

Emerging Regional Variation in Historic Landscape Character: The Possible Significance of the 'Long Eighth Century'

Stephen Rippon

In the sixteenth century, Britain's was a rich and varied landscape. Settlement in the Midlands was characterised by large nucleated villages surrounded by extensive open fields – what John Leland and his contemporaries referred to as 'champion' countryside – while areas such as the south-east of England and the west of Britain had a complex mixture of more dispersed settlement patterns associated with smaller-scale common fields and large areas of closes held in severalty (the 'bosky or 'woodland' countryside of Leland and others). The origins of these villages and open fields in England's 'Central Province' have been discussed in a series of major studies (for example, Rowley 1981; Lewis *et al.* 1997; Jones and Page 2003a; 2003b; Roberts and Wrathmell 2002; Williamson 2003 and this volume), but this paper will focus on landscape change at the fringes of and beyond the village zone and consider why some areas did not develop this distinctive approach towards landscape management.

As Taylor (1983, 125) has argued, villages are in fact an aberration, not just in their limited spatial distribution but also in their relatively late appearance in the British countryside. While there were some nucleated rural settlements in late prehistoric and Roman Britain, isolated farmsteads were more common. The question of when, and why, just part of the country developed a more communal approach towards managing the landscape has been much debated, with an emerging view that it originated in the East Midlands some time around the eighth to tenth centuries, and that this approach was then adopted in adjacent areas. Various suggestions have been made as to why this 'Central Province' saw the creation of villages and open fields and these include a range of socio-economic factors related to the relationship between landed resources, an expanding economy, rising population and the structure of landownership (though it remains unclear whether it was landowners or their communities who were responsible for restructuring the landscape). It has also been argued that physical/environmental factors were important,

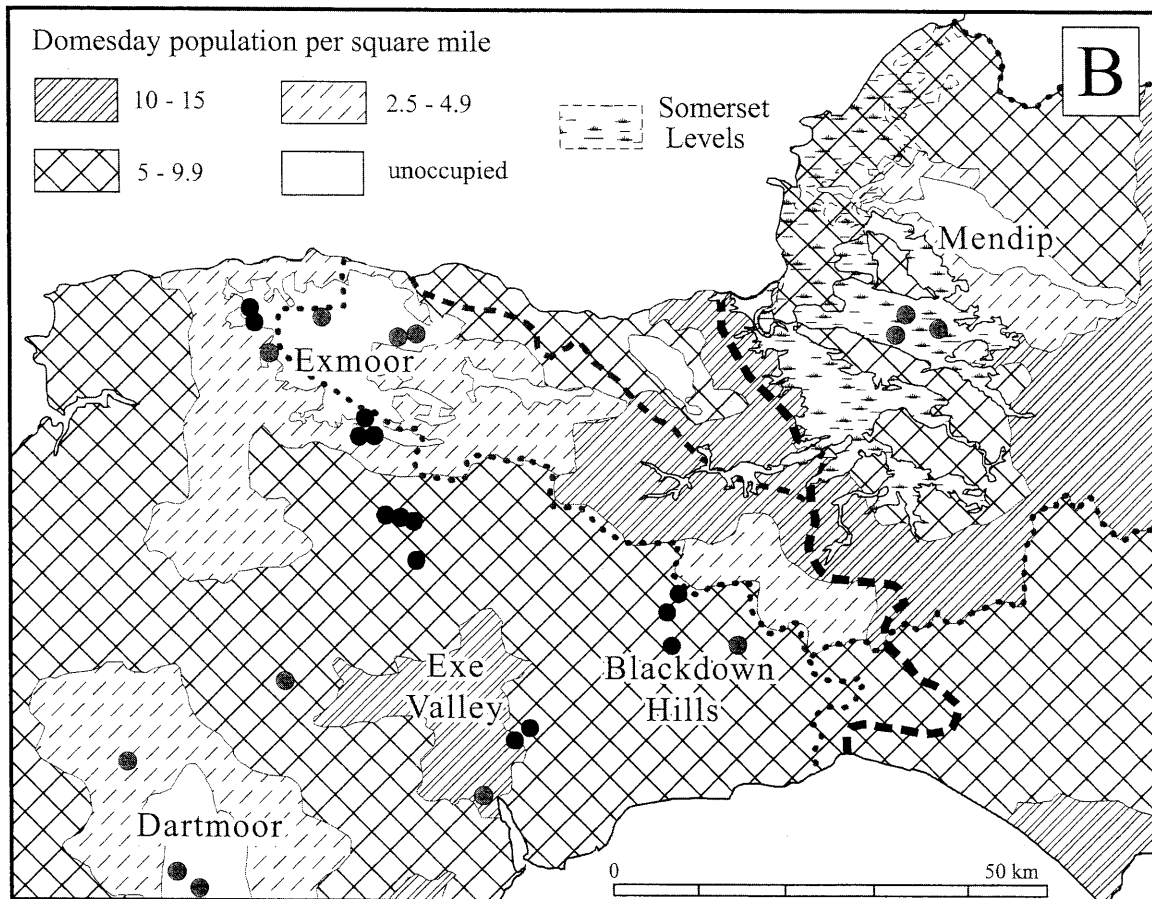
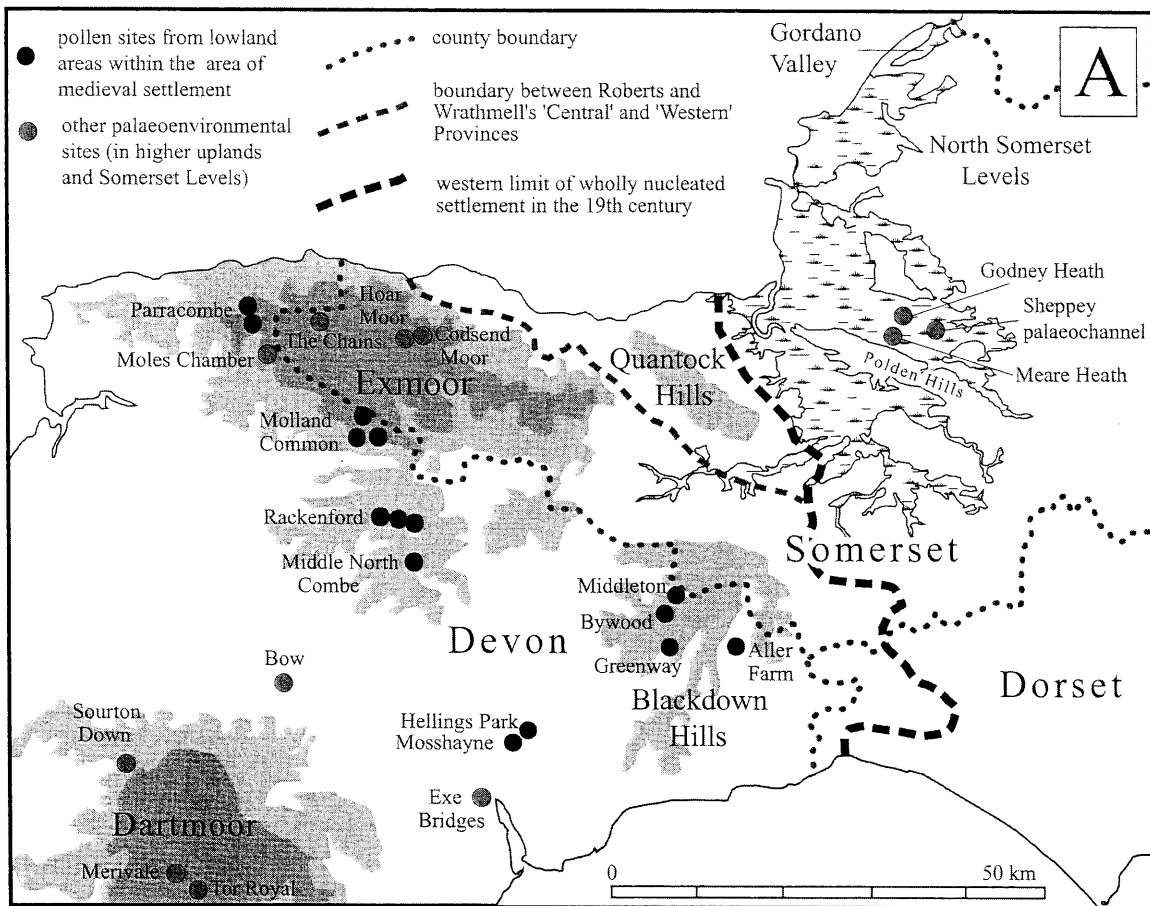
most notably the ability of different soils to respond to the increasing demands of agriculture (see Williamson this volume). The influence of what have been called 'antecedent landscapes' – that is, the way in which the character of the Romano-British and early medieval landscape affected the nature of the later medieval countryside – has also been discussed. The focus of this paper, however, is not why villages and open fields developed in the 'Central Province', but why they did not occur elsewhere. If landscapes characterised by villages and open fields are an aberration, are the landscapes of dispersed settlement in areas such as the South West what the 'Central Province' would have looked like if villages had not been created? Were these regions beyond the Central Province somehow peripheral to the focus of landscape change in the late first millennium AD?

Unravelling the factors behind landscape replanning

A major problem in understanding why the countryside of medieval England was so varied in its character is this wide range of possible causal factors behind landscape change. Analysis at a national and regional scale clearly shows that population density alone was not a factor: there is no correlation between the 'Central Province' and the areas of highest population density in Domesday (e.g. Figure 30; Darby 1967; 1977, 87–94; Rippon 2004, 115–31; Williamson this volume). There have been various attempts at testing the correlation between other possible causal factors behind the development of villages and open fields in the 'Central Province', such as the character of the preceding countryside (e.g. Roberts and Wrathmell 2002, 19–31), the nature and drainage properties of different soils (e.g. Williamson 2003, 141–59; and this volume), and social structure and tenurial freedom (e.g. Williamson 2003, 46–52). Exploring such possible correlations at a national scale raises some fascinating possibilities but it can be difficult to untangle the various possible causal factors. Areas largely cleared of woodland by the eleventh century, for example, broadly correspond to areas of seasonally waterlogged soils seriously affected by compaction and puddling, as well as strongly manorialised parishes where all the land was owned by a single magnate or a few large owners, all of which characterise the 'Central Province' (Everitt 1985, 129; Williamson 2003 and this volume). So is there any way of untangling these various potential causes of regional variation in the character of the medieval landscape?

One way of testing whether a particular factor did indeed play a part in shaping the medieval countryside is to study places where it can be proved that certain other variables were *not* significant. One such example is coastal wetlands, such as the Somerset Levels (Figure 30) that lie towards the south-western fringes of the 'Central Province', which were reclaimed from around the tenth century when a network of settlements, roads and field systems was created that form the basis of today's historic landscape. Crucially, this episode of reclamation was occurring around the same time as the later stages of village creation in the 'Central Province', including the planning of a series

FIGURE 30.
The south-western
boundary of the
'central province':
(A) major features
of the physical
landscape and
palaeoenvironmental
sites referred to in
the text; (B) the
lack of correlation
between areas with
predominantly
nucleated/dispersed
settlement and
Domesday population
density.



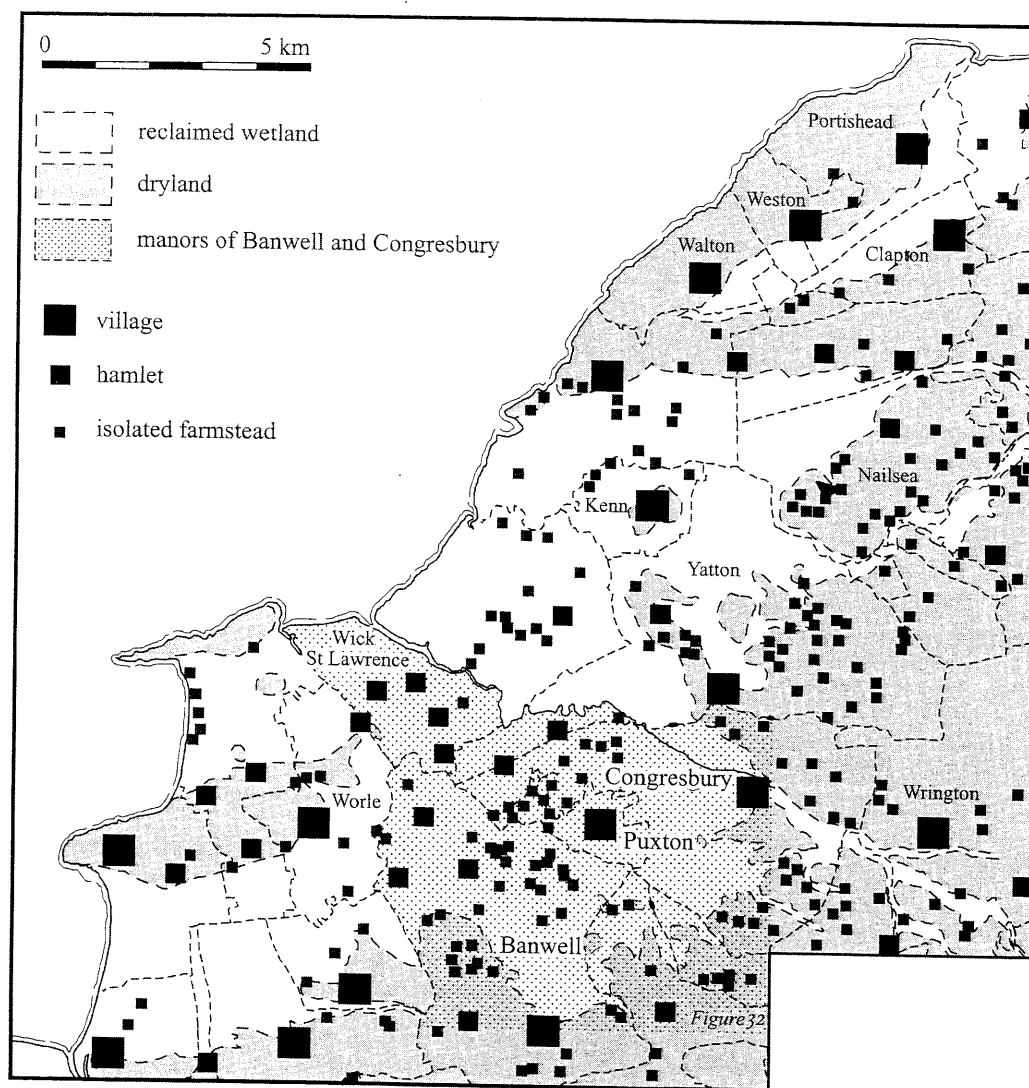


FIGURE 31.
The markedly different
nineteenth-century
settlement patterns
within a relatively
small part of north-
west Somerset, with
'Midland'-style villages
and open fields around
the Gordano valley in
the north, scattered
farmsteads and closes
always held in severalty
to the south around
Nailsea, and landscapes
characterised by
villages (e.g. Puxton),
hamlets (e.g. Wick)
and isolated farmsteads
(e.g. Congresbury
Marsh) in close
proximity on the
reclaimed North
Somerset Levels.

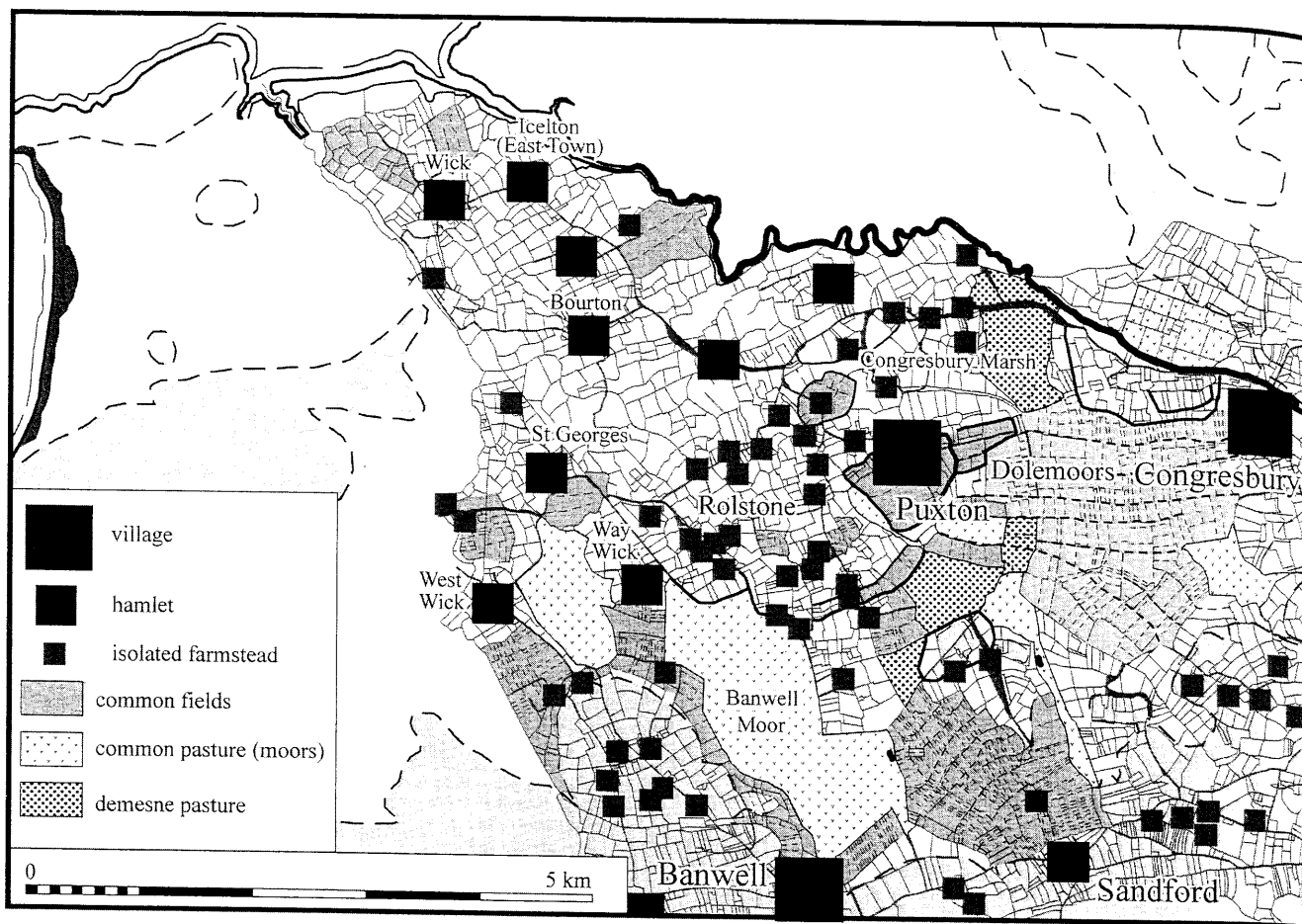
of nucleated villages on Glastonbury Abbey's Polden Hills estate in central Somerset (Figure 30; Aston and Gerrard 1999; Corcos 2002). These villages were surrounded by regularly arranged two- or three-field systems that covered most of the parish, as was the case on most of Glastonbury's Somerset manors (and possibly one of its outlying estates, at Braunton in Devon, which it held from AD 855 x 60 (or possibly earlier) to AD 973: Abrams 1996, 66–8; Pearce 2004, 296–7). On the Polden Hills this reorganisation of the landscape appears to have occurred within the context of the fragmentation of their sixty-hide *Pouelt* estate into a series of five-hide manors, many of which have place-names of the 'personal name + -ington' type (e.g. Cossington, Edington and Woolavington). The same process of landscape reorganisation (the creation of villages and open fields following the fragmentation of a large estate) is found elsewhere in Somerset – for example, around the Gordano Valley, where a series of villages, including Clapton, Easton, Walton and Weston, each with regularly arranged open fields, replaced a large estate of approximately fifty hides based at Portbury (Figure 31; Rippon 1997, 136–7, fig. 34). There is also some palaeoenvironmental support for an increasing intensity of landscape use

in central Somerset around the tenth century, when pollen sequences from Godney and Meare Heath, for example, show a marked decline in dryland trees and an increase in herbs indicative of clearance/cultivation (Beckett and Hibbert 1979, 594; Somerset County Council 1992). About the same time there was increased sedimentation in the palaeochannel of the former river Brue/Sheppey, just south of the Panborough–Bleadney Gap (Figure 30; Aalbersberg 1999, 93), and there also appears to have been an increase in alluviation in the Yeo Valley, in the south-western part of the Somerset Levels around Ilchester (Thew 1994).

Not all parts of Somerset, however, had medieval landscapes characterised by villages and open fields. In Nailsea and Yatton, for example, to the south of Gordano on the foothills that flank the North Somerset Levels, the settlement pattern was more dispersed, with a mixture of small hamlets and isolated farmsteads associated with field systems whose morphology and documentary sources suggest that they contained large areas of closes and only very small-scale open fields. So why are these adjacent landscapes so different: is it due to the physical environment (topography, soils and geology), preceding landscape character (such as the extent of woodland clearance) or socio-economic circumstances (such as the nature of lordship and its relationship to the peasant/tenant community)?

Creating an historic landscape on a cleaned slate

The North Somerset Levels can be regarded as a microcosm of this wider region. In close proximity there are landscapes characterised by compact hamlets, such as Wick St Lawrence, smaller, more loosely arranged hamlets, such as West Wick and Waywick, and areas of scattered, isolated farmsteads such as on Congresbury Marsh and in Rolstone (Figures 31 and 32). This diversity in the settlement pattern is mirrored by other facets of the landscape, such as the field systems and patterns of land holding. In some areas, such as Wick St Lawrence, a detailed survey of 1567 and estate maps of 1738–9 show that farmsteads were associated with a small number of adjacent closes (their ‘home ground’, amounting to between 10–50 per cent of the total land held in severalty), with their remaining land scattered across the surrounding areas in what field names, other documentary sources and historic landscape analysis have shown were former open fields. In 1567, an average 17 per cent of each holding lay in surviving common fields. This is in sharp contrast to Congresbury Marsh, where tenements consisted of large compact blocks of closes held in severalty immediately adjacent to the farmstead (amounting to between 50–90 per cent of the total land held in severalty), and with just occasional detached parcels in former common meadows and pastures some distance to the south. On average 13 per cent of each holding lay in the surviving common meadows (the Dolemoors: Figure 32). A range of documentary sources shows that this striking local variation in field management and landholding can be traced back at least as far as the fifteenth century, while a programme



of fieldwalking, shovel test-pitting and collecting pottery from the gardens of extant houses shows that these different settlement patterns existed by the twelfth century (Rippon forthcoming). So why is there such diversity in historic landscape character within this one area, and what do detailed local studies such as these tell us about the wider issue of regional variation in landscape character?

What makes reclaimed coastal wetlands of particular value in studying the origins of the medieval countryside is that a number of the possible factors behind regional variation cannot have applied as these medieval landscapes were made on a 'cleaned slate' created during a period of early medieval flooding. We can, therefore, rule out the possibility that either soil conditions or the character of the earlier landscape influenced the form taken by the later medieval countryside as, in reclaimed wetlands such as these, the 'antecedent landscape' comprised a relatively uniform area of mudflats and saltmarshes beneath which the Roman-British land-surface was mostly buried. Following the construction of embankments along the coast and major tidal rivers from around the tenth century it was the decisions of landlords, their sub-tenants, and/or the peasant communities who colonised this newly available land that led to such marked local variation in landscape character.

In Somerset as a whole there appears to have been a tendency for settlement nucleation to occur to a greater extent on the estates of some major

FIGURE 32.

The estates of the bishops of Bath and Wells at Banwell and Congresbury. Despite being in the same ownership, when the North Somerset Levels were reclaimed a wide diversity of landscapes were created, such as the village and open fields at Puxton and the dispersed settlement pattern and enclosed fields of nearby Congresbury Marsh. This suggests that it was the sub-tenants and their communities that were responsible for deciding which type of landscape to create.

landowners, such as the abbots of Glastonbury Abbey, than on those of others, such as the bishops of Bath and Wells (Rippon 2004, 121–31). In the case of the North Somerset Levels the methodological principle established above – that, in order to understand the causal factors behind variation in the character of the medieval countryside, we need to rule out as many other potential factors as possible – can be extended into the area of social and tenurial relationships. The majority of the southern part of the North Somerset Levels (as shown on Figure 32) fell within manors (Banwell, Congresbury and Yatton) held by the same lord: the bishops of Bath and Wells. Their estates included landscapes of very different character, including areas with compact hamlets and open fields (e.g. Wick St Lawrence), loosely arranged hamlets and a few common meadows (e.g. West Wick and Waywick), and entirely dispersed settlement patterns with land arranged predominantly in closes but with detached parcels in the Dolemoors, up to 2 km to the south (e.g. Congresbury Marsh). Clearly, in this particular case, the lord of the manor appears to have exerted relatively little control over how his sub-tenants and/or the local communities chose to arrange their newly created landscapes, which is in sharp contrast to the strongly interventionist approach of the abbots of Glastonbury, seen in the planning of villages such as Shapwick.

It would appear, therefore, that around the tenth century the idea of structuring landscapes around nucleated villages and open fields had reached Somerset. The abbots of Glastonbury and their tenants were clearly enthusiastic exponents of this new approach to landscape organisation, while others, such as the bishops of Bath and Wells, adopted a far more *laissez-faire* approach. Other parts of Somerset, Wiltshire, and Dorset saw similar reorganisations though, interestingly, this was not the case in Devon and Cornwall. To the south-west of a line marked by the Blackdown and Quantock Hills the landscape was of a very different character, with more dispersed settlement patterns and a mixture of small common fields and extensive areas of closes. So why did the reorganisation of agricultural landscapes into nucleated villages and open fields not penetrate any further into the South West?

Across a watershed: landscape change beyond the Central Province in South West England

The Blackdown and Quantock Hills are a discontinuous series of uplands that divide the low-lying clay vales and wetlands of Somerset from the gently rolling hills of Devon (Figure 30). These hills not only mark the south-westerly extent of medieval landscapes characterised by nucleated villages and regularly arranged open fields, but were also a significant boundary in earlier times. They divided the land of the Durotriges to the east (as reflected in the distribution of their coins, pottery, and strongly defended hillforts containing large numbers of grain-storage pits) from Dumnonia in the west (which lacked coins, had its own distinctive ceramic tradition, and far smaller hillforts that lacked grain-storage pits: Cunliffe 1991). In the Roman period these same

hills also marked the south-western edge of the Durotrigian *civitas* in the east, which was one of the most highly Romanised landscapes in Britain, as reflected in its abundance of small towns, villas, Romano-Celtic temples and durable material culture. To the west lay Dumnonia which, apart from a handful of small villas around the *civitas* capital of *Isca Dumnoniorum* (Exeter), shows very little outward signs of having adopted the trappings of Roman life (Todd 1987; Jones and Mattingly 1990; Scott 2000; Rippon 2006). So is this an example of 'antecedent landscapes' influencing the character of the medieval countryside?

It is easy to assume that the South West's landscape was simply unchanging, with the predominantly dispersed settlements and their associated pattern of mostly enclosed fields having gradually evolved from the prehistoric period. In West Penwith, at the far western end of Cornwall, this does indeed appear to have been the case, as the present pattern of small, irregularly shaped and strongly lynched stone-walled fields have been shown through survey and excavation to be late prehistoric and Romano-British in origin (Johnson and Rose 1982, 174; Quinnell 1986, 119–20; Herring 1993; 1994; Smith 1996). The other potential example of prehistoric field systems still surviving in use, in and around Dartmoor (Fleming 1988), can, however, be dismissed. The coaxial patterning within the historic landscape at Bittaford, to the south of Dartmoor, for example, probably results from a series of droveways extending from the South Hams up on to the moor, while elsewhere examples of the historic landscape perpetuating the line of the reaves are restricted to areas of later recolonisation and the reuse of derelict boundaries (Lambourne 2004). East of West Penwith the Romano-British and earliest medieval countryside was of a very different character to the historic landscape of today. The majority of identified settlements were enclosed by a simple univalate non-defensive ditch and/or bank enclosing an internal area of c.0.1 to 1.0 ha, and included a small number of oval or sub-rectangular houses (Johnson and Rose 1982; Griffith 1994; Riley and Wilson-North 2001, 65–75). A number of open settlements have also been identified (e.g. Thomas 1958; McAvoy 1980), though their true extent is difficult to establish. The Middle Iron Age open settlements at Long Range and Langland Lane in East Devon, for example, were discovered during road construction and were not identifiable on air photographs (Fitzpatrick *et al.* 1999, 7, 130–59). The scarcity of datable material culture on the Roman-British and earliest medieval rural settlements that have been excavated would also have made them almost impossible to locate through fieldwalking (e.g. Balkwill 1976; Jarvis 1976; Simpson *et al.* 1989; Horner 1993; Todd 1998; Caseldine *et al.* 2000, 65).

It is notable that while some of these late prehistoric or Romano-British settlements in the South West are associated with field systems, many are not (Silvester and Balkwill 1977; Silvester 1978a; 1978b; 1980; Griffith 1984; Simpson *et al.* 1989; Reed and Manning 2000; Quinnell 2004, 3). It is possible that while substantial enclosure ditches show up as cropmarks, lesser field boundary ditches do not, although an increasing number of large-scale excavations

and watching briefs are finding no trace of Romano-British or early medieval field ditches even in the immediate vicinity of known settlement enclosures (e.g. Hayes Farm Clyst Honiton: Simpson *et al.* 1989 and CAT 2000; the A30 Exeter to Honiton improvement: FitzPatrick *et al.* 1999; and see Herring 1998, fig. 42; Johnson *et al.* 1998–9). It is possible that field boundaries were marked by banks rather than ditches (as on the limestone hills south of Newton Abbot: Phillips 1966, 12–16; Gallant *et al.* 1985; Quinn 1995), and that elsewhere these have been destroyed by weathering and ploughing, but it is clear that even those field systems which have been recorded are localised in extent and are on a different orientation to the historic landscape. There is nothing to suggest that there was a continuous fieldscape across the South West in the Romano-British and earliest medieval period; and the field systems that have been identified were of a very different character to those of the medieval period.

There is growing evidence that some at least of these small Romano-British enclosed settlements continued to be occupied into the fifth and even the sixth centuries (Hirst 1937; Guthrie 1969; Saunders 1972; Appleton-Fox 1992; Quinnell 2004, 238–42), while a number of hilltop sites were also reoccupied (Pollard 1966; Grant 1995; Gent and Quinnell 1999a, 19, 24–6; 1999b, 82). A growing body of palaeoenvironmental evidence also suggests broad continuity in the lowlands, with the maintenance of an open landscape and the continuous cultivation of cereals, albeit on a small scale (Hatton and Caseldine 1991; Caseldine *et al.* 2000; Fyfe *et al.* 2003; 2004; Hawkins 2005a; 2005b). Only on the higher uplands is there evidence for contraction. On Exmoor there was a decrease in the intensity of human activity, with a decline in arable and grassland and an increase in heather and possibly woodland around the fifth century (Moore *et al.* 1984; Francis and Slater 1990, 14). On Dartmoor there are hints of a slight decrease in the density of human activity at Merrivale and Tor Royal, although the pollen sequences at Blacka Brook and Wotter Common appear to show continuity in a predominantly pastoral landscape (Smith *et al.* 1981, 246; Gearey *et al.* 1997, fig. 5; Gearey *et al.* 2000a). On Bodmin Moor the picture is similarly varied: there is continuity in land use at Rough Tor North, but possibly slight woodland regeneration at Tresellern Marsh and Rough Tor South (Gearey *et al.* 1997; 2000b, 501). These uplands, however, lay beyond the main areas of settlement, and as early medieval place-names suggest they were probably used for transhumant grazing (Padel 1985, 127–9; Herring 1996); a decrease in the intensity of their exploitation need not suggest a widespread dislocation in the landscape elsewhere. The overriding theme in the lowland agrarian landscape between the late Roman period and the sixth/seventh centuries is, therefore, one of continuity.

It is during the fifth to seventh centuries that we get the first evidence for ownership and control of land and resources, with inscribed memorial stones, which occur across Cornwall and west Devon, with two outliers on Exmoor, implying the existence of a socially stratified elite (Pearce 1978, 24; Okasha 1993; Thomas 1994). It was presumably this elite that was responsible for

maintaining contact with the Mediterranean world, reflected in the importation of late fifth- and sixth-century pottery. The greatest concentration has been found at the rocky coastal promontory at Tintagel in north Cornwall, which can best be interpreted as a 'royal citadel' (Thomas 1981; 1993; Nowakowski and Thomas 1992; Batey *et al.* 1993; Morris *et al.* 1999). Other such sites may well exist – St Michael's Mount in south Cornwall is certainly a contender (Herring 2000), along with, possibly, Burgh Island in South Devon, which lies close to the trading sites or beach markets at Bantham and Mothecombe, where ephemeral traces of occupation associated with late Roman and early medieval Mediterranean imported pottery have been recovered (Farley and Little 1968; Silvester 1981; Griffith and Reed 1998; Horner 2001). The importation of this pottery suggests that communities in the South West had something of value to exchange, and there are documentary references to English traders taking tin (presumably Cornish) to the Continent from the seventh century (Penhallurick 1986, 240). Radiocarbon dates from both Exmoor and the Blackdown Hills have also shown that iron production continued well into the post-Roman period, while at Carhampton on Exmoor an ironworking site is associated with fifth- to sixth-century Mediterranean imports (Griffith and Weddell 1996, 33; Riley and Wilson-North 2001, 112). Clearly, the fifth- to sixth-century landscape of South West England was a busy place.

All of this archaeological and palaeoenvironmental evidence is pointing to broad continuity in both society and the landscape between the fourth and the sixth centuries, but then there was a period of great change. Pottery from the Mediterranean ceased to reach eastern Dumnonia, though it is found all around other parts of western Britain (Thomas 1990). There is neither artefactual nor radiocarbon dating to suggest that Romano-British/earliest medieval settlements continued to be occupied after the sixth century, other than a few possible examples where they were reused as Christian centres (Quinnell 2004, 243). Across the South West the vast majority of Romano-British/earliest medieval enclosures and field systems are quite unrelated to the open settlements, roads and fields of the historic landscape (Padel 1985; 1999; Preston-Jones and Rose 1986; Rose and Preston-Jones 1995, figs 3.1–3.2; Herring 1998, fig. 42; Riley and Wilson-North 2001, 73–5; Turner 2003, 176–8). Even at the level of vernacular architecture we see discontinuity, with the medieval tripartite house, which dates back to the tenth/eleventh centuries at Mawgan Porth (Bruce-Mitford 1997) and possibly Gwithian (Pearce 2004, 304), standing in sharp contrast to the unicellular oval/sub-rectangular huts of the Romano-British and earliest medieval period (Preston-Jones and Rose 1986, fig. 6; Quinnell 1986, figs 3–5; 2004).

The place-names recorded in Domesday and landmarks described in the boundary clauses of tenth- and eleventh-century charters similarly suggest that the historic landscape of today has its origins before the Norman Conquest (Hooke 1994; 1999). Archaeological work in and around medieval settlements has failed to establish their origins, partly because most excavated sites are in secondary locations such as the uplands and heavy clays of the

Culm Measures, that appear to have been colonised as late as the thirteenth century (Dudley and Minter 1966; Allan 1994; Henderson and Weddell 1994; Weddell and Reed 1997). Even if sites in primary settlement locations were excavated, the lack of pre-eleventh-century pottery in Devon and disturbance to the stratigraphically earliest contexts that might potentially be radiocarbon dated, would make dating their origins difficult (Brown and Laithwaite 1993; Henderson and Weddell 1994; Brown 1998).

With so little archaeological and documentary evidence for these crucial centuries between the cessation of Roman authority and the Norman Conquest, it is to palaeoenvironmental evidence that we must turn. In Britain as a whole there are relatively few long sequences that cover the historic period and, of those we have, the majority are in upland areas (Dark 2000). These traditional sites for pollen analysis are blanket peats on the highest uplands and are of limited value in studying the medieval landscape, as they lay beyond areas that were actually settled at that time. Recent work in Devon, however, has revealed a series of palaeoenvironmental sequences from small valley mires that lay within that part of the historic landscape that was actually settled in the medieval period, such as the Rackenford area of mid Devon (e.g. Figure 33; Fyfe *et al.* 2004; Fyfe and Rippon 2004; Rippon *et al.* 2006), Molland and Parracombe in North Devon (Fyfe *et al.* 2003; 2004; Fyfe and Rippon 2004; Rippon *et al.* 2006), the Clyst Valley near Exeter (Hawkins 2005b), and the Blackdown Hills in eastern Devon (Figure 30; Hatton and Caseldine 1991; Hawkins 2005a).

These small valley mires have a relatively local catchment (of just a few square kilometres) and so will be far more sensitive to landscape change than the upland peats whose very broad catchments result in a highly generalised picture across a very wide area. With very local catchments there is obviously a danger that an individual pollen core may not be typical of the region, and so in most cases around three mires were examined in each study area. These lowland pollen sequences consistently show no significant changes in land use between the Roman and earliest medieval periods, but a major increase in cereals around the seventh/eighth centuries. Traditionally, this would have been interpreted as a simple expansion of settlement and the area of cultivation from primary to more secondary areas but if this was the case then we would expect to see a decline in woodland and rough pasture at the expense of arable. What we actually see alongside this increased cereal pollen is a substantial area of improved grassland and no decline in woodland: rather than the clearance and cultivation of new land, it appears that areas that had already been cleared were being used more intensively.

After the seventh/eighth centuries there is then very little change in the pollen record until the post-medieval period, which is significant for two reasons. Firstly, as we know that the essential fabric of the medieval landscape was in place by the tenth/eleventh centuries (see above), and as there is no change in the palaeoenvironmental record between the seventh/eighth centuries and the post-Conquest period, the origins of the medieval countryside may also date



FIGURE 33.
The pollen site at
Middle North Combe
in mid Devon. In
contrast to traditional
pollen sites that are
in remote upland
locations, this lowland
peat sequence is
from an area of
ancient settlement
and enclosure and, as
such, will give a more
accurate record of land
use changes.

to this initial expansion of arable and improved pasture. The second reason why this continuity in the pollen record is so significant is that it is not until the fourteenth century that we have good documentary sources that describe the practice of agriculture in the South West. These sources describe a distinctive form of rotational agriculture known as convertible husbandry, in which the majority of fields were subject to alternating grain and grass crops, with a short period of cultivation (of around two to three years) followed by a long grass ley (of around six to eight years), producing a rotation of around ten

years (Fox 1991; Fox and Padel 2000; Rippon *et al.* 2006). About a quarter of fields would have been cultivated in any one year, and very few fields (if any) within this core 'infield' area of intensive farming would have been permanent pasture. Documentary sources simply show that convertible husbandry existed by the fourteenth century, and that it continued into the post-medieval period. An examination of the late medieval horizons in the peat sequences therefore reveals what the pollen signature is for convertible husbandry, and as this is exactly the same as for the seventh/eighth centuries, when cereals first appear in large quantities, it would seem that this rotational system of agriculture may have developed at that time.

So what caused these changes in the landscape of South-West England around the seventh/eighth centuries? The period from around AD 680 to 830 has been described as the 'long eighth century', when southern England as a whole saw profound changes in settlement structure, architecture, the organisation of landed production and regional exchange (Hansen and Wickham 2000; Hamerow 2002, 191). This was also a turbulent period in the South West, with the eastern part of the kingdom of Dumnonia (i.e. modern Devon) being absorbed by the kingdom of Wessex in the late seventh century (Hooke 1999, 95; Pearce 2004, 252–8). There is no reason why this should have led to a sudden or synchronous replanning of the countryside, but these political changes could have initiated a period of economic expansion, innovation and change reflected in the very least by the granting of large tracts of land to the Church (e.g. King Aethelheard's grant of twenty hides at Crediton to bishop Forthhere in 739: Sawyer 1968, no. 255; Hooke 1994, 86). Could it have been these social changes that led to the gradual restructuring of the South West's landscape?

The origins of regionally distinct landscapes beyond the South West

So far we have seen that there appears to have been a significant change in the landscape of South West England around the seventh/eighth centuries, while in Somerset there appears to have been a phase of village creation (and an expansion of settlement into the coastal marshes) around the tenth century. These two periods appear to have been important across southern England. In the 'Central Province' there has been much debate over when villages and open fields were created. In Northamptonshire fieldwalking suggests that numerous scattered farmsteads associated with 'Early to Middle Saxon' pottery (fifth to ninth century), around a quarter of which are located on or adjacent to Romano-British sites, were replaced by far fewer but larger nucleated settlements that evolved into modern villages, some of which have produced 'Late Saxon' material (ninth to eleventh century: e.g. Foard 1978; Hall and Martin 1979; Taylor 1983, 116; Hall 1988; Shaw 1993; Ford 1996; Brown and Foard 2004). This process of village creation could have been a two-phase process, with the initial nucleation of settlement around a single existing focus sometime before the mid ninth century (and perhaps associated

with the fragmentation of large estates into smaller manorial holdings), followed by a reorganisation/replanning of these villages and the laying out of their open fields around the tenth century (Brown and Foard 1998; 2004, 96). Unfortunately, this first phase is poorly dated, but it must have been after the early eighth century, as the scattered farmsteads that were abandoned are associated with 'Middle Saxon' Ipswich Ware pottery (whose use extended from around AD 720 to around AD 850: Blinkhorn 1999), but before the mid ninth century, as they lack 'Late Saxon' pottery. The palaeoeconomic evidence from Raunds and West Cotton also suggests broad continuity in agriculture during the fifth to ninth centuries, with open-field farming introduced by the tenth century (Campbell 1994).

A similar pattern of dispersed settlement associated with 'Early to Middle Saxon' pottery being replaced around the ninth/tenth centuries by nucleated villages associated with 'Late Saxon' pottery is also discernable elsewhere in the East Midlands, for example in parts of Buckinghamshire (e.g. the desertion of Pennylands and origins of Great Linford: Williams 1993, 95) and Lincolnshire (Lane 1993, 58–9; 1995, 29–31). In Leicestershire and Rutland a dispersed scatter of small farmstead-size sites, recorded as 'Early Saxon' pottery scatters and occasional finds of 'Early to Middle Saxon' metalwork, were similarly abandoned before the use of 'Late Saxon' pottery, the distribution of which is restricted to medieval villages (Bowman 2004; Liddle 1996; Cooper 2000, 152; Knox 2004). In contrast to the dispersed settlement pattern on the Lincolnshire Fens, which continued into the seventh/eighth centuries (Hayes and Lane 1992, 215), however, fieldwalking along the fen-edge suggests that the scatter of sites associated with 'Early Saxon' pottery was abandoned before the use of 'Middle Saxon' pottery. In the north of the county, at Rigby Crossroads, west of Grimsby, a dispersed settlement pattern similarly appears to have undergone nucleation around the late seventh century (Steedman 1994). The colonisation of the nearby Norfolk Marshland also suggests that the idea of structuring landscapes around nucleated settlements was prevalent in that region by the Middle Saxon period. On these marshes just a single Early Saxon site has been located, at the margins of the intertidal saltmarshes and the freshwater backfen, which was abandoned by the eighth century (it lacked 'Middle Saxon' pottery). Soon after, a line of substantial regularly spaced settlements associated with Middle Saxon pottery, around 1–3 km apart, was established on the higher coastal saltmarshes in what was clearly a planned/coordinated act of colonisation based on the idea of structuring landscape around nucleated villages, rather than isolated farmsteads (Silvester 1988; 1993; Rippon 2000, 174).

There are also signs that there were two periods or stages of significant landscape change elsewhere within the 'Central Province'. At Cottenham in Cambridgeshire, for example, a loosely nucleated cluster of farmsteads dating to the seventh century was replaced around the early eighth century by a planned and nucleated settlement adjacent to the medieval village core and to the south of what became the manor site (Mortimer 2000). A shift in

the focus of the village led to the excavated site being abandoned in the tenth century, as was the case with several other medieval villages in the county (e.g. Willington and Fordham; Mortimer 2000). A similar process of village formation may be seen in Oxfordshire, where extensive survey and excavations within the open fields of Cassington and Yarnton have revealed an unstructured landscape of dispersed settlement associated with fifth- to seventh-century 'Early Saxon' pottery that was joined around the eighth century by a more compact and structured settlement – one that starts to have the characteristics of a village – immediately to the south of what became the church/manor complex. This period also saw significant agricultural intensification, with increased arable production, the introduction of new crops, the more intensive use of the floodplain for pasture and meadow, and the manuring of open fields that certainly existed by the tenth century when all the earlier dispersed settlements were abandoned (Hey 2004): once again, the formation of the open fields probably post-dated the initial trend towards settlement nucleation. In the Thames Valley generally there was an increase in alluviation from around the eighth/ninth centuries (Robinson 1992, 201), and the pollen sequence at Snelsmore on the nearby Berkshire Downs shows an increase in cereal cultivation around the ninth century (Waton 1982). It would appear, therefore, that landscape change, including settlement nucleation and the creation of open fields across the 'Central Province', was a prolonged process that began in some places around the seventh to ninth centuries, but was only completed around the tenth century, when some landscapes appear to have seen further restructuring.

We must avoid, however, taking a 'Midland-centric' view of landscape evolution in this period for, as we have seen in the South West, other regions were also seeing significant changes at this time. Many of the best-known excavated fifth- to seventh-century settlements lie beyond the 'Central Province', in the South East, and whilst acknowledging that none has been completely excavated, most appear to have been abandoned around the seventh or early eighth centuries. Well-known examples include Chalton (Hants), Mucking (Essex), West Stow (Suffolk) and Bishopstone (Sussex), but other cases include Fyfield/Overton Downs, Avebury and Combe Down (all in Wilts.), suggesting that this was a widespread phenomenon (see Hamerow 1991; 2002; Fowler 2000, 230; Pollard and Reynolds 2002, 183–202; McOmish *et al.* 2002). This should not, however, be seen simply as a shift in settlement location from drier soils, often on hilltops, to the valleys, as the latter were also occupied during the fifth to seventh centuries: rather than seeing a shift from one location to another, are we simply seeing a retreat from some of the more peripheral locations that communities had settled in the fifth century, and continuity elsewhere? The seventh/eighth centuries are also the period when, in East Anglia, the settlement foci that went on to become church–hall complexes came into being (Newman 1992; Moreland 2000, 86–7), during what palaeoenvironmental sequences are showing was a period of agricultural expansion. At Micklemere in Pakenham (Suffolk), for example, there was increased soil erosion within

the catchment marked by a layer of mud associated with increased cereal pollen deposited around the later eighth century (Murphy 1994, 29–31), while at Hockham Mere (Norfolk) a major increase in cereals is dated to cal. AD 790–980 (Sims 1978). It appears, therefore, that the ‘long eighth century’ saw significant landscape changes across southern England, and that it was several centuries later that further reorganisation in, specifically, the Midlands led to the ‘Central Province’ emerging as a distinctive region.

Conclusion

There have recently been a series of studies into the origins of landscapes characterised by nucleated villages and open fields, but this paper has tried to take the focus away from the Midlands and to broaden discussion to include what was happening at this time beyond the ‘Central Province’. There are, perhaps, four major conclusions. Firstly, we must find ways of untangling the various possible causes of regional variation in landscape character by studying areas that show significant variation in, for example, their settlement patterns and field systems, but which in certain physical or cultural ways were uniform, so ruling out a number of other possible causal factors. The second, also methodological, conclusion is that in a period for which both the archaeological and documentary sources are poor, palaeoenvironmental sequences can provide an important source of information with regards to how the landscape was being managed.

A third conclusion is that the emergence of landscapes characterised by villages and open fields was a long process, showing marked regional variation, which may have occurred in at least two stages, with a trend towards settlement nucleation preceding the formation of open fields. In parts of what became the ‘Central Province’ there are signs of settlement nucleation from around the eighth century, but it was only around the tenth century that fully nucleated villages and open fields emerged. Very similar landscapes were also being created at the south-western fringes of the ‘Central Province’ in Somerset, though this planned countryside is found alongside areas characterised by dispersed settlement. In the case of reclaimed coastal marshland, such as the North Somerset Levels, we can show that neither the natural environment nor ‘antecedent landscapes’ determined whether the medieval settlement pattern was nucleated or dispersed. Across Somerset these different landscapes of farmsteads, hamlets and villages were a cultural construct, and different landowners clearly adopted different strategies towards the management of their estates with some, like the abbots of Glastonbury, embracing the concept of villages and open fields and replanned their estates accordingly, while others, such as the bishops of Bath and Wells, took a less interventionist approach, leaving their sub-tenants and individual communities to create landscapes of differing structure and character.

Finally, there is the question of why the concept of villages and open fields did not extend even further into the South West (and indeed into areas such

as East Anglia and the South East). It would be easy to take a Midland-centric, core-periphery view of such areas as being remote, backward and unchanging, but by looking beyond the watershed we can see that the South West had in fact seen its own period of change in how the landscape was organised around the eighth century, and that this produced a highly successful system of agriculture that turned out to be just as long-lived as that in the Midlands. Overall, therefore, the 'long eighth century' was one of profound change across southern England. There was a tendency towards the formation of more compact nucleated settlements in parts of central and eastern England, while areas in the South East and the South West also saw an intensification of agriculture that could have been associated with a physical restructuring of the countryside. In the 'Central Province' this was just the start of several centuries of change, as settlement was increasingly drawn into what eventually became our nucleated medieval villages (a process possibly encouraged by the formation of open fields), which was an approach towards landscape management that eventually spread out into areas such as central and eastern Somerset. That it spread no further south-west, however, was not because Devon and Cornwall were somehow remote and backward, but because they appear to have already developed their own regionally distinctive way of managing the landscape.