

# Wirral Rural Fringes Survey

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This paper has been abstracted from a report written for the Department of the Environment (Ancient Monuments) and the Merseyside County Council Planning Department as part of a commission to the Archaeological Survey of Merseyside 'to review the collected evidence for sites in Merseyside's rural fringes and carry out field survey and assessments for such sites'. Wirral Metropolitan District was selected for study in the first year of this project from May 1978.

## Introduction

The basic unit of landscape and settlement study chosen for the survey is the 19th century township (see Figure 1; boundaries taken from mid 19th century tithe maps) as this represents an historically meaningful, and often ancient, division of the land which precedes the changes in local government boundaries of the later 19th and 20th centuries. The early 19th century township is the final expression, in an area still totally rural, of the slowly evolved unit of agricultural territory surrounding each individual settlement. For each township information relating to landscape and settlement history up to about 1750 has been recorded.

Fieldwork combined with documentary research has increased the number of sites on record for Wirral to about 1300, of which about 1100 were visited and recorded during the survey. Approximately double this number of sites is known to have existed but many of them cannot be accurately plotted out as their precise location was not identified in the field. These unlocated sites form a 'dead file' which accompanies each township record and which will provide a fruitful source for future field and documentary work.

The general discussion which follows draws together the themes and characteristics of the area's archaeology within the limitations of our present knowledge. No attempt has been made to describe or list all known sites in detail and, apart from exceptional cases, references to specific sites are made only by way of example. Some key published sources have been referred to in the text, but detailed bibliographies for every site and find are too lengthy to include here. Full records for all sites exist in the Archaeological Survey of Merseyside with comprehensive indexes to all publications, maps and documentary sources. These can be consulted at Merseyside County Museums, by arrangement.

## The Prehistoric Period

The distribution of known prehistoric sites and finds on Wirral is shown in Figure 2. It represents a thin scatter of chance finds made largely during the 19th century. The distribution, particularly of the few sites which may indicate some type of occupation as opposed to casual losses, shows a marked coastal preference. The boulder clays have produced only a small number of stone axes and single flint finds in contrast to the sandstone ridges and littoral areas. These sites have one factor in common: almost without exception they are the subject of severe erosion, either coastal or hill top, suffering from loss of sand and soil cover. This suggests two possible explanations. First, that there was a preference for the thin soils and open aspect of the coastal and highland locations as opposed to the heavily wooded clay lands. Second, the identification of sites in these areas may be a function of the natural process of erosion which has not operated in other areas where prehistoric sites still remain covered by alluvium and drift. It has been suggested that apart from the well drained higher land Wirral would have presented a wet, heavily forested and inhospitable aspect over much of its area in the prehistoric period. Such statements, however, have hitherto been based on supposition rather than environmental evidence.

The forest peat beds of the north Wirral coast, although much eroded, are potentially an important source of environmental evidence for the exploitation of the extensive coastal woodlands, marshes and fresh water lagoons by Mesolithic and later populations. In other areas it has been well demonstrated that such situations on the edge of several ecosystems were most attractive in allowing the exploitation of several different sources of food and materials. At this stage the evidence for the effect of Mesolithic activity on the vegetational cover is not clear. Mr R Kenna's work on the environmental history of the north Wirral coastal area has shown some evidence for the activity of man there in the Neolithic period (c. 5000 BP). Also his work on the early drainage pattern of the coastal plain and the local effects of coastal change has contributed much to an understanding of the nature of the prehistoric landscape in this area (see p.27 for detailed discussion). Dr Tooley's work on the complex sequence of sea-level change in the north west (Tooley 1976) has provided a general picture for the area but, apart from Mr Kenna's research, the local effects of these changes, and the mechanisms of coastal erosion and deposition which have affected the Dee and Mersey estuaries, are still not fully appreciated. The present understanding of the undocumented early periods is unlikely to alter significantly until this kind of study in the post glacial environment has been followed further. It may then be possible to predict to some extent where prehistoric settlement is likely to have taken place.

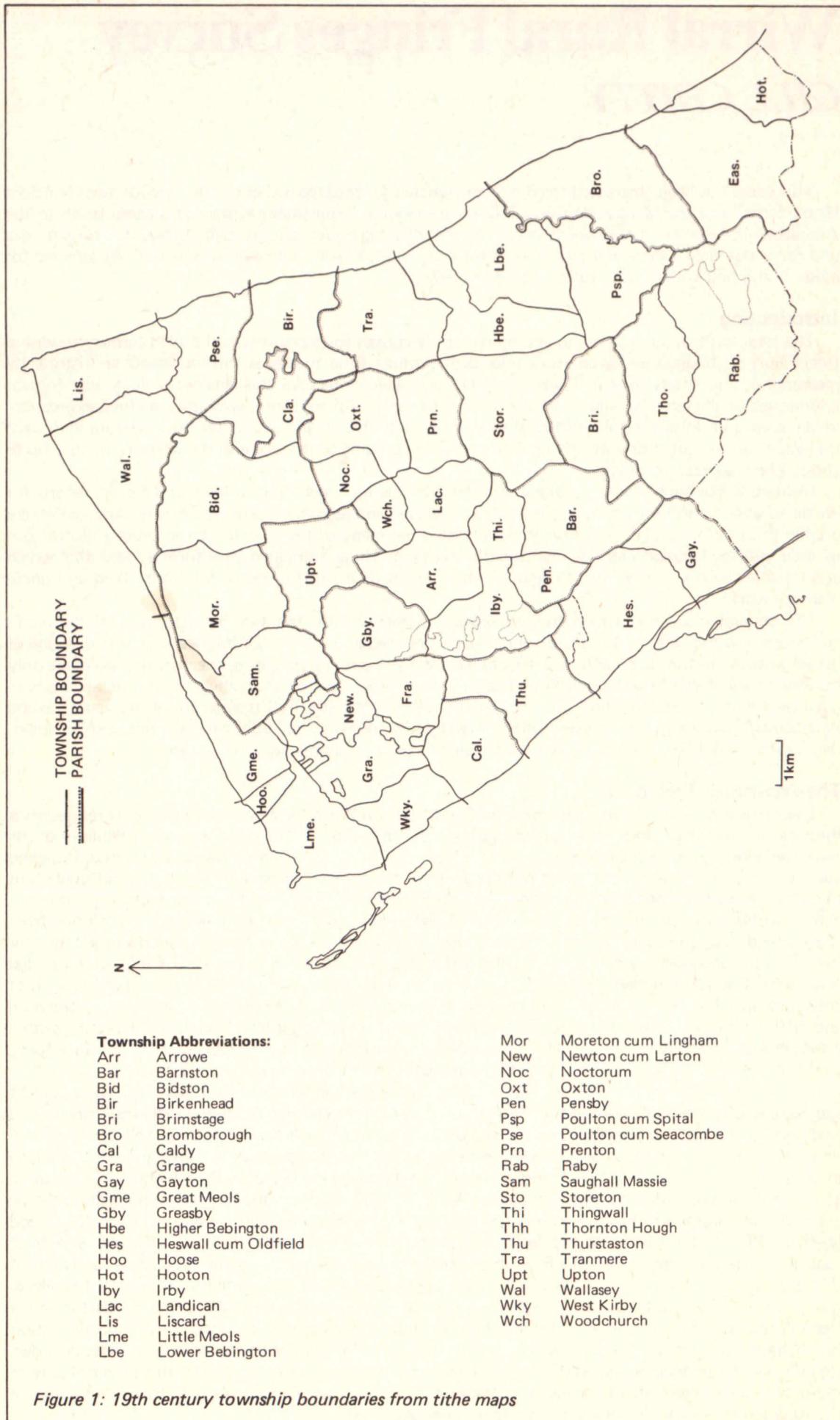
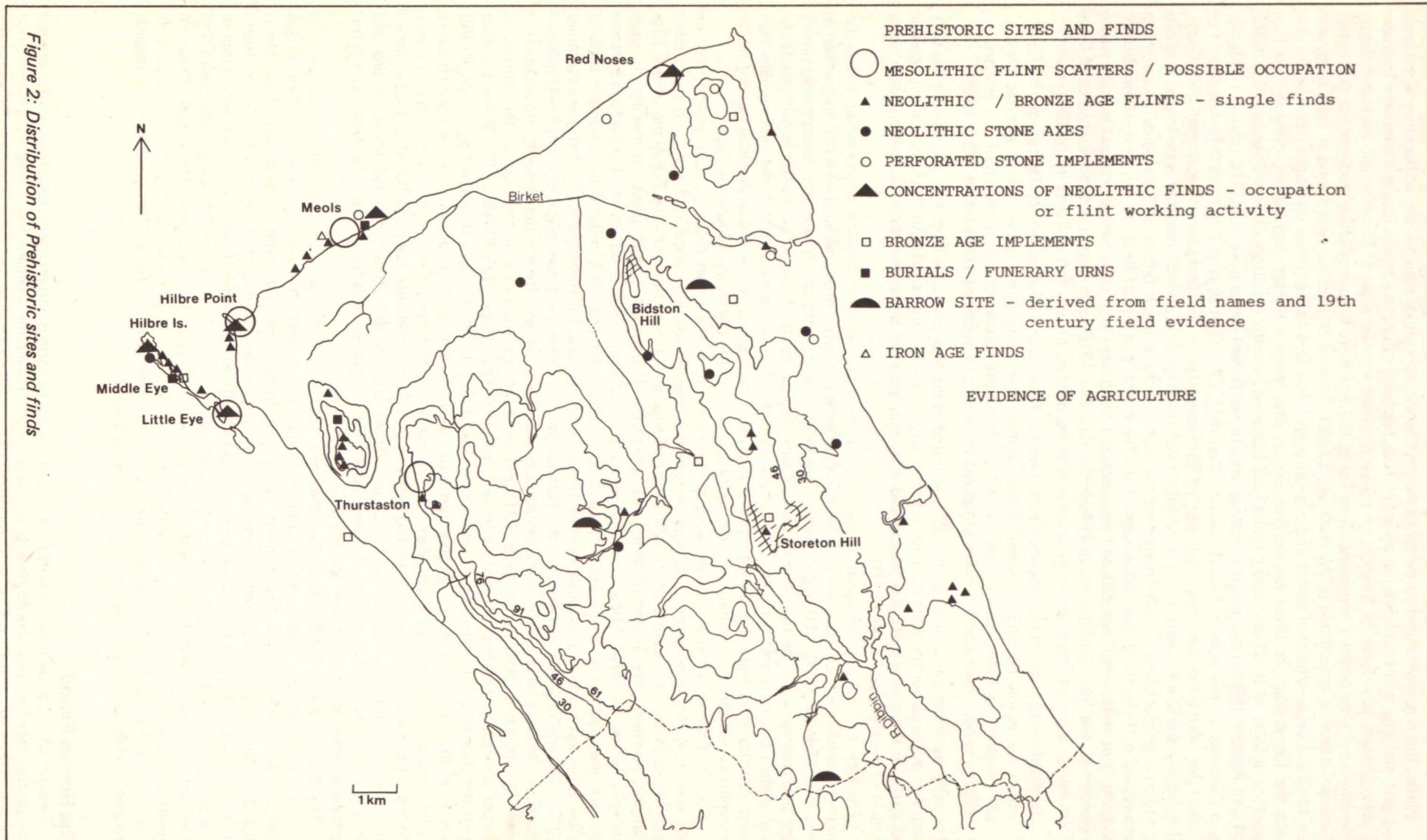


Figure 2: Distribution of Prehistoric sites and finds



Whilst there is environmental evidence for prehistoric agricultural activity, the archaeological evidence is slight, and this is not surprising in an area which has been subject to continuous and relatively intensive arable cultivation. A series of lynchets on the south, west and east sides of Stretton Hill were confidently identified by 19th century historians (Cox 1898, 52) but there is no conclusive evidence for this today. Funerary evidence is confined to the north west coast. Inurned cremations were found at West Kirby and on Middle Eye, a crouched burial under a cairn on Little Eye and a partly cremated inhumation, dug into the forest peat, at Great Meols. Occupation sites show a similar distribution, although the flint working activity at Red Noses and circular huts observed beneath the dunes at New Brighton (Cox 1895, 44 and Roeder 1898) may indicate another area of settlement in the north east. The role of the Mersey as a routeway in the later prehistoric period (Wynne 1959) might suggest that more evidence should be looked for along the east coast (eg east of Bromborough, a concentration of scattered flint finds). Regrettably the dock construction and building of the ship canal, which revealed waterlogged deposits containing artefacts and much environmental evidence, took place before archaeological practice had progressed sufficiently to take advantage of it. The concentrations of finds on the three Hilbre islands suggests that these very exposed and now isolated areas were part of a zone of coastal activity which extended to the flint working site at Hilbre Point (Glenn 1915) and along the shore eastwards to Dove Point where there are descriptions of circular huts exposed by the erosion of dunes in the 19th century:

'In April 1892 I was fortunate enough to find the foundations of another circular hut, one half of which was visible beyond the scarp of the sandhill. The stones were partially rough, but had a few pick marks and holes cut in them, in which to set the stakes for the conical roof . . . all these residences have their upright stakes preserved to a uniform height of 15-18 inches' (Cox 1895).

The only recorded piece of Neolithic pottery found in the area has come from this site, as does the only Iron Age evidence for the district. Since no finds were made in association with the huts it is not possible to attribute them to a particular period and they may possibly be as late as the Romano British occupation of the site (see below, p. ???).

The lack of Iron Age evidence in the area has been attributed to climatic deterioration which discouraged settlement. Dr Tooley's sea-level curve, however, shows a drop, rather than a rise, in sea-level at this time (Tooley 1976, 141) and it seems more likely that the sites which were in existence have simply not been recognised. The Iron Age evidence from Meols consists of a very few, rather remarkable finds: two swan neck pins and two base silver coins from the Channel Islands, both types well outside their usual distributions. Here it is perhaps worth discussing the nature of the site at Meols as its continuous occupation and the unusual nature of the finds will recur in the discussion of later periods.

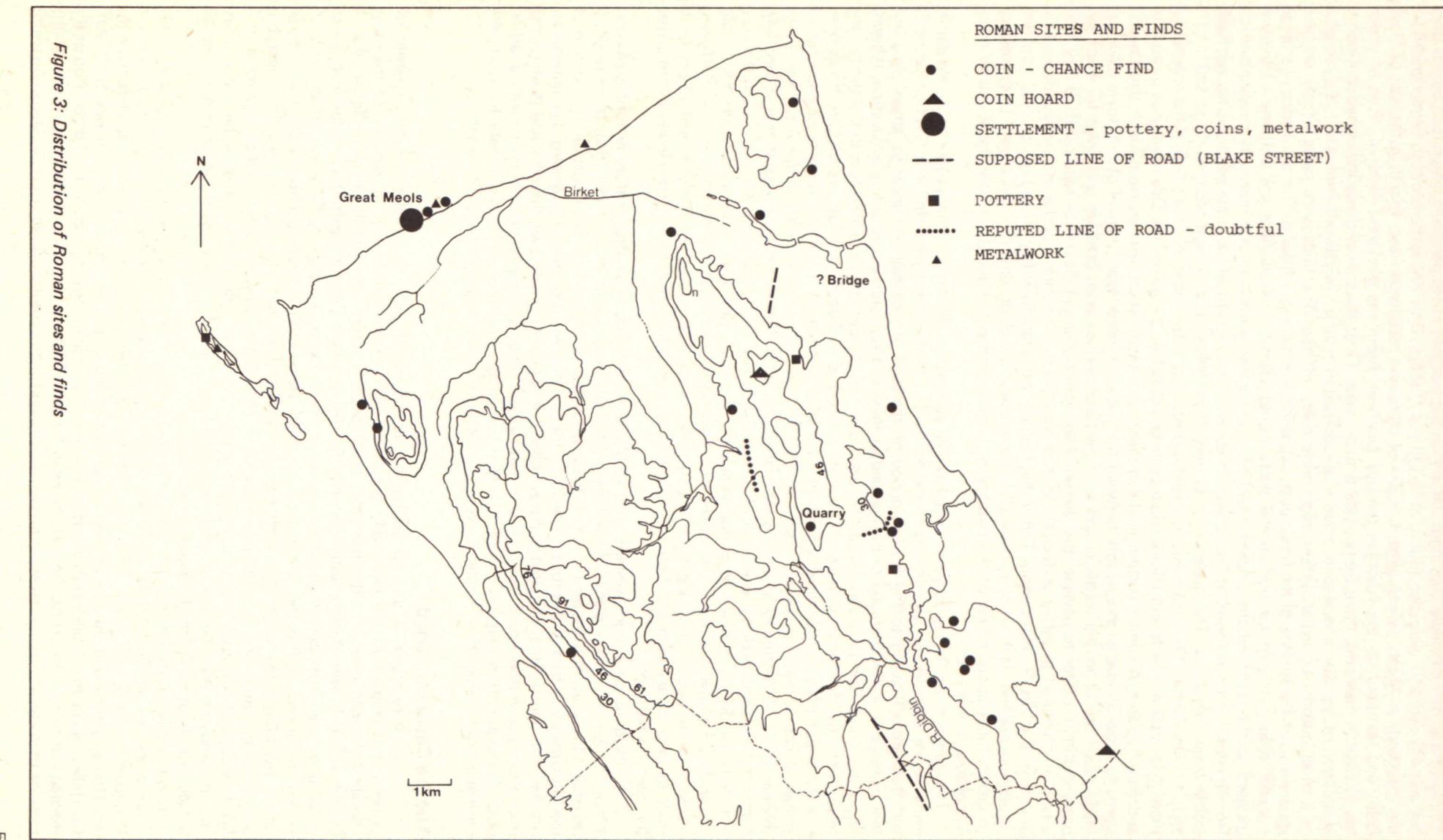
The site first attracted attention owing to the exposure of the forest peats or 'submerged forest' on the foreshore. As early as the mid 16th century this 'waste' was being exploited as a source of timber and firewood by the tenants of the Mostyns and Stanleys. It was not until the beginning of the 19th century, however, that it was recorded that numerous finds, mainly small pieces of metalwork, were being collected by local people from the shore as they were washed out of the buried land surfaces beneath the sand dunes. From 1850 onwards these finds were recorded in detail by a number of local antiquaries and published variously during the next half century (full bibliography in Chitty and Warhurst 1977). The discoveries were made to the east and west of Dove Point over about one and a half miles of coastline. Sections were drawn of the sequence of peat beds, salt and fresh water deposits and occupation levels (Smith 1864, 204; Potter 1876, 121) and there are contemporary descriptions of the remains of timber structures, cart tracks, rubbish pits and industrial waste (Cox 1895; Potter 1876). These, together with the thousands of finds from the site, leave little doubt that there was a significant settlement in this area from the prehistoric period through until the late 14th century. There are, however, some difficulties in interpreting the site and finds. Many objects were misidentified at the time of their discovery and, since only a small proportion of these has survived in museums, reliance has to be placed on the published illustrations. Contemporary accounts do not always distinguish between material found *in situ* and objects washed out on to the beach. Some collectors purchased finds from local fishermen and it is not certain whether all of these were actually found on the site.

The lack of a good understanding of the pattern of coastal change has been referred to above. The advance of the sea and loss of agricultural land under wind-blown sand was a source of concern in this area at least as early as the 17th century and there can be little doubt that a major part of the Meols settlement had been eroded away before the building of embankments and sea-walls in the 19th century. It is possible that part of the eroded area still lies beneath the redeposited sands of the present foreshore and probably also beneath the dunes to the south of the embankment. Here it may be possible to find traces of the gradual inland movement of the settlement to its post medieval site. The spread of modern development now occupies much of this land but some open areas remain undisturbed and would be worth investigating for both environmental and archaeological evidence. The potential for organic material preserved in the waterlogged deposits is very good.

### The Roman Period

Because of the proximity of Wirral to Chester, local historians and archaeologists have always tended to suppose that the area should have been subject to considerable Romanizing influence. The evidence for this is not apparent. In Figure 3 the distribution of Roman sites and finds is shown. This consists

Figure 3: Distribution of Roman sites and finds



mainly of a scatter of single coin finds, largely on the east side of the peninsula, where two hoards (mid 3rd and 4th century) were also found, at Oxtonge and Hooton. Only one settlement can be recognised on the mainland, at Meols, where large numbers of coins and metalwork were found to the east of Dove Point and scattered up the coastline towards Leasowe. From the published material, little of which has survived in museums, there are two points to be made. First, the coin evidence indicates a continuous occupation of the site, and second, there is an absence of military metalwork from which the presence of a small outpost or signal station might have been inferred. The finds were made largely on (and apparently in) the surface of the forest peat, exposed some distance offshore. The occurrence of Roman material redeposited so far out on the shore would seem to indicate that the settlement lay some distance to the north of the present coastline. Comparatively little pottery, normally so abundant on Roman sites, has been found at Meols, and its absence here and elsewhere in the peninsula has not been satisfactorily explained. The presence of pottery from Newstead's excavations (Newstead 1927, 137) and of other Roman finds from Hilbre Island suggest that there might also have been some occupation there. The sites at Meols and Hilbre could both be related to the use of the Dee estuary as a route to and from Chester. A similar pattern in the chronological distribution of coins from Meols and Chester seems to show a close economic link between the two. The deep water channel of the Hoyle Lake was made much use of in the medieval and post medieval periods as an offshore anchorage for ships and boats waiting on tides to navigate the Dee and Mersey estuaries and the coastal sand banks. It may have served this function in earlier periods but it is an assumption to imagine that the channel was necessarily in existence in the Roman period. Today, the Hoyle Lake is rapidly silting up and the continual shifting of offshore material at the mouth of the Dee (and Mersey) is well documented. Once again it is necessary to gain a fuller appreciation of the patterns of coastal change to understand how viable it is to make suggestions of this kind.

The evidence for Roman roads in Wirral is well summarised by Mr K Jermy (1960, 1-13). No dating evidence has been found associated with the sections of road which have been identified (see Figure 3) and they are attributed to the Roman period on the basis of medieval references to 'street' field and lane names and on the character of the cobbled surfaces and kerb stones revealed by excavation. It seems likely that some land route, as well as a coastal one, would have connected Meols with Chester but the route taken by the sections of road identified appears to indicate a different destination. It has been suggested that the object in view was a bridge crossing the Wallasey Pool. The remains of a substantial timber structure were uncovered there in the 19th century during excavations for a railway bridge (Massie 1857). No dating evidence was associated with it and it seems more probable that it should be connected with the medieval watermill of Birkenhead Priory which was located in this area. If it can be assumed that during the Roman period Wallasey Pool was a tidal inlet of similar proportions to that shown on post medieval maps, then there must have been good reason for the need to cross it. There is no evidence, however, to suggest Roman settlement or occupation on the other side of the Pool nor is there evidence on the opposite shore of the Mersey to suggest that the road may have led to a ford across the river this far north.

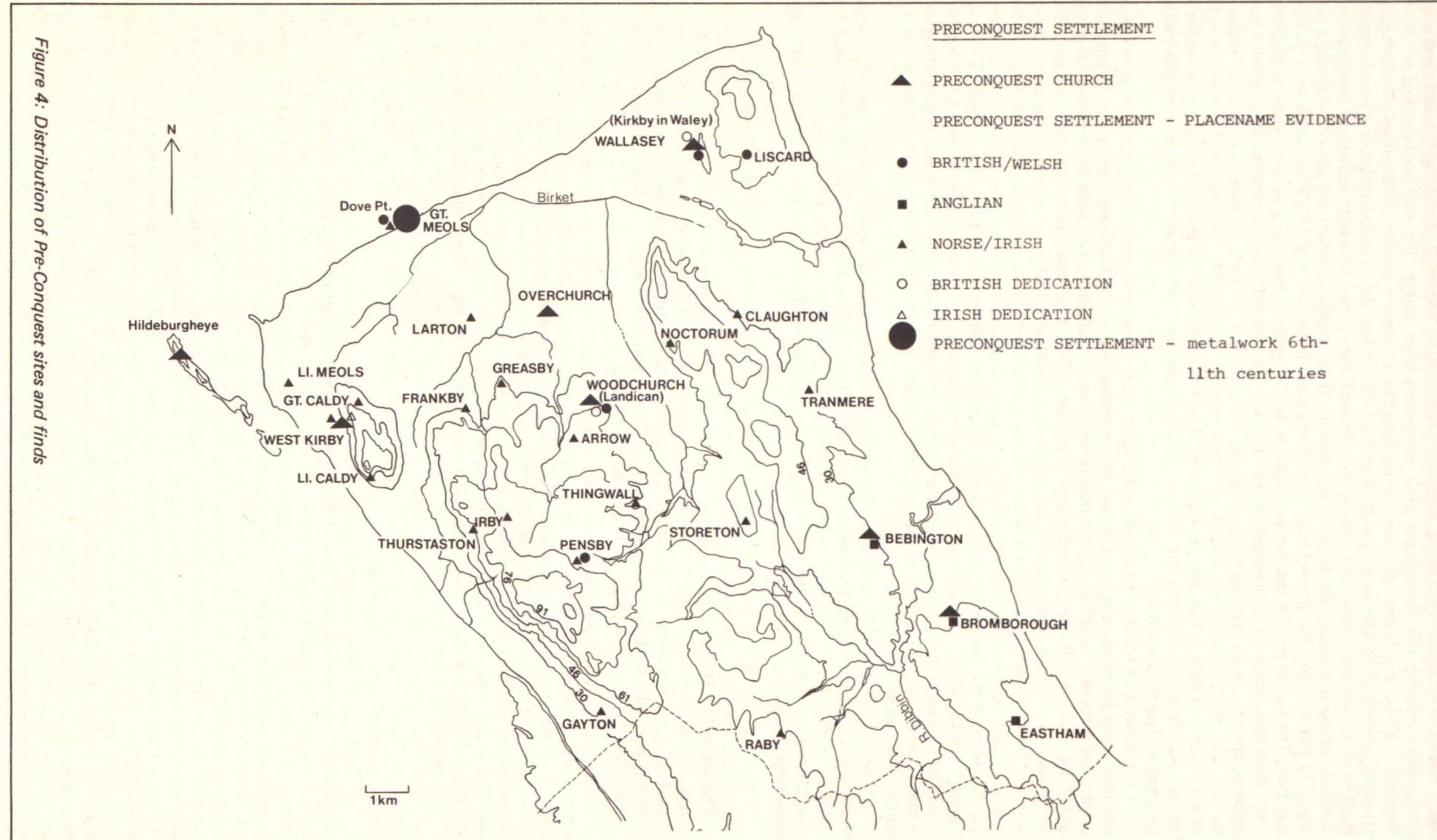
The possibility of a more westerly road to Meols was considered by 19th century historians (Watkin 1886, 57) but has been dismissed in later studies on the grounds of poor evidence. More recently research and excavation by Mr P France (1964-6) has led to the tentative identification of a section of road in Greasby as part of this route. The difficulty of dating roads of this type remains. The network of official, well constructed, metalled highways does not appear to extend over this area, and there is little reason to suppose that a rural lane of Roman date should be distinguishable from latter, or indeed earlier, ones. The assumption that a road with paving or kerb stones is necessarily Roman in date, has led to the misnaming of lanes, such as Roman Road in Storeton, which are almost certainly medieval.

### The Pre Conquest Period

From the very sparse picture for the prehistoric and Roman periods, a greatly contrasting pattern of settlement is evident at the Domesday Survey of 1086. At this period Wirral was one of the most densely populated areas of Cheshire. More than twenty manors occupied the area (see figure 5) and, excluding Earl Edwin's large coastal manor of Eastham, the pre Conquest pattern is predominantly one of small compact manors worked as single holdings of one thegn. Occasionally there are multiple holdings within one manor, eg Prenton, Barnston. Each one is based upon a small agricultural unit, or units, of one to five plough teams. Whether these represent small villages, hamlets or single farms is not clear, but the overall picture is one of a well-populated landscape with a relatively even spread of settlement. It is fair to assume that this pattern had its origins in some centuries of development before the 11th century and, by studying the late Mercian settlement of the area, it is possible to make tentative retrospective judgements about earlier pre Conquest occupation.

It is possible to demonstrate the pre Conquest origins of medieval settlement archaeologically in only a few cases, but all these appear to show a continuity of activity on the same site. In figure 4 the pre Conquest evidence, including place names, is shown. At Meols, once again, there is metalwork from the sub Roman period and the late Anglian settlement of the area in the 7th century (Bu'lock 1972, 20). On Hilbre Island the English settlement is represented by some finds of beads and the dedication of the isolated cell to St Hilda. An early foundation has also been attributed to Wallasey church on the basis of its dedication to St Hilary. For the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries, apart from the Meols site which

Figure 4: Distribution of Pre-Conquest sites and finds



has a wealth of metalwork and coins, evidence is restricted to fragments of sculptured crosses and grave monuments, notably the Aethelmund runic inscription from Upton, the 10th century hogback stone from West Kirby and fragments from Hilbre, Woodchurch, Bromborough and Wallasey. Pre Conquest churches are known to have existed at all these sites from references in early charters and the Domesday Book and, except for Upton and Hilbre, they formed the centres of a later settlement development. Wallasey village still retains the form of the central circular green on which the early church stood (see figure 5) but it is now too altered to be certain whether this hill top might have had an earlier defensive function. The Upton church site remains isolated in open ground (see figure 6), and no traces of settlement have been observed or detected around it, if any ever existed. Here the circular, ditched enclosure suggests, possibly, an earlier date than the earliest archaeological evidence (10th century), but subsequent burials, and rebuildings of the church will have caused considerable disturbance. At Bromborough, Woodchurch and West Kirby, the pre Conquest church sites still exist in the centre of the post medieval villages, and these sites also show the circular or oval enclosures which appear to be characteristic of early foundations (see figures 5 & 6).

In the absence of readily identifiable sites, apart from those mentioned above, place name evidence has been used by many historians to aid an understanding of pre Conquest settlement. A group of British/Welsh names, especially in the north east 'island' (Wallasey — OE *wala-eg*, Welshmen's island) and at the early church site in Woodchurch (Landican — OW *Iann-Tegan*, Tegan's church), suggests that the Anglian settlement took place in an area with a significant British population in the post Roman period. There are no Anglian place names showing primary settlement but Bebington and Eastham are relatively early name forms. The large number of secondary English place names in the area (Barnston, Upton, Bidston) are frequently combined with place name elements of Hiberno-Norse origin (Storeton, Greasby, Thurstaston). The settlement of Norse immigrants from Ireland seems to have left a marked impression linguistically but as yet their presence has not been recognised in the archaeological evidence. Some influence can be detected in the sculptured crosses, and the hogback stone from West Kirby is a purely Norse form.

The historical evidence for the Norse settlement is confined to a single specific source, part of an Irish annal known as *The Three Fragments*, which states that a Norse leader named Hingamund and his followers were expelled from Ireland and, having failed to gain a foothold in Wales, were granted lands, near Chester to settle in by Aethelfled of Mercia. This implies a peaceful occupation of the area although some fighting took place later:

'Hingamund was asking lands of the queen in which he would settle, and on which he would build huts and dwellings, for he was at this time weary of war. Then Edelfrida gave him lands near Chester and he stayed there for a time. The result of this was when he saw the city full of wealth and the choice land around it, he desired to possess them. Afterwards Hingamund came to the leaders of the Norsemen and Danes; . . . he said they were not well off without good lands, and that it was right for them all to come to seize Chester and to possess it . . . Many great battles and wars arose on account of this . . .' (Wainwright 1975, 80-1).

A concentration of Norse and Hiberno-Norse place names in the north and west of Wirral seems to indicate that the planted colony was at its strongest here and this corresponds with the lack of 'good lands' of which Hingamund complained. The mixing of place name elements referred to above, however, probably indicates a mixing of peoples rather than an exclusive occupation of different areas. This is well demonstrated at Meols where an originally British settlement shows evidence of Anglian occupation with later Norse and Irish metalwork and has assumed a Norse place name (ON *meir*, sandhill). There is nothing to suggest that the existing settlement was taken over forcibly or exclusively for the newcomers. A much wider Norse and Irish influence is shown in minor place names, fields (eg breck, thwaite, car, gil) and lanes (eg rake), but the value of these to define the Norse area is debatable owing to the general currency of Scandinavian words eventually adopted into the local dialect. They are widespread in what may be regarded as the Anglian east coast areas.

The incidence of Norse personal names in the Domesday Book record shows a similar pattern to the place names (see figure 7), both in distribution and in the mixing of Norse and English lords even within a single manor. The notable exceptions are the two English named lords, Leofnoth and Earl Edwin, who together hold the entire coast line of the peninsula. This could be interpreted as a deliberate exclusion of Scandinavian control from the Dee and Mersey estuaries and a link with the Danish and Norse settlers in the north. In this context the position of Bromborough is important. It formed the head of Earl Edwin's manor of Eastham which, although rather fragmented by the time of Domesday, must originally have extended to include the whole south coast of the Mersey estuary from Wallasey Pool to the mouth of the Gowy. The north Mercian frontier, strengthened by the Aethelflaedan burghs of the 10th century, is known to have extended as far as Runcorn. The place name evidence (OE *Bruna-burgh*, Bruna's stronghold) and the identification of Bromborough with the 10th century battle of Brunanburgh (Dodgson 1972, 238) suggest that the manor of Eastham might have formed an extension of the Mercian frontier along the Mersey (OE *Moeres'ea*, boundary river). This offers an explanation for the siting and strong defensive position of the large ditched site of Bromborough Court House (see figure 1, p.49). Although later in the medieval period it was used for a monastic manor house and grange, it is isolated from the village to the south and suggests the use of a pre-existing site (see Chitty *et al* 1979).

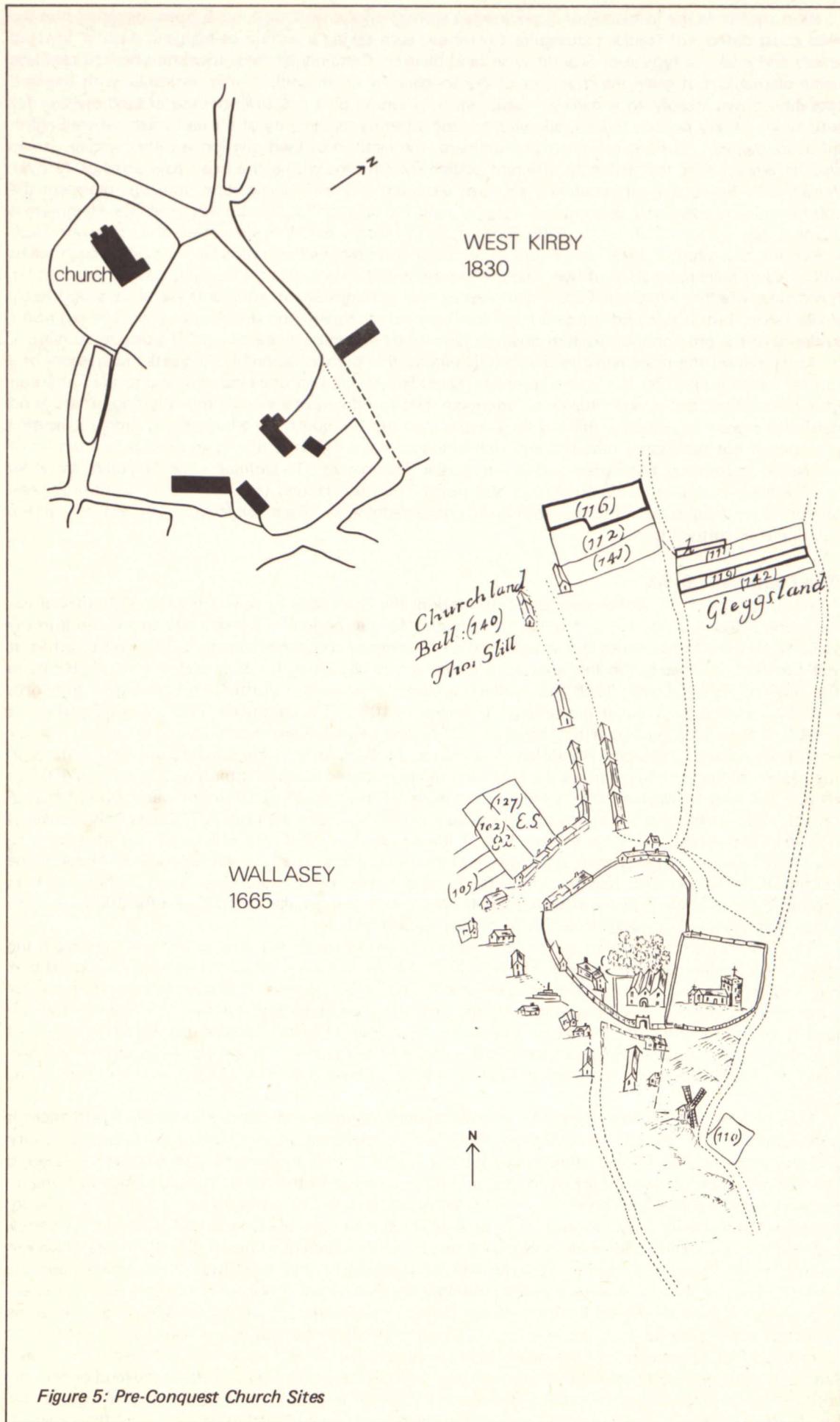


Figure 5: Pre-Conquest Church Sites

With regard to the influence of Scandinavian settlers on the landscape, it has been suggested that the west coast pattern of regular rectangular townships, each taking a section of highland pasture, lowland arable and coast, is typical of Scandinavian land division. Certainly all these townships bear Norse place name elements, but given the character of the topography on this side of the peninsula, with the land dropping down steeply to a narrow coastal strip, it would be a practical method of land division for settlement of any period. Indeed, allowing for the differing topography of the east coast, where English influence appears to have remained predominant, the method of land division is rather similar. It can also be argued that the strikingly different settlement patterns within the small townships of Arrowe, Pensby and Noctorum, all occupying spurs of elevated land with single farm holdings, represent the colonisation of previously unoccupied marginal land for pastoral farming by Norse settlers. Hargreave is a Domesday manor which by the 18th century, and probably earlier, was reduced to a single farmstead within the township of Raby (see figure 8). In 1086, it is described as having land for two plough teams and an adult male population of five. The pre Conquest lord, Osgot, bears a Norse name (ON Asgaur). It is not clear whether a nucleated settlement ever existed in Hargreave or whether it was always worked by single farms, but in this undeveloped rural area detailed air survey and documentary work might reveal evidence of the pre Conquest pattern of single farmsteads said to be characteristic of Norse settlement.

At Thingwall the place name evidence (ON *þing vollr* – place of assembly) suggests the presence of a central meeting place for the Norse colonists. Cross Hill forms a natural landmark and to the south east of this, multiple banks and ditches of unknown date run down one side of the common. There is no particular reason to associate these with the supposed pre Conquest site which, being simply a meeting place, need not necessarily have left any archaeological trace. The tradition of an English counterpart of the Norse assembly may be preserved in the 'mutler' field names (OE *(ge)mot* – meeting place and *lhaw* – (burial) mound) of South Brimstage and north Thornton Hough (see figure 10). No site has been identified on the ground in this area, but aerial photography may be a possible approach, as the fields are still open agricultural land.

### The Medieval Period

As a document for archaeological interpretation, the Domesday Survey is fraught with difficulties, but nonetheless it contains much unique information for this period. It is essentially an enquiry into the value of land for tax purposes and an assessment of the newly conquered kingdom. The basis on which it was carried out varies but in this area three values are usually given for each manor: a value TRE (ie in the time of King Edward, 1066 and earlier); a value 'afterwards' (ie after the harrying of the north c 1070); a value 'now' (ie at the time of the survey in 1086). The landowner TRE is usually given. It is notable that in 1086 the important manors of Edwin and Leofnoth are assumed by Earl Hugh of Chester and his lieutenant, Robert of Rhuddlan. The manors of the largely Norse named pre Conquest lords in the central section of the peninsula are those which are recorded as waste after the campaigns of 1070 to reduce the area to Norman rule. Eastham and many of the manors of Leofnoth were also reduced so severely that their value fell to less than three quarters of their estimated worth TRE and only recovered slowly to about half that value by the time of the survey. The harshness with which the area seems to have been treated suggests that there was a strong resistance to the Norman advance. In terms of the continuity of settlement, however, the effects cannot have been irreversible. Some manors, such as Storeton, had recovered in the fifteen years between their being waste in 1070 and the 1086 survey to the extent of having increased in worth from their value TRE.

The Domesday Book makes only one reference to woodland in the area, at Prenton, and from the absence of Anglian clearance names (Bu'lock 1972, 22 and Sylvester 1963) it has been concluded that much of the landscape was open heath and arable land by this period. If this is the case, it argues for considerable clearance in earlier periods by the prehistoric and later populations. The absence of woodland from the record is not, however, necessarily conclusive. Medieval documents refer to large areas of woodland (eg in Bidston and Wallasey) but the effect of the creation of a royal forest and the management of woodland during the medieval period may have been the cause of some regeneration of tree cover.

The documentary evidence available as an aid to understanding and identifying medieval settlement is very extensive but largely uninvestigated. Two factors, the creation of Cheshire as a palatine county and the afforestation of Wirral Hundred by the 4th Earl of Chester in the early 12th century, have led to the accumulation of a large part of the records for the period in the Public Record Office in London. Parts of these archives have been searched by historians for specific purposes but the bulk remains unassessed. More readily available, and more thoroughly studied, are the County Records held in Chester, but again, many family and estate collections remain to be searched in depth. Some manors, however, granted to ecclesiastical houses at an early date, have generated very few historical documents and the loss of many of these at the Dissolution (notably for Birkenhead Priory) has led to a very imperfect knowledge of these townships in the medieval period. The creation of a royal forest will have had some effect on the development of the area, but it should be understood that in the medieval sense, the term 'forest' is a legal one applying to an area outside common law, under direct control of special royal legislation. It does not imply that the entire area was forested, that the king owned all the land or that the entire area was given over to hunting. The petition to Edward III in 1376/7 (which finally brought about the disafforestation of the hundred) refers to the 'great harm, damage and destruction that the beasts of

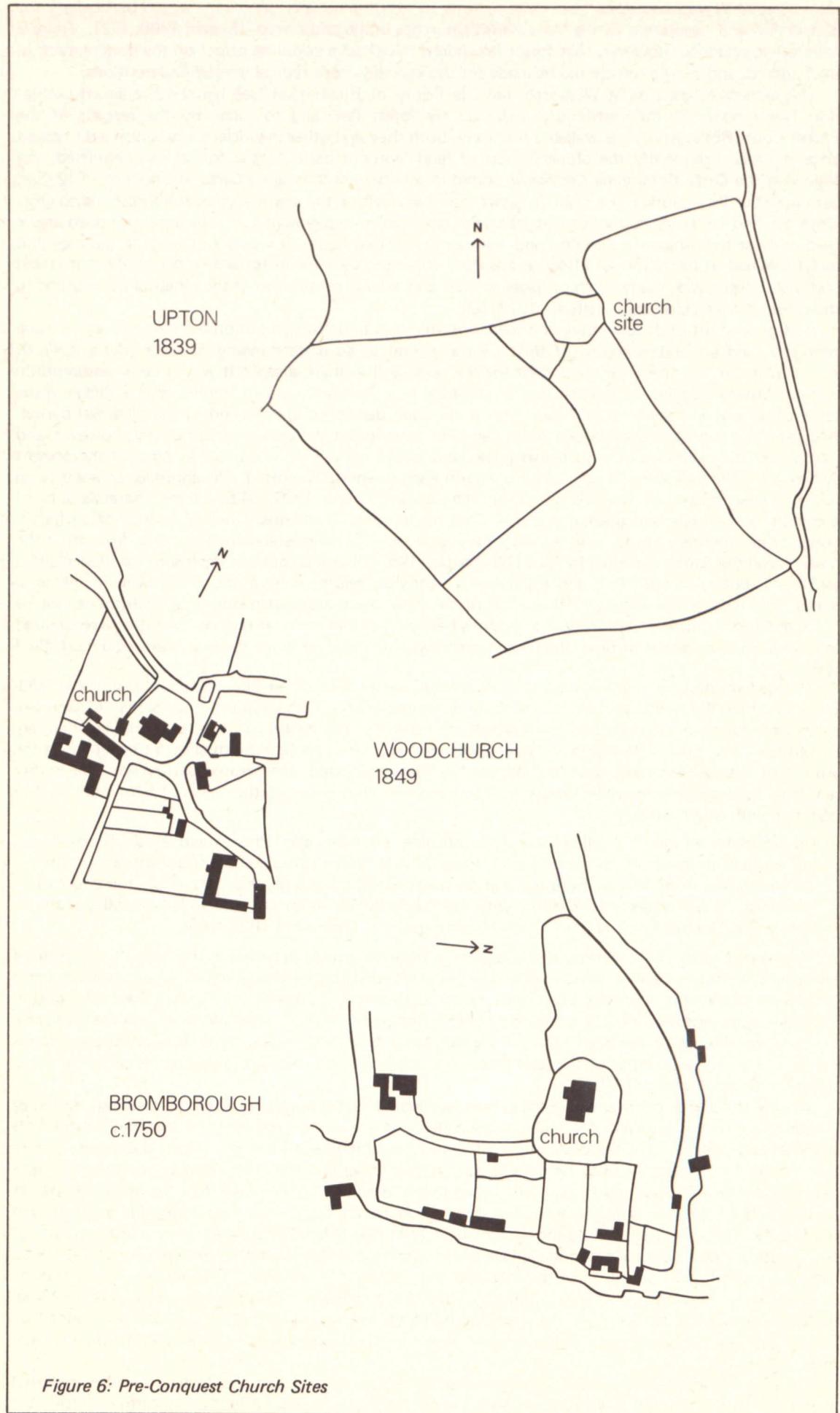


Figure 6: Pre-Conquest Church Sites

the Forest of Wyrall had done from time to time to his Commonalty people there, and particularly the destruction and desolation of the Holy Parish Churches in the said Forest' (Brown 1908, 172). There is little other evidence, however, that forest law might have had a crippling effect on the development of the hundred, and allowances should be made for the overstatement typical in medieval petitions.

The extensive lands of St Werburgh and the Priory of Birkenhead (see figure 12) claimed exemption from many of the restrictions enforced by forest law, and to judge by the records of the Forest Court Rolls, which are available for study, both they and other manorial lords continued to assart areas of land. Frequently the ploughing up of land 'without harm to the forest' was permitted, and following the *Carta Communis Cestririe*, sometimes known as the *Magna Carta* of Cheshire, in 1215-6, baronial liberties included 'the right to assart their lands within the arable area of the forest and to grow crops on land formerly cultivated and free from wood without payment . . .'. The extent of open arable field in most townships by the 13th and 14th centuries (see figure 9) would not seem to indicate that forest law had as restrictive an effect as has been supposed by some historians; 'most of the farms must have been destroyed, many of the villages wasted and a large proportion of the inhabitants confined to the coast or driven elsewhere' (Husain 1973, 62).

A large amount of documentary and field work remains to be carried out on the medieval agricultural economy, and an understanding of this is fundamental to an understanding of the settlement which accompanied it. No medieval maps exist for the area, and in their absence it would be an assumption, without other evidence, to imagine that a reference to a Domesday manor implies that a village of the same name was in existence in 1086, even if one had developed by the end of the medieval period. Accurate plotting of medieval open fields can help to pinpoint the centre of settlement, however, and may imply the existence of a nucleated settlement where none is documented. In figure 9 the present evidence for the existence of open field arable in each township is plotted. The approach to identifying this has been based on Orwin's definition (Orwin and Orwin 1939, 64-5) of the characteristics of common field arable and grazing practice. This has been supplemented, in the absence of sufficient detailed documentary study, with a preliminary study of field names and field patterns from the tithe maps, using the names accepted by Miss D Sylvester (1957, 5) as indicative of enclosure from open strips (eg loons, butts, shoots etc.), and references to *campus*, *selion*, *cultura* and *territorium* in medieval deeds. The incomplete nature of this attempt to show the pattern of medieval agriculture cannot be overemphasised. Studies of individual townships have shown that many areas, now tentatively recognised as having some evidence of open field, can be shown with detailed work to have operated a multi-field system.

The general picture which is beginning to emerge seems to show an intensively worked arable landscape in which the multi-field system was fully developed by the 13th century, if not earlier. Most townships were based on a small nucleated village or hamlet at the centre of its fields, although there are exceptions. The land of Newbold in Grange was worked as a single farm holding by a free tenant of the Abbey of Basingwerk, and does not appear to have supported a nucleated settlement. The rather complex field system described below in 1310 suggests that some of the fields at least were held in common with other tenants:

'In Newbold, all the field called Strangys-Strathfield, the field called Prestysfield, all the Broofield, all the field in length from the court of Newbold that comes to Holmedale and south west to the Smytheshoke, with Middle Furlong, and so from Smytheshoke all that shoots on the court of Newbold, 17 butts next the meadow with the headland that shoot the ends to Holmesdale, all the field called Dorton Knoll, the field called Bake Butts . . .' (Brownbill 1928, 100).

By the end of the 13th century there appears to have been some pressure on the available agricultural land. In Bebington in about 1300 an interesting charter describes the ploughing up of the reams or balks between ploughlands to bring more land under cultivation: 'I, William Lancelyn, lord of Poulton Lancelyn, have given to Robert le Heyre of Lower Bebington all my waste everywhere on the land lying between the ditches of the open fields of the vill of Lower Bebington and the ends of all Robert's strips . . . and also all the middles of the land of the reams between his strips and those of his neighbours . . .' (*Cheshire Sheaf* 3rd ser. XLVIII, 2).

In a large number of cases where the present settlement is still nucleated around a medieval church or manor house in the centre of the enclosed open fields, it is possible to be fairly certain that it represents the site, and possibly also the disposition, of the medieval village. Brimstage is a good example, where part of the 14th century manor house and its fortified tower still stand adjoined to the post medieval hall. The pattern of enclosed strips is still recognisable around the village, some of the open field names survive, and the houses, arranged around an open green, retain the form of the rectangular crofts of each house plot. This is shown well on the tithe map of 1841 (see figure 10) although only a few buildings of even post medieval date survive in the village today. Storeton village is another excellent example. Today a small hamlet lies to the south of the medieval hall and contains an unusually high proportion of good post medieval cottages and farm buildings. Frankby is similarly well preserved, with post medieval buildings occupying the plots of the medieval buildings around a triangular green, and surrounded by one of the best preserved open field enclosure patterns that remain in the district (see figure 11, tithe map, 1844).

The true medieval village, in the technical sense of its size and parish church status, is well represented at Bidston and at Eastham, where later development has not markedly affected the form of settlement

since the 17th century. Eastham is a classic green village with the church of St Mary (12th century and later) on the central triangular green, and compact groups of cottages on three sides (see figure 13 from tithe map 1843). On the north side of the green, many of the stone built 18th century cottages are constructed on much older weathered sandstone bases, which suggest they have replaced timber framed buildings of an earlier date. The growth of Bidston has been affected by the presence of the large 16th century hall and the medieval deer park and hunting lodge which lay to the west of the village. Here a fairly compact group of buildings is centred around the church and an open green with the hall to the south (see figure 13, Kingston Estate Map 1665). It is not certain whether this stands on the site of an earlier medieval hall.

Moreton was apparently a large and prosperous medieval village, paying the largest contributions of any village in Wirral to the fines of the Disafforestation Roll in the late 14th century and to the Mize in the 15th century. 'Morton Towne', on the 17th century Kingston estate map, is a comparatively small linear settlement along two parallel lanes running north from a central square green, and by this date must have shrunk considerably in size. On its western edge lies the medieval chapel, which had decayed and been demolished by the end of the 17th century. This pattern of development along two parallel lanes leading from the village to the fields can be seen in other places. The post medieval plans of Bromborough and Wallasey are similar, and in both cases the village is clustered around an open green on which the church and village cross stood at the bottom of the lanes (see figure 14, Bromborough c 1750 and figure 5, Wallasey 1665). In all three examples modern development has almost totally replaced earlier buildings, but the skeleton of the early layout has determined the modern street plan. The lane from the village to the fields is frequently named 'rake' (eg Mark Rake, The Rake, Bromborough; Hoole Rake Lane, Bidston; Rake Lane, Upton, Liscard, Heswall etc), derived from ON *rák*, a path especially for cattle, although they do appear to lead generally to the arable fields rather than to the common pasture.

Although nationally it has been estimated that there was on average a 25% loss of village settlement with the economic changes and drop in population of the later medieval period, there is little evidence to suggest such a profound change in this area. In other parts of the country the deserted village site and considerably shrunken settlement are characteristic features of the medieval landscape. At Bebington, West Kirby and Upton (all with pre Conquest churches), the churches are marginal to, and in the latter's case, isolated from, the site of the post medieval village, which would seem to indicate a shrinkage or shift of settlement in the medieval or later periods. In the case of Upton, there is no conclusive evidence that the settlement ever surrounded the church site. Similarly Hargreave, a reasonably populated manor at Domesday (see p.10), may never have supported a nucleated settlement. It is not named in the Disafforestation Roll of 1384, and presumably came under the account for Neston, as in 1399 there is one carucate of land there worth 40 shillings. It may have operated as a single farm as it does today. Poulton Lancelyn and Woodchurch appear to be considerably shrunken village settlements by the late post medieval period. The former is reduced still further today, and only two farms and the manor hall remain of the small linear hamlet shown on the 1665 estate map. Barnston hamlet shows evidence of having formerly extended to the west of the present settlement, from the field pattern and the existence of earthworks to the rear of the 19th century church.

The decline of Moreton has already been referred to above, but the abandonment of the coastal settlement at Meols for a site inland is probably the result of environmental rather than economic factors. The wealth of finds made from the site has already been discussed, but those of the medieval period are particularly rich, varied and numerous (Hume, 1863). Large quantities of silver, brass and pewter objects and evidence of smithing, bronze, pewter and leather working indicate an industrial activity which may account for the wealth of the site as expressed in an extraordinarily high number of coins. Part of its prosperity may also have lain in having an outport function for Chester as the Dee gradually silted up. An unusual number of pilgrim badges and tokens from the site suggest that it was also an embarkation point for pilgrims to the shrine of Our Lady of Hildeburgheye on Hilbre Island. The description of structures preserved beneath the dunes provides a detailed picture of the settlement:

'... three or four ancient dwellings, the floors made of puddled clay ... what remains of the walls, from 9-15 inches in height, shows that they were made of wood framework, filled with puddled clay ... The perpendicular timbers of the framework were supported on long irregular squared blocks of stone, two of which had holes cut in their surface for the foot of the timber to rest in. The floors were raised from the surface soil to a height varying from a few inches to two feet ...' (Potter 1876).

The number of coins from the site at Meols drops suddenly from 70 for the reign of Edward II to only 6 for Edward III, and by 1350 the manor house was abandoned and the 'site' reported as of no value. The De Meoles family moved to the neighbouring parish of Wallasey, presumably because of the encroachment of the sea and sand over the fields and the settlement itself. Since the Black Death was at its height during the same period, however, this may also have been a contributory factor to the decline of the village. Settlement was by no means wiped out but the post medieval pattern shows it to be of a rather scattered nature inland.

Although the typical medieval settlement pattern appears to be the small nucleated hamlet and village, some townships show a contrasting dispersed pattern of scattered and isolated farmsteads. Hoose and Pensby do not appear to have supported hamlets in the medieval or post medieval periods. Hoose was

Figure 7: Domesday Manors in Wirral

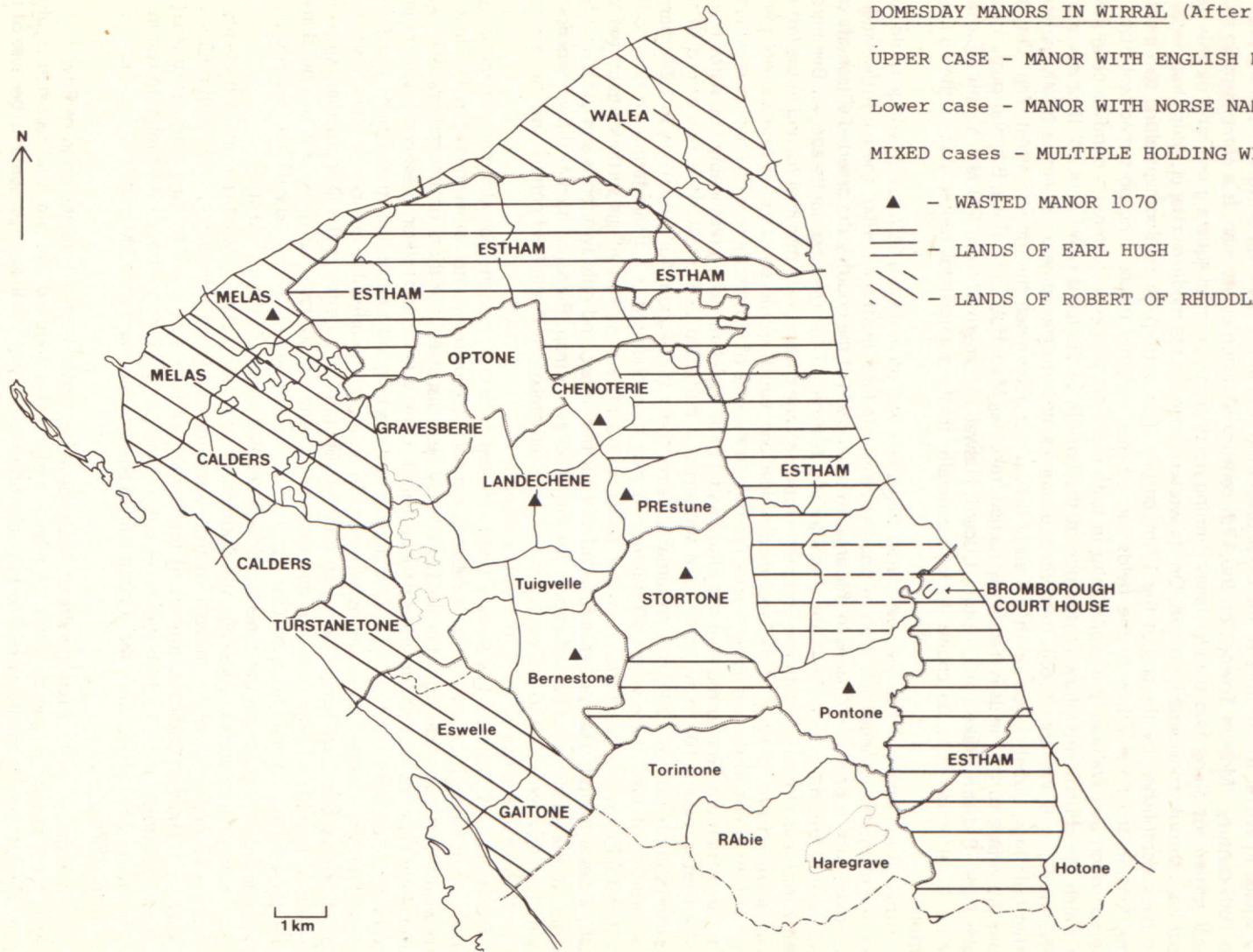
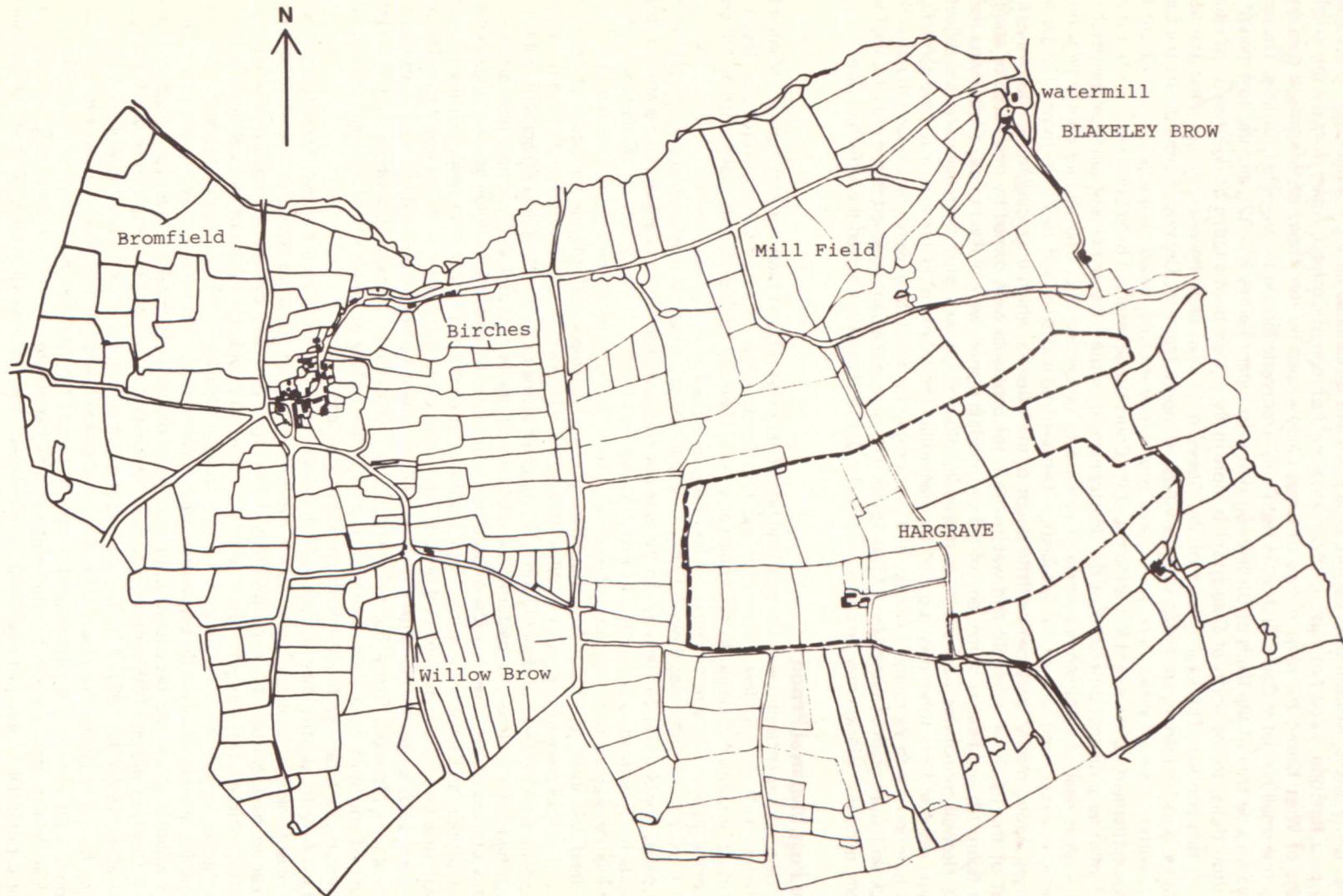


Figure 8: Raby Township 1846



used as a pasture by the Abbey of Basingwerk until the Dissolution, and in the Stanley Rental of 1592 'a pasture called Pensby' worth £40 is referred to, which must have comprised a large part of the township. In both these areas, as in Noctorum and Arrowe, the pattern of post medieval land use is one of isolated farms. Little Meols, Newton cum Larton, Claughton and Birkenhead all show similarities. This pattern may be a function, in part at least, of the management of monastic estates. Apart from the pre existing village of West Kirby, the large manor of Great Caldy owned by the Abbey of Basingwerk contained only one small hamlet at Caldy Grange, in itself only a monastic farm with associated cottages. The same appears to be true of the lands of Birkenhead Priory (compare figures 9 & 12), and the 'lost manor' of Woolton (lying to the north of Claughton) is more likely to have been another grange than a lost village site in this context. The large estates of the Abbey of St Werburgh, however, do not show the same features, and its manors are based upon a village economy (eg Irby, Greasby, Eastham). At the same time, within some of these manors, separate estates have evolved, based on granges isolated from the village settlement (eg Plymyard in Eastham and the Court House estate in Bromborough). As yet it is not clear whether a distinct difference in the development of settlement in monastic lands can be detected, and a great deal of documentary research remains to be carried out. One feature does emerge quite clearly, however, and this is the association between moated sites and monastic manor houses and granges. Economically there can be little doubt of the influence which the ecclesiastical houses exerted. Most of the medieval windmills and watermills in the peninsula were owned by one house or another (see figure 12) and tenants from many of the surrounding manors were obliged to pay for grinding there. Only Heswall church was independent of monastic influence. Consequently the religious houses collected a large revenue from tithes over most of the peninsula. The monks of Hilbre appear to have carried out this function for St Werburgh's Abbey, and presumably for this reason were granted land to house livestock and store grain in Little Meols (Tait 1920). The large stone barn attached to the old vicarage (now Lilac Cottage) in Bidston may be partly medieval in date and probably served the same function.

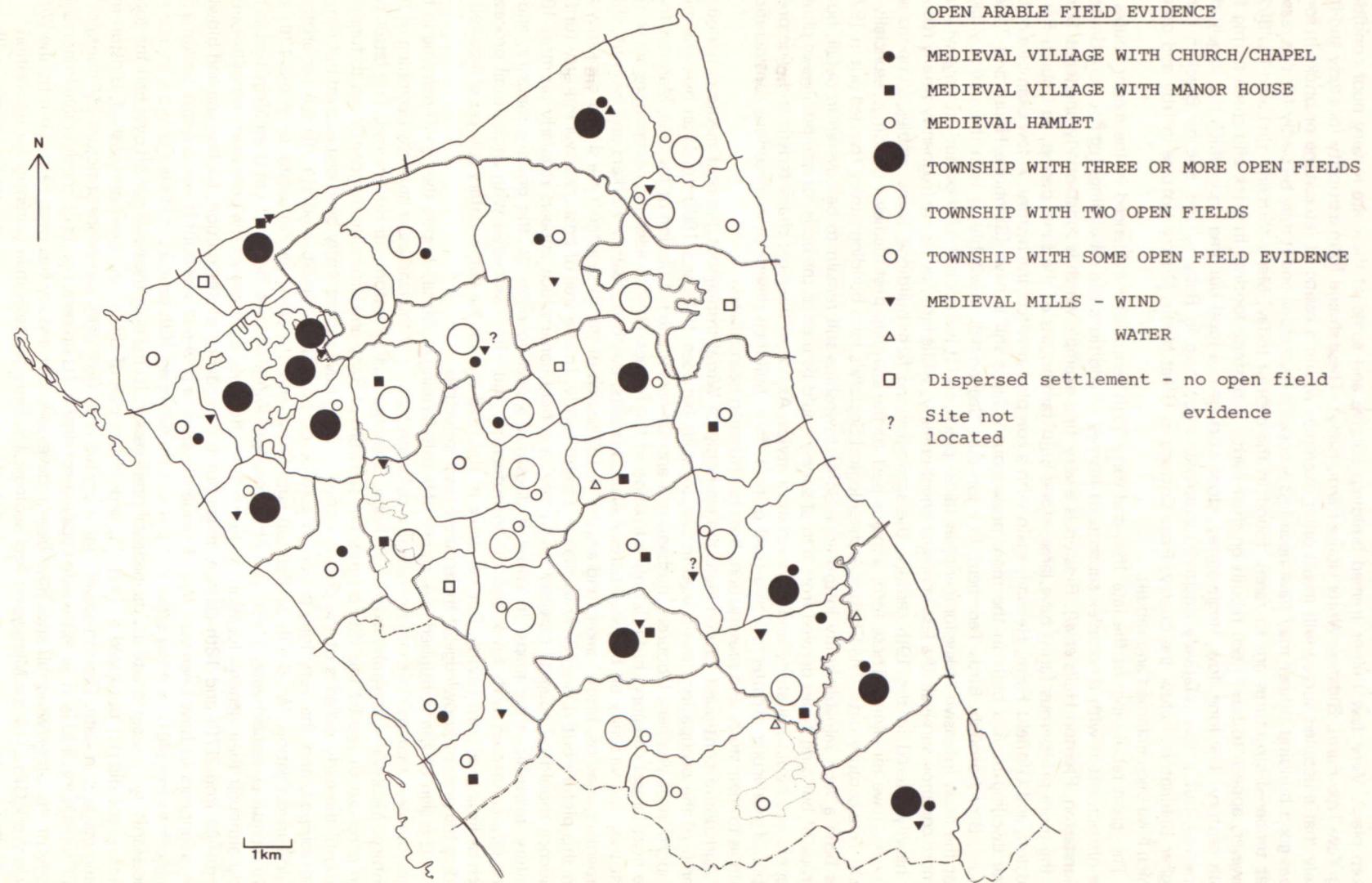
### The Post Medieval Period

There are no enclosure acts for medieval open field in Wirral, and those for enclosure of common are quite late and relatively few. From 17th and 18th century maps it appears that piecemeal enclosure of scattered holdings had begun to take place at an early date. By 1638 Brimstage is described as 793 acres of enclosure and 120 acres of common, and Raby as 805 acres of enclosure and 410 acres common. The mid 19th century tithe maps show only one township where a much decayed common arable system was still partly functioning. In Wallasey, on the east side of the village, tenants were working scattered strips: 'lounds in Townfield' and 'quilllets in Field behind the church'. The economy of Wirral remained predominantly arable (*viz* the large number of 17th and 18th century cornmills), and the unsuitability of the land for sheep grazing meant that there was no movement towards the enclosure of arable for pasture as elsewhere in the country. When Wolsey's Enclosure Commissioners visited Cheshire in 1517, they found no evidence of depopulation, no decayed towns or houses, and only 65 acres of arable land which had been enclosed for pasture. The enclosure of arable in Wirral seems to have been achieved by a slow process of the consolidation of scattered strips into scattered block holdings. This, together with the multiple land ownership within each township, strengthened rather than weakened the nucleated village structure in the post medieval period. The exception to this pattern in Wirral was the enclosure of the culls and waste on the outskirts of townships where isolated land holdings have developed, eg Lingham in Moreton, Benty Farm in Thurstaston, Oldfield in Heswall. Elsewhere in the country, organised enclosure by a single land owner or by parliamentary act tended to encourage the dispersal of settlement, each farm within its consolidated block of land.

Less easy to identify than the pattern which resulted from the gradual process of early enclosure are the reasons and mechanisms by which it was brought about. In areas where nucleated villages never appear to have existed it is correspondingly difficult to trace any evidence of open field arable in the present enclosed field systems, although the documentary evidence for its former existence is in some cases good, eg Arrowe, Newton cum Larton, Grange, Claughton. The movement towards enclosure in townships already managed by single or scattered farms must have been relatively easier to accomplish than where a village was dependent upon communal ploughing to subsist. It has been suggested that the Black Death of the mid 14th century may have 'hastened if it did not initiate the break up of community cultivation' (Sylvester 1957, 12). The degree of manorial control in each township will also have been a major factor. Whatever the reasons, the post medieval village of Wirral appears to have evolved in something like the same nucleated form and on approximately the same site as its medieval counterpart.

The documentary sources for the post medieval period are extremely numerous and their archaeological potential is only just beginning to be realised. They include all types of official records, parliamentary and fiscal, manorial records, private estate papers and title deeds, rentals, surveys and maps. The origins of modern state bureaucracy lie in the Tudor period, and from the 16th century onwards written records were generated on an unprecedented scale. It is only in recent years that it has been recognised that such archives have more than a purely historical value. Until more of these sources have been studied in full, any archaeological examination of post medieval sites would be out of place. In many cases the present fabric of the settlement forms a large part of the physical evidence for its post medieval history, and one would not anticipate an investigation of the underground archaeology taking place so long as the settlement structure is maintained. Detailed architectural and structural recording of standing

Figure 9: Distribution of open field arable evidence



buildings, which it has not been possible to carry out on this survey, should form a necessary part of future work on the post medieval archaeology of the area. Mr A. Shatwell's study of the cruck barn at Vineyard Farm, Poulton Lancelyn, is an excellent example of one of the few such surveys which has taken place. Very few timber framed buildings survive and some of these are in very poor condition (eg Yew Tree Farm, Bidston; White House Farm, Raby). These should form a priority for study and it is likely that a detailed survey will reveal other examples within a casing of later stone or brick. In some areas good building timber may have been less accessible than stone and it may be partly for this reason that timbered structures are so rarely found in the district today. Many formerly timbered buildings, however, appear to have been rebuilt on their earlier sandstone footings in brick and stone during the 18th century. The long, low, single storey, stone cottage is a local building type which has largely disappeared, but a few relatively unaltered examples exist: two in Raby village, one on Bracken Lane, Higher Bebington, below the quarry, Rose Cottage in Great Meols, Quarry Cottage in Irby and others which have been enlarged and rebuilt.

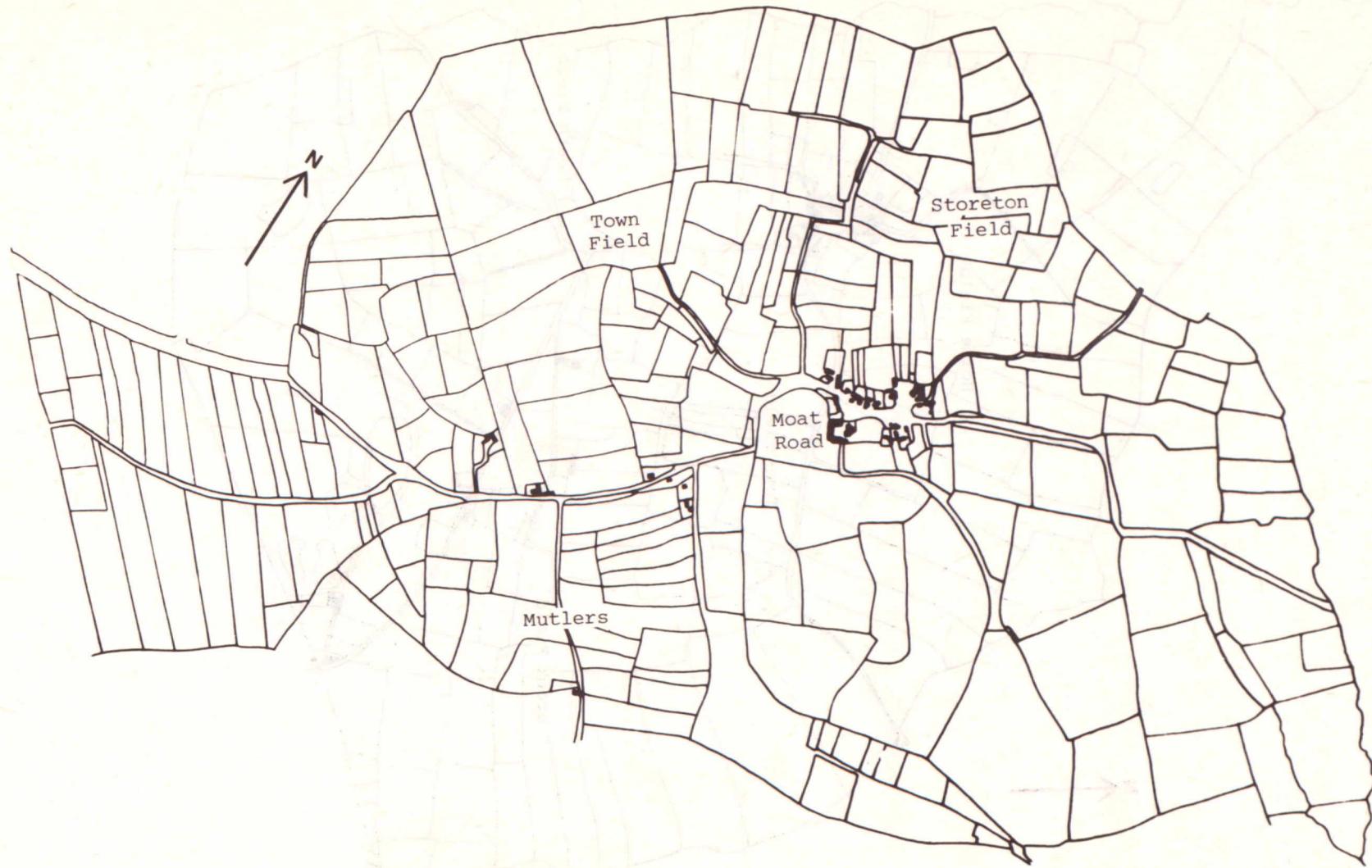
The 'great rebuilding' of the late 16th and early 17th centuries is evidenced in the manor houses of the district, often with a complex subsequent history of additions and rebuildings (eg Poulton, Gayton, Thurstaston, Prenton Halls *et al*). Bidston is a very fine example which is substantially unaltered. Some of the more prosperous farms have large, stone built farmhouses of the same period, eg Church Farm, Bidston, and Oldfield Farm, Heswall, again with a complex architectural history. A few examples of the large dwelling houses built in the more prosperous villages still survive (Stanhope House and Tellets House, Bromborough; Birds Tenement, Poulton cum Seacombe). Inevitably, it is in these large villages that the most intensive redevelopment has taken place, and it is the small 17th century cottage which is a more common survival, if a less imposing one. Similarly, while farmhouses are frequently totally rebuilt or heavily altered in the 19th century, the accompanying farm buildings, barns, stables, shippions and pig-sties, have remained. These form a major part of the standing post medieval buildings, especially of early 18th century date. The Chester Archaeological Society's farm building survey (carried out in 1973) has been a very valuable study in this area. Some townships still remain to be covered in detail, but a corpus of building types derived from a total survey could be used as the basis for comprehensive photographic and structural study and work on local styles. As one of the most characteristic and widespread types of vernacular architecture in a rural district, farm buildings deserve a more serious consideration, both as to their study and preservation, than has hitherto been allowed.

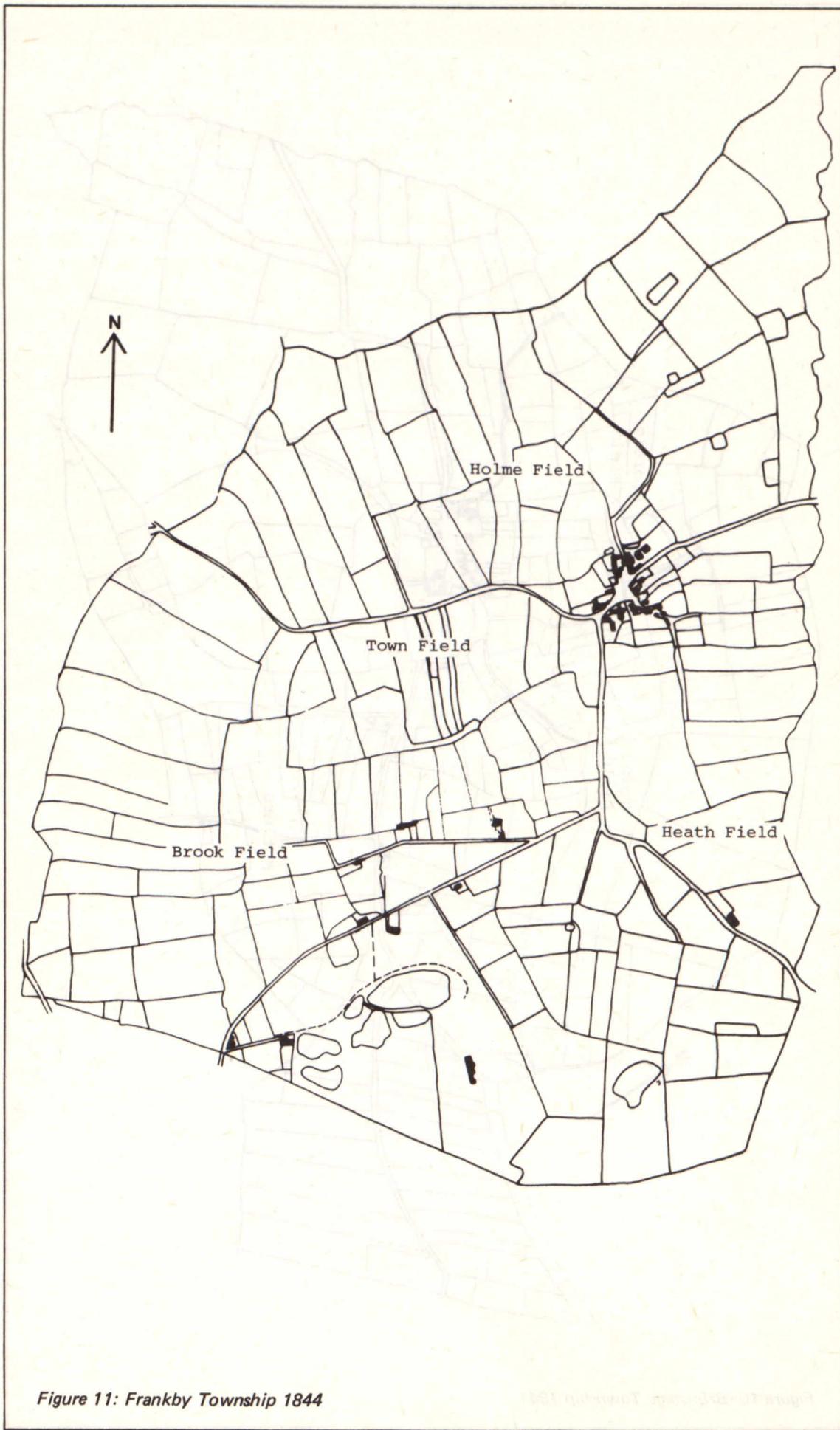
Agriculture continued to dominate the economy of Wirral throughout the post medieval period. A search of the occupations mentioned in Chester wills between 1545 and 1800 shows an overwhelming proportion of yeomen, labourers, husbandmen and farmers in the population of the area. Mariners form the next largest category, but it is only a fraction of the former. Other trades and occupations are so few that they can virtually all be listed here: millers, brewers, butchers, leather workers and weavers, ships carpenters, masons, brick makers and smiths. A full search of parish registers on a similar basis may fill out this picture but it is unlikely to change it significantly. In one area of post medieval industry further evidence should be sought, however. 'Kiln hey' is a field name which appears regularly on most 19th century township tithe maps. In Wirral it does not appear to relate to the pottery industry, and is probably connected with brick and tile manufacture, and kilns associated with agricultural processes such as liming or corn drying. Further work in the field and on the documentary sources is required to add to the present knowledge of these minor rural industries.

It is a sign of the continued importance of arable farming in Wirral, despite the rise of dairying in the 18th century, that the corn mill remained a common feature of the landscape until the beginning of this century. Medieval watermills existed at Raby, Bromborough, Prenton and Birkenhead. The latter two had gone out of use by the 18th century but the mills at Raby and Bromborough continued to function up until the early decades of the present century. Both have subsequently been demolished but remain undeveloped, and the very long period of activity on both sites suggests a good potential for archaeological investigation. Windmills at Poulton cum Spital and Storeton were in existence in the 13th and 14th centuries respectively. These, and other medieval windmill sites, have not yet been identified in the field although their general location is known from field names. Many of the post medieval mills can be identified from 17th and 18th century maps but the incidence of destruction, by burning and blowing down, appears to have been very high. Frequently when a new mill was built it was constructed on a site adjacent to the older one (eg Bidston, Irby) and therefore an 18th century mill may be close to, but not necessarily on the same site as, its medieval predecessor. In the post medieval period over half the townships in the district possessed a windmill, and all but one of these have been demolished, Bidston mill being modern in date. Gayton tower mill, a particularly fine, early sandstone structure still contains its mill machinery, and is in an extremely decayed condition. Its preservation is of considerable importance. Many of the other windmill sites have been redeveloped but a study has been carried out by the Wirral Field Work Group of the Merseyside Archaeological Society to assess their potential for excavation.

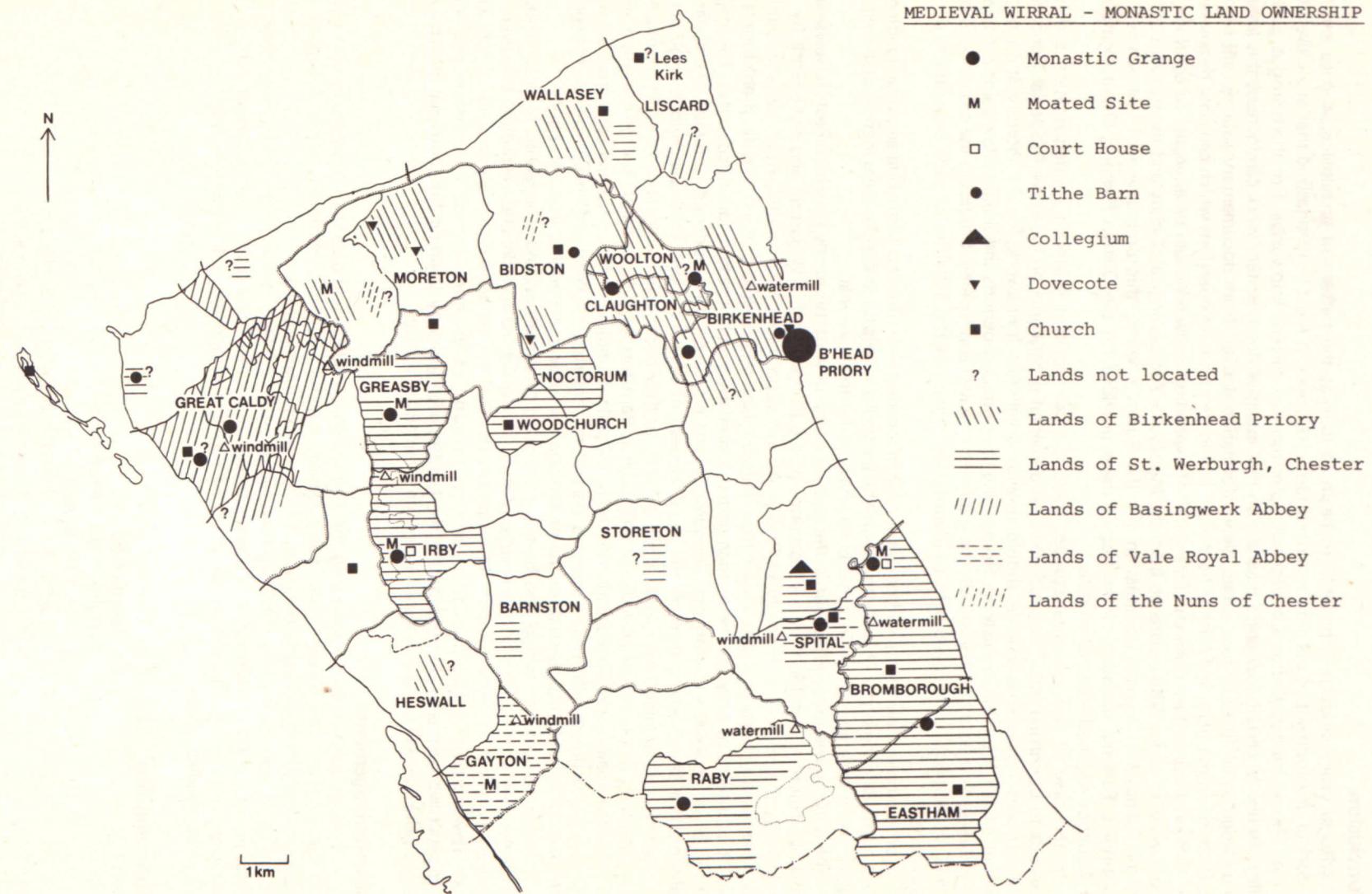
On Bidston Moss a corn mill, with grain drying ovens, and a large complex of iron slitting mills with furnaces, worked on tidal power from the Wallasey Pool in the 18th century (Cuthbert Woods 1927, 113). A small community of houses and offices grew up around the industry but had a short lived existence. By the 19th century only a small cottage remained, which was demolished before 1905. The area is now occupied by railway sidings and refuse tipping. Apart from this limited industrial development, and a very short lived attempt to start, a salt works on Hilbre Island in the 17th century

Figure 10: Brimstage Township 1841





*Figure 12: Monastic Land Ownership*



(Brownbill 1928, 46), there is little other evidence for post medieval industry. Another hundred years was to elapse before the building of the railways, the Wallasey and Birkenhead docks and the beginning of the growth of the east coast industrial belt.

### Conclusion

After a year's study it is possible to begin to look at the pattern of archaeological sites and the historical development of the area in general terms. However, it must be emphasized that at all levels this survey should be regarded as a preliminary assessment of current knowledge. For the historical period, pilot studies on certain townships have shown that intensive documentary work can increase this level of knowledge some three or four times. New information derived from documentary sources will require verification in the field, and further field work will in its turn raise questions which can only be answered by further documentary research. This spiral of expanding knowledge can be expected to continue for some years to come. With assistance from the Merseyside Archaeological Society and the further support of the Manpower Services Commission for the Survey's work, this programme of research will be continued. Periodic updating of the hazard maps provided for the District Planning Departments will probably be required every 18 months.

In the field of environmental studies, there is much work of synthesis, reinterpretation and new research to be carried out. The proposed environmental programme on the Survey's Special Temporary Employment Programme scheme should provide a valuable framework for the interpretation of the slender evidence for the prehistoric, Roman and pre Conquest periods and should allow some prediction of where such sites might realistically be expected to have been located. Studies in the sequence of post glacial vegetational change will help to identify the impact of the activities of early populations on the landscape.

A programme of air survey will be productive in locating new sites and furthering an understanding of the known existing ones. This approach will be particularly helpful in certain areas identified during the survey and a programme for flying has been prepared for the next year.

The only excavations carried out in the area up to the time of this survey have been Prof R Newstead's work on Hilbre Island, Mr K Jermy's sections of the Roman road in Willaston, and some work by the University of Liverpool at Birkenhead Priory. An excavation policy is required which takes account of both rescue and research needs. Apart from Hilbre Island and Middle Eye, no specific prehistoric sites can be identified at present. The Roman period is similarly scant of readily identifiable sites. The examination of a medieval site with pre Conquest origins would be of considerable interest. The apparent conservatism of settlement through the pre Conquest, medieval and post medieval periods suggests that the sampling of suitable post medieval village sites, as they become available, is one way to approach an understanding of the earlier periods. At sites such as Barnston, Irby, Upton and Poulton Lancelyn, areas of interest remain undeveloped and potentially valuable. Sampling of the remaining open areas south of the Meols coastline could suggest whether part of the deserted medieval settlement still exists beneath the sand dunes, and the potential for the preservation of organic material on this site is good.

A major contribution would also be the monitoring of alterations and renovations to post medieval buildings, many of which stand on medieval sites, and which require detailed recording. However, the greatest potential for archaeological investigation lies in the rural areas which are protected from large scale development by the present green belt. In many of the areas outside this, the archaeological contexts have been severely eroded over the last hundred years by building and industrial growth, and rescue priorities will remain in these areas in the immediate future.

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### Abbreviations

Chet Soc	Chetham Society
EPNS	English Place Names Society
Geol J	Geological Journal
JCAS	Journal of the Chester Archaeological Society
JMAS	Journal of the Merseyside Archaeological Society
LCAS	Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society
THSLC	Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire
TRE	<i>Tempore regis Edwardi</i> (in the time of King Edward)
OE	Old English
ON	Old Norse
OW	Old Welsh

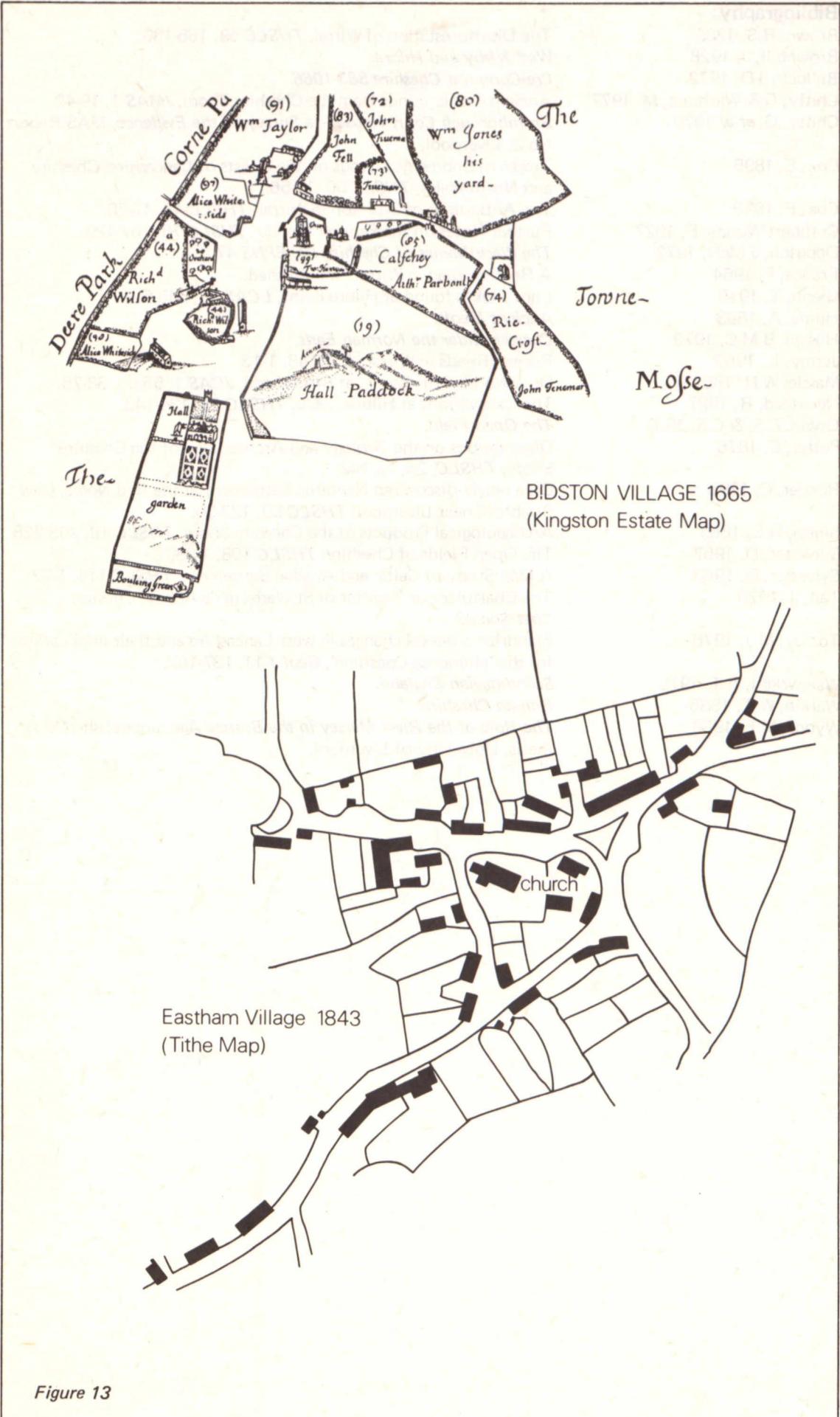


Figure 13

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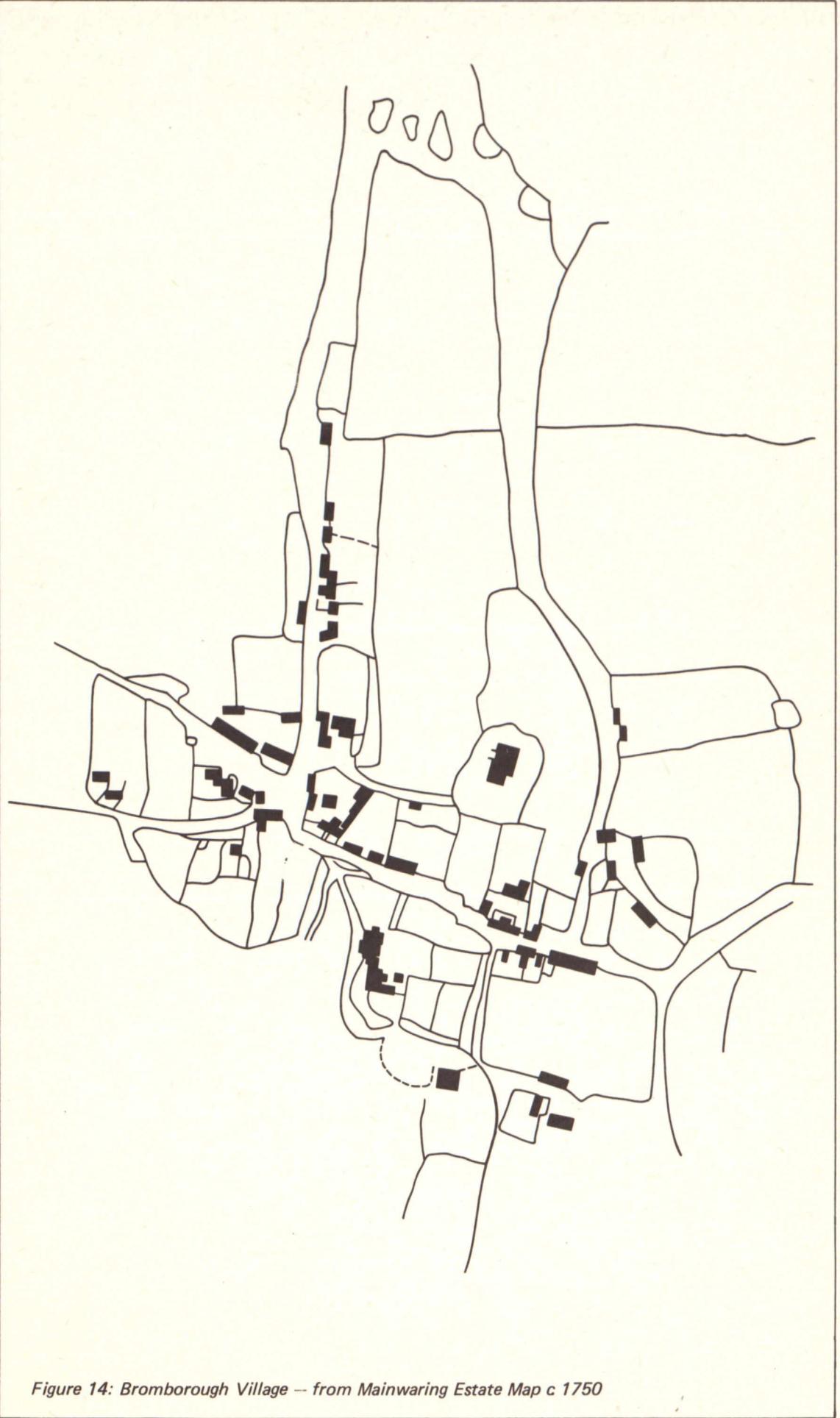


Figure 14: Bromborough Village – from Mainwaring Estate Map c 1750