

An Archaeological Resource Assessment of Post-Medieval Leicestershire

R. F. Hartley, Leicestershire Museums Service

Note: For copyright reasons the figures are currently omitted from the web version of this paper. It is hoped to include them in future versions.

Introduction

The post-medieval period differs from earlier ones in that it shades into our own. Many buildings and landscape features of the period can still be seen, albeit often modified.

Documentation can be very extensive, and often includes maps, and sometimes actual contemporary illustrations.

One problem in Leicestershire is that we only have a detailed Victoria County History volume for one of the Hundreds - that of Gartree. However, John Nichols' "History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester", produced in the 1790s and 1800s is one the most comprehensive histories done prior to the Victorian era, and has numerous accurate illustrations.

The Countryside

The progress of enclosure is the great theme of the period in terms of landscape development, with the abandonment of ridge-and-furrow arable in place of enclosed pasture fields. Alongside enclosure runs the process of creating landscaped parks and gardens, often on the sites of former villages which had been depopulated. However the great houses at the centre of these parks have often themselves been demolished or denuded of their records and collections, even within the Post-Medieval period.

Woodland decline is another important theme, with the reduction in size of Leicester Forest in the early C16, and its complete disafforestation in the early C17. During the same period the traditionally well-wooded area of Charnwood is also recorded as having become short of available trees.

Buildings

The 16th/17th century "Great Rebuilding" postulated by W.G. Hoskins is less obvious in Leicestershire than elsewhere in England because of the relatively poor availability of durable building materials. Mud remained the mainstay of local building until its almost universal replacement by brick in the 18th and 19th centuries, mainly the latter. Only in the east of the county does stone predominate. Timber-framed building are more numerous than is at first apparent, but have in many case been concealed behind later brick frontages

Probably the most important 15th/16th century buildings are Nevill Holt, Bradgate House, and Stapleford Hall. There are more survivals from the 17th and 18th centuries, notably Quenby Hall, Stanford Hall, and Staunton Harold.

Evidence of yeoman and merchant houses of the period continues to grow. The exteriors of our post-medieval buildings have often been re-faced, and it is important to study them internally, especially in the roof spaces, to arrive at a proper estimation of their historic interest.

There are a few post-medieval churches, including Staunton Harold and Great Dalby, in the Gothic tradition, and Stapleford and Saxby in the Classical one. Some settlements show evidence of post-medieval replanning, such as the village of Welham, incompletely rebuilt as an 18th century posting town that never was.

Evidence of the effect of the Civil War Siege on Leicester has recently been the subject of extensive historical study, and the opportunity to confirm aspects of this history through excavation would be welcome.

Industry

The major industries of the post-medieval period were largely those of the preceding era, that is to say farming, and the wool and leather trades.

Slate quarrying continued in the Swithland and Groby areas, and the production of beautifully-carved slate gravestones was brought to a peak of perfection. These gravestones are found in large quantities throughout the county, and also extending into the neighbouring shires.

Mountsorrel granite was used locally as a building stone - as was stone from the various outcrops of Charnwood - but not until the 19th century was the technology available to produce it in quantity for surfacing roads.

Brick making was first known locally at Kirby Muxloe Castle in the 1480s. Bradgate House was built on a much larger scale in the 16th century, and the kiln sites have been identified nearby. By the 19th century virtually every large village had its brick yard.

Pottery manufacturing sites of the period are more elusive. Probably much was provided from sites just outside the county, such as Ticknall, Nuneaton, and Nottingham..

An industry of growing importance was coal-mining, both in the Coleorton/Swannington area and further west around Measham. By 1500 at Coleorton a well-organised industry had been developing for a century and more. The mines were over 100feet deep, reached by carefully-engineered timber-lined shafts. The area was producing tens of thousands of tons per year, and supplying it to villages as far afield as the Welland Valley on the Northamptonshire borders.

The opencast mine sites at Coleorton in 1985 -1995 provided an unparalleled opportunity to examine the workings of the 15th, 16th and 17th century mines. Steps have been taken to record and preserve adjacent areas where evidence of post-medieval mining survives at the surface.

The hosiery industry developed extensively in the county during the post-medieval period. The first reference to a stocking-frame occurs at Hinckley in 1640, and by 1812 there were over 13000 frames in workshops in over 100 villages, mainly in the western half of the county.

Towns

Three of the county's post-medieval towns - Leicester, Loughborough and Hinckley, became heavily industrialised in the 19th century, with a corresponding impact on their heritage of post-medieval buildings. Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Melton Mowbray, Lutterworth and Market Harborough saw less change, while Castle Donington and Market Bosworth declined in importance, preserving much of their post-medieval appearance until quite recently.

Nonconformity was strong in certain areas, leading to the creation of chapels, and other related features such as the unmarked graveyard recently discovered in Swannington, and thought to have been used by the Quaker community there in the 18th century.

Communications

In common with most parts of England, Leicestershire saw the improvement and turnpiking of its major roads in the late 18th century. In places, major cuttings, embankments, and route-shortenings took place, especially on the main route through Market Harborough, Leicestershire and Loughborough, which in the late 18th century saw a remarkable development of fast stage-coach services from London to Nottingham, Derby and Lancashire.

It would be interesting to know more about the use of the River Soar for transportation purposes, prior to the highly-successful Soar Navigation improvements of 1777-1780.

Model Farms

Leicestershire took a leading role in the agricultural improvement of the 18th century, and at Dishley Grange, the home of Robert Bakewell (1725 - 1795), it has the site one of the most influential model farms of that era. Although the buildings have been replaced, Bakewell's water-meadows survive, and the whole site has considerable potential for archaeological study to find out more about the work of Leicestershire's most influential son.

R. F. Hartley, January 2000.