

Towards an archaeology of the free peasantry around the year 1000

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East Midlands; 10th–12th century; social segregation; free peasantry

The existence of Domesday Book has always alerted English historians to the existence of a substantial number of free peasants especially in Eastern England. Nevertheless, they have been relatively neglected by historians despite a few seminal works over the last 70 years (e. g. Stenton 1926 and Hadley 2000). One major problem is that because they existed on the fringes of the manorial system they are poorly documented in manorial records. Occasionally one gets a glimpse of their presence as in a 13th century Lincolnshire charter to which the men of Freiston and Butterwick attached fifty separate seals delete (*Guide to Seals*, iv & pl. II: I am grateful to John Cherry of the British Museum for this reference). Nevertheless, the existence of large numbers of free tenants in certain areas must have had long-term effects on the tenurial landscape. Liddiard (2002) has recently argued, for example, that the westerly concentration of castles in Norfolk is due to the high number of free peasantry in the east of the county preventing Norman magnates from building up consolidated estates. On the Continent it has been detailed regional analysis by historians such as Robert Fossier (1968, i, 210–211) and Pierre Bonassie (1991) that has shown that large numbers of free peasantry once existed in areas such as Catalonia and Picardy. By the 12th century the free peasants in many areas of the Continent were losing their independence as the power of seigneurial lords grew. However, in parts of England and Germany they often continued to have a degree of freedom.

Medieval archaeologists might argue that such a category as the free peasantry, based on legal and tenurial practice, has little meaning for them. Free peasants were undoubtedly often

richer than unfree peasants but not invariably so. It is also clear that in England there were entire villages composed of free peasants, usually marked by the absence of a manor house reflecting the absence of demesne. In mixed villages they often occupied a spatially distinct area to the unfree peasants. Otherwise the material culture of free and unfree was probably little different. However, at least in some areas it is from the upper ranks of the free peasantry that the new seigneurial lords of the 10th and 11th centuries emerged. It is upon this more fluidic period and upon the blurred line between peasant and knight that this paper will concentrate.

Recent work in the East Midlands of England has demonstrated that the medieval landscape of villages and open fields resulted from widespread replanning of the landscape in about the tenth century at least in the fertile river valleys (Lewis et al. 1997; Brown/Foard 1999). Other adjacent areas may have seen nucleation take place over a more extended period of time. In the 1980s Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit and English Heritage undertook a major research project on the four parishes of Raunds, Ringstead, Stanwick and Hargrave in the Nene valley of Northamptonshire, a rich farming region (fig. 1) (Parry 1994 and forthcoming). All four parishes had manorial linkages with Raunds clearly being the major centre, though subsequent research indicted that these parishes were once part of a much larger royal or aristocratic estate based at Higham Ferrers (Courtney, forthcoming). Excavation and fieldwork indicted that all four villages were laid out in the tenth century. Ringstead was shown to be a village entirely occupied by freemen and thus very poorly docu-

mented; while most of Stanwick was held by Peterborough Abbey from the 10th century. The most complex settlement was Raunds which had two field systems linked to different ends of the village. The two main manorial sites, Furnells and Burystead, both lay in the north end of the village. Excavations of Furnells by Andrew Boddington (1996) revealed a tenth century hall and church. Unfortunately excavations on the Burystead site proved unproductive though its church became the modern parish church (Auduoy, forthcoming). By contrast, Furnells church and burial ground was abandoned by the 13th century, no doubt a reflection of the successful power struggle against the secular ownership of churches. The south end of Raunds was once separated from the north end by arable land. It possibly housed a distinct community of freemen but this could not be proven due to the active land market.

Three minor deserted sites lay along the edge of the meadow land fringing the River Nene: West Cotton, Mill Cotton and Mallows Cotton. The place-name 'cotton' indicates a settlement of cottages suggesting low status occupation. However, minor manorial sites were shown to have once existed at all three locations. Earthworks at West Cotton appeared to represent a small peasant hamlet assumed to be a secondary settlement and were excavated ahead of development by Dave Windell (Windell et al. 1990; Chapman, forthcoming). The peasant settlement was shown to have been a short-lived site of 13th–14th century date. Beneath it was found a manorial complex dating back to the early-tenth century (fig. 2). Its hall closely paralleled that excavated at Furnells in Raunds village but it was smaller in size. Minor excavation and fieldwork also suggested that the other two Cotton settlements dated back to the same period.

It was suggested that all three Cotton sites represented the settlements of rich free peasants or minor thegns (lords) with small attached settlements of cottagers (nearly landless smallholders) who worked on their land. Such an association between minor manors and low-status, wage-earning and nearly landless peasants can be seen to have been widespread in Domesday Book and later documentary sources. The implication that it was the low status element that gave its name, at least in the long-term, to the sites has important implica-

tions for place-name interpretation. A similar phenomenon has been observed at Coton in Warwickshire, also recently excavated by Anthony Maull (in preparation) of the Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit. The Raunds landscape of the tenth century was interpreted as representing a landscape of negotiation in which the power of different groups and individuals is reflected in the special distribution of settlements (Courtney, forthcoming). The important lords and the church had their centres of power in the villages surrounded by both unfree and free peasants. The Cotons seem to represent the dwellings of either minor lords

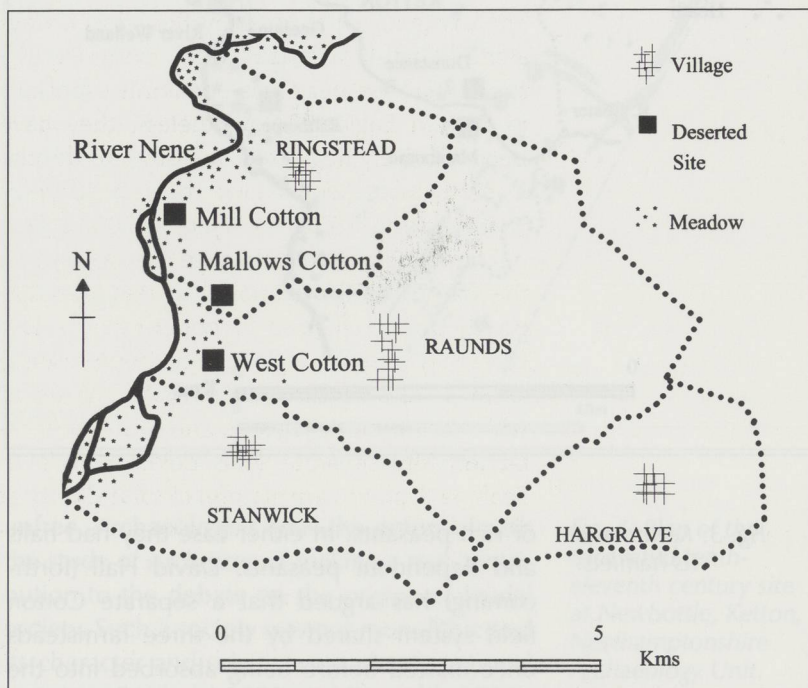


Fig. 1: The townships covered by the Raunds Area project.

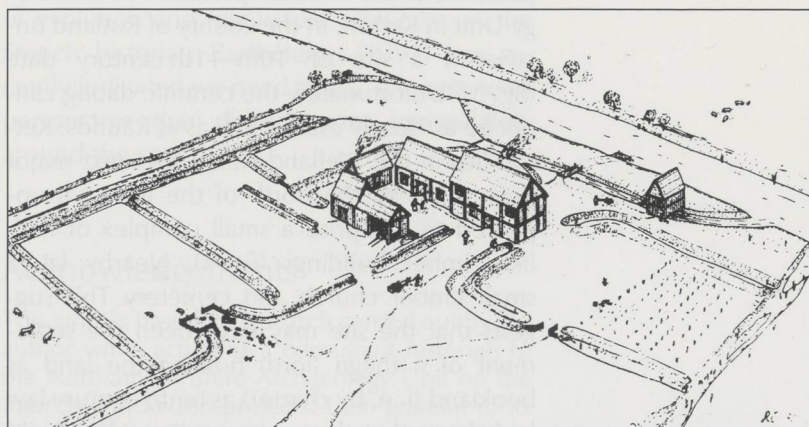


Fig. 2: A reconstruction of the West Cotton 'manorial' site in the tenth century by Andy Chapman, Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit.

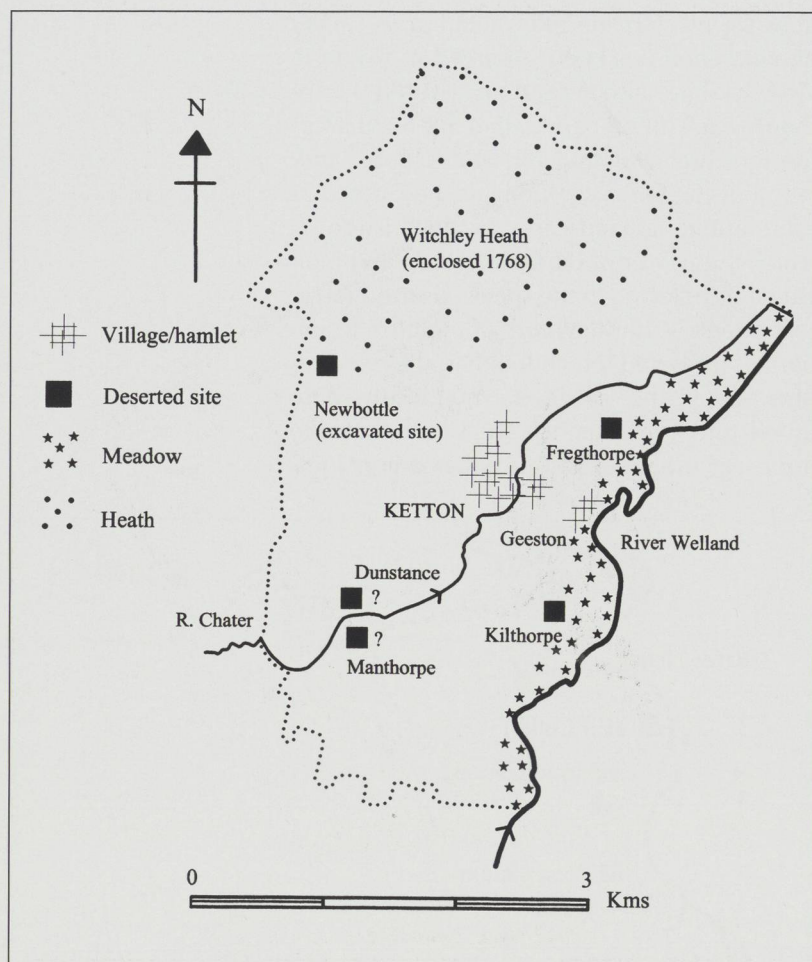


Fig. 3: Ketton and its hamlets.

or rich peasants. In either case they had halls and dependent peasants. David Hall (forthcoming) has argued that a separate Cotton field system shared by the three farmsteads once existed before being absorbed into the fields of Raunds and Ringstead.

In 1997–1998 excavations ahead of limestone quarrying by Ian Meadows (1999 and in preparation) of the Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit in Ketton, in the county of Rutland uncovered a site of 10th–11th century date (fig. 3). Unfortunately the ceramic dating cannot be as closely established as at Raunds. Ketton lies in the Welland valley, the next major river valley to the north of the Nene. It appeared to comprise a small complex of hall-like timber buildings (fig. 4). Nearby lay a small timber church and cemetery. This suggests that the site may have been the settlement of a thegn (lord) holding the land as bookland (i. e. by charter) as tenth century law laid down that thegns were allowed to build churches on their land and keep one third of the income. The status of the owner may ex-

plain why the site was abandoned if he lost his life or estate in or shortly after the Norman invasion in 1066. The excavated site lies on the southern edge of Witchley Heath, a former open common, and adjacent to Newbottle furlong, a cropping unit of Newbottle Field, one of Ketton's three former open fields.

The Old or Middle English place-name of 'Newbottle' means new hall. Post-medieval county maps indicate a deserted site of Newbottle in the general area north of Ketton Village. Several inhabitants of Ketton parish had this surname in the 13th and early 14th century, but may have lived in the main village. However, a document of 1331 about land in Ketton refers to a 'William Moldesone of Newbottle' implying that he dwelt there (PRO E142/67/6). Certainly one would expect the excavated hall site to have had peasant tenants, if only cottagers, to work its land. It is possible that a peasant settlement has been destroyed by limestone quarrying, an industry that probably dates back to medieval times.

Newbottle is not the only subsidiary settlement in Ketton. Three sites lie along the meadow edge of the River Welland paralleling the three Cottons at Raunds. Fregthorpe is a deserted site, Geeston a still existing hamlet and Kilthorpe, now a farm. Fieldwork has produced Stamford ware from the first two sites suggesting a 10th–11th century date though their origins are not closely dateable. All three place-names combine a personal name with either the Old English -tun (farm) or Scandinavian -thorpe (farm or minor settlement). The fieldnames, Manthorpe and in the Chater valley may also point to one or two further lost farmsteads in the Chater valley (see Cox 1999, 50–55 on placenames).

Ketton, a large manor, was held by the crown at Domesday (1086). It lies in the rich lands of the Welland river valley. It seems at least possible, that as at Raunds, we are seeing social segregation at the time of village and open field creation rather than secondary settlement. We are also beginning to recognise a class of sites linked to minor halls lying below the level of those situated in the main villages which belonged to the crown, church and more important thegns. These sites mark the increasing presence of locally-based lords in the landscape. The evolution was altered by the Norman Conquest which disposed the holders of these halls. The excavated site of Ketton was

abandoned but others were granted by Norman magnates to immigrant sub-tenants to hold by knight's fee, i.e. feudal tenure as were the three Cotons at Raunds. The later tenurial history of the Ketton hamlets is confused by the lack of later documentation though this gives evidence to suggest that Kilthorpe, Geeston and Fregthorpe were associated with buildings of manorial status, for example, a Dovecote close recorded at Fregthorpe.

Conclusion

The proposed theory of social segregation in a planned landscape may only apply to the 10th–11th century English Midlands. However, minor hall sites were undoubtedly more widespread. Similar sites almost certainly existed on the Continent and the recently published site at Colletière on Lac Paladru in eastern France has many similarities to West Cotton. The site at Colletière, and two other unexcavated sites on the same lake, differ from the Ketton and Raunds sites in being related to settlement expansion and forest clearance rather than agrarian re-organisation. Colletière was occupied c. A.D. 1000–1040 and abandoned as the lake level rose, a phenomenon probably aggravated by forest clearance (Colardelle/Verdelle 1993). The site comprised a hall and outbuildings within a timber enclosure. Preservation was exceptional due to the site being waterlogged, and the excavated finds assemblaged included weapons, horse-riding gear and musical instruments. The same ambiguity over the social status of the occupants also parallels West Cotton. Indeed, the excavators of Colletière selected the term 'paysan chevalier' or 'peasant-knight' for the chief occupants. Many other such minor hall sites remain to be discovered in western Europe. They relate to a period of social fluidity crucial in the birth of seigneurial society. However, this fluidity was largely extinguished by the emergence of a new class of knights who used their economic and political manpower to increasingly define themselves from those below. The knightly classes used their material culture of display, for example the castle, weapons, coats of arms, dress and luxury items to define their superiority while the free peasantry were increasingly pushed back into the ranks of the

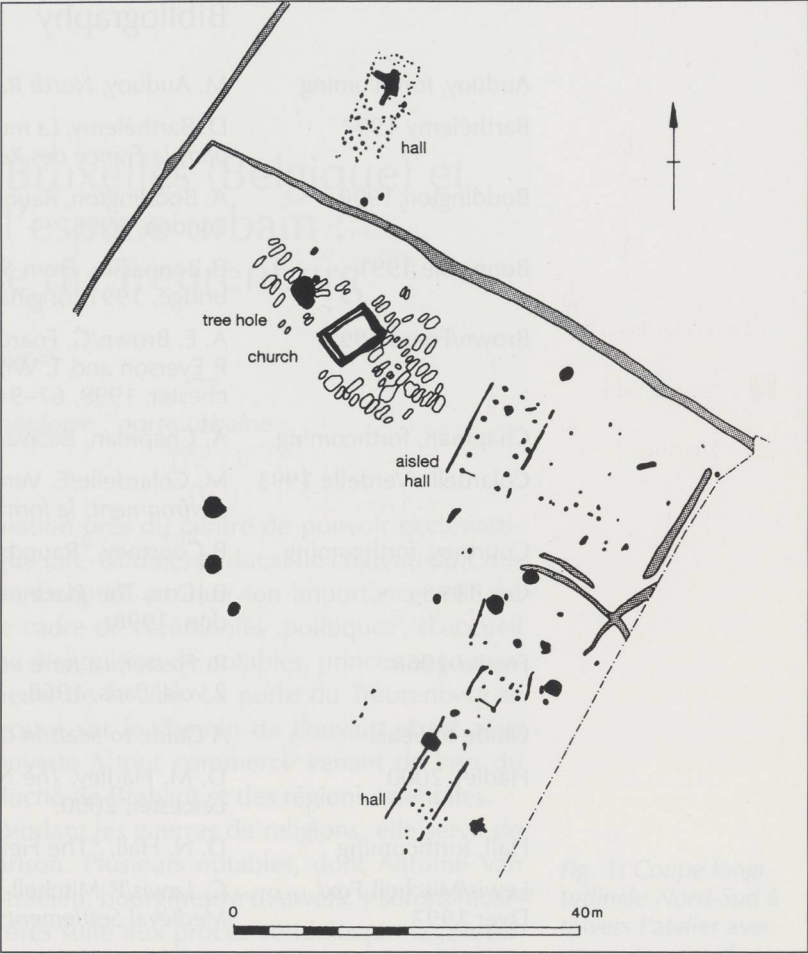


Fig. 4: Plan of the excavated tenth-eleventh century site at Newbottle, Ketton, Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit.

unfree. Archaeologists have the potential with the study of such sites of making a real contribution to the debate on the origins of feudal society. Such a society was not monolithic and its character and origins were clearly regional in nature (Verhulst 1991 and Reynolds 1994). Analysis thus needs to be done at the regional level but a European perspective is also essential. Change is likely to be a complex mixture of evolution and revolution. However, as the French historian Barthélemy (1997) has recently indicated we need to take a longer-term perspective than the decades immediately around the year 1000.

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