

# From hamlets to single farmsteads: assessing the extent of settlement shrinkage in Devon from the late medieval period

By Lynne Walmsley

Research undertaken during my MA research at the University of Exeter assessed the extent to which hamlets in Devon, thought to be common in the medieval period, shrank to become single farmsteads from the later Middle Ages to the late 19th and early 20th century. The later Middle Ages saw a period of settlement contraction over the whole of the country, during which time many settlements shrank and some disappeared altogether. The pattern of mainly single farmsteads that we see today in the south-western counties is largely inherited from this period, although there were periods of contraction (as well as growth) in the post-medieval centuries as well. Devon was divided up into seven regions or 'pays' for the purposes of the study; each of these regions, with its own combination of physical and cultural entities (Roberts & Wrathmell 2000, 6) exercises a strong influence on the character of its shrunken settlements, and these differences in character are highlighted. Settlements from two parishes in each region were selected to explore the extent of settlement shrinkage and the study focused on settlements that came into existence in the medieval period.

The sources used to examine shrinkage were published information (secondary sources) combined with extensive use of Ordnance Survey mapping (both electronic and map sheets), for the late 19th century and the 1960s. Tithe Maps (1830s-1840s) were used for comparative purposes, and 1946-7 RAF air photographs were also studied. For the single farmsteads, shrinkage was identified on air photographs by looking for remains of building earthworks, wall foundations and the outlines of small yards in and around the paddocks and closes adjacent to the farmstead. To identify shrinkage on the OS 1st ed. six inch maps and Tithe Maps, the size, morphology and arrangement of small paddocks and yards close to the existing farm buildings, and the

positions of existing buildings inside these paddocks, were studied. In the closes attached to the landholding, farm footpaths that wind through the fields have been traced; these may have passed through, or be going towards, small settlement areas, so the morphology of field systems is therefore also important.

This study confirmed, in 14 parishes, that shrunken hamlets are extensive throughout Devon and that the majority of medieval isolated single farmsteads examined are the result of contraction from a previous hamlet, between the late 14th and 20th centuries.

However, these must be seen in the context of a dynamic settlement pattern, in which the growth of a single farmstead into a small hamlet and then back to a single farmstead again, was a widespread phenomenon through the Middle Ages (Aston 1989, 21). The size and the forms of shrunken hamlets revealed by this study are also diverse, due partly to regional differences, to differences in their histories, and to the dynamic nature of their evolution. Also important is how well the archaeology on shrunken sites has survived, and this influences the whole picture of settlement shrinkage over the county, including our overall impression of the extent of shrunken hamlets within it. With this in mind, the survival rates of the old pattern of paddocks, yards and closes adjacent to the farmsteads were compared in each parish, as settlement archaeology would originally have been integrated with these features.

## References

- Aston, M. 1989: The development of medieval rural settlement in Somerset, in R. Higham (ed.), *Landscape and Townscape in the South West*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press 19–40.
- Roberts, B. and Wrathmell, S. 2000: *An Atlas of Rural Settlement in England*. London, English Heritage.