The Winscombe Project, Somerset, 2011

By Mick Aston and Teresa Hall

Research in the Winscombe Project in Somerset (Aston and Hall 2009; 2010) continued in 2011 with further documentary research, map regression analysis, test-pit digging and vernacular building surveys. The woodlands of the medieval parish were studied using principally the long series of compotus rolls for the manor, which belonged to the dean and chapter of Wells Cathedral from the 13th to the 19th century, and which have been transcribed and translated by Martin Ecclestone (Aston et al. 2011). This has clearly demonstrated that the economy of the medieval parish was predominantly one of organising the wood-pasture with the inhabitants of the numerous hamlets being engaged in assarting and the management of the woodland. The manor produced lots of oak trees for use in building work elsewhere, including oaks for the chancel roof of St Cuthbert’s church in Wells in 1342–3. The people living at the now deserted hamlet of Wyke, the ‘atte Wyke’ family, were clearly smallholders living on the edge of the important wood of Brimridge, which has all but disappeared as a result of their assarting activities. James Bond has completed an earthwork survey of Wyke, which shows a single farm site and probable cottage sites (Fig 1), and John Gater and Jimmy Adcock of Geophysical Surveys of Bradford have carried out a ground-penetrating radar survey of the site to complement the earlier magnetometer survey.

Much of the parish formerly consisted of woodland and pasture with a relatively smaller area of arable and there were extensive areas of lowland grazing on the North Somerset Levels and upland grazing on the top of the Mendips. Figure 2 shows a hypothetical model of what the parish might have looked like in around 1300 with the known settlements and the areas of different land uses – arable, pasture, meadow and woodland.

Other documentary research has concentrated on the identification of those properties having ‘old auster tenure’ in the Middle Ages. Maria Forbes has now located more than fifteen of these with several in each hamlet. This type of tenure was very valuable and seems to have given the holders of such tenements unstinted access to the extensive pasture in the area. It seems to have been common in central Somerset but does not seem to be recorded elsewhere (or at least called this, with such privileges). Research on this interesting aspect, which may be related to the earliest farmsteads in each settlement, will continue.

Figure 1. Wyke deserted settlement, Winscombe parish, Somerset – plan of the earthworks by James Bond
A – the main settlement site
B – possible cottages.
Figure 2 Winscombe parish, Somerset – map of the settlement and land use as it may have been in about 1300.

Figure 3 Barton in Winscombe parish, Somerset – earthwork survey and geophysical survey in 2010; buildings survey and test pits in 2011.
The Somerset Vernacular Building Research Group, under the direction of John Rickard, continued their survey of buildings in the parish which date from earlier than the mid-nineteenth century.

A further 42 one metre by one metre test-pits were dug in 2011, making a total of 75 in the parish so far. There were dug principally in Barton, Sandford and Winscombe. In Barton, one of the hamlets of the parish which may have been planned, 17 test pits were dug. Survey of the shrunken settlement earthworks by James Bond and geophysical surveys with magnetometer and ground radar have also been carried out here (Fig 3).

A number of the test pits at the eastern end of the settlement produced Roman as well as early medieval pottery and one had a number of fragments of fine 14th- or 15th-century glazed jugs. Test pits were also dug on the Lynch at Woodborough in an unsuccessful attempt to locate further, probably early medieval, burials for radio-carbon dating; skeletons found in this area in 1993 are now lost.

The project had a stall with finds and explanation panels at each of the two annual fairs held in the parish – the May Fair and the Michaelmas Fair. At the latter, a test pit was dug on the edge of the area that had been Woodborough Green, enabling some of the local children to join in the excavation.

Further test pits will be dug in 2012, mainly in Sidcot, Barton, Sandford and Winscombe.

References