Mick Aston developed the idea for Time Team in discussion with producer Tim Taylor in the late 1980s. Seen here with fellow team members Phil Harding, Carenza Lewis and Tony Robinson at the celebration of 10 years of the Channel 4 series, Mick (on right) will be writing more about his travels in future issues of British Archaeology. Main photo shows Muchelney Abbey.
When not filming or finishing writing up the Shapwick Project (with Chris Gerrard of Durham University), I have been pursuing my interest in the early monasteries of the British Isles. Over last winter, which seemed to me a very long one (I was not out much), I looked briefly at the context of a few monasteries in my home territory of Somerset. I have for some time been interested in the county’s early estates (post-Roman or early Anglo-Saxon) as these seem to be the basic building blocks of the administrative and economic arrangements, and they also seem to determine so much else, like settlements, land uses and the towns that come along later.

It was, of course, Glanville Jones who put forward many of the ideas for early estates in a series of pioneer articles from 1961 onwards. Essentially he discerned a pattern whereby a
settlement (the “caput”), occupying the best land in a river valley (sometimes the logical successor to a Roman or pre-Roman site, and often named after the river), lay centrally within a multiple estate of dependent hamlets; all drew on peripheral resources such as forest, lowland marsh or fen and upland pasture or moor. Churches in the “bond settlements” were subsidiary to the central minster.

Although it has been criticised by a number of scholars, I have still found this a useful way to look at a piece of landscape and see how it might have been arranged and might have functioned. A combined interest in early estates and monasteries (and minsters) has been particularly fruitful in looking at Muchelney Abbey’s lands, and their relationship to the early estates in the middle of Somerset between Taunton, Langport and Ilminster.

Muchelney Abbey, a guardianship monument maintained and opened to the public by English Heritage, seems to have been founded by King Ine of Wessex (688–725) in the late seventh century. By 693 it was being granted large tracts of land in the valleys of the river Isle, north of Ilminster (see map). There were further grants in the early eighth century. Although there is some doubt about the authenticity of the charters for these grants, they certainly relate to much of the land held by the abbey at the time of Domesday Book (1086) and all through the middle ages up to the time of the dissolution of the abbey in 1538 under Henry VIII.

But what can these grants tell us about the early monastic estate? And as the grants are being made by the king,
how much can they tell us about the area’s royal estates that predate the foundation of the monastery and its estates?

The name Muchelney means “big island”. It is one of three main islands which formed the core of the original holding – the others being Thorney (thorn island) and Middleney (middle island). There are also Horsey (horse island) and Littleney (little island) nearby.

These look like the sort of sites chosen by hermits in the “Celtic” or British church tradition rather than for new Anglo-Saxon monasteries. Glastonbury Abbey, not far away to the north-east, is first recorded as holding a similar collection of islands in the Somerset Levels in its initial endowment (which may well have been a confirmation of what was already held by a preexisting British monastery).

The first recorded grant of land to Muchelney in 693 was of 37 cassati (or hides – a unit based on the land’s productivity) on the east bank of the river Isle. (The charters are most accessible in Herbert Finberg’s book of 1964, The Early Charters of Wessex, Studies in Early English History series, Leicester University Press.) This must be the area now occupied by Isle Brewers and the interesting collection of deserted villages north of Ilminster – North and South Bradon, Goose Bradon and Earnshill.

Were these villages at some time founded by Muchelney Abbey? Several surviving villages in the area look as if they were planned. Ann Woodward (formerly Ellison), many years ago, drew attention to Isle Abbotts as a planned village. Others planned by the abbey might include Ilford, Fivehead and Drayton. Indeed were they also depopulated by Muchelney Abbey in the later middle ages? Earnshill is one of the rare instances of a settlement abandoned following the Black Death of 1349, but we do not know the precise reasons why the others disappeared.

The 693 charter also refers to three cassati on the west bank of the Isle...
(which must be Isle Abbotts) and a wood called Stretmerch. Now Isle Abbotts had a detached area of its parish away to the south-west in the medieval royal forest of Neroche, an area I worked on years ago with Oliver Rackham, the great Cambridge botanist and landscape historian, and Robert Dunning, until recently editor of the Victoria County History of Somerset (see my Interpreting the Landscape, Routledge 1985, p112, fig 64).

We can identify the position of this seventh century woodland from the parish boundaries on the tithe map for Isle Abbotts. It includes the settlements of Radigan, Kenny and Stewley, near the village of Ashill south-east of Taunton. The busy A358 road that joins the A303 to the M5 goes through this block of land. Interestingly, Stewley is separately assessed in several of the medieval lay subsidy (or tax) documents, and there are two entries for Isle Abbotts in Domesday Book. One of these has only one and a half hides, three bordars (peasants) and no ploughland and probably represents this wooded estate. No doubt over the years the tenants of Muchelney Abbey cleared the woodland to create the present pasture fields, but it still has a very wooded appearance with lots of good oak trees.

Later grants to Muchelney Abbey included two fish weirs on the River Parrett – 6,000 eels came from these in 1086 – and 20 hides at Ilminster itself in 725. This is named in the grant as Ylemister so there must have been a minster on the royal estate there before it was acquired by Muchelney Abbey (for years I had thought the abbey probably founded a minster on its estate when it acquired the land).

Finally in 762 the monastery was granted eight hides “between the rivers Earn [now the Fivehead river] and the Ile having on the west the hill called Duun Meten”. The western boundary of this estate therefore, refers to a hill in the area now called Dommett, west of Broadway. This must be the old original name for what is now the magnificent motte and bailey castle site of Castle Neroche, one of the great strongholds of the Count of Mortain, half-brother of William the Conqueror. The site was excavated by Brian Davison and published in 1972 and is now accessible as a country park in woodland. Duun Meten must have been its Anglo-Saxon (or British) name before the Norman-French Neroche was used after the castle was built.

What was there before these land grants to Muchelney? The area was the Hundred of Abditch in 1086, and later became Abdick with Bulstone hundred. The centre of Bulstone was Curry Rivel near Langport, but there is the possibility that for Abditch it was originally Ilton. The name Ilton means the tun on the river Isle – a common form of name in the west country for the central places of royal estates, drawn attention to by William Hoskins in his work on Devon. In Somerset Michael Costen has shown that great estate centres were in the river valleys on fertile land with names which combined the river name and tun (Taunton, Chewton, Petherton, Bruton and so on).

Ilton itself is today a small, attractive though insignificant village. But did it have a royal palace in Anglo-Saxon times? And was the minster church for the estate, as seems likely, at nearby Ilminster? The grants of land to Muchelney look like the break-up and gradual reallocation of the royal lands to the new Anglo-Saxon monastery of Muchelney, situated on the edge of what had been a royal estate centred on the river Isle. Over a 70 year period, some 68 hides were donated, beginning with outer areas to north-east and west...
(in 693), the large area of Ilminster to the south (in 725) and finally the core of the estate around Ilton in 762.

Several factors interest me a lot about this. Firstly, because of the charters, we can see some of the detail of a complex land transaction process going on a very long time ago – 1,300 years ago in fact. Secondly, none of the features or landscapes involved is particularly spectacular – this is just attractive and interesting but not exceptional countryside. It is not designated with any of the special characteristics that can now be applied to landscapes in this country.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, I have absolutely no doubt that the history of this landscape is in no way exceptional, though we might have better documentation here than in many other areas. It shows us just how rich the British countryside is and how understanding it can make us appreciate it more. It also shows how much study and detailed research are necessary for that understanding to be attained, rather than some crackpot dreamed-up, quick-fix concept – and I am thinking here of historic landscape characterisation (an initiative of English Heritage), in place of the time really needed to get to grips with what a region is really about.