

## OBITUARY

### Maurice Beresford, 1920–2005

For his contribution to landscape history, Maurice Beresford may be compared to William Hoskins. His first book, *The Lost Villages of England* (1954), explored a subject which he initially chanced upon when surveying ridge and furrow in a Midland parish and found that there was a gap in the pattern somewhere near its centre. That gap, a deserted village, led him rapidly into a huge field of enquiry, embracing historical demography, social history and agrarian history, as well the history of the landscape. Many others have been drawn into this field, which was pioneered simultaneously by Hoskins, largely through the enthusiasm of Beresford's writing. It was Beresford, together with John Hurst, who initiated the long-running excavations of a deserted village at Wharram Percy, where fundamental techniques in medieval archaeology were developed and many innovative ideas emerged, on changing settlement morphology, for example, on types of peasant houses and, latterly, on peasant diet and disease. The influential group now called the Medieval Settlement Research Group was at first associated with the excavations at Wharram.

*History on the Ground* (1957) was described by Beresford as 'an ordinary travel book', taking readers, academics and 'men and women who are curious about their own neighbourhoods', into fields, market places, villages and parks. It is in fact more than an ordinary travel book because of the depth of the research behind it and because of its enthusiastic sense of discovery, akin to Rose Macaulay's *Pleasure in Ruins*. It contains a little-known appendix on sources for landscape history, still an infant subject in the 1950s, as well as Beresford's statement on the twin methods which he adopted then and continued to perfect throughout his life: to use visual evidence in order further to understand what documents had already suggested, and to make discoveries in the field which then led back to the archives for further elucidation.

In *New Towns of the Middle Ages* (1967) Beresford again opened up a new subject, previously tackled only with a light hand, by Tout and St John Hope, for example. It is a monumental book based, as is usual with him, on thorough fieldwork and extensive documentary research. Medieval plantations in Wales and Gascony are given as full a treatment as those in England, and for all three countries there is a detailed gazetteer, each new town being listed with its principle documentary sources. One only wonders why this fundamental book stops short at medieval towns planted on previously unsettled sites and neglects those appended to older settlements, for they were equally 'new' in the landscape.

It has been possible here to select only three of Beresford's many books. Others include *Medieval England: an Aerial Survey* (with J.K. St Joseph, 1958 and 1979), *Leeds and its Region* (with G. R. J. Jones, 1967), *East End, West End: the Face of Leeds during Urbanisation, 1684–1842* (1988) and *Wharram Percy, Deserted Medieval Village* (with J. G. Hurst, 1991). His *Deserted Medieval Villages: Studies* (with J. G. Hurst, 1971) updates his first book, while *English Medieval Boroughs: a Hand-list* (with H. P. R. Finberg, 1973) reveals the love of gazetteers apparent in many of his works. Beresford also wrote a flood of papers and pamphlets, some on topics which at first sight seem unlikely, for example on poll taxes and lay subsidies (which he used to gauge the size of deserted settlements) and on glebe terriers (which he used in his work on ridge and furrow). There is a bibliography for Beresford in *Northern History* 37 (2000), pp. 307–20. Many of his papers are collected together in *Time and Place* which also contains an autobiographical fragment, for he liked to publicise his undoubted achievements, especially in lectures where one hour could easily expand to nearly two.

Maurice Beresford had a strongly developed social conscience which led him into social work, adult education and work with young offenders: he listed 'delinquency' as one of his interests. His other interests included music, theatre and literature, the last influencing his style, with its many quotations, evocative passages and love of narrative, as when he described the events of 1296–7 which led up to the rebuilding of Berwick-on-Tweed. Latterly he was rather a shambolic figure, his clothes draped around a large frame rather than fitted onto it. Absent-mindedness was symbolised by spectacles hanging around his neck; once he omitted a whole county from one of his books, because he forgot that the data on it had fallen behind his piano.

Maurice was always good humoured and good company and attracted many friends, some of whom are listed in the dedications to his books (although *History on the Ground* is dedicated to his mother, 'who packed the sandwiches'). Almost the last time I saw him was after a Medieval Settlement Research Group conference at Leicester when I reciprocated his kindnesses to me by driving him to see the deserted village of Hamilton, first dug by Hoskins. We walked about on the edge of high-density housing and near to Leicester's largest super-store. Sometimes, in difficulty, he took my arm to help himself along, but the twinkle in the eye and the wry smile were always there.

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