

## The South Oxfordshire Project

By Stephen Miles<sup>1</sup>

This project is an historical and archaeological investigation of how people in south Oxfordshire perceived their environment and landscape from the early Middle Ages to the seventeenth century (c.500–1650). The first phase of the project (April 2011–12) is being run by Oxford University History Faculty and the Victoria County History (VCH) of Oxfordshire and is funded by the Oxford University Press John Fell fund. Further funding is being sought to extend this to a four-year research programme resulting in a substantial monograph and a variety of other outputs. The study area, which is being researched at the same time by the VCH, covers over 10,000 hectares and comprises the ancient parishes of Ewelme hundred: Benson, Berrick Salome, Brightwell Baldwin, Chalgrove, Cuxham, Easington, Ewelme, Great Haseley, Newington, Nettlebed, Nuffield, Swyncombe, Warborough, and Warpsgrove.

The project is looking to build on established investigations in landscape history and take them in a new direction by integrating them with post-processual approaches. Rather than focusing primarily on collecting evidence about classic problems such as the origins of villages and open fields, it will concentrate on the way inhabitants constructed their identities in relation to the places in which they lived (cf. POMLAS 2007). Theories about contemporary perceptions will be tested against a substantial body of data collected from place- and field-names, manorial and legal documents, archaeology, GIS-based landscape reconstruction, and material and visual evidence (including metal finds and personal seals). Specific themes and issues to be addressed include:

- changing perceptions of landscape, locality and ‘community’;
- the construction and contestation of meaning, values and power through the organisation and use of space;
- the relationship between landscape character, settlement hierarchy and the formation of individual and group identities;
- gender, age and status-based differences in the experience of landscape;
- the impact of urbanism and commercial mentalities from c.900;
- the effect of late-medieval demographic and economic changes on attitudes and social relations;
- the long-term influence of medieval agrarian and social practices on later landscapes and societies.

South Oxfordshire provides an exceptional focal point for such an investigation. The area has outstanding documentary and cartographic sources (many of them in Oxford college archives), and a long tradition of archaeological investigation, with great potential for further work. It lies on the border of the ‘central province’ (Roberts and Wrathmell 2000: 5, 42–3, 49) and encompasses two classic examples of contrasting

settlement and landscape types. The clay vale is dominated by villages and open fields, while the Chilterns uplands to the south are characterised by wood pasture, early enclosure, and dispersed settlement. The two areas were long interdependent and already in the mid to late Anglo-Saxon period they were linked through their attachment to the important royal centre at Benson (near the former Roman town of Dorchester). This part of the upper Thames region was also at the centre of national communications routes, had strong links with surrounding regions, and supported many small towns (see e.g. Christie et al., forthcoming), all of which allows for an examination of changing patterns of contact and communication.

The project is seeking to engage with local archaeological and historical groups and to build partnerships with professionals, academics, local residents, and volunteers. Fieldwork began in Ewelme in February 2011 and planned work includes fieldwalking, geophysics, test-pitting, earthwork survey and analysis of standing buildings, all of which should provide crucial evidence for settlement, farming and material culture in the Middle Ages. Anyone interested in taking part in the fieldwork should email [stephen.miles@history.ox.ac.uk](mailto:stephen.miles@history.ox.ac.uk)

*South Oxfordshire Project website:* <http://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/counties/oxfordshire/work-in-progress/south-oxfordshire-project-perceptions-landscape-settlement-and>

### References

- Christie, N., Creighton, O., Edgeworth, M. and Hamerow, H. (in prep.) *Townscapes in Transformation. From Burh to Borough: the Archaeology of Wallingford, AD 800–1400*. Leeds: Society for Medieval Archaeology
- POMLAS 2007 ‘Perceptions of medieval landscape and settlement’, *Medieval Settlement Research Group Annual Report 22*, 6–31
- Roberts B. K. and Wrathmell S. 2000 *An Atlas of Rural Settlement in England*. London: English Heritage



Figure 1 Volunteer fieldwalkers in Ewelme, March 2011

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