

Out and about in

Martinsthorpe: a walk in the country

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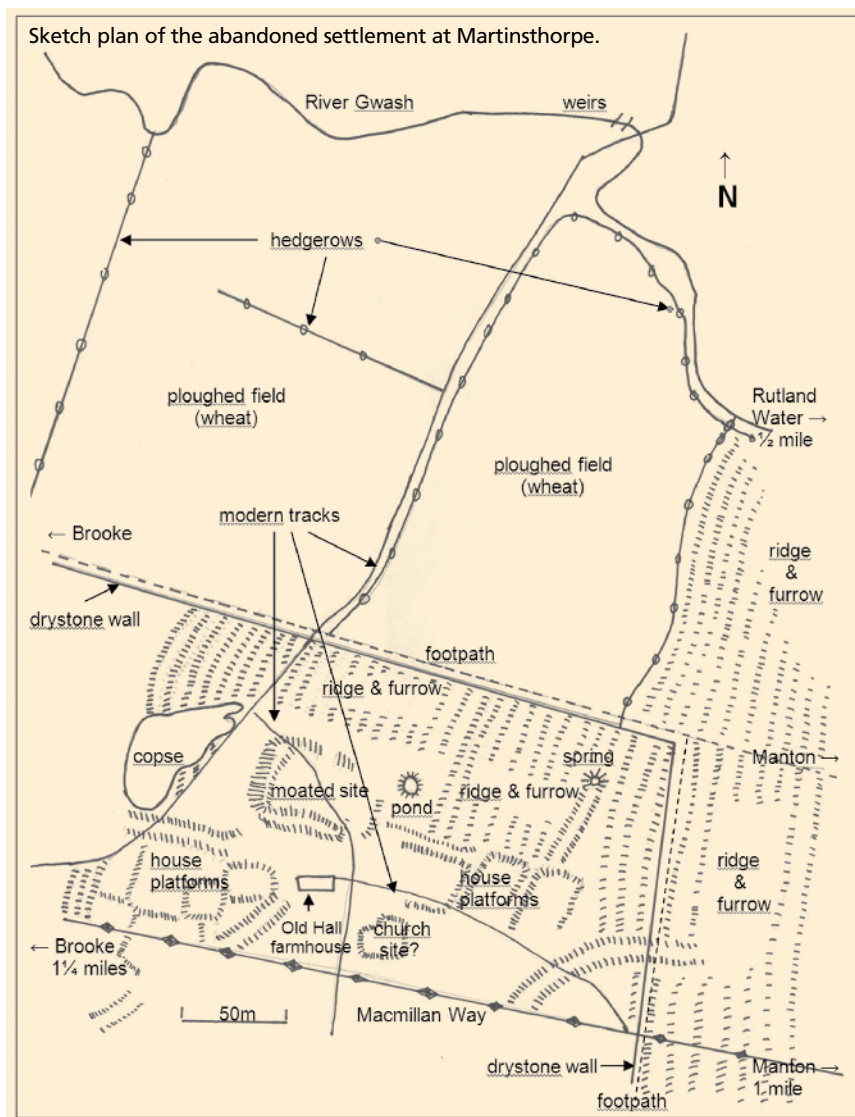
History is nothing if not an exercise in informed imagination. On a country walk in Rutland arranged by a group of (non-historian) friends, I noted that the Ordnance Survey map showed our planned route, following a ridge of high ground separating the valleys of the meandering Gwash and Chater rivers, passed close by Martinsthorpe, described

as the site of a medieval village. Arriving at the spot, a well-defined hollow way, its bed eroded by the tread of countless feet, the wheels of carts, and the hooves of livestock, led towards a field of irregular grassy lumps and bumps. Although not the best-preserved deserted medieval village (DMV), with a modern track and an abandoned building evidence of later

activity, the earthworks were obvious and footpaths allowed good views from three sides.

Half-a-dozen house platforms could be picked out, covered with a scatter of nettles, plants that thrive on phosphate rich soils and are a good indication of human habitation. The site was north facing, tucked just below the brow of the ridge, 120 metres above sea level. Drystone walls showed the availability of stone but, in this part of England with plentiful Upper Lias clays, cottages might well have walls of wychert (mud mixed with straw and pebbles built up in thick layers or 'berries' and known as 'cob' in other parts of the country). This method of building required the provision of a 'good pair of shoes' in the form of a stone plinth or 'grumpling' to prevent damp penetrating. I wondered if stone footings remained below the covering of turf. The ditch of what looked like a moat suggested a possible medieval manor house with an associated dip a potential fishpond. A fresh water supply would have been essential and our OS map indicated a spring just below the north-eastern edge of the village.

Beyond the shadowy outlines of houses and traces of associated trackways, corrugated remnants of medieval ridge and furrow ploughing were fossilised beneath what was now pasture, sinuous curves stretching down the slope in a typical elongated reverse 'S'. The ridgeway followed the headland or baulk, where the plough team was turned and the mouldboard cleaned at the end of each strip. This was where the community's arable land had lain in large open fields, where the precious grain that supplied the villagers' staples of bread and beer was cultivated, possibly in rotation with crops of beans and peas. The slope was gentle enough not to place excessive demands on the oxen pulling a communal plough but providing useful



A spring is surrounded by traces of medieval ridge and furrow ploughing.



Modern ploughed fields interrupt the flow of ridge and furrow.



Rectangular house platforms covered with a scatter of nettles are visible.



Former stable block of Martinsthorpe Hall later converted as Old Hall farmhouse.



'in ruins', adding 'the living is a sinecure rectory' and that 'there is one house and a population of 6'.⁴ The *Topographical Dictionary of England and Wales* of 1870-2 declared Martinsthorpe 'one of eight parishes in England with zero population'.⁵ Early-twentieth century photographs exist of a small roofless church. This was not the village church but the remains of Sir William Feilding's private St Martin's Chapel (the Feilding family were Roman Catholic). Formerly part of the ground floor of Martinsthorpe Hall, the chapel survived the hall's demolition and was re-roofed to do occasional Anglican service until it too was pulled down, presumably in the mid-twentieth century because it was still shown on the OS map sheet 122 (Melton Mowbray) 1945 edition, where its position confirms Feilding's hall occupied the moated site.

Limited excavations at the site in 1960 uncovered a typical spread of occupation debris including pottery broadly categorised as spanning the twelfth to eighteenth centuries.⁶ Of the datable sherds, the one period not definitively represented was the sixteenth century. With a relatively

small-scale investigation this is hardly conclusive but it is interesting. Tax records show an active community in the fourteenth century. But in 1589 the rector of Martinsthorpe was presented for not holding any services or preaching sermons.⁷ Together, these scraps of evidence suggest the settlement was abandoned in the sixteenth century and that the site was already deserted when acquired by Sir William Feilding.

If a landlord with ambitious plans did not evict the villagers the hypothesis about slow decline into unsustainability in the late-medieval period, possibly initially triggered by a plague event, is the most likely reason for the settlement's demise. Fewer people necessitated a more manageable agricultural system leading to some piecemeal enclosure of the open fields to which the curving field boundaries bore witness.

It all goes to show where a walk in the country may lead.

References

- ¹ [Ed. W. Page] *A History of the County of Rutland*, Victoria County History, 1935, vol. 2, pp. 84-5.
- ² Op cit.
- ³ [Ed. C. Matthew] A. Thrush, *Feilding, William*,

first earl of Denbigh, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004.

⁴ J.M. Wilson, *Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales*, 1848, pp. 269-271.

⁵ T. Dugdale, *The Topographical Dictionary of England and Wales*, 1870-2.

⁶ J.S. Wacher 'Excavations at Martinsthorpe, Rutland', *Transactions of Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 1960, vol. 39 (1963-4), pp. 1-19.

⁷ Op cit.

The author visited Martinsthorpe DMV (map reference SK866045) in June and August 2011. The site is one mile from the village of Manton in Rutland and can be viewed from either of two footpaths that link Manton with Brooke. The ridgeway route forms part of the Macmillan Way long distance footpath. *The Horse and Jockey* at Manton is recommended.

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