Reviews


This substantial book accompanies a major BBC television series broadcast in 2010. It is the latest in a series of books written by Michael Wood to accompany television history programmes on a variety of subjects, both at home and abroad, including *In Search of the Dark Ages* (1981), *Domesday* (1986) and *The Story of India* (2007). This volume is very different in scale, as *The Story of England* is focused on the Leicestershire village of Kibworth, or more accurately the three adjacent villages of Kibworth Harcourt, Kibworth Beauchamp and Smeeton Westerby. This area of Leicestershire was chosen as it has an unrivalled collection of documentary evidence; the result of the village’s long association, over 750 years, with Merton College Oxford, where many of the records are still housed. This rich resource has enabled Wood to put together a very in-depth and detailed account of the village, supplemented by a range of other material including archaeological evidence, some of which was the product of the local community’s involvement with the television programme, DNA evidence, place-name evidence and genealogy. However, what really sets this book apart is not just that it is a detailed account of the village framed in the wider context of national events, but it is a history which leaves the reader feeling as if they have really been given an insight into the lives of everyday people from the community of Kibworth from the medieval period onwards.

The text is divided into 18 chapters, several of which can be grouped into clear historical periods. The early chapters describe the location and topography of Kibworth in the landscape, and draw on archaeological evidence, both recent and antiquarian, such as the dig in the village in 1863 (p. 16). The latter included the discovery of what is now thought to have been a Romano-British burial of some importance.

The next six chapters take the reader on from the end of the Roman period into the Dark Ages, through to the Norman Conquest and subsequent occupation, where Wood describes early Kibworth from the pages of the Domesday survey. However, the book’s strength lies in Wood’s ability to describe the lives of everyday people, and this really starts at the end of the thirteenth century, which marks the beginning of the community’s long association with Merton College Oxford. This began with the sale of the Harcourt manor to the college in the aftermath of the Barons’ Revolt. In Chapter 9, Wood draws on the various surviving documents to introduce the people of the village by name, their occupation and even the houses where they lived. This chapter illustrates that Kibworth, like many settlements in England, was experiencing a boom period, and the detail that Wood has included from the Merton College documents illustrates just how vibrant English peasantry life was in this period.

This, however, was not to last, and Chapter 10 leads into the period of the great early fourteenth-century famine and the Black Death. Immediately prior to
the events of 1349, Wood discusses the normal day-to-day life of the villagers who were oblivious to what lay ahead. We learn of new tenancies, fines for bad ale and even a local wedding (p. 191), but it is the first recorded death of William Pole in December of 1348, followed by many more in March of 1349, that makes a real impact on the reader. The documents suggest that at least 70 per cent of the population of Kibworth Harcourt died, which as Wood highlights had a huge impact on such a small community.

The following five chapters then deal with a common theme in the southern part of Leicestershire – that of revolution and dissent following the peasants revolt of 1381. After this, Kibworth features in the Lollard heresy which was particularly fertile in this part of the Midlands, leading to long-lasting continuities with sixteenth-century religious radicals, followed by non-conformists and other dissenters.

After these chapters, Wood then describes another kind of revolution but this time an agricultural and industrial one (Chapter 16). The former in Kibworth resulted in the enclosure of the open fields, thus sweeping away the centuries-old pattern of the countryside. These changes were symptomatic of increased suffering of the rural poor who feature so greatly in Sir Frederick Eden’s three-volume survey The State of Poor of 1797, which features Kibworth strongly. Wood uses this source to good effect to illustrate a major turn in both national and local history. The remainder of this chapter is then concerned with the wider context of canals and industry, and also includes local events such as a riot by navvies at Kibworth in March of 1795 (p. 342), again illustrating the very local matters that are a common theme throughout the book.

The final two chapters, 17 and 18, deal with the Victorians and the twentieth century, and these are by far the briefest chapters. This is surprising given the considerable amount of material that is available for these periods, but to include the same level of detail as the previous chapters would have no doubt doubled the length of the book – perhaps there is going to be a second volume for this period? These chapters cover the coming of the railways and both world wars. They also illustrate that the villagers of Kibworth still had a rebellious streak when it came to something as mundane as street lighting. The resulting outcome was that the residents of Beauchamp enjoyed its benefits from 1863, while Harcourt remained in darkness until after the First World War. Also of interest in this period are the details Wood has included about village sports and leisure which was flourishing.

This substantial volume is aimed at a general readership and it achieves this very well. Although there are no colour pictures in this book, there are a number of black and white photographs which, together with some very useful maps and other drawings, are used to good effect. Most impressively, however, is Wood’s elegantly written text which engages the reader immediately and imaginatively throughout, where his skills as both an accomplished historian, scholar and storyteller really make the text come alive, and give the reader a real sense of the many changes that have happened not only in Kibworth but across England in the past 2,000 years.

Matthew Godfrey
For the past 30 years the pages of this journal have conveyed a series of substantive reports of excavated settlements of Iron Age date, particularly so from the early 1990s. These reports testify to the intensity of archaeological works in advance of development in the county, with later prehistoric sites prominent amongst ongoing discoveries. That these reports have been produced to a very high standard and been carried through to publication is indicative of the drive of the team that brings us the present volume (University of Leicester Archaeological Services). That this time the publication vehicle is a monograph is fitting given the extent of the information to present, and will conveniently profile the nature of Iron Age society and period studies in the county to an audience that might not necessarily view this journal with regularity (in Britain and beyond). There can be no doubting that this journal and this team have, through such regular publication, revealed a broad canvas of knowledge for this formative era that was not known at the time of Peter Liddle’s 1982 review in Leicestershire Archaeology: The Present State of Knowledge, Vol. 1: To the End of the Roman Period. Many scholars of later prehistory thus frequently consult TLAHS, and reports from the county are considered with interest. What of this new volume?

The two sites reported lie on the northern outskirts of Leicester, an area that has seen profound recent change as urban expansion masks the earlier landscape. The pairing of these two sites under one cover works well given their similar date, morphologies and proximity, and sets up a comparative dynamic within the narratives of the volume that is positive and complementary, as similarities and differences are explored (e.g. p. 144). ‘Aggregated settlement’, whilst perhaps an awkward term and one not so familiar to those outside later prehistoric studies, is an accepted and apt descriptor for a form of settlement now widely recognised for the period, where there is structure and domestic and economic concentration, but usually of low density and without a ‘centre’, and where there is development in component elements over time. Whilst an accurate descriptive term, it remains one cast in inverted commas, but we lack a more comfortable nomenclature; an alternative of say ‘Iron Age village’, whilst giving a superficial impression to the non-specialist, carries a certain set of definitions that are not present with these sites. Several such sites are known from adjacent counties and this publication begins to fill-out the picture for Leicestershire. Both sites were probably founded in the fifth century BC; that is, around the beginning of the Middle Iron Age. The Beaumont Leys site ceased around the later Middle Iron Age, whereas the Humberstone site continued until the Late Iron Age, around the turn of the millennium (pp. 141–3). The reported evidence for both sites comprises the remains of roundhouses, ditches, enclosures and other settlement features, together with associated material culture finds, animal and human bone, dietary
and environmental data. The Manor Farm site, Humberstone, produced the
greater amount of material evidence.

The Manor Farm excavations investigated an area (2.7 hectares) adjacent to
the site at Elms Farm, examined previously and fully reported in TLAHS 74.
Rather than ‘more of the same’, the investigation at Manor Farm enabled the
exploration of a further block of this extensive settlement complex. The ability to
compare the data from these adjacent areas is instructive, with implications for the
perceived representativeness of sites only partially excavated. Indeed, through this
new study we learn ‘... that the Elms Farm and Manor Farm areas of the site
differed in function: Elms Farm has some evidence for arable activates and grain
storage, while Manor Farm has only evidence for domestic food preparation and
so may be more associated with crafts or pastoral activities. These differences may
indicate changes over time or spatial differences’ (pp. 131 and 151). Hence it is
that this report can assist in the characterisation of such settlements, which, to
date, are not well understood.

The academic quality of the volume and its constituent elements is to be
commended. The reports on the animal bone, by Browning, and on the charred
plant remains, by Monckton and Hill, exemplify this. As one would expect, the
presentation of the data and discussions are thorough, well referenced and clear,
but these reports (and others) also reach a high level in their nuanced and
informed evaluation of the evidence, and in the regional contextualisation of the
information recovered. Such ‘specialist reports’ will be of considerable interest to
those studying the British Iron Age as well as longer-term processes, for they deal
with the fundamental agricultural economy of these sites and have the merit of
accessibility to the general reader. There is, I suspect, scope for a future study
examining the micro-topographic setting of these and other contemporary sites in
the Leicestershire area that combines such findings and consideration of the
morphological layout of the sites, from a landscape, environment and culture
perspective.

Publication of the sites in monograph form provides the space to include the
full range of elements of research and analysis. The inclusion of the late Alan
Vince’s petrological study and of the chemical analysis of potting clays is
welcome, but reminds us that with Alan’s passing we have lost a premier ceramics
expert and dynamic personality whose work, with its multi-period focus, was
transforming the character of pottery studies in the region.

At a time of explosion in the recovery and documenting of ancient coins found
by detector users, it is of interest to note the presence at Manor Farm of a potin
coin probably dating to the second century BC and produced in Kent (Kentish
Primary Series), for we are told that despite there being a scatter of such coins
north of the Thames this one is only the second such coin to come stratified from
archaeological excavations outside of Kent (pp. 97–8). This find, as with the
occurrence of briquetage, and items amongst the quern and pottery assemblages,
is seen as indicative of the integration of the Humberstone site with wider
exchange and cultural spheres (e.g. fig. 125), something implicit too in the
generality of evidence from both sites that speaks of degrees of shared practice
with regional Iron Age communities (e.g. Marsden’s discussion of the pottery: p. 74).

The volume concludes with a ‘Discussion of the Evidence’ in which Thomas contextualises the findings, setting them within their regional frame of reference and highlighting aspects that chime with current themes in later prehistoric studies (e.g. aspects of artefact deposition, site symmetries and symbolism). The ideas, approaches and evaluation herein are admirably stated, as the ‘grammar’ and daily life of the site are brought to the fore. How the sites functioned and how they might be gauged vis-a-vis hillforts is weighed. These settlements were set beside long-lived linear ditch boundaries and, to this reviewer, in several respects the layout resembles segments of hillforts with, for instance, circular buildings placed adjacent to these ditches, mirroring a similar association seen in contemporary hillfort and enclosure interiors where these buildings tend to lie immediately next to the earthworks.

ULAS possesses at this time an exceptional group of archaeologists with a deep knowledge of prehistory and other specialisms; this volume is testimony to that expertise. That ULAS is embedded within the University’s Archaeology Department and part of its research culture gives strength to both through a matrix of connections. John Thomas has brought forth a volume that warrants a wide readership, and it will doubtless be a standard reference for the county and region for many years.

Steven Willis


Leicestershire sits at the southern edge of the region of England, east of the Pennines and southwards from the Tees, in which are most densely packed those settlements with the name element *thorp* (*throp* in south-western counties). With a few exceptions they are small and unimportant – outliers, daughter settlements, chapelrys, and so on. Nevertheless, so numerous are these little places that their study potentially offers important insights into the peopling of the countryside, especially at the margins.

This opening suggested itself to Harold Fox during his years in the Department, now Centre for English Local History at Leicester University, and his encouragement is acknowledged by the three authors, two place-names experts (Paul Cullen and David Parsons) and the centre’s current Lecturer in Landscape History, the archaeologist Richard Jones.

Their suggested conclusion is that places named *thorp* and those named *bys*, with which they are most often associated by landscape historians, may have performed separate economic functions in the countryside from around circa 850. ‘Thorps housed communities involved with arable cultivation while the primary role of those living within the *bys* was livestock farming’ (p. 132).
Most tellingly, it is in their form and their location in the landscape that the authors see a family of places distinct from settlements in -by (p. 136). They argue that the latter favoured areas containing pastoral soils and were prone to develop more complex layouts than the thorps. This is perhaps an indication that they developed from a background of polyfocal, rather than single-focus, settlement, giving farmers space for barns and byres as well as easy access to the pastures. By contrast, thorps began as small single-focus nucleations, adopting regular and compact plans articulated by a single street and regular plots. This structure, frequently preserved into the nineteenth century, is interpreted as reflecting a need for a local labour force, little social stratification, and manorial tenures.

The importance of these observations for further research is that the distribution of thorps across space and time puts them ‘in the very areas and at the very time that we understand the landscape to have been undergoing fundamental change’ (p. 142). What is most exciting for the authors is that ‘we know that the primary factor driving this shift in farming practice was no less than a cereal revolution’. Thorps, then, were a product of the open-field system.

The authors take this further by hypothesising that the earliest thorps were settlements – ‘perhaps no more than temporary or seasonal shelters’ – for workers in distant fields, for ploughmen or even perhaps slaves (p. 151). This connects thorps with another innovation of the ninth to eleventh centuries, the settling of slaves on the land and the appearance of serfs. The characteristic population of Domedays thorps by tenants owing services to the lord is explained as a development from earlier occupation by serfs with ploughing duties.

By examining both the chronology of place-names in thorp and thorp and their qualifying elements (notably the presence or absence of personal names), it appears possible to chart both the speed of the transformation of these arable enterprises from farming in severalty to communal cultivation, as well as the direction in which the changes spread.

As well as the copious bibliography and index, there is an appendix which lists all 901 thorps so far identified and located, and whether within or outside the Danelaw plus the one case unassigned, the Upthorpe recorded in the charter of Burgred, king of Mercia, Sawyer 214, dated 869.

This important study is a fruit of cooperation in recent years between the Centre for English Local History at Leicester University and the Institute of Name-Studies at the University of Nottingham. The three contributors reflect this. Richard Jones is the centre’s Lecturer in Landscape History and co-author of Medieval Villages in an English Landscape: Beginnings and Ends (Macclesfield, Windgather, 2006), which addresses the relationship between settlements and open-field farming in the English Midlands, and co-editor of Deserted Villages Revisited (Hatfield, University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010). David Parsons was until recently director of the Name-Studies Institute and remains deputy director of the Survey of English Place-Names, while Paul Cullen is one of the Institute’s visiting fellows and currently works at the University of the West of England on the Family Names of the United Kingdom project.

Graham Jones