

## **Open Fields, 'Planning' and the Environment.**

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English landscape historians often emphasise the broad distinction in the lowland landscape between 'woodland' and 'champion' areas: the latter characterized in the Middle Ages by nucleated villages farming extensive and regular open fields, and the former with more dispersed patterns of settlement and varying mixtures of enclosed fields and 'irregular' open-field systems. In many accounts, 'champion' landscapes emerged in the middle or later Saxon period through large-scale replanning: scattered farms were concentrated into villages, often laid out in a planned form, and regular open fields were laid out around them. This transformation was directed, according to most scholars, by major lords and was necessitated by the fact that demographic growth had led to a range of problems – especially a shortage of grazing - which could best be solved by reorganising farming on more communal lines. In 'woodland' districts this great replanning did not occur, or did not occur to the same extent, and settlement continued to be dispersed, becoming more so as population expanded.

Yet it is hard to believe that these broad differences in regional landscape were simply the consequence of variations in population density or the strength of lordship, not least because Domesday leaves no doubt that versions of 'woodland' and 'champion' developed in areas of low, medium and high population density, and in areas of strong, weak or divided lordship. Where great Saxon monasteries possessed a number of different estates scattered across the 'woodland'/'champion' divide, moreover, the settlement patterns and field systems in each resembled those of its immediate neighbours, rather than following a standard, landlord-inspired plan.

In reality, 'woodland' and 'champion' are broad, general terms, each embracing a range of landscapes, and many extensive areas of lowland England displayed characteristics of fields and settlement which were of intermediate character, and which have been variously categorized by scholars. Some 'woodland' areas, for example, were characterized by ring-fence farms while in others most settlement was strung around the margins of extensive tracts of common land; in some, forms of open field were common and extensive, in others they covered only limited areas of ground. Champion landscapes were similarly diverse. Some – as for example in eastern Northamptonshire - consisted of almost of unrelieved arable, lending support to the 'resource-crisis' model. But many retained very extensive tracts of open grazing beyond the arable fields, especially those found on lighter land – chalk, sands – where constant leaching of nutrients demanded the regular close-folding of sheep on the arable to keep the land 'in heart'. In such 'sheep-corn' areas tracts of heath and downland were essential as nutrient reservoirs. Even on heavier clays, however, numerous areas of pasture often survived on damper ground, as ribbons running through the arable, no different to the tracts of common land familiar from

many 'woodland' areas. On the Jurassic clays of western Northamptonshire, for example, recent mapping of the open fields – based on both archaeological and documentary research - suggests that some townships had only 50-60% of their land under the plough and, practicing a two-course rotation, had as little as a quarter of their land under crops at any one time. In many ways woodland and champion are simplistic and misleading concepts, and in reality medieval England boasted a complex range of local and regional landscapes, the boundaries of which were usually related fairly directly to soils types and geology.

The example of places like western Northamptonshire make it hard to believe that any drastic replanning in the landscape in middle or later Saxon times, to create nucleated villages and open fields, can have been motivated by a shortage of grazing. But did such a drastic reorganization, of settlement in particular, really take place? Most published texts emphasise the 'dispersed' character of earlier Saxon settlement recovered by archaeological surveys, in contrast to the 'nucleated' character of late Saxon and medieval villages but – to judge, once again, from recent research in Northamptonshire – most townships contain either no known examples of abandoned, outlying Saxon sites, or only one. Even where more of these small sites are present we should note the essential mobility of settlement in the early Saxon period - the fact that, when excavated, many prove to have been occupied for only a generation or so. What appears as a dispersed settlement pattern which was 'nucleated' at the behest of some Saxon lord is thus probably better understood as a mobile one which – in the course of the 'long eighth century' – stabilized. These initial settlements – pre-village foci – were small: few excavated settlements from anywhere in England from this period extend over more than 2 hectares – and they were certainly not 'villages' in the medieval sense. The latter resulted from the gradual expansion of the former, as population rose through the tenth, eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The 'planning' which landscape historians have discerned in the layout of Midland villages is comparative rare and dates to a period long after the eighth century; and in most cases is almost certainly illusory. The Northamptonshire research leaves no doubt that 'strippy', regular-looking arrangements of tofts usually developed *organically*, as settlement expanded over areas already divided and ploughed, in situations where all the land surrounding a settlement had been taken into cultivation . More usually, farms and cottages appear to have spread into some convenient area of land which had been left uncultivated, often creating large greens which were usually, over time, infilled with further houses – thus creating rather irregular village plans. In Northamptonshire, not surprisingly, 'planned' or 'regular' villages are concentrated in the east of the county, where the landscape was always a largely arable one: they were rare in the west, where pockets of unploughed ground were always a feature of the open-fields.

It is useful to compare the situation in these latter areas with that in 'woodland' districts where settlement was dispersed around the margins of common land. The disposition of common

pasture is much the same, but whereas in 'woodland' areas settlement dispersed around the margins of the unploughed ground, in the 'champion' this happened to a more limited extent, and was followed by the infilling of central 'greens'. In champion districts, evidently, settlement could not easily disperse, and settlements were obliged to grow *in situ*, even to the extent that – where areas of open ground were absent – they spread across their own fields.

The broad contrast between 'woodland' and 'champion' areas is thus not really one between districts which experienced a 'great replanning' and those that did not, but rather between ones in which – following the stabilization of settlement in the 'long eighth century' – settlement gradually developed in a nucleated form, and those in which it became more increasingly dispersed. But what of the other key aspect of the 'great replanning' – the idea that, when villages were created, highly regular and ordered field systems were laid out around them? Planned, regular field systems certainly did exist in many (in Northamptonshire, in most) 'champion' townships by the high Middle Ages, but it is unlikely that these developed as early as the eighth century, not least because they extend over the whole of a township's cultivated area, the limits of which could only have been reached at such an early date if we assume that there was little growth of population during the following four or five centuries. More importantly, when we compare the number of virgate holdings – peasant farms – which make up the regular cycles in the fields, they almost always outnumber the number of holdings listed in Domesday, often by a substantial margin, suggesting that most of these highly regular arrangements were the consequence of reorganization as late as the eleventh or twelfth century. But it is important to note, in passing, that not all open fields display such highly regular tenurial cycles. They were largely restricted to the heavier Midland clays, and were rare on lighter, sheep-corn land.

In England as a whole the character of settlement and fields were intimately connected: the more nucleated the settlement pattern, the more extensively intermixed the holdings in large, communally organized fields. Where, at the other extreme, farms were scattered and isolated, intermixed holdings only existed to a limited extent. It is easy to see how, in situations where (for whatever reasons) farms remained clustered as the area under cultivation expanded, any allocation of land to tenants, or division of holdings by inheritance, would tend to produce intermixed and scattered properties, in order to affect an equality of access at seed-time and harvest – a fair share of far and distant land, as well as of land of better and worse quality. Increasing intermixture of holdings as population grew and the numbers of farms increased led to varying degrees of later reorganization – planned and sudden, or piecemeal and gradual – along more regular lines.

It is sometimes suggested that the distribution of what we might broadly term 'woodland' and 'champion' landscapes is essentially arbitrary – the consequence of social factors, of emulation

and diffusion, and quite unrelated to environmental influences. In fact, there is a striking resemblance between the various maps of these broad landscape types produced over the years, and basic patterns of national geology; while at a more local level more subtle variations in landscape character usually coincide with, rather than cut across, the boundaries of soil types and geological formations. Several years ago I argued that 'champion' landscapes emerged largely for agrarian reasons: in some districts environmental factors simply made it sensible, or necessary, for farms to cluster together in villages, farming communal fields, as settlement stabilized and expanded, as population rose and as a heavier plough came into widespread use. Most 'champion' landscapes were found *either* on very light land, especially chalk; *or* on sticky pelostagnogleys, heavy clay soils, in the Midlands. In the former districts the complexity of organizing communal sheep flocks to fertilise the land, where holdings lay subdivided and intermingled, encouraged the emergence of regular field systems and communal agriculture. In areas of heavy pelostagnogleys, susceptible to damage and compaction if ploughed when wet, the short window of cultivation available to farmers in the spring months ensured that peasants sharing ploughs were obliged to dwell in close proximity, so that they could mobilize the plough teams rapidly when conditions were favourable. It is in these districts that the most 'regular' fields, with recurrent cycles of holdings, were to be found. Such arrangements may reflect a concern that all should have equal access to the plough as it moved steadily though the fields, but in addition they may suggest that high levels of agrarian interdependence engendered especially close-knit communities, with a particular interest in ensuring a close relationship between the quality of the land in each holding, and the renders made to feudal superiors and, perhaps, the state. Clustering of farms in villages may also, in many places, have been further encouraged by the presence of large blocks of meadow land, again creating a need for rapid mobilization and co-ordination of the work force: 'champion' areas were, in general, more meadow-rich than 'woodland' ones.

I still believe that such agrarian considerations were of fundamental importance in the divergence of 'woodland' and 'champion'. But I would now prefer to avoid such a simple conceptual dichotomy. There were many types of regional landscape, with a whole range of distinguishing characteristics, of which the relative extent of 'nucleation' and 'dispersal' was only one. A wide range of factors shaped the development of each. Social and tenorial factors and market conditions were important but – at least at a broad, regional scale – environmental factors were key. These, however, included not just those which influenced the character of farming, but also such things as the nature of domestic water supplies – research into which has been much neglected in England, and castigated as an example of 'environmentally determinist' approaches. 'Champion' landscapes usually developed where water supplies were concentrated, especially along spring lines, or where one source of water was more abundant or reliable than another. In woodland areas, in contrast, hydrological circumstances invariably ensured that water was widely available, usually from shallow wells, allowing settlement to

spread fairly evenly across the landscape. In most 'champion' districts, in fact, hydrogeological considerations dictated that settlement could never have developed in the highly dispersed forms characteristic of most 'woodland' areas.

Medieval landscapes were the consequence of human choice, for hydrology, geology and soils cannot in themselves 'determine' anything. But they were created by a succession of choices, made over long periods of time, by a number of different individuals and groups; and these choices were intelligently made, by people aware of the problems, limits and possibilities of the real world.