

IN MEMORIAM: CHRISTOPHER CHARLES TAYLOR (1935–2021)

By PAUL EVERSON¹

Chris Taylor died in the early hours of Friday 28 May 2021 in Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge. In parallel with a career of more than 30 years in the public service with the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, he had reached far beyond the formal scope of his employment to stimulate and address the inquisitiveness of a wide public in their local landscapes; and, through classes, training courses and lively publications, had showed them how they might develop and satisfy those interests. Much of that energy was devoted to medieval settlement studies. He was Chairman of the former Moated Sites Research Group; President of the MSRG from 1986 to 1989 at the crucial time of the Group's consolidation – when he gave what Robin Glasscock characterised at the time as a *forceful* paper on 'The new Research Group – where do we go?'; and latterly was a long-standing and supportive Honorary Vice-President.

Born and brought up in Lichfield, and taking a first degree at University College of North Staffordshire (newly created at Keele in 1950), Chris Taylor was a proud son of Staffordshire. Yet his outlook was never parochial or geographically limited. By his own account, from an early age he noticed things and wanted to know all about the world around him. In a much-repeated story, he would recall, aged seven or eight, visiting a relative's farm in Northamptonshire and asking why, as the pony cart drove across a pasture field, it (and he) went up and down in a regular rhythmic manner. That is how he learnt about ridge-and-furrow and the medieval open-field system – from people with experience of farming practices past and present. The breadth of his inquisitiveness stayed with him all his life and was even expanded in unforeseen directions: as when his step-daughter, Alexandra, opted to study art history at the Courtauld Institute and he found a new fascination in early North German painting and especially in the landscapes that formed their backgrounds. The pioneering four-year degree course at Keele in his time – including a foundation year in which he and his peers heard lectures on everything the university then taught – served him well. He embraced the excitement of it all; as he said, his mind 'exploded'. And that sense of needing to know about anything he encountered never left him: 'every detail of what I see around me I want to explain and understand'.

But it was not the creditable degree in History and Geography at Keele that set his later course; still less the two-year Diploma in Western European Prehistory at the Institute of Archaeology, London, that followed in 1958–1960. Rather, it was two strands of vacation

work. The first was with Staffordshire County Planning Department under the guidance of its then Assistant Planning Officer David Peace, which gave him experience of the Ordnance Survey Record cards and of the idea of a local Sites and Monuments Record. The second, and more important, was as a temporary survey assistant at the RCHME (Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England) Salisbury office over three successive summers. This introduced him, under the tutelage of Desmond Bonney, to the satisfaction and stimulation of archaeological fieldwork. In 1960, having finished the diploma in London and while in the field with Desmond, he was called to an old-style Civil Service interview and appointed to a permanent position as an investigator with RCHME.

A path seemed to be set: to work at Salisbury on the exceptional prehistoric and Roman monuments of the area, which the RCHME excelled in recording, and thereby finish the long-standing volumes on Dorset (Figure 1), before moving into Wiltshire for more of the same. Instead, unexpectedly, he was sent on a temporary posting to Cambridge with the task of doing the earthworks of 38 parishes for a volume on *West Cambridgeshire* that lacked its archaeology. This experience was critical for Chris. He encountered the commonplace monument types of the English midland counties: large areas of ridge-and-furrow, moats and manors and mill mounds, village settlements which exhibited a variety of form that he could not immediately understand. He felt an attempt to classify moats in the manner his colleagues were classifying vernacular buildings for the published volume was a failure – but the aspiration put him ahead of most who were then interested in settlement studies. With *West Cambridgeshire*, too, he learned that he could set himself a task, deliver it and move on.

By the end of 1961, therefore, he was married and installed at Salisbury. And there he followed through



Figure 1 Chris Taylor at the Iron Age hill fort at Eggardon Hill, Dorset in 1960. Photograph credit: Taylor family.

¹ Nantwich.

on his interest in medieval settlement. Not narrowly as monumentalised remains itemised for inventory purposes, but beginning to see the landscape as a dynamic and changing and multi-layered entity. Evening-class teaching, personal research and non-RCHME writing were the means to pursue these lines of thinking: notably in his famous study of Whiteparish (1967), where he lived, and in his *Dorset* volume in the *Making of the English Landscape* series (1970). Though there was much to enjoy, and to learn from the acute fieldwork practice of Collin Bowen, Chris was frustrated by RCHME's endemic slow progress in both fieldwork and publication. In 1966, he took the opportunity of a transfer again to Cambridge, again for a task that needed just doing – *Peterborough New Town* (1969). The earthworks for *North-East Cambridgeshire* followed – only ten parishes this time – and, in dealing with the landscapes of fen drainage, reinforced for him the limitations of itemising monuments without making an attempt to explain a whole through-time sequence: so, characteristically, he bent normal practice to make it deliver something useful, if not perfect. By the time he had done the few earthworks required for the *Stamford* inventory volume in mid-1970, he was far ahead of any progress that his architectural colleagues might be expected to make and looking around for what to do next. The Commissioners' acceptance of his suggestion that it should be Northamptonshire was a decisive moment, and not least for medieval settlement studies and landscape history.

With Northamptonshire, Chris knew that there were considerable numbers of settlement earthworks in the county; he knew that Tony Brown (as adult education tutor-organiser based in Leicester) was willingly organising conferences and courses at Knuston Hall, including his own practical survey course; he knew that there was a good deal of fieldwalking going on, whose results Tony too was reporting in an annual Bulletin. But, most importantly, the go-ahead put him in the position of setting his own regime of work and timetables. Though operating solo (Fran Crowther was appointed as his field assistant only from 1973), he divided the county – omitting the area of Northampton New Town – into four and set out to produce a volume every couple of years and to complete the whole county in seven or eight years. He was aware that this aspiration would mean some selection, some cutting of corners: inevitably therefore some regrettable omissions and outright mistakes. The countervailing benefit was that he saw a large number and an exceptional variety of field monuments – principally medieval – in a short period. And from that came a stream of ideas and articles, often building on experience in Cambridgeshire and elsewhere, that energised the archaeological study of medieval settlement: polyfocal settlement, village mobility, interrupted rows, market grants and village morphology were among these: but, underlying all this, he identified change as characteristic and urged recognition of a wider landscape and its time-depth as the way to understand the processes.

There is no doubt that much that Chris wrote about individual medieval settlements and landscapes – beginning from Whiteparish – might benefit from review and be liable to revision. He would say so himself, being one of the few scholars who would readily admit he had

been wrong. But he continued to generate and convey ideas; and through those ideas he gave others the tools and the terminology to progress medieval settlement studies and make them interesting and something more than a catalogue of examples. I recall David Austin at a conference on the origins of medieval settlement long ago opining, in a whispered conversation, that Chris Taylor was the only one amongst us who had an overall grasp of the subject and could develop a narrative. He had the experience and generosity of outlook to engage sympathetically on the one hand with those inclined to bottom-up studies and on the other with top-down, characterisation approaches represented by Roberts and Wrathmell's *Atlas of Rural Settlement in England and Region and Place*.

Ironically, the golden age of fieldwork in Northamptonshire for Chris came to an end because he delivered what he set out to do, plus input into Northamptonshire volumes V and VI too. Instead of being told he could have a couple of willing assistants and apply the same dynamism to Leicestershire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire, and Staffordshire perhaps, he found RCHME was itself changing and setting aside the Edwardian objective of county inventories. He was a senior figure, and in a restructured world found himself – slightly uncomfortably – in a position of management and administration: supporting, enabling and encouraging rather than doing. So, in 1980 he became administrative head of the Cambridge Office and also head of Archaeological Survey nationally within RCHME. In the early 1980s, he contributed – with stolen days of fieldwork on sites including Riseholme, West Firsby and Nettleham Bishop's Palace – to wrapping up RCHME's exemplary project in Lincolnshire, and wrote an introduction to the volume; but publication only followed his stepping down from any management post in 1988 in order to push it and a volume on *Roman Camps* through HMSO, because he believed in their quality and value. With responsibilities within RCHME including to set up and energise a new set of local offices – in Newcastle, Exeter and Keele – with staff derived from the closure of Ordnance Survey's former Archaeology Division in 1983, Chris's main output on settlement studies in this period was a series of general publications with commercial publishers, that would stand as major landmarks in a lesser scholar's career but are easily overlooked in his: *Visions of the past* with his friend Dick Muir (1983), the prize-winning *Village and Farmstead* (also 1983), and a new edition of W.G. Hoskins' *The Making of the English Landscape* (1988) with notes and an updated bibliography. While extra-mural classes continued to happen, these were staple items of their book boxes and recommended reading, and continued his impact on a wider interested public. With other publications such as *Fieldwork in Medieval Archaeology* (1974), *Fields in the Landscape* (1975) and *Roads and Tracks* (1979) – each written swiftly, in a lively style and full of examples from his personal experience – plus his two volumes in the *Making of the English Landscape* series, such a book box could be full of Taylor!

With the run-down of Chris's employed career and his early retirement in 1993 from RCHME – his sole, career-long employer – a new surge of publications began to appear, some of them overtly on settlement topics.



Figure 2 L–R: Maurice Beresford, John Hurst and Chris Taylor at Wharram Percy in 1989. Photograph credit: Wharram Research Project.

Several sought to summarise new understandings: ‘Medieval rural settlement: changing perception’ (1992), ‘Dispersed settlement in nucleated areas’ (1995) and ‘Nucleated Settlement: a view from the frontier’ (2002),

each published in *Landscape History*. Much of his work now related to the villages he had known for 30 years or more in Cambridgeshire, as he ticked off – in a series of contributions to the *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* – interesting and stimulating ideas that had accumulated in his files; he enjoyed sharing insights with Sue Oosthuizen and encouraging her researches in their local topography.

Retirement brought a series of awards and honours. The British Academy made him a fellow in 1995 and in 2013 awarded him their John Coles Medal for Landscape Archaeology. In 1997, Keele University gave him a DLitt degree; belatedly, no doubt, for someone commonly cited as the epitome of the enabling benefits of Keele’s distinctive, broadly-based degree course. Remarkably, he received no fewer than three volumes of essays dedicated to him. Typically, that from his colleagues in RCHME touched him especially – not for its academic quality but because of its authorship by young colleagues whom he had nurtured. For settlement studies and the origins of midland villages, he continued to recommend the essay by Tony Brown and Glenn Foard in the second of these volumes as important. One of the last of Chris’s published pieces, too, was a typically generous and thoughtful extended review of the final Wharram Percy volume: ‘Wharram Percy 2013: the final whistle?’ (2013).

Chris was a remarkable man, and remarkably influential in a whole series of academic spheres, displaying energy and good sense wherever he operated and a knack of focusing on what mattered. Medieval settlement studies may be where he had the most, and most long-lasting, interest and impact, because the residues of the medieval landscape were everywhere for him to see and to be inquisitive about. But that focus – importantly to him (and to us, I suggest) – always lay within an appreciation of a landscape scale, a greater time-depth, and with change as an ever-present factor.



Figure 3 Contributors and honorands of ‘The Rural Settlements of Medieval England’ (Blackwell, 1989), a Festschrift for Maurice Beresford and John Hurst, assembled at Wharram Percy. Back row L–R: David Hall, Paul Harvey, Maurice Beresford, John Hurst, Chris Dyer, Richard Hodges, Mick Aston, and Chris Taylor. Front row L–R: Stuart Wrathmell, David Austin (reclining, back), Philip Rahtz (reclining, front), Brian Roberts, and Harold Fox. Photograph credit: Wharram Research Project.