Reviews

John Thomas, with contributions by Carol Allen and 20 others, Monument, Memory and Myth: Use and Re-use of Three Bronze Age Round Barrows at Cossington, Leicestershire, Leicester Archaeology Monographs 14 (Leicester, University of Leicester, 2008), 210 × 300mm, xvi + 144pp, 91 figs, 19 colour plates, 21 tables, ISBN 978–0–9538914–8–1 (pbk), £17 + £2.50 p&p.

Two of the three barrows (1 and 2) reported on in this monograph were excavated in 1976. In one sense, therefore, this report is long overdue. However, the excavation of a third barrow within the same dispersed cemetery in 1999 has provided the opportunity to draw upon the many other excavations, works of synthesis and developments in theoretical understanding that have taken place in the intervening period. The environs of Barrow 3 were also investigated, and this and further work in an adjoining area in 2001 enabled the previous work to be seen in a broader context.

In many ways these barrows conform to what one would expect from barrow excavations elsewhere. They were used for a succession of burials both of unburnt bodies and of cremated remains, within the area enclosed by the ditch or ditches and, in the case of Barrow 1, outside the ditch, and the period in which these took place was primarily the earlier part of the Bronze Age. Yet the story has proved to be far more complex than this. There is evidence that the area was already in some sense special before the construction of the barrows and may even have been used for burial in the Neolithic period. Later, Barrow 3 received what appear to be ritual deposits of pottery in the Iron Age and the Roman period and it was then re-used for burial in the pagan Anglo-Saxon period.

There were also assemblages of grave goods that mark these barrows out as special. The remains of a child of about eight in Barrow 2 were accompanied by a stone bowl, accessory cup, Food Vessel Urn and three flint knives in an assemblage which is described as very rare if not unique. One of the knives was made of a patinated, possibly Mesolithic, blade, which may have been deliberately selected for its ‘resonance’ (p. 40). A composite bead necklace was found in Barrow 3, apparently from the neck of an unburnt body, which had not survived. It consisted of one bead each of faience, Whitby jet and Kimmeridge shale, with the remaining 10 being of amber. Although disturbed in excavation, five beads were found in their original positions. One of the highlights of the report is the discussion of this necklace by Alison Sheridan (pp. 80–8) in which she considers the implications of its various elements, their origin, dating and significance. She concludes that the evidence, particularly the use of ‘heirloom’ elements, points towards their use for ‘supernatural power dressing’ (p. 87). Her account includes a very useful compendium of comparable examples from outside Wessex, where they chiefly occur.

Thus both the overall development of the three barrows and the detailed study of their contents support the idea of continuity and tradition over long periods of time. Alongside this there is evidence for what would normally be considered
purely domestic activities, with boundary ditches and even an Iron Age round house within 35m of Barrow 3. The relationship between these activities and the continued respect shown to the barrows is the subject of interesting speculation. For example, do scatters of worked flint over the area of the barrows and sherds of Iron Age and Roman pottery in the ditch fills of the barrows represent ritual deposits, or are they simply the by-product of the use of the broader area by farming communities? The evidence is presented and the reader is free to make up his or her mind, although the report clearly favours continued ritual activity.

With a report taking in several excavations and covering the use of the landscape over such a long period, there is a huge list of contributors and John Thomas has coped admirably with bringing these all together and weaving them into an almost seamless whole. Some of the specialist reports are acknowledged to have been compiled some years ago, but these are in a small minority and are unlikely to have had any serious impact on the overall conclusions. It would be unfair to pick any out for special attention, since they complement one another in producing an overall picture. However, attention should be drawn to the sequence of 22 radiocarbon dates for both the barrows and also the rather earlier palaeochannels some 600m (p. 47) or 700m (p. 71) away, since these will help in the task of building up a chronology for this period in the East Midlands.

The report is lavishly illustrated, with 91 figures as well as 21 tables distributed through the text. There is also a batch of 19 colour plates all between the final two pages of text. Although very welcome, they appear to have been an afterthought, as does their captioning. With the exception of the composite necklace, none of the finds reports reference the coloured plates. In most cases this is not a problem since the plates can be equated with the figures and, through them, with the text. However, Plate 15 shows ‘leather scabbard impression preserved on an Anglo Saxon knife from the cemetery’, leaving the reader to work out which of the several knives this might be. Unfortunately it is in the report on the Anglo-Saxon finds from Barrow 3 (pp. 58–65, 122–4) that it is hardest to relate the finds to the site plans. Even if the knife illustrated in Plate 15 can be equated with the knife from Grave 3 (F6) (p. 61 and fig. 52.12), the grave is not specifically identified on the plan showing ‘Location of Anglo-Saxon graves and associated artefacts’ (fig. 48). This is a shame because it is an otherwise excellent specialist report.

Finally, attention should be drawn to the attractive series of water-colour reconstruction paintings by Deborah Miles-Williams, used both on the front and back covers and in colour plates 1 to 4. They will help to bring these distant events to life for many readers. The reviewer was concerned, however, that Plate 3 shows ‘a relative [who] is busy making the composite bead necklace that will accompany her deceased kin to the afterlife’. Surely, given all that has been established about the special significance of this necklace, it is extremely unlikely that this was put together by a relative in such a casual manner?

Very little has been missed in proof-reading. The reference to Ford et al. 1984 (p. 77) appears to have escaped the Bibliography, but can be easily tracked down using the Internet. Finally, although the text refers to interim reports (plural) by
Colm O’Brien (p. xiii), only one is cited in the Bibliography. For the sake of completeness, particularly for readers of this journal, reference should have been made to O’Brien, C., 1976, ‘Excavations at Cossington – An Interim Report’, Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society 51, pp. 56–7.

This then is a very welcome, well-produced and attractive report. It fills a significant gap in our understanding of the Bronze Age in particular, but will also ensure that prehistoric monuments are looked at not simply within their broader environmental context but also as features that continued to play a vital role in the lives and beliefs of later generations. This, and the importance of some of the finds, will ensure that this has a readership far beyond this county.

Robert Rutland


The Midland Peasant is a book based on evidence from Wigston Magna, though as its title suggests, it is exploring a general trend – the transition from a peasant community to an industrial suburb. This book has been reprinted just over 60 years after it first appeared. Its conception must have been in the late 1930s, when Hoskins lived in Wigston, and he was thinking about its central themes in 1944.

It has now been reprinted, with a prefatory essay by David Hey. Why was it worth reissuing? And why is it worth rereading, or reading by a new generation for the first time?

These questions pass through one’s mind with particular force as one reads the first three chapters, as they contain a succession of outdated ideas, which remind us how far the interpretation of the period 400–1100 has been transformed in the last 50 years. Hoskins disregarded developments in the Roman and prehistoric periods, as he believed that settlement was limited in scope and by the fifth century even in the centre of the city of Leicester occupation had virtually ceased. He subscribed to the ‘invasion hypothesis’ and thought that Leicestershire had been colonised after 400 by numerous migrants from Germany, followed in the ninth century by hordes of Danes. Like contemporary scholars such as Stenton he believed that the free peasants recorded in Domesday Book were the descendants of Vikings who had settled in eastern England. He applied this idea to Wigston by identifying twin villages, one Anglo-Saxon and the other Danish, which was a pattern that he saw repeated elsewhere in the county. Now we appreciate the importance of Roman settlement and some degree of continuity, the limited impact of invasions, and the indirect connection between Danish landholding and the freemen of Domesday. We emphasise in analysing Wigston’s early history not its ethnic character but its divided lordship and its polyfocal plan.
This village history closely integrates each stage of the story into the overarching narrative, so the social structure of the early medieval community was thought by Hoskins to lie behind its subsequent development. Hoskins argued that the Scandinavian inheritance of free peasants gave the village its special character. He presents us with a rather romantic view of freemen forging their own autonomous community, initially in the context of the weak lordship of absentee aristocrats and then with no lords at all, when both manors were sold to their tenants in the early seventeenth century. The village was strong, and would therefore resist the undermining power of lords which could lead to the collapse and desertion of neighbouring villages dominated by copyholders. We would now retort that most lords were absentees, all villages practised a high degree of self-government from the later middle ages, and some settlements with many freeholders still suffered depopulation. Peasants throughout the country could take the initiative and manage their own lives regardless of the tenure by which they held their land.

If we set aside this problematic belief in Wigston’s heritage of freedom, there is much to admire in Hoskins’s account of the inhabitants of the village in the late medieval and early modern period. Earlier historians such as F. G. Davenport and N. S. B. Gras had written village histories, but Hoskins was a pioneer in his use of previously neglected written sources, such as deeds, probate inventories and the hearth tax, together with unwritten evidence such as the village plan and its buildings. He reconstructed the three-field system from scanty documentary sources and topographical insights. In his account of the fifteenth century he was able to show the operation of a land market among the freeholders and the changes in the distribution of land among peasants. He revealed the mobility among the population, with migration of Wigston families to Leicester and Coventry.

A principal theme of the book presents a paradox that subsequent historians have still not resolved: even in 1670 Wigston (and much of the rest of England) functioned effectively as a peasant society, with many families living on holdings of 30 acres or less. He wrote colourfully of an economy which depended on its ‘natural resources’ – we would call it self-sufficiency or sustainability – and of a society bound together by ‘tenacious cement’. Yet within this strong community lay the seeds of its own destruction. Population increase, itself the result of higher living standards, created a surplus of poor who formed a new class, and were found employment in cottage industry: framework knitting. Meanwhile the land market put increasing quantities of land into the hands of a small minority, which was an easy process because so much land was held by free tenure and there were no manorial lords. The acquisitive freeholders were driven by the opportunities of the market, as Leicester grew in size, for example, and by their own desire to live more comfortable and sophisticated lives. This elite of landowners drove through enclosure in 1764–6, and after that revolution the size of farms increased yet further. Nineteenth-century Wigston became a parish of rich farmers with numerous landless industrial workers. The midland peasant had been eliminated in the rise of a modern society.
Oddities of the book include the addition of a chapter on houses and their contents at the end, and the separate publication of an article on population change in this journal which should have appeared as a chapter in this book. As with all of Hoskins’s writings, fine phrases and value judgements (e.g. South Wigston is ‘ugly’) jostle with statistical information, samples of data, and dry recitations of factual information. The maps in the original were of rather poor quality, and they reappear as before.

In spite of its outmoded views of the early centuries, and the excessively idealised picture of peasant England, this book does succeed in reconstructing a vanished society in readable form. Hoskins, impressively ahead of his time, saw that population change and new consumption patterns helped to drive forward the transformation of the peasant world, and we are still debating those dynamic forces.

Christopher Dyer


The study of place-names can sometimes seem a rather precious occupation to those dealing in more concrete historical evidence. Nevertheless, like shards of pottery in an excavation trench, they may be all we have to go on, especially at a more local level. Moreover, again like those pottery fragments, the more we have the more likely it is that they can give us something solid to build on. The place-names of Gartree Hundred make a good example of this, important for our understanding of Leicestershire’s early history, as well as being of great interest in themselves.

It is not the job of the place-names scholar to write our history, however. It would be natural to have hoped for more guidance from Professor Cox, given his long association with the county’s surnames from the time of his doctoral research 40 years ago, and a 3½ page introduction, covering everything from moot sites to railways, is particularly frustrating. Nevertheless, the work of synthesis properly belongs to those who can sift through the near-400 pages of material and spot the patterns.

The most important feature that Cox points to in relation to the county’s settlement history is the overwhelmingly Old English character of Gartree’s 62 major township-names: 82%. In other words, the Danish conquest of eastern England appears to have left this part of the county relatively untouched, whether we take the evidence to indicate that incoming appropriators were few or modest or as a measure of failure by subsequent generations to deploy an Anglo-Scandinavian vocabulary.

Cox identifies the exceptions to this feature. First is a strip of later Scandinavian names (i.e. not obviously a result of the conquest) north-east of the
Gartree Road (Thurnby, Bushby, Gaulby, Frisby, Goadby), presumably associated with similar names in East Goscote and Framland hundreds to the north. The second exception, the ‘Grimston-hybrid’ names, is likewise limited: Slawston, and possibly Blaston, Illston and Rolleston.

As Cox points out, this relative lack of evidence for Danish appropriators or Anglo-Scandinavian speech (the reviewer’s terms, it must be noted) ‘echoes and accords with the limited Scandinavian settlement in Rutland at Glaston, some six miles to [the] north-east’ (p. vii). How should it be interpreted? One thing the two areas have in common is a high degree of royal lordship at the time of the Domesday Survey. Perhaps the full extent of the royal forest of Leicestershire and Rutland, spanning the county boundary (whereas the later Leighfield Forest and Beaumont Chase were restricted to Rutland), reflected a time when the Eye Brook united two parts of a single territory rather than dividing two counties as it still does today. This is also suggested by the ownership by Peterborough Abbey of estates on both sides of the border. Cox further points out that Holyoaks Liberty was added to Stockerston (Leicestershire) only in 1885, previously being part of Stoke Dry (Rutland) (p. 251), and thinks it likely that the name refers to an oak sacred to Thunor, comparing this with þureslege, probably ‘the grove sacred to the god Thunor’, in nearby Ayston parish in Rutland. Perhaps we should revisit Charles Phythian-Adams’s proposal that Rutland remained independent of the Danelaw as dowry of the Mercian and English queens, and ask whether that exemption might have extended to part at least of Gartree Hundred, so much of which was included in the Domesday royal soke of Bowden.

Turning to matters spiritual, we can only guess what ‘marvel’ was to be encountered at Mirabel hermitage and chapel (Middle English mirable, ‘[something] wonderful, marvellous’, p. 346). Cox counters Throsby’s suggestion that the hermitage was at Mirabel Hole, a place in Great Easton parish (p. 74), by observing that the Exchequer Special Commission records for 1606 mention Holliecock Merrybell in Holyoaks Liberty. So perhaps the Holy Oak and Mirabel occupied the same locale. Did the hermit take care of a miraculous rood, perhaps?

There is a strong echo here of the proximity of St Morrell’s chapel, Hallaton, to the site of the Iron Age temple associated with the south-east Leicestershire hoard. Cox appears not to have seen John Morison’s identification of the chapel site with Hare Pie Bank, starting point of the annual Bottle-Kicking. Consequently, he is led into allowing for a possible confusion between Morrell and Michael, Hallaton parish church’s patron saint, encouraged by reference to ‘St Michael’s Chapel’ in a 1707 Terrier. That could very well refer to St Michael’s, Blaston, a dependent chapel of Hallaton. The archangel’s appearance at Hallaton church on a twelfth-century tympanum makes a confusion with Morrell improbable. Cox thinks that the identification of Morrell with St Maurilius of

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Angers (home city of Norman lords of Hallaton) would have been ‘unlikely of popular acceptance’, overlooking, for example, Firmin of Amiens, venerated at Thurlby, Lincolnshire, North Crawley, Buckinghamshire, and Thorney, Huntingdonshire. He concludes that Morrell’s ‘probable association with the sacred Stowe Welle suggests an early Anglo-Saxon origin, with a personal name such as Merewale, Merewald or Merewalh’ (p. 96). For those unequipped in this area, it would have been helpful to have an additional note demonstrating how the Old English syllable *mere-* could become Middle English *mor[ᵊ]*.

Like the previous volumes in the series, this is a work of reference which fascinates and intrigues on almost every page, whether dipped into at random or trawled systematically. Coming up to date, for example, Cox provides the now standard lists of inn names and modern farm and street names, all of which offer amusing as well as instructive examples. One might imagine that the compendious lists of minor names must have owed something, if only inspiration, to John Field’s MA thesis on the field-names of Gartree Hundred, although it is not mentioned. This lacuna notwithstanding, the glossary of place-name elements, here running to 75 pages, is one of the glories of the series. As always, the typesetting and layout is impeccable. The Arts and Humanities Research Board and the British Academy are to be applauded on their continued support of The Survey of English Place-Names, and of Cox’s masterly Leicestershire volumes in particular.

Graham Jones

POSTSCRIPT: It was with great sadness that news was received during the preparation of this volume of the *Transactions* of the death of Margaret Gelling, leading light of place-name studies for the past half-century. Members of the Society (not least both of the *Transactions*’ editors) can testify to her warm personal support coupled with rigorous scholarship. She was always willing to respond to a query, and her volumes *Signposts to the Past* and *Place-names in the Landscape*, the latter succeeded by *The Landscape of Place-Names*, co-authored with Ann Cole, will long continue as standard works of reference.


Ticknall in south Derbyshire was the centre of a major regional potting centre from at least the beginning of the sixteenth century (and probably earlier) but lost out to the expanding Staffordshire industry in the eighteenth century. The two authors have brought together a remarkable study of the industry, its potters and products.

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The authors have used field walking to locate individual kiln sites. Products included Cistercian fine-ware drinking vessels, Midland Purple kitchen and diary wares. Yellow-glazed white wares were used for mugs, chafing dishes and slipware dishes. Both incised and slip decoration is found on the white wares. Tudor-style heads were also made in the white ware for use as decorative elements on mugs, jugs and chafing dishes. Some of the more decorated wares at least clearly match pots found in Dissolution drain deposits excavated in the 1970s at the Austin Friars in Leicester. However, a major specialisation of the Ticknall potteries in the seventeenth century were butter pots in the plain and highly-fired Midland Purple ware which reflected the regional importance of the dairy industry.

The archaeological analysis, while a vital component to understanding the industry, is relatively brief. It is the extensive documentary and topographic research that forms the bulk of this study. Spavold and Brown have used manorial, estate and probate records to shed light on the potting families and their place in the local community and economy. From three recorded potters in the 1520s, the industry reached its height in the 1660s with 27 recorded potters. Probate inventories also provided information on their wealth, living conditions and tools. The most innovative section of this book, though, is the authors’ major analysis of reference to pots in probate inventories from 11 counties; a study which goes far beyond any previous such analysis of ceramics in Britain. This partly reflects the relative rarity of references to pots as compared to early-modern America and parts of the Continent. Spavold and Brown have also been lucky in that ‘Ticknall’ ware was often specifically referred to as a type in inventories. Nevertheless, to trawl through over 100,000 inventories represents a real labour of love that a modern academic would have been unlikely to have risked.

The researchers found 1,463 named references to Ticknall ware ranging from 1539 to 1809 in date from 10 counties. Its distribution ranged as far as Lancashire and Oxfordshire, each county with a single reference. Relatively few references were to Staffordshire products though it was thought much of the unattributed earthenwares came from there. This shows both the potential of inventories but also the need for careful analysis of what the data can actually tell us. In the 1630s, Ticknall ware was most commonly referred to in Leicestershire and Derbyshire, followed by Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Cheshire. Leicestershire was used as a case study for a more detailed analysis through time. The authors suggest the major role of the river valleys and market towns in the distribution, they also use inventories to evaluate Ticknall’s role including pots described as from Boston, Ely and Burslem and leather bottles. The study is complemented by a study of the regional marketing system and an analysis of references to hawkers and shop keepers selling pots.

After the Restoration, Ticknall began to decline in comparison to Staffordshire, which embraced capital investment, new technologies and marketing methods and catered for changing tastes for fine table wares. Nevertheless, Ticknall continued to produce low-price kitchen and table wares. However, the number of potteries fell sharply after 1780 as its market area contracted and fizzled out in the 1880s. This study offers a useful comparison to
other local studies on post-medieval potting centres such as those at Verwood in Dorset, Donyatt in south Devon and Harlow in Essex. It will be most cited, though, for its pioneering and discriminating use of inventories to study pottery distributions at a regional level. It shows that the independent researcher still has a vital role in play in local/regional history and in archaeology.

Paul Courtney

SHORTER NOTICE


Notice of a book about the Severn Valley and Cotswolds, and the voluminous PhD material on which it is based, published in three BAR volumes, is justified by the occurrence of certain place-names in Rutland and Northamptonshire. These appear to contain the same name as the Hwicce, the people whose sub-kingdom in what became Worcestershire, most of Gloucestershire, and southern Warwickshire was absorbed into Mercia around 700 but survived ecclesiastically until the Reformation as the diocese of Worcester.

If this is correct, then Witchley hundred of Northamptonshire (recorded in 1086 and subsequently succeeded by Wrangdyke and East Hundreds of Rutland, the former running up to the Leicestershire border from Caldecott to Dry Stoke), Witchley Common west of Stamford, and Whiston (Northamptonshire, Hwiccingtune 974), might indicate a possible home territory from which an Anglian people of this name could have been drafted (by Northumbrian overlords) to rule over what in Roman times had been the canton of a people called the Dobunni. The name also survives in Wychwood, the forest area in western Oxfordshire.

Yeates’s suggestion is that the Dobunni and Hwicce are probably identical and that their tutelar deity was Cuda, whose own associated locality and regional names include that of the Cotswold hills. In turn he connects Cuda with a mother divinity shown in sculpture with a bucket – the meaning of Old English hwicce being ‘bucket’ or ‘sacred cauldron’. There is now a need for an East Midlands answer to this hypothesis, perhaps by someone familiar with devotional artefacts of the late antique/early medieval periods.

Graham Jones