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**The rise and fall of a medieval village: Little Aston (in Aston
Blank), Gloucestershire**

by C. C. Dyer
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The rise and fall of a medieval village: Little Aston (in Aston Blank), Gloucestershire

By CHRISTOPHER DYER

The desertion of thousands of settlements is a well-known feature of the rural history of the late middle ages. A recent survey has listed 195 settlement sites in Gloucestershire, and more are still being discovered.¹ The whole process of village desertion presents us with a difficult problem: why did so many disappear? In attempting to find an answer, we are drawn into research into the origin and growth of villages, and one approach is to investigate individual examples in detail. Such a case study is attempted here, on Little Aston, a village chosen because of its relatively early date of desertion, and because of the available range of documentary and archaeological evidence. The settlements of the upper Windrush valley will be used to provide a comparative local context for Little Aston.

The upper Windrush valley (FIG. 1) can be shown, like much of the Cotswolds, to be an 'old country', with evidence of settlement and agriculture from prehistoric and Roman times. One of the earliest pieces of detailed written evidence from the area, the charter for Harford of 963, reveals a relatively small unit of land, a single hide, being granted to a thegn.² The detailed description of the boundary recalls previous human activity in the area by using prehistoric barrows and a Roman site as landmarks. It also demonstrates vividly the civilised nature of the 10th-century landscape, full of man-made features, such as roads, ploughed land and a mill that could be described as 'old'. The pre-Conquest boundary description for Aston Blank/Notgrove is less informative about the state of the land because it tends to follow streams, but still refers to a barrow, a Roman road, and a 'mill way'.³

This evidence suggests that by the 10th century the land had been tamed and divided into clearly defined units of lordship. We can only learn about the external features of the land and its inhabitants at this period – the edge of manors are described in boundary clauses, but we are told nothing of their interiors; the names and titles of landlords (who must often have been absentees) are known, but we remain ignorant about the ordinary permanent inhabitants. There are hints, however. The appearance of small properties like Harford, carved out of the great ecclesiastical estates that dominated so much of the Cotswolds in the 8th and 9th centuries, might suggest some intensity of exploitation of landed and human resources. The existence of cultivated land on the boundary of a piece of land would lead us to expect a great deal more at its centre. If the land was to help to support a thegn, both to keep his own household, and to give him the income to discharge his obligations to his lord and the king, it must have been inhabited with people who could have provided labour, rents and services.

How and where these people lived can only be answered by a future campaign of archaeological research. We now know that it is very dangerous to assume a great antiquity for the nucleated village, which was an artefact, created at quite a late stage of the evolution of rural settlement.⁴ The long-term settlement history of the upper Windrush valley points to phases of both dispersal and nucleation. In the iron age and the Romano-British period relatively small

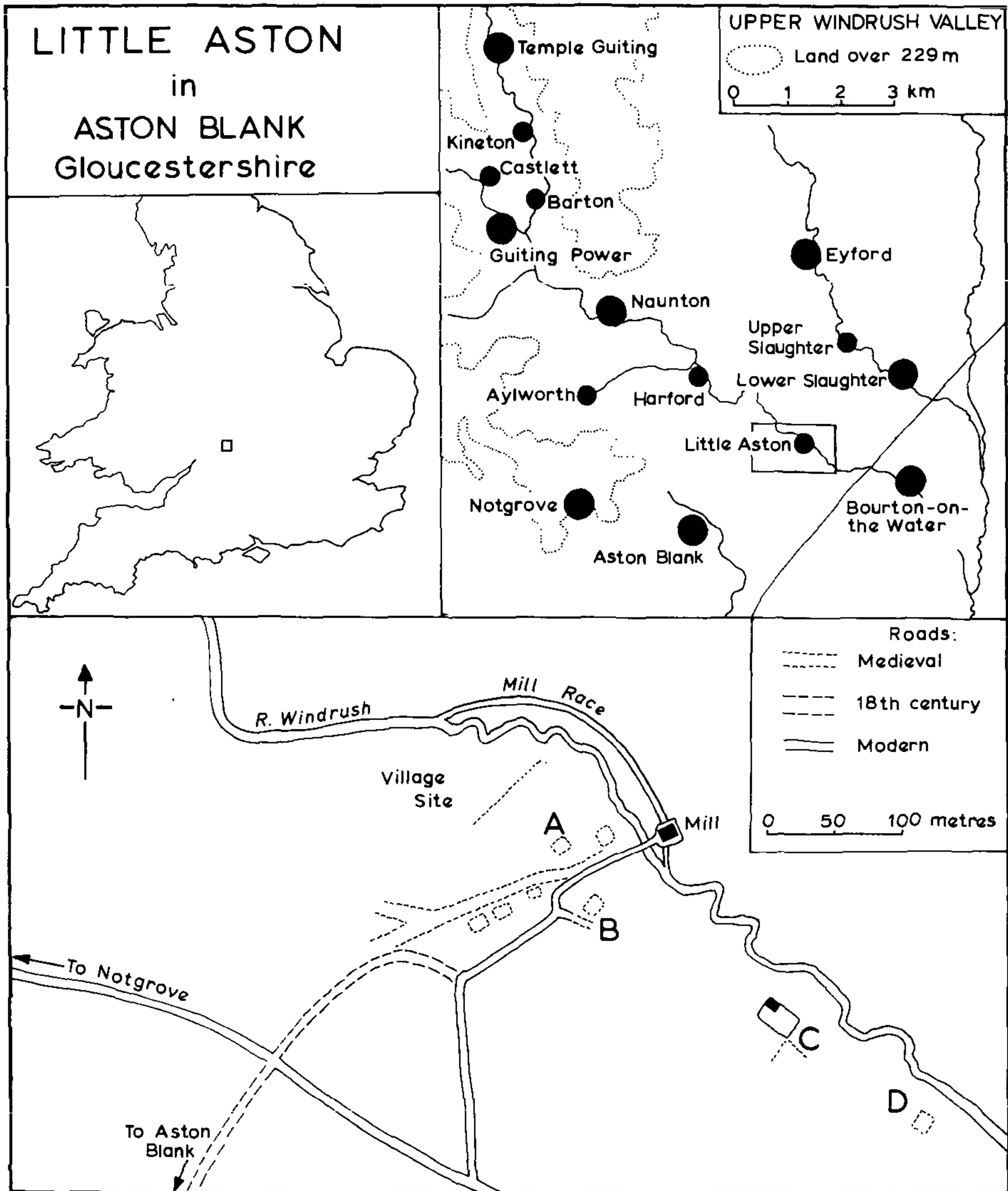


FIG. 1. Location of Little Aston. The map of the upper Windrush valley shows the larger and smaller settlements. Those marked by larger circles had either more than 10 tenants in 1086, or more than 10 taxpayers in 1327. The lower plan shows the site of Little Aston and its immediate vicinity. A – the most prominent house site; B – probable chapel site; C – settlement earthworks at Shepherd’s Cottage; D – possible settlement earthworks.

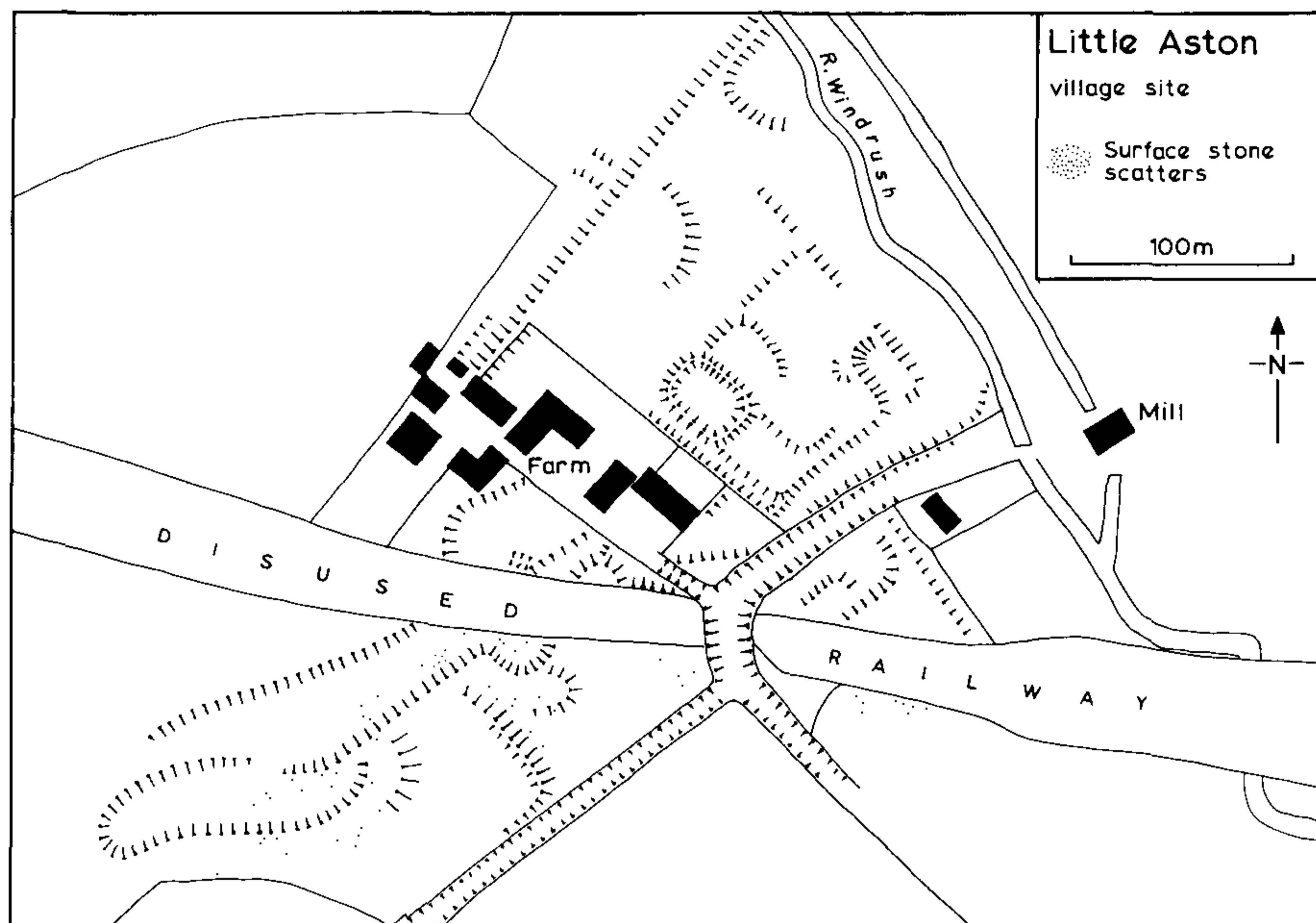


FIG. 2. Plan of the former medieval settlement of Little Aston; hachures represent earthworks visible in 1985; sketch survey at approx. scale of 1:2000.

settlements are known in the parishes of Temple Guiting, Guiting Power, Naunton and Upper Slaughter. The iron age Salmonsbury fort at Bourton-on-the-Water represents a form of larger agglomeration, and in the same area large nucleated Romano-British villages, that may have had an urban character, developed in Lower Slaughter parish and along the Fosse Way at Bourton Bridge.⁵ These large settlements declined in the post-Roman period, and a small scale of occupation at Salmonsbury in the 6th and 7th centuries can be surmised from the excavation of a single hut and scatter of graves. Certainly the small size of farmsteads and cemeteries of this period elsewhere, such as those at New Wintles near Eynsham (Oxon) and Stretton-on-Fosse (Warks), suggest that dispersed settlement patterns were not uncommon.⁶ A new movement towards nucleation came after the 7th century. One theory of village formation appropriate to our district is based on the close connection between extensive arable cultivation, open fields and nucleated settlements; it can be argued, because of the many references to arable in the boundary clauses of 9th and 10th century charters (as in those of the north Cotswolds), that nucleated villages already existed at that date. A more cautious approach is to observe the dates of the earliest houses, toft boundaries and other features in excavated villages. A relevant example would be Upton in Blockley, a few miles to the north of the upper Windrush, where there is little to suggest that the village existed before the 11th or 12th century.⁷ It can be objected that only a small proportion of the village site has been excavated, and because the dating evidence, mainly pottery, is not abundant anywhere before the 11th century, conclusions cannot be drawn from its absence. However, a relatively late date for the first phase of coherent, nucleated villages has been noted in other regions. Accordingly, we must resist the temptation to envisage that the

places like Aston Blank and Harford when they were mentioned in charters or Domesday Book were already compact villages established on their present sites. Their formative period could have been around the time of the Domesday survey, or even later.

Domesday shows that the broad features of the medieval distribution of population had already been established by 1086. There was a striking contrast between the places with recorded tenant populations of a dozen or more, and those with five or less. The Guitings, Naunton, Eyford, Lower Slaughter and Bourton-on-the-Water each had between twelve and 34 tenants (freemen, villeins, bordars and cottars) plus a varying number of slaves, while Castlett, Aylworth, Harford and Upper Slaughter were much smaller.⁸ These contrasts persisted throughout the middle ages, when Aston Blank and Notgrove (which were not assessed separately in 1086) can be shown to have belonged to the larger type, and Little Aston to the smaller (the two size categories are indicated on FIG. 1).

The tax-lists compiled in 1327 indicate the size of village settlements, and show that the population of the area had increased since 1086. The larger places (such as the Guitings, Naunton and Bourton) contained between ten and twenty tax payers. Allowing for the exemption and evasion that led to the omission of a half of the households, and assuming that each householder had a family of about five persons, the tax-payers can reasonably be thought to represent village populations of one to two hundred. The smaller settlements had a dozen households or less, even allowing for 50 per cent omission.⁹ The presence of the places with comparatively low populations might make us hesitate to call the district's settlement pattern a fully nucleated one. However, the contrast is so marked between the upper Windrush and, for example, the woodland areas of west Gloucestershire, where very small hamlets and individual farms predominated, that we are justified in regarding our district as a land of small and middling nucleated villages.¹⁰

What caused the development of compact village settlements? The association between large manors and large villages, as at Aston Blank, might tempt us to link the creation of ordered and compact settlements with the disciplinary aims of powerful lords. Villages had a neat and regular appearance that had clearly been planned, best seen in the deserted Cotswold sites such as Upton or Hawling, but also discernible underlying the plans of modern villages like Aston Blank.¹¹ Again, the lord has been claimed as the obvious authority capable of organizing the laying-out of the streets and tofts. Lordship was certainly strong in the upper Windrush, as in other parts of the Cotswolds, reflected in the high proportion of slaves at the time of Domesday, and the numerous servile and customary tenants in the 13th to 15th century. Large church landowners, like Evesham Abbey and the order of the Knights Templar, exercised a great deal of influence over the district. The strongest case for regarding lords as village planners can be made for places like Castlett, the sole recorded inhabitants of which in 1086 were four slaves, and Upper Slaughter where four bordars were outnumbered by eight slaves. When the slaves were settled on parcels of demesne, in a move that seems to have been almost universally pursued in the west midlands in the late 11th and early 12th century, the lords were indeed creating peasant settlements, and in doing so are likely to have laid them out in some orderly pattern.¹²

However, manors with slaves as their only inhabitants, or in which slaves were more numerous than tenants, though they can be found in this, the most slave-ridden county in England, were very rare.¹³ Normally Domesday manors contained a mixture of social types, including a substantial number and often a majority of *villani*, peasant tenants who at that time were legally free and often held a full yardland or virgate. Though they were subordinated to their lords, they may not have been moved and settled as easily as could the slaves. If village creation was simply a matter of lords ordering tenants into line, we would expect to find villages coinciding with manors, but this is true of only a minority of places in Gloucestershire.¹⁴ In the

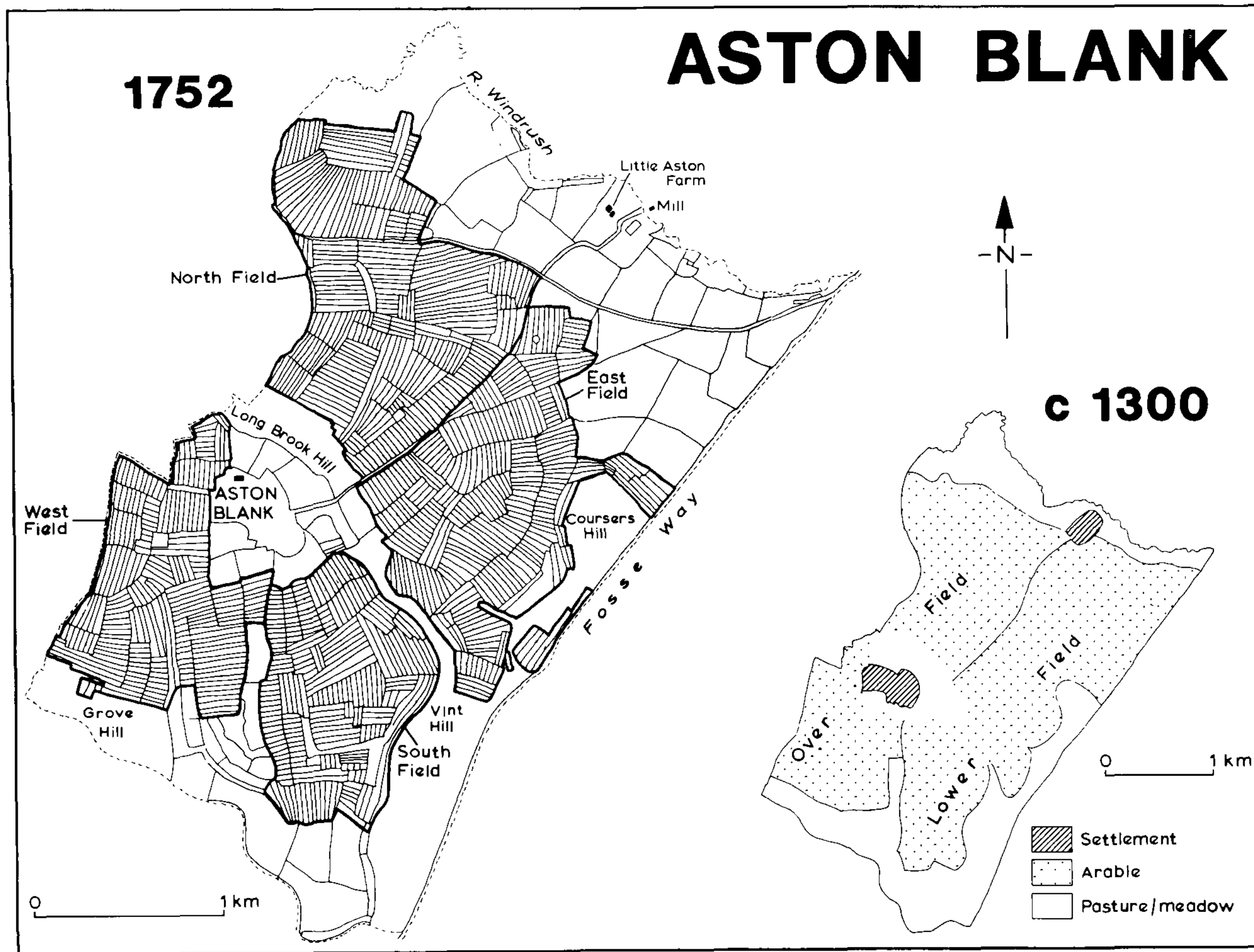


FIG. 3. Plan of the parish of Aston Blank, showing field boundaries for Aston Blank from the map of 1752 (Glos R.O., D 2231); and for Little Aston from the map of 1795 (Glos. R.O., D75/P1). The reconstruction of land-use in c. 1300 is based on assumptions outlined in the text.

Windrush valley, Naunton has all the appearance of a single village although it was divided between two lords.

The most likely explanation for the nucleation of settlement lies in the developing relationship between the numbers of people and the available land in the 9th to 12th century. By the 10th and 11th centuries references to ploughed land in charter boundary clauses suggest extensive arable cultivation. The plough teams enumerated in Domesday – 23 at Temple Guiting, for example, or five at Aylworth – cannot be readily converted into acreages, but comparison between Domesday and the near-contemporary surveys from the estates of the nuns of Caen in south Gloucestershire shows that a demesne plough in Domesday could correspond to about a hundred acres (40 ha.) of arable, and a tenant plough to about a half of that figure, so that the 11th-century cultivated area may have been in the region of 1500 acres (600 ha.) at Temple Guiting and 350 acres (140 ha.) at Aylworth. A glance at maps of plough-team density compiled from Domesday statistics shows that the modern notion that the Cotswolds consisted mainly of sheep pastures is a misapprehension, because so much of the land was given over to cereals.¹⁵ The cultivated area sometimes had little scope for increase in the post-Domesday centuries, but there are cases of expansion. For example, a small lay manor at Temple Guiting in 1086 had a single tenant with half of a plough – less than 50 acres by most estimates. In 1266 on the same manor, by then in the hands of Gloucester Abbey, the tenants had about 240 acres (96 ha.) of arable.¹⁶ The extent of cultivation may be seen in the reconstruction of land use of Aston Blank (FIG. 3), in which about four-fifths of the land was taken up by arable. At some point during that development a single field system was created, in which the hundreds of strips and dozens of furlongs were divided into two fields, so providing for half of the land to lie fallow each year. The peasants had shares in the fields, and the most convenient location for their houses lay at a central point that gave everyone access to the two arable fields and to the areas of grassland.¹⁷ Lords would have been involved in the reorganisation also, because they had manor houses and demesne lands that formed an important part of the settlement and its field system. The peasants may have adopted this new form of settlement in response to a seignorial fiat, but the close correspondence throughout England between the distribution of villages and the areas of extensive cultivation and regular field systems makes it likely that the primary influence was economic, and that both lords and peasants were responding to the same agrarian stimuli.

One of the most intractable problems in reconstructing the obscure origins of villages and manors is to explain the differences in size of units. To take Harford as an example, was this a small village because it developed within a small manor, recorded as we have seen in the 10th century? In fact we do not know if the grant of 963 created a new manor, or whether it had a previous existence, leased out to thegns by oral grants. Even if the 963 charter does record a new tenure, its boundaries are unlikely to have been devised at the time. The most practical way of deciding the limits of the thegn's estate would have been to take an existing agrarian unit, already populated with peasant tenants.

Little Aston

The village of Little Aston lay near the modern Aston Farm (SP 148213), once known as Little Aston Farm, at the northern end of Aston Blank parish (FIG. 3). The site is now marked by earthworks in the pasture fields north of the disused railway line, and a combination of eroded earthworks and scatters of building material and artefacts in the arable fields south of the railway (FIG. 2). The parish contains a total of 2,360 acres (944 ha.), consisting mainly of clay soils, assessed as Grade 3 (of average quality), with better land near the river valley. The highest land lies to the west, rising to 200 m above sea level, and slopes down to the north, where the

Windrush runs at below 140 m. Two streams flow north-west to south-east in well-defined valleys, one through the centre of the parish, the other on its southern boundary, and are crossed by the Fosse Way which defines Aston's eastern edge. The modern village of Aston Blank lies high up, towards the west. The wood of Aston Grove to the south certainly dates back to the 18th century, and may be earlier. The woodland that now lies in the Windrush valley was formerly much less extensive, and the narrow river banks were used as meadow. Domesday Book's comment on Withington and its dependencies, which included Aston, was applicable throughout the later middle ages: 'In certain places [there is] meadow and wood, but not much'.

The large manor of Aston Blank was held in the late 11th and 12th centuries by a succession of lay lords who owed military service to the church of Worcester.¹⁸ The 'east' element in the place-name refers to its location in relation to Withington, the manor on the Worcester estate from which it was held. During the 13th century Aston passed from the Longchamp family into the hands of the Pipards. The manor had two subtenancies, one belonging to the Priory of St Oswald at Gloucester, and the other, called Little Aston, was held by Westwood Priory, a house of the order of Fontevrault, by the rules of which Benedictine nuns were associated with male brothers in the same house. Westwood lay near Droitwich (Worcs) and had been founded early in the reign of Henry II, perhaps in the late 1150s. It had acquired Little Aston by 1220, when the priory was involved in a legal dispute with the lord of Aston Blank, Geoffrey de Longchamp; no charter survives in the later priory cartulary, but the original grant of Little Aston may well have been made by Geoffrey or his predecessor.¹⁹ The origin of the village of Little Aston poses the same problems as does that of Harford. Were the nuns granted a piece of empty land, on which a village grew, or did the beginning of the settlement predate the manor?

The surface finds from the village site provide some idea of its use before the 1150s. They include three worked flints of presumed prehistoric date, and six sherds of Romano-British pottery. In view of the proximity of a long barrow (700 m to the south at SP 143207) some prehistoric activity would not be surprising. In the next valley, that of the stream that runs through the centre of Aston parish (SP 129200), lynchets survive from pre-medieval cultivation. The likely Romano-British context for the future site of Little Aston would have been as agricultural land attached to the large Bourton Bridge settlement just over a kilometre to the east. The pottery could have arrived in cart-loads of manure, either from Bourton, or from some yet undiscovered villa or farmstead in the vicinity. The earliest medieval pottery is of the 11th or 12th century; it provides no certain evidence of the existence of a settlement before Westwood's acquisition of the manor, though it makes it quite likely.

A plausible theory of Little Aston's origins would involve ascribing a rôle of settlement nucleus to Aston Mill, which, in spite of its name, belonged to the manor of Lower Slaughter, and can presumably be identified as one of the two mills belonging to that manor in 1086 (FIG. 1).²⁰ A road connected Aston Blank to the mill, and houses were built along it, where the lower ground near to the river Windrush provided a sheltered site. Communications, the water supply and meadows along the river bank all contributed to its attractiveness. The separate settlement made Little Aston viable as a modest independent manor, already provided with tenants, and suitable for transfer to the Westwood estate at some time between 1154 and 1220.

An alternative hypothesis would be to reverse the supposed rôles of the villages. Normally in the upper Windrush district, each village's territory included both some of the river valley and higher ground. Most of the settlements took advantage of the shelter of the valley, even when it lay on the edge of their territory, and the inhabitants incurred the long journeys to upland fields and pastures that such a site made necessary. Little Aston occupies a low-lying position, while Aston Blank lies nearer the centre of the parish, at 200 m above sea level on an exposed hilltop, and earns its other name of Cold Aston. It is possible that Little Aston predated Aston Blank, and

was only later outstripped by its neighbour. The presence of the parish church on the hilltop is the main evidence against such a view. The church contains much 12th-century work, and must have been built there to serve the more important of the two centres. However, it is still worthwhile to rid our minds of preconceptions about primary and secondary settlements based on later developments, and think perhaps of the settlement pattern of Aston as bipolar, with two *nuclei* competing, and one eventually outstripping the other.

Ordinarily the life of a small village like Little Aston under the lordship of a minor monastery would be hidden from us, but the combination of documents from the Westwood archive, with the material evidence of the settlement, allows us to reconstruct some of the details of its growth and decline.

In the early years of the 14th century the nuns of Westwood held a court at Little Aston annually in the spring. These manor courts came a long way down the jurisdictional hierarchy, and there were complaints that the tenants impleaded one another in superior courts, probably that of the Pipards at Aston Blank, but also perhaps in the court of the bishops of Worcester at Withington which the men of Aston had to attend. In spite of limitations on their power, the courts had enough influence to make the surviving rolls of 1303–5 a valuable source of evidence for the activities of the tenants of Little Aston.²¹ They give some clue of the village's size as nine tenants are named, including the miller. A high proportion of the tenants would have been drawn into the business of the courts as litigants and pledges, though not all of them were necessarily resident. The earthworks of the village site (FIGS. 1 and 2) provide an alternative basis for estimating the size of the settlement. A holloway running from south-west to north-east, most easily visible to the south of the modern Aston Farm, defines the line of the road that led from Aston Blank to the mill, and this served as the village street. At the south-western end of the village another road seems to branch out to the west in the direction of Harford. Hollows and platforms, with dense scatters of stone to the south-west of the former road mark the sites of at least two houses. A rectangular enclosure (A on FIG. 1) and other slight earthworks north of the modern farm also indicate at least two house sites, with an apparent boundary to the north-west. The farm itself probably stands on the site of one or two medieval houses, and one or two more could have occupied the ground between the disused railway line and the mill, to the east of the farm. Analogy with better preserved Cotswold sites at Upton and Roel indicates that there is space at the Little Aston site for about eight to ten houses. There may have been two or three more represented by earthwork enclosures to the east at Shepherd's Cottage (C on FIG. 1); the site further to the east (D on FIG. 1) is much more doubtful. Accordingly we can conclude that Little Aston in c. 1300 contained about ten households.

Though their village was small in size and subordinate in status, Little Aston's inhabitants did not lack a sense of common identity. They assisted in the running of the manorial courts, which served not just as a source of revenue and as a means of disciplining tenants for the lord's benefit, but also protected the interests of the villagers against disruptive outsiders and anti-social elements in their own midst. They allied in 1304 with the men of Aston Blank in forbidding Robert Page to receive 'a certain woman' in his house, and 'all the tenants' of Little Aston reported his failure to comply. Their interests diverged from those of the larger village in 1303 when the Little Aston jury concealed an offence – they claimed that there was nothing to report but afterwards 'came and acknowledged' that John le Piper had taken corn 'in the fields of Aston Pipard', *furtive*. They seem to have been united in their opposition to the bullying behaviour of Richard Miller, the tenant of the mill, who, among other offences, impounded their sheep 'unjustly'. The Little Aston tenants also seem to have acted collectively as farmers of the tithe corn of Guiting Power, for part of which they owed Westwood 17s. 0d. in 1303.

The people of Little Aston were provided with a chapel, whether by the lords or through their

own initiative is not known. Travel to the parish church of Aston Blank involved a journey of a mile-and-a-half (2½ km) which was irksome, but also brought them into a congregation of mainly Aston Blank people, in which their own sense of identity could have been lost.²² The chapel's existence is not recorded in any medieval documents, but a small wooded rectangular enclosure, c. 100 m x c. 50 m is marked in a field called Church Yard on the 1795 enclosure map immediately to the east of Aston Farm (see FIG. 3). In the 17th century it was called Church Hey.²³ The site was largely destroyed by the building of the railway in the 19th century, but it can still be identified on the southern edge of the railway (B on FIG. 1), marked by a scatter of stone, including a Cotswold slate, a roofing material which was not much used on peasant house (FIG. 2). Part of an iron prick-spur of 13th-century date, quite a rare find on a village site, was also lying on the surface at this point.²⁴

Little Aston, unlike the villages of comparable size further up the Windrush, did not have its own field system. Perhaps the peasants enjoyed the use of the meadow along the river bank, but their strips of arable were intermingled with the field system of Aston Blank. This situation explains the reference in the court rolls to the theft of corn from 'Aston Pipard' (i.e. Aston Blank). The erring peasant was stealing grain, not from a separate set of fields, but probably from adjoining strips in the same field-system. The lay-out of the fields can be reconstructed in more detail from later documents. The glebe terriers of the early 17th century show that the whole parish, including land adjacent to Little Aston, was organized in a two-field system, the fields being called the Over and Lower Field, or 'the Field next Notgrove' and 'the Field next Bourton'.²⁵ The existence of two fields can be taken back to c. 1200 because they are mentioned in a charter of that date.²⁶ The boundary between the fields coincided with the road leading north from Aston Blank village, on which Little Aston was situated. The modern transformation of the Astons' fields began with a series of exchanges to give Little Aston Farm its own separate fields, which were complete in 1675.²⁷ The map of 1752 (FIG. 3) shows Little Aston with its relatively new enclosures occupying the north-east corner of the parish, and the rest of the parish retaining its largely unenclosed field system, divided into four fields (North, East, West and South) instead of the former two.²⁸ The change from two to four fields was a common move in the west midlands in the 15th to 17th century, facilitating new rotations and more intensive cropping regimes.

This excursion into Aston's more recent history helps our understanding of the medieval fields, and consequently of the origins of Little Aston. At first sight the fact that Little Aston shared the field system confirms the view that it was a secondary village, and grew as a satellite on the edge of an already existing agrarian unit. Had Little Aston been a separate early village, like Harford, it might have had its own fields. Instead it developed, perhaps in the 11th and 12th centuries, and the tenants acquired their land from Aston Blank tenants by grant, or purchase, or inheritance involving a transfer of strips from holdings based in Aston Blank. Migrants from Aston Blank could have moved their houses to the new village, taking their lands with them, so to speak. The lord of Aston Blank could have granted part of his demesne and helped to endow the tenants of the new settlement before it became a distinct sub-manor. However, the participation of the two villages in the same fields would be compatible with the 'bipolar' idea mentioned above. As the reconstruction map of the parish in c. 1300 shows (FIG. 3), Little Aston did not occupy a fringe location in its heyday. It lay across a major axial road of the parish, which gave the people of Aston Blank access to the northern part of the two fields and the meadows, and provided Little Aston's peasants with a convenient route to both the arable fields, and, at rather greater expenditure of effort, to the common pastures in the south of the parish. The two villages and the field system could have grown up together.

Little Aston must have experienced a period of relative economic prosperity, because it was

able to attract migrants in the 13th century. William le Neuemon's name speaks for itself. Henry de Grendon could have originated in a number of villages of that name, the nearest being in Buckinghamshire at a distance of 33 miles (52 km). The de Holine family had almost certainly come from another manor on the Westwood estate, Hollin in Rock (Worcs), 7 miles (12 km) further than Grendon. Little Aston's peasants were involved in many other contacts with the outside world because of their need to buy and sell. Westwood Priory had perhaps acquired the manor in its early days with a view to giving the estate a share in Cotswold upland which is found on a larger scale on most of the west midland ecclesiastical estates. By the 14th century the priory was expecting to receive a cash income of rent, 66*s.* 8*d.* per annum, which if there were ten tenants would mean that the average payment was 6*s.* 8*d.* per annum.²⁹

The money would have come from sale of produce or earnings on the labour market. The pottery scatter from the surface of the village site reveals the inhabitants as purchasers as well as sellers, because the pottery would have been bought in local market towns (Stow-on-the-Wold or Northleach were the nearest, both reached via the Fosse Way), or was supplied by visiting chapmen. Most of the pots (dated to the 12th to 14th century) had been manufactured in the Cotswolds, with a minority of wares from further afield, such as the Brill/Boarstall (Bucks) kilns, kilns in the Newbury (Berks) area, Hanley Castle (Worcs) and north Warwickshire, all involving transport over 35 kms. Iron-work, like a horse-shoe of medieval type and the spur also found on the site, similarly came via local trade links. However, we may doubt if the people of Little Aston were ever very wealthy, using the pottery as a guide to their prosperity. The predominance of the products of local kilns (195 out of 219 sherds, or 89 per cent), leaves a mere 24 (11 per cent) of sherds of better quality and more expensive wares brought from a distance. Functional cooking pots greatly outnumbered the decorative jugs in a ratio of nineteen to one (10 sherds from jugs were identified, out of 219 sherds, or 4.6 per cent of the total). The houses of the village, judging from the dense stone scatter, were built on foundations of the local oolite, as was normal in the region from the 13th century onwards. A few fragments of ceramic tiles of local manufacture from the village site suggest that the thatched roofs were sometimes surmounted with crest-tiles.

The well-being of the peasants of Little Aston depended on their agricultural activities. Their 'avers' (draught animals) and sheep are mentioned in the court rolls, and we know that there was one quarter-yardland (probably ten-acre) holding, which was small by Cotswold standards.³⁰ Our suspicion that they were rather poor is supported by the appearance of only one of the Little Aston tenants' names in the lay subsidy of 1327. This was Robert Hasard who paid a very low 12*d.*; his neighbours' goods were no doubt assessed at less than 10*s.* 0*d.*, which made them exempt from the tax. Perhaps also in the 22 years that intervened between the last of the court rolls and the subsidy others had died or migrated.³¹

The decline of Little Aston had evidently begun by the early years of the 14th century. A source of stress within the community was Richard Miller, who as the tenant of the mill was set apart from his neighbours in terms of his wealth and his links with the manor of Lower Slaughter. Medieval millers had an unenviable reputation as grasping characters, and Richard Miller fitted the rôle well. He was involved in lawsuits with Westwood tenants; he ignored the jurisdiction of Westwood by settling a dispute without licence; and he pleaded 'in an alien court'. He impounded the tenants' sheep, felled a valuable tree, and in a passage in the manuscript that is difficult to decipher seems to have expressed his contempt for the steward and the lord. More ominously for the fate of the village, he 'demolished his house', not the mill-house, which as an asset of another manor was of no interest to the Little Aston court, but a building on a Westwood tenement, which he had perhaps acquired but which he did not need as a dwelling.³²

A generation later, a parliamentary grant of 1340 to Edward III of a ninth of the sheaves, fleeces and lambs sent surveyors into Gloucestershire. There were many generalized complaints

of economic difficulties, but at Aston, and a number of other places, they were given more precise explanations of the problems confronting the tax-payers. Aston was expected to pay £13 13s. 4d. but the sum had to be reduced to take account of the vicar's share of the tithe and 'because seven of the parishioners of the hamlet of Little Aston of the same parish before the grant of the commission [i.e. 1340] relinquished their holdings and withdrew from the parish'. 'If the land was cultivated' they would have contributed 3 marks (£2) to the total assessment.³³ As the village has been estimated earlier as having about ten householders the departure of seven of them (householders must be meant, not individuals) would have led to the virtual abandonment of the settlement. The arithmetic of the tax-assessment also suggests a plausible figure for the fraction of the agricultural output of Aston coming from Little Aston – being one-seventh of the total.

The departure of the tenants was a severe blow to Westwood, which as a small house with an income of less than £100 per annum could ill-afford to lose the revenue from Aston. At some time in the early 14th century Little Aston produced a farm of 66s. 8d., presumably originating in rents of local people, but collected and paid as a lump sum to Westwood by a middleman like the William de Aston who is mentioned in 1332–3. By the 1350s the farm had lapsed completely: it was 'in decay . . . because not occupied'. Eventually a more realistic figure was negotiated, and in 1383 a farm of 40s. 0d. was being paid.³⁴

What was actually happening to the holdings at Little Aston after 1340 is uncertain. It is of course remotely possible that the emigrants returned, but the pottery evidence is against this – only two of the 219 sherds can be dated after 1350. It seems that the village was permanently deserted in the mid-14th century, any survivors of the pre-1340 departures being removed by the plague epidemic of 1349 and subsequent upheavals. A single house may have remained in occupation, or was reoccupied later, because in 1554 a gentleman of Little Aston, Arthur Rodes, acted as surety for a neighbour from Upper Slaughter.³⁵ The position and alignment of the present farmhouse in relation to the village earthworks suggest that it may be a lineal descendant of a peasant holding (see FIG. 2).

Each successive tenant who took on the farm of Little Aston in the later middle ages obviously had a good deal of land at his disposal – the village site, the meadows by the Windrush and the strips of arable scattered in the common fields of Aston Blank. These would have been inconvenient to cultivate; the effort of travelling to the fields may have been worthwhile to the peasants mainly concerned with their own subsistence in the 13th century, but would have been uneconomic for a farmer producing for sale using expensive hired hands in the period of labour shortage after 1350. Conversion of individual strips to grass would have been possible, as pasture leys in common field systems were not uncommon in the 15th century, but again management of the scattered parcels would have caused difficulties. They may have been rented to tenants living in Aston Blank, from where they could have been used more conveniently. Perhaps the principal assets conveyed with the farm were the former villagers' rights to share in the common pastures. The farmers' best hopes of making profitable use of their awkwardly distributed holdings lay in consolidation and enclosure. Evidently some moves were made in this direction in the two centuries after desertion, because in 1533 Nicholas Martin of Hawkesbury negotiated a new 64-year lease with the prioress for a rent of 100s. per annum and an entry fine of £20, and agreed to keep in repair the buildings, hedges, closes and ditches (the rent in the late 14th century had been £2). When the Crown sold it off in 1538 after the dissolution it was valued at £15 19s. 4d.³⁶ Such an increase in the value of a village site normally followed a reorganization and enclosure of the fields (as happened at Wontley in Bishop's Cleeve in 1482–3), and it is very likely that some improvements had been carried out at Little Aston.³⁷ In 1535 Aston Blank's wool tithe of 78s. implies total annual production worth £39, or about 1500 fleeces, to which sheep kept at Little Aston no doubt made a considerable contribution.³⁸ By 1655 when Little Aston was sold it

consisted of 'several [i.e. separate, excluding common pasture] closes of land, meadow and pasture ground', still with some arable land in the East Field of Aston. It appears that there had been some partial consolidation through exchange, because quite apart from the closes, the gathering of the arable into one of the common fields represented a departure from earlier arrangements.³⁹ Final enclosure took place, as we have seen, in the 1670s, after which George Townsend, a lawyer, was able to lease it out, and to pass on to Pembroke College, Oxford, a large farm of modern type stretched out along the north boundary of the parish (see FIG. 3), without any strips in the surviving open fields of Aston Blank.⁴⁰

Decline of settlements in the upper Windrush valley

Before explaining Little Aston's decline it is useful to turn again to its neighbouring villages in the later middle ages. Of the twelve settlements of the district named in Domesday (see FIG. 1), four were to be deserted (Aylworth, Castlett, Eyford and Harford), and the survivors all experienced some degree of shrinkage. Eyford was virtually abandoned by 1327, when only one tax-payer contributed to the lay subsidy (compared with fifteen at Guiting Power, which was similar in size to Eyford in 1086). Harford and Aylworth in 1327 had only two or three tax-payers respectively (perhaps half of the householders were liable to pay tax), and the two villages were in severe difficulty by 1340–1 when 'many tenants in the hamlets of Harford and Aylworth left their holdings and left them vacant and uncultivated'. At the same date at Upper Slaughter nine yardlands or about 360 acres (150 ha.) lay 'frisc and uncultivated'. People continued to live in some numbers at Upper Slaughter at the time of the poll-tax in 1381, but Aylworth was reduced to three households.⁴¹ Earthworks marking the sites of abandoned houses are visible around the church at Temple Guiting, and in the centre and to the south of the modern village of Aston Blank.⁴² Aston Blank can be shown from documents to have experienced severe shrinkage: at its peak it contained a minimum of eighteen households and probably many more. This is the number given in an inquisition post mortem extent of 1309, but these documents tend to undercount. The eighteen tax-payers of 1327 imply the existence of at least 30 households. By 1524 there were only ten tax-payers, and in 1563 the ecclesiastical census returned a total of nine households. Three of the 1524 tax-payers were assessed on wages, suggesting that a great deal of land had been concentrated in the hands of the other seven, and this situation persisted in the mid-18th century when some tenants had four, five, or six yardlands each.⁴³ Where records of land-holding exist in other villages for the late 14th and 15th century, as at Temple Guiting, tenants are found engrossing two or three previously separate tenements, totalling two yardlands or more, leading inevitably to the decay of former houses.⁴⁴

The story of declining population and contracting villages is found in much of late medieval England. In the upper Windrush valley it was very severe, and began unusually early. The reports of abandoned holdings and uncultivated arable in 1341 are found in other districts, notably in north-east Oxfordshire. There were a number of early desertions of villages scattered over the Cotswolds, from the Stroud Valley to the northern escarpment near Blockley.⁴⁵ We cannot explain these desertions by invoking 'the Black Death' because decline is well attested before 1348–9. The plague epidemic was evidently a secondary factor, hastening and deepening a crisis that had begun in the early 14th century.

What went wrong with the populous and apparently thriving rural settlements of the 12th and 13th centuries? A glance at the upper Windrush villages will remove some hypotheses. Little Aston may have been a relatively late developer, but some were very old, like Harford, so it is unlikely that the deserted settlements were the last to be created. The land cultivated by the Little Aston peasants has been judged (by modern standards) to be of good quality.⁴⁶ Nor can

cataclysmic explanations based on the greedy ambitions of landlords serve in the case of Little Aston, in view of the long-term loss of rents suffered by Westwood, and the very slow conversion of the abandoned lands into a profitable sheep-pasture.⁴⁷

It is easier to identify those characteristics of Little Aston that could have made it vulnerable to the loss of its inhabitants. Some may have been peculiar to one village, like the quarrels between the miller and the Westwood tenants, but even those petty disputes may have had their roots in some deeper social malaise. More general factors would be Little Aston's small size, subordinate status, and remoteness from some of its arable and pasture resources. Other small villages in the district collapsed too. The 11th-century hierarchy of places with large and small populations coincided closely with those villages that survived in the later middle ages and those that perished. The tendency for smaller villages to be deserted is found throughout England.⁴⁸

Most villages contracted in the later middle ages; only a minority collapsed. The small size of the latter meant that they experienced the crisis most acutely. But what caused the crisis? There can be no doubt of the widespread problems of the Cotswolds in the early 14th century, leading to references in the documents produced both by landlords and the royal administration to poverty, migration, ruined houses, poor land and uncultivated land.⁴⁹

Various general causes have been suggested for the agrarian problems of around 1300. The failure of 13th-century colonization of new land is not a factor relevant to our district because so much of the land had been cultivated in and before the 11th century. Nor, in view of the high proportion of large holdings, including many full yardlands, can the proliferation of small-holdings be seen in this locality as a major cause of impoverishment.⁵⁰ At first sight the demands of landlords do not seem to have been very oppressive, because of the modest levels reached by customary rents. In the late 12th century, at the beginning of the great inflation of *c.* 1180–1220, the Templars were receiving rents of 4*s.* 0*d.* and 5*s.* 0*d.* per annum per yardland at Guiting, compared with 6*s.* 0*d.* and more on some of their Warwickshire and Oxfordshire properties. After the inflation and a general rise in rents, Gloucester Abbey in 1266 could collect annually in lieu of services from its Guiting tenants 13*s.* 7*d.* per yardland, and similar sums, between 10*s.* 0*d.* and 20*s.* 0*d.* seem typical of the Cotswolds at this time, when they often exceeded 30*s.* 0*d.* per yardland in the vale between Berkeley and Bristol.⁵¹ Cotswold yardlands were quite large, 38–40 acres (16 ha.) at Guiting, more than 40 acres at Aston Blank, so if calculated as a rent per acre tenants were paying about 5*d.*, compared with *c.* 9*d.* on manors near Berkeley. Landlords generally obtained as much as possible from their tenants everywhere, and the quite modest Cotswold rents must reflect an awareness by the lords that the tenants could not bear too heavy a burden in view of the limited productive capacity of their holdings.

Other evidence supports the view that Windrush valley arable, though extensive, did not give the tenants a high return. Why else should the full yardland tenement so often persist while elsewhere it was being subdivided into halves and quarters in the 12th and 13th centuries to accommodate the growing demand for land? Why were the yardlands so large, compared with the normal 30 acres? And why was the two-field system adopted and maintained, unless as a measure to keep the soil fertile, when more intensive cropping might have been damaging? The key to good crops lay in achieving a balance between corn and sheep; the dung of the animals, preferably trodden into the land in a system of folding, maintained the fertility of the soil. Landlords drawing up agreements and leases at Temple Guiting in the 13th century and 1484 estimated that a ploughland would be accompanied by 300 or 400 sheep.⁵² Assuming a ploughland of about 100 arable acres (40 ha.), this would mean that each 40-acre yardlander, if he was to maintain the same standard, should ideally have kept 120–160 sheep. There is no direct evidence from the Windrush valley for the size of peasant flocks in the 13th or early 14th century, but evidence from other areas, some directly comparable, including the south Cotswold village of

Minety (Wilts), shows that individual peasant flocks as large as a hundred were unusual.⁵³ The areas of common pasture were limited by the extensive arable fields. FIG. 3 attempts to reconstruct the land use of Aston Blank parish in c. 1300. It is based on the assumption that all of the common field strips of 1752 had been used as arable, as also was a high proportion of the land enclosed into Little Aston Farm. Fields to the south of Aston Blank village (at SP 127194) which were enclosed by 1752 have been included in the reconstructed open fields of the 13th century because they now contain ridge and furrow of probable medieval date. The map may still under-represent the proportion of arable in the 13th century because in another part of the 18th-century pasture, in the fields north of the church at SP 128199, there is a further area of ridge and furrow. Much of the grassland in the 18th century consisted of steeply-sloping land near the village and on the fringes of the parish, and this must also have been true of the medieval village.

The small space available for meadow over much of the length of the narrow valley of the Windrush limited production of winter fodder. The Templars, who were anxious to obtain hay in the early 13th century, bought a meadow at Bourton, where the valley widens; the tenants may have lacked the resources to obtain hay supplies at a distance like this.⁵⁴ The fallow field in Cotswold villages always had limited amounts of feed for animals, and was ploughed once or twice to kill weeds, and occasionally *inboked* (brought into temporary cropping) to give an extra cereal acreage. Grain was used to feed humans, and for sale for rent money, not to provide animal fodder. Peas, which were sometimes given to sheep, did not grow well on the Cotswolds.

The economic problems of grain growing on a lord's demesne are revealed by accounts for Temple Guiting when it was temporarily in the hands of the Crown in 1326–8.⁵⁵ The main crop, as on many Cotswold demesnes, was drage, a mixture of barley and oats. Its cultivation costs are given in *Table 1*.

Table 1 Costs of production of drage per acre, at Temple Guiting in 1326–7

Seed (at 4 bushels per acre)	1s. 6d.
Ploughing (2 fallow ploughings and 1 at sowing)	1s. 6d.
Weeding	1d.
Harvesting, carrying, stacking	11d.
Total	<hr/> 4s. 0d.

In 1327 each acre yielded only 9½ bushels, and this amount was sold for 3s. 7d., so in that year cultivation was losing money at a rate of 5d. per acre (more, in fact, because the cost of threshing has not been included in the calculation). One reason for the exceptionally poor yield in that year was the temporary absence of a demesne sheep flock, for which the managers attempted to compensate by hiring flocks to fold on the land at 2s. 0d. per acre. This expensive method of manuring was restricted to 50 or 60 acres (20–24 ha.) at a time of a total sown area of 250 acres (100 ha.). Demesne managers could normally count on better manure supplies from their own sheep, and therefore expected yields at least 50 per cent higher than the Guiting figure for 1327, but could the peasants have obtained enough muck to keep their land in good heart?

Peasants did not have to pay for agricultural work as did the lords, because they could make

more use of their own labour and that of their families. Also they used in their households a higher proportion of their crops, and were not calculating profits from sales in the same way as the demesne managers. But they would still have felt the effects of poor yields, in their impact on food supplies and surpluses for sale. Those with large holdings could have still made an adequate living, unless there were unusually adverse circumstances, and these came in a series of blows – sheep scab in the 1270s and 1280s, heavy royal tax demands in the 1290s and afterwards regularly for four decades, and disastrous harvests in 1315–17. Individuals would have suffered the occasional heavy fine from their lords, who were themselves feeling a financial pinch at this time.⁵⁶ Both reductions in production and sudden increases in financial obligations could drive even yardlanders into poverty and debt. The problems of fertility and natural accidents went together with man-made problems in causing the peasants' difficulties. The shortage of sheep, and the problems of recovery after bad harvests, were not unconnected with the constant financial demands of landlords and the royal tax-collectors.

The inhabitants of the upper Windrush depended primarily on agriculture for their living. The building of fulling mills in the late 12th century at Temple Guiting and by 1206 at Bourton-on-the-Water shows the presence of cloth-making, and this element of economic diversification may have helped to protect those two settlements from desertion.⁵⁷

Conclusion

After a long prehistory the exploitation of the resources of the upper Windrush valley was far advanced by the 10th and 11th centuries. A pattern of nucleated villages and extensive arable cultivation became well established by the 13th century. Little Aston may have developed rather later than the other nearby settlements, and it was certainly inferior in size and status to Aston Blank by c. 1300. Its principal weakness lay in its small population, which made it vulnerable, along with similar villages in the area, to desertion when the agrarian economy went into crisis in the early 14th century. The roots of the troubles lay in the difficulty of maintaining the delicate balance between arable and pasture, and in the social pressures on the peasantry; these problems were exposed by a succession of setbacks. The crisis was no mere episode. Its effects were profound and long-lasting, and villages continued to shrink for two centuries. The abandonment of the village of Little Aston is worthy of study in itself, because no two villages were alike. But the desertion of one small village must be seen as part of greater movements: the regional shifts that in the long term substantially reduced the Cotswolds' population, and the almost universal decline in numbers of people and the cultivated area between 1300 and 1520.⁵⁸ Villages had developed to serve a specific need in the early middle ages, and many had only a temporary existence because of the internal convulsions of the society that produced them.

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