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**Frocester: Landscape and Settlement from the 5th Century to Modern Times**

by E. G. Price

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Frocester, which today covers about 1,800 acres, extends over virtually the whole of the largest terrace of glacial hillwash in the lower Severn Vale. It has been my home and workplace for most of my life. In this I am merely one of the latest of a long succession of farmers, each of whom left his mark on the land I walk over today. Not all of this record is visible, but some of the results of nearly 40 years of investigation, now in course of publication, present a shadowy picture of agricultural development from its earliest prehistoric beginnings up to the immediate post-Roman period.¹ I am now endeavouring to piece together evidence from both fieldwork and documents to illustrate the continuity of medieval and later settlements. The task has perhaps been made easier by the long periods of stable monastic and private ownership of the Frocester estate as a whole, something which has largely persisted to the present day.

How far back can this tendency towards stability be projected, and to what extent did the Romano-British landscape survive into the medieval period? I would suggest that the location of Frocester, in the heartland of a post-Roman community, makes it likely that, whatever might have happened on an individual site, the landowning élite of the Romano-British period would have been reluctant to leave and would at least have remained in contact into the 5th and 6th centuries. Roman tax demands and the pressures of an overriding villa economy would probably already have driven the peasant community into dependence, possibly to the extent of virtual slavery. Complete abandonment of this productive land, even in the event of a population decline, seems unlikely.

Dispossession of the British landowners and the establishment of Saxon overlords seems inevitable after the disasters of the late 6th century. A tied workforce, essential for the future successful management of the estate, would for the most part be likely to survive, only to exchange one hard taskmaster for another. In such circumstances, and because of the economic risks involved, the inherent conservatism of those who work the land, with a tradition of continuity behind them, would ensure that any changes, unless forced upon them, would be gradual. With no certain evidence for a resident lord, this may be reflected in the survival of the structure of the estate as a whole. A recent source² has suggested that this may be demonstrated in three ways:

1. The evidence of physical boundaries.
2. Tenurial arrangements.
3. Survival or continuity of an estate centre.

Taking these points in turn, it is first of all noticeable that over much of its length, Frocester's ancient parish boundary follows topographical features (Fig. 5). On the north and west it follows
the stream which defines the edge of the gravel terrace, while on the south-east it runs along the
top of the Cotswold escarpment. However, part of the north-easter boundary is demonstrably
medieval, being related to the interlocking ridge and furrow pattern. The south-western bound-
ary was the subject of a 1313 A.D. intercommuning agreement with Coaley. It cuts off a small
part of the gravel spread and most of one of the three major Romano-British sites located on it.
Until recently this area was still known as the Frocester Lower Fields.

Tenurial arrangements are less likely to leave traces in the archaeological record, but the
name Frocester suggests an early, if not continuing settlement. Before the early 9th century it
was an estate belonging to Mercian royalty, and a minster church dedicated to St. Peter was
established on what is believed to have been the most prestigious Romano-British site in the
area. The considerable acreage of medieval demesne land surrounding it may have been a
survival from this earlier period.

The monastic manor centre is closely associated with the location of the remaining major
Romano-British site, currently under excavation, but this may perhaps be no more than a reflec-
tion of the high quality of the surrounding land.

Taken as a whole the evidence hints at continuity, but the gap of more than 250 years cannot
at present be satisfactorily closed. Changes, however, did take place. Excavation of the medieval
ploughsoils overlying the above-mentioned Romano-British site has demonstrated that while
the earliest arable, laid out as a wide, flat strip, produced only residual Romano-British material,
the ridge and furrow which overlay it contained 11th-century potsherds.

The pattern of early medieval settlement (Fig. 4) also differs markedly from that of the Roman
period. Spreads of similar 11th-century pottery suggest that there was now a straggle of house
sites dotted alongside the line of the existing Roman road (Margery, 543), and along what is
probably also an early road alignment running from it towards the church and the south-west.
Although some of these early sites were abandoned, and became sealed under ridge and furrow,
later settlement followed the same pattern. Occupation was extended further down the land to
Downton, but tended to concentrate nearer the main crossroads. No medieval settlement has
been found either along the road (Mill Lane) towards Leonard Stanley and the north-east or,
despite the suggestions of county historians from 1703 onwards, around the site of the early
parish church, standing isolated in the fields about a mile from the village centre (Fig. 1). The
possibility of aceramic earlier occupation cannot, however, be discounted.

Frocester was one of the earliest possessions of St. Peter’s Abbey in Gloucester and, with
some notable exceptions, few relevant records survived the abbey’s dissolution in 1539. The
Domesday Book, despite the difficulties of interpretation, therefore provides a valuable first
glimpse of the structure of the 11th-century manor.

In Frocester, the ratio between the numbers of ploughs and the hideage (tax) assessment is
2.2:1, an apparent excess capacity similar to that found on neighbouring estates in the Vale.
However, if the assessment was based locally on the value of only the cropped half of a two-
course rotation rather than on the whole of the arable acreage, the figures balance, and the five
hides and eleven ploughs suggest a total of about 1,000 acres of arable. The four ploughs on
the demesne represent a 36%-63% division of this land between the lord and his tenants, a
ratio which persisted up to 1550. It would be interesting to know who had the ten acres of
meadow. Eighteen tenants are listed. That number, together with an addition for the famuli or
servants of the manor centre, suggests a population of 100. This is almost certainly much smaller
than that of the Romano-British predecessor. The eight villani or major tenants are probably
the forerunners of the same number of later virgate holders, whose farm sites have been identi-
fied; the three servi or slaves endorse a tradition in the West of workers closely tied to the land.
The dimensions of the Domesday woodland closely follow those suggested by later field names, the varieties of hedge species, and the record of the late 18th-century reclamation of the Buckholt hillside. This tree cover, along with that of Lotgrove, extended much further down the scarp slope than does the woodland today. Medieval tenants' duties included carting firewood from the woodlands to the abbey in Gloucester, and recent ploughing has revealed much evidence of charcoal burning. The ridge and furrow of the eight acres of Oldlands represents an early, but undated, expansion of the demesne arable onto the hillside. It was pasture when first recorded in a lease of 1517, but was occasionally ploughed later.

Little is known of the 200 years up to the 13th century, other than the names of five virgate holders in 1225, but this must have been a period of considerable growth and change. The record continues with a detailed extent of the manor in 1266–7. There were by that time about 50 habitations, which suggests that the population had doubled to between 200 and 250, a figure comparable with that of the 17th and early 18th centuries. The tenanted land, for which labour rents overwhelmingly predominate, included the eight virgates, twenty half-virgates and smaller holdings, and a similar number of cottage plots, totalling in all about 830 acres. These figures compare so closely with those of the mid 16th century that they confirm the long period of conservative management by the abbey.

Information on the demesne is also lacking, but there is mention of labour for a vineyard, and court rolls of 1291–2 refer to various trespasses into the lord's corn, his wheat, oats and beans, his park, and his pasture and woodland. The park (Fig. 9) may be the field of that name first identified on a map of 1737 and still so-named today. The service burden of the tenants and
the necessity for the huge estate barn (Fig. 2) point to well-organized direct farming. The arable is likely to have been in excess of the 480 demesne acres suggested by Domesday, and the total for the whole estate would have been near that of the 1,400 acres of ridge and furrow recorded in the field. This evidence, combined with that of the hedgerow study (Fig. 6),\textsuperscript{15} has proved to be a sound base for research into the layout of the field system to complement the existing documentary sources. These are voluminous, but virtually all post-date 1500 A.D. Some field names, e.g. Lyde and Stanburgh, are certainly Old English (Anglo-Saxon), and there are some 13th–14th-century references to fields.\textsuperscript{16} The evidence suggests that when fully developed the medieval landscape consisted of ten unequal-sized areas of open field cultivated on a three-year rotation. Their boundaries coincided for the most part with those of the parish, some natural features, and the internal road and track system. The boundaries of Southfield were confirmed by the earlier-mentioned intercommoning agreement between the abbey and Thomas of Berkeley, the then lord of Coaley. The text includes the earliest known use of the word 'peasant' in any medieval document in the country and, significantly for future developments on the estate, the abbot reserved to himself the right to inclose Frocester lands.

About 11 acres in Southfield, sub-divided by small ditches and for the most part unploughed to this day, probably represent the Domesday meadow. A further 25 acres of meadow lay along the northern and western boundaries of Westfield. Most of it related to the narrow floodplain of Wickster's Brook and was encroached upon by ridge and furrow. Broadmead formed a 40-acre block of meadow in the centre of the estate, and was reserved for the lord. There were also, apparently, about eight acres of woodland by Gabbish Hard (now Capehall), at the lowest (south-western) end of the parish.
The bulk of the demesne (Fig. 7) can now be seen as a large inclosed unit, its perimeter defined mainly by hedged mound or ditch. It extended over the whole of the upper, well-drained south-eastern part of the estate and included the hillside woodland. With the addition of Broadmead and over 70 acres of arable strips in the open fields, it totalled about 800 acres.

Court rolls survive for October 1412 and Easter 1413. They illustrate the change which occurred during the troubled years of the 14th and 15th centuries, although the family names of five of the 13th-century virgate holders (one from 1225) and four of the lesser tenants do suggest some continuity during this period. Indeed, the descendants of one smallholder, Robert Chapman, gradually increased their acreage and farmed successfully in Frocester into the 18th century. They, however, were the exception. The record lists 18 long-established *nativi* who had recently absconded, and the names of 33 newcomers to the estate. More than 20 buildings, variously described as parts of houses, halls and bakeries, haybarns, stables and a sheepcot, were derelict, ruinous, or generally in worse condition than when previously recorded. Despite dire threats, and the imposition of penalties, the occupiers were reluctant or refused to maintain them: in some cases they simply left their land.

Of the eight known leases only three, concerning a renewal to a widow; the surrender of a virgate without a taker; and a grant of cottage with one acre, dealt with servile tenancies. The tenements paid an enhanced rent which, with minor exceptions, included cash for commuted labour services. There was an occasional allowance in respect of maintenance or redundant buildings.

Several holdings by now included plots of demesne land, the first evidence of a change away from direct farming by the abbey. By 1539 this practice of infeudation had been extended to 140 acres of roughly equal areas of arable and closes of pasture, held by 17 tenants. Most of these holdings became permanently alienated from the demesne land when it came into private hands after the Dissolution. The greater part of the demesne was, however, included with other assets as part of the ‘farm’ of the manor. The earliest lease has not survived, but the name of one 15th-century tenant is known from a contract of 1501. This is a lease for a term of 70 years, and it details various benefits and obligations including the rent, mainly payable in specified quantities of certain grains (the yield equivalent of about 50 acres), to be delivered to the abbey cellarer. Additions made to the structure of the Manor Court House at about this time suggest that it was being converted into a residence. A smaller half-timbered replacement court house was been identified in the village (Fig. 3). Known today as Bridge Cottage, it too soon became a farmhouse.

The breakdown of the old manorial system and the growing commercialism of farming, with its emphasis increasingly on livestock, led to the conversion (Fig. 8) of 290 of the 700 acres of tenanted arable in the open fields into closes of pasture by 1550. To this can be added the 80 acres of permanent meadow of this date. No contemporary record of the beginning of this major change to the landscape had been found, but the hedge species count (Fig. 6) suggests that, along with the leasing of closes of demesne land, it began in the 15th century. These small fields stand out from the other, much larger demesne enclosures, whose internal hedges are apparently later in date. One, indeed, is securely dated to the mid 18th century. In addition, the 60 acres of woodland in Lot/Ludgrove, the lower part of which possibly encroached onto ridge and furrow, was cleared during the early years of the 16th century. This was perhaps related to the need for timber in 1525, because fire had destroyed the roof of the 13th-century estate barn.

An inventory of 1552 provides further information. There were at least 42 houses and 9 cottages; 34 tenanted farms are listed, a number comparable with the 32 names in the Military Survey of 1572. The tenants held between them 36 copyhold leases for lives and 8 indentures for terms of years; the largest multiple holding was of 124 acres. A typical fragmented virgate
Fig. 3. Frocester: the 16th-century secondary court house (now Bridge Cottage).

comprised about 22 acres of arable, 15 acres of pasture, mostly enclosed, and 6 acres of meadow. It included stunted common grazing in the open fields for 20 sheep, 12 beasts and 2 horses. One ancient lease still listed pannage for pigs.

Unfortunately, only a précis of the demesne then in ‘farm’ is included, and it does little to supplement an earlier, detailed but very fragmentary record.\textsuperscript{25} The two documents relate to the Crown grant of the Frocester estate to Edward Seymour, duke of Somerset, and his subsequent attainder. Following this, the property was split into two. Seymour’s widow eventually repossessed the tenanted lands,\textsuperscript{26} which descended through her to members of the Warwick family. The demesne and other assets of the original ‘farm’ of the manor were acquired by George Huntley of Standish,\textsuperscript{27} who soon afterwards converted 300 acres of its arable to grass.\textsuperscript{28} This division into separate properties has, with more recent modifications, persisted to the present day.

The continuing piecemeal pattern of exchange and amalgamation of arable strips by the tenants prior to the conversion to pasture is well documented in the 17th and 18th century estate archives. Most of these, with the exception of some of the court rolls,\textsuperscript{29} are held in the Warwickshire Record Office.\textsuperscript{30} Some modern copies and local sources are available in Gloucester.

By 1605–7, 880 tenanted acres were almost evenly divided between arable and grassland. A survey of that date\textsuperscript{31} lists 20 copyhold tenants who between them occupied 25 tenements of 22–50 acres each. Five of those tenants also leased small additional acreages on term contracts. Three other indentures totalled four more tenements and 130 acres. The largest was in the
name of an outsider, Reginald Nicholson of Prestbury, gentleman. He held a combination of three tenements with 63 acres, which properties were in turn assigned to a Frocester resident. This is the first record of sub-letting, a practice which for a single year and a day was covered by the customs of the manor but for a longer term needed a special licence. It may in some cases relate to personal incapacity, or to a beneficiary under a will, but may also, perhaps, signify some form of mortgage, reflecting the increasingly heavy entry fines found towards the end of the century. The resident occupier of the property is not always known, but in the 18th century can sometimes be traced through the parish records.\textsuperscript{32}

The 1607 survey also lists 14 cottagers and smallholders, all with copyhold leases for lives. Another cottage and the ‘Churchhouse’\textsuperscript{33} were held for terms. The latter was leased collectively by the parish officers as a place for holding manor courts until 1696, when it was demolished and rebuilt as a farmhouse. Its site is that of today’s Church Farm.

The population figures calculated from the 1607 survey are in close agreement with the number of men listed in a muster roll of the same year.\textsuperscript{34} The latter also draws attention to the 26
craftsmen and labourers who occupied some of the 45–50 houses in the village. Overall there was probably some increase in the number of inhabitants.

By the later part of the century 41 tenants held 48 leases, 18 of them by indenture. Most of the leases itemize gardens, orchards and farm buildings, while some refer to tree planting, usually a specified small number of oaks, followed by ash and elm. The minutiae of the court rolls record damage to, and lack of maintenance of, live hedges, gates and foot-bridges, together with the recurring problem of silted-up ditches. There are a few references to sources of water; the numbers of varieties of shrub species associated with the surviving field ponds suggest that most of them were dug at the time of inclosure. The courts also recognized the need to examine and re-establish the ancient rights of access (Fig. 4) along tracks which had originally crossed the open field. That through Westfield remained a right of way into the 1930s.

Farm livestock detailed in contemporary wills and inventories usually included some cows—in one case a herd of 25—a yoke or two of oxen, other cattle, and sheep and pigs. Most farmers had only one or two horses. There is ample evidence of the importance of farmhouse cheese manufacture, and one reference to a cider mill.

The old manor and demesne, soon known locally as ‘Court Lands’, were held by the Huntleys until 1628, when the property was sold to Sir Robert Ducie. Detailed inventories of the domestic and farm buildings, goods and chattels survive. They refer to the barn, a disused water mill and the dovecot, a large rectangular 15th-century building which still stands today. A second monastic dovecote, in the centre of the village near St. Andrew’s chapel, was demolished early in the 17th century. The estate fields were ‘well gated or [had] gates to most of them’. A few years later the land was listed in round figures as 150 acres of arable, 100 acres of meadow, 200 acres of pasture and 150 acres of woodland, all of which was by then enclosed. The names and locations of these fields, together with some ‘detached’ parcels of land, are excellently depicted on an estate map of 1737 (Fig. 9). It includes the first illustration of the village as a whole, and accurately pinpoints the sites of 44 identifiable houses, St. Peter’s church and St. Andrew’s chapel, but omits the hamlet of Downton.

Most of the period covering the transition from the medieval farming pattern to that of the early 19th century is covered by the 18th-century leases, an estate inventory of 1777 and the early 19th-century sources. The numeration of the fields shown in the inventory is identical to that of a plan attached to a later sale schedule. This, however, does not illustrate the arable strips listed in the accompanying inventory. Nonetheless, the two sources make it possible to plot the layout of each holding with a fair degree of accuracy. Most holdings were still very fragmented, but some degree of rationalization had taken place, usually as the result of opportunistic consolidation of several adjacent properties. Thirty one tenants now held 51 leases, mostly old family copyholds, but there were new arrivals agreeing to term contracts or tenancies-at-will. The three largest holdings were each by then over 300 acres; seven exceeded 50 acres, and only eight were of less than 10 acres. The enclosed grassland (Fig. 10) now totalled nearly 890 acres, leaving only 260 acres of open-field arable. Thirty three houses, all directly associated with the land, are listed in the sale inventory. Two, the George Inn (1716) and the Crown (1751), stood opposite each other at the village crossroads. The site of a third inn, the Red Lion, is not known. The George eventually became a coaching stage on the main road up Frocester Hill. This was turnpiked in 1726 and greatly improved by a diversion which followed a much gentler incline round the slope to the south, avoiding the original, direct, steep zigzag route past the large quarry in Buckholt Wood, the local source of building stone from the Roman period onwards. This may be one reason why ‘The Old Hill’ as the former route was called, was maintained by the parish as a road until well into the 19th century.
Between 1750 and 1800 the old demesne, or Court Lands, now a farm attached to the Woodchester estate, appears to have been leased out and the outlying fields divided among a number of tenants. This arrangement ended in 1801 when the two landowners exchanged approximately 50 acres each of the fragmented parts of their respective estates to consolidate their property bounds (Fig. 11). The greater part of Broadmead was excluded from the agreement and remained an outlying part of what became Court farm until 1965.

After the exchange the whole farm of about 460 acres, with house and two cottages, was let to D.S. Hayward of Beverstone. He was the first of three generations of a progressive and well-recorded farming family, which held it for most of the 19th century. Initially the land was almost entirely permanent pasture for the production of milk and cheese. There were basket-willow plantations on some of the wetter ground and only 50 acres of arable. By the middle of the century the arable acreage had trebled and the farm carried a herd of 100 cows, with sheep and other livestock.

On the other side of the fence the exchange of lands might have formed part of the reorganization of some of the Warwick estate holdings to pave the way for their eventual disposal. A further example of such preparations appears in an agreement of 1802 under which John Trotman, a tenant smallholder, was paid £12 to give up his scattered arable strips in return for a single block of land near the rest of his holding. This, and other less well-documented agreements, made it easier to split the estate into the seven lots which eventually had a major effect on the layout of the more recent farms.

The sale, advertised for October 1803 (Fig. 11), was of about 1,200 acres of which 250 were still open-field arable. Seventeen tenants with year-to-year leases farmed 60% of the land, five with holdings of between 75 and 140 acres, as compared with only two of the copyholders, who also included most of those with smallholdings. There were 19 principal houses, some of them new, and 35 cottages which had been subdivided between 52 households, representing in all some 360-400 inhabitants. Initially, only the lot comprising the 140 acres of Capehall farm at the lower, western end of the estate changed hands. The rest of the land was the subject of advertisement and private negotiation before being sold piecemeal over the next three years to six purchasers. In 1806 part of the property, some of it repurchased from an earlier buyer and the whole amounting to 700 acres, was acquired by Leonard Parkinson of Kinnersley Castle, Herefordshire. By 1811 this land had passed from him through marriage to the Graham-Clarke family which, by 1858, had materially enlarged and embellished the house and grounds. Some decorative tree planting was undertaken in potential parkland, and small coverts and plantations were dotted across the estate. This had by now been consolidated into five farms, the largest, at Dowton, of over 300 acres, and three smallholdings. Some boundary adjustments were rendered necessary by the coming of the railway in 1845, with the intention of developing a station at Frocester. Later in the century two of the three adjoining properties were repurchased. (The third, Capehall, was eventually acquired by Gloucester County Council.) Out of one a home farm was carved, while the rest of it, together with a new house and farm buildings and an adjacent block of land (which had once been part of Frog Lane farm), became Nutfield farm in 1865. Dowton was also divided into Upper and Lower farms.

During the period 1831–71 the number of houses in the village was reduced by systematic demolition from 82 to 52, and the population fell from a peak of 440 to 240. It remained at this level until the middle of the 20th century since when, despite a slight increase in building, it has declined to under 200.

The pattern of change in the 20th century was similar: by 1900 there were in the parish 11 farms and two smallholdings (Fig. 12); all but two of the former were part of the Graham-Clarke estate. With the exception of Court farm, which was divided into two (the lower part...
Fig. 5. Frocester 1300–1550: the open-field system, woodlands and communications, with house sites as in the 16th century.

Fig. 6. Hedge species count: documentary sources bear out the probable relationship between the number of shrub species and the approximate age of a hedge in centuries.
Fig. 7. Demesne leases of outlying or marginal land. The location of the arable in the three open fields is not known.

Fig. 8. Sixteenth-century enclosure: the plan does not include a further 33 acres of enclosed pasture or arable, the location of which is not known.
Fig. 9. Frocester in 1737: the plan is a simplified copy of the less legible original (Glos. R.O., photocopy 69).
Fig. 10. Eighteenth-century enclosure: the closes, as listed in an inventory of 1777, illustrate the continuing piecemeal conversion of the open-field arable to enclosed pasture.

Fig. 11. Estate sale in 1803: this composite and simplified plan is based on the 1801 and 1803 records. It foreshadows the layout of the modern farms illustrated in Fig. 12.
Fig. 12. Frocester farms in 1922: with the exception of the 1922 division between Court and Hill farms, this layout of the farms was established in the first part of the 19th century and remained unchanged until after 1961.

Fig. 13. Frocester in 1997: the plan shows the farms after the breakup and piecemeal disposal of parts of the estate.
was added to the estate in 1922), their numbers and layouts remained unchanged until 1961: all were predominantly permanent grassland over fossilized ridge and furrow. Most had a small acreage of arable, which was only increased with the exigencies of two world wars.

Today the Frocester estate consists of six of its earlier farms, now consolidated into four, and totals 870 acres (Fig. 13). The other 700 acres, also in four holdings, are individually owned. Although Frocester has escaped the dormitory build-up found in many Vale villages, the south-western part has been amputated by the Bristol–Birmingham motorway (M5). This, together with Dutch Elm disease and hedge-grubbing (only slightly compensated for by new plantings), the levelling of ridge and furrow and the amalgamation of fields, and the loss of some traditional buildings—all part of the pressures on modern farming—is creating a far less interesting landscape than the one which I inherited.

Notes

4. Glos. R.O., Q/R1 47.
12. Ibid. iii, 88–97.
29. John Rylands University Library of Manchester, charter 1766; Somerset R.O., DD/TD.
32. Ibid. P 153/CW 1/1; SU 1.
33. Warwickshire R.O., CR 1886, lease 7970.
35. Warwickshire R.O., CR 1886, court roll 22 April 1675.
37. Ibid. F 191–2.
38. Abstract of Inquisitiones Post Mortem for Gloucestershire 1625–42, i, 212.
42. Ibid. CW 1/1.
43. Ibid. D 1889.