

The Essex Achievement

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THE publication of British Archaeological Report no 48, *Early Land Allotment in the British Isles*,¹ edited by H E Bowen and P J Fowler, contains one research report which seems to me to constitute a milestone in the study of the early agrarian history of England. I refer to the article by Warwick Rodwell, 'Relict Landscapes in Essex' (ibid, pp 89 sqq). Although I am far from the country which it concerns, the implications of the results there outlined are so important that I cannot refrain from recording a reaction in these pages. It is to be hoped that the work concerned has not escaped the notice of most readers interested in early agrarian history; the present note, nevertheless, may have something to add.

Essex is singularly lacking in traces of early iron age and medieval field-systems, also in Saxon charters, while the county's documentation of the enclosure period is sparse and inconclusive. This has led enquirers into Essex agrarian history to devise a different method of research which may be defined as landscape analysis, that is, the study of the relations between elements of the existing field-systems and fixed points or features such as churches, earthworks, dykes, Roman roads, dated settlements, and the like, with a view to determining the relative age of the former. This method has led to remarkable results: it has shown that very considerable field complexes in central and eastern Essex are pre-Roman or Roman in origin. It has demonstrated that the field-systems are earlier than Roman roads, and hinge upon hundred and parish boundaries, on dykes and sinuous lanes which bear no relation to medieval elements. At various points the early date of

the associated bounds and paths has been demonstrated by air-photography or by archaeological excavation. One of the remarkable by-products of these results, evident from the maps accompanying Rodwell's report, but less emphasized by the author, is the demonstration that numerous rural byways, often still in existence as lanes and country roads, were in use in the Roman period if not before. A new dimension, in fact, has been added to our view of Roman Essex, quite as important as the new dimension of air-reconnaissance added by O G S Crawford in the 1920s.

The Essex research did not begin yesterday. The antiquity of the pattern in the Dengie hundred was first suspected by Laver in 1895 and studied by Christy in 1926. Much of the relevant research must have been carried out before the 1970s, but most of the results have been published only since 1972. Their publication may have received an added impulse from the appearance in 1972 of Volume I Part ii of the *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, where this sector of research went unmentioned because its results had been but sparsely reported and little summarized. It was already realized (and this realization was indicated in the *Agrarian History's* discussion of continuity between Roman and Saxon Britain) that the prospects of revealing continuity in southern and eastern Britain were considerable. Moreover, a possible survival of a Roman field grid inside a medieval open-field system at Great Wymondley, Hertfordshire, was there proposed.²

¹ Warwick Rodwell, 'Early Land Allotment' in H E Bowen and P J Fowler (eds), *British Archaeological Reports No 48*, Oxford, 1978. 201 pp. 81 maps and plans. £4.

² Cf also *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, ed Finberg, I, ii, p 262: 'It may be asked, whether, in some localities where the very ancient nuclei of open field systems can be traced in this country, the boundaries enclosing the shotts of the mediaeval system do not represent pre-Saxon plots in certain cases.'

Readers must be left to master the full details of the 'Essex method' and its results from Rodwell's paper and from the fuller publications which he cites. Here I would like to describe very briefly two instances of field-pattern/villa relationships, both in East Anglia, which demonstrate the potentialities of the Essex investigations for the study of the Romano-British rural system.

The first case is that of a Roman villa known to have existed about 300 yards south-west of White Notley Hall in the valley of the River Brain, some five kilometres south of Braintree. The traces of the ancient field-pattern revealed by the researches of P J Drury in the Brain valley south of Braintree are shown on Fig 11.7 accompanying Rodwell's survey, and within the said map they extend to a point something like a mile north-west of the villa site. From the southernmost traces marked on Drury's map to the latitude of White Notley village and Hall, the axis of the present field-pattern is quite different and clearly does not belong to the ancient system, but south of the above latitude, in the immediate vicinity of the villa, the general axis of the ancient field pattern extending from Braintree is resumed, and the present fields are markedly rectilinear in form. There would indeed seem to be excellent prospects of determining the boundaries and extent of the villa-estate by further research.

The position of White Notley church, partly built of Roman material some way south of the present village, would suggest that the original settlement was not where the village is today. The Manor Hall itself was preceded by earthworks and a moat to its north, while Roman roof and hypocaust tiles are recorded from the Hall itself. The finds collected at White Notley Hall from the villa to south-westward contain elements of significance.³ The datable Roman pottery from

that site appears to begin in the second century, but the two most significant fragments are a sherd of grass-tempered ware attributable to the period following the end of official Roman administration in Britain, and a small fragment of ribbed 'Mediterranean' pottery commoner in the south-west of the country, and belonging to the sub-Roman period. Clearly, the prospects of tracing a 'carry over' on this and the neighbouring sites are considerable.

The second instance relates to the villa near Gayton Thorpe, Norfolk. Some years ago my attention was drawn to the fact that the modern north-south road to the east of the villa (certainly existent as a route in the Roman period) is parallel with the earlier excavated north building of the Roman establishment. The present second north-south field-boundary to the west of the villa lies parallel to, and precisely 20 *actus* from, the above road. (One *actus* = 120 Roman feet = 116 English feet.) The east-west boundary north of the Roman site measures 19½ *actus* from the west boundary to the same road. To the south-west of the villa the west field-boundary continues south as a parish-boundary, which then makes a right-angle turn to the east: from this point northward along the boundary to the north-west corner of the field-area containing the villa is 20 *actus*. The present field-area in which the villa stands is therefore very close to the standard Roman unit of 200 *iugera*. We are warned that Domesday figures are highly approximate; the record that Thorpe had sixty-one acres (close on 100 *iugera*) under Edward the Confessor is nevertheless suggestive.

I was unable to find an open-field record relating to the area of the villa itself, but was able to examine the estate maps further north, centred on Well Hall Farm, dated to c1720 and 1750, with additions of 1860, and the Tithe Award of Gayton Thorpe of the year 1843.⁴ Well Hall is a Roman site on the

³ It is a pleasure to record the hospitality and assistance of Mr and Mrs Rowan Butler of White Notley Hall, to whom I owe what I know of this site, and who set all possible information, and the finds made there, at my disposal.

⁴ For access to these documents I have to thank the records department of the County Hall, Norwich.

ancient route (the Icknield Way) that forms the east limit of the Gayton Thorpe area under discussion, and on which, or in whose proximity, Roman sites, including several villas, are distributed northward as far as the Norfolk coast. (These include Grimston, West Newton, Appleton Snettenham, Sedgeford, and Heacham.)

The above-cited maps show that the modern field boundaries in the areas recorded are in most cases determined by the medieval open-field strips; further, that their main north-south axis of orientation is the same as that of the fields associated with the Gayton Thorpe villa, ie 18–19 degrees west of the northing of the Ordnance Survey grid. The Gayton Thorpe boundaries therefore existed in the middle ages, and this receives some confirmation from an oblique air-photograph of the villa taken by Mr K St Joseph, and now in possession of Norwich Castle Museum, which shows to the west of the villa field medieval shotts whose general orientation is also east-west, on a bearing corresponding to that of the field itself.⁵ The same western boundary continues northward in a straight line for some distance, and bears directly on the Well Hall site.

It is therefore possible to conclude tentatively that the medieval field boundaries perpetuated in the present field-system, which extends northward from Gayton Thorpe and west of the Icknield Way, existed at least in part in the Roman period, and that some of the plots defined may have conformed to Roman standard surveying units. In this connection it should be remembered that the Gayton Thorpe villa has yielded a stamped tile of the VI legion Victrix, hence the assignation

of measured allotments to veterans in this area is not beyond the bounds of possibility.

Finally, it may be remarked that various sites in the same district have yielded evidence of continuous occupation from the Roman era to the Saxon period: such overlaps are indicated by pottery from Castle Acre, Broadmoor Hill, Appleton (a villa site), Sedgeford, and from the point where the Peddars Way crosses the Litcham-Gayton road. Two place-names also suggest Romano-British survival: they are Ashwicken, $1\frac{3}{4}$ miles west of the villa, and possibly East Walton, one mile east-south-east of it; Roman sites are known in the vicinity of each.

In conclusion the question must be asked: Is the Essex area unique or can the method there used be applied with prospects of equal success in other regions of the country? Independent archaeological evidence obtained over recent years suggests that continuity sites are numerous or readily available in Essex in particular, and in eastern England generally. The reason for this may well be the earlier peaceful penetration of English elements before the end of Roman rule. On the other hand, there is no reason to suppose that there was an extensive displacement of the Romano-British population in the south-west of England till the sixth century, and a fair amount of archaeological material pointing in that direction has come to light in the investigations of the last two or three decades. The vital difference affecting the conditions of research in Essex and elsewhere is perhaps the presence or absence of the open-field system and its subsequent enclosure, since the Essex enquiries have shown us that over much of that county fields were enclosed at a very early date and never superseded by an open-field regime. The Gayton Thorpe and Great Wymondley examples, nevertheless, might be taken to point to certain possibilities in relation to the open-field regions also, and should encourage investigators to look for the 'skeletons' or vestigial residues of earlier patterns within the open-field complexes.

⁵ I gladly here acknowledge the assistance of the staff of the Norwich Castle Museum, who furnished me with all available information relating to the archaeological aspects of the present brief study. The work relating to Gayton Thorpe was made possible by the visiting fellowship generously extended by All Souls College in 1973–74.