

SEVEN DESERTED VILLAGE SITES IN LEICESTERSHIRE

by

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Some years ago I wrote in these *Transactions* (Vol. XXII, pp. 242-64) an account of all the deserted village sites in Leicestershire I had then discovered; and in 1950 I published an extended account, with a number of additional sites, in *Essays in Leicestershire History*. There would have been no reason for yet further notes on the same subject had not the officers of the Ordnance Survey, in the course of revising their 25-inch maps, made detailed plans on that scale of seven sites in East Leicestershire. By the courtesy of the Ordnance Survey these plans have been made available to the Society for reproduction, and I agreed to write some notes about each plan without, so far as possible, repeating what I have said elsewhere on the subject.

Of the villages discussed here, four were depopulated during the fifteenth century (Hamilton, Ingarsby, Lowesby, and Quenby), one in the early sixteenth century (Baggrave), and two in the mid-seventeenth century (Cold Newton and Great Stretton). Most of these villages lay on the Liassic clay uplands which were better suited to grazing than to arable farming, and the disappearance of their open fields is partly a reflection of the growing knowledge of soils and of the best uses for different sorts of land. In some instances, too, a declining population made it difficult to maintain the traditional mixed farming of the open fields and compelled landlords to seek an alternative system of farming.

In most cases the desertion of a village is reflected directly in its population statistics. In the following notes, these figures are taken from the tables printed in the *Victoria History of the County of Leicester*, Vol. III, pp. 156-74, and no further reference is needed. Where they are occasionally taken from other sources, I have indicated the fact in the text.

Cold Newton is rather a special case. It is not an entirely deserted site: it is a much-shrunken village rather than an abandoned one. But the abandoned area is as large as that in some completely deserted sites and deserves comment. Enclosure for pasture began here towards the end of the sixteenth century, and according to Nichols the whole of the lordship had been enclosed before 1641.* This enclosure probably resulted in the building of a number of farmhouses away from the village in the newly-enclosed pastures, which meant that ancient homesteads were abandoned without any fall in the total population of the lordship. Others may have been abandoned with the engrossing of farms in the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth. Here then the population statistics alone give no hint of what has happened to the village-centre.

*L. A. Parker, "The Depopulation Returns for Leicestershire in 1607", *Trans. Leics. Arch. Soc.*, xxiii. 263-4. *V.C.H. Leics.*, ii. 257.

Little can be usefully said about the interpretation of the plans of these Leicestershire sites since none has been excavated. A few sites have been scientifically excavated elsewhere in this country, but nothing has been published which throws light on the detailed interpretation of deserted village plans as a class. Certain features are, however, common to all, or nearly all, such sites. There is often a well-defined moated area where the medieval manor-house stood. The site of the chapel, where there was one, is difficult to discover by inspection of a plan. The clearest indication is the presence of well-squared masonry on the ground, but even this may be absent and excavation is the only route to discovery. The main street of these villages is usually clearly defined, and so too are a number of side-lanes running off it. The rectangular divisions on a typical plan reflect the crofts and tofts of vanished farmsteads, the site of the actual farmstead being at the street end of the croft. Here rubble masonry—the footings for a timber-framed house with mud walls—is frequently visible in the low banks that define the street-line.

It only remains to say that the excavations now being carried out at Wharram Percy in the Yorkshire Wolds (and of similar sites in Denmark carried out by Dr. Steensberg) reveal something about the house-sites which was perhaps not to be expected. That is the complexity and irregularity of the sequence of houses on the same site. It is obvious that in the course of a thousand to fifteen hundred years houses have been rebuilt over and over again on the same site, sometimes at surprisingly short intervals. It is puzzling why builders did not re-use the older rubble foundations for their timber-framed houses merely for economy's sake. Excavations have shown that house-plans do not in fact fit neatly one on top of the other on the same site, but cut across each other in a bewildering and apparently haphazard way. The explanation must be that knowledge of the older foundations was lost in the rising level of household débris, that most towns and villages have had a chequered history, periods in which houses crumbled and sites became empty, rubble-strewn eyesores from which all materials of value were removed (e.g. the timbers); and that when a period of renewed prosperity led to the rebuilding of houses these sites were levelled precisely as a modern builder would do. Foundations of peasant houses were shallow in depth, and so one gets on a given site a sequence of occupation-levels on each of which the house-plan is more or less independent of what lies in the layer below. It remains to be seen how far the Leicestershire sites conform to this pattern, but it is certain that when they are properly excavated they will reveal more fully vicissitudes of village history which the documentary evidence already hints at.*

*Figs. 1-7 are reproduced from the original plans by kind permission of the Archaeology Division of the Ordnance Survey.

BAGGRAVE

Baggrave lies seven miles N.E. of Leicester and formed in earlier days a lordship of 800 acres. It was a hamlet of Hungerton and possessed a chapel of its own. The site of the hamlet may be identified in Baggrave Park, immediately to the S. of the Hall. Much of its history has already been given in *Essays in Leicestershire History*, pp. 80-1. Though it is recorded in Domesday Book, its population at that date is not given. Tax assessments of 1327 and 1332 show that there were then fifteen or sixteen households in the place, possibly rather more as we do not know the number of exempted families. There is no poll tax assessment for 1377, and that of 1381 (which is known to be less accurate than that of 1377) shows that there were twelve married couples and fourteen single persons, possibly fifteen or sixteen households in all.

Some depopulation took place when the abbot of Leicester enclosed his lands in Baggrave in the year 1500. Five farmhouses and two cottages were pulled down or left to fall into ruin, that is about half the hamlet. There may have been further enclosure by the Abbey in 1502 or 1503. At any rate there remained only two families in the year 1563, when the diocesan return was made. We may say that Baggrave was abandoned very early in the sixteenth century. It is curious that the site of the hamlet is so less well marked than most. Possibly its inclusion in the park may have something to do with it. It will be noticed, too, that the present road to Hungerton is not on its original line, which would have run right through the site of the present Hall. The diversion was presumably made when a large house was first built on this site.

The original line of the village street is clearly to be seen on the ground as a sunken way lined with old thorn-trees. Rubble masonry is visible in the bank on one side of the street. Towards the S. of the site is a well-marked moated area where the medieval manor-house stood. The Caves bought the manor at the Dissolution and probably built the first house on the site of the present Hall, as Francis Cave died at Baggrave in 1583.

BAGGRAVE

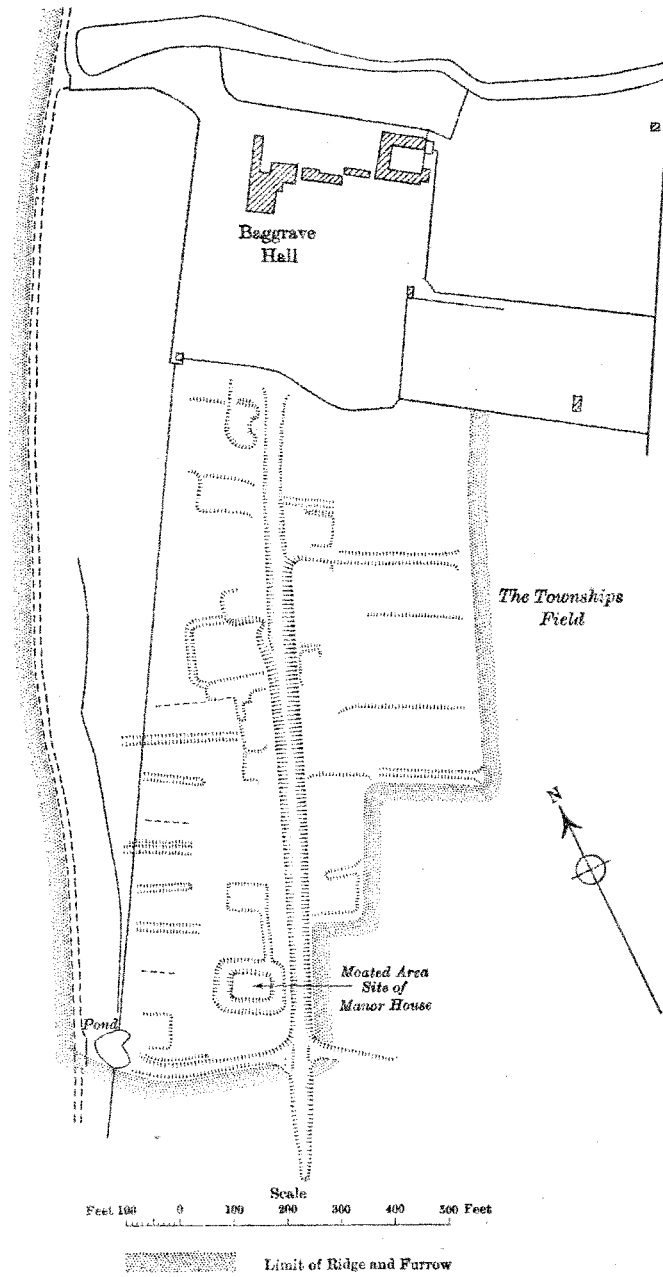


Fig. 1

COLD NEWTON

The site of Cold Newton, of which only a few homesteads survive, lies eight miles due east of the centre of Leicester on the Liassic clay uplands. Much of the land lies over 500 feet above sea-level. The village occupied the summit of a ridge projecting from the higher ground around Tilton, open to every wind, and was known as Cold Newton (as an alternative to its manorial name of Newton Burdet) as early as 1428.

It was a chapelry of Lowesby, and therefore probably a daughter settlement from that village. If Lowesby was of Danish foundation, as its name implies, Newton cannot have come into existence much before the eleventh century or the late tenth. It was never a large place. In 1086 it had eleven households, and in 1377 thirty-eight taxpayers are listed, representing about sixty inhabitants in all, or some twelve to fifteen households. It seems to have remained more or less stationary in numbers down to the nineteenth century. In the diocesan return of 1563 and again in the hearth tax assessment of 1670 fifteen households are enumerated.* Even in 1801 there were 101 people living in the chapelry. Thus Cold Newton is peculiar in being a conspicuously shrunken village without any apparent fall in population at any period. The probable reason for this is discussed in the introduction to this essay.

As to the details of the plan shown on the opposite page, the well-defined moated area was the site of the medieval manor-house. No traces of buildings remain above ground, but on the N. side of the island within the moat considerable pieces of worked stone may be seen, together with large Swithland roofing-slates. This site was abandoned about the middle of the sixteenth century when a new manor-house (now a farm) was built a few hundred yards to the N.

Cold Newton had its own chapel, served from Lowesby, which stood at the N. end of the village. Its dedication is unknown, nor have I been able to discover when it ceased to be used. A drinking-place for cattle in Chapel Hill Field is mostly formed of blocks of weathered stone, apparently taken from the ruins of the chapel.

*Households in the hearth tax returns are to be identified with families rather than with separate houses (*V.C.H. Leics.*, iii. 142, note 54), but in small villages such as these under discussion the number of households and houses was probably identical. In towns there would be a considerable discrepancy between the two.

COLD NEWTON

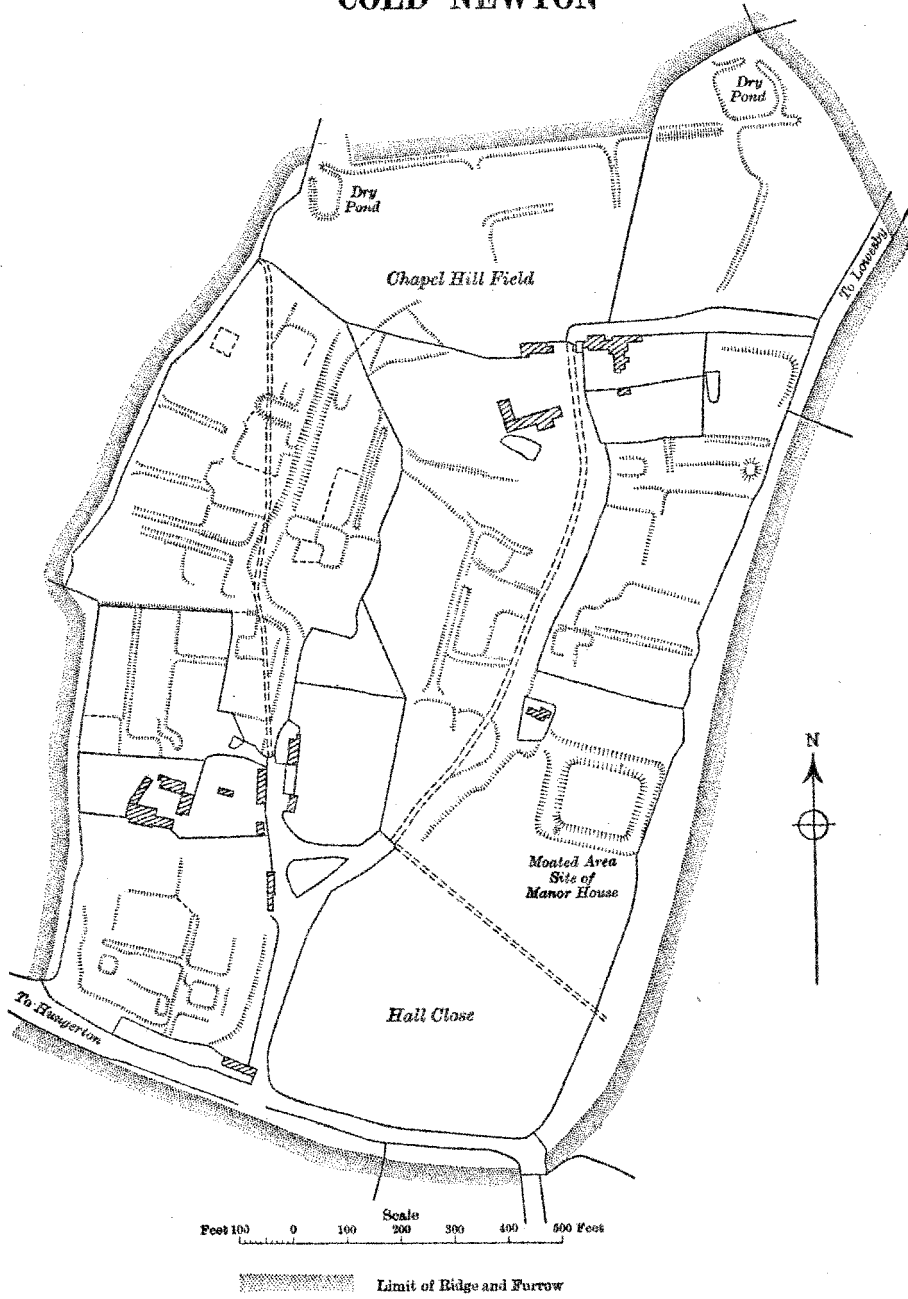


Fig. 2

GREAT STRETTON

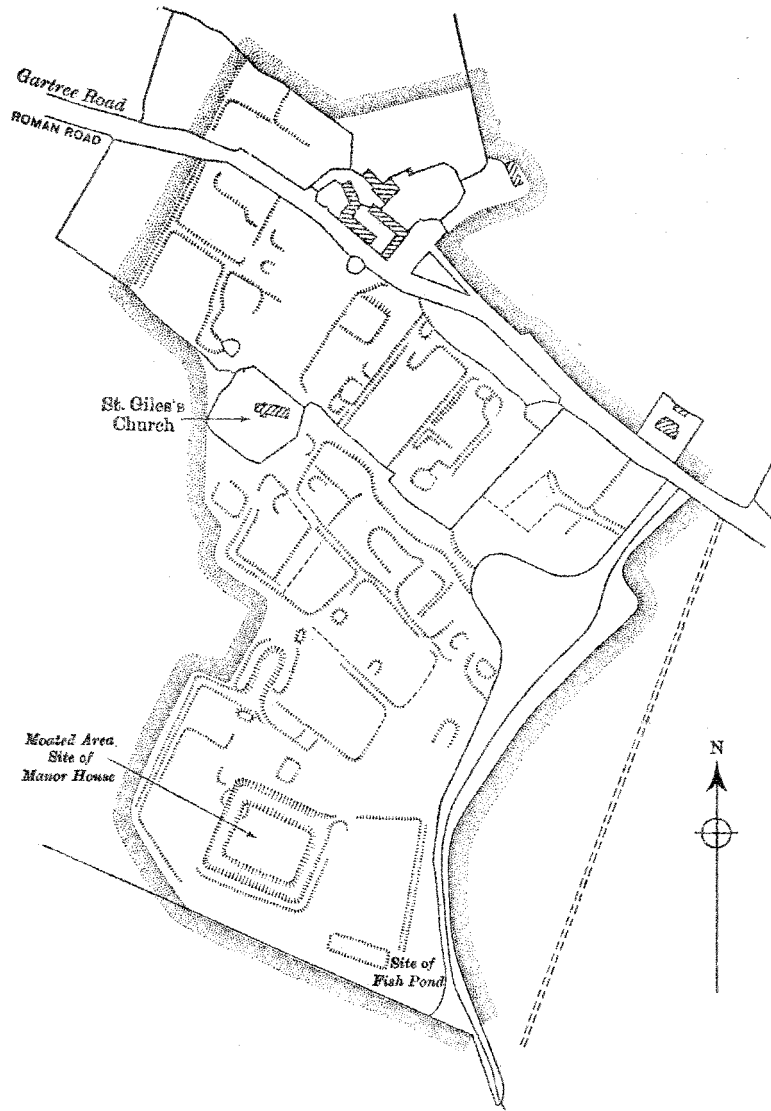
The village of Great Stretton lay five miles S.E. of Leicester, close to the Roman road from which its name was derived. The greater part of the settlement lay to the S. of the road, with a small extension on the N. side, as the plan shows.

Its Domesday population is not known, as the two Strettons are combined in a single entry. Nor does the 1377 poll tax assessment survive. The assessment of 1381 shows twenty-one taxed persons, possibly representing ten families in all. Almost certainly this represents a considerable reduction from the level of forty years earlier and there must be a number of abandoned homesteads of this period on the site. Nevertheless, by 1563 the population of the village had risen again to fifteen households. In 1670 there were only five families, and the parish has remained practically depopulated down to the present day. Its enclosure history confirms that the desertion of the village or the greater part of it took place about the middle of the seventeenth century.

Some enclosure was carried out by Thomas Kebell shortly before 1500, but this was probably of the demesne only. The open fields which remained seem to have been enclosed between 1640 and 1670, and the parish register shows a marked fall of population during the same period. Only five houses were listed in the hearth tax assessment of 1670; by 1801 there were only Stretton Hall and two farmsteads. The parish church fell almost into ruins but was rebuilt in 1838.

Towards the S. edge of the village area is a well-defined moated site, but there are no traces of buildings today and there is no evidence at present as to when it was deserted. Henry Kebell possessed a capital messuage in Great Stretton when he died in 1571 which may have been this house, but it no longer existed in 1670.

STRETTON MAGNA



Scale
Feet 100 200 300 400 500 600 Feet

Limit of Edge and Furrow

Fig. 3

HAMILTON

The history of the deserted hamlet of Hamilton has already been discussed in *Essays in Leicestershire History*, pp. 73-5, but a few notes are called for here.

Hamilton is first recorded by name in the Leicestershire Survey of c. 1130 and its name seems to mean "Hamela's village". In origin it was a daughter settlement of Barkby, like Barkby Thorpe. It is virtually certain that though Hamilton is not separately recorded by name in Domesday Book it is silently included in the entry relating to Robert de Toden's holding at Barkby* and therefore that it goes back to pre-Conquest times as a settlement.

It was never a large place, having only 374 acres of land appurtenant to it. In 1334 its tax quota was fixed at as little as 12s. 7d., among the smallest in the county; but it is not possible to deduce from this how many households were living there at that date. In tax assessments of 1327 and 1331 one can discover nine or ten distinct family names, but by 1377 there were only four taxpayers, possibly representing three or four separate households. The fall would be explained by successive epidemics of bubonic plague during the preceding generation. Fourteenth-century records speak of nine messuages in Hamilton.† So, too, does a record of 1423, but by that date this statement may have amounted to a legal fiction. It seems likely that Hamilton died out in the first half of the fifteenth century, for when Charyte compiled his rental for Leicester Abbey in 1477 he could only record that the chapel of St. John the Baptist which the Abbey had possessed there had disappeared.

The site of Hamilton has long been known, and has been marked upon the Ordnance maps as the "Town of Hamilton" to the mystification of many students. It would be one of the most instructive sites in Leicestershire to excavate. We know that there was a small manor-house, a chapel, and about nine or ten peasant houses, and that it was deserted before 1450 in all probability. The plan of the site shows clearly where the village street ran, and one or two of the side-lanes. It will also be noticed that the modern roads and paths bear no relation to those of medieval times but cut across the site of the village without regard to its original topography.

*C. F. Slade (ed.), *The Leicestershire Survey*, 38-9.

†*Assoc. Arch. Societies Reports and Papers*, xxxv (1920), 341, 343. The same source gives the tax assessments for 1327, 1331, and 1377, which I have used above.

HAMILTON

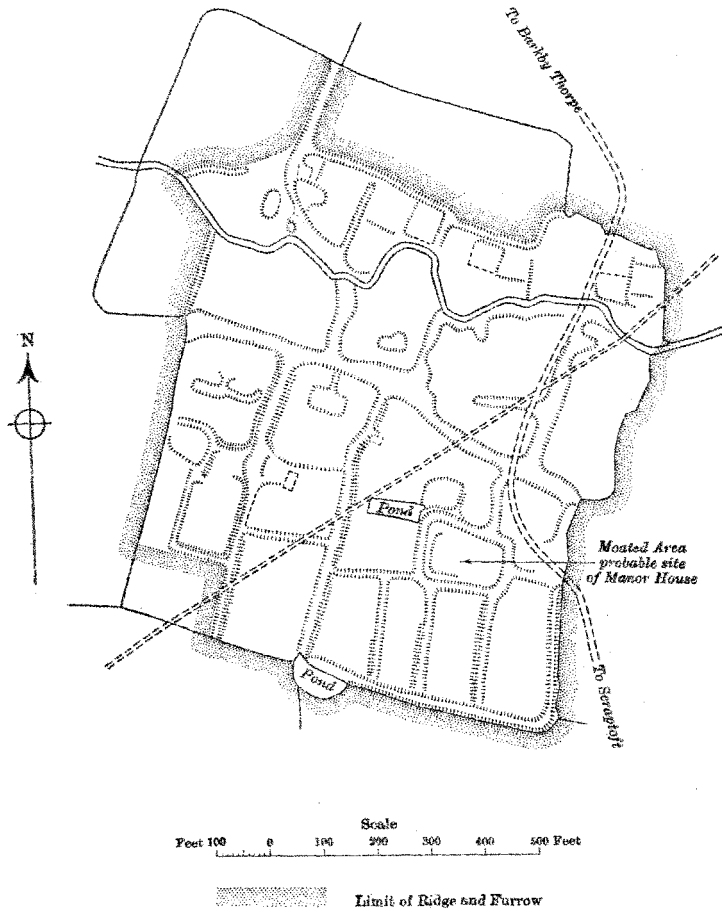


Fig. 4

INGARSBY

Ingarsby, anciently a hamlet of the mother parish of Hungerton, was probably founded by the Danes in the late ninth century or the early tenth. The name means "Ingwar's village", Ingwar being an Old Danish personal name. Domesday Book shows that it was a considerable village at that date, with a recorded population of thirty-two. Hence it is a larger site than most deserted villages, and it is also more clearly defined than many despite the fact that it has been abandoned since the year 1469.

Its medieval history has been related in *Essays in Leicestershire History*, pp. 75-9. There it was shown that Leicester Abbey, which had been granted the manor in 1352, acquired the whole lordship by 1458 or shortly afterwards by buying up the land which had not been conveyed with the manor. In 1469 they enclosed the whole lordship with hedges and ditches* and converted most of it to sheep and cattle pastures. Some land was retained under arable, however, and some was leased to the Ashbys of Lowesby and Quenby for grazing.

We know little about the population of the village after the time of Domesday. The poll tax assessment for 1377 does not survive, and that for 1381 is known to be less comprehensive. Even so, it shows about a dozen families resident at Ingarsby and there were doubtless others. Plague had clearly reduced the population to a considerable extent, but there is some reason to believe that the village was much impoverished well before the Black Death. In 1334 its tax quota was fixed at the very low figure of nine shillings, one of the lowest in the whole county. This figure may be compared with the assessments for the depopulated hamlets of Hamilton and Frisby, which were 12s. 7d. and 13s. od. respectively. Enclosure and conversion to pasture may then have been forced upon the Abbey in the face of a population too small to maintain the traditional husbandry of the open fields. The enclosure of 1469 seems to have been followed by complete desertion, except for the newly-built grange buildings, some of which may still be seen at Ingarsby Old Hall. In 1563 only the Caves remained at the Hall. The village had disappeared.

*Dr. R. H. Hilton, in his article on Medieval Agrarian History in *V.C.H. Leics.*, ii. 193, footnote 83, casts doubt upon the belief that the enclosure of 1469 involved the whole lordship. Having re-examined the evidence, I see no reason to change the view expressed in *Essays in Leicestershire History*. It seems clear that *dominium* means the entire lordship and not simply the demesne (*dominicum*); and the reference to 18 yardlands in free tenure relates to an earlier date than the rental of 1477 to which Dr. Hilton attributes it.

INGARSBY

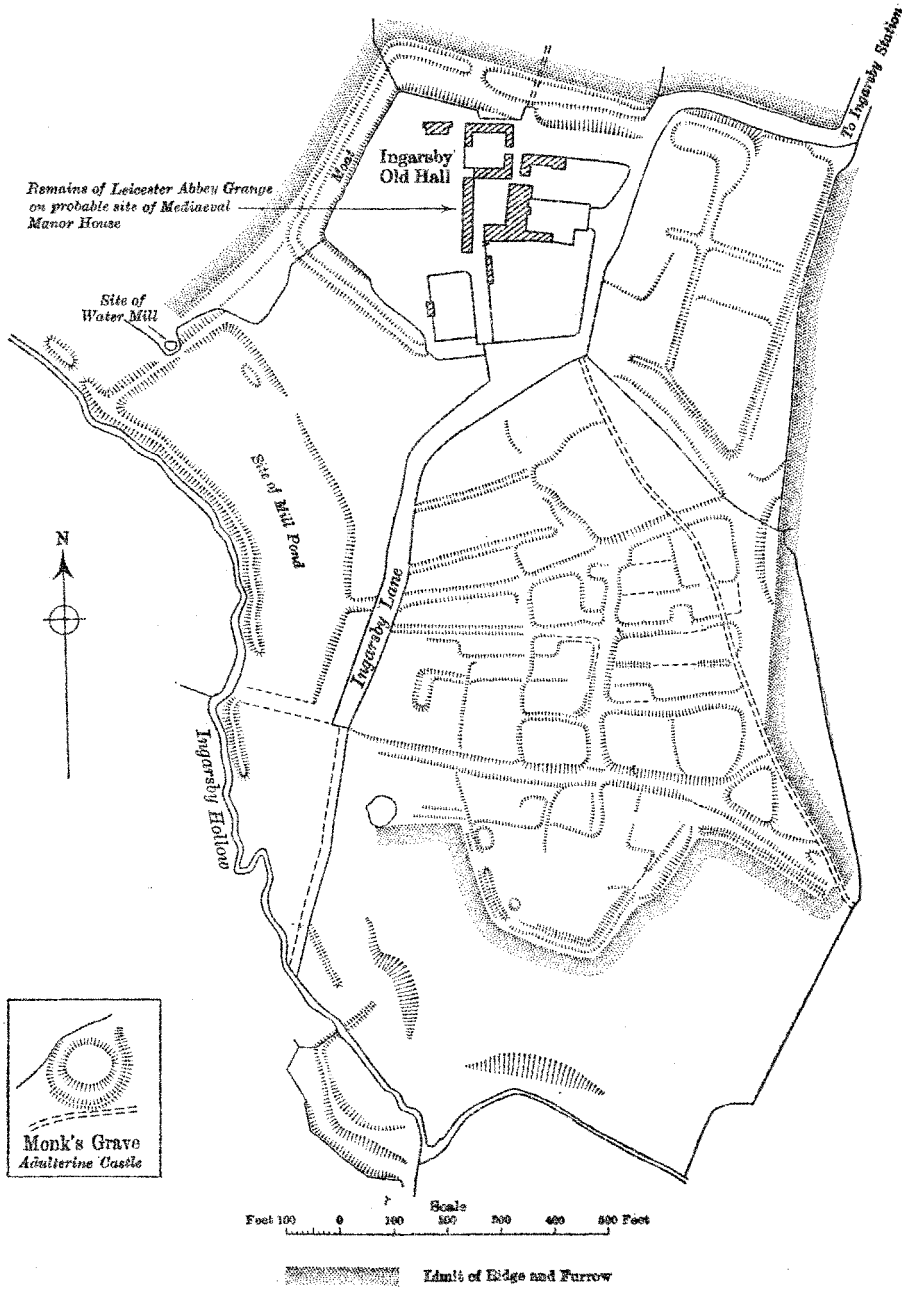


Fig. 5

LOWESBY

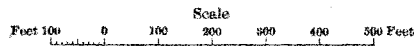
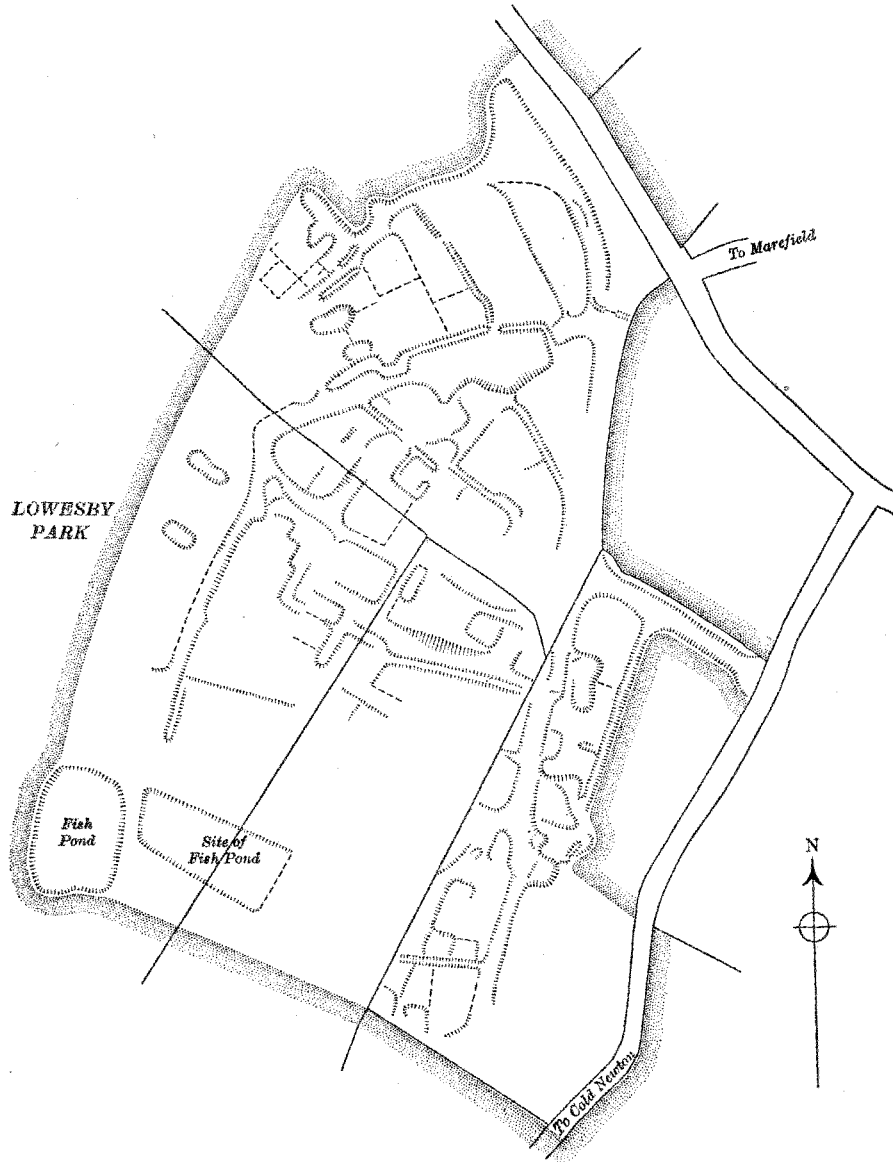
Lowesby lies on the upland Liassic clays about eight miles E. of Leicester and about 500 feet above sea-level. It was probably first founded by the Danes in the late ninth century or the early tenth. Its name is derived from the Old Scandinavian *lausá*, "a slope"—hence "the village on a slope", which suits its topography well.

In 1086 it contained nineteen families, but there seems to have been a period of decline after this for an extent of 1309 shows only twelve farming households. In 1377 there were twenty-five payers to the poll-tax, representing perhaps eight to ten families in all. Although a Chancery suit of 1533-40 speaks of it as having been in the fifteenth century "a great husband town having in the same twenty ploughs and above", this cannot have been true. Lowesby was declining in numbers for generations before that. It was enclosed by the Ashbys about 1487 and immediately converted to pastures for sheep and cattle.* Further depopulation followed, and in 1563 there remained only the Ashbys at the manor-house and three wage-earning families. We may regard the site of Lowesby as having been sealed off before 1500. It must include also homesteads which had been abandoned as far back as the thirteenth century, judging by the fall in population between 1086 and 1309.

Unlike many abandoned village sites, the church has survived and is still in use, partly because it was a mother-church (and therefore not so easy to forget and to neglect as a chapelry) and partly because there were resident squires who needed a convenient place of worship.

*Parker, *Enclosure in Leicestershire, 1485-1607* (unpublished thesis), 33.

LOWESBY



Limit of Ridge and Furrow

Fig. 6

QUENBY

Despite its Danish-sounding name, Quenby derives from an Old English *cwene-burg*, meaning "the queen's manor". It must have formed part of some Anglo-Saxon queen's endowment in pre-Conquest times. It originated as a hamlet of Hungerton but never had a chapel of its own.

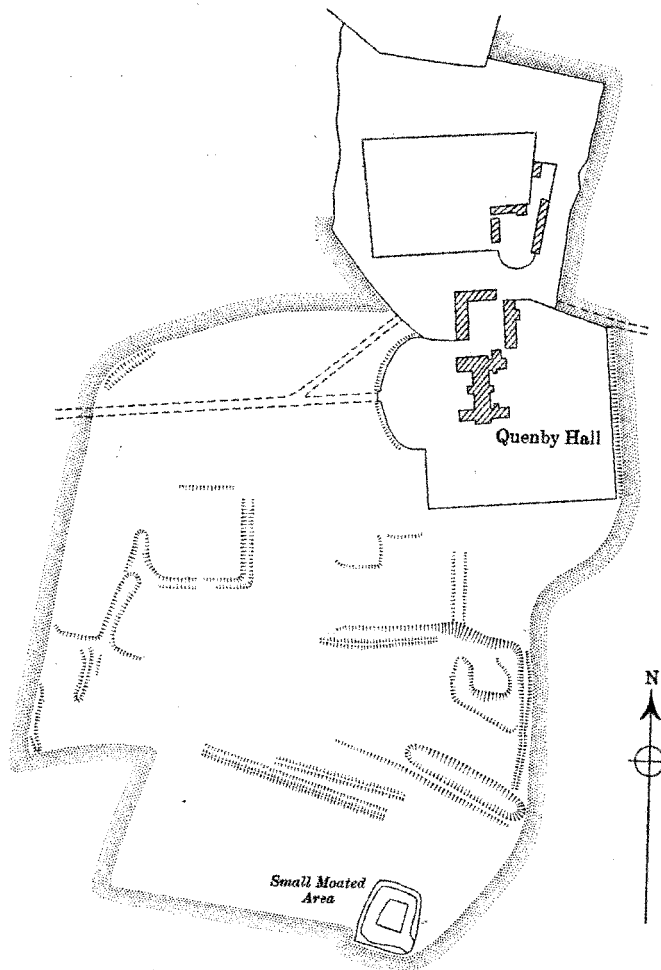
In Domesday Book it is linked with South Croxton, and it is difficult to say what its population may have been. The two vills had eleven households between them, and four slaves on the demesne.* Quenby may have represented the demesne. In any event it was a very small settlement and could hardly have contained more than four or five families at that time. In the poll tax of 1377 there were twenty-five payers, representing perhaps eight to ten families, and it never seems to have been any larger than this.

The Ashbys owned land here from the late thirteenth century. By the late fifteenth century they owned all, or nearly all, the eight hundred acres of the lordship, which they enclosed with hedges and ditches and converted to grassland between 1485 and 1489, precisely when they were doing likewise at Lowesby.† By 1563 there remained only the Ashbys at the great house. The site of the hamlet, to the S. and S.W. of the present Quenby Hall, is small and somewhat indeterminate. On its S. edge is a small moated area, the purpose of which is obscure. It could hardly have contained a manor-house on such a minute island. Possibly it was a medieval fish-pond.

**V.C.H. Leics.*, i. 322.

†Parker, unpublished thesis, 31-3, quoting Nichols, iii. 294.

QUENBY



Scale
Feet 100 0 100 200 300 400 500 Feet

Limit of Ridge and Furrow

Fig. 7