

The Winscombe Project, Somerset, 2010

By Mick Aston and Teresa Hall

Research in the Winscombe Project in 2010 (Aston and Hall 2009) has concentrated on documentary research, map regression analysis, test-pit digging and vernacular building surveys. Using the long series of *compotus* rolls, transcribed and translated by Martin Ecclestone, it has been possible to locate and map over twenty separate medieval settlements, mainly from the surnames of medieval peasants recorded in the documents (Figure 1).

The major discovery from this research in 2010 is the previously unrecognized deserted medieval hamlet called Wyke or Wick. This seems to have had two or three families at most, together with a number of *garciones* (landless labourers) and seems mainly to have existed from the 12th to the early 14th century. It is not recorded after about 1400 AD and so may be a candidate for a Black Death desertion.

This study of medieval settlement confirms the dispersed and varied patterns of settlement within the parish, with one village (with the medieval church, Winscombe), several large hamlets, some of which were probably planned (Sandford, Woodborough, Sidcot, Barton and Winterhead), and a number of smaller farmsteads, one or two of which were moated (Hale, Max, Nye).

Other discoveries from the *compotus* rolls include the former existence of a windmill on a mill mound (at the Lynch) from the 14th to the 16th century. It is likely that the watermill at Max dates from the Domesday Survey of 1086, but it may well be earlier, possibly dating from the tenth century (Aston 2010).

Documentary research has now begun on the woodlands, wastes, commons and greens indicated in the early post-medieval documentation. It is becoming clear that Winscombe was a parish with a wood-pasture economy where arable farming was of minor significance. There is good evidence for assarting and it is proving possible to identify the medieval woodlands in the parish, which were part of the royal forest of Mendip from the 12th to the 14th century. The royal forest, centred on Cheddar, where the royal palace (or hunting lodge) was excavated by Philip Rantz (1979), seems never to have been totally wooded.

The Somerset Vernacular Buildings Research Group, under the direction of John Rickard, have begun a survey of the buildings in existence by the time of the tithe map (1840) and earlier. So far fourteen buildings have been examined and this includes several 16th- /17th-century

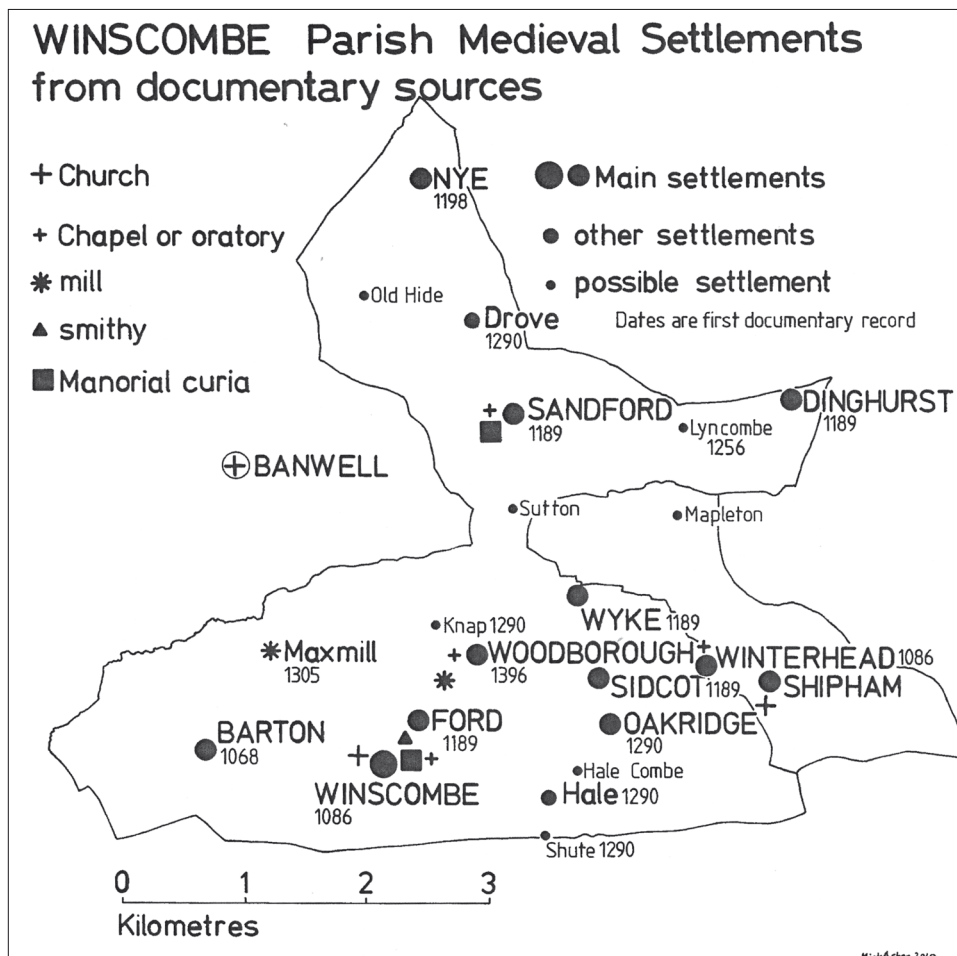


Figure 1 Medieval settlements in Winscombe parish

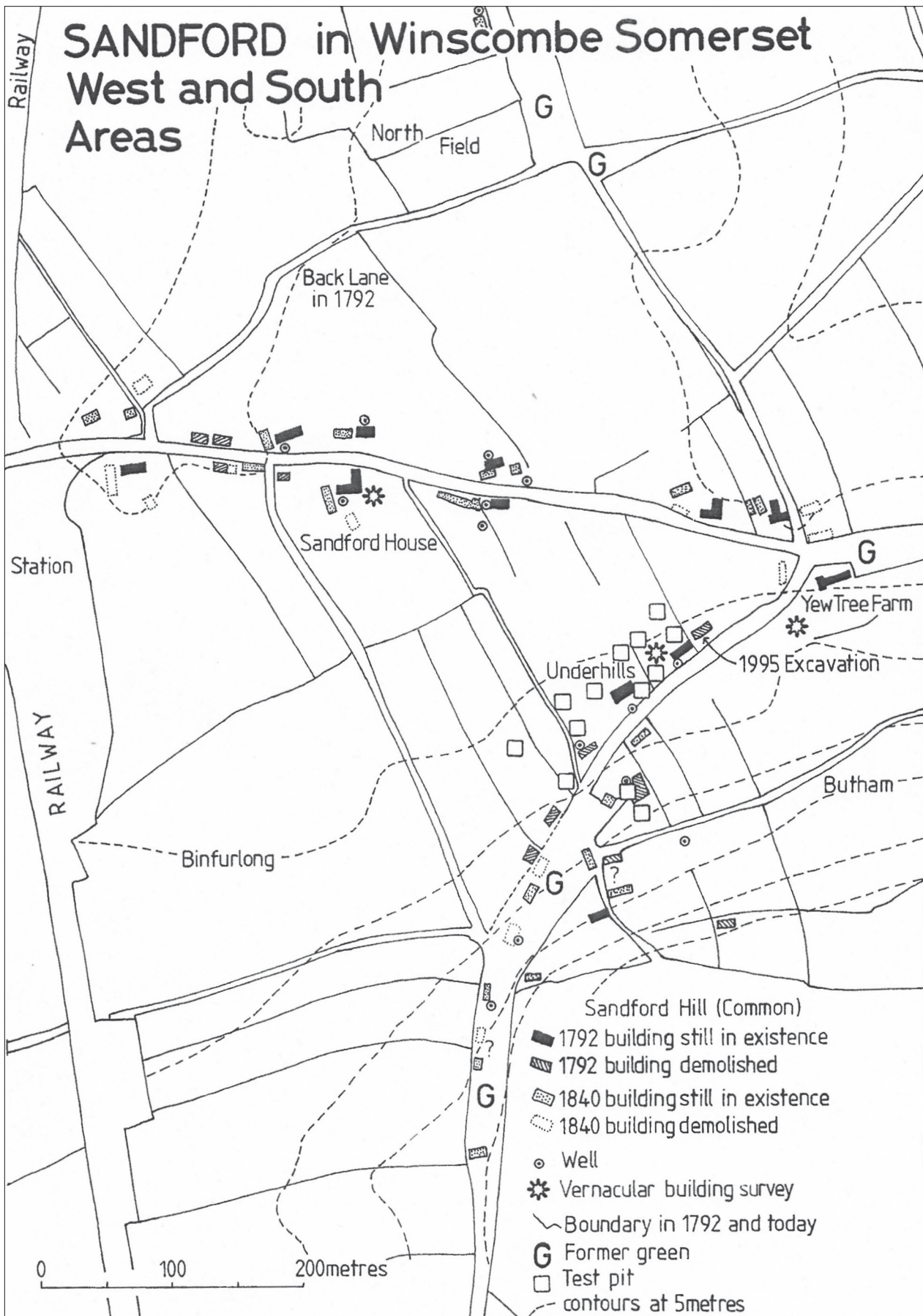


Figure 2 Sandford, Winscombe, Somerset. Southern part of the hamlet showing test pits dug and vernacular buildings surveyed in 2010

farmhouses, one or two of which have smoke-blackened timbers in the roof indicating that they are probably of late medieval date. Research has also begun by Ann Brooks on the fifty or so 'Victorian villas' (c.1830–1930) in the parish and the historical and sociological reasons for their construction. Work by Maria Forbes has continued, particularly on the rich post-medieval documentation, as background to the buildings research.

Geophysical surveys have been carried out by John Gater of GSB at the Wyke site and over the earthworks of the shrunken hamlet of Barton, which have been surveyed by James Bond.

The main fieldwork in 2010, however, consisted of the digging of 33 test-pits each of 1m², under the direction of the authors, mainly in Winscombe, Woodborough and Sandford (Figure 2). These revealed many alterations in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries in a process of 'gentrification' whereby former farmsteads and small holdings were converted into 'polite' gentlemen's residences. Farmyards were grassed over, yards, drains and walls buried, buildings upgraded and unfashionable collections of pottery dumped in the gardens. It is clear from the compliment of finds from the test pits that one test pit per property is not always adequate

to locate evidence of medieval and earlier occupation. The laying of cobbled surfaces, in particular, seems to have entailed the removal of the soil overburden and any artefacts therein. Therefore, large numbers of test pits are needed in any settlement, to provide even a partially reliable indication of the archaeology which can indicate the history of a place. In Shapwick, 81 test pits were dug but it was still not enough to fully understand the development of the village. A minimum number of a hundred is probably needed to begin to understand any sizeable settlement.

The finds from the test pits in Winscombe, which include 12th–13th century pottery, are being sorted and analysed by Teresa Hall and Sue Fitton. Further test pits will be dug in 2011, mainly in Woodborough and Barton.

References

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