The History of Wharram Percy, England’s Most Famous Deserted Medieval Village

written by Alexandru November 23, 2017

Introduction

There are about 3,000 deserted medieval villages in England. Why these settlements were abandoned is not always easy to determine. Reasons could vary greatly depending on various factors: invasion, war, disease (especially the infamous Black Death), famine, but also climate change, technological innovations and changes in the economy. Sometimes, the inhabitants were evicted against their will, even having their dwellings demolished. This was the case of Wharram Percy, arguably the most important and well-known deserted medieval village in England, where the villagers were driven out of their homes in order to convert their farmlands into sheep pastures.

History of the Site
Aerial view of Wharram Percy

The decayed remains of Wharram Percy are located in modern-day North Yorkshire, in a wooded valley from the Yorkshire Wolds. The village was founded in the 9th or 10th century, lived its heydays between the 12th and 14th centuries, and then went into decline, being abandoned in the early 16th century. All that remains of the village is its layout (i.e. the outline of its houses), and its ruined stone church, the only medieval building still standing today. The site of Wharram Percy, however, was inhabited long before the foundation of the village, dating back to prehistoric times. Agriculture was practiced in the area since the Neolithic, but the first evidence of settlement dates back to the Bronze Age. A small village existed on the site of Wharram Percy in 50 BC, when at least two farms were established there. Later, during the Roman era, the settlement evolved into a larger farmstead (five farms) overseen by a nearby villa. This Roman farmstead was abandoned in the 5th century as a result of the collapse of Roman rule in Britain, and permanent settlement would only be re-established in the 9th or 10th century. A Saxon presence is attested since the 7th century, when small huts with sunken floors appeared scattered across the valley.
Wharram Percy’s layout plan

These buildings were probably only temporary dwellings raised by lowland shepherds who drove their sheep over the Wolds to graze in the summer and autumn months. Eventually, these shepherds organized an annual animal fair in the valley, prompting the establishment of a permanent settlement there. Thus, the village of Wharram was founded between 850 and 950. This period coincided with the Viking invasion of England and the foundation of the so-called Viking Kingdom of Jórvík (Scandinavian York), an event which, together with administrative reorganization of the country (new parish and field boundaries), might have played a role in the foundation of the village.

Wharram and the Percy Family

The Domesday Book page on which Wharram Percy is recorded

Wharram was founded with a small wooden church and a pond with a watermill. The church, dedicated to Saint Martin, was rebuilt in stone in the mid-11th century, probably just before the 1066 Norman conquest of England. After the conquest, the first written sources relating to Wharram start to appear, providing valuable information about the village and its evolution from the 11th century onwards. Apparently, the village was the property of Karli and Lagmann, two Viking men judging from their names. The Domesday Book, a manuscript record of the Great Survey from 1086, listed them as lords of Wharram until 1066, when William the Conqueror confiscated their lands.
Armorials of Percy ancient: azure, five fusils conjoined in fesse or

Wharram’s value was recorded as £3.00 while the tax it paid amounted to 9 geld units, a very large sum indicating that the village was rather prosperous and wealthy. By 1086, William the Conqueror granted Karli and Lagmann’s properties to a certain Osbert the Sheriff, while also granting some land to William de Percy, a powerful Norman baron and founder the great English House of Percy, from which the Earls and Dukes of Northumberland were descended. Within less than century, the Percy family would come to dominate the village, being the major landowners together with the Chamberlain family (which had acquired the lands of Osbert the Sheriff).

By 1166, the Percys erected a large manor house, today known simply as the South Manor, and expanded Saint Martin’s church. Ten years later, by 1176, they bought (or were granted) half of the Chamberlain holdings. Then, by 1254, the Chamberlains sold the remainder of their lands to the Percy family. Shortly afterwards, the South Manor was demolished and a new manor – the North Manor – was erected, while two extra rows of peasant houses were built as well, probably by Peter Percy I. It was after this event that the village started being called Wharram Percy, having the family’s name added as a suffix.
**Times of Trouble**

Peter I’s son Robert Percy III enlarged the North Manor and improved conditions in the village. The number of households increased to 40 and the population is thought to have reached around 200 under his rule. However, a series of misfortunes struck Wharram Percy during the 14th century. In 1315, Peter Percy II, the son and successor of Robert III, died young with no male heir, allowing the Crown to take over the estate. To aggravate the situation, the Scots launched a series of raids in 1319, terrorizing the region for three years. They pillaged and burned nearby villages, and caused many locals to flee.

Wharram Percy seems to have escaped destruction, but many of its inhabitants fled nonetheless. Many houses were abandoned and the population dropped from around 200 to around 70. By 1323, the watermill from the village pond was no longer operational and 2/3 of the arable land was no longer cultivated. By 1334, there were only 18 families still living in Wharram Percy. Eustachia, the daughter of the late Peter Percy II, married Walter Heslerton, a nobleman from a nearby village, in order to free Wharram Percy from the Crown’s control and restore it to its former glory. The two had a son together, Walter II, but he would not inherit the estate.

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**Medieval peasants laboring in the fields of their lord**

The Black Death, which swept across Europe since 1346, reached Wharram Percy in 1349, but it did not have a major impact on its demographics. The plague only claimed the lives of around twenty people, reducing the village’s population from 67 to 45. Among the victims of the plague, however, was Walter Heslerton. Since his son Walter II was still a minor, he could not inherit the estate, allowing the Crown to assume control of the village once more. This time, the Crown declared Eustachia mentally unstable to keep her from interfering.

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**Final Decline and Desertion**

When Walter Heslerton II died in 1367, the Crown returned Wharram Percy to a Percy family member, Henry Percy of Spofforth. He did not live in the village, however, and no other Percy ever would. The North Manor, the residence of the Percys since 1254, became a decaying ruin, and many other buildings in the village were decrepit. Regardless, a partial recovery took place. The watermill was restored and all the farmland was cultivated again. In total, 30 families lived in Wharram Percy around that time.
In 1403, the Percys decided to sell the village to the Hylton family of Sunderland. Baron William Hylton, the new lord of Wharram Percy, renovated the church, but left the manor in ruins because he never went to live there. When he died in 1436, only 16 families remained; Wharram Percy would never recover. During the 15th century, woolen cloth became one of England’s most profitable exports, leading to an increasingly higher demand for wool. As a result, many landowners switched to sheep farming, turning their arable fields into pastures. This ruined many rural, agricultural communities in England.

The inhabitants of Wharram Percy fell victim to an economy they could not control

By 1458, the Hyltons started converting Wharram Percy’s farmlands into grazing grounds for sheep. The villagers who were farmers were forced to move out, having no more fields to cultivate and no source of income. Between 1488 and 1506 the last four families were evicted and had their houses destroyed. A skeleton discovered by archaeologists inside one of the buildings might have been the last inhabitant of Wharram Percy, someone who refused to leave his home. He was supposedly killed when the decrepit building he was occupying collapsed on him. In the 1540s, the only inhabitants of Wharram Percy were 1,240 sheep and the two shepherds who were looking after them.

**Significance and Importance**
Wharram Percy is among the largest and most well preserved deserted medieval villages from England. The site of the village was first surveyed and mapped in 1850, but modern research only began after World War II, starting with aerial photography in 1948. Soon thereafter, from 1950 until 1990, Wharram Percy was excavated by archaeologists every summer, becoming the first site in Britain where the technique of open-area excavation was applied. The intensive research of the site led to the foundation of the Medieval Settlement Research Group in 1952, which would play a major role in studying and understanding many aspects of medieval peasant life.

Saint Martin’s church, the only medieval building still standing in Wharram Percy, was the object of much investigation. In the 1960s and 1970s, archaeologists recovered nearly 700 skeletons (687 to be exact) from the church and its attached graveyard. This was the first total excavation of a church in Britain. The bones that were unearthed provided researchers with invaluable information about the inhabitants of Wharram Percy, revealing, for example, that they were much healthier and lived longer than their city-dwelling counterparts. In more recent times, analysis of the skeletal remains revealed that some corpses were mutilated and burned before burial, indicating a belief in the living dead.
The ruins of Saint Martin’s church

These discoveries are all very important, as they helped reshape the image of the medieval village and the medieval peasant. Wharram Percy was (and still is) subjected to intensive investigation by specialists from different fields, including botanists. This multidisciplinary approach achieved to improve the understanding of the medieval world in general by setting its population in various contexts (social, economic, cultural, etc). Between 1948 and 2012, a 13-volume series of reports were published, making Wharram Percy one of the most intensely and extensively researched historical sites in the world. Yet, many questions remain.