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### **Marginal Landscapes and the Medieval English Economy**

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#### Introduction

The economic and social significance of non-arable landscapes in medieval England, such as woodland, heath, moor, marsh, and waste, have been increasingly recognized by historians since the 1980s. Such landscapes are no longer regarded as marginal in economic terms, although they may have been more remote from centres of settlement than areas of widespread cultivation. These marginal landscapes were found throughout England in the middle ages, notably in the uplands of the north and south-west, and in areas such as the Sussex Weald and the Suffolk Breckland. They can be found too within the central belt of England dominated by nucleated villages and large grain-producing open fields. How can we explain the appearance of these often quite small areas of non-arable land use in landscapes dominated by cultivated fields? Were the soils and topography unsuitable for growing grain? Was their economic value, as a source of wood or other resources, recognized by contemporaries who sought to preserve them from the plough? Or was their preservation a political and cultural decision, determined by those in authority? This paper seeks to answer these questions by focusing on a number of woodland parishes on the border of Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire, which lay in the forest of Whittlewood. It argues that only by examining the physical landscape of this area can its economic and social history in the middle ages be fully understood.

### Soils and Topography

The study area comprises a dozen rural parishes covering about 97 sq km on either side of the Buckinghamshire-Northamptonshire boundary. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries this area formed part of the royal forest of Whittlewood and its inhabitants were subject to forest law. The yoke of forest law was imposed in England after the Norman Conquest and was intended to protect the king's deer from poachers and to preserve the wood pasture in which the deer lived. The lords and peasants of settlements within the forest were not allowed to hunt, fell timber, or extend the area of cultivation without the permission of the king's forest officials, even if the crown did not hold the land directly. The restrictions and cost of living in the forest were undoubtedly resented, especially among landowners, whose freedom of action was curtailed.

Why was Whittlewood chosen by the Norman kings to be a forest? Some forests included large tracts of relatively poor land, which were unlikely to yield high economic returns from agriculture. The soils of the Whittlewood area are mostly glacial boulder clay, on which woodland thrives. But this does not mean that the area was unsuited to arable farming. Archaeological evidence reveals that large parts of the study area were ploughed and manured at one time or another during the Roman period. There was considerable demand for grain from the many Roman settlement sites that have been found in the area, as well as from the nearby town of Towcester. Likewise, in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, when the population of medieval England reached its peak, new settlements were established within the forest, the trees were grubbed up, and much land was converted to tillage in a process known as assarting. Documents reveal that the lords of the Whittlewood area sold large quantities of grain, especially wheat, on the market, and archaeology suggests that fields were more intensively manured after 1250, demonstrated by the increased amounts of pottery of that date recovered during fieldwalking. Moreover, the surviving yield figures indicate that medieval farmers were often rewarded for their efforts. The clay soils of Whittlewood supported trees and grain with equal success.

The explanation for the creation of a forest at Whittlewood lies not in its soils but in its history between the fifth and tenth centuries. After the Roman period there was a

retreat of settlement from the claylands, fields were abandoned, and pollen analysis demonstrates that woodland regenerated, either through neglect or because of deliberate policy. Much of the land was held directly by the king, and some distant royal estates held detached pieces of woodland in the Whittlewood area. When King Athelstan decided to hold a council at Whittlebury in about 930, we may speculate that the assembled nobles took the opportunity to hunt after their business was concluded. Whittlewood's status as a hunting ground may well have been a legacy of its Anglo-Saxon past.

In considering medieval Whittlewood to have been a marginal landscape, at least three distinctive features should be recognized. First, throughout the middle ages, the area was relatively underpopulated. For example, in the late eleventh century, at the time of Domesday Book, the study area was less densely populated than much of the surrounding countryside. Secondly, arable farming was not predominant. Unlike in some parts of midland England, including parts of Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire, in which the open fields occupied most of a settlement's territory, in Whittlewood there remained large areas of wood, pasture, and meadow that were untouched by the plough. And finally, the institutions of the forest set this landscape apart from neighbouring districts. On the one hand, the introduction of forest law imposed restrictions, but on the other hand, the more varied landscape, in contrast to the monotony of open-field England, offered considerable economic opportunities to its inhabitants.

### Economic Value

The economic value of non-arable landscapes is now widely accepted among historians. Both lords and peasants were able to make money from the diverse range of resources found in countryside dominated by wood, marsh, or heath. When parishes were formed in the Whittlewood area, probably in the period between the ninth and eleventh centuries, the boundaries were determined by the needs of the inhabitants for a range of resources, including arable, meadow, and wood. The boundaries of a number of parishes converged in the woodland, ensuring that each community received a share of a resource formerly held in common by the tenants of the large 'multiple estates' which were a feature of the

area before the ninth century. The inhabitants were entitled to collect wood for building, fencing, and fuel, a customary right unavailable to many open-field communities. Wood was also gathered, either legally or illegally, for the pursuit of small-scale commercial and industrial purposes. For example, there was a high demand for charcoal in the middle ages, and the remains of charcoal pits have been identified in a number of coppices in the study area. Wood was also needed to fuel the pottery kilns of the area, of which the most active were located in Potterspury. At least half a dozen kilns were operating in Potterspury between the middle of the thirteenth and the end of the fifteenth century, the wares from which have been recovered over large parts of the midlands.

The wood pasture of the Whittlewood area was well suited to livestock farming. Domesday Book records that the woodland was capable of supporting large numbers of pigs, which were likely to have been driven from a wide area in autumn, and from which lords benefited by charging for pannage. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the lords of Whittlewood kept a wide range of animals. Unlike the rather homogenous arable husbandry of the area, with its emphasis on wheat and oats, there was a much greater diversity of pastoral farming types. For example, the extensive wood pastures allowed some lords to keep sizeable herds of goats, often regarded as a destructive browsing animal, at a time when their numbers were falling in more intensively farmed regions. Lords and peasants alike made much use of the common pasture available in Whittlewood, which by tradition was claimed as recompense for the unhindered access deer were allowed to their own land. Stints appear not have been applied in the middle ages, and the records of the forest courts have almost nothing to say on the subject of illegal grazing. By contrast, in champion areas the often small common pastures were usually carefully regulated at an early date.

There can be little doubt that contemporaries recognized the value of the wood pasture of the Whittlewood area. As the medieval population reached its peak at the beginning of the fourteenth century, concerns were expressed that the extension of arable farming into the woods threatened the grazing of livestock. Lords were sometimes compelled to open their newly-enclosed assarts, 'after the grain and hay have been carried from the fields', to the animals of neighbouring villages. Likewise, tenants were fined in the manorial courts for enclosing land from the common pasture and ignoring

orders to allow common grazing at particular times of the year. The demand for grain was such that assarting continued in Whittlewood until the very eve of the Black Death. New settlements were established in former areas of woodland, from which the newly-cleared land was farmed. Attempts to reconstruct the medieval landscape, using maps, documents, and archaeology, suggest that this process of assarting was regulated, and was permitted in some areas but not in others. But was this regulation an attempt to preserve an optimum balance of resources in economic terms, or was it dictated by those in authority for political and cultural reasons?

### Landscapes of Lordship

In the 150 years or so before the Black Death, the king's forest officials recorded the clearance of hundreds of acres of wood pasture and their conversion to other uses. Forest officials could not prevent, but were probably able to influence the geography of assarting in the Whittlewood area. Examination of the landscape reveals that many of the assarts lay in discrete blocks. Likewise, uninterrupted areas of woodland survived, especially around the king's favourite hunting grounds. In the competition for land a balance seems to have been struck between those who wished to hunt and those who needed to farm.

The imposition of forest law ensured that, even if land was successfully assarted, growing crops was not an easy task. The thrill of the chase meant that the king's deer were not allowed to be obstructed by fences or hedges surrounding fields of grain. In the early thirteenth century one lord was allowed to enclose his arable only on condition that the fence was low enough to enable the king's deer to pass freely over it. At Heybarne, an isolated farmstead assarted from the woods, the low valuation of the land was attributed to the fact that it lay in the forest 'and is destroyed by the king's deer'. At another settlement in 1415, arable land within the forest was valued at just 2*d.* an acre, compared to 4*d.* an acre outside it, while in the neighbouring manor a hayward was employed to watch over the grain at night, in order to prevent the deer from entering it. There can be little doubt that the political and cultural importance of the forest, as an expression of the

king's authority and his enjoyment of the hunt, hindered the agricultural and economic exploitation of the area.

Like the king, many landowners were eager to hunt in a managed landscape of coppices and lawns, without the prospect of obstruction by forest officials. The king acceded to many requests for private parks, in part perhaps to counter complaints against forest law. The creation of a park was a powerful symbol of a lord's status. Yet the ability to transform the landscape for the pursuit of private pleasure might diminish its economic value to the lord's tenants. Ridge and furrow has been identified in a number of parks in the Whittlewood area. At Wicken evidence from manure scatters shows that much of the land was cultivated before imparkment but that it was taken out of use following the park's creation. In addition, there are indications that the peasantry seized the opportunity afforded by the lax management of the park and its fall into disrepair during the late thirteenth century to once again extend their arable into areas within the park pale where they had traditionally enjoyed the right to grow crops.

The development of settlement was also affected by the political and cultural importance of the forest. For example, the Domesday manor of Wakefield seems to have disappeared in the early twelfth century, probably because it was appropriated by the crown and a royal residence established there. Any incipient settlement (there were three villeins and a bordar in 1086) was evidently extinguished and the area was given over to the king's hunting lawn and woods. At Silverstone the foundation of a royal hunting lodge and fishponds prevented the expansion of settlement in one direction but perhaps encouraged the growth of the village's distinctive 'ends'. At West End a pottery kiln flourished in the period c.1180-1250, which may have been intended to supply the king's house, a suggestion given credence by the peculiar distribution of its recovered wares. Elsewhere, the radical reordering of village plans in the thirteenth century may have been the outcome of a deliberate attempt by lords to express their power and authority within the village in ways that were inhibited by forest law in woods and fields. The village was the stage, perhaps, on which lords in the forest displayed their command.

## Conclusion

Documents supply much useful information about the economic and social history of Whittlewood in the middle ages, relating to population, social structure, farming practices, assarting, and rural industry. A much fuller picture can be obtained, however, by combining the documentary evidence with information about the landscape gained from archaeology, maps, and other techniques, such as pollen analysis. The ability to locate on the ground the geographical and chronological distribution of different types of land use allows the economic historian to interpret the documentary evidence in a more sophisticated and nuanced manner. The actions of lords and peasants are often recorded in medieval documents; for instance, the creation of a park, the assarting of a piece of ground, or the ploughing of a close or field. But the reasons for these actions, their wider context and meaning, can often only be revealed by a detailed understanding of the landscape in which they occurred and an examination of the surviving material remains of the middle ages. In Whittlewood, a combination of history, archaeology, and analysis of the landscape reveals the extent to which it lay at the margins of the neighbouring districts, a distinctive woodland landscape, economy and society, surrounded by champion countryside.