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The origins and development of deserted village studies

christopher taylor

No academic study springs fully formed from a single event. Thus the meeting in 1948 when a group of distinguished scholars were guided around deserted villages in Leicestershire was far from the beginning of the understanding of such villages. They had been discovered, recorded, excavated – and misunderstood – for over a century and their former presence had been known for much longer. The Leicestershire meeting was indeed momentous, however, marking as it did the date at which the social, economic, geographical and historical links between individual deserted villages began to be drawn together. And, with the aid of new ideas and techniques, the study passed from the ‘stamp-collecting’ stage to become a proper, scholarly subject.

Nonetheless, the meeting did not ensure immediate success. There had long been scepticism among professional historians as to the significance, or even the existence, of deserted villages. In 1912 Tawney, while accepting that some desertions took place, called them ‘isolated examples’.¹ Even after W.G. Hoskins had published his first seminal work on Leicestershire deserted villages in 1946 some scholars continued to question their existence, and as late as 1954 others remained doubtful as to whether any conclusions could be drawn from them.² Yet deserted villages had been known since the 1490s, when Rous listed fifty-eight ‘depopulated places’ in Warwickshire soon after their desertion had occurred. By the seventeenth century their sites were regarded as antiquities that could be mapped, as in Dugdale’s *Warwickshire*. By the early eighteenth century deserted villages in Northamptonshire were being described. The phenomenon even entered literature, with Goldsmith’s poem ‘The Deserted Village’ of 1770.³

1. R.H. Tawney, *The agrarian problem in the sixteenth century* (London, 1912), p. 261.
2. W.G. Hoskins, ‘The deserted villages of Leicestershire’, *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society*, 22 (1946), pp. 241–64; E. Lipson, *The economic history of England*, 1 (London, 1947), p. 80; J.H. Clapham, *The concise economic history of Great Britain* (Cambridge, 1949), p. 197; *DMVS*, p. 3.
3. *LVE*, pp. 81–2; W. Dugdale, *Antiquities of Warwickshire* (London, 1656); J. Bridges, *History and antiquities of Northamptonshire* (London, 1791), p. 296; M. Batey, ‘Nuneham Courtenay: an Oxfordshire 18th-century deserted village’, *Oxoniensia*, 33 (1968), pp. 108–24.

The growth of antiquarianism in the nineteenth century led to the discovery of many more deserted villages; they were even dug into by local historians. The earliest known excavation was in the 1840s at Woodperry (Oxon.; see Figure 6.1, below pp. 85–6, 95, 106), and Saxon ‘sunken huts’ were uncovered on the Thames gravels at about the same time.⁴ Yet the historical significance of this early work was not appreciated and its results remained largely unknown to the wider academic world.

Another potential source of information that was also ignored was the work of the Ordnance Survey. From its eighteenth-century beginnings the OS had always recorded antiquities on its maps, and the specific instructions issued in 1818 that ‘all remains of ancient fortifications, Druidical Monuments ... shall be noticed on the plans’ resulted in many more archaeological sites, including deserted villages, being placed on the Old Series 1-inch maps. The decision in the 1840s to produce 6-inch plans meant that individual surveyors, if so inclined, could include hitherto unrecorded antiquities, and the first plans of East Yorkshire of 1841–54 thus featured a number of deserted villages. One such plan was the ‘Site of Village of Wharram Percy’, which showed some of the crofts and even individual house sites. Despite the increasing number of professional historians and archaeologists and the growth of local history studies in the twentieth century, the lack of information about and understanding of deserted villages continued. Even the work of economic historians, some of whom had begun to study the events that allegedly led to desertion, failed to have an impact. The only archaeologist to realise the potential of these sites was Hadrian Allcroft. In his ground-breaking work of 1908 on the earthwork remains of archaeological sites he published a plan of the former village of Bingham (Notts.), pointed to examples elsewhere and noted that ‘there are indeed few counties which cannot show some such vestiges’. He even suggested that plague and sheep farming were possible reasons for desertion.⁵

Allcroft also commented on the difficulties of excavating such sites. He pointed out that because most of the buildings there had been insubstantial little but pottery could be found. This problem bedevilled the archaeological study of deserted villages until the 1950s. A number of excavations were carried out between 1900 and 1950 but, as John Hurst wrote, ‘the subject might have died ... due to the unsatisfactory nature of the results of these’.⁶ An example of such an excavation was that by Tebbutt in 1928 at the former village of Winteringham

4. J. Wilson, ‘Antiquities found at Woodperry’, *Archaeological Journal*, 3 (1846), pp. 116–28; S. Stone, ‘Antiquities discovered at Standlake’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, 1st series, 4 (1857), pp. 70–1, 92–100.

5. H. Allcroft, *Earthwork of England* (London, 1908), pp. 550–3.

6. *DMVS*, pp. 82–4.

(Cambs., formerly Hunts.). Despite digging on what he (rightly) assumed to be the site of the medieval manor house, the only remains he found were seventeenth-century wall foundations and a handful of medieval pottery sherds.⁷

A larger number of excavations of Saxon 'sunken huts', as they were known, were carried out, particularly in Cambridgeshire and Oxfordshire. Yet, important as these were for the future, no real attempt was made to question why they were there at all if, as was assumed, the original Saxon villages still existed elsewhere. Indeed, because of the scattered nature of the excavated huts and the limited extent of the areas usually dug, the sites were not regarded as being deserted villages at all.⁸

By the later 1930s excavations by professional archaeologists on abandoned medieval settlement sites began in earnest, but these were almost entirely restricted to former farmsteads and hamlets mostly in the Highland Zone where the stone structures were more easily visible and understood.⁹ It was not until Steensberg's method of open-area excavation was taken up by medieval archaeologists after the Second World War that any clear understanding of the overall structure and layout of most deserted villages became possible. Even the rapidly developing use of aerial photography was slow to be applied to deserted villages. However, Crawford was predictably quick to grasp its potential, and as early as 1925 he identified the former village of Gainsthorpe, Lincolnshire, on an aerial photograph and even found a document that established that desertion had taken place before 1697.¹⁰

It might be thought that the setting-up of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England in 1908 would have given an impetus to the study of deserted villages, but it did not. In its early years the Commission was not noted for its academic advances and in any case it was largely orientated towards architecture. As a result only major prehistoric and Roman archaeological sites were recorded in detail. In the first counties in which the English Commission worked moated sites were usually recognised but, although many were noted, few were planned or described and any associated earthworks were ignored. For example, in 1912 the huge double deserted village of Quarrendon in Buckinghamshire was apparently not even noticed, let alone recorded. However,

7. C.F. Tebbutt, 'Excavations at Winteringham', *Transactions of the Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire Archaeological Society*, 5 (1937), p. 103.

8. For example, T.C. Lethbridge and C.F. Tebbutt, 'Huts of the Anglo-Saxon period', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, 33 (1933), pp. 133–51.

9. For example, A. Fox, 'Early Welsh homesteads on Gelligaer Common', *Archaeologica Cambrensis*, 94 (1939), pp. 220–3; E.M. Jope and R.I. Threfall, 'Excavations at Beere, North Tawton', *Med. Arch.*, 2 (1958), pp. 112–40.

10. O.G.S. Crawford, 'Air photograph of Gainsthorpe, Lincolnshire', *Antiquaries Journal*, 5 (1925), pp. 432–3.

possibly for the first time, shrunken settlements were recognised. And the Commission did improve: in 1926 a shrunken village was illustrated and deserted villages were listed in Huntingdonshire.¹¹

Local historians continued to find and record deserted villages; most notably Canon Foster, who in 1924 published a list of over 150 ‘extinct places’ in Lincolnshire. He summarised the documentary evidence for their existence, suggested reasons for the abandonment of some of them and even checked the sites of many on the ground. Almost at the same time the great Cambridgeshire local historian Palmer not only discovered the site of the deserted village of Clopton, but dug into it, albeit without much success. He then published its whole history, including the correct reasons for its late-fifteenth-century desertion.¹²

Perhaps the only person who grasped the historical significance of deserted villages before the Second World War was Hoskins, although his research was based largely on Leicestershire. Drawing on the work of earlier historians of the county, but firmly reliant on his own research on both documents and in the field, he came to realise that deserted villages were common and that they could and should be integrated into the account of wider social and economic events of the later Middle Ages. The war and Hoskins’ time in London, during which he carried out more valuable documentary research, delayed the publication of his work on deserted villages, but even then his ground-breaking 1946 paper on Leicestershire villages, with its account of all he had discovered and, more importantly, his attempt to put the villages into their perceived historical setting, was not widely read.¹³ Nor did Maurice Beresford’s study of Warwickshire deserted villages, carried out during the war, advance matters. He did not publish the results until 1950, partly because it was not until he went to Yorkshire in 1947 that he realised that he was dealing with a phenomenon not confined to Midland England.¹⁴

11. RCHME, *Buckinghamshire*, 1 (London, 1913), Cublington (2), Haggerston (2); RCHME, *Huntingdonshire* (London, 1926), Leighton Bromswold (2), Spaldwick (3), Washingley (2).
12. C.W. Foster and T. Longley, *Lincolnshire Domesday*, Lincolnshire Record Society, 19 (1924), pp. xlvii–xc; W.M. Palmer, ‘A history of Clopton’, *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, 33 (1933), pp. 3–60.
13. Hoskins, ‘Deserted villages’.
14. M.W. Beresford, ‘The deserted villages of Warwickshire’, *Transactions of the Birmingham and Midland Archaeological Society*, 66 (1950), pp. 49–106; *DMVS*, p. 3.