A PUSH INTO THE MARGINS? THE DEVELOPMENT OF A COASTAL LANDSCAPE IN NORTH-WEST SOMERSET DURING THE LATE 1ST MILLENNIUM A.D.

By Stephen Rippon

The study of settlement and landscape in Viking-age Britain has been dominated by a number of major themes, including the extent of Scandinavian colonization in eastern and northern Britain, the excavation of a relatively small number of sites that had possibly been occupied by Scandinavian settlers (notably in the uplands and western coastal regions of northern Britain), and the extensive reorganization of rural landscapes in central England that led to the creation of nucleated villages and open fields. What is less clear is how landscapes elsewhere were evolving at this time, and, indeed, what the English landscape was like before the creation of open field-based systems of agricultural production.

There has been much debate over the origins of villages and open fields, though their creation clearly reflects the perceived need to exploit the landscape more effectively. This pressure on agrarian resources is also reflected in the expansion of settlement seen at this time in both upland areas (e.g. Ribblehead and Simy Folds) and coastal lowlands (notably the Somerset Levels, Romney Marsh, the North Kent Marshes and Fenland).¹ The colonization of coastal marshlands at this time was an important process in that being created from an entirely natural environment — saltmarshes — a cultural landscape emerged that was free from the influence of earlier periods. Clearly, particular conditions within these wetland environments constrained human behaviour to a certain extent, but the landscapes that were created will also reflect the pattern of settlement- and field-systems that was current within society at that time. The study area that is the subject of this paper has another advantage when considering the origins and development of medieval landscapes: there is some debate over the significance of variations in the physical environment in determining when and why open field landscapes emerged, but within this study area such factors were not important as the soils and relief were uniform. Should adjacent areas of marshland

develop nucleated and dispersed settlement patterns this cannot be due to environmental factors.

The area selected for this study lies in the north-west of Somerset, a county that by the medieval period had a remarkable diversity of settlement patterns (Fig. 1).2 In the east and south, the landscape was dominated by Midland-style villages and open fields, in the west there was a largely dispersed settlement pattern typical of South-West England, whereas in the north was a more varied landscape with areas of both nucleation and dispersion. One place with nucleated settlement that has seen particularly intensive study has been the parish of Shapwick, on the Polden Hills between Bridgwater and Glastonbury (Fig. 1). The work of Mick Aston and his team has shown how the present planned village replaced a landscape of more dispersed settlement probably during the 10th century, and that this was part of wider landscape

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replanning as the Glastonbury Abbey estate of Pouholt, that covered most of the Polden Hills, was sub-divided into a series of smaller units. A similar fragmentation appears to have occurred on the nearby estate at Wedmore and further north around the Gordano Valley (Fig. 1), and in each case it would appear that ancient 'multiple estates' were being sub-divided and each new unit provided with a village and open field system.

Two major themes, therefore, within the landscape of Viking-age Somerset were the expansion of settlement into the coastal marshes, and the fragmentation and subsequent reorganization of multiple estates. In North-West Somerset both occurred in the same area, and this study is about how a medieval landscape was created as a result.

A marginal landscape?

Coastal wetlands are by their very nature not ideally suited for settled arable-based agriculture, and as such would be regarded as a classic 'marginal' landscape. It is now appreciated that the concept of marginality is a complex one, and that the simplistic 'population-resource' model of Postan is inadequate to describe how human communities interacted with different physical environments. In particular, many landscapes that have poor potential for arable-based farming will have a high potential for other resource-exploitation strategies: coastal marshes, for example, can offer rich pastures and the opportunity for salt production. Despite their vulnerability to flooding, modern experiments and palaeo-environmental evidence from sites in Britain and mainland Europe have also shown that the cultivation of certain crops is possible on high intertidal saltmarshes, while once reclaimed, the agricultural productivity and as a result land values, could be exceptionally high.

There were, therefore, three broad options open to human communities with an area of coastal marshland within their territory. First, they could simply exploit the rich natural resources of the marsh, without changing its character in any way. Secondly, they could modify the marsh, for example through the construction of 'summer banks' which were designed to keep the relatively low summer high tides off areas of cultivation, but which made no attempt to control the higher winter floods. Thus, the whole marsh remained an intertidal environment but conditions in one

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4 Rippon, op. cit. in note 2, 162-5.

small area were adapted to make it more conducive for agriculture. The third strategy was the full-scale transformation of the landscape through reclamation: the construction of a sea wall along the coast and creation of a drainage system for the whole area now protected from tidal inundation. The colonization of coastal wetlands in this way was a high cost, high risk, but high return strategy towards landscape utilization: high cost in terms of the initial capital investment and subsequent recurrent cost of maintaining flood defences and drainage systems; high risk in terms of the constant threat of both tidal and freshwater flooding; but high return in terms of the rich pastures, meadows and high arable yields. Though difficult environments, wetlands could also be highly rewarding.

The North Somerset Levels

The North Somerset Levels are some 100 sq km of reclaimed estuarine alluvium (former saltmarsh and mudflats) beside the Severn Estuary near Weston-super-Mare, some 15 km south west of Bristol (Fig. 1). They were reclaimed during the Roman period, though the flood defences failed and the area reverted to an intertidal marsh. By Domesday the Levels were re-occupied, though it is difficult to gauge how extensive settlement was for most of the wetland area fell within estates that also extended across the surrounding upland areas, making it impossible to determine where the recorded populations lived. Just one wholly marshland community is recorded, that of Kingston Seymour where there were 43 listed tenants/slaves and at least 21 ploughs.

There has been some consideration of the process whereby reclaimed landscapes like the North Somerset Levels were created. It was assumed that the first stage must have been the construction of a sea wall along the coast, behind which communities then created settlements and fields. Evidence from the Netherlands, however, suggests that this need not have been the case if small individual areas of marsh were enclosed by ‘summer banks’. A number of such low embankments that probably provided only seasonal protection have been recorded the Netherlands dating to the Roman period, including Broekpolder in the west, and sealed beneath terpen mounds at Donjum-Heringa, Peins-Oost and Wijnaldum-Tjitsum in the north. Such a landscape was still subject to winter flooding and so could not have been permanently settled (there is no evidence for continental-style raised settlement mounds or terpen on the North Somerset Levels). It would not have been economical to increase the height of many small embankments to the point at which they could protect an area

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7 Rippon, op. cit. in note 6, fig. 7.

8 Linda Therkorn, pers. comm.

from year-round flooding, and so it may only have been when there was pressure to settle on the marshes all year round that a coastal sea wall was constructed.

The earliest marshland colonization

The nature of the Domesday entry for Kingston Seymour suggests that by the mid-11th century it lay within a reclaimed landscape, implying that the construction of a coastal sea wall, and any preceding phase of landscape modification ('summer banks', etc) had already occurred. In order to establish when this was, it is important to establish how the landscape subsequently evolved so that through retrogressive analysis the earliest landscape features can be identified and dated. What emerges from this analysis is that the earliest landscape elements, in marshland landscapes on both sides of the Severn Estuary, appear to be a series a roughly oval-shaped enclosures that clearly pre-date the surrounding pattern of fields and roads (e.g. Fig. 2). Referred to as 'infields' they have certain features in common (all of which are demonstrated at Puxton: Figs. 2–4):10

— they are restricted to the higher, coastal areas of the Levels (that were the first to be settled, enclosed and drained), either in clusters or individually;

roads and droveways run towards the enclosures but then pass around them (suggesting that the enclosures are stratigraphically early in the formation of the historic landscape);

— their shape is generally oval (also suggesting that they were created relatively early, in a landscape that was not too cluttered with other features that would otherwise have constrained their shape);

— occasionally there is evidence for a bank running around the enclosures' perimeter;

— their size is typically c. 5–19 ha (12–47 acres; average 13 ha, 32 acres);

— extant farms are almost always located on the edge or just outside the enclosed area (suggesting that they represent areas of agricultural land, not an enclosed settlement, which has been confirmed by survey and excavation at Puxton; see below);

— a number are associated with churches or chapels (suggesting some pre-eminence in the settlement pattern, again possibly indicating their relatively early origins).

One of the main character-defining features of these enclosures is their oval shape which coring at a number of sites has established cannot be accounted for through the presence of underlying bedrock islands. They are far too numerous to be related to the morphologically-similar early Christian sites seen in Cornwall and Wales, suggesting that their distinctive form simply results from their having adopted the most economical shape for the first areas to be enclosed within a previously unsettled landscape (the same reason why some upland intakes and woodland assarts also assume an oval or sub-rectangular shape).

One of these early ‘infields’, at Puxton, has been subject to a programme of survey and excavation (Figs. 2–3). The 6.3 ha (15.5 acres) oval-shaped enclosure is surrounded by a bank about 13 m wide, which, though damaged by modern ploughing, survives to a height of about 0.5 m, with an internal ditch (any external ditch is likely to have been retained as the present field boundary which, as a still functioning watercourse, could not be excavated!). A key question is the function of this bank: was it to seasonally protect an area from tidal flooding (i.e. a ‘summer bank’?), or was it a precursor to the ‘fen-banks’ in protecting reclaimed areas from freshwater flooding due to run-off from the adjacent uplands? The geographical distribution of ‘infield’ enclosures rules out the latter: most lie on the higher coastal areas where freshwater flooding is unlikely to have been a problem. The morphology of the bank at Puxton may also suggest it functioned as a sea wall: such a broad but low bank would have suffered less from erosion than a steeper-sided one.


For the Severn Estuary enclosures to have functioned as sea walls, they must have lain below the contemporary highest astronomical tides. High water level in the medieval sally port at Bristol Castle lay between 11.8 and 12.4 m AOD, some 4 m above the modern level (6.95 m), though the value of this observation is questionable as sluice gates may have been used to retain tidal and river-waters within the ditch for defensive reasons. More accurate measures of medieval Mean High Water Spring Tide (MHWST) have been gained from the height of accreted marsh deposits at the Bristol waterfronts at Dundas Wharf (about 6.4 m AOD) and Canynges House (about 6.6–6.7 m AOD), some 0.3–0.6 m below that of today at this point on the river (6.95 m AOD). It is difficult to scale this back to the open Estuary but the difference between medieval and modern MHWST in Bristol is likely to have been more rather than less due to the attenuation/weakening of tidal waves in the River Avon. In the Inner Severn Estuary, Allen has compared the elevations of still actively accreting saltmarshes with those that were reclaimed during the medieval period, and suggests that MHWST around 1300 was about 0.9 m lower than today, revising an earlier estimate of about 1.0 m; the height of MHWST in the outer Estuary adjacent to the North Somerset Levels is also likely to have been higher. Most of the North Somerset ‘infield’ enclosures lie at about 5.5–5.8 m AOD, the surface of these marshes reflecting the height up to which they had built up immediately before reclamation occurred. This was probably around MHWST which is now 6.1 m AOD, with the Highest Astronomical Tides (HAT) around 1.2 m higher. Assuming that the medieval figures were around 1 m lower (MHWST 5.1 m, HAT 6.3 m), it would appear that North Somerset infields were about 0.4–0.7 m above their contemporary MHWST, but about 0.5–0.8 m below the HAT.

The enclosure at Puxton appears to date to around the 11th century or before. The bank itself yielded some residual Romano-British pottery and one sherd of mid-11th- to 13th-century ware (Shapwick fabric U1), though fieldwalking had produced large amounts of medieval pottery (mainly 12th/13th century) from the area in which the bank was excavated. If the bank was constructed after the 11th century, it might be expected that some of this 12th- to 13th-century material would have become incorporated into its fabric. Excavations within the interior of the enclosure produced relatively large amounts of pottery dated to the late 11th or 12th centuries in stratified deposits. There are, however, sherds of an earlier ware dated to the late 10th/early 11th century (Shapwick AA1): a handmade fabric, usually with a grey core, grey margins and buff to grey surfaces, with abundant glassy well sorted quartz < 2 mm and moderate well sorted limestone < 3 mm tempering, and moderate rounded voids < 3 mm. At Puxton the AA1 sherds are always associated with late 11th- to 12th-century material, and it is impossible to say whether they are simply residual, and

15 J. R. L. Allen, pers. comm.
The shrunken medieval settlement at Puxton. Earthwork survey, along with fieldwalking and soil chemistry (cf. Fig. 4) show that only a small part of the oval-shaped 'Church Field' was ever occupied by settlement, the rest being small paddocks and enclosures. The other major area of deserted settlement earthworks at Mays Lane were occupied from around the 10th/11th to the 17th century. (Drawn by the author)
represent evidence for 10th-century occupation on the site, or that at Puxton they date to the end of its range. As pottery in Somerset is very scarce before the 10th century, this simply indicates that the site at Puxton was occupied by the 10th/early 11th century or earlier. Smaller amounts of 10th- or 11th-century pottery (including fabrics AAT and U1) were also recovered from further excavations of shrunken settlement earthworks some 300 m to the north of the ‘infield’ at Mays Lane (Fig. 3). These earthworks are suggestive of an episode of secondary settlement expansion northwards from the primary core next to the ‘infield’, and if this had also occurred by the 10th/11th centuries, the initial creation of the ‘infield’ might be expected to have occurred somewhat earlier.

So what was the function of the ‘infield’? There is no evidence that it was an enclosed settlement. Earthwork, soil chemistry, and fieldwalking surveys at Puxton all indicate that occupation was restricted to a series of slightly raised platforms in the north-eastern corner of the enclosure by the church, with the remaining area being occupied by small fields or paddocks, which the light scatter of mostly small and abraded sherds of medieval pottery suggest were lightly manured (Fig. 4). The enclosure appears, therefore, to have been an area of agricultural land with the associated settlement tucked to one side. Analysis of the landscape surrounding the Puxton ‘infield’ suggests that there was at least one further bank that may represent either a contemporary but less intensively used area of land (perhaps an ‘outfield’?), or second phase of enclosure, still created in a landscape with no other features to constrain its shape (Fig. 7). The surviving field boundaries within this secondary intake are long and narrow in shape, and the post-medieval pattern of land ownership was highly fragmented (far more so than in the rest of the parish), suggesting some form of common field farming.

The tenurial context of reclamation

The landscape of Puxton is typical of the coastal marshes of the North Somerset Levels, in that it was clearly created in a gradual and piecemeal fashion. During this early phase of reclamation there was no planning or co-ordination, in contrast to later periods when lower-lying areas were enclosed and drained in a systematic fashion, leading to carefully laid out planned landscapes. The communities who created the landscape around Puxton, and indeed on much of the North Somerset Levels, were clearly allowed to act on an individual basis, and the tenurial context within which this occurred appears to have been a large estate based at Congresbury (Fig. 5).

The reconstruction of this estate’s former extent, and its subsequent fragmentation requires some complex back-projection of later documentary material. Until 1772 Puxton was a chapel of Banwell to the south (Fig. 1), which led some to assume

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18 Rippon (1998), op. cit. in note 12.
19 Rippon (1997), op. cit. in note 2, fig. 7; idem, op. cit. in note 1, fig. 51.
Figure 4. Puxton Church Field: the results of fieldwalking (pottery distribution) and soil chemistry. The density of Romano-British material is suggestive of a manure scatter, and test-pitting in adjacent fields suggest a settlement focus lies to the east. The distribution of medieval material is focused on a raised platform south-east of the church. The results of phosphate and heavy metal analysis shows a strong correlation with the distribution of medieval material.

(Drawn by the author)
that it was part of the royal (and later episcopal) estate of Banwell. A range of evidence, however, suggests that Puxton was actually carved out of the neighbouring royal estate of Congresbury.

The parish boundary of Puxton and Congresbury contains a series of intermingled parcels, which clearly suggest the former was carved out of the latter. The configuration of parish boundaries also suggests that a block of land known as Hewish was carved out of the far western end of Congresbury and transferred to Yatton to the north (Figs. 5.D and 7; and see below).

Puxton, Congresbury, and Wick St Lawrence (a parish to the west of Puxton) also shared rights in the common meadows known as the Dolmoors.

In (?)1215 the parson of Congresbury confessed he had no right in the chapel of 'Pokerelestone' and sought a pardon from the Prior of Bruton. This may suggest that Puxton was once part of the parish of Congresbury, but that it was now separate and that the new boundary was starting to crystallize.

A series of 14th- and 15th-century deeds (notably those of the lands acquired by Merton College, Oxford) refer to Puxton as lying in the manor of Congresbury, but parish of Banwell.

It would also appear that the tithing of Puxton was part of Congresbury Hundred (which was later absorbed into Winterstoke Hundred: Fig. 5.F), though the story is a complex one and involves piecing together fragments of documentary evidence from archives as far afield as Bristol, Taunton, Oxford and London. The 1327 and 1334 Lay Subsidies list Congresbury and Banwell, but there is no reference to Puxton. The Congresbury Hundred court roll for November 1342 lists its tithings that included Yatton, Cleeve, Wick St Lawrence, Kenn, and Claverham. Puxton is not mentioned, but may be illegible. The court roll for Nov. 1351 includes the same list, and a reference to the libera decenna (free tithing). The roll for May 1379 lists the same tithings as in 1351, but preceded by Libera Decenna: Will. Rayssworth, Will Greve, John Stretend: asisse of ale; cert' redd' 6s.8d. William Rushworth held the lands in Puxton later owned by Merton College. The 'cert redd' money was brought to court by each tithing, to meet the court's expenses which started as 1d. per head — the tithingpenny — and became a fixed amount, often called the 'common fine'. The Puxton Account Rolls for 1472–3, 1474–5 and 1477–8 all include a payment of 4d. to the 'tithingman of the freemen's tithing' for the common fine (along with a common fine of

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22 Two Cartularies of the Augustinian Priory of Bruton and the Cumbri Priory of Montacute in the County of Somerset, ed. E. Hobhouse (Somerset Rec. Soc., 8, 1894), No. 135.
23 Merton College Archives 1204–11, 1214, 1217, 1220–1 and 1230–4.
25 In the parish of Yatton.
26 In the parish of Yatton.
27 Lambeth Palace Library ED 1176, f. 22.
29 Lambeth Palace Library ED 351, f. 1.
Figure 5. Possible extent of the 'greater Congresbury' estate, and its fragmentation. A: the original estate. B: detachment of Kingston Seymour pre-1066. C: division of the remaining estate between Congresbury and Yatton. Wemberham lies to the north of the Yeo, but south of the postulated early boundary between Congresbury and Yatton. D: transfer of one hide (Hewish) from Congresbury to Yatton shortly after 1066; Wick remained a detached part of Congresbury. E: detachment of Puxton. F: arrangement of Hundreds. (Drawn by the author)
3d. to the Hundred of Frowardeshill (Winterstoke). The court roll for Congresbury Hundred in May 1560 includes eight named men for the *libera decenn de Puxton* (‘free tithing’ of Puxton), followed by those for the tithings (not described as ‘free’) of Kenn, Cleeve, Claverham, Yatton and Wick. In September 1560 the court rolls include under the heading *Libera Decenn* the tithingman Richard Cotton (not a Puxton name) presenting ten named Puxton men for not appearing in court, when summoned to pay suit there. In the 1622 Lay Subsidy, and 1664/5 Hearth Tax returns, Puxton was part of the tithing of ‘Congresbury, Weeke [St Lawrence] and Puxton’. Congresbury Court Rolls for 1653 record that Edmund Cooke was appointed constable for Wick and Puxton.

It would appear, therefore, that Puxton along with Congresbury’s chapelry at Wick St Lawrence to the west, and the parishes of Kenn and Yatton to the north, were once part of a ‘greater Congresbury’ estate (Fig. 5). The early history of Congresbury is obscure. A now lost charter of King Ine, dated 688/726, granted seven hides at *Predian* [Priddy] and 20 hides at *Conbusburiae* [Congresbury] to the church at Sherborne. Congresbury was still assessed as 20 hides in 1066. Sometime before 1033, King Canute granted Banwell and Congresbury to Dudoc, Bishop of Wells. Dudoc left the estates in his will to the See, though they were seized by King Harold in 1066. On Harold’s death in 1066, Banwell and Congresbury passed to King William. However, Giso, Bishop of Wells petitioned the king and a charter of 1068 confirms the restoration of 20 hides at Banwell including Compton Bishop. The king retained Congresbury but granted Yatton to the bishop instead, along with one hide of land in Congresbury.

Domesday records two hides as having been removed from Congresbury after the Conquest. One, held by Giso, Bishop of Wells, appears to have been Hewish, an extension of Yatton parish to the south of the Congresbury Yeo river (Fig. 5D). The Domesday entry for Yatton includes reference to ‘A pasture called Waimora [Wemberham?] ... which before 1066 belonged to Congresbury’. The *Exon Domesday* elaborates: ‘Of this manor’s [Yatton] land Fastrad holds five hides from the Bishop, Hildebert four hides. Of the four hides which Hildebert holds, a woman, Aethelrun, had one hide jointly in 1066. With this hide, which Aethelrun held, lies a pasture called Wemberham.’ Therefore, this hide, with the pasture at Wemberham, was transferred from the king’s manor of Congresbury to the Bishop’s manor of Yatton between 1066 and 1086. Although the area currently known as Wemberham...
lies north of the Congresbury Yeo this results from the river having changed course (Fig. 5C), and the hide in question is logically the extension of Yatton to the south of the river (Fig. 5D). The configuration of the parish boundaries of this area certainly suggest that this extension of Yatton was carved out of Congresbury, and its transfer would have served to link the Bishops, two manors of Yatton and Banwell.

The other hide removed from Congresbury after the Conquest was held by Serlo of Burcy and Gilbert son of Thorold. Gilbert held Kewstoke, while Serlo held Woodspring for a short time after the Conquest. Logically, the hide removed from Congresbury was Wick St Lawrence, which lay adjacent to Kewstoke and Woodspring and does not otherwise appear in Domesday. Wick St Lawrence was subsequently returned to Congresbury, with which it had strong links throughout the rest of the medieval period.

It has, therefore, been established that the royal estate of 'greater Congresbury' encompassed Puxton, Wick St Lawrence, Yatton and Kenn. The final element is logically Kingston Seymour whose place-name suggests it was once royal property. The Domesday entry for Kingston Seymour is also very curious. The two manors were assessed as follows:

- 1 hide, land for 17 ploughs, and valued at £6 in 1066 and 1086;
- 4½ hides, land for 7 ploughs, and valued at 6s in 1066 and 1086.

For the second manor, Domesday adds, 'Before 1066 this manor did not pay tax except for 1 hide', and the huge difference between the one hide and seventeen ploughlands in the first manor also suggests tax exemption (though this is rare in Somerset). Kingston Seymour was also later a detached part of Chewton Hundred (Fig. 5F), itself a royal manor with a recorded tax exemption in 1086.

It can, therefore, be postulated that a large part of the North Somerset Levels lay within a 'greater Congresbury' royal estate. So did the colonization of the North Somerset Levels occur in the context of this estate, or following its fragmentation? The fragmentation appears to have occurred in several stages: Kingston Seymour was detached at an unknown point before 1066 (Fig. 5B), as was Yatton (Fig. 5C). Hewish was removed from Congresbury and added to Yatton shortly after 1066 (Fig. 5D). Kenn had been detached at some point before 1086. The date when Puxton was removed is unclear as it cannot be identified in Domesday, though it may have been one of three unnamed hides within Congresbury that were held by Alfward, Ordric and Ordulf.

If we return to an analysis of the historic landscape, we can at least suggest the relative date at which certain key events occurred. The starting point is Puxton. Its location, some 10 km from the coast is far from the most favourable place on the

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40 Op. cit. in note 36, No. 27.3.
41 M. Gelling, Signposts to the Past (Chichester, 1978), 184.
42 Op. cit. in note 36, No. 5.63.
43 Op. cit. in note 36, No. 5.64.
44 M. Costen, The Origins of Somerset (Manchester, 1992), 123.
Levels. The highest ground actually lies towards the coast, as it is here that tidal waters dumped most of their sediments as they flooded what was a saltmarsh environment (the same phenomenon explains the formation of natural levee banks along major rivers). Thus, the area around Kingston Seymour lies at about 5.8–6.1 m AOD, whereas the ground around Puxton lies at c. 5.5 m AOD. Logically, therefore, we would expect the higher, coastal areas to be settled first, and only later were people forced towards the lower-lying backfen areas such as Puxton (Fig. 6, left). This simple expansion of settlement from the coast inland is seen most graphically in the Norfolk Marshland where extensive fieldwalking has allowed the steady spread of settlement to be mapped century by century.47 As Puxton was occupied by the 11th century (and possibly earlier, such is the lack of datable pottery), it might seem logical that the Kingston Seymour area was settled somewhat earlier than this.

The model for marshland colonization outlined above — of simple expansion from a primary location in Kingston Seymour — implies an intact ‘greater Congresbury’ estate within which settlement expansion was a relatively simple process whereby colonists left the dryland, occupied the coastal area, and that subsequent movement into the backfens only occurred as the more favourable areas were fully occupied. Another strand of evidence, however, suggests that it was not that simple. As described above, shortly after 1066, the far western end of Congresbury (Wemberham) was transferred to Yatton. The western and south-western boundaries of Wemberham are marked by naturally meandering watercourses, but its eastern boundary is very straight and clearly artificial. However, this boundary does not cut through other landscape features such as fields or roads: the historic landscape clearly post-dates the laying out of this boundary, suggesting that this area of the Levels was not enclosed and drained at that time (in contrast to the area around Hewish and to the south around Puxton which had a landscape of ‘infields’ similar to that of Kingston Seymour). This in turn suggests that there may have been at least two primary foci of marshland colonization: one in Kingston Seymour from where the higher coastal areas were settled, and the other in that part of Congresbury itself which lay on the marshes (Hewish) (Fig. 6, right): the colonization of Puxton was, therefore, a ‘push into the margins’ — the colonization of lower-lying ground to the south of Hewish — but within the more limited context of Congresbury parish. The area in between was largely unoccupied at this time.

This proposed model, that the Puxton area was colonized from Congresbury, rather than simply as an extension of settlement expansion from the coast, has further implications (though this entails yet further uncertainties). If the people of Puxton were simply the marshland community of Congresbury, then they cannot have been responsible for building the sea wall along the coast. If the interpretation of the ‘infield’ enclosures as ‘summer banks’ is correct, then when the Puxton area was colonized there must still have been a risk of tidal flooding. That implies that the sea wall along the coast was constructed after the fragmentation of the ‘greater

Two models for the colonization of the North Somerset Levels during the late 1st millennium A.D. Left: initial settlement on the higher coastal marshes, with a gradual expansion eastwards into the lower-lying backfens. Right: initial settlement in Kingston Seymour on the higher coastal marshes, and in the western part of the Congresbury Marshes, with subsequent expansion from both primary foci. (Drawn by the author)
Congresbury estate and the detachment of Kingston Seymour. The creation of coastal sea defences must, therefore, have been a collaborative effort between several manors/ communities.

Landscape evolution on a ‘clean sheet’

The marshland landscape of the North Somerset Levels was, therefore, colonized in the late 1st millennium A.D. The cultural landscape was created on a ‘blank sheet’: a relatively featureless marsh with only the occasional former creek to influence how the pattern of fields, roads and settlements would evolve. This was the period when, on the Polden Hills to the south, a landscape of open fields and planned, nucleated villages was being created, and similar episodes of replanning appear to have occurred nearby on Wedmore and around the Gordano Valley. At first sight it appears that no such ‘Midland’-style landscapes, however, were created on any of the medieval reclamations on the Somerset Levels despite their being created at the same time: these areas were characterized by predominantly dispersed settlement patterns, of isolated farmsteads and small hamlets, and a number of small common-fields amongst otherwise enclosed field systems.

The area around Puxton illustrates the diversity present within these more irregular landscapes. Figure 7 shows selected facets of the historic landscape in Puxton, that part of Congresbury that extended onto the Levels (Congresbury Marsh) and Hewish (the hide removed from Congresbury and added to Yatton to the north). The settlement patterns in these areas are remarkably different (as mapped in the 19th century and which a combination of archaeological survey, standing building recording and documentary research has shown can be traced back to at least the 16th century). The eastern part of Puxton was occupied by a single nucleated settlement, while the western area was farmed from a loose green-side hamlet south of Ashfield. The whole of Hewish was settled by two small hamlets (East and West Hewish), in contrast to Congresbury Marsh where isolated farmsteads predominated. These local differences in settlement pattern are also reflected in the pattern of landholding as mapped in the Tithe Survey, and which through earlier documentary material can be traced back to at least the late 15th/16th centuries (Fig. 7A). In eastern Puxton individual tenements, typically around 15 acres, consisted of widely scattered parcels of land, as was also the case in the immediate vicinity of Ashfield. A map of c. 1770, and an examination of the field-names, field-boundary pattern and earthworks allows former open fields to be reconstructed in both these areas, that to the south of Puxton surrounded by a substantial bank (Fig. 7B). The rest of western Puxton, along with Congresbury Marsh and Hewish, was divided between largely nucleated landholdings of typically 40 acres or larger; there is no evidence for open fields in these areas.

The dating of these two different landscape types has been discussed above. The primary settlement core at Puxton (the ‘infield’ enclosure) was in existence by the late 10th-11th centuries, when it appears that the new landscape was created with a tendency towards communality. Hewish was carved out of Congresbury sometime between 1066 and 1086 and this occurred before that area was colonized; the pattern

48 Aston and Gerrard, op. cit. in note 3; Rippon, op. cit. in note 2, 162–5.
Figure 7. Settlement, landholding and field systems in Puxton, Congresbury Marsh and Hewish. A: distribution of landholdings c. 1600 showing the highly scattered pattern in Puxton and more nucleated tenements in Congresbury Marsh and Hewish. B: the primary settlement foci ('infields') and evidence for open fields in Puxton. (Drawn by the author)
of dispersed settlement and enclosed fields must, therefore post-date this period. For whatever reason, communal landscapes were no longer created as part of the process of settlement expansion in the rump of the ‘greater Congresbury’ estate.

**Conclusions**

To a considerable extent, this paper is highly speculative, although it demonstrates two things, one methodological and the other thematic. First, we can study landscape through archaeological or documentary evidence, but their value is greatly enhanced when they are integrated with the richest historical record of all: the historic landscape. The morphology of landscape can be unravelled through historic landscape characterization and retrogressive analysis, to suggest the way(s) in which it evolved. These models then need to be verified through fieldwork, as has begun at Puxton. This paper has also outlined how there was a major phase of settlement expansion into a physically marginal environment starting around the 10th/11th centuries (or possibly earlier). The landscape that was created was relatively unrestrained by existing features, and as such might reflect a relatively ‘clean’ example of a landscape dating to this period.

This marshland colonization appears to have occurred within the context of a major estate that had already started to fragment. The diverse settlement pattern and a mixture of open and enclosed fields was evolving at the same time as Glastonbury Abbey and other major landowners in Somerset were reorganizing their estates with the creation of nucleated villages and open fields. Puxton itself presents evidence for this approach to landscape management being created around the 10th/11th centuries within the former ‘greater Congresbury’ estate, other parts of which, however, had a highly dispersed settlement pattern. There has been considerable debate recently about the relative significance of cultural and environmental factors in determining where open-field based landscapes emerged, but in the case of Puxton that such marked local variation in landscape character emerged, on what was a physically uniform environment, can only have been due to the different strategies lords and their tenants adopted towards estate management. The decision whether or not to adopt the new fashion for villages must have depended upon its perceived advantages and disadvantages, and the freedom of lords/tenants to undertake such a restructuring of their agrarian resources.

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49 E.g. Lewis et al. and Williamson, opp. cit. in note 3.