

Debate: the Emperor's old clothes and the origins of medieval nucleated settlements and their open fields

By Susan Oosthuizen¹

My mother says 'everyone knows' that the monoliths flew from the Preseli Hills to Stonehenge.² That is, the validity of her claim is based on its apparent universal acceptance. There is no empirical evidence for it and so, like the Emperor's new clothes, its 'truth' is more virtual than real. This short note focuses on two beliefs about the origins of medieval open fields and nucleated settlements for which the scholarly consensus is so wide and so deep that they can also be described as things that 'everyone knows'. It examines their cogency and asks whether they, too, represent clothes that the Emperor might consider replacing.

Open almost every major (and minor) book about the Anglo-Saxon landscape and two assertions will be found, for which no justification is thought to be required. The first is that between the 9th and the 12th centuries there was a shift from dispersed to nucleated settlement at the same time that large-scale open fields were laid out. Both settlements and fields are regarded as co-ordinated, interdependent aspects of a single process in which the practice of arable cultivation was remodelled and its organisation centralised. The second contention is that open fields and nucleated settlements were completely new forms in the landscape of Anglo-Saxon England, bearing no relation to what had been there before.

There seem to me to be substantial problems with both these beliefs. The first, and most important, difficulty is that there is – to the best of my knowledge – simply no archaeological evidence above or below ground to show that nucleated settlements and open-field landscapes were laid out together in a single process in any period. This does not mean that it did not happen, of course; but there is at the moment no evidence that the two landscape forms originated at the same time in the same places anywhere in Anglo-Saxon England. Until such evidence is found, that assertion of a joint origin has no higher status than the 'missing link' between *homo sapiens* and the apes in theories of the evolution of mankind – or the statement that the stones arrived at Stonehenge by flying there. It is at best an unproven hypothesis, and at worst a statement of belief.

The second problem lies in the arguments on which these assertions are based. Their origins can be found in the historiography of the Anglo-Saxon landscape. 'Everyone' since Seebohm, Maitland and Gray has 'known' that open fields and nucleated settlements were an Anglo-Saxon introduction (Seebohm 1883; Maitland 1907; Gray 1915). That perception continues to imbue the historiography from the Orwins (1938) through Hoskins (1955), Stenton (1971), Lewis *et al.* (1997) and Williamson (2003) to Rippon (2012). Its origins

can be found in the later 19th and early 20th centuries, a period in which only a small number of debatable documentary sources were known and there was very little archaeology. On this basis, it was concluded, the Anglo-Saxon ascendancy was ruthlessly imposed across late Roman Britain in the 5th and 6th centuries, obliterating all aspects of that earlier culture. Despite an increasing body of scholarship from the mid-20th century onwards (e.g. Hamerow 1997, 33; Laing 2007; Tristram 2007) to challenge that general model – often successfully in relation to demography, linguistics and many aspects of material culture – what 'everyone knows' about the origins of the medieval landscape remains largely unchallenged.

Rather than challenging the premise of an Anglo-Saxon origin for the medieval landscape, subsequent research on open fields and nucleated villages has instead focused on just when, during the Anglo-Saxon period, they were introduced. The consensus of Maitland and Hoskins that a new landscape was laid out by Germanic migrants in the 5th and 6th centuries has been modified in a new orthodoxy that the origins of the medieval landscape, while nonetheless Anglo-Saxon, can rather be found between the 9th and 12th centuries. It is based on the demonstration that many deserted middle Anglo-Saxon settlements were overlain by the ridge-and-furrow of medieval cultivation; and apparently confirmed by the absence of late Anglo-Saxon settlements beneath these fields. It was concluded that such hamlets and farmsteads were depopulated in a large-scale reorganization of arable cultivation in the period of their abandonment, of which the ridge and furrow was the evidence; their inhabitants, it is posited, were rehoused in newly-laid out planned, nucleated settlements.

There is no doubt of the stratigraphic relationship: the fields are certainly later than the settlements. The problem is whether this establishes cause and effect. *Were* the settlements forcibly deserted to make way for the fields? Fieldwalking will not demonstrate a causal relationship between abandoned settlements and overlying fields; all it can show is that one feature is earlier or later than another. Although there *may* be a causal relationship, without empirical evidence we cannot know whether the interval was a matter of weeks or months, or extended over several centuries. Such problems are exacerbated by the notorious difficulty in obtaining a precise archaeological date for the introduction of changes in arable field systems.

There is little in earthwork or aerial photographic evidence to demonstrate that surviving layouts of large-scale medieval open fields were actually created in the middle Anglo-Saxon period. The banks and furrows of medieval strips and furlong boundaries simply preserve the layout of such remains at the time that they were last ploughed. Yet the history of any field up to that point is

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² Although it is *fairly* certain that she 'only says it to annoy, because she knows it teases'.



Figure 1 The nucleated DMV at Baggrave, Leicestershire, set among its 'Midland' open fields. (Reproduced with permission, Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography, BLC57, 1972).

likely to have been dynamic: furlongs and strips were reorganised, divided, amalgamated and reoriented at intervals throughout the Middle Ages (*cf.* Oosthuizen 2010a). That mobility in the medieval landscape is confirmed by excavation of deserted villages, whose archaeology underneath their surviving earthworks frequently reveals quite considerable change in the layout of earlier settlements (e.g. Beresford 2009; Wrathmell 2012). This means that it is difficult to know whether or not deserted middle Anglo-Saxon settlements were really demolished to make way for large-scale open-field arable.

How, then, do beliefs about a common origin for medieval nucleated settlements and open fields stand up against hard evidence? The answer seems to be positive, at least initially: excavation suggests that nucleation does appear to have been a largely post-Roman introduction. The earliest nucleated settlements appear to have been laid out at or near high-status centres between the 7th and 9th centuries (for examples, see Oosthuizen 2010b). The majority of nucleated villages, however, seem to have originated in the 11th and 12th centuries, their property boundaries frequently preserving the ridge-and-furrow, which they overlie (e.g. Everson *et al.* 1991). Not only are they much later in origin than they 'should' be, but they clearly postdate the establishment of open fields and cannot therefore have been laid out at the

same time. The problem in arguing for common origins is exacerbated by the identification of open fields and strips across prehistoric and Roman Britain, centuries before they were supposed to have been introduced (not, admittedly, the large open fields of the medieval Midlands, but the smaller, irregular open fields familiar in the regions beyond). A further difficulty is that there is no incontrovertible documentary evidence until after the Norman Conquest for the complex integrated arrangements that characterised layout, tenure and cropping in large, regular open fields.

There is little archaeological evidence that open fields and nucleated settlements were related or even contemporary developments. Instead, the evidence indicates a more complicated picture than might be suggested by what 'everyone knows': the origins of open fields and strip tenure seem to be prehistoric; the innovation of the middle Anglo-Saxon period appears to be the introduction of nucleated settlement (*cf.* Oosthuizen 2013); and such landscapes were not widely adopted across Midland England until the 11th or 12th centuries.

The premises underlying interpretations of the origins of the Anglo-Saxon and medieval landscape need further research to decide whether it is time for the Emperor's old clothes to go to the jumble, to be replaced by something that fits a bit better.

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