

BOOK REVIEWS

Land, Power and Prestige: Bronze Age Field Systems in Southern England, by David Thomas Yates, Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2007, 218 pp, 64 plates & figs & 24 tables. £30. ISBN 9781842172315

The advent of developer-funded archaeology in Britain, facilitated by government planning policy guidelines (notably PPG 16), has had a massive impact upon the scope and scale of archaeological information for all periods recovered over the past two decades. Such has been its volume that the time-lag between discovery and its appearance in published form in the public domain grows ever wider. Despite this, major new publications do appear all the time, aided by electronic formats, while the national and local authority historic environment records attempt to keep up with cataloguing information as it emerges, but what of the impact of all this new data upon our understanding of the past? This book is an attempt to address this question for the later Bronze Age in southern England via a University of Reading-based research project, the implications of which for a new understanding of this period are profound.

‘Celtic Fields’ have long been recognised as a widely distributed component of the prehistoric landscapes of southern England, surviving notably as earthworks across the chalk downs and recognised more recently in the Dartmoor reaves. Thanks to this study we can now appreciate their real significance and chronology within the context of a remarkable and quite short-lived episode of extensive landscape management by later Bronze Age communities in the south of England. The expansion and extent of developer-funded archaeology over the past 20 years or so has revealed lowland field systems and landscapes to complement the earlier upland examples. Large-scale development along the

Thames and other river valleys, and the necessity for extensive soil stripping has facilitated access and recognition, permitting detailed study of the extent, chronology and operation of these early agricultural landscapes. New data is emerging all the time, but this study provides a framework and stimulus for future work.

The picture emerging from this study is of a relatively short-lived period of intensive land management during the second half of the 2nd millennium BC across a wide swathe of southern England. Large tracts of country were enclosed within extensive grids of predominantly rectilinear fields with pre-determined orientations not necessarily reflecting the natural configuration of the land. Grids with north-west–south-east and north-east–south-west orientations are notably widespread. The focus for this activity can now be placed almost exclusively as a phenomenon of the Middle Bronze Age, and is associated with the widespread appearance of fixed farming settlements. Where detailed study has been possible it is evident that some arrangements reflect quite sophisticated livestock management, though doubtless the agricultural regime as a whole was more mixed. Evidence of ritual or ceremony associated with these enclosures includes the presence of animal and sometimes human deposits within their boundaries, as well as deposition of other items such as metalwork, quern-stones, or curated artefacts; while the very act of large-scale, coaxially aligned land enclosure was doubtless itself of powerful symbolic or ideological significance.

The scope of this study demonstrates that these landscapes are confined almost exclusively to England south of a line between the Bristol Channel and the Wash. It is also apparent that many Middle Bronze Age systems were superseded in the Late Bronze Age by differently aligned plots, sometimes

of less regularity, but which were in turn redundant by the Iron Age. Indeed, it is not until the Roman period that land allotment is seen again on an equivalent scale in Britain. The social and political background to this phenomenon was a rising population; the emergence of a more competitive society in the context of a great expansion in metalwork production and deposition; and the emergence of high status compounds or central-place enclosures. Thirty years ago Rowlands (1980) proposed a socio-economic model for the later Bronze Age of southern England where different communities vied with each other to gain political and economic advantage, ultimately through the accumulation, display and distribution of wealth, within the context of closer ties with Europe. This seems to mark quite an abrupt change with a past of lower populations, communal religious/ritual observance, largely open landscapes, and greater emphasis upon ancestral continuities. Seaboard and river valley-based elites came to prominence, defined initially by concentrations of bronze weaponry and central or high-status enclosures, but also, as this study shows, by intensive land clearance and enclosure on the most favourable soils for agriculture. This system is identified as belonging within a wider north European/Atlantic, or more specifically Channel/North Sea expansionist and competitive economy – an early echo perhaps of our modern capitalist society?

As this study shows, many questions concerning the chronology, operation, social significance and distribution of these field systems remain unanswered, a process which can now be more knowledgeably addressed as new discoveries continue. Inevitably, the distribution of new discoveries has been biased towards those regions where the pace of modern development has been most intensive during the past few decades – primarily the south-east of England. Away from the uplands of the South-west (notably the Dorset Downs, Exmoor, Dartmoor, or Bodmin Moor), there is a dearth of equivalent discoveries on the richer agricultural lands of Devon, Dorset and Somerset. Evidence of field systems is emerging however, where conditions, whether through more extensive developments or research, are favourable. One of the most impressive groups of field systems being revealed by research are those in the catchment area of the South Cadbury Environs Project, where the later hillfort site may have been a contemporary political focus, and there is evidence of associated

settlements, metalworking and metalwork deposition (Tabor 2008). Recent large-scale residential development south of Shepton Mallet has revealed fragments of other Middle and Late Bronze Age field systems associated with settlement, ritual deposition and feasting (Leach 2009), and further contemporary field and settlement remains are coming to light through similarly extensive development on the fringes of Yeovil and Taunton.

This new study is transforming our understanding of the dynamics and revolutionary developments of the later Bronze Age in southern England, but it also highlights an almost total dearth of comparable evidence from Somerset. Recent discoveries cited above, important earlier finds of contemporary metalwork deposits (eg Edington Burtle, Taunton, Norton Fitzwarren), and the extent of high quality agricultural land across the county, suggest that this picture is misleading. Opportunities for discovery through extensive development may never be widespread in a predominantly modern agricultural setting, although the South Cadbury Environs Project demonstrates well the potential of targeted research. Yates's study suggests particular enclaves of lowland field systems concentrated in coastal areas such as the Sussex, Kent and Essex coasts, the river valleys of the Thames and its tributaries, or the southern margins of the Fens. The Somerset Levels and its tributary river valleys, surrounded by extensive areas of high grade agricultural land is surely a candidate for another such enclave.

Leach, P., 2009. 'Prehistoric ritual, landscapes and other remains at Field Farm, Shepton Mallet', *SANH* 152, 11–68.

Rowlands, M.J., 1980. 'Kinship, alliance and exchange in the European Bronze Age', in J. Barrett and R. Bradley (eds), *Settlement and Society in the Later British Bronze Age*, Oxford: BAR British Series 83(i), 15–56.

Tabor, R., 2008. *Cadbury Castle: The Hillfort and Landscapes*, Stroud.

PETER LEACH

Agriculture and Rural Society after the Black Death: common themes and regional variations, eds Ben Dodds and Richard Britnell, University of Hertfordshire Press Studies in Regional and Local History, volume 6, 2008, pp 265 + xvi, ISBN 978-1-902806-78-5. Price not known.

This is a collection of 13 papers, most of which were presented at a conference in Durham in 2002, that concentrate on the 'problem' of rural society posed by the Black Death. Most of the chapters relate to regional variations; the editors suggest common themes to which the variations contribute greatly.

Somerset readers, while finding in John Hare's use of tithe evidence in Wiltshire more than neighbourly interest, should be directed to John Mullan's study of two Winchester bishopric estates, the bailiwicks of East Meon in south-east Hampshire and Taunton, the second much the larger of the two. The author's particular interest is how individual tenants and their families accumulated land (the phrase used for the outcome is 'tenurially enriched peasantry'). The process, traced through many land transfers recorded in the Winchester Pipe Rolls, produced a 'massive surge' immediately after the Black Death, a lesser one after further pestilence in 1361–2, but then a decline caused by a continued fall in population until the turn of the century, followed again by revival. The results were not, however, consolidated farms, but accumulated properties sometimes scattered across several manors. By contrast the many cottages in the bailiwick remained separate holdings (or sometimes held in pairs), though because of the rise in wages, the gap between employed cottagers and arable farmers was perhaps narrowing. Not enough work has yet been done on the farmers and their families, nor on the actual location of their dwellings, though it is suggested that many of the cottages were probably abandoned as their occupants migrated. The story also ends here in 1410. The rest of the 15th century and beyond offers a tantalizing prospect.

ROBERT DUNNING

The Scourging Angel, by Benedict Gummer, The Bodley Head, London, 2009, 512 pp., maps, 18 b/w pls, £25. ISBN 978-022-407767-5.

As historians go, the author evidently got into print relatively early for someone born in 1978. His choice of subject is certainly ambitious and covers the years 1346 to 1381, from the onset of the Black Death in Europe, through the start of the disease in England in 1348 and its ending two years later, leaving some 30 years for consideration of the aftermath, for, after all, around half the population at that time died of

the infection. The author does not like the term 'Black Death' for he maintains there is no historical evidence for an abundance of rats or rat fleas at that period, with the rat theory only becoming popular in the 19th century; instead, the terms 'pestilence', 'plague' and the 'Great Death' are preferred and, furthermore, they were the words used in the surviving writings of the time. Significantly, it appears that the author received the utmost co-operation from his family during the writing of the book; his brother and sisters were 'dutiful and mild', his father was 'a model of patience' and his mother 'emboldened' him to undertake the task. Moreover, the author's aunt gave him the use of her cottage for two years so that work could be continued in solitude. Possibly the family were so helpful because they felt that a starved double first in history at Cambridge should be put to worthwhile use.

For myself, having read a review, I read the work from an interest in the nature of so horrible a pestilence. Previously I had assumed, like many people, that bubonic plague was the cause of the pandemic; this was until I heard of recent research which showed that populations on Iceland suffered from the Great Death, although no black rats were then present on the island. Bubonic plague was certainly present historically in Europe as it is in parts of Asia today, with fever, lymph node swellings as black buboes in the groins and armpits and, perhaps, pneumonia; the life-threatening condition is spread to humans from infected rats, with the plague bacillus being carried by rat-borne fleas, doubtless associated with somewhat unsanitary living conditions. Some researchers have now concluded that the great speed of spread of the 14th-century pandemic really rules out the possibility of bubonic plague which, because of the necessary presence of both rats and rat fleas, travels slowly in a population, even a deprived and crowded one. Further, another factor to be considered is the temperature in Northern Europe which, certainly in winter, is too cold for plague to thrive. During the pandemic, death rates possibly fell in winter, but people probably congregated less in winter than summer in those days. However, whatever the true nature of the infective agent, it is clear that it was remarkably infectious and contagious. Yet, what was the Black Death? This must remain unknown at present; probably it was a haemorrhagic fever of sorts, perhaps caused by a virus similar to some which occur in Africa today and which persist and smoulder in primate reservoirs, and for which there

are no known cures. Then there are those who maintain that the disease was anthrax, caused by a bacillus, which can cause pneumonia and eruptions on the skin, and which has been investigated for possible use in biological warfare. Even so, it seems likely that the Black Death's true cause will never be known with certainty.

So devastating a disease as the Great Death obviously had a great impact on human behaviour and social life in the 14th century and this is considered in some detail in the book, including the cycle of the peasant's life through the year and the influence of the church and its priests. Landowners and royalty are not overlooked and no social classes were really spared in the spread of the pestilence; Edward III and Philippa of Hainault lost three daughters in the course of the plague, which came in two epidemics. Helpfully, separate chapters trace the disease in Ireland and in London. In Somerset, the Bishop of Bath and Wells took refuge in his manor house at Wiveliscombe and had a hard time of it trying to provide replacement priests for his parishes: Yeovil had no fewer than four priests between December 1348 and January 1349. When villages lost their priests there was often no one left to administer the Last Rites. The Bishop instructed that if a priest could not be found the dying could make their last confession to a layman; it seems that a woman would do if no man was available!

A book of this type can only be prepared following extensive source research; notes are provided for each chapter and there are full lists of both primary and secondary printed sources as well as references to unpublished papers, theses and dissertations. Doubtless the non-specialist historian will find much of interest in the book and I can recommend it to medical people and to biologists. The Great Death could not be prevented, and certainly not cured, by any of the physicians of that time; should the same disease arise again, would the medical services of Britain's National Health Service be any more successful? The first essential task would be to determine the causation.

PHILIP RADFORD

Waterways and Canal-building in Medieval England, edited by John Blair, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007; 315pp, 70b/w figures, £64, ISBN 978-0-19-921715-1

This book is a very informative collection of twelve papers on various themes related to the rivers and canals of medieval England. Its publication is very welcome because, although few can doubt the great importance of water transport in the medieval period, there has been no other recent volume with the detail and geographical scope of this work. Somerset is also very well served in the publication, being the geographic topic for a quarter of the papers and featuring significantly in several others.

The book is wide ranging, presenting evidence brought together from experts including archaeologists, historians, geographers, geomorphologists and place-name scholars. It focuses particularly on the Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman periods between 950 and 1250, a time during which England's navigable waterways were particularly significant for transportation and the economy.

The volume editor provides a useful overview to the subject, touching on the other European evidence, before summarising the English evidence for canals, mills, fish traps, bridges, trade and transport. Thereafter the volume is divided into two parts.

The first five papers deal with the significance of waterways for society and the economy and some of the evidence for their use. The first one focuses on the north-west region but the other four deal with the whole of England utilising mainly documentary and place-name evidence. Della Hooke's chapter is an excellent review of the use of waterways in the Anglo-Saxon period, from ports to mills and fisheries. This is complemented by Anne Cole's in-depth review of the place-name evidence for water transport, including the under-researched Somerset sites at Porlock, Stathe, Bleadney and Hythe. The place-name evidence for canalised waterways is hampered by possible confusion over meaning, although once again Somerset is well represented. Mark Gardiner provides the detailed evidence of how these small ports and landing places operated, although most of his evidence is derived from the Fens and East Anglia, with practically nothing from Somerset.

John Langdon presents a chapter on the purveyance records of the Public Record Office that deal with the size and shipment points of real cargoes. In comparison to the traffic on the Severn, Thames, Trent/Humber, Waveney and Ouse, the Somerset records for the Parrett/Tone system suggest relatively small craft plied the waters upstream of

Bridgwater. Water transport is known elsewhere in the county from other sources but that is understandably beyond the scope of this chapter.

The second part of the book focuses on the physical remains of early medieval canal building mainly using archaeological evidence. This provides an interesting contrast to the documentary evidence in the first section as it represents significant construction tasks that are largely absent from the documentary records. The first chapter is by Ed Rhodes, a geographer, who shows what to look for in seeking human modification of rivers. This is followed by a general overview of canal building in England and the rest of Western Europe by James Bond. This provides an interesting introduction to the more detailed papers but a distinct bias to the Fens is apparent and many Somerset examples are overlooked.

The relative lack of Somerset data to this point is counteracted by the fact that three of the five area studies are from Somerset, the others dealing with the River Itchen in Hampshire and the Upper Thames. The first of the Somerset papers is by Steve Rippon, who, after a brief excursion into the coastal reclamation theme that will be familiar from his other works, deals in great detail with the main rivers of the Somerset Levels. This builds on the work of Williams but also adds new information and is well referenced throughout. It considers not just the canals but also the mills and weirs that were often a hindrance to navigation. Somerset had more miles of early medieval canals and canalised rivers than anywhere else in the country, or possible in western Europe, a fact which is not as celebrated as it should be. Even more spectacularly the majority of this medieval system is still in use today.

The other two Somerset chapters are both by Charles and Nancy Hollinrake. The first is a gentle reminder of why the waterways of Somerset played a significant role in the history of the county during the period. This includes their connection to Alfred hiding from the Danes at Athelney, the establishment of the monasteries at Athelney, Muchelney and Glastonbury, and the creation of *burhs* at Lyng, Langport and Axbridge to protect the three main navigable rivers of the county.

Their second chapter deals with the exciting discovery of an Anglo-Saxon water channel at Glastonbury that many, if not all, scholars have accepted as a 1.75km long canal joining the Brue to the market place. The attribution of the canal to Abbot Dunstan is possible but the only date (690–

1030) is less conclusive. The Hollinrakes use place-name evidence and good local knowledge to produce a convincing argument for an extensive system of man-made waterways and mill leats in and around Glastonbury in the Anglo-Saxon period.

Overall the volume manages to pull off a good balance between the documentary and archaeological evidence and illustrates how they provide complementary information. For the local reader this volume cannot replace the much greater detail contained in *The Draining of the Somerset Levels* by Michael Williams, which has recently been reprinted. However, it does hold some new and interesting information about the waterways of the county, while the Williams reprint is 40 years behind present thinking. For the student of the early medieval period it should be a must read. For a more general local readership borrowing the Society's copy may prove more attractive than purchasing the book while at full price.

R. BRUNNING

Hampshire Houses 1250-1700, Their Dating & Development, by Edward Roberts *et al.*, Hampshire County Council, 2003, 275 pp., 18 col. pls, 287 figs, £19.95. ISBN 1-85975-633-6.

In the introduction to her indispensable volume, *Traditional Houses of Somerset* (2005), Jane Penoyre characterised Somerset's vernacular style as 'extremely simple, relieved by the varying colours and textures of the many different walling materials and roof coverings', the buildings predominantly of stone and cob. Roberts makes a similar claim for Hampshire, but here the building material is almost exclusively timber, with stone and brick 'the preserve of the gentry and nobility'. However, within the historic boundaries of the county of Somerset, some 1600 square miles, the topography is extremely diverse, from bleak uplands with the highest sea cliffs in England to extensive wetlands, rivalling the East Anglian fens, with ranges of hills of varied and distinct geological character. Whereas Hampshire, little smaller at 1400 square miles, is divided into two broad bands: in the south, heaths and woodland including the New Forest, and in the north, chalk hills and downland. The vernacular styles of the two counties necessarily reflect these differences.

Roberts' aim 'is to disseminate the results of many years' study of historic houses in Hampshire'.

Therefore, it assumes a degree of knowledge on the part of its audience. The volume is divided into four parts with contributions from John Crook, Linda Hall and Daniel Miles. The first chapter in Part 1 jumps in at the deep end with 'True Aisled and Aisle-Derivative Halls' by John Crook. Needless to say with this author, the discussion is both informed and informative and he makes the interesting observation that 'It is a surprising fact that many of the examples [in Hampshire] were recognised only quite recently, and it is quite possible that other roofs of this type still remain to be discovered' – an incentive for all building recorders.

Chapters on crucks, box-framed construction and building materials follow. Chapter 5 by Linda Hall on 'Fixtures and Fittings' is one of the longest contributions in the book, running to over 50 pages, and is of most value to vernacular studies in general, not just Hampshire. The author is well known for her publications on the subject and this chapter contains a vast amount of comparative material, which will prove invaluable for stylistic dating of all forms of decorative and structural details. For instance, there are three pages of dated examples of beam profiles and stop diagrams. Also there are two pages of measured drawings of apotropaic marks and the accompanying text is most informative and succinct about their meaning and purpose, together with an explanation of the difficulties of identification.

It is not until Part 2 that we reach 'Form and Function' with chapters on open-halls, fully-floored houses and urban plan forms. All the chapters are well illustrated with photographs and measured drawings, and the latter are all uniformly drawn and extremely clear, but it is perhaps surprising that there are relatively few plans. For example, in the chapter entitled 'Urban Plan-Forms' there are only two

measured plans illustrated (whereas Penoyre in her Somerset volume reproduces a plan of almost every house discussed). However, it should be mentioned that the varieties of plan forms are fully discussed in the text.

The third section on 'Place and Status' is also useful when studying other areas and the first chapter in this part, 'Social Status and Building Activity', compares evidence from Hampshire with national trends by means of graphs which repay careful study. Roberts' chapter on 'Rural Houses of the Aristocracy, Ecclesiastical Institutions and the Gentry' also has wider implications, not least in Somerset as the bishops of Winchester had large holdings in the county and Penoyre has highlighted their influence on the design of manor houses, grange farmhouses and tenants' cottages on their estates.

Much of the evidence described in the main body of the book has resulted from dendrochronology in the county and Daniel Miles contributes a concluding chapter on the subject, including a gazetteer of Hampshire buildings dated by this method. In fact he points out that 'The idea of writing a book on the development of houses in Hampshire arose from the work of The Hampshire Dendrochronology Project'. Thus the fact that most of the discussion in the preceding chapters is based on dated examples rather than only on stylistic grounds has important implications for future research.

Roberts' volume is one of a growing number of monographs on the vernacular architecture of individual counties and is a significant contribution to the wider study of the subject and may be read with profit not just by those with a particular interest in Hampshire.

STEPHEN CROAD