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‘Utmark’

The Outfield as Industry and Ideology in
the Iron Age and the Middle Ages

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Utmark, settlement, marginality and power in medieval lowland England

This paper looks at *utmark* in medieval southern and eastern England, the uncultivated and thinly settled landscapes of which are largely lost to us today, transformed long ago into arable fields and settlements. It will consider the nature and extent of such ‘lowland *utmark*’, the use of the concept of marginality in understanding such land, and the factors which affected its development, persistence and transformation.

Lowland England can be defined, for the purposes of this review, as the area east of a curving line extending from Tynemouth to the Bristol Channel (figure 1). It excludes the wilder and more remote parts of Britain, which obviously have more features common with the Alps or Scandinavia, such as the mountains of Sutherland and Snowdonia and the moorlands of Devon and Derbyshire. Lowland England, in contrast, is a land of gently undulating terrain, wide river valleys, temperate warmth and generous rainfall. Today, the south-east of England is one of the most heavily populated parts of Europe, and since the sixteenth century it has been termed ‘champion’ (or ‘champagne’) land by topographers describing this great swathe of intensively agricultural village-based economy which sweeps across southern and eastern England (although excluding the extreme south-eastern fringes). Archaeological and historical research has demonstrated that also in the Middle Ages, much of this region was also relatively densely settled and largely dependent on agriculture (e.g. Seebohm 1883, Maitland 1897, Darby 1977, Thirsk 1988, Lewis *et al.* 1997). In counties such as Northamptonshire and Leicestershire, the extent of medieval arable land can be mapped using air photographs and historical records such as field books (RCHME 1979, 1981, 1982, 1995, Hartley 1987, 1989) and shows that time and again cultivation extended right to the parish boundary. Such a phenomenon would seem to exclude the possibility of *utmark*. This is, however, far from being the case.

One key source of evidence for the medieval English landscape is Domesday Book, a detailed valuation of the lands of England compiled in 1086 for William I following his acquisition of the kingdom in 1066. Most entries in Domesday Book

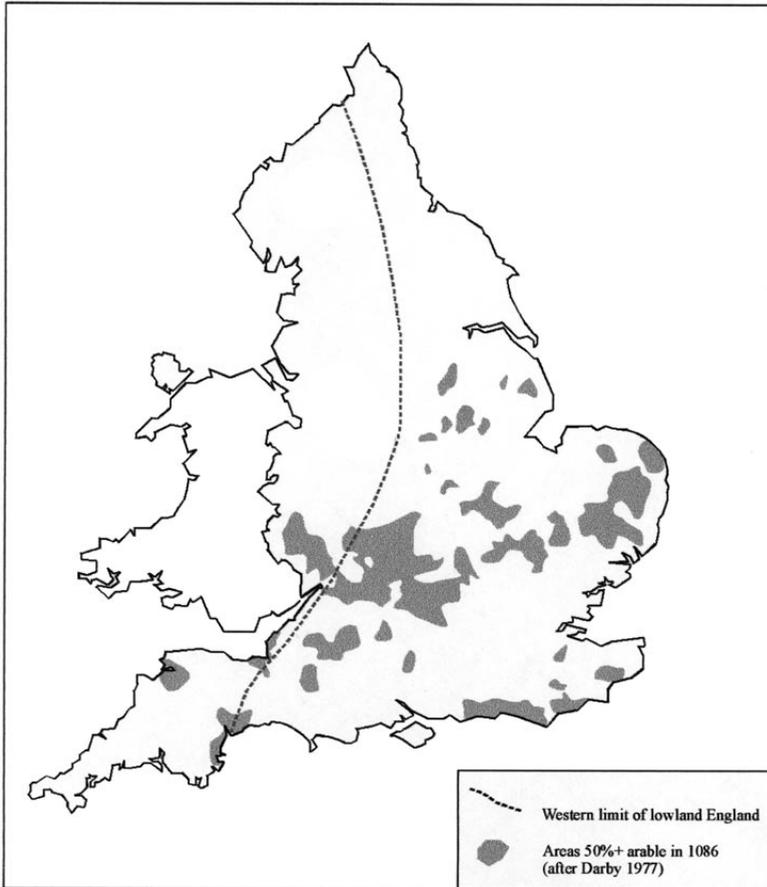


Figure 1

give an indication of the extent of arable land (measured usually in terms of the number of ox-teams needed to plough it) and the number of plough teams actually in use. Although there are many pitfalls in interpreting such apparently simple information, the figures can be used, with caution, to estimate the extent of arable land (Darby 1977:132). From this, it is strikingly apparent from this that across much of lowland England less than 50% of the land was under the plough in the later eleventh century (figure 1). Much of the rest was *utmark*, characterised by woodland, wetland, grassland or heath.

In the absence of human interference, trees form the natural vegetational cover of most of interglacial lowland England and so it should perhaps be no surprise that much of the eleventh century *utmark* was woodland (although it should be noted that none of the original natural 'wildwood' is likely to have remained by this date). Although woodland is extensively detailed in Domesday Book, the varied methods used to measure it make it difficult to arrive at a consensus as to its likely extent in 1086. Darby, for example, suggests that 'one of the outstanding facts about the landscape of

eleventh-century England was its wooded aspect' (Darby 1977:171), while Rackham estimates that only 15% of England was wooded in 1086 (Rackham 1986:75-79). Even Rackham's figure represents a significant proportion of the landscape. The woodland of the Weald in Kent covered around 6000 square kilometres, while on the Chilterns it extended across perhaps 2500 square kilometres. Although little, if any, of this is likely to have been uncharted or unmanaged, and a proportion would have been wood pasture or even open grazing, population figures recorded in Domesday Book do show that regions where woodland was most extensive almost invariably had lower populations than regions dominated by arable. The extent of pre-eleventh century woodland is even more difficult to ascertain. Claims that post-Roman England reverted extensively from arable to woodland (e.g. Brown and Foard 1998:89) are countered by others suggesting the impact of the post-Roman transition on woodland regeneration was low (e.g. Hooke 1998:145) or minimal. However, evidence from disciplines as diverse as place-name studies, palynology, archaeology and history suggest that the extent of woodland in the eleventh century was being actively reduced by energetic human endeavour, and that this had long been the case. A suggestion that as much as a third of England may have been wooded in the later sixth century (Stamper 1988:128-129) does not seem unreasonable.

Wetland is less frequently recorded in Domesday Book than woodland, although entries that do refer to 'marsh' lie almost exclusively in lowland England (Darby 1977:161). Yet, examination of the soils and sub-surface geology of the regions shows that the extent of permanently or seasonally waterlogged land – alluvial marshland (salt or fresh) and peat fen – must be a significant underestimate, as is acknowledged by Darby (*ibid.*:160) and reinforced by Silvester (1999:124) and Cook (1999:23). The largest areas of wetland were the Fens of East Anglia, which extended across around 2000 square kilometres, the Somerset Levels which covered around 600 square kilometres, with other extensive tracts in the Humber Estuary, the Romney Marshes, the Pevensey Levels and the Severn Estuary. Hooke has noted that fen and saltmarsh covered perhaps a million acres of prehistoric East Anglia (Hooke 1998:170-171) (and as sea levels rose in the post-Roman period it is unlikely that the region was any drier then). Rackham suggests that as much as a quarter of the British Isles 'is, or has been, some kind of wetland' (Rackham 1986:375).

Grassland is not indigenous to interglacial lowland England, here, woodland naturally colonises unless the grassland is carefully managed with grazing maintained to prevent it reverting to scrub and eventually tree cover. Although pasture is extensively recorded in Domesday Book, it is impossible to say how much of this was permanent pasture – grassland providing grazing for farm animals – rather than heath (see below) or meadow (prime grassland cut for hay). In an infield-outfield system, land further from the settlement was used for pasture and rarely, if at all, cultivated. However, this system had probably ceased to be widely used in lowland England by the time Domesday Book was compiled. From perhaps the ninth century, a substantial proportion of grazing land in many central English manors was not

permanent pasture but part of a rotational system of annual fallowing of between a half and a third of the arable land. Extensive areas of land reserved for permanent pasture were most widespread on two types of soils. Firstly, land which was heavy and prone to water-logging such as the clayland 'cheese' regions of Wiltshire (Lewis 1994) or the wood pasture of the Wolds, extending across perhaps around 1800 square kilometres of Northamptonshire, Leicestershire and south Nottinghamshire (Fox 1989). Secondly, there was land which was (or had become) thin and infertile such as the chalk massif of Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire (McOmish *et al.* 2002). As much as a third of England may have been grassland in 1086 (Rackham 1986:336).

Heathland in lowland England is, like pasture, a product of human activity. Generally, it develops when areas of poor acidic soils are cleared of trees but not cultivated, and become colonised covered instead by heather, gorse, ling or bracken (Rackham 1986:282-284). There is just one reference to heath in Domesday Book (Darby 1977:152-153), but this emphasises again the caution with which this work must be used. References in Anglo-Saxon charters and place-names with 'heath' elements indicate that heathland was more widespread in the pre-Conquest period than Domesday Book suggests (Rackham 1986:288), and its extent in the eighteenth century, as depicted on the earliest country maps, suggests that a significant amount of this survived the Middle Ages in counties such as Bedfordshire (Bryant 1826). In fact, much of lowland medieval England which was not arable, woodland, wetland or pasture (including extensive tracts of Dorset, Hampshire and Norfolk) could be defined as heathland. Its invisibility in Domesday Book may be because it was recorded under the term 'pasture'.

The above figures can only be rough estimates, and no attempt has been made to make them total 100% because the point to be made here is simply that, whatever the exact measurements, a large proportion of lowland England was still uncultivated *utmark* in late Anglo-Saxon lowland England. Although highly variable, most of this land tended to be characterised firstly by soils that were either heavy, cold and/or prone to water-logging, or thin, prone to desiccation and of low fertility, and secondly by lower levels of population than the arable-dominated lands.

This, then, is the essence of the snapshot Domesday Book provides of eleventh century *utmark*. Still, this snapshot was not taken to record a static, unchanging or 'finished' landscape; it records just one instant in time within a process of change in the landscape which was constantly ongoing. This process of change profoundly affected *utmark* in lowland England. Much of it ceased to exist in the course of the centuries either side of the Norman Conquest. The period from perhaps the ninth century to the mid thirteenth century was one of rising population and expansion of the market economy which generated continual pressure to bring new land into use for settlement and arable cultivation, making intensive cultivation and settlement of much *utmark* both possible and desirable.

The extent of woodland was greatly reduced in many areas. Much of it was turned over to settlement and arable. This started in the Anglo-Saxon period, and may have

commenced, as has been suggested in the Weald of Kent (Everitt 1986), with seasonal settlements or shielings located around 'dens' (OE *denu*), areas of grazing within woodland. In the Weald, woodland remained extensive but this was not the case in other areas. The development of the mouldboard plough, able to cut through soil and vegetation and also to lift and turn the soil rather than merely scratch a furrow, in the late Saxon period (Langdon 1988:88-89) allowed the cultivation of the heavy, but fertile, clayland soils of a broad swathe of central England that had hitherto been predominantly wooded such as in central Bedfordshire (Lewis *et al.* 1997) and the eastern English Wolds (Fox 1989). The mounding-up of the turned soil into long ridges interspersed with furrows warmed the soil and improved drainage on such heavy land. The extent of woodland loss can be seen in individual records of assarting, widely recorded in documentary sources, which replaced woodland with settlement and characteristically small, irregularly-shaped fields. Industry also put pressure on woodland: charcoal and timber were consumed in vast quantities by industries such as potting and iron working. It has been estimated that one small bloomery would need 40 acres of woodland if it were to be self-sufficient in fuel (Stamper 1988:139 and refs). A general picture can be seen by comparing the extent of woodland indicated by Domesday Book with that depicted on the earliest maps (e.g. Lewis 1994:177-179). As the woodland receded, so population levels rose: in Wiltshire, a comparison of Domesday Book and taxation records of the fourteenth century such as the 1334 Lay Subsidy (Glasscock (ed) 1975) and the 1377 Poll Tax show how population levels had risen over the intervening three centuries, and these records reveal a similar pattern across most of England. Rackham has suggested that a third of the English woodland of 1086 had gone by ca. 1350 – a rate of loss equal to 17 ½ acres per day (Rackham 1986:88).

Pasture also fell victim to the expansion of arable made possible by innovations in land-management techniques. Thin, infertile, dry soils such as those of the chalk could be rendered capable of producing good yields by a regime of manure spreading and the folding of livestock on arable land, which allowed the tideline of cultivation to creep high onto areas such as the grassland of Salisbury Plain. Even the steepest, north-facing slopes could be terraced to create strip lynchets which minimised water run-off, which firstly allowed the land to be ploughed without causing the soil to be washed downhill, and then reduced the propensity of the sown fields to dry out (Bowen 1961, Taylor 1987:71-93, McOmish *et al.* 2002). The vulnerability of pasture in the face of the seemingly inexorable demand for arable land is evident in the adoption of the rotational open-field system, one of the most fundamental agricultural revolutions seen in England.

Wetland too, was much reduced in the Middle Ages. The creation of sophisticated systems of sea walls, embankments and channels made possible the drainage, conversion to pasture and subsequent settlement and cultivation across great tracts of marshland and fen. In the Somerset Levels, seasonal settlement on the marshland was followed by permanent settlement protected by sea walls prior to

Norman Conquest (Rippon 1997, Rippon 2000). The same process has been dated to the tenth century in the Romney marshes and perhaps as early as the seventh-ninth centuries in the Lincolnshire Fenland and the Norfolk marshland, where cereal grain dating to the mid-Saxon period suggests that the reclaimed land was under arable (Silvester 1999:127-132, 137). This 'inning' continued apace after the Conquest. Even in the face of rising sea levels, most of the Pevensey Levels had been reclaimed by 1287 (*ibid.*:131).

The history of heathland has seen less investigation than the other types of lowland English *utmark* under consideration here, but the existence of many large common-edge settlements on heathland in East Anglia by the early post-Middle Ages suggest that extensive areas experienced settlement encroachment. Fieldwalking on the light sandy soils of south-east Norfolk has dated the origins of similar settlements to the late Saxon period (Davison 1990). These appear to have begun as an informal process of 'squatter' settlement or assarting from the heathland, a process which accelerated in the post-conquest period.

In spite of the pressures and the processes outlined above, by no means all the lowland English *utmark* was turned over to intensive arable and settlement in the Middle Ages as it provided resources which were many, varied and highly valued. Woodland was a vital source of fuel, construction materials and pasturage, and much woodland was intensively managed to maintain it and prevent the demands on it from exhausting the supply. The income from woodland could be higher than that from arable land, and at times more reliable (Dyer 1989a:43). The value of woodland is reflected not just in the profits that could be made from its products, but also from the lengths that manors lacking woodland went to in order to gain access to it. Charters and manorial records throughout lowland England show us a pattern whereby estates and manors gained access to woodland if there was none within their immediate territory by acquiring, or holding onto, rights to exploit distant woodland. In the west Midlands, manors in the Felden region maintained complex tenurial links with remote holdings in the wooded Arden accessed by long droeways (Hooke 1998:160). In Somerset, most of Neroche Forest belonged to manors located up to twelve miles away (Rackham 1988), as was also the case in the Weald of Kent (Rackham 1986:80-81, Hooke 1998:142-144). Given the pressures on woodland in the Middle Ages, both from assarting for settlement and arable and for timber, the suggestion that 10% of lowland England was still wooded by the end of the Middle Ages (Rackham 1986:88) is a testament to the quality of medieval woodland management.

Wetland provided fish, wildfowl, salt, summer grazing for sheep and cattle, reeds for thatching, and willow withies for making fences and buildings, resources reflected in place-names such as 'Fuelhome' (island of the wild bird, (OE)); 'Seals' (willow (Scand)), or 'Stergot' (sedge (Scand)) (Williamson 1997:42). It is clear from archaeological evidence that much energy and imagination was invested in these landscapes. The Essex coast was extensively remodelled by activities as diverse as water-fowling and oyster

production (Buckley 2000:10-14) while the extraction of peat in parts of medieval Norfolk was so extensive that the fenland landscape was turned into a series of shallow inland lakes (Beresford and St Joseph 1977:269-271). Thereafter, the income from peat was replaced by that from fisheries. As with woodland, the value of wetland resources is evident in the complex tenurial arrangements, which allowed medieval lords access to them. In Norfolk, for example, detached portions of the Halvergate marshes were held by parishes located several kilometres away (Williamson 1997:45) and a similar pattern is evident in the eleventh century in Essex (Darby 1977:157). Far from being considered 'wasteland', such land could be highly profitable, such as the Essex marshes, which were never drained as their owners could do well from the sale of wetland products in the nearby London markets (Rippon 2000).

Pasture provided grazing for animals, of which cattle and sheep were the most numerous. Animals were of vital importance to the medieval rural economy not just because of the meat they provided, or for their secondary products such as milk or wool, but also for their contribution to the arable cycle – namely by providing traction and, less obviously, dung. This was priceless as a source of manure for the cultivated fields, which would otherwise rapidly lose fertility. The value of pasture is dramatically evident in the response to the loss of grazing land in late Anglo-Saxon England as arable land extended onto former pasture, which seems to have been a major factor in the widespread adoption of the open field system. Larger expanses of permanent pasture were used by many different communities, some of whose permanent settlements lay some distance away. Evidence that this typically involved transhumance and seasonal occupation during the early Middle Ages comes from both place-name studies and landscape analysis. In Leicestershire, for example, Fox has identified a pattern of trackways as much as 20 miles in length connecting the Soar Valley to the pastures of the Wolds associated with place names indicative of summer-occupied seasonal settlements (Fox 1989:86). In north Hampshire, an arc of place-names with the element 'summer' in the sandy north of the county hints at a similar pattern of seasonal transhumance (RCHME unpubl. MSP report).

Perhaps surprisingly, given its lack of obvious resources and obscure place in documentary records, heathland was also valuable, although less so than woodland or marsh (Rackham 1986:291). Unusual uses of heathland plants included contraception (bracken) and burning heretics (furze and ling) (*ibid.*:295) but, more prosaically, heathland also provided grazing and fuel. Furthermore, from the twelfth century onwards the light sandy soils of heathland, such as those around Thetford in Norfolk, rose considerably in value as a result of their suitability for rabbit farming. Rather than declining, Rackham suggests that in some areas such as Middlesex, heath may have increased in extent in the Middle Ages due to overgrazing of woodland (Rackham 1986:291-292). John Bryant's map of Bedfordshire shows that the extent of heath as late as 1826 was still considerable, although clearly much encroached-upon by settlement.

The factors that determined which *utmark* land underwent intensification to settlement and arable, and which did not, are intriguing, particularly as the conversion of *utmark* to arable and permanent settlement has commonly been seen in value-laden terms. It has been described stirringly as ‘winning’ land ‘from the wild’ while areas for which this has not been possible are seen as remaining marginalised in ‘a primitive state’ where they will stay until ‘by experiment and research a way may be found, one day, to turn them to more productive uses’ (Orwin and Orwin 1938:20). Land which has supported settlement or agriculture only intermittently or at a low level, is referred to in implicitly derogatory terms as ‘marginal’ to settlement and agriculture, to be redeemed only by permanent settlement and cultivation.

This concept of marginality is interesting as it can express several different concepts in historic settlement studies. At the simplest level, a settlement can be described neutrally as marginal meaning simply that it is on the edge of something else. But more commonly in landscape studies, the term ‘marginality’ infers a more complex, and value-laden meaning. Environmental archaeologists have identified three different notions of marginality (Young and Simmonds 1995, Mills and Coles (ed) 1998). The first is that of environmental marginality. This is deemed to be dependent on factors beyond human control, such as soil type, climate or the incidence of epidemic disease. If such conditions are favourable, a human group can make a living from the environmentally marginal land if the need arises. But if conditions deteriorate, even slightly, it cannot survive. It is this concept of marginality which underpins theories of an environmentally-driven ebb and flow of settlement onto, and off, *utmark* in medieval England. Central to the concept of environmental marginality is the notion that some environments are inherently marginal.

Economic marginality refers to a situation where viability is determined by economic or technological changes. Economically marginal environments are those where exploitation has low profit margins and a high cost-benefit ratio. Economic or technological change can precipitate either abandonment or colonisation by changing the cost-benefit ratio. A downturn in demand for a settlement’s products or loss of technological expertise can render the effort expended in occupying or cultivating an area greater than the return. On the other hand new demands or technological innovation can make formerly unprofitable areas prime candidates for colonisation or intensification. Fundamental to this notion of marginality is the principle that marginality is relative, not absolute, and that environments marginal to one group or in one period may not be so to another.

The third notion of marginality is that of socio-political marginality. This is conferred by physical or social distance from the centre of power. Thus, communities may be considered marginal either because they are spatially isolated or distant, or because they are of a different religious, social, ethnic, economic or linguistic group, even if they are viable in their own terms. This may affect their viability as they can be affected by, but not influence, decisions made by those who control their destiny.

Which, if any, of these concepts of marginality can usefully be applied to

evolution of medieval lowland English *utmark* in the Middle Ages? Firstly, it is clear that environmental marginality is not an issue. The terrain and climate of lowland England are sufficiently benign that even a disease such as malaria, famously supposedly responsible for the abandonment of the Pontine Marshes near Rome (Cartwright and Biddiss 2000:9-10) seems to have had little impact on the East Anglian marshland settlement (Rackham 1986:389-390). Furthermore, as Dyer has recently pointed out (Dyer 1989b), the idea that the later-colonised pastoral and woodland landscapes are inherently marginal for medieval settlement (Postan 1972:15-26) is contradicted by evidence that settlements in such areas are often actually less prone to desertion than those in more 'prime' locations. In fact, the only parts of the lowland English landscape which are really inherently marginal for settlement are those stretches of the North Sea coastline vulnerable to coastal erosion. Dunwich in Suffolk lost most of its land and all but one of its 25 churches to coastal erosion, while several settlements on Spurn Head have vanished beneath the tide completely. Thus, it can be said that the only land in lowland England that could possibly be defined 'inherently marginal' for settlement has ceased (or is ceasing) to exist.

The concept of economic marginality, on the other hand, seems perhaps more useful to the understanding of *utmark* in lowland England. It was technological advances that could make possible the clearing of so much of the clayland woods, the

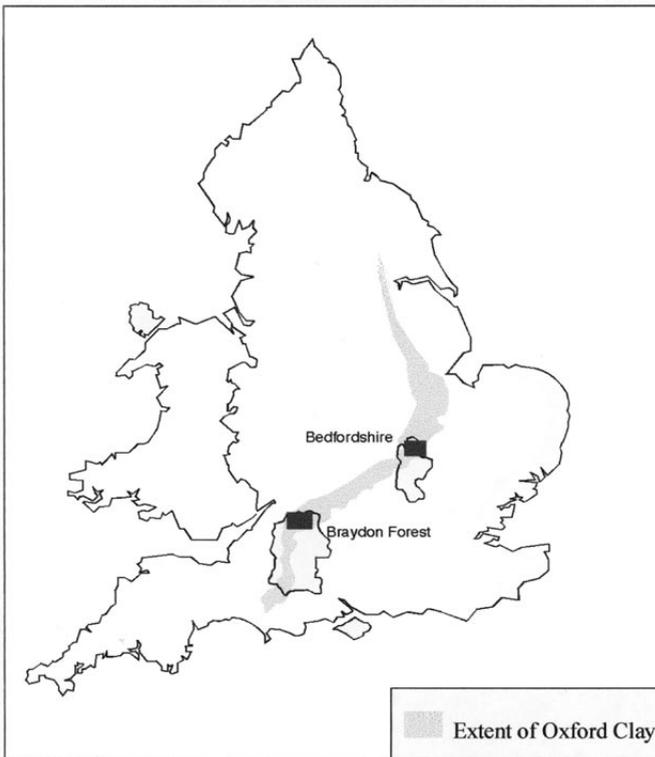


Figure 2

century charter when it is described as the 'silva quae appellatur Braydon' (Sawyer 1968:234, 345). It probably then covered an area of around ca.17,000 hectares. That this was still extensively wooded is suggested by the pattern of landholding, which forms long finger-shaped land units extending deep into the core of the forest (figure 3.1). These land units, such as Purton, Lydiard Millicent, Hankerton, Charlton and Garsdon take this form to allow each land unit access to woodland resources such as wood pasture, pannage and fuel.

A ring of settlements with names documented in the seventh - eleventh centuries (figure 3.1), suggests that the natural extent of the clayland wood was being encroached upon by settlement from perhaps the middle Saxon period. Some of these settlements have toponymical elements indicative of woodland (e.g. Wdetun, 680), Aescstun, 880), several have archaeological evidence of Saxon occupation, and all are the sites of parish churches in the later Middle Ages. These settlements appear not to have been nucleated, instead forming long interrupted rows, in some cases along roads which may have been used as drove-roads into wood-pasture nearer the centre of the woodland. The location of these settlements is also distinctive: they form a ring, approximately 10 kilometres in diameter, with each settlement lying at the periphery of their land units, away from the centre of the forest. Typical of a woodland landscape is the low level of population recorded for these landholdings: this was well below average in 1086 and remained so in the fourteenth century, when levels of population and taxable wealth were still well below average (Lewis 1994:179).

Braydon was almost certainly used by royalty for hunting in the Anglo-Saxon period, but its boundary was not precisely defined legally until the reign of William I, when it became a royal forest, belonging to the king and subject to Forest Law (Grant 1959). The limits of the royal forest at that date are uncertain, but probably followed the line of the outer boundary on figure 3.2, detailed in a perambulation of 1228, referred to henceforth as the C11th-C13th boundary. It is evident from this that the boundary chosen had little regard for the existing land divisions: for most of its course the boundary ignores existing land units and bisects them at will. Even an institution as powerful as Malmesbury Abbey appears not to have been able to prevent its holdings (figure 3.2, shaded areas) from being partly encompassed within the C11th-C13th forest boundary. Evidence that this was a source of resentment comes from numerous documented post-Conquest attempts to get their rights and land in the forest areas restored (Grant 1959). Notably, most of the manors whose boundaries were respected by the C11th-C13th forest boundary were held by minor thanes, who might be expected to have had less power to protect their rights than Malmesbury Abbey. In many cases, however, these would have been the very people upon whose loyalty the king's survival depended in the early years after 1066. It may have been deemed wise to leave these holdings, some of which may have been created anew by the king at the conquest, free of the inconveniences and interference of Forest Law. The inclusion of several of the pre-Conquest named settlements within the C11th - C13th forest boundary (figure 3.3) reinforces the suggestion that the C11th forest was imposed over an existing settlement pattern.

Following *Magna Carta* (1215), which strengthened the rights of the barons at the expense of the king, the legal extent of Braydon Forest was in 1225 reduced so that the early-documented settlements once more lay outside its perimeter (figure 3.4). This reduction was, however, rescinded in 1228 when the C11th-C13th boundary was reinstated. However, numerous small settlements which appear in documentary records for the first time in the period between 1225 and 1299 can be seen to lie within the C11th-C13th forest boundary, but to respect the 1225 boundary. This indicates that the 1225 boundary was more significant than its apparently short life would suggest. Most of these new C13th settlements may have been created out of former woodland as assarts, which are frequently documented at this time (Grant 1959:405). Both settlement and assarting seem to have been tolerated and even encouraged as a source of revenue for the lord and it may be significant that most of these settlements are on land held by the Abbey of Malmesbury.

In 1300, all of Braydon Forest except the land of the Saxon royal burh of Cricklade was disafforested (inner boundary, figure 3.2). However, the disafforested land was not sold off or given away, but remained under the king's control as unenclosed 'purlieu' of common land within which the surrounding vills had rights including grazing. The pattern of settlement and land use was very different to the area outside the 1225 boundary. There is no evidence for any significant medieval settlement encroachment: just a few place-name references exist (which may not indicate settlement at that date), while the few possible settlement remains visible on air photographs are more likely to be of post-medieval date. The distribution of ridge and furrow on air photographs suggest that cultivation rarely extended within the 1225 boundary (Lewis 1999:91-93).

The purlieu were still uncultivated in 1630, when they were described as still 'bushy and woody and overgrown with bracken and bramble', when they and the last remaining area of royal forest were sold off. This prompted a rapid expansion of settlement and by 1773, when Andrews and Dury produced the first county map, settlement had already encroached extensively into the remaining islands of common land. The distribution of narrow ridge and furrow gives an indication of the extent of cultivation in the nineteenth century, which extended right across the 1300-1630 forest. Cartographic and air photographic evidence suggests that this post-medieval settlement pattern was entirely dispersed.

The second case study is in north Bedfordshire. Although around 150 miles north-east of Braydon, north Bedfordshire lies on the same gently undulating, heavy Oxford Clay (figure 2) naturally given to oak and ash woodland. Certainly there are many similarities to Braydon. Both areas are bounded by rolling limestone hills to the north and by greensand giving way to chalk on the south, and both occupy the watersheds of major rivers. Both seem not to have been intensively Romanised, despite being close to major Roman roads, and neither have archaeological evidence indicating extensive activity in the Anglo-Saxon period. Both have toponymical and archaeological evidence settlement encroaching into woodland in the middle or

later Anglo-Saxon period. The fact that woodland in Domesday Book is measured in leagues in Wiltshire and by the number of pigs it could support in Bedfordshire makes direct comparison difficult. However, in relative terms, both have moderately high returns for woodland in 1086 (Darby 1977:181, 183), and both contain a mixture of larger and smaller extents of woodland. All these similarities between these two regions suggest they might be expected to have had a similar history in the Middle Ages.

Evidence from a variety of sources in north Bedfordshire suggests, as in Braydon, an intensification of settlement activity within a woodland landscape in the later Anglo-Saxon period. The incidence of place names with Old English woodland elements such as 'hyrst' (e.g. Bolnhurst, 1086) or suggestive words such as Swineshead (1086) suggest that the area had been extensively wooded. The presence of 'leah' toponymical elements (e.g. Thurleigh, 1086) suggests that this woodland was being actively opened up into settled clearings by the late Anglo-Saxon period and probably earlier (Bilikowska, 1980:36). This process may have been associated initially with industrial woodland activity, in particular iron working, as fieldwalking has revealed numerous concentrations of slag (Hall and Hutchings 1973:4-12). These are undated, but considered likely to be of Saxon or possibly Roman date (Bilikowska 1980:36).

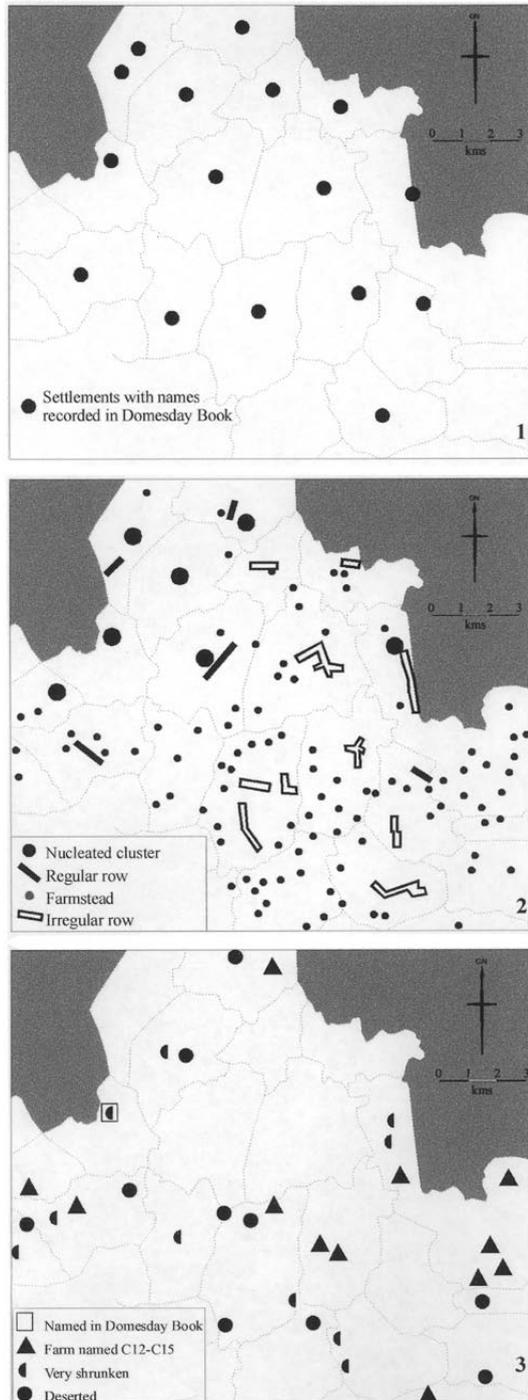


Figure 4

So far, north Bedfordshire and Braydon do indeed seem essentially rather similar. But the arrangement of land-holding is strikingly different. In north Bedfordshire, the central block of Oxford Clay is divided up into five parishes, which form regularly-shaped ovoid blocks, within each of which is just one pre-Conquest settlement which is centrally located. In each case, the settlement contains the parish church, some of which have pre-Conquest fabric, and in each case the settlement name is the name recorded in Domesday Book, suggesting it is likely to be the site of the late Anglo-Saxon manorial centre, and possibly the site of the only settlement then within the land-holding (figure 4.1). This centralised regularity, a stark contrast to the finger-like forest-penetrating land-holding arrangement seen in Braydon, seems to suggest a level of planning of the tenurial landscape in, significantly, a largely unwooded terrain. In parishes such as Thurleigh, the distribution of slag noted above favours the parish margins, suggesting that the woodland in even these peripheral areas had been severely reduced by the demand for fuel by the late Saxon period at the latest.

Thus, by the late Anglo-Saxon period, the pace of woodland clearance seems to have been significantly further advanced in north Bedfordshire than in Braydon. This cannot be assumed to have been the result of environmental or technological factors, which would have been similar for both areas. It is possible that the regular layout of the tenurial landscape of north Bedfordshire may be an artefact of political circumstance such as the Danelaw, as has been suggested for settlement and field reorganisation (Brown and Foard 1998), although this explanation is by no means universally accepted (Lewis *et al.* 1997:216-218) and the settlements are distinctly un-nucleated in form. Notably, and unlike Braydon, Domesday Book records that none of the five parishes were in institutional hands (royal or ecclesiastical) immediately before or following the conquest. However, what does seem clear is that this organisation (or reorganisation) of tenurial boundaries occurred in a landscape that was already largely clear of woodland and probably increasingly under arable cultivation, sometime in or before the late Anglo-Saxon period. By 1086, the population of the area was around average for the east midlands region (Lewis *et al.* 1997:160-1) and slightly above average in terms of the number of plough teams present (*ibid.*:166-167) - both in stark contrast to Braydon.

The central Domesday Book settlements of north Bedfordshire, co-located with the parish churches, appear to have taken the form of dispersed settlements rather than nucleated villages (figure 4.2) (Brown and Taylor 1989, Lewis *et al.* 1997:63-67). They are nonetheless essentially confined to one (albeit rather diffuse) zone within the parish and surrounded by the ridge and furrow of medieval open fields. The landscape is nucleated even if the settlements are not. Population levels in the area rose rapidly in the post-Conquest centuries: by 1377 they were higher than the most densely occupied parts of the country in 1086 (and this figure must have been even higher before the Black Death of 1348-9). Air photographic evidence shows extensive ridge and furrow, indicative of arable cultivation which appears to have been profitable: the area was above average in terms of taxable wealth by 1334 (Lewis and Mitchell Fox

1992:17). In tandem with this, a number of new settlements appear in the records for the first time in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (figure 4.2). These are commonly located on the parish peripheries, somewhat reminiscent of the later-documented settlements fringing the 1225 boundary in Braydon. The exact date of the creation of the north Bedfordshire parish-edge settlements cannot, of course, be assumed to be as late as that at which they were first recorded. However, their omission from earlier sources including Domesday Book reinforces the impression given by their peripheral landscape position and the lack of archaeological evidence for occupation pre-dating the thirteenth century, that they are both later and subsidiary to the central Domesday Book settlements within the same parishes.

However, in contrast with Braydon where there is no significant evidence sign of settlement shrinkage, many of the small post-Conquest settlements of north Bedfordshire became deserted or substantially reduced in the later medieval or post-medieval periods. The incidence of settlement desertion is another significant difference between Braydon and north Bedfordshire. These deserted settlements of the heavy north Bedfordshire clayland would seem to fit Postan's thesis of a retreat from marginal land in the later Middle Ages, were it not for the evidence that the settlements in Braydon did not suffer similar depopulation – they, after all, were on the same 'marginal' clayland and on the edge of a forest to boot. But the heavy Oxford clay was not environmentally marginal for settlement: the technology of the period rendered it eminently cultivable – indeed, clay soils, although heavy, are very fertile. This must surely be confirmed by the fact that most other settlements in north Bedfordshire show little or no sign of contraction, let alone desertion. It is notable, however, that, almost without exception, the deserted and very reduced settlements in the north Bedfordshire clayland all lie very close to the parish boundaries (figure 4.2). The 'main' settlements – those in the centre of the vill, with names recorded in Domesday Book and containing the parish churches – are not significantly reduced. The land which the parish-edge later minor settlements occupy does not appear to be significantly poorer in environmental terms than that of the Domesday Book settlements, but their position is weaker by virtue of their minor status. It is plausible that these settlements were in fact deliberately founded as economic ventures by lords while population levels and grain prices were high, and that similarly hard-headed economic decisions were involved in their demise, when pasturing of the land became a better financial bet. It is likely that although the economy of these settlements was viable, their position within the lords' balance sheets was not. Notably, the contraction of the north Bedfordshire settlements did not usher in a return to woodland, but rather to sheep pasture, allowing the ridges and furrows of the medieval cultivation to survive extensively until recently. By the eighteenth century when the first county-wide maps were made, north Bedfordshire remained largely devoid of woodland.

To summarise, comparison of the fate of the woodland *utmark* in Braydon and north Bedfordshire shows interesting similarities and differences. Neither is explained by the supposed marginality of such landscapes. Indeed, to classify either of the case

study landscapes as marginal ignores their vibrant dynamism, the high potential they offered for a range of different avenues of exploitation and the risks falsely characterising the factors inherent in their evolution. Environmental marginality is, as we have seen, irrelevant in this region, and although social factors such as tenure seem to be important in determining the fate of both *utmark* and the settlements within it, socio-political marginality cannot be seen to be the pre-eminent factor. After all, although minor and more remote parish-edge settlements became deserted in north Bedfordshire, those in similar positions in Braydon did not – in fact in many areas settlements may have been successful because of their very remoteness from centres of power – which could also be centres of interference and control. The concept of economic marginality seems to offer a model for the fate of some of the north Bedfordshire settlements within former *utmark*, but it is not factors of technological innovation which seem to be crucial, rather those of profit and loss. The decisive factors in action here seem to be those of the market, rather than those of the margin.

In conclusion, although little of it remains today, much of medieval lowland England was *utmark*. It was extensively reduced by settlement and agriculture throughout the Middle Ages, but was also valuable in its own right for the resources it provided. It was in no way inherently environmentally marginal to settlement, even of a fairly intensive nature. The fate of *utmark* seems to have been the consequence not of any externally derived factor of technology, economy or even socio-political status. Rather, it was due to case-by-case anthropogenic factors. Inherently, *utmark* could provide zones of opportunity: dynamic, resourceful, adaptable and resilient. The history of settlement in areas of both continuing and extinct *utmark* in the Middle Ages was increasingly determined not by environmental, economic or socio-political marginality but rather by calculated human decision-making and the short- and long-term consequences of those actions undertaken in a period when lords' decisions were increasingly determined by market and economic imperatives (Harvey 1989, Foard 2001:41). What we can see in the differential development of similar zones of *utmark* in the Middle Ages is one effect of a period when technological and environmental factors ceased to be the determining factors, and were replaced as the driving force by lordly self-interest and the power of the market.

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