

Beresford's Lost Villages: a website dedicated to the study of deserted medieval settlement

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This report presents an overview of the website entitled 'Beresford's Lost Villages', accessible at www.dmv.hull.ac.uk. The website is built around a database of deserted settlements and associated evidence. The rationale behind the website is to provide both the general public, as well as active researchers, with an online source of information about specific deserted settlements. This paper provides an overview of the journey taken from concept to reality and concludes by reviewing why such a resource is still valid and a useful tool for further research.

Background

This project started as a result of discussions between colleagues at the University of Hull, triggered by a visit to Wharram Percy, followed by a series of fortuitous events. The initial conversation focused on the lack of a searchable online list of deserted settlements, out of which the main conclusion was that such a project would need serious funding. Then within weeks the University of Hull announced a bequest to the University by Maurice Beresford in his will. This seemed like fate and the project took shape in 2009.

When we started the project we set our sights high. We started with the framework of the 'County Gazetteers of Deserted Medieval Villages known in 1968' published by Beresford and Hurst in 1971, listing deserted villages in England (referred to in this paper as 'the 1968 Gazetteer'). This amounted to 2263 sites. In the preface to this gazetteer it is clear that this was a work in progress – some counties had already been subject to detailed research, for others none had taken place (Sheail 1971). The publication listed 15 counties where considerable research needed to be carried out and of course in the intervening years many scholars have rallied to this call and many more settlements have been added to this list.

Early on into this project it became clear that if we were to attempt to update the county-based lists, we would not be able to publish our envisaged website structure for more than a few counties. Therefore the initial part of the project focused on Bedfordshire and Berkshire (the first two counties alphabetically), and the East Riding of Yorkshire, the home to the project. At the end of this initial phase (2010), we had a structure for our database and the beginnings of updated lists – but only for Berkshire did we feel that every attempt to supplement the 1968 list had been attempted. This included a review of the Medieval Village Research Group (MVRG) archive in Swindon. We also had the framework for the website built. A number of events then transpired which brought the project to a halt until early

2013. It was at this point that a strategic decision had to be taken. If we were to continue attempting to update all the county lists, and provide full data, we would not manage to get many more than four counties completed for the money available to the project. In many ways this echoed issues raised in the early years of the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group (DMVRG). With limited funds, relying on volunteer help, combating fuel shortages in the aftermath of the Suez crisis and rising costs, updates in the Annual Reports tell of a the lack of funds. In 1958 they proclaimed that the historical work on sites would not be completed in less than 20 years if funding were not available (Hurst 1958: 2). A few years later this had risen to 30 years.

In 2013 we decided that what would be possible was to get a 'skeleton' data set for all the 2263 sites from the 1968 Gazetteer completed. This would allow the website to be launched – with a country-wide data set, and with valuable information, while gradually updating as and when we could. The website was officially launched on 10th March 2014. This first release included an entry for all 2263 sites from the 1968 Gazetteer, but with varying levels of data. For Berkshire we have presented all 1968 sites as well as additions based on the MVRG archive, sites identified by the NMR, HERs and local researchers – as a model for where we hope to take the website in the future. For Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Cheshire, Cornwall, Cumberland, Derbyshire, Devon, Dorset, Durham and Yorkshire (East Riding) we have presented the settlements listed on the gazetteer from 1968 with full descriptions for each settlement. For the remaining counties we have provided a skeleton data set for all 1968 sites, but they do not have full descriptions, full bibliographies, or fieldwork histories.

Database and website structure

It was decided to use the pre-1974 counties to list the villages on the website. This was for a number of reasons. Firstly, the 1968 Gazetteer was organised in this way. Secondly the modern administrative units have now become overly complicated with not only counties but also smaller unitary authorities. Whilst these divisions will be familiar to locals on the ground, they would not be as apparent to a wider audience – whereas a notion of the pre-1974 counties would be more accessible, and forms the basis of the majority of the early documentary sources.

The aim of the website is to provide an introduction to the sources that can be used to study deserted medieval settlement. With the structure of the website we needed to use sources that were available countrywide as much as possible. Within the scope of the project we were also limited to sources that had been transcribed and published. These start with the Domesday Book

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(published in county editions by Phillimore), and follow with a taxation of ecclesiastical income in 1291 (Caley 1802), the Lay Subsidy taken in 1344 (Glasscock 1975), Poll Taxes in 1377, 1379 and 1381 (Fenwick 1998, 2001, 2005), Lay Subsidies in 1524, 1525 and 1543 (Sheail 1998a, b), a record of the number of households in each Diocese in 1563 (Dyer and Palliser 2005) and the Censuses of 1801 and 1841. For all these records a standard entry is available on the website. These can be supplemented on a county-by-county basis where other sources exist such as Hearth Tax returns in the seventeenth century, and these are mentioned within each settlement description. Other information such as National Monuments Record (NMR) and local Historic Environment Record (HER) reference numbers, location information such as parishes, as well as fieldwork, plan and photograph references and bibliographic references is also included. This is accompanied with a description of the site and a Google aerial image. For those counties where full descriptions have not been written to date, there has not been a full assessment of the location information from the 1968 Gazetteer, and therefore the location that is used to place a marker over the aerial image may need refinement in the future.

The 'skeleton' data is the minimum level published on the website for all settlements and includes the location information, the basic documentary sources and some of the additional information. To complete these records (which has been undertaken for 12 counties to date) also requires a full description, information on investigations that have taken place at the site, photographic and cartographic records, the period or date of desertion and a classification of the site – whether deserted, shrunken, shifted, migrated or in fact whether it was doubtfully ever a deserted village site.

Whereas most of the information on the website has been formulated from a variety of peer-reviewed sources that are well established and have been well critiqued, the site type that has been assigned to each of the sites is the one item where the website team took it upon themselves to evaluate the available evidence to draw some distinction between types of desertion and, on occasion, to bring into question the site's inclusion on the list. These decisions of course are open to opinions, reinterpretations and re-evaluations and any comments are welcomed from anyone on these classifications. Most of the terms adopted are based on the English Heritage (EH) Thesauri (thesaurus.english-heritage.org.uk/). Using these terms aligns the website with other records such as the local HERs. Reviewing the whole 1968 Gazetteer at once allows differences of interpretation over the years and on a local scale to be ironed out. The categories used are:

DMV – Deserted Medieval Villages. Those settlements that show clear evidence of a population concentration that was present during the medieval period, but has since been totally depopulated. There may be a modern farmstead on the site, or a new settlement may have re-grown at a much later date.

DMH – Deserted Medieval Hamlet. A settlement that was present in the medieval period and shows clear evidence of depopulation. However, such a settlement was never large in size. There is of course a wide variety of settlement types across the country, but it was felt there

needed to be some distinction to indicate much smaller settlements. The size of settlement classed as a hamlet is regionally specific and in some areas it may be a couple of houses, in others it may include around six houses.

Shrunken – a settlement which was much larger in the medieval period, and areas of former habitations have been identified. The area of the current settlement should have been occupied to some extent in the medieval period.

Migrated/shifted – a settlement that has moved location, whether as a result of one sudden action (migration) or through gradual processes (shifted).

Doubtful – This category includes entries where it is doubtful that there is any evidence of a deserted settlement. This may be due to three different factors: there may be no convincing evidence either archaeological or historical of any settlement; there may be no evidence a settlement was occupied in the medieval period; finally there is evidence for medieval occupation, but it is not convincing that the settlement deserved to be classed as a village or hamlet, being more likely just a farmstead.

Issues

There has been no systematic updating of the 1968 Gazetteer in recent years. The MVRG archive was the place that the 1968 Gazetteer was reviewed and added to when individuals suggested sites. The number of sites recorded here had risen to 2813 by 1977 (Beresford et al. 1980). This was updated until 1988 when the decision was taken to close the archive and over 2000 sites that had remained as outstanding queries were assigned to different categories (Wilson 1987: 8–9). This last minute review of outstanding queries increased the number of deserted villages by 241, shrunken villages by 532, and left another 1701 for future generations to review. This archive is now housed in the NMR but no complete index of this is easily available. Also since 1988 there have been many additions to the lists both nationally on the NMR and locally on HERs, but these have not been added to the archive. There is no easy way in compiling a definitive list of settlements from either of these sources. It is clear that not all of the records from the 1968 Gazetteer appear on both the national or local records. In some cases this arises because in the intervening period these sites have been dismissed as deserted sites. But also the way evidence is defined and recorded varies on a national basis. Online services now provide the ability to search across a range of national and local records such as Heritage Gateway which provides access to the NMR record (PastScape) as well as the local HER records for a large percentage of the country. But herein lies the problem – the greater accessibility from your armchair comes with limitations and the quality of the data can be questioned. A quick search via Heritage Gateway clearly highlights the issue. Using the defined term on the EH thesaurus – 'Deserted Settlement' brings differing results. The search identifies 2597 entries on PastScape (the English Heritage website)². A search via the PastScape website itself, results in a list of 3839. On the county HERs varying

² All numbers are for searches on 28th November 2013.

results are shown. For example, the 1968 Gazetteer recorded 69 deserted medieval villages in Kent. A search of the HER via Heritage Gateway reveals 50 results – of which 36 are from the Gazetteer and 14 sites are not listed. The HER does list settlements that it classes as ‘doubtful’ DMVs so it is unclear why there are 33 from the original list not appearing on this record, even if they have been dismissed since 1968. It is clear that deserted settlement is a term that is not consistently used. Also with no way of filtering the results to remove ‘doubtful’ entries, the results are of limited use. Of course a more detailed search can be conducted at the HER itself, but the varying levels of recording at different local offices will still bring a variety of results. This issue was raised by the MSRG in its Revised Policy statement in 2007, and it is clear that not much work has been carried out on the national level to ensure comparability between HERs, even if on a local scale there has been much local enhancement (MSRG 2007).

The initial launch

The initial launch of the website presented full descriptions of 404 villages from the 2263 listed on the Gazetteer (Fig. 1). It also presented a further 80 settlements in Berkshire which had been identified since 1968. Of these 484 sites, 281 are classed as Deserted

Medieval Villages, 60 as Deserted Medieval Hamlets, 48 as shrunken, 12 as migrated, 12 as shifted and 71 as doubtful. For Berkshire there has been a 186% increase in recorded settlements since 1968 but only a 30% increase of DMVs as classified by this website. In total out of the 484 sites listed, 341 are classed as deserted (70%). If you only consider the ones from the 1968 Gazetteer, there are 81% remaining classified as deserted. Of course the counties that have so far been tackled may not represent the full picture by the time the website is complete. None of the classic ‘Midlands’ counties have been tackled – the nearest to this is the data set from East Yorkshire, and only Berkshire is representative of where we are with current knowledge, and could be said to be near ‘complete’. Many of the counties that have full descriptions on the website fall in areas of diverse settlement patterns such as the area of the south-west with Devon and Cornwall complete. The counties tackled include five of the 15 counties identified in 1971 as requiring much further research. The results do show the relevance in reviewing the evidence, but also show the need to update the 1968 Gazetteer.

Relevance of the project

Some may question whether the study of medieval settlement has not moved on from the study of village

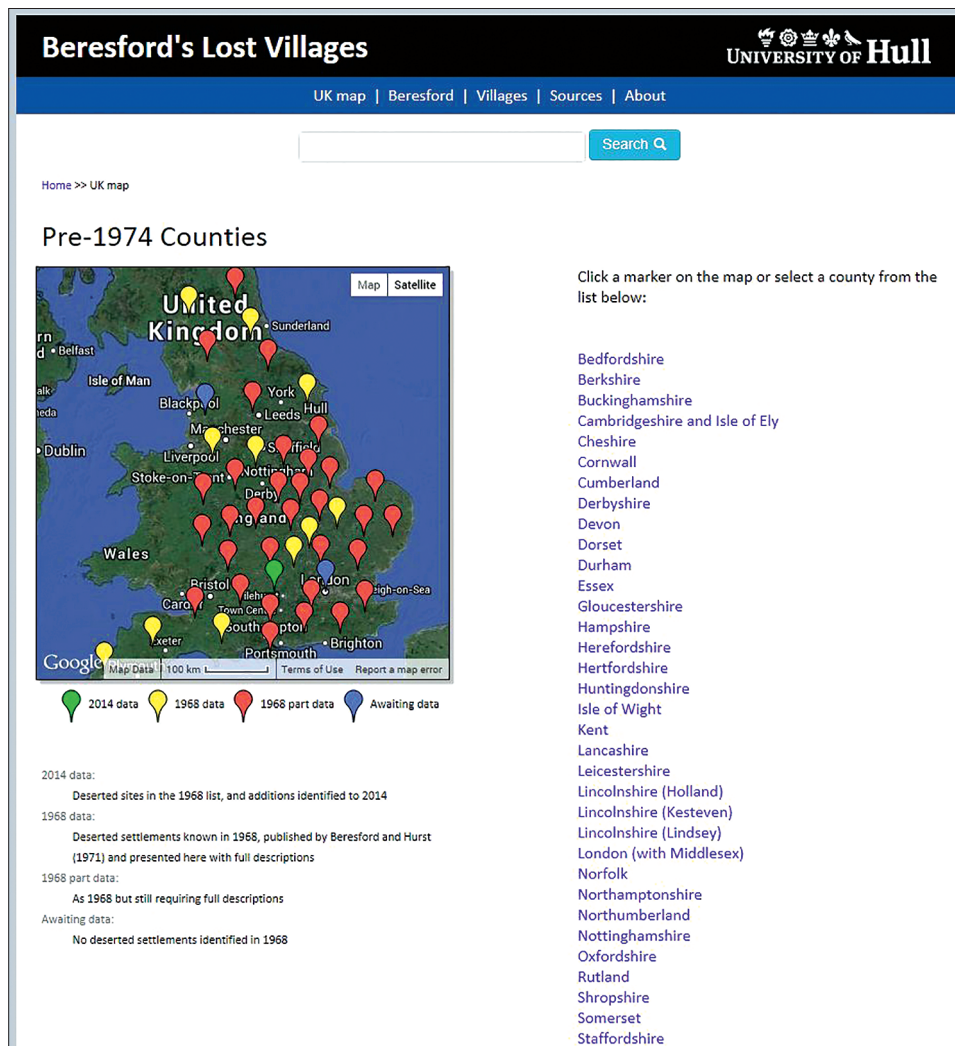


Figure 1 Beresford's Lost Villages website: screenshot.

desertion in this way. And yes there have been many developments; the move to study the great variety of settlement types; the understanding of regional diversity and landscape characteristics; the view of the entire historic landscape. But deserted settlement still fits into these patterns. It enables us to view the different types of settlements and regional diversity. Deserted settlements figure in all the research on the medieval landscape, and yet many people are still using the 1968 Gazetteer as the basis of distribution of deserted settlement. For example Roberts and Wrathmell in their *Atlas of Rural Settlement in England* use the 1968 dataset on three maps (Roberts and Wrathmell 2000). Comparing this distribution with nineteenth century areas of nucleation and landscape character zones they pose a number of interesting questions – but these are questions based on incomplete data. Without considering the changing profile of desertion they may well pose the wrong questions, although they do concede that they felt the data set was more reliable than later distribution maps that have been produced (Roberts and Wrathmell 2002: 8). They do conclude that ‘even with a theme such as village desertion, subjected to the powerful microscope of scholarly research for decades, we are still a long way from being able to create a national map showing major phases of village depopulation’ (Roberts and Wrathmell 2000: 65). The data from this atlas has now been converted for use within GIS software and this enables its use in many ways including reviewing the deserted settlement patterns. A change for the original published maps can be seen in Lowerre’s review of this derived dataset with the deserted settlement from the NMR plotted instead of the 1968 Gazetteer (Lowerre 2011: 35). However as mentioned above the completeness of the NMR dataset on a national basis can still be questioned. Without a review of the available data any models developed on rural settlement will be flawed.

Future development

So to the future. The website is organic and still growing. We are still working on producing full descriptions for each of the county lists from the 1968 Gazetteer and these are being uploaded on a county by county basis. A project to review these 1968 lists and to update the website with all deserted settlements as identified until

the present day is currently in preparation and funding is being sought. This project will see the complete review of the data, and the full dataset will be made publically available. It is hoped that this will allow a wide body of researchers to use a more up-to-date dataset when considering the wider picture of medieval settlement across the country and redress some of the imbalances inherent in the 1968 Gazetteer. It will also widen the definition of ‘deserted settlement’ which has been accepted since 1968, and showcase the tremendous work that has been carried out in local regions, at this national scale.

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