

## Tusmore Deserted Village

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THE deserted medieval village at Tusmore (SP 565309) has for some time been recognized as a classic site. It is one of the few sites in the country where depopulation can clearly be linked to the effects of the Black Death.<sup>1</sup> Its name comes from O.E. *Thuresmere* ('Thures pool'),<sup>2</sup> presumably the pool which was later landscaped into the extant ornamental lake west of Tusmore House.

Tusmore was never a particularly prosperous settlement. The early history of the manor is complicated,<sup>3</sup> and it appears that in the 13th century the estate was held by three lords, Hugh d'Aundeley, Richard son of Guy, and Alan of Tusmore. By the late 14th century, the estate appears to have been amalgamated in the sole possession of Sir Roger de Cottisford. In 1279 there had been 19 tenants with the Rector being the only freeholder. At the time of the 1327 tax only 7 persons contributed, when it was the poorest and quite probably smallest manor in the Hundred of Ploughley.

In 1354 the manor of Tusmore was not taxed at all because of the severity of the Black Death. A writ of 1358 refers to the death from pestilence of the bondmen from Roger de Cottisford's fee and implies that the whole village had been deserted. In 1357 the Lord of the manor was given the right to divert the road from Souldern to Cottisford which had previously run through Tusmore village, now 'void of inhabitants', and on the basis of this it has been argued that the whole village area and former open fields were enclosed to create a park, from which the modern landscaped park is descended. The evidence for the existence of a 14th-century park is, however, circumstantial—and no reference to a deer park or indeed a park of any character is contained in contemporary documents. The absence of a license for the creation of a deer park may indicate that the open fields were enclosed into hedged paddocks and it is possible that these enclosures are now represented on the ground in earthwork form. The 1357 document refers to the road being diverted to the north of the village<sup>4</sup> although evidence is rather for a road on the south, around the parish and manor boundary near the modern Roundhill Farm. Richard Davis' map of 1797, albeit imprecise, indicates a curving boundary, no longer extant, which deflects the footpath from Souldern (see FIG. 1). This footpath seems to link up with the present Sheep Walk—a wide curving trackway bounded on the north

<sup>1</sup> M. Beresford and J. K. St. Joseph, *Medieval England—An Aerial Survey* (1958), 112–14; M. Beresford, *History on the Ground* (1957), 97–9; M. Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England* (1954), 112–13.

<sup>2</sup> *Place Names of Oxfordshire* (1953), 261.

<sup>3</sup> This account is based upon *V.C.H. Oxon.*, VI (1959), 333–8.

<sup>4</sup> *Cal. Inq. Misc.* Vol. III, no. 258. 'The proposed enclosure is not to the damage of the King or others, provided that the said Roger makes an equally convenient road of the same length and breadth on his own soil, outside the enclosure, which at the time of taking this inquisition he arranged for on the north of the hamlet'.

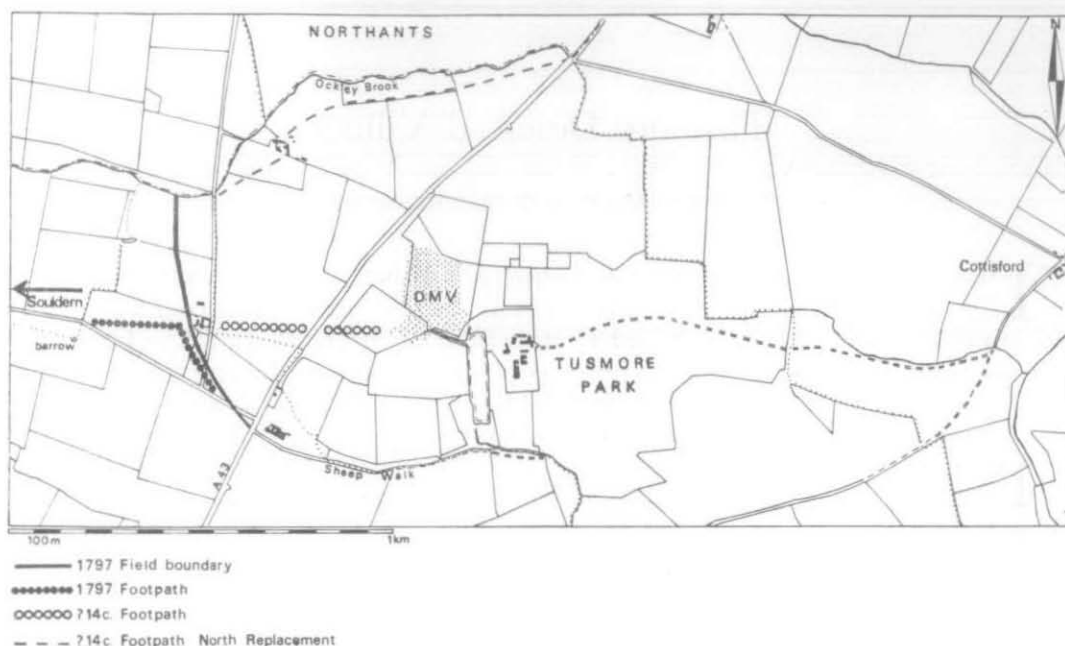


FIG. 1  
Location map.

side by a hedge in which there grows Dog's Mercury (one possible indication of ancient woodland).

The eastern limits of the 14th-century enclosed area are not apparent. South of the Sheep Walk the boundary appears to curve north-eastwards behind the present house, before heading due west to Cottisford. Alternatively the medieval diversion may have been to the south-east, thus approaching Cottisford from the south-west. There is no evidence on the ground for this latter route and it seems more likely that Tusmore House was close to the eastern boundary of the 14th-century enclosed area.

There is no evidence that Tusmore was ever re-populated as a village, as it does not appear in later medieval tax returns or the Compton Census of 1676, and in the Hearth Tax of 1665 only a single house with 19 hearths is recorded, clearly indicating that the site was occupied solely by the lord of the manor.<sup>5</sup> Open field agriculture may have continued in some form after the Black Death as the North Field is mentioned in a charter of 1374. Field names in use in the 18th century could possibly reflect the former open fields—Barley Field in the north and Stoney Field in the north-east. Barley Close, Townsend Close and North Close are enclosures mentioned in a deed of 1629.

Since there is no evidence that the site was ever re-populated after the Black Death, the fact that the previously fragmented manor had been acquired by a single lord only a little earlier should be borne in mind. It was far easier to achieve

<sup>5</sup> M. M. B. Weinstock, ed., *Hearth Tax Returns for Oxfordshire, 1665*, Oxon. Record Society, XXI (1960), 205 and 207.

complete and permanent settlement desertion if all the land in a manor was owned by a single lord and it is possible that Roger de Cottisford did not wish to re-populate his village, preferring to organize a more profitable pastoral estate.

The early history of the manor house is difficult to trace. We can assume that a manor house survived on the site until the 16th century. In 1606 the manor was conveyed to Sir Richard Fermor of Somerton and the Fermor family moved to a new house at Tusmore in 1642. Some landscaping took place at this time as Robert Plot wrote that of all the walks that of Tusmore with its fish pond and hedges was the 'most wonderfully pleasant'.<sup>6</sup> This was eventually demolished and replaced by a Georgian Mansion built by Robert Mylne, largely with locally acquired stone. The fabric of this house was completed by 1717. At that time Tusmore Park was enlarged to its present area of 70 acres surrounded by a stone wall and set out with ornamented plantations, new drives and roads. Later in the century the park was again extended and Mylne's landscape gardening was drastically altered. Mylne's house was demolished in 1960 and a neo-Georgian house was built in 1964/5. The stables of the Georgian house survive and from an earlier manor house a 16th-century granary and dovecote remain, based on staddle stones.

There appears to have been a church on the site since the late 11th century which certainly survived the Black Death, but from the middle of the 14th century it ceased to be an ordinary parish church. In the 15th century it is called a free chapel. As the Fermor family was Catholic and used their own chapel at Somerton, the Tusmore chapel probably ceased to be used in the 16th century. The site of the church is not known although the field names 'church yard' and 'churchyard close' continued to appear in later documents and preserved its memory. The church had disappeared by 1718 when Rawlinson visited Tusmore. The parson's house, the site of which is also unknown, was uninhabited according to the 1665 Hearth Tax.

#### SURVEY OF THE EARTHWORKS AND SITE

The site of Tusmore house and the earthworks of the deserted village lie just below 400 feet on great oolitic limestone. The soil in the vicinity of the village is largely a red clay stonebrash.

The site of the earthworks has been scheduled for some time and the owners receive acknowledgement payments in order to prevent damage by agricultural activity. After being visited by the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group in 1955 it was graded as a class B site, that is of 'medium quality, good earthworks or roads (hollow ways) but otherwise imprecise'.<sup>7</sup> Because of its historical association with the Black Death it is a site recommended for preservation.<sup>8</sup>

The earthworks shown on FIG. 2 lie in three fields. The quality of the earthworks varies considerably throughout the site. Moving from west to east, block (A) consists of a set of five regular parallel sub-rectangular enclosures, demarcated on the north and west by a ditch and bank which on average are 7 metres wide. There is a continuous inner bank and traces of a slight counter scarp in places. The interior

<sup>6</sup> R. Plot, *The Natural History of Oxfordshire* (1705), 266.

<sup>7</sup> K. J. Allison, M. W. Beresford and J. G. Hurst, *The Deserted Villages of Oxfordshire* (1966), 45.

<sup>8</sup> *Beresford and Hurst, op. cit.* note 1, appendix D, 309.



FIG. 2  
Earthwork plan.

of the westernmost enclosure measures 18 metres by 35. One of the enclosures appears to be sub-divided down the middle by a slight bank. Traces of house platforms in the form of raised rectangular earthworks are found on the eastern side of these enclosures, overlooking a partly eroded hollow way. The northernmost house platforms are the most clearly discernible and are also demonstrated by the presence of worked stone very close to the surface. The platforms on the eastern enclosures have been quite severely disturbed. This block of enclosures nevertheless represents by far the most clearly defined earthwork feature on the site.

The hollow way (B) onto which this block faces runs in from the west, possibly representing the road from Souldern (see FIG. 1). To the north of the village it has been largely quarried away. As it enters the village earthworks it divides, leaving an open central triangular area, on the southern side of which is a channel which may well have taken a permanent or semi-permanent stream. To the north of this open triangular area is a large apparently featureless square area, bounded by narrow hollow ways which run through to join the other main artery of the village, a hollow way (C) which can be traced for about 155 metres on the ground. On the north of this hollow way there survive remains of house platforms and other earthworks, although the lay-out is far less regular than in the southern block (A).

In the north-western section of this part of the village, long parallel enclosures (D) run onto the village street, with clearly defined house platforms facing onto the hollow way. These fade away eastwards, and the earthworks become more confusing to interpret. The whole of this block of earthworks is demarcated by an irregular winding hollow way on the east and a shallow scarp on the northwest. This latter may be contemporary with prominent but confused earthworks in the northern area, which contains much complicated detail (E), and what appears to be a fishpond on its northern side. By virtue of its size this area is a possible candidate for the site of the church. The hollow way (C) continues eastwards with a slight thickening and a possible platform just before it enters a post-war tree plantation. This has effectively ruined the earthworks but the hollow way can be shown from early aerial photographs to have continued. On the very edge of the plantation there are several well defined house platforms (F) which were probably lined along the continuation of the hollow way, but cannot now be linked with it.

The only other clearly defined house platforms (G) are very well preserved up to a height of 1 metre, and these lie in the centre of the whole earthwork complex, some 35 metres to the east of the second arterial hollow way. They are aligned east-west onto one of a series of long linear ridges (H&J). One central platform 2 metres by 22 is well defined, and appears to be divided by a cross wall into a small north 'room' and larger south 'room' with an apparent enclosure to the east.

The northern part of the village is taken up by a series of clear rectangular enclosures (H&J), linear banks and ditches. On average these measure some 150 metres by 70 running up to a hollow way and headland (K) which marks the edge of good ridge and furrow. This northernmost hollow way runs roughly on an east-west direction and can be traced running through the wood to the north of the earthworks, towards Pimlico Farm. The ridge and furrow here averages 10 metres from ridge to ridge and is about 0.75 m. high. The boundaries of the long village enclosures appear to curve slightly, reminiscent of ridge and furrow, indeed they appear to

overlie faint traces of ridge and furrow on the aerial photographs. This ridge and furrow, which is not really measurable on the ground, appears to run under the whole of the eastern part of the village, suggesting perhaps that at one stage the village expanded onto an area of former open field arable.

Ridge and furrow has been destroyed by fairly intensive ploughing in the other surrounding areas but it has been identified to the south-east of the village in the area which is now a cricket ground, and in the park to the immediate south of Tusmore house. It can also be seen to the west of the village, where a headland runs across the field with a set of ridge and furrow parallel to it. On the south-western side of the village earthworks there has been considerable disturbance caused by landscaping, which has produced deceptive earthworks incapable of interpretation. To the north of the village ploughing and quarrying have effectively erased all traces of earthworks.

#### INTERPRETATIONS

Distinct areas within the surviving earthworks may represent different chronological phases in the development of the settlement, but on the basis of the physical evidence it is not really possible to be certain of the relationship of each area one to another. The areas are :

- 1 The regular western block of properties (A).
- 2 The earthworks of the northern linear street (D).
- 3 The prominent but confusing islands of earthworks to the north-east of 2 (E). This is a possible site of the church but the absence of any subsequent hollow way leading from here to the house might suggest that the area did not have much use in the post-village period at a time when the church continued to function.
- 4 The central block of house platforms (G) which appear to overlie ridge and furrow, possibly representing an expansion phase in the village.
- 5 The paddocks to the north of the occupation area (H&J). It is likely that these paddocks, which are to be seen on a number of English deserted villages, may be associated with village occupation or it is possible that they represent part of Roger de Cottisford's 14th-century enclosures.

The earthworks, which are admittedly now incomplete, do indicate a complicated evolutionary history for this small village.

#### STATE OF PRESERVATION

It is quite clear that at least parts of the earthworks date to the 14th century and earlier, and are therefore of a considerable importance. This importance is reflected in the fact that public money is paid to preserve the site from ploughing. Although the importance of the site was first recognized some 20 years ago, there have nevertheless been a number of agricultural activities here, relatively minor in themselves, but which have cumulatively eroded the site. Originally there were only two fields, now subdivided to create three together with a small plantation. The area of the plantation has completely obliterated any earthworks, and the sub-division of the large western field has resulted, firstly in the digging of a substantial drainage channel through the earthworks, and secondly in the ploughing of the earthworks

to the north of the hollow way. There also appears to have been ploughing in the south-eastern section of the eastern field, where no traces of earthworks can now be identified. Additionally when the site was visited in the winter of 1975-6 it had just been aerated to improve the turf, and this process, ostensibly innocent in itself, had broken up some of the linear features, bringing stones to the surface. What is more, this process avoids the larger earthworks and therefore leaves them in a more prominent undisturbed position and emphasizes them at the expense of lesser features which are subjected to continuous erosion.

The overall picture is therefore one of gradual, unintentional erosion of a site which is legally protected, and this emphasizes both the inadequate nature of the present legislation and the inability to police it effectively. Within a generation even a protected site such as this will have been virtually destroyed.