

The Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia and the origins and distribution of common fields*

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Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the hypothesis that the agricultural layouts and organisation that had developed into common fields by the high middle ages may have had their origins in the 'long' eighth century, between about 670 and 840 AD. It begins by reiterating the distinction between medieval open and common fields, and the problems that inhibit current explanations for their period of origin and distribution. The distribution of common fields is reviewed and the coincidence with the kingdom of Mercia noted. Evidence pointing towards an earlier date for the origin of fields is reviewed. Current views of Mercia in the 'long' eighth century are discussed and it is shown that the kingdom had both the cultural and economic vitality to implement far-reaching landscape organisation. The proposition that early forms of these field systems may have originated in the 'long' eighth century is considered, and the paper concludes with suggestions for further research.

Open and common fields (a specialised form of open field) endured in the English landscape for over a thousand years and their physical remains still survive in many places. A great deal is known and understood about their distribution and physical appearance, about their management from their peak in the thirteenth century through the changes of the later medieval and early modern periods, and about how and when they disappeared. Their origins, however, present a continuing problem partly, at least, because of the difficulties in extrapolating information about such beginnings from documentary sources and upstanding earthworks that record – or fossilise – mature or even late field systems.

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Over the past twenty years, a relative consensus has developed around the suggestion that open fields appeared during or by the tenth century, and it is generally assumed that this is true of common fields too. However, recent research in Somerset, Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire, and Cambridgeshire indicates the revolutionary possibility that early forms of open fields, divided into strips and sometimes demonstrating incipient features of common fields, may have emerged in the 'long' eighth century, between about 670 and 840, in areas dominated by the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia. This paper aims to explore the potential for further research of such an hypothesis.

I

Several composite terms – open fields, common fields, subdivided fields, townfields – are used to describe English medieval field systems. All four relate to arable lands whose internal divisions were not marked by hedges or ditches and which therefore had an 'open' appearance. However historians from Joan Thirsk onwards have drawn a distinction between 'open' and 'common' fields based on the distinctive patterns of distribution, layout, ownership and cropping that had emerged to characterize common fields by the thirteenth century.¹

Open fields were found across most of England, including the south, south-east and the west, often lying in areas of 'ancient' countryside, and often alongside or including field systems with prehistoric or Roman antecedents (Figure 1). Common fields were restricted to central, southern England, to a countryside described as Midland or 'champion' and more recently defined as the Central Province.²

The layout of both open and common fields was 'open', that is, neither were internally divided by physical barriers. The physical framework of each was, however, distinct. Open-field arable might be subdivided into any number of fields, widely varying in size. Common-field arable was divided into just two or three very large fields of approximately equal size. Open fields were often, but not necessarily, further divided into furlongs (some fields were so small that there was no necessity for subdivision), but almost always into strips.³ Furlongs and strips were integral features of common fields.

There were also differences between open and common fields in the distribution of holdings within the arable. In open-field systems, demesne arable was frequently held in blocks outside the open fields, separate from that of tenants and freeholders, whose holdings were inconsistently distributed among the arable and who may also have had additional arable holdings outside the open fields. The intermingling of holdings was not essential, and strips might be held in blocks, to the extent that some furlongs might even be held in severalty (individual ownership). Common fields were characterized by distinctive distributions of holdings, in which demesne

¹ J. Thirsk, 'The origin of the common fields', *Past and Present* 33 (1966), p. 144; H. S. A. Fox, 'Approaches to the adoption of the Midland system', in T. Rowley (ed.), *The origins of open field agriculture* (1981), pp. 83–4; Gray, *English field systems*, frontispiece and p. 403; W. O. Ault, *Open field farming in medieval England* (1972), p. 16.

² Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, p. 144;

H. L. Gray, *English field systems* (1915), frontispiece and p. 403; O. Rackham, *The history of the countryside* (1986), p. 178; Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, p. 10; Fox, 'Approaches', p. 66.

³ Strips were the smallest physical sub-divisions of open and common fields. They were units of cropping, and also units of tenure (selions).

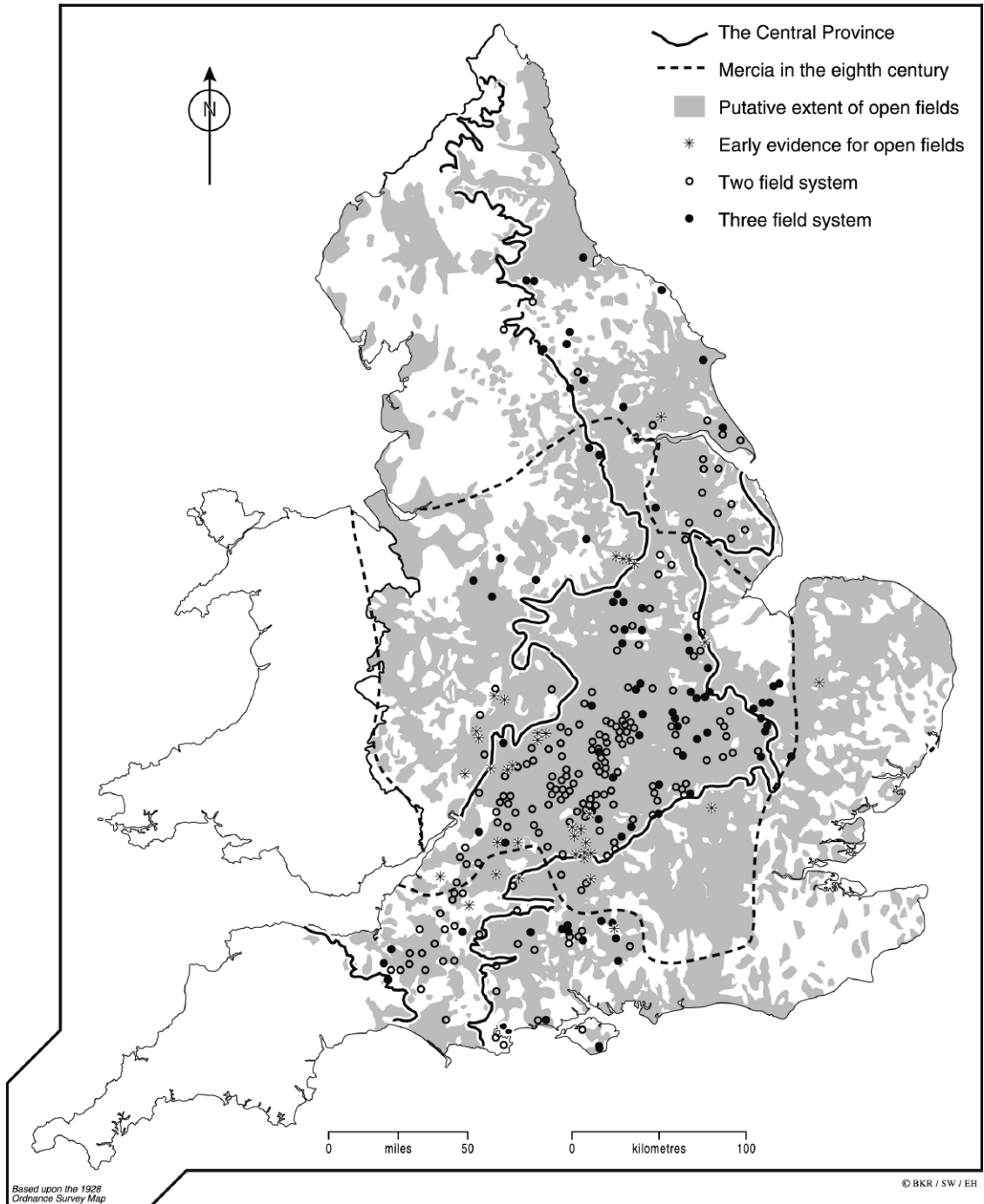


FIGURE 1. England: open and common fields

Note: This combines two maps of common-field and open-field systems published in Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, pp. 124, 144 with a map showing the boundary of 'greater' Mercia in the 'long' eighth century. These maps were based on H. L. Gray, *English field systems* (1915), G. Slater, *The English peasantry and the enclosure of common fields* (1907), C. S. Orwin and C. S. Orwin, *The open fields* (1938), R. Glasscock, 'England circa 1334', in H. C. Darby (ed.), *A new historical geography of England* (1973), pp. 136–85, D. Hooke, *The Anglo-Saxon landscape of the Hwicce* (1985), and A. R. H. Baker and R. A. Butlin (eds), *Studies of field systems in the British Isles* (1973).

and tenant strips were more or less equally distributed between the two or three large fields, where they lay intermingled with those of other holders, sometimes in a regular sequence.⁴

Important as distinctions in layout and patterns of ownership may have been, the most significant differences may have lain in the organisation of cropping. In open-field systems, cropping patterns were variable, since the unit of cultivation was as frequently the furlong as the field. Cropping patterns might be arranged by field, by furlong or even within individual holdings. Because there was very often sufficient pasture for livestock within the vill, communally-regulated fallowing was not essential, and communal regulation of cropping was therefore inconsistently practised.⁵ In common fields, cultivation followed a strict communally-regulated rotation that included a fallow year. Cropping was organized by field rather than by furlong. Either winter- or spring-sown crops were grown on all the strips in all the furlongs of a single field, while between a third and a half of the arable lay fallow each year to provide grazing for the village livestock. Communal regulation of the fallow may, indeed, have been *the* essential determinant of classic common-field systems.⁶ This is because access to the stubbles and fallow field by the community's livestock could most easily be arranged if all the strips in a field were sown at the same time with a crop that took the same length of time to ripen for harvest. Common fields were a specialized form of open fields found only in a restricted zone in Midland England. The question to be explored in this paper is why the distribution of common-field systems should have been restricted in this way. We begin by reviewing the sources available and the methods which might be used to examine the question.

II

Although the scholarly literature on the period of origin of common and open fields has a long history, it has been bedevilled by an inconsistent terminology. A particular difficulty is that the composite terms (e.g. 'open fields', 'common fields', 'subdivided fields', 'townfields') that are used to describe open and common fields, do not distinguish between them.

It is difficult to discern early forms of layout and organisation of open or common fields in primary documentary evidence or in archaeological evidence, especially since the distinction is teleological. Most documentary sources are medieval in date, and record fully-formed rather than developing open- and common-field systems, while Anglo-Saxon law codes, charters and other documents that include references to fields or arable cultivation are usually inexact and susceptible to a range of interpretations.

The precise dating of field systems can be difficult. Ploughing is essentially a destructive activity which militates against the slow accretion of detailed stratigraphies; and, unlike ceramics or metalwork for example, the physical remains of ploughing – earthworks, like ridge and furrow, or ploughmarks in ploughsoil – tend to be dateable only in very general terms unless

⁴ Fox, 'Approaches', pp. 64–5; B. K. Roberts, *The making of the English village* (1989), p. 51; D. Hall, 'Fieldwork and field books: studies in early layouts', in B. K. Roberts and R. E. Glasscock (eds), *Villages, fields and frontiers: studies in European rural settlements in the medieval and*

early modern periods (1983), pp. 117–8.

⁵ Fox, 'Approaches', pp. 66, 92; Ault, *Open field farming*, p. 16.

⁶ Fox, 'Approaches' p. 66; Ault, *Open field farming*, p. 16.

they have some association with another more closely dateable feature. These characteristics pose particular problems for archaeological investigation through excavation or systematic field survey. Archaeological excavations are usually able to sample just a small fraction of any large agricultural layout, and this may make extrapolation or generalization difficult in relation to field systems. Field survey may reveal earthworks resulting from cultivation, and record the distribution of pottery scattered during manuring or artefacts from sites underlying fields. In this it can provide general evidence of cultivation and other activity over large areas in one or more periods, but it is a necessarily imprecise tool for close dating of field systems. A very large-scale ('total') excavation of a field system, supported by documentary and environmental analysis, is unlikely, although it has been recognised as an ideal for over 40 years.⁷

Topographical and morphological analysis of field systems, based on systematic field survey and documentary, archaeological and other evidence, may be useful in developing hypotheses about the development of such large-scale landscapes, especially where archaeological excavation is not possible. Unequivocal evidence for the origins and development of such landscapes, especially those for which written sources are sparse or non-existent, is rare. Topographical arguments therefore rely on the analysis and evaluation of a range of sources, none of which may be conclusive in itself, but together combining to provide a 'best fit' hypothesis for the explanation of a range of data.⁸ They do not necessarily prove that a landscape was created in a particular period, or developed in a particular way; they simply suggest that, given the known evidence, their interpretation of the evidence provides the most likely explanation currently available.

III

To difficulties with sources and methods in the investigation of common fields may be added further problems relating to their distribution, the agencies involved in their origin, and their period of origin, each of which we now consider in turn.

(a) *Distribution*

There are well known differences in the distributions of English open- and common-field systems. Gray provided the first scholarly demonstration of the restricted distribution of common fields in 1915, in a map showing the 'Boundary of the Two- and Three-Field System'.⁹ By the early 1980s the association between common fields and the English Midlands had led to the characterisation of the former as 'the Midland system'. Rackham called this area (and the nucleated settlements associated with it) 'planned' England, contrasting it with 'ancient' England in

⁷ D. W. Wilson, 'Anglo-Saxon rural economy: a survey of the archaeological evidence and a suggestion', *AgHR* 10 (1962), pp. 78-9.

⁸ See Fox, 'Approaches', p. 88. Now-classic examples of such studies include E. A. Pocock, 'The first fields in an Oxfordshire parish', *AgHR* 16 (1968), pp. 85-100;

S. Bassett, 'Medieval Lichfield: a topographical review', *Trans. Staffs. Archaeological and Historical Soc.* 22 (1980-1), pp. 93-121; and T. Williamson, 'Early co-axial field systems on the East Anglian boulder clays', *Proc. Prehistoric Soc.* 53 (1987), pp. 419-31.

⁹ Gray, *English field systems*, frontispiece and p. 403.

which common fields did not occur.¹⁰ More recently, the area within which common fields are found has been defined as the 'Central Province'.¹¹

Even within the Central Province, however, the distribution of evidence for common fields is not even (Figure 1).¹² By far the greatest concentration seems to have lain in a swathe across the central and eastern Midlands: eastern Warwickshire, southern Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Huntingdonshire and west Cambridgeshire; Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, north Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire. There appear to be secondary, but less dense, distributions in Somerset, Wiltshire and Hampshire, and in Lincolnshire and parts of Yorkshire.

(b) Agency

There have been many attempts to explain the distinctive restriction of common fields to the Central Province. Generally speaking, it does not appear to be 'related to any very obvious aspects of the natural environment, such as geology, climate or soils'.¹³ Even allowing for the absence of common fields from the predominantly pastoral highlands and uplands of northern and western England where the soils are too thin and rocky, slopes are too steep, and/or fields are too high above sea level to allow a sufficient period for grain to grow and ripen, the restriction of common fields to the Central Province is puzzling. Good arable land was available far beyond the Central Province. There were as many plough-teams in east Norfolk in 1086, for example, as there were in parts of the Central Province, yet it is open but not common fields that are found in eastern England.¹⁴ On the other hand, Williamson has demonstrated that the distribution of particularly difficult clay soils is generally co-incident with the Central Province. His argument relates principally to settlement nucleation, with which common fields are believed to be closely associated, rather than to common-field origins, but nonetheless provides a factor to be considered.¹⁵

The debate about the possibility of continuity between Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon landscapes began with Seebohm, who argued that the 'three field system' had evolved from Romano-British forms of cultivation.¹⁶ He suggested that, since three-field systems were found

¹⁰ Fox, 'Approaches', p. 66; Rackham, *Countryside*, p. 178.

¹¹ Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, p. 10. This paper provisionally accepts the boundaries of the Central Province in relation to common fields as mapped by Roberts and Wrathmell in *Region and place*, p. 124. More work still needs to be done before these boundaries can be traced more accurately. It seems likely, for example, that there were many more vills with two or three field layouts in Cambridgeshire in the high middle ages than the present boundaries of the Central Province acknowledge (cf. M. R. Postgate, 'The open fields of Cambridgeshire' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1964), App. 1).

¹² Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, p. 144.

¹³ C. C. Taylor, 'Nucleated settlements: a view from the frontier', *Landscape Hist.* 24 (2002), p. 53; see also

Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, pp. 32–9, 64.

¹⁴ Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, p. 69.

¹⁵ T. Williamson, *Shaping medieval landscapes* (2003), p. 6.

¹⁶ F. Seebohm, *The English village community* (1883), pp. 410–1. More recent research indicates that part of Seebohm's premise was misplaced. While it is true that arable land in north-west Europe was often divided into three fields by the high middle ages, by the eighth century this may only have been happening on the highest status monastic demesnes: A. E. Verhulst, *The Carolingian economy* (2002), pp. 16–18. Even when the subdivision of arable into three fields had become more common, cropping was not undertaken communally nor was there intermingling of tenure. Open fields sometimes developed in Europe; common fields never.

only in Carolingian Europe, and since Anglo-Saxon migrants came from an area much larger than the Carolingian empire, not all Anglo-Saxons can have practised three-field cultivation in their homelands. Common fields were unlikely, therefore, to have been introduced by Anglo-Saxon migrants, and it was more probable that they had Romano-British or earlier antecedents. This view was almost entirely discounted until recently, on the grounds of paucity of evidence for the re-use of prehistoric or Roman land divisions in the boundaries and internal divisions of common fields. There is, however, a growing body of evidence now that such continuity did sometimes occur within the Central Province, and the question of continuity with earlier landscapes has been revitalized, although continuity in the use of boundaries does not necessarily imply continuity of cultivation.¹⁷

Other scholars have suggested that areas of Romano-British arable which either continued to be cultivated into the Anglo-Saxon period or which remained cleared as pasture, provided favourable conditions for the accelerating extension of arable from the early eighth century onwards.¹⁸ On the other hand, maps (however tentative) showing areas that seem to have been predominantly cleared in or by the middle Anglo-Saxon period, or showing the distribution of Romanized buildings and villas, do not show unequivocal concentrations of either in the Central Province.¹⁹

Variations in early medieval demography across the country are generally unhelpful in explaining common-field distribution. There are inherent problems in using Domesday Book as a source of population statistics, since it cannot be assumed that everyone was recorded; nor, since it is a record of property rather than a census, that everyone who was recorded was only recorded once. It is, however, the earliest source of demographic data that can lay any claim to national coverage, and perhaps, if the flaws in their collection were more or less universal, the same margins of error may apply across England. If this is the case, then, however flawed the data may be, there appears to have been nothing distinctive about the density of population in the Central Province compared with other parts of England, at least in the eleventh century.²⁰

Nor does lordship in the same period seem to have been a factor. That is, there is no evidence to show that the places in which common fields developed were more or less manorialized in 1086, or that they were characterized by particular forms of late Anglo-Saxon manorial structure. Freeman and sokemen (as opposed to villeins), while concentrated in eastern England, were found inside and outside the Central Province.²¹

Yet others have suggested that cultural factors may have been at work. Such cultural explanations take two forms: one is related to ethnicity, and the other to a model of cultural change. To

Note 16 continued

See, for example, J. Renes, 'Some aspects of open fields in the southern part of the province of Limburg (the Netherlands)', *Geografiska Annaler* 70B (1988), p. 164; Verhulst, *Carolingian economy*, pp. 16–18.

¹⁷ Bassett, 'Lichfield', pp. 93–121; S. Bassett, 'Beyond the edge of excavation: the topographical context of Goltho', in H. Mayr-Harting and R. I. Moore (eds), *Studies in medieval history* (1981), pp. 21–39; S. Upex, 'Landscape continuity and fossilisation of Roman fields',

Archaeological J. 159 (2002), pp. 77–108; S. Oosthuizen, *Landscapes decoded* (2006), ch. 6.

¹⁸ D. Hooke, *The landscape of Anglo-Saxon England* (1998), p. 116.

¹⁹ Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, pp. 78–9.

²⁰ D. Hill, *Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (1981), p. 19.

²¹ Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, p. 127; Williamson, *Shaping*, p. 47.

consider the question of ethnicity first, although the view that common fields evolved from a system of land allotment and cultivation introduced during the Anglo-Saxon migrations is no longer accepted, the debate about the influence of ethnicity persists in arguments concerning the influence of the Scandinavian migrations of the ninth and tenth centuries.²² Hodges, for example, proposed that common fields may have resulted from new attitudes to landholding imported by Danish migrants. Hart came to a similar conclusion, arguing that the collective decision-making that underpinned common-field cultivation was derived from Scandinavian social structures. These views have had difficulty in finding general acceptance and Banham, in a recent review of the evidence, has expressed the objections most clearly: the Scandinavians 'didn't introduce [common-field cultivation] everywhere they lived, and someone must have introduced it into other areas.'²³

The second cultural explanation for the distribution of common fields is based on the assumption that their appearance was part of the same process of cultural diffusion in which dispersed settlement in the Central Province was replaced by nucleated settlement. Rackham, for example, suggested that the differential distribution of common fields and nucleated settlement resulted from a tide which left 'the English Midlands submerged ... [while parts of ancient countryside] such as south Essex were not reached at all'.²⁴ Taylor and Roberts and Wrathmell concur, arguing that the phenomenon spread outwards across central, southern England from an epicentre, perhaps in the Midlands, from the tenth century onwards, until it petered out under the economic and demographic strains of the fourteenth century.²⁵ Even that hypothesis, however, while explaining why common fields did not appear throughout England, does not illuminate either why they developed at all, why they should have developed in the Midlands, or why they should have been adopted in some places and not in others.

(c) *Period of origin*

Common and open fields across England seem to have achieved full maturity by the thirteenth century at the latest. Charters and other documentary sources, supported by some archaeological evidence, show that open fields divided into intermingled holdings could be found in tenth-century landscapes. This is generally taken as evidence for open and common fields, although (as Thirsk has observed) there is no evidence for *communally-regulated* crop rotations at this date, and therefore – by extension – no evidence for common-field cultivation.²⁶

²² F. W. Maitland, *Domesday Book and beyond* (1897), pp. 365–6 and 515–8; W. G. Hoskins, *The making of the English landscape* (1955, 1988 edn), pp. 45–7; F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (1971), p. 280.

²³ R. Hodges, *The Anglo-Saxon achievement* (1989), p. 154; C. R. Hart, 'The Danes', in A. Kirby and S. Oosthuizen (eds), *An atlas of Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire history* (2000), p. 30; also C. R. Hart, 'The Aldewerke and minster at Shelford, Cambridgeshire', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 8 (1995), p. 47, and C. R. Hart, 'Strip cultivation and the Danes', unpublished paper dated 1996; D. Banham, 'Race and tillage: Scandinavian influence on Anglo-Saxon

agriculture?', in M. Kilpiö (ed.), *Proc. International Soc. Anglo-Saxonists Congress, Helsinki, 2001* (forthcoming), my additions.

²⁴ Rackham, *Countryside*, p. 178, my additions.

²⁵ Taylor, 'Nucleated settlements', pp. 53–5; Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, pp. 145–6.

²⁶ cf. J. Thirsk, 'The common fields', *Past and Present* 29 (1964), pp. 3–25; Thirsk, 'Origin', pp. 142–7; Ault, *Open field farming*, p. 18; Fox, 'Approaches', pp. 83–4; D. Hooke, 'Early forms of open-field agriculture', *Geografiska Annaler* 70B (1988), pp. 123–31; D. Hooke, *Anglo-Saxon landscapes of the west Midlands: the charter evidence* (1981), pp. 121 and 206–7; G. Campbell, 'The preliminary

The debate for even earlier origins is more contentious. As long ago as 1883, Seebohm held that common fields could be found in the middle Anglo-Saxon period. Basing his argument on an interpretation of that famous clause in the Laws of Ine (688 x 694), which described ‘common ... land divided into strips’, he concluded that ‘in the seventh century the fields of Wessex were common open fields.’²⁷ This interpretation has since been supported by Finberg, Hoskins, Stenton and Fox, Stenton going so far as to suggest that open fields (in which term he appears to have included common fields) existed not only in seventh-century Wessex but also in the Midlands, Lindsey and Deira.²⁸

Scepticism about such early beginnings for common fields was first expressed by Maitland, and remains a *leitmotif* in modern scholarship, although it is accepted that the Laws may describe intermingled holdings in some form of open field.²⁹ ‘Nothing’, Maitland wrote, ‘... could be rasher than the assumption that the “three-course system” of tillage was common in the England of the seventh century.’³⁰ He conceded that there was ‘a little evidence’ of its existence in the eleventh century, and ‘perhaps some evidence, that it was not unknown in the ninth’, but was prepared to go no further.³¹

Such doubts about an early or middle Anglo-Saxon date for the origins of common fields are supported by the results of archaeological fieldwalking in Northamptonshire where common-field furlongs and strips overlay abandoned middle Anglo-Saxon settlements.³² Discarded pottery sherds from these settlements appeared to indicate that ‘the furrows of the strip fields cannot be earlier than the ninth century.’³³ Similar or slightly later dates have been suggested for the origin of field systems in Holderness (Yorks.)³⁴ The conclusion, also derived from Hall’s work, that common fields and nucleated settlements developed in the same period as inter-linked facets of a single process of large-scale replanning of the landscape, has provided an apparently solid foundation over the past twenty years for the attribution of a tenth-century date (or later) and a common origin for the introduction of both common fields and nucleated settlement.

There is a common-sense element to this view. If common fields were laid out across most of each parish in one dramatic event, as Hall’s conclusions indicate, the inhabitants of the dispersed settlements that underlay them would have had to have moved elsewhere. This provided a good explanation for the emergence of nucleated settlement in the Central Province in the

Note 26 continued

archaeobotanical results from Anglo-Saxon West Coton and Raunds’, in J. Rackham (ed.), *Environment and economy in Anglo-Saxon England* (1994), pp. 67–75, 81; H. Hamerow, *Early medieval settlement. The archaeology of rural communities in north-west Europe, 400–900* (2002), pp. 152–5.

²⁷ Seebohm, *English village community*, p. 110.

²⁸ H. P. R. Finberg, *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, I (ii), 43–1042 (1972), pp. 416–7; Hoskins, *English landscape*, p. 45; Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 280; Fox, ‘Approaches’, pp. 87–8.

²⁹ Maitland, *Domesday Book*, p. 365. For more modern views, see e.g. Thirsk, ‘Common fields’, pp. 4–5 and

Thirsk, ‘Origin’, pp. 143–4; Hooke, *Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 114–5; P. J. Fowler, *Farming in the first millennium* (2000), p. 270.

³⁰ Maitland, *Domesday Book*, p. 365.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 365–6, 515–8.

³² P. Addyman, ‘A Dark Age settlement at Maxey, Northants’, *Medieval Arch.* 8 (1964), p. 24; D. Hall, *The open fields of Northamptonshire* (1995), pp. 129–30.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

³⁴ M. Harvey, ‘Planned field systems in eastern Yorkshire: some thoughts on their origin’, *AgHR* 31 (1983), pp. 91–103, and *id.*, ‘The development of open fields in the central vale of York: a reconsideration’, *Geografiska Annaler* 67B (1985), pp. 35–44.

later Anglo-Saxon period. Hooke's summary speaks for most current scholarship: 'by the late ninth and tenth centuries nucleated settlements at the core of several large open arable fields were gradually replacing earlier scattered farmsteads'.³⁵

More recently-published archaeological research, however, suggests that the link between nucleation and common-field creation is becoming less certain. The change in settlement pattern from dispersed to nucleated on *low status, rural sites* is emerging as a more hesitant, staged, complex and longer-term process than had hitherto been realized.³⁶ The planned, nucleated settlements of the tenth century, of which landscape it was assumed that planned field systems were an integral part, appear to have been preceded by at least one phase in which some nucleation might have occurred, but in which such settlement was informal and unplanned, and which may have co-existed with dispersal: 'settlements very close to later villages but apparently of a formless nature and unrelated in morphology to the subsequent [planned] layout'.³⁷ At the end of that period, planned settlements in low status rural villis in eleventh-century Cambridgeshire, for example, were being laid out over common-field furlongs that clearly predated them.³⁸ As Jones and Page have observed in a similar context, 'what cannot be substantiated anywhere but in a few special cases, either because the evidence remains too vague or because it simply did not happen, is a link between nucleation and the abandonment of outlying farmsteads, the freeing-up of the countryside, and the laying out of the open fields'.³⁹ By contrast, there is evidence on *high status, rural sites* of planned settlement nucleation from the late seventh century onwards at places like North Elmham (Norfolk), Flixborough (Lincs.), Whitby (Yorks.), Pennyland (Bucks.), Raunds (Northants.), Yarnton (Oxon.), Ely (Cambs.) and Brandon (Suffolk) – many at ecclesiastical or royal estate centres.⁴⁰

This leaves the question of the link between the origins of nucleated settlement and common fields in a state of flux. The possibility of a longer-term, more complex, process of settlement nucleation in which settlement status also played a part, suggests that the apparently straightforward relationship between the origins of nucleation and the origins of common fields may need to be reconsidered.

The possibility of an earlier origin for elements of common-field cultivation has recently received new stimulus from both historians and archaeologists. Economic historians have demonstrated the rapid, often planned, growth of north-western European economies during the 'long' eighth century, and the primary role of agriculture in producing the surplus that stimu-

³⁵ Hooke, *Anglo-Saxon landscapes*, p. 115.

³⁶ A. E. Brown and G. Foard, 'The Saxon landscape: a regional perspective', in P. Everson and T. Williamson (eds), *The archaeology of landscape* (1998), p. 76; Oosthuizen, *Landscapes decoded*, pp. 145–8; R. Jones and M. Page, *Medieval villages in an English landscape: beginnings and ends* (2006), pp. 88–92 and 104.

³⁷ C. C. Taylor, *Village and farmstead* (1983), p. 122, my insertion.

³⁸ S. Oosthuizen, 'Medieval settlement relocation in west Cambridgeshire: three case-studies', *Landscape Hist.* 19 (1997), pp. 43–55.

³⁹ Jones and Page, *Medieval villages*, p. 104.

⁴⁰ For North Elmham, see P. Wade-Martins, 'North Elmham 1', *East Anglian Arch.*, 9 (1980), pp. 122–3; for Flixborough, see K. Ulmschneider, 'Settlement, economy and the "productive" site: middle Anglo-Saxon Lincolnshire, AD 650–780', *Medieval Arch.* 44 (2000), pp. 53–79; for Whitby, see S. Denison, 'Anglo-Saxon "planned town" revealed this month', *British Arch.*, 64 (2002), p. 4; for Pennyland and Raunds, see Brown and Foard, 'Saxon landscape', p. 77; for Yarnton and Ely, see J. Blair, *The church in Anglo-Saxon society* (2005), p. 255; for Brandon, see R. Carr, A. Tester and P. Murphy, 'The middle Saxon settlement at Staunton Meadow, Brandon', *Antiquity*, 62 (1988), pp. 371–7.

lated such growth.⁴¹ In many cases, it seems that the lead in the production of such surpluses in the middle Anglo-Saxon period may have been taken by ecclesiastical communities which established specialist trading centres on their estates.⁴²

Such economic models have received support from the identification in the Middle Anglo-Saxon landscape, generally by archaeologists, of two related types of field system: blocks of land which may have been used as core demesnes, and early strip fields. Topographical, documentary and field survey studies have identified Middle Anglo-Saxon 'block demesnes' in Suffolk at, for example, Hinton Hall and Wenhaston Old Hall; compact 'demesne blocks' or 'inlands' have been proposed in Northamptonshire at Wollaston, Kislingbury, Hardingstone, Raunds and Higham Ferrers, and in Cambridgeshire at Bourn and Whaddon, in both latter counties apparently predating common-field systems.⁴³ Pollen evidence indicates that open fields 'defined by roughly oval, lobe-shaped or sub-rectangular enclosures', sometimes apparently divided into strips, appear to have emerged in the south-west during the late sixth and seventh centuries, at least two centuries earlier than the currently accepted dates for open-field cultivation.⁴⁴ At West Cotton (Northants.) strip fields were laid out between 600 and 850, predating a ninth-century manorial complex. A similar date, placed somewhere in the 'long' eighth century, has been suggested for a huge, proto-common field, apparently divided into furlongs and strips from the outset, laid out over four parishes near Cambridge. It is remarkably like the possible middle Anglo-Saxon field systems at Dorchester and Sherborne (both Dorset), identified through similar methods.⁴⁵

Indirect evidence from Whittlewood (lying across the boundaries of Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire) also suggested a middle Middle Anglo-Saxon date for the beginnings of common fields. There, fieldwalking evidence suggested that arable cores were laid out in each parish between about 850 and 1000, gradually accreting new furlongs over subsequent centuries. However, the researchers concluded that 'this form of farming arrived relatively late' in Whittlewood.⁴⁶ As the Whittlewood parishes lay across a pastoral area peripheral to

⁴¹ J. Moreland, 'The significance of production in eighth-century England', in I. L. Hansen and C. Wickham (eds), *The 'long' eighth century* (2000), pp. 69–104; Hamerow, *Early medieval settlements*, p. 170; M. McCormick, *Origins of the European economy* (2001), p. 784.

⁴² P. Crabtree, 'Production and consumption in an early complex society: animal use in middle Saxon East Anglia', *World Arch.*, 28 (1996), pp. 58–75; Ulmschneider, 'Settlement, economy', pp. 72–9; P. Blinkhorn, 'Of cabbages and kings: production, trade and consumption in middle-Saxon England', in M. Anderton (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon trading centres: beyond the emporia* (1999), pp. 18–19; J. Newman, 'Wics, trade, and the hinterlands – the Ipswich region', in Anderton (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon trading centres*, pp. 32–47; T. Pestell, 'The afterlife of "productive" sites in East Anglia', in Ulmschneider and Pestell (eds.), *Markets*, pp. 133–7; Blair, *Church*, p. 261.

⁴³ For Suffolk, see P. Warner, *Greens, commons and clayland colonization* (1987), pp. 30–3; for Northants., see a number of papers by D. Hall, 'Fieldwork and field books', pp. 115–31; *Medieval fields* (1983), p. 117; 'Fieldwork

and documentary evidence for the layout and organization of early medieval estates in the English midlands', in K. Biddick (ed.), *Archaeological approaches to medieval Europe* (1984), pp. 43–68; 'The late Saxon countryside: villages and their fields', in D. Hooke (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon settlements* (1988), pp. 114–5; for Cambs., see Oosthuizen, *Landscapes decoded*, pp. 125–6; S. Oosthuizen, 'Saxon commons in south Cambridgeshire', *Proc. Cambridge Antiquarian Soc.*, 82 (1993), pp. 93–100.

⁴⁴ S. J. Rippon, R. M. Fife and A. G. Brown, 'Beyond villages and open fields: the origins and development of a historic landscape characterized by dispersed settlement in south-west England', *Medieval Arch.* 50 (2006), pp. 58–9.

⁴⁵ For West Cotton, see Campbell, 'Raunds', p. 65; for Cambridge, see S. Oosthuizen, 'New light on the origins of open field farming?', *Medieval Arch.* 49 (2005), pp. 165–93; for Dorset, see L. Keen, 'The towns of Dorset', in J. Haslam (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon towns in southern England* (1984), pp. 206, 217, 236–8.

⁴⁶ Jones and Page, *Medieval villages*, p. 94.

regions of primary arable cultivation, the suggestion of a late introduction of common fields is sensible. The implication, however, is that common-field systems in the more arable parishes surrounding Whittlewood were laid out earlier, that is, before about 850.

The conclusions of landscape historians that areas of core arable may have been laid out in the 'long' eighth century may provide a physical context for proposals by economic and social historians that middle Anglo-Saxon lords began to introduce onto their estates a 'directly exploited core area', sometimes also called 'inland' or 'inner estate', which were centres of specialized agricultural production, and which might, for example, be protected by exemption from taxation.⁴⁷

As the foregoing review has demonstrated, the origins of common fields are most commonly attributed to the tenth century and later, partly because of the supposed link with the emergence of nucleated settlement, and partly because of the difficulties in finding reliable early documentary evidence for them. None of these explanations is entirely satisfactory. Following the lead of more recent research summarised above, would explanations located in the 'long' eighth century be any more successful?

IV

The proposition that the mature common fields of the thirteenth century may have had their origins in the 'long' eighth century is contentious. The exploration presented here is simply intended to investigate the viability of further research, rather than to attempt to prove such a suggestion.

The exploration of the proposition begins here by examining the characteristic distribution of common fields. Most common-field systems seem to have been found across the central and eastern Midlands, from eastern Warwickshire to west Cambridgeshire. In the 'long' eighth century they would have lain squarely within central and eastern Mercia, the Anglo-Saxon kingdom that dominated England throughout this period (Figure 1).

If the Mercian kingdom has a relevance to the origin of common fields, however, three characteristics of middle Anglo-Saxon England in the 'long' eighth century should be noted. The first is the frequent communication, in which Mercia played a leading role, between Anglo-Saxon England and the Carolingian kingdom of the Franks. As Storey has concluded, 'although the ruling elite of other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms ... had independent connections with the Carolingians, much of the Frankish response to them was conditioned by the state of Frankish diplomacy with Mercia'.⁴⁸ Such communication was underpinned by frequent travel between England and the continent, by churchmen, royal and other emissaries, traders, and high status secular and ecclesiastical travellers, enabling elite groups on both sides of the Channel to participate in the lively cultural renaissance that characterises the period.⁴⁹

The second relevant characteristic of the 'long' eighth century is that it coincided with a period in which Mercian state-building was unique in England in its acceleration and consolidation.

⁴⁷ R. Faith, *The English peasantry and the growth of lordship* (1997), pp. 20, 30.

⁴⁸ J. Storey, *Carolingian connections* (2003), p. 169.

⁴⁹ e.g. D. Whitelock, 'The pre-Viking age church in East Anglia', *Anglo-Saxon England* 1 (1972), pp. 1–22; Blair, *Church*, pp. 150–1; Storey, *Connections*, p. 169.

By the reign of Offa (ruled 757–795), of all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, only Mercia ‘could adequately be characterised by most of [the] ... list of features’ by which an ‘ideal’ state might be recognised.⁵⁰ Grants of enormous estates by charter – principally to members of the royal families and to high-ranking churchmen, but also to ealdormen, and initially almost exclusively for the foundation of ecclesiastical houses – although not a Mercian innovation, was creatively used by the Mercian kings in the construction and consolidation of their kingdom. As Bassett has observed, such grants offered at least a partial solution to ‘one of the hardest problems which faced a successful early medieval ruler – how to hold the kingdom together once it had outgrown what he and those around him could control in person.’⁵¹ The vast estates and the charters that accompanied them performed this role in a number of ways.⁵² First, because the founders and/or abbots/abbesses of many of the ecclesiastical houses (generally minsters) that received such charters were overwhelmingly drawn from the ruling families, being of either royal or noble birth, they were able to use their dynastic and secular connections strategically, often on behalf of their families, to achieve long-term ‘power and wealth based on the exclusive control of land.’⁵³ The inalienability of such estates was often enhanced by the development of a saintly cult focused on a member of the founder’s family, which was very often royal. The monastic house at Wenlock is a typical example of ‘a branch of the Mercian royal family, characterized by distinctive alliterating names, which established a dynastic monastery in its own province, and entrusted to it one of its own members, quickly recognized as a saint.’⁵⁴ It was founded in the mid- to late seventh century by Merewalh, a son of Penda, whose daughter Mildburg later became the abbess. The minster estate eventually swelled to 220 hides, receiving further grants from Mildburg’s two brothers, Merchelm and Mildfrith, and her relation, King Ceolred. The Abbess of Minster-in-Thanet, Æbbe (died 694) is another example: she was ‘daughter of King Eormenred of Kent, sister of three saints ... and mother of four others.’⁵⁵ Second, grants of land by charter could be used by the Mercian kings as a means to ‘insert their own men within, and assert their own authority over, the kingdoms that bordered their own’, bringing into greater Mercia at various times over the ‘long’ eighth century previously peripheral regions like Middle Anglia, or extending their overlordship over kingdoms like Kent, the Hwicce and the South Saxons.⁵⁶ Third, the innovative requirement from the mid-eighth century for the owners of such very large ‘bookland’ estates to contribute to the three ‘common burdens’ (provision of men for the Mercian army, for the construction and repair of public fortifications, and of roads and bridges) provided a vested interest for private estates in their public obligations since they also benefited from the protection of the local armies they helped to maintain. The safeguards of

⁵⁰ This sentence is heavily based on C. Wickham, *Framing the early middle ages*, (2005), pp. 303–4. The criteria he proposes are: the centralisation of justice and the army; the development of governmental roles in which the office was permanent and more important than the office-holder; the concept of a public power; independent and stable resources for rulers; and ‘a class-based system of surplus extraction and stratification’ (p. 303). For a critique of Wickham’s use of archaeological material, see C. Hills, ‘History and archaeology: the state of play in early medieval Europe’, *Antiquity* 81 (2007), pp. 191–200.

⁵¹ S. Bassett, ‘Divide and rule? The military infrastructure of eighth- and ninth-century Mercia’, *Early Medieval Europe* 15 (2007), p. 84.

⁵² Blair, *Church*, pp. 85–91.

⁵³ Wickham, *Framing*, p. 303; see also Blair, *Church*, p. 85.

⁵⁴ A. Thacker, ‘Kings, saints and monasteries in pre-Viking Mercia’, *Midland Hist.*, 10 (1985), p. 5.

⁵⁵ Blair, *Church*, p. 144.

⁵⁶ Storey, *Connections*, p. 174.

state authority therefore became at least partially embedded in privatized and inalienable land ownership.⁵⁷

The third pertinent aspect of the 'long' eighth century is that this was a period in which the transition from a predominantly pastoral to a predominantly arable rural economy really got under way. This same period saw rapid economic growth and burgeoning national and international trade, fuelled by increasingly specialized agricultural production and rural industry on minster and other estates owned or controlled by royal kin, high-ranking churchmen, and the secular aristocracy.⁵⁸ By the middle of the eighth century, there was a growing group of kings, nobles and churchmen, many connected by kinship and sharing a common religious and classical culture, who had an interest in managing and extending the economic efficiency and profitability of their newly-acquired vast estates, and especially of their core demesnes. Their estate centres may also have acted as centres for trade and exchange within regional, national and international networks.⁵⁹ The potential for field systems to contribute to the new economic order may therefore be worth investigating further.

The proposition that some elements of field systems that eventually matured into common-field systems may have had their origin in the 'long' eighth century is not a straightforward one. It might be argued, for example, the period of the 'Carolingian renaissance' in Mercia was relatively brief, perhaps coinciding only with the reigns of Offa and Coenwulf (ruled 796–821), and its brevity makes the potential for the introduction of new techniques of agricultural innovation difficult to argue convincingly. The work of historians of the early medieval period, however, suggests that 'by the 730s, and probably a good deal earlier, Mercian dominance south of the Humber was well established and generally recognized.'⁶⁰ The Mercian kings of the period before 730 were no less energetic – Æthelbald (ruled 716–757), for example, in the first year of his reign already demonstrated the 'calculating commercial and fiscal mentality' which was to characterize Mercian kings for the next century at least.⁶¹ And it has been argued that Mercian dominance over London and Droitwich was already clear by the 660s, and lost only between 675 and 704.⁶² If it is argued that the 'long' eighth century was too short a period in which new elements of field organisation might develop, it might be remembered that the period of the 'long' eighth century between 670 and 840 covers over 150 years, and the period of the 'Mercian supremacy' is even longer, extending to 890.⁶³ Either is at least equivalent in length to that between 850 and 1000 to which the origins of common fields are most commonly ascribed.

The possibility of a Mercian origin for common fields raises two further questions, that

⁵⁷ Bassett, 'Divide and rule', pp. 57–8.

⁵⁸ Moreland, 'Significance of production', pp. 69–104; Hamerow, *Early medieval settlements*, pp. 110–12, 152–5 and 170; McCormick, *Origins*, p. 604. See also pp. 171–5 below.

⁵⁹ e.g. Blinkhorn, 'Cabbages', p. 11; B. Palmer, 'The hinterlands of three southern English Emporia: some common themes', in Ulmschneider and Pestell (eds), *Markets*, pp. 51–3; Blair, *Church*, pp. 251–61; J. Naylor, *An archaeology of trade in middle Saxon England* (2004), p. 204.

⁶⁰ J. R. Maddicott, 'London and Droitwich, c.650–750: trade, industry and the rise of Mercia', *Anglo-Saxon England* 34 (2005), pp. 7–59. See also D. Dumville, 'Essex, Middle Anglia and the expansion of Mercia in the south-east Midlands', in S. Bassett (ed.), *The origins of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms* (1989), p. 136; B. Yorke, *Kings and kingdoms of early Anglo-Saxon England* (1990), pp. 105–10.

⁶¹ Maddicott, 'London and Droitwich', p. 57.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 24.

⁶³ Dumville, 'Essex, Middle Anglia', p. 136.

is, whether Mercian kings and high-ranking churchmen, their kin and other noble families demonstrated the necessary capacity for innovation in that period; and second, whether there is any evidence for the deliberate development in Mercia over the long eighth century of strategies and techniques for estate management. What follows is not an attempt to prove the proposition that common fields originated in eighth-century Mercia. It is simply a way of testing the practicability of such an hypothesis as a framework for future research. If Mercia was not an area of innovation in the 'long' eighth century, then the introduction of new forms of agricultural organisation would be unlikely; and if the region was characterized by economic stagnation, then common field origins would be equally improbable. In fact all the evidence points to the buoyancy of Mercia and a considerable capacity within Mercian society for innovation.

V

The Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia dominated southern England between 680 and 890 (Figure 2).⁶⁴ Its borders stretched from south of the Thames to the Humber, and from Wales to the Cam. Beyond its frontiers, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex, Surrey, Wessex and even parts of Wales all recognized its overlordship for most of that period. One of the most marked attributes of the Mercian kings, and particularly of Offa, seems to have been their engagement first with the Merovingian kingdom and then, especially, with its imperial Carolingian successor. Yet there is little evidence that Mercians aped Carolingians, or *vice versa*. Although 'the resemblances are found to be numerous, yet in no case [are they] so strong as to suggest the direct indebtedness of one country to another.'⁶⁵ Instead, throughout the 'long' eighth century, kings, the nobility and leading churchmen on both sides of the Channel appear to have contributed actively to the development of a shared and vibrant culture through which they expressed their status, authority and belief.

References to a Roman imperial past, shared with Carolingian Europe, provided a rich store of real or constructed precedent that could be used creatively to bolster Anglo-Saxon royal authority. For example, the grants of land by charter that were so strategically used by Mercian kings to institutionalize structures of ownership and rights over property may have had Roman antecedents.⁶⁶ Nelson has suggested that the Theodosian code may have formed the basis for the imposition in eighth-century Mercia (and ninth-century Francia) of the 'three universal obligations' of military service, the maintenance of roads and bridges, and the construction of public defences.⁶⁷ Offa was pro-active in using the structures of the Roman church to underpin the

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 136.

⁶⁵ H. Cam, *Local government in Francia and England. A comparison of the local administration and jurisdiction of the Carolingian empire with that of the West Saxon kingdom* (1912), p. 64. See also J. Nelson, 'Carolingian contacts', in Brown and Farr (eds), *Mercia*, pp. 126–43; id., 'England and the continent in the ninth century: ends and beginnings', *Trans. Royal Historical Soc.*, sixth ser., 12 (2002), pp. 1–21; J. Storey, 'Charlemagne and the

Anglo-Saxons', in J. Storey (ed.), *Charlemagne: empire and society* (2005), pp. 195–210; S. Oosthuizen, 'Open and common fields in their European context' (submitted for publication).

⁶⁶ J. Nelson, *The Frankish world* (1996), p. 90; Wickham, *Framing*, p. 328.

⁶⁷ Nelson, *Frankish world*, p. 95; Nelson, 'Carolingian contacts', p. 128.

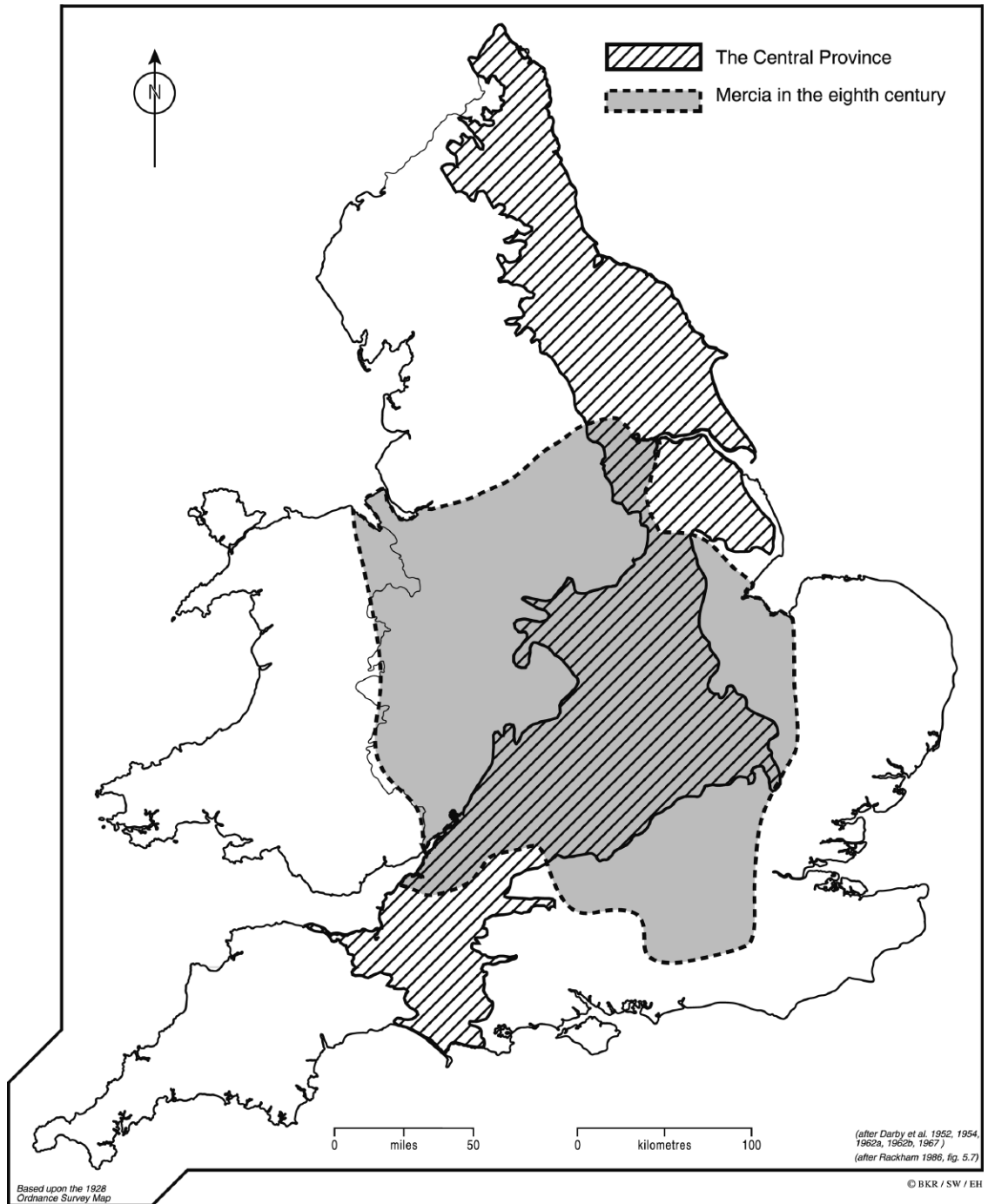


FIGURE 2. England, the Central Province and Mercia in the eighth century

Note: Figure 2 combines that of Mercia in the 'long' eighth century, with the map of the Central Province in Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, p. 120.

political authority and legitimacy of his crown, for example, by establishing an Archbishopric of Mercia at Lichfield, and at the same time arranging for the consecration of his son, Ecgrith, by the new Archbishop (shortly after Charlemagne's own sons had been consecrated by the Pope in Rome). The influence of Rome can also be found in dedications of royal churches to St Peter, like that adjoining the palatial hall at Northampton, annual payments to the church in Rome, and the foundation of royal saintly cults which underscored the close relationship between kingship and godliness.⁶⁸ Blair has argued that minsters themselves, 'like the charters which safeguarded their lands, were ready-made imports from an urban and bureaucratic Mediterranean world'.⁶⁹

The construction of mechanisms for formal control of the English economy was a Mercian innovation with, for example, Offa's reform and standardisation of coinage in 792 (following Charlemagne's example of 771), and his establishment of royal mints.⁷⁰ The importance of Mercia's international trade is underlined by the coincident distribution of Rhenish quernstones and Mercian *sceattas*, and it is notable that, when Offa and Charlemagne were at odds, each sought to punish the other by imposing embargoes on trade with the other kingdom. Naylor has argued that tolls at ports and at inland trading centres were likely to have provided a significant source of revenue for the Mercian kings and a noticeable tax burden for estate owners, since exemption from tolls was a prized attribute of charters from the mid-eighth century onwards.⁷¹

Mercian material culture was as innovative, frequently sharing many of the same elements or sources with contemporary Carolingian structures and artefacts, even if their interpretation was often distinctively Anglo-Saxon. Mercian kings and the members of their courts constructed churches and palaces using constructional techniques copied, and materials plundered, from Roman buildings, just as was being done on continental Europe. The seventh-century church at Brixworth, for example, re-uses Roman materials in patterns replicating Roman masonry, and in design and ambition it ranks on a par with Carolingian royal churches. Other similar Mercian churches were constructed at Wing, Cirencester, Deerhurst and Leicester (where eighth-century bishops may have re-used part of the structure of the Roman baths in the construction of their new cathedral). The plan of the royal mausoleum at Repton, one of the primary cult sites of the Mercian kings, was derived from those of ecclesiastical buildings in Rome.⁷² The enormous eighth-century stone hall at Northampton appears

⁶⁸ Hodges, *Anglo-Saxon achievement*, p. 121; Nelson, 'Carolingian contacts', p. 134; Hill, *Atlas*, pp. 121–3; Yorke, *Kings and kingdoms*, p. 95.

⁶⁹ Blair, *Church*, p. 282.

⁷⁰ Nelson, 'Carolingian contacts', p. 132; S. Coupland, 'Charlemagne's coinage: ideology and economy', in Storey (ed.), *Charlemagne*, pp. 211–2.

⁷¹ Hill, *Atlas*, p. 121; Storey, 'Charlemagne and the Anglo-Saxons', pp. 206–7; Naylor, *Trade*, p. 130.

⁷² M. Carver, 'Environment and commodity in Anglo-Saxon England', in Rackham (ed.), *Environment and economy*, p. 2; for Brixworth, see T. Eaton, 'Old ruins new world', *British Arch.* 60 (2001), p. 19; D. Parsons, 'The

Mercian church: archaeology and topography', in Brown and Farr (eds), *Mercia*, p. 66; for Wing, Cirencester, and Deerhurst, see Parsons, 'Mercian church', pp. 66–9; for Leicester, see J. Blair, 'Leicester', in M. Lapidge, J. Blair, S. Keynes and D. Scragg (eds), *Blackwell encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (1999), p. 281; for Repton, see D. M. Deliyannis, 'Church burial in Anglo-Saxon England: the prerogative of kings', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 29 (1995), pp. 114–5; H. M. Taylor, 'St Wystan's church, Repton, Derbyshire. A reconstructive essay', *Archaeological J.* 144 (1987), p. 220; M. Biddle and B. Kjolbye-Biddle, 'The Repton stone', *Anglo-Saxon England* 14 (1985), p. 235.

to have been modelled on late eighth-century Carolingian palaces, reflecting ‘Carolingian influence and patronage at the highest level.’⁷³ Even constructional techniques were shared: the large cement mixers found at Northampton (Northants.), Duxford (Cambs.) and (outside Mercia) at Wearmouth (Northumb.), with dates ranging from the late seventh to the tenth centuries, are exactly like those excavated at similar sites in Europe. Anglo-Saxon architecture in this period, and especially that of Mercia, reveals unusually high ambitions, being most nearly paralleled not by English structures, but by those built by Carolingian kings at places like St Denis, Aachen and Paderborn. Offa’s Dyke, whose origin in Offa’s reign is not contested, is an appropriate monument to a man who believed himself to be Charlemagne’s equal. It runs from coast to coast over almost 150 miles along the Mercian boundary with Wales, an earthwork twice as long as Hadrian’s wall.⁷⁴

The compositions of most surviving middle Anglo-Saxon sculpted stone are based on or include references to late antique or Byzantine forms and, perhaps significantly, most are Mercian, like those at Breedon-on-the-Hill, the Lichfield Angel (apparently carved in the late eighth century for Offa’s new cathedral), or the warrior horseman of the Repton stone (perhaps representing Æthelbald of Mercia). The Repton stone demonstrates a confident fusion of English and continental influences, and of the past and the present: it shows a rider dressed in Germanic armour, with a Roman hairstyle and diadem, seated on a horse in a pose borrowed from Byzantium.⁷⁵

The Mercian kings, and the secular and ecclesiastical elites who surrounded them, were therefore active members of a north-west European culture. They were neither insular nor parochial, but confident innovators and contributors. High quality art and architecture continued to be produced in other parts of Anglo-Saxon England, but it was in Mercia that they blossomed during the ‘long’ eighth century. Northumbria had bloomed in the seventh century; the primacy of Wessex was yet to come. The leading role of Mercian kings, nobles and churchmen in developing new cultural forms during the ‘long’ eighth century means that it is possible that the earliest forms of common-field cultivation may also have been one of their innovations. It is important, however, to avoid the syllogism that, because Mercians were innovators, and because common fields were an innovation, the latter were a Mercian innovation. The proposition is only possible, not proven.

⁷³ J. Blair, ‘Northampton’, in Lapidge *et al.* (eds), *Blackwell encyclopaedia*, p. 333; see also J. Williams, ‘From “palace” to “town”: Northampton and urban origins’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 13 (1984), pp. 124–5, 135–6; C. P. Loveluck, ‘Rural settlement hierarchy in the age of Charlemagne’, in Storey (ed.), *Charlemagne*, p. 247. For an alternative interpretation, see J. Blair, ‘Palaces or minsters? Northampton and Cheddar reconsidered’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 25 (1996), p. 104.

⁷⁴ For cement mixers at Northampton and Wearmouth, see Loveluck, ‘Settlement hierarchy’, p. 247; for a cement mixer at Duxford, see Anon., ‘Rare Iron Age temple excavated near Cambridge’, *British Arch.* 66 (2002), p. 7;

for Northampton, see Blair, ‘Northampton’, pp. 332–3; for Carolingian palaces, see Loveluck, ‘Settlement hierarchy’, pp. 237–9; for Offa’s Dyke, see M. Gelling, *The West Midlands in the early middle ages* (1992), pp. 102–3.

⁷⁵ R. Jewell, ‘Classicism of Southumbrian sculpture’, in Brown and Farr (eds), *Mercia*, pp. 250, 262; J. Hawkes, ‘Constructing iconographies: questions of identity in Mercian sculpture’, in Brown and Farr (eds), *Mercia*, p. 245; for the Lichfield Angel, see Anon., ‘“Find of several lifetimes” – cathedral archaeologist’, *British Arch.* 88 (2006), p. 7; for the Repton stone, see Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle, ‘Repton stone’, pp. 233–92.

VI

The archaeology of England suggests that the 'long' eighth century was not merely a period of cultural innovation but also of rapid economic innovation and growth. Mercian economic policy lies within the context of a monetary system that was 'not only integrated regionally, with the *wic* as the focal point, but it also displayed the free movement of currency between regions (and between kingdoms)' in a complex trading system operating through a hierarchy of economic centres at local, regional, national and international level.⁷⁶ The centres of the huge, largely ecclesiastical, estates, whose piously-drafted charters may have underplayed their economic potential, seem to have made significant contributions to such growth not only through the production of surpluses of agricultural goods, but also by acting as foci for trade and exchange.⁷⁷ The link between estate centres and the wider economy has been concisely expressed by Moreland: 'By the beginning of the eighth century (at the latest) central places had emerged in the English countryside in and through which secular and ecclesiastical elites channelled the fruits of regional production *and* long-distance trade.'⁷⁸

There is growing archaeological evidence for an interest in agricultural efficiency, increased productivity and technological innovation on middle Anglo-Saxon estates, not least in Mercia, as more arable land was being brought into cultivation during a decisive shift from pastoral to arable production.⁷⁹ At their least efficient, agricultural surpluses were required to support estate owners and their entourages. But estate management aimed far higher than this. Of the 84 mills on the manors of the royal Carolingian Abbey of St Germaine-des-Prés in Francia, for example, 22 ground sufficient grain to feed the abbey; the income derived from the sale or exchange of grain processed by the other 62 contributed to the disposable income of the estate which might in turn be re-invested or used for luxury goods. An example of such an item might be the peregrine falcon found at Brandon (Suffolk), possibly an estate of the middle Anglo-Saxon minster at Ely, and a specialised production centre and market for making and selling woven and dyed woollen textiles.⁸⁰

Markets and trading networks at local, regional and national levels may have provided the outlets for the 'surpluses sold by minsters [which] would mainly have comprised agrarian bulk goods', even though international trade was probably made up of 'small volume, high value' goods such as textiles, weapons, pottery, glassware and millstones.⁸¹ The high-status, rural industrial site at Brandon (Suffolk), for example, imported grain which had already

⁷⁶ M. Metcalf, 'Variations in the composition of the currency at different places in England', in Ulmschneider and Pestell (eds), *Markets*, p. 47.

⁷⁷ Palmer, 'Hinterlands', pp. 49, 57; Blair, *Church*, pp. 87, 296, 260-1; Blinkhorn, 'Cabbages', pp. 18-19; Crabtree, 'Production and consumption', p. 64; Hodges, *Achievement*, pp. 139-42.

⁷⁸ Moreland, 'Significance of production', p. 102, his emphasis. Wickham (*Framing*, p. 349) suggests that this did not occur for at least another century, but see the critique by Hills ('History and archaeology') of his use of archaeological evidence.

⁷⁹ Moreland, 'Significance of production', pp. 65-104; Pestell, 'Afterlife of "productive" sites', in Ulmschneider and Pestell (eds), *Markets*, p. 137; Blair, *Church*, p. 253.

⁸⁰ Verhulst, *Carolingian economy*, pp. 68-9; Pestell, 'Afterlife of "productive" sites', pp. 131-2. For the peregrine falcon, see Crabtree, 'Production and consumption', p. 72.

⁸¹ Blair, *Church*, p. 258, my addition. This view is supported by Palmer, 'Hinterlands', pp. 55-7; Blinkhorn, 'Cabbages', pp. 11-16; Moreland, 'Significance of production', pp. 68-104; Naylor, *Trade*, p. 129. See also McCormick, *Origins*, p. 794.

been cleaned.⁸² The low species diversity driven into and consumed in the emporia, and the consistently high age and physical homogeneity within species of such animals, offers another example of such large-scale networks of trade linking estate centres and emporia. As this seems to have been the case for animals eaten in emporia across England from Hamwic, through London and Ipswich to York, the adoption of agricultural specialisation as an economic and managerial strategy by the owners of extensive estates seems not to have been a localised phenomenon.⁸³

An integrated hierarchy of trading networks has been suggested for middle Anglo-Saxon England, ranging from the great emporia at Hamwic, London, Ipswich and York, through ecclesiastical estate centres and 'productive' sites, to rural sites specialising in particular products, and even temporary markets or fairs set up in fields for a few days a year, each with its own greater or smaller hinterland.⁸⁴ The network of *burhs* almost certainly constructed across greater Mercia in the 'long' eighth century must have been part of this hierarchy.⁸⁵ While they would have generated demand for agricultural surpluses, at very least to feed the labour required for the construction and maintenance of their defences, it is probable that they also provided locally- and regionally-important markets and centres for trade, protected within the walls of the *burh*. At Hereford, for example, the *burh* included an industrial and trading centre; of the other likely Mercian *burhs*, almost all have survived as county towns drawing produce in from, and distributing goods within, their hinterlands, and linking local and regional markets to national (and international) trading networks.⁸⁶ Minster estate centres, too, functioned at a number of levels, each function supporting the others: 'estate and production centres, markets, protected zones, shrines, mausolea of the great, and sources of charity'.⁸⁷ At the same time, the first known post-Roman investment in roads and bridges through the three common burdens supplied by the great estates created a land-based transport infrastructure to support, and provide access to, trade by river and sea.⁸⁸

There is growing evidence of specialisation in agricultural production. A more diverse range of arable crops was introduced in this period, with breadwheat in particular, then barley, rye and oats, displacing the previous dominance of emmer and spelt. Some estates specialised in particular crops – at Raunds and West Cotton (both Northants.), for example, the main cereal crop produced in this period appears to have been threshing wheat; some specialisation in malting and brewing may also have occurred at the same sites, where oats and barley may have been grown together for this purpose; and structures tentatively interpreted as granaries have

⁸² P. Murphy, 'The Anglo-Saxon landscape and rural economy: some results from sites in East Anglia and Essex', in Rackham (ed.), *Environment and economy*, p. 35.

⁸³ Crabtree, 'Production and consumption', pp. 58–75; J. Bourdillon, 'The animal provisioning of Saxon Southampton', in Rackham (ed.), *Environment and economy*, p. 123; T. O'Connor, 'Eighth–eleventh-century economy and environment in York', in Rackham (ed.), *Environment and economy*, p. 139.

⁸⁴ Palmer, 'Hinterlands', pp. 53–6; Blair, *Church*, p. 261. 'Productive' sites are those which are characterised by an

unusual volume of Anglo-Saxon coins and metal-work.

⁸⁵ Bassett, 'Divide and rule', p. 83.

⁸⁶ Bassett suggests that they included Nottingham, Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Stamford, Leicester, Lincoln, Northampton, Bedford, Cambridge and Huntingdon (Bassett, 'Divide and rule', pp. 65, 78–81).

⁸⁷ Blair, *Church*, p. 261.

⁸⁸ Bassett, 'Divide and rule', p. 82; Blair, *Church*, pp. 256–7. See also N. Brooks, *Communities and warfare, 700–1400* (2000), pp. 11–13, 20–2.

been excavated at Yarnton (Oxon.) and West Heslerton (Yorks.).⁸⁹ Other places focused on the production of meat and/or animal products. The homogeneity in size, and consistency in age, of animals eaten in Southampton suggest 'planning and control', that is, that these animals were bred for market.⁹⁰ Such specialist farms, providing animals for more local centres, may have included Pennylands (Bucks.), Riby Crossroads (Lincs.), Flixborough (Lincs.), and at York and South Newbald (both Yorks.), where intensive stock raising replaced subsistence agriculture in this period. Specialist beef rearing and pork pickling in brine were undertaken at Walpole St Andrew and Terrington St Clements (both Norfolk), while St Albans (Herts.) and Wicken Bonhunt (Essex) were centres for pig breeding and export.⁹¹

Innovative investment in agricultural production was undertaken in the introduction and/or proliferation of complex and expensive technologies, especially the heavy plough and the water-mill. The new crops are, it is claimed, a 'direct record of the ecological impact of the transition from arid cultivation to deep ploughing'.⁹² The proliferation of watermills, many with more than one wheel, and with construction dates from the late seventh century onwards, are regarded as a 'key indicator of investment for agricultural productivity', intended for large-scale processing of grain on or near estate centres.⁹³ Fowler has suggested that 'watermills were intended to cope with much more grain than that either grown or needed by the monastic community alone'.⁹⁴ The implication is that both demesnes and other cultivators were producing grain surpluses beyond their own requirements for trading. Exemptions from toll, in these circumstances, may have made a significant difference to profits for estate owners, and may help to explain how why they were so highly prized.⁹⁵ Middle Anglo-Saxon mills (not all Mercian), some with multiple wheels, have been excavated at Wareham (Dorset), Old Windsor (Berks.), Nailsworth (Glos.), Wellington (Herefords.) Tamworth (Staffs.), Barking (Essex), Ebbsfleet and Northfleet (Kent), and Corbridge (Northumberland).⁹⁶ Further ninth-century mills were recorded in place-names or charters in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire, and in Wessex and Kent.⁹⁷

⁸⁹ Fowler, *Farming*, pp. 213–4. See also M. Bell, 'Environmental archaeology as an index of continuity and change in the medieval landscape', in M. Aston, D. Austin and C. Dyer (eds), *The rural settlements of medieval England* (1989), pp. 269–86; for Raunds and West Cotton, see Campbell, 'Raunds', p. 67; for Yarnton and West Heslerton, see Blinkhorn, 'Cabbages', p. 16, and Hamerow, *Early medieval settlements*, p. 154; Rippon *et al.*, 'Beyond villages', pp. 31–70.

⁹⁰ Bourdillon, 'Animal provisioning', p. 123.

⁹¹ For Pennylands, Riby Crossroads and Walpole St Andrew, see Blinkhorn, 'Cabbages', pp. 11–16; for Flixborough, Cottam, York and South Newbald, and Terrington St Clement, see Moreland, 'Significance of production', pp. 87–96; for Wicken Bonhunt, see Crabtree, 'Production and consumption', p. 69; for Wicken Bonhunt and St Albans, see P. Crabtree, 'Animal exploitation in East Anglian villages', in Rackham (ed.), *Environment and economy*, pp. 43, 50.

⁹² M. Jones quoted in Fowler, *Farming*, pp. 213–4.

⁹³ McCormick, *Origins*, p. 10. The earliest known

watermill is that at Wareham (Dorset), dated to between 664 and 709 (Blair, *Church*, p. 256); dendrochronology suggests that the mill at Barking was constructed in 705 (K. MacGowan, 'Barking Abbey', *Current Arch.* 149 (1996), p. 175).

⁹⁴ Fowler, *Farming*, p. 176.

⁹⁵ Naylor, *Trade*, p. 130.

⁹⁶ For Wareham, Nailsworth and Northfleet, see Blair, *Church*, p. 256; for Old Windsor and Tamworth, see P. Rhatz and R. Meeson, *An Anglo-Saxon watermill at Tamworth* (1992), p. 15; for Ebbsfleet, see Anon., 'Saxon Watermill', *British Arch.* 66 (2002), p. 6; for Barking, see MacGowan, 'Barking Abbey', p. 175; for Corbridge, see Anon., 'Anglo-Saxon watermill found on Tyne', *British Arch.* 11 (1995), p. 5; for Wellington, see R. Jackson, 'Anglo-Saxon Mill, Wellington', Herefordshire County Council Historic Environment Record, (www.smr.herefordshire.gov.uk/saxon_viking/mill_wellington.htm, accessed July 2006).

⁹⁷ Hooke, *Anglo-Saxon landscapes*, pp. 267–8; Hill, *Atlas*, p. 114.

There is also plentiful evidence of a wide-ranging interest in other forms of rural industrial production often, but not always, in the Central Province, of which the following are just some examples. The production of wool and woollen textiles was a major activity at Cottam (Yorks.), Flixborough (Lincs.), Castor (Cambs.), Brandon (Suffolk), Barking (Essex) and on estates in the Cotswolds.⁹⁸ Iron-smelting was undertaken at Maxey (Northants.), Romsey (Hants.), Gillingham (Dorset) and Ramsbury (Wilts.); salt production in Droitwich (Cheshire) and also on the silt fen edge; and leather was produced at Cottam (Yorks.) and Flixborough (Lincs.).⁹⁹ Place-name specialists, too, have argued that place-names derived from particular crops, animals or animal products may record centres of specialized agricultural production.¹⁰⁰

An interest in economic innovation, shared with Carolingian estate owners, was also evident in the organisation and administration of extensive estates, and especially of demesnes in the 'long' eighth century. Both English and Frankish demesnes seem to have been located in a single block in each vill, even if the demesne of each extensive estate was dispersed across a number of vills within the estate. Such areas of demesne varied considerably in area. That at Aston Magna (Glos.) was only about 20 or 30 acres in extent, similar to those in Somerset; block demesnes in Suffolk tended to be around 200 acres; while the field systems of Dorset and Cambridgeshire were more extensive, each covering several square miles; those in Northamptonshire have not been quantified in print.¹⁰¹ Such arable was most frequently organized into one, large open field; both furlongs and strips were sometimes present – the former more frequently on the demesnes, and the latter more commonly associated with peasant holdings; there are hints that crop rotation may have been practised, but generally only on individual holdings or on tightly-administered 'inlands'.¹⁰² The relationship between such field systems, patterns of lordship and social relations, and patterns of production, are questions that urgently need further research.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ For Cottam, see J. Richards, 'The Anglian and Anglo-Scandinavian sites at Cottam, East Yorkshire' in Ulmschneider and Pestell (eds), *Markets*, p. 165; for Flixborough, see Naylor, *Trade*, p. 118; for Castor and Brandon, see Blinkhorn, 'Cabbages', p. 17; for Barking, see MacGowan, 'Barking', p. 174; for Cotswolds, see Metcalf, 'Variations', pp. 43–4.

⁹⁹ For Maxey, see Blinkhorn, 'Cabbages', p. 19; for Romsey, see F. Green, 'Cereals and plant foods: a re-assessment of the Saxon economic evidence from Wessex', in Rackham (ed.), *Environment and economy*, p. 85; for Gillingham, see Moreland, 'Significance of production', pp. 98–9; for Ramsbury, see J. Haslam, 'A middle Saxon iron smelting site at Ramsbury, Wiltshire', *Medieval Arch.* 24 (1980), pp. 1–68; for Droitwich, see Maddicott, 'London and Droitwich', pp. 24–33; for salt-making on the silt fens, see Blinkhorn, 'Cabbages', p. 11; for Cottam, see Ulmschneider, 'Settlement, economy', p. 65; for Flixborough, see Loveluck, 'Settlement hierarchy', pp. 243, 252–3.

¹⁰⁰ For example, M. Costen, 'The Late Saxon landscape', in M. Aston (ed.), *Aspects of the medieval landscape of*

Somerset (1988), pp. 33–48.

¹⁰¹ For Aston Magna, see Faith, *English peasantry*, pp. 171–2; for Somerset, see Rippon *et al.*, 'Beyond villages', p. 63; for Suffolk, see Warner, *Clayland colonization*, p. 31; for Dorset, see Keen, 'Dorset', pp. 206, 217; for Cambs., see Oosthuizen, 'New Light', p. 174; for Northants., see Hall's papers cited in n. 43 above.

¹⁰² Hall, 'Fieldwork', p. 117; Hamerow, *Early medieval settlements*, p. 154; Verhulst, *Carolingian economy*, pp. 16–18; Rippon *et al.*, 'Beyond villages', pp. 31–70; Fox, 'Approaches', pp. 87–8; Hooke, *Anglo-Saxon landscapes*, pp. 207, 348–352; Hall, 'Fieldwork', p. 50; Warner, *Clayland colonization*, pp. 30–3.

¹⁰³ The most authoritative current works on lordship and social relations in England are Faith, *English peasantry*, Wickham, *Framing* and S. Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals* (1994). See also P. Sarris, 'The origins of the manorial economy: new insights from late antiquity', *English Historical Rev.*, 119 (2004), pp. 279–311. For economic relations, see Hansen and Wickham (eds), *Long eighth century*, and Wickham, *Framing*.

Royal, ecclesiastical and secular owners may, then, have sought common solutions to the challenges of ensuring the agricultural profitability and efficiency of their extensive estates over the 'long' eighth century. The adoption of open fields across England, by or from the seventh century onwards, in a distribution that ignores the Central Province, suggests that such forms of arable layout and organisation pre-dated common fields. Only in the Central Province were open fields replaced by common fields, whether by evolution or revolution, in the extension and intensification of arable cultivation to create 'an extremely stable grain producing machine, with yields secured by the scale of formal rotations and the integration of arable, meadow and pasture'.¹⁰⁴ Such conclusions raise, but do not answer, important questions about the changing roles of communities and lords, and the relations between them, as well as the part played by each in the production of surpluses.

Much, but by no means all, the evidence cited above, is derived from Anglo-Saxon Mercia. Nor does evidence for strategic organisation and management, and agricultural innovation, predominantly (although not exclusively) on middle Anglo-Saxon Mercian estates, prove that common fields were a Mercian invention. It simply means that the proposition that they may have been has not been disproven.

VII

There is, however, a problem with the argument that common fields – or, rather, the introduction of some elements of field organisation and layout that eventually led to the emergence of medieval common fields – were a Mercian introduction. By the high middle ages, common fields had developed only in central and eastern Mercia, and not in the west of the kingdom. To paraphrase Debby Banham, if the Mercians did introduce common fields, they did not introduce them throughout Mercia and other people must have introduced them in those part of the Central Province outside the kingdom (Figure 1).¹⁰⁵ If the ascription of the earliest elements of common-field cultivation to the 'long' eighth century is correct, then other influences on Mercian estate owners must be sought to explain why common fields developed in some parts of Mercia and not in others.

One such potential factor is contemporary land-use within estates at the time when arable productivity was becoming an issue. Hooke has suggested that 'in general the open fields appear to have been laid out across land that was already open and cultivated in Roman times and in some valley regions of southern England it seems unlikely that the land which was to remain under cultivation ever went out of use'.¹⁰⁶ Is it possible that the agricultural strategies leading to common-field layouts was particularly focused on areas in which grain production was *already* an important part of the local economy?

Maps of the distribution of cleared land in middle Anglo-Saxon England must still be contentious, particularly since the coverage by pollen analysis of the Central Province over the 'long'

¹⁰⁴ Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, p. 136. See, for example, Fox, 'Approaches', pp. 64–5 for an outline of the phases through which common fields may have developed from open fields.

¹⁰⁵ Banham, 'Race and tillage'.

¹⁰⁶ Hooke, *Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 116. Although 'open' is used here, the context suggests that common fields may be under discussion.

eighth century is still in its infancy. It has been suggested that it may be possible to deduce the distribution of cleared land between c.730 and 1086 from the gaps on maps of Anglo-Saxon woodland and woodpasture, and mid-twentieth century commons and wastes.¹⁰⁷ Such evidence is fraught with difficulties.¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, there does seem to have been more arable or grass land, and lower densities of woodland, inside the Central Province than outside (Figure 3). More significantly, the areas with the most clearances appear to have been in central and parts of eastern Mercia, particularly in northern Oxfordshire, south-eastern Warwickshire, Leicestershire, south-western Northamptonshire, and Cambridgeshire – just those areas in which the distribution of evidence for common fields is most dense (Figures 1 and 3). It is therefore certainly feasible that existing arable was a stimulus to estate owners in central and eastern Mercia for introducing new forms of land and workforce management, and arable cultivation, on their estates.

Hooke has also suggested that Romanization might be a factor in the distribution of common-field systems.¹⁰⁹ Romanized buildings and villas have been found across the central and southern parts of the Central Province, and across south-east England in general (Figure 4).¹¹⁰ In this case the correlation between Romanized landscapes and common fields is less clear. On the one hand, Romanized buildings and villas do seem to have been most densely distributed in those parts of central and eastern Mercia in which common fields were most frequently found. On the other, they also appear to be clustered in areas in which there was more woodland than in other parts of the Central Province (even if these densities were lower than outside the Central Province). It is difficult to draw firm conclusions about whether and why a history of Romanization might have influenced common field origins without further investigation.¹¹¹

A further area for investigation is suggested by indications that the middle Anglo-Saxon economy may have had a regional bias: trading networks in eastern England appear to have been both more developed and more complex than those in the west. The distribution of *sceattas*, for example, shows a preponderance of finds in eastern and parts of central England, and most ‘productive’ sites also lie in eastern England, between Reculver and Whitby.¹¹² Most *sceattas* and foreign coins have been found on sites within 15 km of the sea or a navigable river.¹¹³ The direction of flow of most of those rivers is towards the North Sea, linking ports and estate centres along the eastern seaboard of England both with each other and with the

¹⁰⁷ Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 27–30. It cannot always be certain, of course, where woodland recorded within a vill may actually have stood. In some cases it may have been at some distance. Nor does the distribution make a distinction between managed stands of woodland, which may have been quite small, and tracts of unmanaged wood or wood pasture.

¹⁰⁹ Hooke, *Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 116.

¹¹⁰ Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, pp. 78–9.

¹¹¹ Although estate structures in some parts of Carolingian Europe may have been derived from late Ro-

man antecedents, evidence of similar continuity in England is more equivocal: Sarris, ‘Origins of the manorial economy’, pp. 309–10; McCormick, *Origins*, p. 7.

¹¹² Metcalf, ‘Variation’, pp. 42–7; M. Blackburn, “‘Productive’ sites and the pattern of coin loss in England, 600–1180”, in Ulmschneider and Pestell, *Markets*, p. 22. See also Madicott, ‘London and Droitwich’, p. 13; D. Griffiths, ‘Markets and “productive” sites: a view from western Britain’, in Ulmschneider and Pestell, *Markets*, pp. 62–72.

¹¹³ Blair, *Church*, pp. 193, 257–8; Palmer, ‘Hinterlands’, p. 52; Naylor, *Archaeology*, pp. 123, 127.

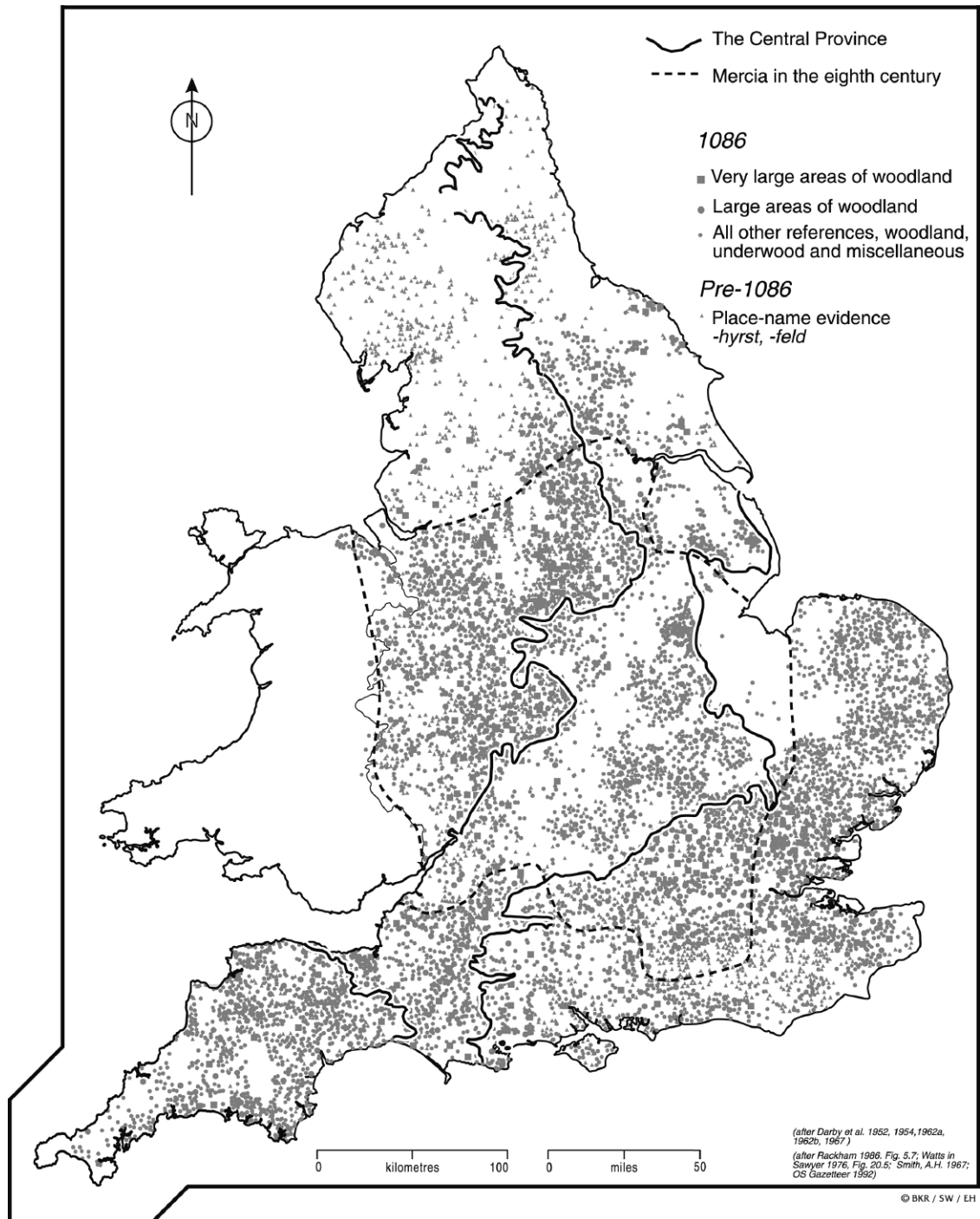


FIGURE 3. England: presence of woodland, c.730–1066

Note: this shows, together with the boundaries of 'greater' Mercia and the Central Province, the presence of woodland in England c.730–1086, from Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, p. 28. The latter is based on common lands and woods surviving in England in the 1930s, references to woodland in Domesday Book, and place-names ending in *-leah*, *-hyrst*, *-feld* and *-thveit*

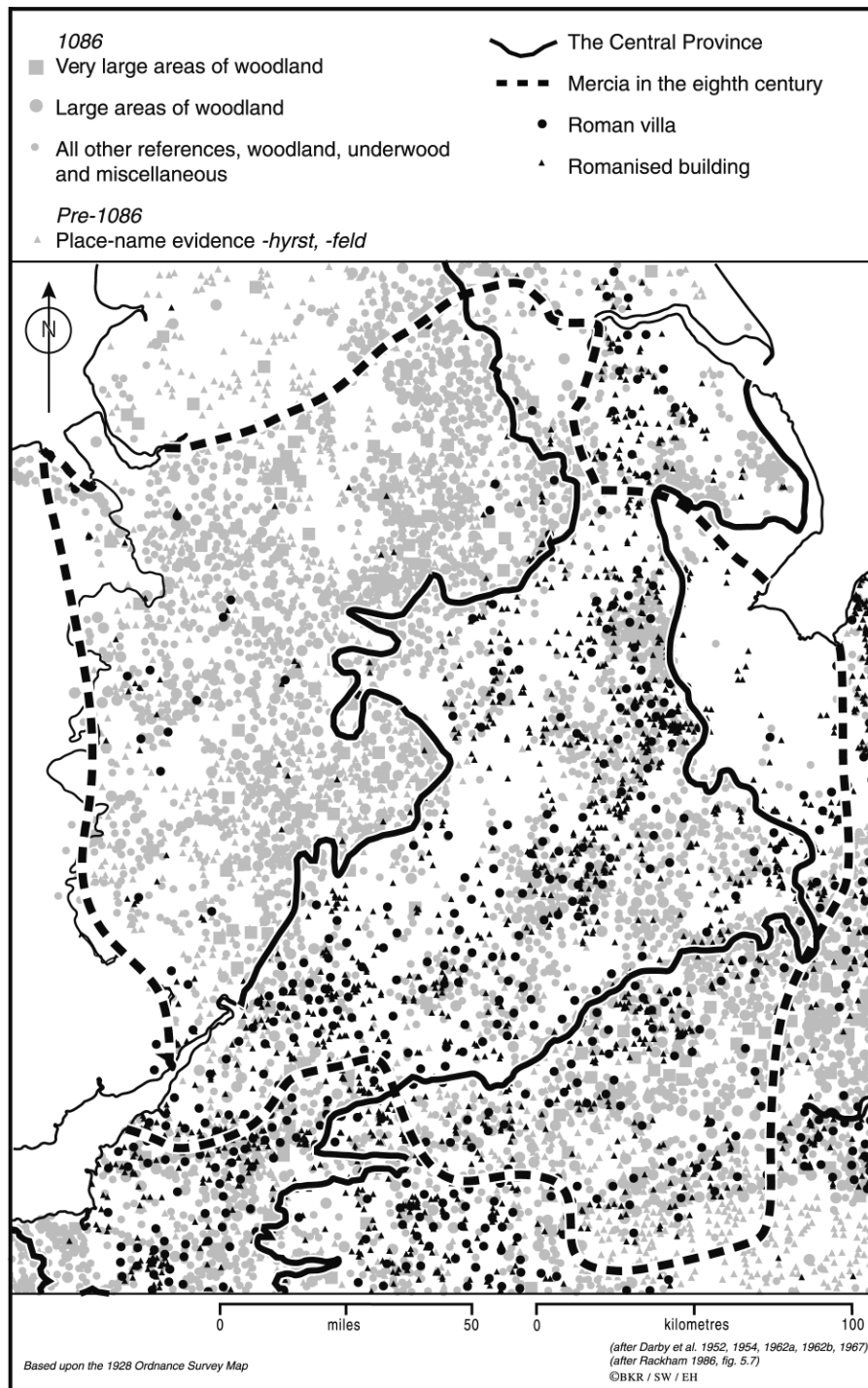


FIGURE 4. Mercia in the eighth century: Roman villas and substantial Romanised buildings

Note: Figure 4 combines the data shown on Figure 3 with two maps showing Romanized buildings and Roman villas, from Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and place*, pp. 78 (Romanized buildings) and 79 (Roman villas). The additional Roman material in these maps is based on E. Scott, *A gazetteer of Roman villas in Britain* (1993), and A. L. F. Rivet, *The Roman villa in Britain* (1969).

Continent, as well as with inland minster estates and embryonic burhs, both frequently sited on or near rivers or the coast. Ipswich ware, for example, the wheel-made, kiln-fired pottery produced on an industrial scale in Ipswich from about 720 onwards, has been found across eastern England from York to Kent, and inland as far west as Northamptonshire, principally (but not exclusively) on sites in royal or ecclesiastical ownership, in a complex distribution linking geography, economy and status.¹¹⁴ Further work is needed to explore the degree to which the Mercian Central Province is coincident with the overlap between greater Mercia and the middle Anglo-Saxon economy of eastern England.

VIII

The proposition therefore still seems sufficiently feasible to justify further research that, during the 'long' eighth century, Mercian kings, nobles and churchmen, innovatory in outlook and active participants in a vigorous economy and a dynamic north-west European cultural renaissance, may have developed strategies and techniques for the arable layout, tenure and cropping on the core areas of their estates which eventually led to the development of common fields. In particular, it may be suggested that there are four interdependent issues of particular interest through which the proposition of a Mercian origin for common fields might be explored.

First, who were the owners of middle Anglo-Saxon estates in central and eastern Mercia? Were they of sufficiently high status to be able to undertake capital intensive economic and agricultural innovations? Did owners of ecclesiastical estates follow the same policies of estate management as secular owners? And were early characteristics of common fields more likely to develop on high status than low status rural sites? Second, how important were soil, pasture and existing arable in the innovatory introduction of the early elements that later developed into common fields? And how influential was the persistence of features of the Romano-British landscape into the middle Anglo-Saxon period? Third, how important for Mercian estates in the Central Province was easy access by water (and, to a lesser extent by road) to trading networks with other parts of England and with north-west Europe? And finally, one of the most intriguing coincidences of this study has been the identification of strip cultivation, and the managerial organisation of cropping, with peasant cultivation of Carolingian demesnes. This raises important questions about the role of lordship and of the peasant community in the development of the organisation of common fields, of the role and structure of peasant labour in the production of demesne surpluses, as well as of the contribution to economic growth by peasant production. Such questions will need, too, to be set within the context of the Roman and early Anglo-Saxon periods, in order to assess the influence of the past as well as the degree of innovation involved in early open- and common-field structures.

It is not possible at this stage to suggest whether any of these approaches will be successful. Even if the 'long' eighth century does prove to provide a *locus* for the origins of the elements that eventually resulted in mature common-field systems, it is likely that a complex combination of contributing influences is likely to emerge, each of different weights and possibly varying in relative importance over the period, rather than one single cause.

¹¹⁴ Blinkhorn, 'Cabbages', pp. 5–8.

There are a number of current models for the process of introduction of common-fields: the slow accretion by assart of further furlongs around an earlier, possibly Roman, arable core; the laying out of huge furlongs taking up almost all the land of each vill in one substantive event; the creation of an intensively cultivated infield – possibly an inland – surrounded by common pastures, over which the common fields were later extended.¹¹⁵ Such models lie within the wider context of questions concerning explanations for cultural change and innovation. This paper has attempted nothing more than the development of a research agenda over the coming years for the investigation of these questions through a study of common fields in the ‘long’ eighth century.

¹¹⁵ Roberts, *English village*, p. 51; Upex, ‘Landscape continuity’, pp. 77–108; S. Oosthuizen, ‘Prehistoric fields into medieval furlongs: Evidence from Caxton, south Cambridgeshire’, *Proc. Cambridgeshire Antiquarian Soc.* 86 (1998), pp. 145–52; Hall, *Northamptonshire*, pp. 125–39; Oosthuizen, ‘New light’.