

Appendix 7

A Landscape History of the Upper Onny Valley

Andy Wigley, Sustainability Group, Shropshire County Council

Analysis of the landscape history of the upper Onny Valley has been conducted as part of the Shropshire Historic Landscape Characterisation Project, which is currently being conducted by the Sustainability Group at Shropshire County Council. This forms part of a national initiative directed and financed by English Heritage in partnership with various English local authorities. The aim is, for the first time, to produce overviews of the history of the modern landscape for entire counties, based upon an assessment of a restricted but holistic range of sources. The process involves examining a range of modern and historic maps using a sophisticated computer based GIS (Geographical Information System) programme, supported up by a powerful database system. The key principle is that the landscape as it exists today, and as it is depicted on the most recent editions of Ordnance Survey maps, forms the starting point for this assessment. This means that we are able account for very recent, as well as more ancient, aspects of the landscapes history.

The approach ultimately results in the production of a series of colour coded maps, which reflect the likely age of the various different components (e.g. fields, woods, settlements etc.) that make up the modern landscape. This information can then be used for various purposes, including the generation of better informed land management policies which seek to safeguard the historic environment and, as in this instance, to help members of the public to understand and celebrate their surroundings.

Whilst the aim is to characterise (i.e. assess and describe) the landscape as it exists today, the data which the project generates can also be manipulated to produce overviews of the landscape as it may have existed in the past. The example presented here represents an attempt to portray the medieval landscape of the Upper Onny Valley. Whilst it is not always possible to reconstruct what the landscape would have been like in all areas (hence the gaps), such maps provide a very useful means of understanding how the use of the land in the past has shaped the modern landscape.

Both maps show that the landscape of the upper Onny Valley is structured around the division between the higher land in the northern and eastern parts of the area, and the lower ground in the south. In places, for example around Myndtown, along the south-western edge of The Long Mynd, the distinction between these two zones remains sharp. Elsewhere, such as the area to the north of Norbury, it has been blurred by the different field patterns that reflect successive intakes and encroachments spanning several centuries.

Much of the higher ground would have been open moorland and rough grassland in the Middle Ages, and both the Stiperstones and The Long Mynd lay within medieval forests. It must be emphasised, however, that this does not imply that they were densely wooded but represents a legal designation that gave the king (or other noble) the right to keep deer and make forest law. These areas would have been subject to common grazing rights, and the holloways (deeply worn trackways) that would have used to drive stock up on

to the higher ground are still survive in some places today. For instance, a number of good examples can be seen on the flanks of The Long Mynd immediately above Asterton, where a series of trackways radiate out from the hamlet at the base of the slope.

Large blocks of moorland survive today on the Stiperstones ridge and The Long Mynd, with smaller pockets in the western part of the area on Heath Mynd and Black Rhadley Hill. Over time, however, the amount of open land has been gradually reduced, as successive generations have sought to enclose and improve the land. David Pannett and David Preshous are due to talk about this process in their guided walk around Norbury, but another good example can be seen to the east of Wentnor. As one follows the road out of the village towards Prolley Moor, it follows a slightly sinuous route as it passes through the older fields around the village. After it crosses the Crifftin Brook, however, it becomes much straighter and the surrounding fields become more regular and are defined by very straight field boundaries. Both the roads and the fields were almost certainly laid out at the same time by surveyors (as indicated by the 'planned enclosure' category on the current character map), as part of the enclosure of Prolley Moor in the 1850s. At the foot of The Long Mynd scarp the field pattern changes again, with the small, more irregular paddocks that run along the edge of the slope around Rose Cottage. The probably represent encroachments onto the common land by cottagers (identified as 'irregular squatter enclosure' on the current character), although whether they are earlier or later than the fields on Prolley Moor is difficult to tell without further research. Finally, an example of a large twentieth enclosure of an area of land on The Long Mynd can be seen to the north, along the road between Rose Cottage and Stanbatch.

On the lower ground, in the southern part of the upper Onny Valley, the field patterns tend to be more ancient. Although in places there has been some enlargement and amalgamation over the course of the twentieth century, the probable extent of medieval cultivation in the area can still be recognised. During the late medieval and early modern periods the common townland fields, with their characteristic long, narrow plots, would have been gradually enclosed. This process would have occurred on a piecemeal basis (hence the 'piecemeal enclosure' category on the current character map), through oral agreements between individual farmers seeking to consolidate their formerly scattered holdings. The fields which result from this process can be relatively easily identified, both on the maps and on the ground, because their boundaries often follow a sinuous course (like a reversed S), or have distinctive kinks ('dog-legs') in them. Particularly well preserved examples of such fields patterns can be found around Norbury and Wentnor. Away from these areas, wetter meadows and pastures can also be seen, particularly along the various stream courses and towards the northern end of the River East Onny around Bridges and Ratlinghope.

Much of the woodland that exists today in the Upper Onny Valley are nineteenth and twentieth century plantations. However, Linley Big Wood and Hayes Wood to the north of Linley Hall, which although they now have a mixed composition (i.e. consist of a mixture of broadleaved and coniferous species), have been identified by English Nature as being 'ancient-semi natural'. They may, therefore, have medieval origins. Another fairly sizable

block of woodland may also have once existed along the western side of the East Onny valley, between Walkmill and Kinnerton. In this area, the shape of the field boundaries, the pattern of dispersed farmsteads and the sinuous course of the roads all suggest that the fields in this area may have been created through the gradual clearance and enclosure (or 'assartment') of a tract of woodland. This process was well underway in Shropshire by the thirteenth century and continued throughout the medieval period and into early modern times. However, more documentary research is required before we can assign a date to the possible assarts in the upper Onny Valley.

The settlement pattern in the upper Onny Valley is again characterised by a split between the higher ground and the lower lying areas. In the upland parts of the area we can see a dispersed settlement pattern of scattered farms and isolated cottages, with the occasional smaller hamlet such as Ratlinghope and Medicot. When not obviously recent in date, many of these settlements probably date to the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, and will often be associated with the enclosure of former areas of open land (e.g. the farms on Prolley Moor). In some cases, however, they may well have earlier origins (e.g. Adstone, Kinnerton, Medicott, Ratlinghope etc.), since recent survey work in the Clee Hills by the former Royal Commission on the Historic Monuments of England (now part of English Heritage), suggests that the medieval settlement pattern in Shropshire's uplands was also fairly dispersed.

On the lower ground, the settlement pattern is more nucleated, with the largest settlements represented by the villages of More, Norbury and Wentnor. We can also identify a second category of slightly smaller hamlets (e.g. Asterton, Hardwick, Myndtown and Whitcot), which comprise of two or more farms and perhaps a small number of cottages. The origins of both types of settlement probably lie in the medieval period. Beyond these villages and hamlets there are also a number of outlying farms, many of which probably range in date from the eighteenth-twentieth centuries.

Figure 1 – HLC map for Lydham, Myndton, Norbury and Wentnor Parishes, Upper Onny Valley.

