

LAWRENCE BUTLER AT FAXTON (NORTHAMPTONSHIRE) 1966–68

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Faxton is a name you might remember. Maurice Beresford illustrated *The Lost Villages of England* with an RAF aerial photograph of the earthworks there in 1954. The site became something of a local celebrity on account of its ghosts and air of atmospheric abandonment; it featured in paintings by John Piper and *Month in the Country* author J.L. Carr visited and recorded his impressions.

All that was before its church was demolished in 1958–1959 in unfortunate circumstances despite the intervention of Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings; some of the fine seventeenth- and eighteenth-century memorials to the Nicols and Raynsford families were eventually removed for display at the Victoria and Albert Museum. In spite of the site's scheduled status, worse was to follow as 'prairie farming' cast its long shadow across Northamptonshire during the following decade. The excavation of one croft was undertaken in 1965 by Gwen Brown who also watched the bulldozing of others. Then, on the recommendation of the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group (DMVRG), the scale and rapidity of destruction led the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments to arrange for further crofts to be fully excavated.

Work on site was financed for three seasons from 1966 to 1968 and directed by University of Leeds archaeologist Lawrence Butler with post-excavation work being funded by English Heritage during the 1980s. Butler had previously directed or co-directed excavations on medieval village sites at Thuxton and Grenstein in Norfolk, both of which were to have an important bearing on his interpretations at Faxton. His mission, as he informed a BBC audience for a 1967 radio broadcast, would be 'to find out information about village life in the clay belt of midland England', the main aim of the excavations being to provide 'an example of a typical house in the medieval period'.

At the time, the DMVRG wished to spread the geographical range of excavation to embrace different regions with varying tenurial patterns, agrarian regimes and building resources. Little intensive work had hitherto been conducted on any 'clayland' site, in part because there was a general perception that such areas had less potential because of the lack of good building stone. In all, three areas were dug at Faxton covering seven crofts, some 4000m² in all. The work force consisted of paid labour, volunteers (paid subsistence of 10s to £1 per day) from Kettering, and students from Leeds and Exeter Universities, as well as overseas students and schoolboys from Kettering Grammar School's archaeological society, several of whom were already experienced excavators.

After the excavations ended, Faxton came to feature heavily in standard texts as a classic illustration of a Domesday settlement where the place-name was seemingly much older than the village itself. Although the place-name with its *-tūn* ending and entry in Domesday Book for six serfs, six villeins and nine bordars were apparently confirmation that Faxton was flourishing in the late Saxon period and certainly present in the eleventh century, Lawrence Butler's excavations appeared to show convincingly that the village site where he had excavated had only come into being later, in the late twelfth century. On that basis, the Faxton of Domesday must have been located somewhere else, perhaps nearby. Although there were other good reasons to remember Faxton, this was the argument which stuck and one which has been repeated since by archaeologists and historians alike whenever the site is called to mind.

Summary reports of each of the three seasons' reports were submitted to the DMVRG, and short accounts appeared in *Current Archaeology* and *Medieval Archaeology*. However, nothing more substantial about Faxton was ever forthcoming as the post-excavation process for Faxton was beset by endless delay. An incomplete draft of a volume was offered for consideration to the Society for Medieval Archaeology monograph series in late 1985 but never submitted in its final form.

Lawrence Butler had every intention of returning to the project late in life, but at his death in 2014 only two chapters were left substantially complete. Since then, the archive has been rescued and a new account pieced together from interim summaries, partial manuscripts, sound recordings, multiple handwritten notes and on-site records.

The project has not been without its challenges. On the one hand, this being a Ministry dig in the mid-1960s, the invoices of expenditure and complaints about the delivery of rusty buckets, blunt tools and huts with loose roofing are inventoried with great care; every bag of sweets and jar of cider is accounted for. On the other hand, there are some yawning gaps in the coverage of what was found, particularly among the specialist reports. While an excellent and detailed medieval pottery report had been completed, animal bone and post-medieval pottery both remained unstudied. Now, for the first time, analyses of these have been commissioned by Historic England, while a new team of writers have set the results into their wider context, in particular to re-consider the finds, the evolution of the landscape and the buildings.

The writing up of an excavation undertaken a half-century ago can be approached in many different ways. The surviving text could have been edited into a seamless narrative – but this would have blurred the voice of the original excavator. In this case the chosen course was to

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Figure 1 Excavations underway in 1966 at Faxton in Northamptonshire (Faxton excavation archive). Lawrence Butler's archive and draft texts are now being prepared for final publication.

retain Lawrence Butler's text with maximum respect for his writing. Figures have been added in, errors corrected and blocks of writing restructured for greater clarity, but the text as a whole is as Lawrence intended. Where new text has been added, whether descriptive or offering an alternative interpretation, it is explicitly identified.

This combination of old and new highlights many of the advances in methodology and knowledge in later medieval archaeology over the past few decades, effectively since Hurst and Beresford were drawing together their 1971 text for *Deserted Medieval Villages*. The Faxton report will reflect changes in interpretation and debate, in particular around its disputed pre-Conquest origins, probable later re-planning and expansion, the decline and abandonment of the village, the development of the open fields and the enclosure process.

By the end, Lawrence Butler had come to question the whole venture of 'rescue archaeology' on medieval

settlement sites but, in many respects, Faxton can now be seen to have been a pioneering venture in both its methods and its observations. Lawrence would discover how buildings inside medieval crofts could change their alignments and construction materials. Also, this was one of the first occasions in which constructions in cob or 'mud' were documented archaeologically, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the academic interests of the director spanned not just excavation but also standing buildings and documentary study. Above all, we hope that Lawrence would have been pleased to find that Faxton still had a distinctive contribution to make to medieval settlement studies.

Bibliography

Faxton. Excavations in a Deserted Northamptonshire Village 1966-68 by Lawrence Butler and Christopher Gerrard will be published as a Society for Medieval Archaeology monograph in 2019.