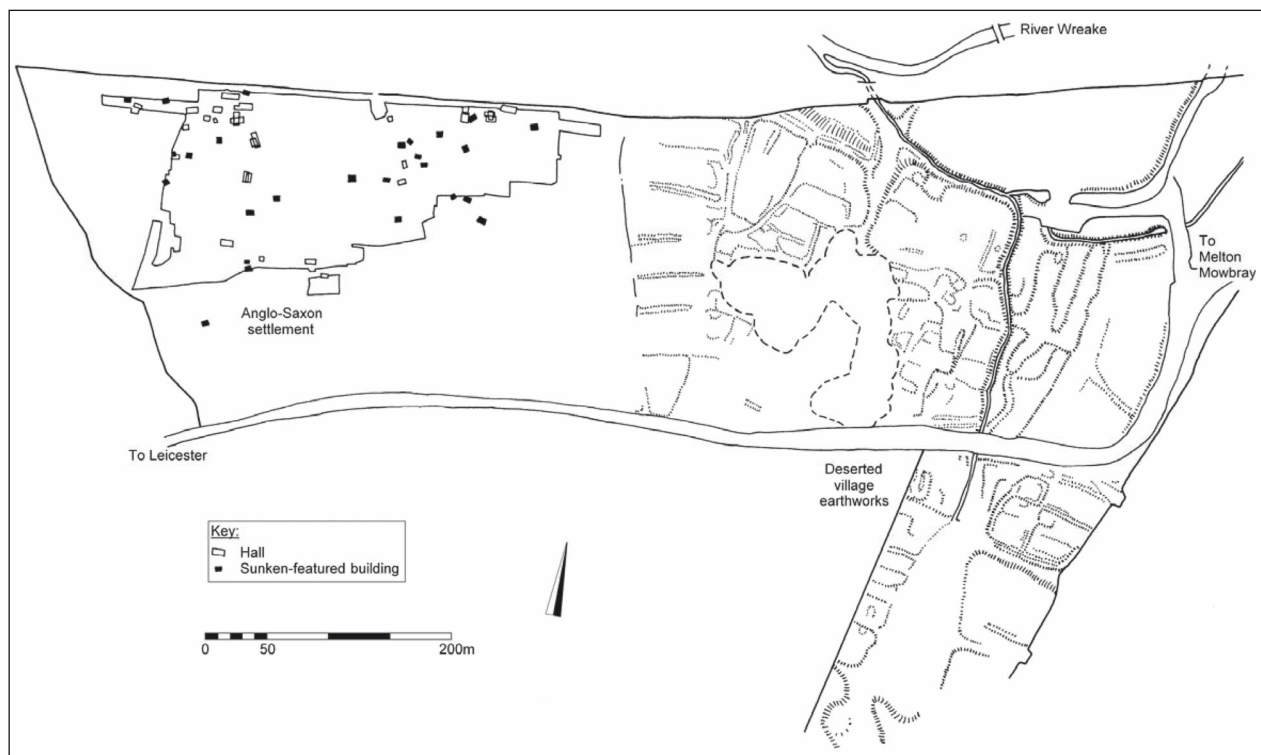

Figure 3   The close spatial relationship of 6th century Anglo-Saxon settlement and 10th-11th century village remains at Eye Kettleby, Leicestershire.

Figure 4   Late Anglo-Saxon settlement features to the south of Burrough-on-the-Hill, Leicestershire.

village development may, in places, have been an occasional and scattered process.

Occupation in the 9th–10th century is evident in the centre of Cottesmore where a pit containing domestic debris was found in association with a nearby gully and ditch (Thomas 1999a). A slightly fuller picture of Late Anglo-Saxon settlement emerges on the southern fringes of Burrough-on-the-Hill where a dense area of plot boundaries, pits and structural remains was uncovered during a watching brief (Thomas 2000) (Fig. 4). The limitations of the work offered only a window onto these remains, but it was clear that several phases of activity were represented, indicative of fairly intensive activity at this time. The proximity of this area to the main historic core of the village is interesting, but based on present evidence it is difficult to judge if this represents early development of Burrough or a discrete focus of occupation pre-dating the formation of the village.

Development of the village plan in the 10th and 11th centuries

The main evidence for village formation is represented by 10th–11th century activity characterised by the laying out of property boundaries demarcating rectangular farmyards (tofts) and associated gardens or orchards (crofts) which often ran away from the main thoroughfares in regular strips. Evidence for this phenomenon comes from excavations at various sites across the two counties. A particularly complete example

at Glaston consisted of the rear end of a toft approximately 20m wide, defined by ditches (Cooper and Thomas 2001) (Fig. 5). A central ditch dissected the enclosed area and was apparently broadly contemporary with the main setting out of the toft, perhaps defining two distinct activity areas; the toft appeared to run away from the main street frontage where, presumably, the associated dwelling was located. A series of small paddocks or enclosures attached to the rear of the toft may have represented the croft, although, apart from several quarry pits, there was little other evidence within these areas. Low level activities within the toft were represented by a scatter of post holes and several pits associated with a thin spread of finds.

Some of the larger excavations hint at a fairly regular format to the early village plot layout, potentially allowing patterns to be extrapolated from more limited views. Thus trial trench evaluations at Empingham (Thomas 1997), Thorpe Langton (Cope-Faulkner 2002) and Burton Lazars (Burrows 2005), have all revealed evidence for carefully arranged networks of boundary gullies indicative of early toft and croft establishment. It is difficult to determine, from such small areas, how much we are seeing evidence for settlement 'planning'. There is reasonable evidence, from continuity of form between some early village plots, to suggest it does. However, other sites illustrate the variety of boundary definition that existed between and potentially within settlements.
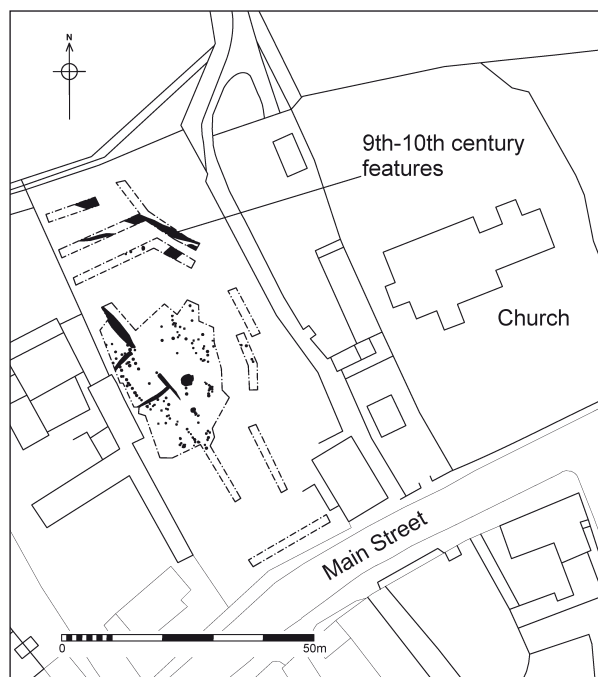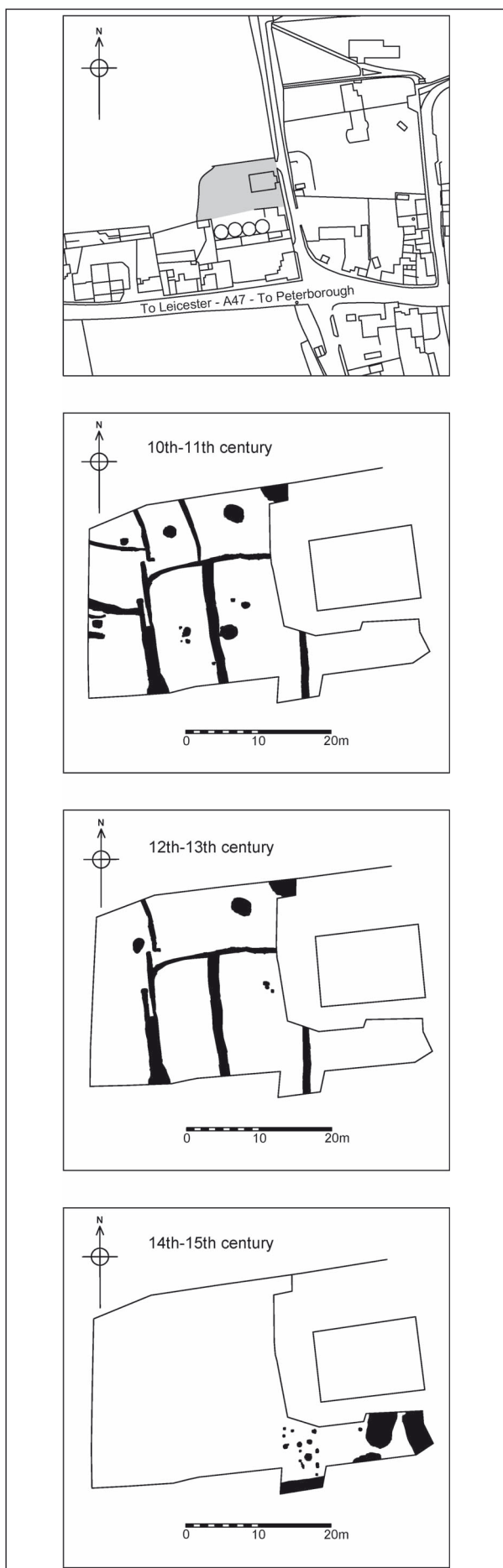
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Figure 6   Toft boundaries in the centre of Cottesmore, Rutland.

At Manton early boundary activity consisted of a loose arrangement of gullies, probably forming part of a rectangular toft on a north–south alignment (Tate 2007). A similar boundary system at Cottesmore was represented by both gullies and rows of post holes on similar alignments (Thomas 1999a) (Fig. 6). This could be a product of two clear phases of boundary definition as at least some of the post holes were stratigraphically later than the gullies. The relatively shallow and impermanent nature of the gullies, however, might indicate they were markers for the post-built boundaries. In contrast to these apparently flimsy boundaries, a toft on the edge of Freeby was defined by a long-lived sequence of substantial ditches (Thomas 1999b), clearly setting the plot apart from the adjacent street. A stream on the eastern side of the toft may also have served as a natural boundary in conjunction with the ditches.

In contrast to the fairly regular nature of toft and croft plans reflected in many examples, evidence from Whissendine indicates an alternative arrangement (Browning 2007). Here 10th–11th century activity was characterised by a scatter of enclosures defined by a combination of gullies and post-built fences. A spread of post holes and occasional pits hinted at occupation, although there were few associated finds, perhaps suggesting the enclosures related to stock control and lay away from the main living areas.

Figure 5 (left)   Development and decline of toft and croft features at Glaston, Rutland.

Village continuity and change – developments in the 12th and 13th centuries

A second clear phase of village activity in the study area is indicated at a number of sites that underwent significant phases of development during the 12th and 13th centuries. The evidence suggests that some villages were at the formative stages of nucleation at this time, although continued activity is also evident at settlements with earlier origins.

At Glaston for example, the toft boundaries were maintained and occupation continued along broadly similar lines to those established in the Saxo-Norman period. In contrast other sites with earlier origins show evidence of considerable reorganisation in this period. A re-orientation of the overall village alignment at Manton is evident in the creation of a new toft boundary overlying its predecessor. At Whissendine a more extensive and regularly arranged pattern of boundaries was established in the 12th–13th centuries, apparently reflecting a more formalised system of tofts and replacing the earlier set of smaller enclosures that had previously been in use. New phases of development at other villages also indicate a slightly later move towards nucleation, although in most cases residual pottery and stray features indicate this was taking place on sites of earlier occupation.

The most complete plan of a toft and its overall organisation comes from Anstey, where evidence for 12th and 13th century occupation has been unearthed as a result of two excavation phases (Browning and Higgins 2003) (Fig. 7). The focus of occupation was a raised toft area defined on at least one side by a boundary ditch, and separated from the open fields by a hollow way to the rear. Space within the toft appears to have been segregated by a series of inter-related smaller boundaries that were generally aligned with the hollow way. Fragmentary remains of cobbled surfaces throughout the area probably related to yards or pathways associated with buildings. Varied evidence for buildings consisted of compacted gravel foundations to support sill-beams and probable post-built structures. A conspicuous rectangular gap within a yard surface at the rear of the toft may also have been the site of a building adjacent to the hollow way. None of the buildings produced direct evidence of domestic use, although environmental information suggests a bias towards domestic waste from features on the western side of the toft. It seems likely that the main dwelling lay outside the excavated area, closer to the street frontage.

While the Anstey toft appears to represent a relatively new development, it is in fact clear from a fairly large assemblage of residual pottery that earlier activity occurred on or near the site in the 10th and 11th centuries. Quite what form this early occupation took is difficult to determine as no features could be directly associated with this phase, which were most likely buried beneath the raised platform.
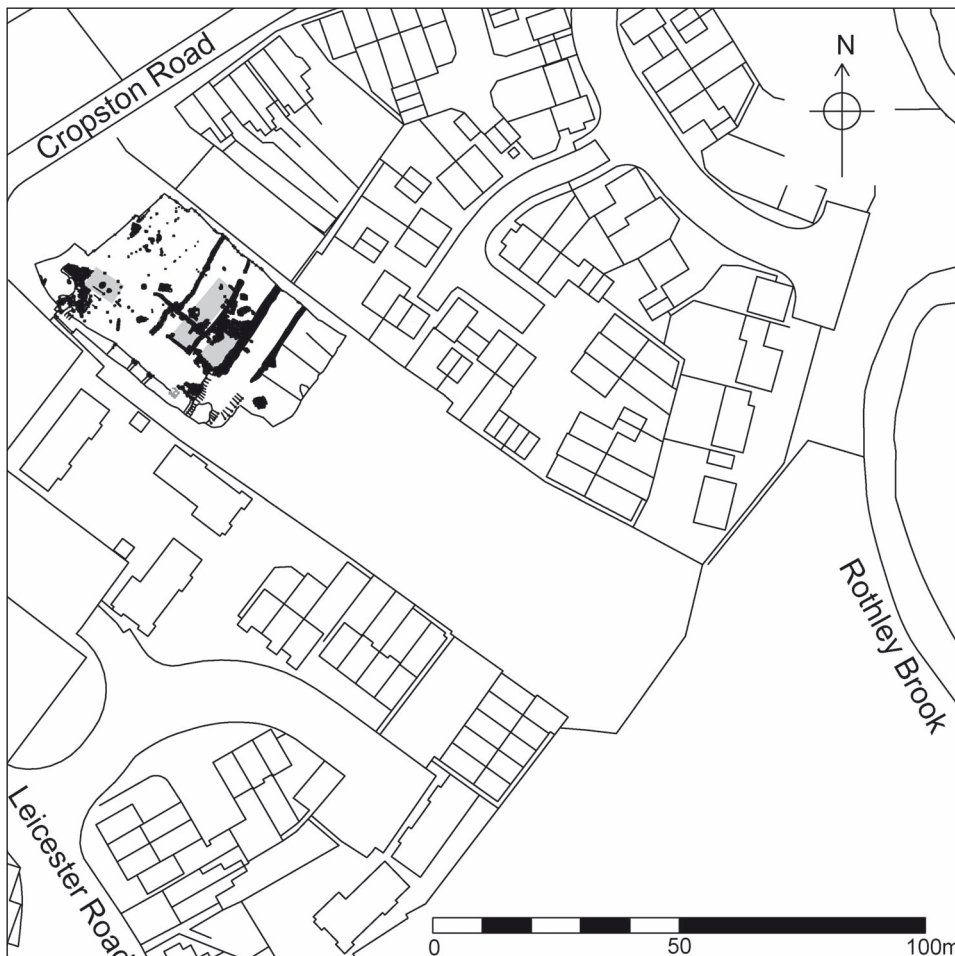

Figure 7   Toft and croft remains at Anstey, Leicestershire. Buildings are shaded grey.
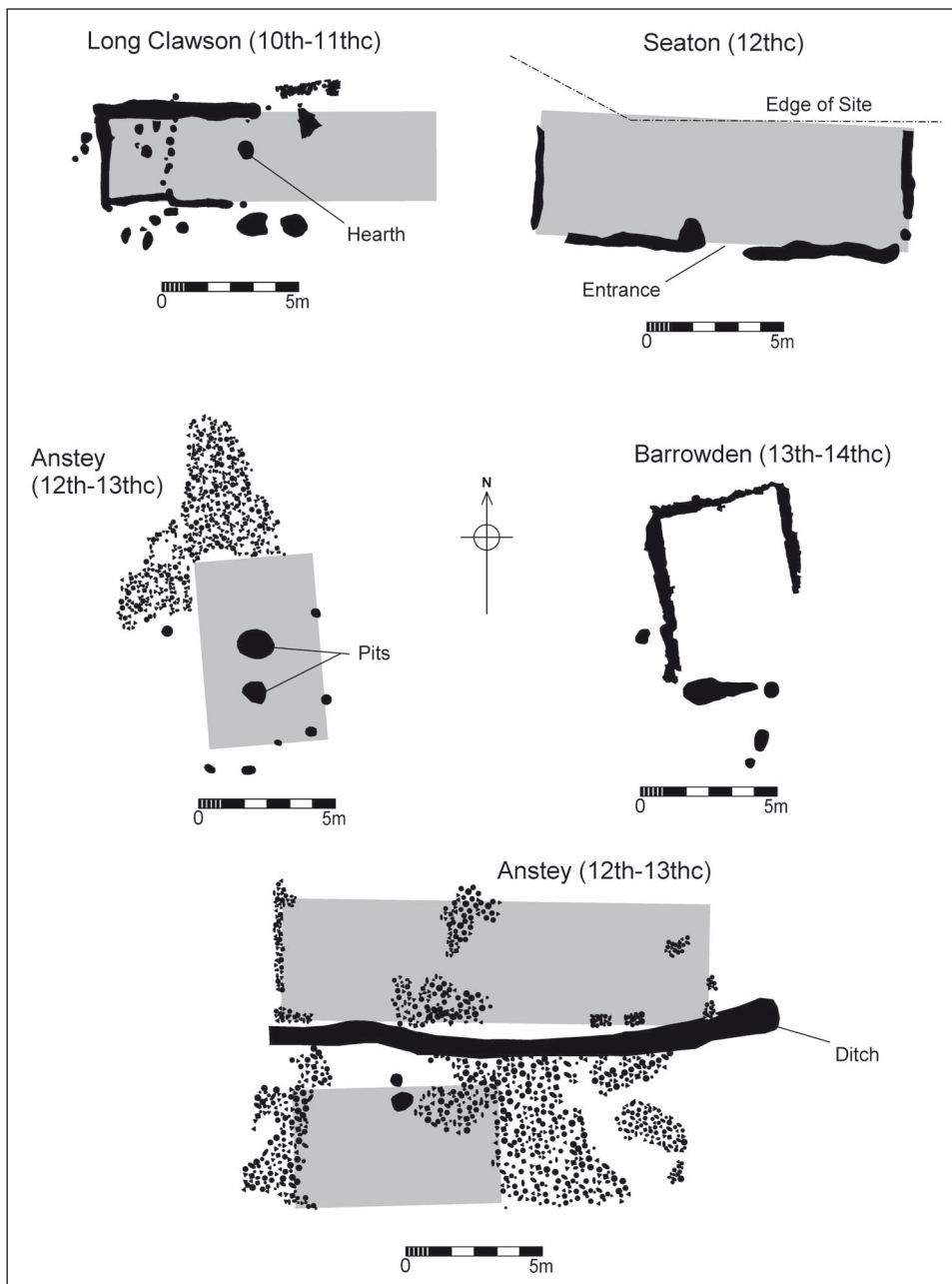
Figure 8 Comparative Ground-plans of Medieval Buildings Revealed During CORS Projects in Leicestershire and Rutland.

Buildings

In contrast to the relatively abundant information relating to early tofts, there has been little corresponding evidence revealed for associated dwellings. In part this must be a result of the locations of individual episodes of work, which often focus on areas away from the main street frontage. Equally, however, the relatively insubstantial nature of buildings from this period might leave little archaeological trace, or could be prone to removal during episodes of rebuilding or reorganisation on the same spot.

Fragmentary evidence for Saxo-Norman timber buildings has been recovered from excavations at Saxby (Thomas 2001a), Eye Kettleby (Finn 1999) and Wyfordby (Jarvis 2002), but the most complete building of this period was discovered on the eastern side of Long

Clawson (Hunt and Coward 2006) (Fig. 8). This building was associated with a centrally placed hearth, suggesting domestic use. The structural remains related to a building measuring c. 4.3m wide by at least 7m long, although the eastern extent was not clearly defined and the overall length could feasibly be doubled. The building was defined by a series of shallow slots containing regularly spaced post settings, commonly referred to as *post-in-trench* construction. A possible internal partition was marked by a line of smaller post holes towards the western end of the building and substantial pairs of post holes to the east suggested a cross-passage.

A similar building dating to the c. 12th century has been excavated at Seaton (Richards 2005). This was also constructed using the post-in-trench method and had a

centrally located entrance in the southern long side. The northern side of the building was not observed; but its estimated dimensions of c. 13.5m x 4.5m suggest it was similar in size to the Long Clawson example. A number of buildings were excavated at Anstey, although alternative construction techniques appear to have been involved. Here, rectangular gaps in cobbled yard surfaces probably represented the sites of timber or mud-built structures, most likely agricultural buildings due to their lack of hearths or other domestic indicators. Another building was partially supported by linear spreads of cobbling, probably supporting sill-beams, while others appear to have been partly constructed of earth-fast posts (Browning and Higgins 2003).

There has been little evidence for buildings with stone foundations, although fragmentary remains of such structures at Barkstone-le-Vale (Richards and Challis 2002) and Empingham (Thomson 2002), were both associated with pottery from the 12th century onwards; the incomplete nature of these buildings may reflect episodes of stone robbing for re-use elsewhere. At Barrowden, excavation in the centre of the village has provided evidence of a more fully preserved stone building datable to the Later Medieval period (Meek 2000). One end of this building had been built into a terrace, helping its survival. A width of c. 4.4m could be ascertained although the original length is likely to have been more than the c. 6m that remained. Charred plant remains and burnt bone from possible floor layers within the walls hint at a domestic role for the building.

Conclusion

Despite the variable size of the individual projects, each positive result contributes information towards our understanding of the origins, functions and growth of rural settlement in the region. Furthermore, each site offers information on settlements that survived, at a time when others were going into terminal decline, and are therefore representative of the successful majority. The results of these projects highlight the extent to which undisturbed archaeological remains can survive within CORS, and provide comparable evidence to that previously recovered from excavations on deserted sites.

An important point to come out of this research is the frequency at which remains of pre-village occupation have been recovered. Not only does this remind us that medieval villages are just a chapter in the continuing cycle of settlement of the landscape, but it also raises questions about the degree of settlement continuity at certain places. To what extent do these palimpsests of archaeological activity reflect real continuity or evidence of preferred locations for dwelling?

One key question has been the degree of continuity between the dispersed Anglo-Saxon settlement pattern and the early formation of villages. In Leicestershire and Rutland, many sites have yielded small scatters of residual Anglo-Saxon pottery sherds, while others have nearby associated cemeteries hinting at possible settlement continuity. This project has offered some tantalising examples where remains of Anglo-Saxon and early medieval occupation overlap, although the scale of intervention on each site does not currently enable clear conclusions to be drawn. Inevitably, where there is such a relationship, the earliest remains are at risk of fragmentation or complete removal by the later activities.

Evidence for the early stages of nucleation from the study sites is represented by a recurring pattern of plot arrangements adjacent to the main village streets. The development of the village plan is apparently characterised by a distinct chronological divide between the east and west of the study area, with the earliest developments occurring in Rutland and High Leicestershire during the 10th and 11th centuries. Admittedly, however, there are many potential biasing factors that could be responsible for this apparent phenomenon, both archaeologically and as a result of individual site circumstances. Many of the apparently 'later' developments, such as Anstey in the 12th–13th century, had residual assemblages of earlier pottery, indicating previous occupation of the same site, although the form of such settlement is difficult to determine.

On the whole early village plans seem to have been composed of broadly similar elements, but the study has highlighted the variety in which individual plots were defined, whether by large, imposing ditches or relatively insubstantial fences. Once defined, the tofts and crofts were often sub-divided and became the setting for a range of activities including temporary containment of livestock, craft areas, orchards and small cottage gardens. By the many pits and quarries often found, it is clear that the toft was also a source of raw materials – notably clay and gravel that could be used to build and maintain dwellings and agricultural structures. In contrast to the evidence for plots, associated building remains have been elusive and, with the exception of Anstey, evidence for both on the same site has not been achieved. The lack of building evidence from these sites may in part be a result of the locations of excavated areas, often set back from the main street frontages, although the setting of the Long Clawson building suggests that dwellings were not always situated in prominent positions. What the evidence does suggest is that early village buildings were predominantly constructed of timber, mud-walling or a combination of the two. Remains of such buildings may be very slight and difficult to recover under unfavourable archaeological conditions.

It is clear from the data that once established the village plan did not stand still, but could be highly dynamic, with frequent alterations and reorganisation over time. This phenomenon can be seen in the variability in which individual plots changed or became abandoned, but by extension must reflect the changeable nature of the wider village, as settlement reshaped and attention was focussed elsewhere at particular times in response to phases of growth or decline. Indeed this process is still an integral part of village development, which is why archaeologists are currently able to excavate within them as new homes are built, and effectively dispels the traditional view of the village as timeless and unchanging.

In conclusion, it is clear from this review that important and well-preserved archaeological remains frequently survive within CORS. It is also evident that this information has considerable potential to contribute

towards our understanding of medieval rural settlement, both to develop and refine current theories on their origins and subsequent evolution. CORS offer one of the few resources of evidence for rural medieval communities and the archaeological remains within them are therefore crucial to our understanding of the lives of 'ordinary' people and places. However, these remains exist in a vulnerable state due to increased 'village infill' development, and as such are a threatened resource. Given the relative imbalance of 'case study' sites in this review, compared to the overall number of interventions, it is clear that the quality of information recovered is directly related to the methodology applied. High quality information has been recovered as a result of controlled excavation under strict archaeological conditions. In contrast the value of information recovered from projects with less rigorous conditions attached, such as 'watching briefs', is diminished even though the resource may be of comparable quality. The changing character of rural settlement will inevitably involve further redevelopment of areas containing these important remains. It is therefore vital that future strategies for managing developments within CORS ensure the maximum retrieval of archaeological information if we are to piece these lost histories back together.

Acknowledgements

A fuller discussion of the project results will be published in the Leicestershire Museums Archaeological Fieldwork Group Monograph: *The Archaeology of Medieval Leicestershire*, Spring 2010.

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