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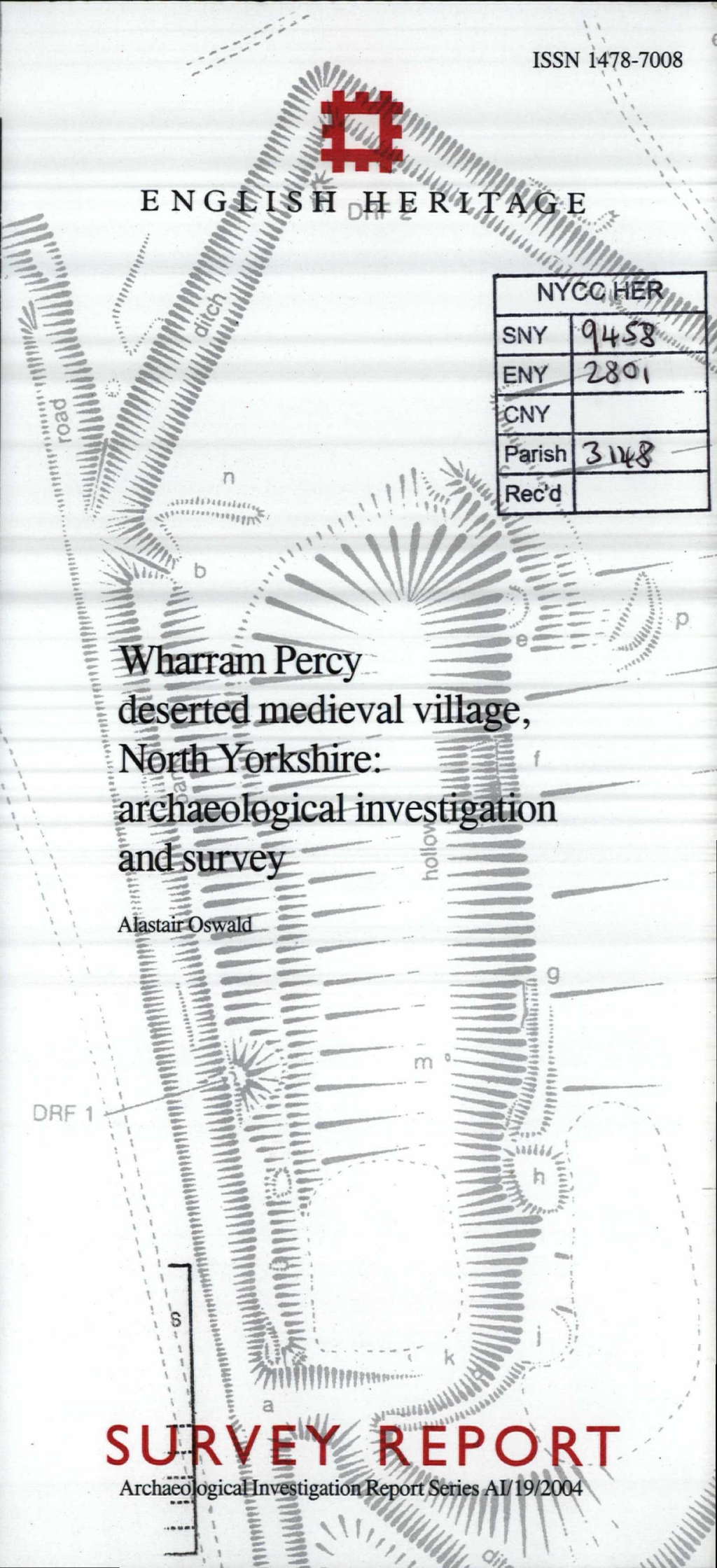
Wharram Percy  
deserted medieval village,  
North Yorkshire:  
archaeological investigation  
and survey

Alastair Oswald

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**SURVEY REPORT**

Archaeological Investigation Report Series AI/19/2004



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ENGLISH HERITAGE

**WHARRAM PERCY**  
**DESERTED MEDIEVAL VILLAGE,**  
**NORTH YORKSHIRE:**  
**ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION AND SURVEY**

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the course of 2002, English Heritage carried out an archaeological investigation and survey of the earthworks of Wharram Percy in North Yorkshire, unquestionably the best known deserted medieval village in England. Deserted villages are not rare: about 130 sites survive to some degree in eastern Yorkshire alone and there are an estimated 3,000 in the country as a whole. Wharram Percy is certainly among the most extensive and best preserved of these, but it really owes its exceptional fame, especially within the archaeological community, to the Wharram Research Project, a programme of survey, excavation and historical research undertaken over the course of forty years between 1950 and 1990. From its outset, the findings of the project proved of key importance to the study of medieval rural settlement in England and they are set to remain so for some considerable time to come. Through the project, the site has also been used as a testing-ground for archaeological field techniques, such as 'landscape archaeology', 'open-area excavation' and the investigation of churches through excavation. For all these reasons, Wharram Percy was among the first deserted medieval villages to be recommended for statutory protection; though the land remains part of the Birdsall Estates, the site has been managed in Guardianship by English Heritage and its predecessors since 1974 and is open to the public all year round.

The deserted village lies in farmland towards the north-western edge of the Yorkshire Wolds, 1km south-west of the 'shrunken village' of Wharram le Street and in the civil parish of Wharram, centred at National Grid Reference SE 8583 6436. It is set on the western edge of Deep Dale, a narrow valley typical of this part of the Wolds, through which a minor unnamed stream flows northwards to join the River Derwent. The medieval village primarily comprises the earthwork remains of 'tofts' (house plots, made up of houses or small

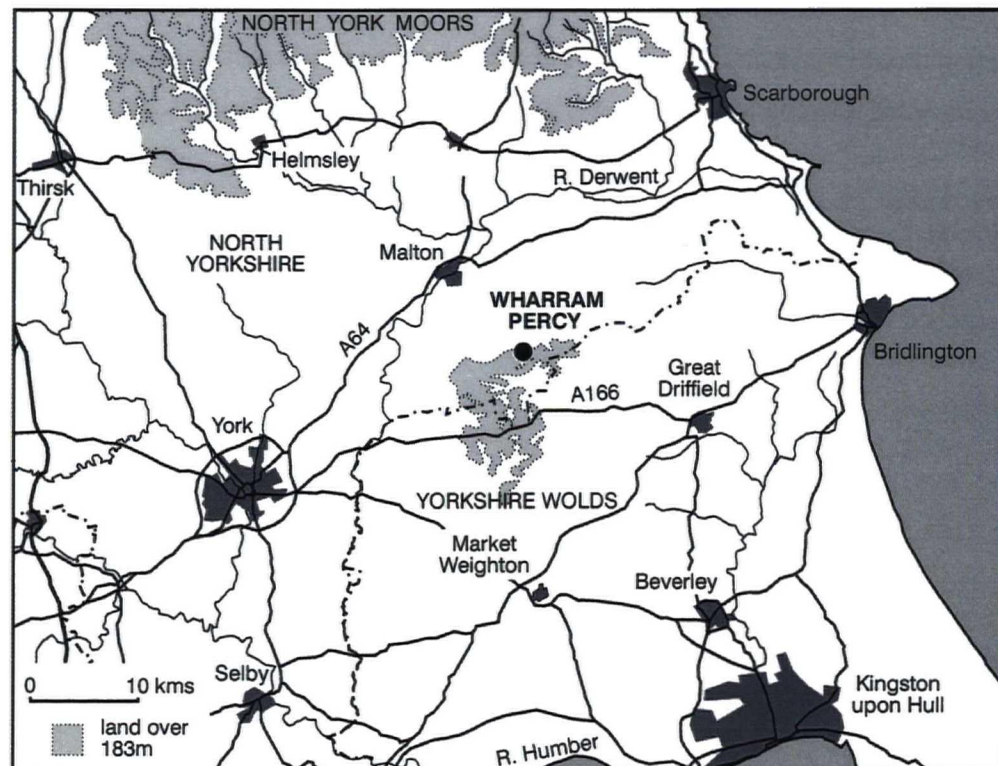


Figure 1  
Location map

farmsteads with their associated enclosed yards or gardens, known as 'garths') and adjacent 'crofts' (enclosed strips of arable land). The plots are arranged in three or four rows fronting onto several streets, and the consistent size of the plots together with the regularity of the overall pattern suggests that the layout of the village was deliberately planned, though not necessarily in a single episode. There are two main streets: one obliquely ascending the western side of the valley and another running along the edge of the adjacent plateau. Between these two, the steep scarp of the valley side effectively forms a triangular green. Wharram Percy Cottages, a row of three 19th-century labourers' cottages which lies near the ruined church, was occupied until the mid-1950s, but by 2002 was unoccupied and falling into disrepair. The closest permanently occupied buildings are Wharram Percy Farm and Bella Farm, each of which lies nearly a kilometre from the centre of the village. The tranquil and picturesque setting of the deserted village lend the site an aesthetic quality which, together with the fact that it lies on the route of the Wolds Way long distance footpath, make it a popular visitor attraction.

In the wake of the Wharram Research Project, a consensus was reached that it was appropriate to produce a synthesis of all the research as the final volume in the series of published reports. The plan of the earthworks available while the project was under way was surveyed by a number of individuals, at various scales, intermittently over the course of twenty-five years. Since most of the survey work coincided with the summer campaigns of excavation, vegetation conditions were seldom ideal for the recognition and interpretation of slight earthworks. Furthermore, as the excavations progressed and it became apparent that the sub-surface remains were more complex than had at first been anticipated, the questions posed with regard to the earthworks became increasingly sophisticated, demanding re-appraisal of the earlier observations. As a result, while the excavations were in progress, the potential offered by the earthworks for understanding the context of the excavated samples could not be fully realised. Therefore, in January 1998, Dr Stuart Wrathmell, responsible for co-ordinating the publication programme, proposed that a fresh analytical earthwork survey and investigation, coupled with comprehensive geophysical and aerial surveys, should be undertaken to accompany the synthesis of the excavated evidence. Fortunately, in 2001, English Heritage's Yorkshire Region team began the preparation of Conservation Statements to lay the foundations for detailed Conservation Plans for each monument in Guardianship within its area of responsibility. This study also concluded that the earthworks would benefit from re-examination, especially with a view to producing a range of new plans from a metric digital base for visitor interpretation boards on the site (English Heritage 2002). These two needs culminated in the investigation undertaken in 2002, which was partly funded by English Heritage through the Wharram Research Project.

The deserted village is protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (RSM 13302) and is managed by English Heritage as a Guardianship site, whose extent corresponds for the most part to the present limit of the pasture. The village's ruined church, St Martin's, is also a Grade I Listed Building. The deserted village is recorded in the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) for North Yorkshire and in the National Monuments Record (NMR) as SE 86

SE 4. The English Heritage field investigation, which covered an area of 31.5 hectares (78.0 acres), was carried out in detail, at Level 3 standard (as defined in RCHME 1999, 3-4), and produced, in addition to this report, a plan of the village and its immediate environs at a scale of 1:1 000.

## 2. GEOLOGY, TOPOGRAPHY AND MODERN LAND USE

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The Yorkshire Wolds, which rise to between 150m and 230m above mean sea level, are made up of cretaceous chalk and the appearance of the landscape owes much to this geological background, being intensively farmed and sparsely wooded (Allison 1976, 22). Since the upper layer of the chalk contains almost no flints and erratic boulders deposited by glacial action are also rare, there is no local building stone apart from the chalk itself, and this is reflected in the local architecture. Deep Dale, which Wharram Percy overlooks, follows a serpentine course from south to north through the chalk uplands, joining the broader valley of the Settrington Beck some 3kms west-north-west of the village. For much of its length, Deep Dale is a narrow, steep-sided dry valley like many others in the area, its sharply incised channel cut into the frozen land surface during the last Ice Age by a sub-glacial stream. The deserted village lies mid-way along the valley, on its western side, just north of its confluence with the shorter but equally dramatic tributary valley now called Drue Dale. In this area, bands of cretaceous chalk of various formations overlie a band of impermeable Jurassic Clay, which has been erroneously called Kimmeridge Clay on early Geological Survey maps (Ordnance Survey 1966; British Geological Survey 1993). These geological conditions have given rise to a number of springs at the bottoms of the valley sides. Three of the strongest of these, which lie on opposite sides of the mouth of Drue Dale, are collectively the source of a small un-named stream. Augmented by six other minor springs in the vicinity of the village, the stream flows northwards to join the Settrington Beck and eventually the River Derwent. Springs are rare across the Wolds as a whole and proximity to a fresh water supply may have been a factor in the distribution of settlements, but they are relatively numerous in the environs of Wharram Percy. The proximity of the water table to the surface has also led to rapid soil creep on the valley sides and a number of major landslips, on both sides of Deep Dale and along the southern side of Drue Dale. One such slip, which must have occurred prior to the Iron Age, since features of that date have been discovered there, seems to have been responsible for creating the broad terrace occupied by the village church. Similar geological circumstances on the western escarpment of the Lincolnshire Wolds have produced an almost identical pattern of distortion on a larger scale (Everson *et al* 1991, 3 and fig 6).

In terms of land-use, the gently undulating ground on the tops of the Wolds, with its thin but light chalky soil, is well suited to arable cultivation. It is clear from the pattern of later prehistoric and Roman settlement and land divisions that agriculture must have been quite extensive from an early date (Stoertz 1997). Documentary evidence shows that by the late 13th century, if not before, the whole region was farmed intensively for wheat and especially barley, both through monastic granges and by the lay community, and the volume of production was apparently well above a subsistence level (Waites 1968, 140-2). Sheep and cattle continued to play an important role in the rural economy and a variety of other crops including rye, oats, peas, flax and hemp were grown. From the beginning of the 16th century, the sharp increase in sheep farming which accompanied the growth of the wool industry was responsible both for the final desertion of many villages like Wharram Percy and for



their fossilisation in earthwork form. Yet with the gradual demise of the wool industry between the mid-18th century and the early 19th century, much of the grazing land in which the medieval earthworks had been left undisturbed was once again ploughed up (Harris 1996). This process accelerated after the Second World War, to the point where steep-sided valleys such as Deep Dale became some of the last surviving islands of pasture in a sea of arable.

Undoubtedly in part because of the archaeological interest shown in Wharram Percy throughout the post-war period, most of the site was preserved intact under pasture. This area is referred to below as the 'Guardianship Area'. A few isolated ash and hawthorn trees still stand on the courses of post-medieval hedgelines, while around the fringes of the site, several small plantations of ash, hornbeam, and lime were planted in the 1980s. On the slope east of Wharram Percy Cottages, a scatter of fruit trees was planted to replace those once cultivated by the occupants. These, together with various unfenced pockets of scrub, particularly around the church and adjacent pond, contribute to the ecological diversity and general air of picturesque abandonment. As part of the Birdsall Estates owned by Lord Middleton, the pasture is regularly grazed by cattle, although fences keep the stock away from the buildings and the pond in the valley bottom. The eastern side of the valley (where much of the ground is permanently boggy) and the northern part of the valley floor has been occupied by Nut Wood since at least 1836. Shown as a mixture of deciduous and coniferous trees on an estate map of that date and similarly but in greater detail on the First Edition 6-inch scale Ordnance Survey map surveyed in 1851, the area was replanted in about 1948 and now comprises a block of Norwegian Spruce and another of beech (Dykes 1836; Ordnance Survey 1854; St Joseph 1948). Scrub, principally comprising hawthorn and blackthorn, has taken hold over much of the rest of the slope. However, there are very few archaeological remains recognisable on the surface in these areas. Tunnel Plantation, a beech wood which adjoins the eastern edge of Nut Wood, was probably planted very soon after the completion of the Burdale railway tunnel in 1853.

Other than the planting mentioned above, the village's treatment as a visitor attraction by the Wharram Research Project and by English Heritage has had relatively little impact on the appearance of the site. The nearest car parking is provided 600m to the east and most visitors arrive via the Wolds Way long distance footpath, which was diverted to pass through the valley with the approval of Lord Middleton. The pond adjacent to the church was cleaned out and replanted as an ornamental feature in the wake of excavations carried out between 1972 and 1981. However, due to the destruction of a timber sluice, it had once again become severely silted by the time of the investigation in 2002. Although the wall-lines of several of the excavated structures around the village were marked out with gravel, interpretation boards have been kept to a minimum and those that existed at the time of the investigation in 2002 were due for review.

### 3. HISTORY OF RESEARCH

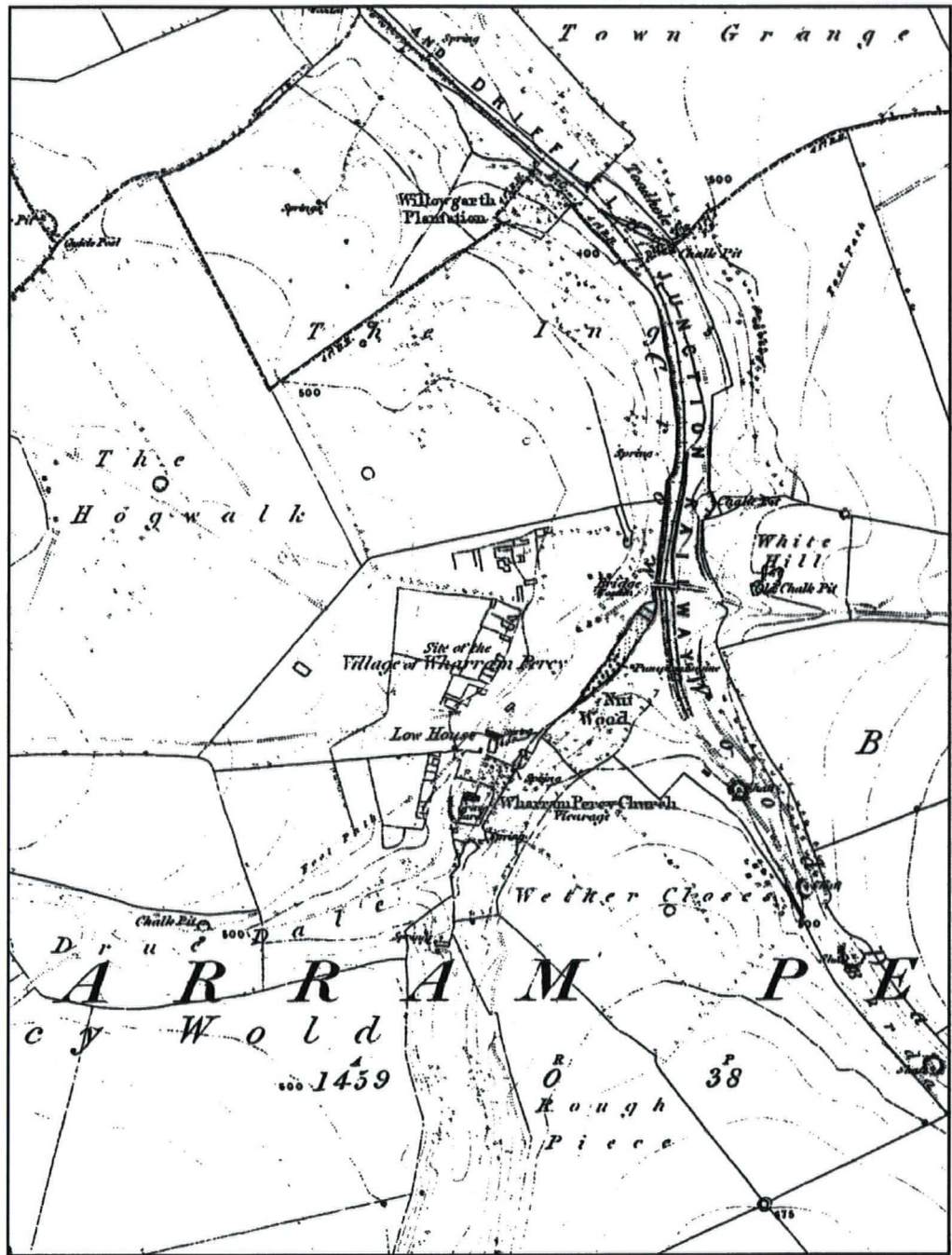
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The notion of deserted medieval villages was generally regarded with great scepticism by academics until the late 1940s, when the production of a number of regional studies began to provide evidence for their widespread existence. Professor Maurice Beresford of Leeds University, the economic historian whose seminal book *The Lost Villages of England* was first published in 1954, has rightly been credited with the promotion of the topic as a matter of serious research. Nevertheless, it is clear that amongst the wider populace, some memory of the former existence of such villages persisted in many instances, their desertion often attributed to fire, plague or divine wrath (Beresford and Hurst 1990, 15; Wrathmell 1996, 7). In the case of Wharram Percy, the evidence for such a popular memory is not clear cut: the only name to appear on early maps is that of Wharram le Street. On John Speede's 1610 maps of Yorkshire and the North and East Ridings of the county, a church was depicted, annotated respectively 'Wharum in y<sup>e</sup> Stret' and 'Wharum'. Moll's 1720 map of the county applies the latter name, while Bowen's 1750 map does not depict even the church. However, beginning with the publication in 1771 of Thomas Jefferys' map of the county, surveyed between 1767 and 1770, a series of maps also record the name Wharram Percy (in various forms). This may indicate that the name had remained attached to the church and the adjacent farmstead and perhaps that some knowledge of the former existence of the village had lingered on.

As the large-scale mapping of Britain progressed in the first half of the 19th century, Ordnance Survey officers would inevitably have become acquainted with such local lore in the course of their protracted campaigns of fieldwork. Captain John Bayly, who was responsible for overseeing the survey of many of the map sheets covering the Wolds, ordered the depiction of the earthworks of Wharram Percy in some detail on the First Edition map at 6-inch scale (1:10 560), surveyed in 1850-1 (Ordnance Survey 1854 and Figure 2). He also correctly identified them, presumably partly on the basis of information gained from local informants and the earlier maps mentioned above, as the 'Site of the Village of Wharram Percy'. Beresford and Hurst (1990, 18) have regarded this as something of an anomaly, attributable to Captain Bayly's personal interest, but his working practice would in fact have been fairly strictly governed by military procedure. Detailed rules for recording archaeological remains were not actually written down until 1884, but as early as 1816, Major-General Mudge, then Superintendent of the Ordnance Survey, had issued a memorandum that included the instruction

...that the remains of ancient Fortifications, Druidical Monuments, vitrified Forts and all Tumuli and Barrows shall be noted in the Plans whenever they occur (Seymour 1980, 63).

The mapping of prehistoric and Roman monuments was standard practice thereafter. Beresford and Hurst have pointed out that the earthworks of other equally well-preserved villages in Yorkshire and beyond were not mapped, while Captain Bayly's map sheet records 'sites of buildings' and 'old foundations' at Towthorpe, Duggleby, Low Mowthorpe and Kirby



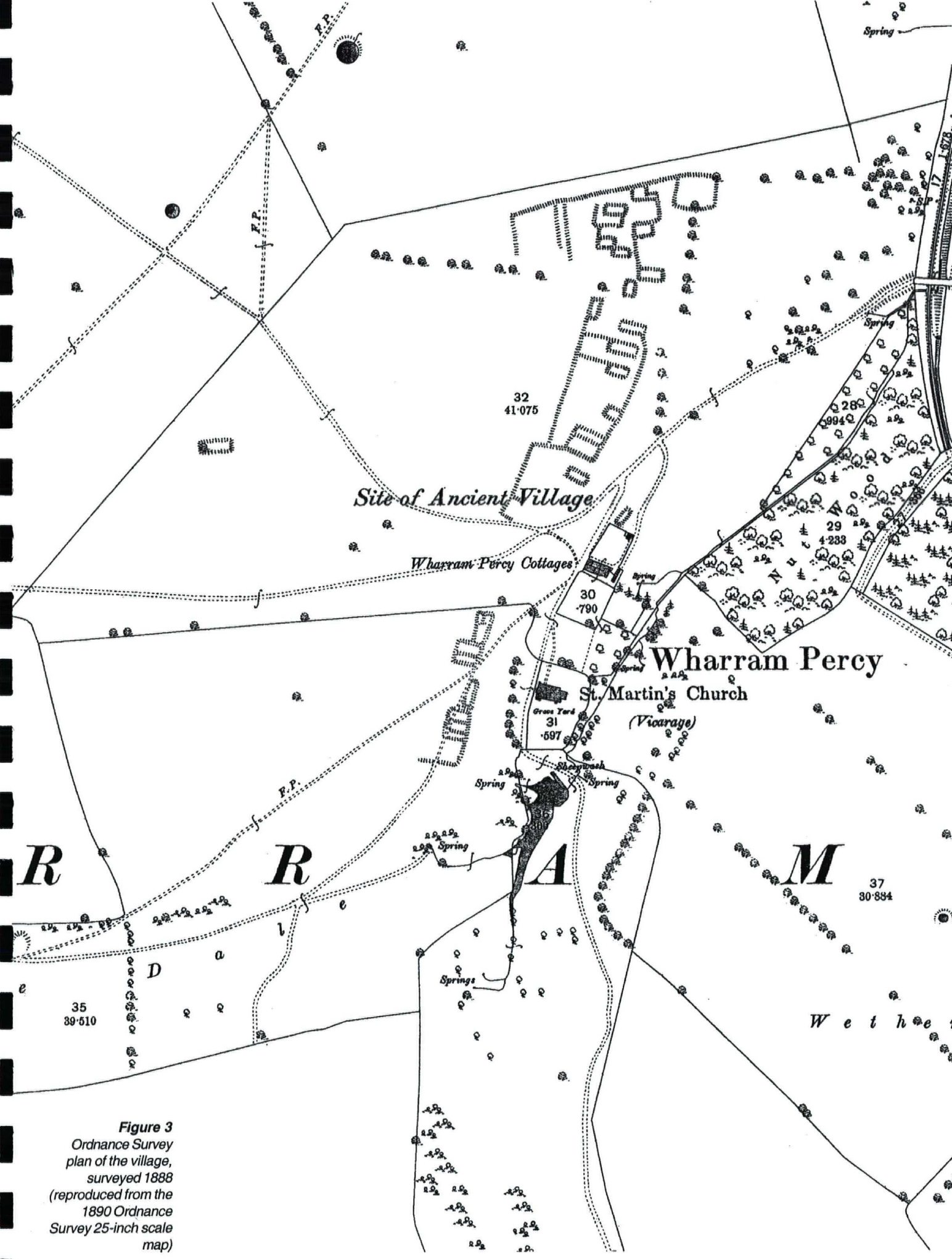
**Figure 2**  
 Ordnance Survey  
 plan of the village,  
 surveyed 1850-1  
 (reproduced from the  
 1854 6-inch scale  
 Ordnance Survey map)

Grindalythe. At Croome House, north of Sledmere, a series of 'old banks' clearly represent a tract of well-developed ridge and furrow cultivation, but elsewhere prehistoric boundary earthworks, which were almost certainly equally prominent as earthworks, are omitted. Bayly's apparent inconsistency can perhaps be attributed partly to the changeable (though unrecorded) official instructions as to precisely what types of remains should be mapped. These instructions were generally biased towards prehistoric and Roman monuments and settlement remains, so the omission of medieval earthworks by other commanding officers need not imply that there was widespread ignorance of their significance. In passing, it could be pointed out that by the time of the First Edition 25-inch scale map, the rules had clearly changed again, for while houses and property boundaries were depicted, disused field boundaries were not, even though some of these were more prominent earthworks and

had been previously mapped by Captain Bayly (Ordnance Survey 1890). Nevertheless, the standard of depiction of such remains certainly varied according to the interest and ability of the individual officer concerned. Captain Bayly clearly had a talent with regard to civil matters, for, having been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, he headed the Ordnance Survey's Boundary Office from 1864 to 1873 (Seymour 1980, 159). Beresford and Hurst (1990, 18) have expressed puzzlement as to how he arrived at the correct interpretation of the remains at Wharram Percy as the site of a village, in the absence at that date of any popular or academic works on the subject. This perhaps underestimates the value of the breadth of experience in fieldwork that would have been gained by supervising officers of the Ordnance Survey in dealing with earthworks of many different types and dates. Even as early as 1816, the interpretation of a monument as being prehistoric or Roman would necessarily have demanded some understanding of the forms of the field remains of later periods. By the mid-19th century, local societies and amateurs with an interest in antiquities assisted in the process of identification and interpretation, and medieval ruins were routinely recorded, together with any associated earthworks (Seymour 1980, 174). By the time the First Edition 25-inch survey of Wharram Percy was undertaken in 1888, it was standard practice to record medieval earthworks such as moats, fishponds and park pales, regardless of whether any ruins or other traces of buildings were present. Having said this, the plan of the village surveyed at larger scale in 1888 does not represent any great improvement on Captain Bayly's work in terms of the interpretation of the earthworks (Ordnance Survey 1890 and Figure 3). Arguably, Bayly's direct experience of analysing so many different monuments in the field would have stood him in better stead in interpreting the earthworks than Beresford himself on his first visit, since at the time neither Beresford nor many other academics would have had the benefit of such wide field experience.

In short, research into Wharram Percy and medieval villages more generally was unquestionably dormant prior to Beresford's visit in 1948, and that visit set in train the current programme of research which has made the site famous. However, the Ordnance Survey's work nearly a century earlier could justifiably be regarded as the first episode of modern archaeological investigation and one that - had the intellectual climate of the day been more favourable - could have been equally influential. A series of oblique aerial photographs dated 3 March 1925 show the well-preserved deserted village of Gainsthorpe in Lincolnshire, which had also been mapped as such by the Ordnance Survey in the 19th century (NMRa). The photographs, which form part of the collection amassed by the Ordnance Survey's first field archaeologist, OGS Crawford, but which were not necessarily taken by him, seem to indicate that the Ordnance Survey's work had already sparked some interest (albeit casual) in deserted villages. It does not seem that Crawford himself was greatly concerned with medieval settlement, although he was intrigued by field systems, park pales and other medieval earthworks. Only one deserted medieval village, that at Barbury Farm in Wiltshire, was included in his pioneering publication with Alexander Keiller on *Wessex from the Air* (Crawford and Keiller 1928, plate XLVI).

Beresford's first visit to Wharram Percy on 26 June 1948 immediately followed a seminar on the subject of deserted medieval villages held at Cambridge University (Beresford and Hurst



**Figure 3**  
 Ordnance Survey  
 plan of the village,  
 surveyed 1888  
 (reproduced from the  
 1890 Ordnance  
 Survey 25-inch scale  
 map)

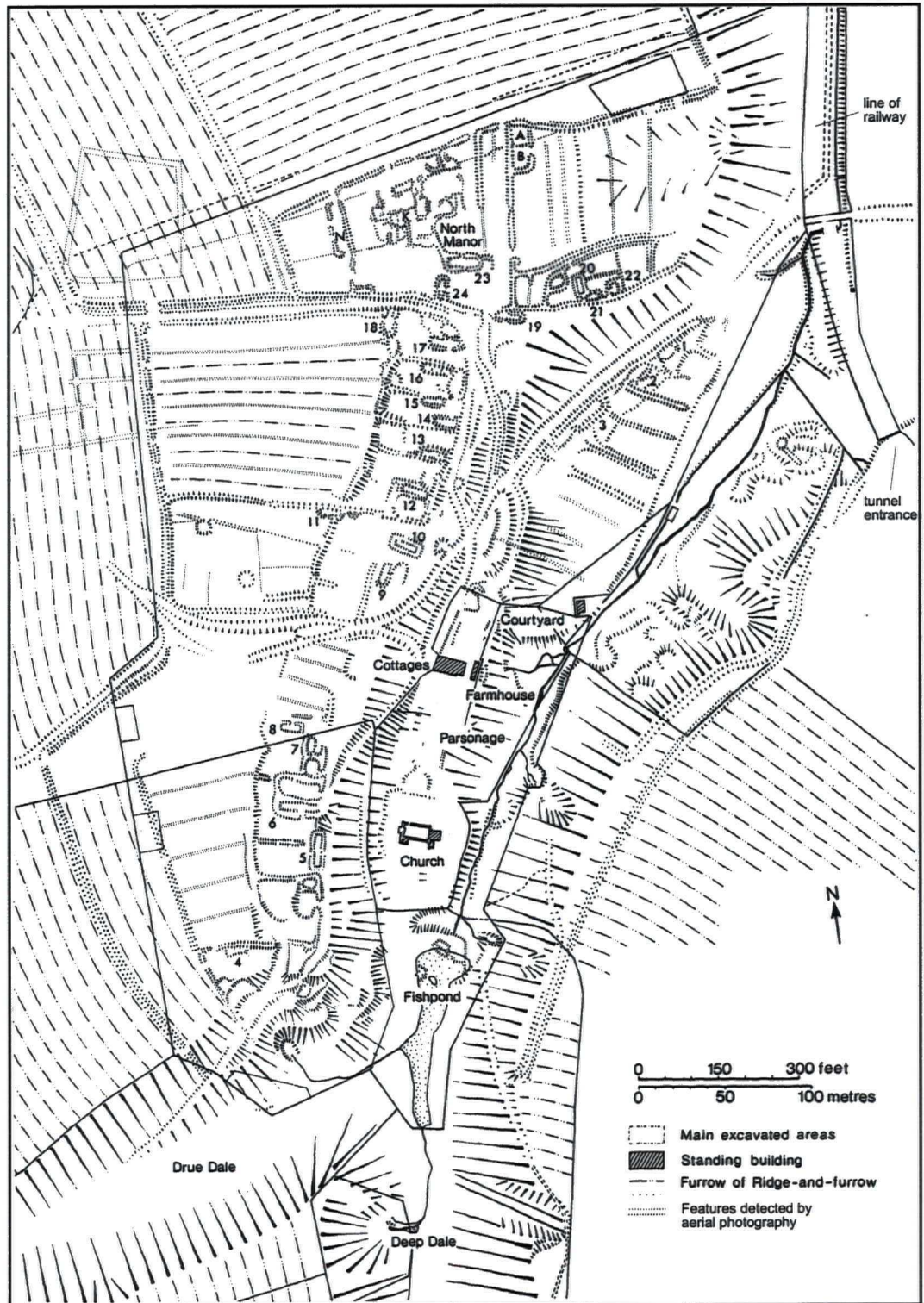
1990, 20). He was immediately struck by how easily the chalk-built foundations allowed the outlines of individual buildings to be traced, in contrast to the much more equivocal evidence on the Midlands sites with which he was more familiar, where buildings had generally been constructed of timber, daub and thatch. It was therefore left to the Cambridge-based aerial archaeologist JK St Joseph to capture the first aerial images of Wharram Percy immediately after the seminar (Figure 4). Contrary to the information presented on current interpretation boards at the site (and notwithstanding the re-appraisal above of the Ordnance Survey's contribution), St Joseph cannot be credited with the discovery of the site, since his sortie was flown almost a month after Beresford's visit, on 22 July 1948 (St Joseph 1948).



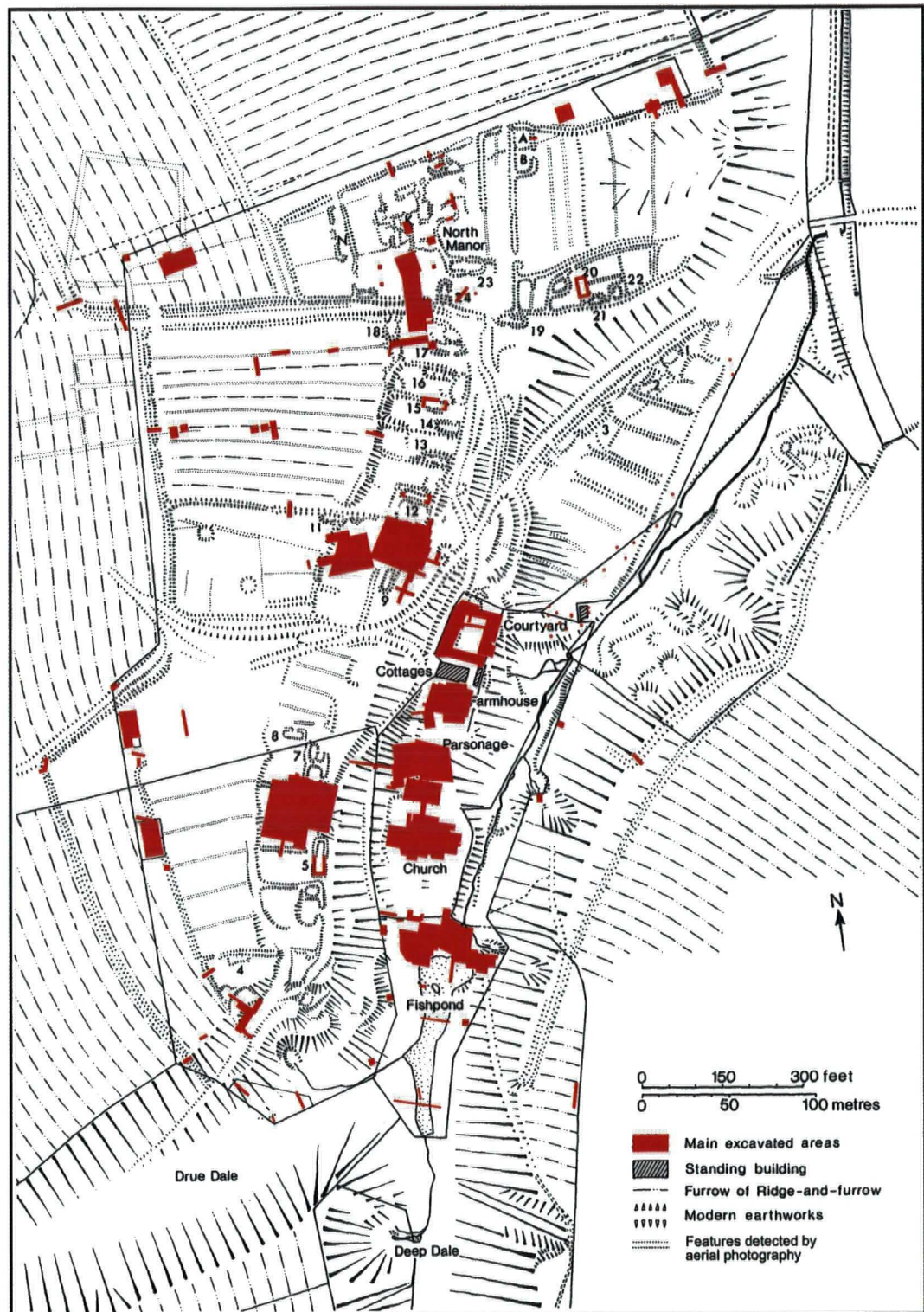
**Figure 4**  
*Aerial photograph  
of the village  
by JK St Joseph,  
taken 1948  
(reproduced by  
permission of the  
Cambridge University  
Committee for Aerial  
Photography)*

The decision to begin the investigation of Wharram Percy owed more to a few lucky coincidences than to judgement. By his own admission, the excavations undertaken over the course of a few summer weekends in 1950, 1951 and 1952 by Beresford and a small team made up of students and local volunteers were limited in their aims and crude in their techniques (Beresford and Hurst 1990, 27-30). The primary goals – beyond the sheer fun of archaeological exploration – were to prove that the earthworks genuinely represented wall-lines and to obtain finds with which the settlement could be dated. The technique mostly employed was that of 'wall-chasing', which left the interiors of the buildings more-or-less intact; Buildings 5, 12, 15, 17, 18, 20 and Building D of the North Manor (see Figure 5),

subsequently interpreted as its buttery/pantry, were wholly or partially examined in this way. No detailed plans or drawings were made, but in places the limits of the trenches can still be identified as earthworks, despite the fact that, at the request of the tenant farmer, backfilling was always undertaken carefully. A number of small trenches, apparently of similar form, have been identified during the English Heritage investigation; these may represent some of those dug '...at several points in the complex where much more substantial walls gave credence to the idea of a manor house'.



**Figure 5**  
 Plan of the earthworks surveyed by RT Porter, GL Worsley and WJ Hopkins (reduced from original at 1:600 scale)



**Figure 6**  
 Plan of all  
 excavations carried  
 out 1950 to 1990

Having visited briefly in 1952, John Hurst, then studying for his doctorate in Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University, joined Beresford as co-director on the excavation undertaken in the summer of 1953. His involvement led rapidly to the foundation of the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group and the Wharram Research Project, as a more professional undertaking. As the goals of the excavations and the scope of the research became more ambitious, the techniques employed became more diverse and sophisticated. Although the medieval village remained the focus of the research, a keen interest in the concept of continuity led to the investigation of pre- and post-medieval features. Between



1950 and 1990, just under 10% of the overall area of the site was excavated, including major open-area excavations at the church, the post-medieval farm buildings, two of the medieval house sites (Buildings 6 and 10) and elements of the South Manor (Figure 6). The excavations became a multi-disciplinary project with the introduction of geophysical and aerial survey work and environmental sampling. Documentary research was also undertaken, although this unsurprisingly shed more light on the history of the post-medieval farms and parsonages than on the deserted village. Neighbouring parishes were investigated, the results helping to place the discoveries at Wharram Percy into a wider context (Hayfield 1987). The findings of the project, the most relevant aspects of which are summarised in Section 4, are being published in a series of site reports and interim syntheses (most notably in the context of this report: Beresford 1971; 1979; Hurst 1971; 1979; 1984; 1985; Wrathmell 1989; Beresford and Hurst 1990; Stamper *et al* 2000). The description that accompanied the revision of the entry in the Schedule of Ancient Monuments in 1993 presents a comprehensive summary of the earlier findings (English Heritage 1993).

The earthworks were recognised as an important source of information at an early date and in 1954 GL Worsley of the Ordnance Survey was commissioned to make a plan at 1:600 scale. This was extensively amended by RT Porter from 1955 onwards. Five separate plans of key areas were made at scales of 1:600 and larger by WJ Hopkins of the Ordnance Survey during his summer holidays and C Mahany surveyed the earthworks in Nut Wood. All these surveys, together with transcriptions of ridge and furrow cultivation and other earthworks visible on vertical aerial photographs taken by the RAF in 1946, were amalgamated into a single plan by Porter (Figure 5). Once redrawn, this final product appeared consistent and comprehensive, but it had in reality developed organically and was a composite of differing theoretical expectations, observational skills and survey methods. For example, a sortie flown on 21 August 1979, at a time when the plan of the village was felt to be tolerably well understood, unexpectedly revealed evidence for croft boundaries on the valley side north of Wharram Percy Cottages (RCHME 1979). This at once prompted a re-appraisal of the overall plan of the village (Beresford and Hurst 1990, 79-80). In the following year, Hopkins undertook a re-examination of the area on the ground, but did not detect the features, although all do survive as vestigial earthworks. There was little confidence in interpreting or depicting stratigraphic relationships between earthworks. Therefore, it was not until a relatively late stage in the research project that the sophistication of the questions directed at the earthworks began to match that of the questions being asked of the sub-surface remains (Wrathmell 1989, 41-5; Beresford and Hurst 1990, figs 34 and 60). With this, it became apparent that fresh and more detailed analysis of the earthworks was desirable.

In November 2001, the same English Heritage field survey team responsible for the investigation in 2002 carried out a rapid examination of the site (at Level 1 standard, as defined in RCHME 1999, 3-4) to inform its conservation and presentation to visitors (English Heritage 2002). This assessment noted several potentially important features not recorded by the earlier survey, as well as a number of fundamental issues that could be addressed through a more analytical approach to the overall plan and specifically to areas where stratigraphic relationships could potentially be detected. Much of the plan produced by the

investigation in 2002 differs little from that produced by Porter and others in terms of metrical accuracy, but it has recorded many more features for the first time and has led to a thorough re-appraisal of all the earthwork evidence. In addition to a plan of the village and its immediate environs at a scale of 1:1 000 and of the North Manor at 1:500, it produced a digital ground model of the natural topography. In view of the intensive research that had already been carried out, the documentary research undertaken in support of the fieldwork was limited to a review of the secondary sources and readily available primary sources, particularly maps and plans.

## 4. HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE

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### Settlement prior to documentary evidence

Aerial survey, fieldwalking and excavation have provided widespread and variable evidence of settlement in the environs of Wharram Percy from the late Iron Age onwards. At the time when the publication of the early excavations was being prepared in the later 1970s, archaeological theory was generally determinist in its outlook. In keeping with this trend, the evidence for pre-medieval activity was at first widely interpreted as indicating a significant degree of direct continuity of occupation, which almost implied an evolutionary progression towards the nucleated medieval village (Roberts 1987, 18; Stamper *et al* 2000, 18). The following summary is derived almost exclusively from the published accounts (the most important listed in Section 3). Yet it inevitably reflects a changed theoretical stand-point: from the current perspective on the development of landscape, which implicitly underpins the interpretations of this report, the tone of earlier interpretations would seem to overemphasise the degree of continuity and the importance of earlier land-use in determining its subsequent development. Rather, the pattern of the landscape's development now seems more complex: at least as much the product of change, on occasions of a sudden and unpredictable nature, often instigated by individuals for idiosyncratic reasons (Roberts 1987, 18; Everson *et al* 1991, 6-9; Hodder 1992).

Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age artefacts have been found around Wharram Percy, but the earliest evidence of actual settlement so far discovered dates to the Iron Age. A late Iron Age high-status burial, dating to the 1st century BC, was discovered on the natural terrace occupied by the medieval church. Near the edge of the western plateau just to the north of the village, aerial survey has identified a series of square barrows, probably dating to the 4th to 1st centuries BC, suggesting that activity was widespread across the site, though no domestic features have been identified. The focus for late Iron Age activity seems to have been a complex of enclosures and trackways on the high ground to the north-west of the site, possibly representing two small farms (Beresford and Hurst 1990, 69-72).

Elements of the late Iron Age agricultural landscape continued in use into the Roman period and excavation of the quadrangular enclosure to the north-west of the village demonstrated that modifications there continued into the 4th century. The increased capacity of a grain-drying kiln set into the side of the trackway south of the North Manor suggests that the area did not experience the supposed widespread crisis of the late Roman economy (Beresford and Hurst 1990, 71). On the other hand, the re-use in the walls of the kiln of large, tooled sandstone blocks, presumably taken from a villa or similar high-status building in the vicinity which has not yet been pin-pointed, may point to some measure of decline at the upper end of the social spectrum.

Two Anglo-Saxon *Grubenhäuser* or 'sunken-featured buildings', dating from the 6th century, were built into the base of the same trackway (Beresford and Hurst 1990, 71-5; Milne and Richards 1992). This has been described as 'paradoxical' in that it suggests both continuity

of occupation and the disruption of the established pattern of movement. However, given that the sunken trackway may have been singled out for nothing more than the shelter that it offers, arguably the disuse of the route, with all that implies, may be regarded as the more significant indicator. Excavation revealed evidence of settlement in as many as six different areas in the middle Saxon period, from around AD 650 to 850, each of which has been interpreted as a 'focus' in its own right, suggesting a dispersed settlement pattern (Beresford and Hurst 1990, fig 54). However, the high coincidence between the examination of an area and the identification of a settlement focus is perhaps strong enough to suggest that the apparently disparate elements were parts of some more cohesive pattern of which the real focus has not, as yet, been recognised. Evidence for late Saxon and Scandinavian activity was strikingly scarce.

In common with most other deserted medieval villages in England, a truly nucleated village probably did not come into being at Wharram Percy until some point between the 10th and late 12th centuries, but precisely at what point within this span has not been securely established. The regular layout of the village shows clear evidence of what was initially interpreted as a single episode of planning, although more critical analysis has demonstrated that the western row is probably composed of two distinct units (Wrathmell 1989, fig 29). There has also been protracted debate over when this took place. It has generally been concluded, as was initially suggested, that since the pattern of the settlement and its associated fields seems to have derived from the Scandinavian system of land apportionment known as *solskift*, the planning might have been carried out in the Anglo-Scandinavian period, probably the 10th century (Beresford 1979, 22). In other words, the nucleation of the village and its planning may have come about in a single operation. Place names are often regarded as useful indicators of the antiquity of settlements and the name Wharram also probably derives from an Old Scandinavian word meaning 'at the bends' (that is, in the valley).

#### **The documented village**

Early reports on documentary research into Wharram contain a number of errors and misinterpretations, which have subsequently been revised. In common with many small rural settlements, the documentary evidence for the history of Wharram Percy is not extensive. In 1086, an entry in Domesday Book records that in the place then known as 'Warron', the king held 8 carucates of land (that is, an area notionally worked by eight plough teams, or sixty-four oxen), forming two 'manors', whose lords, prior to the Conquest, had been Lagmann and Carli. A holding of 1 carucate, which was tenanted by Ketilbjorn, was apparently 'sokeland', that is, land attached to a third manor, probably in Wharram le Street (Beresford 1979, 5-6; Roffe 2000, 2-5).

A document of 1242-3 shows that the Chamberlains were then the most important landowners, their holdings apparently corresponding to the manors earlier held by Lagmann and Carli. In 1176 William de Percy entered into an obligation to pay the king 200 marks 'for having his right at Wharram against Robert de Montford'. This unspecified 'right' may relate to the carucate formerly held by Ketilbjorn. In any case, the dispute seems to indicate an increase

in the interest of the Percy family in their holdings in Wharram Percy. The so-called South Manor, revealed in part by excavation, was built at about this time and was initially equated with the manor house of the Chamberlain family (Hurst 1979, 138-9). However, more recently, it has been concluded that without better understanding of the development of the North Manor, it would remain unclear whether the South Manor was built by the Chamberlain family to oversee their residual holding, or by the Percy family to service their newly-expanded estate (Roffe 2000, 3). In 1254, Henry the Chamberlain quitclaimed to Peter de Percy the rights that he had possessed over two-thirds of his own holdings in what was then called 'West Wharram', together with his rights in the remaining third which was held by Peter's mother Aubrey. The Percy family thus acquired both manors, but thereafter the village was still usually called 'South Wharram'; the name Wharram Percy was first applied in 1292 and did not become commonly used until considerably later. Excavated evidence suggests that the destruction of the South Manor occurred in the mid-13th century and it has been supposed that the North Manor outlived it, or was perhaps built at this time to replace it, and became the manor house of the Percy family. After 1254, the descent of the manor through the Percy family is relatively well documented. In 1321, Henry de Percy was instrumental in obtaining the king's permission to give the 'advowson', that is, the right to nominate the vicar, to Haltemprice Priory (near Hull), together with the millpond and land. At some point between 1394 and 1402, the Percy family of Spofforth, to whom the manor had descended, exchanged the manor with the Hilton family of Hylton Castle near Sunderland in return for a manor at Shilbottle in Northumberland, closer to the Percy family's main seats in Alnwick and Warkworth.

A series of fifteen *inquisitiones post mortem*, made following the deaths of members of the Percy and Hilton families, survive from the period between 1267 and 1543. Of these, five include valuations accompanied by written surveys giving useful topographical information concerning the holdings, which throw important light on the rest of the village. That of 1267 shows that the extent of the farmed land had remained fairly constant since Domesday. Yet a valuation of 1323, if compared at face value with the earlier one, seems to point to a severe economic downturn in the intervening decades, with two-thirds of the village's land then uncultivated and some holdings apparently empty. There were two water mills, each of which had probably been associated with one of the two manors, but these were apparently disused. The grant of 1320 also refers to a 'park' lying adjacent to an 'acre enclosed with a ditch', although this has been dismissed as probably being nothing more than a small paddock, not large enough to hold deer (Neave 1991, 57). The condition of the manor primarily reflects the fortunes of its owners, rather than the state of the wider economy, but it is perhaps significant that it was given a positive value for the last time in 1323. By 1368, following the Black Death, although the manor house was still standing, it was in need of extensive repairs which made it worthless and the surveys of 1435 and 1458 refer only to the *site* of the manor. Nevertheless, in 1323, the village still comprised at least eighteen households including the manor and the parsonage. In a tax assessment of 1334, Wharram Percy ranked thirty-third of the fifty villages in Buckrose Wapentake, its valuation of 18 shillings not much more than half the average of 33 shillings.

The onset of the Black Death in 1349 brought about the death of Eustachia de Percy's husband Walter de Heselton and probably the vicar, Peter Lyelff. It has been estimated that the plague led to a decrease in the population from around sixty-seven to forty-five and this was severe enough to prompt a remission of nearly one third in the tax collection of 1352. Despite this, thirty houses were occupied in 1368 and one of the mills was working profitably, while both the millponds generated an income from fishing. The operation of the mill, together with the fact that all the arable land left uncultivated in 1323 was once more in use, indicate a degree of economic recovery. The worth of the mill remained little changed in 1435 and 1458, and at least sixteen houses remained occupied at those dates.

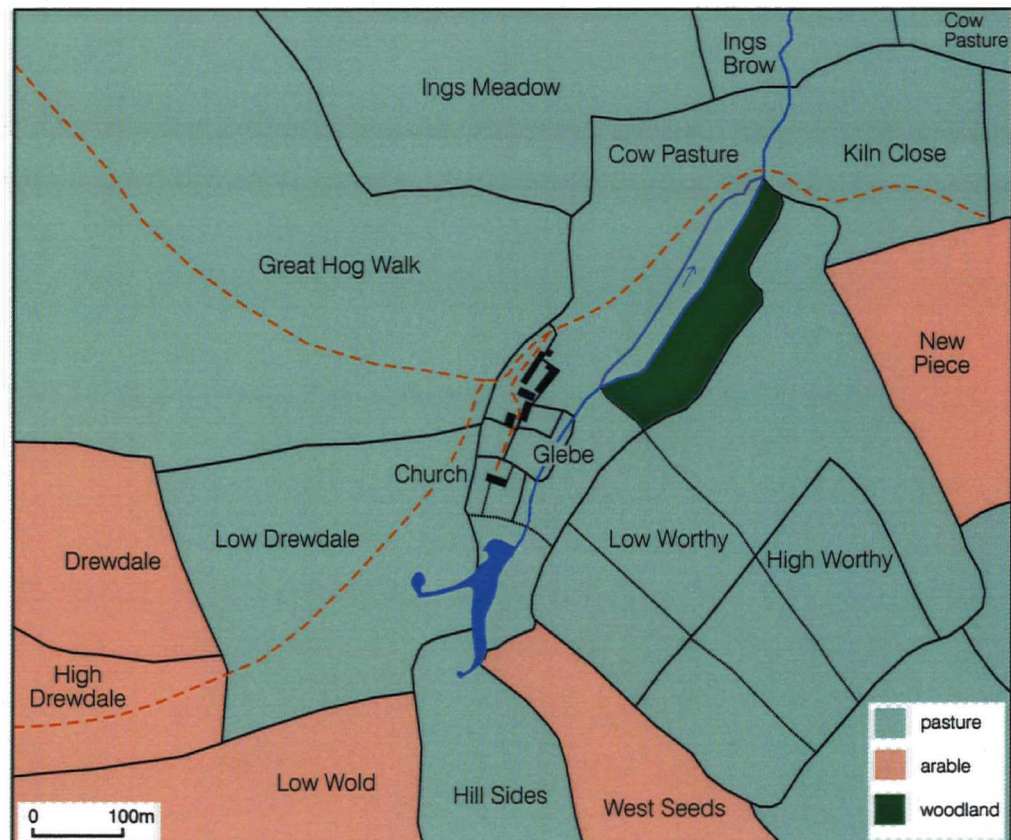
After 1458, there seems to have been a sharp decrease in the population, coinciding with a widespread trend amongst landlords of increasing pasture at the expense of arable land, and perhaps resulting from evictions which went undocumented. Material presented to Commissions of Enquiry in May 1517, in the wake of the anti-enclosure Acts of 1489 and 1515, provides evidence for the eviction of four families and the deliberate destruction of their houses, probably at the instigation of Baron Hilton at some point between 1488 and 1506 (Beresford 1979, 7). However, the discovery of two early 16th-century jettons and stoneware imported from Cologne, along with a significant quantity of other post-medieval material, may indicate that the final desertion actually occurred after the end of the date range suggested by the documentary evidence (information from Ann Clark). There is also evidence that the population was sparse throughout the township by the early 16th century and that most use of the church was made by the villagers of Thixendale and Towthorpe. In lawsuits of 1555-6 relating to the rebuilding of the parsonage after fire damage, none of the witnesses gave Wharram Percy as their place of residence. In his evidence, the former vicar, Marmaduke Atkinson, stated that over the preceding sixteen years '...there had not been growne upon the two oxganges of lande [that is, the glebe land held by the parish church]... above two or three load of corne in one yere', indicating that arable agriculture had been reduced almost to the point of extinction (Borthwick Institute: Cause Papers C.P.G 917).

#### **Post-medieval land-use**

In 1573, Sir William Hilton sold the manor of Wharram Percy to Matthew Hutton, then Dean of York and later Archbishop. By 1584, the whole township was required to provide only four armed men, compared with the sixteen from Wharram le Street, and this in part reflects the change to an economy based on sheep. Leases dating to the early 17th century testify to the enclosure of former arable land, referring to 'hedges and ditches sett with quickwood' (that is, hawthorn). The fact that some of these are described as 'nowe decayed' suggests that they may have been planted soon after the final evictions. In 1634, Matthew Hutton's nephew, also called Matthew, sold the manor to Sir John Buck of Filey. Apart from a brief interlude during the Civil War when it was confiscated by the Parliamentarians, the manor remained with the descendants of the Buck family until Henry Lord Middleton of Birdsall purchased it in 1833. In 1670-4, the collectors of the Hearth Tax recorded only two houses at Wharram: the parsonage and a farmhouse nearby, of which Mr Bacon was then the tenant. An inventory dated March 1699 of the possessions of the recently deceased tenant William Botterell valued the flock at £257 and wool at £51, indicating that sheep were still

the mainstay of the economy, but there was also wheat and oats totalling £30, showing that limited arable agriculture had returned. The inventory also gives a clear picture of the use of the farmhouse, complementing the evidence revealed by the excavation of the building's foundations in 1989. By 1716, the location of the glebe land belonging to the church had been forgotten, suggesting that this small pocket of arable land had entirely reverted to rough pasture.

In August 1773, Sir Charles Buck had a meeting with the mason who was to oversee the 'Improvement' of his estate. This was to entail the conversion of the pasture back to arable, the rebuilding of the farmstead on a grander scale, and the construction of two new farms at some distance from the deserted village: Bella Farm and Wharram Percy Farm. Accounts show that between December 1775 and May 1776, post-and-rail fences were erected and planted at intervals with ash seedlings; a Terrier of 1825 mentions the existence of those around the churchyard (Borthwick Institute: PR WP 9/1a) and a few mature trees still stand. Work on the Improvement farm at Wharram Percy seems to have been completed by 1779 and on all the other farm buildings by October 1780. The new Improvement farm near the church comprised ranges of byres surrounding a courtyard, with a separate farmhouse on the same site as its predecessor a short distance to the south. The buildings are shown on an estate map of 1836 surveyed by William Dykes (Dykes 1836 and Figure 7). The foundations were completely excavated and subsequently laid out for display. The farmhouse was built in chalk and sandstone, with fashionable brick façades on the more visible south and west walls. The byre range on the western side of the courtyard was modified and rebuilt three times during the seventy-five years of its existence. The inventory made in 1786 following the death of William Monkman, whose father John had been tenant at the farm



**Figure 7**  
Fair copy of part of  
William Dyke's 1836  
estate map of  
Wharram Percy  
(based on Borthwick  
Institute: PR WP 9/5)

since at least 1746, adds little to the understanding of the buildings, but shows that at that date, a flock of 1,310 sheep still dominated the farming regime. Most of the buildings were demolished at some point between 1836 and 1851, but the lower courses of the range on the southern side of the courtyard were incorporated into a row of three cottages, preserving evidence for the form of the earlier building which is discussed in Section 5.11. The subdivision into cottages, which census returns from 1851 onwards show were occupied by agricultural labourers, is dealt with in Section 5.12. With the departure in the mid-1950s of the Milner family, who still lived in the cottages when Maurice Beresford first visited in 1948 and assisted with the early excavations, the last permanent occupation of the site (at least, at time of writing) came to an end.

With the final desertion of the medieval village, the days of the parish church of St Martin's were numbered. Analysis of the fabric of the church shows that it was reduced in size in the mid-16th century and again in the early 17th. In 1743, the vicar, William Mills, reported that, with the exception of a single family (that is, the occupants of Wharram Percy farm), all his parishioners lived in Thixendale. The construction of a church in that village in 1870 hastened the disuse of the parish church: the last burial was in 1906, the last marriage in 1923 and the last service in 1949. No major repair work was carried out after 1923 and by 1948, when Maurice Beresford first visited, the interior was in an state of advanced disrepair. The roof, bells and furnishing were removed in 1954 (Borthwick Institute: Fac 1954/1/1). The pulpit and one of the pews were salvaged and are now stored in the nearby Cottages. The western side of tower collapsed as a result of subsidence following a storm in December 1959.

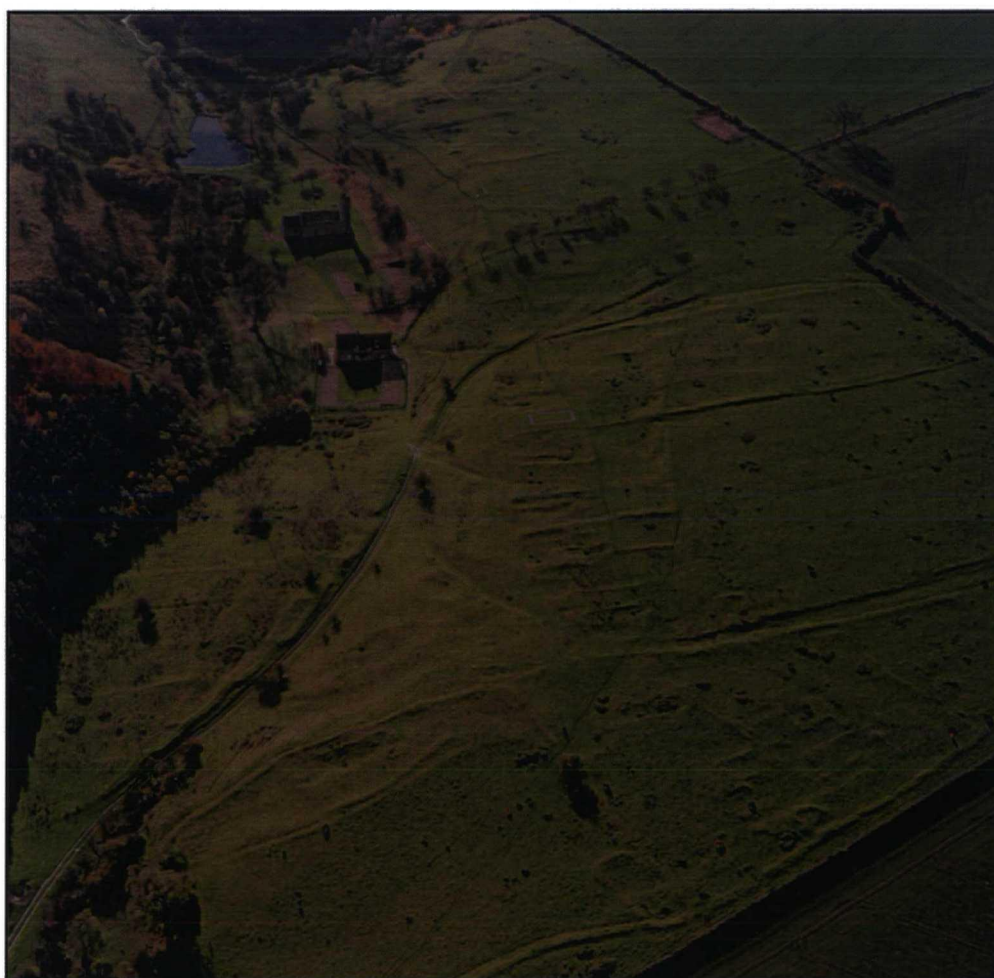
In contrast to the gradual demise of the church, the parsonage was rebuilt at least three times in the post-medieval period. The first rebuilding followed the fire in 1553, as mentioned above, and the vicar responsible for this work claimed that although its proportions differed, the new parsonage was just as large as its predecessor and more elegant. By 1604, however, the building had been let to tenants who had allowed it to fall into 'ruins and decay', prompting a second remodelling. The cold store of this building, which lay below ground and as a result was the only element that remained well preserved, was excavated and laid out for display. Perhaps due to subsidence, a new building was constructed in the 18th century, located a little distance to the north-east. This too has been excavated and laid out for display. Although evidently rather grander than its predecessors, it was described contemptuously in 1853 as '...a mere Cottage with a stable adjoining, both covered with thatch'; it was demolished at some point between 1834 and 1836. By 1809, the agricultural rights of the vicar had been reduced to tethering cattle in the three fields that contained the village site, named Water Lane, Towngate and Town Street.



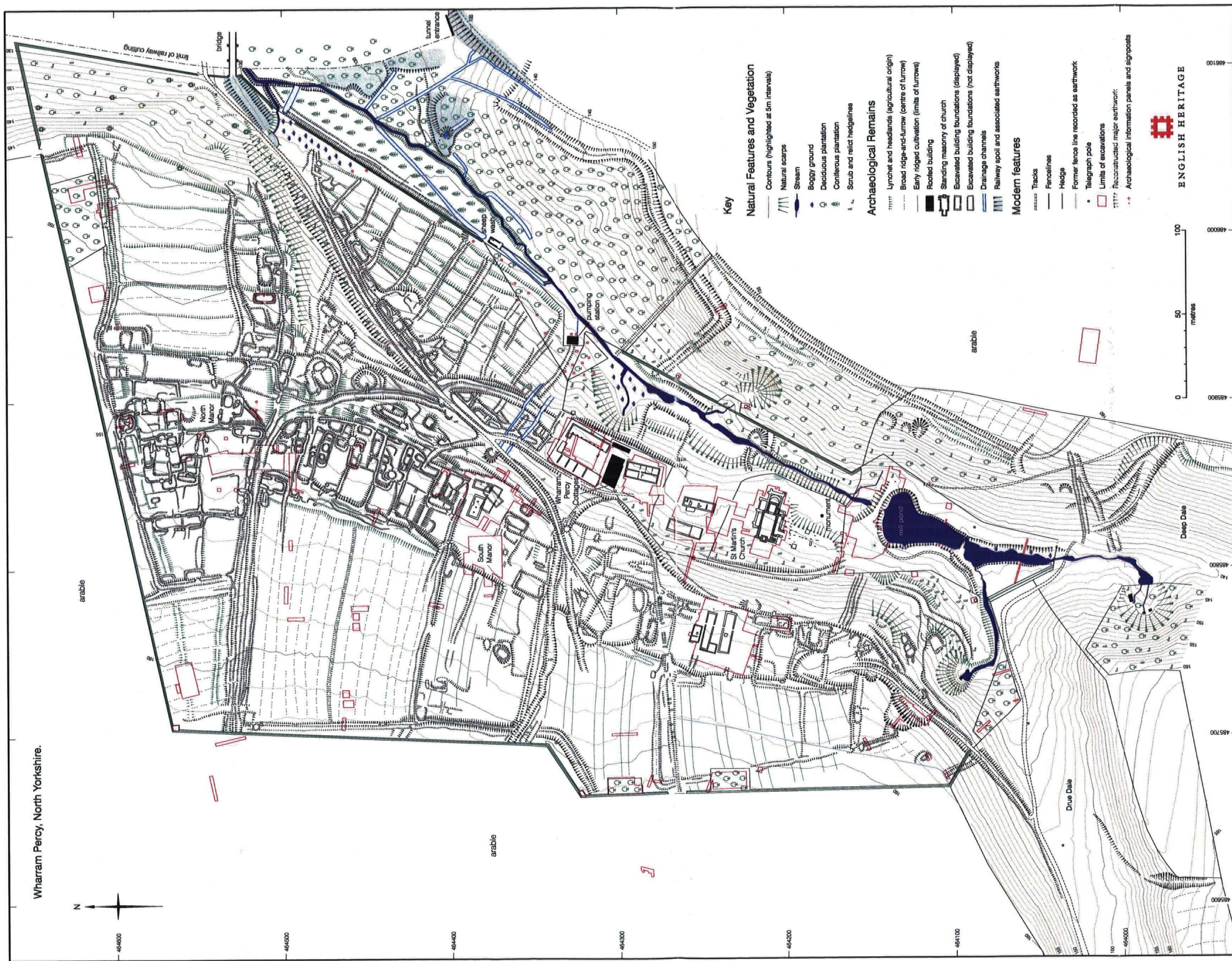
## 5. DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE EARTHWORKS

### 5.1 Summary (see Figures 8, 9 and 10)

This report has attempted wherever possible to use the same terms applied in the course of the Wharram Research Project to describe the various elements of the village. For convenience, however, the different rows of tofts identified previously have here been termed West Row (south), West Row (north), North Row and East Row. The buildings initially recognised as earthworks were numbered 1 to 22 and the excavation trenches, termed 'Areas', took their numbers from those buildings. Occasionally, the same numbers were used to denote the tofts in which the buildings were thought to lie. The identification of additional buildings now renders the previously-used sequence intermittent in relation to the remains on the ground, but the introduction of a wholly new numbering system for these would be untimely. Therefore, the numbers used previously have been retained with reference to the buildings originally recognised, and the tofts have been allocated a new series of numbers. Throughout this report, the newly recognised buildings are specified in relation to the numbered tofts in which they lie. The re-interpretation of some trackways and the recognition of others that have previously been overlooked have made it necessary to revise the earlier sequence.



**Figure 8**  
Aerial photograph  
of the village by  
RCHME, taken 1997.  
NMR ref: 17066/12,  
©Crown



**Figure 9**  
English Heritage plan of the village  
(reduced from original at 1:1 000 scale  
to 1:2 500)

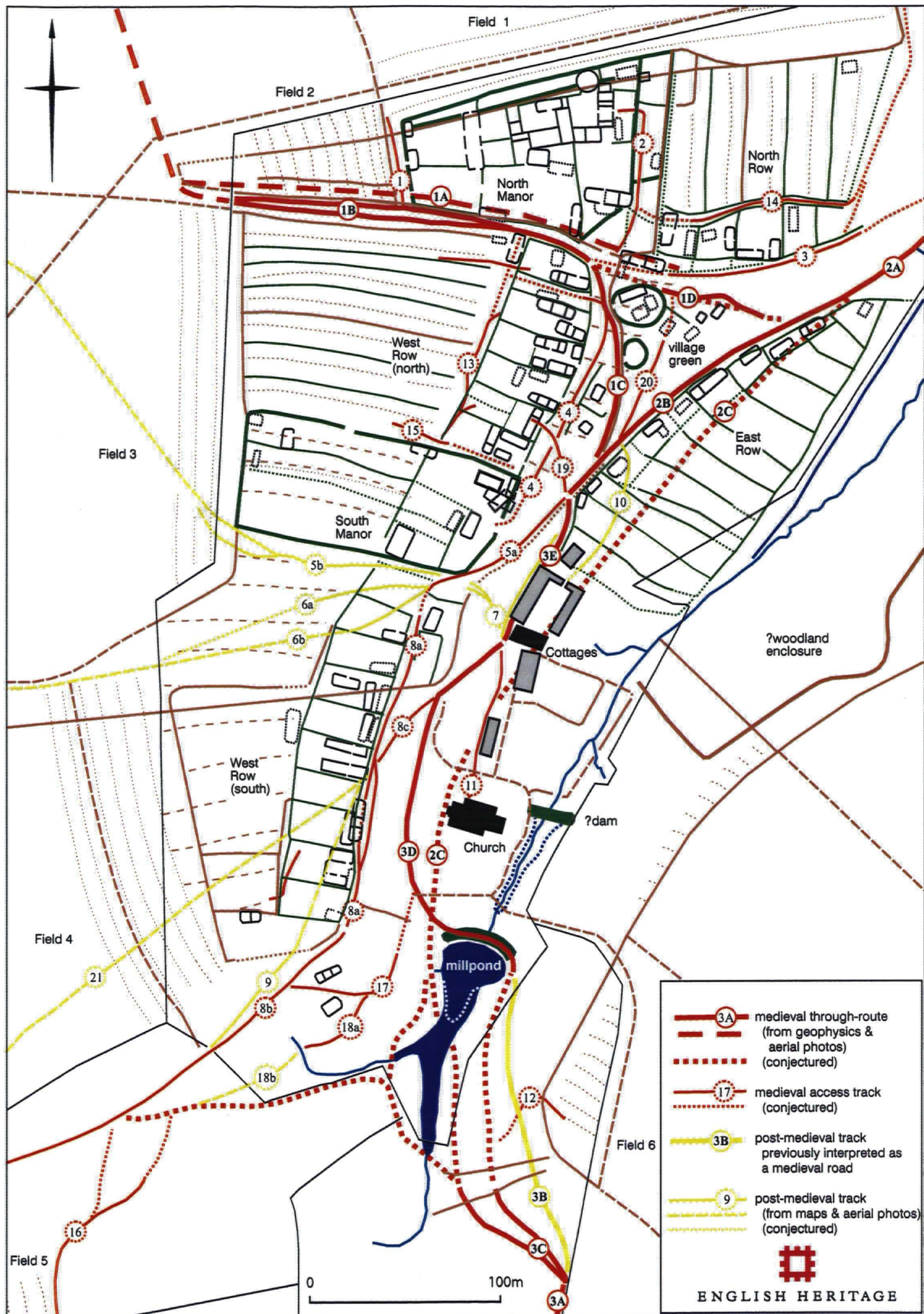


Figure 10 English Heritage schematic plan of the network of roads and tracks