

THE WINSCOMBE PROJECT 2009

Following the successful completion of the Shapwick Project in central Somerset (Gerrard with Aston 2007), preliminary work has begun on a study of Winscombe parish in the north of the county (Fig. 1 – for Somerset location see figure on p. 55) under the auspices of the Winscombe and Sandford Local History and Archaeological Society. Whereas Shapwick is a single village with a medieval two-

field system and was owned by Glastonbury Abbey for around 800 years, Winscombe is an irregular parish with a variety of different settlements – hamlets, single farmsteads and ‘green-side’ settlements (see the paper on pp. 55–90) – with no clearly identifiable common-field systems and with a complex of sub-tenants. Winscombe was also owned by Glastonbury Abbey, from the 10th to the

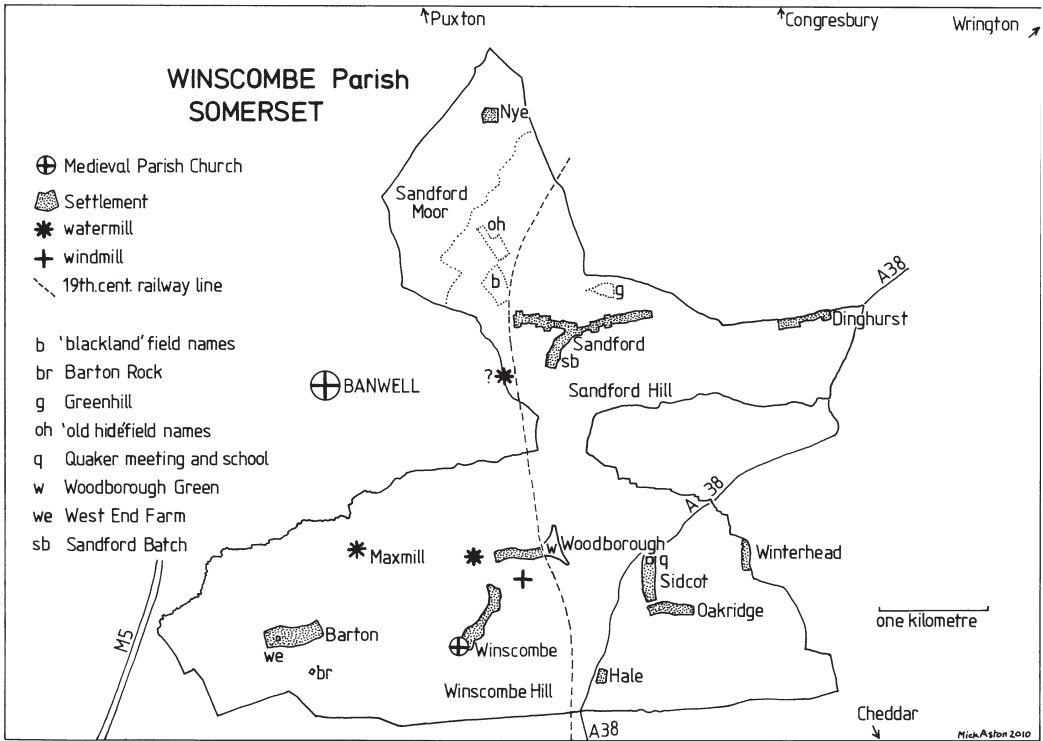


Fig. 1 Winscombe parish, location of key features

13th century, but it then came to the Dean and Chapter of Wells cathedral who owned the manor until the 19th century (Aston and Costen 2008). Their officials seem to have been a lot less directly involved in the parish than Glastonbury Abbey's were at Shapwick. The differences in ownership seem to be reflected in the 'closed' nature of the village at Shapwick – it only had two post-Dissolution landowners – and the 'open village' features of medieval and post-medieval Winscombe with its industrial activity, non-conformity (it has the Quaker meeting house and public school at Sidcot) and public houses.

A great deal of documentary research on families and properties in the parish has already been undertaken by Maria Forbes (with Frances Neale) and a start has been made on the vast amount of medieval court rolls and *compotus* rolls of the Dean and Chapter of Wells by Martin Ecclestone. The parish has many properties with 'old auster' rights including what appears to be the earliest mention of

this type of tenure in 1336–7. In a parliamentary survey of Winscombe in 1650 (SCRO DD/CC 110 733) we are told that old auster rights entitle the holders to *unstinted* access to the commons, greens and wastes of the manor and that this included the uplands of Winscombe Hill and Sandford Hill and the greens at Woodborough and Greenhill as well as the Levels area in the north of the parish at Sandford Moor. The farmers in the parish would also have used the extensive pasture on the top of the Mendip plateau. Elsewhere in the county old auster tenement holders were obliged to maintain flood defences and ditches (Rippon 1997, 216). Large amounts of cheese are recorded each year in the *compoti* rolls, presumably as a result of the large numbers of animals grazed on these areas. We wonder if this is not the origin of Cheddar cheese production in central Somerset!

Map sources include the 1792 map by William White and a regressive map exercise to assess changes in settlement and fields over the last 200

years has already been undertaken. Recently a map of Woodborough Green in the centre of the parish (perhaps dating to around 1700) turned up in the roof of a house in Wells. Buildings survey has already identified a number of 16th/17th-century buildings together with one of the earliest inhabited buildings in Somerset, West End Farm in the hamlet of Barton – dated by dendrochronology to 1278–9 (McDermott 2006, 91). It is hoped that the Somerset Vernacular Buildings Research Group will work on the parish in future as one of their projects.

One of the notable characteristics of the parish is a large number of 19th-century villas. Although the poorly recognised Bristol architect George Oatley (who built many of the Bristol University buildings) lived in the parish and built for himself and his family the fine house at Barton Rock, little is known of the context of the other houses. Winscombe was a favoured place for retirement and for outdoor holidays in the 19th century and no doubt the construction of the railway through the parish in the middle of that century helped to make the place popular, but the proximity of the Quaker meeting house and public school at Sidcot may also have been a very significant factor.

Some geophysical survey has already been undertaken (by Geophysical Surveys of Bradford) at Max Mill and over fields called Old Hyde and Blacklands at Sandford, and more will be conducted as opportunities arise. A little archaeological work has taken place previously with collections of flint, stone and pottery being recorded at a number of locations (Harding and Aston 2009; Aston 2009). A small excavation of a post-medieval cottage which incorporated a Tudor stone fireplace was undertaken in 1995 in Sandford; associated with it was 12th-century pottery (Gardiner forthcoming). A section has also been excavated across the moat at Max Mill Farm.

The strategy for the Winscombe project will be based on properties in the medieval hamlets of the parish. As well as building surveys where appropriate, property ‘pedigrees’ will be compiled by Maria Forbes of the former tenants and their land

holdings from the abundant documentation. A campaign of 1m square test pits in gardens together with garden collections of material from flower beds and vegetable patches will be undertaken to assess dates of origin and occupation of the various hamlets. Small sections across prominent and persistent boundaries in these settlements will also be undertaken.

In 2009 five test pits were dug (one each in Nye, Sandford, and Winscombe and two in Woodborough) one of which at Tower House in Winscombe produced a lot of green-glazed 14th-century roofing ridge tiles with ‘cocks-comb’ decoration. Two ‘surgeries’ were held on Sundays in the village community centre to identify garden finds with over 50 people attending (28 June and 8 November).

The project will run for five years and it is hoped to produce a report for *SANH* each year.

References

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