

DISPERSED SETTLEMENT IN ENGLAND IN THE NATIONAL MAPPING PROGRAMME

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In contrast to the majority of other presentations to the congress, this paper is not a report on a research project or excavation for which the author has been personally responsible. Rather, it is an account of how the state agency for the heritage in England, English Heritage, has progressed with the issue of identification, characterisation and protection of medieval settlement, and of some factors that might shape its next steps.

The paper was given at a session of RURALIA III in September 1999 in the wake of considerable organisational change in state sector archaeology in England. The merger at 1 April this year of English Heritage with the former Royal Commission for the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) to form a body that retains the well-established name of 'English Heritage' has brought with it a round of restructuring, adjustments of function, and personnel change that is only just working through. One consequence of these preoccupations is perhaps that the paper has less to say narrowly about its advertised title than was intended at the stage (long previously) when it was proposed. Contrariwise, the merger of the two formerly separate national state agencies brings together as juxtaposed colleagues the team responsible (on the one hand) for the programmes of assessment and designation within English Heritage's Monuments Protection Programme (MPP), and (on the other) teams responsible for identifying and documenting through field survey the country's archaeological remains within former RCHME survey sections. This affords opportunities for the future for aligning or developing projects with common or mutually supportive aims.

One area with potential for such initiatives is that of medieval dispersed settlement.

Several threads of existing work by the former agencies feed into the issue of dispersed settlement in England.

Most important to date in this context is the work on settlement characterisation and its patterning undertaken through MPP sponsorship by Brian Roberts and Stuart Wrathmell. The approach, procedures and some of the results of this study have been described to an earlier RURALIA congress (*Roberts et al. 1996*), as well as in a series of peer group reviews in England (e.g. *Roberts - Wrathmell 1995*). It develops the concepts of nucleation and dispersal of settlement, rather than desertion, shrinkage etc, as primary discriminatory characteristics. It identifies three main historical zones of medieval and later settlement in England. The central zone is characterised by a predominance of nucleated settlements, though it does not exclude dispersed elements: the flanking two have a predominance of dispersed settlement, though with variable admixtures of nucleations. These local variations are acknowledged through the definition of 'local regions' within the three zones or 'provinces'. The *Atlas* resulting from this study has been prepared, and next year should see its publication (*Roberts - Wrathmell, forthcoming*). Meanwhile, the concepts of nucleation and dispersal are embedded in the two Monument Class Descriptions which guide and structure the assessment procedures of MPP (*Wrathmell 1992; 1993*). In addition, an important essay by Roberts and Wrathmell has specifically explored dispersed settlement, presenting a national distribution map of the intensity of dispersed settlement in England and some initial analysis and evaluation of it. This was published as a contribution to a set of essays in honour of our friend and colleague Christopher Taylor (*Roberts - Wrathmell 1998*).

As you would anticipate, the programme of protection through formal designation, for which the Roberts and Wrathmell study was designed to provide the framework, has been able to move forward briskly and within that secure conceptual framework for the category of nucleated settlements. For this deals principally with the familiar abandoned village remains of the great Central Province of the Roberts/Wrathmell analysis, which still in England survive in some numbers as earthworks in long-standing pasture and are well represented in existing record bases.

A separate project - 'The Midlands Open Fields Project' - is also just now coming to fruition to assess the survival of the ridge-and-furrow cultivation of the open, common field systems of this Central Province as earthworks and to develop criteria upon which formal protection of selected priority areas might be based. The extensive acreages of ridge-and-furrow fossilised in grass pasture - formerly a commonplace sight especially in the claylands of midland England, and once presumed to be typical of the whole country - has been dwindling steadily under the impact of land-use changes and the priorities of subsidised farming, so that in the core counties of the Central Province this project has revealed only a handful of townships, perhaps five or six only, with 40 % or more of their estimated former open field extent surviving as ridge-and-furrow (Hall, forthcoming; and see Hall 1993). That said, this is of course a remarkable asset in European terms. Even while this study has worked its way through to a formal conclusion, protection has been extended to instances elsewhere in the Central Province of remarkable, intact survival, such as an example near Spilsby in Lincolnshire where abandoned settlement remains lie integrated with their field system and the archaeological evidence for their piecemeal enclosure also survives as field remains (Everson - Hayes 1984, Fig. 11).

New initiatives in England are therefore needing to focus on the far more intractable problems of the varieties of dispersed settlement. And it is not easy to find a way into this issue that allows for evaluation and structured selection at a national level. To put it simply, there is no recorded data set.

We do, no doubt, know of a great variety of forms of dispersed settlement around the country.

- in the upland areas of south-west England we know of earthwork groups representing lost farmsteads or hamlets from a dispersed pattern; on both Exmoor and Dartmoor, for example, they are the equivalent of living neighbours and their abandonment in some cases dates from the medieval period, in others from as late as the first half of the 20th century (e.g. Weddell - Henderson 1992).

- in the north-west Midlands - for example in Shropshire (Everson - Wilson-North 1993) - we know of discrete earthwork complexes which are in practice simply components in the settlement pattern of the township or parish, other parts of which are marked by living farmsteads or hamlets. Unhelpfully, such abandoned complexes tend to be recorded in local and national data sets as 'DMVs' as if they were Central Province nucleations, while the living elements are not logged at all.

- in the West Midlands we know from Christopher Dyer's work at Hanbury and elsewhere (Dyer 1990; 1991) of the kaleidoscopic dynamism evidently characteristic of dispersed settlement in lowland England. And we know something of the methods and resources necessary to study these circumstances in any detail.

- we know that - perhaps, one suspects, exceptionally - dispersed settlement forms can survive as earthworks in the South Midlands, as recorded by Brown and Taylor (1989) in Bedfordshire or by field survey at Shenley Brook End in north Buckinghamshire (Everson 1995). In this last case, that very survival, plus the fact that the modern nucleated settlement formed through their abandonment, formerly caused the categorisation of these remains in local and national data sets as a DMV (*qua* nucleated settlement) rather than a dispersed pattern. The same presumption distorted understanding of the township's field system, by conceiving it as an open common townfield system simply because of the extensive incidence of ridge-and-furrow (Croft - Mynard 1993, 131-41).

- in East Anglia, settlement based on greens and commons has also been studied (Warner 1987).

All these, then, are specific examples and insights; and there may well be others. Their proper understanding quite typically entails setting aside the distinction between abandoned archaeology and living settlement elements. Except for identifying sites where medieval deposits might not have been disturbed by later change, it is an unhelpful distinction for both research and management policies, and conceals more useful distinctions like that between nucleation and dispersal. Yet existing record bases are generally poorly equipped, whether conceptually or in agreed terminology, for that step. Commonly, too, the record base concerns itself with the elements or components, which it rarely groups to the next level - which is essentially the settlement pattern of the township or parish.

What is more important is that numerically, geographically and in every other way, these individual cases do not constitute the basis for a national assessment and selection for appropriate conservation strategies. And doubling the number of individual studies would not make a significant difference.

For this reason, the National Mapping Programme (NMP), carried from the former RCHME into the new English Heritage, may appear to be a promising tool. Since it was formalised in 1992, this programme has set out systematically to map the archaeology of England as recorded on aerial photographs, with the intention of covering the whole country within a predicted time frame. It uses both specialist photography for archaeology and, selectively, non-specialist near-vertical coverage, both modern and historic. Early projects acted as trials to develop the methodology, but with approximately one fifth of the land area now covered, NMP has entered a mature phase, with selected areas subcontracted within an established remit. Its scope certainly

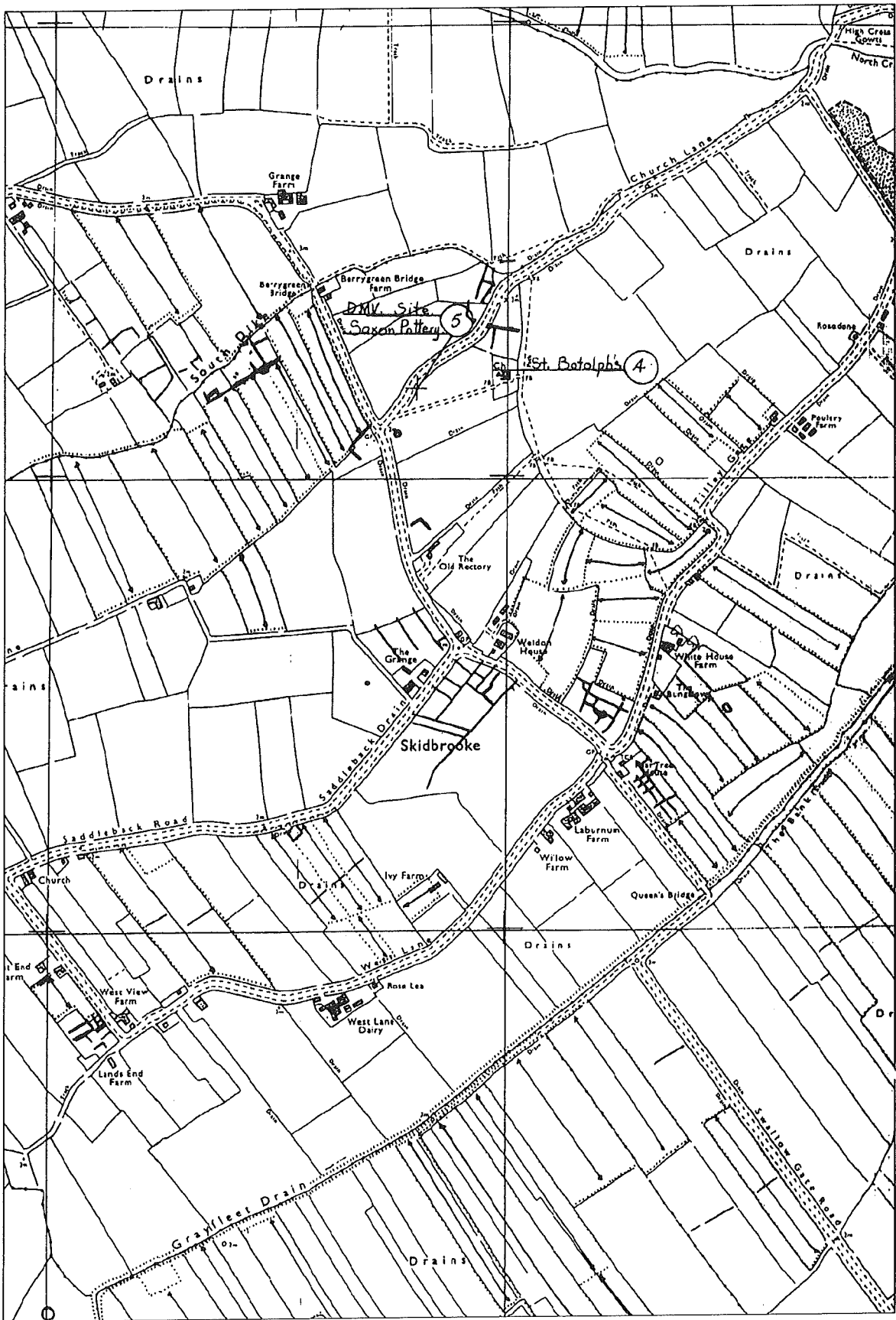


Fig. 1. Sample extract from the NMP's mapping of part of the Lincolnshire coastal marshland: original at 1:10 000 scale. Grid square = 1 km (©Crown copyright, NMR).

includes medieval and later settlement, whether visible in an earthwork or plough-levelled state. The programme produces results as a combination of graphical transcriptions at a survey scale of 1:10000 - formerly as stable plastic overlays latterly as digital data sets - plus monumentalised records for the MONARCH data base of the National Monuments Record (NMR). The latter are achieved principally by morphological classification procedures that break the transcribed information down into elements or groups based on shape and function (*Bewley 1995; Edis et al. 1989*).

How then does the NMP record medieval dispersed settlement in England?

Well, in some areas it simply doesn't - or at least doesn't knowingly do so. Kent, for example, lies clearly in the South-eastern Province with generally medium to high densities of dispersal. NMP there (admittedly at an early stage in the programme) recognised little or nothing of medieval settlement. In practice, for that county the most accessible archaeology of medieval rural settlement probably resides in the numerous late medieval timber-framed buildings - of which former RCHME architectural staff completed and published a respected study in 1994 (*Pearson 1994*). Though that study had quite a different focus and purpose, its raw materials of standing buildings may provide a way into settlement pattern issues in that and other similar regions in a way that NMP is unable to because of its remit of treating only abandoned archaeology.

At the other extreme, the NMP programme has dealt with some areas where abandoned medieval dispersed settlement forms the dominant field remains for transcription. The coastal marshland of Lindsey in east Lincolnshire is an example. In early thinking, the isolated medieval church of Skidbrooke was seen as the indicator of an (explicitly nucleated) 'DMV', and that is embedded in the local and national records. Early near-vertical APs show the situation to have been different by showing a clearly dispersed pattern of deeply ditched properties and closes, some abandoned others still occupied. The NMP work in Lincolnshire duly transcribed these features (*Fig. 1*). However, the process routinely monumentalised this information as up to 50 elements described variously as 'medieval or post-medieval enclosure and field boundaries', 'possible post-medieval stock enclosure', 'medieval or post-medieval settlement', 'medieval or post-medieval enclosures', 'medieval or post-medieval field system of ridge-and-furrow', 'ditches', 'medieval or post-medieval boundaries and/or drains' ... occurring across two or three or four parishes. This careful record, good and accurate in itself and immaculately computer retrievable, does not for all that give the salient overview that our discussions presume or seek - namely that this run of parishes had dispersed medieval and later settlement patterns with good integrated evidence of settlements and fields and the specialist additional activity of coastal salt production (*Grady 1999*). You might say that NMP in this instance records dispersed medieval settlement but omits to identify it as such.

Why is this? In part, the reason lies with the process and objectives of the NMP programme, which indeed places an emphasis on the 'objective' morphological categorisation of elements of transcribed information rather than the interpreted concatenation of those elements as settlements or settlement patterns. This is, of course, absolutely in line with the priorities and practices of local Sites and Monuments Records in England in their function as development control mechanisms. Within NMP, there is discretion for the recording staff to group transcribed entities together in meaningful ways but proper caution against exercising that discretion individualistically. For example, most (perhaps all) when faced with a group of ring ditches - presumed former Bronze Age barrows - would monumentalise them as a barrow cemetery rather than each barrow individually. Most would record a deserted or shrunken medieval settlement as a single entity. In both examples, however, the alternative decision is easily interchangeable with the other. But to act similarly for medieval dispersed settlement requires a different order of decision-making.

And this is not just an issue of understanding, experience or training on the part of individual staff involved in NMP work. There is almost certainly an issue of data-base terminology and organisation here. For dispersal in its several varieties of form is conceptually related to bounded areas or territories. Typically in England that means townships and parishes. The same is clearly the case for field systems, and parish/township is the unit through which the Midlands open fields assessment mentioned above has taken place. At this level of resolution (in contrast to that of the Roberts/ Wrathmell mapping), then, one may need a bounded area in order to define the character of the settlement pattern. It might be argued that at that level, therefore, the medieval township or parish is the relevant monument - characterised by its settlement form, by its field system, road pattern, incidence of woodland or common, and other factors each represented by archaeological elements, abandoned or living or in some combination. That is something of an idealistic solution, perhaps with negative as well as positive effects. At all events, an agreed recasting of medieval settlement information on these lines throughout local and national data bases in England may appear unlikely. Rather, the increasing availability and purposeful employment of GIS technology nationally as well as locally may offer a way forward.

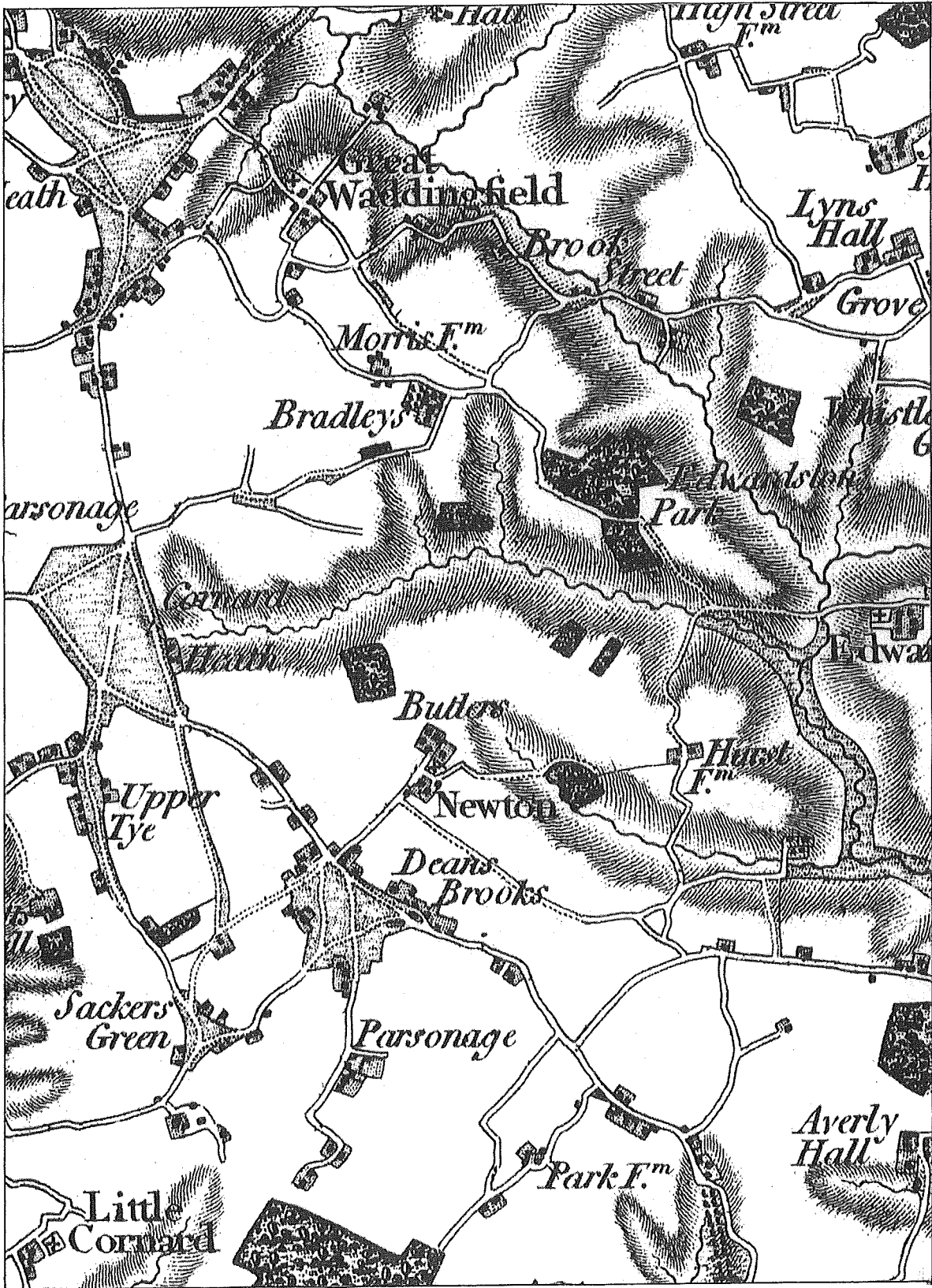


Fig. 2. Extract from 1st edition Ordnance Survey mapping, 1 inch to the mile, 1805; part of Suffolk.

As it stands and without such altered frameworks, NMP products require an additional level of interpretation as a source for issues of medieval settlement. Philosophically this is the case even for nucleated settlement, though it is short-cut by the ease of perception. But practically that need is much more clearly the case for dispersed settlement. Indeed, the programme's product is not solely (or even not principally) the monumentalised data, but the transcribed mapping itself, which is there to be 'read' directly and anew by informed and specialist eyes.

In a zone such as the Lindsey marshland, NMP provides extensive abandoned evidence. Perhaps this might be fairly readily interpreted in itself to characterise the dispersed medieval settlement of the marshland area identified by the Roberts/ Wrathmell frameworking as a distinctive local region, EWASH 6, and to test its western boundary against an area of predominant nucleation for evidence of change through time.

In Kent, NMP work might contribute nothing to an analogous characterisation.

Elsewhere, NMP results are unlikely to provide a one-shot access to medieval dispersed settlement, not least because of the unhelpful distinction between abandoned and living archaeology embedded in it. They are likely not only to require higher level interpretation for the specific purpose, but also to constitute only one source among many, as indeed NMP in England was always conceived as being. This is particularly true of areas with poor aerial photographic information and/or where living settlement remains dominate abandonment.

What is clearly the case is that the issue of dispersed settlement is on the state agency's agenda in England. A couple of initiatives stand as background to current discussion.

1) In East Anglia, a project on field systems (following on the completed Midlands project) is due now to make its delayed start in December. It may offer an alternative route into the dispersed settlement of that region.

2) A simple preliminary assessment of nucleation in Nottinghamshire based on the current local database (*John 1998*) confirmed in an effective way that the actual pattern of medieval settlement forms as we currently perceive it closely matches the Roberts/Wrathmell modelling of local regions in this boundary area of the Central Province. Interestingly, there are hints of complexity in the intermediate CPNSL 7 local region. The NMP mapping for Nottinghamshire is completed (*Deegan 1999*). Its report shows a similar patterning of archaeologically perceived medieval settlement, ie nucleations. It backs that up with a similar, though not quite so restricted, patterning of recorded evidence for ridge-and-furrow cultivation. Both show how systematically partial the current database of medieval settlement is, and point to a need for new approaches to rectify that partiality.

Indeed, there is a further final difficulty for our work on dispersed settlement in England. Not only have past interpretative approaches produced unhelpful SMR and NMP records. More importantly they have tended, with important exceptions, to discourage survey and fieldwork. The DMV syndrome has worked against recognition of dispersed settlement remains, which fall through the perceptual mesh, as too small or slight earthworks, generally considered poor examples of something they are not. In some areas - parts of East Anglia might provide a good example (*Fig. 2*) - modern mapping suggests that the dispersed network survives in three main forms - occupied properties, lanes ending in small closes but with no buildings present, and lanes leading to moats. At present, the county and national records - and MPP - pick up only on the moats. Here, the issue may prove to be whether we can identify protectable monuments representing dispersed settlement at all. Or must we rather remain content with defining and managing dispersed settlement only at a landscape scale, through its lanes, tracks and field patterns etc, via initiatives connected with landscape characterisation (*Fairclough 1999*).

New approaches in England are likely to be formulated within the framework afforded by the patterning of Roberts/Wrathmell sub-provinces and local regions, as suggested through the example of EWASH 6 above. The presumption, too, is that they will be best if based not solely on settlement information, but also on related characteristics of field systems and field size, road networks, incidence of common, woodland and other specialist resources. Problematic though it may be to deal with dispersed settlement as a national issue within the national assessment programme or as a national recording priority, it needs to be done. Without it, we should be setting aside the settlement forms of the most populous, richest and most economically diverse and resilient parts of medieval rural England.

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