

# Water and wetlands in medieval estate management: Glastonbury Abbey, Meare and the Somerset Levels in South West England

Wasser und Niederungsgebiete in der mittelalterlichen Gutswirtschaft:  
Glastonbury Abbey, Meare und die Somerset Levels in Südwestengland

L'eau et les terres inondables dans les propriétés médiévales:  
Glastonbury Abbey, Meare et Somerset Levels au Sud-Ouest de l'Angleterre

Stephen Rippon

Concern over climate change and rising sea level, coupled with recent extensive flooding across Europe, reminds us that wetlands, ranging from extensive coastal marshes to inland river floodplains, still dominate the landscape of many regions. In an era of intensive settlement and agriculture we often see water in such landscapes as a problem, and complex drainage and flood defence systems have been constructed to control their watertables. In the past, however, water was perceived more as a resource, and this paper is an attempt to demonstrate this for one medieval wetland landscape, that of Glastonbury Abbey's manor at Meare in the Somerset Levels (South West England). A strongly interdisciplinary approach is used, integrating remarkably rich documentary material with evidence locked within the historic landscape: the pattern of fields, roads, settlements and watercourses as represented on the earliest (early 19<sup>th</sup> century) cartographic sources, and in many cases still in use today. A series of distinctive 'landscape character areas' are identified which are derived from different approaches towards environmental management. That these wetlands were highly valued in different ways is reflected in a series of acrimonious disputes between Glastonbury and the Dean and Chapter of Wells Cathedral over their respective rights there, and the inclusion of Meare and a series of other islands in the special jurisdiction of the Glastonbury 'Twelve Hides'.

## Introduction

The significance of medieval monasteries in shaping the urban and rural landscape of Europe has long been recognized, and their extensive archives have been a mainstay of medieval socio-economic history. A particular feature of monastic communities was their ability to manage and exploit water, and their role in the reclamation of wetlands, reflecting the increasing intensity with which the landscape was being exploited during the High Middle Ages, is relatively well known (Aston 2000; Bond 1988; 2000 and 2001; Donkin 1958; Rippon 2000). In a society that now values agricultural production so highly, and in the light of the almost relentless trend towards reclamation during the medieval and post-medieval periods, it is, however, easy to over-

look the significance of the wealth of natural resources that wetlands have to offer. Artefacts recovered from the recent excavation of two platforms next to Whittlesey Mere in Fenland (eastern England), for example, have shed important light on medieval fishing techniques, but there is little attempt at palaeogeographical mapping in order to reconstruct the *wider* seigneurial landscape within which the fishery was but just one element (Lucas 1998; and see Bond 1988, 80–1; Hall 1992, 30–2). This paper is an attempt to achieve this for another wetland area: the freshwater backfens of the Somerset Levels in South West England (Figs. 1–2).

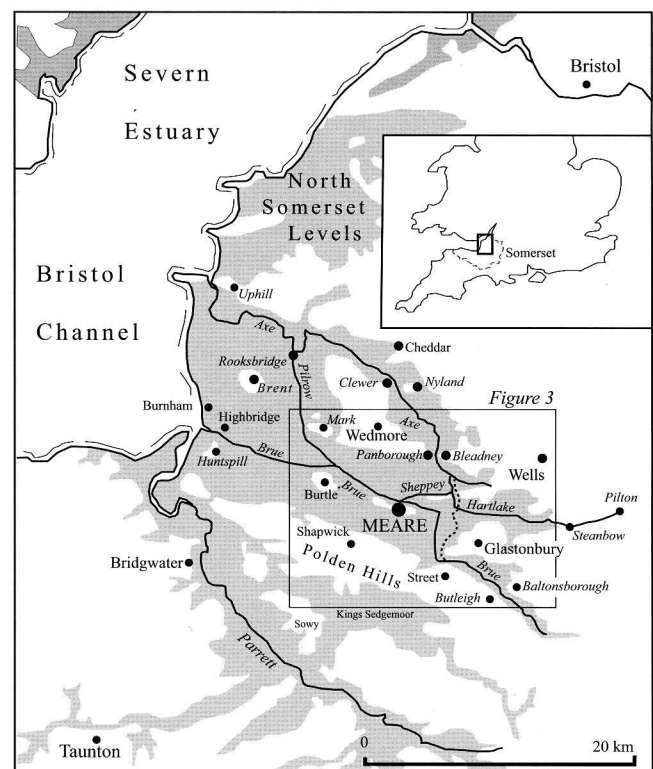


Fig. 1. The Somerset Levels, with places that could be reached by boat from Glastonbury in italics, and other mentioned in the text including the modern river names (the old course of the Brue is shown with a dashed line).

