'Sweet Uneventful Countryside': Excavated Medieval Farms and their Landscape in Essex
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The Eastern Counties Research Strategy identified a number of key themes that needed to be addressed in order to enhance our understanding of the medieval rural landscape (Wade 2000). These included the need to examine the plans of rural medieval buildings and the requirement to examine medieval settlement patterns across the region. This papers hopes to address these themes, in relation to Essex, at least in part .

The landscapes of lowland England fall into two broad types; the 'woodland' or 'bocage' type where enclosed fields were the rule and the 'champion' landscape of open-field farming. All but the north-western corner of Essex falls into the 'woodland' category. It is a landscape of scattered settlements, hamlets and individual farms set within fields which evolved in many different ways, from ancient planned landscapes which pre-dated the Domesday Book, common-fields which were mostly sub-divided long before parliamentary enclosure, former deer parks and demesne fields which were divided and hedged in the late medieval and Tudor period. Linking the dispersed settlement was an extensive network of lanes and greens.

Essex is fortunate in the number of medieval rural sites that have been excavated in the county, 32 in all. These vary in type from high-status sites such as manors and moated sites, farmsteads of middling status, individual peasant dwellings and a number of industrial sites, including windmills, pottery kilns and tile kilns. The higher-status domestic buildings are more than twice the size of the middle-status buildings, in addition to having considerably more ancillary buildings. In turn the middle-status domestic buildings are all bigger than the lower-status buildings, as well as having ancillary buildings.

High-status sites

Five high-status moated sites have been wholly or partially excavated: King John's Hunting Lodge at Writtle, North Shoebury Manor, Low Hall in Walthamstow, Southchurch Hall in Southend and Gutteridge Hall in Weeley.

King John's Hunting Lodge (Rahtz 1969) comprised a rectangular moated site, with a smaller outer enclosure to the west and attached fish-ponds to the east. Documentary evidence suggests the moats were dug around 1211. The first set of structures, consisting of two bridges, gate-house, hall, kitchen and chapel, ranged along the northern and western side of a large courtyard, were erected in the 13th and early 14th century. The chapel appears to have been of stone or flint construction, whilst the remainder of the structures were timber-built. In the 14th and early 15th century the hall and kitchen were re-built and tiled, and the gatehouse extended, but the basic plan remained the same. In the 15th century however, the main buildings were moved to the western end of the moated enclosure, the chapel replaced by a cloister, and the south bridge enlarged by the addition of a porter's lodge. All these new buildings were in brick. 15th century records identifies some of the buildings as the hall, other chambers, chapel, pantry, buttery, kitchen, bakehouse, warming-house and washing-place. There are records that in addition to the buildings within the moated enclosure there was also a house for the steward, stable, hay barn, gatehouse, barn, cowshed, cow-yard, cow-

herder's house, ox-shed, ox-yard, bailiff's house, warrener's house and a barn with an integral dovecote. The site was abandoned soon after 1521 and the buildings within the enclosure demolished, however one of the barns still survives.

At North Shoebury (Wymer and Brown 1995) a substantial ditched enclosure dated to the 12th century, presumed to be the site of the original manor house was excavated. This site was abandoned in the 13th century and the site of the manor moved a small distance to the west under the footprint of the later Tudor house (which was burnt down in 1964). A 16th century barn survives.

A transect was excavated across Gutteridge Hall moated site (Wade unpub.), in advance of the construction of the Clacton-Weeley By-pass. The earliest reference to the site is in 1230 AD where it is named as *Crostwic* in a charter. A 14th century, timber-framed thatched barn had stood next to the site until 1983, when it was destroyed by arson. Excavation revealed four, possibly five, phases of moat. Within the earliest moated area the remains of a medieval structure with a hearth, dating to the 12th and 13th centuries, was identified. The excavation showed a systematic enlargement of the hall and moat from the 12th century onwards. The northern arm of the moat was extended westwards, and to the south of the original medieval building a substantial brick building, dating to the Tudor period, was constructed. This was demolished in the 17th or 18th century and the moat became part of the garden for the new hall located to the south.

Southchurch Hall, Southend (Brown forthcoming) has its origins in the 12th century, with subsequent modifications and changes over the following centuries. The moat and the main house comprising the hall and principal chamber are still standing. The gatehouse, adjoining chamber, bridge, chapel and kitchen, were excavated within the moated area,. There was also documentary evidence for a brewery, dairy and cider-house within the same area. To the north of the moat were the outer court and the barn court, within the former were the cow shed, sheep house, poultry house, cart shed, whilst the barn court had 3 barns of varying sizes, stables, granary and dovehouse.

Low Hall (Blair 2002) in Walthamstow comprised an almost square moat dating to the 14th century, containing a hall house with service wing and a separate kitchen range. The house was subsequently extended by the addition of a further wing, and a gatehouse adjoining the bridge. A further cross-wing was added in about 1500. The medieval house was systematically dismantled in the 17th century and a new house constructed on the north-western side of the enclosure. This was destroyed by a V1 flying bomb in 1944. The farm buildings were sited outside the moated enclosure and there were post-medieval records of a warren and fish-ponds which were probably medieval in origin.

It is evident from the excavated and documentary evidence, that a higher-status site comprised multiple structures, as many as twenty at King John's Hunting Lodge, located both within the moated area and outside in the farmyard or farm-yards. There was also differentiation between the status accorded the buildings. Those directly associated with the habitation of the site, such as the brewery and bake-house are located close to the main dwelling. The agricultural buildings which most closely reflect wealth and status of the owner, such as the principal barns, stables and dovecote are grouped together and adjacent to the habitation, whilst the lesser barns and stock-sheds are further away.

Middle-status sites
Six middle-status sites have been excavated, all consisting of a self-contained rural unit, with a number of buildings performing specific functions (house, kitchen, barn, byre). Medieval tenurial documents use the term *messuage* or tenement to describe the dwelling-house and out-buildings, as well as the farmyard in which they stood. Where the out-buildings were listed in the documents, there were usually two to five buildings including the dwelling-house, often a separate kitchen and then most frequently barns, stables, brew-houses and granaries (Poos 1991, 74-5).

Stebbingford, Felsted (Medlycott 1996) comprised four buildings, though only three were in use at any one time. These were interpreted as a kitchen, an animal byre, a two-roomed building, possibly the dwelling-house and a cellared building. The site dates to the mid-12th to the mid-14th century.

Roundwood at Stansted Airport (Havis and Brooks 2004) consisted of four buildings, separated by a series of drainage ditches. These were interpreted as a barn, two-roomed dwelling, kitchen and a fourth building of which only a portion survived. The site dates to the second half of the 13th century and was abandoned by the beginning of the 14th century.

Boreham Interchange, Boreham (Lavender 1999) had two, possibly three, buildings closely grouped together, one of which was probably a kitchen. Again this site was dated to the 13th to 14th centuries.

Lodge Farm, St Osyth (Germany in prep.) comprised two post-built buildings, a possible cellared structure (or sunken tank), a large pit group and pond that appears to have been used for industrial processing, possibly fulling or tanning. This site dates to the 13th to 15th century.

It is uncertain whether the Blatches site on the A120 trunk-road (Oxford and Wessex Archaeology 2003) is indeed middle-status as the post-excavation analysis is underway at present. The site is thought to have started in the 12th century, there was a 13th century cob-walled building and a second possible building dating to the 14th century.

The medieval site at Maltings Lane, Witham (Robertson in prep.) comprised a series of enclosures pre-dating 1200, containing a gravel surface and a corn-dryer. In the 13th to 14th century the main enclosure was remodelled and two buildings constructed, one tentatively interpreted as a small barn and the other as a dwelling house with possible stock accommodation at one end.

Low-status sites
A number of low-status sites have also been identified, consisting of single buildings, most of which probably combined the role of dwelling and animal shelter, whilst a few could have been isolated sheds or barns.

At Great Holts, Boreham, a single building with two rooms and a possible cross passage, dating from the 12th to early 13th century, was excavated (Germany 2004). Charred crop remains were recovered from the site, suggesting that one end was used as a granary. The medieval building at Duckend Farm, Stansted Airport consisted of a single structure set

within a ditched enclosure (Havis and Brooks 2004), of mid-12th to 13th century date. The building at Molehill Green A, Stansted Airport (Havis and Brooks 2004), was a more uncertain structure, consisting of a small D-shaped enclosure, possibly representing an eaves-drip gully around a building with an internal hearth. There were two possible lean-to sheds attached to the main structure. The site had been dated to the late 13th century. Roxwell Quarry Site B, Chignall St James (Brooks 1992) was a single building of post-in-trench construction of 11th to 12th century date. The Wicken Bonhunt building (Wade 1980) was interpreted as an aisled hall, dated to the 12th to 13th century. The Buxted chicken-factory site, Boreham (Foreman 1997) consisted of three small rectilinear tofts, adjoining the main London-Colchester road. A hearth was excavated and occupation debris found, but no trace of a building although there is space for one around the hearth. The presumption is therefore that the building was either constructed on cill-beams resting on the ground surface or of clay lump. The Takeley site (Mayo 2002) consisted of a roughly rectangular setting of post-holes, probably forming a building, dating to the 12th century.

Windmills and other industrial sites

Three windmill sites have been excavated recently in Essex. At Boreham Airfield (Clarke 2003) a 12th to 13th century moated enclosure containing a windmill, house, outbuildings, granary and a possible third building of barn dimensions. At Clobbs Wood site, Little Dunmow (Oxford and Wessex archaeology 2003) the site of a 12th-13th century post-built windmill was excavated, probably belonging to Little Dunmow Priory. At the Mid Term Car Park site, Stansted Airport (Framework Archaeology 2001) was a small medieval farmstead, dating to the 13th and 14th centuries, comprising a pair of medieval buildings and an associated post-built windmill. Further down the slope was a small two-roomed building, possibly the miller's house.

The wider landscape

It is possible to reconstruct some of the excavated sites within their demesnes or farms and also within the wider landscape, using cartographic and documentary sources to supplement the excavated evidence. From these a landscape of largely dispersed settlement with arable fields, pasture, meadow, woodland linked by an intricate network of lanes and greens can be reconstructed.

At Stebbingford, sufficient was excavated of the site to enable a reconstruction of the field-system to be undertaken. The farmstead was set about 100m to the south of the main road from Dunmow to Braintree and accessed by a ditched trackway. A farmyard area next to the buildings was defined by ditches and there was evidence for either a garden or fruit-growing on a sandy slope next to the farmstead. Four or five linear fields run at right-angles from the road back to the farmstead, these were modified over time with the introduction of smaller paddocks and the removal of a number of field boundaries to increase the size of the fields.

At the Mid-Stay Car Park site, Stansted Airport, Blatches on the A120, North Shoebury Hall and at Barkers Tanks, Takeley (Barker 2003) fields, or portions of fields have been excavated characterised by numerous parallel strips of small shallow trenches, spaced at intervals of approximately 5m (although this varies). These are not furrows created by ploughing, but rather thin, steep-sided shallow trenches. The purpose has not been fully established, but it

seems probable that they represent an early form of hollow drainage as described by Arthur Young (1813).

At Low Hall, Walthamstow (Blair 2002) the manor of Low Hall had been formed out of the earlier manor of Walthamstow Toni, and the lands of the two manors were 'promiscouslie dispersed and intermingled' in the early 17th century. However it is known that Low Hall held great stretches of enclosed arable and meadow, as well as some strips within the parish three-field system. North Shoebury on the south-eastern coast is fortunate in having a map of the demesne dating to 1703 which shows the church/hall complex, a thin scatter of dispersed settlement bordering the main roads and evidence for common-fields, farmed on the strip method. These had been largely enclosed by the end of the 16th century, but the evidence is still there in the map. At Roydon, on the Hertfordshire/Essex border a survey of the parish (Medlycott 2004) common fields and meadows, allotted on the strip method can be identified, again these have been largely enclosed, probably in the late medieval period. This form of common field fits the Type 3 Common Field identified by Edward Martin (pers. comm.) in the Historic Fields Systems project. It has also been possible to identify those fields which form individual farms. At Roydon four manor houses and six farmsteads with their origins in the medieval period were identified, together with the demesnes belonging to the manors and in two cases the fields which belonged to the farms.

Of interest is the apparently widespread phenomenon of the abandonment of sites in the 14th century. Numerous explanations have been advanced for this, including the famine and wet weather of 1315-22 (Astill and Grant 1988), the Black Death in 1349 which killed approximately one-third of the population in Essex (Poos 1991) and the subsequent recurrence of the plague in the following decades, the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 was also particularly active in Essex and may have led to more widespread dislocation and abandonment of rural sites. Some sites do survive the 14th century , however these largely comprise those of higher status, who would have had access to greater resources to draw on in difficult times.

A phenomenon that is becoming increasingly common is the excavation of linear parallel systems of narrow shallow channels, averaging 5m apart and about 30cm deep. These have been found at the Mid-term Car-park site at Stansted Airport (Framework Archaeology 2001), Barling Marsh (Wade 1994), Great Wakering (Reidy 1994) and Takeley (Roberts 2003). It is suggested that these are possibly the result of a form of hollow drainage, that is known to have been extensively used in Essex in the post-medieval period (Young 1813).

Future themes for study

The importance of studying medieval settlement within its wider landscape is self-evident. Efforts should be made when publishing a rural excavation site to consider its location within the immediate landscape, whether that comprises the farm, hamlet or village.

With broader settlement studies (such as those being conducted as part of the Historic Settlement Assessment) it is important that the landscape is studied and mapped, individual elements identified and changes in usage over time recorded.

The issue of the apparent 14th century abandonment of sites merits further examination. At present excavation has been biased towards developments on green-field sites, and hence those farmsteads that have been abandoned for one reason or another. There needs to be a policy in also examining those farms that are still in use and establishing their origins.

The period of change from the Late Saxon to the early medieval landscape is not understood and this gap in the evidence needs to be addressed, it is possible that study of the documentation for this period, combined with archaeological and cartographic evidence, may help shed light on the nature of the landscape. Extensive documentary records survive from the Saxon period onwards for both the extensive holdings of St Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey in Essex and it is suggested that this might be the most fruitful area for research.

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