

# **An Archaeological Resource Assessment of Medieval Nottinghamshire**

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Note: For copyright reasons the figures are currently omitted from the web version of this paper. It is hoped to include them in future versions.

There are 893 sites belonging to the Middle Ages currently recorded in the Notts SMR. Amongst these may be noted 16 castles, 15 monastic sites, 87 DMVs and SMVs (both certain and alleged), 72 moated sites, 117 fishponds (of which 37 are certainly mediaeval), 23 houses, 195 churches and 32 chapels. To these may be added the 395 or so communities or villages mentioned in Domesday Book where we have settlements under the same name today, and a small handful of towns including the Domesday boroughs of Nottingham and Newark, and of course the royal forest of Sherwood and its various associated sites and appurtenances.

This is an under-representation of the proportion of the historic environment that can be attributed to the Middle Ages however, for there are many elements of today's landscape that derive from this period. Indeed, despite the intrinsic interest and value of individual sites and types of site in this period, the relatively high numbers of these mean that they become intelligible only through landscape studies and vice-versa. However, until further data capture from historic maps and the landscape itself has been extended and entered to a common standard into a GIS, this understanding must remain localised and partial.

A comprehensive discussion of Nottinghamshire in the Middle Ages would take many more words than are possible or practicable for this exercise. Consequently, I shall present a simplified overview and pick up on those issues that appear most significant to me.

The period from the 10th century through to the later 13th century appears to have been one of exponential population growth. Domesday Book provides a snapshot of development in the first half of this continuum and is the point of reference for the whole of the Middle Ages in Nottinghamshire.. Despite all that may be said about development in the 10th and early 11th centuries the total population of the County in 1086 was minuscule by modern standards, with fewer than 30,000 people being recorded. Nevertheless most of today's communities had already been founded. The Trent Valley and south Nottinghamshire were well populated with large areas of arable and very little woodland. North and west of the Trent however, there were extensive woods and a much thinner population, although some communities here, such as Laxton, Worksop, Mansfield or Sutton in Ashfield were large, nevertheless

As has been discussed in the previous period reviews, these geographic and economic contrasts which amount to two distinct economic zones were a constant factor throughout much of the history and prehistory of the County. Although developments after 1086 blurred the balance between the two economic zones, they remain evident in, and crucial to understanding, both history and landscape in the mediaeval period and later.

For example, the heathland and woods of Sherwood, on the Sherwood Sandstones and most obviously lacking in settlement and intensive agriculture, typify for us the poorer zone and formed the core of the Royal Forest. However, the extensive woodlands on the adjacent geologies, in the Coal Measures to the west and the Mercia Mudstones to the east, which are indicated both by Domesday Book and landscape study, were undoubtedly a major factor in the extension of the Forest across all of Nottinghamshire north of the Trent under Norman and Angevin kings.

The eventual disafforestation of most areas outside of the traditional boundaries of Sherwood under Henry III was the result of a national political struggle over Forest rights between the crown and landowners, which in turn was part of a wider constitutional contest. However, if one asks what lay behind these events, it is possible to suggest that it may have been more than just a reaction to arbitrary rule and taxation. For the expansion of population and of agriculture manifestly brought Forest Law and community economies into conflict, and in this situation it was in the interests of the landowners to support the communities from which they drew their revenues. It has been claimed that Forest Law inhibited growth in settlement; equally, it may be possible to assert that the growing pressures on woodland and waste resources brought the issues over rights to a head and rendered the Forest itself untenable outside of its barely populated core. But, in that core the Forest survived until the later 17th century.

Overall, the principal effects in the countryside of the sustained growth in population, settlement and economy from the 10th to the 13th century were the expansion of fields and settlement at the expense of woodland. This was diminished by clearance for agriculture, grazing and felling for timber and wood products, despite the exercise of considerable skill in wood management. The rate and character of these changes varied from area to area across the County, according to the qualities of the soils and local social and economic circumstances.

While much of the argument for this expansion before 1066 is deductive, after 1086 it is visible in the distribution of monastic foundations, castles, moated sites, planted towns, and field systems. In Nottingham, the French Borough developed outside the royal castle established after the Conquest, and a new market area and further settlement became established to the north between the French Borough and the Late Saxon burgh, or English Borough. From the late 13th century this market area was enclosed by a town wall that linked the Castle to the line of the Saxon defences. In Newark, the Archbishop of Lincoln rebuilt the castle c.1134, demolishing a Conquest period motte and bailey precursor. At much the same time he built, or rebuilt, the bridge over the Trent and apparently replanned the town, possibly expanding it to take in the market place, refurbishing and extending the Saxon walls. This also embraced the church, which he may well have rebuilt, if not founded. East Retford seems likely to be a new town planted by Henry I c.1105.

Elsewhere, new settlements appear in documents in marginal areas, indicated by place-names with suffixes such as *woodhouse* or *moorhouse* and *thorpe*. While it is possible to argue that many of these were already extant, but were not recorded, in 1086, the documentary evidence for expanding field systems at Laxton and the plan-forms of villages indicates that many communities grew in the 12th and 13th centuries..

It is probably a reasonable assumption that most villages were nucleated by 1086, especially in the more populous Trent Valley and south Nottinghamshire. However, it is likely also that the process was not wholly complete throughout the County, and that this was brought about by population increase and 12th and early 13th century re-organisation of farms and villages. The regulated plan-form elements of many Nottinghamshire villages may result from this process, either as new or additional development or as re-organisation of existing settlements. However, it is also clear that some Domesday communities or estates were little more than farms and probably never grew much larger.

By 1086 then, or at the latest the 13th century, the settlement pattern of Nottinghamshire was established. This was typically one of nucleated villages and some hamlets set amongst open fields with pastures and, depending upon locality, woodlands and wastes towards the periphery of their townships or territories. Again typically, the distribution of the major, perhaps older, villages shows a choice of site that is at the junction of geologies and relates to water sources. This clearly implies that access to different types of agricultural resource was a major consideration in village development. Thus, in the Trent Valley itself the villages are mainly to be found towards one side of the gravel terraces, poised between the riverside pastures on alluvium in the flood plain and the arable on the free draining gravels. Further arable was to be found on clays sloping or above the Valley, whilst the woodland occupied the clays farther back. Along the north bank of the Trent therefore, townships and parishes were, and still are, long and narrow running more or less at right angles to the river.

A similar relationship between village site and agricultural resources can be seen around the wastes of Sherwood. In this area the villages are typically located along the fringes of the Forest at, or just back from, the junction of the Magnesian Limestone or the Sherwood Sandstones with the clays of respectively

the Coal Measures and the Mercia Mudstones. This siting permitted ease of access to common pastures on the Forest wastes, with the arable fields being principally located on the clays and again, with woodland lying farther back on the clays. On the high clays of central Nottinghamshire, there were fewer settlements which were often quite large. As in the case of Laxton, these often lie in a central position to their parish or township with fields, pastures, woods and wastes, in a concentric disposition.

In the Coal Measures on the west of the County however, in an area that was well wooded in 1086, a rather different pattern can be observed. Here, there were some large villages with extensive open field systems, but between them were small hamlets or farms. These were sited with their fields to one side and woodland to the other. This "woodland" pattern which was also followed by some of the villages, is one of polyfocal communities and dispersed settlement between blocks of woodland. This woodland was evidently inter-commoned originally and was eventually either assarted or otherwise cleared and enclosed, or grazed out to create open wastes and commons. Some of these commons survived into the second half of the 19th century and are still traceable in the landscape. While there is every reason to believe that some of the communities represented by the later farms and hamlets will have been in existence in 1086, and one could argue that the separation and dispersal of settlement foci represents the fossilisation of an early pattern, the implication of the documentary record and the landscape is that much of this "woodland colonisation" was a post-Conquest development.

Overall then, the Trent Valley and South Nottinghamshire presented the same sort of champion countryside as much of Midland England. North and west of the river on the other hand, communities and their fields were matched in extent by the woodland and wastes that lay between them.

This suggests that there were differences in the economies of the two regions and in the economies of individual communities. Arable and grain production was the primary landuse of the southern zone whilst animal husbandry and woodland resources had perhaps as much as equal weight in the northern. Indeed on some estates in the west of the County the balance may have been entirely reversed with animal husbandry as the prime concern. An example of this could be sheep grazing on the sandland grange of Rufford Abbey at Morton. However, such economic differences need to be approached with caution. Documentary evidence that communities south of the Trent had access to woodland resources in Sherwood hints that the movement of produce, materials and animals between different areas was normal.

We should never forget that we are dealing with a society that functioned through a complex of long established rights and obligations were not only borne by lords, tenants and individuals, but also were between communities and institutions. Also we should not be blinded to agricultural realities by the emphasis on grain production that is evident throughout Nottinghamshire in the early Middle Ages. Animal husbandry was a necessity to mediaeval economy, for food, clothing, transport, ploughing and manuring. However, it is consistently under-represented in the documentary record.

The implications of this may be evident from a few statistics derived from Domesday Book. Adding up the recorded arable, woodland, and meadow, by applying multipliers of nominal acres, accounts for something under half of the total acreage of Nottinghamshire. So what was the remainder? Normally Domesday Book gives no information about livestock on the estates in the County. However, if we assume that each of the recorded ploughs required an eight ox team, then we can arrive at a total of over 16,000 working oxen at the time of the Great Survey. To maintain such a working population requires a constant breeding stock of females and some males, and that both these and the working population require pasturage, which itself must be managed and maintained, and other fodder. If to this we add the requirements for other types of livestock that must have been present, such as sheep and horses, it is clear that much of the un-described land in Nottinghamshire in 1086 must have been pasture.

The expansion of population, settlement and arable fields in the 12th and 13th centuries was at the expense of the woodland and wastes, and eventually the pastures. In the 11th century there was plenty of capacity in the land resources to endow new monasteries, churches and chantries and to support growing communities. By 1300 this had changed, and there were difficulties in making land grants that did not affect individuals and communities or infringe someone's legal or customary rights. For example, in the 12th century, both Gilbert of Ghent and the King had readily found land on the edges of, or within, the Forest to found and endow the abbeys of Rufford Abbey and Newstead, c. 1146 and c. 1173. However, when it came to Beauvale Priory, in c.1343, its endowment was small by comparison with earlier foundation, consisting of a single township and a number of scattered land parcels matched or exceeded in

value by revenues from appropriations of churches in its vicinity and grants of rents. Further, it took the better part of a generation for the Convent to lay hands on its entirety, if indeed it ever did. And this was in the Coal Measures where Domesday Book records a low population and much woodland !

Not even the Royal Forest was immune from erosion. Increasingly this was viewed by the Crown as a timber reserve and a source of revenue through fines for trespass, which since fines were repeated and trespasses were continued amounted to the licensing of usage by communities in or adjacent to the Forest. Here and in the commons and wastes of the Coal Measures, the practice of brecks was developed and institutionalised to supplement insufficient permanent arable, by the temporary enclosure and cultivation of parcels of land which after a period of some 3, 5 or 6 years, were thrown open, leveled and allowed to revert to heath or scrub. Dendrochronological evidence shows that even the timber resource became depleted with a lack of regeneration in the oaks during the 13th century.

After c.1250, the deteriorating climate, which was becoming colder and wetter which made the land harder to work and reduced crop yields, necessitated more expansion of fields. It may also have led to the redefinition of property boundaries and other features within settlements by the digging of new, or deeper, ditches to improve drainage and to cope with increased surface water run-offs.

By 1300 severe pressure on the land had developed, with almost every area that was capable of it being cultivated. This was often at the expense of pastures. Grazing in the woods and wastes became more intense. Although by modern standards the population was still low, perhaps some 150,000 people if we allow for a high sided five-fold increase on the numbers recorded in 1086, its needs could no longer be met with the agricultural technology and the environmental resources available.

Under these circumstances changes were inevitable and were already beginning by 1300. But the direction of change became dictated and accelerated by the catastrophe of the Black Death and the other epidemics that followed it in the 14th century. The result was to substitute for the pressures of over-population the new ones of labour shortages and changes in social organisation and agricultural practices, as landowners and tenants sought to maintain or improve their incomes.

The documentary record is insufficient to permit an accurate estimate of the effects of these epidemics in Nottinghamshire as a whole, but there is no reason to believe that it suffered any less than elsewhere. However, it appears that outbreaks of disease were not consistent from one place to another and while one community might be struck badly, another might escape almost completely. Despite documentary references to empty or ruinous dwellings in some Nottinghamshire villages, the vast majority of communities in the County were evidently able to respond to the changing circumstances in the later Middle Ages and to continue to prosper, although not necessarily without protracted difficulties.

With reduced population and social change there was a swing away from arable production. Marginal ploughlands and pastures were restored to grassland and open field rotations reorganised to allow for longer fallows, temporary grass and the creation of closes of permanent grass. Vacant tenancies were engrossed into occupied farms, creating more differential between large and small farms. Land exchanges created a growing tendency for the larger farms to be made up of consolidated blocks of land in the open fields, and for the boundaries of these to become fixed.

In some places however, the difficulties resulting from reduced population were particularly severe. Even after reorganisation of the fields, where there continued to be too few people to work the land landlords had little choice ultimately but to convert fields to pasture and enclose them for sheep grazing. But although these effects were terminal, they not immediate upon the 14th century visitations of plague, but were cumulative. For example, on the cold clays of the Wolds, in the south of the County, some communities were re-organising their fields in the first half of the 15th century and the renting out of sheep grazing appears in the second half.

The 15th century then, saw the establishment of convertible husbandry, with a more balanced, mixed farming regime. Grassland and the numbers of livestock increased. This involved changes in attitudes and economies of landholders, and the beginnings of the substitution of copy-hold for bonded tenure and of the rise of the yeoman. It was also the beginning of the movement to enclosure which, under different and changing stimuli, was to be the common theme of social, economic and landscape development in succeeding centuries down to the 19th century. However, it was but the beginning.

Although there are some 60 alleged DMVs listed for Nottinghamshire, it is likely that only some of the smaller hamlets or farms were lost in the 15th century, if any at all. The desertion of most of those settlements that were of any real size before 1300 belongs to 16th and 17th centuries.

It might be expected that the fall in population after 1350 and the resulting changes in land use would have led to a regeneration of woodland. Indeed, this seems to have been the case in Sherwood where the previous phase of poor oak regeneration appears to have been reversed after 1300. However, this has been attributed to the alienation from the Crown of many woods on condition that they be enclosed, thereby protecting regrowing timber from grazing by deer and domestic stock. Outside of these however, particularly on the Coal Measures, the degradation and diminution of the County's woodland appears to have continued without remit.

Why this should have been so is unclear, but it may perhaps be explained through a combination of continued grazing, which may have even intensified as the agricultural balance swung towards animal husbandry and the importance of common rights increased for the small farmers; together with more short-term and exploitative management of timber resources by some estate owners, and the demand for timber and wood by the expanding coal and iron industries. On the other hand, it is to be expected that coppice woods in particular would have been maintained in order to assure the supplies of charcoal necessary to sustain an iron industry. Our inadequate knowledge of the history of the woods of Nottinghamshire can not rule this out, but the overall impression of the documentary record is that there is relatively little to suggest concerted attempts to maintain coppice and scarcely any mention of charcoal burning. Certainly, no charcoal burning sites dating to the Middle Ages have been recorded to date. Whatever the reasons, and whatever the processes, it is clear that by the end of the period the woodland on at least the west side of Nottinghamshire was descending below the critical mass for sustainability. Elsewhere, the picture is less clear but it appears that it was the events and changes of the 16th and 17th centuries that completed the reduction of the extensive woods of 1086 to mere remnants.

The implication of what we know or may deduce about the circumstances of the late 14th and 15th centuries is that there is likely to have been reorganisation within settlements to accompany that of the management of agricultural resources and of the physical landscape. Unfortunately, archaeology has so far contributed little to deny or substantiate this assumption. Replanning in towns is also possible, functional separation may have increased with the refocusing of settlement concentrations and more open space for gardens and industrial activities. The old English borough in Nottingham, now the Lace Market area, appears to have become very reduced in population by the later 16th century. Contrary to the rather gloomy picture of plague, reduced population, social upheaval and agricultural difficulties, the period brought wealth and prosperity for some. This is evident in new building in stone, and later in brick, of churches (such as St Mary Magdelene in Newark which was rebuilt in the Perpendicular style, which also appears in many of the clerestories, aisle and chancel windows and porches of village churches), and of high status, aristocratic, manorial complexes (such as at Wiverton Hall, Lambley and Holme Pierrepont). It is also manifest in the timber-framed houses of merchants and others in Nottingham and in Newark, and in some villages.

It will be obvious how much of this overview is based upon the work of historians, historical geographers, and building historians, rather than archaeologists. The traditional site-based approach of archaeology has not been conducive to syncretical statements. This is despite, or is it because, we have a welter of evidence from the Middle Ages. We have buildings and ruins, we have earthworks- at all scales, from motte and bailey castles to ridge and furrow, we have the towns and the villages, and we have the landscape itself. We also have a wealth of historical data and models to apply to these and against which to interpret our archaeological evidence.

Consequently the range of study and discussion is vast, and the reaction, which has been in tune with academic approaches, has been to narrow the focus and to concentrate upon particular types of site or context. This might have been satisfactory if the availability of sites and the willingness of archaeologists to engage with the historical sources and the work of other historical disciplines had led to the development of research agenda for the County. Although there are notable exceptions, such commitment and development has not been sustained at the local level.

This may appear to be an overly critical and severe analysis. I do not deny the quantity, quality and value of past and present work. We do know a lot, especially about particular sites or places, and of course this knowledge has contributed and does contribute to our overall understanding of the Middle Ages in Nottinghamshire. But by now, we should, and could, know so much more. To explore the reasons behind this situation would be instructive but would take too long and be inappropriate for this paper. In the mean-time, when it comes to synthesis, the hard fact is that we remain dependent upon the work of other historical disciplines to provide context.

So, what **are** the issues and what **is** the research agenda that we should be taking forward?. The issues are, of course, legion. So, I will select a few, ones that appear to me to be most pressing. And I will begin with the need to recognise the continuing need to carry out basic research, to search for and acquire primary data, and to classify and analyse that data. That sites, features and remains still exist to be discovered is demonstrated by our Village Earthworks Survey. This was a reconnaissance exercise that, over 3 years, identified earthworks of a variety of descriptions within or adjacent to many of the villages in Nottinghamshire, and increased our knowledge of such remains by over 200%. What we may then ask, lies tucked away in rarely visited corners of parishes or within woodlands?

We may go on to ask what hope have we of being able to discuss adequately mediaeval field-systems without working through the available historical maps and developing a decent record of the ridge and furrow visible on aerial photographs or, more importantly, on the ground. How can we expect to write the much needed real history of Sherwood Forest without the field-work to identify earthworks and other features within woodlands and forestry and without examining the palaeoenvironmental data locked within colluvium and river valley deposits? How can we expect to develop our understanding of social and economic development, and of landscape, in the Middle Ages, when I must admit that the moated sites recorded in our SMR, those hardy perennials of MPP pilot projects, remain unclassified by type, let alone studied in terms of distribution, location and relationship to other remains.

Contrary to the assumptions of some, we do not know the full extent of our archaeological resource and there are no short-cuts to acquiring this knowledge - only 36% of the new earthworks recorded in our village survey were identifiable from aerial photographs before fieldwork.

To turn to more specific issues, a major question is when and how did the villages of Nottinghamshire develop? It is only an assumption, probably valid, that the communities represented in the entries of Domesday Book lived in villages. The general model of settlement development, derived from elsewhere in England sees the nucleation of settlement into villages as belonging to the 9th and 10th Centuries. We have no evidence of this from Nottinghamshire, indeed such little evidence as we have points to the likelihood of later dates for nucleation.

Consideration of nucleation also involves the question of the date of the planned elements that can be seen in many Nottinghamshire villages, and how these relate to more organic settlement layouts. Are these planned elements primary, belonging to the 9th or 10th Century phase of village nucleation suggested by some, or to a period of population movement and replanning in the immediate post Conquest period? Or are they, as I might suspect related to a reorganisation of farms and fields under the pressures of 11th and 12th century population expansion and seigneurial demands, with their planned regulation reflecting the planning of new towns?

Speaking of towns, we need to address our lack of detailed knowledge about the internal development of these. In Newark, for example, it appears likely that there were open areas within the walls, while apparent burgage plots have been shown to be post-mediaeval. We know little about East Retford, or for that matter any of the other small towns that developed in the Middle Ages, such as Worksop, Blyth or Mansfield, other than what we may glean from their plans. What then are we to say about the distributions of functions and activities across towns, about their historic buildings and their development and replanning through the centuries up to today?

Returning to the villages, we may note that many contain manorial sites, distinguished by manor houses, which are usually of a later fabric, moated sites and fish ponds. The identification and study of these, not just as individual features but as complexes which are both illustrative of the fortunes of an important sector of the mediaeval community and influential in the layouts of villages, is well overdue.

Just as we need to examine the origins of our villages, we need to look at them to assess the socio-economic changes of the 14th and 15th Centuries. Was there indeed a reorganisation, as we might expect from our historical model of reduced population and restructuring of farm holdings? And how far then are the villages that we see on post-mediaeval maps and today the product of this period?

In the wider landscape, we have a need to map its components, their extents and characters. I have already touched on this in my comments on primary research, but I must reiterate this need for it is at the level of landscape that the plethora of mediaeval sites, villages and towns comes together. But the development and chronology of the landscape itself needs study and throws up important questions.. We need to look at areas that were not arable fields. Were these woodland or pasture, or marginal land? Further, were these the remnants of earlier landscapes left over in the early mediaeval expansion of grain cultivation, or were they created in a less arable intensive, reorganised landscape of the Later Middle Ages?

I will finish my selection by pointing out that we have everything yet to learn about rural industry, and the economic relationships between town and country. At the head of the list is coal mining. Nottinghamshire is recognised as one of the cradles of the coal industry. Nottinghamshire coal has been claimed from Roman contexts and mining is recorded from the 13th century. Coal mining was evidently an important and growing part of the west Nottinghamshire economy during the Middle Ages, and developed its own skills and culture, laying the foundations for 16th century expansion and entrepreneurial development. It is however, poorly documented and has not been well studied in the field. We need to develop research into the early history of coal mining in Nottinghamshire as a matter of priority.

Coal is not alone in needing study, although it is symbolic of the lack of attention that industry in general has received. We need to examine pottery production, buildings, tanning, metalworking and food processing, indeed all the manufacturing and processing activities which are recorded in physical remains or documents. All of these can be addressed through palaeo-environmental studies, find studies, laboratory analyses, even field work and landscape studies. We need to identify the centres of production, not just of pottery, but of other manufacturing to examine both processes and distribution. We need to examine road and river transport and the uses of wind and water power. Finally, we have yet to even begin to consider the effects of rural markets on villages plans and development

So, we have much to do. We have a full agenda and the priorities are numerous and urgent. However, before I finish, I have a point to make about the development of our agenda, not least because of some of the attitudes expressed in discussion at the seminar on the Saxon period.

My point is this : the Middle Ages is an historical period and the range of archaeological evidence is matched, if not exceeded by documentary and other data. We are not alone in our interest in the period and we are not the sole possessors of knowledge about it and of the right to interpret it. Our agenda and our attitudes should be multi-disciplinary in its approach to the evidence, the issues and the questions. Historical questions do not lie beyond the remit of archaeology. Historical research sets questions for archaeology and vice versa.

Therefore, if we wish to understand the landscape, settlement and economies of the Middle Ages, we have to work with the other students of history and to be prepared to use their materials and where appropriate, concepts. An agenda based on a purist view of the limitations to archaeological inquiry is both restrictive and counter-productive for a period with such a range of evidence and which was so causative in our modern surrounding and culture.