While there he found many deserted or shrunken medieval villages, and a county that had disappeared altogether near Evesham.
Mick Aston recently went to the border area between Worcestershire and Gloucestershire. He found himself in another county that was already no more than a memory by the time of Domesday Book.

Last summer I was invited by the Worcestershire branch of the Young Archaeologists’ Club to an exhibition of their field work on a site near Broadway on the edge of the Cotswolds. They had spent many hours walking a ploughed field, recording the results and analysing the finds, many of which are Roman and show that there must be a Roman farmstead in the field. It is an exemplary project.

This visit took me to a part of the country which I find very attractive, not really the Cotswolds (which I don’t really like – too flat and featureless for me) but just off the northern end, on the edge of the valleys of the Severn and Avon. It is an area of flat fields and small isolated hills. On the edge are the towns and villages of Tewkesbury and Bredon to the west, Evesham to the north and Winchcombe to the south. There are a number of good iron age hill forts in this area (the camp at Bredon Hill for example, and others at Nottingham Hill and Knolls Hill), but it is mainly an area of small medieval villages and hamlets with their common fields. Much of the area is now large fields of crops, the result of late, post-medieval parliamentary.
enclosure, but there are still good fields full of ridge and furrow earthworks, remnants of the medieval open fields, which have somehow survived all the later ploughing. Air photographs show that there were formerly further vast areas of ridge and furrow, so that much of the medieval landscape remained, abandoned but undisturbed, up until 50 years ago.

There are many deserted settlements in the area, the so-called DMVs (deserted medieval villages), though most were never fully-developed villages with churches and manor houses. This is really an area of hamlets belonging to parishes whose villages by and large still survive. But there is a lot of shrinkage of settlement as well – a much more common phenomenon – with farm site earthworks remaining among the surviving cottages.

DMVs in the area include Didcot, Wormington Parva, Wormington Dastyn, Little Washbourne, Frampton, Littlecote, Great Naunton and one or more sites at Prescott. But almost every surviving settlement has earthworks of shrinkage, showing that they were once larger and that a lot of dereliction has taken place, with empty farm sites being represented by earthwork platforms and patches of nettles. Examples include Great Washbourne, Hailes and Stanley Pontlarge. At the latter, Christopher Dyer has found that Roger Parvus, the lay lord, “expelled the rustics” in the mid-12th century from six yardlands (around 180 acres or 70ha) and “retained and cultivated it”. This is an early date for evictions and clearly it did not result in the disappearance of the village, which is still there.

Didcot was abandoned in 1491 when 30 villagers were evicted by the abbot of Tewkesbury. These evictions were reported in an inquiry of 1517, but it is often not known when these settlements were deserted or why the people moved out and the places were abandoned.

The medieval churches and chapels of this area are also of interest. Most seem to have been built or rebuilt in the Norman period and have elements of Romanesque architecture in them; often they have simple two-cell (nave and chancel) plans, with no elaborate towers, aisles or transepts. Little seems to have been spent on them after the Norman period. Also quite a few seem to have disappeared. At Grafton a chapel has been converted into a cottage, while at Netherton (also under Bredon Hill) a Norman chapel with a decorated tympanum depicting a dragon, stands on the lawn of a cottage. At Laverton there are said to be fragments of the former Norman church, and at Taddington there is the site of a Norman chapel. Stanley Pontlarge, though restored, shows what one of these simple small Norman country churches was like; it survived almost unchanged. Great and Little Washbourne both have small Norman churches, the latter with the Churches Conservation Trust.

It seems likely that almost all these settlements, surviving or deserted, had churches and chapels originally in the middle ages. Some remain, others are derelict or removed and probably others could be found under the ground or in documents. At Gretton the present church of 1868 (by Wyatt) replaced a medieval one, the 15th century tower of which is now on the lawn of another garden!

Other churches are larger, and from this the hierarchy of the early church organisation can be reconstructed. Winchcombe and Deerhurst were early monasteries. Tewkesbury only seems to have appeared as a Benedictine monastery from 1102, and Hailes was a late Cistercian abbey founded in 1246. But most of the churches mentioned above were subsidiary to the main minsters or mother churches of the area. These include Winchcombe with a halo of dependencies (at Prescott, Dixton, Stanley Pontlarge, Gretton and Hailes), Beckford (with Great Washbourne and Didcot) and Bredon (with Bredon's Norton, Kemerton and...
possibly Eckington). This reflects the early organisation of the landscape in the pre-Norman conquest period. The general story of how all this developed can now be seen in John Blair’s fine book The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society (editor’s choice review, Jan/Feb 2006).

The early Saxon estates of the area have been worked out by Steven Bassett of Birmingham University in an exemplary article (the 1997 Deerhurst lecture: The origins of the parishes of the Deerhurst area). I find it particularly useful to know which were the important centres in the landscape and which places were subsidiary to them. This hierarchy usually helps to explain much of what we see even today. Many of the churches mentioned here have hardly any graveyard and no early font. But this is only to be expected if they were chapels and the more important church, the minster, was some way away and had reserved burial and baptismal rights to itself.

There is however an additional, administrative complication to this area. Today these settlements are partly in Worcestershire, partly in Gloucestershire, and not far away to the north-east is Warwickshire. But the situation was even more complicated up to the 19th century. Then there were fragments of Worcestershire detached from the main county and surrounded by areas of Gloucestershire and Warwickshire. Also Oxfordshire was nearby, so that a stone called the Four Shire Stone could reasonably be erected not far from Moreton in the Marsh.

Why were these counties so fragmented? This situation of course does not exist today. Detached bits of counties were all tidied away and put into their surrounding counties in the 19th century boundary changes (by 1882). Originally some parishes were in Worcestershire, such as Blockley, Daylesford, Alderminster, Tredington and Shipston on Stour (now all Warwickshire) and some which are now in Worcestershire were part of Gloucestershire – Kemerton, Beckford, Ashton under Hill, Hinton on the Green, Childswickham and Aston Somerville. Some of this anomalous situation can be explained by the bishops of Worcester “moving” land which came to them into “their county” for administrative convenience. But there is another altogether more intriguing reason, and that is the former existence of another county – Winchcombeshire.

In his fascinating book, A Lost English County: Winchcombeshire in the Tenth and Eleventh centuries (Boydell 1990), Julian Whybra unravels the history of the county showing it was founded by about 1007, as other Mercian shires were being defined, based on boroughs – in this case Winchcombe. Ultimately this was the result of Wessex taking over the Danish areas of Mercia. It lasted only a very short time: Julian Whybra says it was destroyed in 1017, but it was still remembered by the time of Domesday Book’s compilation in 1086. Although only a shire for 10 years it probably represented the area dependent on the burh of Winchcombe for at least 100 years and probably even longer as a recognisable region within Mercia.

Many of us lamented the annihilation of the traditional English county system in local government changes in 1974. Apart from any sentimental value the old counties had, it removed the sense of identity many people had with their historic county. I ceased to be from Worcestershire and now came from somewhere called Sandwell in a “county” called “West Midlands”. But the case of Winchcombe shows that such changes had occurred earlier. Perhaps the medieval peasants felt as disorientated in the 11th century as I did in the 20th!