Minsters and Valleys

A topographical comparison of seventh and eighth century land use in Leicestershire and Wiltshire

Bob Trubshaw
About The Twilight Age series

Not that many decades ago English history between the fifth and eleventh centuries was deemed the ‘Dark Ages’, largely because of the lack of evidence. Much has changed, and scholarship has shed considerable light on the later centuries. However by then many parts of Britain were evolving into Anglo-Scandinavian culture.

Evidence for the Anglo-Germanic fifth and sixth centuries is still scarce and difficult to interpret, so the epithet ‘Dark Ages’ is still apt. The years in between occupy a comparative ‘twilight zone’, fascinating because of numerous social changes, not least the various cultural transitions which ultimately led to Christianity being the dominant religion.

The period spanning the seventh and eighth centuries and, sometimes, the decades either side can be thought of as the ‘Twilight Age’. This series of publications combines available evidence from archaeologists, historians and place-name scholars. This evidence is combined with a broader mix of paradigms than those usually adopted by early medievalists, including topography, cosmology, iconography and ethnography – especially current approaches to comparative religion.

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Minsters and Valleys

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Cover illustration The modern parish church at the hamlet of Disserth, Radnorshire, by the banks of the River Ithon not far from the confluence with the Wye, illustrates how many early minsters would have been situated in the sparsely-populated landscapes elsewhere in Britain.

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Contents

Introduction  1
Part One The context of the early churches  6
Part Two Early churches in Leicestershire  9
Rutland minsters  35
Part Three Early churches in Wiltshire  38
Part Four An overview of early churches in Leicestershire, Rutland and Wiltshire  70
Part Five Early churches elsewhere  86
Part Six Widening the discussion  103
Further research  123
Acknowledgments  125
End notes  126
Sources  129
Preface

This work first appeared at the end of 2015 as a ‘stand alone’ publication. Less than two months later I had the inspiration to ‘pull together’ my varied thoughts about seventh and eighth century England as a series called The Twilight Age. The ‘mission statement’ for this series, together with the list of titles, appears previously in the prelims.

The first three volumes in the series are highly revised versions of prior publications and, at the time of writing, the fifth volume has yet to be finalised. In contrast, this work has been ‘absorbed’ into the series unaltered apart from these prefatory remarks.

This study of early churches fits neatly into the series. However it is different in approach to the first three volumes, not least that the discussions of specific places include considerable detail. It is also different in format (although the format will be shared with the fifth volume).

Unlike the first three works, which bring cosmological, ontological and iconographical considerations to the fore, this work, together with the one on shrines, look at the period of interest principally from a topographical perspective, along with considerable insights from place-name scholarship.

Despite the differences in apparent approach and subject matter between the different volumes which make up The Twilight Age, only by combining cosmology, ontology, iconography, topography and toponyms can we begin to fully appreciate the documentary and archaeological evidence.

If all this is starting to sound way too serious, then imagine a social gathering where almost all the guests are historians and archaeologists. A reasonably well-behaved bunch of cosmologists, ontologists and iconographers have just gate-crashed. And now assorted topographers and onamastically-inclined folk have turned up uninvited intent on rocking out. Welcome to what’s rapidly becoming a much more salubrious party...

Bob Trubshaw

Avebury January 2016
Foxley, Wiltshire. Excavations here in the early 1980s revealed evidence for an early religious community. Within a century or so they moved a mile or so downstream to Malmesbury when a new church was founded there; this evolved into the abbey (now the parish church). See page 57 for further details.

This photograph was taken in mid-December 2014. A few moments before taking it the author had been struck by the similarity of this site to waterside Anglo-Saxon sites in Leicestershire. In the following weeks and months the research in this publication steadily took shape. By mid-2015 the scope had extended to several other counties.
Introduction

We take it for granted that most of the more important churches are located in towns and cities. But the oldest of these churches go back to the seventh century, so predate towns and cities. Indeed it was the presence of an early religious community which steadily evolved into many of the original ‘urban’ settlements. So why were these early churches located where they were? Were they really ‘in the middle of nowhere’?

There is no simple answer to these questions. Where the evidence is available then on first sight there seems to be an ‘easy answer’: that each hundred had one ‘superior church’ to which other churches and chapels were dependant. But hundreds are only recorded in the tenth century – although almost certainly go back into the later ninth century. So hundreds themselves are later than the oldest Anglo-Saxon churches of the seventh and eighth centuries. The apparently simple relationship of one superior church per hundred is probably a result of deliberate ‘tidying up’, and certainly not contemporaneous with the founding of the oldest churches. At the time these early churches were founded they were referred to as minsters; I discuss this term at the start of Part One.

An overtly topographical approach to the seventh and eighth century churches in England provides abundant information on their location. This is in stark contrast to the absence of contemporary written sources and the occasional insights from documents written several centuries later. Neither is there much in the way of architectural or archaeological evidence to help understand the earliest religious establishments. Putting things succinctly, despite modern changes to the built environment and water courses, the locations of early churches have survived far better than documents or material culture. My aim in publishing this extended essay is to draw attention to the clarity of this topographical information.

Furthermore, the topography of these early churches tells clear and broadly consistent ‘stories’. Prior emphasis on scant historical and archaeological sources, while ignoring the abundant topographical resources, has led to this narrative being hitherto overlooked. The study focuses on Leicestershire, Rutland and Wiltshire. In part this is because these are areas familiar to me. More importantly, the documentary evidence for early churches in these counties has been thoroughly assessed by various academics. Similar academic studies have been published for Radnorshire, Surrey and Sussex. The latter two counties are also familiar to me, although the places discussed were revisited, while a four-day visit to Radnorshire (now the eastern part of Powys) enabled all the places mentioned in this study to be visited.

Much of this document deals with the nitty gritty of specific places. The conclusion of these place-specific remarks is that Leicestershire, Rutland and Wiltshire conform to a similar pattern. Initially I suspected that there may be key differences between Mercia and Wessex. However the sites of early churches seem to have been chosen pragmatically, meaning that the differences are surprisingly few.

Early churches in these counties are close to water, especially where it can be forded. Indeed some such churches are associated with paired parishes which straddle the watercourse. The churches may well have been near the limits of navigation for small (perhaps punt-like) craft as trade – presumably including the
redistribution of food stocks – is likely to have been an important function; a significant number of settlements associated with early churches evolve over the centuries into market towns. A surprising number of these waterside locations are in loops of rivers. This may in part have been for dramatic effect but the ability to defend such sites more easily is probably the main reason.

In Leicestershire, Rutland and Wiltshire there seems to be a pattern of one early church per upper river valley, with one or more approximately contemporary churches downstream. The Wylie in Wiltshire is one of the best examples, although the Soar in Leicestershire is similar. More importantly perhaps is that every upper valley in Leicestershire, Rutland and Wiltshire has an early church. This suggests that there was an overall plan. Or that the territories (parochia or pays) of the early churches were based on older land units which straddled both sides of a valley. This is entirely plausible but none of the academics who have addressed this have come up with conclusive evidence. This study falls too falls short of providing proof of a relationship between early churches and river valley ‘territories’. However, in the absence of any clear alternative this is the safest assumption.

This distribution of sites in every valley may in part have been to do with piety – ensuring that there was a focus for Christian worship fairly accessible to everyone. But such piety is probably anachronistic. Instead we should be thinking of more pragmatically reasons. These foundations were always associated with the local nobility so they would have been the ‘estate centres’ of the time, storing food (so much as was possible) in times of plenty and redistributing when the weather or pestilence made famine a distinct possibility (and the entries in the chronicles suggest that this happened several times in a decade).

In contrast to the one-per-upper-valley arrangement of early churches in Leicestershire, Rutland and Wiltshire, contemporary foundations in Surrey and Sussex mostly favour estuarine locations. This is presumably because the upper valleys are located in the Weald or on the South Downs and so would have had limited agricultural potential at the time.

The church at Cefynlls, Radnorshire, sits in a loop of the River Edw. This photograph was taken from the steep footpath which forms the only land access.
Radnorshire is somewhat different, in that the early churches are associated with the main rivers (Wye, Edw and Ithon) but not with the upper reaches of the tributaries. The locations favour watercourses that were presumably navigable to small craft, but which are also defendable – whether in loops or at the side of cliffs.

There is a consistency to the topography of the early churches within each of the study areas, although inevitably not every site is the same. The reasons for the choice of specific sites seem to be based on practical and pragmatic issues. With the exception of two places in Leicestershire – Barrow on Soar (where the place-name is from *bearu*, which has the sense of a sacred grove) and the Bowdens (where an ‘arden’ place-name and associated topography infer ritual activities) – there is no evidence of continuity from pre-conversion sites. And even here caution is needed as both Barrow and the Bowden are exceptionally ‘pragmatic’ sites, accessible to larger boats, at the crossing of a Roman road over the Soar, and in a defendable loop. Bowden is later eclipsed by Market Harborough, suggesting that traders of the time thought the ford over the Welland was an optimum location.

My discussion of fords most considers them as pragmatic crossing places. Apart from *stapol ford* place-names, and near-synonyms such as *crist mael ford*, I do not dwell on the possibility that some (maybe most or even all) fords would have been regarded as religious sites prior to the conversion.

Continuity of royal sites – which presumably included pre-conversion ‘groves’ – is evidenced at Wilton and Hambleton, with parallels outside the study areas at Scone, Govan and Tynwald Hill. But these seem to be the exception. More typically early churches seem to be sited for pragmatic reasons, not to ‘take over’ an older sacred site. The best assumption is that the early churches represent a continuity of the ‘domestic temples’ of the nobility more than replacements for ‘sacred groves’ and such like.

Further research into all the places discussed here is necessary and may either add or detract from specific suggestions. Above all, I hope it inspires people with the necessary knowledge of other counties to look at the wealth of topographical evidence available, and to combine it with the information revealed by place-names together with the, usually scant, documentary sources and archaeological evidence.
Why Leicestershire, Rutland and Wiltshire?

There are two principal reasons for the scope of this research spanning Leicestershire, Rutland and Wiltshire. Firstly, I was resident in Leicestershire from 1986 to 2010 and since then have lived in central Wiltshire (literally next door to the former ‘old minster’ at Avebury). In both these counties I have actively pursued long-standing interests in archaeology, local history, place-names, and related matters which go back to the late 1970s and are part of a broader interest in landscape and geology originating in my childhood (see Endnote 1).

The second reason is that the history of the early religious establishments in these three counties has been the focus of work by a number of researchers, and this work in turn has been critically summarised. At the risk of omitting equally important people, a brief list includes John Blair, Jill Bourne, Simon Draper, Graham Jones, Peter Liddle, David Parsons, J.M.A. Pitt and Andrew Reynolds.

In addition, there have been several regional historical studies of minsters in England, spanning Herefordshire, Kent, Radnorshire, West Sussex and the Thames valley (respectively: Leominster History Study Group 2001; Brookes and Harrington 2010; Fenn 2000; Masters 2001; Blair 1996). The topography is different in all these places and this has an influence on where early minsters were founded. The Welsh Marches offer the closest parallels to Leicestershire and Wiltshire whereas Sussex and Kent favour coastal – or, more specifically, estuarine – locations. The reasons for these regional variations are consistent – essentially offering the best locations for exploiting ‘economic resources’. Understanding the topography of minsters in Leicestershire and Wiltshire helps to shed more light on the differences in topography in the Marches and south-east England. Bear with me while I discuss Leicestershire and Wiltshire initially, before widening the geographical scope.
Because of the differences in early settlement – predominately Anglian in the East Midlands and Saxon in Wessex – some differences might be expected between Leicestershire and Wiltshire. Presumably the conversion to Christianity had a different trajectory. Wiltshire is known to have been missionised by Welsh clergy, but there is not enough evidence to establish the process of conversion in Leicestershire or Rutland. Subsequent to the period of interest Leicestershire and Wiltshire became increasingly distinct, initially because of the impact of Viking raiding and then, after the creation of the Danelaw, in the overall culture.

The most important difference from the perspective of minsters is that in Mercia each county developed at least one urban centre. These were progressively defeated by the Vikings. In Wessex there were no such proto-towns and, with the exception of Winchester, the minsters remained the largest settlements until the late tenth century.

Furthermore there are clear differences in the manner hundreds evolve in the ninth century onwards. The Domesday survey lists forty hundreds for Wiltshire but only four in Leicestershire. These hundreds are significantly later than the foundation of the earlier minsters but nevertheless much of the information we have about the lands associated with the early minsters in Wiltshire needs to be ‘unpicked’ from the subsequent hundred boundaries and the changes to them.

However when comparing and contrasting Wessex with Mercia a certain amount of caution is needed. The northern half of Wiltshire (i.e. north of the Wansdyke) was contested with Mercia until the early ninth century. While Leicestershire was indisputably part of the Danelaw, this was a comparatively brief political entity, created in 886 but brought back under Mercian control by 918. Perhaps more significantly Mercia did not regain control over its former lands south of Watling Street, creating a substantial region where both Mercian and Wessex practices were deeply intermingled. There are many differences between Mercia and Wessex, but there is no simplistic ‘binary’ distinction. Instead both ‘where’ and ‘when’ become key to trying to understand differences.

This study commenced with the expectation of contrasts between Leicestershire and Wiltshire. However this proved to be an erroneous expectation. As the detailed discussions which follow reveal, there are similar relationships between rivers and the oldest religious establishments in Wiltshire, Leicestershire and Rutland. While there could be many reasons, one of the more plausible scenarios is that such parallels arose early in the history of minsters, before the political geography and concomitant social and cultural differences had become polarised.
Part One

The context of the early churches

‘Minsters’ or ‘superior churches’?

Frankly, the only thing we can say with any certainty about the early churches in England is that they were known as minsters, usually spent *mynster*. The word is a corruption of Latin *monasterium* but there is no resemblance to later monasteries. Yes, they are religious communities concerned with the spiritual welfare of the inhabitants and the residents of surrounding settlements. But in most respects they are little different to any other major estate centres, and most of the activities would have been concerned with farming. The abbots, abbesses and so forth were most commonly members of prestigious land-owning clans. John Blair has discussed the evidence for a ‘minster-founding layman’ to make himself into a ‘thegn-abbot’ who was then free from service to the king and also to chose who to bequeath the estate (Blair 2005: 104). While Blair’s evidence is specific to Northumberland, there seems every reason to suppose that the founding of minsters there was done in a similar manner elsewhere in England.

To avoid the confusion with later monasteries some historians chose to refer to minsters as ‘superior churches’. From the perspective of hindsight this is indeed a suitable designation as many (although not all) early minsters evolve into ‘mother parishes’ for a cluster of dependent parish churches and chapels. The documentary evidence for these mother:daughter dependencies usually survives in documentary evidence through to recent times, and is often the basis for the combined benefices of recent decades. However, as John Blair concludes, it is ‘unrealistic to assert that a stable and regular mother-parish network was necessarily spread across the whole of England from the outset.’ Instead, there were probably a vast number of ‘grass-roots’ arrangements where church ‘taxes’ were regarded as reciprocal payment for pastoral ministrations. These informal arrangements seem more likely to have created *de facto* proto-parishes, rather than ‘top-down’ diocese-led schemes (Blair 2005: 160).

This whole arrangement of parish churches and ‘mother parishes’ was still several centuries in the future when the older minsters were founded. The Domesday survey and other comparatively early documentary evidence, where available, reveals that the minsters usually had significantly higher taxable valuations, more landholdings and a greater number of priests (the evidence for Wiltshire is discussed in detail by J.M.A. Pitt (1999)). This confirms they were better off than the manorial chapels and emergent ‘parish churches’. In this sense they were ‘superior churches’.

However at the time the minsters were founded there would have been no comparatively inferior churches. For this reason the comparative term ‘superior churches’ is misleading when referring to the earliest minsters of the seven and eighth centuries. I have therefore opted to retain the name they were known by to the people who built them – minsters – and simply ask that the reader does not
assume that they bore much relationship to later religious establishments which shared the same designation. Purely for variety I also refer to them as ‘early churches’, but regard the two terms as synonymous.

**The development of minsters**

We know that minsters come into existence in the seventh and eighth centuries but nationally there is little documentary evidence from before the ninth century – and usually not until Domesday for minsters in Leicestershire and other parts of Mercia.

Most minsters seem to have been staffed by so-called ‘secular priests’, that is ones who were married. Monks were fairly rare, and a good number of them lived in ‘dual houses’ with nuns. In the ninth and tenth centuries nunneries seem to have primarily functioned as places for widows to live – with few of the notions of piety and such like which seemingly date back only as far as the reforms of the twelfth century.

John Blair’s magnificent work on Anglo-Saxon churches (Blair 2005) reveals that the founding of minsters took off after 670, with a ‘multiplicity’ of minsters by 747. With the exception of what must have been intentional ‘dual minsters’ in close proximity, the mid-eighth century minsters are about seven miles apart (see Endnote 2). This, for good practical reasons, is also the typical minimum distance between later market towns. Minsters too would have needed some sort of markets and the evolution of many minsters into market towns was almost inevitable. Even priories founded in the ‘middle of nowhere’ in the thirteenth century quickly evolved into market towns; Dunstable and Royston are good examples (although their success may, in part, be a result of being located at the crossings of two former Roman roads).

By the tenth century many more ‘secondary’ minsters had come into existence. But the sheer number led to the demise of some of the earlier ones. Around the time minsters became less viable ‘investments’ by the landowners the fashion shifted to founding manorial chapels. These were the direct predecessors of the parish churches which are still a key part of English topography and society. Some of the minsters became parish churches, while others were re-founded under stricter monastic rules and evolved into the major monastic communities of the later middle ages, until their Dissolution in the sixteenth century.

In the eleventh century English law recognised four categories of churches:

1. ‘head minsters’
2. ‘old minsters’
3. ‘lesser minsters’ with churchyards
4. ‘field churches’

Historians have fleshed these terms out, although there is always scope for some ‘misfits’ and ambiguities. ‘Head minsters’ are often, although not always, cathedrals.

‘Old minsters’ are, as the name suggests, usually the ones founded early. In the eleventh century they are responsible for the pastoral care over a substantial number of later parishes. These are the minsters which tend to conform to the ‘one per hundred’ system and most readily fit with the notion of ‘superior churches’. Most of them are also comparatively wealthy in terms of land holdings and taxable value.

Where ‘lesser minsters’ can be identified they tend to be founded around the tenth century. Although they have an income from landholdings, burial fees and such like, their valuation in the Domesday survey (and indeed in the *Taxatio Ecclesiastica* of 1291–92) generally shows their lesser status. Indeed, these are the minsters most likely to evolve into parish churches or simply disappear.
Field churches’ clearly had the same status and function as later ‘chapels of ease’. While their origins are probably as manorial ‘chapels’, they remain dependent on a mother church (most likely an ‘old minster’) for burials and such like. Over the centuries, but often only after the Reformation, many of them acquire burial rights and become all-but-indistinguishable from parish churches.

This study looks principally at ‘old minsters’ but the absence of clear evidence means that there is no clear boundary with either ‘head minsters’ or ‘lesser minsters’. Based on studies of the documentary evidence which survives for Wiltshire and Hampshire, along with similar research in Surrey and Kent, some generalisations can be made. Some verge on the blindingly obvious – for example, the land units (or *parochiae*) associated with the early minsters are progressively broken up as later churches are built. This process had more-or-less been completed by the twelfth century. However this successive fragmentation left an ‘ancestral trail’, as when burial rights are retained by the ‘mother church’, or *church scot* and other dues need to be paid by the ‘daughter’ to the ‘parent’. One of the longest-surviving traces of these dependent relationships is often the distribution of chrism (oil blessed annually by the bishop and passed to ‘mother churches’ who then provide it to their ‘daughter’ establishments). There is little reason for these arrangements to be re-assigned, so they more readily leave documentary evidence in more recent centuries.

*Escob church, County Durham, was founded circa 670–5 and built using stone from the nearby Roman fort at Binchester. This is one of the few churches in Britain which still looks akin to a seventh or eighth century minster. The porch and gables are comparatively recent.*
Leicestershire has a number of sites which we know to have been minsters. However documentary evidence has survived for only one, Breedon on the Hill, founded about 675 as a daughter house of Medhamstede (later renamed Peterborough).

Two place-names provide unambiguous evidence of minsters in Leicestershire: Misterton (near Lutterworth) and Buckminster (between Waltham on the Wolds and Wymondham). In addition there are good reasons to think that there were early minsters at Aylestone, Rothley, Melton Mowbray, Bringhurst, Great Glen, St Mary in Arden (between Market Harborough and Great Bowden) and Hallaton.

There is also evidence for minsters at Barrow on Soar, Belgrave and Bottesford. Barrow on Soar parish is dependant on Rothley, while David Parsons considers that Belgrave fits the pattern of ‘lesser minsters’ even though it became the ‘mother church’ for nearby parishes (Parsons 1996: 32). Bottesford, right at the extremity of a ‘pan-handle’ to the north-east of the county, was also a minster.

At the risk of jumping too far ahead of my arguments, the relationship of the parishes of Barrow, Belgrave and Bottesford to their respective watercourses are especially interesting from the perspective of this study. At first glance the ‘lesser’ status of these minsters argues against my principal argument that the older minsters are the ones which ‘dominate’ their respective valleys. However in the absence of any direct evidence for the founding of these ‘lesser minsters’ then there is the possibility that their lesser status is a result of changes between, say, the eighth and eleventh centuries. In the absence of any documentary evidence, the indisputable evidence which is available – the relationship of the parishes to the topography – needs to be fully considered.
In other words, does the topography of Barrow, Belgrave and Bottesford provide clearer evidence than the all-but non-existent historical sources? Later in this study I will offer both evidence to support a tentative ‘yes’ – and also provide many more examples of places about which the same question can be asked.

Before questions of topography can be addressed then there needs to be a good understanding of the geomorphology and drift geology. Thankfully *The Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland Historic Landscape Characterisation Programme* compiled by John Robinson and published in 2010 provides good summaries of the topography and geology of the counties. Robinson writes:

> The study area is roughly divided east/west by the River Soar’s broad floodplain, for which the only major tributary is the River Wreake. The Soar itself flows northwards to join the River Trent, which forms a short section of Leicestershire’s northern boundary. Much of Leicestershire drains into the Trent through either the Soar or the Mease.

For copyright reasons I am unable to reproduce the various maps included in this report, but the complete document is available online at [www.leics.gov.uk/leicestershire_hlc_report_introduction.pdf](http://www.leics.gov.uk/leicestershire_hlc_report_introduction.pdf)

In the absence of any better arrangement the early churches in Leicestershire are discussed in alphabetical order, except when nearby or dependent minsters need to be considered. These stone friezes at Breedon on the Hill, Leicestershire, are part of a set thought to have been carved around 800 and therefore probably from the second church to be built there.
be considered together. Coincidentally, this enables the discussion of Leicestershire minsters to commence with one of the more complex examples.

**Bringhurst, Hallaton and Medbourne**

Most of the old minsters appear in later documents as estate centres. While this may simply represent the evolution of such minsters into estate centres, the relationship seems to be more fundamental. In other words, at the time of the minster being founded they functioned as estate centres. This begs the question as to whether the minster is the direct successor to an earlier ‘administrative centre’.

The clearest evidence for this in Leicestershire is at Bringhurst where a considerable quantity of early and middle Anglo-Saxon pottery sherds have been recovered from a prominent hill top site. This quantity of pottery indicates something more considerable than the typical settlement of the time. Less than a mile to the west is the site of a Roman villa, implying that either there was some sort of continuity of ‘estate centre’ from a Roman *regio* through to an Anglo-Saxon *soke* or that Bringhurst was intentionally ‘cleaved’ from the edge of a larger estate.

The curvilinear churchyard at Bringhurst, occupying a hill top site, is consistent with an early foundation. More significantly it had a dependent chapel at Great Easton. This is somewhat anomalous as in this part of Leicestershire Hallaton acts as the district’s mother church. This anomaly is also consistent with Bringhurst being an ‘old minster’. Even more revealing, the name of Great Easton implies that, at the time of being named, this was a secondary settlement of Bringhurst, immediately to the west.

*The relationship of Bringhurst to the Welland valley and other places discussed in the main text.*
Brinhurst and Great Easton are part of a sequence of settlements, unsurprisingly situated along the spring line, which occupy the fertile soils of the south-facing slope of the Welland valley. These villages straddle the Leicestershire-Rutland boundary (which follows the course of the Eye Brook to the east of Great Easton) while the course of the Welland approximately defines the Leicestershire-Northamptonshire boundary (with the deviations presumably reflecting changes to the watercourse in comparatively recent times). The north-facing slopes of the Welland valley in Northamptonshire mostly remained as forest and hunting parks, notably the estates of Rockingham castle.

Brinhurst is clearly an estate centre – although hardly central to its estate if, at the time, the lands did not extend across the Welland into what is now Northamptonshire to Cottingham (implying a lay-clerical pairing across the watercourse). However, Brinhurst could also be regarded as the outlier of an estate to the east and north, straddling the Eye Brook and with a secular centre emerging at Great Easton. Graham Jones has identified a group of ‘religiously significant places’ along the Eye Brook: Stoke Dry, Holyoaks (associated with two late Roman coin hoards – indicative of a shrine site – and a medieval hermitage), Priestley Hill, Thor’s leah and the holy well at Bradley (Jones 2015: 24). These are to the north-east of both Brinhurst and Great Easton but suggest that this corner of Leicestershire – defined by the Eye Brook to the east and the Welland to the south – may have been especially significant in the pre-conversion era. The major Iron Age shrine at Hallaton is barely five miles to the north-west of Brinhurst.

Hallaton is closely linked with Medbourne in what Graham Jones regards as a ‘probably lay-clerical’ pair (Jones 2015: 24). In many respects the topography of Medbourne suggests this should have been the ‘ideal’ location for an early minster. Clearly the importance of the Iron Age shrine at Hallaton distorted this simplistic arrangement. The later history of these parishes reveals that Hallaton is the ‘dominant’ partner and its likely minster status is revealed by tenurial links to the north, including Billsdon (Jones 2015: 24). In the other direction the putative parochia extended to Welham, the ham on the Welland.

Other than assuming that the major Iron Age shrine at Hallaton was still an important cult centre early in the Saxon era then there is no apparent reason why Hallaton was more important than Medbourne and Brinhurst around the seventh or eighth century onwards. Indeed, until the iron working activities associated with the Norman motte and bailey it...
may well have remained less important than either. The absence of relevant evidence makes further speculations about the evolving relationships of Bringhurst-Medbourne-Hallaton impossible to fathom.

Even if Medbourne and Hallaton should be regarded as a lay-clerical pair, as Jones suggests, the role of Bringhurst still needs to be considered. All the evidence suggests that Bringhurst is a precursor rather than a later interloper. The topographical relationship to the Welland conforms well to that associated with the earliest minsters. Are we seeing a sub-Roman estate which becomes the parochia of a ‘pioneer’ minster which is subsequently divided by secular land divisions using the course of the Welland as the boundary, leaving the Leicestershire side of this divided unit as an ‘auxiliary’ to the emerging Medbourne-Hallaton lay-clerical pairing? Undoubtedly to answer this question with an unqualified ‘yes’ is to stretch the evidence excessively. But I suggest that it might usefully be the basis of a more considered evaluation (even if such an evaluation turns out to dismiss this as a plausible scenario).

**Bottesford**

Bottesford is situated towards the extremity of a ‘pan handle’ extension of Leicestershire into surrounding Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire. The church is in a curvilinear churchyard in a loop of the River Devon, which flows northwards to Newark on Trent, where it joins the Trent.

The Domesday survey of 1086 reveals Bottesford to be the focus of a group of parishes including Knipston, Redmile and Stathern; in addition Barkeston, Muston and Plungar also appear to be dependent. Two other major manors sit to either side: Orston to the north-west and Grantham to the south-east. Graham Jones considers that this arrangement of land holdings is possibly the result of Danish ‘re-planning’ (Jones 2015: 25) and that Bottesford was originally more important than Orston.

This is supported by the name ‘Bottesford’ which derives from Old English *botl* ‘building, dwelling’ and ‘ford’. According to Jill Bourne:

*Botel* is an interesting element. Its literal meaning is ‘a building’ but in some parts of the country it refers to a significant dwelling, even a hall.

**Early churches in Leicestershire**

Top and above: Bottesford church is located close to a historic ford over the River Devon.
or palace. When this name was coined there would have been buildings everywhere so there must have been something remarkable about this particular building. Bottesford was an important central place in the Anglo-Saxon period so the interpretation of ‘palace’ is not unreasonable. (Bourne 2003: 33)

In almost all respects Bottesford is linked to places in Nottinghamshire rather than Leicestershire. The reasons are unclear but in 1066 Bottesford and Melton Mowbray shared the same landowner, Leofric, and were similar in status.

Suffice to say that Bottesford was clearly an important place – indeed, putatively a place with a ‘palace’ – with an old minster which evolved into an important mother church. Furthermore, the location at a fording place in the upper reaches of a river is consistent with many of the Leicestershire and Wiltshire ‘old minsters’ which will be identified in the next few pages.

**Buckminster**

Hurrah – the place-name reveals that this is the *minster* named after Bucca, a male personal name and presumably the founder. Bucca and his successors would have provided pastoral care for a group of parishes which extended westwards to – or perhaps beyond – Waltham on the Wolds. If they travelled a similar distance to the east then, after the first half-mile, they would have been in what is now Lincolnshire. I share Graham Jones’ belief that the Buckminster *parochia* once straddled what is now the Leicestershire-Lincolnshire border. Indeed in 1086 Buckminster was owned by the Bishop of Lincoln. The most natural eastern boundary would have been the Roman road which is the precursor of the A1, running to the west of Colsterworth, although a less-obvious boundary even further to the east is plausible.

Jones also proposes that the northern boundary would have incorporated the double-ditched earthworks constructed in the Anglo-Saxon era and now known as King Ludd’s Entrenchments (Jones 2015: 25), which seems entirely plausible. Such a land unit respects the watershed of the Witham.

Jones pairs up Buckminster with a ‘lay’ estate centre at Wymondham. In 1086 this estate incorporated Stapleford to the west, forming a complete ‘unit’ in the corner of Leicestershire abutting both Lincolnshire and Rutland.

However neat and tidy this might appear, from a topographical perspective Buckminster does not match the ‘ideal’ riverside locations of early minsters. Although Wymondham and Colsterworth do. Is the anomaly of a minster named after a recognisable individual, Bucca, the result of this being a somewhat late-formation place-name? In other words, is Buckminster not an ‘old’ minster but the relocation of an earlier foundation – or perhaps even two such early minsters – on a unit of land deliberately carved out from two adjoining territories?

There is of course no fundamental reason to suppose that the Leicestershire-Lincolnshire border reflects territorial boundaries predating the formation of shires around the tenth century. But despite the apparent transparency of Buckminster’s name, I would urge caution before assuming that Buckminster is an old minster. As I discuss below, Misterton near Lutterworth may be the *tun* for provisioning a nearby minster (or a minster relocated to Lutterworth from Misterton) so Buckminster too may be something of a ‘false friend’.
Great Bowden, Great Glen, Gumley, St Mary in Arden and Wistow

In a manner akin to Bringhurst, situated about seven miles to the north-east, Great Bowden was also the estate centre for a royal soke which is most likely a successor to a Roman regio (Roffe 1996). And, once again it overlooks the Welland valley, presumably near the centre of an extensive estate for which it was the administrative centre. In this instance there is clear evidence for the estate straddling the Welland as Little Bowden is on the southern side of the river. The boundaries of the parishes of Great and Little Oxendon together with Farndon all fit neatly with Little Bowden, suggesting these villages – now in Northamptonshire – were part of the Bowden estate. To the east, but in Leicestershire on the north bank of the Welland, Lubbenham also seems to ‘fit neatly’ with Farndon.

Neat and tidy as this Bowden estate seems to be, key to the previous paragraph is the word ‘successor’. While Great Bowden functioned as an estate centre by 1086, a recent project of digging test pits in numerous gardens concludes that ‘it is unlikely that there was a settlement of any size in Great Bowden until at least the ninth/tenth century.’ The project director, Carenza Lewis, accepts the possibility of a ‘small pre-village nucleus of middle Anglo-Saxon date’ but there is no evidence (Lewis et al 2015: 102).

If Great Bowden was not the original centre of this ‘Bowden estate’ then where was the precursor? Quite plausibly the now-ruined church of St Mary in Arden (close to Great Bowden, but now incorporated into the suburbs of

Following page: The ruins of St Mary in Arden church on the hill top seemingly once dedicated to Arduuina, the ‘high or exalted one’.
Minsters and Valleys
Market Harborough) originates as the earliest minster. By about 1200 it belonged to the rector of Great Bowden, implying a close relationship – albeit one where the ‘mother’ had become the ‘daughter’. Furthermore, as late as the fifteenth century it was regarded as the mother church for Kibworth, while Whitsun pilgrimages from surrounding villages, including Kibworth, were customary in the thirteenth century (Michael Wood, pers. comm. to Graham Jones (Jones 2015: 23 fn.11)).

The location of the now-ruined church of St Mary inside an Iron Age hillfort (the large circular churchyard seemingly respects the now-destroyed hill fort banks and ditches) mimics that of Breedon in the west of Leicestershire and some of the oldest minsters elsewhere in England. However St Mary in Arden differs from most hill forts in that a number of Iron Age cremation urns have been discovered near the church. Significantly, the name ‘Arden’ is thought to derive from Arduuina, ‘the place of a deity known as the high or exalted one’.

St Mary in Arden conforms to all the expectations – topographically and archaeologically – for a hearg (or ‘harrow’). These are usually rounded hills with an area of about forty hectares in which Iron Age, Roman and Anglo-Saxon burials and votive pits are found – but devoid of evidence for settlement (Semple 2007; see also Trubshaw 2012 for a popularist discussion relating to Leicestershire).

While the gender of Arduuina is ambiguous, the name Bowden derives from the dun (hill or open upland) associated with Bucga (pronounced more like ‘booc-ya’). The hill is indeed a typical dun (or ‘down’) with a fairly level extensive summit. In contrast, Bucga is a rare example of a woman’s name used in a non-habitative place-name. Just plausibly Bucga was the name of the tutelary goddess whose hearg evolved into the minster.

The early form of Lubbenham, Lobenho, suggests that this parish was on the boundary of an important shrine as we seem to have the hoh of Lubba (a male personal name). The Old English word hoh denotes a distinctively-shaped hill spur (usually compared the heel of a giant lying face-down but also rather like a giant-sized burial mound). Compounds of such
**Minsters and Valleys**

*hoh* as Tysoe reveal that these *hohs* were often – perhaps always – shrine sites. All known examples are liminal. For example the villages named after Tysoe are on the Warkwickshire-Oxfordshire border while a Leicestershire example is near the parish boundary between Glenfield and Leicester, and originally the limit of Leicester Forest and New Parks. Other *hohs* mark the boundary between land and sea, such as Plymouth Ho!, Sutton Hoo and several *hoh* place-names on the Wirrall.

A string of *hoh* place-names straddling the Leicestershire-Nottinghamshire border demark the north-western limit of the Leicestershire Wolds and plausibly the territory known as Vernemetum (‘the great or especially sacred grove’). These are Hoton (the *hoh* ton – plausibly the provisioning *tun* for the priest of the *hoh*, a precursor to the adjoining parish of Prestwold), Wysall (the *weoh* or ‘shrine’ on the *hoh* – clearer from early forms than from the modern spelling), and Hose (two or more *hohs*).

There are two recognisable *hoh*-shaped hill spurs in Lubbenham, mimicking Hose. Again, plausibly Lubba is the name of the tutelary deity, mimicking Tysoe, the *hoh* of the god Tiw. Whether any other *hohs* protected the bounds of the pre-conversion *hearg* of the *Arduuina Bucga* requires further research.

Also within the Great Bowden estate, at least in the middle Saxon period, was Gumley, about four miles to the west. This was the location of Anglo-Saxon councils in 749, 772 and 779, the last two convened by Offa. The moot site was probably where the Norman motte now stands. The site of other major councils in Leicestershire, Croft Hill, is intervisible from Gumley motte. The estate centred on Gumley is clearly important until the end of the eighth century, but in some respects anomalous. While direct evidence is lacking the best guess is that it was a centre for hunting (a role which came to the fore again after the invention of subscription fox hunting in the eighteenth century). There is no reason to suppose that there was ever a ‘main’ minster at Gumley, although just possibly there was a minor daughter community in the eighth century.

Gumley ceases to be important at about the same time as Great Glen increases in importance, including taking over as the location for king’s councils in 849. Great Glen is approximately nine miles to the north-west of Great Bowden; nevertheless Glen remains subservient to Great Bowden. Indeed Bowden’s influence extends across most of what was to become, in the late ninth or early tenth centuries, the Gartree Hundred. Bowden was

![The hilltop church at Gumley. Photograph by Stephen Daglish.](image)

![The River Glen wending its way through its glenn near Great Glen.](image)
still the dominant estate at the time of the Domesday survey in 1086, despite its location on the southern periphery of the hundred and county.

Great Glen takes its name from either Old English *glen* or *glenn*. The difference is a subtle one – *glen* is ‘river’ and *glenn* is ‘valley’ – specifically a wide, shallow valley. Just to add further confusion the River Sence which runs through Great Glen was formerly known as the River Glen. Add, for final complexity, the Celtic word *glano* means ‘holy’ or ‘clean’ – entirely appropriate terms for a minor watercourse near an early church (Bourne 1996). And, for once, we can be sure that the church is situated on an older site as the road bends around the churchyard quite dramatically.

In 849 a royal charter was issued at Great Glen, inferring that the estate there was ruled directly by the Mercian kings. The dependence of Glen on Bowden must, therefore, date to the tenth century. The importance of Glen in the mid-ninth century strongly implies there would have been a minster.

Intriguingly, within a few days of the charter being signed at Glen in 849 there was a murder among the Mercian royal family – Beortwulf, the king, killed his relative, Wigstan (also spelt Wistan). This leads to the founding of the church at Wistow (‘Wistan’s holy place’). This is an unlikely place for a church as it is low-lying and subject to flooding. Most probably it was built to commemorate the site of the murder. Almost certainly there was an older minster nearby. Intriguingly this would be the time when a putative secondary minster at Gumley would have ceased to serve the royal estate centre. Did the small community move from Gumley to Wistow? At some time before 1086 the original settlement at Great Glen moved to Newton Harcourt, which might also be be associated with a rearrangement of any minsters associated with the estate.

Frankly there is far too little evidence of the early religious communities in the Glen estate for any suggestions to be more than tentative speculations. The bend in the road around the parish church at Great Glen is the least-worst evidence for the location of the oldest of these minsters.

The dependency of Great Glen on Great Bowden can only be the result of tenth (or maybe early eleventh) century administrative changes. The same is probably true for the way the Langton pays (centred originally on East Langton, some three miles to the north of Great Glen).
Bowden) becomes incorporated into the Bowden estate (Bowman 1996).

Although the church at Knaptoft was never part of the Bowden estate (it is situated about nine miles to the west of Great Bowden) this has been identified as a ‘lesser minster’ (Parsons 1996: 32) which evolved into a ‘mother church’ for surrounding parishes. Nevertheless Knaptoft village was depopulated and the church has been ruined since the mid-seventeenth century and lost its status as mother church. This implies that putative minsters at Great Glen, Gumley and the Langtons could have been eclipsed by the ‘promotion’ of Great Bowden to the administrative centre of the Gartree Hundred (and subsequently, in the thirteenth century, the ‘planting’ of Market Harborough in the part of Great Bowden parish closest to the ford over the Welland).

This uncertainty as to where the minsters might have been is an all-too-typical scenario for anyone trying to identify early minsters, or to distinguish ‘old minsters’ from eleventh century ‘lesser minsters’. The historical evidence is incomplete and often from several centuries later. This means the documentary sources inevitably post-date the formation of the hundreds in the ninth century and the subsequent promotion of one main minster per hundred. We simply never see the ‘original’ (but no doubt ever-evolving) relationships.

The topographical ‘contexts’ of the churches of St Mary in Arden and Great Glen speak more clearly of an early foundation than any surviving documents. The topography of Wistow and Gumley also supports their specific roles, while not matching the characteristic locations of old minsters. For once there is archaeological evidence – or, in this case, the actual absence of – to shed light on Great Bowden. However, none of this evidence allows the ever-evolving relationships of these estates and their churches to be fully established. So a perfectly good reminder, should one be needed, that estates and churches evolved over the centuries.

**Kirby Bellars and Kirkby Mallory**

There is a possible candidate for an early minster on the Wreake, a mere three miles west of Melton. The name of Kirby Bellars suggests an early church, as does Kirkby Mallory in west Leicestershire as these both derive from the Old Scandinavian *kirkju*, the origin of Modern English ‘church’. (Kirby Muxloe is a ‘false friend’ – the early forms of the place-name reveal this was ‘Caeri’s by’, not a ‘circe by’.)

The received wisdom is that Kirby Bellars and Kirkby Mallory were places which, at the time they acquired their names, were *distinctive* because of their ‘kirks’. In other words, at the time most places did not have such a building. This makes them candidates for old...
minsters. But, as Scandinavian has little influence on English place-names before the late ninth century, there is the distinct possibility that these churches were not founded in the seventh to eighth centuries. In other words, they could plausibly be what, by the eleventh century, were deemed ‘lesser minsters’.

Academic research into ‘Kirkby’ place-names nationally has not yet revealed any clear insights into why they are so named, with the exception that only in Cheshire, Lancashire and Cumbria do Kirkby place-names correspond to minsters (Blair 2005: 310) (see also Endnote 4).

While I cannot offer conclusive evidence or arguments, the best guess is that at the time the names came into currency, the kirks at Kirby Bellars and Kirkby Mallory were recognised as being something different to a minster. If so, we might expect slightly different topographical relationships. This is arguably the case for Kirkby Mallory, but not for Kirby Bellars, as the location closely matches the topography of old minsters elsewhere in Leicestershire and also in Wiltshire. Furthermore, there was a Romano-British settlement at Kirby Bellars, and the church was dedicated to SS Peter and Paul. Graham Jones considers that both these ‘point to some significant status within the estate.’ (Jones 2015: 24) The importance of Kirby Bellars would have been impaired by the proximity of Melton Mowbray. (Note that the priory at Kirby Bellars is not the successor to an Anglo-Saxon minster but a collegiate chapel founded in 1319 (Fox 2014: 80).)

Graham Jones suggests that possibly Kirkby Mallory … was chosen as the religious centre for a secular lordship based at Earl Shilton… at a time when that lordship obtained parochial rights independent of some previous ecclesiastical dependency on Barwell. (Jones 2015: 29)

Which makes the church at Kirkby Mallory least like an old minster as it is possible to get. This is consistent with the topography which, likewise, has no traits in common with those of old minsters. (Jones implies that there was no church at Kirkby Mallory before 1220 but this is incompatible with the settlement being referred to as Cherchebi in the Domesday Book. Nevertheless the remarks quoted still remain valid.)

The locations of Kirkby Mallory, Barwell and Earl Shilton. Aldeby and Croft Hill, both discussed in the next section, are also shown (Aldeby top right and Croft Hill as a brown cross).
The most important secular estate relating to Kirkby Mallory is Earl Shilton to the south. However the most probably pre-Christian ‘cult centre’ would have been Barwell (the ‘boar’s well’), to the west of Earl Shilton. Barwell is situated on the eastern periphery of an area of land where grazing rights were shared between Burbage, Earl Shilton and Hinckley. (The documentary sources refer to Elmesthorpe as having the inter-commoning rights, but this was a daughter settlement of Earl Shilton and these rights would date back long before the formation of thorpes.) Such ‘liminal’ locations on the less fertile soils used for shared grazing of livestock are also places associated with pre-conversion shrine sites of local or regional importance.

Further evidence for such as shrine – putatively a *hearg* or ‘harrow’ – at or near Barwell is revealed by the settlement name Stapleton to the north-west of Barwell and the south-west of Kirkby. This is the *tun* (‘settlement’, probably associated with arable farming) with a *stapol* (a wooden post presumed to have been carved with one or more cult figures).

The nucleated settlements at Earl Shilton, Kirkby Mallory and Barwell, together with other dependent settlements at Croft, Elmesthorpe and Peckleton, had their origins in a fragmenting multiple estate. The scant available evidence, dominated by the meanings of the place-names, offers ‘snapshots’ at different stages of this fragmentation, without providing any clear evidence of chronology. Graham Jones has summarised this complex scenario (Jones 2015: 29) and tentatively concludes that Earl Shilton and Kirkby Mallory formed a lay-clerical pairing, although an early chapel at Barwell gained more importance than might be expected. (This is reminiscent of the complexities of Bringhurst, Hallaton and Medbourne, discussed previously, where the presence of a presumed cult site influences the evolution of the respective churches.)

From the topographical perspective of this essay, I will simply note that none of the places in the ‘Earl Shilton estate’ correlate well with locations chosen for the earliest minsters in that the watercourses – all tributaries of the Thurlaston Brook – are too minor to have been navigable. However both Earl Shilton and Kirkby Mallory could be considered to dominate this upper valley, which makes them both consistent with plausible locations for early minsters. This adds further support to Jones’ proposal that these two settlements formed a lay-clerical pair. Whether we should regard Kirkby Mallory as an early minster or a somewhat later one needs to remain an open question.
Leicester, Aldeby, Aylestone and Belgrave

Leicester had a church by at least the 680s, when Cuthwine was appointed the first Bishop of Leicester. However, as a result of Viking depredations, Leicester ceased to be a separate diocese in 870. Some historians argue that in the seventh or eighth centuries a *cathedra* was in some ways distinct from a minster but such distinctions – if they indeed existed at the time – are not relevant to my interests.

Two churches in Leicester – St Nicholas and St Mary de Castro – have been proposed as the seventh century church (Parsons 1996). But there is no evidence that St Mary’s was ever more than the castle chapel until raised to new importance in 1107. So the best guess is that St Nicholas was the first cathedral. However there is no evidence that it existed as a minster before this. On the contrary, John Blair has argued that the *cathedra* created in *ceasters* were part of a novel ‘movement’ whereby the Roman church in England ‘re-occupied’ former Roman *civitas* with two explicit intentions. Firstly, reawakening the by-then legendary ‘golden age’ of the Roman occupation. Secondly, evoking the idea – and ideology – of the holy ‘city of Jerusalem’. At this time Britain was an essentially non-urban society, although Mercia was the pioneer when it came to urbanisation. Wessex – with the exception of Winchester and other *caesters* – had almost no urban settlements until the eleventh century.

Quite plausibly there never was an early minster within the Roman walls of Leicester. The all-but-lost church of St John at Aldeby seems to have been one of the oldest churches in proximity to Leicester, plausibly predating churches in
Leicester. The riverside location is, as will be discussed in more detail later, entirely typical of the first phase of minsters. Now only the footings of the walls survive. This is in large part because the ‘planting’ of Narborough a little over a mile to the south in the twelfth century led to the total demise of Aldeby (see Endnote 6); the former parish is now part of Enderby (mother church for the chapel at Whetstone on the opposite side of the Soar, confirming that at some time there was a parochia straddling the valley).

Topographically Aldeby is significant as it is close to where the Fosse Way crosses the Soar. There is a bridge now but the terrain suggests the river could feasibly have been crossed by a shallow ford. Equally significantly, Aldeby is near the confluence of the Sence and Soar.

Aldeby’s status seemingly changes in the ninth century when Guthlaxton hundred came into existence. Aldeby is outside the hundred and instead within the forests associated with the outskirts of Leicester. The boundary of the hundred was marked by the eponymous Guthlac’s Stone, little more than a mile along the Fosse Way from Aldeby. The stone was most likely a Roman milepost. In the absence of any alternatives Barrie Cox tentatively concludes that the stone is named after St Guthlac of Croyland (Lincolnshire) (Cox 2009).

Although Croyland is about fifty miles to the east of Aldeby, there were strong connections. In later medieval times Sutton Cheney, about twelve miles west of the Fosse Way, was the most westerly possession of Croyland. A now-lost trackway, known as the Salt Way, ran from Sutton Cheney and crossed the Fosse Way at Guthlac’s Stone, presumably continuing to Croyland (Foss 1991).
The ‘exclusion’ of Aldeby from the adjacent hundred tells us nothing about territories before hundreds were formalised in the late ninth or early tenth centuries. In the early eighth century Aldeby would have shared some of the importance of Croft Hill, only a little further along the Fosse Way to the south-west. Croft was the location of Wiglaff’s council of 836, attended by a number of bishops and other leading figures. If, as has been suggested, Croft is the modern name for Clofesho (see Endnote 7) then councils of bishops also met there in 742, 747, 794, 798, 803, 824 and 825.

The community at Aldeby would have gained considerable prestige if one or all of these councils had been convened ‘on its doorstep’ – although the downside was that the ‘great and the good’ with all their entourages would have expected Aldeby to provide hospitality according to royal ad noble expectations.

However there is a complication. About two miles downstream from Aldeby is the settlement of Aylestone. This could also have been the site of a ‘lesser’ minster – and one which may have been, like Aldeby, an ‘old minster’ which was then overshadowed by the cathedra in Leicester. Intriguingly, the parish boundaries of Aylestone straddle the river Soar. A ‘packhorse’ bridge survives at a place which would previously have been fordable. This makes Aylestone akin to Melton Mowbray, Bottesford and several lesser places with old minsters.

A further four miles downstream is Belgrave, another church which may have had an early foundation and close to a medieval bridge over the Soar. As noted above, David Parsons considers that Belgrave fits the pattern of ‘lesser minsters’ which became the ‘mother church’ for nearby parishes (Parsons 1996: 32).

Graham Jones sees the placement of Belgrave to the north of Leicester and Aylestone to the south as part of a deliberate scheme (Jones 2015: 31). This scheme includes the parishes of Glenfield, Groby, Ratby and Thurcaston, together with Knighton, Wigston and the estates centred on Great Glen. This suggests that the scheme was brought together by adapting estates which were already functioning in the Anglo-Saxon era – most notably in the case of Great Glen. Jones suggests that the Glen estate was predominately arable, in contrast to the western areas which may have been more pastoral.
Based on the published outline Jones’ suggested scheme is convincing. However he offers little in the way of a chronology, although a post-Danelaw context seems to be inferred. Given that the formation of four hundreds around Leicester in the ninth century involved changes to existing territorial boundaries (for example the ‘exclusion’ of Aldeby from Guthlaxton hundred, as mentioned) then the scheme identified by Jones was, at the very least, modified at the same time. If so, the evidence for the scheme sheds no reliable light on the oldest minsters of the central Soar valley.

Without dismissing the importance of Jones’ identification and analysis of this complex scheme, care is needed not to allow the evidence for this putative ninth century arrangement to be mistaken for evidence of at least one earlier ordering of the parochiae of the oldest minsters of this stretch of watercourse. Even with that caveat firmly in mind, the relationships of Aylestone, Belgrave and Ratby to Leicester seem to long predate the ninth century. However there is a real possibility that Great Glen was a ninth century ‘substitute’ for a former estate associated with Aldeby and Enderby, while other, less obvious, pragmatic adaptations over the centuries are also plausible.

**Lutterworth and Misterton**

On the face of things Misterton sounds like the location of a minster. But caution is needed as Prestons are more likely to be the *tun* which provided an income to provision the priest than where the priest lived.

While the location of Misterton at the side of the River Swift, together with the partially curvilinear churchyard, suggest that there may have been an early minster, as Graham Jones has argued there are good reasons to think of Misterton as the ‘provisioning tun’ for the more impressive church at Lutterworth. While acknowledging that the ‘jury is out’ regarding the primacy of Lutterworth over Misterton, Jones makes the convincing suggestion that there was once ‘a larger territory occupying the whole upper Avon drainage as far as Crick, Naseby and Husbands Bosworth’ centred on Lilbourne – noting that a Neolithic causewayed enclosure ‘points to the antiquity of the watershed as a boundary’ (Jones 2015: 22). Stanford attests to the ability to cross the Avon while Swinford to the immediate north-west indicates where a tributary was habitually traversed.
Later in this essay I will establish more clearly that the topographical location of Misterton matches the location of the oldest *mynsters* better than Lutterworth. There is no reason that a church at Misterton could not have predated one at Lutterworth – if only by a few decades. The subsequent history of these establishments clearly led to Lutterworth becoming more important – but there are plenty of parallels for the oldest churches losing out to later ones. Nevertheless, there remains the contrary possibility than Misterton only ever functioned as a ‘provisioning tun’ for Lutterworth and was simply located at the most pragmatic location.

**Market Bosworth**

Several pieces of evidence suggest a minster at Market Bosworth. The location is most likely to have been St Ann’s church, to the north-west of St Peter’s, the parish church (Foss 1996). St Ann’s is on the site of Roman villa which, although not directly indicative of a minster, does suggest that the first church there might have been created by putting a new roof on Roman ruins. In any event there is archaeological evidence of fifth to seventh century settlement in the vicinity.

Throughout England many early minsters evolved into locally-important market towns, and Market Bosworth fits this pattern. The exceptions are when a market town is planted nearby in the twelfth century. Market Harborough and the comparative demise of Bringhurst is as good example as any, while Narborough leads to the total demise of Aldeby, as noted. A putative minster at Kirby Bellars would have similarly been eclipsed by Melton Mowbray.

Peter Foss argues that at the time the minsters were founded then Market Bosworth and Breedon were less part of the future county of Leicestershire and, instead, ‘looked west’ to the territory of the Tomsæte. The underlying reason is topographical – they are both situated on the high ground which separates the Trent, Soar and Tame/Anker valleys.

Market Bosworth is not situated by the banks of any of these rivers. Instead it is on the higher slopes near to two of the several sources of the River Sence (not to be confused with the river of the same name at Great Glen). Before later settlement, the position of the
minster would have been a prominent feature in the upper Sence valley. Peter Foss has proposed a sixth century pays corresponding to the Mease and Sence valleys (Foss 1996: 87), which could easily have become the original parochiae of the Market Bosworth minster.

**Melton Mowbray**

Framland hundred is situated to the north of Gartree hundred. In contrast to the peripheral location of Great Bowden to its hundred, Framland is centred on one of the earliest market towns in Leicestershire, Melton Mowbray. Indeed, in the Domesday survey Melton is the only market town apart from Leicester listed in the county. Unsurprisingly, Melton was one of the most important estate centres at the time of the early minsters.

The name Melton denotes a ‘middle town’. The sense is more of ‘important town’ rather than ‘central town’ (just as High Streets are not necessarily more elevated than surrounding streets). Perhaps coincidentally, the prominent ridges of hills running to the north and south of the hundred, together with the boundaries with Rutland to the east and the Fosse Way to the west denote an area of land very similar in size to Rutland (see map and comments on p85). As the origins of Rutland have been demonstrated to be an early Anglo-Saxon kingdom – the eponymous land of Rota – then Melton may too have been a land associated with a contemporary of Rota. This is consistent with Framland hundred being the only one of the four original hundreds of Leicestershire which does not have a boundary extending to Leicester itself (see also Endnote 3).

This region to the east of the Fosse Way (but excluding Rutland) is dominated by Anglo-Scandinavian place-names, indicating a substantial cultural shift in the later half of the ninth century onwards. Uniquely in England, the river running through this hundred changes its name from the Eye (Old English for ‘river’) to the Wreake (Old Scandinavian for ‘crooked’). To the east of Melton the river is however still known as the Eye. Confusingly, to the west of Melton, on the banks of the Wreake is a shrunken medieval village called Eye Kettleby.

The parish of Melton Mowbray straddles the Wreake at a place which would have been suitable for fording (although there has long been a bridge). Running to the south is a seemingly prehistoric routeway going to the Welland at Market Harborough. Ian Wilkinson has proposed that the original Anglo-Saxon settlement at Melton would have been focused on sands and gravels to the north of the parish church (Wilkinson 1996: 63).
As already noted, 1066 Melton and Bottesford were not only similar in status and topography but also shared the same landowner, Leofric.

So far there is no dateable archaeological evidence for the origins of Melton. Indeed, the earliest settlement might not have been at Melton. In 1996–7, prior to the building of a sandwich factory, large-scale excavations at Eye Kettleby close to the River Wreake a mile or so to the west of Melton revealed several timber-built ‘hall houses’, along with sunken-featured buildings and lightly-constructed ‘bothies’. The main phase seems to date to the sixth and seventh centuries, although the settlement ‘migrates’ upstream to the earthworks of a deserted medieval village and the surviving farmhouse (see Endnote 5). In the early Anglo-Saxon era this may have been one of the largest settlements in the region.

The excavations have yet to be have yet to be formally published so any interpretation remains speculative. Presumably from the sixth century onwards Eye Kettleby functioned as a waterside wic or trading-place, either losing importance to Melton just a little further upstream. Or just maybe the community at Eye Kettleby largely moved to a newly-founded minster at Melton. This would parallel the known relocation of a similar riverside settlement at Foxley, Wiltshire, and the foundation of what would become Malmesbury Abbey (see below).

**Rothley and Barrow on Soar**

Five miles downstream from Belgrave the River Soar passes close to Rothley. However Rothley church and the historic core of the village are not at the side of the Soar but instead on the bank of the Rothley Brook, which flows into the Soar about a mile to the north-east. Several bridges cross the brook in close proximity to the church.

Along with Melton Mowbray and Leicester, Rothley was one of the three main settlements in the county at the time of the Domesday survey. The substantial fragment of a tenth century cross-shaft stands in the churchyard, confirming that this estate centre was also a focus of Christianity before parish churches.

Rothley is not considered to be among the oldest minsters in Leicestershire (Jill Bourn pers. comm.) Indeed it may have been relocated from elsewhere. The main evidence is the
substantial number of parishes in north Leicestershire which are dependencies of Rothley. The reason for this unusual distribution has not been established but is entirely consistent with the way the landholdings of early minsters evolve.

One of these dependent parishes is Barrow on Soar, a further four miles downstream where a Roman road running from the high ground beyond Six Hills to the east crosses the river and continues west to a Roman small town near Thringstone. A substantial amount of pottery fragments from Barrow indicates that in Anglo-Saxon times there was a major settlement on at least the south-western bank of the river. This was presumably a wic or waterside trading place.

Barrow’s location in a dramatic loop in the Soar (prior to the eighteenth century ‘cut’ which straighten the main watercourse) is consistent with the place-name originating with *bearu*, which has the sense of a sacred grove (i.e. distinct from Barrow place-names originating in *beorg* and its cognates, all meaning ‘burial mound’).

The status of Barrow on Soar as a wic does not of itself confirm a minster (although is analogous to the estuarine minsters of Sussex). But the location at a long-established river crossing is consistent with many other minsters. The distance from Rothley (four miles) is consistent with the distances between Rothley, Leicester, Aylestone and Aldeby. Are we seeing a blurring between the function of minsters as de facto ‘trading places’ (often at fords or other river crossings for land-based travel) with more specialist trading places which sometimes acquire the names wic?

**Above:** Rothley’s relationship to the Soar valley.

**Below:** Barrow on Soar; see caption on next page.

The tenth century cross shaft at Rothley, carved from a single piece of hard sandstone about fifteen feet in length.
Jill Bourne has suggested (pers. comm.), that an early minster at Barrow later relocated to Rothley, in a manner analogous to Foxley in Wiltshire being abandoned when Malmesbury was founded. Barrow is a dependency of Rothley and there is a good match between the early importance of Barrow (attested by the amounts of pottery) and the later importance of Rothley (in the centuries after the Conquest the second-most important place in the county after Leicester). The widely-spread dependencies of Rothley, mostly to the east, fit well with this scenario, including parishes such as Chadwell, which are accessible via the ‘dog leg’ of Roman roads running from Barrow to the Roman iron working sites at Goadby Marwood via Eastwell. More thoughts – and, ideally, more evidence – are needed about this putative early minster at Barrow being a precursor to Rothley. But the archaeology at Barrow combines well with the later documentary sources for Rothley and the topography of both places.

Vernemetum

Market Bosworth’s location near to the headwaters of streams is mimicked in the extreme north of Leicestershire, just to the south of the Roman small town of Vernemetum on the Fosse Way. The site of the town is to the immediate south of a prominent ridge. Since 1974 the Leicestershire-Nottinghamshire county boundary has followed this ridge although prior to that date a ‘finger’ of Nottinghamshire extended southwards to Six Hills, making Vernemetum part of Nottinghamshire.

Although the only archaeological excavations have been to the immediate north of the town (Kinsley 1993) the site is known from pottery scatters and characteristic dark soils. To the south, in a somewhat muddy area, a metal-detector user discovered over a dozen strap ends in the 1980s. These are only found in early Christian burials (they decorated the ends of thongs used to tie shrouds) and thus strongly suggest the site of a minster.

The location fits with William Stukeley’s 1724 brief account of the ruins of an Anglo-Saxon church still standing ‘recently’ – presumably in the late seventeenth century. The name of the town, Vernemetum, translates as ‘especially sacred grove’, implying that it was near a regionally- or nationally-important Iron Age shrine. Six Hills, about a mile to the south, was the location of the Goscote hundred moot and is arguably an Anglo-Saxon hearth or...
The Roman small town of Vernemetum (spelt on the OS map as Vernometum) is also situated on the rim of the wolds, on a south-facing slope (see photo on right).

The Six Hills crossroads is now the location of the Six Hills Hotel, formerly the Durham Ox Inn. Until 1974 a ‘finger’ of Nottinghamshire (then part of Willoughby on the Wolds parish) extended to Six Hills; the remainder of the Wolds being in Leicestershire. The Durham Ox is immediately adjacent to an area of land which remained extraparochial until the 1890s (shown with a * on the sketch map); this arrangement would be needed by the drovers who would have been the principal clientele of the Durham Ox.

Near to Six Hills was the Goscote Hundred moot site. To the west is a Harrow Farm (not shown on this map); the medieval great field adjoining Harrow Farm was known as the Arrow Field, and the River Mantle was also once known as the River Arrow and as Cumberdale (the dale or valley of the cymru or British). I have suggested elsewhere (Trubshaw 2012) that Six Hills is at the centre of a major Anglo-Saxon hearth or ‘harrow’, inferring continuity of ritual activity from the Iron Age and Roman periods - the vernemeton (‘great or especially sacred grove’) which gave its name to the nearby Roman town.

Perhaps coincidentally, two of the important streams draining the north-western part of the Wolds have their origins near to Six Hills. These found the Kingston Brook and the River Mantle (also once known as the River Arrow near to the source – perhaps a corruption of hearth). If Six Hills and these two headwaters were part of a hearth then they may have been ‘too pagan’ for an early minster,
making the site about a mile to north the more practical alternative, while still dominating the upper reaches of these watercourses.

The parish of Prestwold (‘the priest’s or priests’ wold) five miles to the west tentatively suggests a landholding which may have provided an income for the minster at Vernemetum. There is no other candidate for an early church in the vicinity as few of the surrounding villages have habitative names, and none with early forms such as –ham. Prestwold was created out of Walton on the Wolds parish (the ‘township’ of the walsh, the British speaking slaves) and the parish was further redefined after the creation of Burton on the Wolds in the mid-ninth century.

The strap ends alone offer convincing evidence of a now-lost minster, while the and topography and ‘cultural connotations’ of the location seem to be entirely consistent with an early foundation.

The importance of valleys

The previous pages were originally drafted prior to the publication of Graham Jones’ substantial study of Leicestershire’s churches, territories and landscape in the Anglo-Saxon period. I have included many of his specific insights but mostly ignored his broader discussions. However what cannot be ignored is the manner in which Jones structures his whole approach around the river valleys which make up the topography of the county. He also makes the observation that the county boundary ‘everywhere looks artificial, permeable, the result of arbitrary expansions or contractions.’ He later states ‘Paradoxically, this strange boundary is a help, because it frees the observer to allow for earlier land-units – with central places served by major churches – which ignore it.’ (Jones 2015: 15)

Jones’ combines a considerable variety of evidence in his study, although rarely devotes and attention to the specific location of the churches, and their topography. While I suspect that he would find some of my comments tendentious, I am intrigued that we have independently recognised that rivers and their valleys are key to understanding early churches.
Rutland minsters

David Parsons has summarised the evidence for minsters in Rutland (Parsons 1996). In two instances he suggests that there was an early shift in location: from Hambleton to Oakham and from Riddlington to Uppingham (Parsons 1996: 25–6). This is akin to the known relocation from Foxley to Malmesbury in Wiltshire.

Hambleton is on a hill spur between two tributaries of the Gwash (see map on next page). Indeed, since the flooding of these two valleys to create Rutland Water then the location is even more dramatic. Oakham, three miles to the west of Hambleton, is situated on the upper reaches of one of those tributaries. Preston, less than five miles to the south of Oakham, implies the provisioning tun for a priest – quite plausibly with a church of its own. The parish adjacent to Preston is Riddlington, the centre of Queen Edith’s estate in the eleventh century.

Ridlington is on high ground to the south of the River Chater. The church at Uppingham, just over two miles to the south, is situated on a dramatic hill spur above the source of an unnamed tributary of the Welland (indeed Uppingham is ‘the ham of the upland dwellers’).

Graham Jones suggests that Oakham and Hambleton were two parts of an estate dependent on Empingham (Jones 2015: 19), where the layout of the churchyard and earliest settlement suggest that the church was an integral with nucleation. Ketton overlooks the Welland valley although the church is much closer to a tributary, the River Chater. Indeed the bridge over the Chater (to a hamlet called Aldgate) is immediately to the east of Ketton church. Empingham church likewise has a bridge over the Gwash immediately to the south.

Prior to the importance of Oakham the main administrative centre or caput in Rutland was North Luffenham, so almost certainly there would have been a minster here too. On the opposite bank of the river is South Luffenham, indicating that the original parish straddled
Top: Hambleton today.
Above: Hambleton before the construction of Rutland Water.
Top right: The Luffenhams.
Right: Ketton.
the watercourse. Although Empingham is little more than three miles to the north, the Luffenhams are situated to dominate a putative pays corresponding to the Chater valley.

Ketton, although clearly also important, is betwixt-and-between the Luffenhams and Stamford so does not have such a dominant location. Furthermore, as the examples in Leicestershire suggest, the old minsters with a parochiae originally extending across a valley system tend to be associated with the upper rather than lower reaches of the watercourse.

Charles Phythian-Adamswas the first to recognise that Rutland’s boundaries seem to denote an Iron Age land unit (Phythian-Adams 1980). Clearly this land unit was recognised when the parochiae of Bourne, Grantham and Southwell were created, as these terminate nearly at the county boundary. The more complex history of Stamford has led to the original parochia, which included the Castertons and Ryhall, straddling the Rutland-Lincolnshire border (Jones 2015: 19).

The early importance of Ketton, the Luffenhams and Ridlington seems to be sustained into the twelfth century, based on the quality of some of the Romanesque architecture which has survived there.

Top: West doorways at Ketton.

Centre: One of a set of capitals at South Luffenham. (The same mason also produced capitals for Morcot.)

Bottom: The tympanum now inside Riddlington church, depicting two of the emblems of the Evangelists and the enigmatic wheel which features more prominently on other twelfth century tympana.
Part Three

Early churches in Wiltshire

As noted, there are notable differences between Wessex and Mercia. Foremost is that Wiltshire hundreds fragmented and recombined far more fluidly than in Leicestershire. The Domesday Book names forty hundreds in Wiltshire, ten times the number in Leicestershire. Secondly, Wessex has no significant urban settlements until Winchester comes to prominence in the late tenth century. This is in complete contrast to Mercia where towns predated the Danelaw. Indeed it was these burhs which were picked off one-by-one by the Viking armies whereas in Wessex there were no towns to attack so the Vikings could only fight pitched battles and were more likely to be defeated.

In the 1990s J.M.A. Pitt looked closely at the Wiltshire minsters and their parochiae (Pitt 1999) and established reasonably detailed histories for many of the Wiltshire minsters. He made strenuous and plausible attempts to reconstruct their original parochiae, although the evidence can be ambiguous. He was able to demonstrate that the ‘rule of thumb’ of one minster per hundred applied in many, although not all, instances. But the evidence also suggests that by the time this rule of thumb applies, some of the minsters would have been around two hundred years old. So there is a correlation but it is not causative. Hundreds are created – and re-created – quite late in the process.

While not elaborating unduly, Pitt notes that the oldest ‘territories’ (which he terms either pays or parochiae) of Wiltshire minsters seem to be specific river valleys. His examples include Amesbury, the Deverills, Idmiston, Wilton and Winterbourne. Although not discussed by Pitt, Warminster may take its name from a river name (see below).

The bounds of Avebury’s burh.

The footpath which runs from the main visitors’ car park to the High Street (shown here from the summit of the adjacent prehistoric henge bank) seems to follow one corner of the seventh or eighth century burh earthworks. Instead of a hawthorn hedge, imagine a ditch, bank and wooden palisade.

The modern building in the middle distance was formerly the primary school. When it was erected in 1970 evidence of mid-Saxon settlement was revealed.

The tower of the present church, the successor to the minster contemporary with the creation of the burh, is to the far right of the photograph.
Wiltshire has a significant number of mid-Saxon *burhs*: Alderbury, Amesbury, Avebury, Heytesbury, Malmesbury, Ramsbury, Tisbury, Westbury and Yatesbury. (Salisbury too may predate its later importance as a cathedral city, but the evidence is too scant for this to be pursued further.) The place-name element *burh* denote settlements which would have been fortified with earthen banks and ditches, presumably originally with timber palisades on the banks. From the surviving evidence some were rectilinear, with the four corners having a characteristic curve, and typically two entrances situated opposite each other in the middle of the sides. The evidence for others is of an elliptical shape with no street through the middle, although possibly this is a result of latter adaptations rather than the original layout.

Simon Draper has recognised the successors to these earthworks in the street plans of several of these *burhs* and also at other settlements presumably founded around the same time, most notably Wilton and Tilshead (Draper 2006). The same street pattern can be discerned in the ‘core’ of Marlborough around Kingsbury Street (note another *burh* compound) and St Mary’s church. Substantial development in the twelfth century created the High Street and associated burgage plots to the south-west of the *burh*, extending to St Peter’s church.

By way of an aside, the location of this church on a cliff-like rise above the Kennet, and just west of the confluence with the Ogbourne is consistent with the locations of principal minsters, such as Malmesbury. However the twelfth century building, later modified and restored, offers no suggestions of any earlier structure. Nevertheless, the possibility of Marlborough originating in the seventh or eight centuries as a *burh* – ‘Marlbury’ as it just might have been – and contemporary of Avebury, Ramsbury and the other Wiltshire *burys* cannot be dismissed. Such an origin would be entirely consistent with expansion in the twelfth century into a planned ‘borough’.

These *burhs* seem to be quite distinct from later Alfredian *burh tons* in that they are not secondary to more important places. Leicestershire offers excellent examples of the relationship of ninth century Burtons to places needing defending: Burton Lazars is two miles south of Melton Mowbray; Burton Overy is the same distance east of Great Glen,
The street layout in the oldest parts of Marlborough appears to evolve from a sub-rectangular burh. Significantly, the western side retains the name Kingsbury.

while Burton on the Wolds is three miles from Cotes Bridge (clearly once a strategic fording place over the Soar); indeed a ‘pan handle’ of Burton on the Wolds parish just a few hundred metres wide extends down to the bank of the river (see Trubshaw 2015 for further discussions).

In contrast the Wiltshire burhs are mostly important places in their own right. Indeed, they were the nearest to ‘urban’ settlements in Wiltshire at the time so, unlike Leicestershire’s Burtons, were not situated to protect an already-existing town. Furthermore several of the Wiltshire burhs (such as Avebury and Yatesbury) are situated on the ‘debatable lands’ between Mercia and Wessex which were contested before Alfred’s reign. Westbury may also be the ‘frontier outpost’ of somewhere to the east. The only place of importance in that direction is Edington but this only makes partial sense as Warminster is a similar distance to the south.
Amesbury, Malmesbury and Ramsbury can be confidently associated with early minsters (as can Wilton, which has a surviving Kingsbury street-name). With the possible exception of Yatesbury all the other burhs are plausibly early minsters. Interestingly, with the exception of Westbury and possibly Yatesbury, the names of all the Wiltshire burhs are compounds of personal names. Early forms of these names tell us that they were once Æthelwearde’s burh (Alderbury), Ambre’s burh (Amesbury), Afa’s burh (Avebury), Heahthryth’s burh (Heytesbury), Maildulf’s burh (Malmesbury), Hraefnes’ burh (Ramsbury), Tissa’s burh (Tisbury) and – perhaps – Gaeta’s burh (Yatesbury). Interestingly half of these eight ‘patrons’ are female – Æthelwearde, Afa, Heahthryth and Geata.

Yatesbury could equally plausibly be from ‘goat’ or ‘gate’. As all these enclosures would have been gated the last option seems the least likely. Of all the places for which documentary evidence or place-names suggest an early minster, only Yatesbury is situated away from watercourses (see below). Although all the other burh place-names in Wiltshire are either certainly or plausibly connected with a minster, there is no reason why all burhs were necessarily minsters. The location of Yatesbury on the extreme western part of the Herepath (which also passes through Avebury, about two miles to the south-east) implies a military rather than religious primary purpose (although there is no reason for there not to have been something akin to the ‘garrison chapels’ of modern barracks). If Avebury was a community of nuns, as the place-name tentatively infers, then soldiers may well have been accommodated at Yatesbury instead.

The inference is that at least three, perhaps four, of the nine burhs in Wiltshire could have been founded by women.
Presumably they would have been in some sense precursors to later nunneries. However contemporary sources suggest that these female minsters were, in effect, places for widows to live. As such perhaps we should not be too surprised by the high proportion of female personal names associated with early minsters.

These *burhs* are, like the Leicestershire minsters, almost all situated by prominent watercourses:

- Alderbury is on the eastern bank of the Avon. To the west is Longford.
- Amesbury is on the eastern bank of a loop of the Hampshire Avon.
- Avebury is on the eastern bank of the Winterbourne, just north of where it changes direction and becomes the Kennet.
- Heytesbury is on the north bank of the Wylye.
- Malmesbury is dramatically situated to the north of the Avon; the minster is the successor to the earlier establishment at Foxley which is on the banks of the Avon 2½ miles downstream.
- Ramsbury is on the northern bank of the Kennet.
- Tisbury is at the source of the Nadder; upstream are the Donheads
- Westbury is on ground above the Biss Brook, which runs northwards into the Avon.

The exception is, once again, Yatesbury which is not near a watercourse but instead occupies the chalk ridge above Calne.

**Difficulties identifying the earliest minsters**

The surviving historic sources are from at least several centuries after the formation of the oldest minsters. These sources offer, at best, a very partial and selective view of the relative status of minsters and no direct evidence for their age. The comparatively high status of some churches at the time of Domesday offers no reliable insights into either the origin or earlier status of the church – even though we can assume that some churches with higher status in 1086 are among the older establishments. This passage from Pitt illustrates the complexity:

This is most important in instances where a minster may have existed but is now assigned on the basis of available evidence to the parochia of another. For example, a church in the same hundred as a probable minster will usually be assigned, however tentatively, to the parochia of the apparent hundred minster, but in many of Wiltshire’s hundreds there are hints of one other church of significant status perhaps not accounted for merely by the fact of foundation during the Saxon period. In Alderbury hundred, the evidence for Idmiston is unclear, though it can been suggested that it was a minter for the Bourne valley settlements. In Cawdon hundred, Coombe Bissett appears in Domesday Book and later supported a prebend with a dependent chapel. In Stowford hundred, only Broad Chalke looks like a minster but the lack of evidence for the status of churches in the south-west of the hundred makes it dangerous to assume hundred minter status too readily. In Dunworth hundred, Donhead St Andrew appears as a possible minster and the relative status of Tisbury and Donhead is a matter for speculation.
In Mere hundred, the church at East Knoyle has been mentioned: it existed in the Saxon period and no evidence links it with Mere. In Heytesbury hundred, Boyton appears to have had some status, Codford St Peter has notable Saxon sculpture, and Codford St Mary may have had Saxon origins; and Brixton Deverill in Mere hundred may have been a minster church, again perhaps for a river-valley estate including settlements in Heytesbury hundred by the late eleventh century. In spite of Wilton's assumed status, South Newton may have had a church of significant local standing by the late Saxon period. In Wonderditch hundred, evidence for the character of St Martin's church, as opposed to its significant landholdings in 1086, is minimal and the evidence regarding the church at Durnford might make that church appear a possible hundred minter at first sight. In Dolesfield hundred, Winterbourne Stoke has the only evidence suggesting minster status but Tilshead was a Domesday borough and its church may be of Saxon origin. Examples in north Wiltshire include Keevil, Bremhill, Crudwell and Enford... and the churches recorded by Domesday Book at Pewsey and Wootton Rivers in Kinwardstone hundred.

All these churches might have been known in the tenth or eleventh centuries as 'mynsters' whatever their precise origins or character: to the inhabitants of the areas they served, such churches as Bremhill, Christian Malford, Crudwell and Enford may have been effectively the local mynsters.

(Pitt 1999: 186–7)

Pitt continues with a detailed analysis of the problem of identifying earlier and later minsters. Predictably, the historical sources simply do not allow for such differences to be reliably deduced. My contribution here is to regard the historical sources as less helpful than the topographical evidence – which, after all, survives all-but unchanged in all instances, in total contrast to incomplete historical evidence.

The remainder of this section looks in more detail at the relationship of Wiltshire minsters with their rivers. As with Leicestershire, these will be discussed in alphabetical order, except where they are in close proximity or have mother:daughter relationships.

Alderbury

The place-name element –burh indicates a possible minster. Indeed, Alderbury was an estate centre and gave its name to the hundred. Pitt suggests that Idmiston acquired the northern part of a land unit from which Alderbury hundred was created (see also below, under Idmiston).
Evidence of an Anglo-Saxon settlement and early church was found near the church in Alderbury, along with burials. Alderbury had dependent chapels, such as Pitton, until comparatively recent times.

**Amesbury**

The town of Amesbury is situated in a dramatic loop of the Hampshire Avon in an area of ‘special interest’ since the Mesolithic (as ongoing excavations at Blicks Mead indicate) with Neolithic activity (Stonehenge; Woodhenge; Durrington Walls; etc etc) seemingly drawing together people (or at the very least their cattle) from the Orkneys and elsewhere in Britain.

To the west of the town, in the ‘neck’ of the U-shaped loop in the river, is the site of a nunnery founded at an unknown date in the Anglo-Saxon period. Adjacent, but never part of the nunnery grounds, is the parish church. There are no reliable historic sources before the 1291 *Taxatio* but nevertheless Pitt has attempted to identify the *parochia* of the nunnery.

The extent of a *parochia*, however, may derive from a different date from the status of the minster, for in Amesbury’s case it is again possible to suggest late Saxon modification which may have affected the bounds of the minster’s *parochia*. The parish boundaries of Newton Tony, Allington and Boscombe suggest that these parishes, all dependent upon Amesbury by 1291 and in Amesbury hundred c.1086, in fact belong with the Winterbournes. The Winterbournes, Idmiston, Newton Tony, Allington and Boscombe seem, together, enclosed by a single outer boundary, into a coherent unit which may once have been another river-valley estate, in turn suggesting that later alterations were responsible for the appearance of some of these parishes in an administrative unit centred on Amesbury c.1086, and also perhaps for the presence of the others in Alderbury hundred. Although the evidence for Idmiston’s status consists only of its large parish containing two dependent chapels, it has been suggested that the Winterbournes may have been dependent ecclesiastically upon Idmiston in the Saxon period: Newton Tony,
Allington and Boscombe may have been also, before being transferred to Amesbury. Parish boundaries therefore allow the highly speculative reconstruction of very early units, in turn reinforcing the case both for later administrative adjustment and for its influence on ecclesiastical units. (Pitt 1999: 6)

Such redefining of hundreds and putative parochiae in Wiltshire is typical, as further examples below will confirm. While there is no direct evidence for when these changes came about, what Pitt is able to reveal is an even older pattern, as in the sentence above ‘The Winterbournes, Idmiston, Newton Tony, Allington and Boscombe seem, together, enclosed by a single outer boundary, into a coherent unit which may once have been another river-valley estate… ‘Such remarks are entirely consistent with John Davey’s more recent work in Dorset (Davey 2013) which, as discussed later, also reveals prehistoric river valley estates being ‘respected’ – and modified – in the Anglo-Saxon era.

Avebury

St James’ church at Avebury retains Anglo-Saxon features in the north wall of the nave – three circular windows and ‘long-and-short’ quoins at the north-west corner of the exterior. Furthermore, three fragments of tenth century carving are incorporated into the present structure. Limited archaeological excavations have identified the ground plan of the last of the Anglo-Saxon churches although presumably earlier (probably timber) structures predate this.

The church is to the east of the minor confluence of the Sambourne (or Horslip Brook) and Winterbourne watercourses. Less than a mile to the south the Winterbourne makes a right-angle bend and becomes the Kennet.

Top left: Avebury, the Winterbourne and the Kennet.
Bottom: Avebury, as depicted on Andrews’ and Dury’s Map of Wiltshire, 1773:
Avebury evolved into the minster church for Selkley Hundred and retained several dependent chapels, including Winterbourne Monkton and West Kennet (now, confusingly, in the modern East Kennet parish).

The place-name probably commemorates a woman called ‘Afa’. The location of the south and east burh earthworks is retained in modern paths. To the immediate east of the burh is the Neolithic henge, referred to in medieval documents as ‘Walditch’. As such the name is in concordance with Durrington Walls, another ‘mega-henge’. The Herepath running down from the Ridgeway passes through Avebury en route to Yatesbury.

Calne

Calne’s important is revealed in its Domesday Book entry. Prior to 1066 it held eleven hides but this has been reduced to six hides in 1086, but nevertheless had the high value of eight pounds. Soon after, in 1091, Calne is one of the churches granted by Osmund to Sarum Cathedral. Thirteenth century documents reveal that Calne retained rights over the nearby churches at Berwick Bassett, Compton Bassett and Studley. Pitt summarises this evidence and concludes that Calne and Melksham would have had similar status in the later Anglo-Saxon period (Pitt 1999: 78–9).

Calne seems to have been laid out as a burh as, like Marlborough and Wilton, there is a street named ‘Kingsbury’.

Top left: The exterior of the north-west corner of the nave retains so-called ‘long and short work’ construction.

Top right: There are three fragments of Anglo-Saxon carvings now incorporated into the porch.

Bottom: Three deeply-splayed round Anglo-Saxon windows have been retained in the north wall of the nave. The ring of holes around the apertures once held sticks to disuade birds from entering.
Topographically Calne has just the right location to fit this status. It sits on a prominent hill above the confluence of the River Marden and several smaller streams (shown on OS maps as Cowage Brook, Fisher’s Brook and Abberd Brook, plus unnamed streams flowing from north of Quermford and Calstone Wellington). Nearby is the site of a Norman and medieval castle; small-scale excavations in recent years have revealed some evidence of prehistoric activity here too.

Once the Roman road from the east to Verlucio (now Sandy Lane) went out of use then Calne became part of the London to Bath and Bristol route; it is still on the crossing of the A4 running east-west and the A3102 running roughly north-south from Wootton Bassett and Lyneham to Melksham or Devizes.

Because the River Marden drains into Somerset, and the soils here are clays rather than chalk downland, Calne has something of a ‘liminal’ status to the rest of Wiltshire. This is emphasised by the unusually high number of Brittonic place-names. Calne itself, and Cherhill to the east are the clearest examples. This anomalous group of pre-Germanic place-names seem to be associated with the extent of the probable parochia for Calne (although, so far as I am aware, none of the place-name experts focusing on the use of Brittonic words in English place-names have discussed this apparent correlation).

Until recent years historians have been inclined to accept Bede at face value and assume that the Augustinian mission of 597 onwards encountered an English population who were to all intents and purposes pagans. Now that ‘orthodoxy’ has begun to be questioned, the question remains as to what extent Romano-Britains who had converted to Christianity continued to practice their faith in the early seventh century. This is not the place to even attempt a summary of the conflicting and usually nebulous evidence (read Jones and Semple 2012 and the contributors’ various sources if you want to attempt your own summary). However there is a possibility that at least some of the Brittonic-speaking inhabitants of the putative parochia of Calne thought of themselves as Christians. This would give the minster at Calne a somewhat different role to the large majority of minsters, seemingly associated with predominately English-speaking communities.
The Deverills

The modern parish of Longbridge Deverill runs along part of the Wylye valley and comprises of six villages on the western side of Salisbury Plain: Brixton Deverill, Crockerton, Hill Deverill, Kingston Deverill, Longbridge Deverill and Monkton Deverill. The toponym ‘Deverill’ is probably corrupted from Brittonic words meaning ‘little river’ (although other interpretations have been offered). Whatever the etymology, almost certainly this was at one time the name of the river in this part of its valley. Significantly, the modern parishes straddle the watercourse.

The first evidence of organised settlement is an Iron Age site on Cow Down above Longbridge Deverill, dated around 600 B.C.. Another settlement on Cold Kitchen Hill was occupied until about 350 B.C. while a third Iron Age site near Keysley Farm (between Kingston Deverill and Pertwood) is undated.

The valley remained important during Roman times as two Roman roads, running from Portchester and Poole, cross the Wylye at fords at Kingston Deverill, then join at the parish boundary of Monkton and Kingston Deverill and continues in the direction of Warminster. Probable Roman settlements have been recognised at Longbridge Deverill, Hill Deverill, Monkton Deverill, Kingston Deverill and (away from the valley but near the road to Porchester) at Lower Pertwood.

Folklore tells of the Alfredean army mustering at King’s Court Hill in Kingston Deverill. The name is also associated with King Egbert holding court there. As is always the case with folklore, such associations may simply be speculation long after the event. But there is no underlying reason why either or both these legends are not indeed accurate. A manor held by Queen Edith in 1066 has been identified as Kingston Deverill, providing a royal connection. Furthermore, based on Jill Bourne’s research into king’s tun place-names (Bourne 2011) we can conclude that Kingston Deverill was always a minor settlement, but one with a specific ‘royal’ role relating to its location on a former Roman road. They are typically situated nine or ten miles apart. Bourne concludes that Kingstons were most probably founded during the reign of King Ine, ruler of Wessex from 688 to 726, again suggesting a royal connection with the Deverills.
Archaeological evidence, charters and the Domesday Survey collectively suggest that the five extant churches in the Deverills are successors to simpler structures founded before the Norman conquest. Those at Crockerton, Longbridge Deverill, and Monkton Deverill belonged to Glastonbury abbey from the tenth century.

The Deverill valley is clearly important in the Iron Age and Roman era. This importance is sustained by the various royal connections from at least the early eighth century through into the late eleventh. One of the churches was plausibly a early minster although there is no direct evidence as to which church is the oldest. For reasons that will become clearer by the end of this work, either Kingston Deverill or Monkton Deverill seems to be most probable given their proximity to the fords over the Wylie.
The eponymous bridge at Longbridge Deverill is significant, but the route here has none of the importance of the Roman roads crossing the Wylte at Kingston and Monkton. However Longbridge church had the comparatively high value of twenty pounds in 1291, comparable with the valuations of many other early minsters (and substantially greater than the valuation for adjoining Brixton Deverill, which might otherwise be a candidate for a minster). However Pitt notes that Longbridge’s valuation may have arisen from post-Conquest re-alignments of estates (Pitt 1999: 64); these same changes were presumably associated with Kingston Deverill becoming a dependency of Mere. Both Longbridge and Monkton Deverill had holdings of ten hides in 1086. This means they both conform to the norm for minsters while telling us nothing about when they were founded. The subsequent split which placed them under Heytesbury and Mere, respectively, is consistent with them having similar status in the eleventh century.

The Monkton place-name may only derive from the ownership by Glastonbury so cannot be used to argue for the presence of a minster. In contrast, the Kingston epithet is good evidence for a minor settlement established around the time of King Ine for pragmatic rather than religious reasons. Indeed the shape of the two parishes of Monkton and Kingston suggests they may have derived from a larger land unit. The close proximity of this king’s tun to Monkton suggests that a settlement at Monkton already existed but was not under the control of the king, making it a real candidate for a seventh century religious establishment. The transfer of ownership to Glastonbury is consistent with this, but is not of itself evidence for an early foundation.

J.M.A. Pitt’s attempted reconstruction of the parishes of the Wylte valley as they may have been around 1086. (Pitt 1999: 61)
Based on the ‘secondary’ role of Kingstons and the location of Monkton by the other important ford I am of the opinion that Monkton Deverill lives up to its name and was indeed the earliest minster in this valley. This is contrary to Pitt’s assumption that Kingstons were ‘head places’ (Pitt 1999: 64). Bourne has shown to assumed importance of Kingstons be erroneous (Bourne 2011), so Pitt’s main argument for Kingston Deverill being the location of the older minster loses ground.

Whichever of these two Deverills was actually the early minster, the *parochia* was almost certainly similar to the modern parish, making it an excellent example of an early minster dominating an upper valley. Realistically this *parochia* would have included the modern parish of Sutton Veny and maybe West and East Knoyle (see map). However Knoyle could also have had a minster, at least by later in the Anglo-Saxon period (Pitt 1999: 60). Unhelpfully, Kingston and Monkton are in Mere hundred while the other Deverills are in Heytesbury hundred. But these hundreds perhaps tell us more about ownership at the time of the formation of hundreds in the later ninth century than they do about much earlier land units.

Pitt discusses historical sources which reveal that a chapel at Deverill was subservient to Mere (to the immediate south-west) at the end of the twelfth century. While the existence of a minster – and almost certainly an early one – at Mere (see below) is more certain than for elsewhere, this does not preclude another early minster at Kingston or Monkton. Based on the available evidence Pitt concludes that the *parochia* of Mere was ‘very possibly a later unit’ (Pitt 1999: 60) so the late twelfth century evidence offers no clues as to the original *parochia* of the ‘Deverill valley’.

In summary, based on the ten hide assessment in 1086 both Longbridge Deverill and Monkton Deverill seem to have been minsters. The close proximity of Kingston gives Monkton greater status, and its location at the merging of two Roman roads (where they ford the watercourse) suggests that Monkton was the older of the two. Later administrative arrangements and hundred boundaries offer no assistance in identifying an early *parochia* but the topography and the consistent use of the place-name element ‘Deverill’ strongly suggest an upper-valley arrangement; this is confirmed by later and modern parish boundaries (which in turn suggest that Sutton Veny and both the Knoyles may possibly have been part of the original *parochia*).
Heytesbury

Heytesbury is situated on the Wylye, downstream from the Deverills. In between is Warminster, with Bishopstrow (from ‘bishop’s tree’) close to the river and almost exactly equidistant between Warminster and Heytesbury and overlooked by the Iron Age hillforts known as Battlebury Hill to the north and Scratchbury Hill to the north-east.

There are also the ‘paired parishes’ of Norton Bavant and Sutton Veny between Bishopstrow and Heytesbury. The Andrews’ and Dury’s map of 1773 shows a track crossing the Wylye from Heytesbury to a mound on the Norton Bavant side.

On current Ordnance Survey maps the location of this now-lost mound is named ‘Moothill Leg’. What the modern map also reveals is that the course of the Wylye has changed significantly since 1773, running through the site of the ‘moot mound’. The former river course is now a much smaller drainage channel. I assume this is the result of nineteenth century flood alleviation but this needs confirmation.

None of this tells us anything directly about this part of the Wylye valley in the Anglo-Saxon era, although it generally suggests these few miles of the watercourse were important and ‘busy’. The place-name Heytesbury is, as previously noted, from Heathryth’s *burh*. This tells us that, firstly, it is one of the eight *burhs* in Wiltshire which (with the possible exception of Yatesbury) are all known to be minsters and, secondly, it is one of the three or four of these minsters named after a woman.

*The Andrews’ and Dury’s map of 1773 showing a track crossing the Wylye from Heytesbury to a mound on the Norton Bavant side.*
While we know next to nothing about the role of these minsters named after women, the safest assumption is that they were founded as communities for widows. Their religious function was secondary (for example, their liturgies were provided by priests) and we should not assume any of the piety of later medieval nunneries.

If we know little about the role of these female-led minsters, we know even less about their relationship to minsters which were not. However the proximity of Heytesbury and Warminster to the west offers clues. While direct evidence is lacking, we can assume that there was an intentional ‘paired relationship’, with the eponymous tree at Bishopstrow serving the functions of boundary marker and precursor to later ‘Gospel Oaks’ and their ilk – the destinations of Rogationtide processions and associated preaching.

While much can be deduced from a cursory look at maps, the historical evidence for Heytesbury is more confusing. Evidence survives, but mostly for the secular college founded by Bishop Jocelin between 1150 and 1160. This was endowed with a number of subservient churches. Crucially, evidence from the 1130s and 1140s ‘strongly suggests that Jocelin was confirming and regularising arrangements that existed already.’ (Pitt 1999: 62) Domesday valued Heytesbury at three hides (greater than several known minsters) and a value of sixty shillings, the fourth-highest of all religious establishments in Wiltshire. This is a good example of an early minster successfully adapting and evolving. Jocelin seemingly re-founded a thriving establishment and made it over to a college of four canons.

While only the place-name offers any clues as to the date of origin, by 1086 Heytesbury was one of the more wealthy minsters in the county. Indeed it seems to have been doing much better than Warminster! Nevertheless, Warminster develops into a town and, in so doing, ‘eclipses’ the potential for urban development at Heytesbury. All this, however, tells us nothing about the relative status of the settlements two or more centuries previously. (Warminster is discussed in its own right below.)

The present day parish church at Heytesbury.
Idmiston is one of a ‘string’ of villages along the upper Bourne valley. It sits between the better-known settlements of Porton and Boscombe, and upstream of the three Winterbournes (Winterbourne Dauntsey, Winterbourne Earl and Winterbourne Gunner). Amesbury lies to the north-west, with Boscombe Down forming the watershed between the two valleys.

Firstly, the place-name is not a contraction of mynster but a corruption of ‘Idhelm’s tun’. However we should take note of the adjacent ‘port tun’ as this suggests evidence for a market under the control of the king. More realistically we should read Porton as ‘the tun on the Port Way’, discussed in the next paragraph. Porton and another modern village, Gormeldon (from Gumela’s hill) make up the modern parish of Idmiston.

Within the modern parish there is evidence for Neolithic settlement and two flint mines. Bronze Age burial mounds overlook the valley, and there is evidence for several Bronze Age farmsteads. Similar farms were occupied during the Iron Age and at least some of these survived into the Roman era. More relevant to this discussion is an early sixth century cemetery on Roche Court Down at East Winterslow (on the south-east slopes of Porton Down, now to the south of the A30). This is to the side of the Portway connecting Amesbury with Porton and a Roman road running from Old Sarum to the west to Winchester to the east. This cemetery revealed seventeen graves plus a ‘mass grave’ of eighteen people thought to have been executed. Other Anglo-Saxon burials have been excavated at Gomeldon.

Idmiston from the Ordnance Survey 1890s revision of the one inch to one mile map. The modern civil parish boundary has been superimposed, revealing the manner in which the parish straddles the Winterbourne.
What evidence is there for a minster at or near Idmiston? The oldest clue is that early in the tenth century Glastonbury Abbey held twenty hides. But where within the later parish were they? Domesday book offers helpful clues as the three settlements are listed separately. Idmiston had a population of about 70 to 75 people and had the most land – valued at seven ploughs. Gomeldon’s value was three ploughs, although the population was between 50 and 55. Porton trailed with 30 inhabitants and a valuation of two ploughs. All had pasture and meadow but only Idmiston had woodland (some ten acres). Gomeldon and Porton both had water mills.

Among other things, this tells us that Idmiston’s taxable value was disproportionately high for the apparent population – and that disproportion was even greater as the other two settlements had income from the mills. In other words, Idmiston wasn’t an average kind of place. But its value fits well with the value of places known to be minsters. Furthermore the acquisition by Glastonbury Abbey of twenty hides at Idmiston is almost the clincher – this is exactly the sort of property which Glastonbury successfully acquired elsewhere and many of those are known minsters.

Trying to deduct the prior importance of settlements from their valuations in 1086 is, of course, fraught with possible errors and confusions. But by comparison with its two neighbours, Idmiston is the best candidate for minster status. Indeed the Taxatio of 1291 gives Idmiston a value of £20, which of itself strongly suggests former minster status. And in 1394 Idmiston still held rights over the chapels at Porton and Gormeldon (Pitt 1999: 29). Exactly what would be expected for a former minster.

Pitt suggests that Idmiston may originally have held the northern part of what became Alderbury hundred. Furthermore he suggests, while acknowledging there is no proof, that Idmiston’s parochia may originally have included the three Winterbournes to the southwest and Allington, Boscombe and Newton Tony to the north-east. If his suggestion is valid then what he is describing is an upper valley with Idmiston in a dominant position.

Pitt also considers a scenario where Alderbury (some ten miles to the south and to the east of the very wide flood plain of the Avon as it flows away from Salisbury) predates Idmiston and, initially at least, Idmiston was secondary to Alderbury. This is quite an important scenario as, if Alderbury did indeed predate Idmiston, then it would largely negate my suggestion of one-early-minster-per-upper-valley. However if we look at the place-name
evidence then Pitt’s scenario seems less plausible. Alderbury is a corruption of Æthelwearde’s *burh* and Æthelwearde is another of the female ‘patrons’. The topographical relationship to a shallow valley makes Alderbury akin to the known nunnery at Amesbury and one of the other *burhs* named after a woman, Avebury.

More probably, Alderbury was initially secondary to another, male-dominated, early minster. The relative importance of minsters could shift quite rapidly so, while Alderbury may have started off as a secondary ‘nunnery’, its status could have increased by the time Idmiston was founded. But there are no obvious reasons for not including Idmiston among the earlier phases of minsters. So I am inclined to go with the topographical evidence and contend that in the seventh and eighth century Idmiston may have had at least as much importance as Alderbury, while acknowledging that much could have changed by the later ninth century and the formation of hundreds. By the tenth century Idmiston’s status was high enough to attract the attention of Glastonbury Abbey, but the outcome of this in turn suppressed any further enhancement of status or subsequent development into an urban settlement.

Idmiston is an interesting case study as, although there are doubts about when it may have been founded and even greater uncertainty about the extent of its initial *parochia*, the documentary sources from the tenth to late fourteen centuries reveal exactly the sort of valuations and rights which ‘go with’ minsters at this time. The documentary sources for other places in Wiltshire discussed here are not usually so ‘neat and tidy’.

*Idmiston and environs in 1773.*
Malmesbury and Foxley

Excavations in the early 1980s at a farm on the edge of Foxley, a hamlet five miles to the west of Malmesbury, revealed evidence for an early apsidal-ended church and associated settlement. And also revealed that the site was abandoned comparatively early. The reason is clear. When Aldhelm founded what would evolve into Malmesbury Abbey in 675 the religious community at Foxley presumably ‘upped sticks’ and moved to the new site at Malmesbury. This is consistent with Malmesbury taking its name from Maildulf’s burh, as Maildulf would be an entirely plausible founder for the community at the place now known as Foxley.

The early minster at Foxley is on the banks of a tributary of the Avon which flows into the Avon at Malmesbury. Indeed Malmesbury Abbey is dramatically situated on cliffs above this confluence, somewhat akin to Durham Cathedral and several churches along the Wye and elsewhere in Britain (see the section below on S-bends).

Despite Malmesbury being in the ‘debatable lands’ long fought over by Mercia and Wessex, the settlement there and associated farms were ‘off limits’ for both armies. This has some parallels with Rutland, established by Charles Phythian-Adams to be an Iron Age land unit (Phythian-Adams 1977; 1980). Despite being surrounded by the Danelaw, Rutland not only retained its identity but also acquired almost no Scandinavian place-names (the exceptions are Glaston and Normanton), in complete contrast to adjoining counties.

The historical records for Malmesbury are among the best in the country and its status as a major minster right from its...
foundation in the seventh century was not challenged until the Dissolution. Its location at a confluence is unsurprising, and the choice of a dramatic cliff-top also matches other major establishments. The excavations at Foxley are among the small number at minster sites (the only better-known site is Flixborough on the banks of the Humber) although, apart from the archaeology, the early establishment at Foxley is otherwise unknown – there are no documentary references. Our knowledge of the archaeology at Foxley and the early documentary evidence for Malmesbury makes this ‘pair’ (more strictly, a sequence of sites) unique.

Whether this scenario of an exceptionally early community seemingly moving to a much more dramatic site a few miles away was actually unique is of course debatable. Without the archaeological excavations there would be no awareness of the pioneering minster at Foxley and historians would simply assume that Malmesbury Abbey is the site were ‘it all happened’. The same misunderstanding could naturally arise at other sites in the absence of evidence for earlier establishments.

This means that more attention needs to be given to other sites which are a few miles apart along the same river. I have already suggested that Eye Kettleby and Melton Mowbray in Leicestershire form a similar ‘pair’. However the 1996–7 excavations at Eye Kettleby did not reveal any evidence of a religious community (Neil Finn pers.comm.). My analysis of the minsters along the Soar in Leicestershire offer no suggestions of comparable relocations. The demise of Aldeby after the creation of Narborough is not comparable as Narborough was founded considerably later and for trading rather than religious reasons.

A different parallel has been noted by Patrick Sims-Williams. He considers that the topography of Malmesbury is comparable to Clonmacnoise (County Offlay, Ireland), founded in 544 by St Ciarán (Sims-Williams 1990: 108–9). However a broader consideration of the topography of Irish early churches, especially their relationship to watercourses, needs to be undertaken before this apparent parallel can be given any significance.

Further discussion of the topography of Malmesbury Abbey arises later, in the section on S-bends.
Mere

The later status of the minster at Mere is as one of the more important ‘mother churches’ in the south-west of the county and gives its name to Mere Hundred. Other minsters giving their names to hundred are those at Calne, Heytesbury, and Ramsbury. But, as repeatedly noted previously, this later importance tells us little about the origins of the religious establishment. Indeed if we were to rely on historical sources then Mere is a bit of mystery as it does not appear in either the Domesday Book or the 1291 Taxatio. Yet there is evidence from the eleventh and twelfth centuries of other churches being dependent on the one at Mere! This probably arises because Mere was either at this time a dependency of the minster at Deverill, or Mere and Deverill were inadvertently confused by scribes. The dedication of Mere’s parish church to St Michael is consistent with an early foundation.

In contrast to the omissions and possible confusions in the documentary sources, the topography at Mere is more forthcoming. There is no reason to doubt that St Michael’s church is on the same site as the earliest minster. It is on higher ground above streams (notably Shreen Water and Ashfield Water) feeding into the River Lodden. To the north is a dramatic ‘tor’ with the remains prehistoric burial mounds along the ridge and the earthworks of the mid-thirteenth century castle at the eastern end.

As partially discussed above, Mere Hundred takes in the northern part of the Deverills. This conflicts with the probability that the original parochia of the Deverill minster would have spanned much of this stretch of the Wylye valley. So, although Mere clearly fits the tenth-century concept of ‘one minster church per hundred’ – as the hundred is named after Mere – there is little or no reason to suppose that this hundred is a continuation of earlier parochiae for the minster. Pitt, in his exemplary manner, discusses this in some detail (Pitt 1999: 58–60) but, in brief summary, is unable to identify Mere’s original parochia. In these respects Mere and Heytesbury are similar – they are both beyond doubt early minsters, both give their names to hundreds, but these hundreds are very different to what might reasonably be expected for their original parochiae.

My expectation is of parochiae dominating the upper reaches of a valley. The church at Mere, located below the dramatic ‘tor’ and just above the flood plain, seems to reflect the
best-available location for an early minster. Exactly how far upstream and downstream its *parochia* extended is a question which can only be properly investigated by someone with greater knowledge than myself of the origins of this part of the Wiltshire:Somerset border.

**Ramsbury**

Once again the place-name element *burh* is indicative. And, once more, the line of the *burh* earthworks are respected in the modern street layout. The same elliptical configuration can also been seen at Kintbury (eight miles to the east in Berkshire and also an important minster) and Tisbury (discussed below).

Ramsbury is situated on the north bank of the Kennet, which was presumably navigable for Roman and Anglo-Saxon vessels. The east-west road is a former Roman road running from Bath via Marlborough, through Mildenhall (i.e. the Roman town of Cunetio) on to Wickham Heath and the Lambourne valley north of Hungerford. Note that, although the settlement is on the north bank, the parish extents across the Kennet to the south.

Ramsbury became a bishopric in 909 when the two West Saxon bishoprics were divided into five. Several early bishops of Ramsbury were promoted to Archbishop of Canterbury. The diocese of Ramsbury initially comprised of Wiltshire and Berkshire. In 1058 it was joined with the bishopric of Sherborne to form the diocese of Sarum and the see was translated to Old Sarum in 1075. Nevertheless the church at Ramsbury evolved as one of the larger and more elaborate medieval buildings in the county. This was despite the development of the town being diminished in

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Ramsbury from the Ordnance Survey 1890s revision of the one inch to one mile map. The modern civil parish boundary has been superimposed. The parish clearly straddles the River Kennet.
Substantial parts of Anglo-Saxon crosses and tomb covers are now displayed in the north-western corner of the nave. The font bowl is pre-Conquest too.
1240, when the market at Ramsbury was suppressed because it was damaging the king’s market at Marlborough. Furthermore, Great Bedwyn (about five miles due south) was also challenging Ramsbury’s importance. The parish of Ramsbury is the second-largest in Wiltshire (after Calne Without)

**Tisbury and Donhead**

It is tempting… to suggest that Tisbury was another hundred minster, but there are complications caused by the extension of the current parish of Chicklade into Mere hundred on the west, and the fact that Dinton and Teffont Magna, though apparently not Teffont Evias, were in the late eleventh century in a detached part of Warminster hundred. More notable is the presence of Donhead St Andrew in the south of the hundred, itself with a suggested minster church. Donhead St Andrew, a church whose present structure may include eleventh century walling,

(Pitt 1999: 56)

The toponymic and topographical evidence begs to differ with Pitt’s dismissal of Tisbury. It is clearly one of the *burhs* taking the form of personal name (Tissa) plus *burh* and all the other Wiltshire examples, with the arguable exception of Yatesbury, are attested as early minsters. Furthermore the street plan appears to ‘fossilise’ the bounds of this *burh*. The location on the north-west bank of the River Nadder as it wriggles along towards its confluence with the Wylye at Wilton is also mimicked by other early minsters.

The elliptical *burh* at Tisbury mimics Ramsbury and Kintsbury (Berkshire) but may be a result of later adaptation rather than the original configuration of the earthworks.

This is not to say that Donhead St Andrew is not also an early minster. Indeed the distance of five miles upstream is highly indicative of a planned ‘pairing’. The place-name suggests that this part of what is now known in its entirety as the Nadder was once called the Don, just as part of the Wylye seems once to have been called the Deverill, and the Kennet is the continuation of the Winterbourne.
There seems to have been nothing unusual in Anglo-Saxon times about watercourses having different names in different places. Whether this in turn influenced ideas of ‘one minster per river’ is a moot point. In other words, was the plan more along the lines of ‘one minster per river name’ rather than one minster per watercourse? The relationship of Tisbury and Donhead suggest the former, as does the even more complex scenario of the Deverills, Warminster (also plausibly taking its name from a former river name; see next section), Heytesbury and Wilton (definitely taking its name from the Wylye).

At this stage I can do no more than note that the concept of ‘one minster per river name’ fits the Wiltshire evidence quite well. However considerable more work in other parts of England would be needed to convince me that this was not simply a ‘local solution’ rather than a more general pattern.

**Warminster**

The early forms of Warminster (Worgemynster 899x925; Guerminstre 1086) seem to be a corrupted form of *were mynster*, the ‘minster by the Were’. The adjoining river is now known as the Swan and flows into the Wylye. Eilert Ekkwall suggested *were* came from the Old English *worian*, ‘to wander’, although (as with the Wylye, discussed below) a ‘Celtic’ origin was possible.

Warminster is one of a group of hundreds in south Wiltshire (the others being Heytesbury, Dolesfied and Amesbury) whose extent is determined by the system of rivers radiating from the Wilton-Salisbury area (Pitt 1999: 23). On the face of things these hundreds should have evolved out of the *parochiae* of minsters established on the putative one-per-valley basis.

However, documentary sources don’t play along with such a simple scenario. Firstly Warminster is absent from the Domesday Book. In other words, by 1086 it was subservient to somewhere else. That of itself offers no indication of its status about three centuries earlier, as has already been recognised elsewhere in Wiltshire. Indeed it tells us nothing about the later importance of Warminster. In the fourteenth century the minster, now dedicated to St Denys, was the mother church for a large part of Wiltshire.
Further complexity arises from the close proximity of Heytesbury to the east and an early minster to the south at one of the Deverills. Both of these places are discussed earlier and I will simply repeat that the ‘nunnery’ at Heytesbury may have been deliberately planned as a ‘daughter’ settlement of Warminster. With, presumably, no sense of irony, the creation of Heytesbury hundred around the tenth century gave the one-time ‘daughter’ greater prominence at the expense of Warminster.

While identifying several other dependent chapelries of Warminster, Pitt is unable to establish any sort of bounds for the parochia of Warminster, largely because the changes associated with the formation of Heytesbury Hundred leave little or no evidence of earlier arrangements.
Topographically, Warminster’s location above a bend in the Wylye fits well with what might be expected for an early minster.

**Westbury**

Westbury is something of an anomaly. The place-name element *burh* suggests it could have been a minster, along with Avebury, Heytesbury, Ramsbury, Tisbury, etc. We might reasonably expect there to be some evidence of the *burh* layout in the surviving streets. Draper states that Westbury was an estate centre and minster but offers little evidence (Draper 2006: 82). This assertion seems sound, however, because Westbury gave its name to the hundred and has dependent chapels (as at Dilton), both typical of minsters. The name Maristow Street, in close proximity to the church, seems to perpetrate ‘Mary’s (holy) place’.

Based on the other parallels discussed here, there should be a prominent watercourse nearby but the Biss Brook hardly qualifies. We can assume that Dilton Marsh (to the west of Westbury) was considerably more watery in Anglo-Saxon times. None of the other minsters in Wiltshire occupy the the margins of marshes, but the same is by no means true in Somerset.

Furthermore, there is no obvious place to the east which justifies the name ‘Westbury’, with the exception of Edington.

Warminster less than five miles to the south (and the chain of other minster sites upstream and downstream along the Wylye valley) might argue against Westbury being an early minster.

*Early churches in Wiltshire*

**Westbury. Modern roads plausibly following the line of the original burh are marked in red.**
minster. However there are other examples of minsters four to five miles apart locally and regionally, so Westbury might be part of a ‘grand plan’.

Alternatively, the iron ore deposits at Westbury, known to have been worked in Roman times, may have been exploited again in the Anglo-Saxon era. There is no archaeological evidence but such evidence is always elusive as later quarrying readily destroys older workings. If Edington, to the east, was the beneficiary of the income from such iron working (and that’s one heck of an ‘if’) then most of the Westbury’s anomalous aspects would be neatly explained.

In several respects Westbury is the ‘odd one out’ among the burhs and putative early minsters of Wiltshire. If the reason is not related to iron working (and there is no evidence) then my assumption is that its location reflects practices more typical of Somerset. But that requires considerably more research to substantiate.

Wilton

Wilton has a significantly different trajectory through history compared to any other places discussed here. Its location near to Old Sarum led to it becoming the first seat of the kings of Wessex. By the eighth century Wilton was the capital of ‘Wiltonshire’ (modern Wiltshire, albeit the original county only came as far north as the Wansdyke, now running east-west near the centre of the county).

The early forms of Wilton suggest the origin of the name is Wylye tun, the settlement on the Wylye. Indeed, Wilton is at the confluence of the Wylye and Nadder. Wylye is probably from the Brittonic gwili, ‘twisting and turning’, all-but synonymous with Leicestershire’s Wreake, from the Old Scandinavian wreithk, ‘twisted, crooked’. As already noted, Warminster may derive its name from a river known in Old English as worian, ‘wander’. For reasons that will become clearer, minsters seem to ‘go with’ the upper reaches of river systems, where the course is more likely to be convoluted.

The cathedral at Old Sarum only existed from around 1075 so, before that, quite possibly a minster at Wilton provided pastoral care for the Sarum area (Pitt 1999: 24). However the evidence for such a minster is at best ambiguous. What there is clear evidence for a
prestigious nunnery. First mentioned in documentary sources during tenth century, later legend declare that a church was founded around 800, then converted to a nunnery by King Egbert and his sister, Alburga, in 830. This was followed by a rebuilding around 890, under the direction of King Alfred (Pitt 1999: 99). The nunnery evolved into an abbey; after the Reformation the site evolved into Wilton House.

Whether or not all the details of this foundation legend are reliable, they seem to discount any suggestion that this establishment was part of the early phase of minsters during the seventh and eighth centuries.

Presumably the nunnery was secondary to a male-led establishment within a few miles. Unless there was an equally undocumented minster at Old Sarum then quite plausibly the pre-830 building at Wilton was even older than the legend states. The increasingly importance of Wilton in the early ninth century could plausibly have led to a new minster being built, allowing the original one to be ‘redeveloped’ as a nunnery. The putative new minster would in all probability evolve into the parish church of St Mary and St Nicholas.

Frankly, the exact location of the early minster or minsters within the town are entirely secondary to the interests of this essay. Both the proposed locations are within the confluence of the Nadder and Wylye (the nunnery being nearer the confluence than the parish chuch) and on a well-established route (now the A30).

From the substantial numbers of charters surviving from the cartulary at Witlon (the oldest from 937), Pitt established that

Wilton could have served a parochia extending up the Wylye valley into Heytesbury hundred and up the Nadder as far as the boundary of Dunworth hundred. [...] If… the distribution of the nunnery’s tenth century estates does reflect the parochia of a pre-existing minster, it may indeed have extended along the Wylye at least as far west as Sherrington, in a detached part of Branchbury hundred, and along the Nadder valley as far west as Fovant, in a detached section of Cadworth hundred. (Pitt 1999: 103–4)

Such a large parochia is anomalous in Wiltshire, although consistent with the apparent absence of other minsters (and their parochiae) in the territory so identified. This anomaly is presumably related to the exceptional status of Wilton itself within the region rather than merely pastoral pre-eminence.
Winterbourne Stoke, South Newton and Tilshead

Pitt discusses the possibility of minsters within Wilton’s *paorhia*, with South Newton, Winterbourne Stoke and Tilshead all being possibilities. The comparative importance of Wilton means that all these are ‘over-shadowed’ and as a result leave even less documentary evidence than is normal.

The place-name alone suggests that South Newton was unlikely to have been an early minster. In contrast, Winterbourne Stoke would be a good candidate, with ‘stoke’ suggesting ‘a (holy) place’. This is confirmed topographically by its proximity to a loop in the River Till.

The documentary evidence for a minster at Winterbourne Stoke is ambiguous (Pitt 1999: 69–70) and it quickly fades in importance, becoming a chapel. Nevertheless the evidence does support the presence of a later minster while not precluding an earlier one.

The best evidence for Tilshead being a minster is, firstly, that the church has a similar ground plan to known Anglo-Saxon churches and, secondly, that it had borough status in Domesday Book. Neither of these insights of themselves indicate an early foundation. However the modern street plan convincingly mimics that at *burhs* such as Ramsbury. This does suggest that Tilshead was founded at the same time as places such as Avebury, Heytesbury and Ramsbury.

Tilshead is a little over five miles north-west of Winterbourne Stoke. This is the typical distance separating ‘paired’ early minsters. There seems no reason why they could not have both been early minsters (although not necessarily exact contemporaries). Their *parochiae* was clearly the Till valley (Pitt 1999: 71–3). Indeed, they offer the clearest evidence of how a watercourse might have been divided between two foundations. Once again the two different early names for the same watercourse – Till and Winterbourne – fit neatly with these presumed *parochiae*.

Above: Winterbourne Stoke.

Following page, inset: Tilshead’s elliptical street plan, suggestive of a *burh*.

Following page, main image: The view from the eastern part of the ellipse, looking back to the putative *burh*. 
Early churches in Wiltshire
Part Four

An overview of early churches in Leicestershire, Rutland and Wiltshire

While, understandably, Pitt was only able to reconstruct the *parochiae* of the earliest minsters in Wiltshire with varying degrees of confidence, none of his research contradicts the possibility of these territories originally equating to parts of river valleys. For reasons that may simply be pragmatic, the tendency is for there to be one minster per *upper* valley. However this works the other way about, as seemingly there was a minster for *every* upper valley. Where two minsters share the same watercourse there is evidence – usually quite definite evidence – for two different names being used for the two separate stretches. In contrast, Malmesbury and Wilton are situated in the ‘tongue’ of a confluence, while Marlborough and Calne have less dramatic relationships with confluences.

Where there are dramatic cliffs or striking hills these seem to influence the choice of location for the minsters. Otherwise bends and loops in rivers seem also to have a factor. Overall, the topographical ‘aspects’ of Wiltshire’s minsters consistently aim for one or more of these preferred locations. Intriguingly the one minster site which merely occupies an attractive waterside location – Foxley – does not survive and the establishment is seemingly moved to the more ‘ideal location’ at Malmesbury.

Valleys and early settlement

In Wiltshire, Leicestershire and Rutland the choice of locations for early minsters seems to differentiate them from later establishments. The later establishments are also beside watercourses, but further downstream or in slightly less ‘ideal’ topographical settings. My assumption is that waterborne transport underpinned Anglo-Saxon society, especially the various types of goods and associated trading which can reasonably be expected at minster sites.

The fact that the earliest minsters occupy the most ‘pragmatic’ sites, with the later ones having to settle for ‘second best’ is tautological. Exactly the same logic applies a few centuries later when the earliest nucleated settlements occupy the best-drained sand and gravel terraces while later settlements, such as thorpes, are on less well-drained soils.

In this section I want to look broadly at the topography of early minsters and other settlements of approximately the same period. The location of early Anglo-Saxon settlements in valleys has long been argued. L.W.H. Payling, Kenneth Cameron and Gillian Fellows Jensen all provided detailed rationales based on place-name evidence and geology (Payling 1935; Cameron 1975; Fellow Jensen 1978). Their pioneering studies have been critiqued by later scholars, notably Margaret Gelling, but while specific instances of both place-name elements and localities have sometimes been refined, the broad conclusions remain.

John Blair devotes several pages to the siting of minsters (Blair 2005: 191–5), reiterating the usual practical aspects but also looking at the limited evidence for ‘sacred geometry’ in the siting or layout. In a footnote he ventures into tentative ethnographical comparisons, including Chinese concepts of *feng shui* (p.191 fn 41). Sadly not even the most elusive of the keenings of Old English literature suggest that places were regarded as auspicious – or
otherwise – in a manner akin to *feng shui*. In contrast, the topographical evidence is rich and, as such, offers comparatively clear insights.

**Combining well-drained soils with reliable springs**

The topographical evidence confirms what we might expect – Anglo-Saxons were eminently pragmatic when it came to choosing where to live. Not only were the earliest Anglo-Saxon settlements on well-drained soils with later settlements on more poorly-drained areas, but also the need for reliable springs influences the location of nucleated villages. Many of these were still in everyday use in much of rural Leicestershire until the arrival of piped water in the 1930s or 1950s (see Richardson 1931).

The geological reasons underlying – literally and metaphorically – the location of early Anglo-Saxon settlements has been explored in detail for Framland hundred in Leicestershire by Ian Wilkinson (Wilkinson 1996). More recently John Robinson has provided an overview of soil types and their distribution in Leicestershire and Rutland:

The soil types within the study area are of a fairly broad mix and generally reflect drainage patterns and the underlying parent materials. On the western side of Leicestershire the soils deriving from the rocks of Charnwood Forest are very often thin, stony and acidic. Further west the soils of the Coal Measures are generally sandy and of a poor quality. Soils elsewhere in the western parts of Leicestershire tend to be neutral clay loams.

On the eastern side of Leicestershire and in Rutland the clay soils also predominate although here they are more variable in character than on the western side of the study area. Where the Lias Clays form the underlying geology they give rise to clay soils that are difficult to work and which are traditionally under pasture. Arable usage tends to be located on the limestones and ironstones which produce soils that are lighter and more loamy in character. The most easily worked soils, on the Marlstone, tend to have a calcareous and loamy or marl make-up. (Robinson 2010: 15)

Wilkinson establishes that what seem to be the oldest settlements are on comparatively small areas of well-drained soils, usually sands and gravels – by definition always near to rivers. These areas are usually too small to appear on the published 1:50,000 scale geological maps of Britain. Furthermore these maps are mostly based on late nineteenth century surveys at 1:63,360 scale (one inch to the mile) and do not incorporate more recent and detailed reports from service trenches and other construction activities. This level of detail appears only on unpublished 1:10,000 scale maps held at the British Geological Survey in Keyworth. Wilkinson specifically discusses Melton Mowbray and Bottesford as, based on the 1:50,000 maps, these appear to be located on poorly-drained river alluvium. Only the unpublished 1:10,000 maps reveal the areas of sand and gravel under and around the parish churches.

Although Wilkinson’s careful research provides a remarkable insight into early settlements (see map on next page), sadly there have been no similar studies elsewhere in Leicestershire or, to my knowledge, elsewhere in England with the exception of Payling’s pioneering study of Kesteven published in 1935. Nevertheless there is no reason to suppose that well-drained soils would not be favoured elsewhere for early settlements. This is demonstrably the case for Eye Kettleby (discovered and excavated after the publication of Wilkinson’s paper) where the Anglo-Saxon settlement is situated on a sandy terrace.

Elsewhere in Leicestershire, Misterton is on the much larger expanses of sandy soils in the vicinity of Lutterworth. Buckminster is on the southern edge of a substantial area of heathland straddling the Leicestershire-Lincolnshire border and also associated with
outcrops of marlstone overlying heavy clays. Opencast extraction of marlstone for iron production around the 1970s (usually followed by restoration as agricultural land) has reduced the extent of now-extant marlstone, so considerable care is needed to establish the extent of better-drained soils in the Anglo-Saxon era. But certainly there would have been plenty of better drained localities but only a few locations would have also been near springs. The villages in this part of Leicestershire and Lincolnshire are clearly located on a spring line. Interestingly Buckminster is the most elevated of these settlements (the church is on the 150 metre OD contour line, while the highest point in the modern village is at 158 metres).

Wiltshire has a different geology to Leicestershire. Most people think of the well-drained chalk downland. Indeed so well drained that reliable water supplies can be elusive – several watercourses are known as ‘winterbournes’ and to this day usually only flow in the first few months of the year. This means that most early settlements follow spring lines at the base of chalk escarpments. These springs arise because the Middle Chalk contains more clay that the Upper Chalk so is comparatively impervious, creating a large number of almost-imperceptible minor springs and a few more copious ones (Marshall 2013). Because of extensive abstraction the modern day water table is usually below this spring line, although rose to higher during the 2012–13 floods. A paleo-hydrological report suggests these levels in recent floods closely approximate to historic and prehistoric groundwater levels (Whitehead and Edmunds 2012).

However not all of Wiltshire is on chalk: the west and north of the county is on heavy clays. This includes the general vicinity of Malmesbury and the early minster at Foxley. Here the earliest settlements seem to follow a similar pattern to most parts of Leicestershire; this will be discussed further below.

The importance of fords

Settlements located even small areas of well-drained soils in proximity to reliable springs seem to be both the oldest Anglo-Saxon settlements and also the enduring ones. Predictably enough, Thorpes and other later place-name elements are more likely to be on heavier soils or where water sources were less reliable. These are the settlements most likely to be depopulated during the later medieval era. But the places which seem to have been minsters (rather than just ‘ordinary’ –hams or –tuns) often share another topographical feature – fordable places across rivers. In modern times most of these fords have of course been replaced by bridges.

This association of minsters and fords goes further, in that some parishes associated with minsters straddle the watercourse whereas adjacent parishes extend only as far as the river (Bottesford, the Luffenhams, Melton Mowbray). While I fully accept that entirely practical reasons may result in settlements-with-fords evolving into parishes-straddling-watercourses, this does not explain the good correlation of minsters with ‘straddling parishes’. If most fords are associated with ‘straddling parishes’ then there should be many more settlements which were not founded as minsters which are in parishes which straddle watercourses.

At the most pragmatic level fords would have been associated with overland trade routes. Except when the fords cross the smallest watercourses then they would, by definition, be the places where waterborne goods could be unloaded for local distribution. So they would become small settlements, akin to the hamlets which sprang up around rural wharves on canals during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, minsters would require significant overland and waterborne supplies and also the means to distribute agricultural produce rendered as scot or ‘taxes’. The Domesday survey reveals just how much wealth most eleventh century minsters were generating. In the absence of any other urban centres at the time the first minsters were founded then they would have generated otherwise-unparalleled amounts of goods to be traded in and, perhaps more importantly, out.

I have discussed elsewhere the importance of fords and associated settlements in Leicestershire and the national significance of such ‘inland ports’ in the central parts of England (Trubshaw 2015). In the seventh and eighth centuries, with the exception of
coastal wics, minsters would seem to have been the only types of settlement which could have functioned as ‘wharves’.

Some of the Leicestershire minsters are located on the banks of the River Soar (Barrow on Soar, Leicester, Aylestone, Aldeby) or nearby (Rothley, just a few hundred metres from the confluence of the Rothley Brook with the Soar). With the exception of Rothley all are situated close to historic crossing places over the Soar (and, as previously noted, Rothley may not be one of the older minsters).

With the exception of Breedon, Buckminster, Market Bosworth and Vernemetum (all situated on high ground) all the remaining Leicestershire minsters are located at historic fording places.

While I am reluctant to think of minsters as primarily religious institutions in the manner of later monasteries, nevertheless they were the places from which the clergy travelled to provide pastoral care. There would be pragmatic reasons for any minster located in a valley to be sited near one of the safest fording places. But could the siting near fords also be related to pre-conversion practices? After all Leicestershire has both Stapleford (the ford with a stapol or carved post) and Wyfordby (the settlement by the ford with a weoh or shrine/idol). Interestingly, Stapleford and Wyfordby are also settlements on small areas of well-drained sands and gravels (Wilkinson 1996: 70). There is a Stapleford in Wiltshire too, at the confluence of the Till and Wylye, a few miles north of Wilton. There are other examples of Stapleford and Wyford elsewhere in England.

There may have been something ‘inherently religious’ about fords in the minds of Anglo-Saxon people. Susan Wood has demonstrated that early churches in south Germany were built at fords, crossroads, hilltops, burial mounds and springs (Wood 2008: 79–80). Margery Trantner has briefly considered minor place-names containing ‘ford’ on the Trent between Leicestershire and Derbyshire and the links to medieval religious establishments (Trantner 1996) although not from the perspective of early Anglo-Saxon settlements. Nationally, until the Reformation religious institutions are most commonly responsible for building and maintaining of bridges and causeways. Neither the prominent market places at Eynsham and Bampton. 

*MInsters and Valleys*

Cattle crossing a ford in a valley with travellers on a sandy track nearby by Louis Pierre Verwee (1807–1877).

Fords can be crossed more reliably by four-footed animals than by 4x4s! They retain idyllic associations for most people.
The association of the early church at Eynsham with the crossing of the Thames nearby is surely not accidental. Idiosyncratically, cars using the B4044 over Swinford Bridge still have to pay fivepence toll. However this bridge toll only dates from 1769 when the present bridge, still in private ownership, was constructed. Prior to that travelling between Eynsham and Oxford entailed use of a ferry.

Presumably the eponymous stapol or weoh was there to protect travellers who needed to cross the ford, especially at times when the water levels were high and there was a risk of stumbling on unseen obstacles or being swept away. Presumably travellers made offerings to the stapol or weoh requesting a safe crossing or by way of thanks for making it across (depending whether the traveller was leaving from the bank with the carving or otherwise).

If a minster was founded at such a stapol ford or weoh ford then clearly the place-name is most unlikely to come down as Stapleford or Wyford. Equally clearly the clergy would be keen to offer the potentia of Christ or a local saint by way of protection to travellers. Indeed in Wiltshire the church at Christian Malford (the ford at the crist mael – presumably a crucifix rather than a cross) is located at the south-western boundary of the parish at a place where the River Avon could have been forded. The clergy were presumably happy to sustain the practice of making an offering by way of thanks.

There is no way of proving that minsters were sometimes successors to stapols and weohs. Plenty of other pragmatic reasons justify the location of minsters at fords so, almost certainly some would have were stapols and weohs once stood.
Thanks to the extensive work of Peter Liddle and Paul Bowman in south Leicestershire there is a fairly clear understanding of the extent to which fairly uniformly distributed Roman settlements ‘retreated’ into the lower parts of valleys from the fourth century onwards (see Bowman 1996; 2004).

Bowman’s fieldwalking for pottery fragments in the Langtons lead him to support the suggestions made previously by W.G. Hoskins, Alan Everitt and Harold Fox that the East Midlands was typified by estates which stretched from the valleys up onto the upland clays or wolds (Hoskins 1935; 1936; 1937; 1949; Everitt 1977; 1979 and Fox 1989, cited in Bowman 1996: 139). For understandable reasons none of these researchers attempt to date the origin of such valley:wold estates. They are clearly a reasonable way of allocating land which could have been imposed – and even re-imposed – at any time from the middle Bronze Age onwards.

At the time of the founding of the earliest minsters in the seventh and eighth centuries estates extending from the valleys up to the clay wolds would have been typical of much of Leicestershire. Such estates would equate to the hundred hide ‘riverine’ estates which are characteristic of the parochiae for early Wiltshire minsters (Pitt 1999:20–1). (This contrasts with the status of Wiltshire minsters at the time of the Domesday survey, when most minsters had holdings of five hides or just over; the minimum holding for a minster seemed to have been one hide.) No doubt there were some places in Wiltshire and Mercia where this hundred-hide pattern had already begun to break up into smaller units by the end of the eighth century. While direct evidence is lacking, there is no reason to suppose that the oldest minsters in Leicestershire and Rutland were not also founded within valley:wold estates of around a hundred hides.

These ‘hundred hides’ estates of the seventh and eighth century are clearly the forebears – at least in concept if not in actual territories – of the administrative hundreds which are documented from the tenth century but by then are well-established, so presumably have a ninth century origin. In the scheme of things some later hundreds would have been approximately coterminous with early hundred-hide estates while others would ignore such historical precedents in favour of arrangements which fitted in with ninth century ownership. Indeed the earlier hidages may well have been at best a distant memory. I am minded of the way the 1974 administrative changes in England and Wales created new counties, some of which were almost the same as before while others were entirely novel. Subsequent changes have often reversed the more ‘synthetic’ introductions in favour of reverting to traditional nomenclature. North and South Humberside are among the best examples of this invention and reversion.

Even in Wiltshire, where charters and other documents survive, Pitt is unable to reconstruct the boundaries for any of the original hundred-hide riverine estates associated with early minsters. So the near-total absence of contemporary documents from Leicestershire and Rutland does not of itself make it significantly more difficult to reconstruct such estates in Mercia as the primary evidence is topographical not documentary.

Clearly considerable caution is needed. However, if evidence for the same pattern of estates and minsters can be recognised in different parts of England then this in itself argues for a date prior to the dominance of Mercia and Wessex. Fortunately there have been several regional studies, although previous researchers have only considered evidence from southern England.
Pitt’s study of Wiltshire was preceded by P.H. Hase’s studies of Hampshire and Dorset, and John Blair’s research in Surrey (Hase 1975; 1988; 1995; Blair 1991). Hase seems to have been the first to propose the relationship of an early minster with its river, in his remarks about the Cerne valley in Dorset. More recently John Davey has looked in greater detail at land ‘territories’ in Dorset (Davey 2013). The main aim of his research was to identify rectilinear boundaries dating back to the prehistoric but, as part of his ‘unpeeling’ of the evidence he looks at some of the evidence for Anglo-Saxon land units.

Davey’s work is based on Tom Williamson’s (2003: 40) prior identification in East Anglia of territorial boundaries subdividing river valleys in such a manner that each ‘estate’ had a share of natural resources (including river access, meadows, well-drained arable land, higher pasture and woodland) from valley floor to upland pasture. Roads and paths then developed both within each territory and stretched out to neighbouring territories.

Using five specific field studies in Dorset, Davey established that rectilinear field systems developed episodically since the Bronze Age. The evidence which survives now indisputably functioned as Anglo-Saxon boundaries. Indeed other recent studies have shown that in the late Anglo-Saxon period land division was modified and intensified (Oosthuizen 2005; Costen 2007). A surviving pre-Enclosure map of the Christchurch region reveals that remnants of these ancient rectilinear systems running perpendicular to the Avon and Stour frequently form part of the boundaries of tithings (Davey 2013: 186).

While all of Davey’s research is relevant to this present study, the study of Sherborne is especially significant, given that Sherborne Abbey was one of the important early religious establishments in Dorset, serving as a cathedral from 705 to 1075. Davey convincingly shows that ‘the Sherborne field alignments form part of a wider system of land division incorporating the hundred of Horethorne in south-east Somerset. The whole arrangement runs perpendicular to the valley systems of the Cale and Yeo rivers. However a Sherborne estate had been removed from the rectilinear Horethorne Hundred by the late Saxon period. A hundred-hide estate is recorded in the foundation charters for Sherborne cathedral.’ (Davey 2013: 183–4) This hundred-hide estate was, Davey argues, seemingly separated from the older rectilinear land unit during the late or post-Roman period.
Davey’s detailed study of field boundaries in Dorset has no counterpart in either Wiltshire or Leicestershire. Indeed, relevant documentary evidence – such as old charters and pre-Enclosure maps – may simply not exist. Whether it is possible to identify any existing field boundaries in Wiltshire or Leicestershire as remnants of an ancient perpendicular-to-watercourses system would require substantial research.

Even if the evidence has yet to be recognised or has been all-but destroyed, there is a real possibility of a system akin to that in Dorset existing elsewhere in England. Whether or not these putative land units made it through to the post-Roman era is of course open to debate. Some perhaps did and most probably did not. What proportion, and which specific valleys, remain far more difficult conundrums.

Back to the Mercians

Steven Bassett, Alan Everitt and William Ford have independently investigated the Stoppingas, named in an eighth century charter. Their territory is within the kingdom of the Hwicce and centred on the upper reaches of the River Alne in Warwickshire which extended to an area of transhumance in the forest of Arden shared with the Tomsaete, whose territory was centred on the River Tame (Everitt 1977; Bassett 1989; Ford 1979; cited in Foss 1999: 83). However none of these authors have considered the relationship between these Warwickshire territories and early minsters.

More recently Della Hooke has argued that the earliest minsters were founded in remote wooded valleys (Hooke 2013: 235). Hooke cites the twelfth century Life of St Modwenna which states this Irish saint founded a hermitage on an island in the River Trent because she ‘loved… very much’ places which at that time ‘were a complete wilderness, full of woods but empty of people, the dwelling place of wild animals and a desolate solitude’. Modwenna’s island hermitage developed into Burton Abbey on the adjacent bank of the Trent. As further examples of minsters in wooded valleys Hooke offers Lastingham (Yorkshire) and Great Malvern Priory (Worcestershire).

Sadly neither available documentary sources nor modern topography tell us about the extent of woodland in the seventh century. But the known and plausible locations of minsters do indeed seem consistent with Hooke’s proposal. The evidence for the relationship between early minsters and river valleys is always topographical, never documentary.

If some of the oldest minsters dominate a specific river valley then the implication is that valley-based land units form the earliest basis of Anglo-Saxon landholdings. This seems entirely reasonable. But was it a quick way to divide up a terra nova – in other words, ignore any land units respected by the indigenous British? Or was this arrangement a continuity of land units going back to the Roman era or the Iron Age? Three contributors to a study of Anglo-Saxon landscapes in the East Midlands (Jill Bourne, Paul Bowman and Peter Liddle 1996) have explored in considerable detail the dating of early Anglo-Saxon land units in Leicestershire and, in essence, established that continuity is more probable than terra nova scenarios.

Two-by-two across the water

I have discussed numerous examples of ‘paired’ settlements straddling watercourses – such as the Bowdens in Leicestershire, the Luffenhams in Rutland, the Deverills, Ramsbury and Norton Bavant and Sutton Veny in Wiltshire. With the probable exception of the last pair, these seem to originate as estate centres at a suitable fording point and, presumably for pragmatic reasons, become the locations for the earliest minsters. This topographical and toponymical pattern is among the clearest ‘diagnostic traits’ for the earliest minsters.

Graham Jones has provided frequent examples of minsters being linked with a second settlements that he regards as ‘secular-religious pairing’ (Jones 2015). Understandably, given that the evidence is often from place-names and
topography alone, how functions of the two parts of these pairs differed remains unclear. One assumption is that the prosaic activities of an estate centre are inimical to the piety that modern minds might expect to be associated with a minster. But as minsters evolve into market towns more often than their secular twins then such assumptions are most probably anachronistic.

My own assumption, for which I can offer no specific evidence, is that the granting of charters for minsters relieved that part of the estate from the usual taxation so needed to be distinct from the ‘non-minster’ estate. How well this distinction worked in practice is of course a moot point, and surely there must have been at least some nobles who thought the dual status enabled a useful ‘tax dodge’ (just as profits are transferred to offshore tax havens today). Some readers may regard this approach to ‘secular-religious pairing’ as unduly cynical but there is nothing anachronistic about avarice in the Middle Saxon era.

Even though some minsters were seemingly founded as ‘safe havens’ for widows and other unmarried noble women, this does not explain all such pairings of settlements as being divided along gender lines– unless we make the greater assumption that all of the earliest minsters were founded as places for widows to live. The available evidence does not fully contradict this possibility, but our knowledge of Augustinian Christian communities implies that such a strategy could only have come from an earlier phase of conversion. In others words, plausible but not probable.

Modern thinking might make the assumption that early minsters were given ‘tax breaks’ by the king simply out of piety. But I suspect not, not least that popular piety seems to be several centuries in the future (although that may be a distortion caused by the lack of relevant records). My hunch is that these concessions were offered initially because the king wanted minsters to be fairly evenly distributed around his realm. One per upper valley is indeed a good distribution, given that most of his subjects lived in valleys. Firstly, it would mean that pastoral needs – not least funerals – could be met within a few miles. Moreover, it would also mean there was a literate cleric within a few miles. Bear in mind the words cleric and clerk are cognate. Being able to send out letters with the knowledge that someone in each lordship could read them and, if necessary, reply would be a big help to royal administration. The literacy of the clerics may, in reality, have been better in principle than in practice (and Alfred clearly thought there was scope for improvement) but the ideal of evenly-spread literacy would justify the ‘tax breaks’.

A literate priest would no doubt be expected to teach the sons of the nobility the basics of reading and writing – a tradition which persisted until recent centuries. Indeed, they needed to set at least some of these boys on the path which would lead to the next generation of clergy. The notion of nuns teaching the female siblings of these boys how to weave and sew sounds rather recreational to modern minds accustomed to thinking of needlework as a genteel pastime, an antidote to the Devil finding work for idle hands and such Victorian Protestant ethics.

However, in Anglo-Saxon England ‘needlework’ was far from a pastime – the whole economy depended on endless fibre preparation (flax being especially arduous), spinning, weaving and sewing. Everyone needs clothes, and yet clothes continually wear out. High-status houses needed tapestries and the like to make them more cosy. The priest needed vestments and ecclesiastical items, such as altar cloths. High-status English embroidery was renowned on the Continent. Both domestic consumption of clothing and the export market for high status items made this into a big business. Every woman needed to spin whenever her hands were not otherwise employed. Not for nothing did unmarried women become known as ‘spinsters’.

The etymology of the word ‘nun’ is revealing, as it comes from the Latin nonna, which had the sense of a tutor:
Old English nunne ‘nun, vestal, pagan priestess, woman devoted to religious life under vows,’ from Late Latin nonna ‘nun, tutor,’ originally (along with masc. nonnus) a term of address to elderly persons, perhaps from children’s speech, reminiscent of nana (compare Sanskrit nona, Persian nana ‘mother,’ Greek nanna ‘aunt,’ Serbo-Croatian nena ‘mother,’ Italian nonna, Welsh nain ‘grandmother,’ see nanny).

The nunne or nonna teaching girls the varied skills of textile working would have been an essential part of the economy, making the nunneries at least as important to a manorial lord as the literate cleric in his minster, who was nonnus to the boys bring drilled into the three R’s. Add to this the nunneries being ‘safe places’ for widows then presumably they too deserved to be included in the ‘tax breaks’ for minsters.

The queens of the valleys

The topographical evidence for early minsters and river valleys correlates rather neatly with the idea of much older territories occupying valleys, with the watersheds acting as some sort of boundary – albeit ones which were often ‘inter-commoned’. At the risk of straying too far from topographical concerns I would like to summarise a ‘backwater’ of linguistics, which in turn suggests a mid-Bronze Age origin for this notion.

The evidence is a group of cognate Indo-European words, including Latin genus (with the primary meaning of ‘beget, birth, origin’); modern compounds of gyne- (from the Greek gynaiko- ‘woman, female’); Old English cwen (modern English ‘queen’); cuni (as in ‘cuniform’ or wedge-shaped); the Latin cunnus and the synonymous modern English profanity; and ‘canal’ and the variant spelling ‘channel’ in the original sense of a watercourse smaller than a river.

As I have explored in detail elsewhere (Trubshaw 2014), this range of meanings of words with a distant common origin suggests the sense of a matrilineal sovereignty of the land shares the same semantic roots as words for the upper reaches of rivers. The notion of a ‘queen of the (upper) valley’ is supported by the links between springs and many Indo-European female deities, notably Artemis, and also by Irish, Indian and other traditions where kingship is conveyed by a female ‘sovereign of the land’ (e.g. Irish flaith).

This linguistic backwater allows some tentative dates to be proposed. During the later Neolithic and through the first part of the Bronze Age the material culture of Britain becomes increasingly independent from Continental developments. This changes abruptly by the middle of Bronze Age when British material culture once again shows close parallels with Europe, and this continues through the Iron Age. While falling short of proof, plausibly Indo-European languages reached Britain at the time of the substantial changes in material culture. Alternatively, we have been speaking Indo-European languages since the early Neolithic. But, even if true, the mid-Bronze Age ‘renewal’ would have greater significance as the ‘ancestor’ of Iron Age and later culture.

The linguistic evidence allows a greater degree of confidence that pre-Roman land units were based, at least initially, around valleys. This adds, albeit quite indirectly, further support for the identification of riverine territories in Dorset and East Anglia – and their putative existence more generally. Recent research suggests that the River Oundle in Northamptonshire derives from a tribal name (Coates 2014); more typically river names are thought to derive from the names of deities. But given the paucity of the evidence, more caution is needed. To what extent did these people share their identity with the deity? In other words, are these deity names or tribal names? Or, more to the point, would the people at the time have understood the modern distinction? The answers to these rhetorical questions deserve far more consideration than is appropriate here.
Early minsters and valleys: comparisons and parallels

As already noted, Leicestershire has none of the documentary evidence which allows the history of Wessex minsters to be partially reconstructed. But the topographical evidence is just as available in Leicestershire as it is in, say, Wiltshire.

Leicestershire minsters have clear relationships with their nearest rivers:

- Aldeby located by the Soar
- Ayleston located by the Soar
- Barrow on Soar located by the Soar
- Breedon on the Hill overlooks the Trent
- Misterton located by the Swift
- Buckminster near the source of the Witham
- Hallaton on a minor tributary of the Welland
- Rothley on the Rothley Brook near the confluence with the Soar
- Bringhurst overlooks the Welland
- St Mary in Arden overlooks the Welland
- Great Glen / Wistow located by or near the Sence (formerly the River Glen)
- Leicester located by the Soar
- Market Bosworth / Eye Kettleby overlooks the Sence Brook
- Melton Mowbray / Eye located by the Wreake/Eye

Although Breedon on the Hill is in Leicestershire, topographically it is linked with the Trent valley to the north and the Anker to the west and south-west, both in adjoining counties.
Vernemetum near the source of the Kingston Brook and the River Mantle (both tributaries of the Soar)

Predictably the most important river in the county, the Soar gets several mentions. The Welland also gets three mentions. But, as I have suggested in a previous article in the *Leicestershire Historian*, the importance of the Welland in the Anglo-Saxon era has often been underestimated. Note that the Sence Brook at Market Bosworth is an entirely different watercourse to the Sence/Glen at Great Glen.

One way or another all the watercourses in Leicestershire are linked to one or more minsters. This is matched in Rutland:

Hambleton between two tributaries of the Gwash
Oakham on upper reaches of the Gwash
Riddlington overlooks the Chater
Uppingham above a tributary of the Welland
Ketton adjacent to Chater and overlooks the Welland
Empingham adjacent to Gwash
North Luffenham overlooks the Chater

The situation is similar in Wiltshire, with minsters prominently situated on all the watercourses.

- Alderbury is on the eastern bank of the Avon. To the west is Longford.
- Amesbury is on the eastern bank of a loop of the Hampshire Avon.
- Avebury is on the eastern bank of the Winterbourne (not to be confused with the Winterbourne in the south of the county), just north of where it changes direction and becomes the Kennet.
The Deverills form a group of parishes along the Deverill valley.

Heytesbury is on the north bank of the Wylye.

Idmiston is adjacent to the Bourne.

Malmesbury is dramatically situated to the north of the Avon; the minster is the successor to the earlier establishment at Foxley which is on the banks of the Avon 2½ miles downstream.

Mere is on high ground above numerous streams feeding into the Lodden.

Ramsbury is on the northern bank of the Kennet.

Tisbury is at the source of the Nadder; upstream are the Donheads.

Westbury is on ground above the Biss Brook, which runs northwards into the Avon.

Wilton takes its name from the Wylye and is situated in the confluence with the Nadder; the confluence with the Avon is about three miles to the east.

The Winterbournes form a group of parishes along the Winterbourne valley (not to be confused with the Winterbourne in the north of the county).

Of all the places for which documentary evidence or place-names suggest an early minster, only Yatesbury is situated away from watercourses. For reasons previously discussed I consider that in this one instance the *burh* place-name element should not be taken to infer a primarily religious community.
Curious parallels

More clearly than in Leicestershire, many of the early minsters in Rutland and Wiltshire are clearly associated with river valleys. These early minsters are especially associated with later parishes which straddle the watercourse, or even groups of villages which ‘follow’ the watercourse. In Wiltshire there clearest examples are the Deverills and the Winterbournes, where the numerous later villages still take their names from the eponymous rivers.

There is also an association with fordable places on rivers, which evolve into one or more bridges. Quite clearly there were entirely pragmatic reasons for minsters being beside rivers and adjacent to fords. The key here is that the early minster sites seem to be at the ‘best’ places. This is a purely qualitative evaluation and also takes into consideration the ‘drama’ of cliff-top or hilltop locations, such as Malmesbury, Mere and Breedon on the Hill.

There are however some curious parallels. Firstly, the early forms of Wilton suggest the origin of the name is Wylye tun, the settlement on the Wylye. Wylye is probably from the Welsh gwili, ‘twisting and turning’, all-but synonymous with Leicestershire’s Wreake, from the Old Scandinavian wreithk, ‘twisted, crooked’. Furthermore, Warminster may derive its name from a river known in Old English as worian, ‘wander’. These names are consistent with minsters seeming to ‘go with’ the upper reaches of river systems, where the course is more likely to be convoluted.

Secondly, the founding of Malmesbury by Aldhelm soon after 675 results in the total demise of an early minster.
(attested by excavations in 1985) on the banks of a tributary of the Avon at Foxley, five miles to the west. This mimics the relationship of Eye Kettleby to Melton Mowbray, although Eye Kettleby seems not to be religious site.

Thirdly, despite Malmesbury being in the ‘debatable lands’ long fought over by Mercia and Wessex, the settlement there and associated farms were ‘off limits’ for both armies. This has some parallels with Rutland, established to be an Iron Age land unit (Phythian-Adams 1977; 1980). Despite being surrounded by the Danelaw, Rutland retained its identity and became the dowry of the late Anglo-Saxon queens. More significantly, in complete contrast to adjoining counties, there are almost no Scandinavian place-names in Rutland (the exceptions are Glaston and Normanton). Just as Malmesbury was ‘off limits’ to armies so too Rutland was ‘off limits’ to Scandinavian settlement. Quite what this tells us about minsters and their individual *parochiae* is debatable. The parallel is that the boundaries of a specific *land* could be both recognised and ‘respected’.

**Parochiae, pays or lands?**

Rutland – from Rota’s *land* – reveals that the sense of *land* in the early Anglo-Saxon era is much more specific than later usage of the word. The inference is of an ‘estate’. Indeed, at that period of time, a ‘kingdom’. Interestingly, the well-defined watersheds in Leicestershire to the west of Rutland demarcate an area with almost the same extent as Rutland, centred on Melton Mowbray, suggesting that this too was a *land* ruled by a rival to Rota. This putative *land* evolves into Framland Hundred, although also acquires a ‘pan handle’ stretching north-east to Bottesford.

While the term *parochiae* is undoubtedly the correct term to use for the estates of early minsters, perhaps we should think of these *parochiae* evolving from units of land that would have been known at the time as *lands* (rather than *pays*, the ‘imported’ term adopted by historians).
As stated in the Introduction, there have been several regional historical studies of minsters in England, spanning Herefordshire, Kent, Radnorshire, West Sussex and the Thames valley (respectively: Leominster History Study Group 2001; Brookes and Harrington 2010; Fenn 2000; Masters 2001; Blair 1996). The topography is different in all these places and this has an influence on where early minsters were founded.

All these studies came to my attention after I had begun to compare examples from Leicestershire, Rutland and Wiltshire. During 2015 I visited nearly every location mentioned in Sussex, Surrey and Radnorshire. However I make no claims to have a broad appreciation of the localities during the Anglo-Saxon era.

The following remarks are merely overly-concise summaries of the published work of John Blair, Phillip Masters and R.W.D. Fenn. They provide considerable evidence and nuanced discussions about the Thames valley, West Sussex and Radnorshire, respectively. As the original works are fairly easy to obtain (indeed, apart from Blair, are accessible online) then I would urge the reader to read them first-hand. What follows attempts to draw attention to the distinctive aspects of some early churches in each of these regions, and to make comparisons with Leicestershire, Rutland and Wiltshire.

**Thames valley minsters**

Attempting to distinguish earliest churches from those of, say, the tenth century requires well-honed specialist historical and linguistic skills. My studies can only follow where such specialists have already published their research. The pioneer in such work was John Blair, who published a classic study of the Thames valley in 1996.
Most of the sites Blair discusses are at confluences: Abingdon, Crayford, Cricklade, Dartford, Dorchester, Eynesham, Kingston, Oxford, Reading, Staines and Westminster (Blair 1996: 12). This is somewhat inevitable as the Thames is a major river with many tributaries. In contrast to the main river channel the many and various headwaters are in the Cotswolds and the chalk downlands rising above the valley itself. Like the Weald and the South Downs, these were not necessarily the most productive agricultural regions of Anglo-Saxon England (although caution is needed as parts of the Cotswolds do allow for viable mixed farming, not just pasture).

Blair specifically noted that these Thames minsters are exceptionally important (1996: 7, 8). Indeed, I would go further and say that the Thames minsters are exceptional in almost all respects. This is not a problem, but has caused one significant consequence. That is that Blair’s pioneering study of the Thames has unduly influenced later research, creating an expectation that minsters – especially the more important ones – are at confluences. There are indeed plenty of such examples – in Wiltshire Wilton and Malmesbury come first to mind, with Avebury, Calne and Marlborough similarly sited. In Leicestershire the clearest examples are Aldeby and Rothley. But, as the preceding discussions attest, far more churches were established at roughly the same time away from confluences.

The downside of confluences is that they must be prone to serious flooding. Nevertheless the gravel terraces typically associated with such geomorphology drain well so would have been ideal occupation sites between bouts of flooding. Some of these were originally islands or all-but cut off by a side stream. However later alluvial deposits or deliberate human intervention have often made such water channels difficult to discern without consulting geological maps. Binsey, Cholsey, Chertsey and Bermondsey all include the Old English *eig* (‘island’) in their names; all are early minsters (Blair 1996: 9–10). Blair provides evidence for wharves alongside early Thames minsters at Eynsham, Oxford, Southwark (1996: 11–12, 15, 17).

Furthermore many of the Thames minsters are where Roman roads cross one or more watercourses. Crayford, Cricklade, Dartford, Dorchester, London, Oxford, Staines and Cricklade church is at the top of a long hill, away from the Thames valley.
Westminster. In addition Bampton and Reading are close to important crossings (Blair 1996: 12).

Many of these places went on to evolve into substantial market towns. Although, as Blair notes, this was not a question of steady growth – during the tenth and eleventh centuries the status and wealth of minsters dropped significantly, before typically becoming increasingly urban from the twelfth century onwards (Blair 1996: 12). Five (Cookham, Cricklade, London, Oxford and Southwark) were ‘re-purposed’ in the ninth century as Alfredian burhs; subsequently Cricklade, Oxford and Southwark became the central places of boroughs (Blair 1996: 13). The gist of all this is that these minsters were just too pragmatically located for them not to have become important places for trade. Indeed we can have little doubt that the first churches were located there because of similar pragmatic considerations. As any estate agent will affirm, there are only three important aspects to a property: ‘Location, location and location’.

There are some other topographical aspects of the Thames valley minsters which need to be considered. Towards the upper reaches of the Thames the early church at Cricklade was situated on high ground in the confluence with the River Key; the Ampney Brook and River Ray also debouch into the Thames a short distance downstream, while the River Churn merges just upstream of the Key. Cholsey, further downstream, is also on a conspicuous eminence. The Thames estuary is inextricably linked to the socio-economic importance of the valley, so it is appropriate to note that Minster in Sheppey also sits conspicuously on the skyline, especially when seen from the sea. (Blair notes that Minster in Sheppey is located on the only small knoll of gravel in the vicinity (1996: 9).)

Blair makes a crucial observation: the kingdom of Mercia was landlocked (1996: 15). This made the minsters along the Thames into strategically-important trading places. In essence, it is what made them exceptionally important. The same could be said of corresponding locations along the Trent and its major tributaries (although, to my knowledge, no one has looked at the Trent valley in a similar manner to Blair’s study of the Thames). Although written prior to any consideration of the topics in this present study, I have previously looked at the role of ‘inland ports’ in Leicestershire across a broad time period from the Iron Age onwards; see Trubshaw 2015. While considerable further
research is needed, the safest assumption is that places such as Barrow on Soar were plausibly as exceptionally important as some as the Thames valley minsters discussed by Blair.

Sussex minsters

During the fifth century Anglo-Saxon colonisation in the south-east of England was focused on coastal districts (Rippon and Smart 2015: 42). Unlike, say, Kent there is no evidence of a kingdom based in part on sub-Roman survival. Between the eighth to eleventh centuries central authority, whether state or church, was absent from Sussex. The archaeological and place-name evidence is mostly of ‘clusters of pagan sites and finds of the fifth to seventh centuries in the river valleys and on Downland ridges.’ But there is little evidence of settlement away from the coast. However ‘The density of probable minster sites, particularly on the coastal plain, is high and similar to that on the river valleys within Hampshire.’ (Masters 2001: 151, 153, 154).

There many be a number of reasons why. But surely the more fundamental reasons come under the rubric of ‘Why bother?’ In from the coast was mostly chalk downland and the impenetrable Weald. The opportunities for setting up wealth-generating mixed arable and farming were, at best, seriously limited. Little doubt that the downlands were suitable for sheep, then as now, and that the woodland could be used for pig pannage and rearing geese. But this was as true for all other areas of marginal woodland – there was no fortune to be made from displacing the locals.

Phillip Masters summarises this succinctly:

> The distribution of probable minsters in Surrey, Kent and Sussex was largely determined by a narrow fringe of good land and early settlement around the infertile Weald. (Masters 2001: 23)

Masters then demonstrates that in West Sussex, with the exception of Petworth, all the early minsters focus on Selsey. Seemingly Chichester was abandoned in the early and mid-Anglo-Saxon period (see Endnote 8) and that royal authority had reverted to the old centre...
of Selsey. He considers that this was because, at the time, all major settlements were easily accessible by water, whereas Chichester was not. Selsey was situated on a silted-up tidal inlet, as was its counterpart at Wittering (Masters 2001: 105, 108).

Indeed, early minsters prevailing occupied estuarine locations:

… Bosham, Selsey and West Thorney had direct access to the sea. West Wittering, Warblington and Pagham were on tidal inlets and Aldingbourne and North Mundharn were adjacent to ripes which were almost certainly tidal. The last was on what would have been a substantial river until the diversion of the River Lavant.

(Masters 2001: 47)

For once there is reliable documentary evidence. *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, written shortly after his death, states that on his arrival in Sussex in 680–1 Wilfred was given King Athelwealh’s own estate with the addition of eighty-seven hides associated with Selsey. This reveals that Selsey was already the centre of an extensive estate, since the island is considerably smaller. Wilfrid’s combined estate appears to have formed the endowment of the South Saxon see when it was established in 705. (Masters 2001: 84; Masters discusses the specific places making up this see).

Other sources reveal that between 686 and 770 minsters were founded at Aldingbourne, Peppering, Wittering, Ferring, Stanmer, Henfield and Beddingham. Bexhill was established shortly after Mercia regained control from the West Saxon kingdom in 770 (Masters 2001: 110).

It is helpful to compare the study area with the administrative and ecclesiastical pattern of seventh- and eighth-century Hampshire, for which Hase describes probable *villae regales* with minsters six to eight miles apart.

(Masters 2001: 155, drawing upon Hase 1975, 1988)
There are also parallels in East Sussex, especially at Beddingham. This is now a hamlet about two miles south-east of Lewes, where the main coast road, the A27, crosses a tributary of the River Ouse. This part of the Ouse is tidal, and the banks of the river have shallow slopes which presumably would have allowed for coastal craft to beach for loading. Presumably, too, the watercourse could have been forded at low tide enabling land-based traffic to use the precursor to the A27. The parish church sits on a small knoll close to the historic road and the river (the modern A27 was constructed immediately to the north of the old road).

Overlooking Beddingham to the north is the major eminence known as Mount Caburn. This dominates the local landscape around Lewes and has the remains of an Iron Age hill fort on the summit. Numerous archaeological investigations have revealed evidence of a substantial number of ‘ritual pits’ and such like spanning most eras of prehistory – although little or no suggestion of occupation. There can be little doubt that whoever founded the first church at Beddingham would have been aware of the importance of this ‘harrow-like’ (OE hearg) hill.

After the founding of the Priory at Lewes between 1078 and 1082 the importance of Beddingham presumably declined. However the modern contrast between the bustling town of Lewes and the quiet hamlet of Beddingham should not lead us to think that a similar relationship existed in the mid-Saxon period; on the contrast Beddingham would then have been by far the more ‘bustling’ place.

The shift of emphasis from Beddingham to Lewes in East Sussex seemingly mimics similar shifts in West Sussex from Bosham, Selsey and Wittering to Chichester. Key to this comparison is that the earlier foundations are located at places ideally suited to beaching the sorts of boats used along the coast – and presumably across the Channel – in mid-Saxon times. Other pragmatic concerns lead to later establishments being located nearby – yet close enough to take full advantage of these estuarine trading places – and, in due course, becoming more important.

There are some early settlements and churches inland from Chichester. These are along the valley bottoms, principally in the upper Lavant valley and south-west of Stoughton (where there is a predominance of tun names). Emsworth and Westbourne are both in the Ems valley (Masters 2001: 132–5). Considerably further inland, to the south-east of Chichester, are the early churches at Cassingtion and Bersted.
Petersfield, the substantial estate of Harting, which also had an early minster, extended across the Rother valley (Masters 2001: 128–9, 136), emulating paired parishes in Leicestershire, Rutland and Wiltshire.

However, overall the evidence of Anglo-Saxon settlement inland from the West Sussex coast is thin:

On the Downs, hilltop or upper hillside round or ovoid enclosures at Up Marden, North Marden, East Dean and West Stoke may be associated with early to mid-Anglo-Saxon settlement, although there is only firm evidence at Up Marden. Larger enclosures at Compton and Grailham, perhaps places of significance because of royal status and a ham name respectively, are further down the valley sides, and the remaining church sites are at the valley bottoms, typically close to manor houses except at Stoughton and Singleton, both of which were of high status.
(Masters 2001: 82)

What should we make of these early minsters? Masters is quite specific:

The most logical explanation is that the churches were not minsters in the sense of having wide pastoral responsibilities, but reflected the status of the owner whether a lay lord, king, or the Church with, at best, a few outlying chapelries or shrines, separated from the next significant centre by marsh, woodland and heath.
(Masters 2001: 155)

To repeat a word I have used repeatedly in previous discussions, these churches were located for essentially pragmatic reasons. Paramount among those reasons was the ease of waterborne transport.

This is despite Masters’ opinion that ‘A backward area like western Sussex does not appear to have developed the ecclesiastical, administrative and territorial structures evident in the

The church at Stoughton, Sussex, is situated in a somewhat remote valley.
heartlands of Mercia, Wessex and Kent, and to study areas like Sussex on the basis of models derived from these areas could well be misleading.’ (Masters 2001: 185) This may be true as written. However, the people of ‘backward Sussex’ seem to share the same pragmatic concerns about the topography of early churches as those in Mercia and Wessex. They may have located them differently – estuaries rather than river valleys – but as Leicestershire and Wiltshire are land-locked then there can be no estuarine minsters. The apparent difference is misleading, not for the reason Masters suggests, but because it masks essentially similar pragmatic concerns, viz. that these establishments needed to be near navigable water.

**Radnorshire minsters**

Radnorshire came into being in 1536 and ceased to exist in 1974, when it became part of Powys. The settlements are in the valleys of the Wye and two principal tributaries, the Edw and the Ithon (or leithon). Like Leicestershire and Wiltshire, it is land-locked. Where are many, albeit not all, the earliest churches in Radnorshire? On the valley bottoms, sometimes in the loops of the watercourse.

This is despite the fact that the modern settlements are usually on the lower slopes of the valley sides, meaning that the churches are often between the settlements and the river (Fenn 2000: 22). Llananno, on the eastern bank of the Ithon, is dedicated to St Anno. He is one of the most obscure of the Welsh local saints as nothing is known about him. Nevertheless, we can reasonably assume that he flourished in the late seventh or early eighth centuries.

The church at Cefnllysis is even more dramatically located in a loop of the Ithon (see photograph on page 2). Cefnllysis is pronounced ‘kevn-klees’, as Welsh ‘ll’ is softer than the ‘ch’ sound of ‘loch’ with an ‘l’ at the end. The dedication is to St Michael. While this is in all probability a pre-Conquest dedication, presumably it supersedes a by-then-forgotten founder. Land access is via a long farm track from Penybont and then about half-a-mile along a footpath which, in places, descends steeply. Clearly this was always a place where boats rather than carts were key to transport. Despite modern isolation it was once a medieval town, with a castle on the highest hill overlooking the church (the place-name translates as ‘Castle Ridge’), and only declined in the nineteenth century (I assume because of the growth of Llandrindod Wells just over a mile away).
R.W.D. Fenn established that the first church in Radnorshire was at Llanbister (Fenn 2000: 31), dedicated to St Cynllo, one of the important missionaries in this region. This church occupies a truly remarkable hilltop location. Access is up a steep path through the graveyard, then up a dramatic flight of steps inside the porch, with more steps inside the south door. The tower is, unusually, to the east – were it at the west then the chancel roof would have been higher than the tower. Not long after its foundation there were daughter churches at Glascym and St Harmon.

The old Welsh term for ‘daughter church’ was *clas*, which has the sense of a chapter of a book. This word went out of use and frequently corrupts to *glas*, meaning ‘green-blue’. But Glascwm was originally the *clas* in the *cwm* (cognate with the English ‘coombe’, for a steep but dead-end rounded valley). The village of St Harmon self-evidently takes its name from the founder of the church. However, despite a well-defined drop around the churchyard (especially noticeable on the north and north-west sides) which elsewhere would be termed a *llan*, this is not ‘Llanharmon’; instead the English term has been adopted. There are also hybrids, as with Glasbury – pronounced ‘Glaze-bury’ – just across the border in Herefordshire. This combines the Welsh *clas* with the Old English *bury*, a word nearly synonymous with *llan*. After all, the Marches were independent of both England and Wales until 1536. Such ‘creolisation’ in place-names is only to be expected. Interestingly the churches at Glasbury were so close the Wye that at least two have been washed away – in the 1660s and again 1836.

After the first three foundations in Radnorshire, at Llanbister, Glascym and St Harmon, Fenn identifies a number of subsequent, and subservient, early churches, all in ‘immediate vicinity of old established band hamlets’. This, he argues was because the siting of early minsters was dependent on chiefs (Fenn 2000: 31, 39). In later centuries it was these early churches which became the ‘mother churches’ associated with *cantrefs* (subdivisions of kingdoms) (Fenn 2000: 31), mimicking the manner in which the older minsters tended to become the mother churches of English hundreds in the late ninth century.

Fenn specifically identifies early establishments near roads (Fenn 2000: 39). However he offers no discussion of their relationship with water. Yet many of these early churches are conspicuously near water. Llananno and Cefnllys have already been noted. Disserth (also spelt Diserth) was founded in emulation of the isolation of the Desert Fathers – the name "Llanbister church is situated dramatically above the local landscape."
In contrast to Llanbister, Disserth church sits down in the valley.
Llanbadarn-y-garreg churchyard is being eroded by the River Edw.

Llanbadarn-y-garreg is also located by the Edw. The name reveals this the *llan* by the *carreg* or rock; indeed one side of the churchyard is being eroded away by the water. Cregrina’s church has an incredible location on a cliff about thirty feet above the same river, just a few miles upstream. No prizes for guessing the first element of the place-name derives from *carreg* or ‘rock’, although the second element is now well-disguised – the original sense was ‘rock of Muruna’, presumably the founder of the church but about whom, like Anno, nothing else is known.
Standing at the edge of the churchyard at Cregrina – only a flimsy fence stands above the steep ‘crag’ down to the River Edw. Inside the attractive and whitewashed church is a twelfth century font.
Llanfiangel Rhydithon says it all, albeit in Welsh. This is the *llan* of the Archangel (Michael) at a ford (*rhyd*) over the Ithon. The first dedications to Michael were, at the time, ground-breaking. Previously all churches were dedicated to the founding ‘missionary’, though no one wrote down their lives so, after a few generations, they would mostly have been forgotten except for their name. Michael was the first ‘saint’ to whom churches were dedicated who was not originally a known human being; instead he was an archangel. Later he became most famously associated with dragon-slaying legends, but originally he was regarded as a psychopomp, a guide for the dead into the afterlife. This church, like several other early churches in Radnorshire, occupies a dramatic hilltop location. Being on top of a hill is something of a headstart for anyone aiming to get into Heaven, and is characteristic of early dedications to Michael. But what about Ryyditthon? Well, descend the churchyard path, cross the modern road and continue along the short lane which follows the same axis as the churchyard path and you will come to a small bridge over the river. Clearly this is the successor to the eponymous *rhyd*.
Early churches elsewhere

Top left: Llanfihangel Rhydithon taken from the same place as the photograph on the previous page but looking in the opposite direction towards the modern bridge.

Bottom left: Taken from near the bridge, looking back to the church. The building on the right of this photograph is the one on the left of the above image.

Right: Llanddewi Ystradenni church and Tomen Bedd Ugre.
Llanddewi Ystradenni church is not on a hilltop but on an alluvial terrace, the Ystradenni or ‘vale of Nynnid’. Llanddewi is the ilan of St David; but Fenn cautions that in Radnorshire this is likely to be a local lad, not the same saint who gave his name to the cathedral in Pembrokeshire and subsequently became the national saint of Wales. Less than a mile away is a substantial bridge over the Ithon; I suspect that the relationship between the early church and an important crossing is not coincidental as there are parallels in England, as previously discussed. Curiously, this bridge is reputed to be the burial place of a giant, known in Welsh as Tomen Bedd Ugre (‘grave mound of the Ogre’).

Overall, the earliest churches of Radnorshire are either on hilltops or close to important watercourse. Some, as with Llanfihangel Rhydithon manage to combine a hilltop location with a ford. Others, such as Cregrina, command a cliff-top over a river, near a convenient crossing place. This is however not the only relationship with water. For entirely practical reasons there is either a spring nearby (at Llanstephan it is in the churchyard) or a small brook running at the side of the churchyard.

But not all these springs are for everyday practical purposes as there are sulphur springs in the parishes of five of the oldest of the Radnorshire churches: Llananno, Llanbister, Llandegley, Glaswm (Blaen Edw) and St Harmon (Palmer 2007: 13–15). These are more likely to have been regarded as healing wells.

This begs the question as to whether the riverside locations are merely pragmatic and marginal, or are they older sacred sites? This is especially true of loops in rivers which are both more easily defended yet at the same time more prone to flooding. The Old English had a name for them: hamme, which has the sense of a tongue of land used as water meadow. A pertinent example is Evesham, originally the hamme (surrounded by the Avon) belonging to Eof, where a minster was founded by St Egwin in the early eighth century.

*Llanstephan church is situated high above the village, overlooking the River Wye. The ‘ditch’ running through the churchyard, shown in the photograph on the right, takes the water from a well arising in the churchyard (shown in a photograph on the following page).*

*Minsters and Valleys*
Marginal locations and sacred sites – whether pre- or post-conversion – are certainly not mutually exclusive. But the presence of an early church in a somewhat marginal location falls short of providing evidence for pre-conversion sanctity. However so many of Radnorshire’s early churches occupy dramatic locations that to exclude the possibility would be foolish. But I remain cautious. The correlation with watercourses seems to be more for pragmatic reasons associated with the movement of goods and people than any concerns for continuity or substitution.
Minsters and water elsewhere in Wales

Elsewhere in Wales there are early churches associated with loops. In the lower Wye valley the ruins of the twelfth century chapel at Lancaut are dramatically sited; the original church here was probably erected in the eighth century. To the north-west of Ross on Wye is the nineteenth century church at Hentland. This too is the successor to an early foundation and is on the outside of a large loop in the Wye.

Llanilltud Fawr, otherwise known as Llantwit Major, is the oldest of the churches in the Vale of Glamorgan. Llandaff, St David’s and Bangor are all early foundations at the side of rivers. All four are close to the coast. As ever, more work is needed to identify all the early foundations in the relevant parts of Wales and establish what correlations there are with watercourses.
Part Six

Widening the discussion

‘Geography and chronology are the two eyes of history’


This final section has been termed ‘Widening the discussion’. This is perhaps something of a misnomer, for two reasons. Firstly that the previous sections have included considerable discussion, and have taken a multi-disciplinary approach that is considerably wider than almost all prior research into related topics – specifically the emphasis on topography.

The more cautious may consider that the following discussions verge into the sort of speculative territory where evidence to confirm or refute is lacking. At this stage there is indeed sufficient evidence to confirm my suggestions, although I will leave it to others to consider whether there is sufficient evidence to refute them.

However I am raising these ideas less to establish their validity but rather as tentative examples showing how prior research has simply not looked at what evidence is ‘out there’. By extending the scope from scant documentary and archaeological sources to the vastly better survival of topographical evidence then the evidence for seventh and eighth century settlements increases immensely. I offer these provisional suggestions as to how this evidence might be interrogated. Other researchers may well come up with better or more fruitful questions to ask. My suggestions may indeed ask too much of the evidence and remain speculative. But bear with me. Look beyond knee-jerk refutations and join me in asking ‘Could this idea be proved, disproved or improved upon by looking in more detail at the topographical evidence?’
The selection of S-bends

Once I had started to look at the locations of early minsters in Wiltshire, Leicestershire and Rutland then something else began to stand out. A number of them were located in the loops of spectacular S-bends. Not all river courses offer these dramatic locations but, when they exist, they seem to have been chosen for the minsters.

Amesbury is one of these – and here the significance of the loops in the Avon seem to go back to the Mesolithic and the precursors to Stonehenge.

Barrow on Soar in Leicestershire is another example of an S-bend, albeit the loop to Quorn was made into a backwater by the construction of a new, straight, channel in the eighteenth century.

Barrow’s location in a dramatic loop in the Soar (prior to the eighteenth century ‘cut’ which straighten the main watercourse) is consistent with the place-name originating with bearu, which has the sense of a sacred grove (i.e. distinct from Barrow place-names originating in beorg and its cognates, all meaning ‘burial mound’). Interestingly, Barrow is the mother church of a chapel at Quorn, on the opposite bank of the Soar. The dedication at Quorn is to St Bartholomew is characteristic of English dedications honouring this temple-building apostle. According to Graham Jones there is a ‘statistically positive, geographical correlation’ between St Bartholomew dedications and ‘places whose names are indicative of non- or pre-Christian ritual worship.’ (Jones 2015: 27)

Although the church at Barrow is now dedicated to the Holy Trinity this clearly reflects a later rededication. As daughter chapels often share the dedication of their mother church (at least prior to later changes) then the original dedicatee at Barrow was plausibly St Bartholomew. This makes complete sense – the suppression of a bearu required the ‘best man for the job’, Bartholomew.

Despite the lack of evidence for a minster at Barrow on Soar, the place-name does shed light on the putative importance of minsters which are situated in dramatic loops of the

Top right: Amesbury.

Right: Barrow on Soar.
Widening the discussion

Top left: Avebury. Top right: Wilton.
Left: Great Bowden and St Mary in Arden.
Above: Warminster, Heytesbury and the Deverills.
river. Just because the *bearu* in the loop of the Soar at Barrow does not become a minster (although most certainly functions as a secular parallel to early minsters) does not mean that such dramatic loops in rivers were not considered ‘ideal’ places for both pre-conversion groves and their post-conversion successors.

Next best to a loop is a dramatic bend in the river. St Mary in Arden, near Great Bowden, overlooks where Welland turns from flowing east to flowing north (and recall that Arden is from *Arduuina*, ‘the place of a deity known as the high or exalted one’). Avebury is a short distance from where the south-flowing Winterbourne turns east and becomes the Kennet. Both the early Neolithic henge to the immediate east of the minster and late Neolithic Silbury Hill, overlooking the springs at the bend in the Winterbourne/Kennet, confirm that, as with St Mary in Arden, these sites were considered significant in prehistory. Warminster similarly overlooks a bend in the Wylie; significantly the upstream part was once called the Deverill.

Place-names reveal that Anglo-Saxons distinguished between different types of valleys, hills and other topographical features. If these places within the loops of rivers were special to Anglo-Saxons then we would expect them to have their own name. Indeed, meadows within the loop of a river (as distinct from straight stretches of meadow alongside a watercourse) were termed *hamme*. In contrast, the word *hyrne* seems to have been used for all sorts of tongues of land except those protruding into water. (Jeremy Harte, email January 2015.) Evesham is the *hamme* of someone called Eof, perhaps the founder of the early minster (now the parish church) sitting in the loop of the River Avon.

As previously discussed, minsters seem to ‘go with’ the upper reaches of river systems, where the course is more likely to be convoluted. Initially I began to think there was a correlation between early minsters and rivers whose name meant ‘wriggly’ or ‘crooked’. I have already noted that the early forms of Wilton suggest the origin of the name is *Wylye tun*, the settlement on the Wylye which probably is derived from the Welsh *gwili*, ‘twisting and turning’. Warminster may derive its name from a river known in Old English as *worian*, ‘wander’. And Eye Kettleby and Melton Mowbray are on the Wreake, from the Old Scandinavian *wreithk*, ‘twisted, crooked’. In both Norfolk and Berkshire there is plausibly evidence for lost river-names based on the word *gæge*, ‘the turning or wandering
one’ (Baker 2014: 69–70); one of Baker’s examples fits with where the River Wensum makes a large turn.

However there are two problems. The first is simply chronological. In the seventh or eighth century, when minsters would have been founded on the ‘Wreake’ the river was still known as the Eye; the change of name came after the Scandinavian settlement in the late ninth century. The second problem is simple logic. If, as I am proposing, there was a pattern for early minsters to be established on a one-per-upper-valley arrangement – and, specifically, a one for every upper valley – then every river would have its minster, whether its name meant ‘wriggly’ or not.

This choice of S-bends and similar locations is of course not restricted to Wiltshire and Leicestershire. Durham Cathedral, like Malmesbury Abbey, is situated on a cliff-top and almost encircled by the Wear. Note that a few miles upstream Finchale Priory is also in a loop (although, there are more dramatic loops nearby).
The origins of Durham Cathedral, as recorded by Bede, are straightforward. In 875, after the second Viking raid on Lindesfarne, Cuthbert’s body – already known to be uncorrupted nine years after his death – rested at several places in Northumbria until, in 995, he was moved to Durham. A new stone church was built, the predecessor of the present Cathedral, and Cuthbert’s remains were enshrined in 999.

The foundation legend for Durham Cathedral is far more colourful and involves the bones of St Cuthbert being carried around by an ox-cart until one day the ox lay down and refused to move. This was taken to be a sign that Cuthbert wished to be reburied at this place and so the cathedral was built to house his shrine. This legend stayed in circulation until the early modern era largely because of the popularity of inns associated with the droving trade being called the ‘Durham Ox’.

Perhaps it is just coincidence but the term geographers use for S-bends in rivers (albeit after they have been cut off from the main channel) is ‘ox-bow lake’. ‘Ox-bow’ is an otherwise archaic term, although clearly referring to the shape of the horns. Clearly the term ‘S-bend’ is a modern one, and only descriptive in a generally literate society. Quite plausibly it replaces the designation ‘ox-bow’ (used in a broader sense than modern geographers). Does this mean the Durham legend is a corruption of an earlier way of thinking about the distinctive shapes of rivers preferred as the locations for religious establishments? This is not provable, but well within the realms of how orally-transmitted lore evolves and adapts.

Early religious establishments along the Wye also seem to preferentially select S-bend locations. Most famously, Tintern Abbey is by a dramatic U-bend in the Wye – although strictly this is not evidence for my argument as the Abbey is outside the bend, not within it. In contrast the little-known church of St James at Lancaut (about five miles south of Tintern and two miles north of Chepstow) is dramatically sited above – and within – the next loop downstream in the Wye. The ruined twelfth-century church at Lancaut is the successor to earlier buildings probably going back to 625.

Chepstow is not incidental to this discussion as the place-name reveals this to be, literally, the ‘market place’. It is situated at the confluence of the Wye and Severn, paralleling early minsters-cum-trading places along the Sussex and Surrey coast. On the opposite bank of the Wye the ruined twelfth-century church at Lancaut is the successor to earlier buildings probably going back to 625.

Lancaut and the Wye valley. See also photograph on page 102. Note that Tintern Abbey is right at the top of this map.
the Wye is the Welsh port of Tidenham. The early forms of the name, such as Dyddanhamme, suggest this was a *hamme* (‘meadowland in a loop’) belonging to Dydda.

St Dubricius lived in late sixth or early seventh century. Interestingly, his Welsh name is Dyfrig, meaning ‘waterling’. Three churches founded by him (or perhaps a direct follower) sit in loops of the Wye: Welsh Bicknor, Ballingham and Hentland. Welsh Bicknor sits in a loop of the Wye forming a detached enclave of Monmouthshire in Herefordshire.
Hentland seems to take its name from *hen llan*, ‘the old enclosure’, presumably with the sense of ‘sacred place’. Nearby, and even closer to the loop of the Wye, is Bridstow which seemingly is ‘Brid’s [sacred] place’ – presumably a reference to Brighid, the pagan precursor to St Bridget, whose name means ‘the bright one’ and who was typically associated with high places. Just possibly the nearby place-name Ingstone originally had the sense of ‘fire stone’ (i.e. a stone used to strike fire) which would be consistent with fires sacred to St Brighid. However there are other ways of interpreting Ingstone, including ‘a stone dedicated to or depicting the god Ing (see Endnote 9).

**Shining serpents and wyrma-bends**

This section is decidedly speculative. My inspiration is a section of Clive Tolley’s book on *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic* in which he discusses ‘white’ as a synonym for ‘holy’. His examples include white loam being special significance in the sagas, notably the white mud associated with the spring of Uðr (Tolley 2009: 313; 319; 328). These are clearly aspects of Scandinavian culture which have few parallels in Britain.

The one clear parallel is that in Anglo-Saxon times the Virgin Mary was associated with white – depictions of her dominated by ‘heavenly blue’ come later. This same association with whiteness is retained by St Bridget/Bride. This infers that pre-conversion female saints, such as Brighid, manifested their holiness as whiteness.

Ennyn on Llyn Geirionydd, where legend says Gwion was transformed into Taliesin, the ‘Bright Browed’.
There is a popular assumption that Candlemas, celebrated at the beginning of February, is a continuation of a pre-Christian festival associated with Brigid, with the luminance of the candles being a celebration of her inherent brightness. Candlemas as now celebrated has borrowed from the Festival of Light in Nordic countries which is celebrated on 13th December. This was Christianised as St Lucia’s (or St Lucy’s) Day but the rites retain a number of pre-conversion practices. (See Catháin 1995 and Hutton 1996: 134–45 for detailed discussion of Brigid’s Night and Candlemas.) Whatever the origins of Candlemas and the Festival of Light, self-evidently the brightness (‘whiteness’) of the candle flames retains the sense of holiness. Indeed this can be recognised in the flames of the ubiquitous votive candles at shrines throughout the world.

Another parallel is the Old English word aelfscyne which, among other senses, seems to have breed a ‘poetic’ way of referring to whiteness (Tolley 2009: 379). Aelf is the antecedent of the modern word ‘elf’ but referred not to diminutive hominids but instead to a wider range of supernatual or otherworldly beings. Strictly we should think of them as preternatural (‘beside nature’) rather than supernatural (‘above the natural realm’) (see Trubshaw 2013a). This makes the aelf more akin to Irish sí and pre-Shakespearean concepts of fairies.

Scyne is the antecedent of ‘shine’ but has a sense of being deceptive – in other words, don’t trust superficial
appearances. In Old English scyne is most often used to refer to beautiful women. In other words, don’t be deceived by their apparent ‘glamour’! Indeed, the sense of aelfscyne is matched by the term ‘fairy glamour’, used in the seventeenth century (and perhaps more recently) to refer to the way in which fairies can shape-shift in an instant. However Tolley infers that aelfscyne also denoted holy.

Apollo and other sun gods are self-evidently both bright and holy. Other deities are bright and holy in more subtle ways – for example, Taliesin’s name means ‘bright browed’, from the Welsh ennyn, ‘bright, sparkling, being alight’. The tales of Taliesin include an account of King Seithennin (which combines seith, ‘seven’, with ennyni – an allusion to the Seven Stars – either the Pleiades or the Plough) who creates a giant mirror to reflect the stars. As the photograph on page 110 demonstrates, sunlight readily reflects off the surface of Llyn Geirionydd where legend says Gwion was transformed into Taliesin, the ‘Bright Browed’.

My contribution is that the sunlight reflecting off ‘holy’ water might be deemed aelfscyn. The sun reflects off water most dramatically at sunrise and sunset. But the direction of sunrise and sunset changes almost continually throughout the year. However standing in the middle of an S-bend would mean that the sunrise or sunset would reflect dramatically off some part of the watercourse (at least on days when there was little or no cloud).

Once religion took place in churches, with services held early in the mornings, then east-facing windows created their own sense of splendour. Architecture rather than topography produced similar drama. This was greatly enhanced once the apertures were glazed with stained glass. To this day the east window of the church is almost always the location for the most impressive stained glass.

Looking at the sun reflecting off an S-bend would be akin to looking at a scintillating golden ‘ox bow’. Or maybe something even more animated, such as a golden serpent. This is entirely consistent with St Patrick allegedly driving the serpents out of Ireland – and the similar activities of lesser-known missionaries elsewhere in the British Isles. Is this less a literal description and more a metaphor for the ‘re-purposing’ of pre-Christian sacred sites overlooking S-bends? Given the importance of wyrms in Anglo-Saxon thinking (see Trubshaw 2013b) I suspect that further research would reveal that serpentine watercourses are just one way in which wyrma manifested in the landscape.
Interesting the minsters at Norwich and Sockburn (County Durham) were both established in S-shaped loops. And both places are associated with dragons.

Richard Freeham has recounted the Sockburn lore:

In Durham cathedral library resides the Conyers Falchion, a broadsword supposedly used by Sir John Conyers to slay the Sockburn Worm. It is decorated with dragons, lions and eagles from the Conyers coat of arms and dates from the thirteenth century. Up until 1826 the falchion was used in ceremony to greet each new Bishop of Durham. As the new Bishop crossed the River Tees he was greeted by the Lord of Sockburn Manor on the Croft Bridge and presented with the sword. The Lord then said:

My lord Bishop, I here present you with the falchion wherewith the champion Conyers slew the worm, dragon or fiery flying serpent, which destroyed man, woman, and child; in memory whereof the King then reigning gave him the Manor of Sockburn to hold by this tenure, that upon the first entrance of every Bishop into the county this falchion should be presented.
The ritual dates from the time of Bishop Hugh Pudsey during the reign of Richard I (8 September 1157 – 6 April 1199). It is mentioned in connection with the death of Sir John in 1396. It was last performed in April 1826 when Dr Van Mildert, the last Prince-Bishop of Durham entered the diocese.

A manuscript kept in the British Museum runs thus.

Sir John Conyers, knight, slew the monstrous and poisonous vermine, wyvern, asp, or werme, which had overthrown and devoured many people in fight; for that the scent of the poison was so strong that no person might abyde it. And by the providence of the Almighty God, the said John Conyers, knight, overthrew the said monster and slew it. But before he made this enterprise, having but one sonne, he went to the church of Sockbourn in compleat armour and offered up his only sonne to the Holy Ghost. The place where this great serpent lay was Greystone, and this John lyeth buried in Sockbourne Church in compleat armour of the time before the conquest.

(Freeman 2006: 48)
If the manuscript is correct then the fight took place before 1066 and the falchion is far too young to have been the actual weapon used. Most probably the legend was augmented in the years after the falchion became a ceremonial item, possibly in emulation of the legendary worm-slaying at nearby Lambton.

Above: Snap the Dragon in Norwich museum.

Right: ‘The Archangel Michael destroying the dragon’; illustration by Ian Brown.
Less well-known is a third local example:

At Pollard’s Dene, the land held by the Pollard family at Bishop Auckland, a similar ceremony took place. The land was granted to them after a heroic member of the family slew a huge worm that haunted an oak wood. On entering his diocese for the first time the Bishop of Durham would be presented with the Pollard falchion and the speech:

My lord, I do humbly present your lordship with this falchion at your first coming here, wherewith, as tradition goeth, Pollard slew of old a great and venomous serpent, which did much harm to man and beast.

The earliest record of this ceremony is from 1399.

(Freeman 2006: 49–50)

So far as we know no dragons or worms were slain in Norwich. But ‘Snap Dragon’ was a firm favourite among the crowds who gathered to celebrate St George’s Day. He even survived the Reformation; his last incarnation – an elaborate ‘tournay horse’ – is preserved in the museum.

Oxford, one of the early minsters in the Thames valley, is allegedly the location of a fight between two dragons recounted in the Welsh legend of Llud and Llevelys. While Oxford is in a loop-like confluence I would urge caution as there must have been many places where watercourses were crossed by oxen. While the toponym ‘ox ford’ is now indelibly associated with that Oxford, when the Welsh tale was composed it was more likely to have referred to a now-forgotten location much further west. Indeed it almost a ubiquitous place-name, like ‘green hill’, which a peripatetic storyteller could use in the expectation that, wherever he told the tale, the audience knew of an actual example nearby.

Legends and folk customs do not offer conclusive evidence that S-bends were once thought of as wyrmas. But the evolution of topographical feature into first a supernatural phenomena and then highly-distorted legend and custom is far from improbable. The term S-bend is self-evidently anachronistic. The designation wyrma-bend better reflects the aelfscyne of the ennyn at these locations.
While considerable further research is needed to add any substance to this speculation, I include it here as a way of suggesting how these dramatic landscapes might have been regarded as holy in ways which are only partially matched by the east windows of churches, while wyrmas – emitting the breath of life – have become invisible as a result of subsequent conflation with demonised fire-breathing dragons and serpents.

**Sound as well as sight**

Valleys limit what we can see – assuming no obstructions then the skyline will be the watershed with the next valley. In recent decades the availability of computer modelling has made ‘viewsheds’ a commonplace illustration in archaeological papers.

But valleys do more than limit what we can see. They also limit what we can hear. Catherine Frieman and Mark Gillings have suggested that sound of bells – especially how far their sound carried – helped to define early Christian land units. They suggest using GIS to construct ‘soundsheds’. Travellers would get prior warning when approaching the likes of mid-Saxon settlements from the barking of dogs and the warning cries of other animals disturbed by their presence. As they got closer the sounds of people shouting to each other or using tools, such as a blacksmith hammering on an anvil, would provide further confirmation. Furthermore, travellers would be able to smell the smoke from fires and forges, and the inevitable odour of dung heaps. In contrast to modern preoccupations with vision, traditionally our experiences of places were much more multi-sensory (Frieman and Gillings 2007). In the narrower valleys these sounds and smells might have been more noticeable than in wider glens and where the river meandered.

Widening the ‘perceptions of place’ even further, a traveller would also become aware than even the breeds of dogs changed; if not from valley to valley, at least from region to region. Online lists of modern dog breeds reveal that a very high proportion are named after places, or are strongly associated with places. Alsatians, Highland terriers and St Bernards are clear examples, but there are many more. Modern breeds may only date back a few hundred years but they are the continuation of a very long tradition – in part a consequence of inevitable inbreeding – which would mean that each kin group co-evolved with a distinctive breed of hounds. Assuming, as seems entirely reasonable, that kin groups and valleys were once co-terminal, then this means too that the dogs too
tended to be place-specific. Topography determines more than we might initially suppose!

**S-bends versus confluences**

When I started on this study I expected to find plenty of instances of minsters located near to river confluences. Peter Ackroyd has been moved to write:

> The Thames has many tributaries. There is good reason to honour them. The gods were meant to dance at the confluence of waters. The mingling of the tributary and the main river was deemed to be sacred. The site of entry was a holy place guarded by the three-seated goddesses who have been given the name of Matres. There is a significant clustering of cursus sites, of presumed Neolithic date around the confluences of the upper Thames. So the meeting of the rivers is an occasion for spiritual renewal. (Ackroyd 2007: 43)

Such rhetoric may well reflect history as it has been distorted in popular culture. But, I suggest, the deities Ackroyd invokes are false gods. Their genesis seems largely to result from Richard Morris’s pioneering work published in 1989, *Churches in the Landscape*, and John Blair’s subsequent study of the Thames valley (1996). Subsequently such locations are seen by many as all-but characteristic of monasteries and other holy places.

Morris should not be blamed for this over-simplification. He recognised that confluences were the nearest inland counterparts to coastal sites cut off by the tide – such as Lindisfarne – and gives three examples:

- Jarrow (on the confluence of the Don and the Tyne)
- Leominster (on the confluence of the Kenwater and Lugg)
- Ripon (close to the confluence of the Ure and Skell).

Top right: **Jarrow**. Right: **Leominster**.
He then lists what he regards as next best option, sites enclosed by loops of rivers and promptly offers twice as many examples (Morris: 1989: 110–1). However this list is more than a little optimistic:

- Emstrey, south-east of Shrewsbury (in a minimal loop)
- Kirkham (doesn’t seem to be near a river)
- Lancaut (in a dramatic loop)
- Little Ouseburn (doesn’t seem to be near a river)
- Melrose (near river but not in a loop)
- Sockburn (in a loop)

Having ‘depleted’ Morris’s list, note that the early sections of this study have added many other examples in Leicestershire and Wiltshire. Whereas I can only offer two additional examples of minsters at confluences, Malmesbury and Wilton.

In my opinion Morris over-egged confluences while failing to recognise that loops were the more ‘diagnostic’ topographical criteria. I see this simply as ‘honest error’ by someone pioneering a specific field of study. However this imbalance has become something of a ‘truism’ outside academe. Indeed, up until late 2014, I too had no reason to quibble this. However the previous discussions have revealed that there are only two minsters near confluences in Leicestershire:

- Aldeby, near the confluence of the Sence and Soar
- Rothley, near the confluence of the Rothley Brook with the Soar.

Neither of these are within the ‘tongue’ of the confluence however, merely nearby.

In Rutland the possible early minster at Hambleton would have been dramatically situated within the confluence of two branches of the Gwash. The absence of any other significant confluences means that this can be the only example.
In Wiltshire, the religious foundations at Malmesbury and Wilton have prominent situations within their confluences. In addition, Marlborough is to the west of the confluence of the Kennet and Ogbourne, while Calne is located where several streams flow into the Marden, though none of these could be regarded as prominent confluences.

If we look just outside the study areas, then there are minsters at four Thames confluences. John Blair has discussed Bampton, Eynsham and Oxford (Blair 1996; 2005: 257) while Adam Stout’s research on the origins of Reading Abbey suggests there was a nunnery at the confluence of the Thames with the Kennet by the ninth century (pers. comm. February 2015). Not far from the border with Leicestershire, Repton is near to, but not within the confluence, of the Trent and the Dove. The Ordnance Survey maps show that the church was originally on the southern bank of the Trent, which has subsequently moved.

Confluences were important as ‘tribal centres’ as well as for religious establishments. A prime example is Scone in Scotland. This is near the confluence of the Almond and Tay rivers, at a place where the Tay is the fordable (although navigable all the way to the sea from there). Just downstream is the confluence of the Earn and Tay, with the dramatic Moncrieffe Hill dominating the confluence. Perth lies in between the Almond and Tay. Scone was the meeting place of the tenth century kings of Alba and continued in importance until recent times (see Endnote 10).

A somewhat similar relationship of Doomster Hill, a ford and church (with royal cemetery) exists at the confluence...
of the Kelvin and Clyde at Govan (Driscoll 2004: 81; 89). Similarly again, on the Isle of Man the seat of governance, Tynwald Hill, at the settlement named after the adjacent church of St John’s is within the confluence of two branches of the river Nebb, crossed by several bridges and a still-extant ford.

Scone, Govan, Tynwald Hill and Wilton have two things in common – they are located in confluences and were places of royal power. At Govan and Scone the ‘palace’ was on the opposite bank to the confluence, although at Govan a pre-Christian ritual site was located within the confluence. This means the parish of Govan straddles the Clyde.

Rutland’s only confluence was the ‘tribal centre’ from Iron Age through to early Anglo-Saxon times and known latterly as Hambleton. It too was once a royal seat of power – that of Rota, the early Anglo-Saxon king who gave his name to Rutland; there is some evidence to suppose this was an early minster, as discussed previously. Malmesbury was not of royal standing, although its status was sufficiently high to be regarded as ‘off limits’ to both Mercian and Wessex armies.

Blair’s work in the Thames valley and Morris’s broader but pioneering work has led to a presumption that confluences feature prominently in the location of minsters. Instead, we should think of regard confluences as royal or exceptionally high-status sites which needed churches. The Thames seems less than typical – it is longer than most English rivers, with more tributaries. It also has an anomalous socio-political status. Looking at its rivals for length – the Warwickshire-Bristol Avon and the Trent – there are very few religious sites at the confluences. Could this be because there were fewer ‘royal’ (or, at least, para-regal) sites which needed the prestige of being located at confluences?

Or should we instead simply look to the geomorphology of the valleys and accept that such locations were too susceptible to flooding and even the movement of river channels? After all one of the more speculative suggestions for the name of the Trent is that it derives from a Brittonic word meaning ‘trespasser’ – and the movement of the watercourse near Repton is evidence for that process in the last millennium, while excavations ahead of gravel extraction at Hemington have revealed paleo-channels going back over ten millennia and three bridges from the eleventh century onwards, none of which would have spanned the modern channel.

Widening the discussion

Repton. The church is at the side of the former course of the Trent, not its current channel.
Confluences were seemingly the ideal – and idealised – location, but one which was not necessarily attainable. Clearly there are fewer confluences in rivers than there are bends and loops, so pragmatism must have played a part. The high incidence of minsters at confluences in the Thames valley is not matched on comparable rivers. Whether this is because of pragmatic and geomorphological constraints or because there was little need for such ‘idealised’ high-status locations requires further consideration.

The presumed association between monastic sites and confluences is the exception not the rule with the early minsters discussed here. In contrast, S-bends and river loops predominate. Taken at face value, the topographic evidence is that early minsters are most likely to located on the banks of S-bends, with loops being second choice and confluences back in third place.

Underneath the chancel at Repton is an Anglo-Saxon crypt, constructed as a mausoleum for the Mercian kings.
Further research

This study was instigated by the parallels between Leicestershire, Rutland and Wiltshire. The association between early minsters and river valleys – especially the upper reaches – seems clear. The distribution of these early minsters strongly suggests an ideal of ‘one per valley’, inferring (although not confirming) an original pays (or land) which straddled the watercourse. Significantly, in all the study areas, there seems to have been an early minster in every upper valley.

In contrast, the cluster of minsters about four miles apart along the Soar in Leicestershire – from Aldeby through Aylestone, Leicester, Rothley and Barrow on Soar – suggest an entirely different arrangement. Indeed the topography is different too. With the exception of Aldeby the Soar was probably never fordable (except during unusually low water levels) so the riverside location is presumably associated with either bridges (plausible at Leicester if a Roman bridge survived) or ferries. Furthermore, only Aldeby seems likely to have been an early minster – the other settlements all come into prominence from the eighth or ninth centuries.

While more research is needed, while many minsters are located in close proximity to rivers (almost certainly because of the practical benefits for moving goods and produce) there seems to be a difference between the topography of earlier and later establishments. Inevitably there will be some ambiguities – Aldeby and Barrow on Soar in Leicestershire are among them – but nevertheless the topography of the locations offers evidence which has survived better than for most other sources.

These topographical correlations seemingly identify the oldest minsters – those of seventh and eighth century foundation – when documentary sources are lacking and place-name evidence offers no chronology. Archaeological evidence is also useful, when available, as at Market Bosworth. But typically the evidence is either chance finds or developer-funded evaluations. Only at Foxley has there been a significant dig at a riverside minster site, although there is a possibility that Eye Kettleby might have been an early minster.

Clearly further work elsewhere in Mercia is needed seeking similar correlations. Even within Leicestershire, Rutland and Wiltshire more attention needs to be given to

- parishes straddling watercourses;
- the relationship of minsters to fords and later bridges;
- the identification of hundred-hide parochiae;
- one minster per valley: wold or valley: downland pays/lands.

Ideally the unpublished 1:10,000 reference maps at the British Geological Survey could also be utilised to help understand soil types associated with early settlement sites.

Although this study is entirely provisional, further work should allow the more confident identification of early minster sites and, just maybe, some idea of the pays or parochiae for at least some of them.

As I hope this provisional study has amply demonstrated, it is not appropriate to look at the topography of minster sites without taking into consideration available archaeological,
documentary and place-name evidence. However, as archaeological and historical sources for the seventh and eighth centuries are generally too poor to shed any clear light, then more importance than has hitherto been customary needs to be given to topographical evidence.

Despite modern development and other changes, the topography is usually little changed since Anglo-Saxon times. Where buildings, changes to river courses, and such like have occurred then older maps together with basic common sense will usually enable the older geomorphology to be guessed with sufficient accuracy.

‘To catch a thief, you must think like a thief’ opined G. K. Chesterton through his priest-detective alter ego Father Brown. This epigram can readily be paraphrased about understanding Anglo-Saxons. The wealth of descriptive topographical terms in Anglo-Saxon place-names has long been recognised, providing some indication of the sophisticated ways of thinking about the landscape at that time. Despite the deep-rooted paradigms which privilege documentary sources and material culture, there is no reason why modern research should not adopt similarly sophisticated topographical mindsets. Quite simply, aim to ‘think like an Anglo-Saxon.’ More especially look at and experience the landscape like one.

Were Anglo-Saxons perpetuating a much older interest in confluences?

The Winterbourne (right) and Samborne or Horslip Brook (left) converge to the west of the modern village and Neolithic henge at Avebury. The trees in the distance obscure sight of Windmill Hill, the location a causewayed enclosure predating the henge.

Both streams normally only flow in the first few months of each year. They would have been wider and more lake-like when these monuments were constructed. Plausibly there could have been beaver dams as well as human intervention in watercourses of this landscape.
Acknowledgements

My interest in Leicestershire minsters was awoken a few years ago by Mark Carne’s research into Aldeby. Without his lectures and brief published summary I would not have recognised the parallels with Foxley in Wiltshire. Researching the putative similarities of these two locations led directly to the drafting of this wider study.

This broad approach would not have been possible without the detailed researches of John Blair, John Davey, Simon Draper, R.W.D. Fenn, Peter Foss, David Parsons, J.M.A. Pitt, Patrick Sims-Williams and others mentioned in the main text. After this work was initially drafted an exceptionally useful study of early churches in Leicestershire by Graham Jones was published.

In approximate chronological order, invaluable assistance has been provided by several others. Neil Finn generously showed me around the Eye Kettleby excavations back in 1996 and recently shared his unpublished interpretations. My understanding of Wiltshire parishes has been greatly assisted by John Chandler’s contributions to the Wiltshire Community History web site and the compilers of the county’s Victoria County History. Michelle Axe shared her unpublished research with Gill Smith on S-bends in rivers. Jeremy Harte drew my attention to John Davey’s research in Dorset and clarified the sense of hamme. Nigel Pennick read an early draft and offered numerous suggestions, mostly relating to the locations of religious establishments on S-bends, especially along the Wye valley. Helen Wells kindly provided information on the 2007 trial trenches at Aldeby. Adam Stout made extensive comments on an earlier draft and pointed out several weaknesses in my attempted arguments. Most helpfully he drew my attention to Phillip Masters’ thesis on West Sussex minsters.

Published writings, personal emails and conversations with Jill Bourn, Paul Bowman, Richard Knox, Peter Liddle and Steve Pollington over many years have informed a number of my ideas, although they are generally unaware of how my thoughts have taken flight – and may well regard them as ones of fancy rather than ones they wish to share.

Janet Bord kindly corrected some of the mis-spellings and other errors in the section on Radnorshire.

To all these people, and a great many more, I owe a great debt of thanks.
End notes

1: My juvenile ‘paradigms’ for combining landscape, history and folklore were in large part derived from Geoffrey Grigson’s inspirational book Looking and Finding (Phoenix House 1958); I still own the copy given to me in 1964 for my tenth birthday. Re-acquainting myself with this book in recent years was rather like reading a ‘road map’ of interests which dominated my later life.

2: Nigel Pennick notes that this seven-mile separation equates to the eleven-kilometre spacing of circa tenth century church/monastic settlements in Bohemia. This distance was called the Raste with places called Rastenburg at 44 kilometre distances (further details in Gerlach 1940: 259–69; 302–11).

3: Framland hundred seemingly takes its name from the Old Scandinavian lund, meaning a ‘grove or small wood’ (Bourne 2003: 24). Fraena’s lund was presumably the meeting place of the hundred; a wood two miles to the north of Melton Mowbray is still called Great Framlands. However, as discussed on page 85, there is a possibility that this is a Scandinavian corruption of a by-then-obsolete ‘Frana (or Frama) land’, contiguous with Rota’s land (modern Rutland).

4: There are no examples of Eccles place-names in Leicestershire or Rutland (the near-homophone Egleton is from the personal name Ecgwulf not a corruption of eccles). However Eccles are found in other territories colonised during the seventh century. The long-established scholarly belief is that Brittonic (‘Celtic’) speakers adopted the Latin ecclesia and this usage was kept up by English speakers (Blake 2011: 287, citing Blair 2005: 27). However more recent scholarship argues that Eccles is perhaps not from ecclesia but from a Brittonic river name (Padel 2013: 27–30).

5: Peter Jordan’s research with the Khanty of western Siberia (Jordan 2001) includes a brief remark to the effect that when their wooden riverside winter huts need replacing then the new hut is built upstream of the previous one – if only by a few metres. Not to do so would be considered ‘unlucky’. While Jordan offers no further explanation, this is presumably part of a cosmology which – for entirely practical reasons – associates upstream with abstracting clean water and downstream with disposing of foul water.

Daniel Melia has discussed the complex status of water in medieval Irish legal disputes, usually regarding quarrels between mill owners. He tentatively concludes that upstream water was thought of as ‘nobler’ or more ‘senior’ (Melia 1982: 376 fn 2). Whether Anglo-Saxons had similar sentiments remains an open question.

Jordan’s remarks put me in mind of the probable sequence of buildings at Eye Kettleby (Leicestershire), where the oldest structures are downstream of the later settlement (including the deserted medieval village) and also the sequence of two Anglo-Saxon settlements at Avebury (Wiltshire), on the eastern bank of
the Winterbourne. The earlier of these underlies the area currently used as the main visitors’ car park (and probably extends further) while the middle Saxon settlement site was discovered during the construction of a new school in 1970 and falls just within the sub-rectangular eponymous burh.

Interestingly, faint earthwork traces of a deserted medieval settlement probably from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries survive just to the north (and thus further upstream) of the burh. Furthermore, the small Roman town associated with Silbury Hill is about a mile downstream. If the earliest Saxon settlement was intentionally placed upstream of the Roman town then the successive upstream progression at Avebury spans four known settlement sites and a period of about a thousand years.

In 2007, prior to development, no less than nineteen triall trenches were excavated on the land adjacent to the church footings at Aldeby. These established that pre-modern gravel extraction and later commercial use had resulted in the destruction of all archaeological evidence. No evidence of Anglo-Saxon or medieval activities were discovered. My thanks to Helen Wells for sending relevant information from the Leicestershire Historic Environment Record.

These ideas were put forward in a lecture to the Leicestershire Fieldworkers group about ten to fifteen years ago. Sadly my notes do not record either the name of the speaker or the date. I would be most grateful if anyone who knows these details could contact me. So far as I am aware the speaker never published his thoughts; the remainder of this footnote is a lightly edited version of my notes made shortly after the talk.

The place-name used to refer to the 836 king’s council, Craeft, fully supports the derivation of the much later Domesday name, Crebre, from ‘craeft’ (machine) and ‘bre’ (hill). The topography of Croft Hill was decidedly curious as there was a dramatic rock cleft through which the River Soar flowed. It’s quite a modest-sized river at this stretch so the cleft was not especially large. But after heavy rain it would have blocked the flow of water, causing dramatic flash-flooding upstream. A glance at the contour lines shows this would have typically backed up almost to the line of the Fosse Way about half a mile away. At sometime someone created a ‘bypass’ to feed a water mill. Quite plausibly an Anglo-Saxon water mill predates the 836 council and this would be fully compatible with the ‘craeft’ name. (The first watermill in England seems to be that at Tamworth; the millstones were a gift from Charlemagne to Ofa so must predate Ofa’s death in 796). Regrettably, at some later date (perhaps after the invention of gunpowder) the cleft was destroyed to minimise the flooding.

Curiously, a previous king’s council in 803 is recorded as taking place at ‘Clofesho’, which means ‘cleft promontory’. A number of places have been proposed for the site of Clovesho, including Brixworth in Northamptonshire. But the striking topography of Croft means that this could also be a contender for the ‘cleft hill’ toponym. If so, perhaps Clovesho was the name before the ‘craeft’ (water mill) gave it an even more distinctive appellation.

Croft was certainly more interesting back then than it is now – half a hill with one of the deepest man-made holes in Europe ‘replacing’ the other half. Far from being regarded as a sacred centre, it is the nearest source of roadstone for the whole of south-east England.

Chichester, along with most other English places referred to as caester by the Anglo-Saxons, offers little evidence for settlement in the sub-Roman period. The evidence generally suggests a handful of houses, generally interpreted as evidence for farming among the ruins rather than the manufacturing and trading
associated with urban centres. The turning point seems to be when *caestra* are ‘reclaimed’ by the early Church as models of Jerusalem and become ‘episcopal minsters’ and economic centres. (Blair 2005: 246–7, 251–2, 260). This interest in *caestra* is much more ideological – spanning both mythic perceptions of Jerusalem and Rome – than pragmatic.

The concept of emergent towns, such as the revived *caestra*, in the mid-Saxon period is complex. They are much less urban than later conceptions and are yet to fully evolve from politico-religious sites to primarily economic centres (Blair 2005: 262–4). The rising importance of the *cathedra* situated at the *caestrae* in due course distort or displace the status of older minsters in the vicinity.

Within the study areas Leicester and Chichester fit quite neatly into Blair’s account.

9: In addition to providing me with the examples associated with St Dubricius, Nigel Pennick also passed on his local knowledge of Bedfordshire. In loops of the upper Great Ouse are Buckingham (Radclive), Lathbury and Pavenham. The present churches are twelfth and thirteenth century and further research is needed to establish if they were founded considerably earlier. He also notes that Norwich Cathedral is in a bend on the Wensum and Bungay church is on the neck of a loop of the Waveney (email January 2015).

Similarly Steve Marshall drew my attention to Riveaulx and Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire where both the locations and the names themselves are ‘watery’ (email January 2015).

10: The Moot Hill (often corrupted to ‘Boot Hill’) still survives at Scone. ‘Moot’ is the Old English word for meeting. This has interesting parallels in place-names as it seems that the Old English term for confluence was *ea mot*—literally the ‘meeting of water’. (Although, pedantically, this term is probably more Anglo-Scandinavian than Anglo-Saxon (Pantos 2004: 193).) Whether the adoption of *eu mot* was influenced by the tendency for *mots* to be held at such locations is, pardon the intentional pun, a moot point.
Sources

Maps

The principal research for this article used current Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 maps accessed via www.bing.com/maps. The maps included here are based on maps.google.co.uk as these make it easier to see the watercourses (although at the expense of offering no contour information). I have added the locations of churches from OS maps and, where necessary, the aerial photographs accessible via Google maps.

The historic maps of Wiltshire reproduced here were sourced via freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~genmaps/genfiles/COU_Pages/ENG_pages/wil.htm and history.wiltshire.gov.uk/community/

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