



Book Reviews

MAPPING ANCIENT LANDSCAPES IN NORTHAMPTONSHIRE, BY ALISON DEEGAN AND GLENN FOARD

English Heritage: London, 2007. 171pp, 91 figs in b&w, photos and colour. pb ISBN 978 1 905624 42 3 (£40)

The authors, and all those involved in the production of this volume, have to be congratulated for not only seeing this project through but also in producing such a high quality publication. However, I have to declare an interest, as this was one of the formative projects of what has become known as the National Mapping Programme (NMP) – and thus of special interest to me (and an acknowledgement on page 3, see Bewley 2001).

This exploration of Northamptonshire's ancient landscapes has exceeded all expectations: the breadth of the coverage is remarkable - from the Mesolithic to the twentieth century; the treatment of the data and the information is very well balanced, with excellent graphic illustrations and textual comments on the limitations (as well as the potential) of the information. The use of 'panels' is novel and works well; the panels are small sections of text, printed with a yellow background and cover topics on the local geology and the influences of cropmark formation.

The foundation for this research is the aerial reconnaissance and recording done by Glenn Foard over many years (and before him by some of the pioneers of aerial survey) and brought together through the NMP project. Alison Deegan brought it to publication, which was no small feat and took a considerable amount of time. Not only does this publication report on what has been done, it provides a framework for understanding and using this information (available through the Northamptonshire Historic Environment Record, HER). Building on this foundation the authors take us through Northamptonshire in time and space through the lens of the aerial photographer and more importantly the eyes of the 'landscape interpreter'. What they produce is a fascinating and convincing narrative, if also a depressing one – as so much of what used to be visible is now beneath the plough (and therefore under threat, if not already destroyed).

There is a long history of pioneering aerial survey for archaeology in Northamptonshire and it was under Glenn Foard's visionary direction that interpreting and mapping, using these photographs, began in the late 1980s. So it is entirely appropriate that this is one of the first of the publications bringing this work together. It is a synthesis and not a pretty picture book (though the illustrations are excellent) nor a simple gazetteer. The early funding for the project was in partnership with the RCHME which merged with English Heritage in 1999. This merger also loosened the shackles of what some in the Royal Commission saw as its duty, to create an inventory; inventories are necessary but not an end in themselves – they are quarries for analysis and interpretation. That is what this book does – presents a new understanding of the past. Its audience is anyone who is interested, but more importantly those who have to make informed decisions about the future of the historic environment, or in modern parlance, the heritage of Northamptonshire.

The analysis of the prehistoric landscapes is very revealing, as it transforms our understanding of settlement patterns and population levels. The treatment of the other periods is also very informative and revealing. The medieval section is perhaps the only slight disappointment, partly because so much other investigation has been undertaken on the medieval landscapes in this central part of England; information derived solely from aerial photography could never compete. However the chapter on the medieval material is a very good signpost to the other work that has been published.

In an area of 3,250 square km this survey recorded 14,142 sites (more correctly records, as a site may one or more records, and confusingly vice versa). However on a simple calculation this is 4.35 sites for every km square in Northamptonshire. A dramatic increase of information and this should usher in a complete re-interpretation of the ancient landscapes on England; this is what the National Mapping Programme has begun to do, and recent (verbal) reports show that 64 projects have been completed (or are in train) and almost 40% of England covered.

This publication produces a total of 56 Neolithic and Bronze Age sites (pp. 72-3) but the really staggering statistic is that there are some 5,000 Iron Age and Roman period enclosures. These are not securely dated, as this is a first, but important interpretation. If future investigation bears this out then this will transform the population estimates for the region. In fact other NMP surveys have produced similar results and it is becoming clear that the population of England in the prehistoric period was much greater than we might have estimated even 10 years ago.

This prehistoric material is reviewed and commented in a chapter by Alex Gibson, with the slightly pretentious title *Tenebris ex lux* (qualified later by the phrase '*lux non perspicuitas non veritas est.*' However, the short critique of the prehistoric analysis in the report is also an excellent overview of prehistory in the Midlands. It also raises the concern over NMP data and information –that in some ways the absence of evidence will be taken as evidence of absence.

This is where all publications covering a geographical area have to have a health warning; just because nothing was seen or recorded (using whatever survey technique – but in this case aerial survey) does not mean that there isn't evidence hidden beneath the surface.

The report also discusses the limitations of the information, more generally. The results of NMP surveys should not be seen as definitive, or in anyway comprehensive. Although those involved know this, and most archaeologists using the information know this, others, who will use the information, will need further education. The information is the latest interpretation based on the best available evidence, and thus is not a truth, but a statement of what we know, or what we think we know now.

There is also the concept that with this information future researchers may never need to return to the photographs. However there may be time that this is necessary, but only on a case by case basis – no-one is going to look at all of them again. Given the scale of plotting, and more importantly the depth of interpretation (the material was designed to be used at 1:10,000 scale, even if the sites were mapped at 1:2500), there will be individual sites which will be re-interpreted. Equally, as new evidence comes to light, over a number of years, new sites and types of sites will be discovered.

There was huge technological change during the data gathering phase of the project; the development of digital information and the rapid advance in computerized mapping meant that the project not only had to keep producing the maps and records, but also to keep pace with technological change. From this report they seem to have achieved the balance of up-dating information very well and used the power of GIS systems for illustrations and analyses to good effect. This is aptly summarised on page 21: 'The project has produced a varied and exciting database in a flexible digital environment.'

The criticisms of the publication are few and minor; I do not think the double column format for the text or the style of font are conducive to encouraging the reader the work through some fairly intense information and discussion. The illustrations and photographs are of excellent quality – if a little small.

This is one of the first publications to use the term 'cropmarked' – meaning sites visible as cropmarks. I have never been a fan of making a verb out of a noun unnecessarily and I hope it does not catch on. For me it suggests that sites are affected by crops, as in pockmarked and that there is an active process going on (which there is – ploughing and cultivation), but actually cropmark sites are just that - sites visible a marks in a crop. We do not use the term - earthworked.

Given superb imagery within the publication I feel the cover photograph (although a subtle, atmospheric, watery photograph) does not reflect what the Midlands means to many, or what the authors would want to convey. A stronger image either showing the destruction of a site or one of the last, surviving medieval townships might have been more appropriate and striking.

These are but minor quibbles for what is a very significant publication on the development of archaeology in Britain; it traces the development of a methodology and delivers a convincing and useful analysis and understanding of hidden landscapes which are under threat and need greater protection. The evidence supplied here will help to make sure that those who can have the influence to protect some of these very significant – and in many cases nationally important sites – are protected for the future as the interest in our past grows.

Reference

Bewley, R.H. 2001. Understanding England's historic landscapes: an aerial perspective. *Landscapes* 1, 74-84

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