A MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT AREA ADJACENT TO PITSTONE CHURCH

E. J. BULL

Introduction

During a routine visit to the redundant parish church at Pitstone in 1976, M.E. Farley, the County Museum Archaeologist, discovered a scatter of medieval pottery in the ploughed field to the north of the church (A in Fig. 1). Quite independently, Mr. B. Hinkman of the Pitstone Local History Society, also collected a considerable amount of pottery from the field, which was identified by the British Museum as belonging to the Saxo-Norman and Medieval periods. After the second find was reported to the County Museum, it was decided to obtain permission from the landowner to undertake a methodical field walk to discover the extent of the scatter. The results of the field walk with the subsequent research forms the basis of this report. The object of the exercise was to find out as much as possible about a previously unknown area of occupation by correlating a variety of techniques, none of which involves excavation, and all of which are available to a serious non-professional researcher.

The Field Walk (Fig. 1)

The field (A) was divided into 30-metre squares and a joint team consisting of members of the Pitstone Local History Society and the County Museum Archaeological Group collected sherds from each. Although this method showed which areas had a heavy scatter, as opposed to those with few sherds, there were various factors which prevented these totals forming a reliable guide to the density of occupation. It was found that a 30-metre grid was too large an area to show small concentrated scatters. Also it was found that the amount of sherds collected was directly proportional to the time spent searching, to the number of searchers, and to their experience in recognising small fragments of pottery. However, the walk did show that a small part of the field contained a concentrated scatter of building debris, that approximately half the field contained scatters of sherds indicative of former settlement, and that this was continued into the next arable field (B).

A further walk was arranged in field (B). This time the field was divided into 10 metre squares and an attempt was made to give each one a more uniform search. This resulted in a reliable, but not conclusive, plan of areas of former occupation.

The Material Collected

The material collected has only been subjected to a cursory examination aimed at dividing it roughly into periods, in order to find the approximate time span of the settlement. The results are shown on a bar chart (Fig. 2) which, after allowing wide parameters for faulty identification, show that the majority of pottery sherds collected belong to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Recognising that at some periods pottery
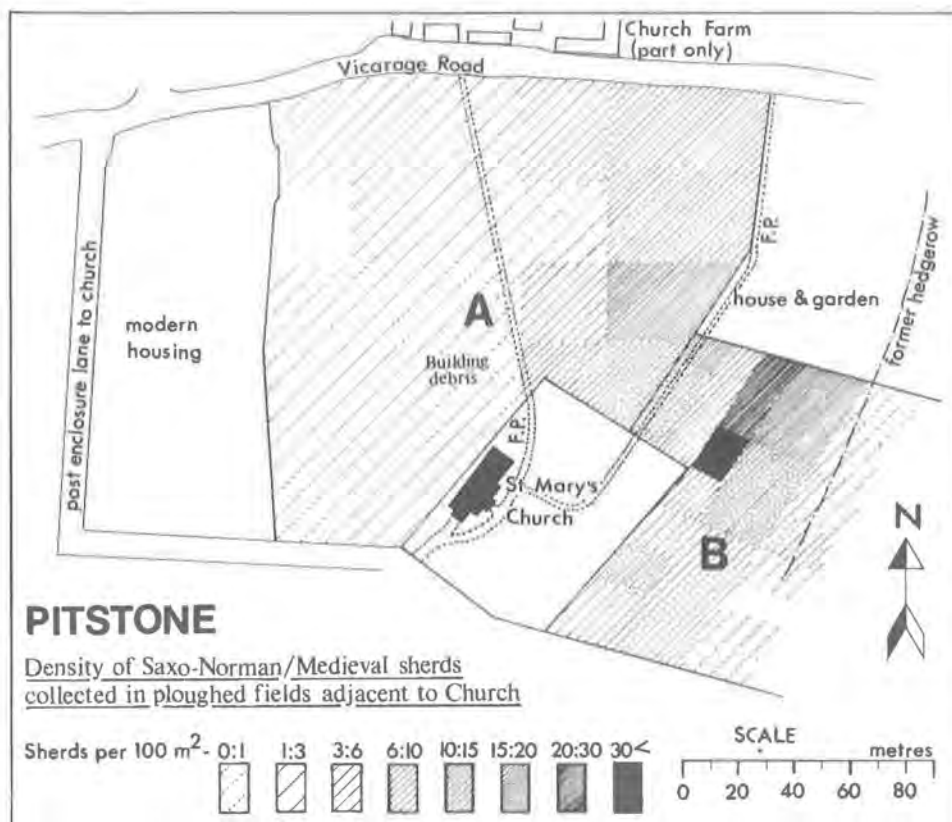
Fig. 1. Density of Saxo-Norman/Medieval sherds collected in ploughed fields adjacent to the Church.

may not have been so readily available to the inhabitants of the settlement, the chart indicates that:—

1. The amount of Romano-British material collected is insufficient to suggest buildings within the search area, but is adequate to suggest adjacent occupation. A probable Roman site is recorded some 200 m away.[1]

2. Finds of Saxon pottery are still relatively uncommon within the county and this suggests that pottery was less extensively used than in other periods. Although only a very small quantity was found on the site, the fact that it was there at all could indicate limited occupation.

3. The amount of Saxo-Norman material (mainly St. Neots type ware) is enough to confirm occupation in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

4. From the amount of material collected, it is safe to assume that the area was extensively occupied in the twelfth — thirteenth centuries.

5. It would seem likely that the earlier level of occupation was much reduced in the fourteenth — fifteenth centuries. The number of sherds collected which can be

attributed to these two centuries is less than one fifth of the amount attributed to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

6. Approximately 7½% of the total sherds found were attributed to the post medieval period. If one considers that most arable fields receive pottery from the farmyard midden, the low density found cannot be used to indicate settlement in this period. The only concentration of post-medieval sherds was among the building debris in Field A (Fig. 1). A number of other post-medieval objects were collected with the pottery and these included two Nuremburg jettons of circa 1600.
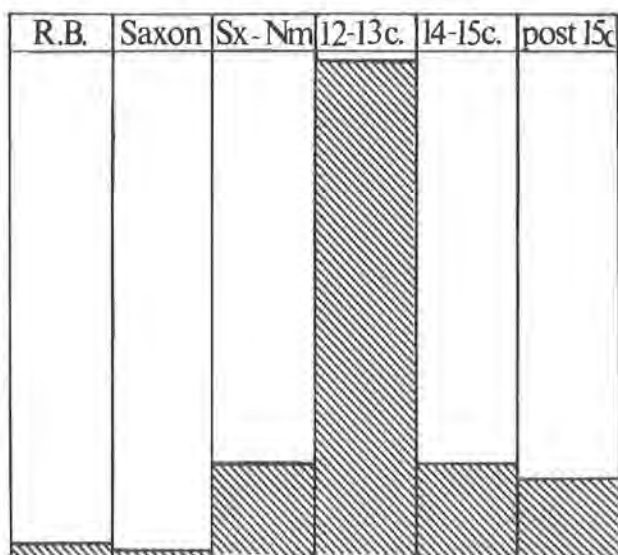

R.B.	Saxon	Sx - Nm	12-13c.	14-15c.	post 15c

Fig. 2. Proportion of sherds attributed to each period (total c. 1700 sherds).

Density of Material

The density of the medieval material is shown by means of cross hatching in Fig. 1. By itself, the density of a scatter cannot do more than indicate the most promising areas of occupation. However, in order to make the most of this information, it is necessary to understand the significance of a scatter expressed in sherds per 100 sq. m. This can best be illustrated by stating that a hypothetical field walker scans the ground at about 50 sq. m per minute. At a density of two per 100 sq. m, he is picking up a sherd every minute. At eight he is picking up one every 15 seconds and at thirty plus he is doing virtually nothing else but picking up sherds. In terms of field walking, it is not unreasonable to assume that, if one is finding more than two 'period' sherds per minute, one is almost certainly walking over a 'feature' of that period. Applying the assumption to the densities shown in Fig. 1, this implies that much of the field contains medieval 'features' and that these are most concentrated in an area north east of the parish church.

Pre-Enclosure Maps (Fig. 3)

Pitstone is fortunate in having a number of excellent pre-enclosure maps which are housed in the County Records Office. The earliest of these, which is dated 1810[2] is also the most informative. It shows the search area to be two hedged fields which form the southern part of a larger enclosed area, the whole being surrounded by open field furlongs. Adjacent to the church in Field A is a large house, yard and outbuildings. The whole search area is sandwiched between two east-west roads, the northern one being the present Vicarage Road. A road connecting the two east-west roads forms the western boundary of the enclosed area and the eastern boundary is formed by a hedge that was still in existence on the 1925, 25" Ordnance Survey Map. Fig. 3, which shows the area before the 1854 Enclosure Award, is largely based on the 1810 map.

648

Of similar content to the 1810 map is a map watermarked 1837.[3] On this, the house and outbuildings adjacent to the church are gone and also the hedge which divides Field A from Field B (Fig. 3). A footpath between the church and Church Farm is shown on this map. The next map dated 1840[4] shows that part of Field B is to be used as a plot of land for construction of the rectory. (See Fig. 1). This map is clearly a fore-runner to the enclosure map and contains a sketch of a proposed diversion of the road connecting the two east-west roads to bring it through the open field furlongs in a dog leg bend to the church. This is its present position. The final map referred to was the Enclosure Award of 1854.[5] This shows the rectory plot larger than envisaged in the 1840 map. The diversion of the connecting road is confirmed and the southerly east-west road, although still shown on the map is abandoned in the schedule. The schedule made special note of the two fields within the search area, which were jointly held in free-hold by William Egerton and John William, Earl of Bridgewater. These two signed an affidavit stating that 'I declare the said ancient enclosures shall be considered as allot-able and parcel of the land to be enclosed.'
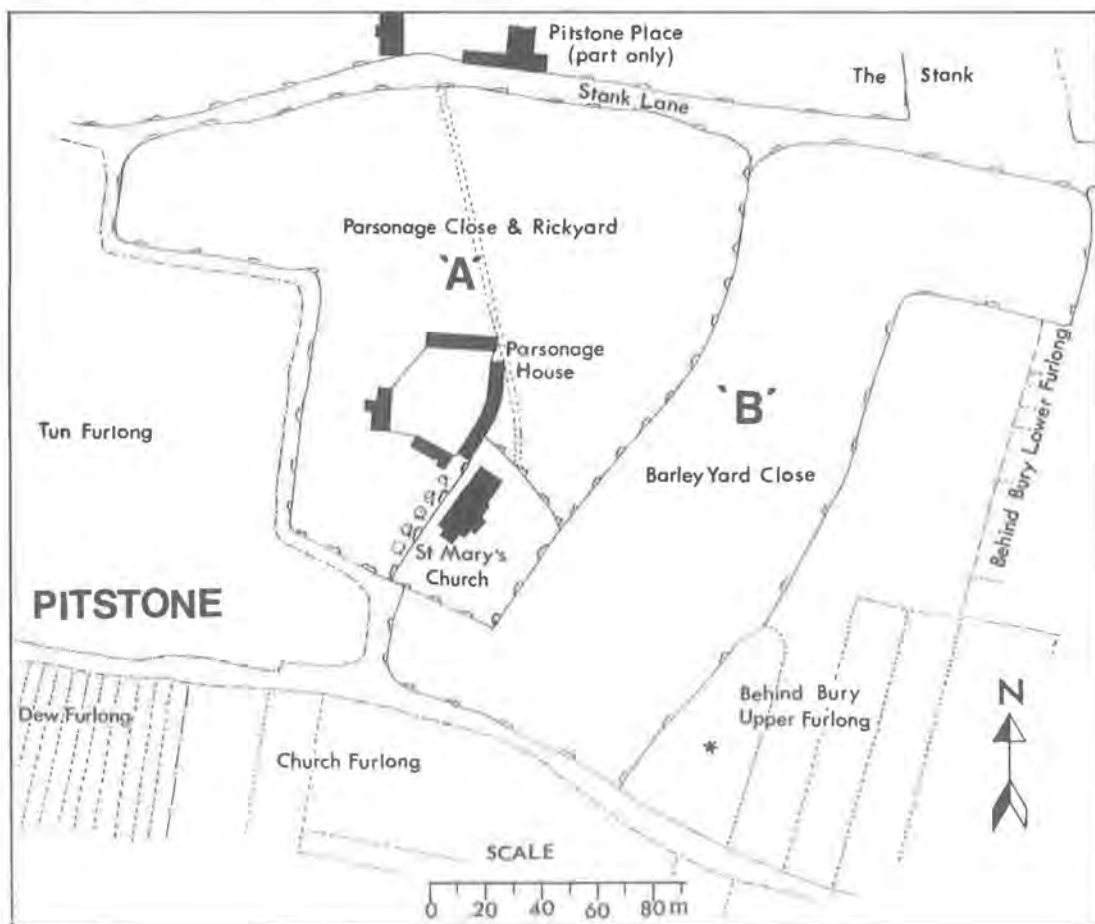

Fig. 3. Area adjacent to Church as shown on pre-enclosure maps.

Leaving aside discussion of the field names shown on these maps, the topographical content can now be summarised:—

1. The area in question forms part of a group of old enclosures and it seems improbable that it had ever been part of the open field.

2. The most likely reason that a central area was left in the open fields is because it had once contained a settlement.

3. In addition to the church, the area contained a large house and outbuildings.

4. The manner in which the original connecting road wound between the two east-west roads suggests that it may have been following a street pattern.

Field Names

The form of field names shown on the 1810 map is more archaic than that used in the later maps and is therefore thought more likely to represent the original pronunciation. Of the names quoted in Fig. 3, only Dew Furlong would appear to be related to the property of the land (moist or damp). The remainder, listed below, probably refer to their geographical position.

Name	Possible meaning[6]
Church Furlong	'The furlong next to the church' rather than belonging to the church. The composition of an open field complex makes it unlikely that the church would have all the dues from strips in any complete furlong.
Tun Furlong (later Turnfurlong)	'The furlong next to the town'. Tun or ton is a common early form of town. In some areas, tun applies specifically to the group of houses with the church.
Behind Bury Furlong (later Behind Berry)	'The furlong behind the Manor'. Bury, or Berry, is the common name for a manor, especially one in which a court is held. An association with the burial ground (churchyard) can be dismissed in the light of historical evidence.
The Stank	'In the area of the moat'. A stank is a pool of slow-moving water, more particularly a moat. A well stanked house was one surrounded by a good moat.

The two field names 'Parsonage Close & Rickyard' and 'Barley Yard Close' in all probability mean exactly what they say. Their use at this time, as a central store for ricks of hay, wheat or barley grown throughout the common furlongs, implies that the owner of the fields held considerable lands indicative of manorial status.

Historical Factors

Pitstone parish once contained a number of separate manors and it would seem probable that each developed its own settlement. It may be assumed that occupation within the search area formed part or the whole of one such settlement, but accurate identification requires research beyond the scope and objective of this paper. Fortunately help has been forthcoming. Mr. G.R. Elvey has kindly written an historical

note, which is appended to the report. From this we now know that the settlement in question was once owned by a manor which belonged to the Neirnuit family. Formerly the only known reference was a statement by Lipscomb[7] that the Parsonage House shown in Fig. 3 had once been the Neirnuit Manor House, where a court was held.

The pottery evidence suggests that intensive settlement ceased at some time in the fourteenth century, although it leaves open the possibility that limited occupation continued to a much later date. There are no known reasons for this depopulation, or why the present population of the village is concentrated at Pitstone Green. However, there are a number of historical facts which may have some relevance. Although modern research has concluded that the Black Death did not have the catastrophic effect on rural settlement previously ascribed to it, no other theory can so neatly explain such a reduction in the resident population. Apart from this, the most common cause of desertion of settlement areas was the compulsory movement or eviction by the Lord of the Manor. In this connection, there may be relevance in the transfer of ownership from the Neirnuits to Ashridge College in the fourteenth century. Ashridge College, which at this time was within the parish of Pitstone, had inherited a number of nearby hamlets, and it would have been within their jurisdiction to rationalise settlement without necessarily interfering with the working of the arable fields. A third, and somewhat simpler possibility, is that the occupier of the manor house (the Parsonage?) no longer deemed it appropriate to live 'cheek in jowl' with the villagers. By the early seventeenth century, all four manors at Pitstone belonged to the Egerton family. For the first time, village settlement could be considered as a whole, and it is possible that this led to the removal of any remaining residents from this end of the village.

Survey of Earthworks

During the field walk it was observed that slight traces of earthworks were visible within the two fields. With two exceptions, these were indisdinct and indicated that the fields had probably been deliberately levelled Inspection of aerial photographs revealed some clear earthworks and an independent attempt was made to survey all extant remains. Fig. 4 shows the result – a rather typical but very fragmentary village street layout to the north of the church, a large hollow adjacent to the church on the northwest side and a bank to the east, which clearly follows the former hedgeline.

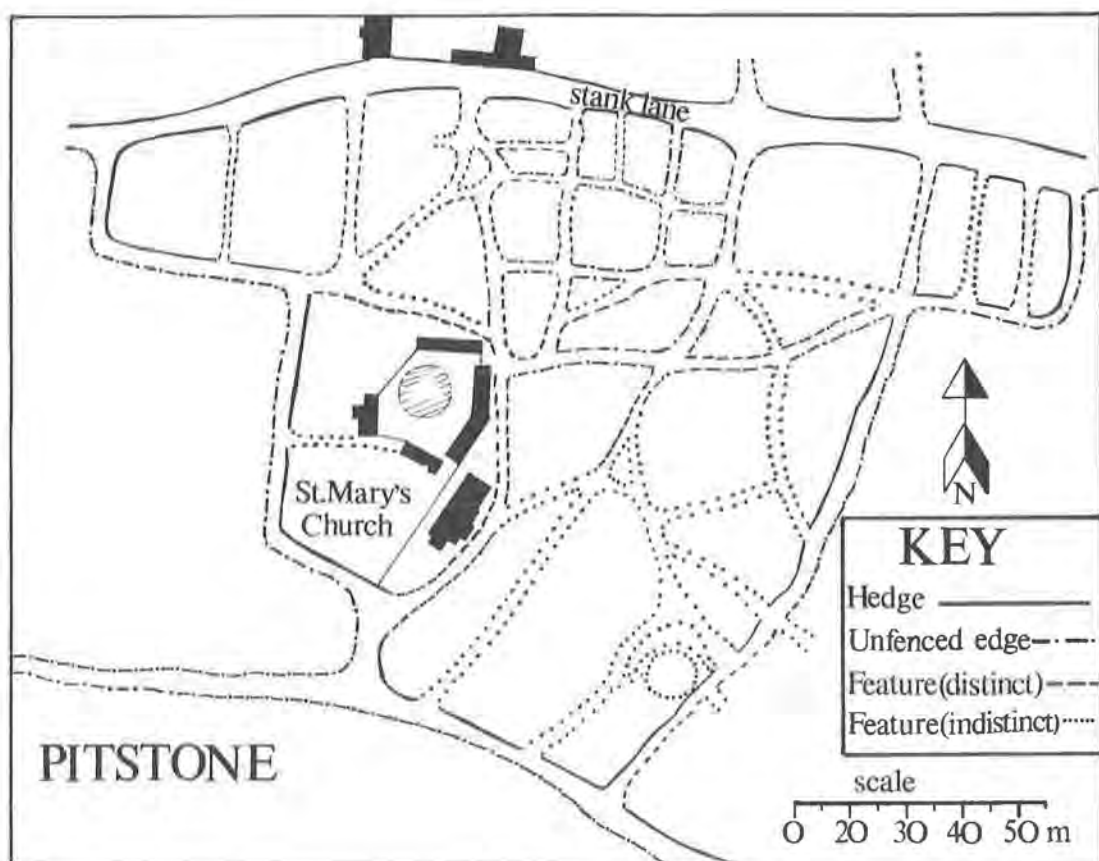Fig. 4. Extant earthworks surveyed in area adjacent to Church.

651
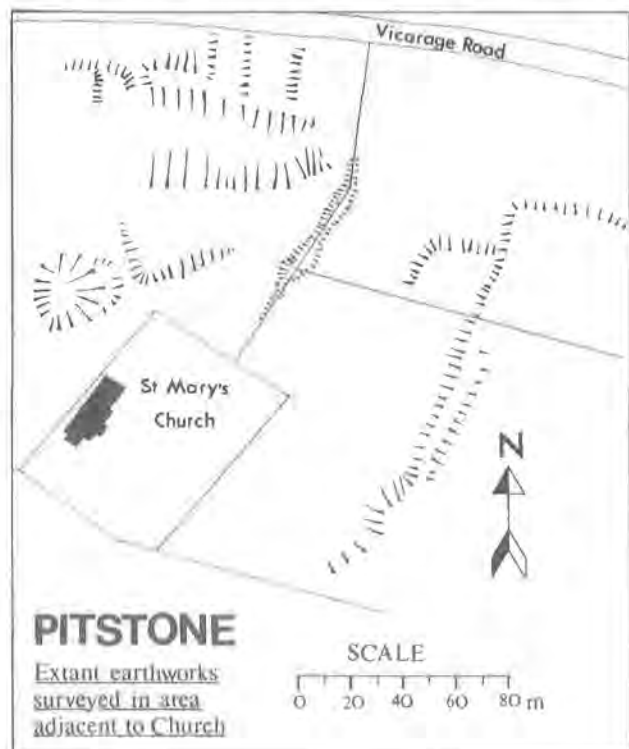
Fig. 5. Ground survey and aerial photograph information transposed onto pre-enclosure detail.

Aerial Photographs

Among the County Museum's collection of aerial photographs is a stereo pair of the area taken before field levelling and peripheral building development.[8] The features detected have been transposed on to the pre-enclosure landscape in Fig. 5. Extreme caution is advised against reading too much into the features shown. Interpretation of aerial photographs is to some extent a subjective technique. Those shown as distinct would pass any critical assessment; those shown as indistinct would not. All the features shown by ground survey were visible on the photographs, which also showed that the settlement complex continued on the northern side of Stank Lane. The only conclusion that can be drawn from the aerial information is that it gives the probable shape, complexity and extent of a settlement whose existence had previously been proved by other methods.

Conclusion

Many villages within the county, indeed in the Midlands as a whole, contain areas once occupied but now surviving only as earthworks. Because of lack of resources, the majority of these sites cannot be excavated in the event of building and other development and are therefore frequently destroyed almost without record. If it is deemed that this exercise has fulfilled its objective, that is to extract meaningful information on the age and composition of settlement on the site, it may — but not as an alternative to excavation — offer a means whereby the amateur archaeological resource can construct a useful record of similar sites which are scheduled for destruction.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Scatter of sherds north of Church Farm. County Antiquity Survey No. CAS 2532.
2. Buckinghamshire County Record Office MA/1662/2R.
3. Ibid, MA/250/3R.
4. Ibid, D/BMT/101/1R.
5. Ibid, 1R/76(1)R.
6. Taken from *The Greater Oxford Dictionary*.
7. Lipscomb, *History and Antiquities of County of Buckingham*, iii, 431–47.
8. Jan. 1946 R.A.F. photographs UP 1113 prints 3055 and 4084.

There is no room for doubt as to which of the medieval manors these instructive investigations were related to. For the lord of a manor built his hall, and housed his tenants on the soil of his own lordship, and his church, if he had one, was also built on that same soil.

Now it is abundantly clear that Pitstone church was Neirnuit property: the recorded presentations are always by Neirnuit patrons up to the time when Ashridge College acquired the advowson from Sir John, the last of the Neirnuits, by a transaction which the bishop of Lincoln ratified in 1381.

We are dealing, therefore, with the manor in Pitstone which Domesday Book records as held in chief by Miles Crispin, and of him by Roger, who was the predecessor of the Neirnuits elsewhere. In the margin, beside the description of the manor, stands the letter 'M', the precise significance of which has not been established, though it may have denoted that the hall of this manor was the one in which meetings of the whole village were held to establish by-laws binding the tenants of all the manors.

It is an important feature of the description that Miles is said to hold it *pro manerio* — as a manor. This phrase is frequent in the descriptions of villages to the north of the Chilterns, and in this county at any rate, it evidently attaches to villages in divided ownership, or in which two (or more) manors shared the same pair of common fields — both of the lords and their tenants having their arable strips dispersed in whichever of the fields was in tilth, common of pasture in the fallow field, and rights in meadow, pasture and woodland. Despite the nature of such a diversion, it was not deemed inconsistent that all the arable land, and some at least of the other land, should lie within one lordship or the other.

When, therefore, we find in Domesday Book land held 'as a manor', we do well to look for its fellow. Sometimes we do not find it at all; sometimes we find it in an adjacent village, but here we do not need to look outside Pitstone, for Walter Giffard's similarly described manor there, held of him by Ralf de Langetot, whose descendants subinfeudated it to the Beseville family, is the manor we are looking for.

We find confirmation of what has been said above in a terrier preserved in the Society's muniment room. It is a terrier of the lands of Thomas Eltridge, dating most probably from December 1483, and from it we learn that land called Neirnuit's lay in close proximity to lands called Besevile's, not once but many times within the area around the church and parsonage, and elsewhere presumably within the same farming complex.[1]

The sites of two constituent manors such as these usually lay close together, though separated by a well defined frontier. Pitstone Place, lying on the side of Stank Lane remote from the Neirnuit lands, can be deduced from the available documents to have been the capital messuage of the fee once called 'Beseville's'.

So we are challenged to explain how and why it should have come about that the Neirnuit manor-house and the houses of all the Neirnuit tenants should have fairly suddenly ceased to be inhabited, leaving nothing in that hamlet but a church and its rectory. It is not a fact, on the other hand, that the Neirnuit lands went out of cultivation during the fourteenth century, for the terrier already mentioned shows them still being tilled in strips, as they anciently had been, at the end of the fifteenth century.

The obvious answer is that after the Black Death the two hamlets coalesced, the southerners moving northwards, taking with them all their chattels, including, of course, their pottery in use. Such a manoeuvre would have been simple to arrange: it would have needed a licence from Sir John Neimuit to his tenants to reside outside his manor, and a waiver of his right to require the upkeep of their houses and farm buildings.

If such a view should demand more latitude in the dating of the pottery than the archaeologists are prepared to allow, a similar sequence of events could well have occurred after one of several well attested outbreaks of pestilence earlier in the fourteenth century. So far as I know, there is no evidence that any one of these afflicted Pitstone, and deep delving would be necessary to cast it up; but a village lying on so frequented a highway of such a great length would have been exposed to acute risks on every outbreak.

G. R. E.

Note

1. B.A.S., P 30/1. This terrier was probably an extract from a contemporary feoffment. The date is corrupt: it reads 'ii (?11) Ricardi primi'. The last figure of the date in the original would have been that of the king's regnal year. Richard I can be ruled out, for these are not 12th-century people. Nor will Richard II do, for whereas the Neirnuits are has-beens in it, Sir John Neirnuit died in 1399, and outlived the king. It must therefore belong to the first regnal year of Richard III. Most of those mentioned as living owners are to be found in late fifteenth-century business there.

It is to be noted that Thomas Eltridge is shown by the terrier to be in seisin of the lands lying partly in Pitstone and partly in Ivinghoe. The first of a long series of our charters (B.A.S. P/25/2) records the grant by John de Pontissara, bishop of Winchester, to Richard of Waltham St. Lawrence, antecessor of the Eltridge family, of these lands, in the late 13th century.