

Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-century Farmsteads: West Whelpington, Northumberland

By MICHAEL G. JARRETT and STUART WRATHMELL

WEST Whelpington (NY 974 837) is a deserted village in the parish of Whelpington, Northumberland (Fig. 1). It occupies a whinstone crag on the north bank of the river Wansbeck 2.4 km. west of the village of Kirkwhelpington, on the eastern fringe of extensive moorland. The site is gradually being destroyed by quarrying, and since 1958 it has been subject to excavation by one of the writers (Dr Jarrett) on behalf of the Department of the Environment, the Medieval Village Research group, and University College, Cardiff. Two reports on the excavations have been published.¹ Work will be completed by about 1980, and full publication of its results is anticipated within a further three years. Meanwhile, it seems desirable to summarize some of the evidence collected in recent years, in particular that concerning the decline and abandonment of the post-medieval village. The sources used are both documentary and archaeological.²

The documentation of the village is too fragmentary to record adequately the process of depopulation, but a recent study of more than 200 villages in southern Northumberland has provided a context into which the fragments seem to fit.³ In that part of the county at least, relatively few desertions can be assigned to the period between 1300 and 1600. There was however permanent shrinkage in the size of many

village settlements, and this led to the redistribution of lands amongst the surviving farmholds. Such reorganizations seem to be typical of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Further shrinkage, and most cases of desertion, occurred as part of the better documented reorganizations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In a county with few freeholders, landowners seem to have had little difficulty in making drastic changes in the management and use of land in order to obtain greater income. These changes included the enclosure of open fields and common pastures, and the abolition of customary tenements. Severalty holdings were created and let at greatly increased rents. Village settlements were abandoned, to be replaced by steadings (often with adjacent cottages) located within the new holdings. In many townships the transformation involved a reduction in the number of farming units. It seems likely that the dispossessed tenants became agricultural labourers, for it is not until the nineteenth century that township (as opposed to village) depopulation becomes apparent; it is presumably to be associated with increased mechanization and improved communications. The process of reorganization was well understood and defined by John Hodgson, the historian of Northumberland, a hundred and fifty years ago. As a general statement his account of the desertion of Bolam (NZ 092 827) could scarcely be bettered today:

From the date of the parish register, 1662, the population of the parish does not, however, seem to have decreased. The truth is, many villages in Northumberland have entirely gone down; but, as on this estate, farmhouses and cottages have risen up in their stead in more convenient situations, a mode

¹ M. G. Jarrett, *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4th ser., 40, 1962, pp. 189-225; *A.A.*, 4th ser., 48, 1970, pp. 183-302.

² We are indebted to Miss Freda Berisford and to Messrs D. H. Evans and Peter Hill for reading, and suggesting improvements to, an early draft of this paper; to Mr S. Moorhouse for commenting on the finds; and to Mr Howard Mason for the plans.

³ S. Wrathmell, 'Deserted and shrunken villages in southern Northumberland', Ph.D. thesis, University of Wales, 1975, pp. 154-6. [Unpublished: copies in the Library of University College, Cardiff, and the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.]

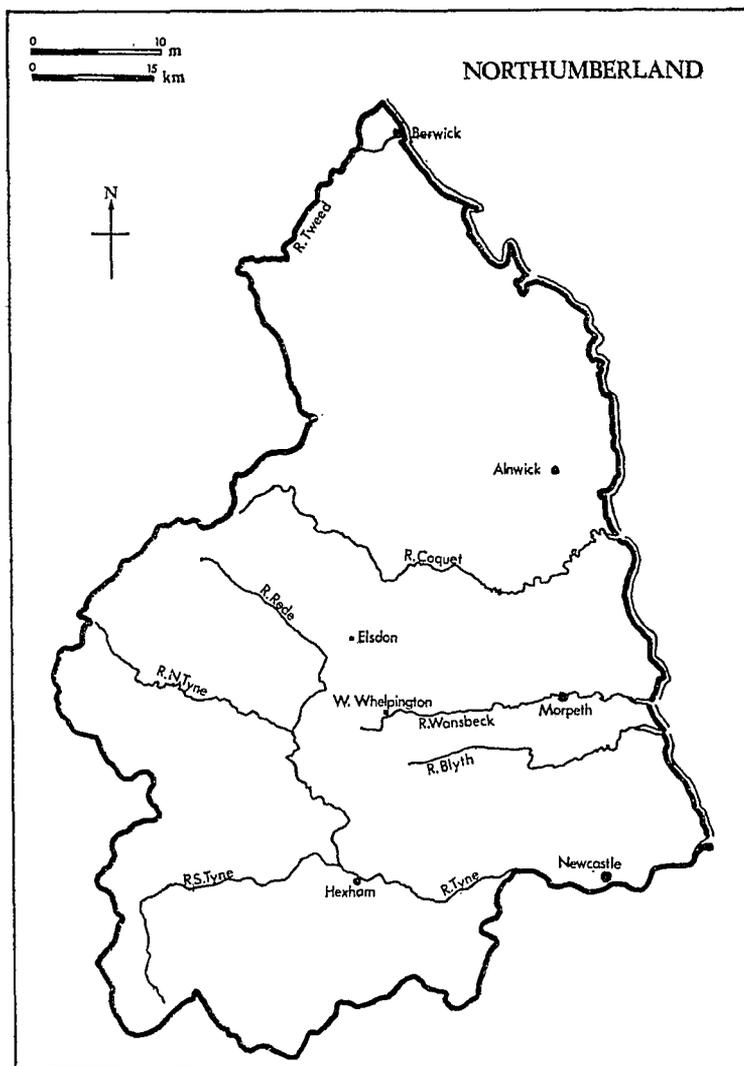


FIG. 1. Map of Northumberland.

better adapted to the growth of good principle and usefulness than the village system.⁴

At West Whelpington a similar transformation is probably reflected in the desertion of the village about 1720. It seems clear that before this there had already been a decline in the number of holdings in the township, as well as some dispersal of steadings. A deposition of 1847 records that the township was assessed for church-rate and poor-rate at nineteen "ancient

farms."⁵ There is good reason to suppose that the "farms" indicate the number of medieval husbandland tenements.⁶ At some stage the "farms" had ceased to represent particular holdings, and had become fixed units of assessment. In villages of south-east Northumberland fossilization seems to have occurred between the fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries.⁷ There is no evidence to suggest that this dating

⁵ F. W. Dendy, 'The ancient farms of Northumberland', *A.A.*, 2nd ser., 16, 1892-3, p. 152.

⁶ Earl Percy, 'The ancient farms of Northumberland', *A.A.*, 2nd ser. 17, 1894-5, pp. 18-39.

⁷ *Northumberland County History*, VIII, 1907, p. 246.

⁴ J. Hodgson, *History of Northumberland*, II, i, 1827, p. 337.

does not apply to the whole county. It is therefore reasonable to assume that at some date in the later Middle Ages West Whelpington contained nineteen husbandlands. In addition, it may have supported cottage tenements and leaseholds created from demesne lands, though there is no evidence for either.

By 1666 the number of holdings seems to have been reduced, if we may believe the Hearth Tax return for that year.⁸ It includes Ray with West Whelpington, and lists for the two villages together seven persons assessed for one hearth each, and another four non-solvents. Hodgson records that a man called Stott, "when he took the whole of it to rent 'put out 15 farmers' here, according to the phrase and account of a person who was his servant, and is still living at age of 86."⁹ It does not seem likely that there was an increase from less than eleven to fifteen tenements in the period 1666 to 1720, so that one source or the other is presumably inaccurate. The evidence from large-scale excavation of the village suggests that the higher figure is to be preferred, and that a number of people were not recorded in the Hearth Tax return, even as non-solvents.

Hodgson fails to give a date for the desertion, but the parish register can be used to produce the necessary information.¹⁰ The register begins in 1679, and West Whelpington occurs regularly until 24 August 1719, after which it is never mentioned. The frequency of its occurrence in earlier years suggests that the village ceased to be occupied between that date and 1722, and probably early in this period.

After 1719 isolated farmsteads within the township are often mentioned in the register under their own names. Two of these farmsteads, Hornscastle and Cornhills, existed before desertion: they first appear in the register in 1685 and 1689 respectively. They may then have been new foundations, but the register by itself does not demand this interpretation:

⁸ PRO: E 179/158/103, m. 14.

⁹ Hodgson, *op. cit.*, II, i, p. 198.

¹⁰ Kirkwhelpington Parish Register. Evidence on the Stott family derives from this source unless otherwise stated. The transcript of the Register in N(orthumberland) R(ecord) O(ffice) is not reliable.

entries for the first five years often omit township or farm names altogether. The earliest record of the extent of these holdings is the Tithe Map of 1844 (Fig. 2).¹¹ At that date Hornscastle occupied the entire eastern end of the township. Cornhills consisted of two large fields, the village site, and the much smaller South Field. The North and East Fields probably represent open fields of the village. There is no certainty that the composition of these two farmholds was unchanged between the late seventeenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries. Indeed it is unlikely that the village site was part of Cornhills before desertion, for it seems clear that it supported more than labourers' cottages during the last thirty years of its existence.

It is probably significant that the two earliest recorded steadings outside the village were located on the arable lands and the better pastures. The extensive moorland which comprises the western part of the township seems to have remained as unenclosed common until desertion. The parish register provides its earliest references to two more isolated farmsteads, Middle Rig and Ferneyrigg, in 1721/2 and 1725/6 respectively. Both are situated on the moorland to the west of Cornhills, and there can be little doubt that they were created at the time of desertion, and that they included from the start the whole of the rough grazing lands. By 1827 Middle Rig had been abandoned, and its lands were subsumed in Ferneyrigg farm.¹²

Such reorganization cannot be understood without reference to land ownership and tenancy. Once again the detailed record for West Whelpington is elusive, although the circumstantial evidence is clear. Whilst reorganization took place in some Northumberland townships as early as c. 1600, it was far more frequent after the Civil Wars. During the second half of the seventeenth century, a number of important landed families in the county were declining into bankruptcy. The causes of

¹¹ NRO: DT 498. For a discussion of the open fields see *A.A.*, 4th ser., 48, 1970, pp. 197-200.

¹² Hodgson, *op. cit.*, II, i, p. 197.

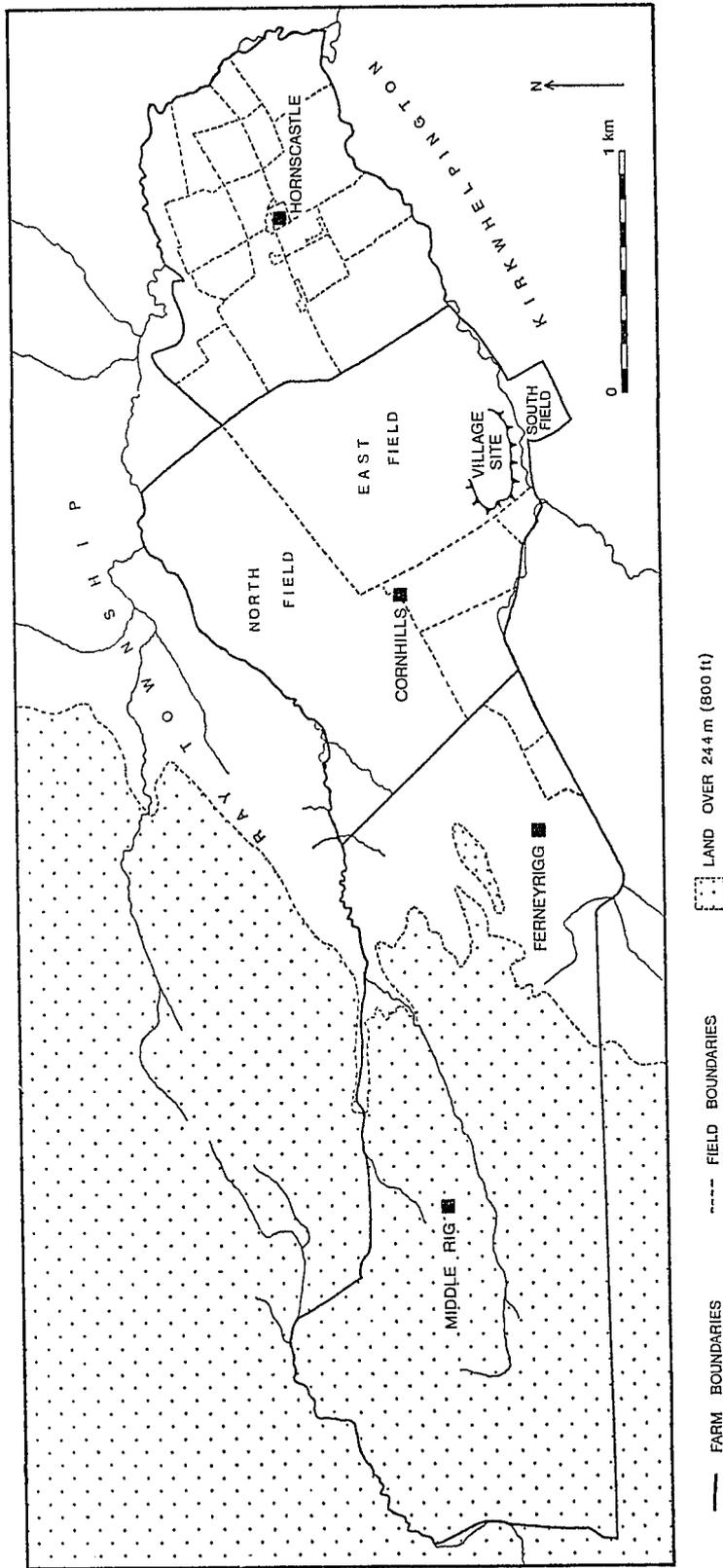


FIG. 2. West Whelpington township (after the Tithe Map of 1844).

their decline were various: financial penalties as Royalists or recusants, wilful dissipation, and sheer bad luck all played a part, and inflation had struck hard at those dependent on customary rents and lacking the capital or initiative to reorganize their estates. The result was the transfer of extensive holdings to their creditors, chiefly merchants and professional men from Tyneside who were able and willing to invest money in reorganizations which promised greatly increased rents.¹³ The Herons of Chipchase, owners of the manor of West Whelpington, were one of the families in difficulties. After 1660 their lands were heavily mortgaged, principally to Mark Milbank, a Newcastle merchant, and Robert Allgood, their own agent.¹⁴ Eventually Allgood acquired most of the Heron lands, whilst the Milbanks gained a number of peripheral manors, of which West Whelpington was one. It was conveyed to the Milbanks in 1675.¹⁵

In the absence of relevant estate papers it is difficult to estimate the effect of this transfer upon the agrarian organization of West Whelpington. No immediate changes are apparent, unless the foundation of Cornhills and Hornscastle was at the initiative of the new owners. By 1675 the Milbanks had established their seat at Halnaby in north Yorkshire, and they acquired soon afterwards other estates in that area. In these circumstances it is not surprising that we do not find at West Whelpington immediate and wholesale "improvement" of the kind undertaken by Allgood and other newly established landowners.

It has been noted that Hodgson's informant named a tenant, Stott, as the person responsible for depopulating the village. The presence of that family in the township is first attested in a parish register entry for 1696, and the same source indicates that they occupied Cornhills Farm soon after the depopulation. We cannot establish whether Cornhills was in their possession before 1720, or whether it was acquired

¹³ For examples see Wrathmell, thesis, pp. 187-190.

¹⁴ The decline of the family is traced in W. P. Hedley, *Northumbrian Families*, II, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1970, p. 58.

¹⁵ NRO: ZAL 23/2.

when they took the whole of the township (excluding Hornscastle) to farm. Whatever the case, this lease will have terminated any residual common rights which might have impeded the exploitation of Cornhills, and it will have provided them with two new and extensive farm-holds. The Stotts may soon have relinquished Middle Rig, but their interest in Ferneyrigg, in addition to Cornhills, continued. The name of Thomas Stott appears alongside that of Mark Milbank on a boundary stone set up in 1736 on the southern march of Ferneyrigg.¹⁶ William Stott, farmer, held Ferneyrigg at his death in 1798.

The archaeological evidence does little to clarify the historical record. It could not be expected to do so. All too often it is assumed that it is the business of archaeologists to write history, and that the conclusions derived from historical and archaeological sources will coincide; even on a better documented site than West Whelpington such an assumption is dangerous and misleading. The two disciplines are concerned with different types of evidence, and only rarely will there be any overlap. It is exceptional for the documentary sources to record anything which the archaeologist might discover and recognize; but it is not always realized that the archaeologist can rarely produce the material from which precise history can be written. If he produces historical information, it will be of limited value and at great expense; his primary concern is to produce complementary evidence which is not available in the documents.

Archaeology can provide some picture of the physical setting and economic basis of peasant life at West Whelpington. The buildings of the village in the late seventeenth century were of stone, one story high, and probably thatched; they were grouped round an oval green and (probably) a pond fed by water draining down from the west end of the site. Parts of the green had recently been enclosed, perhaps as stock-yards. Most families lived in a single room with

¹⁶ *A.A.*, 4th ser., 48, 1970, p. 193; the stone is one of a series set up by Sir Walter Blackett, of Wallington (1707-77), in the course of improving his estate.

a floor area of about 25 square metres; most houses had glazed windows and some had locks. Coal was in regular use as a fuel, and many people could afford to smoke tobacco. Beer would probably leave no clear evidence, but we can be fairly certain that wine was not drunk in quantity. The village boasted a forge, but there is no evidence of other industrial activity. There was some arable farming in open fields, but the grazing of cattle, sheep, and horses was probably more important economically. Archaeology also indicates a number of important changes in the layout and composition of tenements, which must reflect changes in the agrarian economy of the village and township. These changes cannot be precisely dated, so that no equation can be made with those suggested by the documentary evidence. Such an equation may be possible at a later date, if the dating of medieval and post-medieval pottery can be refined.

It is hoped that the following account of a group of interrelated holdings will show something of the value of examining village sites, and also illustrate some of the problems which arise from the interrelation of archaeological and documentary evidence. In the early days of excavation at West Whelpington it was the policy to dig only those buildings which were obvious as earthworks. By the end of the third season it was clear that the results obtained from such limited excavation were at best inadequate, and at worst misleading. When work was resumed in 1965 it was decided to dig a wide area round each building, and since 1970 we have sought to investigate as much as possible of the whole village. This has involved the stripping of substantial areas of the village green, and of the crofts behind the main building lines. This excavation method has dramatically increased the information available, and has greatly improved the reliability of interpretations. It is almost as a bonus that it has also enabled us to think with rather more confidence about the history of the village. It is only by extensive excavation that we have learnt anything of the Iron Age farmstead and of possible Anglo-Saxon occupation, and it has thrown

much light on the complexities of medieval and post-medieval tenements.

At present these complexities are most fully revealed, and are best understood, in a block of holdings on the north side of the village. The area in question consists of sites 6 to 10, with crofts E to I behind them and with areas of village green to the south (Fig. 3). The earthworks indicated that the crofts formed a discrete block, though they did not reveal the general character of sites 6 to 10. In this area of the village the earliest structures were of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; their remains were fragmentary, and they do not concern us here. The last two of the three basic chronological periods are of greater interest. There can be no doubt that Period III ended with the abandonment of the village, about 1720. The date is established from the documentary evidence, but nothing in the archaeological material suggests that it is incorrect. Period III walls and floors regularly sealed clay tobacco pipes and pottery of the seventeenth century; this stratified material suggests that Period III cannot have begun until well into the second half of the century, though we cannot establish a precise date from the archaeological evidence.

The dating of Period II is more problematical. There is no reason to suppose that it did not continue into the second half of the seventeenth century, to be followed at once by Period III. It probably lasted for at least a century, since Period III revealed substantial rebuilding of Period II walls, even though their line was not changed. The date at which Period II began remains uncertain, because most medieval pottery cannot be dated with any precision. Some of the pottery sealed by the walls and floors of Period II is of the late thirteenth century, and most of it need not be later, though two sherds are perhaps best assigned to the fifteenth century. There is a marked absence of clay pipes and of the pottery types which first appear in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Unfortunately the sixteenth-century types are never common at West Whelpington, and it is possible that in this area the medieval ceramic tradition remained domi-

WEST WHELPINGTON
SURVEYED 1958, 1966-70

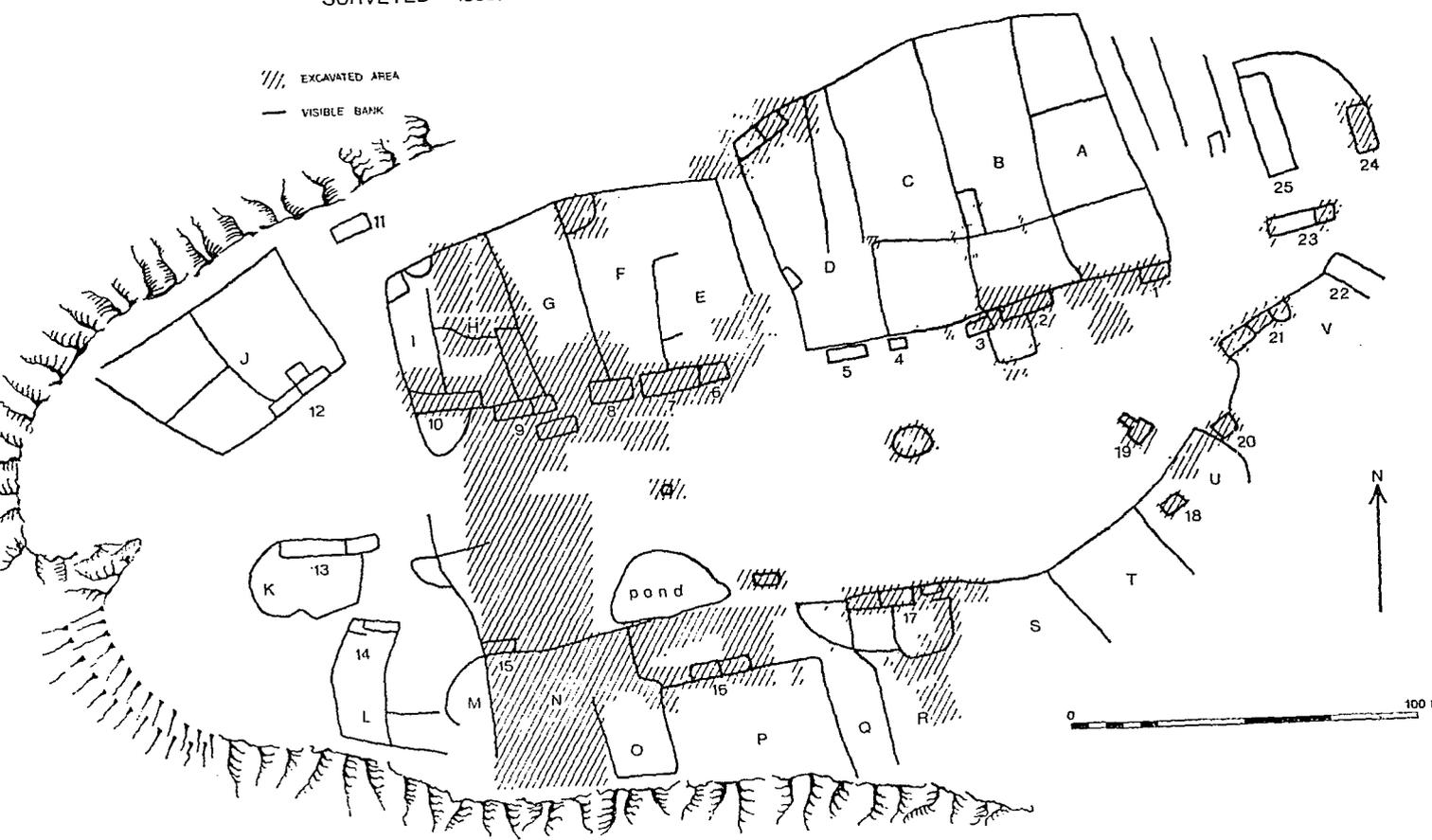


FIG. 3. The village site.

nant until 1550 or later. In the present uncertainty we can say only that Period II began at some date between 1300 and 1600, and that historical considerations point to the middle of this long period. As already noted, rural depopulation, the result of endemic disease and of persistent warfare and raiding across the Scottish border, was leading landowners elsewhere in Northumberland to reorganize tenancies on their estates after the late fourteenth century. It is likely that major changes at West Whelpington conform to this pattern, and are to be assigned to *c.* 1400–1550.

On excavation, sites 6 to 9 proved to consist of a terrace of five long-houses in Period II (Fig. 4).¹⁷ Site 10 was a barn or storage building behind this line; it had a complex history, but it could not be directly related to the five buildings represented by sites 6 to 9. As with the other outbuildings it provided little dating evidence, and there was no way of linking it with the main structural sequence. The five long-houses were remarkably similar to one another. In each case the living-room was at the west and the byre at the east. The byres were characterized by a paved floor with a longitudinal central drain (or sump, since in no case was an outflow provided); each living-room had a hearth, which usually indicated an open fire in the middle of the room. Byres and living-rooms were separated by a paved cross-passage with a door at each end, but in no house was there clear evidence for any internal partition. The terrace was 75 m. long and just over 6 m. wide. The five houses varied in internal length from over 16.5 m. (site 6/1) to 11.0 m. (site 9/1), though the internal width was consistently about 4.6 m. The variations in length were reflected in the size of both byres and living-rooms.

North of the terrace was a group of five crofts, E to I. A direct correlation between crofts and long-houses is not possible, since all junctions between croft walls and houses had

been destroyed by stone-robbing. Such dating evidence as there is for the croft walls indicates that they were not earlier than *c.* 1300; they could be considerably later. Croft I may be a later addition to the other four, but there is nothing to suggest that it was later than the beginning of Period II. Houses 6/1, 7, and 8/1 had north doors opening into crofts E, F, and G respectively; but sites 9/1 and 9/2 both had doors in croft H, and none of the long-houses had direct access to croft I. In croft E there seems to have been a small dwelling (site 6A), perhaps cottage accommodation for members of the family which tenanted this holding. In each of the next three crofts were buildings of indeterminate function and uncertain date which are best interpreted as barns or stores (sites 7B, 8B, 9B, and 10). South of site 9/1 lay a building with a stone platform at its west end (site 9A); it appeared to be contemporary with the Period II long-houses, to which it was linked by a small outbuilding. A drain ran from this outbuilding beneath the floor of 9A and opened on to the green. Site 9A gave no indication of its function, but some medieval houses (7A, 16B) at West Whelpington have similar platforms at one end which are interpreted as the bases of hayricks. The medieval buildings were apparently residential, but 9A revealed no evidence of a hearth, and is more likely to have been a barn. The apparent absence of any barn which might be associated with site 6/1 is probably not significant: croft E was not extensively excavated, and there were fragments of walling which might relate to such structures.

Period II, as interpreted, consisted of a block of five long-houses, of one build, each with a croft and at least one barn. The inadequate documentary evidence discloses no freeholders at West Whelpington, and none objected to Stott's takeover of the village lands about 1720. The erection of this group of more or less standardized farmsteads is therefore likely to have been initiated by the lord rather than a group of peasants. Sites 1 to 5, further east, were less thoroughly excavated, but the evidence is consistent with the suggestion that they formed a similar terrace. The overall length of that block

¹⁷ In this article the term "long-house" is reserved for those buildings which accommodated both people and animals under one roof, with a common access to both parts and without a partition wall between those parts.

would be about 100 m., so that it might have contained six or even seven long-houses; but it seems impossible to detect more than five crofts in the group north of this terrace. However, crofts S and T on the south side of the green were not associated with any structures which would be detected by field survey (no excavation took place), and might possibly relate to farms situated elsewhere in the village, especially if the croft division was earlier than the re-planning exemplified by Period III in sites 6 to 9. A plan of Chatton (NU 056 284) in 1780 shows that the different elements in a farmstead might be scattered round the village green.¹⁸

In the second half of the seventeenth century there is evidence for a further wholesale reconstruction; there can be no doubt that it required the consent of the lord, and it was probably initiated by him. The croft divisions remained basically unchanged, but the row of farmsteads was reduced from five to three units (Fig. 5). The new farmsteads (6/2, 8/2, and 9/3) had longer byres and more comfortable living-quarters; in each the living-room was partitioned off from the byre and the hearth was moved to a position against the partition wall. Small paved outbuildings were added to 6/2 and 9/3; 6/2 and 8/2 were associated with enclosures on the village green. The east-west building lines were substantially unchanged, but much rebuilding of Period II walls was deemed necessary.

Site 6/2 extended both east and west of 6/1. At the east end was a small paved outbuilding of uncertain function, measuring 4.3 m by 3.2 m. internally; the only door which survived led north into croft E. West of this was the living-room, which overlay part of the byre and passage of 6/1. It had a south entrance only, and measured 6.8 m. by about 4 m. internally. The hearth was built against the west wall, which separated the living-room from the byre. The byre overlay the living-room of 6/1 and part of the byre of 7; its only entrance was on the south side. Its internal measurements were 8.7 m. by 4.5 m. Most of the remainder of site 7 was not

occupied by buildings in Period III, but seems to have been attached to 6/2. Walls in this area were very badly robbed, and we are uncertain about the arrangements implied; but it seems likely that a small yard lying mainly to the west of 6/2 was later replaced by a larger yard running south into the village green and containing at least one outbuilding.

Site 8/2 showed relatively minor modifications to 8/1. Here alone the common entrance passage for living-room and byre was retained; but its north door was blocked, and the living-room was now separated from the passage by a stone partition wall. A new hearth was built against this wall and an oven was placed next to it, but there was no other change to the living accommodation. Yet the effect must have been considerable. In 8/1 opposed entrances led directly into a large room with cattle at one end and living accommodation at the other. In 8/2 entry to the living-room was through a single door opening from one end of the byre. At the same time the byre was extended eastwards into the area of site 7, giving it a total length of 10.8 m. A fragment of walling running west from the yard south of site 7 suggests that 8/2, like 6/2, appropriated a part of the village green.

Sites 9/1 and 9/2 were, in effect, amalgamated, and the new farmstead (9/3) shows considerable changes. Already, during Period II, 9/2 had been modified by the erection of a wall dividing the living-room from the entrance passage. Now more dramatic changes took place. The east end of the byre of 9/1 was cut off, and a stone platform built in the northern part of this area; there is nothing to indicate whether this area was roofed or not, and its function is entirely unknown. The remainder of the byre of 9/1 and part of its living-room were covered by new living accommodation measuring 5.1 m. by 3.6 m. internally. It had an external door near the east end of its south wall and a well-built fireplace against the west wall. North of the fireplace a door (subsequently blocked) led into a western byre. This byre measured 9.9 m. by 4.0 m. internally, though the drain occupied only

¹⁸ NRO: ZAN Bell 61/8.

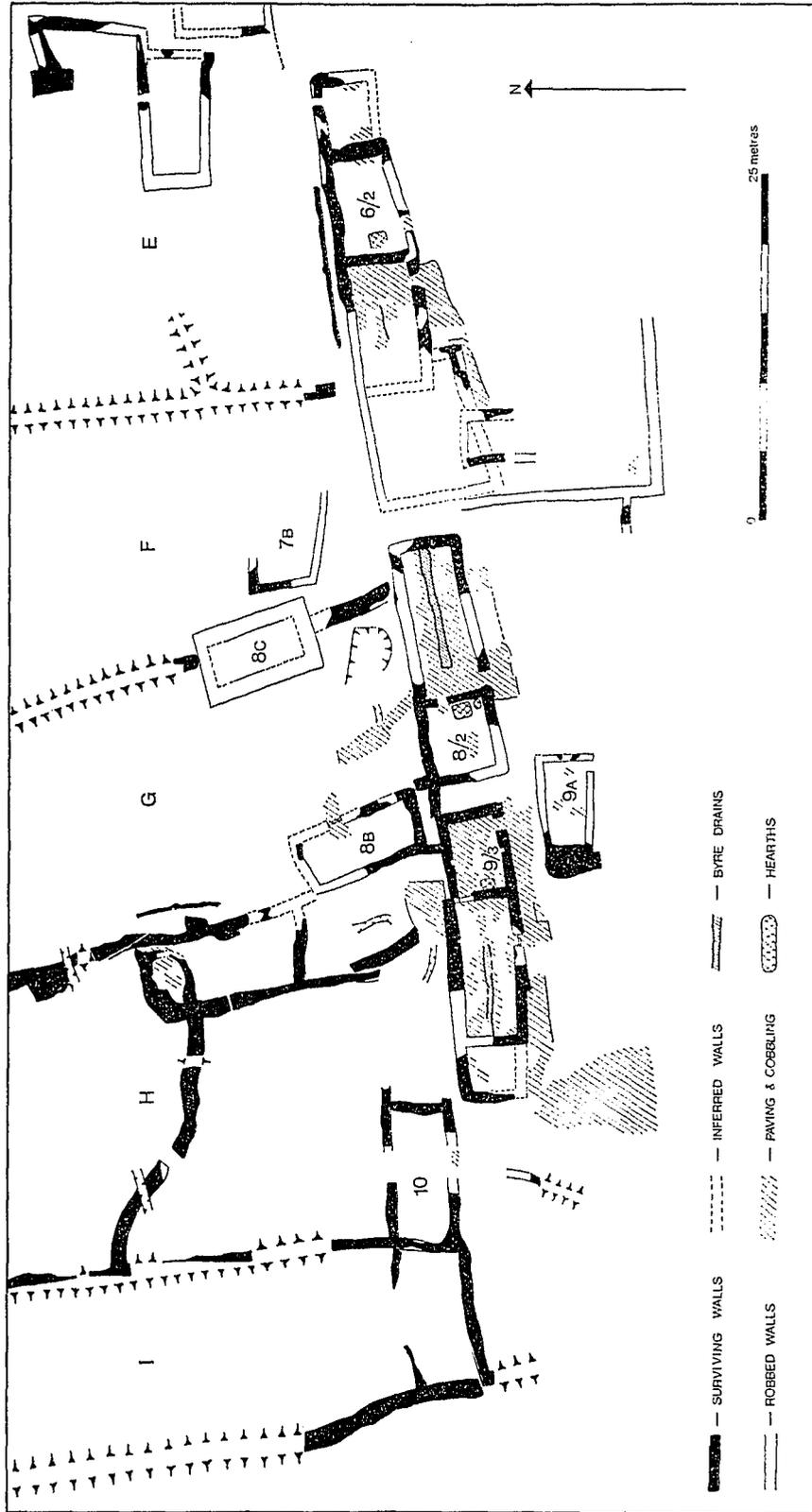


Fig. 5. Sites 6-10, Period III.

about two-thirds of its length. It covered the byre and entrance passage of 9/2, as well as the eastern part of the living-room of 9/1. Adjoining the west end of the byre was an outbuilding measuring 3.2 m. by 3.5 m. internally; its floor had been paved, and its entrance was presumably in the south wall. As with the similar structure at the east end of 6/2, nothing indicated its function. Site 9A continued in use in Period III with only minor modifications, and presumably formed part of farmstead 9/3. An area of paving south of the byre may indicate that this steading, like 6/2 and 8/2, had a yard in the area of the village green.

There is nothing to indicate the ownership of crofts E to I in this period. None of the new farmsteads had a door on its north side. Superficially it looks as though 6/2 may have used crofts E and F, 8/2 croft G, and 9/3 crofts H and I. But there are some secondary partitions in the crofts which may (or may not) be of this period; they could relate to modified divisions of the croft area. It is assumed, but cannot be proved, that the outbuildings in the crofts continued in use in Period III. A new building, 8c, was added across the boundary between crofts F and G. It measured about 7 m. by 3 m. internally. Its walls had been completely robbed, and no door was found to indicate the croft to which it should be assigned. The purpose of the enclosures on the village green is not certain. They can scarcely have been cultivated, for the soil is rarely more than about 150 mm. deep; most probably they should be seen as stock enclosures, encroaching on common land. Their presence may be associated with the absence of doors between houses and crofts in this period. In the more easterly block of farmsteads there was a similar enclosure south of site 2.

West Whelpington is not a well-documented village; in particular it lacks the manorial records which might have provided a great deal of information on the last centuries of its life. Nevertheless, with comparative evidence from other parts of the county, and with the documentary and archaeological evidence from

West Whelpington itself, a reasonable picture of the last years of the village can be presented.

In the later Middle Ages the village seems to have undergone a drastic reorganization, defined as Period II in the archaeological record of sites 6 to 10. With five farmsteads in the north-western sector of the village it seems likely that this phase should be equated with the nineteen "ancient farms" of the rating assessments. Late in the seventeenth century there was further reorganization which reduced the number of farmsteads in the village. This reorganization may have delayed the final collapse of West Whelpington for a few years. By 1720 the combination of an absentee landlord and an enterprising and wealthy tenant, both doubtless inspired by the example of others in Northumberland, led to the deliberate depopulation of the village. With this was associated a total change in the pattern of land tenure; the new pattern has remained substantially unmodified to the present day.

The excavation of these buildings has revealed changes in the accommodation of both man and beast between the fifteenth and early eighteenth centuries. Initially, humans and animals were separated only by a few paving stones. Later, partition walls divided them, and finally the internal access between living-room and byre was abolished. West Whelpington has so far produced no evidence for cattle being housed in separate ranges of outbuildings. This was a sophistication which perhaps came with the erection of new farmsteads elsewhere in the township after 1720.

Some attempt has been made to assign crofts, smaller enclosures, and outbuildings to these dwellings. Again it seems that the changes, though no doubt drastic in terms of the distribution of holdings, were constricted by the fabric of the village. The tentative encroachments upon the village green may be contrasted with the restructuring of the landscape which accompanied the fall of this and many other villages in Northumberland.