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# SITES IN THE LANDSCAPE: APPROACHES TO THE POST-ROMAN SETTLEMENT OF SOUTH EASTERN ENGLAND

Tom Williamson

It is a commonplace amongst field archaeologists that the surface indications of Anglo-Saxon occupation are very slight (Foard 1978, 364). Field-walking surveys which locate large numbers of Roman, medieval, and even Iron Age settlement sites frequently reveal very little evidence of early and middle Saxon occupation. The field survey carried out in Hampshire by Stephen Shennan, to take but one example, which sampled 30 square kilometres out of a total study area of 150, recovered virtually no evidence of Saxon settlement. Shennan commented:

Its [the Saxon period's] most obvious characteristic is the sheer lack of evidence, which the survey did little to alter. This cannot be taken at its face value since early Saxon pottery in particular seems to decay very quickly in the ploughsoil and even when present is difficult to detect; fieldwalking produced only a single grass-tempered sherd and two other sherds of probable late-Saxon date. How much would be recovered by very intensive work within a small area, and whether the returns would justify the effort expended, must remain an open question.

(Shennan 1981, 119)

For those archaeologists whose principal interests lie in the evolution of the rural landscape, and in particular in the relationship between Roman and medieval settlement in lowland England, the problem posed by the low visibility of human occupation over this crucial period cannot be so easily dismissed.

This low visibility appears to involve several factors. Those involving the survival and visibility of Saxon sherds in the ploughsoil probably are, as Shennan suggests, the most important. It is noteworthy, in this context, that those areas in which field survey has been most successful in locating the sites of post-Roman settlements are often those with a late and post-medieval history of non-arable land use, and which have only recently fallen under the plough. Thus field-walking surveys on the Hampshire Downs soon after intensive ploughing had begun in the 1960's revealed several Saxon settlement sites, including the substantial site at Chalton (Cunliffe 1972, 1). In regions such as East Anglia, which have a longer history of intensive arable land use, it might be expected that settlement sites of the Saxon period would be less well preserved and therefore, to the fieldwalker, less visible.

(Archaeological Review from Cambridge 4:1 [1985])

The poor quality of most post-Roman domestic pottery is however probably not the only factor involved in its poor survival on the surface. It is likely that the problem is exacerbated by the frequent absence on early or middle Saxon settlement sites of features of sufficient depth to preserve this pottery from the more immediate effects of ploughing and weathering (Foard 1978, 364).

Yet while problems of preservation are perhaps paramount, they are compounded by the fact that early and middle Saxon settlement sites in many parts of the country do not produce much pottery even when excavated. At Maxey, for example, the excavation of the Saxon settlement produced only some 270 sherds (Addyman 1964, 47). More recently, the excavations at Cowdery's Down in Hampshire revealed "an almost complete absence of cultural material" from the Saxon phase of occupation of the site; a total of only 146 abraded and chronologically undiagnostic Saxon sherds were recovered (Millet and James 1983, 197 and 255).

Indeed, in many parts of the country there is evidence for virtual aceramic periods in the post-Roman centuries. Nor are such areas restricted to the north or west of England. On the basis of a number of excavations in Essex, for example, it has been suggested that

... there are now grounds for proposing that an almost aceramic phase existed in Essex between the demise of plain grass-tempered pottery (probably in the seventh and early eighth centuries) and the appearance of Saxo-Norman wares.

Drury and Rodwell 1978, 146)

Whatever the prime cause of the low visibility of early and middle Saxon settlement, this phenomenon poses considerable problems in the interpretation of negative results from field walking surveys. In the case of Saxon settlement, to what extent can absence of evidence ever be taken as reliable evidence for an absence of settlement? In all those areas of the country which have been subjected to intensive systematic field survey large numbers of Roman sites have been found, on a wide variety of soils and in a wide variety of locations (Taylor 1983, 83). The suggestion that the population of Roman Britain was well up to the levels of the medieval population peak of the early 14th century has, in effect, become a new orthodoxy. Surveys also usually reveal substantial numbers of late Saxon settlements, supporting the current historical perspective that the England of Domesday Book was 'an old country', well past the stage of pioneer colonisation (Lennard 1959, 1). Yet in many areas, as in that studied by Shennan, evidence of occupation in the intervening centuries, between the collapse of the Romano-British pottery industry and the introduction of durable Saxo-Norman ceramics, is virtually or even completely non-existent. This absence of evidence has led to the inference of a catastrophe affecting post-Roman demographic and settlement history. In some versions these events have been held to involve a dramatic decline of population from four to five million in the fourth century to less than one by the sixth (Fowler 1978, 6-7).

Of course, there is nothing inherently unlikely in a population decline on this scale: that following the population peak of the early 14th century, from perhaps six million to around three, could be cited as a possible analogy. The frequent discovery of Romano-British settlements within areas occupied by woodland in the medieval period would support the notion of a measure of discontinuity in settlement history, especially on the less fertile or more intractable soils (Taylor 1983, 84). Yet how substantial would a population decline need to be in order to ensure that the medieval landscape in many parts of the country developed from scratch, within the context of an uncleared wilderness?

Just such an interpretation of landscape history is often advanced for those regions of England which were not, during the medieval period, characterised by a landscape of large nucleated villages farming extensive unhedged 'open fields'. These 'woodland' areas, as they were called from the 15th century, were located in coherent blocks to the north and west of, and to the south and east of, the Midland plain. Their landscapes were characterised by a mixture of small, irregular areas of open field, and by substantial numbers of individual hedged closes. Above all it was the settlement pattern of these areas which distinguished them from the Midlands. Although village nucleations did exist, the landscape was dominated by a complex mosaic of smaller, dispersed settlements, isolated farms and hamlets. Because the essential framework of fields and routeways in these landscapes was already established by c. 1700, they are sometimes referred to as 'Ancient Countryside', in contrast to the 'Planned Countryside' of Parliamentary Enclosure which now dominate the Midlands (Rackham 1976, 16).

The pattern of settlement in these areas, so different from that of the Midlands, has generally been interpreted by historians as a consequence of their late -- i.e., late Saxon or early medieval -- colonisation. When systematic surveys within such areas have revealed the usual evidence for intensive Roman settlement, their failure to produce evidence for Saxon occupation has led to the suggestion that the post-Roman centuries saw widescale abandonment of land, with recolonisation only occurring (as in the conventional historical model) towards the end of the Saxon period (Warner 1983, 43).

Yet in one such 'woodland' area, N.W. Essex, fieldwork by the author suggests instead a remarkable degree of continuity. Twenty eight square kilometres were surveyed within a study area of 144 square kilometres. The soils within this area are varied, due to the nature of the underlying geology. An undulating plateau of boulder clay overlies chalk: on the more level parts of this plateau the soils are heavy and poorly drained; but the plateau is cut by a series of valleys, on the sides of which lighter soils occur, either better drained clay soils or, in a few cases, soils formed over exposures of the underlying chalk.

Of the 28 square kilometres examined, 12 were fieldwalked using fairly standard survey techniques, with transects spaced at 15 metre intervals; while 16 were examined using a more detailed strategy, with transects spaced at only 3 metres. The latter strategy was adopted not



only to facilitate the location of the slight traces indicating Saxon settlement sites, but also to allow the detailed plotting and collection of all artefacts visible on the surface of the ploughsoil. On the assumption that the majority of such stray sherds derive from the practice of manuring, an analysis of their distribution for the Roman period should provide a more detailed picture of the extent of local clearance and landuse than that provided by a concentration on 'sites' alone (Williamson 1984a, 228-229). This would in turn provide a background against which the likelihood of 'total abandonment' in the ensuing centuries could be better assessed.

Two seasons of fieldwork were sufficient to demonstrate the intensity of settlement in the area at the end of the Roman period. In the later fourth century there were around 14 settlements every 10 square kilometres. Stray sherds indicative of manuring were recovered from the heaviest clays, from within the areas of fields with names indicative of woodland clearance in the Saxon and medieval periods, and even within areas only cleared of woodland since 1945. The fieldwalking evidence, supported by that provided by the local Domesday entries, also suggests that in the 11th century the area was by contemporary standards fairly densely settled, and that the settlement pattern was already highly dispersed.

Yet two seasons of fieldwork revealed only two possible settlements of Early/Middle Saxon date. One of these was represented by a small unassociated scatter of sherds within an area of level, fairly poorly-drained boulder clay. The other was discovered in a more favourable location, on level boulder clay but adjacent to better drained soils on the valley side of the river Cam. It was, in addition, close to sites of both late Roman and Saxo-Norman occupation. Close proximity of Roman and early medieval settlements was frequently revealed by the survey in similar locations close to the junction of the heavy plateau soils with the lighter soils on the sides of the major valleys.

By intensively re-examining 27 areas where such proximity of Roman and Saxo-Norman settlement suggested the possibility of occupation during the intervening centuries, a further 22 probable Saxon settlements were located (Williamson 1984b, 237-270). Evidence of such occupation was, however, in most cases only recorded by gridding areas of varying extent in 25 X 25 metre squares and, by examining the ground surface with eye level maintained at a height of between 0.5 and 1 metre, collecting all material visible on the surface. Even employing this tedious and time-consuming strategy, the evidence of Saxon occupation recovered was very meagre. Discounting abraded sherds of debatable date, Saxon occupation was normally represented by 4 to 6, and more rarely 7 to 10, sherds.

Thus in this area, at least, the numerous 'greens', 'ends' and isolated farmsteads which characterise the settlement patterns of 'woodland' countryside do not, in the main, result from the activities of late Saxon or early medieval colonists. Instead they represent the

direct successors of Romano-British settlements. In the more favourable parts of the area studied, stability of settlement location or migration within short distances was a characteristic development from the Iron Age through to the post-medieval period. On the more poorly drained parts of the clay plateau, settlement seems to have been more mobile in all periods; but only on the heaviest, most intractable soils does there appear to have been significant regeneration of woodland in the post-Roman centuries. Continuity rather than catastrophe characterises the later settlement history of the area (Williamson 1984b, 267-270).

These results do not imply that all dispersed patterns of medieval settlement necessarily have their origins in an Iron Age or Romano-British past. They do, however, demonstrate once again that traces of Anglo-Saxon settlement can be so meagre as to be virtually irrecoverable by the use of conventional, transect-walking methods of field survey. It must be stressed that while the N.W. Essex survey began as a rigorously systematic fieldwalking project, evidence of Saxon occupation was only finally recovered by a selective re-examination of target areas. This concentration on areas where the proximity of late Roman and late Saxon settlements suggested the possibility also of early and middle Saxon occupation clearly introduces a substantial element of bias. Single-period Saxon sites in other locations would not be revealed by the strategy finally adopted. In areas where traces of Saxon occupation are similarly meagre, but where -- as indeed was the case in parts of the area surveyed -- the pattern of settlement in the post-Roman period was more mobile, then the Saxon settlement pattern might only be reconstructed by applying in a systematic way the kinds of intensive gridding strategies finally employed only selectively in this survey. More worrying is the possibility that in many areas evidence of early or middle Saxon occupation may survive on the surface even less well than it does in N.W. Essex, due to the nature of local pottery fabrics, soil types, or later land-use regimes. For these reasons, any understanding of the development of landscape and settlement in the post-Roman centuries clearly requires the development of methods by which the true implications of negative evidence can be evaluated.

One such independent check is provided by an archaeological perspective which focuses not on the artefactual evidence for the location of 'sites', or even on that provided by stray sherds for the extent of past arable landuse, but instead takes as its focus the development of the framework of the landscape itself. It is fortunate that the areas in which the doctrine of post-Roman discontinuity in settlement and land-use has become most firmly entrenched, the 'Ancient Countrysides' of S.E. England, the Home Counties, and East Anglia, are those in which such an alternative approach can be most readily developed.

Because the boundaries and route systems of these areas were not produced by a drastic replanning of the landscape in the post-medieval period, and because from an early date most were defined by permanent physical barriers, their form and layout can be examined on the earliest

available maps or, when still extant, in the field, for any evidence of pre-Saxon origins. If it can be demonstrated that the essential framework of such landscapes, especially in those places where the soils are usually deemed least 'suitable' for post-Roman settlement, are of Roman or earlier origin, then it is highly unlikely that they were abandoned at the end of the Roman period and only recolonised at the end of the Saxon. If the results of field surveys within such areas suggested that Roman settlement had been of the usual intensity, but that Saxon settlement had been absent, then there would clearly be difficulties in accepting survey results at face value.

In the 'Ancient Countryside' areas of southern and eastern England, the framework of the landscape is defined by various forms of hedge. At one time it seemed possible that an examination of the number of shrub species contained in a standard 30 metre length could be used to date a hedge, using the now familiar equation 'one shrub species = one hundred years in age' (Pollard et al. 1974, 78-92). This approximate equation was based on an examination of the shrub content of a limited number of hedges for which independent documentary dating was available. Hooper and Pollard suggested that the observed relationship of age and species content resulted from a linear succession of species following an initial single-species planting (Pollard et al. 1974, 78-104; Hooper 1971). Over the years it has, unfortunately, become apparent that there are many theoretical and practical problems involved in this technique (Johnson 1980). Moreover, as a method of isolating elements of Roman or pre-Roman land-division, it suffers from two additional drawbacks. A maximum number of shrub species in any standard 30 metre length is determined by ecological factors independent of age, so that -- in most areas -- a standard length will never gain more than 11 or 12 species however old it is (Hunter et al. 1974, 12). There is also the very real possibility that some boundaries may have existed for many centuries in another form -- perhaps as a 'dead' hedge, perhaps as a simple bank and ditch -- before being marked by a hedge. The dating of boundaries by means of various excavation techniques is similarly beset with a range of problems of a kind perhaps more familiar to those working in more conventional areas of archaeology. The dating of boundaries by evidence inherent in their present physical form is therefore usually impossible. They can, however, sometimes be assigned a *terminus ante quem* on the basis of their relationship with other, more closely dated, features of the landscape.

The essential principle employed in landscape stratigraphy is a simple one. In a parish enclosed in the 18th century, the later date of a 19th century turnpike road or railway line will be self-evident from even a cursory perusal of a large-scale map. The imposition of the routeway upon an earlier system of land-division will produce awkwardly- and irregularly-shaped fields immediately adjacent to it, while over a wider area the layout of the landscape will have a separate coherence which proclaims its earlier and independent origin.

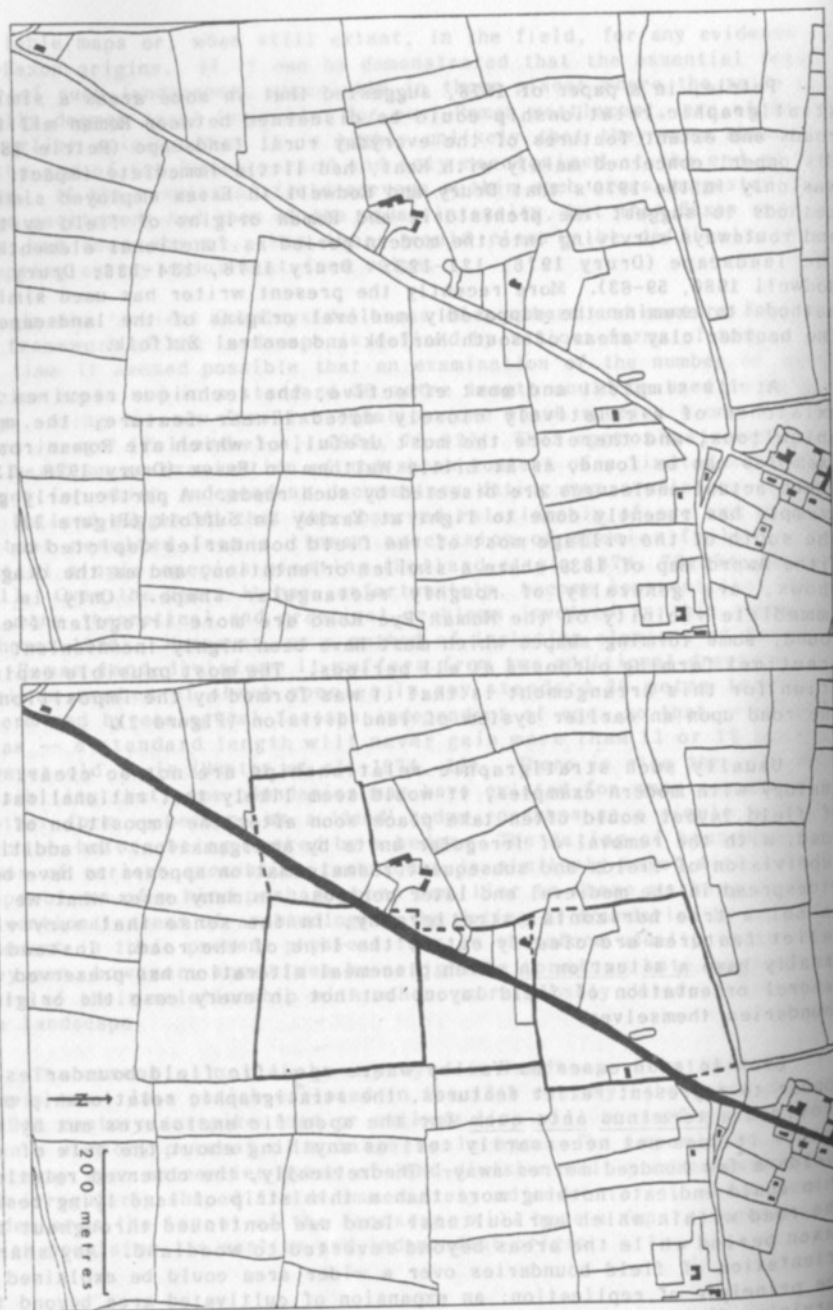
Petrie, in a paper of 1878, suggested that in some areas a similar stratigraphic relationship could be discerned between Roman military roads and extant features of the everyday rural landscape (Petrie 1878). His paper, concerned mainly with Kent, had little immediate impact. It was only in the 1970's that Drury and Rodwell in Essex employed similar methods to suggest the prehistoric and Roman origins of field systems and routeways surviving into the modern period as functional elements of the landscape (Drury 1976, 121-123; Drury 1978, 134-136; Drury and Rodwell 1980, 59-63). More recently the present writer has used similar methods to examine the supposedly medieval origins of the landscape in the boulder clay areas of south Norfolk and central Suffolk.

At its simplest and most effective, the technique requires the existence of a relatively closely dated linear feature, the most ubiquitous, and therefore the most useful, of which are Roman roads. Examples can be found, as at Little Waltham in Essex (Drury 1978, 134), where actual enclosures are bisected by such roads. A particularly good example has recently come to light at Yaxley in Suffolk (Figure 1). To the south of the village most of the field boundaries depicted on the Tithe Award Map of 1839 share a similar orientation, and as the diagram shows, are generally of roughly rectangular shape. Only in the immediate vicinity of the Roman Pye Road are more irregular fields found, some forming shapes which must have been highly inconvenient for practical farming purposes at all periods. The most plausible explanation for this arrangement is that it was formed by the imposition of the road upon an earlier system of land division (Figure 2).

Usually such stratigraphic relationships are not so clear. On analogy with modern examples, it would seem likely that rationalisation of field layout would often take place soon after the imposition of the road, with the removal of irregular units by amalgamation. In addition, subdivision of fields and subsequent reamalgamation appears to have been widespread in the medieval and later periods. In many cases what we see is not a true horizontal stratigraphy, in the sense that surviving relict features are clearly cut by the line of the road. Instead we usually have a situation in which piecemeal alteration has preserved the general orientation of field layout but not in every case the original boundaries themselves.

Even in such cases as Yaxley where specific field boundaries do appear to represent relict features, the stratigraphic relationship only provides a *terminus ante quem* for the specific enclosures cut by the road: it does not necessarily tell us anything about the date of the fields a few hundred metres away. Theoretically, the observed relationship could indicate nothing more than a thin strip of land lying beside the road within which agricultural land use continued throughout the Saxon period while the areas beyond reverted to woodland. Any shared orientation of field boundaries over a wider area could be explained by the principle of replication; an expansion of cultivated area beyond the surviving fields would, other factors being equal, tend to reproduce the orientation of these fields.





For all these reasons, landscape stratigraphic analysis tends to be more informative when a wider focus is adopted, concentrating not simply on the relationship of the Roman road (or other dated linear feature) to the boundaries immediately adjacent to it, but to the general layout of the landscape over a far wider area. In a sense, such an approach can be visualised as the excavation of a landscape. Figure 3 represents the preliminary stage of research along these lines into the development of the landscape of south Norfolk. It depicts the course of the Roman Pye Road between Tivertshall and Scole, and was constructed by removing, from a composite map constructed from early 19th century Tithe Award Maps, the following types of boundary:

1. minor boundaries around houses, gardens and so forth;
2. known or probable features of relatively 'late' date: boundaries resulting from the enclosure of commons and heaths in the 18th and 19th centuries; boundaries of fields bearing names indicative of woodland clearance in the Anglo-Saxon or medieval periods; routeways which, on grounds of horizontal stratigraphy, appear to be later than the fields through which they run;
3. boundaries of the fields clearly laid off the Pye Road at right angles, and therefore later in date than the road.

The identification of medieval assarts remains uncompleted, and around 40 kilometres of boundary (c. 8% of the total) have been removed arbitrarily; it must be stressed that this is only intended as a preliminary statement. Nevertheless, even from this it is difficult to believe that the Pye Road represents the earliest surviving feature in the south Norfolk landscape. Instead, the landscape appears to be organised around a series of long, sinuous trackways, climbing up from the valley of the river Waveney onto the heavier clays to the north. This arrangement is clearly crossed by the Pye Road in such a way that there can be little doubt that the landscape was already partially divided into fields, and certainly demarcated by long sinuous routeways, before the road was constructed. This does not, of course, imply that all the boundaries depicted on Figure 3 are of late prehistoric or early Roman date, although some -- notably those defining the major routeways -- almost certainly are.

Preliminary examination of the East Anglian landscape suggests that the clearest stratigraphic relationships between Roman roads and field boundaries, of the type noted above at Yaxley, occur on the better-drained clays. Where the soils are heaviest, on the most level and therefore poorly drained parts of the boulder clays, survival appears to be of major relict elements only, and especially of the long routeways. This might appear to suggest that, in the post-Roman period, major boundaries and routeways survived within a landscape in which the detailed division between individual fields was obscured by the regeneration of woodland and scrub. While it will be argued below that the landscape evidence does suggest a considerable degree of woodland regeneration in the post-Roman period, the observed pattern could also be the result of an additional factor.

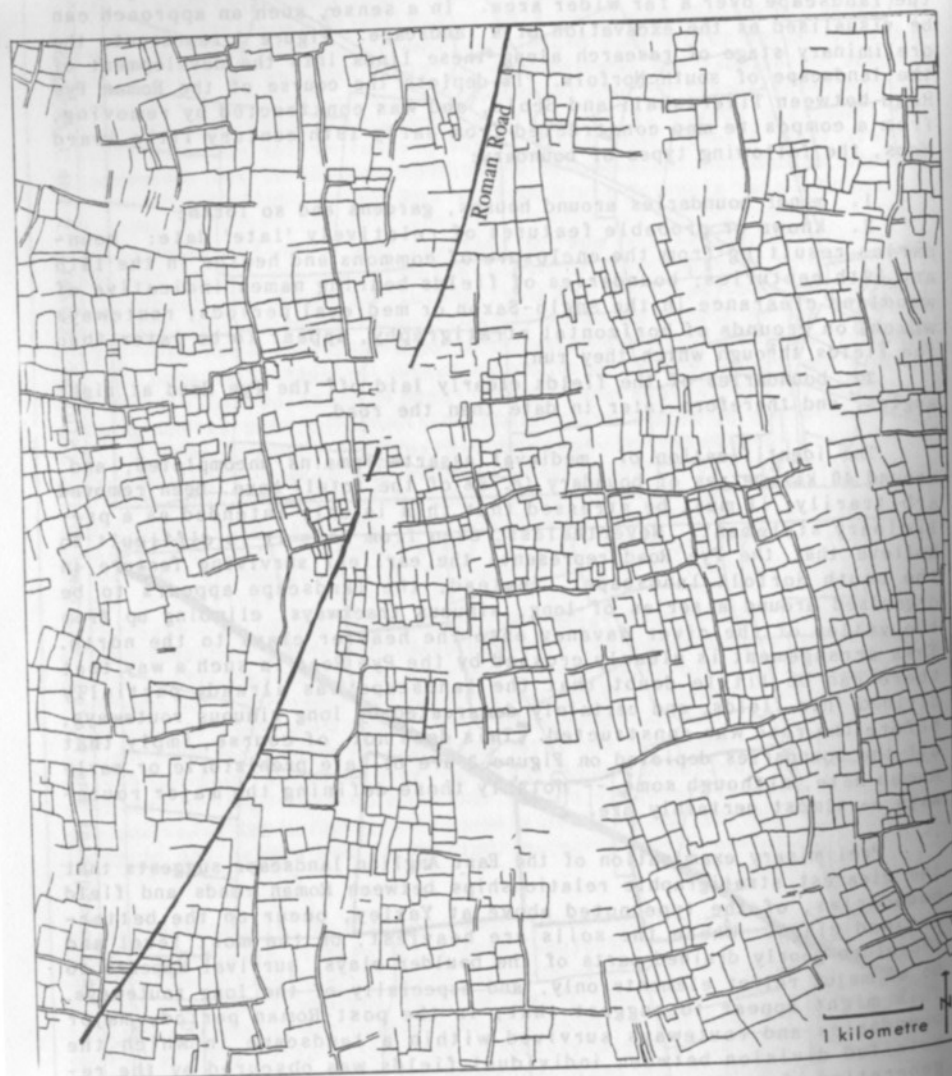


Figure 3: Early landscape features in south Norfolk.

The stratigraphic relationships described above record only the extent of enclosure at the beginning of the Roman period. Intensive land-use may not have occurred to any great extent on the heavier clays at this time, but may have done so by the end of the Roman period. In this context a rather different kind of arrangement of the rural landscape, dated by less direct means, is of some importance. In a number of places, arrangements of routes and field boundaries occur which over a wide area seem to be carefully aligned at right angles to, and parallel with, major Roman roads; so carefully, indeed, that not only planning but a measure of accurate surveying appears to be implied. The most extensive example of this kind of layout so far noted lies in the Elmham All Saints area of Suffolk; here the system covers around 40 square kilometres. More usual however is that shown on the Tithe Award Maps around the Pye Road in south Norfolk, centred on Long Stratton but extending into neighbouring parishes (Figure 4). Such organised arrangements of the landscape are difficult to date. They are clearly later than the Roman roads whose orientation they share, but how much later? Their date can only be inferred with recourse to more complex arguments than those used above to date field systems on straightforward stratigraphic grounds. At Long Stratton, for example, a number of factors suggest a probable Roman date. The uniformity of the system implies unified control over the area concerned: yet by 1066, according to Domesday, it was already divided into several separate tenurial units. In addition, parish boundaries cut through the system in such a way -- sometimes following its principal or minor elements, sometimes following stratigraphically later features -- that their establishment must certainly post-date its layout. Above all, the system has a measure of discontinuity suggesting that parts may have fallen out of cultivation at some point in the past, especially as some of the discontinuities were in the 19th century occupied by areas of woodland or common waste. The most likely time for such widespread regeneration of woodland, sufficiently long term to obscure details of the original layout in this way, would be the immediate post-Roman period.

In areas of 'Ancient Countryside', at least, such approaches to the history of the landscape can provide an important check on the data recovered by conventional archaeological surveys. The areas of Suffolk and Norfolk discussed here have not, as yet, been subjected to systematic field survey, although fieldwalking and chance finds in similar areas of heavy boulder clay within East Anglia have consistently failed to produce evidence for early Saxon settlement (Keith Wade, pers. comm.). If combined with systematic fieldwalking strategies which concentrate, not simply on 'sites', but on more general distributions of artefacts -- especially those indicative of manuring -- landscape stratigraphic techniques have the potential to switch our attention from the changing location of individual settlements to a consideration of the evolution of the entire landscape within which these existed. They may also encourage us to be more critical of 'negative evidence' from fieldwalking surveys, and to consider the distribution and chronology of settlements revealed by these as the result, not simply of original distributions, but of the complex interaction of these with

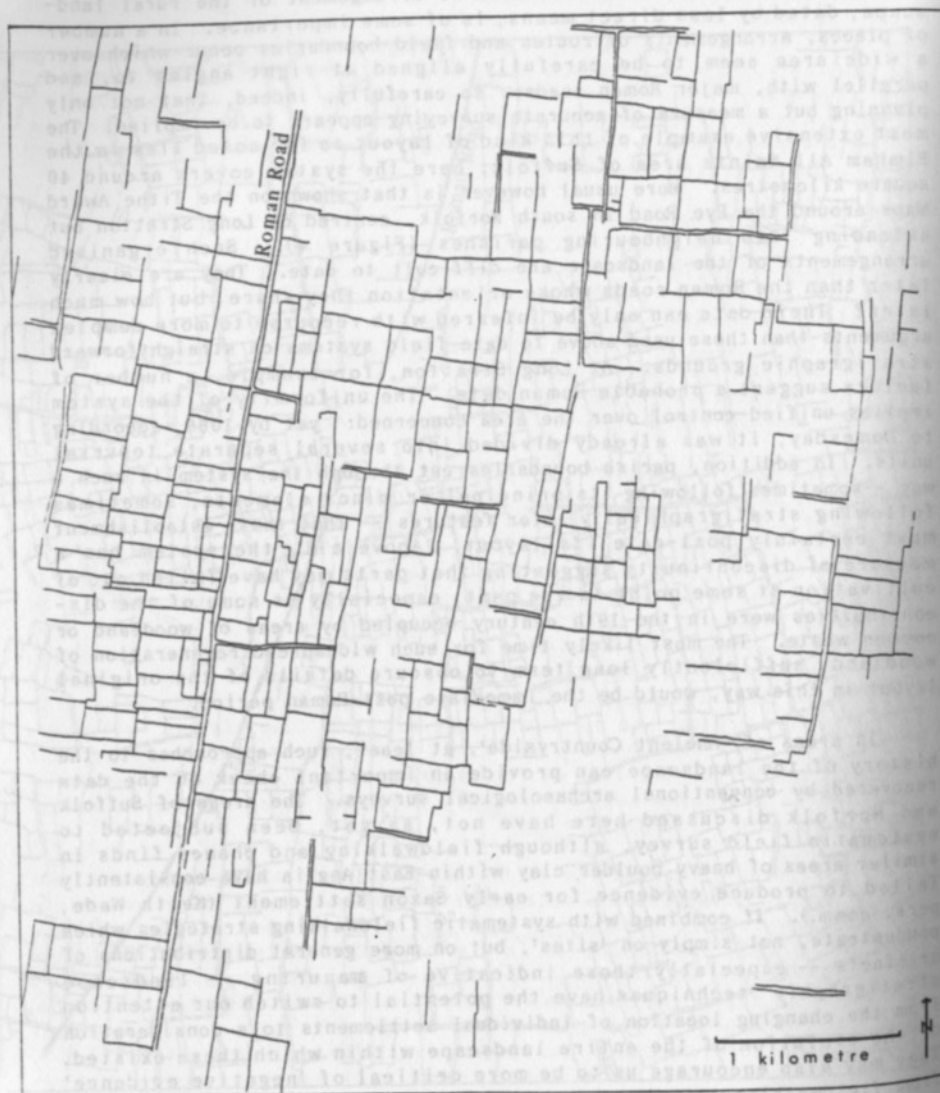


Figure 4: Long-Stratton, Norfolk. Rectilinear field system.

later patterns of land use; the function, that is, of the continuing history of the landscape.

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# EVALUATING THE CONTENTS OF SITES AND MONUMENTS RECORDS: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Nigel Holman

It has become a common-place for archaeological publications of all kinds to bemoan the perceived inadequacies of the extant information about a region and then to present an exposition of an expensive sampling design to remedy the situation. In Britain, Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs) are important repositories for such information much of which has been largely collected by amateur archaeologists and other members of the public and ignored by professional archaeologists. This article sets out to illustrate how these inadequacies might be assessed. Using a series of simple analytical techniques, it aims to provide means of making realistic statements concerning the nature of the surviving archaeological record.

The research reported here was based on a rural section of the Norfolk SMR excluding the large town of King's Lynn (Figure 1). Much of this record is the outcome of individuals working alone and is characterised by a lack of accompanying contextual information of a kind that would make assessment of its value, and its use by others, considerably easier. Although the region was chosen partly for practical reasons of convenience and acquaintance, in features such as its predominantly arable agriculture, it is characteristic of much of lowland Britain. Only a small percentage of the region is inaccessible to fieldwalkers, most notably the parklands of the Sandringham Royal Estate. The database for the study comprised a total of 1321 artefacts.<sup>1</sup> Other, less numerous, categories of finds were omitted. Of this total, 236 (18% of total) were unprovenanced. Also, for 199 artefacts (16%) the name of the finder is unrecorded.

In order to demonstrate the dependence of the contemporary character of the record upon historical trends in field archaeology, the variation through time in the percentage proportions of different artefact-types found in north-west Norfolk was considered using the 1099 artefacts for which this information was available (83% of total). Space does not permit this aspect to be discussed at length, though Figure 2 gives a flavour of the changing interests and perceptions (linked by each being a cause and an effect of the other) of people living in the area and reporting finds. In many respects, these trends are paralleled elsewhere in Lowland Britain, though certain aspects are specific to this area. The important point to remember is that, as exemplified by Figure 2, the present state of knowledge is merely a short-lived composite of historical trends. This is hardly a revelation and serious studies using SMRs will often consider the value of this information in a qualitative manner in the light of the conditions