

POLYFOCAL SETTLEMENT AND THE ENGLISH VILLAGE

(FIG. 67)

Over the last few years scholars have shown an increasing interest in the origin and development of the English village. Much new information on the establishment, growth, mobility and decline of villages has appeared in print, some of which has been summarized elsewhere by the present writer.¹⁰⁵ We can now be sure that the nucleated village, so typical of much of lowland Britain, is the result of complex changes taking place all through the medieval and later periods, and that we are far from understanding exactly how and when they came into being.

However, though most older assumptions about English villages have been rightly queried by recent work, there is one that has not: that is, that villages either resulted from steady growth from a farmstead or hamlet, or were deliberately created as a single entity. In this paper the writer would like to suggest that there is another possible form of habitation which eventually produces nucleated villages, that of 'polyfocal' settlement. It is not offered as a new, alternative explanation for the whole origin of the lowland village, or even the most important one. It is put forward as a tentative suggestion of a stage of development through which some, but certainly not all villages could have passed.

The term polyfocal was originally coined by a group of extra-mural students engaged in examining the present morphology of a number of Midland and East Anglian villages. It had become clear that in some of these villages it was impossible to describe their existing layout as a single entity such as a 'green' village or 'street' village. Villages occurred with more than one green, major road junction or group of buildings, and it was thus found necessary to describe these various units as separate entities and the whole village as polyfocal. At this stage the term was used as a purely descriptive one pertaining only to the existing situation.

The next stage was to establish whether the observed focuses had existed at an earlier date. Because of the involvement of extra-mural students, any method used had to be, in the first instance at least, fairly simple and related to easily accessible documentation. At the beginning this meant the use of estate, enclosure, tithe and early Ordnance Survey maps as well as an examination of the standing buildings. The results of this study were encouraging in that they showed clearly that a number of villages did have separate focuses by the 17th or 18th century at least. Indeed, the work emphasized these features more clearly than did the morphological studies, since much of the recent expansion had distorted and obscured the earlier patterns.

At Newnham, Northamptonshire, which an examination of the present village had shown already to consist of two quite separate focuses, each centred on a green, the draft enclosure map of 1765 indicated that at that time there was a third focus, centred on yet another green. This green was later enclosed, the surrounding buildings demolished and the area emarked.

At this point began the more difficult task of establishing whether separate village focuses existed in the medieval period. First of all documentary sources likely to give topographical detail were examined, in the hope that these might show early focuses. On the whole this evidence proved to be extremely elusive, certainly in Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire where the work was carried out — though elsewhere it may achieve results. Nevertheless some interesting points did emerge. A type of village, common in parts of the East Midlands and Cambridgeshire, is that with clearly identifiable 'ends' or groups of houses set some distance from the main centre, each usually called '. . . End'. From the evidence of place names, it appeared that these were often in existence by the late medieval period at least. For example, at Eltisle, Cambridgeshire, though the main village is set around a large triangular green, there is another small

¹⁰⁵ C. C. Taylor, 'Aspects of village mobility in medieval and later times', in *The Impact of Man on the Landscape: the Lowland Zone* (Council British Archaeol. Research Report, forthcoming).

group of houses a little to the SE. called Caxton End or East End. This was centred on another, smaller, green which was enclosed in 1868. However, in a document of 1455 a clear distinction is made between villagers living in *le Estende* and *le Upende*¹⁰⁶ suggesting that there were two focuses at this time.

The next problem was to try to trace back the existence of separate focuses to an even earlier period. Again because of the need to use easily accessible documents, manorial records were examined in an attempt to see if the major medieval manors had any relationship to the observable or documented focuses. This produced interesting, if unexpected results. It appeared that in certain villages the individual focuses were connected with the location of major manor houses and, in general terms, with manorial holdings which could sometimes be traced back to the late 11th century. This was remarkable, in that the villages of Midland England have usually been regarded as multi-manorial with no clear physical division between the manors. Yet it had already been shown that in the chalklands of Wessex, for example, individual manors listed in Domesday Book were almost always separate settlements, even if those settlements eventually coalesced to form larger villages in later medieval times. This was first pointed out as long ago as 1947,¹⁰⁷ and since then other work has been carried out proving it beyond doubt.¹⁰⁸ Therefore the possible existence of this same feature in the Midlands may not be as unusual as it seems at first sight. Nevertheless, the existence in the medieval period of separate village focuses related to individual manors or tenurial holdings was not easy to confirm. The tracing of manorial descents is beset by difficulties and the constant sub-ifeudation and the creation of new fees, especially in the 12th and 13th centuries, causes endless problems. In many cases it proved impossible to trace the descent of manors and tie them conclusively to individual focuses. Even so, at a few places it was possible to establish that manorial units, in existence in 1086, appeared to be related to specific focuses.

One example of these results may be seen at Duxford, a village S. of Cambridge. At first sight Duxford is a simple nucleated village with a markedly rectilinear form. However, if examined carefully, with the help of the enclosure map, it can be seen to consist of two parallel streets some 300 m. apart, running down to the R. Cam and formerly extending eastwards to cross it at two fords; between these two streets is another group of more irregular lanes centred on a small green now partly built over. So, by the early 19th century, there were three distinct focuses to the village. There is no doubt that these have been collectively called Duxford from the late 11th century onwards. The manorial history of the village is complex but all three focuses can be identified as separate manorial holdings as far back as the late 12th century. Two of them also can be traced further back to two of the four manors listed under Duxford in Domesday Book. As there is another, now deserted, settlement in the parish it is possible that all four entries in Domesday Book relate to separate places. Additional evidence for the existence of at least two of the focuses by the early 12th century is the fact that there are two churches in the village, each of 12th-century date, and each associated with one of the linear streets. In addition each of the latter focuses has a moated manor house site near it, while the third has a 16th-century manor house the name of which, Temple Farm, suggests that it is the site of the manor house of the Knights Templars who once held this manor. Thus, though absolute proof is not forthcoming, there are indications that Duxford developed into the present village from three early focuses.

This work seemed to indicate that a certain number of Midland and East Anglian villages were made up of a number of separate nuclei as early as the 11th century. Having reached this stage the writer realized that he had seen in other parts of England

¹⁰⁶ *Victoria County History, Cambridgeshire*, v (1973), 47.

¹⁰⁷ C. D. Drew, 'The manors of the Iwerne valley', *Procs. Dorset Nat. Hist. and Archaeol. Soc.*, LXIX (1947),

45-50.

¹⁰⁸ C. C. Taylor, *Dorset* (London, 1970), 49-67.

similar polyfocal villages and even described them without realizing it. For instance, among many other aspects of a complicated history, the village of Whiteparish, Wiltshire, exhibits polyfocal features. There the present village "shows that there are still two basic nuclei which have grown towards each other, but even now are not quite joined up".¹⁰⁹ These nuclei were conclusively identified with two separate and very small Domesday manors. Likewise in Dorset, the large and complex village of Marnhull, whose morphology has always defied explanation, in fact contains three clearly separate focuses. An attempt in 1966 to locate a lost place-name in the parish led to the discovery that these three focuses were in fact listed as separate manors in Domesday Book under the name of an adjacent village.¹¹⁰ Again in Dorset, at Combe Keynes, the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments discovered and recorded a large area of settlement earthworks around the isolated church and at one side of the existing village.¹¹¹ The normal interpretation of such remains would be village shrinkage, but the Commission in fact did not offer any explanation. The most likely interpretation, however, had already been published, again during the work on lost place-names, when it was established that the village was two separate units, both listed as manors in Domesday Book, one of which was ultimately deserted.¹¹²

So far the evidence for polyfocal settlements has been based largely on historical documents but, by the late 11th century, the historian is approaching the limits of his material. To establish the existence of polyfocal settlements before this time is a task which probably must be left to the archaeologists. Unknowingly perhaps this has started to emerge from recent work. Two possible sites are worth noting in this context. First, at New Wintles, Eynsham, Oxford, two separate but related groups of farmsteads, dated to the 6th or 7th century have been discovered.¹¹³ More interesting perhaps, especially as they relate to a known village, are the two separate early Saxon settlements recovered from Wharram Percy, Yorkshire.¹¹⁴

Perhaps the best example of the use of archaeological evidence, largely because it forms part of a convincing documented history, is that of Wollaston, Northamptonshire (FIG. 67). Because of development associated with the 19th-century leather industry the village now presents an amorphous plan of little coherence; but on the enclosure map of 1789 a much clearer picture emerges of its old plan, which can then be recognized today. It had a 'dumbbell' plan, consisting of two separate focuses linked by a straight street. The northern focus contains the church, still standing on one side of a green which has been partly encroached upon. On the other side of the green is a small motte which, to judge by the existing building line, had a bailey on its downslope side facing the green. There is no doubt that this northern focus was the centre of a five hide manor, recorded in Domesday Book and held then by Gunfrey de Chocques. The descent of this manor has been traced without a break down to the 19th century, when its enclosed demesne land lay exclusively around this part of the village.¹¹⁵ The later manor house site of this focus remained represented by earthworks until 1957, when they were destroyed by housing development. However, rescue work on the site revealed occupation back to the 12th century.¹¹⁶ In addition, later excavations at the parish church have produced occupation material of early Saxon date.

¹⁰⁹ C. C. Taylor, 'Whiteparish', *Wiltshire Archaeol. Mag.*, LXXII (1967), 83.

¹¹⁰ C. C. Taylor, 'Lost Dorset place names', *Procs. Dorset. Nat. Hist. and Archaeol. Soc.*, LXXXVIII (1967), 208-9.

¹¹¹ Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *Dorset*, II (1970), Combe Keynes (12).

¹¹² C. C. Taylor, *op. cit.* in note 6, 214-15.

¹¹³ M. Gray, 'The Saxon settlement at New Wintles, Eynsham, Oxfordshire', *British Archaeol. Report*, VI (1974), 51-5.

¹¹⁴ Information from J. G. Hurst.

¹¹⁵ *Victoria County History, Northamptonshire*, IV (1937), 58-60.

¹¹⁶ Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *Northamptonshire*, II (forthcoming), Wollaston (33).

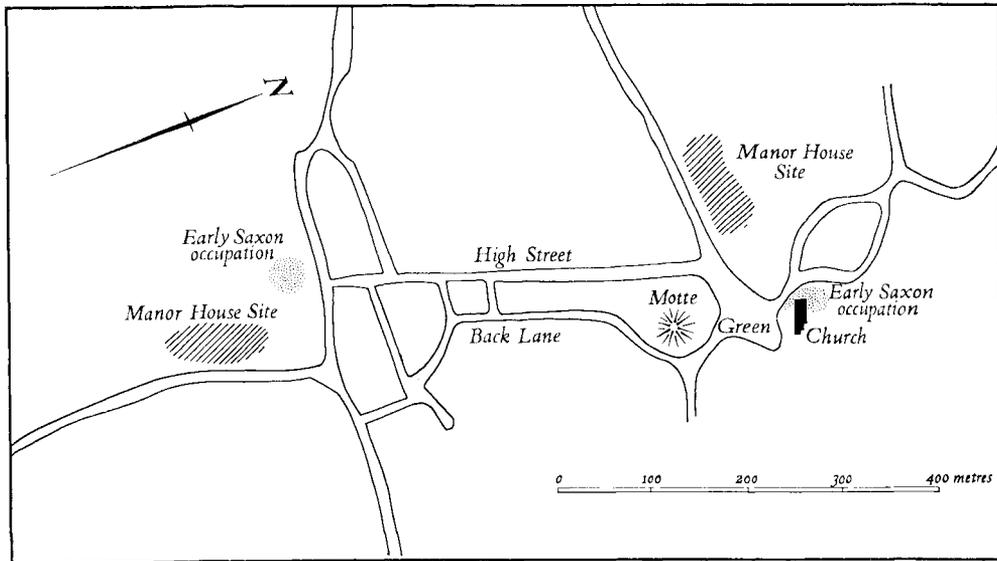


FIG. 67
PLAN OF VILLAGE, WOLLASTON, NORTHANTS

The southern focus is more complex and consists of a closely-knit group of narrow streets. This was certainly the centre of the second manor listed under Wollaston in Domesday Book, gelding for two hides and held by the Countess Judith. This manor too has been traced down to the 19th century, and again its enclosed demesne land was entirely around this southern focus.¹¹⁷ Here the medieval manor house site survives and excavation has produced not only material of early Saxon date but also evidence of Roman occupation. Further Roman and early Saxon occupation debris has been discovered nearby.¹¹⁸ Thus topographical, historical and archaeological evidence all seem to imply the continuing existence of a polyfocal settlement over a long period. It is possible that the two focuses may have gradually grown together in later times to produce the linking street; however, this street is so straight that it is possible that it is a deliberate addition to the original plan of the village.

CONCLUSION

Having established that polyfocal settlements did perhaps exist throughout much of the medieval period, how can their origins be explained? Not all are necessarily of Saxon origin, and indeed such a form of settlement could have come into existence at any time and for a variety of reasons. There are at least five possible explanations for this type of settlement.

- i) Polyfocal settlements could result from normal organic growth from a single nucleated village of the classic form, especially in areas of woodland or waste where land is under-used and available for habitation. This kind of development has been used to explain a number of the so-called 'loop villages', themselves sometimes definable as polyfocal, in parts of Northamptonshire.¹¹⁹ Such a pattern is said to

¹¹⁷ Loc. cit. in note 115.

¹¹⁸ Op. cit. in note 116, Wollaston (31) and (34).

¹¹⁹ M. W. Beresford and J. K. S. St Joseph, *Medieval England, an Aerial Survey* (Cambridge, 1958), 129.

have evolved at an early date, before the restricting influence of the developing common fields prevented further expansion of this nature. This theory could equally explain the origins of many of the '... End' villages mentioned earlier.

- ii) Villages could acquire separate focuses as a result of planned additions made to the original nucleus by the establishment of new fees in post-Domesday contexts. For example, recent work at Cottenham, Cambridgeshire, has shown that the village had at least one and perhaps two new focuses added to it in the 12th century when the bishop of Ely created new fees there.¹²⁰ In this case the new focuses were physically attached to the earlier centre. On the other hand work at Grafham, Huntingdonshire, has indicated that a completely new centre, subsequently deserted, was apparently planted anew at some distance from the original village between 1086 and 1166.¹²¹
- iii) Polyfocal villages could be a variant of the basic form of early Saxon settlement in that they could have been established alongside the more normal nucleated villages but grew out of separate focuses as a result of differences in ownership, land tenure or social grouping.
- iv) Such settlements could be the last remnants of a type of early Saxon pattern which has hardly been considered up to the present time: that is, a completely dispersed arrangement of small hamlets or farmsteads scattered over large areas. Until recently such a pattern has been only a theoretical model but new work has provided some support for it. For example at Great Doddington, Northamptonshire, detailed field walking has revealed the presence of at least six small early Saxon settlements in the parish; and as less than a third of the area has been examined there is every chance that many more settlements await discovery.¹²² Elsewhere in the same county similar work is producing a comparable density of Saxon settlement. The disintegration or abandonment of such a pattern as a result of 'balling' or newly planned nucleated villages might then leave remnant polyfocal villages.¹²³
- v) Polyfocal villages could originate from an even older form of settlement, going back to the Roman or even earlier periods. The large number of Roman settlements now known, notably from Northamptonshire,¹²⁴ made up of farmsteads, villas, hamlets and villages, produce a distribution far more akin to that of the Saxon settlements in Great Doddington, or to an intensive polyfocal arrangement, than to the classic picture of large nucleated, villages.

This paper has attempted only to indicate the probable existence of polyfocal settlement and to suggest possible origins. Whether their presence can be confirmed and their beginnings established depends on much more detailed historical, topographical and archaeological work. Archaeologists in particular should be thinking along these lines, not necessarily with the idea of finding polyfocal settlements of any date, but, and much more important, in order to develop more flexible minds when considering the basic origins and forms of settlement.

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¹²⁰ J. R. Ravensdale, *Liable to Floods* (Cambridge, 1974), 121-3.

¹²¹ A. E. Brown and C. C. Taylor, 'Cambridgeshire Earthwork Surveys', pt. ii, *Procs. Cambs. Ant. Soc.* (forthcoming).

¹²² Op. cit. in note 116, Great Doddington (6)-(9), Wellingborough (27) and (28).

¹²³ B. K. Roberts, 'Village plans in County Durham', *Medieval Archaeol.*, xvi (1972), 35-56.

¹²⁴ Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *Northamptonshire*, 1 (1975), xxxiv-vi; C. C. Taylor, 'Roman settlements in the Nene Valley', in P. J. Fowler (ed.), *Recent Work in Rural Archaeology* (Bradford on Avon, 1975), 107-19.