

WESTBURY-SUB-MENDIP, SOMERSET – AN IRREGULAR AGGLOMERATED POLYFOCAL SETTLEMENT?

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Introduction

At a seminar some time ago on ‘Village Planning’, an aerial photograph of the village of Westbury-sub-Mendip was shown with the comment that it showed a typical unplanned settlement. The speaker went on to demonstrate what a planned settlement would look like – a regular rectangular grid-like structure – illustrating this with a familiar plan of the village of Shapwick (Aston and Gerrard 2013, 171–177). Elaine Jamieson, in her recent *The Historic Landscape of the Mendip Hills*, when describing the settlement forms of the spring-line settlements, suggests that Westbury was polyfocal, with two or perhaps three nuclei linked together by lanes. The three centres were a single row settlement along the northern end of Old Ditch, a central green, now much encroached upon, and an administrative centre to the west of the green (Jamieson 2015, 170 and Fig. 6.49). This essay offers some corrections, refinements and further interpretations following more detailed fieldwork and historical research.

Location and history

Westbury-sub-Mendip, located at ST 500487, is a parish of about 3000 acres midway between Wells and Cheddar in Somerset. The ‘sub-Mendip’ title was added in the nineteenth century to avoid confusion for the Post Office as the village lay on the same railway line from London that ran through Westbury, Wiltshire. The suffix ‘sub-Mendip’ will not be used again in this article. The parish is a rather typical strip parish about 3km wide running between the river Axe, which lies at about 5m OD, and the Mendip Hills, which rise steeply to about 250m OD above the village. It is also divided by two streams, one running through a small gorge called Old Ditch (from OE *hol dich* meaning ‘deep ditch’).

Carboniferous limestone underlies the surface above about 150m OD; below that lies Triassic Dolomitic Conglomerate, from which most of the village farms and old houses have been built. Below that again Triassic mudstones and marls underlie the lower ground. Alluvium, with some medieval peat, overlies most of the fields between the river and 10m OD level.

Westbury is first mentioned in a dubious diploma of Giso, bishop of Wells (S. 1042) dated 1065, and is surveyed in detail in the Domesday Book (Thorn and Thorn 1980, 6.11). At that time it was wholly owned by the bishop of Wells, and probably had been in the

bishops’ possession from the time of the foundation of the bishopric about 909 (Armitage Robinson 1918, 16).

Tenements

Many hundreds of bishopric leases for land and houses in the village have survived from about 1700 (SWHC) enabling a great deal of detailed research to be carried out. When leases concern one of the tenements the common descriptive phrase used is ‘a yardland of old auster containing 60 acres’ with similar phrases for half-yardlands and fardels (one quarter of a yardland), establishing without any doubt that in Westbury one hide (four yardlands or virgates) was equivalent to 240 customary acres. There were also many cottages of old auster with up to 4 acres of land. By the time of the Parliamentary Enclosure Act for Westbury of 1791 almost half of the tenements had become freeholds.

Until this Act for the parish, 418 acres of Westbury Moor and 360 acres of the upper Mendip slopes and hilltop, had been unenclosed and exploited in common by the main auster tenements of the village (SWHC Q/RDE/21). ‘Auster’ is a Norman French term for ‘hearth’ coined in the thirteenth century to define former Saxon tenements that had grazing rights on the Hill and the Moors, and obligations to the lord of the manor (Aston and Hall 2009, 68–69; Lane 2014). The Saxon term for these tenements, *heordas*, also meaning ‘hearths’, is recorded in the Saxon boundary clause of a charter for nearby Banwell dated 1068 in the words *et ceoddar mynster viiii heordas & th’ gemena land uf bufen melc waege* translated as ‘at Cheddar minster nine hearths and the common land above Milkway’ (Dickinson 1877, 57).

At the time of the Enclosure Act for Westbury, the owners or tenants of 56 old auster tenements came forward to exchange their long-held grazing rights for allotments of land in Westbury Moor and on the Hill. There were no disputes about any of these claims. It has been possible to positively identify 48 (86%) of these tenements with tenements or plots still recorded on the Tithe Map of 1838. Most are still standing today. As buildings they are mostly stone rubble-built and date from the fifteenth century at the earliest (Jamieson 2015, 178–186), so they are likely to be successors to earlier structures, which were probably built of timber. The surviving leases provide evidence of the areas of land farmed by each tenement, whether they were virgates, half-virgates, fardels or cottages with or without land. Unfortunately, fewer documents are available relating to tenements that were freehold by the nineteenth century to enable their size to be determined.

Fig. 1 shows a map of the parish with the location of all the identified old auster tenements lying in five groups:

¹ Unfortunately Barry Lane died during the final editing (<http://www.rps.org/news/2017/march/obituary-barry-lane>). This document has been completed by Pete Missingham of the Westbury Society on his behalf.

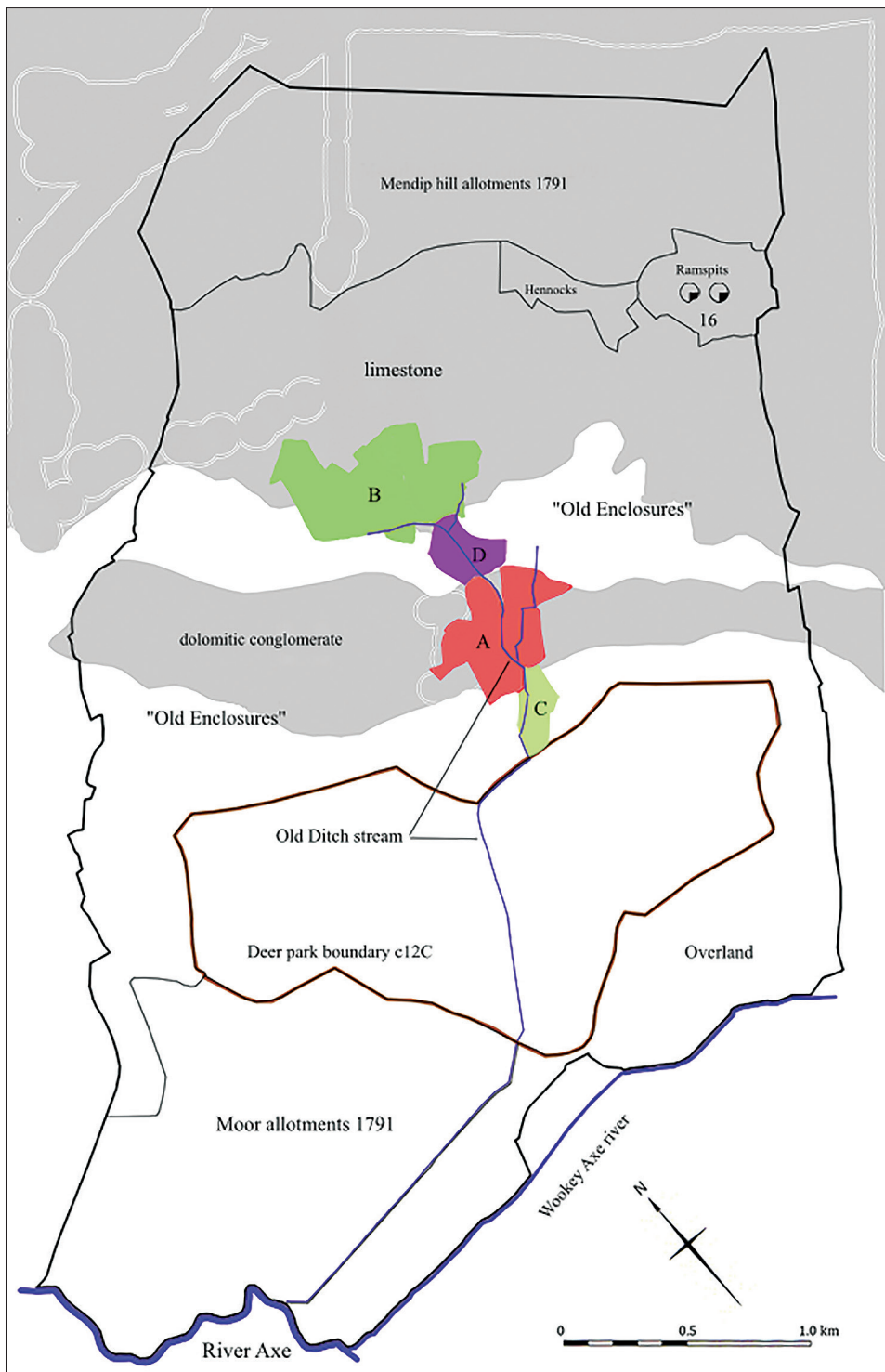


Figure 1 Outline of the parish of Westbury with underlying geology of limestone (grey), and the areas of nucleation and settlement.

A and B on the limestones and Dolomitic conglomerate, C and D on the Triassic mudstones and marls, and high up on the Mendip slopes two fardel tenements within enclosure 16, called Ramspits. This area has been recorded in detail by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (Pattison 1991). This enclosure represents the single element of dispersal in the otherwise nucleated settlement. It is suggestive of an upland summer *hafod*, familiar in areas where transhumance took place. It has not been possible to link it with a corresponding *hendre*, or lowland homestead, within the nucleated core of the village.

Fieldwork and map analysis have enabled the identification of sixteen plots around these tenements and these, together with the tenements' locations, are shown in Fig. 2. As most of the village is built on the porous limestone there are few ditches or gullies to act as boundaries. Generally the enclosure boundaries are stone walls, frequently facing onto roads, tracks, streams or now culverted watercourses, and adjacent pasture fields. Often these boundaries follow sharp changes in slope caused by the underlying geology.

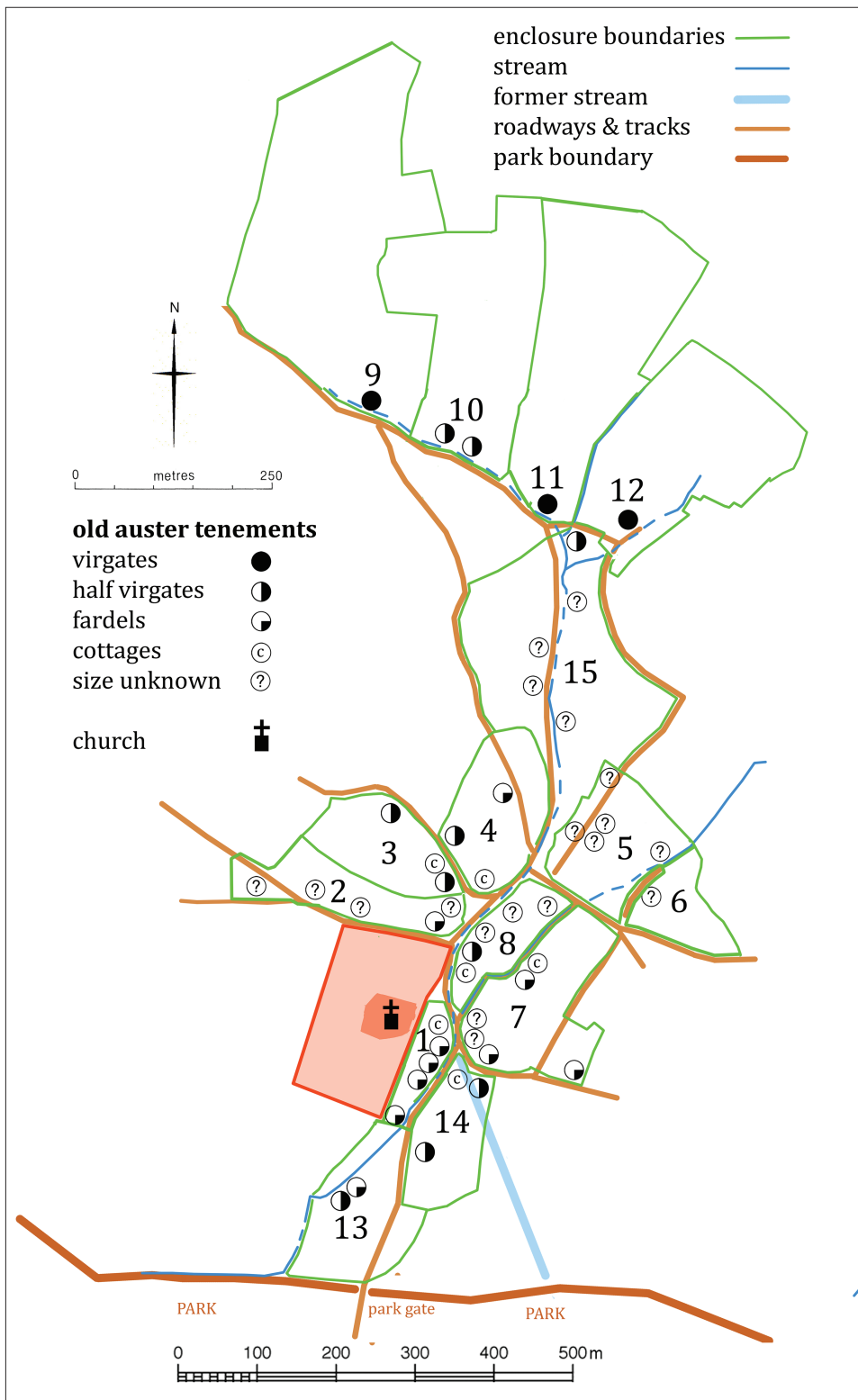


Figure 2 Plan of the nucleated village showing the sites of most of the old auster tenements, suggested boundaries of the virgate enclosures, and a rectangular church enclosure.

Domesday

The Somerset Domesday (Thorn and Thorn 1980, 6.11) records the manor of 'Westberie' paying tax for 6 hides, with 3 hides in lordship and the other 3 hides held by 6 villagers and 10 smallholders. The villagers' 3 hides are equivalent to 12 virgates or yardlands, generally a standard villein holding. If the smallholders held half-virgates, then 11 of the 12 virgates would be accounted for. Perhaps one virgate was vacant at the time of

the survey? To enable a close comparison with the fourteenth-century Lay Subsidy, it is convenient to note that 12 virgates are equivalent to 48 fardels.

Lay Subsidy of 1327

The 1327 Lay Subsidy record for Westbury survives and has been published (National Archives E179/169/5 rot 17 and Dickinson 1889, 136). This lists twenty two

tenants, with all but two paying the Subsidy in simple multiples of 6d (old pence) – 6, 12, 24 and 60d. The two exceptions are paying 9d and 77d. The Subsidy was supposed to be based upon one twentieth of the value of a person's goods or moveables worth more than ten shillings. Few agricultural tenants owned such wealth. Commentators on this period have suggested that the tax was frequently based simply upon the size of a tenement holding (Dickinson 1889, xxvi–xxxv). The Westbury figures strongly suggest that a fardel tenement paid 6d, a half-virgate tenement 12d and a virgate tenement 24d, leading to the conclusion that the village comprised 11 fardels, 5 half-virgates and 3 virgates plus three holdings of rather different sizes. Thomas ate Welle paid 9d, equivalent to 1.5 fardels. Perhaps of more significance were Matilda Hynnok's payment of 60d (for 2.5 virgates?) and Henrico Kynnok's (sic) payment of 77d (for 3.21 virgates?). These probably represent the engrossment of holdings. Altogether the twenty-two tax payers were paying for the equivalent of 14.33 virgates or 57.33 fardels. These figures may be compared with the Domesday figures of 3 hides, equivalent to 12 virgates or 48 fardels, indicating the addition of 2 or more likely 3 virgates.

Colin Platt has recently written eloquently about the population growth in the late thirteenth century, and the rain-soaked summers of the 1290s and Great Famine of 1315–1317, which led to the division of many tenements and the engrossment of others (Platt 2016). To date, no Westbury documents have been discovered that provide any details of the local circumstances.

One other thing is clear from the Subsidy payments – that cottages of old auster with less than a fardel of land appear not to have been included; presumably judged to be too poor to afford the tax. This would also explain the fact that by 1791 there were 56 old austers, while in 1327 there were clearly far fewer recorded paying the Subsidy. As will be shown later, none were created after the thirteenth century.

There is evidence for some of the above assumptions about the Subsidy payments in a 1342 Court Roll for Westbury (Lambeth Palace Library ED1176). This records Walter Edgar paying an entry fine for 'one messuage and one fardel of old auster, which William Edgar previously held'; and 'Agnes, who was the wife of Henry Goldryng, gives the Lord 66s 8d for one messuage and half a virgate of land of old auster, which the same Henry previously held'. These records confirm that in the Lay Subsidy of 1327 William Edgar was paying 6d for one fardel and Henry Goldryng was paying 12d for one half-virgate. It may also be noted that Ricardo Parker paid the Subsidy for a one virgate tenement, which may have been on the site of Lodge Hill Farm, the farm nearest to the gate of the bishop's deer park, which was created in the early twelfth century by bishop John of Tours (1088–1122) (virgate enclosure 9) (Nott 1996).

The Lay Subsidy evidence therefore suggests two conclusions – firstly, that probably three new virgate tenements had been created during the period 1086–1327, one being related to the new deer park and two others to take in more land and accommodate a growing population; and secondly that many of the old auster tenements had been divided into two.

Customs of the manor

It is not known what the inheritance customs in Westbury in the medieval period were, but the survival of virgates, half-virgates, and fardels strongly suggests that this was not the operation of inheritance.

Christopher Jessel (1998, 89) has shown that, under the laws of Edward I (1272–1307), new customs were not to be recognized if they post-dated 1189, so no new auster tenements with grazing rights could be created after this date. Edward I's close friend and Chancellor of England at this time was Robert Burnell, Bishop of Bath and Wells. Not only did Robert probably draft much of Edward's legislation, but he was also lord of the manor of Westbury.

This idea of the division of tenements is confirmed by the survival of a small notebook written at the time of Bishop Mews (1673–1684) (SWHC D&D/Bmisc/3) which begins 'An Abstract of the Customs of the Mannor of Westbury for time out of mind belonging to the Right Reverend Father in God Peter Lord Bishop of Bath and Wells', and includes the custom 'A Yard of Land ought not to be Divided into two half yards, nither a half into two Fardles and the like of the rest'. These seventeenth-century Customs had therefore probably originated in the thirteenth century. In theory, therefore, it is possible that the tenement structure indicated by the Lay Subsidy figures of the early fourteenth century represents the situation in 1189. The rising population during the period 1086–1189 is likely to be the reason for both the growth in numbers and divisions of virgate holdings.

While three enclosures remained intact (numbers 9, 11 and 12), it is also possible to demonstrate that in four of the suggested enclosures (numbers 1, 3, 10 and 14), the sizes of the tenements, when aggregated, are equivalent to one whole virgate. One example of this subdivision of a virgate enclosure into two half-virgates and one cottage of old auster is illustrated in Fig. 3. In

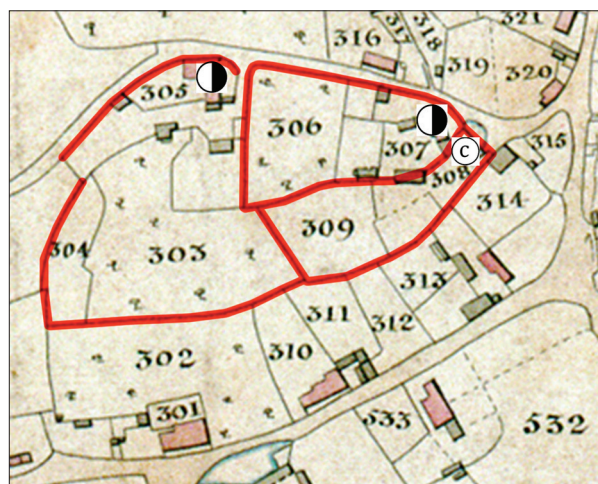


Figure 3 Virgate enclosure 3, with the three old auster tenements on plots 305, 307, and 308. The enclosure is bounded on the north by the access road, The Hollow; the southern boundary follows a sharp geological change of slope. Pasture fields adjoin the enclosure on the west. Based upon the 1838 Tithe map of Westbury.

this case the original virgate farm, probably on plot 307 close to the main north-south road, was split into two half-virgates with the other half-virgate on plot 305; with the first tenement split again to create a cottage on plot 308.

Test pits

Following training by English Heritage in 2009 in the nearby village of East Harptree, members of the Westbury Society began excavating 1m² test pits within the village. A total of 29 pits were completed, of which 26 were undertaken within the areas of the virgate enclosures. Of these, sixteen produced hand-made coarse ware pottery with limestone inclusions of the late Anglo-Saxon to early Norman period (Lane 2015, 147). Several sherds closely matched Cheddar 'B' fabric, which Philip Rahtz identified as of late Saxon date (Rahtz 1979, 315–316). If nucleation took place any earlier, pottery evidence is unhelpful, as Somerset is largely aceramic from after the Roman period until the tenth century. This is work in progress and the Westbury Society hope to follow up on this at a later date.

These test pit results do confirm the thesis that nucleation had certainly begun by the time of the Domesday survey. It is now possible to propose a possible sequence of development from about 700 AD.

Development sequence

The Somerset Historic Environment Record indicates a dispersed Roman occupation of the parish with two, perhaps three settlement areas (PRN 12991, 25648 and 37327) and at least another three sites with scattered Roman finds in the parish, and with Roman finds under the present village itself. Other than the village name, a number of field names and some sherds of possible late Saxon date, there is little physical evidence for a Saxon presence within the parish.

The catalyst for the nucleation of the village is almost certainly the large rectangular church enclosure shown in pink in Fig. 2 which lies on the relatively flat well-drained terrace of glacial Head deposit. Teresa Hall has shown that such enclosures lie at the core of many minster settlements in neighbouring Dorset and, as these have determined the wider layout of later nucleation, must be the earliest feature. Moreover she has proposed that the most likely period for the creation of such enclosures is the few decades after the appointment of the monk Aldhelm as the first bishop of the new diocese of Sherborne, "west of the wood" of Selwood (Hall 2000, 76–78). There is therefore every reason to link the enclosure of Westbury to the period 706–709 AD (Lane, forthcoming).

If this is the case then the large enclosure would initially have surrounded an area for burials and some form of wooden cross or church building, both of which later became bounded by a churchyard wall. The larger rectangular enclosure still only encompasses two properties: Court House Farm, the bishop's home farmhouse, and Westbury House, which would not have been created until the early twelfth century, when the church of Westbury was granted by bishop Robert of Lewes (1136–1166) as part of the original endowment

of Bruton Priory (Somerset Record Society 1894, xix p.32, no.136B).

The next stage of nucleation may have been the creation of the eight virgate enclosures in group A (numbers 1–8), all lying on the central limestone and dolomitic conglomerate ridge. These are tightly grouped adjacent to the church enclosure, the main east-west road through the village and the two streams that run southwards from Mendip.

As the population grew a further four (numbers 9–12) were created as a single row settlement, also on limestone, at the northern end of Old Ditch, one of the nuclei identified by English Heritage. These first two groups together provide the twelve virgates that were recorded in the Domesday survey.

Further population growth after Domesday, and bishop John of Tours' need to provide a tenement for his park keeper, led to infilling (number 15) and two virgate enclosures between the church and the deer park, one later to be called Lodge Farm (number 13) and the other Lodge Hill House (number 14). These three were on the less suitable, poorly draining Triassic marls.

At the same time as the growth in the number of virgate enclosures, division of many of them into half virgates, fardels and cottages was certainly taking place.

Conclusions

Traditional morphological analysis of Westbury based upon its maps and plans, and following Roberts (1987), would probably lead to the description of an irregular

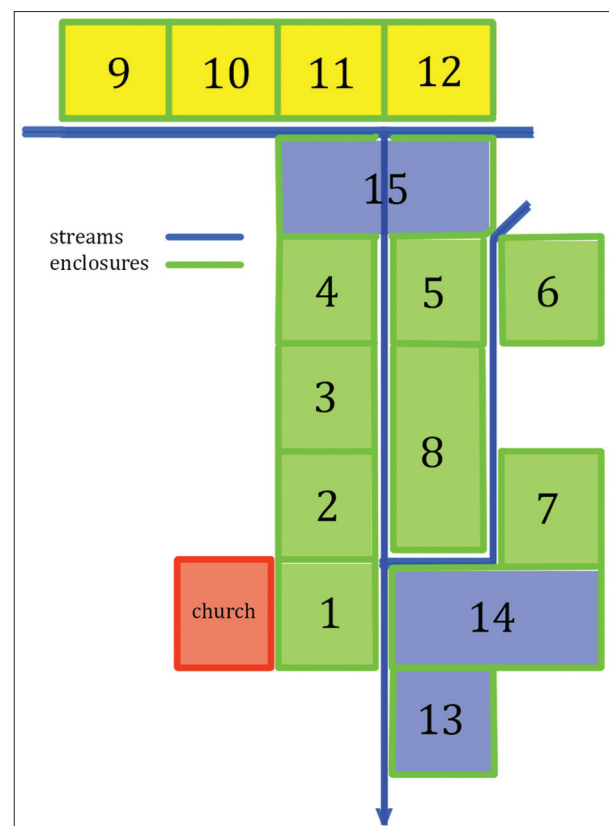


Figure 4 Fifteen rectangular virgate enclosures maintaining topographical relationships. The development sequence is red, green, yellow then blue.

agglomerated polyfocal settlement. However, this research suggests a more ordered and carefully planned development based upon underlying geology, population growth, park keeping, and perhaps changing agricultural needs such as a shift towards stock grazing on Mendip.

Simple map morphology would not easily suggest such a sequence. However another way to look at the question is to imagine the plan of Westbury being laid out on a flat plane, with the streams running straight and the enclosures rectangular, rather than the real irregular landscape created by the underlying geology. This may be illustrated by the diagram in Fig. 4. When viewed in this way it becomes clear that the suggested development of the village is more thoughtful and ordered than morphological analysis based merely upon aerial photographs or flat historical maps would suggest.

As Chris Taylor said in 2010 about the settlement of Little Wilbraham, ‘almost all the final interpretations here are based on the abandonment of obvious facts and on speculation derived from limited and unsatisfactory evidence. Thus they are probably of little academic value and can be ignored. Nevertheless, the writer still believes that this type of morphological analysis, for all its faults, is a useful way of producing ideas on settlement development regardless of whether these ideas are right or wrong’ (Taylor 2010, 44). It is in this spirit that the chronological sequence is put forward.

Abbreviations

S	Sawyer charter number
SRS8	<i>Two Cartularies of the Augustinian Priory of Bruton and the Cluniac Priory of Montacute in the County of Somerset</i> . Somerset Record Society 8. Edited by Members of the Council.
SWHC	South West Heritage Centre document

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