

Planned Field Systems in Eastern Yorkshire: Some Thoughts on Their Origin

By MARY HARVEY

IN a number of recent articles, the author has drawn attention to a distinctive open field system which was found in the Holderness and Wolds districts of eastern Yorkshire.¹ The arable land was laid out in long lands which often extended for one thousand yards or more across the length of a field.² Frequent changes in the orientation of the lands were absent, and for the most part they lay parallel throughout a field. Sub-units or furlongs were large and few in number. Within any one township, their structure was usually very similar. They all contained a similar number of lands, and had the same number of broad and narrow lands, lying in the same relative positions within the furlongs.³

The tenurial units or oxgangs, which formed the basis of land ownership in the open fields, were also laid out in an ordered manner, which related closely to the furlong structure.⁴ Each single or double oxgang holding was made up of a narrow or broad land respectively in every furlong, the position of this land being the same in every furlong. The landholders who occupied the oxgangs always, as a consequence, held lands in the same relative positions in each

furlong, so that the sequence of landownership was the same in all furlongs.

Evidence suggests that these features were present in eastern Yorkshire by the mid-thirteenth century at the latest (Fig 1). By that time documentation becomes available in sufficient quantity and quality to permit some topographical interpretation, and there is nothing in this material to suggest that markedly different arrangements then prevailed. This means that the form must have originated at a time when documentation is unlikely to reveal it, and any discussion on either the dating of the layout or the circumstances of its origin must be a matter for speculation. The distinctiveness of the form, however, justifies some consideration of its development, and this will be the principal aim of this paper. Reliance has to be placed almost entirely upon indirect sources, with archaeology, place name studies and Domesday Book proving to be the most valuable. The field form itself can also be used as evidence of its own evolution.

I

The small township of Southburn, located on the east-facing dip slope of the Wolds, provides a typical example of an east Yorkshire open field system. An eighteenth-century map shows the arable land to be divided into long, parallel lands, whose orientation, with one small exception, was north to south (Fig 2).⁵ Almost every furlong contained twenty-five lands, these being arranged, from the point of view of occupancy, in the same order in each furlong.

¹M Harvey, *The morphological and tenurial structure of a Yorkshire township: Preston in Holderness 1066-1750*, Queen Mary College Occasional Papers in Geography, 13, 1978; M Harvey, 'Regular field and tenurial arrangements in Holderness, Yorkshire', *Jour Hist Geog*, 6 (1), 1980, pp 3-16; M Harvey, 'Regular open field systems in the Yorkshire Wolds' (forthcoming).

²'Lands' is the term used in northern England for the ridges in the open fields which were formed by ploughing.

³Broad lands were twice as wide as narrow lands in the same furlong.

⁴'Oxgang' is the term used in northern England for the tenurial units which formed the basis of landownership. Within any one township, the oxgangs were of similar size, and they were made up of lands scattered through the open fields. They also had rights in meadow and pasture land.

⁵North Humberside County Record Office, DDBV 43/1.

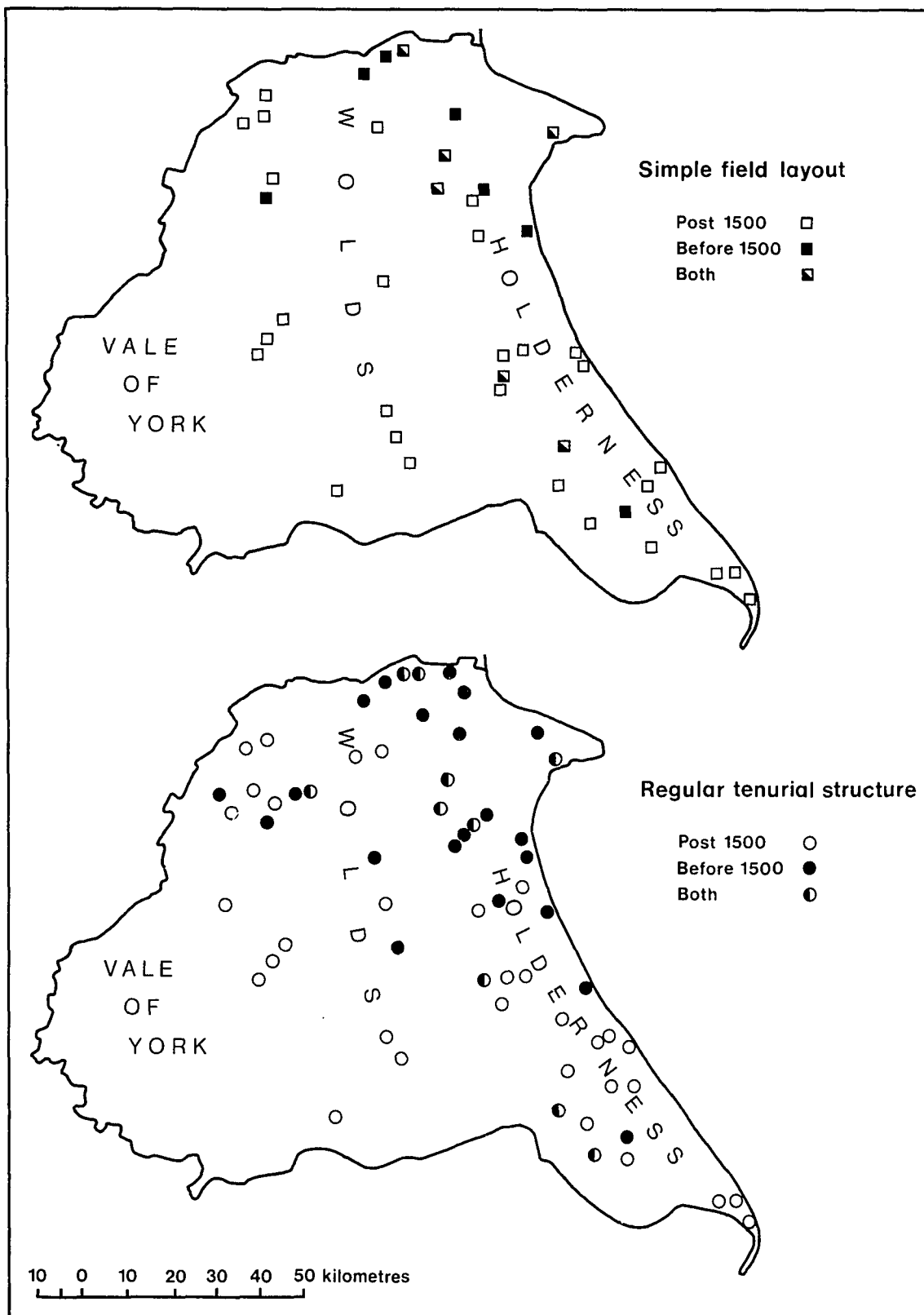


FIGURE I
 Aspects of field system regularity in Holderness and the Yorkshire Wolds

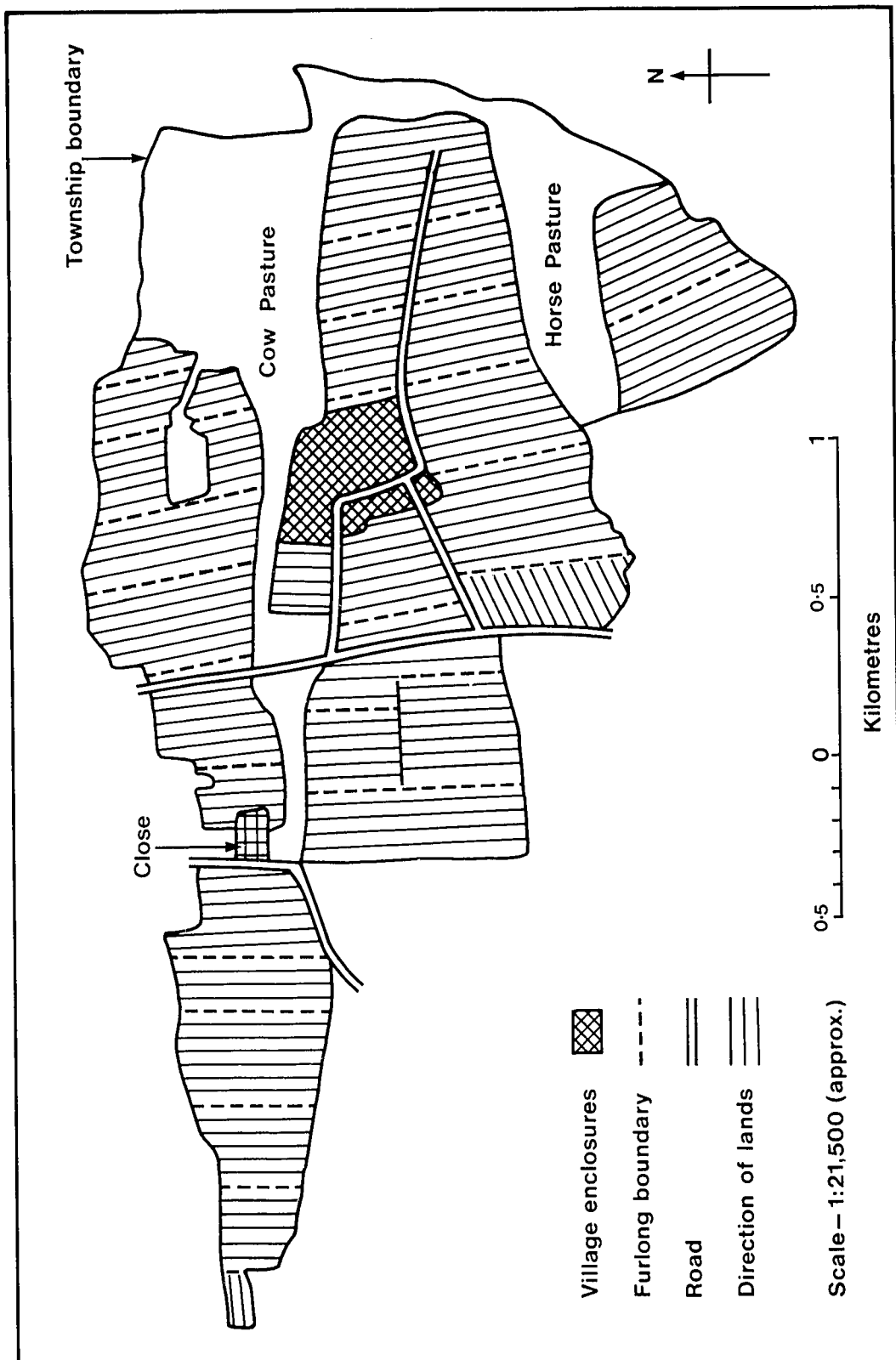


FIGURE 2

The layout of the open fields of Southburn in the eighteenth century (based upon a map in the North Humberside County Record Office, DDBV 43/1)

Apart from the village closes, there were no enclosures within the township, and except in the east, the fields extended to the township boundaries.

Everything about this layout suggests that it was established at one point in time, a consequence of a massive laying out of the landscape according to a predetermined plan. There is no evidence here of the haphazard accretion of furlongs as the community increased in size, no evidence of assarting, or the piecemeal nibbling away at the waste on the edge of a township. Instead, the field system appears to have been laid out in a complete form, with township boundaries which had become fixed by the time of the internal division.

The standard number of lands within the furlongs, and the regular ordering of ownership of lands, also can be most readily explained as the imposition on the fields of some underlying plan of land division. This need not necessarily have occurred simultaneously with the laying out of the fields into long lands — later redivisions of the furlongs cannot be discounted — but it is significant that both must have involved a consideration of the total area of arable land, and that both are suggestive of order and planning.

Similar conclusions have almost always been drawn in studies of other instances of regularity in the landscapes of both England and the Continent. Recent investigation of regular village forms in northern England by Sheppard and Roberts,⁶ and in eastern Sweden by Göransson,⁷ argue strongly for their planned origin, whilst research into simple field forms in a number of areas of

Germany also concludes that these were deliberately imposed upon the landscape.⁸ In all these examples, planning seems to have been instigated from above, by the state, church or an overlord, rather than arising from the action of individual communities. It seems, moreover, to have occurred in a variety of different circumstances, ranging from the organized colonization and settlement of previously unexploited areas, to estate reorganization and even changes in taxation.

In eastern Yorkshire also, regular field layouts can best be interpreted as the consequence of decisions operating above the level of individual communities. Although scholars have often pointed out that similarity of form does not necessarily mean similarity of origin, it is hardly likely that so distinctive an arrangement would have occurred uniformly throughout the townships of the area but for the activities of some superior authority operating at approximately the same point in time. The role of lordship in the area must therefore be carefully investigated. Furthermore, it seems quite likely that such activity would be associated with a period when lordship control was strong, rather than when it was weak or divided.

It can further be argued that planned layouts in this area must have related to a fully exploited landscape, and that therefore they must have been established at a time when population levels were fairly high. It is quite common for the simple field form to extend to township boundaries in both the Wolds and Holderness, so it must be assumed that population was large enough at the time of laying out to warrant maximum cultivation of the land belonging to each community.

The system is also almost invariably

⁶J A Sheppard, 'Metrological analysis of regular village plans in Yorkshire', *Agric Hist Rev*, 22, 1974, pp 118-35; J A Sheppard, 'Medieval village planning in Northern England: some evidence from Yorkshire', *Jour Hist Geog*, 2 (1), 1976, pp 3-20; B K Roberts, 'Village plans in County Durham: a preliminary statement', *Medieval Archaeology*, 16, 1972, pp 33-56; B K Roberts, *The Green Villages of County Durham*, Durham County Library, Local History Publication no 12, 1977.

⁷S Göransson, 'Field and Village on the Island of Öland', *Geografiska Annaler*, 40B, 1958, pp 101-58; S Göransson, 'Morphogenetic aspects of the agrarian landscape of Öland', *Oikos Supplementum*, 12, 1969, pp 67-78.

⁸Hanse-Jugen Nitz, 'Regelmässige Langstreifenfluren und Fränkische Staatskolonisation', *Geographische Rundschau*, 13Jg H9, 1971, pp 350-65; W Filipp, 'Frühformen und Entwicklungsphasen südwest deutscher Altsiedellandschaften unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Rieses und Lechfelds', *Forschungen zur deutschen Landeskunde*, 202, 1972.

associated with nucleated settlements, so that evidence of settlement patterns may be an aid in dating the form. It is worth noting at this point, however, that village forms in Holderness were rather different from those found in the Wolds. A majority of settlements in Holderness were linear, comprising ribbons of irregularly-shaped enclosures which were often of considerable length. Within the ribbons there were sometimes one or more denser clusters of enclosures, giving the villages a distinctive composite structure.⁹ Wolds villages, in contrast, usually had more simple layouts. Houses were either nucleated around an open space or a road junction, or else arranged in two rows facing each other across a street. In a few villages, the associated enclosures had a standard shape and size, but in the majority they had a more irregular plan.

Finally, it should be remembered that an essential aspect of the post-1250 arrangements was their association with tenurial units known as oxgangs. It seems unlikely, therefore, that the system in the form in which we know it could have originated before such units became the normal basis for landholding.

Study of the field layout itself therefore highlights certain factors which could have been important in its origin, namely lordship, land exploitation, settlement pattern, and tenurial structure. The evidence for each of these will now be examined for the period before 1300. It is hoped thereby to draw attention to one or more periods when at least some of the circumstances thought to be necessary for the imposition of the layout could have been present, and from this to suggest the possible circumstances in which planning might have arisen.

II

Before discussing the evidence of landownership, it is useful to speculate upon the most

likely circumstances in which an overlord would be successful in altering existing arrangements. Two possibilities can be suggested. Firstly, at the regional level, the imposition of a standard field layout upon all the townships could be most easily explained if only one or two overlords controlled the whole area. The presence of a large number of estates would be less likely to result in the uniformity which exists in eastern Yorkshire. Secondly, at the level of the individual township, a lord's influence might be greatly increased if he alone held all the land, rather than if it were divided between several estates. Hence, it can be argued that periods when unified overlordship existed in the Wolds and Holderness offer greatest opportunities for the establishment of planned layouts.

Fairly detailed documentary evidence concerning landholding is available for most places between the mid-eleventh century and 1300. Domesday Book provides information for both the immediate pre-Conquest period and for 1086,¹⁰ whilst Kirkby's Inquest of 1284-85, and several early fourteenth-century surveys of knights fees also give a regional coverage of data.¹¹ Intervening changes of lordship on individual estates can be examined from inquisitions post mortem which survive from the reign of Henry III onwards. In this analysis, greatest attention will be focused upon Domesday Book, partly because the Norman Conquest laid the foundation for medieval landholding, and partly because it constituted a marked break with earlier patterns.

The immediate effect of the Conquest was an almost complete transformation of landholding structure. Not only were Saxon thegns replaced as landowners by Frenchmen, but also their estates were regrouped and their lands redistributed. The new Norman estates or honours often included

⁹M Harvey, 'Irregular villages in Holderness, Yorkshire: some thoughts on their origin', *Yorks Arch Jour*, 53, 1982 (forthcoming).

¹⁰W Farrer 'Translation of the Yorkshire Domesday', *VCH Yorkshire*, 2, London, 1912, pp 191-327.

¹¹All printed in *Surtees Society Publication*, LIX, pt 1, 1866.

the lands previously held by many different thegns, so that the direct result was to bring together under one overlord lands which had previously been part of different estates. This circumstance in itself might have resulted in internal changes within settlements, especially since, as Kapelle has recently argued, the new aristocracy in the North made basic changes in the management and organization of their estates.¹² These changes revolved around the increasing manorialization of some villages and the redevelopment of many others, but whether they extended to fundamental remodelling of the arable land has yet to be proved. Indeed, the evidence of Domesday Book seems to indicate that as far as landownership is concerned, circumstances were not especially favourable at that time for the imposition of uniform field layouts.

In the first place, no one lord dominated the landownership structure in the area in 1086. Although the changes following the Conquest did reduce substantially the number of overlords holding land directly from the king, considerable complexity still remained. Fourteen lords held land in the Wolds, the largest of these being the king himself. The Count of Mortain, the king's brother-in-law, also had a sizeable estate there, as did the Archbishop of York. The remaining estates were quite small, and usually geographically localized. None of the lords held land exclusively in this area, all of them having estates elsewhere in the country.

Examination of the distribution of the estates of different lords in the Wolds also shows that no man had influence throughout the whole region. The king was the major landowner in the north Wolds, but he was under-represented further south. In contrast, the Archbishop's land was concentrated in the south, as was that of the Bishop of Durham. Only the Count of Mortain's estate was fairly evenly distributed, but in no area was he the dominant landholder.

¹² W E Kapelle, *The Norman Conquest of the North*, 1979, pp 158-90.

Perhaps of greater significance for field planning, however, was the structure of lordship within individual townships. Divided lordship might well have had an inhibiting effect on reorganization, whilst in contrast, unitary lordship would be more likely to lead to change. Significantly, however, only 48 per cent of places in the Wolds were held by one overlord in 1086, the majority of these having been unitary estates in 1066 also. Thirty-eight per cent of places had two lords, 9 per cent had three lords, and 5 per cent had more than three. Unitary places and divided townships were distributed fairly evenly throughout the Wolds.

In contrast to this picture of complexity in 1086 was Holderness. Unlike the Wolds, the entire region, apart from land held by the Archbishop, was granted after the Conquest to one man, Drogo de Bevrere. This meant that many places which had previously been divided between more than one estate became part of the same honour. In this area, therefore, the landownership structure after 1066 might indeed have presented opportunities for reorganization. On the other hand, the administrative differences between the Wolds and Holderness at this time would seem to preclude such a straightforward explanation for the introduction of a planned layout which was common to both regions.

Any opportunities which the Conquest might have afforded for reorganization could not have lasted very long, however. Almost from the time of its creation, subinfeudation rapidly reduced the number of places linked directly to the honour of Holderness, and landholding became more complex as a result. In the Wolds also, there would seem to have been little occasion after 1086 when the state of lordship might have been conducive to reorganization. The granting by tenants-in-chief of parts of their honours to lesser barons, who in turn often granted individual holdings to knightly families, meant that it would have been increasingly difficult to supervise and enforce a major change in the structure of the

arable land. At Kilham, for instance, the four estates there in the mid-eleventh century were never at any time united under one lord in subsequent centuries. In 1284–85, there were still four estates, the largest being held by the Archbishop of Rouen, and the three smaller estates held by three different families. Many other townships were divided in a similar fashion, and it is difficult to see what circumstances would have caused so many different lords to agree on a common policy of land reorganization.

The structure of lordship after 1066 does not seem, therefore, to have been particularly favourable for large-scale planning in eastern Yorkshire. The same could also be said of the immediate pre-Conquest period. Landownership patterns were as complex then as in 1086, with many lords holding land within the region, and many places being divided between more than one estate. Earlier administrative structures can only be guessed at, however, there being no detailed documentation available. Quite possibly it was even more fragmented a century or so before the Conquest, since one of the features of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries seems to have been the accumulation of estates by a small number of powerful lords.¹³

If a unified lordship did exist before this time, the most likely period when it might have developed was following the Scandinavian invasions of the late ninth century. The impact of this settlement is still a focus for much debate, but there seems to be sufficient circumstantial evidence to suggest not only that Danish society included a substantial class of noblemen, known as 'holds', but also that they could have had considerable territorial power.¹⁴ The very name 'Holder-ness' suggests that this region was once the landed estate of such a noble, and there seems no reason to suppose that the Wolds also was not part of a large compact estate or estates. Whether the 'holds' had the means or the

desire to alter agrarian arrangements in lands they acquired is a question for later discussion, but it should be pointed out that of all the periods before 1300, this seems to be the only one when unified lordship might have existed throughout east Yorkshire. If this factor is important in explaining the uniformity of planned layouts in the area, therefore, it appears that the period of the late ninth and early tenth centuries might well be of great importance.

III

Almost all our knowledge of land exploitation before the thirteenth century must be derived either from archaeological investigation, place name studies or documentary sources such as Domesday Book. Specific documents relating to townships before 1300 are usually too general to be of very great value, although occasionally they can throw some light onto an individual situation. For the most part, however, very little is known of conditions in individual townships between 1300 and 1066.

It is inevitable, therefore, that considerable weight must again be placed upon the evidence of Domesday Book, especially since the Inquest gives information relating to land exploitation for nearly every place in the region. Many problems still surround the handling and interpretation of this data, but two types of entry are thought to be especially valuable for the purposes of this study, namely, the tax assessment of each holding and the identification of waste holdings.

The taxation units used in Domesday Book, carucates and bovates, were the Norman-Latin terms for units known locally as ploughlands and oxgangs. Scholars have frequently drawn attention to the artificiality of the tax units recorded in 1086, but there are strong grounds for believing that in Yorkshire, at least, they related more closely to agrarian reality. It has been argued that the assessment in this area was of quite recent origin, the result of a reassessment

¹³ F M Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edition, Oxford, 1971, p 490.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 509.

made in the early-eleventh century, so that it probably reflected real conditions more accurately than elsewhere.¹⁵ In view of the plough connotations in the names of these fiscal units, it seems reasonable to suppose that this reality related primarily to the arable land. A map of carucate density might thus be a relatively good guide to levels of land exploitation in the mid-eleventh century.

Sheppard's analysis to this end indicates that the Wolds, along with the western part of the Vale of York, was the most intensively exploited region in Yorkshire in the early eleventh century, with Holderness only a little less developed.¹⁶ East Yorkshire must therefore have compared favourably with the most densely peopled and agriculturally productive areas in England at this time, and in many townships, there would be little land left uncultivated. Maximum land exploitation could thus have been reached already by the early eleventh century, the consequence, probably, of a period of population growth and economic prosperity in the tenth century.¹⁷

The other Domesday entry of relevance, that of the incidence of waste, appears at first sight to present a contradictory picture. In Yorkshire as a whole, 44 per cent of holdings were recorded as waste in 1086, and many others were apparently without population.¹⁸ The distribution of waste was uneven, however, and within eastern Yorkshire some areas, such as Holderness and the south Wolds, were hardly affected by it. The north Wolds and much of the Vale, in contrast, had a far higher incidence of waste, with whole blocks of territory being depopulated or only very lightly settled.

This situation was almost certainly a temporary one, the direct consequence of political discontent in the north following

the Conquest. In an unprecedented act of reprisal, William I led his army into Yorkshire in the winter of 1069–70 and deliberately laid waste large tracts of countryside. Although recovery was probably partly under way by 1086, the effects of the harrying were still all too obvious in the wasted holdings and fallen land values. Clearly, devastation on this scale must have had important consequences for population, settlement and cultivation, and therefore could have a bearing on the discussion on planned field layouts.

Considerable debate has surrounded both the interpretation of the waste entries in Domesday Book and the means by which economic recovery was effected. On the one hand, Bishop has argued that the waste entries in 1086 did not directly reflect the results of the 1069 harrying, but rather was a consequence of adjustments made between that date and 1086.¹⁹ These adjustments involved the movement of population from less profitable upland holdings such as those in the north Wolds, which Bishop considered would have escaped the full force of destruction, to lowland estates in the Vale which were directly affected by wastage, but which were too profitable to be left unexploited for long.

On the other hand, Darby and Maxwell, and more recently Kapelle, have raised several objections to Bishop's theory.²⁰ Kapelle especially has argued that the Domesday distribution of waste was probably a fairly true reflection of the course of destruction in 1069, and that the Norman lords by 1086 were still in no position to redevelop their estates on a large scale.²¹ Instead, their attention was focused upon those areas which apparently escaped the full force of destruction and where population and economic life had survived. One such area seems to have been the south Wolds.

¹⁵ F M Stenton, *Types of Manorial Structure in the Northern Danelaw*, Oxford, 1910, p 90; P H Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 2nd edition, 1971, p 172.

¹⁶ J A Sheppard, 'Pre-Conquest Yorkshire: Fiscal carucates as an index of land exploitation', *Trans IBC*, 65, 1975, pp 67–79.

¹⁷ P H Sawyer, 'The two Viking Ages of Britain. A Discussion', *Medieval Scandinavia*, 2, 1969, pp 163–209.

¹⁸ A C Darby and I S Maxwell (eds), *The Domesday Geography of Northern England*, Cambridge, 1962, pp 61, 139, 212.

¹⁹ T A M Bishop, 'The Norman Settlement of Yorkshire', pp 1–14 of R W Hunt, W A Pantin and F W Southern (eds), *Studies in medieval history presented to F W Powicke*, Oxford, 1948.

²⁰ H C Darby and I S Maxwell (eds), *op cit*, pp 67–71, 145–50, 217–21, 450–4; W E Kapelle, *op cit*, pp 158–90.

²¹ Kapelle, *ibid*.

Kapelle suggests that in such areas, the lords were intent upon increasing agricultural production by the expressed means of expanding or creating demesne land for their own benefit. They were able to do this in the 1070s because they had all the advantages over a depressed, food-seeking peasantry. After that time, however, the balance shifted towards the peasantry, and the lords concentrated upon redeveloping their remaining waste estates by attracting peasants by offering them easy terms. Settlements in this category often, as a result, lacked demesne land.

These theories have been discussed at some length because of the importance of waste in certain parts of eastern Yorkshire, and because of its potential significance for the redevelopment of the area. There seems little doubt that the harrying did create an economic and demographic hiatus in the development of Yorkshire, and it might well, therefore, have offered the opportunity for imposing a new pattern on communities. The purposeful redevelopment of estates by some lords was almost certainly the cause of the numerous regular, planned villages of central Yorkshire, and it would be tempting to explain planned fields in a similar way.²²

The evidence, however, does not justify any such explanation. In the first place, redevelopment was probably unnecessary in several areas, including the south Wolds and Holderness, so that it is difficult to explain regularity observed in such areas in these terms alone. Even if Kapelle is correct about the development of manorialization in these areas, there is no reason to suppose that this involved a radical change in farming structure. Indeed, in respect of village forms, it is in precisely those townships where demesne land occurred that regular village forms are not found, and where, therefore, planning did not take place.

A more crucial factor, however, involves the nature of any proposed estate redevelopment.

In the Vale of York much has been made of the role played by small groups of colonists in the progressive clearance and expansion of the arable land through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As population grew so new clearances for arable were made and the fields gradually became larger.²³ There is no hint here of fully developed field systems being imposed onto the landscape almost overnight. Yet, if the Wolds also witnessed a redevelopment, and if the planned fields were part of such a redevelopment, it is necessary to envisage recolonization on a quite massive scale in order to account for the laying out of the entire arable area of a township at one point in time. Any such population movement must have been far greater than that suggested for the Vale, which was supposedly the more attractive area for farming. The likelihood of such a recolonization having occurred seems remote. It should also be noted that there are very few regular villages in the Wolds, which again suggests that the development of the Vale was different from that which occurred further east.²⁴

Here again, therefore, the evidence seems to be inconsistent with an eleventh-century origin of the field planning, and once again we are drawn to the possibility of an earlier dating for the system. It has been suggested that maximum exploitation could already have been reached in some townships by the early eleventh century, if not before, so there is no reason, on these grounds, to reject an earlier origin. Indeed, archaeological investigation of several areas on the Wolds indicates that fully exploited landscapes probably existed there from at least the

²³ T A M Bishop, 'Assarting and the growth of the open fields', *Economic History Review*, 1st series, 6 (1), 1935, pp 13-29; J A Sheppard, 'Pre-enclosure field and settlement patterns in an English township: Wheldrake, near York', *Geografiska Annaler*, 48B, 1966, pp 59-77.

²⁴ W E Wightman's suggestion in 'The significance of "waste" in the Yorkshire Domesday', *Northern History*, 10, 1975, pp 55-71, that waste entries may be a reflection of changes in estate organization than of uncultivated land, likewise fails to explain why field planning should have been imposed so uniformly over the region.

²² Sheppard, 1976, *op cit*.

Roman period,²⁵ whilst place-name studies show that in both Holderness and the Wolds there was a fairly intensive pattern of settlement by the Anglian period.²⁶ Some internal colonization may have followed the Viking invasions of the ninth century, but even here there is a suggestion that many Scandinavian place names, often interpreted as evidence of such colonization, could simply represent a reorganization of existing estates under new lords.²⁷ On the basis of the evidence of land exploitation, therefore, the planned field layouts could be very early indeed.

IV

The early exploited landscape of the Wolds was not, however, associated with either nucleated settlements or a land division based upon long lands. The most detailed archaeological investigation to date, that of the parish of Wharram Percy in the north-west Wolds, shows that the Roman settlement pattern was one of scattered farms and small nucleations, associated with a landscape of small enclosed fields.²⁸ Such arrangements seem to have been quite typical of the Wolds generally, but less is known of the pattern of Holderness.

Despite a probable fall in population at the beginning of the Anglian period, part of a national decrease which Fowler suggests could have involved a loss of up to three million people,²⁹ there is nothing to indicate any break in continuity between the Roman and early Anglian landscapes on the Wolds. At Wharram a number of the Roman sites show evidence of early Anglian pottery, and it appears that the main pattern of settlement

at this time remained one of small scattered hamlets and dispersed farms. Pottery of the Middle Saxon period has also been found on several of these sites.

The process by which this dispersed settlement pattern was abandoned in favour of one of nucleation is a crucial one, because it is clear that the regular open fields which were associated with the medieval village of Wharram Percy could never have related to this early settlement pattern. Indeed, these fields overlie the scattered nucleations and enclosed fields, and bear no relationship to them. It is obviously not possible to link directly the abandonment of the former pattern with the planned fields and nucleated settlement superimposed over it, but it must nevertheless be true that, unless the area was totally depopulated and abandoned, any change in settlement pattern and agrarian organization must have involved an element of reorganization.

Rather less can be said about the early landscape of Holderness, because very little archaeological work has been undertaken in the area. The composite form of many of the later settlements, however, does suggest that they could have developed from smaller units, possibly through the linkage of once separate nuclei to form a larger, linear form.³⁰ If such a course of development did occur, then this would mean not only that the earlier pattern was more dispersed in character, but also that any linkage would probably have necessitated some reorganization of the arable land associated with the nuclei.

V

Before examining the evidence of tenurial structure in eastern Yorkshire, it is helpful to look more closely at the relationship which existed between land tenure and field structure. It is clear from detailed study of planned fields in both Holderness and the Wolds that both the number of lands in the furlongs, and their widths, were determined by the number and size of the tenurial units or

²⁵ M W Beresford and J G Hurst, 'Wharram Percy: a case study in Microtopography', pp 52-85, in P H Sawyer (ed), *English Medieval Settlement*, 1979; K A Allison, *The East Riding of Yorkshire Landscape*, 1976, pp 38-41, 43-63.

²⁶ G Fellows Jensen, *Scandinavian settlement names in Yorkshire*, Copenhagen, 1972.

²⁷ P H Sawyer, 'Baldersby, Borup and Bruges: the Rise of Northern Europe', *Univ of Leeds Review*, 16, 1973, pp 75-96.

²⁸ Beresford and Hurst, *op cit*.

²⁹ P J Fowler, 'Lowland landscapes: culture, time and personality', in S Limbrey and J G Evans (eds), *The effects of man on the landscape: the Lowland Zone*, CBA Research Report, 21, 1978, pp 5-7.

³⁰ Harvey, 1982, *op cit*.

oxgangs within the township concerned. For example, in 1563 Thorpe Bassett contained 64 oxgangs, 60 of these forming 32 oxgang units, and 4 being single oxgang holdings.³¹ Each of the one and two oxgangs was made up of one land in every furlong, the two oxgangs having lands which were twice as wide as those belonging to the single oxgangs. The furlongs thus contained approximately half the number of lands as the township had oxgangs: to be precise 30 broad lands and 4 narrow lands. Almost every township in the area where detailed reconstructions are possible showed this same relationship between tenurial units and field layout.

Any discussion on the origins of this aspect of the regular field system must consider therefore not only the general question of oxgangs as units of land tenure, but also the number of such units present within individual townships. The earliest date for the establishment of the layout as described would presumably be the point when the number of oxgangs in the township was the same as the number in the field layout. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the field planning originated at such a date. If maximum exploitation had been reached by that time, and no new holdings were created, oxgang numbers might remain stable for a long period, and the fields could have resulted from a relatively late reorganization. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the possibility that periodic redivisions of the land occurred, in which case the principle of regular division could be rather earlier than the date at which the number of holdings coincides with the number in the fields.

Information concerning the number of tenurial units present in a township at any date is not usually readily available, largely because villages were often divided between estates, and surviving evidence may give only a partial picture. Occasionally, as at Preston in Holderness, where the oxgangs were named, it has been possible to use other

evidence as a dating aid, and it can be suggested that the ordered system of oxgangs there dates from the mid-thirteenth century at the latest.³² For the majority of places, however, analysis of this kind is not possible, and it is usually the case that Domesday Book provides one of the few sources of evidence for early holdings, in the form of the tax assessment.

The problem with using Domesday Book, however, is one of the relationship between fiscal oxgangs and real oxgangs. If the fiscal geld units were a purely artificial measure, then they are of little value for this discussion. On the other hand, if, as has been suggested, they represent a recent and more realistic assessment of the situation in individual estates, then they can be used with some measure of confidence.

The discussion on land exploitation has already argued that in some townships at least, maximum cultivation levels had probably been reached by the early eleventh century. It would seem reasonable to suppose, therefore, that the number of tenurial units in the townships would be stabilizing by this time, there being little land remaining from which to create new holdings. Herein may lie the explanation for the instances where the number of Domesday fiscal bovates in a township is very similar to the number of tenurial oxgangs incorporated into the later field layout. At Butterwick, for instance, there were 101 oxgangs in the open fields in 1563, whilst the Domesday Book assessment was 96 bovates. At Kilham, the correlation was even closer. This very large township was assessed at 384 bovates in the eleventh century. In 1729, it also contained 384 oxgangs. In these and other instances, therefore, there is no reason why the field layouts observable in later centuries could not have been established by the eleventh century.

There is a further aspect to the problem, however, and that concerns the possibility that the tax assessment itself could have been

³¹ Castle Howard MS, Survey of Estates, 1953, F4/14/3.

³² Harvey, 1978, *op cit*.

used when the fields were laid out. In south and east Sweden, field planning in the medieval period was almost certainly undertaken using the fiscal assessment as the basis for the division,³³ whilst in northern England, Sheppard has demonstrated the existence of a link between regular planned villages and the Domesday carucate assessment.³⁴ These villages appear to have been laid out in such a way that the length of toft rows was proportional to the fiscal totals. If, therefore, the planned fields of eastern Yorkshire were laid out as a conscious attempt at estate redevelopment in the eleventh or early twelfth centuries, it is quite possible that the tax assessment would have been used in the division. The observed relationship between the number of holdings in the fields and the Domesday assessment would then be explainable in terms of the method used in laying out the fields.

It should always be remembered, however, that the geld assessments did not originate with the Norman Conquest. The first known reference to such an assessment in eastern Yorkshire occurs in an Anglo-Saxon charter for Newbald, on the western edge of the Wolds, dated AD 963.³⁵ At that date, the Archbishop of York's estate there was assessed at thirty carucates. Despite the reassessment of the early eleventh century, this estate was still valued at thirty carucates in 1086. Presumably, the arable land in Newbald had already reached its maximum extent by the mid-tenth century, so that no revision was necessary. Unfortunately, only one other pre-Conquest charter is known to exist for this area, so that it is impossible to say whether the situation at Newbald was typical. If it was, however, field planning could have occurred as much as a century before the Conquest, and still show a link with the Domesday assessment figures.

The traditional units of land tenure, the

oxgangs, also did not derive from the eleventh century. They were almost certainly a product of the Danish influence in eastern England from the late ninth century onwards. The new settlers appear to have introduced a new approach to land division which had as its essence an emphasis upon equal shares.³⁶ No-one has yet suggested how this equality might have been achieved in practice, but there seems little doubt that if it was introduced into pre-existing agrarian communities, it would have involved some reorganization. If this occurred within communities which were already quite large, and in landscapes which were already extensively cleared and cultivated, then the simplest way of redividing the land might well have been a massive and simple subdivision into lands which were as long as the unit being divided. Equal shares could then have been allotted by allocating one land to each holding in a regular sequence, so that each received a fair share both in quality and quantity.

The main question mark surrounding a possible early origin for the land division concerns the stability which is implicit in such an argument. Could it survive major upheavals such as the harrying, changes in landownership and demographic fluctuations? Many would reject such an idea, but it is remarkable how, within the period covered by documentation, the integrity of the basic tenurial units was preserved over hundreds of years. Ownership could change, the number of landholders could change, but they did so against the background of a tenurial system which remained remarkably stable. When population increased, tenants could hold half oxgangs, and even odd parcels of oxgangs, but the oxgangs themselves did not disintegrate. When, from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries onwards, farmers began to increase the size of their farms, they did so by

³³ Göransson, 1958 and 1969, *op cit.*

³⁴ Sheppard, 1974, *op cit.*

³⁵ W Farrer (ed), *Early Yorkshire Charters*, 1, Edinburgh, 1914, pp 15-18.

³⁶ H P R Finberg, 'Anglo-Saxon England to 1042', pp 491-3 in H P R Finberg (ed), *The Agrarian history of England and Wales AD 43-1042*, Cambridge, 1972.

increasing the number of oxgangs which they held. Such stability, it might be argued, could survive even the harrying. Even though settlements might have been destroyed, it is quite likely that the basic field layout would have survived more or less intact. Oxgangs may well have gone out of cultivation for a while, but this need not mean that their constituent lands became obliterated.

VI

In this discussion, it has been possible to identify two periods in which circumstances might have been favourable for the creation of planned field systems in the Wolds and Holderness, namely the late eleventh century and the late ninth century onwards. The former stands out because in so many respects it was a watershed in the development of the area. Fundamental changes in landownership and estate structure, combined with demographic and economic traumas, could well have created an environment which was conducive to radical changes in field layout. On the other hand, the evidence of wasting detracts from such a possibility, since, recolonization on a scale far greater than that envisaged for the Vale of York would have had to take place in order to account for the arrangements found in eastern Yorkshire. This seems unlikely, but it cannot be discounted completely.

Evidence to support a late ninth- or early tenth-century origin for the planned layouts is far more circumstantial, but again, the general association of strong and possibly unitary lordship, population growth and changes in tenurial structure at this time could be significant. But this raises the question of why other parts of eastern England were not affected in a similar way, since Scandinavian influence was not confined to eastern Yorkshire. Until recently, this factor alone might have ruled out a ninth-century origin, despite the apparently favourable circumstances which then prevailed. Now, however, work by David Hall

is indicating that massively laid out field systems may not be unique to Yorkshire.

Using both archaeological and documentary evidence, Hall has suggested that long lands were an early feature of even those townships which in later centuries had the classic patchwork-like open field structure of multiple furlongs and short lands.³⁷ Although Hall argues for a Middle Saxon origin for this land division, it may be significant that the area in which he worked, Northamptonshire, was also heavily settled by the Scandinavians, and was thus just as likely as Yorkshire to have witnessed fundamental changes in lordship and land tenure. Unlike the examples in Northamptonshire, however, the long lands in eastern Yorkshire were never subdivided to create shorter lands and more furlongs. Perhaps, in this, we see the true role of the eleventh century.

Hall believes that the subdivision of long lands had occurred in some Northamptonshire townships at least by the twelfth century. The pressures which cause it are not yet fully understood, but it is quite likely that factors such as population growth would have been important. Could it be that in Yorkshire, the effects of the years immediately following the Conquest were such as to reduce the pressures which might have caused subdivision here, thereby allowing the original layout to survive? The significance of the Holderness and Wolds field system would then be that it enables us to study in detail a method of land division which was once far more common in England. Perhaps Finberg was closer to the truth than he realized when he tentatively commented that the effects of the Viking settlement were 'far reaching enough to bring about a reorganisation of the arable fields in many villages of older settlement'.³⁸ In the light of the Yorkshire evidence, this seems to be a very real possibility.

³⁷ D A Hall, 'The origins of open field agriculture — the archaeological fieldwork evidence', pp 22–38 in T Rowley (ed), *The origins of open field agriculture*, 1981.

³⁸ Finberg, *op cit*, p 492.