

Compton Bassett and Yatesbury, North Wiltshire: settlement morphology and locational change

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with aspects of the results of excavation and survey undertaken on behalf of the Compton Bassett Area Research Project (CBARP) since 1991. Evidence pertaining to the study of the Anglo-Saxon and medieval landscape is the primary consideration, although earlier evidence is also taken into account. Far from being a detailed statement, it is the intention here to give only a brief account of the perceived evolution of Compton Bassett and Yatesbury. Additionally, certain approaches to the interpretation of rural settlements are questioned.

It has been clear for some time that the history of rural settlement in England is resistant to general modelling. Regional diversity influenced by variations of geographical location, tenurial institutions and agricultural regimes, has resulted in a multiplicity of settlement forms; the chronology of settlement patterns is equally complex.

The traditional view of the English medieval countryside as covered with nucleated villages surrounded by developed open-field systems is no longer accepted (Taylor 1983). The result has been a healthy one for archaeologists who now have to think in more dynamic terms about settlements and landscapes. An important development has been the realisation that the operation of complex agricultural regimes, involving comparatively dense populations, does not require settlement nucleation (Dyer 1990; Williamson 1988). This conclusion becomes much less surprising when patterns of settlement and land-use in prehistory are considered, particularly those of the Later Bronze Age and Iron Age (cf. Fleming 1978, 1983; Gingell 1992).

It would appear that much fieldwork suffers from period specialisation. Ideally, any consideration of regional settlement patterns should be undertaken from a thematic viewpoint as the constraints of arbitrary period divisions, usually based around artefact typologies, can bear little relation to daily life. In view of Dyer's recent statement that 'at least part of the Medieval dispersed settlement pattern [should be seen] as an archaic survival' (1990: 99), no serious discussion of medieval settlement should be undertaken without a consideration of earlier evidence.

The settlements

The CBARP study area is situated in central north Wiltshire and covers 24 square kilometers (Figs 1 and 2). Three villages were chosen for detailed study due to their variation in form (Fig. 3) and location (Cherhill, although not included in

this discussion, is shown for comparative purposes). A detailed description of the study area, the aims and objectives of the project and the results of fieldwork to date are given elsewhere (Reynolds et al. 1993; Reynolds forthcoming).

Compton Bassett

Compton Bassett has a dispersed plan and may be termed, in a strictly morphological sense, a settlement of the 'interrupted row' type (Dyer 1990; Reynolds 1993: 103). The houses are set both sides of a single road which follows the bottom of the scarp slope which demarks the boundary between the chalk downland to the east and the sand and clay vale to the west.

The existence of a settlement by the Late Anglo-Saxon period is attested by three entries in the Domesday survey for Wiltshire (Thorn and Thorn 1979) which probably correspond to three separate manors. Earlier origins are suggested by a fragment of lava quern, provisionally dated to the Middle Anglo-Saxon period, from Freeth Farm, just under 1km to the north-west of the church. Fieldwork has shown that the present plan is almost certainly post-medieval:

1) Aerial photographs show dense earthworks, of both ridge and furrow and deserted settlement type, immediately north and north-west of the church. These are clearly sealed by property and field boundaries which relate to the road.

2) Test pits immediately to the west of the road, 1km north-west of the church, revealed a buried land surface of medieval date under 1.5m of hillwash deposits. The road would surely have prevented the movement of such deposits westward had it existed during the medieval period.

3) There are no buildings earlier than the sixteenth century that respect the road, the majority being early nineteenth century.

4) Part of the road at the southern end of the village appears to run along the tread of a scarp-face strip-lynchet of probable medieval date; the end of use of a further flight, c.1550-1600, to the north has been established by excavation (Reynolds forthcoming).

The road network at Compton Bassett has yet to be fully understood. However, the positioning of certain properties, at the northern end of the village, and notable earthworks at the southern end, suggests an earlier route situated roughly parallel with, and to the west of, the present road. The medieval village appears to have been a nucleated settlement with the church at its southern limit (Fig. 4).

Yatesbury

Yatesbury appears on first inspection to be a shrunken, nucleated settlement. Present occupation lies some 300m to the east of the church and consists mainly of one row of houses along the eastern side of the most easterly of three parallel roads. Initially, the village was seen as having shifted in a northerly and easterly direction from an early focus around the church.

The settlement is mentioned in the Domesday survey (Thorn and Thorn 1979) and the results of archaeological excavations have indicated activity on the site since the Late Roman period with important ceramic evidence for Early and

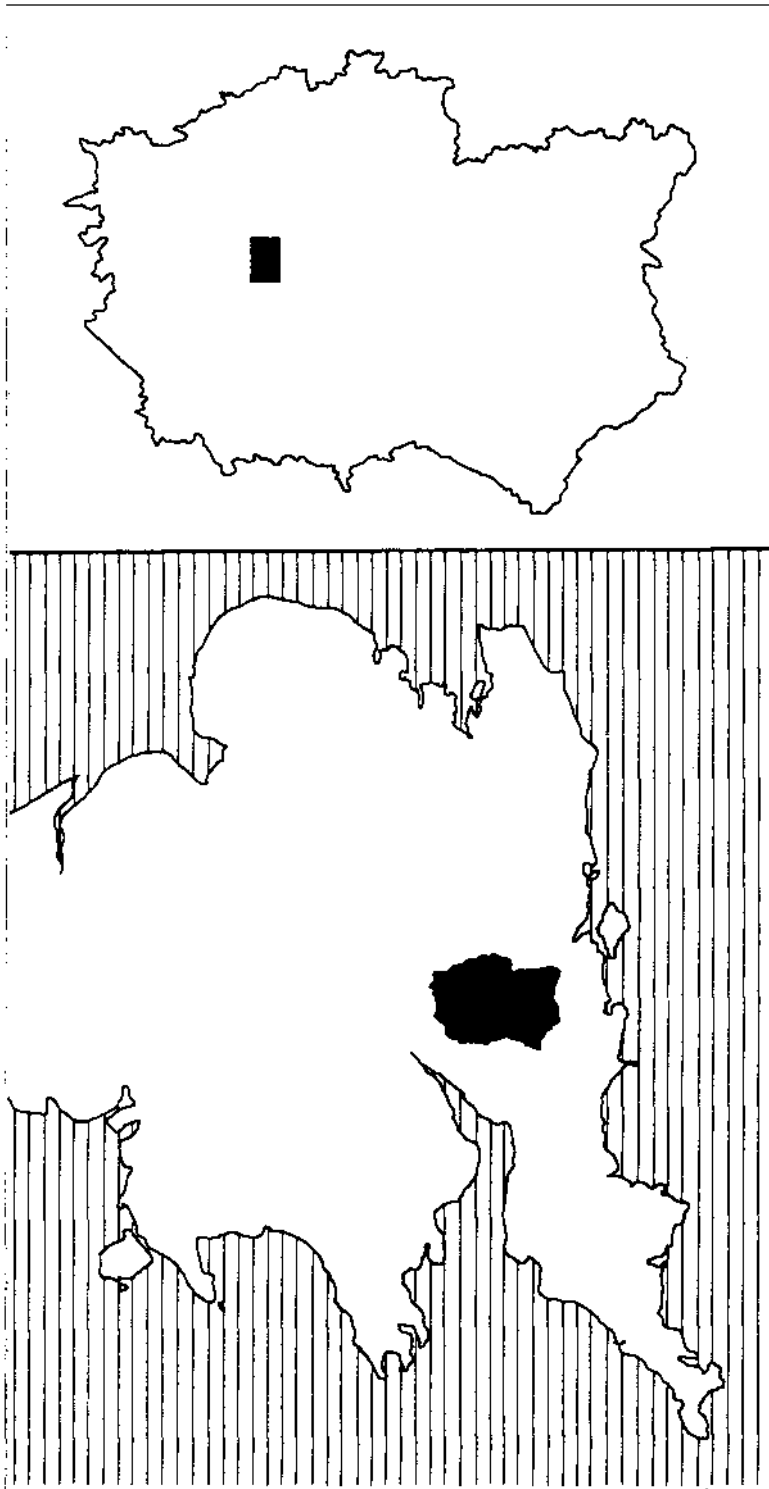


Figure 1 Location of the CBARP study area in Southern England.

Middle Anglo-Saxon occupation.

Survey work indicated at an early stage that the village was quite different in the Anglo-Saxon, Medieval and post-medieval periods (Fig. 4). Three roughly parallel enclosures strung in a line from west to east have been recognised:

1) A sub-rectangular bank and ditch enclosure, measuring approximately 100m x 30m, lies immediately to the west of the church. The position of this feature appears to have influenced the laying out of the road which enters the village from the west and which can be seen to truncate ridge and furrow to the south of enclosure 3.

2) A sub-rectangular bank and ditch enclosure, measuring approximately 150m x 80m. The north-west quarter of this enclosure is formed by the present churchyard and the rest by earthworks which have been cut through by the north-south lane to the east of the church.

3) Approximately a third of a circular bank and ditch enclosure with a possible diameter of 100m. Excavation has revealed a complex sequence of ditch cuts indicating continued existence of this enclosure from the Late Roman period until c.1750. The maintenance of this enclosure in the Early and Middle Anglo-Saxon periods is of particular significance.

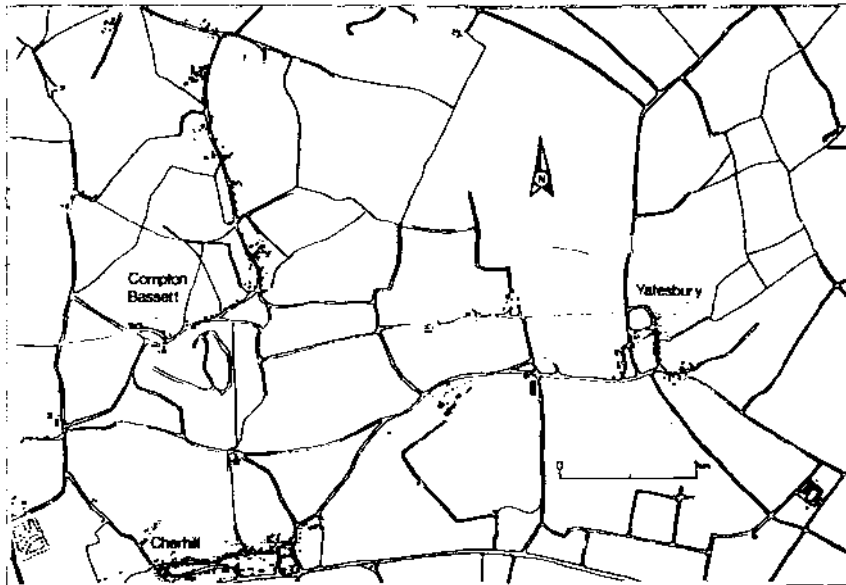


Figure 2 The study area.

The central of the three parallel north-south roads has been redirected from its original course through the village. Its former route, being some 30m to the east of the present road, can be traced using a variety of sources including aerial photographs, Ordnance Survey and other earlier maps, as well as surviving earthworks.

Yatesbury seems to have developed its dispersed form while retaining certain

elements from its foundation in the Late Roman period. In the Anglo-Saxon period the settlement is seen as being located on a locally important north-south route (Reynolds and Pepper in prep.). Comprehensive replanning has occurred in the post-medieval period resulting in the present plan form.

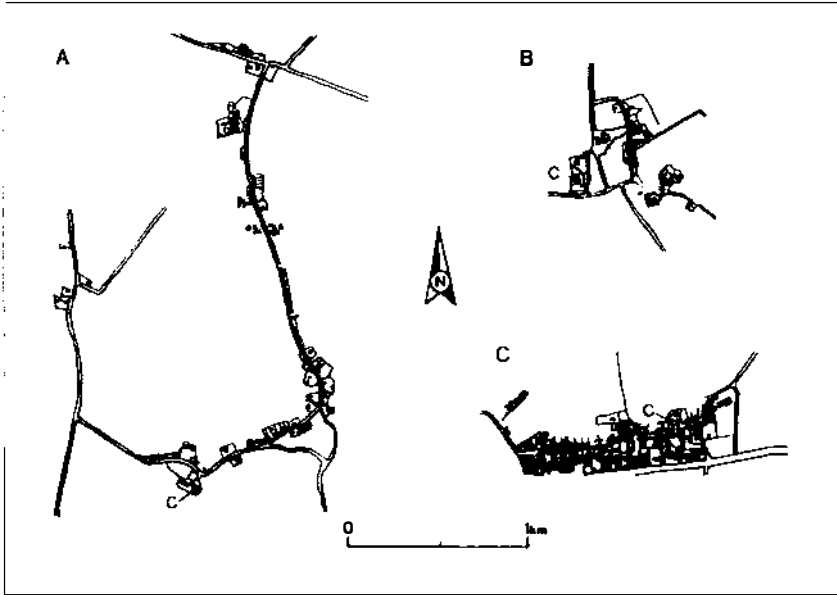


Figure 3 Plans of (A) Compton Bassett, (B) Yatesbury and (C) Cherhill.
c = church.

Discussion

For certain regions the classification of plan forms has been rigorously studied (cf. Ellison 1983; Roberts 1989), if not widely adopted. Such analyses often achieve little other than the identification of common forms based on the study of landscapes on Ordnance Survey maps.

Roberts (*ibid.*) has discussed many of the problems connected with the use of Ordnance Survey maps and the classification of plan forms. The most important point considered here being that, even if a medieval plan survives relatively unaltered, the earliest medieval phases may not be represented. The solution to this dilemma lies in extensive archaeological survey and excavation, and even then questions of deposit survival and availability come into play.

Dating remains a major problem. The lack of securely stratified sequences on rural sites is well known and, where ceramics are found in sealed contexts, it is often impossible to give a date more precisely than within a century. The study of Anglo-Saxon and medieval pottery in Wiltshire has been severely hampered by a paucity of urban excavation. The recent work at Trowbridge Castle (Graham and Davies 1993) remedies this situation to a certain extent, but otherwise those

dealing with ceramics must look to sequences from Bath and Gloucester for general parallels. The apparent very local production of certain coarse wares, however, precludes them from the possibility of accurate dating by comparison with other assemblages. This situation is very much a problem in the CBARP study area, as regionally produced wares of known date and origin are often absent from deposits, ruling out the possibility of dating by association.

The study of village plan forms is riddled with problems, although these have their own regional characteristics. In East Anglia, for example, the existence of distinctive pottery industries in the Middle Anglo-Saxon period allows settlement patterns to be elucidated with relative ease and the mobility of individual villages to be explored (Wade-Martins 1980).

In the north of England, particularly in the areas studied by Roberts, settlements seem to be suited to classification on the basis of plan form, and subsequent interpretation within a broadly historical paradigm.

The south-west of England, given the diversity of its settlement types and forms (Aston 1989: 105), is much less open to such an approach. The partial survival of an archaic settlement pattern should be taken into consideration with the position that the south-west appears largely uninfluenced by the colonisation or widespread destruction that had characterized much of northern England under the Vikings and then the Normans. The number of Danish 'new villages' is difficult, if not impossible, to establish on place-name evidence, particularly as Hodges (1988: 154-5) has recently pointed out that Scandinavian names can be explained as the labels applied by the Anglo-Scandinavian government to existing settlements purely for the purposes of taxation.

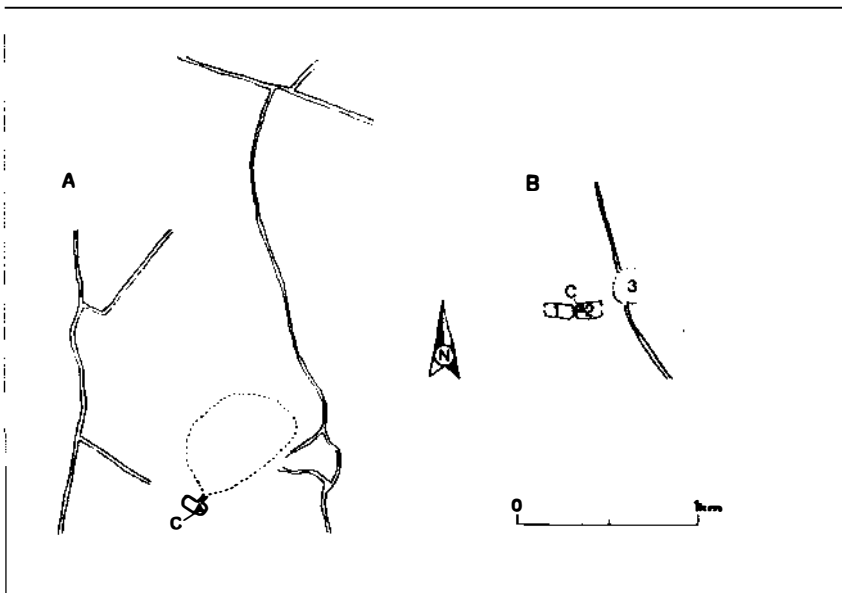


Figure 4 Plans of (A) Compton Bassett showing position of former nucleated settlement (dashed line) in relation to present plan and (B) Yatesbury showing layout of enclosures 1-3 and early N-S road. c = Church

The evidence for long-term continuity of estates has become more convincing in and around the CBARP study area. Fowler (1976) has demonstrated a close relationship between Roman villas and existing settlements in the parishes of West Overton and Fyfield (situated to the east of the study area). The discovery of Roman building material, including boxed flue tiles and tesserae among other finds, at Compton Bassett and Yatesbury further supports the hypothesis that land units may remain relatively static. When the villa sites at Cherhill and Windmill Hill are taken into account we are presented with a situation in which six adjoining parishes share such associations. However, further research remains to be done on the dating of the road network in the study area and on the location of other 'pairs' of Romano-British and later settlements which apparently share the same land unit.

Conclusions

Detailed archaeological fieldwork at Compton Bassett and Yatesbury has indicated that the use of the O.S. map as a local research tool is limited in that, due to reorganisation of the landscape, the village plans have been shown to be post-medieval and bear little if any resemblance to their medieval predecessors. In fact, the reverse of the picture presented by the O.S. map, that of Compton Bassett as a dispersed settlement and Yatesbury as a nucleated one, was apparent less than three hundred years ago. Fieldwork to date has, therefore, indicated that the settlement pattern of the locality is highly fluid. Future research is to be undertaken to locate occupation sites of Bronze Age to Roman date in order to view the picture more fully. Additionally, preliminary study of the relationships between boundaries and settlements has indicated that the major land units (now broadly corresponding to the present day parishes) are much older in origin than the Later Anglo-Saxon period when parish or proprietary churches came into existence.

There is a tendency among settlement archaeologists to play down organic development of settlements and landscapes. Much of the available archaeological evidence from settlement sites of the Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods gives an impression of continual morphological and locational change.

This contrasts with the picture of stabilisation or stagnation which, ultimately, is what any survey of medieval settlement morphology, from cartographic evidence alone, relies upon.

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