The Especially Sacred Grove:

Six Hills and Vernemetum, Leicestershire

The Twilight Age
Volume Seven

Bob Trubshaw

Little is known about the Roman small town on the Leicestershire:Nottinghamshire borders except its name: Vernemetum. This means the 'Great or Especially Sacred Grove' and tells us there was a regionally – or perhaps even nationally – important Iron Age ritual site in the vicinity.

In trying to understand more about this Iron Age site Bob Trubshaw also looks at the likely Anglo-Saxon successor, the hundred moot site at Six Hills a mile or so to the south.

This detailed look at these places is based on current academic research combined with twenty-five years of fieldwork and personal research. By looking closely at these places he also helps us to understand more clearly Anglo-Saxon ritual sites elsewhere.

This extended essay both draws upon and supercedes Bob Trubshaw's previous publications about Six Hills and the Leicestershire Wolds.

About The Twilight Age series

Not that many decades ago English history between the fifth the 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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The Especially Sacred Grove:

Six Hills and Vernemetum, Leicestershire

Bob Trubshaw

Heart of Albion

The Especially Sacred Grove: Six Hills and Vernemetum, Leicestershire

Bob Trubshaw

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Top: *The Six Hills Hotel, September 2002. The A46 runs on the other side of the buildings.*

Above: *The Durham Ox Hotel from the A46; photograph taken in the late 1940s.*

Preface

Anyone using the A46 between Leicester and Newark will have driven past the Six Hills Hotel. Many of those drivers will know that the road is also known as the Fosse Way so may have given a moment's thought to Roman soldiers who once yomped their way where the dual carriageway runs now. Few will take much notice of the unpresupposing modern buildings which make up the Six Hills Hotel, or the small area of woodland adjacent.

Only the most well-informed local will be aware that no less than eight parish boundaries come together – like spokes on a wheel – at this place. This is unique in England and strongly suggests that all eight were once part of a larger land unit. To this day the area is known as the Leicestershire Wolds – or, locally, just 'the Wolds'. About ten villages and hamlets can be found around the 'rim' of this wheel – predictably enough occupying the spring line below the higher ground of Six Hills itself.

Only a very small minority of drivers on the A46 will be aware that a mile or so to the north, where the otherwise straight road forms an uncharacteristic shallow 'S'-bend (a deviation arising after a pagan Anglo-Saxon cemetery was established straddling the original Roman road) the large arable field on the west conceals the remains of Roman small town. This town was known as Vernemetum – the 'great or especially sacred grove'. Clearly this was no ordinary Roman small town. Something in the vicinity was exceptional enough to give it this distinctive name.

In this essay we will not be speeding past Six Hills and Vernemetum on the dual carriageway. Instead I want to explore in some detail the landscape, its place-names and any other clues that can help us to discover just why this sacred grove might have been so special. But first of all we need to find out where the grove was, and how big it might have been. And the outcome of those enquiries require us to take a fairly fresh look at both Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon sacred sites.

For fairly obvious reasons we can only understand this example of an Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon sacred site in terms of other examples in England.

The A46 in August 2009, looking north to the Willoughby over-bridge; Nottinghamshire is just over the skyline.. The site of the Anglo-Saxon cemetery discussed on pages 24–5 is around the over-bridge amd probably continues to the left of the bend where the vehicles are.. The Roman small town of Vernemtum was in the field on the left, continuing southwards out of shot.. Six Hills crossroads and hotel is less than a mile south of where this photograph was taken.

But, by the end of this essay, I hope you will also agree with me that we can only fully understand these other examples if we have a clearer understanding of what was so special about this particular sacred grove. So this essay will frequently alternate some decidedly 'close-up' parochial perspectives with broader 'deities' eye-view' positions. To smooth over the worst of these disjunctions I have separated four of the 'close-ups' as appendices.

This essay is the culmination of twenty-five years of pondering about Six Hills and Vernemetum. I moved to Wymeswold, the largest of the Wolds villages situated on the western edge just above the Soar valley, in October 1987. Over the next few years I explored the area extensively on foot and by bicycle. I also co-ordinated a small amount of archaeological fieldwalking in the immediate vicinity of Wymeswold village (Trubshaw 1993). By 1995 I had published the first of a number of articles which

attempted to look in more detail at the origin of the Wolds (Trubshaw 1995; 2001; 2005; 2006; 2008).

This publication is an attempt to bring together key ideas from these previous essays and, more importantly, to revise them in the light of recent academic research into the Anglo-Saxon era. Most specifically the work of Sarah Semple and her colleagues has changed the way we should think about Anglo-Saxon 'shrines'. People whose knowledge of 'Dark Age paganism' is based on books published in the 1960s and 70s will find many of the assumptions made by this earlier generation of authors have not stood up to closer scrutiny. To avoid this work become bogged down in a detailed critique of outmoded ideas I have concentrated instead on summarising the current – and still-evolving – thinking.

However none of this recent scholarship has been directed at Six Hills or Vernemetum. Much of what I write must be treated as 'extrapolation' and speculation rather than 'fact' – although I hope I provide enough evidence for my speculations to be more than mere fantasies! Much of the time I am attempting to pose interesting questions – but ones which are currently unanswerable.

Ideally I would like to generate sufficient interest in Six Hills and Vernemetum for other people to consider doing geophysical surveys and trial excavations. However, as I moved from Leicestershire to Wiltshire towards the end of 2011 my interests are now mostly focused on the prehistoric and Anglo-Saxon activities in my new 'back yard' here at Avebury.

At the time of writing a three-year interdisciplinary project called 'Landscapes of Governance' is using archaeology, place-names and written sources to research early medieval assembly sites in Britain. I await with interest both their own investigation of Six Hills and the more general understanding of assembly places that this project will supply.

My knowledge of Leicestershire archaeology has benefited greatly from discussions with Richard Knox, Peter Liddle and Richard Pollard. I am especially grateful to Jill Bourn for many discussions about place-names over the last twenty years. Also to Paul Cullen who imparted much useful information during our only meeting. Any understanding of Leicestershire place-names owes a major debt to the impressive scholarship of Barrie Cox. None of these experts will necessarily agree with all my interpretations however.

As it is not possible to reproduce modern Ordnance Survey maps without paying a royalty (not really an option when a publication is free to download!) then I recommend using the Bing maps website (www.bing.com/maps) as there is an option to display the current 1:50,000 OS map. These online maps will provide more than enough detail to make more sense of the sketch maps in this essay.

Bob Trubshaw
Avebury, Wiltshire
March 2012

Preface to 2016 edition

Since this work was first published in 2012 many of the ideas discussed in this study have been explored in greater detail in other publications forming The Twilight Age series. However these other works also cite the specific discussions about Vernemetum and Six Hills. I have opted not to make numerous changes to the text. Instead, note that my discussions of *hearg*, *hoh, weoh* and related words have been greatly extended in Volume Five, *Rethinking Anglo-Saxon Shrines*. This work also adds another *hoh* place-name to the periphery of Vernemetum – Roehoe Wood, just to the north at the side of the Fosse Way. The name probably means 'boundary *hoh*' which is apt as the Leicestershire-Nottinghamshire boundary is nearby.

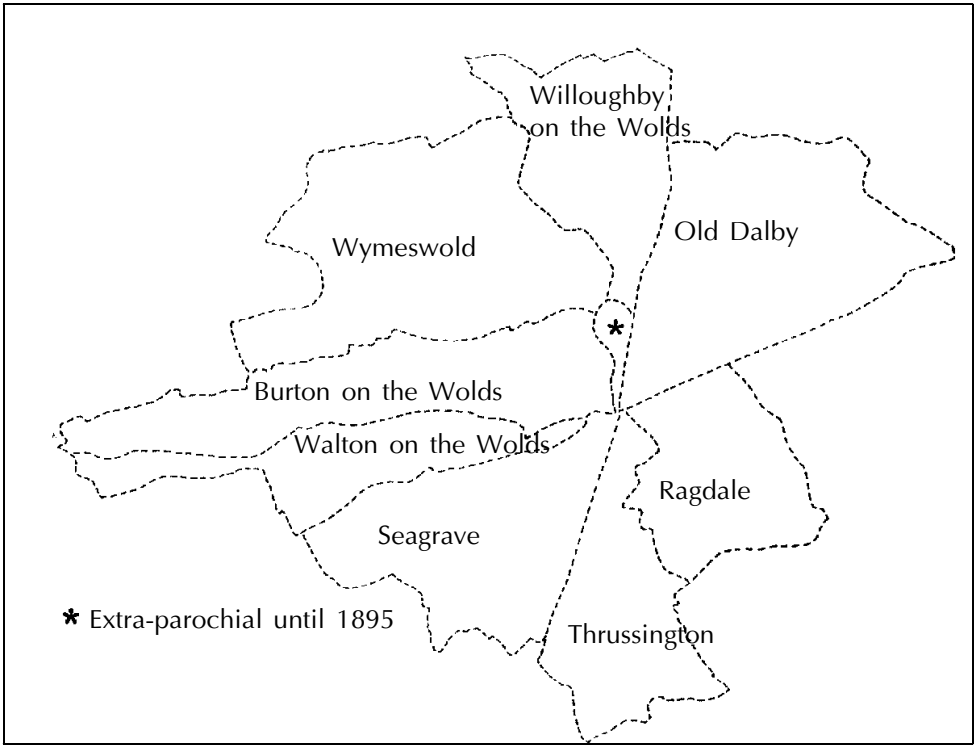
Rethinking Anglo-Saxon Shrines also discusses Harrow Farm near Elmstone Hardwicke in Gloucestershire. Most intriguingly, Deerhurst Walton is to the west and The Hoo to the north-west. These place-names mimic the relationship of Harrow Farm at Six Hills to Walton on the Wolds and Hoton.

If you have not already read *Rethinking Anglo-Saxon Shrines* then I recommend reading this work first and then 'updating' the ideas from that more detailed study.

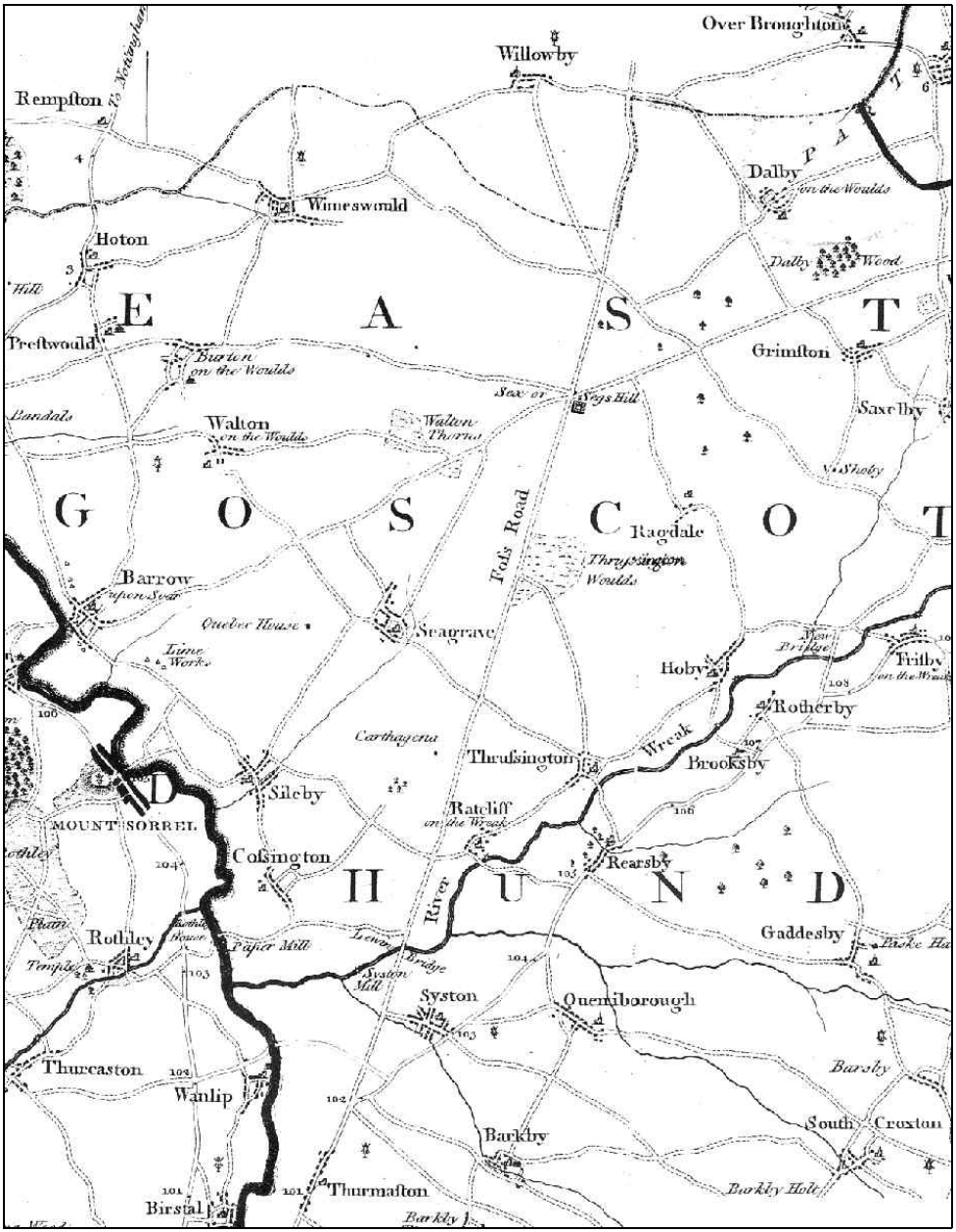
Bob Trubshaw
Avebury, Wiltshire
March 2016

Understanding the north Leicestershire Wolds

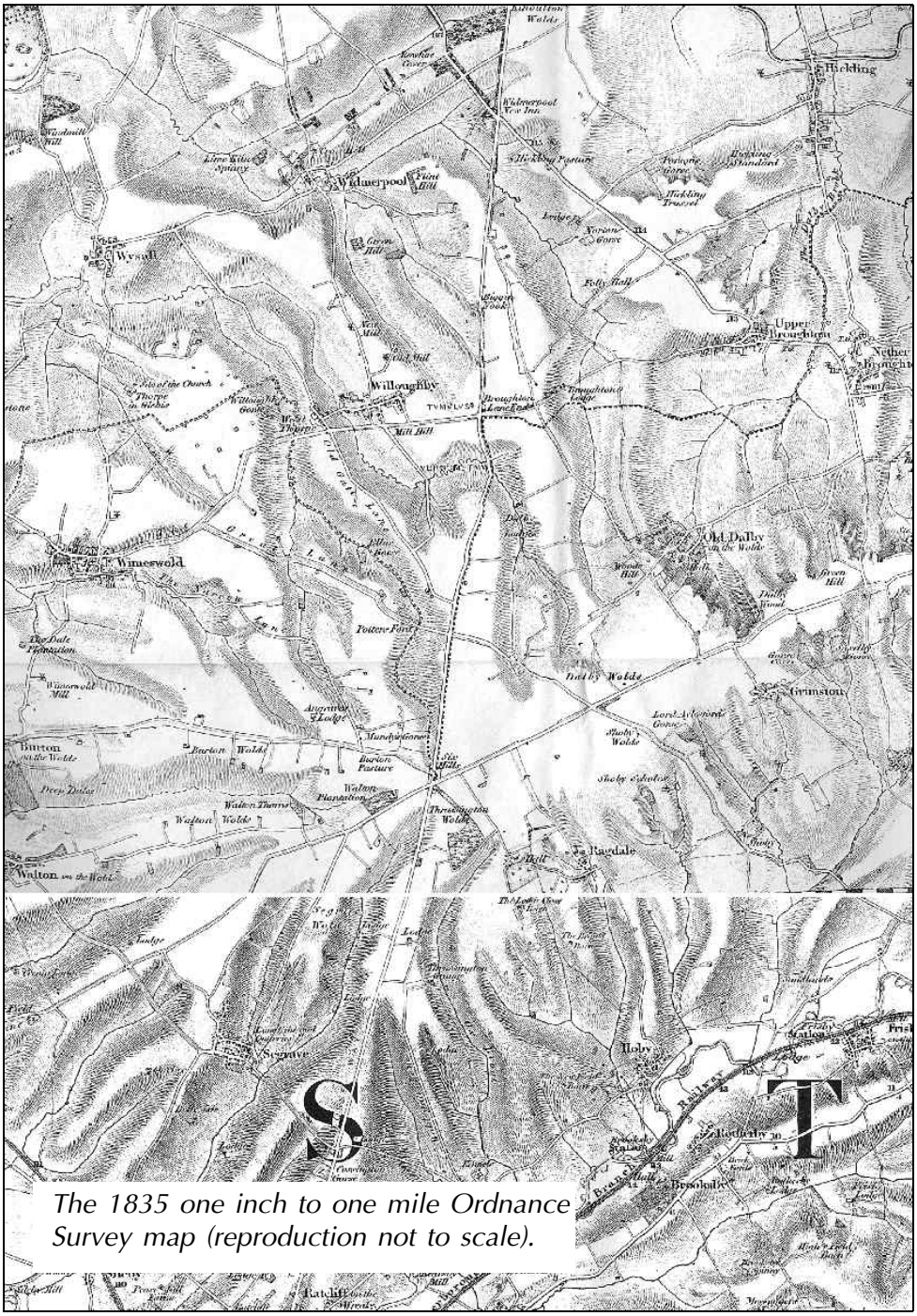
Harold Fox first drew attention to the unusual wheel-like arrangement of eight parishes which make up 'the Wolds' at the north of Leicestershire (Fox 1989). The 'hub' of this 'wheel' is a Roman crossroads. The Fosse Way (modern A46 from Leicester to Newark) runs roughly north-south. Crossing this is a 'saltway' used as a road by the Romans which runs along the escarpment above the Vale of Belvoir in the east down to the River Soar at Barrow on Soar, then on to the Roman town discovered near Thringstone in the 1990s.



The eight parishes comprising the Wolds. (After Fox 1989)



Part of John Prior's map of Leicestershire published in 1777.



The 1835 one inch to one mile Ordnance Survey map (reproduction not to scale).

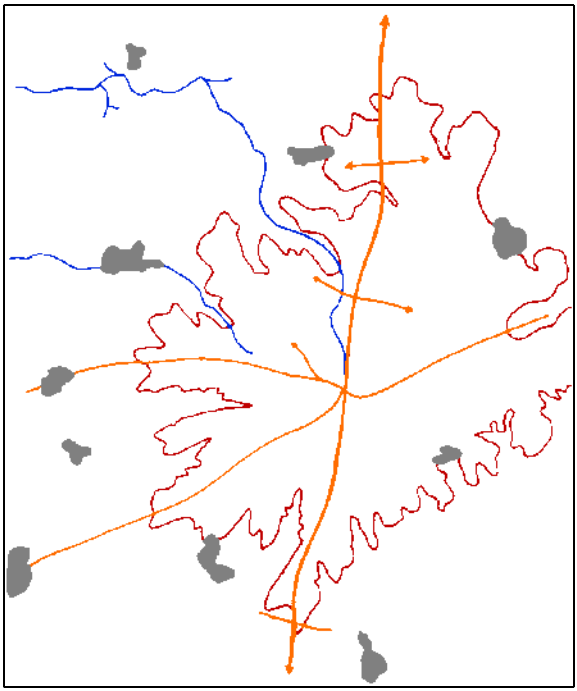
The crossroads at the 'hub' of this 'wheel' of parishes has been shown on Ordnance Survey maps for the last 100 to 150 years as 'Six Hills'. However, despite the name 'Six Hills', there are no hills and the area is plateau-like. The earliest known reference is in 1118 when it is 'Seggeswalda' (Cox 2005: 94). Only by 1701 has it become Seggs Hill and a 1777 map shows it as 'Sex or Segs Hill'. 'Sixhill' is first found in 1796; the 1835 one-inch Ordnance Survey map gives the form as 'Six Hills'. This seems to be the first time the plural 'hills' rather than singular 'hill' is used.

A single topographical unit

The Wolds form a distinct topographical unit with the boundary approximately following the 300 feet O.D. contour line (the nearest equivalent on modern metric maps is the 90 metre contour), with the land rising to a spot height of 118 metres (about 360 feet) at Six Hills. Two watercourses arise near Six Hills and flow to the west and north-west. The westerly one, flowing through Wymeswold, is known as the River Arrow at its upper reaches and the River Mantle by the time it reaches the village of Wymeswold. Note that the appellation 'river' is somewhat grand as this is a seasonal brook which dries up during most summers. The north-west flowing watercourse is the Kingston Brook, which flows towards Wysall and forms the historic boundary between Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire. It seemingly takes its name from the settlement where it meets the River Soar, the small village of Kingston on Soar.

All the nucleated villages of the Wolds are situated on or below the 300 feet contour. Some of these villages (such as Wymeswold and Seagrave) are situated on small areas of sand and gravel. However the predominant soil type of the Wolds is boulder clay.

Topographically the Wolds are quite distinct from the surrounding valley areas – the Trent valley and Vale of Belvoir to the north, the Soar valley to the west and south and the Wreake valley to the east. The Fosse Way links the Vale of Belvoir and the Trent valley to the north with the Soar valley to the south. The Roman road-cum-saltway connects with the Soar valley to the south-west and, to the north-east, it follows the crest of the geologically and topographically distinctive marlstone escarpment above



The topography of the Wolds showing major roads (orange), the River Mantle and the Kingston Brook (blue), the 300 foot contour (brown) and the modern settlements (grey). (After Fox 1989)

the Vale of Belvoir. This saltway also links, via a route through Eastwell, Waltham on the Wolds and Wymondham, to the Iron Age and Roman iron working and temple site at Thistleton on the border between Leicestershire and Rutland. Along with Rockingham Forest, the Weald and the Forest of Dean, Goadby Marwood was one of key iron extraction and smelting sites in Roman Britain. This would have been an exceptionally important source of wealth and the route through Six Hills and on to Barrow on Soar would have been the shortest one to navigable waterways; in addition there could have been some overland trading of iron ingots and goods at Vernemetum.

The Roman roads define the north-south and approximate east-west axes of the Wolds and the crossing of these is at the centre, both geographically and conceptually. The presence of one or more Roman roads cutting through an identifiable land unit, rather than forming a boundary, is indicative of a pre-Roman origin for the land unit. This certainly seems appropriate here as the topographical unity of the Wolds would have been recognised in the Iron Age.

The River Mantle west of Wymeswold, December 2007.

The distinct topography of the Wolds means that Neolithic and Bronze Age people would have 'acknowledged' the area but the near-absence of evidence for pre-Roman activity in the Wolds suggest that the area was largely ignored in prehistory.

What is a *wald*?

The name 'the Wolds' derives from the Old English *wald* which means 'woodland, tract of woodland, or high forest-land' (Bourne 2003). Old English *wald* is cognate with Old High German and Old Norse words from same origins with the sense of 'thickly wooded' and 'upland woodland'. Old English *wald* was used to denote a number of upland wooded areas, such as the Cotswolds, the Lincolnshire Wolds and the Weald. 'Cotswolds' derives from *Codasweald* (possibly Cod's *wald*) and this combination of personal name with *wald* is shared with Wymeswold (Wigmund's *wald* – note that Wigmund would have been pronounced 'Wymund') and can be compared to the formation of 'Rutland' from Rota's

land (although Old English *land* has the abstract sense of 'domain' rather than a topographic description).

'Wigmund's wald' originally referred not a settlement but an area of land. Perhaps this was a parish-sized unit of land – although parishes were still a long way in the future when the name 'Wigmund's wald' was coined. More probably in the early Anglo-Saxon era 'Wigmund's wald' referred the whole extent of the eight parishes we now think of as the Wolds. By the eleventh century units of about six or eight parishes were known as a 'hide' or 'tithing'. Such land units could have been created at any time but where there are clear topographical boundaries – as with The Wolds – then they could easily pre-date the Anglo-Saxon occupation.

Indeed, support for Wymeswold originally denoting the whole of the Wolds comes from an alternative origin for the name. Rather than being derived from 'Wigmund's *wald'* it might be from *weoh munds wald,* i.e. the '*wald* of the *weoh* (pagan shrine) mounds', conceivably referring to now-lost mounds at or near to Six Hills (as will be discussed later, quite probably a *hearg* or 'harrow' – another Old English term for a pagan ritual site). The Old English word *weoh* also gives Wysall, the next village to the north of Wymeswold, and other place-names such as Wyfordby (the settlement at the ford with a pagan shrine) to the east of Melton Mowbray. (Appendix Four lists and discusses other examples of *hearg* and *weoh* place-names.)

Weoh munds wald is clearly contemporary with the time when the area was likely to have been heavily wooded. This origin for the place-name fits in well with all eight parishes of the Wolds once being known as 'Wymeswold', as the eponymous mounds would have been at the centre. Later in this article I discuss further the 'Wigmund *wald'* or '*weoh munds wald*' origins.

From Iron Age grove to Roman town

However Wymeswold is not the oldest place-name within the Wolds. It is predated by Vernemetum, the name of a Roman small town on the Fosse Way near the northern edge of the Wolds. It is ten miles – presumably a day's march – from both Leicester to the south and from Margidunum (just west of modern Bingham) to the north. Although no archaeological investigation has been conducted, the surface distribution of pottery

indicates Vernemetum was larger than a marching camp and probably a small town (Peter Liddle, pers. com.).

The name 'Vernemetum' means 'great or especially sacred grove (*nemeton*)' and undoubtedly takes its name from an Iron Age shrine. Evidence of Iron Age settlement has been recovered ahead of residential developments in both Wymeswold and Burton on the Wolds. In both cases the sites also revealed evidence for early Roman occupation, suggesting a fairly smooth social transition in this area at the time of the Roman occupation.

The presence of the town at Vernemetum would have influenced agricultural practice in the surrounding area. So, although we might expect an upland area of heavy clays to be 'marginal', in practice fieldwalking by members of the Wolds Historical Organisation has recovered small quantities of Roman grey ware from nearly all ploughed fields in the vicinity of Wymeswold (Trubshaw 1993). Such small but widely dispersed grey ware is a result of manuring scatter (i.e. rubbish heaps, mostly of organic waste but including broken pottery, are intentionally dispersed over arable fields to maintain fertility). Such manuring scatters of pottery imply that the fields were, at least at times, arable rather than pastoral (there is no advantage from putting valuable manure on pasture fields). This in turn suggests that the Romano-British farmers were capable of ploughing the heavy clays. So this scatter of greyware is indirect evidence that the so-called 'heavy' plough (Latin *carruca*) was used in the Wolds.

The identification of three Romano-British settlement sites within a mile of the modern village of Wymeswold (Trubshaw 1993) is akin to the pattern of dispersed settlement recovered for south Leicestershire (Knox 2004). The only evidence for farming practice in the Wolds is a fragment from a first century cheese press recovered prior to a 'rescue' excavation by Leicestershire Museum Service on the eastern edge of Wymeswold village in June 1990; sadly this fragment was lost before being properly recorded. Cheese (perhaps made from sheep's rather than cow's milk) would of course have been an excellent product to supply to Vernemetum.

Reverting to woodland

The presence of Vernemetum presumably distorted farming practice in the vicinity during the first three centuries after the Roman occupation.

The Wolds Historical Organisation field walking team in action for the first time March 1988.

However without the 'pull' of the town needing a variety of food supplies then by the early fifth century farming practice probably changed to that most easily sustained on upland clay – stock rearing, perhaps based on woodland grazing rather than open grassland.

Evidence from both the Trent valley and south Leicestershire suggests that in the early Anglo-Saxon era there were fewer farmsteads than in the preceding Roman era (Knox 2004; Knight and Howard 2004). Those settlements that remained were on the soils most suitable for arable farming. This infers that by the fifth century the Wolds, with predominately heavy boulder clays, were not as heavily farmed as in Roman times. Even if the Wolds remained an important resource for livestock rearing, the population would be substantially less than that associated with an arable agricultural regime.

All the evidence suggests that the Roman heavy plough (*carruca*) ceased to be used in Britain between the fifth and eighth or ninth centuries, so the heavy boulder clays of the Wolds would become difficult to use for arable. Cattle, pigs, sheep and goats can all be successfully grazed in open woodland as well as on grass. Presumably all these species were kept, along with horses on pasture, but the only livestock on the Wolds for which we have direct evidence in the early Anglo-Saxon era are geese, as the Goscote Hundred, which met at Six Hills, takes its name from 'goose shelter'. Geese are also consistent with, although certainly not restricted to, woodland pasture and an overnight shelter to protect them from foxes – and, presumably, wolves – would seem to be essential.

Although little is known for certain about the post-Roman era, with the demise of Vernemetum the Wolds would almost certainly have become comparatively depopulated. Whether or not the Wolds had retained significant woodland during the Roman era is debatable. The widespread

Above and next page: *The area to the immediate west of Six Hills. Photographs taken from approximately the same viewpoint, looking in the same direction, in 1991 and 2007.*

manuring scatters near Wymeswold suggest little woodland, but few parts of the Wolds have been systematically fieldwalked, so the evidence from the one area investigated may not be representative. Whether or not woodland cover was extensive during the Roman era, almost certainly large parts of the Wolds reverted to woodland in the immediate post-Roman decades. Without heavy grazing arable land reverts to dense woodland within two generations, with birch woodland and dense undergrowth within twenty years and oak woodland (and less undergrowth) following on. In practice the woodland would have almost certainly been grazed, at least seasonally, and perhaps parts managed for coppicing.

Intriguingly since the 1980s the management of the area to the immediate west of Six Hills (approximating to the former extra-parochial area) has been managed to encourage woodland. The photograph taken in 1991 shows an Ordnance Survey datum ('trig point') about to be subsumed by trees. Clearly such a datum would only be erected where there were

extensive views and predates any of the woodland visible in the 1991 photograph. The photograph taken in 2007 is from approximately the same position and direction, revealing the speed with which woodland can develop. The clearings reflect active management of this woodland for pheasant rearing and shooting.

While we can only speculate about the extent of woodland on the post-Roman Wolds, there is one thing we can be certain – by the time the Anglo-Saxons were giving names to localities then the Wolds were a *wald* – upland woodland. Quite when such names were being coined is less certain, but there is every reason to suppose that the Leicestershire Wolds, along with the Lincolnshire Wolds, the Cotswolds and the Weald, are all comparatively early appellations.

A cluster of watery sacred sites

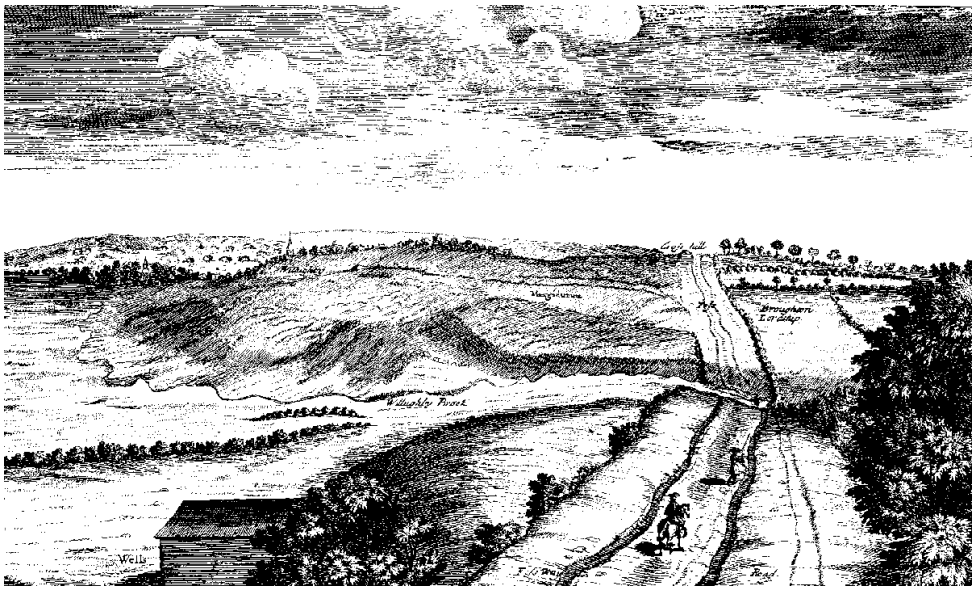
However the oldest-known place-name in the Wolds predates *wald* by at least five hundred years. As already noted, 'Vernemetum' means 'great or especially sacred grove (*nemeton*)' and takes its name from an Iron Age shrine. We know little about *nemetons* (more correctly, the plural is

nemeta) except that place-names related to the word *nemeton* occur as far west as Galicia in Spain, as far north as Scotland, and as far east as central Turkey (Green 1995). In Britain the place-name is most commonly found in Devon and Scotland. The word is related to the name of the Nemetes tribe living by the Rhine between the Palatinate and Lake Constance in what is now Germany, and their goddess Nemetona – the 'Goddess of the Sacred Grove' (Dowden 2000). Sadly, so far as I am aware, no academic has devoted a detailed study to the various *nemeta*.

Iron Age ritual sites are known to favour watery locations and possible confirmation that *nemeta* were watery comes from the excavations at Bath. The Roman name, *Aqua Sulis,* commemorates the goddess Sulis. But other goddesses were also invoked at Bath – including Nemetona.

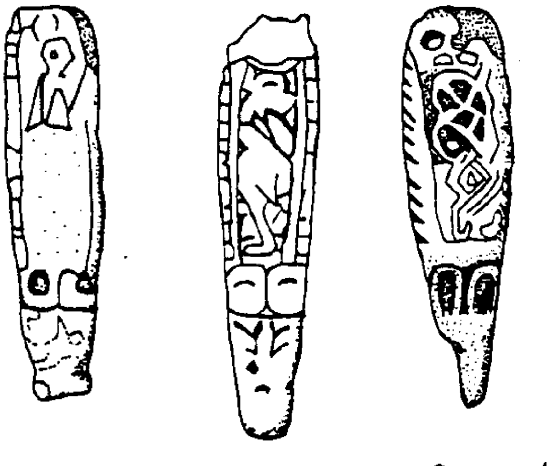
The recovery of sixteen or seventeen ninth- or tenth-century Anglo-Saxon strap-ends within a few metres of each other near Vernemetum by metal detectorists during the 1980s and 90s suggests a Christian cemetery associated with an Anglo-Saxon church – most probably a minster. This would accord with William Stukeley's 1724 account of a church 'on top of Wells':

> After some time I perceived I was upon the spot, being a field called Henings, by which I suppose is meant the ancient meadows. This is upon the brow of the hill overlooking Willoughby, rising between [Old] Dalby lordship and playing in pretty meanders along a valley between cornfields, with a moderate water unless raised by rains. Here they said had been an old city called Long Billington [Vernemetum]. It is often called the black field in common discourse, from the colour and excellent richness of the soil, so that they never lay any manure upon it. Here is a place called Thieves and on the other side of the valley a place called Wells near where now a barn stands, and all this length the said city reached. There was a church on the top of Wells but the city was mostly on Willoughby side, for the land on the other side in Broughton lordship is poor, whilst this is luxuriant to the last degree. So that they affirm a farmer once happening to set his sheep-fold here, it rotted the corn upon the spot, and often he has been forced to mow the blade before it spindled (in their way of talking).
>
> (Stukeley 1724/1776)



William Stukeley's pre-1724 drawing of 'The Wells' and Vernemetum.

The area where the Anglo-Saxon strap-ends were recovered from was muddy and seemed to be associated with a natural spring. Was this the 'watery' Iron Age *nemeton*? If – as seems probable – the Iron Age shrine evolved into a Roman temple (as with Thistleton on the Leicestershire:Rutland border and other examples nationally) was it subsequently reused as an early Christian site? Early Christian sites in 'watery' locations have been discussed by John Blair, Keith Briggs and James Rattue (Rattue 1995; Blair 2006: 472ff; Briggs 2007: 13 and *passim*). First impressions would suggest that such Iron Age to early Christianity continuity is a distinct possibility. In his *Homilies* Wulfstan condemns the cult of wells and trees as a breach of the faith received at baptism. Ælfric had said the same in the 990s in his homily *On Auguries:* 'Some men are so blinded, that they bring their offerings to an earth-fast stone, and to trees, and to well-springs, even as witches teach.' The earlier penitentials had expressed concern about vows being made 'at trees, wells, or stones, or at chapels (*cancelli*), or anywhere except at God's church'; they wanted to curtail the extension of Christian rituals to illicit sites. (Harte 2008: 22) Was this continuity of use an explicit recognition of the sanctity of the pagan site (as suggested by Aelfric's late tenth century edict against



Some of the strap ends from Vernemetum. Each one is just over an inch long. Copyright Leicestershire Museums and Arts Service

making offerings to 'some earthfast stone or tree or well-spring')? Or was it convenient reuse of a suitable Roman ruin? Reusing the remains of secular Roman buildings for early churches is relatively common – a similar continuity from the Roman occupation into the Anglo-Saxon era has been discerned at Stanford on Soar, where the church seems to be on the site of a Roman villa. Similar evidence has been found at Southwell Minster and, nearer to the Wolds, at Flawford (Notts) and Ab Kettleby (Leics). Likewise the earliest version of St Nicholas church in Leicester incorporated parts of the Roman baths, presumably including the part that survives as Jewry Wall.

To my knowledge there are few early minsters on the site of a Roman building where the location is accurately known and *which have not been built upon* by a medieval church or other structures, making survival of the earliest phases unlikely and any detailed archaeological investigation improbable. As such the location where the strap ends were recovered is of special importance. While later in this essay I argue that there is unlikely to be continuity with an older Iron Age shrine, this nevertheless remains a possibility. The absence of any archaeological evaluation of this site in the twenty years since its discovery is remarkable. An understanding of this site would be of national rather than regional significance.

Ab Kettleby church, just to the east of the Leicestershire Wolds. Roman tesserae *and tiles have been discovered in the churchyard, strongly suggesting that the church is on the site of a Roman building.*

A cluster of pagan shrines

The Wolds is remarkable for the place-names which suggest several pagan shrines. In Wymeswold parish the name *Horrou* is recorded in 1212 and *Harrowfeld* appears in 1412; both are probably from *hearg* (Cox 2004a; 2004b). *Hearg* is usually interpreted to indicate an Anglo-Saxon pagan 'temple', typically in a hill-top location (such as Harrow on the Hill in Middlesex) (Wilson 1985, 1992; Gelling and Cole 2000).

There are two options for the Wymeswold 'Harrow'. One that a *heaeg* gave its name to the pre-Enclosure Arrow field which straddled the River Mantle which, significantly, is known as the River Arrow as it passes through the Arrow field. This probably accounts for the post-Enclosure Harrow Farm nearby on the Burton Road. However Arrow is a British (Brittonic) river name. So was the Mantle previously known as the Arrow along its length? If so, the Arrow great field takes its name from the watercourse running through it and the *hearg* derivation is spurious.

The possible Alfletford *over the River Mantle (or Arrow), now a culvert.*

Also in Wymeswold an *Alfletford* is recorded in 1292 and *Alfleethorn* at some time in the thirteenth century (Cox 2004a; 2004b). The Old English word *halh*, meaning a 'jutting-out nook' is fairly common in Nottinghamshire place-names (for example, Arnold from *earn* 'eagle' and *halh* 'nook') and such nooks are often near a parish boundary (Paul Cullen, pers. comm.). However Barrie Cox interprets the Wymeswold examples as from a more obscure Old English word, *alh* (meaning 'heathen temple') with *fleot* ('stream') and 'ford' or 'thorn' respectively. The location of this putative 'temple ford' is not known but has to be associated with the River Mantle. The Mantle is seasonally dry and subject to flash floods after heavy rain. This is consistent with Old English *fleet* – a term also used for tidal areas – which is cognate with Modern English 'fleeting' to describe something transitory and fast-changing.

The *alh* of *Alfletford* and *Alfleethorn* may be an alternative names for the *hearg*, or the *alh* and *hearg* may have been distinct (though presumably in

Great Framlands wood, Scalford, above the Wreake Valley, March 2008.

quite close proximity). *Alfletford* compares closely to Wyfordby (*weoh* or *wig* is Old English for 'pagan shrine', so Wyfordby is 'the settlement near the ford with a shrine') to the east of Melton Mowbray. The same Old English word *weoh* also gives its name to Wysall, immediately to the north of Wymeswold.

The combination of Vernemetum, Wysall, plus a *haerg* and/or *alh* towards Six Hills is a most unusual survival of evidence for three or more pagan shrines in close proximity, and all the remarkable that similar names are known fairly close by at Scalford to the north of Melton Mowbray (where a *Harrowe* is mentioned (Cox 2002: 340) and Wyfordby. Later in this essay the possible links between the Wolds and the Scalford, Melton and Wyfordby will be discussed.

The *Harrowe* at Scalford is unlocated but topographically the most likely location is the ridge where the Framland Hundred met at *Fraena's lundr* to the north of Melton. As Bourne notes (2003) in the Germanic homelands *lundr* denotes a sacred grove, although in Old English the sense is usually of a distinctive clump of trees, without a sense of ritual use. The Framland

moot site is near the south-western edge of Scalford parish and may be the same as the unlocated *Harrowe*.

Notably there are no examples of hundred names formed from *hearg* – such as Harrow Hundred. So, even if what we think of as Six Hills was known as a *hearg* site this was not sufficiently unusual to function as the name of the hundred, so an unprepossessing *gos cot* ('goose shelter') was picked instead. This strongly implies that hundred sites were *typically* at *hearg* sites, so a 'Harrow Hundred' would be tautological. Either most hundreds were at *heargs*, or the use of site for a hundred moot gave it something of the same 'sanctity' as a *hearg*.

Although there is no evidence that Old English *graf* ('grove') denoted a *sacred* grove, the origin of Seagrave, at the southern 'rim' of the Wolds, is an unusual construction from *seah graf* or 'pool grove'. A 'watery grove' conforms to expectations for Iron Age ritual sites, as with the presumed watery site for the *nemeton* at Vernemetum. If the unusual construction of *seah graf* is tentative evidence that this was not a 'normal' *graf* (although perhaps no longer an active sacred site by the time the appellation was coined) then this pool would, as with Vernemetum, have been used ritually for many centuries straddling the pre-Roman to post-Roman eras. The survival of Celtic words in minor toponyms in Seagrave (discussed below) and the adjoining parish being Walton (which, among other senses of Old English *walh*, denotes the settlement of the British-speaking people) strongly suggest cultural continuity in close proximity to *seah graf* over this same time span. Although no more than speculation, the pool grove which was unusual enough to gives Seagrave its singular name might have been a locally-significant sacred site for the *walh*, although probably ceasing to have a ritual function fairly early in the Anglo-Saxon era as the *walh* either left the area or became absorbed within the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture.

If the strap ends at The Wells are evidence for the location of the *nemeton* – and I question this in the next section – then Vernemeton was a watery sacred place. The *alh fleot* was certainly watery, as was the *weoh* at Wyfordby. If Six Hills was a *hearg* then this is notable for being near the source of both the River Arrow/Mantle and the Kingston Brook. If the *seah graf* was sacred then this would add a fifth example of a watery sacred site in this area of Leicestershire. However, unlike Iron Age sacred sites, Anglo-Saxon shrines are not typically 'watery'. So is this collection of Anglo-Saxon toponyms which – with varying degrees of confidence – are

Harrow Hill, Long Compton, Warwickshire, July 2008.

associated with Anglo-Saxon pagan sites best thought of as indirect evidence of a cluster of *Iron Age* sacred sites which maintained their status throughout the Roman era? Although there is currently no way of confirming or denying this speculative overview, recent research on one aspect of Anglo-Saxon sacred sites, the *hearg*, tends to support such enduring continuity.

Rethinking *hearg*

As already noted, *hearg* is usually interpreted as a pagan 'temple', typically in a hill-top location. However Sarah Semple has looked in more detail at Anglo-Saxon *hearg* sites and concluded that 'What is profoundly apparent is that the concept of the *hearg* needs to be rethought – *hearg* was never applied to a Germanic or Anglo-Saxon pagan temple structure. The *hearg* seems to have constituted a naturally significant location that formed a place of gathering and ritual for many generations over a long period of time.' (Semple 2007).

Semple specifically argues that *hearg* sites are spread over several hectares where there is a conspicuous absence of settlement evidence, although good evidence for Iron Age and Roman ritual activity within the area free of settlement. So, contrary to the assumptions made so far in this article, could the 'especially sacred grove' which gives its name to Vernemetum be separate from the area occupied by the Roman town? In other words, did the town take its name from a *nearby* landmark – i.e. the well-established *hearg* near modern day Six Hills – rather than from a shrine within the town itself? And, if so, did the early Anglo-Saxon 'minster' associated with the strap ends occupy a different site to the *nemeton* and instead make practical use of a suitable secular Roman ruin?

By way of answering these questions consider one consistent feature of Iron Age shrines – they occupy a position on the boundary of an Iron Age land unit. Thistleton, on the western boundary of Rota's *land*, is an excellent example, as Phythian Adams has argued convincingly that the modern boundaries of Rutland closely follow Iron Age boundaries (Phythian Adams 1977; 1980). So we would expect the Iron Age grove which gave its name to Vernemetum to be on a boundary. The Roman town is indeed adjacent to the northern boundary of the Wolds. So perhaps the *nemeton* on the 'rim' of the Wolds and the *hearg* near the 'hub' were distinct, meaning there were two notable Iron Age ritual sites within a few miles. Surviving place-name evidence suggests that *nemeta* were distinct from *heargs* but this might be simply because only one place-name has persisted. So far as I am aware *nemeta* were not built on in Roman times (apart from a shrine and buildings directly associated with it), so they are indistinguishable from *heargs* in this respect.

On the basis of Semple's research it seems more probable that the *nemeton* which gave its name to the Roman town of Vernemetum did not become part of the town. Instead I propose that the 'Especially Sacred Grove' became the area of land near Six Hills later termed a *hearg* by the incoming Anglo-Saxons. Based on parallels with other *hearg* sites this must have been are area of several hectares. Indeed, if the 'Especially Sacred Grove' (*Vernemetum*) was bigger than the typical sacred grove (*nemeton*) then it would have covered tens of hectares. (I look further at the significance of the location of the 'Especially Sacred Grove' in Appendix Three.)

The assumption that a *hearg* is a tribal cult centre is fairly inescapable. Here onamastics and place-names come to our aid. The Old English word

ge is cognate with Continental *gau* which seem to equate to Latin *pagus* which takes us into the sense of the modern word 'pagan'. Indeed Philip Shaw, in his recent study of pagan goddesses in the early Germanic world, presumes that each *ge* had its own deity (Shaw 2011: 67–8). *Ge* is found in several Essex place-names (Vange, Margaretting, Ingzatestone, Fryerning and Mountnessing) and also in Kent (Eastry, Sturry and Lyminge); other examples are Ely (Cambs). The county name of Surrey denotes such a local territory, as do the Rodings of Essex. However, to my knowledge, there are no examples of *ge* in the place-names of Leicestershire or Nottinghamshire.

Here we might need to look instead at more local cult centres associated with *–ing* and *–ingas* ('the people of') place-names. In Wiltshire Woden (*weoh don*) Hill at Avebury would seem to be cult centre of the Canningas tribe. Andrew Reynolds (Reynolds 2004: 173) has suggested that after the Romans departed the Canningas established control of an area approximately twenty miles across, from the former town of Verlucio (near modern Calne) in the west, to Cenutio (to the east of Marlborough), up to the dramatic ridge above the Thames valley associated with Chiseldon, Wroughton and other ridge-top settlements to the south of Swindon, and to the south as far as the eponymous All Cannings and Bishops Cannings (near modern Devizes). Waden Hill is both central to this area and immediately adjacent to the small Roman town recently discovered near Silbury Hill (Leary and Field 2010).

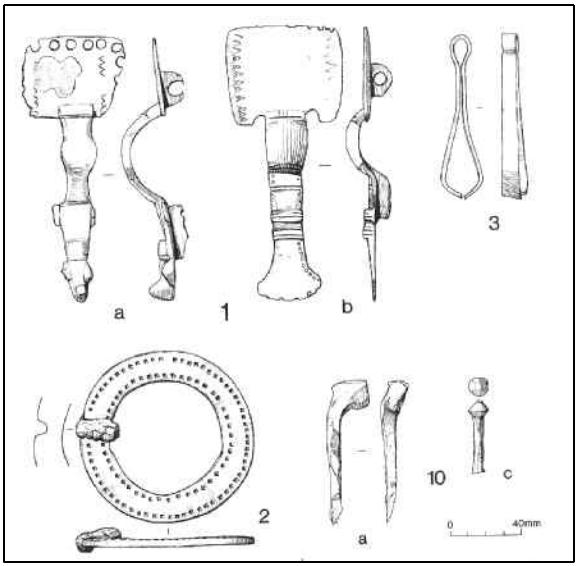
However *–ing* and *–ingas* place-names are curiously absent around the Wolds. Thrussington is misleading as this is a corruption of Thorstein's tun and Cossington is also derived from a personal name not from an *–ing* (Bourne 2003). To find an example of an *–ing* or *–ingas* place-name we need to look as far away as Castle Donington and Ruddington (both Nottinghamshire). Certainly in the vicinity of the Walds there is no cluster of *-ing* or *-ingas* names comparable to east Leicestershire and Rutland. (Empingham, Loddington, Lyddington, Ridlington, Saddington, Skeffington, Tur Langton – a corruption of Turlington – and Uppingham). This might be in part because of the re-naming of the Wreake valley following Viking settlement. It might also in part be because all these other Leicestershire and Rutland examples are habitative (i.e. *–ington* or *–ingham*) and, as noted, the Wolds place-names suggest that the early forms were not habitative. But I mention the parallel with *weoh don* hill and the Canningas simply because of the *weohs* as Wysall, on the edge of the

Beyond the ploughed field is the distinctive profile of Waden Hill,, Avebury, Wiltshire. This was the weoh don *or cult centre for the Canningas of Anglo-Saxon Wiltshire. The stone in the foreground is the sole survivor of the so-called Falkner's Circle, a Mesolithic and early Neolithic occupation site.*

Wolds, and my thoughts about Wymeswold having originated as *weoh munds wald*.

Early Anglo-Saxon burials and occupation

However, moving on from speculations about the pagan past to speculations about early Christianity. Sometime after the Augustinian conversion of AD 595 – and perhaps as late as the eighth century – a ruined Roman building at the Roman town of Vernemetum (which seems to have been situated on a spring line with more reliable water than at Six Hills) became the basis for the putative Anglo-Saxon minster. Such a building was just as likely to have originally been secular rather than a shrine.



Copper alloy brooches from one of the Anglo-Saxon graves excavated by Malcolm Dean. (After Kinsley 1993).

The early Christian burials associated with the strap ends are not the only Anglo-Saxon burials in the vicinity of Vernemetum. In 1969 Malcolm Dean conducted rescue excavations ahead of the construction of a bridge over the Fosse Way to the immediate north of Vernemetum. This recovered over one hundred Anglo-Saxon inhumations, although no attempt was made to establish the boundaries of the cemetery, so presumably many more burials remain. Sadly Dean died soon after and the excavation report was not published until 1993, thanks to the efforts of Gavin Kinsley. Although some burials were inserted through the Roman road surface there was no evidence that the cemetery overlapped Roman occupation sites, so the cemetery is presumably to the immediate north of the Roman town.

As with Iron Age shrines, pre-christian Anglo-Saxon cemeteries were usually associated with boundaries. The pre-christian cemetery at Vernemetum was doubly liminal, in that it was associated with the boundary between the Wolds to the south and the Vale of Belvoir to the north and it also partially respected the route of the Fosse Way, which acts as a boundary between the eastern and western halves of the Wolds.

Apart from sparse evidence of an occupation site discovered within the modern village of Wymeswold in 20000 (Trubshaw 2001; Clarke 2001:

The trees in the middle distance are on the banks of the River Mantle to the east of Wymeswold (nearer are members of the Wymeswold rambling group, April 2008). On the far slope was a third and fourth century Roman settlement; on the skyline near the far left of this photograph Pat Gratton found the sceatas *and high-status jewellery illustrated on the next page.*

156) so far there has been no evidence of pre-nucleation Anglo-Saxon settlement within the Wolds (although systematic fieldwalking might reveal such evidence). High-status jewellery and two *scaetas* recovered by Pat Gratton, a metal detector user, in the 1980s immediately to the east of the modern village of Wymeswold strongly suggest burials. These were found on a ridge-top location overlooking the valley of the River Mantle to the south which is consistent with Anglo-Saxon burial practice and intimates that the deceased had been living immediately to the south, on the south-facing slope of the Mantle valley. Substantial quantities of third and fourth century Roman pottery have been recovered by fieldwalking the area between the find site for the jewellery and the course of Mantle, but continuity of occupation into the post-Roman period cannot be assumed.

Anglo-Saxon sceattas *and high-status gilt and silver-gilt brooches discovered by Pat Gratton in the 1980s (not to scale). Drawings copyright Leicestershire Museums Service.*

Counting sharp-edged weapons on a mound near the goose shelter?

Even if population was sparse on the Wolds, the crossroads now known as Six Hills was a regional landmark because it was here that the Goscote Hundred met. Although the extent of this Hundred in Anglo-Saxon times is not known, in the eighteenth century East and West Goscote Hundreds covered a large expanse of north Leicestershire, from the present Derbyshire border beyond Ashby de la Zouch to the west all the way south-east to Allexton on the Rutland border. In the early twelfth century the original Goscote Hundred was split into West Goscote and East Goscote Hundreds (Cox 2014: 5), with the River Soar forming the boundary between the two.

Confirmation that the original Goscote Hundred met in the parish of Wymeswold was provided by Barrie Cox when he found reference to a now-lost 'Goose Foot Close' (Cox 2004a; 2004b). Although seemingly a metaphor for a triangular plot of land, Cox found no other constructions in Britain for 'goose foot' as a field name and therefore concluded that the field name is a corruption of 'goose cot'.

The proximity of *hearg* names strongly suggests that the long-standing sanctity of the Six Hills crossroads was well-established by the time it was chosen as the moot site. As already noted, the presumed *hearg* predating the Goscote Hundred moot site has parallels with the moot site for the adjoining Framland Hundred, if the eponymous *Fraena's lundr* is considered the same as the unlocated *Harrowe* in Scalford parish. Although confirming evidence is so far absent, the crossroads of two Roman roads at Six Hills is the only plausible candidate for the location of the Goscote Hundred moot site.

The Landscapes of Governance project outlines an early medieval moot – or assembly – site:

> Assembly sites were important at many levels of early medieval society, royal, regional, local and urban, and they provided a means whereby royal and official prerogative met with local concerns. Place-names of assembly sites and their associated districts indicate varying origins, in some cases referring to pre-Christian gods, including Woden and Thor, while other terms relate to monuments of earlier ages, such as burial mounds and standing stones. Other meeting-places are named after seemingly mundane features such as crossroads, bridges and settlements.
>
> Only a dozen or so English assembly sites have been investigated by detailed archaeological survey and excavation. Studying meeting-places and their surroundings can reveal much about their relationship to other social functions and places.
>
> www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/assembly
> accessed 7 February 2011

Because the Goscote hundred took its name from a goose shelter, there was obviously nothing otherwise notable about the landscape at Six Hills – not even a distinctive tree (as with Gartree Hundreds of which there are

The Moody Bush Stone, Queniborough, October 2007, looking to the high ground of east Leicestershire around Billesdon Coplow.

several nationally, including Leicestershire), or a stone (as with Guthlaxton – Guthlac's Stone – in Leicestershire, probably a Roman milestone on the Fosse Way) or even a 'moot bush' (such as gives its name to the still-extant Moody Bush Stone where the East Goscote Hundred met on the boundaries of Queniborough, Syston and Barkby). However the crossroads where the Goscote moot met is known later as Seggs Hill. This begs the question as to why Goscote Hundred was not called Seggs Low Hundred (cognate with Secklow Hundred in Buckinghamshire) or some such. Presumably the 'Seggs Hill' did not exist when Goscote Hundred first met there and only subsequently was a non-sepulchral 'low' or moot mound constructed, as for the Secklow Hundred in Buckinghamshire (Adkins and Petchey 1984).

In the nineteenth century in Leicestershire the word 'segg' referred to horned cattle castrated after the second year (Evans and Evans 1881), and the connections with drovers stopping overnight at the Durham Ox inn in

the extraparochial area of land at Six Hills would reinforce that interpretation. However in Old English *segg* means 'sedge', which is an improbable – though, given the nearby source of two streams, not impossible – origin for Seggs Hill. More interestingly, the near-homophone *secg* means 'edge (of a weapon)'. Given that the Viking name for Hundreds was 'Wapentake' ('show' or 'take [count]' of weapons) and that the mark of a freeman – one able to vote at hundred moots – in Anglo-Saxon society was his spear, then a moot site name including *secg* would be consistent. This presumably best explains the Secklow moot mound in Buckinghamshire (i.e. *secg hlaw*).

Although the origin of the name 'Seggs Hill' cannot be clearly established, the absence of any hill there suggests that the name refers to a now-lost mound. In the late 1980s I came across a quote from an eighteenth or nineteenth century antiquarian who had referred to one or more 'tumuli' at Six Hills (I am fairly sure my recollection of this is sound, although I have been unable to relocate this source since). However the plateau-like location is not consistent with Bronze Age burial mounds. However if we regard the Fosse Way (and perhaps also the approximately east-west 'saltway') as marking Anglo-Saxon boundaries (as indeed the Fosse Way does once Goscote Hundred splits into East and West Gostcote) then the location with accord with typical Anglo-Saxon funereal practice.

As noted, the naming of the hundred after a modest *gos cot* (goose shelter) strongly argues that the putative *secg hlaw* did not exist at the formation of the hundred and was erected – as a moot mound – subsequently. Although a sepulchral function for this putative mound cannot be excluded, it seems more probably that, as with Secklow in Buckinghamshire and other examples nationally (Adkins and Petchey 1984) a moot mound was erected at Six Hills.

Before moving on I will just note that the *gos cot* just might be reflect something 'singular' about the goose shelter. Just possibly the shelter being used by the gooseherd was in fact the remains of something much too grand ever to have been built for the purpose. If we accept that Six Hills is on the site of a *hearg* then it is possible that a stone-built Roman shrine or mausoleum had survived into Anglo-Saxon times. Such a structure would be more than robust enough to prevent foxes or even wolves predating the flock. And it would be a memorably 'cor blimey' goose shelter! However all this is purely speculative – although consistent with a small number of English place-names which seem to be equally 'ironic'.

For completeness there is another possible aspect to *gos cot*. Aliki Pantos, in her brief discussion of the hundred names Claklose (Norfolk), Loes (Suffolk) and Scipe (Wiltshire), notes that these seemingly derive from the Old English words *hlose* and *scypen*, both denoting animal shelters. She suggests that in hundred names they denote 'partial or temporary structures rather than buildings' (Pantos 2004: 191). While hundredal moots and similar assemblies were invariably held outdoors (Harte 1995) this does not preclude such temporary shelters being erected for cooking, eating and sleeping. Interestingly there seem to be no other hundreds with names incorporating domesticated animals.

In a recent book I devoted a chapter to the mythological significance of swans and geese as 'Otherworldly birds' that might have been regarded as psychopomps (Trubshaw 2011: Ch.9). Geese remained closely associated with the feast of St Martin (11th November). Indeed a number of places, including Nottingham, still hold Goose Fairs at this time of year. While there is no evidence to link the *gos cot* at Six Hills with such goose fairs, there is just the slight possibility that the putative *hearg* there was associated with ritual activities involving raising (and, presumably, sacrificing) significant numbers of geese.

Sequencing the Wolds settlement names

If we look at the names for the settlements in the Wolds then Wymeswold, Prestwold and Seagrave are not habitative so presumably predate nucleated settlements. However it would be erroneous to assume that they referred to units of land equating to the subsequent ecclesiastical and, later, civil parishes which bear these names.

As noted, the *seah graf* at Seagrave is a localised feature. Although Wymeswold became an ecclesiastical and later civil parish, this tells us little about how much – or perhaps how little – land this originally denoted. Prestwold is even more problematical as the modern hamlet does not correspond to a modern civil parish, although there is a 'parish' church. Again we are left guessing how big the original Prestwold actually was.

For at least a thousand years the name Walton on the Wolds has denoted a nucleated village and parish. However the name is several hundred

years older than the village (Waltons date to soon after 410; Paul Cullen pers. comm.). Like all the other Waltons in the country, it is from the Old English *wala tun*, meaning 'the farmstead of the British'. The word *wala* evolved into the modern world 'Welsh', but originally had a broader sense of 'indigenous British' and 'slave'. These Britons spoke a Celtic language, akin to Welsh and Scottish Gaelic. Almost certainly Walton is the earliest *habitative* name in the Wolds. But this does not mean that this habitation was necessarily associated with a 'parish' of similar extent to the later parish of Walton. The *tun* of the *walh* may have been much smaller and located within a larger land unit which, initially, was not referred to as Walton.

Prestwold (the priest's *wald*) is unlikely to predate the Augustinian conversion of 596 and is indirect evidence of an early Anglo-Saxon church or, more probably, minster in the vicinity; such minsters are usually founded in the eighth century. This supports the previous suggestion that there was a minster at Vernemetum. Prestwold is not habitative and suggests that this was land farmed for the benefit of the priest(s) rather than, improbably, where the priest lived. Interestingly the proximity of Prestwold (with the implied minster), Walton and Cotes (the hamlet on the banks of the River Soar to the west of the Wolds) is mirrored in the south of Leicestershire with the proximity of Misterton, Walcote and Walton. Misterton is close to the county boundary between Leicestershire and Warwickshire. This 'liminal' location for minsters is also shared with Buckminster, which is just on the Leicestershire side of the Lincolnshire boundary. As Vernemetum straddles the historic Leicestershire-Nottinghamshire border then, if there was once a minster there, it would also conform to this 'borderline' pattern.

As will be discussed later, Burton on the Wolds is a consequence of King Alfred's edict to erect defensive *burhs* and was probably created between 871 and *c.*875. So the closely-spaced settlements of Walton, Prestwold and Burton can either be thought of as having being successively split out of one larger 'parish-sized' land unit or as sequential 'reuse' of the same parish-sized sector of the Wolds. (This three-from-one parochial development is consistent with Simon Draper's observation that Burtons are typically polyfocal settlements and not essentially military (Draper 2011: 103).)

Presumably by the time of the formation of Prestwold sometime after 596 (and more probably after 700) the *walh* had either left Walton, or had become culturally indistinct from the dominant culture, or were forcibly required to pass over the benefit of a substantial part of this proto-parish for the benefit of the priest. In turn by the early 870s the land – presumably with the agreement of the minster, which would benefit from having a defensive garrison – was appropriated to support the *burh*.

How long did the *walh* hold out?

Although I have suggested that the *walh* were absorbed by the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture, Barrie Cox's work on minor toponyms (Cox 2004a; 2004b) reveals some pre-Germanic names in Wymeswold and Seagrave which, remarkably, survived into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

As previously stated, Old English *wala* denotes a native British speaker. However a different Old English word also had an almost identical meaning. This is the word *cumbre* which is a loan word from Brittonic ('Celtic') and became the *Cymru* of modern Welsh, used to denote Wales. Presumably the indigenous people were referred to by incoming Anglo-Saxons as *wahl* (with its pejorative connotations of 'slave') but referred to themselves as *cumbre*, which was then absorbed into Old English.

In 1543 there were references to a *Cumberdale* in Wymeswold. Although the location of Cumberdale is not stated seventeenth century maps show fields called Upper and Lower Cumberdale to the north of Wymeswold parish, close to Cripwell Farm. A dale-like valley runs northwards to the deserted village of Thorpe in the Glebe (across the county boundary in Nottinghamshire). (Thanks to Richard Ellison for sharing his research on field names and locations.)

A few years later in 1601 *Cumberlea* is recorded in Seagrave (a 'lea' is a clearing in woodland). Also in Seagrave are *Finchette* (recorded in 1601) and *Trunchit* (recorded in 1697). Both of these minor place-names take their ending from the proto-Welsh word *ced* (meaning 'a wood'); *Trunchit* also incorporates the proto-Welsh word *trum* ('a promontory'). Furthermore, between Seagrave and Walton runs a stream once called the *Severne*, also a Celtic word meaning 'river'.

Looking north-east over Cumberdale. The building on the left is Church Site Farm, the only building still extant at Thorpe in the Glebe.

This cluster of pre-Anglo-Saxon place-name elements suggests that at least parts of Wymeswold and Seagrave (as well as Walton) were enclaves of the native population for some time after the Anglo-Saxons began to settle in the Wolds. There are parallels in other parts of the country, notably parts of Wiltshire (Coates 2000) which are, like the Leicestershire Wolds, fairly 'marginal' agriculturally.

What the Vikings did for Wolds place-names

All the other settlement names in the Wolds post-date Viking occupation. Nationally such Scandinavian settlement is no earlier than 874 and in Leicestershire is more probably associated with the period 879 to 887.

Grimston and Thrussington are hybrids of Scandinavian personal names with Old English *tun* while (Old – originally 'Wold') Dalby is entirely Scandinavian. Willoughby on the Wolds *may* be from Old English *welig* (willow), implying an Anglo-Saxon formation, but the combination with –*by* strongly suggests a post-Danelaw construction. Indeed Willoughby could be even be a post-Conquest construction. (While some Willoughby place-names may from *wilig* plus Old English *beg* (ring) rather than the Scandinavian '-by' this seems unlikely for somewhere which is so clearly a settlement.)

Subtle confirmation of a late formation for Willoughby comes when we look at the distribution of the Scandinavian place-name elements in the Wolds. All the names to the west of the Fosse Way, with the exception of Willoughby, are entirely pre-Germanic. In contrast, to the east of the Fosse Way all the settlement names are either entirely Scandinavian or are hybrids. As the eastern sector of the Wolds adjoins the Wreake valley, which contains one of the highest concentrations of Scandinavian place-name elements in the country, this is not surprising. Indeed, although there is a tendency to refer to the Viking occupation of the Wreake valley in the late ninth century, place-name evidence suggests that this re-allocation of land extended out of the Wreake valley all the way to the Fosse Way. This is the earliest evidence for the Fosse Way in Leicestershire functioning as a boundary, rather than passing through an area with its own identity. It is entirely consistent with the division between East and West Goscote Hundreds. This place-name distribution is evidence that the splitting of the original Goscote Hundred took place no later than the Viking settlement of around 880.

Willoughby's anomalous status as the only Scandinavian settlement name to the west of the Fosse Way is enhanced when we note that this is the only parish in the Wolds to have been part of Nottinghamshire rather than Leicestershire. Quite why – and when – an ever-narrowing finger of Nottinghamshire first extended down to Six Hills is unknown. It cannot predate the formation of counties around 920 and is more likely to be contemporary with the adjustment of the boundaries of Willoughby and adjoining parishes to form Thorpe in the Glebe. The date of formation for Thorpe in the Glebe is unknown but is probably during the hundred years leading up to the Norman conquest, in other words after the creation of counties (Cameron and O'Brien 1981). The administrative inconvenience of part of Willoughby parish 'invading' Leicestershire was eradicated as part of the restructuring of county boundaries in 1974.

How big was Wigmund's *wald*?

The modern village of Wymeswold is the largest settlement within the Wolds, and this has always been the case since before Domesday. However the toponym almost certainly predates the nucleated settlement by several centuries as constructions based on personal name plus a 'land

unit' are characteristic of the early phases of Anglo-Saxon settlement (e.g. Rota's *land* and Cod's *wald* for Rutland and the Cotswolds, as previously discussed).

Walton and Wymeswold are the oldest identifiable toponyms from the Anglo-Saxon era, although the unusual construction of Seagrave from *seah graf* and putative associations with a pre-Germanic ritual site (see above) means that this may also be of a similar date. Walton and Seagrave both refer to quite localised features – a single settlement and a single grove. But what exactly was Wigmund's *wald*? The immediate reaction is that it equated more or less to the modern parish of Wymeswold. But if so, what was the collective name for the 'wheel' of eight parishes which are now referred to as 'the (Leicestershire) Wolds'? In the absence of any other surviving toponym which could refer to the Wolds collectively then was the whole topographical unit originally known as Wigmund's *wald* – or even, as previously discussed, *weoh munds wald* – with various parishes divided up subsequently?

There are two other place-names commonly derived from Wigmund which could also have originally shared the same origin from *weoh munds*. Both the Wymondham in Leicestershire and the one in Norfolk are, quite understandably, normally derived from Wigmund's *ham*. However both have boundary locations – the Leicestershire example is on heathland close to the borders of Rutland and Lincolnshire.

Wymondham in Norfolk is on a current administrative border which could well have previously followed the adjacent river; the moot hill (now by the railway) also suggests a liminal meeting place. The geology (boulder clay on chalk) also suggests the sort of agriculturally poor land often found at the boundaries of tribal areas. While it is entirely speculative, both these Wymondhams are at locations where prominent *weoh munds* might have been expected.

Ignoring for the moment the derivation from *weoh munds wald* then a derivation of Wymeswold from Wigmund's *wald* has close parallels with Cod's *wald* and Rota's *land* – even though the Cotswolds and Rutland are much larger land units than the Leicestershire Wolds – as all three are distinct topographical units. If there was a Wigmund who gave his name to Wymeswold, was he the same Wigmund who had his settlement at Wymondham about twelve miles to the east? The *–ham* suffix is consistent with an early Anglo-Saxon date. Wigmund may have been a common

personal name in the early Anglo-Saxon era so there could have been two Wigmunds living at the same time or soon after each other. However there is a real possibility that the same Wigmund had his *ham* to the east of Melton and his *wald* to the west.

S.P. Potter in his 1913 *History of Wymeswold* suggested that Wymund (sic) was the son of Wichtlaf, the Duke of Wicco, who married to Alfleda, daughter of Ceowulf, king of the Mercians until 883. Wymund died of dysentery and was buried at Croyland Abbey, Lincolnshire. This is based on information about Wymund given by the monastic scholar Ingulphus in about 870. However there was more than one Wymund (several people with that name enter the records in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries) so Wymeswold may have been named after a person living well before the ninth century, when historical records are almost entirely absent.

One further permutation of the origin of Wymeswold is possible. If the earliest construction was *weoh munds wald* then several centuries later, when the notion of *weoh munds* was no longer current, the near-homophone of the personal name Wigmund (known locally from Wymondham and presumably living bearers of the name, such as Wichtlaf's son mentioned by Potter) could have led to the supposed origin as Wigmund's *wald*.

Nevertheless, the argument for an origin from Wigmund's *wald* can be enhanced. It may or may not be worth travelling twelve miles or more to visit a single parish of *wald*. But it would be well worth travelling that far to administer eight parishes worth of *wald*. If Wigmund owned the whole of the Leicestershire Wolds then it would make sense to think of him as being the same Wigmund who put up his *ham* at Wymondham. In an appendix to this essay I consider the evidence for Wigmund not simply owning the whole of the Wolds and Wymondham but being associated with a substantially larger unit of land in east Leicestershire centred on Melton Mowbray – a putative 'Wigmund's *land*', approximating in area to Rota's *land*.

For the moment it seems reasonable – although a long way from proven – to assume that either Wigmund's *wald* or *weoh munds wald* was the collective name for the whole of the Leicestershire Wolds and that only later – perhaps many centuries later – did the 'eight-spoked wheel' arrangement of parishes and their associated toponyms begin to take shape.

Burh tuns

Burton on the Wolds is obviously a result of King Alfred's edict to erect defensive *burhs* as defences against Viking incursions. This edict must post-date his ascension to ruler of Wessex in 871 yet predate (by more than a year or two otherwise the edict would not have been so extensively fulfilled) the Treaty of Wedmore and the formation of the Danelaw in 878. So Burtons can be seemingly be dated to 871 to *circa* 875.

Note the defensive *burh tuns* which retain the name Burton – as with Burton Lazars and Burton Overy elsewhere in Leicestershire – are seemingly distinct from the market towns set out after 878 in accordance with the Burghal Hidage. Significantly the post-878 *burhs* (such as Cricklade, Wallingford, Wareham and Winchester) are not known as 'Burtons'. Unlike Burtons from *circa* 871–5, the post-878 *burhs* are mostly substantial towns laid out on a grid pattern street plan. Even the smallest of these later *burhs*, such as Ling near Athelney, are not known as Burtons. Only with a later twelfth/thirteenth century phase of planned towns does the *burh* element become explicit, as in Loughborough, Market Harborough and Narborough in Leicestershire, Marlborough in Wiltshire, and many other examples.

There are three Burtons in Leicestershire. Burton Lazars is doubtless intended to defend Melton. Burton Overy is similarly associated with the royal estate centre at Great Glen. As is typical for Burtons, they are situated two or three miles from the place they are protecting. This suggests to me that there was a permanent garrison of troops who, in between being needed, might be wont to get drunk and otherwise interfere with the smooth running of the place they were paid to protect. It makes perfect sense to have them close enough to arrive in time to take on any unwelcome Vikings but not so close that they were a problem. (Several modern day civilian residents of the various 'garrision towns' of Wiltshire have agreed rather enthusiastically with this deduction!)

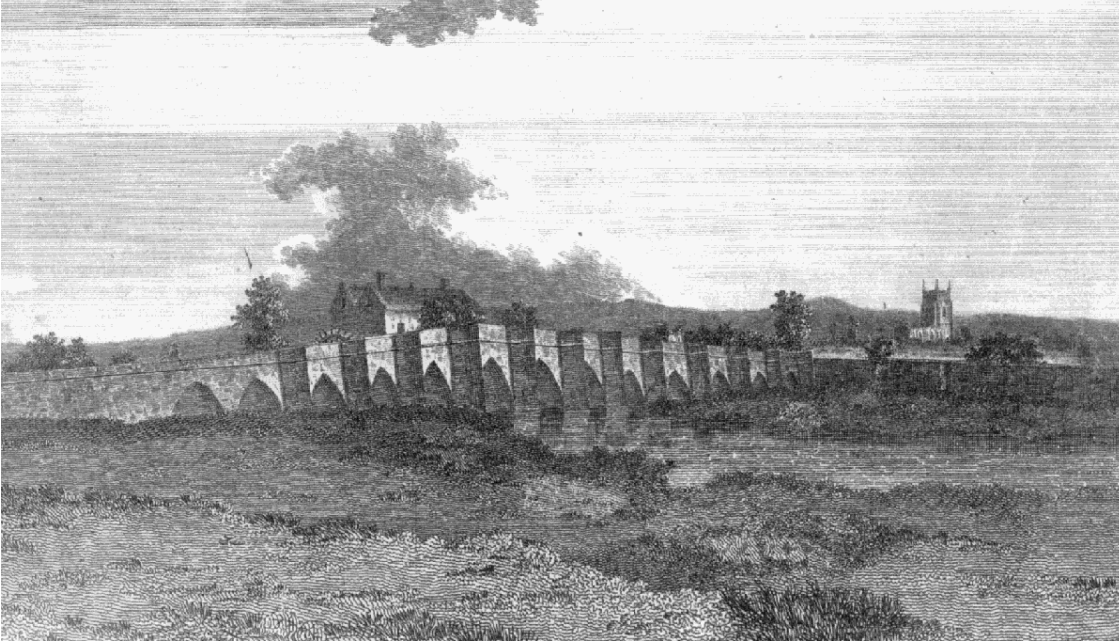
But, on this basis, there a rather awkward question poses itself: what is Burton on the Wolds protecting? There seems to be no counterpart to Melton or Great Glen within the right distance, although the high-status jewellery recovered to the east of Wymeswold suggests there were high status residents near here in need of protection. They might have been in some way linked with the presumed minster at Vernemetum or maybe

there was a high-status secular settlement nearer to the modern village of Wymewold.

The Vikings were least likely to mount a raid overland down the Fosse Way. They would more likely arrive by boat from the River Trent and head up the River Soar or River Wreake to the two wealthiest trading places – Barrow on Soar and Melton Mowbray.

If we look at the topography of the Soar valley then only at Stanford on Soar could the river be reliably forded downstream of Cotes, to the north-east of Loughborough. However at Cotes the surviving medieval bridge and causeway runs over a wide expanse of meadow land, with the river now constrained at the eastern side. If we assume that in Anglo-Saxon times the river did not conform to a narrow channel but flowed more-or-less uniformly over the current meadows then this would offer excellent opportunities for fording. After heavy rain the river level rises quickly and, when the Trent is in flood, significant flooding can be caused by the Trent 'backfilling' the Soar valley. But recent observations of the river level at Cotes confirm that the Soar quickly drops even after exceptional flood levels. Presumably the eponymous shelters which give their name to Cotes were used by travellers waiting on the east bank for the water level to drop to safe levels – and it is not overly-speculative to suggest that it would most probably be raining hard for much of the time they were waiting, making the shelter offered by the *cots* most welcome.

The ford at Cotes would be of key military significance when defending against waterborne infiltrators. Presumably boats could not readily make their way upstream in times of flood so the water levels would always be low when they arrived at Cotes – presumably too low to easily float over. River craft and Viking longboats could readily be hauled over the shallows, but this would be a risky manoeuvre if there was any chance of hostile intervention. So anyone in the ninth century who might prefer Scandinavian raiders not to reach Barrow, Leicester or the confluence with the Wreake and hence Melton could presumably stroll out onto the ford and have a chat to the Vikings hauling on their boats and politely ask them to go back from whence they came. Should diplomacy fail then a bunch of bored 'bouncers' from Burton could be summoned to add more persuasion. Even if the Vikings succeeded in making it upstream without undue hassle, and then successfully raided Barrow or elsewhere, they would still have to come back downstream past Cotes with their boats heavy with booty and no guarantee that water levels would be to their

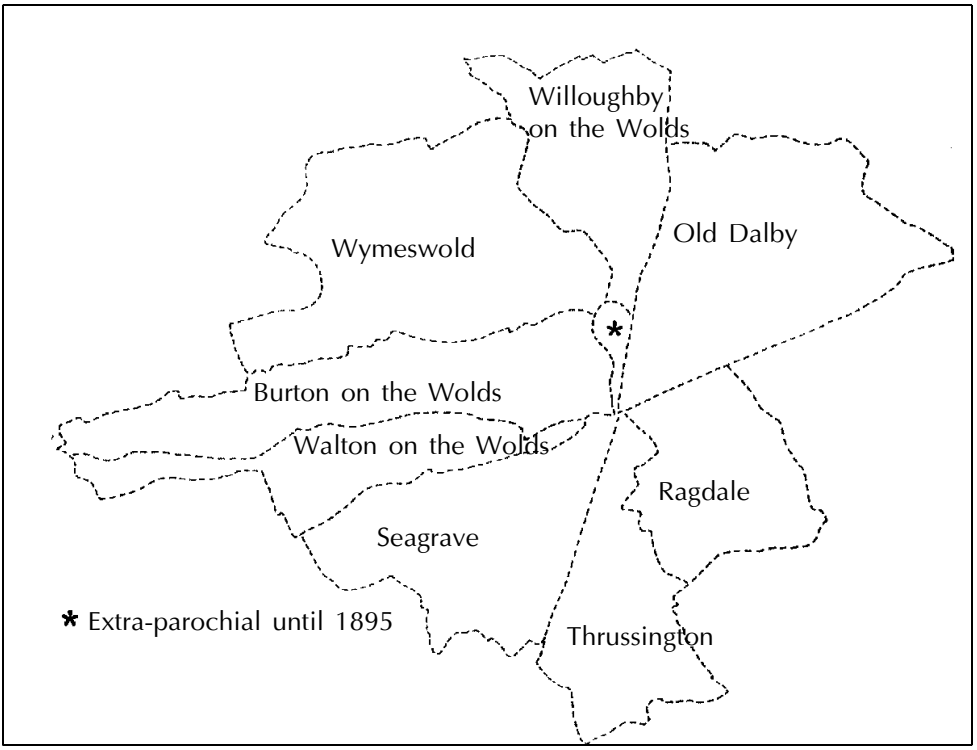


Cotes Bridge – more accurately, a causeway – in the late eighteenth century. From John Nicholl's History and Antiquity of the County of Leicester.

advantage. Any resulting confrontation would be unlikely to be concluded to the raiders' benefit.

If this seems excessively speculative then take another look at the map of the Wolds parishes. Note that the 'wheel' is distorted to the west – at some time Burton and Walton parishes were extended into a 'pan handle'. This extension means the western boundary of Burton parish comprises a few hundred yards of the eastern bank of the River Soar at Cotes. This adds significantly to the suggestion that Burton on the Wolds was built to provide a military presence capable of defending settlements upstream on the Soar and Wreake, while not excluding the possibility that Burton fulfilled a 'secondary' defensive role relating to somewhere inland within the Wolds parishes.

In practice I suspect that Viking boats were commonplace at Cotes. The great majority which were engaged in peaceful trade would continue to their upstream destinations. Only those whose crews seemed to have more of a ram-raiding mentality would be served with ASBOs by the 'boys' from Burton.



Carucates, bovates, oxgangs, haymaking and nucleated villages

The Wolds villages of Wymeswold, Hoton, Prestwold and Seagrave all conform to the English pattern of a cluster of houses and farms around a more-or-less central church. To this list we should add Thorpe in the Glebe on the northern boundary of the Wolds, although this has long been a 'shrunken' medieval village with only Church Site Farm remaining in recent centuries to commemorate its long-gone heyday.

Clearly a church and associated churchyard cannot be inserted successfully into a pre-existing nucleated village. So this settlement pattern cannot predate the re-introduction of Christianity in Mercia during the seventh century. The evidence for early Christianity in Leicestershire includes the various seventh to ninth century minsters together with a large number of Anglo-Saxon cross-shaft fragments, often incorporated into

the walls of parish churches. Work in Derbyshire indicates that these crosses are associated with places at the centres of tribal hideages (Sidebottom 1994; 1999). In Leicestershire the crosses appear to correlate with minsters and estate centres. No such cross fragments survive from the Wolds and, as none of the Wolds villages were estate centres, presumably there were no such crosses to have survived (although the putative minster at Vernemetum is likely to have at least one such cross).

Are the nucleated villages in the Wolds contemporary with the main phase of church building in the tenth and eleventh centuries? Or was there a churchyard, perhaps with a wooden rather than stone cross, at the centre of the settlement before the construction of a church? And, more crucially, when – and why – were villages nucleated? As none of these questions have been conclusively answered on a national or regional level then trying to establish the related processes for the Wolds villages remains difficult. At this stage I am happy to share Richard Knox's more considered thoughts about this process and think in terms of small nucleated settlements being created in the seventh and eighth centuries (Knox, pers. comm.), with some of these (Wymeswold and Willoughby seemingly being good examples; see Appendix Two) later being greatly expanded with planned 'toft and crofts'. Such expansion is either late tenth century or early eleventh century and would give the settlements the status of small market towns.

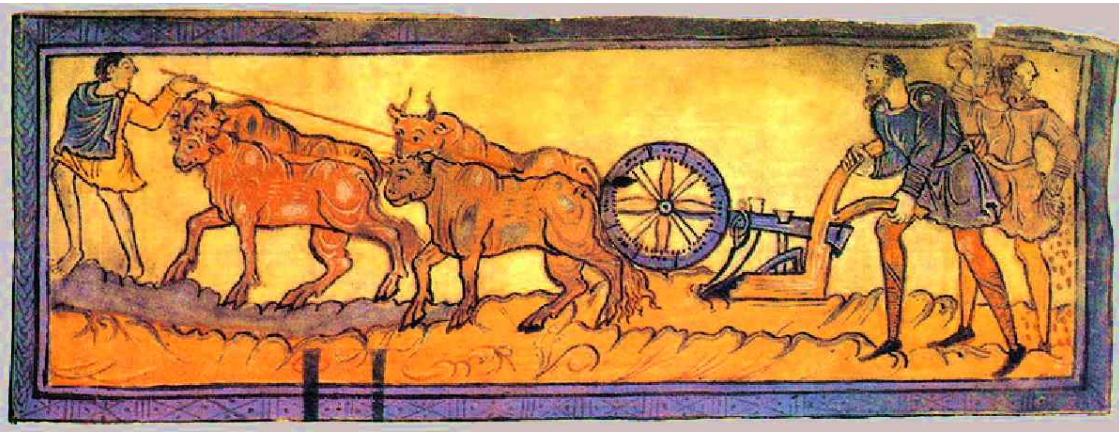
The act of changing a parish from dispersed settlements with their own fields to nucleated villages with a 'great field' system is clearly radical and required landowners with considerable persuasion. Which also implies that there must have been substantial benefits for the landowner to justify the universal imposition of nucleation. There are close parallels with the Enclosure movement of the eighteenth century, although pioneering partial enclosure had been instigated prior to this and some marginal districts – Charnwood Forest is an example – were not enclosed until the early nineteenth century. Was the nucleation process also spread over a century or more? Or was it completed more quickly? The effort required suggests a minimum time-span of a few decades, although adjoining parishes might all be changed within a few years.

The distribution of nucleated villages closely correlates with the maximum extent of the Mercian kingdom. Indeed nucleation occurs equally both sides of the Danelaw boundary so must predate 878 by a number of years. But how much before 878? The best suggestion so far (Williamson 2003)

Left: *The fifteen-feet high Anglo-Saxon cross-shaft at the one-time royal estate centre, Rothely, Leicestershire. There would originally have been a wheel cross on the top. Almost certainly it would originally have been quite brightly painted.*

Right: *The Anglo-Saxon cross-shaft fragment (the lower part is missing) now in the churchyard at Sproxton, north-east Leicestershire. This sculpture was used as footbridge across a stream for many centuries (the far side has been worn smooth as a result). Sproxton was not an estate centre but the adjoining parish is Buckminster and the eponymous minster would have had at least one cross, so perhaps this cross was originally a boundary marker between Buckminster and Sproxton.*

is that nucleation is linked with the reintroduction of the heavy plough. The argument to support this required a detailed look at Anglo-Saxon farming practices but is also supported by the repeated references to ploughs and oxen in the Domesday Book. This is not a count of physical

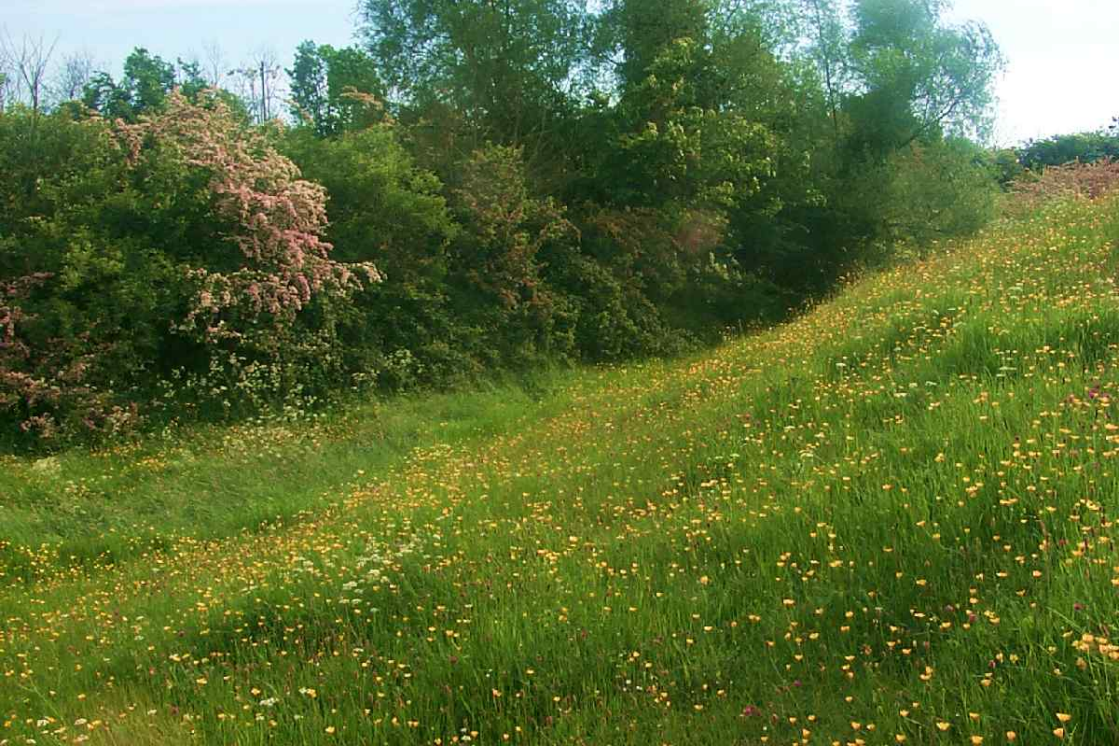


An eleventh century illustration of a heavy plough pulled by oxen.

ploughs and living oxen but a way of calculating land area and value. Carucates, bovates and oxgangs are all units of land area – but derive from ploughs (Latin *carruca*) and words still in use to refer to cattle, bovines and oxen.

In Leicestershire a carucate was about 96 acres and a bovate about 12 acres. In other words eight bovates make one carucate. This eight-fold method of calculating land area occurs elsewhere. It actually begins to make excellent sense when we appreciate that a *carruca* is pulled by eight oxen. Although the *carruca* went out of use in Britain in the immediate post-Roman period, it remained in use on the Continent. At the height of King Offa's reign in the late eighth century closer contacts with the Continent led to a number of influences on British culture. Did Offa see the benefits of the heavy plough around 785–90 and begin to introduce it successfully before his death in 796? If – as seems certain – the heavy plough offered considerable benefits then the pioneering parishes would be extensively emulated by about 840. Even if progress was somewhat slower, the radical changes to Mercian farming would still be essentially completed by the disruptions of the 870s and the creation of the Danelaw.

But why does a heavy plough require nucleated villages? There are a number of inter-related aspects which were discussed in detail by Tom Williamson (2003). Cutting his arguments down to the bare minimum, the eight oxen need to be in prime condition at the time ploughing was performed – February. Sharing out the welfare of the eight beasts clearly leads to bovates and oxgangs. But something else is key – the ploughing will not be successful if the animals are not in prime condition.



Unimproved meadow, Wymeswold, May 2004. The River Mantle runs through the bushes – this is part of the 'Cumberdale' discussed on pages 31–2.

How do you keep eight large, hungry animals well-fed in the winter? Today we would use hay or silage. Silage is of course a modern invention. When was hay first recognised as a valuable storable food source? We don't know. But suffice to say that without hay there could not be eight oxen in fine fettle in February. (Pedantically, dried leaves can be collected and used as stored fodder. But, outside of parts of East Anglia, there is no evidence of sufficient woodland to sustain this practice – although conceivably the Wolds might be a local exception. If so we might expect parallels in other areas of woodland which survived into or beyond the medieval era, such as Charnwood Forest, Leicester Forest, Leighfield Forest, etc. While the settlement pattern associated with Charnwood Forest would allow for – although not necessary confirm – such woodland fodder practices, I am not aware of any comparable studies for the other areas of forest.)

The Stockwell, Wymeswold, October 1993. This part of the village seems to have been created during the earliest phase of nucleation.

Haymaking is tricky. It requires the creation and maintenance of seasonally-flooded meadows to promote the fertility of the grass and other fodder plants. Even more importantly it requires the cut hay to be turned over while the sun shines: 'Make hay while the sun shines' and all that. Fail to dry the hay successfully and it will rot. Rotten hay means by February there be under-fed oxen, resulting in inadequate ploughing and poor crop yields, so almost certainly an unhappy landowner and quite possibly famine for the tenants. Historical accounts of haymaking in the nineteenth century reveal that every person – including children – went rapidly to the hay meadows when the shout went out to turn the hay. And how can you shout everyone to come out and make hay if their homes are spread about rather than close together?

The substantial costs of making a heavy plough and rearing the necessary oxen, plus the demands on keeping the oxen well-fed, mean that the landowner was making a substantial financial investment. Clearly if all went well then he expected to make equally substantial returns. In

essence, Williamson's argument is that substantially increased rents resulted from improved farming which required heavy ploughs which in turn required haymaking which in turn required nucleated villages.

The benefits of nucleation on heavy clays would be considerable – instead of stockrearing (which only requires a small population) with some subsistence 'allotment-style' arable, the land could be used for both arable and pasture. On the basis of later medieval information then beans and barley were the most probable arable crops. The new farming regime would both require and support a much larger population. So, presumably, there was an influx of people from outside the immediate area. Or perhaps the more varied agriculture reduced deaths caused directly and indirectly by famine (and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles record plenty of those) so the population grew quickly within a few generations.

The modern street plan of Wymeswold reveals what appears to be an early phase of settlement in close proximity to the church with a much larger 'toft and croft' pattern surrounding this. Almost certainly the 'planned town' is tenth or early eleventh century; this is discussed further in Appendix Two. Willoughby on the Wolds is seemingly another planned town, again with what appears to be an earlier 'core' around the church.

When was the Wolds 'pie' sliced?

I have referred repeatedly to the wheel-like arrangement of parishes in the Wolds. But perhaps a better metaphor is to think of the Wolds as a pie which, at some time, was sliced up into eight parishes. When did this slicing occur? It does not have to be as early as the formation of Walton on the Wolds or even Prestwold. Indeed there is no real reason to suppose that it predates nucleation and the creation of the 'great field' system around the ninth century. However the settlement pattern does seem to have been well-established by the time of the Danelaw in the late ninth century.

The absence of habitative names in the western half of the Wolds and the predominance of Scandinavian elements in the eastern half all suggest an early-mid ninth century origin. Until then did the Wolds essentially remain as a single unit containing within it a few 'special areas' (perhaps smaller than typical parishes) such as Walton, Prestwold and the putative minster at Vernemetum? Again more expert research is needed.

Summary

The main part of this essay has looked at the evidence for Six Hills as both the moot site for the Goscote Hundred and the 'ritual centre' (or *hearg*) of an Anglo-Saxon tribal area (elsewhere in the country known as a *ge*). This would fit comfortably with the name for the whole eight parishes of the Wolds originally deriving from *weoh munds wald* (later confused with the personal name Wigmund). Such a regional ritual centre is consistent with the Latin *pagus* and strongly suggests that the 'especially sacred grove' which gave its name to the Roman small town of Vernemeton was an Iron Age cult centre for the Corieltauvi (a suggestion I develop further in Appendix Three).

The site of an early minster at Vernemetum has been identified from metal strap-ends associated with early Christian burials. As this is on or near the edge of the known Roman settlement there is a good probability it reused a Roman building. However whether this was a Roman temple on the site of an Iron Age shrine – the eponymous 'especially sacred grove' – is open to question. The 'Great Sacred Grove' may have been many hectares in extent, and possibly as large as the entire Wolds.

The suggestions I have put forward could only be fully evaluated after a systematic programme of geophysical survey, fieldwalking and trial excavations. Such a programme would not only be of regional interest but would also offer valuable insights into 'lesser' *nemeta* and *hearg* sites found throughout Britain.

APPENDIX ONE
Wigmund and his ham, wald, wald ham and possible land

On page 6 and 7 I outlined the suggestion that a person called Wigmund might have had his *ham* at Wymondham and his *wald* at Wymeswold. This appendix adds further detail to that discussion.

Firstly, what routes would Wigmund have taken to get between the Wolds and Wymondham? He could of course follow the precursor to the modern A6006 into the Wreake valley and into Melton Mowbray then eastwards above Wyfordby before picking up the course of a Roman road (later known as King Street Lane) which runs past two Roman villa sites near Wymondham and on towards Thistleton. This is certainly the shortest route and the one a car driver might use today. But much of the route is down in the Wreake valley and would cross numerous small brooks draining into the river. These would become difficult during the winter – if not for the likes of Wigmund, presumably riding a horse, then certainly for anyone transferring goods or livestock from the *wald* to the *ham*.

If the Wreake valley was less than ideal then Wigmund might have chosen a longer – but much better maintained route – north-east along the former Roman road running along the marlstone ridge towards Eastwell. He could then turn south-west onto the continuation of the Roman road later known as King Street Lane going through Waltham on the Wolds. This route avoids valleys and confirms the entirely sensible expectation (considering their enduring later significance as routes) that both the marlstone ridge route and King Street Lane were recognised – and probably still quite well-maintained – routes at the time Wigmund was alive.

Where was Melton the middle of?

Furthermore, this Roman road route draws attention to a smaller area of *wald* around Waltham on the Wolds which is discontinuous with the larger area of *wald* encircling Six Hills. Waltham derives from *wald ham* (i.e. settlement on the wolds) so is not akin to the formation of

Wymeswold from Wigmund's wald. Jill Bourne suggests that a *wald ham* was possibly a 'hunting lodge' rather than a more typical *ham* (Bourne 2003), although – as with other *ham* constructions – presumably dates before about 600. If Waltham is more or less contemporary with Wymondham and perhaps Wymeswold, then was this *wald ham* originally Wigmund's 'weekend retreat'?

This begins to make even more sense if we think of Wymeswold-Waltham-Wymondham while looking at the creation of Melton's name from 'middle settlement or estate'. In Anglo-Saxon usage the term 'middle settlement' meant 'most important settlement' in the same way that a 'High Street' is the 'most important street'. And, in the same way a High Street is not necessarily physically located above other streets, so such a middle settlement did not have to be in the geographical middle. However if – another gigantic 'if' – the name Melton was coined at approximately the same time Wigmund was associated with his *ham* and his *wald* and – just maybe – the *wald ham* at Waltham, then Melton would indeed appear to be the *tun* in the middle.

Furthermore the additional *wald* associated with Waltham on the Wolds and pattern of the King Street Lane and marlstone ridge Roman roads would give a sense of a northern limit of the circumference of this middle settlement's domain. And perhaps the Iron Age hill fort at Burrough on the Hill (due south of Melton and connected by a prehistoric trackway which survives as a footpath) was used as a seasonal meeting place during Anglo-Saxon times (as it was in the seventeenth to early twentieth centuries and presumably before) so was associated with the southern boundary of this middle settlement. Even if the hill fort was not part of the Anglo-Saxon mental landscape, the substantial ridge of hills on which it stands most certainly define the southern extent of the Wreake valley.

The western boundary of a putative land unit centred on Melton is clearly the western side of the Wolds running along the Soar valley. The eastern boundary probably extended to Thistleton and the Leicestershire-Lincolnshire boundary, marked by the long-distance route known historically as the Sewstern Way and more recently as a long-distance bridlepath promoted as the Viking Way.

Against this suggestion is the counter-argument that Melton, Waltham and Wymondham are in Framland Hundred while Wymeswold and associated

parishes are in Goscote Hundred. However so little is known about sixth and early seventh century Anglo-Saxon landholding and administration we do not even know if Wigmund predated the formation of hundreds, or to what extent – if at all – land ownership correlated with hundred boundaries.

As already stated, an Anglo-Saxon 'middle settlement' did not have to be in the middle of anywhere identifiable. But Wigmund's *wald* and *ham*, together with the Roman roads and Waltham to the north, and the southern ridge associated with Burrough on the Hill do encircle Melton approximately equidistantly, enhancing its sense as the central site. If this proposition is accepted then in early Anglo-Saxon times Melton was the centre of a land unit which extended almost to the River Soar in the west and at least as far as Wymondham in the east, with the northern boundary defined by the marlstone ridge and the southern boundary by the hills running south-west from Little Dalby through Burrough and onto high east Leicestershire. This is an area of land which approximates to the area of Rutland (152 square miles or 394 sq Km) so, on the basis that Rutland derives from Rota's *land*, then Melton may have been the focal point of a putative 'Wigmund's *land'*. And if this is the case then, on the basis of Rutland, a reasonable presumption is that the Anglo-Saxon *land* was closely based on a land unit which predates the Roman occupation and might extend back to the Bronze Age (I would be interested to hear from anyone who has identified a possible Anglo-Saxon *land* of between 150 and 200 square miles). This is supported if we regard the Iron Age hill fort at Burrough as having the same 'central place' function as identified for Hambledon Hill near the centre of Rutland (now a peninsula of land surrounded on three sides by Rutland Water).

Whether or not we accept that this land unit was once named after Wigmund, still less a possible origin in prehistory, if we accept that there is land unit focused on Melton extending out to include the Wolds then this territory monopolises known prechristian sacred sites in north Leicestershire as the two significant pagan shrine sites previously mentioned which are *not* in the Wolds parishes – the *Harrowe* at Scalford (to the immediate north of Melton) and the *weoh* at Wyfordby – fall within this putative Wigmund *land*.

As noted in the main essay, Framland Hundred met at *Fraena's lundr* to the north of Melton. As Bourne notes (2003) in the Germanic homelands

lundr denotes a sacred grove, although in Old English the sense is usually of a distinctive clump of trees, without a sense of ritual use. The Framland moot site is near the south-western edge of Scalford parish and may be the same as the unlocated *Harrowe* (Cox 2002: 340) – remembering that the Goscote Hundred met at Six Hills, which is almost certainly a *hearg* site.

The value of limits of navigation

Certainly Melton's significance predated Wigmund by many centuries. Presumably it was the limit of navigation of the River Wreake from Iron Age times until well into medieval times or after; in the eighteenth century the navigability was improved with locks and selective straightening of loops. The relationship of Melton and the limit of navigation of the Wreake with Burrough on the Hill Iron Age hill fort directly parallels the proximity of Ratby late Iron Age hill fort with the presumed limit of navigation of the River Soar at the time, and the subsequent development of Roman Leicester.

As an aside, the progressive silting up of the River Soar, which made the whole length from the Trent confluence unnavigable until major intervention in eighteenth century, may have started by the Anglo-Saxon era. If the upper reaches near Leicester had become difficult for boats by the fifth and sixth centuries then this would partially explain why there was little post-Roman occupation in Leicester but extensive occupation downstream at Barrow on Soar, where overland routes were comparatively good, as a Roman road crosses the Soar at Barrow. On the west bank this road runs from the Thringstone area of Charnwood Forest. On the east bank it rises to Six Hills (and thus connects with the Fosse Way) and on to Goadby Marwood (and thence, via a change in direction, along King Street Lane to Wymondham and Thistleton).

A wide range of produce from inland England could be taken from Barrow or Melton onto the Trent, either for trade along the Trent's tributaries or, more probably, along to the Humber and thence to the North Sea coast or over to the Continent. Whoever controlled trade at the limits of navigation on the Soar and Wreake would have generated massive wealth. Indeed Melton was the second most important place, after Leicester, at the time of Domesday and it retained its prominence well into the medieval era.

Further indications of the importance of navigable inland waterways can

be gleaned from the substantial Anglo-Saxon village excavated in 1998 to the immediate west of Melton at Eye Kettleby on the southern bank of the River Wreake (Finn 1998; the detailed excavation report has yet to be published). The scatters of Anglo-Saxon pottery recovered at Eye Kettleby prior to excavation are only exceeded in Leicestershire by those recovered by fieldwalking at Barrow.

While this publication is mostly about other matters, I remain surprised that there has been little or no academic interest in the importance of 'inland ports' in the pre-canal era, especially the strategically-important ones at the limits of navigation and/or the crossing of major overland routes. The Leicestershire examples suggest that late Iron Age hillforts may offer a further clue as to the power – and wealth – associated with such trading centres.

Summary

So far as I am aware no one has looked for parallels to Rota's *land*. The presence of Melton Mowbray in the middle of a similar-sized area to the west of Rutland however suggests that such units of ownership may have been more common. My assumption is that they were deliberately 'broken up' with the advent of the hundredal system, so surviving evidence is likely to be slim.

Whether or not this assumption about the demise of the *land* as an administrative unit is correct, what is clear is that these *lands* are from the earliest phase of Anglo-Saxon settlement. Presumably some at least reflect earlier – Romano-British – land units and, as with Rutland, there may be evidence for Bronze Age origins. Clearly Rutland is a unique survival – but detailed examination of other places might yield interesting parallels. Certainly a good clue, at least in central England, would be to look for 'central places' at the limits of navigation.

APPENDIX TWO
The planning of Wymeswold

Although seemingly Wigmund gave his name to an area of wald in the sixth century, people at this time were living in dispersed farmsteads. On the basis of archaeological evidence in south Leicestershire, these settlements probably spaced about one to two kilometres apart. Sometime later there was a radical change to what geographers call 'nucleated settlements' – in other words the typical English village, usually centred on the parish church. Without these villages we would not have much of the 'modern' road system, so we have to thank the Anglo-Saxons for giving England some of its most characteristic geographical and social features.

While there is still no confirmed evidence about when nucleation took place, as noted on page 41, I am happy to share Richard Knox's more considered thoughts about this process and think in terms of nucleated settlements initially being created in the seventh and eighth centuries.

Earliest Wymeswold

Why go to all the effort to create villages throughout most of England? Historians are still perplexed, although their best guess is that it was associated with the re-introduction of the so-called 'heavy plough', which required eight powerful oxen to pull it (see Williamson 2003 for details; however Williamson considers that this radical social change probably took place in the ninth or tenth centuries, i.e. the heyday of the Mercian kingdom).

Wymeswold was certainly part of this revolution in agriculture and the earliest phase of the nucleated village must have clustered around the base of the mound on which St Mary's church now sits. Mercian England was Christian, although splendid parish churches were still a couple of hundred of years in the future. Instead priests were based at minsters, which looked after the spiritual needs of an area equivalent to about sixty modern parishes. Instead of an impressive stone-built church, Wymeswold churchyard would have had a wood or stone 'preaching cross' and, maybe, a simple wooden church no bigger than the domestic houses.

Wymeswold before the First World War.

Key to all life in the village was the reliable source of water which we know as the Stockwell – now culverted over but still rising up near to the bus shelter at the side of the churchyard. In medieval times this was probably thought of as a holy well. There is a twelfth century mention of a 'Wulstanwelle' at Wymeswold, although how the eleventh century St Wulstan of Worcester came to be linked with Wymeswold is unknown. Presumably the well was holy before the dedication to Wulstan. The word 'stockwell' most probably referred originally to a stream (Old English *wella*) crossed by a log (Old English *stock*) (see Cox 2004). Before culverting, such a simple bridge would have been desirable at the Brook Street end of The Stockwell. After the Reformation, when saint's wells were largely forgotten, and as the sense of Modern English 'well' changed to denoting a water source rather than a stream, then presumably the word 'Stockwell' transferred from the bridged stream to the well itself.

So Wymeswold had reliable pure water and a stream – the River Mantle – to take waste water away. The soils in this part of the village are free-draining sands and gravels over a thin layer of Blue Lias – all very 'des-res' for Anglo-Saxon house builders.

However a look at any reasonably large-scale map of Wymeswold shows something much more striking than a 'typical' nucleated village. Many of the houses with their long thin gardens line up neatly – I think of them as like slices of toast in a toast rack. Academic historians call this 'toft and croft' – the toft was the house and associated barn, and the croft was where vegetables were grown and a cow, pigs and poultry kept. There may have been a small area of orchard too in the croft.

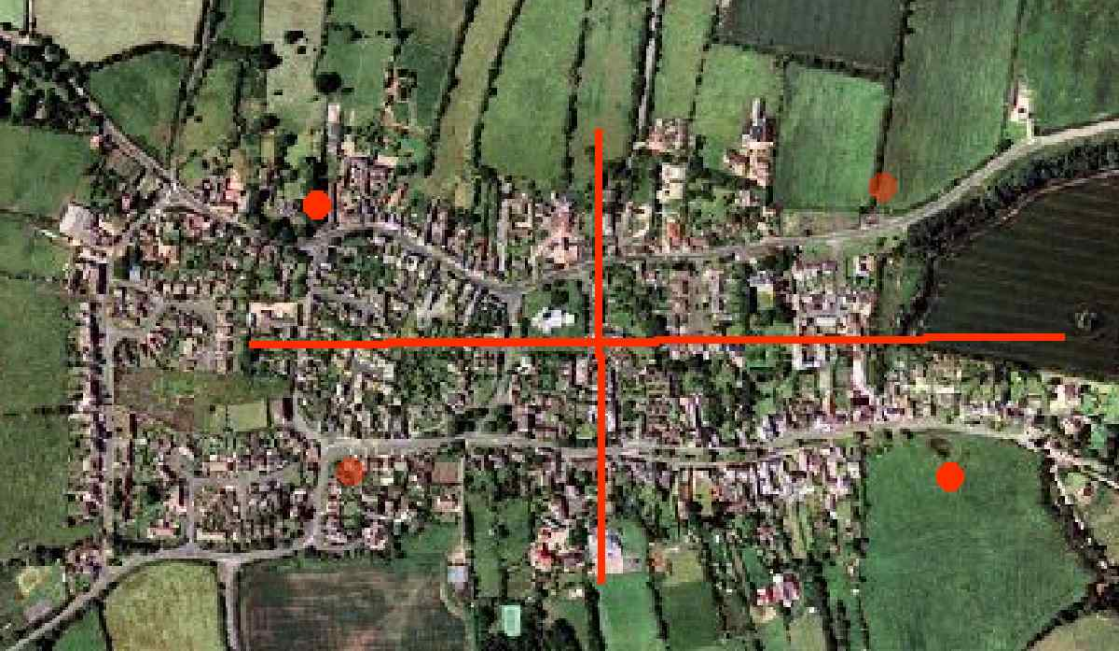
This 'toast rack' of toft and croft is not the way that small ninth century nucleated settlements were planned. But is the way that small 'towns' were planned from the tenth to thirteenth century. Yet there was probably a village of some sort at Wymeswold from around the ninth century – well before the later planned town. Indeed, if we look closely at a map of Wymeswold, we can see that Church Street and The Stockwell do not fit neatly into the 'toast rack' – so these presumably are the oldest parts of the settlement.

Such planned towns were usually intended as trading places – York is a classic example, and both Narborough and Market Harborough are late examples in Leicestershire. They were intentionally set up by a landowner hoping to make a fortune from taxes on the goods brought in to trade. The homes would have mostly been occupied by tradespeople and craftsmen. These artisans would have bought most of their basic food, apart from the 'luxuries' raised on their toft.

Four to three

We will never know who thought it would be a good idea to make Wymeswold into what, at the time, would have been thought of as a new town. However there is some evidence that it happened soon after 1066. The reasoning goes like this: at the time of the Domeday survey in 1086 there were three lords of the manor but, the survey notes, shortly before the Norman Conquest, there had been four lordships.[2] And, although Wymeswold seems to have a 'four-fold' symmetry around the churchyard, one of the quarters seems not have developed as the other three did.

The evidence is still to be seen as the sites of two of the manors are known – one is still called Manor Farm (the Georgian house next to the Country Pine workshop on Far Street) and another stood in Hall Field (on the south side of Brook Street) until the eighteenth century. Intriguingly, both these manors are situated near the extreme corners of the planned



A Google Maps aerial view annotated with the known positions of the manors in the north-west and south-east of Wymeswold. The presumed locations of the other two pre-Domesday manors are also shown.

village (ignore London Lane as this was only fully developed in the twentieth century). We know the manorial lords were absent landowners so these manors would have been occupied primarily by their 'reeves' or stewards. Could the manors have been sited as far away as possible because the rival stewards did not want to bump into each other too often when going about their business? Or were the manors located to give the stewards the best chance to keep an eye on the workers going to and from the fields? Whatever, the placing of these two manors is distinctive. So does this distinctive siting enable some guesses as to where might the other two manors have been?

Well the corresponding part of the south-western corner of the village is the kink at the bottom of Clay Street where the pharmacy now stands. Take away that kink and Clay Street points more-or-less directly at Burton Lane. Was there a manor here? If so, perhaps it became disused before the Hall Field manor so, when brickmaking became fashionable, the land was available for use as a clay pit and kiln – hence Clay Street and the parcel of land there known as 'Kiln Close' before development. As the clay was dig out the pit would need to expand sideways, forcing the road to take a

longer way round. There may be other reasons for the 'kink' but this seems the most probable.

So where was the fourth manor? If the deduction about a manor in the south-west is correct then clearly the fourth one should have been in the north-east corner of the village. But take away houses built in the last two centuries or so and – well there's nothing much there in the north-east quadrant of Wymeswold. Until the Wimpey development in the last ten years this remained something of an 'empty quarter' as, although houses on Brook Street continue well past The Civic, when you walk up The Civic to the main road you are facing allotments and fields.

My best guess is that Wymeswold was planned before the Norman Conquest, when there were four lordships and hence a four-fold village plan centred around the already-historic village core and the churchyard. One quarter remained almost empty, presumably when the number of lordships shrunk to three after the Conquest. It may be that there never was a fourth manor house.

Wymeswold was not alone

We only have to look to an adjacent parish for another example of a planned village set up around a previously-nucleated core – Willoughby on the Wolds. I have not looked at the history of Willoughby in detail, but my first thoughts are that the planning of Willoughby is likely to be contemporary with the creation of Thorpe in the Glebe (which involved significant restructuring of Willoughby and Wysall parish boundaries). Dates are purely speculative but tenth or early eleventh century seems most likely (Cameron and O'Brien 1981) – the same timescale as for the planning of Wymeswold. Was one so successful that a competitor could thrive in the next parish? Or was there an element of competitiveness between adjoining landowners? We will probably never know. But clearly the pre-Conquest period was key to the planning of these two villages.

Furthermore sometime during the tenth or eleventh centuries Walton on the Wolds was also being 'promoted' as a market town (Clarke 2008) – although clearly the layout of the village has none of the toft and croft planning of Wymeswold and Willougby. So did Walton's role as a market predate the substantial development of the other two places, but then get 'sidelined' as the other two succeeded?

So many questions, so few clear answers. Not for nothing is this era known as the Dark Ages. Yet for all the obscurity, the 'evidence' of ninth to eleventh centuries changes is all around us as they created the English landscape of villages and roads that has largely been sustained for over a thousand years.

Notes

1. S.P. Potter in his *History of Wymeswold* (1913) suggested that Wymund was the son of Wichtlaf, the Duke of Wicco, who married to Alfleda, daughter of Ceowulf, king of the Mercians until 883. Wymund died of dysentery and was buried at Croyland Abbey, Lincolnshire. This is based on information about Wymund given by the monastic scholar Ingulphus in about 870. However there was more than one Wymund (several people with that name enter the records in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries) so Wymeswold may have been named after a person living well before the ninth century, when historical records are almost entirely absent.

   Furthermore, Wymeswold does not necessarily derive from Wymund's *wald* but might be from *weoh munds wald* i.e. the 'wald of the *weoh* (pagan shrine) mounds', conceivably referring to now-lost mounds at or near to Six Hills (known to be a *hearg* or 'harrow' – another Old English term for a pagan ritual site). The Old English word *weoh* also gives Wysall, the next village to the north of Wymeswold, and other place-names such as Wyfordby (the settlement at the ford with a pagan shrine) to the east of Melton Mowbray. *Weoh munds wald* is clearly contemporary with the time when the area was likely to have been heavily wooded and fits in well with my suggestion that all eight parishes of the Wolds were once known as 'Wymeswold', as the eponymous mounds would have been at the centre.

2. The Domesday Book states that in 1086 Wymeswold was divided into four parts. The chief landholder was Hugh de Grantemesnil. Durant Malet and Roger de Busli also held land, while the land of the king's servants was held under Robert de Jorz.

APPENDIX THREE
The importance of interfluves

While we know next-to-nothing about Vernemetum, its name deserves closer attention. There is little reason to doubt that the Romano-British gave the epithet 'great or especially sacred grove' to a religious site that was already well-established in the Iron Age and had already acquired its status. But what this status? Was it the meeting place of a single tribe – albeit a tribe more powerful than most and therefore capable of expressing their power in a more dramatic way than usual? Or was it more of a regional meeting place? In this appendix I want to consider the evidence that – just as the seventeenth century antiquarian John Aubrey considered that Avebury suppassed Stonehenge stands 'as a cathedral doth a parish church' – so too an especially sacred grove (*Vernemeton*) was in some manner more striking than a normal *nemeton*.

While in the eyes of the Romans and Romano-British of the area there must have been something about this site that deserved the epithet 'especially sacred grove', we don't really know what a common-or-garden sacred grove (*nemeton*) was like. The best guess is that there must have been some parallels with the sites that the Anglo-Saxons termed *hearg* as the distinctive feature about the *hearg* sites that have been archaeologically investigated is that they contain evidence Iron Age, Roman and Anglo-Saxon ritual activity (Semple 2007). As discussed in the main text of this essay, Sarah Semple has established that a *hearg* site covered several hectares. This seems comparable with what is reasonable to expect for *nemeta*. So perhaps some, although not necessarily all, *hearg* sites were known to the Romano-British as *nemeta*.

While size might not necessarily matter, clearly the marginal land of the Six Hills area of the Wolds could be dedicated to the deities without any great detraction to local agricultural practices (woodland was no doubt grazed whether a sacred grove or not). So perhaps this *nemeton* was *vernemeton* simply because it occupied a bigger area of land than most. This would mean at least tens of hectares. I'm going to be bolder than that. Although I would fully accept that the minimal investigation does not mean that absence of evidence is evidence of absence, so far little

evidence for Iron Age occupation has been found anywhere in the eight Wolds parishes (and the exceptions are in the villages on the periphery of the Wolds). This would be consistent with *the whole eight parishes of the Wolds* (i.e. the plateau of land above 300 feet OD centred on Six Hills) being thought of as 'the *vernemeton*' – with the Roman small town simply sitting near the northern boundary. Such a massive area of land is of course far greater than any other *nemeton* or *hearg* – but would respect the only topographical boundaries. (Although any man-made boundaries for *nemeta* or *heargs* have not been recognised by archaeologists this does not mean that simple hedges or fences could not have once existed.)

Whether or not the *vernemeton* was as big as the whole of the Wolds is irrelevant to the remainder of this appendix, although I will assume it was larger than the usual *nemeton*.

Watersheds and Iron Age tribal territories

If, as seems reasonable, *Vernemeton* had regional significance then we need to look not just at the local topography but at the regional topography. And here the site of Roman town is striking. It is on the spring line just below a major ridge running roughly east-west above the Trent valley (known in this part as the Vale of Belvoir). This marlstone ridge terminates near to Vernemetum although continues east-north-east towards Lincolnshire (although terminating at Belvoir, just a miles or two inside Leicestershire). The town of Vernemetum is also where the Fosse Way drops down to the Vale of Belvoir, having followed a natural ridge above the Soar valley from Leicester. So the two areas of higher ground form a 'T'-shape, with Vernemetum at the intersection of the two ridges – which are both the routes of Roman roads.

Indeed such ridges are often followed by Roman roads. Sometimes the ridge is quite pronounced – as with much of the Fosse Way between Leicester and Vernemetum – and sometimes it is more flat-topped or undulating. Butt nevertheless they are geographically and topographically significant. Indeed such ridges invariably act as watersheds between different river systems. While geographers seemingly prefer the more pompous Latin-derived neologism of 'interfluves' I will retain the established English word 'watershed'.

While a pair of insignificant brooks will have a watershed between them, there are surprisingly few watersheds between major river systems. One of the most significant waterheds in England is the one separating the rives that flow south and west (into the Channel and the Bristol Avon) from those that flow east into the North Sea. It is not a very dramatic ridge although there is a prominent landmark along the whole of its length – the Roman road we know as Watling Street or the A5. Yes, apart from one of the minor tributaries of the River Soar which rises a few hundred yards to the west of Watling Street, every other part of the natural drainage of England falls neatly to one side or the other of this road.

Another important watershed is more dramatic – the ridge of the Chilterns. Once again the Ickneild Way follows the same axis. The most significant English watershed which does not have a Roman road running along it is the Pennines, separating the Mersey drainage from the east-flowing rivers of the Yorkshire Dales. But there still is no road along there – and anyone who has walked the Pennine Way footpath will understand why.

So I think it is significant that much of the Fosse Way through the Cotswolds and Warwickshire follows the high ground. Indeed the Fosse only makes four significant river crossings in the hundred miles or so between Cirencester and Leicester – those at Fosse Bridge, Halford, Bretford and Leicester itself (although the dogleg detour onto Watling Street and then through Sharnford is presumably because of the failure of a small bridge on the original route of the Fosse Way north of High Cross).

Although little seems to have been published about the extent to which Roman roads were routeways before the Romans came and created metalled surfaces, recent excavation (Malim 2011) suggests that some (although certainly not all) Roman roads were simply following routeways that had been established in the Iron Age. (My limited research suggests that we should be cautious about putting the origin of these routes back any further; for example aerial photography on the stretch of the Ridgeway running over Overton Hill near Avebury, Wiltshire, suggests that many dozens of small Bronze Age field boundaries run across the line of the Ridgeway, inferring that it was not in use as a routeway at that time. (Nick Snashall, pers. comm.))

However, as Alan Fox and Jeremy Taylor have independently suggested (Fox 2009; Taylor 2010) watersheds seem to act as boundaries between

Iron Age tribal territories. Pragmatically such ridges are often (although, as with Watling Street, not necessarily) on land which is fairly poor for agriculture. Such ridges also make excellent boundary landmarks. They are (to use a rather ghastly neologism beloved by urban planners and users of GIS software) 'viewsheds' as much as they are watersheds. Routes along the top allow for small military units to keep an eye on possible incursions, which could be backed up with a simple beacon system to call up reinforcements when necessary. As I doubt tribal warfare changed that much between Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon times, a useful parallel is the Wiltshire Herepath ('army path') which follows the Ridgeway then drops down into Avebury before following the high ground above Calne – presumably on the look out for neer-do-wells coming up from the direction of Somerset or from south of the Wansdyke.

More convincingly, the Fosse Way was initially set as the boundary of Roman occupation of England. Curiously, in the ninth century Watling Street became the boundary between Wessex and the Danish occupation or Danelaw; this has persisted as one of clearest cultural dividers in England as Watling Street still separates the West Midlands from the East Midlands – and, as such, marks one of the most rapid transitions between different traditional accents and dialects. People born in Tamworth, just five miles from Leicestershire, speak very differently from people brought up in the villages five miles inside Leicestershire.

Such ridgeway routes seem to have been sufficiently liminal or uncontested to allow travellers – and presumably drovers – to pass along without too much hindrance (although by the same token any travellers would have to contend with any manner of ''outlaws' and other miscreants trying to take advantage of the comparative remoteness of such routes).

In my own travels along the Fosse Way and Watling Street I have been intrigued that there is a near absence of Iron Age hill forts. There are some nearby (Ratby in Leicestershire and Arbury in Northamptonshire come first to mind) but they do do not overlook the Roman road but instead 'nestle into the hills' nearby. Indeed these two are, like Oxton in Nottinghamshire, are both smaller and more rectilinear in plan than the more dramatic examples – such as Maiden Castle in Dorset or Barbury Castle in Wiltshire. Indeed in plan they partly resemble early Roman forts. In the absence of much archaeological investigation of Ratby, Arbury,

Oxton and the like it seems sensible to assume that they are from the late Iron Age, quite probably at a time when Iron Age Britons were trading with the Roman Empire and becoming Romanised in their aspirations. If so, these are the strongholds of wealthy traders – and here we have to think of slave-trading as well as agrarian products – rather than tribal centres. The same may also be true of Burrough on the Hill, which is situated to the south of Melton Mowbray (and therefore the one-time limits of navigation of the River Wreake) just as Ratby is situated to the west of Leicester (at or near the one-time limit of navigation of the River Soar, but at a convenient crossing point utilised by the Fosse Way).

if this deduction has any value then it means that the sorts of Iron Age hillforts which could have originated as tribal centres are effectively absent from the immediate vicinity of the Fosse Way and Watling Street. So I think it is entirely plausible that these Roman roads follow Iron Age boundaries (and probable Iron Age routeways). This is a thesis explored, at least for the Leicestershire:Lincolnshire boundary, by Alan Fox (Fox 2009).

With this in mind we can look in more detail at the shorter watersheds which run eastwards from the Fosse Way. There is the ridge between the Nene and the Welland, the more complex watershed between the Welland and the Gwash drainage (the Gwash valley has largely been flooded to create Rutland Water) which links to the area of high ground to the east of Leicester rising up to Tilton on the Hill which forms another watershed to the Wreake valley (which drains into the Soar). The northern slopes of the Wreake valley lead into the marlstone ridge above the Vale of Belvoir and Trent valley on which Vernemetum is situated.

While the Welland valley is the topographical feature separting Leicestershire from Northamptonshire, the county boundary only follows the river to the east of Market Harborough; upstream it is the watershed to the south of the valley which forms the administrative boundary. But, other than forming the basis of the county boundary, the Welland watershed is too close to the more significant Nene watershed to have had much importance previously. Jeremy Taylor has looked in detail at the differences in Iron Age material culture and, while seeing a difference either side of the Nene watershed (indicative of contrasts between the Corieltauvi and Cornovii cultures), he sees no such difference in the (admittedly more limited) finds from either side of the Welland watershed (Taylor 2010).

However, this scenario of two closely-spaced (and one rather minor) watersheds does not apply to the location of Vernemetum. Although, on the basis of historical (mostly epigraphical) evidence we know that by the early Roman era the Corieltauvi tribe had tribal centres in both Leicester and Sleaford it is reasonable to assume that such a 'mega-tribe' was the consequence of the forcible amalgamation of a number of earlier tribal units. Presumably such earlier units thought of the major ridges and watersheds as their 'natural' boundaries (however much they might have been contested in practice).

Which means that the sacred grove at Vernemeton – on the intersection of the 'T' of two watersheds – could have originated early in the Iron Age when this was a liminal location between tribal territories. Later, as these tribes amalgamated into the Corieltauvi it would have been a fairly central – and dramatically-located – 'cult centre'.

Assuming that the traders did not spend all their wealth on creating hill forts or re-investing it in tradable goods then presumably they made suitably opulent offerings to their deities. Perhaps not for nothing Vernemetum was known as an 'especially sacred grove' and, just as the religious trappings of a cathedral exceed in grandeur those of a parish church, so too did these.

While it would opening up an even more contentious can of worms to push the origins of the Six Hills 'cult centre' back to the early Neolithic, there are a number of aspects of the local topography which link the Wolds with the undisputed Neolithic 'ritual complex' centred on Avebury henge. However the henge is later phase; the monuments start with the causewayed enclosure on Windmill Hill to the immediate north-west and over a dozen long barrows (both chambered and chamber-less). Prior to these monuments are a number of small sites suggesting repeated Mesolithic visits, although there is no direct evidence of these being 'ritualistic' rather than merely pragmatic. I discuss these Avebury sites in *Beyond the Henge* (Trubshaw 2012).

However before abandoning the early Neolithic, may I draw attention to a curious parallel here which Janet Moore has recognised (pers. comm.) The 300 feet contour in the White Peak area of Derbyshire is closely associated with Neolithic chamber tombs leading to the speculation that the higher reaches of the White Peak were in some way associated with the 'realm of the dead'. The 300 feet contour, as already noted, defines

the 'rim' of the Wolds. However there is no evidence for chamber tombs or other early Neolithic ritual activity in the Wolds. Was there some change in natural vegetation which effectively marked 300 feet above modern sea level? Or did the microclimate of these zones mean that they were regarded as marginal for Neolithic activities? Or, am I simply trying to read too much into this 'coincidence'?

Finally, I would like to draw attention to Harrow Hill near Long Compton on the Oxfordshire: Warwickshire border (see photograph on page 19). This prominent hill – like Waden Hill at Avebury – looks somewhat like a beached whale. The name tells us it was an Anglo-Saxon *hearg*. And it is close to a watershed. Rain falling on this Harrow Hill will drain into the River Stour, which flows into the Bristol Avon. However rain falling only a few miles to the east and north-east will drain into the upper Thames valley (Emma Restall Orr, pers. com.).

While the prominent hills favoured as *hearg* sites are, by the very nature, likely to be associated with watersheds, I would be interested to know if anyone with local knowledge of other harrows/*heargs* can show that they are on major (rather than local) watersheds, as with the Harrow Hill at Long Compton. For completeness I would note that Six Hills is on a watershed between the Trent, Soar and Wreake drainages. However as the Wreake flows into the Soar and the Soar into the Trent I would regard this as a local watershed, unlike the separation between the westerly Stour/Avon drainage and the easterly Thames, or the major three-way watersheds in the vicinity of Avebury (the source of the Kennet, which flows east into the Thames; the Bristol Avon; and the Wiltshire/Hampshire Avon which flowing from the Vale of Pewsey and past Stonehenge to the Solent).

APPENDIX FOUR
Hearg and *weoh* places-names

There have been a number of attempts to list instances of *hearg* and *weoh* in English places-names. The first serious attempt was by David Wilson (Wilson 1985) although his list was critiqued by Margaret Gelling (Gelling 1988). This appendix outlines the probable and possible examples.

Probable *hearg* names:

Harrow Hill (Northants), Harrowden (Northants), Harrow Hill Field (Warks), Harrow Hill (Worcs), Harrow Hill (Warks), Harrowden (Beds), Harrowden (Essex), Harrow (Middlesex), Peper Harrow (Surrey), Harrow Hill (Sussex), Mount Harry (Sussex).

Now-lost examples include *Harrowdownehulle* (Oxon), *Beingshearh* (Middlesex?)*; Haregedon* (Sussex), *Cheseharegh, Harrowe* (Scalford and Hinckley, Leics).

Probable *weoh* names:

Wyham (Lincs), Wyville (Lincs), Wyfordby (Leics), Wysall (Notts), Weeford (Staffs), Weoley (Worcs), Weedon Bec and Weedon Lois (Northants), Weedon (Bucks), Waden Hill (Wilts), Willey (Surrey), Wheely (Hants), Patchway (Sussex), Whiligh (Sussex), Wyverstone (Suffolk).

Wye (Kent) is simply 'the *weoh*'; Wysall (Notts) is the *weoh hoh;* Wymering (Hants) means 'people of the big *weoh'*.

Possible *weoh* names:

Wymington (Beds), Wylye (Wilts), Wylam (Northumberland), Wykeham (North Yorks) and the River Wye.

Willey (Warks) is posssibly 'willow wood' but the location near Watling Street suggests **'***weoh* wood/clearing' is more likely.

Note that Wymundley (Herts) is from Wilmund so not a *weoh*.

To add yet further confusion there is an Anglo-Saxon saint called St Wistan. He seems to have been a real historical person, murdered at Great Glen (Leicestershire) in 849 and his relics formed the basis of a cult at both the church erected on the presumed site of his death at Wistow (Leics) and Wistanstow (Shrops) (both from *Wistan's stow* or 'holy place'). However his name 'Wistan' has the literal meaning of *weoh stan* ('shrine or idol stone') – and the usage of *weoh* makes it unlikely this is intended as a metaphor for a Christian altar stone.

Bearing in mind that the early forms of Wigston Parva (Leics) do indeed support an origin from *weoh stan* (although other interpretations, such as 'a stone that wiggles', have also been proposed) then there remains the possibility that dedications to St Wistan are masking a place-name which originally had the literal meaning of *weoh stan*. Such places would include Wigston Magna (also Leics; here the oldest surviving forms suggest St Wistan and not *weoh stan*), Wistanstow (Shrops), Wistanwick (Shrops), Wistan (Somerset) and Wistow (Leics).

However there are a number of Wy– place-names which are unlikely to derive from *weoh*: Wytham (Oxon), Wycomb (Leics), Wyverstone (Suffolk), Wyrley (Staffs), Wyre (Orkneys) and Wynford (Dorset).

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