

Settlement Patterns and landscape morphology in the parishes of Croft and Yarpole and Lucton

Croft and Yarpole Parish and Lucton Parish lie in the north west of Herefordshire about 5 miles north of Leominster. The land within the two parishes lies between about 80m AOD and 280m at their highest point just below Croft Ambrey hillfort. The south western part of the parishes is undulating country on the Silurian Raglan mudstone formation whilst to the north-west, the land rises sharply onto the Silurian Whitcliffe formation, which forms a ridge of high ground between the parish and Wigmore some 3 miles to the north-west.

The elevated parts of the two parishes are occupied by the Croft Castle estate to the south-west, a National Trust property based around a castle surrounded by extensive woodland and parkland. To the north-east, Bircher Common, also owned by the National Trust, is a large open area of common land with patches of woodland. The lower parts of the parish are largely rural, and a mix of pasture and arable land.

There is some evidence of early prehistoric settlement in the area, such as the burial of a neolithic child from Aymestry to the west, but little is known of settlement patterns within this period. In the later prehistoric period, settlement was probably concentrated on the large hillfort of Croft Ambrey which lies at the summit of the high ground above Croft Castle, slightly over the parish boundary. Excavations within the hillfort in the 1960s demonstrated that a town with a well planned and long lived street pattern may have supported up to a thousand people. After the Roman conquest the site continued to be used but probably more as a ritual site than for occupation. A series of enclosures which survive as earthworks on the slopes of Bircher Common probably represent Iron Age or Roman farmsteads and it is probable that settlement remained on high ground in this period.

The current settlement pattern within the parishes was probably established, in the Saxon period. There are three main foci of settlement; Yarpole, Bircher and Lucton and there are smaller settlements at Bicton, Cock Gate and around Croft Castle. There is a scattered fringe of dispersed housing and farms along the southern edge of Bircher Common and houses scattered along three lanes leading to the higher ground; Croft Lane, Welshman's Lane and Leys Lane.

Croft Castle, now more of a fortified manor house, has its origins in the 14th Century but may have replaced a Norman Castle. The remains of a medieval manor house were uncovered in excavations to the west of the building in 2003. The complex includes gardens, the Church of St Michael, a walled garden, a crenellated gothic wall glasshouses and a several avenues of trees including a historic avenue of Spanish Chestnuts. The grounds of the castle are a former deer park which was landscaped in picturesque style in the 18th century. A village of Croft with six households is included in the Domesday survey but the location of this village is far from certain. It may have existed in the fields to the south of the Castle but no well defined settlement earthworks survive. There are several buildings related to the estate scattered around the estate including the former stables, lodge house and keepers cottage but the focus of the settlement remains the castle.

Yarpole was the site of a monastic grange owned by Leominster Priory. The name refers to a fishpool of which the remains of the former dam survive to the north of Church Farm. The grange farm itself was probably based around The Manor House at the lower end of the village where a gatehouse survives.

In the Domesday survey Yarpole was a large village of 34.9 households. The earliest parts of the church and timber framed belltower were built in the 12th Century but are likely to have replaced an earlier wooden construction. Many of the older properties in the village, including twelve listed buildings, are based around the inverted 'T' shape formed by the junction of Green Lane and the

lane leading from Bircher to Kingsland. Most listed buildings are timber framed and 16th Century, or later, in origin. Pound House, a cross winged timber framed house lies slightly outside the village at the junction of Red Oak Lane.

During the 19th and 20th Centuries settlement continued westwards along Green Lane also extending into the closes of Croft Lane, Green Crescent and James Close but a linear settlement pattern based on Green Lane survives in this part of the village. The lower part of the village was also subject to infill in the second half of the 20th Century.

Three farms operated within the village until relatively recently, of which one, Lower House Farm, remains, others having been converted into houses. A mill operated on the northern side of the village until the 1950s and the building and related earthworks including a millpond and leat are well preserved. Until the 20th Century large areas of orchard stood both within and surrounding the village.

The houses on the edge of Bircher Common can be divided into those scattered along the lane which forms the lower, south-eastern edge of the common and dispersed within the common itself. The former were probably small farms and related buildings benefiting from grazing rights on the common. Those within the common demonstrate the diverse style and orientation typical of 'settlement on the waste'; houses originally built unofficially on common land. Some larger houses including Highwood House were also built on the edge of the common to take advantage of the picturesque location and extensive view to the south.

Lucton which lies 2 miles to the west of Yarpole is a small nucleated village built around a circle of small lanes. There are nine listed buildings including the former church of St Peter at which was built in 1834 on the foundations of an earlier church. The earthwork remains of a moated site lie to the north-west of the former church. Apart from some 20th Century infill, the settlement is little changed from its depiction on the first edition Ordnance Survey map of 1885, although, as with most settlements in this area, the once extensive orchards surrounding the village have been removed.

Lucton school which lies south of the B4362 road to the east of the village was established in 1708 and comprises a group of buildings around a large Queen Anne brick building. To the west of the village is the 18th Century Mortimer's Cross Mill, an English Heritage property which is in partial working order.

The settlement of Bircher is a hamlet of houses, and farm buildings, including seven listed buildings, in a nucleated group either side of the B4362 road. A small group of semi-detached houses were built on the east side of the road in the first half of the 20th Century and some former farm buildings have been converted to dwellings but in general the settlement pattern is little changed from the 19th Century although the extensive orchards which formerly surrounded and lay within the village have dwindled to a few remnants.

To the west is Bircher Hall, an 18th Century stuccoed brick house which is set in wooded grounds. The Knoll, a large Georgian house, stands in grounds to the south of the settlement. The road through the hamlet became part of the Turnpike Road between Orleton and Presteigne after an act of parliament of 1756 prior to which the road to Orleton ran to the rear of Bircher Knoll. Several houses and farms are scattered along Leys Lane which leads from Bircher up a steep slope to the common.

Cock Gate lies at the junction of Green Lane with the B4362 at the entrance to Croft Castle. This small group of houses includes two listed buildings and the lodge to the Croft estate. To the west is

the former Yarpole School, which was built in 1851 and closed in 1968 and now a private house.

Bicton is a small hamlet of 19th Century houses on the junction of Croft Lane and the road from Yarpole to Kingsland. Houses and farms are loosely scattered along Croft Lane as it rises up towards the castle including a small hamlet called Enmore Field.

The field pattern within the two parishes is a mix of regular and irregular land parcels the latter suggestive of piecemeal enclosure, in which the strips of the former open field system were enclosed by agreement rather than Act of Parliament. On the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map, many narrow, curved fields reflect their origins as strip fields though many of these were removed by 20th Century amalgamation. Remnants of ridge and furrow survive across the two parishes, though degraded by ploughing in most instances. Orchards were formerly very common within the agricultural landscape concentrated on settlements but also within open country.

Early maps demonstrate that the pattern of woodland has changed little over the last 200 years and some plantations such as Oaker Coppice are still surrounded by woodland banks which may be medieval. Much planting of coniferous trees took place in the 20th Century although areas of mature deciduous woodland stand within the Croft Estate and wood pasture has recently been restored by National Trust, There is extensive evidence for charcoal burning within the woodlands which formerly supplied the iron industry based around Burrington about 5 miles to the north.