

# Villages and their Territories Part II

## The Southeast Leicestershire Survey

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### Introduction

The great merit of systematic fieldwalking is the broad picture of long-term changes in settlement and land use it can reveal, and nowhere is this more evident than a group of ongoing projects in southeast Leicestershire (Liddle 1994; Bowman 1996; Great Easton Fieldwork Group, this volume). Part of this area covers 29.6 sq. km. to include three ancient parishes and the primary vills of Greater Langton (East, West and Thorpe Langton), Tur Langton, Shangton with Hardwick and Stonton Wyville (Fig. 1). Stretching from river vale to the hinterland wold, an almost complete range of *township-types* is found here – typical single village and open field townships (Tur Langton and Stonton Wyville), a complex split-township (Greater Langton) and a township/sub-township land unit (Shangton and Hardwick). The following summarises what these results can tell us about patterns of settlement and land use and considers the influences, particularly those of an institutional and territorial nature, which might account for rural reorganisation during the period c.650 to 1150.

### Patterns of Land Use

The fieldwalking survey has made one thing very clear to us – the sheer density of settlement and intensity of land use long before the appearance of the medieval village, supporting the general picture of the heavy hinterland claylands of Leicestershire being fully exploited by the late 1st millennium BC – late Iron Age farmsteads were utilising all the landscape, including the boulder clay plateaux (Clay 2002 and this volume). Moreover, Roman pottery scatters generally match those of the early medieval period, suggesting the quantity of land under cultivation in AD 1250 was little different from that in AD 150 (Fig. 3). An intensity of Roman land use is reflected in some 25 Roman farm and villa-type settlements so far located, producing an average density of 1.2 sites per sq. km. Work on their chronology within the Roman period points to two periods of change – an early Roman desertion of settlements around the West Langton villa and a reduced occupation of hinterland sites by the late 4th century, something that has also been observed in the Medbourne area (see N. Cooper, this volume; Liddle 1994). The implication is that while late Iron Age settlement and land use continued into the Roman period there was a retreat of arable farming in the later Roman period.

The emerging picture is also one where the Roman to Saxon transition appears less disruptive than once suspected. Early Saxon settlements (Fig. 2) are found

around the valley floors close to late Roman sites and along the ridges of higher ground that often appear have little evidence for Roman occupation. Significantly, the area around most of the Roman villa-type settlements still in use in the 4th century continued to be occupied in the early Saxon period. We have no idea of the number of Anglo-Saxon settlers entering the Welland valley but to judge from the finds the intrusion of Germanic culture was well established by the late 5th century. Of course, diagnostic artefacts tell us nothing about the ethnicity of their users and it is reasonable to see Germanic immigrants (presumably a warrior elite and probably few in number) taking their place alongside the more numerous Romano-British peasantry who remained as the primary tillers of the soil; indeed it might just be possible that this is reflected in the contrasting locations of settlement.

Overall, the number of discrete 5th to 7th century sites recovered, even when accounting for settlement drift and uncertain chronology, implies this was a very busy countryside and it would be rash to assume a dramatic drop in population from late Roman levels (Fig. 4). Nevertheless, the higher heavy claylands were generally avoided, and away from the river vale in Shangton and Hardwick the scarcity of early Saxon finds points to the trend towards a more pastoral land use we are detecting for the later Roman centuries continuing into the early and middle Saxon period. This does not necessarily imply the hinterland was unoccupied or used for seasonal grazing, but is more likely to reflect the difficulty of locating small early Saxon settlements within what appears to be a predominantly wood-pasture landscape.

This use of the land can, of course, be related to the contrast between vale and wold countryside's (Bowman 1995, 79-83; 1996, 129-30). In this context, the name

**Fig. 2. Fieldwalked early Anglo-Saxon finds from settlement and cemetery sites: pot handle (5th century?), decorated sherds and an annular loomweight.**



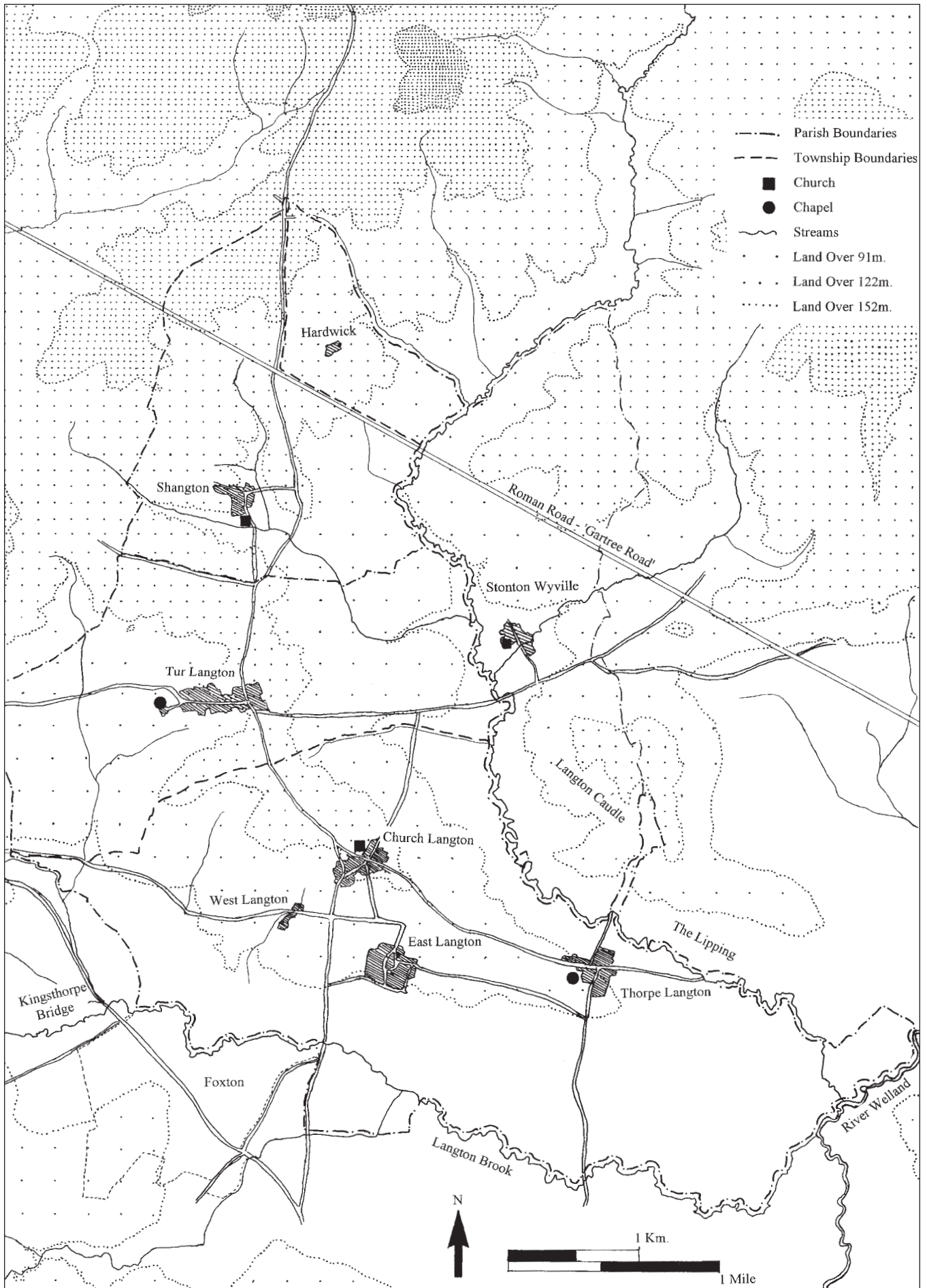


Fig. 1. The Langton Hundred and Stonton Wyville survey area.

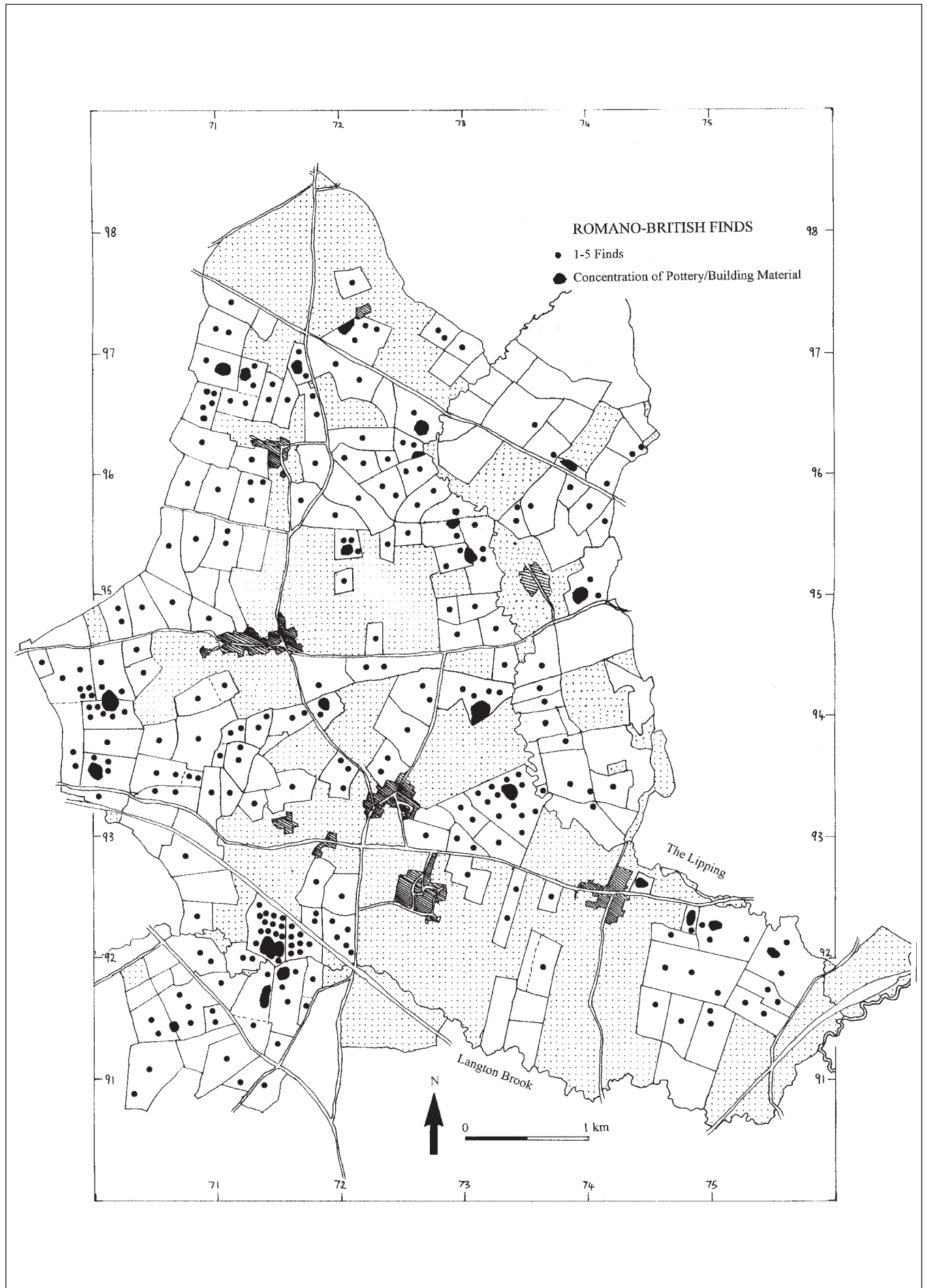


Fig. 3. The distribution of Roman finds.

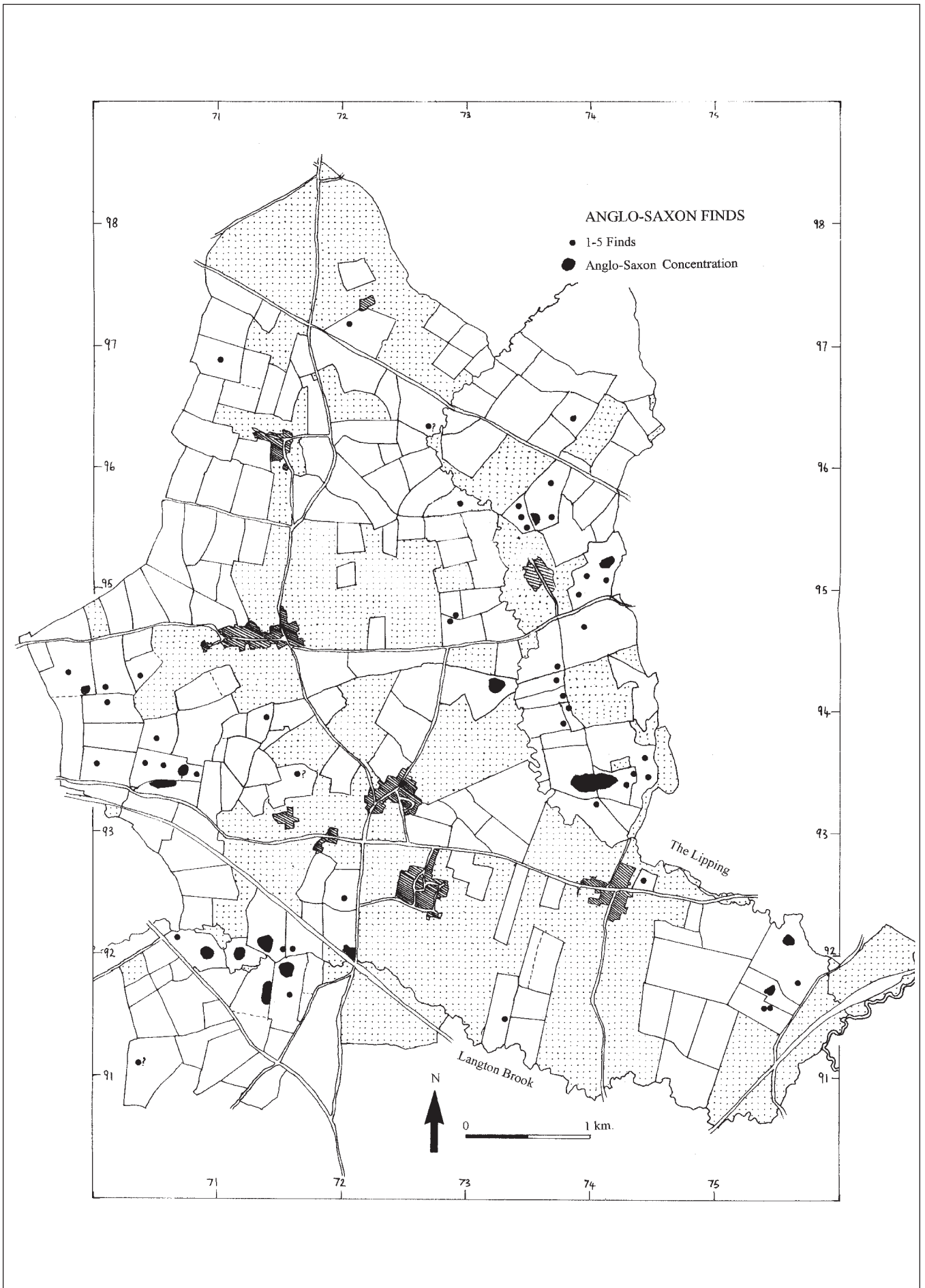
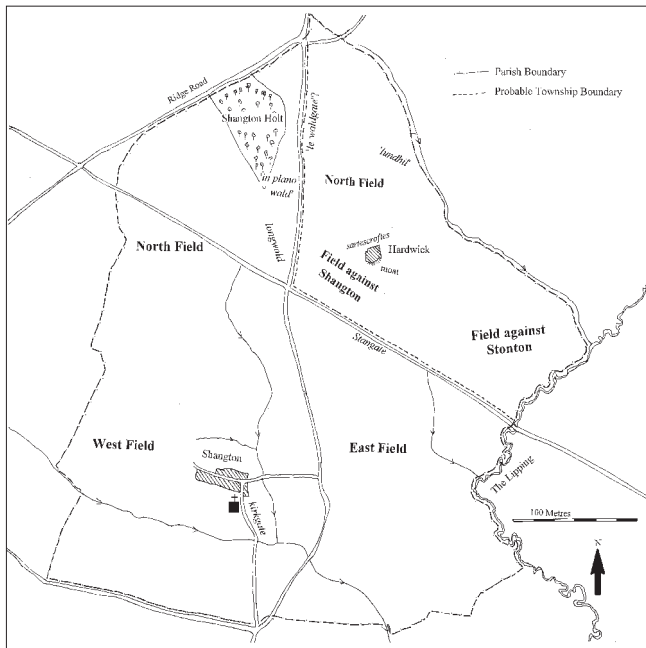


Fig. 4. The distribution of Anglo-Saxon finds.



**Fig. 5a. The medieval open-fields of Shangton and Hardwick and minor field names indicating the location of wolds, small woods and assarts north of the Roman Gartree Road.**

of Hardwick is suggestive to which can be added the presence of wold and other field-names suggesting the presence of small woods north of the Roman Gartree road (e.g. *longwold* and *in plano wald* in Shangton (Fig. 5a & 5b); *lundhyl* – ‘a small wood on a hill’- in Hardwick). Here too, there is documentary evidence for medieval assarting which did not give rise to new settlement – a *sarte* (OF *assart*) furlong and *sartecroft* in Shangton and small acreages of assarts recorded as the responsibility of the ‘men of Stonton’ in 1208/9 that were presumably incorporated into the open-fields (Raftis 1974, 154-5). But despite these signs of a return to more intensive grain cultivation some land could well have remained pasture throughout and is recorded as such in the 13th century. Of course, such subtle patterns of land use are difficult to detect through fieldwalking.

To the east of the Lipping (a boundary of Leighfield Forest in 1218) Stonton Wood appears to be a

**Fig. 5b. Longwold field (north of Gartree Road) looking towards Shangton Holt.**



remnant of a rather more extensive tract of woodland stretching eastwards along the high ground through Glooston, Goadby, Keythorpe and Hallaton and onwards to the Rutland border. Later fragmented and parcelled out to manors, this woodland may have once had a more continuous appearance originally shared by the surrounding communities (Squires this volume). On a much smaller scale, the carving up of the grazing ground of Langton Caudle between Stonton Wyville, Welham, Glooston, Cranoe and Thorpe Langton illustrates well how localised areas of intercommoned land could influence the demarcation of township boundaries. The formalised division of these intercommoned pastures was presumably associated with the allocation of valuable resources to specific ‘settlement’ territories within the Anglo-Saxon period.

So when were the dispersed early Saxon households of the valeland townships drawn into the present village sites? A probable sherd of early to middle Saxon date found during a watching brief in Tur Langton suggests activity of this period within the area of the medieval village (Dawson 2002). In fact, it is probable that the site of many Leicestershire villages were already occupied in the early Saxon period, only later to become the focus for nucleation within defined territories. But with regards to the territory of Greater Langton, it is highly unlikely there was ever a single nucleated settlement, so we possibly have here an example of incomplete nucleation and an open-field system organised around pre-existing settlements. The dispersed nature of settlement is further emphasised by the location of Church Langton – isolated on a hill but never forming a distinct township with its own fields. Overall, throughout the survey area no concentrations of Saxo-Norman pottery have been found away from the environs of the medieval village sites so it is probable that they had been established by the late 9th century. Unfortunately, recognisable Middle Saxon pottery (c.650-850) still remains elusive (Knox, this volume), leaving the chronology of nucleation uncertain. Even so, it can be reasonably suggested that the 8th century or thereabouts was the formative period of village creation with the process of nucleation largely complete by the 10th century.

Taking a long term view of the field-walked evidence and despite an apparent late Roman and early Saxon retreat of cultivation, we are left with a strong impression that the distinctive character of the countryside vis-à-vis the core areas of cultivation, woodland and rough grazing was established with the patterns of settlement and land use laid down in the late Iron Age and Roman centuries.

## The Administrative Landscape

To posit continuity of life at the agrarian base of society is to simply restate the now well-known fact of an ancient countryside long divided between farming communities. Whether or not the character of settlement was dispersed or nucleated, the inhabitants

must have viewed themselves as part of a group of neighbours (*vicini*) sharing rights to the resources of a locality. Even so, groups of neighbours cannot simply be envisaged in terms of enclosed units of habitation solely concerned with internal agrarian matters – they were part of a wider community with definite public duties and responsibilities. Looking to the wider natural region of the survey area some might wish to envisage the watershed boundaries of the upper Welland valley acting as an administrative unit long before the late Anglo-Saxon period, with an institutional continuity running from Iron-Age community to Roman ‘fiscal district’ (*pagus*) to pagan ‘tribal’ territory to middle Saxon administrative unit centred on a royal *tun* (Bowman 1995, 182-91). Behind this viewpoint there appears to be a supposition that once formally established as a fiscal unit within an administrative hierarchy, natural neighbourhood territories and their social and agrarian grouping would continue to be a source of income and manpower from one authority to another and whatever the agency of collection.

But this is a far too simplistic perspective. Power over people meant power over land and the organisation of renders paid in kind to a late Iron-Age chief or perhaps to a pagan Saxon king and his kindred would be very different from the more systematic exploitation in the period of the late Saxon state. This was not simply a transition from chiefs to landlords – before the 12th century the line drawn between public and private, taxes and rents, was blurred or not distinguished. Nor should we be overly concerned with confusing land units in their often overlapping guise as agrarian communities, units of government or estates of landlords. The important point is to recognise that along with the evolution of state systems of administering the land came the organising of people through territory for fiscal purposes. This could have been achieved by maintaining traditional social systems based upon schematically organised kinship networks of family holdings (as in parts of medieval native Wales) or adopting a system more firmly based upon the land itself. It is this latter system that we recognise in our study area – here the ‘village’ community as a ‘corporate body’ (and not one based on rights of kin) implies the notion of resident household rights over a territory. In its most developed form, rights to the land (which could now be called ‘tenant rights’) were inextricably linked to the territorial scheme of local government. Although this evolution of administration is difficult to document, its apparent coincidence with the mid to late Saxon ‘agrarian revolution’ signalled by the appearance of the village and township-wide open-field systems is perhaps the most significant factor influencing the transformation of the pre-Conquest countryside. It is, therefore, to the rather meagre evidence of the pre-Conquest administrative context of the study area that we will now turn.

### Roman to Saxon

Next to nothing is known for certain of the institutional organisation of the Roman countryside. The local region

was part of the lowland civil zone of the Roman province in contrast to the archaeologically flat rural societies of the ‘military zone’ to the north and west, including the southwest peninsula (Sargent 2002); finds from even the humblest Roman site show the Romanization of the lowest classes of rural society. This appears to be no ‘Celtic’ backwater – the land was farmed according to Roman patterns of land tenure and under Roman law. The survey area presumably lay within one or more subdivisions (*pagi*) or ‘rural districts’ of the *Civitas Corieltavi*; the large Roman settlement at Medbourne is ideally placed as a *pagus* centre and it is possible that the lands east of the Lipping were administered from another potential ‘small town’ at Great Bowden (Liddle, this volume). The great unknown, however, is how these *pagi* were internally structured for purposes of administration and agrarian organisation.

In searching for a Roman to medieval continuity of land units, a common approach has been to postulate a relationship between villa-type sites (a catch-all term for Romanised buildings) and lower status farmsteads as one of landlord and tenant (*coloni*) and then to compare the distribution of villas with medieval boundaries (e.g. Hingley 1989, 102-110). We might be tempted, for example, to point to the apparent relationship between the ‘high status’ villa at West Langton with Greater Langton, villa-type settlements at Tur Langton and Shangton and a single non-villa farmstead the precursor of the hamlet of Hardwick (Bowman 1995, 45-55, 195-99). However, a continuity of boundaries in this sense of a transfer of one estate landlord for another is unconvincing – Roman landlords did not generally hold coherent blocks of land. If, then, the villa ‘estate’ serves no ‘archaeologically useful function’ (Millett 1990, 92), an explanation for the any apparent ‘villa’ distribution similar to that of medieval manors might be sought in the natural territories of agrarian communities, some of which may have been very resilient to redefinition by new authorities over the land.

Although it has to be conceded previous attempts to demonstrate continuity between late Roman and medieval land units have been rather inconclusive, some value might yet still be found in fiscal analysis for settlement and territorial studies. Could, then, Roman land taxation – the *key* institution of the late Roman – have any bearing on the question of Roman to Saxon territorial continuity? Under Diocletian (284-305), a dual tax system was calculated upon land (*iugatio*) and people (*capita* or *capitatio*), although it is a mute issue as to how far, or if, this was effectively administered in Britain. In theory, all agricultural land was to be divided into notional *igua* based upon an assessment of productivity so that once a district’s liability was announced (i.e. at so many x, y and z products) the tax assessment was distributed amongst the *iuga* and finally to the individual farms registered for tax. The resulting Empire-wide census might just have been the occasion when area measures were systematically correlated to the lands productivity so that notional units of area

(perhaps in Britain the *iugera* – yoke – from which the *iugum* probably derived its name) were reckoned at so many units of tax. Later Roman fiscal administration was increasingly devolved to *pagus* centres or the villa-owning elite living near to small towns (Millett 1990, 150-1) – perhaps at the time of the 5th century Roman to Saxon transition these were still functioning ‘fiscal districts’ rendering dues to new Germanic masters and possibly already broken down into localities (*vici, loci* or *villae*) upon which the *iugum* system of taxation had been administered.

Of course, it would be futile to imply a continued tax-raising in the Roman sense – the fall of the Roman state makes that obvious. But the polities of the 5th and 6th century must have maintained certain schemes of assessment and it is just conceivable that the territorially based fiscal units emerging in the 7th century (behind which the yoke might still have been a key fiscal criterion) could owe a debt, albeit in attenuated form, to the Roman past (Harvey 1985, 92, 101-2; Higham 1992, 145-6, 232; see also pages 134-5 below). If the hierarchy of boundaries within the Anglo-Saxon administrative landscape did have Roman antecedents, the clearest signs can perhaps be traced in land units of the scale of Greater Langton and the Breedon complex (pages 114-15 above), or the configuration of medieval villas organised around areas of intercommoned land such as Langton Caudle. The breaking down of such core territories into smaller ‘township’ areas of communal exploitation would then be a consequence of a reorganisation of the land during the Anglo-Saxon period.

### Into Mercia

The period of the Mercian kingdom (c.650-877) was a time of increasing royal authority and a return to more efficient administrative methods – it is surely no coincidence that during the course of these centuries we may suspect many ‘township’ boundaries were being formalised on the ground. Furthermore, since this is the time that our archaeology suggests to be the formative period of nucleation, explaining village origins must be framed in the social and economic institutions of that time, *not* the later Saxon period.

One obvious problem in stepping back into the territorial world of Offa (758-96) or Wulfhere (658-75) is the loss of the Mercian assessment framework following the Scandinavian settlement after 877 and the incorporation (probably in the mid-10th century) of an embryonic Leicestershire into the Confederation of the Five Boroughs (Roffe 1986). But land assessments there certainly were (decimal hides) and these had probably already been arranged to fit into a regular fiscal scheme based around a Mercian network of fortress-towns and *provincia* analogous to the Wessex shires (Williams 1999, 67-8, 54-5, 78-9). Indeed, it has been argued the 8th century administrative geography of the West Midlands conformed to coherent units of perhaps 50 hides (Bassett 1996).

For Leicestershire there is little contemporary evidence but our region can certainly be placed within the administrative heartland of Mercia, as is revealed by the itinerary of its kings at Gumley (749, 772, ?779), Croft (836), Great Glen (848) and just possibly Barrow upon Soar (743, 814) (Hill 1981, 82-3; Sawyer 1983, 293-4, 298). Gumley, the ‘well-known place’ (*loco celebre*) of the 749 *witenagemot*, lies just two miles from the complex of early Saxon settlements and cemeteries along the Langton Brook, and I have suggested elsewhere the Gumley/Langton Brook axis to be a likely early ‘central place’ with, perhaps, the hill-top church at Langton its middle Saxon minster focus (Bowman 1996, 128; see also Roffe 1996). To the east of the Lipping, a large multi-vill territory centred on the Medbourne/Bringhurst axis might well have comprised another pre-Viking administrative unit possibly connected with the landholding of *Medeshamstede* (Peterborough Abbey).

Such putative middle Saxon territories almost certainly recognised the primary land divisions of the study area as assessed units of administration and community (*tun-scipes*). For example, the ancient parish of Church Langton – Greater Langton (24 carucates) and Tur Langton (12 carucates) – appears to conform in rating and size to land units associated with Mercian minster foundations such as the 757 grant of the 30-hide minster estate at Tredington by the River Stour (Warwickshire), an assessment still mirrored in the Domesday Survey (Hooke, 1985 106-8). In fact, the place-name of Tredington, associated with a thegn called *Tyrdda* and named in the 757 charter as the previous lord, is of the same type as Tur Langton (DB: *Terlintone*) where *tun* has been compounded with a personal name, with the connective particle *-ing-* implying overlordship of a territory (Gelling 1977, 177-184). We cannot ever know if the *Tyrhtel* or \**Tyrli* of Tur Langton was living in the 8th century, but is perfectly reasonable to see him as a one time overlord whose name became attached to this ‘estate’ after its grant to another landholder in Mercian times.

Seeking to establish a pre-10th century independent agrarian identity for land units such as Tur Langton or Greater Langton is important for our perspectives of rural reorganisation. In short, it would suggest that the stabilisation of settlement and field systems around villages and hamlets should be related to the methods of exploiting land and people *within* middle Saxon multi-vill units of overlordship or administration rather than a consequence of their dismemberment.

### Anglo-Scandinavian

It is only with the adoption of the shire system in the 10th century that we can clearly see a countryside divided into land units that were treated as an undivided whole for fiscal purposes – their boundaries were defined governmental facts (Fig. 6). Work, for example, on the duodecimal framework of Gartree wapentake suggests an original scheme planned around 576 carucates, sub-

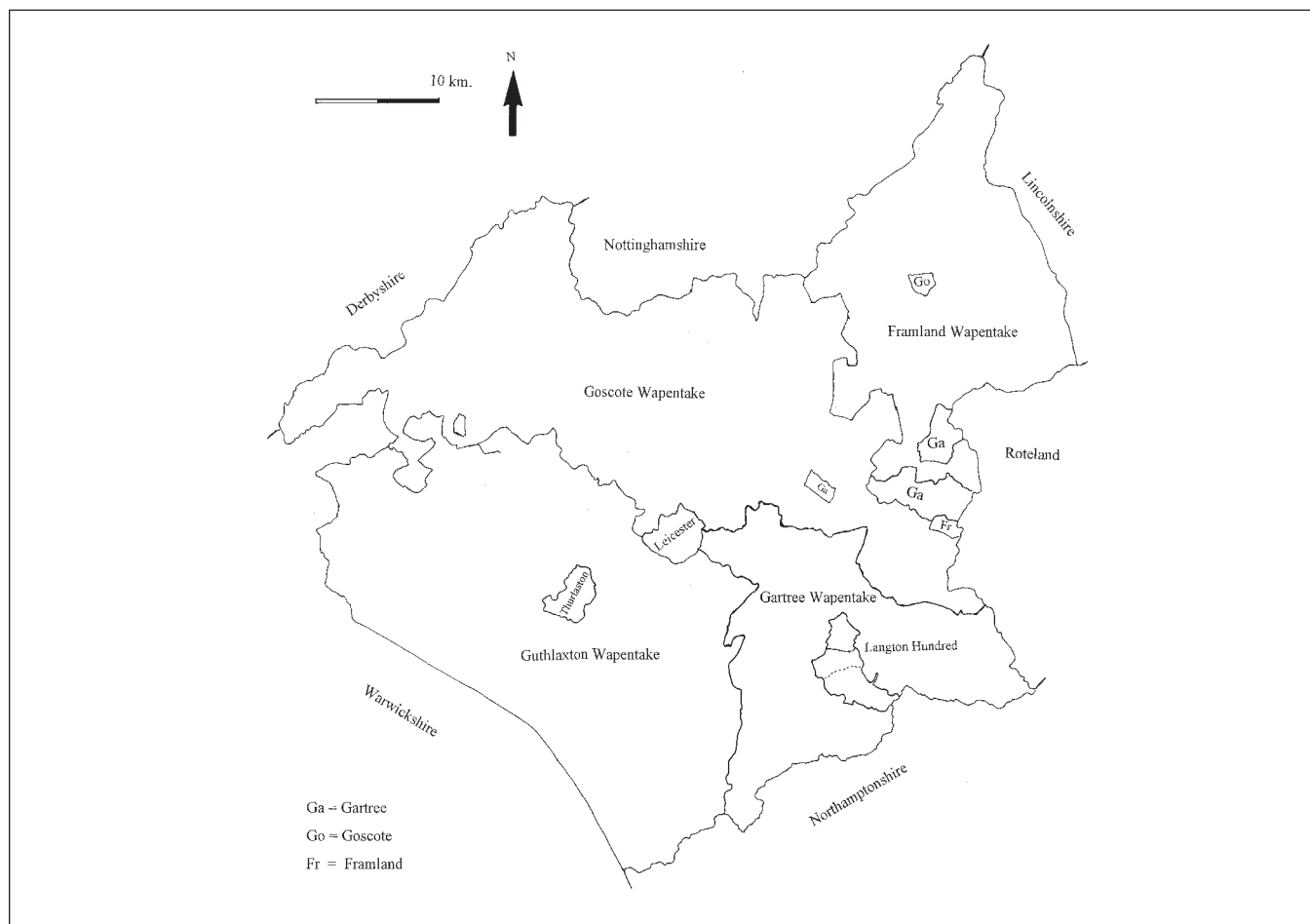


Fig. 6. The Leicestershire wapentakes in 1086 and the location of the Langton hundred in southeast Leicestershire.

divided divided into twelve 48-carucate small hundreds and finally the individual vills (Fig. 7; Bowman forthcoming b). The Langton hundred formed one such a unit within this schematically organised scheme (Fig. 8). We may wish to quibble with the details, but I would argue that this represents a reasonably accurate picture of the geographical basis of 10th century local government in southeast Leicestershire. Moreover, these institutions can be shown to be essentially independent of estate structure, as can be predicted from the laws of Edgar and Aethelred which envisage a land divided into townships and tithings not lordships. 'Geld' carucates are its basis, but the term 'geld' bore a wider and older connotation than the exceptional levy of 'Danegeld' imposed after the 990s. The small hundred, for example, probably acted as a territorial tithing responsible for presenting crimes in the wapentake court and the organisation of military levies. It was also through these fiscal networks that royal officers were in touch with 'men' from village communities within which the post of village reeve or *tunegerfa* may well have acted as a key agent for tax collection 'short-circuiting' the manorial lord (Campbell 2000, 15, 207-10). Indeed, the settlement of a dispute over an assessment within Tonge hundred by 'the verdict (*dictum*) of the men of the hundred' appears to speak of the testimony of hundredal jurors pronouncing judgement on a public matter

(Slade 1956, 18, 44).

The carucate in southeast Leicestershire (*carrucata terrae*) – 'ploughland against which geld is charged' – was also a fiscal net broadly related to agrarian reality (contra: Darby 1977, 9-12 for the 'artificial assessment' thesis). Throughout southeast Leicestershire, the carucate appears to be related to a real measurement of arable capacity so that when compared to township size, low acreages per carucate imply cultivation close to a land units boundary with higher acreages the presence of larger tracts of 'waste' or woodland. This mapping of acreage per carucate reveals, as we suspected, the course of the Lipping marking an agrarian (and probably early administrative division) of the southeast Leicestershire countryside, an inference that can also be made from the distribution of Domesday and medieval woods.

In this context too, a careful study of the relation of tenemental units to the system of assessment has important things to tell us about the organisation of the land. In many places the number of yardlands in a village is related to the Domesday assessment – in other words, tenemental structure was organised with reference to systems of local government. The realisation, to use the apt words of Maitland, that 'the common fields, the hides and yardlands of the village are not the creatures of manorialism' has encouraged new ways of looking at the rational of village plans and



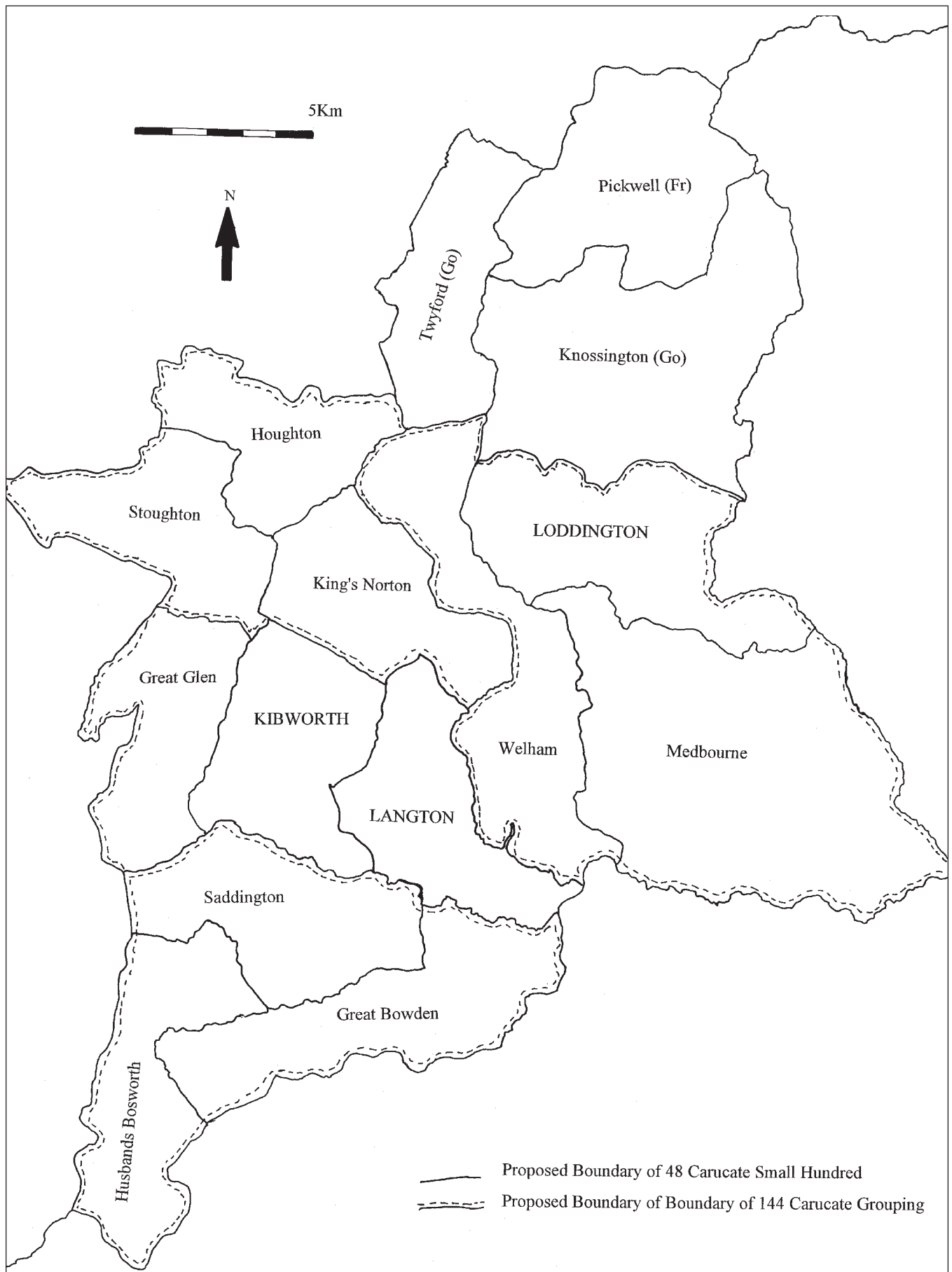


Fig. 7. Reconstituted territorial divisions in southeast Leicestershire showing the possible location of pre-Conquest small hundreds.

Landholding and Assessments in 1086 and c.1130					
Vill	1086 Domesday Survey			c. 1130 Leicestershire Survey	
Langton [East] Langton [West]	13,57 5,1	Hugh de Grandmesnil Abbot of Perterborough	11c <u>4c 6b</u> <b>15c 6b</b>	Earl of Leicester Abbot of Perterborough Henry de Port	11c 1v 4c 6b <u>1c</u> <b>17c</b>
Thorpe Langton	16,6 17,18 13,14	Robert de Veci Robert de Buci Hugh de Grandmesnil	3c 6b 3c 2b <u>0.5c</u> <b>7.5c</b>	Eustace Richard Basset	3c 3v <u>3c 1v</u> <b>7c</b>
<b>Greater Langton</b>			<b>23c 2b</b>		<b>24c</b>
Tur Langton	2,1	Archbishop of York	<b>13c</b>	Henry de Port	<b>12c</b>
Shangton	13,55 16,5 1,4d	Hugh de Grandmesnil Robert de Veci King: Bowden Soke	4c 2c <u>2c</u> <b>8c</b>	Earl of Leicester Ansketil	10c <u>2c</u> <b>12c</b>
<b>LANGTON HUNDRED TOTAL</b>			<b>44c 2b</b>		<b>48c</b>
c = carucates, v = virgates, b = bovates. DB entries (corrected) refer to Morgan 1979.					

**Fig. 8. The Langton Hundred: Landholding and Assessments in 1086 and c.1130.**

field systems (1897, 139). Tony Brown, for example, has used a combination of sources to reconstruct the tenurial structure of Burton Lazars – a village divided into three holdings from at least the time of Domesday. Brown's central argument is that a tenurial structure based around 16-carucates and therefore 64 yardlands underpinned the layout of both village and open-fields: 'The plan of the village was laid out on a modular basis to reflect the pattern of landownership ... and the field system was laid out at the same time to fit in with the village plan. These events must surely be of pre-Conquest date' (Brown 1996, 44).

Brown does not explicitly say so, but the supposition is that territorially based fiscal dues organised around the shire *burh* at Leicester moulded the planning of village and fields. Such a conclusion certainly strikes cords with our understanding the process of 'shiring', which reshaped existing administrative units with apparent ease. Thus, to judge from its boundaries and internal organisation, Gartree wapentake cannot simply be taken to be an administrative relic from the Mercian period (Roffe 1996). It might be, then, that the apportionment of services to the shire *burh* could have been an important stage in which dues and obligations were allotted among the individual farms (Faith 1997, 101) – a time, perhaps, when peasant holdings were measured and fixed on the ground *pro rata* in line with a land units fiscal obligations. Certainly, there is a persuasive logic to the view that in an increasingly monetized world and under the increasing pressure of a national scheme of land taxation, common open-fields became more regularly organised.

It is reasonable to conclude that the balance between arable and non-arable assets was the basis behind

carucation, and this is, in any case, implicit from the use of ploughlands as a central fiscal criterion. It is a mute issue, however, as to how far the carucation of Leicestershire adapted existing assessments already to hand (Mercian hides) to fall in line with a Scandinavian monetary system based on the ore and mark, rather being a completely new assessment scheme that wiped the slate clean. Admittedly, most scholars broadly envisage a 'great reassessment of the 9th and 10th centuries' with its new emphasis on measured ploughing capacity (Stenton 1927, 159; Finberg 1972, 479-81; Phythian-Adams 1978, 20; Hart 1992, 319; Roffe 2000, 60). They may well be right, but, by and large, this 'reassessment thesis' rests upon a supposition that the early hide was an estimate of the potential of all resources (arable, woods, pasture etc.) rather than derived from the ploughing 'yoke' of peasant holdings.

Clearly, this whole debate, which begs the question of the nature of early mensuration and the relationship between Mercian fiscal administration and land management, is still some way from resolution. Even if we are persuaded that Scandinavian influenced systems of reckoning altered the structure of common field communities, an event such as this would not date nucleation for us – the carucation of the open-fields is just as likely to have been cast upon land units whose settlements were already nucleated, working, perhaps, a less regular common field system.

### Reorganisation in the Countryside

The bulk of the field survey discussed here was carried out in the 1980s and as such formed part of a pioneering decade of fieldwalking in the East Midlands that has

revolutionised our perceptions of village origins. The drawing of these ‘dots on the map’ created a picture of early to mid Saxon settlement entirely unimagined by historians before the mid-1970s, and the questions that these patterns raise for the origin of the village and its territory are still very much part of a lively debate.

Three general observations can be offered concerning the interpretation of these results in the context of southeast Leicestershire. Firstly, the density of early-middle Saxon settlement and their relationship to Roman sites suggests that traditional models that invoke colonization or population growth as a prerequisite for village and territorial development are ill founded – there are good reasons to suppose that the focus of middle Saxon rural organisation already lay with whole ‘settlement’ territories broadly represented by the *township-types* we have attempted to classify in the previous chapter. Secondly, the formative period of nucleation appears to be before 900; indeed, a recent review of the evidence from the wider region has firmly accepted ‘nucleation was a middle Saxon, rather than a late Saxon, phenomenon’ (Williamson 2003, 66-8, 97-8), and other archaeologists see the ‘early part of the 8th century’ as the key period in this process (e.g. Mortimer 2001, 21). On the other hand, some historians still think differently and consider the medieval village to be relatively late on the scene during the 10th to 12th century. It is important to remember, though, that most villages appear to have long histories with organic development resulting in shifts in position and planned elements of different periods (Figs. 9a & 9b). The third point is a less contentious one – the processes leading to the appearance of the ‘village’ and township-wide open-fields have left us with no documentation – in the last resort, all our explanations of the process of change can only be models incapable of proof. Moreover, our understanding of rural reorganisation is complicated by the challenge of disentangling successive layers of organisation cast upon the countryside during the half millennia between *c.*650 and 1150 (Bowman 1995, 216-23; 1996, 135-6).

### Perspectives ‘old’ and ‘new’

After the mid-1970s, attempts in some quarters to link process to change resorted to the belief that only the superior authority of lordship could have achieved such a revolutionary reorganisation in settlement – the new buzzword – ‘planning’ – was given a definite emphasis on seigniorial power and a ‘peasantry’ coerced and directed from above. No sign here of the collective action of communities. However, this supposition stands uneasy in the context of Leicestershire where well-known historical perspectives of social and institutional development have long assaulted the fallacy of the ‘typical’ manor as a mental picture of agrarian society. Most notably, Stenton (1910), Hilton (1954) and Hoskins (1957a) contributed to the view that, even in late 11th century Leicestershire, lordship generally fell relatively lightly on the land. This picture of a moderate extent of demesne farming in 1086 (84



**Fig. 9a. Tur Langton (1989): a regular linear row settlement with rectangular lofts and crofts.**

Leicestershire places had no demesne ploughs) must be weighted against the fact that 40% of unattached peasants belonged to the sokes Rothley, Melton Mowbray and Great Bowden. Even so, later evidence showing numerous small demesnes and light labour rents (‘week work’ appearing to be almost entirely absent in the 13th century) still makes the simple notion of a ‘process of manorialisation’ a rather unconvincing explanation for rural reorganisation.

It was not difficult for Stenton, Hilton or Hoskins to accommodate this picture of a rather loose manorial structure with their perspective of the basic organisms of peasant communities – the family holding, the hamlet, and the village – having a more continuous existence than ruling aristocracies or lordships (Hilton 1973, 29). Hilton

**Fig. 9b. Tur Langton (1989) : the site of the manor house, chapel and associated earthworks.**



(1947, 5–6) also noted the absence in Leicestershire of any old-established estates such as a great Benedictine house, which were typically holders of large blocks of land more suited to a tighter demesne centred control of peasant tenants. But if this model of a ‘peasant centred’ world does provide a more satisfactory mental framework for understanding rural reorganisation in Leicestershire, it must be reconciled with our archaeology showing widespread nucleation, together with village morphology and field systems often exhibiting an extraordinary level of planning. It seems fair to say that the debate over the initiators of change has tended to polarise into the two camps of ‘seigniorial power’ or the ‘communal action’ of local communities. To these ‘top down’ or ‘bottom up’ schools we may add the ‘cultural approach’, which posits planning as an idea to be copied (the interplay between ‘town’ and ‘village’ is also an element in this argument), and the ‘environmental approach’, which focuses on the constraints of the land and the everyday practical farming problems faced by peasant communities. None of these explanations are mutually exclusive, but we may suspect that presented in this way they simplify or misconstrue the thorny issue of land tenure and property rights before c.1150.

Undoubtedly, both lords and peasants had rights *over* land. True, the household of the pre-Conquest peasant *gebur* (the antecedent of many a Domesday *villanus*) might be regarded as a servile appendage to land by their lord, but generally speaking, even those ‘bound to the soil’ had a certain essential rights of property and a customary security of residence as long as they possessed a holding (contra: Faith 1997, 76–88, but where also a contradiction is recognised, *ibid.* 106). The *villani* or *tunesmen* of the late 11th century still appear to have been legally ‘free’ – an anachronistic concept maybe but a position that in theory was sustained by their holdings liability for ‘geld’. In any case, the crude legal distinction of ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ probably had little meaning when it came to the everyday routines of agrarian co-operation and the large undifferentiated class of Anglo-Saxon non-noble freemen (*ceorls*) must have been the core of any township community managing their fields and pastures independently of lordship. In this sense, planning and a desire to equalise dues with holding size could have been as much a concern of the peasantry as those with higher authority over the land.

But to the use term ‘geld’ is a limiting point of reference if it is simply taken to mean common ‘geld’ (i.e. Danegeld). We should do well to remember that charges placed on land were of diverse origin – at root, determined at a time when there was no clear distinction between taxes paid to kings and rents to landlords. Thus the basis of the fixed rents of the medieval manor was the customary pre-Conquest payment known as *land-gafol*, the original money or possibly food-rent of the land. *Gafol* became a rent after the transfer of regalian rights to lords, but as far back as we can tell it was still essentially a charge *on the land itself*. Sir Frank Stenton too, in tracing the diverse origins of the ‘customary payments’

(*consuetudines*) incumbent on sokeland (the 13th century custumal of the soke of Rothley was a key example upon which he drew), suggested ‘an important place should be assigned to the *gafol* of early texts’ and further that ‘we may infer a local regulation of its incidence similar to that which obtained in the case of the geld, and from this point on we may accept the desire to co-ordinate the render made by each man with the extent of his holding in the open-fields’ (1910, 34–6). This image of a *gafol* and ‘geld’ paying peasantry certainly strikes cords with those few references we have to *ceorls* or *geburs* ‘sitting on *gafol* land’ – a peasant world in which it is not difficult for us to envisage an important role for peasant collective decision-making. Such communities presumably delegated authority to an individual (the *tun* reeve) or a group of *tunesmen* answerable to those whom rents and taxes were paid.

In fact, evidence is beginning to show how fiscal obligations imposed upon agrarian communities could mould the way in which the land was farmed and shared out in landscapes far away from the ‘central province’ of Midland villages and township-wide open fields. For example, a rationale for the strip-field systems surrounding Cornish hamlets seems to have been the sharing out by farming families of an often ‘round sum’ rent set by lords upon each hamlet territory (Fox and Padel 2000, lxxvii–xciii); the earliest evidence is 14th century, but the shareholding behaviour described probably has a much earlier origin. Likewise, in the western Highlands and Islands of Scotland the imposition of a new or adapted medieval land assessment is argued to have influenced the appearance there of sub-divided strip-field systems and possibly the aggregation of previously dispersed farms (Dodgshon 1998a, 143–9; 1998b, 55). Of course, land farmed in miniature open strip-fields have long been recognised from regions outside the *champion* midland zone – even the *woodland* country of north Essex is beginning to reveal what appear to be compact blocks of small strip-field systems (Hunter 2003). But the particular interest of the examples cited here is the emphasis they give to fiscal and tenurial relations in shaping the way communities farmed and shared out the land.

It is possible, then, that the communalising effect of collective financial responsibility underpinned the historic treatment of land as corporate or collective property. In other words, the possession of assessed *gafol* or ‘geld’ paying land was equated with rights of common, with the arable treated, although individually farmed, as part of a corporate pool. Institutional influences such as these perhaps mark the period before c.1150 as distinctive and would go some way to explain the shareholding rationale for the township-wide field systems of our study area.

### Farms, Fields and the Environment

This might lead us to conclude that land taxation was indeed a critical factor in drawing communities together through the defining of shares to arable land and forcing co-operation in its use. Admittedly this is an over



**Fig. 10.** Thorpe Langton (1989). This area of Greater Langton includes some of the best preserved ridge and furrow in Leicestershire.

simplification and must, in any case, be reconciled with the ‘environmental approach’ to rural reorganisation – models that focus upon a tenurial context are in danger of losing sight of the influence of practical farming methods and its interplay with the constraints of the environment (as recently restated by Tom Williamson (2003)). Indeed, the ‘Langtons’ are a reminder that, even in its heartland shires, the Midland open-field system was never universally uniform in its organisation (for the historiography of open-field origins see, for example, Fox 1981, 68-72; Langdon 1986, 62-3; Hall 1995, 125-28; Williamson 2003, 8-21).

The fieldwalking survey has shown that Roman cultivation was extensive with a remarkable stability of settlement over many centuries. Evidently, Romano-British farmers practiced a mixed farming system with alternating areas of fallow and presumably a ploughing technique that would produce a ridging effect (essential for drainage), perhaps utilising a plough equipped with at least a coulter and possibly a mouldboard capable of turning a sod (Rees 1981, 11-16). This latter development would enable greater weed control and make easier the cultivation of heavier soils. However, we have absolutely no archaeological evidence for the type of ploughs used in Leicestershire – all discussion is ultimately guesswork derived from an appreciation of the problems faced by farmers working the claylands. It is

usually assumed that during the early to middle Saxon centuries there was a regression in agricultural techniques – the evidence cited being a preference for locations close to lighter soils and a presumed instability of settlement implying the need to break-in new fields; settlement, it is conjectured, stabilised as arable farming expanded onto the heavier soils once a heavier plough was adopted or readopted (e.g. Williamson 2003, 119-20). It is not possible to make such a firm conclusion in our survey area – early Saxon settlements generally followed the dispersed late Roman pattern with later nucleation around focal locations (most probably already occupied) that were more suited for the exploitation of the surrounding territory from a single place.

The process of nucleation also implies a complex co-operative and corporate use of the land associated with the laying out of an open-field system. In itself, there is nothing surprising about a detailed communal regulation of the land, evidence for which can be traced deep into pre-history (e.g. Fleming 1988). But in Leicestershire, the mid to late Saxon period seems to radically depart from older farming practices with the adoption of township-wide field systems usually coordinated, if not invariably, from a single settlement area. For a peasant farming these fields three overriding agrarian concerns stand out – maintaining the fertility of the land, providing fodder for beasts and access to

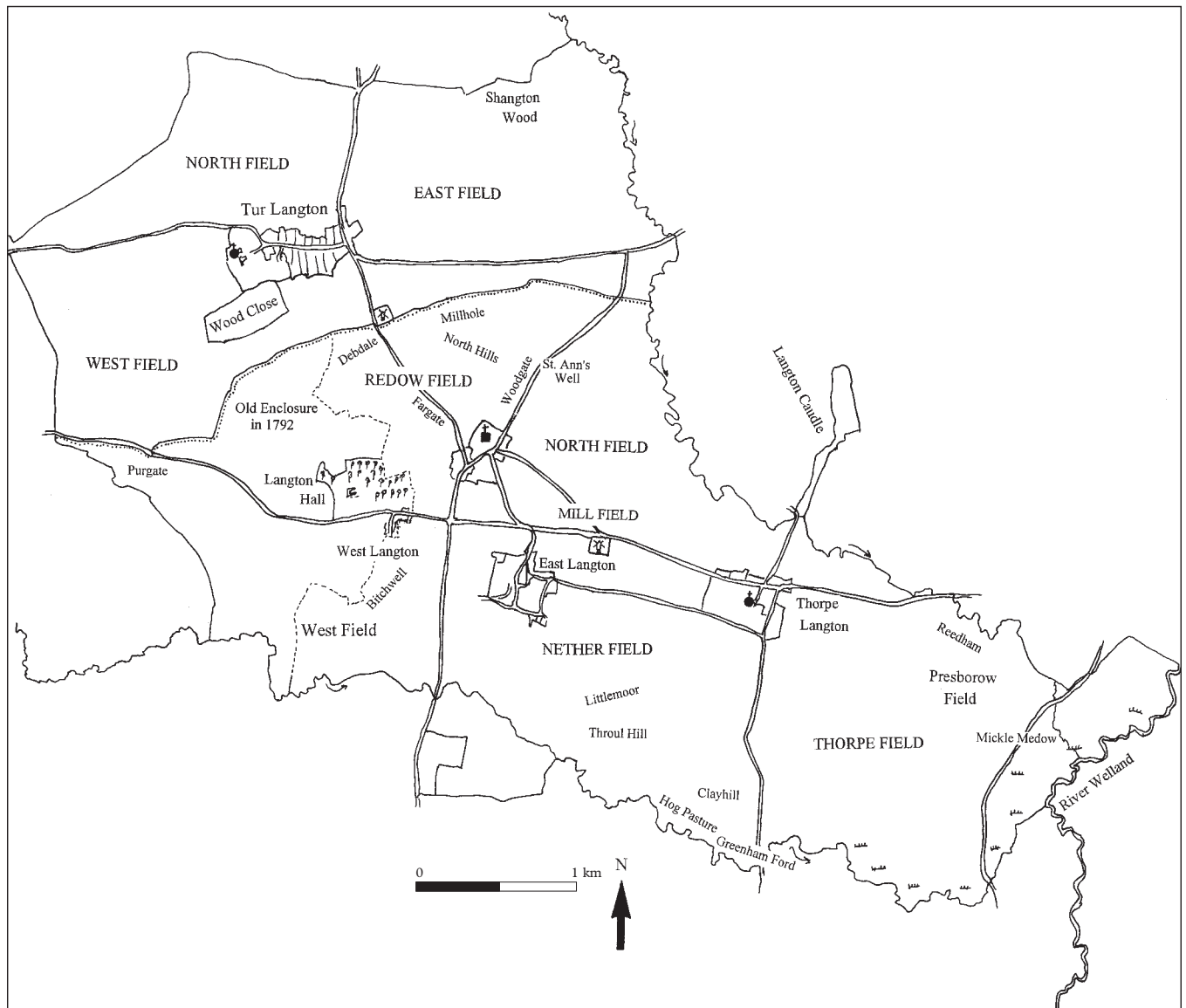
ploughing capital, all of which have been suggested as influential, or at least complementary factors, in drawing peasants into more nucleated communities.

Access to meadowland was perhaps *the* critical ecological constraining factor influencing agrarian cooperation. Such was the importance of permanent hay meadows for sustaining the plough oxen through the winter months that they formed a separately managed part of a townships common-field system, shares being usually allotted only to those with yardland holdings (Hilton, 1954, 161-65; Hoskins 1957a, 164-5; Grieg 1988, 118-21; Goodacre, 1994, 91). In short, meadows were organised as part of a collective agrarian decision and were often subject to the same regular ordering as arable strips as is apparent from a c.1300 grant of 6 'doles' of meadow in Shangton, the word 'dole' meaning the meadow dealt out to the yardlands (Bowman 1995, 104). In the heavily dissected claylands of Leicestershire,

meadowland typically lay along tracts of alluvium subject to winter flooding, proximity to which had, in the main, determined the pattern of Roman and early Saxon settlements. With the appearance of the 'village', the distribution of meadowland tended to dictate the lines of division into field sectors and commonly the boundaries between townships – the arrangement of the three open-fields of Wigston Magna and Kibworth Harcourt are typical examples (Hoskins 1957a, 94; Howell 1983). In other words, the place chosen for the village site was often the most environmentally suitable for ease of access to the labour intensive hay meadows.

However, although meadowland might be more efficiently organised from a single nucleated settlement this was not invariably the case as the example of Greater Langton demonstrates (Fig. 11). True, the bulk of the arable strips of the 'Langton' townships lay in fields surrounding the respective hamlets rather than

**Fig. 11. The open-fields of Greater Langton and Tur Langton. Land terriers and deeds suggest that the intermingled arrangement of East, West and Thorpe Langton was linked to maintaining old established rights to rich tracts of meadowland around the River Welland and its tributaries.**



scattered across the whole of Greater Langton. But this still left detached intermixed parcels of predominantly meadow and pasture – most probably the result of a deliberate allotment designed to maintain rights to the rich tracts of alluvium (e.g. *mickle meadow* ‘the big meadow’ on the Welland floodplain) originally shared by the whole community of Greater Langton and which had very probably long been cooperatively managed. Resulting disputes over access were inevitable; in one case of 1276 John de Langton claimed right of way ‘for carrying hay and grass with carts and going with his oxen, cows and other cattle from his house in West Langton beyond the land of Thomas de Langton which is called *Depedale* to his own land in *Depedale*’, probably Debdale furlong and meadow next to the boundary with Tur Langton (Bowman 1995, 120-1). Not only does the atypical situation in Greater Langton emphasise the importance of meadowland to a farming community, it also implies that territorial rights to the land were laid down within an administrative framework predating the hundredal system of the 10th century.

If hay can be judged to be the ‘oil’ of the early medieval agrarian economy, oxen (castrated male bovines) were most certainly its ‘tractors’. Oxen trained as draught beasts for plough and heavy farm-cart were highly prized (Kelly 1998, 48) and a presumed widespread use of teams of eight oxen pulling a heavy mouldboard plough has long taken a centre stage in the debate over village and open-field origins (e.g. Orwin and Orwin 1967, 39; Hilton 1954, 156; Kerridge 1992, 42-6; Williamson 2003, 118-22; 155-9). In short, it is argued that the smallholder too poor to own ploughing capital of their own and with land sufficient for the upkeep of just one or two oxen joined with others to make up a plough-team with the required pulling strength of eight oxen.

That co-aration between groups of neighbours could lead to the development of open sub-divided fields is not in dispute – this much can be inferred, for example, from Irish law-texts relating to farming practice in the 7th and 8th centuries (Kelly 1998, 371, 445). But the crux of the co-aration thesis is to translate what, in the main, appear to be piecemeal ploughing arrangements into a coherently organised township-wide system of co-operative ploughing, powerful enough to draw dispersed farms into village settlements. Moreover, given the inconclusive medieval evidence for widespread co-aration, it is questionable that a real 8-ox plough-team ever formed the basis of English peasant farming (Langdon 1986, 69-74, 235-44). Much confusion lies in the fact that a yoke (Latin: *iugum*) – the crossbar joining a pair of draught beasts – formed the basis of fiscal and tenorial units throughout ancient and medieval Europe (Harvey 1985, 92, 101-2; Kelly 1998, 472-474). True, the Domesday ‘plough [team]’ (*caruca*) for the demesne and tenant lands alike was reckoned at a notional rate of 8 oxen per ‘plough’ (Darby 1977, 125-6), but it does not follow that teams of this size were actually at work in the field. The fiscal equations embodied in Domesday Book

can be more plausibly explained as a bureaucratic attempt to use the returns of oxen to fit into a uniform national standard of ploughing capacity (*contra*: Williamson 2003, 121).

But what crucially seems to make the co-aration hypothesis untenable is the lack of any evidence that shares in a plough-team ever formed the basis for a township-wide distribution of scattered field strips (Dodgshon, 1975, 4-5). For an explanation we must look to the actual tenemental units farming the land and it is little wonder that in a system using the plough or yoke as a fiscal criterion these were often measured (as in parts of Framland wapentake) in terms of standardised shares in the land deemed notionally sufficient for the upkeep of a single ox (oxgang). This ‘fiscal’ interpretation of shareholding behaviour can be illustrated by a comparison of open-field organisation. For example, Kibworth Harcourt, adjoining the ‘Langtons’, was assessed at 12 carucates and very probably contained 48 yardlands each of about 24 acres (Howell 1983, 78-90). On the other hand, the ‘original’ assessment of Daventry in Northamptonshire was 10 hides divided into 40 yardlands of 30 acres (Brown 1991, 58-9). The tenemental structure of both townships conform to a standard 4 yardlands = 1 hide or carucate organised around a field system of approximately 1200 statute acres – the only real difference being their respective duodecimal and decimal system of reckoning. The implication here, at least, is a ‘fiscally driven’ planning rational rather than one emanating from township-wide co-aration.

### Shareholding and ‘Community’

There was clearly an intricate mixture of complementary environmental, tenorial and fiscal influences at work moulding the character of settlements and fields. What does seem certain is that farming from at least the Roman period was carried out within an organised landscape of territories, although the relationship between the politics of administering the land and farming remains elusive. A connection between peasant farms and the tax-carrying burden of arable land can be most clearly suggested for the later Saxon period, but we are far more reliant on guesswork for the earliest phases of rural reorganisation. In looking for an organising rational, it might be that more attention should be given to the possibility of a rather stronger debt owed to (if not direct continuity with) Roman land measures than has generally been acknowledged. Peter Kidson, for example, has shown that the English perch (16.5 English ft or 17 Roman ft) and acre are very probably of Roman origin and ‘in so doing has altered the context of all future discussion’ (Kidson 1990; Fernie 1991, 4). It might follow, then, that the rulers of middle Saxon units of administration (*regiones*) could well have based their ‘ideal’ systems of land assessment and mensuration on Roman models surviving in manuscript collections such as the surveyors’ manuals known as the *corpus agrimensorum* (Dilke 1971). Signs of such a mathe-

matal relationship with classical mensuration is indeed suggested by the possibility that the notional hide of 120 acres (or its carucate surrogate), subdivided into 30-acre yardland holdings, was modelled on the Roman *centuria* of 200 *iugera* and the quarter-*centurae* of 50 *ingera* (Bowman forthcoming). In this context, a move away from a framework of square or rectangular fields can be plausibly explained by a desire to extend furrow lengths into strips more suited to a heavier plough, although such a change in field size might have already occurred within the Roman period (Rees 1981, 14-6).

Such lines of thinking suggest that a shareholding principle still provides the most satisfactory explanation for the village based township-wide open-fields of Leicestershire (Bowman 1995, 216-23). This, of course, is not a new concept but one originally put forward by Sir Paul Vinogradoff in the 1890s and rehabilitated in the 1970s (Dodgshon 1975). Its rejection as an idea stems from an anachronistic association with primitive tribal equality (*ibid.* 16; Williamson 2003, 8-9), although the need to make such a link has long past. Our discussion has emphasised an association between tenure and territorial land assessments, a relationship which at least which provides an understandable motive for the shareholding mentality amongst tenants and a catalyst for drawing dispersed households into nucleated settlements. Certainly, it is only through discussing our settlement archaeology in terms of farming communities and their relationship with those commanding higher authority over the land that we will be able to more clearly envisage the institutional and territorial context of peasant farming before c.1150.

## Conclusion

In the final analysis though, not only is the period c.650 to 1150 a very long stretch of time, it is also the period within which great undocumented changes were made to the appearance and social organisation of the Leicestershire countryside. The views expressed here are made in the realisation that community archaeology in Leicestershire is now well beyond the stage of merely collecting and classifying finds to one where researchers can apply their hard won data to a dynamic landscape context. Most certainly, Leicestershire fieldworkers can feel satisfaction that their work continues to stimulate a still lively debate. Of course, we are as yet still a long way from fully appreciating the complex forces involved, but then this is the enduring fascination of our subject and one which will surely entertain us for many years to come.

## Acknowledgments

*My thanks go to Professor Harold Fox and Dr Rosamond Faith for reading early drafts of these papers. Their instructive comments and encouragement have been gratefully received although they are, of course, in no way responsible for the final outcome.*

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