Medieval Settlement Research **28** (2013), 70–72

West Backworth: a deserted medieval village and its wider context

By David Astbury[1]

The scheduled monument of West Backworth (NZ29307220) in Tyne and Wear sits on a spur of sandstone 60 m above sea level with extensive views to the north and east. The site is situated in a field measuring 341 m east to west by 226 m north to south, and is currently under pasture.

Medieval settlement studies in Tyne and Wear have been sparse. The site of West Backworth is situated on the margins of what is now a heavily developed area, characterised by the remains of extensive mining beginning in the mid-18th century, and large-scale urban and commercial redevelopment in the last hundred years. The extensive earthworks at West Backworth have somehow survived these changes. Although the site is referred to by Wrathmell (1975) in a PhD thesis, it has never been the subject of extensive archaeological inquiry, and its remains are the only earthworks of a settlement deserted entirely before the sixteenth century in south Northumberland (Wrathmell 1975, 122). West Backworth is therefore an exceptional source of information on medieval village development in the region. This summary charts an attempt to understand the earthworks at West Backworth, conducted through a desktop assessment and topographic survey. The results were incorporated into GIS for interpretation, and then compared with other villages that comprised the medieval liberty of Tynemouthshire.

The name suggests a pre-Conquest origin for the settlement. Places with names ending in *–worth* represent a category of individual farmsteads established within or on the edges of newly reclaimed woodland as the population grew during the Anglo-Saxon period (Roberts and Wrathmell 2002, 179–80). Many places ending in *–worth* are also linked with personal names, in this case, 'Bacca'. The first textual reference for West Backworth occurs in an 1189 charter in which both East and West Backworth were included in the lands belonging to Tynemouth Priory (Craster 1909: 32). In 1241 a manorial hall was built and Backworth, which we must assume comprised both East and West, was included as one of ten manors belonging to the prior of Tynemouth (Craster 1901, 32–3). It is thought that West Backworth lost its identity in the reorganization of the prior's lands during the fifteenth century, as its territory was incorporated into the tenant holdings of nearby East Backworth (Wrathmell 1975, 295, 159). The turbulent nature of the Tynemouthshire administration may also have played a part in the settlement's demise; if a liberty was not well placed to meet the local aspirations and expectations of its inhabitants, divisions and unrest were commonplace (Holford and Stringer 2010, 13).

The medieval earthwork remains of West Backworth share their location with many later features that together create a complex collage of archaeological features. For example, prominent 5 m wide ridge and furrow ploughing overlies all the medieval earthworks at the site. A retrogressive analysis was therefore undertaken in order to unpick West Backworth's earthworks. A LiDAR DSM image at a resolution of 2 m was acquired from the Environment Agency for the whole site; and for one feature in particular (toft 5), a tape and offset survey was undertaken to provide further detail.

The clearest medieval earthwork at the site is the hollow way running on an east–west alignment through the village, separating the two rows of tofts on its northern and southern edges. The later road layout as shown on the 1st edition OS map can clearly be aligned with the hollow way, linking West and East Backworth in the medieval period. The width of the hollow way varies along its length; from the eastern edge of the site until the halfway point its width is 27 m, widening to 54 m in the western edge of the field, possibly to form a village green, a common feature in north-eastern villages (Jarrett 1962, 194). Although many linear earthworks can clearly be distinguished at the site, caution has been applied in linking them to a particular context, or even period. For instance, a number of north–south linear earthworks run on the same lines as the later plough marks at West Backworth. More pronounced banks may be the edges of tofts that were simply overlain by ridges; but some could also be paddock enclosures from a later date. With these factors considered, careful examination of the LiDAR data suggests West Backworth may have comprised up to 22 tofts during the medieval period. A series of north to south banks that terminate at the hollow way on both its southern and northern sides have been identified through this technique; the distance between these banks correlated with the average width of more obviously discernable tofts across the site. The tofts are quite uniform in shape across the site; most are strictly rectangular, apart from toft 5, which is more haphazard.

The back lane on the south side is clearly visible both on the ground and from the air, measuring 4 m wide and set 0.4 m above the tofts that lead up to it. On the north side the back lane is most likely now the modern road. A ditch measuring approximately 15 metres wide runs in a south–north direction through the middle of the site. It seems probable that this was once a watercourse. The evidence for this is as follows: on more than one occasion during prolonged wet conditions whilst undertaking site visits and fieldwork the author witnessed that the ditch had filled with water and was flowing in a south–north direction through the site. Two springs were also detected in the ditch at this time. Unusually the stream at West Backworth, although being a useful resource, cuts the settlement in half. Whilst streams and rivers are common in relation to medieval settlements, in Northumberland they normally run parallel to a village street. It is not known how deep the stream was in the medieval period, but it would surely have acted as an obstruction on the hollowway to the daily lives of villagers.

[1] Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums.

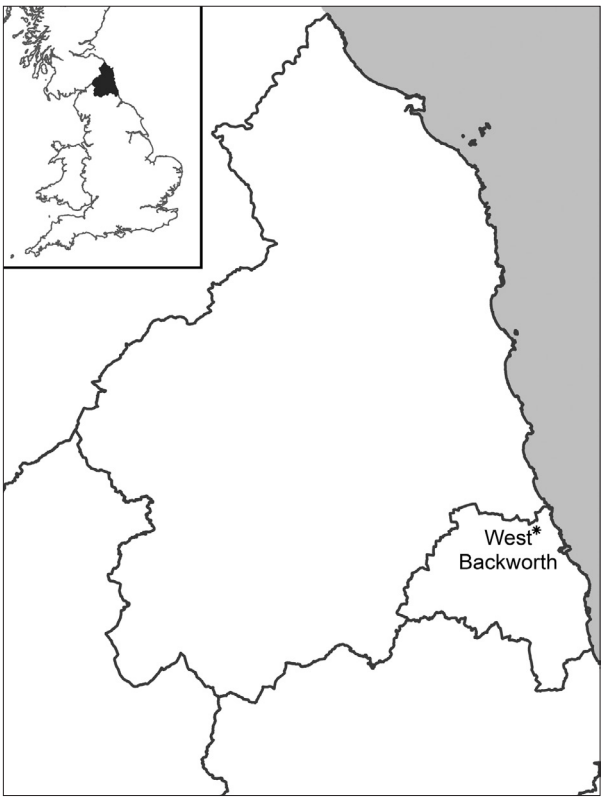

Figure 1 West Backworth: location.

The evidence presented above shows that West Backworth was laid out as a regular two-row village which was typical amongst Tynemouthshire's other settlements during the later Middle Ages. Whilst all medieval settlements are in some way planned, the northern 'central province' has a particularly high percentage of villages which display geometric regularity in their plan forms, characterised by single village settlements set within extensive open-field arable land (Wrathmell 2012, 260; 1975, 251). The uniform length and sometimes width of tofts, evidenced at West Backworth, suggests they were part of a single act of planning, that 'villages were laid out less by logic than by custom' (Homans 1942, 86). The condition of week-work, a series of tasks which a tenant was bound to his lord to undertake, may explain how the villages of Tynemouthshire in particular acquired their regular-planned nature. Before 1100 the bonders in at least four of Tynemouthshire's villages did two days of week-work, a trait closely associated with regular planned villages but something of an anomaly in Northumberland at the time. Bishop Walcher of Durham, who implemented week-work at settlements below the Tyne after the Harrying of the North, became Earl of Northumberland between 1075 and 1080 (Kapelle 1979, 189). It may have been during this period of his stewardship that the villages of Tynemouthshire were manorialised and thus regular-planned.

West Backworth's east–west alignment is a common characteristic throughout almost all Tynemouthshire's settlements; this could be linked to a process called *solskifte*. Goransson (1961, 101) argued that the origins of *solskifte* could be found in England during the early medieval period. The tofts that lined the medieval street were considered as falling in a clockwise direction about the village, which is significant as the course of the sun as seen from any point toward the northern parts of the earth is clockwise. The order of the tofts in a village may have been linked to the order of the strips belonging to the tofts in the fields, so every villager had the same neighbour both in the village itself and in the fields they ploughed. Physical evidence corroborates this in the form of some strips being laid out at right angles to others, resembling a turning in the landscape, which can be seen in fragments of medieval open-fields around present-day Backworth.

It must be stated that the theories offered above are just that; and the reasons for why and how nucleated

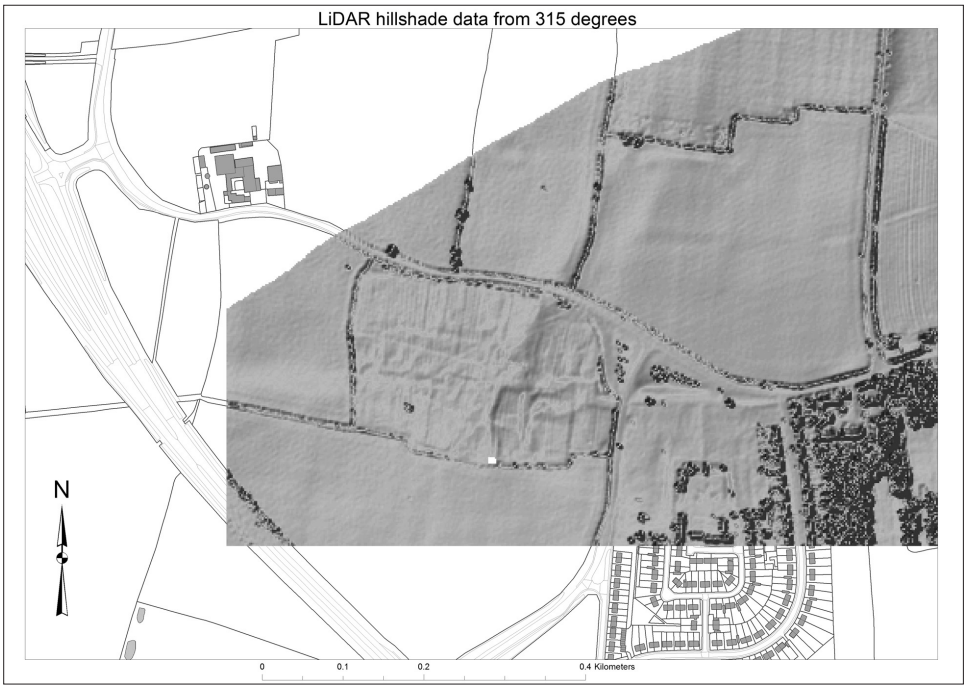

Figure 2 LiDAR hillshade data from 315 degrees.
(Crown copyright/ database right 2013. An Ordnance Survey/Edina supplied service.)
(© Environment Agency.)

Figure 3 West Backworth: interpretation of earthworks, medieval phase 1. (Crown copyright/ database right 2013. An Ordnance Survey/Edina supplied service.)

settlements came into being remain largely elusive (Jones and Lewis 2012, 197; Roberts 2008, 87). The evidence presented for West Backworth and its regional typicality is far from conclusive. In the case of West Backworth more archaeological data can be extracted from the landscape without committing to major excavation. Detailed topographic survey of the whole field in which West Backworth was situated, using more sophisticated equipment such as a differential GPS, or 1 m LiDAR data would reveal the medieval remains in more detail. Furthermore, a resistivity survey may locate actual buildings and boundaries that are not visible on the ground or discernible through existing aerial photography. More work can also be done on the connections between the administrative unit of Tynemouthshire and the morphology of its villages.

References

Craster, H. 1901 *A History of Northumberland*, *Vol. 8*. London: Andrew Reid

Craster, H. 1909 *A History of Northumberland*, *Vol. 9*. London: Andrew Reid

Goransson, S. 1961 Open-field pattern in England and Scandinavian solskifte. *Geografiska Annaler* 43 (1–2), 80–104

Holford, M.L. and Stringer, K.J. 2010 *Border Liberties and Loyalties: North-East England, c.1200–c.1400*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Homans, G.C. 1942 *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Jarrett M.G. 1970 The deserted village of West Whelpington, Northumberland: second report. *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4th Series, 48, 183–302

Jones, R., and Lewis, C. 2012 The Midlands: medieval settlements and landscapes. In N. Christie and P. Stamper (eds) *Medieval Rural Settlement: Britain and Ireland, AD 800–1600*. Oxford: Windgather, 186–206

Kapelle, W.E. 1979 *The Norman Conquest of the North: the region and its transformation 1000–1135*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press

Roberts, B.K. and Wrathmell, S. 2002 *Region and Place: a study of English rural settlement*. London: English Heritage

Roberts, B.K. 2008 *Landscapes, Documents and Maps: villages in northern England and beyond AD900–1250*. Oxford: Oxbow

Wrathmell, S. 1975 Deserted villages of South Northumberland. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cardiff

Wrathmell, S. 2012 Northern England: exploring the character of medieval rural settlements. In N. Christie and P. Stamper (eds) *Medieval Rural Settlement: Britain and Ireland, AD 800–1600*. Oxford: Windgather, 270–288