

Historic Landscape Characterisation: Its Role in Contemporary British Archaeology and Landscape History

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Abstract

This article introduces the various schemes of Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) that have now been widely adopted by organisations such as Cadw, English Heritage and Historic Scotland. Various articles in this special volume of *Landscapes* will discuss the achievements of this technique in the fields of planning and countryside management, although several authors will also examine some of its problems. Most attention will focus on these specific schemes of HLC (and its equivalents in Scotland and Wales), and so this article will consider the wider issue of how the more general process of mapping local and regional variation in landscape character can inform us of its origins and development, and how in assessing character we need to move beyond simple morphological criteria. Particular attention is paid to forms of evidence that to date have been largely ignored, notably patterns of landholding and vernacular buildings.

Introduction: Historic Landscape Characterisation

One of the many special qualities of the British landscape is the local and regional variation in its character. If one drives, for example, from East Anglia, through the Midlands, and down into the South West peninsula, one will travel through a series of regions each with its own local identity. In East Anglia, particularly distinctive features of the landscape are its dispersed settlement pattern and its vernacular building tradition of timber-framed structures with elaborate decorative plasterwork (pargetting) painted in pastel shades. In the east midlands the settlement pattern is far more nucleated, consisting of compact villages within which the traditional buildings are made of local stone. If one continued this journey into the South West, another

change in landscape character can be observed beyond the Blackdown Hills (on the Somerset–Devon border), where settlement patterns are once again more dispersed and the local building tradition is one of cob (a mixture of mud, straw and small amounts of stone).

In recent years there has been a growing interest in mapping this local and regional variation in landscape character. While ‘Historic Landscape Characterisation’ (HLC) is now the best-known technique used for this mapping – and the focus of this issue of *Landscapes* – the origins of such work can be traced back to the 1980s and the exciting fusion of landscape archaeology, local history, historical geography and historical botany illustrated, for example, by Oliver Rackham’s (1986) seminal mapping of ‘ancient’ and ‘planned’ countryside across England. Within the world of heritage management there was also a growing awareness of the need to move away from preserving individual archaeological sites and listed buildings towards protecting the wider landscape (see Fairclough and Rippon 2002, and Rippon 2004 for recent overviews). In 1991, a Government White Paper, *This Common Inheritance*, invited English Heritage to prepare a list of landscapes of historic importance to complement the *Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest*, with the intention of identifying areas of landscape of particular significance which were therefore worthy of protection. Very soon, however, a philosophy emerged within English Heritage that the whole landscape, rather than a small number areas of particular importance, is of historic value and this led to a series of Historic Landscape Characterisations across entire English counties (see Herring and Lake, both this volume). A similar approach was adopted by Historic Scotland and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland (see Dixon, this volume), while in Wales Cadw and the Countryside Council for Wales went down a different path – more in keeping with what *This Common Inheritance* had envisaged – in creating the *Register of Landscapes of Outstanding Historic Interest in Wales*, with each of these individual landscapes then being subject to a detailed HLC (see Alfrey and Austin, both this volume; and Foard and Rippon 1998 for a discussion of these different approaches).

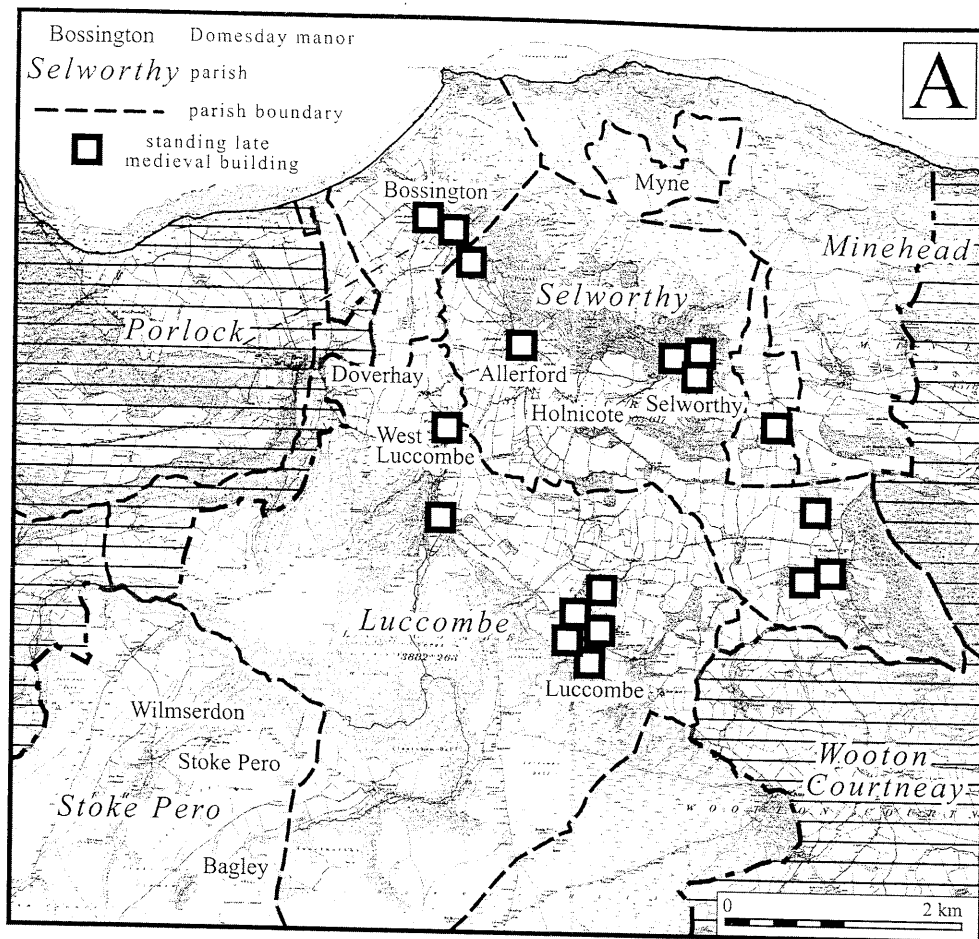
In essence, HLC involves taking an area of countryside or townscape and dividing it up into its smallest constituent parcels: in the case of most rural areas, which cover by far the greatest percentage of the country, these are predominantly agricultural fields, though other land uses, such as unenclosed rough pasture, woodland, and intertidal marshes, are important in some areas. An HLC then attributes each parcel to one of a series of predetermined ‘types’: ‘enclosed land’, ‘woodland’, ‘upland moor’, and so on. These types can be subdivided: ‘enclosed land’, for example, can be divided into ‘ancient (pre-AD 1600) enclosure’, ‘post-medieval (AD 1600–1850) enclosure’, and ‘modern (post-AD 1850) enclosure’. Other ‘attributes’ can be added to each parcel, such as whether a field appears to be derived from, for instance, the enclosure by agreement of former open-field land, parliamentary enclosure, or the piecemeal assarting of woodland.

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'Characterisation' is now a key part of the heritage management strategies of all the organisations mentioned above, but there has been relatively little published debate within the wider archaeological community over the intellectual foundations of HLC, apart from recent discussions by Rippon (2004), Lake and Edwards (2006a), Thomas (2006) and Williamson (2006). This author therefore decided to organise a session at the Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG) conference held in Exeter in December 2006 to discuss the use of HLC, as had the editors of *Landscapes*, who had planned a special volume of the journal on this subject. These various initiatives to try to discuss the present practice and future potential of HLC therefore came together in a jointly organised TAG session, the success of which can be measured by the large number of proposed papers submitted (for which unfortunately there was only time for a small number to be presented) and the packed lecture theatre on the day. All the papers at the Exeter TAG session appear in this volume, along with an additional commissioned article by Judith Alfrey which reviews progress in Wales. Jeremy Lake (English Heritage), Peter Herring (English Heritage), Sam Turner (formerly of Devon County Council) and Piers Dixon (The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland) review some of the achievements and potential of HLC, particularly within the areas of heritage management. The technique is not, however, without its critics, as we will hear from Tom Williamson, Jon Finch and David Austin.

Historic landscape analysis

Of particular concern to this author, however, has been the way that cynicism amongst the academic community towards the way that HLC has been developed is tarnishing the use of characterisation in a broader sense within the wider field of research into the origins and development of our historic landscape. This is why, when the Council for British Archaeology first approached me to write one of their Handbooks on 'Historic Landscape Characterisation', I initially declined, and what emerged instead was a volume on the wider, research-orientated, concept of 'Historic Landscape Analysis' (Rippon 2004). Put simply, Historic Landscape Characterisation (the scheme promoted by English Heritage *et al.*) does not equal historic landscape characterisation (the process of research that maps local and regional variation in landscape character, and then seeks to explain its origins and development through interdisciplinary work). A crucial distinction is that made by Tom Bloemers (2002) between past- and future-oriented archaeology. Let us take just one example: the map-source that forms the basis of the characterisation, which in the case of many English Heritage-sponsored HLCs has been modern Ordnance Survey cartography. It may indeed be appropriate for HLCs that are designed to inform planners and countryside managers – concerned with 'future-oriented archaeology' – that a certain area of countryside today consists of large fields designed to accommodate modern, highly mechanised,



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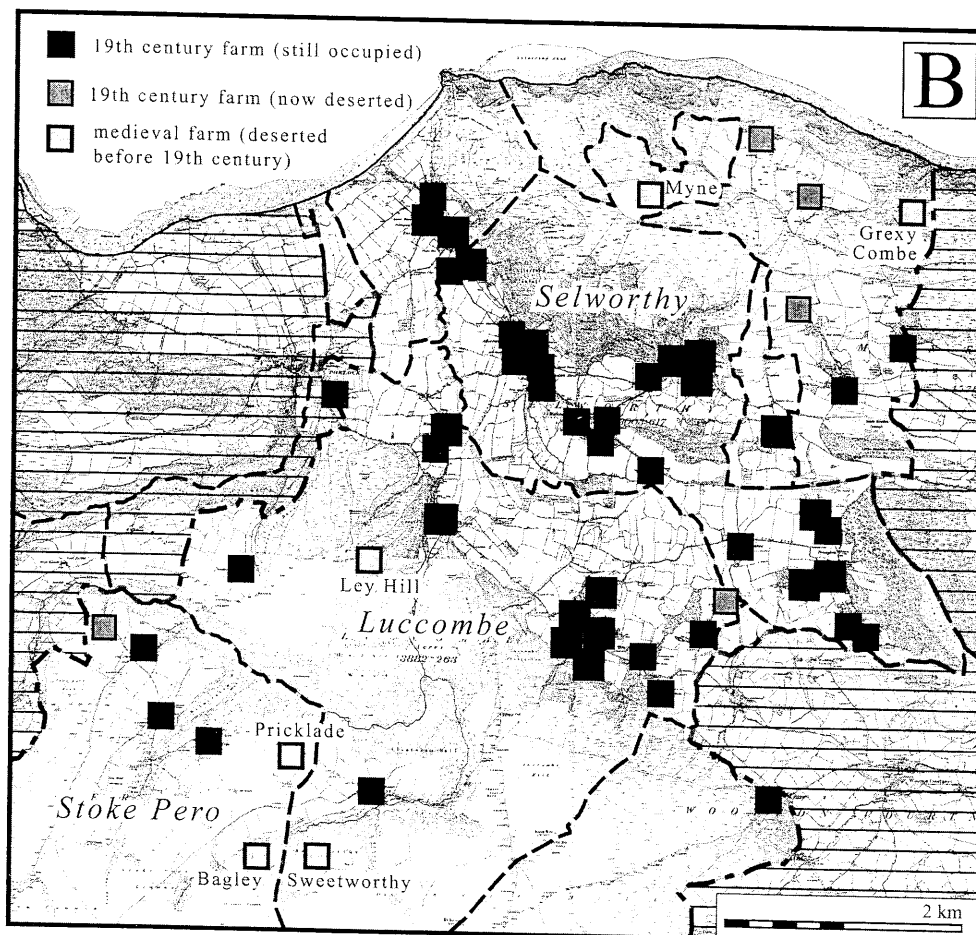
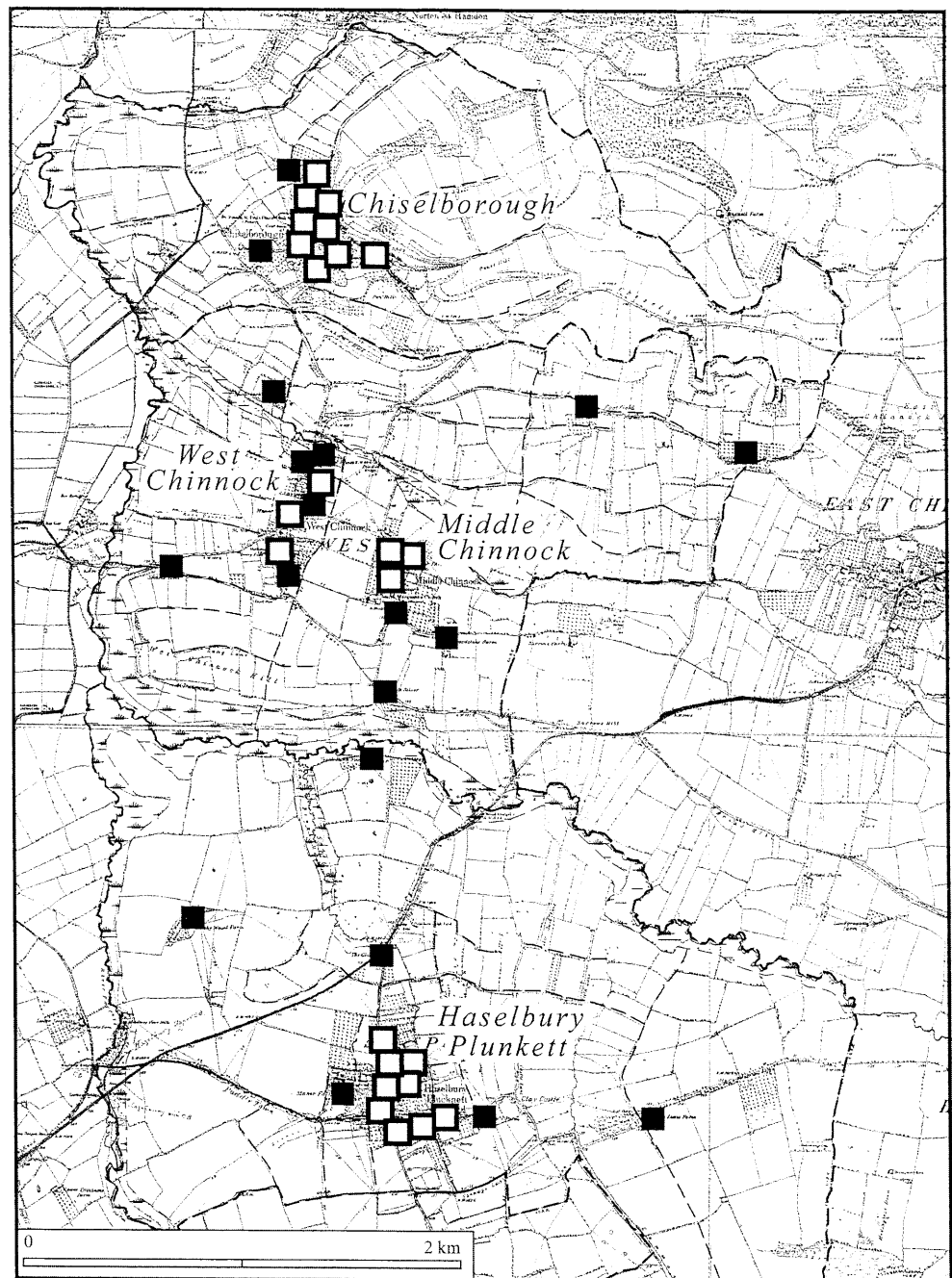


FIGURE 1.
The distributions of
(A) late medieval and
(B) post-medieval
standing buildings that
are scattered across
the National Trust's
Holnicote estate in
western Somerset.
(Data supplied by
Isabel Richardson)

FIGURE 2.
The distributions
of late medieval
and post-medieval
standing buildings
in Chiselborough,
West and Middle
Chinnock, and
Haselbury Plunkett in
south-east Somerset,
based on research
by the Somerset and
South Avon Vernacular
Buildings Research
Group (SSAVBRG
1984; 1993; 1994). Note
how the late medieval
buildings are restricted
to the village centres,
and that it is only
post-medieval houses
that are found out
in the now-enclosed
former open fields.



arable farming, but this is of no value to those of us interested in trying to understand the history of the countryside. We need to know whether the earlier field boundaries that were swept away when these arable prairies were created resulted from enclosure by agreement, or parliamentary enclosure, of former open-field land, piecemeal assarting of woodland or common, and so on. For such 'past-oriented' research we need to use the earliest comprehensive large-scale mapping we have available, which in most cases will be the tithe maps of *c.*1840 or the Ordnance Survey first edition six-inch maps of the 1880s. Methodological concerns such as this, alongside the fact that historic landscape character embraces a far wider range of factors than simply morphology – including vernacular architecture (and building materials), the language of landscape (place- and field-names, *etc.*), and its cultural associations

– mean that this author prefers the term ‘historic landscape analysis’ for this interdisciplinary research.

Another major concern with research that places all of its effort into analysing morphology is whether patterns mapped in the nineteenth century are a reflection of anything other than the landscape of that specific period of time (such ‘doubts about morphogenesis’ go back to the 1980s: Austin 1985; and see Austin, this volume). For example, another major characterisation formed the basis of Roberts and Wrathmell’s (2000) *Atlas of Rural Settlement in England*, which used the differing degrees of settlement nucleation and dispersion in nineteenth-century England to divide the country into three broad ‘provinces’ (‘The South East Province’, ‘Central Province’ and ‘Northern and Western Province’). This too has attracted some criticism (e.g. Dyer 2001; Hinton 2005) and a key issue is whether settlement patterns during the nineteenth century can tell us anything about the medieval picture. In parts of the South West, for example, it has been demonstrated that the isolated farmsteads that characterised the landscape in many areas during the nineteenth century were in fact all that remained of what in the thirteenth century were small hamlets (e.g. Beresford 1964; Fox 1989; Henderson and Weddell 1994; Riley and Wilson-North 2001). So how reliable are nineteenth-century settlement patterns as a guide to the medieval period? This is an issue not just for academic research, but also for the programmes of HLC, as it needs to be clear whether their results represent a snapshot of an ever-changing countryside or are actually mapping differences in character that have longer-term roots.

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The pattern of settlement

The answer to this question will clearly vary from area to area, but a number of general observations can be made. Firstly, even the small hamlets of South West England in the thirteenth century, of which there were several in an average parish, represent a far more dispersed settlement pattern than the nucleated villages of the Midlands. Secondly, there is a range of sources and techniques that we can use to test the antiquity of different settlement patterns in some regions (i.e. test the results of HLC). Unfortunately, in the South West there has not been a great deal of large-scale fieldwalking, but across in East Anglia and the east midlands there has, and this confirms that regional variations in nineteenth-century settlement patterns are indeed a general reflection of the medieval situation. Fieldwalking in the east midlands, where in the nineteenth century there was a nucleated settlement pattern, reveals deserted and shrunken villages but relatively few isolated settlements (other than the scattered fifth- to eighth-/ninth-century farmsteads that were swept away when villages were created). In Essex, in contrast, which during the nineteenth century had a dispersed settlement pattern, fieldwalking consistently finds deserted farmsteads but no deserted villages (e.g. Jones and Page 2006; Rippon forthcoming).

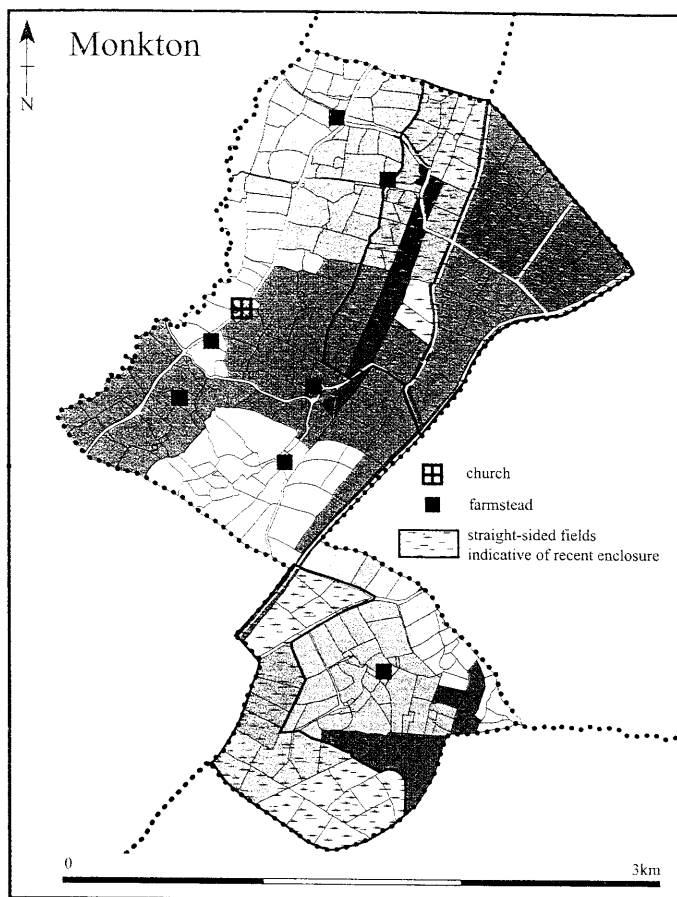
Another source of evidence that can be used to test the antiquity of

patterns mapped through characterising nineteenth-century settlements is the vernacular building stock. This has all too often been studied in isolation from other aspects of landscape character, but it can provide a further 'layer' of data in historic landscape analysis. In central/south-eastern Somerset, for example, the nineteenth-century settlement pattern was largely nucleated, whereas to the west it was more dispersed, and the analysis of the locations of standing medieval domestic buildings within the landscape confirms that this pattern dates back at least to the late medieval period: in western Somerset standing medieval houses are spread across the landscape (Figure 1), while in central/south-eastern Somerset they are only found in villages, with the scatter of isolated farmsteads depicted on nineteenth-century maps dating only to the post-medieval period (being farmsteads that moved out from the villages into the former open fields after they had been enclosed: Figure 2; Rippon forthcoming).

The pattern of fields and landholding

Truly interdisciplinary historic landscape analysis can test landscape characterisations in other ways by looking at further facets of the countryside. Remaining in Somerset, for example, the east–west difference in nineteenth-century settlement patterns described above is also seen in the evidence for how medieval field systems were managed, with a range of indicators – parliamentary enclosure acts, ridge and furrow, and references in medieval surveys – showing the existence of two- and three-field open-field systems in central/south-eastern Somerset, but not in the west (Rippon 2004, 121–3). Another facet of the landscape that can be used to reconstruct past patterns of land management is that of landownership. The boundary between landscapes characterised by villages to the east and dispersed settlement to the west runs just to the east of the Blackdown Hills. To the west of this boundary, in Monkton, east Devon, for example, there is little in the field boundary pattern to indicate former common field and the patterns of landownership recorded on the tithe survey supports the hypothesis that this was a landscape that has always been characterised by closes held in severalty (Figure 3).

The pattern of landownership in nearby Sheldon, in contrast, is more complex, and a characterisation of the landscape allows the parish to be divided into a series of character areas (Figure 4). Across most of the northern and eastern part of the parish, for example, the field boundary pattern consists of small, irregularly shaped fields suggestive of closes held in severalty, a hypothesis supported by the compact blocks of landownership. To the south and west of the parish there is a rather different field boundary pattern, with larger, straight-sided fields that would appear to have been laid out relatively recently. This pattern, which occupies an area of high ground, is suggestive of the post-medieval enclosure of former common land, with the fragmented land ownership in one block of rectangular fields probably resulting from each tenement that held grazing rights in the former common receiving a parcel in



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FIGURE 3.

The pattern of landownership recorded in the tithe survey of Monkton in eastern Devon. Note how the morphology of the field boundary pattern and the compact blocks of fields belonging to each farm are suggestive of a landscape characterised by closes held in severalty. (Research by Adam Wainwright and drawing by Chris Smart)

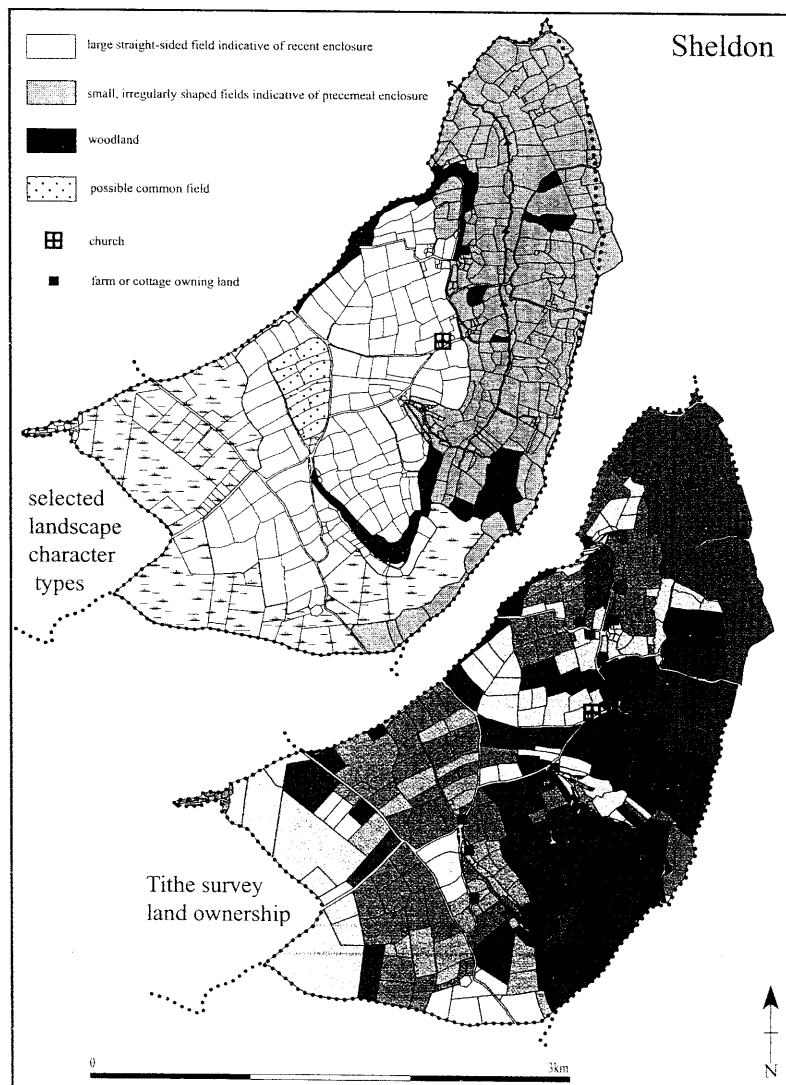


FIGURE 4.

The pattern of landownership recorded in the tithe survey of Sheldon in eastern Devon. To the east the small irregularly shaped fields and compact landholdings suggest closes held in severalty. The larger, rectilinear fields on higher ground to the west are indicative of the enclosure of former common land. In between, the blocks of long, narrow fields and highly fragmented landownership suggest former common field. (Research by Adam Wainwright and drawing by Chris Smart)

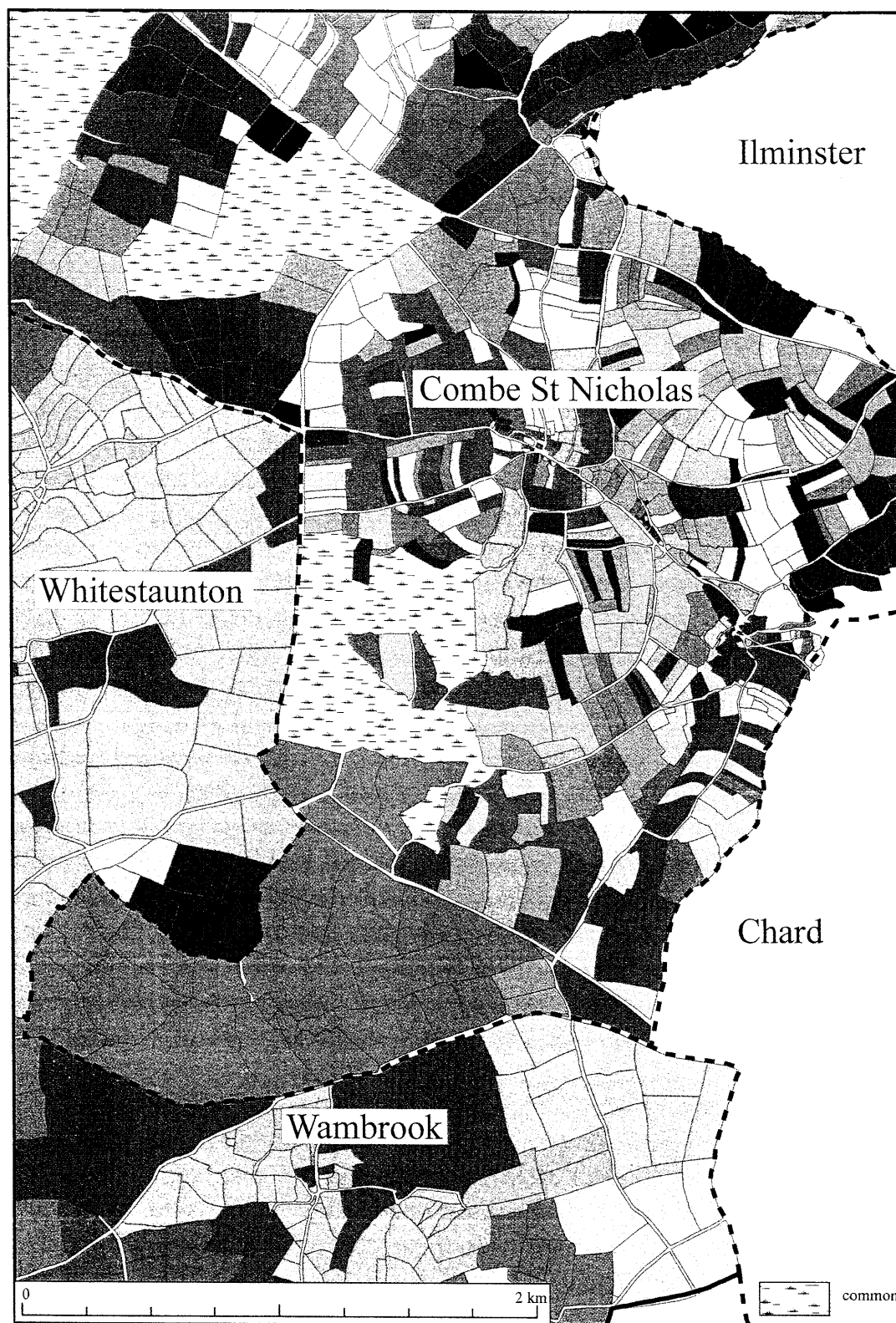


FIGURE 5.
The pattern of land ownership recorded in the tithe surveys of Combe St Nicholas, Wambrook, and Whitestaunton, in Somerset. Here the fragmentation of landholding is even greater, and corresponds to the area of long, narrow and often curving fields that clearly result from the enclosure by agreement of former common-field land. Note how the landscape has a very different character in Wambrook and Whitestaunton, where mostly irregular-shaped fields were held as compact blocks in severalty. (Research by Adam Wainwright and drawing by Chris Smart)

the newly enclosed field system. Towards the centre of the parish lies a third, far smaller, character area which comprises blocks of long, narrow, curving fields that look as if they could be enclosed strips in a former common field, and this is supported by the very fragmented pattern of landownership. This correspondence of strip-like fields and fragmented patterns of landownership is now being revealed across the South West and suggests the presence of

small open fields associated with the numerous hamlets that characterised the settlement pattern in the medieval period (e.g. Alcock 1975; Pattison 1999; Rippon 2004, fig. 19; Herring 2006). These open fields were, however, on a very small scale, in contrast to the vast common fields that characterised England's 'central province', which extended into central and south-eastern Somerset, just the other side of the Blackdown Hills (e.g. Combe St Nicholas: Figure 5).

This example shows how we can go beyond classifying field systems simply on morphological grounds by bringing in a range of other data and developing a more multi-faceted historic landscape analysis that helps us to understand the origins and development of this landscape. Such practice also has a value within the current programme of planning and management-based HLC, as the size and structure of landholdings will influence patterns of farming: small, family-run farms, for instance, with detached areas of grazing in different, specialised, environments such as uplands and wetlands, are a key characteristic of certain landscapes with a strongly pastoral economy, as they provide access to both summer and winter grazing. A potential problem with this use of data on landownership, however, is that the only comprehensive record we have is from the nineteenth century (the tithe surveys), which leads to the same problem as before – that of trying to establish how far such patterns reflect the medieval picture. This requires the survival of suitable documentary sources – which will not be the case in all areas – but one case-study at least; on the North Somerset Levels (Rippon 2006), suggests that the overall character of landholding has been stable since at least the late medieval period. In areas such as Puxton, the tithe survey shows that the fields held by tenements in this shrunken village were widely scattered across areas whose field boundary pattern and documentary sources suggests were two former open fields; some of these dispersed tenements can be traced back through a series of deeds, surveys, rentals and manorial court rolls, largely unchanged, to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. To the north, in Congresbury Marsh, however, the nineteenth-century pattern was characterised by isolated farms with compact blocks of closes held in severalty, and this pattern can similarly be traced back to the sixteenth century: while some tenements may have been amalgamated, others divided, and odd fields exchanged between tenements, the fundamental difference between scattered and compact patterns of landholding in the two areas was unchanged for at least 500 years. As such, this gives a valuable guide to the different farming practices that have helped to shape landscape character: open field around Puxton, and compact blocks of closes held in severalty on Congresbury Marsh.

The example of landholding patterns demonstrates that research-orientated landscape characterisations need to consider as many 'layers' of data as possible. Like many individual aspects of historic landscape analysis, such work is not entirely new, and there have been small-scale mappings of past patterns of landownership before (e.g. Challacombe on Dartmoor: Pattison 1999). What is innovative here is, firstly, its integration with a far wider analysis of

the historic landscape, and secondly, the scale at which it can now be carried out with the use of GIS; at Challacombe, for example, the fields studied, associated with a small hamlet, amounted to around 3 km², while current work on the Blackdown Hills by this author, from which the examples in this article are taken, has so far covered eleven whole parishes, revealing remarkable differences in the structure of landholding.

Buildings and character

As illustrated above, another important facet of landscape character is vernacular architecture, and progress is starting to be made in its integration with HLC (Lake and Edwards 2006a; 2006b; and see Lake, this volume). Archaeologists and historical geographers are now used to studying settlement patterns, and this morphological approach can easily be accommodated within HLC, but we also must consider other ways that standing buildings affect landscape character. In the areas around Glastonbury and Ilchester, for example, the compact villages are characterised by the extensive use of blue-grey Lower Lias limestone in the churches, houses, farm buildings and even garden walls (Figure 6). Just a few miles to the south, the colour and texture of the vernacular buildings changes, as the orange-brown sandstones of the Upper Lias, known as Ham Stone, dominates the villagescape (Figure 7): there is nothing in the two-dimensional, black and white, nineteenth-century maps to indicate a difference in the character of these villages based on their morphology, but on the ground the variation in colour and texture is striking. Building materials make a major contribution to local and regional variation in landscape character across the country, and just one further example must suffice. In Devon, the settlement pattern is far more dispersed than in central Somerset, and the vernacular building traditions are also very different, with 'cob' predominating in the central lowland areas. Cob is a mixture of red Devon soil, straw and fine stone chippings, and in most domestic houses it is limewashed, but in older agricultural buildings it remains exposed, forming a key character-defining feature of the lowland 'red Devon' landscape (Figure 8; Lake and Edwards 2006b).

Conclusion

The stability of broad patterns of landholding demonstrated on the North Somerset Levels will not necessarily have been the case everywhere, and such detailed research cannot be carried out on a county-wide scale. Similarly, research into other facets of landscape character, such as local vernacular building styles and materials, requires time-consuming field-based research. Such work can, however, be used to test and enhance the morphology-driven models of HLC, something that there has been too little of to date. The integration of morphological approaches to characterisation with a wide range of other categories of data, such as archaeological field survey and standing building recording,

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FIGURE 6.
Drayton, in Somerset.
Blue-grey Lower
Lias limestone is
used throughout the
villages in this area
for domestic houses,
outhouses, agricultural
buildings and garden
walls. Even the base of
the churchyard cross
is made out of this
distinctive local stone.

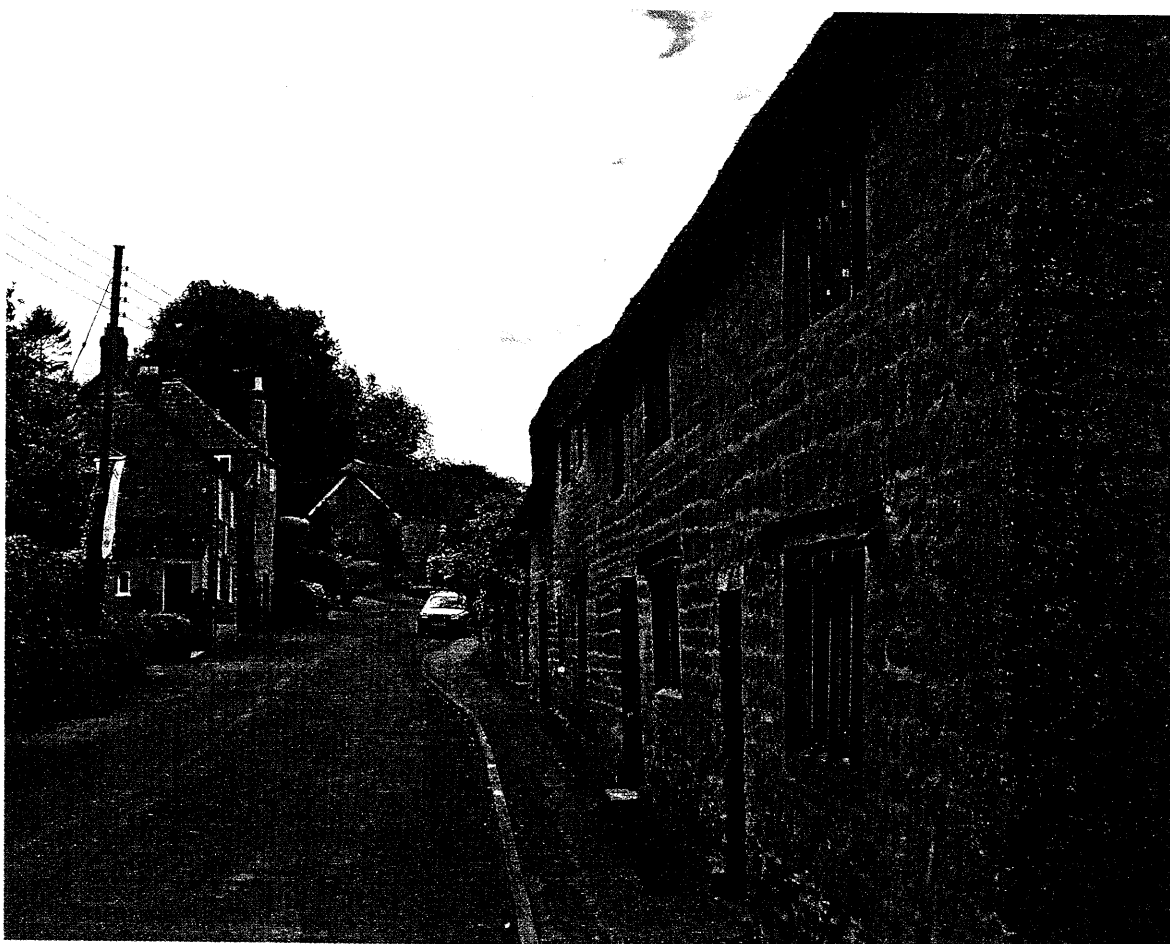


FIGURE 7.
Barrington, in
Somerset. Based simply
on a morphological
characterisation there
is little to distinguish
this part of Somerset
from the area around
Drayton – both are
dominated by compact
villages surrounded
by former open fields
mostly enclosed by
agreement – but the
widespread use of the
local orange-brown
Upper Lias 'Ham
Stone' gives the villag-
escape a very different
character.



FIGURE 8.
Shobrooke, Devon.
Cob is used
throughout this
landscape, in the
seventeenth-century
or earlier farmhouse
of Shobrooke Barton
(limewashed), late-
eighteenth- to
mid-nineteenth-century
agricultural buildings,
and churchyard wall
(the restoration of
which has recently
paid for by a 'Local
Heritage Initiative':
[http://www.lhi.org.
uk/projects_directory/
projects_by_region/
south_west/devon/
shobrooke_heart_of_
cob_country/index.
html](http://www.lhi.org.uk/projects_directory/projects_by_region/south_west/devon/shobrooke_heart_of_cob_country/index.html)).

does, however, show how we can use historic landscape analysis in its broadest sense as part of our research into the origins and development of local and regional variation in the character of our countryside. Such academic research can often be carried out on a smaller scale, and over a longer time period, than the HLCs sponsored by English Heritage, Cadw and Historic Scotland, and as such has the opportunity to bring a wider range of sources and techniques to bear. It is therefore the contention of this article that 'Historic Landscape Characterisation', as practised by various government bodies, is but a small sub-set of the wider concept of historic landscape analysis. The English Heritage scheme in particular has attracted some criticism but this should not tarnish the idea that we can further our understanding of the countryside by first giving spatial control to discussions of local and regional variation – through characterisation – and then adding additional layers of information, such as patterns of landownership and vernacular architecture, that aid our understanding of its origins and development.

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