

## ***Wharram. A study of settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds:* a commentary on the published reports**

By Stuart Wrathmell

In 1950, John Hurst began his excavations at the deserted medieval village of Wharram Percy in the historic East Riding of Yorkshire, and the Wharram Research Project (as it was later known) continued digging each summer until 1990. Over the course of those four decades, the Project excavated a hundred ‘sites’, ranging from exploratory pits and trenches to large open-area investigations; and these interventions produced around 220,000 animal bone fragments, 75,000 sherds of pottery, 13,000 iron objects and almost 2,000 non-ferrous metal items.

Such a major, long-term undertaking inevitably spawned a wide range of publications, from the annual interims which appeared in the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group Reports, to journal articles and contributions to monographs. This commentary is concerned not with this wider body of material, but with the ‘definitive’ excavation reports which appeared in thirteen volumes, the first published in 1979, the last in 2012.

It has been written at the suggestion of the MSRG Committee, with a view to helping researchers find what they might need from these various volumes, for the history of publication at Wharram may seem at times almost as complex and opaque as some aspects of its settlement history.

To understand why this is so, it is worth comparing Wharram with other major excavation projects of the later 20th century. Whilst some of them were published long after the end of the site works, and sometimes by authors who had not been involved in directing the field operations, the key points are that the ‘definitive’ reports appeared after all excavation had ceased, and were informed by a prior programme of post-excavation analysis. Even where excavations took place over a number of years, involving more than one site director, the intellectual product usually appears to be the coherent outcome of an investigation driven by clear and answerable questions.

The decisions about what to investigate at Wharram were also driven by questions, but the combined period of excavation and post-excavation analysis generated almost sixty years’ worth of questions. This led to marked shifts in focus over those decades, and the consequent heterogeneous character of the publication reports. Had the Project stuck throughout to its original questions – when was the village deserted; what were the peasant houses like? – then it would have been left standing in the muddy fields of Wharram, watching the vanguard of rural settlement research disappearing over the nearby hills.

Instead, the Project had a fruitful reciprocal relationship with wider settlement research. At times, it came up with

new ideas that could be tested in excavations and surveys elsewhere; on other occasions, ideas generated by work on distant sites and landscapes were explored further at Wharram. This led to the continual assimilation, revision and rejection of ideas about Wharram’s character and history; a process which usually takes place before definitive publication – but not at Wharram.

The reason for this was a practical one. At a time when the record of timely publication of major excavations was patchy, to say the least, the intention at Wharram was to carry out post-excavation analysis on completed ‘groups’ of sites during the course of the Project, so that results could be published as soon as work in one part of the site was completed. Indeed, this ‘site groups’ approach guided the whole publication programme, leading to volumes devoted to peasant farmsteads, the church, the pond and dam, the north manor and so on (Fig. 1). The alternative strategy, of waiting until the end of the fieldwork to start the whole post-excavation analysis and publication programme, would undoubtedly have met with a hostile reception not only from funders and potential audiences, but also from potential contributors.

The danger of progressive ‘definitive’ publication over more than thirty years is, of course, that it provides an opportunity for interpretations to change, especially when personnel change, and this is what happened at Wharram. In general terms it is something to be welcomed – otherwise research ossifies. In the case of Wharram, however, it became a problem, in that the substantial post-excavation funding provided by English Heritage – almost £1 million between 2000 and 2011 alone – was not designed to support reinterpretation of what had already been published. On the other hand, it would have been duplicitous to have allowed audiences to continue to rely on interpretations which were no longer believed by the current contributors; hence the shifts in the reading of the site data that can be seen in some of the successive ‘definitive’ volumes.

The following paragraphs attempt to summarise some of the key features of each volume, under the shorthand titles *Wharram I*, *Wharram II* etc, which were used by the Project in later years to establish greater coherence for the publication series. Its coherence had been threatened in the late 1980s when, for reasons which are irrelevant to this commentary, volumes appeared from three different publishing bodies: *Wharram II* and *Wharram IV* from the University of York; *Wharram III* from the Society for Medieval Archaeology and *Wharram V* from British Archaeological Reports. At that point, a decision was taken to publish all future volumes through the University of York. As can be seen from the following summaries, that strategy was maintained until the end of the post-excavation and publication phase in 2012.



*Figure 1 Wharram Percy (photo by Paul Gwilliam; copyright WRP)*

#### *Wharram I*

Andrews, D.D. and G. Milne, *Domestic Settlement I: Areas 10 and 6*. London: Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph 8 (1979)

This report deals with the peasant farmsteads excavated in the 1950s and 1960s; and since the focus of investigations subsequently shifted to other components of the village, it remains the most substantial report on Wharram's medieval farmsteads, their structural remains and associated artefacts. The volume also considers the remains of the (southern) manor house which preceded the peasant buildings in Area 10. A reassessment of the structural characteristics of the peasant buildings and their functions appeared in *Wharram VI*, and further manorial and peasant outbuildings immediately west of Area 10 were published in *Wharram VIII*. Other peasant structures at the northern end of the site were published in *Wharram IX*.

#### *Wharram II*

Rahtz, P.A. and L. Watts, *Wharram Percy. The Memorial Stones of the Churchyard*. York: York University Archaeological Publications 1 (1983)

This short monograph, devoted to a survey and analysis of the gravestones surviving in the churchyard, dating from the late 18th to early 20th centuries, was not originally part of the numbered series, though it appeared under the series title. It was numbered retrospectively because it was undertaken in conjunction with the research on the church (*Wharram III*) which itself included the gravestones and memorials surviving within the building.

#### *Wharram III*

Bell, R.D., M.W. Beresford *et al.*, *Wharram Percy. The Church of St Martin*. London: Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph 11 (1987)



The quantity of data relating to the standing fabric of the church, the internal fixtures and fittings recorded before the building was stripped out and de-roofed, the excavated structural remains, the graves in and around the church and their contents, was far too great for a single printed volume; hence the extensive use of fiche located (at least originally) in a pocket attached to the inside of the back cover. The rationale for decisions as to what to print, and what to consign to fiche is not always clear: the pre-Conquest grave-covers, for example, appear on fiche only, whereas post-medieval coffin furniture is illustrated on the printed page. The volume also contains a summary report on human skeletal remains from the nave, intended as the first instalment of a much wider study of skeletons from all excavated areas of the churchyard.

In the event, the long-delayed, comprehensive report on skeletal material (*Wharram XI*) included a re-examination of the skeletons published in *Wharram III*, as it involved a full statistical analysis of the whole assemblage and an associated radiocarbon dating programme. *Wharram XI* also included a detailed discussion – in print, this time – of the pre-Conquest grave-covers. A revised phasing and dating of the church fabric was published in *Wharram XIII*, linked to the wider issues of patronage and power within the local community.

#### *Wharram IV*

Rahtz, P.A., C. Hayfield and J. Bateman, *Two Roman Villas at Wharram le Street*. York: York University Archaeological Publications 2 (1986)

During the 1970s, and running in tandem with the excavations at Wharram Percy itself, a ‘parish survey’ explored the archaeology and history of the six medieval communities encompassed by the ecclesiastical parishes of Wharram Percy and Wharram le Street. One outcome of the fieldwalking programme was the identification of two Roman villas, at Wharram Grange and Wharram le Street. These were further explored by geophysical survey and trial trenching, work reported in this monograph and in the attached fiche. The significance of these sites in the context of Roman Wharram was subsequently reconsidered in *Wharram XIII*.

#### *Wharram V*

Hayfield, C., *An Archaeological Survey of the Parish of Wharram Percy, East Yorkshire, 1. The Evolution of the Roman Landscape*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, British Series 172 (1987)

This is the first and only published volume in a planned series of three monographs covering the parishes of Wharram Percy and Wharram le Street in prehistoric and Roman times, in the medieval period and in post-medieval times. It includes the evidence of aerial survey, geophysical survey and fieldwalking in the various townships. Some of this evidence was reconsidered in *Wharram XIII*, which also made use of the unpublished research notes prepared by Maurice Beresford on the medieval and post-medieval parishes. The two Roman villas at Wharram Grange and Wharram le Street,

though included in this volume, were considered at greater length in *Wharram IV*.

#### *Wharram VI*

Wrathmell, S., *Domestic Settlement 2. Medieval Peasant Farmsteads*. York: York University Archaeological Publications 8 (1989)

This study draws upon the site archives for Areas 10 and 6 and explores, in much greater detail than had been possible in *Wharram I*, the evidence for the forms and functions of the medieval peasant buildings – using not only the structural remains but also artefact distributions. It should be stressed, however, that the bulk of the site and finds data presented in *Wharram I* is not covered in this volume. It also deals with the remains of peasant buildings excavated in the early years of the project but not previously published in detail, and is accompanied by fiche.

#### *Wharram VII*

Milne, G. and J.D. Richards, *Two Anglo-Saxon Buildings and Associated Finds*. York: York University Archaeological Publications 9 (1992)

Several trenches in the northern part of the settlement area, one excavated across a village boundary, the others across the course of a ditch revealed by geophysical survey, unexpectedly revealed the remains of buildings and associated activity dating to the Anglo-Saxon period. These are published together partly because of their particular interest in the context of the village’s origins, partly because of an ensuing debate over the dating of their associated artefact assemblages. The debate also extended to two Anglo-Saxon structures excavated in the trackway immediately south of the north manor site, discussed briefly in this volume and considered in greater detail in *Wharram IX*.

#### *Wharram VIII*

Stamper, P.A. and R.A. Croft, *The South Manor Area*. York: York University Archaeological Publications 10 (2000)

This excavation area was effectively a westward extension of Area 10, published in *Wharram I*, and was intended to explore the provenance of Anglo-Saxon pottery recovered from an earlier trench in the vicinity. The volume presents an important group of Middle and Late Saxon remains, including a smithy and associated artefacts, to set alongside the assemblages reported in *Wharram VII*. It also describes further structures associated with the southern manor complex reported in *Wharram I*, and peasant buildings related to those published in the same volume.

#### *Wharram IX*

Rahtz, P.A. and L. Watts, *The North Manor Area and the North-west Enclosure*. York: York University Archaeological Publications 11 (2004)

Despite its title, this volume is primarily concerned with later prehistoric, Roman and Anglo-Saxon remains in and around the area later occupied by the northern

medieval manorial homestead. The excavations took place within the manorial enclosure, and across the Iron Age, Roman and medieval trackway immediately south of it. They also extended into the northern end of the medieval tofts on the south side of the trackway, where they encountered medieval peasant buildings. Anglo-Saxon features within the trackway were discussed in advance in *Wharram VII*. A further excavation in the Late Roman North-west Enclosure, carried out in 2005 as part of York University's Yorkshire Wolds Project, was published in summary form in *Wharram XIII*, along with a further discussion of the trackway and its context.

#### *Wharram X*

Treen, C. and M. Atkin, *Water Resources and their Management*. York: York University Archaeological Publications 12 (2004)

The tenth Wharram volume focuses on the excavations in and around the pond and dam in the valley bottom, directly south of the churchyard. The investigations were carried out during the 1970s and early 1980s, and the ephemeral remains of successive water mills, leats and embankments were found to date from the Anglo-Saxon period onwards. The volume also contains extensive reports on the environmental remains from the pond silts, and a wider discussion of water management in medieval and later times, including that related to the medieval monastic grange in Wharram le Street, to the north. Remains of buildings and other activity found on the northern edge of the site related to the churchyard and were discussed again in *Wharram XI*.

#### *Wharram XI*

Mayes, S., C. Harding and C. Heighway, *The Churchyard*. York: York University Archaeological Publications 13 (2007)

Although some aspects of churchyard development were included in *Wharram III*, this volume provides a comprehensive review of the evidence for churchyard and burial-ground development from Anglo-Saxon to post-medieval times. Some of the sites at the south end of the churchyard were excavated as part of the pond and dam investigations (*Wharram X*); others at the northern end were later incorporated in the space occupied by the late medieval vicarage (*Wharram XII*). There are contributions on the pre-Conquest and post-Conquest grave-covers which were confined to fiche in *Wharram III*, but the core of the volume is the lengthy analysis and discussion of almost 700 articulated burials and the associated radiocarbon dating programme.

#### *Wharram XII*

Harding, C., E. Marlow-Mann and S. Wrathmell, *The Post-Medieval Farm and Vicarage Sites*, York: York University Archaeological Publications 14 (2010)

The penultimate volume is devoted to the post-medieval settlement at Wharram Percy: the successor farmstead, which may have been founded in the 17th century, and the vicarage which remained in at least intermittent use after the depopulation of the early 16th century. Both homesteads continued in use into the 19th century, and their extensive artefact assemblages effectively encapsulate the residue of activity across the entire post-medieval settlement. The volume includes extensive discussion of the documentary evidence for both farmstead and vicarage, as well as the detailed analysis of extensive charred plant remains from the vicarage barn which was burnt down in 1553, and which represent a further significant assemblage of environmental remains in addition to those from the pond (*Wharram X*).

#### *Wharram XIII*

Wrathmell, S., *A History of Wharram Percy and its Neighbours*, York: York University Archaeological Publications 15 (2012)

The last volume in the series does not simply attempt to summarise the conclusions of the previous twelve reports. Instead, it seeks to draw, both from them and from new investigations, a narrative which places the settlement history of Wharram in its local and regional contexts, from later prehistoric to post-medieval times. The springboard for this approach was a series of surveys carried out more than a decade after the end of the main field project: new earthwork and geophysical surveys of the village site, and new cropmark surveys across the Wharram and Wharram le Street townships, all of which provided significant new insights into settlement history. Other new material includes brief reports on the 2005 excavation of Wharram's North-west Enclosure (see *Wharram IX*), and on the 2005–2007 excavations at a nearby Anglo-Saxon settlement in Burdale, as well as a reassessment of the structural history and phasing of the church (see *Wharram III*).

*Wharram XIII* ends with a note on the extensive site archive, now housed at English Heritage's Helmsley storage facility, and the large quantities of processed but otherwise unpublished Wharram data available through the Archaeology Data Service. These, too, are important resources for future researchers who will, I hope, be drawn to re-evaluate the data and interpretations presented in the thirteen published volumes.