

HARDMEAD AND ITS DESERTED VILLAGE

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The results of a survey and watching brief at the deserted medieval village of Hardmead are evaluated in the context of additional archaeological and historical evidence assembled during a subsequent parish survey. There are indications that Roman land use may have influenced later colonization patterns, which did not peak until the thirteenth century. Documentary sources show that enclosure, followed by local and national socio-economic trends producing long-term pauperism and housing problems, led to the depopulation of the medieval village in the mid-nineteenth century.

Introduction

There are two deserted medieval villages in Hardmead which formed a north-south orientated polyfocal settlement. The watching brief was carried out on the area of the northern 'end' (Fig. 1:5 and Fig. 2), a little under one mile (1.4 km) north of the west-east Newport Pagnell-Bedford road, which bisects the southern half of Hardmead parish. The parish is irregular in shape, with a narrow peninsula-like projection to the south, and a long north-south axis. It is bounded on the west by Chicheley and Emberton, on the south by North Crawley, and on the east by Astwood, its extreme northern limit bordering Petsoe Manor in Emberton, with Clifton Reynes, and with Turvey in Bedfordshire.

The parish is situated on the plateau of bluffs which rise gradually from flood-plain of the Upper Ouse valley, the river lying about two miles (3.2 km) north and some four miles (6.4 km) west of Hardmead. Most of the land north of the Newport Pagnell-Bedford road lies above the 300 ft (91.4 m) contour, the highest point being 341 ft (103.9 m) above O.S. datum, slightly to the west of the northern 'end'. The shallow valley, cut by Chicheley brook on its way westward to join the Ouse, keeps the southern half of Hardmead below 300 ft; the lowest point, where this brook leaves the parish, is around 260 ft (79.2 m) above O.S. datum.

The soil is heavy, slowly permeable calcareous clay with flint, overlying a chalky fill. This would have caused considerable drainage and saturation problems in the past, especially on the level plateau area in the north of the parish around the northern 'end' where, even with modern drainage techniques, long periods of waterlogging can still occur. These soils are also susceptible to compaction, a hard impervious 'plough-sole' forming beneath the tilth after sustained use as arable land. The present agriculture is primarily arable with very little permanent pasture. There are isolated pockets of shrub and tree cover, preserved for the breeding of pheasants. Recent trends towards large open-field cropping have resulted in the grubbing-up of a large part of the hedgerow network, the levelling of upstanding earthworks and the erosion of less well-defined sites by deep ploughing. The destruction of the deserted village crofts described in this report was part of this policy of maximum land use.

The survey and watching brief was carried out in 1973-4 by members of the Milton Keynes Archaeological Unit on behalf of Bradwell Abbey Field Centre Trust and was funded by the Department of the Environment. The report of this watching brief is combined in this paper with additional archaeological and historical evidence obtained by the author during a parish survey which took place over the period 1975-7. This project enables the