

# 'The Spade Might Soon Determine It': the Representation of Deserted Medieval Villages on Ordnance Survey Plans, 1849-1910

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## Abstract

From its earliest days the Ordnance Survey had an interest in recording the earthworks of antiquity. For the large-scale plans the information gathered from the surveyors in the field was supplemented by correspondence with knowledgeable local scholars. The earthworks from medieval villages although numerous were generally ignored except for the East Riding of Yorkshire where, largely through the interest of Capt. John Bayly, RE, FSA (1821-1905), the first edition of the six-inch map detailed twenty-five sites. At the revisions of 1890-1909 the interpretation of these earthworks came into question: the replies of local correspondents, surviving in the OS archive, show considerable scepticism but the better-informed invoked documentary sources, while one - in a phrase embodied in the title of this article - urged abitation by excavation, a course which medieval archaeology has eventually followed.

**E**VEN when the Ordnance Survey maps were produced only on small scales they included certain types of earthwork. The Superintendent's memorandum of 1816 included the instruction:

That the remains of ancient Fortifications, Druidical Monuments, vitrified Forts and all Tumuli and Barrows shall be noticed in the Plans.<sup>1</sup>

The officers and other ranks of the Royal Engineers who carried out the survey were not trained in history or archaeology, and in default the Survey proceeded by gathering its archaeological information from those who might be expected to know: landowners, tenant farmers and local antiquarians, the same sources who were employed to ascertain the accepted local names for woods, hills, streams and other natural features.<sup>2</sup>

In 1865 an instruction from the Director spelt out what had certainly been the practice from the time when the larger

scale 1:10,560 (6 in. to the mile) plans of Great Britain, with their potential for more detail, were initiated in 1840:

the necessity of officers making themselves acquainted with the local history of, and (by personal inspections) with the objects of antiquarian interest in the districts which they are surveying in order that all such objects may be properly represented on the plans and fully described in the Name Books.<sup>3</sup>

The results were collected in the manuscript *Name Books* in which the finally accepted form for any letterpress on the plans was authorized by an officer's signature or initials, and justified by citing his authority.<sup>4</sup>

It was to be expected that the local

<sup>1</sup> Sir Henry James quoted Ibid, p 174. 'Sir Henry ... laid great stress on personal study of these matters by his officers. He desired that they should read up the histories of their districts': T Pilkington White, *The Ordnance Survey of the United Kingdom*, Edinburgh and London, 1886, p 92.

<sup>2</sup> The great majority of the surviving Name Books for England and Wales were deposited in the Public Record Office, Kew, in December 1989. The 'Original Name Books' at OS 34 relate to the 1:2500 and 1:10,560 mapping (1855-1866) of the four northern counties of England, plus Hampshire; the 'Object Name Books' at OS 35 mostly range from c. 1890 (with a few earlier insertions) to 1940 and cover England and much of Wales. I am indebted to Mr R T Porter for drawing my attention to this source and thus inspiring this study.

<sup>1</sup> W A Seymour, ed, *A History of the Ordnance Survey*, 1980, p 63.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp 173-6. The Survey is known to have had a library but the earliest catalogue so far traced (by R H Stotherd, 1884) has only 46 monographs and 11 pamphlets, together with some journals, that would be relevant.

authorities consulted would vary in their knowledge and might not speak in unison. As the distinguished Romanist, FJ Haverfield, wrote in 1906:

Where the Department's reply has been that Mr. So-and-So and the Rev. ABC and Colonel DEF, resident in the district, have told the surveyors, the case is more complicated. For it is quite possible that I may write to Mr. So-and-So (if still alive), and receive from him the answer that he never said anything of the kind imputed to him, and does not take that view.<sup>5</sup>

## I

Of particular interest to archaeologists in the mid-nineteenth century, well-known from papers in national and county journals, and objects of curiosity to local excavating amateurs, were barrows, long and round, so that it was some of the smallest visible earthworks which came to be most frequently depicted, being confidently if vaguely recorded as the ubiquitous *tumulus*.

Earthworks comprising groups of features were more problematic to identify, and abandoned settlements of all periods fell into that class: they were most likely to be noted and identified in areas of extensive open grassland such as Salisbury Plain, already the classic area for English prehistoric studies. Elsewhere, grouped earthworks made up of house-sized units were less likely to be noticed, being not always visible from field boundaries and beset with two particular problems, that of interpretation and of assignment to their correct historical periods.

There seems to have been no central direction other than the general instructions cited, and thus it was the field officer responsible for a particular sheet who determined what antiquities were included. The importance of an individual officer's interest is particularly evident in

the case of the remains of medieval villages. In the Midland counties, despite their frequency, the medieval earthworks hardly ever appeared until after the 1951 revision of *Field Archaeology* had drawn the surveyors' attention to recent academic publications.<sup>6</sup> In one area, however, the first edition of the six-inch plan did include a remarkable number of sites (see Table 1).

## II

Deserted medieval villages had occasionally been recognized by cartographers prior to the Ordnance Survey, principally as incidental to unpublished private estate plans. As far as published maps of English counties were concerned Rutland and Warwickshire seem to have stood alone in having a systematic delineation of depopulated places.<sup>7</sup>

However it is noteworthy that the Ordnance Survey officers who were responsible for Warwickshire were totally oblivious of these depopulations, and elsewhere (apart from the East Riding of Yorkshire) village earthworks were virtually omitted, even where their frequency was of the same order as Norman mottes or Roman camps.

The exceptional case of the East Riding seems to have arisen from the antiquarian interest of the officer who was responsible for most of the six-inch sheets covering that part of Yorkshire, Captain John Bayly, RE (1821-1905). He joined the Survey (then under the Board of Ordnance) in 1846 and, from the attributions at the foot of the plans, began work in East Yorkshire in 1849, remaining there

<sup>6</sup> Ordnance Survey, *Field Archaeology: some Notes for Beginners*, 3rd ed., 1951, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Rutland: symbol for 'olm village' in county map, James Wright, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Rutland* (1684), ex inf. Dr Harold Fox; Warws: lozenge symbol for 'depopulated places' in county map by William Dugdale, *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, 1656; also by Henry Beighton in 2nd ed., 1728. A section reproduced in Maurice Beresford and John G Hurst, eds, *Deserted Medieval Villages: Studies*, 1971, Fig. 8, p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> FJ Haverfield, 'The Ordnance Survey maps from the point of view of the antiquities on them', *Geog Jnl*, XXVII, 1906, p. 171.

TABLE I  
 East Yorkshire Deserted Villages on OS 1:10,560 plans surveyed by Captain John Bayly,  
 1849-52

| Sheet<br>number and<br>date | Village              | Descriptive<br>words                      | Earthworks<br>surveyed |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 124 (1850-1)                | Sutton               | Old Foundations                           | no                     |
| 125 (1850-1)                | Thirkleby            | Sites of Old Buildings<br>[in two places] |                        |
| 126 (1850)                  | Swaythorpe           | Site of the Village of ...                | yes                    |
|                             | Octon                | Sites of Old Buildings and<br>Inclosures  | yes                    |
| 127 (1849-50)               | Pockthorpe           | Site of the Village of ...                | yes                    |
|                             | Argam                | Site of the Village of ...                | yes                    |
|                             | Grindale             | Site of the Village of ...                | yes                    |
| 142 (1851)                  | Thornthorpe          | Site of the Village of ...                | yes                    |
| 143 (1850-1)                | Wharram Percy        | Site of the Village of ...                | yes                    |
|                             | Towthorpe            | Sites of Buildings                        | yes                    |
|                             | Croom                | Old Banks                                 | yes                    |
|                             |                      | Old Foundations                           | yes                    |
|                             | Mowthorpe            | Old Foundations                           | yes                    |
|                             | Thoralby             | Sites of Old Buildings                    | yes                    |
|                             | Raisthorpe           | Site of the Village of ...                | yes                    |
| 144 (1850)                  | Cottam               | Site of the Village of ...                | yes                    |
|                             | Cowlam               | Site of the Village of ...                | yes                    |
| 145 (1850)                  | [Low] Caythorpe      | Old Foundations                           | yes                    |
| 146 (1849-50)               | Hilderthorpe         | Old Banks                                 | yes                    |
| 160 (1851)                  | Holm [Archiepiscopi] | Site of the Village of ...                | no                     |
| 161 (1850-1)                | Eastburn             | Site of the Village of ...                | yes                    |
| 179 (1854)                  | Rotsea               | Old Foundations                           | yes                    |
| 194 (1851)                  | Kiplingcotes         | Site of the Village of ...                | no                     |
| 195 (1851-2)                | Raventhorpe          | Site of the Village of ...                | yes                    |
| 197 (1852)                  | Southorpe            | Site of the Village of ...                | yes                    |
| 209 (1851-2)                | Gardham              | Site of the Village of ...                | yes                    |
|                             | Arras                | Site of the Village of ...                | yes                    |
|                             |                      | Site of Chapel                            |                        |
| 225 (1852)                  | Hunsley              | Site of the Village of ...                | yes                    |

until the Riding was completed in 1852. Subsequently he moved into Survey administration, heading the Boundary Office from 1864 to 1873 before becoming second-in-command and leaving the Survey in 1878 as Major-General and with a CB. He was a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society but, more pertinently, was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1871, although he took no active part in its affairs.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Memoir in *Royal Engineers Journal*, I, 1905, pp 337-8; *Who Was Who*, 1897-1916, 1920, p 48, however, describes him as executive officer, OS, 1874-82, and so does the very short obituary in *Proc Soc Antiquaries of London*, XX, 1903-5, p 297.

There are village earthworks in this area that Bayly did not survey (notably those at Hanging Grimston and Birdsall) but, compared with the work of his brother officers in the two other Yorkshire Ridings and in the other English counties, his achievement was remarkable. Bayly's contribution was noticed by Phillips, the post-war Archaeology Officer, but by a Freudian (even Oedipean) slip Phillips used the name of his own distinguished predecessor, O G S Crawford:

But there were areas like the Yorkshire Wolds where the personal interest of an officer, in this

case Capt. Crawford RE, ensured a series of deserted village sites which have been much commended in recent years for their accuracy and the perception with which minor but significant detail has been supplied...<sup>9</sup>

It is not possible to ascertain Bayly's sources of information, since the Name Books from that period were lost in the bombing of Southampton. Certainly there were no printed sources, whether journal articles, books or maps, from which all these sites could have been identified, although the earthworks at Argam (which appears to have been the first village site that Bayly surveyed) were already shown on Robert Knox's *A Map of the Country round Scarborough*, together with those at Cottam, Cowlam, Octon, Bartindale and Swaythorpe; 'foundations' at Rudston and Speeton indicated house earthworks beyond the area of the surviving village, possibly the earliest representation of what would now be called a 'shrunk' village. This map was first published in 1821 and republished with additions in 1849, just at the time when Bayly arrived in the Riding. It was later incorporated in a geological and architectural account of the same area which included larger scale plans of earthworks at Argam, Bartindale, Cottam, Cowlam, and Swaythorpe, and from which we can know how, 26 years earlier, Knox had interpreted these earthworks;

it would seem as if the several deserted villages upon the Wold-hills had been fated together, and led by one fell swoop in desolation either by war or famine, or other direful catastrophe ruinous to man.<sup>10</sup>

Although Bayly's surveys were complete before 1855 it is not impossible that, since Knox is known to have been living in Scarborough in 1849, Bayly could have

met him in the field and heard his conclusions.

Bayly could also have known of a survey of the East Riding by Bryant, made in 1827 and 1828, which showed 'Site of Cottam Town', and 'Site of Town' at Eastburn and Cowlam; and if his attention had been drawn to these, then he would have been alerted to the significance of similar earthworks outside the area covered by Knox. There also seems to have been an oral tradition for the fate of Cottam. Edward Anderson's *The Sailor: a Poem* speaks of Cottam:

My forefathers by records it appears,  
Were farmers there above two hundred years.  
Without his neighbours' knowledge, as by stealth,  
One farmer leas'd the whole unto himself;  
Then twenty families were in the town,  
Nineteen are gone, their houses all pull'd down;  
A chapel stands neglected on the hill.<sup>11</sup>

Cottam's 'chapel' was in fact a parish church, and when Bayly found parish churches alongside the earthworks at Cowlam and Wharram Percy, the conjunction would have made it easier to accept them as 'Village' remains.

### III

It is unclear why Bayly made a distinction between earthworks which seemed to be those of a village and others which were simply 'Old Foundations' or 'Old Buildings'. The distinction certainly does not rest on clarity or prominence: those at Towthorpe, for example, are just as distinctly the remains of former crofts, houses, and streets as those at Wharram Percy; nor can the presence or absence of a church have been the only reason: if Towthorpe had no parish church, then neither did Raisthorpe, but the latter was dignified as a 'Village'.

<sup>9</sup> C W Phillips, *Archaeology in the Ordnance Survey, 1791-1965*, Council for British Archaeology, 1980, p 19.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Knox, *Descriptions Geological, Topographical and Antiquarian in Eastern Yorkshire*, 1855, p 145; the larger plans, dated 1819, form Plates 10 and 11, pp 142 and 144. This has a claim to be the first post-Goldsmith use of the term 'deserted village'.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Anderson, *The Sailor: a Poem*, 12th ed, Hull, 1828. I am indebted to Dr Alan Harris for the reference to this work and to Bryant's map. The poem may be as early as 1792.

When the Wolds were re-surveyed for the 1:2500 (25 in. to mile) OS series in 1888 small changes were made to the detail of earthworks at village sites but there was a wholesale re-naming of them with the more cautious 'Site of Ancient Village'. The Name Books from this period have not survived but a page is preserved in the 1909 Name Book which does show that the date of the earthworks had been discussed:

There is a tradition that the old Banks & foundations found near villages in this part of Yorkshire, are the remains of villages that were destroyed by William the Conqueror, in 1069, when the whole of the country from the 'Humber' to the 'Tees' was laid waste, & the whole of the inhabitants were slain.<sup>12</sup>

When the local sheets of the 1:2500 series came to be revised in 1909, the existing varieties of nomenclature were noticed, and an attempt was made to introduce some order by way of the traditional appeal to local authority, raising again the questions: what exactly were these earthworks, these sites of buildings, these signs of old foundations?

Fortunately the Name Books from this period have survived, with the replies from the various local correspondents pasted into them, displaying an interesting anthology of interpretations and revealing the spectrum of knowledge at a time when academic awareness of medieval settlement remains, whether by historians, geographers, or archaeologists, had yet to be aroused.<sup>13</sup> At one extreme was sheer indifference. G J Brown and Son, London agents for the owner of the site of Cowlam replied:

it is really immaterial whether the wording on the plan 144 East Yorkshire is 'Site of Ancient Village' or 'Site of Cowlam Village'. The Village, if so called, consists only of the Farm House, Church, Rectory and two Cottages.<sup>14</sup>

Nearer home, Frederick Handley of York, agent for the Lloyd Greame estate at Towthorpe, replied succinctly, 'I do not know that there ever was a Village at Towthorpe'.<sup>15</sup> Mrs Bosville, wife of the owner of Caythorpe, was more helpful, arranging for the land agent, Thomas Boynton, to meet Corporal Jones of the OS at the site. Boynton accepted 'Site of Low Caythorpe Village' as the correct nomenclature but the landowner added his own agnostic comment at the foot of the entry in the Name Book, 'This may or not be true'.<sup>16</sup>

At Raisthorpe the land agent was prepared to leave the question open:

We have no evidence that the *Ancient Village* was called Raisthorpe and that being the case we think the sheets fairly represent the case,<sup>17</sup>

while the agent for Wharram Percy declined to answer and referred the question to the local antiquarian, the Rev. E Maule Cole of Wetwang.<sup>18</sup> The Survey had consulted Cole about other local sites, and the Name Book<sup>19</sup> reveals that it was on Cole's authority that 'Site of Wharram Percy Village' was recommended for the revised edition of 1910 rather than 'Site of Ancient Village': in fact, the OS surveyor had already come to a firm opinion on the subject, as his letter to the agent shows:

Sheet 143 designates the site upon which stood the village of Wharram Percy as 'Site of ancient village' Should this not be written as 'Site of Wharram Percy village'?<sup>20</sup>

Cole's decided preference for the village name led to a similar decision for Raisthorpe.<sup>21</sup>

Cole's letter about Towthorpe, which

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 23 Aug. 1909.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, insert, 27 and 28 Aug. 1909.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, insert, 7 July 1909.

<sup>18</sup> Cole (1833-1911) was rector of Wetwang and a prolific writer on local antiquities: T(homas) S(heppard), 'Two East Yorkshire Antiquaries', *Trans. East Riding Antiq. Soc.*, XVIII, 1911, pp 53-5.

<sup>19</sup> ONB, Yorks. 143SW, p 3.

<sup>20</sup> ONB, Yorks. 127SE, insert, letter from G Finch to E Parsons, date obscured.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 143SW, p 14.

<sup>12</sup> Note by T Curtis in Ordnance Survey O(bject) N(ame) B(ook) 1:2500, Yorks. 127SE, p 16a, (n.d. but before 17 Jan. 1890).

<sup>13</sup> Beresford and Hurst, *op cit*, pp 80-4.

<sup>14</sup> ONB, Yorks. 127SE, insert, 26 July 1909.

bordered on his parish, show that he was better informed about the appearance of the site than the owner's land agent:

I feel certain that 'Site of Towthorpe Village' is the truer and more correct designation than 'Site of Buildings'. In the sixteenth century there was a priest there, and 40 houseling people i.e. old enough to receive the Holy Communion. The site of the chapel is visible in the grass. The spade might soon determine it.<sup>22</sup>

The information that he cited about the priest and the communicants was available in print in the *Yorkshire Chantry Surveys* published by the Surtees Society in 1894.<sup>23</sup> Had he had access to the landowner's archive, he would have found massive documentary confirmation (including a plan of the remains of the crofts, made in 1772)<sup>24</sup>.

In a second letter Cole was even more positive in espousing these sites as former villages. His two pages of accompanying notes include references to Kirby's Inquest of 1284 and to the *Nomina Villarum* of 1316 which the Surtees Society had also published<sup>25</sup>, as well as to Domesday Book.

I decidedly prefer the village name, where it can be shown to be in an ancient manor dating from Domesday. Raisthorpe, Cowlam, Wharram Percy, Swaythorpe and Octon are all in this category and are mentioned in other documents down to 1316 AD. I firmly believe that the mounds... are the sites not of a village but of the actual village of Cowlam etc.<sup>26</sup>

The veteran field archaeologist, J R Mortimer of Driffield, was equally certain that the earthworks were villages, but as a prehistorian he was obviously not acquainted with Domesday Book since he placed their depopulation before the Norman Conquest.

I think that the banks, hollows & uneven ground you refer to at Cowlam, Cottam, Towthorpe & other places are undoubtedly the remains of foun-

dations of buildings & garden boundaries of the inhabitants of Ancient Villages, destroyed, most probably, by Danish invasions and afterwards never, or only partially rebuilt. Also the broken ground between Duggleby & Low Mowthorpe (sc. Thoraby) cannot well be anything but the sites of old dwellings or settlements.<sup>27</sup>

It might be expected that among archaeologists and antiquarians there would not be unanimity. From distant Leeds the historically minded industrialist, E Kitson Clark, was consulted about the nomenclature of Raisthorpe and told of Cole's views. He replied, on his Airedale Foundry notepaper:

I think old Cole is more interested in his personal knowledge than in knowledge itself... 'ancient villages' very often turn out to be surface mines, marling pits etc. & I should be very careful about them... D[omesday] B[ook] was not a geological (sic) survey, it was purely a record of property for the purposes of revenue, a cadastral survey. Local antiquarians are much too cocksure.<sup>28</sup>

Only one academic appears among the array of consultants, and he was a Romanist in distant Oxford, but although in 1909 there were nearer institutions of higher education at Leeds and Sheffield with historians in post it is unlikely that they could have been any more helpful. Professor Haverfield wrote:

2. Mounds at Towthorpe, Raisthorpe etc. I do not myself know anything about these mounds, nor have I plans of any. But if (as I gather from your letter) there is no proof that they are remains of ancient villages, I should say that you were entirely unjustified in calling them 'Site of Towthorpe Village' or the like. 'Supposed ancient dwellings' is the outside limit of fair naming.<sup>29</sup>

#### IV

It is significant that as a result of these enquiries no extra candidates were sug-

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 127SE, insert, 23 Aug. 1909.

<sup>23</sup> Ed W Page, *Surtees Society*, XCI, 1894.

<sup>24</sup> The Towthorpe archive now forms Hull Univ. Library Archives, DDLG 33, the plan being DDLG 33/152.

<sup>25</sup> Ed R H Skaife, *Surtees Society*, XLIX, 1867.

<sup>26</sup> ONB, Yorks. 127SE, insert (n.d. but Aug.-Sept. 1909).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, insert 17 Oct. 1909. Mortimer set up a private museum at Great Driffield to exhibit the fruits of his excavations: see his *Forty Years' Researches in British and Saxon Burial Mounds of East Yorkshire*, 1905; and the memoir by Thomas Sheppard, f.n. 18 above.

<sup>28</sup> ONB Yorks. 160NE, insert 19 Sept. 1909: see memoir, 'Lieut. Col. E. Kitson Clark' by A S Turberville, *Publications of the Thoresby Society*, XXXVII, 1944, pp 310-2.

<sup>29</sup> ONB, Yorks. 160NE, insert 16 Sept. 1909.

gested for inclusion on the revised plans although there were sites such as Riplingham and Hanging Grimston where good quality earthworks could have been seen. The principal result, however, was that the decision was taken to accept the earthworks as 'Villages' whenever they had the proven antiquity of Domesday Book.

There was certainly at least one beneficiary. In April 1948 a young economic historian, fresh from the excitement of discovering deserted villages in the Midlands, began to test the potential for fieldwork around his new northern base. Being used to the Ordnance Survey's indifference to deserted village sites in the Midland counties, however prominent the earthworks, he was astonished to encounter the proliferation of 'Site of the Village of...' in the Wolds. Had they been merely 'Ancient Village' – a designation which was still persisting on the One-inch sheet – he might well have dismissed them as prehistory but before the end of June he was following Captain Bayly and his sappers into the grass fields – the 'Site of the Village of Wharram Percy' – that adjoined the almost disused parish church of St Martin.

Two years later, through the entrepreneurship of the local schoolmaster and the courtesy of the landowner and the tenant farmer, he was able to begin doing what (then unknown to him) Cole and Haverfield had recommended as the final way to decipher and identify what History had left on the ground. Haverfield had looked forward to:

Some future day, when these mounds are properly examined, we shall know what they are & the real names can be given;<sup>30</sup>

while Cole had used the prophetic words embodied in the title of this article: 'The spade might soon determine it.'<sup>31</sup>

In the first number of this *Review* a biographical note announced the forthcoming *Lost Villages of England*. In it, one Plate set the relevant section of Bayly's survey alongside the newly-available vertical air photograph of the village earthworks, demonstrating the accuracy of Bayly's surveyors. Another Plate showed the exposed wall of the Manor House: the spade had indeed begun to determine.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> ONB Yorks. 127SE, insert 23 Aug. 1909.

<sup>32</sup> Maurice Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England*, 1954, pl. 1 (map) and pl. 8 (spade); see also Maurice Beresford and John Hurst, *Wharram Percy: Deserted Medieval Village*, 1990.