

Chapter One

A Review of Historical Research (to 1968)

M. W. Beresford

Introduction

The Lost Villages of England, the god-child of Miss Margaret Stewart and Mr. J. T. Oliver of the Lutterworth Press, was commissioned in June 1949. At that time I had had a year's experience of fieldwork in Yorkshire but was still suffering from the shock of finding that a phenomenon which I, and all other commentators, had thought purely Midland was in fact equally visible in the fields of the northern plains and the Wolds. It was therefore a stimulus and a challenge to attempt a survey with the title "of England". A contract was signed in November 1951 and the typescript sent to the publishers in May 1953. It was longer than expected—an unhappy characteristic of my books—and therefore submitted to a publisher's reader for comment. Miss Gladys Scott Thompson, to whom the manuscript fell, was completely sceptical of its conclusions, she being bred in the old belief that depopulation was a Tudor phantasy, but the publishers had the courage of my convictions and in May 1954 the book was published. Pre-publication excitement had been heightened by the receipt of a postcard from another historian, bringing this advice:

I feel impelled to advise you to consider whether or not you should really go ahead with such a book, and to weigh it very carefully as I myself have no desire to be drawn into further controversy, but my hand would be forced if the book maintained the argument I suspect.

His clairvoyant knowledge of the argument must have turned out to be inaccurate, for after 15 years the threatened exposure is still awaited.

In fact reviewers were in general too kind. It was a book with the usual complement of errors in text, footnotes and grid references; and no one noticed that Cornwall was completely missing from the gazetteer: for the very good reason that this page of the typescript fell down behind a piano without being noticed, and was found only when moving house in 1958. Mr. F. T. Wainwright was perfectly correct in saying in a review:

It is easy to criticise arrangement, to point to over-hasty work, and to urge that the book should not have been written at this stage.¹

1. *Archaeol. News Letter*, v (1954), 76.

In a favourite phrase of Prof. Finberg, “one always writes too soon,”² but I have been fortunate in having had later opportunities to return to the subject of deserted villages. In 1957 my *History on the Ground* was able to consider six sites in a little more detail, and to print the whole of Thomas Clerke’s plan of Whatborough in 1586 and part of the plan of Wormleighton in 1734³ (see also Thorpe,⁴ 1965). An unintended consequence of my second study was to cause a fellow-historian, who was writing a text book, to coalesce ideas from two of my chapters and thus to refer to the planted medieval town of Hedon as a “depopulated place”. The irate Mayor of this borough threatened legal action and readers of the *Daily Express* were entertained by the commotion for a few days.

Prof. David Knowles’ invitation to join Dr. St. Joseph in compiling an anthology of air photographs gave a further opportunity to describe sites not treated in *Lost Villages* and to publish thirteen new views (Beresford and St. Joseph, 1958).

Although *Lost Villages* is still a few years from its coming-of-age its general arguments may be said to have gained academic acceptance, and indeed to have been canonised by two recent authoritative studies of agrarian history, Prof. Postan’s revised chapter in the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe* (1966) and Dr. Thirsk’s in the *Agrarian History of England and Wales* (1967). The respectability of the subject in general may be said to have been crowned by the special sessions devoted to it at the International Economic History Conference at Munich in August 1965. For that occasion the patronage of the Sixth Section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, Paris, produced in *Villages Désertés* a 615-page survey of the progress of research in the major European countries.⁵ In it I attempted a review of the work achieved by English historians and archaeologists, and that review—revised and extended—has formed the basis of this chapter. In particular I have retained for the first nine sections a device employed in the French essay: to set at the head in italics a brief summary of points which I believe I made in *Lost Villages*, and then to follow with an assessment of work by others and myself in the intervening years. It thus has egocentric as well as self-critical passages; and, although I have tried to take account of all work known to me, there must be omissions which are due to that most subjective of academic traits, sheer ignorance. Fellow authors must not mistake this for indifference. They will also notice that I have acquiesced in the substitution of “deserted” for “lost” medieval villages, mainly under the influence of logical critics who argued that villages could not really be “lost” if I had found them.

I: Early Desertion

Some considerable depopulation followed the Norman invasion of 1066, but there was rapid re-population of villis stated to be waste in Domesday Book (1086). The civil wars (1135–54) may have produced a similar impact and recovery. More depopulation—and this often permanent—was caused by the development of monastic-grange farming in the twelfth century. A few settlements may have been lost in war.

2. H. P. R. Finberg, gen. ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, iv (1967), vii.

3. Misdated 1724 in the caption to my Plate 9.

4. Short-title references within brackets are to articles and books listed in the bibliography, pp. 213–26, below.

5. It is unfortunate that this important volume carries no editor’s name on its title page so that it is not easy to find in a library catalogue. The full title is given under *École Pratique* in the bibliography.

Of earlier desertions, those during the long centuries of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian colonisation, virtually nothing is yet known. In the period before the Norman Conquest no list of rural settlements was drawn up comparable to the list of *burhs* in the Burghal Hidage: or if one was drawn up, it has failed to survive. Common sense suggests that during the so-called Dark Ages there must have been sites chosen for early settlements that did not stand the test of time, as well as settlements destroyed in invasion and war but, without documentary evidence, the search for these is properly the task of the archaeologist [see pp. 76–144, below].

The classic sites of Saxon villages and cemeteries known to archaeologists lie mainly away from existing villages. These are clearly “desertions” but their discovery has been largely the result of chance factors such as gravel working or road construction.

Although the earliest documentary evidence for most deserted medieval villages continues to be Domesday Book (1086) it is now possible to adduce more examples of deserted villages recorded in Anglo-Saxon boundary charters of an earlier date. Thus ten Oxfordshire villages now deserted are named in charters dating from between 970 and 1005, and three Warwickshire desertions were of villages that occur in charters from the very beginning of the eighth century: Billesley Trussell (704); Weethley (708) and Milcote (710). Documents of this type, unfortunately, become progressively rarer as one moves north.

Apart from the research in progress by Mr. A. T. Lloyd (and unpublished) on the difficult subject of the New Forest depopulations, no further work has been done on individual villages known to have been devastated by the Norman Conquest and not repopulated. Such a site would be an excavator’s treasure. The devastations of the civil war of 1135–54 has been little studied, for the period is poorly documented. In 1955 Sir Charles Clay published a remarkable confirmation charter for Ulceby on the Lincolnshire Wolds.⁶ It was granted between 1163 and 1176 and it permitted Thornton Abbey to turn out sheep to graze in the fields of Ulceby to a reasonable number—*tot oves quot ibidem moderate habere*—until such time as the village should be repopulated and restored to life—*donee ipsa villa rehabitata et restituta fuerit*. The depopulation must have been during the late wars, for in both Domesday Book and the Lindsey Survey of 1115–18 there is no sign that the Norman Conquest emptied the vill. The anticipated repopulation must have taken place, for Ulceby is not a deserted village, but it is significant that the lord of Ulceby assumed that the best temporary garrison for an abandoned village was a flock of sheep. This was presumably the exact reaction of local landlords in later centuries where villagers retreated from marginal land, the light soils of the high Wolds.

Dr. R. A. Donkin has made important comments on the Cistercian factor in depopulation (Donkin, 1960, 1962, 1963 and 1964). He has shown that 44% of all known twelfth-century granges were built on land that was “waste” or largely waste in 1086, although the well-documented depopulations still remain. A critical account of the Yorkshire evidence will be found in Dr. C. P. S. Platt’s unpublished University of Leeds thesis, *The Monastic Grange: a survey of the historical and archaeological evidence* (1965). The

6. C. T. Clay, ed., *Early Yorkshire Charters*, x, Yorks. Archaeol. Soc. Rec. Series, extra series viii (1955), 58.

granters' charters did not always describe their vill in detail, and below the well-preserved earthworks of a grange such as Griff (Yorks., N.R., between Rievaulx and Helmsley) there may be those of a wasted Domesday vill or of a re-settled vill destroyed when it was given to the abbey in 1131. This fact adds to the importance of such sites for a research excavation, if one could be engineered.

Dr. Donkin has also emphasised that the well-known activity of the Cistercians as sheep farmers on their more remote estates should not lead to a belief that the granges were all pastoral, and that the Cistercians had the same motives as the enclosing graziers of the late fifteenth century. He writes:

The typical grange was, I believe, a predominantly arable holding, although most had some pasture and played a part in the growing of wool. The great upland sheep walks were not as a rule described as granges in the 12th and 13th centuries. (Donkin, 1963, 187.)

In a short local study Mr. M. W. Barley has shown how the monks of Rufford (founded c. 1145) destroyed two Nottinghamshire villages, one of which had ten villein families in 1086 and the other, eleven as well as a church (Barley, 1957). The Cistercians did sometimes offer alternative accommodation if their grange was about to supplant a village. Mr. Barley suggests that Wellow grew in this way, and I have myself shown the shift of population at the founding of Byland Abbey (Beresford, 1957, 52–62).

Where monastic chartularies survive, there is a good chance that all such early depopulations will come to light eventually. The identification of non-monastic depopulations of this period is bound to suffer from the relative shortage of relevant documentation before the mid-thirteenth century, when the inquisitions *post mortem* and the reeves' accounts (p. 72, below) begin to be available. The feet of fines (P.R.O., class CP25) which take land transfers in some counties back to the end of the twelfth century, have not yet been systematically explored for deserted villages.

In the last decade of the thirteenth century, records of taxation of the laity begin to be available (P.R.O., class E179) and local record societies are moving ahead with their publication. Where they survive, these early lay subsidy rolls have been used in the Research Group's published county studies for two purposes: to indicate that a separate settlement worthy of the tax collector's attentions was still surviving; and to obtain some idea of the size of the settlement at that date, relative to its neighbours. Before 1377 the form of these documents does not permit any estimate of the absolute number of villagers.

The lay subsidy files were drawn upon for some of the counties analysed in *Lost Villages of England*, but these sources have been more thoroughly explored in the last ten years. Dr. R. E. Glasscock has transcribed and mapped all the payments made by the villages of England in 1334 (Glasscock, 1963, and subsequent unpublished work), and identified a number of additional desertions. The gazetteers that the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group aim to produce for each county must lean very heavily on the tax-lists and feudal surveys that begin with the Hundred Rolls of 1279 and continue with the lay taxation of 1296, 1307, 1327, 1332 and 1334.

The flimsy remains of an early, pre-plague depopulation were first observed on an air photograph (Beresford and St. Joseph, 1958, 112) and later identified by Dr. Allison

as the former vill of Grenstein. It, and a second Norfolk vill with only early documentary references (*Turstanestuna* (Thuxton)) were excavated by Mr. Wade-Martins. It was vills of this sort that the tax collectors of 1316 categorised as “*parva et paupera*” (Shelswell, Oxon.), while at Langley in the same county they reported only four tenements remaining.

Four Norfolk vills—Pudding Norton, Testerton, Alethorpe and Little Ringstead—were assessed in 1334 at sums that were less than one fifth of those paid by their neighbours,⁷ and it is not surprising that, when the church of Pudding Norton fell into disuse, “the fewness and the poverty of the parishioners” in 1401 were blamed on the barren soil.⁸ Vacant holdings and uncultivated acres are a recurring feature of manorial surveys of the early fourteenth century, even in villages that now survive. They seem to be especially frequent on the high, dry chalklands of Lincolnshire and the East Riding of Yorkshire, and on the sands of the Breckland in Norfolk and Suffolk. Thirty-four places in Norfolk that were named in Domesday Book fail to appear in 1316 in the *Nomina Villarum* either because they were too small or because they were deserted (Allison, 1955, 122).

The reason for these early depopulations still remains mysterious. It would be logical and convenient to follow Prof. Postan’s hypothesis that they were on marginal soil, reluctantly colonised in a period of population expansion, but soon disappointing the over-optimism of their settlers by poor crop yields. This explanation can be accepted most easily when the desertions lie close together on similar soils. In Norfolk, for example, Dr. Allison has shown that 31 of the 130 deserted villages had fewer than ten households in 1428 (Allison, 1955, 125). Taken together with the exceptional number of ruined churches in Norfolk and Suffolk, these figures suggest that some powerful local factor was diminishing settlement even before the Black Death. As Mr. J. Saltmarsh put it:

It is probable that on marginal lands, colonised during the period of expanding demand and high prices in the earlier Middle Ages, whole villages were being abandoned. In the Brecklands of south-west Norfolk—marginal land in the Middle Ages, and marginal or sub-marginal still—I have visited five ruined churches in a single afternoon. Where their ruins could be dated, they were always of the thirteenth century and very small; the first tiny chapels built by the latest pioneer settlements of the High Middle Ages, never enlarged and early abandoned. (Saltmarsh, 1941–43, 24.)

But when an early desertion is found in the middle of a more prosperous county such as Oxfordshire, where only seven of the 101 deserted villages were reported⁹ as having fewer than ten households in 1428, it will be necessary to pay close attention to its soil and situation, especially where adjoining parishes have every appearance of health. One might suspect a random factor such as fire or warfare, but it is difficult to envisage a well-sited village being deserted for long when there was general land-hunger and an expanding population. These depopulations must be set against the fact that the total population of England increased from about 1.1 million in 1086 to 3–3 million on the eve of the Black Death.¹⁰

7. Calculated from figures in Allison, 1955, 127–29.

8. *Cal. Pap. Letters*, v (1904), 474–75.

9. *Feudal Aids ... and Analogous Documents, 1284–1431*, v (1909), 201–02.

10. J. C. Russell, *British Medieval Population* (Albuquerque, 1948), 146.

The more flimsy the houses of a village, the easier it would have been to rebuild after a fire or destruction in war. As to the fields, those who burned them were unintentionally assisting the crops by resting the soil and scattering ash.

The ease with which the vills of the lowlands were re-created between 1066 and 1086, and the subsequent prosperity of many upland vills that were waste in 1086, make an instructive lesson in the resilience of medieval settlement. The ravages of war, like the accident of fire, were always likely to afflict a village. After the civil war of 1135–54 there was internal warfare on more than one occasion, but only the Borders were continuously troubled. Here one might expect war to cause depopulation. In the early fourteenth century there were massive tax reliefs for villages damaged when the Scottish armies ranged as far south as York. The assessment of clerical wealth for taxation purposes made in 1291 was subject to wholesale revision downwards in 1318 to allow for the destruction wrought by the Scots, and in 1334, when the villages of the rest of the kingdom were re-assessed for lay taxation, it was not possible to value the counties of the northern border. Yet most of the places given heavy tax-reliefs are now normal villages. Clearly, other factors than war must have operated to produce the permanent desertions from this period.

II: The Black Death

Some marginal settlements were already shrinking before the Black Death began in 1349, and after the Black Death there are a few well-documented cases of villages totally and irrevocably destroyed.

Authentic cases of Black Death depopulation were cited in *Lost Villages*, and an air photograph of one of these, Tusmore (Oxon.), has since been published (Beresford and St. Joseph, 1958, 114–15). In 1358 its lord was allowed to turn the fields into a park since every ville in was dead, and the Exchequer was obliged to admit that there were no taxpayers left. In 1381 the poll-tax collectors made *nichil* returns for four Gloucestershire villages (Hilton and Rahtz, 1966, 84). The site of another Oxfordshire plague depopulation, *Tilgardesle*, still remains unlocated, a reminder that there is still much fieldwork to be done to trace sites that have been heavily ploughed in modern times or planted with woodland.

It will always be necessary to be so emphatic about the role of the Black Death for two reasons: firstly, it has been the most popular explanation of a deserted site in local folklore; and secondly, because there *was* an important way, to be discussed later, in which the long-term effect of the Black Death did deliver some villages into the hands of the would-be depopulators a century later, and weakened the resistance of many other villages. In this sense, the years following the Black Death were the “pre-history of enclosure” (Hilton, 1955).

Since it is so important to get the Black Death into the correct relation with the desertion of a particular village every effort is needed to establish the genuine Black Death destructions. The classic sequence for such a desertion would be three or more positive items, such as

- 1086: substantial recorded population in Domesday Book
- 1316: listed in the *Nomina Villarum*