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Early Medieval Settlement and Social Power: The Middle Anglo-Saxon 'Home Farm'
By Duncan W. Wright¹

THE LAST TWO DECADES have witnessed a marked rise in middle Anglo-Saxon settlement research, as archaeologists have become increasingly aware of the way in which this transformative period in English history can be recognised through habitation sites. Though a period during which individuals and institutions seemingly wielded unprecedented new power, archaeologists have struggled to identify many of the processes or 'motors' by which such authority was articulated in the landscape. This paper concerns itself with understanding one such driver, demonstrating how early medieval kings shifted power from tribute-orientated regimes to ones rooted in agricultural exploitation. The Church was fundamental to this shift in authority, and was used as a means of consolidating new power relations. In order to sustain more permanent clerical communities, the Church developed core agricultural areas surrounding their centres, known as inland, upon which were established early types of 'home farm'. In addition to their functional purpose middle Anglo-Saxon 'home farms' were subject to exceptionally high degrees of spatial ordering. Such definition of settlement space, which now included property plots and houses defined by boundaries of unprecedented permanence, allowed elites to shape and consolidate perceptions of social order in the landscape. Power was now being materialised, not only through agricultural production but also through the lived experience of rural communities, as a social hierarchy which considered the place of kings as divinely appointed became firmly established.

The early medieval period has for over a century been fundamental to the way in which scholars have understood the historic landscape of England. Until the 1950s, prevailing interpretations held that the character of the countryside was largely the product of the earliest medieval migrants who, after clearing the heavily wooded landscape of post-Roman Britain, established villages and open fields. Bede's assertion that 5th-century immigrants mainly comprised the three tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes provided a convenient framework for early scholars, but whereas variations in the form of cemetery assemblages across the regions of England were related to tribal affiliations from the middle of the 19th century,² it took more time for such disparities in rural landscape character to be related to ethnicity. Only in the second decade of the 20th century, with publications such as Gray's *English Field Systems*,³ were distinctive patterns of countryside and villages related to the cultural affiliations of 5th-century settlers. Such perceptions have since been dismissed by subsequent generations — both the chronological veracity and ethnic preconceptions upon which they were based have been rightly rejected — but the idea of the early medieval period as a transformative age has persisted in current scholarship.⁴

Early medieval scholars are today equipped with a growing body of data that allows the rural communities of pre-Conquest England to be viewed with ever-increasing clarity, as local and regional studies contribute to a gradually more comprehensive understanding of the national picture. The development of a more nuanced chronological framework has proved particularly beneficial for settlement studies, allowing archaeologists to associate more precisely changes to the countryside with social conditions.⁵ Yet in spite of the advances made in early medieval settlement studies in the past twenty years in particular, there remain significant challenges and areas for debate. In general terms, Anglo-Saxon archaeology continues to be dominated by analysis of cemeteries and gravegoods,⁶ and as

an area that emerged from the more established disciplines of history and Anglo-Saxon studies, written methods and texts also have an enduring influence.⁷ It is by no quirk of circumstance that many studies into Anglo-Saxon archaeology have retained a focus upon the two centuries preceding the Conquest, a period which boasts extensive and durable archaeological evidence and availability of written records unparalleled elsewhere before Domesday. The historical figures of the 'late Saxon' period also continue to loom large, and although earlier leaders such as Offa and Rædwald are well-recognised, the influence of Alfred and the later kings of Wessex remain especially prevalent within published research, and in popular consciousness.

Early medieval settlement archaeology is no exception to the more general trends, with the importance of late Saxon England as a period which imparted the most lasting change upon the character of the countryside especially emphasised. More than any other subject, medieval villages — the processes by which they came into being and the rationale behind their varied character — have dominated academic discourse for several decades, although sadly this has often been to the detriment of other areas of research.⁸ Perhaps most notably, the belief among most investigators that historic villages were a product of the late Saxon and subsequent centuries has led to settlement material from earlier periods being viewed as earlier stages of a village evolution process, with little regard given to the potential insight that the archaeology may provide to its immediate historic context. Settlement archaeology relating to the earlier medieval centuries has also suffered from a lack of chronological precision, chiefly as the result of un-diagnostic ceramics, which commonly results in the amalgamation of early Anglo-Saxon (c AD 450–650) and middle Anglo-Saxon (c AD 650–850) material into a broad 'early-middle Anglo-Saxon' period incorporating some four centuries of development.

Over the past two decades, however, a gradually increasing quantity of academic investigation has focussed specifically on middle Anglo-Saxon settlement archaeology so that there now exists, a substantial body of research on the subject.⁹ Developments outside of academia have also contributed significantly to an improved research environment. The introduction of statutory heritage protection in the early 1990s has resulted in the excavation of middle Anglo-Saxon settlements which had previously drawn little interest on the basis of their perceived research value alone.¹⁰ The availability of such new evidence has enabled more nuanced understandings of the changes that occurred across the English countryside between the 7th and 9th centuries. In particular, scholars have become increasingly aware of profound changes in settlement structure, architecture and the organisation of agricultural production datable to the middle Anglo-Saxon period.¹¹ In turn, investigators have associated such transformations with a dynamic period of change in society when increasingly powerful landowners and communities began to demonstrate a greater interest and capability in formally articulating the landscape.¹²

The advances made in both the available archaeological evidence for middle Anglo-Saxon settlement and the related progress in forwarding socially-meaningful interpretations are most welcome and has allowed the discipline to move beyond the lingering shadow of the medieval village discourse. Yet, despite scholars noting a transformation in the structure of both the countryside and the social institutions of the middle Anglo-Saxon period, the processes by which novel social conditions affected the character of the rural landscape have not been discerned. In this regard it may be surmised that middle Anglo-Saxon *motors* of change — the procedures by which powerful individuals and institutions articulated their authority in the landscape — have yet to be revealed. This paper is concerned directly with

this dynamic and seeks to illustrate possible motors of change in the middle Anglo-Saxon countryside of southern England. It will demonstrate that as the basis of early medieval kingship shifted from tribute-orientated regimes to ones rooted in agricultural exploitation, the Church was used as a means of materialising and consolidating changing power relations. In particular, it will be shown that the development of core agricultural areas surrounding early medieval estate centres—commonly known to scholars as *inland*—not only helped to sustain increasingly permanent elite communities but were also structured in a way which enabled leading authorities to establish perceptions of social order. On these inlands archaeological research is showing that early forms of ‘home farm’ were established, geared towards sustaining non-producing individuals within ecclesiastical populations. Distinct from most contemporary rural communities, these middle Anglo-Saxon ‘home farms’ display a great concern with the structuring of settlement space, an approach which allowed the identity of entire groups to be clearly manifest in the Anglo-Saxon countryside for the first time. Property and household plots were defined with great rigour and with greater permanence so that the social space of individuals could be used to reflect their place in the social hierarchy.

WARRIORS TO PRIESTS: THE CHANGING FACE OF EARLY MEDIEVAL KINGSHIP

Establishing the nature of social authority in the initial centuries of early medieval England is a challenging proposition, and archaeologists have struggled to discern the way in which post-Roman power was expressed. The small farming communities of the 5th and early 6th centuries lack much in the way of marked variation within or between settlements which may belie disparities of social status, and the burial record similarly lacks significant extremes of rank based upon the material culture deposited.¹³ Only from the very late 6th and 7th centuries can stratification in society be more confidently discerned in the archaeological record, but then only with slightly more clarity and with the assistance of documentary material. The earliest evidence for ‘kingship’ found in the written sources comes from the last decade of the 6th century and the first decade of the 7th, but the documents describe an institution already well-established, no matter how precarious the position of their individual rulers may have been.¹⁴

We can assume with a reasonable degree of confidence that by the middle of the 7th century those men calling themselves ‘kings’ possessed more deep-rooted and wide ranging authority, although archaeologically-speaking, identifying such power on the ground has proved problematic.¹⁵ It is unlikely to be a coincidence, however, that Anglo-Saxon kingdoms first appear in the written record at around the same time as so-called ‘princely’ burials were first constructed and it seems reasonable to associate richly furnished graves found at places like Taplow in Buckinghamshire with a powerful ruling elite, if not specifically with ‘royal’ authority.¹⁶ Significantly, the evidence from rural settlements of the period does not suggest that the growing authority of individuals buried in wealthy graves was founded on the extraction of transferable farming surpluses. Rather, the polities that came to dominate the early history of Anglo-Saxon England most likely developed on the basis of tribute prized from subject territories, with elites sustaining their power via motors similar to Iron Age tribal leaders. Early kings had thus not yet developed the means to exert power over estates but rather relied upon their ‘extensive overlordship’ to produce yields in order to maintain their social standing.¹⁷

Almost as soon as the earliest kings of Anglo-Saxon England become identifiable, however, the basis of their power appears to have undergone a transformation. From

around the year AD 600, English societies seem to acquire a greater concern with altering the landscape, a process recognisable in a range of phenomena such as planning of cemeteries in orderly rows and aligning buildings on apparently 'ritual' axes.¹⁸ This interest in the structuring of the countryside coincided with an intensification of agriculture across north-west Europe, leading to the development of more sophisticated estate structures and the establishment by landowners of more exploitative relationships with their servile peasants.¹⁹ The most conspicuous remnant of these more coherent agricultural units is preserved in the place names of specialised settlements once tied to high-status centres. Thus, Shipton probably rendered sheep to its estate centre and Butterley was primarily concerned with the production of butter.²⁰

Place names aside, when attempting to reconstruct the functioning of middle Anglo-Saxon estates it is immediately obvious that the majority of our evidence comprise written records produced by ecclesiastical houses. Researchers must therefore be alive to the possibility that the kind of agricultural regimes managed by the Church may not have been typical of early medieval estates generally, although what few sources we have relating to procurement by secular authorities indicate that elites probably structured their lands in largely similar fashion.²¹ Such consistency of agricultural arrangements should not come as a surprise, however, when the royal character of early Church foundation is considered. From their very beginnings, minsters represented a crucial means of sustaining royal authority, and were overwhelmingly established, maintained and populated by royal and sub-royal personnel. Perhaps symptomatic of this close relationship is the continuing difficulty archaeologists encounter when attempting to distinguish between settlements of secular activity and those of ecclesiastical character, without calling upon explicit references from written sources.²²

With regard to the rural landscape it is increasingly apparent that, in addition to diverse cultural accoutrements, the unique forms of land tenure and economic extraction that the early medieval Church brought were extremely attractive to early Anglo-Saxon kings. Together, these elements represented a key means for royalty to materialise their authority, allowing kings to establish a more permanent power base over more extensive territories.²³ From around the year AD 675, surviving charters bear testament to an unprecedented and dramatic increase of endowments to churches. The motivations behind the apparent fervour of investment in the Church which continued through the last decades of the 7th century are difficult to discern, but have been considered by some to represent a crescendo of the gift-giving exchanges which typified the lord-retainer relationship of early Anglo-Saxon kings.²⁴ While maintaining the allegiance of martial leaders through gifts was a key part of the overlordship exercised by 5th- and 6th-century kings, the vast contributions to the Church from the AD 670s more likely signifies a step-change in the motors of royal power.²⁵ Warfare was an ultimately costly, high-risk and unstable way of organising power relationships and although victory on the battlefield was enough to support local chieftains, the establishment of more permanent power over greater geographical areas required the development of more sophisticated economic and ideological frameworks.²⁶

To this end, the middle Anglo-Saxon kings of England utilised the Church as the primary means with which they created a more stable and lasting social power. As a religion, Christianity equipped kings with a hierarchical belief system with normative regulation and one which provided a lasting legacy through the written record. By granting land to the Church, Anglo-Saxon kings not only strengthened horizontal ties between elites in a similar way to gift-exchange, but were also able to reinforce vertical power relations by assigning

particular roles to individuals as clerics or patrons. The vast majority of such individuals were unsurprisingly royal or sub-royal personages, as the kings who granted land were in some ways gifting the property to themselves, with the added bonus of gaining the privileged forms of tenure peculiar to the Church.²⁷ The Church therefore provided kings with much sought after stability within the upper echelons of society, as grants ensured their immediate kin retained their leading status. Perhaps more significantly, however, the ideology of the Christian faith helped to legitimise the concept of kings as divinely-appointed leaders, creating social cohesion among communities that would otherwise probably be diluted as polities expanded. Yet, it was not only Christianity's conceptualised ideological stability which royal powers found so appealing from the 7th century onwards; religious lifestyles also allowed kings to introduce unprecedented stability and structure in landscapes and settlements.

STABILITY: IDEOLOGY, LANDSCAPE AND INLAND

While it has been shown that the similarity of secular and ecclesiastical estate organisation was probably a product of the royal-basis of most Church endowments, at least one vital distinction between elite communities before the Viking period is apparent. Early medieval law codes demonstrate that royal entourages maintained an itinerant lifestyle, moving on circuit in order to obtain food and other provisions from their subject territories. Royal households seem to have persisted with peripatetic courts until at least the middle of the 9th century, as settlements and estates were obligated to provide renders in sporadic fashion whenever the king was in residence. Indeed, that government was decentralised at least to some extent throughout the Anglo-Saxon period is illustrated by the preservation of the 'farm of one night' — the ancient food render provided by royal demesnes to kings — at the time of Domesday.²⁸ In marked contrast, many members of ecclesiastical institutions appear to have remained far more static in the landscape from their earliest development, requiring provisions to be delivered to them.²⁹ This is not to say that religious communities were comprised of wholly static and non-producing populations, and historical and archaeological evidence is consistent that they would have included among their number quasi-monastic personnel engaged with various forms of production for internal consumption.³⁰ The existence of individuals exclusively engaged in the monastic practices of prayer, worship and reflection nevertheless meant that a significant proportion of houses placed unique obligations on their servile communities, as clerics required a year-round stream of surplus foodstuffs for consumption as opposed to kings who drew provision from their estates more intermittently.

It is this characteristic — the more static lifestyle of at least some elements of monastic communities — that allowed clerics to develop more direct forms of agricultural exploitation throughout the 7th and 8th centuries. The main beneficiaries were of course the royal patrons for whom the control, allocation and procurement of a more diverse base of resources enabled them to consolidate the ideological and economic foundation of their leadership.³¹ A fundamental and hitherto little explored component of the regimes adopted by religious communities was the introduction of core areas of surplus-producing agricultural land surrounding church centres, which scholars have termed 'inland'. The existence of inland on early medieval estates was first suggested by Rosamond Faith, who not only noted the physical constitution of core zones but also their unique functions and privileges.³² Based almost entirely on documentary sources, classifying inland as a feature peculiar to the Church is susceptible to the familiar critique that interpretation is skewed by

the heavy ecclesiastical bias in the written record, and indeed by the end of the medieval period it is clear that inland took many forms and could also be found on secular estates.³³ The contribution of archaeological evidence, however, is shedding new light on the utilisation of inland on pre-Viking estates. The material record allows also us to characterise the economy of settlements on inland, demonstrating that dependent communities were tasked with generating a mixed surplus for their ecclesiastical lords. Such demesne settlements are best thought of as middle Anglo-Saxon 'home farms' — places established with the primary intention of sustaining the population of their estate centre. It is the material evidence derived from archaeological excavation in particular that is pioneering the study of occupation on the inland, and provides the greatest insight into the likely lived experiences of the people who inhabited middle Anglo-Saxon 'home farms'.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF INLAND

Before illustrating the way in which archaeological data can reveal the development of 'home farms' on early monastic estates, it is worth briefly reviewing the written evidence for the origins of agricultural core zones. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the corpus that has so far been identified is the significant geographical bias, with the vast majority of potential inland sites located in the western half of England. Such a disparity is unlikely to be purely a coincidence of documentary survival, but instead probably indicates that in western parts of the country at least the recorded exploitation of inland from the 7th century actually reflects an already well-established practice of the post-Roman Church. One such continuity has been noted at Glastonbury where King Cenwalh's (AD 643x674) early foundation charter included a bounded inner precinct which was exempt from geld by the time of Domesday.³⁴ Although recently challenged in a paper by David Pratt, Faith has highlighted the possibility that geld exemption by 1086 was characteristic of inland, and at Glastonbury the evidence comes from a place which boasts a tradition for an even earlier British church.³⁵

By far the most compelling range of evidence for early monastic inland hitherto presented, however, comes from Sherborne in Dorset where a tradition recorded in later medieval sources details the first endowment to the abbey as comprising a vast one-hundred hides granted at a place called '*Lanprobus*', again by Cenwalh. *Lanprobus* combines a personal element with the British word *llan* or *lann*, a term that in south-west Britain is associated with early religious sites.³⁶ Dating place-name usage is notoriously difficult, but the presence of the *llan* element within Sherborne's earliest charter suggests that the church was granted a pre-existing institution, together with its agricultural estate. Research by Katherine Barker has shown how a central component of the estate was an extensive inland, the integrity of which was maintained even when the estate centre was moved westward from an earlier focus during the establishment of the West Saxon See in the early 8th century.³⁷ Indeed, while various elements of Sherborne's estate were subject to modification in the subsequent centuries, the fundamental role played by inland in sustaining the monastic population is revealed by its existence at least into the late 10th century when the minster was re-founded by Bishop Wulfisge.³⁸

Holistic approaches incorporating documentary, place-name and topographical evidence have therefore gone some way in demonstrating that in the west of England in particular, core areas surrounding church centres were a fundamental component of monastic estates from the earliest medieval centuries. Despite these examples, the written evidence for early medieval estates remains slight and provides little indication of the

composition of inland, the functioning and economic composition of such areas, or the lived experience of the people who were tasked with sustaining their clerical lords. Research has also failed to engage with the potential material evidence for inland, especially the archaeological data that has been recovered from early medieval settlements. Archaeological investigation has located a number of settlements in close proximity to prominent early medieval minsters, the evidence from which allows us to explore the character of communities working on monastic inland: the middle Anglo-Saxon 'home farm'. The material suggests that 'home farms' on inland possessed mixed farming economies, the surpluses of which were vital in sustaining the proportion of religious communities who were not involved in agricultural production. Archaeological research also indicates that the stability of monastic groups was in turn reflected in the character of the rural communities which supported them, and with greater settlement permanence also came an increased concern with regulating the form of occupation. 'Home farms' were subject to a degree of internal ordering not usually encountered on contemporary rural settlements, suggesting that churchmen exercised a form of lordship which included a manifestation of Christian ideological power. Settlements were now to be structured around boundaries which reflected new perceptions of property and ownership, as individuals were designated a physical space reflective of their social status. 'Home farm' settlements on inland thus provided kings and the Church with a crucial motor of power, as both new economic and ideological hierarchies began to be reflected in the character of rural settlements.

MIDDLE ANGLO-SAXON HOME FARMS: THREE CASE STUDIES

The archaeological evidence from three locations best serves to demonstrate that within agricultural inland, the Church developed rural communities with greater permanence and internal organisation which ultimately represented new, more radical materialisations of elite power. The evidence presented here illustrates that inland was not restricted to the west of the country as the bias in the documentary sources would lead us to believe, but were economic units also typical of eastern England. In addition to the site at Cowage Farm, Foxley, near the important minster of Malmesbury (Wiltshire), among the most compelling archaeological evidence for 'home farms' located on monastic inland comes from Cambridgeshire where both the island of Ely and the fen-fringe village of Fordham have yielded important datasets for study (Fig 1). The village of Fordham is located approximately 4 km south-east of Soham in eastern Cambridgeshire. According to the 12th-century *Liber Eliensis*, Soham was the site of a minster founded by Felix of Burgundy in the AD 630s.³⁹ Furnished graves have been found in various locations around Soham but given its apparent importance is it surprising that more significant archaeological evidence for early medieval settlement has not been recovered. In contrast to the situation at Soham, Fordham possesses little in the way of written references to suggest that it was a pre-Conquest centre of any importance. It is significant, however, that at the time of the Domesday Survey, Fordham is recorded as part of the demesne of the royal manor at Soham. The minster at Soham does not appear to have been re-founded following the Viking incursions of the 9th century, and thus the lands of the church were probably ceded to royal ownership at some point in the late Saxon period. The subsequent history of Soham and Fordham also hint at an association of significant antiquity. The northern and western projections of Fordham parish consist of fenland which in the medieval period was intercommonable with Soham. Before the 17th century, numerous fields and crofts were located in this part of the parish, yet the continued dependent status of Fordham is hinted

at by the fact that the commons remained under the jurisdiction of a Soham manorial court.⁴⁰

Later written sources therefore hint at the close association between the two centres and indicate that Fordham was a holding of the church community at Soham from an early date. It is the archaeological evidence from the village, however, which illustrates more compellingly that the earliest development of Fordham was as a dependent 'home farm' within the inland of Soham minster. Excavation by Cambridge Archaeological Unit of around one hectare of land in the middle of Fordham during 1998 identified four main phases of activity, stretching from the 6th century into the post-medieval period (Fig 2).⁴¹ Phase I of the site sequence was characterised by five enclosures of variable size and composition orientated on a north-south alignment. That the enclosures may represent tenement plots is suggested by the presence of four *Grubenhäuser* and a series of pits. The excavators found assigning an absolute date for this period of activity challenging but the recovery of organic-tempered pottery, combined with an absence of Ipswich Ware — a ceramic recently attributed a c AD 725–850 lifespan — led investigators to attribute a broad date range of c AD 500–725 for Phase I.⁴²

Although Phase II was dated by Ipswich Ware to between the mid-8th and mid-9th centuries, two sub-periods of activity were discerned within the Phase by stratigraphic relationships. During Phase II (early), several of the enclosure ditches from Phase I were recut but the earlier pits and the *Grubenhäuser* went out of use. Fordham underwent a more drastic change during Phase II (late), when an entirely new enclosure system was imposed across the site. The new arrangement was characterised by a more uniform approach to settlement planning, as enclosures were arranged in a rigorous north-south and east-west orientations. Again the probability that these enclosures represent some form of property divisions was indicated by a series of post-holes probably representing the remains of hall-type structures. The final early medieval period of activity at Fordham was dated between the mid-9th and 12th centuries, when artefact density suggests a shift of focus from the excavated area towards the north-east and the area now occupied by the parish church. The likelihood that late Saxon activity was concentrated around the church is also supported by another intervention, which located a series of property boundaries on the site of the village school. Some of the enclosures from Phase II (late) continued in use into the subsequent period, however, and historic maps demonstrate that, remarkably, one of the middle Anglo-Saxon ditches was reused as a property boundary as late as the 19th century (Fig 3). The evidence from finds and environmental data suggest that throughout the early medieval period, the Fordham site operated a mixed farming economy and was not seeking to specialise in a particular resource.⁴³

Caution is required when attempting to identify the agency behind the establishment and subsequent developments at Fordham, but all evidence points towards the likelihood that the settlement developed as a 'home farm' on the monastic inland of the minster at Soham. In addition to the later evidence from Domesday, the topographical situation of the two sites strongly suggests that Fordham was developed in order to sustain their nearby clerical community. Both sites are located on the River Snail, which before the development of the Soham Lode in the post-medieval period, would have represented a vital arterial link between settlements. Significantly, Fordham is located upstream from Soham meaning the directional flow of the river would have been in favour of servile farmers transporting sizable agricultural renders to their estate centre. The approach to settlement planning, and particularly the restructuring of settlement in the 8th century also

supports the premise that the minster community at Soham played a central role in Fordham's emergence. Also relevant is recent work by John Blair exploring the possibility that formal grid plans were used in the construction of churches and the laying out of settlements from as early as the 7th century. Of central importance is Blair's conclusion that in the period c AD 600–800 grid plans were the preserve of monastic cultures who — articulating buildings and landscapes based ultimately upon Roman principles — were realising a type of imperial form and artistic display.⁴⁴ The approach to grid planning, which currently appears to have been orientated around short perch and four-perch modules has been identified not only on monastic sites but also their dependencies. At Fordham, Blair has argued that two phases of gridding are apparent, with the excavated enclosure system of Phase II (late) superseded by a new arrangement which included the middle Anglo-Saxon ditch which continued in use into the 19th century.⁴⁵

The archaeological evidence from Fordham presents for the first time a suite of characteristics which can be considered typical of a monastic inland 'home farm' — a rural community engaged in the production of a mixed farming surplus, inhabiting a highly-ordered settlement which was perhaps even laid out using standard measures by the monks of Soham themselves. Of the examples presented here, at 4 km Fordham is the 'home farm' located at the greatest distance from its minster but crucially both centres were connected by a navigable watercourse, facilitating exchange between the two. The yields created by the farm at Fordham would have been of fundamental importance to the economy of the minster, both for sustaining the community and for producing surplus which could be sold or traded. Discerning the identity of the individuals living on such 'home farms' is a more difficult proposition, but it is likely that the occupants would have had at least restricted access to the materials typical of a minster community, and were perhaps even semi-monastic brethren themselves. Somewhat remarkably the site at Fordham is not the sole example of an inland farm excavated in Cambridgeshire, as a strikingly similar example has also been identified at Ely, 12 km to the north-west.

Throughout the medieval period, Ely emerged as the centre of one of the most industrious and powerful minsters in the country. The foundation story recorded in the *Liber Eliensis* — the 12th-century chronicle of Ely Abbey — suggests that the minster originated as a double house established by Æthelthryth in the middle of the 7th century.⁴⁶ Within the modern townscape of Ely, it is not certain whether the pre-Conquest house was situated on the site of the existing Abbey, and both St Mary's church and the hospital of St John the Baptist have both been suggested as possible alternatives.⁴⁷ While the early history of Ely is recorded by Bede and the *Eliensis*, until 1990 there was little archaeological evidence for the Abbey or any associated settlement. Over the past two decades, however, a series of archaeological excavations has yielded evidence for middle Anglo-Saxon activity within the modern town. Few structural features relating to the pre-Conquest settlement have been located to date, but Ipswich Ware has been recovered from limited excavations at St Mary's Lodge⁴⁸, Chapel Street⁴⁹ and Chief's Street.⁵⁰ An evaluation trench south of the Lady Chapel also identified a large pit, within which was found the largest quantity of Ipswich Ware from an inland location outside of Suffolk or Norfolk.⁵¹ These investigations strongly suggest that the current site of Ely Abbey and its immediate environs was a focus for middle Anglo-Saxon activity, and probably represents the location of the earliest minster.

Far more substantial archaeological remains have been found approximately 1.5 km north-west of the present cathedral, however, at a site which extends to the north and south of the major thoroughfare of West Fen Road. Open area excavations in 1999 first

identified a detailed sequence of middle Anglo-Saxon settlement and later deposits to the south of the road — known as the ‘Ashwell’ site.⁵² Subsequent investigation at the ‘Consortium’ site revealed that the complex also extended to the north of West Fen Road.⁵³ The combined evidence from these archaeological investigations has revealed a site, the evidence from which suggests that the West Fen Road settlement acted as a ‘home farm’, located on the inland of the ecclesiastical community at Ely. Excavation at the Ashwell site was the most extensive of the two interventions and provides the main insight into the middle Anglo-Saxon community. The find of a single sceatta dated to AD 730x40, together with a pottery assemblage that included Ipswich Ware but lacked organic-tempered wares, provides a firm early to mid-8th century date for the first phase of occupation at the site. Unlike the settlement at Fordham, where the second phase witnessed a significant restructuring, at West Fen Road occupation was planned from the outset. The earliest phase was partly shaped by pre-existing Romano-British earthworks, but otherwise represents an entirely new arrangement, with a series of shallow, ditched paddocks and substantial enclosures ordered around a central trackway (Fig 4).⁵⁴

The trackway first located at the Ashwell site appears to bend northward and almost certainly is the same feature also detected at the Consortium site, around which further enclosures were arranged.⁵⁵ At both sites the enclosures, which were probably furnished with hedges or fences, possessed post-built structures probably representing a combination of domestic and agricultural buildings. In addition to a total of at least six occupied enclosures with internal structures, two large empty enclosures to the south were identified, and interpreted as paddocks for cattle herding. Blair has suggested that despite being partially shaped by extant features the initial phase of the West Fen Road settlement is again the product of gridding, orientated around two successive grids of four-perch squares.⁵⁶ This arrangement was subsequently developed and became less regular after the middle of the 9th century, with the addition of further trackways, enclosures and structures. Many of the middle Anglo-Saxon features were restated throughout the medieval period, however, as the first phase continued to shape the form of the site until its eventual abandonment during the 15th century.⁵⁷ Significantly, the environmental evidence from the ‘middle Anglo-Saxon’ phases at the West Fen Road — represented by a large macrofaunal assemblage and charred plant remains — demonstrates a community living in relative poverty, operating a mixed farming economy geared to large-scale food production.⁵⁸

The site at West Fen Road has yielded the most detailed archaeological evidence for a middle Anglo-Saxon ‘home farm’ anywhere in England, and bears a striking resemblance to the excavated sequence at Fordham. As anticipated, the economy of Ely’s inland dependency was diverse, and aimed at producing surpluses to sustain the clerical lords. Unlike the other inland sites presented here minster and ‘home farm’ on the Isle of Ely do not appear to have been connected by a river, yet at a little over a kilometre apart were located in close enough proximity to ease transportation of personnel and agricultural products. Like Fordham, the structuring of the settlement space of middle Anglo-Saxon West Fen Road appears to have been of fundamental importance, with boundaries delineated by the construction of ditches which were apparently in use for several generations. That the arrangement defined tenements is demonstrated by the presence of domestic structures within the majority of the enclosures, although some were apparently reserved for containing stock. Probably utilising two successive grids to lay out the 8th-century site, the rigour with which the inhabited space was developed at West Fen Road is again striking especially in the wider context of middle Anglo-Saxon settlements. Such an

approach reflects a fundamental concern with the definition of social space and an almost obsessive perception of order which is rarely seen on contemporary sites. It is in this aspect of 'home farms' on inland that we most clearly view the extension of the Christian ideology of the Church — the status of individuals was now defined in the landscape, with each allotted a physical space within a planned settlement relevant to their standing within society.

Both Fordham and West Fen Road, Ely, have yielded vital archaeological data relating to middle Anglo-Saxon 'home farms' within ecclesiastical inland. Together, they are sites of remarkably similar character — both easily accessible to their parent minster by water or land, they were established in order to produce a mixed agricultural surplus. Furthermore, Fordham and West Fen Road were also developed to define the lived experience of their inhabitants as much as they were to meet pragmatic needs. While Blair's case for gridding on monastic sites is convincing, we should not be misled in viewing the emergence of greater permanence and order on rural settlements as exclusive to the Church. In fact, Cambridgeshire in particular boasts a series of middle Anglo-Saxon sites which, like Fordham and West Fen Road, featured ditched enclosures from the outset.⁵⁹ In addition to the middle Anglo-Saxon settlement investigated on the outskirts of Godmanchester,⁶⁰ an intriguing early medieval occupation sequence has been excavated in the village of Cottenham on the southern edge of the fens.⁶¹ From as early as the 8th century, a series of deep, more permanent ditches was dug at Cottenham, forming a radial arrangement which the excavator, Richard Mortimer, interpreted as the beginnings of the toft system of personal property plots.⁶² Attempting to explain the increased use of boundaries on occupation sites throughout the middle Anglo-Saxon period, Helena Hamerow has suggested that many originated as a result of animals being kept closer to settlements. The high incidence of bounded sites found in Cambridgeshire in particular, Hamerow argues, is likely a result of the acute shortage of land for winter grazing around the fenland fringe.⁶³

Sites such as Godmanchester and Cottenham therefore reflect that communities across the social spectrum were responding to changing conditions — probably a greater pressure on pastoral resources — in at least basically similar ways. In spite of this caveat, we see at Fordham and West Fen Road sites of particular character, due to their origins as 'home farms' for important early minsters. Within the broader trend therefore, the conditions of lordship under which middle Anglo-Saxon sites developed was crucial in shaping their function and form.⁶⁴ One final example of a settlement within a monastic inland illustrates that the archaeological evidence for middle Anglo-Saxon 'home farms' is not the preserve of eastern England. The historic town of Malmesbury is located in north-west Wiltshire, on the edge of the Cotswolds. Occupying a steep-sided triangular promontory between the two branches of the Bristol Avon, Malmesbury is best known for its role as a *burh* — one of a network of defensible places developed to inhibit Viking activities from the 9th century. Unlike some other *burhs* which were founded on *de-novo* sites, Malmesbury was an important centre of greater antiquity.

Recorded in the 12th-century *Eulogium Historiarum*, the foundation tradition of Malmesbury Abbey relates the way in which, in the middle of the 7th century, an Irish monk by the name of *Malidub* arrived at a fortified 'castellum' called *Caer Bladon*. Compiled some 500 years later, scholars would be justified in questioning the veracity of the story found in the *Eulogium*. Yet, archaeological evidence from the town environs supports the premise that the Malmesbury origin myth may in fact preserve something of the historical reality —

excavation at Nun's Walk along the eastern arm of the town wall recovered evidence that the medieval defences were developed on the ramparts of an Iron Age hillfort.⁶⁵ While an investigation of limited extent, the findings of the intervention increase the likelihood that Malmesbury originated as a late prehistoric promontory fort, an idea earlier forwarded on the basis of topography alone by Peter Fowler.⁶⁶ The presence of an early minster is supported by the recovery of organic-tempered wares from various locations across Malmesbury, and a penny minted under Cynewulf (AD 757–786) was also found during a watching brief in the middle of the town.⁶⁷

Situated in a hotly contested frontier which extended into north Hampshire and Berkshire during the middle Anglo-Saxon period, the political significance of middle Anglo-Saxon Malmesbury is attested by existing charters of Wessex and Mercia, both claiming the authority to grant lands to the minster. In an attempt to protect the future of the ecclesiastical community from such political wrangling, Aldhelm — abbot of Malmesbury from AD 675 — believed it necessary to obtain special privileges.⁶⁸ Such action was apparently to no avail, as a number of estates attached to the minster, such as Tockenham and Purton, continued to be granted by both royal houses throughout the 8th century. Malmesbury was therefore a minster of great significance by at least the late 7th century situated within an extensive estate called 'Brokenborough', recorded in two 10th-century charters and probably representing the same unit which later became the demesne lands of the *burh*. Within this large estate, archaeological investigation has recovered evidence for a middle Anglo-Saxon 'home farm', located 2.5 km south-west of Malmesbury at a site near Cowage Farm in Foxley. A settlement complex on the south side of the Sherston branch of the River Avon was first recognised as cropmarks on aerial photographs in 1975, prompting a geophysical survey and small scale excavation of the site.⁶⁹

Investigation demonstrated that the settlement is characterised by a cluster of rectangular timber buildings, arranged within highly regular rectilinear enclosures. The focus of the complex appears to have been around a single central hall — labelled 'Structure B' by investigators (Fig 5). Set apart from the main collection of buildings, 'Structure A' is an E/W aligned building located with its own enclosure and with what aerial photographs appear to show as an apsidal-ended eastern end. The lead researcher, John Hinchliffe, draws comparison with the church at St-Paul-in-the-Bail, Lincoln and it must be highly likely that Structure A also represents a church. Both structures were subject to excavation in 1983, revealing post-pit construction techniques characteristic of other elite settlement complexes, such as Cowdery's Down, Hampshire.⁷⁰ A number of the smaller structures were also sectioned, demonstrating that post-in-trench construction was also in use. A single radiocarbon date from the charcoal fill of one of these smaller features (Structure C) produced a date range between the mid-6th and mid-7th centuries.⁷¹

The investigations at Cowage Farm, Foxley were therefore of limited extent, but the archaeological evidence derived is nevertheless sufficient to suggest that the site originated as a middle Anglo-Saxon 'home farm' located within the inland of the minster at Malmesbury. The size and permanence of ecclesiastical community at Malmesbury, established by at least the middle of the 7th century, would have required exceptional provisioning needs from the outset. The religious community therefore began to exploit their immediate agricultural hinterland in a more systematic fashion, developing a 'home farm' within the inland of the 100 hide Brokenborough estate. Due to the restricted scale of the excavation undertaken to date, the economy of the Cowage Farm site is difficult to characterise, and indeed many aspects of the settlement continue to be enigmatic. For

example, it is difficult to reconcile the scale and architectural sophistication of the buildings at Cowage Farm with the other 'home farms' presented here and in this regard the Wiltshire site has more in common with excavated aristocratic residences such as Cowdery's Down. It is likely that this is simply the result of greater investment in their dependent settlements by the nascent community at Malmesbury, but serves as a reminder that not all monastic estates would have been managed along identical lines, nor indeed with equivalent resources.

Aside from the architectural complexity of the Cowage Farm settlement, many other elements of the site are consistent with the archaeological profiles of the 'home farms' at Fordham and West Fen Road, Ely. In a mirror image of the juxtaposition of Soham and Fordham, the service community at Cowage Farm was situated upstream from the minster at Malmesbury. The Sherston branch of the Bristol Avon could thus be used to facilitate the transportation of farm surpluses downstream to the ecclesiastical community located around 2.5 km to the north-east. Based upon the morphology of the settlement the investigators suggested at least two phases of settlement, with the main rectilinear cluster representing an initial phase laid out using grids probably based around a single perch. The church and two of the more westerly buildings of the complex appear to be part of a distinct subsequent phase due to their alternative alignment which matches that of the existing chapel at Foxley.⁷² Indeed, that Cowage Farm was serviced by a church at a later date may reflect something of the same concern on the part of the monks of Malmesbury which had earlier led them to invest heavily in the architecture of the otherwise typical 'home farm', a site laid out with the same rigour as the settlements in Cambridgeshire. Again, the definition of settlement space seems to have been of primary importance to the founders of the dependency, allowing elite authorities to shape and consolidate perceptions of social order.

CONCLUSION: HOME FARMS AND MIDDLE ANGLO-SAXON SOCIAL POWER

This article has been primarily concerned with understanding how early medieval kings shifted power from tribute-orientated regimes which characterised the first two centuries of Anglo-Saxon England, to a situation where their power was ultimately derived from a combination of agricultural exploitation and Christian ideology. The focus has been not so much how kings come to power, but how during the middle Anglo-Saxon period they sought to retain that power. From the 7th century onward, rapidly expanding polities required a shift of both the economic and ideological powerbase and kings were to remain as important martial figureheads throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, but this could no longer be the sole derivation of their authority. The Church represented the primary medium through which royal lineages could undertake this shift, but until now archaeologists have not always sought to unpick the processes or 'motors' by which this change was achieved. It has been argued here that the establishment of middle Anglo-Saxon 'home farms' represents one such crucial motor of change. Many members of ecclesiastical communities were more permanent than their secular counterparts and required year-round provision, a need met partly by specialised dependent settlements located on vast estates many of which have retained the name of the resources they were concerned with producing. Underpinning such specialisation in the immediate hinterland or inland of minsters, however, were 'home farms', communities producing mixed farming surplus which was vital in sustaining their clerical lords.

The middle Anglo-Saxon 'home farms' of Fordham, West Fen Road and Cowage Farm presented here therefore met a functional need: providing for monastic communities ,

many of whom were not engaged with agricultural production. This in itself illustrates a more exploitative approach to farming than is typical of the first two centuries of the early medieval period, and suggests at least a degree of technological improvement in agriculture.⁷³ The sites of service communities were carefully chosen, accessible by water where possible to ease transportation of often bulky renders. Yet, the character of middle Anglo-Saxon ‘home farms’ illustrates that they were not developed with the sole intention of feeding mouths, but rather were a means of materialising new perceptions of social order. The internal arrangement of ‘home farms’ was highly regulated to the extent that they were laid out on standard grids using techniques ultimately derived from Roman *agrimensores*. Articulating settlements in such a way was of course another continental cultural accoutrement with which the Church was so clearly preoccupied, but moreover it provided a structural embodiment of more stable and lasting social power. The introduction of tenement plots defined by substantial boundaries represents a shift in concepts of social space, and reveals how elites were beginning to materialise their power through new means. Christianity furnished kings with a hierarchical belief system which could now be manifest within the hierarchical structure of increasingly permanent settlements — the ideological position of an individual in society was now both reflected and reinforced by their physical place in a settlement. The middle Anglo-Saxon ‘home farm’ thus reveals a motor of social change — just as the authority of kings was now divinely appointed, so too was the status of servile peasants as social power was now materialised through the lived experience of those working the rural landscape of Anglo-Saxon England.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Lib El: Liber Eliensis

VCH: Victoria County History

FIG 1

Location of case study sites discussed in the text. *Drawing by D Wright.*

FIG 2

Settlement sequence at Fordham, Cambridgeshire. The site appears to have undergone two phases of planning, with the second grid-plan more regular than the first. *Reproduced with the kind permission of Birmingham Archaeology. Patrick and Rátkai 2011 Fig 3.2, 43. © Birmingham Archaeology.*

FIG 3

The Phase II (late) enclosure arrangement excavated at Hillside Meadow, Fordham, superimposed onto a First Edition Ordnance Survey 25" Map. Remarkably, some elements of the 8th-century enclosure system continued in use as property boundaries in the village into the 19th century. *Plan by D. Wright, after Patrick and Rátkai 2011, Fig 3.25, 103.*

FIG 4

Conjectural reconstruction of the early 8th to mid-9th-century settlement features at the Ashwell site, West Fen Road, Ely. The network of enclosures and structures were arranged around a spinal trackway that curved northward where it was also identified at the Consortium site. *Reproduced with the kind permission of Richard Mortimer and Oxford Archaeology East. Mortimer et al 2005. © Oxford Archaeology East.*

FIG 5

Plan of features at Cowage Farm, Foxley. The central cluster of the complex around Structure B appears to be the first phase of the settlement, laid out on a grid. The site, which probably represents a middle Anglo-Saxon 'home farm' for the minster at Malmesbury was later furnished with a church — Structure A. *Reproduced with the kind permission of John Hinchliffe. Plan by D. Wright, after Hinchliffe 1986, fig 1.*

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² Eg Roach Smith 1848; Wright 1852.

³ Gray 1915.

⁴ Eg Hamerow 2012; Rippon 2012; Williamson 2013.

⁵ Eg Hamerow 2012.

⁶ Eg Lucy 2000; Penn and Brugman 2007; Sayer and Williams 2009.

⁷ Campbell 2011, 956.

⁸ Jones 2010, 25–7.

⁹ Eg Hamerow 1991; Brown and Foard 1998; Reynolds 2003.

¹⁰ Eg Mortimer 2000; Hardy et al 2007.

¹¹ Hamerow 2002, 191; Wickham 2005; Rippon 2008, 117.

¹² Eg Blair 2005, 52.

¹³ Geake 1999.

¹⁴ Bassett 1989, 3.

¹⁵ See Dickinson and Griffiths 1999.

¹⁶ Carver 2005.

¹⁷ Faith 1997, 5–8.

¹⁸ Blair 2005, 52, 252.

¹⁹ Hooke 2010, 316; Rippon 2010.

²⁰ Fox 2008.

²¹ Jones 1979; Hallam 1988. See Williamson 2013, 25–30 for discussion of the key debates around 'multiple estates'.

²² See Rahtz 1973; Williams et al 1985; Pestell 2004, 40–50; Blair 2005, 204–11; Loveluck 2007, 148–59; Gittos 2010, 827–8.

²³ Scull 1999.

²⁴ Eg Charles-Edwards 1976, 186–9.

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- ²⁵ The evolving role of gift-exchange as a means of consolidating lord-retainer relationships can also be seen in the changing status of metalworkers through the Anglo-Saxon period. In the laws of Ine the smith was a man who belonged to his lord, and archaeology demonstrates how smithies were habitually located within high-status settlement complexes. By the ninth century, however, metalworkers assumed a more prosaic position, and the laws of Alfred depict the smith as a businessman engaged in everyday dealings with clients. See Campbell 1986, 138; Wright 2010a.
- ²⁶ DeMarrais et al 1996, 31; Scull 1999.
- ²⁷ Cubitt 1995, 69; Blair 2005, 90; Urbańczyk 2003.
- ²⁸ Stafford 1980.
- ²⁹ Blair 2005, 252.
- ³⁰ Huntley and Rackham 2007, 122–4.
- ³¹ DeMarrais et al 1996, 28–30.
- ³² Faith 1997, 30–44; although see Pratt 2013 for critique of Faith’s model, especially the issue of pre-Conquest geld exemption.
- ³³ Blair 2005, 253.
- ³⁴ Costen 1992, 64–5.
- ³⁵ Pratt 2013, 2–18; Faith 1997, 21.
- ³⁶ Cf Padel 1976–7; Davies 1978, 37; Turner 2003.
- ³⁷ Barker 1984; see also Faith 1997, 19–24.
- ³⁸ Keen 1984, 221.
- ³⁹ *Lib El*. Book I, xi.
- ⁴⁰ VCH Cambs 1938, 320–2.
- ⁴¹ Patrick and Rátkai 2011.
- ⁴² Patrick and Rátkai 2011, 101–3; Blinkhorn and Dudd 2012.
- ⁴³ Patrick and Rátkai 2011, 104–5.
- ⁴⁴ Blair 2013, 54.
- ⁴⁵ Blair 2013, 50, fig 26.
- ⁴⁶ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Garmonsway 1972, 34–5).
- ⁴⁷ Keynes 2003, 32.
- ⁴⁸ Cambridge Historic Environment Record No: CB17818.
- ⁴⁹ Cambridge Historic Environment Record No: CB15532.
- ⁵⁰ Cambridge Historic Environment Record No: CB15534.
- ⁵¹ Cambridge Historic Environment Record No: CB15021.
- ⁵² Mortimer et al 2005.
- ⁵³ Mudd and Webster 2011.
- ⁵⁴ Mortimer et al 2005, 29–30.
- ⁵⁵ Mudd and Webster 2011, 31.
- ⁵⁶ Blair 2013, 33.
- ⁵⁷ Mortimer et al 2005, 29–32.
- ⁵⁸ Mortimer et al 2005, 144–9; Mudd and Webster 2011, 132.
- ⁵⁹ Hamerow 2012, 73.
- ⁶⁰ Gibson and Murray 2003.
- ⁶¹ Mortimer 2000.
- ⁶² Mortimer 2000, 10–12.
- ⁶³ Hamerow 2012, 89.

⁶⁴ Wright 2010b.

⁶⁵ Longman 2006; Collard and Havard 2011.

⁶⁶ Fowler, 1971.

⁶⁷ Wiltshire and Swindon Historic Environment Record No: 2007:038.

⁶⁸ Kelly 2005, 3-6.

⁶⁹ Hinchliffe 1986, 242–5.

⁷⁰ Millet and James 1983.

⁷¹ Hinchliffe 1986, 250–3.

⁷² Blair 2013, 27.

⁷³ Hooke 2010, 316.