Medieval Villages
in an English Landscape

Beginnings and Ends

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abandoned. *Ends* refers to a place-name much used in Whittlewood to identify the constituent parts of the larger villages, from West End in Silverstone to Limes End in Leckhampstead; the ends provide evidence of the piecemeal growth of villages and describe a type of dispersed settlement; the word also refers to the ultimate fate of a number of the deserted villages and hamlets.

This book does not mark the end of the Whittlewood Project, but a stage in its progress. There will be many more years and seminars still to come, as we seek to answer the still unresolved questions thrown up by the research.

CHAPTER ONE

Studying Medieval Villages and Landscapes

The village has a powerful hold on the English imagination. Generations of writers and artists have celebrated and idealised the visual charm and traditional social rhythms of village life. A common perception of the village, inspired by the apparent antiquity of its buildings, lanes and fields, is of an unchanging place, a constant and comforting presence in a rapidly changing world (Figure 1). This picture is not entirely false; elements of continuity can be identified in the countryside over long periods of time. But in recent years, the emphasis of much writing on the English village has been on change, even if the precise nature of that change is disputed. The study of villages and landscapes, especially in medieval England, offers ample scope for controversy and debate. A contemporary account describing the formation of a medieval village does not survive, and one was probably never written. But even if such a document existed, doubts about its representativeness would almost certainly be expressed, as in the accounts that survive from the twelfth century of the reorganisation of field systems. Similarly, the complete excavation of a village would not yield all of the necessary archaeological evidence, and again would be open to interpretation. To understand rural settlements and landscapes we need to combine the efforts of different disciplines, including the work of historians, archaeologists, geographers, landscape historians, place-name scholars, palaeoenvironmental scientists, and students of vernacular and church architecture. Our ideas about where, when, how and why different patterns of settlement and landscape emerged in England are thus dependent on the interpretation of a wide range of documentary, material and scientific evidence, the complexity of which allows divergent conclusions to be drawn.

Particular disagreement surrounds the definition of settlements. The rural settlements of medieval England are conventionally divided into villages, hamlets, and farmsteads. The classification adopted here - which is by no means universal - is based largely on differences in size. A farmstead refers to a single dwelling house, together with
its associated agricultural buildings, which may have been occupied by one or more families. A hamlet is a small group of farmsteads — of no more than a dozen — the buildings of which either lie close together in the form of a cluster or row, or follow a more winding course along lanes, usually separated from their neighbours by small arable or pasture fields. A countryside in which most people live in hamlets or farmsteads is said to have a dispersed pattern of settlement. A village has more than a dozen farmsteads, which may be arranged in a cluster or regular rows, in which case it is described as nucleated. In some places, the houses may be more widely and irregularly spaced, perhaps forming a number of distinct parts on ‘ends’, which can lead to the village being called ‘polyfocal’. The dividing lines between these categories can be unclear, so that it is difficult to draw distinctions between small villages and large hamlets, and regularity of plan is not always clear-cut. Some villages are so fragmented that they can be perceived as a form of dispersal. But, we suggest, the classification of settlements based on differences in status or function are even less satisfactory than those expressed in terms of size.

After more than a century of scholarship, a measure of agreement has been reached on some aspects of the study of rural settlements and landscapes in medieval England, while others continue to arouse debate. In this chapter we attempt to outline the current state of knowledge about where, when, how and why different patterns of settlement and landscape emerged. Particular problems and issues raised by our case-study of a small part of midland England are highlighted. The authors of this book are, respectively, an archaeologist and a historian, and the evidence from archaeological fieldwork and documentary research forms the basis of many of our conclusions. However, experts in other disciplines have made important contributions, and short discussions are provided about the significance for settlement studies of an understanding of historical geography, place-names, palaeoenvironmental science, and secular and church architecture.

Regional variation

Writing towards the end of the nineteenth century, F.W. Maitland observed the basic division of rural England into a land of villages and a land of hamlets. In some parts of the country, he noted, nucleated villages made up of clusters and rows were distributed at regular intervals across the landscape, surrounded by large fields in which few isolated farmsteads were built. By contrast, in other areas, farmsteads and hamlets — often of no more than three or four houses — were scattered across the countryside, interspersed with small and irregular fields, and connected to one another by a multitude of lanes and paths. Maitland provided sections of the Ordnance Survey maps of the border between Oxfordshire and Berkshire (dominated by nucleated villages) and that between Somerset and Devon (where hamlets and farmsteads are the characteristic settlement form). More recently, an attempt has been made to map the settlement pattern of England as a whole. Based on mid-nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey maps, and plotting towns, villages, hamlets and farmsteads by using subjectively size graded dot symbols, Roberts and Wrathmell have created a comprehensive atlas of rural settlement, which may be employed in studies of settlement patterns both in the nineteenth century and in earlier times.

On the basis of the atlas, Roberts and Wrathmell have argued that England may be divided into three main settlement zones (Figure 2): firstly, a ‘Central Province’, dominated by a dense pattern of nucleated villages; secondly, a ‘South-eastern Province’, characterised by more widely spaced nucleated villages, hamlets and market towns; and thirdly, a ‘Northern and Western Province’, comprising a variety of settlement forms, but which may be distinguished from the Central Province by a consistently higher level of dispersion — that is, more
The identification of contrasting regions of rural settlement has been accompanied by, and related to, similar divisions of England according to observed differences in landscape. The Central Province, for example, has been broadly equated with the area of 'champion' countryside, a term first coined in the sixteenth century, which referred to the large open fields (Fr. champagne) in which the land of the villagers was divided into numerous small and unhedged strips. More recently, this countryside has been described as 'planned', because it was initially laid out according to a coherent scheme of villages and open fields, and then transformed by large-scale, planned enclosure, often by parliamentary act in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By contrast, the dispersed settlements of hamlet and farmstead lay mainly in zones of 'ancient' countryside, which in general have not been subject to such sweeping changes as those brought about by the enclosure movement. In these areas, such as on the Somerset–Devon border, the pattern of fields, hedgerows, and roads is much more intricate and irregular than is usually found in the planned countryside. Much land lay in hedged fields dating to long before parliamentary enclosure.

Such broad distinctions are useful at a national level, but often lack the subtlety needed for more localised studies. Some landscape characterisations have thus sought to take more account of small-scale local variations. One scheme, for example, divided England into categories of countryside or pays. These were defined principally by their physical characteristics, such as champion, down, fen, forest, heath, marsh, moor and wold. However, it was also recognised that these landscapes supported a unique combination of settlement patterns, agricultural and industrial economies, social groupings, and cultural affinities. In other words, the character of a place was determined not only by the physical environment but also by the responses to it, over many generations, of individual communities; such insights have given rise to the idea of the cultural province. The boundaries of each pays (or province) are in some cases sharply defined, but more frequently diffuse, grading in and out of each other almost imperceptibly on the ground, but understood by those who inhabited them. Some pays might be relatively self-contained, while others interacted more fully with their neighbours. The precise mapping of pays is often problematic, but acknowledgement of their existence offers a more nuanced understanding of the English landscape than a simple bipartite or tripartite division. Roberts and Wrathmell have also divided their three provinces into a larger number of sub-provinces.

Within the Central Province of mainly nucleated villages, pockets of more dispersed settlement may be found. In some places, this was
the result of opportunities in the Middle Ages to colonise areas of woodland and waste, which were cleared for agricultural use and farmed from newly established villages, hamlets, and farmsteads. In other places, new settlements were established by freeholders who were granted, sold, or leased land by the lord of the manor. One such area may be found on the border between Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire, which was formerly part of Whittlewood Forest. Surrounded by large tracts of champion countryside, the open fields of which were farmed by the inhabitants of nucleated villages - usually the only settlement within the parish or township - the landscape and settlement pattern of medieval Whittlewood presented a different picture. Not only was there a great deal more woodland and waste in Whittlewood than in surrounding areas, but also some agricultural land lay outside the open fields, in closes farmed in severalty (not communally); the inhabitants of hamlets and farmsteads, of which there might be a number in each parish, often held land which was separate from that of the villagers; and some of the villages had a distinctly dispersed appearance. The Whittlewood area provides the focus for the case-studies presented in this book; its character and the reasons behind its choice as a suitable area for investigation are discussed more fully in the following chapter.

There is, therefore, broad agreement about where different patterns of settlement and landscape emerged in medieval England, even if the boundaries of individual provinces, pays, or smaller areas of countryside continue to be queried, refined and debated. The main contributors to this work have been archaeologists, geographers and historians, although the findings of other disciplines have sometimes also been invoked in support of a particular interpretation. For example, Roberts and Wrathmell make use of the distribution of place-name elements which denote a particular type of settlement, such as 'green' and 'worth', to demonstrate the character of their three provinces. Not all place-names may be used in this way, but some indicate whether a settlement was likely to have formed in a wooded or more open landscape, or close to an area of common waste.

Continuity and change

Early studies of medieval rural settlement identified a period of profound change in the immediate post-Roman period. The Romano-British settlement pattern of hamlets, villas and farmsteads was, it was claimed, replaced in the fifth and sixth centuries by fully formed nucleated villages, imported from the continent by Germanic invaders who imposed them on the English countryside with little regard for what had gone before. Across much of lowland England, the colonists planted their villages, forcing the indigenous British population to flee to the north and west, where settlement continued to be based on the hamlet and farmstead. At the same time, open fields were laid out around the nucleated villages, which were farmed in common by all the inhabitants, the observed differences in their structure reflecting, it was argued, the geographical distribution of the various newly-settled ethnic groups. According to this interpretation, much of midland England underwent a 'thorough Germanization' during the fifth century. These ideas have now been largely rejected, as we discuss more fully in Chapter Five, and replaced by a number of hypotheses which stress the importance of the three or four centuries after AD 800 as the key period of village and open-field formation. Particularly influential in this process of revision was Thirsk's evolutionary explanation of the origins of the open fields, impelled by population growth, which was published in 1964. However, although it is generally agreed that the period AD 800-1200 represents the broad time frame within which nucleated villages and open fields superseded an earlier pattern of dispersed settlements and ancient fields, there remains dispute about a more precise timetable. Villages formed at different times in different places; in some cases the process was rapid, while in others it was more protracted; open fields might be laid out at the same time or later; subsequent phases of reorganisation may mask earlier developments; and the surviving evidence is often patchy and difficult to interpret. The question of when villages and open fields formed is thus far from straightforward; the chronology presented in this book falls within the broad range AD 800-1200, but differs from most previous studies (see below, page 104).

Although there is now agreement that the Saxon invasions of the fifth and sixth centuries did not herald the arrival of widespread nucleated villages and open fields, debate persists about the extent to which the end of the Roman era marked a decisive break in the settlement pattern, and in the management and ownership of land. The most recent survey of the period identified elements both of continuity and discontinuity, but concluded that 'overall, the landscapes of post-Roman Britain remain in use' and that 'there was no catastrophic here, just a slight increase in the rate of change in constantly evolving landscapes'. Many local studies, too, emphasise continuity over change.

There has been a particular focus recently on the survival and reuse of ancient field systems and boundaries. These are well known in areas of 'ancient' countryside, where midland-type open fields were not introduced in the Middle Ages: for example, the 'Scole-Dickleburgh field
system in south Norfolk, the evidence for which has recently been challenged and restated. But now evidence has emerged from within the Central Province demonstrating a similar pattern of survival. At Caxton in Cambridgeshire, for example, Oosthuizen has shown that a fragmentary coaxial field system survived into the modern period: 'the relationship between these ancient field boundaries and medieval cultivation remains ... appears to show that these earlier fields were straightforwardly incorporated into the open-field layout.' Further work on the open fields of Cambridgeshire has also suggested the antiquity of linear features, which may have served as routes for seasonal transhumance or as land divisions, before being incorporated into medieval field boundaries. The survival of prehistoric and Romano-British field systems implies that the land remained in some sort of agricultural use throughout their existence. Nevertheless, this does not mean that patterns of ownership and farming persisted. There may have been considerable tenurial disruption in the fifth and sixth centuries, as farmsteads were abandoned and taken over, and new estate structures imposed on an existing pattern of fields and roads. Likewise, there may have been a retreat of arable farming and an increased emphasis on pastoralism. Elements of both continuity and discontinuity could coexist in the post-Roman landscape.

The retention of the physical boundaries of earlier fields may have important implications for our understanding of the creation of the open fields in the late Saxon period. At Caxton most of the land was held by sokemen before the Norman Conquest. According to Oosthuizen, 'the implication may be that the introduction of the midland system in those parishes which were largely or wholly held by sokemen was achieved by consensus. This consensus may have received physical expression in the retention of the underlying layout of the original field system through the use of some earlier boundaries as furlong boundaries.' Further work is needed to test this hypothesis, but it is possible that the reuse of ancient field boundaries was related to late Saxon social hierarchies. Thus, in areas where lordship was strong, the opportunities for more radical reorganisation of the countryside may have been more widely pursued. For example, in Northamptonshire, where sokemen were less numerous than in Cambridgeshire, the pattern of medieval fields generally bears no relationship to the underlying Iron Age and Roman field systems revealed as crop marks by aerial photography. Even in Northamptonshire, however, Roman field boundaries may have survived in a few places, especially in areas of heavy soils, which were difficult to cultivate and hence less likely to experience innovation and reorganisation.

The survival of ancient field boundaries does not necessarily imply continuity in patterns of rural settlement. At Catholme in Staffordshire, for instance, a Romano-British ditch continued to form the eastern boundary of the Anglo-Saxon settlement. But even in this area, where the impact of Anglo-Saxon cultural influence was limited and mostly late, continuity of settlement is hard to prove. Thus, although the distinctive layout of the settlement at Catholme has prompted speculation that this was 'what a 'Dark Age' British (or a hybrid Anglo-British) settlement looked like', the evidence does not suggest a simple model of continuity. Reoccupation of the site probably began several generations after the end of Roman rule in Britain, while the presence of grubenhauser and 'Anglo-Saxon-style' burials of the late fifth or sixth centuries 'are likely to be due both to acculturation and a limited movement of people.' In many cases, problems of dating mean that we do not know whether the earliest phases of Saxon occupation were contemporary with or later than the final phases of Romano-British occupation. Some settlements, such as Catholme, or Quarrington in Lincolnshire, may have been abandoned and later reoccupied; in the interval, they probably ceased to be functioning agricultural units. Nevertheless, as Rippon observes, 'post-Roman native settlement is notoriously difficult to identify', and in counties such as Essex, 'it may have been far more common for Romano-British settlements to have still been occupied in the fifth or even sixth century than has previously been thought.' But settlement was not sustainable everywhere in the post-Roman period, such as in the fenland or on the claylands. In Northamptonshire there seems to have been 'a fundamental change in the rural settlement pattern, and presumably also in land use, during the late fourth or the earlier fifth century.' In particular, there was probably a retreat of settlement from the claylands in favour of lighter soils. Moreover, as population declined and agricultural land fell out of use, the conditions were created for woodland regeneration. The extent to which woodland colonised former open land in the post-Roman period has been questioned. Many pollen sequences, indeed, suggest continuity or even increased clearance of land in the period AD 400–800. Nevertheless, in parts of Britain, such as eastern Hertfordshire, woodland probably regenerated on a significant scale. The scientific analysis of the early medieval environment has the potential to revolutionise our understanding of landscape and settlement development in the post-Roman era; to date, however, the available information is too limited and widely scattered to allow a convincing general picture to be drawn. Cores of peat have been extracted from the Whittlewood area, the pollen in which points to woodland regeneration in the period AD 400–600 (see below, pages 9.
Unlike the emphasis in much recent writing, therefore, the palaeoenvironmental evidence from Whittlewood indicates a period of discontinuity in land use in the centuries following the Roman era, a view supported, for the most part, by the data derived from archaeological fieldwork. Some Romano-British settlements remained occupied for a time, but in general little continuity of field systems or settlement sites can be demonstrated between the Roman and early medieval periods (see below, pages 85–7).

**Settlement and open-field formation**

There are four principal ways in which a nucleated village might have developed during the Middle Ages: by steady growth from a single place; by the agglomeration or growing together of a number of initially separate farmsteads or hamlets; by the abandonment of individual farmsteads and hamlets in favour of a larger nucleation; and by deliberate planning of a new settlement. Of these four possibilities, the third has been particularly influential in explaining how nucleated villages developed in the Central Province. Systematic fieldwalking, especially in Northamptonshire, has revealed that in parishes now containing a single nucleated village, the fields of the village territory were formerly occupied by a number of early medieval farmsteads. These all appeared to have been abandoned by the mid ninth century, their inhabitants apparently moving to a single site which formed a village (see below, pages 81–2). According to some interpretations, this process of nucleation was followed at a later date by the replanning of the settlement, which involved the laying-out of tenements along a street or in a grid, possibly in accordance with an ideal of what a village ought to look like. The reorganisation of the village plan may have been accompanied by changes in the landscape; principally the formation of the open fields and the equitable distribution of arable strips and pasture rights among the inhabitants. Together these changes to village and field system have been described as the 'great replanning' of the late Saxon period.

Phrases such as the 'great replanning' imply that there was a guiding hand at work in the formation (or reorganisation) of nucleated villages. This is possible. Lords may well have either commanded or influenced the development of new, compact settlements on their estates. For example, at Shipwick and other places in Somerset, the monks of Glastonbury Abbey appear to have been able to render both landscape and settlement 'on an impressive scale, probably to increase revenue'. Other studies have also stressed the role of lordship in the formation of nucleated villages. At Barrington in Cambridgeshire, Oosthuizen has suggested that a former community of free tenants living in at least eight separate settlement foci was reduced to villenage by the new Norman lord and moved to a planned village laid out alongside a green. Evidence has also been found in Cambridgeshire of the 'great replanning', albeit later than that posited for Northamptonshire. Again, it is argued, Norman lords were responsible for laying out the villages, in this case over former arable land, and reducing the sokemen to villenage. The earlier settlements were emptied and it is not known whether they were nucleated or dispersed.

Despite the focus in many studies on lordship, however, it is likely that the local community also had an influence over how villages evolved and developed. For example, the old church site at Shipwick was left marooned to the east of the village, perhaps because the move was unpopular locally. A combination of seigneurial and peasant decision-making can be suggested at Roed in Gloucestershire, where many tenants apparently chose to remain in Roedside next to the village of Hawling rather than relocate to a new settlement and manorial site further north. In a number of places before the Norman Conquest, the population was made up largely of sokemen, privileged peasants who were better able than others to exercise choice in the location and form of their villages, hamlets and fields, as in Cambridgeshire.

The idea and the initiative for change to the village plan or field system may thus have come from the lord, or the local community, or a combination of the two; as Paul Harvey has commented, 'most that is anyone's guess', because a lack of evidence obscures our view in all but a few, exceptional, cases. But whatever agency was responsible, it is generally accepted that settlements and landscapes were subject to constant redevelopment, and sometimes large-scale replanning, throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. Much more contentious is the proposition that there was a 'great replanning', affecting large swathes of countryside, as a result of political developments in the tenth century. Certainly it has not yet been demonstrated that such a change took place over a wide area. On the basis of the studies undertaken for this book, the laying-out of the open fields in the tenth century was a quite separate process from the replanning of settlements, which for the most part occurred in the centuries after the Norman Conquest (see below, pages 91–5).

According to Christopher Taylor, 'steady growth from an initial farmstead is perhaps the most obvious and widely accepted reason invoked for the appearance of a nucleated village', but that 'while continuous growth from a single farmstead is theoretically likely, given the undoubted rise in population in late Saxon and early medieval
Nucleated villages and dispersed settlements

The basic division of England into a land of villages and a land of hamlets is very striking. Why did nucleated villages form in some places and not in others, sometimes only a short distance away? Recent attempts to answer this question have focused on the eastern boundary of the Central Province. In a major study of eastern and central England, Williamson has argued that the overriding determinants of settlement formation were agricultural and environmental (Figure 3). Nucleated villages developed in those places where there were practical farming reasons for the inhabitants to live close together. For example, in some areas variation in rainfall and the presence of particular types of clay soil meant that there were relatively limited opportunities to plough and harrow the fields, especially in the period of spring sowing. Where cultivations needed to be carefully timed, and where full advantage had to be taken of every hour in which the soils were suitable for ploughing or harrowing, ploughteams needed to be assembled with particular rapidity; and this was obviously much easier to achieve where farms were in close proximity, rather than scattered across the landscape. Likewise, in areas in which meadowland was abundant and concentrated in large parcels, the need to mobilise labour rapidly on the few days of the year suitable for haymaking encouraged the nucleation of settlement. By contrast, in other places, where meadowland was widely distributed in small pockets, a more dispersed pattern of settlement developed. Furthermore, in nucleated villages, the sense of cohesion and cooperation which communal farming engendered was likely to have promoted the formation of open fields, in which the land was divided among the villagers in the form of intermingled and unhedged strips, ensuring that each landholder received an equal share of both good and bad soil, some land situated near to their homes and some at a distance. The conclusion drawn is that different patterns of settlement and field system were the outcome of rational adjustments to complex environmental circumstances.

Williamson's emphasis on environmental factors contrasts with that of Christopher Taylor, who has made a close study of the settlement pattern in Cambridgeshire, through which the boundary of the Central Province passes. According to Taylor, influences such as environment, population or social organisation appear to show no significant relationship to the pattern of nucleated and dispersed settlement. Instead, the frontier 'seems to be just there, as if by chance'. He goes on to pose the question: 'could not the frontier have no real significance at all except in marking an arbitrary line where the spread of the process of
nucleation stopped at some time? The idea that nucleated villages, and their associated open fields, were a cultural phenomenon which spread by emulation for a limited time across the Central Province has been likened to a successful evolutionary adaptation, or to a fashion which was duplicated without a great deal of reasoning, except for status or imitation. And then, in the thirteenth century, the vogue for nucleation faded away; villages and open fields were regarded as passé; they were no longer seen to be a useful adaptation. Thus, when dispersed settlements expanded, or new settlements proliferated, in the period after 1200 the inhabitants did not adopt nucleation, even in areas in which environmental conditions may have made such a change beneficial. In this view, the reasons why different patterns of settlement and landscape emerged have as much to do with the conflicting human ideals of conformity, change, innovation and style, as with more rational responses to environment and farming.

The spread of nucleated villages and open fields has been compared to the development of the British railway network in the nineteenth century. According to Taylor, 'the combination of topography, economic value, commercial speculation, technological advance, and status and fashion, all within a rapidly changing society, produced a pattern which is inexplicable in monocausal terms'. Others, too, have argued that no single factor will adequately explain the variations in the pattern of medieval settlement and landscape that emerged between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, another formative period in European history. For example, although it can be demonstrated that the role of lordship, or local communities, or population density, was influential in determining the formation of particular types of settlement or field system in certain places, the relationship between them is not straightforward and exceptions can always be found. Clarity and certainty remain elusive, and recent explanations offer little room for complacency. Even Williamson's bold statement of the environmental hypothesis, though compelling and attractive, cannot be considered conclusive; as he himself recognises, it is likely to be criticised as its arguments are tested, and found wanting, in individual localities (see below, pages 95–9). The variations in the rural settlement pattern are generally linked to human decision-making: whether the settlements were nucleated or dispersed, initiatives were taken by lords or communities in response to a variety of factors. There can be little doubt that most settlements, to a greater or lesser extent, were planned: lords and tenants had to decide where to locate new buildings, taking into account existing tenements, manor house and church, and the alignments of roads and fields. The location of the church may have been particularly influential, and studies of parish churches are often revealing about settlement development (see below, pages 185–9). Few settlements can be considered to be wholly random collections of buildings, and in some places a decision has clearly been taken to reorganise and replan the settlement and its fields at one point in time.

In areas such as Whittlewood Forest, nucleated villages and dispersed settlements lie side by side, often no more than a few miles from each other. Their juxtaposition might be explained by differences in the extent to which they were deliberately planned or reorganised. But it is far from certain that the layout of a nucleated village was subject to a greater degree of control and coordination than that of a dispersed settlement. As Taylor has argued, decisions may have been taken to encourage or allow dispersion, while nucleation was not necessarily the outcome of careful design. The formation and development of settlements in the centuries after AD 800 was not a random process, but it was complex and diverse. The decisions taken by lords and communities, influenced by environment, culture and other factors, had broadly similar, but not identical, effects in particular regions. Subtle differences in topography, both natural and man-made, combined with the idiosyncrasies of human behaviour, produced settlement plans that were, in each case, unique. In some places, differences in topography and decision-making were so slight that settlements resembled one another; in others, of which Whittlewood Forest is just one example, the variations were sufficient to produce a more diverse mix of dispersed and nucleated plans.
Notes to the Chapters

Notes to Chapter 1: Studying Medieval Villages and Landscapes
1. Fox, 'Adoption of the midland system', 94-8.
2. Mynard et al., Great Linford.
3. Taylor, Village and Farmstead, 133; Lewis et al., Village, Hamlet and Field, 49-51; Taylor, 'Polygamous settlement'.
4. Roberts, Rural Settlement, 82-4.
5. Maitland, Doomed Book and Beyond, 38-9.
6. Roberts and Wrathmell, Atlas of Rural Settlement; Roberts and Wrathmell, Region and Place.
7. Thorpe, 'Rural settlement', 167-8; Roberts, Rural Settlement; Lewis et al., Village, Hamlet and Field.
8. Beresford and Hurst, Deserted Medieval Villages, 66.
10. Roberts and Wrathmell, Region and Place, 1-2.
11. Rackham, History of the Countryside, 4-5.
14. Roberts and Wrathmell, Region and Place, 8, 10, 64.
15. Taylor, 'Dispersed settlement in nucleated areas'.
16. Roberts and Wrathmell, Region and Place, 54-6, 180-1.
17. For a recent study, see Gelling and Cole, Landscape of Place-name.
20. Think, 'Common fields'.
22. I.e., Oosthuizen, 'Origins of Cambridgeshire'.
24. Oosthuizen, 'Prehistoric fields into medieval furrows', 151.
25. Hesse, 'Field systems in south-west Cambridgeshire', Harrison, 'Open fields and earlier landscapes'; Oosthuizen, 'Roots of the common fields'.
27. Oosthuizen, 'Prehistoric fields into medieval furrows', 151.
31. Taylor, 'Saxon settlement at Quarrington'.
34. Rippon, 'Landscapes in transition', 57-7.
35. Dark, 'Environment of Britain', 5-16.
36. Wright, 'Woodland continuity and change'.
37. Branch et al., Whittleswood project.
38. Bryant, 'Village and Farmstead', 131.
39. Hall and Martin, 'Brixworth', Shaw, 'Discovery of Saxon sites'; Brown and Foard, 'Saxon landscape'.
40. Brown and Foard, 'Saxon landscape', 77-82.
41. Lewis et al., Village, Hamlet and Field, 193.
42. Brown and Foard, 'Saxon landscape', 82-92.
43. Aston and Gerrard, 'Shapwick project'.
44. Oosthuizen, 'Ancient greens'.
45. Oosthuizen, 'Touristic settlement relocation'.
46. Oosthuizen, 'Prehistoric fields into medieval furrows'.
47. Lewis et al., Village, Hamlet and Field, 177-9.
50. Lewis et al., Village, Hamlet and Field, 200.
51. Lewis et al., Village, Hamlet and Field, 191-2.
52. Taylor, 'Dispersed settlement in nucleated areas'.
54. Lewis et al., Village, Hamlet and Field, 172-83.
55. Williamson, Shaping Medieval Landscapes, 139-40.
56. Williamson, 'Medieval settlement relocation'.
57. Lewis et al., Village, Hamlet and Field, 177-9.
58. Lewis et al., Village, Hamlet and Field, 143-5.
59. Williamson, Shaping Medieval Landscapes, 139-40.
60. Williamson, Shaping Medieval Landscapes, 159-60.
61. Williamson, Shaping Medieval Landscapes, 159-60.
62. Williamson, Shaping Medieval Landscapes, 159-60.
63. Williamson, Shaping Medieval Landscapes, 159-60.
64. Williamson, Shaping Medieval Landscapes, 159-60.
65. Williamson, Shaping Medieval Landscapes, 159-60.
66. Williamson, Shaping Medieval Landscapes, 159-60.
67. Williamson, Shaping Medieval Landscapes, 159-60.
68. Williamson, Shaping Medieval Landscapes, 159-60.
CHAPTER TEN

Implications and
Wider Perspectives

The study of medieval rural settlement in England currently finds itself at a crossroads. National surveys of settlement patterns have revealed broad regional trends, while local case studies have produced detailed examinations of individual sites. Yet there remains little agreement as to why, when and how nucleated villages and more dispersed patterns of settlement formed in different parts of the country. In particular, doubt can be cast on many of the current models explaining nucleation, and it might be questioned how applicable these are beyond the localities on which they have been based. And beyond the Central Province, much work remains to be done to explore more fully dispersed settlement patterns. Those studies that have been undertaken reveal that no two villages follow exactly the same route or chronology to the adoption of their final plan. Their development, where it happened, has been more easily explained, occurring in a better-documented world which enables the agencies that lay behind their failure to be identified. In this, but nowhere else in what is a vast subject, do conclusions drawn 40 years ago still remain valid today.¹

The aim of this book has been to examine settlement patterns at a regional scale, and thus to provide a bridge between the national overviews and local exemplars. While its focus has necessarily been restricted to the twelve parishes subjected to close analysis, its primary ambition has been to explore from this base why the more general settlement pattern of medieval England should have been so diverse. The area selected for investigation is difficult to categorise: it was chosen specifically for this reason. It is a landscape that lies within the broad central belt of England dominated by nucleated villages, yet contains within it the full range of medieval rural settlement types, with compact villages lying alongside multi-nodal villages, hamlets and farmsteads. It is a hybrid, combining elements of the ‘land of villages’ and the ‘land of hamlets’, terms used by earlier historians to express the basic divisions that exist between different parts of England.² Until recently, however, they have masked the more subtle variations

Implications and
Wider Perspectives

of settlement form that they are now seen to contain. Defining the study area as we have has permitted the detailed exploration of the full range of medieval settlement types to be undertaken side-by-side for the first time. This comparative method has exposed the similarities and differences that might exist not only between settlements of very different form, but also between settlements whose plans suggest they shared much in common. The conclusions that are presented here have been framed by four oppositions. These have emerged from this study and embrace its three central themes of landscape, settlement and society. They are: culture versus economy; stability versus instability; lord versus community; and dispersion versus nucleation.

Culture versus economy

Taking the long view of the development of the Whittlewood landscape reveals its versatility. Its woodland resources, lusher pastures and nutrient-rich soils were all exploited at one time or another. Long cycles are visible. Woodland was cleared, only to regenerate before being cleared again. Likewise, the extent of pasture and arable has varied, long periods of intensive cultivation giving way to equally extended periods when the area was largely laid to grass before being ploughed up once more. But never did one land use become so dominant as to eradicate all others, a fact which perhaps accounts for the apparent ease with which successive generations of farmers switched their emphasis between alternative farming systems. The close symbiosis between man and environment is certainly evident, and might encourage advocates of physical determinism to identify a self-regulating macrocycle, dictated by the condition of the soil, which demanded that those who sought to exploit it to rotate between periods of intensive and non-intensive agriculture. Of course, shifts in the uses to which the land was put were linked to many other factors: rising and falling population levels, variations in the market, new agricultural technologies and changes to the organisation of individual or grouped farming units all had major roles to play.

This was a reality for much of the English midlands. Nature guided, but farmers in the end decided how the land would be worked for economic return. Its development was not constrained in the same way by climate, topography or poor soils as was that in the areas which surrounded it, but even here farmers chose within the parameters of a more restricted range of options. In peripheral regions pastoral farming and dispersed settlement came to predomi-
Economics had they turned to animal husbandry as their principal activity. But where the midland soils and gently rolling countryside held clear superiority over these peripheral zones was in their capacity to grow cereals. By the end of the thirteenth century, large parts of the midlands had been developed as extensive corn belts, with nucleated villages surrounded by open fields occupying up to 80 per cent of each individual farming territory. The creation of these landscapes was driven by subsistence needs and the market. That Whittlewood did not follow the same trajectory suggests that other, more localised, controls on the use of the land competed here against the tendency towards monoculture, restricting the growth of the arable landscape and preserving tracts of pasture and woodland.

The most identifiable counter to the formation of an arable-dominated landscape in Whittlewood was its designation as a royal forest, a political and cultural institution imposed at a critical stage in the area's medieval development. There can be little doubt that the crown's successful defence of core blocks of pasture and woodland as hunting grounds provided the principal local barrier to the spread of cultivation during the late medieval period. Without the forest, Whittlewood may well have more closely resembled the champion landscape that surrounded it. Yet it is far from clear how areas of royal forest were selected. Rarely were they simply bad land incapable of supporting agriculture. The forests of Rockingham (Northants.) and Wychwood (Oxon.), as well as Whittlewood, all reveal that these later forest zones had been intensively cultivated and densely settled during the Roman period. But despite their arable pedigree, there are good grounds to suggest that, far from representing an unprecedented departure, the application of forest law after the Norman Conquest may simply have formalised long-standing royal and common rights over these areas that had originated during the post-Roman centuries. Royal forests, it might be argued, perpetuated how those areas that now fell within their compass may have already been viewed, as places on the outside (the term forest deriving from the Latin foris, meaning outside), or at least on the margins, of political and economic units created several centuries earlier. This is implicit both in the name of the Oxfordshire forest of Wychwood, 'the wood of the Hwicce', and in its location on the edge of this tribal territory. Rather than leading to changes in how these areas were exploited, forest status may simply have ensured that the traditional, albeit post-Roman, uses to which these blocks of land had been put, as valuable areas of intercommingled pasture and woodland on the edge of new administrative divisions, were perpetuated.

The origins of Whittlewood Forest are more elusive than those of Wychwood. Nevertheless, three strands of evidence might be presented which point to its early establishment, and possibly its active promotion and preservation, as a peripheral landscape offering essential woodland and pasture to be felled, hunted and grazed from more distant centres of power. The first is the extensive and long-established royal interest in the area, most of Whittlewood falling within the orbit of six estates held by the king in the pre-Conquest period: Kings Sutton, Greens Norton, Towcester, Passenhall, Buckingham and Kirtlington. What was it about Whittlewood that meant that successive kings were reluctant to relinquish direct control over it? The answer may lie in the second piece of evidence, the detached manors within Whittlewood over which these royal estate centres exerted control: Lillingstone Lovell and Boycott from Kirtlington, and Silverstone and Whittlebury from Greens Norton. These links appear to predate the creation of hundreds and shires, suggesting that before these administrative units were established, Whittlewood provided resources unavailable elsewhere, the rights and access to which were carefully guarded despite later political and administrative reorganisation. That multiple interests in the area might have arisen from the exploitation of Whittlewood as an ill-defined zone of intercommingled land on the edge of several polities finds further support in the final piece of evidence: place-names.

Whittlewood contains a cluster of names in -feld (Whitfield, Tifffield, Luffield and Wakefield), a concentration not matched elsewhere in Northamptonshire, and in Buckinghamshire only in the Chiltern. Interpretation of this element is complicated since the meaning of the term changed over time. Generally rendered simply as 'open country', its earliest usage appears to have applied to areas of common pasture, only later becoming associated with common arable land. In other parts of the country, clusters of -feld names have been found to be coincident with county boundaries (e.g. Heris./Mx), or the borders of the early English kingdoms (e.g. Windsor Forest (Berks.), dividing the territories of the West and Middle Saxons). It has been suggested that here the grouping of these names derived from the exploitation of these liminal spaces as areas of intercommingled pasture. In the same fashion, Whitfield, Luffield and Wakefield all lie on the Northamptonshire/Buckinghamshire border; the elements rig (perhaps 'meeting place') in Tifffield and uchta (more certainly 'fertiveness') in Wakefield suggesting their use as group assembly points (Figure 16). It is entirely possible, therefore, that the passing of the later shire boundary through these places represented an attempt to divide equitably an area over which estate centres, that now found themselves within different administrative regions, once shared rights.
In Whittlewood, early medieval tribal divisions cannot be traced with certainty. Yet for the reasons just outlined we may suspect that it lay ‘on the edge’, divided among a number of territories, as it had been in the Iron Age and Roman period. Boundaries may only have been formalised with the creation of the hundreds and shires in the tenth century, and perhaps only tightly defined in the post-Conquest period. While perpetually located away from centres of authority, the development of its landscape was nevertheless carefully managed by those who held power and who wished to exploit its primary assets, woodland, pasture and game; its later forest status was simply a new expression of this enduring reality. Consequently, while Whittlewood was an integral part of a wider economy, providing resources that were not available elsewhere, its development was clearly culturally determined. Its farmers were denied the freedom afforded to their counterparts in the tench regions to extend arable cultivation, despite its soils being able to support such a farming regime. It is this that explains the creation and survival of an alternative midland landscape in medieval Whittlewood, one that contrasted so markedly from those that surrounded it.

Stability versus instability

Villages and hamlets have always been part of the rural settlement pattern of England. Depending on time and place, these either became the dominant form of settlement in a particular region, or remained a rarity, a communal cluster in a sea of individual farmsteads. In many senses, therefore, the medieval villages and hamlets of Whittlewood, which have been the focus of this study, represent the continuation of a settlement tradition stretching back into prehistory. Indeed, the area has produced evidence for early agglomerations, such as the Iron Age settlement at Old Tun Copse, or the large Roman settlements at Lillingstone Dayrell and Briary Copse. But such discoveries, often made well away from later population centres, are also reminders that while the basic forms of settlements have remained constant, their locations have not. Moreover, individual farmsteads, the third component of the medieval rural settlement pattern, have tended to exhibit even greater instability, coming and going, reappearing and relocating, at all periods.

Indeed, it would appear from the numerous surveys that have now been undertaken across the country that most early settlements, and particularly those formed during the sub-Roman centuries, were either short-lived, their sites abandoned in favour of new locations, or drifted across the landscape in regular short-range shifts. Evidence for settlement mobility has not only been found across south-east England, West Stow (Suffolk) and Mucking (Essex) being prime examples of the ‘wandering settlement’, but also in north-west Europe, where the term Wanderstättung was first coined. There are notable exceptions—that is, early-established, long-lived and stable communities occupying the same location over centuries—such as Catholme (Staffs). But these are still commonly regarded as failing to conform to the normal lifecycle of other contemporary settlements. For Christopher Taylor, settlement mobility was a universal experience, a reality not simply confined to earlier periods, but one that underpinned the process of village nucleation in the midlands, or helped to explain the isolation of medieval churches in East Anglia as they were left marooned by the later movement of the settlements they served.

Similar instability might also be suggested for the territorial division of the landscape. While claims that later administrative units, such as parishes, might have preserved, for example, the structure of Roman estates, this has nowhere been proven categorically. Other studies have shown how the multiple estates of the early medieval period might grow or contract, subdivide or coalesce. The fragmentation of these large estates and the creation of smaller manors and vills similarly represents another stage in this process of constant reorganisation. Consequently, the layout of the administrative landscape was regularly changing, rarely remaining the same over time. Within those landscapes, individual landholdings were equally subject to such dynamism, seen no more clearly than in the champion regions, in the more from the farming of discrete blocks in several to the intermixing of strips in the common fields. These were changed parallel in later periods too, as manors continued to divide or join together, and land was repurposed during the process of enclosure.

Instability in Whittlewood is not difficult to find. The settlement pattern has continued to change from the Iron Age, when it can first be mapped, to the present day. Its administrative divisions have been realigned on numerous occasions, both in the Middle Ages and more recently: for example, the division of Foxley Hundred in the tenth century to create the hundreds of Greens Norton and Towcester; or the complex administrative geographies of Passinham and Potterspury, which were not finally settled until 1951. Patterns of farming and landholding were also permanently in flux. But, as the study of Whittlewood has shown, such instability was controlled, contained within defined structural parameters which were themselves inherently more stable. While the Roman settlement pattern differed from that of the Iron Age, it built upon it, up to a quarter of all sites exhibiting signs of continuity of occupation across several centuries. Just as
Roman *civitates* preserved earlier tribal territorial divisions, there are indications that the central functions of the hillfort at Whittlebury were transferred to the town of Towcester, ensuring that the local administrative network remained largely intact. In turn, it would appear that the early medieval estate centre at Greens Norton perpetuated these structures, long-standing arrangements perhaps echoed in the association of *Wicelda* with both the prehistoric fortification and the wider area.

In contrast to surrounding areas, the medieval settlement pattern of Whittlewood was also characterised by stability. The identification of pre-village nuclei lying under later settlement foci extends the occupancy of particular sites back before AD 850. Perhaps as much as half of the early medieval settlement pattern was preserved by the later villages, their origins seemingly not reliant upon the mass abandonment of dispersed farmsteads. On these sites, villages and hamlets might grow and contract but, barring failure, they were places from which they would never subsequently move. And in the wider landscape too, radical reorganisation also appears to have been conducted within an established framework. The discovery of pre-medieval boundary ditches lying below some headlands in the open fields suggests that, rather than being laid out with no regard for what had gone before, the ways in which they were arranged and subdivided were in part influenced by earlier systems. On many levels, then, the Whittlewood landscape can be demonstrated to have extraordinary temporal depth, resulting from the successive borrowing of physical, mental and administrative structures from the past. It is stability rather than instability which should be seen as the decisive factor in its development, and as such Whittlewood joins a growing number of other local studies which are beginning to demonstrate similar developmental trajectories.  

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**Lord versus community**

At various stages in the development of what we have termed the 'villagescape', the guiding hand of lordship is clearly visible. It is at its most obvious in the creation of private parks or the depopulation of villages such as Lillingstone Dayrell or Puxley, where local lords engrossed and enclosed holdings during the later Middle Ages. It can also be seen in earlier reorganisations of the village plan: at Lillingstone Lovell, for instance, the insertion of a manorial complex into the heart of the village appears to have displaced the resident population, leading to the laying-out of new tenements in areas which had previously been outside the settlement; and in Wick Hamon, a capital mesuage was developed on the edge of the village in the middle of the thirteenth century, apparently requiring the clearance of a small number of peasant holdings, leading to the creation of another new row of tenements. The actions of these resident lords were, equally, constrained by a higher level of overlordship. Royal interest in the forest ensured that lords and communities were unable to develop the types of extensive arable landscapes seen elsewhere in the champion midlands. The crown successfully defended its rights, preserving large tracts of land, particular along the Great Ouse/Tove watershed, under wood pasture, or dividing them into defined coppice compartments.

But the strength of the community at large, and its influence over the development of settlements and their wider landscapes, should not be underestimated. Again, evidence is most forthcoming in later periods, as seen in complaints raised by those affected by seigneurial attempts to increase their holdings or to parcel up and grass down areas of former common field. Indeed, the survival of the greater part of the open fields until parliamentary enclosure might be taken as a clear sign of the wider community’s capacity to defend its interests against enclosing lords. At Stonewell, the community was investing in the village fabric in the fifteenth century, purchasing a plot of land close to the church and constructing a church house. Surviving cruck-framed buildings in villages such as Akeley, Leckhampstead and Whittlebury indicate a peasantry still actively developing their tenements at the end of the Middle Ages. Furthermore, court rolls for Silverstone record the peasant engagement of village and field holdings. In earlier periods, there are further signs of general improvement to living areas, with hard surfaces being laid around peasant houses during the thirteenth century. Beyond the village, despite the significant deterrents that faced them, the peasantry can be seen to have been active in the assarting movement, breaking new land and bringing it under the plough, either to be incorporated into the open-field system, or to be farmed in serality. In Wick Hamon, there are indications that the community took advantage of a vacuum of power, brought on by the minority of one of its lords in the late thirteenth century, to once again plough land that had previously been emarked.

In periods when the archaeological evidence is supplemented by the written record, therefore, it emerges that the separate actions of either lord or community could lead to significant changes in the built environment and the remodelling of the landscape. Records of fines for assarting or complaints against engrossment provide unequivocal testament to the conflict that might exist between these two factions, or between local lords and the king, as all parties sought to make
the best use of the land. Manorial court rolls also bear witness to other tensions, this time within the community, between members of the same social standing. Disputes amongst neighbours commonly resulted in grievances being brought before the court. There are examples of crops destroyed by the animals of another tenant or the illegal breaking of hedges. Nor was infighting amongst lords unknown, as the eruption of violence between the Chastilums and Leaumes in Leckhamstead in the 1330s and 1340s shows. All medieval village societies were to some extent divided. Social differentiation, and the opposing interests of the various groups present in the community, meant that the potential for open conflict was never far away. Villages might be considered as fragile institutions, constantly on the verge of social or economic disintegration. So it may be wondered whether this was compounded in Whittlewood by the limitations imposed by forest law. Did the forest provide further grounds for tension?

In other royal forests, perennial poaching and periodic confrontations with forest officials provide a clear impression of the disdain in which forest law might be held by those who lived under its restrictions. But if forest law could prove potentially divisive, pitching lords against the king, and the interests of farmers against those of the hunter, records of concerted action taken against it by whole villages suggest that it might equally have encouraged social cohesion, providing a common cause around which individual communities or groups of communities could rally. This was certainly the case in Kinver Forest (Staffs.) in 1378, when 100 men from a number of villages attacked the forest regarders. The attitudes of the inhabitants of Whittlewood to the forest are difficult to gauge. If the forest promoted resentment, this either rarely surfaced or remained unrecorded. An absence of open rebellion, however, might suggest that life in medieval Whittlewood was largely characterised by the peaceful coexistence of hunter and farmer. A balance was seemingly struck which permitted the accommodation of these two competing interests. The growth and survival of Whittlewood’s villages suggest that in this context, too, a sense of cooperation and perhaps compromise prevailed, ensuring that, despite inevitable minor flashpoints, both lords and peasants were able to negotiate a mutually acceptable, and perhaps beneficial, place within a strongly integrated society. Far from being weak, the Whittlewood villages, like their equivalents beyond the forest, ultimately proved to be resilient solutions to the problem of communal living.

In attempting to understand why villages formed, and why different settlement forms were adopted, it is important neither to overplay the role of lordship, nor underplay the role of the community. Throughout this book we have been careful to acknowledge that, where positive proof of the authority that directed the development of Whittlewood’s settlements and landscape is lacking, sufficient uncertainty exists to permit three alternative explanations of the evidence. Lords might act in isolation, imposing change on the community. Alternatively, the community, acting together, might be sufficiently powerful to bring about change without lordly consent. In both cases, change may have been positively embraced by both parties, or forced by the powerful upon those unable to mount a challenge to unwelcome change. Finally, change might result from consensus, lords and communities acting in unison, a scenario less likely to prompt resistance or complaint. No document survives, if one ever existed, to inform us of the processes involved in the making of a village, nor who initiated such reorganisation. Nevertheless, the apparent ease with which villages were later remodelled suggests that a degree of mutual cooperation must have existed within them. If lord and community could work together to redevelop their settlements, often along radically new lines, the possibility that they might both have participated in their formation clearly cannot be dismissed. Nor was the major role played by the community restricted to the village; consensus between lord and community seems even more evident in the creation of the open fields, an undertaking with far-reaching implications, and one which was, potentially, immensely disruptive in the short term to the economic well-being of its stakeholders.

Dispersion versus nucleation

There is a temptation, perhaps, to view the nucleated village and its open fields, so typical of the English Midlands, as one of the great medieval achievements of the lower orders, leaving a lasting legacy no less significant than the castles, cathedrals and parks of the social elite. In replacing a more primitive form of settlement pattern, comprised of small hamlets or isolated farmsteads dispersed across the landscape, and by altering how the land was managed and exploited, the village could be seen to represent a new and elevated level of social and economic organisation, one characterised by planning and order. If this is accepted then it necessarily follows that those areas where nucleated villages rarely or never developed must be viewed as somehow backward. Here communities could be accused of either failing to grasp the opportunities nucleation offered or of being in no position to act upon them.

In the early years of medieval rural settlement studies, scholars were certainly inclined to interpret dispersed settlement patterns as
largely unchanged survivals from a ‘Celtic’ past. Now it is universally accepted that areas of dispersed settlement experienced equally dynamic change as those areas in which nucleated villages developed. Recent studies have conclusively shown that while the framework of dispersal might be perpetuated in some places, the actual location of the individual sites which made up the overall pattern might vary considerably over time and might often be punctuated by periods of abandonment, followed by recolonisation. This was certainly the case for settlement on the claylands of east Suffolk and north-west Essex between the Roman and late Saxon periods. Where evidence for the development of dispersed settlement patterns from the late Saxon period through to the early fourteenth century have been found, commentators have tended to stress how such settlement, driven by demographic pressure, was attracted or forced towards primarily marginal areas, such as greenspaces, roadsides, uplands, woodlands and waste, or was later required to colonise on to arable land. Because dispersed settlement appears to lack an overarching strategy, and often involved the breaking of peripheral and unattractive land or the surrendering of previously agriculturally-productive areas, and because the settlement forms themselves tended towards the irregular and unplanned, a persistently negative aura still surrounds their development. This contrasts with nucleation, where the positives of maximising land potential, creating an equitable division of landholdings, and offering opportunities for cooperation and the pooling of resources are regularly cited, and where the advantages of this form of communal living are so clearly accepted as outweighing any possible disadvantages.

The pros and cons of dispersion

This rather disparaging view of dispersed settlement can be questioned. Take, for example, the ubiquity of this form of settlement. Unlike nucleated villages, dispersed settlements can be found in every part of the country. In the Middle Ages, they comprised the dominant settlement form in many areas, and in the Central Province they coexisted with nucleations. Clearly, then, dispersed settlement archetypes proved both remarkably resilient and flexible. This form of settlement, the community it housed and the economy it supported were able to develop and survive within every environmental, economic and social niche. Because of their adaptive qualities and their ability to thrive everywhere, dispersed settlements far outnumbered clustered centres. Consequently, in absolute terms, the majority of the medieval rural population continued to reside in individual farms and within small hamlets rather than in nucleated villages. And for most, the decision to do so was apparently a matter of choice; some advantage in retaining or developing a dispersed settlement pattern must have been perceived by their inhabitants.

This offers up the possibility that it was positive rather than negative stimuli that lay behind these settlement models. The attraction of a dispersed settlement pattern is not only clear in its adoption to the near exclusion of all other settlement forms in earlier periods, but also in the continued development of non-village communities throughout the so-called ‘village moment’. It seems to find similar expression in the early modern world: it is perhaps indicative that, once freed from the shackles of nucleation and the open-field system by parliamentary enclosure, dispersed farmsteads immediately recolonised the new landscape of the English midlands. It might even be concluded that given a free evolutionary route, dispersion would always be preferred over nucleation: in ecological terms, it is dispersed and not nucleated settlements which represent the natural climax state. These observations provide a new context within which dispersed settlement, as it developed in the Middle Ages, can now be explored, a task helped by a growing body of evidence generated by the relatively recent intellectual shift away from nucleated villages towards other forms of rural settlement. But we are most especially aided by the evidence from Whittlewood, a project which has sought from its outset to address this particular question of dispersion.

The medieval settlement pattern in the Whittlewood area was mixed, comprising both nucleated villages and dispersed settlements. Most of the larger settlements of the area were relatively compact, and may be described as nucleated villages. These villages had a variety of forms, which may be classified more precisely in terms of rows (e.g. Passenham) or grid clusters (e.g. Lillingstone Dayrell). But they all shared the general characteristic of containing relatively little open space within the built-up area. By contrast, two of our larger settlements were more dispersed in character and may be called ‘dispersed villages': Leckhamsted and Silverstone. These villages possessed three or more distinct areas of settlement (called ‘ends'), which were separated from each other by fields of arable and pasture, and linked by lanes. The question remains, therefore; why, given the similarities of topography and landscape shared by these communities, did people in one place live in large nucleations, while in others they lived in hamlets and farmsteads? And why, when and how did these differences between the nucleated and dispersed villages of Whittlewood emerge?

Across the Central Province, it is argued, centripetal forces were at work in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries, encouraging the movement of people away from their scattered hamlets and farmsteads...
towards a central nucleated settlement. This movement, it is suggested, was the result of pressure from lords and tenants to facilitate the more efficient exploitation of the restricted arable and pasture in a period of population growth and estate fragmentation. The arable was extended over former inhabited areas and, in some cases, pasture and woods. The fields were divided into strips and shared among the villagers, and livestock was pastured in common on one of these fields while it lay fallow. The upheaval involved in such a transformation of the countryside was considerable and the decision to undertake this change must have been made after careful deliberation of the advantages and disadvantages. The benefits of change at those places in the vanguard of the movement would have been noted by settlements nearby and the adoption of a nucleated pattern of settlement and open-field farming may have spread by emulation. Nucleation may have begun as a response to practical problems of demography and farming, but we should not underestimate the importance of cultural factors in encouraging its spread: the village may have become an ideal, to be preferred over the hamlet or farmstead. Yet such hypotheses have failed to engage fully with the reality of dispersion. The comparative investigation of nucleated and dispersed villages in Whittlewood has provided a unique insight into the development of both settlement forms, and has demonstrated that some of the assumptions made in previous models can no longer be substantiated.

The influence of earlier settlement patterns and pre-village nuclei

One critical relationship that we have been able to observe is that between the emergent medieval settlement pattern and that which existed before AD 850. Underlying both, it would appear, is a fully dispersed pattern of isolated farmsteads spread across the landscape. Of course, this landscape was not without variation, but we can confidently conclude that the routes later medieval settlements took towards nucleation and dispersion were not predetermined by earlier arrangements. For instance, the number of dispersed elements occupying the later village territories neither prosed nucleation nor caused dispersion. So, a nucleated village such as Wick Drove or Lillingstone Dayrell might develop from a sparsely populated landscape of small farmsteads, while the basis of similar developments in central Northamptonshire, at settlements such as Brissworth, Irthlingborough, Higham Ferrers and Raunds, would appear to have been a dense pre-850 settlement pattern. Following a contrary trajectory, the dispersed Buckinghamshire village of Leckhampstead appears to have grown from just such a dense base of farmsteads, while at Silverstone later dispersion appears to find few immediate precedents.

Thus, one of the cornerstones of the nucleation hypothesis, that it represents a solution to an overcrowded countryside, beset by internal boundary disputes, problems associated with movement and access to resources such as pasture and woodland, or the need to provide sufficient grazing against the expansion of arable, finds little support in Whittlewood. Nucleation need not be born of crisis, and nor need dispersion develop only where such pressures were absent.

Secondly, it has been possible to demonstrate that certain places exhibit a level of continuity between the pre-850 settlement pattern and that which was to follow. These earlier settlements have been called pre-village nuclei. They are represented by spreads of pottery no greater in extent than those found on the sites of abandoned farmsteads later covered by the open fields, and consequently should probably be interpreted in much the same way. Pre-village nuclei have been found to lie below both later nucleations, as at Whittlebury and Lillingstone Dayrell, and dispersed villages, such as Leckhampstead. In each case occupation, albeit on a small scale, can be dated to before AD 850. In other places, such as the nucleations of Lillingstone Lovell, Wick Hamon and Wick Drove, the pre-village nucleus appears to find its origins in the period 850–1000, the very date at which other dispersed elements, such as Dagnall in Wicken, also establish themselves. In their earliest stages, these too probably represent the dwellings of only one or two households, and could certainly not be considered fully-fledged hamlets. Few correlations can therefore be drawn. It is impossible to differentiate between pre-village nuclei which would either fail or grow. For those that did survive, it is equally impossible to identify why some should develop into nucleated villages while others would become simply one part of a more complex dispersed settlement pattern. Nor does the chronological dimension help, since both early and late pre-village nuclei might subsequently develop along different lines. Again, therefore, there appears to be little predetermination of settlement form. Whether a single pre-village nucleus or many nuclei developed into a nucleation or a multi-nodal village, a hamlet or farmstead, seems to rest in the critical phase of transition which has become known as the 'village moment'.

Of course, the physical layout of these early foci may have exerted some influence over the type of settlement that would emerge. The only difference, perhaps, between a polyfocal nucleation and a dispersed village might be the original distance between their pre-village nuclei. At Akeley, for instance, outward growth from two centres eventually led to their coalescence and the formation of a single nuclear settlement. In neighbouring Leckhampstead, growth was experienced at all the pre-village nuclei, but since they were located at considerable
distances from each other, outward expansion and infilling remained at a scale insufficient to create a built-up area uninterrupted by fields. A similar pattern may be seen in the parish of Stowe. Here there were four discrete areas of settlements, all of which may be called nucleated villages: Boycott, Dadford, Lamport and Stowe. These were even more widely spaced than the ends of Leckhampstead; the inhabitants of Boycott and Dadford, for example, were able to develop their own field systems. But in many ways, these four settlements may be likened to 'ends' and probably grew in much the same way from pre-village nuclei. But instead of forming a single dispersed village, the parish of Stowe would be divided into four separate townships. It is likely, however, that the routes to dispersion and nucleation were in reality far more complex than simply the chance location of their earliest centres.

Nucleation and dispersion: end-products of the same process

There can be little doubt that both nucleations and dispersions were the end-products of processes rather than unique events. In Whittlewood, perhaps in contrast with other parts of the Midlands, there is almost no evidence to support the idea that nucleation took place rapidly, or that it involved those living in outlying farms being moved or moving voluntarily to a new centre.39 Rather, our nucleations appear to find their origins in slow growth out from earlier settlement foci, perhaps coupled with the infilling of vacant plots. Currently we have no knowledge of the actual decisions by which individual houses were sites or how the early inhabited area was divided by gift, purchase and inheritance into messuages, curtilages and crofts. Nor is it known whether these villages initially grew organically or by planned stages. But if the details are hazy, the general trend for expansion from an original core is clear in many of the Whittlewood villages. In the same way, the small hamlet clusters comprising our dispersed villages also seem to have developed around and grown from very similar nodes. Whatever the processes at play, however, the Whittlewood data clearly stand in opposition to any claims that dispersion simply reflects stasis, the survival of an earlier and more primitive settlement pattern. Dispersed settlement developed as a consequence of dynamic change.

What appears to emerge from the evidence is that nucleated and dispersed settlements were in fact end-products of very similar, if not identical, processes. This view finds some support, for instance, in the chronology of their development: both nucleated and dispersed villages formed over the same prolonged period from AD 850. So the basic framework of the dispersed village of Leckhampstead might have already been in place by AD 850, but this was supplemented in the post-Conquest period by the addition of another distinct hamlet cluster, Middle End. At Silverstone, dispersion appears to have occurred over a period of 250 years, during which time first West End and later Castle End were added to the main village. Likewise, in Wicken, dispersion was sequential, with the addition of hamlets such as Elm Green and perhaps Wick Hurst to the three earlier centres at Wick Hamon, Wick Dive and Dagnall. But elsewhere, seemingly oblivious to the explosion in the number of settlements now in the landscape immediately surrounding them, places such as Lillingstone Dayrell and Whittlebury developed as examples of single-centred settlements. This common chronology and the interconnected process of outward growth from earlier centres appears to imply that many of the socio-economic influences and agencies that lay behind both developments were shared by the two forms of settlement.

If there were no fundamental differences between nucleation and dispersion, there were clearly subtle and important distinctions which, at a local level, resulted in one settlement form being favoured over another. The decision to nucleate or to disperse may have been made communally and consciously, but equally it may have begun almost imperceptibly. A tin shift in emphasis at any point in the development of a settlement might have affected a chain reaction with enormous and perhaps unpredictable consequences for settlement morphology. The decision of just one farming unit, for instance, to relocate to the vicinity of another might be sufficient to begin an irreversible process of nucleation which would ultimately affect the whole community. And the converse may also have been true: a conscious move away from a central place could stimulate a larger movement towards dispersion. In sociological terms, it is well-attested how the micromotives of an individual or small group of individuals can quickly escalate into a pattern of communal microbehaviour, a developmental model best exemplified by Schelling's 'segregated city', otherwise known as the 'sifting theory'.30 But what might drive the initial moves? And why should it result in distinct regional preferences towards either nucleation or dispersion rather than the blanket adoption of a single settlement form?

Christopher Taylor's observation that the boundaries between zones of nucleation and dispersion cannot be correlated with topography or geology, the amount of arable, woodland or pasture, social structures, patterns of lordship or tenure, or areas of high or low population, is a warning that no single cause is likely to explain their distribution.31 Far from being insignificant, however, it is probable that all had a part in the conscious or unconscious decision-making of rural communities, and other scholars have made fine cases for the overriding importance
of one or more of these causes in the development of regional settlement patterns, while recognising the complex interplay between these and other factors. Ultimately, however, decisions were made at local level, by people making a living off the land: by lords wishing to maximise their incomes through the extraction of tribute, services, taxes and rents from their tenants; and the peasantry itself responding to these demands and seeking to produce surpluses for sale at the market. What the land could offer in terms of the farming systems it might support, and how this land was organised, must, therefore, have been of primary significance to all communities, and must have been a fundamental influence upon how the land was settled. This relationship has long been recognised, of course, its most obvious expression the link between largely arable economies and nucleation, and pastoral communities and dispersed settlement.

But beyond the few specialist farming zones where topography, soils and climate dictated that animal husbandry and dispersed settlement was the only viable economic option, in most places medieval agriculture was mixed, combining the raising of stock with the growing of crops. In these areas, there was no overriding economic or practical necessity for settlements to take either a nucleated or dispersed form. Yet in certain regions one type eventually came to predominate. One reason may have been changes in their economic focus. In mixed but biased farming regimes, which strongly favoured either arable or livestock, small changes in the ratio of these activities were unlikely to force settlement change. This might be likened to warm water cooling by a few degrees but remaining in liquid state. But under more equitable regimes, small shifts might inexorably tip the balance in favour of one form of farming over another, with fundamental consequences for settlement form, akin, in this case, to cooling water crystallising into solid form as a result of miniscule changes in temperature around freezing point. This moment of transition, which may have been effected consciously or have resulted from global changes, might equally have arisen from small events, perhaps the failure of a single crop, or an isolated outbreak of animal murrain, or a small fluctuation in the local market. If of this kind, then it is unlikely that the seminal moments in settlement development will have left any trace in either the historical or archaeological record. Such invisibility might help to explain why it has so far proven impossible to be categorical about the underlying factors which led to nucleation and dispersion. Where did such equitable farming regimes flourish in the ninth and tenth century? The answer lies in the Central Province and, particularly, in the southern and eastern midlands. Could it be that small shifts of farming emphasis towards more extensive arable cultivation, perhaps affecting only a handful of individual communities in this core zone, led to the first nucleations, a concept that then fairly rapidly spread as the new cereal belt was expanded?

That nucleated and dispersed forms of settlement might form organically in accordance with natural laws perhaps offers a new way of thinking about this subject. It finds a ready-made home in the growing acceptance of the theory of complexity, current in both the physical and social sciences, which acknowledges the role of self-organisation in the development of composite structures. Complexity has provided a valuable model to explain, for example, the tendency for industries of similar type to agglomerate in certain areas, often away from their principal sources of raw materials; or the transition from weakly to strongly integrated systems, such as the shift from a local to global market, or indeed from water into ice. All these models provide close analogies for the development of medieval rural settlement of all types.

Choosing dispersion over nucleation
But there are clear indications that some types of medieval settlement did not simply happen, but were purposely conceived, encouraged and promoted in preference to other forms of communal living. This, of course, has long been accepted as a contributory factor in the process of nucleation, but there is now a substantial body of information to suggest that it lies behind dispersion too. Why, for example, in Wick Hamon around 1100 was a previously unoccupied part of the parish, lying 2.5 km (1.5 miles) south of the main village, developed into the hamlet of Elm Green, when there appears to have been ample scope for further expansion of the existing village core? Who or what guided or motivated people to congregate around what appears to have been a single farm at Dagnall in the neighbouring parish of Wick Dive, again in the first half of the twelfth century, in preference to the parochial village itself? What prompted the development of the proximal, but geographically distinct and terminally dependent hamlets of West End and Castle End around Silverstone or, in a similar move, the hamlet of Middle End in Leckhamstead, when their populations might equally have been accommodated in the principal existing centres? These questions are placed in sharper relief by other developments in the vicinity. Around 1100, new rows of peasant tofts were being laid out and extended from the village cores of Akeley, Lillingstone Dayrell and Wick Dive. A century or so later, a similar village extension was executed at Whittlebury, and in the middle of the thirteenth century also at Lillingstone Lovell. Those that chose nucleation or dispersion thus did so with full knowledge of alternative settlement templates.
This fact alone indicates that both forms of settlement developed as a result of positive choice. Whether the advantages of one form of settlement over another were real or simply perceived, they were sufficient to guide neighbouring communities towards different settlement models.

The advantages of nucleation have been well rehearsed and have been mentioned briefly above. There were disadvantages too. Primarily, the concentration of human and agricultural resources in one place divorced farmers from their land, extending the distance over which men, animals and ploughs had to be transported or vital manure carted. This time/distance deterrent was especially exaggerated in the midlands by the division of landholding units across the open fields. Against this must have been weighed the opportunities to extend the areas available for arable cultivation, the ease with which communal resources such as ploughs and carts could be pooled, and the more efficient management of the agricultural cycle, particularly with regard to the harvesting and ploughing of the demesne. But with the exception of exclusively monocultural arable farming regimes, of which there were very few, equal if not improved efficiency could have been achieved from a dispersed settlement pattern. The distance between the furthest furrows and the nearest centre of population would have been reduced, producing a more cost-effective method of farming which reduced the time spent travelling to and from the fields. This may perhaps explain the hamlet creations of Dagann and Elm Green, new satellites which allowed further areas of arable to be created in those parts of the parish furthest from the principal village. If a dispersed cluster reached a critical mass of around half a dozen households, problems of pooled resources also seem to disappear, for it is likely that these too would have been able to supply at least enough oxen for a single communal ploughteam. Co-ration then need not have necessitated total nucleation. Indeed, the farming of typical midland demesnes, characteristically dispersed amongst the peasant strips in the open fields, during the agricultural year's two 'bottle-necks', often cited as a driving force for nucleation, would have been made less not more efficient where it demanded the assembly of ploughteams at a single centre. Dispersed settlements would have offered a choice of rendezvous, which might be chosen advantageously to fit the cycle of field rotation or the individual strips that required work. Where space was not at a premium, where the significance of arable cultivation to the local economy did not demand that every available acre should be devoted to cereal cultivation, in these places, one might expect dispersed settlement patterns to be preferred over nucleated models.

The disadvantages of nucleation for more pastoral economies are even easier to identify. Animals not only require access to pasture, but also demand greater and more regular consideration than arable crops. Daily care is required for milking herds, while at a number of other critical points in the year—for example, shearing, calving and lambing in the spring, or folding during the autumn and winter—much time and energy was required to be expended on the herd or flock. On modern mixed farms, the greater attention demanded by livestock over arable manifests itself in the almost universal arrangement of permanent pasture around the farm and arable fields on the estate edge. Nucleations may have offered small public spaces such as greens, on which the community's livestock could be folded or overwintered, but private space within crofts was restricted. Livestock farming thus demanded a dispersed settlement pattern. It is probably here that the link between settlement plan and economy is seen most clearly. For, elsewhere, the relationship is far less clear; as we have seen, arable farming did not demand nucleation to the extent that animal husbandry required dispersal. Often, however, nucleation was a consequence of attempts to maximise arable production.

In many ways, it seems that the problems associated with living in both large nucleations and, at the other extreme, in isolated farmsteads could be resolved by the development of the hamlet cluster or small nucleation: particularly so if a number of these small foci were bound together administratively, rather than geographically, to form a more sizeable community. In such situations, households remained close to their land, had space for expansion, for the cultivation of vegetables and for the keeping of livestock, and had neighbours upon whom they could call. They avoided the deprivations of a solitary lifestyle, while also avoiding the restrictions imposed by larger settlements. When a number of these hamlets worked in unison, they could provide the levels of manpower and equipment to work the land efficiently, and could expect to sustain an economy which would challenge the largest nucleations. Dispersed settlement models must have offered strong competition to the nucleation model. In the end, perhaps for the smallest of reasons, one settlement type might be chosen over another. What precise considerations lay behind the critical decisions made by individual communities either to develop new geographically distinct nodes, to continue to develop pre-existing centres whatever their number, or to concentrate growth at a single centre may never be understood. But these choices need not have been profoundly different in order to produce very different forms of settlement. If the nucleated village was one medieval rural ideal, for others the dispersed village model, comprising a number of small settlement
clusters, must have been equally attractive. We might see the community at Leckhampton carefully preserving this arrangement, and the communities of Silverstone and Wicken actively creating such a settlement pattern, in the four centuries straddling the Norman Conquest. If it can be entertained that the model of nucleation proved so popular that it spread by emulation, there is perhaps no reason why the model of the dispersed village might not have been disseminated and copied in the same fashion.

Conclusions

Historians, archaeologists and geographers who seek to understand past landscapes are only too aware of the fragmentary nature of the evidence on which they must base their conclusions. Much of this book has been concerned with revealing the physical structure of a small part of midland England, the uses to which the land was put, and how it was settled. Our view of medieval Whittlewood has either been obscured behind more recent agricultural developments, or totally eroded by them. However, extensive archaeological investigation, rich documentary sources and the targeted exploration of the palaeoenvironmental record, the built environment and place-names, have ensured that the historic landscape can be reconstructed with some accuracy. The shifting location of settlements and changes in their form can all be charted over time, as can the arrangement of fields, pasture and woodland. Inevitably, the picture that emerges of more remote periods is not as full. Yet even so, the fundamental stages through which the landscape passed to produce that of the early Middle Ages, the landscape within which villages began to form, can still be identified.

There are no landscapes without people. What led one particular group of medieval inhabitants, the Whittlewood villagers, to adopt and develop new forms of settlement and to introduce novel systems of farming has been the focus of this book. Their testimony has been hard won. No document chronicles the moment of village creation, nor indeed any subsequent reorganisation of their plans. Similar silence surrounds the laying-out of the open fields and the parceling of woodland into enclosed coppices. But these people have left an imprint on the surface of the land, in the surviving shape of their villages, earthworks of abandoned settlement sites, woodland banks, ridge and furrow and scatters of pottery, all of which help to define the extent of settlement and agriculture. Together with echoes of earlier arrangements preserved in later documents, these have been used to explore the agencies that lay behind fundamental change in
the Whittlewood countryside between AD 800 and 1400, together with the ways in which the land was perceived, divided, organised and exploited. Critically, answers have been sought to how and why different communities developed alternative forms of communal living: the nucleated village, the dispersed settlement, the hamlet and the farmstead. Despite its title, much of this book has necessarily been concerned with the 'middles' of these settlements, not just because it is here that the historian and archaeologist can combine forces most easily, but because it is also here that clues to their beginnings and ends invariably reside.
Notes to Chapter 10: Implications and Wider Perspectives

1. E.g. Beresford and Hurst, Deserited Medieval Villages.
2. Maithland, Domesday Book and Beyond.
3. Binnsill, Britons and Ireland, 7–27.
4. E.g. Hall and Marriott, 'British Hall, Field surveys', Croft and Mynard, Changing Landscape.
6. Fould, 'Rockeringham Forest', 46–9; Bellamy, 'Anglo-Saxon dispersed sites', 33–4; Schumacher, Wyken.'


9. Discussion of names in field follows Gelling, Place-names in the Landscape, 335–45.
10. Gelling and Cole, Landscape of Place-name, 276, 278.
15. E.g. Finberg, Roman and Saxo Wbritons.