

## JOHN HURST DISSERTATION PRIZE 2010

In 2004, the *Medieval Settlement Research Group* announced the launch of a prize, set up in honour of the late John Hurst, who did so much to promote the field of medieval archaeology and in particular the study of medieval settlement. To encourage new and young scholars in the field, an annual prize of £200 is offered to graduate students for the best Masters dissertation on any theme in the field of medieval settlement and

landscape in Britain and Ireland (c. AD 400 – 1600). Directors of Masters courses in Archaeology, English Local History, Landscape Studies and related fields are invited to submit high-quality completed dissertations for consideration by the MSRSG Committee. We are delighted to present below a summary of MA research by the 2010 prize winner, Susan Kilby.

### A DIFFERENT WORLD? RECONSTRUCTING THE PEASANT ENVIRONMENT IN MEDIEVAL ELTON

By Susan Kilby<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

The abundant documentation related to the thirteenth- to fourteenth-century manor has long been considered central to the reconstruction of the socio-economic world of lords and peasants. But historians have rarely questioned the validity of the seigneurial view of the manorial environment that survives through surveys and extents, despite this being the observation of elites who were frequently absent from their lands. Using the Huntingdonshire manor of Elton as a case-study, comparing these documents with literary texts alongside surveys outlining lands closer to the aristocratic heart, like forests and chases, it is evident that there was a deliberate seigneurial distancing from manorial land, which was increasingly being seen dispassionately and simply in fiscal terms in the post-Conquest period.

The much overlooked evidence that can be termed peasant naming strategies – both personal and environmental names – means that we can start to recognise the local environment as an intimately known place, something much closer to modern ideas of landscape as opposed to the arid lordly descriptions of mere land. Indeed, looking at the manorial environment through the eyes of resident peasants highlights that our understanding of how local landscapes were seen has hitherto been one-dimensional. Lords traditionally associated peasants with the soil they tilled, but there is evidence that free tenants attempted to sever this connection, preferring to emulate elites in viewing the natural world as symbolic. Peasant furlong names sustain the seigneurial convictions, but when assessed alongside the manorial documentation, the negative connotations are called into question and we can begin to detect evidence of scientific knowledge and close observation

of the natural world amongst a group almost exclusively portrayed as uneducated and ignorant.

#### Background and methodology

The study of the English manor has a long history, evolving as a scholarly subject from an initial late nineteenth-century focus on the manorial environment, which by the mid-twentieth century had widened to consider more properly the peasants who lived and worked within its boundaries. Whilst the social focus now extends into many aspects of peasant lives, from the construction materials of their houses through to what they grew in their gardens (e.g. Astill and Grant 1994; Dyer 2000), it is striking how, unlike the work of some European scholars (e.g. Le Roy Ladurie 1990; Ginzberg 1980) there have been only rare excursions into the realms of peasant mentalities in a British context (e.g. Stone 2005). In contrast with the burgeoning study of the socio-economic aspects of medieval peasants' lives, there are far fewer historical studies on medieval nature and the environment. Perhaps because of this, these works are usually either diachronic or they emphasise specific people, places and subject matter (e.g. Glacken 1967; Mills 1982; Murray 1992; Salisbury 1993; Chenu 1997; Foot 2010). Nevertheless, excellent though they might be, they are commonly elite-focused: medievalists working in this field seldom venture into the world of the lower orders (although for studies on later periods see, for example Bunkse 1978 on the nineteenth century, and Thomas 1983 on the early modern period). My MA draws together different scholarly disciplines and diverse documentary sources, from manorial documents to agricultural treatises and scientific manuals, in order to consider afresh the medieval peasant landscape.

The focus for this exploration is the manor of Elton in Huntingdonshire (Figure 1), which lies within the midlands champion region. In the period under consideration (c. 1086 – c. 1348), the lord (the abbot of Ramsey Abbey)

<sup>1</sup> MA in English Local History, Centre for English Local History, University of Leicester



Figure 1 Elton from the air (photo by kind permission of Stephen Upex)

was principally concerned with arable agriculture. The local geology is diverse: alluvial and terrace soils border the river, whilst heavier clays dominate the eastern side of the parish. Located in the Nene valley, with the river running alongside the manor's western boundary, water-meadows were more abundant than on some of Ramsey Abbey's other holdings. Fortunately, a large collection of related documents survive, predominantly from the late thirteenth and early/mid fourteenth centuries; these include crown and manorial records, such as manorial court and account rolls, and several surveys of varying detail. Additionally, there is a large quantity of peasant deeds extant which, as seen, enable more comprehensive insights into peasant mentalities through the inclusion of field and furlong names.

My central enquiry was concerned with establishing whether elite views of local landscape differed from those of peasants, and if so, what was the nature of those differences? Using relevant software (e.g. Microsoft Access and Microsoft Excel), data was collated from both published and original primary sources and entered into a database so that more rigorous comparison and analysis could be undertaken. Although all references to landscape, flora and fauna were recorded, four aspects were considered more thoroughly: personal names, field and furlong names, personal seals (albeit to a lesser degree), and references to peasant holdings. A focus on these features, particularly the names, helps to remove the 'seigneurial filter' through which medieval peasants are frequently viewed, allowing some facets of their world-view to be perceived more clearly. In addition

to documentary analysis, landscape reconstruction was necessary in order to consider the peasant landscape in context: Elton's pre-enclosure landscape has largely been reconstructed (Upex 1984), and this provided a framework within which many of the 150-plus medieval furlong names found within the peasant deeds could be mapped. Finally, once particular furlongs were identified and placed within the landscape, on site fieldwork was necessary to validate and clarify some of the findings.

### The peasant landscape at Elton

Initially, an assessment of elite landscape-centric documents from the pre- and post-Conquest periods was undertaken to provide a reference point. It was clear that a change occurred in the way that landscape was described within official documents, possibly coincident with the advent of the administratively fixated Norman monarchy. To illustrate this, a late Anglo-Saxon boundary clause for neighbouring Water Newton (S 437) describes the landscape in rich detail, using adjectives, such as 'muddy', 'linear', 'steep', 'open', in contrast with the terse style employed within a thirteenth-century survey of Elton. This thirteenth-century sterile view is all the more illuminating when compared with the burgeoning elite literature of the period, such as the garden of the *Roman de la Rose*, or the forest in *Eric et Enide*; and it is even more noteworthy when assessed against contemporary seigneurial surveys of forests and chases, which are considerably closer in spirit to the noted Anglo-Saxon boundary clause than the later manorial

survey. It is suggested here that this shift in elite attitude toward the manorial landscape encompassed three key elements: a post-Norman focus on administration and value; the introduction of agricultural treatises in the period of demesne farming (c. 1250 – c. 1350) and their emphasis on measurement, profit and the management of officials; and the disassociation of the aristocracy with the agricultural landscape, which was considered to be the natural domain of the working peasant.

To date, historians and archaeologists have largely concentrated on the physical manorial environment, and yet landscape also operates on a number of conceptual planes that cannot be discerned through reconstruction or archaeological survey. Sociologists suggest there are five conceptual indicators influencing spatial organisation (socio-psychological [concerned with status], behavioural [activity and circulation], symbolic [focusing on imagery], affective [outlining patterns of identification with territory] and morphological [concerned with population characteristics] (Altenberg 2003). These mental constructs can be difficult to identify, however this study shows that naming strategies (for both personal and field names) can help reveal landscapes that have always been imperceptible to those who cannot recognise their significance. A significant quantity of unique personal names amongst Elton's peasant population referenced the landscape, the greatest number of which related to the natural topography (e.g. Abovebrok, at Pool) as opposed to the built environment (e.g. at Lane, at the Oven). The most significant element

in Elton's environmental names was water, reflecting both the manor's riverside location and its abundance of streams and springs. Modern taxonomical concerns have largely obscured peasants' original intentions regarding their naming strategies. In fact, until recently, topographical names were classified simply as 'local' – a category within which personal-name scholars also included toponyms (e.g. de Stanwick). But a close look at the Elton names reveals that only servile peasants bore topographical names, and this was largely the case in several other manors in different regions assessed for comparative purposes (Figure 2).

This phenomenon has been briefly noted but not explained (Postles 1998). The idea that peasants were closely connected to the soil was commonplace throughout this period, and many texts outline this relationship, from the lordly surveys in which peasants appear alongside the manorial lands and livestock, through to legal treatises in which they are described in such terms (Hyams 1980; Hill 1993; Freedman 1999). The notion that a great many free peasants were not known by topographical names, and therefore less connected to the land than their servile neighbours is intriguing, and such a wholesale occurrence suggests a deliberate division. The surviving seal of an Elton free tenant, John Fraunceys supports the idea that free peasants were desirous of being perceived as having a more 'aristocratic' relationship with the land. It depicts a bird and crescent moon (Figure 3) and is reminiscent of the symbolic use of the natural world favoured by elites, as evidenced in illuminations within bestiaries and

| Name                                  | Status           | Name  | Status                    |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|---|---------------------------|
| <b>Elton (Huntingdonshire)</b>        |                  | <b>Barmby Moor (East Riding of Yorkshire)</b> |                           |
| at Lane, in the Lane                  | Villein          | of the Greenwood                              | Customary Tenant / Cottar |
| at the Brook                          | Villein          | in the Garden                                 | Customary Tenant          |
| at the Gate                           | Villein          | in the Nook                                   | Customary Tenant          |
| at Cross                              | Villein          | on the Greenwood                              | Customary Tenant          |
| in the Nook                           | Villein / Cottar | on the Moor                                   | Cottar                    |
| Bovebrok, Abovebrok                   | Villein          | <b>Riccall (North Yorkshire)</b>              |                           |
| at the Water                          | Villein          | at the Gate                                   | Bondman                   |
| at the Oven                           | Villein          | of the Moor                                   | Gresman                   |
| at the Spring                         | Cottar           | at the Spring                                 | Bondman                   |
| at the Church                         | Cottar           | of the Dike                                   | Gresman / Cottar          |
| Deche                                 | Cottar           | at the Church                                 | Cottar                    |
| <b>Woodston (Huntingdonshire)</b>     |                  | in the Lane                                   | Cottar                    |
| at the Cross                          | Villein          | <b>Stevington (Bedfordshire)</b>              |                           |
| at the Water                          | Cottar           | at the Wold                                   | Villein                   |
| <b>Water Newton (Huntingdonshire)</b> |                  | at the Stone                                  | Villein                   |
| at the Water                          | Villein / Cottar | at the Cross                                  | Cottar                    |
| at the Cross                          | Cottar           | at the Church                                 | Cottar                    |
| in le Cley                            | Cottar           |   |                           |

Figure 2 Topographical names and peasant status in six English manors. Sources: Rotuli Hundredorum temp. Hen. III and Edw. I, Vol. II (London, 1818) (Elton, Stevington, and Water Newton); S.C. Ratcliff (ed.) and D.M. Gregory (trans.) Elton Manorial Records, 1279-1351 (Cambridge, 1946); T.A.M. Bishop, 'Extents of the Prebends of York', Miscellanea, Vol. IV (Leeds, 1937) (Barmby Moor and Riccall)



Figure 3 The personal seal of John Fraunceys, free tenant, Elton. Source: The National Archives, E40 / 6784

ecclesiastical ornamentation (Baxter 1998). Fraunceys' image depicts a waning moon, considered to be the best time for harvesting crops, and so perhaps symbolises prosperity and abundance. Thus, the frequently-proffered view of an aggregated peasant experience can be challenged (e.g. Murray 1992; although see Kilby 2010).

Alongside personal names, field and furlong names, which were determined by the peasants themselves, are also revealing of peasant mentalities. That Elton's peasants closely observed their landscape is evident from several furlong names, including Hypperode (wild rose clearing), Mone Rode (moon clearing) and Boterflyemede (butterfly meadow). Boterflyemede provides a useful example here. Generally at Elton, meadow adjacent to the river was named using adjectival qualifiers (e.g. long, nether). Boterflyemede, in the east of the parish, cannot be considered in practical terms, nor was it descriptive of unique characteristics since butterflies abound in meadows generally. It was situated away from the river, in an area that had become a sheep-walk by the eighteenth century, adjacent to some of the parish's poorer soils, suggesting its more isolated location meant that those naming it were not confined to the practical aspects, but could look clearly at its most obvious characteristic – namely its abundance of butterflies (Figure 4). Again, modern classification systems, that arrange field-names into recognisably contemporary categories – such as those denoting colour (e.g. Red Field), or shape (e.g. Long Acre) (Field 1993) – whilst helpful in some respects, can obscure original

meanings and this study shows that there may be more to furlong names than previously considered.

Even within some of the more practically-named furlongs, the potential rationale behind several names becomes clearer when assessed alongside contemporary didactic texts, including agricultural treatises and scientific manuals. Medieval science, ultimately based on Classical Greek elemental and humoral theories, has hitherto been considered the preserve of educated elites, and yet detailed analysis of furlong names coupled with fieldwork observation suggests that a scientific approach could be adopted by peasants within their working landscape. Thus, the Elton furlong-name Molwellehyl comprises three elements: 'mol' (gravelly soil), 'welle' (spring) and 'hyl' (hill). As it is the only Elton name that combines 'welle' and 'hyl', the addition of 'mol' is interesting. This could be simple attention to detail, and might again reveal close landscape observation. But medieval science attributed the qualities hot/cold and wet/dry to all natural phenomena, and so if this name is considered alongside agricultural treatises that outline specific treatments for different soils comprising particular qualities (e.g. gravelly, chalky, heavy clay), then Molwellehyl becomes a mnemonic device to remind farmers that its 'wet' spring is countered by its 'dry' gravelly soil, and so treatment should be tempered accordingly. Archaeological survey confirms that diverse manuring strategies were often adopted within individual manors, and so it follows that it was felt that some furlongs needed particular treatment; perhaps their names helped to remind Elton's peasants how to get the best from them (Jones 2009). The idea that some of Elton's furlong names are rooted in medieval science is further supported by scientific practices undertaken by its peasants as revealed within the manorial accounts. These included porcine blood-letting, which was associated with scientifically-based humoral theory. Elton's account roll shows that this task was delegated to lower-status peasants, suggesting that individuals working in animal husbandry, whatever their status, were required to have a basic understanding of current medical science. The dating of one such porcine blood-letting session at Elton strongly suggests that it was carried out during a particular stage in the lunar cycle, and thus in accordance with specific instructions contained in at least one scientific manual written at nearby Ramsey Abbey in the twelfth century (Oxford St John's College MS17).

Having revealed hidden facets of Elton's manorial landscape, supporting the idea that it was constructed of multiple, overlapping conceptual planes, my study then returned to the physical landscape, which is largely ignored within official documents, but is perceived and revealed in the peasant charters and through fleeting glimpses of fines and works owed to the lord. This outlined a complex landscape of tofts, crofts, orchards and gardens, alongside controlled access to manorial resources. So, whilst the *Rotuli Hundredorum* (1279) was concerned with the official peasant holdings of virgates, cottages and crofts, the peasant charters frequently offer more detail. In one undated charter, Isabella de Ailintone's message with toft and croft was described as 'contain[ing] in width 44 feet and in length 58 feet', of which the croft contained one selion, and yet in contrast with the *Rotuli Hundredorum*, the grant also ceded another 8 acres (The

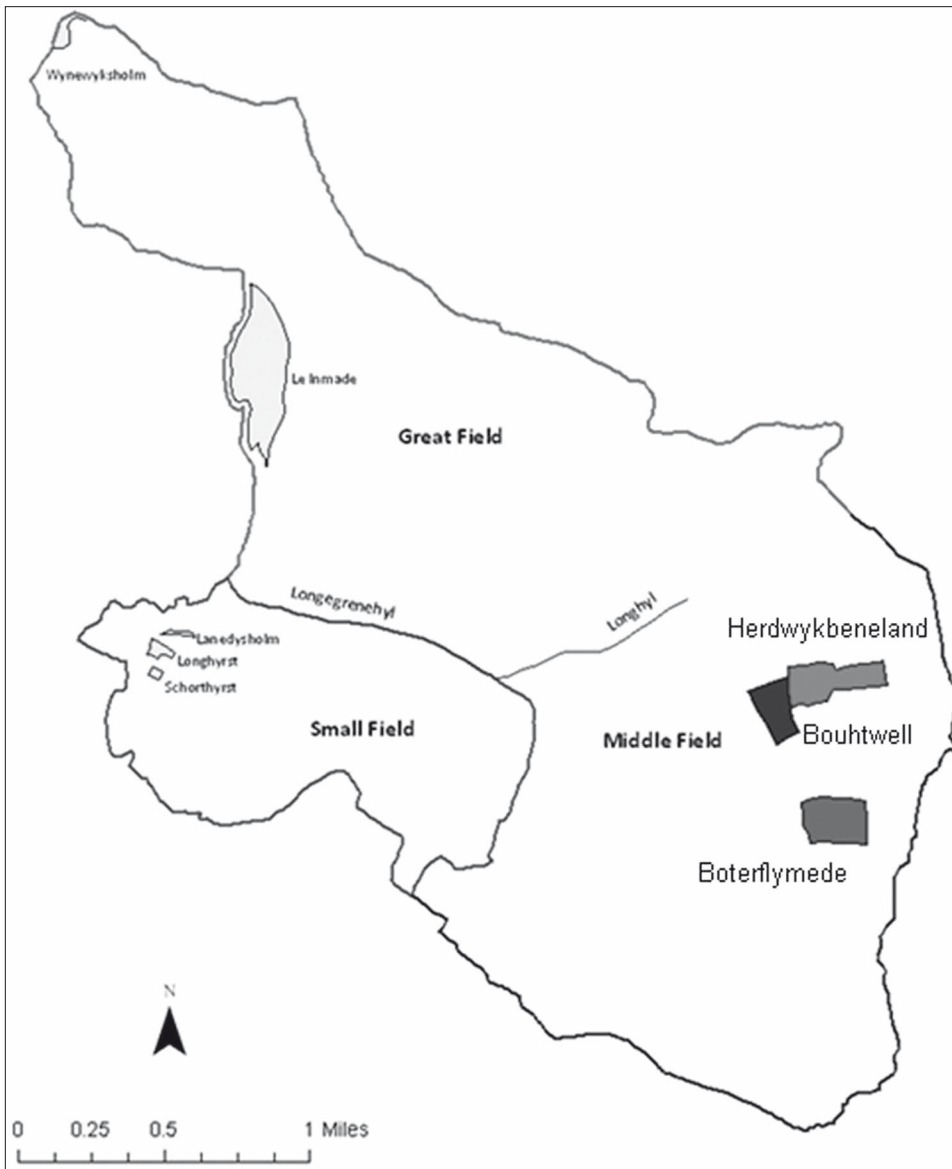


Figure 4 Butterfly Meadow, Elton (after Stephen Upex)

National Archives, E40/ A3286). So, whilst the holding appears to have been that of a cottar, additional land was held that more ‘official’ documents did not record. Similarly, the portion of orchard that the villein Henry Godswein purchased from an Elton free tenant is absent from official records (The National Archives, E40/ A5887). It also highlighted data on building materials, drainage strategies and peasant stone quarrying, which the manorial accounts reveal that the lord invested in at Elton. Finally, it exposed seigneurial attempts to restrict peasants’ physical movements through the landscape to official roads and footpaths, suggesting that peasants not only perceived the landscape on their own terms, but also made their own way through it. This is an idea that has not always been given enough credence (e.g. by Dodgshon 1987; Saunders 1990).

### Conclusion

There should be little doubt that lords and peasants thought very differently about land and landscape in the post-Conquest period. The idea that there were clearly-demarkated seigneurial and peasant spaces is an

elite construct, that through patient re-reading of surviving peasant texts – personal, field and furlong names and seals – all found within administrative documents and peasant deeds, can be dismantled and reconstructed to reveal the multi-faceted, complex physical and conceptual landscapes inhabited by medieval peasants.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Christopher Dyer and Dr Richard Jones for their invaluable comments, advice and suggestions and for tolerating innumerable questions whilst preparing my MA dissertation at the University of Leicester; and Dr Matthew Tompkins for frequent assistance with Latin translation and for the patient encouragement of my fledgling palaeography skills. I also owe thanks to Dr Stephen Upex for generously sharing his work on the reconstruction of Elton’s seventeenth and eighteenth-century fields, for taking me on a personal tour of some of Elton’s surviving ridge and furrow, and for helpful comments regarding my interpretation of the fourteenth-century field system.

## Bibliography

- Allenberg, K. 2003. *Experiencing Landscapes*. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell
- Astill, G. and Grant, A. (eds) 1994 *The Countryside of Medieval England*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Baxter, R. 1998 *Bestiaries and their Users in the Middle Ages*. Stroud: Sutton
- Bunkse, E.V. 1978 'Commoner attitudes toward landscape and nature', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 68(4), 551–566
- Chenu, M.D. 1997 *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*. Eds and trans. J. Taylor and L.K. Little, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Dodgshon, R.A. 1987. *The European Past: Social Evolution and Spatial Order*. Basingstoke: Macmillan
- Dyer, C. 2000. *Everyday Life in Medieval England*. London: Hambledon and London
- Field, J. 1993. *A History of English Field-Names*. London: Longman
- Foot, S. 2010 'Plenty, portents and plague: ecclesiastical readings of the natural world in early medieval Europe' in P. Clarke and T. Claydon (eds), *God's Bounty? The Churches and the Natural World: Papers Read at the 2008 Summer Meeting and the 2009 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*. Studies in Church History 46. Woodbridge: Ecclesiastical History Society, 15–41
- Freedman, P. 1999 *Images of the Medieval Peasant*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press
- Ginzburg, C. 1980. *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, (trans. J. and A. Tedeschi). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Glacken, C.J. 1967 *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the end of the Eighteenth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Hill, O.G. 1993 *The Manor, the Plowman, and the Shepherd: Agrarian Themes and Imagery in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance English Literature*. London: Associated University Presses
- Hyams, P.R. 1980. *King, Lords and Peasants in Medieval England: The Common Law of Villeinage in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*. Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Jones, R. 2009 'Manure and the medieval social order' in M.J. Allen, N. Sharples and T. O'Connor (eds) *Land and People: Papers in Memory of John G. Evans*. Oxford: Oxbow Books/Prehistoric Society Research Paper, 215–225
- Kilby, S. 2010. 'Struggle and enterprise: the experience of servile peasants in Wellingborough, 1258–1322', *Midland History* 35(1), 1–27
- Le Roy Ladurie, E. 1990 *Montaillou : Cathars and Catholics in a French village*, (trans B. Bray). London: Penguin
- Mills, W.J. 1982 'Metaphorical vision: changes in western attitudes to the environment', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 72(2), 237–253
- Murray, A. 1992 'Nature and man in the Middle Ages' in J. Torrance (ed.) *The Concept of Nature: the Herbert Spencer Lectures*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 25–62
- Postles, D. 1998 *The Surnames of Leicestershire and Rutland*. English Surnames Series 7. Oxford: Leopard's Head Press
- Salisbury, J.E. (ed.) 1993 *The Medieval World of Nature: A Book of Essays*. New York: Garland
- Saunders, T. 1990 'The feudal construction of space: power and domination in the nucleated village' in R. Samson (ed.), *The Social Archaeology of Houses*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 181–196
- Stone, D. 2005 *Decision-Making in Medieval Agriculture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Thomas, K. 1983 *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* London: Allen Lane
- Upex, S. 1984 'The Reconstruction of Openfield Layout from Landscape Evidence in Northamptonshire and Cambridgeshire', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Nottingham