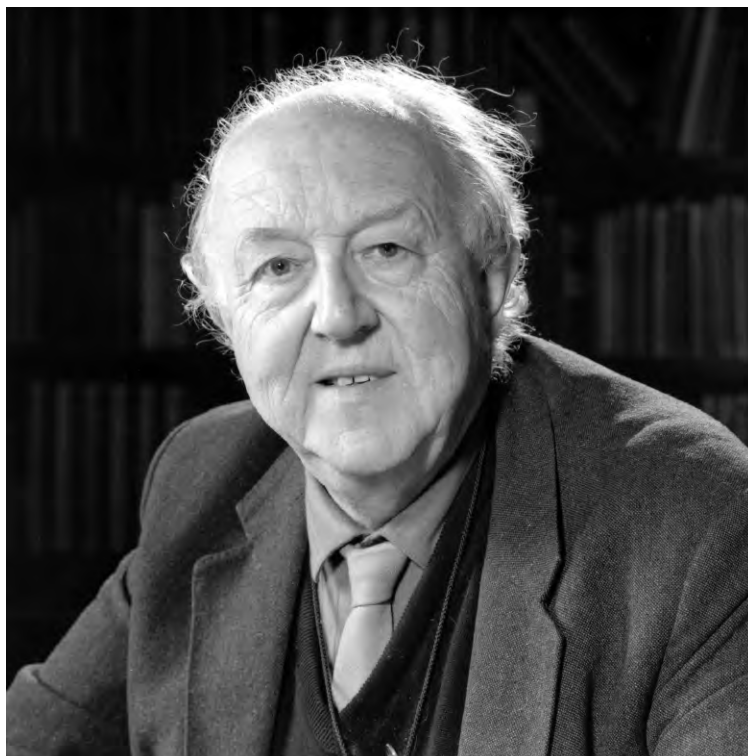


Obituaries



PROFESSOR MAURICE BERESFORD FBA, 1920–2005

Maurice Beresford attended the Golden Jubilee Conference of the Society at Winchester in April 2003, was provided with a wheelchair by kindly forethought of the local organizer, and then wheeled around the hilly site by a variety of younger members, rapidly disabusing them of the belief that he had been long dead, exulting in the attention. He loved renewing his links with agricultural history, and meeting a new generation of scholars, and being able to reminisce about the early days of the Society. As the photograph on the following page – from a conference excursion around 1960 – shows, he liked little better than the opportunity to address an audience, especially when it could be in the field. His death on 15 December 2005 at the age of 85 deprives us of a very distinguished and consistently evangelical rural historian.

Maurice Beresford was educated at Bishop Vesey's Grammar School, Sutton Coldfield, and Jesus College, Cambridge. An experience in his second year at Cambridge, where he took firsts in each year, proved formative of his unique approach to the past. In 1939, John Saltmarsh of King's College took a class of six first-class students, including Beresford, Asa Briggs and the naval historian John Ehrman, for advanced tuition, in his car to Grantchester, where they linked estate terriers with the humps and bumps of selions of the former open fields in modern grassland. Maurice was startled by the experience of 'seeing the fourteenth century' in the modern landscape, and the linkage



of maps, field evidence, and the documents of national and local archives proved the distinguishing characteristic of his research career.

Saltmarsh had also been responsible for the first piece of research, a second-year vacation project in local history, in which Beresford explored the records of his home town to reveal an infield-outfield system in which the poor soils of the 'waste' were periodically redistributed for cropping as lot acres. This was the subject of his first article, written in 1940 and accepted by Keynes for *Economic History*, but lost in bombing, and only 'resurrected' in 1943 in the *Economic History Review*, after the appearance of a short study of Sutton Coldfield had appeared (1942). Bored by revision for his finals, Maurice explored manuscripts in the university library, and located solicitors' records among the recent accessions that led him to work on Commissioners of Parliamentary Enclosure, which produced three studies in 1946, and to think further about the issues of pre-Parliamentary enclosure. Study of the Leicestershire Glebe Terriers reinforced this and led him to encounter evidence of sixteenth-century depopulation and conversion of arable to pasture, later to mature as the study of deserted villages.

A conscientious objector during the war, Maurice engaged in social work at the Birmingham University adult settlement (1941–3), and then at the Percival Guildhouse adult education centre, Rugby, where a room has been named in his memory. This was the base from which he began more regular research forays into the Midland landscape. At first there was mapping of field systems from ridge and furrow, hoping, naively as he later admitted, to evaluate the national extent of past open-field farming, and to reconstruct past landscapes where field maps were absent. Weekend field walking led to mapping of selions and ridge-and-furrow onto the 6-inch Ordnance Survey and there was even an attempt to apply a balloon-mounted camera to the task – this was before the RAF archive of air photographs became available – and the results were published in the *Economic History Review* in 1948. Beresford had satisfactorily demonstrated the identity of ridge-and-furrow and medieval open-field strips, and that the Midland strips, as at Bittesby, were much smaller than the classic Maitland acre, being roughly 220 yards long, but around a third of a chain wide. Discussion of these ideas spread into the pages of this *Review*, but despite critical comments from Eric Kerridge, work by W.R. Mead and by Margaret Spufford sustained his argument, and this link became a central element in what has become the much more complex analysis of field systems, their remodellings, and the origins of communal farming.

William Hoskins had begun the modern study of desertion at Knaptoft (Leicestershire) in the autumn of 1938, and it was only in 1946, when mapping ridge-and-furrow at Bittesby (Warwickshire) that Maurice encountered

earthworks adjacent to the railway embankment that were different, and proved to be the hollow ways and house platforms of a lost village. The gradual realization of the meaning of these earthworks led, after comparing notes with Hoskins on his first excavation at Hamilton (Leics), to three articles on lost villages in 1948, and to his most famous book, *The Lost Villages of England* (1954). His arguments were again challenged, by Kerridge and by J.D. Gould, but the collaboration with the archaeologist, John Hurst, begun in 1952, built the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group, and began the forty-year excavation of Wharram Percy, a DMV on the Yorkshire Wolds. The outcome of this extended collaboration of the 'prolix professor and the taciturn man from the ministry' (M.W. Thompson's phrase) was the demonstration of longevity of the settlement and the fluidity of peasant house sites, making Wharram the benchmark reference for studies of rural settlement history. Collaborative work by others identified long selions in all the Wharram townships, and found some support for a 'Great Realignment' in its fields, as furlongs were created by their subdivision, perhaps as a single act of reorganization.

He made many other contributions to agrarian history, some stemming from his explorations of Tudor State Papers, notably the two-part 'Poll Tax and Census of Sheep, 1549' in the first two volumes of this *Review*, which explored the provenance of the tax and the indications on flocks derived from the surviving returns. His contribution to the Tawney *festschrift* in 1961, 'Habitation versus Improvement' explored the transition of enclosure from threat to the commonweal to its acceptance as community benefit, using a combination of Parliamentary, Chancery and Exchequer records. The use of the decree rolls of Chancery later produced a major listing of enclosure evidence, and *Economic History Review* article indicating their uses and limitations. Beresford's research on *New towns of the middle ages* (1967) covered work England, Wales and Gascony, and explored 'organic' growth and 'planted' boroughs in the expansion or towns, planting, as in Leeds, proving a very effective means or arrenting manorial waste. This led to collaborative work with the founding Editor of the *Review*, Herbert Finberg, which produced *English medieval boroughs: a handlist* (1973).

The balance of town and country was already shifting by the early 1960s, and for the rest of his career urban history predominated, and culminated with *East End, West End: the face of Leeds during industrialisation* (1988). Beneath the city, however, the agricultural landscape remained, and his exploration of urbanization and the building process applied the understanding of field arrangements to explain the physiognomy of the town. 'The back-to-back house in Leeds, 1787-1937' analysed the problem in terms of piecemeal building of housing largely by terminating building societies furlong by furlong from former open field; his contribution to the Hoskins *festschrift* reconstructed the property portfolio of Richard Paley, soapboiler and chapman, to show his purchases field by field, and speculative cottage building; and both themes had been anticipated in his inaugural lecture of 1960, 'Time and Place', where field boundaries were shown to determine the nature of the built environment. You could scratch the urban Maurice and reveal the early modern and medieval agricultural landscape.

Two books added to the three great monographs to define the distinctive Beresford approach to the past. *History on the Ground* (1957) offered six essays in landscape history – boundaries, Elizabethan villages, deserted villages, new towns, Elizabethan market places, and parks, with a concluding guide to practice – linking documents, maps, and field exploration journals. These supplemented or piloted the monographs, or offered thoughts on subjects otherwise not developed in books or journals, and they provide an authentic sense of Maurice's fieldwork. He often gave the impression that it was his favourite book, and certainly its evangelical nature was very much to his taste. *Medieval England: an Aerial Survey* (Cambridge, 1958), with Kenneth St Joseph was the other, and here the combination of wonderful air photography and very crisp explanatory and reflective texts produced a remarkable guide to reading the past in the landscape. The conclusions reached in most of Maurice's books have been modified by subsequent generations, with more grey tones correctly applied to some of his more black-and-white views, but all five have gone into revised second editions: each has lasted.

Maurice was one of the founding members of the Society, and served as a member of its Executive Committee until 1962. Thereafter, he remained its good friend, and assiduous reader of the *Review*, but participated only intermittently in its conferences, though he was delighted to publish again in the *Review*, in 1992. He was a member of the Advisory Group for the Cambridge Agrarian History of England and Wales from 1956, and one of the original authorial team for volume II. He was appointed Lecturer in Economic History at the University of Leeds in 1948, Reader in 1955, and the first Professor in 1959, and served the University to retirement in 1985. He was elected to the British Academy in 1985.