

Future MSRG projects

By Bob Silvester¹ and Chris Dyer²

Over the last twelve months the MSRG committee has been discussing what projects it might promote in succession to the preparation and publication in 2012 of *Medieval Rural Settlement. Britain and Ireland, AD 800–1600* edited by our then president, Paul Stamper, and secretary, Neil Christie. Conscious of the fact that the Group does not have the resources to mount major programmes of work alone, MSRG has decided to offer seed-corn grants for research on particular themes that might then be picked up by academics who could apply for large research grants from the major grant-giving bodies. Fuller details of the proposed grants are to be found on the website and have also been circulated to members in a separate mailing. Here Bob Silvester and Chris Dyer write on two of the themes that they are particularly keen to promote.

Commons, greens and settlement

Thirty years ago, in a paper that is still influential, the landscape historian Peter Warner discussed the origins and development of settlements that lay around the edges of greens and commons in a restricted area of East Anglia, the claylands of eastern Suffolk. He favoured the 10th to 13th centuries for the gradual emergence of such secondary settlements around tracts of open ground, rather than the exclusively post-Conquest development that was preferred by Peter Wade-Martins whose research on village origins in central Norfolk more than a decade earlier focussed on pottery scatters recovered from the arable. Both, however, were cognisant of Late Saxon churches such as Palgrave in Suffolk that lay close to or even on greens, implying the presence of early settlement foci.

The association of settlement with greens and commons in East Anglia continues to be a significant topic today, as Edward Martin's chapter in MSRG's *Medieval Rural Settlement* explains, and his map (fig 14.4) reveals just how many greens there were across the three eastern counties. Brian Roberts and Stuart Wrathmell chose to illustrate two Suffolk examples at Hinton and Linstead Parva in *Region and Place* (2002). Other chapters in the MSRG volume are less expansive about the relationship, and yet it is evident that green-side settlement has been recognised in Hampshire and perhaps, by extension, other counties in central southern England; on the Northamptonshire/Buckinghamshire border, the location of the Whittlewood Project in the early 2000s; in Cambridgeshire where Susan Oosthuizen's research published in 2006 is instructive; and who can forget Chris Taylor's discursive analysis of his own village of Whittlesford with its planned green; in Cheshire; in Somerset, where the late Mick Aston picked out the lost hamlet of Hazelgrove in Queen

Camel on a sixteenth-century estate map; and in the West Midlands where Chris Dyer's work at Hanbury in Worcestershire has resulted in it traditionally being cited as the best-known example in the region. Warner in his concluding remarks also drew attention to other clayland regions of England where commons and medieval settlement were found in close proximity: in the northern suburbs of London, in the Warwickshire claylands south of Birmingham, in the Chilterns in south Buckinghamshire, and in east Hertfordshire, areas of study for historical geographers such as Harry Thorpe and Brian Roberts.

Northern England and the Scottish Borders offer a contrast, perhaps in the overall nature of their commons and greens, certainly in their perception. The two best-known (arguably) excavated deserted settlements in the north east – Wharram Percy (Yorks) and West Whelpington (Northumbs) – both had village greens, while some of the distinctive, planned row villages of the north, such as Milburn in Westmoreland as well as some less ordered settlements such as Gamblesby in Cumberland had integral greens. Reinforcement comes from a 1619 estate survey of the village of Alnham (Northumbs), adopted as the striking cover of the *Medieval Rural Settlement* volume. Yet the index of the volume offers no citations to the greens and commons mentioned in Stuart Wrathmell's chapter on northern England – it might be suggested that in the north they are seen as just one element amongst many in the layout of medieval settlements rather than the principal magnets for dwellings that they were in Suffolk, Essex and Norfolk.

Some regions, however, do appear to be largely devoid of greens and commons. The so-termed inner midlands lying within Roberts and Wrathmell's *Central Province* is one such region where land exploitation was so intensive that any tracts of open land are likely to have been mopped up at an early date. Wales too seems to be devoid of commons and greens, but this is one of the side effects of limited research: they did exist but have largely been overlooked or ignored. In recent years Cadw and the regional archaeological trust have been re-assessing a medieval settlement outside the Edwardian plantation of Caerwys on the Flintshire limestone plateau, originally examined in the 1960s. Two groups of 15th to 16th-century house platforms occupy land that was still common into the 18th century. The parish in fact had several small commons and the planted town itself appears to have been established on a common close to a pre-existing Welsh settlement.

What emerges from this superficial trawl through the literature is that in the medieval era settlement linked to greens and commons was widespread across many parts of southern Britain. Settlement could occur on the common itself, around its edge or more broadly in its vicinity; it could take the form of house sites, moats, churches and, occasionally, industrial centres; settlement

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could be primary, or a secondary development at a distance from the original settlement focus; today it can be recognised through a combination of standing buildings, earthworks, artefact scatters and place-names; and the common's presence may have initiated settlement or been just one element in the settlement's development. Other than in East Anglia, however, where green settlement studies have been advanced to a higher level, collectively identifying and interpreting those settlements that lay in the vicinity of greens and commons requires research across a range of published and unpublished sources, many of which may not have seen settlement as their primary focus.

Whilst the emphasis of the proposed project should be on settlement rather than on the greens themselves, and thus in keeping with the Group's aims and objectives, we do not wish to be too prescriptive as to how a successful applicant might take this forward. We look forward instead to receiving constructive suggestions, as Chris Dyer makes clear in what follows.

Medieval field systems

There have been various studies of the earthworks associated with medieval fields, meaning boundaries and associated features, but above all ridge and furrow. In the mid 20th century the Orwins and Maurice Beresford established the connection between the strips marked on early maps and the visible remains on the ground. That discovery has been one of the inspirations of David Hall's work on field systems. Other researchers, such as David Wilson in a neglected essay in 1989 and Steve Upex in a number of studies have focussed on the earthworks themselves. The survival of the physical form of medieval cultivation in such quantity is unique in Europe, and in spite of the large scale of destruction in the second half of the twentieth century a good deal survives, and we have a record of lost systems on aerial photographs. At a time when the origins and development of key features of the landscape are being debated anew, and with continued interest in the technology and management of agricultural resources in the Middle Ages, this important body of evidence deserves a systematic new research initiative. Such a project is especially timely because of the arrival of Lidar evidence which gives us new insights into the extent and layout of ridge and furrow. The application of GIS would also promise new depths of analysis and allow new questions to be posed. The MSRSG is unable to mount a research project itself, but it can encourage a researcher or preferably a research team to embark on a major long-term project, funded by such a body as the AHRC or ESRC. To make a convincing major grant application a pilot project should ideally be mounted as a first stage, and the MSRSG proposes to make funds available for this and the commons, greens and settlement pilot. Researchers proposing to take up this idea are invited to make an application to the MSRSG, in preparation for which they should discuss their ideas with Chris Dyer of the University of Leicester.

They should be proposing a coherent set of research questions relating to medieval fields: these might relate to their origin, design, form, function, use and

management, or to wider issues such as their relationship to settlements, significance as common assets, and the insights they provide into the mentality and culture of those who farmed them. The research questions should be of a kind that would ultimately satisfy the referees of, for example, the AHRC.

The periods covered would depend on the research agenda. One priority might be the likely origins of the fields, and the relationship between ridge and furrow systems and their predecessors. Much more needs to be known about the date when fields were formed, and the previous use of the land over which they extended. Or the research might focus on the central medieval period, for example by exploring the area covered by ridge and furrow and the insight that this provides into the process of 'cerealisation' as it is known on the continent. For example, did cultivation extend into land normally regarded as suited for grazing, and were there problems in deciding whether to use land for arable or meadow? Can landscape analysis of the patterns of furlongs, or the width and form of ridges, throw light on the growth of the fields, or modifications to their layout? The connection between settlement forms and ridge and furrow could be approached systematically, considering how often houses were established on a ridge or group of ridges? Could a whole settlement be based on converting an open-field furlong, in the same way that new towns or parts of new towns had their boundaries based on field divisions? Extending forwards into the later stages of development of fields, including the post-medieval period, do we just see a shrinkage in the area of cultivation and the advance of enclosure? The not uncommon observation that ridge and furrow was extended over abandoned village sites, or part of them, suggests that the cultivated area grew in some stages of the late medieval recession.

It would be practical to define an area, perhaps region, county or even a group of villages depending on the intended depth of the analysis. A methodology should be indicated, including the sources of information, which might include aerial photographs and Lidar. The analysis might well involve the use of GIS. There could be a role for excavation, for example in test-pitting ridge and furrow systems in combination with the use of the technique on settlement sites. Selective field walking could be used to collect evidence from areas of ploughed out ridge and furrow. Well-established methods of landscape analysis, such as noting the occasions when moated sites, castle defences or other datable features were constructed over ridge and furrow systems would assist in establishing the chronology of fields. The research could be entirely archaeological, or have an interdisciplinary character bringing into contact archaeologists, environmental scientists, historians or linguists, or all of these. As will be evident from this range of possible options, the MSRSG has no fixed agenda, and is not prescribing the content of the research. It may well be that proposals will be made for projects which are based on research questions other than those discussed here. Approaches for consultation can be made at any time, but at present the deadline for formal applications for MSRSG funding is 1 April 2017.