

# MAKING THE MOST OF A BAD SITUATION? GLASTONBURY ABBEY, MEARE AND THE MEDIEVAL EXPLOITATION OF WETLAND RESOURCES IN THE SOMERSET LEVELS

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## RECONSTRUCTING A MEDIEVAL LANDSCAPE

Meare, in the Somerset Levels, is famous for the Abbot of Glastonbury's 'Fish House', and it is well known that it lay to the south of a large open lake, known as Meare Pool. The manor of Meare was centred on a small bedrock island that protrudes through the extensive wetlands of the Brue Valley immediately west of Glastonbury: this was about the lowest-lying and most poorly-drained part of the Somerset Levels, and a question that has to be asked is why on earth did anyone bother living there?

A current programme of research at the University of Exeter is attempting to reconstruct the wider medieval landscape of Meare and its environs, in particular showing how highly valued wetland resources were in the medieval period. A strongly interdisciplinary approach is being used, taking advantage of Glastonbury's remarkably rich documentary archives (eg Musgrove 1999; 2001). In the past these have been extensively 'quarried' for the information they contain on socio-economic history, but they also include abundant, but previously neglected, references to landscape features – such as settlements, fields, mills, fisheries, roads, and canals (yes, artificial canals!). In this project an attempt has been made to actually locate where these features were and address the question: what did the medieval landscape on one of Glastonbury Abbey's manors actually look like?

The key to this lies within the historic landscape: the patterns of fields, roads, settlements and watercourses that make up the modern

countryside, and are represented on the earliest (early 19<sup>th</sup> century) cartographic sources. 'Historic landscape characterization' is a method for analyzing these different patterns of fields, roads and settlements, leading to the identification of a series of distinctive 'landscape character areas'. Analogy with the recent, well-documented, past shows that different character areas arise from different processes of landscape evolution: an example is how gradual, piecemeal enclosure of an area will lead to small, irregular shaped patterns, whereas large-scale, systematic colonization generally results in more regular layouts. Whilst the process of landscape evolution can often be inferred from morphology, however, historic landscape characterization can at best only give a relative chronology for when certain areas were colonized: to improve on this we need to integrate a wide range of other information.

The earliest cartographic sources we have (notably the Tithe Surveys) contain an abundance of names – not just settlements but fields, roads, watercourses – and in many cases these can be traced back to the medieval period, notably when such a rich documentary archive as Glastonbury's survives. In Meare, for example, the former open fields can be located (which covered most of the bedrock island), along with extensive areas of embanked and drained wetland that extended out from the fen-edge. This shows that by the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century around 4-5 km<sup>2</sup> had been reclaimed within the manor, rising to around 9-11 km<sup>2</sup> in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century (most of which was restricted to alluvial soils: Figures 1-2). Though some of these reclaimed lands were used as arable, they were mostly used as meadow. Glastonbury's wetland manors had a strongly pastoral economy including

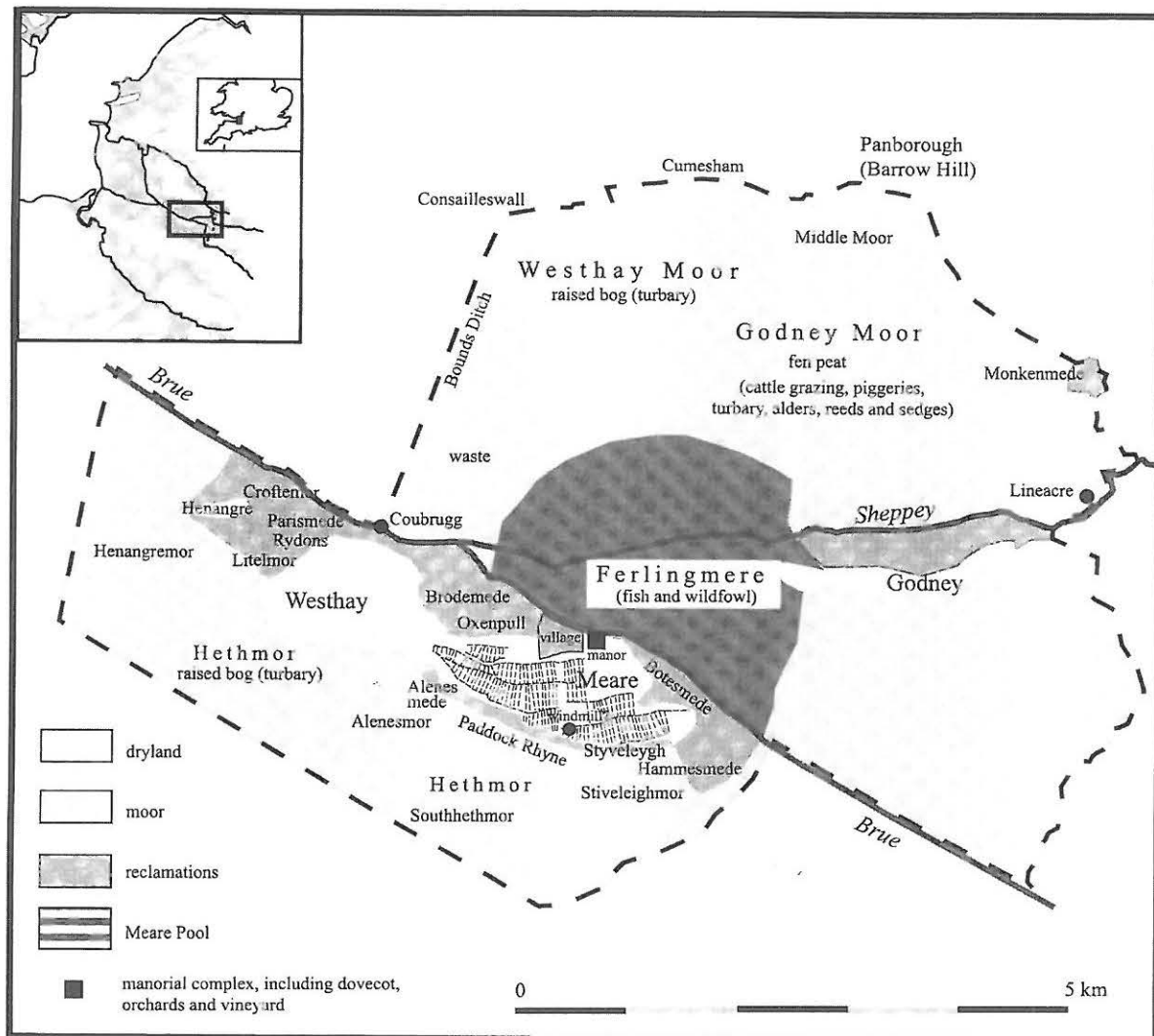


Figure 1: the parish/manor of Meare, at the eastern end of the Brue Valley in the Somerset Levels, c.1350. The planned village lies to the west of the manor house, and on the northern side on an open field that occupies most of the bedrock island. By c.1350, reclamation was restricted to the alluvial fringes of the island. Ferlingmere (Meare Pool) was a seasonally fluctuating lake, providing the setting for the famous Abbot's Fish House (see Figure 3). The peat bogs to the south of the island and around Meare Pool were used as common pastures, rich in natural wetland resources.

the Abbey's only major herds of cattle and pigs, and its only horse studs. Even the arable side to the economy of these wetland manors was significantly geared towards pastoral farming, with up to 40% of demesne land being sown with beans (an important fodder crop).

### RIPPLES FROM THE 'GREAT REPLANNING'?

The careful analysis of the 'historic landscape', and its integration with documentary evidence, not

only allows us to identify areas of medieval reclamation and other field systems but can also be used to study the plans of settlements. This has been demonstrated in another of Glastonbury's manors, Shapwick, lying immediately south of Meare on the Polden Hills (Aston and Gerrard 1999; Corcos 2002). Shapwick is one of a series of carefully planned villages strung out along the Polden ridge, and appears to date to the 10<sup>th</sup> century when a dispersed settlement pattern appears to have been replaced with nucleated villages and their surrounding open fields (the

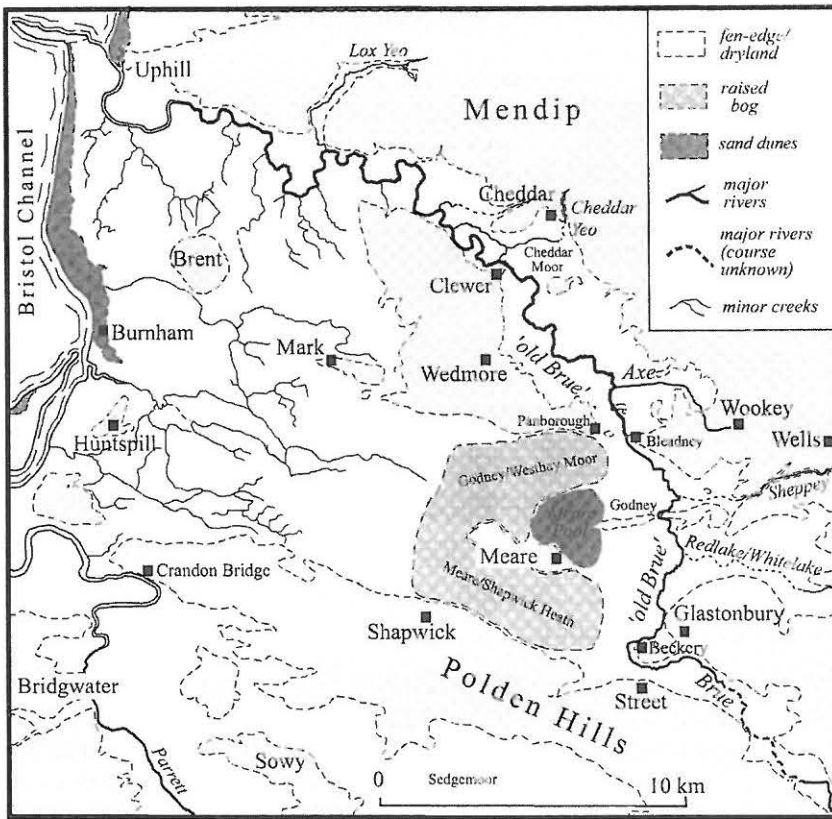


Figure 4: The natural drainage system in the Somerset Levels before human intervention (which occurred in or before the late 11<sup>th</sup> century). Those rivers flowing into the Levels from the east (around Glastonbury) were unable to flow directly westwards into the Bristol Channel as their route was blocked by the raised peat bogs around Meare. Thus, the 'old Brue' flowed northwards into the Axe Valley. The coastal area, around Brent Knoll and Huntspill was an intertidal environment.

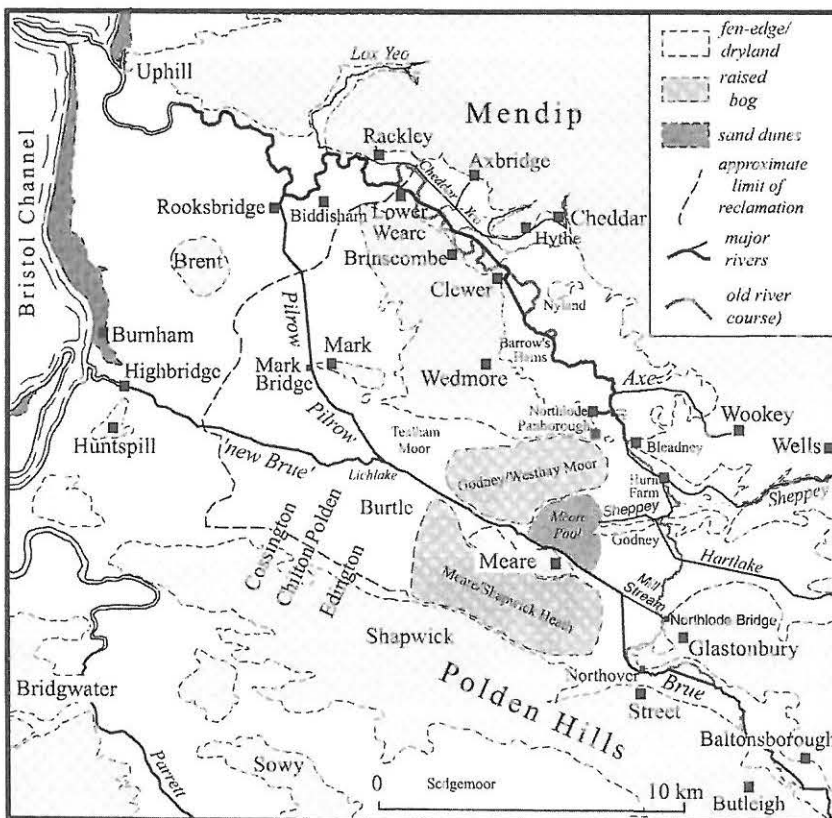


Figure 5: The modified and wholly artificial system of rivers and canals in the Somerset Levels c.1300. The Brue was diverted past Meare by the late 11<sup>th</sup> century. It may originally have flowed along the Pilrow Cut to join the Axe at Rooksbridge; the 'new Brue' under the Highbridge being later?

itself was described as an island), most of which have evidence for early churches or chapels (Aston 2000, 58; Rahtz and Hirst 1974, 11-12). Of these, Meare was the most important, said to be the late 5<sup>th</sup> century hermitage of St Benignus, and being promoted sometime between 971 and 1170 to become one of the 'seven Churches' which Glastonbury held and had exemption from Episcopal and other jurisdiction. The inclusion in the Twelve Hides of what in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century was probably still largely an extensive tract of wetland wilderness, suggests that the area, and notably the small bedrock islands, must have had a special symbolic significance in the eyes of the monks.

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