

WHERE POWER LIES – THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF TRANSFORMING ELITE CENTRES IN THE LANDSCAPE OF MEDIEVAL ENGLAND c. AD 800–1200

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Introduction

Towards the end of the first millennium AD, the emergence of new networks of power and expressions of lordly identity became one of the key social transformations across much of Europe. In England, the Late Saxon period (mid-ninth to mid-eleventh centuries) saw the fragmentation of large estates and the subsequent granting of smaller parcels of land to an emerging elite who increasingly invested in residences and their settings (Draper 2012, 348; Gardiner 2017, 89–95; Blair 2018, 354–362). Contemporary documentary sources suggest that these new lordly centres would have consisted of a secure enclosure within which would have been a hall and domestic buildings (Williams 1992). While these places functioned as residences and centres of local administration, they would also have acted as conspicuous displays of social hierarchy and expressions of their owners' wealth and status (Loveluck 2007, 156). This expression of status also extended to the religious sphere as emerging lords had churches built either within the same enclosures or adjacent to their residences to serve their family (and sometimes communities) and augment their authority.

It has long been recognised that the archaeological evidence for many of these emergent lordly sites lies buried beneath later manor houses and castles (Wright *et al.* 2022, 141), but while these subsequent elements are considered quintessential components of the medieval landscape, our understanding of their origins and earliest development is often limited. And although some Late Saxon lordly sites have been subject to thorough investigation – perhaps the best known of which are Raunds in Northamptonshire (Cadman 1983; Audouy and Chapman 2009) and Goltho in Lincolnshire (Beresford 1987) – there is a danger that examples within this small corpus become styled as exemplars of what was a nationwide and surely much-varied

phenomenon. At present we still remain largely unsure of how many early lordly centres existed, what their geographic distribution was, what they looked like, when they were built, and how their forms may have varied, both temporally and spatially.

Where Power Lies: The Archaeology of Transforming Elite Centres in the Landscape of Medieval England c. AD 800–1200 was a joint project delivered by Newcastle University, the University of Exeter and the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) that aimed to answer some of these fundamental questions regarding the earliest medieval lordly centres. The project, which ran from November 2022 to September 2024, employed a range of archaeological, historical and other methods to map and explore these sites on a range of scales, from region-wide studies to site-specific investigations. It had a particular emphasis on exploring locations where there exists evidence for a lordly residence and contemporary church/chapel combined, as it is these places that we can best trace a wide range of archaeological signatures of elite expression over time.

The big picture

One of the first priorities of *Where Power Lies* was to integrate all available nationwide datasets that could inform understanding of the presence of early lordly centres (defined here as dating from c. 800–1200) into a single Geographic Information System (GIS). Among the evidence included in this national database was the *Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland*,⁵ and evidence for the earliest castles.⁶ Even when combined, these data were far from comprehensive, reflecting instead local and regional trends in research, but they did lay a platform for more detailed interrogation and their synthesis represents a valuable tool for future study. From this nationwide picture, the project targeted two 'macro' study regions, one focused on the South/Southwest incorporating

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⁵ <https://www.crsbi.ac.uk> (accessed September 2024).

⁶ The early castles database was developed during a previous research project (see Creighton and Wright 2016), adapted and enhanced from Philip Davis' Gatehouse Gazetteer (<https://www.gatehouse-gazetteer.info/home.html>, accessed September 2024).

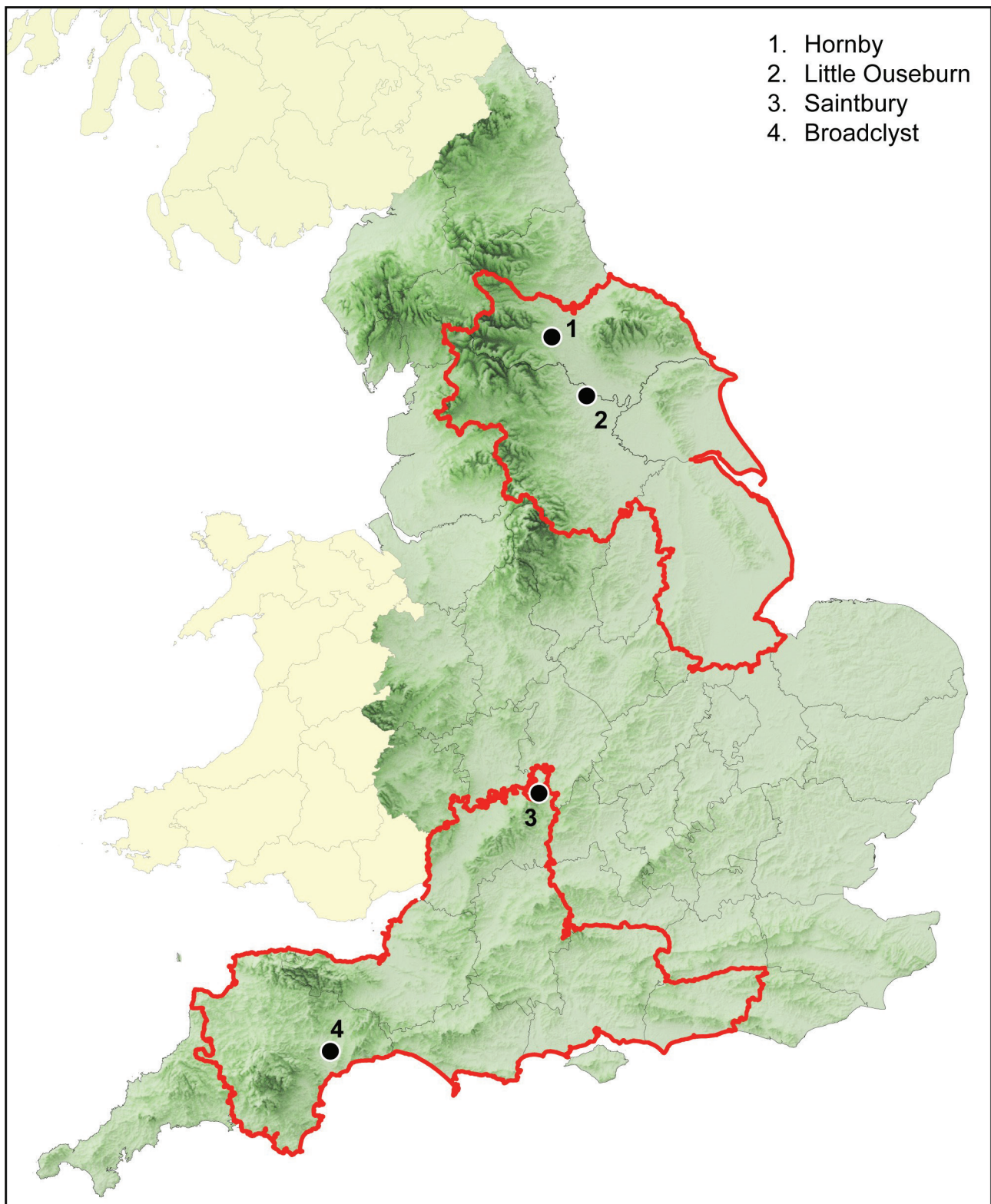


Figure 1 *Where Power Lies*' two macro study regions, and key sites mentioned in the text.

Devon, Dorset, Somerset, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Hampshire and West Sussex, and a second in North-East England comprising Yorkshire and Lincolnshire (Fig. 1). Although these two areas differ in their number of constituent counties, they are nevertheless roughly comparable in size, covering approximately 26,477 km² and 22,716 km² respectively. This choice of scale allowed *Where Power Lies* to compile a dataset that was large enough to permit the identification of meaningful

regional trends, but was also a size that could be comprehensively interrogated within the project's duration. It also ensured that one area within the Danelaw and one without was subject to study, and that a cross-section of Robert and Wrathmell's (2000) settlement types were captured. Many parts of the Danelaw were apparently less heavily 'seigneurialised' than other regions of England, as reflected in the large number of freemen and sokemen in Domesday Book,

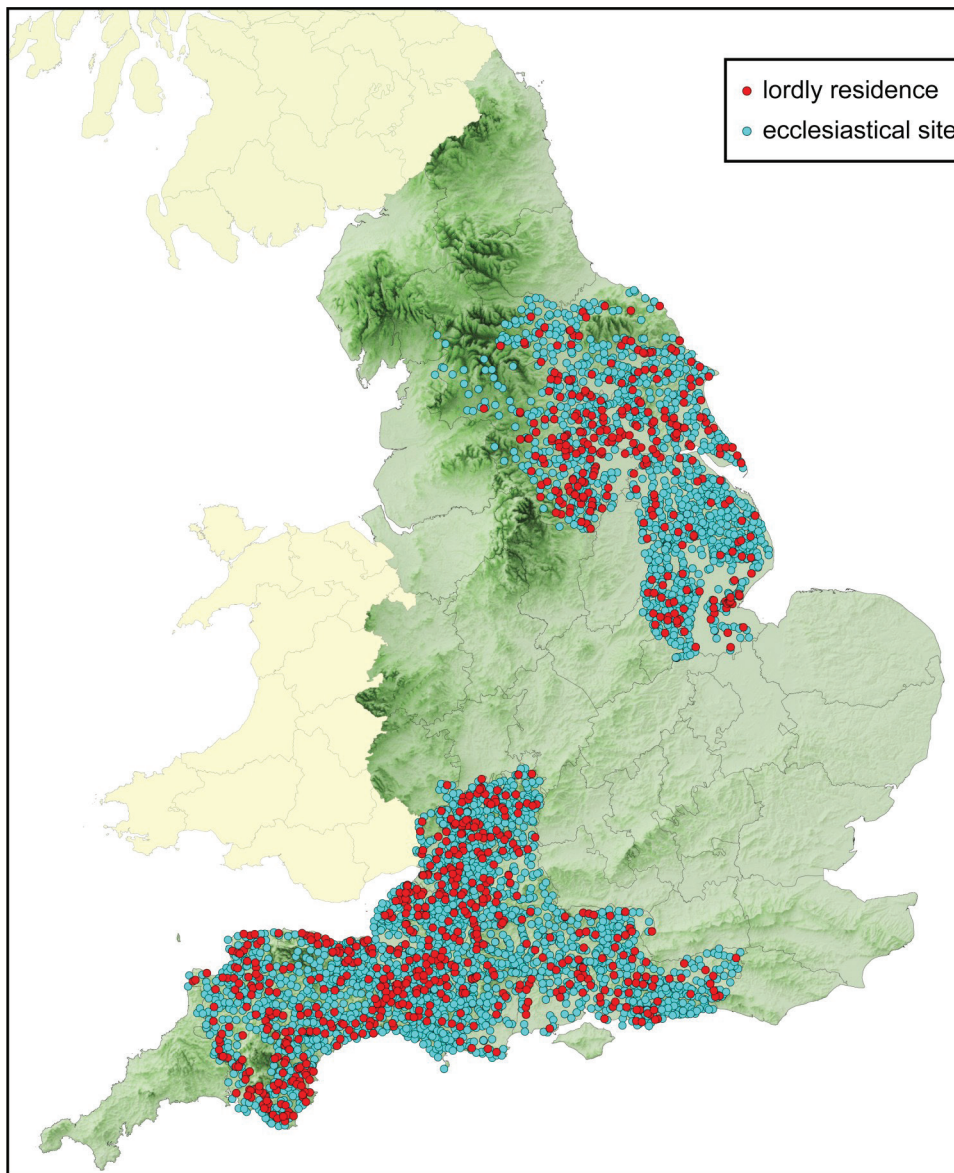


Figure 2 Distribution of medieval residences and churches within the two study regions.

and in selecting the two macro regions the project hoped to capture whether this divergence was in any way manifest in the number, distribution, or character of lordly centres. Overall, this macro region approach meant that a large number of histories and historiographies, which together are so central to our comprehension of early lordly centres, could be explored.

The primary data sources consulted for mapping lordly centres were the various Historic Environment Record (HER) databases, and Historic England's research records and Listed Buildings register. These databases were systematically searched to identify site types that may be indicative of early lordly activity, such as *manor house*, *manor farm*, *manor*, *settlement*, *palace*, *moat*, *chapel* and *church*, while examples of halls, priests, and mills recorded in Domesday Book were also noted. This process identified a large number of potential sites, but the interpretation of significant quantities of these data was far from straightforward. Particular challenges were the differing approaches to categorisation used by HERs and variations in the quantity and quality of evidence used to positively identify sites. The utilisation of Domesday Book neatly

exemplifies some of these difficulties, with some HERs extrapolating the existence of an early manorial centre (commonly assigned an arbitrary location at the centre point of a modern settlement) from reference to a manor in the survey alone, whereas others are more cautious. As a result of these inconsistencies, much of the evidence initially acquired by *Where Power Lies* was reflective of methodological approaches adopted by different archives, and it was therefore necessary to cleanse and corroborate the data. This allowed the team to locate places where there was unequivocal evidence of early lordly activity, contrasting with those cases that were suggestive rather than definitive, while other sites were rejected outright as spurious. Following this exercise, the project identified 870 confirmed elite residences and 3,528 churches dating to the early medieval and medieval periods within the two study regions (Fig. 2).

This dataset allowed the team to move beyond simply mapping the distribution of sites, and permitted analysis and reconstruction of the spatial relationships between lordly centres and different aspects of the human and natural environment. For example, it became apparent that approximately one third (34%) of lordly residences

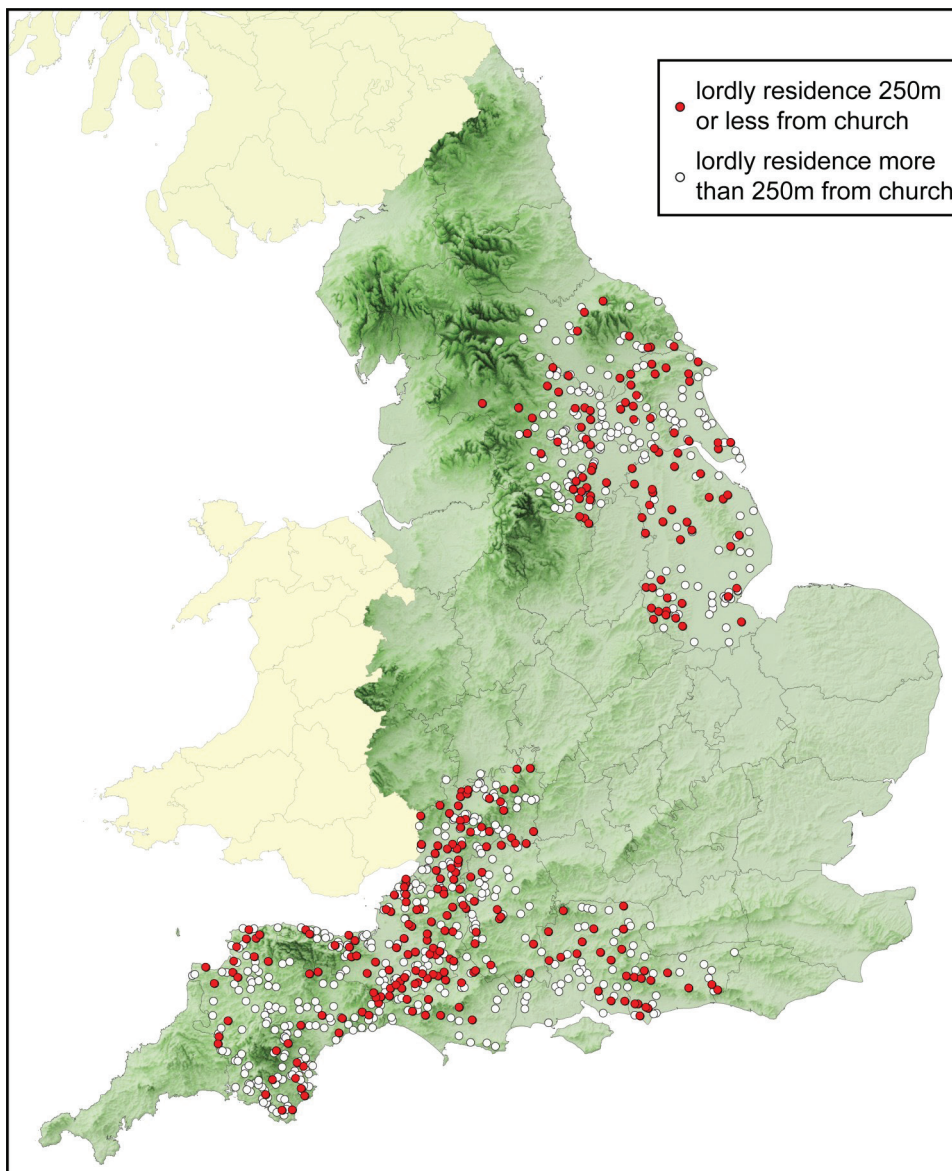


Figure 3 Distribution of lordly residences located within 250 m of a church.

within the two study regions lay within 250 m of a church, and within this overall picture there were some clear distinctions (Fig. 3). In general terms, the spatial relationship between residences and churches was slightly more pronounced in parts of the South-West, with Dorset (40%), Gloucestershire (42%), Somerset (42%) and West Sussex (48%) having more examples of close colocation than average. There were, however, pronounced variations in this distribution *within* the various counties, as examples of close residence-church relationships are absent from Hampshire's New Forest region and are rare in the heathlands of south-east Dorset. Devon has by far the fewest instances of this relationship, with only 20% of its residences located within 250 m of a church – examples being particularly rare in the Culm Measures. Within the North-Eastern macro region there was a contrast between the two counties, with 42% of Lincolnshire's elite residences situated within 250 m of a church compared to only 29% in Yorkshire. There are also variations within Yorkshire, with the historic North Riding (24%) having slightly fewer examples of this close colocation compared with the East Riding (29%) and the West Riding (32%). It is possible that the contrast in close

residence-church siting detectable between the South-Western and North-Eastern macro regions is representative of a genuine distinction, perhaps partly a product of weaker lordship in areas formerly in the Danelaw. The imperfect character of these data, however, urges caution and it is clear that a number of factors, especially topography and differing approaches to classifying lordly centres, have a significant impact on shaping these statistics.

There were also observable differences in the distribution of the residence-church relationship, relative to areas of settlement densities, as classified by Roberts and Wrathmell (2000; Lowerre *et al.* 2015). The majority of the *Where Power Lies* study regions were characterised by areas of low historic settlement density. However, when looking at the total numbers of residences found within those areas, there were proportionally greater numbers located within 250 m of a church in areas of lower settlement density compared to areas of higher settlement density (Fig. 4). This brings into focus the fact that lordship-church sites were embedded within diverse settlements patterns and were not necessarily part of the fabric of nucleated villages.

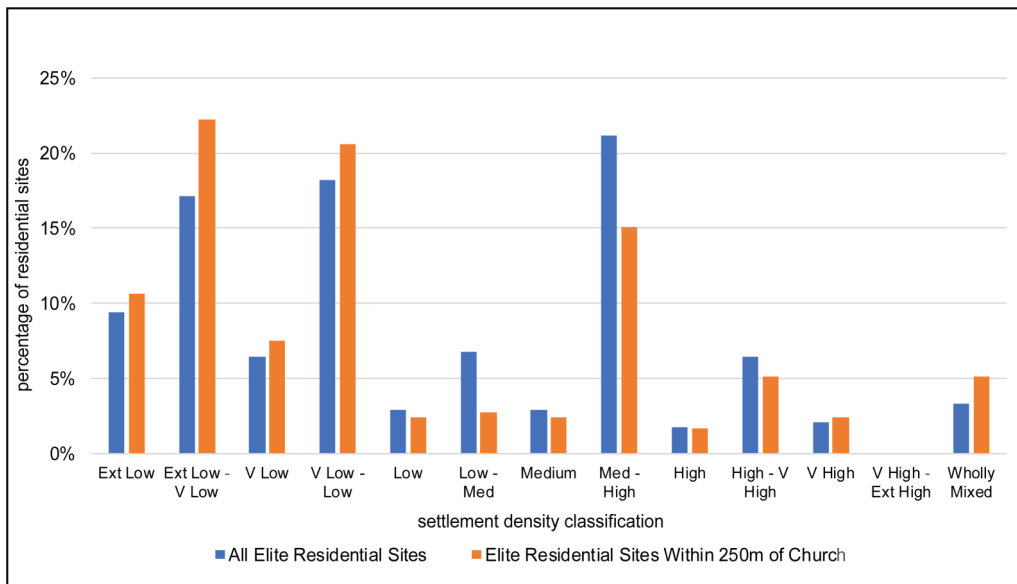


Figure 4 Proportion of elite residences relative to areas of settlement densities (classifications after Roberts and Wrathmell 2000; Lowerre et al. 2015).

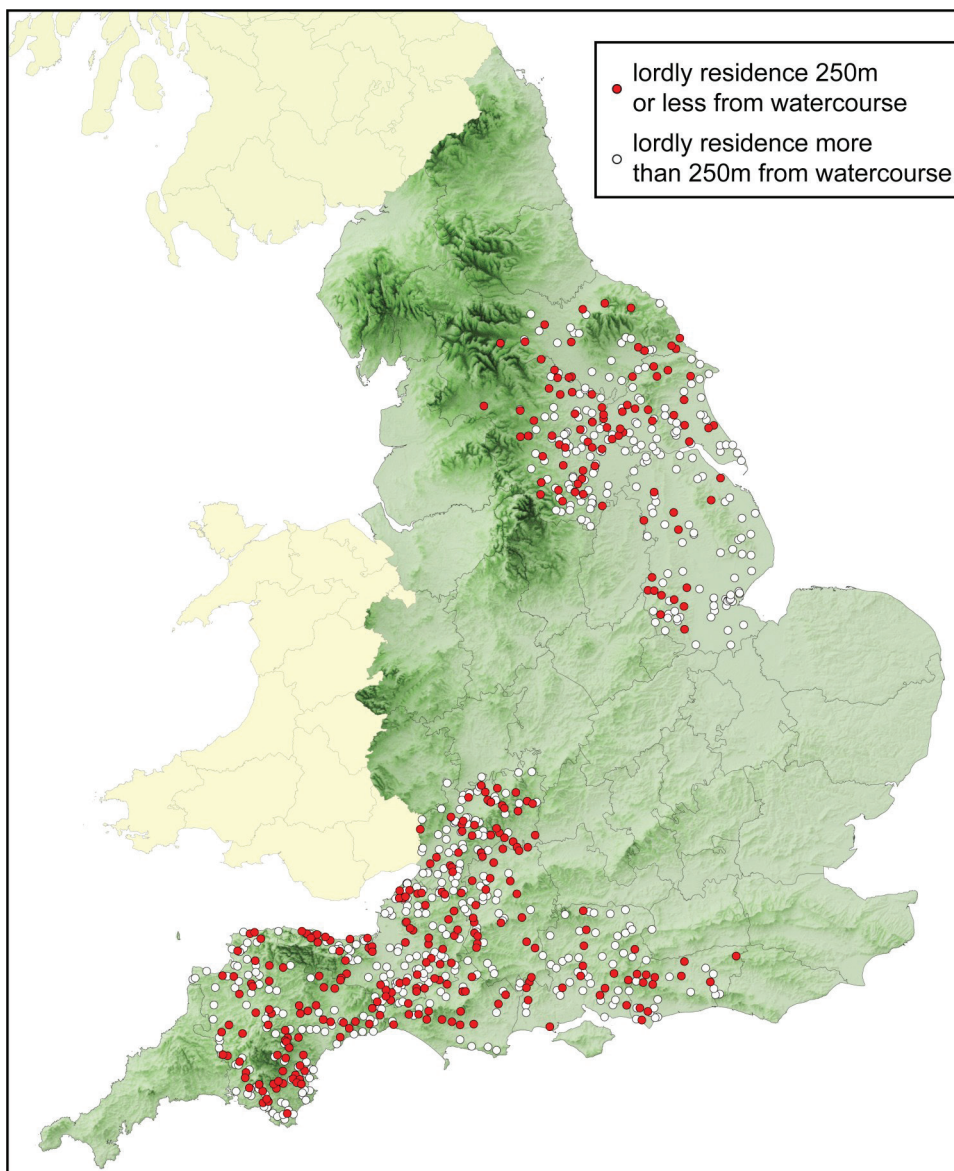


Figure 5 The distribution of lordly residences located within 250 m of a watercourse.

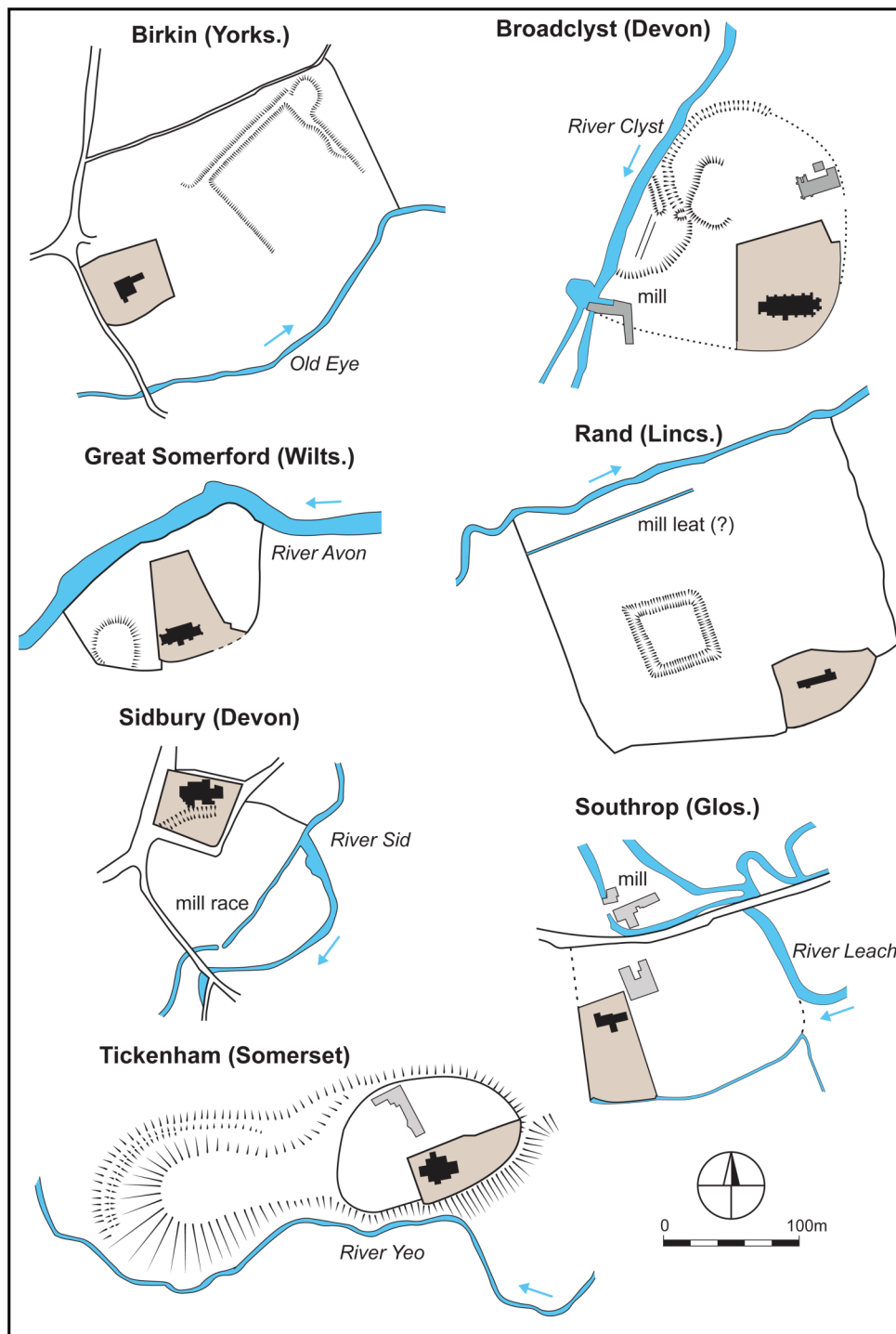


Figure 6 Examples of lordly enclosures situated near to a watercourse. Churches are depicted in black, their burial grounds in beige shading.

It was also apparent that many lordly centres exhibited a close spatial relationship with watercourses, with approximately 37% of residences within the two study regions being located within 250 m of a watercourse (Fig. 5). Indeed, a large number of lordly sites incorporated a river or stream within or on the edges of their enclosures (Fig. 6). These watercourses would have been invaluable as sources of drinking water and irrigation, as well as providing transport on larger routes (Hooke 2014, 38), but many would also have provided power for watermills. Domesday Book gives a good indication of how common watermills

were in the late eleventh century, recording over 6,000 examples, although it is not always obvious whether this metric captures individual mill buildings, shared millstones within mills, or rights to the number of days that an individual was permitted to use a mill (Keith 2017, 58). It has also proven difficult to confidently identify examples of watermills of this period on the ground, and very few have been excavated. Nevertheless, the choice of these early watermill sites must have been made by those with experience of surveying and engineering and with a knowledge of local topographies and seasonal variations in water flow

(Rahtz and Meeson 1992, 145; Rynne 2009, 93–94). Given that the locations of these early mills were therefore not a matter of chance (Harding 2013, 229), it is possible, if not likely, that in many instances later mills perpetuate the approximate location of earlier precursors as they similarly sought to exploit an optimal topographical position. In light of this, the fact that a number of lordly centres incorporate or stand adjacent to watermill sites, albeit of a later date, strongly suggests that they were central not just in their siting but also in the economic and symbolic foundations of elite power from the outset.

Sites and landscapes

As well as addressing this large-scale picture, *Where Power Lies* undertook a programme of more comprehensive study focused on individual lordly centres. Through investigation of these locales, the project was able to reconstruct something of their physical character, origins and development, identifying both commonalities and distinctions in what is usually seen as a homogeneous category of site. One of the project's principal case studies was Saintbury, Gloucestershire, where a series of prominent earthworks lies immediately south-west of the Romanesque church of St Nicholas (SP 11713 39459). Despite the presence of these remarkably well preserved earthworks, almost no previous study has been undertaken either on the church or in the surrounding landscape. Saintbury first appears in the written record in Domesday Book (1086),

at which time it was in the possession of Hascoit Musard, having been held before the Conquest by Cynwy Chelle. An inquisition post-mortem of 1302 demonstrates the Musard family retained the manor to this point, probably as their principal holding, but it was subsequently granted to Evesham Abbey (Gloucestershire Archives D3439/1/328; National Archives C 143/40/21).

Recognising a site of clearly high archaeological potential, the team conducted a programme of landscape-scale investigation including magnetometry, ground penetrating radar (GPR), and topographic and photogrammetric survey. This scheme identified a large number of archaeological features to the north-east and south-west of St Nicholas, hinting at a landscape with a long chronology. The most prominent feature located by survey of the earthworks south-west of the church is an enclosure measuring approximately 130 m by 80 m and forming two sides of an irregular oval. Lying within this circuit a second smaller enclosure is apparent, situated adjacent to the church and encompassing a substantial building platform. Magnetometry survey confirms the presence of a building in the area of the platform and a number of other features, many of which do not correspond to standing earthworks. On the other side of the church, for instance, the survey located a network of rectilinear enclosures, one of which has a distinctive break in its course suggestive of an entranceway from the north-east (Fig. 7).

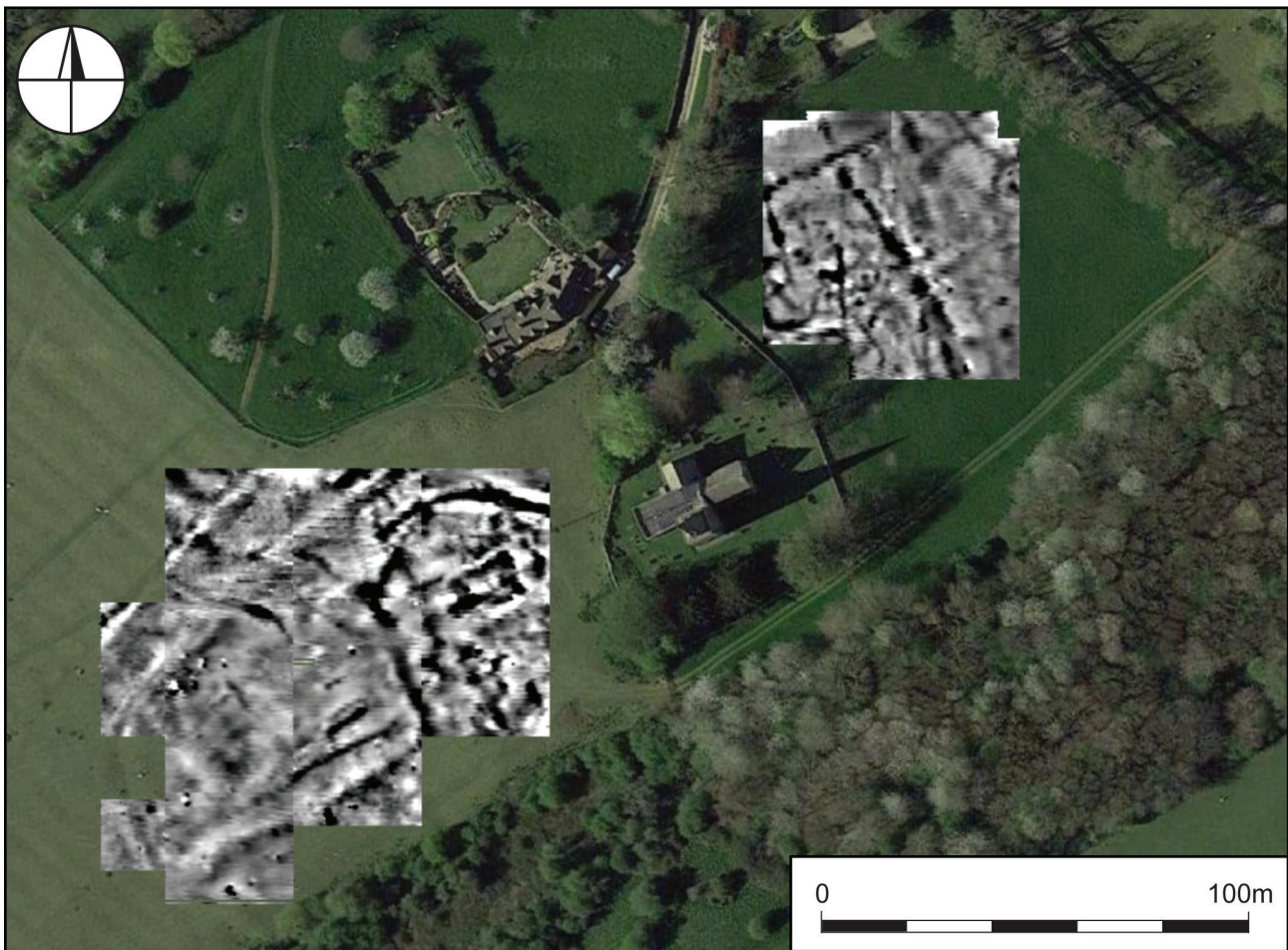


Figure 7 Results of a magnetometry survey at Saintbury.



Figure 8 Drone photo of Broadclyst, showing the remains of a curving enclosure at the rear of the parish church.

In order to provide a provenance for some of these features the project teamed up with Tim Kinnaird (University of St Andrews) and Sam Turner (Newcastle University) to undertake optically-stimulated luminescence (OSL) profiling and dating of several earthwork features. Luminescence approaches are a valuable tool to reconstruct landscape histories, especially for terraces, banks, and other positive features for which the frequent occurrence of residual material limits the effectiveness of more conventional artefactual and lab-based dating methods (Kinnaird *et al.* 2017, 67–70). During the machine excavation of trenches to obtain these samples, a range of ceramics was recovered from the earthworks forming the inner enclosure adjacent to the church; identification of the assemblage suggests Roman and medieval occupation, adding further weight to the idea that Saintbury has a multifaceted history of activity.

The project's survey of the church also hints at complexity; the earliest elements of the standing building relate to an impressive church of c. 1100, but a number of fragments of earlier, perhaps pre-Conquest, fabric have also been identified. It is hoped that OSL dates, due to be ready by the end of 2024, will begin to clarify the chronology of the Saintbury complex – although perhaps only through comprehensive excavation will the site be fully understood.

A programme of geophysical, topographic and building survey was also undertaken at Broadclyst, Devon (SX 98178 97271). The parish church of St John the Baptist largely dates to the fourteenth century, while

the remains of a medieval undercroft are incorporated into the north-east boundary of the churchyard wall; this is the only above-ground vestige of a former manor house complex. It is thought that this residence would have belonged to the Nonant family who held the manor between the twelfth and mid-fourteenth centuries. Despite the relatively late dating of these remains, there are good reasons to speculate that they perpetuate an earlier centre, perhaps even one whose origins pre-date the Norman Conquest: in Domesday Book its name was recorded as *Cliston*, incorporating a Celtic river name (Clyst) with a *-ton* element, which in Devon is generally associated with royal villas or hundred centres (Rippon 2012, 173, 195). Moreover, the way that Broadclyst's parish boundary interlocks with several smaller neighbouring parishes suggests a larger, formerly integrated unit carved from a wider territory in the early medieval period, with Broadclyst's church having been centrally located rather than occupying a liminal position as it currently does near the parish boundary.

Where Power Lies identified the likely form of a large D-shaped enclosure embracing an area of c. 2.2 ha, the remnants of which are most clearly visible today in the curving field boundaries at the south-east edge of the churchyard (Fig. 8), while its western limit was marked by the River Clyst. That the known medieval undercroft lies on the eastern edge of this enclosure suggests that an earlier hall may originally have lain centrally within the enclosure, perhaps on the site of a large level earthwork platform that overlooks the river (Fig. 9). A survey of the undercroft's surviving fabric

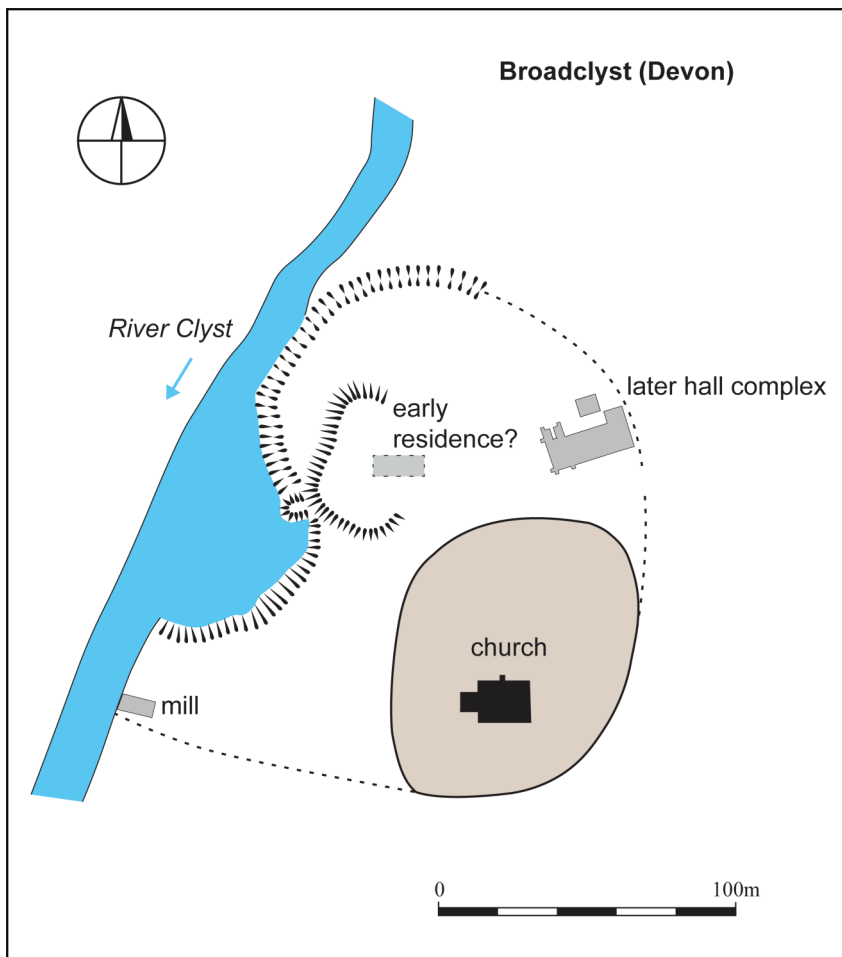


Figure 9 Proposed reconstruction of the lordly enclosure at Broadclyst.

found evidence of possible reuse of several architectural elements that have parallels in late Anglo-Saxon architecture elsewhere, and again points to an earlier phase. Likewise, a tentative reconstruction of the development of the church suggests early origins, with its initial form perhaps having been an aisle-less nave lacking a tower, represented by a relict roof pitch that is incorporated into the eastern face of the present tower. Although undatable, this is clearly early since it is abutted by stonework of the church's second phase when its western tower was constructed.

Broadclyst is yet another example of the close relationship between lordly centre and watercourse, with the nearby river, as mentioned, forming the western boundary of the enclosure. As well as the river itself, a mill constitutes another component of this site, with Clyston Mill lying at the south-western corner of the enclosure, and the vestige of a millpond can also be found lying immediately south-west of the large earthwork platform. The present mill probably dates from no earlier than the late eighteenth century, although it is possible that it lies on, or near to, the site of an earlier mill, and indeed a mill is recorded in Domesday Book paying 20 shillings (Thorn and Thorn 1985 Vol I, 1, 56).

Elsewhere, *Where Power Lies* carried out surveys of two eleventh-century churches and their landscapes in North Yorkshire. This work suggested that both churches originated as free-standing 'tower-naves' that were primarily used for private worship but which also acted as symbols of secular power and authority. The first of these churches is Holy Trinity at Little Ouseburn

(SE 45237 61139), which lies next to a moated site named *Moat Hall*. This residence dates to the seventeenth century, but early estate maps from the area clearly depict a square moated enclosure, suggesting that it is at least medieval in origin. Despite its clearly early date, the church occupies a peripheral rather than central position on the north-eastern edge of the parish, reminiscent of the situation seen at Broadclyst where a once-extensive unit had fragmented. The other probable tower-nave church is St Mary the Virgin at Hornby, Richmondshire (SE 22243 93758), located in close proximity to the fourteenth-century manor house of Hornby Castle. A possible candidate for the patron of Hornby's lordly tower-nave is Gospatric, whose father Arnketil was either killed or forced into exile because of his role in the northern rebellion following the Conquest. While Gospatric was demoted to a subtenant of Hornby, rather than the outright owner of the estate as his father had been, the continued status of apparently Anglo-Scandinavian families is characteristic of lordships such as Richmond, and is a context that has previously been suggested as a reason behind the continuation of the tower-nave form into the late eleventh century in these areas (McClain 2017, 216; Shapland 2019, 188–191). A photogrammetric survey of the landscape around the church has also revealed the remains of a previously unrecorded enclosure, levelled areas within which appear to be building platforms. Lordly activity at Hornby was clearly diverse and long-lived, and is being interrogated by *The Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and*

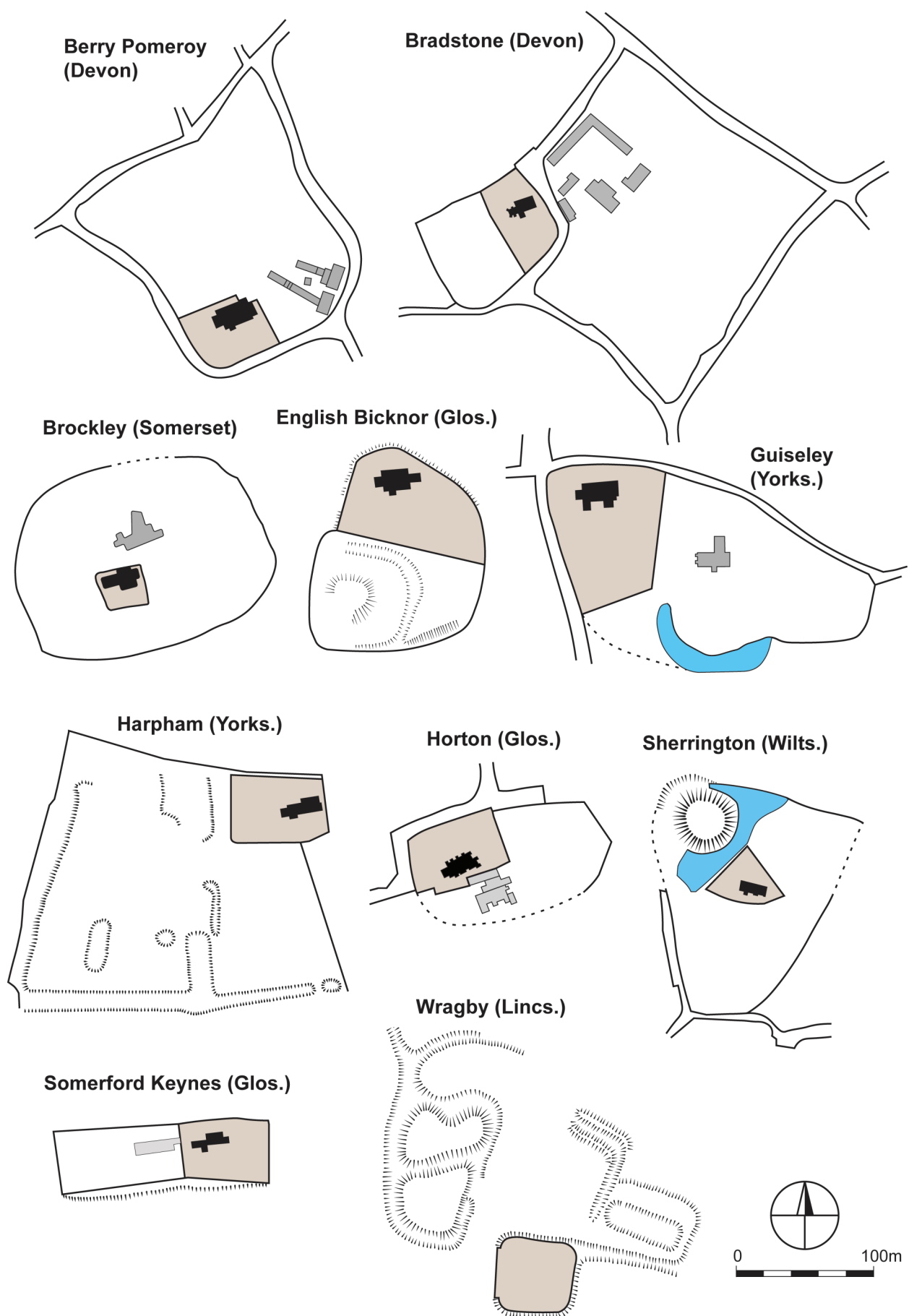


Figure 10 Comparative illustrations showing various morphologies of lordly enclosures.

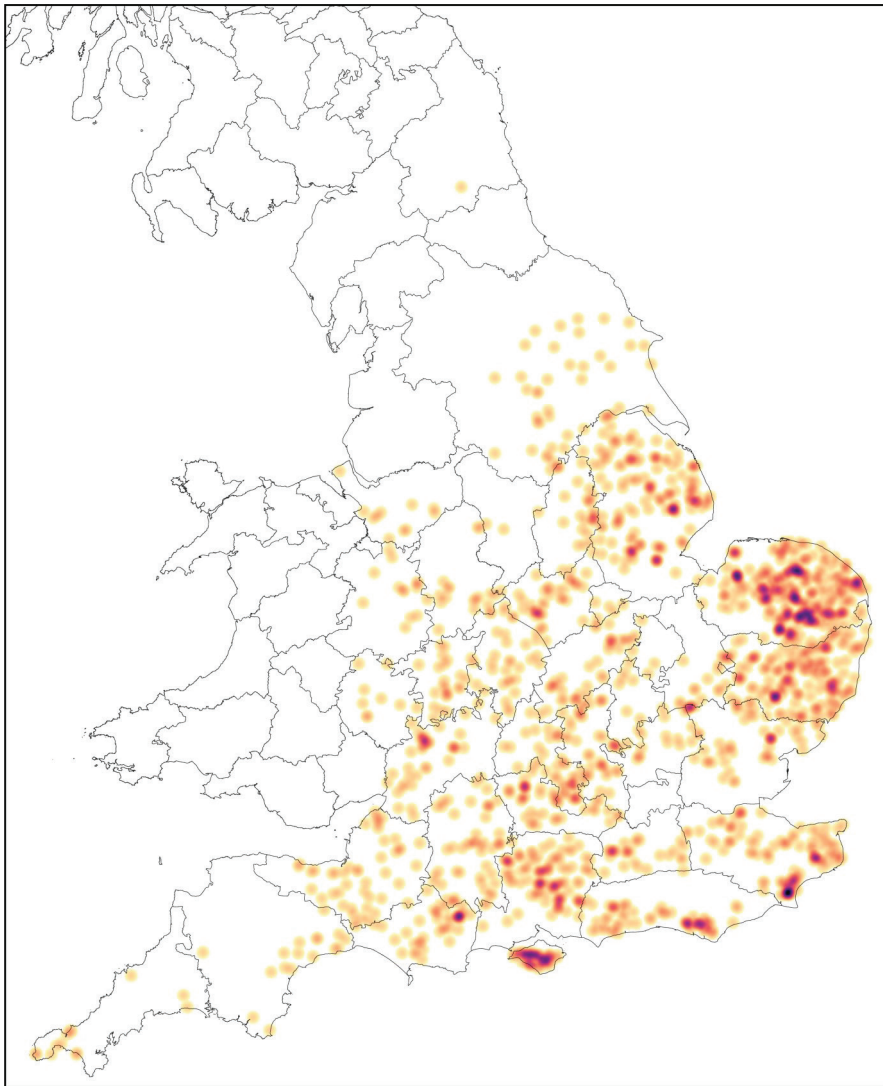


Figure 11 Heatmap showing distribution of stirrup strap mounts.

Northumberland through a programme of excavation and desk-based research (e.g. Matthews 2020).

In another detailed study, *Where Power Lies* conducted a GPR and photogrammetry survey at Great Somerford, Wiltshire, where a motte known as The Mound lies adjacent to a fourteenth-century church overlooking the River Avon (ST 96434 83100). The motte was excavated in 1811 and 1910, revealing traces of a deeply buried walled structure with rounded arched windows that had previously been suggested as perhaps representing an earlier church over which the later motte was imposed, or even conceivably a thegnly tower (Creighton 2000, 112–114). Our work confirmed the presence of a rectilinear building, aligned north-south but not lying centrally within the motte. While the orientation almost certainly rules out this building as a church, the unusual positioning in the north-east part of the earthwork requires further consideration. Photogrammetry surveys have also been conducted at a motte and bailey at Owston Ferry, Lincolnshire (SE 80478 00293), and a manorial complex/early castle at Healaugh, North Yorkshire (SE 49849 47913), while previously published results of topographic, standing building and resistivity surveys and excavations at the Norman earth-and-timber castle at Laughton en le

Morthen, South Yorkshire (SK 51702 88206; Wright *et al.* 2022), will also feed into the project's outputs.

The surveys of buildings and landscapes have provided unparalleled detail of a range of lordly centres, but in other instances we have been able to identify and characterise complexes with desk-based methods alone. It is often possible to reconstruct the form of enclosures as they are frequently preserved in the layout of modern field boundaries and road systems, or in some instances by the survival of extant earthworks. There was evidently a great variety in the morphologies of these enclosures, with both curvilinear and quadrangular enclaves, and with churches either located centrally within compounds suggesting a private use, or instead on the periphery of complexes hinting that the wider community may have had access to the building (Fig. 10).

Movable wealth

Where Power Lies characterised the signature of the Saxo-Norman elite on a smaller scale too, through the evidence of artefacts recorded by project partner, the *Portable Antiquities Scheme* (PAS).⁷ Using PAS data, the project charted the evolving material culture of lordship to illuminate changes in decoration, display and

⁷ <https://finds.org.uk>; PAS database for this analysis accessed in April 2023.

expression across our time period. Equestrian artefacts are particularly indicative of high-status activity, and the distribution of stirrup strap mounts, which tend to be Saxo-Norman, give a good indication of lordly presence and have been mapped at a number of scales (Fig. 11). Such artefacts are often found across extensive areas, given the mobile nature of horse riding, but in some instances, there are distinctive distributions of equestrian equipment immediately surrounding lordly power centres. One such example is Bosham, West Sussex, where the uptick in elite accoutrement neatly coincides with the establishment of Earl Godwine's power centre in the eleventh century, and distributions could in part be the product of a hunting park here. Not only do these data therefore allow the project to dovetail the artefacts into the understanding of these sites, but also, in other instances, metal-detected finds that produce a 'halo' around historic settlements hint at the presence of lordly centres that have otherwise been entirely lost.

Summary

Together the three work packages delivered by *Where Power Lies* – landscape-scale mapping, individual site investigation, and analysis of PAS data – generated unprecedented insight into the material culture of the elites of the late first millennium, adding valuable new data with which to understand newly aspiring families of the period. What is immediately clear from all scales of study is the great diversity of expression that is apparent across time and space, with elites demonstrating their status in a number of ways. At the scales that we have examined, a suite of lordly 'technologies' is often apparent, that not only includes investment into key components of church and residence, but also extends to features such as watermills, sundials (built into churches), and ornate portable objects many of which are associated with horse ownership. Ideals of social separateness and seclusion were clearly a priority, but the way in which these were achieved varied widely. The project has identified a number of consistent forms of elite enclosure, but also some examples with few parallels, where local conditions such as topography no doubt played a part. Relationships between lords and their communities are also apparent in these arrangements, not just in the positioning of churches but also in the inconsistent construction of enclosures around areas of non-elite settlement. It is important, however, that we do not view these past communities and the landscapes in which they lived too statically, something that schematic plans of lordly arrangements tend to encourage. These sites were rapidly developing, ever-changing spaces, populated by a range of individuals from across the social spectrum. While Old English law codes could trick us into thinking that society comprised only nobles (thegn) and free men (ceorl), this simple distinction does not adequately reflect the complex composition of society. The character of legal texts elides the ability that individuals had to improve their social status, as well as omitting slaves and women from the picture (Williams 2018, 1–10). That early medieval women could attain significant power and status, and be lord of the exact centres that *Where Power Lies* has explored, is neatly exemplified by the site of Facombe Netherton, Hampshire. Here, the partially excavated

remains of the elite residence have been allied with a rich written record for the site, including the will of the tenth-century noblewoman Wynflæd (Fairbrother 1990; Weikert 2015). Such integration of evidence at Facombe provides a colourful picture of the people and activities that made up this household over time, but acts too as a valuable lesson for interpreting the results of the project: that only through an integrated approach synthesising archaeological data with documentary, onomastic and other evidence, will we understand the origins, character and varied trajectories of lordly centres, and realise more fully their evolving roles within medieval society and landscape.

Acknowledgements

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