Reviews

Christopher Dyer and Richard Jones (eds), Deserted Villages Revisited, Explorations in Local and Regional History 3 (Hatfield, University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010), 244 × 170mm, xx + 207pp, 40 b/w illus. incl. 9 maps, 6 tables, ISBN 978–1–905313–79–2, £14.99 (pbk).

In June 2008 a number of historians and archaeologists convened at Leicester University to confer on the topic of ‘Deserted Medieval Villages’, and to discuss the various strands of research that have changed our perceptions of ‘DMVs’ so radically. The conference was held in part to celebrate the 60 years of work since the weekend in 1948 which brought together an earlier generation of scholars for a seminar and field trip to several deserted village sites in Leicestershire.

Maurice Beresford’s book The Lost Villages of England followed in 1954, and was read widely by amateurs as well as academics. It is still a topic which fascinates local historians, who are apt to describe their nearest site as ‘a plague village’, or, having absorbed the Beresford view, to explain its disappearance by the actions of the wicked landlord who dispossessed the peasants in order to graze sheep.

Those scholars in the 1940s and 1950s were most interested in answering the questions still posed by local historians today: what happened to the people that lived there? Why did the village disappear? Whose fault was it? When did it dwindle/die? However, as long ago as 1985, Mick Aston pointed out that the familiar shorthand ‘DMV’ was a misnomer: mostly they were not entirely deserted, many were not medieval, and many sites could not be described as villages.

Since that seminal meeting in 1948, historians and archaeologists have been looking not just at the end points of settlements in the medieval period, but also at the beginnings and at everything in between, and later. It is all more complex and each place has its own story to tell.

This book, a fairly slim volume with contributions from 11 scholars, is the result of the 2008 conference, and will be of interest to non-academic historians as well as satisfying the most scholarly, with a copious supply of footnotes and a compendious bibliography. It brings us up to date with some of the latest research and thinking, ranging from Christopher Dyer’s chapter on late-medieval ‘social dislocation and desertion’ between 1370 and 1520, to John Broad writing about the many villages that appeared to shrink in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though still described in Bishop’s Visitation returns in the early eighteenth century as living and viable settlements. Bob Silvester’s chapter ‘The abandonment of the uplands’, focused on western Britain, mainly the south-west and Wales, brings the story even further forward with the arrival of squatters on upland commons in the eighteenth century, followed by late nineteenth-century depopulation and desertion when the agricultural depression was at its worst.

Tom Williamson looks at the relationship between gentry parks and deserted villages, and stresses that although many of the parks round big houses contain
the earthworks of abandoned villages, they were not necessarily destroyed by emparking. Many would have provided ideal sites for mansion and park because they had already disappeared or shrunk. As he points out: ‘large landowners and big villages do not mix’.

Many of these scholars have used new sources and records to look at and measure the processes of enclosure, shrinkage and desertion. Richard Jones uses place names, analysing the prevalence of names in tun, leah, thorpe, by and ing(a)ham among deserted sites, to show that smaller, later places were more likely to shrink. Stuart Wrathmell, writing about the Medieval Settlement Research Group’s excavation at Wharram Percy, and later work, used evidence in a dilapidations case in the mid-sixteenth century to show that the open fields had continued in cultivation until 1527. Christopher Dyer has analysed the guild records of the Fraternity of the Holy Cross in Stratford-on-Avon to show which village populations were shrinking and when.

The most obviously archaeological contributions, from David Hinton and Sally Smith, both writing on the archaeology of deserted sites, seem to have little new to add. Hinton’s pottery finds and other artefacts demonstrate that deserted villages tended not be rich, and Smith, looking particularly at three of the deserted sites now under Milton Keynes, shows us that medieval villages were very variable.

Christopher Dyer’s analogy of the coroner’s judgement for individual desertions is a useful one: ‘murder’ is what Beresford would have written on the death certificate, emphasising the role of (wicked) landlords. Dyer himself emphasises the effect of internal agencies – the peasants themselves emigrating, ‘engrossing’ farms, or changing from arable to pasture, so he would write ‘suicide’ or ‘natural causes’, or possibly ‘misadventure’. He is persuasive about the positive aspects of the changes taking place at this time: from arable to pasture, from subsistence agriculture to specialisation; towns were growing fast and peasants could make choices with the possibility of new livings to be made outside agriculture.

For anyone who is interested in the history of the landscape, and particularly for those in the Midlands with deserted sites all around (I can walk to seven deserted villages from my own house), this is an excellent book, bringing the story up to date but leaving plenty of avenues still to explore.

DEBORAH HAYTER, M.A., is a graduate of the Centre for English Local History in the University of Leicester. She has taught several courses in Local and Landscape History for Oxford University Summer School for Adults and for Oxford University Department of Continuing Education. She is currently working on an edition of the Hearth Taxes for Northamptonshire.

Recent attempts to devolve some political power to England’s regions, in the form of regional assemblies, have failed, in large part due to apathy – the regions seem to lack sufficiently strong senses of their separate identities to want administrative autonomy. Would they have responded differently in, say, the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries? The present lack of regional consciousness is no doubt at least partly due to the erosion of regional differences which has occurred during the last century or so, as improved communications and greater mobility have helped produce an increasingly uniform national identity. In the remoter past England was undoubtedly more culturally varied (taking culture in its widest sense, to embrace every aspect of social and economic distinctiveness) – but what was the nature of that variation? Were there distinct cultural regions, with mappable boundaries, or was the cultural variation too complex, making it possible to distinguish societies at geographical extremities – say Cornwall and Kent, or the Welsh Marches and the North East – but not to discern a series of intervening boundaries dividing adjacent but distinctive regions?

Charles Phythian-Adams, emeritus professor of the University of Leicester’s Centre for English Local History, has developed a complex thesis which argues for the existence during the medieval and early modern periods, and perhaps into more modern times, of 14 distinct regional societies (called ‘cultural provinces’ in early formulations of the thesis). Each consists broadly of a group of adjacent counties, together forming an economic unit centred on one or more ‘primate towns’, but they all coincide with major drainage basins, and where necessary their boundaries have been adjusted to follow the watersheds between these basins more closely. These watersheds, it is argued, have formed sparsely populated cultural frontier zones since Anglo-Saxon times. The thesis has remained a largely theoretical construct – no comprehensive statement of the empirical evidence for the cultural unity and distinctiveness of the proposed regional societies has yet appeared. However, one of Phythian-Adams’s Ph.D. students, Alan Fox, has now produced a meticulously thorough investigation, designed specifically to test the hypothesis, of one of these watershed frontiers – that between the drainage basins of the middle Trent and the Witham, where it coincides with the county boundary between Leicestershire and Lincolnshire. Insufficient evidence survives from the medieval period for a detailed examination of the area at the time when the two adjacent regions are supposed to have existed; instead, they are studied during a long

eighteenth century, from 1660 to 1811, though with occasional excursions further back, so what is being sought is later traces of an earlier cultural divide. The range of possible indicators of a cultural divide which are investigated is impressive, and quite apart from its interest as an inquiry into the regional societies hypothesis, the book contains a wealth of useful information on north-east Leicestershire’s and south-west Lincolnshire’s social and economic history.

The Test Area, as Fox calls it, is the parts of Leicestershire and Lincolnshire which adjoin their 16-mile common border, extending about 15 miles into the former, to beyond Melton Mowbray, and about 10 miles into the latter, as far as Grantham. The boundary runs through an area of sandy heath lying on an elevated limestone plateau, flanked to east and west by clay wolds, though in the north it drops down a scarp into the Vale of Belvoir. Part 1 of the book sets out the hypothesis and describes the Test Area’s historic background and physical characteristics. In Part 2, various aspects of the area’s social and economic geography are considered, in an attempt to discern either differences between the two counties’ populations and landscapes, or to identify a transitional zone along the border itself; these are population density, distribution of wealth and of landownership, occupational structure, land use, vernacular architecture, dialect and folk traditions. The results are inconclusive; in many respects the two counties are very similar – the only really marked distinction between them was in their vernacular buildings (mud-and-stud in Lincolnshire, box-framing or cob, later brick, in Leicestershire).

In Part 2 the two counties’ societies were surveyed in the aggregate; Part 3 focuses on individual relationships, based largely on a family reconstitution exercise carried out for 14 of the parishes immediately adjacent to the central stretch of the boundary (five in Leicestershire, 10 in Lincolnshire, together designated the Focus Area) and an analysis of marriage horizons within a larger area, only slightly smaller than the Test Area, consisting of 50 parishes (equally divided between the two counties, designated the Target Area, or occasionally the Marriage Study Area). The marriage data were supplemented by analysis of the places of residence of bondsmen in marriage licences and in grants of administration, in relation to the groom’s or intestate’s own residence, and of beneficiaries and landholdings mentioned in wills, in relation to the testator’s residence. Here Fox finds the strongest evidence that the county boundary constituted a frontier zone in the eighteenth century: ‘there was a marked reluctance to choose marriage partners from across the other side’ and links to bondsmen ‘showed marked in-county bias’. Part 3 also contains a chapter on transport links between the two counties, the hinterlands of their market and county towns, and the hiring fairs held in them.

In the final chapter the difficult chicken-and-egg question of whether the creation of a county boundary might itself result in the emergence of a frontier, or whether county boundaries were created in pre-existing frontier zones, is considered, though inconclusively. A brief attempt is also made to look back into the medieval period through an analysis of the area’s place names, which reveals, intriguingly, an absence along the border of the high concentrations of
Scandinavian names which are found more centrally in both counties, beyond Grantham and Melton Mowbray respectively.

Fox’s conclusion is that while some of his findings are inconclusive, there is nevertheless ‘quite a strong case for a frontier zone’. However, a reader coming fresh to the matter, especially one of a glass-half-empty disposition, might be even less convinced than this – the weight of the evidence so meticulously accumulated and scrupulously assessed seems rather to point towards a lack of substantial difference between the two sides of the boundary. It is difficult even to discern much of a border zone, to a degree homogenous within itself and different from two contrasting regional heartlands on either side. Some kind of cultural divide can be found if just one or two markers are considered – vernacular architecture, for example, or marriage horizons – but too many other markers seem to produce boundaries which fall elsewhere, or no boundaries at all. This may suggest that the answer to the question posed above is that English cultural diversity was too complex to produce distinct cultural regions with discernible frontiers, that the various cultural markers’ fault lines criss-crossed much more than they coincided, or that if they did coincide, it was not always on watersheds.

On the other hand, the ambivalent results of an investigation into one small 16-mile stretch of county boundary can hardly disprove the entire regional society hypothesis. It may be that this exercise, simultaneously meticulously detailed and wide-ranging in its approaches to the problem, in fact suffers from the same narrow geographical focus that made its level of detail and range of approaches possible. It seems to have been assumed that the transitional frontier zone it sought would have extended only a couple of miles, or one or two parishes, either side of the county boundary – but might a border zone between two regions each a good hundred miles wide be somewhat broader than that, possibly even wide enough to contain the entire Test Area (only 23 miles wide)? Perhaps a study of the two regions as a whole would produce greater distinctiveness, both between their respective heartlands and, to a lesser degree, between the two heartlands and the Test Area.

MATTHEW TOMPKINS took an M.A. and then a Ph.D. at the Centre for English Local History in the University of Leicester (the former during Charles Phythian-Adams’s last year as its Head), and is now an Honorary Fellow of the Centre. He is interested in rural, social and economic history, with particular reference to the medieval peasantry, landholding, surnames and manorial records.

Graham Jones

Reviews Editor