

Settlement Morphology and Medieval Village Planning: A Case Study at Laxton, Nottinghamshire

Keith Challis

HP Vista Centre, Institute of Archaeology & Antiquity, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT

ABSTRACT

Examination of early maps of Laxton reveal a settlement with a regular plan-form, which might indicate that the village was a planned creation, perhaps laid out in a single episode. The date and origin of such planned villages, of which Nottinghamshire has a number, is unknown. In Laxton's case it is possible that the layout of the planned village may be linked to the sudden increase in significance of the settlement gained by the appointment of its feudal lord to the office of Keeper of Sherwood Forest. This paper critically examines the evidence for the village plan-form, focusing on events that may have served as a catalyst for a regularly planned settlement.

INTRODUCTION

In 1980 *The East Midland Geographer* published a collection of papers examining the history and development of the village of Laxton in Nottinghamshire. Among them, a paper by A. Cameron was the first serious attempt to explore the medieval development of Laxton, through the medium of Mark Pierce's map of the village produced in 1635 (Oxford Bodleian Library MS. C.17:48 (9)).

Central to Cameron's thesis, and to any understanding of the development of Laxton, is the observation that the regularity of the plan-form of much of the village suggests that it was created as a deliberately planned settlement, probably in the medieval period, perhaps at the same time as the construction of the substantial motte and bailey castle to the north of the village. Settlements with similar regular plan-form have been noted in many places in England and their origins assigned to various historical events, from Scandinavian colonisation to Post Norman Conquest regeneration (Astill 1988, 38).

This paper builds on Cameron's work by re-examining the evidence of Mark Pierce's map for the morphology of Laxton before embarking on an attempt at an analysis of the development of the medieval village, chiefly focused on events which may have served as a catalyst for a regularly planned settlement. The outcome of such a study may have wider relevance for understanding the development of medieval villages in Nottinghamshire and elsewhere.

ELEMENTS OF THE VILLAGE PLAN

Examination of Pierce's map shows that morphologically Laxton may be broken down into a number of distinct elements. These elements are discussed below and illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

A: The Castle

The castle stands on high ground to the north of the village. It consists of two principal elements, a small strongly defended motte and inner bailey of c.1.5ha extent and a larger, less strongly defended, outer bailey c. 2ha in area (Figure 3). The inner bailey is typical of many smaller, early Norman earthwork castles (Higham and Barker 1992) and is detached from the village while the outer bailey abuts Hall Lane, the back lane of the North Row of the village.

B: The North Row

Laxton's North Row is c.720m long. It comprises an east - west street, Main Street, more or less in a straight line from the western edge of the village to its junction with the East Row in a small green at Crosshill, and for a further c.270m beyond Crosshill, where its name changes to Bar Road. In 1635 the north row contained 38 tofts (Figure 2), though many of these, particularly in the east, appear to be amalgamations of smaller units. Many of the tofts of 1635 have a frontage of approximately the same width, with wider or narrower tofts apparently the result of sub-division or amalgamation. The crofts lying beyond each toft terminate at their northern end in a back lane (Hall Lane) that runs parallel to Main Street. Many of the croft boundaries are gently curving, perhaps suggesting that they were encroachments onto

pre-existing arable strips. A north - south lane, also named Hall Lane, runs south from the entrance to the outer bailey of the castle to meet Main Street adjacent to the parish church

The role of the parish church of St. Michael in the landscape is uncertain. No church or priest were mentioned in the Domesday entry for Laxton and the earliest surviving church fabric dates to the 1190s. The church was extended and altered throughout the 13th century by the Everingham family (several of whom are interred there) and further enlarged during the 15th century when the Archbishop of York held the manor. The medial lane linking church and castle suggests that both predate the layout of the North Row. If so, the late 12th century fabric does not represent the earliest church on the site, archaeological investigations (as at nearby Kneesall church where excavation has revealed two phases of fabric pre-dating the extant 13th century church, the earliest perhaps Late Saxon, (R. Sheppard pers comm.) may reveal earlier phases.

C: The South Row

Laxton's South Row is *c.*750m long and comprises a north-south street, running in a gentle curve south from Crosshill to the southern edge of the village. In 1635 the south row contained 25 tofts, again many of these appear to be amalgamations of once smaller units. Tofts in the South Row also appear to share a roughly similar frontage width. The apparent similarity in frontage of many of the tofts in the north and south rows, and the similarity in total frontage of the north and south rows suggests a degree of metrological regularity in the layout of Laxton, a phenomenon also noted in some Yorkshire villages (Sheppard 1974) and strongly indicating their creation as a single episode under the control of a strong guiding hand.

By 1635 the tofts on the South Row had become divorced from the crofts at their rear by the insertion of a narrow lane or trackway. Cameron (1980) suggested that this part of the village formed the ancient core of Laxton, asserting that the north-south track formed the original main street of the village, with the layout changing after the 12th-century because of the influence of the new castle and North Row. However, the continuous boundaries of the tofts and crofts, merely bisected by the lane, can be clearly traced on Pierces' map (Figure 2). Further examination of the map coupled with field inspection shows that the original back lane of the South Row lay a further 50m to the east where a lane was still in use in the early 19th-century and appears to have survived until at least the enclosure of East Field in 1904. It is marked today by fragments of overgrown trackway at its northern and southern end, a curving field boundary and slight hollow-way. Thus, the South Row can be seen to have a similar layout and dimensions to the North Row, with which it may well be contemporary and Cameron's thesis that, on morphological grounds the South Row should be considered the original core of the village must be rejected. The origins of Laxton must be sought elsewhere, perhaps not in nucleated settlement at all.

D: The East Row

In 1635 the area to the west of the South Row, from Crosshill to the southern boundary of the village, was described as the East Row. This area, comprising in 1635 some 22 tofts, lacks the regular layout of the North and South rows. At its southern end the properties have curving boundaries which might reflect the alignment of former cultivated strips, suggesting that they might be relatively late encroachments on to former areas of arable. At the extreme north end of East Row there is a group of five properties, adjacent to the parish church of St Michael, which exhibit a moderately regular plan form. These properties (shaded on Figure 1-2) may fill a regular rectilinear space, and it is tempting to see them as the infill of a substantial open space adjoining Crosshill.

E: South of Main Street

The area of the village to the south of Main Street shows no indication of regular layout and in 1635 was occupied by a number of farm and cottage plots and the parish church. As is the case with the East Row it seems unlikely that this area is part of a deliberately planned settlement and again may represent encroachment on to vacant ground. Perhaps significantly much of both this area and the East Row were once contained within a sub-manor, first documented in 1232 (Orwin 1938, 85) but certainly in existence prior to this time. It may be that land contained within the jurisdiction of the sub-manor was excluded from the planned development of the North and South Row.

F and G: Peripheral Areas

A small area containing some 11 tofts lies in a triangular area between Toad Lane and Top Lane at the western edge of the village (F on Figure 1-2). The layout of this portion of the village is reminiscent of the

similarly constrained area at the southern extremity of the East Row (G on Figure 1-2) and once again the curving property boundaries in both areas suggest encroachment on to former arable strips.

Summary

Fresh examination of the Pierce plan of Laxton suggests a village plan with several distinct morphological elements. Chief among these are a regular North and South row (both comprising a main street and backlane with toft and crofts of similar dimensions between), the castle and an open space, infilled by 1635, focused on Crosshill. The village is ringed by four open fields, woodland, meadow and demesne parkland (Figure 1-3).

VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT: A PROPOSED CHRONOLOGY

How then might these plan elements fit into a chronological framework? Tangible evidence for the origin of the community of Laxton is limited in the extreme. Excavations by the author on Top Lane in 1993 (Figure 3) produced number of Anglo-Saxon pottery sherds, residual in later medieval contexts. The Saxon pottery (Challis 1994, 28) was limited to a single sherd of 8th - 9th century Maxey Fabric B, and a number of Late Saxon sherds including 9th and 10th century Lincoln Kiln Type ware and Stamford Type ware. A single sherd of Early Glazed York Type 1b was also recovered.

This excavation provided what is so far the only archaeological evidence for pre-conquest occupation at Laxton. Since both the middle and late Saxon pottery was residual the precise nature of Anglo-Saxon activity remains unknown. Late Saxon settlement at Laxton may not have been nucleated, but rather in the form of a number of farmsteads dispersed throughout the area of the vill. Becket (1989; 20) notes a fieldname in the South Field using the Old English element *wic* (dwelling) which might indicate the site of just such a dispersed farmstead. Such a view of Late Saxon settlement (proposed by Taylor 1983) has gained widespread acceptance in recent years, and it is possible, if not probable, that administratively linked groups of dispersed farmsteads formed many of the vills recorded at Domesday.

The Domesday vill of Laxton was part of an extensive estate, comprising land in six counties, the lordship of which had formerly been with Tochi son of Outi and after 1066 passed to a Norman, Geoffrey Alselin. Morphologically the first phase of Laxton's motte and bailey castle would be comfortable as an immediately post-conquest construction and this might suggest that Alselin, at least at some point during his Lordship of the manor, chose Laxton as his *caput*. However, another Alselin property (Hallaton in Leicestershire) is equipped with a motte and bailey, and so might equally have served as the focus of his estate. Further uncertainty arises from the observation that after the division of the Alselin barony at his death, the manor of Shelford in Nottinghamshire is recorded as having been the *caput* of the portion that remained with the Alselin line (Stenton 1961, 200 footnote 1) suggesting that it may always have served this purpose. Moreover, at Domesday Alselin held the valuable manors of Ruskington and Westborough in Lincolnshire, both of which increased substantially in value during his lordship and in both of which he reserved demesne, he also held a hall in the city of Lincoln (Ellis 1877, 227). Therefore, on balance it seems unlikely that Alselin, who it might reasonably be assumed had centred his attention either on his valuable Lincolnshire properties or on Shelford, ever chose Laxton as his *caput*, or was responsible for the genesis of its castle.

Alselin's substantial barony was split between his daughter and nephew at his death, the date of which is not recorded (Orwin 1938, 72). Robert de Caux, who married Alselin's daughter, held the manor of Laxton in her right from Alselin's death (Sanders 1960, 76). Robert chose Laxton as the *caput* of his portion of Alselin's barony (Orwin 1938, 72 and footnote 3) and it is most likely that the first phase of Laxton's motte and bailey castle was his work, built soon after his acquisition of the manor in the late 11th or early 12th century.

In the early 12th century Caux was appointed the Hereditary Keeper of the Royal Forests of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire (Crook 1980). This significant title gave Caux responsibility for a substantial tract of forest, probably including all of Nottinghamshire north of the Trent and Derbyshire as far west as the Derwent. The appointment of Caux as the keeper of the forest marks a significant point in the fortunes of the village of Laxton. It seems reasonable to attribute the second, more expansive, phase of the castle to Caux's newly elevated status - bringing with it the requirement to maintain a household suitable to his office and a castle adequate as a residence for Royal visitors (Beckett 1989, 11).

There is compelling evidence that a regularly planned village, comprising certainly the North Row and perhaps also the morphologically similar South Row, might be a contemporary creation. Morphologically, the North Row, with its back lane abutting the southern defenses of the outer bailey is evocative of an episode of planned settlement layout contemporary with the extension of the castle defenses. Archaeological evidence from excavation on Top Lane (Challis 1994) indicates Medieval occupation starting in the 12th century, the already noted sinuous croft boundaries, particularly in the North Row, might suggest that the settlement was laid out over pre-existing arable strips.

In objection to this, it must be noted that for a brief period in the early 13th century Laxton castle passed into Royal hands, those of King John, and it is conceivable that the expansive outer bailey might reflect his sporadic use of the castle. Royal accounts record repairs to Laxton castle in 1205-7 and the construction of a new pigeon house in 1213-4 (Colvin 1963, 979). However, there are no records of substantial building work, and the sums spent on these two occasions seem unlikely to be sufficient to support the construction of a substantial defended enclosure, thus it remains most likely that the outer bailey was de Caux's work and already in existence when John seized Laxton castle in 1204.

Such a regulated settlement, combining defensive, administrative and agricultural functions must have had considerable status. Beckett (1989) raised the possibility that in the 12th century at least Laxton may have had a market. As noted above, Pierce's map of 1635 shows that a substantial open space may once have existed adjacent to Crosshill; this space may have served as a market. Such morphological features are apparent in a number of other villages with early markets (Taylor 1989). Although no market is documented at Laxton this need not be a complete objection and an prescriptive market, perhaps flourishing during Laxton's life as a centre for Sherwood and before the creation of the nearby Markets at Wellow in 1286 and Tuxford in 1361 (Unwin 1981, 235) remains an interesting speculation.

The size and regular plan the settlement of Laxton, coupled with the presence of a substantial castle, regional administrative functions and a possible market, must raise the question of whether the planned settlement was originally intended to be a town. Certainly Laxton exhibited town-like wealth and status in the 13th century, for example in 1207 the men of Laxton were able to raise £100 to prevent King John from burning the village, and both population and tax income were above those of the neighboring towns of Retford and Tuxford (Beckett 1989, 12). Whatever the case there is no record of grants of burgage tenure and it is therefore clear that Laxton never achieved official recognition of its apparent status.

The later history of Laxton is one of gradual decline in political importance, probably coupled with a gradual transition from a community with regional administrative functions to one based on agriculture. In the 1230s the manor of Laxton and the office of Keeper of the Royal Forests passed into the hands of the Everingham family, who held it until the late 14th century. In 1286 Robert de Everingham was imprisoned in Nottingham Castle for trespass on the royal venison and was stripped of his office by the King (Crook 1979). At his death the following year Robert's *inquisition post mortem* revealed that the manor was not sufficient for the sustenance of his heir (Orwin and Orwin 1938) and at or about this time the de Everingham family abandoned Laxton in favour of the manor of Everingham in Yorkshire.

Paradoxically the crisis in the fortunes of the Everingham's does not appear to have been reflected in the life of the village as a whole. The reduction in the bounds of the Royal Forest confirmed by Henry I in 1232, but instituted as early as 1227 (Grant 1991, 144; Crook 1979, 39) removed Laxton from the Forest and released it from the prohibitions that this enforced, though the actual impact of forest law on agriculture is open to debate as although Beckett (1989) suggests that this allowed an expansion in arable cultivation to its maximum, in fact both the West and Mill field are first documented prior to the reduction in the forest (Mill Field in 1189 and West Field in 1232; Cameron 1980). The creation of the South Field and perhaps the East Field, may represent later agricultural expansion (however, Cameron 1980, prefers East Field as an early creation due to its proximity to the village). In this light it is worth noting that close and furlong names recorded in 1635 referring to former woodland or woodland clearance are common both in South and East field, and that both also have a number of names indicating land of poor agricultural value (Foulds 1989, 4). It is conceivable that these names preserve a record of later 13th century expansion on to former waste and woodland and it may be that this agricultural growth was responsible for the prosperity evidence by Laxton's tax returns in the early 14th century (Beckett 1989, 12).

In the 14th century Laxton is likely to have suffered in the social and economic crisis affecting the entire of England, particularly in the wake of the Black death in 1348-9. Documentary evidence, principally the

inquisition post mortem of the various Lords of the manor show that rents and land values fell throughout the century (Orwin 1938, 105-107). During this period both the site of the manor and many of the fixtures of village life, such as the mill, appear to have fallen into a state of ruin. Falling rents probably reflect a marked decline in the number of tenants, the east Midlands as a whole having lost at least half its population between 1348 and 1400 (Beckett 1989, 14). In Laxton it is likely that the vacation of many former tofts (by 1635 20 tofts, some 19% of the total in the village were vacant) reflects the decline in population experienced in this period. Excavation of two tofts on Top Lane, both vacant in 1635, showed that they had been occupied in the early medieval period, but the absence of late Medieval pottery suggests that by the 15th century they had been abandoned (Challis 1994). Certainly it is clear that by 1635 the original regulated plan of the North and South rows had undergone much reorganization, probably as a result of the opportunities and necessities presented by a declining village population.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has set out to examine the possible cause for the creation of one regularly planned settlement in the Middle Ages. While in the past it has often been the case that a single cause has been sought for the genesis of settlements with a regulated plan across the English countryside, the example of Laxton suggests that it is in locally prevailing circumstances that the causes for such settlement innovation may be found. While Dyer (1985, 32; 2002, 22) has argued strongly against the view that regular planned villages were the results of intervention by landlords, at Laxton it appears that a change in circumstances affecting the status of the chief landlord is the most compelling reason for a planned settlement. Significantly Creighton (1999, 31) has noted a number of other examples of settlements rising to administrative prominence linked with castle building and settlement planning.

Although the way in which change and innovation in settlement planform was articulated among the village community is beyond the power of the surviving evidence to decide, it appears clear that in Laxton at least, the catalyst for change was provided by the changing fortunes of the landlord.

REFERENCES

- Astill, G. 1988 'Rural Settlement: the Toft and the Croft' in *The Countryside of Medieval England* (Eds Astill, G and Grant, A). Oxford Blackwell
- Beckett, J.V. 1989 *A History of Laxton*. Oxford Basil Blackwell
- Cameron, A. 1980 'Laxton before 1635' *East Midlands Geographer* 7, 6.
- Challis, K. 1994 'Trial Excavation at Top Lane, Laxton, Nottinghamshire' *Transactions of the Thorton Society of Nottinghamshire* 98, 24-31
- Colvin, H.M. 1963 *History of the Kings Works*. London HMSO.
- Creighton, O. H. 1999 'Early castles and rural settlement patterns: insights from Yorkshire and the East Midlands.' *Medieval Settlement Research Group Report 14*, 29-33.
- Crook, D. 1979 'The Struggle Over Forest Boundaries in Nottinghamshire, 1218-1227' *Transactions of the Thorton Society of Nottingham* 83, 33-45
- Crook, D. 1980 'The Early Keepers of Sherwood Forest' *Transactions of the Thorton Society of Nottingham* 84, 14-19
- Dyer, C. 2002 *Making a Living in the Middle Ages. The People of Britain 850-1520*. Newhaven. Yale University Press.
- Dyer, C. 1985 'Power and conflict in the medieval village.' In Hooke, D. (Ed) *Medieval Villages: a Review of Current Work*. Oxford: Oxford University Committee for Archaeology Monograph No 5, 27-32.

- Ellis, A.S. 1877 'Biographical Notes on the Yorkshire Tenants Named in Domesday Book' *Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Journal* iv 226-228
- Foulds, T. 1989 'Laxton: Field-Names as Evidence for the Ancient Landscape' *Nottingham Historian* 42.
- Grant, R. 1991 *The Royal Forests of England*. Stroud Alan Sutton
- Higham, R. and Barker, P. 1992 *Timber Castles* London Batsford.
- Orwin, C.S. 1938 *The Open Fields*. Oxford Clarendon Press
- Sanders, I.J. 1960 *English Baronies. A Study of Their Origin and Descent 1086-1327*. Oxford Clarendon Press
- Sheppard, J. 1974 'Metrological Analysis of Regular Village Plans in Yorkshire' *Agricultural History Review* 22, 118-135
- Stenton, F.M. 1961 *The First Century of English Feudalism 1066-116*. Oxford Clarendon Press
- Taylor, C 1983 *Village and Farmstead. A History of Rural Settlement in England*. London George Philip
- Taylor, C. 1989 'Medieval Market Grants and Village Morphology' *Landscape History* 4, 21-38
- Unwin, T. 1981 'Rural Marketing in Medieval Nottinghamshire' *Journal of Historical Geography* 7,3. 231-51

Acknowledgements

English Heritage, Nottinghamshire County Council, Newark and Sherwood District Council and the Crown Estate Commissioners are acknowledged for funding the various episodes of fieldwork and research that have contributed to this paper. A number of people have contributed ideas and argument to the debate over Laxton's origins and the author is particularly grateful to Mike Bishop of Nottinghamshire County Council for his input and advice and to Gavin Kinsley for his comments on an earlier version of this paper. The figures were drawn by Jane Goddard and Richard Sheppard.

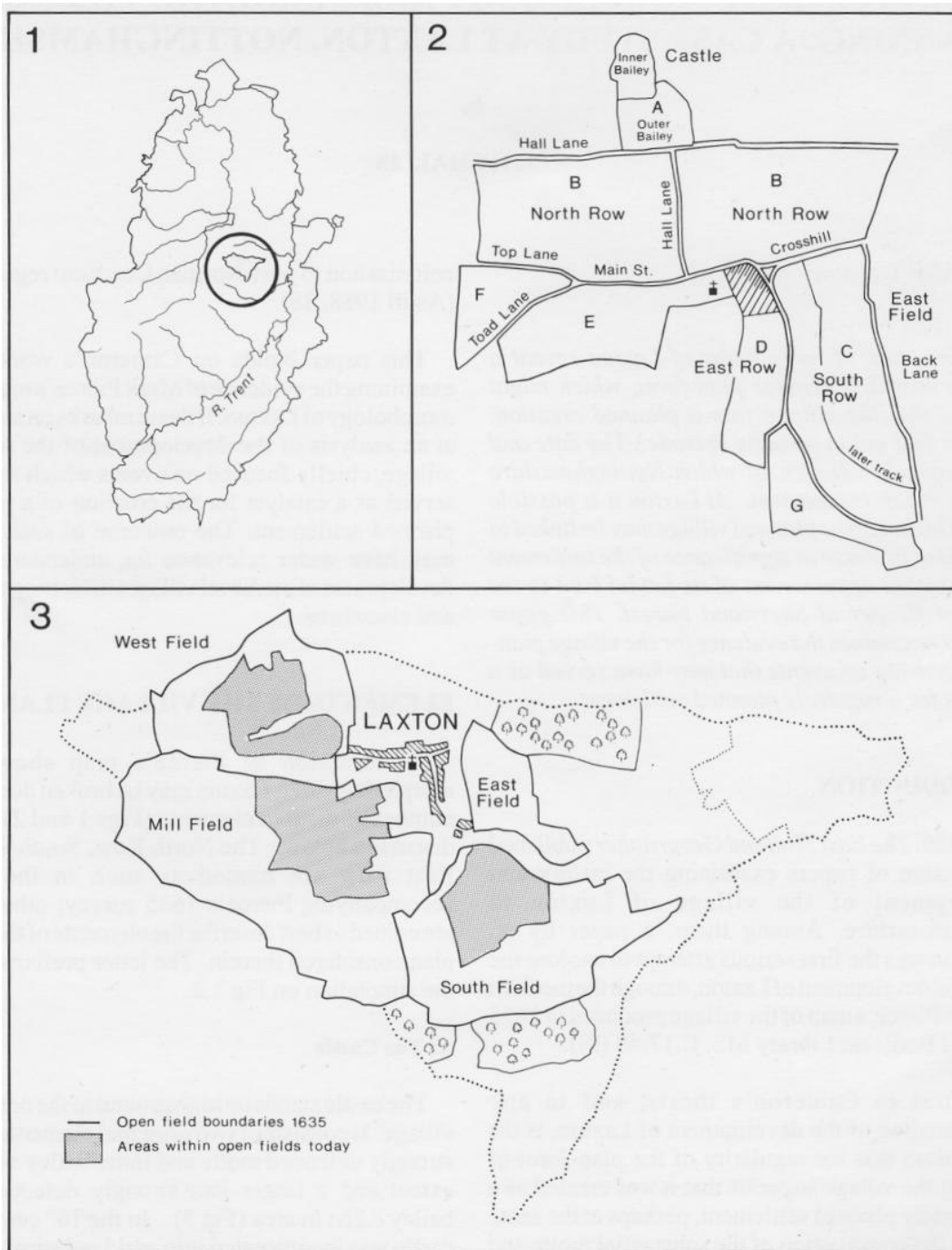


Figure 1-2 schematic plan of Laxton showing the morphological elements discussed in the text; 1-3 plan of the parish showing the layout of the principal landscape elements.



Figure 2. Extract from Mark Pierce's map of Laxton in 1635 showing the village and castle, as traced by C.S. Orwin (1938).

Figure 3. Modern plan of Laxton showing the location of the excavation on Top Lane and the layout of the motte and bailey castle.